

CHAPTER SIX

From Utilitarian Pottery and Terracotta Toy to Decorative Works: The Commercialized World of Asharikandi Clay Craft

A glass pitcher, a wicker basket, a tunic of coarse cotton cloth; their beauty is inseparable from their function. Handicrafts belong to a world existing before the separation of the useful and the beautiful”

- Octavio Paz (Mexican Poet & Diplomat, 1914-98)

6.1 The Prelude

The chapter discusses the commercialization of pottery and terracotta works of Asharikandi. It highlights the changing nature of the craft objects with respect to the prior and existing styles and forms. In section 6.2, the importance of clay objects in social life of people is discussed. Section 6.3 provides reflection on the earlier items produced by artisans in Asharikandi following which section 6.4 gives a discourse on stylistic modification in the crafts, the shifting functional dimension of crafts, innovation in product line, the relationship between clientele and craft in commercial transformation of the craft and the influence of intermediaries and external agents in commercialization. Sub-section 6.4.3 highlights the changes in the use of raw materials. Finally, section 6.5 provides a conclusion summarizing the commercialization of the clay crafts.

6.2 Pottery and Terracotta Products and its Importance in Social Life of the People

Clay crafts are dominant aspects of handicraft scenario in Assam since time immemorial. Its ancient heritage stems from the fact that many pottery and terracotta objects are excavated from different locations of Assam (Roy, 1977; Sharma, 1975; Singh, 2008; Singh, 2015). Prof. Datta (1973) has even observed similarity of the female terracotta toy of Asharikandi with Mohenjo-daro¹ toy. The potter communities in Assam have been traditionally making clay products since ancient times (Medhi, 1992). According to Gait's (1896) classification, pottery products in Assam consisted

¹ Moehnjo-daro is an archaeological site in the Sindh province of Pakistan. It was built around the year 2500 BCE and is considered as the first settlements of the ancient civilization of Indus Valley.

of *adkalah*, *akabasanti*, *bhuruki* (a kind of large storage container similar to *kalah*), *chakali*, *saki* or *chaki*, *charu* (or *saru*), *gacha* or *gosa* (lamp stand), *hari*, *kalah*, *mala-charu* or *saru*, *mridanga* (or *khol*, a kind of musical instrument), *nad pat* (earthen well rings), *thali* or *kahi* (meal dish also called as *hanak*), etc. *Mala saru* consisted of several types known as *tekenia mala*, *medhi mala*, *khamusia mala* along with other items like *dhupdani-dhunadani* (a kind of container for burning incense), *dunori* (a kind of lamp stand with holed lid through which light can escape), etc (Das, 1968). Cooking pots consisted of vessels known as *hari* or *handi*, *paitta*, water carrying vessels as well as storage containers of various sizes and shapes like *matka* or *mathia*, *bhuruki* as well as other small items like *tekeli* (small pot), *saki* (lamp), pipes and drums (Allen, 1905). Each of these items has typical practical use.

Pottery and terracotta products are used in rural Assam in everyday lives of the people for various ritualistic and domestic purposes (Medhi, 1992). In recent times, its religious and aesthetic usage is found to be overriding domestic usage. Nevertheless, some products are still used in households, especially in rural areas, to store and process food. Products like *mala saru* and *tekeli* are used for coagulating milk for preparing curd. Some of the objects like *dhunadani* (a kind of container for burning incense) are still widely used in religious affairs. *Saki* is used as lamp whereas *kalah* is still found to be used to store water. In many different ways, various humble clay objects are ceaselessly used in social and domestic affairs of the people in Assam. Most of these products are even produced today in Asharikandi but have seen sharp decline in its demand in present times (field survey).

Pottery objects are produced by artisan communities in different pockets of Assam like Nalbari, Kamrup, Nagaon, Majuli, etc. However, the pottery and terracotta products of Asharikandi in Dhubri district of Assam have its own distinct place in the clay crafting tradition of Assam. Apart from being traditional craft of Assam (refer to Chapter 3, Section 3.4.1) the clay craft of Asharikandi village is famous for its range of decorative terracotta products. The place is also recognized as a craft village under the rural tourism project of the Ministry of Tourism, Govt. of India. As such, this place is selected for the present study to understand the commercialization aspects of the craft.

6.3 Reflection on Earlier Products of Asharikandi

Asharikandi in Dhubri district is the traditional Terracotta and Pottery making village of Assam and is one of the largest pottery and terracotta clusters in India. Any visitor to this place will be enthralled by the manifold clay products that defy any classification, arranged in heaps in the small work-sheds of the artisan households and even in the backyards. The artisans of this village, since several generations (Ghosh, 2014), have been making traditional cooking pots and storage containers of various sizes and shapes. Ever since the community's migration and settlement (refer to Chapter 3, Section 3.4.1) at Asharikandi, the artisans have been producing earthen utensils, tiles, *nad-pat* (earthen rings), clay toys, jars, etc. (ibid) fulfilling the requirements of the people.



Living septuagenarian artisans Nimaychandra Paul and Dhirendranath Paul acknowledge that during their grandfathers' time utilitarian items in the form of cooking pots and storage containers as well as items used in religious settings were the only products made by potters generally for the rural community members. These items were traded in Dhubri as well as in other places of Assam. According to them, several other important utilitarian products manufactured were *kalasi*, *khuti* (small pot to keep lime), *kalah*, *khoja* (container to store and serve liquid), *hari*, *matka*, *saru*, *gamla* (large vessel to give fodder to farm animals), *badna* (a kind of musical instrument), *dhupdani*, *tekeli*, *kahi*, *tub*, *jhajur-chapri* (a pair of vessel to make puffed rice), etc. The information provided by the artisans also support the documentation

made by Pakyntein in the census of India, 1961 where he had mentioned several other utilitarian products like *lota* (a kind of container to hold liquid with long neck), *bati* (bowl), *dhakni* (lid to cover pots), *chilim* (smoking pipe), *ghati* (small water holding vessel), *gilas* (glass), *bhuruki*, *handi*, *fuldani* (flower vase), tub, etc (page 61). However, these utilitarian items had already started to see its decline when the markets were flooded with superior products from Bengal (Allen, 1905) and other cheap substitutes (Khadria, 1992). Terracotta products primarily consisted of *putala-puteli* (toy dolls now famous as *hatima* dolls), elephant, *soka loga ghoda* (horse on wheels), tortoise, etc (information based on oral history of artisans).

6.4 The Stylistic Modifications of Clay Objects

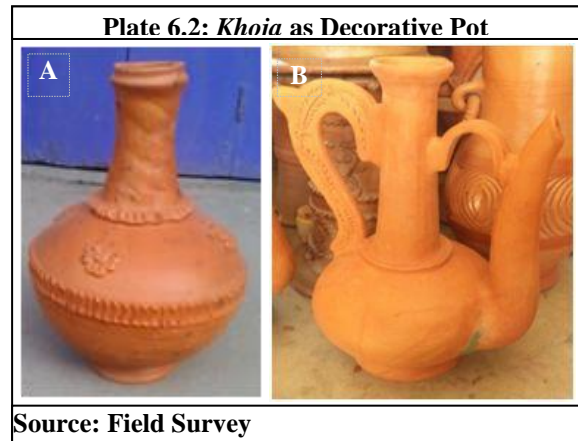
The pottery and terracotta craft of Asharikandi have come out of the undertones of 'ruralism' (Shanks, 1994) and has established space in urban sphere as objects of aesthetics. Several of the utilitarian products as well as toys have undergone enormous changes during the last 35 to 40 years (field survey). Most of the simple products of the past, particularly the pots, are even today produced in considerable quantities for rural customers. However, there has been a tremendous proliferation of a variety of new items for modern customers outside the rural base. The products that were made earlier almost remained devoid of any artistic virtue (Datta, 1995; Saikia, 2000) and were rough in texture (Khadria, 1992). Embellishments, if at all present, were very simple and few. In toys, elementary surface ornamentation, especially on face and at times on body were seen. The products were, thus, not commercially very viable due to lack of smoothness and glaze (Das, 1968). However, aesthetic pretensions and proliferation of new designs and surface decoration could be seen on the clay objects due to the commercialization.

