



## A typological study of design motifs in Rabha traditional textiles of Assam

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### Abstract

This study explores the typology of design motifs in the traditional textiles of the Rabha community of Assam, India, aiming to document and classify, based on their visual form and inspirations. Rooted in field-based qualitative research, the study draws upon fieldwork in Rabha-inhabited regions, combining ethnographic observation, photographic documentation, and interviews with skilled weavers. The findings reveal that Rabha textile motifs are inspired by diverse sources—nature, cultural artifacts, and ritual beliefs—and can be broadly categorized into four major types: geometric, floral, zoomorphic, and abstract & symbolic. Each motif serves as a visual expression of indigenous aesthetics and belief systems, reflecting a deep interconnection between the community's environment, spirituality, and social identity. Beyond their aesthetic function, these motifs embody a repository of indigenous knowledge and cultural memory transmitted through weaving. The typological framework developed in this study not only contributes to the academic understanding of folk textile design but also supports the preservation and revitalization of Rabha weaving traditions as a vital part of India's intangible cultural heritage.

**Keywords:** Rabha textiles, motif typology, indigenous design, visual culture, cultural heritage.

### Introduction

The traditional textiles of the Rabha community of Assam represent a significant aspect of their cultural heritage, reflecting the community's artistic sensibility, ecological awareness, and social identity. Weaving has long been an integral part of Rabha life, and through generations, women weavers have developed a diverse vocabulary of motifs that adorn garments such as the Riphon, Kambung, and Khodobang. These motifs—inspired by flora and fauna, beliefs and folktales, and day-to-day objects—are not merely decorative elements but embody deeper meanings connected to nature, spirituality, and lived experience.

This study seeks to identify and categorize the various types of motifs found in Rabha traditional textiles, to construct a systematic typology that highlights their formal, structural, and symbolic diversity. By examining motif shapes and forms, inspirations, and its visual representation, the research aims to document the visual grammar that defines Rabha textile aesthetics. Such classification helps to trace patterns of continuity and change in design, providing insight into how traditional knowledge is encoded and transmitted through weaving.

Understanding and documenting motif typology is also essential for safeguarding intangible cultural heritage, particularly at a time when traditional weaving practices are facing the pressures of modernization and mass production. By organizing motifs into distinct typological categories, the study contributes to both academic scholarship and cultural preservation, offering a visual and analytical framework for future research in textile design, folk art, and indigenous knowledge systems.

### Objectives of The Study

This study primarily aims to find the various types of motifs found in the traditional textiles of the Rabha community of Assam. It focuses on recording and describing the diverse motif types woven into traditional clothes and clothing, which reflect the community's creativity, beliefs, and

culture. By visually documenting motif categories inspired by different sources found, the study seeks to preserve and interpret the design heritage of Rabha weaving. The documentation aims to provide a comprehensive visual and descriptive record of motif types that can serve as a reference for further research on indigenous textile traditions, design typology, and cultural sustainability.

### Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative, field-based research approach, with its primary focus on visual documentation through field trips in Rabha-inhabited regions of Assam and Meghalaya. Fieldwork was carried out in selected villages known for their traditional weaving practices, where direct interaction with local weavers provided authentic insights into the making and meaning of textile motifs.

During the field trips, data were collected through visual documentation, interviews, and participant observation. The textiles are photographed and the local names and narratives associated with each motif are recorded. Conversations with experienced women weavers helped to understand the inspiration behind various designs.

The documentation process focused on creating a comprehensive visual and descriptive record of Rabha textile motifs as observed in the field. This approach ensures the preservation of indigenous design knowledge and contributes to the cultural and artistic documentation of the Rabha textile design tradition, highlighting the community's creativity and continuity of heritage.

### Data collection

To make data collection comprehensive and inclusive, the data collection process was done in the RHAC areas of Assam, where a major number of Rabha people inhabit, along with the West Garo hills. The objective of this field trip was to collect and document traditional Rabha textile designs, especially motifs and patterns. The Rabha community is renowned for its rich textile heritage, and this

expedition aimed to collect data about design, preserve, and celebrate their unique craftsmanship. The Rabha people of the studied areas are more than just a community; they are guardians of a rich cultural heritage that is as resilient as it is vibrant. Through their customs, traditions, and artistic expressions, they continue to celebrate the beauty of their land and the richness of their shared history. As they navigate the challenges of the modern world, the Rabha people stand as a testament to the enduring power of tradition and the importance of preserving the cultural diversity that makes our world so extraordinary.

