

# A Look on The Crafts and Industries of Pragjyotisa-Kamrupa

## Abstract

Crafts and industry is an important aspect of human life. Since the beginning of human habitat in Pragjyotisa-Kamarupa (Early Assam) people in here started to produce different articles with the available materials that necessary for their day to day life. With the development of civilization of the land different kinds of crafts and industries developed here for producing different kinds of articles like pottery, terracotta objects and figurines, stone and metal objects, plaques, ornaments etc. In this paper it is tried to have a picture of the crafts and industries that developed in early Assam.

**Keywords:** Crafts, Industries, Pragjyotisa –Kamarupa.

## Introduction

Assam, which is existed in the north east India was known as Pragjyotisa and Kamarupa in ancient times and was played the significant role in history. The Vedic sources, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, the Puranas, classical works, accounts of the foreigners, archaeological sources inform about the socio-political-cultural and economic development of the land from remote past. Its physical location, climate, demographic formation played the role to develop a distinct identity in history. However the geographical factors, co-existence of the land with the rest of the territory of northern India maintain its socio-political and cultural contact with rest of India since the time immemorial.

Although agriculture was the mainstay in the economic life of the people of the kingdom, crafts and industry was also equally developed in the historical times. Both literatures and archaeological sources inform on the subject. At least three stone inscriptions and twenty copper inscriptions issued by the different kings of the land from 5<sup>th</sup> century to 12<sup>th</sup> century A.D. that inform about the crafts and industries that flourished in Ancient Assam. Among the stone inscriptions most mentionable are the Umachal Rock Inscription of king Surendra Varman (5<sup>th</sup> century A.D.), Barganga Rock Inscription of Bhuti Varman (6<sup>th</sup> century A.D.), Tezpur rock inscription of Harjara Varman, (9<sup>th</sup> century A.D.) are mentionable in this respect. Among the Copper inscriptions the mentionable are Dubi Inscription of Bhuti Varman(7<sup>th</sup> century A.D.), Nidhanpur Inscription of Bhaskar Varman (9<sup>th</sup> century A.D.), Tezpur Inscription of Vanamala Varman (9<sup>th</sup> Century A.D.), Nagaon Inscription of Indrapal(9<sup>th</sup> century A.D.), Bargaon Inscription of Ratnapala are important.

Certain renowned woks of the History of Assam mention about the crafts and industries flourished in ancient Assam. In 1958, P. C. Choudhury (History and Civilization of the people of Assam) mentions about industries of Ancient Assam. B.K. Barua in Cultural History of Assam (1951) also indicates about the crafts industries of Early Assam. In 1990 in Comprehensive History of Assam (Edited by H.K. Barpujari) (Chapter of Economic Life) S. Chottopabhyaya (pp.233 -262) highlighted the industries and the crafts that flourished in Ancient Assam. In his work Inscriptions of Ancient Assam Mukunda Madhab Sarmah narrates the available inscriptions of Ancient Assam which indicate the information on industries of early Assam.

## Objective of the Study

Crafts and industries played the significant role for prosper of early Assam in economically and thus enabled its people to have political and cultural upheaval. It also led the land to maintain its socio-economic and cultural relation with the territory of Northern India. The objective of the study is to-

1. Have a critical study to trace out the information about the origin and development of industries in Early Assam.



**Golap Saikia**

Associate Professor,  
Deptt. of History,  
Haflong Govt College,  
Haflong, Dima Hasao, Assam

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2. Study the atmosphere in which the crafts and industries developed in Ancient Assam.
3. Study the different industries that developed in early Assam.
4. Find out the role of the industries that played for the prosperity of the land and its people which helped to have good position in history.

**Crafts and Industries of Early Assam:**

Crafts and industry is the creative activity of the human mind. The literary sources like the accounts of the Chinese Traveler Huen Tsang, the Harsacarita of Bāna, Kālikā Purāna etc. and also by the archeological and the epigraphic sources indicate that crafts and industries was properly developed in Early Assam (Pragiyotisa-Kamarupa). The specimen of Crafts and industries developed in Early Assam were consisting of household articles, pottery, terracotta objects and figurines, metal objects, coins, stone objects, plaques, ornaments etc. The important industries that flourished in Ancient Assam were - textile industry, carpentry and wood cutting, metal working, stone working, glass industry, bone and ivory working, perfumery, liquor and oil manufacturing, leather industry, clay working like pottery, terracotta figurine making, modeling, brick making and other miscellaneous industries.

