

## **Chapter Eight**

### **New Aesthetic Practices and Commercialization of Bamboo Crafts of Nalbari**

*To give people pleasure in the things they must perforce use, that is one great office of decoration; to give people the pleasure in the things they must perforce make, that is the other use of it. – (W. Morris, 1877)*

#### **8.1 The Prelude**

The chapter is a holistic overview of the commercialization of the bamboo crafts of Nalbari. In section 8.2, the importance of bamboo and the bamboo crafts in the day today life of the people is presented. Section 8.3 provides a discussion on some of the traditional bamboo products produced in Assam. In the following section 8.4, stylistic changes in the bamboo crafts are presented. It is divided into two sections, the first one dealing with the changes in *japi* and the second one highlighting the commercialization of other bamboo items. Finally, section 8.5 gives a concluding discussion on the studied sections.

#### **8.2 Importance of Bamboo and Bamboo Crafts in the Social Life of the People**

Bamboo craft production is universally practiced by all sections of the society throughout the state of Assam and may be termed as pure handicrafts in which even elementary mechanical devices are not used (Baruah and Choudhury, 1999). Bamboo is an integral plant grown in the traditional home gardens of Assam (Sharma et al. 2016). It has an immense influence on the life and culture of the people of Assam and the North East for centuries. Bamboo has often figured in local proverbs, legends, songs and folklore and it carries many symbolic meanings in its various uses. Bamboo represents growth and strength and is a symbol of courage and energy. Assamese proverb '*jar nai baah taar nai xaah*' presents this important message and value of bamboo in the society. It literally means 'households without bamboo lack courage'. People in earlier days used to make different kinds of instruments out of bamboo for various purposes. It belongs to the folk craft category made for simple but functional purposes (Rao, 1997). In Assam, bamboo is used in households as storage vessels and

in kitchen and farms for husking, cleaning and also to carry heap or cow dung. Items made out of bamboo are used as fishing tools and as head gears; farmers use bamboo hats called *japi* to shield themselves from sunlight and rain. In rural spaces, basketry as a practice is still maintained. In early times, even after the evening meals, people used to produce at least four to five *pasi* (basket) and *khorahi* (small basket) for daily use (Handique, 1959). The practice more or less still continues in rural areas across villages of Assam where people remain engaged in farming and other conventional modes of living. A simple bamboo structure made with bamboo strips woven into a head cover called *japi* has become synonymous today with the culture and tradition of Assam. Every visiting guest or special dignitaries to Assam are honored with a pair of a decorative *japi* and *gamosa*. Irrespective of rural or city life, bamboo products like *khorahi*, *pasi* and *dala* holds an important place in performing rituals like *xokam*<sup>1</sup>.

### **8.3 Some of the Old Products in Bamboo**

As explained earlier in Chapter 3, Assam during the *Ahom* era was a closed economy. People only produced what they required and the produce was consumed locally with little amount bought by the royal and courtly people (Saikia, 1984). Bamboo crafting was generally a men's activity but women also did minor crafting like basket and winnowing fan making (Borah, 1993). Not much information is available on trade and commerce of bamboo products of earlier times. It is probably because of the entirely utilitarian dimension of bamboo works where production was at household level and consumed internally. Even today, most of the conventional bamboo products are meant for utilitarian use and consumed at household level. It is a spare time activity practised by the agriculturists. Only a small fraction of this is produced by professional artisans for sale who follow it as an occupation (Govt. of Assam). All domestic requirements of bamboo articles are fulfilled at household level (Barkataki, 1969).

Bamboo articles made by the village craftsmen in Assam are of two types viz. hollow and flat ones (Das, 1968). The hollow group consists of storage and utilitarian items like *duli*, *japa*, *khorahi*, *pasi* etc. and flat ones comprise of *kula*, *dala*, *saloni*, *dhari*, *bisoni*, *chakdhari*, *dhara*, etc. (Barua, 1961; Das, 1968). Other than these items, some hollow containers made of a piece of whole bamboo was the *kaira* (oral history of

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<sup>1</sup> *Xokam* is a ritual practised in Assam wherein devotion to God is shown through chanting of religious scriptures. It is also a part of sanctification process performed to bring peace in the households.

respondents). It was used as an equipment to keep milk and curd and also to carry water. Fish has always remained a staple diet in Assam. Hence, to catch substantial fishes, traps were made in conical or cylindrical shape with inversions at one or both ends. Those were *charha*, *polo*, *khaloi*, *sepa*, *khoka*, *bana*, *juluki*, etc. which are still produced. Some like the *khaloi* were also used as containers to keep the caught fish. The items mentioned are some of the important bamboo crafts produced since the medieval period (Borah, 1993). Apart from this, *japi* as a traditional head gear is an 'era specific' (Chifos and Looye, 2002) product from the *Ahom* reign whose production continues till date is a symbol of Assam's culture and pride.

### **8.3.1 The Process of Production of Bamboo Crafts**

Around 38 naturally growing species<sup>2</sup> of bamboo are found in Assam (Assam State Biodiversity Board). Depending upon their strength, quality and tensility, these varieties are utilized for diverse uses like craft production, structural applications in house construction, scaffolding, flooring, roofing, etc. Some of the most widely used local bamboo varieties in Assam are *bhaluka* (*Bambusa Balcooa Roxb.*), *kotoha* (*Bambusa Bambos Voss*), *jatie makal* (*Bambusa nutans Wall ex Munro*), *jati* (*Bambusa tulda Roxb*), etc. People in rural areas utilize simple hand-tools like *dao* (bill-hook), knives, carving blade, saw, etc. for crafting bamboo objects.

For making of bamboo objects like baskets, bamboo splits of different thickness and size are made depending on nature of the item. These splits, as wrap and weft, are woven together in different ways to form cross weft, wicker work, checker-work or diagonal as well as twilled patterns. The latter two are the most common patterns in objects produced for rigid works in agriculture and other domestic purposes. Generally in baskets, weaving starts at the base and gradually extends outwards till desired shape is reached. Supports made out of bamboo rods are also used to give sturdiness to the desired forms. In case of flat objects like *dhara* and *dala*, it is rather easier to give definite shapes. However, the sophisticated forms in bamboo crafts found today are outcome of the mastery of weaving technique excelled through understanding of the material used (Rao, 1997).

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<sup>2</sup> For information on bamboo varieties, refer to National Bamboo Mission, Assam; Cane and Bamboo Technology Centre, Guwahati; Bamboo Information Center, India.

## 8.4 Stylistic Changes in Bamboo Crafts of Nalbari

Stylistic changes in bamboo crafts is explained based on the encryption of new design and structural considerations in archaic forms, the change in the use of new raw materials and the shifting functionality of the crafts from utilitarian products to decorative and functional craft objects. Some few craft objects are taken into consideration to present the commercialization induced modifications in bamboo crafts.

### 8.4.1 *Japi*

Like other crafts, as discussed in earlier chapters, stylistic changes are also noticed in some of the most archaic bamboo items. Among all the bamboo products, *japi* has undergone huge transformations ever since the product became an item of decoration.

#### A. Reflection on its Past Use and Form

*Japi* is an adaptation of the head covering of the Shan tribe of Burma (present day



Myanmar), probably introduced by the Ahoms in Assam (Anderson, 1908; Hastings, 1908). During the Ahom reign, it served as a mark of distinction in ranks and social status of the officers, courtiers and also of their wives (DasGupta, 1982). The Sattradhikars (Chief of Satra or Monastery) and Dangoria (a noble man) wore *japis* while making journeys (Das, 1968). There were several names for the *japi* viz. *gorakhiya japi*, *haluwa japi*, *pani japi*, etc (ibid). Based on its bamboo plating and size also, the names were given as *sorudoiya* and *bordoiya* (DasGupta, 1982) which varied in size from a bowler hat to a huge 5 to 6 feet umbrella (Allen, 1906; Barkataki, 1969). The *japi* used by the *haluwa* (peasant) and *gorakhiya* (cowboy) were of the simplest and rough

types used as shield for rain and heat. A similar archaic *japi* for the tea garden laborers is the *banuwa japi* (Das, 1968).

