



CANE & BAMBOO CRAFT OF ASSAM

Submitted by
GRAHESH BHANDARI

Guided by
Ar. Imaad Nizami
Ar. Faraz Farooq

1. INTRODUCTION



Fig. 1 Location of Assam

Source - Google Maps

1.1 ASSAM – A State of Culture

Modern Assamese culture and tradition is greatly influenced by different events that took place both during as well as after the British rule in Assam. The language was standardised by American Missionaries according to that of the Sibsagar District (which is also the place from where the Cane and Bamboo Craft is said to be originated), the epicentre of the Assamese political and economic system while a new form of Sanskrit-isation was adopted for developing Assamese language and grammar. Western and North-Indian influence was apparent in the performing arts and literature, however, ancient arts such as the Cane and Bamboo Craft remained bound to the roots of Assam's culture and tradition.

1.2 THE CANE & BAMBOO CRAFT

Assam is a state full of culture and its forests are filled with different species of Cane and Bamboo. Till date, Assamese artisans achieve their share of cane and bamboo directly from the forests. Trees of different kinds of bamboo (jati, bholuka, kako etc) as well as cane (jati, raiding, houka etc) are cut directly from the wild, processed and used as raw material for this craft. Cane and Bamboo are used in inter-relation. While bamboo provides support, cane is used as the binding material.

Guwahati is the most well developed city of Assam. All the major exhibitions for these kinds of handicrafts are held here. Many showrooms, both government as well as private undertakings have been built in order to create awareness about the traditional crafts of Assam including the Cane and Bamboo Culture.

Traditional products in the city aren't sold in a market, but are mostly auctioned off at exhibitions. Two important government owned handicraft showrooms in Guwahati are namely –

1. JAGARAN
2. PRAGJYOTIKA

Nalbari and **Barpeta** are two small villages in Lower Assam, almost 20 KM away from **Guwahati**. These villages are the source of commercial production of cane and bamboo products, however, in an unorthodox way. The products are not made in a factory. They are hand-made by the villagers in their respective houses. The process is as follows –

1. Certain families (15-20) are employed by a trader/manufacturer in Guwahati.
2. The trader provides the villagers with raw material from the nearby forests and pays them money according to the order that he gets from the buyers.
3. The villagers are given a set amount of time.
4. Once the product is made, it is brought to the city by the villagers themselves.

Cane and bamboo baskets take 3-4 hours to make, while furniture takes 4-5 days.

The cane and bamboo culture is of a dual nature. Traditional bamboo products are either sold in the local market in villages or sold to large manufacturers in the city where these products are exhibited and later auctioned at high prices.

1.1.1 CANE



Fig.2 Processed Cane
Source – The Author

Cane is found in huge quantities almost throughout the state. However, the best quality cane is brought from Arunachal Pradesh. There are three species of cane that are exploited in commercial quantities-

- **Jati** (*Calamus tenuis*)
- **Tita** (*Calamus leptesadix*)
- **Lejai** (*Calamus floribundus*)

Some less important types like **Sundi** and **Raidang** are also extracted. There are a few more types of bamboo and cane used for local manufacturing of different products. A type of muli cane locally called '**muli bazail**' is used for making umbrella handles.



Fig. 3 Cane Decorative Item
Source – The Author



Fig. 4 Cane Hat
Source – The Author

Jati is used for making small decorative items as thin strands of it can be extracted. These strands can be used to give a detailed output on the final products.

Houga is the most expensive type of cane. It is mainly used for making furniture. Even though this kind also grows within Assam, artisans prefer bringing this kind from Arunachal due to the better quality.

