Chapter - VI
CONCLUSION

Being an occupational Schedule Caste community, Hira community occupy a very low social position. Numerically Hirars occupy the 5th position among the sixteen Schedule Caste communities in Assam. Besides, socially and economically they are placed at the lowest among the Schedule Caste groups.

It has been found that schedule caste groups in all over India and Assam are regarded as depressed and exploited class people who find social, economic and political exploitation since time immemorial.

Moreover, in Assam entire schedule caste group is the part and parcel of the mainstream of the total population and economic backwardness is a universal identity. Poverty, exploitation, deprivation are the main features of the schedule caste people in Assam in which S.K. Mishra in his study on poverty and inequalities in rural Assam referred. Although, the rigour of untouchability is very limited in which Bimal Dev and Dilip Lahiri in their book ‘Cosmogony of Caste and Social Mobility in Assam’ referred that Assam is the only state in India which has been officially declared to be free from the evils of untouchability.

While reviewing pottery and Hira community it has been found that a study on pottery in Assam started in 1807. Hamilton in his book ‘An Account of Assam’ referred about the Hira and Kumar are the two indigeneous potter communities of Assam. He also mentioned that the wheel was not introduced by the potters and they produced pottery by hand. He was also supported by Siack. However, many scholars referred in their works that ceramic study in Assam as well as in North East India is still in its infancy. This review also substantiated that no systematic detailed study on potters and potteries is done so far.

Reviewing historical background of Hira community Dr. BM Das and Dr. S Baruah described two legendary stories about the origin of the community and their products – potteries. Both of them claimed that they are originally Brahmin by caste who were later expelled or made out caste by the society. Subsequently, poverty and circumstances compelled them to accept pottery profession. Later, however, they were included in schedule caste community and their women folk became the potters. The males have never taken pottery making.
So far as demographic background is concerned, it is revealed from the various census report that the total population of Hira community was 55,106 in 2001 and sex ratio was 954 which is higher than the sex ratio of Assam 927 in 1991 and 935 in 2001 census. The district-wise distribution of Hira villages is that there are 267 Hira villages in Assam in which the highest is the 18.7 per cent in Morigaon district, and 2nd highest in Kamrup and Barpeta districts i.e. 15.7 per cent and the lowest is 0.7 per cent in Sonitpur and Kokrajhar districts.

The Hira community follow the local customary laws and village councils. The Village Councils are the most common institution in Hira villages and the decision of the council is binding and people of villages are obliged to follow it. The Village Council is headed by the village headman.

6.1 Summary of the Findings:

The total population of the surveyed 415 households in the sample villages is 2136, of which 52.8 per cent are male and 47.49 per cent are female. The sex ratio is 894 which is lower than the sex ratio of Hiras in Assam (954 – 1991 census), and the average family size is 5.15. Nearly 13 per cent families are small one having 1 to 3 members, whereas majority of households (71 per cent) are medium ones with 4 to 6 family members, and the rest 16 per cent families are big families having more than 6 members. Out of 415 surveyed families about 92 per cent households are nuclear ones.

6.1.1 Social condition of Hiras

The social indicators to measure the social condition of Hira are education and literacy rate, housing, marital status, medical and health, sanitation and safe drinking water, status of women, and role in socio-cultural organizations etc.

Literacy rate of Hira people shows male literacy 78.5 per cent, whereas female literacy 84.6 per cent. Regarding educational level, only 31.2 per cent are primary, 29.6 per cent are middle, 10.9 per cent are HSLC, 6.9 per cent are HS, and only 2.5 per cent are graduates and above. Although, female literacy is higher in comparision to male, but in higher educational level; i.e. graduate and above, females are lagging behind male. The study also revealed that disparities in literacy is prominent between the groups.
Disparity index is computed from the sex-wise literacy and total literacy rates of the surveyed villages. Disparity index in surveyed villages found as 107.8 per cent whereas total literacy rate is 81.1 per cent, out of this male literacy rate is 78.5 per cent and female is 84.6 per cent respectively. Further disparity index is also estimated with total Hiras of Assam and scheduled caste people of Assam. It is found that disparity index of surveyed village is significantly higher in comparison to Hiras of Assam and SC people of Assam.

Housing type indicates a household’s socio-economic status. It is observed that out of the 415 surveyed households nearly 23 per cent have pucca houses, while another 20 per cent have Assam type permanent houses, 23 per cent have thatch permanent houses and only 34 per cent families have katcha huts, only 45 per cent households also have their own separate kitchen and toilets.

As health and medical care is concerned, it is found that out of 415 households 391 number of households follow the scientific health care measure and 42 numbers follow the indigeneous measure.

About 64.58 per cent of households have their own tube-well, 25.06 per cent households use water from public tube-well, 3.37 per cent use piped water and 6.99 per cent use own well respectively. However, awareness of purification of water is seemingly low, among the Hira people. Another significant findings is, about 78 per cent households have electricity. But no family use this facility for production purpose. No villages use electricity for production purpose.

