

Woven Textiles as Art:  
An Examination of the Revival of  
Weaving in the Chittagong Hill Tracts

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## **ABSTRACT**

Woven Textiles as Art: An examination of the revival of weaving in the Chittagong Hill Tracts

**Arshi Dewan**

Weaving, in both its traditional and innovative applications, emerged across the Chittagong hills hundreds of years ago. After several decades of neglect, a traditionally woven fabric is once again commanding recognition: as a cultural artefact and as an art object. My research in a weaving village led me to explore how indigenous communities can foster a greater appreciation for the craft and attempt to push the medium to its creative limits. This thesis locates and identifies the uniqueness of hand weaving by examining the relationship between art and culture. During my field research in Bangladesh, I juxtaposed textile crafts from various indigenous groups to do a comparative analysis and to show their similarities in technique and function. I did participant observation to take a closer look on how the production of textiles reflects broader social, economic and political issues.

Cloth still has a very important significance to indigenous communities in the Chittagong Hill Tracts but more creative alternatives are needed to preserve and revive the art of weaving. The exhibition of fabric designs using traditionally hand-woven textiles was created to demonstrate the resiliency of cloth in a modern way and to motivate the younger generation of women to rediscover their heritage and weaving knowledge. My research will show how these fabrics can be used as a means of gaining agency and control for the people. The 'Raygula' textile project aimed at awakening indigenous people to the richness of their heritage and enabled them to express their creativity through the art of weaving.

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The “Raygula” exhibition of fabric designs was an extension of my studio work that explored the artistic potential of weaving. The project unleashed a new vision, more importantly, an alternative method of discourse about cultural diversity and identity. I am indebted to the following weavers for their contribution in realizing this community project: Konabi (Maloti ma), Mala, Thandamala, Felabi, Bossundra, Kobitra, Belo, Shapna, Niharica, Nirmala, Subarani, Tribini, Mongolmala, Sumotibala, Shantibala, Shonpodi, Champarani, Nandi, Judhopudi and Sanpudi. I would also like to thank Tenzing Chakma, all the participants and lenders to the exhibition because this endeavour would not have been possible without their help and cooperation.

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## Introduction

In the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh traditional hand weaving is a functional need and a professional practice among indigenous women who are guardians of culture at home and in the community. By preserving their clothing traditions, they educate future generations, show pride in being part of unique cultures, and affirm their lasting connections to their ancestors. Traditional textiles of various groups reveal a wealth of information about social relations and aesthetic conventions in the hill region. Textiles are much more than objects to be handled and admired since they are associated with various local rituals and indicators of cultural change throughout time. However weaving traditions and self-expression through dress are being obliterated by the traditions of a dominant society that engulf them. I will examine how the ritual of weaving still motivates women to preserve and pass down their knowledge to future generations despite being under constant threat of cultural assimilation. Recognizing the value of their creative work empowers women's roles in society and highlights the cultural significance inherently embedded in textiles. Weaving is a craft that mothers teach their daughters, generations after generations. Women pay tribute to past generations of women who were role models. Continuity and connections not only link with the past, but they are also expressions of hope for the future. Weaving remains a significant statement of both historical and social magnitude even though many may not realize it. I will attempt to know and learn about the identities of dedicated weavers in my community and create a path to better understand our cultural heritage through the weaving traditions.



In this introductory chapter, the historical background of the Chittagong Hill Tracts and its people will be explored in order to understand the relation between indigenous dress and cultural identity. The indigenous groups are distinct and different from the rest of the Bangladeshi population in respect to language, culture, religion, ethnicity, and especially in the way they dress. The historical and cultural background of the Chittagong Hill Tracts is important to keep in mind in order to understand the various political and social obstacles faced by indigenous people in this region. The region was named 'Chittagong Hill Tracts' in 1860 when the British occupied it and made it a district of their colony of British India. It is Bangladesh's only mountain or hill area with peaks of up to 900 meters and this region forms a bridge between Western Myanmar, Northern India and Southeast Bangladesh (fig. 1).

Ecologically the Chittagong Hill Tracts occupy a distinct position in South Asia because of their close proximity to the neighbouring autonomous native groups who practice slash-and-burn cultivation on the mountainous regions and wet-rice cultivation in lowlands. Thus the Chittagong Hills occupy a peripheral position between two distinctive environments and two distinctive subsistence patterns. Slash-and-burn agriculture is called "Jhum" and "Jhumeah" are those who practice it. It is the predominant form of subsistence pattern among five hundred thousand indigenous people who live in the mountainous region. They are divided into a dozen linguistic groups and their social organization is based on a kinship of clan and lineage (Dewan, 1991, p.50).

For many years this extensive region has attracted little attention, partly because it has been closed to outsiders due to political instability. Although news of

regional wars, ecological change, migration and floods occasionally reached international audiences, such news has rarely been placed in a wider social or historical context. The hill region and its indigenous population remain hidden behind a curtain of ignorance since they tend to be overlooked whenever generalizations are made about Bangladesh. The boundary between plains and hills is much more than just a geographical divide because it also marks a strong cultural and religious division. The inhabitants of the plains are Bengalis and the hills people constitute eleven different indigenous groups whose cultural links tend to be with Southeast Asian populations. The largest indigenous groups are the Chakma, Marma, Tripura, Mru and Taungchengya (Van Schendel, 2000, p. 1).

Historically, the Chittagong Hill Tracts ecological, cultural, linguistic and economic links with the mountains to the east and south have been more significant than those with the Bangladesh lowlands. Partly for this reason, within Bangladesh the region is often seen as marginal, remote and irrelevant. It tends to be overlooked whenever generalizations are made about Bangladesh. The Chittagong Hill Tracts were never much in the public eye until they suddenly sprang into national and international view in the early 1980s. The reason was clear: something 'news worthy' was happening. An armed conflict had broken out in the 1970s between a regional political party and the Bangladesh armed forces. The conflict resulted in serious human rights abuses and since then indigenous people lived in fear due the militarization of the entire region and a national political problem of the first order.<sup>1</sup>

The Bangladeshi government has never denounced the massacres, the destruction of resources, and the injustice committed by the army during the civil war. When army repression forced massive migration of Bengali settlers to indigenous village areas, many women abandoned traditional dress in order to hide their identities and to avoid regional identification by urban government forces.

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<sup>1</sup> Willem Van Schendel, *The Chittagong Hill Tracts: Living in a Borderland*. (Bangkok: White Lotus, 2000): 2.

Women have adopted many features of the Bengali culture in order to set themselves apart from their original indigenous culture that was considered backward or primitive. The middle class, conscious of social trends, opted for the 'Selwar Kameez' or 'Saree' since it was considered more modern. As financial circumstances dictated fabric choices, imported readymade fabrics became popular for those living in towns. Traditionally hand woven clothing made at home was still probable choices for those living in village settlements.

The predominant religion in the hills is Buddhism but there is also Hinduism and Christianity among indigenous groups. For centuries the majority religion (Islam) in the plains of Bangladesh, rarely converted the indigenous people but the conservative views impacted on how women dressed in the public sphere. The settlement of predominantly Muslim people caused some indigenous groups to give up their traditional dress in fear of being ridiculed and condemned for not integrating (Van Schendel, 2000, p. 107). Most indigenous women in villages still produce and wear traditionally hand woven fabrics but in the urban areas indigenous women, especially in the case of the Chakma, have been heavily influenced by Bengali culture over the last few centuries. The other indigenous groups have tended to retain their traditional mode of dressing more successfully because they lived away from the cities.

Seen from the outside, one would be inclined to believe that the beautiful indigenous textiles are the expression of a people who live in harmony and joy in the highlands of Bangladesh. But one would be surprised to learn that they live mostly in oppression and injustice since they lack freedom of expression. To encounter beauty

within these hostile conditions can be explained by the survival instinct of this culture, often attacked but never surrendering. These textiles are part of indigenous identity and symbolize a form of resistance. However, the traditional crafts are often used as a means of promoting tourism in the Chittagong Hill Tracts without even considering that they are the embodiment of their culture and bear great testimony to their history. Many women living in town areas abandoned the practice of weaving but handicrafts are slowly reappearing in markets in response to the quest for the hand-made as opposed to mass-produced goods from factories.

Raja Devasish Roy, Chief of the Chakmas explains the social circumstances that led to changes in indigenous occupations. He thinks that changes in cultural practices are visible in domains of dress, food habits, observances of rituals and ceremonies, and preferences in music and literature. These changes have come about both due to changes in occupational patterns and the spread of education. The social intercourse with non-indigenous people and the influences of the national and international media has greatly altered many of the traditional ways of indigenous people. The decline of the 'Jhum' cultivation and the expansion of the market system have been major factors in the declining use of traditional dress. Even a few decades ago, market centres were so few and far between that almost all the rural indigenous communities spun their own thread and wove their own cloth from hill cotton. This is still common for the more remote settlements, but in the cities, most indigenous people find it easier to procure clothes produced outside the region at a much cheaper price (Roy, 2000, p. 73).

The affirmation of Chakma identity is a relatively recent phenomenon within the society. As a result of this movement, a revalorization of their culture can be felt in the spheres of language, dress or other cultural expression that is deemed uniquely Chakma. Such a statement provokes a certain discomfort within the political and intellectual circles of Bangladesh. All too often the politicians have the tendency to see indigenous dress as an exotic and monumental manifestation most notably associated with primitivity. The Bangladeshi government forced its rule upon indigenous people while slowly destroying their social structures. Some people may wrongly understand that traditional dress reflects their cultural identity and an expression of an "archaic" and backward mentality because it is considered ancient (Van Schendel, 2000, p.107). Bengali people relate this trend to the contemporary Chakma with aversion or indifference even if they have adopted the dominant dress in order to be accepted. Even intellectuals patronizingly reduce the indigenous people to objects of research without any possibility of expression rather than seeing them as agents of change within their own environment.

In this light, the perception of indigenous dress remains outdated and static. This thesis re-introduces these textiles without minimizing the importance of the traditional indigenous designs. The objective of this thesis is to situate indigenous women at the centre of textile production. My aim was to make them see dress not only in a utilitarian sense, but also as a product of a great artistic inventiveness that expresses artistic creativity. To this day, the indigenous women still materialize with great fidelity and authenticity the various woven designs, in spite of repressive attempts by the dominant group (Bengali) to assert control over people through a

homogenous Bengali costume. It is my perspective that it is essential that these textiles remain a part of their modern cultural identity. It is therefore necessary to stop considering them as a cultural abstraction relegated to the past. Meanings can be found in the fineness of their weaving, and the symbols and colours of these fabrics reflect the depths of rich cultures.

Chapter two is devoted to describing the various dress styles of eleven different indigenous groups in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. I will also examine in detail the textiles, materials, technique and patterns that embody the worldview of indigenous people and how weaving is an integral part of their lives. In the third chapter, I will discuss the social significance of weaving by observing various socio-cultural processes that mould the production, use and meaning of textiles produced by various indigenous groups in the region. I will show how the art of weaving preserves cultural identity and serves as a great source of empowerment for women even though hand crafted artefacts are not considered a “fine art”. I also consider cultural change through dress and the issues which are important in view of current debates concerning the struggle and resistance in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. In chapter four, I will explore how my fieldwork research revealed the significance and value placed on textiles and how they often depend on their mode of production, and reception by a particular society. I observed the reality of the weavers and learned to weave myself in order to understand how weaving is part of their day-to-day lives. By challenging perceptions of culture and the conflicting roles of indigenous women from one generation to the next, I will explore the complex interweaving of these various issues surrounding cloth and what it reveals about culture and personhood.

Why should the preservation of material culture matter? What is the significance of hand-woven textiles in indigenous communities? I was able to instigate these questions during my research and while organizing the “Raygula” exhibition of fabric designs. The fifth chapter concerns the Raygula textile project that demonstrated how a community ritual such as weaving can preserve cultural identity and have transformational power in their society. During summer 2001, I organized an exhibition of fabric designs that was presented in a form of contemporary fashion show in my hometown Rangamati. Carrying out the project in my own native Chakma community enabled me to examine how indigenous societies currently place value on cloth according to individual or collective needs. In the fifth chapter, I contextualize the fashion show presentation by revealing how various indigenous groups were encouraged to negotiate changing dress styles in the contemporary society. The exhibition of fabric designs was an extension of my studio work that turned into a community project.

In the final chapter, I will discuss some of my art works inspired by my research on textiles. The works in general evoke tradition of textile arts but most importantly assert the presence and contribution of the weavers. I consider traditional fabrics to be bodily extensions of its people, materializing their history, hopes and struggles. The exhibition “Weaving identities” creates a window to indigenous cultures through the language of cloth. I refer to weaving to make visual statements about the nature of the medium and how it is pertinent for indigenous identity in the Chittagong Hill Tracts.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Weaving traditions and dress of indigenous groups in the Chittagong**

#### **Hill Tracts**

There are very few people in the world whose culture has not included spinning and weaving. Textiles are one of the most easily transported goods; through their history, motifs and patterns have been exchanged between cultures. Among isolated communities, the need for weaving is acknowledged for its utility; as well many familiar and poetic expressions are born out of specific cloth making process.

A Chakma woman weaves a traditional cloth with the back-strap loom outside the house (fig. 2). From time immemorial Chakma women have skilfully developed the work of weaving their designed fabrics with ideas of figures that have been collected directly from the natural environment where they have been dwelling for hundreds of years. The Chakma society is among the eleven indigenous people whose social functioning is based on a core of personal relations and duties handed down from generation to generation. Therefore weaving is still considered a sacred duty by the people of this land in a predominantly agricultural society.

A Chakma woman is represented wearing 'pinon' (skirt) and 'khadi' (fig.3). The traditional Chakma pinon (fig. 4) is a home woven long skirt made of a rectangular piece of cloth that is traditionally blue and black in colour with red borders on top and bottom and a flowery embroidery called 'sabugi' at the edge from top to bottom on one side. This intricate 'sabugi' on the edge of the skirt is only present in the Chakma pinon and it is their trademark. The pinon is open at the ends and laps over the other from waist to the ankle. The fabric is wrapped around the



body and tucked in at the waist on the left side. The ensemble also includes a 'khadi' (breast cloth) and a white turban called 'khabang'. The khadi is an intricately woven cloth with coloured designs of about two feet, in width and six feet in length worn around the bosom or over the left shoulder. There are three kinds of khadis: 'ranga khadi' (fig. 5) is mostly worn by young women and it always has a red background, 'phul khadi' (fig. 6) is decorated with flower motifs and 'chibuttana khadi' (Fig. 7) is meant for older women who prefer plane designs.

Both men's and women's clothing of eleven different indigenous groups are represented in the figures 8 and 9. Starting from the left, the (a) Chakma, (b) Lushai, (c) Chak, (d) Khumi and (e) Taungchengya groups display their dresses (fig. 8). The next set of groups, (starting from left) (f) Marma, (g) Bawm, (h) Khyeng, (i) Mru, (j) Pankhua and (k) Tripura communities represent their respective indigenous clothing (fig.9).

I will discuss the dresses of women more in detail because women's clothes are more intricately woven with designs whereas men's clothes are plain and usually common among all groups. They generally wear white a 'dhuti' in different lengths, a skirt-like dark designed fabric called 'lungi' with a shirt and occasionally wear a headdress known as 'Khabong' (fig. 8 & 9). The description of the textiles below follow the order of the groups which are presented in figures 8 and 9 starting from the left.

a) The Chakma women wear 'pinon' and 'khadi' as described earlier in the detail (fig.3).

(b) The 'Lushai' women wear intricate 'puans' woven with multi-coloured geometric design on white background (fig. 10).

(c) The 'Chak' women wear long horizontally striped skirt with a white blouse and another striped cloth wrapped over the shoulder. Their weaving is rather plain without any intricate designs or colourful decoration (fig.8).

(d) Among the eleven different indigenous groups, the 'Khumi' people arrange their hair with flowers and other hair ornaments. The Khumi dress usually consists of a white coat of coarse homespun, and a short wrap skirt that barely reaches the knees. The Khumi woman also adds a long cloth to wrap around one shoulder to complete her outfit (fig. 8).

(e) The 'Taungchengya' group is considered a sub-group of the Chakma because of their similarities in language dialect and customs. The women's skirt is woven with red, yellow and other coloured stripes on a black background (fig.11).

(f) The 'Marma' women wear homespun thabing (skirt), 'bedai' (blouse). They also use floral or geometric print patterned fabrics purchased from the market with Western-style blouses (fig. 9).

(g) The 'Bawm' women wear woven long sleeved blouses. They used to wear highly intricate designed skirts but they now wear long wrap skirts with floral prints like the Marma group (fig. 12).

(h) The unmarried Khyeng girls wear a jacket with no sleeves, but cut low in a V shape both in front and in the back. This has no opening and it is slipped on over the head. It is meticulously woven in colours with the most elaborate patterns. The horizontally striped skirt is worn long, almost reaching to the ankles (fig.9).

(i) The 'Mru' women wear a rectangular piece of cloth 'wanklai' wrapped around their waist. It is about one foot wide with the left side remaining open. It has an embroidered centre of above six inches width from the bottom (fig. 13).

(j) The 'Pankhua' wear hand woven 'kortas' and also machine-made coats and shirts purchased from the bazaars. They wear 'khabongs' made at home and worn only on special occasions such as ceremonial festivals. Another garment worn like the roman toga is the 'Choung-nak-poon'. This is a multi-coloured striped cloth on a black background and very striking to look at because the pattern is so complex. The women wear a skirt called "khazel" that is worn from the waist to below the knees. They use breast cloths which they purchase from the bazaar as they do not weave it themselves (fig.14).

(k) The 'Tripura' is another group who wear a similar dress like the Chakmas, but instead the red stripes on their skirts are broader and outlined with golden threads sometimes. Women wear home woven skirts called 'renai', 'khadi' and 'resa' (blouse) and headdress called 'karokcha'. Different sects wear their 'renais' in different designs. However, Tripura women are mostly known for their intricate beaded necklaces and silver ornaments (fig.15).

Thomas H Lewin was a British anthropologist who travelled in the Chittagong Hill Tracts in 1866-67 and he describes how they are dressed during a festival:

The pilgrims arrived generally by villages, each community dressed in gala attire and preceded by a drummer. The maidens were clad in home-spun skirts of dark blue border with scarlet, and white breast-cloths barred with chocolate and red, also of home manufacture. They wore silver or coral chains around their necks, and orchid blossoms stuck coquettishly in the long hollow, truncated, silver cones which most of them wore through the lobe of the ear.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Thomas H. Lewin. *A Fly on the Wheel or How I Helped to Govern India*. (London: Constable and company, 1912): 221.

Over last hundred years, there were adaptation to dress styles in order to conform to the notions of decency imposed by Bengali settlers and other outsiders. By inventing and experimenting with different uniforms, hill people tried to get away from the stigma of 'primitive nakedness' and link up with modernity. The most common way was to create a modernized 'traditional costume' by negotiating between old cultural style and new elements of respectability. The white blouses of the Taungchengya women are examples of the change in dress. A second option was to reinvent one's outer appearance completely and come up with a truly modern costume which was still specific to each group. The Khumi women have chosen this option by abandoning the short skirt and opting for long flower printed wrap skirts. The new dress does not resemble traditional Khumi dress in any way anymore.

#### *Weaving Technique*

The weaver uses her fingers in picking up the appropriate number of warps for each motif to insert the next pick of weft; and so the weaving progresses. This technique of hand weaving remained unchanged for generations because the fixtures are simple and the loom is portable. The size of the loom will depend on the width and length of the cloth, the complexity of the weaver's design, and the materials available for building it. Sometimes the pattern of a cloth is determined before weaving, by arranging the threads in bands of colour for stripes and checks. The coloured warps will create a bolder or muted impression depending on how thick the threads are, how they are spaced, and whether the warp or the weft dominates the surface in cloths (Lechtman, 1977, p. 57). Very rich and spontaneous effects are created by using up small lengths of yarn left over from earlier weaving. The

knowledge of weaving is not passed on by writing but by indigenous process of person-to person communication, by watching and practicing. Traditional hand weaving using the back-strap loom is therefore a ritual activity that reinforces family and community ties.