Textile or weaving industry, which was the important and popular industry of Early Assam, was generally consisted of three varieties viz. Cotton, Woolen and Silk industries. In early Assam cotton was not only used for manufacture of cloth only but also used for preparing paper sheet, which was called as *Tulāpāt*. It was prepared by pressing cotton so as to make it into something like a paper sheet<sup>1</sup>. Instances of the using of *Karpāsa* (Cotton) garment are indicated in the Kālikā Purāna (6<sup>th</sup> century A.D.)<sup>2</sup> and Harsacarita of Bana (7<sup>th</sup> century A.D.)<sup>3</sup>. The professional weavers of early Assam were called the *Tantuvāyas*<sup>4</sup>. Although it is not available to get the detail picture of cotton weaving industry Early Assam, the good reputation and widely prevalence of cotton manufacture during the succeeding Ahoms period (mediaeval period) indicates that cotton industry was a great industry in Early Assam. The usual process of the cotton manufacture was the treating cotton threads with some gummy substances like a pounded rice to make them hard so as to make the loom<sup>5</sup>. Besides the cotton garments the woolen garment (*Kambala*), bark cloth (*Kosāka*) and hemp cloth (*Sānavastam*) were used in early Assam<sup>6</sup>, since the time of the epic Mahābhārata<sup>7</sup>. It is known that among the presents that were sent by Bhāskaravarman of Kāmarupa (594-650 A.D.) to Harsavardhana of Kanouj there was the cloth as smooth as birch bark<sup>8</sup>.

Manufacture of silk was a well-known industry in Early Assam since Rāmāyana<sup>9</sup>. The *Periplus of the Erythian Sea*<sup>10</sup>, and the work of *Pliny*<sup>11</sup> (1<sup>st</sup> century A.D.) also inform about the production of *Pāt* (Silk cloth) in Early Assam and was considered as an important commodity of trade of the land. The work also refers to raw and manufactured silk from Thinā<sup>12</sup>, which is identified with Assam<sup>13</sup>. Kautilya refers three varieties of Indian silk cloth namely *dākulā* of

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Vangas, Pundras and Suvarnakunda (Assam), *kshaumā* from Kasi and Pundras and *patronā* silk from Magadha, Pundras and Suvarnakunda<sup>14</sup>. Harsacarita of Bana indicates that along with other materials, Bhaskaravarman, the king of Kāmarupa sent to Harsa of Kanouj, an *Amogha* umbrella, wrapped by *dākula* cloth and other variety of silken objects like *patronā*<sup>15</sup>. The same is also referred in the Grants of Early Assam<sup>16</sup>. Bhaskaravarman also sent to Harsa the *Kshaumāni*, a silken towel<sup>17</sup> as present.

Sources indicate that along with the weaving industry, dyeing industry was also developed in Early Assam. Bāna, in his Harsacarita indicates the reference of the coloured and painted cloth of the time of Bhaskaravarman, which were as smooth as birch bark with the pattern of jasmine flower<sup>18</sup>. The coloured cloth is required generally for worshiping deities in Early Assam<sup>19</sup>.

The dyeing was produced in Early Assam generally from *lac*, indigo and various other ingredients like roots, leaves and barks of trees like *khair* (acacia catechu), acanthaceae etc.<sup>20</sup> Inscriptions indicate the '*madhurāsvattha*' tree that used for breeding of *lā-poka* or lac insects<sup>21</sup>. But Ctesias and Aelian refer to the people of Seres (Asia) who had the habit of rearing lac insects on *Siptachora* (tree) producing purple dye<sup>22</sup> and thus the practice of colouring of cloth with *lac* in Assam came from the other countries. But the availability of '*madhurāsvattha*' tree in Early Assam proved that lac was produced in the land. Thus both the art of embroidery and the manufacture of dyeing materials were known in Early Assam.

