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Terracotta Industry: The Living Source of Asharikandi Barasha Devi

M. Com. 4th Semester, B. H. College, Howly, Assam, India

Bhabananda Deb Nath

Assistant Professor, B. H. College, Howly, Assam, India

Abstract:

Terracotta Industry of Asharikandi in the Dhubri District of Assam is one of the exemplary and heritage industries carrying the example of innovative work with the locally available resources (i.e. Hiramati, Water, Red-soil, Caustic Soda, Firewood, Sandpaper, Hay, etc.) and has taken items of the industry to the heart of world. The industry is in practice before independence, but its history claims that, it is an industry more than 10 decade old and their products also bring the essence of Indus Valley Civilization products' shape and design.

Once, a Sick and Shrinking Industry, now become a Piece of Pride for Assam, and a living source of more than 129 families and of course a good business. The study try to reveal the history, products, people-engaged, income-generation, challenges faced by Terracotta Industry of Asharikandi as exploratory study, on the basis of both secondary and primary data. The study was a great experience for the researchers and has come with many important findings and more importantly, the Terracotta Industry of Asharikandi needs urgent care from the Govt. and other stake holders for its survival and growth; otherwise, those days are not so far, when this heritage industry can be seen only in the Museum.

Key Words: Terracotta-Industry, Living-Source, Asharikandi.

Introduction: The term terracotta is derived from the words 'Terra' and 'Cotta'. 'Terra' means earth and 'Cotta' means baked. An object of art made of a composition of clay and sand and baked with earthen color, a brownish red, is terracotta. Terracotta is one of the oldest craft that human beings introduced on earth. (Sah R. , 2011)

Terracotta was once considered to be poor man's craft, but in due course of time it has made its ascent and occupied a distinct identity among all classes of people by its aesthetic value. Terracotta as a medium has dominated the handicraft scene of Assam since time immemorial. The tradition itself has been handed down from generation to generation without break. The terracotta tradition is the continuation of the Indus valley traditions that date back 5000 years. Various excavations at Mohenjodaro and Harappa have unearthed several terracotta items in the form of various figures and figurines. Terracotta figures also have a ritualistic aspect associated with it. In fact, terracotta art in India is considered

mystical because it incorporates within the five vital elements like air, fire, earth, water and ether.

In a number of states in India, the terracotta figures have a lot of prominence. For instance the impressive Ayanaar horse from Tamil Nadu represents the largest terracotta sculpture ever made and is constructed from coiling and beating, the same technique used for making vessels. Madhya Pradesh is represented by the highly embellished elephants offered in forest shrines and also by woman's wall decoration. This involves using clay pigments and decorating techniques similar to pottery creation and modeling process. In West Bengal the snake goddess Manasa is worshipped through a terracotta tree shrine constructed from multiple thrown and modeled parts. Another major form of West Bengal terracotta finds its artistic channel in the horses. In Gujrat and Rajasthan terracotta panels and storage jars painted in white are famous. In Orissa and Madhya Pradesh the roof tops with profuse terracotta works are also a part of the terracotta work. The countries famous for Terracotta practice other than India are ITALY, CHINA, FRANCE, JAPAN, IRAQ, EGYPT, etc.

In the Dhubri District of Assam, the terracotta activity is practiced widely in the village of Asharikandi. Every household of the village are fully involved in terracotta activity and has taken it as primary means of livelihood. The practice of Terracotta in Asharikandi presents an unique case where pottery and terracotta are practiced in traditional way for which Asharikandi is known as Terracotta Craft Village.(Ghosh, 2014)

Brief Review of Literature: Pal, (2012-13), in his paper highlights the core issues related to process and techniques, machine and tools, packaging and transportation etc. of the terracotta industry. The paper is actually a unit level report of Ghurni cluster in West Bengal. In this report it has mention that, all the possible sites which require incentive to revitalize this craft which seems to prove as a promising field for handicrafts export. SWOT analysis has also been done which helps in better understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the cluster.

Ashtage & Thakur, (2015), wrote about the pottery-making cultures which include manufacturing techniques, continuity of ethnic composition, caste framework and their technologies from selected sites. The paper help to understand contemporary traditional pottery practices. Besides documentation of degeneration of technology, the researchers aim to put forth the survival problems of the potters.