The first process prior to the weaving involves picking cotton from 'jhum' (slash-and-burn cultivation). The cotton is removed from the pod in the 'jhum' and brought to the house and thoroughly cleaned. It is then spread out on mats and exposed for two or three days to the sun to dry. The dried cotton is then ginned to remove the seed from the fibre and then the cotton is made of soft with an object called "dhanuni". When the cotton has been sufficiently bowed it is placed on flat boards, and portions are rolled by hand on little slips of bamboo. It is further rounded on a rod called "pech" and then it is spun into yarn with the "Charka" (spinning wheel).

In the following figure, a Chakma woman is spinning thread to prepare for weaving (Fig. 16). "Pering" is a bamboo base with another four bamboo strips and these are like a spider web-like spinning wheel called "charka" (known as the Catherine wheel in the West) which have rope around them, containing cotton bits. "Laidai" comprised of wood which have circular and rectangular parts with spikes on top. "Ranga" is then used to separate the threads in a straight line of bamboo with other delicate lines crossing them (Haq, 2002, p.12).

The second phase is dyeing the yarn with indigenous mixtures. For the manufacture of blue or black dye, 'kalma' or indigo leaves are placed in an earthen vessel. This is filled with water and left to soak for two days. To get the black dye the

bark of the 'kalagab' tree has to be boiled. The red dye is obtained from root of a tree called 'rang gach' (colour tree). Yellow and green dyes are also prepared from natural plants. The former dye is prepared by mixing turmeric and the bark of mango tree. A combination of indigo and turmeric makes a vibrant green. The preparation in each case is the same as for the blue dye (Bessaignet, 1958, p.78).

One of the first processes of weaving involves preparing five pieces of bamboo that are measured and stuck in the ground. The thread is then wound around them, two threads at a time. These are alternately twisted around the end pieces. The amount of thread required for the cloth to be woven is calculated by 'hundred pairs' of threads; and on average it will take four and a half pounds of thread to weave the piece of cloth a yard and a quarter wide and four and a half yards long. When a sufficient quantity of thread has been thus treated, the whole is taken up and fastened to the beam or post in the veranda, and weaving commences.

The back strap loom is called 'bain' and the following terms are the names of fixtures that are needed to weave: tagalak tapsi cham and its rope, lablebi, taram, suchyak bach, bawhadi, tambu bach, byang, thur chuma, kuduk kadak or chibung, siang, etc. (fig.17). These materials are made primarily out of bamboo and they are made in different sizes according to the length and width of the fabrics.

The woman seats herself before the cloth beam, pressing one treadle with the foot. She raises one shaft of healds and lowers the other, making a space between the upper and lower threads of the wrap and throwing the intersection on the cloth beam. The shuttle is passed through the gap from left to right, the lose end of the thread being held on the left of the wrap. The thread is now between the upper and lower

threads of the wrap and in front of the intersection the reed being pulled towards the weaver the thread is pushed home. The other treadle is then pressed and a fresh gap is made between the threads which have become reversed, and two fresh intersections have been formed, with the threads kept at tension by the healds. The thread is passed through and driven home with the reed; the shuttle is then passed from right to left this time. The intersection at the end where the weaver sits is thus woven in. Another pressure of the first treadle reverses the threads and brings the remaining intersection from the far end and throws it against the weft thread just shot which brings the threads to the same position as they were at the commencement. This operation is repeated over and over again till the required length is obtained (Hutchinson, 1978, p.65). The woven cloth as described above is used for their own wearing apparel, as well as for satchels, bed sheets and wraps. What is unique and challenging about weaving with a back-strap loom is that the tension in the cloth has a feel and character that the machine weaving cannot replicate.

The patterns are often in the weaver's head; there are sometimes over a hundred of them so they are recorded on a special fabric called 'alam' and other variations of well known themes are judged by the eye. These are some of the patterns abstracted from nature and others that are immediately recognizable like the elephant and the swan depicted in this 'alam' (fig. 18). Different shapes inspired by plants, fruits and animals like the tiger's eye, house-lizard's footmark, cat's footmark, snake's backbone, snail's tail are just some of the familiar design motifs that are commonly found in 'alam' (Chakma, 2002, p. 4).

Fabrics are woven as small panels so that new thoughts and variations on the visual themes can be worked into each and everyone. Within them, the decoration does not have to be distributed across the piece in relentless repeat; it is usually possible to pick up and leave off details. The placement of decoration corresponds to the traditional way in which a cloth is worn; the effect may be extremely rich, but in fact nothing is decorated unnecessarily (Talukdar, 1994, p. 67). Weavers held onto certain geometric patterns and abstract floral motifs inspired by the natural elements surrounding them.

The various indigenous groups display different patterns and colours in their traditional dresses. I discussed the dress styles of each group, the weaving technique, the method of production. I have examined how textiles, comprised of materials, technique and patterns, embody a system of formal relationships that provide information about the worldview of the indigenous people. The unique value of a given fabric emerges from the personal involvement of the weaver, who with great labour weaves her ideas into each warp and weft in a form of narrative.



## Chapter 3

### Social and cultural significance of weaving

The indigenous groups are distinct and different from the rest of the Bangladeshi population in respect to language, culture, religion, ethnicity and especially in the way they dress. Even within small distances between villages, there are enormous variations in design and style that identify the particular group affiliation. The subtleties of language expressed through the patterns and motifs are well understood by the weavers of the various groups. What they have in common is that most of the motifs are abstract forms of the local flora and fauna that are present in the natural environment around them. Each indigenous group has its own design, pattern and color combination so their traditional dress often indicates the identity of the weaver. Women are skilled in weaving their own dress and try to maintain the customary and traditional dress that bears evidence of a civilized culture of an ancient period. Most hand-woven fabrics are characterized by attractive primary coloured stripes and ornamental motifs in bold geometric forms. Nowadays, most weavers have access to the synthetics such as acrylic and viscose rayon and occasionally some other glittery yarn that is woven into their work to make them more attractive and fancy.

At a personal level, the goal of the weaver is to reach the highest standard of achievement in her technique because some designs cannot be recreated or some knowledge of technique is secretly kept within a family. It is important to bear in mind that some of the designs created by hand can never be simulated by machine and the result is a mere shadow of the real thing. The most complicated computer-

based looms cannot reproduce the genuine spontaneity and authentic spirit of cultural tradition taught by example and the result of generations of experience (Gianturco, 2000, p. 50). Intricate designs and rich effects of varied weaves can be produced with the simplest technology of sticks and strings. Some may say that these craft traditions are unrecoverable; but tradition is not static, and never has been. New techniques may undermine the old, but on the other hand, fresh ideas are being created.

For women, weaving has played an important role in the economic and cultural-history. Taboos and myths as well as designs have been passed down from mother to daughter through oral teaching traditions of weaving. The significance of weaving throughout life cycle celebrations is still important especially in relation to a young women's marriage and other rites of passage (Milgram, 1994 p. 36). In many communities, a productive and skilled spinner and weaver is still viewed as a necessity for she would be able to contribute to the family's income through her creative work.

Since women are the main producers of cloth and control its distribution at marriage in particular, their contribution to social and political life is considerable because cloth acquires special significance with bestowal and exchange. Thus, cloth-givers on such occasions generate ancestral authority, power and commit loyalty and obligation in the future. The traditional clothing is an important part of a woman's life and it is used ceremonially at major points in life from birth to death (Fraser-Lu 1988, p. 74). There are meanings attached to the hand weaving because it involves subtle rituals that characterize the people, their behaviour and their belief system. When a Chakma couple gets married for example, the bride and groom go to their elders who

bless them with 'dhan' (paddy), symbol of food, 'tula' (cotton), symbol of clothes, and 'durba grass', for all around prosperity. Cotton is therefore very symbolic in the marriage. Particularly in the Chakma society, a would-be bride is expected to produce a piece of fabric as part of her rites of passage into womanhood. In turn she receives an honorary garment as she is welcomed into her new family.

Other rituals and superstitious beliefs are related to birth, death and regeneration. It is considered bad luck for example to leave an incomplete fabric attached to the loom before giving birth or after the New Year called 'Biju'. For the Biju festival (the beginning of the new year in mid-April), it is a tradition to wear new clothes and many women weave their new outfits on time for Biju as a ritual of renewal. Similarly, deceased people are changed into new clothes before they are cremated. Therefore fabrics carry a great deal of ritual significance during special ceremonies or festivals. They not only signify wealth and the status of the owner but they are also treasured as family heirlooms. For example, a woman can hope to "make merit" with her weaving to win over her beloved because it is considered to be a virtuous quality for young women. She may give offerings of woven fabrics to Buddhist monks during festivals. It is an action intended to achieve contentment in this life, and to reach spiritual grace in the next.

Indigenous cultures have a rich heritage of their craft and possess a metaphoric vocabulary in which weaving and the art of textile manufacture provide the idiom of sociality. It is as though language makes us examine the relationship between the creation of materials and the materialization of social relations through cloth and clothing (Milgram 1994, p. 52). The predominance of women in clothing

production and distribution in many parts of the world shows the widespread symbolic systems in which cloth evokes female power and economic autonomy. For many indigenous societies, the major reason for continuing the production of textiles is still for cultural significance even though it has become an economic necessity. Cloth communicates the wearer's or user's ideological values and claims of indigenous people.

The weavers are conscious about their strong traditions passed down from ancient times but this practice is slowly fading away. Traditional motifs and patterns can be a source of local pride and identity but they cannot always be worn with peace of mind. Due to non-indigenous settlers in the region and the pressure to assimilate, many of the old village patterns and modes of dress are in danger of being lost. Some styles are being subdued and the weavers are no longer identified according to their ethnic creations. The skills required for weaving are disappearing since most women living in town areas are being discouraged to weave in order to pursue higher education. Young women are not given a choice whether they would also like to weave during their leisure time. In towns, they are only expected to do scholarly studies and completely abandon the weaving practice since it is no longer deemed important for a girl's upbringing. As social circumstances in the Chittagong Hills have changed, so did the dress styles of the different groups. Certain groups were more successful in retaining their traditional dress but the majority who live in towns adopted the sari or the selwar kameez (panjabi suit of the Bengalis) which covers the

entire body. These types of attire are completely different from the traditional clothes of indigenous people.

The invisibility of the female body is an important marker of status and propriety among most Bengalis whose rules of dressing are much stricter than the indigenous groups. In the Bengali moral universe, a woman showing too much of her body is easily reputed to be loose or mad (Van Schendel, 2002, p. 359). The change of dress is more common among the largest indigenous groups like the Chakma, Marma, Tripura and Taungchengya who integrated more with the mainstream Bengali society. The new way of dressing is closely linked with the status provided by formal education and state or private sector employment. Elite hill women educated in Bengali ways would often choose this option, particularly for public appearances and when they lived in large cities. Some of these changes involved covering more of the body as a protective measure to deviate the attention away from the female form. Women became uncomfortable with the unwanted gaze attracted by their colourful clothing so they wore garments with subdued colours. When representing the people of the Chittagong Hills, both Western and Bengali people have consistently stressed the connotations of primitiveness and textiles were material evidence of that primitivity (Van Schendel, 2000, p. 56).

Since the colonial period in Bangladesh in the 19th and early 20th centuries, many changes have taken place politically and socially affecting the textile production in a variety of ways. The great divide between rich and poor became greater and caused many people to slip ever further behind in living standards. The intensive cultivation of land to solve the problems of growing population also caused

environmental changes and in many cases restricted access to raw materials used in traditional crafts such as cotton from “Jhum” fields (Roy, 1995, p. 58). The vast majority of the rural population who relied on the informal sector of employment such as making and selling crafts were affected by these factors.

Many textile products that carried ritual values are now being sold off for cash in response to the economy market in order to maintain their livelihoods as their exchange economy disappeared. The indigenous communities are experiencing a great deal of changes due to modernization and commercially mass produced garments. Local weavers do not get fair prices for their products when they compete with the factory made fabrics. Weaving used to be widespread, and almost every village household still has a loom, but inexpensive milled cloths are plentiful in bazaars and are rapidly replacing the handmade products, even for festivals and other special occasions. Women in town areas do not weave anymore because it is time consuming and they prefer to buy readymade fabrics to make ‘selwar kameez’.

It is unfortunate that weaving practices are slowly disappearing and the skills required for weaving are often taken for granted. The weaver’s identity is not known beyond the family or the community because there was not enough value placed on the importance of these artistic creations. In developing countries, people rarely make crafts for leisure, they turn to craft production out of sheer economic necessity because it is pivotal in their social and economic life (Herald, 1992, p. 65). For as long as crafts are made for sale, they are adapted to suit the market instead of appreciating their artistry. The factory system, which has mechanized cottage

industries, inevitably devalued hand skills and mass-produced machine-made imitations of handcrafted textiles became readily available for the consumers. This put extreme pressure on the weavers who were finding it difficult to compete with factory goods.

What are the values that encourage people to want to make things themselves despite the apparent marginality of craft? In the case of traditional weaving, indigenous people kept this technique using the back-strap loom because it is a skill passed down from generations and cloth production signifies cultural resistance. It is a marginal population asserting its culture through what is considered a “marginal craft”.

Weavers do not consider their creations as art; they simply create them for their own use or to sell in the market. “While the ethnic styles could be identified, the weight of tradition within a group was seen as so great that no personal statements were possible” (Graburn, 1976, p. 295). This belief is mostly due to the lack of information about the creator and therefore the work cannot be identified as the masterwork of someone. In textile production, great skill and craftsmanship is preferred over individual creativity and experimentation. A traditional weaver’s work is culturally embedded and yet remains autonomous. The fabric holds an intrinsic value but it does not usually have a conceptual meaning behind its construction because uniformity is preferred over innovation. Weaving was traditionally associated with women in relation to notions of ethnicity and femininity. In both traditional and

modern societies, weaving is devalued and women's works are not regarded highly due to narrow cultural perceptions shaped by the dominant society.

According to Henry C. Finney, minority groups and women are both under-represented in most urban galleries and museums, but the dynamics giving rise to the imbalance differs for the two groups. Both have experienced discrimination in the art-world's upper reaches and their lower visibility appears to be mainly due to some process of selection or discrimination by the western canon of art (Finney 1997, p. 75).

Dr. Charlotte Otten is an anthropologist who conducted research on how the art and craft of non-Western societies differ in import and function from that of the Western societies. According to her, art in traditional societies is a symbolic expression of the basic values and beliefs held by a society as a whole rather than by a rebellious or avant-garde minority (Otten, 1971, p. 209). For the indigenous societies in Bangladesh, there is no distinction between art and craft, woven cloth is functional and used to beautify the body. Weaving is a communal activity that is not limited to "artists" or "craftspeople".

During my initiative, I was confronted with the image of the women in relation to these notions of femininity. Since weaving is mainly a women's preoccupation among indigenous communities in Bangladesh, they evoke self-reliance and make a collective contribution to society. One of the most significant aspects of crafts from the makers' point of view is the way in which production can fit into the life of the community. In addition, the work of a casual weaver is in marked contrast to that of master craftsmen who have undergone long



apprenticeships. There are few such masters who may enjoy the same status as the artist in the West. Many indigenous people operate in a collective society whereas people in the West live in an individualistic society. In the West the “cult of the artist” is worshiped. In indigenous societies, their works reflect collectivism; individuality does not have to transcend in their creations (Markowitz, 1994, p. 65). Thus, indigenous art is a system of communication that manifests the ideologies and beliefs that bring order and definition to a person’s culture.

There are complex moral and ethical issues that can be raised while observing cloth as metaphor for society, thread for social relations and how it expresses more about connectedness in a given community (Weiner, 1989, p. 36). By observing the indigenous dress of a given group, one can identify their dialect, marriage customs, house style, spiritual offerings, and other cultural facets that distinguish one subgroup from another. Rites of passage into adulthood are used by many cultures as a means of transmitting and reinforcing political and cultural norms regarding gender role specific to distinct ethnic groups. Dress as a visible expression is often a vehicle used to express normative expectations for women and indicates different stages of the female life cycle. With each successive stage the dressed woman is further adorned by symbols of cultural commitment related to assuming the expected gender roles of a fully mature woman. Married women’s dress is critical for the culturally appropriate psychological state of a woman, for the continuity of cultural transmission, and for the understanding of the cultural system (Lynch 1999, p. 9). Traditional dress thus immediately carries visual cues that identify the status of the wearer. In the Chakma society for example, young women wear the ‘phul khadi’ or the ‘ranga khadi’ before

marriage, whereas the older women in the community were the 'sibutana kdadi'.

Material artefacts, in this case, dress can have a powerful influence on the socialization of individuals and the continuance of a cultural system.

Threats to culture are also threats to unique perspectives on life. Loss of traditional cultures means loss of knowledge also. The rapid disappearance of remote cultures is part of a larger trend since human societies have always mixed and changed. Far from uniform, the new global culture is a shifting mixture of experimentation and innovation in which societies learn and benefit from each other where the old and the new are mutually transformed. We can resist and shape change but loss of the old is inevitable because it makes room for the new. Although a dilution of heritage characterizes the passage of time, we wanted to reintroduce the traditional dress in alternative ways. Culture does not exist in a vacuum and the ancient customs were also modern at one time. The modified versions of these garments highlighted the originality of hand-woven fabrics by making them more practical and comfortable to wear. It was about exposing to possibility of having more choice and variety in the way they dressed instead of conforming to some homogenous entity.

In the case of the indigenous people, they are resourceful, resilient and innovative in the way they strive to preserve their heritage. At the same time they no longer want to continue to be perceived as people who live in a museum and want to adapt to the changes in time. Clothing can be an appropriate bearer of the trend of the year, decade or age and it is not only about embellishment. All cultures tap into the power, real or imagined, of dress. Clothing has the power to transform. The

transformations engendered by dress range from the trivial to the profound. For the people living in the Chittagong Hill Tracts; it is a political and personal statement, a form of rebellion and resistance. The indigenous women can resist assimilation by asserting their ethnic identities through dress and not succumb to a higher authority.

Sarat Maharaj, a curator and author of the article “Arachne’s Genre: Towards Intercultural Studies in Textiles”, writes about Mahatma Gandhi’s quest for freedom by mobilizing his people to resist the oppressive British colonial system. For Gandhi, the post-colonial self could not be forged in a clear cut instant by simply negating the colonizing other: independence, self-determination were not so much ready-made states of being and mind as a self creating process on the part of the colonized—a struggle to awaken new capabilities and qualities in themselves no less than the colonizer (Bachmann, 1998, p.181). Gandhi’s campaign for the renewed production and use in dress of a hand-spun and hand-woven textile is testimony to the potentiality of cloth to unify large-scale society. He believed that people would need to experience through weaving and spinning a sense of what it might mean to make to do things for themselves. He grasped the idea that deliverance from colonial subjugation lay in their own hands. Cloth served as an economic product and medium of communication. Similarly, indigenous cloth of the Chittagong Hill Tracts can be used to communicate it is intrinsically connected to socio-cultural independence. People must be sensitive to the connection between costume and social status, and that perceived changes in social position required changes in costume. We must deliberately use the indigenous dress in the public sphere not only to express our socio-political identity, but also to initiate the revival of handmade cloth.

## Chapter 4

### Fieldwork and personal experience

My research methodology involved the collection of data from primary sources and secondary sources. My primary sources included the fieldwork: the observation of participants and spontaneous conversations with them. I also drew upon my own experiences while interacting with them in the weaving community. Oral traditions and informal interviews with indigenous peoples have been a major source of information. My photographs and video footages helped me to review what I experienced during my field trips. My interviews were conducted in private homes, I travelled to remote areas, and I did extensive work in a community of weavers in the Rangapani village. Secondary sources include archival materials, books, articles, journals, photographs, field studies and other relevant documentation.

I first began my research with exploratory and informal interaction in my Chakma community during my first visit in Bangladesh in 1997. I spoke the native language since my childhood was spent among my Chakma relatives. The advantage of being from the same community helped me to bridge the cultural gap to a certain extent, although having lived in Canada for 17 years it was apparent by my dress and manners that I was not a resident of Bangladesh.

