

Manipur Maharaja's New Clothes at The Alford Manor House Museum, Lincolnshire, UK

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Introduction

This article narrates the experience of the author to work in a team to recreate the clothing of the Maharaja and the Maharani of Manipur from an early 20th century black and white photograph. It was an amazing journey from the research on colour of the fabrics in the black and white picture, then recreating the garments in the most authentic manner, with natural dyes hand weaving on the back strap loom, hand embroidery, understanding the nuances of Manipuri clothing, the British influence on Maharaja's clothing, to finally showcasing them at the Alford House Manor Exhibition on World War – I in June 2017. There is a description of the articles created in order to academically understand the nomenclature, type and use of the garments.

It was a black and white photograph of Maharaja Churachand Singh and his Maharani Dhanamanjuri, which was with Sarah Teesdale that got the exhibition into reality. Sarah, a Trustee and researcher at the Alford Manor House Museum was excited to work around the recreation of the clothes in that image. Sarah and I got introduced to each other on email that was sent to DATS (Dress and Textile Specialist) network. I was excited to see the India Connection of John Higgins in the early 20th century with the Maharaja of Manipur. John Higgins was originally from Alford, Lincolnshire. The Manor House being the birth place of his father. As the Political Agent in Manipur Higgins lived in the British Residency close to the Maharaja's palace. His family and the Maharaja's family have pictures together to show the time that they had spent together.

The Maharaja's New Clothes was a project to recreate the clothing of Maharaja Churachand Singh and his Maharani Dhanamanjuri for an exhibition at Alford Manor House Museum in Lincolnshire. Being a clothing historian, I was really excited. Sarah and I discussed this and I felt that some research into original colours and textiles of the early 20th century needs to be done and the most authentic recreation should be done. I could do the research but for an exact recreation, an ex-student of mine, a big designer now, Ms Richana Khumanthem was an ideal person. I contacted her and she readily agreed. Being from Manipur, having studied at NIFT and at the UK, she had a big advantage of being exposed to her culture, design education and systems.

Thus, began the journey of recreating the Maharaja and Maharani's clothes. Sarah introduced us to Mr L.Somi Roy, who hails from the Maharaja's (in the picture) family, and I knew Richana. Thus a strong team of four, Sarah, Richana, Somi and I began the process of research, recreation and fund raising, dividing our work and coordinating almost weekly (sometimes daily) using the famous Whatsapp group technology, since Richana was in Manipur, Somi was in and out of Manipur, Sarah was in the UK and I was in and out of Delhi and Glasgow those days.

The first step was to understand the colours in the black and white photograph. With the help of studying the books written on Meitei (Manipuri) Costumes, looking at objects in the museums, paintings and current collections, meeting the right people guided by Somi, and by gathering the resources, it was that the work began. It took us almost a year along with our other duties, to get this done and it was a proud moment for all of us when piece by piece was recreated and then shipped to Lincolnshire, to be displayed in the museum.



Maharaja and Maharani of Manipur
early 20th century



At The Alford House manor

Right side image is original picture and left side is the picture of the author with Sarah Teesdale at the Alford House Manor, in front of the recreated garments in June 2017.

Photo Courtesy: Author

The Recreated garments

The garments that were recreated were:

- Phanek
- Innaphi
- The durbar coat of the maharaja
- The ajmeri turban

The Phanek

The Phanek is a traditional lower garment worn by Meitei women, as can be seen in the black and white picture of the Maharani. A *phanek* could be plain or striped and is wrapped around the woman like a sarong. *Phaneks* are usually handwoven in either cotton or silk on a back-strap loom, by the women in Manipur. The *phaneks* are named according to the type, e.g. *MapanNaibaphanek* is a type of *phanek* with 2 or 3 horizontal stripes, *Kumphanek* is a cotton *mapannaibaphanek* in which the black yarn used is

dyed with the *kum* plant¹ but these days, due to the dwindling number of *kum* plants chemical dyes are used. In our recreation however, Richana made sure that *kum* plant extract was used. The lotus-pink *mapannaibaphanek* worn by Maharani Dhanamanjuri Devi in the photograph was recreated. We found out that the photograph of the newly wedded couple was taken a day after the wedding, thus the *phanek* worn by the new bride is the traditional lotus pink cotton *phanek* with silk embroidered borders that is worn by a bride. This would have been the first occasion she wears a *phanek* in the manner of a married woman. This was hand embroidered in the borders and our recreation reflected the same.

Somi helped with all the information to be displayed, telling us the exact names. According to him, the sample on display is called a *Thambal Leikhok Kum Phanek* : (*thambal* = lotus; *leikhok* = the more lighter coloured, lower part of the lotus petal). Our recreated *phanek* was woven on a back-strap loom at Maibam Leikai in Imphal West district of Manipur (a place well known for its *Kumphanek*), India, in late 2016 and early 2017. The hand-embroidered motif on the border is known as *Khoiakoibimayek* (*khoi*=bee, *akoibi*=circular, *mayek*=motif. *Kabrang*(mulberry silk)floss was used for the embroidery.

