Chapter - II
REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The study relating to socio economic condition of Hira community is exploratory in nature. The Hira Community is one of the communities belonging to schedule caste category. They are exclusively engaged in making traditional handmade pottery. The Hira community of Assam is normally known as Hira. They are primarily engaged in pottery making for their livelihood. The economic activities and occupations of different groups of people during the Vedic period were the determining factor of their social system and status, accordingly they have been categorised in different castes in Aryan society.

2.1 Scheduled Caste

Differential economic activities have always been the essential feature of each and every society. Perhaps, this was the reason which led Aryans to evolve and introduce the Varna System, which ultimately became a caste system.

According to Ampere (1884) three conditions are essential for the existence of the caste system in India. These are to hold back from certain alien occupation, to prevent any alliance with outsiders, and to continue in the same profession received from the ancestors.

The connotation of caste and class are viewed by K.L. Sarma (1987) in his paper “some reflection on caste and class in India.” According to him they are the two most significant dimensions of social stratification and are considered to be the closely interrelated, almost inseparable, basic processes of social life. He further observed that caste is viewed as a sole model for analyzing Indian society and class is used for analyzing caste and power.

Regarding caste and hierarchy, Gupta Dipankar (2000) in his book ‘Interrogating Caste’ remarks, as inspite of the fact that all castes, no matter where they may be placed in terms of the existing structures of power, believe strongly and impurity and purity, and in all the other basic beliefs that uniform the caste system. The disagreement primarily lies in the elaboration and in the practice of social distance based on hierarchy.
Choudhury Bhupen (2006) in his book, ‘Indian caste system essence and reality’, examines the nature and motivation of caste hierarchy and factionalism among the different religious communities like, Hindu, Muslim, and Christian in India. This study has led to the exploration of the connections between economic and political powers, through the analysis of local political system. In his book many newly emerging social issues have also been discussed i.e. the degree to which these changes have affected their ranks, the extent to which the caste system is still a factor of social organization.

So far as caste system in India is concerned, Brook J.S. (2005) states that – the caste system is believed to have evolved out of the conquest of Aryan or Indo European invaders of the darker Dravidians, which at the same time were absorbing some of their proto-caste hierarchies. In the middle of the first millennium BC, caste inequalities became more clearly demarcated and institutionalized, and were legitimized with the rise of Brahmanic Hinduism, and formalized in the laws of Manu, in which subjection of women and discrimination against the Sudras were explicit.

The four major caste formations in India ramify into enormous number of subdivisions. The basic castes are called Varnas or colours, Sub-castes or Jaties are subdivision of the varnas. The Brahmin or priestly caste is at the apex, the Kshatriya or warrior, Baishya or traders and then the sudras, who are labourers and servants, are in the second, third, and fourth ladder of the caste hierarchy.

Those outside the formal caste groups are now known as Dalits, the oppressed, and untouchables. Again, he states that the Indian caste system is perhaps the most tenacious of all hierarchies. The sanction they take from religion embeds them profoundly in a society to which they give meaning. The Bhagavat Gita states that the work of a Brahmin is for peace, acclaim and purity, loving, forgiveness and righteousness, vision, wisdom and faith. The work of a Kshatriya is to safeguard nation with heroic mind, inner fire, constancy resourcefulness, courage in battle, generosity and noble leadership. The work of a Baishya is trade, agriculture and rearing of cattle. The work of the Sudra is service. Beneath then are the untouchables. It is significant that the higher castes are distinguished by their qualities or virtues, the lower by their functions. By this type of differentiation of works the society was divided into upper, lower and working classes.
So far as occupational division is concerned he further states the impact of caste on the lives of the people is multidimensional. It controls their occupation in a static division of labour.

The term scheduled caste was first coined by the Simon commission and incorporated in the gazette of India, 1935. The Act defined the term of scheduled caste as the castes, races and tribes corresponding to the classes of person formerly known as the depressed class as his majesty in council may specify (Govt. of India Act 1935 P-24 of the first scheduled). The schedule castes people in earlier British period were denied access to Hindu religious temples, water sources and admission in the schools meant for upper castes. They had separate wells and while moving in the roads, they had to give way to the upper caste Hindus (Ghurya GS 1932).

Singh Darshan (2009) in ‘Development of Scheduled Castes in India: A Review’, viewed that the gap between the mainstream and scheduled caste population still persists significantly in our traditional society. Besides, their circumstances, the major factors responsible for the deprivation and/or poverty among the scheduled caste people are their improvident habits, thriftlessness and mismanagement. Therefore, there is an urgent need to reorient and focus the strategy in order to support the lesser privileged by providing qualitative education and infusing among them the individualistic and moralistic values of self-denial, temperance, forethought, thrift, and sobriety. The self-reliance is essential to bring these downtrodden into the national mainstream. These values will help them in proper utilization of the various developmental schemes, which, in turn lead to the stability/improvement in their lives.

