CHAPTER- VI

Textile motifs and designs

The Tiwas of Assam, particularly those living in the hills of Karbi Anglong, have a rich tradition of textile motifs of old days. The motifs are innumerable, so are the exquisitely colourful designs where different motifs are integrated into a cohesive composition. The weavers derive the different forms of motifs from nature and their surroundings. Trees and shrubs, flowers and foliages, birds and animals and insects and other objects of daily use with which they had long intimacy and closeness got transformed into some stylized form and design in the textile. It is observed that the motifs so derived mostly did not find realistic representation, instead, an impression of the object was considered significant if it could convey a meaningful expression in the medium of coloured threads. For example, the eye of the game-bird called dorik (pheasant), the hoof of dog or the teeth of a cow were all impressionistic and conventional in their visual presentation of turumo, khugri-yaphli and masu-hagam-khum respectively.

The weavers in the hills developed substantial number of decorative motifs over a long period of time and embraced many of them as culture specific of the tribe. They were also not hostile in allowing entry of new ones imported from sources other than their own societies. Sidi-lai (a sheet of paper used to write a letter), phada-lai (lease-paper), thaga-mor (round like coins) and several others were new entries.
It has been mentioned above that the Tiwas have developed several motifs which are strongly culture specific of the tribe. For example, the motif called *turumo*, which represents the *dorik*’s eye, is specific as border design in some of their clothes. It is defined by by-colour threads which are extended along the warp in such a manner that the threads create the design at the border of the cloth when the warp and weft threads get interlocked. In the plains, a different technique is adopted in the execution of *turumo*. Two by-colour threads are fastened together to make a single warp yarn at the border. In this way warping in the design is executed in the plains. The designs called *kilalongai, ramsa-khajari, kip-khum* (fan motif), *hadi-pisa* (elephant’s calf), *Sing-gong* (lion motif), *ingkhrulai-khum* (castor leaf motif) and several others which are traditionally handed down from time immemorial have become culture-specific of significant nature. It is believed that most of the motifs were given by different gods whose abodes were at different hills or rocks. Tradition goes that the Tiwas belonging to different clans believe in the existence of different clan-gods whose abodes are believed to have been located in the hillocks nearby their village. The abode of each deity is the revered place of worship called *than* (sacred grove). The *than* gods gave the people different forms of dances as well as the costumes for the dancers. It is significant to find that each clan has got its own dance, may be more than one. The dances of the Marjong clan are *sagra, phuja, wanchuwa* and *yangli*, the major dance forms being the *sagra* and *yangli*. The major dance form of the Amswai clan is *sagra*. In the same way, the dance called *kheljawa* is to the Magro, *phuja* and *yangli* to the Rongkhoi, *sagra, phuja* and *yangli* to the Amri and *sagra, phuja* and *yangli* to the Lumphaid. The Tiwas of the Amswai region got the *sagra* dance from the deity Pala Khongar. The *sagra* of Amswai can not be taken to other areas. The dances of other clans stated above are also the gifts of different *than* gods.
The association of divinity and dance with clothes and clothing is a significant feature of the Tiwa textile of the hills. The Tiwas had no clothes to wear in the days of yore. When they settled in Amswai after their migration from the Jaintia hills, they got their clothes from the than god, Pala Khongor, who not only gave them clothes but also taught them how to dance and sing along with the rituals of his worship.

It is worth mentioning that *kila-longai* and *muikuri* are two most popular and common decorative designs which are strongly culture specific in developing the choreographic patterns of the *sagra misawa* and *yangli*. Both the designs follow a movement along a zigzag line. Their application in dance movement recreates a handsome look like the one in the cloths. It is said that Parvati was engaged in creating figures in cloths in old days under the influence of alcohol, which endowed them with many curves and bends. The word *kilalongai* means zigzag, while *muikuri* denotes bends (literally *mui* denotes eye and *kuri* the small one). *Muikuri* is also connotated in a different sense. *Muikuri* is a vegetable plant. The motif is derived from the flower of that plant. It is one of the popular motifs which finds its ubiquitous application in the *nara*, a majestic waist cloth of the fair sex (Plate-16-i). The motif also finds its overwhelming presence in the bamboo craft. Plate-31-i Presents a hand fan with the beautiful design.

