



International Research Journal of Interdisciplinary & Multidisciplinary Studies (IRJIMS)

A Peer-Reviewed Monthly Research Journal

ISSN: 2394-7969 (Online), ISSN: 2394-7950 (Print)

Volume-II, Issue-XI, December 2016, Page No. 139-147

Published by: Scholar Publications, Karimganj, Assam, India, 788711

Website: <http://www.irjims.com>

A Study on the Socio-Cultural Significance of the Terracotta Craft of Asharikandi

Mohibul Hoque

Research Scholar, AUS, Silchar, Assam, India

Abstract

Terracotta is regarded as the oldest medium of expression among all other medium. Asharikandi in Dhubri district is the largest cluster village in entire India where pottery and terracotta together is produced. They produces number terracotta items inspired from the past traditions, believes, ritual practices and present day demands. Their unique products have demands not only in the local markets but also other parts of India. This ancient craft practice in Asharikandi is not only the source of livelihood for these craftsmen but also carries the socio-cultural characteristics of this region with many changes and innovations.

Key Words: Terracotta, Asharikandi, Dhubri district, socio-cultural.

Introduction: Among the various media chosen by man for expressing his joy is form as in sound and movement through art, music and dance respectively as through art, music and dance respectively as through literature for expression of thought, the simplest medium has been soft and malleable clay. The clay well kneaded, well chosen of the right variety, is the most easy to handle to express the form observed in nature which may be of an animal or a bird or a human being, individually or collectively composed in a theme or episode chosen.¹ The word 'Terracotta' derived from the Latin and Italian word. The Latin "Terra" means 'Earth soil' (indicates the mud) and the "Cotta" is an Italian word means 'statue'. In Assam locally it is called '*pora Matir shilpa*'. Terracotta is regarded as one of the earliest medium of popular artistic expression. Terracotta objects have been prepared and used by human beings from ancient time of human history in the form of household objects, ritual objects, aesthetic objects and sculptures. Terracotta satisfies the creative urge of human beings and also meets their domestic and aesthetic needs. Since, clay is considered as auspicious (earth = mother) terracotta objects also fulfil the ritual purpose of a community.²

The people of Assam are known to the other parts of the world for their proficiency in the handicraft production. At present time they produce number of handicraft products and some places are related with some particular item with unique identification i.e. bell metal of sarthebari, Hajo, Sualkuchi for Silk, Mornoi for pottery, etc. when we discuss about

handicraft of Assam, the name of Asharikandi of Dhubri district comes in the forefront for its mastery in terracotta and pottery craft production. Asharikandi has a unique identity in the field of terracotta and pottery making because in entire India it is the single largest cluster where both terracotta and pottery craft are found and practiced in traditional method. The village Asharikandi is better known as 'Terracotta craft village'. The people of Asharikandi are practising this art competing with the industrialized challenges since many decades. This profession; the making of terracotta and pottery associated with all the people since the several decades carries the socio-religious and cultural significance.

Historical Background of the development of terracotta craft in Asharikandi:

Geographically, Asharikandi is located 14 km away from the district town Dhubri, 3 km from Gauripur and 1 km away from the National Highway 31. The nearest big cities are Guwahati which is about 230 km away and Cooch Behar and Siliguri of West Bengal. A present terracotta pottery and activities in Asharikandi comprises of five villages that is palpara, Baganpara, Bogurapara Madikhali, and Sikhasipara. The terracotta craft and pottery is practised in only Madaikhali village comprising total 137 household covering 500 craftsmen among which 195 are male and 305 are female.

Like other places of Assam this craft of pottery and terracotta making continued by the *Kumars* and the *Hira* who are belonged to the *namasudra* community. The terracotta toys are made by some of the fisher folk for the enjoyment of children and for decorating the houses. Among the toys there are animals like horses, birds, elephants and fishes and human like images are also made. In the fishermen villages of Dhubri district majority of the images are of birds and variety of bride grooms. Bride groom toys called bar-kaina putla, while the mother and child putla are called as mao- bachha putla. ³ In Dhubri district the pottery and terracotta is one of the most important craft which survived during the British period but in very tragic condition. The Pal community of this region generally are involved in this profession. However, many people of this community have left this profession due to very low rate of the items and the scarcity of the raw materials. At present this craft is present at the places like Bilasipara, Asharikandi and Shapatgram. The artisans of Asharikandi are only expert in making various items of terracotta with market demand but products of other places of this region are not efficient enough and still making the age old items with out innovations. The artisans of Asharikandi keep alive the hope of the future of this ancient craft.

