



Design for Change: Fostering indigenous art and design practices for sustainable livelihood

Debasish Chakraborty¹

*¹Associate Professor, Department of Visual Arts,
Assam University, Silchar, Assam*

Abstract

Art and design practices in community development, actively involves residents in identifying needs, planning a sustainable design solution, and implementing changes, shifting from top-down aid to collaborative empowerment, fostering ownership, building social capital, and ensuring sustainable, culturally relevant outcomes for better economic growth, and flexibility, using methods like re-design of the existed practices which is one of the prime focus to address issues of sustainable design practices from indigenous to contemporary design for the artisan community who are practicing indigenous art forms, but could not withstand the indignation of continuous technological development in preserving their art and thee is a tendency to shift their occupation for survival in many occasions which had caused threat for survival to both the artisan and the art practice. Despite the cultural significance, these traditional art practices faces problems due to various factors which need attention for socio cultural and economic upliftment of an artist community from the design development perspective. The paper focuses on the projections of creating sustainable livings for local artisans, particularly potters of Barak Valley through contemporary

art and design intervention and integration of new design elements in preserving the age old heritage of traditional art practices. The paper has possible expected outcomes through participatory, community-centric approaches of the skills of the artisans/potters identified for the purpose of study, moving beyond mere mass production of the traditional pots and other utility items in particulars to new contemporary utility based items to foster self-reliance, broader economic benefit, social security and environmental adaptation.

Keyword: Art, Indigenous, Community, Design, Sustainability, Livelihood, Adaptability.

1. Introduction

Art and creative expression plays an important role in shaping our identity and existence and the dominance of various forms of design practices has made a considerable impact in our daily life in both aesthetical and functional approaches of the designs in any form - product, industrial, graphic or communication. While we all enjoy art that is created for the sake of art and artistic expression, it has also made a decisive impact on the existence of the craftsman and artisans from various domain of the traditional craftsmanship like, pottery, weaving, handicrafts, handlooms etc. who are facing resistance from the onslaught of technological intervention with the adoption of various design prototypes for a ready to accept market for mass productions of artifacts, negating the credibility of the skill and expertise of the traditional craftsman which had caused serious consequences for survival and economic security (Mago, 2017). In the framework of and design practice, community engagement as art work often define the involvement of diverse community members in a collaborative creative works and active participation that not only uplifts the cultural wisdom and practice to revive the indigenous art forms but also helps to sustain their livelihood through creative design integration in both traditional and contemporary approach. In community engagement projects, the designer's role is that of a catalyst and collaborator, bridging the gap between traditional craftsmanship and modern market demands to ensure sustainable livelihoods and cultural preservation which is the ultimate goal for a design to bring out change in the community.

2. Indigenous art practice and Barak Valley

The state of Assam is situated in the North-Eastern region of India, land of hills, plains, and rivers and bordering Bangladesh and Burma. The river Brahmaputra crosses through the state from North-East to the South-West. The state is divided into two river valleys- Brahmaputra valley and Barak valley (Bareh, 2001). Barak Valley, southern part of Assam is unique because of its diverse ethnicity, heterogeneous culture, language, ecosystem and rich heritage. The valley is named after the river "Barak" which consists of three districts Cachar, Karimganj, and Hailakandi. The Valley is a land of diverse community, ethnic like Bengali, Kachari, Assamese, Dimasa, H'mar, Kuki, Manipuri, Mizo, Reang, Tea- Tribe, and Naga co-exist together. Indigenous art, crafts and handloom of this region are deeply rooted to the culture, tradition, religion, ecosystem, economy and hold even an integral part in the survival of the common man. It has been observed that a groups geographical, socio cultural, political and economic condition of a particular place defines its historical orders and holistic growth (Paul, 2022). Art and Craft history of Barak is a noticeable phenomenon that also defines the history of these province. Pottery is one of the region's most famous cultural symbols. Until recently, all Indian pottery was made of earthenware, including terracotta as well. The art form continues to be widely practiced both inside and outside India as a cultural art. An important art form in the valley is pottery, clay artisans are known for carving different gods and goddesses on burned clay pots. These skilful clay artisans also create clay pots and utensils, flower vases, and other essential items (Nandi, 2010). Due to the unique feature of the soil, pottery works of this region is highly adorned everywhere in and around. Panibhora Bekirpar, located in southwestern Cachar, Katlicherra located in Hailakandi, and Anipur located in Karimganj are some places particularly famous for pottery and other clay works. In this valley, potters make a variety of percussion instruments, including the left part of the Tabla, Mridangam and khol. Bengali Hindus adopt this profession as Rudrapauls and Kumbhakars. (Ranjan et al. 1986). But then some members among the teagarden labourers who hailed from Uttar Pradesh have attached themselves to this profession particularly in Nayabil, a place adjacent to Barjalenga tea estate in Cachar. But most of these clay-potters are not introduced to the modern techniques of pot-making (Paul, 2022).

