

WHEEL TO HAND: A STRATEGIC REVERSAL OF POTTERY TECHNOLOGY IN MAJULI, ASSAM

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Abstract: *This paper portrays an account of a lesser known potter community of Assam who may well be termed as 'Majuli Kumar' because of their habitation in the Majuli Island of the river Brahmaputra. There are two distinct indigenous potter communities in Assam - the Hira (hand-made potters) and the Kumars (distributed in other parts of Assam). For the convenience of discussion we will refer to this Kumar community as 'General Kumar' since the Majuli Kumars stand apart from them in respect of the pottery technology and in many other techno-economic and socio-cultural aspects. The General Kumars are wheel-made potters and the craft is masculine oriented; contrary to that, the Majuli Kumars are hand-made potters and the craft is the exclusive domain of the females. This is nothing but a total shift from wheel to hand but this unparallel shift was a survival strategy – a distinctive case of induced culture adaptation highly susceptible to the geo-cultural environ operating in this secluded islet (Majuli). This paper attempts to address some of the basic questions, viz. (1) Why is there a shift? (2) Why is the craft transferred from male to the female? (3) How are they successful in synchronizing and harmonizing the whole process of transformation in societal context?*

INTRODUCTION

Pottery in India is one of the most tangible ancient regional crafts. It has a prehistoric legacy in Assam and its archeological antiquity has so far been recorded from four Neolithic sites, viz. Daojali Hading (Sharma, 1967,1980), Sarutaru (Rao 1977: 191-204), Dibru valley (Saikia 1988), and Bambooti (Ashraf and Duarah 2015). All these sites have yielded stamped and plain coarse handmade pottery dated within the range of 3600 to 1200 BP. (Hazarika 2006: 25-43),

In Assam, conservatively, two indigenous potter communities are well-known - (i) the Kumar, popularly known as *chak-kumar* (wheel made potter) and (ii) the Hira, known as *hasta Kumar* (the handmade potter). But within this fold another least known indigenous potter community emerged quite distinctively and they also recognize as 'Kumar' but unlike the Kumar in general they successfully manufacturing pots without using wheel and at present the craft is practicing by the women folk from Kumar of Majuli. It is a

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full-blown cottage industry producing varieties of economically viable and praiseworthy earthenware in prolific manner to sustain it as a primary means of livelihood. The male folk of the community are not directly linked up in shaping the pots but in all practicality they set the pre and post production stages so coordinated manner that eventually it makes them successful in trading the finished products to the whole of Assam and its adjacent states mainly by using river routes. They usually transport and trade the products locally and outside Majuli through their own mechanism /without engaging any middleman; mainly by using river routes. The traditional pottery industry of Majuli reveals numerous features which are atypical to this industry. They aptly perceived all these challenges and could overcome the hurdles in pursuing their subsistence strategy where pot making has been the mainstay economy. This paper is an attempt to look at the causes and the contributing factors responsible for certain unusual situations through which they had to pass and how they sustain it. What makes the Majuli Kumar graspingly extraordinary? Why and how did they shift from the so called advanced to the archaic mode of pot-making technology? And how far could they overcome all the odds and manage to proceed with accomplishment? This could be a classic instance of man's interlacing and readjustment with the environment where the localized ecology and socio-economic environment played a vital role; in fact, the pot making tradition of Majuli is a case of induced human cultural adaption and a living proof of techno-evolutional renaissance. Here the studies will confine only to the potter and potteries of Majuli in the context of the present and past: an anthropo-archaeological move towards understanding of past-presents cultural readjustment.

Before coming to the key aspects let us have a general idea of the land and people of the area in question.

The Land

Broad area: **Majuli, Assam**

Specific area: (i) **Salmara** village (contemporary Potters village)

(ii) **Dhowachala** (archaeological site related to pottery industry)

Majuli or Majoli is a large river island in the Brahmaputra River, Assam, India. Its geographical coordination is 26° 57' 0" North, 94° 10' 0" East. The island had a total area of 1,250 square kilometres, but due to severe land erosion, the total area is now reduced to less than 400 square kilometres at present. (fig. 2)

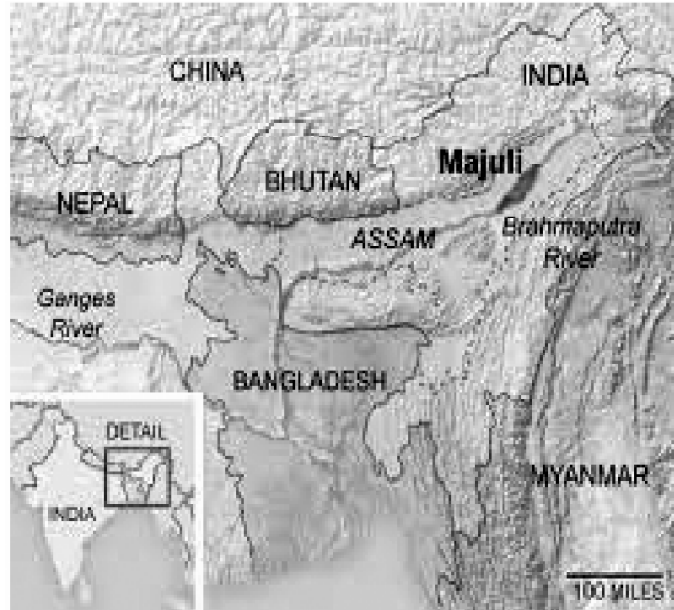


Figure 1: Satellite imagery of Majuli, India and near destinations

(Source: www.maplandia.com/india/Assam/jorhat/majuli)

