

Traditional Textile Designs and Costumes of Assam



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Traditionally textile designs from Assam have been based on inspirations from the epics and Mother Nature, with prominent geometrical/ floral designs produced in brilliant shades for the ethnic costumes. Brindavani cloths were the most famous traditional Assamese fabrics produced with designs depicting the different incarnations of Cod Vishnu. Major textile designs presently used for ethnic fabrics include Kimkhwab, Boro diamond, Ohol jonberi, Cosa sazia, Miri and Hatipati designs consisting of geometrical, floral, inspired by nature and traditional festivities. Evolution of traditional textile design in the dominant handloom sector has been witnessed during couple of decades post Indian independence period, with adaptation of jacquard fitted looms. Major traditional costumes of the region include Mekhla-Chadar, dhoti-kurta, dokhna, sarees, riha and japi which profusely use the traditional Assamese designs for fabric ornamentation. A review of traditional textile designs of Assam, their usage in the handloom industry for the ethnic and tribal costumes of Assam state has been reported in this article.

Assam is a land of rich cultural heritage where weaving is not just an occupation but also a way of life. Almost every home in rural Assam bustles with the sound of hand loom weaving. In the earlier days, prior to Indian independence, cloth required for the Assamese family was woven by the family itself. Handloom weaving forms a cultural constituent for the people of Assam, as a traditional household women activity, which enhances family income and raise standard of living. Textile industry in Assam is dominated by traditional handloom weaving, which employs about 131akh people in handloom sector and is a vital source of employment to rural folks. Silk, cotton, polyester, acrylic and rayon are the major fibres presently used in the Assam textile sector. Assam is also one of the major silk producing states of India with a unique distinction of producing all the four commercial varieties (Mulberry, Tasar, Eri and Muga) of silk. Cotton, polyester and rayon yarns are outsourced from other states, apart from partial supply from two cotton and eight polyester/blend spinning mills in Assam.

The reference of weaving as a major activity in the Assam region can be traced in the Kautiliya Arthashastra, the oldest and most exhaustive treatise on the governance of a state. In its description about the activity of the 'heads of departments' in this region, it is stated that the 'superintendent of yarns' used to administer the trade to be carried out in yarns to produce armors, cloth and ropes through weaving experts. He would get yarn spun out of wool, silk, bark-fibres, cotton, hemp and flax from slaves, widows, crippled women and maids. Assamese textile reference is also found in Mahabharata, where the assamese king Bhagadatta took part in the Kurukshetra war for Kauravas and was proud wearing armor made of muga silk (Rakhshakabas). During the period 1490-1520 AD, the great Ahom king Suhung Mung (Swarna Narayan) of Sibsagar patronized the silk industry in Assam state and during his reign many skilled weavers from Varanasi, UP migrated to Assam.

Historically, Assamese weavers of different ethnicities are adept in weaving fairy tales on the fabric, which is commonly known as 'Kechapat'. Assam skilled weaver would imagine and work with loin loom (as illustrated in the Figure 1), in which the warp is tied up in split bamboo to the ends of which is fastened a leather strap which pass across the weaver. The intricate designs were produced on the handloom during weaving and designing was earlier woven using lampa technique, whereas jala (threaded network) and jacquard techniques are a very recent phenomenon.



Figure 1: Traditonal Weaving on Loin Loom

Artisans used nangal-sirakh (a type of jala technique of design formation during weaving) and designs were directed from Phani (ring). That slow process of weaving was not changed till 1934-35, when a jacquard fitted loom was used in Sualkuchi (near Guwahati) for the first time by Sri Kaliram Karigar, with technical support from Sri LP Sunderam, Superintendent of the Guwahati weaving school. In 1946, a Sualkuchi weaver Sri Rajen Kalita (Rang Ghar) wove Mahatma Gandhi's image on the 480 hooks jacquard and welcomed Mahatma Gandhi on 4th Jan, 1946 to Assam. Gandhi was so pleased and impressed by the silk weaving in the region and termed the place as 'Manchester of India'. During 1956-57 Assamese textile industry witnessed the introduction of 120 hooks jacquard machine by Sri Dharmeswar Malakar, which is now very well adopted by the weavers of Assam and locally it is called as 'Dobby'.

