Chapter 2
Profile of the Barpeta District and selected study areas

2.1 Introduction

The study area of this research work is Barpeta district. It is situated in the lower Assam. Before going into details about Barpeta district, an overview has made on the state of Assam. Assam is situated in the north-east corner of India. It is situated between the parallels of 24°88' and 27°10' north longitude and 89°42' and 96°10' east latitude. The mighty river Brahmaputra dominates the whole of the Assam Valley, and the blue hills interest most part of the state with their evergreen forest and haze.

Assam is bounded both by international and inter-state boundaries. The international boundary of the state lays three sectors namely Dhubri, Karimganj, and Indo-Bhutan boundary. In respect of the inter-state boundary, the state of Assam has its boundary with West Bengal, Meghalaya, Nagaland, Manipur, Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram and Tripura. Assam has a geographical area of 78,438 square kilometer and 26,655,528 people comprising of 13,787,799 males and 12,850,608 females as on 2001 census.¹

It constitutes about 2.4% of the country’s geographical area. Its 26.64% million people as on 2001 census account for 2.59% of the country’s population. The population density of 340 persons per square kilometer is marginally higher than the average density for the country (324 persons per square kilometer).

The literacy rate among scheduled caste in Barpeta stands at 62.96% percent in 2001, where male literacy was 74.19% and female literacy was

1. Government of Assam, Directorate of Census Operation, Assam, as per 2001 census, Table-1.03, p.5.
50.80%. In rural areas, it was 59.73% and in urban areas, it was 85.35% in 2001.²

Geographically it is divided into three regions namely the Brahmaputra valley, Barak valley, and hilly area composed of Karbi Anglong & North Cachar districts. The Brahmaputra valley may be divided into three zones namely upper, middle, and lower Assam. The district Barpeta is within the jurisdiction of lower Assam.

History reveals that there has been continuous migration of people from many parts of the world. At present the population of Assam is composed of the Assamese Hindus, Various Tribal Communities, and sizable Assamese Muslims, Assamese Sikhs, Tea Garden people and a section of local Christian. Most people in Assam, in fact seven of every eight people (87.28%) live in rural areas. The table 2.1 shows that even today overwhelming majority of Assam’s population live in rural areas.

Table 2.1: Distribution of population in the Districts of Assam, 2001

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Districts</th>
<th>Area</th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>Density</th>
<th>Rural population (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dhubri</td>
<td>2838</td>
<td>1635</td>
<td>584</td>
<td>88.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kokrajhar</td>
<td>3129</td>
<td>930</td>
<td>294</td>
<td>93.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bongaigaon</td>
<td>2510</td>
<td>906</td>
<td>361</td>
<td>87.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goalpara</td>
<td>1824</td>
<td>822</td>
<td>451</td>
<td>91.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barpeta</td>
<td>3245</td>
<td>1642</td>
<td>506</td>
<td>92.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nalbari</td>
<td>2257</td>
<td>1138</td>
<td>504</td>
<td>97.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kamrup</td>
<td>4345</td>
<td>2522</td>
<td>579</td>
<td>64.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Darrang</td>
<td>3481</td>
<td>1504</td>
<td>432</td>
<td>95.08</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>Literacy</th>
<th>Total Educated</th>
<th>Literacy Rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sonitpur</td>
<td>5324</td>
<td>1678</td>
<td>315</td>
<td>91.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lakhimpur</td>
<td>2277</td>
<td>889</td>
<td>391</td>
<td>92.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dhemaji</td>
<td>3237</td>
<td>569</td>
<td>176</td>
<td>93.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morigaon</td>
<td>1704</td>
<td>776</td>
<td>455</td>
<td>95.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nagaon</td>
<td>3831</td>
<td>2315</td>
<td>604</td>
<td>87.99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Golaghat</td>
<td>3502</td>
<td>946</td>
<td>270</td>
<td>91.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jorhat</td>
<td>2851</td>
<td>1009</td>
<td>354</td>
<td>83.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sibsagar</td>
<td>2668</td>
<td>1053</td>
<td>395</td>
<td>90.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dibrugarh</td>
<td>3381</td>
<td>1172</td>
<td>347</td>
<td>81.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cachar</td>
<td>3786</td>
<td>1442</td>
<td>381</td>
<td>86.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karimganj</td>
<td>1809</td>
<td>1004</td>
<td>555</td>
<td>92.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hailakandi</td>
<td>1327</td>
<td>543</td>
<td>409</td>
<td>91.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karbi Anglong</td>
<td>10434</td>
<td>812</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>88.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tinsukia</td>
<td>3790</td>
<td>1150</td>
<td>303</td>
<td>80.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assam</td>
<td>78438</td>
<td>26655</td>
<td>340</td>
<td>87.28</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Census of India, 2001

The table 2.1 shows that the total percentage of people dwelling in rural areas in Assam is 87.52% and Nalbari district has highest percentage 97.63%. In Barpeta district the percentage is 92.39% in rural areas.