## Results

### Rabha Tribe and Textile

There is no clear indication in history of how the Rabha people came to Assam and became a major tribe. Different scholars have shared different accounts about their origin. Major A. Payfair believed Rabhas migrated from the Tibet region to Garo Hill and later spread out to different parts of the Assam plains (B.N. Bordoloi). One of the oldest indigenous inhabitants of Assam, the Rabhas belong to the Indo-Mongolian tribe. Along with Rabha, some more tribes with similar affinity forms a group of tribes known as *Bodo* or *Bara* forms a major section of non-Aryan tribes in Assam. Dr. B.M. Das's work scientifically established the fact that the Rabha were more closely allied to the Garos rather than any other tribe of the Bodo Group. Like E.A. Gait. Dr. Das also stated that the Rabha were ethnically and culturally a distinct tribe. J. E. Friend Pereira gave a poetic description of the physical features of the Rabha tribe in the word that follows, like this: "in general appearances, the Rabhas show all the characteristics of the Mongolian stock, a round face, flat nose, prominent cheek bones, obliquely set eyes, sallow complexion, coarse hair, scantily beard and well-developed lower extremities." (B.N. Bordoloi).

The generic term Bodo or Boro is believed to be coming from the word Bod-Tibbet-Tibet. People who were inhabitants in those Bod areas are called Boddo-ficha or Boddo-cha; ficha or cha means children. Which means children from Bod land. Slowly, with time, these people were later simply known as Bodo or Boddo. (Basumatāri, a 2010) [4]. So Rabha were also believed to come from the same region as another ethnic group that belongs to the broad Indo-Mongolian Bodo group.

In other ancient stories about Rabha's existence, in the Rabha language, "Marap or Marab means people or human, from this word "Rab" means ups and down, and "Ha" (Land), so it's assumed Rab+ha literally means people from the hill and land. Hence, the area where these tribe people used to stay was called Rab-Ha, Rab-ha-rab-ah, and later known as Rabha. (Rabha).

Textile weaving is as ancient as human existence. Clothes are often described as a "second skin" and are considered fundamental to life, along with food and shelter. As one of the oldest sectors of human activity, weaving has served both commercial and personal purposes. Traditional textiles also produce customary garments that hold cultural significance, shaping identity and reinforcing social traditions. Assam, a northeastern state of India, has a rich heritage of handlooms and woven textiles. Each tribe has its own distinctive style, weaving patterns, and motifs (Imp-Traditional Textile Motifs of Assam as Symbol of Visual

Identity (2), n.d.). With a population of 31,205,576 (Census 2011) and a geographical area of 78,438 sq. km., Assam is the largest state among the "Seven Sisters" of Northeast India (des.assam.gov.in/information-service, 2022) [5]. Assam has long been recognized for its colourful handloom folk textiles and their intricate woven motifs. These textiles remain integral to the daily life of ethnic communities. The patterns embedded in each textile reflect the cultural and social context of both the weaver and the wearer (Sukkon, 2015).

Traditional textile is an important part of human civilization, and the motifs on them play a pivotal role in providing identity to the cloth, the wearer, and the community to which they belong. Since ancient times, textiles and their patterns have been used as symbols to represent communities and their social identities. Traditional crafts offer an intriguing reflection of a society, its culture, and its economy (Jogendranath Chutia & Sarma, n.d.).

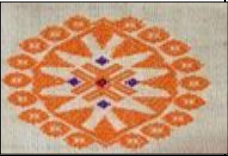

### Inspirations of Visual Forms

The visual language of Rabha folk textiles is deeply rooted in the community's symbiotic relationship with nature and its socio-cultural environment. The visual forms in Rabha folk textiles are inspired by a rich tapestry of cultural, ecological, and spiritual elements integral to the community's way of life. The sources of inspiration for motifs and patterns are deeply rooted in everyday life, natural surroundings, cultural symbols, and belief systems of the Rabha community. These inspirations are both tangible and intangible. These motifs often reflect the natural environment—flora such as plants, creepers, and flowers; fauna including birds and animals—as well as anthropomorphic figures representing everyday life and traditional beliefs. Geometric and abstract patterns are also drawn from symbolic meanings rooted in indigenous cosmology and gender-specific aesthetics. These inspirations are not only aesthetic choices but also, in most cases, serve as visual texts that communicate social values and cultural continuity within the Rabha community.

