

Crafting Heritage: The Historical Legacy of the Khanikars of Assam (From Patronage to Disruption)

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Abstract:

This paper explores the historical legacy of the Khanikars, the traditional craftsmen of Assam, examining their significant role in the socio-cultural and religious landscape of the region. The Khanikars were highly skilled in various artistic forms, including manuscript illustrations, sculptures and theatrical arts, and played an essential role in the creation of religious art and the popular Assamese theatrical performance, Bhwana. Under the patronage of Ahom rulers, the Khanikars flourished, and their crafts were integral to the cultural life of Assam. However, the arrival of the British East India Company and the implementation of colonial policies disrupted this thriving tradition. The dismantling of traditional guild systems, the loss of royal and temple patronage and the prioritization of cash crops and industrial manufacturing led to the decline of the Khanikar profession. Despite their decline, the Khanikars' artistic legacy continues to be a vital part of Assam's cultural identity. The study aims to understand the evolution of the Khanikar tradition, its transformation and eventual decline during the colonial period, highlighting their resilience, the challenges faced under colonial rule and their lasting influence on Assamese artistic traditions.

Keywords: artist, Assam, heritage, history, khanikar, khel, manuscript paintings, paiks.

Objectives: This paper has the following objectives:

1. To trace the historical evolution and socio-cultural role of the Khanikars in Assam, particularly during the Ahom period.
2. To investigate the diverse influences, indigenous, religious, and economic, that shaped the artistic practices of the Khanikars.
3. To analyse the causes behind the decline of Khanikar traditions during the colonial period of Assam.

Methodology:

This study is descriptive in nature, based on a qualitative historical research methodology. It involves Archival research, official reports, museum visit and interpretation of primary sources. It also includes secondary sources, including scholarly journals, books and historical accounts.

Introduction:

The visual and material culture of Assam offers a vibrant testament to its layered history, where art was not merely ornamented but integral to social, religious and political life. Central to this heritage were the **Khanikars**, a diverse group of artisans including painters, sculptors, engravers, creator of clay figures, mask-makers and manuscript illustrators. The term Khanikar in Assamese comes from the word 'khanan', which means to dig or carve, representing a craftsman or sculptor. These craftsmen were highly respected in Assamese culture and were denoted a specific class of 'paiks', particularly during the Ahom era, which lasted from 1228 to 1826, a time known for its vibrant art and architectural achievements. Despite their vital role, the contributions of the Khanikars have often remained on the margins of historical discourse. This paper seeks to reposition them at the centre of Assam's cultural narrative by exploring their techniques, influences and transformations, especially in the face of colonial disruption and modern decline.

Historical significance of Art in Ancient Assam:

The art of painting was developed during ancient and medieval times, evidenced by literary references and illustrated manuscripts. King Bhaskaravarman of the ancient Varmana dynasty of Kamarupa, sent gifts to his contemporary North-Indian ruler Harshavardhana, which included painted panels, boxes, brushes and gourds, painted bamboo cages and coloured reeds in baskets, suggesting that painting was practiced around the seventh century C.E. Salasthambha ruler Balavarman III issued the *Uttarabarbil Inscription* which mentions palaces decorated with pictures and portraits. Prominent poet, **Madhava Kandali**, gives poetic descriptions of paintings of deities in the palace of Rama of Ayodhyakanda. The *Darrang Rajavamsävali* records that the Kamateswari Temple in Cooch Behar contained mural artworks. Shankaradeva, an important poet and reformer active during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, was also recognized for his painting skills. The tradition of *pata* painting, which can be found in various regions of India, was present in medieval Assam as indicated by terms such as *citra-putali*, *pata* and *citrakara* in historical literature. Biographies of Shankaradeva refer to a theatrical event called *Cihna-yäträ*, which utilized painted scrolls depicting seven Vaikunthas (celestial abodes) as backgrounds to engage followers in his Vaishnavism teachings. **Bijaya Khanikar** associated with *Vanamalidevar Charitais* recognized as a notable draughtsman. During the Ahom dynasty, a guild known as *khanikar-khel* was also established for artistic endeavours (Sarma, 1989).

