

Textile
Tradition
of Assam

an empirical study

LABANYA MAZUMDAR

TEXTILE
TRADITION
OF ASSAM

an empirical study

LABANYA MAZUMDAR

Dedicated
to my husband
Late Amal Kumar Mazumdar

TEXTILE TRADITION OF ASSAM

an empirical study

Written by

Labanya Mazumdar

Published jointly by

BHABANI BOOKS

An imprint of Bhabani Offset Pvt. Ltd.

Bhabani Complex, Hatishila, Panikhaiti, Guwahati-781026

Ph.: 0361 2522222, 2738837, 2524056, 2528155

Fax: +91 361 2450797

Kolkata Office:

C/14, Niranjani Pally, P.O.-Banshdrohi, Kolkata-700 070, West Bengal

Phone: (033)24311257, Mobile: +91 98368 68304

&

FABRIC PLUS PVT. LTD.

5th Bylane, Zoo Narengi Road, Guwahati 781 021, Assam, India

Telefax: +91 361 2207262

Website: www.fabricplus.in / silkcountry.com, email: info@fabricplus.in

First Edition: November 2013

© Publishers

All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the Publishers.

ISBN: 978-93-82624-69-1

Cover & Layout Design

Mridul Nath

Printed in India at

BHABANI OFFSET PVT. LTD.

Bhabani Complex, Hatishila, Panikhaiti, Guwahati-781026

E-mail: books@bhabani.com, Website: www.bhabani.com

PREFACE

Handloom weaving forms an integral part of the socio-cultural heritage of India. Many of the textile items produced by the weavers in different handloom states have worldwide acclaim for their distinctive features and fine workmanship. The Northeastern region of India in general and the state of Assam in particular has a rich tradition of handloom weaving descending down from generation to generation.

It is a known factor that there have been considerable inter-mingling of various ethnic stocks in Assam, both tribal and non-tribal. This has formed a synthesized culture in the state. These ethnic groups having diverse socio-cultural background have contributed immensely towards the glory of textile tradition of Assam as a whole.

The traditional hand woven fabrics woven out of silk as well as cotton are widely known for their beauty and simplicity. The varieties of textile items produced by the indigenous weavers in different ethnic groups indicate many interesting culture-specific elements as well as similarities. Besides the functional utility, many of these textile items have notable socio-cultural significance. The textile items having distinctive characteristics pertaining to their texture, numerous designs, colour schemes, the culture specific names, utility, socio-cultural significances intricately connected with textile tradition are the major source of inspirations in undertaking an in-depth investigation in a cross-cultural framework.

This book is an edited version of a thesis approved for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Assam Agricultural University, Jorhat. Based on the comprehensive study encompassing a broad spectrum of ethnic cultural communities, the book attempts to give a systematic account of the textile tradition in Assam. Its unique features, historical perspective, past and present status of textiles in terms of its continuity and change, socio-cultural and economic contexts of weaving are the major issues taken into consideration for discussion. In view of the emerging trend of transition in textile production, this book serves as a reminder that the indigenous textiles of different ethnic groups in Assam are not merely a commodity, but a reflector of socio-cultural life of the people of this region.

It is unfortunate that in spite of best efforts it has not been possible to maintain

rigid uniformity in the transliteration and spelling of names of persons, different ethnic groups, local names and terminologies used. However, an attempt is being made to explain the English equivalent of the textile items produced by respective communities as given in the glossary

Last but not the least, the responsibility for any factual errors or any erroneous views which might have entered into the text of this book is however entirely mine.

If this book is able to benefit the readers, especially the research scholars who are interested in exploring further for unknown facts about the treasures-unique and unparalleled features of textile tradition of this region, I would consider that my humble endeavour of publishing this book is successful.

Jorhat,
November 2013

Labanya Mazumdar

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my gratitude and indebtedness to various individuals and institutions without whose guidance, support and encouragement this book would not have been published.

At the very outset, I owe a debt of gratitude to Dr. Annada Charan Bhagabati, former Professor of Anthropology in Gauhati and Dibrugarh Universities and also Vice-Chancellor of Arunachal University who helped me in various ways when I worked under his guidance and supervision for my Ph.D. degree. His illustrious guidance has made my perspective sharper to focus on the work in the light of socio-cultural dimension of textile tradition in Assam. No word is adequate to express my gratitude to Dr. Bhagabati for his inspiring guidance, keen interest and encouragement throughout the course of investigation and preparation of manuscript. He has put me further in debt of gratitude by kindly agreeing to write a foreword to this book.

Data for the work were collected at actual village level through interview and observation method. My sincere thanks and indebtedness are due to the people in the field who had accepted my presence among them and offered their full co-operation and hospitality during my stay in their villages for field investigation. I am particularly grateful to Late Rajen Rabha, Late Mohini Mohon Brahma, Dr. Upen Rabha Hakacham, Mr. Khagendra Narayan Rabha, Mr. Deka Ram Rabha, Mr. Golap Deori, Mr. Golap Kutum, Mrs. Renu Brahma, Mrs. Junu Neog without whose guidance and invaluable assistance it would have been impossible for me to undertake the indepth field work.

I wish to acknowledge the help taken from various publications and express my sincere thanks and appreciation to the authors for their dedicated work.

My thanks and gratitude are due to Ms. Rosemarry Crill, the curator of the Indian Department, Victoria and Albert Museum, London, who provided me the copy of her article on Brindavani Bastra entitled Vaishnavite Silks – the figured textiles of Assam. This has indeed enlightened me about the different scenes incorporated in the Brindavani Bastra, the great silk scroll, the woven techniques and the colour schemes. This invaluable help and encouragement received from Ms. Rosemarry Crill is gratefully acknowledged.

I owe a deep sense of gratitude to my parents, in-laws, brothers, sisters, their families & our only son-in-law Manash, relatives, my colleagues and all my well-wishers for their unstinting encouragement in publication of this book.

My husband Late Amal Kumar Mazumdar had been a consistent source of

inspiration in preparing the manuscript for the book. Without his deep understanding, co-operation, technical help and active support, it would not have been possible to complete this task. My deep feelings and appreciation are also due to our only daughter Tanushree for her understanding and co-operation during the entire span of this study.

I am extremely thankful to Mr. Biman Sharma and Mr. Lohit Mohan for their sincere help in improvement of many of the plates presented in the book. My thanks and appreciation are due to Mr. Kandarpa Kachari for his technical expertise, assistance and co-operation in proper arrangement of the motifs and designs collected during the field investigation.

I would like to acknowledge the courtesy of Assam State Museum, (Plate 1, 2, 63, 68), Department of Anthropology, Gauhati University (Plate 8, 16, 84, 85, 89) and Rani Saraju Bala Naree Samiti, Gauripur (Plate 65) for their kind permission to take the relevant photographs used in this book.

My sincere thanks are due to Mr. Mridul Nath for his keen interest and the pain he has taken in planning, formatting and designing the layout of the book as well as the cover.

I take this opportunity to put on record my deep sense of appreciation and indebtedness to my younger brother Mr. Dilip Barooah for his constant encouragement towards publication of this book. Without his initiative, active involvement, constant technical guidance and constructive suggestions, it would not have been possible to bring the dream of completing the book to reality.

I remain deeply indebted to the team of Bhabani Books and Fabric Plus Pvt. Ltd. for their initiative in publishing the book.

I am also grateful to Mr. Utpal Hazarika, Proprietor, Bani Mandir, Guwahati for his encouragement and keen interest in the concerned area of study and also to artist Mr. Ranjit Gogoi.

Last but not the least, I wish to place on record my sincere thanks and gratitude to all the people who helped me in one way or the other in getting the book published.

Jorhat,
November 2013

Labanya Mazumdar

FOREWORD

“The tradition of textile production at home is an age-old feature [in Assam] which has been descending from generation to generation and the historical antecedents provide substance to the contemporary practices.”

The sentence above, from her Conclusion chapter, just about sums up Dr. Labanya Mazumdar's major finding of the painstaking field research which she undertook among various communities of Assam, in addition to library research. I should know, because as supervisor of her doctoral thesis, I was impressed and fascinated by the depth of her enquiries and her eye for details while pursuing her field work. There are any number of books on the textile tradition of Assam and other regions of India's Northeast. But Dr. Mazumdar's study is truly an empirical and comparative study, taking within its ambit not merely the textile tradition of Assam in historical perspective but also its practice in seven culturally discrete communities, mode of production of textile, motifs and designs, and, a comprehensive overview on the status of textiles in Assam as well as their role in projecting ethnic cultural identities of the regional communities.

The text is lucid and easy to read and follow, aided by vivid illustrations and photographs. In one word, the book is a remarkable, one time contribution in the sphere of Assam's cultural heritage. For the lay reader, the book is a mine of information and for the researcher the book opens up unlimited opportunities for future work.

I have great pleasure in recommending the book to the readers in their treasure hunt in the realm of textile tradition of Assam.

Annada C. Bhagabati

Tagore National Fellow,

(Formerly Professor and Head of Anthropology,

Dibrugarh and Gauhati Universities

& Vice-Chancellor, Arunachal University)

INTRODUCTION

The hand woven textiles have occupied an important place in the culture and civilization of India since very ancient times. The art of weaving has enormously contributed to the rich cultural heritage of the country. In fact, the handlooms and the weaving of myriad textiles, often of exquisite finesse and beauty, may be said to represent the very ethos of Indian culture and civilization.

The artisans living in the Indian countryside were influenced by the elements of physical environment as well as by their myths, legends, rituals, ceremonies, festivals, social organizations and cultural norms. All these elements reflected upon their respective textile traditions in one way or another. As a result, each culturally definable region of India has developed distinctive characteristics of its own in the craft of weaving and production of textiles of diverse types and designs. The weavers, whether housewives or full time artisans, worked not merely to cater to the needs of the individual, the household or the community, but also to satisfy their personal urge for self-expression and creative impulse.

Though in the yesteryears weaving had been a fairly widespread feminine activity in India, in the course of time, it became a specialized caste-bound craft practiced as a household enterprise by particular groups. The Hindu Tāntis or the Muslim Jolāhas in North-India are examples of such specialized weaver castes. Textile production became the monopoly of such castes that produced various items for the need of the wider regional populations. In areas where weaving became a caste-bound occupation, it became almost a taboo for people of other castes to operate the loom. The exception to this trend was found among some tribal populations in secluded tracts. Such tribal groups have retained their age-old tradition of weaving and textile production for their own consumption.

The Northeastern region of India comprises the states viz. Assam, Meghalaya, Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram, Nagaland, Manipur and Tripura including Sikkim, enjoys a place of pride

in the whole country for its rich heritage of artistic handloom products. There is an immensely rich assembly of tribal cultures in this region. In fact, except for the Brahmaputra and Barak Plains of Assam and the Imphal Plains of Manipur, the indigenous inhabitants of most of this large hilly region are tribal. The beautiful hand woven products of the tribals and non-tribals of this region not only reflect the skills of individual weavers and artisans, but the creative capacity and deep perception of beauty in colour and design of the people as a whole. The very socio-cultural life of the communities is revealed significantly in their textiles.

The focus of this book is on the textile tradition of the State of Assam. The handloom industry is a vital cottage industry of the state, next only to agriculture in importance. The state of Assam has a glorious heritage of artistry and fine workmanship displayed in the indigenous handloom products. It is one of the major handloom populated states in India, where weaving has always been a way of life and an indispensable aspect of the various indigenous cultural groups. The status of traditional handloom products can be judged from the remark made by Mahatma Gandhi after his visit to Assam in 1929 : "Assamese women are born weavers, they can weave fairy tales in their cloths" (cited in Census of India 1961, Vol. III, Part VII-A : 8).

In the not too distant past, it was rare to come across an Assamese home without a loom. Indeed, the loom was as precious to the Assamese maiden as life itself. An Assamese folksong describes that the loom also wept along with the members of the family on the departure of the bride to her parents-in-law's home following marriage.

The traditional handloom fabrics of Assam unfold the creative genius of the indigenous weavers: the plains Assamese as well as the tribals. Apart from cotton textiles, three varieties of silk, viz., *eri* also called *endi* (*Philosamia ricini*), *mugā* (*Antheraea assama*) and mulberry locally known as *pāt* (*Bombyx mori*) are produced in Assam. The traditional textiles, woven out of these silks were known for the fine quality, brightness of colour and durability. On the other hand, cotton textiles were known for their bright colours, specific textures and bold loom-embroidered designs. The numerically dominant Assamese-speaking peasantry of the Brahmaputra Plains and the indigenous tribal populations of the region share many cultural elements and common definitions of the situation.

There have been considerable inter-mingling of ethnic stocks since early historical times resulting in a synthesis of cultures. In the field of handloom weaving also, the influence and contributions of these various ethnic groups are easily marked, especially in the numerous designs and varieties of colour schemes of the textiles of Assam.

