

A Case of Pottery as Livelihood at Majuli District (Largest River Island in the World), Assam, India

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ABSTRACT

This article is based on a case of pottery in which a family in a rural (village) district of Majuli Island of Assam, India, was eking out the livelihood. It is pertinent to mention that pottery is one of the oldest and most widespread items made of clay and hardened with heat. For the preparation of foods, serving foods and liquid items, keeping local-made wine, curd, milk decorative items, nurturing of plants, etc., pottery items are used. In this article pottery as livelihood studied at Majuli district of Assam (Largest River Island in the World), is presented. The study area was Salmora Kamjanalange village of Majuli district, a typical rural area. One family was interviewed to get an in-depth idea. The family members were earning income mainly through pottery, i.e., making and selling. The study reveals that both backward and forward linkages facilitated taking up the activity. During the study, the local people informed that out of 210 households in the village, around 190 households were involved with pottery as their main source of livelihood. The study is based on primary data, and secondary data has also been included here to enrich the article. Since the scope of wage employment was less in the village, it is suggested that more projects under Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS/MGNREGA) should be implemented, which was absent for quite some time in the area when the author visited.

Keywords: Assam, Income, Household, Majuli, Pottery, and Rural (village).

FULL ARTICLE

This article is based on a case of pottery in which a family in a rural (village) district of Majuli Island of Assam, India, was eking out the livelihood. It may be mentioned here that Indian pottery has been found dating back to the Indus Valley Civilization. Most Asian nations are well known for their pottery, which is slowly making its way worldwide. Also, by referring to britannica.com/art/pottery, it may be mentioned that “earthenware was the first kind of pottery made, dating back about 9,000 years. In the 21st century, it is still widely used. Much of the commercial earthenware produced beginning in the second half of the 20th century was heat- and cold-proof and could thus be used for cooking and freezing as well as for serving”.

According to history, India is believed to be the country where the craft of pottery originated and was carefully sculpted before spreading throughout the world. Actually, there was a time when the old Indian business class considered pottery to be their primary source of income. Indian culture is well visible in the many pottery art forms. As times evolved, so did pottery, particularly in the moulding method. There are unglazed pottery, glazed pottery, and terracotta. The types of pottery are earthenware, stoneware, and porcelain. Pottery in India has evolved over the years into a ceramic art, which has become a source of occupation for many. Entrepreneurs are not just limiting themselves to exploring creative ways of moulding this material but are also providing employment opportunities to many artisans. There is an indefinite number of hands aching to put their skills to use, and this profession not only helps generate income yearlong but preserves ancient art as well. In a way, the startup culture is reducing poverty and uplifting the livelihood of potters. Since potters were able to sell their products mostly during festive seasons, but with the help of these companies, they are promised monthly income. The Government of India has taken a number of initiatives to safeguard the economic and social interests of small-scale companies, and it has been quite supportive of them. These are beneficial to business owners from all communities. Ambedkar Hasthashilp Vikas Yojana, Research & Development, Mega Cluster Program, etc., are a few of the plans included in the National Handicrafts Development Program. Under the Atmanirbhar Bharat Scheme, Micro, Small, and Medium enterprises (MSMEs) can get free collateral loans.

The objective of the Government is to improve the sales of pottery products by improving production through technology provided to potters at a reasonable cost. Also, by forming SHGs (Self-help Groups) of potters, lots of development took place. It is important to mention that the Economic Survey 2022-2023, presented by the Union finance minister to Parliament

on January 31, 2023, mentioned that there were 12 million SHGs with all women members and a minimum of 10 members in each SHG.

Anyway, the Government of India has been helping potters to set up a unit under the PMEGP (Prime Minister's Employment Generation Programme) scheme, which helps potters to graduate from pottery to crockery.

Majuli is a lush, green, environment-friendly, and pollution-free freshwater island in the Brahmaputra, around 20 kilometres from Jorhat city and 350 kilometres from Guwahati city. From Jorhat city, everyday ferry services are available to go to Majuli. There are good arrangements to stay at Majuli. Assam Government's guest house at a reasonable cost is available. Also, there are good lodges and restaurants.