In eastern India, there are villages known as 'Khanikargaon', where the descendants of traditional khanikars continue to preserve their artisanal skills. Certain khanikars collaborated with significant 'Satra', a socio-religious institution of the Neo-Vaishnavism, contributing to the decoration of manuscripts, while others focused on wood-carving and mask-making. The interaction of these local craftsmen with the royal courts of the Ahom and Koch led to the evolution of their art. **Ram Chakravarty and Sridhar Kandali** were some of the prominent manuscript artists belonged to the medieval era. Manuscript illustrations, particularly in miniature style, gained popularity during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. To date, around twenty illustrated manuscripts have been discovered, with potentially more concealed in private collections. This indicates that a distinct school of miniature painting emerged in late medieval Assam, featuring remarkable works such as the *Samkhadudavadha* alongside various pieces by notable local artists. A thorough investigation could uncover additional manuscripts that have yet to be identified.

Influences of the Khanikars:

Indigenous influences:

When it comes to indigenous influences, the Khanikars of Assam were influenced by other contemporary styles prevalent in other parts of India. The royal khanikars were prompted by the Lodhi, Kangra, Jain, Rajput-Mughal Styles and Rajasthani-Gujarati style which appeared in the form of Satriya style (e.g. *Kalpa Sutra*). Despite these influences, the point which made them distinct is that they never fail to use the locally made materials in their works. The art of manuscript painting has a heritage of using the bark of the tree to write on. The Khanikars made paper from fibres of 'Jhari' and 'Sanchi' tree, also known as Agarwood or Aloeswood. 'Sanchi' is a local term used for Agarwood in Assam while 'Jhari' is a term for the same tree found in certain regions. Alongside, the Khanikars also used local elements of their daily lives, in their paintings such as, *khol* (drum), *Sarai* (tray), *Pepa* (buffalo horned pipe), *dhol* (drum), *Japi* (sun-shade) etc. This gave birth to the Assamese school of miniature painting (Sarma, 1989). The eighteenth-century paintings of Assam stand apart in the broader panorama of Indian art for their intimate engagement with nature. As Dr. S.K. Chatterjee aptly observed, "One thing marks off the eighteenth-century paintings of Assam. There are beautiful landscapes, mostly green and undulating plains with flower, trees, hills and rivers. It is a wonder how the beauty of nature as spread out over the face of the earth could captivate these artists in Assam in a way it never did artists of any other parts of India" (Chatterjee, 1995). This remark highlights not only the aesthetic sensitivity of Assamese artists but also the deep cultural and environmental integration that defined the region's artistic ethos.

Religious influence:

The Khanikars also had significant religious influences. Under the patronage of the Ahom rulers such as, Rudra Singha (1696) and Siva Singha (1714-1744), the task of the Khanikars were not only to create new paintings but also to manipulate older religious paintings and giving them new dimensions. They often worked under the support of the royal court and religious institutions. The concept of Theravada, the Ahom concept of transmigration of soul, the teachings of the Buddha greatly influenced the works of the Khanikars. For example, in the *Phungshin Manuscript* of the 1473, the Khanikars successfully illustrated Buddha with *Bhumisparsa-mudra*, *Buddha's Parinirvana*, the pillar of Dharma and others illustrations. The *Suktanta Kyempong of the Namphakial*, Lakhimpur district, contains a treatise of 300 pages with an illustration of Buddha in Bhumisparsa Mudra. Both of the manuscripts represent the earliest phase of Tai Ahom painting of Assam. Khanikars were custodians of knowledge systems as they knew how to prepare astrological birth charts called Janma Patrikas and fortune telling (see Fig. A8 and A10, Appendix). Besides, the temple such as Siva Doul in Sivasagar constructed under the Ahom rulers, has intricate carvings curate by Khanikars.

Apart from the manuscript paintings, Khanikars were also engaged in the Assamese theatrical play "*Bhawna*", introduced by **Srimanta Shankaradeva**, the founder of the neo-Vaishnavite movement in Assam. The Khanikars not only painted the scenes but also outfitted the actors and crafted their costumes and accessories. He also created masks and 'mukhas' for divine characters. Out of the various distinct communities such as the *Likhaks*, *Patuas*, the Khanikars also emerged due to the emergence of the Sankaradeva's religion, whose means of livelihood was the transcription and illustration of manuscripts. The Khanikars had close relationship with the '**Satras**' which supported them with help with patronage and resources to enhance their penmanship. This relationship showed the importance of backing skilled workers in their craft. Along with the Satras, the Khanikars also built community prayer halls of worship, known as **Namghars** and houses of the aristocratic sections of the people. These influences collectively shaped a distinct Assamese visual language, fusing devotion with local identity.

