

The Dress of the Exiled Tibetan Community in India: Navigating Changes for Cultural Continuity & Identity Formation

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Abstract

This study examines the evolution of traditional Tibetan dress within the Indian diaspora and its significance in sustaining cultural continuity and identity formation following the 1959 exodus prompted by the Chinese occupation of Tibet. The displacement of thousands of Tibetans and the establishment of over 35 settlements across India created new socio-cultural environments in which traditional practices required adaptation. Within this context, dress has remained a vital medium for expressing collective memory, cultural resilience and a sense of belonging. Tibetan clothing carries symbolic meanings that extend beyond function, serving as a cultural, emotional and political anchor for a community negotiating life in exile.

Using visual ethnography, participant observation, literature analysis, oral histories and surveys conducted in New Delhi, Chandragiri (Odisha), Darjeeling and McLeod Ganj, this research documents both transformation and continuity in Tibetan dress. While traditional garments in Tibet were crafted from indigenous wool, yak hair and felt suited to the plateau climate, exile introduced new material conditions, making cotton, synthetics and mill-woven textiles more accessible. Though materials have changed, enduring silhouettes and layered constructions reflect a strong commitment to cultural preservation.

The findings show that, despite climatic adjustments, external influences and modern style aspirations, traditional dress remains a powerful marker of identity in exile. Participation in festivals, religious ceremonies and community events reinforces these practices, transforming clothing into a daily expression of cultural pride. Ultimately, Tibetan dress in exile emerges as a living embodiment of resistance, memory and cohesion—a vital medium through which the diaspora preserves heritage, negotiates belonging and asserts collective identity amid displacement.

Keywords: Cultural Continuity, Diaspora Community, Identity Formation, Material Adaptation, Tibetans Dress

1. Introduction

The Tibetan diaspora in India represents one of the most enduring and culturally cohesive exiled communities in the world. Following the Chinese occupation of Tibet in 1950 and the Dalai Lama's flight in 1959, more than 100,000 Tibetans resettled across India, establishing communities dedicated to safeguarding their linguistic, religious and cultural heritage. Today, 35 officially recognised Tibetan settlements extend from Ladakh and Himachal Pradesh to Odisha, Karnataka and Arunachal Pradesh.

Although demographic estimates vary—with the Ministry of Home Affairs recording 72,300 Tibetans in 2020 and the Central Tibetan Administration reporting approximately 66,000 in 2022—migration to India continues, positioning the country as both a long-term home and a transit space for those seeking opportunities elsewhere.

Within this socio-cultural and political context, traditional dress occupies a significant role as a visual, material and performative marker of identity. Historically, Tibetan clothing communicated values, beliefs, regional affiliations and social hierarchies, but in exile, it becomes an especially powerful medium through which cultural continuity is affirmed and cultural erasure is resisted. This study examines the documentation, evolution and contemporary relevance of Tibetan attire within Indian settlements.

Traditional garments—such as the woollen *chuba*, sheepskin robes and yak-hair accessories—arose from the environmental and pastoral conditions of the Tibetan plateau. Exile in India introduced new climates and textile markets dominated by cottons, synthetics and machine-woven fabrics. Despite these changes, Tibetans have preserved the fundamental silhouettes, layered constructions and ritual functions of traditional dress. This research investigates how these clothing practices operate as mechanisms of cultural continuity and identity formation, exploring how they evolve, endure and express collective memory, resilience and national consciousness in exile.

Figure 01: HH The Dalai Lama being welcomed by Shri P. N. Menon at Bomdila, India in April 1959. Credit: Manjusri Museum, Darjeeling.



Figure 02: HH The Dalai Lama with the children of the first Tibetan migrants to McLeod Ganj, 1961. Credit: Tibet Museum, Dharamsala.



2. Objectives

The objective of this study is to document and analyse the evolution of traditional Tibetan dress within exile settlements in India, focusing on how clothing functions as a mechanism of cultural continuity, identity formation and memory preservation among the displaced Tibetans. By tracing shifts in material culture—from indigenous wool-based garments of the Tibetan plateau to the cotton, synthetic and blended fabrics available in India—the research aims to identify how dress traditions are preserved, adapted and symbolically reinterpreted across four varied Tibetan settlements- New Delhi, Chandragiri (Odisha), Darjeeling and McLeod Ganj . Through ethnographic observation, visual documentation and community narratives, the study examines the continuity of dress vocabulary and structural styles, while also assessing intergenerational perspectives on traditional practices in festivals, rituals and everyday life. Additionally, it evaluates how clothing operates as a socio-political symbol within the broader narrative of diaspora communities.