Haque, (2016), in his paper explains the socio-cultural significance of the terracotta craft of Asharikandi. The paper put focus on the terracotta products and how it has affected the socio-cultural dimensions of the people of this region as well as Assam in general. The historical background of the development of the craft has also been explained in details. The paper also attempts to indicate the work place at Asharikandi as a symbol of women empowerment because of the large number of women workers.

Dutta, (2013), in his paper has made an attempt to portray the basic and ground level problems affecting the marketing mix for the products of the concerned MSME cluster,

which is indeed one of the unique clusters in India. Of course, it is evident from the study that, concerned government authorities, NGOs and the artisans of the clusters should take corrective measures for proper utilization of the available resources through modern techniques and marketing strategies with a long term vision of ASARIKANDI TERRACOTTA AND POTTERY CRAFT CLUSTER as a production hub of world class terracotta products, and revive this traditional art which is, at present standing, on the verge of extinction.

Objectives of the Study:

1. To know the history and products of Terracotta Industry of Asharikandi.
2. To know number of people involved and income generation of people engaged in Terracotta Industry of Asharikandi.
3. To know the socio-economic condition and challenges faced by the people engaged in Terracotta Industry of Asharikandi.

Methodology:

- a) **About the area of the study:** The present study is confined to the terracotta industry of Asharikandi Craft Village situated in Dhubri District of Assam. The Asharikandi village comes under the Debitola Block of Dhubri District. Asharikandi is located 14 km away from Dhubri, 3 km from Gauripur and 1 km from NH-31. It comprises of five villages i.e., Madaikhali, Palpara, Baganpara, Bogurapara and Sikasipara. The terracotta craft is only practiced in the Madaikhali village which comprises of 129 household units covering 500 artisans of which 195 are male and 305 are female. The study was undertaken in the Madaikhali village of Asharikandi where the practice of terracotta presents a unique case.
- b) **Types of data:** The study is based on both primary data and secondary data. For conducting the survey, the primary data was collected through schedule and personal interview of the artisans of the Asharikandi Craft Village were also conducted. Again, the secondary data for the study was collected from-internet websites, related books and journals, local newspapers, etc.
- c) **Fixation of Sample and Data Collection:** For the purpose of this study a sample of 50 respondents (i.e. 10% of the total 500 Artisan) and that covers 50 Artisan families out of the 129 Artisan families of the village. The sample respondents have been fixed on consultation with Dhirendranath Paul¹ and on understanding after making a pilot survey/visit in the village and on convenient sampling technique.

History of Terracotta Industry of Asharikandi: 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. In fact, the village Asharikandi itself is

¹ Sri Dhirendranath Paul son of Late-Saralabala Devi (Late-Sarala Bala Devi begged the prestigious National Award on Terracotta craft in the year of 1982 for her excellent innovative masterpiece-HATIMA Doll s lovely female figure with a child on her lap), is nationally and internationally acclaimed master crafts-man on Terracotta.

known as the “Asharikandi Teracotta Craft Village”. The artisans of this village are practicing this craft competing with the industrialized challenges since many decades. The place Asharikandi and the people associated with the terracotta craft have a long historical background of their own.

Before the partition of India, a few potter families from Pabna District of East Bengal i.e. present day Bangladesh, migrated to this place of Asharikandi. During the rainy season of Ashar, heavy rainfall causes flood in this low lying area and the potters have to endure a lot. They cannot make, dry up, burn and store safely their products during the rainy season. The potters shed tears out of misery caused by the havoc of flood. Thus from the name of this rainy season (*Ashar*) and the shedding of tears by the potters (*Kandi*) the place has been named as “Asharikandi”. The senior most villagers opined that in spite of these problems they selected the place due to its nearness to raw materials, cheaper transportation facility and its strategic location. The main raw material Hiramati (clay soil) lies in the nearby areas of Silaipar, which is only 4 km from the village. (Sah R. , 2011).

Earlier the needs of the Jamindar (Royal) family’s use of ware and utensils were catered from this area since the potter community migrated to this place. But in the later period the potters started the terracotta craft. The potters used to sell the terracotta products in the neighbouring villages at a very low rate and hence, the money earned by the selling was very meagre to run a family. It is said that the activity of this craft in the village dates back more than 100 years. But the efforts of the artisans of Asharikandi first got recognition in 1982 when SaralaBala Devi was conferred the President Award for traditional terracotta craft for HatimaPutul. In 2005 DharendraNathPaul (son of SaralaBala Devi) won the Bokul Bon Award from Assam Sahitya Sabha and Mahadev Paul, another renowned artisan of the terracotta cluster bagged the Best Handicraft Artist Award by Assam government for his master piece, Ganesh.

