Chapter - I
INTRODUCTION

Introduction

Castes have been recognised as enigma to the modern thinkers and intellectuals. According to the Chambers Dictionary it is an exclusive social class in India and limited to the Hindu religion only. Since the Vedic times, the functional specialization has been treated as a means of organising the Caste System in India.

According to Risley H (1891), “A Caste may be defined as a collection of families or groups of families bearing a common name; claiming descent from a mythical ancestor, human or divine; professing to follow the same hereditary calling; and regarded by those who are competent to give opinion as farming a single homogenous community. The name generally is associated with a specific occupation. A caste is almost invariably endogamous in the sense that a member of the large circle denoted by the common name may not marry outside the circle, but within the circle there are usually a number of smaller circles each of which is also endogamous”.

EA Gait (1925) observes that, “the main characteristics of a caste are the belief in a common origin held by all the members and the possession of the traditional occupation. It may be defined as an endogamous group or collection of such groups bearing a common name, having the same traditional occupation, claiming descent from the same source, and commonly regarded as farming a single humongous community”. Ketkar in his book ‘History of caste’ defines caste as “a social group having two characteristics (1) membership is confined to those who are born of members and includes all persons so born; (2) the members are forbidden by an inexorable social law to marry outside the group. Each one of such groups has a special name by which it is called several of such small aggregates are grouped together under a common name, while these larger groups are sub-divisions of groups still larger which have independent names”.

As per official record, castes in Assam has been recognised since 1872. The Constitution of India recognises sixteen sub-castes in the group of Scheduled Caste (SC) community. The total population of the sub-caste constitute about 15 per cent of population of Assam. Again, out of the 16 Scheduled Caste communities, communities such as Basfore, Jhalo-Malo, Lalbegi, Mahar, Mehtor or Bhangi, Munchi or Richi etc. are not found in Assam. Rest of the Scheduled Caste
communities, such as Brittal-Bania, Kaibartta, Hira, Namasudra, Patni, Sutradhar, Mali/Bhuiimali, Dhoba, and Jalkeot are mostly living permanently in Assam following their traditional occupations.

The Scheduled Caste, originally considered to be the lower castes having several names such as ‘broken men’, ‘out castes’, Panchamas’, ‘Parihas’, unsceables’, ‘Atisudras’, ‘Avornas’, ‘Antyajas’, and ‘Namosudras’. The term ‘depressed class’ was used by the colonial administrator while the census report of 1931 coined the terms ‘exterior classes’.

It may be mentioned that the entire scheduled caste population in Assam is part and parcel of the mainstream of the total population of the State. The Scheduled Caste people inhabit in the entire state of Assam, in a scattered way. Socio-economic backwardness is an important feature of entire Scheduled Caste community of Assam, as they still follow the age old traditional profession to meet their daily needs. However, the rigour of untouchability is not found at least openly but in rural areas, to some extent the disguised form of untouchability is still there. The great Baishnava reformers and preachers Sri Sri Sankardeva and Sri Sri Madhabdeva had done much towards the elimination of caste differences. Today Assam is the only state of India which has been officially declared to be free from the evils of untouchability (BJ Dev & Lahiri).

Hira community is one of the sixteen Scheduled Caste community. It is traditionally an occupational group who make pottery by hand. The people of this class use special type of clay which is found only in Assam and which is popularly called as “HIRA CLAY”, a principal raw material of the Pottery Industry of Assam. Therefore, this potters group is distinguished as the Hira Potters or Hira Community in Assam. They produce various kinds of earthen pots and utensils of the best quality for households and community use. They usually manufacture the potteries as per the demand of the locality.

In the absence of any systematic study or literature regarding handmade pottery i.e. Hira Pottery of Assam, it is extremely difficult to find the exact date of its origin. However, as per the information gathered from the history and other literatures, the use of pottery wares in Assam may date back to 5th or 6th Century AD. The Hiras are traditionally entangled with the pottery industry - one of the most significant ancient cottage industries of Assam. It is the simplest activity to learn because it is the most elemental on the one hand and it is most difficult because it is
the most abstract (human instinct) on the other hand. Historically it is the oldest and first among all the arts Herberbert (1954).

The potteries made by Hiras are known for its beautiful designs and colours. Hira potters produce different shapes and sizes of earthen items, which are used for different purposes. The important earthen items made by Hiras are Kalah, Tekeli, Hari, Saru, Mola lota, pat soru, musical instruments like drums called Nagra and Kurkuri, lid vessels etc. Hiras means of livelihood is handmade pottery since time immemorial.

Pottery is practised by two communities of artisans in Assam - the Hira and the Kumar. The ethnic and traditional items of daily use are prepared by the artisans of Hira and Kumar communities. The Hiras make household articles using the compression method while the Kumars use potter's wheel to make images for worship and clay dolls and toys.

The preference and durability of the products depend on quality of the clay as well as technique used for making pottery items. It is observed that, the Hira pottery has more demand than kumars for its utilitarian value.