Throughout my research, I consciously attempted to keep interacting with them as naturally as possible during my on-going informal contact with them. As a result, I was able to compare information gathered during my first visit and see the subsequent developments when I returned to the Chittagong Hill Tracts in 2000, 2001

and 2002. The compiled information was absorbed in a more casual and real context. In 2000, I made many contacts and met with many individuals who were directly involved in the textile industry and those who were generally interested to have discussions about indigenous cultures in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. Some of these individuals were politicians, academics, entrepreneurs, family relatives, friends and weavers in the community. I also travelled to the southern district of Banderban to meet with other indigenous groups who lived in remote villages. During my stay in 2001, the entire summer was dedicated to organizing the “Raygula” exhibition of fabric designs. I spent most of my time in the Rangapani village to work closely with the weaving community there.

A combination of anthropological methodology and my studio practice with weaving was used to examine the relationship between art and culture. During my field research in Bangladesh, I juxtaposed textile crafts from various indigenous groups to do a comparative analysis and to show their similarities in technique and function. I did participant observation to take a closer examination on how the production of textiles reflects broader social, economic and political issues. Non-written sources of information come in many shapes and voices. In interpreting stories and other ‘oral’ sources, the ears become a primary research tool, whereas pictorial art, photography, objects, textiles and other crafts provide clues for the eyes. Non-written sources allow us to use a wide range of sensory information about the past but they also require us to develop new ways of assessing the quality of information they provide. Collecting these materials and making them publicly

available is one way of giving voice to ideas, perspectives, and interests of people who have been marginalized or silenced. The stories of the women in my documentary film *Guardians of Culture* provide insights into the realities of life in the highlands and how the production of textiles reveal a wealth of information about social relations and aesthetic conventions. Through numerous interviews with individuals from three separate communities, namely the Mru, Bawm and Chakma, I learned why they still continue to produce hand woven textiles despite pressures to abandon their weaving practices. I discovered that the major impetus for textile production is still for cultural significance even though it has become an economic necessity.

I spent my time visiting the Rangapani village at least twice a week and often talked with the craftswomen over three months during each visit. I asked all the artisans similar questions about what weaving means to them, plus some inspired by their particular cultures. What were their dreams and disappointments, their accomplishments and predicaments? They felt comfortable enough to volunteer personal information. The women became my friends and my teachers. They sat in their bamboo and straw huts, or on their bare patios, or on bare ground, spinning, weaving and talking to me.

Textile weaving seems to have played a pivotal role in their social and economic life. The continued existence of this craft helped in decentralization of the social and economic power and also provided with enough employment for the women in the village. Throughout developing and transitional societies, women use the money they earn making crafts to buy food and provide education for their

children. Many are illiterate and their access to resources are limited; yet their energy and ingenuity, and commitment make it possible for them to earn the necessary funds often by juggling various tasks at a time. I wanted to meet these entrepreneurial women. I felt that these invisible women with their incredible talents deserved the spotlight. A passion for traditional crafts led me to focus my research on indigenous craftswomen who weave in the Chittagong Hill Tracts.

The study on the textiles revealed many things about my own culture and threw light on the artistic life of the indigenous people, their customs, religions and social history. In fact while studying the traditional arts, I got to know the working of their aspirations and beliefs regarding traditional dress. They weave not only to satisfy their needs but they are encouraging future generations of women to continue weaving and preserve their culture. Therefore, learning their histories, appreciating their artistry and acknowledging their worth is necessary.

#### *Personal experience*

When exploring my Chakma lineage I had to negotiate through my native language, often encountering the limits of my ability to communicate with the women who innately knew the vocabulary of weaving. One of the most significant aspects of weaving, from the makers' point of view is the way in which production can fit into the community life. Since weaving is mainly a women's preoccupation, many processes may be worked conveniently around the domestic realm and agricultural calendar. The women also build their lives around the weaving practices in relation to their belief systems and rituals that are connected to myths. My desire to establish links with these weaving traditions includes social responsibility to claim an identity

and to reinterpret oral histories of indigenous women. Some of my links are with stories and domestic crafts to see what relationships women have to the home, family, society and generational transitions.

My interest in the process of weaving in my native country was stimulated during my first trip in 1997 when I saw some of my family members weaving. I realized early on that it was not enough to just study about weaving since it was personally a much richer experience to gather knowledge by practical learning. Once I began to learn the ritual process in weaving from my grandmother, the richness of the experience came through. My attempt to create a piece of cloth made me realize how we were two different people learning to understand each other and how I was actually learning to define myself. My personal connection to this topic led me to explore stories of women in my family and other Chakma women from one generation to the next. These stories involve the experiences of my female relatives when and how they first learned to weave. They told me about the personal obligation they felt to preserve the material culture.

Weaving is a craft that mothers teach their daughters, generations after generations. Continuity and connections not only link with the past, but they are also expressions of hope for the future. Weaving remains a significant statement of both historical and social magnitude even though many may not realize it. I was attempting to experience, to know, and learn about the identities of my lived and living female relatives. In telling our oral histories, we share who we are, creating a path to better understand our cultural heritage through the weaving traditions.



## **Chapter 5**

### **The Exhibition of Fabric Designs**

In the process of learning to weave and seeing so much versatility in textiles during my travels in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, I decided to do an exhibition of fabric designs. In the correct sense of the word, I am not a weaver, but I want to draw attention to this medium as a source of the aesthetic experience. If women get invigorated to start weaving indigenous dress and wear them in public, this is the best thing I can hope for. Although traditional methods of weaving would continue, not everyone was interested in remaining close to the traditional roots. Women would see potential in weaving as a vehicle for expressing their artistic sensibilities and their vision of the world around them. It can be a medium that can provide the basis for exploring female imagery and concerns but also great economic benefits.

The purpose of the project was to recapture some lost historical aesthetic, to tap into the spirit and motivations of the women who made fabrics a hundred years ago. Making a fabric manually may have limited the production but it certainly improved the artist's sense of creative resourcefulness. Clothing designs were an extension of my artistic pursuits by working creatively with basic symbols and motifs that are commonly known and recognized instantly. The initial designs and layouts of the fabrics were demonstrated but the execution was left to the weavers and tailors. The original designs were based upon observations of hill life and my indigenous heritage. The Raygula project provided an opportunity to interact socially among other people with the similar interest of promoting indigenous heritage and that is why this venture turned into a community project.

I invited my fashion designer partner Tenzing Chakma to join the project. He studied fashion design in Calcutta and returned to Rangamati in summer 2000. I was fortunate to be introduced to him through friends while I was in there to do my preliminary research. We talked about our mutual interest in preserving our culture and celebrating our heritage by exposing the beautiful fabric designs in a modern way. He showed me his portfolio of his previous works and I was instantly impressed and excited that we had a similar vision. We discovered that we had complementary visual perspectives. We briefly discussed making a partnership with and started making plans to work together in the future. When I returned in 2001, I approached him about collaborating to organize a fashion show in our hometown Rangamati.

We selected the Rangapani village to carry out the weaving because the commitment of the weavers in the community propelled the Raygula project. The project had to do with the conceptualizations of kinship, community, friendship, and other types of social relatedness among the indigenous people. Fashion impulses are also integrated into the ensembles in the form of new fabrics, trims, or accessories indicating attention to a 'modern look' that characterized new-style ensembles. We created dress styles that were expressive of change and transformation in the society to arouse debate about appropriate attire for indigenous women.

The Raygula project was a social intervention on my part: I wanted to do a social experiment on how the local people perceived their own dress in relation to culture and identity. For the first time the local young indigenous people took the initiative to create and celebrate their own heritage through dress. The aim was to

renew people's interest in asserting their cultural identity through dress and to inspire them to wear these clothes in the public sphere. The purpose of the Raygula project was to raise awareness about these socio-cultural factors related to the textile arts. Inspired by the Rangapani village women who turned weaving into a professional practice, many other communities in the CHT region may be more conscious in preserving their weaving heritage. By displaying these fabrics in a new light, it was important to emphasize the creativity of local weavers and communicate their unique knowledge and innovative skills. This cultural show was made possible with the tremendous help and support from the local organizations and participants so in a sense it became a community project. Two shows were presented at the Cultural Institute in my hometown Rangamati on the 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> August 2001. Pamphlets were distributed to the audience explaining the purpose of the Raygula Project. The presentation was realized to celebrate the cultural heritage of distinct ethnic groups and to highlight how the textiles act as cultural bearer of the society.

In my native community, the show explored the phenomena of collective perception and the aspects of self-awareness that are felt in terms of dress at a particular time in history. It was created to provoke the local indigenous people to think about what the clothing means to their identity and challenge their preconceived notion about traditional dress as being an outdated "village dress." It was essential to raise the status of indigenous dress and highlight the importance of weaving in indigenous cultures.

“A society’s knowledge, and its system for generating and maintaining that knowledge, is cornerstones of its culture” (Manek, 2001, p.9). The impetus and fundamental reason to do the fashion show was to raise the status of the “traditional fabrics” and highlight the creative ideas of indigenous people who developed these intricate weaving techniques. Certain geometric patterns and abstract floral motifs were intentionally used on these designed clothes since these decorative motifs are deeply rooted in the consciousness of the people who live in this region. I drew inspiration from both the past cultural history as well as western dress patterns to create an arena of validation and recognition of the magnificent hand-woven textiles. Using geometry, the principles of light and shade, and their innate colour theory, these women interpreted those design elements into large-scale fabrics. The weavers painted with fabric, judging them like a body of painting by attracting attention to the graphic qualities of the designs. We were interpreting older patterns so imagination, creativity and an intuitive sense of good design played a big part in the creation of these fabrics both by the designers and weavers.

A description of the stages of this project leading to the fashion show is as follows: First, the Rangapani weavers went to markets to buy the coloured threads that they needed for the fabrics we ordered. The three women ( Sanfudi, Niharica and Subarani) represented in this photograph took part in this project which involved a group of twenty women (fig.19). In the next photograph, the woman is known as “Maloti ma” is using the ‘charka’ for spinning (fig. 20); she is a senior member of the Rangapani community and the leader among the group of accomplished weavers.

A weaver named Felabi was assigned to make a red and black striped fabric and she demonstrates how the fabric for the Raygula project was emerging (fig. 21). In the making of this particular fabric, she started with a basic pattern that she was asked to replicate, the traditional ‘ranga pale” (red border) in varying sizes. The following figure shows how that same fabric is transformed into a sleeveless long vest for the purpose of the fashion show (fig. 22). After the basic design was chosen, the final outcome was entirely up to the weaver, as she had to decide upon colour schemes, whether or not to include borders, etc.

By using the weaving as another art medium, the weavers expressed the seriousness of their aesthetic concerns. Weaving, combining both the qualities of flat surface and relief, offered the artist the scope to explore many formal concerns. Types of fabric, colour, texture, stitching; all influenced the final appearance of the piece. The weaver must possess a good sense of design, whether learned or intuitive, which enables the finished woven cloth to be judged as visually successful. The appearance of the original fabric is altered by cutting, layout, or stitching, innovative designs carried the chance for that ultimate danger—failure. However, we wanted to explore the potentiality of these fabrics by sewing them to create beautifully shaped designs. Over a hundred outfits using woven and machine made fabrics were combined to showcase the hour-long show.

The results of some of the designs are indicated in the series of photographs. Here, a model displays the bridal gown designed entirely with the Chakma Pinon and Khadi fabrics (fig. 23). Another outfit is created with the Chakma fabric but in this

case the pinon (skirt) part is used for the top and the “khadi” is used as a skirt (fig. 24). Both the colour bands and the geometric shapes advance and recede, investing the fabric with properties of optical illusion. A variety of dresses made out of Chakma, Taungchengya and Tripura fabrics are displayed in the photo shoots (fig. 25).

The clothes possessed a greater sense of form and the fabric creases heightened the body’s curved shapes. The series was more suggestive of the figure as the soft cloth was evocative of the human form. Despite the seeming random placement of the fabric strips, there was an inherent internal organization. My fashion designer partner Tenzing Chakma and I designed these clothes carefully to highlight the symbolic design motifs of the fabrics. For example, Tenzing is wearing a shirt made out of a Chakma woman’s pinon to bring forward the gender bending issue about traditional fabric making which is relegated to women. I am also wearing a long coat demonstrating a traditional Chakma motif. The other member of our designing team is the tailor who is shown wearing a hand-woven shirt (fig. 26).

The overall design of the fabrics was balanced by both colour and arrangement of forms to create these stylish clothes. Similar to a painting, the elements of design operated within the rectangular shape of the original fabric and then we designed the clothes with the precise placement of the stripes to enhance the visual sensation. Although women relied heavily upon the intuitive placement of coloured threads, the work was more closely related to the traditional patterns.

These are some of the intricate design motifs that were woven to highlight traditional recognizable Chakma motifs (fig.27). References were often made to historic patterns, though these appeared in a fragmented as well as layered form. Weaving is expansive enough to include numerous renditions of traditional patterns as well as innovative experiments. This discontinuity acknowledged the heritage of the weaving past but also promoted the need to explore new directions.

### *The reflection on the Raygula fashion show*

The fashion show played a significant role to visibly display the beautiful textiles of various indigenous groups. I also wanted the fashion show to be the arena wherein culture is transformed or reconstructed to fit changing social, economic and political realities. Young men and women who had "nothing else to do" took part in the project to challenge themselves and create new avenues. All participants ultimately became engaged in the action, and were therefore transformed by the process. I interpret the participants' willingness to dress for the event as a visible display of commitment to bring exciting change. I argue that those who dressed for the performance were moved to meaningful participation through the process of dressing to fit the changing roles within the event.

In my judgment the show was a culturally significant event that involved a physical and mental act that drew the participants into the theatre, the performance, and the discourse on culture. The 'Raygula' stage design was also inspired by the bamboo structure of typical indigenous houses and this figure shows how it served as

the backdrop of the stage (fig. 28). The show provided a space for both models and audience to experience a different environment integrating the traditional and the modern. The focus was on the young people to define themselves, in contrast with being defined by history and/or tradition. Traditional modified clothes were displayed in a new light to reinforce the present, pay testimony to the past, and attempt to change toward the future. Traditional dress inherently reinforces historically linked identities but we also consciously created an image of ourselves, rather than dressing to fit an existing normative role in society. The people now have the choice to conform to the normative ideal of the homogenous clothing, or dress to challenge it.

‘Ethnic’ dress seems part of the local effort to stabilize a radically compromised identity. It is also a mark of displacement from the centres of social production and cultural production. Fashion seems especially appropriate for this task in the modern world, for it epitomizes the power to encompass the self (Howes, 1996, p.21). Identity is something owned apart from one’s self, something that must continuously be ‘put on’ and displayed. The show provided the audience with the opportunity to explore cultural expectations, challenge and redefine themselves both as men and women and as members of cultural groups with distinct histories and bodies of aesthetic expression. The show caused self-reflection among older people in the audience as well, as they assess their own lives in comparison to the young models being presented as exemplar. Invention of new dress styles created debates surrounding their identity so they explore the relationship between appearance and maintenance of cultural heritage. It was therefore an aesthetic expression as well as a



self-conscious effort toward reconstruction of our identity. It was not an attempt to re-enact the past, but rather a use of heritage as a response to current realities and balancing their cultural inheritance with commitments to modernity and self-invention.

Social activism is essential to overcome marginalization and bring positive change in society. There is not any group of people in the margins who have been able to mobilize themselves, socially, culturally, economically, and politically who have not gone through some sort of re-identification, re-territorialization and re-identification in order to overcome their exclusion and marginalization (Hall, 1997, p. 53).

According to another cultural theorist, Cornel West, the most significant theme of the new cultural politics of difference is the agency, capacity and ability of human beings who have been culturally degraded, politically oppressed and economically exploited. The new cultural politics accentuates their humanity and tries to attenuate the institutional constraints on their life-chances for surviving and thriving (West, 1990, p. 34). The new cultural politics of difference therefore affirms the perennial quest for the ideals of individuality and democracy by digging deep in the depths of human particularities and social specificities in order to construct new kinds of connections between people. From the perspective of cultural construction and transmission through dress, what happened is the meeting of real and idealized or imagined conceptions of a modern identity emerged through clothing. The coming together of the traditional and the modern is what created transformation and heightened consciousness.

The project also involved coming to terms with the dominant ideology that devalues indigenous identity and bring hope to those individuals and communities suffering cultural relocation and discrimination. Meghna Guhathakurta observed women's survival and resistance in the Chittagong Hill tracts:

Women in their own way have admitted that despite differences in Culture and Language among different communities, the hill people have been drawn together by common bond of resistance against the repressive forces of the Bangladesh State. Many women claimed that they needed to participate in the resistance movement because it was only way to ensure their dignity. Many claimed that it was the only way to ensure their existence, both physical and cultural. Even if they did not directly participate in the movement they gave economic and moral support.<sup>3</sup>

Women of the Chittagong Hill Tracts have been negotiating their identity in the public as well as private spheres. They are continuously learning to adapt and rework their roles in society because it is a struggle for survival for a community that is facing cultural uncertainty. The resistance movement involves protecting and preserving the weaving traditions despite the pressure to assimilate and abandoning the traditional dress. The fashion show relates to the resistance movement because it was a public affirmation of the strength and innovation of indigenous people.

In regards to the visual impact of the woven fabrics, this was the instrumental feature of their acceptance and would also function as the hook to lure in traditional art audiences. The weave as an art experience suddenly brought widespread recognition within the community for the medium and a change in status. Weaving has innovative design and exploration of colour, line, form and illusion with two-

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<sup>3</sup> Guhathakurta, Meghna. "Women's survival and Resistance". *The Chittagong Hill Tracts: Life and Nature at Risk*. (Dhaka: Society for Environment and Human Development, 2000): 85.

dimensional mediums. The majority of the weavers will continue to work in the traditional manner since meticulous weaving still prevailed. Familiar patterns presented the maker with a sense of stability in a world where everything is changing rapidly. Traditional weaving will always be practiced. However, new woven fabrics and the new techniques will ensure its appeal and continuation.

Fashion itself can change, spurred by images offered in the world. Fashion has evolved and reflects outwardly our internal desires and conflicts. In the course of my research I discovered that numerous and complex motives inform our clothing decisions and that our personal style can be a strong reflection of our sense of self. The project Raygula grew out of this research and my desire to reveal how a woman's clothing choices help women understand what their clothes are saying to others and how they can use this information to better understand themselves. As well, the Raygula show provided the opportunity to consider more deeply what clothing conveys about cultural identity. In the process, one may recognize how attitudes about indigenous dress deemed 'inferior' have been shaped. .

By removing the weave from its negative impoverished connotations, the public perception of this item must change. The appreciation of the craft for its virtuosity would give rise to the other individuals incorporating this craft into their oeuvre (Paz, 1974, p. 59). In the future, weavers can be challenged to push the medium so that it can break through and achieve higher status. It is not an impossible proposition. A sociological interpretation of this phenomenon was that the complexities of technological society reinforced the human need for outlets of creative expression.

The garments with which we cover our bodies everyday are encoded with fascinating but usually unexplored meanings. From the Raygula show, one can learn how to use appearance and clothing as tools of empowerment. Thus, I began a personal crusade to promote the awareness to recognize women's creativity and work by raising the consciousness of others.

Paolo Freire is a progressive educator who espoused social intervention and encouraged many disadvantaged people to find their voice and strive for a better society:

Imagination and conjecture about a different world than the one of oppression, are as necessary to the praxis of historical "subjects" (agents) in the process of transforming reality as it necessarily belongs to human toil that the worker or artisan first have in his or her head a design, a "conjecture," of what he or she is about to make. Here is one of the tasks of democratic popular education, of a pedagogy of hope: that of enabling the popular classes to develop their own language.<sup>4</sup>

A progressive attitude is needed to explore the connections between weaving and indigenous cultures. My aim was to show how indigenous dress as presented at this show can give young people and their community agency and power of expression that allows them to assert their cultural identities. An explanatory brochure written in English and Bengali was distributed during the fashion show to contextualize the reason for having an exhibition of fabric designs. It explained that this cultural event was motivated to bring in focus the importance of weaving and bring these textiles in a new light. The brochure stressed how we must value our own culture in order to preserve the art of weaving (Appendix).

