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Contemporaneity of the Folk:
Northeast Indian Crafts

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This paper addresses the traditional craft practices, including textiles, of the North-East of India in their functional, aesthetic, and semantic aspects. These aspects are studied in the historical and cultural contexts of the diverse communities. This entails an encounter with the inevitable forces of urbanisation and modernisation and the changes consequent upon the encounter. Besides these, the inter-ethnic co-mingling has effected changes where the meanings are. These meanings are yet not separate from their traditional symbology but still burgeoning urban awarenences make them an 'open' class and they accommodate significant other realities which inform their practices. This is facilitated by the co existence of the folk and the modern in the area where folk traditions are still vitally alive. The intent is to explore possibilities for fresh insights for modern technology- aided practices, which will be exploited to reinvigorate the traditional ones.

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We are concerned here more with connections than priorities, even though to trace the journeywork from functionality to aesthetic concerns still remains a challenging affair. After all, meaning or understanding meaning is a practical everyday necessity as it is an analytic concern for researchers. 'Researchers must share the meaning and conventions of their object domain in order to develop a second-order scientific interpretation...[which] may become constitutive of daily life'. [Alexander and Seidman, 1990] I share the life-world that I am studying, that of the communities of the Northeast of India. This region of the Seven Sisters, as it is popularly known, is further enriched now by the entry of Sikkim, a former kingdom within India. There is a veritable salad-bowl of communities here, in all of the constituent states of Assam, Arunachal, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, and Tripura. Specifically, the North East has experience of varied ethnic existences with community specific culture, tradition, custom, rituals, etc. I feel, there is enough scope to explore this area, to identify the common and specific features that can be used as elements in the context of contemporary design. Present day design based on specific elements like form, shape & size and colour ([fig 1](#)) enact the graduation of the native artifacts that we had already referred to. The vitality of ethnic forms and their unabashed functionality can make room for the inherently aesthetic items of present day urbane décor.

Kula used in winnowing and the creel (Khaloi) ([fig 2](#)) to store the day's catch of fish are efficient in their function and had always been. However, even though no sophistication in technique and form is forthcoming. Its semantics, functions have changed and they are now part of an urban drawing room décor. From this trained dancer ([fig 3](#)) the stylized design lampshade is mass-produced, in the case of traditional Assamese implements or utility items the form, the material, the technique and the structure remain rigorously traditional but their functions and meanings are being radically transformed with a change of context. In their original context they still serve the traditional function.

This itinerary is necessary not only for the native artifacts in that they may survive in an alien milieu but it can, equally adroitly, give a fresh lease of life to emaciated modern mass produced crafts which are often seen to adorn insensitive walls. However, the knowing elite often chooses right and traditional/ ritualistic items, which would not have survived otherwise, can exploit the unwarranted patronage and create its own private space.

Most of the original art, craft and artifacts representing NE culture are preserved in museum; some are still available in private antique collections. The rich tribal tradition is on the verge of extinction due to many influences of modern civilizations. Still its essence is alive in the works and practices of the contemporary life of the region.

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There are over 150 communities in the region and they have their own language, mores, beliefs, and rituals. The Assamese and the Manipuris had always had their own script while the others made do with either the Assamese script or the Roman. Some are using Devnagari now. Assamese had served as the link language till some thirty years when the whole area was virtually one political unit. The faiths of the people range from Animism to Buddhism but the process of Hinduisation inevitably informs all. The unity and integration of the diverse peoples in the Assam valleys came primarily not through religion but through the secular festival of Bihu or Spring Festival. All the communities in the valley have their own version of it though they are variously called and celebrated. The various harvest festivals are another meeting point. The other rites and rituals of the communities are distinct without really being separate and they afford connections. The hill communities within and outside Assam offer a differently arresting spectacle as they had lived in long isolation. Some are isolated even now. Another unifying factor is the brewing of rice beer, a commonality encountered all over the region.

