

Intangible Cultural Heritage of India-9

# Textile Traditions of Northeast India

Sankar K. Roy

General Editor  
Kishore K. Basa

338.4767709546  
ROY

INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE OF INDIA—9

# **Textile Traditions of Northeast India**

**(A Catalogue of M.C. Goswami Museum  
Collection, Gauhati)**

**Sankar K. Roy**

*General Editor*  
**Krishor K. Basa**

**INDIRA GANDHI RASHTRIYA MANAV  
SANGRAHALAYA**

**(National Museum of Mankind)**

**BHOPAL**

**&**

**PRATIBHA PRAKASHAN**

**DELHI**

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338.47677095416

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First Edition : 2008

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ISBN : 978-81-7702-200-1

Rs. : 2250

Published by:  
INDIRA GANDHI RASHTRIYA  
MANAV SANGRAHALAYA  
Shamla Hills, Bhopal

&  
PRATIBHA PRAKASHAN  
(Oriental Publishers & Booksellers)  
7259/20, Ajendra Market, Prem Nagar,  
Shakti Nagar, Delhi-110007 (India)  
Ph. : (O) 47084852, 09350884227  
e-mail : info@pratibhabooks.com  
Web : www.pratibhabooks.com

*Laser Type Setting :*  
**S.K. Graphics, Delhi**

Printed by : **D.K. Offset Process, Shahdara,**  
Delhi-32 Ph : 9868629306

## Foreword

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Madhab Chandra Goswami Museum (Previously Anthropological Museum), Department of Anthropology, Gauhati University was established as an integral part of this discipline in the year 1950. Since its inception this museum directs its endeavour to record and to preserve the material cultural items from diverse ethno-cultural situation of Northeast India. The collection began with the pioneering zeal of Prof. M.C. Goswami, the founder.

All speak of the cultural distinctiveness of Northeast in visual and tangible form of the textile come to the fore. They not only visually project the cultural distinctiveness of the life and culture of Northeast India; but also reflect the wider cultural nomogeneity within the hererogeneity. Integration reflects on heretogeneity. Chromes of textiles and the motifs woven on it catches this reality.

This needs exposure. The Indira Gandhi Rashtriya Manav Sangharalaya, Bhopal came forward with a bening approach to bring the aforesaid tacit reality to the lime light by way of publishing a book on textiles based on the collection of Madhab Chandra Goswami Museum from their institution. We are thankful to them.

**Rekha Das**

Professor & Head

Department of Anthropology

Gauhati University

Guwahati

## Preface

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Madhab Chandra Goswami Museum (Previously Anthropological Museum), Department of Anthropology, Gauhati University has been existing for more than fifty years. This museum at the moment stands with it more than two thousand ethnographic and eleven thousand archaeological specimens. These were collected from different parts of Northeast India and at different depths of time. In addition, the museum houses skeletons of anthropoid apes and other primates numbering ten only.

The material cultural items collected are diverse and many; but each item stands for the concrete expression of the means through which people of Northeast India fulfill their specific material need in a culturally determined way. The needs are diverse but integrated; so are the expression of their fulfillments. The beginning was humble and it was made by early fifties of the preceding era under the pioneering efforts of late Prof. Madhab Chandra Goswami, the founder Head of this department. Over the time the museum has taken a tangible form and emerged as an anthropological museum potent with valuable and rare ethnographic collections from Northeast India. This museum contributes tangibly to the understanding of the cultural heritage of Northeast India in particular and India as a whole.

As said earlier, we have many collections of national and international importance. Of them textiles from Northeast India occupy an important place. They not only stand as the cultural identities for diverse ethnocultural peoples of the Hills and the Plains; but also they reflect an integrated cultural unity among the diverse ethnocultural groups of this area. This we feel but we could not bring it to the national forum through publications for financial constraints. We are thankful to Prof. Kishor K Basa, Director Indira Gandhi

Rasthriya Manav Sanghralaya, Bhopal who of this own has come forward to materialize our long cherished vision into reality through his initiative. The author feels exhilarated when he proposed the author's name for carrying out this responsibility this was approved by my Department. I am thankful to both.