3. Objective of the study

The objective of the study is to understand the aspirations of the artisans and incorporate the expertise and expertise in amalgamation with contemporary taste. Since the artisans' lacks education and awareness on design approaches for sustainability, the project aimed at ensuring the facts that sustainable design projects are truly sustainable in the long run in standings for effective design amalgamation to the existed products they work on and to inculcate and provide new ideation and technical support. The study is based on the available indigenous art practices across Barak Valley and pottery in prominence. The proposed study follows the descriptive analytical method. For the study, both the primary and secondary data were utilised. The sources of preliminary data are personal interviews and interaction with the potters engaged with the art practices across Barak Valley is considered. The secondary data includes, books, journals, magazines, and internet sources.

4. Identification of problem

The indigenous art and design practice is confined to a particular demographic area/community/locality causes low awareness among the practicing artisans and the young urban consumers. Preservation, transportation and seasonal market is always a big challenge for the indigenous crafts man. Customers prefer cheap factory-made alternatives. Another important problem is that the handmade items is time consuming resulting to less income. Several other problem ideated in due analysis is that the items were traditional in their appearance and stylization and did not suit modern tastes. And the prospect of selling the items is limited to the local area only due seasonal demand and lack of transportation. Flower vases, cups, and plates lacked modern utility and variety. Some prominent clay items of Barak Valley are: *Kalsi (Matka)*, an earthen pot used as an important daily household items in rural part of the valley. *Kalsi* is generally used in rituals along with the daily use. *Hadri* is one of the most familiar pottery items of Barak Valley. *Hadri* (Bowl for cooking) is also is used to store water as well as act as a rice maker. *Chaye Bhar* (Tea cup) made out of clay is usually consumed in tea stalls, but due to the adoption of paper cups, the skill remain almost outdated in use due to the brittleness, but in recent past it has a partial reach for the item and is also used as matter of

popularizing tea with the branding like *Kullar chai*. The market for clay flower pot is also seen shrinking owing to the adoption of plastic pots for its durability and price. *Fooldani* (Flower Vase) is a popular item for beautification. Another important item *Patil* (banga for bowl) used to culture and preserve curd is mostly preserved and widely used clay items hold a legacy of its own for not only daily use item but has cultural significance as well. *Tandoori* pot or tandoori stove is a clay pot that is traditionally used in fire, made of terracotta, this tandoori pot can be heated to the highest temperature. *Dhupdani*, (banga for incense burner pot) is an extraordinary coconut charcoal incense holder, a handmade item from natural red clay used extensively to get rid of mosquitos and also used in religious activity (Paul ,2022).

