

Crafting Heritage: A study on Material and Technology in Assam's Handicrafts

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Abstract: *With more than two millennia of handicraft history, Assam has a strong bond with its natural resources and cultural customs. The crafts of the area are essential to everyday living and cultural customs; those that use cane, bamboo, brass, and bell metal are especially noteworthy. Old brass and bell-metal objects are the specialty of centers like Hajo and Sarthebari, while the Vaishnav monks continue to practice the age-old skills of manufacturing toys and masks. Another important part of Assam's artisanal heritage is its silk industry, which is particularly well-known for Muga silk. Silk weaving is a common rural occupation in the region. The strong textile heritage is enhanced by the numerous ethno-cultural groups who produce unique cotton clothing with intricate embroidery. Assamese handicrafts represent the artistic brilliance of the state in addition to its practical uses.*

Key Words: *Assamese Handicrafts, Muga Silk, Cane and Bamboo Crafts, Brass and Bell Metal Artefacts*

1. INTRODUCTION:

Over two millennia of varied handicraft traditions have been preserved in Assam. Crafts made from cane and bamboo are essential to day-to-day living, offering a variety of products such as furniture, musical instruments, building materials, and accessories for weaving and fishing. Every Assamese home also has traditional artefacts made of brass and bell metal, with the Xorai and Bota being two of the most well-known symbolic pieces used to present gifts to important people. Sarthebari and Hajo are important hubs for these age-old crafts. Assam is particularly well-known for its distinctive crafts, which are performed throughout the region. These crafts include jewellery, terracotta, woodworking, ironworking, and toy and mask creation, which are frequently connected to Vaishnav monasteries.

1.1. OBJECTIVES:

- To Examine the Evolution of Assamese Handicrafts along with the development of Assamese handicrafts over time.
- To Evaluate the Cultural and Economic Impact of Handicrafts in Assam. This goal assesses the role of handicrafts in Assam's culture and economy..

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE:

The following books were reviewed for the proposed study:

The social, economic, and political history of Assam is masterfully described in Edward Gait's book *A History of Assam (1863)*, which spans the region's prehistoric past to British administration. In addition to describing the process of creating cotton fabric, Gait alludes to the custom of the medieval era in which, prior to a marriage proposal becoming official, the bride is asked about her level of bowa-kota, or if she is proficient in spinning and weaving.

W. W. Hunter (1879) *A Statistical Account of Assam (Volumes- I & II)* provides a detailed statistical and historical account of the Assam region during the colonial period of British India.

A thorough history and production of silk in the north-eastern Indian state of Assam is given in E. Stuck's *Silk in Assam (1884)*. The book provides insight into the rich cultural legacy of Assam and the importance of silk to the economy and society of the area.

S. K. Bhuyan's (1949) *Anglo-Assamese Relations* is an important book. This book deals mainly with Assam's contact with Europeans in general prior to 1771 and during the period of 1771-1826.

3. METHODOLOGY:

The proposed study follows the descriptive analytical method of historical enquiry

4. FINDINGS:

Assam is well known for its wide range of silks, especially the prized Muga silk. Other noteworthy types are Eri, which is used to make warm winter garments, and Pat, which is a creamy-bright-silver silk. Apart from Sualkuchi, which is the centre of the old-world silk trade, Brahmaputra Valley rural households also make silk and silk clothing with elaborate embroidery. Assamese ethno-cultural groups also produce unusual cotton clothing with eye-catching color combinations and original embroidery motifs.

Bamboo, Timber and Cane industry

Under the Ahom monarchs, Assamese handicrafts developed and attained a high degree of refinement after the thirteenth century. During this medieval era, cane and bamboo crafts in particular gained popularity. Ahoms, Kacharis, Kochs, Mikirs, Miris, and other ethnic groups were among those with distinctive cane and bamboo crafting traditions. In medieval Assam, these goods were essential to day-to-day existence. The adaptability, quality, durability, girth, and length of various cane and bamboo species were taken into consideration by artisans when choosing them for varied uses.¹

During the Ahom dynasty, Assam remained mostly isolated from the rest of India. The economy was closed, meaning that all goods were produced and consumed locally, with the majority of the produced goods going to the royal and courtly classes.² Due to the lack of regular buyers' markets where trade in products and articles took place, commerce was mostly restricted. Ahom's desire for personal services as payment for state revenue had a major role in the Assamese cottage industry's lack of external commercialization and consequent representation of a closed economy.³ Nonetheless, the Ahom administration's royal and aristocratic patronage allowed for the existence of cottage industries and crafts throughout the kingdom, with the royal public and households being the main consumers.

Within the traditional crafts sector, the province's basket industry flourished during the early Ahom government, mostly catering to the needs of the aristocracy and households. The peasants equipped kitchens, went fishing, farmed, and took care of other household and kingdom necessities by crafting a wide variety of items from bamboo, cane, and reed. During the Ahom period, ministers wore traditional Japi headdresses, which became a status symbol among bamboo artisans.⁶

Indeed, bamboo is a significant material in many regions of the world, and many people consider it an indispensable component of their everyday lives due to its durability and versatility. Bamboo is utilized for many different things besides agriculture, such as building houses, furniture, paper, and even medical supplies.