Some forms of decoration with silver and gold threads were also worked upon the *japis* used by the courtly people. In the days of the Ahom, ministers of highest stature

like the *Buragohain*, *Borpatra Gohain* and *Borgohain* (these three posts were of the hereditary councilors of the state in the Ahom administrative set up) and their wives used to get *pani japis* adorned with gold threads (Bhuyan as cited in Das, 1968). The other councilor called as *Borphukan* used to wear *japi* worked with silver threads while his subordinate *phukans* wore *uka* (plain) *bor japi* (ibid). The *japi* were sometimes also adorned with different colored threads with its conical top embellished with embroidered works suggestive of leaves and trees (ibid). These decorations were found more on the *japi* worn by the women (ibid). Even the rich upper class women would venture out only with an ornamental *japi* on head (Borah, 1993) just like the British aristocratic ladies do. *Japi* used by the commoners were plain and simple (ibid).

### B. Production Technique of *Japi* Frame

The *japi* is a hat like structure with a conical shaped dome on top, not necessarily



pointed but ovular, and made of striped bamboo and *tokou* (scientific name is *livistonia jenkinsiana*) leaves. The strips of split bamboo are interspersed together forming a pattern beneath which *tokou* leaves are arranged and tied with the help of *bet* (rattan or cane) fibers. The wicker work

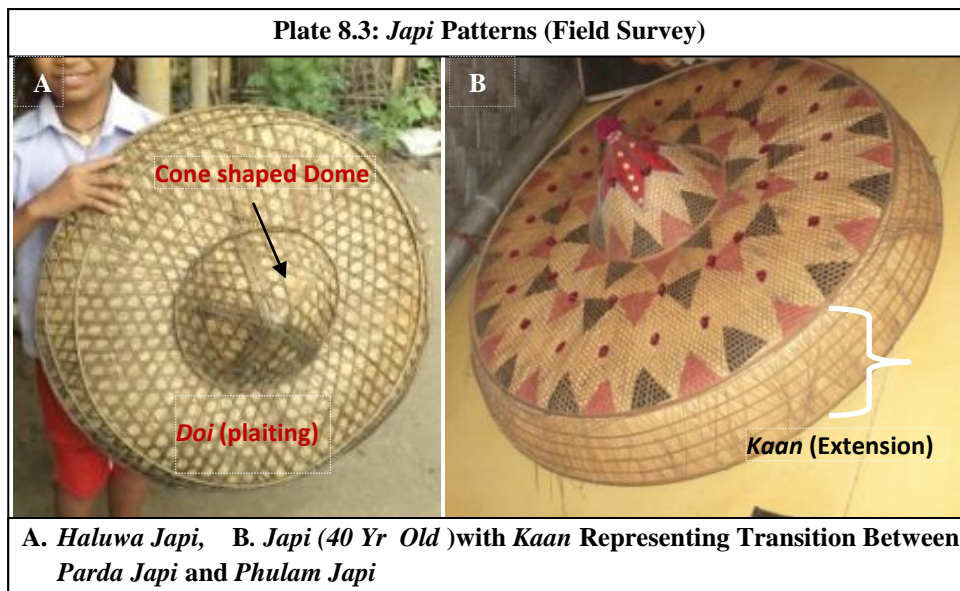
is constructed in a way that gives the *japi* a circular form with a dome shape atop. The interspersed pattern or plaiting of the bamboo strips is known as *doi* which gives strength to the entire frame. *Doi* works in case of the *phulam* (decorative) *japi* is narrow whereas it is broad spaced in *japi* used by farmers and workers. The design works for the decorative *japi* are done on these frames.

### C. Ornamentation and Forms of the *Japi*

The description of the ornamental works on *japi* of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century by Allen (1905) describes *sarudoiya japi* made in Sibsagar and worn by the Muslim women and Brittrial-baniyas. The 6<sup>th</sup> volume of the Assam District Gazetteers by Allen (1905)

elaborates on the 4 feet diameter *japi* made in Nagaon which are held over a lady or priest as heat shield while the 2 feet ones were worn by Mohammedan ladies and lower Hindu castes. These hats are found to be decorated with red, blue cloth strips, silver braids and little balls of threads. Some of the ornamental *japi* works appear in the first motion film produced in Assam by Jyoti Prasad Agarwala in the year 1935. The large *japis* appear with sharp triangular cut outs placed on the lower rim and outer rims of the conical dome with pompoms also placed on the surface. Semi-circular patch works are also seen placed for decoration on the outer rim in some *japis*. Perhaps, such decoration might have been exclusively used for the purpose of the cinema to invoke grandeur in the settings.

**i. Earlier Designs and Forms of the Japi**



Exact references to ornamental *japi* works is not found in great details for Nalbari in the then undivided district of Kamrup. Some records by Pakyntein in 1961 mentions about the *phulam japi* or *chata* produced in Nalbari on a commercial level in the villages of Mugkuchi. The modest form of the *japi* such as *haluwa japi* remained the same while the ornamental ones used by the nobility in earlier times started its course of design transformation. Based on oral history records of some octogenarian artisans of Nalbari district like Nabin Chandra Baishya and Deben Das, it is found that prior to *phulam japi* as known today, a kind of *japi* called as *parda* (veil) *japi* was produced in Nalbari before independence of India (pre 1947). These *japis* with wide peripheral rim drooping to form *kaan* (extension) were used by the Muslim people during

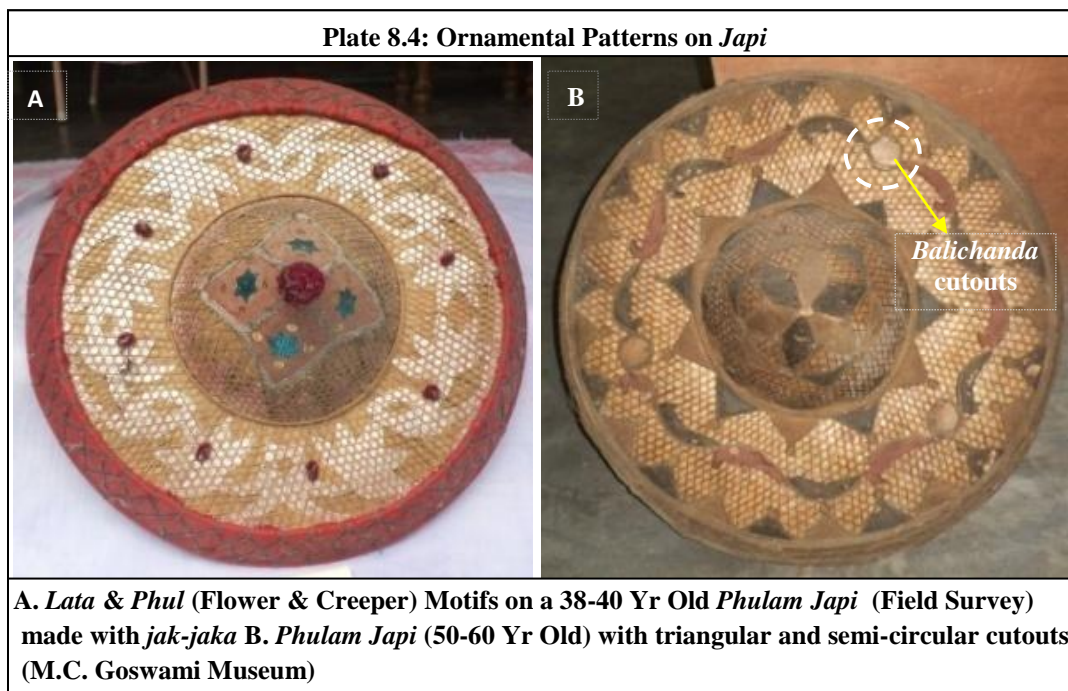
marriages. The *kaan* measuring around 6 to 12 inches provided a veil affect to the wearer, generally the bride. This extension is usually not found in the conventional *japis* used by farmers and tea gardens laborers. A representative *japi* (refer to Plate 8.3 B) is presented above to show how the extensions or *kaan* looked like. The image does not represent the traditional *parda japi* made in the past but simply demonstrate a simple near-image of the *japi* made in the earlier days. However, as mentioned in the previous paragraph, triangular cutouts as shown in the Plate 8.3 B were found to be present on the *japi* used in the mentioned motion picture by the name ‘Joymati’ that released in the year 1935.

