

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Conclusion: Retrospect, Prospect and the Implications of the Research

‘Research into human behavior must begin as well as end with human beings and should focus on the individual for an object ‘ (an art or craft) ‘cannot be fully understood or appreciated without knowledge of the person who made it’

- (Michael Owen Jones, 1987)

15.1 The prelude

In this concluding chapter of the thesis, section 15.2 provides a bird’s eye view of the various aspects of commercialization of the traditional crafts of the Brahmaputra valley in Assam. Extensive literature review suggested that limited literature exist with reference to commercialization and its related modification in reference to major crafts of Assam. This gap led to the framing of primary objective to study the commercialization of traditional crafts of Assam with respect to the change in style, functionality, clientele and the use of raw materials. Change in clientele is presented throughout the description while presenting the changes in the style, functionality and shift in the use of raw materials in Sections 15.2.1, 15.2.2, 15.2.3 and 15.2.4. Also, it was thought necessary to study commercialization related socio-economic impact on artisan households. Hence, secondary objective was constructed to study the socio-economic status of artisans in view of commercialization. Finally, the study aimed to offer suggestions for sustainable commercialization of crafts with emphasis on tradition sustainability based on the findings of these objectives and also with added inputs from Tourist Survey, FGDs with artisans, Interviews with experts, sellers of crafts, entrepreneurs and other persons involved in the process.

15.2 Traditional Crafts of Assam and its Commercialization: What Changed, What Stayed and Why?

In the Brahmaputra valley of Assam, commerce of crafts has been in practice since centuries (refer to Chapter 3). Though not very much prominent due to self reliant economy in earlier times, commerce of some traditional crafts like brass and bell metal were found to have been in practice with neighbouring states and countries. Plain *pat*, *muga* and *eri* fabrics are also found to have been commercialized and

exported to few places outside the state. However, most of the products traded were utilitarian in nature and not much information is found with respect to modifications in crafts due to commercialization. As such, the commercialization and modifications in crafts is studied with emphasis on commercialization from 20th century onwards due to the availability of primary data from field. The study yielded information that craft commercialization brought stylistic changes in motifs, design, form, shift in the use of raw materials, change in clientele and functionality of the crafts. The study also brought to light a suggestive framework to understand the interface between producers and customers through which craft commercialization has taken place in the select geographical areas. The discussions are presented below in a nutshell.

15.2.1 Commercialization and Stylistic Changes in Crafts

Commercialization of crafts for different market segments induces modification in craft objects. It is found that objects serving religious and utilitarian purposes when commoditized into aesthetic and functional objects saw changes in its traditional design components and motifs as well as transmutation in size and form. In pottery & terracotta, simple incised lines, circles, tiny flakes, etc. were found to have been replaced by heterogenetic patterns like representational designs (refer to sections 6.4.1) to increase the aesthetic aspects for garnering customer attention, both local and external, and the products' consideration as decorative objects.

Similarly, in brass and bell metal at Sarthebari, intricate chiseling works like fish scale, *pan-kata*, *dhekia* patterns, etc. are found to have become more spacious, widespread but lacking depth and intricacy (refer to Section 7.4.1 & 7.4.2). Economic considerations like increasing the quantity of items in less time, have also led to dilution in the embossing works on the metal products. Heterogenetic designs like letter writing and individual motifs have also come into being due to internal competition among artisans to increase market share. In Hajo, orthogeneous designs are no more etched on surfaces since it is less remunerative and the products are generally purchased by local and intermediate customers for utilitarian and religious requirements.

Japi used earlier as veil is considered for decoration now and hence has seen compromise in plaiting of the bamboo stripes for production of *phulam japis*. By 1940s as the use of *parda japi* vanished, original ornamentation with *balichanda* (a

kind of translucent material) and triangular cutouts in red and black cloths, traditionally placed below the plaiting were changed into creepers, lotus, petals, etc (refer to Section 8.4.1 C). With time, these got further replaced with heterogenetic elements and fanciful motifs. Original triangular patterns still stay but designs have become elaborate and structural changes are also noticed as artisans constantly innovate for having a competitive edge against fellow artisans.

Adaptation of traditional *eri* product for modern customers since the beginning of this century led to excessive change in ornamentation (refer to section 9.4.2). Simple motifs used on corners and borders became widespread and heterogeneous components were infused mostly from *pat* and *muga* fabrics to offer variety in designs to customers. In *eri*, ornamentation became even more elaborate since the beginning of this century.