DESIGN AND COLOUR

The range of design and colour from the hand loom sector is vast and colorful yet has a pristine simplicity and infinite charm. Although complex weaving techniques and dense figural decoration are not features usually associated with the Assamese textiles, major design elements are derived from nature such as geometrical, floral and animal motifs. Usually the geometric and floral motifs are smaller and are sometimes delicately intertwined with each other producing vast range of flowing/allover designs for the traditional Assamese clothing. The fabrics were earlier made from hand dyed yarn, dyeing of yarn was usually done with natural dyes. Indigo, madder, ratanjot and harda were the major natural dyes, which were acquired from the surroundings and nearby forests. Recent commencement of yarn-dyeing units in and around Guwahati has assisted the use of synthetic dyes and thereby enhancing the local availability of dyed yarn to a great extent. Brilliant shades are now produced for the designing purpose to produce colorful and contrast designed cloths. Availability of mill yarns in the region has also added range of colours to be incorporated into the traditional and ethnic designs these days.

TRADITIONAL DESIGNS

Brindavani Designs:

The "Brindavani Vastra" or "Vaishnavite Silks" are cloths containing types of designs which were passed on from one generation to another for the textiles produced from Lampa technique and all are characterized by designs depicting scenes from the life of Lord Vishnu (God of Hindu religion) [6]. Most of these relate to his exploits as a killer of demons in various animal forms (crane, the snake and others) or as a lover of the cowherds (Gopi) with whom he passed his youth in the forests of Brindhavan. Several of the pieces also show scenes from the Ramayana and Mahabharata (Hindu epics), which of course concerns another incarnation of God Vishnu- Rama and Krishna and some include depictions of other avatars, such a Matsya the fish, Kurma the tortoise and Narsimha the man-lion. Brindavani Vastra's are available in the form of artifacts at British Museum, London which illustrate the richness of textiles of the region along with the design capability of weavers at that time. Hence most of the ancient textile fabrics of this region available on display in many of the museums across the world are characterized by the Brindavani designs produced exclusively by the lampa technique. A Brindavani design from one such artifact preserved at LACMA (Los Angeles County Museum of Art) is represented below in Figure 2, which illustrates the Vali-Sugriva fight (Gadha yudh) design in the cloth.



Figure 2: An illustrative design of Brindavani vastra

In several of the more complex pieces, Garuda (God Vishnu's man-bird vehicle) is also shown. Almost all the pieces have woven inscriptions in Assamese which seem to be mostly simple labels to the scenes or characters depicted such as 'Ram avatar'. Other pieces especially those with black ground favor larger blocks of text, which may be quotations from the Bhagavat Purana (holy Hindu inscriptions), with which these cloths are closely linked. This vastra was to perform an unusual role in Vaishnavite people's worship of god. The drawing of the figures is fine and well conceived with an interesting variation of scale between rows. The only poorly woven section are the inscriptions which are barely decipherable as the names of the figures are in some cases reversed.

Contemporary Designs and Motifs:

Apart from the religious traditional designs of the Brindavani Vastra, various other designs also found their way into the woven fantasies of Assamese skilled weavers. Prominent ones of them are mentioned as under.

Kimkhwab or Singkhap Design:

During the era of Ahom kingdom in 14th century, a royal emblem or design consisting of lions and a peacock was used as design for dress materials of the aristocrats. The design is referred as Kimkhwab or Kimkhab or Singkhap, which is a 3 colour extra weft,

pointed draft design consisting of face to face lion along with a peacock bird covered with ornamented circles as illustrated in the Figure 3.

Kaziranga Design:

These are derived from the great Kaziranga sanctuary which is a seven colour extra weft design, which can be produced by straight draft consisting of design elements like: deer, single horn rhino, flying bird and a tree. The illustration of common Kaziranga design is as in the Figure 3.

Boro Diamond:

One of the most common design motifs of traditional textiles of Assam is the diamonds and its variations. Presented in Figure 3 is an ornamented Boro diamond design woven with colored weft using pointed draft. These diamonds are used profusely to design variety of dress materials in the north eastern region of India.

