

## **Traditional Pottery in Assam and its Role in Assamese Socio-cultural Life**

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### **Abstract**

Folk art is the basis of folk life. Some people living in the folk community are still earning for their livelihood through folk art. Pottery is one of the various folk industries prevalent in the Assamese society. The 'Kumar' and 'Hira' communities living in Assam have been hereditarily engaged in preserving the pottery tradition. But, this traditional pottery industry in Assam is currently in crisis. Financial constraints or several other problems have led people to lose their interest in the industry. This article analyses the importance this industry is carrying in Assamese people's society.

**Keywords:** Pottery, society, tradition, commodity, phrases and idioms, community

### **1. Introduction:**

Pottery is one of the significant and widely prevalent folk arts in Assam. Places like Majuli, BARPETA, Dhubri etc are particularly famous for pottery. Since the ancient times, three different types of pottery methods are seen to be prevailing in the state and these include<sup>1</sup>- (a) Pottery by applying clay over a mold made of hay or straw, (b) Pottery by applying clay inside a mold and (c) Pottery by using a clay rope and forming the mold of a pot.

#### **Pottery by applying clay over a mold made of hay or straw**

In this process, hay or straws are used to form the mold of the pot or vessel. Further, clay is applied all over the mold of straw and left under the sun to dry. After drying it up well, the clay applied mold of straw is burnt in fire in which the straw mold inside the pot is burnt down and the pot comes out well.

#### **Pottery by applying clay inside a mold**

Another process of making clay pot is to prepare a mold of a vessel or any other pot made of fine bamboo strips. Then, a 1 to 4 inch thick layer of clay is applied inside the bamboo pot. Once the layer of clay is well set inside the bamboo pot, a sort of stone called 'ghila' or something similar is used to rub the pot from inside to smoothen it up. Following this, the bamboo mold is put under the sun to dry up and then burnt in fire. Once the bamboo strips are burnt down, the earthen pot inside the mold gets prominent.

#### **Pottery by using a clay rope and forming the mold of a pot**

As per this third process of pottery, the clay is first scraped well with both hands and then a long earthen rope or string is prepared from this clay by rubbing both the hands with one another. Such earthen strings are then wrapped in the shape of a pot or vessel. Once the pot is formed, a smooth stone is used to hit the pot and finally form an earthen pot out of it. Once it turns a bit firm, it is put under the sun followed by burning in fire. In addition to these methods, there are some other pottery methods as well wherein some potters use rotating wooden wheels or disks while some others use their hands to form pots.

Two communities living in Assam are particularly related to pottery. They are known as the Kumar and Hira. Both these communities have been safeguarding and preserving the pottery tradition of Assam hereditarily. Although both Kumar and Hira communities are associated with this tradition as a means of earning livelihood, the earthen pots prepared by them differs from each other. Kumar are known for preparing earthen pot that is generally used in religious ceremonies and in everyday life. On the other hand, the Hiras prepare earthen pots that are used in the practical life only. The Kumar generally use the rotating horizontal disk to mold the clay and make pots and vessels. But the Hira community potters use their hands to make earthen pots.

## 2. Significance of the Study:

Assamese society is deeply connected with the traditional pottery industry in Assam. The pottery industry is currently in crisis due to various reasons such as financial constraints and reluctance of the new generation towards this industry and so on. If the art disappears, various words, proverbs, phrases & Idioms, etc., which is associated with this art form, will also be lost from the Assamese language. Therefore, the subject for this discussion has been chosen on traditional pottery in Assam.

## 3. Aim and Objectives:

The aim of the study is to perform a descriptive analysis based on field study on the traditional pottery in Assam, India. The objectives of the study are,

- (i) To perform an analysis of the traditional pottery products in Assam.
- (ii) To analyse the phrases and the idioms in Assamese language related to traditional pottery.
- (iii) To analyse the role of traditional pottery in Assamese society and culture.

## 4. Review of Related Literature:

Borah(2014) in the article *Pottery of Assam: A Note* focuses on the traditional pottery and its types in traditional Assamese society. The use of pottery in the present day context is also brought into the context. Sarma (2008) in his book *Axomiya Sanskritir Sambhar* discusses on the pottery culture in Assam in the articles entitled *Pottery System of Ancient Assam*. The article highlights the pottery system, its significance and widespread use of traditional pottery in the ancient and middle age Assam, particularly in the Ahom era. Khan et al.(2013) in the article *The Past and Present of Pottery in Sivasagar* presents an elaborate analysis on the pottery in Sivasagar district of Assam, its past and the present status along with the problems faced by the pottery practitioners in contemporary context. Kakati(2015) in the article *Pottery of Majuli: The Traditional Techniques* discusses on the traditional practice of pottery in the Majuli district of Assam. Majuli is the largest river-island in the world which has the widespread use of pottery making in traditional pattern. The pottery products are marketed through riverine routes across Assam since the ancient time which is still now practiced as well with some of the modifications. Gogoi (2013) in the book *Axomor Loka Sanskriti* provides an analysis of

the pottery in Assam. The writer provides some of the elaborated images of the instruments associated with the pottery manufacturing and pottery products. Saikia(2013) in the book *Axomiya Manuhor Itithaas* co-relates the concept of the history of Assamese people with the place of pottery in the evolution process of Assamese civilization.

