

Textile art of the Taiphake: A descriptive study

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Abstract:

The textile activities of the different tribes of Assam have been considered as an art in folklore studies. The textile of the Taiphake tribe, who live in the East zone of Assam, also adds to reflect their distinct cultural identity. The Taiphakes are one of the six Tai originated tribes. The necessary clothes that needed in their day to day life are produced by themselves by *Ki hook* (weaving frame). They have peculiar way of producing raw material, colour, thread, and weaving of their own. Regarding population, there are about two thousand people and almost all of them use homemade clothes which also help them to be economically independent. An important feature of the Taiphake textile is that the colour varies according to the age of the people. In spite of their adherence to the tradition, modernity has brought some changes to textile culture of the Taiphake. An attempt has been made to discuss the textile system of the Taiphake including its dress, manufacturing method, weaving frame, colour in this paper.

Key words: 1. Textile, 2. Taiphake, 3. Raw materials, 4. Weaving, 5. Colour preparation.

Objective of the study:

- To give an introduction of the textile art of the Taiphake.
- To study the production of the raw materials, colours, threads, weaving methods and frame etc.

Importance and significance of the study:

- Study on the textile of the Taiphake is necessary in order to have a scientific study of the overall textile art.
- Such kind of study would help to revive various information related to the textile of the Taiphake which are on the way to be extinct.

Scope of the study:

The study is on the textile art of the Taiphake. It covers the cloths, methods, accessories of the weaving frame, and the way of preparing colour and so on.

Methodology:

For the introduction of the Taiphake textile, descriptive method and regarding the changes of the Taiphake textile, analytical method has been used. Field study is also an integral part of this study.

Introduction:

Cloth has been one of three primary needs in the human civilization, therefore, cloth and textile managed a place in the folklore studies as folk-art. The artistic ways of preparing and producing cloths can be regarded as textile art. So far as Assam is concerned, textile art embraces the making of clothes from the raw materials such as *pat*, *muga*, *eri*, cotton etc.

Assam is the land of tribes along with their unique culture. In this respect, like other art, each culture is endowed with their own textile system. Such distinct cultural elements have enriched the textile art of Assam. The Taiphake tribe, who live in the East zone of Assam, has been also maintaining their unique art of textile. They prepare the necessary cloths that needed in their daily life in *Ki hook* (weaving frame). They have also been reflecting their richness of culture by producing raw materials, colour, thread, etc. Having

given an introduction of the textile of the Taiphake, this paper proceeds to study the cloths, methods, accessories of weaving frame, and the way of preparing the colours.

General introduction of the Taiphake:

The Taiphake is a small tribe of Assam living only in about seven villages of Tinsukia and Dibrugarh district. Namphake, Tipamphake of Dibrugarh and Barphake, Man mo, Nong loi, Mung lang, Ning gam, and Pha neng are the villages where the Taiphakes have been living. It is written in their history 'Lik kho Moun' and genealogy 'Lik Kho Khon' that they entered into Assam from Hokong valley in 1775. They are also known as Phakeal or Phakial. The total amount of people living in both the districts is about two thousand. In spite of their life struggle, these people have also been maintaining their culture. According to the two books- Lik Khokhun and Lik Khomung, which have preserved the history of the Taiphake, the meaning of the word Phake is ('pha' means wall made of stone and 'ke' stand for old) ancient people living in the hilly area. With the passing of time, those hilly people started knowing as Phake. Geographical existence of the Phake kingdom was supposed to be existed in Hokong valley, nearby Patkai. Due to political predicament and social, economical and natural disaster they needed to cross Patkai and settle at Nangtau in Arunachal leaving their own kingdom. Later on, they scattered to the places of Assam where they are currently living for various reasons.

The Taiphake practises Buddhism. The prevailing language among the Taiphake is Phake which belongs to Thai-chin or Shyam-chin from the China-Tibetan family. It is a tone centric language and its front is Phake front. Physically, the Taiphakes are tall, colour of the skin is generally fair, tiny eyes, and characteristics features of the Mongolian are conspicuous.