6.4.1 The Changing Dimensions of the Clay Crafts with respect to Motifs and Designs

A) Pottery

Some of the most significant changes on the pots and vessels can be seen with respect to surface decoration. Previously, the items, since utilitarian, remained unornamented and simple. However, the realization of economic potential of the crafts outside the conventional customer base necessitated stylistic modifications in the craft objects.

Incised lines appearing as parallel lines in horizontal or vertical shapes, waves or geometric forms are usually found on items meant for decorations. Flowers and petals are added on the surface to enhance its aesthetics. Textures are also created through pressing of the clay surface with grained blocks while further ornamentation is done through sculpting of leaves, flowers and various other shapes. Items like *khoja* used as a



vessel to store and serve liquid (which is no more in use today) is now redeveloped as a flower vase with surface ornamentation to be used as a decorative vase (refer to

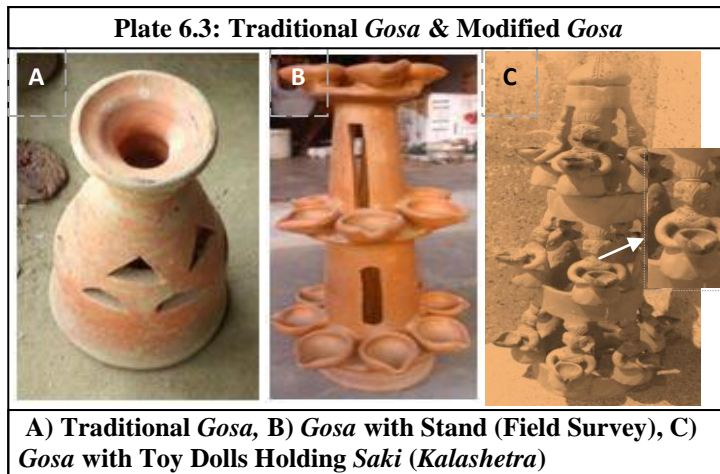


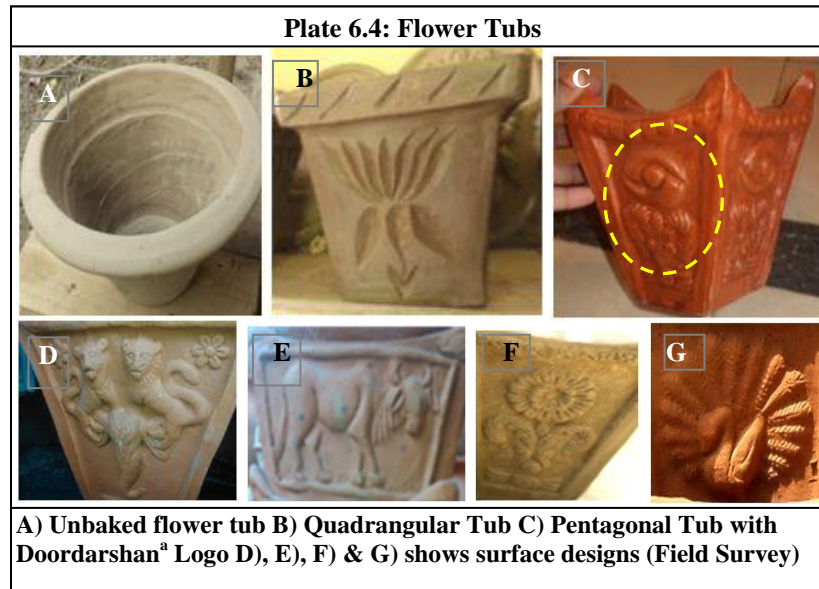
Plate 6.2 A). The vessel otherwise was kept utterly plain for practicable purpose. Similarly, other artistic features are also added to the *khoja* in the form of spout and handle to imitate decorative metal craft objects (refer to Plate 6.2 B). The idea is to give new functional dimensions to elementary craft items to entice new customers due to the change in its utility among people.

Simple lamp stand known as *gosa*, used in *namghar* (community hall for religious gathering and congregational worship and prayer in Assam), sometimes on which lamp is also affixed, is nowadays produced as a stand with multiple lamps and also in towering formats. These lamps serve the purpose of decoration during Hindu festivals like *deepavali*². Dolls known as *hatima* are also affixed to the *gosa* as in Plate 6.3 C. Likewise elementary items like *dhup-dhuna dani* and *dunori* are also adorned nowadays to attract customer attention. Significantly, the initiative for such revival came from among the master craftsmen of the village (field survey). Growing

² Deepavali or Diwali is the Hindu festival of lights signifying the victory of good over evil which is celebrated in the month of Kartika in Bikram Sambat calendar. According to Gregorian calendar, it falls between mid October or mid-November.

replacement of clay objects with substitutes reciprocated the notion of sustaining tradition besides offering competitive advantage to the pioneering artisans among fellow artisans. *Matka*, *bhuruki* and items like *saru* were transformed to decorative planters and garden tubs.

The trend seems to have slowly started since the last 25 to 30 years period prior to which only simple garden tubs were made (field survey). Simple flower tubs (refer to Plate 6.4. A) produced earlier are



still in practice. But the tubs are also shaped in quadrangular and pentagonal forms to offer variety to customers. On account of rising demand for planters and decorative garden tubs, artisans constantly aspire to create a distinction for their products in the market. The surfaces are incised or sculptured with various images from environment and modern surroundings. These representational styles are heterogeneous in nature due to its innovative designs and motifs. Sometimes, the structure of the tubs is completely changed to accommodate new forms. Plate 6.5A shows one such flower tub in heart shape.

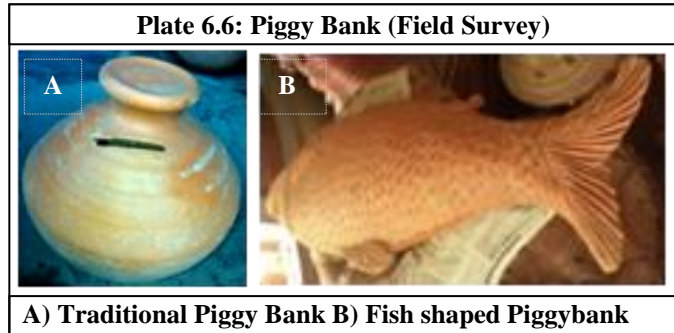


Sculpted designs varying from *bihu*³ troops to *Sattriya* dance form and Lord Krishna dancing with *gopis*⁴ (refer to Plate 6.5 B) can be found made on the surface. This

³Bihu is a folk dance of Assam. It is performed during the festival of Rongali Bihu during the month of Baisakh, i.e. the middle of April. The other two Bihu festivals are Kati Bihu and Magh Bihu celebrated during the months of Kartik, i.e. the middle of October and Magh, i.e. the middle of January respectively.

