



# HimKatha

*Celebrating human-nature relationships*

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*Traditional weaving Illustration by Nawang Tankhe*

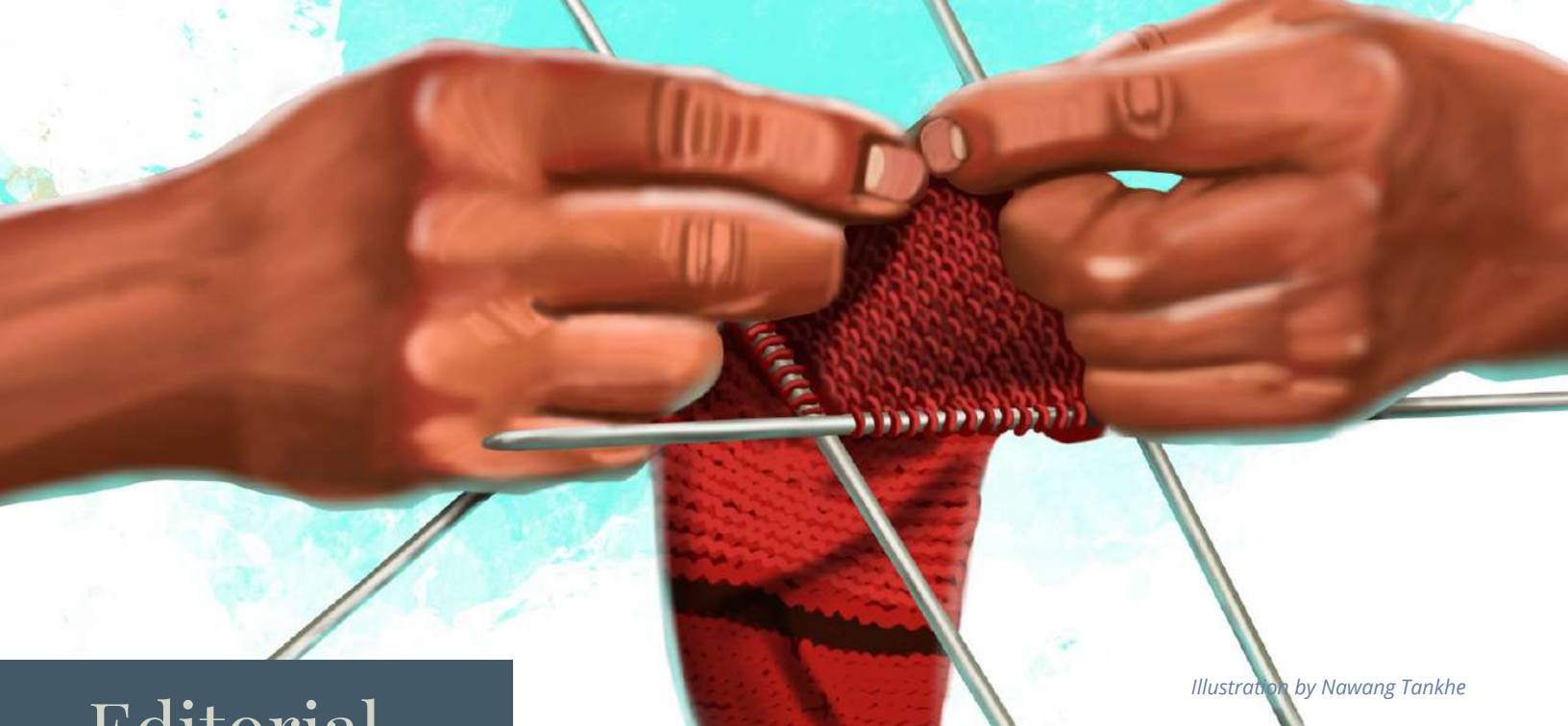


Illustration by Nawang Tankhe

## Editorial

As the winter rolls in with the yellowing of tree leaves, my mother begins preparing warp on her aluminum loom; tying one thread over another - an old familiar winter activity she has been doing for a decade now. In many high himalayan communities, the onset of winter is more than a seasonal change. It signifies the cessation of agricultural work and retreat into slower times, where people mostly spend their time reading scriptures, praying, and catching up on handicraft work that the busy summer period doesn't allow.

