



A Case Study on the *Pati* Making Crafts of Assam

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ABSTRACT

Pati making is an age old eco-friendly craft of mankind. Although it is a traditional craft of Bangladesh, it finds an important place among the handicrafts of Assam. This craft is found in small pockets of Assam, Tripura and West Bengal in India. This paper tries to study the scope and limitation of the *pati* making tradition of Paharsingpara village of Goalpara, Assam.

Keywords: Environment friendly, Indigenous craft, Intangible heritage, *Pati*

Pati is a cool, smooth and lustrous traditional mat. Prior to the introduction of technologically advanced modern appliances, *pati* was an important aspect of household during the summer season in the eastern part of India, especially in Assam, Tripura and west Bengal. This craft is restricted in small pockets of Assam, especially in Goalpara district in Brahmaputra valley and Karimganj district in Barak valley. This craft was introduced to the people of the area by the British administrator before independence from Bangladesh. However, this traditional handicraft is included in UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

At present the traditional use *pati* restricted to the rural areas only, but its aesthetic use is increasing in the urban areas. Along with the creativity of the artisans, a mutual development of few innovations and modern skill elevates the attractiveness of the craft.

Objectives

The main objective of the study is to:

1. Study about the indigenous craft of the region
2. Study the scope and limitation of the craft on present context.

Methodology

The present study was conducted in the village Paharsingpara in Goalpara district. In this study the preliminary household data have been collected through household survey using a well-designed survey schedule. The other information was collected through interview with the key informants.

The Study Area

Paharsingpara is a revenue village of Goalpara district. It falls under the jurisdiction of Suryagiri Gaon Panchayat of Matia tehsil. The location of the village is 9 kms from Goalpara town towards east. The village is surrounded by Dekdhowa Pahar and Dubapara Bazar on the north, Baladmari char on the west and Dhuptola Bazar on the south. The famous tourist spot of the district the Sri Surya Pahar lies on the east. Rakshasini Pahar, a small hillock, situated towards the south-west of the village. River Jinari, the life line of the village, passes through the northern part touching the eastern boarder of the village and merged into the mighty river Brahmaputra on the north. A state PWD road, from Goalpara town towards Mornoi, runs through the village dividing it into two unequal parts. The area of the village is 289.68 hectares.

The village is inhabited by total population of 2644. Out of these 1460 are male and 1180 are female. The literacy rate of villagers is around 67%. The elder generation is hardly cross the upper primary level of school. But the younger generation of the village is highly educated. Bengali is the language of communication and is the follower of Hinduism. The villagers opted different occupation for their livelihood including white collar job. *Pati* making is an integral part of their life. Each and every household of the village practices the *pati* making craft.

Raw Material

The *pati* making craft is purely based on the Murta plant locally known as Bet (in assamese- *Patidoi*, botanical name- *Schumannianthus dichotomus*). These non-stemmed knotless reeds grow in marshy and water-logged areas.

Process

Pati making consist a series of steps including plantation, weeding, cutting the stem and peeling, boiling, colouring and weaving.

Patidoi or the bet used for *pati* making is locally grown by the villagers. Most of the weaver produced their required raw material by their own. They cultivated in the fringe area of the village near the river Jinari.

Plantation of bet is done in the month of March-April in a thoroughly prepared soil. The saplings are planted keeping around 10-15 inches distances between two saplings. Regular weeding is compulsory for better growth of the plant. The plant grows upto 7-8 ft in height. Normally, once the plants grow it survives around 20 years. It takes around five years from sampling to a matured plant. The main body of the bet is called *ga bet* and the sub-branches are called as *thal bet*.

While collecting the raw material, it is important to cut the plant at a proper height. The level of maturity of the stem determines the quality of the *pati*. Each stem of the mature plant split lengthwise into several pieces, which are further split into three parts- outer, middle and inner. The outer part is used to make *Mota* (rough/thick) *pati* and the middle part is woven into *Bukar pati*.

The innermost part (*pith*) is split into pliable strips for various uses instead of *pati* making.

