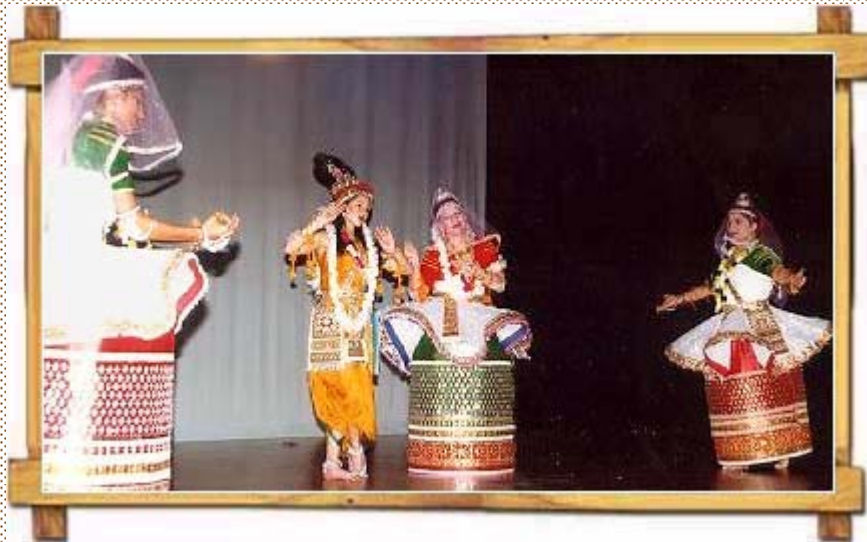


Costumes of Meitei – A Reflection of Rich Cultural Heritage of Manipur



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Introduction

The human race universally wears articles of clothing-also known as dress, garments, or attire-on the body in order to protect it against the adverse climate conditions. People wear clothing for functional as well as social reasons. Apart from the practical functions of placing a piece of garment above the skin, wearing clothes also carries specific cultural and social meanings. Religion, customs and of course, particular historically important circumstances have shaped the way different people in various times feel about clothing and exposure. Moreover, clothing has been regarded as one of the best ways to distinguish social classes, sexes, occupation, marital status and ethnic or religious affiliation.

Encircled by nine hill ranges, Manipur is marked out by a picturesque valley in the midst. The total area of Manipur is 22,327 sq. Km. The hills around the cup-shaped valley add the natural beauty of Manipur. The first Prime Minister of India, the Late Pundit Jawaharlal Nehru, described Manipur as a “Jewel of India”, bewitching beholders with its natural beauty and its cultural paraphernalia. It is bounded by Nagaland in the north, Mizoram in the south, upper Myanmar in the east and Cachar district of Assam in the west.

Among the Manipuris, the Meiteis form the predominant ethnic group and traditionally inhabit the valley. The surrounding hill ranges are settled by many tribes. Meiteis are deeply sensitive and their unique pattern of life with inherent love art is reflected in their festival, dance and music. Their rich culture and tradition are also reflected in their costume, handloom textiles and in finer workmanship of handicrafts.

Ladies Garments

NUPI PHURIT

It was one kind of upper garment served as a shirting and still in use among the Meitei women.

BLOUSE

The blouse is also the upper garment. The garment is presently introduced among the Meitei women.

KHUDEI MATEK

A type of stole which the Meitei women has been using from the past is the khudei matek. Stole of this kind are used in day-to day life and in public occasion at home and with in the locality. Khudei are made of



cotton, either in plain design or in chequed design, with coloured border strips.

INNAPHI

It is a tradition among the Meiteis to wrap themselves with a variety of cloth, of either cotton or silk. It is an upper garment. In texture, these wrappers were broadly of these types. Namely (a) fine cloth (b) medium coarse and (c) very coarse. The wrappers were in plain and in decorated types. The wrappers of plain design are mostly in white colour. The size of Innaphi is 2.25 m x 1m.



PHANEK

The Meitei women wore a lower garment locally called Phanek. It typically measured 1.75m in length and 1.30m in breadth. It is worn in two styles, reflecting either the married or the unmarried status of the wearer. The first style is called Khoidom shetpa and the other is Phidol chingkhatpa. The style is worn by the unmarried girls, and the later style by the married women.

In the Khoidom shetpa style, the cloth is worn lengthwise with one border around the waist, and in such a way that the left breadth end was carried to the right, while the counterpart, carried to the left overlapped the inner end (that is the left end was placed on the right side) and its counter end is then lightly tucked into this upper end of the cloth wrapped around the waist. The lower border of the cloth freely hangs in a circular form around the middle of the legs. In Phidol Chingkhatpa the cloth is worn in the same way as in Khoidom shetpa fashion, but in this case above the breasts. This mode of dressing is so fashioned to cover the breasts.

