

CHAPTER THREE

Assam and its Traditional Craft Culture: A Historical Perspective on its Trade and Commerce

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Bharotorepurbadishorsurjyauthadesh
Gutejiwonbisarile, Alekhdwashraati
Asomdeshordorenepau, Imaanrokhalmaati*

- (Bhupen Hazarika)

(Translation: *Beautiful is our Assam, with virtues infinite, the land in the eastern direction of India where sun starts its day's ascent. Search day and night an entire life shall even fail to find fertile grounds like my country Assam.*)

3.1 The Prelude

The Chapter presents a detailed narrative on Assam and its traditional craft culture and the commerce of crafts in the region. Section 3.2 deals with the geography of the state of Assam. Section 3.3 gives description on the trade and commerce providing insight into commercialization of the crafts through time. In the latter section, some of the renowned crafts and the craft producing places of the region are discussed giving an idea about the historical linkage of the crafts to the sites.

3.2 A Brief Discourse on the Geography of Assam

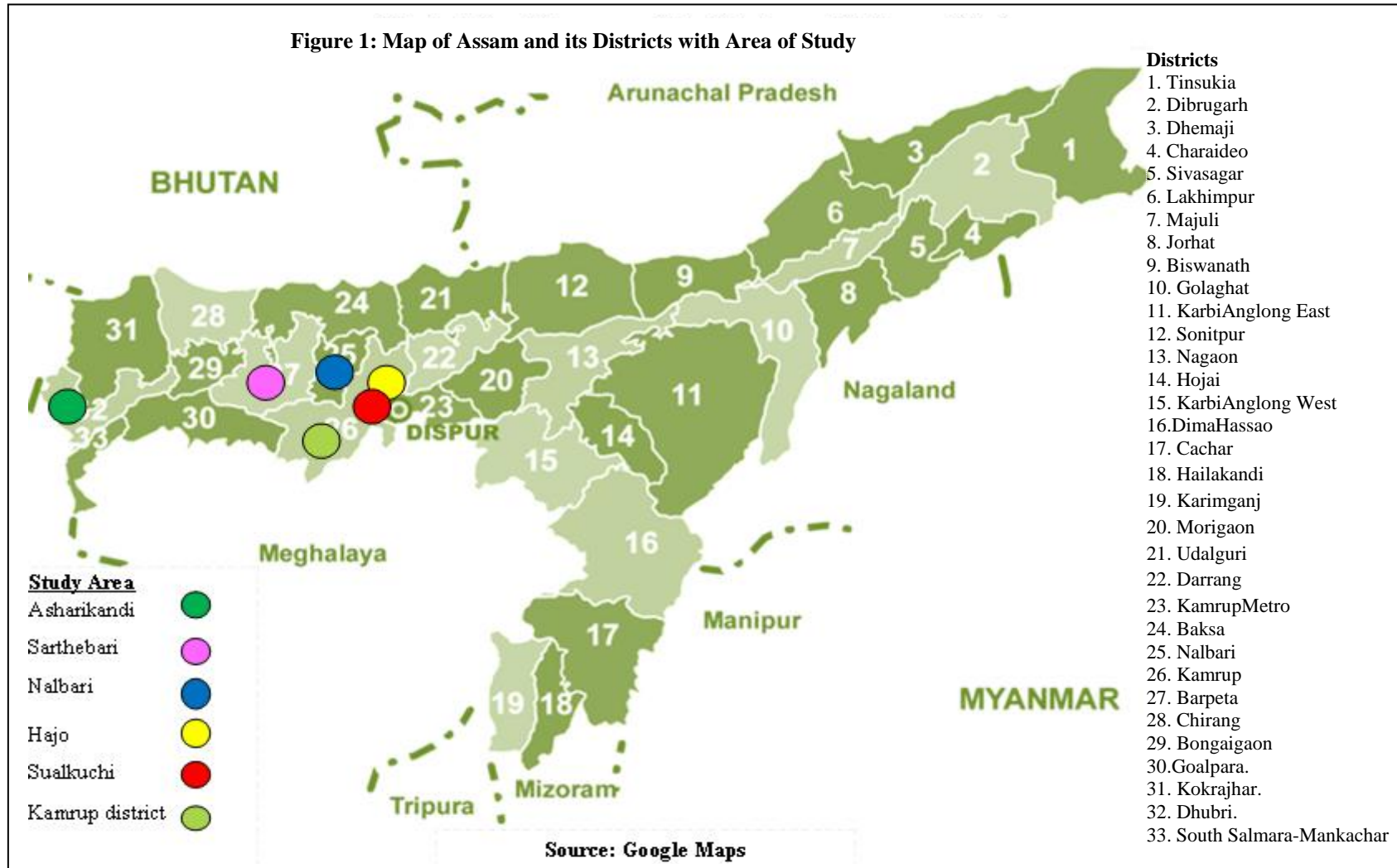
Assam, the land of the mighty river Brahmaputra, in the ancient times was known as Pragjyotishpur, which according to Kalikapurana is the place where Lord Brahma created the stars. It also means the land of the eastern lights (Sircar, 1990). Its references are found in the ancient texts of Ramayana and Mahabharata. The Mahabharata refers to Bhagadutta, also known as Sailyalaya (Baruah and Choudhury, 1999), as the king of Pragjyotisha, whose kingdom extended to the seas, considerably the Bay of Bengal. The Ramayana mentions its western extension to as far as the river Kausika (Kosi in Bihar). In later times, it came to be known as Kamrupa whose geographical spread extended much beyond the present state of Assam. According to Chatterjee, during the reign of King Bhaskarvarman of the 7th century, the extent of the territory was till the greater part of Bengal (1951). According to Porjitor, a scholar of the *Puranas*, Pragjyotishpur which included present day Assam, extended up to the

