

# Handicrafts in Assam

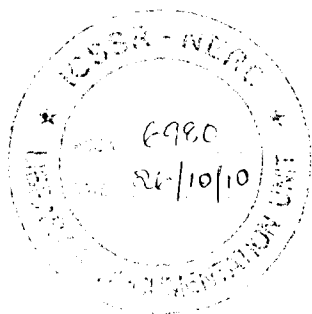


Krishna Jyoti Handique

# **HANDICRAFTS IN ASSAM**

**Krishna Jyoti Handique**





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Rs. 690

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ISBN: 978-81-7835-819-2

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Published in 2010 in India by  
Kalpaz Publications  
C-30, Satyawati Nagar,  
Delhi-110052  
E-mail: kalpaz@hotmail.com  
Phone : 9212729499

*Laser Type Setting by: Rudra Computer Graphics, Delhi*  
*Printed at : Gian Ridhi Offset Printers, Delhi*

# Contents

<i>Foreword</i>	7
<i>Preface</i>	9
<i>List of Tables</i>	13
<b>1. Introduction</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>2. Handicrafts in Assam: Past and Present</b>	<b>37</b>
<b>3. Review of Existing Literature on Handicrafts</b>	<b>71</b>
<b>4. A Brief Profile of the Surveyed Districts and Socio-Economic Conditions of the Sample Entrepreneurs</b>	<b>99</b>
<b>5. Economics of Cane and Bamboo Units</b>	<b>137</b>
<b>6. Problems and Prospects of Cane and Bamboo Works in Assam</b>	<b>173</b>
<b>7. Summary, Suggestions and Conclusion</b>	<b>203</b>

<i>Appendices</i>	<b>221</b>
<i>Glossary</i>	<b>251</b>
<i>Abbreviations</i>	<b>255</b>
<i>Photography</i>	<b>257</b>
<i>Bibliography</i>	<b>259</b>
<i>Index</i>	<b>273</b>

# 1

## Introduction

The handicrafts have a deep significance to our society in day-to-day life of the people. It is seen that handicrafts stand as an example of human creativity expressed over generating of human society. It may be mentioned that from the beginning of the known human history, the handicrafts form a valuable social, cultural and economic trait of a community. The socio-economic pattern of a society is very often reflected in the quality, creativity and craftsmanship of handicrafts. The handicrafts not only constitute the economic life but also the cultural unity of the people. It is a fact that the handicrafts items have far greater significance than is indicated by the value of their production as they embody cultural, social, religious and artistic traditions in the society.

The term handicrafts stand for those items of a specific society, which are generally produced manually with their traditional indigenous technical knowledge. Handicrafts tell us about the nature and needs of life of the people which are the indigenous creation and

expression of the rural folk. In certain parts of the world, handicrafts have been the skilled work, to create items of utility. However, the activities of handicraft can be termed as trade or occupation that requires to develop skill in the use of mind and hand. In most of the developing countries, handicrafts have continued in their traditional forms.

Handicrafts have been defined in different ways. In the report of the Task Force on handicrafts, for eight five year plan, it has been rightly observed that it is difficult to give a cut-and-dried definition on handicrafts.<sup>1</sup> Various Organizations and writers have given different definitions of handicrafts in a different manner from time to time. According to Encyclopedia Britannica, "handicrafts are manual skills for making usable products graced with international visual appeal."<sup>2</sup> In the New Book of Knowledge, handicrafts have been defined as "objects made by hand, usually one at a time, are handicrafts."<sup>3</sup> The office of the Development Commissioner (Handicrafts), Ministry of Textiles, Govt. of India, New Delhi, has given a workable definition on handicrafts as "items made by hand, often with the use of simple tools, and generally artistic and/or traditional in nature. They include objects of utility and objects of decoration"<sup>4</sup>. In the words of M.P. Ranjan, "the term handicrafts and Crafts are used in a very specific sense, to mean those activities that deal with the conversion of materials into products, using primarily hands skills with simple tools and employing the local tradition wisdom of craft Processed"<sup>5</sup>. On the other hand, John Mao mentioned that "the term craft has been derived from the Anglo-Saxon craft which means skill, strength or cunning in contrast to art which implies an intention of producing beauty or pleasure"<sup>6</sup>. From the above definitions, it can be mentioned here that the range of

studying handicrafts are very wide because it includes all the activities or objects that produce, by using hand skills with simple tools and mind. In fact, handicrafts should cover products made primarily by hands skills with simple tools; use of mind and employing indigenous knowledge. Handicrafts were originally made for home consumption, but occasionally, some surplus products were exchanged for goods. With the changes of economic system handicraft products were sold into the market economy.