Assam’s traditional manufactures were weaving cotton cloth, rearing silk worms, gold washing, small quantities of iron smelting, making of brass metal and bell metal, jewelers, pottery and handicrafts. Most of these productive activities were organized commonly as household industries and there was no caste wise specialization of artisans as in other parts of the country. Though, in Assam, there are certain artisan who has been continuing

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the traditional occupations, for example Hira & Kumar Potter does pottery, gold smithy is done by Bania community etc.

There were industrial Development during the decade 1921-1931 in Assam and there was expansion of new industries like coal, oil, tea which has gradually popularized and has become the prime industries of Assam after independence. But certain skilled people of some of the community made them to remain in the traditional craft rather to join as labour for these new industries. Example Hira potter of our study is also a traditional craft of Assam who has been continuing this craft of pottery making from a very long time. Especially women of Hira’s have wholly engaged in this craft.

2.2 Notes on Barpeta District

Barpeta district is a socio- economically backward district consisting of two subdivisions- Barpeta and Bajali. There are eleven community development blocks, 129 gaon panchayats, Total 851 villages among which 834 inhabited villages, 1 Zila Parishad, 11 Anchalik Parishad, two municipal board, four town committees, one census town, and one revenue town. There are eight revenue circles in the district. The total number of household is 292924 where 268986 are in rural areas & 23938 are in urban areas. The density of population is 508 and sex ratio is 941. The community development blocks are-

The names of the blocks are:

1. Gobardhana CD Block
2. Bajali C.D Block
3. Chakchaka C.D Block
4. Bhawanipur C.D Block
5. Paka Betbari C.D Block
6. Sarukhetri C.D Block
7. Rupshi C.D Block
8. Barpeta C.D Block
9. Mandia C.D. Block
10. Gomafulbari C.D Block
11. Chenga C.D Block.

The profile is systematically discussed below-

(a) Historical background

Barpeta was an important town in the district of Kamrup after Nelbari district. It was located in the midst of a purely agricultural population. Its importance among the town was due to its being the site of celebrated Vaishnavite Sattra or Monastery founded by Sri Sankardeva at the end of fifteenth century.

In March 1841, Barpeta had announced as a sub-division of the old Kamrup district and John Batler was the administrative officer. It had given the statue of a district on 1st July, 1983. There are eight sub-districts at present.

Barpeta district is connected with western part of the Nalbari district. The north of the district is surrounded by the foot hills of Bhutan. The river Brahmaputra is in the south and Bongaigaon & Kokrajhar district is in the west of the Barpeta district. The National Highway number 31 runs at a distance of 10 kms away to the Barpeta town and the Barpeta Road Railway station is situated at a distance of about 21 kms towards the north.

Barpeta has been a place of great religious importance. Known by various names like Tatikuchi, Porabhita, Mathura, Vrindavan, Choukhutisthan, Nabaratna-Sabha, Ichakuchi, Pushpak Vimana, Kampur and Barpeta. In the pre-sankara era, Barpeta was little known in the socio-cultural and religious history of Assam. It came into lime light only in the socio cultural and religious history of Assam during the Ahom period [Medieval period] with the advent of the Sankardeva, the great Vaisnava saint of Assam. Sankardeva & his disciple established many satras in and around Barpeta town and from then Barpeta came to be called as ‘Boikunthapuri Dham’.

During the struggle for independence large number of people participated and was jailed from Barpeta. During this period, Barpeta gradually developed as a centre of trade and commerce. Different handicrafts such as pottery, blacksmithy, goldsmithy wood and ivory works developed side by side. Tantikuchi was the original name of Barpeta and it was the main centre of textile weaving of that time. Mathura Das Burha Ata, another vaisnava saint took special interest in organize Barpeta into several “Hatis” and imposed different duties and responsibilities in connection with services
to the Kirtan Ghar to different Hatis. This structure and organization of the societies are still, surviving. There are altogether twenty-two Hatis inhabited by different castes like Napit, Kumar, Kalita, Keot, Koch, Brahmin, Kayastha, Jogi, Bania, Kaibarta, Hira, and Brahmin.

But in spite of such a strong historical background, the Hira Community who has been living in and around Barpeta town and in many parts of Barpeta district is still socially exclusive. Mainstream acceptance is very poor. They have been living in a cluster system even within their localities. As a result the study has tremendous necessity to highlight the causes of their deprivation both from the people and from the government.

(b) Demography

The district wise total area is 3245.00 sq. km. [as per 2001 census] with 3212.67 sq. km. (Rural) and 32.33 sq. km urban setting. Barpeta town is situated about 140 k.m. Northwest from Guwahati. It is the district headquarter of Barpeta district. The geographical ambit of Barpeta district is 26°03' north to 26°52' north latitude and 90°40' east to 91°27' east longitude. As of 2001 India census, Barpeta has a population of 1647201. Males constitute 50% of the population and females 50%. Barpeta has an average literacy rate of 80%, higher than the national average of 59.5%; with 54% of the males and 47.1% of females literate. 10% of the population is under 6 years of age.

