

Fashion Zeitgeist in Northeast India

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It is a widely accepted fact that Fashion and Northeast India are synonymous. ... It is a well-known fact that in the Northeast, one gets to see very well dressed and elegant girls and also boys sporting the latest hairstyles. In fact, fashion in the Northeast is not just a modern trend but it has been present since a long, long time. This is due to the fact that in the Northeast itself we have more than 400 communities – each unique and magnificent in its own way, in fact, giving an identity to Asian Fashion worldwide. ... So, it's only understandable that we carry on the legacy passed on by our forefathers. ... People nationwide appreciate and acknowledge our efforts. Be it our bloggers, designers, models or fashion photographers – we have a super scale range of talent in terms of Fashion.

This is the appraisal of the situation by Yanam Waghe in one of her internet blogs (Waghe 2012), a young woman from Northeast India in her mid-twenties, living in New Delhi. The self-confident and self-evident manner in which this young woman, who is present on the internet in the form of several fashion statements on LookBooks, Twitter and the like, perceives and represents the fashion scene of Northeast India, is no exception among the Northeast youth of today. In the last decade, a general notion that Northeast India is a hub not only for trendy fashion, but also for contemporary ethnic looks, has been established. This self-image of Northeast India is not restricted to the fashion-conscious youth or a handful of enthusiasts; a nearly identical notion of the fashionability of Northeast India can also be found among middle-aged members of the administrative and political establishment. On the official website of the Government of Nagaland we can therefore read that:

The present generation of Nagas have ventured into fashion designing in a big way, reproducing fabrics that represent the ancestral motifs blended with modern appeal. Indeed, it is a beautiful mix of the past with the present... a paradise for those who are into fashion designing. This is an affluent fashion station of the East. (Government of Nagaland 2013).

A Legacy of the Forefathers

The Nagaland referred to here is one of the 'seven sister' states of North-

Left:

Evening wear designed by Akala Pongen, Nagaland. The blue-red striped fabric intersected to the white frills in the dress in the foreground stems from a traditional Ao Naga woman's dance skirt, while that of the dress in the background is taken from an Angami Naga woman's skirt. The blue bolero jacket is manufactured from a very common shoulder shawl worn by men and women among the Ao Naga. Hornbill Designers Contest 2010, Kohima, Nagaland.

east India, along with Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Meghalaya, Manipur, Mizoram and Tripura. In territorial terms, Northeast India is only connected to 'mainland' India via a narrow corridor of land, and, for a large part of the 20th century, it was known as a zone of ethnic turmoil. Closed for decades to foreigners and Indian visitors alike, it has seen many open, armed conflicts that were barely noticed outside of India. In 'mainland' India, the people of the Northeast were largely perceived as combative, exotic 'tribals' or 'dangerous terrorists'. The self-perception of the great diversity of ethnic groups in the region was, for many decades, defined by freedom fights and a political notion of self-determination or separatism. These conflicts mainly originated in colonial times, although were also rooted in a long history of local kingdoms fighting for power and influence especially in the Brahmaputra valley, and wars and battles between local small-scale communities in the surrounding hills, in which the honour and splendour of 'the warrior' was held in high esteem. Taking the example of the Naga groups, prestige and status could mainly be gained by two means in ancient times: through success in war and through feasts of merit that were arranged by individual families for the whole village. When the British colonizers started to become more interested in the region, in the middle of the 19th century, they encountered a highly ritualised court culture in the plains of Assam and war-like tribes in the hills. These people were striking not only for their practice of head-hunting, but also by their incredibly splendid material culture and dress. In fact, the jewellery, head-gear, textiles and weapons of the Nagas were so appealing to the British that a substantial part of the object collections in the Pitt Rivers Museum of Oxford University – one of the largest ethnographic museums in the UK – stems from the Naga region of the beginning of the twentieth century (see for instance Jacobs 2012, Oppitz et al. 2008).

