

ABSTRACT

1. Introduction

Craft production has remained a basic activity in every society of the world. Crafts grew from utilitarian and religious objects to objects of beauty due to artists' desire to make something which is pleasing (Parezo, 1981). As communities got integrated with market economies craft became the easiest items of exchange (Berma, 1996). Stylistic modifications got initiated due to commercialization of the crafts for customers other than the internal community members.

2. Rationale

Researchers identified that commercialization leads to stylistic changes in motifs and designs (Boynton, 1986; Lewis, 1991; Parker & Neal, 1977), raw materials used (Chartniyom, 2013; Guta, 1978; Popelka and Litrell, 1991) and change in functional dimension (Chang, et al, 2008; Chua, 2006; Hauser, 2002; O'Neill, 1997; Parezo, 1981; Terry & Cunningham, 1993) of a craft. Limited information on craft modification in Assam due to commercialization (Barkataki, 1969; Ghosh, 2014; Goswami, 2005; Hoque, 2016; Sarma, 2009) is available (except for a study by Sarma, 2016). Hence, it is important to have an in-depth study on the extent and influence of commercialization of major crafts of Assam. Commercialization and hence modification in crafts also takes place due to direct and indirect influence of different clientele (Cohen, 1989; Graburn, 1984, 2008; Jones, 1973; Jules-Rosette, 1986). However, there is a dearth of studies on this aspect. Commercialization brings economic rewards and it is imperative to see the impact of commercialization of crafts on the artisans. These necessitated the present study. Thus it is decided to proceed with the following objectives.

3. Objectives of the Study:

- i.** To study the commercialization of traditional crafts of Assam with respect to change in style (motif, design), functionality, clientele and use of raw materials.
- ii.** To study the present socio-economic status of artisans in view of commercialization.
- iii.** To offer suggestions for sustainable commercialization of traditional crafts.

4. Scope of the Study & Limitations of the Study

Geographical scope of the study is confined to the Brahmaputra valley of Assam. Only select and known traditional craft practices viz. Pottery and terracotta craft of Asharikandi, Bell metal craft of Sarthebari, Brass metal craft of Sarthebari & Hajo, Bamboo craft of Nalbari, *Pat* and *Muga* silk craft of Sualkuchi and *Eri* craft of Kamrup are included. Only commercial motivation or modification for economic opportunism is studied. Due to qualitative nature and presence of large number of pictures and sketches, the study looks little voluminous.

5. Research Methodology Followed

Methodology for Objective 1:

Commercialization, in this work, is with respect to change in style (motifs and design), change in raw materials used and change in functionality of the crafts. The typologies viz. spontaneous commercialization and sponsored commercialization developed by Cohen (1989) are used only as a guide to explore the interface of artisans and customers. The basic methodology followed is narrative inquiry (focusing on narratives of people) and documentary-historical style (focusing on artifacts and material culture). Methods used are Observation, Photography, Oral History and Unstructured Interviews conducted with artisans who are 60 years of age or above and with other knowledgeable craftsmen and persons engaged in the commerce of the craft.

Methodology for Objective 2:

Quantitative research is used to study socioeconomic status of artisan households with the help of demographic, occupational and perception variables. The sample size is 570. Non-probabilistic convenient sampling technique is followed for data collection through schedule.

Craft	Sample Size
Pottery & Terracotta	30
Brass	70
Bell	70
Bamboo	100
<i>Eri</i>	150
<i>Pat & Muga</i>	150
Total	570

Methodology for Objective 3:

To offer suggestions for the sustainable commercialization of traditional crafts, the methodology comprised of qualitative and quantitative methods. Exploratory Tourist survey used questionnaire, data for which was purposively collected from 200 tourists at sites like Kaziranga and Guwahati through convenience sampling. Data were also generated through Focus Group Discussions with artisans, Informal Interviews with Shopkeepers & Persons Engaged in Selling of Crafts, Govt. and Semi Govt. officials and

experts. Data generated from these were used along with the findings of objective 1 & 2 to offer suggestions.

