Chapter III

ARTS AND CRAFTS

I Arts and Crafts of Old Kamarupa

In the development of various industrial products, the craftsmen of Kamarūpa had a place in ancient India. The economic wealth of the country played a considerable part in the evolution of these crafts. Whether in the art of weaving and sericulture, or working in metal, ivory, wood, leather, clay, cane, bamboo and the like, their reputation was equal to that of the craftsmen of other parts of contemporary India. This is evidenced by literature, foreign accounts and epigraphy, which mention different professional classes like weavers, spinners, dyers, smiths, workers in ivory, metal, wood, cane, bamboo, etc.  

But this is also a fact that this all-India reputation of the craftsmen of this region had suffered some decline in certain fields in later days. The reasons for this seem to be that, on the one hand, the craftsmen of other parts of India had improved their techniques while the craftsmen here had failed to keep pace with them; and on the other, the economic and professional organisation of the craftsmen of these parts had failed to gear itself to the changed conditions brought about by the changes in the political fortunes of the region.

A noticeable feature of the arts and crafts of the region is that they have not been organised on a strictly caste basis. It

is true that some castes have been traditionally associated with some particular crafts or professions. But this custom has been followed more to facilitate functional specialisation than to rigidly bind down particular communities to particular professions, as in, say, neighbouring Bengal. In fact, in Assam the caste system has had a much looser structure than in other parts of India and is marked by a degree of tolerance and adaptability rarely met with elsewhere. As Dr B. K. Barua remarks: 'Assam's social system moulded primarily on the varna system. But because Assam is a border region and its relations are mostly with Kirata or Mongoloid peoples, the Aryanised social forms and the Vedic customs and rites do not adhere to any rigid pattern. For the same reason the number of Brâhman here is small and its influence not dominant and further, racial discrimination or the caste system is not so rigid.'

The tradition here has been for the people, irrespective of caste, to practise almost all kinds of arts and crafts without any social disapprobation. As Martin observes: 'In Kamrup there was no distinction of caste arising from a difference of profession, and all the trades, with which inhabitants were acquainted, continue to be practised by all persons, Koch and Muslims indifferently, who were copper smiths, cultivators of betel, weavers, makers of garlands, blacksmiths and potters.'

And also: 'In Kamrup there seems to have been little or no distinction of castes from profession, and each caste, or rather

1. B. K. Barua: A Cultural History of Assam, p.198
tribe, practised all the arts which were known to the country. They were farmers, traders, blacksmiths, goldsmiths, carpenters, extractors of oil, potters, weavers, dyers, artificial flower makers, preparers of tobacco, brick layers, workers in bamboo, parchers of rice, and preparers of curds...

This has on the one hand made for a kind of pleasing versatility among the people of this region but at the same time it has barred the way to the growth of technical and professional expertise and also of economic self-sufficiency due to the lack of proper commercial organisation. Thus it is that many of the indigenous crafts of this region are either wholly dead or are in a moribund state and their places are being progressively occupied by craftsmen from outside. Martin had observed this trend as early as the earlier half of the last century and had found 'strangers' working in some crafts unknown here. His prediction that 'Bengalese being better workmen will gradually spread' has largely come true.

Against this background we shall deal with the arts and crafts of Goalpara.

II Weaving and Sericulture

(a) Weaving

(i) In the Eastern Parts

In the eastern parts of the district, in conformity with the tradition of the rest of Assam, the weaving of cotton cloth is carried on by the women, rich and poor alike, and one or more looms are to be...

1. Ibid., p.556
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
seen in the courtyard of most houses. This applies to some extent to the middle parts also.

'As weaving only occupies the leisure moments of the women, the use of home made clothings helps to save the pocket of the villager. There is, however, but little doubt that weaving as an industry is commercially a failure, the price obtained for the finished article being out of all proportion to the time expended on its production. The principal articles made are patanis or cloths worn by women which are tied above the breast, large cloths called gilap or ber kapor, smaller shawls pachora, and gamchas or napkins often worn on the head.'

In the eastern parts a woman who is an expert weaver is called a tātāti or bhājini and she commands respect and admiration in the society. But the woman who has no weaving skill is called akhāji or ghasuri and is an object of scorn and ridicule as is clear from proverbs and sayings like the following:

The husband of the so-called expert weaver
Does not go to the assembly
Because he has a torn cloth around his neck.

And:

I married you, taking you to be an expert weaver,
Now you are giving me torn pieces to wear.

We have already referred to the custom followed at Boihagar Domahi according to which women are expected to present their men-folk with napkins woven by themselves. Also, girls who have a

reputation of being good at the loom have a better prospect of getting husbands. Many girls prepare enough cloth to last them for months and take them to their new homes after marriage.

(ii) In the Western Parts

In the westernmost parts of the district the tradition of weaving has practically died out today, except among the tribal people whose women are veteran weavers. The non-tribal women have virtually rejected the traditional wear, the pātāni, in favour of the cheap mass-produced sāri, rendering weaving at home an unnecessary exercise.

But even in this region the art of weaving must have been fairly popular as is evidenced by references to the different processes of weaving, from the cultivation of cotton to the making of the cloth, in various songs, tales and proverbs of the area. However, from the manner in which the women and the professional weavers (jol and tājī) figure in these references, it appears that the women did not carry out the entire weaving operation; they mostly did the processing of the cotton and the spinning. While the actual weaving was done by professional men. This could, of course, be a later development or may relate to specialised kind of weaving, for it is known from other evidences, including the testimony of old men, that many Rajbansi women of this region continued to practise weaving till comparatively recent times. This is confirmed by Martin who says: 'In all the remote parts weaving and dyeing have been exclusively practised by women, as is the case in Ava.' From Martin's evidence

again we can infer that in these parts professionalism had come, and that too partially, only some time before his report was ready. As he says, '... now the example of Bengalis has induced many Rajbongsi men to confine their labours to the shuttle for which women appear to be much better fitted.' 1 This suggests that though some local men had tried their hand at weaving, the effort was not too successful.