An objective study on the socio-economic conditions of the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes, in Karnataka state in early seventies was made by Parvathamma C (1984). The study covered all the 19 districts of the state. In the book “Scheduled castes and scheduled tribes – A socio-economic survey” (1984) an attempt has been made to cover various aspects of their social and economic conditions including demographic characteristics, caste and sub-caste composition, educational background, residential pattern, economic conditions, occupational structures, political consciousness and awareness of constitutional benefits and the magnitude of untouchability. The study has given detailed account of the socio-economic conditions of the most deprived sections of the population. While examining the main problems, the author opined that the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes in the country and in the state as a whole continue to be the most poor.
Singh Soran (1987) in the book “Scheduled Castes of India: Dimensions of social change” has made an attempt to analyse the changes in the socio-economic conditions of the scheduled tribes with reference to Jaunpur district of eastern UP. Major dimensions of social changes in the field of social structure, occupation, economic condition, political participation and affiliation, education, health, housing and reservation quota are analysed in the book.

Vakil AK (1985) in his book “Reservation Policy and Scheduled Castes in India” endeavours to evaluate the implementation of reservation policy in various sectors and sub-sectors. He analyses the reasons of its failure in implementation and also recommends some measures for its efficient and effective implementation. The book deals with the atrocities inflicted on the Scheduled Castes. Attempt has also been made to examine the changes brought forth in the reservation policy in education and economic fields.

The book “Development of Scheduled Communities” (1988), edited by Bhowmik KL presents a well researched papers which reflect representatives of current researches on development of scheduled communities in India. These studies display a wide range of issues covering different dimensions like action priorities, policy and strategy, socio-economic changes, institutions and technological changes for development of scheduled castes, scheduled tribes, De-Notified tribes and backward class people.

The book “Changing status of Depressed Castes in contemporary India” (1988) by Choudhary SN is a collection of essays to present a comprehensive account of village India. The author attempts to assess the problems of the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes, the process of social transformation, the role of voluntary and government efforts and the consequences of social implications on social development. The author opines that now a days the scheduled castes and scheduled tribes are exposed to outside world of industrialization and urbanization and their migration to industrial urban areas has brought a new consciousness and closer inter-caste relationships in a changing situation.

Parvathama C (1989) in the book “Scheduled Castes at the Cross Road”, attempts to explore the problem of untouchability, land reform, religious conversion and the crisis of political leadership among the scheduled castes in contemporary India. The author tries to evaluate the development process of scheduled castes since independence. He says that the social stigma and ritual pollution is so high that the
untouchables cannot engage themselves in many gainful employments and they are forced to remain in the traditional occupation. The reform movements within the Hindu social order have not made any impact in overcoming the disabilities faced by the untouchables. Economic backwardness is common to them while the policy of protective discrimination militates against them.

2.1.1. Schedule Caste in Assam

Regarding caste system of Assam, Das (1987) mentioned that unlike some other parts of India casteism is not practiced very rigidly in Assamese Hindu society. Various reasons can be attributed for liberal ethos in the Assamese society. One may be Vaishnavite movement launched by Srimanta Sankardeva, a socio cultural reformer and religious preacher of the 15th Century. Another may be the fact that Assam come under the influence of the Aryan culture at a much later date and hence casteism could not gain strong foot hold.

From various discussions regarding castes and class, it has been confirmed that scheduled castes originate from lower castes and they had several names such as “broken men”, outcaste, ‘Panchamas’, ‘Parihas’, Avarnas, Ati sudras, Antyajas, and Namasudras. The colonial administrators used the term ‘depressed class’ while the census report of 1931 coined the term ‘exterior classes’. Dr. BR Ambedkar proposed, ‘Protestant Hindus’ or non conformist Hindus at London Round Table Conference 1931. The term ‘depressed class’ refers to those caste which belong to the lowest rank of the Hindu caste hierarchy and whose touch or proximity is considered to be impure/polluted one by the Hindus (Pradhan 1986).

The castes in the eastern part of India have begun to be recognized in official records since 1872. Reference of caste could be traced in the writings of Phukan, Tamuli Kashinath (Assam Buranji Chora), Baruah Gunabharam (Assam Buranji 1876), Gait EA (A History of Assam, 1905), Rabinson (Descriptive Accounts of Assam 1840). In these reports castes were referred to performing all the unclean jobs.

