

## **Bamboo and Cane Craft: Indigenous Craft Practices of Assam**

**PORIPURNA GOSWAMI<sup>\*1</sup> AND URVASHI MISHRA<sup>2</sup>**

<sup>1&3</sup>Ph.D. Research Scholar and <sup>2</sup>Assistant Professor

Department of Family and Community Resource Management, Faculty of Family and Community Science,  
The Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda, Vadodara (Gujarat) India

**\*Corresponding Author**

### **ABSTRACT**

The traditional bamboo and cane crafts prevalent in the heart of Assam stand witness to a cultural heritage that has stood constant through the ages. These crafts, deeply ingrained in Assamese culture, are the product of many generations of skilled artisans who have passed down a legacy that goes beyond simple skill. This research paper aims to comprehensively explore the intricate bamboo and cane craftsmanship of Assam, with a focus on navigating heritage, understanding traditional processes, and promoting sustainability. The objectives exploring the historical and cultural significance of these crafts and documenting the craftsmanship process, including the use of traditional equipment and techniques. Concurrently, the study also aims to identify contemporary challenges faced by craftsmen and assess the health problems experienced during crafting. As Assam's indigenous bamboo and cane crafts embrace the present, therefore, the study conducted a comprehensive market survey, unraveling the diverse range of Bamboo and Cane products that grace the markets. Simultaneously, it seeks to evaluate existing government support mechanisms, anticipating the welfare of craftsmen and the sustainable futures of this distinctive craft. A descriptive research design was adopted for the present study and a market survey and interview schedule were used for collecting the data. Through a multidimensional approach, combining historical exploration, craftsmanship insights, and contemporary assessments, this research contributes to the academic discourse and the preservation and revitalization of Assam's indigenous bamboo and cane crafts.

**Keywords:** Bamboo and cane craft, Indigenous practices, History, Health problems

### **INTRODUCTION**

The vibrant state of Assam, located in the north-eastern part of India, is a treasure of cultural heritage, with a tradition deeply rooted in traditional bamboo and cane-based crafts. This art, rooted in the bountiful Assamese forests, reflects the harmony between nature and artisanal ingenuity. As we embark on a journey to revitalise these indigenous crafts, this documentary seeks to explore the complex interplay of tradition and modern resilience in the dynamic context of the bamboo and cane cultures of Assam. Weaving of bamboo and cane into complex patterns is a time-honored practice, and each product bears the stamp of centuries-old handwork. This cultural heritage is not only a testament to the rich history

of Assam, but also an economic source for the communities involved in the artisanal sector. In the face of evolving social dynamics and economic changes, the rejuvenation and conservation of these indigenous crafts is of paramount importance. As a thriving hub of technology, Guwahati is a testament to the clash between tradition and technology. Government and private showrooms such as JAGARAN and PRAGUE provide an important platform for displaying these traditional crafts and promote their recognition. However, the heart of the craft is in the villages of Nalbari and Barpeta, where craftsmen continue the ancient tradition, contributing not only to the preservation of the tradition, but also to the economic vitality of their villages (Choudhury, 1959)

### Objectives of the study:

1. To know the products available in the market that are made up of Bamboo and Cane.
2. To explore the history of Assam's indigenous bamboo and cane crafts.
3. To know the tools used and the production techniques used in Bamboo and Cane craftsmanship.
4. To identify the contemporary challenges and health problems faced by the craftsmen involved in the process of crafting bamboo and cane products.

### Review of Literature:

Literature surrounding the indigenous bamboo and cane crafts of Assam is a rich tapestry, rich in diverse perspectives and insights. Various academic works have examined the historical development of this traditional craft and have shed light on its cultural importance in the region. Studies have been conducted on the different types of bamboo and cane used and provide valuable insights into the raw materials that make up the backbone of these crafts. The artisanal processes, from complex basket weaving to the production of durable furniture, are carefully documented and show the skill of craftsmanship passed down through the generations. In addition, research has examined economic dynamics and highlighted the role of villages like Nalbari and Barpeta as integral hubs in the trade chain. By synthesizing these sources, this document aims to contribute to existing literature by offering a contemporary perspective on the revival efforts and the lasting importance of the indigenous Assamese bamboo and cane crafts.

### METHODOLOGY

This study was carried out based on a market survey carried out in the districts of Assam, namely Nalbari and Barpeta, and a careful examination of secondary data collected from a comprehensive literature review. Researchers systematically examined academic journals, books and online repositories, focusing on aspects such as types of bamboo and cane, artisanal processes, historical development, economic impact and the cultural importance of indigenous Assamese crafts. The information collected was synthesised, analysed and interpreted, and this formed the basis of the comprehensive overview of the report. This approach

will facilitate understanding the multi-layered nature of the traditional artisanal trade in bamboo and cane in Assam.

### FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

#### History of the indigenous bamboo and cane crafts of Assam:

Since the seventh century BC, bamboo and cane-growing have been practised in Assam under the rule of King Bhaskar Varman. Over the centuries, the art has evolved in parallel with the abundant cane and bamboo growing in Assam, both on plantations and in the wild. Bamboo, because of its religious and auspicious properties, has historically been considered sacred and it was forbidden to cut it on sacred days. While the Harshacharita records the production of various cane items, including stools, the early literature refers to the extravagant use of elaborate and colorful sital patis (cold mats) by the rich. Its association with the Bihu festival, which marks the Hindu New Year, shows how religious feelings and beliefs are intertwined with bamboo and cane-based crafts. The complex interaction of tradition, culture and spirituality throughout the long history of this ancient art is further illustrated by the belief that certain varieties of bamboo are sacred in villages (Ranjan *et al.*, 2004).

In Assam, the production process of cane and bamboo boats has changed considerably, from labour-intensive to some degree mechanised. Until 2010, bamboo and cane products were produced entirely by hand. But by the middle of the decade, technological developments and the growing awareness of mechanisation among craftsmen were beginning to take hold. Contrary to its traditional labour-centred approach, the sector has adopted partial mechanisation by 2016, in particular for tasks such as cutting and splitting, which have added efficiency to the production cycle. Despite the simplification of the process, the addition of machinery led to a slight increase in the cost of the finished product.

#### Raw materials used for the cane and bamboo craft:

The rich natural environment of Assam provides raw material for the manufacture of bamboo and cane products. Cane is grown wild near villages, much like palm trees along the coast. Craftsmen select suitable cane plants and cut them at the base of the stalk, leaving the roots whole. This sustainable harvesting technique

ensures the maintenance of the cane plantation in the forests. The white inner side of the stem is revealed when the bark, which contains leaves and thorns, is carefully removed by craftsmen. The cane is then prepared for further artistic endeavours by drying in the sun for two or three days. Similarly, although some artisans prefer to grow their bamboo plantations. Bamboo requires more complicated processing than cane, which increases costs. The first step is to cut the bamboo from the base of the stalk and remove any unnecessary components such as leaves. The bamboo is then allowed to dry in the sun for two or three days, preparing it for the complicated curing process. The dynamic development of cane and bamboo harvesting in Assam reflects this dual reliance on naturally abundant raw materials and the introduction of mechanised elements.

### Tools Used in Bamboo and Cane Craft:

The craft of bamboo and cane in Assam intricately weaves together a tapestry of traditional and modern tools, each playing a pivotal role in the artisanal process, from harvesting raw materials to the creation of exquisite final products.

#### Traditional Tools:

- **DAO** (Traditional Assamese Knife): Rooted in the cultural fabric of Assam, the dao stands as a symbol of tradition and practicality. Its multifunctional use in household chores extends seamlessly into the Cane and Bamboo Craft, where it serves as an indispensable tool for artisans. Whether it's shaping, trimming, or carving, the dao embodies the skilled hands of Assamese craftsmen.

#### Modern Tools:

- **Saw**: A fundamental tool in the modern arsenal, saws provide precise cutting of bamboo and cane. Their versatility allows artisans to shape and structure the raw materials with accuracy, laying the foundation for intricate designs.
- **Burner** (Kerosene Fueled): The kerosene-fueled burner introduces a modern touch to the craft, facilitating the bending and shaping of bamboo and cane. This tool enables artisans to create curved and detailed designs, adding a layer of sophistication to the final products.
- **T-Bar Clamp**: Offering stability and precision,

it secures materials during assembly, ensuring accuracy in crafting intricate designs. Its adaptability makes it an indispensable tool for achieving structural integrity in the final products.

- **Chisel**: Carving intricate patterns and detailing work are brought to life with the chisel. This tool allows artisans to add fine textures and designs to the surfaces of bamboo and cane, showcasing their artistic flair.
- **Cutting Machine**: Introducing efficiency and precision, cutting machines revolutionize the crafting process. They contribute to increased productivity by streamlining the cutting of raw materials, allowing artisans to focus on the artistic aspects of their creations.
- **Leg Vise**: Providing a stable grip on workpieces, the leg vise enhances control during various stages of crafting. Its utility in securing materials allows artisans to execute detailed work with confidence.

#### Others:

- **Fevicol** (Synthetic Adhesive): As a bonding agent, synthetic adhesives like Fevicol play a crucial role in joining various components. This ensures the durability and structural integrity of the final products.
- **Polish** (Polyurethane Finish): The finishing touch in the crafting process, polyurethane polish enhances the aesthetic appeal of bamboo and cane products. It not only adds a protective layer but also brings out the natural beauty of the materials.