Thus it can be said that the rejection of the pātāni and the adoption of the sari by the women coupled with the indifferent take-over of the art of weaving by the menfolk led to the eclipse of the art in this area. The folk-mind in this area still associates jolās and tātis with weaving, especially of saris, but there are few local tātis or jolās who are actually functioning today. 2

(iii) Among the Tribal People

Though the non-tribal women of some parts of the district have discontinued the tradition of weaving, the tribal women through-

1. Ibid.
2. Look at the following pieces of popular folksongs:

Don't hanker for a sari, O maiden,
For the tāti has fled away

The jolā friend from the other side of the river
Offers me saris for the waist.

Professional weavers called tātis were not unknown in other parts of Assam. The old name of Barpeta, the famous Vaishnava centre in Kamrup district, was Tātikuchi. There is an Assamese ballad called the Ballad of the Weaver (Tātir Juna). A famous historical ballad of Upper Assam also has a reference to the tātī:

The cloth made by the weaver
Covers the whole earth
put the district has not only maintained the age-old tradition but
they can also certainly claim to be the producers of some of the
most colourful textiles in the whole of North-East India.

Weaving is so much a part of the Bodo village life that no
Bodo home is considered complete without the loom. The Bodo women
are born weavers. The girls start helping their mothers in the dif­
ferent processes of weaving from their childhood and one of the che­
rished ambitions of a young Bodo girl is to be able to work out
attractive designs on their cloths. This is reflected in a Bodo folk­
song:

O friends, let us learn the arts of weaving and spinning
From our old mothers.
Butterflies lying on flowers and birds flying in the sky —
Let us weave all these in our cloths
And show them to all.

An old song still retains the memory of the days when Bodo
women used to start ginning cotton even before it was light:

O grandmother, ginning cotton at daybreak!
Listen, the golden oriole has flown across the sky. ¹

Some Bodo women of Kokrajhar sub-division are so adept at
the loom that they can weave directly in their looms such articles as
pillow cases and pyjamas that need no stitching.²

And yet the weaver goes bare-bodied.
S. K. Bhuyan (Ed): Barphukanar Git, p.73.

The Darrang Raja Vamsavali refers both to tātis and the jolós
(pp.50,107,130). But few professional weavers are to be found today
except in Sualkuchi village of Kamrup district.
1. R. N. Brahma: 'Boro-Kachāri Jātir Samskriti' in Asam Sāhitya Sabhā
Patrikā, Nos. 2 and 3.
2. Ibid.
The Bodo households produce the bulk of the cloth used by the both male and female. However, the superb artistry of the Bodo weaver is on display in the women's girdles (dakhnā) which are rich both in colour and in design. A plain dakhnā is called sālā māthā. A dakhnā which has a colour-scheme resembling a dove's neck is called dāothu gado. Phārāo megon dakhnā is the one which has a design resembling the pigeon's eye. Daorāi mākhrop is the peacock design. But the dakhnā with the most plentiful and intricately decorative motifs is called the dakhnā thāosi which is worn by women only on special occasions.¹

Rabha women are equally good weavers and the designs on their cloths are also extremely pleasing. How much of importance is attached by the Rabha society on the women being proficient in weaving can be gauged by the following popular bahrāngi songs of the Pati Rabhas:

Through the crevices of the wall
   The sun is visible,
   She touches her spinning wheel
   Only when the sun is up.

   She is a fine girl!
   The cloth is rotting in her loom,
   What kind of a daughter-in-law is she?

Even beauty in a girl who knows no weaving is considered to be meaningless:

   She may have a bun
   As big as a don. [a measuring basket]

¹. Bhaben Narzi: Boro-Kachārīr Sambāj Āru Samākriti, pp.204-205.
So far as silk-weaving is concerned, the district is certainly deficient in comparison with other parts of Assam Valley where three varieties of silk of distinctive quality, eri, muga and pat, are produced. Allen found in 1905 that the silk industry was 'not nearly so important as in Assam proper.' Pat and muga were not reared and the only silk produced was that obtained from eri worm, which however, was 'of not much importance'. Rangjuli, North Salmara and the Eastern Duars were the chief silk-producing areas, as of now.

The bulk of the cloth today is made of mill-made cotton yarn as the crafts of spinning and dyeing, once practised at home, have been practically given up.

(d) The Loom

The loom that is most commonly used is the typical Assamese country loom. It consists of four stout posts which are driven into ground so as to make a rectangle about 5'10' x 2'6' and are joined together at the top by a cross beam. The warp yarn is placed in horizontally at the height of about three feet from the ground, the weaver sitting on a bamboo bench or stool. But in some looms the yarn is not much above the ground level. The weaver sits on the ground with her feet on the pedals placed in a pit in the ground. This is the typical pit loom. The first type is called chang tāt (lit. platform loom) in the local language and the second, mātiya tāt (ground

1. B. C. Allen: GoaDist. Gaz., p.84
2. Ibid., p.85
loom). All the parts and accessories of the loom are made locally with indigenous material, mostly bamboo and wood. Some of these are quite artistically designed; some are even decorated with fancy motifs.