Consequently, the remarkable shift that has recently occurred regarding the image of Northeast India reorienting from that of a dangerous war zone to a lively fashion hub is, as stated by our young blogger, not entirely based on new ideas. In certain ways, the fashion scene in Northeast India does 'carry on the legacy of the forefathers' – indeed, in multiple ways: an important aspect of the current fashion scene is the manifold fashion shows, 'model hunts', beauty pageants and designer

Right:

Evening wear designed by Boney Darang, Arunachal Pradesh. The embroidery is traditionally applied to a background cloth with more patterning and structure. The style to wear a rectangular, uncut piece of cloth as wrap skirt with a matching shawl is very closely oriented at traditional wearing styles. Hornbill Designers Contest 2010, Kohima, Nagaland.





contests that are specifically held for 'ethnic fashion' and largely sponsored by the local governments of the seven sister states. Examining such events, one can find links and parallels to a notion of dress and fashion with a long history. The fact that the designs presented on stage use traditional ornaments and textile patterns is the most obvious connection. The show environment used to present fashion – which is often not worn in everyday life or 'on the streets,' and tends to be dominated by a modern Korean style in the hills or the kurta *sarval/sari* mainstream in the plains – can similarly be linked to 'shows' in ancient festivals and rituals held on occasions of feasts of merit or head-receiving ceremonies, to take the Naga example once again. In these celebrations, the village people were resplendent in their best outfits and, when the feast or ceremony was over, the splendid ornaments and intricately woven textiles were stored away again, ready for the next occasion. The governments of the states, in the guise of particular representatives responsible for the events, have taken on the function of sponsorship – an analogy to the feast-givers of ancient times – and, in this way, have the opportunity to accumulate personal status among the spectators and visitors, as well as through the local media.

This also means that the local ethnic fashion designers in Northeast India, especially in the tribal hill states, are often not dependent on making a living from their sales, as a considerable proportion of their shows and the expenses incurred are covered by the government funds. They do not have to promote their labels among the general public to generate sales. This also means that they give little attention to making creations that are suitable for everyday use. Thus, ethnic fashion in the hill states is more closely tied to governmental programmes of identity-building than to economics, leaving the designers with a great deal of freedom in terms of artistic creativity (see also Wettstein 2013).

A slightly different overall picture can be found in the plains of Assam and Manipur: in some cases, the notion of tribal dress is not as sharply distinguished from other clothing styles. The Assamese *mekhla chadar*, for example, a women's garment in three pieces (blouse, skirt and a long shawl) that superficially looks like a sari when worn, is seen very much as an ethnic garment, especially when woven from the local *muga*, *pat* or *eri* silk. In its simple variations, it is also used widely in everyday life.

Left:

Evening wear designed by Daniel Shiem, Meghalaya. With the effects of the simple, uni-colored, cosmopolitan elegance and the use of lesser known local raw materials like for instance the mix of cotton and eri silk, Shiem's designs won the contest in the category of evening wear. Hornbill Designers Contest 2010, Kohima, Nagaland.



Ethnic Glamour and Tribal Chic

As far as the hills of Northeast India are concerned, one can clearly distinguish a trend to link contemporary tribal, ethnic fashion with notions of glamour and chic, rather than with a down to earth 'eco' or alternative lifestyle, as is the case in so many other parts of the world. As stated elsewhere (Stockhausen & Wettstein 2008), the notion of 'extravaganza' has established itself since some time in the vocabulary of fashion in Nagaland, and the trend has been bolstered throughout the Northeast – as can be gleaned, for instance, from the *Manipur Fashion Extravaganza (MFE)*, held on January 6th 2013, which was explicitly organised 'to promote the existing sense of glamour and beauty of Manipuris since antiquity' (*Eastern Mirror* 2013). Similarly, the *North East Fashion Fest* held in February 2013 was praised as 'all set to bring you a thrilling juxtaposition of fashion, glamour, Bollywood, beauty and elegance' (*The Times of India* 2013). Yet what exactly does ethnic glamour from Northeast India look like? How is this new notion of the over-arching image of the region conceptualised?

As an example to illustrate Northeast Indian ethnic glamour and tribal chic, we can take a closer look at an event that took place in December 2010 in Kohima, the capital of Nagaland: *The Hornbill Designers Contest*, with the motto 'traditional fashion of Northeast India'. This contest was held within the larger framework of the annual *Nagaland Hornbill Festival*, usually scheduled in the first week of December, showcasing 'traditional' dances, costumes, games, cuisine and other activities for an entire week. In 2010, several other events were scheduled alongside the festival, such as a fashion night, a night bazaar, a photo contest, the *Miss Nagaland Beauty Pageant*, a motor rally, and the aforementioned designers contest. During the preparations, one fashion designer from each of the seven sister states of Northeast India was selected as a representative, in most cases once it had been assured that the designer's main centre of activity was in the state they represented and that they were not already established nationally or internationally. The contest was thus conceived of as a competition between the states rather than primarily between specific ethnic groups – of which there are too many in the region for all of them to be represented in such a show. In my view, this specific conceptualisation of the contest connotes two important polit-

Left:

Evening wear designed by Tenzin Tsering and Riya Payang, Sikkim. In these designs featuring blouses made of Chinese 'silk' and aprons of three horizontally striped lengths of cloth we can recognize the strong influence of Tibetan traditional dress that is predominant in the very northern borderlands of Northeast India.