Raw Material: Hiramati is the basic raw material and is available from the banks of nearby river Silai from where the hiramati is transported by country boats. The area is a Khas land and has been settled upon by the migrants. Earlier the artisans used to procure clay by paying a small royalty to the forest department but now the artisans have to buy clay from the migrants @ Rs.950/- per boat and it carries approx. 20,000 kg clay.

Next to the clay, the other raw material needed is sand which they get from the contractors @Rs. 300/- per thela. Red coloured clay (*Kabish*) is collected from the mountains which costs Rs.150 per bag. A bag carries 40 kg *Kabish*. Further Caustic soda is also needed to remove the toxic elements from the clay. For firing the fuel is firewood. Earlier, the firewood was collected from the nearby Modhatipur at normal cost, however at present the artisans pay Rs.400/- for 100 kg of firewood. Straw is also required for firing to cover the kiln and also used in piling up the products. (Sah R. , 2011)

Tools and Equipments: The traditional tools and equipments used by the artisans of Asharikandi are chiefly *Kodal*, *Pitna*, *Kaim*, Knives, *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 removing the impurities of the clay. *Aith* is used to bring out the *hiramati* from the big jar. *Boila* and *Pitna* are used to give a desired shape to the clay. Knives are used cut designs on the terracotta products. Lastly, brush is used for the painting of the terracotta products.





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 the work continues in step by step as shown below-



Product category, product range and rate of each product: The artisan of Asharikandi produces two categories of terracotta products that are Utility item and Decorative item. They produce various product ranges at different sizes. Following are the details of the various product categories:

UTILITY PRODUCTS-

Sl. No.	Items	Size Range	Rate per item (Rs)
1.	Tub	6"-10"	10-200
2.	Lamp Shade	3"	200
3.	Round Vase	1'-6"	30-250
4.	Flower Vase	1'-6"	50-750
5.	Water Ketli	2"	70
6.	Pen Stand		30
7.	Agarbatti Stand	6"	15
8.	Glass	4"	15
9.	Xarai	6"	50
10.	Decorative Tub	4"-8"	50-250
11.	Water Filter	10"	150
12.	Water Flash	5"	120
13.	Candle Stand		20
14.	Piggy Bank	3"-6"	3-5
15.	JalerKathi		2-3

DECORATIVE PRODUCTS-

Sl. No.	Items	Size Range	Rate per item(Rs)
1.	Decorative Motka	5"-10"	60-150
2.	Horse	6"-13.5"	50-1500
3.	Designed Flower Vase	1"-6"	50-750
4.	Ganesh	1"-6"	45-500
5.	Wall hanging piece	6"-10"	80-250
6.	Bihu dancer	1"	60
7.	Palki	6"	15
8.	Mayur Pankh Boat	6"	15
9.	Krishna		80-135
10.	HatimaPutul		110-280
11.	Elephant Tub		80-150
12.	Pankhi Raj Horse	2"-6"	50-150
13.	Duck Pot		30

14.	Designed Boats	6''	30
15.	Hatima Putul Dani	6''	100

Demographic Profile: Asharikandi comprises of five villages namely- Madaikhali, Pal Para, Bagan Para, Bougura Para and Sikasi Para. The terracotta craft is practiced only in the Madaikhali village which comprises of 129 household units covering 500 artisans of which 195 are male and 305 are female.

