

Preserving Culture Through Skill Development in Manipur

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Abstract

Manipur is renowned for its culture and traditions. Many heritage related skills like handloom, carpentry, carpet weaving, cane and bamboo products are also the pride of Manipur. However, due to various reasons indigenous skills are hardly being transferred to the young generation. While new technologies open new perspectives for preservation and conservation, it can also lead to disappearance of our indigenous skills if not used properly.

There should be an initiative from both the students and educators that aims to address these challenges by supporting the inclusion of cultural heritage in skill development.

Curriculums in skill development institutions should aim to train and impart the younger generation with skills that would help them get employment into heritage-related jobs in addition to other sectors. This will play a significant role in preservation and it will also act as a means for tackling unemployment.

Keyword: Culture, Skill Development, Employment, Preservation

Introduction:

Tucked in the North East of India, Manipur is known for its rich culture and tradition, which is shaped by its unique and dynamic history. There are sixteen districts in Manipur. They are: Bishnupur, Chandel, Churachandpur, Imphal-East, Imphal-West, Senapati, Tamenglong, Thoubal, Ukhrul, Kangpokpi, Tengnoupal, Pherzawl, Noney, Kamjong Jiribam, Kakching. In each of these districts, there exists an array of different communities whose language, culture and tradition add to the colourful tapestry of the state.

Manipuris take pride in the rich and diverse cultural heritage. The people are also known for their creativity and artistic skills that is manifested in the handloom and handicrafts. Dance, music and songs are also an integral part of the life of the people.

Manipur is known for its rolling green hills, sparkling lakes, and a culture that's as old as it is vibrant. Often called the "Jewel of India," Manipur's beauty is both striking and serene. One of its most cherished natural landmarks is Loktak Lake, the largest freshwater lake in Northeast India. With floating patches of vegetation called *phumdis* that drift across its surface, Loktak has a surreal, dreamlike quality. Beyond its beauty, this lake is essential to the local way of life, providing fish, water, and even a place to call home for some communities.

The cultural heritage of Manipur is diverse, with roots that trace back thousands of years. The people of Manipur, maintain distinct customs, languages, and traditions. This ethnic diversity is reflected in the state's festivals, music, dance, and attire. Manipuri dance, one of India's classical dance forms, is home to Manipur and it is distinguished by graceful movements and deep spiritual expression. Other traditional

arts, such as the lively *Thang-Ta* martial art and folk theater, play important roles in preserving Manipuri heritage.

Festivals and devotional celebrations are also an integral part of Manipur's cultural tapestry. One of the most significant celebrations is Lai Haraoba, where people honor their deities and ancestors with rituals, dance, and music. Another popular festival is Yaoshang, a version of Holi, marked by playful colors, sports meet and *Thabal chongba*. During Ningol Chakouba, families come together to celebrate the bond between brothers and sisters. The Sangai Festival and The Shiroy Lily festival are annual events showcasing the best of Manipur's art, culture, and cuisine, bringing locals and visitors together to appreciate the region's many talents.

The people of Manipur mainly depend on agriculture, especially rice farming. The state's artisans are also renowned for their handloom and handicraft skills. Manipuri textiles, like the *phanek*, a traditional skirt worn by women. These traditional attires are not just clothing; they are symbols of identity and pride. Manipur's traditional product has proven to be popular among many people in the recent years as well.

Role of skill development:

According to UC Berkley, skill development means developing ourselves and our skill sets to add value for the organisation and for our own career development. Developing our skills begin with assessing which skills are important for ones desired career. Manipur has one of the richest culture and tradition and resources are available in plenty. Therefore, it is absolutely unacceptable that more than seven lakh people are unemployed. In order to tackle unemployment and avoid decline of our heritage, more culture-related skills should be taught. This will create more jobs in this particular sector and knowledge of one's culture and tradition can be shared.

According to the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) conducted by the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MoSPI), as of 2024, Manipur has reported an unemployment rate of 22.9%, which positions it among the states in India with the highest levels of unemployment. This rate is particularly concerning for youth, with young women's unemployment at 27.5% and young men's at 19.9%. India's workforce as a whole also exhibits a significant gap, as many are not trained for their respective fields. According to the India Skills Report 2024, only about 2% of the workforce has formal vocational training, while approximately 9% have received non-formal vocational training

There is an urgent need to shed light to this problem and put forward various solutions. One of the various ways we can help people find employment is through skill development in Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET). According to UNESCO, TVET is concerned with the acquisition of knowledge and skills for the world of work. It deals with imparting skills that are required for a particular vocation, thus, enabling learners to get employment in a particular sector or vocation.

Skill development is one of the ways to tackle unemployment and it can be achieved through vocational education. According to Billete, 2017, vocational education is 'associated with developing and sustaining the capacities required for working life.' The primary purpose of vocational education is to identify the skills and knowledge required for a particular vocation or occupation. It has a tough job of meeting the needs of the employers and the learners, if the bridge provided by vocational education is broken, there will be a gap between the employers and job seekers.