There are quite a good number of motifs behind which lie the cultural values of the tribe. One of the motifs is the *ramsa-khajari* together with which the motif called *sing-gong* and several other motifs contribute to give birth to a grand composition in textile. The *ramsa-khajari* was the design that emerged from the combination of different motifs. An attempt is made here to evaluate the design and its development through multi-layers of cultural integration.
Ramsa is a place, a hillock and a sacred grove in Dvar Amla mauza. Ramsa is also the name of a god who is popular as Budha Ramsa among the people of Saru Amli village. The people of the village worship the god. On the other hand, the people of the Amni clan revere the god as their protector.

A Karbi myth\(^1\) of creation relates Ramsa as the first man of the Kacharis. According to the myth, the first man of the Kacharis was born of an egg laid by a mythical bird \textit{wo plakpi}. S. Endle\(^2\) has let us know that the Kacharis living in the plains were known as Ramsa to their brethren in the North Cachar Hills. We have been informed that Ramsa was one of the old \textit{mouzas} of Kamrup and was situated close to Guwahati.\(^3\) Therefore, it can be presumed that the motif called \textit{ramsa-khajari} was originally developed in the plains by the Kacharis. The word \textit{khajari} stands for the Kacharis. \textit{Khajari} is also believed to be a \textit{daini}, an evil woman by the hill Tiwas.

How the motif travelled to the hills is uncertain. It cannot be attributed to marriage, as intermarriage was unknown between the two sections of the Kacharis, i.e., the Kacharis of the plains and the Dimasa-Kacharis of the hills.\(^4\) Language was the barrier in holding such a marriage. According to Endle, inspite of having much in common in the language spoken by the two sections of the people of the same stock, in their “modern form they differ from each other nearly as much as Italian does from Spanish.”\(^5\) In the hills, however, the motif achieved wide popularity among different clans of the Tiwas through marriage.

One of the components of the \textit{ramsa-khajari} design is an animal called \textit{sing-gong}. It is believed to be a frightful animal. When it cries at night, it

\begin{itemize}
\item \textbf{1.} \textit{A Handbook of Folklore Material of North-East India.} p. 16
\item \textbf{2.} \textit{The Kacharis}, p. 26
\item \textbf{3.} \textit{Ibid}, p. 26, fn 3.
\item \textbf{4.} \textit{Ibid}, p. 9.
\item \textbf{5.} \textit{Ibid}, p. 9.
\end{itemize}
is believed to be a sign of impending death. It is also believed that disease is impending in the village if the animal cries at midnight facing to the village. The animal is placed in the design as if it tramples over a *hadi-pisa* (elephant calf). Thus the entire design, *ramsa-khajari*, can be a representation of multi-layer cultural development. Plate-26.

The word *khum* which means flower in Tiwa language is also used to denote decorative motifs in textile. The word *kanthi* is used to denote the *kotted* designs used in the male garment, the sleeveless coat called *tagla*. *Kanthi* also denotes the picks. As such, the design called *cari-kanthi* carries four picks, while the *kha-kanthi* is rendered with twenty four picks. The designs rendered in extra weft threads of *kanthi* are specific to the *tagla*. The female garment called *kasong* carries quite a substantial number of stripes of *turumo* set together at the centre of the cloth.

The art of weaving patterns is called *khum-tiwa*; the word *khum* denotes motif, while *tiwa* carries the meaning of creating figures on cloth. The minimum count in a motif is one pick. *Khadisha* is a single pick motif (*Khadi* = pick, *sha* which is a short form of *kasha* meaning single).