Many people now use the improved fly-shuttle loom. The following are the names of some of the important parts of the country loom and a few other accessories:

- **Tāt, shāl**: the loom.
- **Gāri**: the rollers, two in number, one for the cloth and the other for the cloth.
- **Rās**: the reed.
- **Māku**: the shuttle.
- **Nāsni**: the pulleys.
- **Sāl-bāri**: the pulley-bar.
- **Ba, boā**: the heald.
- **Ba-chunga, boā-chungi**: the bamboo pipe for winding the heald.
- **Putal-bāri**: the temple.
- **Garkā**: the pedal.
- **Paghe**: the bobbins made of bamboo sticks.
- **Chorki**: the reel for winding the yarn.
- **Nātāi**: another reeling device.
- **Petā, noli**: the pirn.
- **Karāni**: the leage.
- **Jatar, charkhā**: the spinning wheel.
III Bamboo and Wicker-work and Work on Wood

(a) Various articles made of bamboo, cane, grass, etc

In Goalpara, as in other parts of Assam, a big variety of articles are made of bamboo, cane, reed and grass. In fact, bamboo is the chief material used in the building of houses, making of containers and furniture, shaping of fishing and weaving implements and many of the farming aids. Tribals and non-tribals equally share the skill of working in bamboo.

The chief articles of this class that merit mention are:

(1) Various household articles like round flat trays (dālā) and seives (chailein, chālīn) of different sizes, horse-shoe-shaped winnowing trays (kūlā), a variety of tub-shaped containers of different sizes called (dēli, dāsi, tālā and don), huge barrel-like bins for storage of grains (dōl or dulī).

(2) Mats of various shapes and sizes. Four kinds of mats are made in Goalpara, i.e. pati, kath, dhara and kathia dhara. Pati mats are manufactured by the patia caste from the patidoia (maranta dichotoma) ... Kath mats are made of moj (saccharum ciliare) and are woven in a frame much as cotton in a loom ... Dhara mats are made of plaited bamboo, and a kathia dhara of reed.1

(3) Almost all the trap-like fishing contraptions, the majority of the agricultural implements excepting the plough and the yoke; and practically the entire range of weaving implements and accessories with the exception of a few items.

(4) Some rough broad-brimmed hats (jāpi, jhāpi) are also made with a split bamboo frame and certain kinds of leaves.

(5) Some articles like trays and baskets made of certain species of grass (benna) in some pockets of the district.

(b) Basket-making and the Doms

Since olden times making of baskets and such other articles from bamboo and cane has been practised in Assam by men of all communities irrespective of caste and social status, as weaving has been by women. A separate caste with basket-making as a profession does not seem to have developed in Assam although the existence of such a professional caste in neighbouring Bengal was perhaps not unknown. This is apparent from Martin's remark that 'the basket-makers of Bengal being a very low caste, none of the Kamrupis will make them for sale.'

While this is generally true of Goalpara, in the western parts of the district skill in basket-making is often associated with a separate caste called Dom who are believed to be akin to the Chanda-la and who are considered to be of very low birth. Here we find a definite similarity with the system in Bengal where the Doms, traditionally engaged in the disposal of dead bodies, also make baskets; they are also social outcastes. It must be made clear that in the rest of Assam, including most parts of Goalpara excepting the westernmost, the term Dom stands for the caste of fishermen most numerous throughout the Brahmaputra Valley. Although they occupy a rather low

1. Martin: Eastern India, p.556
position in the social hierarchy they are by no means social out-
castes or untouchables.¹

However, that in west Goalpara the Doms are traditionally
believed to be capable of turning out bamboo-works of particular
beauty is testified to by some folksongs that speak admiringly of
the Dom's special skill. We may refer to the marriage-song which
describes a bamboo seive so wonderfully designed by a Dom that the
bride's sister is completely bewitched.²

(c) Work on Wood

Except for some rough furniture and certain useful imple-
ments there is not much work on wood. Only, in some satras (monas-
teries) and prayer-halls some artistic wood-carvings can be seen.

However, many of the musical instruments carved out of wood
are tastefully designed and executed. Dotārās and sārinḍās with
finely carved out designs can rank as good works of art.

IV Jewellery-making

A description of the various types of ornaments worn by the
women of Goalpara has been given in an earlier chapter. Whether made

¹. There is a likely evidence of Doms being associated with artistry
in decorative basket-making and allied works in the Manasa-kāvyā
of Nārāyanadeva. After the resuscitation of Lakhindar and his
brothers, Lakhindar and Beulā return to Champak Nagar in the guise
of a Dom couple making and selling wicker-work fans. It is as a
Dumuni (Dom woman) peddling superbly designed fans that Beulā gains
entry into her father-in-law's mansion and it is the motif in a
fan that helps her in establishing her identity.— See D. C. Taluk-
dar (Ed): Sukrāni Padmāvati, p.710.

². See Chap.VIII Sec.I(a)
of gold, silver or any other metal, many of these ornaments testify to the artistic taste and craftsmanship of the local jewellers. We have already mentioned that in comparison with the rest of Assam, gold ornaments are fewer in Goalpara, particularly in the west.

Jewellers in Goalpara are called bāniyā or bāneyā and these number seems to have been considerable in the past, for there are quite a number of villages, or localities within villages, bearing the name Bāniyāpāra. In the Abhayapuri area, there are some families with the surname Banikya who are traditionally associated with the making of ornaments. Goldsmiths also frequently appear in folksongs.

Some of the ornaments have patterns and designs found in other parts of Assam, particularly in Kamrup and Darrang. But there are some others with distinctive patterns, having more in common with those of North Bengal and less with those of other parts of Assam. The technique of inserting details, however, is vastly different. Inlay work is a speciality of the Assamese technique. But in Goalpara there is practically no inlay work and the decorative effect is achieved by appliques, carvings and filligree-like work.

V Pottery and Toy-making

a. The references in ancient grants to potters (kumbhakara) and potters' pits (kumbhakaragarta) point to the antiquity of the potters' craft in the old Kamarupa region. Again, "the discovery of large number of terracotta figures leads us to believe that the village potter, besides his normal duty of vase-making was engaged in toy-making also."¹ That the Goalpara region has a rich heritage of

¹ B. K. Barua: A Cultural History of Assam, p.97.
artistic potteries and terracottas is proved by the fact that some of the finest specimens in the collection of the Assam State Museum in this section are from that district.