Raidang is the cheapest type of cane found in Assam. *It is also known as Jheng.*

1.1.2 BAMBOO

Assam has a vast amount of untapped sources of bamboo which can be utilized for different kinds of productive work including the making of products through this craft. Such a plentiful growth is not found anywhere else in the entire country. The different types of bamboo used in making products both traditional as well as economical are given below –

- Bholuka
- Bor – Bholuka
- Kako
- Jati



Fig. 5 Bholuka Bamboo

Source – The Author



Fig. 6 Jati Bamboo

Source – The Author



Fig. 7 Bor Bholuka Bamboo

Source – The Author

Assam is divided into several districts. The best Bamboo is found in the **KARBI ANGLANG DISTRICT (hill district)**. However, outside Assam, the best quality bamboo grows in Meghalaya. The villages of Assam have a wide variety of these bamboos growing naturally. Almost 100% of the raw material is brought in by the villagers directly from the forests and it is then processed locally. The bamboo is either sold within the village or supplied to retailers in the city.

2. HISTORY

2.1 ORIGIN

The craft is being practiced since the very dawn of civilization. It can be safely assumed that the craft dates back to the **7th Century A.D.** when Assam was ruled by King **Bhaskara Varman**. Since times unknown, cane and bamboo have been growing in Assam both in the wild as well as plantations. In the early period in Assam, bamboo was held with special reference and is forbidden to cut in “auspicious days”. It is a general belief that bamboo possesses auspicious character and is of religious significance. Early literature refers to the well-decorated and coloured sital patis (cool mats) used by the rich people. Evidence of the production of other cane articles is also supplied by the ‘**Harshacharita**’, which mentions stools of cane.

2.2 RELIGIOUS BELIEFS & SENTIMENTS

India is a country where religion and culture go hand in hand. The Bamboo and Cane Craft of Assam is no different. Several religious beliefs and sentiments surround this ancient craft. Cane and bamboo products are a part of the **Bihu Festival** which marks the beginning of a new year according to the Hindu calendar. The uneducated population of the villages even believes some varieties of Bamboo to be haunted. During religious processions, priests sit on cane and bamboo mats known as **Dhara**.



Fig. 8 A Temple of Shankar Dev housing Ancient Cane Masks

Source – The Author

2.2.1 THE ART OF MASK MAKING – A Case Study



Fig. 9 A man wearing a cane and bamboo mask.

Source – The Author

All over Assam, people follow an ancient priest known as **Shankar Dev**. Shankar Dev was born in 1449. He preaches **Hinduism** but with a very different kind of approach. He **combined religion with culture** in order to attract people from the creative fields. Shankar Dev actively supported art forms like Dance, Music and Acting.

Mask Making is an art with a history as far reaching as Shankar Dev's very own existence. The masks themselves are not for show or sale. They are used in religious performances known as **Bhawanas**. They are worn by actors who then perform to display Shankar Dev's plays.

Mr. Rebakanta Mahanta is a **living descendant** of Shankar Dev.



Fig. 10 Mr. Rebakanta Mahanta

Source – The Author

MR. REBAKNATA MAHANTA (81 years)

Khatpar Hatra,
Nemuguri,
Sivsagar District,
Assam.

The following information has been provided by by Mr. Mahanta in an interview.

Shankar Dev taught all sorts of art. He wrote a total of **six plays** in his life.

However, later on, when British took over India, they took away all the creative people from his followers and put them to work as farmers on the fields.

Mr. Mahanta believes that people these days only want their descendents to follow them. But in creative works like these, he feels that people should be chosen on the basis of their talent. Otherwise, there will not be any growth in this field.

Shankar Dev wrote his first play in 1460. It was known as '**SIHNO ZATRA**'. The following masks were made and used in that play.



Fig. 11 Chatramukh Brahma (First mask ever made)

Source – The Author



Fig. 12 Shiva's Headgear

Source – The Author



Fig. 13 A Swan (Lord Brahma's Chariot)

Source – The Author

PROCESS OF MASK MAKING

1. Firstly, like all other cane and bamboo products, the cane and bamboo is sun-dried for 2-3 days.
2. Then, the basic structure of the mask is created using a combination of cane and bamboo.



Fig. 15 Masks right before painting.