A few pieces of information about the district are presented, which have been collected from the website [.wikipedia.org/wiki/Majuli](https://www.wikipedia.org/wiki/Majuli). Majuli is an island on the Brahmaputra River, Assam, the largest river island in the world. On September 8, 2016, then Chief Minister of Assam Sarbananda Sonowal announced Majuli as a district, and it became the first island to be made a district in India. In the 1790s, the island covered an area of 1,300 square kilometres, but because of erosion, it presently covers 352 square kilometres. The total population, as per the 2011 census, was 1.67 lakh. For administrative purposes, there is one Subdivision, two Revenue Circles, and two Development blocks.

Study Area and Methodology:

The study was conducted in December 2023 at Salmora Kamjanalange village of Majuli district, Assam, India, a typical rural area. It is pertinent to mention that the author knows Assamese (read, write and speak Assamese, Bengali, English and Hindi also some other languages can speak and understand) so interaction was not at all an issue.

One family was interviewed to get an in-depth idea. The family members were earning income mainly through pottery making and selling. The study reveals that both backward and forward linkages facilitated taking up the activity. During the study, the local people informed that out of 210 households in the village, around 190 households were involved with pottery as their main source of livelihood.

The study is based on primary data, and secondary data has also been included here to enrich the article. The head of the household Dharmeswar Saikia (47 years, Other Backward Caste/OBC, Higher Secondary pass) provided information. So, the information is based on primary data, and the interview method was followed.

Findings of the Study:

During the interaction, the author was informed that the earthen pots were made by hand. Both male and female members of the households were involved in the activities. The local villagers have the prowess as they are endowed with the skills. The clay is collected from nearby areas, i.e. within the vicinity of the village, as a special type of clay is required for making the pot.

Generally, two types of pots are made two litres and five litres in size. And these are used for making curd and sometimes based on the order of the local tribal community (ST) Mising people 10 litres of the size of pots are made. I was told that for making local rice –beer these are used. Since the Mising community is not common across India and the world so, I wish to mention a few lines from the research article, “the Mishing people or Mising, also called Miri, are an ethnic tribal group, the second largest tribal group in North-east India, first being the Bodo in Assam. They were earlier called Miris in historical days, and the Constitution of India still refers to them as Miris. They are on the list of Scheduled Tribes of India under Constitutional Order 1950. They were originally hill tribes of the Himalaya region of North Eastern India, living in the mountain ranges lying between the Sivasiri and Siyang districts of Arunachal Pradesh. They are one of the major sections of the tribal population in the Brahmaputra Valley of Assam and now spread over a wide range of plains and are found in the districts of North Lakhimpur, Dhemaji, Dibrugarh, Sivasagar, Golaghat, Sonitpur and Tinsukia. According to the Census of India 2011, the total population of Mising in Assam is 5,87,310. They are now part and parcel of the Assamese society of India and have contributed a lot to its growth and enrichment. But still, they maintain their socio-cultural system and tribal traditional beliefs and customs” (Kakoti Nandita “iraj.in/journal/journal_file).

During the field study, the wife of Saikia demonstrated how pots were made, which was really praiseworthy. She informed that to make around 50 earthen clay pots, a minimum of five days is required as these have to be burnt. It is interesting to mention that for the burning pots, woods are required, and wood (as logs) is collected from the Brahmaputra River, which comes from

the upper area of the River. Each household with their boat moves and collects logs from the River and, after making pieces, is kept near their house.

Regarding earning income, it was reported that by making pottery, each family in the area earns, on average, Rs. 8000 per month for six months. In other months, they had different types of work, such as petty business, daily labourers, etc. Anyway, Dharmeswar Saikia knows boat making, so he does that for the next six months to earn income. The materials are supplied by the boat owner as a making charge; he gets Rs. 6000 for one boat.

He informed that for six months, on average, his earnings per month were around Rs. 5000 as he, in recent years, made five boats and earned Rs. 30,000. His two children, one son and one daughter, were students of tertiary level.

The family did not have any agricultural land but had two cows, and for 6/7 months, they got milk. He informed that in the last couple of years, there were no projects in the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA/ MGNREGS), so if it is introduced, it would help the villagers who seek employment for 5/6 months.

Conclusion:

It is evident from the study that by making pottery, the family was eking out the livelihood with lots of hardship. They faced both backward and forward linkage issues, such as a collection of raw materials and marketing. So, I suggest the Governments- the Union and Assam Government- look into these. Also, MGNREGS projects should be implemented in the locality for at least 100-day and the Government of Assam may also initiate other scheme(s) in the area.

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