

Cultural Symbolism and Handicrafts of Traditional Artisans of India: Case Studies from *Padmashali* Weavers and *Jaapi* Artisans

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Abstract: Material culture be it prehistoric artefacts or present day traditional crafts are the products of human physical and mental constructs, fulfilling socio-ecological functions, regulating social relations and giving symbolic meaning to their ideational world. Weaving and other handicrafts are such material culture through which humans have not only earned a living but have also reflected the mental and ideational environment under which art and designs are produced. The present paper therefore makes an attempt to understand the socio-cultural significance of handicrafts of India by taking into account two case studies, one on the *Padmashali* weaving community of South Indian state of Telangana and another on the *Jaapi* artisans of India's North-East state of Assam, by reflecting on the symbolic meaning and attributes that the producers portray in their traditional crafts. The paper is mainly a representation of weaving and *Jaapi* handicrafts as objects of socio-cultural identity of a community apart from being treated as objects of securing livelihoods

Key Words: Pochampally Ikkat, *Jaapi* Handicraft, Cultural Products, Symbolic Meanings, Identity.

1. INTRODUCTION:

Design in any form of craft cannot be just considered a piece of object embroidered but something which has a symbolic utility. Symbols assigned to the cultural objects of representation can be used as strong tool for social messages or voices to the people. For example, Mahatma Gandhi's use of *charkha*, the spinning wheel during the freedom struggle became the symbol of national integration. In consumer culture where designs become a highly visible marker of choices, particular social and class structure tend to possess distinctive taste preferences for certain motifs and objects over others and hence these preferred motifs and objects become the marker of aesthetic value and social identity (Bourdieu, 1984¹; Woodward, 2001²). These objects are assigned cultural meanings in the contexts of narratives of self, identity and biography in which they are embedded whereby social actors go about actively constructing linkages between their ideational and physical environment (Gibson, 1986³; Harré, 2002⁴). Similarly, textile and handicraft objects can be interpreted symbolically as having their realistic and abstract communicative qualities. In this regard, *Padmashali* weavers of Telangana and *Jaapi* Artisans of Assam can be studied in order to trace the mental constructs and social implications of the art and designs they assign in their objects of representations and consumptions. Handicraft communities such as traditional weavers and agricultural artisans possess the culturally learned language of creative symbolism within the medium of their produced items and their creative agency as designer, weaver, finisher and owner (Femenias et al., 1987⁵; Heckman, 2003⁶). These utilitarian objects of everyday use has great ritualistic cultural importance and become a strong tool for visual storytelling about the socio-ecological setting of those creators as art holds creative space and time cross culturally through both realistic and symbolic expressions (Jung, 1968⁷). Traditional handicrafts as material representation of values and worldviews preserve the cultural identity of a community or a region in particular and national identity in general and acts as the educative tool for the present generation about the socio-ecological life of the past generation of the producer culture (Peterson, 1984⁸; Seidman, 1990⁹).

Cultural Symbolism which the symbolic and interpretive anthropologists developed over time focuses on how people give meanings to their reality and how this reality is expressed by their cultural symbols being reflected in their art and language (Geertz, 1973¹⁰). According to Geertz, to understand a culture is to rely on *Thick Description* which specifies many details, conceptual structures and meanings hidden in the art and language of the people and an ethnographer's task is to extract those hidden structures that make up a culture. Steward's *Cultural Ecology* (1955)¹¹ states that culture tends to survive and continue in two orders, *Cultural Core* and *Secondary Features*. While *Cultural Core* of a society forms the basic survival strategies associated with subsistence pattern and economic arrangement, *Secondary Features* include social, political and religious organizations which are the results of the extractive subsistence technology and social behaviours, built on and shaped by the core.

1.1. OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY:

Based on the approaches of Geertz's *Thick Description* and Steward's *Cultural Ecology*, the present paper is of a descriptive research work which attempts to deal with the socio-cultural implications of handicraft art and designs of traditional *Padmashali* weavers and *Jaapi* artisans; how the communities use these representations to confirm their social status and cultural identity.

2. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY:

In the era of urbanization and industrialization, loss of traditions and cultural assets are taking place which ultimately pose threats to the community's self, identity and worldviews and in order to preserve the cultural identity and existence, people strive to preserve the cultural objects upon which they symbolically continue their traditions and identity. In this perspective, in-depth understanding of the material representation of the handicraft communities like traditional *Padmashali* weavers and *Jaapi* artisans will help us to understand the importance of material objects of consumptions as a strong tool to reflect socio-ecological identity apart from being treated as objects of securing livelihoods.

3. MATERIAL AND METHODS:

To fulfill the objective of the study, primary data were collected through participant observation and semi-structured interview methods from the respondent artisans who belong to two distinct cultural areas of India. For this purpose, two case studies were taken. Case study on the *Padmashali* weavers was conducted at Bhoodan Pochampally, a prominent handloom weaving centre in the Yadadri Bhuvanagiri district of Telangana. The centre is well known for *Padmashali*'s expertise in *Ikkat* textiles and received Geographical Indication (GI) status in 2005. While case study on the *Jaapi* artisans was conducted in the Patharughat revenue circle of Darrang District of Assam. The place is well famous as "Assam's Jallianwala Bagh" for the historic agrarian agitation of 1894 in Assam. Unlike *Padmashali*'s *Ikkat* textiles, *Jaapi* has not yet received GI status. The selected respondents were the skilled aged members of the artisan households who have been involving in the handicraft making for years. The ethnographic visits were made during May to August in the year 2019.

4. RESULT AND DISCUSSION:

4.1 CASE STUDY ON PADMASHALI WEAVERS OF TELANGANA:

Padmashalis belong to the Telugu speaking Hindu weaving castes of South India, mainly residing in the state of Telangana, recognized as Other Backward Classes (OBC) under the Government of India. For the *Padmashali* community, weaving is not mere an economic activity but is inextricably mixed with their traditions, skills, aesthetic values and worldviews that make up their cultural identity. Like other traditional weavers, *Padmashalis* have also modified their occupation as a means to accommodate new technology in the looms and emerging demands of modern market forces but still the community has withstood to continue its tradition of producing well defined unique textile motifs and designs of its own over years known as *Pochampally Ikkats* (Srikanth, 2002¹²).

Thick description of the motifs and designs:

When investigation is made regarding the production of certain defining motifs and patterns that form the hallmarks of *Padmashali*'s *Ikkat* textiles, it is found that these representations are of significance as having some socio-ecological implications and role in their ideational world. Why certain objects or patterns are given due importance in the traditional designing is because these objects have a specific history of origin and ritual importance. Respondents are of the opinion that the motifs or patterns embroidered are not just a mere designs randomly selected but have embedded meanings assigned revealing the mythological story of their community and ecological setting in which they manifest their living. This constitutes the logic of selection of certain floral and faunal objects and geometric patterns which make their *Ikkat sarees* a unique of its own. They demonstrated their abstractions by the pictorial representation of the objects of their designs and motifs and assigning them a meaningful expression upon which they constructs their worldview.

Objects of designs depicting the origin and history:

- Etymologically, the name of the community *Padmashali* is derived from two words *Padma* and *Shali*, meaning lotus and weaver respectively. The term *Shali* traces its root to the Proto-South-Dravidian word *Saal*. In Telugu, *Saaleedu* means spider, symbolising the weaving activity with the spider's web. Since spider's web forms a series of geometric shapes so does it reflects on the *Ikkat* designs embroidered by the community.
- It also traces the root from the mythological story that they originated from the fibre of the lotus flower (*Padma* in Sanskrit also referring to the higher order of human intelligence) which comes out of the navel of the Lord *Vishnu* from where Lord *Brahma* originates. So patterns of floral motifs especially Lotus and dots resembling the navel got reflected in the designs.

Objects of designs depicting the ecological setup and ritual importance:

- The ecological setting around which they surround constructs their mental setups and social environment. Portray of faunal motifs such as peacock and elephant find importance as objects of designs due to their physical presence in the environment around which *Padmashalis* live in with close proximity for years. In addition to it, they also play important role as sacred objects among the Hindus with ritual importance. Peacock is often associated with Lord *Krishna*, incarnation of Lord *Vishnu* symbolizing variant of beautiful shades of colours indicating beauty and joy while elephant is associated with Lord *Ganesha*, symbolizing luck, protection and fortune. Mere presence of such faunas in close proximity with the physical environment of the community cannot be the objects of their motifs but find place if supplemented with ritual significance that these objects play. For instance, cats are seldom considered as objects of their motifs though live in close proximity with the *Padmashalis* as they do not have ritualistic importance as sacred objects.



