

## **Traditional Terracotta Craft of Asharikandi and the Cultural Legacy of Dhubri District of Assam**

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### **ABSTARCT**

The paper attempts to know how the craftsmen had settled in this tiny village with their profession, and how the terracotta creations carry the cultural legacy of this locality. This paper is not limited to these only; it also tries to give a glimpse of the production process, and the popular terracotta figures. Asharikandi is a terracotta and pottery cluster village in the district of Dhubri of Assam where the age-old terracotta is made. Though this profession gives the artisans of this village a very low level of income still they keep alive this beautiful art and carrying the cultural legacy through their productions. The terracotta items are representing the numerous cultural traits viz; the religion, rituals, rites, glorious history, socio-cultural changes in the society, etc of Dhubri district in narrow concept and Assam in broader terms.

**Key words:** Terracotta, Asharikandi, Cultural legacy, Dhubri district.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Asharikandi a small village in the Dhubri district of Assam is well known for its beautiful creation from the clay. The craftsmen of this village keep alive this wonderful art of human creativity and expression. In this paper, an attempt has been made to know how the craftsmen had settled in this tiny village with their profession, and how the terracotta creations carry the cultural legacy of this locality. This paper is not limited to these only; it also tries to give a glimpse of the production process, and the popular terracotta figures.

### **OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY**

To know the historical development of the Asharikandi terracotta craft.

To study how this craft is carrying the cultural legacy of the Dhubri District.

### **METHODOLOGY**

The research follows an analytical method of investigation within the framework of historical methodology. The study has been conducted using both combined qualitative and quantitative methods of Social Sciences. The field-based study is crucial in collecting data regarding the historical growth, making process, and the present condition of the craftsmen. Personal interviews were taken to grasp better their profession, legacy, income level, and economic prospects. Both primary and secondary sources are utilized in the research work. Primary sources include relevant materials from the Census Reports, Gazetteers, Statistical Handbook,

Journal's, etc. Secondary sources include books, articles in magazines, newspapers, etc; associated with the study.

### **TERRACOTTA CRAFT OF ASHARIKANDI-A HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

The village Asharikandi is located in the westernmost part of Assam in the district of Dhubri. Geographically it is situated on 26.09 latitude and 90.05 longitudes position. The term Ashrikandi has derived from the two terms one is ASHAR and another KANDI. ASHAR is the third month in the Assamese calendar when rainy season begins and "KANDI" means shedding tears. During the Ashar month, heavy rainfall causes flooding in this low-lying area. The dwellers of this place shed tears out of misery caused by the havoc of flood; especially the potters have to suffer a lot. They could not produce, dry up, burn or store the produced items during the rainy season. From the name of this rainy season, the place has been named Asharikandi. The craftsmen of this area had migrated from the Pabna district of then East Bengal in the last decades of the 19th century with their profession. During this period a large-scale migration took place in different parts of Assam. The majority of them were cultivators and a small section of artisan also migrated towards Assam. The demand for pottery of East Bengal at those times was very high not only in the Brahmaputra valley but also in the Garo Hills. The ingress of pottery towards the Goalpara region from former East Bengal via different trade routes was a regular practice, and the pottery products brought by bullock and buffalo carts from the river to surface routes. (Miksic, 2003)

The present Dhubri district was an integral part of the old Goalpara district. The old Goalpara region came under British rule much earlier than the Yandaboo treaty signed in 1826. From 1765 the administration of Goalpara went under the Britishers. According to the Census Report of Assam conducted in 1901 occupation pattern was divided into eight main classes. The numbers returned under each head were as follows; Government 1647 or less the half percent, pasture and agriculture 387,440 or 84 percent, personal services 5,538 or 1 percent. People engaged in the preparation and supply of material substances 37,143 or 8 percent, commerce transport and storage 7,403 or 2 percent; Professions 4,156 or 1 percent; unskilled labor not agriculture 10,654 or 2 percent. People engaged in means of livelihood independent of occupation 8,071 or 2 percent; a total of 462,052. (Allen, 1905) Allen mentioned the presence of pottery making and supply in the Goalpara region. The principal articles manufactured were cooking pots (*hari* and *paitla*), large and small water jars (*Kalsi* and *bashna*), and larger vessels (*hari* and *janga*) with lamps, pipes, and drums. (Allen, 1905)

