

Textile of Northeast India: Orality, Textuality & Beyond

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The domain weaving of vast region of undulating and flood plains of India's north east is the men's world. Women generation after generation now textiles as an economic activity for life lived at subsistence level. Women practiced every step of knowledge and production. More so, innovation of eco-friendly knowledge system of weaving is a treasure of cultural diversity. Within culture that is a way of life which integrated art and aesthetics, while society exercised control over productions. All woven cloths were for respective societies. Those productions being visible and tangible manifestations of identity, status, culture, rituals and age, were reference of weavers' soul communicated welfare to near and dear one. A lady's taste was perceived through her textile creation. The experience is similar to all Tai/Thai community of South Asia. The loom weaving tradition of northeast India manifests connectivity with vast region of eastern and Island India, tribal tracts of Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Orissa, Bihar (Iyer 1962: 57). Similarly, more notable colour sources connecting northeastern textile Himalayan communities have tradition of loom weaving. Textile of northeast India is actually a re-statement of an unknown past of



human civilization. Ancient sculptures depict most vividly garments which are two/three pieces, comprising of lower garment, waist band and wrapper for upper body. This is still the reality of dress code for the women of all states of northeast India, which has now added a blouse. For a few societies (Mishmi, Zemi Naga) sleeveless stitched garments were always there. For men loin loom/dhoti as working dress, waist belt, and wrapper for upper body/sleeve less coat are dress code for cold weather, ritual and festival. The most important aspects of these products are that the changing meaning of text of local and region is understood within the society. They are home grown in all aspects of technology, knowledge, resources, motifs and cultural meanings that connect the remote past to present. Most fascinating is the "structure of age-old loin looms are simple in construction and ease of operation. They are cheap too. They have neither permanent fixtures nor heavy frames and so are easily portable. Apart from these the greatest advantage that lies with these looms is the unlimited scope they offer for free designing. The 'Dakbundas' of the Garo tribe, the breast cloth of Tripura girls, the 'phenek' belts or 'Longhan' of the Nagas, and Vaisnava ladies of Manipur, the dance dresses of the Naga of Manipur bear ample testimony for the wide range of varieties of fabrics that could be manufactured on these looms" (Iyer 1962: 57).

Myths and History

In northeastern hills of India, there are folk tales on origin of weaving (Jayakar 1962: 7; Harhsel, 1987: 83). Weaving is an essential qualification for all women and traditionally each woman was a weaver of clothes, blankets, ritual cloths for family members and relatives. One of the marriage gifts in the past was a loin-loom, which women must carry to the house of her spouse. In contrast, in plains of India most of the places, weaving is caste specific and usually the men's job. Kalhan's *Rajtarangini*, of 11th century, depicted women of Kashmir as producer of cloths required for family members and men as producers of the Shawl in 'Karkhana' (Industries) for commercial purposes (Odud 1987). This book mentions that under the Muslim rulers in the valley, 'Karkhana' employed men to weave shawls and carpets and they were traded to far off Middle East countries. Muslim rulers created public and private spaces for weavers to commercialize the indigenous knowledge system of Kashmir. Northeast India's tribal heritages of weaving do not connect with Vaisnavism, except for one story of the marriage of Usha with Krishna. This Mishmi

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story reveals that lord Krishna eloped with the daughter of Mishmi king. Versions of this story are available with different tribal communities of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam and Manipur. Whether this popular story linked Vaisnavite religion or ancient trade route through which both products and labour migrated!

Lord Krishna's image in Vaisnavite tradition is an embodiment of 'Love'. In Mahabharata, he is an intellectual/advisor for war and political relations. The stories of his friendship with Draupadi and his hundreds of women friends/followers (*gopini*) create an idea of women space, what might have been there for women due to their economic contributions in respective societies. This symbolic Lord of 'Bhakti Cult' is worshiped by Vaisnavites and is a central theme in textile traditions of plains of Assam, Manipur and plains India. The 'Bhakti movement' iconized lord Krishna and his love stories as eternal aspects of human relations. Since medieval time famous reformers of Bangla and Assam like Sree Chaitanya, Snakardeva, Madhav Goswami, and their followers propagated Bhakti cult which had denied that social hierarchies persisted in the social organization of Bengal and Assam. Four hundred years back the king of Manipur also allowed the preachers of the Vaisnavite religion in his own country. All the areas of the then Vaisnavism are also the location of textile traditions today. That famous Vaisnavite cloth, *Vrindavan Bastra* of Assam, metaphorically connects lord Krishna and Sankaradeva. But who were those weavers! Were these tribal women who contributed to the production of *Vrindavan Vastra*? Varadarajan (2010) identifies the Bodo motifs and technology of textile in parts of 'Vrindavani Vastra'.

Bhakti movement had hardly any influence on the communities of Nagaland, Mizoram, Meghalaya, Tripura and Arunachal Pradesh, except for a group of Nocte people were influenced by Vaisnavism. Loin-loom traditions of hill communities of northeast India were never under the influence of Vaisnavite traditions as far as weaving was concerned. Migration of textile labourers of ancient time, trading of textile products and raw materials from northeastern India to eastern and other parts of India cannot be ignored. The dress code of a section of Bengalese of Chittagong in Purba-Bangla and present Bangladesh was as similar as traditions of northeast. Women in those families were weavers at home and that was before Gandhi's tradition of weaving Khadi which was introduced a few decades back.