6. Major Findings of Objective 1:

Commercialization of Pottery & Terracotta of Asharikandi

- i. Due to commercialization, Pottery and terracotta are found to have come out of the nomenclature of utilitarian wares and traditional toys. Traditional objects have been put to different functional and decorative uses like garden planters, cloth hangers, etc.
- ii. Design development is spontaneous as master artisans regularly infuse creativity. Modifications in basic surface ornamentation and structural forms became a part of the commercialization process since the mid 1970s.
- iii. Surface embellishment shows heterogeneity since old patterns like chipped lines, circles, flowers, etc. though produced, are quickly getting replaced by new overblown motifs and representational designs. Artisans apply burnish and synthetic paints.
- iv. Artisans mostly sell their crafts through local intermediaries. In recent years, some input has also been received on the design development front through trainings.

Commercialization of Brass and Bell Metal Craft of Hajo and Sarthebari

- i. In Hajo, brass products are more or less produced in the same way and accomplish primarily the same old function of being utilitarian and religious wares. Some structural modifications are seen and items are made lighter. Earlier designs on most items are no longer chipped. Items are miniaturized due to growth of new functional requirements. Primary customers of brass and bell metals are the local populace of Assam.
- ii. External agents play very negligible role in modification or selling of brass crafts of Hajo. Intermediaries provide the market linkage to the artisans.
- iii. Modification of brass and bell products at Sarthebari has been primarily spontaneous in nature initiated by master craftsmen in search of new markets. Crafting of innovative items in brass like *japi* and tray began during 1970s. In bell metal, innovation is seen since the late 1990s after artisans started getting trained to craft novel items. More heterogeneous designs have come into picture in recent decades. Designs have become more spaced for faster production. Competition from machine made products also compelled artisans to

miniaturize some products. Use of oil based paints can be seen on some decorative objects and jewellery items. Influence of the external agencies in the design modification and product development has been sporadic however in Sarthebari.

Commercialization of Bamboo Crafts of Nalbari

- i. In *japi*, proliferation of design and structural modifications were spontaneous artistic responses. *Parda japi* (used as veil by women), post-independence transformed into *phulam* (decorative) *japi* for decoration, institutional gifts and souvenirs. Artisans utilized new raw materials available from time to time to ornament the *japi* to make it suitable to aesthetic purposes. Conventionally used natural elements and triangular patterns changed into heterogeneous elements and representational motifs and letter writings.
- ii. In recent times, role of external agents and intermediaries can be seen in commercialization and modification with regard quantity and quality of *japi* demanded in market and raw materials which brought in standardization.
- iii. Commercialization of the utilitarian crafts as aesthetic and decorative products has progressed in Nalbari only since 1980s mostly due to intermediaries and external agencies.

Commercialization of Eri Craft of Kamrup

- i. Utility of *eri* cloth basically remained as winter fabric and plain *eri* pieces called *barkapor* were traded by middlemen. Design on *chadar* till the later part of the 20th century remained simple and small.
- ii. Demand for the ornamented *chadars* gave way to modification in designs. By late 1990s and in last decade, ornamentation became more spread out, complex and heterogeneous and use of synthetic yarn in several colors for designs came into being to make it suitable for different customer segments.
- iii. Diversification in *eri* fabrics was realized due to intermediaries and external agents. As a result, functional items like stoles, mufflers, wrappers, etc. came into being. Designs from *pat* and *muga* were incorporated in *eri* in order to offer more design variations and choice.

Commercialization of Pat & Muga Craft of Sualkuchi

- i. In earlier times, motifs in *pat* and *muga* consisted of small floral motifs, creepers, butterfly, birds, circles, dots, lines, etc. laid in geometrical shapes to form design pattern. The designs were not spread profusely but showed synchronicity.