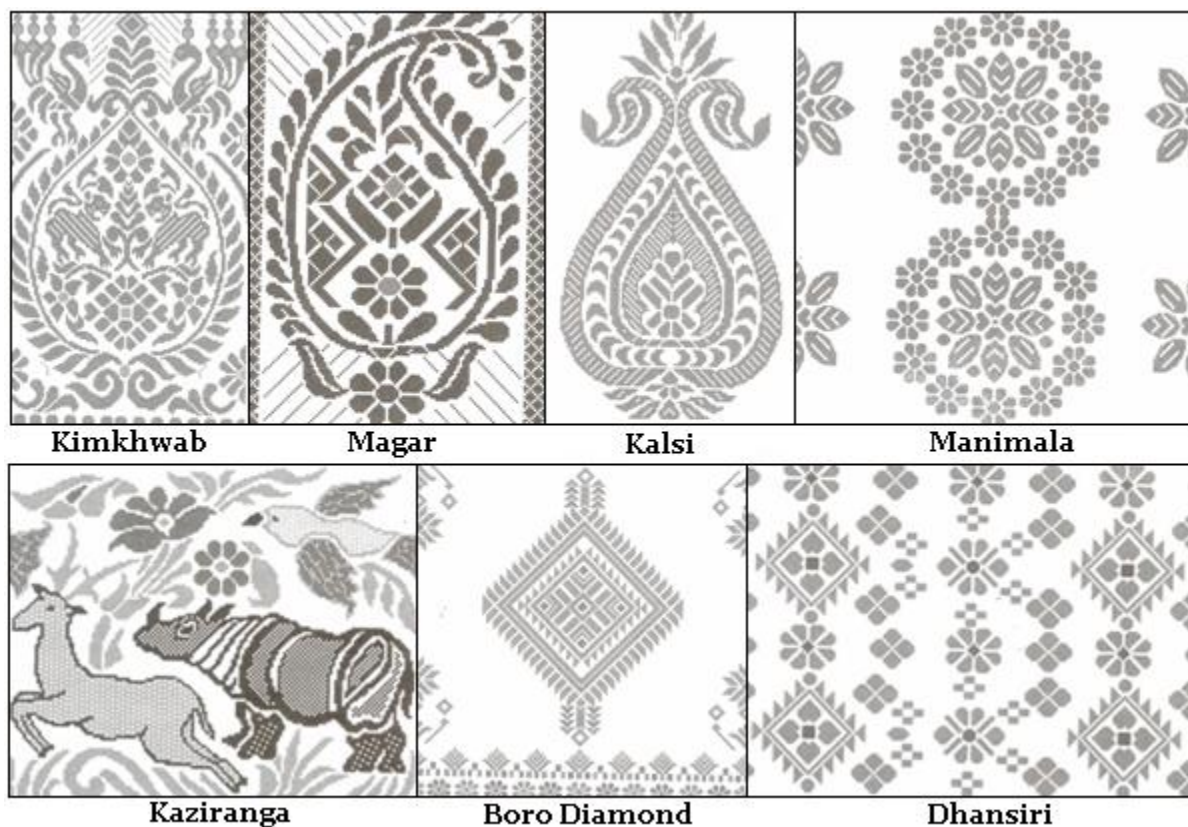


Figure 3: Traditional textile designs of Assam

Miri and Magar:

Both Miri and Magar designs are single colour extra weft designs, Miri constituted by face to face birds under an ornamented tree whereas Magar is a mango shaped design with a small climber tree as shown in the Figure 3 and 4. The mango shaped Magar designs are the adopted varieties from the rest of India region through the weavers of Varanasi.

Hatipati:

This type of animal motif design consists of an elephant and duck inside ornamented diamonds produced by double colour extra weft with straight draft as illustrated by the Figure 4.

