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Craft Industry of a Marginalized Community & Its Prospects for Rural Employment under Globalization

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Abstract

Rural handicraft industry has performed exceedingly well and enables our country to achieve a wide measure of industrial growth and diversification. By its less capital intensive and high labour absorption nature, this sector has made significant contribution to employment generation and also to rural industrialization. Small scale industrial sector in India create largest employment opportunity for the Indian populace, next only to agriculture. A failure to modernize the rural industrialization programme and revamp the rural non-farm and agricultural sector on the part of the government is partly responsible for the apathetic condition of some rural craft industry and “Pottery industry” of the Hira people provides a good example in this regard. This pottery industry which is given full and part time employment opportunities to a large section people belongs to a marginalized community is crippled by various problems. The real incomes of the workers associated with this profession have declined over the years instead of increasing in tandem with the growth of economy. Consequently the no. of workers working in this industry has been decreases to large extent despite its potentialities for self-employment. The paper studies the prospect of Pottery Craft industry for rural employment in Assam particularly in Karimganj district of Barak Valley and various views of Hira (Kumar) people to solve their basic problems.

INTRODUCTION:

Rural handicraft industry has performed exceedingly well and enables our country to achieve a wide measure of industrial growth and diversification. By its less capital intensive and high labour

absorption nature this sector has made significant contribution to employment generation and also to rural industrialization. Small scale industrial sector in India create largest employment opportunity for the Indian

populace, next only to agriculture.¹ (*Yojana*, May, 2010, (A Development Monthly Magazine), Upkar Prakashan, Agra, p-08) After independence lots of fund has already been spent to strengthen and restructure the rural economy and even now we talk about inclusive growth of the economy without realizing the importance of our traditional crafts industry. But this sector along with other allied activities holds the key to faster economic development. They not only remove poverty and unemployment from the villages but also make them self-sufficient economic units. In fact a failure to modernize the rural industrialization programme and revamp the rural non-farm sector and agricultural sector on the part of the government is partly responsible for the apathetic condition of some rural craft industry and the “Pottery industry” of the Hira people provides a good example in this regard. Pottery industry refers to a particular rural craft industry where the person produces different kinds of earthen pots from a special type of clay without using technical and scientific instruments. This pottery industry which has given full and part time employment opportunities to a large section people belongs to a marginalized community, it-self crippled by various problems. Consequently the number of workers working in this industry

has decreased to large extent despite its potentialities for self-employment.

Earthen pots like “Kalah”, “Charu”, “Ghat”, “Tekeli”, “Nagra”, “Madali” etc. are still considered important from religious and cultural point of view and still occupy an important place in auspicious occasions like celebration of marriages, religious occasions like “Puja”, performance of “Preta Karma” of deceased. Increasing cost of collecting the Hira clay, difficulty of getting necessary and required burning materials and more importantly the availability of similar cheap plastic items everywhere reduced the demand for the product produced by this industry. Further, in this age of globalization it has failed to attract large capital and more importantly the upcoming generation of this community is also not interested to work in such a profession. As a result, this industry is facing extinction which in turn will bring disaster to this community.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND RESEARCH GAP:

The origin, growth and development of the Hira community can be traced from mythological, historical and ethnological sources. From mythological point of view, the word “Hira” is derived from “Mahadeva”, while the “Kumar”

was born from father, “Viswakarma” and mother “Gritachi”.² (Haloi, R. (2007), A Study on the Problems and Prospects of Pottery Industry of Hiras in Nalbari district with reference to Pub-Nalbari Block, (M. Phil dissertation),p-74

Historically about 600 hundred years ago, late Mahendra Mahapatra along with his wife Hira Devi came to Assam from Orissa to visit the temple of “Maa-Kamakhya”. One day in a pleasant morning while she was passing by the bank of the mighty Brahmaputra, she noticed some lumps of earth were sparkling and shining like a diamond. Then with the help of Kumars she learnt the art of making earthen pots from this clay. From then on, the soil is known as “Hira mati” after the name of its discoverer “Hira Devi” and the different earthen pots are called “Hira bachan”, and her descendents are known as “Hira Jati”.³ (Haloi, R. (2007), A Study on the Problems and Prospects of Pottery Industry of Hiras in Nalbari district with reference to Pub-Nalbari Block, (M. Phil dissertation), p-74