In our ancient lores, weaving is likened to the flow of glacial water- crisscrossing two threads to find cohesiveness; much like glacial runoff that meanders through deep mountain crevices to reach its destination. Hand-spinning on the other hand resembles a smooth, continuous flow of river water (*Dhokpo-chu*) - calm and dependable in nature. Weaving with its interlacing pattern symbolizes the value of connectedness while the soothing effect of spinning evokes the virtue of mindfulness. Both handicraft work requires rhythmic coordination,

discipline, patience and dexterity of a learned hermit in meditation. A skill that helps us sustain harsh winters and an artform that's an aesthetic expression of a woven fabric.

Across the globe, women form a significant workforce of the handloom sector but their contributions often remain invisibilized, much like many other house-bound activities. The Autumn 2022 edition of HimKatha brings polyphonic voices of himalayan women and we focus on the theme of handicrafts and diverse fibers found locally in the region like *Khullu* (yak wool), *Lena* (pashmina) & *Nimbu* (goat-sheep hair) and explore women's relation to it. We share stories that touch upon personal, collective experiences, reflect on insights particular to the life of women in mountains and embody their values. I hope you enjoy reading it and find resonance.

*Kadrin-che!*

**Chemi Lhamo**  
**Kaza (Spiti)**  
**Nature Conservation Foundation**

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Illustrated by Nawang Tankhe(Kaza, Spiti)





# The art of weaving in Lahaul's upper valleys

*Chemi Lhamo in conversation with Rinchen Angmo & Chhering Gajji*

In the Higher Himalayan region, weaving is an ancient craft and forms an integral part of people's lives. In Lahaul, weaving signifies a retreat into slower, simpler times amid icy cold weather when the farming works are at their lowest. There's a saying in local folklore attributing weaving as visual art that reflects stories about people, their communities, and their place in the universe. It symbolizes the value of creation, interconnectedness, and rejuvenation.

Weaving requires profound discipline and dexterity to untie complexities; it involves crossing two threads the warp and the weft, one vertical, and one horizontal, one stretched tight, the other intertwining the first. To produce a textile, the two threads need to be bound together otherwise, the weaving work will remain fragile. Hence in ancient Buddhist belief, a weaver is akin to a problem solver, someone who is adept at

bridging silos and bringing greater connectedness.

Weaving is a traditional skill that's passed down to generations and is practiced with great vigor in our village. Of the many products that are woven, Tsug-den (Tibetan rug) weaving remains the most popular with its elegant design and high pile, plush feel. In our village, the handwoven woolen carpets are called Tsug-thu or Tuk-tuk in villages around the Darcha side in Lahaul. Tsug-dens are unique handwoven carpets, that are woven on a backstrap loom called "Khaddi".

It is an extremely slow, time-consuming process, that involves a lot of hard work as each bit of the work is done manually - from livestock herding to wool shearing to cleaning, carding, spinning, and yarn making and finally weaving, the process can stretch up to a year. Most families still keep livestock



"Phang" - Traditional spindle  
Photo by Rigzin Dorjee

and the wool is shorn around March or April month. Wool from a single sheep is sufficient to make one pair of *Tsug-den*. It is then sorted and cleaned to remove any impurities, and further processing of wool is done in Shamshi in Kullu valley in Himachal. We take wool gunny bags in bulk and get them carded and de-haired before we bring them back for spinning and yarn making.

Spinning is done mostly during winter and is much like agriculture - a collaborative work involving a group of women working together. Wood-made traditional spindles called "*Phang*" are used for spinning and great care is taken to get consistent, smooth yarn. The base of the weaving is done with cotton threads on a metallic or wooden loom *Khaddi*. The handspun woollen yarns are weaved in a knotting system where one thread is interwoven with the other on a loom. Once a row of knots is complete, a rod is hammered against it to tighten the row below. A weaver uses the blueprint of a woven carpet to weave complex designs and to ensure accurate shape, size, and alignment of the carpet. Black, white and beige sheep wool is used for *tsug-den* while the rare white yak hair is used for *Challi* (woolen quilt).

The elaborate designs and motifs on the carpet are inspired by lives in the higher mountains of Tibet and often nostalgically evoke themes of nature and the environment.



Photo by Sherab Lobzang



*Tsugden Photo by Rinchen Angmo*

Motifs of birds, flowers, and mythical animals are quite common- dandelions, native birds, Druk (sky dragon), tiger, ibex, leopards, snow lions, and yaks can be seen beautifully woven on the carpets along with motifs that have special religious, cultural significance like the mandala, four elements of nature (earth, fire, water, space), the Buddha's vajra. Swastika and depiction of the precious stones Dzi and Gau (amulet).