According to Allen BC (1905) various castes were prevalent in Assam while Brahmans and Kalitas were kept high in the social hierarchy whereas Brittial Bania, Koibarta, Namasudra and Hira in the Assam Valley and Patnis, Malis, Sutradhar in Surama Valley were considered as lower castes in Hindu society of Assam (Dist. Gazetteer of Kamrup BC Allen – 1905, pp 87 – 88).
Another study regarding different communities of Assam is made by Deb Bimal, and Lahiri Dilip, (1984). They enlarged the knowledge of unknown socio-political life of the people of Assam which stands out as a glaring example of a socially more progressive society than that found in other parts of India. The traditional Hindu social order had placed different caste groups in the ascending scale of reverence and descending degree of contempt. But this iniquitous social stratification entrenched in the caste system did not flourish in Assam where the traditional heritage with its horizontal divisions underwent characteristic adaptability and became linked up with humanistic trends. They also threw new light on unexplored processes of vertical social mobility against the background of interaction between the entrenched and ascendant castes. As per them today Assam is the only state in India which has been officially declared to be free from the evils of untouchability. Besides it has been singularly free from any case of atrocities on the Horizons in the recent past.

In the context of Schedule Caste people particularly Koibarta communities of Assam; Bardoloi BN (1994) in his book “Socio-Economic Condition of the Koibartas of Assam – A Case Study”, highlighted some problems faced by (Koibartas) fisherman community in carrying out their traditional occupation.

Similarly, Bezbarua DK (1996), in his book “Brahmaputra Upatyakar Koibarta Jatir Ruprekha” – throws new light on the deplorable socio-economic plight of the Scheduled Caste Koibarta of Brahmaputra Valley and their historical profile. The historical profile shows the transition of the “Doms” of Brahmaputra Valley to Nodiyals and ultimately to Koibartas under the process of sanskritization and their origin, culture, religion migration and their own characteristics.

In the context of socio-cultural condition of the people of Assam, a study titled ‘Loka Kalpadristi is made by Phukan Nilomani (1987). He highlights the study of folk arts and crafts of Assam. He states that Assamese society is based on the socio-cultural condition of Scheduled Caste and tribe. Assam is a land of transformation of various cultures, tradition, beliefs of different communities and its organic feature cannot be differentiated from each other. It is diluted automatically in nature. He further opines that there is unity of culture of different communities among diversity.

So far as religious character is concerned Chaliha BP (1996) in his book ‘Sankardeva’s Bhakti Dharma: Some salient features’, offered some cultural and religious characters of different communities of Assam. It is also reported that the
fore-fathers of Hira Community might have been brought to Assam by Srimanta Sankardeva (1449 – 1568), who is the founder of new-vaiñnavism known as ‘Eksarania Dharma / Bhakti Dharma’ in Assam. Most of the married couple follows the Eksarania Dharma under the Hindu fold.

In regards to economic conditions of Scheduled Caste of Assam, Athaparia and Pandey (2001) observed that most of the scheduled caste people in Assam either do not have their residential plot or have very small land holdings which is not sufficient for them to maintain their family. Most of the Scheduled Caste communities in Assam pursue agriculture as their main occupation. They engage themselves in cultivation during the rainy season and other occupations in other seasons. Very small land holdings of the Scheduled Caste people of Assam indicate the unemployment and poverty of the Scheduled caste people of Assam. Fish Catching in Assam is practiced mostly by the Scheduled Caste communities like Kaivartas, Jalia, Namasudras, Jhalo-Malo, etc. But the fishing sources like rivers, beels etc. remain inaccessible to the poor fishermen as the same are auctioned to the big traders or Mahajans. Consequently, the local fishermen are suffering from the economic hardship.

Ashokvardhan (2004), envisaged the existing socio-economic conditions of scheduled caste people of Assam in respect of their economic activities, occupational patterns and source of livelihood. He observed that, with the increase of population in Assam, the members of “middle class” in Assamese society stood exposed to a hitherto unknown competition as avenues for advancement in various economic spheres were not expanding at an identical pace. On the other hand, social discriminations, the superiority complex of the caste in Assamese society and the caste based social equations gradually started pushing them away from the larger Assamese society resulting in the sufferings of the lower caste people in the society from the stigma of inferiority and low socio-economic status.

Mishra SK (2005) in his study on poverty and inequalities in rural Assam found that the extent of poverty is very high among the backward communities in rural areas of Assam. Income inequality is alarming in the villages of Assam and such inequality is more prominent than in India. The prime reasons of poverty are excessive dependence on primary sector, disguised employment, poor development of marketing facilities, connectivity and power supply, poor agricultural productivity, absence of any significant manufacturing activities, and so on. Any conscious effort
for removal of poverty must aim at the development of the manufacturing sector, creation of infrastructural facilities and enhancement of agricultural productivity.