The place Asharikandi and the people associated with the terracotta and pottery has a long historical background of their own. Before the partition of India, a few potter families from erstwhile East Bengal, at present Bangladesh migrated to this place of Asharikandi. ⁴ The term 'Asharikandi' is derived from the combination of two words 'ASHAR' and 'KANDI'. ASHAR is the third month in Assamese calendar and 'KANDI' means shedding tears. During the Ashar, heavy rainfall causes flood in this low lying area. The dwellers of this place shed tears out of misery caused by havoc of flood; especially the potters have to endure a lot. They can not make, dry up, burn and store safely their earlier produced items during the rainy season. From the name of this rainy season the place has been named as

Asharikandi. It is said that the practice of this craft in this village dates back more than 100 years. Earlier they used to supply their products to the Zamindar family of Gauripur and the total requirement of wares and utensils was provide from this village.⁵ These people actually had migrated from Pabna district (present Bangladesh) to Asharikandi during the British period and with their exposure. The Gauripuri zamindar had given them 599 *bigha* of land tax free to collect the raw material for the pottery and terracotta product.

The artisans of Asharikandi had used to make terracotta dolls for the children to play with. They used to sell these items in the neighbouring villages in a very low market rate. As described by Dharendra Nath Pal, a senior artisan, the people of Asharikandi had almost left the profession of making pottery and terracotta. Only a few families were engaged with this craft and as alternative profession they used to catch to work as fisherman. At that time mostly the women were involved in making of terracotta toys. They used to go to the villages by boat loading with the pottery and terracotta dolls. Those who bought their items in return give them rice (like barter system) in certain fixed pottery jar locally called 'Shear' (a jar fixed for weight in half or full of jar). The money they earned by selling these items in villages was very meagre to run a family. As Dharendra Nath Pal described, once idea had came in his mind to make sophisticated items and make it popular among the higher and middle educated class of the society. The time came when in 1982 late Sarala Bala Devi; mother of Dharendra Nath Pal was awarded President's Award for Traditional terracotta craft for Hatima doll and got a national recognition. 'The story dates back to the early 1970s, a glorious time when the royal family of Gauripur nearby patronised the terracotta toys. It was Nilima Baruah, sister of renowned filmmaker Pramthesh Baruah – the first of India's most popular screen tragic hero Devdas – who coined the name Hatima Putul and showcased them in different parts around the world. The name came from observing the elephant-like ears of the mother. The Gauripur royal family also used to nurture an elephant-centred culture. They captured elephants from the wild, reared and traded them. Many local people were involved in this entire business. The folk songs of Gauripur are thus deeply rooted to this culture.'⁶ Dharendra Nath pal who first took the initiative to bring this craft to a higher level had denied two government jobs. The efforts of the craftsmen of Asharikani got recognition in 1982 when Sarala Bala Devi was conferred the President Award for traditional terracotta craft for Hatima Putul. In 2005, Dhirendra Nath Pal (son of Sarla Bala Devi), won the Bokul Bon Award from Assam Sahitya Sabha and Mahadev Pal, bagged the Best Handicraft Artist Award by Assam Govt for his master piece Lord Ganesha.

Terracotta manufacturing process at Asharikandi:

Raw materials: Among the raw materials required for the terracotta making is the clay (Hira mati or aithal mati) which is collected from the river side of Silaipar about 18 to 20 Km from Asharikandi. In order to mix with clay second most essential ingredient needed is the sand. Next among the raw material is the colour called Kosh. Further Caustic soda is also crucial to remove the toxic element from the clay. For firing the chief fuel is wood, hey are the most important element.

The tools: The traditional tools and articles used by the artisans of Asharikandi are chiefly Kodal, pitna, kaim, knives, kaim, kathi, boila, khota, aith and brush etc. the Kodal (spade) is used for the cutting of the clay at the initial stage. Khota is an important thin tool of bamboo used for remove the impurities of the clay. Boila and pitna are used to give a desired shape of the clay. Brush is used for the painting of the terracotta figures. Aith is used to bring out the aithal mati from the big jar.

The process of terracotta manufacturing: The process of terracotta making is very complex and labour intensive. In this process along with hard labour time is also required in a long process to give it final touch. In this process works continues in step by step.