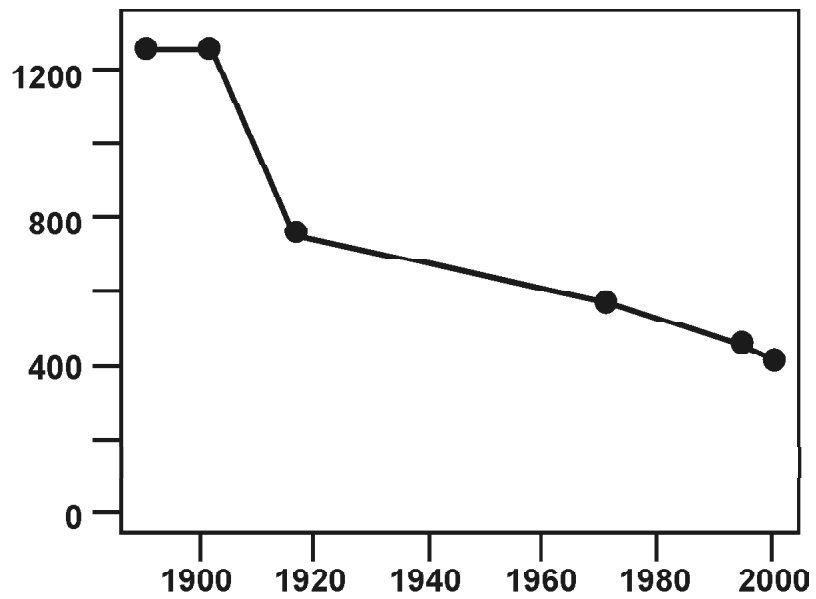


Figure 2: Shrinkage of Majuli over the years

Demographic Settings of the potters village of Majuli

According to 2011 census, the population of Majuli is 1, 67,304 with a density of 300 individuals per sq. km, distributed in 144 (with 192 hamlets) villages. Salmara is one of them, and is inhabited by heterogeneous population distributed in three *suburi* (hamlets), namely (i) Borboka (ii) kamjan-*Alengi* and (iii) Bessa Mara-Aflamukh. Salmara as a whole is dominated by the potter's community traditionally known as Kumar. The total population of Salmara is 3,245, out of which 2,464 individuals (75.93%) are Kumar, followed by Kaibarta 327 (10.07%), Kalita, 150 (4.62%), Mishing 148 (4.56%), Jogi 82 (2.52%), Bania 55 (1.69%), Brahmin 14 (0.43%) and Ahom 5 (0.15%).

There are 474 households at Salmara, of which 341 (71.94%) belong to the Kumar, 52 (10.97%) = Kaibarta, 28 (5.9%) =General caste, 21 (4.43%) = Jogi, 13 (2.74 %) = Bania, 3 (0.63 %) = Brahmin, and 1 (0.26 %) = Ahom.

Table 1
Hamlet-wise population distribution of village Salmara

Suburis (Hamlets)	Male		Female		Hamlet-wise Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Kamjan Alengi	451	50.50%	442	49.50%	893	27.52
Borboka	821	48.29%	879	51.70%	1700	52.38
Bechamara/Aflamukh	352	53.98%	300	46.01%	652	20.10
Total (Village Salmara as a whole) →	1624	-	1621	-	3245	100.00%

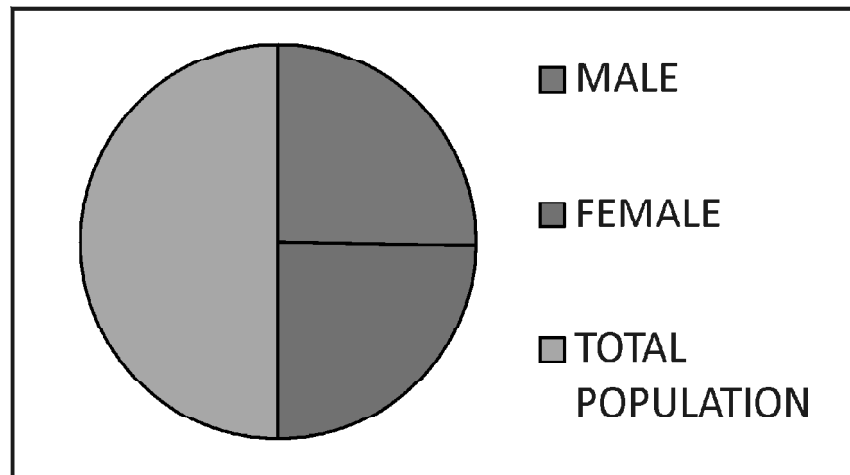


Figure 3: Distribution of Population of Salmara

Perception on the potters and pottery of Majuli

Despite the potters community of Majuli being quite distinctive in making and trading earthenware and maintaining socio-economic synchronization not only in a reckonable fashion, but in an established way, yet it is unusual as to why they are straightforwardly unfamiliar even in Assam. There is no authentic proof as to when, how and why they adhere to this occupation that too in an isolated landmass detached from mainland Assam. To find a solution to the complexity let us first try to fix the background of the indigenous pot makers of Assam in general and Majuli in particular

Caste and Craft Hierarchy among the Potter's communities of Assam: Hira, General Kumar (Wheel made) and Kumar of Majuli (handmade)

The Hira, the General Kumar and the Majuli Kumar are the caste groups traditionally associated with pot-making craft. Hira believe that they are the original potters of Assam. According to census report of India 1891, the Hira are the potters of the Brahmaputra Valley (Gait, 1891; 272). Siack (1833:96) referred the Hira as sub-caste of Chandal¹ but the basis of this inference is not clear. Under no circumstances do the Hira ever accept this presumption, as their occupation is quite different from that of *Chandal*. It is also a fact that except the basic technocraftic similarity between the Hira and the Majuli Kumar where women folk are engaged in making pots by hand, the Hira in social affiliation differ from the potters of other castes. It has been mentioned in the report of census of India that "Hiras adopt a very ancient method of making pots known as coil building process (Hand-made techniques). But the Kumar, like other potters in India, "manufacture pottery with the help of a wheel", (Census Report 1981). Surprisingly, there is no mention of the Kumar of Majuli who make pots by hand. Early literature indicates that the 'Kumar', or Kulala is a caste of the Nava Sakha group, but most of the Kumar in upper districts of Brahmaputra valley are actually potters of the Kalita and Kewat caste (Gait, 1891; 272).

General observation

1. Barring the Kumar of Majuli, the Kumar in general of Assam fashion pots by using wheel and the Hira, always by hand. This is the popular notion unequivocally made out by most of the people of the region.
2. Based on this set paradigm in Assam, two caste groups - the Hira and the Kumar engage themselves in making pottery of different types by using widely divergent techniques. Among the Hiras, the women are the main crafters, whereas men never make pots. Nevertheless, they handle all

necessary arrangement for raw materials used in making and firing pots at the appropriate point of time, besides transporting and marketing the pottery.

3. On the other hand, the Kumar in general manufacture wheel thrown (*Chack*) pottery where the male are the sole crafters and the craftsmanship is a masculine concern, but the females render full support and assist the entire process in their own capacity and even shape the miniature earthen lamps which are used elaborately for ritualistic purpose by the people of Assam. Therefore, unlike many potters communities of the world, Assamese potters are not confined to a single group or to a single sex. (Saraswati and Behura. 1966: 175).
4. Most likely, another indigenous caste group encroached into this occupation at a much later date during mediaeval Assam. This inference may fairly be made on the basis of prevailing legends floating among the Kumar which may be substantiated by the archaeological findings retrieved through Dhowachala excavations at Majuli during 2003. This emerged group of potters is the Kalita by caste and because of their profession they are also named as Kumar because of the fact that in Assamese language the term '*Kumar*' is used to denote persons who by profession manufacture earthenware. Within this milieu, it should also be pointed out that socio-culturally, the Hira and the general Kumar are specialized in the same craft, but under no circumstances do they consider themselves as equal. Socially, Kumars place themselves at a higher position than the Hiras but, on the other hand, Hiras also consider themselves higher than the Kumar. Further, both the groups are basically peasant and they also practice agriculture along with their craft with full vigor. They are endogamous, but marriage between Hira and Kumar is forbidden. This phenomenon is applicable to many parts of India where social status of the potter is not uniform. "Diversity in the rank order occurs not only in different linguistic areas, but in different localities too". (Saraswati and Behura, 1966: 175). In Assam, Hiras are recognized as Schedule caste (SC) and the Kumar as backward caste (OBC). But in their own traditional pattern, Kumars recognize themselves as Kalita, which in fact, is higher than the Hiras in their caste *hierarchy*. On the contrary, Hira identify the Kumar as "*nai-kata-Kumar*" meaning Kumar (potter) who detach the product from the mother earth with the help of a string, an act symbolically denoting the detachment of naval-cord; thus, according to Hira the Kumar are impure and cannot claim superiority in caste hierarchy. In many parts of India e.g. Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and West Bengal, the same concept is prevalent (Saraswati and Behura, 1966). Occupation cannot