Unlike *eri*, major change in ornamentation in *pat* and *muga* was realized soon as improvised looms were introduced in 1920s and master artisans of the place started using design specimens. Weaving soon got a boost due to increase in demand for traditional garments (refer to Section 10.4.1b). By India's independence, *pat* and *muga* weaving got further fillip since demand for the fabrics grew in the nearby towns and cities. Many novel designs were introduced as master artisans competed for market share (refer to Section 10.4.1.c). Orthogenetic patterns were greatly modified to offer variety. Till 1980s, ornamentation remained simple and scattered and had symphony in border and body works (refer to Section 10.4.1c (ii)) but later begun to see much use of color combinations (which remained confined only to some primary colors in earlier times), excessive spread and fancifulness of designs. Changing customer tastes and their increased propensity to spend also required artisans to adapt their designs and products accordingly. Customers' orientation towards variety also led to increasing heterogeneity in design line.

15.2.2 Change in Functionality of Crafts

Utilitarian objects like pots and toy dolls (refer to Section 6.4.1 & 6.4.2) were transformed into various functional and aesthetic objects since 1970s as artisans looked for expanding their customer base beyond traditional and local markets. The widespread acclamation received by terracotta products like *hatima* toy dolls from DC (Handicrafts) due to its striking similarity to Mohenjo-daro figurines brought renewed

interest among artisans. As a result, artisans started introducing newness in the traditional item. Innovative items began to be introduced in the product line to keep competitive edge among fellow artisans and capture customers seeking functional and decorative items like garden planters, lamps, hangers, wall tiles, etc.

Though still utilitarian and religious in nature, conventional brass metal products at Hajo are slightly changed in structure to fit functional uses such as decorative vases. Similarly, some bell metal products are also considered for structural change to increase its appeal as decorative objects (refer to Section 7.4.2 C). Competition from imported items also forced artisans to produce miniature replicas and consider packaging features to grab gifts and souvenir markets. Innovation led in late 1990s by some Hajo artisans failed to succeed in competition with imported products due to lack of fine finish, quality and weight of the products. Keeping in view modern customer requirements for gifts and demand from institutional buyers, novel range of products are developed in Sarthebari in both brass and bell metal more since the late 1990s (refer to Section 7.5 & 7.6). Old objects that could not be commercialized for new uses have ceased to exist (refer to Section 7.3).

Since the time of independence, Nalbari artisans have attempted to transform one of the most iconic bamboo craft called *japi* for its suitability as an aesthetic and decorative product (refer to Section 8.4.1). Its functionality has been regularly modified from utilitarianism to a product that can be used as a souvenir as well as a symbol of culture of Assam. *Japi* comes in different sizes for different needs. As 3 inches miniaturized *japi*, it is used as badge and souvenir while several other sizes are made for home furnishings and institutional gifts. In similar manner, some of the other indigenous bamboo items (refer to Section 8.4.2) are also found to be translated into new functional objects like wall decorations, waste bins, vases, etc. for garnering market attention from customers of the cities and towns, apart from the rural customer base. Innovation in product line only initiated since 1980s when NGOs, trained individuals and government agencies started offering training to bamboo artisans on design and production aspects.

Eri fabric, generally used as winter clothing, was reintroduced for local customers and customers from cities. Product wise, the items have moved beyond the conventional *chadars* to fashion garments and home furnishing items for modern customers (refer

to Section 9.4.4). Ornamental silk products were generally for upper echelons of society and hence its commerce was seldom practiced earlier except for plain fabrics. However, with the generation of demand for such products from intermediate customers of cities and external customers from other regions, artisans started diversifying their products to suit different needs. In *pat* and *muga*, bed sheets and saris were made around 1960s (refer to Section 10.4.3). During the 1990s, the realization of tourist customers to Sualkuchi led to change in the functional dimension of the fabrics to fashion garments and home furnishing items.

15.2.3 Shift in the Use of Raw Materials

Availability of new raw materials also triggers further commercialization and modifications in crafts. Changes in raw materials (refer to Section 6.4.3, 7.7, 8.4.1 D, 8.4.2 D, 9.4.3 & 10.4.2) can also be seen to increase acceptability of products as aesthetic objects. Raw materials in japi changed from *balichanda* and plain cotton fabric to *jak-jaka kagaz*, velvet papers, sparkles, laces and velvet cloths to silk in present times for aesthetic considerations of different customers. In metal craft, use of light metal sheets is seen due to customers' inclination towards lightweight objects and price considerations. Oil paints, synthetic colors, metal wire, beads and plastics is regularly seen in other crafts for enhancement of aesthetic features in objects.