Shared Ecological Niche and Motifs

The hill states of northeast India and eastern Himalaya is home of several hundred species of plants, trees, grasses, insects, and animals. Perennial rivers born from Himalaya nourished them from time immemorial. The area emerges as the cradle of wild rice varieties and cultural bio diversity. Several hundred communities developed linkage with natural environment through cultural adaptations, nurtured species at kitchen, garden or in forests. Those delicate species are manifested in cultural knowledge, both intangible and tangible way of culture. Especially illustration of motifs of flowers and birds of Assam, insects,

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animals, motifs of other communities depicts the natural environment of their locality as well as the vast region of south-east Asia. Age old textile motifs, technology of loin-loom, related social customs, institutions and organizations traverse time and space, communities and national borders. Obscure cultural relations of tribes and indigenous communities of Mongoloid origin and of Tibeto-Burman, and Tai and non-Tai languages are manifested through motifs of celestial bodies stars, sun, moon, flora like ferns, leaves, creeper, seeds, straight lines, dots, geometric patterns, like zigzag, arrow, lozenge, swastika, fauna like snake (python), spider, butterfly, lizard, fishes, tortoise, birds, horse, elephant, tiger, and anthropometric motifs of human bodies, human and dog eyes, and multicolored bands, along warp and weft length. Meaning of single motif or clusters of motifs differ from community to community and they go beyond weaving designs. They are used as tattoo, in wood carvings, and paintings of dormitories. Gender and social status are depicted through the motifs.

Loin-loom technology remains a major link that depicted connectivity of ecology and a knowledge system of all women of respective hill communities. Raw materials for making loin-loom and their accessories were always collected from immediate natural environment. Size and shapes of respective looms are always looked at with the product. Loin-loom can be set up at any place, especially in the narrow space of hilly areas. Weaving traditions manifest the connectivity of ecology and culture. Loin looms across communities, of northeastern states are made of locally available resources like bamboo, wood, and natural fiber.

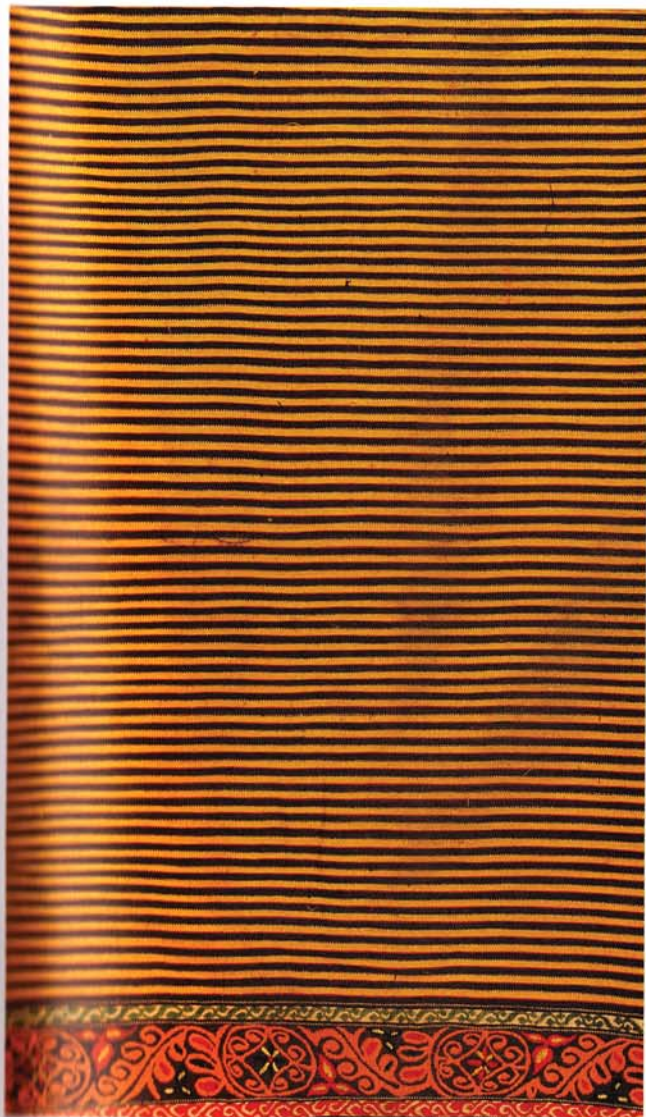
Loin-loom Tradition and Products of Mizoram

In the Mizo tradition the quality of the women were judged by their textile creations. They are known for their elegant dresses and hairdo (Chaterji 1975 : preface) and their active participation in all activities of life when women were weavers and cultivators. Since second half of twentieth century western dress codes were very popular among men (Pakyntein 1967:13-14). The Mizo -Pawi women used blouse and skirts. The loin-loom made cloths used for making blouse and skirt (*puan*). Complex designs of warp and weft on stripes are common in *puan*; coats made up of loin loom woven narrow cloth, which were placed side by side and stitched along the warp length till up to half of the cloth to create a sleeveless coat. Since the second half of twentieth century, weaving was every family's activity and the Mizo women took pride in weaving. Women were found to use 'Puan' as apron or covering lower part of the body over western inner garments (Pakyntein 1967:25). This author mentions that Cotton (la) was grown in the Jhum field and as well as collected from forest. 'Thangchhuah' was the name of a very prestigious male garment. Fraser and Fraser (2012) titled that as 'The Highest Status mantle among the Mizo People of Northeastern India'. They quote Shakespeare to describe that the word 'Thangchhuah' denotes an honorable title for men who earned that cloth by 'Feast of Merit' in previous centuries. They described that the different colour shades of that cloth varies from one group to other. Among all blue base with red and white borders are old and prominent. This status of men traditionally connected two qualifications that are his great hunting and feast giving ability (Fraser and Fraser 2012). But village studies of Pakyntein (1961) didn't discuss about the cloth. Although comparative studies on *Thangchhuah Puan* reveal that this textile announces a meritorious accomplishment. Elaborate descriptions of each *Thangchhu Puan* available with different groups of Mizo describes back strap loin loom cloth woven with supplementary wefts. Designs are different stripes on warps and weft with geometrical motifs, arrow, spear heads and stools, python skin, seeds of cucumber, and tiger stripes.