The unique characteristics of the textiles as well as the techniques of weaving of different ethnic groups have not been retained in all their pristine forms. Changes in many aspects have been incorporated and adopted from time to time. The inspirations and socio-cultural conditions which influence the skilful weavers of the past no longer exist with the same force or intensity. As a result, the rich textile tradition of Assam is on the decline. The indigenous textiles have been facing stiff competition from mill-made products. With all the changes that have come about since the advent of British Rule in Assam in 1826 A.D., handloom weaving is still an important cottage industry and a living craft of Assam.

The book attempts to present the status of textile production among different ethnic groups of Assam at actual village community level, their continuity and contemporary importance. In order to have a proper understanding of the present status of textiles, it is important to know its age-old traditions. This is so because the contemporary techniques of production as well as designs have their roots in the history. It is through a process of evolution that the new elements have come into existence. The historical perspective of textiles, continuity of traditions and adaptive changes through which textile production have passed in the present times are also taken into consideration in this book.

The universe for the purpose of the work encompasses the ethnic cultural communities of Assam, both tribal and non-tribals. Constraints of various kinds have not made it possible to encompass each and every ethnic cultural community of the state. The investigation is, therefore, concentrated to the selected major tribal and peasant communities living in the Brahmaputra valley and adjacent hill-tract of Assam. Accordingly, a cross section of communities such as tribals namely Bodo-Kachāri, Rābhā, Mising, Deori and Tāi-Phāke as plains tribals; Kārbi as representative hills tribal and non-tribal plains Assamese were included for the purpose of the study.

While selecting the communities due attention was paid to the prevalence of textile traditions and contemporary practices of such traditions among them. The main aim of this investigation was to chart out the textile traditions in the distinctive cultural and village settings of Assam. The approach called for an in-depth, qualitative and quantitative investigation in village setting chosen purposefully for each defined study community (Table 1). In this context, it was assumed that village-level investigation will be helpful in obtaining micro-level information of weaving and textile production in the communities methodically.

TABLE 1. VILLAGES CHOSEN FOR DEFINED STUDY COMMUNITIES

Sl. No.	Name of village	Ethnic composition	Location		
			Sub-Division	District	Area
Plains tribal :					
1	Bātābāri	All Bodo-Kachāri	Kokrajhar	Kokrajhar	Lower Assam
2	Bātāpārā	All Māitori Rābhā	Lakhipur	Goalpara	Lower Assam
3	Bar-Deori	All Deori	North Lakhimpur	Lakhimpur	Upper Assam
4	Ratanpur Miri	All Mising	Majuli	Jorhat	Upper Assam
5	Bar-Phākiāl	All Tāi-Phāke	Tinsukia	Tinsukia	Upper Assam
Hills tribal :					
6	Timung	All Kārbi	Hamren	Karbi Anglong	Hill area
Non-tribals plains Assamese :					
7	Mechāgarh Gohāin-Gāon	Āhom (as overwhelming majority), Brāhmins, Kaibartas, Muslims, Ex-Tea Garden Labourers	Sivasagar	Sivasagar	Upper Assam
8	Bagariguri	Multicaste : Kalitā, Mahanta (Kāyastha), Kaibarta, Hirā, Lālung (a plains-tribal community)	Nagaon	Nagaon	Middle Assam
9	Gandhiā	Multicaste : Ganak, Gosāin Kalitā, Muslims	Nalbari	Nalbari	Lower Assam
10	Jājari Burhā-Gāon	All Muslims	Nagaon	Nagaon	Middle Assam

Moreover, the study of textile traditions in specific village communities has helped in acquiring a holistic perception of this aspect of culture. In order to obtain the authenticity

of the continuity of textile tradition the regional and religious spares were also kept in view while selecting the villages particularly with regards to non-tribal plains Assamese. For this purpose, one village in Upper Assam with predominantly Āhom population, one village in Middle Assam with Assamese Muslim population, one multi-caste village in Lower Assam and one multi-caste village in Middle Assam were covered in village level investigation.

Since the book concentrates on the traditional textiles of Assam, the terms 'tradition' and 'traditional' are used frequently in the text. As such it is deemed necessary to explain the sense in which these are used. The terms do not specifically refer to a time plane or a point of time in history. In the anthropological sense, the term 'traditional' refers to items or elements of culture, beliefs or practices that are handed down from generation to generation. Anything that flows from the past and continues in the life of a community could be called 'traditional'. In this context, all elements, irrespective of their time of adoption by a group or community, which have been appropriately internalized by the group and considered by them as representative of their culture or heritage is traditional. In this sense, the types of yarn and fabric, textile motifs and designs, looms and accessories, etc., which a particular group of people consider as their very own could be called traditional.

The technical parameters required to be used in the text are mainly the pattern, texture, motif, design and colour. The term pattern refers to the structure of the fabric. In weaving, the two sets of yarn used as warp¹ and weft² are interlaced at right angles in different manners producing different patterns. For example, in the pattern called plain or chequed the first weft-element passes alternately over and under each warp element; the second passing over those warp-elements under which the first passed and under those over which the first passed, and so on.

Texture is the term used to refer the surface characteristics of the woven fabric including the quality conveyed by the touch of the fabric. It is also used to imply the smoothness or roughness of the fabric. For example, the fabric produced out of fine yarn in plain weave would give a smooth texture, while the fabric woven out of coarse yarn in twill, satin or such other pattern, would definitely give a different texture. Textiles produced in Assam are mostly of uniform yarn woven in plain weave producing smooth textures. However, the loin-loom products of the hill-tribals have a separate texture which is compact in nature with a distinct characteristic of its own.

1 Consists of a number of yarns laid parallel to one another in the lengthwise direction

2 The yarn passing crosswise from side to side is called weft of filling

In ornamentation of textiles, the term design³ implies the arrangement of motifs or units. These can be woven on a ground of plain or twill weaving by floating definite extra-warp⁴ or weft-element⁵. Motifs⁶ and designs—the important aspect of weaving, lend intricacies and add beauty to the fabric. In case of hand-woven textiles of Assam also, various indigenous designs with their discrete symbolic meanings play an important part. Unfortunately, these traditional motifs and designs of Assam are in many cases on the verge of disappearance. In view of this, an attempt is made to delineate the motifs and designs used by different cultural groups in their textiles traditionally.

Not only the design, but colour has played an important role in textile production too. A harmony of beautiful designs and colours is regarded as the unique characteristic of traditional textiles of Assam. An in-depth understanding on the status of dyeing of textiles with particular reference to indigenous dyes used by tribals and non-tribals in Assam is also taken into consideration.

Varieties of textile items are produced traditionally by different ethno-cultural groups of Assam. Besides obvious utility as item of everyday wear, these textiles have distinct socio-cultural significances. Very little published evidence of this socio-cultural dimension of textile is available so far. Hence, this aspect occupies a vital position in this book.

3 Design refers to the composition, produced by the regular arrangement of motifs or unit.

4 Extra-warp yarn interlace with the regular filling yarns to form a design.

5 The technique in which the extra-weft yarns, as per the design float over the main interlocking of warp and weft.

6 The elements, units or forms in a composition of design.

CONTENTS

Preface	v
Acknowledgement	vii
Foreword	ix
Introduction	xi



CHAPTER 1 :	
The Land and People of Assam	1-15
The Ethnographic Context of the Communities	



CHAPTER 2 :	
Textiles of Assam in Historical Perspective	17-29
Eri Silk Culture	20
Mugā Silk Culture	22
Mulberry (Pāt) Silk Culture	23
Status of Textiles during Ahom Rule	24
Brindāvani-bastra	24
Other Textiles of Historical Significance	27



CHAPTER 3 :	
Profile of textile traditions in Assam	31-92
The Textile Tradition of the Bodo Kachāris	33
The Textile Tradition of the Rābhās	40
The Textile Tradition of the Deoris	50
The Textile Tradition of the Misings	57
The Textile Tradition of the Tāi-Phākes	66
The Textile Tradition of the Kārbis	72
The Textile Tradition of the non-tribal plains Assamese communities	80



CHAPTER 4 :	
Mode of Production of Textiles	93-111
Raw Materials	95



Dyes and Dyeing Practices	97
Looms and Accessories	100

CHAPTER 5 :

Motifs and Designs	113-142
Floral and plant motifs	118
Animal motifs	128
Structural motifs	131
Geometrical motifs	133
Mode of preservation of design	141



CHAPTER 6 :

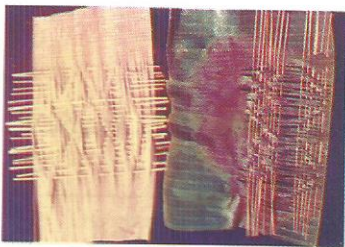
Status of Textiles : An Overview	143-156
Past and present status of textile tradition	145
Persistence and change in textile tradition – A comparative assessment	147
Commercial production of textiles	152
Socio-cultural forces in the persistence of textile tradition	153
Role of textiles in ethnic cultural identity projection	154



CHAPTER 7 :

Conclusion	157-161
-------------------	---------

Glossary of the textile items (abbreviations used to indicate the communities)	163-166
Appendix	167-175
References	177-182
List of Figures	183-184
List of Plates	185-188
List of Tables	188
Index	189-194



I

THE LAND AND THE PEOPLE OF ASSAM





THE LAND AND THE PEOPLE OF ASSAM

Assam, a land made up of the mighty expanse of the Brahmaputra Valley and Barak Valley as well as the undulating terrains of Kārbī Anglong and Dima Hasao, is an integral part of the Northeastern region of India. The State is well-known for its natural beauty, lush forests, meandering rivers, variegated topography and its culture. The present name of the province is said to be the Anglicized form of Assamese word 'Assam', which means 'uneven' or unparalleled (Chaliha 1976: 60). According to Barua (1969: 4), the name Assam is connected with the Shan invaders of Mongoloid race, known as Āhoms, who entered the Brahmaputra Valley in the beginning of the thirteenth century A.D. Āhom tradition indicates that the present name Assam is derived from 'Asama' (in the sense of 'unequaled' or 'peerless'), as the Āhom were clearly distinguishable from the native populations whom they conquered.

The present State of Assam is bounded by hills on all sides, except the south-west and west, where it shares common borders with Bangladesh. In the west, there is a narrow corridor connecting the State with the northern part of the State of West Bengal. The mighty Himalayas bound Assam in the north. Bhutan and the State of Arunachal Pradesh make up the main Himalayan tracts in the north. The Patkai ranges, stretching down from the

northeast, girdle Assam on the eastern side. Besides a part of Arunachal Pradesh, the States of Nagaland and Manipur make up the eastern borders of Assam. Mizoram lies in the extreme south, beyond the Barak Plains of Cachar and Karimganj District of Assam. The hilly State of Meghalaya lies to the south of the western (or lower) part of Brahmaputra Plains of Assam.

Assam occupies a strategically vital position in Northeast India. It is situated between latitudes 24° to 28°N and longitudes 89°42 to 96°30 E. The State has a total area of 78,438 sq. kilometers out of which the two hill districts (Kārbī Anglong and Dima Hasao) account for 15,322 sq. kilometers (Statistical Hand Book of Assam, 2001).

The plains region of Assam is broadly divided into the Brahmaputra Valley and the Barak Valley. The Brahmaputra Valley is further divided into three socio-geographical parts of Upper Assam, Middle Assam and Lower Assam. Upper Assam covers the districts of Dhemaji, Lakhimpur, Tinsukia, Dibrugarh, Sivasagar, Jorhat and Golaghat. The districts of Nagaon, Morigaon, Sonitpur, Darrang and Udalguri may be placed in Middle Assam since these lie in the central stretch of Brahmaputra Valley. Lower Assam consists of Kamrup (Metro), Kamrup (Rural), Nalbari, Barpeta, Bongaigaon, Kokrajhar, Baksa, Chirang, Dhubri and Goalpara District. Upper, Middle and Lower are the terms used to connote the course of the mighty Brahmaputra flowing from the extreme north-east to the west. These terms also imply distinctive cultural regions in the context of Assam. The Barak Valley comprises the districts of Cachar, Hailakandi and Karimganj. Kārbī Anglong and Dima Hasao are the only two hill districts.

The total population of Assam, according to the Statistical Hand Book of Assam 2009, is 2,66,55528. Two dominant racial elements are to be found in the population of Assam: the Caucasoid and the Mongoloid (Das 1985 : 1). The Caucasoid type is represented by the caste Hindu people, some professional castes and the Assamese Muslims (the Muslims came to Assam first in the early part of the thirteenth century during the Āhom reign and in different periods before the present century). Bāmun (Brāhmin), who traditionally formed a priestly caste, Kāyastha, Kalitā, Keot, Rājbanshi (also called Koch), Jugi, Kaibarta, Hirā, Kumār, Sāloi, etc., are some of the Hindu castes of Assam. The Mongoloid of Assam includes mainly the Āhoms, Bodo-Kachāris, Rābhās, Tiwās, Kārbis; Misings, Deoris, Chutiya, Morāns and the Tāi or Shān groups like the Tāi-Phāke, Khāmti, Āiton, Turung and the Khāmyang (ibid : 8-11).

Moreover, during the British rule when many tea gardens were started in Assam, various tribal groups from Bihar, Orissa, Madhya Pradesh, etc., migrated to Assam to work in the tea-gardens. In the course of time, many of their descendants accepted the Assamese language and

culture to some extent and they now form an integral part of the present Assamese population.