All such occasions demand special artefacts. All events have allied rituals. The purely functional and utility items gain exclusivity as they are hallowed by tradition. Some areas are a preserve of the initiated and the professionals. They become a closed class. They are not to be tempered with, items in magic rituals for instance. The Mising community of the plains of Assam, for instance, have priestly chants that they call Mibu: A bangs, which are only traditionally handed down and even the priests cannot take any liberties with them. Their Oi-Ni: toms, on the other hand, are a species of folk music and they can accommodate all changing realities with aplomb. Some survive only as unmeaning gestures, as shadows, and modern researches into them have sometimes succeeded in retrieving lost meanings. They, therefore, cease to have little cognitive hold on their performers and audiences.

I have chosen to illustrate the craft practices of the region with the Missing and Karbi ethnic communities and the mainstream Assamese from Assam, the Angami from Nagaland, the and Jaintia from Meghalaya, Monpa and Nisi from Arunachal.

My choice is not necessarily arbitrary, as I want to underline living traditions to show the process of accommodation, translation, and transformation, on the one hand, and to make predictive propositions for the future on the other. The availability of materials has also been a factor.

Some of these are preserved only historically and ethnographically but others are vibrant and vitally alive. It is these, which I explore and exploit not only in my own work but also from the perspective of the technologically equipped design syndrome. This entails a study of pan-Indian symbology and the still burgeoning Northeastern motifs. The functional-aesthetic imperatives of the folk arts and crafts of the region reflect an abiding community and it is there that we have to trace the sources of the motifs. The sources of culture are always local; there are no trans-local sources. The passage from the local to the universal is, therefore, natural and that is how the modern adventure is informed, through a lively, imaginative interest in the past and its complex continuity. This translation and transformation would interest any artist or designer and this, I believe, cannot only be illustrated with the arts and crafts of the region but they yield insights and ideas to facilitate the inter-active process.

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In the Northeast of India the folk and the contemporary coexist, each sustaining and transforming the other. This routine interface traces the journeywork from functionality to abstraction while maintaining the rooted character of the crafts of the communities, which ensures its own distinctive identity. The rich diversity of arts, crafts and music of the area with its multi ethnicity provides us with fresh spectrum of colours, motifs, sounds and designs ensconced in materiality-in objects and figures. This exploration of the possible transformations in the proposed modern adventure of colours and motifs in designs empowered by historical and ethnographic studies of the extant and continuing arts and crafts of the communities of the area is already making inroads into traditional bastions.

The communities have specific colour and form preferences that vary in different geo-physical conditions and in different seasons. The black and red stripes of the Nagas are almost uniform but the motifs they work into their fabric are strictly hierarchical as, Rajasthani women can be identified with their black barfi-bandhni and Rajasthani men with their coloured headgear. Specific practices followed by a community are, more often than not, identity specific and form a culture and with retainment and changes in time make a tradition. Geographic locations and environmental variations obviously influence the process to give them the values the community will continue to uphold. These religious and ritual practices protect the character of a society.

The phenomenon of ethnic culture, in almost its entirety, is tied to beliefs, myths and legends that give them a sense of an abiding community.

'Human intelligence begins with conception, the prime mental activity; the process of conception always culminates in symbolic expression. A conception is fixed and held only when it has been embodied in a symbol. So the study of symbolic forms offers a key to the forms of human conception. The genesis of symbolic forms - verbal, artistic, mathematical, or whatever modes of expression there be- is the odyssey of the mind.'

In Indian tradition colour used as symbol while practicing rituals such as Red colour symbolized Shakti and Green is a symbol of fertility. But in Northeastern textiles, as in the shawls from the Misings and the Karbis, black is the hue of the damsel who has come of age. Ritual symbols to perform certain rituals in Naga and Mizo culture. They use human and animal skulls, bones and horns as their symbolic representation with different colour applications ([fig 4](#))

An exploration with refined and contemporary application of traditional elements, direct application of features symbol Extract/Exploration of elements for contributing to contemporary design ([fig 5](#))

A myth is no more and no less than an explanatory account, which may or may not be historically accurate, but seeks to give ultimate significance to some event. Myths are the product of man's unceasing effort to interpret meaningfully the world around him. This is further evidence of the contention that man cannot live for very long without meaning. Some of the constituent states of the Northeast of India are almost hundred per cent Christian. So, let me illustrate this with an instance from the Bible. The Tower of Babel shows in simple fashion the multiplicity of languages that the Amorites (later to be the Hebrews) encountered in their travels.

