



Traditional Art form of South Assam: Prosperity and Possibility

Dr. Ganesh Nandi

Assistant Professor, Department of Visual Arts
Assam University, Silchar, Assam, India

Abstract

Geography and population of South Assam i.e. Barak Valley have differentiated this area from other places. Wonder is the first response if and when an outsider approaches this valley from the point of view of its racial, religion, linguistic, cultural and ethnic diversity. In a word, Barak valley in itself is a mini-India. But the real-life force of the valley lies at the heart of its rural sector. The residents of the valley are the Bengali Hindus and the Bengali Muslims, the Dimasas, the Nagas, the Hmars, the Manipuris, the kukis, the Assamese speaking people, the Rieng, the Nepalis and the tea garden labourers and various other tribes. Their intermingling since time immemorial has carved the natural way for a mutual interaction. Each community has enriched its immediate and remote neighbor. Although Barak Valley has its own rich art and cultural tradition but it is unseen to the outerworld due to its poor communication and different geographical condition.

In the area of folk art, the valley has a huge art treasure with full of variety and different ethnic and linguistic groups are engaged to develop their indigenous art forms in their own traditional ways. Of the indigenous art tradition, we find Pottery, Pati Work (cane mat), Bamboo Craft, Textile, Nakshi Kantha (Designed Quilt), Pata Chitra, Jute Craft, Sara Painting as the most prominent art forms of the valley. Art works created by the various community of the valley can easily draw attention to the art-buffs through their uniqueness and definite aesthetic quality. They can also arrest the attention of buyers and can thus do a lot in promoting and developing the valley's economy. There is a scope to develop its own art identity on the basis of their folk-art treasure. But unfortunately, due to communication problem, lack of public consciousness and government patronization maximum folk art are going towards dying bed. So there a scope for in-depth study in this area which can give a new direction of an unexplored horizon to the art world.

Key words: Folk Art, Pottery, Pati work, Textile, Pata Chitra, Sara Painting, Bamboo Craft, Jute Craft, Nakshi Kantha.

1. Introduction

South Assam, known as the Barak Valley, carries a thousand years of history. Many ethnic groups live here. Their lifestyle is different. Art, culture - in every field they have rich treasure. Although, due to various reasons, the prosperity of this marginalized region is still hidden from people's eyes. But undoubtedly it can be said that today the Barak Valley stands at a special place of potential in the field of folk art.

As everyone knows art is an external expression of human creativity. This creativity incorporates various human feelings and habits like weal and woe, laughter and joy, etc. The geo-political environment of a place decides, to a large extent, its artistic endeavours and conventions which are intrinsically tied up to the life-style and habit, taste and culture of that place. The conventional and traditional flow of artistic strivings all on a sudden take a new curve, and thereby create a new space for unforeseen possibilities. South Assam, popularly known as Barak Valley is now passing through a phase of transition in her artistic arena. Barak had a rich post marked by the artistic achievements of her artists. Today's Barak is full of ingredients and components that constitute the basis for future



artistic success. Many things combined together worked as a catalyst behind Barak Valley's artistic glory. Its geography and population have differentiated this valley from other places. Wonder is the first response if and when an outsider approaches this valley from the point of view of its racial, religion, linguistic, cultural and ethnic diversity. The Aryan and the non-Aryan blood both have mingled in the veins of this valley. Barak is the place of congregation for Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Jains, Buddhists and a meeting place of the various segments of the four prime linguistic families of India. Perhaps due to this, scholars have unhesitatingly described this valley as an "anthropological garden" of India. In a word, Barak valley in itself is a mini-India. In this paper, an attempt has been taken to highlight and discuss about the art treasure of Barak Valley.

2. Geographical and Demographical overview of Barak Valley

Barak Valley is a historical place covering three districts Cachar, Karimganj and Hailakandi. Since once the Barak Valley was a part of the greater Bengal, the Bengali-speaking population of the valley outnumbers others. Bangla has won the place of the major language in this valley through the self-sacrifice of eleven language-martyrs. From time immemorial, different linguistic communities are living here together without the least malice against each other. Once upon a time, this valley saw the rules of Tripuri, Koch and Cachari kings. Over a period of 115 years Barak Valley had to live under the yoke of British Raj. For different political reasons, many a tribe came and settled down in this valley. Its tea gardens invited laborers from all over the country West Bengal, Bihar, the erstwhile Madras, Orisa, Chhotonagpur etc. These tea garden laborers are in a body known as Hindustani or Deshwali community.

