

PREFACE

Assam has nurtured many traditional handicrafts in its various regions across the state. But its Brahmaputra Valley has always remained the hub of crafts since the time it was known in ancient period as the kingdom of Kamrupa. It is indeed interesting to learn that Kamrup is glorified in Kautilya's Arthashastra of 4th century B.C and a place namely Suwarnakundya (possibly present day silk cluster of Sualkuchi) is extolled for its three varieties of silk namely *dukula* (muga), *patrona* (mulberry) and *khaumak (eri)*; that soft gem like silken garments, were gifted to king Harshavardhana of Kannauj by king Bhaskarvarman of Kamrupa (7th Century A.D) is also a proof of the excellence Assam had in textile craft. The Medieval (12th Century A.D to 18th Century) records of the Ahom regime highlight that highly skilled craftsmen in brass and bell metal produced many varieties of wonderful objects and people of the valley produced and consumed things locally. Varieties of bamboo objects, especially *japi*, a kind of head gear, adorned the nobility and the princely class. The society was opulent in every regard.

A voluminous range of literature can be found on the crafts history of Assam. Eminent works have been published as books and articles on the commerce of handicrafts during the British time period. There was a good demand for the metal crafts in the adjoining areas of Tibet and Bhutan till 19th century and *muga* was traded far off Malabar coasts and Bengal during 17th century A.D. These richly texted documents provide the history of handicrafts of Assam. Handicrafts, thereafter also, have been produced and traded even more and have undergone many changes while adapting to new emerging markets. However, the arts and crafts of Assam have not attracted the kind of attention it deserves to receive in terms of commercialization related aspects. Several major works are found with respect to craft commercialization but for countries like Thailand, Malta, Indonesia, etc. Commercialization of crafts of Assam and transformation thereof, is an area that needed a relook and passionate approach, since it is about tradition and its survival.

In proper consciousness, I must admit that I owe this relooking into this void in research to my Professor and Guide Dr. Mrinmoy K. Sarma. Crafts always fascinated me but not in a way that it fascinates me now only due to the constant influence of my guide to entertain a meaningful research in our rich traditional heritage of crafts. This

research is an absolute outcome of his interest and insight, apart from mine. Prof. Erik Cohen's work on craft commercialization in respect of Thailand is also an eminent work that guided us to look at many perspectives in craft sector of Assam, that remained little explored.

Coming to the context of the work, the overarching focus of this study was to understand craft modification from the perspective of commercialization: the circumstances of transformation, kind of transformation, institutions or groups associated or involved in craft commerce and their level of involvement in the transition of crafts, etc. In doing so, it became extremely important to approach the issue at the roots. Apart from reading and understanding crafts through observation, many artisans and persons dealing with the craft, in some or the other ways, through production or commerce, were approached. As a result, a mammoth of information in the form of photographs of craft objects, oral history, interviews, etc. were generated. This led to the writing of this report which in a sense is a monographic text, dealing with some of the most known traditional crafts of the Brahmaputra valley of Assam. The volume of the thesis hence need not be counted in pages but as a rich documentation of many unexplored facts. I would say that the pictures presented herein along with the data shall help understand the richness of Assam's craft culture, tradition and commerce and changes in the objects therein, and shall be an enjoyment for readers and helpful for policy makers for its distinctive take on tradition and economic sustainability of crafts and craftsmen respectively.