

The Tai-Phake Textiles : A Case Study

Dr. Sanjita Chetia

Associate Professor

**Department of Home Science
Digboi.MahilaMahavidyalaya
Digboi ,Dist - Tinsukia,Assam**

Tai is one of the most significant communities that entered Assam in the historical past. The Tai culture is very rich and old and the people belonging to this culture are distributed in wide areas in south western provinces of China, Laos and Thailand. Tai is a generic name denoting a great branch of Mongoloid population of Asia. Today, the tai groups have different sections of people in Assam. (Grierson; 1966). The following are the main ones : Tai-Phake, Tai-Ahom, Tai-Khamyang, Tai-Khamte and Tai-Turung.

Tai Phake (or Phakials) call themselves Tai-Phake and the claim to be the descendents of the Tai Royal officials. One interpretation in support of this view is that 'Pha' means 'king' or 'chief' and 'ke' means a great man that is high official (Gohain, 1950).

The Tai Phake have their own traditional dresses. They weave their dresses in the traditional handlooms. The necessary colours are made from tree barks or some other domestic system. Handloom weaving among the Tai-Phakes continues as a living art and forms an integral part of their socio-cultural life. Textile production is an exclusive preserve of womenfolk and they produce various textile items having distinctive ethnic characteristics in the indigenous looms.

The textiles produced by the Tai-phake are not generally decorated with very elaborate designs. Harmonious arrangement of colours with checks and stripes, some motifs and designs are also expressed to give their textiles enrichment. Such designs are brought out by means of employing an additional layer of dyed yarn based on the ground material. These extra yarns of designs normally float over the main interlocking of wrap and weft. The traditional technique is called the extra weft technique.

The Tai-Phake have a very rich textile tradition with its ethnic characteristics and their contribution towards the overall textile of Assam can not be ignored. The socio-cultural dimension of textiles of Tai-Phake has not been undertaken for study so far. Hence a systematic scientific approach to have a comprehensive idea on the traditional textiles of the Tai-Phake in the context of its socio-cultural significance is undertaken as a case study keeping in view the following objectives.

1. To study the textile tradition of the Tai-Phake.
2. To identify the motifs and designs used in their textiles.

Methodology :

A village setting where the Tai-Phakes have been found concentrated was chosen for in-depth comprehensive investigation on their textile traditions. The village Bar-Phakial is situated on the north bank of the river Burhidihing under Margherita Development Block

of Tinsukia District which is said to be oldest Tai-Phake village in Assam. The village was selected for the purpose of the present study. The people of this village are found to have preserved the traditional distinctiveness in socio-cultural and religious life of the Tai-Phakes.

While dwelling on the methodology, it may be noted that, different standard anthropological techniques were used in order to generate information from the data acquired in the field. Emphasis, however, was always laid more on observation (preferably a participatory one) and interview method. Data were collected mainly from the village who were actively engaged in textile production. The field data were supplemented by secondary information collected from various published and unpublished sources and analysed.

The textile of the Tai-Phake are described below:

Chin: Chin is the major item of Phake women's dress for lower part of the body from waist extending down to the ankles. Three equal pieces of the size 0.75 x 0.50 mts with characteristics stripes are joined lengthwise. On the top of this a striped or chequered piece of 1.50 x 0.50 mts is attached to get the chin of the size 1.25 x 0.75 mts. It is woven out of cotton and occasionally with muga as weft. Green, white or yellow, violet, blue and black or blue are the colour schemes used popularly in chin. No separate ornamentation is used in this, but the harmonious arrangement of different colours in the stripes themselves produce a rich and pleasing effect.

Nangwat : It is chequered cloth of the size 2.70 x 1.00 mts. Nangwat is used by Phake women to wrap over the chin, covering the breast and leaving both ends hanging in front. It is generally used by the women after marriage but strictly not before attainment of puberty. It is woven out of dyed cotton yarns. But in the earlier days it was also woven out of handpunmuga dyed in indigenous colours. Such nangwat is called nangwatpychung. Using nangwatpychung as a part of the wedding attire is still considered as a mark of prosperity and high status. Two equal pieces of the size 2.70 x 0.50 mts are woven separately and stitched lengthwise for nangwat. It is woven in checks with sparingly placed tiny flower as butis. Nangwat with cross borders having creepers and floral motifs at both ends followed by fringes are also being woven these days.

