Traditional Hira potters of lower Assam

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Pottery making is an age-old traditional occupation of the human civilization. The process of making pottery from a particular type of clay on wheel reflects traditional knowledge. Hira potters are distributed in Goalpara, Kamrup and Barpeta districts of the lower Brahmaputra valley of Assam. The women folk of the Hira society of Assam are practicing the pottery making without wheel since centuries ago as their traditional occupation. It is their hereditary pursuit through female line, which has still retained its importance, aesthetic appeal, unique technique and skill. The paper, outcome of the field research on the Hira people in lower Assam, examines the present status of crafts and artisans, technique of pottery production and sale of finished products. The study concludes that the Hira people lives under the shroud poverty and unless urgent measures are taken this inherent craft will not survive.

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The pottery was first innovated by the prehistoric people in Neolithic age. Potteries are almost as old as civilization itself. There are found some excavated decorated potteries with floral and geometrical designs from Harappa and Mohenjodaro sites. India is well known for the richness of her traditions and occupies an important place in folk art and craft. Each and every crafts have their own identity. Some people practicing crafts as their traditional occupations are called as master craftsmen. Pottery making is an age-old traditional occupation of the human civilization.

The process of making pottery from a particular type of clay on wheel reflects traditional knowledge. The traditional knowledge is inherited from generation to generation through practice as their traditional occupation. Even today, people are making the potteries on wheel for socio-religious and domestic purposes. There are few such potter communities in eastern India, who are called by different names likes Kumar/Kumor/Kumbhakar/Kumhar, etc. Many scholars have studied different aspects of Indian potters and potteries since earlier period to modern period. They mainly focused on distribution of wheel made pottery, pottery making techniques, typology, art, motif, socio-eco-religious life of the potter societies and the pottery making culture. Hira potters of Assam are one such community. Only few studies have been made on them. The study mainly focuses on traditional beliefs in pottery work, which is made by the women folk only, socialization process, pottery making techniques, socio-eco-religious life and strategy adopted by Hira potter for the survival of the craft in lower Assam.

Hira potters are distributed in Goalpara, Kamrup and Barpeta districts of the lower Brahmaputra valley of Assam. Total population of Hira of the state is 32,624, of which 3.58% are scheduled caste. Hira people believe that they basically belonged to Utkal Brahman. These people are mostly living in rural and town fringe areas. Their hamlet is known as Hirapara and is close to the river or stream. In some cases, they have a separate namghar and it is located in their hamlet. Hira inhabited villages are connected to the local markets by mud/metal road and or water way. Assamese is their mother tongue. The literacy rate of Hira male is higher than the female. According to folk belief, the mythological origin of Hira potter dates back to 500-600 BC, when one Utkal Brahman named Shri Mohendra Mahapatra came to Kamakshyadham on foot and by boat along with his wife named Hira and two sons as pilgrimage. Just after visiting the temple, Mohendra died at Kamakshya. Then, Hira faced extreme problems for food, shelter and security. It was much difficult for her to return to her native place at Orissa. One day,
she walked along with his two small sons on the bank of river Brahmaputra in search of food. She observed bright clay near by and collected some amount of clay. Immediately, she made small earthen pots with the sticky clay with her fingers and burned the dry pots. Then, sold it to neighbouring people and thus began to earn her livelihood. Her sons also learned this craft and assisted her in the work. From that day, they are known as Hiramanu (manu means man in Assamese language) and their pottery craft is known as Hira potter. This unique type of clay is also called Hiramati. It is reported that their forefather might have brought here by Shrimanta Sankardeva (1449-1568), who is the founder of neo-vaishnavism known as Eksaraniadharma/Bhakti-dhrama in Assam.