If vocational institutions impart culture related skills, it will not only preserve our culture but it will also be a means for tackling unemployment. Including culture-related curriculum will also help promote our

culture. As we can see in figure 1, both students and teachers of vocational institutions agree that through skill development:

- a. Local products can be promoted and sold to the consumers outside Manipur which is likely to bring more revenue to the state
- b. If the local products reach the prospective tourists, they may like to visit Manipur and thus may indirectly boost the tourism industry
- c. The application of new technologies and processes related to different products can be explored which may help in further research on the local products
- d. The publicity of locally available indigenous skills and products will gain momentum

The study, ‘From Cultural Heritage Preservation to Art Craft Education: A Study on Taiwan Traditional Lacquerware Art Preservation and Training’, explores the strategies and challenges involved in preserving and teaching Taiwan’s traditional lacquerware art. Recognizing lacquerware as an essential cultural heritage, the study examines how Taiwan’s preservation efforts aim to ensure the continuation of this craft, integrating both cultural and practical aspects. The research employs in-depth interviews with expert artisans, government officials, and artists to understand the cognitive, affective, and skill-based elements of lacquerware education.

Key findings reveal a structured approach to learning that emphasizes not only technical skills but also emotional engagement and cultural identity. Apprentices are taught to master intricate techniques, work with diverse materials, and develop a personal artistic philosophy. Through this, they cultivate a “way of life” that blends livelihood with cultural reverence. Additionally, the study presents a framework that supports a sustainable learning model, where knowledge, skills, and cultural values are transferred from artisans to students in a multi-year apprenticeship, fostering both craftsmanship and a deep respect for the craft’s heritage. This approach is vital for maintaining and evolving lacquerware art as a living tradition in Taiwan.

The paper, ‘The Role of Informal Education in Preserving Culture’, examines how family-based informal education contributes to preserving the traditional Javanese art of *karawitan* (traditional gamelan music). Using a qualitative case study approach, the researchers explore the role of family in passing down cultural knowledge, attitudes, and skills to younger generations in Jono Village, Indonesia. The findings reveal that families play a significant role in nurturing the practice of *karawitan* through early exposure, fostering emotional connection, imparting moral education, establishing religious foundations, and creating a supportive learning environment for children.

Families introduce children to *karawitan* at a young age, teaching them about cultural values and the importance of respect, especially when learning under older instructors. Through informal methods such as storytelling, demonstrations, and discussions, parents serve as the primary guides in their children's early musical development. The process includes multiple stages, beginning with basic exposure, progressing to structured group learning, and culminating in independent practice, where children are encouraged to perform with peers. This step-by-step approach not only strengthens the children’s skills but also deepens their connection to their cultural heritage. The paper concludes that informal family education is essential for the preservation of *karawitan*, as it instills both practical skills and a sense of cultural pride that sustains the tradition across generations.

The study titled ‘Impact of Skill-Development Programme in Pottery Industry: A Study in Andro Village, Imphal East District, Manipur’ examines the socio-economic conditions of potters in Andro village, predominantly from the "Lois" community, and the challenges they face in sustaining their livelihood

through traditional pottery. The study highlights the economic difficulties the community encounters due to limited income opportunities in pottery, pushing many potters to pursue alternative livelihoods. Although Andro's pottery tradition has cultural significance, the industry's unorganized nature, lack of capital, outdated technology, and limited market knowledge have hindered its development and contribution to the state's economy.

The research found that while skill development programs have some positive impacts, they have not significantly improved the socio-economic status of Andro's artisans. The pottery sector remains vital to the local economy, with artisans depending on both pottery and agricultural activities for income. However, challenges such as inadequate access to modern technology, limited financial resources, and lack of entrepreneurial skills have prevented potters from fully capitalizing on skill-development programs.

The study suggests that the pottery industry in Andro has substantial potential for growth if properly supported by government initiatives, modern training, and accessible funding. The study concludes that targeted interventions, including modern skill development, marketing assistance, and entrepreneurship training, could empower Andro's potters, help preserve their traditional craft, and contribute to the rural economy of Manipur.

Conclusion:

Culture is a bond that is shared among the people of a community. The customs and traditions that the people follow such as festivals, rituals, clothes, food and values is what makes humans a social being. One's culture helps develop a sense of belonging, and unity in the minds of the people of that particular culture. Therefore, continuing it and adhering to it is one of our most significant duties. Though the world is moving at a fast pace we can make sure that our rich culture continues in addition to catering to some of the problems our society is facing.

Vocational education has a direct link to the workforce sector in addition to its effects on economy and social status. Different countries have adopted different approaches to vocational education as there are significant differences in social, economic and cultural scenarios. Manipur has the right resources to cater to the problems of unemployment with the help of its rich culture and traditions. Skill development can play a significant role in managing, transferring of heritage oriented skills. Henceforth, we need to thoroughly study and understand the context of Manipur and bring forward a desirable solution.

Skill development is an integral part of cultural preservation by empowering individuals to carry forward the art, stories, and practices of their ancestors. When people learn traditional skills, they are not just acquiring techniques, they are building a deeper connection to their heritage, often gaining a sense of pride and belonging. For younger generations, learning from experienced artisans is a way to inherit something meaningful, making their culture feel alive and relevant in today's world. These skills also open doors to economic independence, allowing artisans to earn a livelihood through their crafts, which keeps traditions vibrant and sustainable. Blending tradition with contemporary design or marketing helps these practices evolve naturally, so they stay part of our daily lives rather than fading away. And beyond the techniques, skilled artisans often become storytellers and advocates, sharing the beauty and significance of their culture with others. This passing down of skills keeps communities connected and resilient, safeguarding the unique richness of heritage in a changing world.

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