The phanek of a simple variety made of cotton, silk, acrylic and wool different colours made up of two equal parts, each provided with or without a border and joined together length wise by the unembroidered side. The phanek is of three types.

The first one is of striped nature of different colours. This type of phanek is usually worn at occasional functions like feasts, festivals and other important social function. The second type of a simple variety made of cotton in different colours. Women usually wore this type for day to day work. The younger generation wore this type of garment with top. The third type is also, but it is

one colour with or without any border. It is generally used at the time of mourning, religious functions etc. widow and old women also use this type of phanek.

Mayek Naibi is one of the lower garments of stripped design. The strips are set horizontally throughout the body of the cloth and are hemmed in by broad border in black, on the top side as well as the bottom of the fabric. The pattern of strips is one of regular repetition of the set of three or two, predominantly three colours of matching combination.

Some other types of Mayek naibi phanek of different colour combination are Higok mayek naibi phanek of blue dominating colour, Hangam mapal naibi phanek of yellow of mustard plant dominating colour with made of cotton maroon and black, Langhou phanek having black and white strips, and Loirang phanek characterized by colour scheme of white and light pink.

LEIRUMPHI

This is a traditional coarse shawl with a peculiar woven design. Much ceremonial value is attached to this cloth, and it has been an indispensable item of gift by parents to their daughter on the occasion of her marriage. The shawl is very much popular among the Meitei society. The occasion of presenting the leirumphu from bridal family in relation with the marriage has been given much cultural thrust, so much so that throughout history and till date, in Meitei marriages the gifting of Leirum cloth was an unavoidable item of the bride gifts. Thus, with all cases of marriage not only the Angom but also with any other clan of the Meitei, are ritually solemnized with the gift of leirumphu as unavoidable item. Later in history, the design on this cloth as is made by the Meitei became quite different from the original design of Leirum. Now-a-days, this shawl is also used in day-to-day life during winter season.

NGABONGPHI

The Ngabong is a type of shawl which is very coarse in texture made by twisting two big threads. The cloth is commonly used at home and in the locality in routine life on winter days. The cloth is done in white background of plain design where large stripes are given. The size of the ngabongphi is very large i.e. (2.5 x 1.25m) and some time used as loin cloth also.

COAT

Coat is the attire which is used by the other people in the country i.e. not the local one. Coat of old designs are used by the older generation and fashionable coats of various size and designed are used by the younger generation.

KHWANGSET

Khwangset is a kind of chaddar, wrapped and gathered lengthwise, around the waist in the form of belt side over the phanek. Women wore this belt when they are involved in field or household work.

MALE GARMENTS

PHEIJOM

A long piece of cloth is wound around the waist and tied securely at the mid abdomen, with the lower part passed between the legs and tucked in at the back so that the knees are usually covered generally white coloured dhoti is used. The mode of dressing differs from occasion to occasion. The size of the pheijom is 4x1.25m.

KHUDEI

It is a type of dhoti but shorter in both length and breadth. So when worn it is not folded properly and the lower border did not reach down below the knees. The khudei is about 2.50 meter long and less than 1 meter wide of cotton material.

Khudei is found in chequer weaving design throughout the body of the cloth with plain border strips in district colour. This chequer design is shown in varying colour pattern and in varying sizes of the square. The check design in different schemes of colour combination characterized the artistic motifs shown in the Meitei male lower cloth khudei. This kind of lower cloth in the said design is used commonly in daily life.

MOJA PHURIT OR VEST

It is an upper under garment. The traditional one is made from cotton material using plain weave. But the modern are the hosiery cotton vest, like those used by other people, in the country. Moja phurit is most widely used by the Meitei men from ancient time.

PUMYAT OR KURTA

It was the upper garment like other Punjabi kurta. It is collarless and cuffless apparel. Generally people wore white colour kurta of cotton or terry cotton, but colourful kurta is also worn by the Meitei people.

INNAPHI / PHI

A stole to hang over the shouder in formal occasion.

ATTIRES REGARDING SOME CULTURAL ASPECTS

MAIBI DANCE



Maibis are a class of priestesses. The Maibis are priestesses of an order said to have been instituted many hundreds of years ago by one of the royal princesses. Anyone can not be a maibi unless she shows definite signs of being spiritually predisposed. She may show the signs of spiritual predisposition at a tender age or when she is an adult. She is then to be a maibi and lead the rest of her life the way prescribed for a maibi.

Dresses of white colour are only worn by the Maibis i.e. they cover their body with the white wrapper covering her or his (Maiba) entire body. Bracelets and armlets are also worn. Sarong are also worn around waist. Salai koyet is worn by the Maibis. The Maibis put on special costume in the dance such as tight fitting white uniform, sarong phi, tied on the waist and reshom phurit for this performance.

