

CHAPTER TEN

Commercialized World of *Pat* & *Muga* Weaves

Every women of Assam is a born weaver. No Assamese girl who does not weave can expect to be a wife. And she weaves fairy tales in cloth. Some of old pattern showed to me were of matchless beauty. And as I saw these beautiful patterns; I could not help shedding a silent-tear over India's past glory and her lost art. – (Mahatma Gandhi, 1921)

10.1 The Prelude

This chapter begins with a discussion on the importance of *pat* and *muga* garments in the society of Assam in section 10.2. The following section 10.3 presents glimpse into the old product line in *pat* & *muga* silk. Section 10.4 in its various subsections, discusses the style elements and stylistic changes with respect to motifs and designs, raw materials and shift in the functionality of the fabrics. The succeeding section 10.5 offers insights into the role played by intermediaries and external agents in the commercialization of the craft. Section 10.6 concludes the chapter by giving an overview of the entire discussion.

10.2 The Importance of *Pat* & *Muga* Garments in Assam

Textiles out rightly, of all other handicrafts, form a class by itself (Das, 1992) that enrich India's craft heritage. Different places in India have distinctive set of textiles, each having an aura of its own, which identifies a wearer as belonging to a particular place or a region. During any cultural parade in fact, it is the textile that identifies the culture (Sarma, 2009). The traditional silk costumes as 'folk products are the visible outright badge' (Yoder, 1972, page 295) of the people of Assam which consciously expresses their identity to the outside world. Silk dress, especially made of *pat*¹ (Mulberry) silk, comprises the national dress of the Assamese (Bahadur, 1915). Though *muga*² and *pat* silks could be afforded only by the well-to-do (ibid), these garments quintessentially represent the culture of Assam. A traditional white *pat mekela chadar* is the dress that every Assamese bride would wear on her marriage

¹ *Pat* silk is obtained from the mulberry silkworm called as *Bombyx mori* (Scientific name).

² *Muga* silk is obtained from the silk worm *Antheraea Assama* (scientific name).

while those who can afford would also gift their daughters a pair of the dress in *muga*. To say so, *pat* and *muga* are the pride of Assam and its effervescent culture.

Pat and *muga* are considered as timeless silk which only shine more with every wear. It is said that *pat* and *muga* silk garments outlives the wearer (Gogoi, et al. 2017). *Muga* silk, the queen of fiber (ibid), is nature’s gift to Assam in which it possesses extreme monopoly. In 2007, it was given the Geographical Indication (GI) tag. Due to properties like moisture absorbance, eco-friendliness, tensility and natural luster, *pat* and *muga* silk garments are preferred dresses of people. Also, the UV rays absorbing capacity of *muga* silk is another unique attribute that increased its worth even more in present times. Mulberry or *pat* silk is not exclusive to Assam but its worth is so much so that Assam has to import this silk from Karnataka and countries like China to feed its *pat* looms in the state. *Pat* garments of Assam have huge demand among silk connoisseurs and the local public. In spite of enduring modifications brought about by assimilation and absorption, *pat* and *muga* silk textiles are unique in itself for which the state is known today.

10.3 Glance at Some of the Silk Costumes of Assam

Since medieval times, Assamese costumes for women consisted of *mekhela*, *chadar* and *riha*. Garments primarily consisted of *mekehla* and *chadar* was the original female dress of Kamrup (Bhuyan 1940). According to Allen (1890), *muga* (non-mulberry silk) was basically used for making *rihas* and *mekhelas*. For the male it comprised of *churia* or *dhoti* (3 to 7 meters in length and 1 meter in breadth), a kind of fabric worn around waist and falling on the knee or below till the heel (Sarma, 2009), *cheleng*, similar to *churia* but hung over the left shoulder to the front with its other end taken across the back hung on the right arm.



The use of silk garments as a regular clothing was very limited and small in the Assam province (Samman, 1897). From the records of Assam State Museum and *Kalashetra* artifacts, it is found that many fine fabrics in silk existed in earlier days. Yet, weaving finer fabrics was rather for personal consumption or produced by some families for the Royal households and hence did not supply the masses with any clothes (ibid). Silk costumes of *pat* & *muga* were mostly used by the aristocrats and nobles (Bhuyan, 1940). Only well to do families and royal households used silk in their everyday wear. The Assamese men and women, those who could afford, wore richly ornamented and embroidered clothes in cotton as well as in silk of all the three types' viz. *pat*, *muga* and *eri* (Samman, 1897).

Principal items made in Kamrup were *churia*, *cheleng*, (Allen, 1905), *riha*, *mekhela* and *chadar* (Pakyntein, 1961). *Muga* was generally used by the richer women for ordinary wear and white *pat* for special wear while the poorer classes used cotton for ordinary wear and silk for special occasions (Samman, 1897). The *mekhela* was a piece of cloth with its ends stitched lengthwise which was worn from waist to ankle. It approximately measured 1.35 meters in length and 0.90 meters in breadth (*all measures used in this chapter are an approximation*). *Khania* is another piece of cloth 5 meters in length and 1.30 meter in breadth, sometimes made in *pat* silk and used among higher officials in medieval times. It is mostly worn during religious occasion both by men and women (Barua, 1957). *Chadar* measuring around 2.75 to 2.80 meters lengthwise and 1 to 1.25 meter breadth wise is an upper garment one end of which is tucked to the *mekhela* at the navel and the other is draped around the chest with its loose end hanging from the shoulder (Sarma, 2009). The *riha* is also worn over the chest in the same way as *chadar* but is somewhat narrower than the *chadar* (Samman, 1897) and is worn below the *chadar* during special occasions and religious ceremonies. *Chola* or shirt in tunic shape and *chapkan* (surcoat) of different kinds, *paguri* (turban), etc. were also worn (Sarma, 2009). Wealthy people also used *garur kapor* (pillow case) made of silk (Samman, 1897).

10.4 Common Styles in Pat & Muga Silk Fabrics and its Changing Dynamics in View of Commercialization

Stylistic changes in *pat* & *muga* due to commercialization can be explained by decoding the old signature motifs and designs and the present design elements. In this section, only some major stylistic changes with respect to few common motifs and

patterns are discussed as part of design change to offer some insight into commercialization. The change in the use of raw material with respect to combination of different types of fabric with *pat* and *muga* silk as well as use of dye or color also sheds light on the commercialization related changes in the fabric's texture. Apart from that, change in functional dimension of the craft is looked at to understand the commercialization of silk with respect to style.

10.4.1a Signature Motifs, Designs and Regular Patterns on Pat & Muga Silk Textiles in the Past

The ornamentation on the cloths largely determines the type of the cloth. If simple *butis* (motifs mostly resembling single individual motifs or small dots) are present on the cloth, it is known as *butidia kapor*. For example, if the *butis* are present on *cheleng*, the cloth is known as *butidia cheleng*. *Makhimur* (head of housefly) is a small spot like motif which can be termed as *buti* or *buta* (refer to Plate 10.3 E). Likewise, there are *paridia* (border work) *kapor*, *garidia* (stripes), *asu phular kapor* (floral motifs present on the *asu*, the fringes of the *pari*), etc.



(Samman, 1897). *Chadar* also had several variants based on the type and extent of elaboration (Saikia, 2008). Some were *bankara* (highly decorated), *kinkhap* (brocaded motifs), *gunakata* (decorated with silver and golden threads), *buta phul basa* (having simple floral motifs) or *garidia chadar* (*chadar* with stripped ends) (ibid). Some

motifs from the Late Medieval Period to Early 20th Century are presented in Plate 10.2 to present an idea of the type of motif works existing during those times.

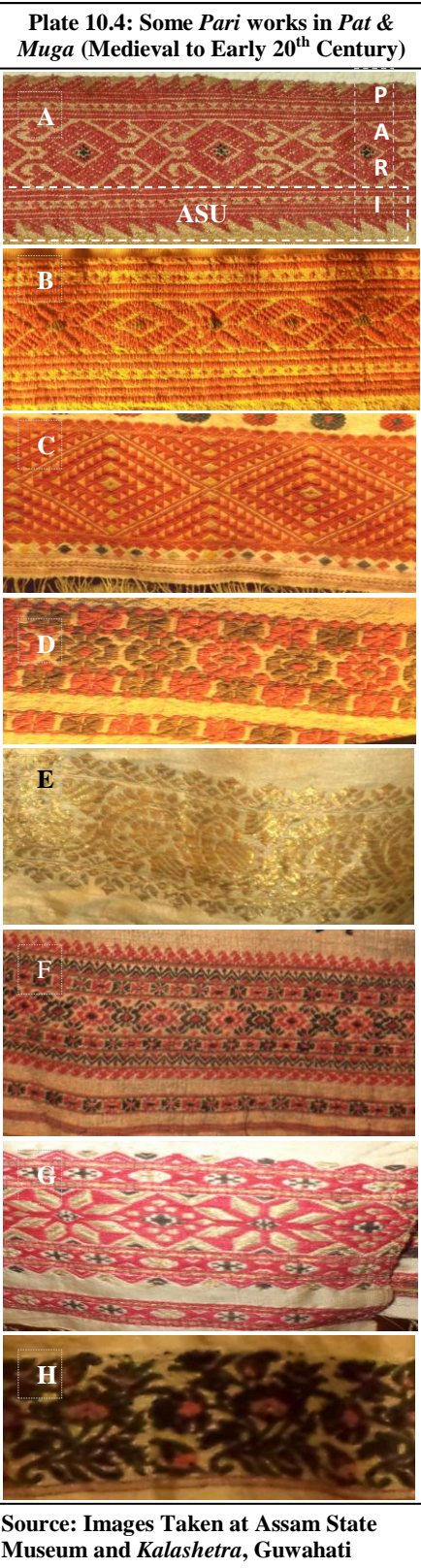
Riha, also a kind of drape just like the *chadar* can be either *uka* (plain) or *phul basa* (decorated). Simple variant is the *paridia riha* with borders on both sides done with either colored silk or simple cotton (Pakyntein, 1961). Extremely ornamented *riha* was called *deel bahar* (it is an Urdu term signifying heart rendering) *riha* with flower and creeper designs also sometimes accompanied by motifs of birds and animals (ibid). One gets to know that Islamic influence also existed in Assam's silk garments. *Mekhelas* in silk, especially *pat*, were believed to be of several different kinds. *Dharidia mekehla* was the finest woven garment amongst the Assamese with ornamentation work covering more than half of fabric. Gold colored twists could be found extending from the decorated border lines of the *mekhela* at the bottom (Allen, 1899). Then there was *patal phul bacha* (light floral ornamentation) or *bonkora mekhela*, exclusively made of *pat* where the decoration was non-continuous and scattered still forming symmetry in the design (ibid).



In medieval Assam, the designs known as *phul* (flower or floral pattern) or *phuljali* (flower and creeper) or *jalpahi* (refer to Plate 10.6 C) mostly constituted of motifs taken from nature, were geometric or abstract and sometimes used in combination (DasGupta, 1982). Individual motifs present on the fabrics were known as *butis* or *butas*. Flowers of various types and

creatures, mostly butterfly, always remained the source of many motifs (Phookan, 1987). DasGupta (1982) had given a vivid description of some design elements of medieval Assam. Some of the most typical motifs were *tinipatia phul* (clover type or three petalled floral motifs), *tengesipat* (similar to clover motif resembling the leaves of *Oxalis corymbosa* L), *panch patia phul* (five petalled rosette), *satpatia* (seven petalled rosette), *mora* (peacock), *pokhila*

(butterfly), *gach* (tree), *tora phul* (star motif), *para* (pigeon), *rosettes of champa* (*Michelia champaca* Linn) and *guti malati*, *gunaphutuki* (dots with gold and silver yarn), *mach* (fish), *pan kata* (betel leaf motif) and *bakul phul* (flower of *Minusops*



elengil Roxb). Tree motifs like *kadam goch* (*Anthocephalus cadamba*), sometimes with *pach kadam phul* (five large *kadam* flowers) or *sat kadam* (seven large *kadam* flowers) were also used in the designs. Other motifs mentioned by Sarma (2009) were *bel pat* (*Aegle mermelos*), motifs woven in horizontal or vertical forms and like *nadimer* (the bend of river) (ibid, pages 152-3), *chiraphutuki buta* (like the puffed rice grain) and *mekurikhujia* (like the paws of a cat) (Changkakati, 1993: 4). Some small *phutuki buta* (motifs in the shape of spots) included *makhimur* (head portion of the housefly, (refer to Plate 10.3 E), *paro soku* (eye of the pigeon), etc. (Samman, 1897).

