



THE DHOWACHALA EXCAVATIONS AND EXPLORATION: AN ANTHROPO- ARCHAEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

MOUSHUMI DAS

Superintendent of State Tax, (Civil Service Allied), Assam.
E-mail: mdasgu2015@gmail.com

Abstract: *Dhowachala is located in the river island of Majuli in Assam in the middle of the mighty river Brahmaputra. Excavations at Dhowachala have revealed a rampart and potsherds some of whose fabric bear a close affinity to the pottery fabric made by the potter community in present day Majuli. It is proposed to examine the socio cultural elements of the traditional potter community of Majuli known as the Kumars, in the backdrop of the indigenous potter communities of Assam from an anthropo-archaeological perspective. It is also proposed to identify the general distinctiveness, if any, amongst the indigenous potter communities of Assam. In doing so the identifiable symbiotic relationship between the Kumars of Majuli with that of the Hiras and the Kumars inhabiting other parts of Assam has also to be identified. This we feel is needed because the Kumars of Majuli and the Hiras of Assam who make handmade pottery are apparently quite distinctive from each other; on the other hand the Majuli Kumar and the General Kumar are viewed in a common bio-cultural plane as they were address by the same name- 'Kumar' which in Assamese means potter. However, the former makes pottery without using the wheel while the latter uses the wheel to make pottery. The "Kumar" is a general term used by the Assamese to denote group(s) of persons attached to pot making as their occupation. This term is used against the Kumars living in and out of Majuli and they are viewed as a common group of people from the caste and cultural point of view. However, some of the earlier works indicate separate entity for both the groups of people. Moreover, it is quite apparent that the pot making technique is also quite different amongst the Majuli Kumar and the Kumar of other parts of Assam. Our aim is also to obtain the actual pictures by applying some scientific devices.*

Keywords: *Dhowachola, Archaology, Majuli, Brahmaputra, Antiquity, Potsherds, Riverine*

Received : 16 December 2024

Revised : January 2025

Accepted : 6 May 2025

Published : 30 June 2025

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Das, M. (2025). The Dhowachala Excavations and Exploration: An Anthropo-Archaeological Perspective. *Journal of History, Art and Archaeology*, 5: 1, pp. 59-84. <https://doi.org/10.47509/JHAA.2025.v05i01.07>

Introduction

Majuli is a large riverine island created by the river Brahmaputra. Its formation has a reckonable antiquity; it was ultimately detached from the mainland of Assam during the early part of the 20th century (Gait: 1801:272), but its administrative setup is still attached to the Jorhat District of Assam. Historical events suggest that Majuli's geographical isolation facilitated the setting up of a number of Sattras (Neo-Vaisnavite monasteries) at this island. The establishment of the Sattra culture or institution in a coordinated way is a result of clustering of standardised interrelated institutions, which is supported by a complex economic base. These socio-religious institutions utilise the pottery made by the Kumars and these are well-matched for instant use in all the sacred segments of the institutions.

In this context it should be mentioned that the potters of Majuli known as Kumar, are in fact, quite distinctive from that of the Kumars living in other parts of Assam, especially, as regard to their technological differences in making earthen wares.

The women folk of the Kumar from Majuli are quite skilful in producing varieties of economically viable earthenware in prolific manner as a primary means of livelihood. The male folk of the community are equally successful in trading the finished products to the whole of Assam and its adjacent states by using the river as a main mode of transportation of goods. They transport and trade the products through their own mechanism without engaging any middleman. The Kumars as an artisan group has their economic participation. Despite Majuli's isolation, one thing is apparent that they continue to be existent as a part of the Sattra culture by virtue of being a part of the agrarian economy. In traditional context, the Kumar had been a part of the Brahmanical system and existed as a viable economic unit. Under the Sattra based socio-religious system their economic bases get shrunk, because, under this system the

participation of his production at certain juncture comes almost to a fixed spot. But this artisan group shows an identifiable occupational adaptability and to meet the economic crisis, they move beyond Majuli and established regular riverine trade relations, with other distant ethno cultural groups throughout the year.

This involves change in the production level, the women became producer of the pot, while male circulate them to the distant areas. By resorting to this newly evolved system they achieved a new economic order and balance. This is quite unique. Therefore, there are enough scopes to go further deep into the problem and to elicits some new dimensions that contribute to the understanding the changing perspective of the Kumar at Majuli against the ethnographical, ethno historical and Archaeological perspectives. From technological point of view pot making industry in Assam is fundamentally divisible into handmade and wheel made traditions. Within these cultural milieus it will be interesting to find out the actual status of the Kumars of Majuli amidst the other two indigenous potter communities of Assam.

Methodology

Collection of data is mainly achieved through interviewing method and both planned and unplanned approaches were applied. To get a clear picture on various aspects related to efficacy in pottery production, and its impact on socio-cultural and religious pitch, weightage has also been given on the direct observation method by staying in the field of action till the process has been completed. This technique was repeatedly carried out in several occasions till a clear picture could be perceived.

Finally, to put the findings on a sequential plane, the anthropo-archaeological method in the form of a 'Trial Trench' has been used. This has to be done also with a view to authenticate or to check the legends prevailing in Majuli as regards to the shifting of ceramic technology.

Geomorphology of Majuli

Majuli being a river island is encircled by the main channel Brahmaputra on the east, south and west, and its main tributaries Kherkatia and Luhit on the north. Majuli shares its border with Lakhimpur and Dhemaji districts in the north; Sibsagar District in the east; Jorhat in the south; Golaghat and Sonitpur Districts in the west. The landmass of the sub-division extends for a length of about 90 kilometres towards east-west direction. It lies at an elevation of 84.5 metres above the mean sea-level. The average temperature during the summer is between 22-24 degrees, while during the winter it is between 10-12 degrees Celsius. The average rainfall experienced by the island is between 200 cm to 300 cm per year and the number of rain days is 150. The island extends lengthwise about 80 kilometres from east- west direction and about 10-15 kilometres in the north- south direction. Prior to its declaration as a sub-division under Jorhat District on January 26, 1979, it was under the control of the Sub-Deputy Collector under Sibsagar district. The Sub-division is delinked by motorable roads from the either side which makes it an island. However, in 1972 a long embankment was constructed over the Kherkatia channel in the north –east of the island by the Flood Control Department to connect Majuli by road with the district of Lakhimpur. On 27 June 2016 Majuli was declared a district.

Salmara in Majuli consists of marshy land called “beels” and “holas” most of which are imprints of dead tributaries formed as a result of earthquakes and the erosion activities of the rivers during time of flood. The area is a riverine tract along the River Brahmaputra as there are many sand bars (Fig.7.1). There are no hillocks expect some “chars” or highland in Salmara. Some of these are man-made for the sake of protecting against the devastating floods. Salmara is located on the bank of the river Brahmaputra in the north and its tributary – the Tuni in the south-east. Just above the tributary there is a terrace formed by

the river during flood as such making it look like an elevated land covered with grasses. There is another terrace on the bank of Khajuati Beel. The people of Salmara call it a “Platform”. This terrace can be reached by a broken bamboo bridge across the Khajuati Beel. It is covered with grass. In between the grass on the ground silts had been found which has been carried away during flood and as such small bushes of pine scattered on the both the terraces. The Tuni, a detached part of the Dikhow flows along Salmara.