(c) Physical feature

The topography of Barpeta district is wide varied from low lying plains to the elevated land having small hillocks in the South West corner of the region known as the “Baghbar Zone”. The northern part of the district comprises the foot hills of Bhutan and the southern part is comparatively low lying through which the mighty Brahmaputra, the longest river of the state.
follows, waving its way through many char (Sandy river plains) areas. That is why the soil of Barpeta is mostly sandy, sandy loamy and forest soil. The plain is an alluvial origin and along with sand, varied proportions of clay soil is available. It is 44 km away from Manas National Park. The total forest area is 17511.25 hectare (according to professorial study). The entire forest belt covering Manas and Kokilabari, falls under the northern part of the district is covered by elevated grassland. The fertile and cultivable part of the district lies at about 7K.M.s from the northern bank of the river Brahmaputra.

The Brahmaputra is the main river flowing from east to west in the South of the district. The other important tributaries of the river Brahmaputra are Manas, Saolkhowa, Kaldia, Pohumara, Nakhanda of Barpeta. There are river palla and Beki join with Nakhananda. Some other small tributaries of the river Brahmaputra in the district are – Hakua, Busha, Dong, Dhir, Chikni, Saru-Beki, Bhelengi, Kumbhira, Gyatim-Chorphuli, Rabang, Rupsi etc. Two rivers - Saolkhowa and Mora Nodi (Dead River), both of which are tributaries to Brahmaputra run through the town. Many fishing marshy swamps and beels also surround the district.

2.3 Population structure of Barpeta District

(a) Description:

The total population of Barpeta district are 1642420 as on 2001 census. Here male constitute 846106 and female constitute 796314.\textsuperscript{7} The total urban population are 126868 and total rural population are 1520333. The total number of S.C population of the district is 93861; on the other hand, the total number of the scheduled tribes is 123266 according to 2001 census. The total number of male S.C is 48694 and that of the female are 45167 as on 2001

\textsuperscript{7} Government of Assam, \textit{Directorate of Census Operation, Assam}, op.cit.p.5
census. The sub-division-wise scheduled caste are 72883 with a total of 1062424 and percentage is 6.86, in Barpeta as per 1991 census.8

Though Barpeta has been rapidly developing as a town, the unusual size of population stood as the main dangerous factor for its social economic and political dimensions.

Table 2.3 A : District Literacy Rates

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District</th>
<th>Person</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Rural</th>
<th>urban</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Barpeta</td>
<td>57.35</td>
<td>65.95</td>
<td>48.16</td>
<td>53.75</td>
<td>83.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assam</td>
<td>64.28</td>
<td>71.93</td>
<td>56.03</td>
<td>59.73</td>
<td>85.35</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Table 2.3 A shows the literacy rate in the district. In rural, it is 53.75% and in urban, it is 83.44%. But in Assam it is 59.73% in rural and 85.35% in urban areas.9

Table 2.3 B: Household Population and Literacy in different towns in Barpeta, 2001

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District/ town</th>
<th>No of Household</th>
<th>Total Population</th>
<th>Literacy rate</th>
<th>Percentage of S.C</th>
<th>Percentage of S.T.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BARPETA</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barpeta (M.B)</td>
<td>7952</td>
<td>14038</td>
<td>87.79</td>
<td>18.04</td>
<td>0.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barpeta Road (M.B)</td>
<td>6621</td>
<td>35725</td>
<td>82.75</td>
<td>14.93</td>
<td>2.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Howli (T.C)</td>
<td>2926</td>
<td>16730</td>
<td>7360</td>
<td>8.52</td>
<td>0.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarthebari (T.C)</td>
<td>1268</td>
<td>7628</td>
<td>90.38</td>
<td>0.41</td>
<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bohari (C.T)</td>
<td>1481</td>
<td>8086</td>
<td>68.94</td>
<td>32.48</td>
<td>0.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sorbhog (T.C)</td>
<td>1538</td>
<td>7687</td>
<td>8424</td>
<td>6.89</td>
<td>0.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pathsala (T.C)</td>
<td>2184</td>
<td>9974</td>
<td>88.99</td>
<td>2.59</td>
<td>1.14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Census of India 2001.

Again, table 2.3 B, shows that according to census 2001, Out of the seven towns in Barpeta district, our study areas fall under Barpeta (M.B). The number of household in Barpeta (MB) is 7952 and total population is 14038. The literacy rate is 87.79% while it is 56.24% in the district. The male literacy rate is 64.83% and the female is 47.1% according to the census of 2001. In the rural areas it is 53.75% and in the urban pockets it is 83.44% according to the 2001 census. The scheduled caste constitute 18.04%. The total GP/AP/ZP are 150/40/25 numbers and the total villages are 1073 numbers.  

(b) Female population of the district (specification)

Out of the total inhabited villages of 1050, the total number of household are 290494 in 2001 census. The number of female headed

households are 29478 (2001 census) in the district which are 501789 (2001 census) in the state.

