Chapter 3

General Description of the position of women with reference to the study Areas

3.1 Introduction

The United Nation Human Development Report of 1995 makes clear that, massive investments in human capital and development of managerial and technological skills are needed in developing countries, if they are to improve their people’s living standard.

Over the years, human civilization has been undergoing steady and systematic changes. Change has become an inevitable aspect of the modern living. Any dynamic society must accept and generate the necessary potential to promote them further. In India, large sections of people are still illiterate, poor & poverty. In terms of human debt indices, it is among the worst off nations in the world. Though there are various laws both constitutional and general, yet there is a gap between theory and laws. Poor sections are still remains poor, frustrated and behind the mainstream without getting due benefit or knowing their rights and privileges.

The 2011 report of Human Development publishes that India occupies the 119th position according to Human Development Index “The United Nation expert stressed on the need to integrate a human rights based approach into the Government, Index, Times Off India says “India is the fifth most powerful nation.” Most recently Human Development Index by country has published its definition as “The Human Development Index values in its table, the following factors as important- of family income, technology index,

growth rate Debt & takes into account a country’s life expectancy at birth.\(^3\)

All these factors are socio-economic indicators while talking about position or status. The position of an individual on a social-economic scale that measures such factors as education, income, etc are socio-economic in nature.

A family’s socio-economic status is based on family’s income, parental educational level, and social status in the community (such as contacts within the community, group, association and the community’s perception of the family). It has been reflected that families with high socio-economic status often have more success in upbringing their children, have easy access to information. It is obvious that when basic necessities are lacking, parents must place top priority on housing, food, clothing, health etc.

It has observed that the social structure of a civilization to a great extent is based upon the culture & tradition of the society and accordingly in each society women occupies a definite position which accounts their status in that society. Since the origin of society, women had become an integral part of the social structure by influencing thoughts. So without taking into consideration, the Status and contributions of women in different spheres of life, we cannot have a total picture of any civilized country. Thus for the development of a society, contribution of both man and woman are equally important. In most cases, woman’s contribution to the society is considered invisible. Even with the changes of time from traditional to modern, the position of women has not changed much. In the male dominated society, on one hand women have been idealized and looked upon with reverence and respect and on the other hand they had been subjected to exploitation and ignominy. But still in the midst of such an unfavorable condition some of the woman could achieve exceptional recognition only because of their creative

\(^3\) http://www.google.com.human development index, 26th April, 2011.
faculty and sacrifices. Thus, the status of a woman is determined by the functions allotted to them. ⁴

The social status of women in India is a typical example of the gap between position and roles accorded to them by the constitution and law. The men’s domination over women lies in their institutionalized power of taking decisions not only on issues governing themselves but also women’s live. Social status of women would lead to empowerment if women have acquired greater access to knowledge and resources, greater autonomy in decision making, greater ability to plan their lives, have greater control over the circumstances that influence their lives and free them from the shackles imposed on them by custom, beliefs and practices. Similarly economic status would provide economic empowerment. Thus the empowerment of a country’s human resources goes a long way in determining the economic development of a nation. The nature and type of economic and non-economic role played by women have undergone continued transformation in accordance with the changing concepts regarding the extent to women’s contribution is desirable and necessary.

Economists identified that, India at present suffers basically two greatest evils at this time. These are namely as oppression of women and the exploitation of the poor. And as far as the economic growth & development is concerned, the contribution made by human beings is not significant. Considering this point, the sixth five year plan, emphasized on the welfare of the women of the disadvantaged sections of the society.

Although, women have been actively involving in carrying out different agricultural operations and household crafts in the country continually, yet their roles are mostly restricted to the production activities

⁴. Dr. J, Nirmala and Dhulasi, B.V., (2005), op.cit., p.2.
only & hardly involving them in various marketing and entrepreneurial activities. The tenth plan (2002-07) has made a commitment towards empowering women as the agent of socio-economic change and development. It is in this context, positions of women of all sections may be envisaged in terms of improvement of awareness, knowledge, and skill makes effective use of local resources and takes account of the local needs and constraints. Therefore development of women’s status is a pre-requisite & this development of women may take place both socially and economically, if economic & social inequalities are reduced among all section of women.

In India, for instance, due to the women’s movement and because of the contribution of many scholars like Amoretto Sen., the invisible work of the women are gradually has become visible in many areas. Whatever they doing has some economic relevance. As a result in today’s world a lot of emphasis is given regarding women’s economic contribution. Today, women all over the world are getting different types of education & are qualifying for variety of jobs.