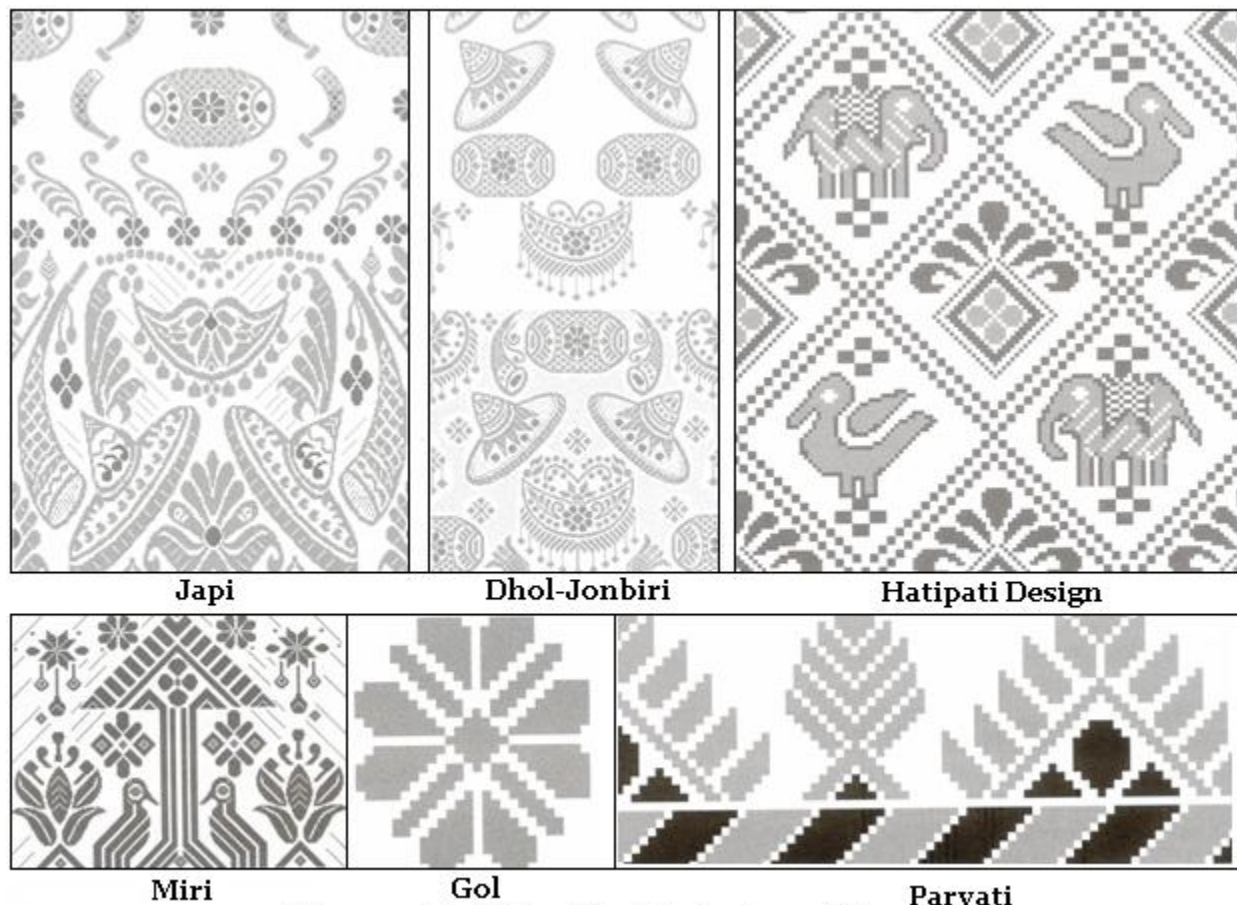


Figure 4: Traditional textile designs of Assam

Manimala design:

It is a single colour extra weft with pointed draft design which has eight small pearls (mani) with petal forming a bigger pearl in the form of circular chain (necklace or manimala) as shown in the Figure 3.

Dhansiri:

This is a geometrical cum floral motif which consist of diamonds and floral designs forming a single colour extra weft design with pointed draft.

Japi and Dhol Jonbiri:

These two are textile designs originating from the cultural background with design elements consisting of Assamese traditional Japi (cap/headwear for cultivation use), Dhol (musical drum) and ladies earring ornament (Jonbiri). Both the designs are single colour extra weft as illustrated by the figure 4.

Kalsi:

It is a design derived from the kalash (crown) formed by single colour extra weft with pointed draft as shown in the Figure 3.

Gol Buta and Parvati:

Apart from the common traditional motifs mentioned above, two of the most common design elements used for ornamenting the traditional fabric are a small body repetitive design (butta) and border lining design. The butta commonly used in the Assamese traditional textiles is the Gol buta as shown in the Figure 4, constituted by six to ten petal flowers. A border lining design used for decorating the traditional textiles is called as Parvati design which is a running diamond design as illustrated in the Figure 4.

TRADITIONAL COSTUMES OF THE ASSAMESE PEOPLE

Historically Assam has been home to different races of men - Austric, Mangolian, Dravidan and Aryans who came to dwell in this region at different points of time. The original inhabitants of this region were Kiratas as referred in the Mahabharata. The inhabitants of Assam can be divided into three major streams, namely Tribal population, Non-tribal population and Scheduled castes. The important tribes among the total 23 tribes of Assam are Bodo, Mising or Miri, Rabha, Deori, Karbi, Tiwa, Dimasa, Kachari and Adivasi or Santhals. Non tribals include Ahoms, Kayasthas, Kalita, Morans, Muttaks and Chutias. An indication of region wise distribution of people of Assam is as represented by Table 1.