Once the *pati* stems are cut, they start off the process of splitting into fine strips. Each strip is locally known as *Beti*. These *betis* are used in two different ways. The first way is the raw strips are directly dried in the sun and used for weaving *pati*. While in the second method, the *betis* soaked into a solution of hot water and rice starch for 3 to 4 days and then boil them until the *betis* change their colour to white. These strips are dried in sun for 6-7 hours daily for a couple of day. The first types of *betis* are used for weaving normal *pati*, while second types are used only for making *sheetal pati*, which has more cooling effect.

Colouring is also a part of *pati* making process. Colouring is done occasionally to add beauty to the *pati*. For colouring they use locally available dye prepared from tamarind leaves, hibiscus flower, bark of mango tree etc. After dyed the strips with different colour these are again dried in the sun. Now the strips are ready for weaving. The ultimate process of *pati* making is weaving. The first step of weaving is known as *palo*. Weaving is started from a corner of the *pati* and gradually proceeds until complete the whole. After the weaving is over, finishing touches are given to the product which is known as *mura*. The finished product is dried in the sun for 1-2 days before send to market.

Types of Pati

Based on the raw material used, *pati* can divide into two different categories, *Nelor pati* and *Dalar pati*. In *Nelor pati* the strips are prepared from the main body of the plant, while in the *dalar pati* strips are prepared from the sub-branches (*Dal* means brunch in local language) of the bet plant.

Based on the amount of raw material used for making a *pati*, they are also named as *aath gonda pati*, *Chari gonda pati*, *Pondra gonda pati* etc. These categories themselves indicate the size of the mat. For example, *Chari gonda pati* means that while making the *palo*, they used four sets of strips each set containing 4 strips. While *aath gonda pati* need eight sets of strips, which will definite be bigger in size than the former.

Uses of *Pati*

The uses of *Pati* can broadly be categorized into two groups:

1. *Utility purpose*: Use as sitting appliances, bed mat etc. Wallet, hand bags, file covers, dinning mat, hat etc. Are also prepared by using *pati* (the mat).
2. *Aesthetic purpose*: Uses for interior decoration and various other decorative purposes.

Division of Labour

It is observed that in all types of society, either modern or preliterate, division of labour is clearly visible. The *pati* making craft is also shows the tendency of gender specific division of labour. It has been observed that although both the gender is equally involved in this indigenous cottage industry, gender specific differences are noticeable. Generally, males are associated with growing the plant, cutting the stems, peeling the strips, marketing the ultimate product etc, while preparing the strips for weaving, such as drying, boiling and colouring the strips, taking care the of the ultimate product etc. are the responsibility of the female counterpart. It is to be mentioned that although in the recent past weaving was the sole domain of the female members; male members have learnt the skill of weaving and get recognition for the attractive product. Mr. Ranjit Kumar Dey, a proud villager of Paharsingpara village, received the *Seal of Excellence* awarded by *Craft Council of India* (CCI) and UNESCO in 2004.

OBSERVATION AND REMARKS

The *pati* making craft makes the village Paharsingpara famous in the district. It has been observed that almost all the villagers irrespective of age and gender are

equally efficient in *pati* making. Although the villagers are expert in traditional *pati* making craft, they need to be flexible to introduce innovations to their craft. Now-a-days the artisans make different utility products such as money bags, hand bags, hats, file covers, mobile covers etc. But the products are seems to be raw, where the finishing touches are somewhat missing out.

The major findings derived from the study are:

1. The products are environment friendly in nature.
2. No specific infrastructures are required to practice the craft. It can be made in any corner of the household.
3. Product can be used both for utility purpose and aesthetic purpose.
4. Traditional use of *pati* confined to the rural areas only, the modern and technically advanced appliances replaces the traditional use of *pati* in urban areas. In these areas *pati* is used only for aesthetic purpose.
5. Due to the affordability the products are most in demand in the local markets.
6. A few innovations will create opportunity to access new market.
7. It is a time consuming craft.
8. Skilful finishing touches will effectively get a better market share.

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