



TRADITIONAL EARTHENWARE OF HIRA COMMUNITY OF BARPETA DISTRICT IN ASSAM, INDIA

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ABSTRACT :

Pottery, an ancient art form, is present in all civilizations worldwide and is an ancient handmade occupation. Its history is related to human civilization and culture, with the invention of pottery being a measure of the transition from barbarism. Pottery is a traditional craft in Assam, used for everyday tasks and important events. Two communities, Hira and Kumar, have been involved in pottery making using different techniques. Kumars use pottery wheels, while Hiras use paddles, beaters, and dabbers. With a population of 55,300, the Hira community is spread across the plains of Assam. The Hira community's traditional earthenware-making process is time-consuming, expensive, and lower in quantity compared to modern pottery. It is a women-centric cottage industry, using simple tools and clay not readily available in the local area. This research paper explores the Hira community's earthenware production in Barpeta district, focusing on the manufacturing process, product identification, and usage. The data were gathered from primary and secondary sources.

Keywords: *Assam, Barpeta district, earthenware, Hira community, Traditional .*

I.Introduction:

Earthenware is a major division of pottery (Tylor 1991:179). Pottery is an integral part of and one of the oldest art forms in human culture. The presence of pottery is seen in all civilizations around

the world. It is an ancient handmade traditional occupation of the human civilization (Sarma and Gogoi 2019:68). Pottery is more or less used in all societies around the world. It is not known exactly



when pottery was created in the distant past, although its history is related to the history of human civilization and culture. Lewis Henry Morgan, in his book *Ancient Society* (1877), mentions the invention of pottery as a measure of the transition of human culture from the state of barbarism (Jha 1996:42). In the Mesolithic period, humans learned to make baskets using thin tree branches, which proved useful for storing dry food. They later developed a method of making pots by covering the baskets with clay and hardening them over a fire. Primitive humans used wooden scoops, bamboo barrels, and heated rocks in water lined with animal skin for boiling, although these methods were not very efficient. In the Neolithic period, humans learned to make pottery, which had a wide range of styles and manufacturing techniques. Neolithic pottery was made without the use of a wheel or kiln. The wheel was invented in the Old World, particularly in Egypt, around 5000 years ago. Pottery was a prominent aspect of the Neolithic period. Clay pots were considered impractical by nomadic societies due to their food-gathering lifestyle, whereas settled communities embraced them for their compatibility with their sedentary way of life (Roy 2011:386-388).

Archaeologists have found lots of pottery at Neolithic sites across India. The pottery found at Burzahom in North India, as well as at Tekkalkolta, Maski, Narsipur, Sangankallu, Hallur, and Brahmagiri in Karnataka, and Paiyampall in Tamil Nadu, is particularly noteworthy (Sarmah 1988:266-272). Pottery was widely used in the ancient cities of Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro during the Indus Civilization on the Indian subcontinent. Skilled potters created a variety of items, such as animals, humans, gods, goddesses, seals, horse cars, utensils, and toys, using clay. The potters also depicted women and goddesses in a sexually appealing manner in their artwork (Hossain Nov. 28, 2021).

The tradition of pottery-making in Assam dates back as far as other regions of India. Pottery from historical and prehistoric periods has been unearthed in various regions of Assam, similar to other parts of India. Assam is home to numerous important prehistoric sites where pottery has been discovered. These include Daojali Hading in the North Cachar Hills District, Sarutaru located 25 km southwest of Guwahati, Langting Valley in the North Cachar Hill District, and Nilachal Hill (Kamakhya Hills) in Guwahati of Kamrup district. Other significant historic sites in Assam where



pottery has been found include Ambari and Jalukbari in Guwahati of Kamrup district, the historical mound at Bangtimari village, which lies about 7 km south of village Hallidayganj on the Phulbari-Tura road, and Shri Shri Suryapahar in Gaolpara (Singh 2015:118-119). The pottery found at Daojali Hading is technically distinct from pottery in other parts of India. It can be said that Daojalian ceramics influenced China and Southeast Asia (Sarmah 1988:272).