The present area of Barak Valley which consists of three districts - Cachar, Karimganj and Hailakandi is 6922 square km. Of this, the area of Cachar is 3786 square km, that of Karimganj 1809 square km and of Hailakandi 1327 square km. The town- village ratio of Barak Valley equals to 13:2332. According to the 2001 census report, the population of the valley is 2995769, though some assumption parts the number on a larger scale to be more than 40 lakhs. But the real life force of the valley lies at the heart of its rural sector. The residents of the valley are the Bengali Hindus and the Bengali Muslims, the Dimasas, the Nagas, the Hmars, the Manipuris, the kukis, the Assamese speaking people, the Riang, the Nepalis and the tea garden labourers and various other tribes. Their intermingling since time immemorial has carved the natural way for a mutual interaction. Each community has enriched its immediate and remote neighbour. With so many cultures in its treasure house, the culture of the valley has developed into some kind of a mixed fixture.

3. Folk Art of Barak Valley

In the area of art, different ethnic and linguistic groups are engaged to develop their indigenous art forms in their own traditional ways, such that taken together; these art-forms and artistic endeavours constitute a natural gallery. These indigenous items not merely invite the attraction of the art-buffs; they can also arrest the attention of buyers and can thus do a lot in promoting and developing the valley's economy. If we broadly divide the art world of Barak Valley into two schools -as the indigenous, conventional, folk school and the modern school, then we will have to admit that the modern school is yet lagging behind its folk counterpart. Folk art treasure is full of variety.

3.a Pottery:

Of the indigenous art school, pottery is one of the most prominent art forms of the valley. Various clay pots and utensils, flower vases, different essential things used in daily life are the common works of clay artisans. The clay used to make these items is of a very high quality for which the pottery works of this region is highly extolled everywhere in and around. The places particularly famous for pottery



and other clay works are Panibhora and Bekirpar which are in south western Cachar, Katlichera which is in Hailakandi and Anipur situated in Karimganj. The potters of this valley produce a good number of percussion instruments like the left part of the tabla, mridangam, khol, Manipuri mridangas, pakhowaj etc. Mainly the rudrapal and kumbhakar community among the Bengali Hindus opt for this profession. But most of these clay-potters are not introduced to the modern techniques of pot-making. There is no infrastructure for them to find an ever-widening market. Which is why many artisans are disentangling themselves from this family trade for the sake of bare livelihood.

3.b Pati Work (cane mat):

Another significant item of the indigenous folk art forms of Barak valley is pati-work. Artisans of both the sexes and Muslim and the downtrodden Hindu communities are attached to this trade. Barak valley produces canes of very good quality. For this reason, the shitalpati (cool mat) work of this valley has earned country wide fame. The fine texture, design and weaving quality easily attract everybody. Though this pati-weavers are scattered almost all over the valley, the works of GobindapurBerabak and shalchakra of Cachar district, that of Kaliganj of Karimganj district are particularly popular. Here again, lack of proper conveyance system and that of the govt. patronage are pushing the pati-weavers away from their traditional trade.

3.c Bamboo Craft:

Bamboo is another medium of art in Barak valley which abounds in natural resources. The Hindus and Muslims belonging to the lowest strata of the society and different tribes of the valley are master craftsmen in bamboo-work. Essential household items like the tukri, dala, dhari and broom are perhaps no art works, but bamboo flute, fruit container, hats and caps and different play things certainly exhibit some artistic design and these household paraphernalia could surely have converted the valley into a big trade centre had govt. attention poured in this area. A large section of our population would have developed their life style, opting for this trade.

3.d Textile:

Textile industry is imbued with immense potentiality in Barak valley. Though there is no mill here, the Manipuris, the Assamese speaking people and the Nagas have their indigenous loom in almost every household producing multifarious clothing like gamchha, chadar and fanek etc. The most valuable of all these is the Manipuri gamchha. Controlled mostly by members of the fairer sex, this handloom production includes as raw materials cotton, wool, silk, muga, everything. But the home-made dresses and attire of the Manipuris, the Nagas the Nepalis, the Dimasas catch the attention of almost every viewer for their quality, rare design and colour-fulness. Proper marketing of these clothing items would have challenged even the most professional design of the modern fashion industry. Here again, this indigenous loom products due confined to the respective communities due mainly to govt. and social indifference.