Sex ratio (Females per 1000 males), the district average is 941 where 943 in rural and 917 in urban. Whereas sex ratio (girl’s per 1000 boys) in the district are 961 (total). In rural it is 962 & in urban it is 947 (2001 census). The female literacy rate in the district is 47.1% where 44.4% in the rural areas and 76.5% in the urban areas as per 2001 census. The district gender gap (Male- Female Rate) is 17.7 (total) .In rural it is 18.1 and in urban setting, it is 13.3 as per 2001 census. Again the female work participation rate in the district in average is 14.1, in rural 14.5 & in urban 9.4 (2001 census) and the district gender gap (Male- Female Rate) is 33.6 (total), in rural it is 33.0 and in urban it is 42.2 in 2001 census. Such a picture of the data’s shows that position of women can not be satisfactory in Barpeta. For example, the literacy percentage shows that there is vast gap in rural and urban areas in case of literacy. Rural women are much below the level while comparing to urban females. Gender gap is also high in rural areas. So, our study shows that rural women are worst sufferer in case of socio-economic life; as such factor affects their position.

2.4 Profile of the Hira Community

(a) Distribution of Hira Community in Assam

The Hira community is a scheduled caste community and are earliest potter community in Assam. They are mostly found in the plains of the Brahmaputra Valley. Particularly in the districts of Barpeta, Nagoan, Nalbari, Darrang, Goalpara, Dhubri, Kamrup In Barpeta district, they are mostly found in the areas naming as Sorbhog, Barpeta road, Sorupeta, Patacharkuchi, Pathsala, Howli, Barpeta, Mondia, Sarthebari, Bohari.

According to 1971 census, the total population of the Hira Community consists of the 5.6% of the total population of Assam. On the basis of the available data’s, the following table is drawn showing the district-wise distribution of Hira population in Assam.

### Table 2.4 (a) The district-wise distribution of Hira population in Assam

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of the District</th>
<th>Males</th>
<th>Females</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kamrup (Include Barpeta)</td>
<td>4,787</td>
<td>4,611</td>
<td>9,398</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goalpara</td>
<td>2,543</td>
<td>2,233</td>
<td>4,776</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Darrang</td>
<td>1,603</td>
<td>1,556</td>
<td>3,159</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nagoan</td>
<td>7,310</td>
<td>6,927</td>
<td>14,237</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sibsagar</td>
<td>189</td>
<td>156</td>
<td>345</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lakhimpur</td>
<td>359</td>
<td>280</td>
<td>639</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karbi-Anglong</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N.C.Hills</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cachar</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total (Assam)</td>
<td>16,328</td>
<td>15,794</td>
<td>3,2622</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: 1991 Census report on population with caste-wise distribution is yet not available and there was no census done in 1981 in Assam, therefore the district-wise distribution of Hira population based on 1971 census.

Since Barpeta had given the statue of a district on 1st July, 1983, therefore there is no mention about Hira population separately in Barpeta district and include in Kamrup district in that list.

From the above table 2.4 (a), it is seen that the total Hira population are 3,2622 of which 3.58% are scheduled caste. The Nagaon district of Assam accounts the highest Hira population. Next to Nagaon, Hira’s are found in large number in the district of Kamrup.

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(b) Origin of the Hira Community:

In Assam, there are two principle castes that derives livelihood from making earthen pots. They are the Kumar and the Hira. No definite evidence has been found about the origin of the Hira’s. But they claims their decent from one mythical being Basistha. Due to the paucity of formal historical records, it is difficult, if not impossible, to say that origin of the Hira as well as Kumar. The pottery of Assam is known as Kumar (kumbhakara). Reference to the kumbhakara is also found in early inscriptions of Assam. During Ahom rule, the potters were classified into Khels or Guilds.¹⁴

There are different views about their origin. Dr. S.K. Baruah in his report, said that according to Hindu mythology the need for the pot was first felt by Gods and Demons Viswakarma, (Goddess of Hindu) thought over and took out from each of the Gods a bit of “Kala” or spirit with which their bodies are made and molded it into a pot. It is believed to be the first of its kind on the world.¹⁵ As the single pot did not serve the purpose of the gods in suffice, lord Siva created an organization which is known as caste potter. With the blessings of lord Siva, potter became expertise in making pots. We can rightly come into conclusions that this story may be one kind of mythological origin from which the cast of pottery happens to be original.

Another probability about their origin has been explained in census of India 1981, Tribal are the autochthonous people of North- East India. The methods of pot making by hand was found among some of the Mongoloid

Tribal of this part of India. It is probable that the methods practiced by Hira’s might have been inherited by them from the Mongoloid Tribal people.\(^\text{16}\)

A.D.Phukan has mentioned about the Hira’s as a community whose profession is pot making without the use of wheel. He also named two other sub-castes at lower stratum along with Hira’s of the society. They were “cadal” and “toker”\(^\text{17}\).

