

CHAPTER NINE

***Eri* 'The Poor Women's Silk' and its Commercial Appreciation**

Folk art is the art of the poor, that is, of the immense majority of humanity, but folk art is not a poor art, it has immense wealth that can only be afforded by humility and love.- (Juan Ramirez de Lucas cited in Bartra, 2000)

9.1 The Prelude

This chapter discusses the commercialization of the *eri* craft in the Kamrup district of Assam. The importance of *eri* as a fabric is presented in section 9.2. In the succeeding section 9.3, a brief discourse is presented on the traditional *eri* products since old times. Then section 9.4 offers insight into the changing style of the craft with respect to modification in designs, raw material use and functionality of the craft. Section 9.5 then looks into the influence of external agents and intermediaries in the innovation and transformation of *eri* craft. This chapter is finally summarized in Section 9.7.

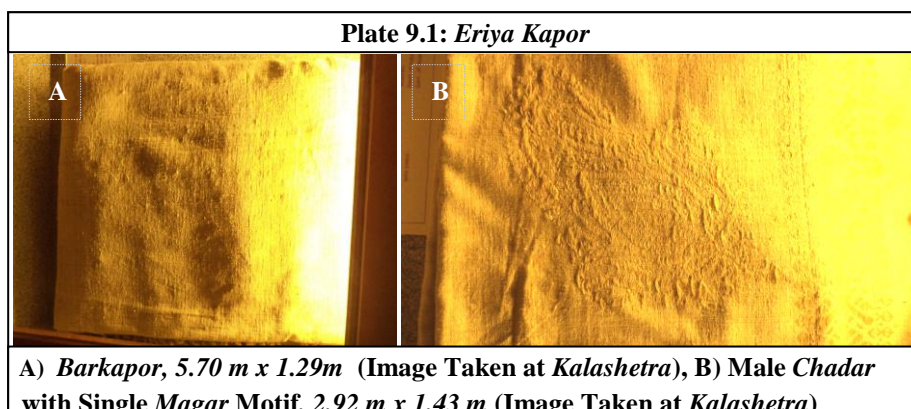
9.2 Importance of *Eri* as a Fabric in the Society of Assam

*Eri*¹ weaving is a specialized art confined only to Assam since ancient times (Rao and Kumarappa, 1935). Women in Kamrup district, particularly in Rampur, Palashbari and Chaygaon areas, have been practicing the craft since more than three centuries (Kumar, 2006) now. Difficult to reel, yet its wool like finish, coarse cotton look and silky soft texture, and thermostat property (Singh and Benchamin, 2001) makes it an essential winter cloth of the Assamese villager (Darah, 1896; Stack, 1896). In spite of being categorized as silk, due to its inexpensiveness as compared to *muga* and *pat* silk, it is tagged as 'the poor man's silk' (Das, 2009 as cited in Bhattacharyya, 2015). However, this silk is no longer as cheap as it used to be in earlier days, mostly due to its commercialization and supply constraints. Its commercial appreciation has increased its value in present times. The most practicable garment out of *eri* is the *bor kapor* or *eriyā kapor* (sometimes also referred to as *eri chadar*²), a sheet of fabric as large as 20 or 21 feet in length and five feet in width generally used as a cold wrap (Allen, 1905). It is also referred to as *eri* shawl.

¹ Eri silk cocoons exhibit different colour. Some are brick red in color while some are white. As such, the images provided in this chapter might exhibit certain variations in color.

² In this chapter *eri chadar* represents the *eri* shawl

This large piece of cloth is a sign of respect and often presented during marriages (Saikia, 2000). Its socio cultural significance dwells upon the fact that even today, village women would carefully meander *jora kapor* (*eriyā kapor* in pair) and preserve



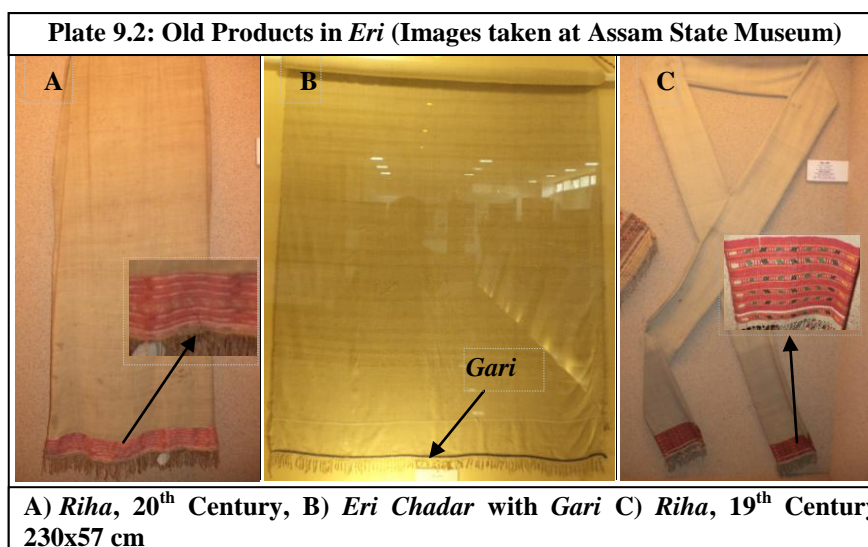
them only to be gifted later to the daughter on her marriage. Importance of *eri* fabric

also reflects from the Assamese proverb ‘*bhal gharar bani aaru eriya hutar chirakani*’ literally meaning that a maid from a good and honorable house is as good and respectable as the lady of the house; likewise even a tattered piece of cloth is good if it is made of *eri* (Field Survey).

9.3 Reflection on the Traditional *Eri* Products of the Past

In Medieval period, fabric made of cotton and the three varieties of silk, namely, *pat*, *muga* and *eri*,

fulfilled the major garments of the people of the region (Sarma, 2009). This can be ensured through the varieties of silk garments of that period



found in the Assam State Museum. *Eri* cloth weaving has been an important industry in Palashbari (Bahadur, 1915). As recorded by Bahadur, the most important *eri* piece manufactured in Assam is the *bor kapor* used as a body sheet or suiting material which is plain white.

As mentioned in section 9.2, *eri chadar* of 5.50 meter in length and 1.50 meter in width (approximately) was woven with hand-spun *eri* yarn. Due to its huge size it was used as a twofold winter wrap. It was coarser in texture. Apart from this, it has been found during field survey that *eri* fabric was also used as a bed cover to escape cold. Hardly any motif work was done on the *borkapor*. However, for occasional wears, some ornamental work could also be noticed on the *eri* shawl. *Paridia kapor* was a slightly enriched *borkapor* with beautiful and intricate *pari* (border) work (Allen, 1905). The *pari* design was either done with *muga* yarn or white cotton thread (fieldwork). According to Allen (1905), the artisans of Kamrup also wove smaller variants of these *chadars* for the women. Generally for the males, the dimensions were 2.75 x 1.35 meters while for the women it was slightly smaller (Sarma, 2009). Other than *eriyā chador*, *riha* (refer to Plate 9.2) and *mekhela* were common items made in *eri* silk (Allen, 1899). *Riha* or *kachali* known as *uttariya bastra* in medieval times was a kind of drape especially used by the royal and aristocratic married women to cover the chest which was used much before the introduction of blouse (Sarma, 2009).

