

## **RIGWNAI FROM COSTUME TO PRODUCT DIVERSIFICATION: a study on revival of tribal textile of the Reang tribe of Tripura India**

### **Authors**

Paramita Sarkar, Nilanjana Bairagi and Avani Pandeya,

Dr. Paramita Sarkar,  
Assistant Professor,  
NIFT, Kangra, India.

Dr. Nilanjana Bairagi,  
Associate Professor,  
NIFT, Bengaluru, India.

Ms. Avani Pandaya,  
Founder of Mothers Grace Women empowerment Trust,  
Himachal Pradesh.

Corresponding Author: [paramita.sarkar@nift.ac.in](mailto:paramita.sarkar@nift.ac.in)

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Reang, Rigwnai, Handloom, Design intervention, Backstrap loom.

### **Abstract**

Tripura is situated in the northeastern part of India. The population of Tripura is approximately 32 lakhs of people among which 31.1% belong to the scheduled tribe category. There are 19 tribes residing in the state - Tripuri, Reang, Jamatia, Noatia, Uchai, Chakma, Mog, Lushai, Kuki, Halam, Munda, Kaur, Orang, Santal, Bhil, Bhutia, Chaimal, Garo, Khasia, and Lepcha. Ethnographic research was conducted from the year 2011 to 2016, to study the tribal costume of the Reang tribe of Tripura, India. The Reang people are the most primitive tribe of Tripura and have the 2nd largest tribal population in the state. The uniqueness of the tribal community is expressed in hand-woven textiles. The traditional costume of the Reang women consists of two pieces of hand-woven textiles named “Rigwnai” and “Risha”. Rigwnai is wrapped on the lower abdomen and Risha is wrapped on the upper abdomen of the body. The Reang women weave their clothes on primate looms also known as a back-strap loom, in the combination of black and white stripes, preserving their tribal identity. They weave geometrical motifs inspired by nature and their surrounding environment. With modernisation and socio-economic development, the preferences of the modern tribal women have changed from the traditional way of dressing and adorning. The traditional costume has also undergone changes in terms of yarn, colour, and motifs as well as in draping style. Young women were observed to be more experimental with clothing, than the older women who still prefer more traditional costumes.

It was observed that there was a reduction in the number of women weavers and consumption of costumes within the community. In 2021 workshop on design intervention was conducted for the preservation of tribal textiles. For research and field visits two villages were selected named Bogafa and Chakhi Kho of South Tripura Dist. Tripura. Data were collected by survey & in-depth interviews. Traditional Rigwani, was sourced from the elderly Reang women, weavers and local vendors. Further new product designs were developed with NGOs supporting tribal artisans. Contemporary products were designed and developed on the model of sustainability and slow fashion. Rigwani, woven on back-strap loom worn as the traditional costume was used for product diversification like garments, lifestyle products and souvenirs. The paper focuses on the need for design intervention for the revival of Rigwnai and the contemporary use of the traditional textile of the Reang tribe.

## 1. Introduction

Tripura is situated in the northeastern part of India. In northeast India, Tripura is an abode of indigenous people who have migrated to this state during an unknown period in the history of the Indian sub-continent. In Tripura, there are nineteen tribes, each with a distinct culture. Ethnically they are mainly of Mongoloid origin and have migrated between Mongolia, Tibet and Burma. Linguistically these tribes are divided into distinct groups. Bodo Group of tribes who are known as aboriginal tribes of Tripura. They are Tripuri, Reang, Jamatia, Noatia and sub-tribes as Murasingh, Kolo, Rupini and Uchai. Their language is *Kok-Borok*, which is under the *Bodo* linguistic group. Tribes like Halam, Kuki, Molsom, Darlong, Kaipeng and Lushai, speak a language of the Kuki- Chin linguistic group. Mog and Chakma tribes speak a language of the Arakanese linguistic group. Bhill, Santal, Munda, Orang, Bhutias, Lepchas and Meghalaya tribes like Khasi and Garo are also inhabiting in the state. All these tribes belong to Austroid, Austro-Asiatic, Austro and Mongoloid origin, each having distinctive ethnic features. The later tribes have entered the state of Tripura for economic reasons during the first part of the 19th century (Land of Rich Ethnic Tapestry Tripura, 2010).