Pottery has a long-standing tradition in Assam, where it is considered a traditional craft. The people of Assam have been creating and using pottery for various purposes, including everyday tasks and important events like religious ceremonies, weddings, and funerals. In Assam, two communities, namely Hira and Kumar, have been traditionally involved in pottery making. However, they employ different techniques in their craft. The Kumars use pottery wheels to shape their pots, while the Hiras rely on their hands and utilize paddles, beaters, and dabbers (Sarmah and Hazarika 2018:967). In spite of the difficult economic conditions, the Hira caste in Assam excels in the age-old craft of pottery-making through manual methods (Sarmah 2014:101). Hira is one of the sixteen scheduled castes in Assam, with a population of 55,300 (2.48%) out of the total

scheduled caste population of 22,31,321 (7.15%), according to the 2011 Census Report. The Hira community is spread across the plains of Assam, particularly in Goalpara, Barpeta, Kamrup, and Nagaon District. In Barpeta district, they can be found in Badarutup, Sundaridya, Bamuna, Barpeta town, Pathsala, and Kaljirapara village (Ojah 2003:275).

II.Objectives:

The aim of this research paper is to investigate various aspects concerning the earthenware produced by the Hira community in Barpet district.

- a) Process of manufacturing earthenware.
- b) Identification of the products.
- c) Use of the products.

III.Methodology:

The people:

Hira is one of the largest among the 16 Scheduled Caste communities in Assam. As per the 2011 census, the total population of Assam was 3,12,05,576, out of which 22,31,321 belonged to Scheduled Castes, making up 7.15% of the state's population. Among the Scheduled Caste population, the Hira community accounted for 55,300 individuals, which is 2.48% of the total. A significant number of Hira people reside in the Barpeta district, and this paper will



specifically focus on those living in and around the Barpeta municipal area.

Study Area:

The paper will focus on Barpeta District in Assam, located to the northwest of Guwahati, the capital of Assam, India. The Hira community primarily resides in specific areas of Barpeta district, including the Barpeta municipal area and its surrounding regions. This study will specifically concentrate on the Barpeta municipal area and its nearby locations, such as Bamuna, Sundaridia Dakshinhati, Budarurtup, Ghoramarahati, Kumarhati, Majorhati, Ambarihati, and Gandhinagar. Bamuna village and Sundaridia Dakshinhati village fall under the jurisdiction of Sundaridia Gaon Panchayat, while Budarurtup, Ghoramarahati, Kumarhati, Majorhati, Ambarihati, and Gandhinagar are situated within the Barpeta Municipal area.

Methods of data collection:

This paper concentrates on the traditional earthenware produced by the Hira community in Barpet District. Both primary and secondary data were collected for this study. Primary data was gathered through personal observation, interviews, and surveys conducted in the research area. Secondary

data relevant to the study was sourced from various reliable sources, such as books, reports, research journals, dissertations, published and unpublished Ph.D. theses, census data, websites, and other credible sources. The data collected has been systematically organized and analyzed in this paper.

IV.Result and Discussion:

The earthenware manufactured by the Hira people is hand-made. They utilize a special type of clay and basic tools during the manufacturing process. Unlike modern methods, they do not use a kiln to bake or fire their pottery. This suggests that the use of kilns for pottery production is a more recent development in human society. It is worth noting that while primitive pottery was typically baked or fired, a kiln was not always necessary for this purpose (Roy 2011:387). The pottery discovered at various Neolithic sites is primarily handmade (Sarmah 1988:270). Evidence of the wheel being used in pottery production can be traced back to Egypt approximately 5000 years ago (Roy 2011:387). It is possible that the Hira community has been manufacturing earthenware using very primitive techniques.

The entire process of earthenware manufacturing in the Hira community of the



Barpeta district can be classified into the following steps:

- a. Collection of raw materials
- b. Preparation of clay
- c. Process of earthenware making
- d. Decoration
- e. Drying
- f. Firing

A. Collection of Raw Materials:

The essential raw materials for making pottery include clay, tempering materials, water, colouring materials, and fuel for baking or firing.