But at the same time a large number of women are still in the backward position, this is basically because of their geographical position, lack of education, lack of employment, lack of connection with the market. Basically people living in rural areas are up against three main problems of great magnitude. These are utter backwardness, widespread unemployment, and massive poverty. All these three factors are very common among Hira’s in Assam and in our study areas. Women in our study areas belong to the particular category naming as Hira community which is a minority community in Assam facing tremendous hardships for their survival. Neither they know about the market nor do they get money by selling their products. As a result their condition has become poor and poor which ultimately have been leading to low socio-economic condition of women. Before going into
details of our study an analysis is making covering the importance of women in every society in general so that the importance of Hira women can also be discussed thoroughly. As status of women is also not similar in all societies in all the ages, varies in accordance to her functions in their social organization, which provides a social status to them. Therefore following analysis has made showing status of women in India and Assamese society in different periods of times.

3.2. A brief description of status of women in Indian society over the years

The archaeological findings, ancient historical records and other sources give us a varied picture of the status of women in India. Systematically written Indian history is available only after the 16th century from that, up to the periods 2000 B.C the sequence of events is described in the Sanskrit literature of that period. The historical period with respect to the consideration of the status of women in India can be broadly classified as ancient and modern periods.

A. Status in ancient period (B.C 3000-1200 A.D)

A (1) Status in pre Aryan period (B.C 3000- B.C 2000)

In this period, we discuss about the totally mature Indus Valley civilization and the status of women before the arrival of Aryans in India. Nothing can be said with certainly due to the absence of enough literature. But high status accounts if society will civilize and culturist.
A (2) Vedic Period (B.C 2000-B.C 600)

Women were highly respected and they enjoyed high status inside and outside the home till to the Vedic period up to 1200 B.C. For e.g., from the verses of Ramayana as written by Tulsi Das, we can have civilized and idea about women of the ancient India. Moreover, the Vedic period is regarded as one of the glorious chapters in Indian history for women. Literary and historical researchers have now established beyond doubt that women held a position of equality with men during this period. The Vedic women being educated had a voice in the selection of their husband. The dowry system did not stand as important in daughter’s marriages at that time. As regards to the Property right, according to the Vedic humans, both the husband and wife were joint owners, in spite of the patriarchal prevailing. In the religious ceremonies and sacrifies man and woman took part as equal partners.

A (3) The age of Revolt (B.C 600- 300 A.D)

In this period, Brahmins established themselves at the highest position in society and sudras at the lowest. It decreases the status of women.

A (4) Puranic age (A.D 300- 1200 A.D)

Gupta imperialism flourished during this period. The feeling of slavery increased in the status of women and obedience and tolerance were considered the essential virtues of women.

A (5) Manusmriti and period from about 1500 B.C

Change in women’s status caused due to various reasons basically because of denial of education for women during this period. Manusmriti

A (6) Dravidian period

Again during the Dravidian period and for sometime in the beginning of the Aryan era, women enjoyed a respectable position commanding a reasonably equal status with men. Aryans by introducing improved methods of agriculture in India, brought about a transition from hoe to plough cultivation. This had improved a lot, in many ways, which was a turning point in the life of women in India.

A (7) Buddhist era

Again the position of women started to improve in the age of Buddha. There was no discrimination between a male and a female progeny in a Buddhist family. In the Buddhist society, the son was not essential for performing one’s funeral ceremonies and giving oblations. A sonless man could also obtain Nirvana, if he could lead a spotless pure life. The adoption of daughter was quite valid in the Buddhist society. Polygamy was uncommon and the general practice of marriage was monogamous. Women captured important position in the religious and spiritual spheres.