But, as found through oral history, the *parda japi* made in Nalbari had extensive use of *balichanda* (a kind of translucent and shiny material), largely on the *kaan* portions along with wool balls in red scattered on the surface. Probably, it could also be due to its easy availability or to mark a distinction from the *japi* produced elsewhere. Red cloth was also placed on the *kaan* sometimes to distinguish the extensions from the main *japi* frame. Some artisans also refer to using black fabric found in umbrella. These simple ornamentations were offered to the customers using the *japi* during marriages as veil. It is important to mention here that the placement of the *balichanda* or cloth was placed beneath the *doi*. It was done to stop the displacement of the material, and also, for thorough exhibit of the *doi* which itself presented a spectacular crisscrossed design. *Doi* made for the *parda japi* was narrowly spaced and much refined unlike its hexagonal plaiting in the *haluwa japis* or *japi* used by commoners. The artisans sold the *parda japi* in nearby areas in the weekly bazaar and some even sold it in towns. Customers, even from Guwahati, also started coming to the villages of Mugkuchi to buy these decorative *japis*.

## ii. Subsequent Changes in Ornamentation and Form of *Japi*

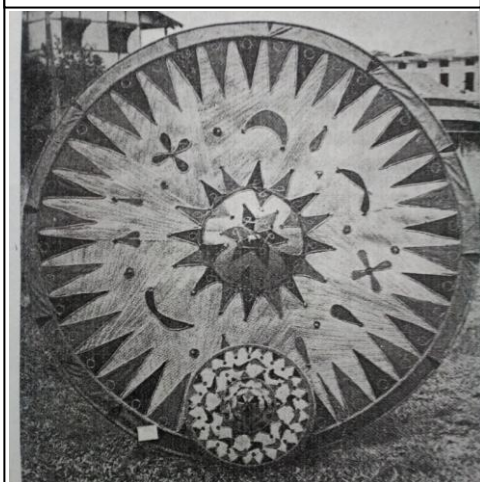
After independence, with the decrease in the use of *parda japi* due to the easy availability of the umbrellas, the more decorative *phulam japi* came into existence. Subsequently, the *kaan* size was also reduced. Artisans started decorating the *japis* with triangular and semi-circular or ovular cutouts made with red and black cotton fabric. Perhaps, the influence may also be due to the use of such designs in the motion cinema. These cutouts were placed in alternating colors of red and black showcasing a harmonious design pattern, extremely popular and even followed till date forming

tradition and a baseline design on the *japi*. However, with the availability of *jak-jaka kagaz* or *rangpata* (aluminium foil in different color), artisans started creating various patterns of flower, creepers, *gadh* (rhino), lotus, etc. Jugal Das (1968) also mentions the use of these *rangpatas* on *japi* for decoration works and the fading of the application of *balichanda*. Some artisans even stated to have cut *bagh* (tiger), *bhalu* (bear), etc. on *rangpatas*.



On *japi* with triangular cutouts, some lace work was also done on these patterns to

**Plate 8.5: Phulam Japi with Crescent & Flower**



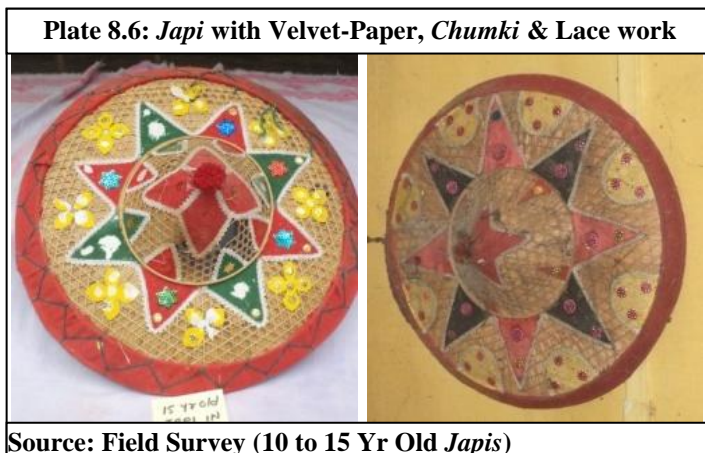
**Source: Pakyntein's Work (1961)**

enhance its features. Sometimes smaller round cutouts of *balichanda* were also placed on the triangular patterns made of cloth to increase its aesthetics. By this time (around 1960s), *japi* had already become an object of decoration in and were used in drawing rooms (From Field Survey; also from Pakyntein, 1961).

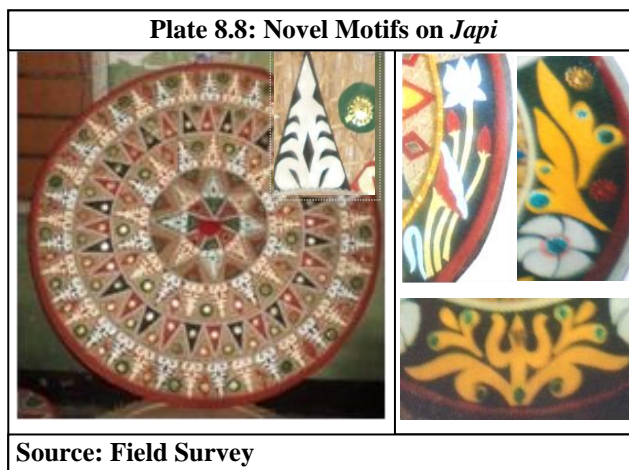
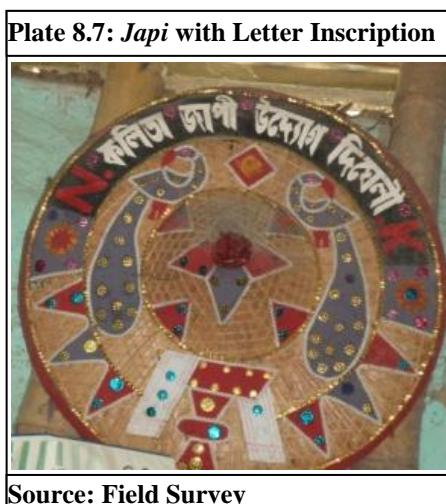
With respect to the *japi* craft of Nalbari, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay in 1975 stated that several varieties of *japis* are produced in



villages (page 100). The attractive *japis* are made against bright red background with a number of motifs like crescents, stars, butterfly etc. (ibid).

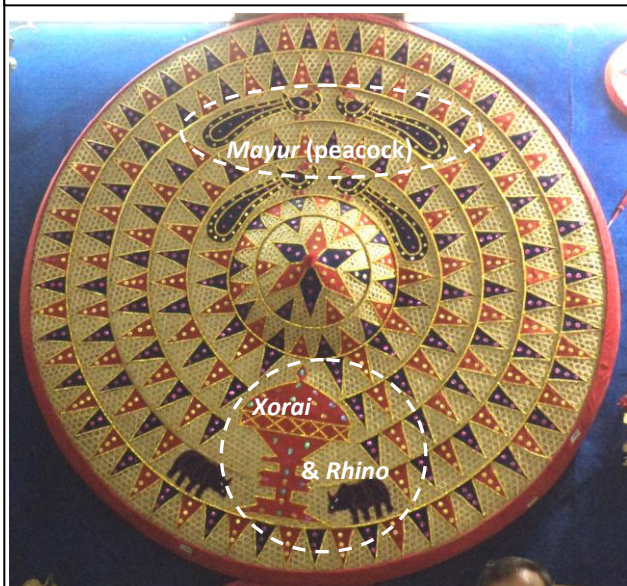


Since, bamboo is easily degradable, old samples were difficult to be found during the field survey. An image of *japi* with crescent and flower motifs is found in Pakyntein's 1961 work (refer to Plate 8.5). *Japi* for decoration were large, sometimes even 8 to 10 feet and were also made small, of the size of plate (Field Survey). Artisans used to cut different motifs but mostly the inspiration was drawn from nature and surrounding objects.