The pottery makers who had migrated from East Bengal were encouraged by the Zamindar of Gauripur to settle in Asharikandi. The Zamindar of Gauripur had given them 599 bigha tax-free lands to collect the raw material for the pottery and terracotta product. The craftsmen who settled at Ashraikandi worked as an agriculturist and used to supply their products to the Zamindar family of Gauripur. The total requirement of wares and utensils provided from this village. The potters had selected this particular place for their settlement for several reasons and among them, the most important was the flow of river Gadadhar behind this area joins the Brahmaputra River; which provides not only the cheap means of transport but also the supply of raw material from the river.

In the post-independent period, they had lost support and demand from the Zamindari family of Gauripur. The Potters of Asharikandi had used to make terracotta dolls for the children to play with. They used to sell these items in the neighboring villages at a very low price. For this reason, the people of Asharikandi had almost left the profession of making pottery and terracotta. Only a few family members were engaged with this craft and as an alternative profession, they used to catch to work as a fisherman. At that time, mostly the women were involved in the making of terracotta toys. They used to go to the villages by boat loaded with pottery items and terracotta dolls. Those who bought their items in return give them rice (like a barter system) in a certain fixed pottery jar locally called "*Shear*" (a jar fixed for weight in half or full of a *jar*). The money they had earned by selling these items in villages was not enough to run a family. The craft got a chance to revive only after in 1982, when (late) Sarala Bala Devi mother of Dharendra Nath Pal got President's Award for traditional terracotta craft for Hatima doll.

The potter community of Asharikandi belongs to the Kumar community of potter and presently, the Kumar community is found in twenty-five districts of Assam. In Brahmaputra valley; the Kumar potters reside in the districts of Dhubri, Goalpara, Bongaigaon, and Kokrajhar used to speak Bengali. In Upper Assam, some of them speak Hindi and other Assamese. According to the Chatur Varna system in Hinduism, the Kumar community falls in the Sudra Varna. Their job was to make earthen items to use in rituals and festivals. There is no historical evidence present to trace when they had started making earthen items. Numerous legends and myths are associated with the origin of the Kumar community. They trace their origin to various legends in Vedic literature and holy books like the Puranas, the Samhitas, and Dharmasastra. The term "Kumar" has been derived from the Sanskrit word "Kumbhakar" meaning one that makes earthen water jar (Kumbha - water jar, kar - maker). There are two other similar terms in Sanskrit, like Kulal, and Ghatikar, meaning-makers of the earthen pot. Mention of the term Kulal is found in the Tahtyriya Samhita, Bajshaneyi Samhita, Kathak Samhita, Tahtyria Brahman, Satapath Brahman, etc. The meaning of Kulal is also Kumar. This shows that the profession of pottery making was prevalent in Vedic times. At that time people must have made earthen pots and used these for domestic and ritual purposes. The Kulaldartda and Kulal chakra mentioned in these pieces of literature, later on, came to mean the Kumardanda, the stick used to rotate the Kumar wheel and, the Kumar chakra meaning the Kumar wheel (Kumar Chak) in Assamese. In Hindi, a similar term is Kumhar. It can be presumed that the term "Kumar" has been derived from these sources to mean the people associated with pottery making. (Mrinmoy, 2008)

According to a very popular legend, rampant among the artisans of Asharikandi is that the *kumars* were chief devotees of Lord Shiva and when Shiva prepared to get marry goddess Parvati, he came to know that the whole items essential for the wedding except the auspicious *ghat* was not ready. At that instant, Lord Shiva had created a male person from a bead of his rudraksha garland and asked him to make the *ghat* but the male person had put forwarded two conditions before Shiva. In his first condition, Shiva had to give him the stone on which he used to sit to use as the wheel, and secondly, Shiva had to give him a thread used in the fire to remove the *ghat* from the core lump of the wheel. Lord Shiva agreed to give the

demanded items by the male person and, thus the first *ghat* used in auspicious ceremonies by the Kumar community. In addition to that, another belief is present among the potters of Asharikandi is that Lord Vishwakarma had nine sons from his wife, Ghritsehi. These nine sons of Vishwakarma adopted nine different professions like carpenter (Karmakar), Wreath maker (Malakar), bracelet of shell maker (Sanghakar), pottery maker (Kumbhakar), weaver (Tati), Jeweller (Swarnakar), portraiture maker (Chitrakar), etc. Thus they believe that they are the creation of Vishwakarma.