Distribution of People Engaged in Terracotta Industry-

Villages	Total Population	Number of household practicing terracotta craft	Total Artisan practicing terracotta craft	Male Artisan	Female Artisan
Madaikhali	7500	129	500	195	305

Caste-wise distribution of Artisans-

Category	Number of Artisans
SC	152
OBC	348

Source: Primary Data

Income Generation: During the study an effort was made to know the income generation of the artisans of Asharikandi and various question were asked to them in this respect. Firstly, they were asked if terracotta was their main source of income and whether they fully relied on it for income generation or were engaged in some other activities for their livelihood. It is found that 42 respondents out of the total 50 (i.e. 84% of the artisans) have said that terracotta is their main source of income and they fully rely on it. The remaining people are engaged in some other activities like retail shops, fishery, etc. other than the terracotta work. They were also asked regarding their method of selling and whether they were satisfied with the selling price or not. Out of the total 50 respondents, 39 (i.e. 78%) have said that they sell their products through intermediaries or middle-men. They also showed their dissatisfaction for the price they received from these middle-men. The remaining 22% of the respondents told that they sell their products directly. Most of the artisans in Asharikandi have very low income and people are not willing to disclose about it in details. As regard income generation of the artisans nothing much has been found clearly and on repeated request the researchers has able to understand none of the family engaged is earning good income and their total average income would fall between 5,000 to 7,000 rupees per month. Besides this the artisans also face constraints during operation, such as financial shortage. This low rate of income creates various problems for the artisans, such as inability to provide better schooling to their children, lack of proper health facilities, etc. Because of low income generation the artisans of Asharikandi have been forced to stay

in the vicious circle of poverty for many years and the possibility of coming out of this poverty is very little.

Socio-economic condition: The artisans of Asharikandi constitute an important segment of the terracotta industry. Once all the people of the cluster used to practice the terracotta craft but slowly, the number of people engaged in the activity is declining because of various reasons. Other than the traditional technology, no modern technology has been applied in terracotta production-procedure at the Asharikandi cluster. The traditional way of production is highly time, labour and energy consuming. Thus, the artisans are unable to meet up the challenges from rest of the technologically advanced clusters in other parts of the country. Moreover, the artisans of the terracotta industry do not receive the remuneration deserved by them and are exploited by middle-men which is one of the major reasons for the decline in the number of artisans of the cluster. Even though Asharikandi is the largest terracotta cluster in India, the place is under-developed and the people there live in poverty. Due to these reasons, now the new generation does not want to continue the age-old traditional terracotta work.

The terracotta industry of Asharikandi has a scope for growth but in the present condition their development is not possible. The artisans of the village and the terracotta industry itself are not in a flourishing state. Revival of the industry with modern technologies is a must for the development of the industry. Incorporation of modern technology and inborn artistic skill of the artisans of Asharikandi cluster together can easily compete with the terracotta products of the rest of the states in India and abroad.

Challenges: On the basis of the information gathered from the field survey, the present study highlights the following problems faced by the artisans of Asharikandi Craft Village which stands in the way of growth and development of the terracotta industry of Asharikandi-

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- a) **Illiteracy:** The people engaged in the terracotta craft of Asharikandi are mostly illiterate and they do not have any knowledge about the modern techniques of terracotta production. Also, because of being uneducated they fail to understand the prevailing market trends. The middle-men take advantage of their illiteracy and gain all the profit and the condition of the artisans keep on deteriorating. The artisans of Asharikandi are an integral part of the terracotta industry; as a consequence, their illiteracy put a negative impact on the terracotta industry.
- b) **Training:** All the artisans engaged in the terracotta industry of Asharikandi are not trained. Out of the total 500 artisans involved in the terracotta industry of Asharikandi, only 36 are trained artisan. The rest of the artisans produce utility items like tubs, water kettle, water filter etc. Thus, it is evident from the data collected that majority of artisans in the cluster are untrained and alien to the improved methods of production which limits the variety in their product lines and product designs. The lack of training is a huge barrier in the growth of the terracotta craft.

