CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION :

The Tiwa tribe of Assam is one of the many ethnic communities belonging to the great Bodo race. The people of the tribe reside mainly in two plains districts of Assam, viz. Nagaon and Morigaon. They have also resided in the hill district of Karbi Anglong, more precisely in the western part of the sub-divisional headquarter of Hamren.

The Tiwa women are known for their expert craftsmanship in handloom weaving and rearing and spinning of eri-silk. Several monographs have been written on the tribe and the tribal society. But none of these have provided us with any detail account of the textile tradition of the tribe. The present study is designed to investigate the tradition along with the cosmetic perceptions, ornaments and hair-dos of the people.

It is a fact that like all other tribes, the Tiwa tribal society of Assam has also undergone considerable changes in many areas. The handloom industry has a glorious past. But in the face of competition from mill-made products, the old technique of weaving has lost its pristine form which eventually has affected to some extent in the persistence and continuity of the tradition and in some other activities like spinning and dyeing. Dyeing was mainly conducted on cotton yarns in old days. But with the eclipse of cotton spinning, the art of dyeing in natural dyes wanes altogether. With the introduction of mill-made clothes and the yarns, changes are evident in the fabrics, dresses and designs and also in the old aesthetic perception around colour. It is, therefore, necessary to evaluate the age-old tradition
in order to have a proper understanding of the present status of the textile tradition of the tribe.

In the context of handloom weaving the hills and plains Tiwas differ in many respects. It is necessary to shortlist the differences in terms of technique and form, dress and fabric, looms and their operation. An indepth study of all these require intensive field survey in the villages both in the hills and in the plains. At the present moment of time, there are only a handful of men and women in the hills who know their old tradition in weaving. On the other hand, it is difficult to find even a single person or artisan in the plains who know it and narrate the features distinguishing his tradition from that of the non-tribal people.

With this end in view, a total of thirteen villages have been selected for survey from the hills, and the foot-hills and the plains where the people speak their mother tongue, i.e. the Tiwa language besides retaining their age-old culture in some form or other. The number of villages in the plains are restricted to five only. It is because of the fact that the plains Tiwas have already absorbed many elements from their non-tribal neighbours leading to the loss of their old tradition. Moreover, they cannot speak their mother tongue. As such, the survey conducted in more villages in the plains would yield almost the same result what have been found in one or two villages. Therefore, it would be repetition of what have been found even if the number of villages are increased.

The selection of villages in the plains is made taking into account of two factors.

The first factor is related to the concentration of the people. For example, Barapujia is a major village which has recorded the highest concentration of Tiwa population. The second factor has its concern with age-old reputation of the village as major centre for handloom weaving. In
this context, several hamlets at Raha, Barapujia, Jagiroad and Morigaon can be cited as having reputation in this craft.

**Objective of the study:**

This study is undertaken keeping in view the following objectives:

1. To study the textile tradition of the hills and the plains Tiwas who have maintained two separate trends in respect of their heritage in handloom weaving, spinning and dyeing.

2. To study the traditional mode or modes of textile production retained by the people of both the hills and the plains.

3. To study the traditional elements, the motifs and designs which continue to exist in the fabrics or lost for good.

4. To study various textile garments worn by both male and female.

5. To study the status of textile in relation to the past and present. In the case of the present status of textile, the changes and the historical factors effecting the changes are also to be counted.

6. To study the cosmetic tradition of the people of the tribe as it presents a different aesthetic perception of the community on personal decoration.

**Review of literature on Assam textile:**

It is considered rewarding if the present work could be assigned a place in the study of the history of textile tradition of Assam. This objective could be fulfilled only by a review of literature written on indigenous textiles of Assam. In this context, mention may be made first of some British accounts on Assam textiles.