Carpentry and wood cutting was a flourishing industry in Early Assam. Inscription informs that King Vanamālā erected rows of palaces which had numbers of rooms decorated with carvings<sup>23</sup>, and king Ratnapāla constructed magnificent buildings (*soudha*) in the city of Durjayanagara<sup>24</sup>. These references in the inscriptions and literature regarding the structures of Prāgjyotisapura and other cities of Early Assam indicate the availability of skillful carpenters and woodcutters who produced the structures of the cities with the wooden materials. It was possible because the literature and accounts of the foreigners inform of the magnificent buildings constructed in northern India during the Mauryans' times using the wooden materials<sup>25</sup> and again Arrian states that all the cities situated on the banks of the river or on the Sea-shores were constructed with wood instead of bricks<sup>26</sup>.

Inscriptional reference of '*rathya*', a type of road constructed in the cities of ancient Assam<sup>27</sup> and Brahmin scholar Himānga as a *rathika* (charioteers)<sup>28</sup> indicate that the *Rathas* (Chariots) were used as the vehicle for transportation as well as in warfare in early Assam and were prepared by the *Rathakaras*<sup>29</sup>. The Palanquins (*Sivika*)<sup>30</sup> and *Dolā* were also the wooden articles produced by the carpenters in early Assam. The luxuriant boxes like "Carved boxes with panels" produced in early Assam<sup>31</sup>. The superb carpentry and wood cutting work of early Assam was the boat (*noukā*) making industry which indicates in the Tezpur

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Copper inscription of Vanamālā<sup>32</sup>. Inscription informs that the luxurious wooden beds of the palaces of early Assam dazzled like the gold<sup>33</sup>.

Like the carpentry another developed craft work of early Assam were the bamboo, cane and reed industry. Articles prepared from the bamboos and canes like baskets were variously coloured and embossed by skilful artists<sup>34</sup>.

References of the fighting of kings and his army against the enemies with the weapons like bows and arrows, swords, spears etc. indicate that iron was used in ancient Assam from epic period. The descriptions of Pliny that the iron of *Sericā* (Assam) was considered to be the best<sup>35</sup>, and mention of merchandise articles by Ammian Mercellinus from early Assam consisting of skin, iron aloe, musk and rhinoceros horns<sup>36</sup>, indicate that iron working was done in Assam from the classical period. The inscriptional references of the weapons such as arrows, *saktis*, *chakra* (wheel), *prāsas*, swords, *tomaras* etc. of ancient Assam indicate that iron was properly used in early Assam<sup>37</sup>. It was also used for producing household implements like spades, sickles, ploughshares, chains, iron plates and pans, swords and various other weapons in Early Assam<sup>38</sup>.

The literary and epigraphic sources indicate that Assam in early times was rich in respect of gold<sup>39</sup>. The abundant production of gold led the kings and the wealthy people of the kingdom to lavishly use the gold in different occasions. Thus the king Vanamālā rebuilt the fallen golden temple of Lord Siva (*Hataka Sulin*) in Hārūppeswara<sup>40</sup>. The same king made gifts of gold and silver on different occasions<sup>44</sup>. It is stated in the *Tabāt-I-Nāsiri* that after facing a great disaster, Bakhtier Khiliji took refuge in a temple of Kāmapupa where there was a huge gold image of a god<sup>45</sup>. Though it is rare, gold was also used for minting the coins in ancient Assam<sup>46</sup>. Gold was also abundantly used for making ornaments in ancient Assam. Members of the royal family including kings and their queens, highborn people of well to do families who lived in the cities had abundantly and skillfully used the gold ornaments<sup>47</sup>. The jewellery industry of Early Assam was superbly developed in the urban centers and the goldsmiths of Early Assam were skilled enough to studding the valuable stones like the *gajamuktā*, *pādmārāga* etc. in the ornaments which were exhibited and sold the jewellers including the Topaz in the jewellery shops (*Vipanis*), which attracted the foreign traders<sup>48</sup>. Like gold, silver was also used for making different kind of ornaments in ancient Assam<sup>48</sup> and that the kings of ancient Assam donated silver along with gold<sup>49</sup>. Silver was also used in ancient Assam for manufacturing pitcher that used for carrying water in the auspicious occasions like the coronation ceremony<sup>50</sup>.