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<sup>4</sup> Paolo Freire. *Pedagogy of Hope: Reliving Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. (New York: Continuum Books, 1992): 39.

The mission of the Raygula project was to raise awareness about indigenous cultures through the textile arts. The literature on the brochure emphasized the creativity of local weavers by communicating their unique knowledge about intricate designs and innovative skills. In the Chittagong Hill Tracts, cultural identity is constructed through indigenous weaving traditions that create a sense of belonging and strengthen community ties. The purpose of the Raygula exhibition was to create awareness among indigenous people the heritage of weaving and how it can motivate women to preserve and pass down their knowledge to future generations despite being under threat of assimilation.

## Chapter 6

### Studio Practice

**‘Weaving identities’** is an exhibition that creates a window to indigenous cultures through the language of cloth. Textiles are presented in the form of visual essays, addressing the continuously evolving identity of the indigenous people living in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. These essays combine weavings, photography and text to reconsider the presentation of indigenous cultures.

I consider traditional fabrics as to be bodily extensions of its people, materializing their history, hope and struggle. My objective was to take traditionally feminine activities of weaving and use them to make visual statements: about the nature of craft, about the nature of indigenous identity, and the nature of domestic skills. Their true nature lay underneath the soft appearance and the fabric functions as a metaphor for female concerns. Fibre arts served as a mediator for these issues and they appeared more accessible and recognizable through this medium. It is a way of exposing the truth hidden behind the beautiful facade. Some of my works carry commentary about the ecological fragility and a warning of the impending dangers of industrial development. I explore issues interconnected with the actions of economic exploitation of resources in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. Human rights, environmental issues, and the spiritual nature of life provide both the impetus and subject matter for the creative process. I consider the representation of these textiles as mirrors of indigenous pride and embody selfhood. They also bear testimony to their endurance after the last three decades of brutal civil war which officially ended in 1997.

While addressing various issues, the art works are inextricably related to each other. It became a method of exploring the insidious nature of militarism to confront complacency and demonstrate the need for harmony. The medium of weaving presented an opportunity for social commentary which was not possible in other art mediums without obscuring the message or diminishing the cause. Fabrics were metaphorically linked to integrating different elements within a whole; they were both the message and the medium. They represented a powerful testament to their memory. I presented my philosophy through a medium that possessed a long history of supporting, albeit abstract, human concerns.

Who am I? What am I? These are initial questions which young person asks as she/he begins to realize that a relationship does exist between the individual and society. In search of personal identity, it soon became clear that the mirror of the outside world plays a crucial role in the manner in which I saw myself reflected by others. Some pieces foreground precisely how “ethnic” identities have displaced or are in the process of transforming old-style definitions of nationalism or national identity. There is a fundamental and inescapable tension between the identities you choose and the identities that are fostered on you. But we have to face the fact that some of those identities are ethnically marked in ways that produce antagonism and contradiction (Maharaj, 45). Why we feel impelled to “go beyond” our cultural identities in any way at all, whether by minimizing them or valorizing them. It was time to celebrate the uniqueness of all the indigenous groups and diminish the hostility those cultural identities may illicit in one another. In trying to merge the two aspects of my culture, I negotiate my dual identities of being Canadian, yet from

another country. The basis of my work is linked with South Asian cultural concepts, philosophies, patterns of thinking, methods of perception and the resultant outward cultural products. An essential part of my work is tied to my lived experience than to the canons of art history.

Different ideologies enable us to represent, interpret, and make sense of different aspects of our existence. I had endeavoured to maintain a deep bond with my homeland. Like many immigrants, I live the bifurcated existence of the Chakma-Canadian, neither one nor the other, yet a strange amalgam of the two, always unfixed, forever unstable. My art references my Chakma culture through the recreation of traditional fabrics using indigenous motif design and a mix of calligraphy inspired by the ancient Chakma script and language. Art indeed may be the mirror of nature. My metaphorical mirrors bears the borders of history suggesting that we are defined and restrained by our ancestry as well as by our perception as such. I also incorporate writing in the fabric to reveal hidden meaning and underlying nature of the narrative in weaving. The works in general evoke tradition of textile arts but most importantly assert the presence and contribution of the weavers.

A description of my art works is as follows:

*Chakma script* (fig. 29)

The action that preceded or grounded the conception of my art work was my willingness to learn the Chakma traditional script through practice. The hand writing gestures of the abstract shapes of the alphabets emphasized the recreation of an old tradition that connected me to the past. Our basic attitudes about our culture, identity and self are always directly or indirectly condensed into our works of art. Such



relationships are voluntarily emphasized in my “Chakma script” piece. Instead of using the medium of paper for writing, I transposed the alphabets on fabric to create a visual document resembling an ancient scroll that rolled into cylinders. I explored the naturally fluid character of the fabric and the fine surface of the fabric through the ‘devore’ technique. This process by which some parts of the fabric are eliminated to reveal an ancient script represents the transitory state of my native language.

*Weaving a narrative* (fig.30)

The piece resulted out of thinking about story telling and how a woven fabric contains a narrative. I use all natural materials such as fabric and bamboo sticks. I wanted to bring new materials and old concepts into a three dimensional object. The use of fabric also reminds me of the alternative materials used in the past for writing. The form is inextricably linked to the content because the tools used for weaving are integrated with a ready-made “Khadi” fabric to resemble an actual loom. There is also text embroidered in the woven fabric to suggest that weaving is a form of language that communicates the maker’s historical narrative.

*Photographic journal* (fig. 31)

During my field trip, I travelled to remote villages to meet different indigenous groups. The photos and videos taken from those travels inspired me to do a series of how I experienced key moments during those visits. I have displayed photographs in a chronological series of events almost to suggest a film reel. I used canvas and wood for the structure of the piece and printed a familiar Chakma “Pinon” motif along the edges.

*They are coming* (fig.32)

The mixed media instillation is concerned with the subjugation on indigenous people in my native country but which have a wider implication for tyranny anywhere and everywhere. I often use the veil as a surface layer covering the truth about the atrocities faced by indigenous people that are hidden in silence. I speak of this silence as a weapon that is used for oppression but subverted in the process as the work silently speaks of witnessing, fragmentation, and displacement. My piece attempts to summon the strength of resistance for victims of repression in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. The red “pinon” design motif is also present to symbolize the land of the Chakmas and how many people have lost their lands and lives to the civil wars.

*Layers of meaning* (fig. 33)

The relation between the homeland and its people are interconnected and inseparable since indigenous people feel a deep sense of belonging in their land. The hanging installation contains eight layers of dyed and printed fabrics. Each piece of fabric has an image of a woman or a landscape printed on it to symbolize mother earth and a search for a homeland. I also printed various weaving design motifs and the ancient Chakma script. In my view, using design motifs is a form of symbol making because they will remain somewhat mysterious. These symbols account for my fascination, interests in all sorts of activities that reflect my heritage and personal expression. Symbols often represent a repressed unconscious drive or memory so the meaning is communicated more subtly and precisely than any language could. Each of the symbols represents different elements from nature so I was intrigued by how

they were abstracted into these geometrical shapes. By the means of these symbols, I was somehow able to add the experiences of my ancestors to my own.

*Haute couture* (fig. 34)

I presented some of these clothes in a gallery setting to raise some questions about how we perceive dress. In the three pieces in view, dresses become the focal point. They seem to stand in for bodies and personalities that would inhabit them; the dresses both symbolize and replace the human form. What is done to the body can be both a metaphor and a reflection of oppression. We often regard clothes from two incompatible points of view- on one hand, as means of displaying our attractions; on the other hand, as means of hiding our bodies. In my work, I try to articulate the way indigenous people are controlled and how they try to hide the body as they generally refrain from drawing attention of others them.

My studio practice explores various issues surrounding cloth because it tends to be powerfully associated with memory. The woven fabric has the ability to be permeated and transformed by maker and wearer alike; it has the ability to endure over time. Most weaving is done through direct visual inspection and keen understanding of the visual rhythm of the design. The works of art themselves are prime symbols because they embody my own imagination of organized feelings, the rhythm of life, and the forms of emotion, while it offers viewers a different way of conceiving another culture.

## **Conclusion**

We all search in one way or another to better understand who we are: through language and ethnicity, through cultural practices, or through understanding our sense of place. I have considered how cultural identity is constructed through indigenous weaving traditions in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh. The uniqueness of woven textiles can be interpreted as form of intersocietal art because weaving is a community ritual that creates a sense of security and strengthens community ties.

The Raygula project was created to recognize the value of their creative work and to empower women's roles in society by highlighting the ritual significance inherently embedded in textiles. The cultural and social values placed on textiles often depend on its mode of production, reception and on a particular interpretation. By challenging perceptions of culture and the conflicting roles of women from one generation to the next, I explored the complex interweaving of these various issues surrounding cloth and what it reveals about culture and personhood.

### *Future Projections of the Raygula Project*

The exhibition of fabric design had two important impacts: the artists were no longer anonymous and they propelled a revival of indigenous fabrics. The weavers did not choose anonymity but rather it has been imposed on them due to lack of appreciation for their work. Neglect of the weavers is blatantly a symptom of a society that failed to recognize the importance of cultural preservation and how these weavers are actually the guardians of culture. They have been underrated so the purpose of the project was to allow indigenous people to represent or define their

culture in their own terms. The show brought to the forefront a new way to examine fabrics; modern as well as traditional. This exhibition paved away for a revival of weaving and the quest for the establishment of a history of the medium. The weave, traditional or contemporary, introduced a new approach to the way society looked at, as well as made cloth. By presenting the clothes in a fashion show, one was able to look beyond the inherent functionalism of cloth and dwell in fantasy. Crafts achieved recognition for their proximity to art as well as a sense of legitimacy as aesthetic objects. Removed from their normal context—in home or some other domestic situation—one looked upon these items from a different perspective. The timing for this exhibition was good since textile crafts were undergoing a decline in use. I wanted to express a great deal of concern about losing the tradition of weaving and encourage elders to take greater responsibility in teaching and helping youngsters keep the tradition alive. It would be reasonable to assume that within the next few decades, this art would die out with its practitioners if younger converts were not found.

The people of the Chittagong Hill Tracts will need to generate and articulate their own ideas as to what kind of development they want. These ideas will have to be rooted in their own historical experiences and must be meaningful in terms of cultural categories they can relate to. This is a process that has hardly begun in the CHT, thus there seems to be a long way ahead for all concerned (Tripura, 2000, p.100).

I wanted to initiate a kind of transformation that involved the community and represent our own culture with pride. It was important to engage in social activism in order to bring positive changes in society and create awareness about our heritage.

With the Raygula project, we want to enable interested people in towns and villages to participate in a weaving program that has the potential to yield great rewards for the weavers and their families through economic development. In the future, these efforts can reach many other weaving communities if a greater demand is created for these fabrics. Raygula project's income generating approach involves purchasing hand-woven textiles to encourage talented weavers to continue their weaving while earning money to support their families. We hope that a centre will be established in the local town area where weavers from different villages can demonstrate and sell their work, contact each other to share their ideas and inform visitors about the existence of these textiles. All this is an effort to develop weaving from a household activity into a cottage industry whose products are marketable domestically and abroad. The Raygula project will develop better facilities for weavers to improve their working conditions all year round and provide better marketing opportunities through a reliable medium. Other people can help implement this project by consciously purchasing and wearing traditionally hand woven fabrics and encouraging women to continue their weaving practices.

Why should the preservation of material culture matter? And what is the importance of the social memory embedded in hand-woven textiles?

Traditionally made fabrics have obvious relevance to the inhabitants of the Chittagong Hill Tracts; they provide them with an anchor in time, points of identification and self-esteem, and an antidote to the political and historical marginalization to which they have been subjected for over a century.

In the second chapter, I have examined how textiles, comprised of materials, technique and patterns, embody a system of formal relationships that provide information about the worldview of the indigenous people. Chapter three expands on how weaving has an important social and cultural significance for indigenous people and how many forces in society influence the continuation of tradition. The ritual of weaving motivates women to preserve and pass down their knowledge to future generations despite being under constant threat of cultural assimilation.

In chapter four I discussed how my fieldwork enabled me to take an inside look into the lives of local weavers and their oral histories that reveal why they continue to produce these traditional fabrics. A combination of anthropological methodology and studio practice was used to examine the relationship between art and culture. During my fieldwork research in Bangladesh, I juxtaposed textile crafts from various indigenous groups to do a comparative analysis and to show their similarities in technique and function. I did participant observation to take a closer examination on how the production of textiles reflects broader social, economic and political issues.

Currently, marginalized ethnic groups are being engulfed by the dominant society of Bangladesh so indigenous people must rely on self-representation to order the past, give meaning to the present and prepare for the future. The idea of putting on a fashion show using indigenous fabrics may have unsettle and disrupted the general conservative norms of the society. And this has been the reason why nationalists of Bangladesh have ignored and suppressed various endeavours of organizing cultural events by indigenous people. Collecting these fabrics and making them available is

one way of giving voice to ideas, perspectives, and interests of indigenous people who have been marginalized or silenced. In chapter five, I discuss how the exhibition of fabric designs allowed the construction of a more grounded and less partisan accounts of the culture and begin contributing to a more integrated interpretation of our modern identity. The evolution of dress in the hills presented in the Raygula show demonstrates that culture is not a stagnant tradition but has the possibility of constant transformation, renewal from within and interaction with others.

The Raygula project was an extension of my studio art practice. Human rights, environmental and women's issues provide both the impetus and subject matter for the creative process in my art works. Fibre arts served as a mediator for these issues and I intend to use this medium in the future for further artistic explorations. I consider the representation of these textiles as mirrors of indigenous pride because they bear testimony to their endurance and resiliency. Researching on indigenous textiles helped me to explore the complex interweaving issues surrounding cloth and what it reveals about culture and identity. In the Chittagong Hill Tracts, cultural identity is constructed through indigenous weaving traditions. Raygula project's purpose was to preserve the diversity of creative expression and celebration of textile arts. Weaving is an art form that indigenous people live with everyday and it is a historical part of our living culture.

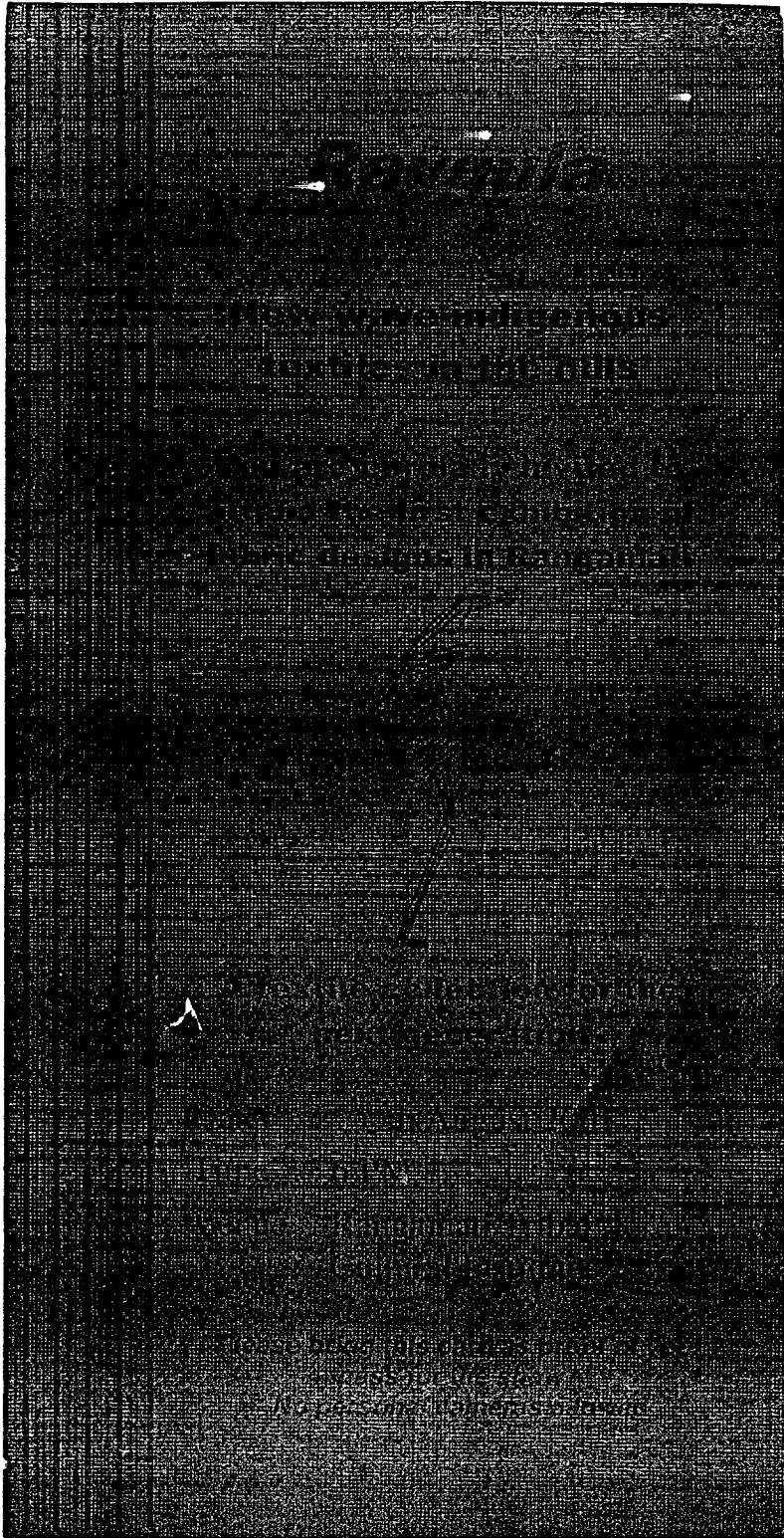


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RAYGULA

New wave  
indegenous textiles  
in the hills

RAYGULA



ra gUŁa



A textile collection for the next generation. Raygula is a special design motif that embellishes the hand-woven clothing of indigenous people.

**A i m o f R a y g u l a :**  
Preserving and reviving indigenous fabrics of the Chitragong Hill Tracts (CHT) by creating stylish and modern garments using traditional textiles. The Raygula collection integrates certain traditional design elements by drawing inspiration from visual signifiers that are present in the clothing of distinct indigenous groups. For the first time the local young indigenous people are taking the initiative to create and celebrate their own traditional fabrics in a different way. With this collection, we hope to renew people's interest in asserting their cultural identity through dress and to inspire them to wear indigenous woven clothes in the public sphere. We also hope that the next generation of young women will restore these extraordinary textile designs and complex weaving techniques.

**Why do indigenous textile traditions need to be preserved?**

The knowledge of weaving is not passed on by writing but by the indigenous process of person-to-person communication by watching and practicing. Traditional weaving is therefore a ritual activity that reinforces family and community ties by sharing their knowledge about design, color, combination and technical skills. Raygula clothing line will expose and highlight the creative ideas of indigenous people who developed these intricate weaving techniques and kept alive our folkloric heritage. By preserving our clothing traditions, we can celebrate our accomplishments, show pride in being part of unique cultures and affirm our lasting connections to our ancestors.

**C h a n g e s o v e r t i m e :**  
In this land of enchantment with mountains, winding rivers and lush tropical forests, the colorful indigenous dress of various groups and their cultures make this region stand apart. However, many customs regarding indigenous dress diminished due to the dominant cultural patterns of the society. Although a dilution of heritage characterizes the passage of time, we believe that Raygula can reintroduce the traditional dress in alternative ways. The modified versions of traditional garments will highlight the originality of both hand-woven and loom-based loom fabrics in order to show their evolution. In placing these textiles in a modern context, perhaps these clothes will be viewed in a new light, and their producers may get the recognition they deserve.