### 2.2 Pottery

Pottery is one of the ancient and older concepts that man evolved at the beginning of the civilization. Pre-civilized men abandoned their nomadic life and for a long time they did not have any idea of vessels or pots to cook or to store. But their intelligent brains must have felt an acute need of some kinds of pots or vessels to solve their problem of storage and cook and what we can say that pottery is the outcome of their urge to invent. There are numbers of stories and legends in mythology in all the regions of the world about the discovery of clay for pottery purposes.

Deo and Ansari (1977) stated that pottery is the alphabet of archeology, as the archeologists depend solely on potteries for the reading of the material culture of the site excavated, when no other datable evidences like coins etc are found.

Pottery according to Henry Frankfort as stated by Pal (1978) is an essential element of the form of a civilization. It not only throws light on the food habits of the people, their religious and social customs, the technological advancement attained by them and even their economic condition, but also provide us with a more satisfactory basis than a mere event for reviewing the historic archaeology or history as such. So the study of pottery without any reference to its sociological context remains unrealistic or sterile.

The art of making pottery is one of the most ancient craft of man. Clay has been one of the most popular media of self expression since ancient times. Cox (1979) opines that before man learned to chip stone (the Paleolithic periods) he learnt to make clay cups. Further, he stated that young children intensively love to make mud pies and from the mud pies to the mud cup is a short step. Because clay is such a fascinating medium that if a lump of clay is given to a child, he instinctively wants to create things out of it. The urge to create something is a part of the eternal instinct in man. From early times he had been creating things which, infact is an expression of his eternal urge – the mental template. Clay is perhaps the only media through which mental urge could very well be expressed.
Pottery is not only a material which depicts the creativity and aesthetic sense of the people. It had been used as an indicator of an industry or culture. It had also been used as a “time marker” in many archaeological contexts. American archaeologists have developed the technique of collecting potsherds from the surface of sites, in order to provide a basis for seriating the sites in archaeological order (Rouse, 1962). Clay is the most abundant and easily available material which Mother Nature stored. It has the quality of giving any desired shape. Although sensitive to touch, the impressions are permanent after dry. After drying and baking, it becomes permanent in this impermanent world. Several thousand years ago this quality of clay was recognized by man, and he was delighted in making pottery. Thus, the beginning of civilization came into being (Sing 1979). He further pointed out that pottery was undoubtedly invented and developed independently, perhaps several thousand years ago in various parts of the world. It was never diffused from one central point, not even wheel turned pottery. At the early stage people molded and turned pots of soft clay by hand, until the Egyptian invented the potter’s wheel in 3000 BC (Sing).

Herskovits (1974) very aptly pointed out that before baskets and pots were devised, man had recourse to natural objects, such as skins, gourds and shells for his belonging. People like Australians or the Bushman, who make neither pottery nor basketry, employ such objects like ostrich egg shells to store water.

According to European writers as stated by Mirmira SK (1987) it was just by accident that the early man came to know about the quality of clay. He happened to see the foot prints of his legs left imprinted in wet soil during the rains which retained the same shapes when it dried up. This curious incident made him to realize that clay, if given shape in wet condition, retain the same even after it is dried.

The earliest pots were shaped in limitation of baskets, gourds and other vessels of wood and stone of pre agricultural times. Basketry might have proceeded pottery as there exists some closeness between the methods of manufacturing pottery by coil building and basketry (Scott: 1954). Basketry might have impressed pottery as reported from the prehistoric context of China. Potteries have been manufactured by coil building a method which has been used in basket making too (Wu 1939).

For many centuries, potters produced wares by hand only. A typical sample of Badarian hand-made coiled pottery is a living example. He must have had mastered the art of making coiled pottery for which bamboo baskets were used as
reinforcement. Invention or introduction of the potter’s wheel was not known then and we cannot say at what stage of our civilization it came into existence.

But the paintings on the tombs of Hammurabi in Egypt well depict the pottery works made of wheel. This means that the introduction of the potter’s wheel must have come not earlier than 10,000 BC at which Egypt, the birthplace of ancient pottery, was well thriving, with burnt bricks, vessels and statues (Mirmira SK 1987).

Pot making by the same method is also observed among the local potters of Assam and the tribes of north east India. Besides, basketry is a very popular and most useful industry, particularly in rural Assam (Medhi B 1992).

At the beginning, pottery was made by hands, as dried bricks and containers. It was accidental fire which brought the knowledge that clay hardened on firing and their shape retains for all the times (Singh 1989). The idea of shape and size might have developed in the mind of potters from the shape and size of the fruits. Childe (1956) pointed out that imitating shape and size of fruits might have been a recurrent practice of many pottery manufacturing areas. Later on, the potter’s wheel was developed. The use of the first wheel for shaping pottery was known in Mesopotamia (Singh 1979, Ghose, 1981).

