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Costumes of the Ahom Royalty

In emphasis to the collection of Assam State Museum

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PREFACE

This catalogue is vital in so far as it seeks to remedy the lack of information on the textiles of Assam, its intricate patterns, designs and weaving practices. On a personal level, this has allowed me as a Project Curator of Assam State Museum direct access to one of the most important textiles of the Ahom Royalty of Medieval Assam to be able to examine it, handle and study about it. The catalogue also serves as a guide, and become standard references as well for scholars and researchers which gives an understanding of the deeper story behind an ethnographic object, chemistry of colours, as well as the techniques of making (Craftmanship).

The Assam state museum has its exquisite collection of Assamese textiles in its collection which needs to be documented and reach out to a wider audience. The manufacturing process of traditional textiles of Assam is in itself an enormous enterprise which needs to be researched, and enhanced through publications and other research journals.

DIRECTOR'S NOTE



Indian crafts are art of the people with deep memories of ancient times. Each part of the country has its own unique cultural ethos, which is manifested in the crafts of the region. Weaves, crafts and craft traditions are influenced by local topography, climate and socio-religious factors. Creativity of Assamese weavers and crafts-persons gives Assam and North-east India a unique identity. The textile gallery of Assam State Museum depicts the Textile of the Ahom Royalty of Medieval Assam depicting the nuances of Royal costumes along-with details of the making, the procedures and the materials that give deep insight into the rich cultural and traditional heritage of the state and about the artisans behind these exquisite creations.

This is a substantial effort for showcasing the work of our local weavers and crafts-persons to enable them to gain more confidence to demonstrate their skills in order to attract the craft lovers to take Assamese crafts to the rest of the country and world.

Y.S. Wunglengton

Director, Assam State Museum

Author's note



The display maps the weaves, wefts and the crafts of the state and capture the traditions that have enriched the day-today lives of the people around the globe while being a source of livelihood for generations of weavers and crafts-persons.

I am sure that the efforts in this catalogue would be a catalyst for creating more and more awareness about the rich heritage and traditions of Assam.

I am thankful to all the people who helped me in preparing this catalogue especially Y.S. Wunglengton Director, Assam State Museum for his support and giving me the opportunity to write this catalogue. I also wish to express my appreciation for my family who have encouraged me in every aspect.

Namrata Sarmah

Project Curator, Assam State Museum

EVOLUTION OF TEXTILES

The spinning and weaving culture came to Assam since very past. It is evident from historical evidences that the textile culture came to the Brahmaputra Valley from Western and Eastern side. There are evidences of Assamese textiles in different sculptures, inscriptions, manuscripts, ancient literature like Ramayana, Mahabharata, Kalikapurana and so on that craft has been prevalent in this region from very past. The attires in sculptures shows Assamese male in *dhoti* as a lower garment and *Uttariya* for covering the upper body sometimes kept a *Paribhaya* on waist. There are paintings and illustrated manuscripts from medieval period which reflects textile tradition. Many folk songs like bihu geet, biya geet (marriage song), bangeet (song related to nature), baramahi geet, nao khelor geet, nichkani geet, malita (descriptive poems), phakara-yajana speaks volumes about the weaving culture of Assam.

The folk tales of 'Chilonir jiyekor sadhu' (tale of Kite's daughter) and Tezemolar sadhu (Tale of Tezemola) has been reflecting the pride of Assamese textiles since very past.

Hiuen Tsang, the Chinese traveler of 6th Century A.D. also left invaluable records on the textiles of Assam.

The textile industry in Assam excelled under the patronage of the Ahom Kings. Queen Sarveswari, the wife of Ahom King Siva Singha supervised personally the activities of loom and training of young girls.