- c) **Traditional Techniques:** The artisans of Asharikandi still resort to the age-old traditional techniques and equipments of terracotta making like manual mixing and kneading the hiramati, production and designing the terracotta and pottery products with bare hands, firing of items in traditional kiln and traditional packaging of the products by hay. These traditional techniques are labour intensive and time consuming which affects the efficiency in production. Also due to the application of the traditional techniques the cost of production tends to be high, leaving very small margins of profit for the artisans.
- d) **Storage Facility:** The artisans do not have proper storage facility for the raw materials. The raw materials needed for making the terracotta products are available locally in sufficient quantity but due to lack of storage facility the artisans are forced to produce limited number of products. A lot is needed to be done in this regard.
- e) **Working Place:** One work-shed has been provided by the government in the cluster but it is not sufficient for all the artisans. Most of the artisans either use a bamboo shed or a place within their houses. Working inside the houses, besides reducing the productivity, creates a lot of health issues, especially for the children, which is a big concern for the artisans. Bad lighting and improper ventilation deteriorate the working condition to worst.
- f) **Showroom Facility:** The artisans also do not have proper showroom facility for finished products. Most of the artisans keep their finished products left out in open due to lack of showrooms, which leads to high amount of wastages by various ways such as breakage, destruction by rain water and thunderstorm, etc. Specially, in times of flood the lack of proper storage leads to mass wastage of all kinds of stock-raw materials, work-in-process, finished goods. Three showrooms were provided by the government which has created convenience for some artisans indeed, but the majority of the artisans are still deprived of the benefits.
- g) **Channel of Distribution:** Though Asharikandi is the largest cluster of terracotta work in India there is no any organized market to sell the products. Mostly, the products are sold to middle-men by the artisans. Due to lack of proper distribution channel most of the artisans are forced to sell their products to the middle-men. As a result the middle-men gain all the profits and the artisans receive a very low price for their labours. The loss of these artisans indirectly hampers the growth of the terracotta industry.
- h) **Financial/Government Support:** Inadequate amount of capital is gradually pushing the terracotta industry towards extinction. Majority of the artisans have not received any financial aid from any organization/NGO or the government. They do not have sufficient amount of money for their own survival. In such condition, it is not possible for them to contribute in the growth and development of the industry. Very few craftsmen from the cluster can make it to the national and international exhibitions and trade fairs because of their financial position and subject to financial aids from NGOs and government.

- i) **Challenges in Promotion:** Not much has been done yet to promote the unique craft of the cluster. This is probably in line with the low level of literacy among the artisans that they are yet to discover the benefits of promotion. Moreover they are often restricted by financial constraints to undertake planned measures for promotion. Negligence towards the industry on the part of government is one of the major reasons for lack of effective promotional activities related to the terracotta industry of Asharikandi.
- j) **Lack of Unity:** The artisans of the terracotta cluster do not work in groups and have high level of distrust among themselves. They prefer to produce the products separately, each family as a single unit of the cluster. This also leads to difference in the quality of similar products. But in doing so they do not realize that if they start working together then they produce more products in less time

Suggestions:

The findings of the study lead to several issues which may have policy implication for the future development of Asharakandi terracotta industry in Dhubri District. The suggestions are as follows-

- a) Proper education is must be provided to the artisans, which would enable them to understand the market potential of their beautiful creations.
- b) The government should provide old age benefits like Shilpi Pension for the artisans which will encourage the youth to participate in the craft.
- c) The government and NGOs should provide training programs to facilitate the implementation of modern tools and technology for fast production of goods as well as better quality of the products.
- d) There should be proper infrastructure facilities like sufficient number of work sheds, road transport and communication and power supplies to the artisans of the craft.
- e) The government should take initiative to increase the number of showrooms inside and outside the craft village for better exposure of the products.
- f) The government and NGOs should take steps to ensure that the artisans get proper price for their products and protect them from exploitation made by the middle men.
- g) The artisans should be provided with proper financial assistance by banks so that they are relieved from the chronic problem of insufficiency of capital and are able to contribute in the growth of the industry.
- h) The government should take steps for aggressive market promotion of the craft which would enable better publicity and thus, revival of the craft which has reached the edge of extinction.

Conclusion:

The craftsmen of Asharikandi carry forward a great legacy of society and culture of Assam in general and Dhubri District in particular. Their unique style of terracotta craft done by the skilled artisans of the terracotta craft village has raised the attention of the world. But the above study shows the terracotta industry is highly unorganized and there is no proper distribution channel which has become the great cause of low wages of the

artisans of the terracotta industry. The most exploited section of the workers of the terracotta industry is the artisans. The low income of the artisans of the terracotta industry seems to be the cause that the artisans are forced to leave their traditional craft of terracotta. These hardworking people should be encouraged to continue the great tradition of terracotta making. The Asharikandi Craft Village has proved its efficiency to compete with the world due to its unique style of terracotta craft. The terracotta industry of Asharikandi can play a great role in the economic development of the people of Asharikandi Village. This industry has the capacity to employ the rural unemployed artisans of this locality and could be an instrumental for removing their poverty. But, the need of the hour is to take care of the industry for her survival and on successfully doing that; this Industry could be an exemplary industry for India.

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