5. Sustainable approach and design integration

In context to the sustainable approach in integrating present-day design to the existed traditional art practices, a prospect space of the artisans had been identified across Barak Valley to recognize the need and revival of the traditional practices under community engaged design project which indicated a greater potentiality for design practicability and its sustainability in terms of product design, technical support, and innovative idea generation. One such identified community is from Bakerpar a small village in the Sonai area of Cachar district, Assam is locally knows for the traditional pots and clay utensils. More than eighty families of the Pal Community depends on this traditional practice for their livelihood. Shora, an earthen plate has been adopted and mostly practiced by the artisans of the same Community. The artisans draw images of god and goddesses on these clay plates which had become a traditional practice of visual narration. In due course of time it is found that this indigenous art practice is gradually disappearing due to the change in the household items in favour of more durable and cheap price. To address the issue where the need for urgent design intervention is formulated with a grant received as an award from Hyundai Motor India Foundation under “Art for Hope 2023”, REDESIGN, the design cell of the alumni of the Department of Visual Arts Assam University had led a design project to execute a space beautification project and product development project to promote the traditional art of Barak Valley which seems to be fruitful for the community to revive the

art practice with new idea generation approach and the present scenario is very promising with engagement of the artisans with new ideas based product practicability. Many such work also been carried out under the community engaged design project by the students of the Assam University Silchar, who made a thorough investigation on the current problem of sustainability of the artisans on such traditional skills to support a family from Allenpur, located in the Cachar district, where a local potter practices primarily involves producing bowls and pots used largely for ceremonial purposes using a traditional potter's wheel, following forms and techniques adopted for generations without any change. While his craftsmanship is consistent and rooted in tradition, the scope of products he creates remains limited, offering little opportunity for diversification or increased income. Unlike many narratives of disappearing crafts, this artisan did not have discontinued forms or forgotten products in his practice, that he thought might not be worth making, while also stating that he was content with making what he knew from the his childhood as mode of learning the craft from his ancestor. This presented a challenge, as the initial objective of reviving an abandoned craft that was not directly applicable. As a result, the project required an adaptive approach while still remaining grounded in the principles of community engagement, sustainability, and economic viability. A possible findings from the practicing community is also conducted in Dwarbond area, known for its traditional pottery practices where a local potter who still uses age-old techniques to produce handmade clay pots was identified who had previously crafted clay flower vases, cups, and plates, but discontinued them because of low demand and insufficient income. The purpose then was to come out for a design solution of these discontinued products so that they become more marketable, functional, and profitable for him. In continuation of such design integration with traditional norms, an idol maker family from Hailkandi district was also identified where traditional idol and clay dolls making process is still practice in a techniques which is in rudimentary form and locally sourced terracotta clay. During the interaction with the family it is revealed that they primarily produces idols as prime items and few utilitarian items to cater the religious practices-items such as pots, bowls, earthen lamp, and other similar utilitarian items were identified. Although these objects are well-crafted and functional, their demand has abridged over time,

owing to the increasing use of plastic, metal, and factory-made alternatives. Most of the items continue to follow repetitive forms with limited design innovation, making them less appealing to younger and urban consumers which had increased the tendency to shift their profession due to technological adaption and use of synthetic materials. This situation highlights the need for design intervention that respects traditional craftsmanship while introducing contemporary relevance. The outcome of the intervention had a possibility of revision of the existing pottery from functional and aesthetic modification to support sustainability and livelihood of the artisan.

6. Design concept and inspiration

To cater the need for sustainability of the livelihood of the artisan community who are engaged into these traditional art practice, the concept and inspiration for a sustainable design emerged from observing one of the most commonly used utility items that almost every house hold consider upon - a stationery item, a pen holder, organized in a multiple compartments to ease the workspaces with simple handmade product which has a prospect for students and office stationery items that is not only functional but also aesthetical and sustainable in practicability . With this approach, a clay desk organizer will replaces plastic ones with something more natural and personal. The stationery holder is meant to serve as an all-stationery product on a desk. Its usage involves potentially less use of the plastic factory- made stands that are available today, which also makes it environmentally friendly. Drawing inspiration to have more variants in applicability with new ideas, is a flower pot that was chosen due to its lack of daily usage as people are mostly driven by plastic pots, bowls and kitchen utensils for their needs. Although the artisan does not traditionally produce flower pots, the form itself is a widely recognizable decorative object with a simple structure and clear functional logic. The idea was then to explore how such a form could be adapted for contemporary needs while retaining recognisable elements of the original object. This approach allowed the design inspiration to remain respectful of the artisan's skills and tools, while opening possibilities for broader utility and appeal. The final design concept involved developing a stationery stand inspired by the basic form of a flower pot, adapted to suit the artisan's existing wheel-based techniques. The product