As in other parts of Assam, there are in Goalpara two communities engaged in pottery-making: the Kumār and the Hirā. B. C. Allen gives a fine description of the technique of pottery-making used by the potters of Goalpara, which we are quoting below:

'The earth used by the potters is a glutinous clay, which is well-moistened with water and freed from all extraneous substances. If it is too stiff some clean coarse sand is worked up with it. A well-kneaded lump of clay is then placed on the wheel which is fixed horizontally and made to rotate rapidly. As the wheel revolves the potter works the clay with his fingers and gives it the desired shape. The vessel is then sun-dried, placed in a mould, and beaten into a final shape with a mallet, a smooth stone being held the while against the inner surface. It is then again sun-dried, the surface is polished, and it is ready for the kiln. The collection of the clay and firewood, the shaping of the utensils on the wheel, and the stacking of them in the kiln, form the men's portion of the work. The women do the polishing and the final shaping. The Hirās, however, do not use the wheel but mould the vessel on a board, laying on the clay in strips, and the whole of this work is entrusted to the women.

1. It is difficult to see how Martin got the impression that 'Potters of Kamrup seem to have been unacquainted with the lathe, and formed their vessels merely by kneading.' — See Eastern India, Vol. III, p. 556.
The instruments employed are — the wheel (chak) which is about three feet in diameter and rotates on a piece of hard wood fixed firmly in the ground, the mould (athali), a hollow basin 16 inches long by \( 3\frac{1}{2} \) inches deep, the mallet (baliya piteni), and the polisher (chaki).

The principal articles manufactured are cooking pots (hari and paitta), large and small water jars (kulsi and bashua), and larger vessels (hari and janga) with lamps, pipes and drums. ... The principal centres are at Fakirganj, Gauripur, Rupsi-Satya-pur, Rokakhata, Dubapara and Marnai. ¹

The articles mentioned above are meant for ordinary domestic use. Excepting a few items in which decorative designs are attempted, the bulk of them cannot be said to possess any particular artistic merit. However, references in a few folksongs, point to the existence, at least in the past, of a 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.

Terracotta Toys²

It is the terracotta toys made by the potters of Goalpara that merit particular attention as objects of folk-art. Some of

them are of such outstanding quality that they have earned the ad-
miration of specialists of all-India standing in the field; and in
at least one important work on the folk-toys of India, a terracotta
figure from Goalpara occupies a prominent place.

Among the toys there are animals like horses and elephants.
Some have riders on their back, adding to their charm and utility as
children's toys. But human figures are the most numerous. In eastern
Goalpara the majority of the human images are of bride and bridegroom
variety and are called bar-koina putla. Mother and child— with the
child on the mother's lap or in front of her— happens to be the
most favourite theme of the toy makers of the western region. The
reason for the choice of this kind of themes is not far to seek: the
toys are generally made by the female members of the potter's family
during their leisure hours and it is naturally such themes that are
dearest to the heart of the simple village women.

While looking for folk-toys in Goalpara, one has to be par-
ticularly careful and be on one's guard against the possibility of
mixing up local toys with those made by craftsmen who have come over
from East Bengal settled here. In recent times, the proportion of
the latter has been steadily increasing in the local fairs and mar-
kets. The ground for the confusion arises because of the fact that

1. Ajit Mookerji: Folk-Toys of India, Plate No.1.
2. In fact it is the women who used to peddle the toys from house to
   house in exchange of provisions, mostly paddy, especially after
   the harvesting season.
3. The similarity of many of the mother-and-child toys with some
terracotta toys of Mohenjo-daro is really striking. However,
these folk-toys do not seem to be connected with the mother-
goddess cult with which scholars have associated the Mohenjo-daro
toys.
a more or less common tradition of making highly stylized toys, with certain local variation in style, obtains over an area which includes West Goalpara and those parts of North and East Bengal from which most of the new settlers have come. Moreover, it is also possible that in recent times, there has been through close contact at least some degree of mutual adaptation of the two styles, the indigenous and the imported. The result is that it often becomes difficult to tell the toys of one style from those of the other.

Most of the toys of the eastern parts of the district, however, present no such problem. These are less formal and stylized, and there is an unassuming kind of simplicity in them, easily marking them out from the East Bengal variety. These toys have greater affinity with the toys of Kamrup and other parts of Assam.

No moulds are applied by the toy-makers and all parts of a figure are shaped by hand. But there is such uniformity in their shaping that different toys of the same type are practically indistinguishable from one another. When the toys are shaped, they are dried in the sun. A layer of slip is applied to them before they are burnt in fire.

Figures of the human female are the most numerous among the toys of West Goalpara. Marked by a very refined of stylization, they are also the most attractive. The head is flattened, with a large

1. Ajit Mookerji’s comment on the mother-and-child toy of Goalpara: 'A variation of the more primitive type of Tangail (Mymensingh) doll'. — See Folk-Toys of India, Plate No. 1.

2. The practice of decorating toys with paints is rarely found in these parts.
round bun placed high on its back. The face itself is elongated in the suggestion of the nose and the mouth. Ears, eyes and various ornaments are appliqued into the main body. Hair and fingers are indicated by scrapings made into the figure while it is still soft. In most toys, there is only the suggestion of clothings delicately executed with scrapings here and there. But in some toys with the standing posture, the addition of the lower garment with elaborate design, resembling the local female dress, gives them a most distinctive appearance. Conformity with local styles is also discernible in the hair-do and the designs of the ornaments.