Source – The Author



Fig. 14 Basic Structure of a mask

Source – The Author

3. Then, it is covered with a layer of cow dung and cloth.
4. Finally, it is painted and made ready for the play.

MATERIAL USED

1. Bamboo (Jati)
2. Cane
3. Mud (clay)
4. Cloth
5. Cow dung
6. Paper

Mr. Rebakanta Mahanta maintains an array of these masks in his museum and doesn't sell them off due to the religious sentiment attached to them.

He has performed at and been part of the **Republic Day Parade** held at the India Gate every year. He has received the **President's Award** and has met both **APJ Abdul Kalam** as well as **Pratibha Patil**.

1.1 SUPERSTITIONS

Superstition is and has been part of Indian Culture and Civilization since times unknown. It is a term purely based on one's beliefs. It definitely reduces with an increase in one's scholastic knowledge, however, in the Indian conscience some beliefs always remain. Similar is the case with Assam. The Cane and Bamboo culture dates all the way back to the **7th Century** and this leaves no doubt for the existence of superstitions attached to it.

Many villagers believe that the **Bholuka** Bamboo is haunted and refrain from growing it anywhere near their houses. The Bholuka Bamboo makes a crackling like sound which can be heard on a silent night. Even though this seems quite absurd, the sound does exist. However, the sound is made due to the dryness of the land. When the **bholuka** bamboo grows, it tears the ground and comes out of it. Since the **bholuka** is large in size and the land is dry, this crackling sound is made when the plant grows outwards.



Fig. 16 The Bholuka Bamboo

Source – The Author

3. PROCESS

From the very beginning of this craft up until recently in 2010, the process of making cane and bamboo products was completely labour oriented. In mid – 2010, with improvement in technology, awareness about mechanization began spreading in the artisan community. Now, in 2016, this craft has been partially mechanized and machines are being used for actions like **cutting** and **splitting**. This has also slightly risen the price of the final products.

3.1 RAW MATERIAL

- **CANE** – Assam has an abundant natural supply of Cane which is similar to that of Palm Trees in the coastal regions. Cane plants can be found growing in the wild all around the villages. Artisans walk into the forests, choose the plant and cut them out from the base of the stem.

The roots are left since the cane plant can grow back from a cut stem if the root is untouched. This property of the plant also ensures the existence of this plant in the forests.



Fig. 17 Cane plant growing naturally.

Source – The Author

After extracting the cane, the craftsmen remove the bark of the plant consisting of leaves and thorns until an off-white inner-side of the stem is revealed. This then is sun-dried for 2 – 3 days and readied for the art.

- **BAMBOO** – Bamboo is also available largely in the wild, however, some craftsmen like to have their own plantation in their separate houses. Bamboo requires more processing than cane and hence is a costlier affair.

Firstly, like cane, the plant is cut from the base of the stem.

Then unrequired parts like leaves are removed.

Finally, it is sun-dried for 2 – 3 days.



Fig. 18 Bamboo Trees

Source – The Author



Fig. 19 Sun-dried pieces of bamboo

Source – The Author

3.2 TOOLS REQUIRED



Fig. 20 Tools used in Cane & Bamboo Craft

Source – The Author

Following are the tools required in the Cane and Bamboo Craft of Assam –

➤ TRADITIONAL TOOLS

DAO – A **dao** is a traditional assamese knife used in almost all household chores in the villages of Assam. Over time, it has become a part of Assamese culture and it is also one of the most important and handy tools used in the Cane and Bamboo Craft.



Fig. 21 DAO (Traditional Assamese Knife)

Source – The Author

➤ MODERN TOOLS

- Saw
- Burner (kerosene fueled)
- T-Bar Clamp
- Chisel
- Cutting Machine
- Leg Vise



Fig. 22 Saws and Chisels

Source – The Author



Fig. 23 T-Bar Clamp

Source – The Author



Fig. 24 Kerosene Burner

Source – The Author



Fig. 25 Cutting Machine

Source – The Author

➤ OTHER TOOLS/ EQUIPMENT

- Fevicol (synthetic adhesive)
- Polish (Polyurethane Finish)



Fig. 26 Synthetic Adhesive

Source – The Author



Fig. 27 Polish (Polyurethane Finish)

Source – The Author

Research Through Innovation

3.3 TECHNIQUE OF PRODUCTION

Cane and bamboo products have several different methods of production. No single pattern is followed. Each different product has a separate manner in which it is made.