Depending on their various specialization, the maker of crafts known as artisan, craftsmen, craftsperson, designer crafts parson, artist craftsperson etc. Kanwarjit Nagi has used the word craftsperson to imply a skilled worker in crafts<sup>7</sup>. Dictionary of Economics has defined craftsman as “a skilled worker in a particular occupation, trade or crafts, who is able to apply a range of skills to basically non-repetitive work with a minimum of direction and supervision.”<sup>8</sup> It may be mentioned that a person who has engaged himself for production of handicrafts items with the help of his hand, eye, brain and tools for both home consumption and business purposes is generally known as handicrafts artisan or craftsman. This definition is also applied to the craftsman in Assam. In Assam, the crafts objects are generally created by the tribal craftsmen, mainly or partly, according to their traditional pattern.

The handicrafts not only provide income and employment opportunities to lakhs of people but also an essential key to the understanding of the cultural, social and religious heritage in the state of Assam. The skilled hand of a craftsman is most important and most the invisible resource of a society. According to Encyclopedia Britannica, handicrafts includes needle work, lace,

weaving, printed textile, pottery, ornamental, metalwork, jewelry, leatherwork, wood working, embroidered goods, cane, bamboo, bell-metal, ivory, tannery works etc<sup>9</sup>. A Catalogue on Handicrafts of India includes handloom woven fabrics and hand printed artistic cotton and silk textiles, bamboo and cane works, wood carving, ivory and horn works, handloom, leather works, pottery, jewellery and metal wares and a host of such other artistic products of cottage artisans as handicrafts.<sup>10</sup> In the context of industry and crafts, it can be mentioned that industry has its origin in crafts. In the Pre Industrial Age, agriculture and handicrafts were interdependent and combined and the degree of the development of crafts in a country was dependent on agricultural development. T. M. Abraham observed that "craft is the historical parent of modern industry and the craftsman was the immediate predecessor to the modern industrial technologist."<sup>11</sup> It is a fact that the primary aim of a craftsman is perfection of beauty in the product of his hand and mind. At the same time, a craftsman is like a poet or a painter in a society. From the social points of view, handicrafts are essential for the satisfaction of human wants. Handicrafts satisfy not only the economic wants alone but also the aesthetic cravings of human hearth throughout the world.

Among the various crafts, cane and bamboo works are the most important crafts in India. At the same time, Assam is very suitably endowed with resources for cane and bamboo works in terms of men, material and markets. Assam has been blessed with very rich, important tropical resources including cane and bamboo. It may be noted that cane and bamboo are now considered as the most important natural and renewable vegetable resources in the world. Cane and bamboo works are also recognized

for a sustainable development in the economy of Assam. From the very ancient times, cane and bamboo works have been recognized as the most important works because of its role in ecological, social, cultural and economic upliftment of people of Assam. Among the famous traditional crafts, the making of cane and bamboo items is perhaps the most universally practiced by all sections of the people throughout the state of Assam<sup>12</sup>. The cane and bamboo crafts bear the witness of many cultures, traditions, races and civilization and these have been persevered by the long experience of cane and bamboo skilled artisan of Assam. The cane and bamboo product may be termed as pure handicraft products and these products have very wide range of uses and such commodities are found in every household in the state. The wide range of utility of cane and bamboo products has the sanction of tradition and culture in the state.

Assam is one of the most important states of India known for its rich and diverse cane and bamboo products. The state has been blessed with very rich and important tropical resource including cane and bamboo from the very ancient time. It is generally seen that cane and bamboo products are part and parcel of the life of the people of Assam. The cane and bamboo items are used extensively in the day-to-day life of people throughout the state which provides more employment opportunities and better income distribution to the people.. This craft is mainly a household cottage industry and it provides a subsidiary occupation of the rural people. On the other hand, this craft provides full-time occupation to those highly skilled artisans who produce cane and bamboo products on commercial basis in both rural and urban areas in Assam. The potentiality of making cane and bamboo articles on commercial scale is quite considerable for the good demand in the state.

