

Making of Basketry among Rabha Tribe: Tradition and Change

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Abstract: Basket making is virtually a universal craft, and its specific forms have been shaped by the particular uses which are served in agriculture, preparation, and serving of food, fishing, trapping, furniture, housing, etc. For making basket, Bamboo is mainly used, which is the versatile group of plants capable of providing ecological, economic and livelihood security to the people. The versatile uses of bamboo have made it the backbone of rural economy. Therefore, it is known as 'Poor man timber'. It is probably the most extensively used plant resources and associated with all spheres of life (e.g. food, medicine, crafts, agricultural implements, house building, materials cordage, etc.). So every tribal group has used these resources in their livelihood. Rabha one of the racial communities of Assam also engaged in making baskets which is related to their culture and livelihood. For making baskets they mainly used natural resources especially bamboo. But, due to various reasons, the traditional basket-making process has come under change. Therefore, this paper tries to highlight what changes occurred in the process of making baskets among Rabhas.

Keywords: Culture, Basket, Rabha, Change, Tradition, Bamboo.

1. INTRODUCTION

One of the most crucial elements of any community is its culture. Culture is the intricate whole that consists of all of the knowledge, beliefs, morality, laws, conventions, and other skills that people learn as members of a society (Tylor, 1871). As a result, culture integrates into society. There are many distinct kinds of culture, but material culture which comprises a society's material things, assets, and physical environment is one of the most significant. Handicrafts and folk art are integral components of material culture. Handicrafts such as basketry, pottery, carpet weaving, clothing manufacturing, and so forth have been practiced by people since the beginning of time. These tribal arts and crafts, however, are much more than just a means of subsistence; they also serve to highlight the unique characteristics of individual societies. In other words, basketry has been named the Mother of Arts since it is essentially a thousand-year-old, almost global skill. Since the maker had access to a variety of materials, many of its shapes and techniques developed independently in many parts of the world. Tribal art and craft can be broadly categorised into three categories: individualistic, where the craftsmen express their emotions, utilitarian, which is required by social traditions, and ritualistic, which is utilised in the service of rites associated with certain beliefs. Crafting baskets is known as basketry. Its particular forms have been influenced by fishing, trapping, farming, building furniture, and housing. Nature has provided the raw materials for basketry. Due to their custom of living in forested areas, tribal members have deep contact with the environment. They make an effort to make the most of the resources found in the natural world to meet their needs. The Rabha is the nine Scheduled tribes in the plain district of Assam, who speak a language from the Tibeto-Burman branch of the Sino-Tibetan language family, is not exceptional in this sense. Bamboo is a readily available material in the forests, and basketry is particularly popular among the Rabhas because the people's livelihood is reliant on it. Their means of subsistence are therefore derived from the public resources, which they employ to create a range of baskets. They have been using this procedure for ages, manufacturing them for both

personal and business use. Nonetheless, several modifications have been made to the Rabhas' original basketry method. Therefore, this study is an attempt to study the basketry-making process of what was before and what is prevalent now among the Rabhas. It also tries to identify various factors that bring these changes.

2. OBJECTIVES

1. To attempt to study the changes in basketry-making among the Rabhas.
2. To identify the factors of change in basketry making.

3. METHODOLOGY

To analyse the objectives, the research paper uses a qualitative research approach. In-depth interviews with semi-structured questionnaires were used to collect primary data from the people who are engaged in the process of making basketry. The respondents were chosen from the Southern part of Kamrup district, Assam with 30 homogeneous samples of the Rabha tribe. For the study observation method was also used to gather as much information as possible.

4. TRADITION AND CHANGE IN BASKETRY OF RABHAS:

The Rabha culture is a vibrant depiction of tribal life, and it is fundamentally shaped by the beautiful arts and crafts. The hunting, farming, and other facets of their daily lives are reflected in these artistic endeavours. Through their art and craft, they portray a variety of dimensions of their lives, including their thoughts, economic, social, married, and holy lives. Rabhas since the time of immemorial had engaged with the basketry process. It is heavily concentrated in rural areas because of the availability of bamboo and the high demand for the products in every rural household. Most of the products are manufactured for domestic use, and only a small percentage of the products are sold in the markets. Traditionally, they have made various types of baskets according to their work activities. So, based on their work it can be divided into four categories agriculture, fishing/hunting, cooking, and other household activities.