3. Literature Review

3.1 History & Background

Historical scholarship provides extensive documentation of the Tibetan migration to India, outlining both the political circumstances that precipitated exile and the socio-cultural challenges encountered upon resettlement. Gamble et al. (2013) describe the Tibetan exodus as a response to Chinese state repression and the flight of His Holiness the Dalai Lama in 1959, which resulted in the formation of Tibetan communities across India, Nepal and Bhutan. Pehrson (2003) notes that Tibetan migrants in India are officially designated as ‘persons of concern,’ given that India is not a signatory to the 1951 United Nations Refugee Convention. Subba (2001) provides a vivid account of the hardships endured during the journey into exile and the difficulties faced upon arrival, including inadequate housing, unfamiliar clothing requirements, widespread illness and extreme climatic adjustment—often forcing Tibetans to abandon their woollen attire, cut their hair and adopt cotton garments suited to the Indian environment, a transition that resulted in significant loss of life due to the lack of acclimatisation. Saikia (2019) highlights institutional efforts to preserve Tibetan cultural heritage in exile, noting that the Central Tibetan Administration established the Department of Religion and Culture to safeguard spiritual and cultural traditions through organisations such as the Tibet Museum and the Tibetan Institute of Performing Arts.

3.2 Current situation of the Tibetans in the diaspora

Hampton (1985) notes that India hosts the largest population of Tibetan migrants, many of whom have worked to preserve and maintain their distinct cultural heritage despite the challenges of displacement. Subsequent scholarship has examined the diverse experiences of Tibetans across different settlements in India. Satpathy (2006) observed that Tibetan migrants in Odisha initially struggled with drastic climatic differences but have since acclimatised and established cohesive communities marked by cooperative relationships with the local population. Chatterjee (2015) highlighted how the colonial histories of Darjeeling and Kalimpong made these regions attractive to Tibetans even before the 1959 exodus, offering economic and trade opportunities. Biswas and Momin (2016) focused on the minority Tibetan Muslim community in Kalimpong, documenting their economic prosperity and prominent social standing. Mir et al. (2019) explored the identity crises faced by Tibetan Muslims in Kashmir, who occupy a marginal position both within the Tibetan diaspora and within the broader Muslim community; their presence in India traces back to Kashmiri traders who settled in Tibet and later returned following the 1959 events. Sapam and Jijina (2020) investigated the experiences of unaccompanied Tibetan minors who escaped to

India, revealing significant psychosocial challenges and mental health challenges. Additionally, Calkowski (1991) demonstrated that the economy of Dharamsala is deeply dependent on Tibetan cultural presence, driven by continuous flows of tourists and pilgrims. Collectively, these studies reveal the complex socio-economic, cultural and psychological dimensions of Tibetan life in exile.

3.3 Preservation of Tibetan culture & identity in exile

Anand (2000) defines diaspora as communities dispersed from an original geographic centre who retain a strong collective memory of, and hope for return to, a homeland that is no longer accessible, while actively preserving shared cultural traditions and often experiencing political and social alienation within the host country. In analysing the Tibetan diaspora, he emphasises the importance of examining personal narratives of Tibetans born in exile to understand how they negotiate identity within this complex context of displacement. Falcone and Wangchuk (2008) similarly observed that first- and second-generation Tibetans in exile largely reject creolisation with host cultures, viewing cultural preservation as central to sustaining Tibetan identity. Bauman and Benedetto (2004) further conceptualised collective identity as a form of resistance and empowerment, drawing on Jeffrey Weeks' argument that threatened communities often derive their strongest sense of unity from the need to assert their existence. This perspective resonates with Talkha's (2018) findings, which highlight how the Chinese state misrepresents Tibetans as merely a minority group within China, intensifying the urgency of cultural preservation in exile.

The construction of identity within the Tibetan diaspora is fluid, complex and often contradictory. Shih (2013) and Feldman (2014) note that Tibetan youth express their identity in divergent ways—some embrace it with pride, others distance themselves; some find comfort in shared identity, while others experience marginalisation because of it. Yeshi (2001) and Palkyi (2011) underscore the role of Tibetan Children's Village schools as key institutional sites where ethnic identity is actively constructed for younger generations born without direct experience of their homeland.

3.4 Dress & Identity Formation

Dress serves as a potent marker of cultural boundaries, social differentiation and political expression. Cordwell and Schwarz (1979) argue that clothing functions as an essential component of a culture's communication system, capable of transmitting complex non-verbal information. Building on this idea, McCracken (1988) as well as Cunningham and Voso (1991) highlight how dress conveys fixed sets of messages within a society, signaling personal identity, social worth, values and beliefs, thereby playing a central role in shaping both individual and collective identity. Roach-Higgins and Eicher (1992) further advance this understanding through their 'Meaning and Identity Model,' which positions dress as an active medium of communication through which individuals negotiate and express identity. They contend that identity is formed through social and physical interactions, and that individuals may modify or abandon particular forms of dress to communicate new social positions. This moves the study of communication beyond language alone to include appearance as a critical site of meaning-making.