riverKartova including major portions of North and East Bengal (Bhusan, 2005). The Buddhist and Greek records of 14th century B.C. identifies its northern boundary to the Bhutan hills and part of Nepal. The *Ahoms* entered into the Brahmaputra valley about 1226 A.D and expanded their empire till 1700 A.D (Bose, 1989).

The Assam valley always remained the nucleus and centre of the great kingdom of Kamrupa whose capital was famous as Pragjyotishpur, the city of eastern astrology (Kapoor, 2002). It included the vast tracts of the Brahmaputra valley and also the whole of Eastern Bengal down to the sea in the south and the present mountainous kingdom of Bhutan in the north (Barua, 1933; Kapoor, 2002). The present day Assam only took shape in A.D 1873 during the British period. The Treaty of Yandabo in 1826 A.D marked the entry of the British colonial forces into North East (Goswami, 2012). After its annexation from the Burmese rule through this treaty, the British portion of the Brahmaputra valley was divided in 1834 A.D into the districts of Goalpara, Kamrup, Darrang and Nagaon. In 1839, another two districts of Sibsagar and Lakhimpur were constituted with Guwahati as the headquarters of the Commissioner of Assam. During the time of independence of India, Assam had 13 districts. At present, the state of Assam constitutes of 33 districts. The geographical spread of the present day Assam extends from 89° 42' E to 96° E longitude and 24° 8' N to 28° 2' N latitude having a total land area of 78,438 km². It shares boundary with two foreign countries and seven Indian states. On the northern boundary, lie Bhutan and Arunachal Pradesh lies in the north and east as well. Assam also shares its borders with Nagaland, and Manipur in the north. Mizoram and Meghalaya touch the southern boundary while West Bengal, Bangladesh and Tripura skirts the western side.

3.3 Reflection on Craft Commerce of Assam

As per J. P Tavernier, a 17th century French traveler, the 'kingdom of Assam is one of the best countries in Asia, for it produces all that is necessary to the life of the man without there being need to go for anything to the neighbouring states' (cited in Handique, 2012). The Assamese proverb *akalonaibharlonai* (neither scarcity nor abundance) explains self sufficiency of the people of the state (Ahmad, 1990).



Medieval Assam mostly remained insulated from the rest of India during the *Ahom*¹ reign (Das and Saikia, 2011). The economy was a closed economy and whatever was produced consumed locally; the produced objects were mostly bought by the royal and courtly people (Saikia, 1984). Commerce was mostly limited as there were no regular buyers' markets wherein trading of goods and articles took place (Ahmad, 1990). Assam had more than one classical mode of production i.e. productions were small and produced among small tribal groups and other communities (Hussain, 2004). This, in fact, generated very limited surplus and had a very limited market place; still its economy was self reliant enabling it to maintain a distance from rest of India (ibid). During the *Ahom* rule, state revenue was demanded in the form of personal services, which contributed greatly to the lack of commercialization of the Assamese cottage industry outside the kingdom, thereby representing a closed economy (Khadria, 1990). However, cottage industries and crafts existed within the kingdom due to the royal and noble patronage of the *Ahom* administrators where consumption was to the extent of households and the royal public (ibid).

In the traditional crafts segment, the early *Ahom* administration saw the flourishing of the basket making industry in the province though primarily within the household and for the consumption of the royal and nobility (Khadria, 1992). The villagers made all sorts of articles using bamboo, cane and reed and furnished kitchen, fishing, farming as well as other utilitarian requirements (Barkataki, 1969) of the households as well as the kingdom. Among bamboo crafts, *japi* acquired a status symbol as the traditional headgear of the ministers during the *Ahom* period (Chifos and Looye, 2002). Pottery sector also prospered due to sufficient demand for cooking, storing and eating vessels (Das Gupta, 1982; Handique, 1959). The *Ahom* kings patronized *muga* and *pat* silk for their robes (Sarma, 2009; Phukan, 2012). Cotton and *eri* were also the main garments in the medieval times and women of the households produced little more than required which helped in some trade and export (Sarma, 2009). The business was brisk with hill tribes of the territory, Bhutan and Tibet but trade with lower Ganges plain was not very developed due to stricter travel rules during King Rudra Simha's reign (1669-1714 A.D) (Ahmad, 1990). Yet so, it is described that King Rudra Simha took great interest in crafts and made efforts to import artisans from Bengal (ibid) and

¹Ahoms were the people from the Shan dynasty of present day Myanmar. Led by prince Sukapha they established the Ahom kingdom in Assam (1228 A.D to 1826 A.D.) for a period of almost 600 years.

asked artisans of the kingdom to practice new designs (Phukan, 2012). Not many substantial records exist about the trade and commerce of the crafts of the region of this part of the early medieval era. However, some records of trade for the late 17th and 18th centuries A.D with neighbouring countries like Bengal, Tibet, and Bhutan show evidence of arising trade and commerce (Ahmad, 1990) in the region.

