

Tribal Costume of Tripura, India: Witnessing Transformations

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0206

The Asian Conference on Asian Studies 2013

Official Conference Proceedings 2013

Abstract

A study on the traditional costume of the tribal women of the Reang community was conducted in the state of Tripura, India. Tripura, a small state in the North Eastern Region of the country with a population of 31,99,203, of which 31.05% belonged to the schedule tribe category. The Reang is the second dominant tribes of Tripura having a population of 1,65,103. The tribal communities are known for its conformity in clothing. Conformity is a process by which individual adapt their behavior to pre-existent norms. It is a form of social interaction within the tribal community in which one tries to maintain standards set by group. The traditional Reang tribal women weave their traditional fabrics on loom, dye yarns in black, brown and white. Their tribe could be identified by the pattern and colour woven in their costume. Their traditional costume consists of two parts the “ria” and the “rigwnai” which are wrapped on the chest and the lower part of the body, respectively. Reang women wear ornament made of silver coins. However, with change in socio-economic status of this community, influence of the culture of neighboring states, certain cultural changes have been observed and can be witnessed in their traditional costume. Traditional dyed yarn has been replaced by factory dyes acrylic yarns available in the market, use of motifs from other tribal communities of that region, use of non-traditional colours etc. It was observed that the draping of the traditional costume varied among individuals in the same community and influences from other culture get reflected in the draping pattern. The younger generation has contemporized the traditional costume. The study focuses on the changes in traditional costume women of the Reang women in the 21st century and correlating it with socio-cultural factors.

INTRODUCTION

Tripura is situated in northeastern part of India. It is surrounded on the north, west, and south by Bangladesh and is accessible to the rest of India through Assam and Mizoram state (Tripura State Portal, 2012). The state has an area of 10,492 sq. km. Tripura was a Princely State until it merged into the Union of India on 15th October 1949. During the last phase of the princely rule by the Manikya dynasty, Tripura witnessed the emergence of a new culture, which was the outcome of the migration from the Colonial Bengal and from the adjoining territories. The flow of immigrants increased in the state during the 1950s' and reached its zenith during the independence movement of Bangladesh in the year 1971 (De, N.).

The population of Tripura is 31,99,203 of whom 31.1% belong to the schedule tribe category. There are about nineteen different tribes living in Tripura. The Tripurias, Jamatia, Noatia, Reang, Halam, Chakmah, Mog, Garo, Munda, Lushai, Oraon, Santhal, Uchai, Khasi, Bhil, Lepcha, Bhutia, Chaimal and Kuki tribes have their own cultural heritage and identity which is reflected in their traditional costume. The Reang is the most primitive tribe of Tripura and has the second largest population after the Tripurias' (De, N.). The uniqueness of the tribal community is expressed in the hand woven textiles, woven in back strap looms.

The transformations on the tribal textiles in the 21st century have not been documented in details. Therefore, the aim of this research is to study the transitions in the tribal costume of Reang women, with the changes in the socio-economic and political factors.

METHODOLOGY

An ethnographic research study is done on the "Reang" (also spelt as "Riang") tribe of Tripura to study the transformations in the traditional costume. Statistical data was collected from the Government Census Office of Agartala, Tripura on the regions and clusters occupied by the "Reang" community prior to sample selection. The selection of the villages is based on factors like concentration of the "Reang" tribe's population, the practice of weaving, accessibility, political stability, mobility and safety of the researcher. Two villages namely "Chakhi kho" and "Bogafa" of the South Tripura district and the state capital Agartala was selected for this study. Personal interviews and observation were used for mode of data collection. Additionally, visual-ethnography was used. Regional weavers' centres were also visited for data collection.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Reang tribal costume

The complete costume, which is worn by the Reang tribal women of Tripura, consists of mainly two parts "rigwnai" and "rishai" or "ria". The fabrics are woven in the loin-loom by women and draped on the body. This kind loom is also found in Mexico, Peru and Guatemala where it is known as the 'back strap loom'. The photograph of a Reang lady

weaving in a loin-loom during 2012 in West Tripura is shown in Figure 1. The loom is made with bamboo sticks and can be folded and kept when not in use. It was observed that mostly the older generations practice weaving, the younger generation know the art but it is not practiced by them. During personal interviews it was mentioned by the younger women that as they focus more on education and personal growth, they do not find time to weave in the traditional lion loom. Weaving is time consuming and it takes minimum 1-2 weeks to weave a single set of ria and rigwnai.