All ornamentations are done in the loom itself, the method being the extra-weft technique of using additional layer of dyed yarns in the weft. Patterns in the sleeveless male wear (i.e. *tagla*) are obtained by necessary combinations of different colour threads worked in with a porcupine quill while the cloth is being woven. A bamboo needle may replace the porcupine quill if the latter is not available or easy to procure. The stitch done on *tagla* with porcupine or bamboo needle in known as *suwan*. The above method of ornamentation in the *tagla* is not followed in the present-day weaving. The technique involved in weaving a *tagla* in old days was different from the method employed at present.
Apart from the extra-weft technique, there are few other methods to do the ornamentations. One of the methods is called *choro-poho*. In this method the desired straight lines in colour threads are obtained in the cloth, each line being rendered over twin-healds. Another method is known as *thoka-parewa*. It is similar to *bulowa* in Assamese. In this method, the design is rendered like configuration of extra threads of variegated hues. The small patches of colour appear to have come out boldly from the fabric. It may be mentioned here that *thoka* is also a decorative motif simple in its rendering. It denotes a bunch of spots.

The hill Tiwas have retained till to-day quite a substantial number of textile motifs. Most of them are very old. Only a few are adopted from outside their own tradition. The motifs as well as the designs both old and new are grouped as follows:

(i) Motifs derived from animals and birds.
(ii) Motifs derived from plant and vegetables.
(iii) Abstract and Geometrical motifs
(iv) Structural motifs

By far the animal motifs are many compared to other forms. *Sing-gong*, a mythical animal, and *hadi-pisa* (elephant’s calf) are two significant motifs which owe their sources to a sylvan deity. The motifs were delineated in the ornamental sash of a *phalisa*. Their patterns are strongly conventional, stylized and tend to become geometrical with the touch of angularity. Plate 26 demonstrates how the figures of two *sing-gong* in the row is interspersed by the figures of *hadipisa*. Different birds were subject of attraction to the weavers. The names of motifs of birds made a point clear that the weavers developed fascination for the depiction of the eyes of the birds and animals rather than delineating the entire object in cloth. *Khangrewmo* (crab’s eye), *mira-shogor* or *shokkor* (round spot, i.e., the ocellus in peacock’s feather),
phairewmo (dove’s eye) and pongra-mo (black bee’s eye) were some of the motifs which could demonstrate how minute was the observations of the weavers. Apart from the mo (eye) of birds, the weavers created patterns of spider’s finger and the foot-prints of dog (khugri-yaphli). Shuguri-khum (motif of butterfly) was one of the favourite motifs of the Tiwa weavers. Plate-35. presents a configuration of different motifs, the central motif being that of a suguri-khum in its conventional form. A hairy caterpillar and a leech did not escape from the imaginative speculation of the weavers who developed the patterns called maishom-khum (maishom = caterpillar) and siliu-khum (siliu = a leech) out of the small animal motifs. We have already mentioned that the pheasant (dorik) has occupied a prestigious position in the textile tradition of the hill Tiwas. The decorative pattern called turumo derived from the pheasant’s eye has become a culture specific thing of beauty alongwith sing-gong, hadi-pisa, kilalenggai and muikuri-muijali and several others which are believed to have been the gifts of than gods. A significant bird motif is the bird bhimraj. Plate 21-ii presents the motif with the motifs of thoka. Culturally the bird is also associated with the Karbis. The Karbis wear the feathers of bhimraj in the turban on festal occasion as among the Khasis.

Man’s first encounter in this world was with the trees which provided them food to dispel hunger as well as shelter and protection from rain etc. With the progress of civilization man learnt the vegetable source of threads and different forms of natural dyes for colouring the threads when he developed in himself the perception for creating patterns in clothes he had used to wear.

In creating patterns in cloths man’s first choice could be the animal and plant life with which he had established close intimacy in connection with different agricultural activities. The weavers derived many motifs from

6. The Mikirs, p. 6
animal and plant life for ornamentation in cloths. The plant life gave them maximum scope for decoration in cloths out of the configuration of flowers and foliages observed by them in nature.