Leaving technicality aside, cane products have a three step procedure –

1. Firstly, the cane is cut from the forests and transported to the workshop.
2. At the workshop, the barks of the stem as well as thorns are removed and the stem is made smooth.

3. After that, the cane is sun-dried for 2 – 3 days until it becomes strong and able to hold weight.
4. After that it is burnt and given the necessary shape using a burner filled with kerosene.
5. A structure is created and given to a different craftsman for completion.
6. The entire product is cleaned with a cloth.
7. The product is covered with fevicol and sun-dried



Fig. 28 Kerosene Burner

Source – The Author

Finally it is polished and kept away for two hours.



Fig. 29 A Craftsman working on a Cane Sofa

Source – The Author

NEW EMERGING INDUSTRY –

RHINO is an Assam based company which has recently started mechanized production of **CANE AND BAMBOO BLINDS**. They are using Chinese technology to weave cane fibers together like cloth to form chiks and blinds. The mass production of these products will begin within 2 years. The factory for its production is located in the **Export Promotion Industrial Park (EPIP)** near Guwahati.

However, all the products made in this factory are going to be exported and none shall be sold in the local/Indian market.

4. PRODUCTS

4.1 FISHING IMPLEMENTS

- **Khaloy** - Used to store fish after catching.
- **Jakoi** - Used to catch fish in shallow water.
- **Paulo** - Used to trap large fish which are later caught using bare hands.
- **Juluki** - Used to trap small sized fish.
- **Chepa** - This implement has the most interesting technology. The fact that fish can't swim backwards, makes them unable to swim out of the chepa.
- **Dori**
- **Dingora**



Fig. 30 Khaloy

Source – The Author



Fig. 31 Jakoi

Source – The Author



Fig. 32 Paulo

Source – The Author



Fig. 33 Juluki

Source – The Author



Fig. 34 Chepa

Source – The Author

4.2 MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS

- **Gogona** – It is one of the most traditional assamese instruments. It is usually played by women during the Bihu Dance. When not in use, it is worn in the hair along with a **Kako Phoni** (bamboo comb). It is held in between the lips, air is blown through it and a vibration is created by striking it with one hand.
- **Toka** – The Toka is a percussion instrument and used somewhat like a metronome. It is used to maintain the beat. However, change of scale is not possible.

- **Pepa** – It is the most prestigious instrument as it is made almost entirely of a Buffalo's horn. It is shaped like a trumpet. The part controlling the notes is made of bamboo. There are two types of Pepa – (i) Single horned and (ii) Double horned.
- **Baahi/Flute**

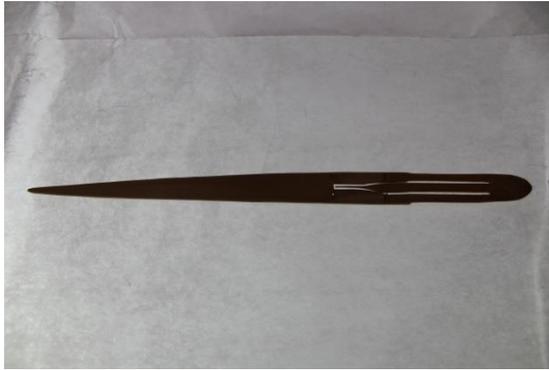


Fig. 35 Gogona
Source – The Author



Fig. 36 Toka
Source – The Author



Fig. 37 Baahi
Source – www.snapdeal.com



Fig. 38 Pepa
Source – www.pinterest.com

4.3 JAPI

- HISTORY

A **Japi** is a bamboo and cane **head-gear** originally designed as a **hat** for tea plantation workers. It was made as a replacement for umbrellas providing the workers with two, instead of one, usable hands making them more efficient in the plantation process.