While compiling this work I received technical support form our departmental colleagues : Dr. Bhavani Bora, Exploration Officer; Smt. Jayashree Kalita, Photo Artist and Ramen Thakuria of this department. The Photographs on textile were taken by Mr. Tapas Biswas and secreterial assistance given by Shri Sudhir Shrivastava and Manoj Jain from Indira Gandhi Rashtriya Manav Sangrahalya, Bhopal, I express my gratitude to them. I must express my thanks to Prof. B.K. Medhi of this Department for his academic support. Last but not least, I express my heartfelt thanks to all who co-operated with me in giving this work a definite shape.

**Sankar K. Roy**

Curator, M.C. Goswami Museum  
Department of Anthropology,  
Guwahati University

## List of Illustrations

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### Assam

- AS -1 : *Chaddar* (Shawl)
- AS -2 : *Chaddar* (Shawl)
- AS -3 : *Mekhala* (Skirt)
- AS -4 : Handkerchief
- AS -5 : Shawl (Female's wear)
- AS -6 : Shawl in colour; japtogar
- AS -7 : *Joumgra* (Skirt)
- AS -8 : Shawl
- AS -9 : Ritualistic Scroll
- AS -10 : Ritualistic Scroll
- AS -11 : *Riha* (Breast Band)
- AS -12 : *Chaddar* (Shawl)
- AS -13 : *Chaddar* (Shawl)
- AS -14 : *Chaddar* (Shawl)
- AS -15 : *Joumgra* (Skirt)
- AS -16 : *Miri Chaddar* (Shawl)
- AS -17 : *Sari* (Skirt)
- AS -18 : *Riha* (Breast Band)
- AS -19 : *Dhuti Saji* (Ritualistic Shawl)
- AS -20 : *Kagironga Chaddar* (Shawl)
- AS -21 : *Joumgra* (Skirt)
- AS -22 : *Chaddar* (Shawl)
- AS -23 : *Chaddar* (Shawl)
- AS -24 : *Chaddar* (Shawl)
- AS -25 : Shawl
- AS -26 : *Mekhala* (Skirt)
- AS -27 : *Mekhala* (Skirt)

- AS -28 : *Dhuti Chaddar* (Rapper used in cooking)
- AS -29 : *Gasul* (Upper Garment of *Riha*)
- AS -30 : *Ege* (Skirt)
- AS -31 : *Gosor* (Females upper garment or *Riha*)
- AS-32 : *Sagreg* or *Kelpong* or *Palou*
- AS-33 : *Dumer* or *Gamocha* (Towel)
- AS-34 : *Ege* (Skirt)
- AS-35 : *Gero* (Breast Band)
- AS-36 : *Segreg* (Band over the *ege*)
- AS-37 : *Gancheng* (Skirt)
- AS-38 : *Sareg* (Shawl)
- AS-39 : *Mugu Gasor* (Muga Shawl)
- AS-40 : *Gosor* (Scarf)
- AS-41 : *Ege* (Skirt)
- AS-42 : *Gero* (Breast Band)
- AS-43 : *Segreg* (A band over *Ege* or *Patoli*)
- AS-44 : *Garbunge* (Upper Garment)
- AS-45 : *Khonia Kapor* (Ceremonial cloths exclusively for males use)
- AS-46 : *Khonia Chelang Kapor* (Ceremonial cloth)
- AS-47 : *Khonia Kapor* (Ceremonial dress)
- AS-48 : *Khonia Kapor* (Ceremonial cloth)
- AS-49 : *Khonia Kapor* (Consisting of border)
- AS-50 : *Khonia Chellang Kapor* (Ceremonial Cloth)
- AS-51 : *Dangiri Kapor* (A variant of *Khonia Kapor*)
- AS-52 : *Gamocha* (Towel)
- AS-53 : *Chatosa Supti* (Female Scarf)
- AS-54 : *Kinkhan* (Female Scarf)
- AS-55 : *Kinkhan* (Skirt for Ceremonial use)
- AS-56 : *Kinkhan* (Skirt for Ceremonial use)
- AS-57 : *Riha* (Upper Garment)
- AS-58 : *Riha* (Breast Band)
- AS-59 : *Chellang Chaddar* (Shawl for special occasion)
- AS-60 : *Chutiya Chola* (Women's Blouse)

