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Dressing My Culture

The *Mekhela-Chador*, Women's Agency and Patriarchy in Assam

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Introduction

Choice is a luxury that all cannot afford. To be able to choose how to act, how to behave, what to eat, how to dress, what to choose and what not to choose is a luxury that not everyone can avail. We are constrained in the ways culture is defined for us and in the manner the neo-liberal market in conjunction with it seems to give us an illusion that we can choose.

Culture is commodified not only by parochial and patriarchal cultural nationalists but also the market which presents itself as an entity without any bias and thus is 'liberal'. To recognize this, is the starting point of any anthropological or sociological enterprise in present times not only in Assam but in many parts of the world as the debates on 'authenticity' and 'realness' of a culture, of an identity, or nationality is perpetuating violence. Moreover, feminist history, anthropology and sociology has time and again shown how this ideas about protection and preservation of 'authentic' culture and identity is about making women and their bodies cultural symbols and objects. The market too, in present times has found quite a bit of currency in depicting women not only as cultural

symbols and objects but also a certain kind of womanhood is defined. If we belittle the idea of a heterogeneous womanhood, i.e. that not all women look the same, behave in the same way, or dress in same styles and are also diverse based on caste, class, religion, region, etc., we are belittling the justice the #metoo movement seeks today, the recent scrapping away of Article 377 of the Indian Constitution and all the achievements of the post-colonial feminist scholarship and activism in this part of the world.

In the 'story' of *mekhela-chador*, a few (women) have the comfort of choosing when to wear it and where. Those few are also the fortunate ones whose identity, be it of their gender, ethnicity or nationality, is not questioned based on their attires. But this is only about just a few. The rest have to subscribe to certain rules and norms of dressing; either implicit or explicit. This paper is premised on the latter. But before I proceed with my paper I have to share an anecdote to give a broader and a better background.

A couple of years back at a conference, I was heavily criticized by an Assamese upper-caste Hindu woman anthropologist for stating the points I just referred to above. She was seated dressed in a *mekhela-chador* during my presentation and accused both me and my mother (whom she has never even met) that we do not know the 'real' 'Assamese' 'woman'. According to her, this 'real' 'Assamese' 'woman' that she was referring to, is defined by her attire, i.e. the *mekhela-chador*.

But isn't it both patriarchal and parochial to consider attire the most important manifestation of being a woman? Neither 'Woman' nor 'Assamese' is a homogenous category. And can we ever have a unilateral definition to what is 'real'? Today, when we are constantly being haunted by violence of all kinds, which has such questions at its base and a few privileged are becoming the guardians of answering these questions; caste and class being the primary privileges, I cannot help but ponder on them and then reflect on who defines what for whom, how and why?

To reiterate, my paper nowhere suggests that women should give up wearing their traditional attire, including the *mekhela-chador*, but it is also about the agency irrespective of any gender. It is about confronting the elitist, casteist, and sexist definitions of Assamese

culture and also against commodification of culture and women's bodies by the market in the name of culture. Women are much more than what they wear as the landscape of being Assamese would also suggest the material manifestation of it. The definition of 'Who is an Assamese?' is difficult and has been looked into from various perspectives and in various time periods such as pre-colonial, colonial, post-colonial, etc. It has simultaneously elicited diverse viewpoints on this question as Neo-Assamese, indigenous Assamese, Assamese tribal, the migrants living along the banks of the Brahmaputra, etc. (Dutta 2012: 189). In short, this question has never been resolved.

The *Mekhela-Chador*: An Overview

The *mekhela-chador* today has been idealistically seen as a Pan-Assamese traditional dress for women. Any other alternate narrative is considered a deviation from the idea of being an Assamese woman. Now, the word 'Assamese' itself is a debatable term and is more of an idea about an 'imagined community' (Anderson 2006) rather than it having a concrete definition which eventually leads to a certain kind of tradition being 'invented' (Hobsbawm & Renger 1983). As with invention of tradition, a particular notion of what is authentic to that tradition and culture is also created. Dresses and attires, then, which is visible, tangible and reproducible and serves as a material proof become important as a cultural artefact (Wickramasinghe 2003: 69-70).

Even though this popular acceptance of *mekhela-chador* as the only traditional dress for Assamese women has to be debated further, my aim in this paper is solely to look into the act of adorning and valuing the *mekhela-chador* by Assamese women today, as it happens in actual practice in contemporary times and the gendered notions associated to it in the urban space of Guwahati.