Maynard (2002, 2006) similarly emphasizes dress as a reflection of group affiliation—whether organized around gender, class, ethnicity or religion—arguing that clothing not only expresses alignment with particular social groups but also reinforces hierarchies within them. Arthur (1999) extends this perspective by asserting that traditional and folk dress demarcate social boundaries, distinguishing cultural groups from outsiders while strengthening internal bonds. Collectively, these scholars underscore the significance of dress as a socially encoded system through which identity, belonging and cultural continuity are continually produced and negotiated.

Arthur (1999) further identifies dress as a powerful instrument through which minority migrant cultures ensure continuity across generations and geographies. Coghlan (2019), drawing parallels with India's use of khadi during the independence movement, argued that clothing operates as a nonverbal mode of political communication symbolising cultural resilience.

3.5 Culture & Cultural Products

In recent years, there has been increasing global recognition of the importance of culture and cultural industries. Friedman (1994) argues that culture, once embedded in lived experience, is often transformed into consumable objects within contemporary economies. Engel et al. (1995), as cited in Shin (2011), distinguish between two core components of culture: abstract elements such as values, attitudes, ideas, symbols and rituals, and material elements comprising the visible cultural objects that represent a society. While Kokko and Dillon (2010) note that culture is difficult to study because it manifests through complex human behaviours, they emphasise that tangible cultural expressions—such as clothing and jewellery—provide accessible entry points into understanding cultural systems. Legino (2012) similarly stresses the importance of analysing traditional art forms, including textiles and dress, to uncover the underlying values of a community.

Hofstede (2001) contends that culture distinguishes one group from another and is expressed through visible forms that carry layered meanings apparent primarily to insiders. Building on this, Byers (2014) discusses Jaan Valsiner's framework, which differentiates between personal culture—individual constructions of meaning—and collective culture, which encompasses shared cultural processes and public expressions of identity.

3.6 Traditional Dress of the Tibetans

Tibetan dress has long served as a marker of regional identity, social hierarchy and political structure. Goldstein (1989), in his study of the political landscape of Tibet, documented clear distinctions in dress based on region, marital status and official rank, noting specific styles that identified government and military personnel. Taklha (2018) further emphasized that traditional clothing practices were shaped by both social hierarchy and seasonal demands. Common materials included sheepskin, lambskin, handwoven wool, woolen felt, and imported silk from China and India, with Indian-mill wool and cotton gaining popularity during the 20th century. The *chuba*, a fundamental robe worn by both men and women, varied regionally in length and pleating. Recent studies by Goyal and Pant (2021, 2022) documented the aesthetic, structural and color characteristics of *Khampa* costumes in Dharamsala, noting that contemporary clothing preferences are shifting alongside modernization and socio-economic change.

3.7 Cultural Movements

3.7.1 Lhakar

Yangzom (2014) analysed the relationship between clothing and social movements in the context of *Lhakar*, a cultural resistance initiative within the Tibetan freedom struggle, demonstrating how attire becomes a deliberate political tool for solidarity-building. Pasricha (2014) further emphasised *Lhakar's* intergenerational significance, noting how both elders and youth actively participate by wearing traditional dress, speaking Tibetan and raising awareness about Tibet.

3.7.2 Gorshey Nights

Gorshey, a traditional Tibetan circle dance, has been revitalized in the diaspora through initiatives such as *Gorshey Nights*, which celebrate cultural heritage through communal gatherings featuring music, dance and Tibetan food. These events extend beyond cultural festivity to cultivate a shared national

consciousness. Participation has generated renewed interest in Tibetan clothing among younger generations, contributing to the revival of local dressmaking practices in settlements such as Darjeeling. By engaging both youth and elders, *Gorshey* Nights reinforce cultural pride, foster intergenerational connection and promote continuity of tradition. The initiative thus exemplifies how diasporic communities mobilize cultural practices to sustain Tibetan identity and cohesion amid ongoing political and cultural pressures.

3.7.3 Miss Tibet Pageant

The Miss Tibet pageant, held annually in McLeod Ganj since 2002, serves as a cultural showcase that reflects both the preservation of Tibetan heritage and the community's engagement with global modernity. While older generations often express concern that the format aligns with Western beauty ideals, younger participants view the pageant as a creative platform through which cultural identity can be articulated and sustained. The title 'Miss Tibet' functions symbolically to affirm a unified national identity distinct from China, an assertion further reinforced through the prominent display of traditional dress and ornaments. Despite attempts by Chinese authorities to reframe the event as 'Miss Tibet-China,' organisers and contestants have consistently resisted such interventions, using the pageant as a site of cultural affirmation, political agency and the continued enactment of Tibetan identity in exile. Additionally, Choedon (2021) explored how the Miss Tibet pageant encodes cultural meaning within the transnational Tibetan diaspora, revealing its function as a site where political struggle, identity and women's empowerment intersect.

