



INDIGENOUS USE OF CANE AND BAMBOO AS HANDICRAFTS AMONG THE APATANI OF ZIRO VALLEY (WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO UTILITY ITEMS)

Hage Yamang

PhD Scholar, Department of History

Rajiv Gandhi University, Itanagar, Arunachal Pradesh- India

Email: hageyamang25@gmail.com

Abstract: The concept of Indian handicrafts has emerged from one of the oldest civilizations called the Indus Valley civilization. The word Handicraft is made by two words hand+craft. Hand mean by made of hand or using simple tool in making of any items, and Craft mean a unique expression that represent a culture, tradition and heritage of the country. So in simple words handicraft are mostly defined as “items made by hand, often with the use of simple tools, and are generally artistic or traditional in nature. Handicrafts of the Apatani find a vivid expression through their fine works in cane and bamboo, which are of high artistic and utilitarian value. In fact, the cane and bamboo work is a remarkable distinguishing cultural trait common to the community living in the region. Their arts and crafts are mainly associated with weaving, and cane and bamboo work. This crafts have origin in their past and characterizes their cultural legacy. The study is an attempt to outline different types of handicraft and understand the significance of indigenous uses of cane and bamboo in day to day life.

Keywords: *Indigenous, handicraft, cane, bamboo, Apatani*

INTRODUCTION

The land of dawn lit mountains; earlier known as the North-East Frontier Agency (NEFA), it was on 20th January 1972 the area was renamed as Arunachal Pradesh. In the same year it was declared as a Union-Territory and became a full-fledged state on February 20, 1987. The present day Arunachal Pradesh covers a geographical area of 83,743sq.km, and is bounded by China and Tibet in the north, Myanmar on the east, Nagaland and Assam in the south, and Bhutan in the west. It has a population of 1,382,611 according to 2011 census¹.

The tribe Apatani, the subject of investigation in this study are said to belong to the Tibeto-Mongoloid

stock and are the original inhabitants of Ziro valley in Lower Subansiri district. The Apatani valley is set in a landscape typical of most of the middle ranges of Eastern Himalayas². And the valley comes under Sub-Himalayan climatic zone and lies between *Panior* and *Kamla* rivers at an altitude of 1524m³. The total population of this tribe is about 83,000 approximately. Apatani peoples mainly subsist on agriculture and animal husbandry. They generally practice paddy cum fish culture which is one of the unique cultivations in the state. The Apatani religion is characterized as animistic, and there is a general belief in one Supreme God who is considered as just, benevolent and good. *Danyi-Piilo* is often regarded as a God representing eternal truth.

¹ *Statistical Abstract 2011*, Govt. of Arunachal Pradesh.

² Christoph von Furer-Haimendorf, *A Himalayan Tribe from Cattle to Cash*, Uttar Pradesh, 1980, p.11.

³ Takhe Kani, *Indigenous Cane and Bamboo Culture*, in a Souvenir Hao Langkar, Golden Jubilee Celebration Committee, Govt. Middle School Hari, 2003, p.21.

Indigenous knowledge system means institutionalized form of indigenous knowledge that is unique to a culture or society and is transferred from generation to generation in an informal way. This knowledge is the outcome of hundreds of years of researches, experiences and adaptation to local culture and environment and covers a wide range of subjects such as agriculture, food preparation, handicrafts, indigenous healthcare system and many more aspects of life. Often indigenous knowledge system is looked against the modern knowledge system, but in actuality, both are complementary and supplementary to each other⁴. This paper attempts to understand the significance of indigenous uses of cane and bamboo in day to day life with special reference to utility items.

The concept of Indian handicrafts has emerged from one of the oldest civilizations called the Indus Valley civilization. The exclusive items carved by the Indian handicrafts industry comprise of vast cultural and ethnic diversity that has imbibed an array of unique themes, techniques and crafts. The word Handicraft is made by two words hand+craft. Hand mean by made of hand or using simple tool in making of any items, and Craft mean a unique expression that represent a culture, tradition and heritage of the country. So in simple words handicraft are mostly defined as “items made by hand, often with the use of simple tools, and are generally artistic and/or traditional in nature. They are also objects of utility and objects of decoration”⁵. Indian handicrafts industry has been globally popularized as the rich and cultural heritage of India for its unique appeal. Handicrafts of India use brass, metal, wood, stone and beads to carve its products ranging from master pieces to plain household items.

