CHAPTER - II

BACKGROUND
2.1 Geo-physical background of South Kamrup:

South Kamrup is located on the southern bank of the mighty river Brahmaputra. Geographically, it is bounded on the east by the district of Morigaon and Goalpara on the west, the river Brahmaputra flowing on the north and Meghalaya hills stands on the south. Therefore, the landmass between Morigaon and Goalpara districts, between Brahmaputra and Meghalaya is earmarked as South Kamrup. It lies between 26° 15' N and 26° 30' N latitudes and 91° 01' E and 92° 15' E longitude.

The region has a varied physiographic features ranging from low lying flood plains through monotonous plains to the hilly areas. In fact, the topography of South Kamrup reveals that more than three-fourth of the area is covered by hills and rest of the area encompassed by the rivers, beels, marches, swamps and forest. However, the hills of South Kamrup are stretching almost from the bank of the river Brahmaputra and merges with the ranges of Shillong or Meghalaya Plateau. Finally, they connect undivided Assam (i.e. North-east India) with China, Burma and other South Asian countries. Considering this connection perhaps Paul Pelliot as referred by Dhavalikar stated that there was a regular trade route by land between this region (Assam) and China through upper Burma and Yunan, at least from 2nd century B.C. (Dhavalikar, 1973:138).

The important hill ranges some of which stretching from the middle of the area to the Meghalaya Plateau are - Chakardew, Chagalcari, Burha parvat,
Gumi, Dakhala, Gobardhan, Mailata, Basistha, Sona pahar, Ghogua, Bornihat etc. Besides their geo-ecological setting, these hills by and large are the resource mobilising areas from where the villagers collect the materials necessary for their livelihood.

**Drainage:**

The drainage system of South Kamrup is primarily controlled by the river Brahmaputra. The region is being patterned by numerous rivers of different orders, water channels and water bodies or beels, marshes and swamps. However, major rivers of this region are — Bharalu, Kulsi including Mora Kulsi, Digaru, Boko and Singra. All these rivers are originated in the Meghalaya ranges and debouch into the river Brahmaputra. These rivers with their tributaries and sub-tributaries form a network in the region. These are over flooded during the monsoonal rain.

**Water Bodies:**

In South Kamrup, there are numerous low lying areas which act as water reservoirs and water remains there throughout the year. These are locally known as 'beels'. In fact, 'frequently changing courses of the tributaries along with the Brahmaputra on the one hands and backwater effect of the Brahmaputra on the otherhand, have perhaps been responsible for the permanancy of large water bodies.' (Barman, 1986:65). Besides, the area is under active seismic belt which causes lot of damages from time to time and giving rise to marshes, beels and relative uplands.

The earthquake of 1897, in particular, had caused perceptible depression in many places. The Chandubi beel of Kulsi bears the consequences of this. Prior to this earthquake, Chandubi area was a thick forest encircling 16 mile,
and due to this unfortunate sequel the area sank up to a depth of about fifty feet. (Ibid :78). As a matter of fact, branches of the trees are visible below the water level of Chandubi. Besides, this earthquake had created lot of depressions and in consequence formed low lying tract, number of marches, swamps and beels. Most of these beels and other stagnant water bodies have now been converted into rich agriculture field leaving the deepest portion with standing water. However, quite a number of beels and marshes with varied sizes and shapes are found scattered in this region. In Guwahati sub-division alone there are about 56 such beels. These beels act as a reservoir of varied kind of fishes. The local fisherman catching fish from these beels and maintained their livelihood by selling fish. Apart from this, the Hira potters collected - clay (Hiramati) for pottery making from these beels.

The largest beel of South Kamrup are - Dipar-near Jalukbari, Chandubi near Loharghat, Kukurmara, Itila-near Maloibari etc.