Figure 1 Mazumder. P., 2012. Reang women in traditional costume, practicing weaving, West Tripura, India [Photograph].

Rigwnai

Rgwnai is also known as “pachra”, is a piece of cloth that is wrapped in the lower part (Figure 2 and 3) of the body. Reang and Tripurite tribal women both wear “rigwai. The dimension is generally customised according to the waist measurement of the wearer. The available dimensions are: 43 inch * 66 inch and 45 inch * 55 inch.

Risha or Ria

“Risha” is a narrow piece of cloth which is wrapped over the breast (Figure 2 and 3). The dimension is generally customised according to the bust measurement of the wearer. The dimension of the “riai” can vary from: 46 inch * 12 inch and 50 inch * 12 inch. The ria and rigwnai were originally woven with cotton yarn which were locally grown by shifting cultivation. But with the local availability of factory spun acrylic yarns in bright colours which costs lesser than cotton yarns, the modern rigwnai is woven using acrylic yarns.

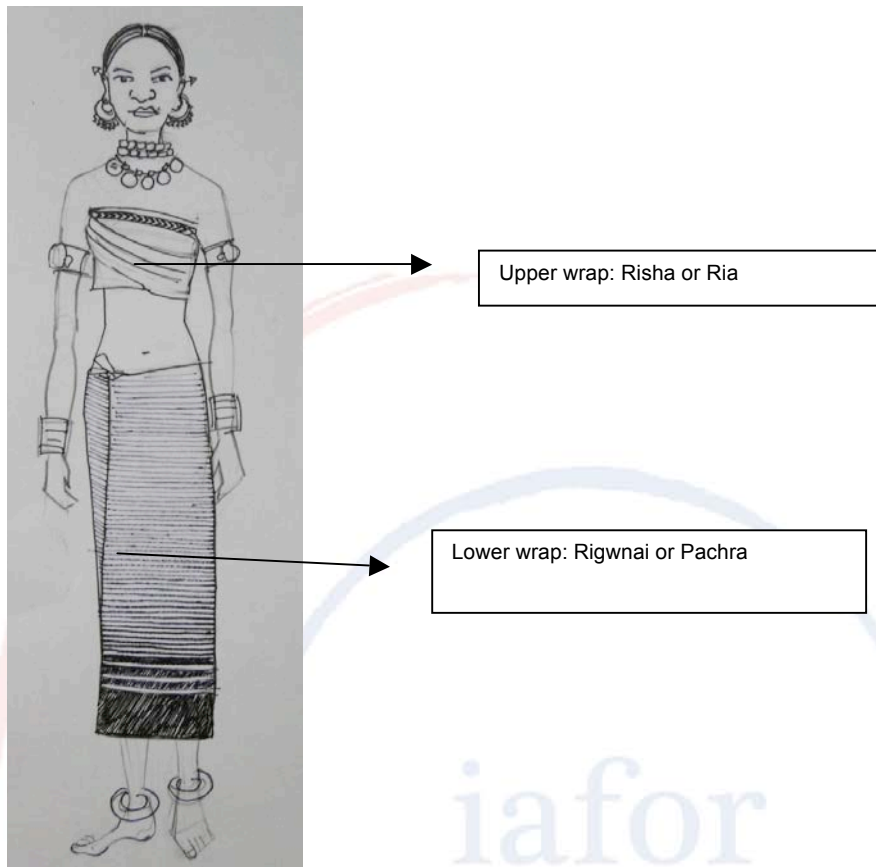


Figure 2 Mazumder, P., 2012. *Reang woman wearing traditional costume*. [Pencil Sketch].

