



# Heritage of the Handicraft Industry of Assam under Satras (Vaishnavite Monasteries)

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**Abstract-** *The Neo-Vaishnavite Movement propagated by Srimanta Sankar Deva in Assam during 15<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> century. It brought changes almost all the aspects of the society. Handicraft Industry of Assam started flourishing under the Vaishnavite Monasteries. The attractive arts and crafts of local crafted people became the part of Neo-Vaishnavite tradition. Satras started patronising Handicraft industry of Assam and also developed on the crafted goods for their customers and ceremonies.*

**Keywords:** *Handicraft, Assam's Handicraft Industry, Satra, Neo-Vaishnavite, Culture Heritage.*

## 1.0 INTRODUCTION:

The Handicraft Industry of Assam began more than two thousand years ago. The region was mentioned in *Ramayana, Maharashtra*, and other ancient Sanskrit literatures for its rich cultural heritage in the traditional handicrafts and handloom products (especially *Muga Silk*). Handloom industry of Assam takes the lead in every period of Assam history. Handloom goods are the most significant feature of the Vaishnavite tradition of Assam. Bamboo and cane craft also wood craft was one of the chief industries of Assam. Fertile land of the Brahmaputra River provides rich reserve of bamboo and cane. After Bamboo craft bell-metal industry of Assam was prominent chief industry which has very intense relation with Satras. Satras use crafted goods for customs, ceremonies, traditional music and dance thus the handcrafted goods of Assam became the prominent part of the Neo-Vaishnavite tradition.

## 1.1 REVIEW OF LITERATURE:

The following books were reviewed for the purposed study:

A)Nagan Saikia in his book '*Asamiya Manuhar Itihas*' (The History of the Assamese People), Publisher – Katha Publication, Guwahati, Assam, 2013 discusses about the effects of the Neo Vaishnavite Movement in the society of Assam, more particularly in the domain of social tradition and literature of Assam in detail and also highlights the contributions of colonialism towards the growth of Assamese literature in Assam.

B)Sir Edward Gait '*A History of Assam* Global Net Publication, New Delhi 6<sup>th</sup> Edition 2024 discusses the society of Assam from every aspect from the ancient to modern history of Assam. This book includes religious customs, traditions and Art of Assam and its importance in the society.

C)R.D Choudhury in his book '*Art Heritage of Assam* ,Publication Aryan Books International; 1st edition (May 1, 1998)the book focus on the traditional art and architecture of Assam.

## 1.2 OBJECTIVES:

The Work makes an attempt to understand:

-To find the relation between Neo-Vaishnavite tradition and Handicraft Industry of Assam.

-To search the history of Handicraft Industry of Assam under Satras.

## 1.3 METHODOLOGY:

The Study will follow the descriptive, analytical, mode of Historical enquiry based on secondary sources.

## 2. FINDINGS:

Satras are Vaishnavite Monasteries established by Mahapurush Srimanta Sankardeva, founder of the Neo-Vaishnavite movement in Assam. Satras were founded to promote the ideology of *Eksaran Naam Dharma*. Satras are devoted to cultural and religious activities. Satras have sturdy relation with Handicraft Industry of Assam from decades. Various Crafts have emerged in Assam more than two thousand years ago. Crafts like pottery and terracotta, Bamboo crafts,, wood crafts, silk weaving , mask making metal crafts are major sources of employment for rural craftspeople of Assam. Handicraft industry of Assam and Satras

has a long history, Crafted goods are essential for the traditional customs and ceremonies of the Satras. Each and every Satras of Assam utilises handicraft goods of local artisan despite that same most popular Satras of Assam fabricated various types of handicraft goods under their Monasteries.

Satras emerged during 15<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> century and from the beginning served as a pillar of socio-cultural institution of the region. Satras are leading institution towards the preservation of Handicraft industry of Assam. Satras which are fabricated Handicraft goods under their monastery are Auniati Satra, Kamalabari Satra, Samaguri Satra and more.