A (8) Medieval period (A.D 1200- A.D 1757)

Myths and misinterpretations of scriptures to suit convenience introduced to justify women’s subjugation in later Vedic age. In the later

Vedic age, women’s position was so bad that they were made completely dependent on men. Men and his sons ballooned to a higher and important position. Women were branded as weaker sex. Thus began the downfall and inferior status of women. Muslim invaders had established their rulership in India and status become much more pitiable. Many social scientists describes this period as the “dark” era for women in India. Purdah system (the obligation for women to wear a veil or being kept inside the house at all times) exited along with child marriages, and education for women was completely stopped. The overwhelming concern for poverty and maintenance of horror through a women resulting in underpinning of her role as wife and mother, exercised through both overt and covert regulations, seem to have been necessities by the material development needs of the society. So one can say, the traditional localism are handicapped


After the battle of 1757, British Raj prevailed in India. During British colonialism, education was enhanced. The introduction of English western medium education affected the Indian education. And women were also allowed to acquire education. Moreover women’s role began to change due to emancipation from the clutches of men’s domination as the principal of democracy and liberalism brought out greater emancipation all over the world in the 18th century. Later, every possible effort was made to enhance the status of women by the social Reforms movement of 19th century. Moreover, the decade between 1917 and 1947 witnessed the emergence of a number of women’s organizations. And people started thinking of the issues regarding the women with a new respective. Women organizations like Bangal Mahila Samaj, Bharat Parisha (1904), Women’s Indian Association (1917), National Council of Women in India (1925), etc took the initiatives for improving the

status of women. Many social reformers like Mahatma Gandhi, Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Vinoba Bhave etc also made significant contribution for enhancing the status of women that time. Many educational institutions were opened. The British government passed many acts like the prohibition of Sati Act in 1829, Widows Remarriage Act 1872, Married Wife Property Act 1874 etc. Women got released to an extent from the pain of economic, social, familial, political disabilities to a great extent. However the significant fact is that, the advantage of all these facilities was procured only by the urban women of the upper class and that too in limited quantity. The social, political, familial, economic disabilities of the vast majority of women particularly in rural areas could not be assumed even up to the independence of the country.

In the post independence period, after 1947 besides many laws pertaining to public sector such as- Factory Act 1948, Employees State Insurance Act 1948, Maternity Benefit Act for women etc were passed at the initiatives of the state in order to encourage participation of women in the public domain and to ensure gender equality in the public sector. Several commissions have also been appointed both by the central as well as state government with an intention of looking into various women’s related issues.

Though, attempts were made for creating awareness to remove disabilities of women of all sections, yet the growing instances of suffering socially and economically has been very large among the scheduled caste and scheduled tribe. Women generate despair, frustration and expose the intertwining of caste, class and gender forces. Thus the situation has not been changing for all section of women.

An analysis of the five year plans reveal that in the first 25 years of planned economic development in India, the issue of women’s development
was never made a part of the planning agenda, and as it was assumed by the planners that if the country as a whole marched towards progress, then the progress would be shared by all sections of the people. But this assumption turned out to be faulty as no such development in the status of women was seen, nor gender equality was achieved. As a result, it was in the 6th five year plan that for the first time a chapter on women and development was included. The subsequent plans that followed the 6th plan also noted the result of development efforts in terms of both poverty alleviation and improvement in the status of women. Moreover various developmental programmes were undertaken by the government of India on the economic front such as the Integrated Rural Development Programme (IRDP), Development of Women and Children of Rural Areas (DWCRA) etc.

The status of women in Indian society has certainly been elevated as they seem to redefine their limits and boundaries by trespassing, the so-called artificial boundary. But unfortunately, the womenfolk of our country have never been able to break away and defy the male bondage.

3.3 Description of status of women in Assamese society over the years

Assamese Society by tradition was a rural society which was also characterized by powerful sentiments of Kinship, locality, caste, and community. But contrary to some conservative tradition, Assamese women were not so much subservient to male sex. Assamese women enjoyed the aroma of freedom as well as better social status in comparison to her counterparts in other parts of India. She was never kept under the total subordination disdainfully.  

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In order to properly estimate the position of women in ancient Assamese society, as expressed through Varna and caste system is necessary as the traditional Indian society was primarily based on Varnasrama. The principle of categorization of society into four groups that were Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, Sudras and four stages of life, that were Brahmacharyya, Garhasthya, Vanaorastha, Sannayasa exited in the Vedic society. The four Varnas were mentioned in order of hierarchy wherein the first three were called dwiya i.e. twice born while the Sudras occupied the lowest position in the society and they are expected to serve the other three Varnas

But in case of Assam, no concrete evidence either inscriptional or literary is available about the existence of all the four Varnas. The social division of the Assamese Hindus though fundamentally allied to that of India, presents a picture of liberalized caste hierarchy. This liberalism was due to the emergence of Neo-Vaisnavism according to which all the castes are equal in front of God. Due to the liberal outlook in the caste system and occupation, the Varnasrama Dharma was also not properly observed here as was followed in other parts of India. But being an integral part of India, Assamese social life was also based on Varnasrama Dharma which is proved by ancient epigraphic and literally sources. The epigraphs are completely silent about the intermediary two Varnas-Kshatriya and Vaishya. Dr. P.C.Choudhury broadly divides the Assamese Hindu society into two classes viz the Brahmins and the Sudras.⁹