The traditional accessories like exquisite silver ornaments and beads also compliment the colorful clothes of the CHT region. Indigenous people use these ornaments not only for decoration but also for ritual significance and functional purposes. Some prefer to use ivory ornaments or create headgears with exotic feathers. Raygula collected these accessories to beautify the models in this presentation and to revive these types of embellishments for the future.

**R a y g u l a ' s m i s s i o n :**  
The mission of Raygula is to raise awareness about indigenous cultures through the textile arts. This collection will be available to international audiences and textile experts for further research, exhibits and eventually for market. By displaying these fabrics in a

new light, we want to emphasize the creativity of local weavers and communicate their unique knowledge about intricate designs and innovative skills. We hope that a center will be established in the local town area where weavers from villages can demonstrate and sell their work, contact each other to share ideas and inform visitors about the existence of these textiles. The weavers also need to acquire greater knowledge about how to use good quality threads for durability and improve dyeing color processes. Raygula wants to develop better facilities for weavers to improve their working conditions all year round and provide better marketing opportunities through a reliable medium.

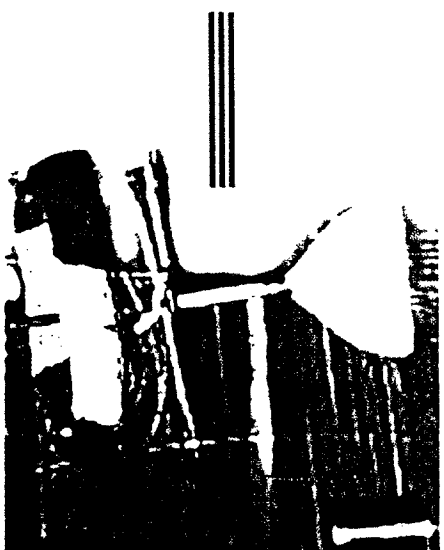
**The Raygula project's income generating and educational approach:**

Raygula purchases hand-woven textiles to encourage talented weavers to continue weaving while earning money to support their families. Another approach builds on the ancient oral tradition of youngsters learning to weave from experienced village weavers. Through these oral teaching traditions young people can acquire the valuable expertise passed on by their elders and preserve their cultural heritage. Raygula especially acknowledges weavers who show exceptional achievement in weaving and appreciates their efforts to preserve their expertise. Inspired by the Rangapani village women who turned weaving into a professional practice, we hope the project will enable interested people in towns and other villages to participate in a weaving program which has the potential to yield great rewards for the weavers and their families through economic development. Raygula's efforts will reach even more weaving communities if a greater demand is created for these fabrics. You can support this project by consciously purchasing and wearing traditionally hand-woven fabrics and encouraging women to continue their weaving.

**Support for Raygula projects**

We believe that concerned individuals at home and abroad should join us to develop a broad base of support for the project. In just a short time, Raygula brought together a new textile collection for both local and western admirers of indigenous fabrics. This project was realized to show how important it is to celebrate the cultural heritage of the distinct ethnic groups living in the Chitragong Hill Tracts. By wearing our traditional fabrics we can affirm who we are, creating a better path to understand our cultural heritage through weaving traditions. Join Raygula's endeavors to preserve the diversity of creative expression and celebration of textile arts. Weaving is an art form that indigenous people live with everyday and it is a historical part of our living culture.

**Advisory committee**  
Raja Devashish Koiri, Buddakendra Bikash



**Barage Chakma, Ubama Chakma, Priyankada Chakma, Lena Talukdar, Mousumi Chakma, Emily Chakma, Joyes Dewan, Mohitosh Dewan, Joyjit Khin...**

**Rangapani Village weavers:** Konabi (C), Mala (C), ...

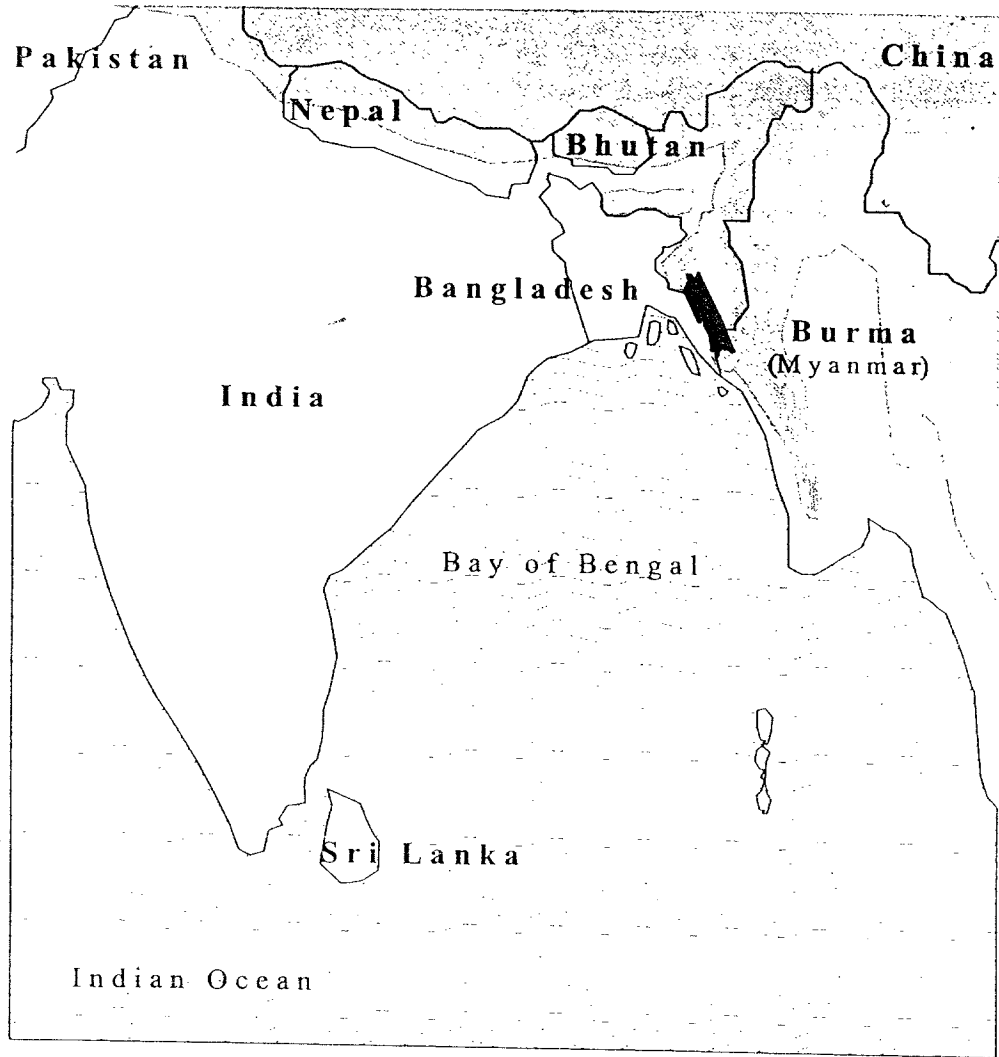
**Contributors:** ...

**Raygula designers and working committee**

**Design:** ...  
**Photographs:** ...



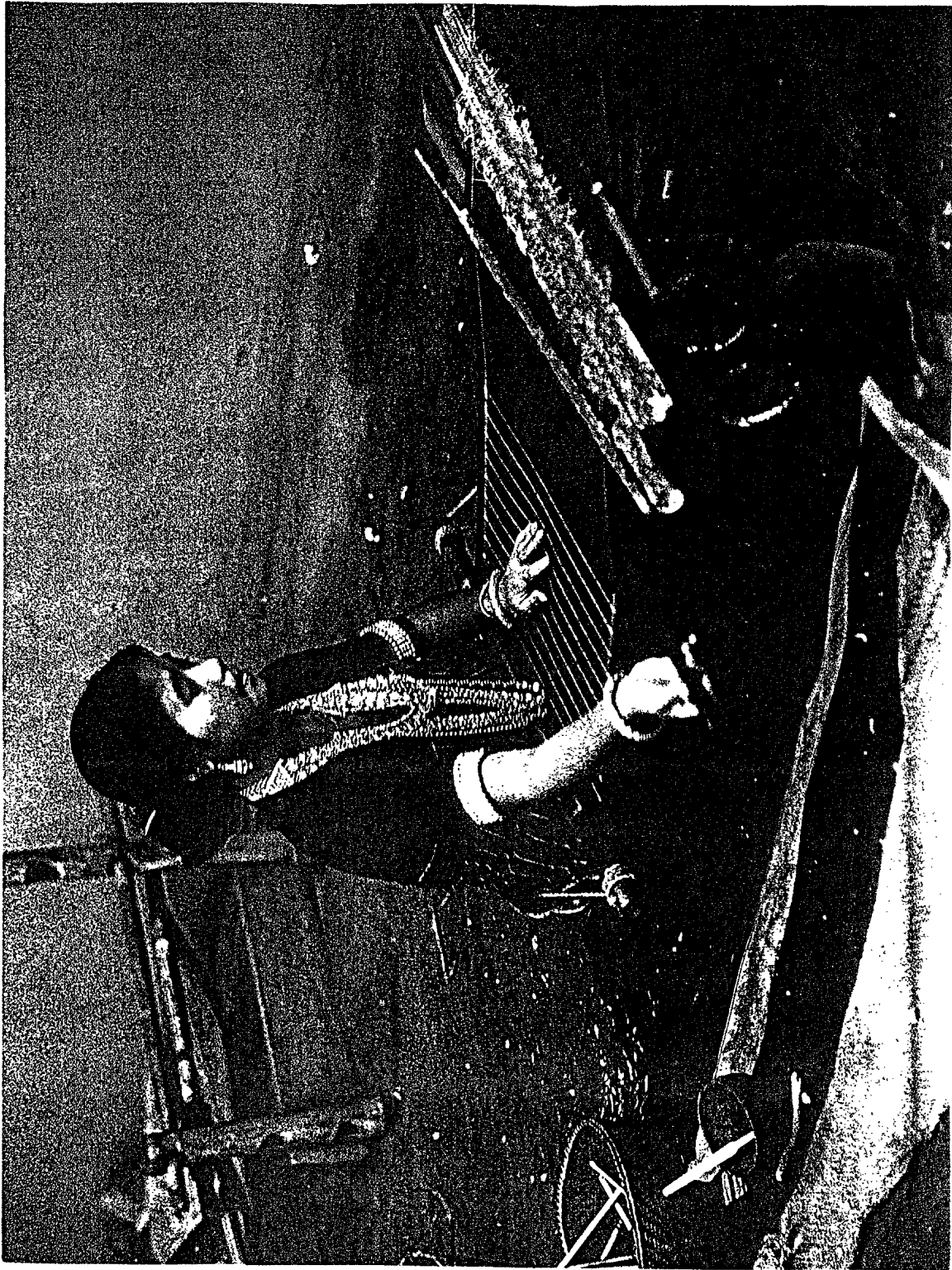
**Contact:** ...



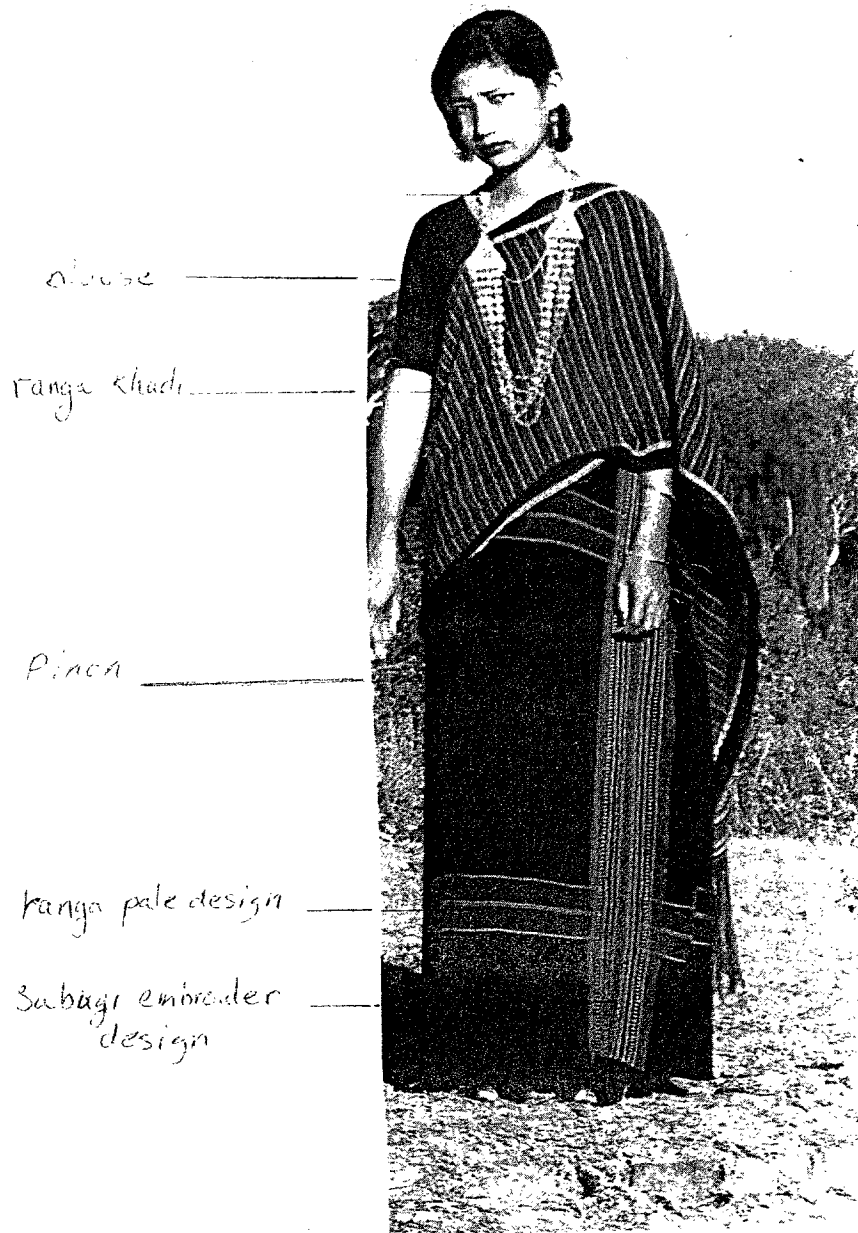
- = Chittagong Hill Tracts
- ▨ = mountain ranges

The Chittagong Hill Tracts: postcolonial boundaries (from 1947 to 1971, Bangladesh was East Pakistan).

