

# Significance of Bamboo among the Tai Ahoms in Rural Situations of Assam

## Abstract

Bamboo is one of the integral objects of human culture. It has a pristine heritage of its own and is invariably use as an important ingredient for construction of houses, different household implements like bed, mat, spread, storing basket, drinking/storing bamboo tubes, decorative items, etc. Varieties of delicious food items are prepared from bamboo offshoots. The people of Assam have established a near obsession with the use of bamboo for the major construction of all domestic implements / accessories and thus their habitual norms are customarily very much linked with the bamboo. Bamboo has got an integral relation with the belief system of the autochthones of Assam and is conspicuously related with their custom and tradition. Again the mainstay of the people of this remote part of India is agriculture, along with fishing, hunting, gathering and domestication, where bamboo implements has a prime role as the major source of ingredient for making the implements of the same. Due to the pioneering position of bamboo in the culture of the people of Assam, different folk art and craft are based on or made of bamboo and is invariably use in performing arts of different communities of Assam. So, in a nutshell the culture of the people of Assam is adorn with innumerable bamboo items and each ethnic group of Assam has their own parochial heritage of bamboo artefacts which is differ from the other in their style and form. The Tai Ahom, one of the major ethnic groups of Assam has also their own pristine use of bamboo items and in this present endeavour a humble attempt has been made to delineate about the heritage of bamboo culture among the aforesaid ethnic community in a rural context of upper Assam, India.

**Keywords:** Bamboo, Heritage, Tai Ahoms, Autochthons, Art and Craft.

## Introduction

Assam is one of the prime states of North East India which has an intangible and tangible heritage of its own since distant past. Among the tangible part of Assamese cultural heritage, bamboo artefacts occupy a significant place because of its availability as well as capability to transform into different implements of day to day use. Bamboo has been occupying an urgent place in the cultural matrix of the Assamese people. Different varieties of bamboo are abundantly found in the forest of Assam as rich natural resources. Rural folk in Assam love to have bamboo plantation at the backyard of their household unit and it has integral relation with every aspects of folk life ways and culture. Life without bamboo is seems to be impossible in rural areas and is used in multifarious ways like in fencing, as agricultural and domestic menial implements, for making musical instruments, weaving implements, head gears, decorative items like furniture, mats, baskets and so forth. Medhi and Bora (2016) mention that Assam is rich in forest cover. A wide variety of bamboo species in found abundantly in the plains and hills of the state. Its use is so deep rooted in the Assamese culture that it is reflected in a number of ways in the oral literature, social folk customs, material culture, performing arts of the community. It is so significant in the rural Assamese life that any occasion whether it is commemorative celebration, festivals, folk performances and folk sports, birth-marriage-death rites, without bamboo is incomplete. There is a popular Assamese adage which rightly justifies the role and importance of bamboo in the life of an Assamese as follows

*Zar nai bah*

*Tar nai sah*

## Meaning

“One who does not possess a bamboo grove does not either possess courage”.

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The peoples of this region are predominantly agriculturists. Cultivation of paddy and certain other cereal crops has been the mainstay of the people since time immemorial. Agricultural outputs are constantly supplemented by collection of wide range of wild vegetables as well as grains from the forests and varieties of fish from the surrounding water sources. Apart from the aforesaid modes of subsistence the people's habitation pattern are distinctive by themselves. The Assamese people are habituated to living in houses built of materials which are all locally available in the people's backyards or in the neighbouring forests. Besides the house building materials the household implements and accessories are also profusely acquired from the household habitations or the nearby jungles. The most important materials needed for constructing the frame of the dwelling house and making of various domestic implements and accessories is bamboo, which normally surround most of the Assamese villages. The Assamese people have thus established a near obsession with the use of bamboo for the major construction of all domestic implements and accessories. The place of bamboo object in Assamese socio cultural life has been empirically dealt by scholars like- Barua (1956), List (1972), Datta, Sarma and Das (1994), Dowarah(1994), Das(2006), Dutta(2006), Chetia(2008), Medhi and Jose(2009), Zaman(2015), Medhi and Bora(2016). It could thus be assessed from a wide range of empirical observation that the people's habit and customs are very much linked with bamboo. As agriculture is the paramount occupation of the people, the need of domestically produced implement and various types of grain holders and storage basket are predominantly prepared from bamboo.