**Flora and Fauna :**

The heavy rainfall, varying soil and humid tropical climate have contributed to the growth of sub-tropical luxuriant green vegetation of diverse flora. There are three types of forest vegetations, viz - the tall trees, intermediate shrubs and ground covering weeds and grasses. The lofty woody and tall trees are commonly seen in the hills and hill slopes. Besides, the luxuriant growth of tall grasses and reeds, water hyacinth are also seen in the marshes and riverine areas. There are good numbers of reserve forest with valuable trees like Sal (Shorea robusta), Shegun (Tectona grandish), Sonaru (Cassia fistula), Gamari (Gmelina arborea) etc. Among them, now the growth of Shegun (teak) plantation is increasing.
However, the valuable tall trees are devasted rapidly by different agencies. This not only despoiled the natural beauty of the areas also created an eco-environmental imbalance in the region. Despite the restrictions and vigil of the government, wanton destruction of these valuable trees are carried by the illegal contractors which is the main cause of the vegetational degradation of the forest areas. Moreover, the neighbouring rural population of these forest collect wood and timber for their domestic use.

In the domain of fauna, the most commonly found animals of South Kamrup are elephant, tiger, leopard, bear, wild pig, mongoose, spider monkey and different kinds of deer namely swamp deer, spotted deer, barking deer etc. Near the hills spider monkeyes are fairly common in South Kamrup. Besides, varieties of snakes - both poisonous and non-poisonous, insects etc. are remarkable.

Climate:

Like other parts of Brahmaputra valley, the South Kamrup also lies within the regime of monsoon climate. This region, perhaps due to this, experience a Humid sub-tropical climate. Further, the climate of this area is controlled by many factors. The chief among them are the existence of highland areas of Meghalaya Plateau on the southern border and its debouchment towards the west have created a regional variation of weather in the area. Besides, the existence of local valley winds, forest and local storms also have great effect on the climate of the area.
Rainfall:

Usually, the rainfall in the area started in the month of May and continued till September. During this period the rainfall amounts to about 80 percent of the total rainfall of the year. Besides, the period from November to early part of March is almost rainless. Sometimes, sporadic rains also occur towards the end of the year. However, the highest rainfall occurred in the southern foothills region and the plain areas generally received a less amount of rainfall.

Temperature:

The temperature is another unsteady and fluctuating environmental component in this region. The maximum temperature so far recorded in the area is 36°C in the summer and 9°C in the winter. But it was found that in last year (i.e. 1999) the temperature increased upto 38°C and above in the summer. It is also observed that the temperature fluctuate from place to place in response to the seasonal variation of rainfall and humidity.

Soil:

In this area both residual and transported types of soils are found in general. These are basically characterised by lateritic and alluvial soils. The lateritic soils which form due to the weathering of the rocks are mostly residual type of soils. It is usually found in the hills and mountains regions of the area.

Though the alluvial soils represent both transported and residual soils, may be re-worked to some extent by water. Most of the alluvial soils in the study area are found mostly in the mountain foot hills and valley areas. The characteristic feature of the soils are sandy, silty, loamy and clayey. The texture of the soil is also variable one. Generally the soils are heavy textured in hill
soils, medium as well as light textured in alluvial soils or plain soil. Besides, the sandy and clayey-silty soil occurs up to depth of one to two meters. The clayey soil which is used by the potters for pottery making is found usually below one to three meters.

2.2 Ethno-historical background of hiras:

The Hiras are an indigenous potter community of Assam. They are regarded as scheduled caste community of Assam. It may be mentioned that some scholars considered them as sub-caste of Chandal. (Siack; 1833, Gait; 1891, and Hutton; 1986). Moreover, Chattopadhyaya stated that "Possibly the Hirās are akin to the Hādis and might have left their original profession and took up that of Kumbhakāra". (Chattopadhyaya, 1990 :217). But the view of Chattopadhyaya is not accepted by the Hiras themselves. In fact, the caste Hādi is not present in the Brahmaputra valley as far as the present field observations are concerned.

However, the Hiras are one of the major scheduled caste community of Assam. They are primarily concentrated in the district of Kamrup, Goalpara, Nagaon, Darrang, Nalbari and Barpeta respectively. As per 1971 Census Hiras constitute 3.58 percent of the total scheduled caste population of Assam (C.I. 1971).

Pottery making is the primary source of livelihood of Hiras. They moulded pot by hand without taking the help of wheels. This method is considered as the most ancient, earliest and archetypal method of pottery making. But, when and how they acquired this technique is not known.
However, it may be mentioned that many tribes of North-East India used this technique of pottery making for long time and some of them still practise it. Although there are variations in raw material and morphology, but they show similarity to pottery making technique. Barua (1986) hypothesised that the Hiras learned this technique of pottery making by hand, from the tribals and he also emphasised that Hira people married tribal girls in ancient times. But Hiras never accepted it and they narrate different legends and stories about their origin and the birth of the craft. Some legends regarding this are described below. These are narrated by respective scholars in many of their writings.