Das (1985: 11-12) comments on the ethnic composition of Assam in the following way : "Assam has been a meeting place of various ethnic stocks having diverse socio-cultural backgrounds who came to this part of the country during different times and from different directions".

The life and culture of various ethnic stocks have contributed towards the growth and development of a synthesized Assamese society and culture through the ages. Assam's ethnic makeup is a composite one and the same composite character, though harmoniously blended into a distinctive pattern, is reflected in various aspects of culture, economy, social organization and religion.

THE ETHNOGRAPHIC CONTEXT OF THE COMMUNITIES

Handloom weaving, as a folk art in Assam, forms an integral part of the cultural heritage of different ethnic groups having diverse socio-cultural backgrounds. The indigenous traditional handloom fabrics of Assam not only unfold the talent of Assamese weavers; it is also an indispensable aspect of the socio-economic life of the village communities. As the book aims to focus on the textile traditions of Assam in the light of their socio-cultural and religious significances, it is felt essential to understand the ethnographic context of different cultural groups in the state. In this section, based largely on secondary sources of information, an attempt is made to provide the ethnic cultural profiles of the communities, whose textiles are specifically presented in this book.

The Bodo Kachāris

The Bodo Kachāris are believed to be the original inhabitants of Assam. They ruled in the Northeastern region of India since the days of Rāmāyana and developed a distinct civilization which thrived till the later part of eighteenth century (Choudhury 1980 : 17). In the absence of any written account of the early times, it is difficult to ascertain the origin and history of the Kachāris. However, based on the ruins, relics and some toponymic instances of their time, the scholars have now established that the Bodo-Kachāri people are a section of the Indo-Chinese race of the Mongoloid stock, whose original habitat was somewhere between the upper waters of the Yangtse-Kiang and the Hoang-Ho (ibid.).

The Bodo Kachāris migrated in successive waves to the southern submontane region of the Himalayas. Gradually they spread over a considerable portion of the Brahmaputra Valley to Nilachal Hills near Guwahati. From Nilachal they migrated to the south-east and established a kingdom on the south bank of the river Brahmaputra with its capital at Dimapur. In the beginning of thirteenth century, the Kachāris occupied and ruled over the western part of Sibsagar District, a large portion of Nagaon District and the northern part of North Cachar Hills till 1535 A.D. The Āhoms, a race of people of the great Shan stock migrated to Assam in the early part of the thirteenth century. They attacked and defeated the Kachāris in 1536 A.D. The Kachāris shifted their capital to Maibong, but the Āhom king Rudra Singha invaded the Kachāri kingdom in 1706 A.D. and occupied Maibong. The Kachāri king fled to Khaspur in Cachar District. Ultimately the Kachāri kingdom was annexed to the British Empire in 1832 (Dutta 1981: 101-4).

The Kachāris called themselves Bodos or Bodo-fisā (sons of Bodos) in the Brahmaputra Valley and Dimasa or Dim-fisā (sons of the great river) in the North Cachar Hills. About the origin of the terms 'Bodo' and 'Kachāri', it is said that a sizeable branch of the race lost itself for centuries in the land locked areas of Tibet. In earlier times, it was known as Bod and hence the name Bodo or Boro. The term 'Kachāri' is presumed to be the distorted form of 'Khrohāri', 'Khro' means 'a head' and 'Hāri' means 'a clan'. Thus, 'Khrohāri' stands for a dominating clan (Choudhury 1980:17). Bodo or Boro is believed to stand for a group of people speaking the Bodo (or Boro) language, of which Kachāri is the dominant section.

At present the Bodo Kachāris, with their traditional language and culture, can be seen in particular tracts mainly in the districts of Goalpara, Kokrajhar, Kamrup, Nalbari, a portion of Darrang and in the two hill districts of Assam. The Barmans of Cachar and Kārbi Anglong; the Sonowāl and Thengāl Kachāris of Nagaon, Sivasagar, Lakhimpur and Dibrugarh are said to be the Hinduised Bodo Kachāris.

Agriculture is the mainstay of the village economy of Bodo Kachāris and Paddy is the chief crop that is cultivated. According to some scholars, the Bodo Kachāris were the first agricultural nomads to have entered Assam. They were also the first to introduce silk culture in this region which is now reckoned as the pride of Assam (Choudhury 1980 :20).

The Bodo-Kachāris have a thriving language belonging to Tibeto-Burman group. In the present days, Bodo-Kachāris are found having different religious faiths. Some of them adopted Hinduism, a very limited number adopted Christianity, while the others still profess

the traditional tribal religion of their own. The customs and cultures of the latter are found to be retained fairly intact. Bāthow or Sibrāi represented by the Siju plant, is the primal God of the Bodo-Kachāris. They cremate their dead. The most important religious festival of Bodo-Kachāris is Kherāi, a fertility festival, where the God Bāthow is worshipped for peace and prosperity of the community.

The Rābhās

The Rābhās, one of the scheduled tribes of Assam Plains, are distributed in Kamrup, Nalbari, Barpeta, Goalpara, Darrang and Sonitpur Districts of Assam. A section of Rābhās also inhabit the northern slopes of the Garo Hills (in Meghalaya), bordering Goalpara. Rābhās are also found in the northern part of West Bengal. There are varied opinions regarding the origin of the Rābhās. According to some scholars Rābhās form a distinct tribe, while others say that the Rābhās are an off-shoot of the Kachāri tribe. Das (1960:3) holds the view that the ethnic origin of the Rābhās is Mongoloid, but they are not an off-shoot of the Kachāris. This view regarding the origin of Rābhās is regarded as most recent and un-refuted (Choudhury 1980:60).

The Rābhās comprise a number of socio-cultural sub-groups, viz., Rangdāni, Māitori, Pāti, Dāhari, Bitlia, Totalā, etc. The Rābhās speak a language slightly different from that of the Kachāris, though both belong to the same branch of Tibeto Burman. At present, the Rābhā language is spoken by the Rangdāni and Māitori sub-groups of the tribe. These two sub-groups, which inhabit the region of Goalpara and northern slopes of the Garo Hills, retained much of their traditional culture. The Rābhās are agriculturists with paddy being the chief crop.

A majority of the Rābhās have adopted Hinduism. Among others also, the traditional religion has incorporated elements of Hinduism. The ideological and behavioural conceptions, which they have developed since time immemorial under the influence of a typical ecology, have still retained their grip on the people. This is generally found to be true not just among the Rābhās but, among all the plains tribes of Assam (Choudhury 1980:65).

The Rābhās also cremate their dead. They observe a yearly festival for the dead kin of the clan, which is known as Fārkhānthi. Their biggest festival of the year is Bāikhu, which appears to be a fertility festival. Kingfisher is their sacred bird, and they respect it almost like a totem. They use a replica of the bird as a mascot during the performance of traditional religious dances.

The Deoris

While the Bodo-Kachāri and the Rābhās are typical tribes of Lower Assam Plains, the Deoris are tribal people of Upper Assam Plains region. The Deoris are recognized as one of the important scheduled tribes of Assam. Ethnically, they belong to the Bodo group of Tibeto-Mongolian origin. Historically, the Deoris were a priestly section of the Chutiyas, who ruled the northeastern part of Assam from 1187 A.D. to 1522 A.D. (Saikia 1976:1).

The term 'Deori' is said to be derived from the word 'Deva' which means God. Hence, the people conducting religious performance in the temples or elsewhere on different occasions are called Deori (Choudhury 1980 : 94). It is evident from the sub-divisions of the Chutiyās as stated by Endle (1911:91) and Gait (1926:41-43) that the Deoris were a clan of the Chutiyās. They divided the Chutiyās into four main sub-division viz., the Hindu Chutiyās, the Āhom Chutiyās, the Deuri Chutiyās (Priestly clan) and the Barāhi Chutiyās (the pork eating clan).

The Chutiyā kingdom was subjugated to the Āhom kingdom when the Āhom defeated the Chutiyās in 1522 A.D. As a result, the Chutiyās were assimilated in the greater Assamese society and accepted Hinduism as their religion leaving aside their own traditions. But the Deoris, the priestly section of Chutiyās, preferred to adhere to their own tribal religion which is still followed by a large section of the Deoris.

At present, the Deoris are living mainly in the districts of Lakhimpur, Dibrugarh, Sivasagar, Jorhat and Sonitpur. Deori villages are generally found in the riverine areas having fertile arable land. The houses are built on bamboo platforms, raised about 5 to 6 feet above the ground on wooden posts and always facing towards the east. It is interesting to note that while the Kachāris and the Rābhās live in houses with earthen plinth like those of other Assamese peasantry, the Deoris, though plains inhabitants, still prefer to live in platform houses. Agriculture is the main economy of the people and paddy is the chief crop cultivated.

The Deoris are bilingual and speak both Assamese and their own dialect. Deori is still the language used at home. They attach much importance and value to their religion. Many people identify themselves as Hindus. Girā Girāchi (Lord Siva and his consort Parvati) are the supreme deities of Deori pantheon. The Deoris usually cremate their dead, but in the case of death due to epidemics the dead bodies are buried.

The Bohāg Bihu and Māgh Bihu observed in the month of Bohāg (April-May) and Māgh (January-February), respectively, are their main festivals. These are closely connected with the religious and agricultural life of the Deoris.

The Misings

The Mising, officially recorded as 'Miri', is one of the major groups of plains, tribes of Assam. Etymology of the term 'Miri' is debatable which now appears derogatory to the people. Gait (1926 : 373) noted that 'Miri' means 'go between' or middle man. It is said that they were really go betweens in the matter of trade between the Government of Āhoms and the hill men. As suggested by Pegu (1981: 5), the word 'Miri' is derived from the improper intonation of an Adi word 'Mirui' meaning an institution of priest or poet. In this respect, Pamegam (1962 : 155-162) holds his view that the term Mising is derived from a combination of the word 'Mi' (man) and 'Asi' (water). As the people of this tribe never called themselves Miris, they prefer the autonym Mising.

The Mising was originally a hill tribe and inhabitant of the sub-Himalayan region of northeast India. They migrated down to the Brahmaputra Valley through different routes perhaps in the 16th century A.D. (Pegu 1978 : 3). Gradually, they had to adopt themselves to the new environment in the valley and thus, grew up a new social order in the areas north of the river Brahmaputra in Upper Assam. They belong to the Tibeto-Burman linguistic family of the great Mongoloid race and have Mongoloid features.

The present habitat of the Misings is on the strips of alluvial land along the northern bank of the river Brahmaputra from the large island Majuli to the river Dehong, the northern branch of the Brahmaputra. Mising villages have spread over wide areas of Lakhimpur, Dibrugarh, Sivasagar, Jorhat and Sonitpur districts and even small parts of plains portion of Arunachal Pradesh.

The Misings generally build their houses by the bank of a river, perpendicular to the mainstream. Like the Deoris, the Misings also build the houses on bamboo platform raised about 5 to 6 feet above the ground supported by rows of wooden posts.

The Misings are essentially agriculturists. They concentrate their efforts in Āhu paddy cultivation, which occupies a very significant place in their socio-cultural life. In earlier days a plot of land was especially kept for cotton farming. The indigenous cotton was much in demand for use in weaving of Miri jim (called gādoos by the Misings), a special type of cotton rug.

They speak a language termed Tāni-agam or Tāni language, which belongs to the north Assam section of the Tibeto-Burman stock (Choudhury 1980:43). As regards their beliefs, Pegu

(1978:4) states as follows: "By faith the Mising people were originally worshipper of 'Donyi-Polo' (Sun-Moon) cult practiced in the Adi hills (Lower and Upper Siang districts) of Arunachal Pradesh, but their thoughts and beliefs have been largely influenced by the Hinduism. The Vaishnavite Satras, near the Mising villages in Majuli also have great influence in their socio-cultural life".

The Misings never burn the dead, but dig a grave called ago (Pegu 1981-153). The corpse is bathed, clothed with favorite items of dress of the deceased, placed in a long coffin and then carried to the cemetery.

'Āli-aye-ligāng' and 'Po-rāg' are the most important social festivals celebrated by the Misings. Āli-aye-ligāng is celebrated invariably in spring and generally on the first Wednesday of the month of Fāgun (February-March). It is considered to be a festival of rich cultural significance. It is a festival of praying, dancing and drinking when the ceremonial sowing of a handful of Āhu paddy seeds in the earth is performed. The closing of harvest is marked by another celebration called Po-rāg, observed either in autumn or spring or also after an interval of two to five years, because of expensive and elaborate arrangements.

The Tāi-Phākes

The Tāi-Phākes of Upper Assam, also known as Phākiāls, are one of the ethnic groups of the Tāi family. The Tāi is a general name denoting a great branch of the Mongoloid population of Asia. The history of their origin and migration to Assam is still shrouded in obscurity. However, writers and researchers have attempted to construct a historical narrative of the early periods of this race out of the available data in fragments and fables. Barua (1969:8) states that in the 13th century one of the Tāi or Shan, the Āhom overran and conquered Assam itself, giving their name to the country. The Āhom were followed by some other Shan tribes like the Khāmtis, Phākiāls, Āitons, Turungs, and Khāmyangs. These tribes were sparsely distributed in certain parts of Dibrugarh, Sivasagar and Jorhat districts of Assam and Lohit district of Arunachal Pradesh. The Phake or Phakials call themselves Tāi-Phāke.