6.1.2 Economic condition of Hiras

The significant findings about the surveyed Hira people are that out of 415 households only 43.4 per cent individuals are earner and 56.6 per cent are dependents, so the dependency ratio among Hira community is quite high.

Another finding regarding occupational structure is that, 55 per cent of households have pottery as primary occupation, and 21 per cent have pottery as secondary occupation. Thus, we find that nearly 76 per cent surveyed Hira families have pottery occupation for their livelihood and the rest households get livelihood from other economic activities like agriculture, business, service, animal husbandry etc.

Landholding pattern of surveyed Hira families categorised under land-less (0-1 bigha) with 44 per cent, and 42 per cent marginal landholdings (1-5 bighas).
Regarding the pattern of annual income, the study observed that about 33 per cent pottery families have annual income of Rs.40000 – Rs.60000 which is inadequate for maintaining a medium size family of 4-6 members, while nearly 35 per cent families annual income is in between Rs.60000 – Rs.100000 and 20 per cent households annual income is less than Rs.40000. About 12 per cent Hira families’ annual income is above Rs.100000. Analysis of intensity of poverty reveals that more than 42.4 per cent households comes under BPL category and 11 per cent families have just crossed the BPL category, 34.7 per cent families are in upper middle income group and only 12.05 per cent households are rich families. It is also found that 81.69 per cent and 37.59 per cent are the beneficiary of BPL and Job Card holders and 16.87 per cent are under IAY scheme.

6.1.3 Economic activities, occupational distribution and its changes

The occupational pattern of the surveyed households is that, out of 415 households 42.41 per cent (176) households are engaged in pottery as primary occupation, 20.96 per cent (87) households are having pottery as secondary occupation and 12.5 per cent (52) households have pottery as only occupation for their livelihood, and only 24.1 per cent (100) households are engaged in non-pottery occupation as they have given up their traditional occupation. However, it is found that the occupational system among them has changed tremendously and abruptly particularly among the people of the present generation. Study reveals that common occupation of the present day Hiras other than pottery is cultivation, wage earner, weaving, business, services, poultry, piggery etc. This diversification of occupation from pottery to non-pottery among the Hiras due to some push factors like loss of free source of raw material, decreased demand for pottery, getting low price for pottery items and as pottery is a time consuming work and not getting income immediately; Pull factors such as governments poverty alleviation and social security measures, upgradation of social status, better economic prospects and as pottery is considered to be the dirty work.

6.1.4 Social and economic status of Hira potters

It is observed from the study that out of 12 villages, many households in 8 villages have changed their title from Hira to Das, as Das is a common title in Assamese society, in order to upgrade their social status by changing caste related title to common general title.
The highest average annual income of a full time (FT) potters’ family is Rs.38,270 while the same of non-potter (NP) families is Rs76,600 and the families having pottery and other income (POI) have annual average income of Rs.63,916. It is clearly noticed that the full time potter families’ annual income is far less than those of other Hira potters families.

6.1.5 Raw materials, implement used, techniques, cost and return, demand and marketing

Hira clay fields are located within the reach of the potters almost in all the villages. It is found that only 2 villages face difficulty in the collection of clay and other raw materials and their transportation cost is higher than those of other villages. For procuring sand, firing materials, and towards transportation, potters have to spend large amount.

Regarding preparation and process of production, it is observed that Hiras take much care. They apply two main techniques i.e. the coil building and pressing for making their items. But it is noticed that the demand for ceramic vessels at present is declining due to spread of education and impact of globalization along with social mobility. Similarly, the appearance of fashionable portable, durable as well as cheap metallic plastic, fiber, substitute for ceramic vessels, non-availability of the resources, high cost of production, negligence of consumers, and limited marketing potentiality etc. are factors responsible for decreasing demand for Hira products.

6.1.6 Present status, problems and future prospects of Hira trade

Hira potters have traditional knowledges, skills, craftsmanship, and caste identity which play important role to carry on their traditional occupation for future life.

Another important positive factor of Hira trade is the active and dominant involvement of females in this occupation. Womens’ involvement, no initial investment and use of traditional skill and knowledge are playing vital role in its continuity. But some negative factors influencing Hira trade are higher education and social mobility, seasonability of ceramic production, loss of free source of raw material and high prices of firing materials, high transportation cost, lack of organized market, lack of demand, lack of communication facility, and insignificant role of financial institutions along with change in life style due to modernization and globalization etc. All these factors hinder this age-old industry and its survival has become doubtful. But, it is observed that in spite of many ups and down the artisans
over the decades are keeping alive their traditional occupation and they legitimately feel pride in it.

However, according to the respondent’s views, this trade finds some problems in order of gravity are, the stiff competitions from industrial products, lack of marketing facilities, change of consumer’s preferences, shortage of firing materials, non-availability of raw materials, lack of storage facility, and high transportation cost.

There are basically 2 principal causes responsible for economic backwardness of Hira potters of Kamrup district. Non-availability of basic raw materials (i.e. firing materials and suitable clay), lack of storing facilities, and absence of organized marketing, transport, credit facilities etc. are the principle economic causes which are hindering in the process of pottery manufacturing and the development of pottery industry.