segregate caste groups especially in an egalitarian peasant-centric society of Assam, nor is it sufficient to account for the difference in rank between the Kumar-Kalita and Hira who are labeled as potters by birth. (Cantilie 1984: 246)

5. The Kumar of Majuli distant themselves from the other group of Kumars, because, like the Hira potters, they also consider them as *Nai-Kata-Kumar* (used in derogatory sense i.e. impure potter) who detach the pot from the wheel with the help of a thread, which is compared with the detachment of umbilical cord of a newly born baby. So, the Hiras do not establish any marital relations with the wheel made Kumars. The handmade Kumars of Salmara consider them as Kalita Kumar, and claim to be superior to wheel made Kumar in social status.
6. There is a basic socio-techno-craft similarity between the Hiras and Majuli Kumar. In both the communities, the women make earthenware by hand, but despite this similarity, there is no social proximity between them because the Hiras belong to scheduled castes whereas the Kumars of Majuli are Kalita by caste. They consider themselves higher in caste hierarchy.

It should be noted that the pottery made by the Kumars of Majuli find acceptance in the Satras and are used for ritualistic purpose, whereas the pottery made by the Hiras are not accepted by the religious institutions of Assam, though both are handmade.

7. The Hira have their own priest to perform all the religious rites and rituals. But these priests are never invited by any other caste group and even by the Kumar potters for performing religious rites.

Historicity of the Kumar of Majuli

There is no written account on when, how and why they adhere to this occupation, that too in an isolated landmass detached from the mainland Assam.

The potters of Majuli remain fully engaged throughout the year in making pots, since it is almost their lone means of subsistence. As this industry has an intimate relationship with the regional ecological setting and weather conditions, the climatic effect over this industry needs a bit of explanation. As informed by the potters: During the Assamese month of *Fagun* (February-March) the pottery industry suffers a great setback because during that period winds blow at a great pace due to vast openness of the isle from all sides that merges with the mighty river Brahmaputra. During this month, firing of the pots in open or even in the *paghali* (kiln) could be hazardous. During summer

(May to August), torrential rain poses problem in drying and firing the pots. Further, due to inundation of all clay mines situated on the river banks, collection of potter's clay also remains inoperative. But during this period, when devastating flood engulfs not only the Salmara of Majuli, but many parts of Assam, as a matter of fact the situation enthralls the potters of Majuli. Convincingly, Kumars of Majuli are somewhat exceptional in facing flood situation. They not only remain prepared mentally and physically to face this recurring natural calamity, but very productively manage to harness the advantages of this devastating flood for their benefit. The flood caused by the Brahmaputra River at Majuli has a great impact on the life and craft of potters of Salmara – an unparalleled phenomenon that needs special attention.

- (i) Being a low-lying area, Salmara of Majuli always remains vulnerable to flood. To cope with the situation, most of the Kumar households keep ready self-made boats at their instant disposal (plate 1). Besides, they are also quite skilled in making and using various types of rafts, especially of banana stem. These make them confident to overcome the first thrust of the flood.

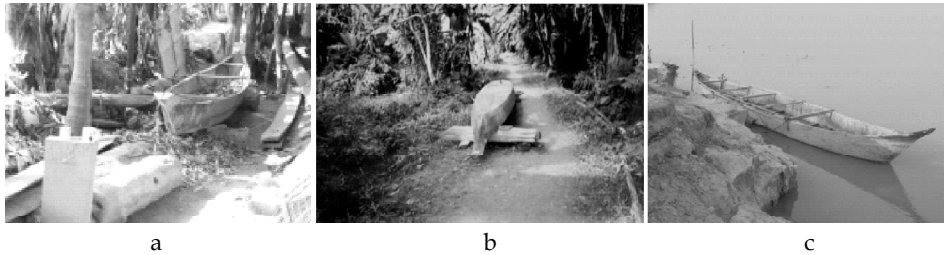


Plate 1: (a) boat under construction (b) boat being kept ready for emergency use and (c) using of boats

Advantage of flood

- (ii) The flood in the Brahmaputra offers the potters a great opportunity to gather the required quantity of firewood for firing of pots and logs/uprooted trees for making of boats and furniture, which the river Brahmaputra carries along with its current from the upper reaches of Northeast India. (Plate 2). In fact, getting hold of heavy unstructured floating materials, that too from a particular spot (close to Salmara) and specific time from the mid-current of river Brahmaputra is itself a matter of valorous thrill. As per the size of the floating log, they use one or two small boats. In most cases, they execute the entire operation quite successfully, which they believe as a traditionally acquired time-tested competence.



Plate 2: Collection of driftwood by the potters of Salmara

- (iii) Receding flood often cuts down the river bank adjacent to Salmara to a considerable depth, and that helps the potter to acquire quality clay through deep pit mining; the depth of the mining-pit may go down up to 50 meters or so depending on the river's aftereffect. The process of securing of potter's clay through deep mining is a risky task carried out collectively by the Kumar youths. This operation is so vital that the year's production depends on its success and the success truly reflects on the faces of the youth who performed the task. (Plate 3)



**Plate 3: Left: Joy of success after acquiring required clay
Right: Clay-yard (Reserve collection)**

- (iv) Nevertheless, there are certain exceptions to this norm as has been informed by the potters, that half of the entire Bechamara- Aflamukh *chuba* of Salmara village submerged during the time of a heavy flood, as a result of which half the population had to shift from their locality to another locality Ataichuk to escape the flood. It is also noticeable that many of the inhabitants even change their traditional house pattern to cope with the situation. (Plate 4).