### **TERRACOTTA PRODUCTION PROCESS**

The potters of Asharikandi collected the clay (locally called Aithal mati) from riverside named, Silaipar 7 K.M away from Asharikandi and transported it up to Baganpara ghat close to the village by boat which cost less. Nowadays contractors supply the clay required for pottery and terracotta. At present, they have to pay around Rs. 900-1000 for 20,000 kg clay, Rs. 300-350 for sand per thela (trolley), Rs. 150-200 for 40 kg per bag of red-colored clay (locally called Kabish). The potters of Asharikandi use the normal kiln, which requires raw material for firing. They typically use straw and wood. They have to pay Rs. 500 for 100 kg for firewood and Rs.5 per kg for straw. Very typical steps are followed in the long production process.

At the initial stage, the collection of the clay is the most essential. The artisans of Asharikandi collect the clay locally called Aithal *mati* or hira mati from the riverside of Silaipar. The Hira clay is found one foot underneath the surface land. Some decades earlier these artisans used to go there and collect the clay and transport it on a boat by river Gadadhar however nowadays the hira clay is supplied by some contractors. In the next stage cleaning the clay is very crucial. Sand is mixed with the clay in a percentage of 80 percent clay and 20 percent sand to avoid crack or any bend at the time of dry under the Sun. In the third step shape of figures to the clay is given and put under the Sun for a day to dry. In the fourth step, the manufacture of color locally called *Kosh* is important. This is a very typical process which includes several steps viz; the collection of red clay from the hills and to make powder of it. In this red clay powder, *khoir* and caustic soda are mixed to remove the toxic elements and it also helps to get standard red color. In the last step, the figures prepared from the clay are put into the kiln according to the size. The figures are covered by hey and normal clay. Wood is requisite as the main source for firing is collected from Modhaitpur. The temperature in the kiln rises from low to high in a gradual process up to 7500 C 8000 C fire for 48 hours.

### **IMPORTANT TERRACOTTA FORMS**

The terracotta products of Asharikandi can be divided into three different forms viz; religious, decorative, and toys. They make the terracotta items following the local religious rites and rituals, religious believe cultural habits, local customs, and traditions, glorious history of the region, etc.

#### **Religious**

A striking feature of Assam is the prominence of the mother deity or Sakti Cult. The Sakti cult has been originated and worshipped as a fertility cult, mother goddess, and as Sakti. It has been worshipped in different forms like Manasa, Durga, Kali, Saraswati, Kamakhya, etc. Terracotta

form of Manasa Devi is an important production of Asharikandi. The craftsman of Asharikandi has taken inspiration from the history of this region. Goddess Manasa has a long association with this region as terracotta from goddess Manasa has been discovered from the historical site of Bhaitbari. Moreover, a mythological story is mentioned in Padma Purana of Manasa Devi and her encounter with merchant Chando where this locality is mentioned. Devi Durga means invincible is an important deity of the Shakti cult. Durga represents mahamaya a form of Shakti that had gained popularity and the temple of Mahamaya was built at Bagribari. As a center of pilgrimage, the Mahamaya temple is very popular and considered as one of the supreme Shakti pitha in Assam. Goddess Kali is a notable symbol of the Shakti cult. The artisans of Asharikandi make the half size of Goddess Kali on the clay plate and it is very popular among the people of this locality. The presence of Devi Saraswati, the goddess of learning and music has been found from the historical site in Bhaitbari of the 13th century. The terracotta figure of Saraswati is made by the potters of Asharikandi in several forms.