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Craft practices in the Northeast of India have throughout history and legend been exploiting traditional motifs maintained through rites and rituals giving distinct identities to diverse ethnic communities. The rigours of town and city living and the pressures of market economy are invading the customarily sacrosanct spaces. Their realms are no longer inviolate. Consequently, these motifs are changing while remaining true to the original impulses. (fig 6) The traditional rhombus of the Bodos travels to the apparel of the Misings unobtrusively because of the continuing admixture and yet the dress is unmistakably Mising in its colour texture. Jiban narah, a Mising poet, says it in verse:

Right after birth/ grand mother had ducked me in the green/ my mother picked me up/ from among the yellow/ the motley threads led me on my path/ as the reels gobbled up their length/ till I reached the black/ the black soaks through my soles/ and now, in the blue/ my lips merge with another/ two vital waves/ the dappled waves of the threads/ will slowly lead me on to the red/ once I am ducked in the red/ there's no coming back then.

A love song is a love song in any language, but the Karbis, as the story of Sher-di-hun tells us a love colour is also equally unmistakable in its urgent message. The girl weaves a shawl to tell of her love and her colours are received and apprehended in the spirit it was meant. This is the process of abstraction, which was present even then, may be inchoately, without the blessings of digital precision. In Assam they predominantly use white with red ornamented borders, which is perhaps natural in the land of the Mother Goddess as red is not only a symbol of shakti, it also, at the same time, serves as an auspicious mark, of fertility, strength, and well-being. The Nagas, like most other ethnic communities use primary colours, e.g., Black, red and white, not only because they are close to nature as they are actually immersed in it, but because they extract all their colours from nature both physically and metaphorically as the Bodos: Use yellow, green and black. The Monpas and the Sardkpens from Arunachal, being of the Buddhist dispensation, exploit secondary colours, as they use them more ideationally than naturally. The Maroon-yellow of the Buddhists is not only a pan-Indian phenomenon but also a global Buddhist reality. Non-Buddhist Arunachalies, exploit both primary and secondary colours in their apparels of Green and yellow because they cannot deny the proximity to Buddhist mores. (fig 7) Karbi: Red and black stripes etc.

Traditional ornaments, of Naga, Mniपुरi, Karbi and other tribes of NE are mostly vibrant and beautiful in terms of colour application and designs (fig 8).

Interchanging ideas and know-how transfer enrich the concept of universality. Selective

absorption not only underlines the imperatives of exchange but also sometimes offers scope for rejuvenating old ideas and thus can set new trends rolling. . Because of fast communication and exchange of information and material there is a constant struggle to

expand beyond given parameters coupled with the inherent urge to keep

the identity inviolate. A balance is often arrived at. For this when we are absorbing

significant elements from other cultures, we need to know our own. Who are we, where we come from, what was our struggle to become what we now at present are; we need to know our roots, which are often in our accessible history.

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When the trained designer or steps in with his experimentation, he effects certain modifications through abstractions and items are made to fit into the changed functionalities. Use of colour and form on the wall of houses in rural India is an essential and day-to-day activity, for performing rituals and simple house decoration. [\(Fig 9\)](#)

The intrepid Naga male had had many a human head up his totem pole during the head-hunting days of the recent past, but mithun or bison horns equally asserted themselves in his house decorations. The motifs and the manner here are so akin to the African masks and other non-functional artefacts from the south of the dark continent that they had figured in Picasso's imagination and had educated his insight while arriving at the radically new Cubism. [\(Fig 10\)](#)

The folk is an infinitely self-sustaining area and can face and accommodate holistic changes of material, shape, form and colour. And in the process not only the aesthetics but the semantics also change radically.

