

Living Traditions: Occupational Resilience of Kumar Potters in The River Island of Majuli, Assam

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ABSTRACT

Traditional occupations are not as specialized and skillful as modern occupations, which, under the impact of industrialization and urbanization, have become more and more specialized, involving more division of labour and requiring longer periods of technical training. Moreover, in contemporary society, many new occupations related to transport and communication, trade, finance, and government are emerging, which were not present in traditional society. In traditional society, the choice and selection of occupation depend on factors such as age, sex, caste, and class, birth, whereas in modern society, it is more based on rational grounds such as merit, efficiency, education, and training. This research focuses on the kumar potters from Majuli district of Assam, centered on their age-old craft of pottery making, one of humanity's earliest forms of artistry that traces back to the prehistoric Neolithic era. The Kumar potters in Salmara village, situated on the northwestern edge of Majuli district in Assam, maintain this legacy. This document examines the traditional work of the kumar potters in Salmara village and investigates how they preserve their pottery-making skill across various generations.

Introduction

Traditional jobs are less specialized and skillful compared to modern occupations, which, driven by industrialization and urbanization, have become more specialized, involve greater division of labour, and demand longer technical training periods. Pottery making is one of the earliest crafts of human beings. It began in prehistoric times, i.e., the Neolithic period. Pottery wares have also played a very important role in human life since ancient times. Archaeological sites around the world have contributed to our knowledge of pottery through material finds from the past. Although C.J. Thomsen discovered that pottery was made during all three ages—namely the stone, bronze, and iron ages (Renfrew and Bahn, 2005:198)—pottery sherds are among the most common objects, often providing clues to Neolithic communities (Scupin and DeCorse, 2009:201), and are practically indestructible (Krishna Murthy, 1995:34) because once fired, pottery retains its form and colour for hundreds of years (Singh, 2015:117). Pottery is tangible and is considered to be as old as civilization itself (Duany, 2008:98). It is a valuable source of information for anthropologists and archaeologists.

Ethnoarchaeology has been regarded as a combined effort of archaeology and anthropology to understand the past and the present culture and society. The term 'ethnoarchaeology' was coined by Jesse Fewkws in 1900. Fagan (1988) has pointed out that ethno-archaeology is the study of living societies to aid in the understanding and interpretation of the archaeological record and that the gap between past and present. It documents the material aspects of people's lives to understand the archaeological evidence, either from the same region or from a different part of the world. Farid Khan (1994: 83) refers to ethnoarchaeology as a study of modern and traditional processes that result in specific phenomena, which might also be observable archaeologically.

The ethnographic study conducted among the Kumar potters of Salmara Village of Majuli district, Assam. The kumars are the only pot-making community on the Majuli island. They follow this traditional occupation of pottery making from generation to generation. The village Salmara of Majuli district of Assam, inhabitant by Kumar community people.

Objectives

The objectives of this paper are to study the continuity of traditional occupation among the community under study and to analyse the factors responsible for continuing their occupation.

The Study Area

This study is based on an ethnographic fieldwork done by the researchers among the *Kumar* potters of Salmara village of Majuli district. Majuli is the 2nd largest riverine island of the world and is popularly known for its rich culture and tradition. The village Salmara is a big one comprising of predominantly potters' community and divided into three hamlets. Among the three hamlets, the researchers selected only one hamlet, i.e. Kamjan Alengi. Kamjan Alengi is a hamlet situated at the bank of the Brahmaputra River.

Methodology

Various methods and techniques were applied depending on the nature of enquiry. The main method used by the researchers are non-participant observation method, structured and semi-structured interviews of the potters from different generations. The in-depth case study method was also used by the interviewer. Based on the specific nature of data some relevant persons and sources were also contacted. To acquire data on their occupation extensive interviews and observation were undertaken. Selection of the informant was the most important part of field investigation. To get information regarding their occupation, personal interviews with the village people of different ages and different economic backgrounds, were made.