Another notable metal industry that developed in ancient Assam was the copper industry. Copper was abundantly used in making ornaments, weapons, utensils, and inscriptions in Ancient Assam and most of the kings of Ancient Assam issued numbers of copper inscriptions, donating land grants. The craftsmen or the persons who produced the articles of copper were known as *Sekyākara*<sup>51</sup> or

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*Kamalākāro*<sup>52</sup>. Discovery of copper coins at Dhulāpādung tea estate indicates the using of copper metal for making coins also in ancient Assam. Evidence of using copper making bells is witnessed by the discovery of a copper bell in the Narakāsūr Hoard which is now preserved in the Assam State Museum, Guwahati.

The craftsmen of Assam were also adept at creating alloys like bronze. The Assam State Museum houses a number of bronze plaques and icons made from bronze that recovered from different sites of Assam which include miniature sculptures of Brāhmannical and Buddhist gods and goddesses like Indra, Surya, Tārā, Durgā and those of Epic heroes like Arjuna and Krisna and so on.

The Stone working was a developed industry in ancient Assam. The discovery of both ancient secular as well as religious stone structures and images in different sites of Assam like Surjya Pāhār in Goalpārā, Da-Parvatīā in Tezpur, Mikir Āti, Chāngchouki in Nagāon, Deopāni and Deopāhār in Golāghāt, Madan Kāmdev near Guwahati, Ambāri in Guwahati and many other places of Assam indicate that stone working was a big industry in ancient Assam. Another stone cutting example of ancient Assam was the inscribing of inscriptions on the flat stone by the stone- cutters to memorize the victory and other adorable activities of the kings of Ancient Assam. Some of such inscriptions are the Nagājarī-Khanikargāon Fragmentary Stone Inscription<sup>53</sup>, Umāchal Rock Inscription<sup>54</sup> and Tezpur Rock Inscription<sup>55</sup>. Dedication of a cave temple by king Surendravarman for Lord Balabhadra<sup>5</sup>, is a example of making of cave temple cutting the stone is the example making caves by cutting stones in Ancient Assam. Another outstanding example of stone cutting work in ancient Assam was the construction of the stone bridges. One such stone bridge was on the channel of the Barnadi River, which Mahmmad Bakhtiyār Khiliji and his army crossed in the year 1206. The stone cutters were known as '*Pasānakuttakas*,' who were skilled in their work<sup>57</sup>.

Both plains and hills of Assam is full of forest and is rich for sylvan products like ivory from time immemorial<sup>58</sup>, and it is evident from Indian and foreign writers<sup>59</sup> the ivory works suitably developed in Early Assam. The reference of Bāna in his Harsacarita, sending the rings of hippopotamus ivory, encrusted with rows of huge pearls from the brows of elephants<sup>60</sup> by king Baskaravarman to Harsa is the example of availability of the work in Ancient Assam.

The prevalence of the aromatics industry in Assam was known from the epic period. In Mahabharata it is mentioned that Bhimasena, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Pāndava, after conquering Assam received Sandalwood and aloe wood (*agaru*) as presents in the land<sup>61</sup>, and in the *Rājasuya* Sacrifice of the Pandavas, the *kirātas* of Prāgyotisa (ancient Assam) offered aromatics like Sandalwood and heaps of other aromatics to king Yudhisthira as presents<sup>62</sup> and that the inscriptions indicate that the women of Early Assam use of perfume<sup>63</sup>. The classical writers cited the important references producing aloe and msk from Assam<sup>64</sup> and according to Commentator

