

UNDERSTANDING PROCESS OF CHAKMA OUTFITS: A STUDY ON THE ART OF TRIBAL FASHION OF BANGLADESH

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Chakmas are one of the major tribal community in Bangladesh. Tribal fashion and its trend depend on their culture, language, religion and traditions, which is identical for an ethnic person or group. Tribal dress ranges from a single piece to a whole ensemble of items that identify an individual of a specific tribal group. Ethnic or tribal people not only belong to a unique culture but they have different taste in design and dresses also. Tribal fashion is a traditional style that represents a culture and allows one to celebrate their heritage and origin.

Chakma is the most prominent tribal group of Bangladesh. Natural environment of Chakmas are colorful what widely seen in their artisan work particularly dresses. This Chakma community has followed a very traditional way of weaving to make their attire. They usually carry out numerous preparatory work of weaving such as produce cotton in hilly slopes through jum cultivation and spin the cotton into yarn, use natural products dye in a traditional way. Chakma weavers make their own loom widely known as “Bain” which consist twelve parts and each part play a significant role in traditional cloth weaving. Chakma girls and women weave in “Bain” and girls learn weaving in “Bain” from their mothers or elderly women folk of household. Those women and girls also learn a range of traditional design which locally called ‘alam’ and those traditional designs or motifs reflects Chakma culture and their natural world. Chakma women and men have their different specific outfits or attire which is very colorful. They have festival specific dress and robe also. According to Chakma culture, weaving through “Bain” and following Chakma motifs considered as good traits and spiritual value of wife and girls. This study describes and focuses on traditional process of Chakma clothing and its related issues.

INTRODUCTION

Bangladesh is a small country but rich in tradition, where its beauty is exposed on its own style that is unique and colorful like tribal folk. The art hidden in the mind of the tribal folk inhabiting in the mountainous forest may be termed as ethnic art.

Mongoloid originated this aboriginal folks are classified into 45 factions among whom Chakma, Marma, Mro, Garo, Khumi, Monipuri, Shantal, Khyeyng, Tripura, Lushai, Rakhaing, Tanchangya, Bawms, Pangué and so on. Among all ethnic community Chakma is the name of the largest tribal group found in the hilly area of eastern Bangladesh known as the Chittagong Hill Tracts. More than 90 percent of them are concentrated in Rangamati and Khagrachhari districts (Population Census 2011, BBS).

There are 444,748 million Chakmas in Bangladesh which represents the largest Buddhist group in the country. (Population Census 2011, BBS). Chakma tribal folks are king centered with remarkable simplicity, honesty and hospitable, pious and patriotic in nature.

The clothing of the tribe consists of several steps. They starts with Jhum cultivation of cotton in their hill slopes, they make yarn from the cotton, dye it and finally weave. The yarn preparation, dying and weaving maintains a very special traditional procedure that has been always a subject of study for the researchers who studied tribal culture of Bangladesh. The research began with very selective review of the literature related to fashion, ethnic population of Bangladesh, ethnic artisan work, ethnic fashion. The study then explained the complete process of Chakma cloth making.

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of the research on this particular traditional tribal fashion is to understand Chakma tribal clothing and its traditional manufacturing process. The study area was chosen Chakma community of Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) purposively because Chakma is the major tribal community in Bangladesh.



Fig-1: Geographical location of Chakma community

Mainly observation methods have been used to explain the process of Chakma cloth making. In discussing the influence of culture and tradition on the tribe's clothing some previously published research articles have been consulted, the views of some prominent researchers working with tribal culture have been taken by interviewing with open-ended questionnaire and some of the tribal leaders were also interviewed. The researcher interviewed reputed fashion designer of Chakma community, conducted Group Discussion with weaver and observed weavers' weaving work.

LITERATURE REVIEW:

In this section, empirical findings of pertinent literature to the subject of the research will be reviewed. Practically, very little literature found regarding ethnic fashions in Bangladesh and most of the article exists at web page. Although literature is very inadequate but these literature tries to deal with Chakma ethnic community and their lifestyle, their culture, attire and fashion, importance of clothing in chakma community of Chittagong Hill Tracts in Bangladesh.

Chakma community mainly lives in Rangamati, Bandarban and Khagrachari, the 3 hilly districts called Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) of Bangladesh. Most of the Chakma community is Buddhist. They celebrate various Buddhist festivals e.g. Buddha Purnima, Baisabi(Bizu),Kothin Chibor Daan. Chakma ethnic community have rich culture and tradition. They observe Bizu as their New Year festival. Chakma people livelihoods mainly depend on jungle and hill. They cultivate their crops in hill through traditional slash and burn methods widely known as jum cultivation, Chakma girls and women are very hard-working. Women do their work at jum as well as carry out their household chores. Moreover, women are responsible to meet clothing needs of everyone and they do weave clothing for their household members and monks.