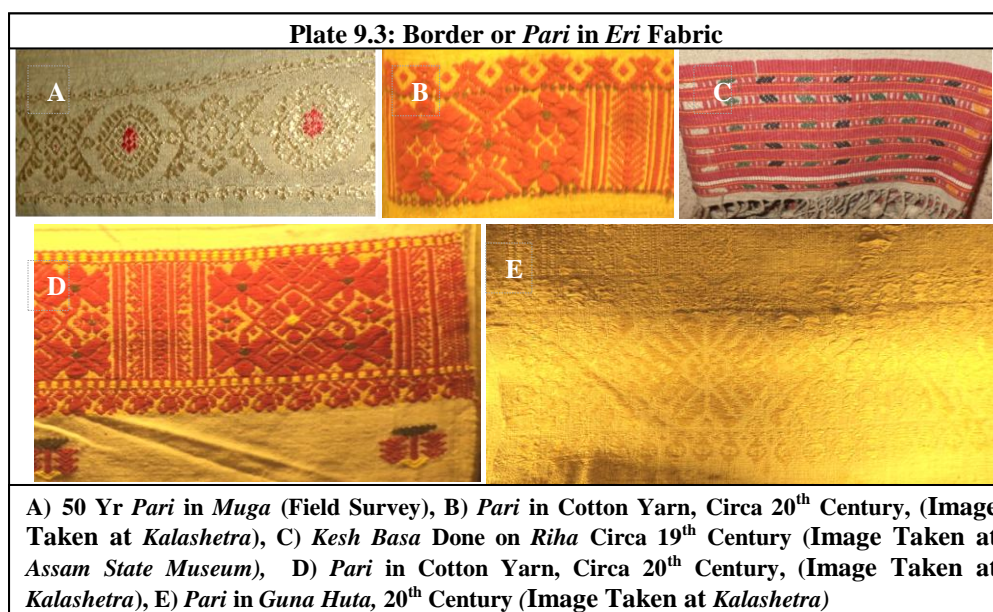
The size of the *riha* ranged from 6 to 8 cubits in length and around 1.5 to 2 cubits in breadth (ibid; Hamilton, as cited in Basu, 1970). Some samples of *eri riha* are found in the Assam State Museum from the 19th as well as 20th century the sizes of which are found to range between 308 cm x 79 cm and 352 cm x 60 cm. Another piece of *eri riha* from 19th century was found to be in the dimension of 230 x 57 cm. These dimensions and measurements are only approximation and not an exact or perfect standard. Sizes varied depending upon weavers' choice or requirements.

9.4 Prevalent Styles in Eri Kapor in the Past and its Changing Dynamics in View of Commercialization

The stylistic changes in *eri* craft due to commercialization can be explained by decoding modification in previous motifs and comparing with the present design elements. It has been seen that primary motifs and designs woven on *eri*, and other varieties of silk such as *pat* and *muga*, remained almost similar. However, ornamental weaving was more prominently done on *pat* & *muga* and since *eri* was generally used as a winter wear, ornamentation remained rare. As such, major part of the motifs and designs and its transformation is covered in Chapter 10 on *pat* & *muga* textiles. But, in present times, designs and patterns done on *pat* & *muga* are also done on *eri*

fabrics. Hence, a few old designs generally woven on *eri* that is still woven on *eri* shall be considered in this chapter. Commercialization related changes with respect to change in the use of raw material, utilization of dyes and colors and the functional change of the *eri* craft from garment to accessories and fashion objects shall also be discussed in this Chapter in Sections 9.4.3 and 9.4.4. While discussing the changes in *eri* fabric in the following discourse, this Chapter will basically discuss the style changes in relation to traditional *eri* garments like *eri chadar* and *riha*.

9.4.1 Motif and Design: Analysis of the Past Forms

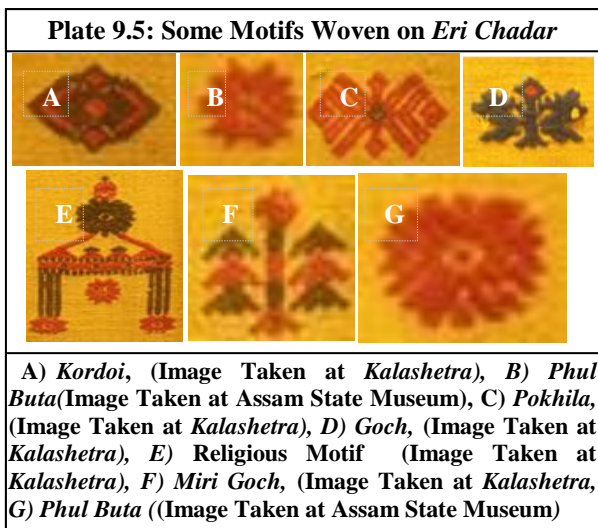


Eri fabric since considered basically as winter clothing item, generally remained plain and simple except for ornamental work on *riha* and some work on smaller variant of the *borkapor*. The *borkapor* was only produced as a warm sheet and sold so (Barpujari, 1993) and normally remained plain and coarse (Samman, 1897). It has been reported by Gupta in the year 1908 that only few weaver families made ornamental cloth called *paridia* (border work) or *gutibuta kapor* (spotted works). Only those people, who could afford, wore richly ornamented cloths (Samman, 1897). Ornamental weaving on *borkapor*, if at all done, was typically minimal. Ornamentation was generally done on the border ends (refer to Plate 9.3 B, C, D, E). Common design patterns were twills (Maxwell-Lefroy and Anson, 1917) or stripes on the borders (refer to Plate 9.2 B) and were known as *gari*. This cloth used to be called as *garidia chadar* (Samman, 1897). Some border works were more spread and ornamental and were called *pari* (refer to Plate 9.3 A, B, C, D & E). *Chadar* with *pari*

work was hence called as *paridia borkapor*. These were made especially for women. For men's *chadar*, small *kalka* or *magar* motif (refer to Plate 9.1 B) on the borders suited the best on *eri* in medieval times (DasGupta, 1982). DasGupta has also mentioned about rows of *kalka* being used on the borders in the silk clothes from medieval Assam. Plate 9.1 B presents *eri chadar* for the men with *magar* or *kalka* motif on one of the corner in the shawl collected from *Kalashetra*, Guwahati.



The *eri chadar* for the female were ornamented along the borders with floral motifs. Some samples belonging to the circa 19th and 20th century (as mentioned in the museum records), as shown in Plate 9.4, are presented. Again, as observed by Barpujari (1993), during the post medieval period from 1826 to 1919 A.D., only the well-to-do wore silk and ornamented clothes. Weaving finer ornamental pieces was more a pastime activity done for personal consumption or for royal households but not for supplying to the masses (Samman, 1897). *Eri* was used by the rich women for ordinary wear (ibid). At times, the *riha* and *chadar* during the medieval period and late 19th century was ornamented with scattered floral motifs and borders (Barpujari, 1993).



Motifs were more in geometrical shapes such as stars, diamonds, triangle, crosses and rosettes, most of the time, representing natural objects like animal, bird, fish, insect, butterfly, tree, flower, creeper, fruit leaf, fan, temple, etc. in infinite shapes are found (Samman, 1897). Some of the flower motifs include *goloch* (white flower with five lobes

and a ball), *toraguti* (star shaped), *kadam*, *togor*, *bakul*, *babori*, *champa*, *ahatpat* (*pipal* leaf, scientific name *Ficus religiosa*) etc. (Samman, 1897, pages 99-101). These motifs are also heard from the yester year artisans during field survey. Plate 9.6 shows some motifs generally woven on *eri chadar* (images taken from old *eri* products). Designs were in perfect symmetry and woven mostly on parts which remain exposed the most (ibid).

Some tribal motifs of the medieval era include *barfi* (diamond), *dhekia phul*, *goch* (tree), *loka paro* (a pair of bird facing each other), and ornamental designs like *jon-beri* (crescent), *thoria*, etc. (Sinha, 2012) that were exclusively woven by the tribal people on their *eri* clothes.

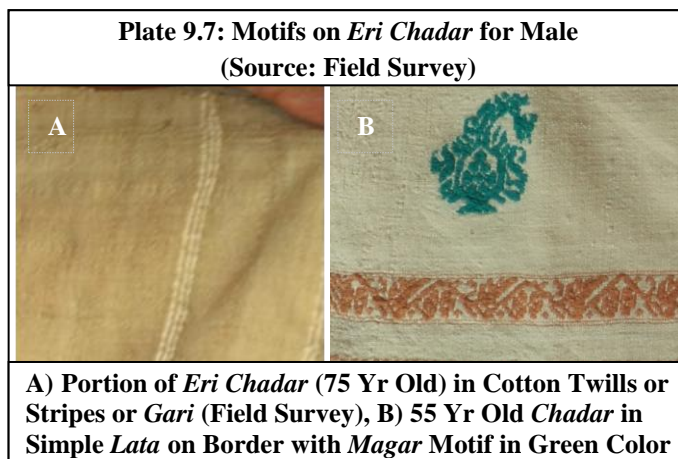


Another important motif is of the *Mishing* tribe includes the *miri* motif (tree with a pair of bird on both sides). However, tribal designs had no equivalence to the designs made on Assamese fabrics (Samman, 1897; Gupta, 1908). In whole, if the old designs on the *eri* cloths are looked at, it is found that the designs always remained delicate and small with narrower *pari* or border (Samman, 1897; also found from observation of old pieces). The designs on the body of the cloth were mostly flowery spots made with silk or colored thread (ibid).