Assam has a rich diversity in cane and bamboo resources. It may be mentioned here that there are over 1200 species of bamboo found in the world. The largest bamboo resources covering 500 species of bamboo are found in China. Whereas in India, 120 species of bamboo are reported.<sup>13</sup> On the other hand, about 600 species of cane are found in the world. Indonesia is one of the largest supplier of raw cane comprising about 300 species. It is known that 51 species of cane are distributed in different part of India<sup>14</sup>. The North Eastern Region occupies more than 50 percent of the total bamboo area with 81 species of bamboo. It is known that more then 24 species of cane are found in different areas of the North Eastern Region. On the other hand, about 18 species of cane (Appendix I) and about 29 species of bamboo (Appendix II) are available in the state of Assam<sup>15</sup>. It is generally seen that despite the diverse species of cane and bamboo, only a handful and suitable species are used by the artisans in Assam. Some cane and bamboo species are cultivated in homesteads and some species are grown naturally in the forest of Assam. Our cane and bamboo artisans collect their valuable raw materials for handicraft industries, mostly from homesteads, local market and nearby natural forests of the sate. The cane and bamboo industry is generally a low capital but labour intensive and hence acts as a good employment generation and better income distribution to the people. These household industries provide diverse employment opportunities and value-added products in every rural household.

It is a fact that the cottage industry can play a major role to reduce unemployment, poverty and income inequalities problems in the third world countries, like India. The manufacturing activities of cane and bamboo

crafts in most of the rural areas of Assam are carried out by both male and female members of the family, but the male members pre-dominate the activities of cane and bamboo works. The manufacturing of most of the products is meant for domestic use and only a small part of the products is sold in the market. There are large number of units in the urban and semi-urban areas engaged in the manufacture of various cane and bamboo products with distinctive features and exquisite designs. The making of cane and bamboo products requires a high degree of skill and knowledge. In these cane and bamboo units, the professional artisans are associated who follow this trade as a whole time occupation sell their products in the different markets. It may be recalled that the cane and bamboo are used for the construction of houses, bridges, various kind of household utility items, fishing instruments, musical implements, weaving implements, decorative items, ploughing instruments, hunting implements etc. for the daily usage of the Assamese People. The cane and bamboo articles like *Bahi, Bichani, Borchunga, Chepa, Chalani, Charakee, Cheri, Dola, Doon, Dhara, Dhanu, Duli, Dingaru, Gagona, Garaka, Hukuma, Hali, Japi, Jakoi, Jluke, Japa, Kula, Khorahi, Karia, Lati, Khuka, Khaloi, Latai, Murha, Muhura, Pawra, Pachi, Pola, Ranch, Tuna, Thoura, Toka, Ugha*, Flower Vase, Fruit Tray, Tea Tray, Candle Stand, Magazine Rack, Flower Basket, Tea Stainer, Beer Mug, Jewellery Box, Hanger, Egg Shape Basket, Umbrella Stand, Baby Jhula, Baby Cot, Garden Chair, Dining Chair, Ladies hand mirrors, etc., are used extensively for day to day life of the people of Assam.

The Assamese craftsmen like other part of the world have been practicing cane and bamboo culture since time

immemorial by using various techniques. To know about the material culture of the Assamese people, it is essential to study the cane and bamboo crafts evolution which have cut a deep impression in the life of the people in Assam. Of the exquisite designs of cane and bamboo items, some are made for general use and some are made for sale in the market. However, with the changing socio-economic scenario artisans have begun to sell in the markets those items that are required in everyday life of the people. It can be noted here that in most of the cane and bamboo growing developing countries, cane and bamboo crafts have continued as a folk craft. A.G. Rao observed that folk crafts which catered to the needs of the rural population, have remained simple and the creativity of folk craft excelled in harmonious social settings<sup>16</sup>. The creativity of the artisans have reflected in the high level of product aesthetics. It is now known that cane and bamboo craft is an integral part of the culture, traditions and the religious ceremonies in most of the South Asian countries. It also provides one of the items of food, raw materials, shelter and even medicine for a good part of the population in the world. In Japan, bamboo is treated as a precious material akin to gold and almost cares and attention has been given to the artisan's work, which is reflected in the exquisite quality and craftsmanship of the Japanese bamboo items. Cane is also considered one of the most important minor forest products in India. It is however estimated that there has been increasing growth of cane-trade in Indonesia, Philippines, Malaysia and Thailand, over the past decade, but there was an declining trend in India.