From Buchanan-Hamilton's account collected in between 1807-1809 A.D, it is understood that bell metal items from Assam had good demand in adjoining areas of Bengal till 19th century A.D (Bhuyan, 1963). The articles were common daily used utensils manufactured till late 1880s (Gait, 1884). Crafts such as brassware, cooper and iron product, and mat, ivory were reported to be exported till 1835 (Handique, 2012). *Muga* silk, especially raw material, was traded with far off Malabar and Corromandal coasts during the 17th century A.D as recorded by Hamilton (Khadria, 1992). Some finest varieties of silk *mekhela* with decorated border lines were sold in the markets during the 1890 at cost of Rs. 80 to Rs. 100 (Allen, 1899). During the period 1826 to 1919 A.D., Sualkuchi and Jorhat emerged as the major centers of *muga* weaving industry and the best of *eri* came from Palashbari, Rangia and some other places of then Kamrup (Barpujari, 1993). The fabrics, especially *eri*, were used to make suits and coats for the Englishmen (ibid; Allen 1905). *Muga* was also exported to Tibet and China during the period 1808 to 1809 A.D. (Basu, 1970). Assam exported *muga* silk to Bengal, Bhutan. Records from 1809 A.D. mention the export of 75 maunds (a unit of measurement, 1 maund is equal to 37 kg) of *muga* fabrics to Bengal (Phukan, 2012).

The entry of the British colonial forces into North East post the Treaty of Yandaboo in 1826 marked the beginning of the decay of self sufficient economy of Assam (Goswami, 2012; Khadria, 1992). The decline of *Ahom* kingdom led to fading of the royal patronage earlier enjoyed by the artisans. Crafts that once flourished started to see decline during the British era. Many village industries were reported to have died under this foreign domination and Assam got transformed into a mere raw material producing region (ibid). European import created a substitution effect wherein the local public was replacing handmade yarn cloths for finer mill made products (Dasgupta, 1988). Hunter in 1879 mentioned about the sad plight of the brass sector mentioning that the trade of the domestic utensils is dying out due to cheap imported

brass vessels. Late in the 19th century, handmade brass and bell metal crafts consisting primarily of utensils were fast getting replaced with imported metal items due to its poor quality in comparison to enameled objects (Khadria, 1992). It led to stagnancy of the industry in many districts (Dasgupta, 1988). Metal craft, though in demand locally, were not able to withstand this substitution effect (Khadira, 1992). The period 1901 A. D to 1921 A. D was a tough phase in the textile and metal industry of Assam (Dasgupta, 1988). Citing the industrial situation during the early 20th century, Khadria(1992) writes that brass and bell metal workers, since not in direct contact with the actual customers, heavily depended upon the middlemen and got exploited. The expansion of the market in this period was only due to the increase in flow of the imported articles (ibid). Also, in case of pottery industry of Goalpara and Dhubri, artisans could earn a minimal profit due to its mostly utilitarian nature (Allen, 1905). The local pottery products were rough in texture and could not stand against the competition presented by the pottery from Bengal (Khadria, 1992).

In 1898-99, Kamrup sold about 500 maunds of *eri* silk to the Bhutiyas and 1500 maunds were exported to Bengal (Allen, 1899). The quality of the *eri* fabric was, however, reported to be inferior (ibid). India was exporting waste *tasar* silk (raw silk which is difficult to disentangle; it is the refuse obtained from the cocoon reeling which is considered useless) to Europe after 1857 A.D when its utilization began in Europe (Stack 1884). Even though the Brahmaputra valley had capabilities to supply *muga* or *eri* silk waste to the foreign lands, its exports were yet not initiated (ibid). According to the census report of Assam of 1921 by Lloyd, only 2.5 % of total population of Assam was supported by industries other than tea; cottage industries were in a languishing state in the province. Only Palashbari and Sualkuchi in Kamrup, in 1929 A.D, reported some organized market for *endi* or *eri* and *muga* due to the access of the bazaar at Guwahati reached by the weavers through local Marwari dealers (Khadria, 1992). By this time, Banarasi silk made inroads into the Assam economy due to its widespread adoption by the Assamese (Ahmad, 1990). Allen (1905) mentioned that due to the little aptitude of the Assamese populace, the industry was in a state of decline. Only some cotton cloth was prepared for sale that too with imported yarn available in many colors (ibid). Brass and bell metal workers already had a depressed state due to the influence of middlemen arising from no direct access of the actual market and customers (Gupta, 1909).