Das stated that about 500/600 years ago one pilgrim from Orissa Shri Mohendra Mahapatra with his wife Hira Devi and two sons came to visit Kamakhya temple. He soon died and his family had to face untold miseries. The wife found a piece of shining clay while she was going by the bank of the river Brahmaputra in search of livelihood. She found that the clay was flexible and necessity inspired her to mould the clay into various forms of earthen pots and burn them with the help of her sons. Hence, this particular clay came to be called as Hiramati after the name of Hira Devi, the wife of the pilgrim Mahendra Mahapatra.

The general brahmins did not allow her sons to put on the lagun (sacred thread) though they were Vedic Brahmin. They were not allowed to do so as they followed the Kumar’s profession. Subsequently, Hira Devi died and her two sons continued with their pottery making profession. They were made outcaste by the general brahmins and were compelled to migrate to village Bahati, Goalpara to earn their livelihood. Hiras earn their caste- name Hira from the Hira Devi and they identify themselves to be her progeny (Das ; 1986:34).
Barua explained another legend of a childless Brahmin couple who came to visit Kamakhya temple in the Kamrup district of Assam. During their stay in the temple they were blessed with two sons. They were so happy that they decided to settle and earn their livelihood in this temple by performing pujas. As time passed by their sons gradually grew young. It is a prevalent custom of the brahmins to give Loguna (Sacred thread) to the young boys within a particular range of age. Otherwise, they will not be treated as brahmin. Owing to their poverty the couple could not performed the sacred thread ceremony and eventually they were outcaste from the local brahmin society. After that, they started living near the foot hills of Kamakhya temple. As the poor brahmin could find no other source of income, he took up begging and his wife however, began to making earthen vessel as a means of livelihood. Later on, one of her son started earning by selling fish and the other son followed his mother's profession. The son who earned living by selling fish was known as Namasudra and other son who earned his livelihood by making earthen vessel was known as Hira. Thereby, Barua suggested that the name Hira is derived from the name of the brahman's wife whose name was also Hira Devi. (Barua: 1988).

These two stories referred by Das (1986) and Barua (1988) have some similarity. Both of them supported that the Hiras were brahmin in origin. But poverty and circumstances compelled them to accept Kumbhakāra profession for their livelihood. As a result, they were outcaste from the Brahmanical cult and society as well. Moreover, both of them stated that the title/name Hira is derived from the name of Hira Devi, wife of brahmin pilgrim. It is a fact that the Hiras claimed Hira Devi is the inventor of both the clay and the technique of making pottery. Thereby, this community is known as Hira and the clay used by them is known as Hiramati. These stories though have no historical authenticity but are still prevalent among the Hiras.
Although divergent views have been expressed by different scholars regarding the ethnic individuality and the original abodement of the Hiras, but now they are regarded as one of the caste group of Assamese community. They speak Assamese language and follow the custom of the Assamese in all respect. Their physical features are also similar to that of Assamese people.

The Hiras are considered to be the original pottery makers of Assam. Though they belong to the scheduled caste community, they consider themselves superior in the social caste hierarchy than the Kumars. They believe that Kumars are impure as they detach finish vessel from the parent lump of clay by means of a cotton string. This as the Hiras say like cutting naval cord or umbilical cord when child is born. Perhaps, due to this, Hiras have disgusting attitudes towards Kumars and considered them as Naikata Kumar. Therefore, the Hiras do not use the wheel for fear of lowering themselves in their caste status.

In fact, the womenfolk of the Hiras are the potters and the males cooperate with the women in all other aspects except pottery making. They help the women in procuring raw materials, firing and marketing of the finished products. Thus, one of the important aspect of the pottery craft of Hiras is that there is a possibility of transmitting it by the female through marriage. However, the Hira women make various types of potteries needed for varied purposes. In fact, these are used mostly for household purposes and are not used for any religious rites.