A. Change in Agricultural Baskets:

The main economic activity of the Rabha people is agriculture, which is regarded as the foundation of their society. Traditional methods of land agriculture involved the application of indigenous concepts and a significant role for tools made of bamboo. Tools made of bamboo were the main implements used in agriculture from start to finish. However, in recent years, certain bamboo baskets that are utilised in agricultural operations have changed, including-

HISA: One of the most significant bamboo implements for distributing rainfall across the farmed area is the *Hisa*. *Bor* and *Pati Hisa* are the two varieties of *Hisa*. *Hisa* is made by weaving bamboo splits into the shape of a half-boat and tying it up with a strong bamboo pole. Because weaving *Hisa* required more patience and hard effort than before, people no longer engaged in this ancient skill. In two or three days, they made one *Hisa*. To attach the texture tightly, there is a need for *Sosi Kata* (creeper yam) which grows only in the forest. But as a result of deforestation, this material is becoming less and less available; therefore instead of using bamboo to make *Hisa*, people are turning to tin. Aside from that, the Rabha people's ancient methods of obtaining water were superseded by contemporary machine technology. The images that follow make it very evident how the traditional and contemporary *Hisa* that the Rabhas have available differ from one another.



Traditional Hisa



Modern Hisa

(Source: Fieldwork, South Kamrup, Assam)

JAPI (BUKHRI): Another tool that Rabhas use extensively when working in agriculture is the *Japi*, which is a device they use to shield themselves from the sun and rain. To make the *Japi*, three bamboo splits are spread out into three parts of the frame, and after the bamboo is woven, it closes into a hexagonal shape. Originally, the *Japi* was made of palm tree leaves inserted into the frame, but over time, their use of plastic paper replaced the palm leaves due to a lack of resources.



Traditional form of Japi



Modern form of Japi

(Source: fieldwork, South Kamrup, Assam)

LUKHA: One of the most significant baskets in Rabha society is the *Lukha*, which is used to plant seeds once the ground has been tilled. Bamboo was used to weave these baskets, but currently, plastic splits are utilised in place of bamboo splits to tie up the rim. In addition, people began utilising various containers—such as *Pasi*, metal containers, etc. instead of *Lukha* to spread seeds in agriculture. *Lukha* is now exclusively made by people to showcase their folk dance traditions. People utilised this technology extensively when *Jhum* farming was practiced. Utilising a head belt made it easier to carry the seeds; however, when settler agriculture took hold, the device's utility decreased. Jute rope, knotted with the basket, is often used in place of head belts made of bamboo.



Traditional Lukha with bamboo head belt



Modern Lukha,

Source: Fieldwork, South Kamrup, Assam)

B. Change in Fishing Baskets:

Another significant traditional activity of the Rabha people that is connected to their way of life is fishing. They attempted to continue practicing the things that they were doing earlier. Rabha has been catching fish with bamboo baskets since the earliest days. They are still in use, but the problem is that they can no longer support the sizes and structural components of the earlier ones. They lost their uniqueness and their former basket-making texture as a result of cultural absorption into other societies. Nowadays, there isn't much of a distinction between the baskets of Rabha and other communities. Thus, the baskets that are affected by change are:

JAKOI: Among Rabhas, Jakoi plays a very important role. They used this fishing trap in the past to catch fish from lakes, ponds, etc. Three forms of jakoi, Tinikuti, Duikuti, and Ekkuti, can be distinguished among Rabhas according to their size and structure: the first has three pieces in the middle of its body, the second has two parts, and the third has no division at all. The Rabha people used to adopt the third (Ekkuti) basket pattern and abandon the earlier two varieties as time went on and as a result of the integration of many societies, particularly Assamese society. The following images illustrate how traditional and modern versions of jakoi differ from one another.