The artisans of Asharikandi make a beautiful terracotta figure of Lord Ganesha. The figure of Lord Ganesha is very popular among the people of this region. The artisans of Asharikandi craft the figure of Ganesha in different forms viz; one is in sitting posture as Lord Ganesha is sitting on a decorated bowl and in other he is engraved on the polished clay plate. The terracotta figure of Radha and Krishna is one of the prominent terracotta figures of Gods by the artist of Asharikandi. The artist of Asharikandi creates in two ways; one is free-standing and in other, both are sitting on a cow. The popularity of this Radha & Krishna in the Dhubri district can be assessed from the existence of the Radha-Krishna temple built by the Zamindar of Gauripur at Gauripur. The cult of Saivism has occupied an important place in Assam since early ages. Lord Shiva is worshiped in various forms like; linga, trident, tree, etc. The terracotta form of Lord Shiva is very popular among the people of the Dhubri district. The craftsman of Asharikandi makes only the full size terracotta form of Lord Shiva. The statue is installed in the congregational prayer house or individual family house and is worshipped. The other prominent figures of Gods crafted in Asharikandi are the terracotta figure of Kartika, Mary & Jesus, Lord Buddha in multiple forms.

### **Decorative**

The terracotta figure of mother and child locally popular as *mao-baccha* putul is a unique creation by the craftsmen of Asharikandi. The mother and child figure of Asharikandi is called *the hatima* doll because the mother with an elephant-like ear carrying her child on her lap. The hatima doll is made in two forms in one form mother is carrying her child on her lap and in another form mother is carrying her son in her lap in one hand and a pradipdani in another hand, which indicates that she is doing her work bothering about a child on her lap. In this category the terracotta figure of horses, elephants are very significant. The decorated terracotta horse and elephant were indicated as a symbol of social status. The elephant has a great historical association with the Zamindari family of Gauripur. Another important form in the category of decorative items is the multiple forms of pradipdani. Terracotta form of palanquin locally called as *palki* is an important feature of rural marriage ceremony in early ages. The craftsman of Asharikandi has given a lovely terracotta form that carries our old culture and tradition. The famous historical figures of Indian history and Assam are given a

terracotta form by the artisans of Asharikandi. These terracotta plate forms of famous personalities have a good demand.

### **Toys**

The craftsmen of Asharikandi have great skill and creativity. They observe the socio-cultural changes and demand and accordingly they shaped their items. They make a life-size female welcome doll, a bicycle with a rider, a peacock boat, decorated flower vase, decorated amulets, a mermaid, lamp, decorated bowl, terracotta Bihu dancers, terracotta peasant, a terracotta bicycle with a rider, etc.

### **CULTURAL LEGACY OF THE DHUBRI DISTRICT AND THE TERRACOTTA OF ASHARIKANDI**

Terracotta items have been prepared and used by human beings from early times in the form of household objects, ritual objects, aesthetic objects, and art of expression in the shape of sculptures. This form of art satisfies the artistic urge of human beings and also meets their domestic and aesthetic needs. (Dutta, 2013) S. S Biswas remarks that “the terracotta of ageless type representing the human and animal figures essentially of folk origin is generally made by hand and there is hardly any change in their execution and style through the ages”. (Sen, 2013) This ancient art has a long association with the culture of a particular region. It represents the cultural facet and changes of a particular region or society. The term culture is very difficult to explain and it has a very broad meaning. The British Anthropologist E. B. Tylor, regarded as the founder of cultural anthropology has defined culture in his book *Primitive Culture* (1871), one of the earliest and widely accepted definitions of culture which is as thus: “that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits obtain by human being as a member of society.” Thus the broad term culture includes the material and non-material aspects of human beings and the broad concept of religion also comes in the concept of culture.

The terracotta art represents the culture and tradition of the land. Kamaluddin Ahmed refers that terracotta carries cultural importance in two ways—firstly, terracotta express the creative mentality of the common people and as such constitutes folk art, and secondly, a study of terracotta figurines reveals the material culture of the people of a particular period. In a broader sense terracotta figurines are a very important source of the cultural history of the common people. (Ahmed, 1983) Terracotta toys are regarded as the earliest outcome of human creativity. Since early ages, these terracotta products fetch the characteristics and identity of particular cultural, religious, economic, and other aspects of a society or region. (Dongerker, 1954) The craftsmen of Asharikandi is practicing this craft for several generations which carries various aspects of culture like, religion, history, social changes, festivals, art, etc.