From the ethnological point of view, the Hira people originally belonged to higher castes like Brahmins, Kalitas, etc. and Schedule castes Namasudras. By making a study in terms of “Gotra” the origin of the Hiras can

be traced. The gotras of the Hiras of Assam are Parasara, Alemyan and Kashyap which are found to be similar among the Brahmins and the Namasudras. But it is a matter of regret that, at certain turns of history of our social system, they have fallen within the fold of untouchable under certain unavoidable circumstances.⁴

(Haloi, R. (2007), A Study on the Problems and Prospects of Pottery Industry of Hiras in Nalbari district with reference to Pub-Nalbari Block, (M. Phil dissertation),p-75

As per the 1931 census report, there were 17,000 Hira people, which has increased to 28,310 in 1961, 32,622 in 1971 and to 49,336 in 1991. According to the 2001 census report, the Hira people live in districts like-Barpeta (15.7%), Kamrup (15.7%), Darang (13.5), Nalbari (13.1%), Marigaon (18.7%), Nagaon (9.4%), Goalpara (6.0%), Bongaigaon (5.2%), Dhubri (1.3%), Kokrajhar (0.7%) and it is 0.7% in Sonitpur district of Assam. But it has been observed that with the change in nature of the economy and due to the diversification of the attitude of the people of this traditional craft industry, it is going to disappear from our society. The social standing of this vulnerable community depends on the prospect of this industry, so

different scholars and researchers carried out a number of intensive and extensive studies with respect to mobility, origin of the pottery work and its socio-cultural importance in the live of Assamese people. In this regard Roy (1977), Medhi, B. (1992), Sharma and Sarma (1998), Sarmah, H. C. (1991), Sarmah, P. R. (2001) and Bezbaruah, D. K. (2003) focused on this craft industry through their research work. But till date no one has worked on the Hira community extensively from employment perspectives in the era of globalisation.

AREA OF THE STUDY:

The study was carried out in Karimganj district of Barak-Valley of Assam. It is selected keeping in mind the deplorable conditions of this craft industry. It has seven blocks and is surrounded by beautiful geographical and natural scenarios along with national and international border link. This is the first attempt to make a survey study in Karimganj district in relation to life conditions of the people of a marginalized community like “Hira” and the prospect for rural employment in their profession.

OBJECTIVES:

The prime objectives of this study is-

1. to know about the prospect of the pottery industry with respect to

rural employment in terms of their socio-economic conditions and participation in the profession of pottery works;

2. to know their views to overcome their problems.

METHODOLOGY:

As there is a dearth of data, the study is exploratory in nature and is dependent upon field survey. For the purpose of interview, a structured open-ended questionnaire was developed. The interviews took place with the author writing down or a tape recorder was used to collect views of the people from this community. Each interview lasted for about 30 to 40 minutes. Here a sample of 25% families selected from Sadarashi block where the inhabitants of Kumar people are large in number out of seven blocks in the district as per report of the official person of the District Economics and Statics department of Karimganj. The study was conducted under normative survey method. Besides official's data, information from memory of the old-age person and informal discussion were held with different social workers and with some people of Karimganj town area who exclusively deals in the business of earthen products.

Apart from this, a case of example is also considered here for our better understanding of the

problems and for this purposes the “Rural Tourism Project on Terracotta Craft Cluster of Asharikandi” in Dhubri District of Assam is selected.

DELIMITATION:

1 The study is confined with the Kumar (Hira) people of Karimganj district, particularly in Sadarashi block; and

1. The head of the family members were interviewed in this study.

ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS:

1. The number of working Kumar people has decreased to a large extent during the last few years but up to the nineties pottery works had been their principal means of occupation. Altogether nine villages in the seven blocks of the district of Karimganj are inhabited by the Kumar people. But the number of families and workers has declined to a large extent and it is evident from the following statistical Table-1

VILLAGES	TOTAL NO. OF KUMAR FAMILY(approx.)	TOTAL NO. OF FAMILY PRODUCING POTTERY(approx.)
Maizgram	103	18
Jiadhara	25	04
Baropara	15	03
Beelbari	30	10
Teelbum	15	03
Nebia	18	Nil
Suraibari	16	01
Raipur	10	03
Sadhukuchi	30	02
Total	262	44

Source: - i) Field survey

ii) Information from interviewed old-age person.