Figure 1: Pochampally Ikkat Motifs and Designs

1) Motifs of geometric shapes resembling the spider's web. 2) Floral motifs of Lotus and dots resembling the Lord *Vishnu*'s navel. 3) Faunal motifs of Elephant resembling signs of luck and fortune.

4.2 CASE STUDY ON JAAPI ARTISANS OF ASSAM:

Jaapi, a conically shaped headgear made of Bamboo (*Bah* in Assamese) and Himalayan fan palm leaves (*Tokou Paat* in Assamese) is an indigenous craft and invention made by the agricultural population especially the mongoloid tribes inhabiting in the rain-fed tropical Assam which has in due course of time become an integral symbol of representation for the Assamese society as a whole; having ceremonial values and symbolizes good luck and fortune (Nath, 2019¹³). *Jaapi* as craft is not specific to a particular community's heritage product but a collective identity of the indigenous agricultural population of Assam.

Haluwa-Gorokhiya Jaapi as Cultural Core:

Taking into account the views and insights from the respondent *Jaapi* artisans, the motive behind the origin of art of *Jaapi* making is investigated and analyzed in this section. Assam and its surrounding region belong to the hot humid sub-tropical climatic zone which experience severe flooding and rainfall during its monsoonal summer season (June to September). This period is also important for the agricultural communities in Assam to start their summer paddy (*Sali*) cultivation. Hence the farmers (*Haluwa*) and cowherds (*Gorokhiya*) involve in their agricultural field and cow rearing by making ways to adapt to the severe rainfall and hot humid climate. As the environment demands, the farmers tend to craft a typical headgear in the form of *Jaapi* from locally available raw materials which fulfill their agricultural subsistence pattern. The very purpose of *Jaapi* as a form of craft did not evolve as a mere object of cultural identity for Assamese society but it came into existence as a means to adapt with the ecological conditions of their environment. There is an urgent requirement for the farmers and cowherds to prevent themselves from rain and scorching heat at the time of farming and cow rearing and in order to make the environment convenient, they developed a headgear in the form of conical shaped hat that can be fixed static over head so that the worker's hands are made free to use and hold other items. This typically structured headgear forms the *cultural core* of Assamese society with the main purpose of fulfilling the agricultural economy.

The selection of bamboo and palm leaves as main source of raw material for crafting *Jaapi* lies in the fact that these are locally available plant species of Assam which owns some advantages over other raw materials. Bamboo culture thrives in Assam because of the fact that it can be put into multiple uses and is the fastest growing canopy and

eco-friendly in nature. Communities in Assam do not opt for bamboo cultivation since bamboo grows as natural groves within the dwelling places and thus people utilize it extensively for crafting *Jaapi*. In fact bamboo can be torn into thin polished strips which can be easily woven into a specific frame and this is one of the reasons why bamboo is prioritized over other items for the production of miniature to large handicraft in Assam. Palm leaves are widely used for layering the *Jaapi* as they are best suited for roofing purposes in order to stop penetration of rain and heat through it. In order to prevent so, a typical layer of palm leaves is framed into the stripped bamboos so that it acts as a roof over the head like that of thatched huts. Another advantage adds to the logic of selection of palm leaves is that it can make the roof cooler by hitting the heat with wind blows. One of the reasons supporting this fact comes from the manually controlled hand-made fans (*tokou paator bisoni*) where Palm leaves are used widely. This creates a cooling effect on the headgear. All these factors ultimately got transformed into an artistic craft in the form of *Jaapi* which is conveniently utilized by the needy farmers and cowherds.



Figure 2: *Jaapi* and its significance

- 1) *Tokou paat* as raw material for *Jaapi* crafting.
- 2) Original form of *Jaapi* (*Haluwa-Gorokhiya*) rarely used at present.
- 3) A farmer wearing *Jaapi* and working in the vegetable field.
- 4) Modern form of *Jaapi* (*Phulam*) as cultural identity of Assam.