Since Assam as a state is known for its tea plantations, the Japi itself became a symbol of unity among the people of Assam.

- RAW MATERIAL

1. **JATI** Bamboo (to provide support to entire final product)
2. Cane Fibers (for binding the bamboo together)
3. Cane Stems (to provide support to the japi and to stop the tokou leaves from falling out.
4. Leaves of Tokou Plant.

- TYPES OF JAPI

1. **HALUA JAPI** (non-decorative) is the traditional head-gear and it doesn't have a lot of ornamentation on it as it is purely utility based and has a very minimal price.



Fig. 39 Halua Japi

Source – The Author

2. **FULAM JAPI** (decorative) is usually used as an Assamese symbol. Hence, it is smaller in size and is ornamented with cloth and precious stones. It is used as a gift item as well as a token of respect usually given to men of high status on auspicious occasions.



Fig. 40 Fulam Japi

Source – The Author

- PROCEDURE

1. Firstly, all the cane and bamboo is cleaned (outer cover is removed) and sun-dried for 2-3 days.
2. The bamboo is burnt and bent into the required shape such as to make a skeletal structure to the head-gear.
3. Then, small pieces of cane are arranged in a crisscross manner to form the conical shape of the Japi.
4. Tokou leaves are put on top of this frame and a second frame of crisscrossing cane is attached on top of it to make it structurally strong and to prevent the tokou leaves from falling out.
5. All the different parts of the Japi are bound together using nails and cane fibers.

- USES

1. For protection against rain and sunlight.
2. During farming to increase the efficiency of farmers in the process of ploughing.
3. In Assam's traditional festival, BIHU, the Japi is worn during the Bihu Dance as it represents Assamese culture.

3.4 BISANI

A **Bisani** is a traditional hand-held fan. It was first made hundreds of years ago. It was entirely made of cane. The handle was made using the stem and the head of the fan was made by knitting cane fibres together. In today's time, Bisanis are still an active part of people's lives in both villages as well as the cities of Assam. However, nowadays, a hollow bamboo piece is attached around the handle so that the fan can be rotated at complete 360 degrees increasing both utility and efficiency.

3.5 PATI

A Pati is a traditional Assamese mat which is hand-made by artists in villages all across Assam. It is originally laid on the floor, however, in some cases it is also laid on the bed as a sheet.

A Pati is made using Cane fibers weaved/knitted together to form a surface.

LOCALLY MADE PRODUCTS AND THEIR PRICE LIST



Fig. 41 Pati

Source – The Author

NO.	PRODUCT	PRICE (in Rs.)
1.	Gogona (musical instrument)	100
2.	Jakoi (fishing implement)	200-300
3.	Khaloi (fishing implement)	200-300
4.	Chalani (used to separate stones from rice)	70-200
5.	Dola (used in combination with chalani)	70-200
6.	Dhora (used for winnowing)	120
7.	Bisani	50
8.	Dhari (floor/bed mat)	200-500
9.	Kako Phani (bamboo comb)	100

EXPORT PRODUCTS AND THEIR PRICE LIST –

NO.	PRODUCT	PRICE (in Rs.)
1.	Sofa Sets/Dining Sets	6000 – 200000 (based on quality and aesthetics)
2.	Bamboo Trays	200 – 10000 (based on level of ornamentation)

5. ARCHITECTURAL RELATION



Fig. 42 World's First Bamboo Book Library under construction. (Owned by Mr. MOHAN SAIKIA)

Source – The Author

Cane and Bamboo seem appropriate as a material for making products like chairs; even entire sofa sets. However, the bigger question is whether these can be used as a building material. **Is the true strength of these materials enough to hold floors of people or is it just for show?**

Well, the answer to this question is –

Since ancient times, villagers have actually used cane and bamboo as a material to make entire walls and slanting roofs. Whether this material can hold two or more floors is still a mystery. In the villages of Assam, **bamboo is made into a frame forming complete walls with open able fenestrations**. After the frame is put in place, it is **covered with mud** in order to reinforce the thin bamboo walls. Recently, a well-known craftsman, **Mr. Mohan Saikia**, has started making a three – storey building where he has used cane and bamboo, not for structural strength, but to enhance the aesthetics of the building. The building, on completion, will consist of the **World's First Cane & Bamboo Book Library**.