The above table reveals that the number of family surviving by this profession of pottery decreased over the last decade. During nineties, altogether there were 262 families which highlighted the importance of this industry for their day to day survival. In the absence of their own agricultural land and other means of occupation, they concentrated on their inherited work culture and thus maintained a subsistence life. But at present approximately 44 (16.79%) families are engaged in this sector. Interestingly, out of these 44 families, all the members of each family are not engaged in this profession, rather they are seeking or diverting to other jobs for day to day survival.

A Case of Example:

Under the “New Country Programme 2003-07” sponsored by “United Nations Development Programme” (UNDP), the honourable District Commissioner of Dhubri district of lower part of Assam inaugurated a new project

entitled “Rural Tourism Project on Terracotta Craft Cluster of Asharikandi in Dhubri District” at a proposed cost of Rs. 70 lakhs. Though the project has not been formally inaugurated but it has practically started to reap benefits out of it. It benefits directly 400 artisans and indirectly 1000 people at present. Thus, it is expected that the completion of the project would cater to the need of the tourist and the artisans and the villagers in bigger manner and this experience can provide a good example for our proposed study.

2. Another important observation regarding the Kumar workers is that all the workers engaged in this profession are not able to earn the minimum income for their subsistence level and at the same time the rate of dependent person is also very high indicating disguised and underemployment in the study area.

TABLE NO.2
Person engaged in pottery works in surveyed areas

Head of the Family	Total population			Person engaged in Pottery			Subsistence Income earner			No. of dependent (18-60 Yrs)
	M	F	T	M	F	T	M	F	T	
Nripendra R. Paul	03	03	06	01	01	02	01	01	02	03
Satyendra R. Paul	03	02	05	01	01	02	01	00	01	02
Bhushan R. Paul	04	01	05	01	01	02	02	01	03	02
Rasendra R. Paul	02	03	05	01	01	02	01	01	02	03
Niranjan R. Paul	03	04	07	01	04	05	01	00	01	02
Kripesh R. Paul	06	03	09	04	03	07	02	00	02	01
Karuna R. Paul	01	02	03	01	02	03	01	02	03	NIL
Anil R. Paul	04	02	06	NIL	NIL	NIL	01	00	01	03
Ashutosh R. Paul	03	01	04	01	01	02	01	00	01	02
Gagendra R. Paul	05	01	06	01	01	02	01	01	02	03
Total	34	22	56	12	15	27	12	06	18	21

Source: - Field survey

It is evident from the Table-2 that out of 56 person 27 (48.21%) person are engaged in pottery works whereas 21 (37.5%) number of people are workless. Moreover, although 48.21% people are working in their own profession but only 18 (66.66%) workers can earn their minimum income and the rest 33.33% people are unable to earn their minimum income and thus show a significant percentage of disguised unemployment.

Another important feed-back gained during the survey is that in most of the family only the head persons are engaged in the works of pottery and their children are not interested in becoming potters. As a result the real incomes of the workers have declined over the years instead of increasing in tandem with the growth of the economy. This calls for policy changes both at the Centre and state level.

3. Almost more than 90% people engaged in pottery industry in the survey area said that the demand for their products is very high. Though it is a season based business, but throughout the whole year they can produce and sell it at local market. But the marketing system followed by these people is not organized in nature and in general they sell their products to the whole seller or to the middleperson.

4. Regarding the educational status, the number of literate person is not so less compared to other communities but the quality is very poor. Low income, improper guidance, lack of educational environment and basic facilities are the factors responsible for their educational hindrance. In our survey we found that 85.17% people are literate (can just read and write their mother language) and remaining 14.83% are illiterate. Sex-wise the literacy rates among the peoples are not equal. It is found that 88.23% male persons are educated against 81.81% female candidate. But the number of higher educated person (minimum graduation or more) is less than 10.71% in the study area. So they do not know or are not aware of the environment of modern business and consequently unable to receive the benefits of new economic and industrial strategies.