The lower portion of most standing figures is hollowed and rounded, thus giving them the necessary balance. The standing figures with the legs apart naturally lack such balance.

Of unusual beauty and attractiveness are toys of a particular type of seated mother-and-child composition. They are characterised by the most refined and intense kind of stylization achieved through simplification and the elimination of inessentials. The figure of the mother is much too obtuse and rotund, and looks almost out of proportion. The child she carries looks more like the young one of an animal than a human baby. And yet, in spite of these apparent representational incongruities in the figures, the whole composition possesses a kind of vibrant plasticity and evokes an atmosphere of health and well being, security and serenity. Such eloquent suggestion is rare in folk toys. In fact, because of its deliberate suggestion of depth and massiveness and the intensity of its artistic appeal, it ceases to be a more toy and almost approaches the character of a sculpture.
VI Work on Pith

(a) Pith-work in Assam and the special position of Goalpara

There is one particular field of folk-art — work on pith — in which Goalpara can claim a very special place not only in Assam but in the whole of India. The folk-artists of Goalpara engaged in this field turn out numerous articles of highly superior craftsmanship and also extraordinary artistic quality. Although not many people outside the district know much about this unusually rich material, it has drawn the attention of experts and connoisseurs and received unstinted praise and admiration. Pith articles from Goalpara have been included in more than one collections of representative specimens of folk-art from all over India.

It is true that the tradition of working on pith is not confined to Goalpara alone. In North Bengal to the west of the district and Kamrup and Mangaldai to the east of it a similar tradition is known to have existed. Some work on pith is also done in East and West Bengal. But according to some experts the art developed in Lower Assam and North Bengal where the natural abundance of the material and the local artistic genius combined together to the greatest advantage, particularly in the districts of Kamrup and Goalpara in Assam, and Jalpaiguri in North Bengal where rainfall is copious and


2. A kind of fibrous reed growing in swampy tracts. It is called solā in west Goalpara (and also in Bengal). In East Goalpara it is called botolā.

3. See Folk Paintings of India: published by Inter National Cultural Centre. The booklet contains an appreciative note on pith-painting of the region, pp.5-6. See also Ajit Mookerji: Folk-Toys of India (Plate No.35).
natural drainage defective. Reeds grow in abundance in the many swamps and it is left to the native genius of the 'Malakars' and 'Solakars' to put it to good use.'

That the art of working on pith has been practised in Assam since a long time past is known from references to it in Buchanan-Hamilton's *An Account of Assam*, the materials for which were collected between 1807 and 1809:

'The Malakors, called Phulmali, make artificial flowers' (p.55).

'Garlands and artificial flowers, made of Sela, are made and sold by Kolitas and others; but a few workmen have been introduced from Bengal' (p.66).

The above extracts show that professional workmen engaged in pith work were called Malakor (Mālākar) or Phulmali. Such professional workmen are still to be found in Goalpara, who are ordinarily called Phulmāli and referred to as Malakar only when one wants to be formal. In many parts of Kamrup also there is a class people called Māli or Mālākar but their skill is confined to the making of garlands of real, and not artificial flowers, and they were originally attached to the more important temples of the district. Even if the craft of working in pith once flourished in Kamrup it is at present in a declining state and apart from making mats and, occasionally puppets for puppet-shows, the pith workers make *mājus* needed in a Manasā Puja. The same is true of the Mangaldai sub-division of Darrang where the Manasa cult is quite powerful.²

1. *Folk-Paintings of India*, p.5.
In East Bengal also the craft is more or less confined to the field of Manasa worship whereas in West Bengal some toys are also made. Of course, ornamental head-gears for ceremonial occasions and decorative pieces like flowers seem to be most numerously produced pith articles in both East and West Bengal today.

But in Goalpara, although the craft is primarily connected with Manasa worship, it has a much broader base and is more intimately linked with folk-life. Apart from the figures and other articles centring round the Manasa cult, the Phulmālis of Goalpara produce a large variety of other pith articles including images of gods and goddesses of the local pantheon, figures of various birds and animals different kinds of masks, artificial flowers and toys of variegated forms and designs.

B. C. Allen had observed in 1905: 'Toys are made of sola pith by Malakars and a few Rajbansis in the parganas Ghurla, Jamira, Parbatjoar, Khuntaghat and Kalumalupara, who sometimes turn out quite artistic little images of gods and goddesses.' At present the craft seems to be most flourishing in the Gauripur-Golokganj area and the articles produced here are the most well-known and sought after. But there are expert craftsmen in different parts of the district and the total volume of their output is quite considerable. Although the technique of shaping and decorating the articles is basically the same everywhere, works of different localities bear some marks of local distinctiveness.

(b) Two Parallel Art Forms

Work on pith practically incorporates within itself two parallel art forms: the first is that of image and toy-making and the second, of painting.

(i) Image and Toy-making

Here we have a wide range of articles:

(1) Images of gods, godlings and spirits as well as figures of human beings representing different functional or professional classes.

(2) Toys of various kinds including those representing figures of animals and birds either independently or as mounts of different gods and goddess. Rattles and such other articles meant for children also belong to this class.

(3) Artificial flowers: As the name Phulmāli or Mālākar suggests, the pith craftsmen must have had something special to do with the making of flowers. The most favoured flower motif resembles the kadam flower but flowers with other motifs are also frequently made. The decorative headgears meant for ceremonial occasions should also be included in this category as floral motifs predominate in their designs.

(4) Masks: Masks are of various designs of which the Kāli-Chandi masks are the most important both from the point of number and of excellence of craftsmanship. Next to them come the Mahādeva masks which are of course much simpler and plainer. Clown-masks and masks representing different animals are also made.