However, it seems that the wheel was an independent discovery of many early civilizations. Childe (1969) stated that since the equipment of pottery is very simple and the potter’s raw material (clay) is available everywhere, “the expert potter may be a perambulating craftsman as easily as the Smith”. Such perambulating potters may still be found in some regions, who with their families and their wheel, travel from village to village and from island to island providing the needs of local people. Further, he stated that the earliest wheel made pots were everywhere produced by such travelling workers. The potters like many other craftsmen, were emancipated from the restrictions of territorial society, and this emancipation was made possible by the surplus production of agricultural economy. The nature of the ceramic process demands a permanent site and stable environment in order to flourish. The earliest known examples of Ceramic Art were from those areas of the world where the stable agrarian society was first developed. The development of hollow forms for storage or cooking came later. As Egypt and its eastern parts were the first parts of the world to develop an identifiable social pattern, it is from those areas from where the earliest known ceramics came (Hamilton 1982). The word ‘Ceramics’ is derived from the Greek word ‘Keramics’ which means earthen or made of clay or earth. This is similar
to a Sanskrit root according to which “Keromos” means “to burn” (Mirmara SK 1987).

Harskovit (1974) clearly states that the potter’s wheel however is not found outside the literate cultures of Europe and Asia. Almost everywhere that pottery is produced by men with the aid of a potter’s wheel. But where it is made by hand, it is women’s work. About the division of labour he states that in the case of pottery, it is not known whether this was initially the work of men or women, but everything points to the conclusion that it was women’s responsibility. The wheel was discovered during the Neolithic age, probably in connection with transport. Further, he opines that when the utility of the wheel for the pottery making became apparent, this activity also became a task of male. Men are potters in Eurasia, elsewhere women make the pottery. Later the potentialities of materials and techniques were fully exploited to give new shapes and designs to a large variety of pots and terracotta figs. Not until the development of Neolithic economy did social conditions permit a high standard of pottery craftsmanship.

In the context of Indian pottery, according to Sir Birdwood as stated by Mirmira SK (1987) “True to nature in the directness and simplicity of its form and their adaption to use and purest in art of all its homely and sumptuary handicrafts is the pottery of India”. Again Mirmara SK states that Rigveda the oldest of all veda mentions the use of pottery wares which dates back to 2,000 to 3,000 BC.

Sanklia (1962) states that most Indian sites beginning with a certain phase of microlithic culture are associated with pottery. Whatever be its origin, one can’t deny the fact that Indian pottery could not become an important factor of human culture until Neolithic man had adopted it along with their sedentary way of living as well as subsistence pattern.

The pottery of Neolithic times is often coarse and hand made, representing pale grey or burnished grey, red, orange or pale-red, brown, pale-brown or redish-brown, black and cream, slipped. These are found in different Neolithic sites of India (Ghosh, 1960, Piggott 1961, Zeuner, 1952). The sites are Brahmaguri Songanakallu and Nagarjuna Konda in the districts of Chitradurga and Bellory, Karnataka, and Guntor (Andhra Pradesh), Piklihal in the Deccan Keuchi in Orissa and Burzahom in Kashmir, Daojali Hading in Assam. The study of Neolithic pottery thus brings into light an overall picture of a settled sedentary life in a very early stage of human
The next important phase of development in ancient ceramic industry is found in Chalcolithic. Chalcolithic, signifies a phase characterized by the introduction of metal specially copper and bronze. Pal (1978) divided the chalcolithic pottery into two categories viz. Harappan and Post-Harappan. The great bulk of Harappan pottery is wheel turned, but home handmade pottery have also been recovered from the lower level of the excavated sites (Wheeler, 1953).

In recent times remains of post-Harappan Chalcolithic cultures have been traced in a good number of sites, viz. Eran (Dist – Sagar, Madhya Pradesh), Maheswar (Dist – Nimar, Madhya Pradesh), Nagda (Dist – Ujjain, Madhya Pradesh) Navdatoli (Dist.-Nimar Madhya Pradesh) Bahal (Dist.- Puna, Mahararastra), Ahar (Dist.- Udaipur, Rajasthan) and Jorwe and Nasik in Deccan. These sites have revealed a variety of ceramic fabrics and techniques (Pal 1978).

Gupta K.C. (1988) provides insight into the progress and prospect of pottery industry as developed in India and various problems faced by it. He has investigated in detail the important aspects of the growth and development of this industry which have been responsible for its locationalisation at Khurja, Chunar, Chinhat, and Phoolpur all in UP. He has examined at length the organisational structure, administrative set up, capital involved, techniques of manufacturing, and packing, transportation and marketing problems. The production trends and the cost analysis as well as the problems faced by the workers engaged in the industry, including their wage structure, working condition and social welfare have also been exhaustively examined.

The study offers a number of useful suggestions for a more systematic and a faster development of pottery industry. He is of the opinion that if proper attention is paid by the government by assisting the potters in the application of new technique of manufacturing the industry will only stand on a strong footing in UP but will also serve the country’s requirements to a great extent. It can also be a potential, foreign exchange earner.

