

The Costume Culture of Manipur

Author: Devraj

The author is a former Professor and Dean of the School of Translation and Interpretation at Mahatma Gandhi International Hindi University, as well as a former Professor of Hindi at Manipur University. He has spent the greater part of his academic career in Manipur and possesses a deep understanding of Northeast India, its people, and its culture.

Like its cultural traditions, dance, music, martial arts, casteless social system, theatre, and literature, the clothing culture of Manipuri society is also unique and sublime. Religious rituals, which began around the fourth century BC, according to the story given in the book 'Panthoibi Khonggul' about 'Lai Haraoba' (Lai = deity, Haraoba = to please / to be), Goddess Panthoibi's in-laws play a trick to humiliate her. The father-in-law pretends to be dead and lies down like a corpse, while the mother-in-law defames her free-spirited daughter-in-law, calling her a licentious woman, who does not

care for the sick, does not take care of the house, and roams around shamelessly. To expose her father-in-law's charade, Goddess Panthoibi inserts a tarengyot (spindle used in a spinning wheel) into his nose, causing her to call him 'Maiya Hi'. Saying this he sits up. According to the legend of Panthoibi, she was the one who stitched cloth for the first time, using a needle made of wood. This same legend also mentions the gift of a 'Namanga' (shawl) to Goddess Panthoibi by a deity named 'Kaibu'. In the folktale titled 'Khuyol Haoba and Yaithid Konu', popular in the Meitei community, Konu

throws a shawl into the hut where Khuyol is hiding. He comes out covering his body with it and a love relationship develops between them. Another folktale, In 'Sangba Naha Lamanganba Aur Khamanung Konu' the heroine gifts dhoti-kurta to the hero.

As long as the monarchical system prevailed in Manipur, the state alone had control over any sambal tree growing in the courtyard or field of any citizen. Even, if necessary, the person could not sell or cut it without royal permission. The state also had control over the cotton produced from these sambal trees. It was used to make clothes and other items for the royal family. This sambal cotton also served as a means of raising funds for the treasury. For this purpose, the king appointed a special officer who collected the cotton, sold it in the market, and deposited the proceeds in the treasury.

One of the traditions that distinguished Manipuri social structure was that if a girl did not know the art of textile weaving, her marriage was hindered. Along with textile weaving skills, dancing skills were also considered a socio-cultural qualification for a Meitei girl to marry. This practice persisted until the latter half of the twentieth century. Since ancient times, every Manipuri household had a handloom, where women wove cloth. With the advent of the market system, the buying and selling of textiles began. 'Lakshmi Bazaar' in central Imphal is still famous for the sale of handloom textiles made by Manipuri women.

It sells both simple and exclusive garments, and items ranging from mosquito nets to attractive cotton garlands.

These few facts reveal that the art of textile manufacturing had developed in Manipur society as early as prehistoric times. As a cultural discipline, this art found its place in areas such as religion, social rituals, specialized disciplines, and daily life. The diversity that emerged in textile manufacturing to fulfill these related purposes can be termed a "textile and apparel culture."

Clothing Culture: Religious and Spiritual Perspectives

Manipuri society is deeply religious. The most ancient ritual is known as "Lai Haraoba." The primary performer is called "Maibi."

Ancient Manipuri texts refer to this figure as "Konjai Charai Phi Shetpi Khabi." This indicates that her attire was white. She wore a distinctive kurta, a "phanek" (lungi-like garment) as undergarment, and a skirt-like garment over it, the lower edges of which were decorated with tassels. She wore a cloth sash around her waist. A string of thread adorned her neck, along with a string of beads. A modern change is that the lower portion of the Maibi's skirt-like garment is now decorated with deep brown, black, and white stripes, and the skirt is also colored (red, maroon, or yellow). The colorfully bordered scarf is folded and draped over the left shoulder, with

both ends tied to a feather on the right armpit. The feather of the Maibi, a kurta made of the special Khamen Chatpa fabric, has also become colorful. Manipuri folk instruments, The character playing the 'Pena', 'Pena Khodba', He wears a dhoti called a 'khamen chatpa' and a green silk shirt (like a bush shirt with a round collar). The dhoti, printed with dark copper-colored curved line motifs on a white background, is called a 'khamen chatpa'. It is said that other participants in the Lai-Haraoba ritual include men wearing a white dhoti, kurta, and chadar. The folded chadar rests on the right shoulder, with both ends tied to the left armpit. A white kachhni is tied around the waist. All women wear the "mapan naiba phanek, "a pink lotus-colored shawl. Adults wear a phanek over their chest, a yellow cloth tied around their waist, a white blouse, and a dupatta of the same color. Young women's kurtis are green or red (silk), and their dupatta is white. Young girls' kurtis are similar in color to those of young women, but they do not use dupattas.