Fafek-hang :

It is an important item of dress of grown up girls and akin to nangwat in size and in manner of use. Only the colour is white. Fa-fek-hang is woven out of cotton. Floral design in any colour is woven as cross borders at two ends.

Fa-nung :

It is a typical item of men's apparel among the Tai-Phake. It is tucked around the waist covering the lower part of the body. Generally dyed cotton yarns of violet, blue, yellow, maroon, green, black etc. are used to make this colourful cloth. Fa-nung is made up of two pieces woven separately and stitched lengthwise. Further, a side seam is made to make the garment cylindrical. The main feature lies in the different arrangements of colour with

checks and stripes. However, very tiny flowers of geometrical shapes (called maklu) are woven as butis in the body of the cloth. Muga silk yarn dyed in indigenous colours were also used in the past in weaving fa-nung. This was named fa-puchung. It has become a rare specimen these days and the few pieces available in the village are being preserved only to use on socio-religious occasions.

Fafek-mai or Famai : It is a shoulder cloth used by adults, irrespective of sex. It is woven out of cotton in white. The designs at two ends are woven mostly with muga yarn. The size of f-fekmai or fa-mai is 2.75 x 1.40 mts. The two stitched lengthwise. It has important cultural significance since it is invariably required to be put on when people go to Buddha-Vihar (temple) or participate in social gatherings.

Gamocha :Gamocha is basically a towel having multipurpose uses. The most commonly used one has a length of around 1.50mts and a breadth of 0.70 mts. It is decorated with different types of flowers, creepers and plant motifs at one end. The other end is finished with a plain border of the same colour. It is woven out of cotton. It is similar to the Assamese gamocha. It is a new adaptation by the Tai-Phake.

Tang-khan : the decorated sacred hanging named tang-khan is offered to the Buddha Vihar by Phake women on sacred days of the Buddhist calendar and at various other occasions. The size of the tang-khan vary from 0.50 x 0.15 mts to 1.50 x 0.40 mts. It is divided into 3,5 or 7 division with fine bamboo sticks woven into the fabric. It is woven out of cotton in different shades. Various designs with motifs of flower, tree bird, butterfly and animal along with the weaver's name and address are woven in tang-khan. The two cross ends of the hanging are finished with fringes to which beads are also interlaced.

Thung : It is an indigenous shoulder bag. Sizes vary from 0.30x0.25mts to 0.35x 0.30mts. The bag has a strap which is used by Tai-Phake men. A shoulder bag is considered a representatives item of Tai-Phake culture. The thung is woven out of cotton preferably in black, blue or maroon colours. Different motifs like trees, birds, butterflies, creepers, flowers and fruits are woven in varieties of colours covering the body of the bag.

Phya-jet : It is a richly decorative cloth. The size of the phya-jet is approximately 0.70 x 0.30 mts. It is considered essential in the common ceremony of the Tai-Phake.

Chankanfra :Chankanfra, the symbolic sacred cloth the greatest of all giftis the villagers can offer in the name of Lord Buddha, for the well-being of the village and it is inhabitants. It is prepared during the annual festival called Poi-Kaithing observed on the full moon day of Kartika (October- November). On the day before the festival, the womenfolk of the village assemble either in the Vihar compound or in village headman's and weave this symbolic cloth in the course of a single night. This cloth is offered at the Vihar in the early morning of the festival day. So it is called as a symbolic cloth and seven squares are essentially of religious significance.

Phachanglong : It is a sacred decorative shoulder cloth. The size is 2.70 x 0.7 mts. It is woven out of dyed cotton with elaborate arrangements of floral and geometrical designs as cross border at both ends. The are interlaced with the fringers. It is never used as an element of casual dress. Only when a person adopts the life of a Buddhist monk, this decorative cloth is used at the initiation ceremony called Carman. So, it has a socio-religious significant and considered a much valued item.

Conclusion:

Tai-Phake weavers produce varieties of cloths with fineness of texture and colourful designs. The decorated woven fabrics have always been of great importance as the expression of the tradition and culture of the people. The skill of weaving has been inherited from generation to generation through the process of enculturation and socialization.

The textiles produced in family looms with beautiful eye-catching designs is a prestigious and pride possession for every Phake lady. It is of great traditional value for every social function of the Tai Phake people.

References:

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