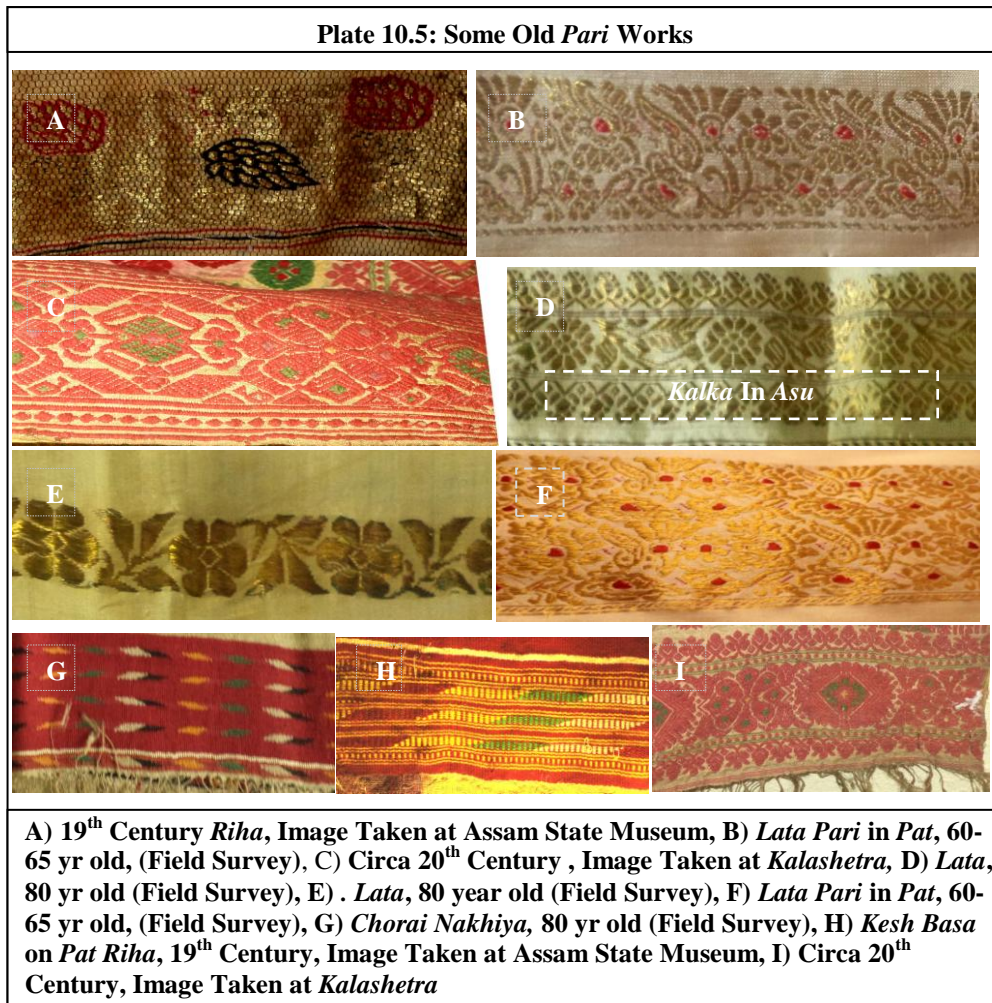
According to art critic Nilamoni Phukan (1987), *guna phutuki* (small motifs done in golden threads) always remained the prime motif in all Assamese textiles. Some of the motifs found in old clothes since the late medieval period to the beginning of the 20th century are shown in Plate 10.2. Motifs found in the mid 20th century are also presented in Plate 10.3. Traditional designs from the earlier period were almost carried down till the early and middle part of the 20th century representing the orthogeneity in the design line. List of some more motifs and designs extracted from Samman's (1897) work and is also presented in Appendix 10.

Exclusively ornamented pieces, as mentioned earlier, were generally for the aristocratic class. However, designs overflowed in certain fabrics meant for religious purpose. Designs also filled the spaces on clothes based on their importance in social circuit (DasGupta, 1982). Pieces meant to be kept at temples, especially for deities were exclusively ornamented with special motifs. *Gosain Dhaka kapor* is a kind of sacred cloth piece to cover the religious scriptures or deity also had lavishly woven motifs (ibid). There were some exclusive motifs like *xorai* (tray with a stand for offerings) and *saki* (lamp) which were reserved only for religious cloths like *gosain kapor* (Sarma, 2009) due to its religious significance. These designs were influenced by metal objects of the same name used in the society have been surfaced on ritualistic cloths (Mazumder, 2006a; for more information on metal objects refer to chapter 7).

The other designs patterned on this sacred cloth were *rajhansa* (swan), *agnigarh* (a fortress located at the hillock of *Agnigarh* in Assam in ancient Hindu mythology), *singha* (lion), *dhupdani* (incense stick stand), *dhunadani* (a vessel to burn resin during prayer), *hophura* (a kind of metal container in Assam), *kapou phul* (fox tail orchid; scientific name is *Rhynchostylis Retusa*), *dhul-pepa* (musical instruments) along with various *lata* and *phul buta* (Sarma, 2009). Other religious motifs include *dama* (drum), *bortal* (big cymbal), *sarutal* (small cymbals), *khutital* (very small cymbal), *temi* (a small case), *padma chakra* (ovary of lotus), *tilak* (sandal paste mark on forehead), *dol* (religious shrine) (Samman, 1897). Garments like *mekhela* and *riha*, exclusively meant for brides also had elaborate patterns (DasGupta, 1982).

Running motifs often formed the *pari* or edges (refer to Plate 10.4 & Plate 10.5) of the cloths and those resembling creepers were called *lata phul (creepers) paris* (DasGupta, 1982, refer to Plate 10.4 E, H, Plate 10.5 A, B, D, E, F). *Lata phul* were mostly known by the name of the respective flowers known as *kadam lata*, *parvati lata*, *angur lata*, *aparajita lata*, *angur lata*, etc. (Sarma, 2009; also from the interview conducted by the researcher with Prof. Medhi in 2017). Other *lata phul* were that of *dhekia* (fern), *kerela* (*Momordica charantia* L. creeper), *bakul*, *mokordama lata*, etc. which were predominantly produced on Assamese fabrics (ibid). Small *magar* or *kalka* also rowed the narrow borders called *asu* (the outer ends of the *pari*)

(DasGupta, 1982; refer to Plate 10.5 D). According to eminent researcher Prof. Birinchi Medhi, *lata* represents women.

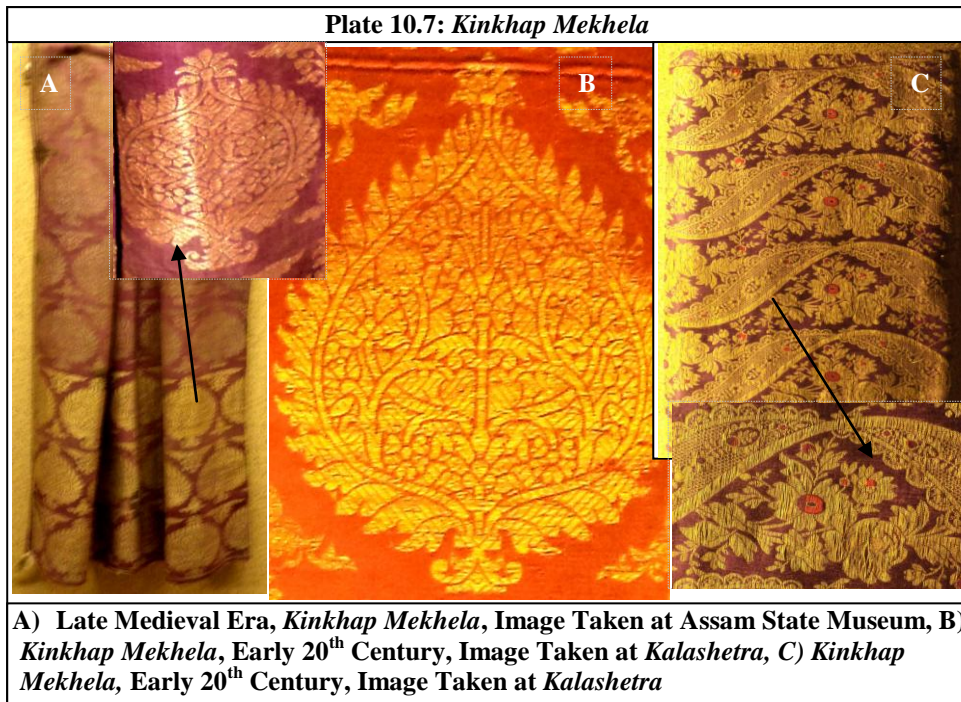


Women expressed their desire for support through creepers or *lata*s on cloths. Borders with plain bands in a particular color, mostly red, were also very common (as observed from the museum textiles). At times, each individual motif was narrowly arranged in a way that it depicted river and hills in geometric form. These patterns are believed to have entered into the *pat* and *muga* textiles tradition of Assam from the tribal costume culture (Phukan, 1987). *Jalpahiya* (net) design (refer to Plate 10.6 C) was also a common pattern (Sarma, 2009). *Charai nakhiya* or *kesh basa* (resembling the steps of birds on ready to be sown muddy paddy fields, refer to Plate 10.5 G), formed a common design pattern for *pari* works (DasGupta, 1982). Some of the most common *pari* works are presented in Plates 10.4 and 10.5.



Designs in geometric shapes like diamond (refer to Plate 10.4 C), squares, triangles and *zig zag* lines have been in prevalence since long back and has been popular among the tribal weavers across the Brahmaputra valley of Assam (Phukan, 1987). These patterns are also seen to be present in the non-tribal weavers of the state (ibid). The geometric patterns, according to Pakyntein (1961), penetrated the Assamese design line as people especially from Sualkuchi who toured other places brought the designs of the tribes and developed them to use on their fabrics (ibid). Even the present day weavers of Sualkuchi village present the same belief about the transfusion of tribal designs to Sualkuchi weaves hinting towards a spontaneous design change process (fieldwork). Other than the *lata paris*, these patterns also formed the running designs on the edge of the fabrics. Other common tribal motifs seen on silk textiles are *gosa-sazia* (tree motif), *loka paro* (a pair of birds facing each other), *jon-beri* (crescent moon-shaped motif), *dholak* (musical instrument) and other jewellery motif like *thuria*, *karana sinhu*, etc. (Shanker Roy, cited in Sinha, 2012, page 241). A combination of *gach* and bird motif (refer to Plate 10.2 C) is a popular motif of the *Miris* or *Mishings* (DasGupta, 1982). Yet, it is said that ornamentation wise, tribal handlooms have no equivalent among the fabrics of mainstream Assamese (Gupta,

1908; Samman, 1897). In Plate 10.6, some silk garments are presented to show the placement of motifs and *pari* works.



Some of the most versatile motifs were the *kalka* or *magar* and *kimkhab* motifs (Samman, 1897; DasGupta, 1982). *Kalka* was also woven in pair known as *juria kalka* (ibid). The larger *kalkas* had intricately filled interiors with *dhekia lata* (ibid). The famous *kimkhwab* (the name of this motif would appear as *kinkhap* in this report) motif was introduced into the Assamese textiles due to the influence of the Muslims (Shanker Roy, cited in Sinha, 2012, page 241). Some anecdotes highlighting Muslim elements like the use of gold and silver threads and embroidery during the period of *Ahom* king Suhungmung (1497-1539 A.D) (Sarma, 2009) and settling of Muslim weavers in Assam by King Jayadhwaja Singh (1648-1663 A.D) (Phukan, 2012) hint toward the connection to the Muslim influence in design. *Gunakara* or patterned work with gold and silver thread (Sarma, 2009) and stitching of *chola* (shirt) began from this period (Choudhary, 1959; Sarma, 2009) prior to which the clothes were loosened fabrics without any stitching done. King Rudra Singha (1696-1714) gave special encouragement to new ideas and designs in silk from rest of the country (Phukan, 2012).

Plate 10.7 A presents *kinkhap mekela* worked with golden thread from the late medieval era. The inside of the motif is filled with floral patterns and small creepers.

Another type of brocade worked with golden threads also known as *kinkhap mekhela* is shown in 10.7 C. Similarly, *kalka* motif was also woven exclusively. *Kalka* motif is also equated to that of *kinkhap* motifs as it was also brocaded exclusively on *mekhelas* (Mazumder, 2006). Like, *kimkhaps* the inside parts of the *kalka* was also mostly filled with ferns (DasGupta, 1982). Apart from these, the other types of motifs found on old cloths are *kordoi* (star fruit) and *babori* (a kind of flower) *buta* (product observation).

Motifs woven on the Assamese textiles of the old times seem to be like reliefs which stand out prominently on the fabric surface (Phukan, 1987). Designs were delicate and small in whole with comparatively narrower borders (Samman, 1897) especially on the lengthwise parts of the *chadar*. *Kinkhap* remained the largest pattern woven on clothes. At most, individual motifs remained scattered on the exposed portions of the fabric. However, to the exception, cloths for special occasions were profusely decorated but most of the time, only on those portions which remains exposed on drape (ibid).

10.4.1b Change in the Presentation of Motifs and Designs: An Analysis on Commercialization related Aspects of Pat & Muga

According to reported history, all weaving in Assam were done with the plainest and crudest of handlooms and the market supply of the silk products as well as those made in cotton was very insignificant which was mostly from Nagaon, Kamrup and Goalpara (Gupta, 1908). Probably, one of the reasons might be the limited use of silk fabrics among the commoners. Products sold mostly comprised *borkapor* and *gamocha* (ibid). Only few weaver families made ornamental cloth called as *paradia kapor* or *gutibutta kapor* (ibid). However, Sualkuchi along with Jorhat were growing as important weaving centre of silk textiles (ibid).