The cloths of the Taiphake and the weaving methods:

The Taiphake used handmade cloths in their daily life. Usually the females take active part in the weaving. They produced the cloths using the treads prepared from *eri*, *muga*, cotton etc. But nowadays, apart from silk, other threads available in market such as wool, polyester, filament etc have been used. Using the traditional 'ki hook', they prepared the cloths according to their need. Among them, the major dresses used by the male are *phanung* (lungi), *phahu* (turban), *pha-kong-kho* (similar to towel), *souh* (shirt), *pha phouk* (seleng) and the dress belongs to female are *chin* (mekhela), *nangwat* (cloth wore in breast), *pha phok* (dress used by the unmarried girl), *nangwat pojung* (used during marriage), *chyu* (shirt), *thung mok* (bag) etc.

It is through the dress, married and unmarried female can be recognised. Married female usually wear *nangwat* at the breast while the unmarried one uses *pha pho*. The remarkable aspect of the dress of the Taiphake is that the dresses vary according to the age of the people. Elderly people start using dense colour with the age. Blue, red, yellow, pink etc have been used by the youths and the newly married girls. On the other hand, old people wore comparatively less sparkling dresses. Having no separate dress code for the widow is another important aspect of the Taiphake.

Different methods of the weaving of the Taiphake are discussed below:

Phanung (lungi): *Phanung* is worn at the waist and it covers from waist to ankle. *Pha* means cloth and *nung* means big that is the biggest cloth worn by the Taiphake is the *Phanung*. It is made in the traditional weaving frame (ki hook) using wool and *muga* thread. Regarding the length and breadth, *phanung* can be compared to *lungi*. Parallel to the *ki hook*, they prepare a woof and thus make it eligible to wear combining numbers of woof. It is needed to sew four woofs to create a *phanung*. The cloth is prepared with various *garis* (a *gari* is a design in the shape of a line) of various colourful threads such as black, white, yellow, green, violate etc. The joining points of the *garis* itself create a *buta* (another design in the shape of an addition mark). Usually a *buta* is white or light yellow. In the festivals the youth wear the *phanung* of a

mixing colour of white and violate and for the older people, it is made of mixing black, violate, green, and white threads.

Pha-kong-kho: *Pha-kong-kho* is usually worn by the male. There are two types of *pha-kong-kho*- one is with *gari* with the colours like yellow, chocklet, green and blue and another is with small *gari* the colours such as blue, brown black, green, violate etc. The old people use the *pha-kong-kho* which has *gari* in woof. Generally a *pha-kong-kho* is made of cotton, wool or *muga* thread. At both the edges of the *pha-kong-kho*, a flowery designed is made. The breadth of a *pha-kong-kho* is about one and half feet and is made in weaving frame with one woof. The length might be from one to two metres.

Phahu: *Phahu* is the symbol of status for the male of the Taiphake. Elderly men use to wear *phahu* on the head. Elderly female also cover their head with white cotton or pat sheet. The *phahu* used by the male is made of mixing different colours such as white, yellow, green, blue etc. It needs about two meter long and one and half meter wide cloth to have the *phahu* used by the youths.

Pha-phouk: It is a borderless cloth weaved with cotton threads that worn by both male and female. Regarding the size, it is about one and half feet wide and three to four metre long and at edge of a *pha phouk* flowery designs are made. Although, unmarried women usually wear it, the elderly people also use in various festivals. It hangs on the left shoulder under right hand letting one side to hand at the front. Unmarried women use it on *japi sou* (a shirt like dress) making it three or four folds. In order to enhance the beauty, flowery designs are also portrayed at the mid of the *pha phouk* with golden threads.