The settlement pattern of Hiras is though similar to their Assamese counterpart but they settled in a compact form. The number of houses of a family depends on their economic condition and the family size. Generally, it ranges from one to five per family. They usually constructed the main house in the northern side of the courtyard. The entrance to be household usually faces the main house. Most of the Hira households have a backyard.
The houses are constructed by locally available thatch, reed and bamboo. Two roofs are constructed with bamboo frames and is thatched with dried straw. The roofs inclining roughly at an angles of 45°-50° towards the ground. The walls are plastered with a mixture of mud and cowdung. Tin roofed houses are relatively infrequent. However, construction of houses in modern style and design are also found in some Hira villages but among the potters it is a rare possibility. They also built a shed separately or attached to their houses for storing and making potteries. But sometimes they also burnt the potteries under the shed in inclement weather. It is worth noting that most of the Hira villages lack in granary and cow-shed. But only a few of them have these. This indicates that only a small number have owned cultivable land. Das mentioned that only 5% of the people of Hira community owned cultivable land. (Das, 1986: 35)

The local customary laws play a vital role among the Hiras. In fact, these laws have been framed by a consensus of the village people on the basis of prevalent customs, usages, tradition and religious beliefs. The laws have covered such subjects like the judicial power of the society, succession to office of socio-religious nature, type of marriage, principles of martial relations and degree of prohibition liability of atonement on committing unnatural and unsocial offences etc.

However, village council is the most common institution of Hira villages. Only the menfolk of the village associate with this institution. The village headmen is the head of the village council. The decision of the council is binding and people of the village are obliged to follow it.
2.3 Social position of the Hiras:

The Hiras are considered as scheduled caste community like the Kaibartas Namasudras, Charals and Nadiyals. They occupy a separate position in the social caste hierarchy. They are placed at a lower position than the Kumar. In The Comprehensive History of Assam, Chattopadhyaya mentioned that "At present the Kumbhakāras or the potters in Assam are divided into two groups, Kumāra and Hirā, the latter being regarded as inferior to the former". He further states, "... They differ from the other Kumbhakāras in that their womenfolk also work and instead of using potters' wheels, they shape their vessels entirely by hand." (Chattopadhyaya, 1990: 217). It may be accepted that difference in the technology of production and the utilization of the potteries might be resulted in the formation of two caste groups with unequal social hierarchies. Despite this, the Hiras persisted with other peasant occupation, as they are basically peasant potter. On the otherhand, though they are similar to the Kumar in many respect, but Hiras try to keep themselves away from the Kumar and never considered the latter as their fellow workers or superior. Perhaps, due to this they never hesitate to introduce themselves a scheduled caste.

The Hiras are endogamous caste group and traditionally they established affinal relation only with the Hiras. Besides, Hiras have their own priest like some other lower caste group for performing religious rites. They are locally known as Hirar Bamun i.e. the priest of Hiras. Chattopadhyaya alluded that "....... in the Pushpabhadrā grant (L.50) we meet with the expression pūrvadakshinena dijjaratihādi. It is to be noted that while the land donated has been described as having natural boundaries on all sides the exact meaning of the expression dijjaratihādi is not clear. Bhattacharya thinks that Hādi should be taken to mean Haḍḍika, Bengali Hādi. If we accept this interpretation then it
would appear to be somewhat curious that the house of a Hādi, i.e., Hirā may be so important as to form a boundary line. Evidently, this Hirā was an important personage having great influence in the locality. Can we take the term dijja in the sense of dvija or a priest of the Hira or Hādi class, meaning thereby that Hādi used to act as a priest of this sub caste group? " (Chattopadhyaya, 1990: 217). However, as regards the interpretation of the verse pūrvadakshinena dijjaratihadi of Pushpabhadra grant, Sharma in his book Inscriptions of Ancient Assam had given a different interpretation. Sharma interpreted the above verse as "To the eastern south (the land of ) Dijjaratihadi". (Sharma, 1978: 255-272). Sharma perhaps interpreted the term dijjaratihadi as a name of a person and not as dijja (dvija) or priest of Hira or Hādi. In all probability sharma's interpretation appears to be somewhat justified.

Furthermore, Chattopadhyaya is correct in saying that there are separate classes of priest for performing religious ceremonies among the lower caste groups and they 'are compelled to intermarry with the caste to which they minister'.