Similarly, social causes responsible for economic development of Hira potters in the surveyed area are low social status, hatredness of other caste people, conservative social system, and high expenditure related to ritualistic faith and traditional beliefs etc. and adverse attitude of people to pottery work.

6.2 Suggestions:

Numbers of negative factors have pronounced their impact on the Hira pottery industry. To mitigate these negative factors and for the upliftment of socio-economic condition of Hiras some suggestions are made. The utmost important step should be taken by the administration to set up some institutional framework which will provide necessary moral and social support in Hira inhabiting villages.

It has been observed that the potters have to face a lot of problems in regards to the procurement of raw materials (clay, firing material, etc.) which may be the causes of abandonments of the craft by Hiras. To remove these problems following suggestions are put forward:

(1) The problem of the non-availability of Hira clay could be resolved by leasing clay bearing lands to the representatives of Hira community. Some potters groups have identified such clay bearing lands and sought access to them. A
general policy of allotting clay bearing lands to them should be made by the district administration.

(2) Some market place with shopping sheds should be provided to the full time potter families at the vicinity of Bus Stands/Railway Stations/other public places.

(3) Whenever regional, national and international conferences, conventions are organised by any agency, some provisions should be made to display these pottery items near those gatherings. This will not only help potters to exhibit their items, but also may receive the appreciation of the participants of the conferences and boost the moral of the Hira potters.

(4) Suitable potter villages like Dhantola village of South Kamrup area and Khehnipara village of North Kamrup area may be developed as tourist centres.

(5) All government departments, public sector organisations, and educational institutions should purchase the pottery goods needed by them directly from potter – producers through a proper price fixation formula which can be worked out through the govt. offices of the Assam Industrial Development Corporation (AIDC), District Rural Development Agency (DRDA), North Eastern Development and Finance Institution (NEDFI), or Khadi and Village Industrial Commission (KVIC) and Indian Institute of Entrepreneurship (IIE).

(6) One of the most useful measures for the removal of the problems faced by the pottery industry is the formation of the well-organized co-operative societies in almost all the Hira villages. They can easily solve the problems of capital, raw materials and the sale at the reasonable price.

(7) The findings of the study indicate that although government poverty alleviation programme (i.e. BPL, Job Card) and social security measures (old-age pension, widow pension, IAY) have help the Hira people in their efforts to raise their economic status, but it has failed to bring them above the poverty line on permanent basis. So it is suggested that programmes regarding economic upliftment for scheduled caste in general and Hiras in particular (i.e. special component plan and programme for economic assistance for income generating activities) should be enlarged and diversified both qualitatively and quantitatively.
Appointment under the reservation Act should be implemented in such a manner so that representation of Hira potters group is ensured.

The ceiling surplus lands should be allotted to the landless and marginal landholders of Hira community as homestead land or as operational holding along with necessary funds for improvement of lands. So that they could boost up their economic standing. But the right of transfer of land should be restricted so that they could not transfer them at will.

Since the Hiras are not in a position to generate sufficient income from their paternal occupation, they should be encouraged by providing economic incentives in the form of self-employment opportunities or subsidiary occupation like dairy farming, piggery, poultry farming, bee keeping, ink making etc. by concerned department facilities.

There should be separate women organization i.e. Mahila Mandal for Hira potters and it may be entrusted with the responsibility to suggest measures for development of pottery industry or to overcome the difficulties faced to maintain their trade. They should also be entrusted with the responsibilities to disseminate social and family education to conduct vocational courses to provide skills to women so that they can practice self-employment vocations within the village.

The Hira potters of Kamrup district suffer from many problems relating to availability of safe drinking water, electricity, sanitation, drainage problem and health. The government has extended some services to them under general development programme. But the study suggests that these services need to be improved so that they can be made more effective and useful for the Hira people.

6.3 Conclusion

On the basis of findings, it can be said that pottery industry has played multifarious role in boosting up the socio-economic status of the Hiras as it is employment oriented with least capital investment. This trade also does not require high level of education, high-tech technology, where women can gainfully utilize their leisure time at home. In fact, a very low investment in this trade provides high return.
However, at present many changes have been taken place in Assam and its environments. In addition to the society as a whole and even in the industrial sectors including ceramics, diverse morpho-technological change and upliftments have taken place. But none of these changes have influenced Hiras to modify their types of ceramic products and technology.

Now-a-days, Assamese pottery craft in general and Hira pottery in particular is facing a stiff competition from the immigrant potters on the one hand and cheap, durable and well decorated substitutes on the other. Under the above circumstances Hiras would be forced to give up their traditional age old handicraft, if appropriate amenities and resources are not provided. If the economic condition of the Hiras has to continue at this dreadful level, very soon they will be forced to give up their age-old traditional craft and the country will lose a very important handicraft industry which is exceptionally linked up with the cultural, environmental and technological evolution of the country. Therefore, rightful measures have to be taken up to upgrade the quality of the products and techniques of production.

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