1. Map of the Chittagong Hill Tracts

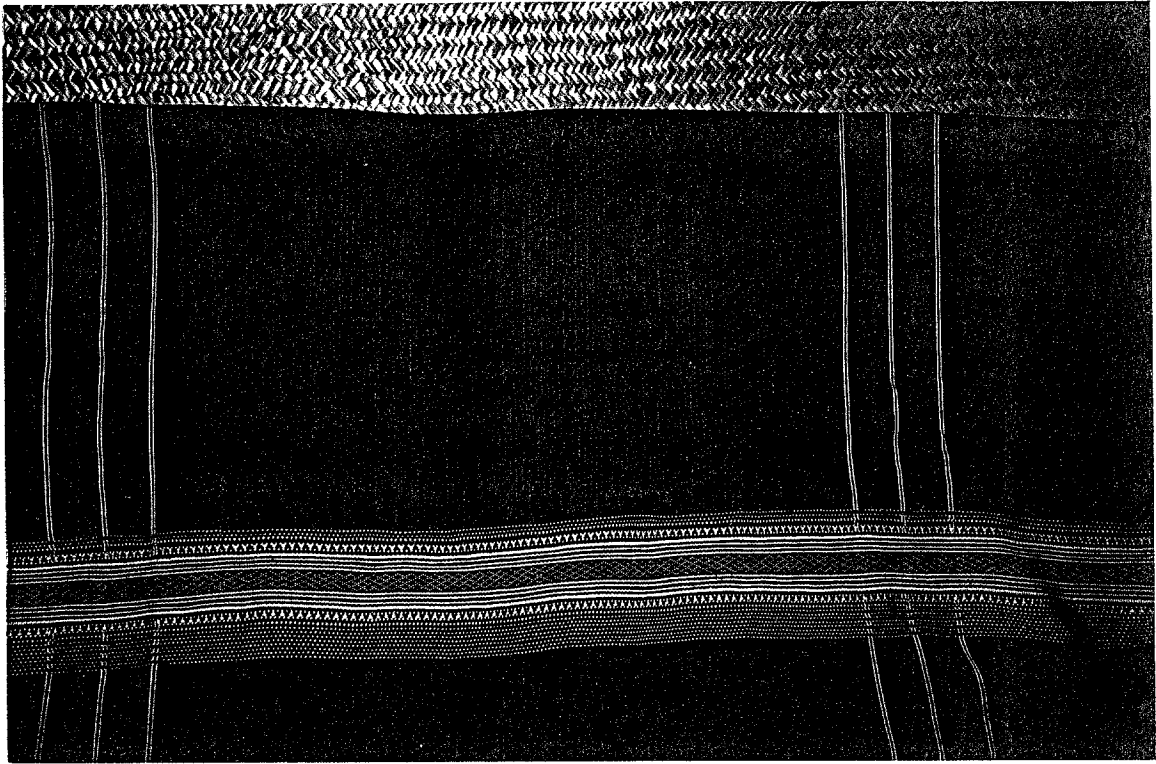


2. Chakma woman weaving with a back strap loom (Photo:Amiya Kanti Chakma)



3. Chakma woman wearing 'Pinon' and 'Khadi' (Photograph from calendar)

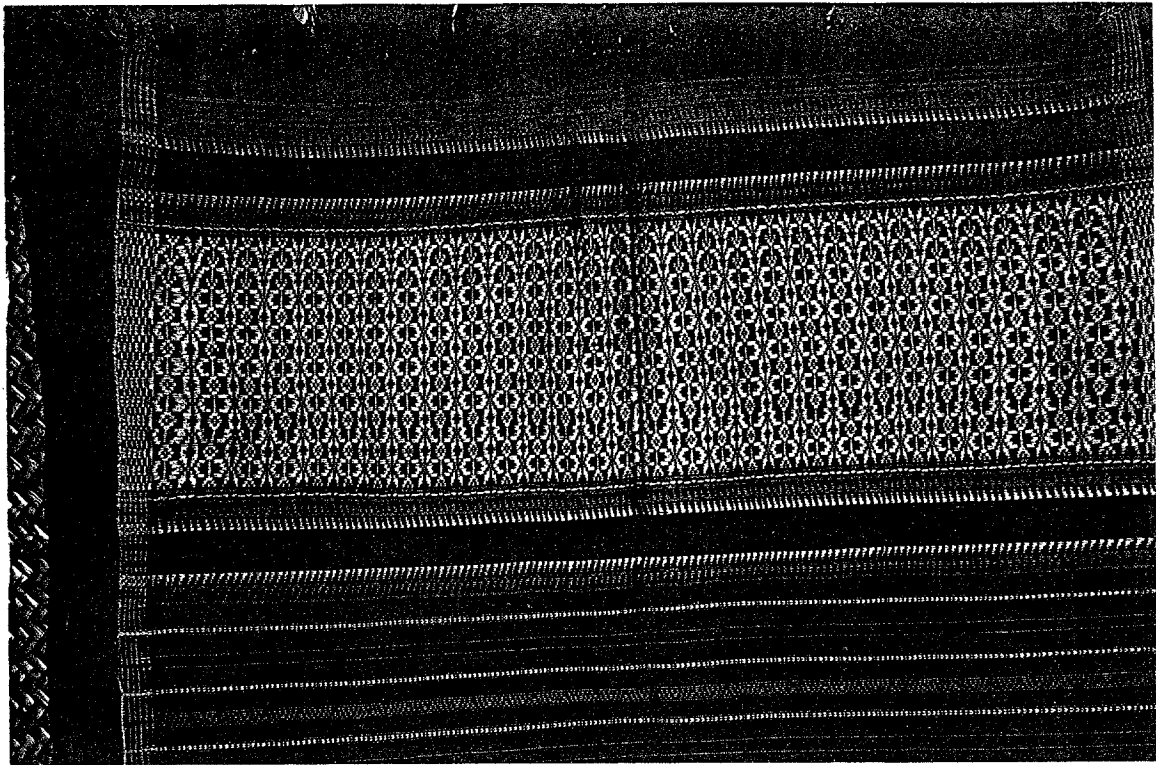




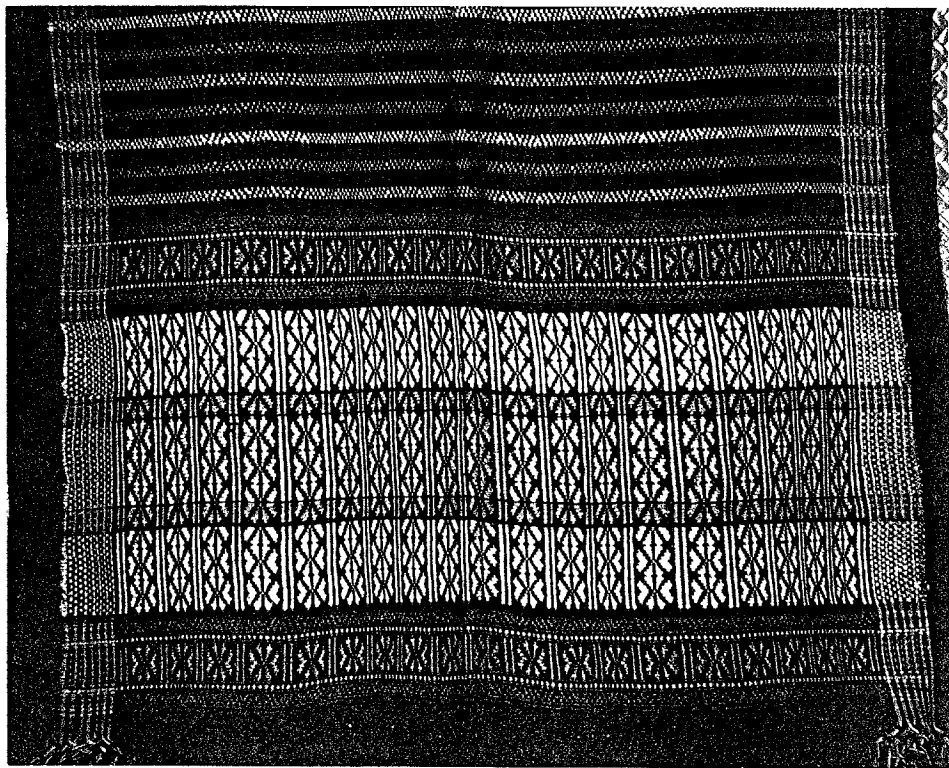
4. Chakma, Traditional Pinon



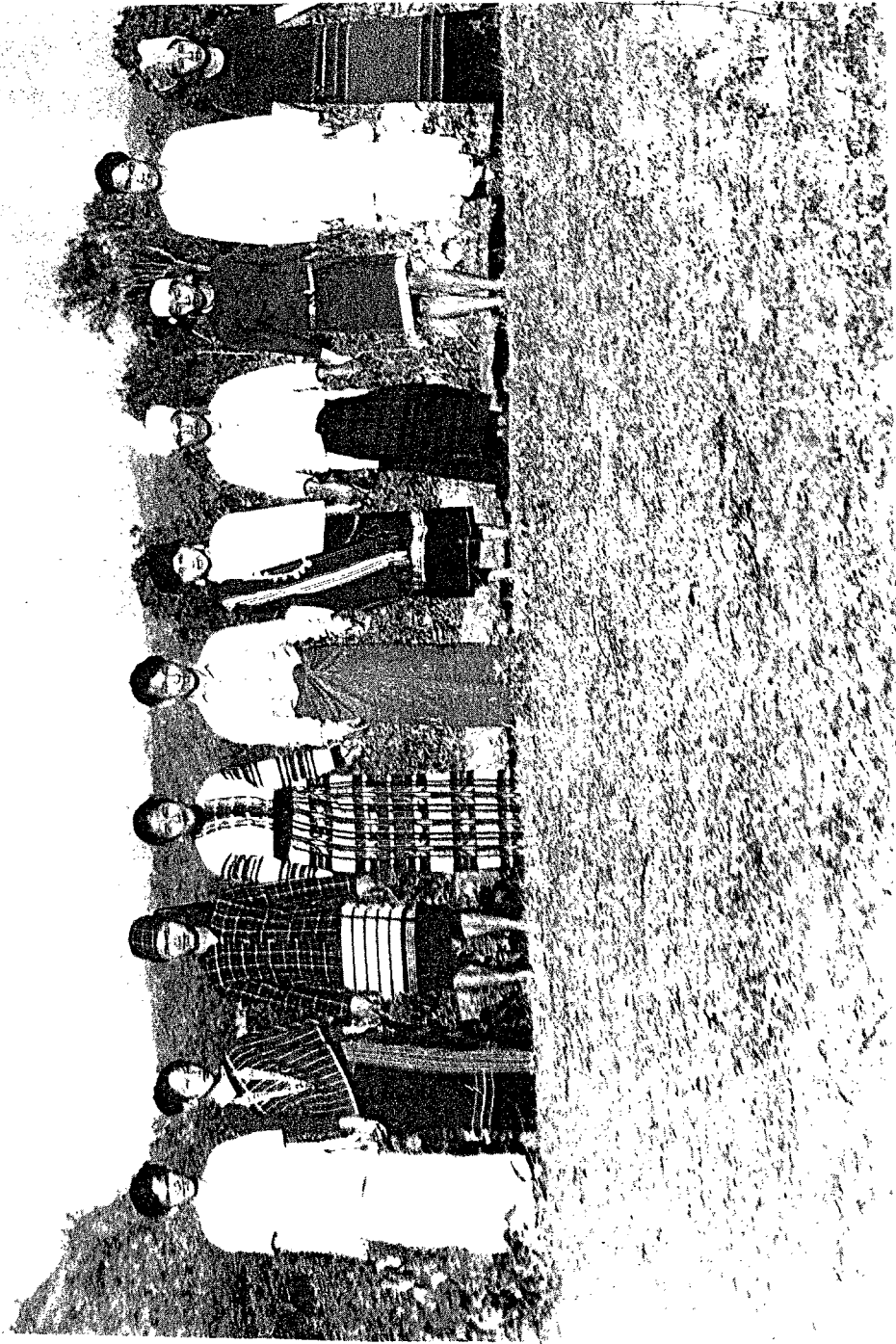
5. Chakama, Phul Khadi



6. Chakma, Ranga Khadi

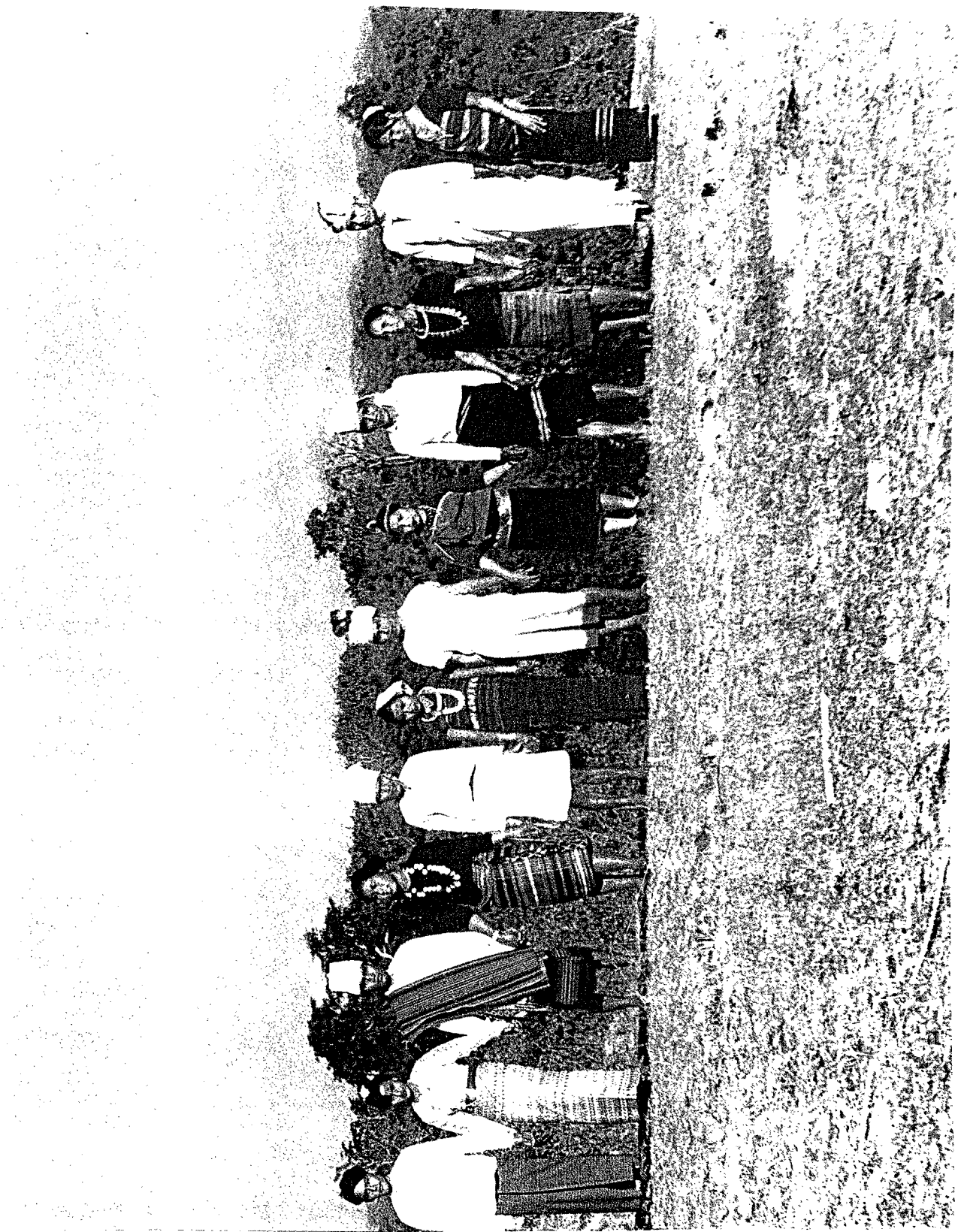


7. Chakma, Sibutana Khadi



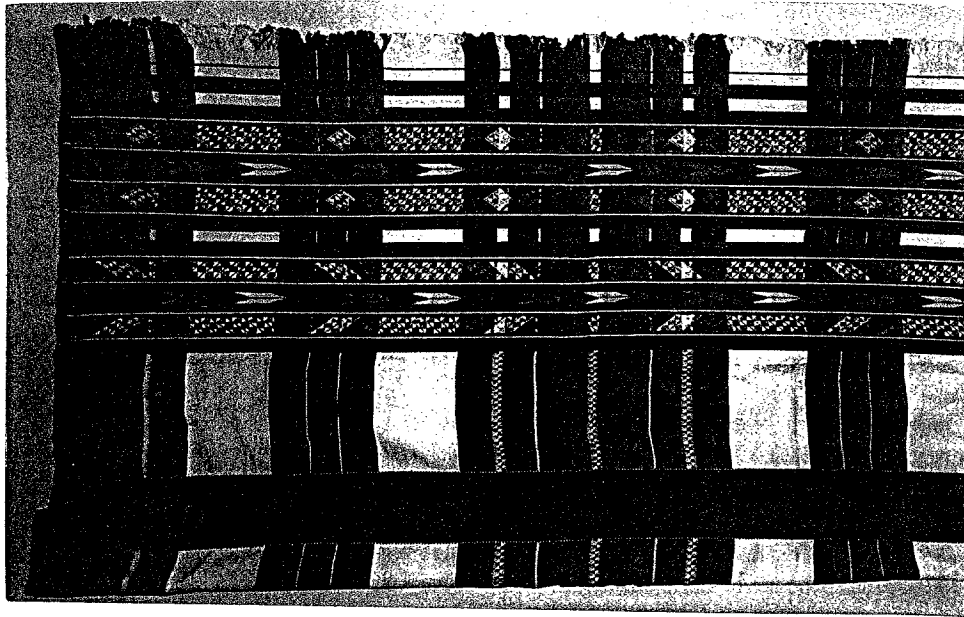
a b c d e

8. Indigenous groups. From left: Chakma, Lushai, Chak, Khumi, Tauchengya. (Photograph from calendar)

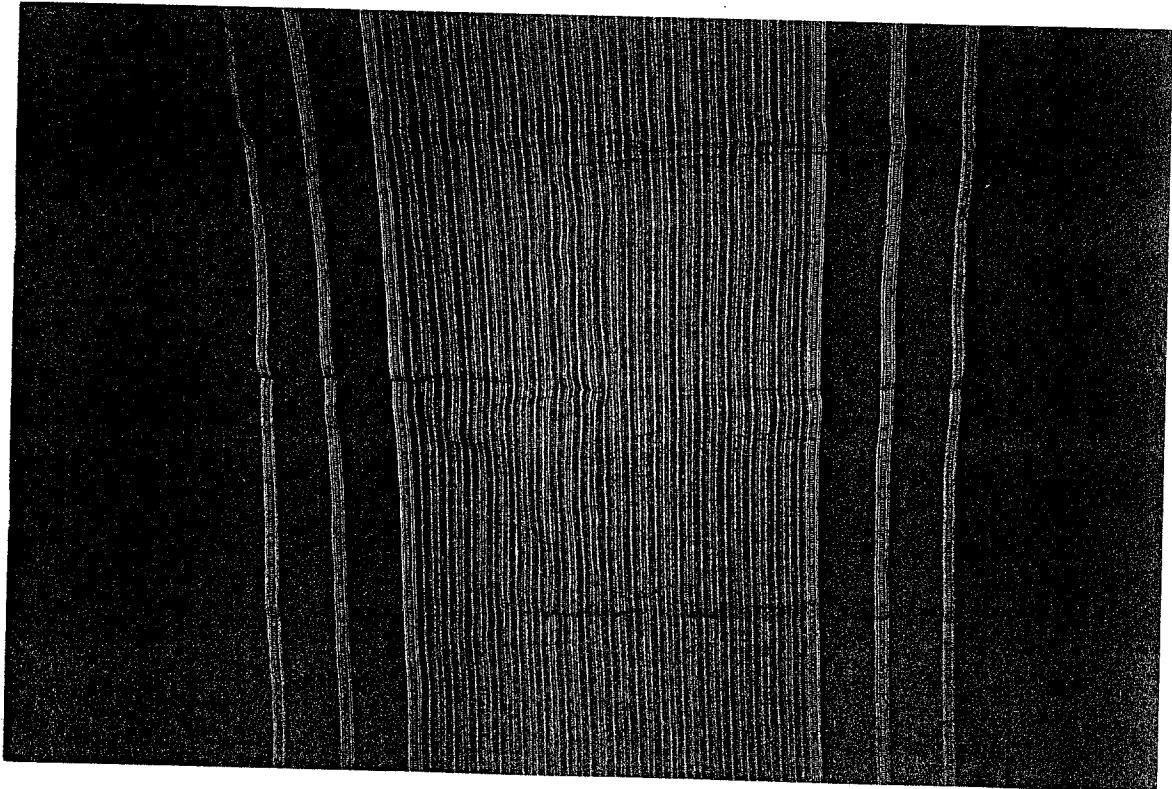


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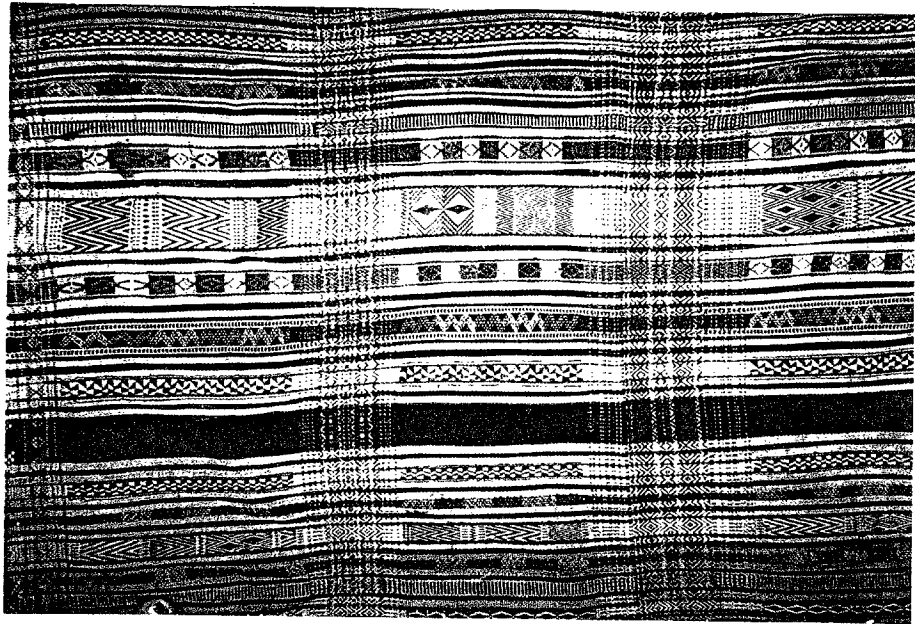
9. From left: Marma, Bawm, Kheng, Mru, Pankhua and Tripura.