The core inspirations are categorized into 3 thematic domains: Nature, manmade, and Synthesis of Inspiration

### Nature as Inspiration

The motifs in Rabha folk textiles are deeply rooted in their close relationship with the natural environment, often drawing inspiration from the flora, fauna, and everyday life of their surroundings. Designs such as Toh Niken (bird's eye), Ghora (horse), and Mayura (peacock) reflect the presence of animals and birds in their ecosystem. Plant-inspired motifs like Dhekia Paat (fern leaf), Leba Paar, or Lota Paar (creeper vine highlight their botanical environment. Natural elements like the sun (Rang San), sun rays (Rod Kata Paar), and the hill-like Hatsu Paar (also called Pahar Kata) show how celestial and geographic features influence their visual language. Additionally, Even textures from nature, like Garai Phong Khap—inspired by healing skin texture—find place in Rabha textile. These symbolic motifs not only beautify the garments but also embody stories, beliefs, and the spiritual bond between the Rabha people and nature, preserving their indigenous identity through woven art. Some examples are placed below.

Motif Name	Natural Inspiration	Motif	Visual Reference (Description)
Toh Niken	Bird's eye		Circular shape resembling a bird's eye
Dalim phul	Pomegranate design		Depicting a pomegranate fruit with a leaf.



This table illustrates various Rabha textile motifs that are inspired by elements of nature. These motifs reflect the tribe's deep connection with their environment, with references drawn from plants, animals, birds, celestial bodies, and natural objects.

**Manmade and Cultural Objects**

Rabha textile motifs are deeply inspired by manmade and cultural objects that reflect their daily life, material culture. These motifs often draw from traditional tools, architecture, jewellery, and musical instruments that hold cultural significance in Rabha society. These motifs reflect their deep cultural connection with tools, household items, and functional implements, translating lived experiences into visual form. One such example is Doka Sari, a motif symbolizing a rice container—emblematic of agricultural livelihood and food security.

The Katshi Pha Paar is inspired by the sharp zigzag form of a traditional saw used in paddy fields, capturing the essence of agrarian tools.

Cheriki Paar, shaped after the spinning wheel, pays homage to the craft of weaving itself. Bisoni Fool, meaning "hand fan flower," depicts the pleated form of a traditional hand fan, combining elegance and daily utility. Similarly, Bulti Nakap, inspired by the design of a chain, is a fine example of how personal adornments influence textile vocabulary. The Manchalenga motif derives from a rhythmic dance prop, used in performances with bird feathers and strings that move to music, highlighting performative traditions. These motifs not only showcase the tribe's ingenuity in abstracting utilitarian objects but also serve as cultural markers, preserving memory, symbolism, and heritage within the fabric of their garments. Through these woven patterns, the Rabha people have encoded their lifestyle, tools, and traditions into lasting visual forms. These inspirations not only serve decorative purposes but also act as carriers of identity, tradition, and historical memory within Rabha textile artistry. Some examples are placed below for reference.



Motif Name	Man-made Object Inspiration	Motif	Visual Reference (Description)
Doka Sari	Rice container		Rectangular or cylindrical shapes symbolize the traditional grain storage container.
Cheriki Paar	Spinning wheel		Circular, spoke-like patterns resembling the structure of a traditional spinning wheel.

**Synthesis of Inspiration**

In Rabha textile traditions, motifs often emerge from a synthesis of nature and man-made elements, creating abstract symbolic representations deeply rooted in cultural beliefs and rituals. These motifs are not mere decorative forms but are imbued with meaning—reflecting aspects of everyday life, tools, spiritual beliefs, and the natural environment. For instance, Nen Marang, known as a protection cloth, symbolizes spiritual safeguarding and must be woven in a single night under strict ritualistic conditions, often worn by warriors or in dangerous situations. *Modhus Paar* is a complex and sacred motif composed of various abstract elements, used specifically in religious ceremonies like *Marai* or *Monokha* puja, with rules against

misuse.

The *Mokurdoma Paar* (also known as *Jaap Paar*) is a symmetrical, mirror-like motif believed to bring victory in legal battles, and is often worn around the neck during important societal affairs. *BAI Paar*, referred to as the "God's motif," is used exclusively in special garments, symbolizing divine presence and reverence. These motifs represent a unique blend of the natural and constructed worlds. They encapsulate the Rabha worldview, where textiles serve as vessels of cultural memory, identity, and ritual function. These motifs not only preserve Rabha heritage but also encode layered meanings rooted in both material culture and intangible traditions. Some examples are placed below.