Commercial production of crafts such as metal art and silk textiles was started late enough in Assam to be able to compete with its neighbouring states (Khadria, 1992). Bengal became a centre of economic activities in eastern India and as a result textile and metal industry of the Brahmaputra valley did not get any foothold among the imported goods in the British era (ibid). Some revival of the silk industry took place in the early part of the 20th century due to increase in local consumption and export as is suggestive in report by Gupta (1909). Sualkuchi weavers used to produce *eri charkhand* (a kind of cloth) for the Synteng (a tribe from the Khasi hills of Meghalaya) women and silk fiber *bhuni* and *tel-kapor* for the Garo and Khasi women wherein dyed silk yarns formed the base (Bahadur, 1915). 80% of the demand for *pat* and *muga* was local yet the industry was in decadence due to import of cheap silk from Bengal and China (Gupta, 1909). In a report by Maxwell-Lefroy and Anson (1917), it was stated that Assam is distinct with regard to its mulberry silk production, as the bulk of its produce is consumed locally. But the mulberry silk quantity produced was very small and there was little or no scope for its trade in *pat* articles (Bahadur, 1915). As recorded by Bahadur (1915), the artisans at Sualkuchi were using around 40 to 50 maunds of Chinese silk yearly for the production of items. During the 19th century, the *muga* silk was bought by local Marwari traders who later exported it to Calcutta or Sylhet (Phukan, 2012). But *muga* silk industry prospects remained gloomy during the British era (ibid). *Eri* rearing and weaving was basically done by Rabhas, Meches, Mikirs, Kukis, Kacharis and other tribes (Stack, 1884) and the best *eri* fabric came from Nalbari, Mangaldai, Rangia and Palashbari in Kamrup (ibid). The items produced mainly consisted *thaans* (plain pieces of fabric) and *chadars* and sale was facilitated with the help of *marwari* traders (Gupta, 1909). In 1929, only Palashbari and Sualkuchi had organized market and only some few professional weavers had some direct access to main bazaar at Guwahati while the rest of the weavers had to sell, in certain instances, through local dealers (Khadria, 1992). *Erichadars* and *thaans* were exported to Calcutta and also in certain instances to Australia in some amount by wholesale Marwari dealers. *Eri* silks were used to stitch suits by Europeans and well-to-do Indians. The British traded good quantity of *eri* silk with Bhutia and other tribes (Begum, 2010). The *thaans* were 6 to 7 yards (1 yard is equal to 0.91 meters), with a width of 54 to 56 inches. One red variety of *eri* silk found in Mangaldoi called *bhumoko* was sold to buyers from Bhutan (Allen, 1899); several other varieties of cloth made from *eri* was also sold (Maxwell-Lefroy,

1917). Commercial weaving of silk at Sualkuchi increased manifold during the Second World War Period (Kalita, n.d). In the small towns of Dhubri and Goalpara, as was mentioned earlier, pottery and terracotta craftsmen producing cooking pots and vessels were losing out due to quality clay products from Bengal. Clay craftsmen generally bartered their products against grains within the locality (Das, 1968). Commercialization of the handicrafts is thus found to be minimal and confined more to the local consumption; exports remained minimal. But the crafts were surviving despite in a state of languish as those were consumed locally.

The scenario of commerce of handicrafts of Assam is different today. Handicrafts and handloom industries are considered to be a way of life in Assam and has ample role to play in the economic development of the state (Economic Survey, Assam, 2010-11). At present, around 2.80 lakh looms are utilized for commercial weaving in Assam and around 5.70 lakh looms provide subsidiary income to households (ibid). A considerable amount of *eri* fabric is exported to Tibet and Bhutan ('Sericulture in Assam non mulberry silk, n.d). Marwari businessmen of Palashbari, Baroma, Rangia, and Tamulpur in Kamrup also tried to develop *eri* textile trade but its limited suitability in others seasons except winter restricted its commercial growth (Saikia, 2000) in the last decade. However, *eri* as a commercial item is increasing its foothold in the textile industry. With respect to *muga* silk, the value of export of *muga* fabric products like home furnishing stood at Indian Rs. 221.60 lakh for the year 2007-08 (ARTFED, Guwahati). The exports were made to Japan, USA and European Union. According to the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, Govt. of India, spun silk yarn produced in India, including both mulberry and non-mulberry silk is 1280 MT for the year 2013-14. Out of total (raw) silk production, Assam produced 31 MT of *pat* silk, 3055 MT of *eri* and 135.65 MT of *muga*. Kamrup alone produces roughly 156 MT raw *erisilk*, 10.50 MT of raw *muga* silk and 0.55 MT of mulberry silk yarns (Directorate of Economics and Statistics, Statistical Handbook, 2014-2015). Dress materials, saris, scarves, stoles and ties including silk yarn are adding values in millions (MoSPI, Govt. of India). Most of the available information on handicraft products is in respect to silk and silk products. However, only limited information on sale and export of products like bamboo, pottery and terracotta crafts, bell metal brass metal etc. are available for Assam. According to the Directorate of Archive Report (1996) on trade of metal products between Assam and adjoining

foreign countries, total exports in Rs. for the period 1995-96 stood at Rs. 5,36,643/-. A primary field survey by Deka (2012) found that locally made bell metal products worth Rs. 58.71 lakh were sold in the year 2008-09 whereas brass metal products worth Rs. 1.51 crore were sold in the market. These figures show that commerce of the metal crafts from Assam is on the rise. NEHHDC reports for the year 2011-12, placed the average sales value of handicraft products at Rs. 18 crores approximately. Khadi and Village Industries Board also undertook sales of Rs.32 lakh worth silk, cane and bamboo valued at Rs. 1.95 lakh and village pottery valued at Rs. 151.76 lakh in 2013-2014 (Statistical Handbook Assam 2014). Reports and statistics discussed thus show that handicrafts sales in Assam are showing significant improvement through the years.