somewhat retains the key visual characteristics of the original design, like the tapered body - just slightly altered to make it look more interesting, while subtly modifying proportions and openings to accommodate stationery items like pens, brushes, and small tools. The inspiration for this project also came from observing contemporary ceramic products that need to be reinterpreting the traditional materials for modern lifestyles. Products such as perforated clay lamps creating shadow patterns and ceramic phone holders functioning as passive sound amplifiers, demonstrated how simple design changes can significantly enhance usability and value. These references showed that clay can move beyond conventional usage and become part of modern interior décor and everyday technology for sustainability and economic growth. This understanding encouraged a shift in perspective—from viewing the potter's work as purely traditional objects to recognizing them as adaptable forms with potential for modern application.

7. Conclusion

A community engagement design project is a collaborative process where designers work with a community to identify needs, co-create solutions (for spaces, policies, or services), and implement changes, ensuring projects are relevant, equitable, and foster ownership by involving locals in decisions from start to finish, using methods like workshops, interactive maps, and participatory budgeting. It's about building trust and shared leadership, moving beyond simple consultation to true partnership for positive, sustainable change. The story of the traditional artisans from *Panibhora*, *Allenpur*, *Bakerpar*, *Nayabil*, *Borjalenga*, *Katlicherra*, *Duarbond*, and *Hailkandi* as discussed, highlights a strong affiliation for traditional earthy culture that is currently under tremendous sustainable crisis. With thoughtful redesign of clay plates, flower vases, cups, and pots, the artisan can regain market relevance, attracting a wider customer to achieve sustainable income with sustainable product which is necessarily ecofriendly in nature. Such design interposition demonstrates the importance of combining traditional skill with contemporary design to uplift the artisans and preserve the craftsmanship and its culture. At its core, design for a change can acknowledge a simple yet profound truth : SUSTAINABILITY, which isn't just about materials and technology, but about people, creating sustainable design solutions that will genuinely meet the needs of those who will use and be affected by them. To

enrich the community with sustainable eco-friendly products, continuous design impetus is required to understand the needs and aspirations of the community for better economic stability, incorporating local knowledge and expertise from professionals in order to build trust and foster a sense of ownership of the legacy for a sustainable design approach to be effective in the long term. For an extensive design exercise to chance the sustainable design goal in relations of product development, branding, sustainable packaging design innovations in merchandising of the products etc., conducting regular workshops and training programs to help artisans learn new techniques, and co-create products that align with the current market demands can be commendable. Implementation of public awareness campaigns to nurture the cultural significance of local crafts and encourage community support for these artisans can be effective in dealing with the problems. Bringing community members together to brainstorm ideas, share knowledge, and develop design solutions to understand their needs and preferences followed by testing of those design ideas on a small scale to gather feedback from community can help and refine the approach of design to grow and sustain. Instead of merely commissioning work, designers can engage with artisans, respecting their traditional knowledge and allowing for shared creative input. Designers also can help reinterpret traditional techniques and motifs in contemporary contexts, ensuring the products that call to a wider consumption space and contemporary audience. The prospect for advocacy of sustainability can be improved by sourcing materials locally available in promoting handmade and durable products, aligned with a wider sustainability goals.

8. References

- Bareh, H. (2001). *Encyclopedia of North-East India*: Assam. Mittal Publications.
- Nandi, G. (2010). *The Art of Barak Valley and its Possibilities*. Gauhati Artist Guild.
- Paul, B. (2022). *Pottery is a traditional art form of the Barak Valley in Assam, India: A Study* ShodhKosh: Journal of Visual and Performing Arts.
- Ranjan, M. P., Iyer, N., and Pandya, G. (1986). *Bamboo and Cane Crafts of Northeast India*
- Mago, P. N. (2017). *Contemporary Art in India: A Perspective*. National Book Trust.
- https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Traditional_crafts_of_Assam (accessed on 12.2.2026)