6. SCOPE FOR DEVELOPMENT

➤ ABOUT THE PRESENT STATE OF THIS ART –

From a producer's point of view, the present state of this art is not good. It is declining. People don't want quality, they want a good bargain. Good quality cane products are long lasting but expensive. Hence, the market is decreasing due to competition from cheap better looking wooden products. Even though cane will continue to exist in the international market, the local market is very small and cane artisans will perish within a few years. *Houga* cane, because of its expensive rate, shall cease from existence within two to three years in the local market.

On one hand, the hand tools are no match for mechanized production in other countries. The traditional craftsmen are moving to the cities for better jobs as they are not well-paid in this tradition.

Nowadays, processes like Polishing, Splitting and Cutting are being done using machines, making the products more professional and costlier.

Traditional JAPI makers are almost extinct as the new generations don't wish to continue this art. They prefer moving out to the cities or just adapting to farming. It is a matter of great distress that soon JAPI will become a thing of the past and will only be found in history books.

7. CONCLUSION

The main raw materials for the industry, i.e. bamboo and cane of various types are abundantly available throughout the State. It requires little or no investment and can be pursued by anybody and everybody of a household as a subsidiary occupation. As such, the industry has considerable scope for development and various new products suited to modern tastes can be manufactured out of bamboo and cane. The critical state of the craft further increases the need to revive it and to maintain it as a source of Assamese culture and tradition. Research needs to be carried out on using bamboo as a building material.

Mechanization of the art is of utmost priority. With the continuous and perennial rise of technology, the need to make the art fit the needs of the present day is a necessity. The new generation of Cane & Bamboo artisans has seen a big fall as this era of craftsmen doesn't find traditional instrument worthwhile. The introduction of machines is important to make this craft faster, more efficient and hence, able to earn more money to sustain the lives of the modern-day craftsman.

ARCHITECTURAL POINT OF VIEW –

As an architect, a study on the Cane & Bamboo Craft of Assam is vital. The usage of cane and bamboo as building materials needs more research as, presently, this is only practiced traditionally by the villagers. 'The study of cane and bamboo as materials that provide structural support as well as aesthetics to buildings' is a topic which is severely untouched.

The RAINFOREST RESEARCH INSTITUTE (RRI) holds workshop in its JORHAT Unit about the CANE and BAMBOO CRAFT every year. The RRI has a total of 6 units around the country. An architect should be a part of this workshop at least once to be able to fully understand the true value and nature of Assamese Bamboo and the culture. The properties of cane and bamboo need to be studied and further developed both as a building material as well as a raw material for the traditional craft.

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APPENDIX – I : INTERVIEWS

DAY 1 (22-03-16)

M/S Pinky Furniture,

A T Road, Tinkunia,

Dibrugarh, Assam.

(Cane Artist + Retailer)

Q. Where do you bring all the cane from?

Ans. Most of our raw material is achieved locally. However, it is a well known fact that the best Cane grows in Arunachal Pradesh, both as plantations and in the wild. Expensive furniture, which may ever cost above 1-2 lac rupees, is made using cane brought from Arunachal.

Q. What are the different kinds of cane used in this craft?

Ans. Well, all kinds of *baet* (cane) that grow in and near Assam are used in this craft. There are mainly three types of cane –

- Houga
- Raidang
- Jati

Out of these, **Jati** is used for making small decorative items as thin strands of it can be extracted. These strands can be used to give a detailed output on the final products.

Houga is the most expensive type of cane. It is mainly used for making furniture. Even though this kind also grows within Assam, we prefer bringing Houga *baet* from Arunachal as it is of a better quality there.