The hill Tiwas developed a rich tradition of ornamental decoration with flowers and foliages which they transformed into some stylized patterns in the medium of coloured threads. The pattern called *phutum-par* was derived from lotus. Castor leaf, cucumber, the seeds of bottle gourd, the elephant’s apple and mango fruit were developed into some conventional motifs for ornamentation. *Ingkhrulai-khum* is a motif in 10 picks. It was derived from the castor plant. Plate-23 presents a configuration of not less than 8 motifs with the central motif is that of an *ingkhrulai-khum*. The motif is surrounded by *lao-kuthi* which represents the seeds of a bottle-gourd. The *lao-kuthi* motif has two varieties. The motif *lao-kuthi* is designed out of the big seeds, while the motif called *lao-kuthi-pisa* was created with the small seeds. Similarly the motif called *orao-par* known to the Assamese as *aou-tenga* (elephant’s apple) is of two types—one big and the other a small one. The big *orao-par* is of 21 picks while the number of picks in the small one is 12. Dr. Majumdar observes that the *aou-phul* design has occupied a vital place in the textile of Assam, specially among those of the Bodo-Kacharis, Deoris, Karbis and non-tribal Assamese.7 The motif called *thui-par* was derived from cucumber. The number of pick is 5.

The form of *ramsa-khajari* could have been derived from floral motif. It looks like the *pla-khum* (arrow-shaped). Both the motifs carry blade like petals with minor difference in the mode of presentation of the radiating diagonals that made a configuraion of straight lines in the two big petals on either side of the motif. Plate-27 presents the design surrounded by the motif *khaji-haso* (sickle notch) and interspersed with *champui-yasi* (spider’s finger). The rows of spots arranged diagonally to distinguish between the

design from each other are misane-mokuri meaning the tiger’s eye developed in 6 picks. Sing-gong and hadi-pisa are placed in a horizontal line atop the design. The bottom part of the design presents a row of sing-gong. The animal motifs create movement in the entire design. Plate-32 presents an embroidered border in a phaskai. The vertical lines are built of many joints. The decorative border that the joints create is derived from sugar-cane. Hence the figure gets the name khochar-kanthi.

Geometrical Forms:

Almost all forms of ornamentation in Tiwa textile are someway or other geometrical as the lines which go to make a form are bold in their bends for giving birth to a triangle or rectangle in the design. Plate-34 is a configuration of a good number of motifs which are set in such a manner that the lines they have created have made the design a beautiful rhombus. Strictly geometrical forms are not many in the repertory of design. But delineation of floral motifs setting them transversely to create a design, the diamond-shaped coloured spots used to fill blank spaces or coloured spots placed independently as outlines of a design, the emerald motifs in red as if engraved are all geometrical in form and shape.

The motifs called kila-longai and muikuri are endowed with many curves and bends. They resemble the meandering contour of a hilly track. Legend attributes the motifs to Parvati who was said to have created the patterns under the influence of intoxicating drugs. Plate-17-iii presents the exquisite ornamentation in a phaskai, a breast garment of Tiwa women. Another Plate-16-i&ii similarly presents exuberance in figural forms of curves and bends of kilalongai in a nara, which is exclusively a garment of the fair sex.

Running line of shang-khorla-khum used to embellish the cloth along other running lines of motifs may have its source in the hill ridges. Trans-
verse movement of lines, cross-hatching mostly present diagonal progression of motifs when set in order are some of the significant features of the process of ornamentation in Tiwa textile. The weavers eyes to create patterns basically seem to have rested on the angularity of forms rather than on lyrical curves. *Phadum-par* also called *phutumpar* (lotus) is such a motif which is rendered like a diamond of exquisite beauty (Plate. 34).