The motifs on the carpet are not mere designs but have larger symbolic meanings to it for eg: the depiction of the crane motif on Tsug-den symbolizes good luck, Yak motifs are reminiscent of nomadic life, dandelions, birds, and clouds depict one's closeness to nature, the vajra is symbolic of Buddha's enlightenment, tiger stripes symbolizes one's prestige and wealth, while snow lion and sky dragons represent mythical creature from traditional folklore and phoenix is a sign of auspiciousness.



*Photo by Rinchen Angmo*



*Motif of dragon on a carpet.*



*Motif of Snow Lion and Khorlo - a traditional design on a Tsugden*

Most families in Lahaul and other higher Himalayan regions own simple domestically produced Tsug-dens and it remains one of the most functional pieces of the item which comes in really handy during harsh winters. The usage of natural fiber and natural vegetable dyes also enhances the overall aesthetics of Tsug-den and it is one of the practical pieces of a garment whose luster, and sheen increases over the years with usage. One of the most appealing characteristics of the Tsug-den-making process is that it is the result of resource utilization in the most natural way.

The entire carpet is handspun, hand-carded, naturally dyed, and handwoven where nothing goes waste and the final product lasts for decades, some even passed down to generations. One of the greatest wealth a woman can inherit from her parents is the traditional handwoven carpets, rugs, and quilts along with handwoven shawls. Weaving is not just a craft, it holds ample of material, and cultural value and the artwork on woven Tsug-den is symbolic of values, beliefs, and mysticism beyond our comprehension.



**Rinchen Angmo  
& Chhering Gajji**

Rinchen Angmo and Chhering Gajji are natives of Gumrang village in Lahaul (H.P). Agriculture and livestock rearing is their primary vocation and they have been farming for over thirty years. Apart from the vast agricultural fields, they also sow wide varieties of fresh vegetables in their kitchen garden. Rinchen Angmo started working in the fields when she was very young and continued it till now. She likes knitting and is a skilled weaver. Chhering Gajji also learned to weave and makes handcrafted woolen quilts and carpets during winter.

# The Sheep of Himalaya – a homegrown woolen enterprise

*Anuradha Miyan*

Handloom and handicraft are an old age tradition in Kinnaur (H.P) and have their roots in the ancient trade routes. The intricate designs and colorful patterns differentiate Kinnauri handcrafted shawls- making them a much-coveted textile product in India. However, the bulk of its history, symbolism, and contemporary relevance remains obscure. A history of textile production reveals interesting facts about the local environment, different modes of living, and cultural exchange. The Silk Road is the most famous trade route dating back five thousand years. Another lesser-known trade route connecting India, Tibet, China, and Central Asia is called the “wool road” which passes through Kinnaur and Kullu in Himachal Pradesh. The strategic location of Kinnauri weaving communities settled along the trade route inspired many weaving traditions across neighboring states as well as took cultural inspiration from their trading affairs.

Some of the most famous motifs and designs on the Kinnauri shawl bear a resemblance to Central Asian designs. The journey of wool trade and weaving traditions was truly iconic and drastically changed the destiny of the Himachali textile trade. Today, Himachali handloom stands amongst the foremost contributors of state revenue along with tourism and agriculture.

Growing up in a Kinnaur I saw my elders weave, knit, spin, and make yarn. Most women and young girls in my village knew how to weave and they owned the traditional weaving machine called “Khaddi”. Wool weaving and handicraft became indigenous to the region because of the cold weather conditions and women picked up the skill and nurtured it passionately. Most of the weaving, yarn-making, spinning, and knitting work



happens during winter and the process is more collaborative. Since women made garments for self-consumption, it is common for one or two artisanal families to work together especially if it is a large-sized product like a carpet or a woollen quilt. I have always been passionate about handicrafts and after finishing my higher studies (MBA), the zeal was renewed all over again.

I observed that although the women of my village - Labrang in Pooch tehsil of Kinnaur are skilled artisans, their products were used only locally within different villages of Kinnaur. There was no handicraft center in our village and given the difficult terrain, the market remains inaccessible to us.

Agriculture and cultivation of apples in our village orchards are primary vocations for most people but many women still rely on handicrafts as a secondary occupation to earn for themselves.

