

Folk crafts of Assam: Tradition and changes

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Abstract

Assam is a state rich in its arts and crafts. The people of Assam have craftsmen and this is what makes their products so unique and charming. In Assam a confluence of a number of tribes and cultures and it is reflected in the traditional handicrafts of the place as well. The objectives of the study are to highlight the various folk crafts of Assam and to examine the role of these crafts in the economy and also the changes of art and crafts. Methodology adopted for this paper is descriptive and analytical.

Introduction

Assam is a state rich in its arts and crafts. The people of Assam have traditionally been craftsmen from time immemorial. History tells us that the artisans of Assam were known far and wide for their exquisite craftsmanship. In addition to the world famous silk products, bamboo and cane products have also occupied an important place in handicraft industry of the state. Then, there are the traditional masks, metal handicrafts, paintings and so on. There is a sense of simplicity and style in the skills of the Assamese craftsman and this is what makes their products so unique and charming.

Assam is a confluence of a number of tribes and cultures and this is reflected in the traditional handicrafts of the place as well. However, in the recent times, due to the effects of globalization, changes have been seen in the patterns and designs of the Assamese arts and crafts also. In order to improve the standards of the handicrafts industry of Assam, the government has established Assam art and craft society (1971) in Guwahati.

Objectives:

- i) To highlight the various folk crafts of Assam.
- ii) To examine the role of these crafts in the economy of Assam.
- iii) The changes of Art and crafts.

Methodology

Methodology adopted for this paper is descriptive and analytical. The present study is based on the secondary data collected from printed books, journals, library, thesis and any other references.

Analysis:

Presently, cane and bamboo craft, bell metal and brass craft, silk and cotton weaving, toy and mask making, pottery and terracotta work, wood craft, traditional jewellery making, musical instrument making are remained as major traditions. This major crafts of Assam are to be discussed in this paper.

Bamboo and cane craft:

Bamboo and cane are the two most commonly used materials in daily life of Assamese people. Products ranging from household implements to construction of dwelling houses from weaving accessories to musical instruments are made in bamboo. Bamboo and cane crafts provide a variety of products like bamboo mats, sital pati, baskets of various sizes and shapes, winnowing trays, sieves, japi or chatta, various types of fishing implements etc. that are manufactured in large numbers in the plain districts of the state. Items like chalani (sieve), kula (winnowing fan), kharahi (small basket), dukula (big basket), Dala (bamboo tray), Duli (Assamese) that are big basket, Dhal (big measure) are of immense importance to the people of Assam. Some of the fishing contraptions those are prepared out of bamboo and cane are polo, Jakai, khalai, dori, cheap, paran, jhuti, hogra, gui, Dingaru, Thupa, etc. Another remarkable item of bamboo and cane crafts are Dhari, Dhara, Jharia or Darma. A huge variation of Japis is created by the artisans that include halua japi, pitha japi, Sorodoiya japi, Bordoia japi, cap japi, Fulam japi, etc. the musical instruments are flute, bamboo beater. Do-tara, Gogona etc. apart from these, some households produce for the market like making independent products for localized markets, making storage and carrying baskets, fishing traps, agricultural implements, seed trays, and mats and fencing materials.

No mechanical devices are used in this craft, which is mainly a household industry. The craft traditionally provides part time employment to cultivators in the lean season, although, increasingly, full-time artisans engaged in commercial activity can be found now.

Metal crafts:

Metal crafts in Assam consist of generally brass craft and bell metal. Both bell metal and brass crafts of Assam are popular for the durability and beauty of the materials. The brass metal industry has developed in Hajo of Assam over the centuries while Sarthebari in Barpeta district is famous for bell metal craft. Sarthebari is home to the bell metal industry, the second largest handcraft of Assam. Bell metal is an alloy of copper and tin and utensils made from it are used for domestic and religious purpose. A range of domestic items are made from bell metal like kahi (plate), Bati (bowl), Ban Bota, Lota, Charka, Safura, Maihang, Ashana, tray, tal (cymbals). Besides this, Xorai and Bota are used in almost every Assamese household, to offer Paan (stuffed betel leaves) to guests, to welcome them. The Xorai is in fact, the traditional symbol of the state. They were originally made from bell metal but now, brass and silver are also used in making them. A great benefit of keeping food in bell metal utensils is that the food does not get spoiled for a long period of time.