3.4 Some Renowned Craft Producing Places of Assam

Assam is inarguably the state in north east of India most known for its variety of craftworks across its two valleys; the Brahmaputra valley and the Barak valley. The Brahmaputra valley is a region situated between the hill ranges of the northeastern and eastern Himalayan range comprising the western, central and eastern plains of Assam. The Barak valley is located in the southern part of Assam consisting of administrative districts of Cachar, Hailakandi and Karimganj. Many communities in Assam are known for producing a variety of traditional crafts. Despite a sense of unity among all communities of Assam, there is heterogeneity in terms of excellence in crafts produced among them. Consequently some of the places in these regions are very much known and are today marketed as tourism destinations. In the brief discourse provided below, some of the best known places of craft production having historical linkage to the ancient and medieval period are presented. The description presents vividly the major traditional craft making regions of the Brahmaputra valley especially, and its historical antecedents. The discussion, thus, does not cover all its craft producing places. It must be mentioned here that, generally, every household in every village of Assam across its two valleys produce some or the other types of crafts. It is nearly impossible to address all crafts produced in Assam in this research report. It is also difficult to trace the exact historical birth of the crafts in the valley but it is apparent that handicraft has always stayed as the part and parcel of the society of Assam. Hence, only some of the major crafts and craft producing regions are discussed below.

3.4.1 Asharikandi and its Pottery & Terracotta Craft Culture

A) Geographical Details of Asharikandi

The craft village of Asharikandi is one of the largest pottery & terracotta craft cluster in lower (west) Dhubri district of Assam in India. Located along 26.13° N latitude and 89.92° E longitude, Dhubri, as a district, was carved out of undivided Goalpara district in the year 1983. Old Goalpara in the kingdom of Pragjyotisha included large parts of North East India, North Bengal and even many portions of East Bengal (Khan, 1936). But Goalpara still continues to resonate in many contexts the region that almost corresponds to the geographical area covered by the previous undivided district (Datta, 1995).

B) Historical Linkage of the Craft

The pottery & terracotta craft of Asharikandi has an interesting historical trajectory that quintessentially makes it a traditional craft practice of Assam. The craft in the village of Madaikhali is primarily practiced by the Bengali speaking Paul community members who are believed to have migrated from erstwhile East Bengal prior to the partition of India. Though there is no exact evidence of the time of their migration, some statistical documents suggest the influx of artisans from neighboring areas of East Bengal since 1905 (Bhagabati, 2004) or even further to 1881 (Goswami, 1985). The first report to officially comment on this in-course was the census of 1911. Settlers from districts of Mymensingh, Pabna, Bora and Rangpur were found settled on the char lands of Goalpara increased the number of such immigrants by 240 per cent (Vaghaiwalla, 1954). The Brahmaputra valley's relatively very low population started to attract large swath of population from East Bengal, particularly Mymensingh, Rongpur, Pabna and Bagra since 1905 on the uninhabited riverine lands (Bhagawati, 2004). There was in-migration of artisans from East Bengal since 1881 (Goswami, 1985). Vast majority of Mohammedan and Hindu families have settled from chiefly Mymensingh in the lower Assam district of Goalpara (Mullan, 1931).

Lower Assam was annexed to the British empire in 1828 (Barooah, 1970). Mills in 1853 observed that a number of Bengallees came into Assam from erstwhile East Bengal when the British took control of the region. Assam remained an administrative division of the province of Bengal from 1826 to 1874 (Gait, 1906). The province of Assam was created in 1874 with the district of Sylhet attached to it (ibid). However,

in 1905, the province of Bengal was partitioned and a new province of Eastern Bengal and Assam was created with its headquarters in Dacca (ibid). Goalpara, then was a part of Rangpur district of Bengal which was reconstituted as a district only in 1822. C. S. Mullan in the census report of 1931 reported that Assamese was rarely spoken in Dhubri. Due to Goalpara's cultural and linguistic similarity, Raja Prabhat Chandra Baruah along with other zamindars of Goalpara in 1919 pleaded to be a part of Bengal (Baruah, 1999). Das's(2013) doctoral thesis on immigration in Assam during the colonial period nicely draws in the settlement of the Bengali speaking Hindus from East Bengal. He cited that immigration in the lower Brahmaputra valley was to such an extent that Bengali was made the medium of instruction in the schools of Assam in 1836-37 (ibid). The Census report by Lloyd (1921) showed the extraordinary in-course of Bengali speaking Muslim and Hindu settlers from the Bengal districts of Mymensingh, Pabna, Tippera, Bogra, Dacca and Rangpur to Goalpara.