Assam in particular and North East in general the earliest record of pottery was found at Daojoli Hading in NC Hills district of Assam (Medhi 1992).
2.2.1 **Pottery in Assam**

As no systematic survey on pottery has so far been undertaken, it is impossible to give a chronological account of growth and development of pottery in Assam. However, from many places pottery items of prehistoric period have been discovered. This, in fact, proves the existence of pottery tradition in Assam from prehistoric time. Besides, the presence of pottery in the remains of old temples, shrines have proved its long antiquity. Thus all these available sources have established the fact that it is one of the oldest crafts in Assam. Hence, it offers a glimpse of the society and culture of the people in the past, if not the whole (Medhi 1992).

However, it is gathered from the history that the use of pottery wares in Assam may be dated as far back as 5th or 6th century AD (Census of India – Vol-I part VII (A) (6), Pottery of Kumbharwada, Bombay 1972).

Hamilton (1807 – 1814) reported that potters in Assam did not know the use of wheel and they merely kneaded their clay into form. However, he mentioned that the Hira and Kumar potters were the two indigenous communities of Assam who used to make pots by hand. Shakespear (1914) mentioned that in the Dikrong Valley near Sadiya town, numerous debris of earthen vessels were found. According to Hanry (referred by Shakespear) who explored this area, these remains totally differ in shapes from those used by the inhabitants of Assam but closely resemble the earthen wares of Gangetic India.

Choudhury (1963) further observed that a well developed pottery industry flourished for a period of last hundred years in Assam. It was typologically and also technically different due to its resemblance with the North Indian pottery, which is usually made on wheel. But in absence of ethnic continuity, it could not be ascertained whether the trait was indigenous or the potters were imported to Assam from Gangetic India.

Das Jugal (1968) described in his book “Asomar Lokkala” that the use of clay wares was prevalent in Assam from very ancient times. These potteries were used mainly by the people living in the plain areas. Potteries were found to be used in religious as well as domestic purposes. Though pottery associated with Hiras and Kumars spreaded over many places in Assam, certain villages or localities distinguish themselves for various kinds of pottery works i.e. wheel made and hand made.

Roy S.K. (1977) also mentioned the traditional hand made pottery of Assam and he opined that this handmade pottery crept into north-east India and Assam from
South Asian Island via littoral countries of South East Asia, Vietnam and Korea. According to him this cultural trade originated somewhere in Polynesia and from there it had migrated to south-east Asia and then to Assam.

Phukan Nilamani (1987) reported that Hira, Kumars, Blacksmith and Goldsmith are the principal professional artisans of Assam. Hira and Kumar are exclusively engaged in making pottery. He also pointed out that there is a distinct difference in the technique, use of raw material and also shape of various earthen wares made by these two groups. He mentioned that Hiras manufacture potteries for domestic as well as other day to day use whereas the Kumar manufacture potteries which are generally used for religious and other social ceremonies.

Baruah B.K. (1986) mentioned that “in Assam at present there are two classes of potters, Kumar and Hiras. The Hiras are a degraded class (antyaja i.e. lower status class) having a distinct occupation and Kumar are not like Hiras. Hiras differ from other potters as their women also work and they shape their vessels entirely by hand in four stages, each of which forming a separate ring is partially done before next is added, and when manufacture of a whole lot of vessels is complete, they arrange the vessels in a heap with grass in between to which they set fire and thus back the clay”

Similarly in 1980s Anthropological survey of India under the directorship of Prof. NK Bose took keen interest in surveying the pottery industries of India. Undivided Assam was also included in their survey. They have divided India into three pottery zones and Assam was included in south east zone. In that survey they worked in certain selected areas of Goalpara, Tezpur, Sibsagar etc. But the district of undivided Kamrup, where the maximum concentration of indogeneous potter, the Hira and the Kumars are found, was not included in their survey. Therefore, this survey also could not visualize a true picture in regard to the growth and development of pottery industry in Assam.

Saraswati & Behura (1966) summerised the works done on the ceramics by the Anthropologist of the survey. They also refer Assam in their works. In fact, the districts which they referred in the book are dominated by the immigrant potters. The technical terms of pottery they used in their book are not indigenous Assamese terms. This may be said that they also failed in their attempt to represent Assamese pottery industry.
2.3 **Hira Community of Assam**

The word Hira is a reformed form of native word ‘Hari’ i.e. a kind of earthen pot (Roy, Maloy 1982). The word ‘Hari’ is found in the Charjyapad also. This reference indicates that they are the ancient local, origin of Assam. In accordance with the Adhunik Asomiya Sabdakosh the Hira is a class of potter who produces different kinds of earthen pots. The makers of earthen pots are known as potters in English and Kumbhakar in Sanskrit. From the Sanskrit word ‘Kumbhakar’, the word ‘Kumar’ is emerged in Assamese, while from the English word ‘potter’ the term ‘Hira’ comes. Thus in Assamese both Kumar and Hira are used to indicate two equivalent words like Kumbhakar and potters respectively. So both Kumar and Hira are the occupational sub-castes.