Since its commercial production as decoration object materialized successfully, more number of artisans started joining the *phulam japi* making activity. As a result, some dilution in its surface designing is noticed. The cutouts were now pasted above the *doi* to speed up its production. Moreover, use of synthetic glues also catalyzed this change. Also, the *doi* that used to be refined and narrow spaced started seeing broader spacing. These changes in technique were brought into practice as artisans wanted to increase quantity of produce to stay competitive. Also, since the *japi* now came to be used as decorative object fixed to drawing room walls, it did not require the same sturdy make in its *doi* and frame.

Plate 8.9: Multiple Layers of Designs with *Mayur*, *Gadh* & *Xorai* Motifs



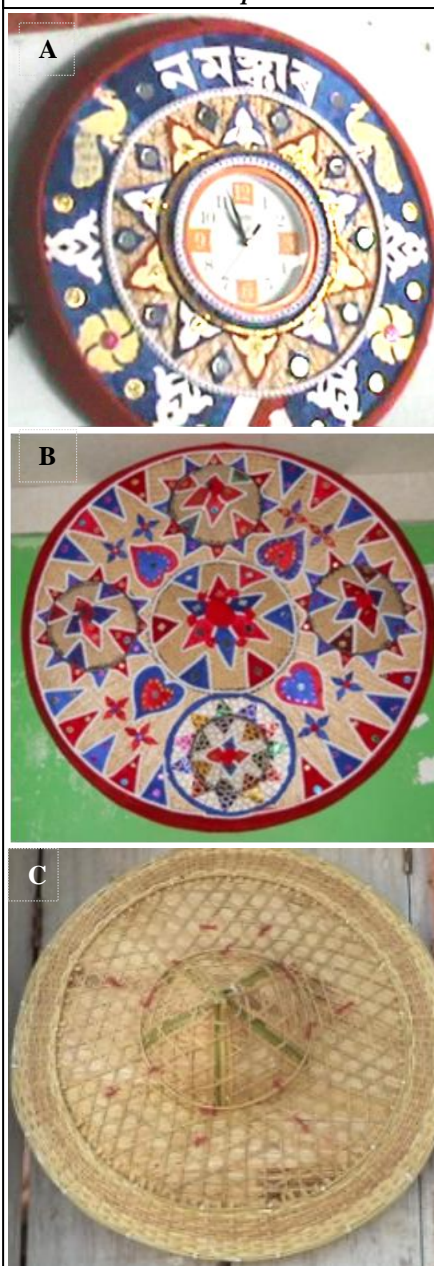
Source: Field Survey

In the mean time, some creative artisans also introduced several new forms in the *japi* as new materials like velvet-paper, *chumki* (sparkling particles), cardboards, etc. came into picture in the markets. Ornamentation became more colorful now due to the use of new materials and colorful and inexpensive velvet-papers which came around the early 1980s. Artisans like Navin Chandra introduced *japi* in the shape of duck, map of India and Assam, etc. for garnering customers. Though it generated some interest in local markets, the traditional round shape of the

*japi* with its orthogeneous triangular cutouts were preferred by customers including the intermediate customers as well as the locals. Intermediate customers from Guwahati especially also come with specific design requests. One such request was placed with Siro Deka for a square shaped *japi* for its use as a ceiling.

Some rapid change in ornamentation came into picture in the early 1990s period. Artisans like Suren Tamuli, one of the early initiators of letter inscriptions on the *japi*, started introducing it when customers started seeking *japi* with letters, especially institutional customers like schools and colleges. Initially, it was written with the help

Plate 8.10: Structural Considerations in *Japi*



Source: Field Survey

of white laces. Ashwini Baishya claimed to have offered one such letter written *phulam japi* to the then Chief Minister of Assam Shri Prafulla Mahanta (1996-2001). Artisans also stated that ornamentation found in *japi* works from other places of the state like Tezpur (Sonitpur district) and Nagaon also influenced their works.

The letter inscriptions usually done with laces were soon substituted with letters on colored papers. Further ornamentation continued with cutouts of *mayur* (peacock), *xorai*, *bota*, *thoga* (stand made of wood for holding religious scriptures), *gamosa*, *pepa*, etc. in colored papers pasted on the surface. Words like *welcome* and *namaskar* (refer to Plate 8.10) came into large circulation and are still commonly found in *phulam japis* today. Larger floral motifs and novel cutouts (refer to Plate 8.8) are also found on *phulam japis* in present times. These ornamentations show the prevalence of heterogeneity in the design patterns that coexist with the orthogeneous elements. These cutouts are largely placed above the usual triangular cutouts to produce contrasting color effect. On larger *japis*, more number of circular rims can be found to accommodate designs throughout the body (refer to Plate 8.8 & 8.9). Since the last decade or so, more emphasis and visual prominence is given to the motifs than the plaiting or *doi*. Vibrant color combinations are also observed in the triangular cut outs. Against the traditional use of red and black, blue and red as well as blue and green are widely used colors.

Structural considerations are also applied to the *phulam japis* by either eliminating or adding certain orthogenetic components of the *japi*. Against the conical dome in the centre, clocks are fitted to convert it into decorative wall clock piece (refer to Plate 8.10 A). In certain cases, multiple domes are added on the *japi* to enhance its visual appeal (refer to Plate 8.10 B). Finding several other interesting features in *japi* is not new since artisans always aspire to create distinction. One such *japi* is shown in Plate 8.10 C wherein the peripheral circumference of the *japi* is woven throughout with reed instead of the use of red cloth. However, this *japi* is more in use as a regular piece than as a decorative object. Similarly, star, heart, square and *ahat pat* (leaf of *Ficus religioa*) shaped *phulam japis* are also produced in the villages of Nalbari. However, these *japis* are not regularly produced but on demand. Another important aspect of changing ornamentation was the diminishing use of the red pompoms. These attractive woolen balls are now placed only on the top of the conical dome.

#### D. The Shift in the Use of Raw Materials with Commercialization of *Japi*

In the early days when *parda japi* was in vogue, *balichanda* was prominently in use

**Plate 8.11: *Japi* with *Xorai* Motif Made in Muga Fabric (Field Survey)**



Letter inscriptions read as ‘*Sonali Jayanti Utsav 2014, Kariya Uchta Madhyamik Vidyalaya*’ meaning Silver Jubilee Celebrations 2014 of Kariya High School

along with red cotton cloth and wool. Since made for use in marriages, some amount of ornamentation was done on the *parda japi*. However, with reducing demand of these *japis*, artisans started developing *japi* as *phulam* pieces. As a result, artisans started using newly available raw materials like *jaka-jaka*. Customers’ increasing liking for the beautifully decorated *japis* developed further interest among artisans to explore. Other raw materials like lace, velvet papers, *chumki*, etc. were thus brought in use to enhance the ornamentation. Some artisans even used cardboards to give different

shapes to the *japi*. The use of cotton cloth for making the triangular and semi-circular cutouts also got reduced with the availability of substitutes like velvet papers. The use of these papers increased as it was easier to use.

**Plate 8.12: *Japi* with *Chumki* and Glass Work**



Source: Field Survey

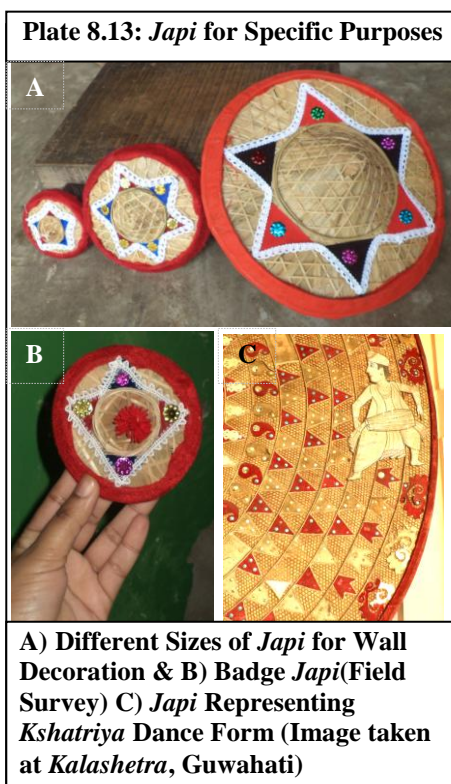
For customers who can pay more, artisans also started using velvet cloth instead of the cotton fabric. The color choices for ornamentation have also undergone huge change due to availability of several hued fabrics. In later periods, simple color paper (chart papers) was also brought into use. *Japi* makers keep on experimenting with new raw materials to increase the surface aesthetics. Sometimes artisans creatively use costly raw materials like *muga* and *pat* fabric and also introduce interesting ornamental work.