Majuli is not an unbroken landmass but a combination of islands being washed away by its own streams. The island extends up to Kaliabar located opposite to the Bongfang.

Physiography

In Majuli there are number of sand bars or chars. Though Majuli seems to be a char but actually it is an island and is entirely a stable landmass. The area is flat in nature just like the flood plains. The whole area is slightly sloping towards west and compared to other parts of North East India which has a hilly terrain, in Majuli, there are no hillocks. It is an island detached from the mainland Jorhat. It has some man-made raised platforms to secure humans and livestock from the flood during the rainy season. The area contains numerous beels like Barchalla, Barghal and among them the important terraces are Panganadi, Chilanadi, Tuni River etc. Thus the whole area consists of fertile alluvial deposits constituting alluvial plains (Fig.7.2a)

Sedimentary structure

Assam underwent a series of diastrophic earth movements commencing from the cretaceous to the late Tertiary. The configurations of the geomorphology of the province evolved in a chronological way and were synchronized by the geo-tectonic process. The sedimentary rocks types deposited throughout the time period of cretaceous to Tertiary, manifests the different evidences of

the roles played by two geodynamical forces. The sedimentary rocks may have some structures like rain prints, ripple marks, current beddings etc peculiar to a particular period. The presence of such a structure often becomes valuable than the other tools in constructing the palaeographic maps and correlations in Majuli.

Relief Slopes

The basement of the Assam valley forms a shattered belt compressing multiple slices e.g. – “*Sonderbichan*”. The Shillong Plateau, titled block of the basement rises as an untroubled monocline and gently meets the Brahmaputra valley in the north. It disappears gradually under the alluvium towards north east. The slopes of Majuli are negligible. The whole region is prone to floods due to which the region is inundated every year. These are some built up areas in the region of the Satras like Kamalabari, Benganaati, Garmur, Salmara and also Dhowachola.

Lithology and Classification of the Alluvium

The rocks are undoubtedly sub-aerial in origin and consist of sandy clay and silts with sporadic beds of gravels, kanpars and peats. These are stratigraphically in the following sequence:

3. Recent deltaic deposits
2. Khaddar – newer alluvium
1. Bhangar – older alluvium
- Unconfirmed

The contemporary of the khaddar in the recent period is the deltaic development at the discharge of the rivers. Majuli is subjected to such a process of development.

The soil of Majuli consisted of alluvial soils, salty soil and a small percentage of soil is also saline. The new alluvial soil is sandy and is of recent deposition whereas old alluvial soil is black in colour. Beside these, there is a layer of sand ranging from 30-300cm on the top of the land of Majuli generated by frequent floods and in Salmara also the soils bears the same

characteristics but on the terraces mostly salty sand are found.

Climate

Broadly speaking, Assam is characterised by coolness and extreme humidity. Moderate climate conditions is characterized by the help of the vast water of the rivers, hills, closely spaced ramparts on which excessive precipitation takes place during summer and the thick and extensive vegetations which acts as agents of evaporation and condensation. The characteristic feature of Assam is the presence of essentially one type of climate, i.e- the tropical monsoon type. Copious rainfall between March and May in Assam brings a different climatic condition. As Majuli is situated within the river, it is affected by land and water breeze; hence it is comparatively milder than the places away from it. The average rainfall is less than 50cm and the temperature varies from 11C-19 C in winter and 156cm and 22C in summer. A special type of fog appears in the time of flood decreases.

Drainage System

Majuli experiences erosion and flood since the time of its formation as an island. Geographically and geologically Majuli is most vulnerable regarding its existence. The drainage system of Majuli is poorly represented and there are problems in spillage of the flood water (Fig.7.2b).

Topography

The Brahmaputra valley stretching across the central parts of Assam is included in the Indo – Gangetic alluvium. The peninsular shield i.e. the mountainous region, is formed by the ancient rock types of the province. This region may be termed as the Central Range and it includes the Garo Hills, Khasi and Jaintia Hills, North Cachar Hills and Mikir Hills. The Central Range of Assam consists of a largely dissected plateau which is known as the Shillong Plateau. The whole of

Majuli is a low-lying area periodically subjected to flood water. In general the region appears to be gradually sloping towards the south. This may be due to the fact that char (sandbar) itself was formed higher in the north by river accumulation of debris. As such Majuli is divided into three divisions, viz. Upper, Middle and Lower

The upper area is comparatively higher from the rest. The middle part along with the rest of the upper part is gradually lower and is characterised by many *beels* and ponds. And the lower part maybe said to be the latest depositional area of the Brahmaputra. It is a low lying area. The soil of the upper area or “char” area is not fertile and suitable for the growth of vegetation. The middle part is gradually lower and is characterized by bills and ponds. The Tikkas are in most cases, densely forested and the *holas* are having bush type vegetation. It is suitable for grazing animals and by alluvial deposits of annual flood water. The lower areas may be said to be the latest depositional area of the Tuni and the Brahmaputra. The soil here is of sandy alluvium. There is no dense vegetation except bushes and grasses. The soil of this region is mostly generated by frequent floods. As the soils are too fertile, almost all tropical and sub-tropical trees benefiting

Flora and Fauna

Since the climate of Assam is tropical humid and rainfall is abundant so, the major vegetation that is to be found is evergreen tropical. Large quantities of Giant bamboo (*Bambusa balcooce*); Bijuli Bah (*B.pallida*); Jati Bah (East India brown bamboo; *B.tulda*); Titachampa (Champak; *M.champaca*); Silika (*Chebuli myrobalan*; *T.chebela*); Pine (*Pinuskasya*), Segun (*Tectona Grandis*) Betel nut (*Areca catechu*); Cocunut tree (*Cocos nucifera*); Kharuwa (Toothbrush tree; *Slreblus asper*); Bargos (Indian fig; *F. benghalensis*) Dalchini (Cinnamon; *C. zeylanicum*); is to be found. We also find a number of evergreen plants in Majuli. Since in Majuli there are mostly terraces

created by river action, on the silt terraces we also find the evidences of small pine trees such as Jharbon (Broom grass; *Thysanolaena maxima*); Bobochabon (Indian gooseberry; *P.emblica*) Gak Hirati (Graceful pouzolz’s bush; *Pouzolzia zeylanica*) Eragos (Castor; *Ricinis Commenes*) Nal (Arundo grass), etc are to be found. Deciduous forests are also to be found. Some tall grasses like Khagori (Common reed; *Phragmites Karka*); Kohua (*S.spontaneum*) are also to be found abundantly. The most popular Bamboo species are Muli (*Melocenna Bambusoides*), Dali (*Teinostachyum Dalloa*), Kaligoda (*Oxytenanthera nigrocitlata*) Tejpat (Indian bay leaf, *C.tamala*). The most common single seeded plant found in Majuli is the Fox Tail Orchid (*Orchidaceae*).