Now why Guwahati and not any other space, rural or urban? Because often it is thought that urban locations such as Guwahati do not value or give lesser importance to things which is seen as 'traditional' and 'cultural', unlike smaller towns or rural areas. And

also, urban locations are the epicentres of neo-liberal manifestations where anything and everything is objectified for profit making. In addition to that, what one needs to notice in contemporary times is that even though the *mekhela-chador* is elevated to a symbol of an important marker of Assamese cultural identity but such a status is not given to the *dhuti-suriya*, which has also been considered the traditional attire of Assamese men. Rather, it is seen on the verge of becoming almost obsolete as it is seen to be 'old-fashioned' and 'outdated'. Tarlo (1996), while defining the idea of the traditional dress, writes – 'It is of course impossible to answer, for the term 'traditional' does not refer to any particular features of a garment but only to the fact that garment is perceived as something that was worn and accepted by people in the seemingly timeless past' (Tarlo 1996: 316). Further, she adds, 'the process by which we categorize things as 'traditional' and 'old-fashioned' is the process by which the 'stuff of the past' is divided into categories of relevant and irrelevant. The 'traditional' is that stuff of the past (real or imagined) that we consider relevant to our present and our future, while the 'old-fashioned' is that stuff of the past which we dismiss as irrelevant to our contemporary life' (ibid. 317).

I have attempted to indicate the different meanings and experiences attached to the *mekhela-chador* today in addition to it being about Assamese culture and tradition and how gender norms are intertwined in all these meanings.

Assamese Women and the *Mekhela-Chador*

Chatterjee (1989) argues that the dominant nationalist discourse is problematic as it regards women as voiceless objects in this discourse during the colonial era; what is important to see is that a new kind of patriarchy was created to dominate the new kind of women. However, she was not just a passive object through which the new nationalist imagination was displayed. Das (2014) views the nationalist discourse as a gendered one where women were subordinate to men even when they were part of it. Even after actively participating in the anti-colonial struggle, women were

not free from the dictates of patriarchal norms. Reconciling the women's movement with nationalism created a paradoxical situation of reaffirming patriarchy in the name of nationalism. When I refer to the Assamese women and their relation to *mekhela-chador*, in this case, I would say, Assamese women's role in the perpetuation of cultural identity through *mekhela-chador* can be seen as active but also passive at the same time.

I would like to term the role of women in the cultural discourse of Assam as being that of 'passive-active'. They have their own way of meaning-making when it comes to *mekhela-chador*. They have developed ways to rationalize their burden of carrying cultural identity. I have termed this role of theirs as 'passively-active' because they do not see themselves as victims or objects of patriarchal norms of dressing in the first place, rather most of the time they see themselves as active, responsible carriers of cultural identity. The female subjects in the nationalist discourse today is reasoning out her agency in such a discourse. Duits and Zoonen (2007) is of the view that women who adorn various dresses should be taken as subjects as they themselves give an account of their agency and meaning making through the dresses they wear. But the question that we need to analyse is why and how do they give meaning to this very agency.

Mekhela-chador is often associated with words like cultural pride, beauty and comfort. Although such words seem to appear quite naturally to people, however, they are not as innocent as they seem to appear and neither are they neutral words. Such words are constructed which is impacted by gender norms. For instance, in terms of *mekhela-chador* being comfortable and *dhuti-suriya* being uncomfortable, the notion does not hold much ground, even if we move into a more structural analysis of both the attires. A pure structural analysis shows that a *mekhela-chador* seems to be as difficult or easy to wear as the *dhuti-suriya*. Thus, indicating the fact that 'comfort' is a mere construct for making women carry the burden of cultural identity. Along with the notions of comfort and discomfort comes the idea of the functionality of attire.

The question then arises is, why and how such a negotiation on functionality has occurred? An answer to this question would

indicate that the concept of functionality has been gendered on the basis of space and time. Since, most men and women work in the public sphere, it is quite acceptable today when both men and women wear trousers, jeans and shirts, T-shirts, kurtas etc. on an everyday basis. Saris and Salwar -kameez is more than acceptable while working. As one of my respondents said that her husband has no problem when she wears the salwar kameez to work, even though on formal occasions or when they are visiting her in-laws in the village, he expects her to wear the *mekhela-chador*. Thus, one can easily notice that the process of gendering in such narratives, which is needless to say neither gender neutral nor gender equal. Women at the end of the day, have to carry the burden of culture.