- AS-61 : *Riha* (Upper Garment)  
AS-62 : *Riha* (Females Shawl)  
AS-63 : *Jekletari* (Jacket)  
AS-64 : *Riha* (Women's Upper Garment)  
AS-65 : *Gamocho* (Towel)  
AS-66 : *Gathing* (Male Garment)  
AS-67 : *Chinkan* (Upper Garment)  
AS-68 : *Nayantara* (*Vinca rosa*)  
AS-69 : *Mokardama Phul*  
AS-70 : *Mokardama Phul*  
AS-71 : *Bahari*  
AS-72 : *Sankha Chakra Lata* (Conch and quite creeper)  
AS-73 : *Krishna Yasoda* (Lord Krishna and his foster mother)  
AS-74 : *Parijat Mala* (A Garland made of Celestial flower)  
AS-75 : *Aparajita* (Clitoris)  
AS-76 : *Parijat Lata* (Creeper with Celestial flower)  
AS-77 : *Angur* (Grape vine & Lata Creeper)  
AS-78 : *Gutmali* (Jasmine)  
AS-79 : *Gulancho Lata* (Temple tree)

### **Arunachal Pradesh**

- AP-1 : Lower Garment  
AP-2 : *Riphum* (Wooden Carpet)  
AP-3 : Meandur Scroll  
AP-4 : *Mahok* (Waist Band)  
AP-5 : Shawl  
AP-6 : Lower Garment  
AP-7 : *Lamsam* (Skirt)  
AP-8 : *Lamasan* (Shawl)  
AP-9 : *Thoruh* (Gents Shawl)  
AP-10 : Bag  
AP-11 : *Galak* (Coat for male's use)  
AP-12 : *Galak* (Male's Coat)

- AP -13 : *Jilan* (Gent's Shawl)
- AP -14 : Lower Garment
- AP -15 : Skirt
- AP -16 : Skirt
- AP -17 : Bago Naya Skirt
- AP -18 : Carpet
- AP -19 : Waist Band (Female's use)
- AP -20 : Coat (Male's use)
- AP -21 : Lower Garment
- AP -22 : Lower Garment
- AP -23 : *Zidis Aran* (Female Coat)
- AP -24 : *Heling* (Ceremonial female's Skirt)
- AP -25 : *Gale* (Female's Skirt)
- AP -26 : *Helling* (Skirt)
- AP -27 : Skirt
- AP -28 : *Jaskora* (Tachel)

### **Manipur**

- M -1 : Skirt
- M -2 : Skirt
- M -3 : *Zakuolaisen* (Upper Garment)
- M -4 : *Hmar* (Skirt)
- M -5 : *Lenglan* (Female's Dancing Dress)
- M -6 : Kuki Skirt
- M -7 : *Punandun* (Side Bag)
- M -8 : *Raivat* (Cotton Shawl)
- M -9 : *Phulung Sa* (Lower Garment)
- M -10 : *Saijeng sa* (Lower Garment or Skirt)
- M -11 : *Phangaisa* (Lower Garment)

### **Meghalaya**

- Me -1 : *Gena rikhing* (Skirts)
- Me -2 : *Rapper* (Female's wear)
- Me -3 : Scarf (Female's wear)

- Me -4 : Shawl (Female's wear)  
Me -5 : *Riphan* (Skirt)  
Me -6 : *Angcha* (Comfortor)  
Me -7 : *Mekhala* (Skirt)  
Me -8 : *Kokal bandha* (Waist Band)  
Me -9 : *Lemo Riphan* (Comfortor)  
Me -10 : *Dokhna* (Skirt)  
Me -11 : *Dokhna* (Skirt)  
Me -12 : *Dokhna* (Skirt)  
Me -13 : *Arnai* (Comforter)  
Me -14 : *Arnai* (Shawl)  
Me -15 : *Riphoni/Mekhela* (Skirt)  
Me -16 : *Lemu Rephan* (Scarf)  
Me -17 : *Chaddar* (Scarf)  
Me -18 : *Riphan* (Scarf)  
Me -19 : *Arnai* (Scarf)  
Me -20 : *Riphan* (Skirt)  
Me -21 : *Chaddar* (Shawl)  
Me -22 : *Gena Rilching* (Skirt)  
Me -23 : *Angcha* (Handkerchief)  
Me -24 : *Angcha* (Handkerchief)  
Me -25 : *Angcha* (Handkerchief)  
Me -26 : *Angcha* (Handkerchief)  
Me -27 : *Angcha* (Handkerchief)  
Me -28 : *Angcha* (Handkerchief)  
Me -29 : *Angcha* (Handkerchief)

### **Mizoram**

- Mi -1 : *Jacket* (Male's wear)  
Me -2 : *Lushi* (Skirt)