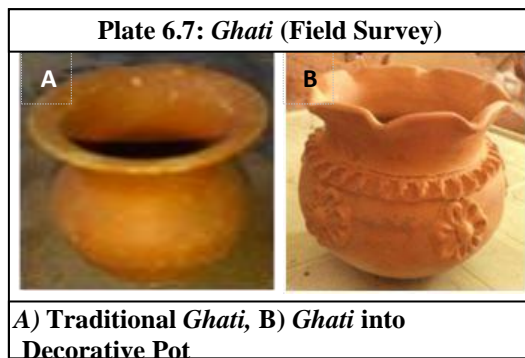
sculpting, according to artisans, is an inspiration from the ancient architectures and temples. Modern modes also inspire creativity. The *Doordarshan* logo instilled on one such tub, as shown with highlighted circle in Plate. 6.4 C is an outcome inspired by the logo of the national broadcaster of India. Intricate surface decoration fetches higher price in the market and hence it is considered among artisans.

Artisans have also modeled traditional drinking glass by offering designs on the surface either through incising or sculpting. Such decorative glasses attract more local



customers during rural fairs and weekly markets. Ornamentation allows artisans to price their products higher. Similarly, simple piggy banks are also modified to arrest attention of young customers like children. Aesthetics are added in the form of external sculpting on the traditional format. Apart from the usual shape (refer to Plate 6.6 A), it also comes in several other forms as shown in Plate 6.6 B.

Small pots and vessels like *khuti*, *ghati* and *handi* as well as *saru* of various sizes are also transformed into decorative items like hanging pots, wall vases, planters and items of home decoration which are more in demand among town dwellers than the



traditional vessels. Innovative and heterogeneous sculpturing depicting animals like fish, rhino, etc. can be seen on the products meant to serve as drawing room objects (refer to Plate 6.8 B, & 6.8 C). Limited rural customer base necessitates the need among artisans to

diversify their products and fit in the niche markets. Likewise, bigger storage vessels like *matka* and *kalah* are also transmuted into garden tubs and planters (refer to Plate 6.9). The narrow neck part above the belly portion are often removed or sometimes kept intact with little tampering. Heterogeneous features like handles and rings to

⁴ Gopi is used to refer to the group of cow herding maids in Puranic literature describing stories of Lord Krishna.

^a Doordarshan is the logo of the national broadcaster of India under the aegis of Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India.

suspend from ceiling and surface ornamentation showcasing birds like duck are also added for further aesthetics.

The base of the pots is slightly made flat or basal rings are often added for stability of the pots and planters as drawing room pieces. Essentially, the openings of the mouth of these conventional pots are either removed or are formulated into wavy circumference enhancing the beauty of the final products.



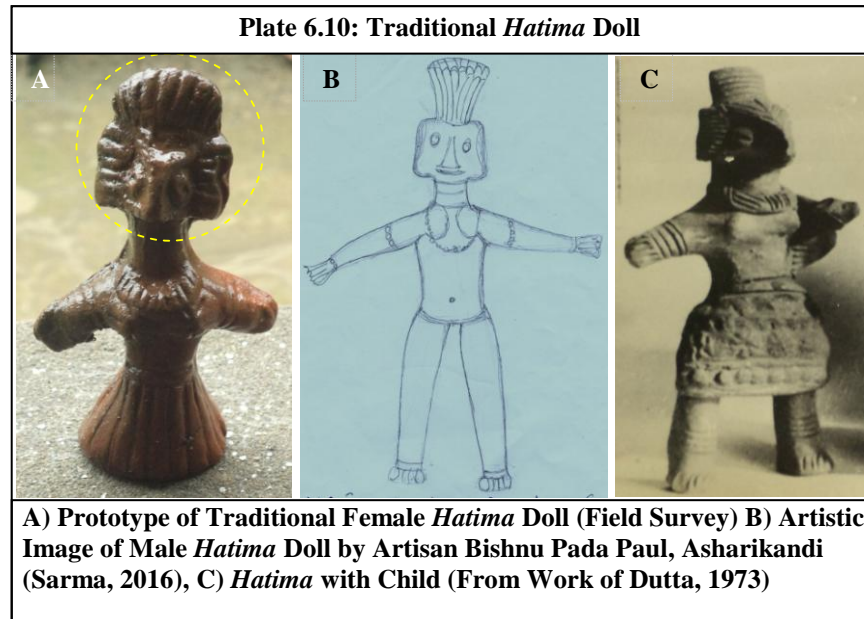
B) Terracotta Toys (*Putola*)

Terracotta toys and dolls are the most articulate clay expressions of the Paul community of Asharikandi. Items like tortoise, horses and elephants on wheels, etc. were play objects produced for the children. Statuettes of male and female with open arms were made on which children enjoyed draping clothes (refer to Plate. 6.10). The conventional doll has close resemblance to the unearthed figurines at Mohenjo-Daro due to its pinched bird-like beaky face and fan shaped headdress (as narrated by elderly artisans; also mentioned in work by Dutta, 2004; salient features shown with highlighted circle in Plate 6.10 A).

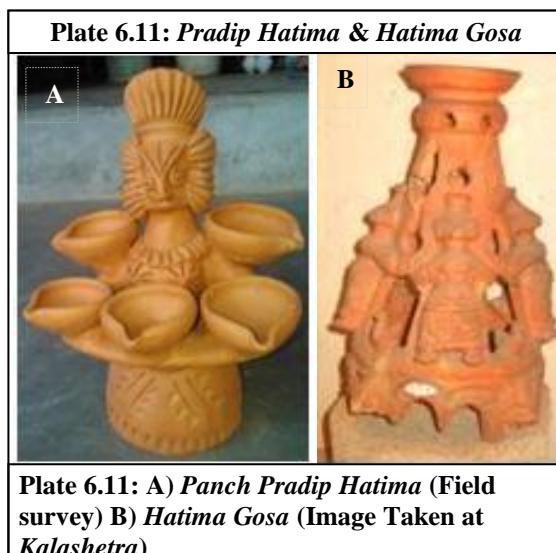
Of all these terracotta toys produced in Asharikandi, toy dolls, now known as *hatima*, has seen a wave of transformation for its suitability and adaptability as an interior decoration object. Its functional dimension has also changed from a toy to art work.

Usable pieces like cloth hangers and key holders are derived out of this toy doll for addressing new functionality of the product.

Traditional *hatima* dolls are transformed into hangers for such clientele. Decorative cloth and key hangers based on traditional *hatima* models, according to artisan Bishnu



Paul, are derived from the plastic hangers available in market. Other than the beaky faced doll, clay toys include cooking vessel sets, palanquin, animals on wheels and horses with long legs and necks (Chattopadhyay, 1975; Das, 1968).



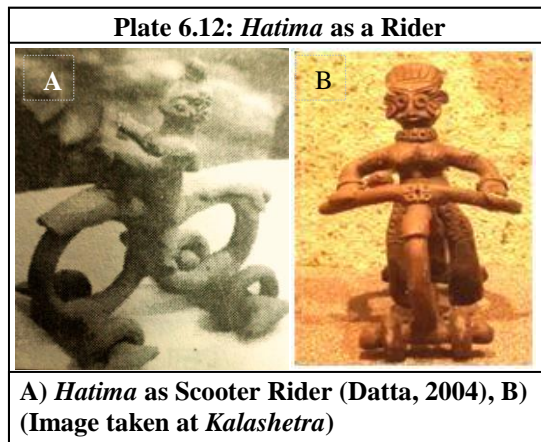
The surface ornamentations in the original *hatima* dolls included simple lines incised to resemble ornaments like bangles and necklace, frills of the clothing and ornamental head-dress (refer to Plate 6.10A). Some tiny flecks resembling flowers were also added later to adorn the lower body part of the female toy doll (refer to Plate 6.10 C). The overall motifs and ornamental work done on these earlier toy dolls,

especially the female versions, were simple in nature. The archaic dolls always reflected wide open arms since produced as toys on which clothes could be draped.