Loin-loom Tradition and Motifs of Manipur

Manipur shows precisely two traditions. Plains of Manipur have rich silk and hand spun transparent cotton weaving traditions. Hill communities have handspun cotton and wool weaving traditions. While there is use

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of Fly shuttle loom and Throw Shuttle loom in plains, tribal women of hills prefer loin-loom till today (by Lonjam 1014: 12). Major tribes of Manipur are divided into two groups. The Naga and Kuki are further divided into subgroups. "An interesting fact is that the tribes are quite possessive of the designs which they create on their traditional textiles. Cloths with similar patterns are claimed by different tribes as their own, supported by their respective prevalent myths. At times, the same design is interpreted differently by different tribes, connecting their creations to their oral traditions" (Bahadur 2000 as quoted by Lonjam 1014: 14). "The tribes of Manipur believe in natural phenomenon; sun and moon occupy special position in their divine circle. The cowrie shell is quite prevalent in the designs and motifs of the Naga of Manipur, which represents moon. Traditionally number of cowrie shells on the shawl of the Naga men depicted the numbers of heads taken by the wearer. The moon is again related to fertility for the Nagas of Manipur. The 'Zigzag' pattern represents torturous path through the jungle which a hunter pass through. A red zigzag pattern is symbol of head hunting foray launched at night time through the jungles" (Agliaja Stin 2000 as referred by Lonjam 1014: 14). Like the Nagas, the Kuki tribes of Manipur also associate most of their textile designs with bravery and honour. Motifs based in the Tangkhul Naga textile for men are 'Phorei' (spear head motif), *Atengkhe* (cheek of bird), *tashertathe* or *thabimaru* (cucumber seed), *thamoleikap* (crab) are popular. In funeral ceremony the women of the community put on skirt (*kong-ra-kasan*) with motifs of rivulet (*kongra*). The motif depicts a boat in a rivulet. The two ends have double rows of 'phorei' motifs interwoven in green and red colours. 'Harakhan' (throat of a bird) and *Chingchala* (prolonged house pillar) are woven on another type of skirt (*Phangyaikasan*). The skirt (*phuirei-kasan*) depicts spearhead motifs on the two ends and the body of the cloth represents a particular insect of the bee family (*khuata Shen*). For another group of Tangkhul Naga people an important motif is the crab (*Thamoleikap*). Black border is woven on the bridal skirt (*Seichangkasan*), which is further decorated with spearhead and panels. Skirts (*kamokasan/ khrute/ kangkum*) is the attire for dance, which depicts all motifs as mentioned above and *langkapphet* (men's headgear). The skirt *Thang-kan-Kasanis* black in colour and carries very small motifs of crickets on the body, with a red border. *Lei-shat-kachen* is men's shawl made by joining two stripes of cloth together using *phungri* technique. It has bottle and spearhead motif. *Aphorkachon* - a cloth for both men and women is white at its base, there are scattered spearheads are woven in different shades; the *Chong Khom* is another

unisex shawl which is made by joining four narrow bands of fabric together, solitary 'phorei' dot are woven on the weft (Longjam 2014:17).

The loom textile tradition of Kabui Naga of Manipur was of women skirts (*kamthang Phensoi*; *langmu Phensoi*; *Lengli Phensoi*; *Phingak-phensoi*; *puirio Phensoi*), petticoat of women worn during funeral ceremony (*Nai*), breast cloths (*Phang phi*), lower garment for men (*Leng-lan*), daily wear (*Shen-lan*), dress for dancing, kilt (*Lang-shen*), shawl for men (*Chingkhongphei*, *Maseampheipon*; *Mareipon*; *Pheingao*; *loileiram phi*) and women. Most common features of these cloths are borders on warp, motifs, stripes and bands on weft. Use of red, maroon borders, blue bands, white stripes, geometric motifs and tassels made up of orchid stems and goats red hair on the cloths are popular. Bungkham and sel lam are long and narrow waist belt for both men and women. These may be plain white, with borders colourful (Longjam 2014:18-20).

Hmar textile of Manipur comprises of Skirts for women (*Hmar-aam*). The Chuki/stool (*saketzangzia*), Disul designs are woven on weft base with multi-coloured yarns. Rows of spear head and *saketzangzia* accompanies parallel in *Puanlaisen*. (Longjam 2014:50). Funeral cloths of women (*Hmar-Puan*; *Maw-ngtampar*/*Mithipuan*/*Soupam*/*Thanllampuan*) are predominantly black in colour with narrow white bands on weft. There is special cloth for women relatives accompanying the bride and cloth for men (*Ngo-tekher*) during auspicious occasion. These are black and white striped cloths with no patterns. *Hmar-puan* cloths weave cucumber seeds (*fangmamu*); arrow head (*feikibar*). *Chouki* (stool) design is woven. On *Hmar aam*, it is black skirt worn during dance. Shawl (*Lung - dumpuan*) of women is of blue black colour with white and red stripes with butterfly motif. (Longjam 2014: 21). There are cloths for dances (*Puan-lai-sen*); during dance and weddings women put on Blouse (*zakua-leisen*). The design of white blouse with stripes of multicolor sleeves for women dancers, looks like designer clothe. *Mar-puan* without motifs are dress for war heroes. *Thang-suo-puan* shawl for men is usually woven for honorable man of high status. This is shawl of black and red combination. (Longjam 2014:22). Motifs like cucumber seeds (*Fangmaimu*), Arrowheads (*feikibar*), Mithun head (*seilu*), flower dots (*ngotlong*) are common in the Hmar textile (Longjam 2014:51-52).