During the late 1930s and mid 1940s, looms increased in Sualkuchi and people began to do commercial weaving (Kalita, page113). Weaving industry in Sualkuchi saw a boost after 1935 due to increase in demand for fabric, which

Plate 10.8: *Hinghap* on a 65 year old Pat Chadar (Field Survey)

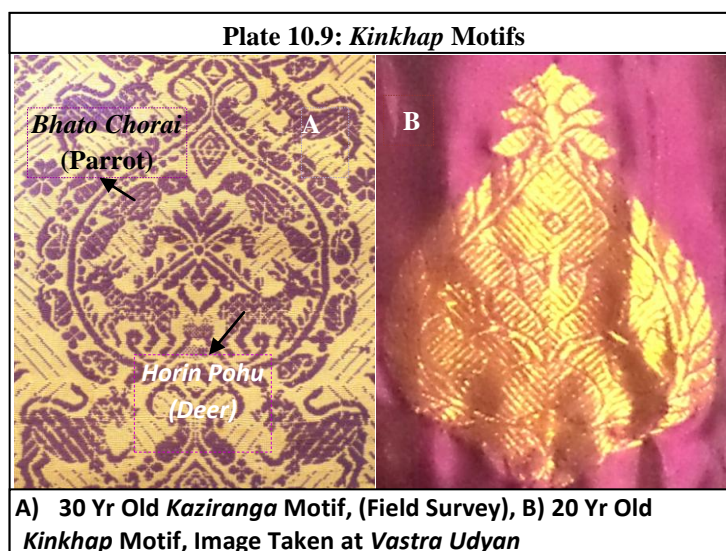


encouraged some families to start weaving factories (Das, 2008). Introduction of technically advanced fly-shuttle looms also was one of the reasons for rapid introduction of new designs. Presentation of motifs also started to change. Padma Ram Bayan, a weaver from Sualkuchi, started to use design specimen for weaving in 1914 (Bharali, 1974 as cited in Das, 2008). Prior to this, the ornamental work or patterns were made on coconut bark, on *kusa* grass (scientific name is *Desmostachya bipinnata*) or cloth of net to be produced later on the fabric (Allen, 1899). According to Barpujari (1993), during the early parts of 20th century, ‘no two designs worked by different weavers were alike though not un-often general pattern adopted was the same’.

The manufacturing of first pair of *muga chadar mekhela* at commercial level is believed to have done in 1946 (J. Bharali, p. 51, cited in Das, 2008). As traditional silk garments came under commercial dynamics, expert artisans infused more creativity in the design elements. Discussion on stylistic modification with respect to designs is difficult to be encapsulated in limited pages. Hence for proper readability, only few traditional and widely used motifs like *kinkhap*, *miri* and *kalka* are analysed for delineating probable commercial modification or improvisation.

i) ***Kinkhap* through the Ages**

Kinkhaps were basically silk textiles brocades done with silver and gold threads (Rao & Kumarrapa, 1935: 41). However, as time passed, a particular shape in the form of *pipal* (Assamese terminology is *ahat*) leaf (*Ficus religiosa*) was affixed to *kimkhab*. This can be seen from the



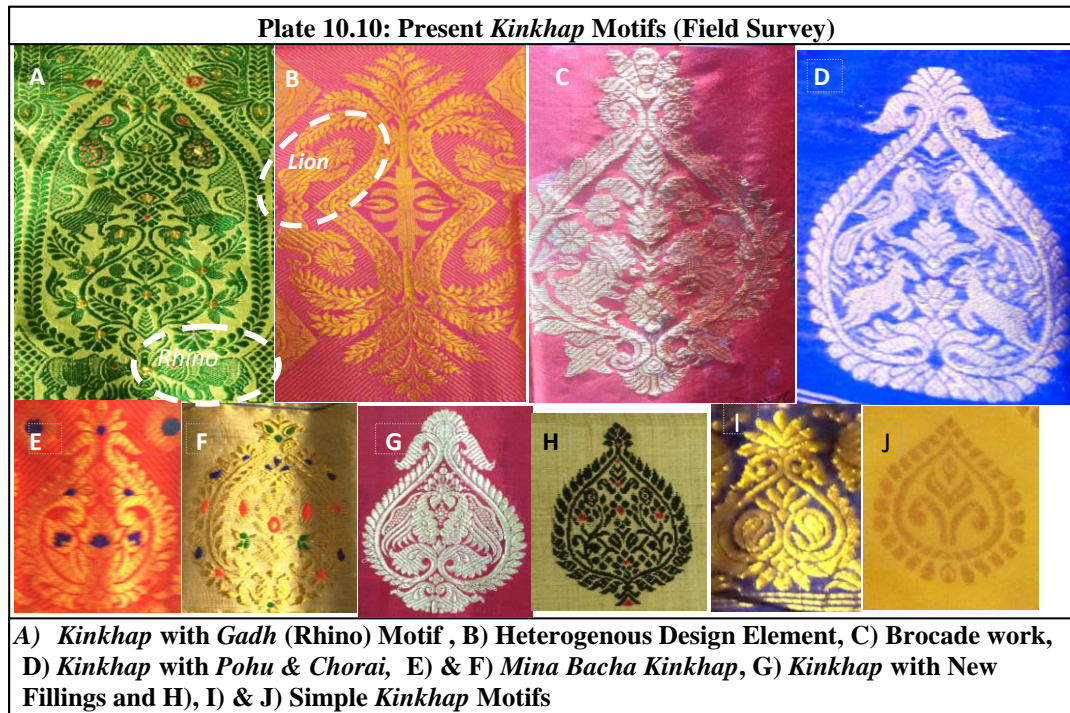
two separate *kinkhap* motifs found in Assam State Museum as shown in Plate 10.7. Sometimes it is also called as *hinkhab* as a literary variation, brocaded for the kings and nobles with gold or silver threads (Chetia, 2016). Benares, Surat, Raichur,

Ahmedabad, Murshidabad and Trichinopoly were mostly famed for varieties of *kamkhawb* (*Kinkhaps*) textures like *chand-tara* (moon and stars), *mazchar* (ripples of silver), *murgala* (peacock's neck) and *Shikargah* (hunting ground) (Rao and Kumarappa, 1935). It may be so, that weavers from Assam started using the name *kimkhab*, *hingkhap* or *singkhkhap*, as a dialectical variation to the *kamkhawbs*. However, the *peepal* or *pipal* leaf shaped motif is taken as the *kinkhap* motif in design dictionary of Assam.

According to Ganesh Karigar, the grandson of late Kaliram Karigar, a well known artisan from Sualkuchi, the name *singkhkhap* or *hingkhap* is probably because of *hingha* (lion motif) as one of the added features of *kinkhap* (Field survey, refer to Plate 10.8; some also take the lion motif in *Kinkhap* as shown in the mentioned plate as the version of Chinese Dragon). *Kinkhap* or *Singkhkhap* motif as mentioned in present day is simply the dialectical variation of the original *kimkhawb*. As per octogenarian artisans, Tarun Das and septuagenarians Manmat Baishya and Umaram Kalita, the *kinkhap* motif has undergone great changes throughout the last century. Master artisans, in an effort to impress customers and keep competitive, would create some distinction in the motif. This was also due to artisans' spirited outlook towards the craft. It is observed that the earlier *kinkhap* motifs distinctively remained filled with creepers and flowers (refer to Plate 10.7). In the succeeding work too, as seen on a 65 year old *kinkhap* motif (refer to Plate 10.8), fillings remained the same. However, in the latter images (refer to Plate 10.9A), animal motifs like *horin pohu* (deer) and *bhatou chorai* (parrot) are woven.

Pohu, *chorai* and *goch*, apart from *hingha*, became a part of *kinkhap* motif either inside the motif or externally. At times the motif is also woven without any of these combinations (refer to Plate 10.9 B). However, the orthogeneity of the motif in early years was kept intact in its structural form of that of *ahat pat* or *pipal* leaf. Modifications of this type were spontaneous initiated by master artisans of the place. In recent years, slight structural modifications seem to be prevalent in the motif. The leafy structure is elongated to fill in more features like peacock, parrot, tree, ferns, creeper, etc. (refer to Plate 10. 10). The motif that was known for its brocade work either in gold or silver threads is now made in yarns that artisans' think appropriate and fit. Use of spot works (referred as *mina bacha* works) is highly sought among customers apart from the traditional brocade pattern. *Mina bacha*, as artisans have

stated, is presumed by customers as traditional feature of the craft. Also, new set of fillings also feature in *kinkhap* motifs woven today.



On comparing the yester year *kinkhap* motifs and the present ones, it is found that the motif has either become extremely simplified (as seen in Plate 10.10 H, I & J) or being made enormously decorative for different categories of customers. Heterogeneous components representing rich wild life of Assam in the form of world renowned one horn rhino (*Gadh*) are added to the motif. Young customers, especially from the internal and intermediate categories, prefer these latter ones since it represents wildlife bounty of Assam for the state is known world over. In such type of heterogenetic changes, master weavers also working as graph masters, play an important role. These graphs men produce designs, which they think might generate attention from customers. It is important to mention here that religious motifs or ornamentation are not found produced in the *pat* and *muga* silk garments till the time of this work. Such ornamentation, since considered sacred was woven only on few fabrics of religious significance.

ii) Variations in *Kalka*

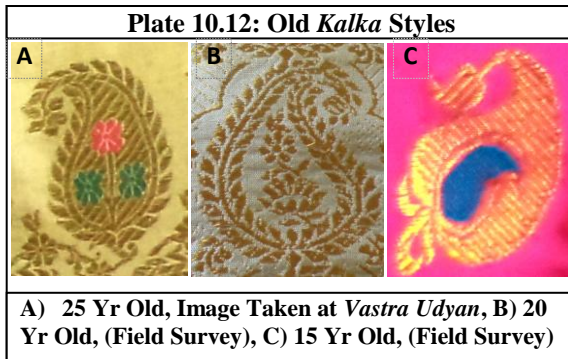
Yet another traditional and widely used motif like *kalka*, also referred as the *magar* motif, shows immense modification. The inside parts of the *kalka* motifs, in earlier times, were mostly filled with ferns (DasGupta, 1982) and flowers. *Kalka* is another

leaf design similar to the *ahat* leaf without its pointed end and equated with *kinkhap* motif found in the *mekhela* of the medieval period (Mazumder, 2006). The *kalka* and *kinkhap* motifs later on got transferred to different



fabrics (ibid). However, the *kalka* motif resembles more to the *aam* (mango) motif

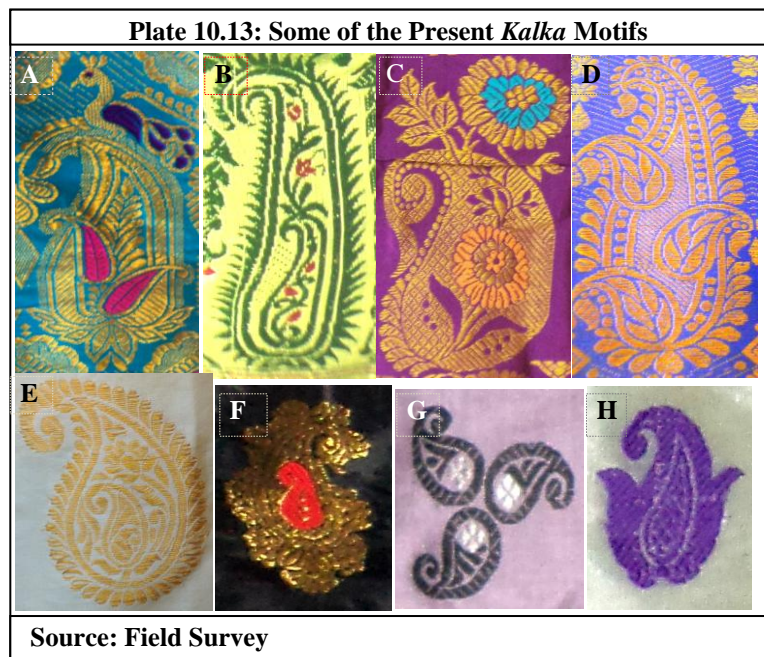
than the leaf. In present times, it is also called as the paisley motif.



The *kalka* as large motifs were mostly woven on the corners of the *chadar*, especially on *borkapor* used by the men. However, *kalka* also formed a favorite motif on women's silk

garments like *riha* usually on the exposed sides (refer to Plate 10.11). Rows of small

kalkas formed the *asu* along the *pari* (DasGupta, 1982; refer to Plate 10.5) works. In a fashion similar to *kinkhap*, the fillings have been made simple or complex depending upon the fashion preference of the targeted audiences. Creepers and ferns are not uncommon but are

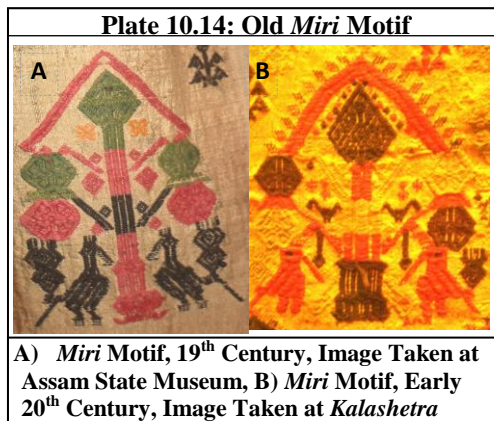


fashioned differently and *mina bacha* has become very common.