First step; in this initial step the collection of the clay is the most important. The artisans of Asharikandi collect the clay locally called as Aithal mati or hira mati (mostly found in the low land areas) from the river side of Silaipar. Hira clay is generally found in one foot beneath of the surface land. Earlier these people used to go there and collect the clay and transport on boat by river Gadadhar. But at present days the hira clay is supplied by some thikadars (who are Muslims) continuously through out the year by road.

Second step; after the collection of the clay a process of cleanliness is required to remove any kind of impurities. In this hira clay Sodium Silicate is present for which earlier people especially women used to wash their hair by this clay. With the clay sand is mixes in a percentage of 80% clay and 20% sand to avoid crack or bend when it put under Sun to dry.

Third step; after the mixing of sand with clay a desired shape is given in to different figures. When a desired shape is given the figures are put under Sun for a day.

Fourth step; in this step the preparation of the colour and giving the colour called as Kosh is most important. Firstly the red clay from the hill side is collected (supplied by the thikadars) and make powder from this clay. Secondly Khoir and Caustic soda is mixed to remove the toxic element from the clay. The mixer of caustic soda and Khoir is boiled in water. Thirdly the red clay powder is mixes with the boiled mixer of Khoir and caustic soda and together boiled to gain the red layer. Fourthly this layer is given over the terracotta figures and again put under the Sun for a day.

Fifth step; in this final step the firing of the finished products is important. All the figures are arranged according to the size in the Vatti or kiln. After the arrangement in the kiln a cover of hey and piling of clay (normal clay) is given over the all the figures. Wood is required as main fuel which is collected from Modhaitpur. The temperature in the kiln is rise from low to high in a gradual process up to 7500 C 8000 C fire for 48 hours. Finally the items bring out from the kiln and keep in open space to cool down.

Most important terracotta forms of Asharikandi:

Mother & Child Form: In the various forms of terracotta products the most famous and well known product is the mother and child (mao- bacha putul) with its unique local identity. The mother and child doll of Asharikandi is called hatima doll because of the

mother with elephant like ear carrying her child on her lap. An interesting aspect of the hatima doll is in one figure hatima is carrying her child on her left hand but on her right hand she is carrying a pradipdani. The purpose of the pradipdani is the people could know that not only the hatima with child but also they produce the pradipdani also. The Hatima doll of Asahrikandi has its uniqueness in face, ear, the ornamentation and physical structure and can easily identify from other mother and child figure from other region of India i.e.; West Bengal. 'Figure of the human female is the most numerous among the toys of West Goalpara. Marked by a very refined of stylization, they are also the most attractive. The head is flattened with a large round bun placed high on its back. The faces itself is elongated in the suggestion of the nose and the mouth. Ears, eyes and various ornaments are appliquéd into the main body. Hairs and fingers are indicated by scrapings made into the figure while it is still soft. In most toys, there is only the suggestion of clothing's deftly executed with scrapings here and there. But in some toys with the standing posture, the addition of the lower garment with elaborate design, resembling the local female dress, gives them a most distinctive appearance. ⁷ Mother Deity

Mother Goddess- Mother Goddess figurines are generally associated with the fertility cult. However, interesting terracotta productions of the Asharikandi in the mother goddess of Indus valley shape. Some writers tried to make a relation between the Indus valley civilizations with the past of Dhubri district but there is no evidence till date to prove their point. B. N. Dutta observes, 'the similarity of many of the mother and child toys with some terracotta toys of Mohenjodaro is really striking. However, these folk toys do not seem to be connected with the mother goddess cult with which scholars have associated the Mohenjodaro toys.'⁸

Goddess Manasa is historically associated with Dhubri district. In this region goddess Manasa is regarded as one of the most important among all the goddess people worship. Padma purana or Marai-gan performances, based on the story of goddess Manasa and her encounter with the merchant chando, from one of the most popular and most widely current institutions of folk entertainment combining singing, dancing and often acting. ⁹ Manasa, occupies a place of prominence in the socio-religious life of the rural people of the locality. She is not only installed in a shrine, but she has always an important place in the community shrine. Even she is a household deity, who kept in the altar of the family shrine with the other deity.¹⁰ The popularity of the Manasa goddess is a remarkable phenomenon in the socio-religious life of the people of Dhubri district. Manasa puja is performed with great grandour in the temple where a good number of devotees offer their puja with traditional rituals. ¹¹In addition a terracotta figure of Manasa unearthed at Bhaitbari and a Manasa temple is also located in Dhubri.

