

## **20 Clothing preference of the 21st Century tribal women: a study of the transformation in the costume of tribal women of Tripura, India.**

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### **Keywords**

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### **Abstract**

An ethnographic research was conducted from 2011 to 2016, to study the tribal costume of the Tripuri and Reang tribe. Tripura is situated in the 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 witnessed the emergence of a new culture, with the flow of immigrants in the state during the post-independence period.

There are about nineteen different tribes living in Tripura. The Tripuri and Reang are the most primitive tribes of Tripura. The uniqueness of the tribal community is expressed in the hand-woven textiles. The tribal communities are known for their conformity in dressing, a form of social interaction within the tribal community in which one tries to maintain standards set by the group. With modernisation and socio-economic development, the preferences of the modern tribal women have changed from the traditional way of dressing and adorning.

The traditional costume has also undergone changes in terms of textiles, colour, and motifs as well as in draping style. The research paper focuses on the transformation that has taken place in the traditional costume, while the Tripuri and Reang tribal women also strive to preserve their cultural identity. One of the great challenges for tribal communities in the 21st century is to develop practical models to capture, maintain, and pass on traditional knowledge systems and values to future generations.

The study ideates that there is a rise of contemporary local, regional, national and global contexts, raising questions about cultural conviviality and the influence of

trans-cultural, trans-national and multicultural factors influencing different cultural identities, which can also be witnessed through the textiles and costumes of the tribes.

## **Introduction**

The state of Tripura is situated in the 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). Tripura was a princely state until it merged into the Union of India on 15th October 1949 after the independence of India on 15th of August 1947. Since then the history of Tripura has witnessed various political, economic and social developments. Tripura gained full statehood on January 21, 1972. 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 colonial Bengal and the adjoining territories of the state. The flow of immigrants increased in the state during the 1950s and reached its zenith during the Independence movement of Bangladesh in 1971 (De, N., 2012). The current population of Tripura is approximately 32 lakhs (3.2 million) among which 31.1% belong to the scheduled tribe category. There are about nineteen different tribes living in Tripura. The Tripuri, Reang, Jamatia, Noatia, Halam, Chakmah, Mog, Garo, Munda, Lushai, Orang, Santhal, Uchai, Khasi, Bhil, Lepcha, Bhutia, Chaimal and Kuki tribes have their own cultural heritage and identity, which is reflected in their traditional costume. Two tribes - the Tripuri and Reang are the most primitive tribes (Anon., 2010). According to Census India, Tripura Report 2001, the Tripuri tribe has the highest population, and the Reang tribe has the second highest tribal population in the state. The uniqueness of the tribal community is expressed in the hand-woven textiles, woven on backstrap looms. This research aims to study the traditional costume of the Tripuri and Reang tribes of Tripura and their transformation, and to correlate the changes in the tribal costume with various socio-economical and socio-cultural factors. The change in demography, exchange of culture, change in religion, the influence of media and communication and religion play a significant role in the transformation in tribal clothing in the 21<sup>st</sup>- century.