B.C. Allen\(^1\) wrote a monograph on silk clothes of Assam in 1899. The work deals with the production of various silk garments and also the

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production methods of some of the fabrics. *Pat, muga* and *eri* were used in making the fabrics. The author mentioned as many as nine varieties of lower garments called *mekhela* worn by the Assamese women. *Dharidia mekhela* was the finest of all with *bonkara mekhela* taking the second position in terms of work of art. The garments were remarkable for they were profusely decorated with beautiful designs. The weavers adopted three methods in weaving *muga* fabrics. Accordingly the fabrics were known after the methods adopted for weaving as *titakaria, sukankaria* and *mahuralerelai bowa*. Married women covered their upper part with a long piece of garment called *riha*. There were six varieties of *riha*, namely, *dharidia, bonkara, karsipi, garidia, paridia* and *uka*. Gold threads were used to decorate the garments made of *pat*.

Another British Officer, W.A.M. Duncan wrote a valuable book entitled *Monograph on Dyes and Dyeing in Assam* in 1896. The author named a variety of dyestuffs, their preparation method and their use. The list of dyes available in Assam was a long one. Based on his account, Dr. Rajen Saikia summarises the art of dyeing in Assam in his book *Social and Economic History of Assam* (1853-1921). Dr. Saikia has commented that the dyeing was the first victim of import trade in British Assam. The scholar has made a significant comment in this regard as follows: "By the end of the nineteenth century, the number of people engaged in domestic preparation of dyes and dyeing was few and far between. Within the next twenty years it became a thing of the past. Of more than three hundred known variety of plants in the valley, the use of only three or four varieties has survived to the present. Secondly, at present not even 10 percent people could identify the local plants having dyeing properties."2

Dyestuff and materials used to wash silk in old Assam drew the attention of some foreign travelers. J.B. Travernier, a French traveller, mentioned that

2. See pp. 50-53.
the Assamese people reared silk on trees, the agent being an animal having the form of silk-worm, which remained for a whole year on the trees. He has also mentioned that the country produced abundance of Shellac. There were two varieties of it. One was reared on trees and its colour was red. People dyed their calicos and other stuffs with it. The ashes of fig leaves when applied to silk by boiling method, the silk glittered as white as snow. “If the people of Assam”, the traveller reported, “had more figs than they have, they would make all their silks white, because white silk is much more valuable than the other, but they have not sufficient to clean half the silks which are produced in the country.”

Pradip Chaliha, an eminent art historian of Assam, has furnished us with a long list of 48 plant species having dyeing properties. He has also mentioned that the names of most of the dyestuff have been lost to oblivion. Few of the dyestuffs have assumed new names. For example, the oda-phul has assumed the name of ranga java phul, the pani-pipali the name of sewali-phul etc. Some of the plant species have no colour of their own. Such plants were used as mordant to make the dye permanent in cloths. For example, the leaves of bhomrati (Symlocos spicata) and barungach (Crataeva religiosa) were used as mordants. Chaliha has given us an exhaustive account of the plant species having dyeing properties of the colour of red, yellow, brick red, green, blue, black and earth. The leaves of bhomrati plant found universal application as mordant in all colours except blue. Leaves, flowers and the rinds of certain tree and the shell of bel-fruit were used as mordants. Acid dye and alkali dye were the methods that the people practised in dyeing the fabrics. The British officers engaged in administration in Assam did never miss to record their knowledge about

3. Quoted in Ahomar Din. pp.463-464 and 472
clothing, weaving and dyeing practised by different ethnic groups or tribes. Their works are not comprehensive to deal with every aspect of handloom weaving of the communities. But they did pioneering works in the field. Of the British writers mention may be made of J.H. Hutton, J.P. Mills, S. Endle, Major A. Playfair, Charles Lyall and P.R. Gurdon. Hutton and Mills did their pioneering works among some Naga tribes. J.P. Mills has furnished an important message that the Ao Naga males themselves embroidered the white bands of cloth they used to wear to cover their private parts, women were not allowed to do the work. Rev. S. Endle has discussed in detail the practices of eri-culture among the Kacharis. Among the Kacharis, eri-culture was one of their chief industries. The author has described the method of rearing of eri-worms, the looms used in weaving and the fabric in terms of its strength and durability.