Nipen Tamuli on an order of *japi* for a school’s golden jubilee celebrations added *muga* fabric in the *xorai* motif. On another *japi* asked by a temple management body, he introduced cutouts of Lord Krishna. Such occasional creative instincts are usual

among artisans. Doing so provide them niche market and better prices. Artisans stated that aristocratic customers from the cities usually like buying *japi* made with velvet cloths that give more richness to the *japi* than the ones made in paper. Artisans also use golden hued *rolex* threads instead of lace to offer richness in the ornamental works. Other than *chumki*, glass works are also found on *japi* (refer to Plate 8.12).

### E. The Changing Functionality of *Japi* and its Commercial Transformation

*Japi* as a humble headgear of the peasant and the laborer class is still having an



important place in commerce since early times. Its utility has remained popular and without any change. However, it is the *japi* used as a status symbol in the society since Ahom times that can be said to have undergone changes due to emerging social and political environment. As stated earlier, since used as status symbol in courtly and public life, and used by women to cover themselves in public spaces, some simple ornamentation and decoration with gold and silver threads were executed to distinguish it from the regular *haluwa japi* and the *uka japi* used by the commoners.

Probably, since the times of the nobility to the period of the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, *japi* graced the upper echelons of the society. Its use in later period by the Muslims further changed its utility to that of a veil for the bride as well as the groom. As such, *parda japi* was further ornamented with *balichanda* and wool balls. However with time, *japi* got transformed into *phulam* (decorative) object. Artisans, in order to stay in business started conceiving *japi* in more ornate forms. With the declining demand of *parda japi*, *phulam japi* conceived with slight structural changes. *Japi* now did not require the *kaan* to be used as *parda* but more aesthetics to fit into drawing rooms. It is produced in several sizes as a set (18'', 14'', 10'', 9'' & 6 inches) to be used for wall decorations. *Japi* in smaller sizes were also constructed keeping in view external customers who probably would wish to buy the product as a souvenir product.

The next change in its designs resulted when *japi* was utilized for institutional functions like commemorations, centenary celebrations (refer to Plate 8.11), etc. *Japi* was used for outright display of the institutional propaganda. *Japis*, as small as saucers, were produced by artisans even before, and used as decoration in households. However, the growth in the meeting culture and socio-cultural gatherings led to the proliferation of further smaller *japis* to be used as badge since the 1990s period. The concept of badge *japi* got introduced (refer to Plate 8.13 B). Customers demand for 2 inches and 3 inches *japi* as badge grew with time. Through the badge *japi* tied to which is a small ribbon, the wearers display the cultural ethos of the culture of Assam. *Phulam japi* paired with a *gamosa* also serves as an object to honor guests. In 2016, it had been in news that Nalbari artisans are making hay by selling *phulam japis* to felicitate the politicians and VIPs during the election campaigns (Bora, 2016). Artisans work out the ornamentation depending upon the theme of the event. For commercial success, *japi* makers understand the importance of simulating the prevailing events on the *japi* works. During *bihu* celebrations, its ornamentation reflects the culture of Assam through use of *dhol* and *pepa* motifs whereas for *Vaishnavite* institutions or *namghars* (temple and community prayer hall) they prepare motifs reflecting *Kshatriya* dance forms.

However, beyond all designs and forms of the *japi*, the traditional round feature and the triangular cutouts are considered the baseline elements and preferred over others, especially among the upper class customers of cities and external audiences.

#### **F. External Agents and Intermediaries and their Influence in Commercialization of *Japi***

*Japi* is an art purely practiced and developed by artisans through the ages with an understanding of the market. Artisans balanced their economic orientation and understanding of the customer requirement by offering modifications in the *japi* as per the rising need. Structural variations and change in the motifs and designs were a spontaneous response of the artisans for grabbing new market share in the decorative segments. *Japi* modification is a case of spontaneous commercialization initiated by artisans according to market situations. However, there are instances where intermediaries involve in the commercialization process. Apart from its sale in the local markets, *japi* selling, like in the past, involves local hawkers who collect the produce from the makers and sell them at various places. Some act as middlemen by

collecting large amount of the produce and later selling them in shops located in the towns and the cities. To the most, these intermediaries bring information about the quantity demanded in the market and some information on the type of design accepted or rejected in the market.

On the other hand, there are some external agents like ARTFED, NEHHDC and AGMCL who influence the choice of the raw materials in the product. These organizations selling the products within Assam and outside the state direct artisans to use velvet cloth against papers since quality is regarded important for sale. Certain NGOs purchasing *japis* like Madhapur Milan Baniyik Samabay Samiti also dictate producers about the type of materials to be used. However, their influence is rather very succinct and seldom touches upon the modification of designs in the *japi*. They, at a greater level, perform the task of providing a link to the producers to the market. These agents also give input to artisans regarding the size of *japi* in demand. In the modification of the *japi*, their role is rather very limited, mostly acting only as sales agent of the craft. Under the Design Clinic Scheme of MSME, Govt. of India and with design guidance and support from IIE, and with help of NGO such as SPARSH, in 2012, a workshop was conducted for *japi* artisans at Mugkuchi *Japi* cluster. Artisans are informed about the market scenario and inputs are provided for product improvement.

#### 8.4.2 The Commercialization of Some Utilitarian Bamboo Products and Innovation in Product Line

As stated in the beginning of this Chapter in Section 8.3, crafting utilitarian products



in bamboo is done by almost all households in rural settings. It is an inherited and integrated activity in Assam's society and culture. The industry, primarily concentrated in rural area, had been a highly developed sector even in ancient times. It is said that King Bhaskara Varman sent various types of bamboo and reed baskets to King Harshavardhan (6<sup>th</sup>

century B.C) (Choudhury, 1959). In earlier times, the craftsmen might be producing utilitarian products of bamboo for the royal households too. However, Allen in 1905 wrote that every household in Assam produced bamboo sieves and baskets for personal use and hence these products were usually not bought or sold. References to

the commercialization of utilitarian bamboo products is found in records by Pakyntein (1961), Barooah (1978) where places like Nagaon, Darrang, Kamrup Cachar are mentioned for large scale commercial production of utilitarian bamboo works.