The potter community from some of these districts also migrated to the place and satisfied the needs of the Zamindar family for earthen wares and utensils for generations (Ghosh, 2014). The present elderly population of the village also attests the visit of their ancestors to the royal kingdom of Goalpara during the Zamindari period. The artwork got patronage of the 'Baruah' family of the Gauripur Raj Paribar (Chatterjee, 2010). Living old artisans from the place recall the oral narratives of travel of their ancestors to supply earthen rings for wells (Field survey). An Assam Tribune article also cited the migration of the Paul artisans from Mymensingh of erstwhile East Bengal to Asharikandi ("Paulpara...pottery", 25 January, 2011). B.C. Allen's (1905) book mentions Dhubri as a small town in Goalpara producing earthen wares. This reportedly establishes the pottery & terracotta art of the place as traditional craft of Assam.

3.4.2 Hajo and Sarthebari and its Metal Craft Culture

A) Geographical Details

Hajo and Sarthebari of Assam boast of a unique metal craft tradition. Hajo in Kamrup district of Assam is known for its brass metal art whereas Sarthebari is renowned, mostly, for its bell metal craft. Brass art of Sarthebari is particularly known as *Xorai Shilpa* though several varieties of brass items are produced here. On a limited scale, these crafts also exist in some other areas of Western Assam. However, these two

places are much known in Assam for its traditional metal crafts and its high concentration of artisan community. Sarthebari is a bell and brass metal cluster located at a distance of 90 km to the west of Guwahati in the Barpeta district of Assam situated along 26.32° N latitude and 90.98° E longitude. The district of Barpeta has an inalienable linkage with the history of the kingdom of Kamrupa. Barpeta, in the ancient times, always remained an integral region of Kamrupa, and till 1983 it continued to remain so. In 1983, Barpeta was carved out of Kamrupa as a new district. Hajo is situated at a distance of approximately 35 km from Guwahati in Kamrup district which is along 26.31° N latitude and 91.59° E longitude.

B) History of Metal Craft in Sarthebari

The reported history of bell metal industry of the state of Assam dates back to 321 B.C to 185 B.C to the times of Mauryan period (Deka, 2012). During emperor Ashoka's time, Buddhist Missionaries probably accompanied with *kanhar* (metal crafters) passed through Assam to tour the South East Asian countries; they might have settled in various places of Assam during the mean course (ibid). Legends state that Kumar Bhaskar Varman (594-650 A.D) sent a pair of *bhortal* and several kinds of drinking utensils to King Harshvardhan of Kannauj (Baishya, 1989; Baruah and Choudhury, 1999). It is believed that one of the *kangshapatra* (bell metal items) was produced by an artisan from Sarthebari; however history linking the place and the bell metal is yet disputed (Deka, 2012). Later it received patronage of the *Ahom* kings and nobility and flourished so well that few products made by the artisans were sent to Buddhist countries like China, Tibet, Burma, Bhutan and Nepal (Baruah and Choudhury, 1999).

The export of *tal* are worth crores (in Indian monetary term) of Rupees and continue till date. The *Ahom* courts remained decorated with artistic bell metal utensils (Deka, 2012). Written records of the 14th century based on family tree of the people of Sarthebari provide ample evidence of the place's connectivity to the bell metal craft (Deka, 1995). Today, the metal industry is spread to adjacent villages of Namsala, Karakuchi, Gomora, Haldibari and Baniyakuchi probably through the dissemination of the art through the artisans' kinsfolk. These villages together form the Sarthebari metal cluster in Assam.

C) History of the Brass Craft in Hajo

Brass metal production is an ancestral work of the Muslim community members in Hajo. They are called as *Morias* in Assam. The *Moria* people are believed to have migrated to Assam along with the Muslim invaders during the *Ahom* regime (Das, 1968; Medhi et al, 2012). Several Muslim invasions took place in Assam from the neighbouring Muslim Bengal since 1662 (Bose, 1989). In the mean course, many Mohmmadans settled in Assam with Hajo becoming the stronghold of this settlement (Bose, 1989). The members were highly skilled craftsman who later started producing brass items (Medhi, et al. 2012). Other than the *Morias*, brass metal particularly known as *xoraishilpa* flourished among some Hindu people at Hajo and Sarthebari (Deka, 2012). According to reports, it started circa 1850 A.D in Sarthebari and was limited to only the villages of Baniyakuchi and Haldhibari (ibid). However, the family tree of the artisans suggests settlement of the brass and bell metal artisans in the region sometime in the 14th century (Ghosh, 2016).

3.4.3 Nalbari and its Bamboo Craft Culture

A) Geographical Detail

The district of Nalbariin the lower Brahmaputra valley lies between 26° & 27° N latitudes and 91° & 97° East longitude and covers an area of about 2,257 square kilometer. It was carved out of erstwhile Kamrup district in the year 1985. Nalbari, since ancient days, was a part of the kingdom of Kamrupa extending up to Karotoya in west to Dikkarabasini (Census of India, Assam 2011). Nalbari, as a name, was coined sometime during 1836 and 1883 (Goswami, 2009). Some of the rivers like Pagladiya, Borolia and NaoNadi flows through its land and the swampy lakes around the rivers are fertile grounds for growth of reeds, colloquially termed as *nal* (and *bari* means place derived from the Sanskrit word *vatika*) from which the name Nalbari might have come into being (Bhagawati, 2007).