Not many references exist to suggest the rich ornamentation of *eri* clothes during medieval times. However, *riha*, made in all the three silk types, in earlier times, was

generally ornamented and were known by different names as *guna kata riha* (worked with golden thread at the end), *kesh basa riha* (braided hair design seeming like striped pattern, refer to Plate 9.2 A & C), *buta dia riha* (adorned with single motif all over), etc. (Sarma, 2009). Some products preserved at Assam State Museum and *Kalashetra* in Guwahati provides information on the decoration of *eri chadars* and *riha* post medieval era.

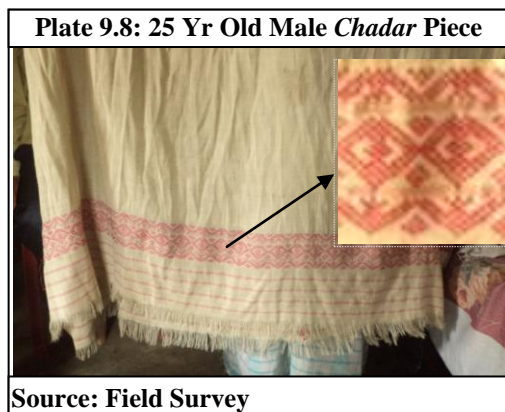
From data gathered through interviews and oral histories of septuagenarian and



octogenarian elderly weavers, even during the later part of the 20th century, the male shawl remained plain on most occasions with simple border if at all woven, depicting creeper or straight lines in bands on the two ends of the *eri chadar*. Creepers are found

to be exclusively woven on the borders (from observation of the old fabrics).

These *chadars* were woven by the women of the households for the elderly male members of the family. However, those artisans, producing for sale, chose plain *chadars* and *thaans* (Plain fabric pieces in the dimensions of 10 to 12 meter



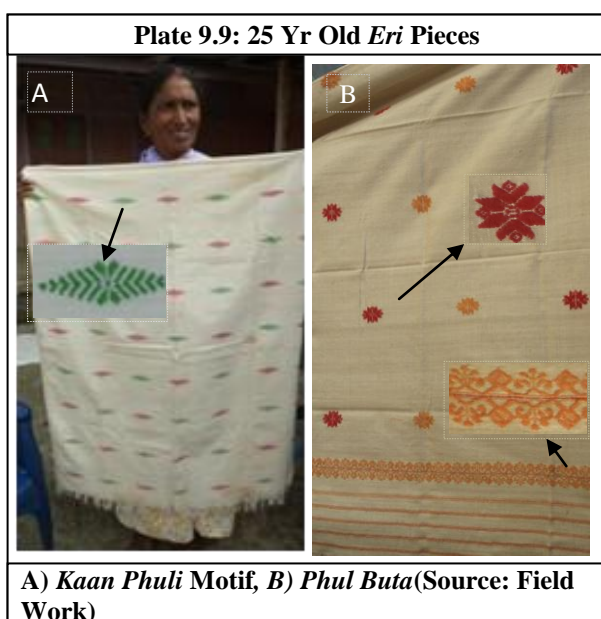
lengthwise and 36 inches breadth wise) often found demand among customers from Nepal, Tibet and Bhutan at Palashbari and Bijoy Nagar markets in Kamrup. Chitrallekha Das, Devika Das and Minoti Talukdar, all of whom are septuagenarian yesteryear artisans from Kamrup, still reminisce producing the plain weaves for the local intermediaries.

Some *garidia chadar* were also sold in these external audience markets with the help of the middlemen (refer to Plate 9.7 A). Within the community (which was very small), *chadar* with *kalka* motif and simple *pari* work were also preferred (information from field survey, refer to Plate 9.6 B). It is mostly the domestic needs at

households for which *eri* textile was produced and hence market demand was not very high except for consistent buyers of the product from the hilly tribes (Saikia, 2000). *Chadars* for the men with simple flowers were also not uncommon in local market and among internal audiences, though infrequent in sale. One such 25 year old *paridia chadar* was purchased by local intermediary Abdul Ali from one of his village weavers (refer to Plate 9.8, color adjusted to highlight the design). *Pari* made of small *magar* or *kalka* motifs arranged in sequence was also made.

9.4.2 Motif and Design: Analysis of the Present Forms

Towards the later part of 20th century, weavers started making *eri chadars*, mostly for



the women, a segment of the internal audiences, ornamented with motifs throughout the entire body of the *chadars*. The individual motifs remained scattered throughout the length and breadth of the *chadars* sometimes even left without *pari* works (refer to Plate 9.9 A & B). Few other *pari* works and *buta* used in *chadars* are presented in Plate 9.10. However, the sales as reported by the artisans were low and

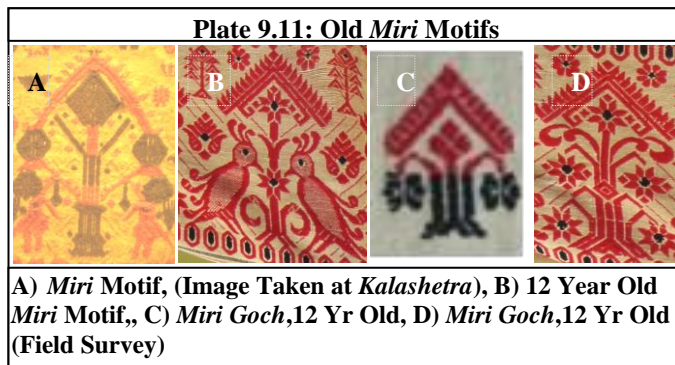
infrequent. Ornamented *chadars* were made only on orders.



However, middlemen started exploring intermediate audiences market in towns of Guwahati and in towns of other districts in the state, as a result of which commercialization of *eri chadars* became faster. As

found from field survey, the *chadar* was now promoted as an ornamented shawl for women. As soon as, the *chadars* received customers from nearby towns, that is, the

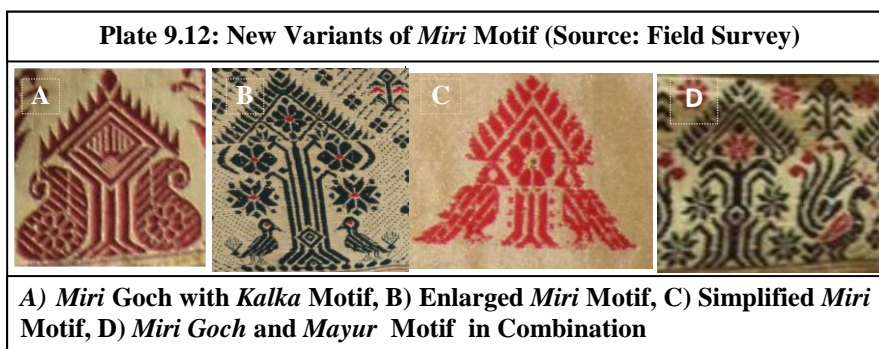
intermediate audiences, through the middlemen channel, design development took



place. Customers now looked at *chadars* as fashion objects rather than winter wraps. Those involved in commercial production of *eri* clothes state revolutionizing

modifications in motifs and designs to have initiated since the last decade. The period after 1990s seems to be the beginning of the explicit use of tribal motifs along with usual motifs like *kalka*, *lata* and *phul* on *eri* fabrics produced by the Assamese weavers for some sale. Plate 9.11A represents a *miri* motif from early 20th century. Other *miri* motif and *miri goch* motifs, which are more than a decade old variants of the original motif, are presented in Plate 9.11 B, C & D.