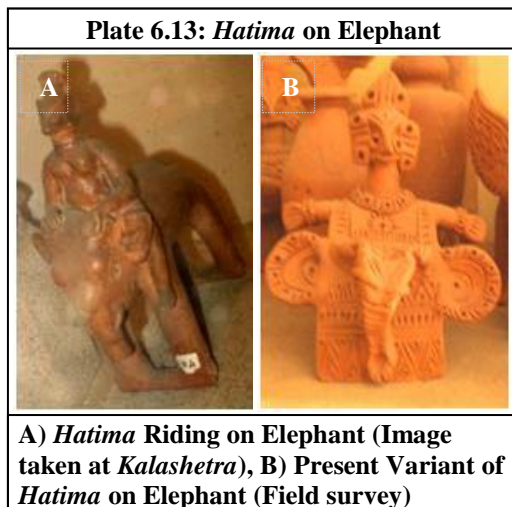
Apart from that, the *hatima* doll also appeared as a woman carrying a child (Datta, 1973, refer to Plate 6.10 C). As observed by Datta (1995), the mother figurine was

obtuse and out of proportion while the child on the lap ‘looks more like the young one of an animal than a human baby’ (p. 270).

The doll with a baby in lap is more evolved form of local *Nohira* dolls or clay toys resembling abstract human forms of Goalpara which are votive in nature (Chattopadhyay, 1975; DasGupta, 1982; Sarma, 1989). Ajit Mookerji described this mother and child toy produced by the new settlers from



erstwhile east Bengal as a variation of the Tangail (Mymensingh of Bangladesh) doll (1956). The name *hatima* appeared around the year 1974-75 due to its features such as large ears like an elephant (*hati*) and motherly image (*ma*) carrying a child (as interpreted by elderly artisans during field survey). The designs were simple patterns of tiny parallel and incised lines and simple floral sculpturing on the body surface.

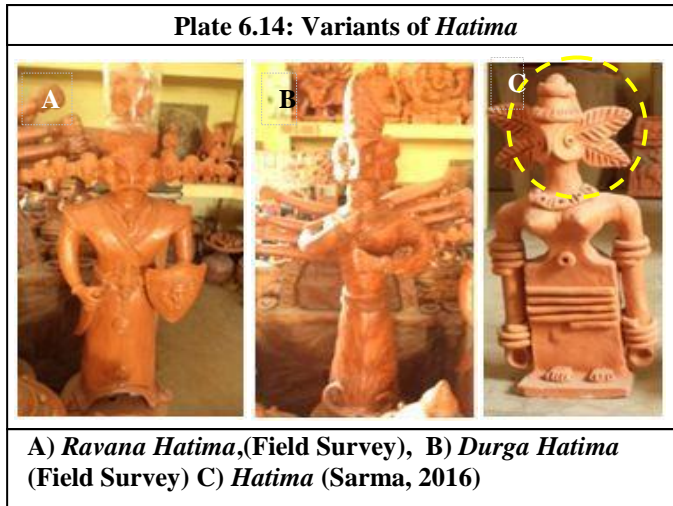


The first modification in its original form came when an eminent personality from the zamindar⁵ family of Gauripur (Dhubri district) instructed crafters to flex the hands of the doll in a way that it can hold a *pradip* or *saki* (lamp). It came to be known as *pradip hatima*. Nilima Baruah, sister of renowned film maker Pramathesh Baruah from the royal family is said to have

advised artisans to produce *hatima* in a way that it is used for purposes other than as toy. It resulted in *pradip hatima*. This art work received attention from government authorities due to its striking resemblance to the excavated doll from Mohenjo-Daro. According to artisans, the craft village started getting more limelight since 1982. Renowned master artisan of Asharikandi, Dhirendranath Paul introduced *hatima* as a bi-cycle rider which was highly recognized in an exhibition of art work in France in

⁵ Zamindars were petty land holders in the Indian subcontinent who had enormous control over the peasants. They collected revenue and ensured proper collection of taxes on behalf of the *Mughal* Empire and later the imperial courts.

1984 following which Shri Paul also said to have received order for ten thousand pieces of the art from France and the US. The other variant is that of a *hatima* as a scooter rider.

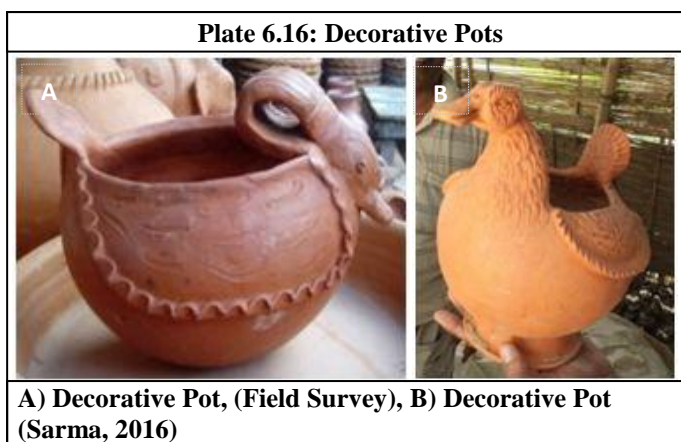


Initially, the artisans started modifying the doll to sell it during local fairs. *Hatima* as *pradip hatima* was received well locally as well in several other places of Assam which led to its production as commercialized object. Later on, *panch* (five) *pradip hatima* (refer to Plate 6.11 A) in

various styles as well as *hatima* arranged in the form of *gosa* started to be produced (refer to Plate 6.11 B). *Hatima* dolls are produced in various forms as far as the creativity of the artisans could stretch. However, the original *hatima* doll still remains the epitome of Asharikandi toy making culture. The figurines are now made perfect in dimensions with added aesthetics to shift its utility to that of decorative art objects from the toy nomenclature.



Plate 6.15: Hatima on a Swan Boat (Field survey)



Structural features of the body of the *hatima* doll are tapered or broadened, made cylindrical or flattened according to the required beauty and theme of the object (refer to Plate 6.14). Other than structural

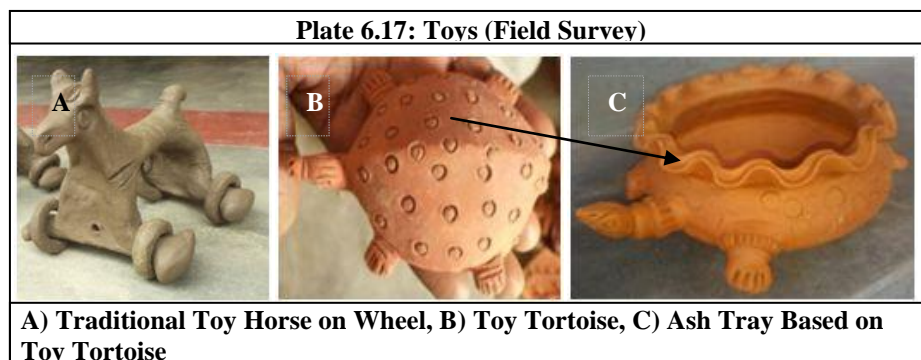
modifications, stylistic variations in the form of excess ornamentation can be noticed in the necklines, body decoration as well as on its elementary features like ears and headdress. The fan shaped headdress is sometimes offered in conical shapes to

resemble crown to suit personalities like the ten headed demon king *Ravana* (refer to Plate 6.14 A) and goddess *Durga* (refer to Plate 6.14 B) of the Indian mythology.