The *Paite* well known cloth (*puandum/nampuan*) is acknowledged for its distinctive colour patterns. Multi-

coloured and multilayered stripes with motifs (self coloured) on warp and weft are woven in *puandum*. The geometrical designs on stripes comprise a diamond at the center which is transverse with straight lines both diagonally and obliquely. There are parallel lines woven with each hand of diamond in rows. The central line along the warp is narrow and has contrasting colour lines. The central row has a diamond motif. The belief of the community is that their ancestors learnt this design from supernatural sources. The *Aksipakphanek* is another popular *paite* cloth. The flower stars are woven all over the body of the cloth. They weave white, black, green, and red stripes over their skirt (*puanlaisen*) with motifs like arrow head (*Talbo*), spear head (*Thalka*); skirt (*Lianbuangthuam*) is a modern cloth of red and white wide bands; skirts (*gungalpuan*) weave green, red and black stripes; dark colour skirts (*kheaupheau*); and skirt (*aksipak*) weave star, and flower motifs on the body. B.A. *Puandum* is a cloth is woven and gifted to meritorious person. It has black, white, green and red stripes with cucumber seeds pattern (Ibid: 24). Cucumber motif is woven within the stripes (Longjam 2014:47). Mal-am motif is common in Mizo cloths and Kuki cloth (Ibid 48). Textile design of *Paite* (*ngotekero*) is similar with Hmar. Motifs (*panpalekpuan*) for skirt for older women are found in borders they are complex diamond motif in one row and accompanied by rows of insect/butterfly on both the side of the diamond row. Traditionally, fearless warrior received award of shawl (*Gaalhang Puan*). This was the very special award to the great warrior only. This shawl is known as *Thalanlam-puan* among the Hmar (Ibid 47). The 'Talbo' stripe is referred in the *Paite* design as arrow head but in the Mizo tribe this motif is known as tiger design. There is folklore on the Mizo and tiger relation (Ibid 48).

The Thadao beliefs that their ancestors originated from animals, which were their totem and thus their motifs are named after or inspired by animals. Their woven cloths are often available in rich colours and unaltered motifs (Longjam 2014: 53). One of the important motifs is *Saipikhup* (elephant's knee). This motif is woven to create separate designs for men and women (Ibid 53-54). Interestingly, this metaphor of the elephant leg is in combinations with the different shapes and sizes of diamonds and are arranged at the base level. For women those diamonds are square and for men oblique. The outer lines of the design create the knee of the elephant. Innermost diamond is '*changmaimu*' and the whole is '*saipikhap*'. *Changmaimu* is accompanied by four in its four sides. The placements of four *changmaimu* diagonally at four side, ultimately creates curvatures of knee of

elephant. (Ibid 54). 'Saipikhap' design for women does not show curvatures; rather those places are filled up by same colour threads. Thadao textile for women garment (*khamtang*), the cloth for auspicious occasion, is woven in either white or black base with central band of yellow, red and white rows on warp. These rows depict designs- path of the python (*gulpi*) along with *Thangmaimu* (elongated diamond). In fact, the path of python is a zigzag line and alongside the zigzag lines elongated diamonds are placed. This design is very common with the non-tribal of eastern India. In Bengal's ornaments or in 'alpana' it is common. The 'spike' (*linglukhujem*) motif is woven in the border of this cloth. This motif is combination of twelve corner star within diamond. Each star and diamond is traversed by white lines at the middle. Those diamond shape figures are woven in rows in the border (Longjam 2014:56). Traditional motif of skin of female python (*pakhamba*), and musical instrument (*gosemjang*), tree insect (*thangnang*) are popular motifs woven on this skirt. Colour combination of *Thangnam* motif is of bright colours. While, "Thangnang" motif for women is woven over the whole cloth, it is on two ends for men. Men shawls (*pon-mang-vom*) are basically of black borders and white cloth (*mongyom*) with the border of gourd vessel and musical instrument (*gosemjang*).

Designs may have separate names in the neighbouring tribes but the meanings of motifs are same. Designs by common names may be same but by structure slightly variant in two communities (Longjam 2014:61). All such realities along with larger realities like ethnic group specific colour schemes and particular motifs, are exclusively intellectual property of women of respective communities at collective level. They have been enriching and practicing these traditions of weaving.

Loin-loom Tradition and Motifs of Nagaland

As a matter of fact, nearly hundred years back in the Naga subgroups woven cloths distinctly defined gender and the status of the wearer and their wife(s). Naga culture incorporated the idea of entitlement within the dress code. Motifs and designs were not for all. One had to achieve those through earthly contribution – 'Feast of Merit' or by hunting heads. Dress materials comprised woven yarn, beads, job's tear, natural fibers, goat and dog's hair, metal

pieces, cowrie, conch shell, shell discs and cane, elephant tusk, and bird feathers. Black, red, and white were common colour contrasts in men's body wear. For men's body cloth different stripes were decorated with motifs of cross lines, arrow, and zigzag. Due to technological reason loom-woven narrow stripes of cloths are further stitched with one another along the warp length, and have joints painted with natural colours. There were variations from tribe to tribe. While band of painted animals at the center line is a symbol of Ao Naga body cloth for men, Sema Naga prefers to decorate that with geometric designs. More or less these cloths were text of the society. With the advent of Christianity, traditional ethos and meanings, customs of wearing cloths started changing. Joshi (2000:381) refers to Hutton (1935), when he states that the village heads had to settle dispute in a Sema Village where younger generation put on clothes to which they were not entitled. Joshi (Ibid) analyzed that may have been the impact of conversion to religious faith of Christianity. So, the 'taboo cloth' (Jacob 287), 'cloth of man who had given the full

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series of feast of merit' (Jacob 292), 'body cloth for head hunter men' (Jacob 293) were perceived as art works in the new meaning. Motifs might have been liberated from the clutches of entitlement, restrictions, and taboo. Body cloths for feast of merit differed by designs from community to community. In the Sema Naga design red dyed dog hairs are woven on black weft in squares. Cowrie shells are embroidered in circles.

The large tassel worn over the shoulder is decorated with cowrie shells, plaited yellow orchid straw, glass beads, and beetle wigs (Jacob 296). For Chang, the use of warp and weft designs and colours are same with Sema Naga, and there are zigzag lines on warp. In all cases mostly lines are woven on warp. In case of women skirts use of cowrie is found in the Konyak and Chang dresses. At present the Naga people prefer western outfits for casual and formal wear. They are conscious about traditional dresses, which is festival wear and identity marker for respective communities.