Further new variants of this motif can be found in present day *eri* fabrics (refer to Plate 9.12). The motif is used in combination with other motifs like *mayur* (peacock) and *kalah*. *Kalka* motif is also fused with the *miri* motif to offer variety. Several variants of *kalka* motif also exist in the design line today (refer to Chapter 10, Section 10.4.1 b). This common motif is transmuted into various sizes and used in combination with other motifs. Sometimes the mango shaped *kalka* is elongated, at

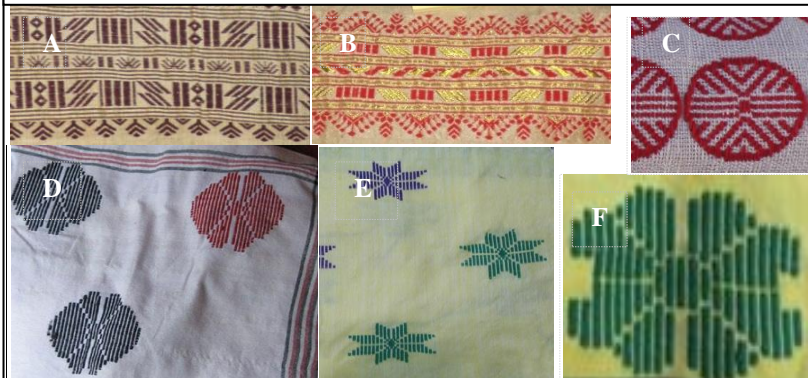


times flattened and worked with leafs and creepers within. Common

tribal motifs like *barfi* are also replicated today with further adaptation and intermixing. Customers always look out for newness in the traditional motifs which leads to designing of the conventional motif in new style. Rather than the intricacy of the work, it is the holistic shape and structure of the motif that defines a motif's typical name. It is not necessary to have a motif appear exactly in the same form or size in garments since made by different artistic hands.

Important stylistic variation seen in motifs and designs is in the size and spread of the

Plate 9.13: Simplification, Enlargement & More Spacing in Motifs and Designs (Source: IIE Website)



A) & B) Shows More Spacing and Simplification, (Image Taken from IIE Website), C), D) & E) & F) Shows Enlargement of Motifs (Source: C & E, Field Survey; D & E, IIE Website)

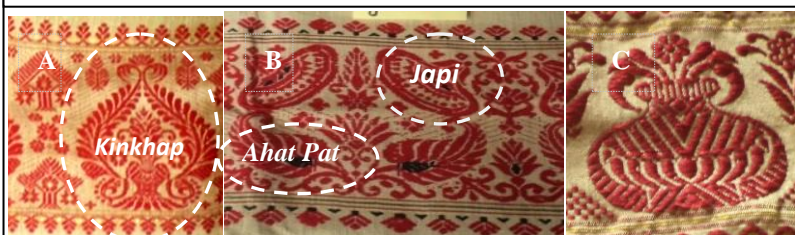
designs. The old motifs are enlarged and woven more profusely along the entire body of the eri chadar.

Conventional motifs woven on eri are still retained, but the motifs are often

simplified. At times, excess space is found within the design to cover more space. It must be mentioned here that, widening of space is done to quicken the weaving process, since artisans try increasing the quantity for economic reasons.

While some features of the motifs are removed for simple weaving, others are added to make the design look elaborate and complex yet attractive. Design simplification or complexifications are regular features of style variation. Observation of old and new

Plate 9.14: Combination Motifs (Field Survey)



A) Kinkhap & Miri, B) Ahat Pat & Japi, C) Kalah or Kalasi

designs highlight that the design features have become sharper which is also admitted by artisans, especially in

animated motifs like birds, insects and animals. In earlier times, as noted by Samman, the animal motifs seemed realistic but not beautiful (1897).

Orthogeneity in the design is still maintained when old designs like *kalka*, *barfi*, *keshbasa* and petalled rosettes are employed on the fabrics either in simplified or complexified forms. (Detailed information on old motifs and changes is discussed in Chapter 10). However, no particular old design can be said to be woven in toto. But most of the designs made today are a combination of orthogenetic and heterogenetic elements. Also different motifs are combined together to produce a new design, which

is a very new trend in ornamental designing. The variations are made with a specific purpose to offer distinctiveness in design to customers. Young National Award winning *eri* artisans like Bina Kalita from Jiakur village in Kamrup (won in the year 2008) believe in creating designs which is unique and different than other competitor designs. According to her, anything in the surrounding that attracts the mind is appropriated on to the *eri* canvas by the artisans reflecting the spontaneity of the design transformation. However, working for NGOs and society brings in added inputs from the intermediaries which help in further design enhancement. Also, visit to exhibitions through government sponsored schemes provides direct information about the existing demand and fashion prevalent in the society which endorses the zeal of artisans like Ms. Kalita to bring new designs and products in *eri*.

Designs are nowadays exclusively borrowed from the *pat* and *muga* garments and replicated on the *eri chadars* and other fabric pieces made of *eri*. The *kinkhap* brocade



work, *kaziranga* pattern (refer to Plate 9.15 A), *mayur* (peacock), *japi*, *phuldani* (flower pot), *kalasi* (water vessel), ornament motifs like *gamkharu* (bracelet), *monimala*

(necklace) and motifs typifying musical instruments like *dhol* (barrel shaped drum), *pepa* (a musical instrument made from the horns of buffalo), *jonberi* (a crescent shaped locket), etc. are now produced on the *eri* pieces. The *Kinkhap* and *Kaziranga* designs are most widely made designs today believed to be representative of the design tradition and culture of Assam. Most of the new design elements, artisans' stated (from field survey), are from *pat* and *muga* textiles. Substitution, elimination and transposition of minor or major portion of the motifs (Parezo, 1981, pages 229-30) are regularly observed in the designs made for modern consumption.

The *pari* has become more elaborate and large covering the ends of the *chadars*. It is now worked on all the sides of the fabric. It is narrower lengthwise in comparison to *pari* work done on both the broad ends of the *chadar*. Plate 9.16 presents fully decorated *eri chadar* in combination motifs. Less



ornamented *chadars* are also produced just like yesteryears targeting customers who seek traditional look and simplicity. In these types, the designs are less congested and seem to have more spacing. On the other hand, heavily congested designs filling up every available space is also worked upon in the *eri* fabrics of present times. Artisans as well as shopkeepers and intermediaries have stated that these differences in design are kept based on customers' willingness to pay. From field survey, it is found that local customers and intermediate customers in cities of Assam, especially women, prefer fully decorated *eri chadars* for aesthetic purposes whereas the aristocratic customers like moderately decorated *eri chadars* offering designs that are more rooted in orthogenetic characteristics. Customers also seek designs on *chadars* that are a blend of traditional and modern designs. Accordingly, designs are made by the enterprising artisans. Designs are also season specific. It is said that during Bihu and other local festivals, *japi* design and other ornamental designs are preferred more.

9.4.3 Change in Use of Raw Materials

The purest of the *eri* fabric, especially *borkapor*, was always coarse yet highly priced in the market (Barua, 1880 as cited in Barpujari, 1993). According to earlier anecdotes and references of Samman (1897), *eri* was found to be combined with cotton for domestic use (Bahadur, 1915), but the fabric produced found little acceptance even in local households (Samman, 1897). Instead, *eri* was used more in combination with *muga* and *pat* by weavers for major markets like Guwahati and Sualkuchi where they were engaged by local agents to do so (Maxwell-Lefroy and

Ansorge, 1917). This combination during that period might have been made to increase its adaptability as a costly silk.