At times, the ears are tampered into the shape of leaves and hands are elongated (refer to Plate 6.14 C highlighted with circle). But the orthogeneous beaky face and largeness of ears are kept intact concurring with its name *hatima*. Several heterogenetic elements in the ornamentation style can thus be seen in the *hatima* dolls produced for decoration today. *Hatima* is conceived in various forms such as a boater, a farmer carrying a plough and as a palanquin bearer. Artisans reason such changes necessary to attend to aesthetics oriented customers and to compete monopolistically among fellow craftsmen. Another reason for such modifications is the shift in the target of artisans from local markets to regional markets and far beyond.

6.4.2 Shifting Functionality of the Crafts and Innovation in Product Line

Pottery and terracotta objects of Asharikandi always served the local rural



populace as well as customers of the adjacent districts across Assam. The items were primarily used in domestic purposes, as children's toys and were used in some religious practice. With artisans vying for customers, outside this rural customer base, modifications were necessitated in objects to suit new functional requirements. Since the 1970s, some traditional forms like *matka*, *handi*, *kalah* (refer to Plate 6.8 & 6.9), *tekeli* (refer to Plate 6.21) etc. were developed as garden planters and tubs. Items began to be developed as decorative objects for households.

The target customers had now shifted to the consumers in cities and towns. As a result, aesthetics were added to the conventional pottery objects through ornamentation. Tubs (refer to Plate 6.4 A) already in production during the time were also fused with further aesthetic elements. The terracotta *hatima* was modeled as a bicycle and a scooter rider for its wider acceptance among children and as an item of home decoration (refer to Plate 6.12).

Plate 6.18: Large Decorative Vases Based on Metal Crafts



Source: Field Survey

Traditional toy item like the tortoise is developed as ash tray and incense stick holder to fit requirements of modern customers (refer to Plate 6.17 C). Innovation in product line also started to take place soon as functionality of the clay items changed from utilitarian objects to home and garden decoration items.

Production of novel products initially initiated due to some master craftsmen's desire to create newness in the product

line and also to expand their customer base. Soon, as new artisans started joining the process, it gave rise to competition, which resulted in further proliferation of the products. The trend continues as enterprising artisans, to hold monopolistic advantage, seek frequent successful innovations from time to time.

Plate 6.19: Metal Craft Inspired Clay Objects



Source: Field Survey

Traditional metal objects of Assam like *lota* and *ghati* (detailed discussion on metal craft of Assam is in Chapter 7) often become the inspiration to producing innovative objects through simple structural modification

and sculpting (refer to Plate 6.19). Other than that, large metal objects produced in famous regions like Moradabad (in Uttar Pradesh) also inspire the creations of the master artisans of Asharikandi (refer to Plate 6.19). The idea is to offer inexpensive decorative vases in clay to customers seeking lesser priced home decoration items.

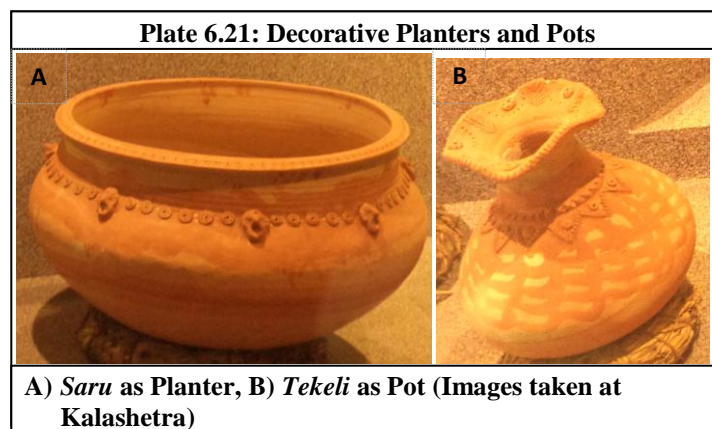
Artisans believe in offering competition to metal and plastic product manufacturers by producing what the latter produce in metal and plastic.



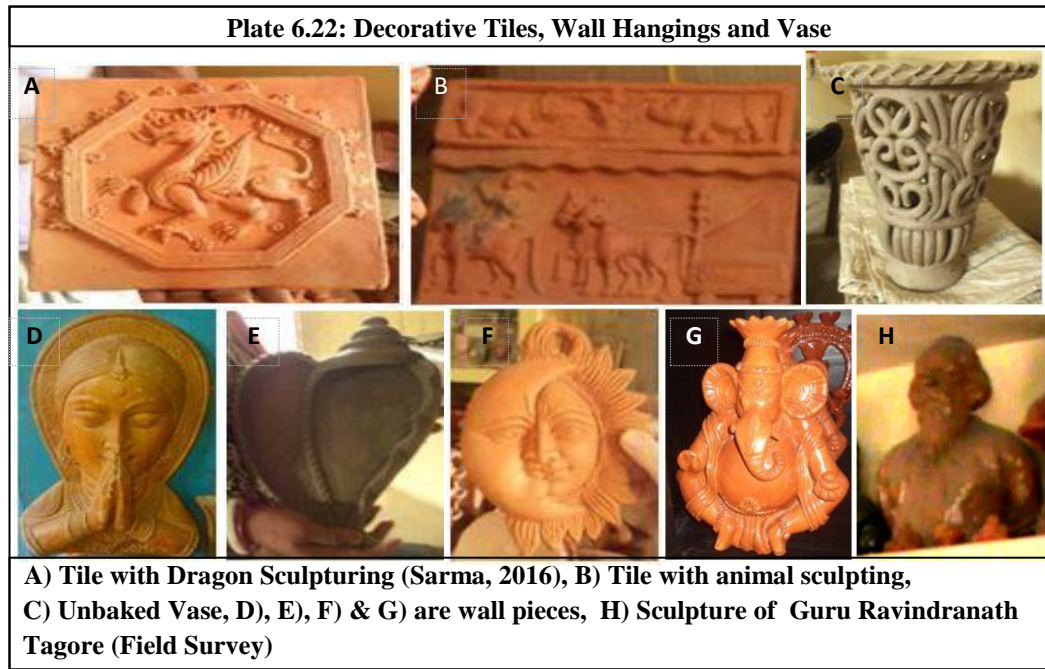
Apart from these, new items fulfilling other functional requirements are also developed. Water jug, paper-waste bins, toothbrush holder, pen holders, etc. are such items that are usually available in plastic and metal which are now offered in clay. Decorative lamp holders modeled on temple bells (refer to Plate 6.20 D) and conventional lanterns (refer to Plate 6.20 E) are an inspiration from fanciful lamps available in the market. Artisans constantly

vie to grab share in the consumer items market leading to proliferation of innovative product ranges.