A legend is also found about the origin of the Hira’s which is mostly popular among people.\(^\text{18}\) It is a folk belief, the mythological origin again that Hira Potter dates back to 500-600 BC, when one Utkal Brahmin named Mohendra Mohapatra came to Assam to visit Kamakha temple. According to it, a group of people from Haripur village of Orissa came to visit Kamakhaya temple. Among them Mahendra Mahapatra and his wife Hira Devi also came along with them. They took shelter at a panda’s house (priest of the temple kamakhays). Here due to flood, they could not return back so as that time there was no such communication and the only mode of communication was boat and foot. Hira Devi was pregnant that time & she gave birth two boys. But in course of time, her husband and even the panda died and she was unable to return back to Orissa alone. And so she had to live in Assam. She found very difficult in finding bread for herself and for her sons. She started begging. One day while she was coming back begging, on her way, she went to take bath near Pandughat of the Brahaputra River. Here, one strange thing happened. Hira Devi saw some lump of clay on the bank of the river which were shinning like Hira i.e. diamond. She took a lump thereof and found it very claying without any crack. It inspired her to make earthen pots out of

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\(^{18}\) Ibid., p.22.
the lump of clay and she tried & tried and at last she succeeded. She used to burn the pots and as the pots was very hard & did not crack easily, these became marketable. After her death and her sons also learnt this craft and continued it. They further went to Goalpara & other districts for marketing their products. From then onwards gradually they were known as “Hiramanu” & potting clay is known as “Hiramati” and the community as Hira who has been making pots from that day by their own hands without using any machine.

These probabilities only makes it clear that Hira’s were well known in ancient literature and it was mentioned there that they were potter by occupation, but these traditions don’t however account for the origin of the Hira. It was only got its systematic recognition when “The Government of Indian Act 1935” had found the term “depressed classes”. As a depress class, the Hira community was recognized later in the scheduled caste order 1950 modified by the scheduled caste modification order 1956 as “scheduled caste” in Assam along with other 16 castes. (Mention in chapter 1). They generally live in small houses made up of mud or brick walls. They speak Assamese language. They follow the division of lab our on the basis of gender, age, skill.

(c) Handicraft and small scale industries IN Assam

The most striking about Assam’s handicraft is that neither the style nor method of production has changed for hundreds years. In particular, pottery is also a handicraft and small scale industry of Assam. The tradition of pottery in Assam speaks of the oldest of times. In fact, the art of Assam’s pottery

finds its mention in the pages of history too.\textsuperscript{20} It is believed that the practice of pottery making in Assam evolves as a result of satisfying the daily needs of the ancient people. In the earliest of tears, pottery was a thriving occupation of almost all the villages of Assam. Pottery in particular is made in Majuli, a large river island in the Brahmaputra River and cultural capital and also cradle of Assamese civilization. From beaten clay and burnt in driftwood fired kilns exactly as it was during the ancient civilization over 4000 tars ago.

The Hira potter is distributed in the Goalpara, Kamrup, Barpeta, etc districts. Due to the impact of changing kitchenware and other utensils by plastic and other materials, the earthen items have no formal reorganization or honor. But these have considerable demand in religious & traditional celebration.

\textit{(d) Hira as potter in Barpeta}

Hira is one of the most ancient community of Assam. In the seventh century from the days of Kumar Bhaskar Barman to subsequent kings words like Kumbhakara, Kumbhakara Gatra have been found in the copper plate (tamraphali). Therefore fact that the words mentioned in the copper plate indicate the most primitiveness of this community.

The dictionary maning of the word Hira is given in this ways-

a) Charu Garha Cyali Charat - low caste of potters.\textsuperscript{21}

b) A class of kumar of lower Assam - main occupation is pot making.\textsuperscript{22}

In Assam, Hira’s generally live in the rural areas. The traditional pattern of social interactions between the Hira’s and other Hindus reflects to

\textsuperscript{20} http/www..Wildmahseer.com.handicrafts.
\textsuperscript{22} M.Bronson., \textit{A dictionary in Assamese and English}, p.567.
some extent the idea of social distances. Earlier in Barpeta, Hira’s were not allowed to enter into the Namghar. Later, after the establishment of satras, they were allowed. It is very difficult to say when & why Hira’s has come to Barpeta. As there are lack of information, literature on them. That is on the basis of presumptions, it can be said that from the very beginning Hira’s has been living temporarily due to their business. Because they has to sell their pots in different places. They moved from one place to another. Previously barter system prevailed in Assam. And Hira’s sold their pots against rice, wheat etc in different places. It must be mention here that originally most of the scheduled castes were by a large a non agricultural professional people pursuing some craft and occupations as fishing, pottery making, gold smithy, weavers, etc, so this can be taken as another explanation of the origin of occupational caste groups. Hira’s in Assam might have originated by this process. As Barpeta is a religiously famous district having plenty of areas lying in nearby river, bells, Hira’s may also select this place for dwellings. Moreover marketing may also be a cause as most of their products were bought by the Muslim people living in villages in Barpeta. It is also evident that both the two villages of our study areas are very near to Muslim village naming as Koyakucki. Those who are living in the town areas are only migrated people from the village. They did not form a hati (local name of an area) by themselves as Hira hati. They have been living along with other Hindus though they live in cluster in small areas.

Hira community’s skill of pottery making has not developed much .In Dhubri and Goalpara certain modifications have been done. As a result, economic position is better than other place. But women in our study area have not made much progress. This group of Hira population particularly women are in a very bad condition.
(e) Potters in Barpeta

The potter of Barpeta are very simple and modest. The food habits, dresses, language, religion are as same as other people belong to Hindu religion. The older generation specially women still consider pottery making as a prestigious occupation. But the younger generation those who are reading in educational institutions are not interested in pottery making occupation.

It is not sufficient for them to just meet the minimum requirements and so males engage with some subsidiary works viz. hand cart pulling, rickshaw pulling, daily wage earning etc.