### **Nagaland**

- NG -1 : Scarf  
NG -2 : *Lolli* (Scarf)

- NG -3 : *Lolli* (Scarf)  
NG -4 : Shawl  
NG -5 : *Lolli* (Scarf)  
NG -6 : *Funorrhite* (Female's Skirt)  
NG -7 : Ceremonial Shawl  
NG -8 : Scarf  
NG -9 : Skirt  
NG -10 : *Lohi*  
NG -11 : *Sanak Su*  
NG -12 : Scarf (Loin Cloth)  
NG -13 : Front Cover  
NG -14 : Male's Scarf  
NG -15 : *Lohi* (Skirt)  
NG -16 : *Prem hod* (Scarf)  
NG -17 : *Savungsui* (Shawl)  
NG -18 : Scarf  
NG -19 : Scarf  
NG -20 : Scarf  
NG -21 : Scarf  
NG -22 : Scarf  
NG -23 : *Kalukemyu Su* (Ceremonial War Dress)  
NG -24 : Scarf  
NG -25 : *Yangnasu* (Males Wear)  
NG -26 : *Taperen Su* (Males wear)

**Tripura**

- T -26 : *Phani* (Skirt)

## Contents

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<i>Foreword</i>	<i>v</i>
<i>Preface</i>	<i>vii</i>
<i>List of Illustrations</i>	<i>ix</i>
Madab Chandra Goswami Museum : An Introduction	1
1. Importance of Textile traditions in Northeast India	5
2. Ecology, Ethnography and Textile Traditions	9
3. Art of Weaving - Its Technological Base	35
4. Resume	40
<i>Bibliography</i>	49
<i>Illustrations</i>	

## **Madhab Chandra Goswami Museum : An Introduction**

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The Anthropological Museum, Department of Anthropology, Gauhati University newly named 'Madhab Chandra Goswami Museum' in the year 2003. The Museum was established in 1950. From the inception 'Museum Method' was included in the syllabus of the Post Graduate Course of this discipline. The main idea was to get the student acquainted with the material cultural heritages of this region along with non material cultures of Northeast India. For this the Museum of this Department serves as a medium. Now, this Museum has emerged as one of center imparting information to the scholar studying on culture and history of Northeast India in particular India as a whole.

Scholars from India and abroad northeast India (previously comprising Northeast Frontier Agency and undivided Assam ) paradise for archaeological studies and researches.. This area encapsulates a plethora of numerous ethno cultural groups; each having distinctive cultural identity, heritage and manifestation of its own .This is reflected both in the material and non material cultural life of a cultural group. The cultural scenario as was observed prior to the early fifties cannot be same as we see to day. It might have undergone transformation over the time same area itself .The artifacts which were once indigenously made and came from within given resources,; now they have become obsolete or defunct . The basic mode of subsistence of the mass remain same; but they got exposed to new world view ..Their ethos changes and they got exposed to the market economy. Culture leaves a little space for the indigenous products. The artifacts used during fifty years ago will be priceless objects for to day. This was visualized by Late Professor. M. C. Goswami, the founder Head of the department of this discipline well ahead of his

time .He very often said," Collect as many specimens as you can; or else it will be too late.. You will get the people but not the same artifacts (as it was during fifty years ago)..Time is going out of your hand." For this he directed most of the tenure of his service in collecting the material cultural items for the museum; while conducting anthropological field works among the different cultural groups of different regions of Northeast.

Many of the specimens have already assumed culturally endangered status .and they ceased to exist in the places of their origin; but these are preserved in this museum of this department. This was possible for the tireless efforts and commitment to the cause and the development of this museum and his inspiration to his colleagues. The zeal generated by late. Professor Goswami continue to be the driving force for the next.

As a result of the integrated efforts of his colleagues, the Anthropological Museum of this department reached to the present state. Now, it stands with ten thousand archaeological specimens ( Prehistoric artifacts occupy the major part of the collection and the rest are from historic contexts) from different parts of northeast India. This provides a basis for the archeological research of Northeast India. The ethnographic collections comprise of two thousand specimens and three skeletons of primates and three skeletons of anthropoid apes.