The river Burhidihing, the banks of which are the abode of the Tāi-Phākes, originates in the Patkai Hills. After leaving the hills it flows along the southern border of Dibrugarh district and passes through Margherita, Jaipur, Naharkatia and Khowang. Accordingly, on reaching Assam, the Phākes started living on the banks of the river Burhidihing (Rajkumar 1955 :26-27).

Agriculture is the major occupation of the Tāi-Phāke people and they concentrate all their attention upon this economic activity. The Phakes are bilingual. Amongst them they speak the Tāi language, but they use Assamese language with Assamese people among whom their villages are located. The Tai-Phakes although a lesser known Buddhist population with its microcosmic existence, is still preserving the traditional traits of their socio-cultural life to a considerable extent (Sharma Thakur, 1982:237).

They practise their own religion which is Buddhism. Each Tāi-Phāke village has a Buddha Vihar (temple) constructed in a central place. All the religious beliefs and practices of the Phākes centre round the Buddha Vihar. Poi Chang Ken i.e. festival of bathing the images of Lord Buddha and Poi-Kitting, the festival of offering a symbolic dress to the image of Lord Buddha are the major festivals of Tāi-Phākes. Death is considered as a natural phenomenon among Phākes. In disposing the dead bodies, cremation is the rule for natural deaths in the case of abnormal deaths, burial is prescribed.

The Kārbis

The Kārbis are one of the distinctive Tibeto-Burman tribal groups of Assam and recognized as a scheduled hill tribe. They are said to be one of the few most ancient races of Assam. The Kārbis are also called Mikir by some; but the name does not find any place in the vocabulary of the Kārbis (Gohain 1984:2). According to the Kārbi people, the name Mikir is a misnomer and is now completely replaced by the word Kārbi. They also call themselves Ārleng, which means man. Lyall (1908:4) writes that Ārleng means a Mikir man, not man in general.

At one time, all the hilly areas from east of Guwahati to Bokakhat (in Golaghat district) were habitats of the Kārbis (ibid : 3). According to Gohain (1984:1-2) the Kārbis living in the district of Karbi Anglong are decidedly the most colourful of the tribes. Moreover, the Kārbi people living in the Hamren sub-division of Karbi Anglong district, still retain the old traditions and culture of the Karbi people.

The Kārbis, especially the hill Kārbis, are generally agriculturists by profession. Though at present a few of them are being absorbed in other occupations, the people stick to agriculture as the main source of livelihood. Generally the Kārbi villages consist of a number of households under a village headman and very often, the name of the village is given after the name of a headman.

Racially the Kārbis belong to the Mongoloid group, while linguistically they belong to the Tibeto-Burman group (Bordoloi 1982; Preface). The original religion of the Kārbis have many similarities with Hinduism. Hemphu, means God of the house, is the Supreme God who is supposed to be the owner of the Kārbi people.

They cremate their dead. After death, the body is bathed and dressed in new clothes. As per customs, the body is generally kept inside the house for three days to observe the pre-disposal rites. The most elaborate as well as important socio-religious festival of the Kārbis is the Chomangkan, which follows an event of death (Bordoloi 1982:1-2).

Chojun puja or Swarak puja, Rongker and Sokk-croi are observed as their annual festivals, out of which the Rongker, meaning worship, is considered as the annual festival of the village. It is celebrated generally at the beginning of cultivation. Jāmbeli-āthon, the intricate traditional wood carving of a symbolic tree with birds (a species of the bird of paradise) is used as a mascot for the socio-religious functions of the Kārbis.

The Āhoms

The Āhoms, an offshoot of the Tāi or Shan race of the Mongoloid group came to Assam in the early part of the thirteenth century. The Āhoms are the only Mongoloid race, whose arrival in Assam is historically recorded. From the time of their coming in 1228 A.D., a systematic history of Assam is also found. They recorded their own activities from the beginning to the end of their reign in the chronicles called buranjis (Gait 1926 : 71). The Āhoms established their settlement first in the Valley of Namrup River, which at the later stage they developed into a kingdom. In the course of time, they became very powerful and the whole of present day Assam came gradually under the sway of Āhom Rulers. Since they believed that they had no equals, they called themselves 'Asam' (peerless), from which are derived the words Āhom and Assam (Barua 1969 : 4).

Besides the historical facts about the origins of Āhoms and their arrival into Assam, like all ancient people, the Āhoms too have their own legends about their origin. These legends described them as descendants of the Lord of heaven, whom the Hindus call Indra, and the Deodhais designate as Lengdon (Dutta 1981:87).

During their reign, the Āhoms brought into existence a stabilized policy, a balanced society, a liberalized economy and an efflorescent cultural life in Assam (Basu 1970 : 342).

Specially, Rudra Singha had a very wide cultural vision and during his reign Assam established widespread cultural contact with the rest of India.

According to Basu (1970 : 162-169), due to the patronage of the Āhom kings the craft of handloom weaving flourished and developed. They took special care and evinced keen interest for the development of this traditional craft. Barua (1969 : 104-105) writes that the Āhom Kings patronized the production of all kinds of silk in Assam. They established a department of weaving and maintained skilled weavers to supply the royal wardrobe with clothes. These weavers received special incentives like grants of rent-free lands and other favours in return for their services. It was during the Āhom period that the traditional dress of Assamese women began to be made from mugā and pāt silks (Das Gupta 1982: 189-191).

The Vaishnavite Satra institution came into being during the Āhom rule. The Āhom kings and nobles, who accepted Vaishnavism, strengthened the Satra as a great social force (Basu 1970: 246-249). These Satras played an important role not only in the sphere of religion, but it enriched the Assamese life socially and educationally and also contributed a great deal to the cultural life of the people of Assam.

The reign of Āhoms came to an end in the year 1826 with the annexation of Assam by the British. Though the Āhoms were originally Tāi or Shan speakers, in Assam they gradually abandoned their language in favor of Assamese and adopted the Assamese language as their own, which they also developed greatly (Gogoi 1961 : Preface). The Āhoms became hinduised by the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries. Though scattered all over the Brahmaputra Valley, the largest concentration of Āhom population is to be found in Jorhat, Sivasagar, Dibrugarh and Lakhimpur Districts.

The Assamese Muslims

Migration of Muslims into Assam and their integration into the indigenous social framework has added colour and variety to the pattern of life in Assam. It is evident from the historical records that the Muslims first came to Assam in the early part of the thirteenth century (Das 1985 : 7). Muhammad Bin Bakhtiar Khiliji, a Muslim general of Qutubuddin invaded Assam in 1205-1206 A.D., but lost the battle. It has been presumed that some Muslim soldiers preferred to live in Assam instead of going back with their defeated leader. Thereafter, several attempts at invasion of Assam by the Muslim rulers continued intermittently with varying

degree of success. Each time Assam was invaded, some Muslims were left behind in Assam and gradually they settled in Kamrup and Goalpara Districts (ibid.: 8).

Many Muslim saints entered Assam with the invading Muhammadan army. Some of these saints stayed in the region while others might have returned after a short stay (Saikia 1978 : 186). Moreover, the Muslim religious leaders or Pirs used to visit Assam to minister to the spiritual needs of the Muslims. They were encouraged by the Āhom monarchs to settle down in Assam by granting revenue free lands known as Pir-Pal lands.

Thus, a traditional Assamese Muslim community gradually came into being. This includes the descendants of the Mughal soldiers left behind in Assam; the Muslim saints; Muslim religious leaders or Pirs; other immigrants who came in small number at different periods. Das (1985:8) gives a very clear, concise idea about the adjustment and assimilation of Assamese Muslims in the cultural life of Assam as follows:

“The cultural similarities between the two are also noteworthy. This is perhaps due to the fact that conversion generally took place through marriage. Moreover, there was no large scale migration of Muslims in the past. They came in small numbers at different times and gradually became part of the greater Assamese community”.

The contribution of the Assamese Muslims in the development of art and crafts, especially in the field of textiles, is worth mentioning. From the historical records it is evident that Muslims had introduced several techniques and designs in the Assamese textiles and contributed with their sincere service in the development of this craft in Assam.

The Assamese caste-Hindu peasantry

In addition to the Āhoms, the Brahmaputra plains of Assam is the abode of a number of Hindu caste populations. The Hindu caste people in Assam are recognized in two broad categories. These are Bāmun (Brahmin) and the Sudir (Sudra : non-Brahmin) (Das 1987 : 12).

The Brahmins are widely distributed in the Assam plains, though their number may not be large in the context of particular villages where they live. The traditional calling of the Brahmins is preaching (especially in the case of Gosāin segment), priesthood and teaching. Though many Brahmins are basically dependent on agriculture they do not themselves operate the plough. It is considered taboo for them to handle the plough and bullocks to till the land. There is, however, no ritual restriction in other associated tasks of agriculture and many Brahmins in the rural areas do, in fact, work in their respective fields, except for the ploughing

operation. In recent years, a large number of Brahmins are found to be in salaried occupations, made possible by the spread of modern education.

The Sudir group includes several castes of different socio-religious positions. Among them, the Kalitās form the most populous and dominant caste of Assam. The Kalitā caste is said to be a speciality of Assamese caste system. Das (1987 : 12) refers to several accounts as regards their origin, migration and occupation. According to one such account, Kalitās were originally Kāyasthas, but as they took to agriculture they assumed a new name and formed a separate caste (ibid.).

The Kāyasthas, comparatively small in number, are mainly found in Lower Assam. Hamilton (1940 : 53-4) describes the literate Kāyasthas as the religious guides for most of the other castes. The Koch is another agricultural caste and forms a large population of Assam. According to Barua (1956 : 48) the Kochs ruled for a long time over Assam and North Bengal till they were ultimately over-thrown by the Āhoms and the Muhammedans about the beginning of the seventeenth century. In the districts of Goalpara, Kokrajhar and Dhubri, Kochs are known even to this day as Rājbanshis, which means men of the royal lineage.

The Chutiyā kingdom formerly extended over the present districts of Jorhat, Sivasagar and Lakhimpur up to Sadiya in the extreme northeast. It was finally conquered by the Āhoms in 1500 A.D. (Cantlie 1984 : 243). The Chutiyās absorbed a good number of Āhom through inter-marriage and other social exchanges. This ultimately evolved a new section of people called the Āhoms-Chutiyās (Barua 1956 : 49).

The other castes, who belong to the Sudir fold are the Kaibarta, the Keot, the Kumār, the Hirā, the Sut, the Nāth, etc. Most of these castes are named according to their traditional occupations. The traditional occupation of the Kaibartas is fishing. The Keot is an agricultural caste, Hirās are potters, who make pottery with hand without using the potter's wheel. The Kumārs make pottery with the help of the wheel. Mulberry silk culture is the traditional occupation of the Nāths. They are also known as Jugis or Kātonis.

Among all these caste groups of Assam, weaving is extensively practiced at home by the women folk to meet day-to-day requirements. It is because of this, that in Assam, there is no separate caste of weavers or Tāntis, as is to be found in most other parts of India including neighboring Bengal.

II

TEXTILES OF ASSAM: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE



TEXTILES OF ASSAM: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Handloom weaving is an ancient craft of Assam. It is widely known for its beauty as well as simplicity. Though the precise time of origin of handloom weaving in Assam is difficult to ascertain, its extensive practice among nearly all sections of people points to its very early adoption as a part and parcel of the regional culture. It is certainly among the most important cottage industries that have flourished in Assam from time immemorial. Different streams of population, each carrying with it distinct elements of culture and civilization, entered Assam at different periods of time. It is reasonable to assume that handloom weaving in Assam must have come to this region along with those early immigrants in prehistoric and historic times.

The ancient literature and archeological sources give excellent evidence of the textiles of Assam, when Assam was better known as Kāmrupa. In the Mahābhārata, the Kirāta army of King Bhagadatha of Kāmrupa was described as attired in bark cloth. The mention of cotton in the Kālikā Purāna and Harsacharita gives evidence of the availability of cotton in ancient Assam.

In the Arthasāstra, Kautilya refers to a place known as Suvarnakudya in the eastern part of India and stated that the best type of dukulā was from Suvarnakudya. The dukulā as stated by Barua (1969 : 104) was as red as the

sun as soft as the surface of the gem and uniform or mixed texture, woven while the threads were still wet. Choudhury (1966 :341-2) identified the place Suvarnakudya as Sonkundihā, a village in Kamrup district and dakulā has been interpreted as nothing but mugā silk of Assam. The identification of dakulā as mugā silk is borne out by the fact that even today mugā silk is woven with wet yarn, at least in the weft.