The second major religious ritual in terms of costume and decoration is the Raas-lila. In the Manipuri Raas-lila, Krishna wears a yellow coral dhoti. He wears a crown and a semi-circular head ornament called Kajenglai, adorned with a peacock feather. Krishna wears a Vaijayanti and a beaded necklace around his neck. A waistcoat is tied around his waist, and a flute graces his hands. Krishna's beloved Radha wears a half-sleeved green silk blouse-like kurta and a "potloi" (kumin) as

undergarment. Over this, she uses a cloth as a “kachni.” Radha wears a transparent shawl that covers her chest, head, and waist. This is called “koktumbi.” She wears earrings, bangles, rings and many types of necklaces and applies alta to decorate her feet. The gopis of Raasleela wear red coloured potloi (kumin) and green coloured kurti. Their other decorations are similar to that of Radha. The master of this ritual, Mapan Naiba Phanek, wears white kurti and a sheet of the same colour along with necklace, bangles and ear rings etc. Mridang players use white dhoti-sheet.

A very important ritual of the Gaudiya Vaishnava sect is the Gaura Lila. In it, Gauranga Mahaprabhu (also known as Nimai, Sri Krishna Chaitanya, Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, etc.) wears a yellow dhoti, a green silk shirt, and a velvet garment decorated with sequins and stars (similar to Krishna’s waistcoat) around his waist. He wears a cotton necklace and strings of pearls around his neck. In this ritual, female characters named Shachi and Mailani wear green silk shirts and a Ghagra or a modern dress, similar to a midi, as undergarment, called a Chamar. It is said that their shawl is light spring-colored and

encircles the waist with a shiny waistcoat. In the Gauri Lila, a character named Mishra wears a white dhoti-shirt, a light yellow or earthy turban, and a saffron-colored sheet. The Brahmin named Sukriti wears a saffron-colored dhoti-shirt. His sheet is also saffron, with “Hare Rama -Hare Krishna” printed on it.

Many other religious rituals are also prevalent in Manipur society, such as Goshtha-lila, Mandap-lila, Kaliya-daman, Pena, Lyrik Hayabathiba, Wari-liba, Phagi-lila, Khubak Ishai, etc. The costumes of these characters are as distinctive as those described in detail above in the context of some of the religious rituals. The costumes and decorations displayed in these rituals reflect the religious beliefs of Manipur society and its imagination regarding the characters associated with religion. The costumes worn by Maibi in “Lai Haraoba” are imbued with religious mysticism. Indeed, they present a thrilling sartorial interest between gods and humans. Similarly, the costumes of Radha-Krishna and the Gopis always leave a grand, supernatural impact. It is noteworthy that the

Rasleela traveled from Vrindavan to Manipur. In Vrindavan, it was under the control of the Gosains and Swamis, but upon reaching Manipur, it toned down the playful sentiments and promoted subtle spiritual experiences, thus adopting a completely unique form and taking the name “Manipuri Raasleela.” Costumes play a significant role in this transformation. The characters playing

Radha, Krishna, or the Gopis are considered to have transformed into incarnations during the disguise. Dr. Kapila Vatsyayan has acknowledged that the costumes adopted in Manipuri Raasleela are unique and possess a certain transcendental element. This demonstrates that the costumes of worldly beings and divine figures are not the same. These costumes are completely different from those of Braj Raas. (Traditional Indian Theatre: Infinite Streams, p. 110) This distinctiveness is a testament to the religious sartorial preferences of Manipuri society.

