

Material Culture Of Assam: A Discussion

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Abstract: In general, folk culture has been classified in four broad categories oral folk culture, social folk customs, performing arts and material culture. This paper discusses the material culture of Assam, which is one of the major constituents of folk culture. Material culture includes physical objects, resources, and spaces that people use to define their culture that has been carried forward with tradition and social customs. This paper analyses different types of material culture, various objects and resources associated with it, their utilities and relevance in the human lives in Assam.

Keywords: Folk culture, material, customs, Human, Society etc.

Introduction: Robert Redfield defines folk society as small, isolated, non-literate, and socially homogeneous. Like other branches of folk culture, the material culture has also emerged from this society. The material culture is closely aligned with the folk society. Therefore, the objects and tools used in the material culture are found in such societies. Generally materially culture relies on visual aspects rather than aural ones. Like other branches of folk culture, the material culture is also largely driven by two forces—conservational traditions and personal behaviour. The material culture encompasses the essential things used in day to day life. It includes utensils, houses, architecture, culinary, art etc. ``The study of material culture may be most broadly defined as the investigation of the relationship between people and things irrespective of time and space. The perspective adopted may be global or local, concerned with the past or the present, or the mediation between two. defined in this manner, the potential range of contemporary disciplines involved in some way or other in studying material culture is effectively as wide as the human and culture science themselves''¹ [1996:5]

Discussion: The material culture of Assam can be classified into five categories:

- (1) Folk crafts
- (2) Folk art
- (3) Folk architecture
- (4) Folk cookery
- (5) Folk Costume

Folk crafts: Folk crafts are among others under the visual art. It is one of the forms of art which reflects the rural life and attitude. The folk crafts are referred to those tools and items which are used for daily life. Therefore, besides their aesthetics, these items are helpful for the daily chores. These artefacts have a positive impact on financial side of the people. Like other forms of fine arts, folk crafts do not need a formal training to excel in it. The knowledge on folk crafts is carried forward traditionally. The folk crafts of Assam are mostly pottery, bamboo, woodcraft, bell metal, Sholapith craft and ivory craftworks. The paper gives a brief introduction of these crafts below.

Pottery: Pottery is one of the most remarkable ancient crafts of Assam. The remains recovered in various places of Assam corroborate the antiquity of this craft. “The history of earthen pots in Assam is probably as old as the spread of culture during Neolithic age in Assam.”² (2003: 16) Pottery can be defined as the process of producing vessels and other objects with clay and other ceramic materials. There are two classes of people associated with this art. They are—Kumars and Hiras.

The Kumars use a special tool while producing the earthen items. It is known as Kumar Chak. They prepare various items required for religious practices like—dijas, ghats etc. On the other hand, instead of Chak, the Hiras use a wooden or bamboo stick. With this stick, they give shapes to the items. They mainly produce various pots. Jnanpith awardee Nilamani Phukan opines about the pottery culture in Assam—“The most of the Assamese pots are practical and regional forms of some timeless, universal fundamental sizes. Some pots are still prevalent in some parts of Assam which resemble with the items found in distant Mohenjo-daro and Harappa.”³(2003:17)

Bamboo Craft: “The bamboo craft in Assam is a contribution of the Mongoloid. There is not a single aspect in the lives of Assamese people, where there is no use of the bamboo.”⁴(2011:03) This signifies the importance and prevalence of the bamboo craft in Assam. Both tribal and nontribal people made significant contributions towards prevalence and survival of the bamboo craft. There are various items made of the bamboo. Among them Pachi, Khorahi, Kula, Duli, fishing equipment, handmade fans, weaving tools are most notable.

Cane craft: Cane is one of the natural resources found in Assam. It looks like Areca Palm. But it has a large number of thorns. When the cane grows, it is dried and various products are made from it.

Terracotta: Assam has a rich culture of Terracotta. It is an earthenware substrate and a clay-based unglazed or glazed ceramic. The book titled ‘Lokkalpa Dristi’ states the characteristics of Assam’s Terracotta—

“The faces of majority of the Assamese Terracotta dolls are sharp. It may have some kind of relationship with Totem worship. These dolls do not have foreheads. The making of these dolls by piercing the clay to shape the eyes and using the thumb and index fingers is an ancient and universal method. The mouth of the some of the dolls are open, some have only the symbol. Some do not have eyes, ears and nose.”⁵(2003:14)

Asharikandi village in western Assam's Dhubri district is well known for Terracotta culture. The Terracotta idol found at Da-Parbatia in Sonitpur is one of the oldest in the state.