In the caste hierarchy, Hiras occupy a very low social position, which is even lower than that of the Kumars who manufacture pottery through a wheel. Normally Hiras live along with other caste people in the same village, but all the Hiras are mostly clustered in a particular portion of the village which they call ‘Hira para’ or ‘Hira chupa’ and they mostly fill some kind of isolation from other castes people of the village. This might be because of their inferior caste position in the greater Hindu caste system. Numerically the *Hiras* occupy the fifth position among the Scheduled Castes of Assam. Economically and socially they are placed at the lowest cadre among all the Scheduled Caste groups.

The Hira community is mostly found in Brahmaputra Valley who are considered as an original handmade pottery making community of Assam. Their principal place of inhabitation is undivided Kamrup district, Goalpara, Nagaon and Darrang districts. Hiras in general, treat pottery as a definite source of income. Another interesting feature of this craft as practiced by Hira is that all the potters are invariably the females. The males never make pots. However, they play the role of helping hand in procuring and preparation of raw materials and also in marketing the finished products. Hira pottery in Assam is used by all sections of people. This traditional craft is an indispensable identity of Hira potters in Assam.
Kamrup district having a total area of 2740.74 sq km, is populated by 13,21,839 number of local inhabitants (2001 census). Among them Hira population is only 55,106. The latest position of the population of the said class would be more than 70,000 as demanded by the organization “The All Assam Hira Sanmilani” constituted by the Hira people.

The study of the socio-economic condition of the Hira community includes different aspects of their social and economic life. The social conditions of the Hiras encompasses their family system, education and literacy, food habits, status of women, housing pattern, health and their social norms. The study of economic condition includes occupational changes over time, composition of income, present economic status and future prospects of trade by Hira community etc.

1.2 Significance of the Study

The socio-economic problems of the scheduled caste communities in general and the Hira communities in particular are characterized by lack in education, its facilities, and absence of ownership of productive resources, extreme dependence on traditional occupation and agriculture for livelihood, indebtedness and poor participation in the secondary and tertiary sectors. Besides, their share in the affairs of the administration, both in the state and the union and also in developmental projects of the country, is still inadequate. Their improvement is necessary in order to make them economically viable and socially well-up, so that they may feel themselves an inseparable part of the society. They also want to involve themselves in the effort of their social and economic developmental activities and in the affairs of administration.

In this context a systematic study on Hira community, is an imperative to find out the causes of their socio-economic backwardness and to suggest some measures to improve their standard of living.

Democratic pressure in a developing society like India, is bound to accentuate group identity leading to ‘caste factor’. In the context of today’s globalisation, socio-economic conditions and struggle for existence of Scheduled Caste communities of Assam, a critical study on Schedule Caste people have significance. The studies on the socio economic problems of the Hira community are very rare, although, there are few references on the occupational mobility among the Scheduled Caste people of Assam. There are almost 35 to 42 villages in Kamrup district where people from Hira
community are scattering in various blocks. In spite of their close proximity to Guwahati, the gateway of Assam and the entire North Eastern Region of India, the *Hira* potters of Kamrup district appear to be quite backward in terms of development. So far no research study has been made by any researcher or academician on the socio-economic conditions of Hira community of Assam. It is, therefore, pertinent to have an in-depth study about the socio-economic conditions of the *Hira* community of Kamrup district for their growth and development.

Moreover, the study will focus to analyse about their socio-economic characteristic i.e. education and literacy, medical and health condition, food habits, occupational structure, income and intensity of poverty, occupational changes, and their trade at the district level. This will also help to identify the main constraints of the development of Hira community of the Kamrup district. Further, the field survey will also help to study the aspirations of Hira community, assessment of development so far made by the government and non-government agencies in Hira inhabiting villages, their discontentment against the policies implemented by the government. Thus the findings will be useful to the planners to formulate strategy and review their already implemented policies. Moreover, in view of the studies, some suggestions would be prescribed for the solution of the problems associated with the pottery industry.

### 1.3 Objectives

1. To study the social condition of the *Hiras* which includes their education and literacy rate, health (medical facilities), housing, and status of women;
2. To study the economic condition of the *Hiras* which includes occupational structure, land holding pattern and income;
3. To examine the economic activities and present condition of Hira pottery industry, which also includes cost and return analysis, demand and marketing, present status, problems, and its future prospects in trade by Hira community;
4. To study the relation between the traditional occupation and the social status of Hiras;
5. To suggest suitable measures for improving the economic condition of Hira community.
1.4 Hypotheses

1. The people of Hira community are socially not backward.
2. The people of the Hira community are not economically backward.
3. Hira community of the state has not passed through any occupational changes in Kamrup district.
4. The age-old traditional occupation has no significant relation with social status of Hira community.
5. Pottery occupation of Hira community has little bearing on their income level.