Joshi (Ibid 382) mentions that weaving was a very popular cottage industry and controlled by women. Contribution of women in weaving was an invisible act and as the indigenous knowledge which is extensively women's world. Photographs of the Naga dresses had been showing variation in the use of colours over hundred years. Earlier use of white yarn in women's skirt and shawl for men were common. Similarly, use of natural fiber and cowrie shells are less visible in dress material but Joshi (Ibid) mentions

that nettle fiber is used for bedding. Embroideries with conch shells, cowrie and job's tear were frequent in designer's cloth used by the fashion designers on the ramp. Sizes of women's skirts have also enlarged over hundred years. Use of conch shells and discs indeed connects the Naga with the trade routes, which has brought wool and replaced hand spun cotton in the Naga life. Use of silk yarn is conspicuously absent in the Naga weaving. This is a point to be noted that otherwise silk is one of the treasured items in the Naga's neighborhoods. The Assamese, Manipuri and Myanmar traditions including tai traditions, silk cocoon rearing is part of cultures. Whole South East Asia including China were home of silk cocoons and handspun silk traditions, Naga weaving tradition is a departure from the whole lot in terms of materials and lines woven on warp. Home growing dyes of red, blue and black was practiced. Later trade routes brought wool from Myanmar and contemporary weavers prefer Acrylic, Cashmilian yarns (Joshi Ibid 382).

New generations are creating garments of new shades of colours. The idea of entitlement for woven cloths incorporated new list of achieved statuses. Joshi (2000: 383) mentions that certain textiles indicative of achievement by an individual. For example Chakesang Naga warrior cloth are supposedly worn by graduates; Angami Nagas designed a Sarong (1997) –black with yellow orange border and orange green motifs, which only can worn by women graduates. Among Sema Naga, earlier cloths were gifted to person of honour within the society is now presented to honorable person of outside society (in personal communication with Dr. Kanato Chophy). In Manipur designed cloths are there for Engineers and their wives (personal communication with Ms. Diana Ashem). Weaving as a medium of creativity in Nagaland liberated itself from clutches of customs or traditions, whether it is Christianity or traditional faiths, people are participating in the performing arts like group dancing and singing during festivals, putting on traditional cloths in fashionable ways. Joshi (Ibid) adds that textile products of Nagaland are popular gift articles; even Christian delegations to Pope carried Naga textile as gift article. Naga textile and accessories which were part of head hunting traditions is a gift article today. Angami Church Ordination robe for priest used white hand woven cloth in 1989.

History of struggle of the Naga has created new text of designs and colour combination. Textile incorporated all contemporary social events as a medium of expression and wrote social history. New generations have had to decipher meaning by reading creations of the Naga women.

Loin-loom Tradition and Products of Meghalaya

Mownai village Census Monograph (1961) mentions about the dress of the Khasi inhabitants. Villagers were quite exposed to the western dress but for women it was mentioned that on western inner garments, women of all ages like to put 'Jainsam'- a piece of cloth about four or five yards long and one yard broad. Two of these types of cloths are common and old too. One is colourful silk cloth with cross borders of beautiful designs and combination of bright coloured threads. This cloth is known as 'Dhara'. It is made up of Muga silk and locally known as 'kajainsem'. This dress is used by those who are not engaged in manual work, and used as formal cloth for any occasion. Usually this is considered as dress of adults. 'Jainkyrshah' is a piece of cloth is used as a wrapper on the formal dress during the time of works. The wearing patterns of these cloths are more or less same. Two ends of a border of a cloth is tied on the shoulder, which allows two hands be outside of the dress. They use a piece of cloth to cover the head (Philip 1961:14). The traditional cloth (*shah kpoh*) for Khasi women is replaced by the blouse. Traditionally, there was a cloth put on below 'jeinsam' by women which was replaced by the 'chemise' (Parkyntein 1961:19). Formerly the male dress was very simple, the sleeveless coat known as 'kajymphong' which looks more or less like a loose waist coat covering the upper part of the body. It is combination of two pieces of colourful cloths with threads hanging at both ends of the cloth. The two pieces are joined together to make a single back piece and then a portion is left out to allow the head to pass through. The front part is joined or fastened with arrow of tassels or colourful threads across. Two sides of two pieces are joined except in the upper ends, which create a sleeveless stitched cloth. The lower garment was a long narrow cloth which was put on like a loin cloth and two ends of that cloth hang at front and back. (Parkyntein 1961:19). Gordon (1907/1975: 18-21) had described the formal and informal dresses of the Khasi men and women, and details on the variation as per class background. Traditionally men's dress of the Khasi was similar to the traditional dress of the Adi, Galo, Mishing, and Mishmi of Arunachal Pradesh and Assam. Traditional formal and informal dress codes of women were distinctly separate from the dress code of the region. Gordon (1907/1975: 27) says, "... Waddelis to be unacquainted with the art of weaving; but the fact that a considerable weaving industry exists among the khyrwang villages of the Syntengs, and at Mynso and Suhtnga, has been overlooked by him. The khyrwangs weave a special pattern of cotton and silk cloth, striped red and white. In Mynso and Suhtnga

similar cloth are woven, also the sleeveless coat. In former days this industry is said to have been considerable, but it has been displaced to a large extent of late years by Manchester piece goods. The number of weavers returned at the last census in the district was 533. The Khasis and the Mikirs of the low country, or Bhois as they are called, weave cotton cloths which they dye with the leaves of a plant called, *unoli*. This is perhaps the wild indigo, or ram, of the shan settlers in Assam valley. The weavers are almost always females." Though these literatures on the Khasi textiles didn't mention about the nature of loom but from the description of sleeveless coats it appears that the loin-loom was used by them for weaving.

