CHAPTER - III

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3.1 Problems:

Aims and Object:

Pottery is an integral and inseparable part of man's culture. Moreover, it is also considered as a mirror of the cultural patterns of a society. Besides, pottery can reflect the way of life and culture of a population. In the context of the above, it is worth quoting Grieder. Grieder observes that "First and foremost, archaeologists believe that ceramics can reflect the culture of a people such that the main forces of cultural change that affect a society are reflected in their ceramics". (Grieder, 1974:850-1).

In fact, pottery, which is the purposeful creation of potters, is an essential component of material culture. Clay is such a fascinating medium that potter can produce any kind of article/object with the use of clay. Clay, though variable in structure and composition, consists largely of silicates of aluminium and have the property of plasticity which permits it to be moulded into many different forms and are finally fixed with the proper amount of heat.

In the beginning, people learned to make and use only bone and stone tools. Later, they started making pottery as it was required to store their food stuff and for preparation of food. Although no communities using stone and bone tools are living today but there are people who still make and use pottery like prehistoric man. Besides, the technique used by the present day potters are almost similar to the techniques used by those prehistoric potters. Despite
assorted morphological variation, it provides clues to understand and assess the social, cultural, technological and economic attainments of both the makers and users. Therefore, it yield a good and effective clues for comprehending the basic elements of culture in totality.

In the context of the above Arnold opined that "The relationships of a population of potters to the environment and culture are viewed as a series of feedback mechanisms following a cybernetic model." (Arnold, 1989:18).

Therefore, the anthropologists and archaeologists counted pottery as an important element of civilization, culture and society. This is the only device which exhibits psychological make up/ motif in terms of mental template of the maker concerned. Therefore, the study of pottery not only throw light on the techno-cultural advancement, but also many other socio-cultural facets.

Considering these above as objectives the Hira potters of South Kamrup which is a significant area of their settlement have been intensively and extensively investigated.

The contemporary trend towards the study of ceramics in Assam and North-east India as well, has already been discussed. A review of the earlier works shows that most of the works done so far are fragmentary and the problem is sketchily dealt with. The Hira potters though included in those studies, but they have been treated cursorily.

However, none can deny the fact that this is the only potter community whose products and technology is closely linked with the prehistoric potteries. Therefore, if this community and their productions are studied extensively, may reveal some very important clues regarding the origin and development of
pottery, also it will help in reconstruction of the cultures from prehistoric past. Therefore, keeping aside the Kumar potters, the Hiras and their production, distribution, economy and occupational mobility have been primarily and thoroughly dealt with in this work.

The basic importance of the Hira pottery is the methods of fashioning the vessels. They fashion pottery by hand without using wheel. Moreover, the women are the artisan and men are no way involved in the production of pottery. Despite so much of morpho-technological development and advancement of ceramics, the Hiras never accepted wheel for manufacturing pottery. This although may lead to many queries but the following two are by far more noteworthy.

1. Why Hiras are not using the wheel?
2. Why only women and not the men are involved in the process of production?

In fact, this two aspects are given special emphasis along with the other aspects of the study.

Regarding the involvement of men and women in the production of pottery Herskovits opines that "Almost everywhere that pottery is produced with the aid of a potter's wheel, men makes it. But where it is made by hand, it is women's work." (Herskovits, 1974:140). Further, he noted that - "In the case of pottery, it is not known whether this was initially the work of men or women, but everything points to the conclusion that it was women's responsibility...... Men are potters in the plow cultures of Eurasia; elsewhere women make the pottery. The logic of this is the logic of history, and its implications present some of the more difficult problems with which the student of culture must cope." (ibid : 141). Although the above statements of Herskovits apparently answered the above
questions, but in the context of the present study, the area and concerned community as well, the situation is a bit different.

In Assam and South Kamrup in particular, both the potters - Hira (Handmade) and Kumar (Wheelmade) continued the production of pottery along with plough cultivation. The Hiras though have less cultivable land, practised pottery and plough cultivation simultaneously. Even among the prosperous and prominent Hira cultivators, women still engaged themselves in pottery making. Therefore, in Assam both men and women are potters even in the plough cultivation. Among the Hiras, though men are plough cultivator but never make pottery. They believe that pottery making is the women's assignment.

About the selection of South Kamrup for field study, it may be pointed out that this area is located on the south bank of the river Brahmaputra, on the foothills of Assam and Meghalaya ranges. It contains a mixed population of both tribals and non-tribals. In fact, tribals particularly are the extensive users of the ceramics. They use pottery for many different purposes and the Hiras produce potteries plentifully in response to their demand. Moreover, the tribals prefer Hira potteries more than the Kumar potteries because of its hardness and tenability. This may be due to the beating technique used by the Hiras for pottery making. Hence, they get good response in the tribal areas. This is one of the best economic viability of the Hiras of South Kamrup.

Besides tribals, this area contains ethnic population of diverse cultures and religion consisting Hindu, Muslim and Christian who are also the users of pottery products. Over and above, the Hiras, one of the major components of scheduled caste community acquire the highest percentage of population in South Kamrup and in this region majority of them are the potters.
The physiographic setting of the area under study is also an alluring one. First, it is located on the south bank of the Brahmaputra, covering an area of both hills and plains. It connects the state Meghalaya which primarily a hilly area with tribal population. Meghalaya again connects Barail and Mizo hills which further extended to the South East Asian hill ranges. Hence, South Kamrup conserve a good network of mountain ranges and makes a passage for cultural exchange from South Asian countries through these hills to the other parts of N.E. India and India. The discovery of a neolithic sites at Daojali Hading, North Cachar Hills, which contains the cord impressed pottery, justified a well connected cultural exchange system which is also continued in the later stages (Sharma, 1967).