(5) Apart from these traditional items, pith-workers now-a-days produce many 'realistic' representations of birds, animals and fruits, etc. obviously in response to 'modern' taste and demand. These 'realistic' articles no doubt speak volumes of the mastery of the craftsmen over their medium and their capacity for adaptation. But such creations are sadly wanting in the simple and direct appeal of the traditional folk-items.
(ii) **Painting**

The second art form connected with work on pith is that of painting which can be said to have two levels of application: one, that of decorating the images, and the other, that of independent painting on a flattened surface. The images and toys we have mentioned above are not finished products till they are given the necessary treatment with paints by the Phulmali, and as such, painting is almost as important as shaping in turning out the finished images and toys.

It must be admitted that painting on toys and images cannot have an independent character as it is bound to follow the contours of the given forms the artist takes up for decoration. And the artists working on pith have obviated this limitation by using skilfully flattened pith sheets as 'canvas' to produce real paintings. Most of these paintings are on temple-like structures erected for Marai Puja. Representations of characters from the Beula legend naturally predominate in them. But artists also attempt independent paintings on 'pats' with compositions based on themes from the epics and the Puranas. The masks also offer sufficient scope for the expression of the painting skill of the artists as they have much wider and flatter surfaces than the images and toys.

(c) **Character**

We may now have a look at the distinctive characters of the images and the paintings turned out by the Goalpara folk-artists.

(i) Let us take the images and toys first. Pith is soft, fibrous, and at the same time extremely brittle, and the shapes of the figures are to a great extent determined by these qualities of the material. It is difficult to split and cut pith into curved shapes;
but it easily yields itself to straight shapes and thus we find in
the pith figures the conspicuous predominance of rectilinear and
angular compositions. (In contrast, the lines of the paintings used
on them have flowing curves, thus striking a fine balance).

The next important characteristic of the pith images is
stylization — so common in folk-art. The folk artists are normally
not concerned with any realistic representation of objects but shape
their images in delightful conventional patterns determined, on the
one hand, by the natural qualities of the material used and the ac­
quired traditional know-how of the trade. Individual imagination and
mastery only serve to give distinction to particular article. Thus,
the shape of an elephant or a peacock made of pith is very different
from that of an actual elephant or peacock; but the folk tradition
has developed such set formulae for making these images that they are
never made in any other manner.

As the images are shaped by cutting and carving out pieces
from whole lengths of reed, they are naturally related to sculpture.
At the same time, as they involve the joining of different parts
according to a pre-conceived plan, some of them also give the sugges­
tion of an architectural design. This is particularly of the human
figures. The images are generally not big—they seldom exceed two
feet in height; but the impression of massiveness that some of them
give is quite imposing. These outstanding characteristics come out
most effectively in the exquisitive bairāti images. (Bairāti = a
woman who performs special auspicious functions in a marriage).

Of the animal figures, those of birds — some representing
real birds and others imaginary — are extremely attractive and they
virtually throb with life.
(c) The Nature of Painting on Pith

Since the paintings executed on pith by the folk artists of Goalpara represent a very rich folk-art heritage of Assam and since there has been little discussion on them till now, it will be worth while to dwell upon them at some length.

Professional pat painters known as patuas were not unknown in medieval Assam. It is clear from occasional references to them in old Assamese works. One of the important events of Sankaradeva's life, as narrated by his biographers, relates to his painting on pressed cotton paper (tulāpāt) scenes of the seven Vaikunthas as a backdrop for his play Chihna-Yatra. There is a similar record about Madhavadeva. It is also certain that the neo-Vaishnavite movement had given a fillip to the art of painting in Assam and a distinctive Assamese school of painting had grown under its inspiration. The degree of excellence this school of painting had reached is evidenced by a big number of illusminated manuscripts that have been found in different parts of Assam, the most well known amongst which are the Bhāgavata-purāṇa, the Darrang Rāja Vamsāvali, and the Hasti- Vidyārṇava. Most of these works were undertaken either on religious inspiration or under the patronage of the Ahom and Koch royal courts or their noblemen. But originally inspired as it was by the neo-

1. 'The biography of the saint written by Ramcharan Thakur (d.1600) records that it was a sannyasi who happened to teach Sankardev how to paint scenes (pata lekhbaka) ... Daityari Thakur's biography of Sankardev and Madhavdev records that Madhavdev in producing the Govardhana-jatra had mountains painted "in the manner of Patuwasi"' - See P. Goswami: Assamese Drama, pp.12-13.

Vaishnavite movement, the art especially of the religious variety, flourished chiefly in the Vaishnava monasteries (satra). In the secular variety of paintings that developed later, some scholars have discerned the influence of the Rajput and Mughal schools, and other have seen the affinity with Newari, Oriya and Jain paintings. A few again regard them as belonging to a folk style.

But we have little information about the nature of the indigenous folk-style of painting that probably served as the basis of the Assamese manuscript paintings. Nor is there a surviving tradition of folk-painting that could be directly linked with them. Patuas are no longer heard of; and the class of professional artists, called khanikars, who had practised the art of painting along with several others like wood-carving and clay-modelling, have practically given it up. Thus in the whole of Assam today, it is only in Goalpara that a living and vigorous tradition of folk painting is being maintained by the Phulmalis, who still wield their brushes with excellent effect to decorate the numerous images and toys shaped out of pith by themselves and also to execute independent works on 'canvases' of flattened pith.

The most obvious peculiarity of the paintings on pith, which gives them a marked distinctiveness, is the uniqueness of the medium—an unlikely medium which has most unexpectedly attractive results.

2. Ibid., pp. 8-9 (see foot-note).
3. Ibid.; also see A.K. Haldar: 'Folk-Art' in Rhythm, Vol. VI, No. 4.
4. Folk-Painting of India, p. 3
The following are the more important characteristic features relating to the drawing and painting styles of the pith-painters:

(1) As it is, much of the painting on pith is dependent on the forms of images and toys. And since the images are generally designed on a triangular conception, the paintings on flat surfaces also have a tendency to approach triangular compositions. Even the shapes of many of the pith 'canvases', especially the Bishohori pats, are distinctly triangular.