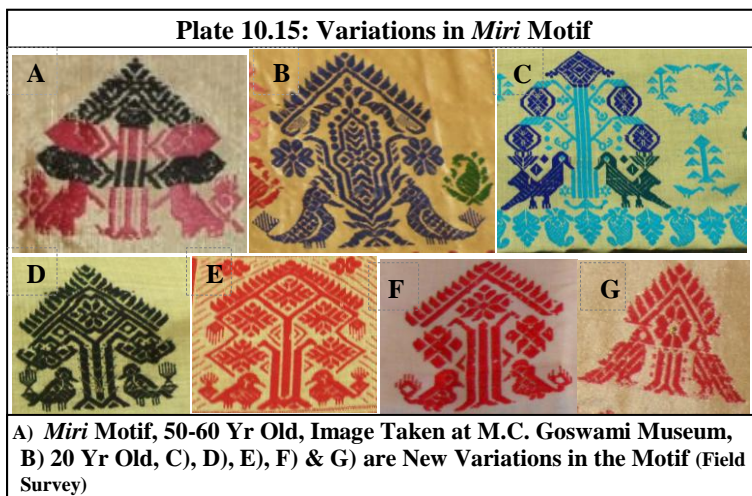
The pursuance of master artisans to giving unique touch in the motifs have also led to addition and deletion of some features and heterogenetic elements. However the change noted has been more in the recent decade. Some artisans derived inspiration from wedding cards, and have added *kalka* within a *kalka* and others arranged it in threesome manner. Like the *kinkhap*, structural modifications are common in the *kalka* to cover larger ends of the *aanchal* (the frontal portion of the *chadar* hanging from the shoulder) and the *mekhela*. Plate 10.12 & Plate 10.13 present some of the most becharming modification in this common motif of present times.

iii) Transformation in *Miri* & *Goch* Motifs

The *miri* motif, of all the tribal motifs of Assam, is the most predominantly used motif in textiles including *pat* and *muga*. This tree motif along with a pair of birds on both the sides with other tribal motifs like *barfi* (diamond, refer to Plate 10.4) is often drawn as the traditional design among all segments of customers. It is sometimes even woven without the pair of birds, but yet termed as *miri* design.



In earlier designs (refer to Plate 10.14), the motif flashed a tree laden with five large



flowers underneath which sat bird on each side of the tree trunk. The similar trend seems to be carried to the modern times too with some variations found in the number of flowers and design intricacy (refer to Plate 10.15).

However, it can be seen that the individual reliefs like bird, flower and tree have

become more prominent and sharp. One of the reasons for the sharpness of the motifs is the increasing use of design cards and improved looms which is prominently used nowadays to increase productivity. Training received by artisans on designs is also the reason for this positive feature in motifs and designs. Customers' orientation with respect to the type and number of reliefs also determines the prevalence of a particular type of *miri* motif in the market. Apart from that, individual artisans always attempt at creating a sort of newness in traditional motifs of the past yet keeping its orthogenetic integrity alive. Some other traditional motifs which have undergone modifications are also presented in Plate 10.15 to highlight the change in motif's design. Among yet another traditional motif set, *jalpahiya* design, *barfi*, *mayur*, and *lata* patterns have been modified to a large extent.

10.4.1c Application of Novel Designs in Silk Fabrics of Sualkuchi

The weaving occupation at Sualkuchi, during the 1940s shifted from domestic to more commercialized activity. Soon country looms got replaced with fly shuttle and jacquard looms. The period between the years 1945-1950s and thereafter, was a period of renaissance in design development. It got further fillip due to involvement of some skillful artisans at commercial level. Expert craftsmen of the village under master artisans like Kaliram Karigar (died, 1968) remained constantly engaged in graphing out new designs which led to development of motifs like *raj-mukut* (king's crown, refer to Plate 10.17 A & B), *monimala* (garland or necklace, refer to Plate 10.17 D), bottleneck motif, *mousak* (honeycomb), *hatipati* (refer to Plate 10.18) etc. (Field Survey, oral history of yester year artisans). Paisa motifs portraying *panch paisa* (five paisa) and *dus paisa* (ten paisa) coins were employed as a symbol of modern economy (Deuri, 2014).

Under the supervision of Kaliram Karigar, artisans Rajen Deka and Dharmeswar Karigar developed the Kaziranga design on graph (J. Bhorali, p. 51, cited in Das, 2008) prior to 1946. Since then, this design has become synonymous with the textile tradition of Assam along with other traditional designs like *kinkhap*, *magar* and *miri*. The design is woven on almost all silk fabrics and is absorbed today in the traditional design heritage. Brief information on its modification is provided below to illustrate change in this design.

i) **Kaziranga Pattern and its Design Transformation**

Singh-pahu bacha kapor (fabrics with lion-deer motifs) was worn by royal members and by elite people on special occasion (Samman, 1897). It also included bird,



rosebud and shrine arranged in rows one after the other (ibid). The borders have *pan kata* patterns or leaves (ibid). Samman's (1897) work also mentions *hati gach*

(elephant and tree) indicating a design representing some kind of a wild habitat. However, *rhino* motif never finds any mention in the literature on old motifs of Assam. It suggests that *Kaziranga* pattern evolved out of artisans bid to reintroduce these motifs that might depict Assam's wildlife bounty. Kaziranga, since a famous national park, was introduced in the form of design by the artistic minds of the time. *Kaziranga* pattern is a new design form conceived by the artisans.

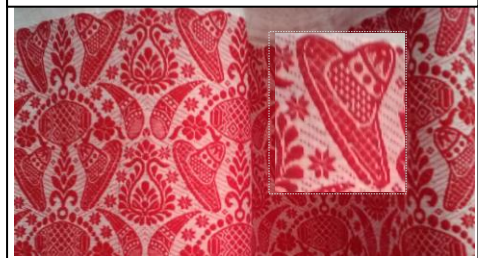
In its original form, the *Kaziranga* pattern included *pohu*, *chorai*, *gadh* and *lata* (as understood from interviews with old artisans). The design restored a peaceful narrative of the wild life present in Kaziranga National Park. Yesteryear artisans seemed to exhibit Assam and its available resources to the world through their designs (as narrated by Sailen Sarma, 75 year old). Since its inception, the design has undergone several changes with respect to the placement of the individual reliefs, inclusion and substitution of several old and new elements. The *Kaziranga* pattern today seems more boisterous and disturbed. New designs show different animals as drowned and running helter-skelter to survive the floods (from the interview with artisans, refer to Plate 10.16b A & C). Apart from the regular animals, *hati* (elephant)

and *mayur* (peacock) are also added to the original design line and the trees have grown larger in size (Babul Mali, 65 year old artisan).



Kaliram Karigar, also developed *Ashok Sthambh*³ design and wove it on *pat cheleng chadar* and *gamosa*. But Bimala Prasad Chaliha, the then chief minister of Assam, asked him to discontinue producing the design (as narrated by his grandson Ganesh Karigar). Most of the designs produced on *gamochas*⁴ also started to become part of silk fabrics. According to anthropologist Prof. Medhi too, designs as seen today are mostly inculcated into silk garments from *gamocha* (interview, 2016). *Japi* design (refer to Plate 10.25) is one such design that made its way onto *muga mekhela chadar* from this revered piece in the last four decades. However, its placement on *pat* was even later and is more prevalent only since the last decade (interviews with artisans). Apart from this, artisans were also inspired by the *banarasi* print saris (oral history of yesteryear master artisans) that had already made inroads

Plate 10.16c: Japi on Pat Chadar

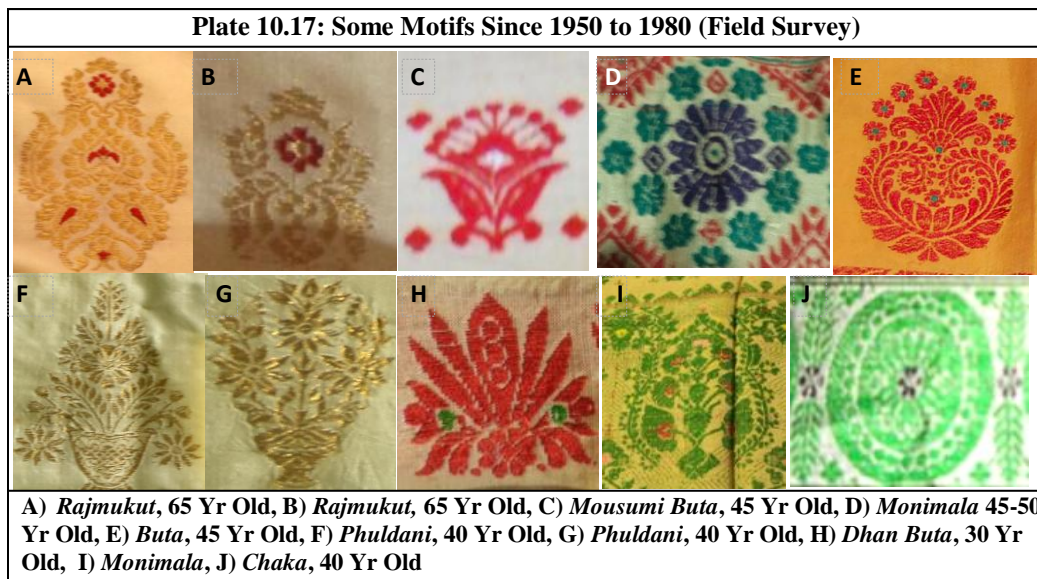


Source: Field Survey

³ Ashok Sthamb design was as inspiration drawn from the pillars of Ashoka which were built during the reign of Mauryan king Ashoka (3rd Century B.C) in India.

⁴ *Gamocha* as a cloth piece has a great significance for the people of Assam. It is generally rectangular in shape, on the white body of which ornamentation work is done in red on both ends. It is generally made with cotton yarn. It is basically a small piece of cloth to cover scriptures but is also used by men as waist cloth or hung around the neck at the prayer hall. In the past and even today, it is used over the shoulder to signify social respect and status. Guests are welcomed with *gamocha* and elders are respected by offering this cloth in Assam.

by then (Allen, 1899). Its prettier ornamental designs were yet not adopted by the Assamese weavers as Allen again writes that improvement in design was necessary for artisans to stay in competition with the imported saris. Manmat Baishya and other septuagenarian artisans like Jagdish Bharali remember some of the designs being inspired from the sari prints in later stages. Master artisans of the place competed with each other to develop novel designs for the slowly increasing customer base of the towns. Growing likes of the customers towards *banarasi* prints was inspiring master artisans to creating new patterns.



During the early seventies period, ornamental designs like *junbiri*, *kanphuli*, *dugdugi*, *dhol* and *pepa* as well as *japi* were introduced in *muga mekhela chadars*. The growing acceptance of the designs in *pat* prompted artisans to introduce the designs in *muga* too. Customer orientation was towards designs with traditional touch. The design having combination of ornamentation and musical instruments came to be known as *dolma-deli* (refer to Plate 10.23). In *pat*, it was only introduced during the later part of 1980s. Some designs portraying metal objects like *kalasi* were also introduced during this period. Other names that yesteryear artisans like Dharani Thakuria (65 Year Old) recall are the *phuldani* (flower vase), *dhansiri* (name of a river in Assam), *ramdhenu* (rainbow), *anaras* (pineapple), etc. Round shaped motifs known as *chakra*, *biscuit*, *gadi chaka* (wheels of vehicles), etc. were also introduced during this period. Each of these designs has yet again undergone further transmutation while some like the *anaras* pattern is produced no more.