The population of Tripura is approximately 32 lakhs of people among which 31.1% belong to the scheduled tribe category. Out of the 19 tribes residing in the state of Tripura. The Reang people are the most primitive tribe of Tripura and have the 2nd largest tribal population in the state. Regarding the original homeland of the Reangs, opinion differs. It is commonly believed that the Reangs migrated from somewhere in the Chittagong Hill Tract (now in Bangladesh) to Tripura during the time of the ruler Ratna Manikya in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. In the opinion of Ramesh Ch. Mazumdar, the coins of Ratna Manikya belonged to the period between 1464 AD to 1467 AD, and the Reangs might have migrated to Tripura during that period. The Reangs were recruited as soldiers in the royal army during the reign of Dhanya Manikya who ruled Tripura from 1490 AD to 1515 AD.

There is limited literature on tribal textiles of Tripura and its transformation in the present. As a result, the researcher studied changes of costume in different tribes, in African, South American and South Asian countries. What any researchers reported on the costume of various tribal communities gives insight on various aspects of tribal life, issues and challenges. The very purpose of this review study is to get a comprehensive and broad knowledge of the study on background and culture of tribes, which will surely help to form a foundation for the further construction of the chapters of the study. This review was helpful to get an extensive understanding of the contributions of ideas of the previous scholars who studied on tribes in general and particularly on tribes of Tripura, which can be related to the present study on the costumes of tribes of Tripura and its transformation. The uniqueness of the tribal community is expressed in hand-woven textiles. The traditional costume of the Reang women consists of two pieces of hand-woven textiles named "Rigwnai" and "Risha". Rigwnai is wrapped on the lower abdomen and Risha is wrapped on the upper abdomen of the body. The Reang women weave their clothes on primitive looms also known as a back-strap loom, in the combination of black and white stripes, preserving their tribal identity. With changing times the preferences of choices of clothing has changed among the Reang women. Young women were observed to be more experimental with clothing, than the older women who still prefer more traditional

costumes. It was observed that there was a reduction in the number of women weavers and consumption of costumes within the community. The research paper focuses on the project among on revival of the costume by design intervention and contemporary use of Rigwani.

## 2. Methodology

This study was part of the Ethnographic research as a part of Ph.D completed by the author from the year 2011 to 2019. The traditional costume of the Reang tribe was studied from the empirical data collected during the visit to the places, dominated by the Reang tribe, from the year 2011 to 2017.



Figure 1. Researcher with Reang women in remote villages in South Tripura.

As per the statistical data collected from the census office, the South Tripura district and the Dhalai district had the highest concentration of the Reang population. For research and field visits two villages were selected named Bogafa and Chakhi Kho of South Tripura Dist. Tripura. Data were collected by survey & in-depth interviews. The State Museum in Agartala was visited to study the traditional costume. During the field visits as observed and through analysis of old images, costume collections from museums and photographs of families who volunteered to support the study, the following information were derived. A survey of 100 Reang women and in-depth interviews with 20 Reang families to study the transformation in costume of the of the Reang women. After completion of the doctoral studies, the author further took various projects on design intervention using Tribal fabrics of Tripura. In the year 2019 the author was awarded the first prize in Innovation contest in International conference in Functional Clothing and Textiles, IIT, New Delhi. In 2021 workshop on design intervention was conducted for the preservation of tribal textiles. The workshop was conducted with team of tailors of Mothers Grace Women empowerment trust. Rigwani was sourced from Reang

weaver and families and the tailed of the trust were guided to design and construct diversified products like bags , cushion covers. The aim of the work-shop was to design diversified products using tribal textile.

### 3. Finding & Discussions

#### 3.1 Traditional costume of Reang Tribe

The traditional costume of the Reang tribe is an unstitched and draped textile.

The costume consists of mainly two parts rigwnai (draped on lower abdomen) and risha or ria (draped over the upper abdomen), as shown in Fig 2. The Reang women classified the rigwnai in two categories, based on the design worn by elderly and younger women. Younger women before and after marriage wear rigwnai with stripes in black and white colours. Women who have become mother- in- laws or grandparents wear a black colour rigwnai with motifs on the borders, in both sides of the rigwnai borders in the warp direction. Traditionally only cotton yarn (grown through shifting cultivation), was used and dyed with natural dyes. The Reang women weave specific motifs on the rigwnai, different from the motifs of other tribes of Tripura. The length of the rigwnai in olden days was from waist till mid-calf length. Weaving is practiced by the women of the Reang community. The Reang women weave the risha and rigwnai on the backstrap loom. The rigwnai is a rectangular piece of cloth woven continual in one direction of the loom. Traditionally the fabric in full width is woven on the back-strap loom.