In the ancient and medieval Assamese society, the professions determined the castes position. But it never played a dominating role in the formation of caste rigidity in the Assamese society. It is also important to note

that caste or sub-caste differences were never considered an intractable barrier to social harmony and interaction in the Assamese society. The main reason behind liberal attitudes of Assamese folk mind in the caste based society was the preaching of the great Vaisnava Guru Sankardeva and his associates. The scheduled caste (the Sudra) suffers subjugation and exploitation in other forms as prevailed in other parts of India. The structural form and relationship in rural areas have continued almost intact in even post independence India, although some changes have come about in urban settings. During the Pre-Vaisnava period, Sudras occupied the lowest rank in the caste hierarchy in Assam. They were by and large, landless agricultural and casual laborers which add to lower their social and ritual states further.10

In the traditional rural Assamese society, despite a subservient status, the Hindu women of various castes suffered less from social disabilities than her counterparts in some other regions of India.11 The prime reason for this is because of the absence of evils custom of dowry. But in spite of that the social status of women in Assam was not good in certain aspects. Patriarchal domination was there in all the aspects of life of a woman. For example, social status of the groom’s party at the time of marriage was always superior in comparison to the bride and her family. Certain task had to be performed by women while other tasks were meant for men. For example women can engage themselves in water regulation, transplanting reaping, but not in ploughing. Women of the upper classes were withdrawn from the outside work. They naturally took the caste of their husbands. Accordingly they had to follow the rules and restrictions. Some of the strict social customs like child marriage. Sati–dah system etc did not affect the Assamese women at that time

10. Das Mausumi…, (1992), A step towards removing the educational backwardness from scheduled caste society, An article, published in Socio- economic development of the scheduled caste OF Assam, published in, Assam Institute of Research for Tribals and scheduled castes, Guwahati, Saraighat printers, Pp. 43-45
like the women of other parts of India. This was because of the influence of the Mongoloid tribes. Women had far greater freedom in marriage, divorce and other matters than we find in orthodox Hindu society.

In the ancient and medieval periods, in the Assamese society, the professions determined the castes position. But it never played a dominating role in the formation of caste rigidity in the Assamese society. It is also important to note that caste or sub-caste difference were never considered an intractable barrier to social harmony and interaction in the Assamese society due to liberal attitudes of Assamese folk mind in castes based society.

During the pre- vaisnava period, sudras occupied the lowest rank in the caste hierarchy in Assam. They were by large landless agricultural and casual laborers. Those were mostly engaged in manual jobs which add to lower their social and ritual status further.

We shall not discuss further in details about the caste system, but we will take some of the features of the caste system which have direct relevance to women. Srinivas defined that caste, is a hereditary, endogamous usually localized group having traditional associations with an occupation and a particular position in the local hierarchy of castes. Relations between castes are governed among other things by the concepts of pollution and purity and generally maximum commensality occurs within the caste.\(^1\)

Following are some of the practices that lower the women’s position in Assam in all periods.

(A) The concept of Hypergamous (anuloma) and hypogamous (practiloma) marriages by definition denigrates women.

\(^{1}\) Srinivas, M.N., (1962), Caste in modern India and other essays, Asia publishing house, Bombay,p.3.
A marriage where a boy of upper caste marry a lower caste was approved and called Anuloma. On the other hand marriage of women of ritually pure groups with men of lower rituals status doesn’t receive a similar approval and known as Pratiloma. Moreover if a men of the low caste, marry a girl of the high caste, then they were both considered as degraded and impure.\textsuperscript{13}

(B) During the medieval Assamese society punishments like excommunication could be evoked for transgressing the norms. Women as a guardian of purity has not to lower herself but she could be raised high.

(C) Another symptom is the differential status of bride giver and the bride taker, where the latter is considered to be always superior. Though the evil of dowry was not prevalent in the Assamese society, but the social status of the groom’s party was always superior in comparison to the bride and her family. This is still following in Assamese society.