The fauna consists of tiger(*Panthere Tigris*), Wild Buffalo(*Bubalus Bubalis*),Rhesus Monkey, Jungle Cat, Eastern mole, Indian Grey mongoose, Chinese Pangolin (*Manis Pentadactyla*), Swamp Deer (*Cervus Duvauceli*), Common otter, Indian Fox (*Vulpes Bengalensis*), Civet (*Viverra Indica*), Flying Fox (*Pteropus Giganteus*), Feral horse (*Equas Caballus*) Cobra (*Naja Naga*), Indian Gui (*Varanus Bengalensis*), Python(*Python Molurus*) Spotted Black Terrapin (*Geoclemys Hamiltoni*) Elephants (*Elephus Maximus*)Vulture (*Gyps species*), Dove (*Stareptopelia species*), Cuckoo (*Cuculus Species*) Koel (*Eudynamis Scolopacea*), Wag tail(*Motacilla species*).

Perception on the potters and pottery of Majuli

Conventionally, there are two distinct indigenous potter communities in Assam –

the Hira potters who do not use the wheel; and the Kumars who use the potter’s wheel and this group is distributed in various parts of Assam. For all practical purposes and also for the convenience of discussion here in this paper we referred to this Kumar community as ‘General Kumar’ since the Majuli Kumars have been found

to stand apart from them in respect of the pottery technology and in many other techno-economic and socio-cultural aspects.

The General Kumars make wheel-made pottery and the craft is masculine oriented; contrary to that, the Majuli Kumars make hand-made pottery and the craft is the exclusive domain of the females. This is nothing but a total shift from wheel to hand but this unparalleled shift was a survival strategy – a distinctive case of induced culture adaptation highly susceptible to the geo-cultural environ operating in this secluded island (Majuli)

Clues regarding technological shift in manufacturing pots was first sensed in the oral traditions operating among the Kumars of Majuli.

In this paper we have addressed 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 synchronising and harmonising the whole process of transformation in societal context?

Pottery has a prehistoric legacy in Assam and its archaeological 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: 2004: 25-43).

The pottery industry of Majuli reveals numerous features which are non-conforming to this industry. The local potters aptly perceived the 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 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 managed to proceed successfully? This could be a classic instance of man's interlacing and readjustment with the environment where the localised 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 are essentially confining only to the potter and potteries of Majuli in the context of present and past-an anthropo-archaeological move towards understanding of past-presents cultural readjustment. Despite the potters community of Majuli being quite distinctive in making and trading earthenware and maintaining socio-economic synchronisation not only in a reckonable fashion but in an established way; yet it is unusual to think of as to why they are straightforwardly unfamiliar even in Assam. There is no authentic proof on when, how and why they adhere to this occupation that too in an isolated landmass detached from the 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.

The Hira, the General Kumar and the Majuli Kumar are the caste groups traditionally associated with pot-making craft. The Hira believes 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 to the Hira as a sub-caste of the Chandal but the basis of this inference is not clear. Under no circumstances do the Hira ever accept this presumption as Siack's observation may be based on the use of earthen pots at cremation ground where the Chandal played a major role. Around 1830s in some parts of Assam the Chandal (who cremated the corpses) might have also supplied pots required for rites related to the cremation. It is also a fact that

except the basic technical means of production, similarity between the Hira and the Majuli Kumar where women folk are engaged in making pots by hand, the Hira in social affiliation differs 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 makes 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 the upper districts of Brahmaputra valley are actually potters of the Kalita and Kewat caste (Gait: 1891: 272). 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. Based on this set paradigm in Assam, two caste groups – the Hira and the Kumar engaged 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. On the other hand, the Kumar in general manufactures 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 shaped the miniature earthen lamp which are used elaborately for the ritualistic purpose by the people of Assam. Therefore, unlike many potter communities of the world, potters of Assam are not confined to a single group or to a single sex. (Saraswati and Behura: 1966:175). In Assam the Hiras are recognised as a Schedule caste (SC) and

the Kumar as a 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 the navel-chord; thus, according to the 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).

It is quite likely that another indigenous caste group encroached into this occupation at a much later date during mediaeval Assam. This inference may be made on the basis of prevailing legends floating among the Kumar which may be substantiated by the archaeological findings retrieved during excavations at Dhowachala in Majuli during 2003. This new group of potters is the Kalita 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 specialised 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 peasants and they also practice agriculture along with their craft with full vigour. 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).

There is no written account of when, how and why the Kalitas started practising 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 sole means of subsistence. Moreover, 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. Being a low-lying area, Salmara of Majuli always remains vulnerable to flood. To cope with the situation most of the Kumar household keeps ready self-made boat at their instant disposal. Besides, they are also quite skilled in making and using various types of rafts, especially of banana trunks. These make them confident to overcome the first thrust of the flood. 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. In fact, getting hold of heavy unstructured floating materials, that too from a particular spot (close to Salmara) and at 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.

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 metres or so depending

on the river's erosion. 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 their success is reflected on the faces of the youth who performed the task. Nevertheless, there are certain exceptions as has been informed by the potters. Nearly half of the entire Bechamara- Aflamukh *chuba* of Salmara village was submerged during the time of heavy floods, as a result of which half of the population had to shift from their locality to another locality called Ataichuk to escape the floods. It is also noticeable that many of the inhabitants even change their traditional house pattern to cope with the situation.

As stated earlier, it was proposed to examine the causes and the contributing factors responsible for certain unusual situations through which they had to pass and how the potters of Majuli overcame them. What makes the Majuli Kumar so extraordinary? Why and how did they even shift from the so called advanced to the archaic mode of pot-making technology? And how far were they able to overcome all the odds and manage to achieve success? This could be a classic case in point of man's interlacing and readjustment with the environment where the localised ecology and socio-economic environment played a vital role. A Majuli Kumar has a sacred affiliation with the Sattras; that brings the woman within the sacred fold like the male. This eliminates the stigma of pollution and thus the female's participation in this craft does not hamper the ethical code, at least in the Sattras of Assam that never practice any caste-creed differentiation. Hence, pottery becomes ritualistically sacred and has an access to the Sattras.

In the past, as narrated by the village elders, the men married girls from distant places as far as 300 kilometres 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. The more the female engage in pottery production, the more the male become free for their trade. As such, there is no taboo for using potter's wheel in Salmara; they once used wheels, but the situation demanded a 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 Dhowachala 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 regional practice of other Kumars of Assam. Up to the 1960s, almost the entire system of trading of pottery was based on bartering, where the pots were exchanged against paddy and varieties of leguminous seeds. 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. The 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 the annual floods.

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) *Becha Khep*, (ii) *Kholuwa Khep*, (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 or households propose to carry out the job jointly, and load the pots collectively on the boat without any personal tag.

(i) ***Becha Khep***: In the month of February the group sets sail for Sadiya, Dhubri, Shapekhaiti. Because of zero surface tension on transporting the earthenware by boat, no extra care has to be taken by the potters and that saves time and money.

(ii) ***Kholuwa Khep***: 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 get this opportunity because of the gradual technological shift (wheel to hand), together with the involvement of the opposite sex in a coordinated manner. 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 group.

(iii) ***Ahu Kholuwa Khep***: For this *khep*, they set out for Dibrugarh, Jorhat, Golaghat, and Sadiya during the month of July.

(iv) ***Sali Khep***: This trip is carried out during the month of December. The potters in this *khep* proceed towards Bechamara, Nazira, Sonari, Biswanath Chariali etc where Sali paddy grows in abundance.