- ii. Around the period of independence of India and thereafter artisans created many new designs. Use of new loom technology also influenced production.
- iii. During later stages of 1950s and 1960s, Banarasi prints influenced the designs on Assamese silk garments. By 1980s, ornamentation became more profuse and compact. Some political situations of the time like the growing sentiments of seven sister states in the North East were economically harnessed. Use of synthetic yarns with silk started to take place and color combinations became complex.
- iv. Since the late 1990s, due to realization of tourist inflow to Sualkuchi, product diversification took place. In present times, extremely innovative and fancy designs are observed. Intermediaries and external agents have also influenced changes in design elements especially in the reproduction of fusion motifs as well as production of innovative design.

The Commercialization Process of Crafts of Assam in a Framework

Instances of commercialization in Assam vary from the process mentioned in works by researchers in other places of the world. Commercialization is more due to artisans own involvement (pure spontaneous) and marketed through intermediaries (spontaneous). Pure sponsored commercialization is seen wherein external agencies give training and inputs on craft modification. At times, both market linkage and design guidance is initiated by them leading to sponsored commercialization of crafts.

7. Findings of Objective 2:

- i. Decorative crafts provide more income to artisan households. More number of family members is found to be engaged in the case of households producing both conventional and decorative types of crafts. But 59.3% artisan households are still found to be engaged in conventional craft making.
- ii. Marketing channel used to sell crafts influences net income. Richer product mix is also found to drive the income higher. Degree of change in the craft is also found to have positive impact on net income.
- iii. Artisans of the decorative and both (conventional and decorative) craft genres have higher perception of income sufficiency and perceived high social status is found to be higher for artisans producing decorative and both craft genres. Participation of women in case of decorative genre is also found to be more than conventional genre.

8. Objective 3: Major Suggestions for Sustainable Commercialization of Crafts

Sustainable commercialization of craft, in this report, is viewed as ensuring economic sustainability through steady flow of income carried forward by balancing tradition and modernity in craft objects while capturing the ever changing customer requirement. Economic sustainability cannot be ensured unless traditional craft objects are adapted according to market requirement. But at the same time, it is necessary to see that indigenouslyness remains preserved.

- i. Handicraft items need to be produced in different categories: conventional, functional, and decorative. Maximum Retail Pricing is suggested for craft products. Articles developed in highest conformity with traditional aspects must be priced higher.
- ii. Differentiating and branding crafts into two categories viz. pure traditional, locally crafted.
- iii. Meaning and identity of motif and design can be kept intact through educating and training budding artisans to adopt motifs and design in a way that its shape and size is proportional. Provision of proper tools to speed up production can be effective to make craft remunerative and hence make craft a sustainable occupation.
- iv. Products made by master artisans and their apprentice ensures quality and standards, and may be given permit to use authenticity marks under Govt. monitoring and regulation.
- v. Promotions of soft aspects of crafts like health benefits, skin friendly properties and organic and eco-friendly attributes are suggested to market crafts successfully.
- vi. Immediate restoring of lost techniques by forming team comprising of elderly artisans, experts and trained designers. Linking training programs intended for the artisans with the Skill India program can increase entrepreneurship in craft sector.
- vii. Fair buying mechanism through decentralized collection centers or depots for the crafts at cluster levels.

9. Conclusion and Contribution to the Body of Knowledge

To conclude, the study looked into various aspects of commercialization of major crafts of the Brahmaputra valley. It offers the first comprehensive analysis of commercialization of major crafts of Assam. It brought to light major changes in motifs and designs, use of raw materials and functionality of crafts due to commercialization and has also brought forth the direct and indirect interface of producers and customers by

delineating the role of intermediaries and external agencies in a proper framework. The study has also contributed by linking commercialization with the socioeconomic status of artisans, mostly based in rural areas. Moreover, it has offered suggestions on how commercialization can be achieved in harmony with tradition and modernity in craft making that can be incorporated by policy makers.

10. Recommendation for Future Research

The study can be carried over to examine the commercialization of the crafts and its relation to concept of authenticity. Commercial modification in crafts with exclusive emphasis on tourism and tourist induced changes can also be taken up in future. Craft transformation can also be studied in future from the prism of cultural assimilation.

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