P.R. Gurdon has let us know that the Khasis did not weave silk or cotton by themselves. They obtained their silk cloths from Assam valley and from the Nongtung or Khyrwang villages in Jaintia, where eri-silk thread and weaving it into clothes was a “fairly considerable industry”. Cloths were dyed in natural dye. The Khyrwang cloth was red and white, mauve and white, chocolate and white. Dark blue or black dye was obtained from a plant called *u sybu*. The red dye was obtained from the mixture of the dry bark of two shrubs, one of which was the Assamese *achukath*. The Lalungs and Bhois and Lynngams practised weaving of cotton cloths, which

6. The Ao Nagas, pp. 90-94
7. The Kacharis, pp. 19-23
8. The Garos, pp. 46-47 & 56-58
9. The Mikirs, p 10
10. The Khasis, pp. 18-20 & 59-60
11. The Khasis, p. 59
are generally dyed blue, sometimes stripped blue and red. Gurdon has also enumerated the modern perception of dress of the Khasi people\textsuperscript{12}.

Robinson's "Descriptive Account of Assam"\textsuperscript{13} is a valuable book on the production methods of \textit{eri, muga} and \textit{pat}.

In this book, "The Art of North-East Frontier of India"\textsuperscript{14} V. Elwin narrates a tradition of the Kaman Mishimis of the Lohit Valley. According to the tradition the first weaver was a girl named Hambramai, whom god, Matai, taught how to weave cloth. The story of Hambramai's craftsmanship is significant for it relates that she observed minutely everything beautiful in nature to incorporate as design in her textile. She died of an accident and the loom she had developed was broken into pieces. The small stream carried the broken pieces to the plains and thereafter the people in the plains learnt how to operate the loom. The designs of flowers and foliages she had developed were all transformed into some butterflies. The decorated feathers of the butterflies were none other than those developed by her for her loom.

V. Elwin deals with weaving in Arunachal Pradesh in another book from a different angle i.e self sufficiency in clothing.\textsuperscript{15} His account on traditional weaving and dyeing, although brief is significant for being an exercise with a new economic and cultural outlook.

H. Borgohain dwells on handloom weaving of the Adi people of Arunachal Pradesh in a book\textsuperscript{16}. He recounts the rich heritage of the Adis around cotton spinning and weaving. It appears from his account that handloom as a cottage industry is fast losing in most of the areas for not being able to withstand the market competition. The new generation of young boys and girls have embraced various changes in their dresses.

\textbf{In spite of the changing trend that touched the society, the author says that}

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{13} Robinson has narrated the production methods of different varieties of silk, pp. 227-34
  \item \textsuperscript{14} P 24
  \item \textsuperscript{15} \textit{A Philosophy for NEFA}, pp. 92-98
  \item \textsuperscript{16} \textit{Handloom and Handicraft of the Adis}, pp. 13-24
\end{itemize}
cloths made manually in the loin-loom have their own charm and as such, the tradition cannot die altogether. In this context, he has observed that the Adi patterns continue to exist in the woven fabrics. This is an important thing to be reckoned with.

The Ahom chronicles called the *buranjis* are some veritable respositories of information on the dresses of the people of old days. Lila Gogo\(^\text{17}\) has given us an authoritative account of wearing apparels of old days along with the names of clothes. Each type of cloth had many varities. For example, the *khania-kapor* which was a double folded wrapper had twelve varieties, viz. *chakathia khania* (*chakathia* is a measuring unit), *uka-khania* (*uka* means plain), *gunakata-khania* (having decoration in gold thread), *gariyali* (cross border lines), *dariyali* (stripped) etc. The *cheleng kapor* (a piece of thin cloth used as wrapper) has also twelve varieties. The wearing apparel of women called *riha* has a number of varieties like *achualia, boroi-laga, gariyali, gunakata, kech-bacha* etc. Similarly, there are at least ten varieties of *mekhela* in Gogo’s account. Some of the *mekhelas* were named after the place from where they owed their origin (for example *Nara-mekhela*), while some others were known after the yarns they were made of (for example *patar mekhela, mugar mekhela, mejankari mekhela* etc.). There were some other *mekhelas* which owed their names after the motifs they were adorned with. There were large number of dresses and turbans which the males used to wear.