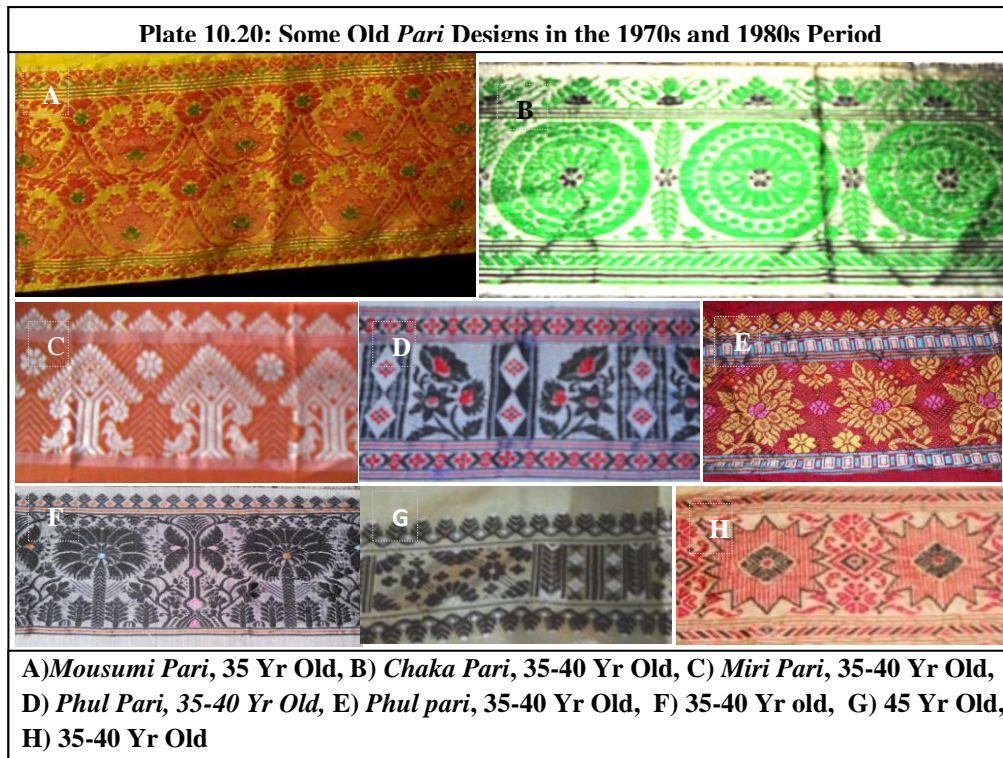
ii) Common Ornamentation Style from 1960s till the 1980s Period

Observation of the old fabrics highlight that simplicity remained very pronounced in ornamentation. According to some yesteryear artisans and dealers of the silk garments, the ornamentation



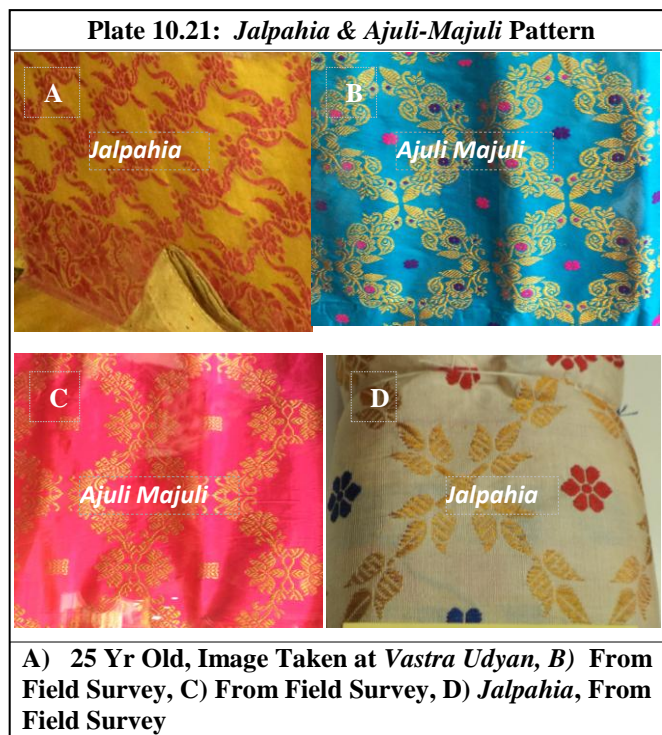
till late 1960s, remained only on one end or *anchal* of the *chadar*, especially on those items produced for commercial exchange. The *mekhela* was ornamented more than a quarter from the bottom but not beyond. If at all ornamented, the body *butas* were small and lay scattered. But, one of the unique characteristics found in the designs on the silk fabrics during this period was the symphony of the body *butas* and *pari* works (refer to Plate 10.18 & Plate 10.19). That is, the *buta* constituted major or minor portion of the *pari* work to give the entire ornamentation a synchronic appearance.

By the 1970s, the decoration was replicated on both ends of the *chadar*, but the *butas* remained scattered and widespread. The use of dyed yarn in ornamentation was also limited to few colors primarily in black, green, yellow, red and blue. Use of different hues of *rolex* or metallic yarn, apart from the regular gold and silver is also seen. Till the later part of the 1980s, the *buta* and *pari* features were presented in harmonious manner. The *buta* on the body of the fabric complemented the *pari* (refer to Plate 10.19), *Hatipati* design with *pari* complementing the *butas*; in connection to *hatipati* design, some old artisans argue that the original form also had *kalgach* (banana plant) and *tora* (stars).



The *pari* works during this period (refer to Plate 10.20) presented a distinction with respect to the earlier patterns as shown in Plate 10.4 & Plate 10.5. Some of the traditional motifs like *miri* were produced in the *pari* whereas new designs like *chaka* and biscuit were also placed in between parallel *asu* to form a *pari* (refer to Plate 10.20B). Master artisans strived continuously to produce newer designs which can garner customer demand.

The period post 1945 till the 1980s saw revolutionizing change in the designs and presentation style of the motifs on the fabrics. New designs were developed by master artisans highlighting heterogeneity, as well as old designs like *miri* and *barfi* were modified yet keeping the orthogeneity in place. The changes were more rapid due to



competition arising in the *pat* and *muga* markets. Artisan cooperative societies, during

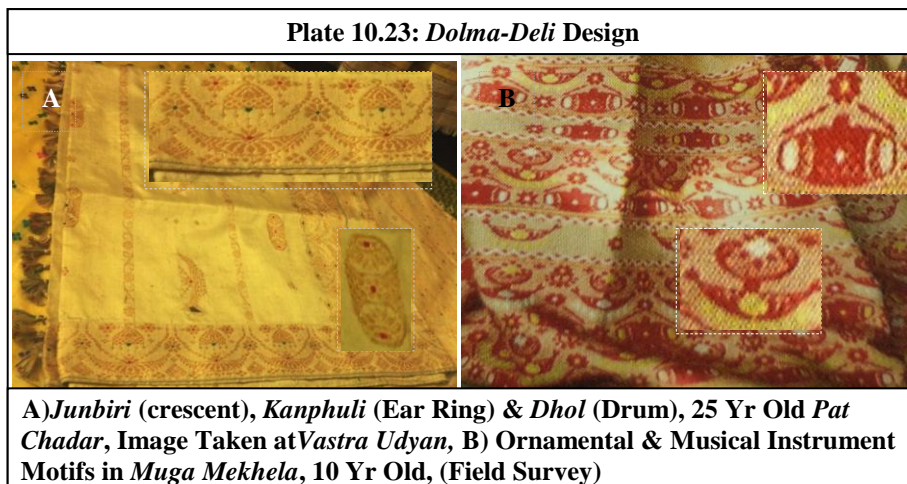
this period, were also increasing in number, as a result of which competition to grab intermediate markets was growing. According to the Registrar of Cooperatives of Assam, in the year 1951-52, the number of cooperatives in Assam was 662, which went up to 7218 in 1971-82, out of which weavers cooperative societies numbered 1203. The first artisan cooperative society was the Assam Cooperative Silk House which started functioning in 1938 with a sales centre at Guwahati.

iii) Ornamentation Post 1980s Period

In the 1980s period, some of the old designs were renamed and modified to suit the growing sentiments of the people. *Jalpahi* design was reintroduced as *ajuli-majuli* design in more simplistic or complex forms. Designs like *satbhoni* were brought forth around the year 1985 and *monikut* or *mandir* (temple) pattern also came into being. The stronger sentiments growing for the unity of the seven states in the North East region of India, the Land of the seven sisters, sobriquet first coined by Jyoti Prasad Saikia during the 1972 period, was marketed to internal and intermediate customers of Assam. Artisans banked upon the sentiments or perhaps gave their artistic expressions through the *satbhoni* design.



The master artisans and graphs men of the place added two more leaf like strands to



the *miri gach buta* to make it appear like a seven leafed *gach* known as *satbhoni* (refer to Plate 10.22).

Other than this, the motif encompassing seven *gol butas* in the form of flower, similar to the *monimala* also constitutes the kernel of the *satbhoni* design. Yet today, this design is famous and in great demand among buyers for its traditional outlook. New designs like *dhara* (flow of water droplets) were also conceived to add to the heterogeneous design line.



The design presentation, in this period, was made compact. Every possible space was filled to give the designs succinct appearance. Another ornamental feature was the conjugation of several individual motifs to form a single design. Local customers

appreciated the dense ornamentation in many colors. Since this period, maximum use of several colors in a single garment piece became prevalent. During the 1990s, more heterogeneity could be seen in this regard. Artisans aspired towards producing contrasting effect through the use of different *butas* and *pari* works to give the ornamentation a fresh effect. The simplicity found in the designs turned more conspicuous. *Pari* designs were either simplified to a greater extent (refer to Plate 24) or simply enlarged to cover wider part of the *anchal* and the bottom of the *mekhela*. More than ever intermix of designs (refer to Plate 10.26 b) took



place in the last one and a half decade. Fusion of several motifs is done to produce new patterns.



Artisans have also shifted towards fancy designs rather than producing realistic motifs as in the past giving way to more heterogeneity. At times, the synchronicity followed earlier in selection of *buta* and *pari* design is also modulated. Heterogenetic designs are also an inspiration from the prints on bed sheets and *banarasi* saris. Local *mahajans* and intermediaries like Lakhi Das and Abhijeet Thakuria from Sualkuchi

village collect different such prints of bed sheets from the market and ask master artisans to produce it on graphs to be implemented later on Assamese Garments (as found during field Survey and interviews with these intermediaries). This has also brought heterogeneity in present design elements in the Sualkuchi products. The designs have enlarged much in size even spreading through the length and breadth of the fabrics. Individual motifs are also gigantized to cover more space. Local customers' choices and demands of fanciful ornamentation works have resulted in more enlarged and fanciful ornamentation. *Pat* and *muga* has become customary dress today in social practices like marriage. Customers always tend to ask for designs which are different than the fellow buyers. The shapes of the designs are well defined and more realistic in present times.

Plate 10.27: Mandir Design on 8 Yr old *Chadar*



Source: Field Survey

Plate 10.28: *Nachoni*



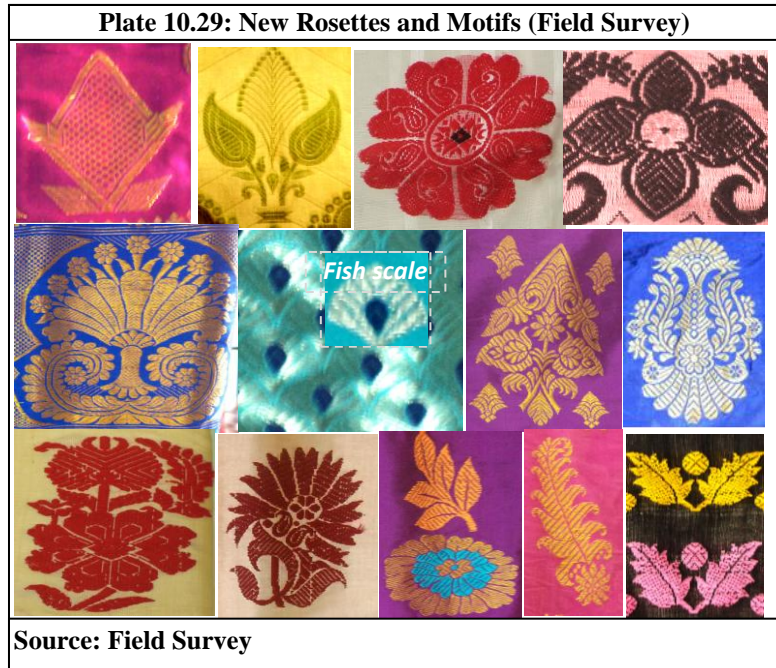
Source: Field Survey

Another striking dimension in recent decade is the making of the *pari* separately and then affixing it onto the borders, especially on the lengthwise side of the *chadars*. *Pari* works, generally, the lengthwise ones, were earlier woven simultaneously on the fabric. New technique is adopted to increase speed

and quantity of the production. Moreover, it also makes it easier to work out separate designs on single fabric which is much liked among intermediate as well as local customers of Assam.

The commercialization of *pat* and *muga* fabrics and customers' frequent orientation towards new designs have also resulted in inclusion of several sacred motifs used only in religious fabrics. *Podum* (lotus) and *golap* (rose) motifs, considered sacrosanct and made usually on religious cloths, are nowadays produced on all types of *pat* and *muga* fabric (Chetia, 2016). Swan and peacock motifs are still woven on *gosain kapor* but

the latter is woven on other garments too. In earlier times however, *mayur* motif was woven only on clothes meant for the kings and nobles. The *kalasi* motif is also used on *mekhela chadar* in various modified forms and shape (refer to Plate 10.34 B). As mentioned earlier,



mandir or *monikut* (temple) design motif is also produced on silk garments (refer to Plate 10.27). Use of representational motifs like *nachoni* (dancing girl, in this case women performing *bihu* dance; refer to Plate 10.28) is also seen in present times showing a total shift in world of designs in Assamese costumes. Some of the new rosettes and leafy motifs made today bear no resemblance to the *phul butas* and *pankata* done in earlier times showing complete heterogeneity in the design line.