4. Analysis & Research Gap

The literature highlights the historical circumstances of Tibetan migration to India and the subsequent formation of a resilient exiled community. Unlike many displaced populations, Tibetans place exceptional emphasis on safeguarding culture as a means of preserving identity and collective memory. Youth are encouraged to maintain language, arts and traditional practices through institutions such as the Tibetan Institute of Performing Arts (TIPA) and the Norbulingka Institute of Tibetan Culture. Levels of assimilation vary across regions, yet cultural platforms like *Lhakar* and *Gorshey* Nights continue to reinforce appreciation for heritage among both younger and older generations. Traditional dress emerges as a key marker of belonging and cohesion, even as modernization and intercultural exposure shape evolving preferences among Tibetan youth.

The analysis provides a multidimensional understanding of Tibetan exile, integrating historical, socio-economic, political and cultural perspectives. It acknowledges the heterogeneity of the diaspora by referencing understudied groups, such as Tibetan Muslims and unaccompanied minors. The discussion of cultural preservation is particularly robust, demonstrating how identity is negotiated through narrative, education and embodied practices. Material culture—especially dress—appears as central to sustaining identity, functioning as both heritage and personal expression. Despite this, research specifically addressing dress as a tool of cultural continuity and identity formation remains limited, revealing a gap in understanding its adaptation across settlements and its broader social, cultural and political significance.

5. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, multi-method approach to capture the lived realities of Tibetan dress practices in exile. Participant observation during *Losar* celebrations, *Gorshey* celebrations as well as within Tibetan households and businesses provided insight into the ritual and everyday use of clothing. Semi-structured interviews with elders, youth, tailors and community members explored memories of

dress in Tibet, attitudes toward adaptation and the symbolic meanings attributed to traditional attire. Visual and material documentation of garments from museums, household collections, tailoring units, cooperative shops and cultural centres enabled detailed analysis of patterns, construction techniques and stylistic variations. Additional data was gathered through oral histories and surveys across four Tibetan settlements—Samyeling (New Delhi), Phuntsokling (Chandragiri, Odisha), Darjeeling and McLeod Ganj—resulting in a comprehensive understanding of how Tibetan clothing is preserved, adapted and reinterpreted in exile.

Figure 03: Map of India & Tibet, highlighting the towns of Chandragiri, Darjeeling, McLeod Ganj & New Delhi.



6. Results And Discussion

6.1 Traditional Tibetan dress before exile in 1959

6.1.1 Fabrics:

Due to easy availability of wool, it was the most common material used for clothing. *Nambu* (hand made wool) as well as *chingpa* (woolen felt) were commonly used. *Pagtsag* (sheepskin) and *tsalog* (lambskin) were also popular among the nomads. Silk and brocade imported from India & China were worn by government officials, regional leaders & the wealthy people. In the 20th century, wool woven in Indian mills and cotton became popular. Fur was rare & difficult to obtain due to religious laws against killing wild animals. Nevertheless, it was available in limited quantities. It was used on the borders of robes of government officials and wealthy people in Kham & Amdo provinces (Taklha, 2018).

Figure 04- Man in a Chingpa cape.

Figure 05- Man in a sheepskin chuba.

Credit: TIPA, Dharamsala.



Figure 06-Nambu Thingma fabric. Credit: TIPA, Dharamsala.



6.1.2 Dyes:

Nambu cloth was usually left in its natural shades of white, brown or grey. The middle and lower class wore robes made of white *nambu* where as the wealthy & the government officials wore black *nambu* robes. Monk and nuns wore maroon *nambu* robes & shawls.

Dye was obtained from the roots, leaves & barks of plants & trees. *Tsoe* flowers were used for maroon dye. Rhubarb, walnut leaves, walnut shell & barberry were commonly used dyestuff. Indigo was obtained from Bhutan. Later, synthetic dyestuff were imported from India. (Taklha, 2018).

6.1.3 Dress Styles:

Traditional dress in Tibet had regional variations depending on the region in Tibet it belonged to- Amdo, Kham or U-Tsang.

The laws dictated the colors of dress. Government officials and the wealthy adorned themselves in vibrant hues such as red, pink and green, while the middle and lower classes dressed in uncolored fabrics, opting for shades like black, off-white and brown. Government officials were mandated to wear silk for all state occasions.

Men usually wore wide-cut trousers tucked into their boots, a shirt called *wog-jueg* and a robe called *chuba* or *chuchen*. The men wore one-sleeved *chuba* for casual occasions and two-sleeved *chuba* for official occasions as a mark of respect for their seniors & elders. The *chuba* was tied at the waist with a sash. Women wore a shirt called *wog-jueg*, a robe called *chuba* or *chuchen*. The women wore sleeveless *chuba* in summers and full sleeved *chuba* in winters. Before fabrics were imported from India & China, both men & women did not wear *wog-jueg*. Women wore petticoats under their robes till 1930s. Later, they started wearing trousers instead of petticoats.