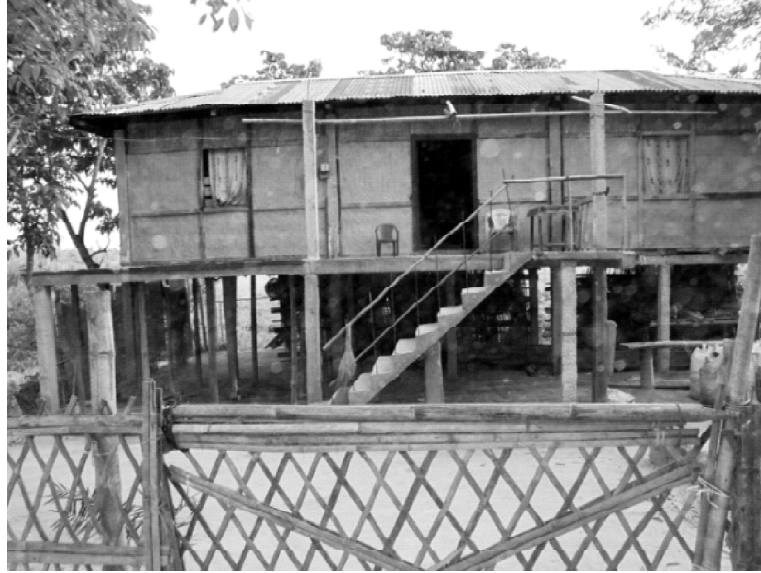


Plate 4: Adapt pile dwelling to escape the flood

As has been mentioned earlier, this paper is an attempt to look at the causes and the contributing factors responsible for certain unusual situations through which they have had to pass and how they sustain in spite of it. What makes the Majuli Kumar graspingly extraordinary? Why and how did they even shift from the so called advanced to the archaic mode of pot-making technology? And how far have they overcome all the odds and managed to proceed with accomplishment? This could be a classic case in point of man's interlacing and readjustment with the environment where the localized ecology and socio-economic environment played a vital role. In fact, the pot making tradition of Majuli is a case of induced human cultural adaptation and a living proof of techno-evolutional renaissance. Here the studies will limit to the potter and potteries of Majuli in the context of the present and past, an anthrop-archaeological move towards understanding of past-present cultural readjustment.

In ethical code, the female's direct participation in the temple or in the ritualistic sphere is either restricted or avoided, so are their products. "For the need of technological shift, the very attribution of impurity assigned to the female is ignored. She becomes a part of the process of production. She is merely a part of the technology, which exists under the safe coverage of a sacred attribution ascribed by the Classical code. (Roy 1992: 94-96). A Kumar has a sacred affiliation; that brings the woman within the sacred fold like the male. These eliminate the stigma of pollution and thus the female's

participation in this craft does not hamper the ethical code, at least in the *Satras* of Assam that never antagonize any caste-creed differentiation. Hence, pottery becomes ritualistically sacred and has an access to the temple too.

Crucial technological shift in pot making: its causes and effect on the Kumar of Majuli

The Department of Anthropology of Gauhati University carried out a joint expedition at Majuli during January-February 2003 under the Headship of Professor B.Choudhury. This joint academic venture of Physical, Social and Prehistory branches gave us an opportunity to study the tangible and intangible heritages of various communities living in Majuli from varied anthropological angles. Kumar, the sole potter community of Majuli, is one of them. While collecting information on the concerned potter's community at Salmara, something unusual regarding Kumar of Majuli in the form of oral saga came to our knowledge. In brief, the legends go as follows:

- (i) The present day Kumar population of Majuli belongs to Kalita caste and initially they settled at Majuli as common farmers practicing agricultural activities, but because of heavy silt deposition (plate: 5) on their paddy fields due to recurring flood, they had no other option but to change their subsistence strategy and accordingly learnt the art of making pottery on wheel as an iv) Nevertheless, there are certain exceptions to this norm as has been informed by the potters, that half of the entire Bechamara-Aflamukh *chuba* of Salmara village submerged during the time of a heavy flood, as a result of which half the population had to shift from their locality to another locality Ataichuk to escape the flood. It is also noticeable that many of the inhabitants even change their traditional house pattern to cope with the situation. (Plate 4).

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Regarding the time period of this transformation, the saga remained silent. To keep track of this appealing saga prevailing in Majuli, we do not have any other option but try to come close to the reality as far as practicable in the following manner:



Plate 5: Accumulation of layers of silt at Dhowachala, Majuli

1. To realize the ethno history of the Kumar of Majuli, our first attempt was to find out if there was any other place in or out of Majuli other than Salmara village where the handmade Kumar potter's

community once lived. In Majuli, that could be a frustrating attempt because by that time Majuli has already lost a vast area (Approximately 850 sq.km.) from its original 1,250 square kilometres of land due to erosion of the banks of river Brahmaputra at Majuli. But while we were on the subject compiling the data on village to village survey coupled with surface exploration, an archaeologically potential locale covering an area of approximately 24 *bighas* came to our notice at Dhowachala, 7 kilometres west of Salmara village, and eventually a small scale excavation in the form of 'trial trench' was laid down. The result of this Test pit is quite astounding. Before discussing the findings let us mention another indication relevant to this search.

2. Interestingly, 350 years ago² or a little earlier, the potter's community of Majuli might have received Royal patronage/recognition from Ahom King of Assam or else they might have had some sort of association with the Royal family as indicated by a piece of potsherd with imperial insignia retrieved through Raonapara exploration, the area lying between Dhowachala and Salmara.(plate: 6)



Plate 6: Potsherd with imperial Insignia of Ahom Dynasty

Dhowachala Exploration & Excavations

The site is situated within an area which looks like a '*charania pothar*' (Grazing ground: Plate-7c). Dhowachala (in Assamese language Dhowa means smoke and chola means kiln/fireplace i.e. land of smoking kiln) exhibits cultural

items scattered over a vast area. The surface finds at random include wheel and handmade potsherds, slags, flat bricks, smoother (*Bulia*-potter's implement for making handmade pot), terracotta toy, 'Cornucopia' (Lamp holder), shallow bowl, grinding stone, iron chisel, dish, scratcher (*Majonii*-implement for making handmade pottery) and a piece of Neolithic Celt³.

Dhowachala is surrounded by Mishing Gaon on the north, Bongaon on the south, Samarguri on the west and Mudoigaon and Salmara on the east. Interestingly, the site is situated outside the ambit of a huge fortification constructed on the principle of earthen rampart and moat, locally known as *Garh khawoi*.