In this dynamic amalgamation of traditional craftsmanship and modern technology, artisans in Assam masterfully wield these tools. The result is a transformation of raw materials into intricately designed, durable, and aesthetically pleasing pieces, showcasing the rich heritage and evolving craftsmanship of Cane and Bamboo Craft.

#### Production Technique:

The production of cane and bamboo products in Assam involves a diverse array of methods, with each product following its unique production process. Despite the absence of a standardized pattern, the crafting of cane products typically adheres to a sequence:

- 1) Harvesting and Transportation:** The process commences with the harvesting of cane from the forests, where it thrives abundantly. Once harvested, the cane is transported to the workshop where the crafting journey begins.
- 2) Preparation at the Workshop:** At the workshop, the initial steps involve the meticulous removal of the bark and thorns from the cane stem, rendering it smooth and ready for the subsequent stages of crafting.
- 3) Sun-Drying for Strength:** Following the preparation, the cane undergoes a crucial sun-drying phase lasting 2 to 3 days. This process imparts strength to the cane, ensuring it can bear weight and withstand further shaping.
- 4) Shaping with a Burner:** Post-drying, the cane is subjected to controlled burning using a kerosene-fueled burner, providing the necessary flexibility for shaping. Skilled artisans employ this technique to give the cane its desired form and structure.
- 5) Crafting Structure and Completion:** A structured framework is established, and the product is then handed over to a different craftsman for the final stages of completion. This division of labor ensures specialization in each aspect of the crafting process.
- 6) Cleaning and Finishing Touch:** The entire product undergoes a meticulous cleaning process using a cloth, enhancing its aesthetic appeal and removing any residual debris.
- 7) Application of Fevicol and Sun-Drying:** To ensure the longevity and structural integrity of the product, it is coated with Fevicol, a synthetic adhesive. Following this application, the product is subjected to another sun-drying phase, allowing the adhesive to set and the final product to achieve its enduring form.

This multifaceted technique amalgamates traditional craftsmanship and modern methods, resulting in the creation of sturdy, aesthetically pleasing cane products that bear the imprint of Assam's rich cultural heritage.

#### **Products Made from Bamboo and Cane:**

The market survey was done by the researcher and the following are the Bamboo and Cane products that are available in the market of Assam:

#### ***Fishing Implements:***

- **Khaloy:** Serving as a storage vessel for freshly caught fish, the Khaloy is a practical implement that facilitates the preservation of the day's catch.
- **Jakoi:** Crafted for precision in shallow water, Jakoi is a versatile fishing tool designed to navigate and capture fish in areas with limited depth.
- **Paulo:** Tailored for trapping large fish, Paulo employs a strategic approach where the caught fish can later be retrieved using bare hands.
- **Juluki:** Specialized for trapping small-sized fish, Juluki showcases the adaptability of bamboo and cane in creating tools suited for various fish sizes.
- **Chepa:** An implement with ingenious technology, Chepa leverages the inability of fish to swim backward, ensuring they remain confined within the trap.
- **Dori and Dingora:** These implements contribute to the diverse range of fishing tools, each designed for specific fishing requirements.
- **Gogona:** An integral part of Assamese tradition, Gogona is a bamboo instrument primarily played by women during the Bihu Dance. Its vibrations, created by blowing air and striking with one hand, add a unique musical element.
- **Toka:** Functioning as a percussion instrument, Toka aids in maintaining the beat. Although unable to change scale, it contributes rhythmically to musical compositions.
- **Pepa:** The most prestigious instrument, Pepa, made mostly from a buffalo's horn, resembles a trumpet. It comes in two types: Single horned and Double horned.
- **Baahi/Flute:** Adding to the melodic repertoire, the Baahi or bamboo flute complements traditional musical performances.
- **Halua Japi (Non-decorative):** A traditional headgear with minimal ornamentation, Halua Japi focuses on utility and holds a minimal price.
- **Fulam Japi (Decorative):** Smaller in size, Fulam Japi serves as an Assamese symbol, adorned with cloth and precious stones. It is often used as a gift or token of respect.

#### ***Bisani (Hand-held Fan):***

A traditional hand-held fan, Bisani, initially entirely made of cane, now features a hollow bamboo piece for

enhanced utility and efficiency.

**Pati (Assamese Mat):**

A hand-made mat woven from cane fibers, Pati finds its place both on the floor and bed, reflecting the traditional craftsmanship of Assam.