The Hornbill Designers Contest 2010, Kohima, Nagaland.



ical messages in its subtext: Firstly, it clearly tries to avoid rivalry and jealousy between individual ethnic groups. Tribalism and armed clashes between ethnic groups in Northeast India have continued to occur up until quite recently, so the politico-cultural establishment supporting such contests and shows attempts to alleviate tension from all notions of tribalism. Secondly, the concept reinforces the administrative notion of the Indian Nation being subdivided into union states, thus confirming the integration of these states into 'India' and thereby diverting attention from separatist ideas. At the same time it strengthens the notion of Northeast India as one single cultural unit and thus gives it more weight as a whole within India. Incidentally, these tendencies can be observed not only in the emerging fashion scene, but also in ventures in such fields as tourism, agriculture and small-scale entrepreneurship.

To return to the designers contest, however: the participating designers were explicitly requested in advance to use traditional ethnic elements in their garments. They were given two rounds of presentations to win over the audience and the judges: one for 'street wear' and one for 'evening wear'. As an incentive for the collections they produced, they each received a subsidy of 10,000 INR [Indian rupees] (approximately 160 euros or 215 US \$). However, as in the case of the Naga representative, this subsidy was insufficient to cover the material costs for the collection. Even if the designer chooses lower quality traditional textiles for the show, the investment for the basic materials alone will be appreciably higher. Likewise, the materials used by other designers doubtless far exceeded this incentive, considering, for instance, the cost of *muga* silk. But the awards in the different categories were substantial by Northeast Indian standards: Zothanpui Puite, the representative for Mizoram, won the prize for 'Best Hornbill Traditional Designer' (50,000 INR) and 'Best Street Wear Designer' (30,000 INR), while the prize for 'Best Innovative Designer' went to Akala Pongen representing Nagaland (30,000 INR), and for 'Best Evening Wear Designer' to Daniel Shiem representing Meghalaya (30,000 INR). The other participants in the event, which was sponsored by the Government of Nagaland and the Music Task Force of Nagaland, were Prashant Singha (Manipur), Tenzin Tsering and Riya Payang (Sikkim), Boney Darang (Arunachal Pradesh), and Dhiraj Deka (Assam).

Left:

Street wear designed by Akala Pongen, Nagaland. In this outfit the designer shifted the notion of Naga dress from using actual ethnic textile design to applying general Naga symbolism to a plain cloth. The wheel of hornbill feathers usually worn as a traditional male headgear and the sign of the mithun (local buffalo) are considered essential symbols for 'Naganness'. Hornbill Designers Contest 2010, Kohima, Nagaland.



The range of dresses presented by the designers at this event extended from those with a distinct ethnic background to such strong fusions of traditional design or materials with mainstream, mostly Western styles that an 'ethnic' touch could only be recognised by people with significant background knowledge. Akala Pongen and Boney Darang certainly made the strongest and most obvious use of traditional textiles in their designs. The majority of their garments were directly based on traditional cloths or patterns, adapted and cut to shapes familiar to the Western fashion world. But while their creations are of the kind that can scarcely be worn outside the catwalk, and can thus rather be considered as wearable art, the creations of the main winner, Zothanpui Puite, who also made strong use of ethnic textiles, were more moderate in appearance and evoked the clothes that could, in fact, be found locally during weddings or special church services. (Christianity is the dominant religion in the hill states of the Northeast, while the plains are mainly Hindu influenced).