Sarongphi is an over- cloth that is worn by the Maibis over the inner and the longer lower cloth of white colour, and use as border of the waist band. It has two parts, one piece is joined at the end of the white cotton cloth while at the far edge of which is fastened another broad woven lace which forms the lower part of this garment. On a background of light yellow coloured cloth made in cotton, striped patterns of three colours are designed on the lace at the time of wearing. The lace is bordered along the length of its bottom edge with a handwork of tassels formed out of the free unwoven threads of the wefts of the fabrics (lace).

Another garment which is long sleeved white coloured blouse and sees to be a waist coat with some coloured designs on its lower parts, is worn by them. They put flower in their hair and behind their ears and also wear a colourful garland.



KHAMBA THOIBI DANCE

The well known Khamba –Thoibi dance presented on the modern stage represent an episode of the immortal love story of the epic “Khamba –Thoibi”. In the reign of king Chingkhlu Telhaiba of moirang, a Khumal skilful archer of the hill village, Aton Puremba, shot nine tigers with his bow and arrows and brought their skins to the king, who sought a goft worthy of the hunters powers. He would not give him clothes or such things. He had no daughter, so he gave him his wife and by her the bold hunter had two children Khumnu and Khamba. Then Chingkhuba akhuba, brother of king Chingkhlu Telhaiba and uncle of the princess

Toibi, ordered his men to seize Khamba and have him trampled to death by the elephant. His sin was that thoibi had made a coat which she gave to Khamba, for she loved him. The God Thangjing warned Thoibi of the peril in which her lover was and she arose and threatened to kill her father so that Khamba escaped. Then it befell a hunting party that a tiger killed a man in full sight of the king, but Khamba killed the tiger single handed, and as a reward the king gave him the princess Thoibi in marriage.

In this dance, the male head dress called Samjin is a turban of white colour cloth. The front portion of turban projected upwards with a snout and curves back like a swan neck and bend forwards a little like the spread hood of a cobra and ends in a loop and inserting bird plume. Plume or bird feathers are passed down the loop and inserted in the back of the turban. A fan like cloth is a decorative strip tied down the turban with a knot under the chin. The male shirt is generally of green velvet known as Reshom phurit of half arm sleeves. The lower garment consists of a Khamen Chatpa pheijom (dhoti), Ningkham and Kwangset.

Printed design occurs only in the kind of male lower cloth locally known as Khamen Chatpa. This cloth is so named after the scrolled designs painted throughout the body of the fabric. This design on the glamorous Meitei male lower cloth is a scheme of deep purple colour, deep red or chocolate painted on the white background of the cloth of silk. This design is said to be adopted from the patterns on the ventral side of Pakhangba, the serpent god worshipped by ethnic Meiteis. There are reportedly seven patters of paintings of the Khamen Chatpa representing the seven clans of the Meiteis.

The dresses worn by the female (Thoibi) dancer are Mayek naibi phanek of thambal machu (lotus colour), green coloured Reshom phurit and Innaphi. Lai-phi is the white coloured chaddar with yellow border is tied at the waist. Harao phichil lace is also used in the Innaphi.

RAS LEELA

The well known Manipuri Ras Leelas represent only a fragment of the vast Sankirtana tradition. It is a dance drama, the subjects of which are devotional and centre round the theme of the Radha-Krishna idylls. The Ras Leelas are classified into six types, each to be performed on a special occasion. They are Maha Ras, Vasanta Ras, Kunja Ras, Nitya and Diva Ras, Gostitha or the Gopa Ras and Ulukhal Ras.

Costume of Lord Krishna

The dress of lord Krishna and Gopas in Ras almost the same. The head-dress for lord Krishna is quite elaborate and composed of numerous elements. The Nakhum is a black velvet cap, embellished with scattered sequins. The base has a decorative silver 'Jari' border. On the top of the Nakhum is a crown known as the Mukut. It is made from a conical wooden piece and covered with gold paper. Petals designed out of silver wire and sequins and referred to as chirong decorated the middle section of the crown. Affixed to the Nakhum is the Chura- a fan like piece made of peacock feathers which is purely local expression. It is a circular piece with a number of peacock feather with the eye of the feather radiating from the centre out to the rim. The Chura had a centre-piece with beads, gold and silver threads and sequins of silver. The performer also wear a koknam-headband of silver sequins – just above the forehead that is the kajenglei, which consists of eighty to a hundred brass strips. These are attached to red flannel strips one centimeter in width and tied around a circular metal ring. Above the kajenglei the Cherai is worn. The Cherai is composed of white paper fans joined to one another to form a chain that covers one of the two Khwangnaps. The first Khwangnap is thirty centimeters long and attached to the back of the black cap.