Animal Forms: The presence of elephants and horses were visible in the history of India as well in Assam. In Assam in comparison of horses, elephants were more in use. The elephants and the horses in ancient and in medieval period of Assam kings used not only for the military purposes but also for the means of transportation. In addition to the above mentioned activities these were also used for the ritual purposes. In present day in addition

to these two most demanded animal figures, the figure of rhino become very popular because it is associated with the pride of Assam. The horse and elephant serve as decorative and status symbols. Economically well-off families buy these decorative horses, elephants as an object in urban site and in rural areas as for ritual purpose. . Significantly the elephant has its own connection with the Gauripur Zamindari family and numbers of songs of Pratima Pandey are associated with the description of the elephants. The size and look of the horses and elephants of Asharikani can easily distinguish from the productions of other parts of India.

Popular Gods and Goddess Forms:

Lord Ganesha: Among the terracotta figures of the gods and goddess the figure of lord Ganesha is the most popular among the customers. The artisans of Asharikandi make the figure of Ganesha in different form.

Lord Buddha: At Asharikandi the artist makes not only the Hindu gods and goddess but also from other religions. Among them the figure of Lord Buddha is most significant. They prepare the figures of Buddha in different format and colour. The artist used to colour the figure on customer demand but they want to keep the figure in its original clay colour.

Lord Shiva: The Saivism from the ancient period is one of the most prominent cults in Assam and particularly in the western Assam. The inhabitants of the area are agrarian. The agriculturists are to depend on natural phenomenon for proper seedling and good harvests. The tilling instruments, the bullocks etc, are indispensable for agriculture. Siva in oral and written literature is depicted as an introducer of agriculture and an inventor of agricultural instruments.¹² There are various aspects ranging from as a fertility god, for storm etc god Shiva is worshipped. Lord Siva also worshiped in various form like, linga, trident, tree etc. However, the clay form Shiva is gaining more popularity among the customers in this region and the craftsmen of Asharikandi makes only full size terracotta form of lord Shiva. The statue or image is installed in the congregational prayer house or in individual family house and is worshipped. Siva is the household deity of some family.¹³

Mary and Child Jesus: The life size figure of mother Mary with child Jesus is very significant creation with secular characteristics.

Famous personalities: At Asharikandi the craftsmen make some terracotta figure (not life size) of legendary figures of Assam and India. Among the figure of the legends the popular are; the figure of Swami Vivekananda, Kabi Guru Rabindra Nath Tagore, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, Pratima Pandey Baruah, Atal bihari Bajpai and Indira Gandhi. Here for illustration two figurines of Guru Rabindra Nath Tagore and Pratima Baruah Pandey is given.

Other important terracotta forms: The craftsmen of Asharikandi have an urge for creativity. They not only stick towards the traditional figures but try number of different ideas to give new structure far from conventional. Among other important terracotta figures the most important are-a life size female welcome doll, Greek soldier, a bicycle with a rider,

peacock boat, decorated vase, decorated amulets, mermaid, lamp, decorated bowl, terracotta Bihu dancers, terracotta peasant etc.

The usages of the terracotta items: The terracotta items which make by the craftsmen of Asharikani are generally used basically for the religious or ritual, aesthetic use and thirdly for domestic in play purpose. Terracotta forms such as elephants, horses, decorated plaques, mask, and decorated flower vase are used in aesthetic purpose. These are sold in different fairs in local areas or in far flung areas and in regular markets with great demand. The figures of the Goddess and Goddess are used in the religious or ritual and have a good local market for the local occasions. The toys of small animal, dolls, carts, bicycle etc are commonly used in domestic play purpose by children and used for rural purpose.

Socio-Cultural Significance of Asharikani terracotta: The terracotta toys or the products is regarded is the earliest outcome of human creativity. Since early ages this terracotta products carry the characteristics and identity of a particular cultural, religious, economic and other aspect of a society or region. Toys are not only an index to human activity but reflect the strong under currents in the structure of society.¹⁴ In ancient Assam number of terracotta material has been found from different places and carries many significant characteristics of different regions and time. During the ancient and medieval Assam periods some animals like, elephants and horse played a significant role in communication as well as in war efforts. Among the familiar animals, elephants are very common, and they were carved and chiselled with great skill. The elephant head was used as a royal seal in Assam. In many temples a row of elephants, gajathara appears as a basement moulding.¹⁵

Animals as symbolism play a great part in Hindu plastic art. According to the text, various animals symbolise different gods and goddesses. The animals used as symbols were always conventional and conventionalisation was always welcome to the designers of decorative art. The artists, therefore, even in dealing with animals with whose real habits they were familiar, did not hesitate to follow the texts and traditions so as to make their work look symbolical rather than real.¹⁶

The terracotta practice of Asharikandi has a very wide and multifarious significance. The contemporary terracotta products and its usages let us know about the past of this place in particular and Assam in general but also the socio-cultural dimensions of the people of this region.