Hira people generally live in small houses made up of mud or brick walls. Male wear the gamacccha, dhuti, pant and shirt. The married women wear colourful meghla-chadar and coloured saree. The married female use the sindur or vermilion on forehead and parting of hair as marriage symbol. Widow wears white meghla-chadar. The female use metal ornaments in ears, nose, neck and fingers. Hira people have some wooden furniture and household utensils made up of earthen and aluminum. Their common food is boiled rice and vegetable curry. They regularly visit the namghar (it a socio-religious cum cultural centre of the village, which is initiated by Srimanta Sankardeva) and local satra (main religious institution which have been playing a vital part in social and cultural life of the Assamese people for last four hundred years) with some offerings for devotional prayer and worship. They have a traditional sabha/mel or village council, which consists of a few community members. The headman of the village called, gaonbura, plays important role in village affairs. Most of the married couple follows the Eksaraniadahrm under the Hindu fold. They participate in Hindu festivals and observe some rituals. Hira men folk work as daily wage labour and female only does pottery craft. The girl child of Hira family learns all sorts of pottery making activities from her mother and other senior female members. She regularly assists her mother in every stages of pottery making. Hira society also follows the division of labour on the basis of gender, age and skill. The male people select the fine quality of sand, suitable clay and carry it from source area to residence, collect fuel, arrange the potteries in bhati and put the fire. Lastly, they carry the potteries and other craft objects and sale it in local market or hat from time to time.

Instrument used in pottery making

Hira potters use traditional simple type of instrument in pottery making profession, namely Kodal or spade, which is used mainly for cutting the clay and making the trench, where they store the clay for some period. Gayen or wooden beater, a cylindrical piece of sal wood with a rounded head is used for threshing the clay during storing and preparing the clay for making potteries (Figs. 5, 6). Baira or a half broken earthen bucket is used to keep water (Fig. 10) and a piece of old cotton cloth, called Kani is kept for applying the water during the final shape. Pitani or a small round shaped wooden beater is used for making final shape of the pottery (Fig. 8). Natural tools like Dangarhil and Haruhil are collected from the riverbed, which are almost round shape pebble in different sizes for holding the grip or handle of the dabber by left hand and is pressed on the inner surface of the earthen pot while strokes are applied outside by the female craftsman (Fig. 4).

Techniques of pottery making

The whole process of the pottery making consists of application of different techniques at each stage like collection of fine quality of white sand and Hiramati or clay, preservation of clay, preparation of clay, making of the tapal, gol and dan, giving of the final shape to earthen potteries and preparing the bhati or furnace for burning dry earthen items. Seven broad stages of pottery manufacturing technique are as follows:

Stage-I

Adult male members bring the white sand from local dried river-bed and store it near the courtyard in gara (trench) for preparation of final clay for making the pottery. Clay is stored for about a year in the gara such a way that the stickiness of the clay is not destroyed or lost (Fig. 1).

Stage-II

Male folk usually go in groups to Diparbil near Guwahati for particular type of clay. It requires whole day for gathering the sticky clay, i.e. Hiramati in the month Magh-Phalgun. They do it with the help of kodal or spades, basket and khan or flat long wooden piece. They prefer during February-March for
collection of clay for yearlong pottery works and prefer this clay for its stickiness, which is essential for making pottery by hand in traditional way. They worship the earth with betel leaves, tamul or betel nut and agarbatti or incense sticks for successful expedition. Then, an aged and experience man of the team collects a small amount of clay and examines its suitability. He examines the clay for its colour, suitable ratio of the clay and sand, texture, stickiness, etc. Colour of the clay (kala or blackish, boga or whitish and kaima or sky colour) is less important than the other qualities of the clay. After expert’s opinion, labourers start digging the earth with the help of spade and pull the clay in a traditional method by using khan. They keep the clay in a flat rectangular shaped gara or pit near the courtyard in shadow preferably under the tree (Fig. 2).

Stage-III
Before keeping the clay in gara, they make a layer of white sand in the pit. After putting clay up to certain level, woman folk thrash clay by a gayen. Then, they make another layer of clay in the same way and thus the process of making one layer after another continues. The top layer is made by the local soil and is covered with the jute bags. For preservation of clay in pit, it is kept wet for some time.