10. Lushai, Puan



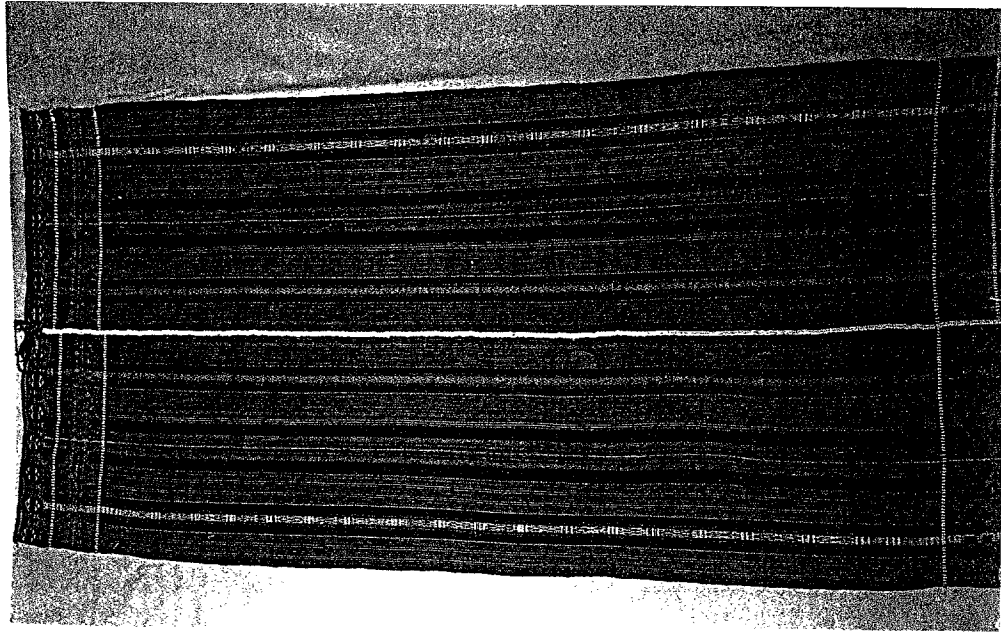
11. Tanchangya, Pinon



12. Bawm, Puan



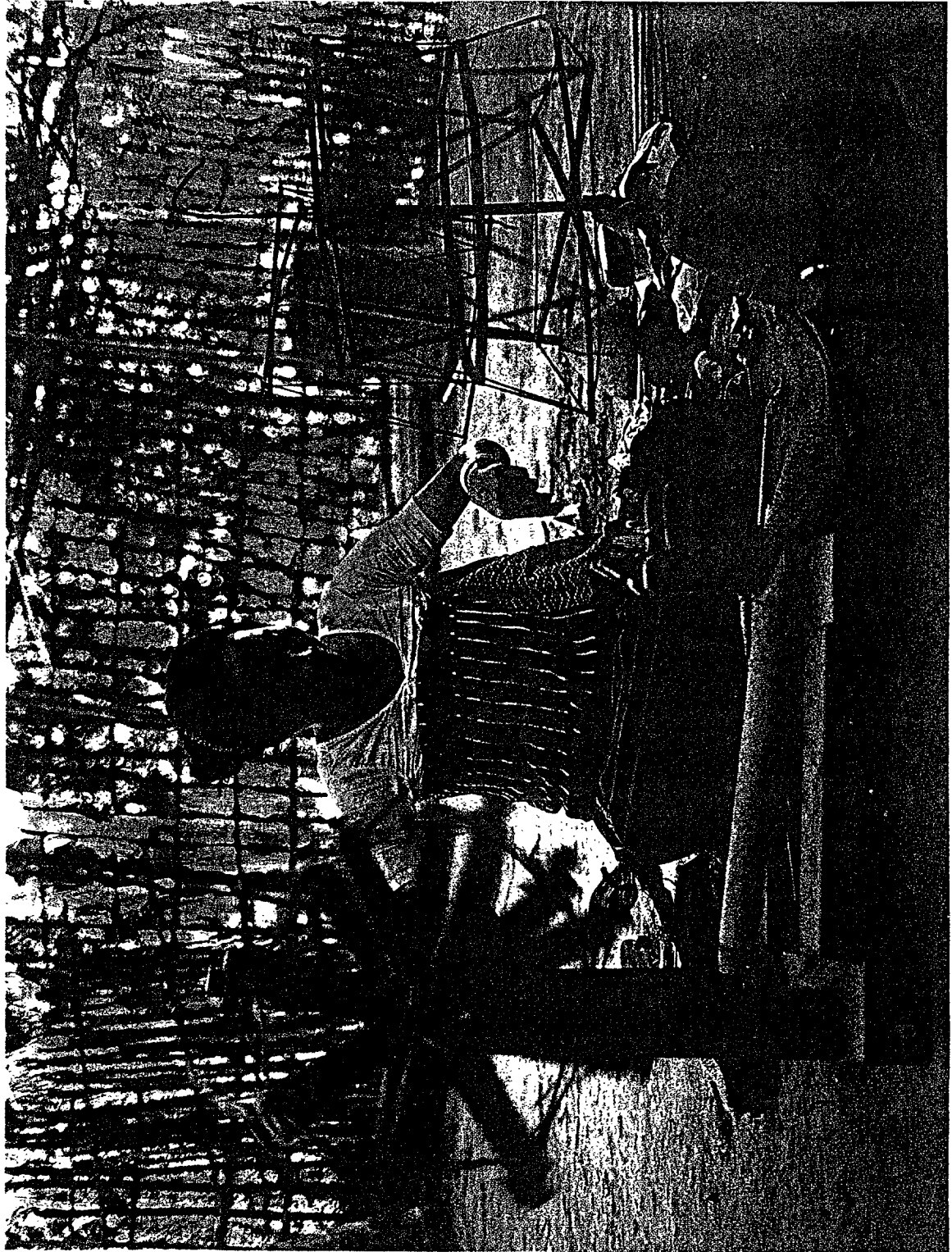
13. Mru, Wanklai



14. Pankhua, Puan



15. Tripura woman wearing beaded necklaces



16. Chakma woman spinning (Photo: Amya Kanti Chakma)

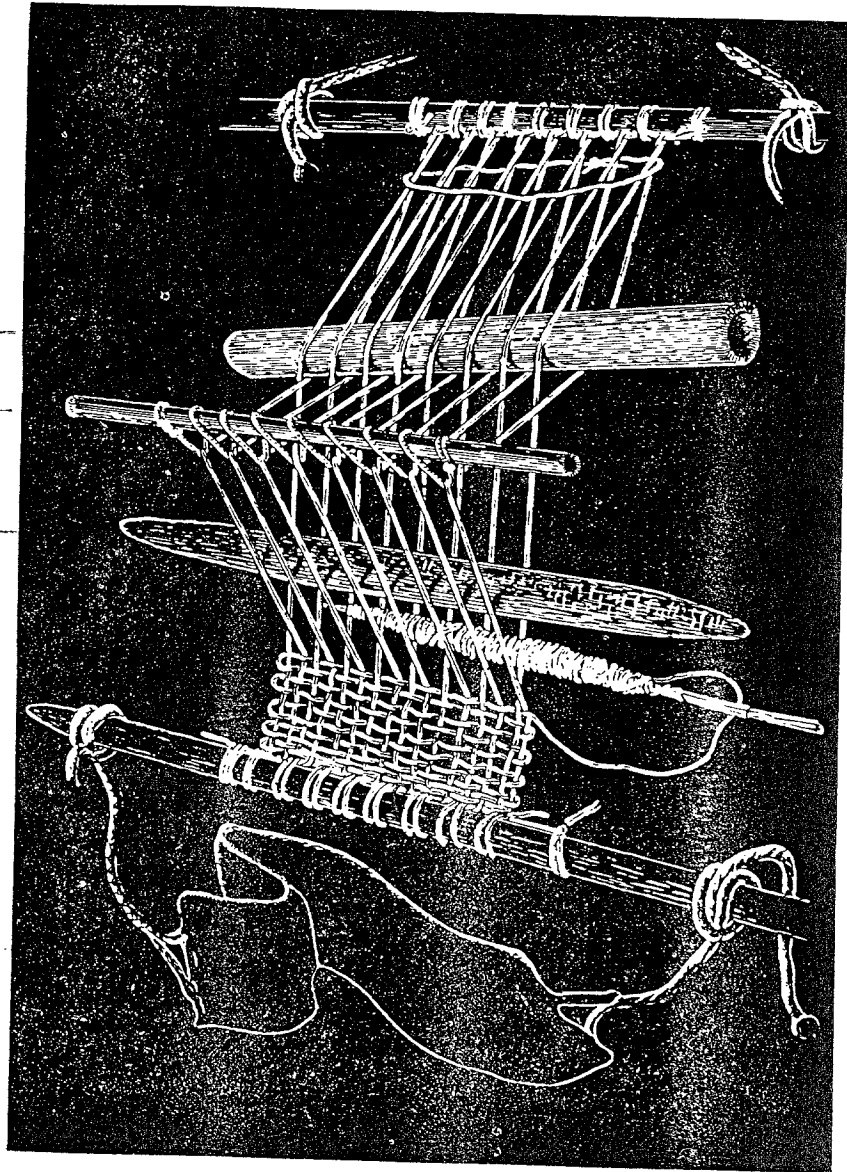


Suchyax bach

Dawhad,

byang

tuqalax  
tapsi cham



17. Structure of a back-strap loom

elephant

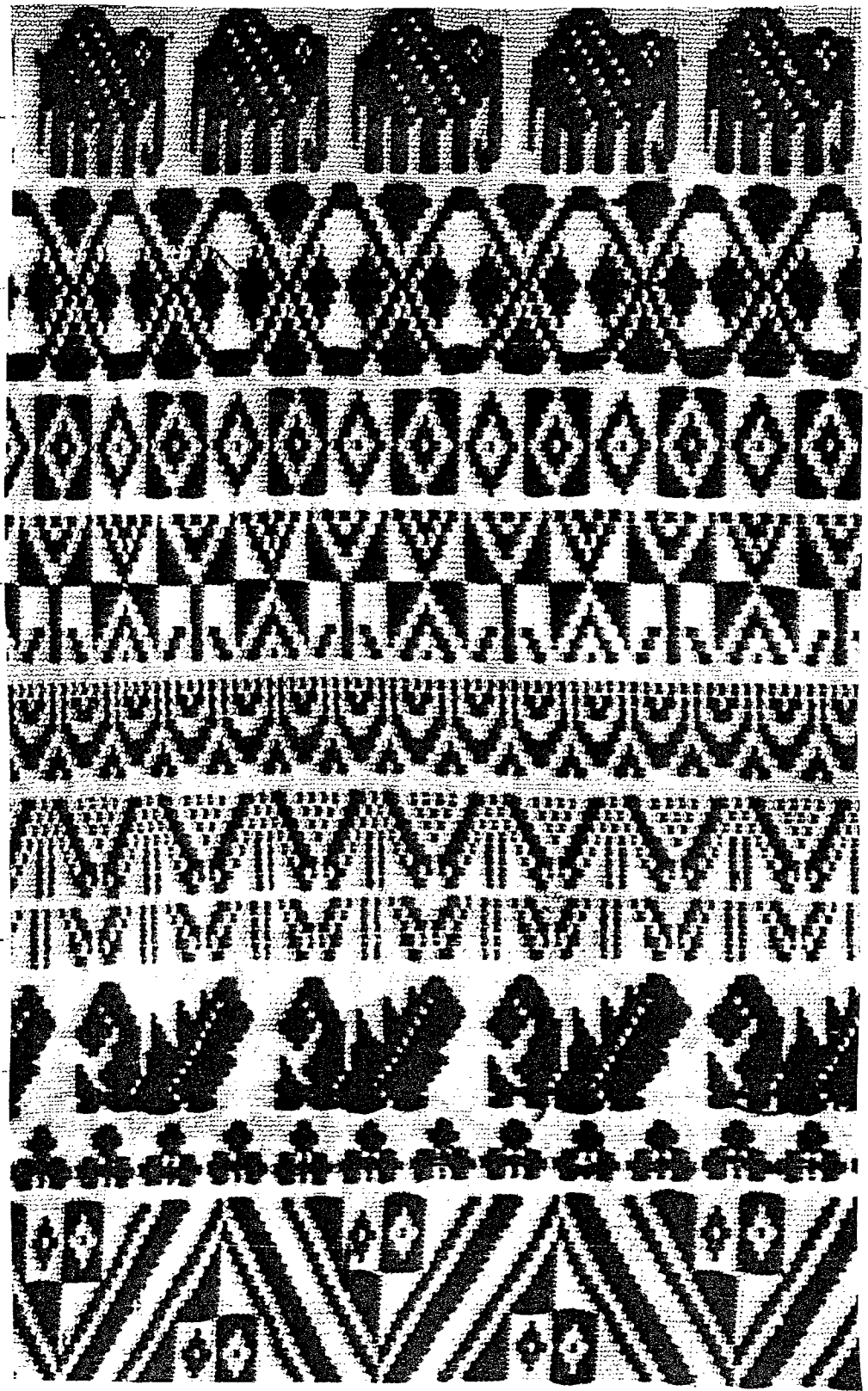
tiger's eye

geometric designs

butterfly

swan

flower design



18. Chakma, Alam



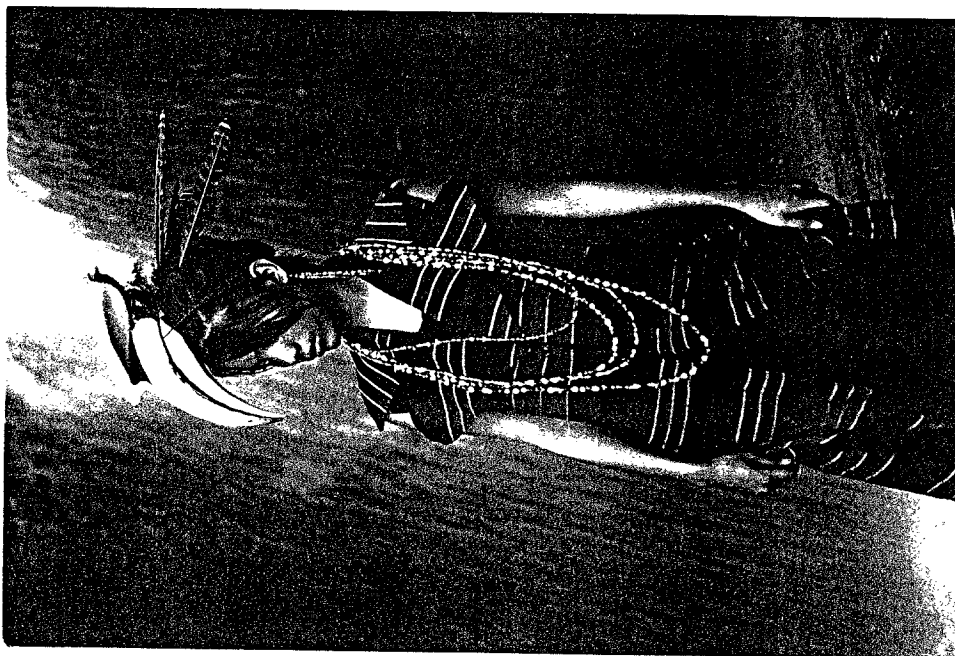
19. Rangapani village women buying threads in the market



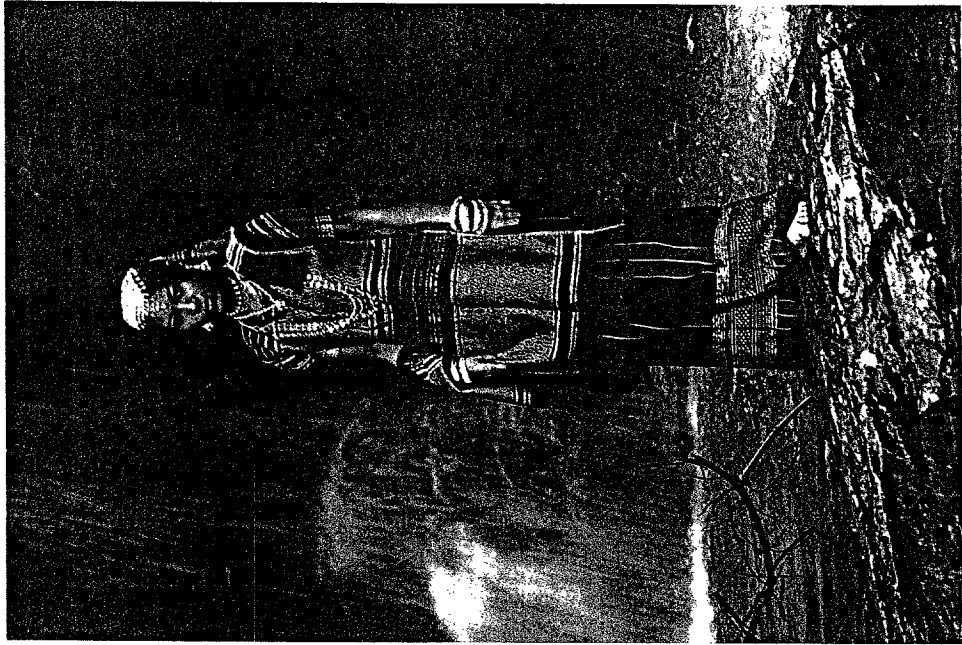
20. Woman using the Charka



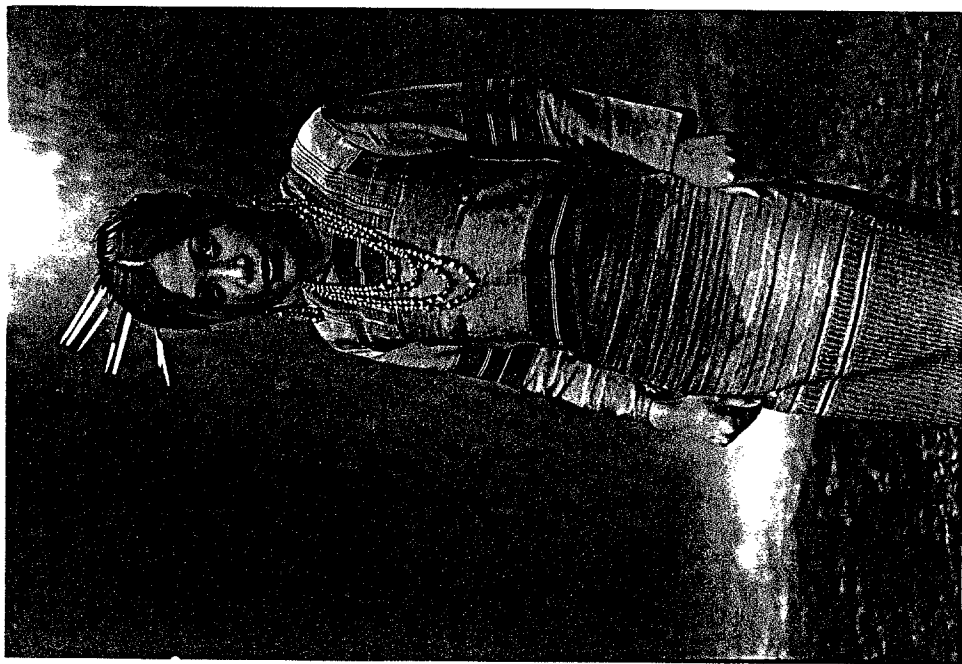
21. Weaver at her loom making a striped fabric



22. Model demonstrating the striped fabric in a sleeveless long vest



23. Chakma bridal dress made out of Pinon and Khadis



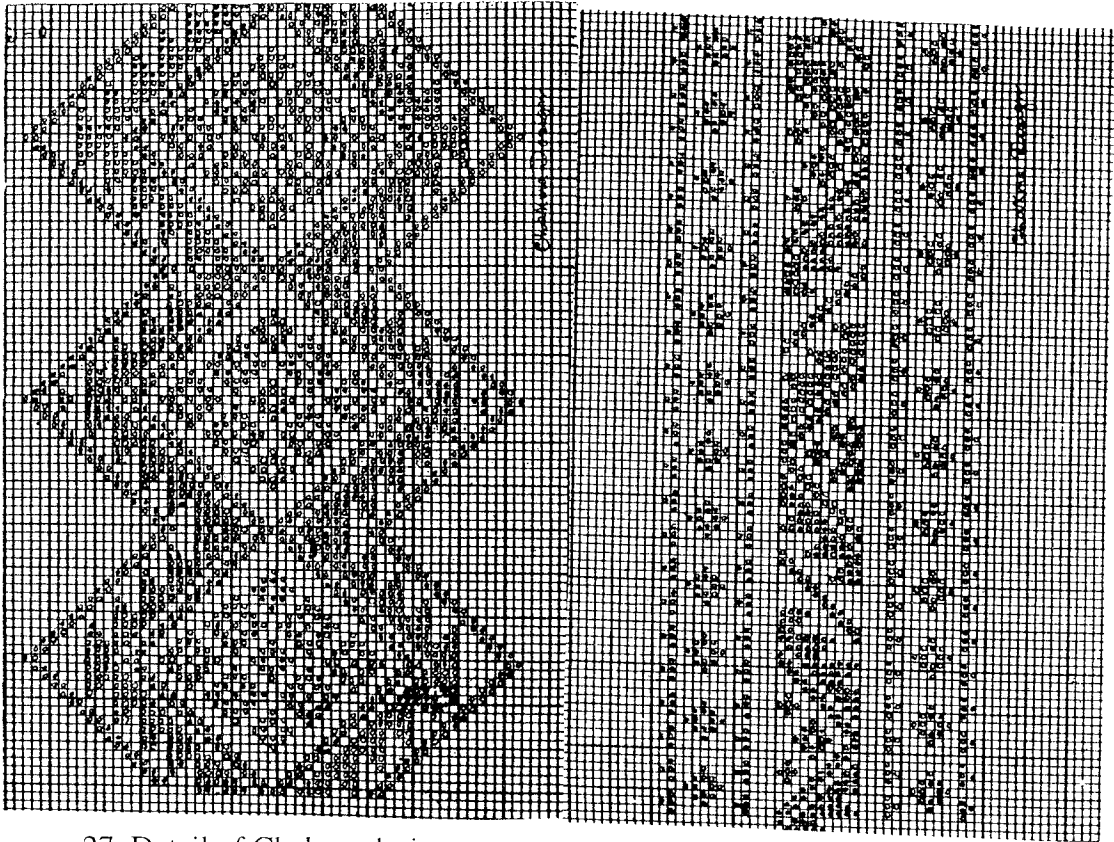
24. Chakma outfit made of Pinon and Khadi