How Silk travelled to Assam

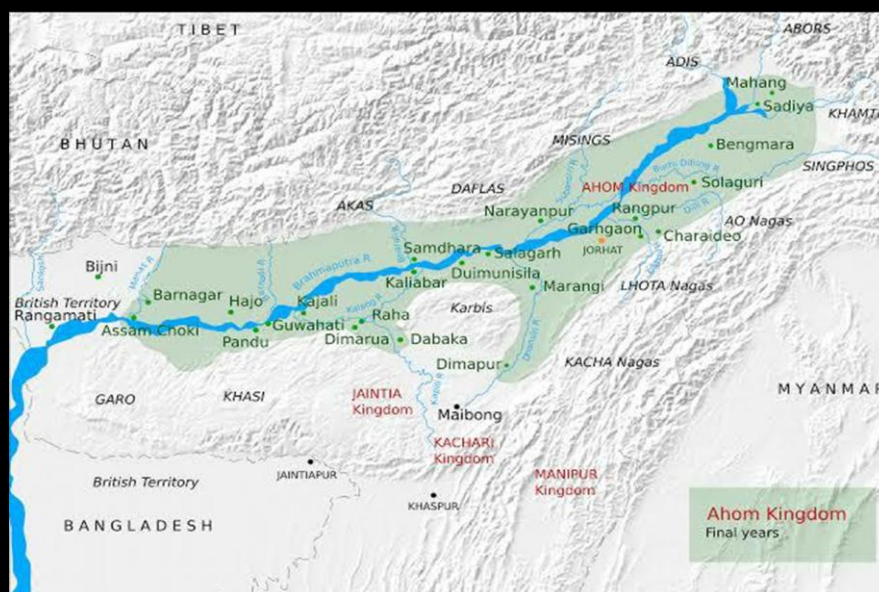
It is believed that Assam was a transit point in the historical silk route running from China to ancient Rome. While the primary portion of the route went via Central Asia, its peripheral routes may have incorporated the Eastern Himalayas. Due to constant migration and mobility of people across the region, commodities such as silk and tea, and practices such as rice transplantation entered Assam via these routes.

Archaeological evidences suggest that silk was first reared in the Yangtze valley of China in the second millennium BC. The Tibeto-Burmese ethno-linguistic groups living in Assam and its vicinity (often called Kirata in ancient scriptures) introduced silk rearing in Assam. In fact mulberry tree on which silk cocoons are raised is believed to have spread to Indian subcontinent from Tibet. Jean-Baptiste Tavernier, a 17th century French merchant who travelled extensively in India mentions that the quality of silk found in Assam was similar to its Chinese counterpart. Along with the methods and techniques of textile production, designs, palettes, and motifs from Tibet, South-East Asia and the Yunnan province of China also found their presence in the textiles of Assam. This process picked up pace during the Ahom reign. Ahoms are a Tai-speaking people, and Yunnan is believed to be the historical homeland of Tais. The dragon motif in the Ahom coat of arms, and the introduction of Gomcheng silk of Chinese origin reaffirms this connection.

MAP OF ASSAM AND AHOM DOMINANCE

Assam- the land of the mighty river Brahmaputra has glorious tradition and historic significance. Almost every home in Assam hummed with the rhythm of the handloom in the morning along with the first veneration of river at dawn.

The ethno-cultural groups of the region consider the textiles as one of their main crafts. They wear their own self woven traditional costumes and prefer certain design and colour. These designs are indigenous and intrinsic with harmonious colour schemes. The colouring patterns are something they procured from natural ingredients. Like weaving, the knowledge and expertise of natural dye were traditionally passed from the master craft person to his disciples.



KINGKHAP MEKHELA

It is worth mentioning that the Ahoms frequently battled with the Mughals and also resisted them in the famous Battle of Saraighat. During the reign of Rudra Singha many Mughal elements came into the designs and motifs of Assamese textiles. It is believed that the most exquisite brocade work known as Kingkhap were executed in Assam during the period. The word kingkhap means interweaving of coloured silk and gold threads to form an attractive floral motifs. These were mostly worn by the females of the Royal families. The selection of colour and motifs used in the fabric signify the aesthetic taste of a weaver. Brocade design is mostly one single-design which is woven continuously one beside the other in many lines. Kingkhap is from the Ahom dynasty which signifies Royalty and generosity of the kingdom.

The *Kalka design* (like leaves of peepal tree without their pointed ends) is seen in old kingkhap cloth.

This design is popular in different fabrics and is considered as *Fabric of dreams*.



CHAPKAN SHIRT

The costumes of Ahom Royalty is distinctive and unique. In medieval period, the stitched cloth 'Shirt' first began to be used by kings, officials and other aristocratic high ranking people. Chapkon shirt is worn by the males usually full armed reaching up to knees, a cheleng over that and a simple Dhoti and a Paguri (headgear). Earlier this was made of silk and nowadays it is made of cotton. Everything they wear is in white, which signifies spiritualism and pure individual self. The type of costume and their wearing style, colour and design signifies the caste, creed, marital status and gender of a person. It also expresses the cultural aesthetics, sense and mind of an individual. The Ahom king used Chapkan made by kingkhap, majankari and gomseng silk yarn which is designed with golden thread.