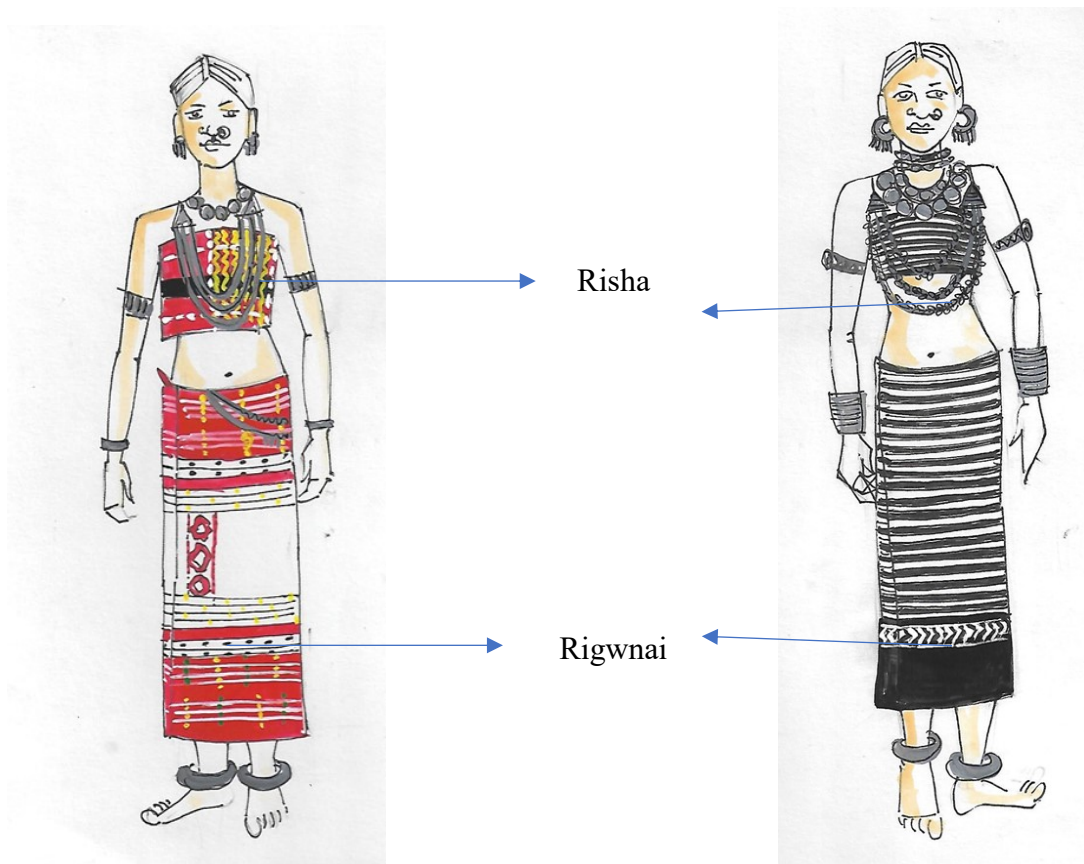
## **Methodology**

Ethnographic research was conducted to study the tribal costumes of two tribes in Tripura. The data was collected in both rural and urban settings and followed multi-sited ethnography. Data was collected using methods including participant observation, face-to-face interviews, focus group discussion and visual ethnography. The triangulation of data was done through observation, interviews and visual ethnography. The selection of the villages is also based on factors such as the concentration of the Tripuri and Reang tribe's population. To study the Tripuri tribe, field visits were carried in Sunder Tilla, Khumulwng, Rajarghat, Agartala (capital of the state) in West Tripura District and Champahowa in Khowai District. And to study the Reang tribe, field visits were made to Bogafa and Chakhi Kho in South Tripura District. A survey was conducted among 100 Tripuri and 100 Reang women to study their clothing preferences. Further market study and observation of street fashion helped to understand the fashion trends.

## **Findings & Discussions**

### **Traditional Costume of Tripuri and Reang women**

The tribal women wear an unstitched costume. The costume consists of two parts known as a risha (draped on the upper abdomen to cover the breast) and a rigwnai (draped like a wrap around skirt to cover the lower abdomen). The costume of the Tripuri and Reang tribe have the same name and same draping style. However, the colour combinations, motifs and designs of both the tribes are different, as shown in Fig 1. The Tripuri women wear pre-dominantly red and white colours, whereas the Reang women wear only black and white. The traditional colours of the costume form the identity of a tribal community. The colours help to identify the village or tribe the women belong to.