The fame of Assamese textiles has been recorded even in the Harsacharita. It is said that King Bhāskaravarman of Kāmrupa (594-650 A.D) sent some gifts including varieties of fine textiles to King Harshabardhana of Kanauj. The most important variety of textile was in the shape of a white silk parasol known as ābhogā which was wrapped in a piece of mugā silk cloth (Das Gupta 1982 : 189). Hiuen Tsiang, the Chinese traveller of the sixth century, had also left valuable records about the textiles of Kamrupa, i.e., ancient Assam.

Though a considerable amount of cotton was produced in Assam, the region's specialization was in the varieties of silk. Assam has as hoary a tradition in silk culture as in handloom weaving. Silk culture is a traditional cottage industry rooted in the rural life and culture of Assam. To quote Choudhury (1966:338-340), "The art of sericulture and rearing of cocoons for the manufacture of various silk clothes were known to the Assamese as early as the Rāmāyana and the Arthasāstra".

Sericulture in Assam comprises mulberry (pāt) and non-mulberry silkworm culture. The latter includes eri and mugā. Eri and mugā silks are considered to be of indigenous origin and found nowhere in the world except Assam and the foot-hills of Meghalaya (Baruah 1982:15). The State of Assam occupies a unique position in the sericulture map of the world because of eri and mugā silks. It is evident from various studies that as a cottage industry, sericulture is an effective means for generating gainful employment in rural Assam. It can play an important role in the context of building the rural economy of this region.

Eri silk culture

Eri, Endi or Erandi is a type of wild silk, cocoons of which are collected only after the moth emerges. Eri silk worm (*Philosamia ricini*) derives its name from the castor oil plant (*Ricinus communis*), called erā in Assamese, on which it is usually fed. Eri silk cocoon is open at one end for which the silk does not form into a continuous filament. Hence, the eri silk is spun not reeled.



Eri silk culture has always remained as a subsidiary occupation of Indo-Mongoloid and Tibeto-Burman ethnic groups of the Brahmaputra valley i.e., the Assam plains and adjacent hill areas. It is carried out traditionally by the rural and tribal women-folk in their leisure hours.

Eri culture is the only culture that does not necessitate the killing of silk moths in the

process of producing yarn from the cocoon. Moths are allowed to emerge conveniently at their own. Therefore, eri silk is known as Ahimsā silk. It is also called Non-Violent Silk, which can be defined as the silk yarns produced without violating the natural law of 'live and let live' and thus, without the process of killing the moths while inside the cocoons. As such, Non-Violent Silk (NVS) can only be produced from open-mouthed cocoons or pierced cocoons.

Allen (1905: 160) mentions that eri silk was produced mostly in Lower Assam. Chowdhury (1982:7-9) also states that North Cachar and Karbi Anglong Hills Districts, Kokrajhar, Goalpara, Barpeta, Nalbari, Kamrup, Darrang and Sonitpur districts are the chief eri silk cocoon rearing areas of Assam. Eri silk is also produced in most of the districts of Upper Assam. The rearers utilize the limited cocoons they produce for the production of family's requirements, mainly wrappers or shawls of various sizes.

Eri silk has its own distinguished properties like softness, iso-thermic (cool in summer and very warm in winter), comfortable, being handspun with natural denier variation and special texture. Eri silk is primarily associated with winter wear, as protection against cold. The coarse, durable eri silk cloth is regarded as the silk of the poor. The status of eri clothes in the folk life of Assam can easily be gauged from an old Assamese proverb, "*dair pāni, erir kāni*" which implies that while curd cools the eri clothes warms up a person (Allen 1899:10).



Mugā silk culture

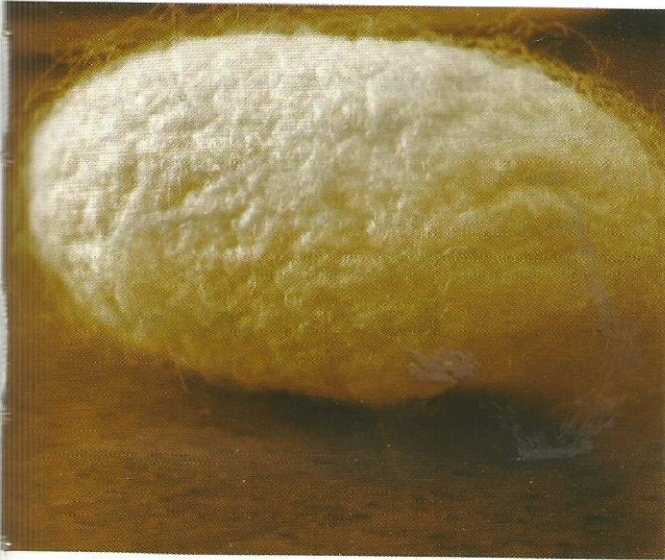
Among the three varieties of silk (eri, mugā and pāt) production of mugā silk is exclusive prerogative of Assam and is considered most valuable. It is indigenous to Brahmaputra Valley and assiduously practiced in the districts of Upper Assam. The most important mugā cocoon rearing villages lie in Lakhimpur, Dibrugarh, Sivasagar and Jorhat districts. It is mainly grown in the southern part of Jorhat and south-east of Sivasagar, chiefly by the Āhom

community (Chowdhury 1981 : 13-14). It is also said that Mariani (in Jorhat district) was once the chief mugā cocoon growing area, specially for Chapā or Pān-chapā as well as Mejānkari or Ādākuri varieties of mugā silk.

Mugā silk worm (*Antheraea assama*) is basically a wild variety. It is commonly fed on som (*Machilus odoratissima*) tree in Upper Assam and suālu (*Litsaeapolyantha*) in Lower Assam. Mejānkari (*Litsaea citrata*) and Pān-chapā (*Magnolia sphenocarpa*) are secondary host plants. Mugā silk in general is rich golden yellow or light brown in colour depending on the host plant on which the worms are fed and the season.

Mugā silkworm fed on Mejānkari, produce fine silk of bright golden colour. Fine, glossy white silk comes out of worms fed on Pān-chapā (Ibid : 25-26). The Mejankari and Chapā (also called chapā-patiā) silks were considered as luxury fabrics used only by the members of Āhom royal families and other nobilities. These two varieties of silk were very much prized by the Assamese people, but the culture of these special varieties are now quite forgotten and rarely met with. Production of mugā cocoon in general has declined in certain tracts, where it was once prolific.

Most of the cocoons ultimately are purchased by the traders of Sualkuchi (in Kamrup district of Lower Assam), where commercial reeling and weaving are done almost as a monopoly (Baruah 1982 : 17). Though the bulk of the rearing is done in Upper Assam, the womenfolk



there reel a very small quantity of cocoon to utilize in their looms for household use. The textile items made out of mugā silk are rihā, mekhelā, chādar, sāree, dhoti, dress material, etc.

Mulberry (Pāt) silk culture

Mulberry silk industry in Assam is also pretty ancient. The climatic condition of Assam is favorable for mulberry culture. Mulberry silk, locally called pāt, is produced by a silkworm, known as *Bombyx mori*,

which feeds solely on mulberry (*Morus indica*) leaves. Hence, the name of the silk.

Though there is no caste bias in weaving and silk rearing in Assam, the mulberry silk culture was originally practiced by a caste known as Jugi or Kātoni. However, this caste-based specialization has almost disappeared now-a-days. Beceriā, Bihaguri (near Tezpur), Patharighāt, Sipājhar (near Mongaldoi), Morābazār and Salaguri (near Nāmtidol in Sivasagar) were once important locales for the production of mulberry silk (Das Gupta 1982 : 196).

The mulberry yarn reeled by the rural folk are primarily meant for domestic consumption. The traders of Sualkuchi, where silk weaving is done commercially, are reluctant to use the silk yarn produced in the rural homes of Assam because of lack of uniformity and standard quality. The commercial weavers purchase the twisted mulberry silk from Karnataka. Mulberry silk is light and cool; has sheen and is strong, delicate and resilient. It is used in Assam primarily for manufacturing items of dress such as mekhelā, chādar, rihā, sāree, dhoti, men's upper garment, etc.

Gogoi (1982 :302) narrates a story in a 'mantra' (hymn) used by the silkworm rearers. According to this, Lord Siva gave a species of silkworm to a man of Kachāri tribe. Based on this, it can be said that the art of sericulture and weaving was introduced into Assam by the Kachāris, when part of Assam was ruled by them during the Pre-Āhom period. But very little is known about the handloom weaving prior to Āhom rule.

Status of Textiles during Āhom Rule:

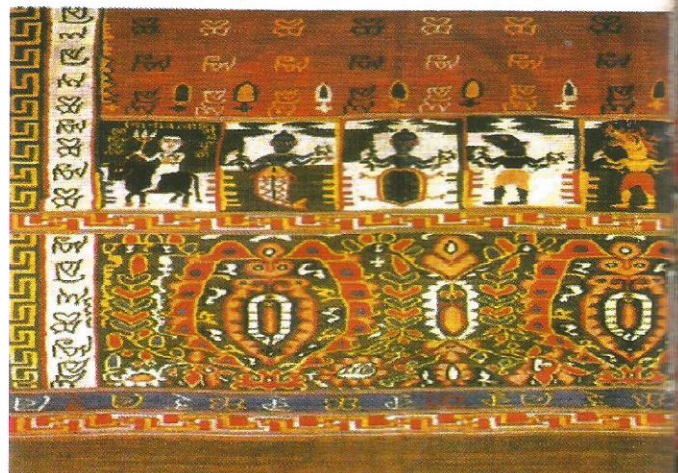
The field of artistic activity in which Assam excelled during Āhom rule was the art of handloom weaving. Due to the patronage of the Āhom kings (1228-1826 A.D.), handloom weaving as a household craft flourished and developed. Adequate measures taken by the Āhom kings contributed to the rapid development of handlooms and also made the weavers skilful (Baruah 1969:104-105 and Das Gupta 1982:189).

The days of King Pratap Singha (1603-1641 A.D.) witnessed an era of State patronage for the textile industry (Das Gupta 1982 : 180-190). During his reign, under the close supervision of Momai Tamuli Barbarua, a minister, spinning and weaving were made compulsory craft to be practised in every household. The Administration ordained that every able-bodied woman in the household must spin a certain amount of silk yarn every day before sunset. The defaulters had to face physical punishment. It is said that this was scrupulously followed by the people to avoid punishment. Moreover, every household had to present to the king one powā (approximately 250 Gms) of silk yarn per year. Though such compulsions disappeared in the post Āhom period, spinning and weaving were still regarded as necessary accomplishments for women, including unmarried girls.

The Āhom ruler Pratap Singha also made it possible for many weavers to settle down who were drawn from different places of Assam, in the village of Suālkuchi on the north bank of Brahmaputra in Kamrup district of Lower Assam. The weavers of Suālkuchi and those of nearby Palāsbāri (on the north bank of the Brahmaputra) were known to be experts in both spinning and weaving. Their work attracted the attention of the Muslim invaders who came to Assam during that period. Some of them also learned these crafts gradually and settled down in Assam. They came to be known as Jolāha-Kātoni (Gogoi 1982:305). These villages, particularly Suālkuchi, have even to this day retained their tradition of silk weaving.

Brindāvani-bastra

In the olden days, there were a few professional weaving castes, such as the Tāntis and Muhamadan Jolāha who were mostly



Scenes from Brindāvani-bastra, the great silk scroll

engaged in weaving finer fabrics for the royalty and other dignitaries (Basu 1970:162-163).

The word Tānti, derived from the Sanskrit word Tāntuvaya, denotes a class of people, whose profession is weaving. But no record is available to indicate clearly the sex of those professional weavers. It was probably a profession of male weavers till the reign of Koch King Naranārāyana (1540-1587 A.D.) of Cooch Behar. Weaving as a masculine occupation is evident from the Brindāvani-bastra, a great cloth which was woven during that period. How and when the craft of weaving in Assam passed onto the hands of women and became primarily a feminine activity, is not clearly known.

Brindāvani-bastra with its distinctive workmanship unfolds the creative and artistic talents of the weavers of Tantikuchi (near Barpetta) in particular, and Assam in general. Das Gupta (1982) describes this significant cloth as tapestry. Brindāvani-bastra was the creation of great Vaishnavite leader and reformer Shri Sankaradeva in the mid 16th century at the request of King Naranārāyana. This great silk scroll depicted the eventful life history and activities of Lord Shri Krishna from Lord's birth till the episode of the killing of Kansa by him.

The Brindāvani-bastra was named after Brindavan, a place in modern day Uttar Pradesh where Krishna grew up. The literary sources revealed that the creation of Brindāvani-bastra took place initially as the narration made by Sankaradeva on Lord Krishna's life in the royal court of the King Naranārāyana. The King and Prince Chilārāi, brother of Nāranārāyana

was so impressed that they wanted to see it visually. Depiction of Shri Krishna's early life at Brindāvan in the form of painting on the floor with various colours impressed the king further. Finally, Sankaradeva was requested to get the scenes woven in the form of silk scroll for its preservation.

