

Textiles of Assam (India): Perspectives From Techniques, Embellishment and Oral-Lore

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Introduction

Assamese textile is not only famous for the quality and diverse material varieties, but also noted for various eye-catching designs and shades. The erstwhile Assam (or, *Kamrupa* as it was historically known) which is the home of four varieties of silks (namely *paat*, *muga*, *tassar* and *eri*) and fine cotton even today and people of which region knew the technique of preparing very good quality textile dyes has a long textile tradition. Rich natural resources of the region provide the required raw materials, themes and motifs of ornamentation. There is existence of different types of looms among different ethnic communities of the region. Various textile motifs, natural dyes, different weaving skills (techniques) together with numerous oral lore's make it an inevitable part of the cultural heritage of the region. Weaving has been a way of life in Assam since time immemorial.

History

The histories of the northeast Indian textiles are not well documented except a few tribal textiles produced by the Nagas, Adis, Mishings and Karbis etc. The extra-ordinary quality of historicity of textiles from this region caught attention of the scholars only after attribution of a number of 14th-16th Century textiles pieces known as "Vaishnavite silks" made of lampas technique to be originated in Assam by western scholars like Rosemary Crill and then the works of late Lotika Varadarajan.

Although, the dearth of material evidence from the past is a problem for study of textile history of this region. However, literary evidences show that the antiquity of a developed art of production and export of textiles in Assam goes back to 1st century AD as mentioned by *Periplus*¹. The *Ramayana* is also referred to mention about ancient Assam as "the country of cocoon rearers". In the *Kiskindhya kanda*, while mentioning the provinces one passes through going to the east, the poet refers to Magadha, Anga, Pundra and the 'country of cocoon-rearers' (*Kosa- karanam bhumi*), which must be Assam². On the basis of Kautilya's reference in *Arthashastra* to *Ksauma*, *dukula*, and *patrona* in connection with their production in *Suvarnakudya* and other places of *Kamrupa* and on a comparison with the various references P. C. Choudhury have tried to show that these were nothing but the *edi*, *muga* and *pat* silk of Assam³. Mention of "variously dyed"⁴ textiles is found in the records of Dionysius. Mention of coloured textiles is found among the gifts from Bhaskarvarmana (7th century AD) to Harshavardhan as it mentions about a 'coloured cloth as smooth as birch-bark with patterns of jasmine'⁵ There is also mention about *ksauma* cloths 'pure as the autumn moon light'⁶ In *Harsacharita*, there is also mention about *abhoga* umbrella wrapped in *dukula* as gifts to Hasha Vardhana⁷. The use of hemp-fabric during 7th century AD is also known from the account of Chinese traveller HuenTsang⁸. *Kalika Purana* (54/22; 69/8) mentions the use and manufacture of variously coloured cloths like *raktam*, *kauseyam*, *nilam* in connection with the worship of deities⁹.

During the Ahom reign textile art was directly patronized by the state and the history from that age is documented. *Gomcheng*, *Mejenkari*, was the finest varieties of silk worn by the Ahoms.

Types, Materials and Methods

The dress pattern of the people of Assam is not uniform over the ages and been undergone changes due to different reasons in different ages. Both un-cut and stitched clothes were used in pre- Ahom period. *Adhovastra* –a lower garment like present *daydhoti*, is used to held tight at the waist. People of higher status used *uttariya- vastra* as upper garment and a *paguri* or turban in the head. The women also wore two different parts- *adhovastra* fastened by a *nidhibandha* , and *uttariya vastra*. *Kachali* or *riha* wrapped round the breast is used as *uttariya vastra*. A class of women also used saree in that age. *Riha* and *mekhela* were the costumes of women, which come with Tibeto-burman groups to Assam. During winter, use of *khania kapor*, *endi kapor*, *bor kapor* were very much evident. *Muga*, *pat*, *endi*, *mejankari*, *gomcheng*, *singhkhap* etc are the commonly used dress materials for the higher people while cotton by the commoners and in certain cases used by all.

Ahom ways and dress-patterns became predominant due to assimilation of the people with the rulers. But some dress patterns are exclusively confined to Ahoms only and distinct of social status and aristocracy is clearly inferred from the costumes. The *cheleng kapor* and the type of *paag* (head gear) indicates the position and grade in the Ahom administration.

Black (later white) *churia*, *nara-chola*, *phasau*, are common attire for male. *Baswal*, *tongali*, *gamocha*, with red borders are also of Ahom origin. Later comes *jama*, *cauga*, *chapkon*, and *ghagra* etc. due to Mughal influence during the reign of Rudra Singha.

Production Technique and textile design

The process of weaving is handed down orally to the younger generation from the elder generation. The techniques are practiced under supervision of expert weavers first and then after acquiring the skill they weave independently. Traditionally, the initiation to this process starts at a very early age, as an insider of the society where woman weave during their free time for house hold needs and watching and assisting in some parts of the procedure happened as a natural process through which the younger ones learns the skills.

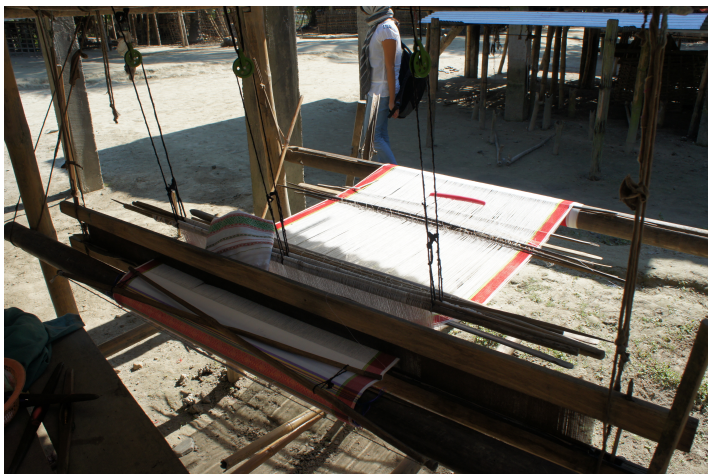
The embellishment may be through various alternate patterns of simple weave to motifs produced with extra weft and/ or with supplementary weft and twill weave. The number of warp yarn can be from one to four and that of weft can also be from one to as many as the weaver can handle. Sometimes, designs and patterns can also involve very complex techniques like that of *lampas* technique.