B) History of Bamboo Crafts

Bamboo craft in Assam is not confined to one place or region. It has not been an exclusive occupation of a community (Ranjan, 1984) and is spread throughout Assam across its many villages. Majority of the populace of Assam in the rural settings has capable craftsmanship in bamboo work acquired through generational diffusion of knowledge (ibid). Varieties of bamboo products like farming equipments like *pasi-*

khorahi and many other utilitarian items like *duli*, *kula*, *japa*, etc. were produced in Assam. However, among all bamboo products, *japi*, a traditional head gear having its linkage to the *Ahom* kings and nobility has prominent place in Assam. Many varieties of *japis* with various names such as *haluwa*, *pitha*, *bordoiya*, *sorudoiya*, etc. were produced in undivided Kamrup, Nagaon, Darrang, Lakhimpur and Sibsagar districts of which Nalbari and its villages of Kamarkuchi and Mugkuchi are renowned even today (Baruah and Choudhury, 1999). Fishing tools and equipments known as *jakoi*, *sepa*, *polo*, *juluki*, *bana*, and *khaloi*, also form the part of bamboo tradition of this place. Fishing remained a caste base occupation in Assam traditionally practised by the Kaibartas of Nalbari who have been living in Assam since the 4th century (Haque, 2017). According to researchers, this caste has been using several different kinds of fishing tools made of bamboo since ancient past (ibid). This again relates to the production and use of bamboo items in the region since ages. Apart from these, traditional baskets for storing grains, clothes, and trays for sorting and threshing grains have also evolved due to centuries of cultural and functional mediation (Ranjan and Ranjan, 2008).

With reference to the commercial production of the bamboo crafts, studies quote the names of Nalbari, Barpeta and Kamrup in Brahmaputra valley and Cachar district in Barak valley (Ranjan and Ranjan, 2007). Nalbari district in Assam is one of the regions where traditional clusters of bamboo and cane are found (Ghosh, 2008). Besides other bamboo crafts, Nalbari district is of prominence due to its traditional and commercial link to the *phulamjapi* which is one of the main crafts of this district.

3.4.4 Kamrupa and its Silk Textiles

A) Geographical Details of Kamrupa

Kamrupa, in present state of Assam, is a district situated between 25.46° and 26.49° N latitude and 90.48° and 91.50° E longitude on the globe. In ancient period, Kamrupa mentioned as a kingdom covered the entire North Eastern region of India extending further beyond to Bhutan and East Bengal. Kamrup district since ancient times is known for its silk textiles spread across its many villages. Sualkuchi, known as the Manchester of the East, is a craft village located on the north bank of the river Brahmaputra, approximately 35 km west of the main city of Guwahati in Kamrup district. Sualkuchi is a small census town consisting of two revenue villages

Sualkuchi and Bamun Sualkuchi. As a craft cluster, it includes some of the neighbouring villages like Sarulah, Borlah, Gandhamou, Srihati, Bamundi, Bongsor, Sonpara, Bathan, Kayatol, Halogaon, Siliguri, Hardia, Ramdia, Tokradia and Subanshah along with Sualkuchi (Baishya, 2003). Kamrup district is also renowned for its *Eri* weaving. Rampur, Chhaygaon and Palasbari of Kamrup district held the tradition for more than 300 years now which is primarily done by the women folk (Kumar, 2006). Other prominent villages include Jiakur, Amtola, Bankakata, Patorikhat, Tejpur-Haru, Tejpur, Satpukhuri, Nahira, Guamari-Cemina, Dakhla, Borihat, Jharobari and Barduar, which together constitutes the largest *eri* exporting cluster in India (Saikia, 2012).

B) History of Silk Craft Culture

Ancient Kamrupa is glorified in Kautilya's *Arthashastra* of 4th century B.C. for its production of the three varieties of silk namely *dukula*, *patrona* and *khaumak* (Baishya, 2005; Sarma, 2009). Historians like K. L. Barua has interpreted the silks as *muga* (*Antheraea Assama*), *pat* (*Mulberry*) and *eri* (*Philosamia Ricini*) silk respectively. *Antheraea Assama*, the Greek word for *muga* itself indicates that none other than Assam is the home of this non-mulberry silk variety (Baishya, 2005). Some passing references have been made about the silk textiles of Assam in ancient literatures and texts like the Ramayana, the Mahabharata and Harshcharita which give an idea about the existence of the craft in this region. King Chandragupta, as inscribed in *Arthashastra*, mentioned Kamrupa as the kingdom of cocoon rearers (Sarma, 2009). This same text also mentions about *dukulabastra* or the *muga* yarn as shining 'as red as the sun, as soft as the surface of a gem, being woven while the threads are wet, having uniform or mixed texture' (Barua, 1951). Kautilya also mentions about *patrona* garments which is the best in quality produced in the place called Suvarnakudya (ibid). *Harshcharita* written by Banabhatta (7th century A.D) cites silken garments that Harshavardhana, the king of Kannauj received from Bhaskarvarman, the King of Kamrupa (Sarma, 2009). Interwoven Jasmine flower patterns made on *jatipatikah* or *kamarbandha* mentioned as pieces as smooth as birch bark indicates it to be *muga* silk (Mati Chandra as cited in Barua, 1951). Besides this, oral folklores, adages and tales also mention about the silk weaving tradition of Assam (Nath Das, 2006 as cited in Sarma, 2009).