Hundred years back traditional casual wear of the Garo men was blue loin cloth (*gendo*) had red stripe (Plyfair 1910/1992: 24-25). It used to be six inches wide and six to seven feet long. It passes between the legs, and coming up behind is covered waist and the end was tucked in under the folds at the back. The cloth at ends used to hang in front. The end of this cloth sometimes further decorated with the rows of beads and conch shells. The *Garoused* a blue/white and the *Khasiused* white, as their head dress, *Pagri*. The person of the rank of head (*Nokma*) and Military head (*Laskar*) were entitled to wear red silk turban of Assamese silk. A cotton cloth/ blanket were part of a Garo dress code for men during cold days. For women it was an unstitched short/miniskirt (*riking*) fastened at the top corner. The women often draped on their shoulder a blue or white cotton shawl. In the past the costume for dance of the Garo women was dyed Assamese silk, and was similar to cloth worn by the Khasis (*marang Jasku*). Now a days the Garo women prefers to put on a skirt coming upto the heels with designs. Western outfits are usually popular in this part of India as casual wear. Traditionally '*Pandra*' (black cloth) was worn by men during dance ceremony after head hunting. Traditional cloth weaving technology of the Garo was invariably based on loin-loom. This is understood from the size and shape of garments for men and women. Interestingly, the nature of cloth for women was very similar to the traditional dress of the Konyak of Nagaland and the Wancho of Arunachal Pradesh. Plyfair mentions about dyeing techniques and raw material for dyeing of red and blue (1910:57). The dress of the people has changed according to the taste and time. Traditional cloths are mostly festival/ceremonial cloths for men. Apart from that Garo men adopted men's cloth (dhoti) from neighborhood (Pakyntein 1967:13). Women wear a handloom cloth- '*Dakmanda*' (Skirt) (Pakyntein Ibid), and Blouse. They prefer to put on coats as formal wear with a handloom shawl hanging from

shoulder. Western cloths are very popular in any occasion for all age groups (Pakyntein Ibid)

Loin-loom Tradition and Products of Assam

Assam is the confluence of weaving traditions of plains, Himalayan and northeast India. It has cultivated Tai traditions of South East Asia too. Silk, Cotton, Endi, Muga, Nettle fiber are sources of yarns. Loin-loom, Shuttle loom and Fly loom, are found being used. Varadarajan 2010: 61-65). So far tribal traditions are concerned, Pakyntein (1967: 7) referred People of Laisong village as Zemi. This place was known as Mikir hills. He described cloths of the people as follows: Richly colored cloths of the Zemi for men are a garment (*henipai*), which hangs down from the left shoulder. The front row ends below the knee. Another piece of cloth (*heni*) is fastened round the waist and the upper portion of the body with a narrow strip of cloth (*dimdia*). A cane ring is worn below the knee with other ornaments. Women dress is similar to that of men. A garment (*arimang*) is worn round the upper portion of the body and hangs up to the knee. A long shawl hangs down from the shoulder. 'Gonjung' of Halflong, Assam was one of the predominantly Dimasa Kachari villages. The handloom garments of Dimasa Kachari women consist of '*Rajampai*' (cloth put on around upper body which reaches up to waist; '*Regu*' – the cloth is like an unstitched skirt which extends up to knee. And over it they put another sheet of cloth (*rakaosa*). All those textiles were woven by Dimasa Kachari women (Saikia 1967:8). He mentions during 1967, women of rich family backgrounds preferred Assamese or Bengali costumes. Men cloth consists of Dhoti, Chadar and Turban. The then Mikir (presently known as Karbi) women were loin-loom weavers. They preferred stripes of different colour and combinations. Chief products of the loom were loincloth for men (*rikong*), unstitched skirt for women (*peinki*) and wrapper for upper part of the body, the Chadar. They preferred stripes of different colour and combinations. Natural dye of blue, yellow, black, and red were prepared from local flora mentioned in the article (Lyngdoh and Roy Burman (1967:17-18). Traditional dresses of the Bodo, Rabha, and Koch of Assam were *Dokhna*, a three meter cloth in length and nearly one and half meter in width and very colourful. This garment is identified as national garment for them since the Bodo movement (1987-1993). The wearing pattern of this cloth differs from the others and slightly similar with traditional wearing pattern of the 'sari' of Bengalees. They preferred a short chadar to cover shoulder and at present put on a blouse. Textile motifs of



the Bodos are rich in concepts, aesthetics and variation. Equally rich is the Mishing weaving traditions. Ahoms of Assam are links of Tai textile in Assam. Therefore, motifs and designs of Ahoms of Assam are similar to designs of South East Asia but these do not appear to have the Ikat traditions which are common in Southeast Asia, to be practiced here. The common dress of Assamese women of all caste, sect, and community is the *Mekhela* (lower garment) and *Chadar* (wrapper of upper body), and *Chula* (blouse). Traditionally, men's dress was *Dhoti*, *Chula*, and *Chadar*. Most distinct aspect of Assamese textile tradition is that women of all castes, sects, and community know and practice weaving. This was considered as exclusively women's work. Therefore, she may belong to potter's caste (Saikia 1967), or Chutia, or Borahi, yet they are all weavers.

Textile motifs of Assam are amalgamation of Tai and non Tai traditions of South East Asia, Himalaya and beyond. Vaisnavism had introduced new concepts of storytelling in textile traditions of Assam (Vrindabani Vastra). Varadarajan 2010:61-65) described the problem of reconstruction of the Vrindavani Vastra from the obscurity of history. But her journey in search of that and a few comments are very significant, which says that the great saint Sankaradeva was the person who planned for such a cloth, in which the life of lord Krishna was woven. Probably, the theme of the cloth was based on the biography of the saint Sankaradeva. Further, British museum reference for Vrindavani Vastra resembles the *Bodo-Kachari* weaving tradition (Barua as quoted by Varadarajan 2010:62). Borthakur, as quoted by Varadarajan Ibid) who claims that specimen of Vrindavani Vastra of British museum ritual cloths exhibits the Bodo and Ahom influence.

Common motifs of Assam are varieties of flowers, creepers, fern, design of ornament, stars, butterfly, insects,

crab, fish, birds, all seasons, day and night, diamond, and fancy diamond, lozenge of different sizes, Trees of different shapes, hen, rhino, tiger, elephant, temple, star within diamond, zigzag, lines with different colour combinations, arrow, vertical and horizontal borders, human figures on horses.