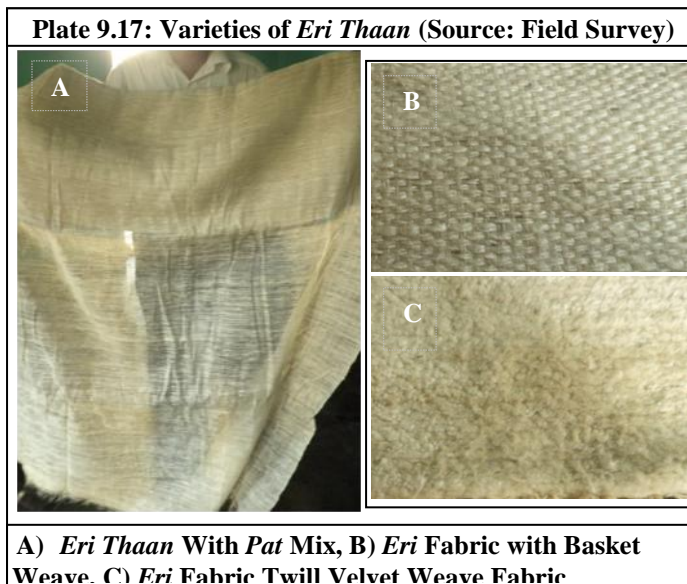
With respect to yarn used for ornamentation, cotton was used. Responses from older generation of artisans confirm the use of cotton yarn on *pari* works. Besides the use of cotton, *muga* yarn was primarily used for ornamentation on *eri* fabric, especially *eri chadar*. Artisans like Minoti Talukdar, Bharati Kalita, Kusum Kalita and Subhadra Das from villages of Jiakur 2, Jiakur 1, Nahira 6, Jiakur 1 respectively, who are in their mid 70s now, could never recollect anything other than cotton and *muga* for creating motifs on *eri chadars*. Even when cotton was used it was its natural white hue preferred over other colors, especially in shawls for the men. In religious gatherings and social ceremonies, male members preferred wearing *eri chadars* and *borkapors* only in cotton and *muga* works. Use of colored cotton thread particularly in red and black could be found on some 19th and 20th century *eri fabrics* preserved at *Kalashetra* Museum and Assam State Museum (refer to Plate 9.2 & 9.4). Mill made threads spun in Europe and imported to the province were becoming popular (Duncan, 1896 as cited in Samman, 1897) but were still rarely used on *eri* clothes for ornamentation at least for commercial purposes. At times, thin wool yarns (yarns with less fiber count) were also used for ornamentation (from oral history and interviews). Plate 9.3 A is an example of a 50 year old *eri chadar* piece with *guna kam*³ done with *muga* yarn. Colored mill made threads from Europe in several hues had already made inroads in Assam (Camber as cited in Samman, 1897) but were rarely utilized at least in *eri* works other than the few mentioned colors.

Spurt in use of synthetic yarn in *eri chadars* gained momentum as soon as different customer segments were found. There were local audiences willing to buy *eri* fabric that could offer beauty without pinching their pockets. On the other hand, within the internal customers, there were buyers who preferred traditional *eri* fabrics. Similar segments were also found among the intermediate audiences of the towns and cities. Use of myriad colored yarns in cotton as well as synthetic for ornamentation on *eri* products has materialized only since the start of this century when its demand increased among different sections of customers, especially among the young customers. One can find use of several different hues in a single piece of *chadar*.

³ *Guna kam*, in Assamese terminology, means brocading work done with *guna huta* (gold or silver metallic threads). It is also done with *muga* fibre. Today, synthetic threads are used to do *guna kam*.

However, ornamentation in primary hues like red, golden and black are still the most preferred.

Synthetic yarns are favored more among young artisans due to its low price, many color combinations and varieties. The other reason cited was customers' inclination to buying less expensive products. Ornamentation, done in *guna*, increases the cost of the item and hence preferred only by high end customers willing to pay more. However, *guna* work with *muga* thread in *eri*



fabric is getting abandoned nowadays due to the use of imported metallic thread in golden hue.

Apart from the aggressive use of synthetic yarns for ornamentation, cotton, *tasar* silk, or other synthetic thread is used entirely in either the warp or weft to increase its suitability in seasons other than winters (field observation; Kakoty, 2012). *Tasar* silk, since cheap, is mixed with *eri* (Choudhury, 2011) and widely used too as it blends very well with *eri* and gives shine to the fabric. But, the use of the *eri* fabrics till the late part of the 20th century was limited only to the extent of being utilized as winter clothes. *Eri mekhela* though made in the past, were produced rarely post medieval phase. However, it has once again seen resurgence with its use with *noni pat* (mulberry silk). New generations of *eri* businessmen are trying to make *eri* suitable for the hot summers. *Eri* is also mixed with *muga* silk to increase its value and price. Local artisan cum intermediary like Narmohan Das has been trying to create new varieties of *eri* silk fabric by intermixing different fibers. Plate 9.17A shows a very lightweight and transparent *eri thaan* produced by mixing *pat* with fine *eri* yarn having less fiber count to be used as a shirting material. Plate 9.17 B & C are also other variety of fabric that is slowly coming into the market. Rugged *eri* yarn is used nowadays other than the usual *eri* threads to produce several other varieties (refer to Plate 9.17 C) to produce carpet. This product might slowly see acceptance in the

western markets soon (from field survey). Few intermediaries and entrepreneur like Narmohan Das from Jharobari village and Chandan Keshav from Boko are exploring newer avenues for such types of *eri* fabric.

Leaving aside the *eri borkapor*, *eri chadars* have become lighter due to use of mill made *eri* yarn. In the year 2009, Fabric Plus Pvt. Ltd. set up *eri* yarn producing factory as Chhaygaon in Kamrup. Such commercial yarn centres are not new. Khadi and Village Industries Board run production centre at Rampur in Kamrup supplies *eri* yarn as well as produces plain fabrics since 1955. The *borkapor* used as winter wrap however, is still fashioned with thick and coarse *eri* yarn mostly spun through the *takli* (a traditional spinning top made in wood) by the village women whereas other variant produced as *thaan* is made more refined to be used later as shirting material. But yet again, it is not uncommon to find *borkapor* made with mill spun *eri* yarn giving it much refined texture and look. These products are still exported to Bhutan, Tibet, Nepal and regional customers belonging to states like Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Arunachal Pradesh, West Bengal and Bihar (from field survey). For commercial success, more importance is given to the weight and texture of the *eri* fabric. The reason, as cited by artisans, is the reliance on use of easily available mill made *eri* yarn for making shawls and other products. Besides this, the use of small machines among artisans for spinning the yarn is also yielding high quality *borkapor* and *chadars*. These yarns due to its fine thread count are much lighter and even textured than the hand-spun *eri* yarn.

Takli (Drop spindle) spun *eri* yarn is slowly getting replaced with mill spun *eri* yarn due to its thin thread count, refinement and uniformity. In earlier times, artisans spun their own yarn or bought yarns spun by others to produce the *eri* clothes. Nowadays, artisans are primarily using the machine spun yarn to save time and produce more clothes for sale. But the practice of hand spinning is not completely given away yet. Old women in the villages can still be found passing their idle time spinning *eri* with *takli* while chit-chatting. However, it is the inclination of the modern customer towards quality, lightweight and fineness that is pushing towards this change in the raw material used.

The commercialization of *eri* has revived the use of dyed *eri* yarn (refer to Plate 9.18 A & B.). Dyeing was traditionally practised only by the tribes like Meche, Mikir,

Rabha, Phakial and Kachari of South Kamrup to a small extent and only for domestic needs (Bahadur, 1915: 50). Dyed *eri* fabrics were not brought or sold but were only produced for personal consumption. These tribes generally used natural dyeing techniques to create red and yellow colors (Bahadur, 1915). Bleaching or dyeing of silk was rarely done by other weavers of Assam (ibid). *Eri* with a natural drab hue was not considered for dyeing, at least among the non-tribal communities who were generally into the commerce of the craft. It was generally used in its original tint (Maxwell-Lefroy and Ansorge, 1917). None of the literature references point toward the trade of dyed *eri* fabric in Assam. Dyed *bor kapor* seems unknown as demand also seems nil (Bahadur, 1915). If the non-tribal of Assam has to do so, only little colored thread is placed on the borders of the silk fabric (ibid). However, the involvement of the local artisans cum intermediaries and traders of *eri* has regenerated the use of natural dye in the entire cloth base.



The existing demand for naturally dyed fabric among high end customers is proving commercially viable. Organically dyed *eri* products have good demand in European countries like Germany, Netherlands and even Australia. However, internal customers and intermediate customers primarily prefer *eri* products in its drab hue as they find it more traditional and rooted in culture. When demanded so among the intermediate audiences, especially from the cities like Guwahati, light hues are preferred while dark colors are liked by young local customers. Likewise, international customers seek colored *eri* products developed from natural materials like turmeric (for yellow), *hilikha* (botanical name is Terminalia Chebua, for rust color), tea waste, indigo and lac.