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 siltation 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 engage in 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 required at least a century with the stabilising of village marriage endogamy.

We shall now examine 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 well being 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.

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

The Geo-Cultural Background of Majuli

Majuli has not reached to its stable state as yet, because of the erratic nature of the river Brahmaputra. It has been changing its courses since many times, the geographical, geological and historical documents offer credence to this fact. There is a historic reference that at about 1189 CE Sri Gauri Narayan (later adapted a new name Ratnadhvaj Pal) belonged to the Bodo ethnic group established a dynasty having its capital at Ratnapur located near Kherkatia Suti on the south bank of Lohit river. By either sides of the capital there flowed two channels. For this it is called "Majali or Majuli" (Hazarika: 2004: 447).

It was believed by the villagers that the Ahom King Gadadhar Singha due to enmity chased Lora Raja via the Subansiri River and at last captured him and pinned him by hammering bamboo nails into a big mango tree called “Konaikuliam”. But the popular view is that Lora Raja brought many young boys and broke their legs so that the young boys could never become king in future. Since the incident took place on the banks of the River Dikhow (where the river Brahmaputra is presently flowing along the bank of Salmara) the village is so named. Another legend in vogue is that marauding Maan (Burmese) brought many people to Majuli and were killed by nailing on the bank of the river Lohit. The name of the village Salmara was thus derived from the word *sal* means nailing or pegging, that is, the place where people were killed by pegging. In 1838, Montgomery Martin mentioned in the book “Eastern India” that Assamese potter did not use Chak (potter’s wheel). But it is not appropriate to say that use of potter’s wheel was unknown in Assam. Probably, Martin encountered either Hiras or Kumars of Majuli and not the *kumars* who live outside Majuli. According to Phukan, potters who migrated from other parts of India introduced the wheel in Assam. The view is supported by the

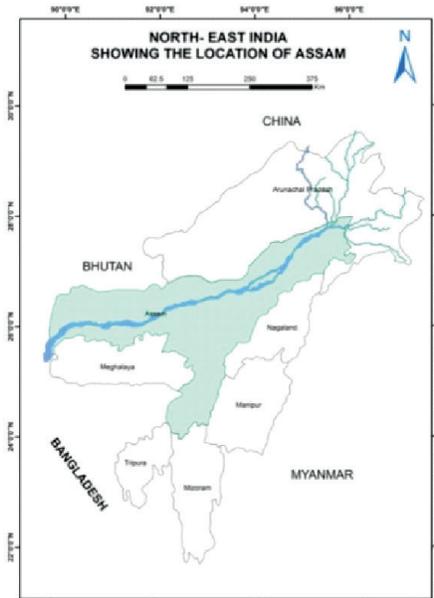
following statement -”In the 3rd -4th century, many people from the North and Central India migrated to Assam (Pristine Kamrup) to escape the harassment of the frequent “Hun” invaders .The migrants consisted of peasant and artisan .The ruling Kings also received such skilled migrants. Regarding the origin of the Kumar potters of Salmara and their skill in making boat there is no written evidences. The only record found is in the form of legends that has been passed from generation to generation. According to the senior most villagers of Salmara,the Kumars came to Assam from Burma during the 7th century B.C. But some are also of the opinion that during the 13th century when Chaulung Sukapha came to Assam crossing the River Irrawady he brought with him about eleven *Bar* (large) Kumar families from Hong Kong in China. As such, according to their opinion the Kumars were Mongolians.

The Area of Study and Archaeological Site of Excavation and Exploration.

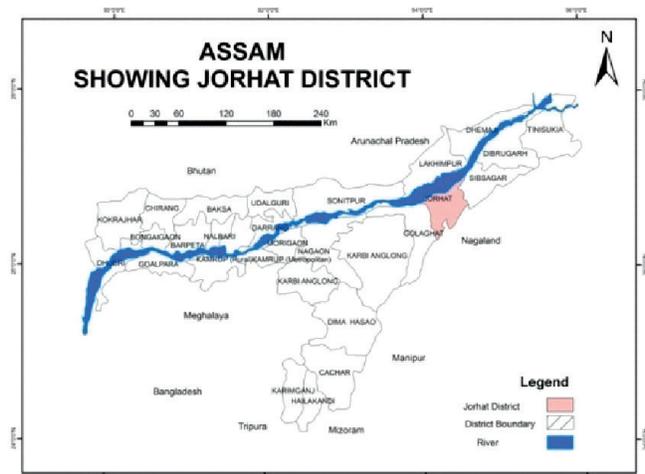
The Land

Broad area: **Majuli, Assam**

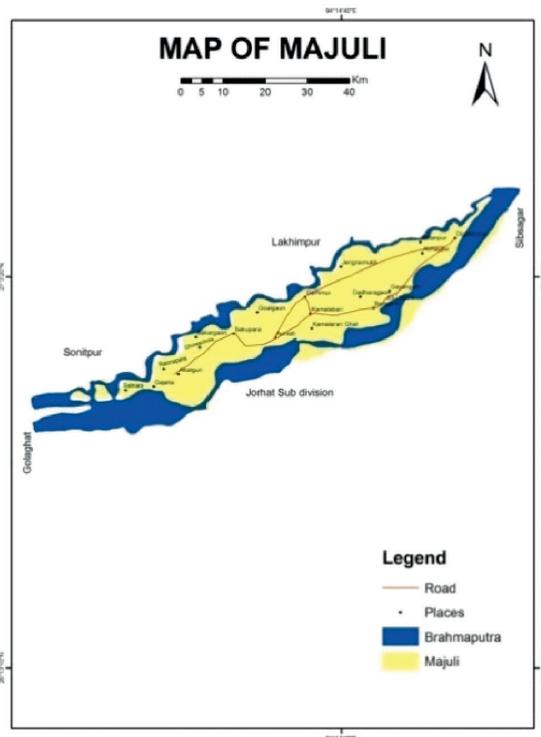
Specific area: (i) **Salmara** village (contemporary Potter’s village); (ii) **Dhowachala** (archaeological site related to pottery industry)



Map of Northeast showing Assam



Map of Assam showing Jorhat district



Location of Majuli in mid-Brahmaputra

Majuli or Majoli is a large river island in the Brahmaputra River in Assam. Its geographical coordination is $26^{\circ} 57' 0''$ North & $94^{\circ} 10' 0''$ 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 till date. The following maps show the location of Assam in North East India, Jorhat District (at present Majuli is a district) and the location of Majuli in mid-Brahmaputra respectively.

Geographic isolation together with recurring flood and siltation keeps the potters community of Salmara away from keeping the dual subsistence strategies (crop raising and pot making) as enjoyed by the other two indigenous potters communities of Assam. But the ecological setting helps them cater to the need of pottery for the inhabitants as well as the large number of *Sattras* (more than 35 numbers) through unilateral dealing without any interference of traders from outside Majuli.

In other words, cultural landscape of Majuli which accommodates huge number of religious institutions (*Sattras*) makes the craft alive even within a relatively small confined area.

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 product reduces the chances of getting fuel for the kilns at a feasible mode. 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.