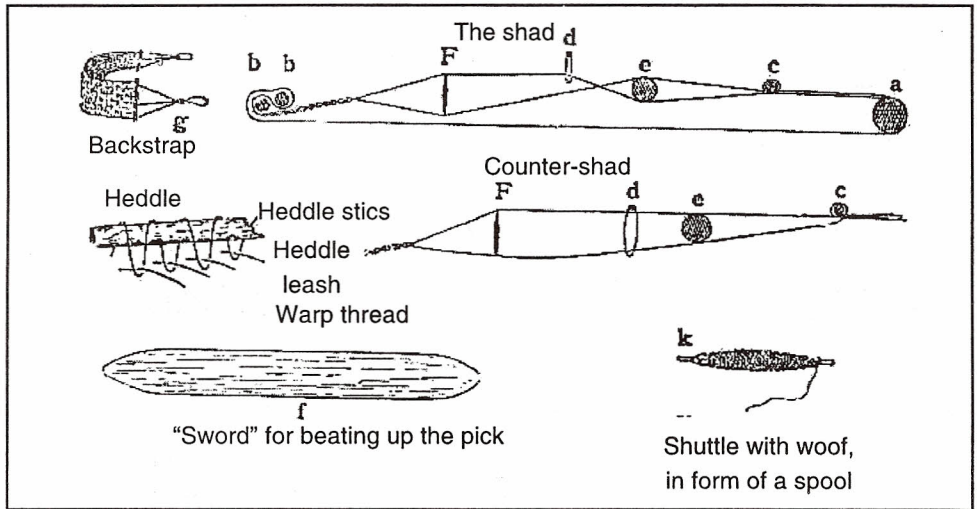
The museum is mainly divided into two sections-the archaeological and ethnographic sections. The ethnographic section includes the specimens made of inorganic and organic media. The inorganic objects include; iron hoe blades, axes, chopper sand weapons for 'war and chase', carpentry tools and the appliances related to agricultural works and utensils made o brass metal. The specimens made of organic media consist of basketry of different types,head gears fishing baskets and gears and other decorative receptacles for religious and decorative, combs,etc made of cane and bamboo's woodcrafts consist of receptacles, masks and different types of wood cuts; textiles woven by using cotton threads and silk yarns constitute a sizable portion among the ethnographic collection.

Textiles are important for the reasons that these are collected from among most of the ethnocultural groups of North east India .The number of textiles is more than five hundred .These reflect the

cultural identities of the ethnocultural groups of the seven sisters' states in a variable proportions. Textiles from each area have distinctiveness of their own. This is expressed through the distinct differences of in the arts of weaving, colour differences, and variation in sizes and forms and in wearing patterns. Motifs woven on textiles are distinct in types and colour variations (in relation to the textiles). These carry cultural meanings and significance of their own.. This becomes obvious when the textiles of Northeast India are examined on comparative basis. In fact it is visual identity for each ethno cultural groups inhabiting this part of India. In fact through the textiles one may feel the vibrations of cultures of Northeast India. The Madhab Chandra Goswami Museum, Department of Anthropology, Gauhati university preserves such priceless cultural heritages of Northeast India.



(A) The Sema Loin Loom



(B) The Description of Sema Loin Loom Components

(Source : Hutton, 1921:50)

## Importance of Textile Traditions in Northeast India

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Once I had a chance to witness an costume parade of different ethnic groups organized by an educational institute. The parade was organized in order to highlight the identity of each ethno- cultural group of Northeast India through this cultural item that remains with a person from the moment he develops sense. Such costume continues to be with a person till he breathes his last and sometime beyond that also. the multitude of chromes and myriads of autumn woven on their textiles.

Time passed on; now as a museum personnel I feel how deep the impact of that parade on my mental spectrum was. I tried to piece together the patches of my memory which got broken at many points. The people whom I had met last from a distance in terms of my own cultural perspective look mystic. When I reach closer to them, I discover something more than what they appear to be. These are not a means to protect body from the cold and sun; they are not inanimate pieces of object of a showcase in an emporium or a museum; in their proper context they assume life and movement being an indivisible part of bio-cultural process. Man and material become inseparable. Textiles emerge as a visual reflector of mind - an indicator of cultural aesthetics.

Textiles of Northeast when viewed against the vast, diverse and multiple cultural backgrounds and heritages, visually assert cultural distinctiveness. In fact the textiles of a given culture act as a visual language for a culture. Their growth and development are conditioned by the geographical, cultural and linguistic factors.