Loin-loom Tradition and Products of Sikkim

"The handloom tradition of Sikkim is very old and Lepcha women play a predominant role in handloom weaving. They begin to learn the art from a very young age and gain exceptional craftsmanship. They were cotton weavers and use tension loom fitted in the vertical frame. They weave traditional dresses, shoulder bags, cushion covers, napkins and table mats. The Bhutia women of Sikkim weave carpet. Nepalese women of Sikkim weave blankets".

Loin-loom Tradition and Products of Arunachal Pradesh

In the Monpa community of Arunachal Pradesh men assist women in preparing and coloring yarns. Distinct variations are there in the motifs of Tani, non Tani and Buddhist traditions. For Tani group of tribes like the Adi, Galo, Nyishi, Tagin, Apatani, Miji, and for many other sub groups stripes along the warp at middle level of skirt of loin-loom cloth are strips, which are joined together, is the same for the Mishmi. The loom of the Sherdukpen, the Monpa differs in size for weaving quilt, blanket, and cloth for winter garments. They have tradition of loin-loom also. Women coats, side bags, and many type of belts are woven by women on these looms. Therefore the structural patterns of coats are same as loin loom coats of other parts of northeast India and motifs on the cloths are relate to their social history. In those motifs we locate human figures on horse, swastika, borders, stars, pillars. The human and horse figures are not visible in motifs of the cloths of the Tani group. Stripes, lozenge, diamonds, beads and in case of the Mishmi cloths, the skin of the python are very prominent motifs. In fact there are different designs on the python motifs (Chaudhuri 2006). Arrow heads, small flowers within borders, are motifs common in the Mishmi Cloth. The general rules of dress are a skirt, a top, traditional or a European coat, and a wrapper for women. Loin loom for men may be considered a festival dress but otherwise the both formal and informal dress of common men is trousers, shirt and traditional coat or three piece suit. In the motifs of the Wancho and Nocte human body,



Stripes of different colours in all communities are found in other designs of north east India. Colour preference varies from each community.

dog's eye, diamond of different sizes, are common. The Khamti motifs show similarities with the Tai. Stripes of different colours in all communities are found in other designs of north east India. Colour preference varies from each community. The Endi cloths are usually used by the Nyishi men and women, the style of wearing is different. Usually those cloths come from Assam. They are three meters in length and one and half meters in breath. Generally Endi cloth is used by them as festival dress now. These cloths are off-white and without motifs. The dress code of the Apatani men is similar to the Nyishi except their loin-loom cloths. The intricate motifs and designs for men's coats has motifs of hook/key, flower, dots. The Apatani women use blue, red, while Galop prefer white, yellow, for Adi it is blue, red, green and for the Mishmi, black. The Monpa, Sherdukpen use pale pink and dark red. Arunachal is a cotton weaving state at present which had strong tradition of nettle fiber weaving.

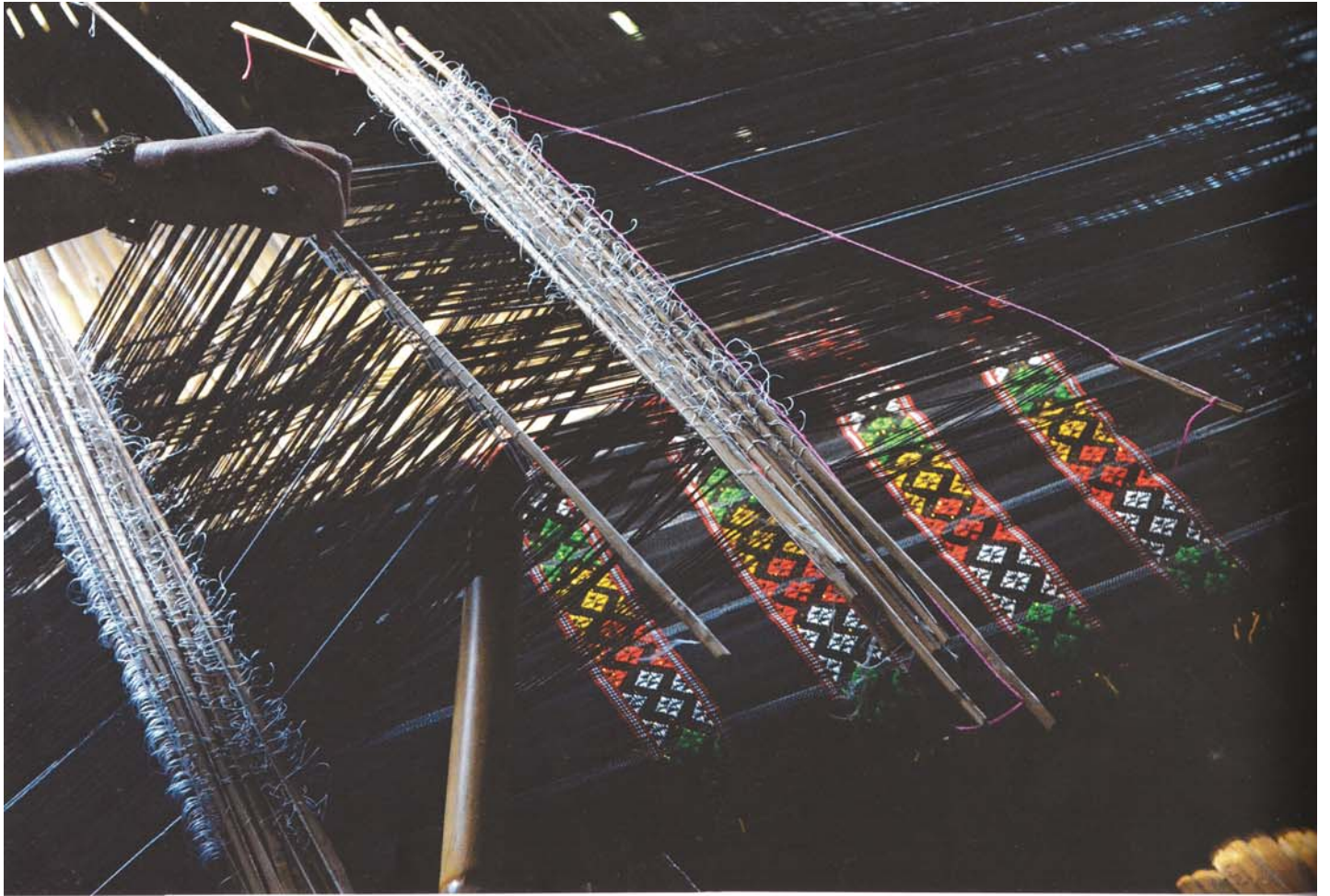
Customary Cloths and the Tribes of Northeast India

