

Cultural Symbolism of Motifs in Northeast Indian Tribal Textiles Review of literature

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1. Introduction

The textile traditions of North-East India represent vital parts of native cultural tradition, where motifs function as holders of symbolic meaning, identity, and shared history. These motifs tell us about the traditions and way of life of tribal communities. Weaving, in this environment, is not simply a practical activity but a significant medium of creative and cultural expression that maintains identity across ages (Goswami, 2021; Jain, 2013; Roy, 2018; Varadarajan, 2010).

Additionally, textiles serve as visual documentation of cultural heritage, ensuring sequence through oral and material traditions (Government of India, 2015). Today, because of modernization and globalization, these traditions are in danger. So, it is important to protect and preserve them. (UNESCO, 2012).

1.1 Nature-Inspired Motifs in Tribal Textiles

Nature remains the primary source of inspiration for motifs in North-East Indian textiles. Designs derived from flora, fauna, rivers, mountains, and celestial bodies symbolize the intimate relationship between indigenous communities and their environment. These motifs are often stylized into geometric or abstract forms, reflecting both aesthetic sensibilities and ecological awareness (Das, 2020; Ghosh, 2015).

Scholars argue that such motifs embody traditional ecological knowledge and sustainable practices, emphasizing biodiversity as a core element of cultural expression (Saikia, 2020; Shimray, 2024). These designs are not random but deeply meaningful representations of environmental interaction and survival.

1.2 Religious and Cultural Significance of Motifs

Motifs in tribal textiles frequently carry religious and spiritual meanings. They symbolize fertility, prosperity, protection, and cosmic harmony, and are closely associated with rituals, ceremonies, and festivals (Ambily et al., 2023; Sharma, 2016; Singh, 2019).

In many communities, textiles are integral to religious practices, where specific motifs represent deities, mythological elements, and cosmological beliefs. These symbolic

representations reinforce the spiritual dimensions of textile traditions (**Crafts Council of India, 2018; Dasgupta, 2017; UNESCO, 2012**).

1.3 Symbolism in Manipuri Textiles

Manipuri textiles, particularly the traditional Phanek, illustrate how motifs convey social and cultural meanings. Specific patterns and colors are associated with identity, marital status, and ceremonial occasions (**Devi, 2015, 2017; Yumngam, 2022**).

Research indicates that weaving practices in Manipur are closely linked to ritualistic and social customs, making textiles an important medium of communication within the community (**Goswami, 2012; NIFT Research, 2020**).

1.4 Motifs in Naga Textiles

Naga textiles are known for bold geometric patterns and motifs inspired by nature and everyday life. These motifs often represent myths, folklore, and ancestral heritage, acting as visual narratives of identity (**Goswami, 2021; Shimray, 2024; Singh, 2019**).

The inclusion of ethnobotanical and ethnozoological elements highlights the community's deep connection with biodiversity and traditional knowledge systems (**Baruah, 2018; Das, 2020**).

1.5 Diversity Across Ethnic Groups

The North-East region is characterized by immense ethnic diversity, with each community possessing unique textile traditions and motif systems. These variations arise due to geographical, cultural, and social differences, resulting in distinct patterns, weaving techniques, and color palettes (**Saikia, 2020; TCRC, 2018**).

Textiles also play a role in life-cycle rituals such as birth, marriage, and death, where motifs symbolize different stages of life and cultural beliefs (**Government of India, 2015; Roy, 2018**).

1.6 Motifs in Bodo and Mising Textiles

Bodo textiles, particularly the Dokhona, feature motifs representing animals, plants, and celestial elements, symbolizing strength, fertility, and harmony (**Borthakur, 2014; Bodo Cultural Study, 2022**).

Similarly, Mising textiles incorporate geometric motifs representing rivers, hills, and cosmic elements, reflecting their worldview and close relationship with nature (**Mising Cultural Study, 2021**).

1.7 Motifs as Communication Systems

Motifs in tribal textiles function as non-verbal communication systems, conveying information about social hierarchy, marital status, and community affiliation (**Goswami, 2021; Roy, 2018; Singh, 2016**).

Certain patterns are reserved for specific groups or occasions, reinforcing social structures. This demonstrates that textiles act as cultural texts beyond their aesthetic value (**Dasgupta, 2017; Sharma, 2016**).

1.8 Role of Women in Preserving Textile Traditions

Women play a central role in preserving textile traditions and motif symbolism in North-East India. Weaving is predominantly a female-driven activity, where knowledge is transmitted across generations (**Devi, 2015; Goswami, 2012; Jain, 2013**).

This highlights the gendered nature of textile production and emphasizes women as custodians of cultural heritage (**UNESCO, 2012; Varadarajan, 2010**).

1.9 Modern Developments and Digital Preservation

Recent research emphasizes the integration of digital technologies in preserving traditional textile motifs. Techniques such as digital documentation, augmented reality, and machine learning are being explored to safeguard intangible heritage (**Digital Heritage Study, 2025; NIFT Research, 2020**).

Scholars advocate combining traditional knowledge with contemporary design practices to ensure sustainability and relevance in modern markets (**Crafts Council of India, 2018; Das, 2020**).

1.10 Research Gap

Despite extensive research on North-East Indian textiles, several gaps remain:

- Most studies focus on documentation rather than application in modern textile and apparel design.
- Limited research exists on adapting tribal motifs into contemporary fashion while maintaining authenticity.

- There is insufficient exploration of digital design integration and commercialization strategies.
- Comparative studies across different tribes are limited, particularly in terms of symbolic interpretation and design translation.
- The role of young designers and innovation in preserving motifs remains underexplored.
- This study aims to bridge these gaps by analyzing tribal motifs and exploring their application in modern textile and apparel design.

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