Dr. D.C. Sarkar treats the subject of *ericulture* in India in a scientific manner in his book "*Eri Culture in India*". *Eri* has been identified as Assam silk, as Assam was its original home. It is the only non-mulberry variety, the worms of which are completely domesticated. The *eri*-silk cannot be reeled and it is spun. Rearing of *eri*-worm is easier and cheaper. The worms can resist diseases and can stand little fluctuation in temperature

17. *Ahom Jati Aru Asamiya Sanskriti*, pp. 176-178
and humidity. The animistic rearers in Assam slit the eri-cocoon and extract the chrysalis to give it the status of food item. During the turn of the 19th century the British East India Company attempted for the spread of eri-culture in India, but it did not spread beyond Assam. The tea planters also found eri-culture uneconomical. Without making any headway as an industry, the eri-culture remained only as a small cottage industry in Assam. The rearers seldom produced eri more than what they need for domestic consumption.

Dr. Sarkar has treated eri-culture from rearing of worms to spinning. The appendices include two tables – the ecological table and the table showing heritage characters of silk-worms. The chapter on rearing begins with the varieties of food plants, pests of the plants and their control with the aid of pesticides. The chapter on silk-worm rearing is devoted to the life-cycle of the worms, rearing appliances, the methods of rearing, bed cleaning for the worms, mounting and harvesting etc. The chapter on genetics and breeding deals with racial characters of silk-worms, the habitats where they thrive better and the breeding of selected worms. In the matter of breeding white worms are preferred, as the yarn obtained is always white having better dyeing properties. The last chapter of the book is devoted to spinning of eri-cocoons along with the appliances.

Nilomoni Phukan, a noted poet and art-critic of considerable repute, opines in his book Loka-kalpa-drasti that among all the folk arts of Assam, the clothes woven by Assamese woman artisan are most attractive and pleasing to the eyes. According to him the Assamese can boast of in entire India with two of the folk arts – one is weaving and the other is woodcarving. Weaving in Assam achieved excellence during the Ahom period under royal patronage.

The tribal cloths are rich in wealth and intoxicating quality of colour.
The Assamese cloth, however, lacks all these and also the magical character of colour being bustled with feelings besides the contrast and depth of brilliance of tribal cloth. Colour in Assamese textile is moderate and mild compared with tribal tradition. One of the major characteristics of Assamese fabric is the copious use of creeper design. Buta is another major design. The most coveted flower design of an Assamese weaver is the guna-phutuki-phul. This flower motif is considered to be the king of the motifs.\footnote{Loka-kalpa-dristi, pp. 28-32} Phukan believes that the Assamese weavers borrowed motifs like diamond, triangle and square and the configuration of star motifs and ferns from tribal textile to decorate their own fabrics. One of the commonly used motif in Assamese textile is the plant design. It is significant to note that the flower motifs in Assamese textile appear relief like to the beholders. The motifs stand out boldly from the surface of the cloth. This relief like feature of floral forms is typical of the traditional textile of the tribes.

R.N. Dasgupta\footnote{Art of Medieval Assam, pp. 198-199} is of the opinion that the motifs and designs in Assamese textile are mostly derived from nature. The common appellation to denote design is a phul (meaning flower) and the combination of flower and creeper is called the phul-jali.

Dr. L. Majumdar’s\footnote{Traditional Textiles of Assam, Unpublished} dissertation on the textile tradition of some tribes of Assam is a comprehensive treatise on the textile traditions of five plains tribes (Bodo-Kachari, the Maitori section of the Rabha, Deori, Mishing and Tai-Phake), one hill tribe (Karbi) and four non-tribal Assamese. She has studied the textile traditions of the tribes and the non-tribal people with reference to the continuity of the traditions in the face of present day market competition and social change. Her study also takes stock of different modes of production of textile in terms of raw materials, dyes and dyeing
practices, loom and accessories and the manufacturing process. The chapter on motifs and designs is an original one. This chapter is devoted mainly to the documentation of different motifs – floral and plant motifs, animal motifs, structural and geometric forms. The author has mentioned as many as 90 different types of motifs and their artistic rendering in textiles among various study communities. Some of these have been plotted on graph for presentation in the study. The graphic presentation of the motifs adds a scholarly dimension to her treatment.