The Hira people used a unique type of sticky clay for their pottery, known as Hiraclay, or locally referred to as Hiramati. Unfortunately, Hiraclay is not readily available in the local area. Therefore, they must purchase Hiramati during the winter season from Deepor Beel in Guwahati, which is situated approximately 90 kilometers southeast of Barpeta. Each year, they gather the clay from January to March. To transport the clay from Deepor Beel, some families collectively hire a truck. Once collected, they store the clay in a pit dug in the corner of their courtyard and use it throughout the summer season.

The Hira people used sand from the nearby river as a tempering material. They would gather sand from the river during the

winter season and store it in their courtyard. Since sand is readily accessible in the area, there is no need to purchase it.

The decorative coloring material, known locally as rongdiya mati, gerumati, or rangamati, is a type of soil found in specific areas of the hilly regions of north-east India, including Guwahati. This soil has been collected from Guwahati and has been used for many years.

Potters used various locally available materials for firing vessels. These materials include wood, straw, dry cow dung, dry water hyacinth, and dry leaves from herbs and shrubs. They have purchased thatch, wood, and dry cow dung from nearby areas. Sometimes, they would collect dry cow dung by exchanging pots. Dry water hyacinth is collected from nearby ponds and rivers, while dry leaves from herbs and shrubs are gathered from the surrounding areas.

B. Preparation of Clay:

To make pottery, it is important to properly prepare the clay. The first step in clay preparation is to clean the raw clay by removing any debris, rocks, snail shells, or other impurities mixed with it. Once the clay is cleaned, it is mixed with the appropriate amount of water and sand. This mixture is then crushed using a pestle, locally known as



a *gayen*, on a gunny bag or plastic surface. The clay lumps are crushed and wiped with the feet until they reach the desired consistency. These clay lumps, also known as *topas*, are then covered with gunny bags or plastic bags to prevent them from drying out. This helps to keep the *topas* soft and in good

condition for a longer period of time. Typically, the task of making the *topas* is carried out by the women of the Hira community.

C. Process of Earthenware Making:

(i) Tools: The Hira potters use some simple tools in making earthenware. These are as follows-

Sl. No.	Name of the tools		Use
	Local name	English equivalent	
1	Gayen	Handmade wooden pestle	It is used for shaping clay through kneading.
2	Kodal	Garden Hoe	The tool is utilized to cut through the clay and create a trench for the preservation of the clay.
3	Danshil	Medium size round stone	This stone serves as a foundation for holding the clay plate in place while it is being beaten to achieve the desired size, shape, and thickness.
4	Khana	Handmade wooden spade	This tool is used to dig up the muddy lump of clay from the surface of the earth.
5	Hatshil	Small size round hand stone	It is used to shape the inner surface of the pots, helping to achieve the desired thickness, shape, and size of the pot.
6	Hargora pitnimari	Small sized quadrangular wooden beater	It serves as a tool for enlarging and smoothing pots.
7	Itaboira pitnimari	Big sized quadrangular wooden beater	It serves as a tool for enlarging and smoothing pots.
8	Parkani	Small wiping rag or cotton cloth	This cloth is used for shaping the neck and wiping the surface of pots.



9	Panicharu	A small water container with an open mouth is typically crafted from clay or other materials.	This container with an open mouth is used to store water for moistening the posts during the manufacturing process.
10	Chuchnibari or chekni	Scraping tool made from bamboo wand	This tool is a smoothing implement used to remove excess clay from the surface of a pot.
11	Khajkata	Engraving tools made from bamboo or branches of trees.	This tool is used to decorate the pots by engraving different shapes on the surface of the pots.

(ii) Making Process: The Hira potters of Barpeta typically use two techniques for making pottery. They use the traditional coil-building and beating methods for making pots, while they use the pressing method for crafting some clay objects that cannot be made using coil-building and beating techniques.