There are various private and state centres now for the diffusion of knowledge and expertise. The artisans of the community are taught modern finishing skills and hitherto unknown methods of treating the traditional material make them not only durable but also commercially viable. Cane and bamboo furniture of the region get sophistication in the process that will make them endure. The rugged native artefact becomes aesthetically more attractive as well as more diversely functional. This working together of traditional artists and modern technologically equipped personnel on locally available material has also been promoted and encouraged in the Design department of the Indian Institute Technology Guwahati. The local traditional worker often tends to fall back on his native resources if he finds the going tough or if he somehow gets threatened. He is reassured when the basic elements do not change and he does not feel that the whole thing is an alien aggression. The Department of Design, IITG, conducts workshops imparting necessary training to the traditional craftsmen of various localities in utilising their skills through newer technology. The process involves digital technology to enhance the possibilities of refinement of traditional motifs. In such workshops, the traditional craftsmen get an opportunity to internalize the digital techniques and give their crafts and products a fresh look with the help of their traditional expertise. The designers (craftsmen) are basically traditional artisans, trained and equipped with modern technology.

The contemporary designers, after their design education at professional schools return to their native places and explore the possibilities of modifying the craft products with the use of recent technologies.

The folk and contemporary find many linkages. They changed their semantics, functions, and techniques, which are after transformed and translated to meet different functional needs. As the modern or the contemporary draws from the folk and the folk is also informed and reinvigorated by the encounter. This is the process of completion and the journeywork involves abstractions at different level. Abstraction has always been a human prerogative, which we had first encountered in the cave paintings [\(fig 11\)](#) where there was a change of the medium and a delimitation of dimensions. The same process is now added by technology and digital efficiency. This process will continue to enrich the global craft scene when we are concerned with an aware of the sources, the faiths and the symbology of the peoples whose practices we address.

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Author's biography

Academic background :

M.F.A, Visva-Bharati University, Santiniketan, India

Experience & Achievement :

- Since 1979 he has been exhibiting his works at most of the major art galleries in India.
- Apart from his career in Art & Design he has been associated with regional films as an art director.
- In 1997 he worked in the film 'Wosobipo' (the spring) as an art director, which won the national award in 1990 and has entered Berlin International film festival in 1991 and Friburg International film festival in 1992.
- Included his work titled ' A butterfly was passing by' in 'Glimpses of Indian Art from 1947-97' a book published by AIFACS in the occasion of 50 years of art in independent India, inaugurated by H.E. Sri K.R. Narayanan president of India in 1998.
- Included his name in the dictionary of 'Modern Art and Artists' of India compiled by Pratima Seth a well-known art historian. .
- Life member of Kamrupa Anushandhan Samiti (a research society), Assam since 1990.

Exhibitions:

Participated in over 35 major exhibitions in India including National Exhibition of Art, New Delhi. AIFACS, New Delhi. Academy of Fine Arts, Calcutta. Birla Academy, Calcutta. Jahengir Art Gallery, Mumbai. Bharat Bhavan, Bhopal etc.

Awards:

Art Fest National Award 1997. AIFACS, State Level Award. 1997. Fellowship awarded by Ministry of Human Resources, 1998.

Area of Interest : Basic Design, Crafts, Illustration, Digital Art, Colour symbology, History of Art & Design, Visual Language etc.

Area of research : Indianness in Art and Design, Traditional art and artifacts of Northeast India, and Semantics of form and colour symbology.

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Fig 1
Refined contemporary artifacts from North East

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Fig 2

Khaloi and Kula changed its traditional function to lampshades

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Fig 3
Lampshade



Fig 4
Human and animal skulls used
for rituals



Fig 5
Contemporary design
of a lampshade



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Figs 6a and 6b
Bodo and Missing dress