Findings and Discussion

Kamjan Alengi is a hamlet of Salmara village that consist of 103 households where people depend mostly on their traditional occupation of the earthenware. They have been practicing this occupation since the earliest period. There are some basic institutions among the Kumars that support their economy. There are: the size of the household, the forms of ownership of land, kinship system, their roles very often expressed in reciprocal obligation and other corporate body. All these together form a system, the kumar with their system get integrated with the wider economic system of Majuli and beyond that as well.

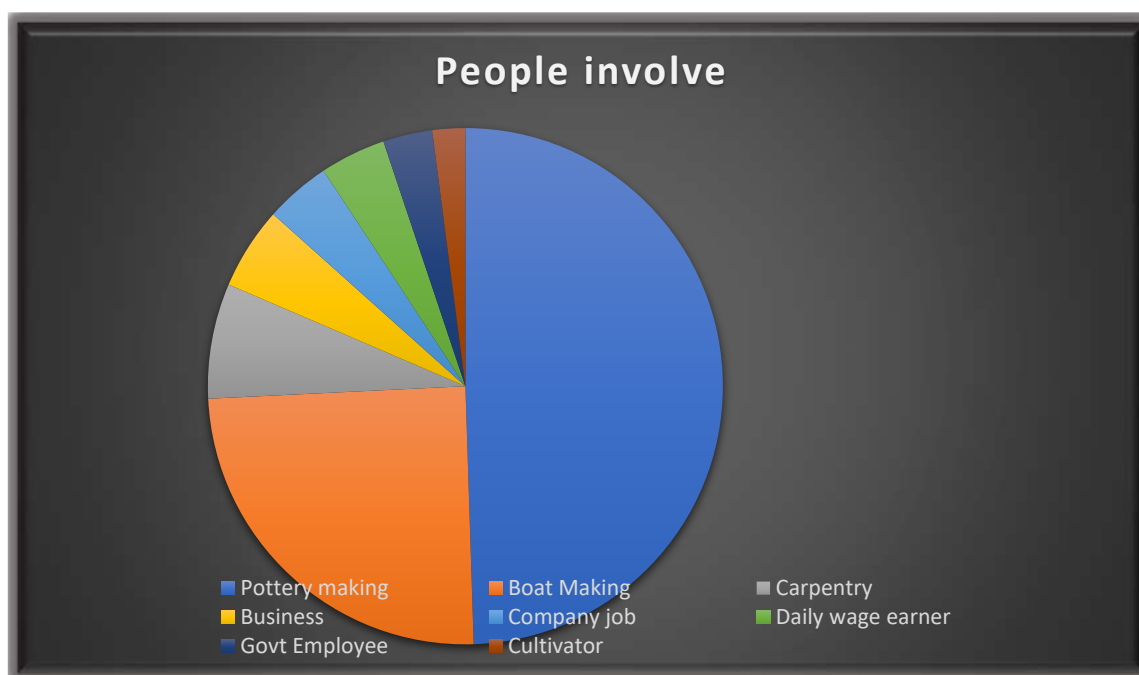
Their traditional occupation is pottery making. The inclement environment acts a differently to further economic growth or enlargement. The people know that the river Brahmaputra is the cause of annual sorrow for them, but they never consider the river as a bane, if not a boon. Their traditional mode of production (i.e., on the mainland) in a constantly changing environment suffers from a gradual decline. But a *kumar* has to exist as a socio-economically viable entity; he cannot shake off his traditional identity as he has to work within the traditional system. Boat making is also one of the occupations of Salmara village. They have a reputation in Majuli as expert boat makers. They construct boats for the other inhabitants of Majuli on a commercial scale.

Although nowadays, the government can make some special plans for developing such a type of small industry like pottery, the natives are of the opinion that they have not received any kind of help from the government. However, in the year 2002, some of the boys of the village were given training on pottery making by the use of a wheel, yet none were seen using the perfect potter's wheel to make pots. They make it with the help of their hands.