The Auniati Satra was established in Majuli in 1663 AD by Ahom king Jayadhwaj Singha. Auniati Satra is famous for “Paalnaam” and “Apsara dance” but the Satra also has remarkable contribution in creation of artefacts which were found in the museum of the Satra like- Assamese traditional crafted jewellery, crafted ivory goods, wooden crafted toys etc.

The Kamalabari Satra founded by Bedulapadma Ata at Majuli. This Satra was renowned for made finest boats, mainly by the use of wood. Also decorated hand fans made by bamboo, cloths, tree leaves are also created in this Satra .

The Samaguri Satra founded by Sri Sri Chakrapani grandson of Srimanta Sankardeva, under the patronage of Ahom kind Chakradhar Singha. Samaguri Satra is worldwide famous for its traditional mask making practices. Masks are use in *Bhaona* (traditional performing art). The glory of masks making in this Satra brought honour for the region. The Mask art of Majuli was first brought into the world stage by Satradhikari of the Samaguri Satra Kosha Kanta Dev Goswami. Mask makes of this Satra honoured by several national and regional awards. These masks are made by cow dung, jute fibre, paper cloth, natural colours.

The Bamboo and cane craft of Assam also have historical relation with Neo-Vaishnavite Monasteries. Hand crafted bamboo mats, sitalpati, basket, Jaapi etc used in Satras for performing everyday customs. Wood crafted goods and furniture and various articles in Satra and Naam-ghar are tiff carve on wood, depicting the *Guru Asana* and different kinds of birds and animals figuring in mythology crafted by wood decorated in Satras and Naamghars

The bell-metal industry of Assam is one of the prime handicraft industry connected with Satras. Products like ‘banbati’, ‘kanhi’, ‘ghoti’, ‘koloh’,

'Sarai 'were mostly used in the Satras for religious customs and ceremonies. Also musical instruments like 'Bor taal', 'Pati taal' (cymbals) are most prominently used in Satras for performing traditional dance, music and plays.

The handloom industry of Assam is significant part of the tradition and cultural heritage of Assam. By the request of Koch prince Cilarai during the reign of Koch king Naranarayana Mahapurush Sirmanta Sankardeva led the weavers of Tantikuchi or Barpeta with Gopal later Mathuradas Budha Ata as master weaver began to woven Vrindavani Vastra which depicted childhood activities of Krishna ( Krishna Lila). The tapestry was 120 cubits long and 60 cubits broad and it took about six months to finish the weaving. Also various woven cloths most prominently Gamusa are still one of the most chief woven cloth use in the Satras by the devotees and in the 'Thapona 'which was especially made and uniquely designed for 'Thapona 'or 'Guru Asana'.

Assam is famous for Elephant from ancient times. Elephant tusks are available for carving and moulding into different articles. Especially in royal houses utilised ivory crafted goods. Thus this industry grew to fulfil the needs of royal household. Till now there were number of Satras preserved ivory carved goods in their museums which were used by the Ahom kings and prince.

The terracotta and pottery is one of the most ancient Handicraft Industry in India. Assam also has the largest historical relation with terracotta and pottery production from ancient period. Terracotta earth lamp, *saki*, *sakidani* ( lampstand), *dhupdani*( to burn incense), *Kalaha* for storing water and different kinds of mythological birds, animals were used in Satras.

### 3. CONCLUSION

Assam is richest state in natural resources which were used by the craftspeople for make crafted goods. Unique and traditional crafted goods of Assam are worldwide famous. Neo-Vaishnavite monasteries are the most prominent patroniser of the Handicraft industry of Assam. Traditional customs, ceremonies, music and performing arts in Neo-Vaishnavite tradition are incomplete without hand crafted goods and instruments made by local artists.

Neo-Vaishnavite traditions not only uplift the Handicraft industry of Assam but also make it relevant for the Vaishnavite culture in Assam

which indicates the importance and significance of the beauty and unique nature of the Handicraft industry of Assam.

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