(D) There was an important practice on women in Assam that determined social division of labor in Assamese society. The tasks for women were specific like men in Assamese society. In agriculture, for instance, women could engage themselves in water regulation, transplanting, and weeding, reaping, thrashing but not in plugging. Women of the upper caste were withdrawn from the outside work.

(E) Although women of Assam or any other parts of India did not constitute a caste by themselves, yet they naturally took the caste of their husbands. Accordingly they had to follow rules and restrictions. For example tradition prohibited the Brahmins widows from eating non-vegetarian foods. Again one thing was common among the

women of all castes that they were always considered as subordinate to male members.

(F) The recommendations and prohibitions for sudras (lower caste) and women were same on many occasions. For example, the prohibition of the Upanayana Sanskara for both women and sudras or denial of religious privileges for Sudras in Assam. This also points out the lower position of a woman in traditional Assamese society.

(G) There are some traditions for women also, prevailing among many castes in Assam, which were practiced during pregnancy, delivery period, menstrual courses, birth of a child etc which were totally linked with status of women.

In a traditional Assamese society, followed a number of rites and used several charms during the time of her pregnancy in order to avoid the possibility of being attacked by the evils spirits. Even after the delivery, women were provided with a separate room for certain days and a dhai (care taker of the child and mother) of low caste assisted her and many more.

(h) Though the practice of child marriage was not so relevant and large in traditional Assamese society, yet it could not be told that it was not practiced totally particularly among Brahmin caste the tradition of “Aag Beya” was done before menstruate. It was due to the early child marriages at very low that could not provide proper education among girls, and also free movement hampered. The child rearing, caring etc also had it be done from a very low ages.

Regarding the position of women in the ancient and medieval period of Assam history, there is a serious difficulty of locating authentic sources, which can help to construct a profile of Assamese women. But it can be
assumed that, as an integral part of the Indian society, the Assamese womenfolk were also guided by the same Indian beliefs and customs prevalent in other parts of the country. That is why; they had to accept everything like the other Indian women more or less.

3.4 Socio- Economic problems of the Scheduled Caste people of Assam

Stratification of societies is a phenomenon known to all civilizations—living as well as dead. This is a direct result of class struggle and class exploitations. The ancient Indian societies was not only stratified but also fossilized into different varnas and jatis, which were determined by the ancient of birth. The varna system hierarchy in the caste system was established in the Vedic period. According to Ghurye, the following are the salient features of the caste system.14

a) Segmental division of the societies.

b) Hierarchy

c) Restrictions on feeding and social intercourse.

d) Civil and religious disabilities.

e) Lack of unrestricted choice of occupation.

f) Restrictions on marriage.

Castes in Assam have begun to be recognized in official records since 1872. Prior to that we find names of some castes in histories, chronicles and descriptive accounts describing their status in the Hindu society in Assam.15 It was in the wake of the Indian political reforms during the thirties that some depressed classes got an effective opportunity of ventilating their grievances

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15. Thakur, G.C., Sarma., (1992), Socio economic development of the scheduled caste in Assam, Institute of Research for Tribals and
against the social injustice. Accordingly by the constitution (scheduled castes), Order, 1950, identified 16 castes as scheduled caste which has already mention in the Chapter.1. They occupied throughout the country the lowest rank in the caste hierarchy. Hence, in hierarchy of unequal relationship, they are socially inferior to all others in the entire community. Even though Government has been making many schemes, programmed, for their enlistment, yet they are not in a position to compete with other communities.

While going to discuss on the socio-economic problems of the scheduled caste people of Assam, we have to be aware of the causes and other factors associated with the prevailing situation of the social and economic condition. The following are some of the causes for their backwardness.

1. The main problem of the scheduled caste people is absence of sufficient education in the real sense to understand their problems themselves.

2. Indebtedness is another problem causing miseries to many of the scheduled caste people. One of the causes of indebtedness is the inherent poverty.

3. Traditional occupation with age old techniques which does not bring large scale benefits to the people.

4. Poverty is an important cause. It is because of the fact that landlessness is common among them. They can not take loan offered by the Government as they can not sufficient security.

5. Administrative problem is also there. The benefits provided by the administration donot go to the genuine needy and bonafide people.

6. Lack of information and communication among the scheduled caste about different schemes offered by the government is also a problem.
7. Directorate for the scheduled castes which has been established separately is not properly oriented and organized and unable to remove grievances.