## 5. Discussion:

### The products of traditional pottery in Assam

The potters are seen to make a whole variety of earthen things. The earthen things made by them are used in the religious ceremonies, day to day life, functions and festivals etc. such usages points at the rich heritage of the pottery industry. The various kinds of earthen things made by them are-

- ‘Dhunaban’ (a pot where pleasant smelling resins are burnt),
- ‘Dhupdani’ (incense stick holder),
- ‘Ghot’ (a small earthen water pot),
- ‘Saki’ (earthen lamp),
- ‘Molachoru’ ( a little big earthen vessel),
- ‘Khol’, Doba, Nagara, Mridanga, Xutuli (kinds of musical instruments),
- ‘Koloh’ (earthen vessel),
- ‘Gosa’ (a lamp stand),
- ‘Phuldani’ (a flower vass),
- ‘Bhuruka’ (a small earthen vessel),
- ‘Xaneki’, ‘Hari’ (earthen cooking vessel),
- Terracotta etc.

### Phrases and Idioms in Assamese Language related to Pottery

The legends and the phrases and idioms widely prevalent in the folk society, gives a glimpse of the creative caliber and moral values of the folk culture and life. There are quite a good variety of phrases and idioms associated with the pottery industry that can still be found prevailing in the Assamese society. For instance-

- a) *Komarorhorotburhadaa*  
*Kumarorhorotbhogachoru*  
*Hirarghorotbhogahari*  
*Chohokirhorotbhogalori* ||<sup>2</sup>

(An old broad-sword has no value in a Blacksmith’s house and similarly, a broken pot, a broken vessel and a broken or useless truck has no place or value in the Potter’s, the

Hira's and in a Rich person's house, respectively).

b) *Gaat naisaal-bakoli*

*Mod khai tin tekeli*<sup>3</sup>

(A person who has nothing to wear and eat, rather likes to spend money in drinking three pottery-vessels full of alcohol)

c) *Munatnaidhon*

*Tekeli khabormon*<sup>4</sup>

(Not a single penny in the bag and but wants to eat an earthen pot full of rice-beer)

### **Idioms in Assamese Language related to Pottery**

The proper use of clause and idiomatic expression of language conveys the narrative quality of the speaker. The Assamese language has an array of clause and idiomatic expressions of language. The use of the words 'choru', 'tekeli' etc in the clauses or idiomatic expressions of language are noteworthy. For instance-

*Chorutdhora*<sup>5</sup> (An act of burning food while cooking and making it stick to the bottom of the cooking pot)

*Chorutloga*<sup>6</sup> (Busy in cooking)

*Chorutxumua*<sup>7</sup> (To enter into the kitchen to cook)

### **Role of Pottery in Assamese Society and Culture**

Pottery has been practiced in Assam since the ancient times. The earthen pots and things made by the potters of the state have been used in innumerable activities of the day to day life of the Assamese people. Keeping in view the wide usage of the earthen things in the Assamese lifestyle, we can proceed with discussing its role in three categories-

#### **Economic role**

The potters, for preparing the perfect clay to make earthen things, dig seven layers deep down the earth to dig out a sort of sticky clay to make things out of it. The potters use to sell things made by them either in stall in market or sometimes at their place of work, i.e., at their homes. They are earning for their livelihood either by selling these in the market or by setting up a stall in front of their homes. In other words, it is mainly the selling of the earthen things that can be termed as the main business or source of income of the potters.

#### **Social role**

The wide usage of plastic made things has led to severe outcomes like major pollution and global warming. The main issue with plastic is that once a plastic made thing is

used and discarded or thrown away, it does not decompose and remains on ground as it is. This, thus, make the ground lose its goodness and productivity. But this problem can be solved with a much better outcome if earthen things like glass, cups, vessel, pot etc., are being used. The pots made by the potters in Assam can also be seen to store edibles like dried 'thekera (*Garcinia Pedunculata*), 'khar' (alkali) as well. These edibles, often stored for long and then eaten, are seen to have retained its goodness on storing these in earthen pots. Moreover, their skills in terracotta give a view of their artistic qualities as well.

#### **Cultural role**

The earthen things made by the potters in Assam are seen to be used in the cultural aspects as well. Marriage is a social festival and different rituals followed in the Assamese marriage system are witnessed to have used different varieties of earthen things. For example, earthen lamp, pot, vessel etc. In the lower Assam marriages, it is seen that a sort of flat leaf like earthen thing is also hung with the mango leaves that are tied on two banana trees at the entry gate. Although this particular earthen thing has different names in different places, these are being considered as a blessing for the newly married couple for a happy conjugal life. Some weddings are also seen to serve its guests with food on earthen pots and dishes. Another wide usage of the small earthen vessel is that it is often used to store milk and prepare curd from it in the regular Assamese households.

The earthen things bear a good value in the religious ceremonies. The small water pot/jar made by the Kumar is widely used in the holy rituals of Durga puja, Saraswati puja, Laxmi puja and other holy activities. Kumars are known to make 'Nag Ghot' especially for the Manasha puja. Earth pot is also used to offer ghee, Prasad etc to the deity in the puja. In this way, the earthen things made by the potters have been inseparable roles in the economic, social and cultural life of the state of Assam and its people.

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## End Notes

- <sup>1</sup>Sarmah, Mrigen: *Axomiya Sanskritir Sambhar*, P. 326
- <sup>2</sup> Kock, Jeevan Chandra(2011). *Axomiya Bhakhar Alankar Fokora Jujona*. Kumaronichiga, Dibrugarh. P- 81
- <sup>3</sup> Hakasam, Upen Rabha(2008). *Bor Axomor Bornil Sanskriti*. Bina Library, Guwahati. P-109
- <sup>4</sup> Kock, Jeevan Chandra(2011). *Axomiya Bhakhar Alankar Fokora Jujona*. Kumaronichiga, Dibrugarh. P- 259
- <sup>5</sup> Baruah, Anil(Ed)(2015). *Jatua Thas aru Khandabakya*. Axomiya Bhakha aru Software Bikash Kendra, Guwahati. P-60.
- <sup>6</sup> Ibid
- <sup>7</sup> Ibid