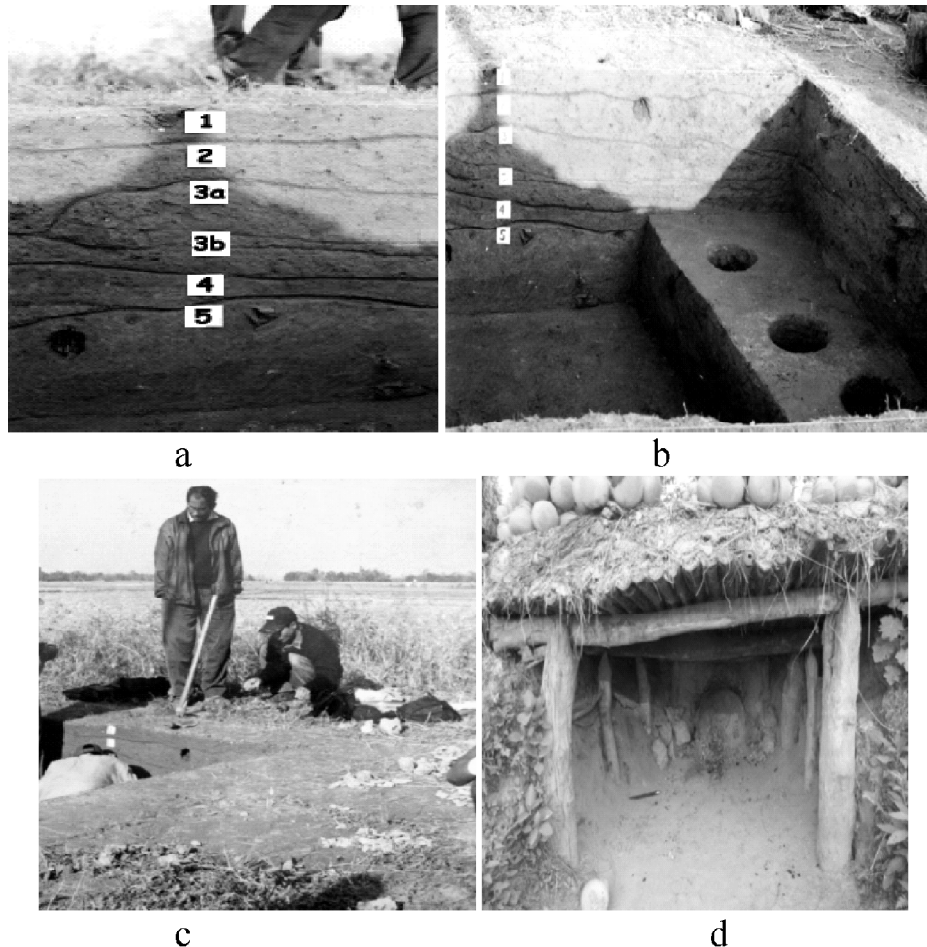


Plate-7(a-c) excavated layers with exposed postholes of a paghali (kiln); capped by layery 7(d) present day kiln of Salmara village

On the basis of surface collection, a 3 X 3 metre trench was laid down to determine the unrecorded facts related to the pottery industry of Majuli. The excavation revealed a 1.16 metre thick single culture deposits divisible into two distinct cultural phases beginning with wheel made tradition and subsequently replaced by handmade pottery tradition.

Cultural layers within the trench end at 116 centimetres below the surface (B.S) and within this range, five layers have been identified, of which wheel made pottery flourished in between layer ⑤ and ④, (till we encountered the sterile layer ③ at 1.16m B.S). Thus, 80 cm thick wheel made pottery deposit (plate 8) starting from top of the layer ⑥ and ends at layer ③b. This wheel made pottery horizon also includes series of post-holes of a kiln, the plan of which is still being used by the handmade potters of Salmara. As indicated by the layers 3a, 3a', & 3b (Plate-7a), there was some sort of stratigraphic instability⁴ towards the decline of wheel made pottery. And that sequence continues with the reciprocal decline and increase of wheel made and handmade pottery respectively.

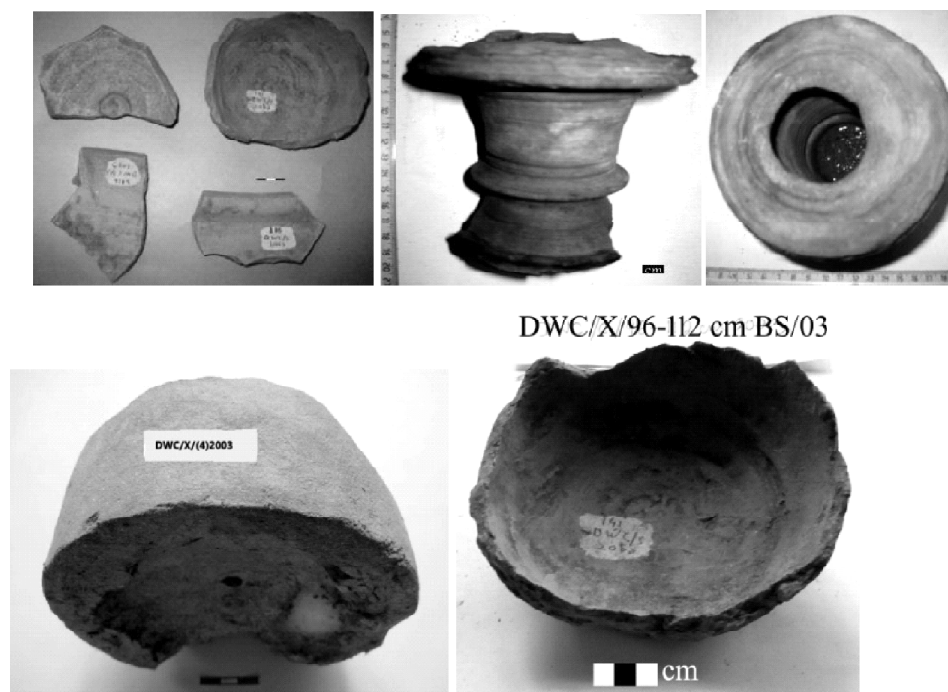


Plate 8: Cultural Materials from Wheel made pottery Horizon Representing Layers-⑤ and ④

In this respect, it is worth mentioning that the potter's village continued to exist at Dhowachala at least up to the early part of the British Rule in Assam. Their dual practice of both wheel and hand ceramic technology is indicated by the presence of pot making implements like *Bulia*, *Majoni* (plate 9) and other related items associated with handmade pottery craft at Dhowachala site. Finally, they shifted to Salmara, but prior to that, as informed by the villagers, a community known as Lahkar inhabited Salmara. They later abandoned the village and went out of Majuli probably because of recurrent flood havoc. This abandoned land locally known as *erabari* was later occupied by the Majuli Kumar. The entire episode may be backed by the fact that the potters have to pay *torjubadi khajana* (tax for unauthorized occupation of Government land without proper registration) till today as imposed by the British⁵ in Assam.

Even at Salmara too, as the oral tradition indicates, initially they mostly practiced wheel thrown pottery – a masculine job, along with handmade pottery, intermittently practiced by their women folk, but these phenomena started changing soon and by early 19th century the female of the Salmara fully controlled the craft and the Kumar of Majuli is thus recognized as handmade potter. It will not be out of context to say that the most striking and unusual feature is that the religious institutes like Satras (Vashnavite institutes of Assam) accept the pottery made by both the sexes of Kumars of Majuli from time immemorial – an unusual phenomenon where the concept of purity and impurity related to the pottery by sex and technique of manufacturing has been totally ignored. This social recognition exerts a positive impact on the female of Salmara to get them involved more seriously into this craft. But because of gradual increase of demand for various pottery types, these newly married girls had also tried their hands to increase the production along with their fellow family members. The demanding economic situation rather encouraged them to learn the process of manufacturing pots from the other skilled crafters among their relatives, and ultimately, a large population of women from Kumar families acquired the knowledge of this craft.