When I broached the idea of building a clothing brand showcasing our traditional attire, there was a bit of reluctance from many artisans for they feared uncertainties. I took a leap of faith and started "*Sheep Of Himalaya*" in 2019 with just two artisans from my village.

The prime motive was to bring some visibility to Kinnauri handcraft on an international level and showcase regional craftsmanship.



Photo by Anuradha Miyan

Photo by Anuradha Miyan

While the artisans would weave mufflers, stoles, and shawls with vibrant Kinnauri designs and knit sweaters and socks, I would find market avenues for us. For me, the process proved a bit challenging as there were no established Kinnauri brands and our products were often mistaken for Kulluvi products which have better brand visibility. I took to social media to build a unique handicraft brand for Kinnaur and to connect with people who appreciate the labor of love.

Over the years, the enterprise found its feet as more artisans joined us in our journey from neighboring villages like Spillo and Kanam. We are now a proud all-women's team with twenty-five artisans who are involved in the handcrafted and handloom business during our spare time. Kinnauri handicrafts and handwoven attire require dexterity that can be perfected only through patience and meticulous care while weaving. To make a shawl, each thread is carefully pulled through the reed (part of the weaving loom that resembles a comb) and installed on a loom that forms the base for an entire textile to be woven. It is one of the most complex and laborious processes that an artisan undertakes.

Given the complexity of designs, it can take up to three months to finish a shawl and it can cost around twenty-five thousand rupees for a single shawl. Widely known for their intricacy and finesse, Kinnauri shawls are unique and reflect indigenous designs. We use five key colors to design our attires - red, white, yellow, green, and blue which symbolize five elements of nature- earth, water, fire, air, and space. The elaborate geometrical and floral designs have strong symbolism and many of the motifs woven

have religious significance like the representation of stupas in the border design of a shawl.

Since many families are into livestock rearing, raw wools are sheared locally from goats and sheep for making yarn and weaving but in recent times, we have also started procuring Angora and Merino wool from Ludhiana.



*Traditional Kinnauri shawl and Topi worn by the bride and the groom*



*Pullans (grass slippers)*

*Balzanu Pona* or *Pullans* (grass slippers) is another traditional wear that is slowly disappearing from daily use and in fact, there's only one artisan left in my village who can skillfully make it from scratch! The footwear is made out of fibers procured from the bark of wild bushes. The upper portion of the Pullan is handknitted with goat wool and is adorned with colorful patterns while the lower portion is made of hemp or *Bhang* fiber (Cannabis). We make all kinds of traditional wear including Kinnauri shawls, stoles, mufflers, sweaters, Pulla (socks), and

Kinnauri topi (hats). It didn't take us long to sell products online via Instagram/Facebook and soon we were getting international orders!

I have been pleading with the H.P handicraft and handloom department in Shimla to open a handicraft center in Kinnaur so that it is easier for weavers and other artisans to organize for a mutually exclusive vision, gain training, exposure, procure raw materials, and boost the entire value chain. We have capable and hardworking artisans who are passionate about their work and with the right market opportunity and assistance from the government, they will soar high.

We further expanded our product range and started making children's wear, cushion covers, diary covers, and pouches - all while retaining our unique Kinnauri designs. All the women artisans who are associated with us rely primarily on their traditional looms and work from their homes which at times, proves a bit challenging as they have to juggle agricultural work, and domestic works at home and are able to undertake handicraft works only during their spare time.



**Anuradha  
Miyan**

Anuradha Miyan is from Labrang village in Kinnaur (Himachal Pradesh) and she is passionate about indigenous Kinnauri arts and crafts and traditional crops. After finishing her MBA from Punjab University in Chandigarh, she started working with artisans in her village and gave life to *The Sheep Of Himalayas* - a clothing brand dedicated to local fiber and artisanship. She is also a Pradhan of Labrang panchayat and aspires to encourage local women in her village to earn their own livelihood. SoH products can be availed by simply writing to her at [anuradha.rathour92@gmail.com](mailto:anuradha.rathour92@gmail.com) (089686 09107) or via their social media channels: [TheSheepOfHimalayas](https://www.instagram.com/thesheepofhimalayas)



Photo by Sherab Lobzang

# Changthang - an oasis of Himalayan fiber

*Padma Dolker*

Nestled amid the lofty Trans-himalayan mountains, Changthang is a unique terrain where climate and topography play a crucial role in the sustenance of local communities. The region consists of wide wetlands and giant mountains which offer indispensable ecosystem services and safeguard our water and food security.