Design preference in traditional costume

Each tribal community have their own design preferences of “rigwnai”. It is observed that the Reang women mostly wear black, brown or blue “rigwnai” with white stripes. Geometric motifs can only be observed at the borders. The motifs are mostly inspired by flora and fauna. The tribal women convert all the inspirations into geometrical forms. Young Reang women in the community wear stripes all over the “rigwnai” whereas the older women wear only stripes or a line of motif on the hem of the “rigwnai”.



Figure 3 Mazumder. P., 2012. Reang women in traditional costume, West Tripura, India [Photograph].

Transformations in traditional costume

Tribal communities are known for their conformity in dressing. It was observed that the elderly Reang women of the family strictly followed the traditional way of dressing where as the younger generation are adding an unique style to the way they are wearing their tradition costume. In recent years the traditional costume of the Reang women has undergone visible changes in the length of the rigwnai, introduction of blouse/ shirt in place of ria, draping styles and colours.

Length of rigwnai

The length of traditional rigwnai is till mid calf length. That length was easy for the women to climb the hills during cotton cultivation. However, with time as the community has shifted to rural planes or urban areas, it is observed that the length has increased to ankle length as shown in Figure 4.



Figure 4 Mazumder. P., 2012. Reang women in traditional wearing rwignai of various length, West Tripura. India [Photograph].

Introduction of new colours and yarn in traditional costume

Traditionally the Ria and Rigwnai are woven on the loin loom using undyed white cotton yarn and dyed black or brown yarn. In recent years use of non-traditional colours like purple, green, red, etc is observed within the Reang community and other tribes residing in Tripura. The Reang women still prefer using white and any one colour, unlike other tribes who use more than two or three colours to weave their textiles. This trend can be observed in the rigwnai swatches shown in Figure 5 and the dressing styles in Figure 6. Moreover, introduction of metallic yarn and acrylic yarn over tradition cotton yarn can also be observed in the modern rigwnai (Figure 5).

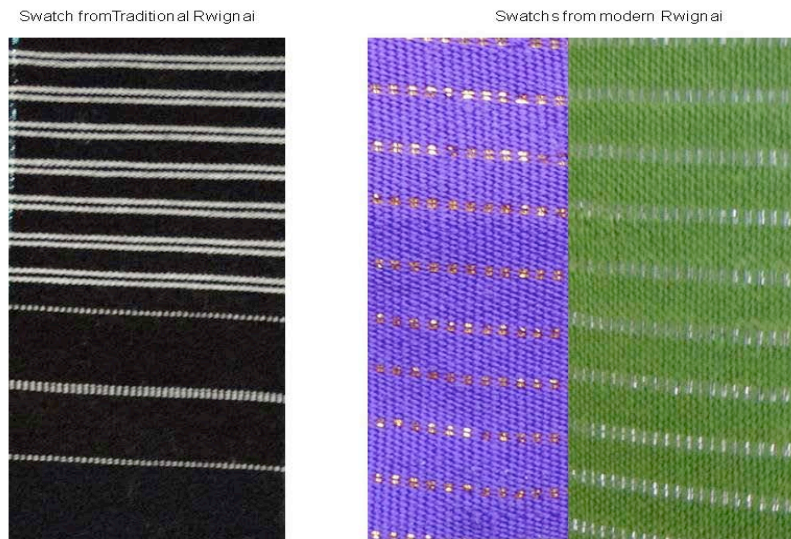


Figure 5 Rwignai swatches, West and South Tripura. India (2012)



Fig 6 Mazumder. P., 2012. Reang women in the traditional costume: Traditional to contemporary colours, South Tripura, India [Photograph].

Ria to Blouse

It can be observed in Figure 6 that the ria has been replaced with stitched blouses. Middle aged women prefer wearing stitched blouses with rigwnai. This has been adapted from the Bengali culture while conforming to the traditional rigwnai. Some women also wear shirts with rigwnai. The younger generation prefers wearing western tops that is imported from the neighbouring countries like China, Korea, Nepal, Malaysia, and Thailand etc. This can be observed in Figure 4 and 6.