Economic Influences: The discovery of a human sale deed from the time of **Gadadhar Simh** reflects their involvement in recording complex socio-legal agreements (See Fig. A7, Appendix). This highlights the multifaceted nature of their craft, blending calligraphy, record-keeping, and artistic sensibility.

Types of Khanikars:

There were various types of Khanikars, engaged in various occupations. Some were Manuscript painters, artisans who moulded clay images, goldsmiths, etc. Others used to do attractive paintings on the masks used for traditional folk dances such as Bhawna. There was another category of the Khanikars, known as 'Hilakuti Khanikars' who were the Cannon balls makers (see Fig. A10 and A14, Appendix).

Composition of the Khanikars:

The 10th century *Kalika Purana* mentions about the composition of local artisans. However, the chronicles also say that during the early seventeenth century, **King Pratap Singha** of the Ahom brought artisans from Cooch Behar to Ahom capital in order to make clay images of Durga and other gods. **Rudra Simh** brought **Dilbar and Dosai**, two artists who infused Mughal miniature art and curated the famous '*Hastividyanarva*'. He also chose some *Kalitas* to learn this craft, who originally were '*sonāris*' (goldsmiths). As the business grew profitable and there were no restrictions on professions during the late Ahom rule. **Ghanashyam**, an artisan from Coch Behar, was also brought as a Khanikar by Ahom king Rudra Singha (Barbaruah, 1997).

The exceptional skills necessary for each task were not wide spread among all families or locations. They were limited to particular families where the male members mastered the craft, trained the younger family members and passed down the knowledge from one generation to the next (Saikia, 2000). Some Ahom kings welcomed many Muslim khanikars and let them live in certain villages, which came to be known as **Khanikar Gaon**. They were brought in for building royal palaces. Ahom King **Gadadhar Singha** hired many Muslim khanikars to decorate thrones and *Dolas* using metal sheets and paint (Handique, 2005). Muslim Khanikars were also known as the '*Baktar Khanikars*', engaged in crafts related to Ivory, which were used as gift items and deer horns, which were used specially for decorative purposes. The general **Momai Tamuli Barbarua** under the reign of Pratap Singha's reign, reorganized villages and established different classes of artisans such as potters, blacksmiths, goldsmiths, and silversmiths. Skills in these crafts became hereditary. The Khel system, which included various guilds of artisans like *Japisajiya*, *Jathipatiya*, *Dhenuchocha*, *Shilakuti*, *Gurjugonia* including *Khanikars*, demonstrated the effectiveness of artisans in various cottage industries that were passed down through generations within these guilds. The Khanikars also made images of God Biswakarma, Ganesh and goddesses Durga, Kali and Saraswati in various regions of the state. Shankaradeva also brought many khanikars from Kopimukh to make '*khul*', a type of musical instrument.

It is seen that there was absence of female Khanikars in records which reflects both social norms and archival silence, rather than a lack of creativity or artistic potential.

Laws related to the Khanikars:

Even though not much is known about the prevalence of laws related to the Khanikars during the Ahom period, there are references that Ahom rulers used to appoint spies who looked at the activities of the Khanikars. A notable example can be seen in case of Ghanashyam, originally known as **Ghanasyamuddin Khanikar** who was brought from Cooch Behar, Bengal by King Rudra Singha who was entrusted with the duty of designing the city of Rangpur. He was arrested in the charge of carrying a map of Rangpur along with him when he was going back to Cooch Behar. Ghanashyam was taken back to Rangpur, faced a trial, found guilty and given a life sentence (Dutta, 1962). The story of Ghanashyam highlights that the Khanikars were not spared by the rulers and were strictly punished in terms of any misconduct.