Table 1: Region wise distribution of tribes/communities in Assam

| Tribe/Community name | Location in Assam |
|-----------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Karbi | Nagaon, Karbi Anglong |
| Bodo | Kokrajhar, BTC |
| Mising/Miri | Dhemaji, Lakhimpur |
| Rabha | Goalpara, Dhubri, Kamrup |
| Rajbonshi | Goalpara |
| Tiwa | Nagaon, Morigaon |
| Lalung | Nagaon, Morigaon |
| Mikir/Mikri | Nagaon |
| Deori | Lakhimpur |
| Dimasa Kachari | Cachar, NC Hills, North bank |
| Hmar (Homar) | NC hills, Karbi Anglong, Cachar |
| Chutia | Sonitpur, Sadiya, Darrang |
| Kukie (Kukj)& ZemeNaga | NC Hills, Karbi Anglong |
| Garos | Garos-hills (Goalpara, Dhubri) |
| Rankhol | NC Hills |
| Nishi | Lakhimpur, Naodar in Tezpur |

TRADITIONAL CLOTHS AND COSTUMES

The common cloths woven by the handloom weavers of Assam are Borkata or Churias (cloth for men's bottom wear dhoti), Mekhla-Chadar (ladies bottom wear similar to saree along with shawl like cover cloth for top), Dangorikapor /Borkapors (long cloths),

Khania kapor (dupatta type cloth used by women) and Gamochas (traditional designed towels). Dangorikapors are gifted to bride during weddings.

Expert weavers also use finer silk yarns called Asu or Asuli Poreahs and Gunnah (zari yarns) for designing fine woven cloths for traditional cloths. Gai Bonkara, a type of Muslin cloth is also woven by few expert weavers occasionally.

Some of those fabrics are used in Men's Bihu Shirt, Challeng Chaddar (covering cloths), Pagori (head wear) and also for Women's Mekhla, Chaddar, Riha (ladies wear worn at the waist) and Saree.

The details of the important ethnic costumes used by different communities and tribes of Assam and the traditional designs used for making these cloths are as presented in the Table 2 below. Batadrava area of Nagaon district and Gauripur area of Dhubri district in Assam is famous for Kuhila Koth (weaving directly using the fibres) to produce heavy fabric directly from fibres using traditional loom made of wood and bamboo to make seats, mats and cushions.

| Name of the product | Type of designs used | Utility |
|---|---|---|
| Mekhala, Chadar & choli (blouse) | Miri, Bodo diamonds, King Khap, Kaziranga, Pokhila (Butterfly), Kalka, Magar, Tora (Gol), Gamkharu (Dhol Jonbiri), stripes and checks | Traditional and ethnic women attire |
| Dhoti & Cheleng (kurta) | Kalka, Magar, Tora, diamond and stripes. | Traditional and ethnic men attire |
| Gamocha | Pokhila, Sarai, Japi, Dhol Jonbiri | Traditional accessory for men (towel) |
| Saree | Tora (Gol buta) with diamond border, Miri, King Khap, Magar, Dhol Jonbiri | Ethnic attire for women in Assam |
| Tongali, marphala, Pakhi & Panchi (Shawl, Stole & Scarf type) | Kalsi, Magar, Kimkhwab, Tora, Diamonds, stripes and checks. | Traditional accessories used by both men and women |
| Dokhna | Manimala, Bodo diamonds, Gosa-Sozia, stripes and checks. | Traditional women attire of Bodo tribe |
| Riha | Manimala, Bodo diamonds, Gosa-Sozia, stripes and checks. | Traditional women accessory |
| Japi | Tora, Manimala and Kalka designs | Cap for agricultural use |
| Pagori/Pagoda | Diamonds, Kalka, Tora, Pokhila, Gosa sozia, Dhol Janbiri and Manimala designs | Traditional head-wear used by Tiwa and toher tribal people in Assam |
| Patani Ruphan | Diamonds, Kalka, Tora, Pokhila and Manimala designs | Traditional women attire of Rabha tribe |

People of Assam use traditional costumes which commonly consist of Mekhala-Chadar, Dakhona, Sarees, Riha, Dhoti-Kurta and japi which profusely use the traditional textile designs for fabric ornamentation. Till date these costumes are used by in Assam during ethnic occasions and especially during the Bihu (spring harvest) festival in April, which provides a beautiful platform to showcase traditional costumes through the folk dancers at the Bihu dance programs organized throughout the state.