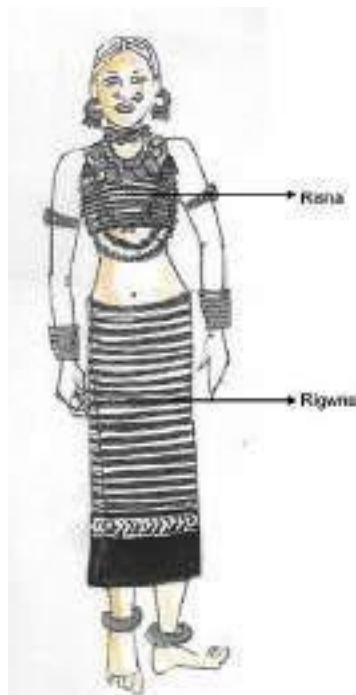


Figure 2. Illustration of Costume of a Reang women.

The researcher observed that the back-strap loom made out of local bamboos is present in every tribal house and every woman practice weaving in the rural areas. The researcher interviewed 20 families in village known as Bogafa and a primitive village known as Chakhi Kho, in South Tripura district. The researcher found that both the elderly and younger generation weave their clothes. During the field visits from 2011 to 2017, the researcher observed that the Reang women practice weaving in every household. In rural areas like Bogafa and Chai Kho in South Tripura District, it was observed that in every tribal house the Reang women practice weaving, as shown in Fig. 3. During the interviews many women said that since the modern education system, the younger generation of women gets less time to weave. But the elders of the family has made it compulsory for the younger generation to learn weaving They are encouraged to learn and practice weaving in their free time and especially during vacations and holidays.



Figure 3. Sarkar, P., 2013. Reang women weaving on back-strap loom, Bogafa, South Tripura District. [Photograph] (Photo taken by the researcher).

### **3.2 Elements of Tribal Costume**

From the study of various textiles preserved in tribal families in different places like Bogafa and Chakhi Kho, the researcher found that the tribal fabric, woven on the back-strap loom consists of the following elements - Plain surface & Stripes, as shown in Fig. 4(a & b).

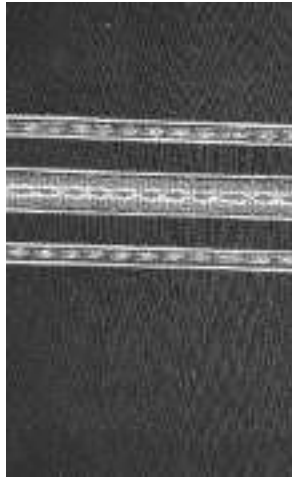


Figure 4a.



Figure 4b.

Figure 4. Sarkar, P., 2013. Study of elements of design in traditional Reang rigwnai, Bogafa, South Tripura District. [Photograph] (Photo taken by the researcher).

#### **i. Plain surface**

A plain surface is commonly seen in the traditional black colour rigwnai with three lines of motifs on the borders, usually worn by the older women of the Reang tribe. In another design of all over striped rigwnai, usually worn by the younger women, specific panels in rigwnai can be a plain surface. The researcher found that the plain surface is created with plain weave.

#### **ii. Stripes**

In the rigwnai worn by the Reang women, the stripes run in the direction of the warp. The distance between each line of the stripe can be 1/8 inches. The traditional colours used in the stripes of Tripuri rigwnai are white and black. Nowadays women create stripes with a various colour combination with white colour. The researcher observed that the women weave very thin stripes across the entire cloth in both traditional rigwnai and risha. The width of the stripes may vary from 1/8 the inches to 1/4 the inches or more.

### **3.3 Traditional Rigwnai**

The Reang women weave the rigwnai on the backstrap looms, is a rectangle piece of cloth, draped in the lower part of the body like a sarong or wrap around skirt. The dimension customized according to the waist measurement of the wearer. The available dimensions of rigwnai varied 68 inches \* 41. 1/2 inches.

The rigwnai is draped in the lower abdomen, starting from waist till mid-calf or ankle length. In the olden day, the length of the rigwnai was till the knee or mid-calf length, making the women comfortable while climbing the hilly regions. With changing time the Reang population

has moved towards plane land and has started wearing rigwnai of full length. The rigwnai with black and white stripes is the identity of the Reang tribe. The Reang women create stripes with a combination of black and white colour yarn. The women also use brown, dark blue, violet in place of black. The researcher has taken various photographs of tribal women wearing rigwnai in different places of South Tripura District. The researcher observed that there are two designs of rigwnai worn by the Reang women. Both the designs of the rigwnai have the same colour combination of black and white, as shown in table 1.