Motif Name	Cultural Beliefs and Rituals as Inspiration	Motif	Visual Reference (Description)
Nen Marang	Protective cloth woven during specific rituals to guard wearers from danger or war. Worn by warriors; woven with chants and rituals		Small rectangular cloth, usually red/black, tied at the waist, with minimal design
Modhus Paar	Used in Marai or Monokha puja; believed to affect weavers' eyes if misused. Spiritual and abstract; limited to sacred garments		Mixed and complex abstract forms with sacred symmetry

**Typology of Motifs**

Visual forms of Rabha textile motifs A motif in art is an idea, pattern, image, or theme that is repeated. A pattern is a repetition of specific visual elements. (MUSA, 2019) [7]. The nature of these visual forms, such as motifs and patterns are often drawing inspiration from the tribe's surroundings, folklore, and cultural symbolism. After digitizing the motifs to linear form, using digital software and analyzing their visual forms, it can be stated that traditional Rabha textiles motifs can be categorized into a few major categories based on their inspirations and visual design elements, and thematic representation. For instance, motifs were grouped into categories like floral (depicting elements like flowers and plants), Zoomorphic (elements like animals), geometric (featuring lines, angles, and symmetrical shapes), and abstract & symbolic (representing cultural or spiritual concepts). The process of categorizing motifs is essential for a structured and systematic study of these elements. According to cognitive categorization theories (Athavankar, 1989) [2] human perception naturally groups objects based on similarities. This means that categorizing motifs helps scholars and designers quickly recognize patterns and understand their meanings.

**Types of Rabha Motifs**

In traditional Rabha textile motif designs, visual forms are a combination of natural and artificial forms. Natural forms like animals, birds, creepers, plants, humans, and daily life things used in society are woven along with some artificial geometric design as abstract forms to give some significance to the design. Based on their inspiration and representation, Rabha traditional textile motifs and patterns can be categorized into 4 broad categories of design.

1. Geometric
2. Floral
3. Zoomorphic Motifs
4. Abstract & symbolics.

**Geometric Motifs:** Geometric motifs, characterized by recurring decorative elements such as circles, squares, and polygons, are widely used in traditional textile designs to create rhythm and symbolic meaning (Joanne B. Eicher, 2010) [6]. Some of the prominent motifs used in Rabha textiles, often featuring symmetry, angular patterns, and repeated shapes like diamonds, "Briphul paar" (Figure 1), triangles, and squares. Geometric designs like "Chakra paar" spinning wheel motif (Figure 2) and "Rin Kham Bokai" (border design for Khodabang headgear) are crucial in Rabha garment aesthetics. Showing symmetry is another design called Aap paar, which means mirror. Designs are symmetric to an axis and represent a reflection of a mirror image when kept on one side to another.

Rod Kata paar (figure 3), this design looks like bright sun rays, hence the name. Red color is used for this design. This design is also a combination of different small geometric shapes to create a diamond shape to represent the sun.



Fig 1: Briphul



Fig 1: Chakra

Some of the important designs with simpler geometric designs used in Rabha textiles are Mala (chain worn by women) design (Figure 4) and Nusuk bokai (which means middle line in Rabha language), and Zignata (pumpkin color used). These are simple lines and checks, but it has their own pattern and counts. Zignata is a simple check design used for men's bottom wear and worn like a wrap-around or lungi.

**Floral Motifs:** A floral motif refers to a recurring decorative element inspired by the natural forms of flowers, plants, and other botanical elements (Amanda Briggs-

Goode, 2011) [1]. Inspired by local flora, floral designs include "Dhekia Paat" (fern leaf) (Figure 5), "Lotus Flower Motif" ("Podum paar") (Figure 6), etc. These motifs often symbolize purity, growth, and beauty. "Leba paar" creeper design is very common in Rabha textiles. It has many versions, as per the wearer's own skill and imagination. "Paan paar", "Thopa full", Joba phool" are some flower motif prominently used. It's interesting to observe that these flower motifs are mostly used as a single unit to fill the textile body of the garment, then being part of any border design.



Fig 3: Rod Kata

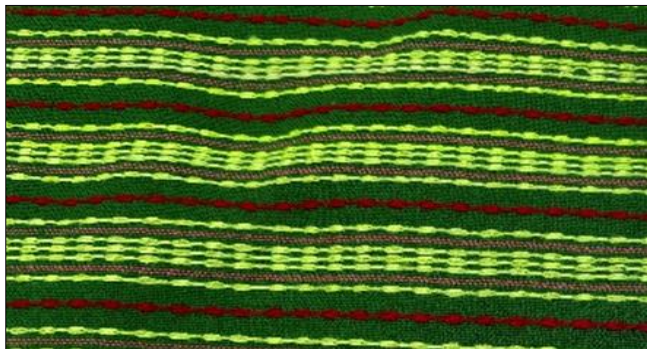


Fig 4: Mala



Fig 5: Dhekia paar



Fig 6: Podum paar

Zoomorphic Motifs in traditional textile design can be defined as the decorative elements inspired by or resembling animal forms, used in textile designs to convey symbolic meanings, cultural beliefs, or aesthetic appeal. Animal and bird motifs, such as "Toh paar" (bird motif), "Moyura paar" (peacock motif), and "Topak paar" (butterfly motif) (Figure 7) showcase the tribe's reverence for wildlife and nature. It's observed that these motifs are simple and basic lines in terms of their representation. To illustrate the same, Ghora and Peacock's design may be seen. The same simple hand-drawn representation may also be seen in the "Chong kambung paar" (Figure 8), which represents Ants and bugs. Very primitive in terms of forms and formations.