The cane and bamboo craft has been an inseparable and indispensable part of the economy of Assam as well

as NER. The making of cane and bamboo handicrafts becomes crucially relevant from the angle of economic, environment, employment, equality and culture in Assam. The cane and bamboo craft constitutes an important sector in the rural areas for the earning of income of the rural folk. With the changing Socio-economic scenario, the craft is shifting from rural to urban areas in the state. However, the cane and bamboo craft is functioning in an unorganized way. The cane and bamboo products are in great demand outside the state. But the supply can not be increased due to old aged method of production. It has been widely believed that handicrafts industry has a special place in the economic development of Assam. Of course, the role perceived for crafts including cane and bamboo crafts and the nature of crafts has been changing over time, but the importance attached to it in the developmental process remains unsatisfactory in Assam. At the same time, it is also seen that the cane and bamboo products are representative of a major fraction of the rich diversity of handicrafts of Assam which constitute an indigenous cottage industry in the state of Assam.

### **Importance of the Study:**

In a backward state like Assam, handicrafts have a big role to play for economic development. There is ample scope for the development of handicrafts on the basis of factor endowments available in the state. The rural agricultural families of the state earn supplementary income from different types of handicrafts. Among the various crafts, cane and bamboo works are the most important crafts in Assam. The cane and bamboo works not only provide employment and income opportunities but also form a prominent element in cultural and social unity of the Assamese people. The cane and bamboo

artisans have been important element in the development process of the state. From the very ancient times, handicrafts had been recognized as the most important economic activity in the state. Therefore, a comprehensive study on handicrafts assumes great relevance and significance.

The importance of cane and bamboo works as remunerative economic activity is yet to be realized in Assam. The cane and bamboo works are amenable to labour intensive and value added processing systems. As cane and bamboo products enter divers markets, the value of these resources tends to grow in the state. Additional benefits may be derived from cane and bamboo works, systematized resource use, management, marketing and processing in the state. In Assam, handicrafts study have been shown by some writers, departments, organizations etc,. But very few systematic studies on the potentiality of cane and bamboo works have been made in Assam. Only recently some scholars and the very few organizations have shown their interest in assessing the present status and potentiality of cane and bamboo works in the state. The scope of our study covers problems and prospects of handicrafts in Assam, particularly cane and bamboo works. It is hope that such research study will also enrich knowledge, especially in the field of handicrafts in the state. We also hoped that such knowledge will lead to overcome the different socio-economic barriers in the handicrafts sector in Assam.

### **Objectives of the Study:**

In spite of abundance of raw materials for cane and bamboo crafts in the state, crafts based on cane and bamboo works are not developed, as expected. The

professionalisation in the handicrafts industry has yet not started in the state. Instead, much of the traditional items made from cane and bamboo are fast disappearing from the state. The present study seeks to modest attempt to examine the following objectives.

1. To study the historical development and present status of handicrafts in the state.
2. To find out the socio-economic conditions of the cane and bamboo entrepreneurs.
3. To find out economics of cane and bamboo units.
4. To examine the problems and prospects of cane and bamboo works in the state.
5. To assess the overall status of cane and bamboo works in Assam in order to formulate strategies for its growth in competitive market.

**Hypotheses:**

To fulfill these objectives, the following hypotheses will be tested.

1. Cane and bamboo works are not remunerative to the entrepreneurs in Assam.
2. There is no proper infrastructural facilities for development of cane and bamboo works in Assam.

**Methodology:**

In order to achieve the objectives of the present study, seven districts were selected for field investigation from the Brahmaputra valley in Assam. These seven districts were purposively selected for field investigation as cane

and bamboo works are mostly concentrated in these districts. These seven districts are Sivasagar, Tinsukia, Nagaon, Nalbari, Sonitpur, Kamrup and Goalpara district of the state. These districts are located at the Brahmaputra valley of Assam. The list of registered cane and bamboo units in the rural and urban areas of the seven districts was prepared. From the list only a few successful units were purposively selected. For non registered units the efficiently functioning units as reported by the District Industrial Centre and Commerce (DICC) were purposively selected. All total 131 cane and bamboo units were randomly selected from both rural and urban areas for collection of primary data from the seven districts for the purpose of this study. Out of the total 131 sample units, 86 (65.65%) were rural and the rest of 45(34.35%) were in the urban area. This present study is an empirical research based on the survey method. The primary data relating to cane and bamboo units has been collected through personal interview method. For the purpose of collection of primary data, a survey schedule (Appendix III) has been used. District wise sample cane and bamboo units are presented in Table 1.1.

The randomly selected total 131 cane and bamboo units for primary data collection were both registered and non-registered units. Out of the total 35 registered units, 18(51.43 %) were rural and 17(48.57 %) were urban areas of the surveyed districts.