3.e Nakshi Kantha (Designed Quilt):

Nakshi Kantha is another household art work of Barak valley. The word Nakshi Kantha is a hybrid of Sanskrit and Persian roots. Almost every rural Hindu and Muslim woman of this valley possesses the inborn dexterity of weaving a Kantha. Modernity, here again is pushing this indigenous art form behind the screen. This Kantha not merely protects from cold, but is a showpiece of designs and motifs. Different motifs like flower and leaf motif, bird-motif, motifs of human figures and that of Lakshi, the goddess of wealth are embroidered in these pieces in such a deft hand that proper nurturing of it would have attracted the tourists. The Nakshi Kantha of Dattapur, Marjat Kandi, Anipur, Lala, Bilaipur, Maijgram, Kumbhirgram, Urnabandh, Doodhpatil, Narsingpur and particularly popular.



3.f Pata Chitra:

Around five to six decades earlier, the pata-art of this valley was very famous. Religious, ritualistic, social and even political themes could be communicated through this art-form. Some easy straight line in some common colours would embroider on a piece of cloth familiar themes or episode from the Ramayana or the Mahabharata or would weave some report of a social anecdote. Hindus and Muslims belonging to the lowest section of the society were engaged in this trade. But the modern information technology has already wrung the bell of farewell for this trade. No Jamini Roy was born in Barak Valley who could base his art- language on this very pata- art and thus could immortalize his own art along with the pata –form itself.

3.g Jute Craft:

Recently the jute –works of Barak Valley are showing a new silver lining in an otherwise cloudy canvas. Due mainly to some self –help groups, this trade is now gaining recognition. Many women have engaged themselves in this trade and are getting the right direction to head their lives. Some good works are done in this field particularly in Lakshmipur and Dhalai. Pairs of sandal, satchel, plaything and dolls and similar other essential items are being produced by the jute artisans. Some of these are now on the list of export – items. A more positive drive from the state govt. and a yet more promising marketing infrastructure will render the jute – trade to a brighter phase.

3. e Sara Painting:

Sara painting is a unique folk art tradition prevailing in Barak Valley. The circular disc made with clay painted with figures or motifs are popularly known as Saras. These are used in rural Barak Valley in connection with Pujas and sometimes connected with ‘Vratas’. The representation of Goddess Lakshmi, Durga and Radhakrishna are found popular. These are extensively made as seasonal work, usually once a year, for the purpose of Durgapuja, Lakshmipuja and also on the occasion of Jhulan Purnima. In Barak Valley, now a day, there is little demand of Saras. It is due to the change in the socio- economic pattern of urban as well as in rural life. Now these painters are a fast-vanishing race. Most of them gave up the profession of making Saras because of the lack of customers’ demand and choose different professions and are struggling hard for survival. Only a few of them still traditionally make Saras, once a year but the whole year they are making clay models or Potteries and marketing largely in the different parts of Barak Valley. Once this sara making practices were very popular in Panibhora, Srikona (Silchar) and some parts of Hailakandi and Katlichhera but presently it is confined only in two families of Panibhora. Although the Sara painters are very skilled as potter and painter what they acquire from long traditional experience but unfortunately this art is in death bed due to lack of patronization.

4 Conclusion:

No doubt Barak Valley has a rich art treasure. In the field of pottery, textile, bamboo or wood craft, jute work, Pati work or in the field of modern painting-sculpture, the valley is full of possibilities. But unfortunately, this art treasure is hidden from outer world till today. Moreover, due to political bankruptcy, indifference at the govt. level, weak communication system, Barak has never been able to show her art treasures to the outer world. Or else the art objects of this valley would have snatched a prestigious room for her in the present global art-market. Lack of adequate infrastructure and patronage is thus pushing the immensely potential folk art of Barak Valley to its death bed. In this condition Govt. aid should pour in side by side with individual drives. Establishment of an art gallery and a museum is also the cry of the time. It can preserve past and can promote future of art. But the proposed art-gallery should never neglect the folk arts of the valley. Because, this is the main base. The economic development of the valley will definitely find a new avenue if the infrastructure is developed.



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