**Products and Their Price Range:**

Sr. No.	Products made up of Bamboo and Cane	Price
1.	Gogona (Musical Instrument)	Rs. 100
2.	Jakoi (Fishing Implement)	Rs. 200-300
3.	Khalo (Fishing Implement)	Rs. 200-300
4.	Chalani (Used to Separate Stones from Rice)	Rs. 70-200
5.	Dola (Used in Combination with Chalani)	Rs. 70-200
6.	Dhora (Used for Winnowing)	Rs. 120
7.	Bisani	Rs. 50
8.	Dhari (Floor/Bed Mat)	Rs. 200-500
9.	Kako Phani (Bamboo Comb)	Rs. 100
10.	Sofa Sets/Dining Sets	Rs. 6,000 – 200,000 (based on quality and aesthetics)
11	Bamboo Trays	Rs. 200 – 10,000 (based on the level of ornamentation)

This comprehensive array of products showcases the versatility and craftsmanship of Assamese artisans, blending traditional techniques with modern adaptations to create functional and artistic pieces from bamboo and cane.

**Contemporary Challenges and Health Problems Faced by Craftsmen in Bamboo and Cane Craft:**

Crafting bamboo and cane products, while deeply ingrained in Assamese culture, poses contemporary challenges and health concerns for the artisans involved.

**1) Economic Challenges:** Artisans engaged in traditional bamboo and cane crafts often grapple with economic challenges. The lack of a stable market, coupled with the absence of modern marketing strategies, poses hurdles in selling their products at fair prices. Additionally, the dependence on middlemen can lead to inadequate compensation for their labor.

**2) Declining Interest and Skilled Labor Shortage:** The younger generation exhibits dwindling interest in pursuing traditional crafts.

The allure of modern professions and the perception of traditional crafts as financially unrewarding contribute to a shortage of skilled labor. This poses a threat to the continuity of the craft.

**3) Health Problems from Manual Labor:** The traditional process of crafting bamboo and cane products is labor-intensive and involves repetitive manual tasks. Craftsmen are susceptible to musculoskeletal issues such as back pain, joint strain, and repetitive strain injuries due to prolonged hours of bending, cutting, and weaving.

**4) Lack of Safety Measures:** Craftsmen often work in environments lacking proper safety measures. The use of traditional tools poses risks of cuts and injuries. Inadequate ventilation during the burning and drying processes may lead to respiratory issues, exposing artisans to health hazards.

**5) Impact on Mental Health:** The uncertainty of income, coupled with the declining demand for traditional crafts, contributes to stress and anxiety among craftsmen. The struggle to sustain this age-old craft in a rapidly changing market can lead to mental health challenges.

**6) Lack in Training and Skill Upgradation:** The craft, deeply rooted in tradition, requires adaptation to contemporary tastes and demands. Craftsmen face challenges in accessing training programs and resources for skill upgradation. Incorporating modern designs and techniques can enhance market appeal and economic sustainability.

**7) Environmental Concerns:** The over-reliance on forest resources for raw materials raises environmental concerns. Sustainable harvesting practices need to be promoted to ensure the longevity of bamboo and cane resources.

**Conclusion:**

The Cane and Bamboo Craft of Assam, deeply rooted in the state's rich cultural heritage, stands at a critical juncture, demanding attention and revitalization. Abundant raw materials, such as various types of bamboo and cane, are readily available throughout the region, presenting a unique opportunity for economic development. With minimal investment requirements, this craft can be embraced by households as a supplementary

occupation, contributing not only to the economy but also preserving Assamese culture and tradition.

The craft's significant potential for development is evident, especially with the creation of new products tailored to modern tastes. However, the urgency to revive and sustain this craft is underscored by its precarious state. Research initiatives, particularly on utilizing bamboo as a building material, could open new avenues for innovation and expansion. Mechanization emerges as a critical need for the survival and evolution of this traditional art form. The integration of modern technology is imperative to make the craft more efficient and appealing to the present generation of artisans. The decline in interest among contemporary craftsmen necessitates a shift towards machinery to increase speed, efficiency, and economic viability.

From an architectural perspective, a thorough exploration of the application of cane and bamboo as building materials is essential. The untapped potential of these materials for providing both structural support and aesthetic value to buildings remains a promising area for research. The Rainforest Research Institute (RRI) plays a pivotal role in advancing knowledge in this domain, conducting annual workshops that offer valuable insights into the true essence of Assamese bamboo and culture. Architects should actively participate in these workshops to deepen their understanding of the properties of cane and bamboo, both as building materials and raw materials for traditional crafts.

In conclusion, the revival and modernization of the Cane and Bamboo Craft of Assam require a multi-faceted approach encompassing research, mechanization, and

architectural exploration. Preserving this cultural legacy is not just a responsibility but an opportunity to foster sustainable development, economic growth, and the continued flourishing of Assamese tradition.

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