The upper body portion of the lord Krishna costume is blouse- with or without sleeves of blue velvet. It has a border of sequins or jari generally placed along the neck, waist or sleeves and is called the Reshom phurit. The lower portion of the costume is considerably more complicated. There is the pheijom- a yellow silk dhoti of four meters with a green border named Pitambar. On top of the dhoti is a hip ornament tied at the waist and known as the Dharna.

The costume of Radha and the Gopis

There are two basic types of head-dress in Radha and Gopis costume – the Kaktumbi and the Thapa. The kaktumbi is a conical black bun formed either directly from the hair or with the aid of cardboard. Another part of head dress is the Koknam, a head band embroidered with silver sequins. It is worn just above the forehead. Completing the head dress is the Maikhumphri a thin almost transparent white veil with a silver jari border draped from the top of the bun which covers the face in the front and hang down to the waist at the back.

The costume for upper portion of the body comprised the Reshom phurit and Thabakyet. The reshom phurit is a blouse made of velvet (red colour for Radha and green for all the Gopis) with borders of brass sequins or jari around the neckline and waist. A white piece of cloth called the Thabakyet is worn tightly under the shoulders from above the breast down to the waist, in all Ras Leela except Nitya- Ras.

From the waist down, the costume of Radha and gopis consists of an embroidered brightly coloured silk skirt called Kumin. The kumin of Radha is made of green satin, while those of Gopis are made of red satin. Both the green and red skirts have broad border decorated with circular designs made out of red felt and mirrors framed by embroidery. It is stiffened from inside with canvas and cane. It is partially covered by the Poshwal, a short skirt worn over the kumin. Poshwal means waves of water that is nature. This is made of approximately five to ten metres of fine semi-transparent white cotton with ribbons of silver and a border of mirror work along the bottom fringe. The bottom fringe is stiffened and shaped with wire.

MARRIAGE CEREMONY

In the marriage ceremony the groom wear handsome costume like silk white dhoti (pheijom), silk white kurta (pumyat) and the head gear salai kokyet matek and white chaddar. The chandan tilak on the forehead is a must. No particular ornaments is worn by the bride groom.

The bride also wear a beautiful costume. The upper part is covered by reshom phurit, the green coloured velvet blouse. From the waist down, red coloured Kumin or Potloi is worn. The head covered by a traditional delicate muslin attire as a head veil like the innaphi. The cloth is so delicate that any two adjacent strings of the weft and warp in the woven far apart from each other, and as such the cloth is fully transparent. A fine variety of muslin, but of close knit texture of the weft and the warp is also used. Patches of a uniform design locally called Kabok chaibi. Kabok means when paddy seeds are roasted the husk are removed by heat and the seeds puffs into balls of snow white colour.

The bridal dress has a strong meaning as the bride used three colours in her costume. She wear green coloured blouse as women is compared with earth and nature. She wear red colour Kumin mean 'Kali' or danger i.e. when any difficult or danger situation arrived women may become as 'Kali'. The bride use white chaddar because the women after marriage going to play a new life with clean sout to her in-laws home.

MOURNING

The dresses worn during mourning is somewhat similar with the dresses worn for worship. That is at the time of mourning same costume is worn but for the family members kurta is not worn and only the dhoti and innaphi is worn. Some members of third generation usually wear khudei, vest and another khudei as innaphi.

The women folk also wear the same costume used for worship. But the phanek worn that is the pumngou phanek with no border.

WIDOW

Traditionally the widow has some dresses. They wear pumngou phanek of white colour, phi angouba, white innaphi. Only widow used to wear a type of phanek having certain pattern known as Kumchingbi, Hiza mayek phanek woven with the needle. The phanek has pattern of cross section of timber. This pattern at the border of a Mayek Naibi phanek is flanked by two strips, one at the top and the other at the bottom; the top strip is decked with design of flowering creeper all along with a set of two sides of the stem known as khongnang. Widows put on the Hiza mayek pattern on its border; for which this phanek is also known as Lukhra phanek that is the 'phanek' of the widows'. But now a days, the women used general costume like other general women after one year of her husband's death. But the widow cannot use the white or off white coloured chandan tilak, and therefore they put on black coloured chandan tilak on their forehead. The widows avoid using highly decorative jewellery.

CONCLUSION

The Meitei society is the society of festivals. Their festival depicts their rich cultural heritage and beautiful rhythm of music, dance and songs. Their dances, whether folk or classical or modern are devotional in nature. Meitei rarely performs any festival which is not accompanied by music, song and dance. The festivals are mainly connected with Vaishnavism.

The costumes of Manipuris are very colourful. Today the life style is changing to the utility and taste, but still they are tied their age-old tradition and culture.

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