Khanikars under the Company:

The role and the condition of the Khanikars of Assam significantly changed with the coming of the East India Company during the early nineteenth century. The East India Company implemented new management and tax systems that disturbed the prevailing socio-economic frameworks. The taxes were burdensome for artisans who depended on local patronage and religious institutions for livelihood. The **Paik system**, which had traditionally supported artisans under the Ahom rule in Assam, was replaced by the British revenue system. This resulted in socio economic disruption among communities reliant on royal or temple support, such as the Khanikars. With the collapse of the Ahom court, Khanikars deprived of their patronages and lost their primary supporter. The economic policies of Britain prioritized cash crop farming and industrial manufacturing instead of traditional artisanal production. Hence, the Khanikars found it difficult to sustain themselves in the new economy. Further, they employed various artisans in the tea plantations, the Khanikars participated in other crafts under the royal support of the Ahom. The Company perceived Indian crafts from an Orientalist perspective. Although they appreciated specific exotic elements, they failed to focus on maintaining the natural development of local crafts. Artistry was diminished to the creation of ornamental souvenirs for British officials and displays. Some Khanikars adjusted by serving British officers to match their colonial preferences, while the traditional motifs were softened or modified to appeal to western tastes. Khanikar art was sometimes showcased in colonial exhibitions like the Calcutta International Exhibition (1883-84), where crafts from Assam were presented. By the end of the 19th century, Assamese handicrafts, including those created by Khanikars, were being commercialized in bazaars and fairs. The emphasis moved from religious and symbolic

art to production aimed at the market. The expansion of industry was unable to initiate any significant alteration in the occupational structure of the indigenous people. One possible reason for this was that the British used to provide low wages to the labourers engaged in the industry. During the early twentieth century, the Assamese cultural revival movement motivated by nationalism began to stress the significance of safeguarding indigenous crafts.

Gradual decline:

The early nineteenth century witnessed a period of profound upheaval for the artistic heritage of Assam. Among the most devastating blows to the legacy of Khanikars were the Burmese invasions (1817-1826), which coincided with the final collapse of the Ahom kingdom. Many Temples, royal ateliers and especially the **Satras**, which functioned as repositories of manuscript painting and artistic production were destroyed, looted and burnt (See Fig. A6, Appendix). This rupture resulted in the displacement of the Khanikars and the decline of manuscript painting, marking a significant break in the continuity of their visual legacy.

Gradually, the traditional families also stopped carrying forward their crafts because there was not enough opportunity for export and the local market demand was inconsistent. They could not survive on random sales and shifted to other jobs, mostly in the fields and started engaging in agriculture, leading to a decline in their craft. The significant 'Baktar Khanikars' also tuned into agriculturalists during the later period of the medieval Assam.

There were also decline in the old aristocracy class. The khanikars lost their nearest class patrons. The foreign rule supported their own preferences and artistic sensibilities alien to the natives. Further, there was lack of local trading funds which hindered flow and development of the Khanikar groups. Additionally, there was lack of popular demand of the traditional crafts made by the Khanikars among the society. The children of the old Khanikars could not look up to the profession of their fathers or ancestors with confidence. As their number declined there emerged a need to bring them from outside regions, especially from Punjab. According to the **Journal of Indian Art of James Donald**, the last representative of the Khanikar class was **Fiznur Mussalman** from Jorhat, whose family has the title of *Khanikar Baroja*, awarded for skills in ivory carving.

Improved technology from nearby Bengal helped certain industries thrive. Remarkably, some local industries continued to survive under the Ahom reign without formal education, relying on practical knowledge and experience. With the British imposition of centralized control and the introduction of Western Education and Print Media shifted interests towards printed books and Western literature. Manuscript making is very time consuming, expensive and requires lot of hard work. The materials were required to be very fine, strong and durable, produced in small quantity and hence, had no chance of entering the market. As printing technology took over, the demand for handwritten manuscripts significantly reduced and the khanikars found themselves marginalized. Further, the **Forest Act of 1865**, which granted the government control over forests led to the deprivation of the Local artisan communities' access to materials.

