The Scientific Structure Underlying Traditional Knowledge: Material Culture Of Assamese Kumaar Community

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Abstract: The Kumaar community of Assam inherits a unique affiliation of identity in the formation of mainstream Assamese nationality. Considered as one of the ancient communities of mainland India from the Vedic ages, kumaar i.e. the potter community is cited as ‘kumbhokaar’ in the Puranas and historically they are popularly identified as ‘kumaar’ till today. Historical and anthropological evidences claim that from seventh century onwards, kumaar community registers its presence in Assam. They have toiled with their occupational pursuit of pottery culture both as a means of livelihood and harbours as a significant way to facilitate an integral socio-cultural life with the rest of Assam. But with the passage of time, due to the industrial and machinery reshuffling of the world in post-colonial times, this vernacular material culture of Kumaar community has encountered an abjured phase and it is an urgency to reconsolidate this handmade industry from its decaying existence. It is needless to speak how much affect it will charge upon the cultural canvas of Assam along with making its rural economy dying eventually if this industry gets collapsed. While the predicament of the Kumaars cannot be encapsulated only within an existential frame alone, what constitutes the structure of this article is to explore the practical speculations underlying this material culture upon the functioning of human life. Being the root of the cosmos, the earth is the vibrant source of energy and motion force of human existence. Taking this attribute in the forefront, it is equally significant to reflect upon the scientific bases of this vernacular material culture which constitutes a traditional signifier of culture and community life. In a nutshell, this paper is committed to conflate tradition and scientific argumentation as its basis primarily focusing on the indigenous pottery culture of Assam developed by the kumaar community.

Keywords: Beliefs, Culture, Indigenous, Industry, Material, Scientific, Tradition.

I. INTRODUCTION
From the pre-historic times, the Kumaar community of Assam has performed a superfluous business of granting rural economy with material proliferations and with their relentless pursuit of pottery culture, the vernacular industry has been exposed to popular name and fame. An insight into their material culture will make us aware of the fact that there are less representations of it because of a lack of detailed documentation of their traditional history. The hegemonic discourse of mainstream culture has, to a great extent, relegated the kumaar community and their cultural tradition of preserving a significant practice of fine craft into the margin yet we cannot value less this cultural practice that reflects real material condition of the community. To locate this cultural form within the institutional structure is a postmodern approach that exactly supports the idea that circulation of specific representation of a community directly leads to the questions of power and privileges in the society. It can also be argued that cultural forms and practices are linked to material conditions of production and profits in a particular social network. Kumaar community of Assam can be placed in a conflicting and struggling zone in the dominant structure. But as has already been pointed out that this study will conflate two discourses on the same plane i.e. scientific interpretation of tradition which is preserved through a vernacular mode of material culture seems quite thought-provoking. The art of pottery is not only a significant cultural formation but also implicates their subjectivity and identity construction.

This study will draw certain conclusions regarding the pragmatic values as well as the scientific interpretations behind utilizing these material resources as a part of Assamese household life.

II. METHODOLOGY
This paper is basically prepared through an analytical method based on primary sources from a field visit and secondary sources of data including books, journals, and magazines.

III. AREA OF THE STUDY
For convenience of study, the research has been carried out particularly through a field study of a rural area called ‘dhekiaal’ situated at northern part of Golaghat district of Assam. The region is specifically popular for its culturally oriented work-culture of the people and pottery culture is an unique characteristic of this area.