8. Absence of establishment of small scale industries among them.

9. Unemployment leading poverty as well as cause low standard of living.

10. Mere reservation even are unable to solve their problem as people are uneducated, untrained.

11. Lastly the problem of social and physical environment which is not healthy has not changed and improved their position.

Indian government has been trying to remove its economic backwardness, and has adopted various measures in economic planning after independence. But despite this, improvement in the living standard has not been possible among Scheduled caste in Assam, which provides a low social status to them. Therefore following analysis has made showing Hira’s.

3.5 Hira’s a brief outline

Hira community is belong to scheduled caste and is considered to be the original pottery makers of Assam. They are found mostly in the plains of the Brahmaputra Valley. They are mostly concentrated in the districts of Barpeta, Nalbari, Goalpara, Kamrup, Darrang, and Nagaon which has shown in the previous chapter. An overwhelming majority of the Hira’s dwell in the rural areas of Assam.

In Assam there are two principle castes viz Hiras and the Kumars who derive livelihood from making earthen vessels. They are found to be engaged in pot making as obtained from Assam. Besides there are also a few other castes engaged in the crafts, but they don’t constitute any significant
proportion. The Hiras are a class of potters who shape the various pots by hand and it is done only by females. In this case the role of female in a family can not be denied though they do not compete with the male.\textsuperscript{16} The position of Hira’s in Assam is very low indeed. The standard of living of this community is also very low. But those families who have shifted to urban centers have the position in society and have got the high standard of living.

The social and cultural life of the Hira’s do not involve much complexity. The Hira’s are living in the same village along with other cast people, but all the Hira’s are mostly clustered in a particular portion in the same village or town areas. Their society and culture are almost similar to other caste Hindus. Hira’s of course don’t know about their own religious beliefs and social customs. The religion of Hira’s varies from place to place where there is Sattras, the Hira’s have accepted “Vaishnavism” and in some places of Assam they have followed the path of “Damodara”. Shaktism is also found among the Hira’s. Sankardeva, the great reformer and architect of neo-vaishnavism in Assam made no distinction of caste and in the matter of preaching his religion. He accepted socially depressed caste and tribal also and the door of Namghar, Sattras, was kept open for all classes. Most of the scheduled caste of Assam including the Hiras accepted this religion and worship Sankardeva as the incarnation of God.

As a Scheduled caste Hira’s were listed in the scheduled caste, according to the Constitution of India, the Scheduled Caste order 1950 as modified by the scheduled caste Modification order1956. The traditional pattern of social interactions between the Hira’s and the other caste Hindus reflects to some extent the idea of social distance. The Brahmins of course don’t practice intertwining with the Hira’s. Traditionally this caste was not

allowed to enter into the Satras or Namghars in Barpeta. But this situation changed after the introduction of Vaishnavite movement. The majority of the Hindu population was brought to a common platform.

The traditional pattern of social interactions between the Hira’s and the other caste Hindus reflects to some extent the idea of social distance. In some places they have got their own Satras or Namghars. In this case, the questions of social distance don’t arise. But where the Hiras and the other higher caste have common Namghar social distances are maintained in certain cases. The Hira’s were not allowed to distribute prasada if the Namghar is dominated by Brahmins. They can not participate in the arrangement of materials in connection with the Nam or Puja. In our study villages, Hira’s have their own Brahmin who belong to their own caste. At present they have got two deuris {person who prepares and distribute prasadas in the Sattras} in the Sundaridiya Sattra. Deuris are also selected from Hira’s and all the Bhaktas from different castes (prayer) accept prasadas. Of course in some rituals such as mortuary rites and puberty rites, the food prepared by Hira’s are not accepted by other higher caste Hindus in villages in Barpeta. In case of marriage also Hira’s prefers to marry a Hira, though there exists enter-caste marriage. This is because of love affairs.

Thus one can say that, the Hira’s in Assam have failed to receive the social recognition of their caste status as the caste Hindus still maintains social distance rigidly in all matters of lives. 17

3.6 Short description of the study areas and socio-economic life of its people.

Pottery is being made more or less in both the study villages and in the other Selected Hira concentrating areas of the Barpeta town. There are 11 community development Blocks in Barpeta. For this study, the Barpeta Block (Also known as Kautkuchi Block) is selected. The two selected study villages are -

Bamuna and Daskhinhati Village of Sundaridia Gaon Panchayat area of Barpeta and other Hira concentrating urban areas are selected as Ghoramarahati, Majorhati, Kumarhati, Ambarihati of Barpeta Municipalty areas.