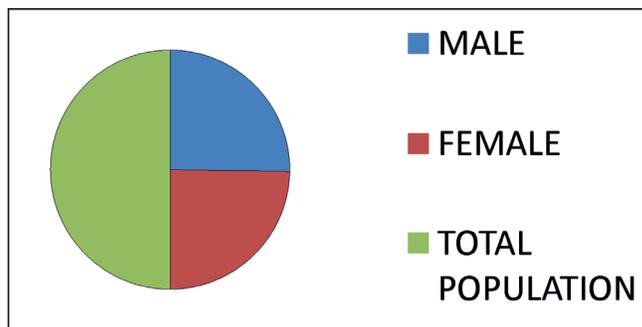
Demographic settings of the potter's village of Majuli

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 hamlets 192) villages. Salmara is one of them and is inhabited by heterogeneous population distributing 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. Total population of Salmara is 3245. Out of which 2464 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%).

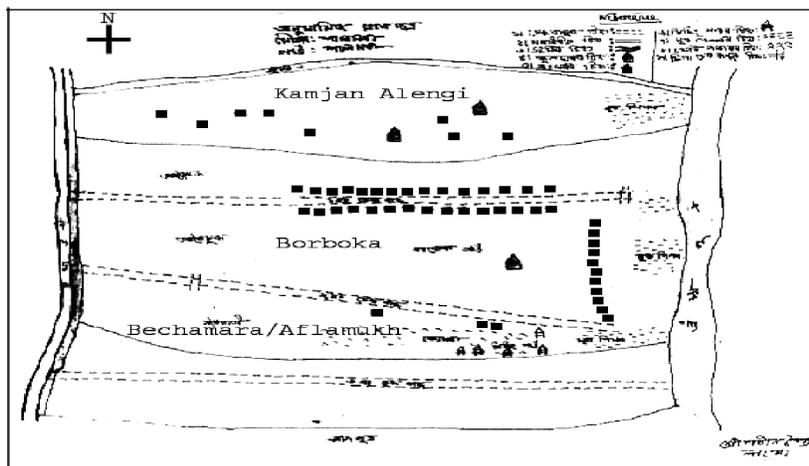
There are 474 households at Salmara, of which 341 (71.94%) belong to the Kumar; 52 (10.97%) = Kaibarta; 28 (5.9%) =General caste; 21 (4.43%) = Jogi ; 13 (2.74 %) = Bania ; 3 (0.63 %) = Brahmin ;and (0.26 %) = Ahom. The following table shows the distribution of population across different hamlets (*suburi*) of Salmara, followed by a pie diagram showing male female ratio and a diagram of settlement patterns.

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%



Distribution of Population of Salmara



Settlement pattern of Salmara village (official record: prepared by S. Baisya)

Traditions in Archaeological Perspectives

There is no written account on when, how and why the Kumars of Majuli adhere to pot making craft as a primary 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 the lone means of subsistence. In this context it may also mentioned that the trade through river routes began with the emergence and flourishing of handmade pottery, at least around 300 years ago as indicated by the archaeological excavations at Majuli. And

thus it become a set tradition continuing even today without any disruption

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 Professor B. Choudhury. This joint academic venture of Physical, Social and Prehistory branches provided 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 are 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 are as follows:

(i) The present day Kumar population of Majuli belongs to Kalita caste and initially they settled at Majuli as a common farmer practicing agricultural activities, but because of heavy silt deposition on their paddy fields (Fig.7.3) 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 altered mode of occupation. Regarding the time period of this transformation the saga remained silent. To keep the track of this appealing saga that prevailing in Majuli we do not have any other options but tried to come closer to the reality as far as practicable in the following manner:

To understand 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 are in 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* has come to our notice at Dhowachala, seven kilometres west of Salmara village and eventually a small scale excavation in the form of 'trial trench' has been laid down. The result of this Test pit is quite astounding. Before discussing the findings let us mention about another indication relevant to this search:

2. Interestingly, 350 years ago or a bit earlier, the potter's community of Majuli might

have received Royal patronages/recognition from Ahom King of Assam or else they might have some sort of association with the Royal family as indicated by a piece of potsherd with imperial insignia (Fig. 7.4) retrieved through Raonapara exploration, the area is lying in between Dhowachala and Salmara.

Dhowachala Exploration and Excavations

The site is situated within an area which looks like a '*charania pothar*' 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 (*Majoni*-implement for making handmade pottery) and a piece of Neolithic Celt. Dhowachala lies at a distance of about 18 kms from Salmara. Dhowachala was a village under Ahom rulers as evident from a large fortification which is popularly known as *Dhowachola garh*. The entire area was scattered by low mounds distributed in all directions. These low mounds could once act as plinths of Dhowachola settlement but later they had to abandoned the area due to recurring flood; Probably it happened after the construction of the rampart which might have act as an unscientific embankment. Dhowachala is surrounded by Mishing Gaon on the north, Bongaon on the south, Samarguri on the west and Mudoigaon and Salmara on the east. 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*.

On the basis of surface collection a 3 X 3 metre trench was laid down to determine the unrecorded facts related to pottery industry of Majuli. The excavation revealed a 1.16 metre thick single culture deposits divisible into two



a

b



c

d

Excavated layers (a-c) with exposed post-holes of a *peghali* (kiln); capped by layer 4 vi (d) presents day kiln of Salmara village.

distinct cultural phases beginning with wheel made tradition and subsequently replaced by handmade pottery tradition.

Cultural layers within the trench ends at 116 centimetres below the surface (B.S) and within these range five layers have been identified, of which wheel made pottery flourished in between layer 5 and 4, (till we encountered the sterile layer 6 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 3 b. 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, 3ay, & 3b as shown below.

There was some sort of stratigraphic instability³ towards the decline of wheel made pottery. And that sequence continues with the reciprocal decline and increase of wheel made and handmade pottery respectively.

In this respect it is noteworthy that the potter's village continued to exist at Dhowachala at least up to the early part of the British Rule



DWC/X/96-112 cm BS/03



Cultural materials from wheel made pottery horizon representing Layers-(5) & (6)

in Assam (1830s). Their dual practice of both wheel and hand ceramic technology is indicated by the presence of pot making implements like *Bulia*, *Majoni* (see below) and other related items associated with handmade pottery craft at Dhowachala site.. Finally, they shifted to Salmara and prior to that, as informed by the villagers, a community known as Lahkar inhabited at Salmara. They later abandoned the village and went out of Majuli probably because of recurrent floods. This abandoned land locally known as *erabari* was later occupied by the Majuli Kumar. The entire episode may back up by the fact that the potters have to pay *torjubadi khajana* (tax for unauthorised occupation of Government land without proper registration) till today as imposed by the British administration⁴ in Assam.

At Salmara also, 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 recognised as crafting handmade pottery. It will not be out of context to say that the most striking and unusual feature is that the religious institutes like Sattras (Neo-Vaishnavite monastic institution of Assam)

accept the pottery made by both the sexes of Kumars of Majuli dating back to living memory - 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 on 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 encourage them to learn the process of manufacturing pots from the other skilled crafters of the 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, they 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 becomes a common practice and thus they protect, conserve and expand their area of expertise.