9.4.4 Shifting Utility of Eri Fabrics and Innovation in Product Line: Addressing New Functional Requirements

Eri, in the past, was never looked at as a garment for fashion. Apart from *eriyā kapor* and chadars, local people also made some other regular garments like *mekhela* and *riha* but its production remained low woven only by few households. However, as found in extant



literature, the use of plain *eri thaan* could be seen among the European customers during British period. Coats were made out of *eri thaans* which was a very much prevalent attire of the Europeans then. Camber found some influence of prevailing western fashion among the consumers (as cited in Samman, 1897). As a result, plain *eri* fabric was also made into coats and petticoats (Allen, 1905). Other than this, these *thaans* were also used by the local populace for creating items like *kurta*. Octogenarian local resident from Uparhali village in Bijohnagar (Kamrup) named Rajat Mazumder, still remembers the artisans of his village producing *thaan*, also known as *faungri kapor* or *uka kapor* (literally means plain fabric) which were in great demand among the politicians of his time for stitching Punjabi shirt or *kurta* (a kind of long sleeved garment worn by men). Local residents also used this fabric for the same. In neighbouring Buddhist countries like Thailand and Bhutan, the coarser cloth carried religious significance (from information obtained from local traders of *eri* silk).

But there has been a shift in the functional use of the fabric in modern times. The commercialization of *eri* products picked up since the beginning of this century (Field Survey; also cited in Bhattacharyya, 2015). Early entrants to this trade in the mid 1990s like intermediaries Kishore Jain and Azad Ali who happened to trade plain *eri* fabrics, started producing *eri* stoles only since the beginning of the 21st century. It is believed that Narnohan Das, *eri* artisan and intermediary, produced the first stoles in *eri* in the year 2002. *Eri* stoles, he reminisces, at that time was still unheard of. He found the inspiration during an exhibition where he could find smaller versions of Kashmiri shawls selling like hotcakes. In another exhibition in Germany that he participated in, he found customers asking for stoles, possibly in *eri* to be worn around neck and shoulder. *Eri* entrepreneurs and artisans also link this transformation in *eri fabric's* functional dimension to the introduction of new items in *pat* and *muga*. Nearby silk village of Sualkuchi saw introduction of items like silk stoles, scarves, *kurta* pieces, etc. This further prompted *eri* entrepreneurs to try their hands in new product line.

Plate 9.20: Eri Sari in Kalka Motif (Field Survey)



Such external influences gave way to the diversification of *eri* as fashion garments. Stoles, smaller in comparison to *eri chadars*, in dimensions ranging from 28 inches to 18 inches in breadth and 2 meters in length are good buys among customers from metropolitan cities like Delhi and Bangalore, and also among local buyers of Assam. This item is also fancied by young women customers who would have mind taking traditional but large *eri chadars*. *Eri* stoles gave them more satisfaction of using a traditional but high fashion product than the old modeled *eri chadars*. Similar to the

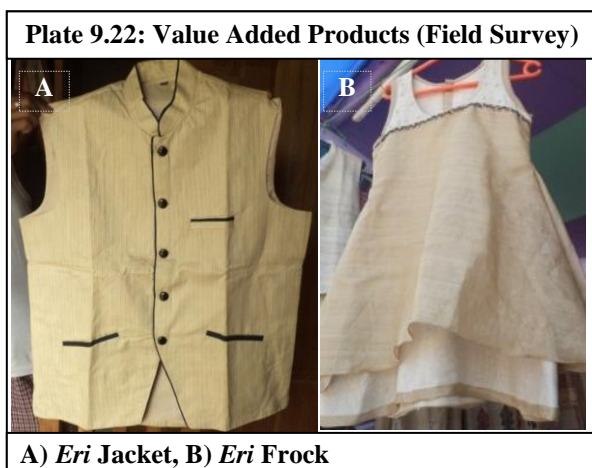
eri stoles, mufflers are also produced, primarily for male customers. Yet again, the breadth is further decreased to 12 inches for its use as a neck drape.

During field survey, it was found that Mr. Das had received an order for one thousand pieces of *eri* stole in natural dye from one Japanese buyer. The stoles were sought in the size of 30 inches breadth wise and 2.40 meters lengthwise. The demand for stoles and mufflers is also high from the cold region countries like Germany and Switzerland. Besides natural dyes, the customers from these countries also seek high quality, fine finishing and good textured *eri* fabric. Fashion garments like mufflers are still in infancy among the local customers of Assam.



Apart from mufflers and stoles, *eri* fabric is also converted into sari (a kind of traditional drape for women in South Asian countries, refer to Plate 9.20). Artisans working for Chandan Kesav who operates Guldasta Weaving Studio at Boko have been producing saris since 2009 for different customers across the country. Narmohan Das regularly gets order for *eri* saris from some customers from Bombay, Calcutta and Delhi. The trend of *eri* saris is

picking up in Assam too. He supplies *eri* saris to some shops in Guwahati wherein it is getting demand from intermediate customers. Occasionally, it also gets notice from



tourists visiting Assam. At times, he also receives order for specific designs on *eri* saris. Other new items in *eri* are the *duppatta* (a cloth piece extended on the *salwar kameez* worn by women) and scarf for ladies. However, these products are mostly targeted for customers from other cities of India since its demand is

still very nascent among local customers. To make the material light and shiny, *noni* pat is mixed with *eri*.

In present times, when *eri* fabric is catching attention of customers and designers alike, and the fabric is utilized for producing many domestic accessories as well as fabrics suitable for other garments. *Eri* entrepreneurs are seeing the scope of a particular variety of *eri* fabric for floor mats. Fibrous *eri* extracted from *eri* cocoon is yet again woven with *eri* yarn to reproduce a new pattern similar to floor mats (refer to Plate 9.21, a sample piece of floor mat made in *eri* in natural indigo dye). *Eri* fabric is produced in sizes that are exclusively made to be stitched later as pillow covers, curtains and cushion covers. Several varieties of *eri* fabric, from light to denser textured, is produced in *thaans* to be sold as shirt pieces. These shirt pieces are very popular in Europe (from field survey, also cited in Kakoty, 2012). In the local circuit and among the intermediate customers, and also sometimes among tourists, jackets and waist coats made out of *eri* fabric are highly demanded as fashion garments. Plain coats in *eri* called *Jawahar* coats and Modi jackets are more in demand among the tourists visiting Assam. Locals however, also buy much ornamented coats.

Through value addition, *eri* fabric is further transformed into children's garments like frock and ladies *salwar-kameez*. *Eri* utility has changed exorbitantly in recent times due to its transmutation into pieces that can justify modern needs of the customers. Artisans and intermediaries are still of the opinion that *eri* market, especially in fashion accessories and women's garment section, is yet not saturated and less explored. Also, the home furnishing segment in *eri* has ample scope to grow. Local

intermediaries are utilizing the traditional design elements found in tribal costumes (refer to Plate 9.23) and blending it with other motifs to impress it upon new



functional products. As said before, designs from *pat* and *muga* are also infused upon *eri* fabrics.

9.5 External Agents and Intermediaries: Role in Commercialization of Eri Craft

As early as the 19th century, local middlemen and *Marwari* (a business community particularly with their ancestral roots in Rajasthan) traders helped artisans sell their

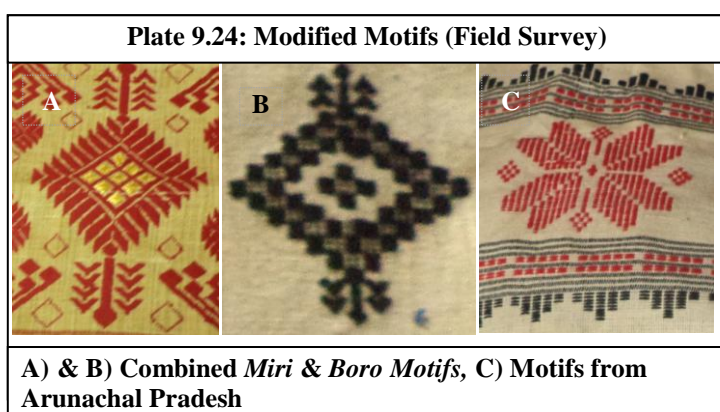
products to customers of distant places. These local buyers bought the produce of the weavers from weekly markets or from weavers' home and sold those at various places of the region and outside. However, the primary *eri* fabrics traded during the 19th century were *eri chadar* and *eri thaan* (Stack, 1896). The dealers also bought *eri thaans* and *chadars* from local artisans to export these to Calcutta (present day Kolkata) and to some foreign countries (Allen, 1890). It was also exported to Tawang (Arunachal Pradesh) from Assam (Samman, 1897). Its export to places outside Assam took place through the wholesale *Marwari* dealers. The intermediaries primarily worked as sales agents for the produced objects. Intermediaries, especially *Marwari* traders, simply traded in *eri* but never interfered with the designs.