Review of literature on Hira community can be traced from mythological, historical, anthropological and ethnological point of view.

From mythological point of view we can find out the origin of Hira community. As the question of the origin of the Hira community has never been raised before, naturally there exist no theory as to how Hira group started making of earthen pots out of Hira clay. However, from mythological point of view the Hiras were born from Mahadeva (God), while the Kumars were born from father, Viswakarma and mother Ghritachi (Das, G 2011).

From the historical point of view three groups of scholars have three different opinions regarding the origin, growth and development of the Hiras. As per the first group of scholars led by Sidheswar (1461) and the book ‘Satya Sangrah’ of Amrit Lal Sarma, the original mother of Hira devi of Hira community migrated from Orissa to Assam and used to live in the Nilachal Hill (Kamrup, Kamakhya) about 600 years ago. Except these writers no writers mentioned about Hira community up to this date. Dr. N. N. Bhattacharyya (1987) is of the opinion that the Hiras are a sub-caste of chandal and they produce earthen pots.

There is also a reference in the Charit Puthi (books related to Vaishnav literature) about the existence of a Hira family in Kumar Kuchi where Sankardeva, the great saint stayed leaving Chunpara Bhitha near Barpeta.

On the basis of the historical fact and census figures the second group of scholars, made an effort to identify those Chandals and Sarals who followed the profession of pottery without the use of wheel as the Hiras on the following grounds:
First on the basis of historical fact a group of historians like S. N. Sarma (1989) opine that during the medieval period or the Ahom rule those potters who produced pottery by hands were treated down with hate by the society and they were called Chandal or Hira, but those potters who made earthen pots by means of wheel were known as Kumar and they were treated not so poorly and not with hated eyes in the society.

Besides in the accounts left by the Chines travelers Fahien and Huen Tsang, the Chandals were mentioned and some scholars call them the Hiras. According to the historian Gunaviram Barua (1972) also some Chandals called themselves to be the Hiras.

Secondly in the census of 1881 the Hiras were included under the same head as chandals (Census of India Assam 1881: P 31). According to the census of report of Assam 1901, the Hira caste is said to be functional off shoot from the Namasudras and Chandals.

Thirdly, according to the last group of scholars like Dr. N. C. Sarma, the Hiras are the generation of inter caste marriage between the people of scheduled caste and non tribal low cast people. As in other parts of India, pottery making in Assam is also associated with castes or groups. The Hira and the Kumar are the two principal caste groups or classes of people found to be engaged in this traditional craft. Hiras are still believed to be the original potters of Assam. According to census report of India 1891, the Hiras are the potters of the Brahmaputra Valley (Gait, 1891). They are frequently called of as a sub-caste of Chandal, but they do not eat with the latter, and their occupation is quite different. It thus seems preferable to treat them as a separate caste. They differ from the potters of other castes in that, only their women are engaged in the craft, and that they shape their vessels by hand, instead of by the aid of a wheel (Siack, 1833).

In the “Comprehensive history of Assam”, Chattopadhyay (1990) mentioned that “At present the Kumbhakara potters in Assam are divided into two groups – Kumar and Hira, the later is considered to be inferior to the former”. He further states that they differ from the other Kumbhakar on the basis that Hira women folk work and instead of using potters’ wheel they shape their vessel entirely by hand (Chattopadhyay 1990).

Baruah (1986), published a survey report of Hira potters of Assam. He studied the three Hira villages of three different districts. These villages are Chechamukh of
Kamrup, Dharamtul of Nagaon and Ganeshkuwari of Darrang Districts. It is stated in the report that the introduction of cheap and durable metal utensils has decreased the demand of earthen vessels resulting direct impact on the Hira pottery.

Duari (2008) – in his book “Traditional Hira Potters of Lower Assam” observes that Hira potters of Assam are one such community about which very few studies have been made so far. Thus, in his study he mainly focused on traditional beliefs in pottery work, which is made by women folk only, socialisation process, pottery making techniques, socio-economic, religious life and strategies adopted by Hira potters for the survival of the craft in lower Assam.

In 1990-91, Sarma worked on the Hira potters of Barpeta District for his M.Phil dissertation. He studied pottery techniques and typology and also referred to socio-cultural aspects of Hira community of Barpeta District. For his study, he selected only two villages viz. Bamuna and Sundardia.