Figure 07: Map of Tibet showing the 3 regions of Tibet- Amdo, Kham & U-Tsang. Credit: Tibet Museum, Dharamsala.

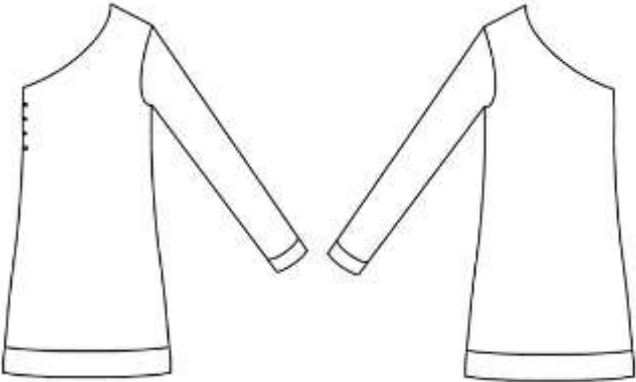
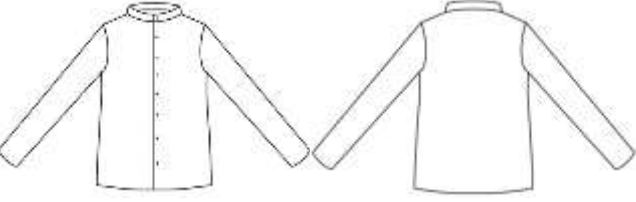


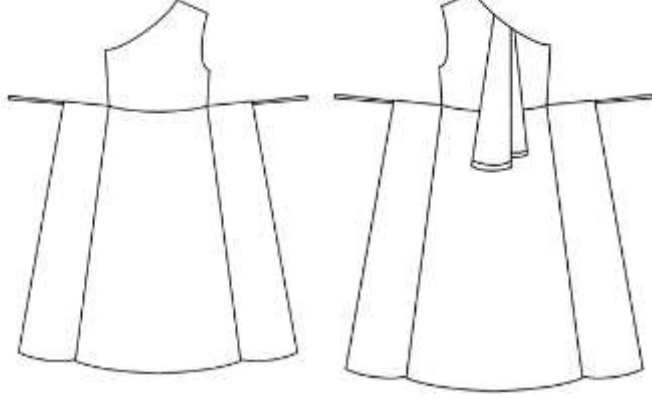
i. Traditional Dress of the Amdo Region

The women's *chuba* has 2 hanging components at the back called *kayb-ti* made of animal fur or *nambu* or padded silk and held together at the bottom with silver or brass clutch.

Figure 08- Regional dress of Amdo on display. Credit: Manjusri Museum, Darjeeling



Amdo Men		
Garment	Fabric for Government Officials & Rich Class	Fabric for Middle & Lower Class
 Front Chuba Back	Sheepskin/ lambskin with brocade borders	Undyed <i>nambu</i> wool
 Front Back	Cotton/ Silk with brocade borders	Cotton

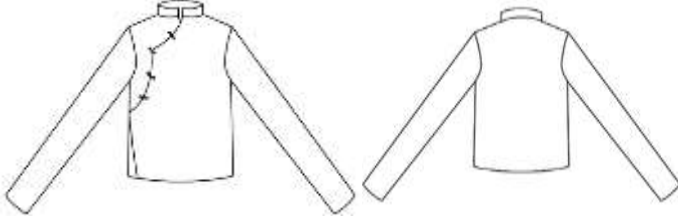
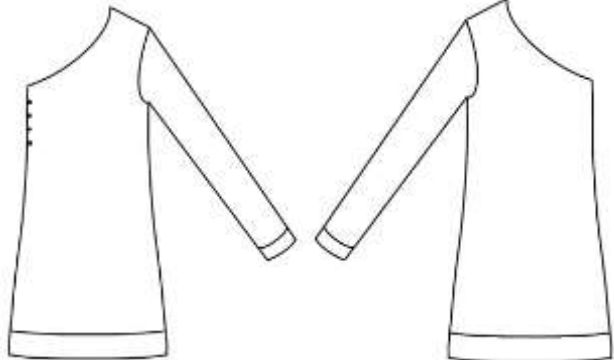
Wog-jueg  Front Dhorma Back	Silk/ Wool	Cotton/ Wool
 Sash	Silk	Cotton
Amdo Women		
 Front Wog-jueg Back	Silk/ Brocade	Cotton/ Silk
 Front Chuba Back	Sheepskin/ lambskin in winter. Brocade in summer.	Cotton/ Undyed wool
 Sash	Silk	Cotton