The people of Dhubri district is encircled by various rites and rituals throughout their life. In these rites and rituals, the use of some pottery and terracotta items are essential. In this region, various ceremonies are observed at the family level and community level some are occasionally and annually. In these rituals and rites various items like *ghot* (pot), the terracotta figure of gods & goddesses, *dhupdani*, *charu*, etc are considered indispensable. The Bastu puja is an



important festival in the Dhubri district. It is celebrated in the Assamese month Magh (Jan-Feb). In this puja, a pair of the *ghat* is worshiped, which serve as the icons of the deities. The two pair of *ghat* placed under a tree and is kept throughout the year. According to the tradition, some articles like beetle-nut (tamol pan), some portion of mud from the teeth of elephant, and some portion of mud from the prostitute home are put in the *ghat* before put under the tree. Asharikandi artisans manufacture this *ghat* on order and supply chiefly in nearby areas. Kalosh (a pitcher) is an important Kumar product made on the wheel and use in marriage ceremonies and shakti puja. In Dhubri district *kalohs* made by Kumar are placed at both sides of the approach to *puja mandap* (altar) filled with water. In this district, various other religious ceremonies are celebrated at the household and community level in which the terracotta and also pottery items are used extensively. Some of these are performed annually like, Durga puja, Kali puja, Saraswati puja, Vishwakarma puja, Lakshmi puja, and Vishwakarma puja, etc. whatever be the nature, objective, and course of the function some terracotta items are essential to perform these.

Terracotta items are commonplace in homes of the Dhubri district in various forms which encouraged the artisans to keep alive this art from one generation to other. Nowadays terracotta items like decorated hanging bells, murals, lamps for Diwali and vases, decorated flower vases, etc are very common. In this region though several changes can be visible in rituals and rites the use of terracotta and pottery items are still intact but these items are mainly used by the Hindu religious believer. This western part of Assam has a very dynamic demographic pattern comprised of various linguistic group of people viz; the Assamese, Bengali, Hindi, and Rajbongshis, etc. In this part among the Assamese and Bengali Hindus lighting up an earthen lamp is considered very auspicious. In cultural ceremonies and rituals different types of *chaki* (lamp), pitcher, bowl, and even clay molded figures of gods and goddesses are considered to be very sacred.

In this western part of Assam Manasa Devi puja is a household activity also known as Marai puja. On this occasion terracotta pots, *topari* are essential. (Nath, 2008) Manasa Devi occupies a prominent place in the socio-religious life of the rural people of the locality. She is not only set up in a shrine, but also she is a household deity, who kept in the altar of the family shrine with the other deity. (Kalita, 2006)

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 biting by a snake, Behula his wife arrived in the bank of Brahmaputra and used to pray goddess Manasa. The people of Dhubri district have high esteem towards goddess Manasa and the artist of Asharikandi also produces the image of the goddess Manasa. Folk songs are associated with Manasa Devi which is very popular in the Dhubri district. Women sang the song in this way - (Das, 2002)

*'Kancha kola atop choul, mondepa thuia;*

*Sole sonai bhashok dhoria.*

*Sitat nai more shish bhora sandur*

*Ki mote Karim mair puja*

*Nakot nai more nakbhora sona*

*Ki mota karim Mair puja.'*

The renditions of above lines are:

Go and keep the bundle of Banana

and uncooked rice on the chapel,

People are engaged in prayer in their pageantry for me,

The vermilion of my forehead is gone.

How to offer oblation to mother Goddess.

The golden ornaments from my nose is gone away,

How to offer oblation to mother Manasa.