Chakma Sugata (2007) mentioned that traditionally ethnic Chakma women weave clothing through back strap loom locally called "Bain". Usually most of the women weave clothing during their leisure time. They do not only weave clothing rather make yarn and dyeing in traditional way.

Willen van Schendel (2001) stated that the Chakma people of Rangamati were more connected with outsiders when many of the other tribal groups live in the remote jungles. Therefore, their life style and dress have been impacted more than any other ethnic groups in the Chittagong Hill Tracts.

Arshi D. Roy (2005) stated that an intricate border locally called sabugi which is located on the edge of the skirt is only present in the Chakma pinon and it is their trade mark. And other ethnic groups do not weave this kind of border design. Saidur (1992) also stated that Chakma clothing have identical motifs which is very different from other ethnic groups. So, designs of clothing differentiate Chakma from other ethnic community.

Clothing Process of Chakma Tribe

The art of finest weaving is not something that can be acquired by academic knowledge rather depends on inherited skill. Process of Cloth making of Chakma communities consists of five steps: (i) groundwork of Chakma cloth weaving, (ii) dyeing, (iii) yarn processing, (iv) loom preparation and (v) weaving.

i. Groundwork of Chakma Cloth Weaving:

Traditionally, they use cotton and produced that in the hilly slopes from jum (slash and burn) cultivation for making the yarn for weaving. The cotton would be removed from the pod and brought into the house and thoroughly cleaned. It was then spread out on mats and left to dry in the sun for two or three days. The dry cotton was then ginned to remove the seeds and to make it soft. Afterward it was rolled by hand on to little pieces of bamboo. It was further refined by being rolled on a rod called pech, before being spun into yarn with the charka or spinning wheel. Though these days, most yarn is purchased from the market. However, on the occasion of Kathin Chibar Dan, cotton is still picked in the traditional way and spun into yarn before being woven into cloth. All this takes place within 24 hours, with groups of women working around the cloth.



Figure – 2: Cotton



Figure- 3: The Charka

ii. Dyeing

Chakma community lives in a very colorful natural environment. So colors widely exist in their artisan work and reflect in every sphere of their lives. Particularly, in their dresses mountainous colorful feature are even more naturally displayed.

The next step involved dyeing the yarn with natural dyes. Thus, red dye is prepared from the root of the rong gachh tree and black dye is obtained by boiling the bark of the kala gab tree. For blue dye, they use indigo leaves and placed in an earthen vessel. The leaves usually covered with water and left soak for two days. Yellow dye mainly prepared by mixing turmeric and the bark of a mango tree. After that the yarn buried in the soft mud beside the river to make it color fast.

Though these days most of the yarn is purchased from the market but those yarns still needs further treatment to prepare for weaving. The skeins are starched and hung out to dry. After the skeins are dry, they are wound round bamboo frames known as natai or nadai and wound into balls known as thum. When industrial yarn is purchased in spools, it is made into skeins with the help of lanyya. These skeins are then dyed, starched and made into thum.



Fig-4: Yarn Processing

iii. Yarn Processing:

The next step involves laying out the yarn in preparation for weaving. This is known as tana deya in Bangla or bain bajat in Chakma. To lay out the yarn, several lengths of bamboo are stuck in the ground. The round bamboo at the two ends is known as bainokhuda. When the laying of the warp is complete, they will be replaced by the tambo bash and tagalog bash. Next to the bainokhuda on the left of the warp layer is the lablebi. Next to the lablebi is the round bogla bash which will be substituted by the thinner ajaju when the warp is taken up and attached to the loom. Next to the bainokhuda on the right of the warp layer is the siyong. This will help the warp to retain its tension when the weaving is being done. The yarn is wound round the bainokhuda, the lablebi and the siyong, two threads at a time. While winding the strands for the warp round the bainokhuda, the person preparing the warp twists a different colored yarn round the bogla bash for the weaver to alternate layer of the warp while weaving. When a sufficient amount of warp has been prepared, the whole is taken up. The tambo bash replaces the bainokhuda at the far end of the loom. It is then tied with ropes to the bain khudi in the verandah or under a tree below which the weaving will take place. The other end of the warp is attached to the tagalog bash which is attached to the tachhi sam, the leather strap which will go over the shoulders of the weaver and rest on the small of her back when she sit down to weave.

iv. The Loom Preparation:

The most well known back strap loom is called "Bain". It has twelve main parts, nearly all made from bamboo, rope, a piece of leather and the chhaw betel nut tree.