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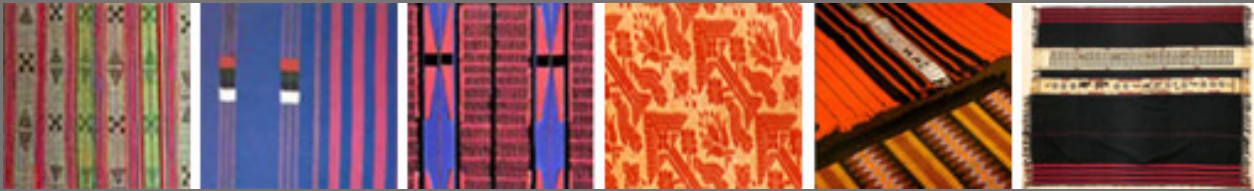


Fig 7
Textiles of North East

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Fig 8, 8a and 8b
Traditional ornaments of North East

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Fig 9
House decoration

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Fig 10a
Naga sculpture



Fig 10b
Picasso's imagination



Fig 11
Cave Painting

Fig 1



Fig 2



Fig 3



Fig 4



Fig 5



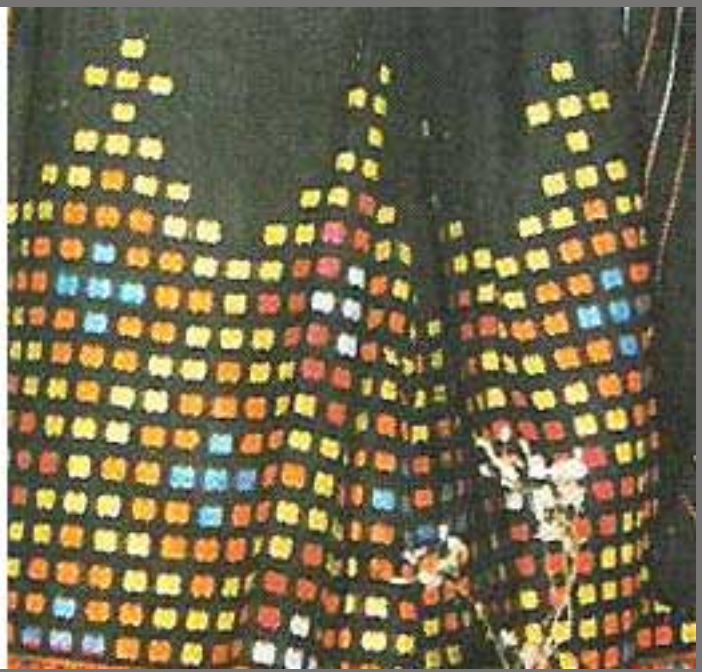
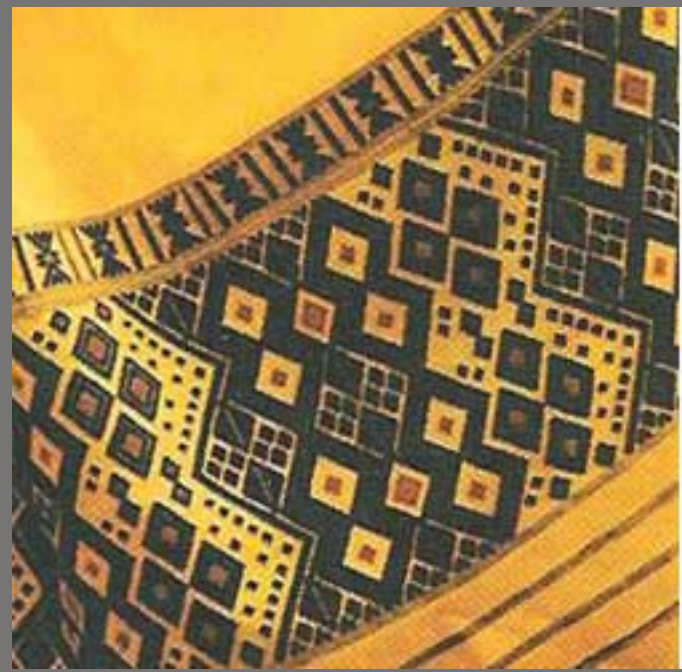


Fig 7



Fig 8



Fig 8a



Fig 8b



Fig 9



Fig 10a



Fig 10b



Fig 11