Not earlier than the initial years of the 21st century did the external agents and local intermediaries play any role in the design modifications. Known local intermediaries of the region like Kishore Jain, Abdul Ali and Azad Ali ventured into *eri* trading in the mid 1990s. Somehow, their role during the early years were mere collecting of *eri* products from village artisans and selling them at different locations of the state as well as exporting the products to states outside Assam. Mohammad Abdul Ali, a trader from Cemina village, who has been in business since 1994, sold the fabrics to Gazipur in Uttar Pradesh, Bhagalpur in Bihar, as well as in Nepal, Tibet and Bhutan. Other local traders, Uttam Das and Hasmat Ali, sell the products to buyers from Siliguri (West Bengal) and Shillong (Meghalaya).

Eri is also sold to middleclass buyers in China, majority of which is in the form of the men's shawl (Choudhury, 2011). These traders profess that local weavers of the villages do not have any understanding of the existing market demand and unless persuaded to weave something new, they would continue their status quo. Mohammad Ali made artisans weave different *eri* garments, though only plain in nature, used by the people of Bhutan apart from conventional weaves. The artisans hence produced *kokal katha*, a kind of waist cloth (known as *lulluri* in Bhutan), *burechari* and *buroi kamni* (kinds of Bhutanese garment; names are simply as given by the intermediaries and not verified). It must be acknowledged here that many of the local intermediaries other than the *Marwari* traders themselves were weavers but now undertook the responsibility of trading *eri* by getting the clothes woven in desired designs by other artisans (field survey, also cited in Choudhury, 2011). Due to the involvement of these intermediaries, standardization of size and quality of the

fabrics took place. *Eri chadar's* conventional size was curtailed to a modified size of 2.10 meter x 1.5 meter for female customers and 2.5 meter x 1.5 meter for the male customers. *Eri stoles* and *mufflers* have standard sizes and artisans are asked to make according to these sizes.

Though designs were seldom produced on *chadars*, for little sale of the ornamented *eri chadars* in local areas, it was generally the artisans who decided about the designs and wove whatever they liked or fancied. But their motifs and designs mostly revolved around traditional components. Local artisans directly dealt with their customers and also sold their products through local traders who hawked at some



other place or village (Samman, 1897). During the time of septuagenarian weaver like Kusum Kalita and Thaneswari Das from Nahira village, Kamrup, customers from adjacent places used to come and

explain the designs they wanted on their *chadars* and the designs stayed very simple. To the most they wove *lata phul* and *phul buta* on the *eri chadars*. The interaction was very much spontaneous and faster. Intermediaries never determined the designs to be woven as they dealt only with plain fabrics. To this day also, artisans working independently go with the flow of designs available in the market place and simply take indications from the existing demand.



But for sale of their products, they still take the intermediary route since most of these artisans belong to rural places and find it difficult to reach

customers. Some weavers directly sell their products at fairs through government and NGO support (field survey, also cited in Choudhury, 2011). Artisans working in Self Help Groups also get chance to directly sale to customers by being part of exhibition troops under government schemes. However, in recent times, intermediaries are majorly engaged in the design specification and sale of products. Local artisans are instructed about the types of design that are in demand.

Some intermediaries like Pulin Kalita from Chaygaon and Niranjana Goswami from Palashbari who happen to be from *eri* artisan families, blend tribal motifs and gets it executed by artisans working under them.

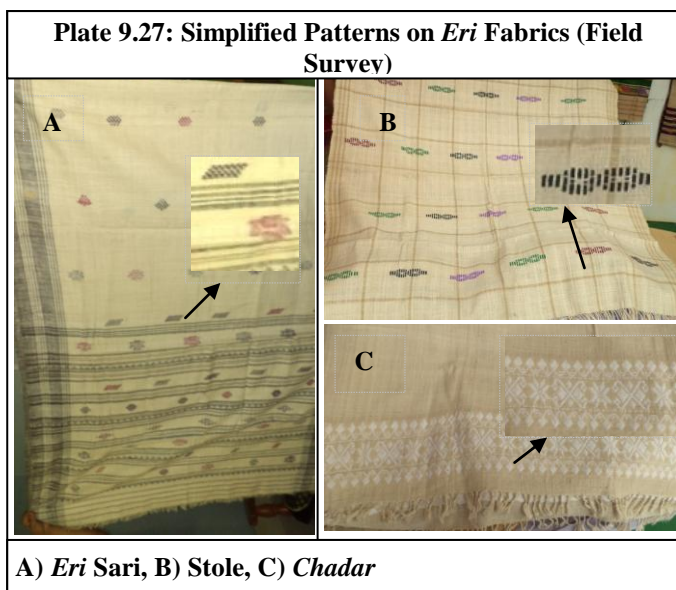
Likewise, *arnai* (a wrapper worn around the neck) designs found in traditional *Bodo* (a tribe from Assam) garments and designs of the *Mishing* tribe found



on *gero* (a kind of cloth worn by the Mishing women) are also modified and replaced on *eri chadars*, pillow covers and stoles (refer to Plate 9.25 B, 9.26). Many designers from places like Bombay and Delhi happen to contact local intermediaries with their own designs or at times designs collected from tribal belts and regions like Nagaland and Ladakh. As suggested, these local intermediaries direct the artisans working under them to produce these designs on fabrics. Also, individual entrepreneurs running shops and boutiques in Guwahati city direct artisans of the villages working under them to produce design of their choice and color as demanded and sought by customers in the market.

In Plate 9.24 C, traditional motif from Arunachal Pradesh is shown on *eri chadar*. Mohammed Abdul Ali asked his artisans to execute this design especially for the customers of Arunachal Pradesh. However, the design is very well received in the markets of Assam too. Changes in design of this kind are meant for customers who seek traditional designs in modern garments and accessories. The involvement of external agents like entrepreneurs from the cities has also led to simplification of

many traditional motifs. These agents with their target group between the upper class segments and aristocratic customers of the cities have induced modification. The change can also be seen with respect to the use of color combinations on *eri* fabrics. Some private companies like Fabric Plus



have also been instrumental in bringing change in *eri* and other silk textiles. They utilize the skill and labour of local artisans to create variety of fabric. They employ trained designers to blend designs but give due impetus to old traditional designs through simplification of the motifs. Some Self Help Groups and NGOs also employ artisans to produce *eri* products for various customer segments.

Due to the involvement of these external agents and intermediaries, huge change

Plate 9.28: New Color in Eri Products

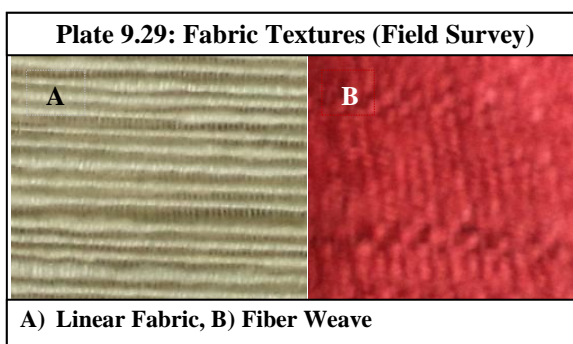


Source: Field Survey

could be seen in the design and color patterns on *eri* fabrics (refer to Plate 9.27 & 9.28). For international customers, agents ask artisans to produce *pari* in simple lines, slant as well as horizontal and vertical or crisscross, and in combination or individually which are perceived much more traditional (refer to Plate 9.27). These works were not uncommon in earlier times too, but have been more in use today. Elderly women customers from cities also prefer such simple ornamental work on *eri*. Intermediaries understand the pulse of the local buyer and city customers that help artisans produce items that can fetch demand. Many of the tribal motifs are seeing reintroduction in new *eri* fabrics due to the guidance and

direction of external agents. Other than traditional elements, heterogenetic motifs have also come into the design line (refer to Plate 9.27 A & B). Involvement of intermediaries has helped artisans produce several kinds of the fabric as *thaan kapor*. As sought by customers of different regions, *eri* traders like Narmohan Das and Chandan Keshav has been pursuing to produce various textures in *eri* by intermixing different natural fibers as well as changing the techniques to reproduce *eri* yarn. Linear Fabric, Fiber weave (refer to Plate 9.29, basket weave (refer to Plate 9.17), etc. are some of the fabric patterns in available in *eri* now.