10.4.2 Commercialization and the Shift in Use of Raw materials

A) General Fabric

Though intermix of *pat* and *muga* silk as well as *pat* and cotton yarn was not a very uncommon practice in Assam in earlier period, the commercialization of the craft accelerated the practice. Old records of the 19th century highlight this practice. Pure *pat* and *muga* were costly silk reserved for the upper echelons of the society. Hence, *pat* silk was mixed with cotton to produce a close variety of fabric resembling silk (Samman, 1897). *Muga*, popular as Assam silk, was also combined with cotton to produce *muga-boronia kapor* (*muga* colored fabric) for *chadar*, *gamocha* and *thaans* for coats, *chapkan*, etc. (ibid). Cotton was very often mixed with *muga* or *pat* silk either in warp or weft to produce mixed yarn for *churia*, *mekhela* and *riha* (Allen, 1899; Maxwell-Lefroy and Ansorge, 1917). However such textiles were mainly used for local consumption only. During the early 20th century, weavers in Guwahati and

Sualkuchi had started using mill spun silk (ibid). Small quantity of *pat* silk production was sufficient only for domestic consumption and hence around 40 to 50 maunds of Chinese silk were regularly imported to Sualkuchi (Bahadur, 1915). But it is reported that the import of cheaper silk from Bengal led to some degeneration of the *pat* and *muga* industry in Assam (Gupta, 1909). The pure silk textiles traded during the 1826 to 1919 period were coarse yet high priced and it was observed that unless quality was improved, factory produced cheaper Banaras (in Uttar Pradesh) and Bhagalpur (in Bihar) fabric would drive out Assamese silk (F. C. Barua, 1880 cited in Barpujari, 1993). Bengal and Bihar produces a kind of silk, called *tasar* similar to the *muga* silk but comparatively cheaper. Probably since then, the use of *tasar* might have initiated in Assam though on an inconspicuous scale.

However, there is no documented information related to use of *muga* or *pat* with *tasar* silk. Somehow its use with *muga* on a large scale only materialized during the past few centuries and is now on a full scale today after the first commercial *mekhela chadar* came to be produced. Since pure *muga* and *pat* are costly and expensive for many to purchase, artisans started to mix the yarns to reach larger customer base. The other reason for its intermixing, as found through interviews during field survey was also due to the artisans' own economic feasibility. Using silk yarn in warp as well as weft is costlier. Hence, artisans resort to using a cheaper variety of silk, cotton or any other yarn in either the warp or the weft. Apart from the use of cotton with silk, generally in case of *pat*,

Plate 10.30: Pat Chadar in Contrasting Hues



Source: Field Survey

polyester fiber is also mixed in present times either in the warp or the weft to produce a less expensive fabric. Further degummed raw silk yarn application is also on the rise. Use of raw silk⁵ has been there even in early times (as seen in an early 20th

⁵ Raw silk contains sericin, a kind of gummy substance. This substance is usually removed through boiling the silk to produce yarn which leaves the resultant silk smooth and lustrous.

century *mekhela chadar* found in *Kalashetra*). However, the use of raw silk, known as *kesa pat* is much more profound today due to its lesser cost and tensility. Since little less expensive than generally used *pat* fiber, local and intermediate customers mostly also prefer buying this *pat* fabric.

B) Dyeing

The general practice in *pat* and *muga* was to not dye, but yet *pat* was sometimes considered for dyeing in places like Mangaldoi (Allen, 1899). *Muga* was used in its natural golden color (Maxwell-Lefroy and Ansorge, 1917). Traditionally, some colored thread ran across borders at one end in *garidia riha* and *chadars* with strips running crossways and lengthways (Barua, 1961). Even these threads were in primary colors like white, red, green, yellow and black. It is stated that tribes only generally dyed their yarns with indigenous mixtures of blue and black (Hutchison, 1909). Dyed fabrics in the plains of the province were far less favored than in the hills and among the tribes (Samman, 1897). The Assamese populace, at least in silk, loved to stay less colorful but with utmost artistic sense (Ghosh and Ghosh, 2000). But bleached or dyed silk was used for producing clothes for the costumes of Synteng, Khasi and Garo women of Meghalaya (Bahadur, 1915). Samman (1897) had noted in the past that ‘dyeing among the people of Assam is an art of the past at one time universally known but now being rapidly forgotten’. In Brahmaputra valley, only Sualkuchi artisans used considerable amount of dyed silk with only colors in vogue being red, black, yellow, blue and green, all in deep shades (Bahadur, 1915; Allen, 1899).

Bahadur also mentions that ‘dyeing in pale color is unknown in Assam and is not perhaps liked by the people’ (page 51). At Sualkuchi during the 1890s period, artisans still used natural dyes like lac, *bomrati* (*Symplocos grandiflora*) leaves, *thekera thenga* (*Gorcinia Pedunculata*) and alum, *hilikha* nuts (*Myrobolans*), etc. (Duncan, 1896 cited in Bahadur, 1915). However, little further in Guwahati, some amount of fast chemical dyes was used for *pat* silk (Maxwell-Lefroy and Ansorge, 1917). Colored mill made threads especially in red, blue, green and yellow hues in different shades were also becoming popular (Duncan, 1896 cited in Samman, 1897). However, as per interviews with old artisans, the base color of the fabric was made with dyed *pat* yarn used only in the *bani* (weft) while the *digh* (warp) was made in *pat* in its original hue. Today, both the warp and the weft yarns are dyed and used in the

making of the fabric, sometimes in the same color shade and at times in a separate combination to produce different shades.

Dyed silk from Bengal and China had already been pouring into Assam, yet its use was not very prevalent (Gupta, 1909) except for tribal garments. However, the arrival of *banarasi* silk into the Assam economy got due acceptance, especially among the commoners, mostly the Assamese (Ahmad, 1990). This might have also resulted in native artisans slowly adopting dyed silk yarn in garments to address the requirements of new generation of customers. However, the use of colored *pat* fabric is on the rise only since the last few decades. According to elderly respondents, during the middle part of the last century, *pat* was preferred among customers in white or cream hue.

Pat garments, in those days, were a status symbol and preferred by the richer segments. As customer segment for the *pat* garments grew, some newer hues like *mosur dal* color, *kamala*, surf color and green were added to the existing hues. Only since the last three decades the interpretations of colors have veered towards shades of prominent pink, deep green or magenta (Deuri, 2014). Now there are several shades found for each color. Artisans tried producing the fabrics in the colors of customers' choice which led to addition of many hues. Also, according to artisans, more choice of colors opens the door for creative ornamentation and gives customers a plethora of colors to choose from. Use of yarns in multiple colors is also practised today to create fabrics with contrasting hues (refer to Plate 10.30). Artisans also acknowledge adding yellow color to generate more shine to *muga*. Another prominent change in the dyeing of silk is the reverting to traditional dyeing methods. Though this art is almost dead, it has seen revival in recent times among a few entrepreneurial artisans of the place. The reason has been the renewed demand for naturally dyed or organic silk clothes among customers. International customers are more inclined to organic dyeing in silk which has yielded more opportunities for the artisans.

C) Ornamentation

The shift in the use of raw materials, especially for the purpose of ornamentation of *pat* and *muga* silk garments is astounding. Old items from the late medieval period to 20th century found in the museums of Assam provide information on the use of cotton and metallic threads in gold color. Cotton yarns used for ornamentation were only in

colors of red, yellow, black and green. For brocade works *guna* wires, that is metallic gold wires were used (Gupta, 1908). Apart from that, ornamentation in *pat* garments was primarily done with *muga* yarns (Allen, 1899; also from observation of old products). On *muga* garments, cotton yarn was the primary choice for ornamentation. Maximum use of red and black cotton fiber was made for the decoration work in *muga*. However, the inflow of imported silk yarns into the region brought in its limited use on silk garments among the weavers of Assam. In Sualkuchi and Barpeta, silk clothes were embroidered with colored silk yarn like the Kashmiri shawls (Maxwell-Lefroy and Ansorge, 1917). *Pat* weavers in Sualkuchi generally made borders of *pat* silk in four colors and made damask with a pattern over the whole fabric (ibid). The weaving was simple, plain or twilled (ibid). Till mid 1950s and to the 60s period, not much change could be seen in the use of raw materials for ornamentation. However, in the last two decades great fusion of colors can be seen in the use of colored yarn. Apart from the use of silk threads for ornamentation, artificial yarns such as polyester are also seen. Brocade work or *guna kata*, as called colloquially, that used to be done in gold wires are now also done with *rolex* threads (artificial metallic yarn) that come in several hues. The use of silver color for brocades is also on the rise. Other than this, several other cheap variants of *rolex* yarns are also available made of nylon and other materials. Artisans' choice of the yarn for ornamentation depends on the price of the cloth, the use of the cloth and the customer segment. But, outright shift can be seen in the use of yarn quality for ornamentation purpose.

10.4.3 The Shift in Functionality of the Craft and Innovation in Product Line

Pat and *muga* garments such as *mekhela chadar*, *riha*, etc. comprise the traditional dress of the people of Assam. In earlier times, it remained as the associated with royal and upper classes and for those who could afford. Slowly, silk garments also came to be worn by common people on special occasions, as a result of which the demand for the fabrics increased more and more with time. However, other than serving the purpose of garments, the fabrics were also used as economic exchanges. Apart from traditional garments, weavers also produced *thaans* in *muga* and *pat*. It is registered in historical literature that artisans used to weave *thaans* to pay in lieu of taxes to the *Ahom* kings. During the 18th century, one weaver by the name Gondhoram Morol wove *muga thaans* for the service (Gunabhi Ram Barua, 1972 as cited in Das, 2008).

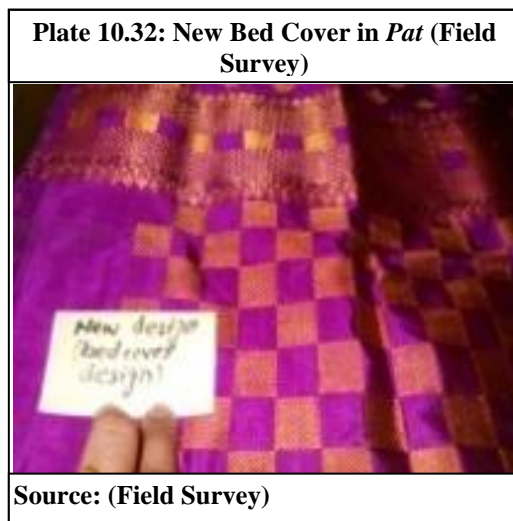
Since earlier times, silk fabrics have been used for various functional purposes. There



have been references of the use of *eri* silk for producing *talpara* (bed sheet) (Samman, 1897: 107). However, bed sheet produced from *muga*, is believed to have been seen since the time of famous artisan of Sualkuchi named Kaliram Karigar (died 1968) and Parshuram Baishya. A specimen of his hand woven *muga* bed sheet, around 65 years old in bottle neck design, is shown in Plate 10.31. The

product had only few wealthy takers then, mostly among the officers of the tea gardens and military personnel (from interview and oral history).

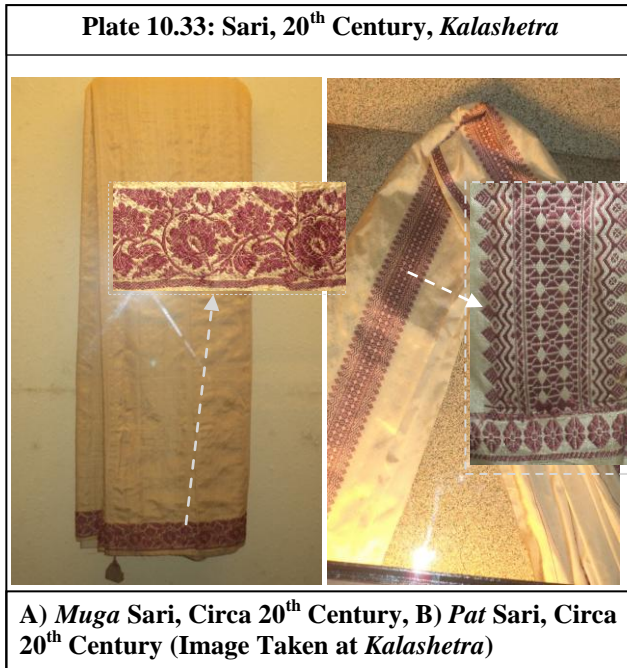
Even today, producers of bed sheet are very few, but the product is gaining demand in recent years. Artisans and entrepreneurs like Hiralal Kalita, Lakhi Das and Harekrishna Baishya supply few to buyers from Delhi. Also, due to the rise of interior decoration and home furnishing segments, aristocratic customers from Guwahati, as well, buy the product. There is more demand for traditional design elements on



the bed sheet. Apart from the shift in use of colors to polychromatic ones, heterogeneous design elements found in printed bed sheets are also produced on *muga* bed covers. Bed covers are also produced today in *pat* silk (refer to Plate 10.32).