A. COIL-BUILDING AND BEATING METHOD:

The process of coil building and beating is quite time-consuming, typically taking two to three days to create pottery. Therefore, the production cost of pottery prepared using this coil building and beating method is higher, and the quantity of production is also lower than the pottery produced using wheels or other modern machines. This method typically involves four main steps to completely structure a pot.

First step: In the first step, clay balls are prepared using a combination of hiraclay and sand. These clay balls are called '*dan*' in the local language. The shape of the clay balls depends on the shape of the container that wants to be made. These clay balls are then pressed on the palm of the hand to create small, plate-like shapes. The plates that are made with pressure from both hands are placed on the palm of one hand and made wider and lighter by beating with the palm of the other hand. Afterward, these plates are left to dry in a shaded area for a day. Due to the drying process in the shade, the plates remain soft. This particular step of transforming the clay balls into plates is referred to as '*danpara*' in the local language.



Second Step: The next phase of 'danpara' is referred to as 'ghansa'. During this stage, the moist clay plates are placed individually on a circular rock (*danshil*) and then beaten with the assistance of a beater (*pitni mari*). To create larger pots, the '*ita boira pitnimari*' is utilized, while the '*hargora pitnimari*' is used for smaller pots. After slightly widening the clay plates, coils of clay are attached to the sides and then crushed with the beater to form the shape of a pot. The coils are continuously attached until the pot takes shape, using the clay plate as the base. In the local language, the process of connecting the clay coils is known as '*ita*', and the coil itself is called '*lari*'. Once the pots have been shaped and the clay coils attached, they are left to dry in the shade for approximately three to four hours.

Third Step: In the third stage of the process, the partially dried pottery is moulded using a small round rock called "*hatshil*." The rock is placed inside the pot with the help of the left hand and gently crushed and thinned with a beater held in the right hand, while water is applied regularly to keep the pot moist. After shaping the pot as desired, it is left to dry for three to four hours.

Fourth Step: In the final step, the potters shape the rim and neck of the pots. A thin coil of clay is used for making the rim and neck. The potters shape them by hand, rotating them with the assistance of a wet cloth called *parkani*. The process of making the rim and neck of the pots is locally called '*mukhdia*'. Some pots also have handles, which are made by hand using small coils of clay and attached to the appropriate place on the pot. Finally, any excess clay on the surface of the pot is removed using a bamboo scraper (*chuchnibari or chekni*) and wiped clean with a wet cloth.

B. PRESSING METHOD:

Another method of making pots is the pressing method. The pressing method is used for crafting some clay objects that cannot be made using coil-building and beating techniques. In this method, all objects of clay are shaped by the bear hand. Some clay objects made by this method are stands (*xorai*), incense stand (*dhupdani*), lamp stand (*chakidani*), fishing net sinkers (*jalar guli*), smoking pipes (*chilim*), earthen lamps (*chaki*), dhuna stands (*dhunadani*), clay toys (*putla*), etc.

D. Decoration:



The Hiras in Barpeta use two methods to decorate earthen pots: painting and engraving.

(i) Painting: Pots are painted using *gerumati*, a type of red soil, as a colour. The *gerumati* are dissolved with water in a container prior to painting. Various shapes are drawn using dissolved *gerumati* in a well-dried earthen pot exposed to the sun. This is done by using a finger or a small piece of bamboo. The decorative designs that the Hiras draw on clay pots are very simple. The decorative designs are usually drawn on the rim, neck, and balley portion of the pots.

(ii) Engraving: he potters used a very simple, small, and pointed tool to decorate the pots by engraving different shapes on the surface of the pots. This tool is made from bamboo or the branches of trees. This tool is locally known as '*khajkata*'. The decorative designs are engraved on the surface of the clay-made objects before drying. The decorative designs are very simple. Generally, engraving is done on the stands (*xorai*), incense stands (*dhupdani*), lamp stands (*chakidani*), fishing net sinkers (*jalar guli*), smoking pipes (*chilim*), earthen lamps (*chaki*), dhuna stands (*dhunadani*), clay toys (*putla*), etc.