In *eri* and *pat* & *muga*, change in color and raw materials and fabric textures were introduced to fit the requirements of price, quality and aesthetic considerations of different customers (even export markets) (refer to Section 9.4.3 & 10.4.2). *Eri*, *pat* and *muga* silk is used in combination with *tasar* and synthetic yarns to develop different textures and variety of fabrics for different purposes. Due to customer demand for different colors, artisans use yarns in myriad colors. Demand for organic products from high end customers of cities and tourists have also re-introduced use of natural dyes. Preference for darker shades has also led to use of dyed yarns in both warp and the weft. Likewise, metallic and synthetic yarns in several colors are nowadays used against cotton or *muga* yarn for ornamentation. To accommodate *eri* as regular wear, yarn with less fiber count and mixed with *pat* is produced. Rugged *eri* is also used to produce fabrics that can generate market in western countries.

More than ever intermixing of raw materials can now be seen to garner market in different customer segments. This has been brought to practice to target customers

demanding for products in different price range and quality and is also due to artisans own economic motive and consideration.

15.2.4 Commercialization of Crafts: Role of Intermediaries and External Audiences

The research also brought to light the influence of intermediaries and external agents in the commercialization process of the crafts in the studied region. It is found that stylistic changes in crafts also take place due to involvement of the middlemen, Govt. and NGOs, and entrepreneurs. While most of the commercialization related changes in crafts occurred due to the artisans' disposition towards producing beautiful objects, competition and realization of demand in the market, instances of direct interaction with customers that determine spontaneous commercialization is found to be very limited. Tourist interacting directly with artisans, leading to transformation of crafts (which is *pure spontaneous commercialization*) of Assam is seldom a case with few instances found at places like Sualkuchi and Asharikandi. It is found that crafts commercialization in Assam generally does not follow the process of pure spontaneity unlike seen in several other places of the world (e.g. Thailand's crafts have modified due to direct touristic influence). Rather, in the studied places like Asharikandi (pottery & terracotta especially conventional pots, toy dolls), Nalbari (*japi*), Sualkuchi (*pat & muga*), Sarthebari and Hajo (conventional products metal products like *kalah*, *xorai*, etc.), changes in designs and motifs, functional dimensions and raw materials were introduced spontaneously by the artisans (especially master artisans, suggesting *spontaneous commercialization* but without the direct involvement of customers). Innovation also resulted due to their artistic inclination. However, majority of the crafts were mostly sold through the local intermediaries. The process is *spontaneous* in spite of intermediary involvement as sales agent.

On the other hand, crafts such as *eri* commercialized mostly due to the direct involvement of intermediaries which in later period also saw government agencies and NGOs directing changes in the craft. But in recent decades, the involvement of the external agencies as well as intermediaries is largely seen in commercialization. These agencies perform the role of change agents as well as sales agents of the crafts. It is found that sometimes agencies provide only design interventions and thereby act as change agents. This aspect of commercialization can be termed as *pure sponsored commercialization* which largely happens in the studied regions through training

efforts of government and some NGOs. However, it is also found that middlemen, local entrepreneurs and external agencies such as NGOs actively provide both design and sales interventions. Some Govt. agencies also perform these tasks through training, exhibition and direct selling of crafts through its outlets. The process in this regard may be termed as *sponsored commercialization*.

It is thus found that crafts of the studied regions can be placed under the categories of *pure spontaneous*, *spontaneous*, *sponsored* and *pure-sponsored* commercializations (refer to Chapter 13, Section 13.2.6 A; the terms spontaneous and sponsored commercialization exist from Cohen's work, 1989). The research thus brought to light the level of involvement of intermediaries and external agents. It highlighted their role as marketing channels and agents of change.

15.3 The Socio-Economic Implication of Commercialization on the Artisan Households

On the socio-economic status front (refer to Chapter 11), it can be seen that artisans producing conventional (C) crafts comprise the highest percentage (59.3%) whereas decorative (D) craft makers and both (C & D) craft producers comprise (24.2%) and (16.5%). It is found that percentage of artisans who produce D and C & D are comparatively more in the higher net monthly income groups than conventional craft producers (refer to Table 11.22) and these craft genres also provide more opportunities for household members to remain engaged (refer to Table 11.7). This suggests that mix of C & D crafts is profitable for artisans. Also, higher degree of change in craft increased chances to earn more (refer to Fig. 11.6) highlighting that commercialization can indeed be beneficial for artisans.

38.9% and 71.7% of those who responded that craft activity is profitable and highly profitable belong to conventional and decorative craft groups respectively (refer to Chapter 11, Table 11.35). But again 88.8% of those who responded that craft is loss oriented belong to conventional category. This suggests that decorative craft is more profit oriented, but conventional craft can also provide opportunity to artisans side by side with decorative products. This is mostly due to the demand of conventional products among local customers and intermediate customers for religious and utilitarian purposes. Richer product mix found to positively influence net income can be beneficial for both genre artisans (refer to Table 11.25) as artisans producing

decorative and miniature products can produce more. Similarly, marketing channel followed also influences net income (refer to Table 11.38). Direct selling that largely influences net income in a positive way is, however, found to be followed only by 23.4% of the artisans (refer to Table 11.39) showing large-scale dependence on intermediaries. Lesser work hours for decorative and conventional & decorative genres are suggestive of the fact that artisans find more disposal time for self and family. Commercialization is also found to positively impact the savings of the artisan households (refer to Section 11.17).