Fig 7: Topak paar



Fig 8: Chong kambung paar

**Abstract and Symbolic Motifs:** in traditional textile design, refer to patterns that deviate from direct representation of the physical world, instead conveying meaning through stylized forms and symbols. Abstract motifs are often geometric or non-representational, focusing on shape, color, and rhythm without depicting tangible objects or figures. Symbolic motifs, on the other hand, carry deeper meanings, often tied to cultural, spiritual, or societal symbols, representing ideas, beliefs, or natural elements in a stylized manner. Abstract forms like "Mokordoma paar" (design used to assure a win at court) (Figure 9) and "Modush paar" (a sacred design used in rituals) (Figure 10) carry deep symbolic meaning and are often associated with spiritual beliefs or protection. This motif is used in Marai puja or Monokha puja. The significance of this design is, it should not be used the wrong way or wrong placement, as this design is used for Puja or sacred events. It's believed that they can weave very few designs of it. If we weave a few, one should offer one to Marai puja, or else it will affect the weaver's eye. "Nen marang", a protective garment also

called “Rakha kabas”, with its design has a huge significance in traditional Rabha clothing and in culture at large. These clothes with this design are believed to save anyone from any harm during any kind of war or battle, or fight. “Mancalenga paar” is another design symbolic to the Rabha tribe, as it is used as a prop to do the Rabha traditional dance.



Fig 9: Mokordoma paar



Fig 10: Modush paar

## Conclusion

The typological study of Rabha traditional textile motifs highlights the richness and diversity of indigenous design traditions in Northeast India. The study identifies four principal categories of motifs—geometric, floral, zoomorphic, and abstract & symbolic—each reflecting distinct source of inspiration and aesthetic principles. By classifying motifs into geometric, floral, zoomorphic, and abstract-symbolic categories, the study provides a systematic framework for understanding the visual language and symbolic depth of Rabha textile motif design. Each motif embodies layers of meaning—rooted in nature, daily life, mythology, and spirituality—that together construct a coherent cultural narrative expressed through textile art. The research reveals that Rabha weavers are not merely artisans but custodians of a living tradition that encodes ecological awareness, social values, and spiritual beliefs into woven forms. The preservation of these motifs is therefore crucial, not only for maintaining cultural identity but also for informing sustainable design practices and contemporary textile innovation.

In documenting and analyzing this visual vocabulary, the study contributes to the broader discourse on indigenous knowledge systems and strengthens efforts to safeguard the intangible heritage of the Rabha community for future

generations. The outcome demonstrates how Rabha weavers transform elements from their surroundings—flora, fauna, tools, and mythic symbols—into stylized patterns that encode collective memory, identity, and cosmology. The typology developed through this study not only provides a structured framework for interpreting Rabha design traditions but also serves as a valuable resource for future comparative, conservation, and design-based research. By mapping the diversity and continuity of these motifs, the study contributes to the preservation of indigenous visual knowledge and underscores the sophistication of Rabha aesthetic reasoning within India’s broader textile heritage.

## Further Scope of The Study

While this study provides a comprehensive typological classification of Rabha textile motifs, there remains significant scope for further research in both analytical and applied dimensions. Future studies may explore comparative analyses between Rabha motifs and those of other tribal communities of Northeast India—such as Bodo, Mishing, Garo, and Karbi—to understand cross-cultural exchanges and shared design vocabularies. Ethnographic and semiotic approaches could further deepen the understanding of symbolic meanings and their transformations in contemporary contexts. Additionally, digital archiving and computational analysis of motifs can be undertaken to create a systematic database for documentation, preservation, and design innovation.

The study also opens avenues for design translation and sustainable development, where traditional Rabha motifs can inspire modern textile and fashion applications while maintaining cultural authenticity. Collaborative projects involving local artisans, designers, and researchers can contribute to heritage-based design education and community-centered entrepreneurship. Finally, longitudinal studies tracing the impact of modernization and market forces on Rabha weaving practices would provide valuable insights into the resilience and adaptation of indigenous visual traditions in a rapidly changing cultural landscape.

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