

Traditional Meitei Dresses

Dr.I.Dinamani Singh

Assistant Professor, Department of English
S. Kula Women's College, Nambol Manipur

Article Received: 16/07/2026

Article Accepted:17/08/2026

Published Online:19/08/2026

DOI:10.47311/IJOES.2026.8.08.403

Abstract:

The Meiteis have a rich tradition; one of them is the variety of dresses they wear. The art of making traditional textiles still continues from the ancient times with some minor changes. The Meiteis have a close affinity with the surrounding environment, and some of those have been showcased in the form of designs on their textiles.

The former princely kingdom of Manipur lies in the India-Burma frontier, occupying a prime location in a subsidiary alliance with the British rule in India. This state's history is enriching and epic, full of royal tales and sagas of the many heroic Kings who ruled Manipur. The oldest kingdom is that of the “Kangleipak”, when the same name knew Manipur; the kingdom dates back to the 11th century and has ruled for almost two thousand years! Manipur became a part of India after the nation became independent in 1949, thereby losing its long-standing independence. The Meiteis are known to be of the highest order and the oldest tribal community of Manipur. The presence of several tribes living in this region, like the Aimol, Anal, Chiru, the Nagas, many more, have significantly influenced Manipur's diverse and rich culture. Everything starting from the arts, traditions and even the cuisine result from the fascinating amalgamation of different tribes and their cultures

Key words: Meitei, Kangleipak, Manipur.

Introduction

The former princely kingdom of Manipur lies in the India-Burma frontier, occupying a prime location in a subsidiary alliance with the British rule in India. This state's history is enriching and epic, full of royal tales and sagas of the many heroic Kings who ruled Manipur. The oldest kingdom is that of the “Kangleipak”, when the same name knew Manipur; the kingdom dates back to the 11th century and has ruled for almost two thousand years!

Manipur became a part of India after the nation became independent in 1949, thereby losing its long-standing independence. The Meitis are known to be of the highest order and the oldest tribal community of Manipur. The presence of several tribes living in this region, like the Aimol, Anal, Chiru, the Nagas, Koko/Zizu and many more, have significantly influenced Manipur's diverse and rich culture. Everything starting from the arts, traditions and even the cuisine result from the fascinating amalgamation of different tribes and their cultures.

Manipur has its various items of traditional dresses since the time long back. The traditional dresses of the Meiteis are divided as the dresses of the male and the dresses of the female and further it can be classified again into the following as (1) Dresses for the deities, (2) Coronation dresses of the king and queen (3) Dresses for the festivals, (4) Dresses for dancing (5) Dresses for mourning, (6) Royal dresses for the king and queen, (7) Dresses for the noblemen, (8) Dresses for daily life of the commoners, etc.

Dresses of the deities:

Among the traditional dresses of the Meiteis, the dresses of the deities may be mentioned in the first place. In this regard mention may be made of the cloth of Chinphi and Laiphi which is used at the time of rituals. The Chinphi is the Tonkap Phaneak which are not embroidered in the border. Namthang Kokyet is another type of cloth which is used as turban of the lairemmas (goddess) which are worshipped as Umanglai, the tutelary deities in every villages.

Coronation dresses of the king and queen:

The traditional dress of the coronation ceremony of the Meitei king and queen can be traced for the period back to first century A.D. The manuscript "Leihou Naophamlon" gives a vivid picture of the coronation dress of Nongda Lairen Pakhangba and his consort queen Laisna. According to this source of information, the coronation dress of the Pakhangba were – Leiruthak, Ningkham, Phirel Lushet, Lullei, Samjin Lengkhong, Konkha Phurit, Pihai Nigkham, and the coronation dress of the queen Laisna were – Lurel Luchao, Kumsang Phanik, Kabrang Kanak, Kabrang Khawon, Pheisa Lengkhong, Phurit Samparet, Phiren Kanak, Tharon Phanik, Khonik Khangka, Pumthit Saiba.

The king and queen had also the dresses of special design which were different from others. Traditionally the dresses of the Meitei kings were Pheijom (dhoti) with embroidered border, white Samjin (head gear) with applique work in white colour, Khwangchet with Pharangji Nambi, Konkha Phurit. Then folded Innaphi was also worn over around the waist and shoulder.