**Figure 1.** Sketch of a Tripuri woman (left) and Reang woman (right) in traditional costume.

Traditionally the tribal women of Tripura weave their traditional textiles on the backstrap loom. Weaving on the backstrap loom is practiced by the women of the tribal communities in Tripura. Traditionally the tribal women used locally grown cotton yarns and dyed the yarns in natural dyes. The Tribal women weave specific motifs on the rigwnai, different from the motifs of other tribes of Tripura. Traditionally the Tripuri women classified the rigwnai in categories based on the design, and are locally known as Sada, Chamathia and Shikla. The Reang women classified the rigwnai in two categories, based on the design worn by elderly and younger women. In the Reang tribe, the younger women before and after marriage wear rigwnai with stripes in black and white. Women who have become a mother-in-law or grandmother wear a black rigwnai with motifs on the borders, in both sides of the rigwnai, with borders in the warp direction. Women from both of the tribes weave traditional geometric motifs unique to their community.

## **Transformation in the tribal costume of Tripura**

During the research, it was found that the traditional costume worn by the tribal women in rural areas has undergone various changes. Changes are observed in reference to change in yarn design, draping, motif and colour. The researcher, in discussion with the officials of the Tripura Weavers' Centre came to know that due to unavailability of the local cotton fibers, cotton yarn from the mill as well as acrylic yarn is being used for the weaving of traditional costumes. According to Mr. Tapan Lal Chakraborty (2012), an official at the Tripura Weavers' Service Centre in Agartala, acrylic yarns were introduced at the end of the 20th century, and in the early 21st century, the use of 2/40s mill spun cotton yarns, as well as 20s acrylic yarns, gained popularity. The acrylic yarn became popular among the tribal community as sizing of the yarn is not required, it is wrinkle resistance, comfortable during cold weather conditions and cheaper and more durable than cotton yarns. Women started using contemporary colours as the acrylic yarns were available in various shades. In similar research, Bhandari, Dhingra, & Kashyap (1998), reported that cotton yarn is no longer in use in the entire Northeast except in Manipur and Assam. The Researcher observed during the field visits that the Tribal women wear new styles of rigwnai as daily wear in the office, home and outside. The new versions of rigwnai have contemporary colours, new surface designs (hand embroidery, machine embroidery, and fabric paints), and are not necessarily made on the backstrap loom. Both frame-loom woven fabric and power-loom made fabrics readily available in the market can be purchased to make this rigwnai. The tribal women can purchase the new rigwnai from local shops, custom make it from other weavers' fabric, or weave the fabric themselves.

During an interview, Ms. Deepali Debbarma (2012), an expert weaver from the Tripuri tribe explained that traditionally the tribal women of Tripura always weave motifs inspired by nature and daily commonplace objects. Each tribal community has their own motifs. For example: Larima (butterfly), and Bang (spider) motifs of the Tripuri community; Malim mhba (Jasmine flower), Wah mul (bamboo flower) and Thakumtum (duck's egg) of the Reang community. The colour combinations of motifs are different in different communities. It was observed that the Tripuri women have started wearing contemporary motifs. The younger generation of women seems to be fond of floral motifs. There were no specific names for these motifs as

they were copied from printed designs, or self-designed. Traditionally the Tripuri women used green, yellow and blue to weave motifs on a red and white base. During the interviews Ms. Gunabati Reang (2012), from the village Bogafa, explained that the Reang women would only weave the motif in white colours. The Reang women continue to wear traditional designs of motifs; however, they now weave the motifs in contemporary colours. The researcher found the change in motifs used by the Tripuri women portrays the change in their lifestyle. In the last few decades, educated Tripuri women have begun to work outside their homes. A few Tripuri women own, cultivate and engage in the rubber plantation. As the Tripuri women become essential wage earners, some enterprising women have recently begun weaving traditional pieces professionally for other urban tribal women who do not have the time to weave for themselves.