In the past, as narrated by the village elders, the men married girls from distant places as far as 300 kilometers away from Majuli. These girls could not help them in the craft since they had no knowledge of it. However, with the encouragement of village endogamy, at present it has become a common practice, and thus they protect, conserve and expand their area of expertise.

Majuli products have very high demand not only in Assam's riverside⁶ districts, but also the fringes of other Northeast Indian hilly states. The ceramic technology become a time-tested phenomenon in the potter's village of Majuli and thus has become an essential part of their life. Besides pottery making, the Kumar are also adept in making boats and other woodworks.

The more the female engage in pottery production, the more the male become free for their trade⁷. As such, there is no taboo for using potter's wheel in Salmara; they once used wheels, but the situation demanded to shift from wheel to hand. Hand-made technique is the only one that exists now. That they prepared wheel made pottery in the past is evidenced from the Dhowachola excavations at Majuli. The shift from wheel to handmade techniques is a gradual process adopted by women folk of the potter's community who picked up the art of making pots in their own way without following the regionally popular coil building process in making of handmade pottery. Shifting of gender and techniques of manufacturing of pottery was mostly contributed by the following factors:

(i) Ecological setting

(a) Geographic isolation, together with recurring flood and siltification, keeps the potters community of Salmara away from practicing the dual subsistence strategies (crop raising and pot making) as enjoyed by the other two indigenous potter communities of Assam. But the ecological setting helps them cater to the need of pottery for the inhabitants as well as huge number of *Satras* (more than 35 numbers) through unilateral dealing without any interference of traders from outside Majuli. In other words, the cultural landscape of Majuli which accommodates a huge number of religious institutions (*Satra*) makes the craft alive even within a relatively small confined area.

(b) The craft which needs vast quantity of fuel is bound to decline at a faster rate within an island of limited area along with the growth of population. In fact, increase of human exploitations on forest products reduces the chances of getting fuel for the kilns in a feasible manner. But fortunately, the strategic location of Majuli helps the potters to fetch the entire firewood required for their kilns free of cost from the river Brahmaputra during the time of flood.

(ii) Human resource management

(a) Beside earthen works, the Kumar potters of Majuli are skilled wood workers too. They occasionally meet the local demand for wooden furniture and boats which facilitate marginal additional earnings, but that obviously depends upon availability of time to spare. As already mentioned, they got this opportunity because of the gradual technological shift (wheel to hand), together with the involvement of the opposite sex in a coordinated manner. Along with the increase in production through direct involvement of the females, the males can involve more intensively in trading the products for a longer period of time without attracting any middle man. In other words, it becomes a direct dealing between clients and producer-cum-traders. The trading is carried out

in four *khep* (voyages), namely- (i) *BechaKhep*, (ii) *KholuwaKhep*, (iii) *Ahu-Kholuwa-Khep*, and (iv) *Sali-Kholuwa -Khep*.

A *Khep* consists of two members from each family who decide to proceed jointly for the voyage. The families/households proposed to carry out the job jointly load⁸ the pots collectively on the boat without any personal tag.

(i) *Becha Khep*

By February they set sail for Sadiya, Dhubri, Shapekhaiti. The popular types of pottery taken with them are – *Nadia, mola, doi tekeli, kalah*. They anchor the pot loaded boat near a village and ferry the goods inshore by using *banka- bhari* (carrying poles) from house to house and also sometimes sell them in the village weekly market.

By the end of April they get ready to return home from the trade. In this *Khep* they can either exchange their goods for grains or money, according to their convenience. The profit they earn through the *khep* is equally distributed among the individuals of the trading troupe.

(ii) *Kholuwa Khep*

This *khep* proceeds towards Jorhat, Bongaon, Tezpur etc. during the month of October. The popular types of pottery taken with them are –*mola, Chaki, dhupdani, dhunadani, chat, etc.* In this *khep* also, they exchange pottery for grains and money which varies according to the quantity and types of pottery. By the last week of December, they return home from trade.

(iii) *Ahu Kholuwa Khep*

For this *khep*, they set out for Dibrugarh, Jorhat, Golaghat, and Sadiya during the month of July. In this *khep*, they exchange pots against *Ahu* paddy. It is said that in the past, *Ahu* rice was cultivated in the village and it met the requirements of the family for almost a year. In this *khep*, the potters take varieties of potteries ranging from *ghot, tekeli, kalah, duneri, mola, Chaki etc.*

(iv) *Sali Khep*

This trip is carried out during the month of December. The potter in this *khep* proceeds towards Bechamara, Nazira, Sonari, Biswanath Chariali etc where *Sali* paddy grows in abundance.

Clients demand different type of potteries for different varieties of *Sali* paddy, for instance, for *bara Sali* they prefer mostly *Kalah, tekeli, ghot, nodia*, for *komal chaul* they demand *Chaki, dhupdani, dhunadani, dunori, etc.* On being

asked why such demands vary, the potters' only reply was that there is no hard and fast rule in this exchange system, but a traditionally controlled system carried out by both the parties for generations. They return from this trip by the end of February.

Each *khep* covers considerable distance and places to sell or exchange their products to their regular clients (Table 1a & 1b).

The Majuli Kumar produce standardized pottery types in varied quantities as per the demand of their clients. A comprehensive production-related picture is given in table 2 and 3. In fact, the Kumar potters of Salmara are scattered in three different hamlets Namely-(i) Borboka (ii) Kamajan-Alengi, and (iii) Bessa Mara-Aflmukhh. They produce twenty-two types of pottery throughout the year according to the trip-wise (*khep*) demand. The potteries are both ritualistic and utilitarian in character. Among the common type of potteries, the pitcher (*Kalah*) acquired the highest percentage (11.48) in Borboka, followed by kamjan-Alengi 7.08%, and in Bechamara - Aflamukh 6.42%.