Raidang is the cheapest out of the three. *It is also known as Jheng.*

Q. Where is cane grown and how is it processed?

Ans. Cane is grown in plantations by big companies for mass production of products like furniture and different kinds of decorative items. However, Individual artists like me get our cane from the wild where it grows naturally.

- Firstly, the cane is cut from its base and transported to the workshop.
- At the workshop, the leaves are removed and the outer layer of the stem containing thorns is cut out leaving behind a smooth thin stem which will later act as support in the final products.
- Now, few of these stems are taken and their fibers are separated. These will later be weaved together to form cloth like structures and as binding units for the stems.
- All these parts are then sun-dried and readied for the craft.

Q. Give us an insight into the present state of this craft here in Assam.

Ans. The present state of this art, well, is not good. It is declining. People don't want quality, they want a good bargain. Good quality cane products are long lasting but expensive. Hence, the market is decreasing due to competition from cheap better looking wooden products. Even though cane will continue to exist in the international market, the local market is very small and cane artisans will perish within a few years. *Houga* cane, because of its expensive rate, shall cease from existence within two to three years in the local market.

DAY 2 (23-03-16)

In Assam, the cane and bamboo craft has its manufacturing and retailing centre at **NALBARI** and **BARPETA** which are two small villages near **GUWAHATI**. Since it wasn't possible to reach Guwahati physically, we did a Skype Interview with **MR. RAHUL VIKRAM DAS** who is a manufacturer and trader of Assamese bamboo and cane products within as well as outside of the country. He has a close relation with the villages and was eager to explain to us the entire process of manufacture. He specializes in **FURNITURE, BASKETS** and other **DECORTIVE ITEMS**.

Q. Give us the prospectus of Guwahati as a hub of Assam and its relation to this craft.

Ans. Well, since Guwahati is the most well developed city of Assam, all the major exhibitions for these kinds of handicrafts are held here. Many showrooms, both government as well as private undertakings have been built in order to create awareness about the traditional crafts of Assam including the Cane and Bamboo Culture which is by far the most widespread.

The products aren't sold in a market, but are mostly auctioned off at exhibitions. Two important government owned handicraft showrooms in Guwahati are namely –

3. JAGARAN
4. PRAGJYOTIKA

Q. Please tell us about the state of this craft in Nalbari and Barpeta.

Ans. Nalbari and Barpeta are two small villages in Lower Assam, almost 20 KM away from Guwahati. These villages are the source of commercial production of cane and bamboo products, however, in an unorthodox way. The products are not made in a factory. They are hand-made by the villagers in their respective houses. The process is as follows –

5. Certain families (15-20) are employed by a trader/manufacturer in Guwahati.
6. The trader provides the villagers with raw material from the nearby forests and pays them money according to the order that he gets from the buyers.
7. The villagers are given a set amount of time.
8. Once the product is made, it is brought to the city by the villagers themselves.

Cane and bamboo baskets take 3-4 hours to make, while furniture takes 4-5 days.

Q. Where is the best quality cane and bamboo found?

Ans. CANE –

Cane and bamboo usually grows in the wild and not in plantations. It is a well known fact that even though this craft is performed in Assam, the best raw cane grows in ARUNACHAL PRADESH.

BAMBOO –

Assam is divided into several districts. The best Bamboo is found in the KARBI ANGLANG DISTRICT (hill district). However, outside Assam, the best quality bamboo grows in Meghalaya.

Q. Tell us more about the market. Are these products exported?

Ans. Cane and Bamboo products of Assam are world-famous and are exported to almost all Asian countries as well as a few Middle-Eastern countries.

Our competition from other nations include –

1. Thailand
2. China
3. Cambodia
4. Vietnam

These countries have partial or complete mechanization and hence better craftsmanship than the mere hand tools of Assam.

In the Indian Market, however, Assamese cane and bamboo has a much higher value. The only competition within the country is FURNITURE from TRIPURA. Cane and Bamboo furniture made in Tripura is considered the best in the nation.

Q. Tell us about the present state of this craft.

Ans. The present state of this craft is rather questionable. On one hand, the hand tools are no match for mechanized production in other countries. The traditional craftsmen are moving to the cities for better jobs as they are not well-paid in this tradition.