It is found during survey that the craftsmen of Nalbari have also been producing common bamboo items and dealt in its commerce in the local market place since ages. They produce several varieties of hollow baskets like *pasi*, *khorahi*, *duli*, etc. and flat



items such as *kula*, *saloni*, *dala*, *bisoni*, *dhara*, etc. useful for carrying out usual activities in kitchen and farms. Besides that, they also produce fishing instruments like *thuha*, *kok*, *sepa*, *jakoi*, etc. However, the production was generally small. Households usually sold some number of items, a pair or two, in the weekly

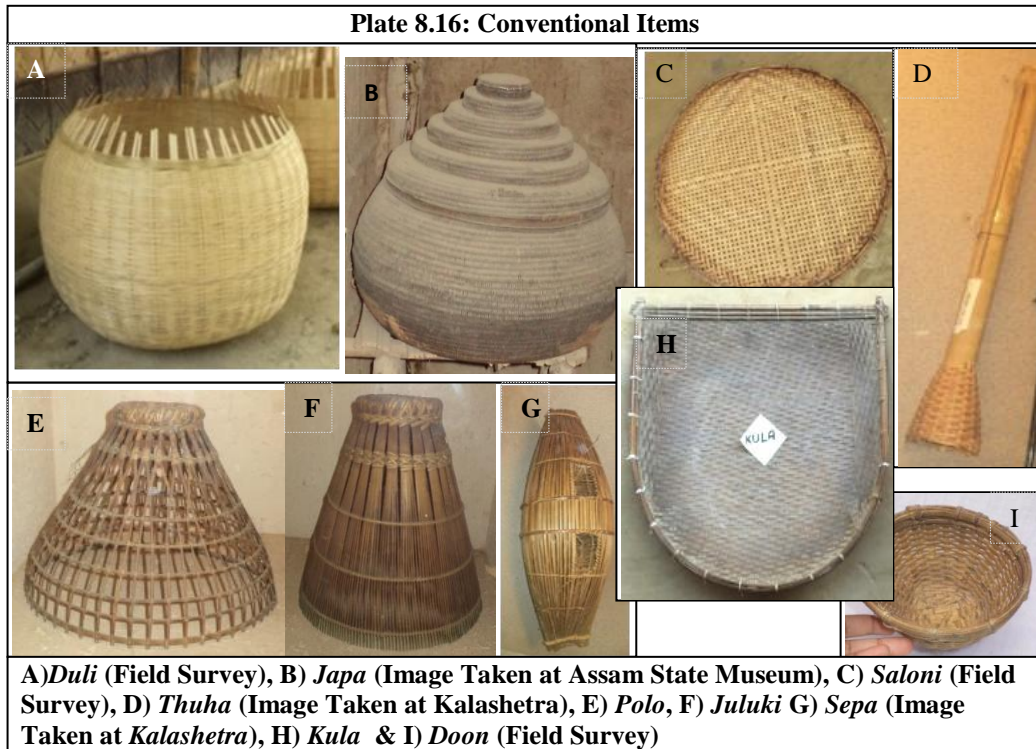
markets and the rest was used internally. The production of these utilitarian items have been growing with times since rural populace are have initiated producing conventional items in modified forms. As a result, it has been offering opportunities to many artisans to engage primarily in the commerce of utilitarian bamboo craft. Apart from the regular products, craftsmen in some villages of Nalbari have also engaged in innovation of bamboo crafts.

### A. Features of Conventional Bamboo Objects

Utilitarian bamboo objects both hollow and flat, are produced through simple techniques of interlacing bamboo stripes into desired forms. Artisans employ several types of weaves such as cross weft, diagonal, twilled and checker works. A large variety of baskets with special form and design for each purpose is made. *Pasi* and *khorahi* are kind of baskets used in multiple ways. *Pasi* is large and used generally in farm for carrying waste such as cow dung, dried leaves, etc. whereas *khorahi* is smaller in size with provision to allow water and dirt to pass and is used for washing rice, vegetables and fish. *Duli* is another hollow item in bamboo used for storing large quantity of paddy and *doon* is used for measuring rice with varying holding capacity (from 2 seer to 3.5 seer). For keeping clothes and other valuables, *japa*, a kind of lidded container was in use. It is also made with cane apart from bamboo. Similarly, flat items comprised of *kula* (winnowing fan), *dala* (disc), made out of flexible bamboo slips in twilled pattern and *saloni* (sieve) woven in crisscrossed or simple



plaited forms for sieving are produced. Some conventional items and fishing tools are presented in Plate 8.16.



### B. Modifications in the Conventional Bamboo Objects and Change in Functionality of the Crafts

In rural spaces, the use of basketry has yet not decreased. There has been unwavering consumption of the traditional utilitarian objects in the original design and form. For modern consumption however, some structural variations, especially in size, could be seen in the items like *pasi*, *khorahi*, *jakoi*, etc. Conventional bamboo items, other than for use in rural areas and households, are developed today mostly as functional or decorative products divorcing itself from its original practicable features.

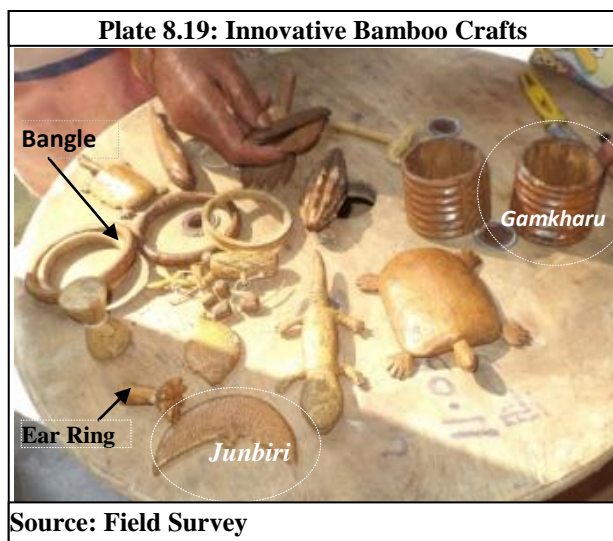


Sexagenarian artisans like Debjani Haloi (from Majdia village) and Paresh Haloi (from Kaithalkuchi village) initially started producing miniaturized versions of the



daily used objects in bamboo as toys for children some around 30-35 years back. Likewise, other artisans also state that their initial idea was to create such replicas for play. Toy sets consisting of miniaturized *dala*, *jakoi*, *khaloi*, *muha*, *kula*, etc. were conceived for its sale in local fairs and weekly bazaar. *Khorahi* was modified as *sakoni* or sieve to strain tea (refer to Plate 8.17 E) whereas *hiyani* (used to drain excess water while fishing in a shallow area) is produced as a toy (refer to Plate 8.17 C). However, vendors took these products and sold it in city markets which generated demand.

These items are nowadays bought as decorative items and keepsakes. Items like *khaloi* (used to keep caught fish), and *jakoi* (used to catch fish in shallow water) were also converted into miniaturized items. The *khaloi* is conspicuously modified to give aesthetic look that fits to be called as a flower vase. It is made protruding at the belly sometimes, whereas at times, its neckline is lengthened to increase its artistic appeal.



The use of bamboo as a hollow container is immense in rural areas. Bamboo was specially cut at the nodes with one end left open and the other end forming the base used as container known as *kaira* (refer to Plate 8.18). Sometimes flexible handle made of cane was also affixed to it for using it as a water jug. Beer mugs are considered to be

a modification of these traditional jugs. Old artisans believe that the inspiration to create these mugs might have sprouted from ceramic mugs. Even more, the concept of

beer mugs used by Westerners might have influenced its development. These introductions only initiated during the last 2 or 3 decades. Artisans also produced the simple hollow frame with little surface ornamentation as flower vase.



In majority of the cases, the conventional products are developed as functional objects and objects to furnish modern homes for its easy acceptance in customer markets, especially of the towns and the cities. Objects like *duli* are converted into waste paper



bins and conventional trays like *dala* (refer to Plate 8.20) are developed as tea trays. The sizes are moderated to suit these requirements. Customers' willingness to buy bamboo crafts as

decorative and functional objects in urban areas results in such artistic modification of the traditional crafts items.

### C. External Agents and Intermediaries' Influence and Innovation in Product Line

Bamboo artisans, apart from making utilitarian products, have also been making innovative items often for sale during local fairs and festivals. Artisans like Navin

Chandra and Debjani Haloi produced various play items in the shape of animals and fruits and traditional metal ornaments like bangles, *gamkharu* (a kind of broad bangle), *jonbiri* (crescent shaped locket), etc. (refer to Plate 8.19). Some even mentioned to have produced bamboo suitcase for school children. The image of such suitcase is also found in Pakyntein's 1961 work (Census of India, Assam Vol III). However, the products were generally meant as toy items which had limited sales in the local areas.