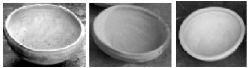
Table 1a
Places and distance covered by the Majuli Kumars for trading pottery





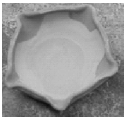
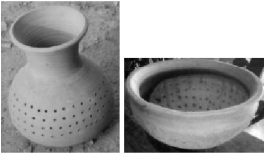
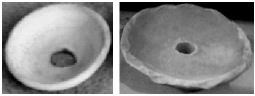
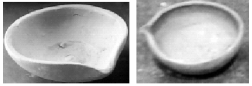

<i>Tributaries of Brahmaputra river used as trade route</i>	<i>Distance covered (in km)</i>	<i>Trading target</i>	<i>Clients (mostly ethnic communities)</i>	<i>States involved</i>
Subansiri	201	North Lakhimpur	Kachari, Mishings	Cover Foothills belt of Assam- Arunachal Pradesh
Dikhow	88	Nazira, Sivsagar	Sonowal, Motok	Covering parts of southern parts Assam- Nagaland border
Buri dihing	240	Dibrugarh, Naharkatia	Deori, Mishing	Covering parts of eastern Arunachal Pradesh
Dibang	176	Jorhat, Sadiya	Mishimis, Karbi, Mishing	Arunachal Pradesh and Assam
Llohit	176	Sadiya	Mishimis, Karbi, Deoris	Arunachal Pradesh and Assam
Bur gong	137	Biswanath Chariali	Deori, Kachari	Assam
kalang	181	Nagaon	Koch and Tiwa	Assam
Borgong	117	Borgeng	Kachari, Rabha, Nyshis & others	Arunachal Pradesh and Assam
Dhansiri	87	Golaghat	-do-	Nagaland and Assam
Jia bharali	116	Chardwars	Koch and Tiwa	Assam
Dhubri	499	Dhubri	Rabha, Kochari etc.	Assam

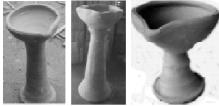


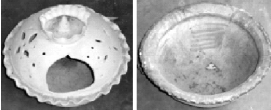


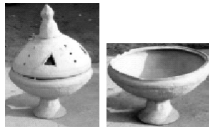


Table 1b
Distance covered by each trip (Khep) and the exchange value of the pottery in terms of cash and kinds is shown below

<i>khep</i>	<i>distance covered from salmara</i>	<i>in kind</i>	<i>in cash (Rupees)</i>
Becha	176km-499km area-Tinsukia, Makum, Ledo dist- Dibrugarh state-Assam	12-15 pot=40kg, paddy (<i>ahu dhan</i>) type of pottery- <i>kalah</i> , <i>tekeli</i> , <i>mola</i>	1 <i>kalah</i> = 100-150 1 <i>tekeli</i> = 50-70 1 <i>mola</i> = 30-60
Ahu soluwa	137km-427km area-Dudnoi, Avaiapuri dist-Goalparastate- Assam	15-20 pot=50kg paddy type of pottery- <i>gagori</i> , <i>bhaluki</i> , <i>ghot</i>	1 <i>gagori</i> = rs 150-200 1 <i>bhaluki</i> = 130- 170 1 <i>ghot</i> = 20-30
Soluwa	180km-380km area-Biswanath Chariali, Jamuguri hat dist-Tezpur state-Assam	15-20 pot=50kg paddy Type of pottery- <i>dunori</i> <i>kalah</i> , <i>tekeli</i>	1 <i>dunori</i> = 80-100 1 <i>kalah</i> = 100-150 1 <i>tekeli</i> = 50-70
Sali	80km-250km area-Sapekhati, Chowldhuwa, Nazira dist-Sibsagar state- Assam	Assorted pots of reasonable quantity (un specified) =100 kg mustard seeds	1 <i>chaki</i> = 2-3 1 <i>dhupdani</i> = 10-12 1 <i>dhunadani</i> = 15-16

Table 2
Types of Pottery produced at Salmara village of Majuli

<i>local name</i>	<i>English equivalent</i>	<i>Pottery type</i>	<i>Yearly production at Salmara</i>	<i>Utility</i>
1 <i>Kalah</i>	Pitcher		8000	utilitarian
2 <i>Gagori</i>	pitcher		3000	utilitarian
3 <i>Ghot</i>	small goblet		5000	utilitarian- cum-ritualistic
4 <i>Mola</i>	bowl (Rimless)		2000	utilitarian- cum-ritualistic

5	<i>Nadia</i>	Frying-pan		1500	utilitarian
6	<i>Charu-left</i> (female related) & <i>right-charu</i> (siddha patra)	big bowl		500	Utilitarian-cum-ritualistic
7	<i>Bhaluki</i>	big pitcher with lid		400	utilitarian
8	<i>Bhog charu</i>	large deep bowl (serving bowl)		200	ritualistic
9	<i>Shahastra-bati</i>	multi-lipped shallow disc		150	ritualistic
10	<i>Shastrad-hara</i>	perforated pitcher and perforated deep bowl (with 108 perforations for each type)		100	ritualistic
11	<i>Shahstra-mala</i>	Perforated disc used as garland at the marriage gate		100	ritualistic
12	<i>Chaki</i>	earthen lamp		10000	ritualistic
13	<i>Dhopedani</i>	incense stand		8000	ritualistic

14	<i>Gacha</i>	lamp stand		5000	ritualistic
15	<i>Chat/Dhakani</i>	lid with knob		300	ritualistic
16	<i>Akashbanti</i>	lamp stand (hanger)		400	ritualistic
17	<i>Dunori</i>	Decorated pot (marriage related)		500	ritualistic
18	<i>Gilas</i>	goblet/glass		600	utilitarian
19	<i>Tekeli</i>	small pitcher		700	utilitarian
20	<i>Sarai cum bota</i>	Disc- on- stand with conical dome (lower part is used as <i>bota</i> to offer betel-nut)		250	ritualistic
21	<i>Dhunadani without handle</i>	Stemmed-pot (Bowl on disc-based stand)		900	ritualistic
22	<i>Dhunadani with handle</i>	pot for burning dhuna (Scented latex)		1000	ritualistic

Method of potting in brief

The process of firing is locally known as *Pag dia*. The Kumar of Salmara generally burn the pots in the kiln locally known as *peghali* (Plate 9a) constructed on an open place in the village. But, occasionally they also burn the potteries in the open (Plate 9b).



Plate 9: (a) Kiln (peghali) ; (b) Firing of pots on open ground

The necessary firing materials besides fire-wood include straw, thatch , bamboo vein split, and ash, dry banana leaf, cow-dung, etc.

Saraswati and Behura (1966:41) opined that “there are certain standardized processes which are adopted by potters all over the country. These are cleaning, mixing and kneading”. On the other hand, Ansari reported that in Poona, the potters carry out three different stages of preparation of clay, viz- levitation, treading and kneading. (Ansari, 1964: 2-3).

Potters clay is known in Assam as *Kumarmati* and *Hiramati*. The *Kumarmati* contains sand 21.0%, silt - 49.5% and clay - 29.5%, whereas *Hiramati* contains sand (45.5%), silt (27.0%) and clay (25.0%) (Medhi, 1992: 28). Obviously, these are the general proportions of both the clay samples. But this ratio may vary, though not abruptly, depending on the location as well as the geological constitution of the area concerned.