The Apatani have been always dependent on the natural resources for their livelihood since time immemorial. They have been dependent on cane and bamboo for constructing traditional shelters, fencing, household articles, as sacrificial structure, hunting weapons, agricultural tools and implements and other miscellaneous items. Handicrafts of the Apatani find a vivid expression through their fine works in cane and bamboo, which are of high artistic and utilitarian value. In fact, the cane and bamboo work is a remarkable distinguishing cultural trait common to the community living in the region. Their arts and crafts are mainly associated with weaving, blacksmith, and cane and bamboo work⁶. This crafts have origin in their past and

characterizes their cultural legacy. The Bamboo plants grow in abundance in the region. Consequently, the people make multifarious use of these in daily life. Not only these materials are readily available, they are also easy to work with and hardly require the use of specialized tools or equipment. Using Cane and bamboo for crafts is generally men's job, although there is no taboo for woman. Generally womenfolk have devoted their leisure time at the loom and produce varieties of textile items and have contributed in making the indigenous handicrafts. The instruments used in the traditional loom locally known as *chichin*, for manufacturing textile also consist of stakes of cane and bamboo. Almost every household have bamboo gardens locally called

⁴ Manish Sharma, 'Indigenous Knowledge System in Healthcare among the Tawang Monpas of Arunachal Pradesh', in Sarith Sengupta, *Indigenous Knowledge Traditions*, Gyan publishing house, New Delhi, 2012, p.115.

⁵ Planning Commission Government of India, *Status Study of Tribal Handicraft-An Option for Livelihood of Tribal Community in the States of Arunachal Pradesh, Rajasthan, Uttaranchal and Chattisgarh*, www.planingcommission.nic.in, 2006.

⁶ *Gazetere of India*, Arunachal Pradesh, Subansiri district, Shillong, 1982, p.202.

'*Bije*', and this resource was guarded and meticulously tended by every villagers in the plateau. Bamboos of different kinds are used for making vessels for bringing water, mugs for carrying and drinking beer, spoons and plate to eat from, tongs for holding hot things and pipes for smoking. The Apatani makes fine mats of cane as well as bamboo for sleeping. In agriculture, bamboos are used for fencing and for making handles of spades and axes⁷. Cane has the same importance as bamboo for the Apatani as it is mostly used with bamboo together. Canes are mainly used for tying, making of strings and ropes, making of fine mats, multipurpose basket and fans. The three varieties of cane found and used in the plateau are locally known as *Tarpi*, *Tasur* and *Tikhe*. There exist a wealth of indigenous knowledge on the utilization and management of bamboo and cane resources which go side by side in traditional use.

The community has certain ways of processing the raw materials using their indigenous technique. The principle raw materials of handicrafts cane and bamboo are seasoned properly by the indigenous method. A fully matured cane and bamboo is normally considered for the purpose. A matured cane collected from the forest is first trimmed and made rough strips. Whether strips or not, they are twisted round in several coils, which are then placed for drying over the hearth for a considerable period. The constant smoke from the hearth seasons the cane, which makes it durable and insect proof. Finally the seasoned strips are cleared to fine strips and kept them ready for making required craft items. Similarly the matured bamboos are also seasoned by same process of smoking or by keeping them in sunlight. Sometimes unseasoned cane and bamboo are used directly in making crafts meant for temporary purpose. The tools employed for making craft items are *dao*, knife and a spike of bone or metal⁸. The technique and design employed is of three main types viz. *Harpo podu* (is a local term used for checker design), *Lopu* (is a twill technique) and *Lapoi* is a hexagonal design which is found to be common throughout Arunachal Pradesh. Plaiting technique on the other hand is generally used for making various basket appendages instead of basket proper.

TYPES OF HANDICRAFTS ON THE BASIS OF FUNCTION AND UTILITY

A large number of articles, which can be traced in an Apatani house, are precisely made of cane and bamboo. These articles can be broadly classified into carrying, storing, and distributing food items.

The list of handicrafts on the basis of function and utility are listed below:

Baskets

Entii/Entw Yagi: it is a finely woven bamboo basket, generally used for carrying grains during the harvesting. A wooden slab is attached to this basket for threshing corn from the sheaf, which is called *Entii Pata*

Barju: *Barju* is of two types, *Yasang Barju* is a coarser wicker basket used for carrying soil and firewood from forest. It is cylindrical in shape with flat bottom. The technique employed is twilling. Another type of *Barju* is *Bamin Barju*, whenever the women go out for other purpose at own village or other, they use this *Barju*⁹.

⁷ Ibid., p.207.

⁸ Dr D. K. Duarah, 'Handicrafts of the Tribes of Arunachal Pradesh with reference to Cane and Bamboo', in Dr P. C. Dutta and Dr d. k. Duarah(eds), *Handicrafts of Arunachal Pradesh*, Government of Arunachal Pradesh Department of Cultural Affairs Directorate of Research, Itanagar, 1990, Pp.27-28.