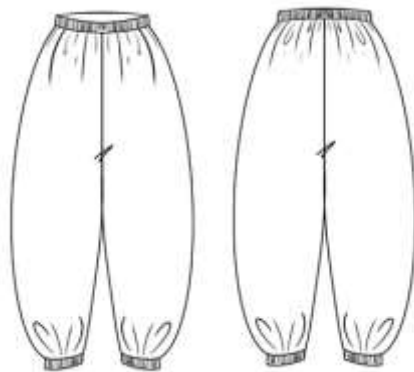
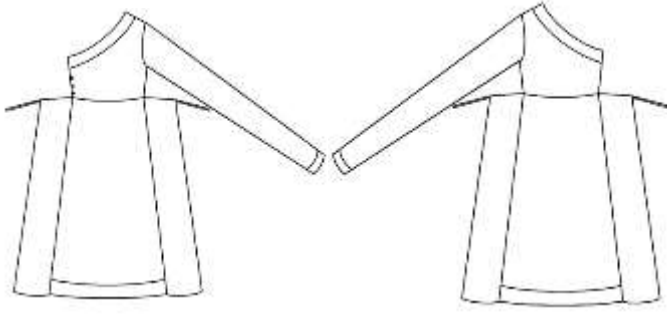
ii.Traditional Dress of the Kham Region

Both men and women wore really long sleeved robe called *chuchen*, with sleeves hanging below the knee to almost floor level.

Figure 09- Regional dress of Kham on display. Credit: Manjusri Museum, Darjeeling



Kham Men			
Garment		Fabric for Government Officials & Rich Class	Fabric for Middle & Lower Class
 Front Wog-jueg  Back		Silk	Cotton
 Front Chuchen  Back		Sheepskin/ lambskin in winter. Brocade/ silk in summer. Sometimes fur was added on borders.	<i>Nambu</i>

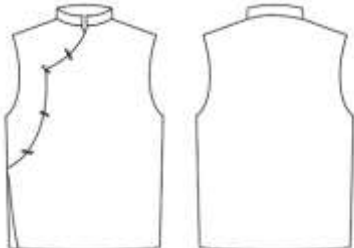
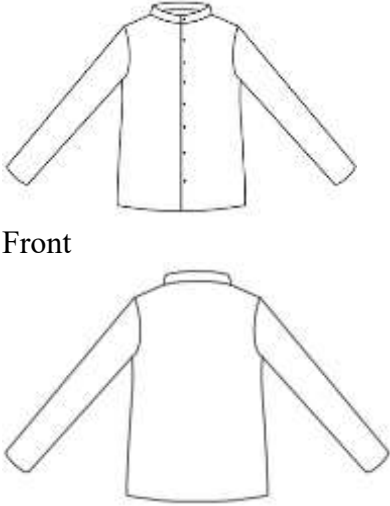
 Front Goe-thung Back	Silk/ Dyed wool	Undyed wool
 Sash	Silk	Cotton
Kham Women		
 Front Wog-jueg Back	Silk	Cotton
 Front Chuchen Back	Sheepskin/ lambskin in winter. Brocade with sometimes fur trimmings in summer.	Undyed wool

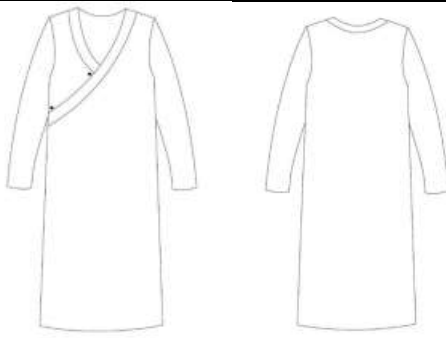
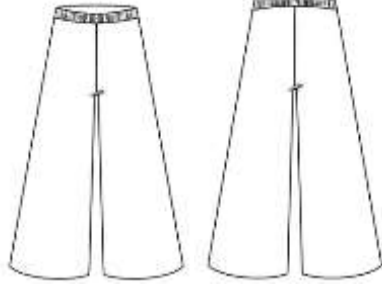
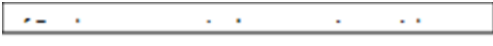
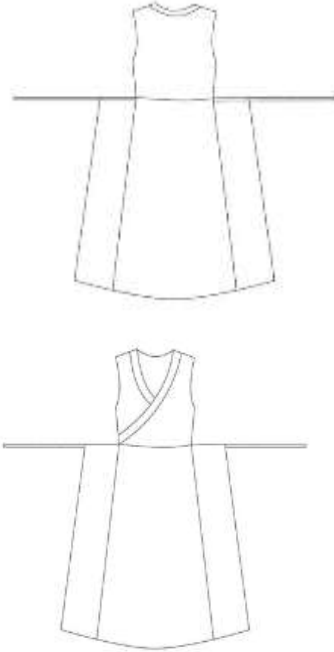
iii.Traditional Dress of the U-Tsang Region