(2) The artists rely heavily on drawing. Whether on images or on flat surfaces, an outline is first drawn and the picture is then completed by filling out the outlined surface with colour. Sometimes fine lines are applied on the painted surfaces to bring out details.

(3) The lines are strong and sure. Although all artists do not show the same boldness of strokes, the effortlessness and confidence displayed in the works of master artists is surprising. The angularity so much in evidence in the shapes of the images is absent in the use of lines in which curves predominate. The flow and grace of the curves of some Bishohori paintings are particularly vibrant.²

(4) The artists have a weakness for primary colours. However, red, carmine, yellow, green, blue and black seem to be the

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1. *Folk-Paintings of India*, p.3

2. According to Dr Niharranjan Ray, such emotionally charged curves are the specialities of the painting styles of Eastern India including Bengal, Assam and Orissa.— See *Bangali Itihās* (abridged) pp.422-423.
most favoured colours, although their proportions in the paintings and also their tones vary from area to area. Notwithstanding the preference for brightness in hues, 'the colours used on pith soak into the surface to give it an overall soft tone which is the special charm of paintings on pith.'

(5) Proportion is fairly well-maintained, especially in the images. But there is no attempt to represent perspective. The use of colour is flat and there is no variation of tones, and as such, the paintings on flat surfaces lack the sense of dimension that is naturally present in the images. However in many paintings variations in the breadth and boldness of the lines bring the suggestion of depth. There is an unusual example of giving a three-dimensional effect on a flat surface in some paintings where the nose is not painted but a piece shaped like a nose is fixed in its place in the manner of a collage.

(6) Human figures, which include figures of gods and godlings (because they are modelled on the same pattern), predominate in the paintings. There are animals and other objects also. There is not much of landscape except the occasional suggestion of water, moon, clouds, etc. in some pats. Floral and other designs are often painted on the borders of the canvases. In Bishohori pats, the symbolic representation of the goddess is also frequently met with.

1. Folk-Paintings of India, p.6
(7) Stylization is present in many of the paintings but it is not as manifest as in case of the images. However, the themes, compositions, figures and designs follow certain conventional patterns and have a tendency to become stereotyped. Occasionally there are attempts by the artists to adapt their art at least to subjects outside their conventional field. They draw pictures with themes drawn from the epics and the Puranas and even from modern life. But these efforts are also marked by all the peculiarities of the conventional technique.

In fact, work on pith possesses all the characteristics of 'peasant art' as described by Herbert Read and L. Adam. True to Kroeber's description pith articles also often 'tend to geometric and floral designs or to a naive, somewhat inept realism.' In the words of Asit Kumar Haldar, 'Folk Art developed in a community circle which followed it as a profession and its baneful result was

1. 'Peasant art is not art made by peasants in imitation of the art of more cultured classes— that is to say, it is not a crude reflection of the art of sophisticated people; much less is it the art that springs from a sophisticated love of simplicity and the simple life. To be precise, the term should be limited to objects made by uncultured peoples in accordance with a native and indigenous tradition owing nothing to outside influence— at least, nothing to the vertical influence of another grade of society; lateral influences from another country are possible, though not often probable'— Herbert Read: The Meaning of Art (Pelican Edition), pp.64-65.

'By 'peasant art' ... we usually mean the art of the peasant population of the civilized countries of today. Compared with sophisticated arts in urban centres, it is apparently 'primitive', and no doubt it has preserved from remote heathen times a number of genuinely primitive traits.'— L. Adam: Primitive Art, pp.61-62.

2. Quoted by L. Adam, Ibid.
that it became obviously stereotyped. Eventually commercial aspects continually developed in Folk Art and instead of emotion-invoking pictorial expressions and forms only patterns originated by the collective efforts and experiences. Rural and urban art changed according to the time of its origin and cultural development of the period. Folk Art remained almost static throughout the ages. All this is largely true of the pith-work of Goalpara.

(d) The Pith Paintings and the Medieval Manuscript Paintings of Assam

As the manuscript paintings and the pith paintings represent two distinctive styles of painting of Assam, it will be interesting to have a look at the points of resemblance and difference between the two.

Both the pith paintings and the manuscript paintings are marked by unusual nature of their mediums — pith in the former and sānchī or ḍāgar bark (and sometimes pressed cotton) in the latter.

In both cases, religious beliefs constitute the main source of inspiration although secular themes also come in. But while in case of religious pith paintings there is a direct link with the religious practices, it is absent in case of manuscript paintings. Again, while Vaishnava themes predominate in the manuscript paintings with religious inspiration, the pith paintings have little connection with Vaishnava themes.

As for technique, lines predominate in both the forms, colour being applied to an outlined surface. There is no use of the idea of perspective and there is no variation in tones in either form. Artists of both the forms have a preference for bright primary colours. While in the manuscript paintings human figures almost always have faces in profile, in pith paintings faces drawn from the front are almost as frequent as those showing the profile.

Unlike the pith paintings, the manuscript paintings of Assam especially those of the Bhāgavata-Purāṇa and the Hasti-Vidyārṇava, are too disciplined and sophisticated to be deemed as folk paintings without reservation. Though obviously based on some local folk tradition, these manuscript paintings must have attained a considerably high degree of refinement and sophistication by coming in contact with superior techniques, probably of the Rajasthani and Mughal schools. The pith paintings on the other hand have an unmistakable folk character and in some ways their style has close resemble with that of the pat paintings of Bengal. While comparing the style of the pith paintings with that of the manuscripts of Assam, it may be pointed out that it is only with the less sophisticated forms of the latter that some resemblance of the former can be seen.