(f) Hira women in Barpeta

Hira women of Barpeta are potters by profession. They do the pottery, besides doing their household duties. Male member help them in collecting clay, selling finished products etc. But in modern time, pottery business is not much profitable due to non-availability of raw-materials and expense of firewood etc for burning the pots. Male member as a result shifted to other jobs like riksha puller, thela puller, carpenter, handyman, driver, hocker, raj mistri, biscuit ferry etc. But women are still doing this craft in spite of these hardships. They only use their hands in making pots. In spite of giving their precious contributions in this field of pottery, they could not attain a very good status. She has neither her own property nor her own savings. Whatever she earns, she has to spend for the entire family.

They are socially & politically not in a good position. Their decision making power in the society as well as in the family is low. Their literacy rate is also low and drop out is high at high school & college level. Even local people are not interested to know about them. So it has become inevitable that study of women’s status will reflect such factors. The works on them are still
in its infancy. A scientific study of a society, its culture is an imperative necessity with a view to know the reality of a society. Therefore a profile of the study areas has shown below.

2.5 Description about the study areas

2.5 (1) Introduction

The present study is confined to the village inhabited by the Hira community namely Bamuna, Dakhinhati (Hirapara) within Sundaridia village and in urban Pockets of Barpeta town naming as Ghoramarahi, Kumarhati, Majorhati and Ambarihi. All these places situated in and around the Barpeta town, the district head quarter of Barpeta District of Assam. Moreover the two villages fall under Sundaridia Gaon Panchayat area and the rest of the four fall under the jurisdiction of Municipality areas.

In order to know the geographical location of the Hira Community in the study areas, we have to look at the total scheduled caste people of Barpeta within these villages and urban pockets as separate census has not found showing the Hira Community and population in Barpeta. The geographical setting of the schedule caste population in the town and villages is presented below in this chapter.

The scheduled caste people of the Barpeta district are mostly distributed in rural areas though they are found also in town localities. The total number of S.C population of the district is 93861; on the other hand, the total number of the scheduled tribes is 123266 according to 2001 census. The total number of male S.C is 48694 and that of the female are 45167.23

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The scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribes are also found in the town of Barpeta road, Sorbhog, Sarthebari. Bahari, Barpeta, Howly, Pathsala of Barpeta district. In Barpeta district, the people of Hira Caste are also found in the following villages of Charanmakha, Khagrabari, in Patacharkuchi, Kalgirapara in Nityananda, Bishnukuchi, Banakhata, Amguri saltar and Saldhowa in pathsala, Ananda Bazer, GyatiSalbari (Panbari) and Bortari in Sarupeta, Porabharal in Howly, North Athiabari, Kahabari in Barpeta Road, Roha in Sorbhog. They are also found in Chenga, Bashkuchi, Chinadi, Kawaiamari, Helechabari, Sarthebari Simla bazer in the North of Jalal and in Mondia.

Again the Hira’s of Barpeta are distributed in two villages and different municipality wards having definite ward number. It is also evident from the village/Town primary census abstract of 1991 that in Bamuna and Sundaridia village, and in the town areas particularly in the ward No. 1, 5, 6, 7 most of the scheduled caste Hira populations are found.

The total numbers of general male people are 12942 and females are 12445. Whereas the total number of scheduled caste male is 2127 and scheduled caste female is 2180 within town areas. And the table 2.5 A, Shows that the total population of the Bamuna village is 772 where scheduled caste is 438 and the total population of Sundaridia village are 2416 where scheduled caste is 438.

**Table 2.5 A : Distribution of population in two selected villages of Barpeta head quarter**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Names of the village</th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>No. of S.C population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bamuna</td>
<td>772</td>
<td>438</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sundaridia</td>
<td>2416</td>
<td>438</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>3188</td>
<td>876</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: primary census abstract 1991 Village/Town, Govt. of Assam
Table 2.5 B: Distributing of general & scheduled caste population in different Municipality wards of our study areas

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sl. no.</th>
<th>Name of the Areas &amp; Ward</th>
<th>Total Male</th>
<th>Total Female</th>
<th>T.S.C. Male</th>
<th>T.S.C. Female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Ambarihati (Ward 5)</td>
<td>2185</td>
<td>1921</td>
<td>268</td>
<td>265</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Ghoramrahati (Ward 1)</td>
<td>1419</td>
<td>1408</td>
<td>362</td>
<td>391</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Kumarihati (Ward 5 &amp; 6)</td>
<td>808</td>
<td>813</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Mazorhati (Ward 7)</td>
<td>1121</td>
<td>1047</td>
<td>119</td>
<td>104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>5533</td>
<td>5189</td>
<td>761</td>
<td>894</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: primary census abstract 1991 Village/ Town, Govt. of Assam. (Data’s are available only for 12 wards at that time, though the total number of wards is 22 at present & only selected areas are mention).

Table 2.5 B shows that, in Ambarihati, the total scheduled castes male is 268 & female is 265. In Ghoramrahati, the total male is 362 & female is 391. In Kumarhati, the number of scheduled caste male is 12 & female is 134. And in Mazorhati, the total scheduled caste male is 119 and female is 104.