**Structural Design:**

Dr. Majumdar has classified under the head of structural designs those artifacts and material objects which the people used in daily life and adopt them for ornamentation in textile. She observed that brick, awl, earring, nose ring, button, watch, serrated edge of a sickle or saw, arrow, aeroplane and hand fan have found expression as structural motifs in the tribal textile of Assam. The textile of the hill Tiwas are rich in ornamentation in structural designs. The objects which inspired them to develop the designs are mainly arrow, aeroplane, water vessel,, sitting stool, dented sickle, hand fan, handkerchief, paper both lease paper and writing paper, thread winding contrivence, silver coins and wine-pot and the wine strainer.

The arrow motif is called *pla-khum*. The number of pick is 82. Plate-27 presents the motif being hedged by dented sickle on all four sides. One of the significant motif is the kip meaning a hand fan. It is compact in form with colour intoxicating to the eyes. The motif is used to decorate the sash in *a thongali* as well as in a *paguri* (cloth used as turban). The motif of a hand-fan is also popular among the Dimasa-Kacharis and the Karbis besides the non-tribal Assamese. The Dimasas call it *kichipmin* (*kichip* = fan and *min* = a pattern). The execution of the motif differs in technique between the Tiwas and the Dimasas. The Dimasa motif can be made small or big in accordance with the increase and decrease in the number of dots representing floral motifs that exist in the blades.
Plate. 13 demonstrates the motif in a thongali.

The dents or the dented sickle called khaji-haso is another significant motif which is used to hedge another motif on all around.

Rath-khum is a conventional portrayal of an aeroplane. Plate- 27 presents a part of the sash in a phalisa. Rath-khum is rendered to decorate the border of the cloth. The execution is interesting for the movement in the motif.

The motif called khunguri-khot is derived from the sitting stool where the khunguri, the princess, sits. Lotha-khilang-kanthi is another structural design which represents the bottom of a water vessel called lotha (lota in Assamese). Sariki or siriki is a contrivance made for winding threads. The Assamese equivalent of the motif is chereki. The thaga-mor presents the symbol of silver coins. It is worth mentioning that silver coins were used in making the ornament called thoga-lo.

The Tiwa women brew wine for domestic use as well as for offering to gods. Wine is necessary on all social occasions and in the celebration of dance and festivals. People of high status in the hierarchy of social leadership are served with gourd shell of wine. The hill Tiwas cultivate a variety of gourd which is bitter in taste. Gourds of various sizes are used as pots for drinking wine. The gourd vessels bear great socio-religious significance. The Tiwa women depict the gourd vessel tran-khelang-khum and the wine strainer in their cloths. Plate-22 presents a lady’s wear, the sash of which is adorned with wine pots and the strainer. Handkerchief called mukhshowa is rendered like a horizontal bar in a piece of nara worn by women on special occasion (Plate-36-i).

The Tiwa weavers have developed new motifs and used them in the ornamentation of cloths. Sidi-lai and phada-lai are two new motifs. Lai denotes a leaf in both Tiwa and Dimasa language. Sidi denotes a written
letter. The motif bears the impression of a leaf containing writing. On the other hand, the motif *phada-lai* denotes a lease paper. Plate-17-ii depicts the motifs one each on either half of the cloth.

There are some running lines which are used to distinguished different coloured areas in the frinze. Such a line is called *tobol*, and each *tobol* is named after the colour it is made of. For example, *koja-tobol* denotes that the colour of the running line is red while *khojam-tobol* stands for the black divider. Another distinguishing line is called *tokhra*. It serves as a sitting pedestal for the patterns. It is related to religious practices. In invoking a deity inside a room in a household the worshippers are given a *tokhra* to sit, because all other types of sitting devices are forbidden at the time of worship except it. A bamboo piece equal in size of the room is splitted into two in order to make the sitting arrangements for the invitees. Each splitted piece is a *tokhra*.

**List of motifs used to decorate the cloths:**

6. Phaguri (old cloth on muga silk): Kip-khum, kip-tar.