	RIGWNAI WITH STRIPES	RIGWNAI WITH MOTIFS ON THE BORDER
Age group wearing the rigwnai	Worn by teenagers and married women.	Worn by elderly women who have become mother in laws or grandmothers.
Colour Panels	 <p>Borders on top and near the hem can be in black, brown or blue.</p> <p>All over stripes black and white, in the warp direction.</p>	 <p>The body of the rigwnai is black in colour.</p> <p>3 lines of motifs near on the border near the hem, in white and brown colour.</p>
Stripes	All over stripes in the warp direction.	Three line of motifs on the border, in the warp direction.

Table 1. Comparison of two types of rigwnai of the Reang Tribe

The young women of the Reang tribe wear a rigwnai with stripes in black and white colours. This rigwnai is worn daily and on special occasions. Young girls, married women and mother of the family are eligible for wearing the rigwnai with stripes. The diameter of the rigwnai of the Reang tribe, may vary from 43 inches \* 66 inches and 45 inches \* 55 inches. The border of the rigwnai will be woven in black/ blue/ brown. The border of the rigwnai is around 5 inches wide or more. The diameter of the rigwnai is custom made and woven according to the size of the wearer.

### 3.4 Traditional colours of Reang costume

The researcher found that apart from the Reang tribe, all other tribes wear colourful costume in Tripura. The Reang tribe was restricted to wear only black and white colour. During the interview the researcher came to know that it was a political decision to not allow the Reang women to wear red colour. This finding of the research is supporting the research by Dhamija (2010), where the author mentioned that a dominant tribe can punish a rebellious one by forbidding the use of colour in their dress in Tripura. It is said once the Reang tribe revolted to grab the attention of the rulers. It was as a punishment they were restricted to use colours. The



women use a combination of black and white colours to create stripes. The preferred base colour of the rigwnai is black, while the motifs are made with white colour yarns. Sometime the women also use darker shades of brown, violet or blue in combination of black.

#### **4. Social Cultural and Economic Factors Influencing the Choice of Clothing**

One community that is facing rapid changes is the Riang (Reang) tribe of Tripura, a northeastern Indian state. The Riang (Reang), is a dominant tribal community of Tripura, recognised as the most primitive tribe are now struggling to find their identity and to capture position in the cultural milieu of Tripura (Bhattacharjee, 2009). The demographic picture of Tripura undoubtedly presents the effects of a constant influx of people from across the international border, and therefore the growth of population in the State is not entirely accounted for by natural growth but also by new net immigration each year. Hence the immigration-based pattern of population growth has changed the demographic composition in the State. Tripura State is undergoing social, communal and ethnic tension resulting from the indigenous people's feeling of being cornered and the insecurity in the land of their own, due to the overwhelming presence of the immigrants. a (Debbarna, 1995). The changes is reflected in the dressing and lifestyle of the tribal people, also reflected in their dressing.

Similar research works had been carried out to study the changes in the traditional costume of different tribes and groups. The changes in traditional costume are a common factor in many cultures and regions of India and worldwide. There are many reasons for the change in the traditional costume of different tribes. For example, changes in the traditional costume of Tangkhul Naga tribe of Manipur was due to many reasons. After the advent of Christianity in Tangkhul, many rituals and festivals, no longer celebrated. Costume related to those festivals had lost their significance. Change in the costume of men and women could also be because of education, urbanisation and modernisation which have broadened the outlook of the youth. Industrialisation has revolutionised the very dimension of fabric. Media and tourism have also made its impact on the clothing pattern. The youth no longer wants to wear the costume. They want to dress like the people they encounter (Moiwunshi, 2013).