New draping styles

It was observed that draping of the traditional costume has changed and new draping styles have been adopted by different age groups. The modern tribal women add her personal touch and styling to dress up as shown in Figure 7. Influence of Bengali culture can also be observed in the new draping styles. Bengalis wear sarees with a "Pallu" that covers the fitted blouse in the front. The ria is replaced with blouse and the traditional ria is used as a "saree pallu" or "dupatta".



Figure 7 Mazumder. P., 2012. Reang women in traditional costume draped in different ways, South Tripura, India [Photograph].

Woven to printed textiles

The modern Reang women also wear printed textiles as "dupattas" with rigwnai. This can be observed in Figure 8. As printed textile is not a part of traditional textile, but with global trends in printed textiles the tribal community also started experimenting with printed "dupattas".

Modern rigwnai with contemporary dupatta



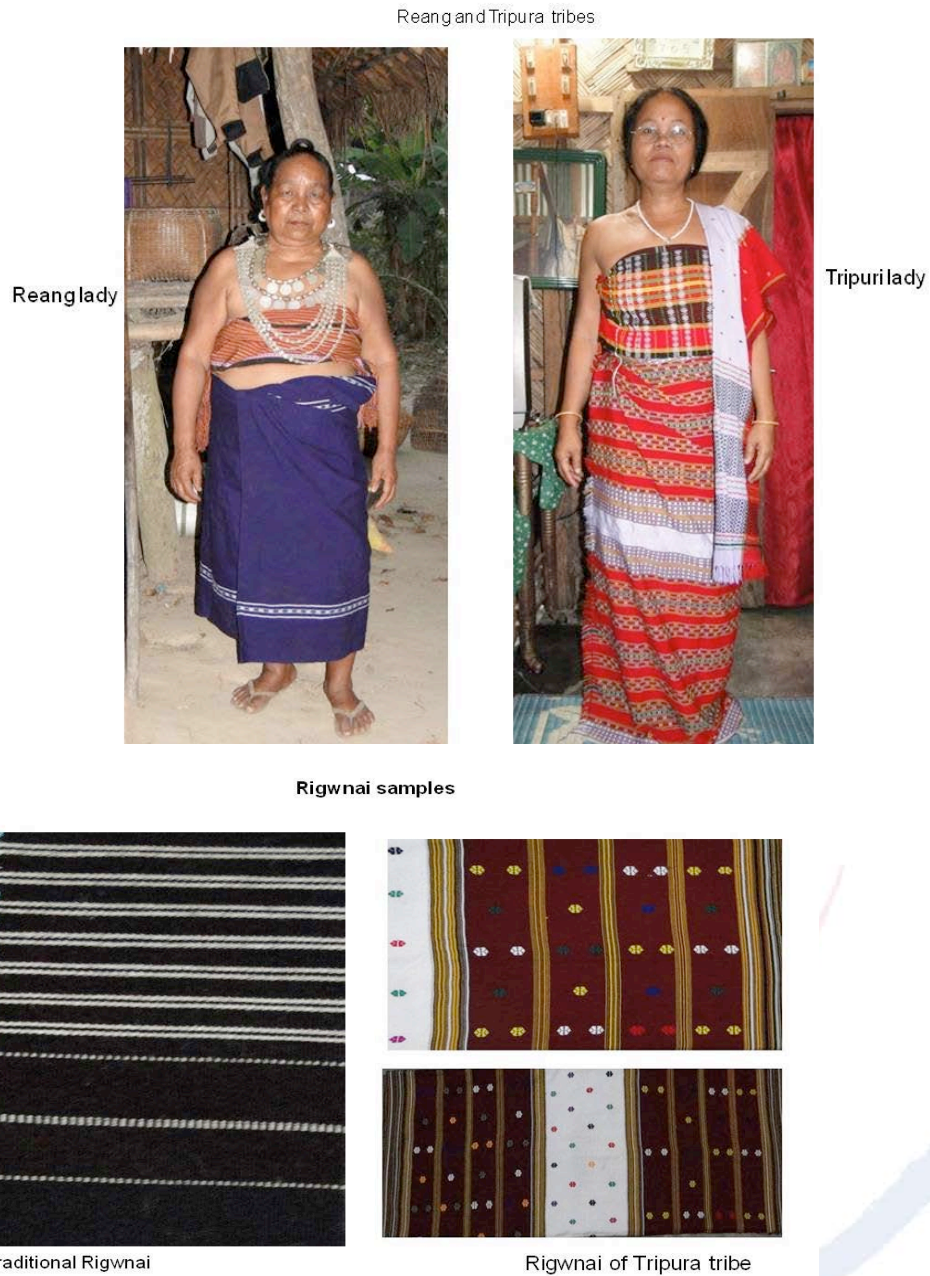
Traditional full length rigwnai with printed dupatta