Hira localities are found in and around Barpeta town of our study areas. An honest attempt has been made here to present a rough sketch plan of the villages showing—the village roads, public places, school, religious centers, houses etc. This plan is not drawn according to the scale. The Hira’s are living in the same village along with other caste people, but all the Hira’s are mostly clustered in a particular portion in the same village or town areas in Barpeta also which they call as Hirapara. They maintain some kind of isolation. This might because of their inferior caste position in greater Hindu caste system.

The socio-economic life of the Hira’s in Barpeta in general is discussed below. One thing must be mention here that women status reflects with their socio-economic living.
(a) Religion

Hira’s are Hindus in general. The religion of course varies from place to place throughout Assam. Basically where there is Sattras, Hira’s have accepted “vaishnavism”. All the Hira based areas in Barpeta has been performing the similar rituals. As Baishnav religion is popular in Barpeta, they have accepted Baishnav religion. They pray in Namghar. In village areas, Hira’s have their own Namghar. Of course, in one town locality of our study areas naming as Kumarhati, Hira’s have their own Hira Namghar. They call it as “Daityari Thakur Sakha Sattras” in Barpeta. Women of Hira’s have been performing Nam in the Namghars. Of course they can also go and pray in the other namghars.

(b) Family of Hira’s

Family is the first and foremost social unit among Hira’s too. One of the main functions of the family is to provide a shelter to the members of the kinship. The primary social unit of the Hira’s life is the “ghar” or household. They call to their homestead as “ghar” No systematic pattern is followed in constructing ghar or house. The houses are haphazardly made. Each homestead of the Hira localities has only 1 to ½ kathas of land. Though some families have only 6/8 hats of land. In spite of living in village set up, they live in nuclear family. Two or three nuclear families being separated out from joint family at present, build houses around the same courtyard. As they are potter, pot shreds are seen lying in their small compound. Particularly in villages they generally keep their pots in the main house where they sleep. Most of the villagers of both the villages have very small thatch houses. The materials used for constructing the houses are bamboo, wood, thatch; seed etc. In town areas, Hira families have mainly Pokka houses.
(c) **Roads**

The paths which are running through the villages are very small and the condition is very bad, though now the present government has been making new roads. Even in the town areas in Ghoramarahati, Hira dwelling roads are very small, katcha. In summer season the villages are covered with flooded water.

(d) **Educational facilities**

There are primary schools for the two villages. There is a high school too at about 1 k.m distances from the village. The college is situated at a distance of a 2 k.m. In town areas there is many institutions for education. Though the villagers have got free and compulsory education, yet enrolment is very poor. They do not even complete the high school and in secondary and colleges level hardly on or two reaches. The urge for education among Hira’s is not seen and they never give importance to education. And so educational level is seen poor among them in Barpeta. Though town areas have portrait a slide different picture. Here some families acquires high educational standard and have got government jobs. But the overall picture is more or less similar among Hira’s.

(e) **Medical facilities**

No health center is found within the village Bamuna. But one health center is found in Sundaridiya village. The civil hospital which was in the middle of town areas is now shifted to far Jania path. Now it is named as Barpeta medical hospital. It is not less than 5 to 6 k.m from village areas. No private hospital is found near to village. No Doctors are living nearby areas in the villages.
(f) The people of the villages/towns

The people of the villages are the original inhabitants of Barpeta. As the present study is related to Hira’s, so it shall considered only that hamlet which is inhabited by the Hira’s. Besides Hira’s, napits, keot, and kayasthas also live in the Bamuna village. Sundaridia is the inhabitants of different castes like Hira, napit, kalitas, keot, koch, Brahmins, kayasthas etc. But in Dahkinhati village, only Hira people lives. In the town areas apart from Hira’s, keot, bamun, bania etc. are found within Hira localities. But in Ghoramarahati, Hira’s live in cluster and Bania’s live nearby in the opposite side. In other three areas Hira’s live together with other caste people.

(g) Occupation

The Hira’s stand low in the social scale on account of their occupation. They are traditionally concerned with pot-making. Census of the village shows that pot-making is the prime occupation of the Hira’s of the two villages. As the Hira by name is the only reference about their physical characters are found from outside Assam. But in town areas they are engaged with other small works like grocery, shop boys, backery, driver, handyman as pottery is not a profitable business for them. They are shifting families from village to town areas for occupation other than pottery. There are very few families who have engaged in government jobs.