The motifs and embellishments are generally copied from earlier textiles -- sometimes in multiple different combinations to make a new pattern. Traditionally these are not recorded and only remembered. However, sometimes the weaver uses a device to document the traditional motifs made of some bamboo sticks and strings as warp and weft respectively; it is known as *caneki* in Assamese. This method in recent years is being replaced by graph papers by a few professional weavers and textile designers.

Some simple weave embellishment prevalent in Assam, specially in women garments (*mekhela-chadar* and *riha*) are:

- *Achu-dia*: Both ends of the textile piece have coloured border, predominantly red. This is used in *Chadar*, *riha*, *mekhela* etc.
- *Gari-dia* or *Garijali*: Thick stripes or checks or coarser threads are woven along the warp and weft of the cloth at regular intervals. It is generally used in *riha* and *chadar*.
- *Dari- alia* or *Darijali*: It is a design with thickly woven coloured stripes or checks along the warp and weft at regular intervals. Generally, used for *chadar* and *riha*.

- *Jeljelia boan*: This technique of weaving is traditionally employed for weaving mosquito-net. But of late, the use is extended to employ this technique in *chadar*, *riha*, *dupatt* etc. too.
- *Dhup-Chaya*: The cloth appears different coloured when looked from different angles due to use of contrasting coloured warp and weft, checks and stripes.



Achu dia chadar while weaving in a loom
Photo Courtesy: Author



Textile weaving with multiple coloured weft
Photo Courtesy: Author

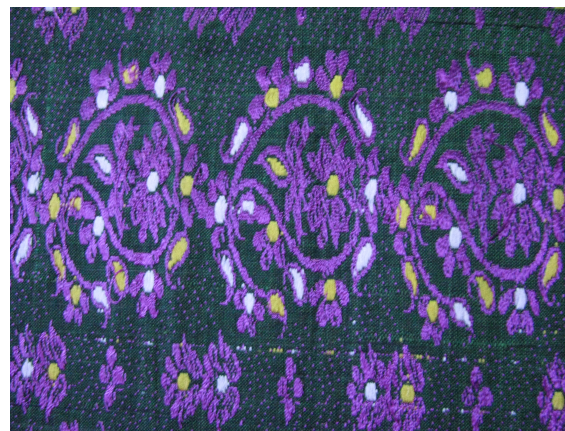
Although these are referred to as various designs or embellishments, yet these are actually based on different technique of weaving.

The following embellishments use secondary or supplementary weft. Depending on need and extent of embellishment the technique of weaving can be simple weave (with supplementary weft) or twill or even lampas.

- *Kech- Bacha* or *Kech-dia*: This is a design for side borders where multi-coloured threads are woven in a zig-zag pattern over the base of three (generally) coloured horizontal striped bases. Now-a-days, the number of colours and the stripes used vary widely along with extending the use from *riha* to *mekhela chadar* too.
- *Phul- Bacha*: Floral patterns of flowers and creepers are woven on the cloth. Motifs other than flowers and creepers are also used in this type. It is used for gamocha, chadar, mekhela, and other textile materials.
- *Buta dia* or *Buta bacha*: Buta are small floral and geometrical or any type of motif used in the body of *mekhela chadar* which have some kind of similarity with the main border design.



Gach-phul: A traditional motif used in Assam



Kalka: A traditional motif used in Assam



A geometrical textile design used in Assam
Photo Courtesy: Author



Caneki: A device for documenting textile motif in Assam
Photo Courtesy: Author

Through weaving, Assamese women try to create aesthetic imagination of folk minds. The weavers knowingly or unknowingly carry the cultural ethos and the spirit of Assamese culture. In colour scheme, designs and texture, the aesthetic creativity is revealed. They use natural forms as they are close to nature and express their feelings through the meaningful symbols. Innovation in designs and motifs are seen through new designs, in a single design with difference in use, size and shape and internal changes, in pattern, in colour-schemes, in the arrangement of motifs etc.

The age-old textile designs of Assam like kech bacha, king-khap, *guna-kora*, and various motifs like *gach*, sun-tree, *gach-phul*, *kalka* etc. undergoes various innovation in the process of their acceptance and currency in the contemporary period. At present, although conscious efforts of various textile designers and loom- owners play important role in the creation of some textile designs, yet it still reflects the folk-minds and creative faculty of Assamese weavers.

Conclusions

The specific name for each motifs and each type of weaving style in Assamese language confirms that these are traditionally present in Assamese societies. The importance of knowledge and/ or skills of weaving among the Assamese women are also manifested in various proverbs, folk songs and other forms of oral lore. The high perfection in of weaving among the communities of Assam is also testified by the existence of a few 14th-16th century silk textiles preserved in the museums of Europe and America. The oral stories about *tanti-kuchi* weavers, (a place near present day Guwahati) and *sualkuchi*, which are till today famous for silk weaving are known to the common people of Assam. However, there is an utmost need of a holistic study on the textiles of this region to reconstruct the history and document this illustrious tradition.

Acknowledgements

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