(e) The Phulmālis of Goalpara and the Patuās of Bengal

It is true that the folk paintings on pith have some resemblance with the pat paintings of Bengal, but this resemblance is confined to the style only, and that too, to a limited extent. But in other fields like technique of production, mode of operation, organisational pattern and social status of the workers, there are
The Patuās of Bengal are exclusively painters but the Phulkālis of Goalpara are image-makers, toy-makers and painters rolled into one. Some of them also make clay images.

The Patuās of Bengal draw their pictures mostly on cloth, in the form of scrolls, or and occasionally on paper. Some small rectangular pats are also drawn. Pith is scarcey used in Bengal for painting. But Phulkālis of Goalpara drawn only on flat pith sheets of various shapes. But the scroll form is unknown to them. It is only recently that they have taken to using paper.

Unlike the Patuās, the Phulkālis of Goalpara do not go from house to house showing pictures and receiving money for doing so. They produce images and paintings on receiving orders from some party or directly sell their wares in the market.

The Goalpara painters have no songs comparable to those sung by the Bengal Patuas while showing the pats.

The social status of the Phulkālis is by no means low, while the Patuās of Bengal occupy an unenviable position in the society, living in a sort of no-man's land between Hinduism and Islam.

(f) Patronage and Market

The bulk of the pith articles, both images and paintings are directly or indirectly connected with the religious and semi-religious beliefs and practices of the area. Rituals and beliefs

centring round the worship of the snake-goddess Manasā provide, on the one hand, the most extensive field of work and, on the other, the most substantial sustenance to the pith artists. Apart from the temple-like structures, both large and small needed in Manasā Puja, a large number of Bishohori pats are also produced. Sometimes even big-size images of the goddess with elaborate background structures are made. Then there are the snake-hood images installed in the ājānkar form of Manasā worship. Again, such figures connected with the Beula legend as godā, godāni, ganak (astrologer), bhumāli (drummer) are some of the most popular images made by the pith workers. Another popular image is that of god Kati with his peacock mount, or with the double mount of peacock and elephant. With turban and trousers, with bow and arrows, with shoes and moustache, the Kati image looks most elegant. Jakalis another widely favoured object of worship and Jakāshrines with pith images of the spirit-cum-godling are quite numerous. It has been described earlier how community worship is held twice a year in the community shrines (dasjaniyā dhām) of West Goalpara and how fresh pith images of almost all the gods and godlings are installed on each occasion. Again, every year the fishermen organise a ceremonial worship of various gods and spirits before starting their fishing operations for the year. The number of the 'deities' runs into scores—three score and three, five score and five, seven score and seven, and even nine score and nine, depending on the resources of the devotees. The Phulmalis supply all the images.

There are also the masks, the Kali and Mahadeb masks being the most important, and also the artificial flowers used for auspicious purposes, mostly religious.
All this is enough to show that it is mainly the peculiar religious and ritualistic beliefs and practices of the region that have helped work on pith to continue as a living art till today. Of course there are the secular objects like toys, birds, animals, flowers and rattles.

Formerly these objects used to be sold in fairly large number in fairs and markets throughout the year, but they are gradually being edged out by cheap plastic and metal articles. The patronage that the artists formerly used to receive from the zemindars and other landed gentry of the district has in recent years shrunk to an alarming degree. The result is that few of the Phulmalis can support themselves and their families with the income from working on pith. For most of them, working on pith is only a subsidiary occupation.

(g) Material and Implements Used

Pith is of course the main ingredient used in producing the images and paintings. Sometimes dry jute sticks are also used for giving firmness to the images. As the making of flat sheets of pith involves much concentrated labour, thus pushing up the cost of production, and consequently the price, many people now use sheets of paper, even newspaper, in place of pith sheets. Some tinsel is also used in some images and headgears.

The special kind of chopper used for cutting, splitting and making strips of pith is called kāit. It is about a foot long and has sharp edges on both sides. The skill and artistry with which the pieces are cut out, given the desired shape and the manner in
which sheets of even thinness are turned out with a single chopper are really extraordinary. A kind of glue prepared from the Dhekiya fern is used for joining the different pieces of an image or for keeping a sheet stretched and flat with the help of ribs.

As for the paints, only bazar colours are used today. It is said that paints were once prepared by the artists themselves from indigenous materials like vermilion or red ochre for red, yellow ochre for yellow, indigo for blue, lamp-black or soot for black. But the practice has long been given up. The colours are mixed with a glue prepared either from tamarind seeds or from barley. The brushes are made of goat-tail hair.
TERRACOTTA TOYS

Mother-and-child (sitting)

Bar-ko'ina toys

Standing mother-and-child toys
**Work on Pith: Images**

**Godā (Gauripur- Golekganj)**

**Bairāti (Sapatgram)**

**Jakhā and other spirits and godlings (Gauripur- Golekganj)**

**Godā-Godāni (Bilasipara)**

**Bhulmāli (drummer) and Granāk (astrologer) (Gauripur- Golekganj).**

**Godā-Godāni (Salkocha)**
WORK ON PITH.

Two colour photographs
Left: God Kāli mounted on a peacock and an elephant.
Below: Three Jakhz images

MASKS

Left:
A Kāli mask
Right:
Two demon masks

PITH rattles

PITH birds
WORK ON PITH: PAINTINGS

A Manasa (Bishohori) pata

A pata showing Parasurama

A pith image of Manasa with paintings

Three Manasa (Bishohori) pata

Detail of a painting on a mandap of Marai Puja

Paintings on smaller Marai Puja structures
Recent pith paintings depicting six of the grahas (planets)
(Courtesy: Sm. Nilima Barua of Gauripur and M. Saadul Hossain)