(h) Distances with other Hindu people

The Hira’s of the two villages are dwelling in urban settlement means very near to Barpeta town. Yet rural condition is still prevailing among the Hira’s of the two hamlets. It is reflected through their lives in villages. They have relation and co-corporation with the people. The Hindu castes. But the age older generation keeps a distance from them. They still maintain their
social distances in Barpeta. One thing must be mention here that, though the younger section has kept good relation with the other younger section of the Hindus, yet the minds of the general people has not changed regarding caste barriers in Barpeta.

(i) Family as an economic unit

Each family serves as an independent economic unit in their society. From the occupational analysis, it is found that most of the families in the villages subsist on pottery. But in towns it is not similar. All the female members of a family are always busy in the pot making. The duties of the male members are to collect Hiramati and materials for burning the pots. They also engage themselves in various other activities like rickshaw pulling, thala pulling, driver, etc. The family budget is prepared by the head of the family that means male member of the family. Decision in other causes are also taken by the males.

(j) Types of the family

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of family</th>
<th>Rural</th>
<th>Urban</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Count</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>Count</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nuclear</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>59.88</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joint</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.62</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>60.49</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Survey.

Thus it reveals that types of families are found among Hiras are nuclear and joint. The analysis visualizes that nuclear family with a percentage of 91.36% dominates among Hiras in Barpeta. This is followed by joint family with a percentage of 8.64% Table 3.6 (j). The reason of the
dominance of nuclear family in the Hira society is essentially economical. The joint types are confined to those families whose mainstay is the cultivation within Assam. But no such family is found in the survey areas. For instance, family disputes also lead them for nuclear family. Moreover, if a couple of a joint family used to get some more money on individual basis either by holding a job or otherwise, considered the other members of the family as their burden. As a matter of fact, the tendency of separation from the main family is initiated there and thereby the entire joint family is divided into many nuclear families.

(k) Languages

They are Assamese people and they speak Assamese language. Assamese community in the rural areas under survey speaks Assamese and in the urban areas too they speaks Assamese

(l) Water supply

Most of the Hira families have no safe drinking water facilities in villages. They have mainly take water from nearby ponds. Kacha walls and tube walls are the sources of drinking water in towns though water supply has been there in town areas. Yet they can not effort the cost of connection and bill of water supply. So they lack safe drinking water facilities.

(m) Sanitation

And so far as the sanitation is concerned state of affairs of the two villages cannot be considered as satisfactory and hygienic. They have no sanitation and they mostly use open space. Few families have katcha latrine and only a very few families have pacca latrine. Same is the case in town also.
Of course, people of the urban localities use latrines instead of going for open spaces. They have pacca latrine.

3.7 Conclusions

We have already mentioned that the main task of the women is pot making. Hira’s are traditional potters of Assam which is confined to the women folk only. Females are original pottery makers which flourished in Assam from very fairy past. The adult women and the widowed women as well as the old women make pots in almost all the times of the day. Generally the adult women do the domestic works. It is customary to know the pot-making techniques is known by most of the women and even the girl’s hereditarily (Source: field survey) learned the methods. They make pots by their hands without using wheel.

The womenfolk’ help in the time of sickness, clean household, utensils, carry water for cooking purpose. The old aged females and widowed women always go to kirtan ghar to listen to the recitation of the Assamese version of the Bhagavata purana. The children of the age group (0-5) stay in their homes and they are roaming helter and thither inside the villages. The children of age group (6-10) go to school and play minor games during the stay at home. The female members of age group (11-15) help in domestic works. (Source: field survey). Some of the young girl’s go to school and colleges and some times, them also partially help in the process of pot making.

Besides these, it must be mention here that a Hira women is mainly responsible for her children. The women besides pottery making, takes over more responsibilities than her husband, so far as the domestic and pottery works are concerned. So far as the economy is concerned, the husband keeps money with him. Though sometimes in some families wife can take money with her. But she helps her husband when situation demands. The main task
of spending money is decided by men. Thus the socio-economic life of the Hira women in our study areas is pitiable. On one side, she does domestic work and on the other hand pot making. But never sells the products they make. The money earned from pottery are spend for the entire family. Women have no say in this money but silently do her work in her family. Such a position ultimately shows the patriarchal domination over her talent & skill. She is totally dependent on her husband, father, and brother for her life. In the later chapter, the picture will be more clearly understand as survey results will be discussed.
References