Fig 8 Mazumder. P., 2012.Reang women in the traditional costume: Use of non-traditional textiles, South Tripura, India [Photograph].

Identity and Reang costume

Each tribal community maintains their own design preferences of colour and motif as mentioned earlier. It is observed that the Reang ladies mostly wear black, brown or blue “rigwnai” with white stripes. Younger women in the community wear stripes all over the “rigwnai”. Whereas, other tribe like the Tripurians, prefer to wear more complicated motifs, all over the “rigwnai” as well as on the borders (Figure 9). Even at present the Reang women conform to their cultural identity through the design of the rigwnai. The younger generation was also found to conform to similar trend in their dressing.



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Fig 9 Mazumder. P., 2012. Costume and textiles of the Reang and Tripuri tribe, South Tripura, India [Photograph].

Traditional to modern costume

It was observed during the research that the traditional rigwnai is worn with printed t-shirts by the younger generation. But the cultural identity is maintained by the young women. It is represented by the design in rigwnai as shown in Figure 10. The girls shown

in the photograph 10 belong to three different tribal communities and it can be clearly observed that the design in the rigwnai is different in the three communities.



Fig 10 Mazumder. P., 2012. Examples of Contemporary Costume and textiles of the Reang, Tripuri and Jamatia tribe, South Tripura, India [Photograph].

Factors influencing transformations

It was observed through the study of the lifestyle of the tribal people of Tripura, that the factors influencing the transformations in clothing includes influences from the sectors like political, socio-cultural, media and communication.

- Mixed cultural & political influences:
 - New draping styles are largely influenced by immigration of people from neighboring districts of Bangladesh. Knitted tops imported from neighboring countries like Korea, China, Malaysia and Thailand is accepted by the younger generations.
- Socio-economic influences:
 - With change in socio-economic status of the tribal women there is more disposable income to purchase ready-made clothes. Weaving in lion loom is time consuming and tedious. The younger generation knows the art of weaving, but it is mostly practiced by the older population. As the younger generation is taking up formal education they are also influenced by the global dressing trends.
- Mass-media influences:

- Moreover, due to impact of mass-media (television, internet and mobile phones which is available now) on the younger generation, it has influenced them to contemporize their dressing style.

CONCLUSIONS

Tripura has been mainly a tribal region, but with the passing of time and growing cultural contact with the neighboring areas, as the population of non-tribal people has steadily increased in the state their influence is also reflected in the Reang tribe. People of different parts of India are also settled in Tripura for job and education. Even tribal from other northeastern states like Mizoram, Manipur, and Nagaland can also be found travelling or residing in the state. The Reang tribal women community maintains their own design preferences of colour, stripes and motifs. With change in socio-economic status of the tribal women certain cultural changes has been observed and reflection of the same can be witnessed in their traditional costume. The traditional black and white colour are taken over by bright colours like, red, green and shades of blue in the rigwnai. Draping of the traditional “ria” has changed to stitched blouses/ shirts. The stripes in the rigwnai which are a mark of identity of the Reang it is still preserved with the contemporary tribal costume. The modern tribal women add her personal touch and styling while dressing. Selection of the printed fabrics for stole/ dupatta shows the acceptance of other cultures and global trends. Young women were observed to be more experimental with clothing, than the older women who still prefer more traditional costumes. In spite of transformations, Reang women preserve their cultural identity in the rigwnai.

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