*Costumes, Textiles, Cosmetics and Coiffure in Ancient and Medieval India* written by Dr. Motichandra is a most scholarly work on the historicity, technical devices and aesthetics of Indian textile tradition, cosmetics and coiffure. The author studied Indian costumes in a chronological order from the days of the Indus Valley Civilization to the Sultanate period. He had utilized all materials available in ancient Indian texts belonging to different religious traditions – the Buddhas and the Jainas in order to put the problem of study in its historical perspective. He explored the Indian art traditions – the sculptural art, painting and dance to put these in support of his views in the context of dresses of people of different walks of life. His study was a total exercise of every tit-bits of costume that a man or woman could decorate his or her body from toe to the hairs. The chapter on cosmetics and coiffure delves deep into the totality of Indian tradition in this context. Bath and bathing accessories, eye-paintings, ointments and perfumes, luxury toilet, hair-shampooing and hair dressing and fumigating of garments etc. have been dealt with in detail.

Dr. Dinesh Baishya’s book on traditional cosmeticology is an exploratory work on traditional medical lore and aromatics and cosmetics of Assam. The author states that the Assamese people used scented paste
and cream and body lotion derived from certain aromatic plants. For example, *agaru* (*aquilaria agolocha*), *chandan* (*Santalum album*), *sal* (*shorea robusta*) and some other plants were used for making scented paste. Sawdust of *chandana* were kept in small bags of cloth for use in scenting cloths. Kautilya mentioned about *agaru* wood and three varieties of sandal wood available in ancient Kamrupa. Banabhatta also mentioned in the *Harsacarita* about *agaru* to have been sent by the Kamrupa King, Bhaskara Barmana (mid-7th century), to his north Indian friend and ally, King Harsavardhana along with other gifts. The Ahom queen were said to have used facial cream for beautification of their face. The paste was derived by boiling the rind of orange, white mustard seeds, *pirika-sak*, extract of raw turmeric, *agaru* and sandal wood powder in *ghee*. Scented hair oil called *gondh-tel* was made by mixing large number of ingredients,

Dr. Baishya has mentioned about pastes prepared from natural objects for beautification of female body and facial skin. He has also mentioned about the preparation of oil which keeps hair strong, black and fragrance releasing.

A.C. Dutta’s book *Dictionary of Economic and Medicinal Plants* is a significant source book. It enhances our knowledge with the large number of entries on the dye stuffs of Assam and their availability in different geographical and ecological situations. Some of the entries are also valuable in knowing the cosmetic tradition dependant on natural plants.

**Methodology:**

Some of the Tiwas are hill dwellers and the others who constitute the majority live in the plains districts of Nagaon and Morigaon and several other pockets distributed on either side of the river Brahmaputra. The dwellers in the plains have absorbed many cultural elements of the non-

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tribal neighbours. On the other hand, the hill dwellers are politically and geographically neighbours of the Karbis in the Karbi Anglong district. But culturally they are not close to the Karbis inspite of living beneath the same roof of nature. There are differences between the Tiwas of the hills and their compatriots in the plains. The differences are noticed in the physical folk life of which the age-old textile traditions are essential components. The present study is designed to investigate the differences as well as the similarities wherever ostensible or apparently discernible.

The number of villages selected for the study from the hills is higher than the number of villages in the plains. It is presumed that majority of inputs regarding the old tradition in textile would come from the villages in the hills because of the reason that the villages in the hills are the only secluded places for retaining the old values around the culture of the tribe and the physical folklife of its people. In this context the mother tongue of the tribe is taken as an index in the selection of the villages, because of the fact that the mother tongue carries with it the basic cultural contents the village communities in the hills have preserved from time immemorial. The same index is not applied to those villages in the plains where the people have absorbed elements of different cultural groups, who are basically non-tribal, besides the fact that they have forgotten most of their old cultural traits in course of social transformation.

The study aims at a micro-level investigation to be conducted in as many as households in the selected villages. Surely, such a study would be more authentic in capturing the textile tradition than that of a generalized account of it. In addition to this, data available in books and journals have been collected to compare and establish the authenticity of the tradition.

