

Traditional Attires: The Hidden Jewels of North-East Region of India – A Peek Review

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Abstract—As an emerging nation in the globe today, India has much to be proud of in terms of both its diversity and uniqueness in every sphere of its socio-cultural landscape. The thrust of the Government of India in boosting its tourism sector with its 'Look East Policy' is a timely one to highlight the unseen and unheard of the North-East region's heritage on innumerable aspects ranging from food, art, craft, fashion and music. While India's textile industry has been making waves in terms of its traditional weaves and designs, the rich traditional attires of the eight North-East states had been hidden from popular Indian culture. However, the hidden treasures of North-East cultural aspects including its wealthy heritage of traditional attires are beginning to get its due notice through the concerted efforts of the Ministry of Development of North-East Region through its various programmes, fairs and festivals. The present paper is an attempt to unravel the kaleidoscopic and rich traditional attires of the eight states of North-East India.

The paper is based on secondary sources and desk research and is an attempt to explore the traditional attires worn in their daily lives that are defined by the topological and geographical environs of the diverse ethnic communities in the northeastern region.

1. INTRODUCTION

Theodore L. Cuyler's statement that "You may not be able to leave your children a great inheritance, but day by day, you may be weaving coats for them which they will wear for all eternity" best describes the traditional attires proudly worn by generation after generation in the eight states of North-East region of India. True to its epitome, the Ashtalakshmi of India, which describes the states of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Tripura, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Sikkim and Nagaland are endowed not only with pristine beauty in terms of natural and other resources but also symbolize the elegance of life styles of its diverse communities and people through the artistic and creative attires worn by them.

In a diverse land like India where travelling every 50 to 100 kilometres one will find people look different, speak different languages, eat differently and wear different clothes. While attires and textiles from Rajasthan, Gujarat, Panjab, Tamil Nadu etc are popular for their various types and weaves and regional specialties, the myriad of colourful costumes and weaves and attires of North-East India has remained relatively unknown. The hidden treasures of North-East attires traditionally made and manufactured by the natives and worn for times immemorial have been slowly coming out to capture the popular culture of Indians.

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2. METHODS

The paper is an exploratory endeavour to highlight how the traditional attires of North-East region are unique in terms of their styles, design, motifs; and, to understand how the traditional attires worn in their daily lives are defined by the topological and geographical environs of the diverse ethnic communities in the North-Eastern

region.. Information is based on secondary sources and desk research.

3. ATTIRE¹ OF EIGHT STATES OF NORTH-EAST INDIA: A PROFILE

In understanding the cultural richness of North-East attires, it needs to be remembered that there are innumerable tribal groups spread across the eight North-Eastern states. Hence, the attires that are described in the present paper are both limited and representative of some of the commonly known tribal /non-tribal attires. Also, it has been attempted to showcase the popular traditional attire as well as the wedding attires of some communities of the northeastern region.

3.1 Traditional Attires of Assam

In India's textile landscape, Assam's Muga and Pat silk plays an important role. Typically, common Assamese women flaunt Muga and Pat silk sarees especially on festivals and ceremonies. Assamese brides wear these handloom sarees woven with gold and silver threads embroidery. However, the Mekhla Chador reigns as the classic traditional dress of Assamese women. This consists of a three-piece set and is akin to South India's half saree. The ensemble consists of a long skirt a la embroidered petticoat called Mekhala, a long fabric like half saree and a finely woven Chador or Chaddar. A matching blouse accompanies Mekhla Chador. (See Exhibit 1 and 2) Among Assam's tribes, Dimasa women tribes wear skirt-like clothing, which is called 'Rigu' and embellished top attire called 'Rijamphai', also called 'Rikhaosa'. A Thai Phake tribal woman wears a striped girdle- the 'Chin' that stretches from waist down to the ankles with a ' Chairchin', a cloth belt to encircle her waist and a 'Fanangwait' for her upper body. Young girls wear a short version of this called 'Fafek' paired with a multicolored blouse called 'Chekhamchum.' The wedding costume of an Assamese bride is "Mekhala Chaddar" - made of off-white or cream colored Muga silk decorated with golden thread that makes the bridal costume ethereal. Colored motifs, are also, and often are mildly sprinkled all over it.