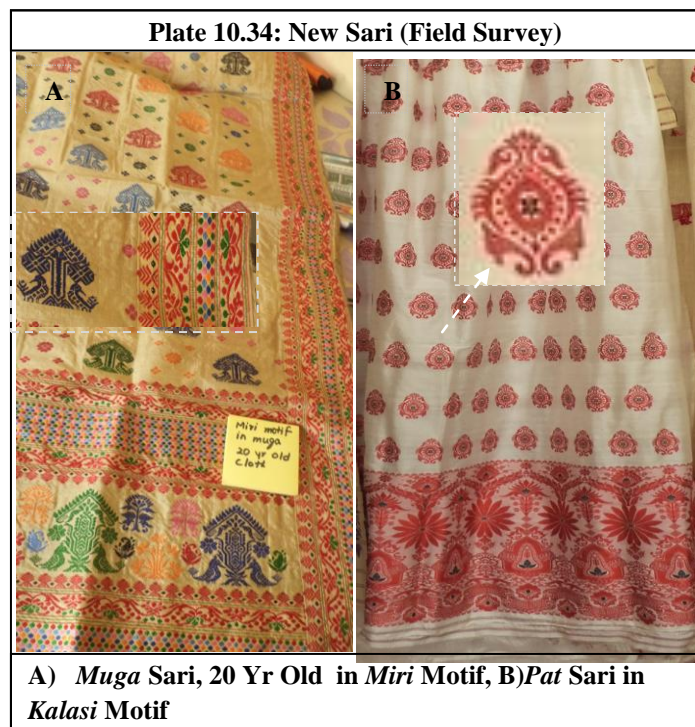
Artisans also produce sari in *pat* and *muga*, apart from traditional garments, for customers belonging to towns and cities. The demand for sari is also among regional tourists visiting Sualkuchi and Assam. However, the importance of functionality of the sari in *pat* and *muga*, among a small but important customer base was realized much earlier. It has been recorded by Allen that *banarasi* silk saris were giving tough

competition to Assam silk as the former types were much prettier ornamentally and cheaper (1899).



Allen noted that improvement in design novelty in colors was urgently required to stay in competition. Probably, the competition from imported sari created the need among the artisans to produce sari for a developing customer base. Reference to production and export of sari exists in the record of Pakyntein (1961). He stated that *muga* saris of Sualkuchi

enjoyed great repute in West Bengal (ibid). From oral history of the elderly artisans, it is found that large scale production of sari initiated in 1980s. However, prior to that too around the period 1950s and 1960s, saris were produced. Some octogenarian artisans reminisces the story of their father, who used to produce saris. It was basically produced for the wives of the army personals and tea garden managers. *Muga* sari was sold at a staggering price of Rs. 3000 then, especially to Bengali customers. But the saris were simple with little decoration on the borders, especially of *lata phul*. Similarly, *pat* saris were also produced. Much since then, sari has undergone transformative change with respect to design



and hue. Like the *chadars*, the saris are also ornamented profusely with traditional as well as fancy motifs (refer to Plate 10.34 B).

During the 1960s, artisans developed baby *jora* (pair), a pair of *mekhela chadar* woven on a single piece of fabric for girls attaining their first puberty. It was designed with a view to accommodate two garments at the cost of one. The functional dimension of the craft was changed to customers who wanted to buy the garment for young girls and who did not wish to invest upon costly garments. But now as customers have grown richer, the product is discontinued as they willingly buy the two piece *mekhela chadar* at any cost.

During the 1970s, *ek phulia mekhela* in *pat* as well as *muga* or a combination of

Plate 10.35: Ek Phulia Mekhela in Pat (Field Survey)



A) Lata Phul, 30-35 Yr Old, B) Phul Jali, 25-30 Yr Old

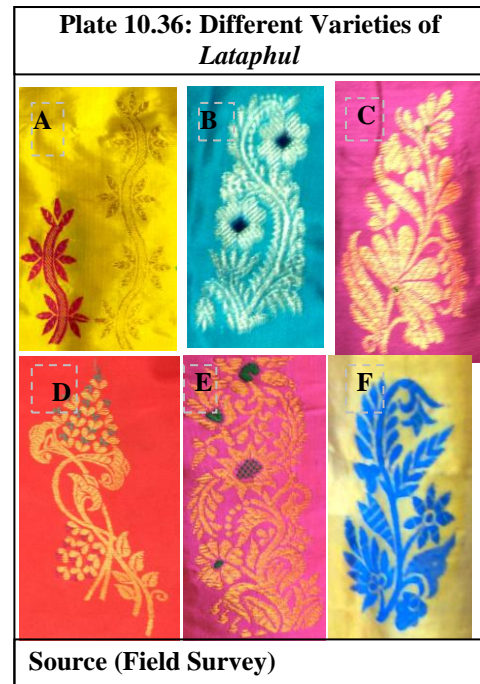
different silk yarns was also produced in large scale to cater to growing demand for silken *mekhela* which is less expensive than the traditional pair of *mekhela* and *chadar*. This *ek phulia mekhela* could be worn with any other piece of *chadar*. Besides this, its production also is faster as the same motif is repeated covering a quarter or more portion of the *mekhela*. The vertical alignment of

the *lata*, during this period, was a new stylistic representation and a shift from its traditional horizontal placement. *Lata phul* is also produced in in-animated forms simply representing the idea of *lata*. The *lata phul* is woven in various forms today (refer to Plate 10.36).

In early days, artisans of Sualkuchi were engaged in the production of plain *thaans*. Apart from the domestic *mekhela chadar* and *riha*, *Garo Bhuni* dress of the Garo tribe was the first type of commercial dress woven at Sualkuchi (Bhuyan, 1930). Till the late 1980s, the artisans wove plain sheets of 10 meters length, blouse pieces, sari, *khasijim* (skirt and scarf used by Khasi tribe), *khasi dhara*, *garidia chadar* (Baishya, 1986; 2005) and *Jemseng* (Das, 2008). The production of these garments still

continues at Sualkuchi and its nearby villages. However, innovation in the product line could be seen post the 1990s period. According to some prominent artisans of the place like Hiralal Kalita and Harekrishna Baishya, innovation in product line has picked up pace reportedly since 1999 due to the arrival of tourists to Sualkuchi.

Tourists demand for fabrics that are useful functionally has led to development of stoles, scarves and mufflers. Demand for naturally dyed silk clothes has reinstated the dyeing practice. Not many but few artisans make bed sheets, bed covers, pillow covers, table covers, and curtains, file covers, cushion



covers, necktie, sofa covers, curtains, jacket, scarf, sari, traditional dresses, bags, etc. Cushion covers in *muga* and *pat* are very much in demand outside Assam and India (Bora as cited in Junaita Kakoty, 2012). *Jholas* are made out of fabrics ornamented with various geometric structures and floral patterns (Chandra Bhusan, 2005) are a good buy among young customers, especially girls. Artisans are

also producing traditional wears of the tribes like *dakhna* of the Bodos as customers, particularly wholesome buyers, come to the doorsteps from Udalguri and Kokrajhar.

Artisans have started producing plain as well as ornamented sheets in specific dimensions that suit the requirements of a particular item. Other than this, artisans are also weaving shirt pieces in approximate dimension of 3 meters and 36 inches. *Kurta* pieces are also woven with designs specifically falling on the button line and neck line and on the frontal portion and back. Silk garments are sought by customers in various functional ways. Specially customized pieces of *kurta* for men and *salwar kameez* for women are developed as dressing pattern of the modern and young customers has changed. Artisans no longer produce them only as *thaan* pieces but in specific size for specific requirement. Due to technical improvisation, a range of 15 new products and 57 new designs are developed at Sualkuchi in recent years (Sualkuchi: Assam ka Manchester, 2015, n.p). Other than these products, there are specially produced jacket pieces for children and for young as well as old customers. Heavily brocaded blouse pieces are also produced for young women as party wears (refer to Plate 10.38).

Plate 10.38: Brocade Blouse Piece with Mina Work, Lata



Source: (Field Survey)

However, most of the smaller products made from *pat* and *muga* silk fabrics like hair bands, mobile pouches, purses, etc. are valued added products. Young artisans of the locality with training in cutting and tailoring are producing these functional items which garner great demand in the market. *Muga* umbrellas are also the outcome of such product diversification.

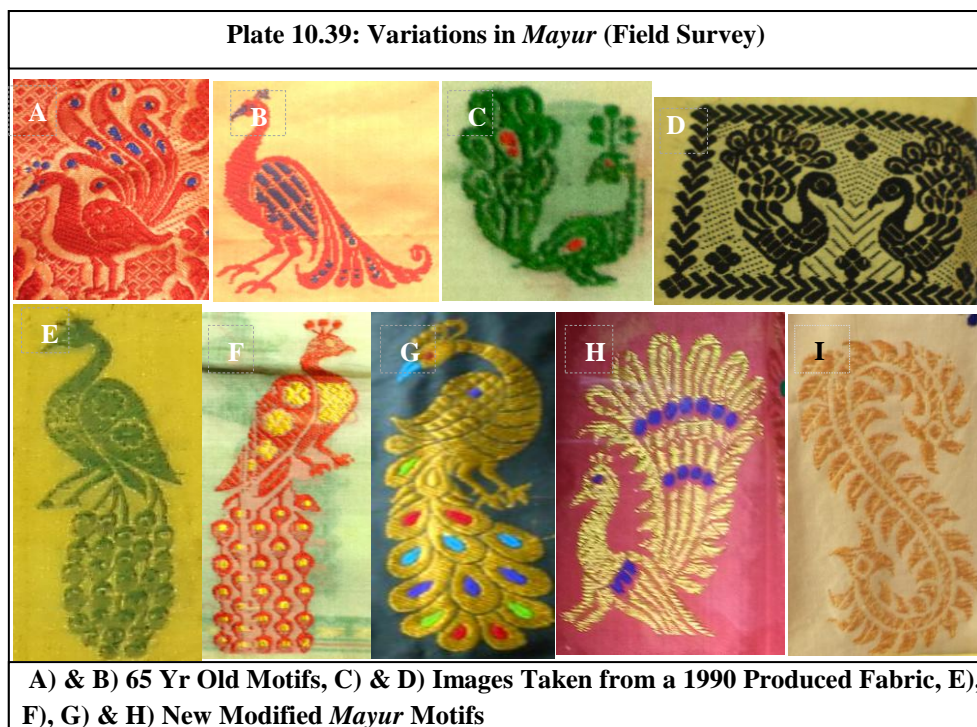
10.5 External Agencies and Intermediaries and their Role in Commercialization of Pat & Muga Craft

During the late 19th century, *pat* and *muga* garments were not produced commercially at a significant level. Locally, artisans used to sell their products through village *haats* or bazaars. Most of the times, it were the dealers and agents who normally used to buy the fabrics from home or *haats* or engaged weavers to make the pieces (Maxwell-Lefroy and Ansonge, 1917). However, at Sualkuchi, artisans were trying to form their own association and cooperatives to sell their products (ibid). Around 1929, professional weavers from Sualkuchi who had some access to the markets in Guwahati were selling the products directly (Khadria, 1992) to the intermediate

audiences. Sale of products at local levels was done directly to the consumer and inter district trade was very limited and if at all done, was made by the Marwari traders (Samman, 1897) who exported it to Calcutta and Sylhet (Phukan, 2012). Other than the dealers and the local agents, some vendors also used to buy the produce and hawk them in many other places of the region (Samman, 1897). During this period local intermediaries played the role of sales agents for the weavers and their role in design development or modification was very limited or nil.

A) Role of Cooperatives and Local Middlemen

Once commercial activity went full-fledged post the Second World War period, design modification and stylistic changes started to take place. Originally, it was the master artisans of the village who started conceiving several new designs and formulated them on graphs to be reproduced on the fabrics. However, in later periods, some master artisans like Umaram Kalita and Biren Das also assumed the role of intermediaries. Artisan's Cooperative Society like Kalpataru (established 1941), started playing the role of change agents. These intermediaries informed artisans of the villages working for them to produce designs that were more in demand in various markets. Even then, the greater part in modification was played by the master graphs men of the place.



But local intermediaries like *mahajans* (or middlemen) advise artisans about type of fabric and design. They also suggest artisans the dimensions of the garments. In a way, intermediaries brought standardization in size. Earlier, the garments were woven according to the height and size of the customer. *Mekhela* today comes at a standard size of 36 or 38 inches in breadth by 2.40 meter in length. In the same way, *chadar* comes in between 40 inches to 45 inches in breadth and 3 meters in length while sari is 48 inches in breadth and 5.49 meters in length. *Thek paana* (narrow breadth) *chadars* are also there which is 32 inches in breadth and is 2.75 meters in length. Intermediaries have also brought in standard size for *thaan* pieces based upon the ultimate use of the fabric. General sizes of the *thaan* range from 32 inches to 54 inches breadth wise and 10 to 12 meters in length.