Reviewing historical background of Hira community Das (1956) and Baruah (1986) described two legendary stories about the origin of the community and their potteries. These two stories have some similarities. Both of them supported that Hiras were Bahmin in origin. But poverty and circumstances compelled them to accept Kumbhakara profession for their livelihoods. As a result, they were out caste from the Brahminical cult and society as well. Moreover, both of them stated that the title / name ‘Hira’ is derived from the name of ‘Hira Devi’ wife of Brahmin pilgrim. It is a fact that the Hiras claimed ‘Hira Devi’ is the inventor of both the clay and the technique of making pottery. Thereby, this community is known as ‘Hira’ and clay used by them is known as Hira soil. These stories have no historical authenticity but are still prevalent among the Hiras. Whatever may be the historical and legendary account of the two groups of potter communities in Assam, the statistical hand book of Assam (Sarma 1980) records the Hira as a Scheduled Caste community and Kumar as a backward class.

Each group of potter exhibits uniqueness in their traditionally acquired crafts and each continues to exist with one’s own distinct identify in the sphere of pottery technology. This distinctiveness in techno-typological sphere along with distinct hierarchical position is a unique feature of the pottery tradition of this area.

Goswami and Roy (1976) also studied two potters groups i.e. the Hira and Kumar for making some comparative analysis. They observed that manufacturing of pottery was the secondary occupation for both the groups for earning cash or kind to
cater for their own needs. It was interesting to note that two different techniques were employed in manufacturing pottery by these two distinct groups. The Kumar group work on the spoke and Pivoted wheel and the Hira group apply coil-building and beating techniques the most archaic method of pottery making. Technologically, some pottery elements of Hiras could be equated with the prehistoric potteries of this province. Further, they mentioned that the products made by the Kumars are considered to be ritually pure and the hand-made potteries manufactured by the Hira potters are considered ritually impure and are solely used for utilitarian purposes.

Medhi (1992) reported in her work that indigenous potteries produced by both the communities exhibit their own tradition. They seldom allow new trend in the craft and thereby restricted the production of certain types, which have value only in the traditional way of living. The continuity of traditional craft is an integral part of cultural milieu and social system of Assamese people.

Some copper plates and ancient script, vaguely mentioned about the potters but curiously the historical records seldom documented potteries and their makers. Nevertheless the above facts have substantiated that both handmade and wheel-made potteries co-existed since early historical period, if not earlier. In fact such trend of growth and extension of both wheel-made and handmade potteries still persist among the present day potters of Assam (Sarma 1992).

Sarma & Sarma (1991) studied the pottery making process of Hira and Kumar potters of Sahapur village of Nalbari District. In fact, this is the only report on ceramic studied in Nalbari. They divided the pottery manufacturing process among the Hira and Kumar into four stages as given below –

A. Stage I  -  Preparation of clay
B. Stage II  -  Fashioning of vessels
C. Stage III  -  Surface treatment
D. Stage IV  -  Firing

Further, they also gave detailed description of different kinds of pots manufactured by both the potter groups.

It has been mentioned in the report of census of India 1981 that Hiras adopt a very ancient method of making pottery known as coil building process (Hand-made technique). But the Kumar like other potters in India, manufacture pottery with the help of a wheel. Another significant difference is that Hira potters are all females,
males never make pot, their participation remains limited only to the collection of clay and marketing. The introduction of metal utensils has to a great extent eroded the demand for the earthen vessels resulting in a direct impact upon the Hira pottery. Yet it could not totally eliminate the production of pottery because earthen wares are still considered an essential requisite in observance of various socio religious ceremonies.

Whatever their origin may be, these pottery items play an important role in the traditional ceremonies, ritual and religious function of Hindus from their birth to death.

Bondopadhyay (1961) published a paper on “Hira potters of Assam”. His work was confined to two villages of Goalpara district viz – Lakhipur and Mornoi. But the clay preparation, terminology, typology and technology etc. referred to in that paper are not in parity with the Hira potter of Kamrup. Besides, the utility, and economy are also not in compliance with the Hiras. This may be due to their close association with the immigrant Bengali potters.

Das Bhakta (1986) who studied in detail about the socio-economic condition of scheduled caste, also included the Hiras of Assam in his study. He observed that the pottery making among the Hiras is a women’s job. He also revealed that the Hiras could not recourse to cultivation as only a few percentages of them had cultivable land. For want of finance they could not undertake other business. It is seen that not even 5 per cent of the population of the Hira community own cultivable land. Thus, due to their poor economic condition majority of them could not afford to educate their children and within teens, most of them left school to help their parents in their profession.

In view of the exploration of studies made by several researchers and academia, some knowledge regarding the socio-economic condition of Hira community of Assam has been developed. However, to have a detailed and thorough knowledge about the said community, the present research works is undertaken.
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