Pottery making is mainly a female-oriented occupation. The male does not directly involve himself in giving shape to pottery. They get themselves involved in the pottery trade that works around the year, while the females prepare pottery throughout the seasons when their husbands are on economic voyages.

Present Status of their Occupation

While studying the nature of occupational mobility or change, it is necessary to have an idea about the present position of occupation of the locality. The traditional occupation of the native of the study area is pottery making which has been in practice since time immemorial. Their forefathers also followed the same occupation of pottery making. It has been continuing as hereditary. The maximum people are engaged in this traditional occupation i.e. pottery making. Their present status of occupational distribution is shown with the help of a graphical presentation-



The graphical analysis reveals that approximately nine distinct occupations are practiced by individuals in the study area. A significant majority are engaged in pottery making, indicating that this traditional occupation continues to hold a dominant position within the community. The findings suggest that there has been little deviation from this occupational tradition over time.

Therefore, it was observed that pottery making is regarded as the primary occupation within the study area. The physical environment of the region is also conducive to this craft. The community has engaged in pottery making and sales since early times, a tradition passed down from their ancestors, which they continue to uphold. The elderly residents of the study area are highly aware of this heritage and informed the investigator that some young individuals are increasingly expressing interest in perpetuating this traditional occupation. To observe their occupational changes, the investigator has also considered their current employment status across three generations. To date, the majority of individuals continue to adhere to their traditional occupation of pottery and boat making. Additionally, they are engaged in agriculture, government services, private sector employment, carpentry, daily wage labor, and commerce. Some individuals also participate in their traditional occupation as a secondary activity. No significant alterations in their traditional occupation have been observed.

Pottery is a skill that endures despite modernization. Although there have been numerous changes in the living conditions of the local population, the demand for pottery materials remains steady. The pottery materials produced by the kumars of Kamjan Alengi are utilized by the residents of Tezpur, Lakhimpur, Dhemaji, Biswanath Chariali, among others. The tradition of pottery-making has been passed down through generations, primarily due to their habitation in riverbank environments with suitable conditions for such craft.

In order to assess changes in occupational patterns, the investigator collected data from the villagers concerning their current occupations, as well as those of their fathers and forefathers. The study's findings indicate that approximately half of the local population continues to engage in pottery, maintaining the traditional occupation passed down through successive generations. However, a number of families have transitioned away from this ancestral trade due to various challenges. The younger generation in the area exhibits limited interest in pursuing pottery, opting instead for alternative employment such as carpentry or private sector jobs outside the state of Assam. Furthermore, agricultural activity in the region remains scarce, primarily due to the recurring and severe flooding of the Brahmaputra River during the monsoon season.

Factors responsible for continuing traditional occupation

The *Kamjan Alengi* is situated at the bank of the river Brahmaputra. The raw material or the clay, which is used to make pot locally known as *Kumarmati* is easily available on the bank of the river. They collect the clay from the river and do not travel to distant places to collect it. Therefore, the people of the study area are involved in pottery making, which does not cost much to collect its raw materials and make it. It is a profitable business for them because its production is free of cost. The amount that the people receive from selling their items is profit for them. And the clay, which is also used to make pots and other earthen ware exists on the riverbank.

One of the primary factors sustaining their traditional occupation is the commerce of pottery. Due to their residence along the riverbank, it is convenient for them to engage in trade via the river route. The Brahmaputra River connects various districts of Assam, facilitating villagers' trade expeditions to these areas without significant difficulties. The riverine trade route is more economical than other transportation methods. Additionally, a further advantage of conducting trade via the river is that the pottery transported is made of clay, which is soft and susceptible to breakage; therefore, waterways pose no risk of damage.