Finnane (1996) views that, 'there is an observable connection between gender and national politics in clothing cultures in the modern world. This is because in literate societies (and perhaps in other) women often serve as a metaphor or alias; a topic of conversation that is about something else altogether than the women themselves' (ibid. 102).

But when it comes to men, traditional dress is something that would affect their functionality in all spheres, be it regular everyday life or any special occasion. For women their functionality in society is compartmentalized. When they work to earn, they need to be functional in a different way and wearing the *mekhela-chador* should not hamper it but when it comes to certain occasions, she needs to be a body that serves to represent Assamese tradition, culture, status etc. which needs to be preserved. She needs to project the extraordinariness of *mekhela-chador* in these extraordinary situations. She needs to be a spectacle to be viewed.

While it is considered extremely important by both Assamese men and women to be wearing a *mekhela-chador* to portray the 'ideal' 'authentic' and 'real' Assamese women, who are modern yet rooted to their traditional values, the same standards are not followed when it comes to men. In today's day and age, it is quite outdated for a man to wear the *dhuti-suriya* and it is hardly correlated to how the 'ideal' 'authentic' and 'real' Assamese men should be. The traditional *dhuti-suriya* is not considered as important as

the *mekhela-chador* in being a marker of Assamese culture. This is a consequence of the popular patriarchal perception that activities of men is relegated to the 'practical' sphere to earn money. And so, *dhuti-suriya* in contemporary times is not considered comfortable enough for men to work and move freely. The *mekhela-chador* is also more than often associated with the respectability of Assamese women.

Some people I spoke to, were of the opinion that women wear their traditional dress irrespective of whether men wear their traditional dress or not, because of the fact that women are more aware about preservation of Assamese cultural heritage. This might indicate that, as if women are active agents of culture. But we must understand that words like beauty, comfort, respect, agents, etc. are also constructed in a certain context. They are not just simple words. The burden of displaying cultural identity through the women's body is rationalized through words like beauty, comfort and respect. But we need to question how these words are defined? Why it is considered a matter of beauty, comfort and respectability for women to wear the *mekhela-chador* when the *dhuti-suriya* for men becomes uncomfortable and awkward.

Thus, I have termed the role of women in this cultural discourse as 'passive-active'. There is no denial of the fact that she is defining her own agency but it is within certain constraints that are already in place even before she can define it. Meanings of beauty, respectability, comfort and discomfort have been already constructed in certain ways for her which evaluates women's 'respectability' and her allegiance to the prescribed gender norms of a culture. Thus, this evaluation that a women goes through is like the 'panoptic gaze' of surveillance of the female body which needs to behave in a certain way (Foucault 1992).

But to say that women are coerced to wear *mekhela-chador* to which she passively agrees is in my view over-simplification of a much complex phenomenon. Rather, Assamese women see themselves as active agents of tradition and culture under a new mechanism of implicit coercion, such as adhering to certain definitions of beauty, cultural preservation through the *mekhela-chador*, comfort, respectability, graceful, etc., under the guise of consensus.

Taking extreme positions as women being voiceless or active in the cultural discourse would be having a reductionist approach. Nonetheless, as I see it, women still do not have the power to define either gender or cultural norms and various meanings attached to it. Exercising agency does not equate to being liberated. What I mean to say is, an image however is created that makes women believe that it is not the cultural burden that they are forced to carry but a responsibility they are suited to carry which they fulfil without external compulsion.

Mekhela-Chador in Contemporary Times

Hristova (2014) puts forward the idea that a dress one wears is a sign and an embodiment of a cultural identity (Hristova 2014: 86). Whisner (1982) views that appearance is the communicator of class, race, occupation, physical freedom and gender (Whisner 1982: 73). Thus, various cultures claiming to have unique characteristics of its own undergo the need to display it for those characteristics and distinctiveness to be known, perpetuated, identified with and differentiated from. Dress as indicated by Tarlo (1996) has the potential to mark 'boundaries' as to what is inside of it and what is outside of it. The people who wear the *mekhela-chador*, try to identify with the ones sharing the same notion of it as a matter of social inclusion. For a lot of people I spoke to during fieldwork, it needs to be constantly differentiated from its similar counterpart, the sari. The *sari* is a long piece of fabric worn around the body, whereas the *mekhela-chador* is a two-piece attire. The fact that both attires look the same at time give rise to the necessity of maintaining the difference between them.