The primary information collected through canvassing the survey schedule among the sample cane and bamboo units were aggregated and then the collected data were properly processed and tabulated by using standard statistical tools for the purpose of analysis in the

**Table: 1.1**  
**District wise of Sample Cane and Bamboo Units, 2002-03**

District	No. of Rural Units			No. of Urban Units			No. of Total Units
	Registered Units	Non Registered Units	No. of Total Rural Units	Registered Units	Non Registered Units	No. of Total Urban Units	
Sivasagar	3	14	17	4	5	9	26
Tinsukia	2	11	13	2	2	4	17
Nagaon	2	8	10	3	4	7	17
Nalbari	4	9	13	2	2	4	17
Sonitpur	3	12	15	2	3	5	20
Kamrup	2	9	11	3	3	6	17
Gcalpara	2	5	7	1	9	10	17
Total	18	68	86 (65.65)	17	28	45 (34.35)	131

present study. To supplement the primary data the secondary data for the present study has been collected from both Government and Non-Government sources. A number of discussions have been held with reliable and learned persons such as government officials, industrialists, artisans, traders, middleman and workers employed in the cane and bamboo units in the state in order to know the inside of the present status of cane and bamboo units in the state.

### **Statistical Tools Used:**

The concept of profit/volume ratio (P/V ratio) is applied to calculate the break-even point (BEP) (in terms of sale) from cane and bamboo works of the sample units. The equation of the P/V ratio is expressed as under.

$$P/V \text{ ratio} = \frac{S-V}{S}$$

This P/V ratio is shown in the form of percentage by multiplying 100. Thus

$$P/V \text{ ratio} = \frac{S-V}{S} \times 100$$

The equation of BEP (in terms of sale) is fitted as under

$$BEP = \frac{FC}{P/V \text{ ratio}}$$

Where, S means sales, V means variable cost and FC means fixed cost

### **Reference Period:**

A fixed one year reference period from July 2002 to June 2003 was used for all surveyed units. Thus, the reference period of these data is 2002-03.

**Limitations of the Study:**

It is true that in spite of our sincere effort, the study is subject to certain limitations. The present study is confined to seven districts having predominance of cane and bamboo crafts for the primary data collection. The handicrafts sector is mostly in the unorganized sector of the state. It is a well known fact that the handicrafts sector is run by mostly uneducated and less educated persons in general. Usually, the cane and bamboo artisans do not care to maintain records of production, consumption, investment and marketing etc. However, the collected data have been verified from various reliable sources in this study. Care was taken for the collection and verification of necessary data. In spite of the mentioned shortcomings the present study is expected to fill an important gap of fact finding and throw new light regarding the problems and prospects in the handicrafts sector in the state.

**Layout of the Study:**

The study report has been organized into seven chapters.

The first chapter deals primarily with the introduction and design of the study. This chapter covers introduction, importance of the study, objectives of the study, hypotheses, methodology, reference period, limitation of the study and layout of the study.

The second chapter has objectively examined the historical development of handicrafts in Assam. This chapter also deals with the present status of cane and bamboo works in the state.

The third chapter deals with review of literature on handicrafts in general and cane and bamboo works in

particular. The important research study, survey and committee reports, relevant to our study have been reviewed in this chapter.

Chapter four has been devoted to analysis in socio-economic conditions of the sample entrepreneurs of the cane and bamboo units along with the socio-economic profile of the surveyed districts.

The fifth chapter covers the assessments of the economics of cane and bamboo units.

The sixth chapter deals with the identification of the various problems of the cane and bamboo works and the discussion of prospects of developing cane and bamboo works in the state.

The last chapter provides the main findings, suggestions for development of cane and bamboo works in the state and conclusions of the present study.