1.5 Methodology

Selection of the Study Area

In order to serve the purpose of the study, Kamrup district has been selected because it is the district where most of the Hira community people reside. There are 267 villages in the state where Hira people reside. However, in Kamrup district there are 42 villages where majority of people belongs to Hira community. The people of Hira villages have been earning their livelihood from their age old pottery occupation since ancient time. So it is expected that the Hiras in the villages of Kamrup district can be treated as representative of the whole Hira community of the state.

Secondly, it is one of the oldest area in Assam with its diversified ethnic population which contains people of different caste groups plain, tribal, Muslims both Assamese and Bengali, and Christians mainly tea garden labours etc. The tribals and many religious centres situated in the district are the best consumer of Hira potteries.

The most important reason for selecting Kamrup district as sample area of the research work is that Kamrup is the highest and largest earthen wares producing district in Assam. Hira community is mostly observed in large number in the Kamrup district and special kind of clay which is used for producing Hira products is abundantly available in the district and another interesting fact is that potters from other districts also come to Kamrup district for collection of variety of Hira clay.

This study is a field survey based one. The villages, where mostly Hira community is inhabited, have been identified by consulting the records of the concerned block development offices. Besides, relevant information about the potter community has also been collected from the block. This was followed by the village
survey. While surveying the villages due care has been taken regarding the prevalence of pottery tradition among the Hiras and their continuity. Pottery is so closely connected with the life of the Hiras that both the community (Hira) and the pottery industry have to be studied collectively.

The study primarily covered the following two aspects; (i) the socio-economic aspects which include demographic and historical background, various socio-economic indicators for assessing their status, economic activities and occupational mobility and the causes of economic backwardness; and (ii) the Hira pottery – its production, technology, cost and return analysis, types of products, demand and marketing, and various factors affecting Hira trade etc.

In view of the objectives of this research work, the field survey was conducted primarily in the Hira villages of the Kamrup District. For collecting primary data the researcher has taken field survey of 415 households from 12 purposively selected villages. Those villages are again selected from six blocks where Hira potters are concentrated. Before going to field survey questionnaires have been prepared and tested through pilot survey.

Although the pilot survey started in the beginning of 2010, but the main field works commenced in February 2011 and completed in March 2013. In most cases, the villages were visited regularly for collection of data. This was possible due to the amiable and cooperative nature of the households of the selected villages. However, some of the villages were not well communicated as these stand apart from the road as well as the centre or block. So the researcher had to stay there for collection of data and for observation.

For the collection of data both formal and structured, and informal interview techniques were used. To get information recorded specially structured questionnaires were prepared. For preparation of these questionnaires the guidelines suggested by the Census of India and Economic Survey of India were given due importance.

As far as the personal interview is concerned, persons from various age groups and female members of the sample families were selected, of course elderly persons of the villages and head of the households were the main target.

For analysis of data, the primary data has been generated from the information obtained through questionnaires from the randomly selected pottery making households. Selected quantitative data have been presented in tabular form. Data so
tabulated have been arranged for interpretation as well as statistical analysis. Basically, Chi-squar test and desparity index are used for statistical interpretation.

1.6 Scope and Limitation of the Study

The present study throws light on the backwardness of the Hira community in general and Hira potters of Kamrup District in particular. However, because of resource and time constraint, the researcher has undertaken the study of Hira community of the Kamrup district alone, though some Hira potters live in other parts of the state.

Even if the researcher tried her best to have an in-depth study of socio-economic condition of Hira community, yet some aspects of Hira community might have not found place in the present study. Thus, there will be an ample scope for further study on the said community for research workers.

1.7 Research Design

The quality of a research primarily depends on the systematic presentation of research report. Thus, the report of the research work is designed as below:

The Chapter – I, ‘Introduction’ highlights the introductory part of the research topic, significance of the study, objective, hypotheses, methodology and limitation of the study. Chapter - II ‘Review of literature’ deals with the extensive discussion on the studies made by earlier researchers in the related topic. Chapter-III “Demography and economy of the state and the sample district” deals with the economic status of the state as well as the sample district Kamrup. It includes the (i) geographical and demographic background of Assam and sample district, and (ii) historical and demographic background of Hira community of Assam.

An empirical study on the socio-economic condition of Hira people of Kamrup District is gives in chapter – IV. A thorough and systematic discussion is made in this chapter on social life of Hira people i.e. population pattern, family system, food habit, sex ratio, status of women, education and literacy, health and sanitation and housing, economic life of Hira people i.e income and economic status, economic differentiation and poverty intensity, standard of living, land holdings pattern, occupational structure, and causes of economic backwardness. An empirical analysis on the economic activities and trade of Hira community is made in
Chapter – V. It highlights the factors responsible for occupational changes and also factors influencing the Hira trade, its present status and future prospects. Chapter – VI, ‘Conclusion’ contains the summary of the findings, suggestions and concluding remarks of the researcher.

References


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