However, the need to display this cultural uniqueness and difference in spaces and occasions having ceremonial significance such as weddings and cultural and formal events points towards the elevated status of *mekhela-chador* from a mundane everyday wear. Also one can see Assamese women adorning *mekhela-chador* on occasions such as Republic Day and Independence Day, while welcoming VIPs, etc., as these are seen as occasions to portray their 'Assameseness' through their attire.

All my respondents when asked about the reason for this transformation of the *mekhela-chador* were of the opinion that this is because of *juger poriborton* (change of time) which means that practical necessity of contemporary times where women are not only relegated to the domestic sphere like earlier times but work outside of it too that has led to this change. As such changes occurred, taking the *mekhela-chador* out from the mundane everyday has put it in a domain of the extraordinary. These occasions then become the spectacle to experience the extraordinary, which also function as an important element indicating one's 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu 1986) of showcasing one's competence as societies' high status who are not confined to the ordinary. It also becomes a marker of taste.

What I mean to suggest is, it is true that even if the *mekhela-chador* is not worn daily and is elevated from the status of a mundane everyday wear to a symbol of extra-ordinariness having a high ceremonial significance and occasional appearance, it still has not reduced its importance.

Thus, when *mekhela-chador* attains a ceremonial significance, in addition to it becoming a marker of uniqueness of Assamese culture, a matter of identification and differentiation, it also functions as a manifestation of cultural capital and a marker of good and bad taste. They add additional meaning to the idea of cultural significance. And this is where the market steps in to cash in on the idea of culture –the process of boundary setting of various kinds and objectification of women's bodies to display these very ideas.

The market for *mekhela-chador* is huge. There is in fact a phenomenon of re-invention of it. Gone are the days when *muga* (mulberry silk) and *paat* (golden silk of Assam) were the only material that were used to make a *mekhela-chador*, although they are still considered 'evergreen', today the market is flooded with *mekhela-chadors* made of various materials like cotton, net, chiffon and different types of silks and synthetic material having designs ranging from traditional Assamese to sequins work, appliqué work, embroidery work, prints, etc., to cater to every taste, need, mood, occasion and pocket. However, even this re-invention has not re-located the *mekhela-chador* to the domain of the

ordinary, mundane everyday life of Assamese women. The reality is that people buy *mekhela-chadors* in huge numbers for special occasions. The new re-invented *mekhela-chadors* are cheaper yet have an appeal. It is bought by women as they want to display their social status. Second, just like in actual practice of wearing *mekhela-chadors*, having the ability to buy *mekhela-chadors* indicates one's cultural capital and is also a signifier of one's good taste. Third, even though women do not wear it every day, the *mekhela-chador* is considered an important symbol of Assamese culture and women as responsible carriers of culture feel bound to preserve and perpetuate it. They buy and preserve not only for themselves but also to give it to their daughters or daughters-in-law especially during times of marriage and in this way pass on cultural the heritage from one generation to the other, and along with that passing on status and class.

The market strategizes its profit-making activities while bringing culture into its fold. There is camaraderie between how the elitist notion of preservation of culture, class and status functions and the way the market commodifies women. Both these streams use mediums such as visual media to perpetuate their patriarchal understanding of women and womanhood. After all, there is no mystery in how patriarchal nationalism has used women and their body as weapons of wars to protect national pride and neither is it any secret how the market today with neo-liberal economics of profit making, defines and re-defines womanhood. At times, the latter achieves its aim in exposing parts of women's bodies to indicate the idea of 'liberated' women and at other times, it would dress her in a way to represent 'authenticity' of a culture to get its products sold in the market.

Conclusion

The boundary of what is permissible and not permissible and women's choice in taking part in that boundary setting is already defined. Gender norms of appropriateness and respectability in dressing still delineate the limits within which Assamese

women can exercise their power in the process of adorning the *mekhela-chador* and defining the layers of meaning attached to it. Moreover, this expression does not always result into being liberated from all kinds of constraints to make choices. Through this paper I am advocating a culture of choice to be able to choose to define womanhood, how we look and how we want to define our existence. Whether someone chooses to wear traditional attire or not, should not be dictated by any patriarchal norms, be it by elitist, upper-caste norms or the market which forces us to believe in certain assumptions and notions of terms like 'authenticity', 'real' or 'traditional'. We all are beyond how we dress. And most importantly, 'womanhood', 'realness', 'authenticity' and 'Assameseness' can never have a unilateral definition and also the same should not be imposed.

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