In Bamuna village, Hira households are 80 (approximately) and in Sundaridia (Dakhinhati), again Hira households are found as 80 approximately (pilot survey). So from these two Villages, out of the total population of 876, the Hira households (122 households) are taken as sample for collecting data based on the population of the household who do pottery work. (Table 2.5 C). Moreover females are regarded as main respondents while collecting data’s based on questionnaire.
Table 2.5 C: Village setting

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sl. No.</th>
<th>Name of the Village</th>
<th>Total no. of population</th>
<th>No. of Hira HH</th>
<th>Surveyed HH</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Bamuna</td>
<td>772</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Sundaridia(Dakhinhati)</td>
<td>2416</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>3188</td>
<td>160</td>
<td>122</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: primary census abstract 1991 Village/ Town, Govt. of Assam, & electoral role in panchayat election 2007.

Note: * indicates field survey data

Table 2.5 D: Town setting

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sl. No.</th>
<th>Name of the Surveyed area (Ward No.)</th>
<th>No. of Hira HH</th>
<th>Surveyed HH</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Ambarihati (Ward 5)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Ghoramara (Ward 1)</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Kumarhati (Ward 5/6)</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Mazorhati (Ward 7)</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Selected field survey data based on electoral role in the census report 2008.

* indicates field survey data.

The other selected Hira concentrating areas are situated within the town Barpeta. There are about One thousand scheduled caste people living in these areas from where approximately 57 Hira households are found (survey) and 50 of these are taken as sample from each of the areas who do pottery work more or less. (Table 2.5 D)

**Bamuna** village situated about 2 kms north east from Barpeta town, the district headquarter. It is bounded by the Koloni on the north, Sundaridia on the south, Chaolakhowa river on the east and P.W.D road on the west.
There are almost 80 Hira household inhabitants. Apart from Hira’s, there are general caste, other backward caste has been living along with Hira. They are all Hindus, yet Hiras have their separate namghar (religious place) in the area. Of course, other places like health centre, library, veterinary office, primary school within the localities are shared by all the people.

The Sundaridia village stands 1&1/2kms north east from Barpeta town. Dahkinhati or Hirapara is a small village area within Sundaridia village consists of Hira people. Its southern side is bounded by the paddy fields and Bamuna village, toward the south lays Barpeta town, in its west it is bounded by the P.W.D ROAD. The village is famous for its Kirtan Ghar all over Assam. In the village, Hira’s & general caste kalita’s, Keot, other backward caste has lived but in each side of the village represent a definite population. Example Dakhinhati or Hirapara represent Hira people. There is a goan-bura for Sundaridia village. There is a primary school in Hirapara.

Ambarihati is near to Barpeta bazaar, where most of the general caste is living. There are only a 5 Hira household who live to the side near to Kumarhati. The Hira families living there, don’t make pots but do other works like driver, shop boy, etc

Ghoramarahati is situated in the door way area to Barpeta town from Hazo-Chenga side. Hiras live in the right side of their localities. On the left side Bania’s who is a scheduled caste lives who does gold smithy. The Hira families’ practices pottery in this area but not primarily. Only those family who is very poor and widowed are practicing this craft for livelihood. Most of the families do other works like small service, driver, small shops, handyman etc.
Kumarhati is next to the Barpeta bazaar behind the Barpeta Vidapeth School. Keot, kalita, Brahmin are found along with Hira’s in this area. Some of the Hira families does pot making within this locality. Others do jobs in government offices, stay as a hotel boy, have small shops, driver etc. One thing must be noted here that the Hira’s, there are making a special item called as “fuljari” which is used in Dewali and marriages. That who does government jobs has a living standard equal to other castes. There are few families of Hira’s who has shifted from Barpeta to Guwahati city. There is a separate “Haitaghar” (religious place for worship) in Kumarhati for Hira’s which is suppressing that even in the town, there is differentiation in the name of religion.

Mazorhati ward 7 is a place near to the Barpeta Kirtan Ghar. There are about 100 families, among them only 7/9 Hira families are living .There are Brahmin, Kalita, Kaut, Kumar, Other Backward Caste, along with Hira. The practice of pot making is more or less end in these localities, though old women knew pot making .Families earn by doing government jobs, shops, and in other works. The living standards of these Hira families are almost equal to other castes.

2.5 (2) Life and Culture of the Hira People in the study areas

The profile discusses the life and culture of the Hira people in the study areas below -

(a) Settlement pattern

Hiras of the villages in Barpeta followed no systematic pattern in constructing their houses. The houses are haphazardly made. It is also seen in Ghoramarahati also though it is a town area. The paths which are running through the villages are very small and the conditions are very bad in most
areas (Bamuna, Hirapara, Ghoramahati). Floods are common in the summer in the villages. People of the areas have very little land which they say as hat approximately 5/6/7 hat (each family).

Most of them have single home where they live. The house type are basically katcha house where roofs are of thatch/tin, floors are katcha, walls are of reed and split bamboo Two or more Hira families are living around one courtyard.