C) Retracing Sualkuchi and its *Pat* and *Muga* Craft Tradition

Sualkuchi undoubtedly is eminent centre of silk fabric production not only in Kamrup but also in the entire state of Assam (Baruah and Choudhury, 1999). It is by no means easy to ascertain the origin of the tradition of silk weaving in Sualkuchi. However, historical facts points to the presence of *katonis* or rearers of pat silk in Assam in 12 century A.D. *Pat* weaving in Sualkuchi was very much an established practice during the period of Assamese poet Chandra Bharati who was a contemporary of King Naranarayan (1540-1587) of Cooch Bihar (Barua-Bahadur, 1915). *Ahom* chronicles like Assam Buranji, KamruparBuranji and Puroi Assamor Buranji narrates the shifting of some Tanti families from Sualkuchi in 1636 A.D to other places of Assam (Baishya, 2005). Older generations of the 1970s reminisces some of the villages producing silk fabric one of which was named Swarnakuchi, all of which now lie in the riverbed of the Brahmaputra (Baishya, 2005). The present name Sualkuchi may be a dialectical variation and Swarnakuchi might itself be a version of the place called Swarnakudya mentioned in Kautilya's Arthashastra (Paul, 1948).

Muga silk industry in Assam is in existence since time immemorial but its golden period was during the Ahom reign (1228-1828) (Phukan, 2012). *Ahom* chronicles present a clear history of the importance of silk in the kingdom. Sualkuchi as a weaver's village was believed to be established by Momai Tamuli Barbarua during the *Ahom* rule of Swargadeo Pratap Singha (1603-1614) (Basu, 1970; AC Nielson, 2012). During Raja Pratap Singha's (1603-1641 A.D) time, 50 weaver families of Sualkuchi were entrusted the responsibility to handcraft the finest of silk fabrics for the Mughal emperor of Delhi (Sen, 1984). King Rudra Singha (1696-1714) gave special encouragement to new ideas and designs in silk from rest of the country (Phukan, 2012). It is said that queen Sarveswari, wife of King Siva Singha (1714-1744), personally took great interest in silk weaving and spinning and encouraged all women to undertake the activity (Bhuyan, 1985). *Muga* silk was patronized by the *Ahom* kings for royal robes (Phukan, 2012). Muslim weavers called *jholas* brought from Delhi during the reign of Jayadhvaja Singha (1648-1663) wove for the royalty while king Rudra Singha (1696-1714) encouraged Assamese weavers to practice new designs brought from other parts of India (ibid).

As per Pakyntein, history of Sualkuchi can be exactly traced to about 340 years when Mohmmedan rulers of Dacca invaded Kamrup about 1620 A.D (1961). They set up a

Hindu zamindar from East Bengal by lending him an estate at Sualkuchi (Pakyntein, 1961). Probably that zamindar named Satrajit picked up the technique and carried on the silk trade from Sualkuchi (ibid). Such anecdotes on the silk culture of Sualkuchi, undoubtedly ascertains the traditional nature of the craft in the place. While referring to Sualkuchi, the census of India 1961 observed 'though silk weaving is not uncommon in other parts of Assam, yet Sualkuchi claims a technique, quality and reputation of its own and is unique in so far as *muga* and mulberry silk fabrics are concerned' (Das, 2008). Sualkuchi is a famous centre for handlooms in Kamrup (Gupta, 1909). It is the busiest traditional silk centre in North Eastern India and the biggest *Muga* weaving centre in the world (Saikia, 2012). At present, the greater Sualkuchi textile cluster comprise the villages of Sualkuchi, Bongsar, Sanpara, Bathan, Srihati, Gandhmou, Sarulah, Barlah, Kaeyatol, Halogaon, Bamundi, Siliguri, Hardia, Tokradia, Sobangshah and Ramdia (Saikia, 2012).

3.5 Wrapping up the Chapter

This chapter provided insight into the various crafts and craft producing regions of Assam. From various historical records, it can be established that craft culture in Assam, kingdom of Kamrupa as in earlier times, can be traced back to as early as the era of Mahabharata and Ramayana. The kingdom, in ancient times, remained a prosperous economy. During the reign of the *Ahoms*, the cottage industries received wide scale patronage from the royal households and the nobles. As a result, silk industry, bell and brass metal industries and other crafts flourished in the valley and the economy remained self sufficient. However, historical facts highlight that the cottage industries started to see degradation during the period of the British rule. Due to wide scale import of well finished and cheap objects into Assam, the versatile utilitarian and traditional craft objects started facing tough competition. As a result, production of crafts such as pottery and terracotta and metal crafts started seeing its decline. The rough textured local products were not able to stand in competition with the imported objects from places like West Bengal. Nevertheless, it is still established that craft production remained a primary occupation of the people of the valley which is practiced even today.