Woodcraft: woodcraft is the one of the most unique and oldest art form in the world. In the book 'Mirrors of the sea' by Joseph Conrad says about this art form "Such skill, the skill of technique is more than honesty, it is something wider-embracing honesty and grace and rule, in an elevated and clear sentiment, not altogether utilitarian, which may be called the honour of labour. It is made up of accumulated tradition, kept alive by individual pride, rendered exact by professional opinion and like the higher arts, it is spurred on and sustained by discriminating praise. This is why the attainment of proficiency, the pushing of your skill with attention, to the most delicate shade of excellence, is a matter of vital concern, efficiency of a practically flawless kind, may be reached naturally in the struggle for bread. But there is something beyond, a higher point, a suitable and unmistakable touch of love and pride, beyond mere skill; almost an inspiration, which gives to all work that finish which is almost art-which art."⁶(1906 :37)The woodcraft artist is called 'Barhoi' in Assamese. 'Woodcraft is Assam's one of the best arts. Simplified look, less distortion of the shape and relatively abstract character, well constructs, qualities of expression are noticed in Assamese woodcraft. Woods are easily available in Assam. Assamese people use wooden furniture and other daily items. Wood is also used for doors and windows. Earlier, books were written on the wooden plates. Besides all these, wooden statues are also made.

Ivory craft: Assam is world famous for the Ivory craft. There are several mentions of ivory items of Assam in many ancient texts. They stated about the sword with ivory handle sent to Judhisthir by King Bhagadatta, Kundal sent to Harshvardhan by Bhaskarvarman etc.

It established the fact that ivory craft prevailed in Assam since ages. Barpeta district has a reputation for ivory craft. Among various artefacts of ivory, the portrait of Queen Victoria with ivory made by late Radhanath Das and Guru Aason by Sailen Das are noteworthy.

Metal craft: The metal craft includes crafts of Bell metal, brass, gold, silver and other metals. Kanhi, Baankanhi, Fulam Kanhi, Borkanhi, Maihang are made of the bell metal. Sarthebari is famous for the bell metal culture.

The Moria community is mainly associated with the making of brass items. Hajo is well known for the brass items. Different utensils are made of brass.

Folk art: Folk art is one of the prominent forms of art which gives us artistic pleasure. Manuscript painting is one of the remarkable forms of Assam's folk art. Some of the such significant ancient manuscripts are Tulapotia Chitrabagavat at Norowa near Bordowa in Nagaon district, SachitraKirtan of Kathbapu Satra in Jorhat, Ekadash Skandh of the Bhagavata at Dakshinpat Satra in Majuli Chitra Kirtan at Madhupur Satra in West Bengal.

Folk Architecture: The folk architecture in Assam mainly encompasses the houses made with bamboo, wood or different type of tree leaves. The granary, cowshed, Dhekisal are also included under the fold of folk architecture of Assam. These are not constructed by any professional, but the common people. The skills are traditionally inherited.

Folk cookery: Rice is the staple food of the people of Assam. The agrarian state produces a large amount of rice. People belonging to all the communities and ethnic group take rice as their staple food. Other food items prepared from the rice such as flattened rice, puffed rice, laddu, aakhoi, pitha are also predominant in the list of the food.

Food with sour, pungent and bitter tastes are also popular. Khar is one of the most used food items. Besides that, various fruits and vegetables are taken by the people of the state.

They have various traditional dishes and traditional ways of cooking. The tribal communities use less oil and spices.

Folk costume: The dresses of the people in Assamese society differ according to their gender, age and social status. Traditionally, Assamese men wear dhoti. Riha and Mekhela were the main dresses of the women. Other traditional attires include JaliChola, Khorachola, Chouga, seleng etc.

Conclusion: The globalisation and urbanisation posed serious threats to the folk culture of Assam. The crafts under the material culture need serious research and preservation. The primary aim of the paper was to shed light on different folk crafts which are on the verge of extinction or facing serious threats.

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