From the interviews and observations, the following three reasons were found for how the changes in the lifestyle of the Tripuri women are portrayed in the contemporary motifs. Firstly, during the interviews, few women mentioned how they copy new motifs. They do not claim authorship. New motifs are quickly dispersed among the group to become fashion. One weaver related that she took inspirations from the designs of trendy saris worn by other women. Secondly, due to the commercialisation of traditional textiles, symbolic meaning, as well as the exclusivity of designs, has been reduced to minor concerns for many weavers, or is no longer considered at all. According to weaver Shefali Debbarma (2012), motifs are kept simple, for easy production. Other than weaving, motifs are also created using various surface design techniques such as hand and machine embroidery. Thirdly it was observed the new generation of educated tribal women are not skilled weavers like their ancestors. Due to less time, they prefer making simpler motifs. In similar research (ManKiller, 2019), many of the traditional motifs are no more in use. One of the great challenges for tribal peoples in the 21<sup>st</sup> century will be to develop practical models to capture, maintain, and pass on traditional knowledge systems and values to future generations.

Earlier the tribes were strict in wearing colours and motifs only from their communities, but with changing times, they have started wearing colours and motifs from different communities. The use of contemporary colours and motifs has now removed the age-old tradition of conformity of dressing.

Traditionally the length of the rigwnai was from the waist to mid-calf, as it was easy to climb the hills, during cultivation. As tribal people shifted to the plains, the length of the rigwnai was increased to ankle length. In urban areas, the women felt the need to cover their body. They learnt to wear a blouse and skirt from women in urban areas. Women started wearing ri-kutur (a type of stole) instead of risha. The educated and working women in good positions further felt they should dress like other non-tribal communities. Draping of a risha and ri-kutur visually looked similar to a sari. The new draping style also helped them to preserve this traditional costume. The main change involved the clothing of the upper torso. Earlier the women wore risha to cover the breast. They also wore many beaded ornaments and coin necklaces to decorate the exposed upper abdomen. After the 1950s, the tribal women adopted blouses and t-shirts. It was observed that the draping of the traditional costume varied among individuals in the same community, and influences from other cultures were reflected in the draping pattern. New styles of draping were observed during the research period from 2011 to 2015 among both the Tripuri & Reang women, as shown in Figures 2 and Fig 3.



**Figure 2.** Tripuri women wearing contemporary costumes in West Tripura District.



**Figure 3.** Reang women wearing contemporary costumes in South Tripura District.

As mentioned earlier the tribes were identified by the traditional colour and motifs of the costume. The tribal communities are known for conformity in dressing, a form of social interaction within the tribal community in which one tries to maintain standards set by the group. However, presently the readymade contemporary costume is the same and is worn by tribal women of every community. It was observed that no more we can recognise which village or tribe the women belong to from the costume they wear.

### **Clothing Preference of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Tribal Women**

A survey was conducted among 100 Tripuri women and 100 Reang women to study the clothing preference of Tribal Women in the urban and semi-urban areas. The result of the survey of both the tribes was compared to find if there is any significant association between the clothing preferences of the women of both the tribes. The findings of the research show that 71% of the Tripuri women said that women in the last two generations in their family wear the traditional costume, whereas 100% of the Reang women indicated that their previous two generations wear the traditional costume. 31% of the Tripuri women prefer to wear traditional costume when they travel outside of the state, whereas 64% of Reang women said that they wear traditional costume when they travel outside of the state. The results showed that the Tripuri women are more experimental in dressing when they travel outside compared



to the Reang women. 35% of the Tripuri women said that they could weave the traditional textile on the backstrap loom and 70% of the Reang women said that they weave the traditional textile on the backstrap loom. 69% of Tripuri women traditionally drape the traditional textile, and 31.0% said they would cut and stitch the fabric to construct a garment, while 96% of Reang women said they traditionally drape the traditional textile and 6.1% said they would cut and stitch the fabric to construct a garment. It was found in both the tribes the majority of the women did not prefer to cut and sew the traditional fabric. 80% of the Tripuri women and 53% of Reang women said they prefer wearing contemporary colours. It was found that Tripuri women and Reang women both prefer wearing new colours. It was found that only 2 out of 100 Tripuri women answered that they always wear their traditional dress, 45% said they prefer wearing other Indian dresses such as the salwar kameez or sari. 10% of the women said they prefer wearing only western dresses and 43% said that they wear both Indian and Western dress. Among the Reang tribal women it was found that 50 out of 100 Tripuri tribal women answered that they only wear the traditional dress, 8% said they prefer wearing other Indian dresses like salwar kameez or sari, 21% of the women said they prefer wearing only western dresses and 21% said that they wear both Indian and western dress. Hence there is a significant association between the women of both the tribes in regarding preference of wearing clothing. The association is more in the Tripuri women with respect to Reang women in wearing non- traditional clothes.