During the field visit it was observed that in the Reang community, with the passage of time, social, religious and economic changes are noted. The studies reveal that due to the impact of outer society, socio-cultural reasons and attraction towards the contemporary trends, the slow transformation in the traditional costume is observed. Since the Reang population is settled in rural areas, there exposure to the outer world seems to be less compared to the other tribes of Tripura, majorly settled in the Capital Agartala and West Tripura District. Similar to the Tripuri tribe, the exposure to new culture and change in surrounding environment, physical, social and economic conditions affects the change process in their cultural domain. They are now subjected to a massive cultural change due to the influence of modern society. Key change agents are impacting the state of Tripura include increased numbers of the educated tribal population, exposure to media, excess to the internet from local internet café or smartphones, availability and promotion of contemporary textiles and inexpensive western and other Indian dresses. The survey among the Reang women in the semi-urban area shows the preference for

their clothing. 90% of Tripuri women said they wear traditional costume, 100% of women said that elderly women in their still wear the traditional costume. 64% of the women said that they wear the traditional costume when they travel outside the state of Tripura. 70% of women said that they still practice weaving. 53% of the women said they wear contemporary colours. The findings of the research show that though in Reang family's women continue to wear traditional costume and weaving, the change is noticed in the choices of colours and draping style. The younger generation of Reang women is still inclined towards their traditional way of dressing as shown in Fig. 5. However, unlike their ancestors, they prefer wearing colourful costumes. Due to modernisation there is threat of decrease in the number of women weavers. To preserve the age old tradition of weaving a new design strategies are required.



Figure 5. Sarkar, P., 2013. Preference of clothes in three generation of women in same family. The grandmother ( 2nd left hand side) is wearing a traditional rigwnai and risha, the mother is wearing a traditional all over striped rigwnai with a western blouse (left hand side). The elder granddaughter ( 1st right hand side) is wearing a rigwnai of different tribe with a t-shirt and stole, Th younger granddaughter( 2nd right hand side) is wearing a skirt and top, Bogafa, South Tripura District. [Photograph] (Photo taken by the researcher).

## 5. Design Intervention with Rigwnai

Identification & study of traditional crafts so as to incorporate the appropriate interventions maintaining the traditional elements of the crafts was the approach that was followed during these workshops. A proper design thinking process was followed for design intervention. On the basis of the focus group discussion it was found that there is need for conservation and revival of tribal textiles. There is a huge scope of creating diversified product for luxury market.

This will generate income and also encourage the younger generation to continue with the practice of weaving. Traditional Rigwani, was sourced from the elderly Reang women, weavers and local vendors. For selection of categories of products a market research was conducted online. For the first workshop different styles of bags and cushion cover were selected for designing. It was also kept in mind that the new design of products will have the essence from the culture of the tribe. As trims artificial silver coin were incorporated in the design, as the Reang women traditionally wear silver ornaments. The textile used for making the products were traditional rigwani woven in traditional stripes and motifs. Colour palate was kept as per the traditional colours used by the tribal women like black, brown, & white.

The products were developed in collaboration of Mothers Grace Women Empowerment Trust. The author has been working on various projects on design intervention with tribal fabrics of Tripura since 2019.

The organisation works on design intervention of tribal fabrics from different tribal communities of India . A group of 8 women from Jia Valley, Himachal Pradesh participated in the workshop as shown in Fig 6. The organisation works with artisans and craftsmen of defferent region of India.



Figure 6. Sarkar, P., 2022. Women working with rigwani during the workshop.

The products were designed keeping in mind the market demands as shown in Figures 7 & 8.



Figure 7. Sarkar, P., 2022. Bags designed using traditional rigwnai



Figure 8. Sarkar, P., 2022. Cushion cover designed using traditional rigwnai

The products developed will further be promoted through the social media network sites for customer feed back and collaboration with various online and offline marketing channel. This ongoing project is an attempt for revival of tribal handloom and encouraging the younger generation of tribal women to continue practice of weaving traditional textiles on back-strap loom.

### **Conclusion**

The Reang community of Tripura were know for their conformity on clothing. Traditionally the reang women wear a costume similar to wearing know as rigwani. The tribal women weave the rigwani in a combination of black and white stripes on back strap loom. The transformation in the tribal costume is co-related with various socio-economical and socio- cultural factors. As in many other tribal areas in India, Tripura is passing through a transitional phase though the nature and pace of change are specific to this frontier state owing to its history and demographics, as well as to common policy implemented following Independence. However, change is everywhere and has had an impact on traditional social structures. With changing time it is noticed that due to modernisation, urbanisation and education the preferences of clothing among the younger generation is changing. The elderly women continue to wear their traditional costume, where as the younger generation wear the costume only on special occasions. There is also a decline in interest in weaving in the younger generation. The research paper focused on the attempts taken for revival and preservation of textiles. Design intervention will help in designing diversified products and also empowering the tribal women in continuing the ages practice of weaving. The traditional tribal costume can be customised into new designs and value addition to make it more attractive, adaptable, seeking new dimension and universal appeal, with distinct essence of Tripura. There is much scope for future study and research.

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