The unemployment is the main problem of today. It is very difficult to engage in occupational activity without proper knowledge and skill. The Kamjan Alengi is a very backward area. In the rainy season the villagers get detached from all direction for about two or three months. It acts as a hamper for the villagers to study in such situations. Therefore, they lack proper education which is the most essential element to get a good job. The villagers are engaged in their traditional occupation which does not need any educational qualification. And it decreases the unemployment rate in that area. As it is a team work therefore all members of the family are engaged in it.

Another factor responsible for continuing their traditional occupation is the flood and erosion of the study area due to the river Brahmaputra. Every year, the flood affects the area badly. Because of this, most of them engaged in making pottery and selling it in the winter season. In the monsoon season, they collect wood from the river to set fire during for pottery making process. The soil erosion during rainy season and flood affecting their livelihood. As per information collected by the investigator from an elderly person of the area, the village Salmara is at present situated 3 km away from the location at which it was situated during 1950. But this is now on the verge of water due to soil erosion and the village is reducing its land due to erosion. Because of these conditions they do not practice agriculture and other occupation. Even they have not the agricultural land to cultivation.

Geographical Setting and Raw Material Availability

Kamjan Alengi is located along the banks of the Brahmaputra River. One of the key reasons for the prevalence of pottery making in the area is the easy availability of raw materials. The clay used for pottery—locally known as *Kumarmati*—is abundantly found along the riverbank. Villagers collect this clay directly from the nearby river, eliminating the need to travel long distances in search of raw materials. As a result, pottery making incurs minimal production costs, making it a profitable occupation. Since the primary input—clay—is freely available, the income earned from selling pottery products largely constitutes profit.

Trade and Transportation

A major factor sustaining the traditional craft of pottery is the commercial viability it offers. Given the village's riverside location, transportation of goods is facilitated through the Brahmaputra River, which connects multiple districts across Assam. This riverine trade route is not only convenient but also cost-effective compared to other modes of transport. Additionally, waterway transportation minimizes the risk of damage to the fragile clay products, which are susceptible to breakage during land transport.

Unemployment and Educational Constraints

Unemployment is a critical issue in contemporary times, particularly in regions lacking access to proper education and skill development. Kamjan Alengi is a socio-economically backward area. During the monsoon season, the village remains cut off from surrounding regions for two to three months, severely hampering educational opportunities. As a result, many villagers lack the formal education required for modern employment. Engaging in their traditional craft of pottery provides a practical solution to unemployment, as it requires no formal qualifications. Since pottery making is a collaborative, labor-intensive activity, it often involves the participation of the entire family, thereby further reducing the unemployment rate in the area.

Environmental Challenges and Adaptation

Flooding and soil erosion caused by the Brahmaputra River also play a significant role in perpetuating traditional occupations. Annual floods severely impact the area, discouraging agricultural activities and other forms of livelihood. Consequently, most villagers engage in pottery making during the winter months, while the monsoon season is typically used to gather firewood from the river for the pottery production process. Erosion has drastically altered the landscape; according to information provided by an elderly resident, the village of Salmara is now situated approximately 3 kilometers from its 1950 location. The ongoing loss of land due to erosion has made agriculture nearly impossible, as most villagers no longer possess arable land. These environmental constraints have further reinforced reliance on pottery as the primary source of livelihood.

Conclusion

The residents of *Kamjan Alengi* in *Salmara* village lead a modest and traditional lifestyle. They maintain their distinct customs, beliefs, and cultural practices. As an occupational group, they continue to exist within the broader economic and social framework of the caste system. There is a strong desire among them to preserve their ancestral occupation, which has been practiced since earlier times. A majority of the population in the study area continues to engage in pottery making.

Pottery, as a skilled craft, has withstood the pressures of modernization and remains relevant today. Despite noticeable changes in the living conditions of the local people, the demand for pottery products persists. The items produced by these artisans are widely used, particularly across Upper Assam. The tradition of pottery has been passed down through generations, largely due to the community's settlement along the riverbank, which has influenced their occupational choices.

In conclusion, pottery remains an ancient and enduring craft in the study area, upheld by the community despite various socio-economic and environmental challenges.

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