Many wetlands in Changthang are located at a higher altitude and are fed by glaciers and snow from the surrounding mountains. The high-altitude wetlands in my region contribute significantly to the downstream landscape productivity and form a unique ecosystem for floral and faunal diversity. The nomadic pastoral communities composed of distinct groups located at Rupsho,

Kharnak and Korzokh rear a variety of livestock such as goat (*rama*), sheep (*luk*), horses (*ta*), yaks, and donkeys (*bhungpa*) which supports them in all aspects of their lives. The Changpa shepherds are skillful in tending their herds; navigating steppe grasslands, accessing fertile pastures, breeding resilient animals, caring for livestock, and preventing diseases. When there's less grass in the pastures or the livestock are not able to graze due to excessive snowfall, they provide the cattle with fodder they have stocked months before to avoid weakness and starvation. It is precisely the efforts of the local herders and the nutritious resources in the cold arid land that the livestock we breed gives the finest fiber.

Ladakh has a highly diverse textile tradition that reflects its physical, socio-cultural, and environmental features. The herd provides different kinds of fiber: *Khullu* or *Sitpa* from Yak wool, *Ral* or from Goat hair or Sheep wool, and *Lena* (Pashmina) from the underbelly of Changthangi goat. The wool is sheared from the livestock around early Spring or before lambing season using a wooden/metallic comb. It takes about 2-3 hours to shear wool from a single sheep and since it requires physical strength to hold a

sheep, goat or yak to shear, it is usually men who do the work while women clean and sort the wool to remove any impurities.

Once the wool is collected, it is laid on the sheet and beaten with a wooden stick to remove dust, dry grasses, and other impurities. It is then washed, dried, and then hand spun with a traditional spindle called "*Phang*" - thin yarns are made for weaving while slightly thicker and knottier yarns can be used for knitting.



From elaborately patterned garments for the nobility to simple home-spun garments from local fibers, a range of garments are processed and procured in Changthang. The local fibers found in Changthang are used for various purposes; Yak wool and goat/sheep wool are primarily used for self-consumption while Pashmina (*Lena*) is often traded. The high altitude and the intense cold of Changthang serve a good purpose for the growth of the fine luxury fiber Pashmina. Due to its softness, elegance, and warmth, it is one of the most coveted fibers and fetches the highest price.

Weaving is an ancient craft and the Changpa lifestyle is reminiscent of the time when our ancestors wore clothes made up of animal skin. Due to freezing weather, animal skins are still used for various garments, quilts, and mattresses. The rich tradition of textiles came into being when our ancestors learned how to spin, make yarn, and weave. Wool and fiber are an integral part of the nomadic culture as Changpas reside in the traditional tents called *Rebo* made of *Sitpa* (Yak wool).



*Rebo and landscape of Changthang.*

Rebos are very functional and aptly suited for the nomadic lifestyle - as the nomads migrate in search of better pastures for their herd, the use of Rebo comes in handy for them. Making Rebos are extremely labor-intensive as it is handspun and handwoven and a

group of nomads makes it collectively. Rebos are also precious family assets and are passed down from one generation to another but these days the use of canvas tents is also becoming popular.

Handcrafting has great significance in Changpa tradition, it is a skill that everyone inherits and proves useful in resource-starved land like ours. Weaving and knitting are so economical and wholly self-sufficient - we knit sweaters, socks, hats, and mufflers, and weave mattresses, quilts, saddles, and even containers for foodstuffs. Imagine having to buy all these!

Even the traditional clothes we wear *Gos* are made up of fabric called *Snambus*. All of which are handwoven from scratch! When I think about the olden tradition of Changpas - whether it is sustainable grazing of the livestock, food habits, lifestyle, or the practices of spinning, and weaving I realize how self-sufficient and environment-friendly the whole system is.

However, the practices around local fiber and cloth making are undergoing changes. Machine-made fabrics and ready-made clothes are easily procurable from the markets and one doesn't necessarily have to make everything from scratch like in olden times. Although a great variety of wool and



*Traditional weaving in Changthang.*

fibers are found in Changthang, there's relatively little expertise when it comes to processing these fibers and adding value to them. Kashmiri artisans are way more known for their skills in handicrafts and if this gap can be fulfilled locally, the fiber value chain will be complete in Changthang itself.