Accordingly, the Brindāvani-bastra, systematically designed by Sankaradeva was woven by local weavers in Tāntikuchi under the supervision of master weaver Gopalatta and direct guidance from Sankaradeva. The original cloth with intricately woven designs is said to be 120 cubits long and 60 cubits



Scenes from Brindāvani-bastra, the great silk scroll

wide approximately. All the sources of information agree that twelve master weavers took one year to weave this great cloth. The scroll was presented to King Naranārāyana just before Sankaradeva's death in 1569. It is evident from the literature that the Brindāvani-bastra was housed in the Madhupur Satra at Cooch Behar.

Unfortunately, the Brindāvani-bastra disappeared at some unknown time and no one is sure about what happened to this original scroll. However, recent literature on this valuable cloth reveals some interesting information on availability of some pieces of silk textiles with figure from Tibet. Furthermore, literary evidence linking these pieces of cloth to the creation of the one by Assamese religious leader Sankaradeva indicates that these might have been the parts of the great Brindāvani-bastra.

Ms. Rosemary Crill, the Curator of the Indian Department, Victoria and Albert Museum, London who specializes in the study of Indian textiles and painting has many acclaimed publications on Brindāvani-bastra. As mentioned by her, nearly 15 exquisite pieces of original scroll reached Europe from Tibet which are almost certain to have originated in Assam in the Middle ages. The curators of different museums in United States of America and England had at first been skeptical about the exact origin of these textile pieces and suspected them to be of Bengal origin – Crill stated. This suspicion was based on the fact that there had been neither any evidence of any such cloth being woven in Assam nor had any existing pieces of them being found in this region. However, further analysis on these pieces changed the concept as the silk, either mugā or eri, used in this great cloth was produced exclusively in Assam.

Crill's comprehensive research on Brindāvani-bastra revealed that such exquisite pieces were woven in complicated methods with a technique akin to the Lampas of Italy. In Lampas technique, ornamentation of fabric is made with two sets of warp and one filling usually in different colours. This technique is generally used to produce drapery and upholstery fabric similar to satin damask made of silk, rayon, wool or cotton or combination of these yarns. While interpreting the scenes used in these pieces of great Brindāvani-bastra, they show several avatars of Vishnu, Garuda, and Krishna with the gopis (female cowherds), scenes from the Ramayana including the demon Ravana with Hanuman, the monkeys and Bali and Sugriva fighting, Krishna killing the crane demon Bakasura, the Naga King Kaliya, the snake demon Aghasura, Krishna holding up Mount Govardhan, etc. were also incorporated in embellishment of this cloth as stated by Ms. Crill. These scenes were intricately and harmoniously woven mostly on crimson background with variety of coloured yarns such as red, white, black, yellow, green, etc.

Each scene had its caption below it, in ancient Assamese language and the letters too were loom embroidered, Das Gupta (1982).

Availability of majority of the pieces of Brindāvani-bastra in Tibet raises another question about their use and distribution there. The Indian silk including silks from Assam, had long been prized in Tibet which were adopted for use as hangings, canopies, etc. in Buddhist monasteries of Tibet and Bhutan. As such, it is not surprising that the textiles with such scenes of Hindu background could find place in those monasteries. According to Crill, after disappearance of the great bastra from Madhupur Satra at Cooch Behar it would have been easily transported to Tibet via the well-used trade route along the valley of river Teesta to Gangtok and Yatung. Literature also revealed that Assam had trade relations with Tibet in those days and the Assamese merchants are known to have traded silk as well as rice, iron, skins and horns, etc. to Tibet in return for silver and salt. The Brindāvani-bastra if not in original form, in pieces might have been readily available to those traders for that purpose.

About the longevity of this great cloth, Crill commented that while the Brindāvani-bastra might have been destroyed in Assam in due course because of humidity, the comparatively dry climate in Tibet enabled these clothes to survive for centuries. Placement of these textile pieces in dark interiors of the Tibetan monasteries also contributed towards their survival in remarkably good condition, with its bright colours intact in most of the pieces.

Other Textiles of Historical Significance:

The Assamese warriors marched to the battle field having on their body the wonder working and evil averting Kavach-kāpor, i.e. talisman cloth (Rajkumar 1980:369). This was supposed to be the handiwork of mothers, wives, sisters or other near kith and kin of the respective warriors. Kavach-kāpor was considered as a cloth capable of ensuring victory in the battlefield. Wade (1972:34) described Kavach-kāpor as follows: "War like cloth is made in the following manner. At midnight the



Plate-1 Kingkhāp

cotton is ginned, pressed into rollers, spun into thread, manufactured into cloth and worn by the warriors in the morning”.

An Assamese proverb defines a fine cloth produced in ancient Assam as the cloth that could be hidden within the closed fist and could be dried even in the shade. The status of such fine and superior quality cloth is also depicted in Assamese folk songs (Gogoi, 1968:69).

Gunā (gold and silver threads) and dyed yarns were used for ornamentation of Assamese textiles. In this connection Samman (1897 cited in Basu 1970 : 164) says, “In former days, the gold and silver wire (gunā) used for embroidery was made within the province by a class of workers called Gunakatiā; the process of manufacture was a trade secret. The class Gunakatiā is rapidly becoming extinct”.

It was during the reign of Āhom King Rudra Singha that rihā-mekhelā ensemble was specified as the dress of Assamese women to bring about uniformity in the court costume for the ladies in Assam (Barua Sadar Amin 1962 : 65). This dress, rihā-mekhelā with cheleng for festive and occasional use, was mostly of pāt and mugā silks; introduced in Assam by the Āhom (Das Gupta 1982 : 189).

The decorative fabrics like Kingkhāp, Gomcheng, Kārchip and Sisupat (fine stuff of Mejānkari silk) were considered as aristocratic and most prestigious. Kingkhāp and Gomcheng were widely used at one time by members of the Āhom royal families and other nobles. These were imported from outside the state.

The word Kingkhāp is said to have derived from the Chinese word Kumkhwab meaning “less sleep”. The irritation caused by gold and silver threads while wearing Kingkhāp could

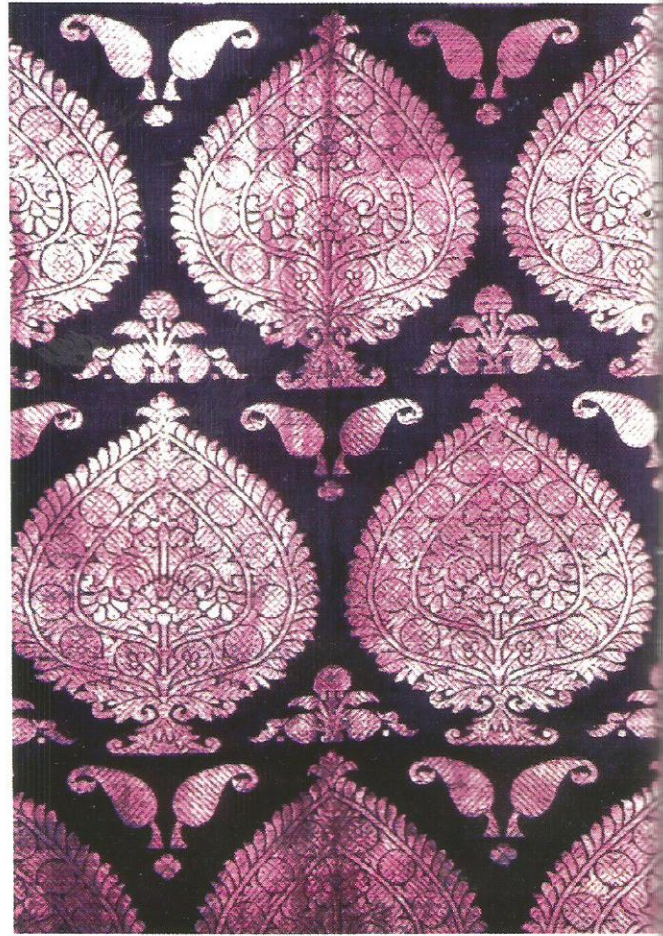


Plate-2 Gomcheng

indeed impair sleep. The root of the term could also lie in the anxieties the wearer had due to fear of losing such precious cloth (Das 1968:75-76). Kingkhâp is a precious silk fabric in bright colours richly woven in gold and silver threads. Indian brocade, "the fabric of dream" is akin to Kingkhâp, where also the ornamentation is done on the loom giving an impression that the large flower and other cognate motifs are made in gold or silver (Shenai 1981:183-4).

Kingkhâp in black colour known as Gomcheng and imported from China was very popular during the Āhom period. Kingkhâp (Plate 1) and Gomcheng (Plate 2) are non-existent these days. Old, tattered pieces are preserved in museums or as heir-looms in some old families. Kingkhâp silk used to be decorated with a specific rather complex design which is popularly called the "Kingkhâp design". Kalkā (Paisley design) and circular roundel were also used in this type of silk fabric. The motifs and designs were commonly used all over the body of the cloth in a regular arrangement. The local weavers in Assam started weaving rihā and mekhelā following the Kingkhâp pattern in their indigenous looms. As such Kingkhâp, pronounced as 'Sinkhâp', became very popular and closely associated with the traditional textiles of Assam.

Silk of the exotic varieties mentioned above were extensively in demand among the Āhom royal families and other dignitaries. Royal patronage and interest led, in the course of time, to the development of indigenous production of silk and its weaving. Soon, silk fabrics and other textiles became valuable articles of exchange with foreign goods. Out of all goods exported from Assam to Bengal and the rest of India, mugā silk yarn, mugā clothes and *āthua* or *mossarie* (mosquito net) decorated with floral motifs, were the most important ones (Hamilton 1940:61).

With the advent of British Rule in Assam in 1826 A.D., the indigenous handloom industry faced stiff competition from mill-made goods. The latter started dominating markets situated even in the interior areas of Assam. In spite of such competition, handloom weaving did not lose its popularity among the rural womenfolk and the age-old tradition of handloom industry is still maintained (Dutta 1978 :185-6). In fact, the craft of weaving is literally woven into the very fabric of Assamese society. The rural women of Assam, whether tribal or non-tribal, are still deeply attached to their looms and produce a variety of fabrics. Many of their creations are unique from the point of view of texture, colour, motifs and designs. For the women in Assam, weaving is still a living art which has persisted across generations, albeit with incorporation of innovations at different stages.

III

PROFILE OF TEXTILE TRADITIONS IN ASSAM



PROFILE OF TEXTILE TRADITIONS IN ASSAM

Textile production at the household level is typically a feminine activity in all the communities of Assam. The men never weave, but they assist the women by way of making the loom accessories and setting up the loom. The people to this day, rely greatly on products of their own looms especially for women's attire. These are produced to meet the requirement of the family and not generally for sale in external market. The textile items produced traditionally by the weavers in different communities show many distinctive elements as well as similarities. Understanding the regional and community-wise variations in the textile traditions and the functional significance of different products in details revealed some interesting information. Many of the products have socio-cultural significance which is discussed in this chapter. The size, i.e., the length and breadth of different specimens, is given approximately (as average) in meter and presented as 'length X breadth'.

THE TEXTILE TRADITION OF THE BODO-KACHĀRIS

The Bodo-Kachāri tribes of the Assam plains have an age-old tradition of spinning and weaving. In olden days, cotton was grown and spun at home.

Presently, mill-made cotton yarn is almost wholly bought from local shops. Spinning is restricted to the production of eri silk yarn. The main categories of textiles produced traditionally by the Bodo women for their personal and family use are outlined in Table 2. A brief account of these textile items are given below:

TABLE 2. MAJOR TEXTILE ITEMS PRODUCED TRADITIONALLY BY THE BODO-KACHĀRIS

Sl. No.	Name of textile item	Approx. size (in metre)	Use
1	Dakhanā (The major item of Bodo women's dress)	3.25 × 1.40	To cover the body from breast level to ankle
2	Jömgrā (The stole)	2.25 × 0.90	As a loose cover over the shoulders falling over the upper part of the Dakhanā
3	Gāngrāchi (Dhoti, the Bodo men's dress)	4.00 × 1.10	As dhoti to cover the lower part of the body
4	Fāli (Napkin/Towel /small dhoti)	0.50 × 0.70 / 1.50 × 0.70 / 2.50 × 1.00	As napkin/towel/small dhoti for ordinary wear
5	Golābān (Comforter, presently popular as arnai)	1.50 × 0.25 to 2.00 × 0.35	To wrap around the neck by men. Has socio-cultural significance
6	Chimāchi (Cotton shawl)	5.50 × 1.50 and 2.25 × 1.00	As shawl or body cover in winter by both men and women
7	Endichi (Eri silk shawl)	2.75 × 1.25 and 2.00 × 1.00	As shawl by men and women in winter
8	Bogrāchi (Bed sheet)	2.40 × 1.25	As bed spread
9	Bodo-chādar (Highly decorated Bodo cloth)	2.50 × 1.00	As a loose covering on top of Dakhanā in traditional dances

1. Dakhanā:

Dakhanā is a thick cloth traditionally of 3.25 × 1.40 meters size. It is regarded as the main item of distinctive ethnic dress of Bodo women. Dakhanā is worn as a wrap around the

body covering the breasts and reaching down to the ankles. The upper edge is tied firmly around the trunk beneath the armpits and it is further secured tightly at the waist level (Plate 3).