5. During the study period it is observed that apart from their conventional hindrance this industry has suffered due to its being unorganized, with the additional constraints of lack of education, low capital, poor exposure to new technologies, absence of market intelligence, and a poor institutional framework.

6. One of the paradoxes of a nation full of paradoxes is our attitude to its crafts and craftspeople. Even craftspeople themselves do not respect their own skills and traditions. Only in our society the potters think it as a liability rather than an asset with enormous potential whereas the countries like Thailand, Indonesia, Nepal and even the Philippines have realised that indigenous crafts can give them an international edge.⁵ (Yojana, May, 2010, (A Development Monthly Magazine), Upkar Prakashan, Agra, p-32) But during our study period an important feedback was gained that most of the young boys and girls are not interested in becoming potters due to the lack of dignity of this work. They think that workers of this profession do not have high social status or value in the eyes of society. Accordingly, they jump to other areas and jobs which clearly indicate mobility of occupational pattern.

VIEWS OF SOME HIRA WORKER TO OVERCOME THEIR PROBLEMS

With respect to solution of their problem most of the Hira people of the surveyed area opined that-

i) Earthen product produced by this community can give them national or international edge and

in the long- run the upcoming generation will also be inspired to work in such industries.

ii) Since it is an eco-friendly product to some extent compared to plastic product, its use can protect our environment. The scarcity of raw-materials particularly of fire-wood and Hira soil can be overcome if the government lends its support;

iii) To reduce their physical labour they want modern equipment's;

iv) They feel that if possible, at least one "Work-shed house" should be supplied to this section of the people engaged in this sector;

v) They also suggest that special awareness/training programme should be organized to encourage the youth so that their mind-set can be changed.

PROSPECTS FOR RURAL EMPLOYMENT IN POTTERY CRAFT

The future prospect of pottery craft with respect to employment generation will depend upon certain consideration regarding its modernization keeping in view its demand and use of potteries. In fact craftspeople need what is called market professionals; require education, investment, research and development, modern

technology, design and product development, credit facilities, proper work places, market access and most importantly social acceptance and status, and thereafter we can expect a favourable effect on this industry.

i) Specialization of work will take place among the members of Hira people. As an outcome, along with the male and female members, youth can pay wholehearted attention to their industry. So, it can be expected that this industry will be able to cut the massive unemployment not only among the Hira community people but also among the people living in other backward classes in our society.

ii) With the development of this industry its demand will rise, and consequently the production of pottery industry will get enlarged and this sort of enlargement will widen the scope of market and the skills of an entrepreneur in sourcing inputs and selling their product will also rise. Thus, there is a scope for policy intervention for providing appropriate and sustained market intelligence and necessary supply conditions for a sustained growth path of the artisans.

iii) After the modernization of this industry, its output can compete with the substitute items produced in large and medium

scale industries and at the same time the country's heritage and history can be protected and developed.

iv) The migration of labour force from the rural areas can also be checked. By developing such crafts industries, basic employment opportunities in the rural areas can be provided.

CONCLUSION

The future of this marginalized community and the profession of pottery lies in our attitude, in our ability to recognize that our unique heritage and a large number of living practitioners are an enormous strength rather than a weakness and also in recognizing that they require encouragement and investment. The Kamauli and Nidhanpur Grants refer respectively to Kumbakara (Potter) and Kumbhakargarta (the Potter's pit) and it is obvious that pottery was then an important village craft as it still is.⁶ (Barua, B. K. (2003), A Cultural History of Assam, (Early Period), Bina Library, Guwahati (Originally Published:1951), p-110). "We are talking about inclusive growth excluding the already marginalized....." and therefore it is observed that the problem with crafts and craftspeople today is not dwindling market demand, or even access to a globalised market.⁷ (Yojana, May, 2010,

(A Development Monthly Magazine), Upkar Prakashan, Agra, p-35) It is our own attitude to crafts people of this community. Even crafts people of this group do not respect their own skills and traditions. Craftspeople belonging to this Hira community need to change their mind set and should

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concentrate on their own work culture, and at the same time this beautiful art of these people should have social acceptance. Then only time will tell whether these wonderful skills and tradition end up a triumphant success story or a tragically lost opportunity.

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