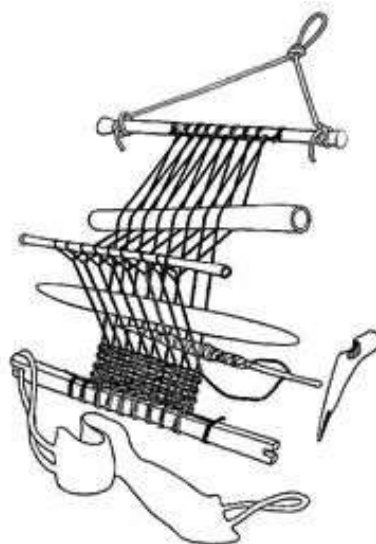


Fig-5: Simple diagram of a Back strap loom (Bain)

Chakma Manjulika (2010) describes different parts of the loom which have different names and different functions as follows:

Tambo bash, a bamboo pole, tied with ropes to two poles, the baino khudi, at the further end of the weaver. Both ends are cut straight through.

Tagalog bash, the length of bamboo that has been split into two and to which the woven cloth will be attached. The tachhi sam will be attached to it. This piece exists in front of the weaver.

Tachhi sam, the leather strap that will go at the back of the weaver. It is attached to the tagalog bash with two loops. It is traditionally made of buffalo leather, though some weavers fasten a plank of wood.

Biyong, a flat length of hard wood, originally cha supari, a wild betel nut palm but now they use shill koroi. The weaver places in the shed vertically to separate the upper and lower warp. After each throw of the shuttle, the weaver uses the edge of the biyong to tighten the weft thread against the cloth that has already been woven. One end of the biyong is rounded, while the other end is pointed.

Phulo biyong, a flat length of bamboo measuring about $\frac{3}{4}$ inch across, like the biyong, has one rounded and one pointed point end. It is used to count threads for a pattern.

Suchok bash, a round bamboo placed after the ajaju in plain weaving. The weaver use it for raise the upper threads of the warp.

Bokati, lengths of narrow round bamboo which separate threads for border designs.

Phulo suchok, a round bamboo placed after the ajaju in plain weaving to raise the upper threads of the warp. It is placed through the warp for a design.

Bokati, length of narrow round bamboo which separate threads for border designs.

Phulo suchok, a round bamboo. It is placed through the warp for a design.

Ajaju, a round bamboo pole placed before the suchok bash in plain weaving. The weaver uses it to move the warp threads up to create a space called the shed.

Siyong, a length of narrow bamboo which twist the yarn while the warp is being prepared. In the loom it serves to keep the warp tight. When the weaver comes close to the siyong, two women help loosen the siyong and move it further up.

Taram, length of flat bamboo attached to the cloth to keep the width accurate.

Kuduk kadak, used to bring the yarn closer in intricate designs.

Thurchuma, a bamboo shuttle.

Bainugor, a length of wood or thick bamboo against which the weaver places her feet for weaving tension.

In addition to those materials, the weaver also needs wax and as well as sufficient water. The wax is passed along the yarn to stiffen it for weaving and water is necessary for cotton, sprinkled on the cloth.

v. The weaving process:

Mainly Chakma women play the role of weaving cloths by their back- strap loom at the courtyard of the house. Once the yarn has been fastened to the loom, the weaver sits down, her legs straight in front against the bainugor, foot rest. She fixes the back strap behind her waist. In order to weave, the weaver moves the warp threads up or down with the help of the ajaju, creating a space called the shed. The biyong is placed in the shed vertically. The weaver then passes the shuttle, known as thurchuma, through the shed. Then she uses the flat edge of the biyong to beat the weft thread against the woven cloth. The biyong is taken out and the suchok bash is used to reverse the threads of the warp. With the help of the ajaju, a fresh shed is created between the threads which have become reversed. The biyong is replaced in the shed vertically and the shuttle passed from left to right. When the weaving begins, the split tagalong bash works as the first weft. The process continues in this way for plain weaving.



Fig- 6: Weaving

Motifs in Chakma Cloths:

Every Chakma girl is taught weaving by her mother and elders. At about eight years of age a girl is encouraged to start learning a range of designs, which her mother shows her from an heir-loom woven catalogue. This is called the alam. In Chakma clothing a total 210 motifs (alam) exists since age long. Most alam designs are

drawn from nature (flower, tree, reptiles, birds and animals). The skill to weaving motifs in clothing is considered a qualification of a good wife and a spiritual value.