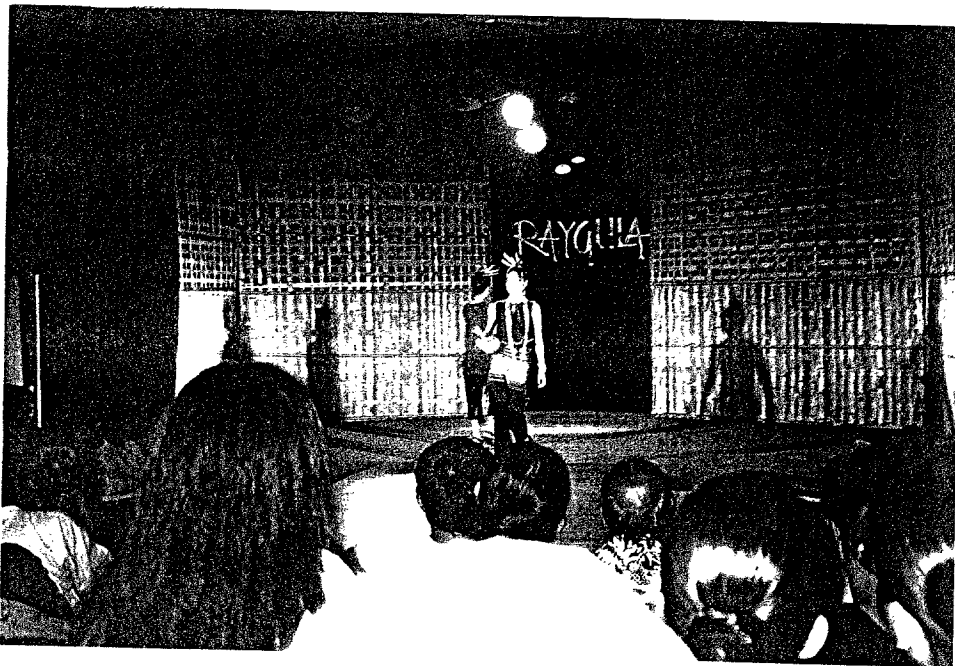
25. Dresses made out of Chakma Khadis and Tanchangya and Tripura Pinons



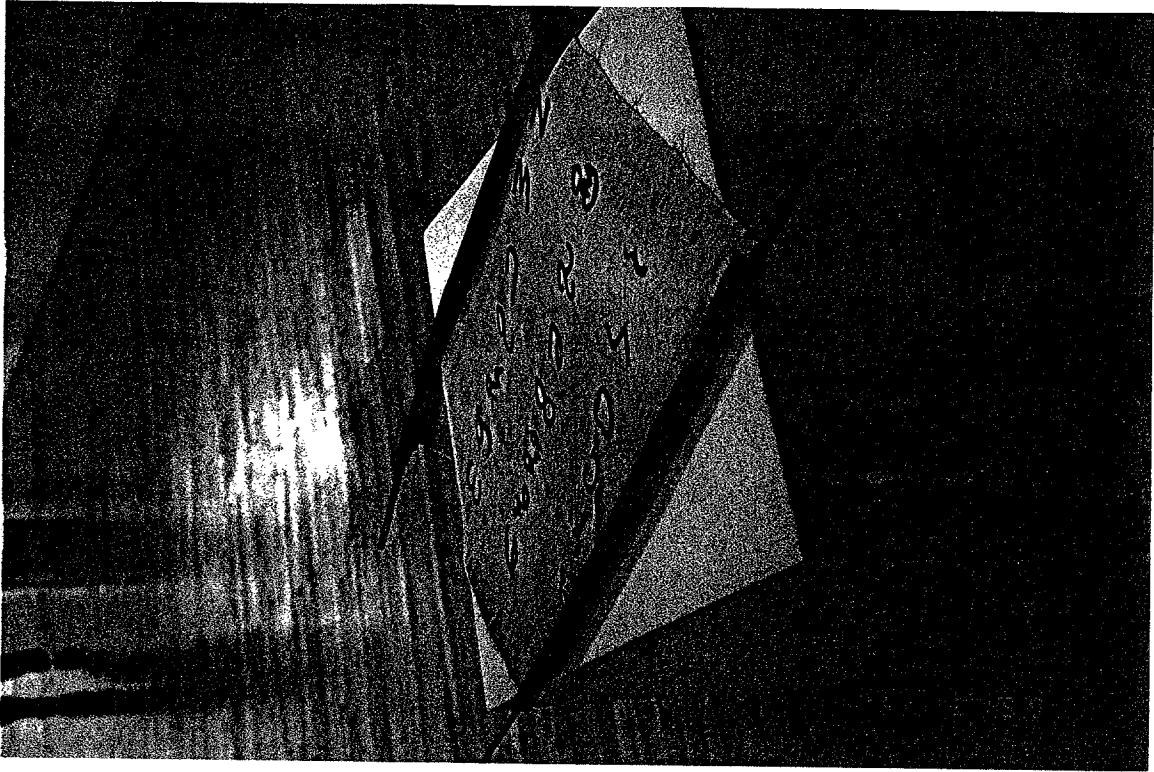
26. Tenzing (designer), Arshi (designer) and Torun (tailor)



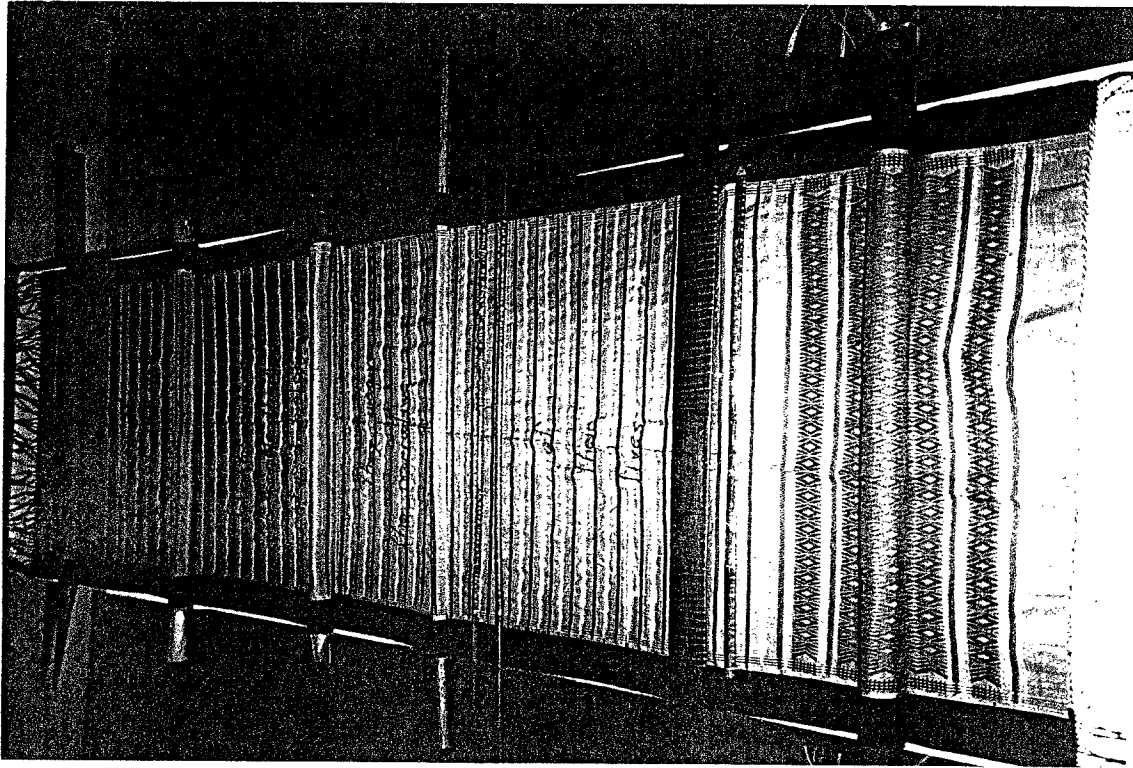
27. Detail of Chakma designs



28. The Raygula fashion show stage

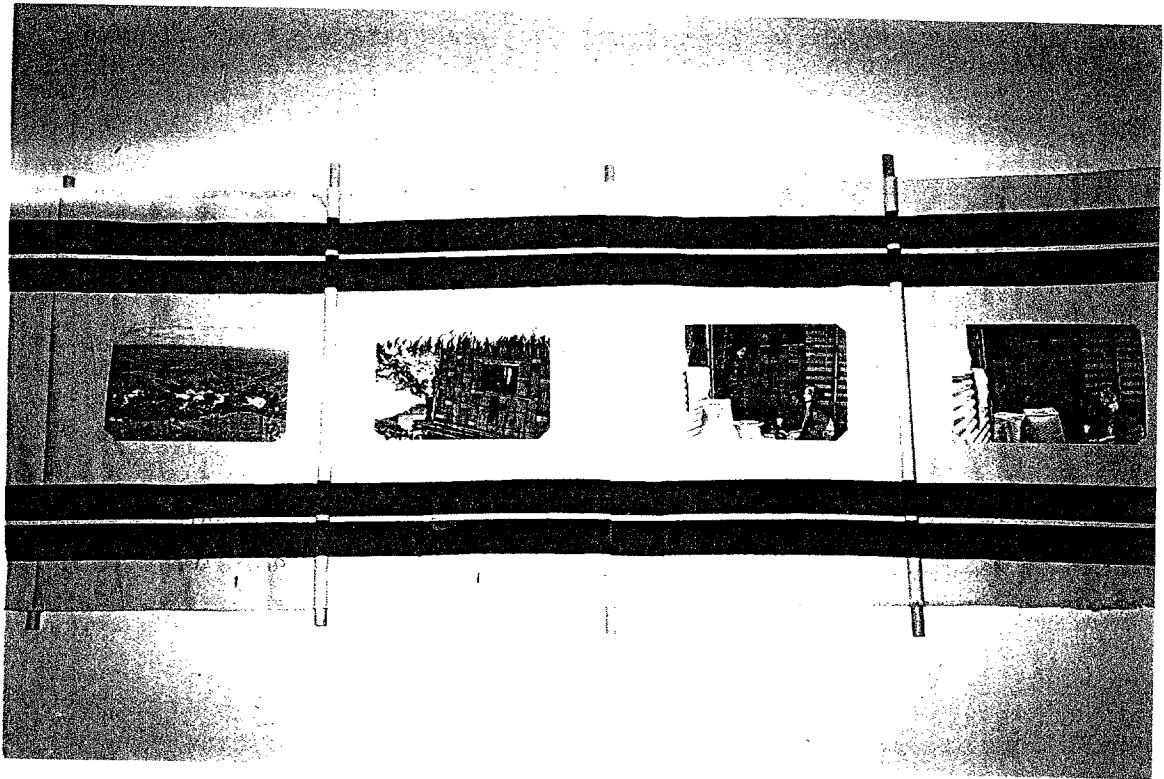


*29. Chakma script*

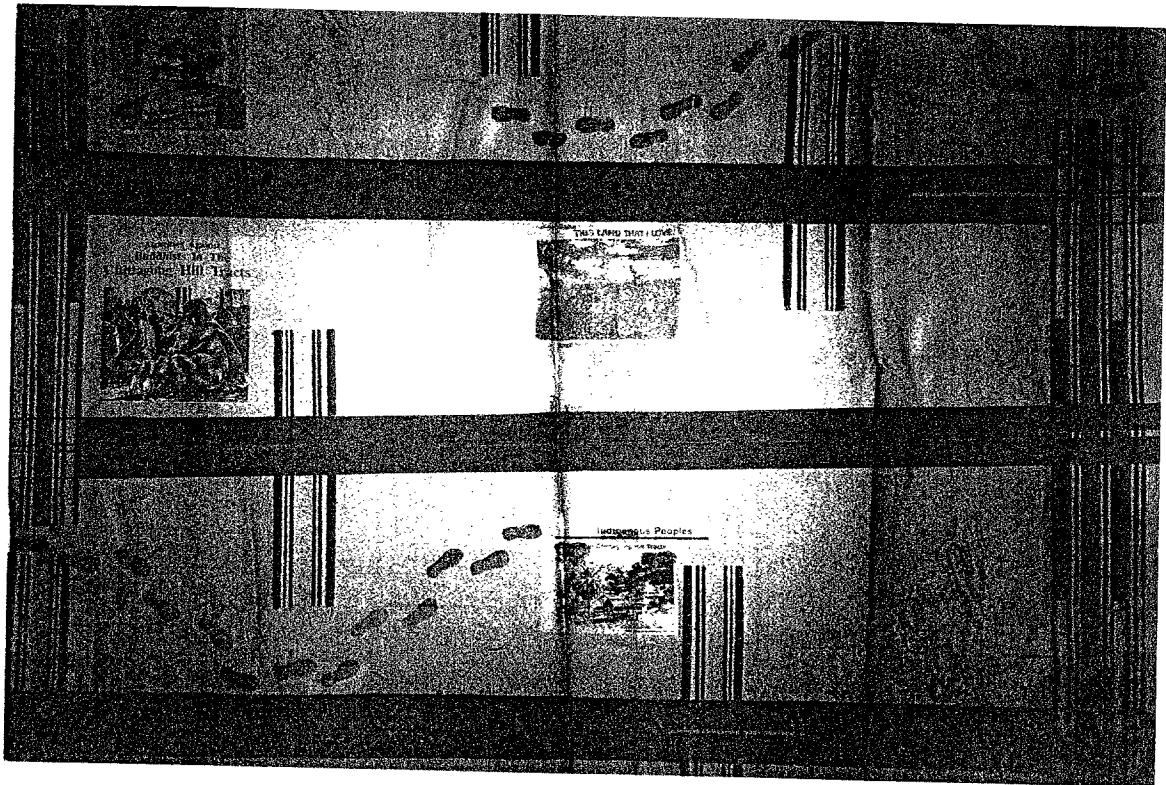


*30. Weaving a narrative*

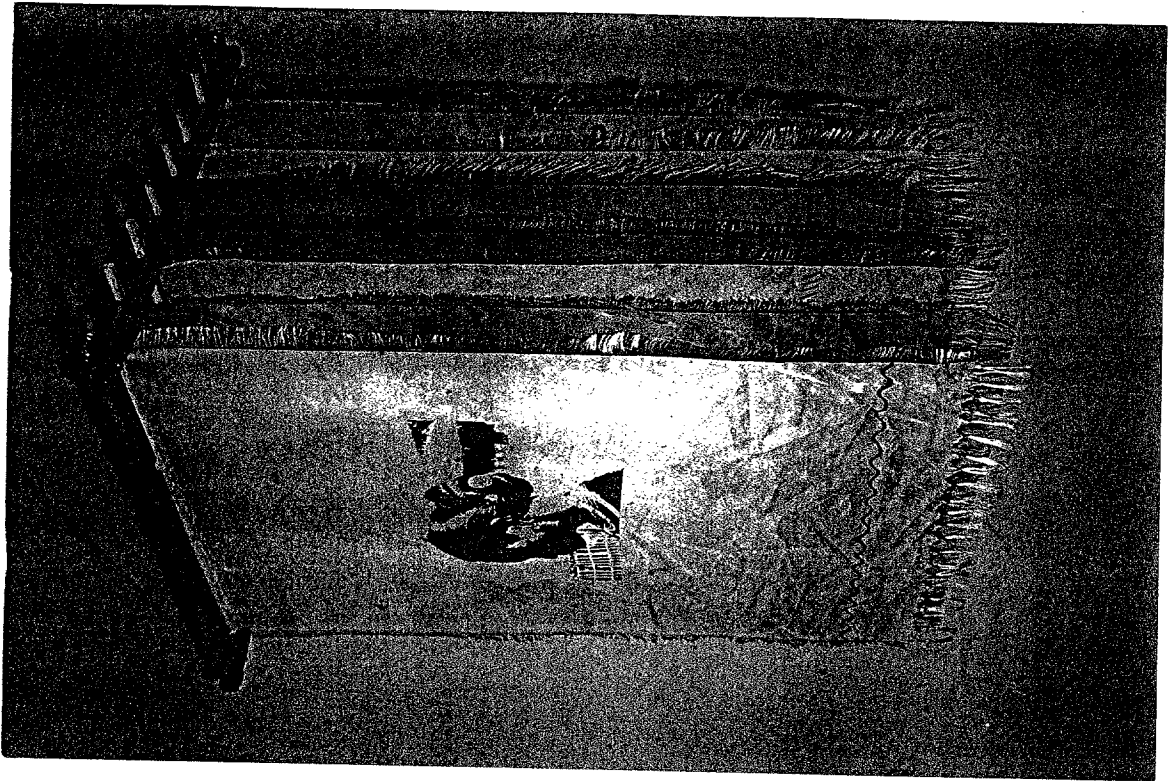




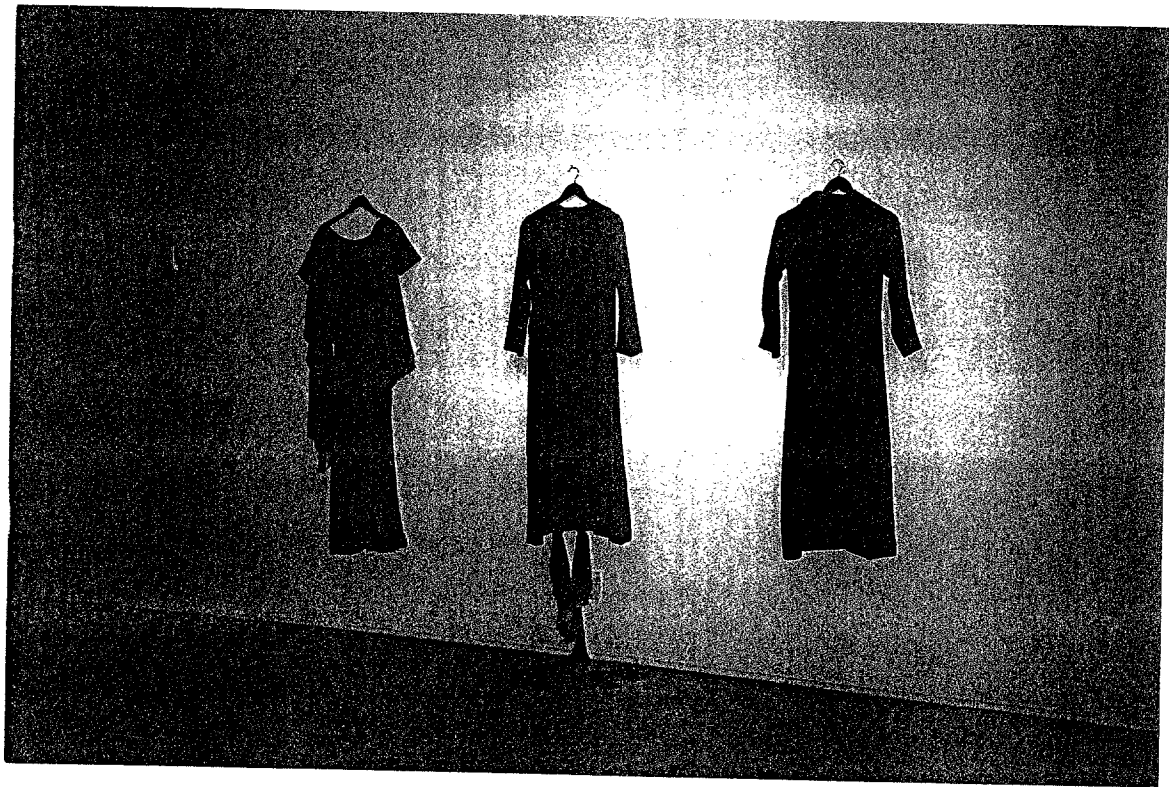
*31. Photographic journal*



*32. They are coming*



33. *Layers of meanings*



34. *Haute couture*