The Innaphi

The Innaphi (WANGKHEI PHI) (*inna*= to wear, *phi*= fabric) is the term used for a thin stole made of silk or cotton worn by Meitei women. Somi informed us that it is woven on a traditional throw shuttle loom known as *yongkham*. *Kabokchaibi* (*kabok* = puffed rice, *chaibi* = scattering) is the term used to describe an *inna-phi* with dainty extra weft design all over it. The *innaphi* is usually worn over the shoulders, however, in the wedding picture, the Maharani does not wrap the *innaphi* on her shoulders, but keeps in her lap, merely suggesting that this garment is also there. It is possible that it was intentionally done to display the array of jewellery / necklaces worn by her.

On looking closely at the picture, it appears that the *innaphi* could be an imported from India, as it was fashionable to weave such fine fabrics and India (Manipur was not a part of India till 1949) was famous for them. The sample that was created for display was woven in Wangkhei, which is a locality in East Imphal District of Manipur and thus called Wangkhei phi. The Wangkhei phi is characterized by its very fine cotton weave and delicate extra weft designs. The motif used on the border is a modified version of *lamthangkhuth at*. *Lamthangkhu that* is one of the oldest motifs used by the Meitei. It originated as, and is still used, as a lace. A set of *LamthangKhuthat* has two parts. One is a narrow strip sewn lengthwise onto an *inaphee*, while the latter is sewn breadth wise. On the sample, the latter has been used. Scalloped lace crochet has been added to the borders for adornment purpose only. A *Wangkheiphee* may or may not have an added embellishment.

The Durbar Coat

The Durbar Coat, these coats were worn by the Indian kings, during the British Raj in the presence of their subjects or while attending formal meetings and discussions in the early 20th century. This style of coat closely resembles the fashion of the stand-up collar and the front placket that gained huge popularity those days for the rajas and maharajas, the *sherwani* also reflects that. For detailed discussions on this my thesis on Elite Indian Menswear can be read online (Glasgow University). The Maharaja was an alumnus of the Mayo College Ajmer, Rajasthan, and thus his dressing sensibilities reflected that. Early 20th century menswear was an amalgamation of the East and the west. Indian embroidery and European cuts became popular. Maharaja Churachand Singh wears this elite fashionable garment in his wedding picture. It is a tunic of embroidered velvet which is not a traditional Manipuri attire but a fashionable attire of Indian origin. The fabric is black velvet embroidered with golden metal yarn. As a result of the British influence, the *durbar coats* had become more tailored and fitted towards the end of the nineteenth century and early 20th century.

The golden metal work on the coat is known as Zardozi. (Zar = gold, dozi = embroidery in Persian). This form of embroidery came to India from Persia during the Mughal rule. Almost till the beginning of 20th century, real gold and silver wires, wound over a silk yarn, were used for Zardozi. Now they have been replaced by copper wires which are gold plated. The Zardozi embroidery on this sample was done in Shahpurjat, a village in South Delhi, India.

The AjmeriKokyet (Turban)

The AjmeriKokyet (Turban) is the headgear worn by the Maharaja in the photograph. Ajmeri = of, or belonging to Ajmer, a city in the northern Indian state of Rajasthan. Kokyet = Turban. The sample woven for the museum display is an AjmeriKokyet in cotton. The rulers of Ajmer wore this type of turban called a *safa* and it became the formal attire of the students of Mayo College Ajmer, the turban can be of different fabrics and colours. Maharaja Churachand who studied in Mayo College, Ajmer, adopted this style of tying a turban as his personal signature instead of the traditional Manipuri turban. The one worn in the photograph is made of Indian embroidered silk. The term "Ajmeri Kokyet" is used only in Manipur. The original name of the turban is *Safa*. The *Safa* turban is an indispensable part of the uniform for formal functions at Mayo College. The cloth for the sample is a Manipuri design and make, in keeping with the Manipuri handloom theme of the exhibit, was woven on a throw shuttle loom, and is 12 metres long and 21 inches wide. The golden colour of the cloth is called *MairenMabuk* (Mairen = Pumpkin, Mabuk = stomach), referring to the deep golden colour on the inside of a pumpkin. It is a colour of royalty and indicates the Maharaja's dynastic lineage of the House of Ninghtouja.

The exhibition has served its time in England, and we are planning to bring it to India, for us it was an amazing experience. For those interested in further reading or images the recommendations are :

- A facebook page for sharing all pictures and videos was created, it can accessed at: https://www.facebook.com/pg/The-Maharajas-New-Clothes-1064593503621110/photos/?ref=page_internal
- A detailed write up by Sarah can be seen on –
- <https://aboutalford.com/about-higgins-india/the-maharajas-new-clothes/>
- L. Somi Roy's article, on what colour is the chair –
- <http://www.enterpix.in/pix-post/what-colour-is-the-chair-the-untold-story-of-a-photograph/>
- My article on the Costume Society of UK Blog can be read at –
- <http://costumesociety.org.uk/blog/post/recreation-of-the-manipuri-maharaja-and-maharani-costume-for-alford-manor>