The priest of the Hiras are not consider equal by the general Brahmin. Neither the general brahmin intermarry with the Hira brahmin. The general brahmin treated them as untouchable and never taking any food or drinking water from them.

The potteries produced by the Hiras are not used for religious ceremonies. The reason for this still remain a question. Some are of the opinion that as the potteries are made by women and they are not pure and due to this reason potteries cannot be used for religious purpose. Others are of the view that it is because the Hiras make potteries by beating technique. But second view can not be correct on the ground that Kumar's also produce pottery by
beating technique and that too by both men and women. Above this, the priest who usually select potteries for various ritual purposes differs in their opinion. Considering all these aspects one can conclude that only because of the lower social position of the Hira potteries are not used in any religious ceremonies. Even the Hiras themselves never used their potteries for religious rites and rituals. (Sharma, 1999)

Nevertheless, a changing trend in the social outlook is observed among the present day Hiras. It is in this context mention may be made of occupational mobility. The Hira people are now-a-days changing their traditional occupation. Besides, changes are also noticed in the marriage. Inter caste marriage are taking place. The Hiras now-a-days are marrying outside their in order to upgrade their social status. The attitude of educated sections of the Hiras are also undergone a changed. They are now hankering after job, living behind their traditional occupation. Another remarkable change are noticed in respect of religious beliefs and practices as great number of people have coverted to the Vaisnavite cult, following the Mahapurusia sect of Vaisnavite school.

2.4 Review of relevant works:

Assam is well known for its rich cultural heritage. The discoveries of archaeological ruins and relics in different parts of Assam have substantiated its rich past cultural heritage and prosperity. Unfortunately, the culture and civilization of this state have long been least known to the rest of the world. Nevertheless, whatever recovered so far has not been systematically and properly recorded and studied.

It is worthnoting that the value of archaeological ruins and relics of Assam were more appropriately understood by the European scholars. Their interest
in the interpretation of culture had evolved in many of their articles published in the journals of India and abroad. In 1906-7, T. Block wrote an article as 'conservation' in the Annual Report of Archaeological Survey of India. This had largely influenced the scholars of India, followed by some Assamese scholars like Padma Nath Bhattacharyya, Kanak Lal Barua, Sarbeswar Kataki, Birinchi Kumar Barua etc. Likewise, many other publications of the European scholars (Dalton, 1872; Hutton, 1928; Dani, 1960) opened the eyes of the Assamese scholars and they realised the value of their own cultural heritage. Hence, they published a number of articles. (Bhattacharyya, 1931; Kataki, 1939; Barua, 1966; Barua, 1986).

It has already been mentioned elsewhere that pottery is considered as an archetypal indigenous craft of Assam. The study of ceramic of this region, though is a long felt need in the context of building up a cultural history of Assam, but systematic research on this craft is still in its infancy. Moreover, no ethnographic account of the two indigenous potter communities of Assam — Hira and Kumar have been found in the pre British period.

Nevertheless, the works of European scholar-administrators in the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries are worthnoting. Hamilton in his book *An Account of Assam* in 1804-1814 stated that Hira and Kalita Kumar were the two indigenous potters of Assam. He further stated that potters of Assam did not know the use of wheel, and pots were manufactured by hand. This was perhaps the first report on the indigenous potters of Assam. Siack reported that Hiras of Assam are different from the other potters, because their women are engaged in manufacturing of pottery. They shape the vessel by hand instead of potter's wheel. (Siack, 1833: 93).
In the Census Report of India, 1891 Gait mentioned that Hiras are the potters of Brahmaputra valley. As regards to Kumar Gait further stated that real Kumar or Kulala is a caste of Navasakha group and in the upper district of Brahmaputra valley Kumar potters belong to Kalita Kumar and Kewat castes and they are designated as Kalita Kumar and Kewat Kumar. (Gait, 1891: 272). Shakespear reported that numerous debries of earthen vessels were found in the Dikrong valley in Sadia by Hanny who explored the area. Further, Hanny commented that these potteries are totally different in shape from those of the Assamese potteries. (Shakespear, 1914: 83)

Das may the first among the Assamese scholars who worked on Hira potters of Assam. His work confined to the Hiras of Lakhipur, Goalpara, Assam. Besides their brief ethnography, he also included the pottery techniques and typology. He found only five types of potteries which are comparable to the Hiras of South Kamrup (Das, 1956: 36 (3) (199-202).