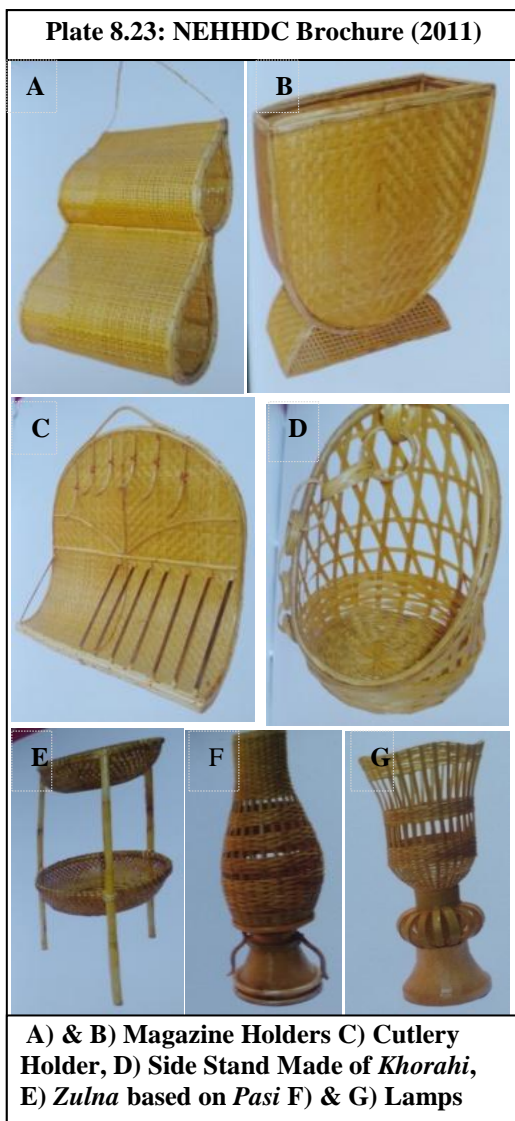


Innovation in the product line, especially in case of Nalbari bamboo crafts, initiated in the later part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Paresh Haloi, an early entrant into innovative bamboo art making and other former artisans like Kashiram Baishya and Deben Das mentioned that decorative craft making and production of functional as well as home decoration products started only since the 1980s period. Prior to this period, artisans generally produced conventional tools and objects and some items like flower vase (usually out of *khaloi* and *kaira*), and flower baskets (refer to

Plate 8.21). These baskets were developed as an item to carry flowers to the temple. Plate 8.21 B is a basket work wherein plastic is used to tie the bamboo strips while in image 8.21 A, the basket is worked with bamboo and cane.

It is important to mention here that commercialization of bamboo crafts had already accelerated in places like Cachar, as early as 1960s. Craftsmen manufactured various cane and bamboo items like boxes, *bota* in bamboo (based on the traditional metal product of Assam), office trays, waste paper baskets, bottle carriers, bins of several types, tiffin cases, bi-cycle baskets, etc. (as found in Pakyntein's work in 1961). The innovation in bamboo craft manufacturing in Nalbari can probably be also due to the

influx of such items in local markets. However, the role of middlemen and local vendors in the initial modification is worth noticing. These intermediaries, as stated by old artisans, would bring replicas of bamboo items produced in different places and would ask the local producers to manufacture them. Some of the items produced in initial periods of innovation are letter boxes, wall hangings, baskets and tribal masks. Small *japi* with spears are mounted on a bamboo piece with a mask combined into a unit to produce decorative pieces (refer to Plate 8.22 A, B). Even today, middlemen like Akshay Talukdar and Hiren Tamuli usually influences producers' artistic creations by presenting them replicas of objects collected from places like Tripura and Nagaland. Chinese Bamboo products traded by these middlemen also influence local artisans' productions. They also bring in designs on papers and ask craftsmen to make it in bamboo.



As a result of the intermediaries and subsequent commercialization of bamboo in other places, modification and innovation of bamboo products took place in Nalbari. The ordinary hollow bamboo tube initially developed as flower vase underwent further development in designs (refer to Plate 8.20 F, G & H). Surface ornamentation through chipping and accessorization through added aesthetics had been practiced since then by artisans with motive of gaining competitive edge. With training, artisans started developing new range of bamboo products.

Modification and commercialization of bamboo crafts also materialized due to involvement of handicraft development agencies. Some people with ITI (Industrial Training Institute under Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship,

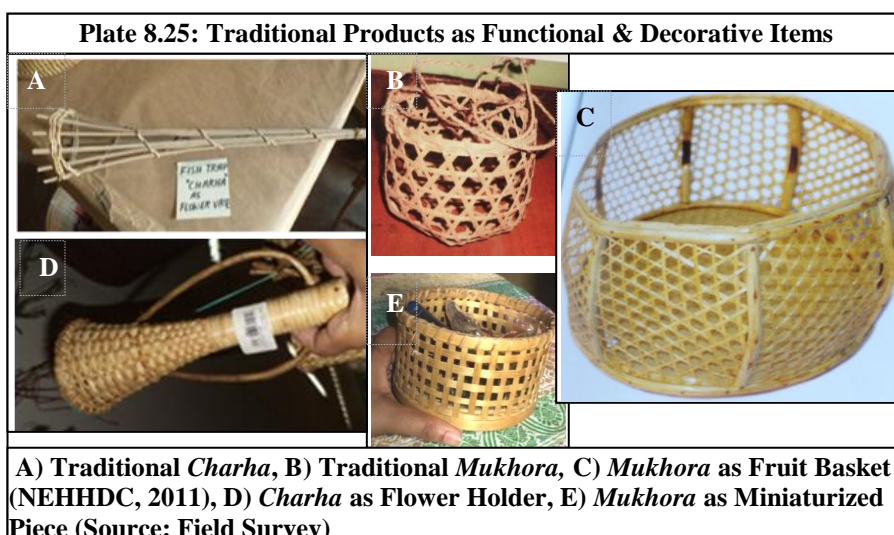
Government of India) training like Dwijen Sarma started providing guidance to fellow

members of their villages. As a result, artisans started developing new products in some villages like Kaithalkuchi. On the other hand, Government sponsored training programs were also conducted in bamboo craft clusters like Sahrpur. Artisans are trained on aspects of technique, designs and quality. In such cases, these external agencies act as change agents of the crafts.



Several NGOs like Nalbari Zilla Bah Bet Unnayan Samabay Samiti and Gramin Vikas Handicrafts Society train artisans to produce innovative items under their fold for customers belonging to Delhi, Calcutta and Mumbai. Besides that, they are also sellers of the products. These NGOs utilize the design catalogues developed by NEHHDC (refer to Plate

8.23) and also undertake activities like training artisans. Most of the artisans work for these societies. There are also some private individuals who sell the items through



shops across Nalbari and other places. Such sellers like Ganesh Udhyog direct artisans into producing items that are

sought in the markets. They provide design specifications to the artisans of the villages working under them.

NEHHDC with the help of private designers provide design guidance to the organizations and private individuals seeking their help. These government

organizations have great role in the commercialization of innovative bamboo crafts in Nalbari. Young artisans like Basant Kalita and Dhiraj Das, with training in bamboo crafting, produce bamboo crafts and sells it to NEHHDC and AGMCL.

Along with the task of being change agents these external agencies also provide help to artisans for marketing and selling of their products through their respective sales



outlets in different places. Innovative bamboo crafts are a result of the response to commercial earning motives materialized through the support of various types of intermediaries. Banajit Bhagawati shifted to making decorative products as modern customers demand bamboo crafts more as decorative items. He sells his products to customers in Bhutan either directly or through middlemen. Producers like him state that there has been growing demand for items like bags, file covers, bangles, clips, mobile stands, etc. in bamboo.

Artisans like Bhagawati and Jiten Pathak, after getting trained, are themselves able to introduce innovative products. Moreover, frequent interaction of artisans with craft makers of other states through exhibitions sponsored by organizations like DICCC (Directorate of Industries and Commerce, Govt. of India), also help artisans to learn.

There has been huge growth of both innovative products and modified items based on conventional molds since the last decade. Items like lamps were introduced based on the old molds of products like *polo* with further tapering made at its narrow end (refer to Plate 8.26 A). The various plaiting technique in bamboo viz. cross weft, twill pattern, diagonal, checkered patterns, are utilized for development of different types of products. Items are manufactured from the plaited base of *saloni* and *dala* into decorative lamps (refer to Plate 8.24). Artisans are instructed by intermediaries about the design of the lamps to be made. Lamps and trays are the most widely made innovative items produced from simple base of the conventional items which are widely sought as home decoration products. Small items like table coasters are also

made of plaited bases in various shapes for fulfilling functional requirements of modern households.