They knead the clay repeatedly by foot until the required softness of the clay is attained. It is an arduous and time consuming work. Kneading is the fourth and final stage of preparation of clay. The amount of kneading is dependent upon the personal choice of the potters. In this stage, the potters take out the required quantity of clay from the already prepared heap of clay. It is then kneaded again by hand on a bamboo mat or on a wooden plank. After being kneaded the whole lump of clay is transformed into several conical chunks. These chunks are placed separately on a wooden plank or earthen

platform and squeezed by sprinkling well dried ash of husk. In order to retain its softness and wetness, the potters cover the prepared clay with wet gunny bags. The clay is now finally ready for preparation of vessels as shown in plate-10.



Plate 10: in the process of making pot

Without going into details, before concluding the writing, let us submit a comparison of the three indigenous potter communities of Assam in a tabulated form

Table 3
Assamese Potters at a glance

<i>Sl. Characteristics No</i>	<i>General Kumar</i>	<i>Potter Communities Majuli Kumar</i>	<i>Hira</i>
1. Technology	Wheel made	Hand made	Hand made
2. Sex Involved	Male	Female	Female
3. Utility	Ritualistic	Ritualistic/Utilitarian	Utilitarian

contd. table 4

Sl. No	Characteristics		Potter Communities	
	General Kumar	Majuli Kumar	Hira	
4.	Caste	OBC (Other Backward Caste)	Kalita Kumar (General caste)	SC (Schedule Caste)
5.	Technique of manufacturing	Throwing and Beating	Beating and Pressing	Coil building and Moulding
6.	Raw material (Clay)	Kumar mati	Kumarmati	Hiramati
7.	Distribution	Both upper and Lower Assam	Only in Majuli	Mostly in Lower Assam
8.	Selection of spouse from	Covering whole of Assam	Prefer Village Endogamy	Covering whole of Assam
9.	Buy and sell (Transaction)	Transaction through cash	Transaction through Barter and occasionally Cash	Barter and Jaota System

SUMMARY & CONCLUSION

Kumar as an occupational class still exist within the broader economic network of the caste structure. Though in oblivion, circumstantial evidence backed by archaeological findings point out that they belonged to the peasant communities prior to the formation of Majuli as an island. This Kalita population by caste, later by virtue of acquiring the craft of pot making around 14th-15th centuries AD, gradually established them as *Kumar* – in Assamese language it means potter, which has become their mainstay economy. The prevailing legend, coupled with archeological evidence retrieved from Dhowachala excavations, clearly indicate that these wheel-thrown potters (a masculine venture) gradually shifted to ‘handmade potter’ along with total reversal in the direct involvement of male to female. The discernible specifics indicate that the shift in technology and sex in pot making was largely due to the following reasons:

- (a) The unique situation of Majuli that arose out of the eco-cultural setting, where recurring flood and siltification of paddy fields, aggravated by acute shortage of cultivable land due to geographical isolation forced the Kumar to stick to a unilateral occupation of pot making, whereas other potter communities of Assam are peasant-cum-potter.
- (b) The more they were acquainted with riverine trade, the potters of Majuli needed more time (even months together) to involve with it, and that motivated them to think of direct participation of female in the craft, or in other words, shifting the craft to the hand of women-folk just to keep the production stable. The shifting was a slow and gradual process and its total transformation requires at least a century with the stabilizing of village marriage endogamy.

Now, let us appraise precisely the impact of this rare occurrence on the socio-economic life of the Kumar of Majuli.

- (i) From the early 1960s the village exogamy was converted to the village endogamy, and at present, has become a general practice among the Kumars of Salmara. The reason of transformation is techno-economic, related to the production of pottery.
- (ii) Shifting of the craft to the hands of women increased the bond of attachment between both the sexes of the family because the female are the sole manufacturers of pots, but the initiation and completion of the process is carried out by the males, that includes collection of potter's clay (*Kumar mati*), firewood for the kiln, and trading of the products. As the craft is built on interdependency, reciprocity, and mutual understanding between both the sexes, lack of coordination could be disastrous to pursuing the economy harmoniously, and this is the perceivable secret behind the success of the potters of Majuli in Assam for centuries.
- (iii) It is a riverine trade carried out in four traditionally controlled trips in a year. Each trip has its own duration concluded generally within sixty to ninety days. This is a risky expedition in which the near and dear of the potter's families are directly involved. A decade ago it was simply an emotionally charged operation without any communication between the family members for months together and that ended only after the safe return of the family members. It appeared simple, but for the wellbeing of the members on each and every voyage, the concern of the entire village is reckonable, where the latent forces in the form of intangible heritage consolidate the relationship among the potters community beyond imagination.
- (iv) It is worth mentioning that both the males and the females of the Kumar are also skilled in other crafts. Males are expert in boat-making and wood works which they carry out in accordance with the time on hand, and it supplements their economy considerably; on the other hand, the females are expert weavers who cater to the needs of each and every member of the family. No doubt, the Kumar's way of life may appear to pass instinctively, but in a highly synchronized way, wherein lies the success of their subsistence strategy.
- (v) The liberal Vaishnavite philosophy may have given the potter of this cultural island a limited economic base, but liberated them from segmented socio-economic system. It has given them economic mobility. "They dichotomize their economic character without

disturbing their relative identity in wider sphere of classical system". (Roy. 2005: 26-32).

With this dichotomy, the Kumars of Majuli economically integrate with the ethno-cultural group beyond Majuli in a balanced way. They get reciprocally influenced with each other's needs and demands; accordingly, the pattern of production and economic institutions of the riverine islanders get oriented.

Notes

1. Siack's observation may be based on the use of earthen pots at cremation ground where *chandal* played a major role. Around the 1830s in some parts of Assam, the Chandal (who cremated the body) might have also supplied pots required for rites related to the cremation.
2. Raonapara *pukhuri* (manmade water body) is bounded by raised earthen rampart made of dugout soil of the tank. The tank was constructed during the reign of Raja Jaydhaja Singha on 1662 AD. The potsherd with Royal symbol was retrieved from the middle portion of an exposed section of the rampart. The same fabric of pottery has also been recovered from Dhowachala site.
3. Assamese and many other ethnic communities of Northeast India consider ground Celt as 'thunder bolt' (*Sarag patthar*) and regard it as a prized possession and this superstition encouraged them to preserve these items for generations. So a solitary finding of this cultural item denotes nothing about prehistoric activity on the island.
4. This limited excavation couldn't ascertain whether the stratigraphical instability was manmade or natural, but the phenomenon has an important effect to the extent that beyond that point the handmade pottery started emerging gradually along with wheel made pottery.
5. The Ryotwari system was introduced by Sir Thomas Munro in 1792.
6. Kumar's commercial transaction of pottery is mostly riverine based following the watercourse of Brahmaputra River and its tributaries, carried out by manually operated river-faring locally made wooden vessel.
7. Up to the sixties, almost the entire system of trading of pottery was based on bartering, where the pots were exchanged against paddy and varieties of leguminous seeds.
8. Because of zero surface tension on transporting the earthenware by boat, no extra care has to be taken by the potters while loading the goods and that saves time and money.

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