The Anthropological Survey of India during the regime of Prof. N.K. Bose, the then director of the Survey included the study of ceramic industries in their research programmes and had done a very good work. They also published series of monographs, books, articles etc. during that period. This survey divided the potters of India into three different zones and the state of undivided Assam was included in south east zone in their zonal division shown in a map. In Assam (undivided) only four districts were selected and the responsibility of the work was given to one B.K. Dasgupta (1963). The area and the villages selected for the work were mostly dominated by the immigrant potters and the indigenous potters of Assam were not being taken into this survey. Besides, Kamrup district, where the majority of the Assamese indigenous potters are living was totally ignored. Therefore, the picture, drawn in their report, is not the true representation of the potters and potteries of Assam.
In 1966, Saraswati and Behura published a monograph entitling *Pottery Techniques in Peasant India* summarising the works carried out by them on the potters of India. In this monograph the potters of Assam were occasionally referred to, but the technical terms which they had mentioned in regards to typology and technology, in fact were the terms used by the immigrant potters.

Bandopadhyaya published a paper on *Hira potters of Assam*. His work was confined to two villages of Goalpara district, viz—Lakhipur and Mornoi. But the clay preparation, terminology, typology and technology etc. referred to in that paper are not in parity with the Hira potters of South Kamrup. Besides, the utility, economy etc. are also not in compliance with the Hiras. This may be due to their close association with the immigrant Bengali potters. (Bandopadhyaya, 1961).

Goswami and Sharma discovered potteries along with lithic implements of Neolithic period in Daojali Hading, N.C. Hills, Assam. (Goswami and Sharma, 1962-63;3 & 1963-64:45).

Sharma who studied these materials, classified these potteries into four different groups. All these potteries were produced by hand and no trace of the use of the wheel had been found. (Sharma, 1967: 2(1): 126-128). This was the first discovery of pottery in prehistoric (Neolithic) context.

Dhavalikar and Ansari published a report on pottery and other antiquities, discovered in Ambari, Guwahati. In this, both handmade and wheelmade potteries were abundantly found. They have categorised the cultural materials into: Period I - from 7th to 12th century A.D. and Period II- from 13th to 17th century A.D. In the Period I, the potteries were mostly manufactured from Kaolin clay and in Period II Muslim glazed potteries were dominating. Along with the
potteries building structures, sculptures, terracottas were also found. (Dhavalikar & Ansari, 1972 : 81)

Sharma et. al published a paper on Ambari materials. They visualised in that paper a ceramic traditions in Brahmaputra valley, Assam centred round Ambari. (Sharma et. al 1994 : VIII : 87-104)

Sharma, again published another paper on Ambari. In this, he considered Ambari as the Epitome of Brahmaputra Valley Civilization. (Sharma, 1994 : IV : 72-75)

Again, in 1972 Goswami and Roy studied the potsherds found at Ambari excavation. They divided these sherds on the basis of colour and design/pattern into five different categories. They also observed similarity of these sherds with the potsherds collected from the prehistoric horizon at Tanjong, Kubur on Santubong.

In 1975, Sharma found potsherds at Belbari and Barkapla of Barpeta district, Assam. He found potteries of six different colours as well as textures and opined that these are comparable with the same potteries of Ambari, Guwahati.

Further, Goswami and Roy studied both the indigenous potter groups - the Hira and the Kumar. They found that both the communities accepted pottery making as secondary occupation for earning cash or kind to cater for their own needs. They also reported that both the groups applied two different techniques for manufacturing pottery. The Kumar group worked on spoked and pivoted wheels and the Hira applied coil building and beating techniques. They also revealed that technologically, Hira pottery could be equated with the prehistoric
potteries. Again, they stated that pottery made by the Kumar is considered as ritually pure whereas the Hira pottery is ritually impure and used for utilitarian purposes. They compared these potteries with Ambari pottery. (Goswami and Roy, 1976)