3.2 Costumes of Arunachal Pradesh.

The distinctive attires of Arunachal Pradesh is as varied as its many tribes. For instance, Buddhist Mompa women, one dominant tribe wear quilted or plain jackets

over sleeveless chemise and is attached to the waist with a long and narrow cloth strip. Arunachali women wear plenty of ornaments - rings, bamboo earrings, silver jewelry and beaded turquoise pieces.

Adi Tribe another large tribe women and men wear Galae. The unmarried women wear a unique jewelry known as Beyop. The traditional dress of the tribal women is crinoline that resembles a blouse. Sherdukpen Tribe members wear loose flowing collarless and sleeveless garments, which extend from the shoulder to the knee area in a loose fluidic line (Exhibit 7). Sometimes an intricately embroidered and full-sleeved jacket is worn over the garment and there is also a waistcloth known as Mushaiks that is worn over the robe. Tangsa or Naga tribe women wear an intricately hand woven linen blouse. The dress is patterned similar to a shirt and skirt. Miji tribe women also dress similarly by wearing a ankle length cloak in pure white and adorn themselves with huge chunky silver jewelry and neckpieces (Exhibit 8).

Wedding costumes of Arunachal Pradesh have an earthy tribal touch in general though contemporary cuts and trends are seen. Natural fabrics, vibrancy of colours and designs mark the style statement of wedding attires, which has Bhutanese and Tibetan motifs. Variations in terms of accessories and colors delineate wedding costumes of diverse tribes. Glass beads and silver form the major part of wedding jewelry. The bridal couple wears a special headgear known as "Koktung" and assorted types of bead chains known as sampu, sengme and sangiang. (Exhibit 9)

3.3 Manipur and its Traditional Attires.

Outfits from Manipur have earned recognition by virtue of dances from the state both at national and international levels. Simplicity and aesthetics play a more important role in the clothing designs. Phanek and a sarong are traditionally worn by Manipuris. Phanek -is a conventional hand woven wrap around like sarong skirt and combined with a transparent shawl - Innaphi. The Phanek is typically worn with a blouse and an upper cloth a la mini saree.

It is pertinent to note that traditional dresses of Manipuri women differ for each occasion; however, main customary dresses comprise Innaphi, Phanek, Mayek Naibi, Kanap Phanek, Lai-Phi, and Chin-Phi. Meitei women stitch Mavek Naibi, a special Phanek with

¹ All exhibits are placed in the end.

horizontal stripes and Kanap Phanek. Chin Phi is a heavily embroidered Phanek.

Different attires are, as stated earlier, worn for different events. For instance, during Rasa Leela dance festivals, Manipuri women wear the Potlois; and, Kumins. Koks and Phurits etc. are worn during other dance festivals. Different tribes of Manipur display wearing typical dresses like Lmaphie, Saijounba, Ningthoupee and Phiranji. 'Oirang Phi' - a garment is worn similar to a saree like countless women across India.

3.4 Traditional Costumes of Meghalaya

Meghalaya, the land of clouds is inhabited by three major tribal populations, each of which is identified for their unique styles of attires worn by them. Garos tribe living in the hilly areas wear Jainsen, which is an unstitched garment made from mulberry silk and wrapped around the body. Their another apparel is Endi silk shawls that are popular across India due to its light weight and warmth. Rural Garo women drape 'Eking' - a short fabric around their waists inside their homes and use a longer Eking for outside. Typically a Garo woman also wears blouse, 'Dakmanda', an unstitched 'lungi' like cloth tied up around the waist. 'Dakmanda' has broad borders (six to ten inch) with attractive motifs or floral patterns.

Khasi tribal women's traditional attire also is termed 'Jainsen' that is ankle length matched with a blouse and a checkered cotton shawl with tiny or large checks called 'tap-moh khlieh' (Exhibit 12). This garment resembles an apron and is worn round her neck or pinned up at the shoulders. On festivals and ceremonial occasions, while young khasi women also wear 'Ka Jainsem Dhara' - a long piece of Assam Muga silk; senior khasi women wear 'Jainkup' - which is a strip of woolen material.