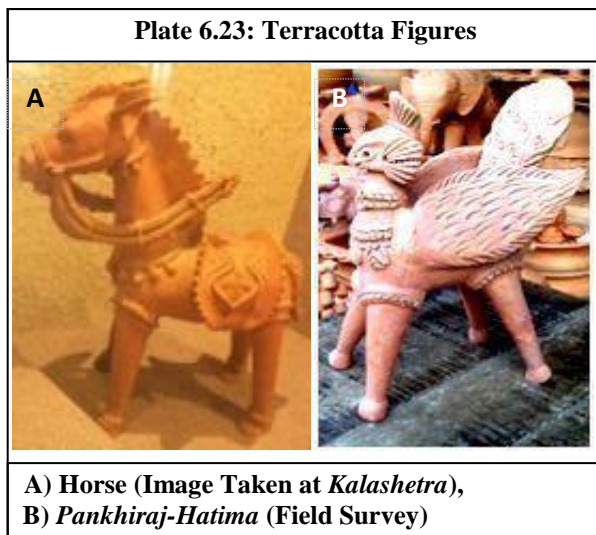
Terracotta frames with beautiful sculpturing ranging from flowers, birds, animals and other scenes as well as flat-backed wall pieces are produced by the artisans to offer variety in the interior decoration segment. These items, according to artisans (field survey), are also inspired from decorative terracotta products from neighbouring states like West Bengal which flood



the local markets of Assam. Small size and sturdiness along with aesthetic features make such products better buying options among intermediate as well as external customers and hence opted by artisans at Asharikandi.



Sculpturing of prominent personalities is an innovative dimension attempted by a few master artisans of Asharikandi like Dhirendranath Paul. There are sculptures of eminent Indian personalities like Mahatma Gandhi, Indira Gandhi, Ravindranath Tagore, B. R Ambedkar as well as images of Buddha in various forms. Such sculptures find good institutional buyers and are well sold in gift markets.

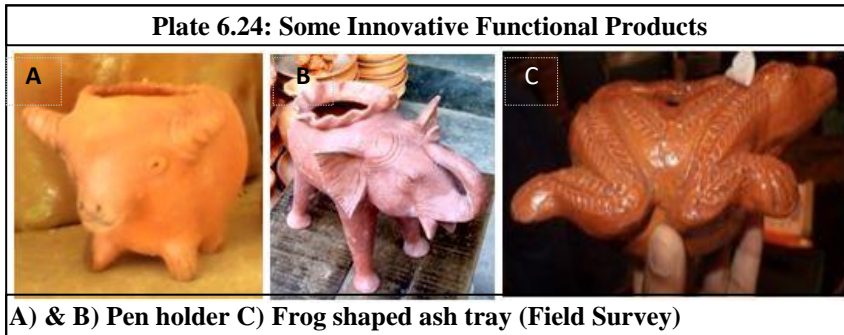


One of the most significant and spontaneously innovated products in Asharikandi is the decorative horse developed by Dhirendranath Paul in the middle part of the 1970s. During his visit to a fair in Gwalior in 1976, he happened to see the famed Bankura (a region in West Bengal) clay horse and Aynar clay horse of Tamilnadu. The Asharikandi horse

was modeled by combining the artistic features of these two clay horses (refer to Plate 6.23 A). Shri Paul believed in creating a decorative horse in clay that would represent the decorated horses used during *ashvamedh yagya*⁶ in ancient India besides

⁶ Ashvamedha Yagya is a horse sacrifice ritual followed during the Vedic times in ancient India. Through this ritual, kings tried to prove their undisputed sovereignty over the land and its people. The heavily decorated animal was released to wander closely followed and monitored by king's warriors.

representing the artistic terracotta culture of Asharikandi. The initial horse model had added artistic features like saddle with smaller limbs and neck than the other two horses. Since then, the Asharikandi horse has undergone many changes. The saddle initially kept plain was later ornamented and body ornamentation was also included.



Structural modification in the horse was later initiated by fusing the pinched face of the *hatima* doll

with horse's body and adding wings to it giving rise to *panki-raj*⁷ *hatima* (refer to Plate 6.23 B). Artisans' aim to commercialize the product further resulted in stylistic creativity and further structural modification. Apart from the regular small sizes, large life sized clay horses are also produced for the home furnishing range. Miniaturization and gigantism forms key features for the commercialization of the products (refer to Plate 6.25). Smaller products fitting palm tops are much fancied by young customers. According to artisans, items are also miniaturized to give sturdiness and strength to the fragile clay products which increases its scope of buying among long distance customers.



Another important dimension for the commercialization of clay products is the growing value of altruism which drives city dwellers to buy clay products but offering functionality and aesthetics. Modern customers' search for functional features in humble clay objects offered scope to further transform the products.

The territory traversed by the horse would be considered under the king's authority till nobody challenged his authority. If no enemy king or person manages to capture or kill the horse, after a year or so, the horse was guided back to the original territory and sacrificed.

⁷ *Pankhi-raj* literally means bird with wings.

6.4.3 New Raw Materials in Use

Colored or burnished pottery was never produced earlier in Assam and ornamentation was simple without any sophistication (Saikia, 2000). But growing competition from high quality imported clay products from neighbouring states like West Bengal and shifting customer inclination towards high finished and glazed products has impelled Asharikandi artisans to using synthetic colors and materials. Glazed surface increases the aesthetic appeal and helps entice customers. Synthetic substance is thus applied to offer burnished and vitreous look to the objects. Extra aesthetics like clay beads are also added to vases sewn with the help of metal wires on the peripheral parts. Use of artificial colors is also on the increase in some terracotta and pottery objects (refer to Plate 6.25).

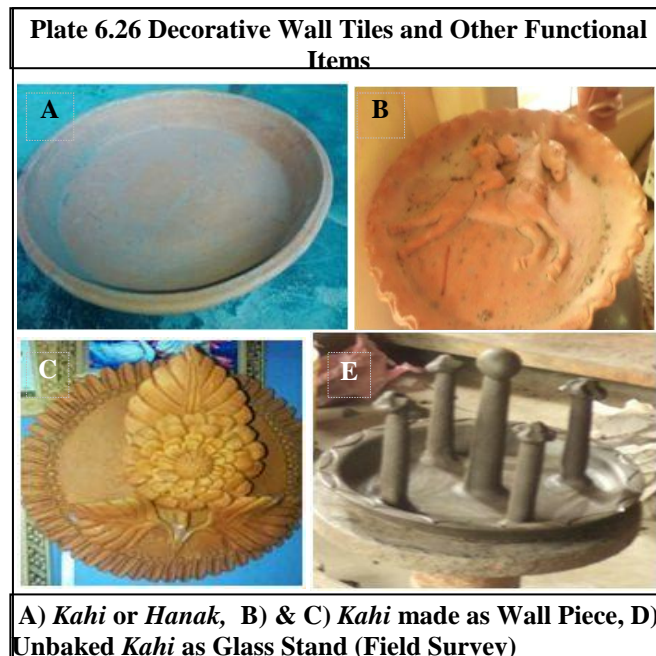
However, application of synthetic colors on baked clay products are only practiced since the last two decade or so. In traditional practice, during production *gerua rang* (red color) called as *kosh* (a kind of powdered substance that gives color) is added to clay along with caustic soda while preparing the soil for articulating the products. Once baked, these ingredients bring the desired red color in the products. However, on the red surface additional synthetic colors are also applied at times to distinguish it from the traditional pottery and terracotta products. Painted pots and vases as well as piggy banks sell quite well in the markets and hence practiced more and more in recent times.