While 72.3% would continue the craft in future since it is their main source of livelihood (74.3%, refer to Table 11.3) for artisans, decorative craft makers are more likely to continue the occupation in future (refer to Table 11.34). Positive opinion on profit situation also influences continuity of craft occupation positively (refer to Table 11.36). An important aspect found through this study is the reflection on the status of women in the craft occupation (refer to Section 11.22). Women's participation is found to be considered more positively in D crafts suggesting the view that this genre of craft offers more opportunity of involvement for women. However, marketing of the produce by women from outside the home premises are still found to be not considered by majority of the respondents.

15.4 Contribution of the Research

From academic viewpoint, the study has provided a basis for studying commercialization related changes in crafts from design, function, clientele and shift in utilization of raw materials perspective. These are some of the basic aspects that undergo transformation due to commercialization. This may be one of the pioneering studies that explain the commercialization of traditional crafts of Assam in terms of modifications taking place in crafts due to ever evolving market situations and dynamics. As discussed in Section 2.3 of Chapter 2, earlier studies in the context of crafts of Assam have limitations with respect to studying crafts only from the perspective of production history and anthropological aspects. Simple passing references on craft modification due to commercialization are found in earlier studies (except for one work by Sarma, 2016). This study is an academic contribution to the literature on craft commercialization from the point of modifications in style (motifs and designs), functionality, clientele and changes in the use of raw materials for some

of the major traditional crafts of Assam. The study explores both continuities and change in crafts which is important in order to ascertain the future sustainability of Assam's traditional crafts.

Further, this study has brought forward the depth of interface between producers and customers of the crafts. It has come up with a suggestive framework highlighting the influence of intermediaries and external agents in craft commercialization. Some of the major literatures (Owens, 1973; Jules-Rosette, 1986; Cohen, 1989a; Popelka & Litrell, 1991) dealing with this aspect are from different craft producing regions of the world with major void existing in the context on India, and especially Assam. The study has been able to fill this literary gap. At the same time, it has redefined the existing terms viz. spontaneous and sponsored commercialization from the context of commercialization of crafts in known craft producing sites of Assam. It has identified processes like pure spontaneous commercialization and pure sponsored commercialization in context of Assam. The suggestive framework can be practically used to study changes due to commercialization in different craft producing regions of the state and regions within India.

Other than this, the study has also contributed by linking commercialization with the socioeconomic status of artisans, mostly based in rural areas (refer to Chapter 11). The study has highlighted newer aspects of craft commercialization in artisans' socio-economic conditions. It has identified subjective perceptions as well as objective status and brought to light that degree of change in crafts and craft genre in practice has relation to net income status of the artisans. It has presented important information on perception of women's involvement in the craft occupation, marketing channels employed by artisans, etc. The findings can be the basis for any future Govt. schemes and policies for crafts and crafts-persons.

The study also offers practical suggestions for sustainable commercialization of traditional crafts by taking into consideration the opinions of artisans, intermediaries, tourists, external agents, experts and academicians. The suggestions on commercialization that emphasizes harmony in tradition and modernity in craft making can be incorporated by policy makers for ensuring growth and development of the traditional crafts sectors.

15.5 Future Prospects in the Studied Area

While continued with this extensive work, it is felt that the following areas may be addressed in future studies.

i. The study can be carried over to examine the commercialization of the crafts and its relation to concept of authenticity. There is a need of empirical study of impact of commoditization on the authenticity and meaning of cultural products, within a procedural and comparative framework (Cohen 1979, pages 31-32). This research has not undertaken this journey of studying authenticity.

ii. Commercial modification in crafts with exclusive emphasis on tourism and tourist induced changes can also be taken up in future. Much additional research is required in the areas of craft related entrepreneurship in major towns and cities and its influence on changing dimensions of crafts in adjacent villages. It was observed that modification and innovation introduced by craft entrepreneurs of the cities had certain influence on the crafts produced in villages.

iii. Craft transformation should also be studied from the prism of cultural assimilation which the present study ignored. More in-depth study with respect to understanding related modification in craft objects and designs can be taken up in future for a particular craft object or individual designs.

iv. Other than that, the study of commercialization and modification in crafts can also be studied from the aspects of exports of the crafts. This study simply touched upon the aspect that crafts object change for its suitability in various customer segments. But, further study is required to understand export of crafts and modification.