According to the villagers of Salmara, their forefather's were migrated from Dhowachala under certain circumstances which they now failed to explain properly. When we explored in Raonapara Pukhri, we found a potsherd from the section of the rampart of this Pukhri at southeast corner Raja Jayadhaja Singha excavated this Pukhri in 1662 CE. Various cultural artefacts retrived from Dhowachala site are Neolithic celt, iron chisel used in making boat by the present day Kumar, varieties of tools used in making pots; potsherds with and without rim, slags, flat bricks of Ahom period, cornucopia of early mediaeval period ,earthen toy, etc,. In fact all these cultural items helped us in laying the trench at Dhowachala site. The surface finds along with excavated materials were analysed in the laboratory.

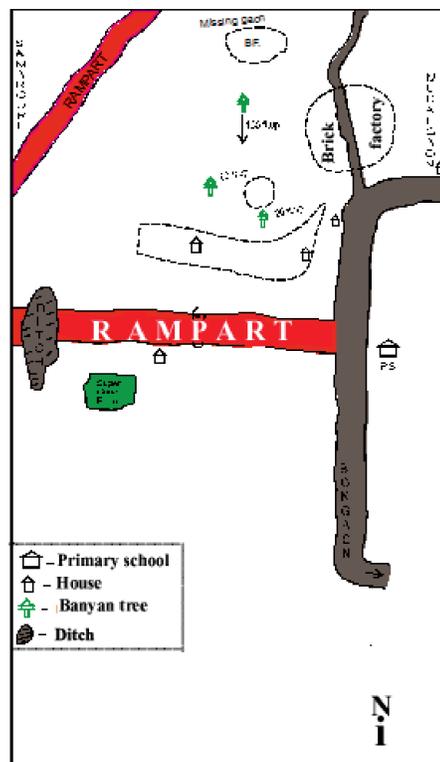
Table showing Surface finds of Dhowachala Archaeological site

Sl No.	Name of the cultural artifacts	No.
1	Potsherds with rim	190
2	Potsherds without rim	74
3	Slags	8
4	Bricks	4
5	Smoothner (<i>Bulia</i>)	4
6	Earthen toy	2
7	Kornokopia	17
8	Plate like bowl	7
9	Polished stone	2
10	Iron chisel	1
11	Dish (<i>Thali</i>)	1
12	Scratcher (<i>Majoni</i>)	1
13	Neolithic celt	1

Note: The artefacts shown in the above table represent only a portion of randomly collected materials

Dhowachola Garh (The Rampart of Dhowachola)

The rampart is approximately 20 metres long. A sketch of the rampart was prepared with the help of chain and compass.



Sketch of Dhowachola Rampart and the Site

The illustration of the explored and excavated materials is given below below:

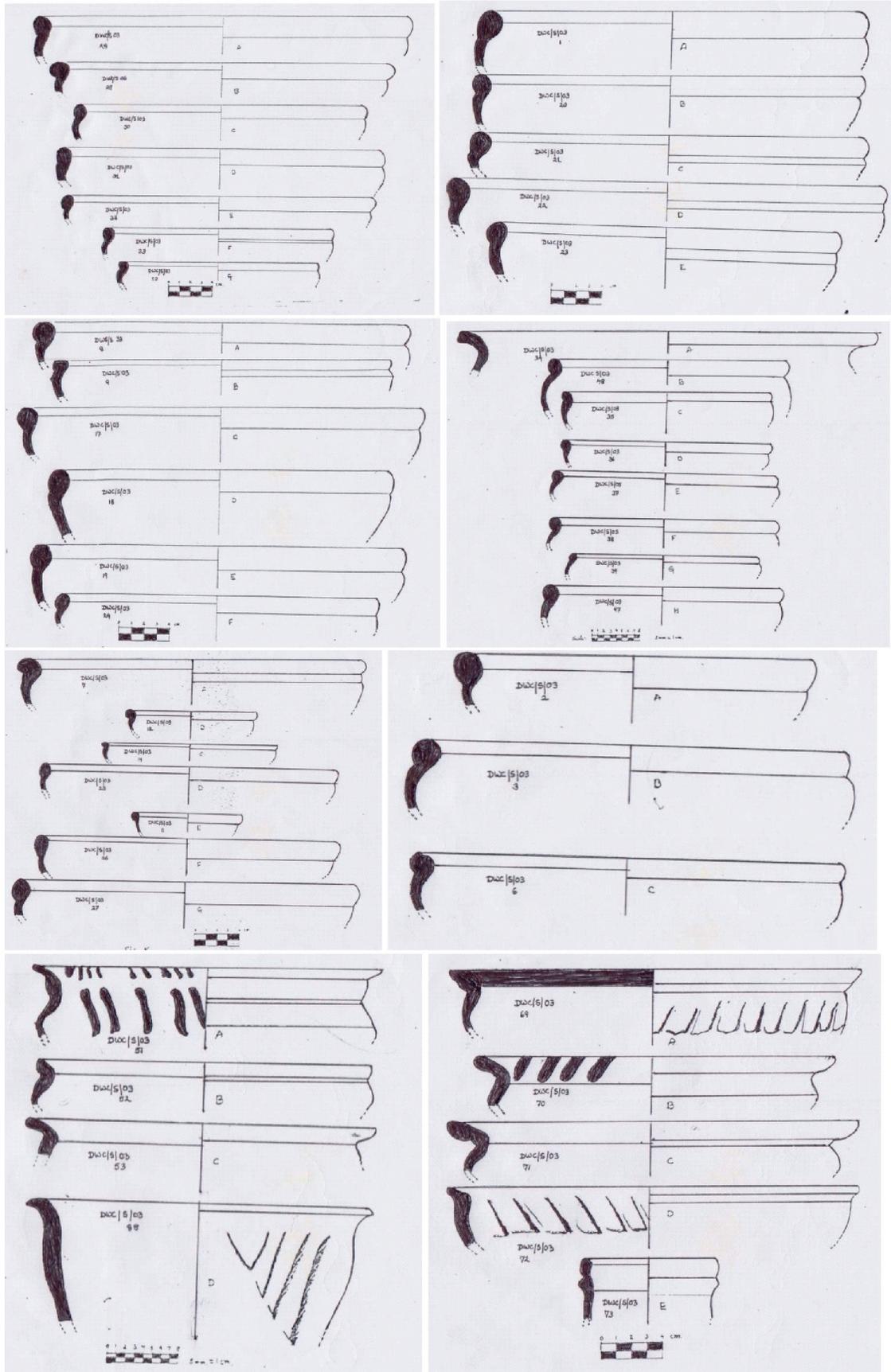


Illustration of the excavated materials (Wheel made)