The Mekhla-Chadar is an awesome ensemble, which resembles a sari, and is yet not a

sari. The distinction lies in the fact that a Mekhla-Chadar is composed of two or three pieces of cloth, whereas a sari is a single piece of cloth. The Mekhla is worn as the skirt or petticoat or lungi, while the other half, Chaddar, is akin to the sari's anchal, used as the upper-garment for the skirt. Added to the chadar, choli or blouses are worn, below

chaddar, to complete the dress. The mekhla skirt bears a broad border and is thicker in texture, but the anchal is light-weight for easier hand ling. The chadar is worn in a special crisscross pleated-form, down the front side. Assamese women look marvelous in these fascinating costumes of Mekhla-Chadar.



Figure 5: Traditional Attire of Mising/Miri people

The traditional dresses used by the Mising/Miri tribe are koina borkata (designed mekhla)-chadar-choli (blouse)-riha by the women and borkata (Dhoti)-designed Kurta (short shirt), Tongali (fabric accessory used as belt) and designed Gamocha by the men. Figure 5

displays the designed Mekhla-Chadar-Choli-Riha used by the Mising women and Dhoti-designed Kurta-designed Gamocha used by the Mising men. This attire is commonly used by most of the people Assam for ethnic occasions. Gamocha's are also profusely used for honoring and welcoming the guests in Assam state.

The Bodo tribal womenfolk acknowledge Dokhna which is also a type of Mekhla as their prevalent costume, along with the blouse; a waist-wrap accessory called Riha and long stole called Aranoi. The Bodo men dress themselves in short dhoti called pani gamocha, short kurta, long stole (Aranoi) and Chadar (upper body wrap) made from Eri silk. Tiwa and Karbi tribal people use colorful costumes which were earlier made with eri silk yarn dyed with natural dyes. Tiwa men use bright-short designed kurta, light colored dhoti,



Figure 6: Traditional costumes of Tiwa Tribal people

Figure 7: Traditional Costumes of Santhal Tribe

designed pagori (head turban) with pakhi (feathers), tongali (fabric belt like accessory), marphala & phaskai (designed stoles and scarf) as shown in the Figure 6 A. It also shows Tiwa tribal women (Figure 6 B) with dark, designed mekhla, light colored-designed

phaskai (chadar) and bright designed riha. The Karbi women use Pini (mekhla), Jar-ek (upper garment) and Pekok (shawl like chadar) while men use Cheihongthor (short kurta/shirt), Rikong (dhoti) and Poho (Head turban).

The Dimasa tribes are renowned for their expertise in silk culture and weaving-prowess. They are indeed the producers of eri silk. A Dimasa woman covers herself in a skirt-like attire, known as the as Rigu, topped by an embellished vest-like cloth, called Rijamphai. During the ceremonies and merry occasions women adore themselves in more ornate Rijamphai, locally named as Rikhaosa. Similar as the Bodo men, Dimasa men wear Risha, this is a loin cloth-dhoti of deep green colour. They also wear a vest, called Rimsao and cover their head using Pagori, a turban woven from pure eri silk. The traditional costumes of the Adivasi or Santhal tribal people are represented in the Figure 7. Santhal tribal men use white or light coloured dhoti-short kurta along with gamocha and pagori (Figure 7 A), whereas the women use designed dark colored Mekhla-Chadar-blouse as shown in the Figure 7 B.

SUMMARY

Traditional Assamese textiles are uniquely distinguished among the Indian traditional textiles. Many urban, rural and tribal people of Assam profoundly use the ethnic dresses for many occasions even now. Although much influence on technology front, design and colour has been witnessed over the years, still the charm of traditional textile designs can be distinctively seen in these traditional costumes of the Assam state. Brindavani vastra or Vaishnavite silk depicting designs of God Vishnu, Mahabharata and Bhagavata purana were once very famous but over the time the art of making Brindavani cloth through Lampa technique has been lost. Traditional textile designs kimkhab, miri, magar, kaziranga, kalka, hatipati and gosa sozia are abundantly used for designing traditional costumes. Mekhla-Chadar and Dokhna are the important traditional wear of women in Assam state which have made a global impact with its exclusive appeal. The vibrant contemporary traditional designs and costumes of Mising, Bodo, Tiwa and other Assamese tribes have been documented in this article. Coordinated actions of various organizations in the region could very well augment the process of effectively preserving the traditional designs and costumes of the Assam state for GI (geographic indication) patenting. Assamese costume has cast an enchanting spell not only in India, but also on the foreign nations due to their charming colors and mind-blowing manual perfection.

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