⁹ Mihin kani, *the Rising Culture of the Apatanis*, Himalayan publishers, Itanagar, 2008, p.83.

Badr: is a tabular shaped basket made of cane and bamboo, it is used as a straining basket to filter the wine and beer.

Sador: it is a funnel shaped straining basket made of cane and bamboo for preparation of rice-millet beer.

Ajipiha: is a netted vegetable basket made of bamboo wicker.

Yadin: it is a lidded cane basket for storing garments and ornaments.

Pykha: it is a gent's netted basket made of cane for carrying firewood from jungle.

Hiijan Liha: is a ceremonial basket used to carry food and meat to the household of a newborn. It is used by the mother as plate for taking food during the post-natal observance of taboo.

Supun Liha: is also a ceremonial cane made basket used to carry rice powder during ritual ceremonies.

Agricultural tools and implements

Yatii: is a traditional rain shield of Apatani.

Kele: is a pointed split bamboo stick used in weeding. It supplements the hoe in the weeding process.

Yasi Hurbu: is a hollow wooden beam used as a water conduit in the paddy field. Another version of water conduit is a concave wooden beam called *Yasi Siicho*.

Household Articles

Pepu: it is a sitting mat made out of bamboo, which is generally used for sitting and sleeping on the floor.

Piipin: is a Bamboo mat mostly used for drying paddy grain and other edible items outside the house under direct sunlight.

Turla: is a bamboo mug with twin side handles meant for taking drink. Apatanis use different types of bamboo mug on different occasion, each symbolic and specific to a particular event

Müige: it is a kitchen tong made of split bamboo which is used for handling hot items near the fire place.

Yapyo: is a winnowing fan made from special type of bamboo and cane strips called *Yabin*.

Dülii Kiiche: is a standard bamboo cup used for measuring amount of rice.

Lera: is a haversack made of cane wicker, carried during jungle trips and hunting expeditions.

Significance of Handicrafts

The whole discourse reveals how indigenous knowledge is linked with the day to day utility items made of cane and bamboo of the Apatani and reveals that the traditional handicrafts tools and methods is as old as the cultural history of the Apatani. With the advancement of technology in the present century, the Apatani are going through the process of transition and exposed to various forces of changes. It has mostly affected their material life and gradually started replacing many of their utility goods and with time the traditional handicrafts have been in the process of becoming extinct. This is probably because the art of craftsmanship is limited and practiced only by few. Beside the use of modern readymade utilities are readily available in the market at much cheaper prices. In spite of the changes the community is still maintaining their tradition in respect of production and utility of the handicrafts, and the culture and customs still retain their significance. The handicrafts of the community play a very important role in representing the culture and tradition of the region. They are substantial medium for presenting the rich traditional art, culture and heritage, traditional skills and talents which are associated with people's lifestyle and history. This crafts also serves as a source of livelihood for the marginalized.

Notes and References

1. *Statistical Abstract 2011*, Govt. of Arunachal Pradesh.
2. Christoph von Furer-Haimendorf, *A Himalayan Tribe from Cattle to Cash*, Vikash Publishing House Pvt Ltd, Uttar Pradesh, 1980, p.11.
3. Takhe Kani, Indigenous Cane and Bamboo Culture, in a Souvenir *HaoLangkar*, Golden Jubilee Celebration Committee, Govt. Middle School Hari, 2003, p.21.
4. Manish Sharma, 'Indigenous Knowledge System in Healthcare among the Tawang Monpas of Arunachal Pradesh', in SarithSengupta, *Indigenous Knowledge Traditions*, Gyan publishing house, New Delhi, 2012, p.115.
5. Planning Commission Government of India, *Status Study of Tribal Handicraft-An Option for Livelihood of Tribal Community in the States of Arunachal Pradesh, Rajasthan, Uttaranchal and Chattisgarh*, www.planingcommission.nic.in, 2006.
6. *Gazettere of India*, Arunachal Pradesh, Subansiri district, Shillong, 1982, p.202.
7. *Ibid.*, p.207.
8. Dr D. K. Duarah, 'Handicrafts of the Tribes of Arunachal Pradesh with reference to Cane and Bamboo', in Dr P. C. Dutta and Dr d. k. Duarah (eds), *Handicrafts of Arunachal Pradesh*, Government of Arunachal Pradesh Department of Cultural Affairs Directorate of Research, Itanagar, 1990, Pp.27-28.
9. Mihinkani, *the Rising Culture of the Apatanis*, Himalayan publishers, Itanagar, 2008, p.83