The fast growth and widespread availability of bamboo make it an environmentally beneficial material in many regions of the world. Bamboo may be collected without harming the environment or depleting natural resources, in contrast to many other types of wood. Furthermore, bamboo is a renewable resource, meaning that it may be taken from the ground again and time again without running out. All things considered, bamboo's adaptability, toughness, and environmental friendliness make it a valuable material in people's daily lives all over the world. Its use in building, agriculture, and other fields demonstrates how creatively and resourcefully people can utilize available natural resources.

Many locations in Assam have long been recognized for their bell metal work. Bell metal utensils were once made by either the "hammering technique" or the "lost wax process." Locally, bell metal is referred to as kanh, and the industry that produces it is called kanhudyog. Kanhars are the craftspeople who make bell metal.⁷ The bell metal is used to make a lot of products using the conventional process.

They included several new aspects into the patterns and shapes of the utensils during the Ahom period. These newly created Ahoms utensils shared characteristics with those of its bordering countries, including far-off Indonesia, Tibet, Burma, and Siam.⁸ Because bell metal fabrication is a very labor-intensive profession that exclusively employs men, the entire working structure is co-operative. A garshal is a production unit that comprises four to six kanhars. The ojha-kanhar, a master craftsman, was once one of these kanhars, and the palis, other kanhars, were his assistants. For this reason, the cooperative working system is called the ojhapali.

In the Brahmaputra Valley, there were no distinct occupational castes or sub-castes involved in the production of bell metal goods. They were mostly members of the kalita, koch, and kewat (Keot) castes, with the word "kashar" appended to their correct caste names to indicate the occupation they pursued, according to E.A. Gait. Instead of calling them kashars, the Assamese termed them kanhars. In actuality, familial ties allowed the bell metal smithy to pass down from one generation to the next.⁹ There is an extremely old Bihu song that attests to the kanhars' authority over the manufacture and promotion of bell metal goods.

Among the significant craft forms in Assam is the art of crafting items out of brass and bell metals. Numerous items for both practical and decorative uses are made from these metals. An essential part of Assamese society's social and cultural life is bell-metal utensils. Bell-metal goods are used in religious and ceremonial rites in addition to being

used in daily life. Bell-metal utensils are very essential in religious organizations such as monasteries and temples (Namghars). Without bell-metal objects, Assamese weddings are deemed incomplete. At every Assamese wedding, the bride must be accompanied by exquisite bell metal artefacts.

Dapani is the name for a mirror on bell metal that is specifically for weddings.

According to documents kept in the State Museum of Assam in Guwahati, the Ahom rulers used the kanhars to make Bartop, a large gun, and Barhilo, cannonballs. The Singphos of Jagaloo in the Tinsukia district still manufacture and export hengdung, a combat weapon, to Myanmar.¹⁰

In the era of Swargadeo (king) Rudra Singha (1696–1714 A.D.), Assamese bell metalsmiths' creations did attract attention from both domestic and foreign audiences. The kanhars were respected by the Ahom kings, who also encouraged their artistic endeavors. For instance, the well-known Sarthebari craftsman Jieudhan created a pair of Bhopal and positioned them inside a wooden tiger such that it roared like a genuine tiger while it was being handled. Eating food prepared in bell-metal Maihang bati and Maihang kahi gave the Ahom emperors and nobility delight.

The right to utilize those things belonged to the royal family as well as the affluent members of the royal court and castles. A few exquisite examples of Sarthebari artisans' superior skill can be found in the brass and bell metal door at Batadrava Satra (in Nagaon district), Kamalabari Satra (Majuli), and Bulanighar at Kamakhya temple.

In Assamese society, the bell metal business is also well-known for its kahi (dish). There are various types of kahi based on design, decoration, and shape. These include Chada Kahi, Chach Kahi, Julkhanda Kahi, Kardoisiriya Kahi, Ban Kahi or Bela Ban (a dish with a foot that has three subtypes: Chach Ban Kahi, Julkhanda Ban Kahi, and Jail Ban Kahi), Jaat Kahi (a dish made with three legs of brass rings over which cups are placed to serve rice and curry), Maihang Kahi (a foot that was used by the Ahoms of ranks), Pandhowa Kahi (a dish with a high and board rim that has three subtypes), Dofla Kahi (used by the Nichi people of Arunachal Pradesh), etc. In addition to the Kahi, the Bati (bowl) is a significant utilitarian bell metal object.¹¹

The majority of brass metal industry products are similar to those of the bell metal industry. Tou, a cooking tool, Kharahi, a container with tiny, dense holes on its body to pass water, Karia, a container used to draw milk, Badna, a water pot used by Muslims, Chamoch, a spoon, and Jug, a container, are a few examples of products that are used as household utensils. Some of the items used in Assamese society's socio-religious life are Dunari, a sarai-like container without a high stand used in marriage ceremonies, Japa, a box-shaped container used to store dresses of a girl when she reaches her first period, and Koli, a flower bud or bud-like knob fixed at the top of temple.