Adi tribe of Arunachal Pradesh, the Mizo tribes of Mizoram and the Nagas of Nagaland have a custom of weaving winter quilts by women for every family member which are even given as a wrapper for the dead body at family level. The Kuki tribe has a custom of weaving cloth by women which is given as wrapper of the dead body of the husband. Among the Bodo, traditionally, 'Aronai',

woven for husband was considered as a cloth which will protect the warrior in the battlefield. In fact, hand woven cloths were perceived as a special creation which contained the soul of the producer. Each piece of cloth was woven with care and became an art form. There is a belief that the soul of the weaver may be passed on from one family to other. The custom of removing a thread from woven cloth is customary to prevent the movement of the soul of the weaver with the cloth. Weaving for men is taboo in the Manipur tribes because they may lose the ability for hunting which is a symbol of masculinity for men. (Ibid). In Manipur only cotton cloths are given in burial. Cloth is linked with puberty and marriage. Traditionally, small children wear minimum possible clothing during summer and receive cloth gifts during puberty rituals. Women became producers of cloth before marriage and they are supposed to put on different pieces of cloth for covering the body and head after marriage.

Common Customs and Dress Codes

Common customs of weaving cloth incorporates garments and blanket/quilt. Women are expected to weave and carry cloths with them to the in-laws house after marriage, they are expected to weave cloths for covering dead bodies (in case of the Adi and Mizo). Different pieces of cloth are significant at different phase of life. Putting on three pieces of cloths including head gear (sometimes) for women are



compulsory after marriage. Loin cloth for men is common to most of the hills communities for men while unstitched skirts are common for women. Three types of wearing patterns are available for women. One is from the waist which hangs up to the knee/heel/thigh. Waist belt made up of cane, beads, woven cloths are also worn. Wrappers for covering upper body for both men and women, from cold and sleeveless coat for men to short blouse and tops for women are very common. For another group the garment is put on from just below the shoulders. The third type is the style of the Khasi, and the fourth may be the wearing pattern of Bodo women.

Since colonial time to today, the dress asserts the ethnicity and is part of historical identity for the communities. For women it was the Sarong (lower garment), wrapper (upper garment), head cloth, and a third piece of cloth of not less than three meters of length and less than one meter breadth wrapped on waist or upper body as part of the clothing in the vast region. Unstitched skirts may be of different lengths. Colonial historical records, fieldwork observations, and archaeological records trace a trajectory from miniskirts to ankle length skirts. Material used to make those cloths are different types of natural fibers, home spun cotton, bark, etc. For men wide use of Loin Cloth as lower garment, sleeveless coats, turban, cane/bamboo hats, are common for the hills. Dhoti of different colours and coats were also traced. Those pieces of unstitched cloths fulfill different requirements of life for people alongside representing history. Different layers from inner garment to outer garment can be text if taken into consideration to understand the transformations happening in the cloths. For example, the use of bead ornaments on the cloth was important for their apparel. In the past beaded attires were apparels. Similarly, bark cloths are used as outfit on the cotton made lower garment recently as identity marker. Shape, size, designs, of those ancient bark cloths are amazingly similar. The traditional cloth of the Wancho women of Arunachal Pradesh, northeast India shows similarity with lower garment of Gaddang women of Luzon, Philippines¹. Still, men of Luzon use loin cloth, the form of which is the same as the Wancho loin cloth for men. At present the loin cloth for Wancho men is not regular wear, but they are ritual dress or identity markers. This example shows similarity in concepts that include jacket, betel nuts/tobacco bags, use of beads in embroidery and use of colours like red and blue in men's attire.² Archaeological findings in Luzon

dating from fifteenth century confirm the early use of beads to form decorative patterns on skirts and other garments, and Gaddang are noted for their striking bead works. Similar, tradition of bead works are there with the Wancho and at present cotton replaced the natural fibers.³

Concluding Remarks

Dresses of tribes are identity markers in the twentieth century which has crystallized history and the identity of tribes. Tradition of loin-loom weaving is reorganized, reinforced within the cultural milieu during postcolonial time for establishing political rights and autonomy of tribes. Colonial rulers maintained history of people through collection of artifacts and photographs. Museum collection, preservation and exhibitions of those artifacts helped to reinforce tradition of loin loom weaving. Motifs of hills to a great extent show typical features. Multi-colour stripes on warp and weft along with supplementary warp and weft designs are typical to states of Mizoram, Nagaland and Kuki-Chin and Mizo group of Manipur. Flower, animal and zoomorphic motifs predominate in the motifs of Assam. Hill communities of Arunachal Pradesh combining geometric designs and motifs of seeds, sword belt, python skin, stripes in warp and embroidery on weft at central place of the cloth, hills, temples, diamond, lozenge, hook designs. Tribal costumes are a strong medium of fashion statements and aesthetic value of loin loom materials is drawing attention of the business world. A few entrepreneurs are working to promote the business facilities on the loin loom cloths. But for the sake of rich knowledge system, and as women's trade, this area of weaving must be free from clutches of middlemen and corporates who may reductively brand this rich and eco-friendly heritage as 'ethnic'.