Chin: The most important dress used by Taiphake female is the *chin*. It covers from waist to ankle. Although, the *chin* was prepared by *muga* and wool, nowadays, it is weaved by common threads of polestar, filament etc that available in the market. The weaver makes the *muga* threads eligible for *chin* colouring them naturally. They use green, pink, yellow, violate, black, white, brown for this purpose. For the small *chin*, *kokal bonda sal* (the frame, where human waist is connected to the frame to weave) is used. There are three parts of a *chin*. The upper part is called *kho-ma* and is finished with green, pink, yellow, violate, green, black, white and pink successively. The lower part is named as *tin-sin* which is two centimetre wide. The top portion which is bound to the waist is regarded as *hou-chin*. There is no specific design for the *chin*. The weaver makes them beautiful with their efficiency combining different colour of threads. The remarkable feature of this piece is that only black colour is used while weaving the wrap. The *chin* varies according the age. Newly married and young women wear silver and onion and green, black and silver is weaved for the elder.

Nngwat: *Nangwat* is worn by the married women and regarding measurement it is one metre wide and three metre long. It is weaved in *kokal bandha sal* with two woofs. With iron stick, various colours like black, yellow, green, white, red, violate are used in every one inch. Earlier, the Taiphake seamstress weaved *nangwat* only from *muga* using natural colour, but in present time wool, filament and other threads that available in the markets have been used. *Dohi* (*dohi* is a design in which the remaining threads at the edges are tied separately) are made at the edges of a *nangwat*. Although, *nangwats* are made of various colours, the elder women wear violate and dense green and yellow and red are used the newly married.

Nangwat pojung: *Nangwat pojung* is used as *methoni* (a way of covering the breast of a woman) by the bride. Generally, it is weaved by *muga* threads. Both the length and breadth are equal and flowery design is portrayed at the front. *Nangwat pojung* is comparatively brighter than the *nangwat*. Out of various colours, white, and pink, golden seems to be the major among them.

Chou or chy: A *chy* or *chou* is similar to shirt worn by both male and female according to age. In the earlier time, the Phake weaver produced *chy* using the *kokal bondha sal*. But at the present time, various modern shirts available in the market are conspicuous among them. The elder use cotton or *muga* made *chy*

which are usually white and the male wear the *chyu* commonly prepared from the colourful cloth such as white, black, red, yellow, violate, green, pink etc.

Thung mok: *Thung mok* is a bag that hangs at the shoulder. It regarded as respectable object by the Phake. The Phake weaver designs the *thung mok* imitating the birds, natural scenery, animals etc. They prepare the design with their hand, using their efficiency and indigenous techniques and use red, yellow, black, green, white etc while making this traditional bag. Polyester, filament, wool etc have been used instead of *muga* and *pat*. It is about one to one and half feet long that could be hanged on shoulder. Raw materials might have been changed but the tradition regarding the size and the shape is still continuing.

Weaving frame of the Taiphake and the accessories:

Weaving frame is related to the cultural life of the Taiphake. The female have been satisfying the demands of the family by the cloths produced in the *ki hook*. By producing the cloths in the weaving frame, the Taiphake women achieve economical independence to a great extent to the family. Mostly, keeping the tradition the Taiphake, the women have been producing the cloths in *kokal bandha sal*. In this method, smaller cloth could be weaved. In the framed, one and half feet wide cloth can be weaved. Waist is connected to the threads with an instrument made of the skin of deer. Moving the two series of arranged threads up and down, with the *maku* (an instrument where some threads are furnished to wave the breadth) the cloths are weaved. It is noted that, this weaving system has only one *goroka* (a piece if bamboo which is connected to the arranged threads with a piece of string with which the arranged threads are pulled up and down.)

The weaving frame of the Taiphake is known as *ki hook*. There are about fifty two to fifty seven accessories to the frame. These are made of bamboo, wood, skin of deer, phragmites etc. Name of the some of the accessories used in the weaving frame is given bellow:

Taifake	English
Kounkak	Bobbin hanger
Kounpan	Spinning Wheel
Louwat	Pirn
Tanw	Shuttle
Tam hang	Bobbin
Banbeyan	Large Sweft
Kounkhya	Sweft hanger
Phum	Reed
Kham phum	Batten of loom
Ot at	A part of loom
Kounkai	Temple
Khau huk	The harness for guiding the warp threads in a loom, heddles
Maiyep key	The treadles of a loom
Cannak	One of the beams of a native loom.