6.4.4 The Relationship between Clientele and Craft and the Influence of External Agents and Intermediaries in Commercialization

Commercial potential of pottery and terracotta objects was facilitated by some wider historical circumstances. Earlier and even now, the products are laden on boats and sold in the stretches of the lands around the Brahmaputra where demand for the utilitarian wares exists (field survey). Craftsmen themselves sold their products, mostly to the internal customers of the region through weekly *haats* (markets) and regular fairs. Some toys like horse on wheels (refer to Plate 6.17 A) are still marketed for its conventional children customers during local fairs. Some of the traditional utilitarian products like *jhajar* and *chapri*, *kalah* and *tekeli* are still produced for the rural folks of the place as well as regions outside Asharikandi. These conventional items are traded as far as Tinsukia district in upper Assam.

For regular utilitarian needs and religious uses, conventional items are still made and sold. However, realization of clientele needs influences craft's transformation. Artisans depending on crafts as source of livelihood produce crafts which promise sale. As a result, artisans spontaneously start infusing changes in their traditional products to garner demand among immediate customers. But, most of the items sold to the clientele in places other than Asharikandi are through local middlemen and vendors (field survey). These intermediaries become the primary purchaser (or clientele) of the crafts who later resale the products in several places of Assam and even outside Assam. The practice today is, in fact, more widely followed than in the past. On certain instances, craftsmen also receive local customers from adjacent towns and cities who visit their work-sheds and buy required products.

Generally, there is lack of direct access of the craftsmen with the clienteles in places located far off from their locality. Even then, craftsmen understand the prospective demand an object might generate when made in compliance with the clientele need. Hence, they experiment with their product line and introduce necessary modifications in the craft. This has led to changing



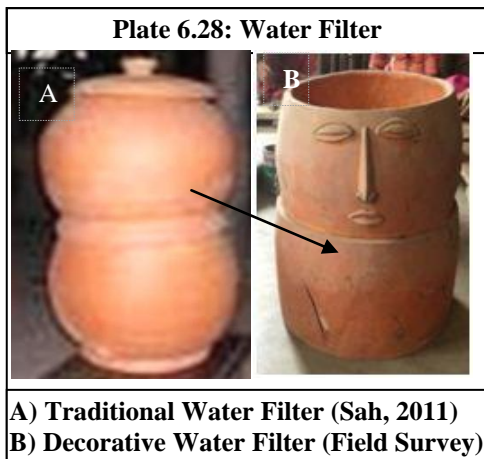
nomenclature of the pottery items like *kalah*, *tekeli*, *khoja*, *tub*, *saru*, etc. into terracotta class. Though used marginally in its conventional forms among rural customers, its declining demand amongst intermediate customers from nearby towns and cities, due to spread of inexpensive and durable plastic alternatives created the need for modification of the products. The utilitarian wares like cooking pots or storage vessels are overtly transformed to re-establish the objects as aesthetic pieces for urban customers of Assam. Artisans also fancied converting *kahi* or *hanak* into wall decorations. Due to its dying utility as a meal dish among farmer and rural labour segment, the product was modified into wall pieces (refer to Plate 6.26 B & C). The

modifications are spontaneous in nature mostly initiated by the master craftsmen themselves in realization of probable demand.



However, in recent times, local middlemen and vendors, as clientele of the craft products are also guiding artisans about the type of the product in

demand. These intermediaries inform artisans about the size and shape that is preferred by the customers in different places. They ask artisans to produce the crafts in specific quantities. But, the information provided by these brokers is seldom about designs. Based on these considerations, artisans balance their productions. These local channels form an essential link for moving craftsmen's products to different markets. They offer their services as sales agents of the crafts.



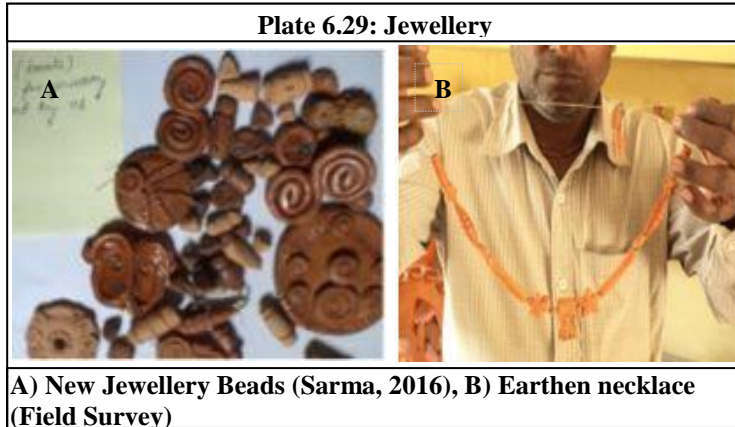
Often discussed in crafts related research, tourists as clientele yielding necessary modification in the crafts are hardly seen in place like Asharikandi named as a model crafts village in Assam. As a rural tourism site, its performance is dismal ("Evaluation cum Impact", Ministry of Tourism, n.d.). Though limited in nature, some direct interface with this clientele category

influences artisans' creativity and sometimes results in modification and innovation of products. To cite one such case, a visitor from Sivasagar district of Assam to Asharikandi asked master artist Mahadev Paul to replicate the dragon image found on the gate of *Ronghar*⁸ on to the flat tiles produced in Asharikandi (Sarma, 2016). The tile is in production since then. Apart from that, international tourists' appreciation for

⁸ Ronghar is an architectural edifice constructed during the reign of Ahom king Swargadeo Pramatta Singha in the 1746. This structure served as a sports pavilion for the royals and the nobles. The amphitheatre is located in Sivasagar town of Sivasagar district of Assam.

clay jewellery also leads to modification in existing types. However, such instances are rare.

For tourist clientele, some of the iconic products like *hatima* doll are converted into



miniaturized souvenirs (refer to Plate 6.27 C). Utility of the object based on clientele needs and type of clientele thus play an important role in the determination of the size and shape of clay objects.

As a result, items that fit the palm or are convenient and easy to pack in bags are produced for tourists who plan to buy easily transportable clay items. Conventional *hatima* dolls, as small as 3 to 6 inches in sizes, are specially produced for customers willing to buy clay craft of Assam as souvenir items.

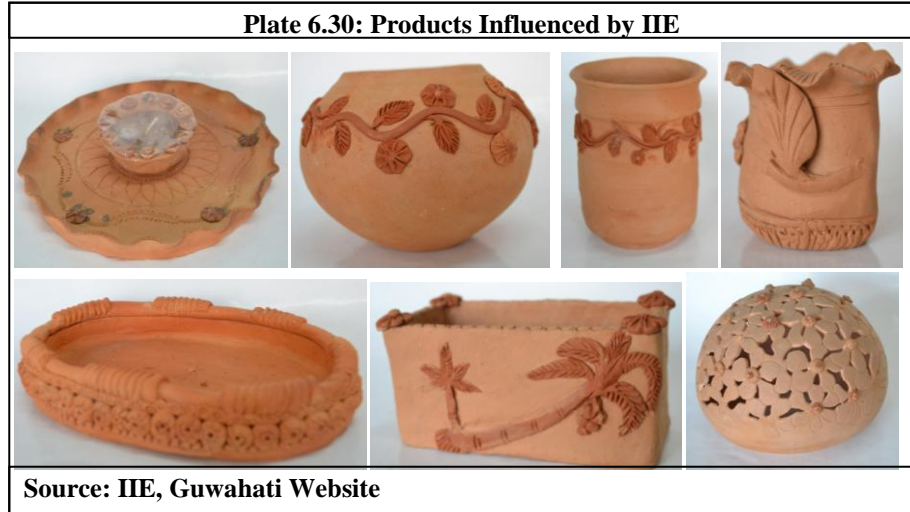
In recent years, innovation in the product line is led by some training efforts of government agencies like IIE (Indian Institute of Entrepreneurship). The role of such external agencies in modification of the products for commercialization has been very recent in Asharikandi and has been rather non-continuous. Most of the time, its aim is to provide marketing support through organizing exhibitions. The agency in collaboration with National Institute of Design (NID), in 2011, along with its designers and master artisans of the place acted as a change agent by developing new range of products like ash tray, incense stick and candle stand, pen stand, jewellery, etc. Artisans were advised to beautify the surface of the traditional water filters with facial features and etch textures to renew its diminishing demand (refer to Plate 6.28 B). New range of jewellery beads (refer to Plate 6.29 A) in clay other than few traditional ones was developed during the short training program. With the financial support of Development Commissioner Handicrafts, these agencies also help artisans participate in exhibitions and fairs across the country, thereby partly helping artisans in selling their products.