Some of the Tiwa people in the hills have embraced Christianity. The study covers all of them irrespective of their faiths. In order to show the
textile tradition of the plains Tiwas, the study of the textile traditions of the non-tribals with whom they share a common habitat would be of immense necessity. The study of non-tribal tradition would be confined to occasional reference to clothes and wearing apparels, motifs and designs, methods of handloom weaving, weaving accessories and implements.

**Selection of villages:**

The researcher had her preliminary conversations with few knowledgeable persons of the tribe in search of resourceful men and women. The discussion was rewarding for her in the selection of villages and also in identifying the persons who were knowledgeable and resourceful.

A total of thirteen villages have been selected out of which eight villages from the hills of Karbi Anglong, two in the foothills and three in the plains where the dwellers speak their mother tongue without any hindrance. The villages are— (i) Maslaikhunji, (ii) Mugaguri, (iii) Silaguri, (iv) Ulukhunji, (v) Amswaiparo, (vi) Amkhalam, (vii) Tharakhunji, and (viii) Bar Marjong in the hills of Karbi Anglong.

The following villages are selected from the foothills: (i) Komarkuchi and (ii) Daborghat.

(i) Bherakuchi, (ii) Amsoi Marjong Gaon and (iii) Nambor are three villages in the plains where the Tiwa inmates speak both Tiwa and Assamese.

A total of five villages have been selected from the plains. They are (i) Na-Khola Rajakuchi in Jagiroad, (ii) Owabori and Koraigurj, (iii) Ezarbari-Jerenga, (iv) Barapujia, (v) Khaigarih and Kamarjan.

A minimum of 5 households have been selected for intensive survey work in each village in the hills. A self-help group operating in the village Tharakhunji has been surveyed in addition to the households identified for investigation. Survey of more households in the hills is beset with troubles due to the location of the households in places difficult to reach on foot.
The number of household selected for investigation in the plains is restricted to a minimum of 10 and a maximum of 15 depending on the total number of households in respective villages.

**Data collection:**

Data has been collected from the actual weavers, who are women. It is worth mentioning that the researcher has come across some male members in some hill villages who are conversant in the craft of handloom weaving. They are not only knowledgeable and resourceful but also good interpreter between the researcher and the tribal women who know little of Assamese.

A pre-study tour was conducted in Tharakhunji and Ulukhunji in the hills for a prior comprehension of the problem.

The main study was conducted with the aid of an interview schedule based on a set of well-framed questionnaire (enclosed in Appendix 1.A). In the first phase of study, a network comprising of villages more than the double of those mentioned above in both the hills and the plains was developed. But it was found that not all villages were resourceful, neither knowledgeable persons having familiarity with the Tiwa tradition in textile were found for interaction. Therefore, a scrutiny was made and several villages were eliminated leaving only ten villages in the hills and in the foot hills in our list.

The questionnaire was framed in such a manner that it could embrace areas like historical antecedent of the tribe in general and the villages which were brought into our discussion in particular, agricultural practices with reference to production of cotton and non-mulberry silk, economic status and the standard of education, status of textile as a craft in the community, mode of production of textile and the accessories used in
production, dyeing practices, motifs and designs and lastly the impact of modernity and market economy in changing the perception of the people. Regarding cosmetics, ornaments and coiffure some additional queries were made in the same set of questionnaire. A separate field data schedule on individual textile item was framed in order to collect certain information in respect of textile item. (Appendix 1.B) Similarly another separate schedule on design and motif was also prepared to draw information in this regard. (Appendix 1.C)

The questionnaire and other data schedules prepared for data collection were discussed with individual resource persons through interview method. Interviews were held for days together and also on several phases.

The researcher did this by staying in the villages for all those days when interview and discussions were held with the resource persons. Discussions in respect of designs and motifs were undertaken with the weavers by closely observing these with the help of actual piece of cloths. Graph papers were used for transfer of some of the motifs from the cloths. Photographs of the motifs were also taken to illustrate them in order to behold the visual beauty of the cloths.

The study is based mainly on field studies. However, books and journals were consulted in order to derive an overall understanding of the textile tradition of Assam and Assam’s tribes including the tribes frinzing her. Oral tradition particularly the lyrics of the Tiwas was studied to derive information on old apparels and ornaments. □