ENGA CHOLA

It is a vestment like a tunic with ornamental design with Golden embroidery which might have been worn during ceremonial occasions. It is generally made of Muga or silk cloth.



GOMCHENG CHADAR

Gomcheng is a kind of fine Chinese silk cloth having design of Gom, the body of a snake. The Ahom King wore smooth **Megankari Churiya**. They also used white silky cheleng and Jama decorated with creeper design by golden thread in whole body of the cloth. Some elements like the golden and silver threads and embroidery work could be reflected in Assamese textiles during the reign of Ahom King *Suteupha* (1268-1281 A.D.) The art of Gunakara and Chola-sia began from this period. The turban and Gomcheng Chadar expressed the social status of Ahom. The Chadar in the present day is used as felicitation cloth as a token of respect and greetings.



COTTON RIHA AND ENDI RIHA

The Assamese costumes had a remarkable change in medieval age. The life of an Assamese women is closely associated with handloom, which reflects in many literatures - Tati Juna and folk-song. They called the loom as 'Tal sal'. In medieval period, the main female Uttariya bastra was called Riha. It has come to Assam through Tibeto-Burma. It was used as covering the chest before blouse was introduced. It is still used by women in marriage ceremony. This garment is wrapped round the body with one end kept suspended after fixing it under Mekhela. The cloth is woven with silk, muga and cotton. In the past, silk and muga riha were exclusively for the royal and aristocratic families.



TANGALI

The Tangali (Girdle) is a piece of cloth about 4-5 cubits in length and 2 cubits in width. The ends of the cloth is ornamented with coloured threads. It is a waist wrapper worn by males or used a belt to gird the waist and the two decorated ends hangs at the front. The two ends of the cloth are trimmed with fringes(*dohi knitting*) besides having floral motifs. Young boys tie red tangal on their waist whenthey sing bihu Husori.



MUGA MEKHELA AND CHADAR

Mekhela is worn mainly by female around the waist covering down to the ankle joints with 2-3 folds in the front. The two ends of this piece is stitched like a skirt and this entered Assam by Tibeto- Burmese and Ahom. Mekhela are woven with cotton, muga, endi and silk. The silk produced in Assam are mainly of two varieties - Mulberry silk and non-mulberry silk. The mulberry silk includes Pat silk and non-mulberry silk includes Eri and Muga. The ethnic groups of the region weave their own mekhelas which are identified by their ethnic names. Women from high social strata wore Muga mekhela during the period. The one end of the Chadar is tucked at the waist over the mekhela. The other end is hung over the left shoulder after covering the chest. This Chador is worn with triangular folds the art of which can be mastered only by sheer practice.



KHONIA CHADAR

It is a double folded wrapper having flowered border of golden thread at the end of one fold, instead of cotton yarn. The Khonias are locally known as *Muga Phular Achudiya* . It is altogether 12 cubits in length and 3 cubits in breadth. The decorative works at the two ends of Khonia cloth is with muga and golden thread. Male and female from higher strata used Khonia woven with silk yarn.



JORICHOLA AND CAP

The Jorichola is a long coat worn by Ahom aristocrats with different motifs of Golden thread. They are ornamented with different coloured threads and spread in the entire costume all over. The jorichola is usually worn with a headgear or a Cap. Cap (Tupi) is seen to be worn by Ahom kings which is beautifully embroidered with gold and silver strings. Many historical evidences also record that Assamese soldiers used the Caps in war.



GAMUSA

On the occasion of Rangali Bihu (the spring festival of Assam), it is a folk-custom that a grown-up girl should have her self-woven '*Bihuwan*' (*phulam or decorative gamusa*) to present their beloved as a token of love or elders as symbol of respect. They weave different motifs on Gamusa and each motif becomes an alphabet of her mind. Such alphabets or symbols when put together become a letter in terms of floral language or it becomes a visual form of message in floral language. The Phulam Gamusa is reckoned as one of the special social status costumes in Assam. The red used in this cloth is like the colour of blood of the Assamese people which stands for fertility.



Conclusion

The collection in this catalogue is from the Textile gallery of Assam state Museum which was redeveloped and inaugurated on International Museum day 2019 by then Commissioner to the Govt of Assam, Cultural Affairs Department, IAS, Sri Pritam Saikia.