One wishes to see the role of social reality in the transcendental and spiritual aspects of this interest, one should pay attention to the costume of Nanda in the Goshtha-lila. Nanda wears a kurta called “Takliya” and a white dhoti. The sleeves of the Takliya kurta are wide and swing widely. He wears a yellow or red coral silk waistcoat. He wears a turban called “Rushet,” one end of which hangs down to the waist. His upper garment is also made of coral silk. The medieval Krishna-devotee poet Surdas addressed Nanda Baba as “Mahar.” “Mahar” said, “You two play, where will you go? / Counting the cowherd boys, you stay close to me.” He used this same address for Radha’s father, Vrishbhanu- “Listen, daughter Vrishbhanu, Mahar’, take Krishna and play/Sur, you will keep looking at Shyam, no one will tell about marriage. “The poet used “Mahari” as the feminine form of “Mahar” and addressed Yashoda with the same word. According to the dictionary, “Mahar” is “a respectful word, used especially in relation to landowners etc. “(Braj). Similarly, the word “Mahari” is used in relation to respectable women in Braj. (Sankhsht Hindi Shabd Sagar, published by Na. Pracha. S. Varanasi, page 803). It is clear that Nanda and Vrishbhanu were prominent landowners in the Braj region and possessed a feudal cultural

influence. Nanda's costume in the Goshtlila performance in Manipur reflects both these aspects, and it is also clear that as Krishna's foster parent, Nanda's authority also acquired a supernatural appeal. The same holds true for Yashoda.

Clothing Culture: A Social Perspective, festivals, and celebrations prevalent in Manipuri society can reveal social tastes regarding clothing. Marriage is the most important social ritual. Since ancient times, according to the original Meitei social system, or the "Sanamahi cultural stream," the groom wears a white dhoti, white kurta, and a white turban. The bride typically wears a green silk kurti (sometimes red) and a "mapanaiba phanek" as undergarment. This is called "thambal laikhok." This is an artistic garment

composed primarily of stripes of red, maroon, and black. Different combinations of these colors create phaneks with a variety of hues. Manipuri king, who lived in the second century AD, Since the time of Khuyoi Tompok, the border of this phanek began to be designed in a distinctive style. It was created as a strip with red dots on a dark brown background. According to experts of the Sanamahi cultural tradition, the marriage ceremony and the attire used in it have symbolic meaning. According to this tradition, the groom symbolizes the sun, while the bride symbolizes the earth. On the occasion of the marriage, the bride circumambulates the groom seven times, symbolizing the earth's revolution around the sun. The green color of the bride's kurti represents her fertility in imitation of nature. Similarly, the dots on the background and top of the border strip of the phanek worn by her symbolize the genitals. The important thing to understand here is that those associated with the Sanamahi tradition have given marriage both a social and personal dimension. The attire worn by the bride and groom, apart from the marriage rituals, indicates the social, religious and completely solitary-personal behaviour conditions of the Grihastha Ashram.

With the advent of the Vaishnavite cultural trend and its assimilation by the general public, wedding attire also underwent a change. The groom's attire remained the same: a white dhoti-kurta, chador, and turban. It was only observed that the royal class and those favored by the king began decorating their turbans with golden-hued brocade on the occasion of their wedding. This

was primarily a sign of dominance and social distinction, as well as the influence of aristocratic culture. This trend can be seen, to a greater or lesser extent, even today. A significant change in wedding attire occurred in the area of undergarments for the bride. A bride following the Vaishnavite tradition wears a green silk kurti and a garment called "Potloi" (Kumin) instead of "Phanek" (Phanek) as undergarment. It is made by folding cardboard into a cylindrical shape and covering it with silk. It is then decorated with dotted, square, or similar patterns. Zari is used for this, and sequins and stars are also used. The border of the Potloi is also very artistic, resembling a strip. A silk cloth is attached to the upper part of this cylindrical garment, with the help of which the girl wears the Potloi. Potloi with a red background is mainly used for wedding purposes. A transparent shawl, decorated with a white border, covers the back of the girl's head, back, and chest. The jewellery worn by the girl gives this attire a grand dignity.