## The Setting

North-East India comprises of seven states, viz., Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, and Tripura, and Sikkim was recently added within its jurisdiction as eighth states of the land. The region is predominantly inhabited by different ethnic groups came at different historical period of time. Out of the states, four states, viz., Arunachal Pradesh (64.2%), Meghalaya (85.9%), Mizoram (94.5%), and Nagaland (89.1%), are having tribal population in majority. About a quarter of the region is covered by hilly terrains, and another quarter is made up of the four plain areas, namely, the Brahmaputra Valley, the Barak Valley, the Manipur plateau, and the plain areas of Manipur. The entire region constitutes a geographical area of 2,55,083 sq km of Indian territory having a population of 39.04 million (as per 2011 census). North-East India is the homeland of a good number of ethnic groups including as many as 209 scheduled tribes, almost half of the number of the communities so categorized in the whole of India. The seven states of North-East India constitute a single cultural zone. In the cultures of these seven states any one can trace a good number of common cultural elements (Zaman, 2015: 5).

Assam is the gateway of North-East India (except Sikkim), and is the abode of a good number of communities – both tribals and non-tribals. 'Assam, located between tropical latitudes of 24.3° N and 28° N, and eastern longitudes of 89.5° E and 96.1° E, is the most populous state in North-East India. It is surrounded on three sides by hills and mountains. The rivers, Brahmaputra and Barak, in the north and south, respectively, carve out deep valleys, that represent the major part of the state. ... it is a transitional territory between South Asia and South-East Asia. The transition is reflected not only in the region's flora and fauna, but also in human types, languages, and cultures. Assam is surrounded by seven Indian states which have such a strategic location. The state has an area of 78,438 sq km representing 2.39 per cent of the Indian landmass and a population of 22,414,322 (1991) accounting for 2.64 per cent of the total population of the country' (Bhagabati *et al.*, 2001: 1). According to 2011 census the total population of Assam is 31,169,272.

The present Assam was reconstituted after 1971 census. According to Puri (1968:2), Professor of Indian History and Culture, National Academy of Administration, Mussoorie, 'The land with its flourishing passage with a romantic touch enveloping it, Assam as a name does not figure in Ancient Indian literature. The earlier inscriptions also do not mention it. The origin of the word remains a mystery'. 'The ancient Assam was known as Pragjyotisha in *Mahabharata*, and as Kamrup in *Puranas* and *Tantras* (Gait, 2005: 10). The name Assam is Anglicized form of the Sanskrit word 'asama' which means 'unparalleled' or 'peerless'. It is said that this was used to describe the invincible might of the Ahoms, who marched into this region in the thirteenth century from across the Patkai ranges (Zaman, 2015:6). 'Anthropologically speaking, almost nothing is known of Assam. For many centuries it occupied a peripheral position, both geographically and politically' (Cantlie, 1984: IX). It is very difficult to say about the original inhabitants of Assam. Barkataki (1981: 4-5) supports this view and writes: 'all that we can say with certainty is that from about 200 B. C. there was a movement of population from the banks of the Hwangho and the Yang-tse-kiang in China to India through Assam, and these Mongolian people, along with others who migrated from northern Burma formed the bulk of the population of Assam.

The population of Assam by and large is Mongolian; fusion took place here between the cultures of Aryan and Mongolian. It is pertinent to note here that the Assamese are one of the principal inhabitants of Assam; main concentration of them is found in the Brahmaputra valley of the state. Assamese is the principal language of Assam, and besides the Brahmaputra valley, in almost all the parts of the state it is accepted as the connecting language among different ethnic groups having different pristine languages and cultures.