Over the years, the role of the local intermediaries has grown. Some intermediaries like Harekrishna Baishya collects designs found in other modern textiles and ask artisans to develop the pattern. Lakhi Das still articulates designs from *banarasi* silk saris and bed sheets and asks his artisans to produce accordingly. Local middleman Manoj Kumar Baishya sells his fabrics to some Afghan people too who use the *pat* and *muga* fabric as *paguri* (turban). American customers seek for *pat* and *muga dupatta* (a piece of cloth that is donned over the shoulder). Hence, he asks his artisans to make few pieces from time to time. These intermediaries ask weavers to fuse motifs which are in great demand. Likewise, former artisan Monikanta Kalita from Bathan had catered to tourists from Japan who happened to seek *thaan* pieces. Prakash Baishya, a 40 year old young artisan tends to design any motif which he finds interesting from magazine.

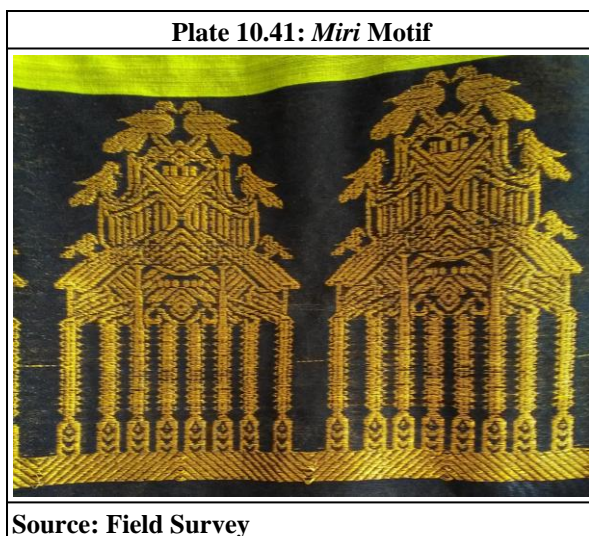
B) Private Entrepreneurs from Cities and Influence on Design and Products

In recent times, apart from local intermediaries, the role of external agents, mostly private traders and entrepreneurs from cities is also seen in the modification of the motifs and designs is also very significant. These intermediaries advise artisans to combine traditional motifs into a common design or modify the existing design to suit the fabric. Plate 10.39 shows several variants of the *mayur* motif. Intermediaries regularly bring information and update on the type of motif demanded in the market according to which artisans are guided. Due to different interpretations of the intermediaries, this motif has undergone vast change in recent years. Plate 10.39 D, is

a latest addition produced by artisans on inputs by a private agent from Guwahati. Similarly, *barfi* a common motif exclusively used among tribal populations has also undergone transmutation due to its interpretation and reinterpretation by the agents.

In recent *gach* motif, one can also find the motif presented as a split one (refer Plate 10.40D). The much traditional *miri* motif appears completely different on fabrics today (refer to Plate 10.41) with changes in the placement of the indigenous components like *gach* and bird. Older pattern of this motif is

also in practice. These intermediaries and external agents always work at simplifying or ramifying the designs to increase sale of their products. Besides this, they always direct artisans about the type of color to choose for the fabric and ornamentation, the intermixing of the yarns during the production process of the fabrics and the quantity of a type of garment to be produced. These players also ask artisans to produce items as demanded in market. Most of the times, village artisans are instructed to make fabrics of different qualities items for products like curtains, bed covers, cushion



fabrics.

covers, etc. Private individual players as well as private organizations like Fabric Plus Pvt Ltd. are also responsible for reinstating some of the most traditional tribal motifs like *kopo* (dove) *buta* and *bichani* (fan) motifs in silk fabrics of Sualkuchi. Some of the private agents from towns and cities also act as international sellers of the silk

C) Government Agencies and their Role in Commercialization of *Pat* and *Muga*

Governmental agencies like NEHHDC (North East Handicraft and Handloom Development Corporation) and Directorate of Handloom & Textiles under the Government of Assam also have some role to play. Their designers produce designs based on traditional motifs. Entrepreneurial artisans as well as middlemen approach these organizations for designs which are later adopted in silk garments. Plate 10.16 C shows a modified Kaziranga pattern produced in 1992 under the aegis of the Directorate of H & T. Such interjection in designs also leads to further modifications. Governmental organizations through its infrequent trainings under various support schemes also train artisans but mostly in handling new technologies and computer aided graph making (from Field Survey). Assam Tourism Development Corporation along with Deputy Commissioner, Sualkuchi provided weaving, printing and dyeing training to around 20 people under the rural tourism project in 2005 ('Ministry of Tourism's impact and evaluation study', 2012:n.p). Directorate of Handloom and textiles of Assam also runs handloom training institutes and Weavers' Extension Service Units which provide from time to time such trainings.

Other than this, Government selling agencies like ARTFED (Assam Apex Weavers & Artisans Co-operative Federation Ltd.) also help in commercialization of the craft through specific orders for national and international customers. At the demand of selling agencies like ARTFED, some local intermediaries like Manmat Baishya have made artisans produce sari and *muga* curtains for western countries. Besides that, through their marketing departments they also organize exhibitions and fairs for artisans and thus help them sale their products. Assam Government's Marketing Corporation Ltd. (AGMCL) also procures products from sellers and sells through their emporiums like Pragjyotika. NEDFi (North East Development and Finance Corporation), in 2003 organized exhibition under the banner of NEDFi Haat in Guwahati. For every exhibition under its banner now, it has 26 permanent stalls for the artisans to display and sell their products. in doing so, these government agencies act as sales agent and facilitate sale of products.

Value addition in silk products have seen a rapid growth in present times due to facilitation provided by agencies like IIE (Indian Institute of Entrepreneurship) and

local institutes like Sualkuchi Institute of Fashion Technology at Sualkuchi. The short term training courses on cutting and tailoring provided to young artisans of the locality has helped artisans diversify their product line through value addition. Artisans like Dipali Kalita and Sumi Kakati undertook such three months training and now apart from weaving regular fabrics they also make value added products like bag, tie, mobile cover, frock, etc. Artisan and intermediary like Hiralal Kalita initiated making functional items like stoles and wrappers for foreign customers. Local entrepreneurs like him were trained by Govt. agencies like Sualkuchi Institute of Fashion Technology (SIFT) in making value added products in *pat* and *muga*. He now directs artisans working under him to produce pieces with specific design and hue. It is seen that intermediaries and external agents both governmental and non-governmental have been helping artisans in marketing as well as diversifying of their products.

10.6 Wrapping up the Chapter: Commercialization and the Modified Fabrics of Sualkuchi

Sualkuchi since the ancient past has always been a traditional craft weaving village. The artisans wove several types of garments like *mekhela*, *riha*, *chadar*, *cheleng*, etc. and met the domestic requirements of the households. Some amount of clothes during the late 19th century and early 20th century were also exported to places like Calcutta and Sylhet, mostly in the form of silk *thaan* and *muga* sari pieces.

A) Earlier Times (Late Medieval to Early 19th Century): Influence of Nature Induced Motifs and Designs

Pat and *muga* fabrics were basically the garments of the richer classes and nobles who wore the best ornamented pieces. The designs mostly comprised of nature influenced motifs like *lata*, rosettes of different types based on variety of flowers, birds, butterfly, etc. Brocade works primarily consisted of *kinkhap* and *kalka* motifs. Metallic wires in gold and pure cotton yarn typically in red, black, yellow, green and blue colors were the only fibers used while intermix of *pat* and *muga* silk yarns and cotton was also in practice. However, the designs were chiefly woven on the fabric parts which remained exposed on its drape while the rest of the body of the fabric remained plain. Synchronicity reflected in the *buta* and *pari* works on the old fabrics (refer to Plate 10.6 & 10.8). *Buta* works on the body of the fabric also comprised the

pari designs on the borders. Designs were mostly geometric patterned and influences of tribal elements could be found during this time (refer to Section 10.4.1a).

B) Commercialization during the Late 1930s to 1960s: Influence of Master Artisans and Beginning of Cooperative Association of Artisans

Around independence of India, commercialization of silk fabrics in Sualkuchi took a momentum as more people began to do commercial weaving (refer to Section 10.4.1 b). The introduction of technically advanced fly shuttle looms also led to rapid commercialization. Local master artisans of the place started producing several new designs on graphs which were replicated on the fabrics. Extreme modification also took place in the traditional designs. As a result, conventional designs like *kinkhap*, *kalka* and *miri* were modulated and new elements like *raj mukut*, *monimala*, *kaziranga*, *phuldani*, etc. were developed. In order to sell their weaves to customers, artisans started to introduce newness in designs to keep a competitive advantage among the peers in their profession. Throughout the period the change in the design was mostly at the behest of the master artisans who also acted as graph men for designs. The old designs were also produced but many substitutions, addition and elimination of major or minor portions of the designs took place. However, traditional *pat* and *muga* fabrics were yet liked by the customers in their natural hue. Even when dyed, a few limited colors in darker hues were preferred. The local middlemen generally were performing the task of selling the products to customers at various places. This period also saw flourishing of many artisans' cooperative societies who helped artisans sell their products in cities like Guwahati.

C) Changes in the Designs and the Traditional Craft Forms from 1960s to 1990s (refer to Section 10.4.1.c)

During the 1960s and 1970s period, more changes started to take place. In earlier days, the *pari* works remained mostly on the lower part of the *mekhela* and the designs on the *chadar* were woven only on one end. Artisans now began increasing the designs to cover more portions of the fabrics. However, the motifs still remained scattered and small. During this period, artisans also made some structural considerations with respect to the new functional requirements of customers. A kind of two-in-one item including *mekhela* and *chadar* in a single piece was developed for young girls keeping in view the limited purchasing capacity of the parent customer

and the purpose of the product. Ornamentation done exclusively on *gamosa* was also applied to silk fabrics during this period. Motifs like *japi*, *kalasi*, *dolma-deli*, etc. were transmitted from *gamosa* to silk adding more variety in the existing design line. Designs from *banarasi* silk saris also penetrated into the traditional design line heterogenous designs like *dhansiri*, *ramdhenu*, *chakra*, biscuit, etc. were frequently developed by the artisans.

In the later decades, radicalizing changes took place with respect to design ornamentation and use of raw materials. The synchronicity in the use of *buta* work and *pari* designs found in earlier works also started to change. Artisans started blending a different *buta* with a different *pari* or used combination of designs to produce new designs. Also, maximum use of colored yarn in a single fabric for ornamentation started to take place as well as synthetic yarns were also used profusely. Apart from gold colored metallic thread, artificial *rolex* yarns and synthetic yarns in different colors were also used. Artisans started to combine more of *tasar* silk with *muga* and *pat* to create some cheaper varieties of silk garments. This was also done to address their economic feasibility. Some of the old designs were modified and renamed as *sat bhoni* and marketed to customers according to the rising sentiments of the times. The spread of the designs on the fabrics had also changed. Design presentation which remained not beyond a particular area was now spread across the length and breadth of the fabric. Also, the ornamentation was on the *chadar* which remained only on one end was replicated on the other end in toto. By this period, local intermediaries and external agents started to play an influential role in the design development process apart from their usual role as marketing and sales agents of the craft. They brought in fusion in the motifs and advised their artisans to replicate the motifs found in *banarasi* print saris and bed sheets. The intermediaries also brought in standardization in the size and structural dimensions of the cloths.

D) Commercialization Phase after 1990s to Present Times

Later, during the 1990s the growth of tourist inflow to Sualkuchi led to innovation in the product line (refer to Section 10.4.3). Functional items like scarves, stoles, ties, wrappers and shirt pieces were developed to cater to the modern customer. The shift in the utility of the fabrics from status clothes and traditional garments to items of aesthetics and modern dressing brought revolutionizing change in the design,

structure and dimensions of the fabrics. Original designs like *kinkhap*, *lata*, *gol butas*, *jalpahi*, *miri*, etc. are either extremely simplified or made too complex to serve the different aesthetic requirements of the customers. The most important reason for simplification or complexification, addition or substitution of the elements is to make the product suitable for different segments of the customers. The involvement of local intermediaries and external agents became more prominent (refer to Section 10.5). Government agencies like Directorate of H & T of the Government of Assam, NEHHDC, etc. individual private agents and entrepreneurs utilized local artisans to produce modified designs and new items. Shirt pieces, *kurta* fabrics and jacket pieces in customized sizes are produced as ordered by these external agents. External agents are also playing the role of sales agent by arranging sales platform for the artisans.

In the last one and a half decades, dynamic change is noticed in the craft. Other than the use of traditional designs in modified forms, there has been a rise in the use of representational and fancy motifs. Designs representing *bihu* dancers are also found these days whereas fancy motifs are also becoming the canvas of representation on the silk fabrics. Motifs are gigantized to cover more and more part of the fabrics. Apart from that, the demand for traditionally dyed fabrics is also bringing the practice of natural dyeing back in Sualkuchi, though only among few artisans. Commercialization has also brought in the use of some traditional motifs exclusively reserved for the *gosain kapor* and other religious garments. On a larger note, in case of color combinations on *pat* excessive use contrasting colors can be seen on the garments. In some cases, some yellow color is also seen added to *muga* fabrics for extra color and glaze. Also, a spurt in production of bed covers and saris with new motifs and hue can be found today. Value addition in product line can also be seen due to the involvement of young artisans who attained some training in cutting and tailoring.