The fact that the main award went to Puite's collection may indicate that the judges acknowledged the balance she achieved in her dresses – deftly incorporating a touch of everything: ethnicity, a little glamour, although not too much for an interested customer, a good mix of traditional and Western colours, and, last but not least, a realistic opportunity of local marketability. After all, we must remember that the North-east of India does not (as yet) have a super-rich upper class able to afford pure luxury, in contrast to many urban areas in the rest of India. Any fashion designer who genuinely wishes to survive at home on the basis of his or her profession, must have a good sense of intuition concerning how much glamour is socially acceptable away from the catwalk. When comparing the evening-wear collections, many visitors may have wondered why Daniel Shiem's collection won ahead of others that were, in the eyes of visitors, far more glittery and captivating. In this case the honour was awarded due to the very simple elegance evoked by straightforward, clearly cut sewing patterns and the naturally dyed, locally produced fabrics. Shiem can certainly be regarded as one of the designers in the competition who skilfully, and yet discretely, applied local materials and ethnic patterns, just like Prashant Singha, another

Left:

Evening wear designed by Zothanpui Puite, Mizoram. This dress has nothing whatsoever to do with the ancient traditions of Northeast India, but it mirrors a contrasting contemporary fashion trend. There is hardly a Northeast girl that doesn't dream of a pink, shiny western style princess dress. And evening gowns like this can be increasingly found swishing the ramps of Northeast India nowadays.

Hornbill Designers Contest 2010, Kohima, Nagaland.



Evening wear designed by Dhiraj Deka, Assam. Among the traditional and ethnic fashion styles of Northeast India the Sari-look of Assam has the highest marketability also in 'mainland' India. Especially mughra silk is already known as a trade mark nation-wide. Hornbill Designers Contest 2010, Kohima, Nagaland.

award-winner, who transformed the stripes found in traditional Manipuri textiles in a manner fitting a young, modern style, with seemingly no recognisable ethnic feel. Ultimately, however, it is probably the silk tradition of Assam and its closeness to the mainstream Indian sari look – in this competition represented by Dhiraj Deka – that will convince the rest of India that the Northeast should henceforth be regarded as a fashion hub instead of being feared to be a hotbed of insurgency.

Conclusion: A national agenda for a fashionable Northeast

What can be recognised underlying an event such as the *Hornbill Designers Contest* is a national political agenda to integrate the whole of Northeast India in friendly, artistic, creative competition, in keeping with the administrative framework that the Indian nation state has outlined. By focusing such events on backgrounds that evoke positive emotions – beauty, creativity, craftsmanship, show atmosphere, the limelight, music, and so on – tension and energy is distracted from destructive and militant notions of separatism and internal tribal fights. The idea behind



Street wear designed by Daniel Shiem, Meghalaya. In many regions of Northeast India ancient local textile fibers like cotton or nettle have been replaced by chemically colored, machine woven rayon or synthetics. Some designers actively support the reactivation of original fiber production with their fashion.
Hornbill Designers Contest 2010, Kohima, Nagaland.

this is to bestow Northeast India with a new image of fashion and glamour. This is clearly part of the national Indian agenda, which can also be gleaned from several other fashion events that took place recently. In late 2012, for example, the Ministry of Textiles at the Government of India announced via the Fashion Design Council that Northeast India would be the special focus region at the renowned *Wills Lifestyle India Fashion Week 2013* in New Delhi. Alongside many other designers, a special place on the catwalk was given to internationally-working Atsu Sekhose from Nagaland. Having designed for some years for the Spanish fashion label Zara, Sekhose has recently launched his own label 'Atsu', which is renowned for its elegance. For the *Wills Fashion Show*, he created a collection specifically referencing Northeast India that was positively recognised and received nation-wide.

Another event that attests to the new public image campaign was the *North East Fashion Fest 2013* held in one of the few five-star hotels of

Guwahati, Assam, and attracted several thousand people. It was funded by, among others, the Home Ministry of India, the Department of Tourism of India, the Bodoland Territorial Council, and the Department of Handloom Textile. Here, the strategy for gaining national attention was to include Bollywood actors and actresses in the shows. Soha Ali Khan could be enlisted to act as an ambassador for the festival and several other actresses and actors were engaged to walk the catwalk for the featured designers, drawing on 'big' fashion events in mainland Indian metropolises as a model. Time will show whether the image campaign for a fashionable Northeast will bear fruit in the long run and succeed in gradually overcoming the violent experiences and memories and the nation's inner enemy stereotypes of the past, and whether, through fashion, the perception of Northeast India can be changed, so that the people of the Northeast will no longer have to face discrimination and negative prejudices in India.

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Right:

Street wear designed by Prashant Singha, Manipur. Some of the textiles of the Meithei are based on alternating thin same-with stripes, especially in the colors yellow and red. The design here is a very abstracted interpretation of an essentially traditional cloth design. Hornbill Designers Contest 2010, Kohima, Nagaland.