## The People

The Tai Ahoms are one of the Major ethnic groups inhabiting in the plain areas of both northern

and southern banks of river Brahmaputra of upper Assam. They were the ruling class of Assam, who have been rule in this part of land for about six hundred long years. They are the members of Shan branch of the Tai or Thai family of human race. The Tai family extends to the gulf of Siam northwards up to Yunnan and then westward to Assam. Chao Lung Sukapha, who is the pioneer of establishing mighty Ahom dynasty in Assam, was the chief of the Shan group immigrating into the North Eastern region of India. The Ahom Buranjis (The historical accounts compiled during the Ahom rule) are all supported that Maulung (Burma) was the original home of the Ahoms. Racially the Shan group of people belongs to the mongoloid and have their own pristine language. They called themselves as Tai which means 'heavenly origin'. The Tai Ahoms are said to be makers or the groups who are considered by the masses as the facilitators of forming the Assamese identity as a whole through its varied social, cultural and political activities. The Ahom administration is known for their acceptance of local ethos, and their great statesmanship under which the formation of Assamese identity took a shape (Dowarah, 2016:19). The Tai Ahom culture at present is blend of the original Tai culture, the indigenous Tibeto- Burmans and Hinduism. The majority of the people are Hindu by religion, though some of them still practise their traditional religion furalung and few of them are also the believer of Buddhism. The Tai Ahoms worship their ancestors individually by the family as well as community. The priestly families worship their dead ancestors in the occasion of marriage, festivals like Bihu, before and after harvesting, feast of new paddy, birth and death ceremonies etc. *Me dam me phi* is one of the major ancestor worship observe by the community member in every year. The main occupation of the Tai Ahom is agriculture.

### The Micro Field

In this present study an attempt has been made to evaluate various bamboo objects prepared by the Tai Ahom people in Sibsagar District of Assam, India. Sibsagar is one of the 32 districts of Assam. Situated in the eastern part of Assam, Sivasagar stands high and tall with its rich aesthetic appeal. The main communities living in the district are Ahoms, Tea Garden Workers, Sonowal Kacharis, Mishings and Deoris.

Bamboo objects that have been considered for study includes domestic implements, fishing implement, musical instruments, agricultural implements, of Tai Ahom community of three homogenous villages, viz., Akhoya Gaon, Hologuri Gaon and Patsaku Gaon of Sibsagar district, Assam.

### Objectives of the Study

- The present study tries to examine,
1. Heritage of bamboo culture among the community under study;
  2. The patterns and purposes of preparation of the bamboo objects;
  3. Significance of bamboo objects in the community.

### Methodology

The primary data for this study has been gathered with the help of standard anthropological field methods viz., non-participant observation, structured and unstructured interview, concrete case study method, etc. With observation method, information regarding bamboo artefact, the craftsman who prepare it, their day to day activities and their interaction with fellow society members were recorded. Interview method was applied to collect empirical information about pristine methods of preparation of bamboo objects, it's different types, utility, methods of preservation of the objects were gathered. Concrete case study method was applied to know details about the craftsmen, his training, type of objects, and purpose of preparing the same were documented. The data gathered by one method or one person is cross checked by another method or person as and when situation demands.

### Results and Discussion

Assam is rich in forest resources and most of its forests are enriched with bamboos and canes of various species. Bamboo is a raw material which forms an integral part of the lifestyle and economy of Assam in general and Tai Ahoms in particular in rural context. The important species of bamboos of economic value are the *jati bah* (*Bambusa tulda* Roxb.), *bijuli bah* (*Bambusa pallid* Munro), *bhaluka bah* (*Bambusa balcooa* Roxb.), *mukal bah* (*Bambusa nutans* Wall.). The *jati bah* and the *mukal bah* have great commercial importance, the former for pulping, construction and fencing purposes, and the latter for the mat and basketry industry.

The making of bamboo and cane object is perhaps the most universal of all the crafts practiced by a large number of artisans scattered throughout the State. It is practiced as a household industry and no mechanical device is used. Cane and bamboo products are used for a wide range of purposes and extensively used in every household. The Tai Ahom villagers produced a large number of implements, agricultural tools and varieties of basket. These products have extensive use in day to day of their rural life. Some of the bamboo items of the studied villages are as follows:

### Bamboo as Agriculture Implements

A large number of agriculture implements are made of bamboo. The Tai Ahom people of the study villages make these implements by themselves from the bamboo grown at the backyard of the household unit. *Moi* (Harrow), *echari* (a stick to drive cattle), *junwali* (yoke), *dolimari* (earth clod breaker), *jowaka* (Paddy shoot collector), *bindha* (leveler), *korona* (spreader), etc., are found in every household. These agricultural implements typify the Assamese way of life. Owing to the importance of these implements in the agricultural production processes, these implements are invariably crafted in every household, especially by males.