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Bhattasvami, some of the best varieties of Sandalwood like *Jongoka*, *Grāmeruka*, *Aupaka* or *Jāpaka* and *Taurupaka*, refers by Kautilya were collected from Kāmarupa<sup>65</sup>. The epigraphs of Assam referred variously about the *Kalāgaru* (black aloe)<sup>66</sup> and the *Harsacarita* of Bana indicates that king Bhāskara sent to Harsa a bundle of dark aloe as pounded collyrium, black aloe oil in thick bamboo tubes and *kākkolā* sprays<sup>67</sup>. The animal products like the mask of deer (*kusturikā mrigānāvi*) and mask of oxen were used as scent in early Assam<sup>68</sup> and that Bana mentions that king Bhāskaravarman sent to Harsavardhana a "scented bags of mask-oxen and mask deer which scented the space all around them"<sup>69</sup>. The literature like Kālikā Purāna indicates the using of different types of perfumes of ancient Assam as like *curnikrita* (powder), *ghrista* (paste), *dahākrista* (ashes), *samardājarasa* (juice), *pranyāmodbhāva* (mask)<sup>70</sup>. Kautilya also indicates out of ten kinds of aromatics oil (*Tailaparnika*) many varieties were found in Assam<sup>71</sup>. These references indicate that the perfumery and scent industry was properly developed in early Assam.

In ancient Assam liquor was also produced and used by its people in different purposes. It is indicated in the *Harsacarita* that among the various presents that sent by Bhāskaravarman to Harsavardhana there were the cups of '*Ulākā*' diffusing a fragrance of the sweetest wine and thick bamboo tubes containing mango saps<sup>72</sup>. The reference of '*madhumada*' in the inscription of Assam informs about the prevalence of wine in ancient Assam<sup>73</sup> and that the literature refers to the worship of Goddess Kāmeswari with wine, meat and blood<sup>74</sup>. The Kālikā Purāna regards wine as an ideal food along with *pistaka*, *pāyasa* and *madhu*<sup>75</sup>.

Sources indicate the developed leather work of early Assam and the Skins of different animals like antelopes, deer, cows etc. were used as the leather<sup>76</sup>. The suitable example leather works of early Assam was the pillows made of *Samaraka* leather and bucklers made of *Kardaranga* leather that sent by king Bhaskarabarmān to Harshavardhan of Kanouj<sup>77</sup>.

Discovery of huge products in different places of Assam indicate that the clay working was a popular and important industry in ancient Assam. The most citable example of this is the discovery of the terracotta products in different sites of Assam namely in Bhismanagar, Ambāri and other places. The clay seal of Bhāskaravarman discovered at Nālandā is one of the significant clay working examples of ancient Assam. This Clay Seal bears the genealogy of the kings of the Varman dynasty of Kamarupa. Some of the unique specimens of clay working of Early Assam, dated the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> century A.D. have been discovered from Dah-Parvatīā in Sonitpur district and near Sadiyā in Dibrugarh district. The reference in the *Harsacarita* of "drinking vessels embossed by skillful artist" and "molasses in earthen pots"<sup>105</sup>, are also the suitable citation of the clay working activities that developed in ancient Assam. The epigraphic and archeological evidences also indicate flourishing clay-working activities of the land. The Nidhānpur Grant indicates the *Kumbhakāragarta* (Potter's pit)<sup>78</sup> and the

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Kamauli Grant and the Bargaon Grant refer to the *kumbhakāras*<sup>103</sup>, who were the professional potters. There is the reference of special village namely the *Dijaratihādi* where potteries were produced<sup>79</sup>. This indicates that the potteries in ancient Assam were produced in guild system.

The existence of the ruins of temples and other remains in different parts of Assam namely Sri Surjya pāhār, Hājo, Madan Kāmdev, Guwahati, Davakā and its adjoining places, Deopāni and Deoparvat in Golaghat, Tezpur and its adjoining places, Sadiyā etc., and inscriptional references indicate that bricks and stones working was properly developed in ancient Assam. This trend was even continued during the succeeding periods.

The available copper-plate inscriptions and stone inscriptions in different places and finding of sculptural works and architectural designs in the temples and other buildings indicate that the act of engraving was flourishing and developed industry in ancient Assam and as this engraving of the inscriptions and decorating of the buildings were done for wellbeing of the royal authority and establishing the dignity and popularity of the kings of ancient Assam this industry was patronized by the ruling authority of the time.

### Conclusion

Crafts and industries of Ancient Assam developed to produce the articles that necessitated for the people in here. It was suitably developed and was capable of having suitable market in and outside of the land. However many facts related to the topic are yet to be discovered, and those already discovered are not properly utilized. If more research has to be done on the topic much new information will come out on the flourishing of crafts and industries in early Assam which will change the historical trend of the land and will determine its role that plays towards the main stream of the national history of our country.

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