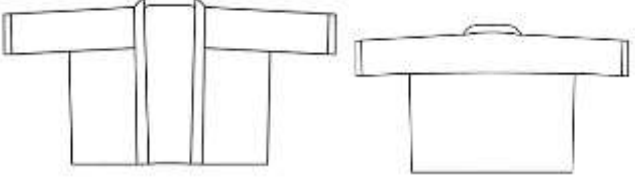
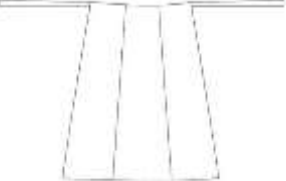
Married women wore a striped apron over their *chuba* in the front, called *pangden*. It consisted of 3 vertical panels denoting self, husband and kids. The stripes were mismatched while attaching the panels to signify that everyone in a family is different, yet a family is united. It was tied on the waist with cotton/ silk ribbons called *pangthak*. For ceremonial occasions, a *pangden* with brocade edges was worn. The brocade triangular pieces at the corner are called *dogdhen* and the brocade strip at the top edge is called *pangthue*.

Figure 10- Regional dress of U-Tsang on display. Credit: Manjusri Museum, Darjeeling.



U-Tsang Men		
Garment	Fabric for Government Officials & Rich	Fabric for Middle & Lower Class
 Front Back Khenja	Wool	Undyed wool
 Front Back	Silk	Cotton

Wog-jueg  Front Chuba Back	Sheepskin/ lambskin in winter. Brocade in summer.	<i>Nambu</i>
 Front Dhorma Back	Silk	Silk/ Cotton
 Kayreg	Silk	Cotton
U-Tsang Women		
 Front Back Chuba	Sheepskin/ lambskin/ <i>Sheyma</i> in winter. Brocade in summer.	<i>Nambu</i>

 Front Wog-jueg Back	Silk	Cotton
 Front Pangden	<i>Sheyma</i>	<i>Sheyma</i>
 Kayreg	Silk	Cotton

6.2 Transition of Tradition Tibetan Dress in Exile

6.2.1 Fabrics

A major material shift observed in exile communities is the replacement of indigenous Tibetan wool with cotton, polyester blends and synthetic brocades. In Tibet's cold plateau climate, wool was integral to survival. However, in the hotter plains of Chandragiri and New Delhi or the humid environments of Northeast India, such heavy materials became impractical. Polysilk is commonly worn in Darjeeling & Dharamsala. Across all settlements, silk is worn for formal & ceremonial occasions.

Interviews revealed:

- Elders expressed nostalgia for sheep wool and yak-hair garments.
- Youth preferred lighter, easy to maintain fabrics.
- Tailors cited cost and availability as primary factors shaping change.

6.2.2 Dress Styles

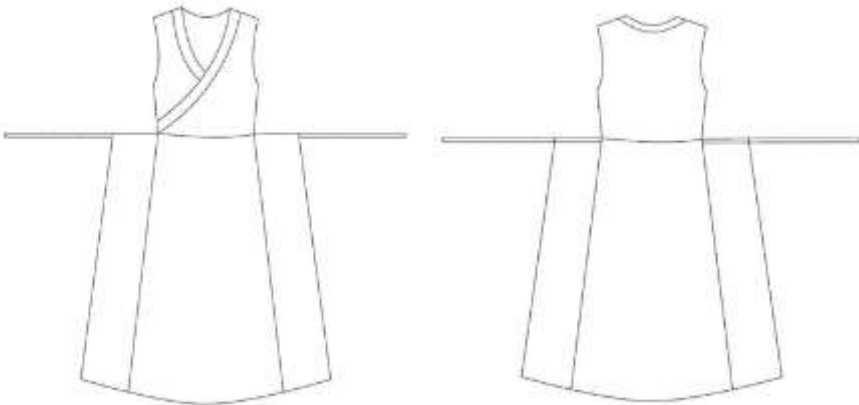
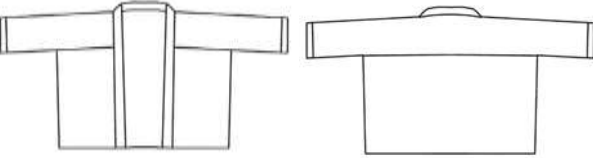
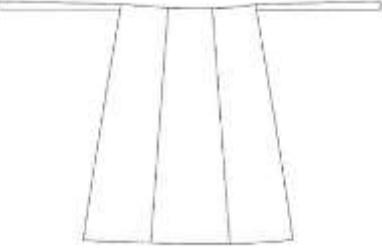
In exile, the styles have merged to create a common Tibetan dress style, devoid of regional variations. The men usually wear British style trousers with a hip length shirt for casual occasions or an ankle length robe, tied with a sash at the waist, for formal & ceremonial occasions. The women adopted the style of U-Tsang region to wear a *chuba*, *wog-jueg* & *pangden*. A narrow belt of the same material is attached to the *chuba* in place of the sash. Different collar styles & necklines are designed. Sometimes the *chuba* has attached sleeves eliminating the need to wear a *wog-jueg*.