### Use of Bamboo in House Construction

The dwelling house forms an important part of domestic life. Nearly eighty percent of the components of a dwelling house are made of bamboo

that is available one's own backyard. Some of the most important components for constructing a dwelling house include (a) the pillar (*Khuta*), (b) the wall (*bera*), (c) the primary supporting beams (*choti*) and (d) supporting beams for the roof (*maroli* and *ruwa*) etc. A typical Ahom house of the village is a solid bamboo made structure without any provision for entry of Sun-beam or Sun-light. It is a dark four-walled tenement. Every dwelling house is capped by a single bamboo and thatch made shade in the frontal part. The various components used in the construction of a house are made of matured bamboo that are properly processed and fitted in. It is known that mostly three or four varieties of bamboos, namely, *Bhaluka banh* (*Bambusa balcooa*), *Bijuli banh* (*Bambusa tulda*) and *Mukal banh* (*Bambusa pallida*) are used in construction of house. For fastening the different parts of bamboo components on the roof and on the walls, soft green bamboo strips (*Tonga*) are used.

#### **Bamboo in Domestic Utility**

Rice is the staple food of Tai-Ahom community and in the villages people use various bamboo made implements to process paddy and produce rice. Some of these implements are *Dola* (bamboo platter or tray), *Kula* (Winnowing fan), *Saloni* (Sieve), *Pachi* (Basket), *Kuki* (Carrying basket), *Khorahi* (a variety of small bamboo basket), *Bahor Sunga* (bamboo cylinder), *Dhuwa Sang* or *Bor Sang* (suspended shelf), *Barhoni* (broom) etc. Besides, carrying implements like *Kandhmari* are also made of bamboo. Before the advent of urbanization, say fifty years back, a large number of household appliances were made of bamboo. These are presently steadily being replaced by machine made good.

#### **Bamboo as Weaving Accessory**

It is a well-known fact that the Tai Ahom rural women are highly proficient in weaving. It is practised as a domestic craft. One who does not know weaving is looked down upon in the society. A tradition handloom is made of wood. All other accessories required for weaving numbering about twenty five items are made of bamboo. To name a few; *Garaka* (peddle), *Ba tula Chunga* (healds; an elongated cylindrical piece of bamboo for wrapping thread) *chiri* (the separating rod), *phul chiri* (a small bamboo rod with which floral design are made), *putal* (the implement through which the breadth of the cloth is maintained), *bangi* (a piece of solid bamboo which is tied under the yarn of the loom to keep the level of the thread) etc. These are some of the bamboo implements that are finely polished and made fit for weaving purposes at various stages of the process. The thin slip of dressed bamboo called *Chiri* is used for making embroidered designs on certain varieties of cloth.

#### **Use of Bamboo in Transportation and Carrying Things**

Another significant use of bamboo is seen in transporting and carrying domestic items from place to place. Baskets are also often used as head loads. Besides, as already referred to, the *kandhmari*, a cylindrical solid bamboo pole is used for carrying purposes. The most important means of

transportation is the bullock cart bearing two large wheels made of wood and pulled by a pair of bullocks. The other parts of the cart are made of bamboo. Often the cart is fitted with a canopy-like bamboo made structure that protects the cart-riders from sun-shine and rain.

#### **Use of Bamboo as Musical Instruments**

The aesthetic life of the Tai-Ahoms is also to be noted for its link with bamboo-from which various musical instruments are made. Very common musical instruments made of bamboo are *banhi* (flute), *Pepa* (trumpet), *toka* etc. *Toka* is made of a cylindrical green hollow piece of bamboo with a node at the upper extremity that is split in to two halves that produce musical notes while manipulated by both the hands.

#### **Use of Bamboo in Fishing and Hunting**

The Tai Ahom people of Assam are traditionally non-vegetarian in food habit and they eat food items like fish, and meat. These items are mostly procured from the natural sources likes *beels* (lake) and the forest surrounding their habitat. Most village people occasionally undertake fishing and the hunting trips. Indigenous implements and appliances are used invariably in these trips. The appliances used here are made of bamboo and these are all constructed at one's own household. Almost every adult villager knows how to make these appliances and traps etc. Some of the appliances are manipulated in the shallow as well as deep waters, while others are traps that are stationary devices put up against running shallow waters in the open fields to catch fish. The Tai Ahoms use implements and traps that are locally called *Polo* (Plunged trap), *Sepa* (Double-valved trap), *Thuwa* (Valveless trap), *Dingora* (Single valved trap), *Jakoi* (bamboo scoop used in catching fish), *Khaloi* (a small bamboo basket for keeping fish in), these are all made of bamboo.