Moreover, from many different areas like Loharghat, Kulsi, Rani, Chakardew, Tetelia, Kamakhya, Noonmati, Sarania, Basistha etc. of South Kamrup scattered neolithic celts have been found which are housed in the museum of department of Anthropology, Gauhati University in particular. Therefore, this substantiated the importance of South Kamrup from prehistoric times onwards.

In addition, the Ambari, which is one of the important early historical site exhibits a huge number of potteries of various stages and development and also the celadon wares of South Asian origin. More so, with the potteries found almost in all hills and plains of South Kamrup which bear long antiquity. This further justified that pottery as a cultural element was produced in the prehistoric times passes through in the historical period and continued in the present.

Over and above, South Kamrup now becomes a nerve centre for the entire Assam and North east India as well. Many premier and important educational institutions including the capital of Assam are located in this area. Besides,
the Kamakhya temple which is well known for the shakti cult and trantism, the Surya pahar, which is a centre of both Hindu and Buddhistic religious concepts have perceived considerable prominance in the field of history and archaeology. Moreover, many other Vaisnavite satras are also located in this area. These temples, shrines and satras have a history of utilizing huge quantities of potteries of both handmade and wheelmade varities since their inception.

Keeping all those features in mind as aims and objectives, the Hira potters, particularly of South Kamrup region have been selected for this work. The study aims to visualise the Hira potters with their ethnography and morphotechnological development of pottery and its variation. Besides, menfolk are not involved in pottery production, they opted for diversified occupations in response to the demand of time and space. Therefore, this facet is also carefully dealt with in this study.

3.2 Methods:

(a) Methods and techniques applied:

This research work basically is an ethnographic discourses. Therefore, the methods and techniques usually applied for such studies have been primarily used.

First, the villages of the Hira people were identified and located by consulting the records of the concerned block development offices. Besides, relevant information about the potter community had been collected from the block. This was followed by the village survey. In total, twenty six Hira villages are there in the entire South Kamrup and all these villages were thoroughly and systematically surveyed. While surveying the villages due attention was paid to the prevalence of pottery tradition among the Hiras and its continuity till the
present. Pottery is so closely connected with the life of the Hiras that both the community (Hira) and the pottery, have to be studied collectively and not in isolation.

This study primarily covered the following two aspects: (i) The pottery — its production technology, typology, distribution of types, marketing etc. and (ii) The community - the Hira of which demographic patterns, socio-cultural, economic, religious background and the occupational mobility have been systematically studied.

It was found that many households manufactured pottery casually and seasonally or on part-time basis and some were engaged themselves deeply and constantly as full-time potters. Therefore, for intensive study of pottery, the serious and constant pottery makers were primarily selected. However, this does not disqualify the casual pottery makers rather they were also given due importance. Besides, in order to get a detailed account about the pattern of occupational mobility of Hiras, both male and female, were interviewed appropriately.

3. 2. (b) Field work and Data Collection:

In consideration of the objective of this research, the field work was conducted primarily in the Hira villages of the South Kamrup. The cardinal purpose in the field work was to collect first hand data/information. Although the field survey started in the beginning of 1996 but the main field work commence in September 1996 and completed in September 1999. Moreover, the field area was visited later occasionally for collection of additional information and verification of data.
In most cases, the villages were visited regularly or everyday for collection of data. This was possible due to the presence of a good communication. However, some of the villages were not well communicated as these stand apart from the road, as well as from the centre/block. So the researcher had to stay there for collection of data and observation. Besides, for intensive study also often times camping in the villages was necessary. Utmost care had been taken to obtain correct data. Further, photographs at different stages of pottery production such as firing, transporting and selling the products in the market etc. had been taken.

The people of all the villages were friendly and extended their co-operation in the entire field work and also in the process of collection of data. Therefore, information could be collected without much difficulty and impediment.

For the collection of data primarily the interview technique was followed. In this, both formal or structured and informal interview techniques were used. To get a clear picture in terms of technique of pottery production, utility and its impact on socio-cultural and religious behaviours, observation technique was also preferred. To get the informations recorded specially designed interview schedules were prepared. For preparation of these schedules the guidelines suggested by the Census of India and Anthropological Survey of India were given due importance.

Besides, participant observation which involves the direct observation of the life ways of the Hiras and their potteries was deemed to be a very useful one. While making close observation of a single aspect, one has to look into the various inter related factors. Moreover, this technique was also applied for studying the utility of pottery in rites and rituals and ceramones. In fact, every step of pottery making process was participated and necessary data were collected by the intensive observation.
As far as the interview is concerned persons from various age groups were selected. In fact, elderly persons of the village and head of the households were primarily the main target.

Furthermore, available literature including books, journals and periodicals were consulted to obtain the historical and socio-cultural perspectives of the community as well as the variation of ceramic morphology and utility in general and Assam in particular. Over an above, historical documents like census report, published and unpublished ethnographic accounts, monographs, dissertation and field report on the people of this region and essentially the Hiras were consulted.