These fabrics are used for creating various home furnishing pieces and the demand especially comes from western countries. According to local traders, the export of *eri* to foreign countries like Germany, USA and Japan is greatly increasing due to its brand as organic silk and ahimsa silk. It is referred to as *Ahimsa* Silk because



unlike other silks, *eri* silk worms are not killed. The cocoons are not boiled but moths



are allowed to emerge from the cocoons before reeling. The *Ahimsa* silk market is gradually growing and *eri* intermediaries constantly vie for gaining market share through innovation in *eri* weaving techniques.

Intermediaries, unlike in the past, are not only acting as sales agents to the artisans but have put on the role of change agents too. In remote villages of Boko, the *eri* items are found to be extremely simple and without any designs or dyeing (Choudhury, 2011). However, in recent years since 2009, efforts of Guldasta Weaving Centre and IIE's design development initiative under Ministry of MSME which initiated short training programme on design development resulted in change in items manufactured today in some of the villages. The former organization also helps artisans to connect with customer markets and in the sale of the products.

Multicolored *eri* stoles and mufflers (refer to Plate 9.30) as well as saris are unique combinations that only fructified in recent times due to intermediary understanding of changing tastes and customer preference. With the help of fashion designers, private organizations trading in *eri* have also produced patched work or *ikat* (a resist dyeing method used to create patterns⁴) technique patterned saris which are sold in Guwahati. Such patterns have emerged as most innovative and heterogenetic works never done on *eri* before. However, local artisans of the remote interiors are yet to learn this technique. These agents also dictate dimensions for door and window curtains in *eri* as well as determine the combination of colors and designs. *Eri* fabric pieces with ornamentation are produced in specific dimensions for *eri* jackets, ladies purses, handbags, mobile pouches, tablecloths and ladies *kurta*. *Eri* made ladies purses are popular in Greece (Kakoty, 2012).

Private players also produce items like *eri* beads in the form of chain to complement traditional attire and ties in *eri*. NGOs and Cooperative Societies like Kasturba Gramin Bayan Samabay Samiti Ltd, Tarali Handloom Centre and Dakshin Kamrup Tatshilpa Samabay Samiti Ltd mobilize artisans to produced items for different markets. Organizations like Mouman Sevashram facilitating with the Dept. of Handloom & Textile, Govt. of Assam, also initiated commercial weaving of *eri* in Boko (Sarmah, 2006). NGOs like Grameen Sahara since 2007 are also providing financial support to artisans through small loans to procure yarns and providing platforms to sale the products. Diversified handloom products training is also on the

⁴ *Ikat* is a well known art in India and Indonesia. *Ikat* work was already present in India by the 7th century CE. Andhra Pradesh is the celebrated birth place of Indian *ikat*. In North India, Gujarat is home to *ikat* tradition which is commonly known as *Patan Patola*. Koyalagudam in Andhra Pradesh and Orissa also produce *ikat* saris. Orissan style of *ikat* known as *bandha* has a long history dating back to 12th century. (For more information, visit <https://strandofsilk.com/journey-map/gujarat/ikat/history>).

offer in Kamrup by SIRD (State Institute of Rural Development) since 2002-03. Most of the innovative items in *eri* as well as designs on the fabric are sponsored by external agents and intermediaries who have been working as change agents as well as sales agents.

9.6 Wrapping up the Chapter: The Commercialization of *Eri* in Kamrup

Weaving *eri* items like *chadars* and *borkapors* have always remained a part of the culture of Kamrup as well as that of many other parts of Assam. The products such as *eri chadar* and *barkapor* were utilized primarily as winter garments. Other items made were *riha* and *mekhela*. Some quantity was also sold to internal customers as well as external audiences of neighbouring states through middlemen. At times, slightly ornamental *chadars* were also produced for occasional wears. The designs woven as *pari* works were simple *lata* and *gari* works, and *kalka* motif on the corners of the *chadar* especially on pieces used by the men. For special purposes like self gratification and for use during special ceremonies, artisans wove individual motifs including bigger *pari* works on the *chadars* meant for the females. But ornamented items were more in use among the aristocratic class. The design variations in motifs present the history of adaptation and assemblage of culture of the various races and tribes of Assam, technology and environment (Samman, 1897; Sarma, 2009).

Changes that were seen in the motifs were much spontaneous then, mostly due to expressive freedom of *eri* artisans that leads to unhindered creativity of *eri* artisans. Yet the designs showed simplicity and remained confined only to those parts of the *chadar* which remained exposed when worn. However, commercialization of the craft that materialized hugely since the early years of the 21st has led to increased design elements in the entire body of *chadars*. Motifs were combined and heterogeneous elements in the form of borrowed designs from other garments were getting infused to increase artistic appeal. Traditional motifs like *kalka*, *barfi*, *phul buta*, etc. got enlarged and modified while the *pari* works got elaborated across the length and breadth of the *chadars*. As a result, designs transmuted to more complex types for one segment of customer. On the other hand, designs were also over simplified for customers seeking simple and traditional motifs. Most of the designs in *eri* fabrics have been brought from *pat* and *muga* fabrics.

In the case of raw materials, change took place in the use of yarn for ornamental works. *Muga* and cotton fiber has been replaced with metallic and acrylic threads for reducing the cost of the product. Also the use of color became promiscuous in the ornamentation unlike in the past when only some limited colored fiber available in red, black, green and white were used. Major change brought about by commercialization is the use of naturally dyed *eri* fibers to form the base cloth. Developments were also made in the texture of the *eri* cloth base to offer variety to customers. *Eri* fiber was intermixed with several types of silk and synthetic threads to create more refined, lighter and all weather fabrics.

Another reason for transformation in design and base material of the fabric was its evolving utility as functional object and fashion garment. As a result of this shift, *eri chadars* got redeveloped as stoles and mufflers each serving a different customer base. These items were adopted in *eri* inspired from such *pat* and *muga* products made in neighbouring Sualkuchi. Standardization in material dimension has also been introduced. Again, innovation in the product line could be seen to increase the suitability of the *eri* products as accessories and home furnishing products. New products like pillow covers, mobile pouches, handbags, curtains and waist coats are developed continuously for the internal audience base as well as the foreign customer segments.

In the commercialization process of *eri* products, especially in the modification and transformation of the designs and base material, local traders, agencies like weavers SHGs, cooperative societies as well as governmental and nongovernmental agencies have been playing crucial roles. Till the end part of last century, local intermediaries played the role of sales agents forming a link between the producer and the customer, but without any role in the modification of the craft. They traded plain *eri* fabrics in neighbouring states and countries bordering Assam as well as other regions of the country. The influence of government agencies was also very limited. Soon, as the realization of new market segments and customer bases were made, these agencies also started playing the role of change agents of the craft. The key change introduced has been with respect to the style elements. They started dictating artisans about motifs and design preferences among customers and made artisans execute the same. Due to their insight and commercial motive, *eri* fabric has been customized and designs are modified. They infused both orthogenetic as well as heterogenetic

elements in the traditional craft. In the process, these agencies successfully modified the prevalent utilitarian style of the *eri* fabrics to fashion objects and aesthetic items. The role as a sales agent of the craft thus got reconstructed to that of a change agent who modified and initiated innovation in the craft. Govt. institutions like IIE and SIRD have also been instrumental in recent years in bringing modification in the crafts by providing training to artisans. Besides, they also helped artisans sell their products in the markets.

The involvement of intermediaries also led to innovation in product line. Value addition took place as artisans were directed by intermediaries to produce items such as mobile pouches, jackets, pillow covers, curtains, etc out of the *eri* fabrics. At some sporadic level, design changes could be seen arising out of the efforts of the artisans to sell the craft at local market places. But, commercialization led changes, as a whole, has been a result of the sponsored designs and raw material changes initiated mainly by the intermediaries and external audiences. Intermediaries' ability to understand the demand of customers for new designs and new functional products has led to heterogenization in motifs and designs as well as innovation in product line. Modification and diversification stayed as continuous spin-off in current years in case of *eri* fabric in Kamrup. It is observed that sponsored commercialization of *eri* fabric is more dominant process in Kamrup, especially in craft producing pockets of the villages around Bijohnagar, Chhaygaon, Palashbari, Rampur and Boko. As *eri* weaving became more than a subsistence activity today in remote villages of Kamrup, its commercialization is reflected through its specialized fabric production, designing and innovation.