These factors play both negative and positive roles, sometimes

they act as forces that create isolation or reduce the force of interactions or sometimes they provide the space for easy interaction, mobility of traits among various cultures. This we have observed in the Northeast in geographically contrast locations and wherein the ethno-cultural groups distributed having their variations and diversities.

The textiles of Northeast preserved in the Anthropological Museum of Guhati University when studied against their geo-ethnic backgrounds give a picture of co-existence and interaction among the cultures of this region. When we see the textiles collected at different points of time dating back to more than a decade, these in most of the cases present blight less form. Textile is also a representative of indigenous art and aesthetics. Technology applied in weaving exhibits its transformation from simple to complex; but the extant forms of technology still continue to exist in isolation in many areas of Northeast. The chromes that tinge the textiles consist of indigenous dyes; the motifs displayed or weaved have their sources of inspiration from the objects around.

Textile is an artificial means to protect one from 'cold and heat'; but the natural phenomena are etched out or weaved extensively on the textiles as motifs. This speaks of the aesthetic root of textiles with nature. The textile traditions of Northeast reflect this reality on the looms considered simple or archaic in the face of mechanized and modern ones. These motifs are simple, and stylized very often and are woven in tabby. Technological limitations are there but within the limitation the weavers who are exclusively women create textile with multiple colours with motifs. They did that within the dictates of cultures.

They name each textile, each motif and attribute cultural meaning to each. In traditional context each becomes a unique creation and gets woven in socio-cultural matrix and stands unique which coordinates imagination with technology. That culminates in the creation of multi-chromed material cultural treasures. Each culture has its own values, norms and symbolic language. This gives distinctiveness and individuality to each culture. Textile is a visual spectrum, whereon cultural identity is reflected and passed on from one generation to another.

The most important aspect of textile tradition in Northeast India is that the art of weaving is exclusively reserved for the female

irrespective of one's ethno-cultural and caste affiliations. On the textiles her vibrant finger etches out the myriad of autumn. She coordinates her imagination and creation in concrete on loom, may it be loin or shuttle, in a rhythm she inherits from her mother. Sometime it gives an impression that the cultural system of this part of India is such that it breeds the women as born-artists. This is reflected in the proverb among the Missings of Assam, "A girl dances before she learns to walk, she weaves before she learns to wear cloth". Still I imagine the tinge of apprehensive piquant pleasure and laugh on the face of a belle when she completes weaving a 'Bihuan' - the colourful towel carrying the messages of her affection to the youth of her choice in floral motifs with her vibrating fingers. To a belle the 'BiHu' (a spring festival) continues to be a moment for a pleasant expectation and for the married a matter of pleasant reminiscence. A youth sees the 'Bihuan' as a token of the memento of his love and affection.

Northeast remains under the veils of sylvan mist. The hectic heel of time does not move here at the same pace with that of the other parts of the subcontinent. Some maintain till today a kind of insularly existence, Is it ordained by the culture itself or imposed by the geography? Whatever it may be, the modern technological order and its related moral order are constantly knocking at the traditional door of this part of India. It has already made its presence felt in the periurban area and it is slowly but steadily proliferating; thus causing a quantitative and qualitative transformation in the socio-economic and socio-cultural patterns.

Rather, call it a kind of cultural hybridization. This is a universal process. Nothing wrong in hybridization provided that does not jeopardize the existence of the traditional cultures or put such cultures in a state of oblivion. Modernization has pitched in here; but it has not acquired enough momentum to displace the traditional lore, values, norms and ethos completely. When the question of ethno-cultural identity comes to the fore, people search for such material cultural item, that has stood and is standing as a basis for one's cultural identity. Textiles are one such item that not only warp one's body and mind but also one's culture. This ensures his socio-cultural existence against the pulverizing impact of globalization. It acts as a cultural shield over time and space. Beneath that one feels the vibes of past and present. With that one moves towards the future.

Let this item be imbued with values; emotion and affection be allowed to exist with its own rhythm and tenor. Let the rattling sound of the loom be allowed to vibrate the air of Northeast, let the vibrating and creative fingers of the belle create myriad of autumn on the textiles. Let the body and mind of the people be tinged with the chromes and rhythms of nature. Nature becomes captive in the 'warp and weft' of the textiles. The vibrating fingers of the belle of this part of India cradle and rear them up as a part of life and culture. Let this age-old art and its charmed process be continued. This is perhaps the oasis of our existence.

ISBN 817702200-8



9 788177 022001

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