The mother and child called Hatima putul have a cultural association with the Gauripur Zamindari family. The name itself was popularised by Nilima Baruah, a member of the local Zamindari family because of the elephant like ear of the terracotta doll. The Gauripur Zamindari has a very interesting story of the elephant catching and domestication. Many popular Goalparia songs of Padmashri Pratima Baruah Pandey are based on the elephants. The Hartima putul of Asharikani has a good cultural and historical importance as it bears the cultural legacy of this region. Further, it carries the historical inheritance of Assam, as there is evidence of worship of the mother and child doll during medieval Assam period.

There were sometimes specially made semi-religious folk ceremonies like dolls weeding in Kamrup by childless women wishing for offspring's.¹⁷

The horse and elephant had played significant role in the life of the people of Dhubri as well as Assam. The local Gauripur Zamindari family had long association with the domestication of the wild elephants. A part from the part of ritualistic values, it serves as a status symbol for the economically affluent families. In Dhubri district the most popular religious festivals for the Hindus are the Durga puja, Kali puja, Saraswati puja and Vishwakarma puja. The craftsman of Asharikandi produces the popular deities for worship and carries the cultural legacy.

The Behula-Lakhindar story mentioned in Padma purana has an integral cultural relationship with Dhubri. The name of Dhubri itself from this famous story, when Lakhindar died due to bite by a snake, Behula his wife arrived in the bank of Brahmaputra and used to pray goddess Manasa. The people of Dhubri district have a high esteemed towards goddess Manasa and the artist of Asharikandi also produces the image of the goddess Manasa.

The craftsmen of Asharikandi give a very remarkable example of religious harmony and tolerance. Their terracotta products represent all the important religion i.e., Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity and Islam. Though they are believer of Hinduism but they have a broader outlook about other religious believes. Customers from the religious believe come to this place and buy according to their wish.

The work place at Asharikani is a symbol of women empowerment. The women folk actively participated in the process of making terracotta items. The division of labour is distributed between a couple. A husband collects the clay, sand and fuel for the kiln, and prepares the clay while the wife makes the pot from the initial stage to the chasing. Firing is done by both of them.¹⁸ In Asharikandi the involvement of the children in making of pottery is an important feature in order to continue the profession for generation.

Conclusion: The craftsman of Asharikandi with many ups and down along with many changes carries a great legacy of society and culture of Assam in general and Dhubri district in particular. These hardworking people should be encouraged to continue the great ancient tradition of terracotta making.

Notes & References:

1. H. Shah, (1985): (ed) Forms and many forms of mother clay, New Delhi. P-63.
2. Dutta Anwita (2005): The cultural significance of early historic terracotta art of west Bengal: An ethnography archaeological approach, May 2013, Pune. P-2
3. Das Provas (2002): The traditional fishing community of the Dhubri district of Assam: A socio-economic study .p-194.

4. Ashrikandi cluster, Interactive Design Research and Need assessment Survey, MSME scheme, 2011. P-14,
5. *ibid.* p-14.
6. Bharali. T. Ratna (2016): Asharikandi: Echoing Harappan terracotta tradition, *The Eastern Today*. January 7.
7. Datta Birendra (1973): A study of the folk culture of the Goalpara district of Assam, Guwahati. P-405.
8. *ibid.* P-403.
9. *ibid.* P-106.
10. Das Kabita (2006): Temples and Shrines of Dhubri district: A critical study on socio-religious condition of the society since 12th C. to 19th C. A.D, Guwahati. P-83.
11. *ibid.* p-84.
12. Choudhary. N. Rabindra (1990): Folk deities of lower Assam, with special reference to the Goalpara region, Guwahati. P-48,
13. *ibid.* p-56.
14. Kamala S Dongerkery (1954): A journey through Toyland,. Bombay. P- 3.
15. B.K. Baruah (1951): A cultural History of Assam, Guwahati. P-201,
16. *ibid.* p-201.
17. Gupta R. D (1982): Art of Medieval Assam: Cosmo publication, New Delhi. p- 94.
18. H.Shah, (1985) :(ed) Forms and many forms of mother clay, New Delhi. P- 60.