IV. DISCUSSIONS AND RESULTS
In a wider sense, the concept of ‘folk culture’ accommodates ‘folk-beliefs’ as a fundamental element and folk-beliefs has an immediate inclusivity in the wider circumference of tradition which has a transformative nature with the passage of time. Not only have the social rituals, philosophy, religion, ideology had a strong appeal towards the genesis of folk-beliefs but also material culture of a particular community heavily influences this factor. Under the range of memory studies, these folk-beliefs foreground diverse discourses underlying the particular community. When we study the material culture of kumaar community of Assam, we see the operations of these discourses in various patterns which are directly related to their identity politics and the degree of conglomeration with the
mainstream culture. From an unusual perspective, this discovery of scientific rationalization of traditional cultural practices gives evidence to the fact that these are conceived out of a living reality, not simply a matter of archival interest. The advent of technically sophisticated modern life swallows up such distinguished folk-cultural practices which signal a close proximity of negligence and subsequent extinction of them along with the folk-beliefs attributed with those. There should be renewed cultural poetics to change the whole scenario which strategically leads to the emergence of ‘New Historicism’ propounded by Stephen Greenblatt in its early phase. Inaugurating a new sphere on scientific study of these cultural industries can reverberate these worn-out properties for experimentation and attention to the posterity. As an alternative structure for sustenance of traditional life, this perspective can be acknowledged as quite relevant. The study of pottery culture enables us to understand the links between culture and history. What we usually term as tradition is nothing but a living structure of culture which is relived in diverse ways in different times of human history. An analysis of ancient medieval Assamese cultural life will show that this particular material culture is an effective prism to understand the rich treasure of knowledge and manual skill of the potters. Traditionally, the folk beliefs associated with utilizing pottery items in day to day life explore scientific bases which are also socially abided by in many rural areas till today in terms of their scientific justifications. If we look it from a larger context, production and reception of this material culture forms a culture industry which propagates a particular version of social formations. The textualization of Anom history has addressed this ancient cultural practice prevailed among the Kumaar community though in practice, its origin cannot be yet clearly discerned. In the seventh century ‘Nidhaanpur’ stone script of ancient Kamrup region, the word ‘kumbhokaar’ has been mentioned and the later rescue of ‘Do-Porbotia’ stone script of Tezpur district, has also evidenced their presence. A massive expanse of fourteen-hundred years can be associated with this cultural practice from the rule of Bhaskarbarma in Assam. To trace its historical root from the Ahom period onwards, it is argued that Mumai Tamuli Borbaruah, uncle of the renowned historical persona Lachit Borphukan, has consolidated the kumaar people from different corners of Assam in the Dhekial region in order to validate this village as an ideal one to cherish in history. Under the royal patronage, he tried to embellish and preserve this indigenous culture among generations. From that time, the Kumaar community of Dhekial region has earned its reputation for appropriating this cultural industry for long ages and with the emergence of commercial business pursuit, this culture has experienced revolutionary changes. Their tradition of making earthly materials cannot be reduced only to their aesthetic appeal rather it has distinguished pragmatic benefits to be inculcated for the sake of biological maintenance of human health. To foreground this idea, we need to encapsulate how usage of these resources has served a primary function of biological sustenance of human body and also heavily influencing the biotic-abiotic bilateral mechanism of nature. Here our concern is to show that though this material culture looks very primitive in its origin, there is no superstitious outdated beliefs behind their production and usage. Rather, a scientific reflection upon their usage transcends the stereotypical association of tradition as a non-relevant proverb. From an ecocritical approach, this material culture is consciously designed on this motif to use and recycle the items. A wider discussion on these materials have brought the following results. ‘Kalah’ is one of those indispensable household items made by the potters which is profoundly used in almost every Assamese home. In Dhekial region, from the proportion of size if we look at, there are mainly three types of kalahs that can be found in this area.

(a) Clay vessel for storing jaggery (Guror Kalah): this clay vessel is 1.5/2 feet in its height and it weighs almost 7/8 kg. Behind using this, Assamese household tradition is indispensably related. This vessel is primarily used in sugarcane cultivation when after processing jaggery, it is stored in these vessels for long time preservation to protect it from unhygienic conditions of food spoiling, weather changes, affect of germs and insects. The clay vessel is like a natural preservative as it can immune the food from affect of bacteria till 8/9 months. It is one of the effective best conservative practices which is commonly found in Assamese household items as it is scientifically accepted that clay absorbs the surplus water from the jaggery and helps in solidifying it. Though this process of jaggery storing has now gone into oblivion in many places because of the overwhelming demand for technically smart food preservation tactics, yet we cannot undermine the scientifically proven interpretation existing in Assamese folk society for using it even in community occasions like marriage, village feasts, ritual, and religious ceremonies.