Plate 3 Bodo women in traditional dress



Plate 4 Traditional Dakhanā

It is generally woven out of 40s⁷ cotton having four ends in a dent. This gives a thick and compact texture to the cloth. However, 2/60s⁸, 2/80s cotton and acrylic, polyester yarns are also being used now-a-days for weaving the dakhanā.

Deep yellow is the traditional colour used in dakhanā. On the yellow body, fine stripes of various designs in green, maroon,

- 7 The number denotes the count, i.e the size of yarn. It is expressed in terms of length per unit of weight. The count is based on the number of hanks (1 hank=840 yards) in 1 pound of yarns. The 'S' after the number indicates that the yarn is single.
- 8 Refers to the yarn composed of two threads of 60s making a two fold yarn having resultant hank of 30 in one pound.

red, etc., are woven. Now-a-days, the stripes are often in plain weave. Plate 4 shows an example of traditional dakhanā. In the recent years, the traditional yellow colour has given way to some extent to red, blue and green. As a result, non-yellow dakhanā with contrasting side borders (plain or in design) are also to be found frequently. The shifting away from the traditional yellow dakhanā indicates a change in colour preference of the present generation of Bodo women. Easy availability of coloured yarns of varied hues is also assumed to be one of the influential factors in this regard.



Plate 5 Jomgrā (Stole)

2. Jömgrā:

It is a common item of Bodo women's dress used in combination with dakhanā when going out of home. The jömgrā is a sort of stole placed lightly over the shoulders on top of the dakhanā to cover the upper part of the body. It is considered as a must to make her dress complete while going out or during any socio-cultural occasion.

Compared to dakhanā, jömgrā is a much finer piece of textile woven out of 2/80s cotton and generally in the size 2.25 × 0.90 meters. There is no traditionally defined colour for the jömgrā, though red and green are widely used. The body is woven plain with cross borders at two ends. The cross borders

almost always have woven designs, and a variety of motifs for example, the sun, ridges of hills, fern, plum flowers, spider, reedhook, earring, brick, etc., are used in forming the designs. These motifs are also used as design in the side borders in rare cases as shown in Plate 5.

3. Gāngrāchi:

It is the typical Bodo-Kachāri male dress for the lower part of the body. It is worn in the same fashion as the dhoti by the Assamese-Hindu peasantry. Gāngrāchi is woven out of generally 40s cotton in the average size of 4.00×10 meters. It is woven in white with very narrow side borders of different colours. The borders are plain and traditionally no ornamentation is used in this item. However, in rare specimens fine cross borders at both ends are woven. This type of indigenous dhoti is still widely used by the older generation of Bodo-Kachāris.

4. Fāli (Napkin/Towel/Loin cloth):

Fāli is an important textile item of the Bodos, woven in various sizes and used extensively for different purposes. It is woven out of 40s or 2/80s cotton in plain weave, with checks of different colours. Fālis are named differently according to their size and use.

Fāli of the average size of 0.50×0.70 meter called hāchati, is used as a sort of handkerchief or napkin. It is very handy for carrying a bundle of betel leaf and areca nut by men and women when they travel or go out for work. Fāli approximately of the size of 1.50×0.70 meters is used as towel and is also referred to by the Assamese term gāmochā. Fāli is also woven in the size of 2.50×1.00 meters which is used by men to cover the lower part of the body (from the waist up to the knees) in the form of a Loin cloth. The Bodos had another type of fāli in the olden days called the fāli-ālāngā of 2.75×0.50 meters size. It was woven out of handspun cotton yarn within a night. The body of the cloth was kept plain in white and the two cross ends were richly decorated with designs in varieties of colour. This was meant to be worn by the warriors as a kind of girdle to keep the dress secured. Plate 6 shows the mode of wearing fāli-ālāngā in the olden days. There was a strong belief that the warrior



Plate 6 Mode of wearing Fāli-ālāngā

going to battle wearing fāli-ālāngā would definitely win and never die in the battle field. A particular round floral motif called derhāchār-āgar was the main motif used in fāli-ālāngā (the word 'derhā' means success). This particular textile item, with specific cultural significance has become a thing of the past. Battles are not fought any more, but the memories of the glorious past still linger in the minds of the people.

5. Golābān (Presently popular as ārnāi):

It is used in muffler fashion around the neck, partly as a decorative item and partly as comforter for protection against the winter chill. The golābān, also called fāli, which is presently popular as ārnāi is an important textile item of the Bodos. It is woven out of dyed cotton yarn of either 40s or 2/80s and in the size 1.50 × 0.25 meters or 2.00 × 0.35 meters. Acrylic/polyester yarns are also being used in recent years for weaving ārnāi.

The most popular colour scheme used traditionally is green with designs in yellow. Round floral motif called derhāchār-āgar and another geometrical design named mokardamā-āgar, considered as the symbol of success, are widely used in ārnāi. These designs are woven either as a continuous border on both sides or throughout the body of the cloth (Plate 7). Though the ārnāi is used as a mere comforter, it has increasingly acquired distinct cultural connotation among the people.

The ārnāi is offered as an item of gift to indicate love and respect of the giver to another person. It is also



Plate 7 Golābān (Presently popular as ārnāi)

increasingly being recognized as a textile item distinctive of Bodo-Kachāri. Now-a-days even young men dressed in shirt and trousers use ārnāi, obviously to indicate their cultural identity. Further, it has become customary to offer the ārnāi to distinguished guests invited to cultural functions of the Bodos. In this context, the place of ārnāi is comparable to that of a gāmochā (described later) in plains Assamese culture.

6. Chimāchi:

Chimāchi is a coarse, white cotton shawl for use in winter. It is used to cover the upper part of the body by loosely placing around the shoulders. It is woven out of 20s or 30s cotton in the size 5.50 × 1.50 meters without any embellishment, which is used in double layers. A smaller version (2.25 × 1.10 meters) is also woven for the children.

7. Endichi:

It is a shawl, made out of handspun eri silk yarn for use in the winter. Endichi is woven in two sizes (2.75 × 1.25 meters and 2.00 × 1.00 meters) for men and women, respectively. No ornamentation is done on men's shawl, while in the shawls used by women, there are cross borders carrying different designs like hill ranges, fern, wild flowers, etc.

8. Bagrāchi (Bed sheet) :

Bed sheets are mostly woven in the rural households. These are woven out of 20s or 30s cotton generally in the size 2.40 × 1.25 meters. The coloured left-over yarns after weaving the dakhanā, are often joined carefully and utilized in the side borders, checks, strips, etc.

9. Bodo-chādar:

It is a richly decorated textile item of the Bodos. The author could not find any piece being woven in the present times in the Bodo homes she visited. The tradition of weaving such item seems to be on the verge of obsolescence. However, it was produced till recent past. It is a black, blue or yellow piece of cloth measuring 2.50 × 1.00 meters. The bold motifs and designs are worked in contrasting colours as cross borders and butas in the body of the cloth. Plate 8 is an example of this highly distinctive type of textile. The Bodo-chādar is essentially meant for

ceremonial or occasional wear by women on festive occasions.

In addition to the above, information on the existence of certain other textile items in the olden days among the Bodos, were also collected. One of these is named gāndurchi (pillow case) and another thengcholā (trousers).

These were so woven that no stitching was required. These two occupied a place of pride in their textile history and reflected the creative skill and talent of the Bodo women. But in the context of contemporary fashion trends, and easy availability of mill-made goods, these items have totally become obsolete.



Plate 8 Richly decorated Bodo-chādar

THE TEXTILE TRADITION OF THE RĀBHĀS

As noted in Chapter II, the Rābhās a scheduled tribe group of the Assam Plains are divided into a number of sections. Weaving is considered as a traditional craft of all sections of the Rābhās. However, the information pertaining to status of textiles has been collected from the Māitori section of the Rābhās among whom the traditional culture is found preserved to a great extent.

Textiles produced by the Rābhā weavers are known for their unique texture, design and colour scheme. It is learnt that in the bygone days the home-grown cotton was spun and dyed with indigenous colour to produce different textile products. Eri silk was also produced till the recent past. But these days, mostly the cotton textiles and the textiles with acrylic, polyester yarns to some extent are produced for which yarns are bought from local shops. The major textile items traditionally produced in the Māitori group of Rābhās are presented in Table 3. A general description on these textile items is given below:

TABLE 3. MAJOR TEXTILE ITEMS PRODUCED TRADITIONALLY BY THE RĀBHĀS

Sl. No.	Name of textile item	Approx. size (in metre)	Use
1	Lemphatā or Riphān (The major item of Rābhā women's dress)	2.50 × 1.40	To wrap around at breast level down to the ankles
2	Riphān chākkāy (Major item of married women's dress)	1.50 × 1.00	As wrap around at breast level by married women. Has special significance in socio-cultural life of Rābhās
3	Kāmbung (The brest cloth)	2.00 × 0.50	To tie around the body at armpit level by the married women
4	Khodābāng or Khochne (Female turban cloth)	1.50 × 0.50	As turban by married women
5	Āngchā (Girdle/Turban for men/Towel)	2.00 × 0.70	To tie at waist on top of Lemphatā as an item of women's dress. Also as an item of men's dancing attire
6	Pājāl (Dhoti, the Rābhā men's dress)	2.50 × 1.00 or 3.00 × 1.20	As dhoti to cover the lower part of the body
7	Fāli (Handkerchief)	0.50 m ²	As handkerchief. Has important significance as gift item as a token of love and respect
8	Khore (Comforter)	1.00 × 0.25 to 1.50 × 0.40	To wrap around the neck. Has cultural significance as an ethnic symbol
9	Ālan or Ānāy and Pāchrā (Shawl)	2.00 × 0.90 and 2.75 × 1.25	As shawl by men and women in winter
10	Nenthānen (cloth out of discarded material)	2.40 × 1.35	As bed cloth. Also as a blanket in winter.
11	Table cloth-cum-design Catalogue	1.00 m ² or 1.50 × 1.00	As spread on table on ceremonial functions and as design catalogue

1. Lemphatā or Riphān:

Lemphatā is a major item of Rābhā women's dress worn as a wrap around the body covering the breast and reaching down to the ankles (Plate 9). It is a thick cloth of 2.50×1.40 meters size, considered as the traditional dress of Rābhā women. In the olden days, it was used only by the unmarried, while at present, it is used by both married and unmarried women. Now-a-days it is popularly known as riphān and the name lemphatā is hardly in use. The traditional lemphatās found very rarely now-a-days, are called jorpāru and majāpāru (Plate 10). These are differentiated on the basis of colour schemes used on them. The lemphatā



Plate 9 Mode of wearing lemphatā or riphān



Plate 10 Traditional Lemphatā

with red body and lines of black and yellow at both sides is called jorpāru; while the lemphatā having white body and bold lines of red, yellow and black at both sides is named as majāpāru. No particular designs were woven on these traditional types. But at present lemphatās



Plate 11 Contemporary Lemphatā

designs are arranged to have the side border of approximately 20 to 30 cms. wide and worked in colours contrasting with the body colour of lemphotās.

2. Riphān chākkāy:

It is a major item of traditional dress of married women, used rarely these days. It is worn as a wrap around the waist reaching down to near the ankles, completely covering the lower part of the body (Plate 12).

Riphān chākkāy is a piece of cloth woven in the size 1.50 × 1.00 mts. It was produced till the recent past, but no such item is being woven at

are woven with elaborate designs on both side ends (Plate 11). These are woven out of 2/20s or 2/40s dyed cotton. The most common body colour used in the contemporary type is green; but the use of violet, blue and red as base colours are also seen.

Motifs like the star, flower, spider, chariot, watch and nose ring are commonly woven as border designs in lemphotās. These



Plate 12 Traditional dress of married Rābhā women

4. Khodābāng or Khochne:

Khodābāng is traditionally used by married women as a head cover tied in the fashion of a turban (Plate 9). It is considered as an important part of the distinctive ethnic dress in any ceremonial occasion. It is a black or maroon piece of cloth woven out of 40s, 2/60s or 2/80s cotton measuring 1.50 × 0.50 meters. White or yellow horizontal lines in ribbed weave are woven in the body of the cloth leaving the side borders plain (Plate 14B). Motifs like flowers, star, diamonds and nose ring are found commonly in the cross borders used in Khodābāng.

5. Āngchā (Girdle/Turban for men/Towel):

Āngchā (Plate 15) is an important textile item used extensively for different purposes on different occasions. It is woven out of mainly 40s or 2/80s cotton in 2.00 × 0.70 meters size. Āngchās are woven white or in any other colour, generally with a plain side border. Ornamentation is done with elaborate designs at both cross ends. Floral motifs of different varieties, tree, star, temple, etc., are the most common motifs found in the traditional āngchās. The āngchās are named differently according to their use and ornamentation.