Stage-IV
Clay is prepared by the women folk only. Soil is collected from gara by spade and kept in a jute or plastic bag. Then, number of pieces is made by spade and water is sprinkled for softness. Soil is trashed in uniformly with the help of gayen and mixed with water and white sand for preparing the suitable clay for making pottery. This process is called matikhunda. After this, a number of rounded shape lumps of clay, tapal are made without using any instrument.

Stage-V
Potters bring tapals from gara to the courtyard for making small gols and disc shape plate, chakti with pressure and movement of both palm and hands (Fig. 3). This shape of clay structure is called dan (Fig. 7). Dan is kept in sun and later shifted to shade for proper shape of the earthen items in the next stage (Fig. 9).

Stage-VI
Dan is methodically beaten in anti-clock wise by pitani and final shape of the objects is given. The work is done in rhythm through movement of both limbs and beating sound before putting potteries in bhatti (Fig. 11).

Stage-VII
Before making of the bhatti, they first collect some amount of kathkoila or charcoal, paddy straw/dry grass and a kind of aquatic algae i.e. dry pana. Bhatti is made in courtyard in round shape. At first pana is kept, charcoal is put on it and thereafter earthen pots, vessels and other objects are arranged in a circular manner. Then it is covered by pana or paddy straw or grass. Lastly, charcoal fire is put in different points of the bhatti. The amount of the fuel depends upon the number of potteries to be fired. Generally, the work is done at the interval of 7-8 days. Then, these earthen objects are sold in the market.

Hira potters prepare all kind of vessels, pots and domestic objects according to the demand. People use these for cooking food, fetching and storing of water and also a few of these items are used for religious and smoking purposes (Figs. 12-16). The price of the articles depends upon its size and season. The names of some articles are as follows:

Baira-a special kind of vessel used for various purposes.
Chilim-one upper part of the traditional smoking pipe.
Dangar baira-a big size vessel, used for many purposes.
Dhupdani-a small stand, used for keeping the incense
Dangarkata-a wide, specious cauldron, used for frying rice
Handi-a specious vessel, used for various purposes
Kata-a flat bowl shape pottery, used for cooking purpose
Karahi-an earthen cauldron, use for as a frying pan
Kalaha-long earthen vessel for fetching and storing water
Thagi/ Haldhuna- small rounded pottery with stand used for burning incense
Saru-a shallow bowl shaped vessel used for making bread and pitha
Saki-earthen lamp used during Diwali, the festival of light
Sakidan-earthen lamp with a stand used for worship

Generally, they do not follow any taboos and restriction in pottery making during the birth and death of their family members. But women strictly maintain the pollution period during menstruation cycle.
Discussion and conclusion

Hira society is strictly following the traditional pottery making techniques and division of labour on the basis of gender in this profession. It is merely by seeing, learning and practicing they gradually become professionals around the age of 12-15 yrs. Different kinds of shape, design and size of the earthen articles depict the regional style. It bears the unique feature, which can easily be separated from the wheel made pottery from any part of the country in general and Assam in particular. Local people have fascination for craftsmanship, quality, and durability. Therefore, potteries are made as per the demand in different seasons and during the festival time. The nature of such relationship is the combination of ritualistic, economic, social and political, resulting from the social coherence of the particular Indian caste-ridden society. The earthen pottery, Hiramanu is not merely an occupation for them, but it also depicts their traditional knowledge, customs, creativity, craftsmanship and caste identity of Hira society. Local people are now using the least number of hand made potteries of Hiras in their daily life due to the availability of machine made cheaper pot and containers. But the rural and urban settlers are still using some particular potteries for its durability and utility. Hira pottery, the traditional occupation of the female is still unchanged due to the rigidity of their society. For the development of economy of Hira people, it is essential to implement the functional literacy programme for the female and also commence the community based special welfare and training programme for overall development of the society through practice of their crafts as cultural heritage of the rural Assam. Proper development strategy may evolve with experience and experiment where traditional wisdom can contribute much.

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