**Duikuti Jakoi****Ekkuti Jakoi**

(Source: fieldwork, south Kamrup, Assam)

KHALE/KHOKDUR: *Khokdur/ Khale* is another important basket that is available among the Rabhas. Fish captured by any type of fishing trap are stored using this device. Four varieties of *Khokdur* are available among Rabhas: *Kub*, *Duikuti*, *Tinikuti*, and *Ekkuti*. To allow for an orderly division of fish, *Duikuti Khale* has two internal portions, while *Tinikuti* has three. However, unlike the other three, *Kub*, the fourth, lacks a neck. In contrast, *Ekkuti Khale* has no internal division. The size and structure of the *Ekkuti Khale* are similar to other societies, and which rate of usage is much higher in comparison to others. Aside from that, the style of *Duikuti* and *Tinikuti Khale* is more complex than *Ekkuti Khale*. Thus, a growing number of people now favour using *Ekkuti Khale*.

**Duikuti Khale****Ekkuti Khale****Kub (Neck-less)****Khale with Lid**

(Source: Fieldwork, south Kamrup, Assam)

C. Change in kitchen baskets:

A variety of bamboo baskets are used by Rabhas to prepare and store the food that they consume in their diverse ethnic culinary customs. Though certain modern procedures are used, over time people have come to place little value on those ethnic food preparation ways. Their meal list also included several new things that they adopted. A variety of baskets and bamboo tubes were once used to store food goods, but because plastic is more readily available in stores, these tools have been replaced. In the end, it challenges the Rabha's tradition. The kitchen's structure has undergone significant structural changes. In the past, people kept their food in *DHOWA SANG* and prepared meals using firewood. Bamboo baskets, which are currently replaced by plastic/metal products, were used to store food items such as rice and drinking water. There has been a significant shift between the traditional and modern Rabha society, which has affected how its various tools are used, including:

KHASA/TOKHOP: It is one of the most significant bamboo tubes that Rabhas uses to store various foods, including salt, turmeric, alkali, snails, dry pork, and dry fish. It is carefully sealed with a bamboo cover after the goods have been stored, though sometimes straws or cloths are used instead. Now, people do not give importance to the usage of bamboo tubes, instead they use plastic containers, where they store their important items. So it is a huge transition to the Rabha society.



Menku Topa,
Being used to store dry fish



Gup Topa, used to
store dragon fly



Chonka, used to store
snail

(Source: Fieldwork, south kamrup, Assam)

KHARSI CHOKHOR: *Kharsi Chokhor* is an important part of the Rabha society. The basket, which is primarily made of bamboo, is used by people to filter alkali. Alkali is most frequently used in Rabha recipes, hence traditionally; they have filtered alkali using this bamboo-made *Kharsi Chokhor*. However, earthen pots, coconut tubes, or any other metal vessel were eventually used in place of the basket.



***Kharsi chokhor*, being used to filter alkali**

(Source: fieldwork, south Kamrup, Assam)

JANTHI: The Rabhas use *Janthi* to filter and strain their raw rice beer. It is a bamboo frame set in the centre of an earthen pot used to keep rice beer. Therefore, it aided in separating the beer from the rice. However, instead of utilising *Janthi* to filter the rice beer, people now use towels or other materials that are readily accessible in the market.



***Janthi* is being used to filter the Rice-beer**

(Source: Fieldwork, south Kamrup, Assam)

5. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

A clear empirical reality that is directly related to defining the patterns among the Rabha has been obtained through exposure to the field. To ensure that the greatest number of villagers participate in the production process; the basketry-creating process is strongly linked to Rabha culture. Baskets have always been quite important to the Rabha people in a variety of

ways. They utilised many kinds of baskets for daily use as well as for occasional activities. From day-to-day activities to other occasional activities, they used various types of baskets. Every basket has its uniqueness and speciality and according to that, it is used for different functions. The narratives from the respondents revealed that the changes started from the traditional form of basketry to food habits, dress patterns as well as lifestyles of the people. The Rabhas have experienced numerous changes over history, both positive and negative. Many tribal communities are influenced by Hindu society as a result of the Sanskritization process, abandoning their previous customs and rituals in favour of adhering to Hindu civilization's rites and ceremonies. They lost their particular identity when they were Sanskritized from their old social order to the new Hind social system. Furthermore, the process of acculturation and cultural assimilation had a significant influence. Assimilation is the process by which one dominating culture becomes indistinguishably blended with another through assimilation.