White or coloured āngchā with heavy ornamentation is an important item of women's dress. In the olden days, it was



Plate 15 Āngchā (girdle/turban for men/towel)

used by young unmarried women to tie at the waist on top of lemphatā. But at present, it is also used by the married women to tie at the waist or to cover the upper part of the body. Āngchā, used by men as girdle in their traditional dances is called chenkimār-khākāy. Āngchā with fine ornamentation used by men as turban is called khopong-khākāy. Āngchā is also used as a towel which is woven with a design at one end.

6. Pājāl:

It is the typical, traditional male dress of the Rābhās worn in dhoti fashion to cover the lower part of the body from waist downwards. Pājālis woven out of 30s, 40s or 60s cotton in the size 2.50 × 1.00 meters or 3.00 × 1.20 meters. Green is the most common colour in pājāl, but the pājāl used as an item of wedding dress is always white with fine side borders of blue, red or green. No ornamentation is used on pājāl except in the pieces used on ceremonial occasions.

7. Fāli (Handkerchief):

Fāli is the traditional handkerchief generally used by men. It is woven out on 2/60s or 2/80s cotton, white or coloured and in the average size of 0.50 m². Fāli as shown in Plate 16 is woven with much labour and care by the Rābhā women for their kinsfolk and loved ones. The elaborate side borders and cross borders and butas consisting of motifs like flower, tree, butterfly, peacock, lion and human figure are woven intricately in contrasting colours. Fāli though merely a handkerchief, plays an important and significant role in the life of the Rābhās. It is an important item of gift



Plate 16 Fāli (Handkerchief)

given as a token of friendship, love and respect. It is also regarded by the people as a symbol of weaving expertise of the women. But the weaving of fāli with rich traditional designs, is gradually dwindling. As a result, it is rarely found in Rābhā homes these days.



Plate 17 Khome (Comforter)

8. Khome:

Khome is an important textile item of Rābhās generally used by menfolk as a muffler around the neck. It is woven out of 2/40s or 2/80s cotton in the sizes 1.00 × 0.25 meters to 1.50 × 0.40 meters. Border designs with motifs like flowers, leaves, creepers and various geometrical forms are woven lengthwise, crosswise or in the whole body of the khome (Plate 17). Fringes with coloured yarns on both the ends are also found commonly in khome as additional ornamentation. Although khome is simply used as muffler it has increasingly acquired distinct cultural connotation among the Rābhās similar to that of golābān (ārñāi) among the Bodo-Kachāris.

9. Ālan or Ānāy and Pāchrā (Shawl):

The shawls are always produced at home either from 2/20s, 2/40s cotton or handspun eri. These are named according to their size, raw materials and designs used. The shawl of the size 2.00 × 0.90 meters used by the womenfolk is called ālan or ānāy. Creepers along with floral motifs are commonly woven in the cross border designs at both ends. The ālan

with other geometrical patterns of honeycomb, zig-zag, twill, etc., woven all over the body of the cloth are also found (Plate 18). The shawl of the size 2.75×1.25 meters used by the men folk is called pāchrā. It is usually woven plain without any design. But ornamentation with small designs at cross borders is also marked in rare cases.

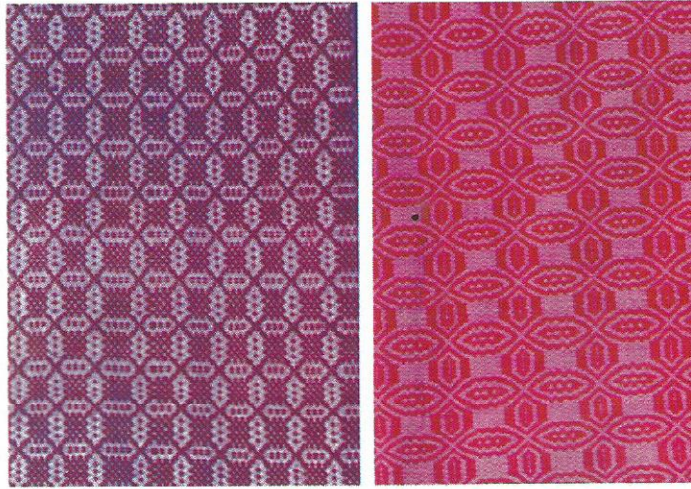


Plate 18 Ālan or Ānāy (Shawl)

10. Nenthānen:

This piece of textile is of particular interest. Among Rābhās, as also among many other communities of Assam, there is a tradition of weaving thick, rather coarse, cloth using yarn in combination with strips extracted from worn out and discarded fabric. In the weaving, yarn of 2/10s, 2/20s cotton is used as warp and fine strips of discarded cloth is used as weft. Nenthānen is generally woven in the size 2.40×1.35 meters or as required. It has a high utility value in rural homes. Besides, Nenthānen can also be used as a blanket or quilt in winter.

11. Table cloth-cum design catalogue:

In addition to the above, a few specimens of 1.00 m^2 or 1.50×1.00 meters size with varieties of traditional designs were also found being woven traditionally. These old specimens are used at present as spread over tables, especially at meetings and ceremonial functions among the Rābhās. These precious specimens (Plate 19) may also be referred as 'design catalogues'. The traditional motifs, designs are being preserved from one generation to another through these decorative pieces.



Plate 19 Table cloth-cum-design catalogue

THE TEXTILE TRADITION OF THE DEORIS

Like other communities of Assam, textile production among the Deoris is predominantly a feminine activity. Cotton yarns bought from local traders and eri silk yarns produced at home are used these days for production of different textile items. The textiles produced by the Deoris are rather simple and less colourful compared to other plains tribes of Assam. But they have a rich textile tradition with distinctive characteristics of their own. The major traditional textile items produced by the Deori women are summarized in Table 4 and a brief account of those textiles are given below:

TABLE 4. MAJOR TEXTILE ITEMS PRODUCED TRADITIONALLY BY THE DEORIS

Sl. No.	Name of textile item	Approx. size (in metre)	Use
1	Igu (Female garment for the lower part of the body, akin to mekhelā)	1.40 × 0.90	To cover the trunk and the lower part of the body
2	Jakāchibā (The waist cloth for women)	2.00 × 0.90 and 4.00 × 0.90	To tie at the waist on top of igu by the married women. Considered as a sign of marriage
3	Khaniā or Cheleng	2.75 × 1.40	As wrapper by the elderly women, as turban by men, also as a shoulder cloth by elderly men as part of formal attire
4	Barkāpor and Khaniā-barkāpor (Wrapper)	5.50 × 1.40	Barkāpor in double layers as shawl in winter. Khaniā-barkāpor as an important item of dress on ceremonial occasions
5	Boche/Gātigee/Bāigā (Towel type cloth)	1.50 × 0.70	As towel called boche, to cover the head by girls and women called gatigee; to cover the breast by grown up girls called bāigā
6	Iku (Dhoti, the major item of male dress)	3.00 × 1.20	As dhoti to cover the lower part of the body

7	Ichā (Shawl)	2.00 × 0.90	As shawl
8	Khāmji-tope (Cloth out of discarded material)	2.40 × 1.35	As bed cloth. Also as blanket in winter.



Plate 20 Deori women in traditional dress

1. Igu:

It is an important item of Deori women's attire. The igu is worn to cover the lower part of the body from waist down to the ankle level. It is tucked around the waist by unmarried women with broad pleats hanging in front. Married women wear it to hang down from the breast level (Plate 20). The average size of igu is 1.40 × 0.90 meters. For this, material of the size 3.00 × 0.92 meters, needs to be woven. In the olden days, igu was woven out of homespun cotton yarn. But now-a-days it is woven out of 40s or 2/80s cotton and recently the acrylic, polyester yarn is conveniently purchased from local traders. Traditionally, Igu is woven in white with ornamentation of dyed cotton yarn at the bottom. Different motifs like flowers, stars and



Plate 21 Igu with traditional design



Plate 22 Jakāchiba



Plate 23 Luguru jakāchibā

diamonds are arranged to form big butas¹⁰; but no continuous design as such is found. Plate 21 is an example of such traditional igu. In the recent years, many new designs have been adopted in Igu and woven in diverse shades.

2. Jakāchibā:

It is a distinctive item of dress of married Deori women which is used to tie at the waist on top of igu reaching down to the knees (Plate 20). Wearing jakāchibā is considered as a sign of marriage. Jakāchibā is a fairly fine cloth of 2.00 × 0.90 meters size. It is woven out of 40s or 2/80s cotton. The colour is generally white with traces of yellow in rare cases. Dyed cotton yarn in red or orange is used in side borders as well as in the ornamentation at two ends. The old jakāchibās seen during field investigation indicate that pāt and mugā silk were also used at one time. The traditional geometrical designs of Deoris

10 Denotes a flower or spray or any other motif used singly.

along with the other motifs like flowers, earrings, creepers, etc. are woven as cross border at two ends of jakāchibā. In addition to cross borders, small butis¹¹ all over the body of the cloth is also noticed in jakāchibā these days. It is further decorated with dyed cotton yarn attached at extreme ends as fringes, as shown in Plate 22.

Jakāchibā of the size of 4.00 × 0.90 meters with ornamentation, mostly in ribbed pattern¹², is called luguru-jakāchibā (Plate 23). It is an important item of the wedding dress. This type of jakāchibā is also used by unmarried women to tie at breast level on ceremonial occasions (Plate 24). In such a case, it is more appropriately named as luguru-bāigā. Jakāchibās used both as luguru-jakāchibā and luguru-bāigā are considered valuable textile items of the Deoris.



Plate 24 Mode of wearing Luguru-jakāchibā in traditional style

3. Khaniā or Cheleng:

Khaniā or cheleng is a fine white cotton cloth having diverse use among the Deoris. It is used by elderly women over igu and jakāchibā by loosely placing around the shoulders for decency and modesty. It is also a part of the attire of an elderly man. The cloth is neatly folded

11 Similar to buta but, smaller in size.

12 A further variation of the plain weave. The ribs may be achieved by alternating fine yarns with coarse yarns or single yarns with doubled yarns.

and thrown over the shoulders as part of ceremonial wear. It is also used as turban cloth by Deori men. The Khaniā is woven out of 60s or 80s cotton in the size 2.75×1.40 meters. The ornamentation with fine cross border at two ends is done with dyed cotton yarn of blue or green or with mugā silk yarn. Designs formed with motifs like creepers, leaves and flowers are used for ornamentation of khaniā or cheleng.

4. Barkāpor and khaniā-barkāpor:

These are large pieces of cloth used for different purposes. The count of the thread varies depending on the purpose for which these are made. Barkāpor is a coarse cotton cloth. It is also made with eri silk. Folded in two layers, it is used in winter as a shawl. It is also used as a substitute for a blanket. Khaniā-barkāpor is a fine piece of cloth, used in double layers as an additional item of dress by loosely placing around the shoulders. Both barkāpor and khaniā-barkāpor are woven in the size 5.50 × 1.40 meters. Barkāpor is woven out of 10s, 20s, 2/40s cotton or handspun eri. The barkāpor woven out of eri is called eriā- barkāpor. Though simply a wrapper, cross borders with small designs at one or both the ends of the barkāpor are done with mugā or dyed cotton yarn.



Plate 25 Khaniā-barkāpor of Deoris

The barkāpor woven out of high count cotton like 60s, 80s or 2/80s is called khaniā-barkāpor (Plate 25). It is highly valued by the people and has a deep socio-cultural significance. It is woven in white with ornamentation done in mugā or dyed cotton yarn of brown or blue colour. The indigenous design popularly known as Deori-ebā (traditional design of Deoris) is used as cross border at one end. At the other end, a few coloured yarns are woven to form a plain cross border called sekerā. Small flowers, trees, earrings, etc., are used as butis in the body of the cloth, especially on the upper layer, for ornamentation.

Khaniā-barkāpor is an important item of the wedding costume used as a shawl on top of the wedding dress by both bride and bridegroom (Plate 26). Moreover, it is customary to cover the dead with khaniā-barkāpor before the funeral. From the cultural point of view, the Deoris regard it as the most valuable piece of textile.

5. Boche/Gātigee/Bāigā:

It is a piece of cloth akin to gāmochā in plains Assamese culture. It is named differently



Plate 26 Use of Khaniā-barkāpor as an item of wedding attire



Plate 27 Boche/Gätigee/Baigā

according to its use. When it is used by men as a towel it is called boche. It is customary among the Deoris that girls and women should cover their head with a towel type cloth right from their childhood. In such a case it is called gätigee. It is also used by grown up girls to cover their breast, which is then called bāigā.

This particular cloth, whether it is used as boche, gätigee or bāigā (Plate 27), is an important item of textile produced by the Deoris. It is woven out of 40s or 2/80s cotton and in the size 1.50 × 0.70 meters. It is generally woven white with reddish-orange side borders and ornamentation. The design is worked at one end, while the plain cross-border of similar colour is woven at the other end. Since the motifs and designs used in this cloth are taken from textile items outside their own culture, these are being used without any specific names given to them. However, the designs used are called latā-ebā which includes motifs like trees, flowers, leaves and creepers. The distinctive geometrical designs of the Deoris are not found in this textile item.

6. Iku:

Iku is the typical item of men's attire among Deoris. It is worn in the same fashion as the dhoti by the Assamese Hindu peasantry. It is interesting to note that Deori men are