The training programs for the artisans are conducted with the purpose to accustom artisans to the market requirements, help them develop better products that can

compete in design, finish, and in quality. Such agencies emphasize on developing products that are unique and can be used for interior decorations.

Articles are often molded on the conventional products apart from innovative product ranges. Items

like incense stick holder, worshipping tray, glass as pen holder, magazine holders, lamps, etc. are some of



the products developed during the training program me under IIE (refer to Plate 6.30). Glass holders, modeled on *hanak* (refer to Plate 6.26 D), was developed with some guidance from IIE. Such agencies often introduce heterogeneity in designs and product line.

Prior to the training provided by IIE, in 2004, *Kalashetra* also conducted a workshop for the artisans in Guwahati, wherein artisans produced objects based on traditional items. However, a few master craftsmen like Dhirendranath Paul and his son, a fine arts graduate, are pioneers in innovating items which are later followed and produced by fellow craftsmen of the community. Under the Guru-Shishya Parampara Scheme of the Ministry of Culture, Govt. of India rolled out in the year 2003-04, the enrolled master artisans like the father son duo, train budding artisans of the village to sustain tradition. The govt.



sponsors finance to support this program. Similarly, another craftsman Bishnu Pada Paul has also trained young members of their community. These master craftsmen train artisans to develop innovative products that can generate possible demand in the markets. In doing so, they are intermediating modifications in pottery and terracotta crafts of Asharikandi.

Another society called Asharikandi Terracotta Doll Making Samabay Samiti Ltd., a cooperative society with artisans as its members, also regularly conduct workshops for new artisans of the village with the help of its artisans like Bishnu Pada Paul and Devdas Paul. Local NGOs like North East Craft and Rural Development Organization (NECARD) also facilitate artisans from time to time in marketing of crafts through exhibitions. Artisans, those who could be a part of government and NGO sponsored exhibition troops, are also influenced by the products that they see outside. Due to direct contacts with the external customers, artisans realize the demand which they try to develop back home. Altogether taken, the influence of intermediaries in the change and modification of the products is rather found limited and sporadic. However, their role in organizing frequent buyer-producer meet is found to be prominent (as found through field observation).

6.5 Wrapping up the Chapter

The study highlighted that commercialization of the Asharikandi pottery & terracotta products have led to the modifications of the crafts with respect to style of the products, the functional dimensions of some crafts and raw materials usage for its suitability and adaptability in various markets. Stylistic modifications are noticed in the ornamentation of some of the archaic toy dolls and pottery objects. Other than orthogeneous designs like incised lines, dots, floral flecks and simple layering of clay to form wavy patterns, heterogenetic elements like representational motifs, logo of broadcasters, elaborate leaves and floral patterns have emerged (refer to Plate 6.2, 6.4, 6.5, 6.14,). Designs started to become elaborate and much spread especially on tubs and pots as artisans tried to reposition their crafts for customers of towns and cities. This initial wave of modifications begun in the 1970s as artisans started developing the products for serving new functionality. The designs are the most expressive iconic attempt to endow the recently introduced products with the coating of tradition. It is also complemented by the simplistic endeavor of artisans to antique some of the wares and toy items by smearing them with simplistic lines and flakes of flower and leaves to present traditional elements in decorative objects. *Hatima* dolls can be found having such incised lines and other simple components along with the highly aestheticized dolls (refer to Plate 6.10 A) for customers seeking the craft for decoration purposes.

The modification in the traditional pottery and toy objects was rather very spontaneous in nature. Artisans initiated modification in realization of probable demand of a product and understanding of customer requirements. As such, they produced object and launched it in market. When the object garnered effective demand, its production continued. Local middlemen as a major clientele base played an important role in bringing crafts to the markets in the earlier times and in the present as well. Direct influences of customers such as tourists rather seem to be rare. However, artisans who take part in exhibitions through funding from agencies often revolutionize designs and bring innovation.

Emerging scope for commercial success led to stylistic transformation as well as innovation in product line (refer to Section 6.4.2). Conventional pottery items like *kalah*, *matka*, *bhuruki*, *saru*, etc. used as utilitarian wares were stylized with added aesthetics elements to be reproduced as decorative items and garden wares. Majority of the artistic products found at Asharikandi are of recent origin. Artisans conceptualized innovative objects based on traditional metal craft products of Assam and elsewhere to add variety (refer to Section 6.4.2, Plate 6.19). Similarly, certain structural changes in form and size of the crafts are also noticed. Clay items are enlarged to accommodate home and garden decoration requirements of modern customers. Accordingly, simpler or excess surface ornamentations are added to the craft items. Other than producing items in larger sizes, some of the traditional products like *hatima* were developed as miniature items to be brought as souvenirs (refer to Section 6.4.4, Plate 6.27). Commercial realism of the clay products have also brought changes with respect to use of varnish and colors on the baked products. Synthetic colors are smeared on the pottery and terracotta objects like vases, *hatima* dolls, piggy banks and decorative pots (refer to Plate 6.25, section 6.4.3). These are highly liked by clienteles in towns and cities who buy these products for home decorations. Apart from colors, beads are also fixed at times with metallic wires to add further richness.

In recent past, government agencies have also stepped in to diversify and promote the traditional craft (refer to section 6.4.4). Institutions like IIE in collaboration with NID and DC (Handicrafts) train artisans in novel craft making and redevelopment of conventional items with new functional features. Traditional water filters, *kahi*, glass, lids, etc. are reformulated as vases, trays and pen holders. Other than that, many other

objects like magazine holders, incense stick holders, lamps, etc. are also developed through their short period workshops. The trainings conducted have brought in further heterogenetic design elements in the baseline designs. Government schemes like *Guru-shishya* programs doled out through government agencies also help train budding young artisans under the guidance of master craftsmen of the village. Most of the training programmes are rather sporadic in nature. Other than infrequent design interventions, these agencies along with other similar NGOs like NECARDO also help artisans provide marketing platforms by facilitating artisans take part in exhibitions and fairs and organizing producer-buyer meet. They, thereby, facilitate sales of crafts in different markets. These instances of external agencies' influence in design modification and sale highlighting aspects of sponsored commercialization taking place in the craft place. However, these are very sporadic in nature, particularly in terms of craft modification. In recent years, the local intermediary that remained an important marketing channel has also been providing necessary information to artisans on quantity and quality of products demanded in the markets. However, their role has rather been very minimal with respect to design guidance. They act mostly as facilitator and as a sales agent.