ABSTRACT

The Hira community is a traditionally occupational Scheduled Caste community. They are associated with traditional handmade pottery industry in Assam from time immemorial for their livelihood.

The two communities, Hira from Scheduled Caste Group and Kumar from Other Backward Class (OBC) Group in Assam have been practising pottery. The Hiras make household articles by using the compression method while Kumars use their potter’s wheel to make images, idols for worship and other earthen wares. It is observed that Hira pottery has more demand than Kumars for its utilitarian value. The Hiras are inhabited in the four major districts of Brahmaputra Valley i.e. undivided Kamrup, Darrang, Nagaon and Goalpara. In caste hierarchy Hiras occupy a very low social position which is even lower than Kumars who make pottery by wheel. Hiras live in a same village along with other community, but they are mostly clustered in a separate site of the village, which they call ‘Hira Para’ or ‘Hira chupa’ and they maintain some kind of isolation from other communities due to their low social position. All Hira potters are invariably female and male members play the role of helping hand in procuring raw materials and marketing the final products. So pottery making is a female dominated craft among Hira Community.

The socio economic problems associated with Hira community is characterised by poor literacy, poor housing and medical facilities, absence of ownership of productive resources with acute poverty and poor participation in secondary and tertiary sectors. As an occupational Scheduled Caste community, pottery is the sole occupation for Hiras. Although this occupation is an unorganised one, it is not merely a livelihood for them. It depicts their caste identity, craftsmanship, innovativeness, religious beliefs and also their material culture. Though the industry has been playing a very important role in the economy of Assam, now it has lost the glory past because of stiff competition with plastic and metallic decorative durables fibre substitutes and high cost of production.

The present study deals with the socio-economic condition of Hira potters of Assam with special reference to Kamrup district where around 16 per cent of pottery practising Hira villages are found. The present study reveals that in spite of their close
proximity to Guwahati, the gateway of Assam and entire North Eastern Region of India the Hira potters of Kamrup district appears to be quite backward in terms of development. They have poor literacy (both male and female), high dependency ratio, low sex ratio with low social position of women, poor health and sanitation, high income differentiation and low standard of living. These factors indicates that people of Hira community are not having better socio-economic status. On the other hand as a traditional occupational caste, they have a very few land to cultivate. Most of them depends primarily on pottery and their earnings from this occupation is not sufficient to maintain their family as pottery occupation is no longer a profitable venture for them because of increasing cost of production and declining demand of pottery due to spread of plastic, metallic and fibre substitutes. These create occupational hazards to the potters and circumstances compelled them to change their occupation.

The development of pottery industry can reshape the rural economy of Assam to great extent since it is the least resource intensive activity with high employment opportunities, which also does not require high level of education, high-tech technology and women can utilise their leisure time at home. Moreover, after studying their problems, some suggestions have also been incorporated for the development of Hira pottery industry and for improving their socio-economic condition.