The Jaintia tribal woman wears Thoh Khyrwang – a sarong outfit with a velvet blouse and this attire is totally wrapped around the waist. This outfit is complemented with an Assamese muga silk cloth that is sometimes wrapped around the shoulder and is allowed to flow down to the ankles or lower down. Jaintia tribe woman completely covers her head with 'Kyrshah', which is a designed head accessory made of a piece of cloth with small checks. In general, all three tribal women wear silver and gold ornaments.

3.5 Traditional Attires of Tripura

Tribal women from Tripura from either of the sub tribes - Khakloo, or the Halam, the Lushei and the Kuki-Chin tribes are gifted weavers. Hence, the attires worn by the natives of this state wear creatively worn fabrics. Khakloo tribal women wear 'Rinai' which is a lengthy and broad cloth draped around the waist that reaches till the knees. This is matched with 'Risa' - a short embroidered body piece for the chest. Of recent times, a trend seen among the younger generation of women is to substitute a blouse in place of Risa; however, it is obligatory to wear Risa on their nuptials.

Lushei tribal women wear something similar to a skirt / petticoat in dark blue cotton textile. This is tied around the waist and held by a stringed corset. Kuki-Chin women wear attires are patterned like snakeskins. Traditional names for these dresses are Thangang, Saipikhup, Ponmongvom, and Khamtang and have been worn by aristocratic women in the past. Special fashion accessories of Tripura women are made mainly of beads and coin strands as necklaces.

3.6 Conventional Costumes of Mizoram

One can find Mizo tribe costumes as varied as several tribes in the state but the most popular attire one that resembles the Churidar Kurta, a popular North Indian dress is Puan. It has three pieces- a legging, top clothing and a head cloth resembling the dupattas. On the occasion of weddings and other festivals, the Mizo women wear 'Puanchei'. It has many varieties such as 'Chapchar Kut', 'Mim Kut' and 'Pawl Kut'. Puanchei has two parts- straight long skirt type clothing and a shirt or top that is worn above it. They are traditionally bright in color with checkered patterns. The headdress, worn during dances, is the most attractive feature of this Mizo Lusei dress. This headgear is made of a coronal, which is built, from brass and colored cane. There are porcupine quills on this headdress and upper edges of these quills are added with green wing-feathers of the common parrot. Some very attractive blouses are also worn by the women of Mizoram such as Kawrchei and Ngotekherh. They are usually worn along with 'Puanchei' while performing various Mizo dances.

3.7. Traditional Costumes from Nagaland

Traditional attire of Nagaland is synonymous with beautiful woven shawls besides a host of conventional costumes worn by its people. The distinctiveness of different clans is identified through the diverse designs

of shawls and occasions. Angami clan women mainly wear a plain blue cloth and a white cloth with black marginal bands of varying breadth and also are in the habit of wearing men's costumes. Casually, these Angami women wear a petticoat called neikhro, a sleeveless top called vatchi, and a white skirt called pfemhou. While the Angami men wear shawls, women wear Mechala.

3.8. Traditional Costumes of Sikkim

The most famous state for the tourists is Sikkim, which offers rich and colorful costumes that are worn by the commoner and the royalty. Kho, a dress known to be worn by the Namgyal royalty is a loose cloak like garment that is tightened at the neck on one particular side while a bright silk or a cotton belt cinches in the cloth at the waist. Bhutia tribal dressing culture in Sikkim is very unusual and colourful and is well known in many parts of the world. Their main garment is Bhaku, which is a free flowing garment. There are also Nepalese, who wear sarees called Pharia and many other tribes with unique styles of attires.

4. CONCLUSION

In a nutshell, the northeast costumes are as old and extensive as they are intricately designed with distinction and elan. It may be correct to state that Oscar Wilde was apt when he said, "One should either be a work of Art, or wear a work of art". This is a truism with respect to the hidden treasures of the North-East region of time in terms of their costumes, besides various parts of their socio-economic life styles.

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