Nowadays, processes like Polishing, Splitting and Cutting are being done using machines, making the products more professional and costlier.

Traditional JAPI makers are almost extinct as the new generations don't wish to continue this art. They prefer moving out to the cities or just adapting to farming. It is a matter of great distress that soon JAPI will become a thing of the past and will only be found in history books.

DAY 3 (24-03-16)

Mr. Mohan Saikia

Nonath Village,

Bakata, Sipsagar District,

Assam.



The following is an interview with **Mr. Mohan Saikia** who is a Cane and Bamboo artist. He specializes in making products using the waste part of Cane and Bamboo which is usually thrown away by other artists of this manner. He has been working on and mastering his skills since the past 20 years. He has won many awards for his work; however, he prefers to stay humbled to his roots. His passion for this craft has led him to work on unimaginable scales and earn a source a livelihood for himself. He is a well-read gentleman fluent in English and a philosopher in his own beautiful ways.



HISTORY –

Mr. Mohan Saikia was born in the tiny village of **Nanath**. His father passed away before he was born and his mother passed away when he was just a year old.

Very early in his life, he learnt the importance of money and education. He read a lot of books, both in English and Assamese. He learnt to embrace bamboo and cane as his only method of livelihood and his love for this art made it his passion.



LIFE –

Mr. Saikia has been practicing this craft for the past 20 years. In these years, he has built a reputation for himself and his love for this art has lead him to create a battalion of crafts persons who work under him.

Presently he has FIVE units under him, all five of which specialize in different kinds of products.

1. MR. SANJEEV DOWERAH

Dowerah Village,

Nemuguri, Sivsagar District,

Assam.

Makes **Gogona, Kakoi Phani** (comb) and small decorative items.

2. MR. INDRAKAMAL PHUKAN

Bakata,

Nagaon, Sivsagar District,
Assam.

Makes **Horai, Bota**, Pens and combs.

3. MR. BASANTA NATH

Bakata,

Nagaon, Sivsagar District, Assam.

4. MR. ABIJIT NATH

Makes products to be sold in a showroom in **NEMALIGARH**. Decorative items, Japi, etc.

5. MRS. LAXMI BARUAH

Specialized in small scale production of gogona, combs, pens and decorative items.



INTERVIEW –

Q. What are the different kinds of cane and bamboo that you use?

Ans. BAMBOO –

1. Bholuka
2. Jati (most used)
3. Bor – Bholuka
4. Kako
5. Bijuli
6. Mokal

CANE –

1. Houka
2. Raidang
3. Jati

Q. Give us your views on the present state of this craft.

Ans. Well, I'd blame the new generation if we're not making enough cane and bamboo products anymore. But it's not entirely their fault. On a small scale, this craft doesn't earn a lot of money and hence, people prefer to move to the town to find jobs. They drive private vehicles like bulldozers and cranes and this earns them around 10000 rupees a month. However, the traditional Japi has a huge market so many people come back to this art.

Q. What is your aim?

Ans. I'm glad you asked. I am presently working on a three-storey building which I shall be turning into a Museum cum Resort. I plan on building the **World's First Bamboo library**. I have written 100 books on the history and culture of Assam. The amazing thing about this library will be that the books are entirely made of cane and bamboo unlike anywhere else in the entire world.



Q. What is the motto of your life?

Ans. My motto would be – “Simple living, high thinking.” I don't open a website about my work because I feel like I don't want to be part of a market. I want to do something different. Something nobody has ever done before. I want to leave a mark. I want people to use natural hand-made material as that would help in the betterment of our environment.

Q. What else do you do apart from practicing this craft?

Ans. Well, I like to teach. I occasionally do workshops at the RAINFOREST RESEARCH INSTITUTE (RRI) in JORHAT. I teach people about this craft and try to find new craftsmen. The RRI has six centres all over India. You must visit someday. You will learn a lot about methods of reducing pollution levels and ways to protect our forests.