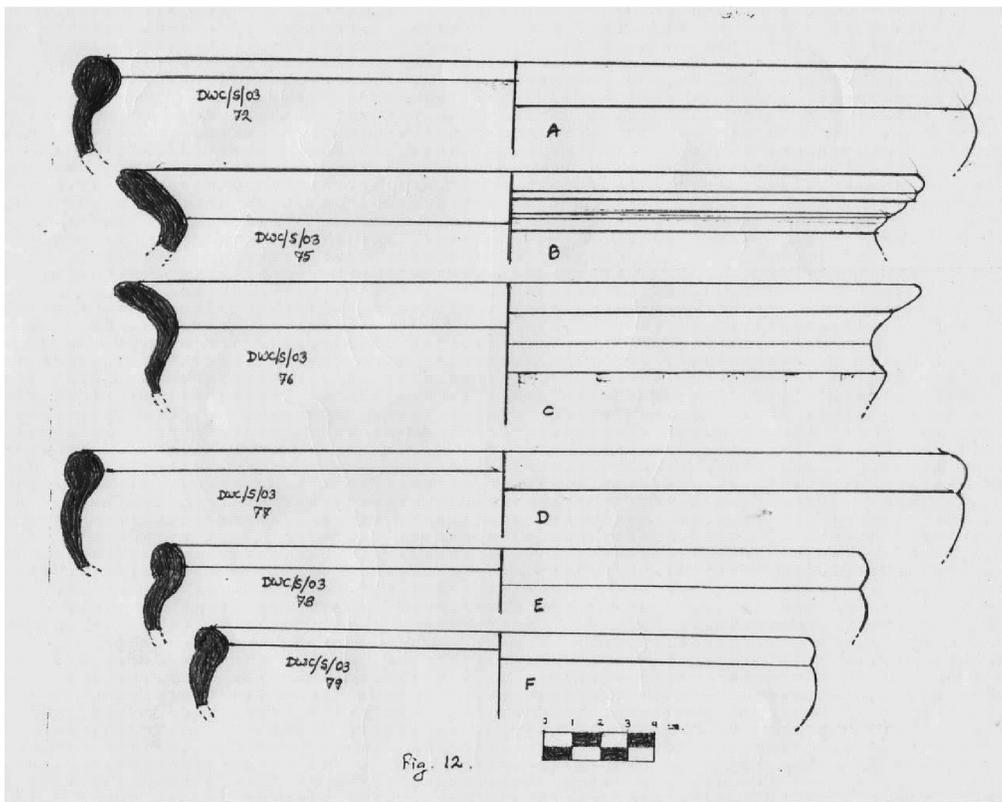
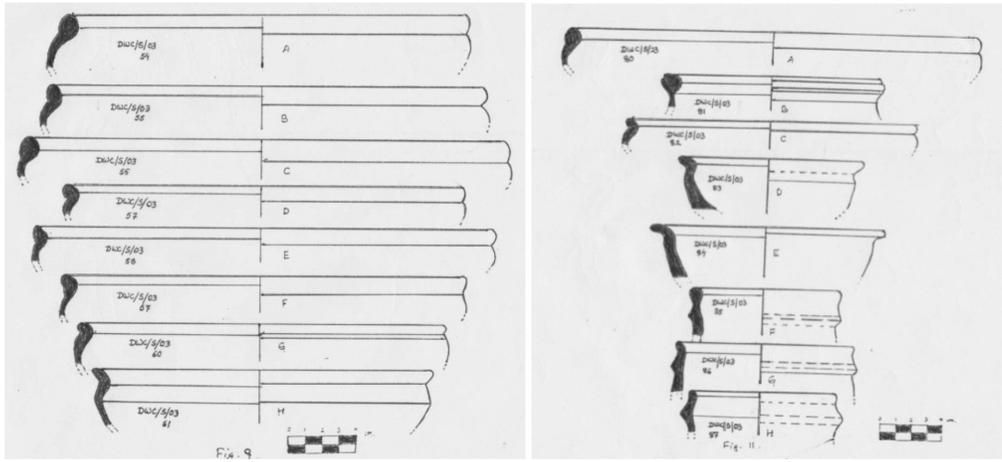


Illustration of the excavated materials (handmade)

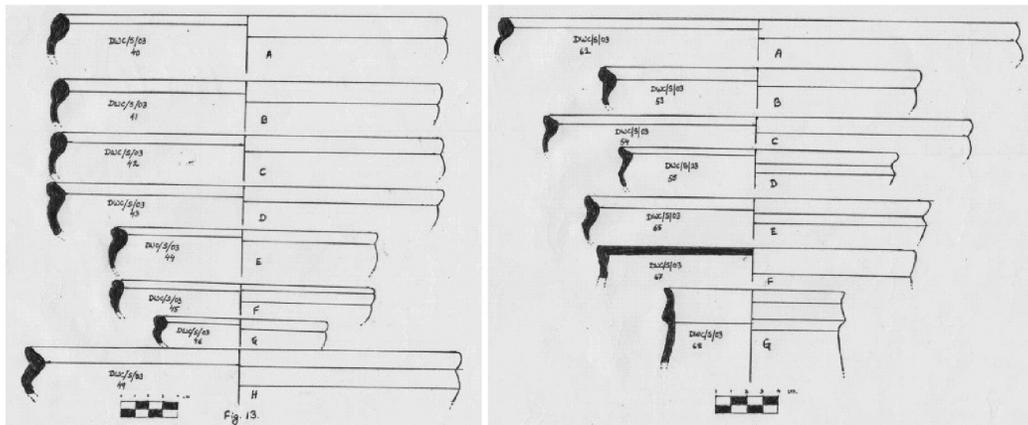
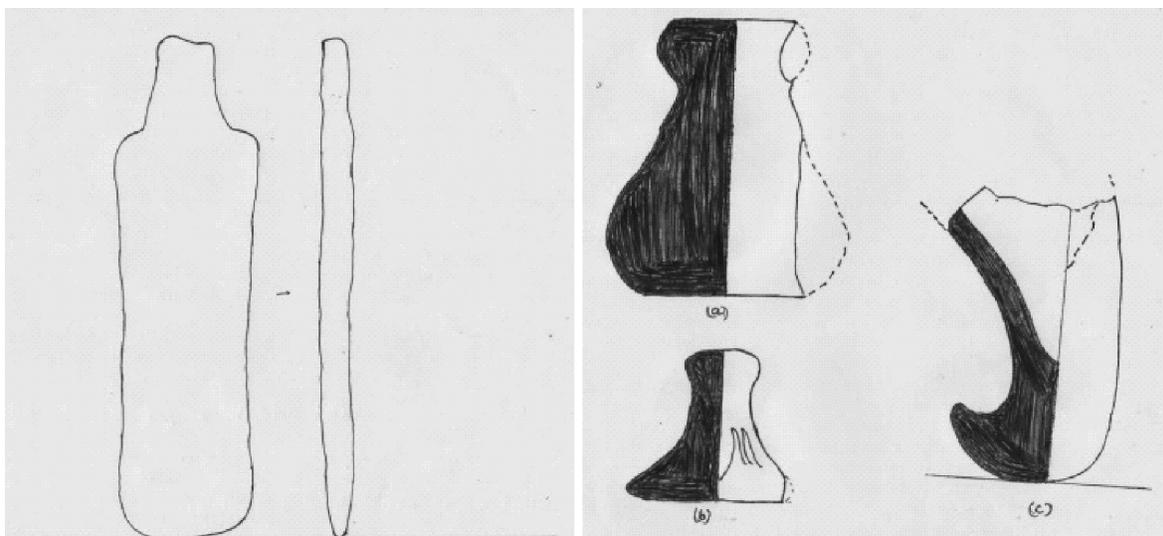


Illustration of the excavated materials (hand made)



Explored materials from Dhowachola (a) Iron chisel used in making boat (b) bulia & cornucopia

The excavations revealed at least three successive occupational layers belonging to a common potter group. Further the excavation revealed a cultural process in terms of pottery. The genesis of this craft laid its continuity throughout the early medieval period to the present day.

