



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

“Cultural Identity Through Weaving And Attire: Exploring Traditional And Modern Trends Among Tripura Tribes”

Author: Nelmit Debbarma(B.A [H] EDUCATION ,M.A EDUCATION, NE SLET GUEST LECTURER IN DDMC KHOWAI)

Abstract

This paper examines how traditional weaving and attire among Tripura's tribal communities (notably Tripuri, Reang, Darlong, Rupini, Jammatia, Noatia and related groups) express cultural identity and how those practices are adapting to modern pressures and revival initiatives. Using a mixed-methods approach—literature review, content analysis of recent scholarship and government initiatives, and synthesis of field-report style findings—this study outlines the symbolic meanings embedded in garments such as the *rignai*, *risa* and related textiles, traces technical practices (looms and motifs), and evaluates contemporary shifts including market revival, geographical indication (GI) protections, and stylistic hybridization. The paper concludes with recommendations for culturally sensitive preservation and sustainable livelihoods for weavers.

Keywords: Tripura, *rignai*, *risa*, tribal textiles, weaving, cultural identity, handloom, modernization, revival

1. Introduction

Clothing and woven textiles are material languages that communicate identity, social belonging, status, and collective memory. In Tripura, indigenous garments such as the *rignai* (lower-body wrap) and *risa* (narrow breast cloth) have long functioned as visual markers of clan affiliation, gender roles and cultural knowledge passed along female lines through weaving practices. These textiles remain an active domain where tradition meets change: looms, motifs, and wearing practices are simultaneously sites of continuity and innovation. The Tripura state has recognized the cultural and economic importance of these textiles and engaged in initiatives to document and revive them.

2. Literature review (selected highlights)

- Ethnographic and craft-focused studies describe the *rignai/risa* complex as constitutive of Tripuri dress systems; each clan historically has distinctive *rignai* patterns and designs that operate as group identifiers.
- Technical descriptions of the work show back-strap and simple looms in domestic contexts, with narrow, highly patterned textiles woven by women. These studies note motif sources in local ecology, myths, and everyday tools.
- Recent scholarship examines modernization's impacts — e.g., changing yarn sources, substitution of blouses for *risa*, and market-facing adaptations — and notes both erosion and strategic revival efforts that seek to combine cultural conservation with livelihood enhancement.
- Public initiatives (state and private) and protective measures such as GI recognition for specific tribal textiles have been used to secure identity-linked products and income for artisans. These policy moves are part of a broader push to both safeguard heritage and connect artisans to markets.

3. Methodology

This is a desk-based, mixed-methods study combining: (1) targeted literature review of peer-reviewed and policy sources on Tripura textiles; (2) content analysis of recent reports and news about revival/GI/market interventions; and (3) synthesis of key themes and patterns into an interpretive framework relating textile practices to cultural identity. The aim is analytic—not empirical fieldwork—but grounded in published ethnographic and policy literature.

4. Findings and analysis

4.1 Material culture: garments, techniques and motifs

Tripuri women traditionally wear a three-piece arrangement: the *rignai* (lower wrap), *risa* (narrow chest cloth), and *rikutu* (upper cloth), each woven with characteristic motifs and color palettes. Weaving is frequently home-based, executed on simple looms (often back-strap or loin looms) that enable narrow-width weaving best suited to strips like the *risa*. Motifs derive from flora, fauna, and symbolic forms and can encode clan-level information.

4.2 Identity signals and social meaning

Designs and color combinations function as markers of clan affiliation and social identity. Historically, a woman's weaving skill and the complexity of her *rignai* and *risa* communicated social competence and were intimations of cultural literacy in the community (a form of embodied cultural capital). Changes in intermarriage, migration, and schooling have altered some traditional signaling functions, but many motifs continue to be recognized within communities.

4.3 Modern trends: erosion, hybridization, and revival

Several intersecting trends are visible: (a) substitution of manufactured yarns and machine-made cloth for handspun cotton; (b) younger women adopting blouses or tops in place of *risa* for ease and mobility; (c) stylistic hybridization where motifs are adapted into contemporary garments and fashion items; and (d) state and civil-society-led revival efforts, including branding, design workshops, and GI registrations to protect traditional textile identity and boost weaver incomes. GI recognition and promotion campaigns have helped raise awareness and commercial demand for tribal textiles while also inviting debates about commodification versus custodianship of cultural forms.

4.4 Weaving as livelihood and cultural transmission

Handloom weaving remains an important source of supplementary income in many villages. However, younger generations often migrate to towns for education and work, which affects intergenerational transmission of weaving techniques. Revival programs that link market access with training, documentation, and design innovation have shown potential to make weaving economically viable and culturally respected.

5. Discussion

The interplay between weaving and identity in Tripura illustrates how material culture adapts under social, economic, and political pressures. When a textile gains external attention (for example via GI or exhibitions), its symbolic value is reframed: it becomes both a local identity marker and a branded cultural product for broader markets. This dual status carries opportunities (economic uplift, cultural visibility) and risks (loss of contextual meanings, stylistic dilution). Policy and community responses that emphasize co-creation, fair remuneration, and documentation tend to preserve both the craft and its meanings better than purely market-driven approaches.

6. Conclusion

Weaving and attire among Tripura's tribes remain powerful expressions of cultural identity. Despite pressures of modernization, the textiles' symbolic grammar—motifs, colors, garment forms—retain social relevance. Recent revival efforts, including GI recognition and focused design interventions, offer pathways for sustaining the craft while improving livelihoods. For culturally sensitive preservation, initiatives must combine documentation, skills transmission, maker-led design, and ethical market linkages so that tradition is neither fossilized nor exploited.

7. Recommendations

1. **Community-led documentation:** Systematic recording of clan rignai patterns, motifs and oral histories to preserve contextual meanings.
2. **Skill transmission programs:** Local apprenticeships and school-based programs to encourage youth participation.
3. **Market and design partnerships:** Collaborations between weavers and ethical designers to create products that respect motif meanings while fitting contemporary demand.
4. **Policy protections:** Extend GI and trademark protections as appropriate while ensuring benefits go directly to weaver communities.
5. **Research & monitoring:** Ongoing ethnographic work to track changes and evaluate revival program impacts.

References (selected / for further reading)

1. Tripura Rural Livelihood Mission / Tripura state information on Risa and Rignai — product descriptions and cultural notes. trlm.tripura.gov.in
2. Tilla (Marg collaboration) — short ethnographic/technical description of the *risa* and weaving technique. [Tilla](#)
3. Granthaalayah / ShodhKosh articles on textile design among Tripuri communities — motifs, techniques, and cultural meaning. [Granthaalayah Publication+1](#)
4. Recent reporting on GI recognition and revival initiatives for Tripura textiles (news summaries and policy reporting). [The Indian Tribal](#)
5. Foundational ethnographic overviews and conference papers on Tripura tribal costume evolution and identity. [ResearchGate+1](#)

