

## GRASPING THE NETTLE

### *From nettle fibre to fashion fabric*

**'Nettle is like gold dust** in Nagaland', says Radhi Parekh, founder of the Artisans Gallery in Mumbai, of the deep traditional regard for the plant that grows in the wild in this north-eastern state of India. In a time-consuming and labour-intensive process, the plant is harvested once a year in the dry winter season, hand-processed and hand-spun into yarn, and stored for the rest of the year for weaving shawls.

Nagaland is home to sixteen major indigenous tribes, broadly referred to as Naggas who gave the state a name. The state has a distinct identity stemming from different factors such as its geography, a landlocked mountainous forested state, the people, belonging to the Indo-Mongoloid ethnic group, their religion, the Nagas originally practised animism and now are predominantly Christian, their culture, as manifest in their craft, music, dance, language and their practises; such as kitchen gardens, community farming and age-group identity whereby every member of a village belongs to an age group and contributes towards certain activities according to this age-group.

Naga women have traditionally been skilled weavers, with the know how being passed down informally from elder women to the next generation. They weave a range of textiles with wool, cotton and nettle yarns, on back-strap looms. Of these, their shawls –that often indicate the identity of their tribe, social status, attributes of bravery and merits, traditionally hosting lavish feasts for the community, through their colours,

motifs and patterns - are striking and symbolic. While women wove for their family and themselves, in recent years they are weaving for NGOs and other organisations, thus spreading the reach of Naga textiles.

During Parekh's travel to the state in May 2016, Zhachuno Medikhru arranged for her to visit Leshemi village. Parekh was mesmerised when she watched a theatrical enactment at the village, by a group of Naga women from the Chakhesang tribe, of the entire processing of the stinging nettle yarn accompanied by age-old folk music that narrates the story. The women wore nettle shawls, draped across the body and knotted at the shoulders, as they sang and demonstrated the many steps in converting stinging nettle into yarn and cloth.

The charming setting of the performance in an open space near their homes; the soulful acapella harmonies of the music and spinning; the organic beauty and tactility of the nettle shawls left Parekh marvelling how a rough, wild plant with a sting was transformed into a shawl infused with softness, warmth and a gentle aesthetic. And the skill of the weavers in weaving fine neat motifs had her thinking of exploring the possibilities for promoting and co-designing a range of products with the fibre.

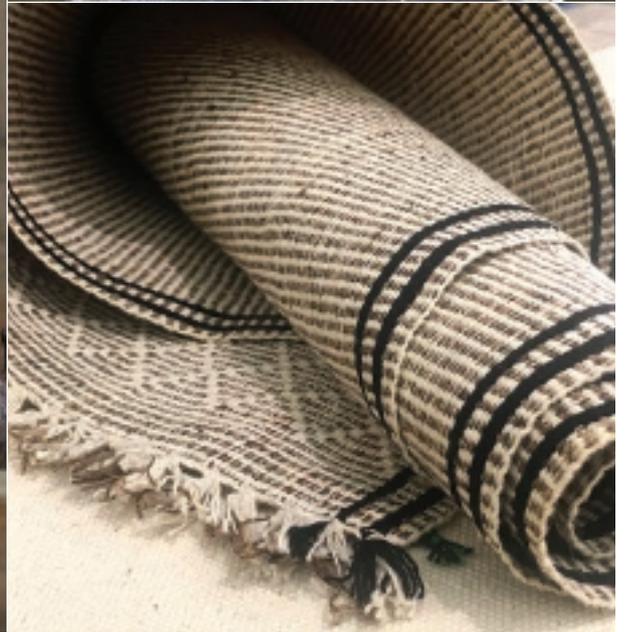
Parekh learnt that the nettle shawl is called 'peuke phe' locally that translates as thick rough cloth, and has a unique identity as it is warm, waterproof, strong and durable. The shawl is

draped in different ways to create a pouch in which different things, including agricultural implements for cutting paddy, are carried. It is worn for ceremonies, festivals and special occasions. The distinguishing feature of the nettle shawls woven by the Chakhesang was a natural-dye indigo, (earlier shawls) or a natural black (recent shawls) line running lengthwise.

Most of all, the nettle fibre-to-fabric journey is almost completely local and self-sustaining with the women involved in the processing of the fibre, production of yarn and weaving of textiles. For obtaining nettle yarn, 'the bvo' or stinging nettle is foraged once a year from the wild, the stems are carefully cut, the leaves removed and the stems left for retting to soften them. The stems are subsequently dried in the open, split to remove the pith, and the nettle stripped off the stalks lengthways. The strips are then thigh reeled to be spun into yarn with a drop spindle, that turns with gravity, with the spinner holding the yarn up high in her hands. The yarn is then scoured and starched with rice flour to make it a tough yet smooth fibre amenable to weaving.