It was observed that the change in the transformation of clothing is more among the Tripuri women than Reang women. Both the tribes have a different socio-economic background. The Tripuri tribe are the dominant tribe in Tripura, the kings and rulers of the state belong to the same community. They were educated, and economically better off than other tribes. According to the census report of 2011, the literacy rate of the Tripuri women is 50.2%, and the Reang women are 27.3% The educated Tripuri women were exposed to various forms of written, visual and digital media. The nature and dimensions of change in the lives and status of the Tripuri women living in urban areas are greater, and they have lost some of their traditional rights. The gains they have made in the spheres of education, employment or personal mobility are significant compared to rural tribal women.

On the other hand, the transformation in the costume is witnessed slowly since the Reang population is settled in rural areas, their exposure to the outside world seems to be less compared with the Tripuri tribe, primarily settled in the capital Agartala and West Tripura district. Similar to the Tripuri tribe, the exposure to new culture and change in the surrounding environment, physical, social and economic conditions affect the change process in their cultural domain. The Reang women continue to wear the traditional costume in rural areas.

The younger generation of both the tribes has contemporised the traditional costume. In similar research, according to Gregory (2018), clothing tastes become more settled with age, older persons tend to have a more significant percentage of their income taken up with commitments, and after years of experiment, one finds the styles which are most satisfying. Young people may welcome frequent fashion changes, which give them a chance to experiment and still be like everybody else. In urban areas, the women wear new designs of rigwnai and drape it in different styles. The younger generations of women, residing in urban areas, wear western dresses and other Indian dresses, reflecting their participation in global culture. They prefer wearing contemporary designs of rigwnai on special occasions. According to Dhamalji (2010), in early 21st century India, the younger elite wear the universal western jeans and t-shirts. Many men and women are comfortable wearing both jeans and traditional dress, thus demonstrating their ease in the multinational world of the new millennium. Pitimaneeyakul (2010) reported that in the twentieth century, the hill tribes in Thailand wear the traditional casual wrapping-cloth forms of dress in rural areas as everyday wear. In urban areas, women wear trousers, skirts, shirts, blouses, and dresses, reflecting their participation in global culture. Becker (2010), reported that in the Tosonga tribe, the main changes over the last hundred years involved the upper body. In the 1930s, many more beaded ornaments were used to decorate the exposed upper torso, arms, and head. Later in the century, women adopted blouses and t-shirts.

The findings of the research show the nature and dimensions of change in the lives and status of tribal women in Tripura. The urban tribal women have lost some of their traditional rights; the gains they have made in the spheres of education, employment or personal mobility are significant compared to rural tribal women.

## **Factors affecting the transformation of the costume**

The transformation in the tribal costume is co-related with various socio-economic and socio-cultural factors. As in many other tribal areas in India, Tripura is going through a transitional phase. The nature and pace of change are specific to this frontier state owing to its history and demographics, as well as to common policy implemented following independence. However, change is everywhere and has had an impact on traditional social structures. The last part of the Manikya dynasty of Tripura witnessed the emergence of a new culture in Tripura, which was the outcome of the migration from colonial Bengal and the adjoining territories of Hill Tipperah. There are two phases of migration in the last hundred years of Manikya rule in Tripura, which not only increased the population of the state but also altered the ethnic composition of Tripura's population (De, N., 2012). The First Phase of Migration in Tripura (1849-1947) and Second Phase of Migration in Tripura (1947-1949). The migration from colonial Bengal and the exchange of culture among the nineteen tribes also affected socio-cultural change in Tripura. Mixed cultural influences are visible in the tribal clothing. New draping styles are primarily influenced by immigration of people from the neighbouring districts of Bangladesh.