Conclusion

The Khanikars of Assam, with their rich legacy as craftsmen, played a pivotal role in the cultural and artistic life of the region, particularly during the Ahom era. Their contributions to manuscript illustration, sculpture and theatrical arts were highly valued under royal patronage. However, the decline of the Khanikar tradition can be traced to the socio-political and economic shifts brought about by British colonial policies. The dismantling of the traditional guild system, coupled with the reduced patronage following the collapse of the Ahom monarchy, severely impacted the Khanikars' livelihood. The advent of the East India Company further marginalized indigenous crafts, as the focus shifted to cash crops and industrialization. Despite their decline, the history of the Khanikars offers crucial insights into the transformation of artisan communities in Assam

during the colonial period and highlights the profound changes that occurred in Assam's socio-cultural fabric during this time.

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Appendix:

A. Field Photographs Documenting Khanikar Artistry belonging to the period of the study, from the Assam State Museum, Guwahati, captured by the author on 15/05/2025.



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A1. Sundara Kanda Ramayana. A2. I) Kirtan



(II) (III)



A3. Bhagavat.

A4. Shyamnta Haran

Figure A1, A2, A3, A4: Manuscript Paintings

Description: Scenes of Sundara Kanda Ramayana, Kirtans, Bhagavat and Shyamnta Haran.



Figure A5: Artisanal Tools Display

Description: Traditional tools used by the Khanikars.



Figure A6:Burnt Manuscript.

Description: A Ramayana illustrated manuscript partially burnt during the Burmese invasions of 1824.Originally found in Jorhat district, currently preserved in Assam State Museum, Guwahati.



Fig A7: A human sale deed.

Description: A human sale deed belonged to the period of Gadadhar Simha, found in the Silsako, North Guwahati reflects that the Khanikars were entrusted with economic and legal documentation.



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Fig. A8: Janma Patrika.

Description: Astrological birth chart created by the Khanikar of medieval Assam.

Location: Assam State Museum, Guwahati.



Fig. A9: A painted Wooden Box.

Description: A painted wooden manuscript box from medieval Jorhat showcases the Khanikars' craftsmanship in both preserving and ornamenting sacred texts through functional art.



Fig. A10: Kathi Ban Cheng manuscript.

Description: A very interesting Fortune Telling manuscript on Bamboo strips written in Tai language belonged to the medieval Assam was found in Sibsagar, Assam.



Fig. A11: Nagajari Khanikar Gaon Stone inscription.

Description: A stone inscription from Khanikar Gaon records details of land grants, highlighting the historical recognition and socio-political relevance of the Khanikars in pre-colonial Assam.



Fig. A12: A rare Stone Inscription.

Description: A rare stone inscription, likely crafted by Khanikars, records land transactions among common people, unusual, as such details were typically inscribed on copper plates.



Fig. A13(I)(II)

(III)

Description: Copper plate inscriptions meticulously crafted by Khanikars during the reigns of (I) Rajeswar Simha, (II) Pramatta Simha and (III) Kamaleswar Simha.



Fig. A14 (I).



(II)



(III)

(IV)

(V)



Description: Inscribed Bell-Metal Muskets from the period of (I) Queen Pramatheswari (1651 Saka), (II) a Koch Musket of King Parikshit Narayan (1532 Saka), Cannons bearing the names of (III) Siva Simha (1682 CE) and (IV) Gadadhar Simha and (V) Handang of the late medieval period, each bearing intricate inscriptions that reflect the Khanikars' role in both functional and symbolic dimensions of warfare.



Fig. A15: Coin of Last Ahom king Jogeswar Simha.

Description: The 1821 coin of Jogeswar Simha reflects the enduring role of Khanikars in engraving royal symbols during the final phase of the Ahom dynasty. The coin is Octagonal or polygonal (not perfectly round, indicating hand-struck technique).



Fig. A16: Bronze Sculptures.

Description: Bronze sculptures of Ganesh (16th–17th century) and a brass male figure (18th century CE) reflect the artistic excellence of Khanikars in crafting sacred and secular icons across centuries.



Fig. A17: Terracotta plaques.

Description: Terracotta plaques from late medieval Bhaghapara and Ambari, Guwahati, highlight the

Khanikars' mastery in expressive man-animal designs and narrative clay art.

**B. Photographs Documenting Khanikar Artistry collected from Departmental Museum,
Department of History, Handique Girls' College, Captured by the author on 24/05/2025.**



Fig. B1: Masks Making.

Description: Traditional Terracotta Masks made by the Khanikars of Majuli.