As a result, although being a separate tribe, Rabha was influenced by and integrated into the greater Assamese society. New ideas and innovation were enforced in their traditional form by assimilation into the greater Assamese community. In addition to upholding their traditions, they place greater value on change. Therefore, it drastically alters the Rabha tribe's culture. In addition, another way that Rabhas is subject to the process of change is through acculturation. In addition, modernization is a significant factor that contributed to societal transformation. Due to the modernization process, Rabhas faced lots of changes in society as well as in the culture, whereas their material culture like making basketry process faced problems. With the introduction of science and technology in modern society various work had to be done by technical tools and machines so ultimately it has an impact on traditional practices.

In addition to these factors, the process of creating baskets was altered by other factors, such as a shortage of resources. Bamboo is primarily utilised to make baskets, as was previously noted. However, the materials found in forests are harder to access because of deforestation. Rabha liked a particular type of bamboo, called *KEKOWA BAH*, which grows exclusively in the forest, for creating baskets. Due to its current scarcity, this particular variety of bamboo has to be valued more highly. In the end, it cannot provide the appropriate shape and texture like a classic one, which also contributes to the shift in the baskets. People are also disinterested in manufacturing those baskets because of the scarcity of supplies.

Second, there is a system in place in some Rabha villages where no dead person's belongings are kept, thus when someone passes away, their whole creative output is disposed of together with their body. Because most people are illiterate and unaware of their traditions, there is no mechanism in place to keep track of talent. Therefore, death dismissed a person's body and his quality as well. So, it is a great loss to society, and that is why it should be paying more. Societies are not able to hold their tradition and immediately come under the influence of any other society. As a result, their basketry-making process is also isolated from others.

Thirdly, the use of traditional basketry is declining in their society due to the growing demands of popular culture in both marketplaces and society at large. In the world of today, plastic is quite significant. Both in society and the market, it currently holds a dominant role. It has the potential to replace the customary use of baskets because people prefer to use plastic materials in their daily lives. Making baskets with plastic required less labour and money than with conventional materials because it was widely available. Therefore, this material was largely used by individuals.

In addition to this, the commodity of things is another significant factor that affects most. Anything meant for exchange is referred to as a commodity. The demand for goods and the pace at which marketplaces were expanding boosted the tribal society as well. Thus, tribal people's main focus these days is maintaining their market position and commercialising all of their material cultures. To meet the need, the great majority of people today focus more on new art forms and incorporate fresh originality into their traditional items to successfully draw in customers. In a similar vein, the Rabha also moved from their old material culture into a new marketplace where they introduced fresh innovation and sales.

The market is experiencing an increase in demand for bamboo items, as more and more consumers wish to use bamboo materials exclusively for home décor. The community concentrates on bringing innovation to the traditional baskets to fulfill the demands of today's people. Consequently, it causes variations in the specific baskets' size and texture.

6. CONCLUSION

A humble effort to give a detailed account of the Rabhas, particularly its making basketry process, signified the importance of the study. A humble effort to give a detailed account of the Rabhas, particularly its making basketry process, signified the importance of the study. The Rabhas were culturally rich and distinctive from very early. People used to look down

upon the way they lived, the dialect they spoke, the food they consumed, and so on. So later they slowly began to hide their identity for the way people treated them and gradually got assimilated with the way of life of the larger group of people viz. the dominant Assamese society. This can be reflected through various aspects like accepting Hinduism as their religion, dress patterns, conversing in Assamese, and so on. So they went on with the flow as to how the larger society expected them to be. This process became so widespread that it led to the loss of many of its traditional elements. It has reached a stage where it has become difficult to distinguish between a Rabha and a non-Rabha. If anyone enquires as to how the Rabha dialect was, there would hardly be a few persons to know it. In a similar vein, the basketry-making process is largely the focus of the study. There must have been some uniqueness in the basketry-making process among them. But due to various influences like assimilation, Sanskritisation, modernisation, etc., they no more hold their tradition like earlier. So now there emerged vast differences in the basketry-making process being solemnized before and how it is today and its content being elaborated in the preceding units. Though various changes come across them even with the change they are still rooted in their tradition.

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