Moreover, the impact of mass media (television, the internet and mobile phones) on the younger generation, has influenced them to contemporise their dressing style. The 21st century tribal women are educated and well-travelled, and read magazines like Femina, Shanada, Vogue. These publications spread the latest fashion ideas. Local dressmakers copy the styles the best they can with available fabrics, as shown in Fig 4. As more women became aware of fashion styles through magazines and other forms of mass communication, their desire to wear these fashions increases, as shown in Fig 5.



Fig 4



Fig 5

**Figure 4.** Signage board of a tailor's shop in Agartala, showing a model wearing salwar kameez.

**Figure 5.** Tribal woman wearing salwar kameez made from tribal textile in Agartala.

In the 21st century, visual history is created by print media, for example advertising displays, hoardings, banner stands, printed film posters, CD covers, photographs in magazines and newspapers. Sometimes the clothes of the model for a printed advertisement can give the idea of clothing to the consumer who will be using the product. On the other hand, the photographs of models, film stars, celebrities draping a sari in different ways can encourage ordinary people to imitate the same style. The theory of mass society and the power of media (C. Wright Mills) states that there is a significant relationship between foreign media and fashion trends in girls. Various studies shows that clothing displays played a role as a source of information to professional women on the choice of clothing designs. The study results indicated that clothing displayed in fashion magazines, fashion shows, friends, newspapers and family members were the most popular sources of information used by professional women in their choice of clothing designs.

It was found that the younger women in urban areas, especially in the capital Agartala are exposed to various visuals of advertisement. The researcher found that

the younger tribal women of both rural and urban areas wear other Indian dresses such as the sari and salwar kameez. Western dresses such as t-shirts, jeans, skirts, are worn by the younger generation of women residing in Agartala. According to Wilkinson-Weber & Clare M (2014), the fashion trend in most Asian countries follows the style of Bollywood outfits. In other words, we can say that Bollywood outfits represent the fashion of the modern age.

The educated tribal youth are now familiar with the increasing use of smartphones. The researcher found that the younger generations are very actively involved in social networking sites like Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp. Their interaction is now not limited within the tribal community, they have access to a wider world. The researcher found many online communities are promoting tribal culture and costume. Apart from that profile pictures of the young tribal girls residing in urban areas shows that for special occasions they prefer to wear tribal costume, but for daily wear, they prefer wearing western clothes.

Based on the study of socio-economic and socio-cultural changes in Tripura, and observation and interviews, it was found that the change in demography, exchange of culture, change in religion, the influence of media, communication and religion all play a significant role in transformation in clothing.

## **Conclusion**

To conclude, it can be said that Tripura has been mainly a tribal region, but with the passing of time and growing cultural contact with neighbouring areas, as the population of non-tribal people has steadily increased in the state, their influence is also reflected in the different tribes. The older Tripuri and the Reang tribal women, living in rural areas maintain their design preferences of colour, stripes and motifs to preserve their cultural identity in the rignai. Some of these clothes have been woven for centuries, while others originated during the beginning of the 21st century. At first glance, the more recent clothes seem quite distinctive in comparison to the older clothes. The younger generations are open to a new culture and a new mode of dressing. They wear contemporary, traditional costume, other Indian and western dresses. Young women were observed to be more experimental with clothing, compared with the older women who still prefer more traditional costumes. The

findings of the research indicate that unlike their ancestors, the younger generations of tribal women living in urban areas are creating their own identity within the community. The 21st century tribal women add their own personal touches and styling. As with many other tribes, the changes in the lives and status of the Tripuri and Reang women are reflected in their dressing style. The transformation of the costume is more noticeable in the Tripuri than in the Reang tribe. With the change in the socio-economic status of the tribal women, socio-cultural changes are reflected in the changes to their traditional costume.

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