The uses of the clay items on several occasions in this region still can be visible. The use of chaki, ghoti, Dhupdani, peacock figure, decorative motifs, and Dhunadani, etc are essential for various rituals and religious purposes and continues from generation. There are several folk songs and myths are also associated with them. Birendra Nath Dutta points, "However, references in a few folksongs, point to the existence, at least in the past, of practice among potters of decorating their articles with various attractive motifs particularly on special occasions like marriages. We may refer in this context to the marriage song which speaks of the artistry of the potter decorating his pot with motifs representing ducks, peacocks, and peahens." (Dutta B. N., 1973) The lighting up of an earthen lamp (*chaki jolowa*) is considered to be very auspicious among the Hindu people in the Dhubri district. In some houses, people used to lighten up in the morning and in the evening in front of the household deity. In another view earthen lamp molded by *Kumar*, the artist is considered similar to the reproductive organ of the women. P. Goswami points that "the ceramic earthen pot alone can express nothing. But whenever oil and fired wick is added on it converts to a symbolically expressed fertility symbol". (Goswami, 2010)

The craftsman of Asharikandi produces a huge number of earthen lamps and supplies throughout the year. They make a huge earthen lamp especially for the use at cremation *ghat* (*sasanghat*) of Dhubri which can contain two-liter of oil and can run for twenty-four hours on a particular occasion. The mother and child called Hatima doll have a cultural connection with the Gauripur Zamindari family. The name itself was popularized 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 elephant catching and domestication. Many popular Goalparia songs of Padmashri Pratima Baruah Pandey are based on the elephants. The Hartima putul of Asharikani has good cultural and historical importance as it bears the cultural legacy of this region. The dress-up and ornaments of this toy represent the cultural heritage of the Old Goalpara region because this toy was designed to resemble the



local female dress. B.N Dutta refers to ears, eyes, and various ornaments are attached into the main body of the mother & child figure. The hairs and fingers of the doll are shows by scrapings made into the figure while it is still soft. In most toys, there is only the suggestion of clothing's deftly accomplished with scrapped here and there. But in some toys with standing posture, the addition of the lower garment with elaborate design, resembling the local female dress, gives them a most distinctive look. ( Dutta B. N., 1973) Moreover, it carries the historical legacy of Assam, as there is evidence of worship of the mother and child doll during the medieval Assam period. There were sometimes specially made semi-religious folk ceremonies like dolls weddings in Kamrup by childless women wishing for offspring. (Gupta, 1982)

The horse and elephant had played a significant role in the life of the people of Dhubri as well as Assam. There are numerous instances of worship of elephants in ancient Assam. N. D Choudhary points that "Elephants are very common in the ancient art of Assam and the elephant tusk was used as the royal insignia in early times. A row of elephants, *gajathara* appears as the molding of the *adhithana* (base of some temples). Elephants tusk in the attitude of supporting the superstructures of a temple are also found in the ruins of Deoparbat'. (Chodhury, 1973) The local Gauripur Zamindari family had a long association with the domestication of wild elephants. Allen has mentioned the art of domestication of wild elephants in this region. Elephants are fairly common on both banks of the Brahmaputra, especially near the hills, and when the crops are ripening the solitary males occasionally do considerable damage. For elephant catching the temporarily settled portions of the district are divided into two *mahals* or tracts. The right to hunt in each *mahal* is sold by auction, and the lessee is obligatory to pay a royalty of Rs 100 on every animal imprisoned. The method usually employed is known as *mela shikar*. (Allen, 1905) In folk literature and songs of this region evidence of worship and rituals related to elephants are found. There are several folk songs are being composed on elephants and their domestication in the Dhubri district region. A popular folk song on elephant in Dhubri district is - (D. Nath, 70)

*Areeah oh mor hastir koainae rea*

*Tok sundorik lagi ghuria bearing rea*

*Ashisung ai banorea*

*Tok hastik dharibar badea*

*Rohilam sai kanonea.*

The terracotta of Asharikandi has a deep cultural resemblance with the local culture of the Dhubri district. The artisans are practicing this craft as a source of livelihood for generations and carrying the cultural legacy of this place. Economically this craft is not so profitable because of the competition from the machine-made cheap goods. The average income level of most of the potters falls around Rs. 5000 to Rs.6000 monthly. Only a very few potters are there those income level may fall from Rs.7000 to Rs.10000.

## Conclusion

The terracotta and pottery of Asharikandi are well known in Assam and the artisans have expertise in this craft. They are facing numerous challenges still they are practicing this art which not only providing them a source of livelihoods but also carrying the cultural legacy of this region. These craftsmen should be encouraged and provide support from government or non-government support to keep alive this beautiful art of human expression.

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