The warp is then prepared by alternating one yarn of nettle with one of cotton, and the weaver weaves in nettle and cotton weft. This fabric construction gives the woven textile a wonderful ribbed texture, with tones of white from the cotton and brown from the nettle, which itself has gradations of colour. The bringing together of cotton and nettle conserves nettle yarn which is relatively expensive, due to the effort that goes ▶





into hand-producing it. For creating the black line, cotton yarn is dipped in a tannin-rich walnut or oak bark extract that acts as a mordant, and then dyed in black iron-rich clay from the rice fields. Given the dynamics and dimensions of a backstrap loom, each width of textile woven is narrow, typically about 12-18 inches. To work around this narrow width, three or four lengths are woven for a shawl and the lengths are joined with decorative stitches. For a matching shoulder cloth, two lengths are stitched together.

A few days after watching the performance, Zhachuno, the village administrator and the head of the Leshemi Women Welfare Society met Parekh after hearing of her keen interest to promote the tradition. The meeting led to conversations on how ARTISANS' could collaborate with them to co-create new designs and new products for new markets; help develop entrepreneurship and production systems; increase awareness of nettle textiles; help sustain women's creative livelihoods and support the local economy; brand, promote and market the new products. In the ensuing months, after Parekh returned to Mumbai, Zhachuno led the weavers in Leshemi to weave nettle shawls, table runners, table mats, coasters, purses, bags and yardage working with the width permitted by the loom with traditional motifs and patterns. Throughout the collection, the identity of the slim black stripe was retained as a mark of the tribe.

It was the first time that their products reached a new market. 'It was quite an exciting venture for

the women to move away from the traditional designs that they had been weaving passed down from generations coupled with much anticipated trust in us for a means of better livelihood', says Zhachuno of the response of the women to the new designs and products they wove. The collaboration also worked on understanding the costing and pricing of the textiles to ensure fair remuneration for the spinners and weavers as well as a comfortable price for customers. The textiles and products were exhibited at the ARTISANS' gallery and subsequently are being retailed at the ARTISANS' store next to the gallery.

More recently, Parekh conceived and curated a fashion show which paired artisans with designers to co-create a fashion show to commemorate International Women's Day in Mumbai. She invited a designer who works with zero-waste silhouettes to design garments (with the nettle yardage) with minimal stitching and no cutting. Simply folding and tucking the fabric and working a few stitches, the designer created stylish jackets, shrugs, wraps and dresses from multiple lengths of woven fabric.

With the nettle products and garments being well received, there is a plan to streamline the project. 'Nettle is a forgotten wild fibre. Interestingly, some evidence suggests that nettle pre-dates cotton. We hope the project will help continue a tradition of weaving that sustains the local economy, that values the humanity of handmade, and that celebrates the unique Naga identity,' says Parekh. ••• **Brinda Gill**

## NETTLE WEAVING WORKSHOPS

**Butser Ancient Farm** A unique experimental archaeology site nestled into the rolling countryside of the South Downs. Their next nettle workshop takes place 26 July 2020. You will have the chance to harvest fresh nettles and learn about their folklore. You'll learn how to spin nettle fibre, turn it into string and how to spin it on a drop spindle. You'll also have a chance to dye with nettles and make simple medicine.

[www.butserancientfarm.co.uk](http://www.butserancientfarm.co.uk)

**Weald Down Museum** An independent museum that rescues historic buildings, and teaches traditional trades and crafts. Their next nettle fibre workshop takes place 5 July 2020. Participants will learn how to extract nettle fibre, and how to spin it so it can be used for weaving, knitting or crochet. [www.wealddown.co.uk](http://www.wealddown.co.uk)

## NETTLE YARN SUPPLIERS

The 100% natural sock yarn from Danish company Onion is a unique blend of wool and nettle fibres, making it an incredibly strong fibre and resistant to wear. It has the same durability as synthetic yarns but brings a gorgeous sheen and subtle heathered effect that makes it a great choice for all kinds of light-weight projects. Onion yarn is available in a range of lovely colours from [www.yarnandknitting.com](http://www.yarnandknitting.com) and [www.stephenandpenelope.com](http://www.stephenandpenelope.com) • [www.nettlesfortextiles.org.uk](http://www.nettlesfortextiles.org.uk) Lists events resources and houses how to videos