(b) Clay pot for drinking water: along with food preservation, clay pot is commonly used in traditional Assamese society for conserving drinking water and it is one of the commonly visible household equipments in Assamese rural scene. During summer season, the water after storing in clay pots gets naturally cooled that reduces dehydration level of our body and keeps it cool. It maintains bowel functioning regular and water drank from clay pots can immune our body from deadly diseases like cholera, hyza, dysentery which cause from infected water. Traditional Assamese society considers water stored in clay pots is a sacred thing and its consummation was in vogue for religious ceremonies. After drawn from rivers, ponds, the distilled water gets filtrated in clay pots which is a natural eco-friendly way to purify water and scientifically proven. The clay pot used for storing clothes in traditional Assamese society is also scientifically based as it protects the clothing materials years after years from damaging effect of climate changes. We call those clay pots as ‘muthia’. The climate of Assam is pervaded with a high level of humidity in six months of a year and for that, the rural people here used to contain their clothes in these pots tightly covered by a lid. The clothes do not get worn out even after successive adverse impacts of weather and
insects attack. Moreover, the popular Assamese weaving clothes like ‘paat’, ‘muga’, ‘khadi’ etc. require an optimum balance of temperature for preserving its quality. The agrarian Assamese society also uses such kind of pots for multiple purposes like storing rice, pulses etc. which has valid grounds to prove its scientificty more than those widely used plastic containers and air-conditioned granary or refrigerator in present times.

(c) Tekeli (small round-necked clay jug): tekeli is one of those commonly used household equipments which is used both for food preparation and food preservation by Assamese people. They used to keep milk in the tekelis so that after a particular duration, it turns into natural curd without any artificial application of catalysts though this takes very less days for the final product. Curd processed through this way is delicious, free from any bacterial infection as well as advantageous for our health. Use of tekeli has numerous ritual implications in Assamese domestic and cultural life.

(d) Soru (mini round-shaped clay pot): soru is a part and parcel item of Assamese kitchen. Traditionally, Assamese folk society gets their rice cooked in these ‘sorus’. With its usage, many cultural belief-systems of Assamese society are also integrally related. We have this religious tradition of offering ‘payas’/ ‘khir’ to the deity when a person catches pox, fever, or any unknown diseases and this ‘payas’ must be cooked in a soru. This payas is a boiled version of rice adding milk and sugar which is prepared for the patient and it is believed that s/he will feel some good repercussions as remedy from god after eating it. This is not a mere observation of religiosity mingled with tradition rather it has scientific bases behind such observances which we need to keep it in mind.

(e) Bhabuki: this is another home utensil which is made out of clay and basically used for the purpose of keeping snacks. It is believed that it is an effective preservative for the grinded rice, snacks and is also healthy.

V. CONCLUSION
It is true that the resources which forms the material culture of the kumaar community of Assam has a long-drawn tradition but as a post-modern human being, it should be our continuous endeavour to study the science behind these practices and thereby to promote such rich cultural heritage to the forefront of global audience. Only folk beliefs cannot be the backbone of such traditional cultural constructs to survive in the changing circumstances, scientific argumentation validate these practices for an extensive use. From an economical perspective also, there can be a rising demand for pottery items in global market as it will provide quality assurance and ecological suplement. It is not exaggerate to comment that there are profound justifications of science as par with cultural belief-systems in using these material resources in day to day life. From that neo-cultural perspective, it is very relevant to reflect upon scientific argumentative structure lying beneath the meta-structure of tradition in such cultural practices.

REFERENCES

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