Traditional objects like *khaloi* is also converted into lamps (refer to Plate 8.26 A). Similarly, *charha* (another fishing trap, refer to Plate 8.25 D), is remodeled into wall vases. In modifications of crafts, organizations like IIE are highly institutional in redeveloping old products into new functional items. *Charha* is in the process of redevelopment as bouquet

holders at IIE. Some external agents at Sahrpur village have trained artisans to weave bamboo splits into window screens for supplying it to hotels and restaurants. *Bana* (a traditional fishing tool) is also developed as screens for institutional customers and individual buyers. Likewise, *khowta* (a small container) is redeveloped as tabletop can to keep salt and spices (refer to Plate 7.26 C). One of the simplest products such as *mukhora* (used to cover mouth of cows) is developed into fruit containers and vegetable baskets. *Japa* (conventional storage boxes to store clothes and valuables) is also converted into small jewellery boxes for women customers. The rise in the consumption of bamboo crafts at domestic households, institutional and individual levels is a major reason for the modification of existing crafts and innovation of new products.

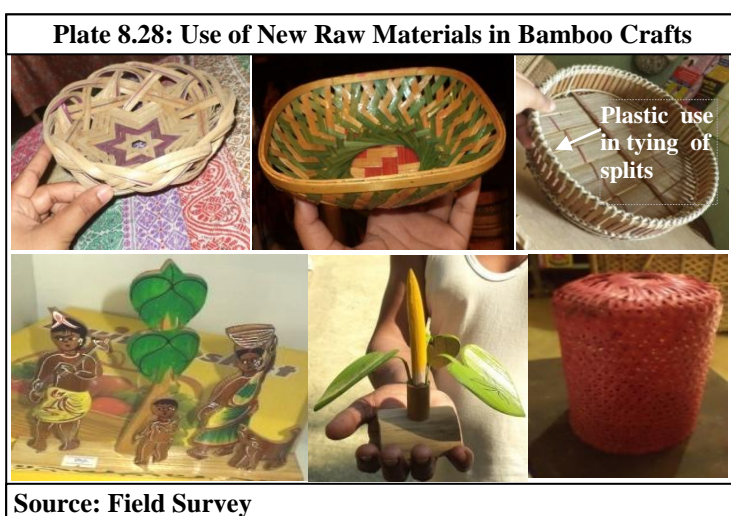
The growth of innovative items and modified bamboo crafts at Nalbari can be largely attributed to middlemen and external agencies. These agencies have mediated design guidance and training to the rural craftsmen. As a result, artisans have been successful in commercial bamboo crafting. In recent years, many decorative objects like mobile stands, flowers, calendar and pen stands, etc. are developed. New products are constantly manufactured to cater to new customer segments with varying tastes and



demand. Demand for miniaturized bamboo products is also leading to production of the items in smaller sizes. In bamboo, women's jewellery and accessories segment have been growing prominently during the past few years in Nalbari. Trained artisans are developing bamboo chain, lockets, hair clips, etc. to cater to such customer segments.

#### D. Commercialization and Change in Use of Raw Materials in Bamboo Crafts

The original raw material used in bamboo crafts is the flexible bamboo splits or wickers. These splits are shaped in different ways to give specific form to a craft item. Often for tying, cane wickers or bamboo splits are used. However, availability of



inexpensive plastic materials has led to increasing use of this synthetic material. It is also in use as it gives smoother finish on the tied ends of the article. Moreover, availability of these synthetic threads in different colors allows

artisans to enhance the aesthetics in the object. Apart from that, it reduces the effort and time that is required to obtain natural splits made of either bamboo or cane.

On bamboo craft items used as decorative objects, synthetic burnishing and coating of glazed substance is also done. It provides luster and smoothness to the surface which is admired by customers. Colored yarns are also used in wall decoration items like wall hangings for doing the embroidery works and ornamental designs. In window screens, ornamental patterns are made with the help of yarns woven along with the bamboo splits. Apart from that, synthetic colors are also used in items like hair clutch, flowers, and other interior decoration items. In several cases, the bamboo splits are dyed in colored solutions to produce desired hue in the final object. However, bamboo crafts are generally preferred, especially among tourists and upper class customers without any color coating. Local customers and younger generation wishfully buy small accessories and decorative items that are colorful functional.

### 8.5 Wrapping up the Chapter: Commercialization and the Modified Bamboo Crafts of Nalbari

Bamboo crafting is an important activity in rural places across Assam but mostly being done for personal consumption. Traditional craft objects in bamboo such as *saloni*, *khora*, *khaloi*, *sepa*, etc. have remained unchanged for use in rural households and farms and were traded in the daily and weekly markets. There is no doubt that the items are still in demand among the internal community members.

However, it is apparently noticed that search for new consumer bases has been the major reason for growing commercialization of the bamboo products. Consequently, modification resulted in the traditional forms of some of the craft items. The availability of new raw materials also led to further translation of items like *japi*. The *japi* was transformed from an object of status symbol and veil, and headgear to that of an object of decoration mostly due to artisans' effort to keep the product in market. *Japi* underwent spontaneous commercialization as artisans increasingly started adding new dimensions in designs and motifs for its adaptability as decoration object. Decorations on *japi* which initially grew as simple ornamental works mostly made with cotton fabrics, *balichanda* and *jak-jaka*, later transmuted manifold with time due to availability of newer variety of raw materials. Motifs were later cut on velvet papers and color papers, and extensive use of artificial materials like *chumki* was made. Similarly, ornamental works also changed through times. The placement of the triangular cut outs also became fuller and spread across the entire *japi*. Structural modifications were also initiated when domes were replaced with clocks. With its adaptability as item of commemoration in institutional set up and rise of social gatherings, letter inscriptions were practised and *japi* took miniaturized form.

The modification in *japi* is primarily due to artisans' response to emerging customer requirements. Artisans also aspired to introduce newness and experimented with their creations setting in process spontaneous commercialization of the craft. With the growth of institutional buyers, the product got further changed in time. However, in recent years, some involvement of intermediaries can be seen in terms of dictating about the size of the *japi* and quality of raw materials to be used in manufacturing of the *japi*. Intermediaries such as middlemen, vendors, NGOs, etc. procure *japi* from its makers and help in selling the craft across Assam and outside. Similarly, Govt. agencies like AGMCL and NEHHDC are also found to have advised artisans about

the quality of design and raw material (such as velvet cloth) sought in the market. But, on a major basis, their main role is towards facilitating sales.

In case of the other conventional crafts, it is found that large scale modification resulted when external agencies like government organizations and NGOs started training artisans on design development. Based on information obtained from field, it is understood that decorative crafts making primarily started during the 1980's period. Prior to this, alteration in the craft products were limited though some conventional items were miniaturized as toys for children. A few objects like baskets and vase were also introduced in the product line. However, most of the innovation took place as a result of the trainings and catalogues provided by organizations like NEHHDC, thereby acting as agents of change. Middlemen also initiated change by bringing replicas of objects from outside and prompted artisans to produce accordingly. They also helped in the selling of the finished items in various markets. Knowhow such as design and plaiting of some of the most conventional objects like *polo*, *bana*, *khorahi*, *mukhora*, etc. are transformed into modern functional items like lamps, vegetable baskets, screens, etc. to suit the requirements of the urban customers. Innovative bamboo items like wall hangings, calendar stands, jewellery, etc. are also introduced through training for the home furnishing segments.

Commercialization also led to the miniaturization of the objects for external customers who buy bamboo crafts as souvenirs. It is observed that in the entire process of commercialization of bamboo crafts, the rise of consumer interest in favor of functional and decorative crafts led to modification and innovation. The process, in case of the bamboo crafts other than *japi* is, however, more sponsored in nature with intermediaries playing both roles as initiators of change and sellers of finished products.