Dresses for the festivals:

Within a calendar of year Manipur has different festivals. The name of some festivals is Lai Haraoba, Hiyang Tannaba, Pana Kangjei, Kwak Tanba, Sanamahi Chenghongba, Pakhangba Chenghongba, Mera Haochongba, Mera Men Tongba, etc. In such festivals, various kinds of dresses were worn. In the Lai Haraoba (the merrymaking festival of the Umanglai), the Maibis are wearing the dresses of white colour, bracelets and armlets. Sarong is also worn around the waist by the Maibis. The Salai Kokyet is also worn by the Maibas and Kokyet Achouba is worn by the Pena Khongba. In the festival of Hiyang Tannaba (traditional boat race), the Tengmai Leppa wears the Khamen Chatpa Pheijom, Resom Phurit and Ningkham Samjin.

Dresses for the noblemen:

The noblemen in the court of Meitei kings had their particular dresses. Among the dresses of the Noblemen, Khamen Chatpa Pheijom was a special cloth. This cloth Khamen Chatpa Pheijom is a white silk cloth with purple pattern of scrolls stamped on it by means of wooden blocks. It may not be worn by persons of inferior rank, but Princes may use it at their pleasure.

Dresses for daily life of the commoners:

Within these kinds of dresses i.e. the dresses of the commoners, we may write here something about the different dresses of the male and female use for different occasions in their day to day life. Because, these common people are mostly the major component of the Meitei society. So, we may some accounts about these subject as in under.

Male dress :

The material for traditional Meitei male loindress is commonly of cotton. Besides cotton, silk was basically reserved for aristocrates and the royalty. Commoners normally wore cloths made of cotton. Traditional Meitei male loincloth are mostly in plain design of varying colours but more commonly in white. A few types are completely plain, of one colour throughout its length and width. There are types with plain bodies in one or more colours with strips in both width and lengthwise, in any chosen colour usually different from that of the body of the cloth. The check design in different schemes of colour combination characterises the artistic motifs of loincloth is used commonly in daily life of Meitei male.

A white Pheijom (a kind of male garment) and white shirt are worn when a Meitei person attends religious functions. No bordered portion Pheijom can be used for sacred ceremonies. Most of the Manipuri males dress in long Khudei both plain, and those with criss-crossed patterns. This Khudei is used by placing it on the backside and the left end is brought towards the left side of the waist, and the right end is tucked in either in front or

more on the right side. The frontal and left-sided end is brought between the thighs and the end is pushed down between the waist and the back cloth. The upper right part is brought towards of the naval and tucked in. If the right end is about the line of the knee, it is known as Ningree.

Painted designed occur only in the kind of male loincloth locally known as Khamen Chatpa. This cloth is so named after the scrolled designed painted throughout the body of the fabric. This design on the glamorous Meitei male loincloth is a scheme of deep purple colour, deep red or chocolate painted on the white background of the cloth of silk. This design is said to be adopted from the patterns on the ventral side of Pakhangba, the serpent-god worshipped by ethnic Meiteis. In the ancient past, the people normally put on black loincloths. But most of the ceremonial dress of this people are white in colour. Meitei warriors used to put on black loincloths. On ceremonial and festive occasions, the Meitei nobles used two kinds of loin over garment, namely Ningkham and Khwangset. Meitei traditional fashion of shirting can be broadly divided into two types; (i) in which the body is not fully covered, (ii) in which the body is covered with the garments.

Along with the Manipuri females, men also have very distinctive traditional clothings. The traditional clothings for men comprises Turban (which is called as "Pagdhi"), a jacket and a Pheijom. There is a special type of Pheijom called Khamen Chatpa : it is worn by superior members of the society during rituals and ceremonies. In ancient times, Khamen Chatpa was given as reward to brave people by the king as a token of appreciation.

Female dress :

The historic landmark in the history of the art of dress of the Meitei women was the introduction of the embroidery works of the Khoi (hook) pattern on the border of the female loin dress "Phanek Mayek Naibi" during the time of king Yanglou Keiphaba, who reigned from 969 to 984 A.D.