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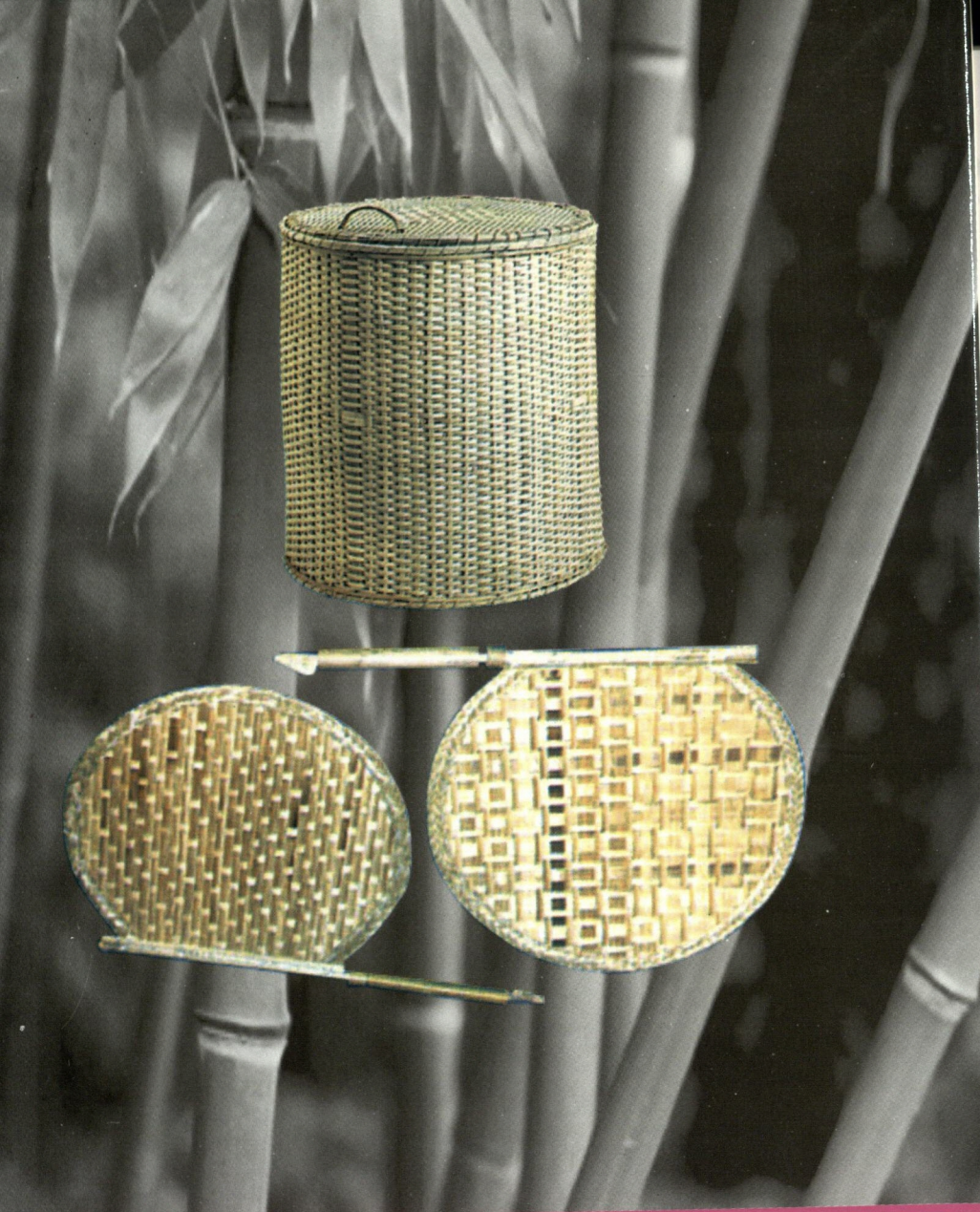
Assam is the one of the most important states of India known for its beautiful handicrafts. Despite the considerable richness and variety of handicrafts in Assam, books on the subject are few. In view of the role of handicrafts in the social and economic life of the people of this land, the present work is significant. The merit of the work is that it has brought into focus an essential area of economic activity of people of Assam which has a bright prospects of development even in the time of globalization. The author gives an interesting interpretation of the cultural background of Assam's handicrafts. It has made a beautiful delineation of the history of development of handicrafts in the state. The author has once again shown the importance of cane and bamboo crafts from the point of view of preserving the social and cultural heritage of the Assamese people. The economics of cane and bamboo works has also been discussed in depth and observed that because of well organization the urban cane and bamboo units are more remunerative.



**Krishna Jyoti Handique** obtained his M.A. degree from Dibrugarh University; Dibrugarh in 1995.

He received his Ph.D. from the same University in 2008. He is life member of the North Eastern Economic Association and North East India History Association. He has been an ardent researcher in the field of Agricultural Economics particularly in Handicrafts. He has also contributed research papers to different academic journals. He is currently working as Senior Lecturer in the Department of Economics, Gargaon College, Simaluguri under the University of Dibrugarh, Assam.

**ISBN: 978-81-7835-819-2**



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