Later on, however, contemporary Assamese potters were studied by the researcher of Gauhati University for Ph. D work. Roy may be the first scholar to study both the potter groups- the Hira and the Kumar for his Ph.D. in 1977. His work was a comparative analysis of both indigenous potteries and the potteries of archaeological context. However, a brief ethnography along with their ceramic technologies have been dealt with by him. (Roy, 1977)

Das et. al studied the anthropological traits of Hiras along with other four Assamese caste groups. In consideration of the whole set of anthropological variables they found that all the four castes are showing more or less marked differences in the distribution of anthropological characters. They categorically pointed out that their dissimilarities due to their endogamous marriage system, which confined themselves to their own caste group and thereby restrict the gene flow (Das, et. al, : 1986).

(Bhakta) Das who studied the socio-economic conditions of the scheduled castes, also referred to the Hiras. Besides pottery making, he mentioned the agricultural practices among them. But only 5% of the population of them have the cultivable land which is not even sufficient for poor economic conditions which becomes a barrier for both business and education. (Das, 1986).

Barua published a survey report on Hira potters of Assam. Basically, he studied the three Hira villages of three different districts. These villages were — Sessamukh of Kamrup, Dharamtul of Nagaon and Ganesh Kuwari of Darrang
districts. It is also stated in the report that the introduction of cheap and durable metal utensils have decreased the demand of earthen vessels resulting direct impact on the Hira pottery. (Barua, 1986)

In 1991 Sharma and Sharma studied both the Hira and the Kumar potters of Sahpur village in Nalbari district. They discussed the techniques of manufacturing and the typology. Both techniques and typology used by the Hiras in that area, in particular are similar to the Hiras of South Kamrup.

In 1990-91 Sarma worked on the Hira potters of Barpeta district for his M. Phil dissertation. He studied pottery techniques and typology and also referred to the socio-cultural aspects of Hira community of Barpeta district. For this, he selected only two villages namely Bamuna and Sundaridyiya, respectively.

Another noteworthy Ph. D work on the contemporary Assamese potters was done by B. Medhi in 1992 on the potters of Nalbari district, Assam. She studied the present position of this traditional craft in a broad ethnohistorical perspectives. Both Hira and Kumar potters in particular context of Nalbari district were studied comprehensively. She observed that indigenous potteries produced by both the communities persisted the old tradition. They seldom allow new trend in the craft and thereby restricted their production of certain types which have value only in the traditional way of living. But it continues as living craft which is an integral part of cultural milieu and social system of Assamese people. She also included the potteries of archaeological context. For this, the potteries of Daojali Hading have been studied. Finally, she presented a model on the evolution of ceramic product. In that, she draws a close affinity of Hira potteries with the tribal potteries which originated in the Neolithic period. (Medhi, 1992)
In 1998, Sharma and Sarma published a paper on the Hira potters of two villages of South Kamrup. The salient revelations of this work is that- (i) the quantum of production and good quality potteries are mostly produced in joint families and (ii) when demand, in terms of better quality potteries increases, the quantum of production proportionately increased and potters are forced to produce better quality potteries. Besides, they also inferred a variation of quantum of production on family size basis. (Sharma & Sarma, 1998)

Again in 1999, a research project on Hiras was undertaken by Prof. H.C. Sharma in the Department of Anthropology, Gauhati University. He entitled the project as *Craft Specialization and Occupational Mobility of the Hira Potters of Kamrup District, Assam*, financed by the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, New Delhi. It is based on a field study carried on by a group of researchers under the supervision of Prof. Sharma. The report covered all aspects of Hira potters of Kamrup district, viz— demographic pattern, marital status, family types, economy, religion, techno-morphology of pottery and its quantum of productions along with detailed account of the pattern of occupational mobility. Hence, it is a very comprehensive study so far done among the Hiras of Assam. A review of the project report revealed that craft exists among the poor and uneducated section of the Hiras who do not have any other resorts for subsistence. Report also envisage the dwindling status of the craft and its consequences in future it also suggested some measures for restoration of the craft and improvement of economic conditions of the potters.

The study further revealed that there is a wide assortment of occupations among the Hiras particularly among the males. This is supported by the improvement of their education in one hand and the non involvement of males in the ceramic production on the other. Most of them are interested to achieve white collar jobs. The uneducated commoners are also look for the blue collar jobs.