(b) Health Centre/sanitation

In Barpeta district, there are 41 PHC and 9 Dispensary. Again there are 6 CHC and 351 SC according to the report of Deputy Director, Economic and Statistical Deptt. 2008. No health centre is found in Bamuna though one primary health centre is found in Sundaridia. There was Barpeta Civil Hospital in the middle of the Barpeta town but it is shifted to Jania Road after the establishment of Barpeta Medical College in Jania. It is not less than 5 to 6 k.m far from the two villages.

(c) Communication

There is paka road in and around Barpeta town. A paka road from Barpeta town through Bhabanipur to national Highway is there, P.W.D road passes through the villages where buses run. The roads in the town localities of our study are also not bad, either gravel road or paka road are found in these localities.

(d) Water Supply

Only in the town areas water supply has been facilitated. But most of the families use hand pumps. In the two villages also most of the people use
hand pumps. Of course, some families are bound to use water from ponds from nearby rivers.

(e) Relation with people

Rural condition is still prevailing among the Hiras of the two villages. The Hiras have relation and corporation with the people of other Hindu castes though they live in cluster in their localities. Moreover, the age old section still maintains their social distance. In towns no such distances are found in theory, but in practice Hira’s do not usually mixed with the general castes in all respect. Particularly in Mazorhati, they mix with all. In other study areas, the young sections, only mixes with the other Hindu young section at present. Moreover, the economic standard of the family decides their inter mixing in urban areas.

(f) Education

The literacy rate in Barpeta district is satisfactory. Over the years, it is increasing. In 1991 it was 43.24% and in 2001 it was 56.24%. Comparing to the state, the district literacy is good than many other districts. In 1991 state literacy was 52.89% and in 2001 it was 63.25%. In both the study villages there are one primary schools each. In Sundaridia, nearby area of the villages, one high school and a girl’s college and others are there. Moreover, vocational institutions are also there in Barpeta. (Government ITI, Computer training centre, etc). Yet Hira’s are not educated. The highest educational level is only metric or upto middle class for women (Survey shows). The children are living school in the upper classes. On one hand, the district regular pass percentage in high school leaving certificate examination is good.

It is 73.27% up to sep. 2007. On the other hand, performance of scheduled caste percentage of regular student in high school leaving
certificate is lowest while comparing to scheduled tribe & other backward caste in Assam. It has shown below-

**Table 2.5 (e) The performance of scheduled caste, scheduled tribe and other backward caste (regular student) in high school leaving certificate in 2008. (In terms of person)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Caste</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Scheduled caste</td>
<td>7317</td>
<td>4256</td>
<td>3061</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scheduled tribe</td>
<td>12045</td>
<td>6861</td>
<td>5184</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other backward caste (OBC)</td>
<td>29762</td>
<td>16117</td>
<td>13645</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


And may be because of the low socio-economic condition of the scheduled caste people of Assam, their educational level is poor to other castes. The case is similar to Barpeta district too. The high drop out rate is seen mainly because of the poor condition of the parents. They go to school upto the level where government provides free education. Though due to lack of knowledge, Parents unaware of the government facilities and thus they prefer their children to stay at home helping mothers. The economically good families of Hira’s acquire higher education, doing government jobs in urban areas. (Field survey)

**(g) Activities of the women**

The main occupation of Hira women is pot making. As mentioned earlier, every girl of Hira community, learn pot making. Usually the adult and old women make pots in almost all the times of a day that are free of household activities. It is customary to know the craft by all Hira women. The old and widowed women always go to Kirtan Ghar to listen to the
recitation of the Assamese version of the Bhagavata Purana in the evening. The girl’s helps in domestic works when gets time after coming from school or colleges. They sometime partially help in pot making basically at the time of firing of the pots. Sometimes Women together fire the pots in a place within their locality. It is mostly done in the villages. Some women even sell their pots at home in the hands of middleman. Particularly by those women, who is widow or whose husband does other work outside their home.

(h) Economy

Social life of a community is shaped and brought up by the economic activities of the people. The economic status of Hira’s is not good. They have no big land. Hira community is mainly dependent on pot making though some families engaging in other activities at present. About two decades ago, it was the basis of their economic life. But at present, they have kept the pottery making tradition as a subsidiary occupation and are taking up unrecognized work such as riksha puller, thela puller, carpenter, handyman, driver, hocker, raj mistri, biscuit ferry etc. The income received from pottery is negligible now a days and the chief raw material for pot making is not easily available. The clays are collected by the villagers or by local agents at high prices. Fuel is also essential for burning the pots. But many things are needed at the time of firing of pots (such as straw or leaves, small pieces of woods, dried cow dung’s etc) which are now become costly. The selling prices of these pots are also low as people buy them generally only at the time of some rituals or for certain specific purposes. Only women continue the pottery work in villages. Thus the socio-economic condition of the Hira women are facing problems.
References

1. Government of Assam, Directorate of Census operation, Assam, as per 2001 census, Table-1.03, p. 5.


4. Economic and Statistical Department, Barpeta, (2008), Barpeta at Glance, a Report of the Deputy Director.


7. Government of Assam, Directorate of Census operation ,Assam, op.cit.p.5


18. ibid., p. 22.