The traditional dresses of Manipuri females differ from occasion to occasion but major traditional dresses comprising Innaphi, Phanek Mayek Naibi, Kanap Phanek, Lai-phi and Chin-phi. Innaphi is a shawl that is worn on the upper body. It is almost transparent in texture, which is a result of the way its woven. Phanek is a hand woven dress like a sarong and is most commonly worn by Manipuri women. It is wrap around skirt like dress. The traditional Phanek would be mostly either black colours or striped.

For the Meitei women, there are modes of wearing loin cloth identifying the different status of the married and unmarried women. In the case of married women, the upper end of the cloth was raised up to cover the breasts. When clad in this manner, the women did not require to put on shirt. Unmarried women, on the other hand, put on loincloth around the

waist leaving the upper part of the body to be covered by shirt in earlier days before the introduction of shirt in its present form.

The Meitei women wear a loincloth locally called phanek. It is worn in two styles, reflecting either the married or the unmarried status of the wearer. The first style is called Phanek Khoidom Shetpa, and the other is Phanek Chingkhatpa. The first style is worn by the unmarried girls, and the latter style by the married women.

The married women's mode of wearing phanek is known as Phidol Chingkhatpa while that of a girl is known as Phanek Khoikha Setpa. This mark the difference in status between womanhood and maidenhood. On some occasional particularly mortuary rites and ritualistic worships, the Meitei women put on Pumngou ('pum' meaning 'whole' and 'ngou' – shortened form of 'angouba' meaning 'white' i.e. 'complete white') Phanek as their customary loincloth. It has been said that the Pumngou Phanek worn by the women on these occasion were of Ureirom Machu (saffron colour) with no border strips. After the lapse of some years the use of moirang phijin as border became fashionable.

As time goes on girls starts using short shirts (blouse). Married women will wear it below the chest. But at times of religious and important social occasions, like a marriage ceremony, it is compulsory to cover the upper part of the body with the phanek. From a part time upto the present, women will cover the head with a part of the upper cloth. This is done as a sign of reverence before social gatherings, elders, father-in-laws and elder brothers of her husband. Phaneks were traditionally borders but now most of them are without borders. In the past women belonging to the royal family had to carry the phanek allowing it is to cover the lower ankles; it was mandatory for the queen, married women and girls. Ordinary women covered the leg reaching the lower part of the calf. Contemporary women, now-a-days, do not follow these extremes.

Mayek Naibi Phanek is of stripped design. The strips are set horizontally throughout the body of the cloth and is hemmed in by broad border in black, on the top side as well as the bottom of the fabric. Reportedly, women of the seven clans of the Meitei's used their respective types of the Mayek Naibi Phanek as a mark of their respective identities.

Women clothe themselves in pumngou phaneks and a white upper cloth. Married women who usually dress in pumngou phaneks by placing them below the chest will pull up it over the chest when the go for religious and death ceremonies. The practice of using mayek naiba phanek, in place of pumngou phanek, was in place in the villages before and during the 2nd World War when women, not yet widowed, attended death ceremonies. Pumngou phanek was for widowed women; it was used for any occasion. On ceremonial and sacred

occasion, married women, in order to keep the hair in place, wind a piece of cloth around the head.

Conclusion :

The material culture of the Meitei traditional dress had functional value of organising the civil society of the people in the historical times, aiding in strengthening its moral, aesthetic and ideological foundation. The historical Meitei civil society was a well organised civil society. The material culture of the traditional dress gradually developed in time. The material part of the Meitei culture, particularly the dress culture of the people, functioning efficiently at equal par with other parts of the same cultural system, successfully sustained the society including its political structure befitting of a state, though of the early inchoate type.

Reference:

- Sapha Y, & W. Apanthoi. (2018). *Text and Texture of Clothing in Meitei Community: A Contextual Study*. International Journal of Research in Social Sciences. 2018;8(2):236-255.
- Zehol L. (2001). *Research Priorities in North-east India with Special Reference to Manipur*. New Delhi-Regency Publications.