Cetap	Lease Rode
Keu	A thin, long bamboo stick.

Raw materials and colour used in Taiphake textile:

Almost all the tribes from Assam farm the raw material such as *eri*, *muga*, larva, cotton etc that needed in the textile art. The Taiphake are also not exception of it. Although, the Taiphake comparatively use more *muga* than silk, they also use *pat* and cotton cloth more or less. Earlier, they cultivated *muga* in order to produce thread, but nowadays such tradition of cultivation disappeared. In the present time, they buy the threads from the market and form other tribes and prepare the cloth from them using traditional methods and colour. Although, the market fulfils the growing demands of the thread, the Taiphake have been preserving their tradition by using colours that are prepared naturally.

The main source of the colour of the Taiphake is nature. Being a part of Assam which is rich in natural resources, they learnt to collect the colour form the tress, creeper, root, flower, fruits etc. Blending of various colours is another characteristic trait of the cloths of the Taiphake. Starting from the white to red, black, yellow, green, blue violate, brown, grey, saffron, pink can be found in a single piece of cloth. The colour that used in the cloths have been collected and prepared naturally. Sometimes the trees, flowers, roots, fruits, creeper are boiled, smashed, or rotten in create colour.

Name of the various colour and the means to prepare them:

Blue: The Taiphake squeezes the peel of *garcinia xanthochymus* with water in order to have blue colour and boil it. The *muga* threads are dipped into the water for four days. To make the colour long lasting, the threads are again soaked in alkaline water and dry it under sun. As, it dried, the threads turn to be blue.

Golden: For the golden colour, the kernel of Fang's seed is put into water and grinded it and *rohi* (a local liquor) is added to it. White cotton or *pat muga* is dipped into the mixture and dried it out and thus golden colour is earned.

Brown: The Taiphake uses to boil the peel of plum and jackfruit tree and make juice out of it and put the threads into it. After it is dried, the threads gained the colour.

Black: Leaves of Rom tree, *saj pitha* (*saj* is a liquor and *pitha* is the raw material for it made from rice powder), Tum cow (creeper) are needed to create the colour black. The leaves of the Rom trees are soaked into the water for seven to ten day and the *pitha* and the twig of the creeper should be added to it. Then it is smashed to add to alkaline water prepared from ashes. Threads are soaked into it for days. It is to be noted that black colour is prepared to use in the chin used by the elderly women.

Yellow: Having crashed the peel of radish or *garcinia xanthochymus*, it is mixed adding rice and water to it. White threads are boiled putting them into it. After three days these are to be dried. Then again the threads are soaked into to alkaline water prepared from ashes for the colour to be permanent. After it is dried, a bright yellow colour will be gained. Such threads are used to prepare *Nongwa poju* of the bride and others dresses weaved for the youths.

Green: For the green, leaves of the Rom tree are dipped into water for seven to ten days and after it, these are powdered. The powder is mixed with alkaline water prepared from ashes and makes it half liquid. The threads are dipped into the mixture and boil it. Having the threads boiled, they are dried out and again the threads are boiled in the mixing water of *garcinia xanthochymus*, and the leaves of Mout tree. Thus, green colour can be collected.

Violate: The leaves of Rom tree are to be rotten in the water and then separated it from it. Threads are boiled in the separated water. Thus the threads earn the colour of violate. Again to make the colour permanent these are soaked into to alkaline water and make them dry.

Moreover, a paste of tea leaves can also be used to achieve tea like colour. In the present time, although, the Taiphake have been continuing the traditional way of preparing the colour, they use the threads available in the market in textile.

Findings:

- The indigenous technique and tradition of the Taiphake enriches the textile of Assam.
- The Taiphake prepare the raw materials naturally. Use of natural colour is a remarkable feature of the tribe.
- Regarding textile, the Taiphakes are self dependent. They arrange the weaving frame and its accessories out of bamboo, wood, skin of deer, phragmites etc. They need to cultivate the raw materials, thus they have been protecting the nature indirectly.
- The beauty and the efficiency of a woman are reflected in their use of colour, threads, dressing sense etc.

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