The land of feasts and celebrations is Assam. Bihu is one of the most significant festivals in Assam. The three varieties of bihu that the Assamese celebrate are Bohag bihu, also known as Rangali bihu, Kaati bihu, also known as Kangali bihu, and Maagh bihu, also known as Bhogali bihu. Of these three varieties of Bihu, the Assamese celebrate Bohag Bihu, also known as Rangali Bihu, with much merriment. Bihu dance, a traditional dance of Assam, Bihu Song, and Huchari are the ways the people of Assam exhibit their delight and happiness over these seven days. Bell metal utensils are an essential component of each of these activities. Many Bihu songs make reference to different bell-shaped metal cutlery.

Assam is renowned for its distinctively eminent golden jewelry. Under the Ahom King's sponsorship, the craft flourished but then deteriorated in later centuries. The royal storage had numerous priceless jewels that the Ahom King once wore. The nine gems placed on a gold plate, pearls, diamonds, and other necklaces known as pachari, satsari, chandrarhar, gazera, etc. were among the decorations used by the monarchs.¹² The kings also used various headdresses such kiriti and mukut, bracelets like gamkharu, and earrings like karnabhusan, kamabala, makarkundala, hangsakundala, and lokapara.

Sands from rivers such as the Brahmaputra, Dihing, Dikrang, Sowansiri, Bharali, Dhansiri, Bargang, Burhi Ganga, Juglo, and so on were washed in order to extract gold. Three such rivers—the Bharali, the Dicho, and the Juglo—have been mentioned by W. Robinson; the gold discovered there was purer than that of the other rivers. There are also examples of people washing sand in large quantities in search of gold in the Chutiya kingdom. Despite the lack of written records, the Ahom conquered the Chutiya kingdom and took possession of gold elephants, gold cats, gold thrones, and other items. Based on this list, we can draw the above conclusion. Similar to this, gold was also removed from sand in numerous rivers during the Kachari empire.

During the Ahom era, a variety of ornaments and domestic items were carved from silver. The Ahom king utilized silver dishes, bowls, pots to serve betel nuts, and ornate pots (bhogjoraa) to store and consume alcohol during this period in addition to ornaments. Silver jewelry were also fashioned by the less fortunate members of society to be worn on the hands, neck, nose, and other body parts. Therefore, at that time, there was an equal demand for silver and gold.

The handloom sector in Assam is mostly focused on silk. Sericogenous plants and animals thrive in Assam's pleasant environment. For commercial and economic reasons, four types of silk worms and their host plants—mulberry, Eri, Muga, and Tassar—are well-liked and significant. One significant Assamese cottage industry is sericulture. Silk

has always been produced traditionally by Eri and Muga. The pride of the Assamese women is Muga.¹³ In Assam, the oak tassar was first introduced in 1972.

In essence, sericulture is a rural population's ancillary source of income. Silkworms are raised for two purposes: first, to make silk fabric; and second, because silkworms are a highly prized delicacy in both tribal and non-tribal cultures. It primarily focuses on raising three types of silk worms: Mugaa, Paat, and Eri/Endi. These silkworms can be raised in a variety of ways.¹⁴

While Assam boasts a long history of cultivating silk and producing silk goods, most everyday things are usually made of cotton. The majority of weavers prefer to purchase cotton threads from the market, even if there are still very few traditional weavers who prepare cotton yarn. Differential gauge cotton threads come in a range of variations; popular ones include aaxi xutaa, pakoa xutaa, kesaa xutaa, sallis xutaa, saitris xutaa, and so forth. The way cotton yarns are treated makes them special. Bleaching and starching are processes used to process threads. The goal is to make the yarn stronger in both situations.

5. CONCLUSION:

Assamese artists and craftspeople have a long history of excellence, and the state is renowned for its rich artistic and craft tradition. Products made from bamboo and cane are equally significant to the state's handicraft sector as the well-known silk products. Assam is also the home of traditional mask makers, metal workers, painters, and other craftsmen. Assamese artists are known for their simple yet elegant craftsmanship, which gives their creations a distinct and endearing quality. Assamese traditional handicrafts are a reflection of the region's convergence of diverse tribes and civilizations. The patterns and designs of Assamese arts and crafts have, however, changed recently due to the effects of globalization. to raise the craftsmen' quality criteria

Handicrafts have been used for ages to show artistic talent and mental ingenuity, as well as to make daily life more comfortable. They are an expression of human inventiveness. The majority of crafts in Assam are low-investment side jobs for many households since they are created by hand using manual equipment and instruments and local raw materials. Assamese traditional crafts have a lot of potential to grow, and by encouraging them, new goods can be made to fit contemporary tastes while maintaining the distinctive legacy of Assamese arts and crafts.

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