There are hundreds of motifs that a good weaver must learn. Some of the most famous designs are:

- i. Begun bichi – seed of eggplant.
- ii. Tin biyya – three lines.
- iii. Das biyya – ten lines.
- iv. Sath beya karanga kapya – seven lines.
- v. Chhatrish biyya – thirty-six lines.
- vi. Kanjal – snake curve.
- vii. Bangali chabugi – small flower.
- viii. Bago chokh – tiger’s eyes.
- ix. Chori phool – design on clay water pot.
- x. Anaj – pineapple.
- xi. Tuptupi – aat bo – lizard’s foot.
- xii. Bourgiyoja – like Bangla alphabet letter.
- xiii. Padi chabang gachh – king of design.
- xiv. Aza thang – ducks feet.
- xv. Chaba Kangel – snake twist.
- xvi. Satacrang – small wild marigold.
- xvii. Kangara – crab.
- xviii. Chera – scorpion
- xix. Het - elephant
- xx. Karanghapyra – like a starfruit.



Fig- 7: Chakma motif

Outfits of Chakmas:

It is the women who maintain the traditional Chakma style of dress, which consists of two pieces of cloth. One is worn as a skirt (pinon), wrapped around the lower part of the body and extending from waist to ankle. Its traditional color is black with fine lines of dark blue and red bands, known as pale, towards the top and the bottom of the garment. The second piece of cloth is a breast- band (hadi), woven with colored designs that is tightly wrapped around the upper body.



Fig- 8: Hadi



Fig- 9: Chakma women in traditional dress

Moreover, they also wear the siloom, a loose, stitched upper garment, was generally worn when they went to the forest for jum cultivation or to collect twigs. The khabang is a long piece of cloth worn around the head. With the increasing number of Bengali inhabitants in the Chittagong Hill Tracts area, Chakma women began feeling uncomfortable with their usual outfits in public places. Therefore, these days to counteract the gaze of the outsider, in urban areas they started adding an upper garment to their traditional wear, a blouse. This is worn with a variety of necklaces, bracelets, anklets, rings, and other ornaments. Jewellery used by the Chakma women include various ornaments made of coins, metals and local available flowers. Nowadays in urban areas, instead of traditional cloths Chakma men usually wear western-style shirts and trousers but in rural areas many continue to wear knee – length dhuti or lungis (sarongs).

Festivals Clothing of Chakma:

The festivals are the central part of Chakma tribe and that is their lifestyle. As the vast majority of Chakmas are Buddhists, so they celebrate various Buddhist festivals. The most important is Buddha Purnima. This is the anniversary of three important events: Buddha's birth, his attainment of enlightenment (nirvana), and his death (parinirvana). Buddha Purnima observed on the full moon day of the month of Boishakh. As part of rituals they light thousands of lamps, release of Phanuch Batti (an auspicious lamp made of paper in the form of a balloon) are also done. On this festival day Chakmas put on their best clothes and visit the temple. Bizu is the most important socio-religious festival of the Chakma. The festival lasts for three days and begins on the last day of the month of Choitra. The first day is known as Phool Bizu and the day start with bath in the early morning and offer flowers to the river. And Chakma girls wear traditional colored dress. Traditional color of pinon is black with fine lines of dark blue and red bands. They wear traditional scurf called hadi and blouse both are red in color. The second day known as Mul Bizu or one day before the New Year eve (Choitro Shongkranti) day starts with the bath in the early morning. People wear new traditional clothes and pay visits to different houses of the village. The day ends with Bizu song and Bizu dance. During third day of festival which is called Gojjepojje din and that is the first day of Baishak. On that day children and adults go out wearing new colorful traditional dress and bathing the elders to get their blessings. They also go to monastery to offer their prayers.



Fig 11: Clothing in Bizu Festival

Kothin Chibor dan is another main religious festival of Chakma community. On that festival day people respect Buddhist monk through offering chibor (means cloth) gift. Women make that chibor on a very traditional way. They collect gin jum cotton, spin the cotton into yarn, collect natural dye, dye yarn, dry the yarn, weave into cloth and sew the cloth into ceremonial dress and present that chibor (ceremonial cloth) to monk. After receiving that robe (chibor) monks left their old robe and wear new robe.

vi. CONCLUSION:

In the study it is found that the Chakma ethnic tribe had a remarkable traditional fashion and it is totally different from the other tribes of the region. Tribal folk are creating their own beauty with their own vision and style. This wild- flower beauty is remain trapped only to mountainous southeastern zone of Bangladesh. But currently fashion designers and young entrepreneurs are trying to generate inspiration and craze of the young generation for the tribal fabric and style. Their efforts hopefully will go across the world and explore rich culture and heritage of Bangladesh.

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