While *Jathi* (Spear) is a very common hunting implement; traps made of bamboo are also used to catch small animals and birds. It may be noted that the Tai Ahom people are fond of fishing than hunting and so they are adept in utilizing bamboo for preparation of fishing traps and implements rather than the hunting ones.

#### **Bamboo as Food Items**

Other than the specific uses of bamboo as outlines above, the tender bamboo shoots are a palatable recipe of the Tai Ahom rural folk. The tender bamboo shoots are cut into fine slices and these are allowed to ferment for months. The fermented contents could well be preserved for about a year like pickle. Further, tender green bamboo shoot is utilized for preparing various Assamese recipes. For preparing and storing curd, the large cylindrical part of a bamboo variety called *Mukal Banh* is invariably used by these people. To make a cylinder a piece of such bamboo is finely cut just below a node and on the other side the piece is cut transversely below the other node to make it an open cylinder.

Another variety bamboo locally called *Bijuli bah* (*Bambusa tulda*) is used to cake from rice flour. Here, a narrower bamboo cylinder open in one side is

filled with rice flour, cover its opening with banana leaf and put it on fire and the rice flour is cooked. Such rice cakes are used as breakfast by these people.

Further, such narrow bamboo cylinders are also used as storage vessel for storing salt, sun-dried fish or fried fish or meat etc. Long and large hollow bamboo cylinders are used as containers for fetching drinking water from the streams and rivers by the Tai Ahom people of the villages. Five or six such large bamboo cylinders are tied together in a bundle to be carried on human back for fetching water from the water sources.

Besides the above mentioned utilities of bamboo plant in the day to day life, the plant has some unusual domestic utility. Whenever a person dies in the household, the most important item required for carrying the dead body to the cremation ground is the *changi* – a kind of makeshift stretcher which is made of a instantly cut green bamboo plant available in the backyard of the household of the deceased person. Thus the Assamese virtually live on bamboo as forming an important part of life. While bamboo is variously utilized in the life-time it is also a part and parcel of one's after-life in his or her journey to eternity. The folk song in Assamese in this connection runs literally as follows:

“*Barire pachore jati bahn ajupi  
Sio mur sodarar bhai  
Giai thako mane karo kathi kami  
Marileo lagate jai*”

Meaning:

“*That a bamboo grove is there at the backyard;  
it is like one's uterine brother;  
throughout the life different articles are prepared from  
bamboo  
and at the death it goes with the deceased as byre.*”

Further, in the olden days whenever house building materials like thatch, reed and bamboo and wood had to be transported from distant places, the Assamese Tai Ahom people used an indigenous devise of transportation. As Assam is a riverine land, there are water bodies anywhere. The people in need of house building materials go to upstream overland collect the house building materials like thatch, reeds, wood and bamboo etc. They built robust rafts using wood and bamboo and then loaded them with bundles of wild reeds and thatch. The rafts float down-stream plying it along the middle course of the river to one's own destination near the river-bank.

### Conclusion

From the above delineations it may well be asserted that the Tai Ahom material life is vastly connected with the used of bamboo in various ways. It covers people's total life, giving them shelter and comfort and pleasure of living in the day to day life. The use of bamboo is inherently related with the rural folk from cradle to grave and is still very much effective in contemporary times also. Tai Ahom rural life without the use of bamboo artifact is impossible. Starts with domestic to agriculture, fishing, hunting, as well as religious rites and amusement purposes significance of bamboo is enormous. The entire household components in an Ahom family portray the

importance of bamboo in one way or other. Apart from the eating and cooking vessels in an Assamese Tai Ahom household, most other appliances are seen to be made of bamboo. Besides the use of bamboo for making material components in a household, the young shoots of bamboo provide a palatable dish. The processed bamboo shoot could be preserved for the whole year round. Further utility of bamboo for providing aesthetics pleasures in the form of musical instrument is a well known feature in the Assamese society in general and of the Tai Ahoms in particular.

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