Handloom crafts:

Handloom comprises of one of the crafts in Assam and is known far and wide for its rich textures and designs. So much importance is attached with this craft is that it is customary for every young Assamese girl to acquire the skill to weave, in under to quality for marriage. Of course, at present change has come to this custom all are not interested to acquire this skill. The raw materials used in the handloom craft of Assam mainly include cotton, Muga or Golden silk pwat or Mulberry silk and Eri silk.

Handloom products created in Assam is unique and has no resemblance with other. Images of birds, animals and flowers are mostly embroidered on the traditional handloom products of Assam. Most popular handloom products of Assam are as follows:

Muga silk:

The kings of silk, Muga is golden yellow in appearance and is extracted from semi-domesticated silkworm *Antheraea assama*, common to this region only. Different traditional attires, like Mekhala chaddars and saries are made from the silk. The biggest muga silk producing centre in Assam is Sualkuchi. The silk garments produced in this area have earned international acclaim and from a major export item for the entire state.

Paat silk (Mulberry silk):

A variant of the Muga silk, Paat is extracted from silkworms that are raised exclusively on the leaves of Mulberry plants (hence the name), the texture of the silk is very refined and is in great demand among the fashion conscious and the trend setters all across the globe. The shiny and bright silver color of the silk gives a new shade and meaning to the traditional attire of Assam.

Eri silk:

The warm Eri silk is made by the silk worm *philosamia ricini*, which harbors on the castor oil plant. Also known as the Endi silk or the non-violent silk, it is mainly used to make shawls and quilts. A unique feature of the products made from this silk is that they are slightly coarse in the beginning, but become soft and smooth after regular use. The silk comes in a variety of colors, like cream, gold, brown and beige. Its porous quality and thermal nature makes it ideal for use in both summers and winters.

Cotton textiles include bedspreads, furnishing material, Mekhala chaddars, shawls and saries. The lasingphee produced by weavers of cachar district is extraordinarily warm and soft with excellent craftsmanship as it is woven by using colorful staple yarn with cotton or bamboo inserted between the wefts for warmth. The weavers of Assam weave beautiful designs on the borders of their mekhalas, chaddars, rihās (traditional garments used by the women) and gamosas (towels). The patterns generally involve animals, human figures, flowers, birds and diamonds.

The designs in Assam are symbolic of the different tribes and ethnic groups of the area. Women weaver work from a graph of small designs which are generally geometric patterns embellished with floral tracery in between coloured striped strips and is woven on a loom with traditional colours. As for custom, the young women in Assamese society has to present a self woven bihuan (gamosa or towel) to her beloved as a token of love, and to elders as a symbol of respect on Bohag Bihu (New year's Eve). These towels are white with patterns at both ends with stylized forms of birds, animals, humans, flowers, foliage, and geometric motifs. The beautiful tribal mirijim work is commonly done on blankets, mattresses and floor covering in honour of guests and visiting dignitaries. The work is known for its great beauty, excellence of traditional designs and durability. The tribal designs of Assam are woven on Rajampa ssi fabric in striking colours. Kumbang whddich means chaddar in the Rabha language is a traditional Rabha dress and is used by the Rabha women like a shawl draped over the shoulder as an accessory to the sarong or kocha lufung. The patterns are generally geometrical lines embellished with floral tracery in between coloured strips and is woven on a loom with traditional colours. The traditional Rabha muffler is woven on fly-shuttle looms with traditional colours and exceptionally fine patterns. The Bodo tribes of Assam are from the plains and their women wear the traditional dakhana, a fabric wrapped around the body with only the shoulders exposed. This is very much like sari and has a border running along its edges. The Miri tribals weave patterns on blankets, mattresses and floor covering in honour of guests and visiting dignitaries. The work done by the women of this community is known for its great beauty, excellence of traditional designs and durability.

The flourishing handicrafts of Assam are renowned not only in India but also in whole world. These crafts can be considered as one of the bases of the state economy.

Findings:

- a) Folk crafts facilitate tapping of the natural or local resources like raw materials, labor, etc, for productive purposes. That is utilization of huge volume of natural resources has become possible through these crafts.
- b) Exercising these crafts, the empowerment of the people improves with economic growth.
- c) Folk crafts also help to protect and promote the art and creativity, the age old rich heritage of the state.

Conclusion:

The main raw materials for most of the crafts are abundantly available throughout the state and it requires little or zero investment in terms of money and can be pursued by anybody and everybody of a house hold as a subsidiary occupation. These crafts have considerable scope for development and various new products suited to modern tastes can be manufactured by supporting our traditional crafts.

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