Figure 13- Ms. Lhakpa Dolma in the chuba and wog-jueg. Mc Leod Ganj. Credit: Self- clicked



Figure 14- Ms. Tsering Yangzom in the chuba, wog-jueg and pangden. Mc Leod Ganj. Credit: Self- clicked.



Garment		Fabric
Women's Garments		
 Front Chuba Back		Brocade/ silk/polysilk/ cotton/ cotton blend
 Front Wog-jueg Back		Silk/ polysilk/ cotton/ cotton blend
 Front Pangden		Polyester/ dobby weave striped fabric
Men's Garments		
 Front Trousers Back		Cotton/ blend cotton

 Front Shirt Back	Cotton/ blend cotton
 Front Chuba Back	Brocade/ cotton blend silk/
 Sash	Silk/ polysilk

Some design variations in neckline and the flare at the hem are observed in the styles of the *chuba* with the youth across all settlements.

6.3 Continuity of Dress Vocabulary

A structured quantitative survey was administered across four Tibetan settlements—New Delhi (41 respondents), Darjeeling (92 respondents), Chandragiri (46 respondents) and McLeod Ganj (90 respondents)—using convenience and snowball sampling to understand perspectives on traditional dress. Findings reveal that dress styles and silhouettes remain largely unchanged across locations. Even when lighter fabrics are used, the essential form of the *chuba* is preserved. This continuity reflects symbolic identity, cultural cohesion and ritual significance, as traditional attire is essential during festivals, weddings and religious events. Schools further reinforce these practices, with cultural programmes promoting traditional dress and all Tibetan schools requiring students to wear the *chuba* on Wednesdays for *Lhakar*. The data suggests that Tibetan dress in exile is shaped by both preservation and adaptation: elders maintain continuity through regular use, while younger generations selectively adopt traditional garments during cultural and ritual occasions. Clothing thus becomes a medium of resistance, adaptation and cultural expression, and playing a key role in transmitting memory and heritage. Despite universal use of traditional dress across all settlements, respondents report significant market limitations, including restricted style options, climate-inappropriate fabrics, high maintenance and limited availability. Nevertheless, comfort levels remain high and there is unanimous willingness to adopt contemporary

versions. Strong demand for changes in fabric, style, sleeve or chuba length and decorative elements indicates a desire for modernised yet culturally rooted evolution. Overall, the survey highlights enduring attachment to identity through dress.

6.4 Tibetan Dress as Cultural Continuity among Settlements

Across all four settlements, dress practices remain remarkably consistent, despite geographical distance and varied climate as well as social circumstances, with shared clothing styles cultivating a unified national identity and reinforcing the sense of a collective Tibetan community in exile. Traditional attire is integrated into both everyday life and ceremonial contexts, ensuring that dress functions as a living heritage rather than a static artefact. Younger generations often navigate dual identities—embracing global modernity in daily wear while returning to traditional clothing for cultural events—whereas elders view dress as a link to homeland memory, a spiritual symbol and a responsibility for cultural continuity. This intergenerational exchange enables creative adaptation without cultural erasure. At the same time, dress carries a strong political dimension: during protests, prayer gatherings and commemorative events, traditional attire becomes a visible form of resistance, expressing unity and cultural pride. In this way, clothing serves simultaneously as culture, memory and political statement.

7. Conclusion

Traditional Tibetan dress in exile reflects a careful negotiation between cultural continuity and adaptation. While new climatic and economic realities in India have encouraged the use of lighter, more accessible materials, the essential silhouettes and structural features of Tibetan clothing remain largely unchanged. This stability signifies a deliberate cultural strategy—sustaining identity through everyday visual practices that connect generations. Dress functions as a cultural anchor, a repository of memory and a marker of belonging across dispersed settlements, reinforcing a shared national identity and collective pride. At the same time, material adaptations demonstrate flexibility and resilience, allowing the community to respond to new environments without eroding cultural meaning.

The documentation of Tibetan dress in exile highlights its role as a medium for cultural preservation and social memory. Beyond practical utility, traditional attire embodies aesthetic values, symbolic meanings and intergenerational knowledge. For younger Tibetans, it supports identity negotiation in a globalized context, while for elders it serves as a vital link to homeland traditions. Events such as *Lhakar* and *Gorshey* Nights make clothing an active expression of cultural participation and subtle political assertion. Ultimately, dress becomes a living archive of Tibetan identity—simultaneously preserving heritage, enabling adaptation and affirming cultural resilience in the face of displacement.

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