in Raas originated during the reign of Rajarshi Bhagyachandra, a Manipuri king. Rajarshi Bhagyachandra (ascended between 1759 and 1763) holds a significant place in Manipur's history for his cultural achievements, more than his political ones. While he promoted the Gaudiya Vaishnavism of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, he also installed the Meitei deity Atiya Guru Shidaba in 1778. He also commissioned the construction of a statue of Sanamahi, the eldest son of the great sage Bhagyachandra. Bimbavati Manjari, daughter of this same king, Bhagyachandra (original name Maudidgu Chidthad Khomba), played the role of Sri Radhika in the first performance of the Raas and became famous as Manipur Meera. Once, Bhagyachandra Maharaja, defeated by the ruler of Ava (Burma), had to seek refuge with King Swargadeo of Tekhao (present-day Assam). By a stroke of chance, he had to tame a mad elephant to prove his true identity as Bhagyachandra. He accomplished this feat thanks to the vision and grace of Shri Govindji in his dreams. In that dream, he also promised to have an idol of Govindji constructed and consecrated. When he successfully regained his kingdom, he fulfilled his vow. In 1779, on Kartik Ekadashi, the idol of Shri Govindji was consecrated and the five-day long Raas

ceremony commenced. The form of this Raas is believed to be based on the image of Shri Krishna and Shri Radha in Bhagyachandra's dream. Radha's Potloi garment, later worn by the bride at her wedding, is

also a replica of this. Knowledge of this cultural tradition makes it clear that the Vaishnavite wedding attire prevalent in Manipuri society is a powerful example of the sublime integration of religious and social beliefs.

In Manipur, the fifth day of the wedding is celebrated as "Manani Chakkouba" (fifth wedding day meal). Men wear a dhoti, kurta, and a chadar (sheet). The kurta is usually made of silk or cotton, and the folded chadar draped over the shoulder is usually a woolen shawl. Women wear a blouse-like kurti in a color of their choice and a phige phanek (undergarment) made of coral silk. Adult women wear a chadar (sheet) elegantly. On this occasion, young girls wear phige and other types of phanek (pieces of cloth), a silk or cotton kurti, and a transparent shawl called "moirad-phi" (piece of cloth) as a dupatta.

'Bhai Dooj' is celebrated on Diwali in North India or 'Bhai Phota' in Bengal, Manipuri society celebrates 'Nindon-Chakkouba' (a feast for sisters). Brothers invite their married sisters for a meal and, upon their departure, gift them clothes and other items. Similar attire is worn on this occasion for Manani-Chakkouba. The attire for both occasions primarily reflects social festivity. At the same time, there is also an element of displaying material prosperity, as, in addition to clothing, a large quantity of gold jewelry is also used.

A form of attire popular in Manipuri society is seen during the Shraddha festival. Men wear a white dhoti-kurta, while women wear a white kurti and chador, along with a light pink phanek as undergarment. In ancient times, the seeds of a plant called "urirom" were used to prepare the dye. Nowadays, chemical dyes are used. Manipuri women wear this attire not only during Shraddha but also during public processions and sit-ins during mass movements.

As for the attire used in daily life, its traditional form reflects a divine aesthetic vision. The white dhoti-kurta is the common attire for men. Adults and elderly people wear a gamchha-like white cloth over their shoulders instead of the chador

worn on special occasions. Women wear the "mapan naiba phanek" (phanek with a border). They wear half of the modern sari, encircling a portion of it so that it passes over the shoulder and covers the chest. In common parlance, this garment is called the "half sari." Different types of the "mapan naiba phanek" are determined based on the color combinations. The one in which white, black and brown colours are predominant is called 'Loirang', the one in which brown, black and light blue colours are predominant is called 'Hawaimubi Mpal' and the one in which black and blue are predominant is called 'Langhau' Phanek. The Phanek called 'Kumshungbi' is prepared for goddess characters, in which black and white colours play a special role. Women decide the colour of the blouse or blouse-like kurti according to the natural interest of their respective age group. Unmarried girls give maximum emphasis on 'Moirad-Phi' as a scarf.

Clothing culture:

martial arts and sports: Martial arts and traditional Manipuri sports also exhibit distinctive clothing. On special occasions, martial artists wear a black dhoti that reaches the calves, a black kurta that reaches above the knees, and a black turban (called a mundasa in North India). The kurta is loose and half-sleeved. A red or black stripe runs through the middle of the turban, which is tied under the chin. Its purpose is to prevent the turban from falling off when jumping while wielding a sword, spear, or other weapon. The arms below the elbows are covered with protective armor, and the bare calves are wrapped with a stripe, the dominant color of which is red. A leather shield is held in one hand, and a weapon or weapon in the other. Players participating in the game of "Shagol Kadzai" (playing with a wooden ball while mounted on a horse, i.e., Manipuri Polo), believed to be created by the deity "Marjing," also wear similar attire to martial arts performers. The color of this attire varies according to the ethnic and social stratification of the Manipuri community. Contestants in Mukna (Manipuri wrestling) wear a dhoti that reaches above the knees and ties a folded cloth around their waist. Both men and women participate in "Kad," the only traditional Manipuri sport played in a covered arena. Male players wear a white dhoti and a sleeveless vest.