E. Drying:

The pots are thoroughly dried in the sun after being made. It is very important to dry the earthen pots before firing. If the pots are not dried properly, they break during the firing. The pots require at least two days to dry well. The pots become suitable for firing after drying.

F. Firing:

The Hira community does not use a kiln or have a permanent place for burning their vessels. Instead, they typically opt for an open area. The process of burning the vessels is done systematically and takes approximately three to four hours. Usually, the burning takes place in the evening. They make use of a variety of locally sourced materials, such as wood, straw, dry cow dung, dry water hyacinth, and dry leaves from herbs and shrubs. The burning process consists of three stages that are completed.

Stage 1: Preparation of fire base: To build a fire base, wood, straw, and dry cow dung are used. First, the straw is laid out in a circle on the ground. Next, wood pieces are placed around the edge of the circle, with the dry cow dung placed in the centre. The fragments of stored broken pots are arranged in a circular pattern to form a boundary.



Stage 2: Placing vessels at the fire base:

The vessels intended for burning on the fire base are stacked on top of each other and organized in a circular pile resembling a cone shape. When arranging the vessels, larger pots are positioned at the bottom, while smaller and thinner vessels are placed on top. Once the vessels are arranged, the hips are then covered with straw, dried water hyacinth, and the dried leaves of various herbs and shrubs.

Stage 3: Firing:

The vessels are set on fire from the east or west after they are arranged in a cyclonic way. The practice of setting fire in the east or west direction is associated with religious belief. Straw, dried water hyacinth, and the dried leaves of herbs and shrubs are given in the vessel's pit so that they are fired well. The vessels are allowed to cool for about twelve hours after they get hard enough to burn well. The vessels are suitable for sale after they cool down.

Types of earthenware and their applications

Sl. No	Type	English equivalent	Use
1	<i>Maale</i>	Wide mouthed earthen vessel	Ritualistic
2	<i>Dhunadani</i>	Earthen incense stand	Ritualistic
3	<i>Dhupdani</i>	Incense holder	Ritualistic
4	<i>Gacha</i>	Earthen lamp	Ritualistic
5	<i>Sarai</i>	Dish or Stand	Ritualistic or Decorative
6	<i>Kata</i>	Wide mouthed vessel	Utilitarian
7	<i>Beira</i>	Wide mouthed vessel	Utilitarian
8	<i>Choru</i>	Earthen frying pan	Utilitarian
9	<i>Kerahi</i>	Small sized cooking vessel	Utilitarian
10	<i>Tawa</i>	Earthen frying pan	Utilitarian
11	<i>Kalah</i>	Pitcher	Utilitarian
12	<i>Tekeli</i>	Miniature Vessel	Utilitarian
13	<i>Hari</i>	Short neck vessel	Utilitarian
14	<i>Khuti Deiba</i>	Small sized earthen vessel	Utilitarian
15	<i>Putla</i>	Earthen doll	Playing and Decoration
16	<i>Jalar Guli</i>	Net Sinker	Utilitarian
17	<i>Chilim</i>	Smoking pipe	Utilitarian
18	<i>Khuti</i>	Earthen container	Used in fire cracker
19	<i>Fhulor Tub</i>	Flower vase	To plant garden flower

(Source: Ojah, M. 2018:80)



V.Findings:

The above discussion provides the following information:

1. The traditional earthenware-making process of the Hira community is quite time-consuming.
2. It is expensive.
3. The quantity of production is also lower than the pottery produced using wheels or other modern machines.
4. Hira pottery is a women centric cottage industry. Women are the principal producers of earthenware.
5. The clay used to make earthenware is not readily found in the local area.

6. They use very simple tools to make earthenware.

VI.Suggestions and Conclusion:

The Hira community of Barpeta district are still making earthen pots using traditional methods. They meet their basic livelihood by making and selling earthenware in the nearby area. Lower profits are often the result of having to purchase many pottery items individually, as they are not commonly produced in large quantities. They will be able to become financially self-sufficient if they produce more using modern machinery and create new markets outside of the local area.

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