**Padma Dolkar**

Padma Dolkar is from Samad Rokchen region of Changthang in Ladakh. She has done her graduation with a Bachelor of Science and a year-long entrepreneurial leadership program at Naropa fellowship. She is currently a fellow at the Ladakh Pashmina fellowship by NCF and is in process of setting up her start-up around Pashmina wool with nomads in Chanthang. She serves as a Panch of Samad Rokchen under Rupsho Panchyat Halqa and works with Himmothan Society (Tata Trusts) as a cluster coordinator.



# Spiti's handwoven traditional clothes

*Dolma Zangmo, Chhering Zangmo & Tanzin Ankit*

Clothes and identity are closely related: traditional clothes of a region reveal a lot about its geography, physical environment, climatic conditions, and cultural practices. The high altitude and cold weather conditions in Spiti have led to distinct clothing attributes of its people. Since most of the families are agro-pastoralists, the livestock people breed gives different kinds of wool like yak wool, sheep wool, and goat and that forms the natural

source for most of the attire worn by the people. In the olden times, people weave handcrafted attires and ornaments from scratch but with increasing access to market and trade, wide varieties of fabrics and garments are available and the clothes designs are adapted with time.

Let us share about some of the traditional clothes of the region



1. **Reygoi or Ghoey:** Ghoey is a thick full-length robe worn by Spitian men. In the olden days, men would wear *Ghoey* made up of woolen material but with time, robes of thin fabric like cotton also became popular which is called *Rey* (thin cloth) ghoey (to be worn). The style of the robe resembles the Mongolian robe which overlaps on the right side and is buttoned from the left shoulder. Men usually wear a thin shirt or plain trousers to pair with it and the robe is finally secured by a wide belt around the waist made up of woven threads called *Keera*. These robes come in neutral shades of brown, maroon, dark blue, and black. With changing times, access to fabrics like silk and velvet has increased so a Ghoey can also be made up of silk, velvet, and other multicolored synthetic fabrics.

2. **Sulma:** Sulma is a long voluminous traditional gown worn by Spitian women. It has a round neck and long sleeves. The dress flares downwards with multiple pleats which is why it is called *Sulma* which means; to gather, to fold, to fold into pleats. A thin undershirt is worn underneath and the Sulma is tied with a waist belt called *Keera*. The dress is fairly wide around the leg, making it comfortable for walking or working in the fields.



Photo by Radhi Kunga

Spitian Amchi wearing traditional Ghoey.





Spitian bride wearing Lingzey (multi colored shawl) Lokpa (thick hand strewn green cloak) Sulma (brown gown) and Tiwi (hat)

3. **Bhal Sutan:** Sutan is woolen or cotton trousers worn both by men and women in Spiti. It is made up of thick woolen fabric called "Nimpu" procured from the local sheep hair. The fabric is woven on a backstrap loom or foot loom, which can then be stitched into trousers of the desired style. *Nimpu Sutan* or *bhal Sutan* (woolen pants) is primarily worn under *Sulma* by women and under *Reygoi* by men. With changing times, Spitian women popularly wear it with a matching Salwaar or Suit.

4. **Lokpa or Geplok :** Lokpa is a thick cloak-like garment worn by men and Geplok is worn by women. It is hand-sewn with sheep skin turned upside down with elaborate woven designs on the front. The local name Lokpa (meaning: to turn over) is reflective of the intricate process with which a seamstress makes it. Lokpa and Geplok are extremely warm and are perfect for harsh weather conditions. The thickness of

the garment also cushions the wearer's back while carrying a heavy load on the back like firewood or fodder for livestock. Sometimes, newborn babies or even lamb kids are wrapped in the garment to provide warmth and comfort.

5. **Lingzey:** Lingzey is a traditional handwoven shawl worn by women on the back. It is one of the most vibrant and elegantly designed shawls woven by women on the loom and comes in a wide variety of colors and patterns. The base color can be red, white, or black where elaborate symbolic geometrical designs are handwoven. Motifs inspired by nature are common like local flora or fauna or religious motifs like stupa and swastika (to protect the wearer from evil spirits) or motifs of precious stones. *Lingzey* is worn during special occasions like marriage, ceremonies, festivals, rituals, or while visiting Rinpoches.