Women wear a mapan naiba phanek, a white chador or moirang-phi, and a blouse as desired. The attire used in the games is designed keeping in mind the nature of the sport. The horror of war can best be expressed through the color black, and violence and destructive spirit can also be personified through it. Therefore, participants in this game primarily wear black attire. On the other hand, in mythology and folklore, Kang is considered a game played by the gods. Naturally, it prioritizes purity, joy, and simple entertainment, along with an elegant artistic spirit. The costumes of its participants are also tailored accordingly. This is the case with other games as well.

Clothing culture: modern change, reaction and resistance: From the latter half of the twentieth century, the daily attire of Manipuri society began to be heavily influenced by Western clothing. Men began wearing pants and shirts, coats, and ties, while women, especially teenagers, adopted jeans and tops and various midi- frocks. Acquainted with the lifestyles of Punjabi and other regions of India, women also embraced the salwar-kurta and sari. A time came when it seemed as if Manipuri men and women were choosing their daily attire in competition with Paris, London, Mumbai, or Hollywood and Bollywood. The economically affluent class began to push the boundaries. This change created a huge consumer market for vibrant fabrics and shorts and shirts made from polyester and other synthetic fibers. A new elite also emerged in Manipuri society, occupying administrative offices connected to political power centers as well as economic power establishments, and adopting Western attire and lifestyles as the basis for social stratification. The use of everything from expensive imported shoes to expensive clothing, expensive hotels, and expensive modes of transportation became a sign of status. This marked the beginning of the economy's transition towards a capitalist sociology. A new materialistic sociology of clothing was developing as an integral part of this, in which the display of the female body became a common occurrence. The only consolation was that this new change did not penetrate the sphere of religious rituals and

social ceremonies. Except for the addition of the traditional white color to the attire of female figures like the Maibi in religious ceremonies, some other colors were added, and on occasions like weddings and Shradha, some men began wearing kurta-pyjama instead of the traditional dhoti and kurta. Such an impact of the glamour of the present era cannot be considered unnatural.

The tendency toward sexual display, which had begun to take root in everyday social life, sparked a fierce reaction in the last two decades of the twentieth century. Desperate to preserve their ethnic and cultural identity, those associated with the "Meitei Marup" movement saw not only modern clothing but also the use of salwar-kurta and sari as an attack of cultural imperialism. Consequently, demands arose for a ban on non-traditional Manipuri clothing. Some organizations sympathetic to the Meitei Marup movement even threatened to use force or social boycott. In the early years of the twenty-first century, demands for traditional clothing in schools also began to emerge. This widespread reaction was rooted in concerns for independent identity, as well as religious-cultural prejudices and hidden political reasons, the independent interpretation of which would be irrelevant here. It's worth noting here that this reaction didn't have the impact that status quoists might have hoped. A major reason for this was that the traditional clothing revolution was attempted to be imposed solely on women. Men didn't feel the need to

change their attire, they simply didn't think about it, or, due to patriarchal egotism, didn't consider it necessary. Women, especially adolescent girls, took aim at this characteristic duplicity of male society and, perceiving it as an attack on their freedom, continued to wear modern clothing in protest. Consequently, only those modern women who feared public humiliation by powerful organizations saw a change in their clothing and behavior. One reason for this was the mistake of implementing this entire change through the language of command. Had an ideological dialogue been adopted and the development of the local indigenous textile industry been seriously addressed, some hope for its success might have been possible. Whatever the case, this incident reveals the current state of male-female relationships, ideological turmoil, interaction,

and clothing culture in Manipuri society. We have solid grounds to believe that the clothing culture prevalent in Manipuri society reflects not only the traditional beliefs of the people here but also their relationship with modern civilization. Furthermore, this culture also expresses the personality of both society and individuals.