Xojuwa Phulam Jaapi as Secondary Features:

The transition from the original form of agricultural *Jaapi* (*Haluwa-Gorokhiya*) to present-day decorative floral *Jaapi* (*Xujuwa Phulam*) is the response to the change brought by the era of modernization and urbanization. The importance of Agricultural *Jaapi* has decreased due to the impact of modern agricultural equipments which has shortened the level of intensive labour of the farmers. At present, they need not to spend longer time in the rain and sun as a result of which the original motive behind *Jaapi* production undergoes changes and took the new form of cultural representation i.e. *Phulam Jaapi*.

The present form of *Phulam Jaapi* with addition of floral motifs and colours has now gained a symbol of cultural identity for the larger Assamese society which symbolizes the sense of integrity and community existence over time and space. With the entry of *Haluwa-Gorokhiya Jaapi* into other aspects of social life among the communities in Assam, people tend to give *Jaapi* a ritualistic role in many ceremonial occasions and festivals such as Marriage and Bihu where it is gifted as a token of love and respect. Thus, cultural symbolism is attached to *Jaapi* as it showcases the sense of hardships and very existence of survival strategies of farmers and cowherds, the backbone of agricultural economy of Assam. It has been revealed that *Jaapi* took the form of craft as a result of an artistic framework of holding things together (i.e. *atar oporot aantu jaapi de* meaning casting bamboo and palm leaves tied into a layered structure) which basically symbolizes the sense of integrity among diverse ethnic groups of Assam. Moreover, the floral motifs embroidered in red on the *Phulam Jaapi* also symbolically represent the local environment. The spring season of Assam is characterized by the blossoming of red flowering trees such as *Delonix regia* (*Krishnasura* in Assamese), *Bombax ceiba* (*Simalu* in Assamese) and *Erythrina variegata* (*Modar* in Assamese) adding serene beauty and joy among the people and this is the time people welcome their new year in the form of *Rongali Bihu* (festivity of colours).

5. FINDINGS:

Finding of the present study as follows-

- Material objects in the form of traditional craft are the important tools for representing socio-cultural and ecological identity of a community or a region.
- These objects of representation connect the human physical and mental constructs over time and space.
- A traditional craft is modified into a new form as response to the ongoing societal and technological changes.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS:

The *Cultural Symbolism* and *Cultural Ecology* approaches reflected in the present study have policy implications for community development as well as for sustainable environmental conservation practices.

- Conservation of traditional craft will promote to safeguard the cultural heritage of a community or a region which is a growing concern for social security and identity crisis. The government as well as the educational institutions should make necessary provisions to arrange *heritage visits* for the student community so that they are made aware of the indigenous culture of their society and this could be a way to promote innovative ideas among the students by learning the creative art and craft at grass-root level. In this way new inventions may take place. In addition to it, the government should arrange vocational courses on handicrafts which will strive to generate employment opportunities for rural youths.
- Sustainability of environment can also be encouraged taking into account the local ecological knowledge of the indigenous community. For instance, promoting for palm tree cultivation in the urban planning will not only help in the sustainable development of the *Jaapi* artisans but will also help in protecting the local and regional environment. This initiative will have bipolar role, first as a means for secure procurement of palm leaves for *Jaapi* making and second as a way to deal with global warming in the cities by combating heat through the cooling effect of palm leaves. Himalayan fan palm trees can be selected under afforestation scheme that might lower the heating effect during summer season. Another initiative that must be encouraged is inclusion of critically endangered species as Textile motifs along with traditional motifs and designs so that it can be used as a strong tool for environmental awareness among both literate and illiterate population. Pictorial representation and textile designs have a greater potential in making impression on the minds of the illiterates and hence such practice must be prioritized at the present era of pollution.

7. CONCLUSION:

Material objects of consumption such as *Pochampally Ikkats* and *Jaapi* handicraft have a crucial role to play in restoring the socio-cultural identity of a community or a region. Through these non-vocal representations, people have been preserving their age old tradition, self and identity that might otherwise be difficult to deal through active vocal protests and movements. Thus, these representations have great symbolic value apart from being treated as consumer products. A society strives to survive and adjust with the evolutionary stages by making changes over their utilitarian material objects like *Jaapi* crafting that are necessary to modify as a means to adapt to the ongoing societal changes and technology.

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