6. **Tsadar:** Tsadar is a plain woolen shawl worn by women on a daily basis. It is thin, light weighted compared to *Lokpa*, and is woven on a handloom called *Khaddi*. It is made up of goat or sheep wool and is usually found in toned neutral colors like beige, grey, off -white and black. It is the most functional piece of clothing and can be worn over *Sulma* or even drape babies in it. In the olden days, it is said that women are not allowed to go out bareback, wearing a Tsadar symbolizes

one's respect for the person you are visiting.

7. **Tiwi:** Tiwi are worn both by men and women. Traditionally, *Nimpu* (yak wool) is the base fabric with which it is made and has goat or sheep skin lined underneath. Cotton or wool fabric is sewn inside for warmth with matching silk brocade. Golden or silver zari designs or threadwork can be supplemented depending on the need.



Spitian men wearing Reygoi. Photo by Rabhi Kunga

8. **Lham:** *Lham* refers to footwear worn by people in the high Himalayan region or more suitably to the boots worn in the nomadic region. Originally it is made up of yak hides but with time, it is adapted to canvas, jute, or cloth material. *Lhams* are decorated with rich embroidery and exquisite designs of dragons or snakeheads. The material, color, and fabrics used to make *Lham* showcase the craftsmanship of the creator.

Men's *Lham* is knee length and comes in handy while treading snowy mountains. It is worn with *Ghoey-shan* (Silk robe) by men and women wear a slightly smaller frame with *Sulma*. The usage of *Lham* has gone out of daily use and is now worn only during festivals or special occasions.



*Traditional Spitian Attire. Painting by Nawang Tankhe*



The garment and material used to make the traditional attire of Spiti symbolize the optimum use of local resources and fibers available regionally. During festivals and special occasions, this is adorned with elaborate pieces of jewelry like the vibrant turquoise *Perak*, The peal-made *Uldik*, the Silver *Docha*, *Dikra* (brooch), *Khinyur*, and *Pitsup*. Our traditional dress represents close cultural affinity with the Western part of Tibet and forms a big part of our cultural heritage.



*Lingzey - the multicolored shawl with traditional designs*

Tanzin Ankit



Chhering Zangmo

Dolma Zangmo



This article is a result of generous discussion and insights from Mrs. Dolma Zangmo, Chhering Zangmo & Tanzin Ankit. They are from Kibber village in Spiti (H.P) - a place popularly known for its thriving habitat for Snow Leopards. They are farmers and work in agricultural fields known for their harsh conditions where they cultivate barley, green peas, and other crops. All of them are active participants in the conservation initiative Shen (Snow Leopard Enterprise) where they contribute to greater environmental protection in their village and also promote the production and sale of handcraft products.

# Young Explorers



## Importance of weaving & knitting in Spiti

by Poornima Rai

The land where I come from is the land of snow and mountains. The weather is mostly cold throughout the year and the evenings can get freezingly cold. Spitians wear thick clothes like handmade woolen sweaters, mufflers, socks, hats, and long scarves. In our homes, we use a woolen blanket and handwoven rugs and carpets called “*Bhal-den*” to put on the floor for decoration as well as for warmth.

The primary occupation of the people is agriculture but for some women, making sweaters and weaving is an important means of livelihood. Because of the cold weather, weaving is also a necessary skill that everyone in Spiti tries to learn. Most women learn weaving, spinning, and knitting when they are young, and teach the same to their daughters. People who do not have jobs and lands for agriculture also do weaving and it benefits them a lot.



When I was a little younger, my mother used to knit matching sweaters, socks, and mufflers - she would measure my tiny feet with her hands, measure the muffler length by covering her half-knit yarn over me, and finally after a few days when it's snowing, I am ready to wear all of it and go out to play in the snow.

*"I personally feel weaving and knitting are important because it helps your family become self-sufficient."*



She also weaves and spins and other aunties in the village help her to get the work done faster. This is a beautiful tradition people in our village follow and everyone is very collaborative and kind to each other. Weaving is a good occupation for women who have skill and creativity but they lack opportunities. I personally feel weaving and knitting are important because it helps your family become self-sufficient and hand weaving beautiful carpets is decreasing these days as more people prefer to buy readymade carpets.



Spinning illustration by Nawang Tankhe



Poornima Rai

Poornima Rai is from Rangrik village in Spiti. She studies at Munselling School and is in class ten. She loves reading, drawing, writing stories, and composing poems and songs. Her favorite subject is social studies and she wants to become an IAS officer when she grows up.





## Tepang - the Pride of Kinnaur

Tanzin Palkit Negi

Nestled amid beautiful gigantic mountain ranges, Kinnaur is one of the most picturesque districts of Himachal Pradesh. Owing to its geographical proximity to Spiti and having been historically part of Rampur Bushahr, Kinnaur inhibits the unique cultural amalgamation of Buddhists and Hindus. One of the defining features of people living in Kinnaur is their vibrant traditional dress and the unmistakable headwear Kinnauri Topi which forms an integral part of the whole attire. The headwear is colloquially called “Tepang” or “Khunnu Tiwi” and is different from the Himachali Topis of Shimla, Kangra, Kullu, and Chamba. The design variations and the aesthetics of this headwear represent different parts of Himachal where it is worn. The *Bushehri* (Rampur region) cap is plain maroon in color with the same design as the Kinnauri topi, the *Kulluvi* (Kullu-Manali) topis have vibrant multicolored stripes, and the Kinnauri Topi has unique green velvet color and the ones worn in Kangra is deep saffron color.

Made up of local wool yarn with velvet green stripe, it is adorned with beautiful wildflowers among which the bright white colored flower seed called “*Chamakha*” (*oroxyllum Indicum*) is preferred among locals. The flower is not indigenous to the region and is mostly found in the lower Himachal region like Mandi, Palampur, Bilaspur, Nalagarh, etc. The usage of *Chamakha* flower seeds became popular in Kinnaur because of the flower’s resilient qualities - once plucked from its pod, the flower seeds don’t get spoiled and can last for years without getting dried. The *Chamakha* seeds are split open from their’s pod and a bundle of seeds called “*Dalang*” is strung together on a green, and red thread and is fixed on the Tepang. Apart from that, the cap is also accessorized with peacock feathers, marigold flowers, or the dried petals of the rare Himalayan Brahma Kamal (Lotus). However, the use of *Chamakha* flower seeds as well as the Brahma Kamal is decreasing as these flowers are endangered.

In the olden days, the Tepangs are domestically made at home by all households but the weaving tradition has become less popular nowadays and it is woven only in a few cluster villages like Leo, other parts of Hangrang valley, Pooh and Reckong Peo. Unlike Kinnauri Shawl and other traditional dresses, the handweaving tradition of Tephang disappeared among general people and is now kept alive among a handful of skilled artisans and weavers. In recent years, machine-made Topis are also getting more popular in Looms and handicraft centers in Lower Himachal.

However, the difference between handwoven and machine-made topis is so stark. There's a huge difference in terms of material, quality, technique, appeal, garment feel, and usability.

The handwoven Topis, although takes a long time to make and is more labor intensive, the overall usage and desirability are higher due to warmth and durability. A topi once woven can last for years till its natural wear and tear, while the usage of machine-made topis is



Photo by Anuradha Miyan

*Kinnauri Tepang.*

more popular among non-locals and tourists for it is also treated as a souvenir. The native Kinnauri people always prefer the handwoven ones for it has far more value than their materiality.



The use of Tepang is ubiquitous across all villages of Kinnaur and locals people take great pride in wearing it. The local communities lovingly refer to it as their crown, symbolizing communal pride and prestige, and they believe it upholds their indigenous cultural values. It is worn both by men and women on daily basis and during festivals, ceremonies and occasions, people

heap it with all kinds of floral adornments. There's also a tradition of gifting Tepangs to one's special guest and during weddings as ceremonial gifts. The use of Tepang has percolated so deeply in the collective consciousness of Kinnauris that it not only holds significant cultural value but is also seen defining part of their identity.



*Photo by Anuradha Miyan*



**Tanzin  
Palkit Negi**

Tanzin Palkit is from Nako village and has now settled in Chango In Kinnaur. She finished her studies with a Bachelor of commerce from St.Bede's College Shimla. She is currently preparing for various government civil services exams and is keen on socio-political and civic issues in her state. Apart from reading and scholarly interest in current affairs, she nurtures a deep passion for local Kinnauri culture.

# The Artist



## Nawang Tankhe

Nawang Tankhe is a freelance artist based in Kaza (Spiti) and he has studied visual art from Himachal Pradesh University. He likes oil paintings and has participated in many art fairs and exhibitions to showcase his skills. He regularly contributes to Himkatha through his artwork.

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