The material which has been excavated at Dhowachola helps to establish a relation between the present day potters and past pottery tradition. The excavated materials revealed red wares, brown wares and similar types of pottery is also to be found at Salmara from which it is evident that in the entire Majuli the same types of wares are found because it is Salmara which circulates these potteries in Majuli. The fabric of the pots of both past and present are more or less same, especially so far the lavigation and firing is concerned. There is even no differences as far as the types are concerned.

The excavated potsherds are however to some extent coarser than that of the present

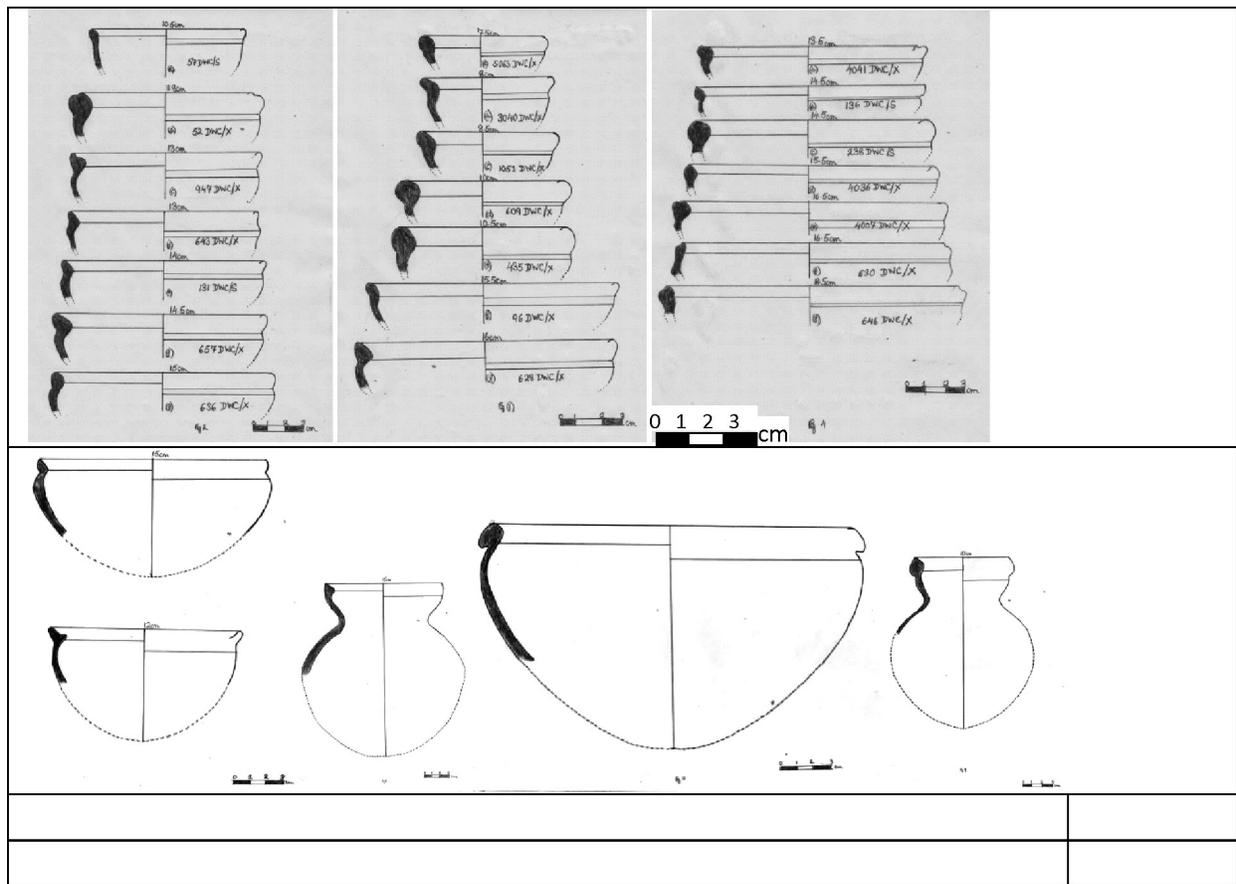
day pottery from Salmara. Shoot marks on the red washed potsherds from surface-finds is a common phenomenon. Such types of potteries are also found at Salmara. No remarkable decoration except incised designs have been found in the excavated potsherds and same are the case with Salmara pottery.

Further, as evident from the findings of burnt clays and postholes at the excavated trench indicates presence of *peghali* at Dhowachola. From the existence of *peghali* it can be inferred that the potteries were kiln burnt and the tradition in minute details has been continuing even today at Salmara. The potsherd which has been excavated at Dhowachola reveals vessels, bowls, pitchers, earthen lamps, lampstands, anvil etc. The materials of exploration and excavation at Dhowachola site are also similar to that of pottery explored at Raonapara *pukhri*.

Table showing description of potsherds found at Dhowachola

Sl No.	Museum No.	Thickness of the rim	Type/ Shape	Surface Treatment/ Decoration	Colour	Texture	Hand made/ Wheel made	No of Potsherds	Remarks
1.	136DWC/(S)	0.1cm	Vessel	nil	Dull red	Smooth	Handmade	8	
2.	37DWC/2013	0.2cm	Vessel	nil	Dull red	Gritty	Handmade	5	
3.	3088DWC/(x)	0.3cm	Vessel	nil	Dull brown	Smooth	Handmade	6	
4.	435DWC/(S)	0.3cm	Bowl	nil	Dull brown	Gritty	Handmade	7	

<i>Sl No.</i>	<i>Museum No.</i>	<i>Thickness of the rim</i>	<i>Type/ Shape</i>	<i>Surface Treatment/ Decoration</i>	<i>Colour</i>	<i>Texture</i>	<i>Hand made/ Wheel made</i>	<i>No of Pot-sherds</i>	<i>Remarks</i>
5.	643 DWC/(X)	0.1 cm	Bowl	nil	Dull red	Smooth	Handmade	8	
6.	57DWC/(S)	0.1 cm	Bowl	nil	Dull red	Smooth	Handmade	10	
7.	291DWC/(S)	0.2 cm	Bowl	nil	Dull red	Gritty	Handmade	12	
8.	130DWC/(S)	0.1 cm	Bowl	nil	Dull brown	Smooth	Handmade	14	
9.	131 DWC/(S)	0.2 cm	Vessel	nil	Dull red	Smooth	Handmade	15	
10.	670DWC/(X)	0.2 cm	Bowl	nil	Dull brown	Gritty	Handmade	12	
11.	52DWC/(X)	0.3 cm	Bowl	nil	Dull brown	Smooth	Handmade	5	
12.	603 DWC/(X)	0.2 cm	Vessel	nil	Dull brown	Gritty	Handmade	10	
13.	238 DWC/(S)	0.3 cm	Bowl	nil	Dull red	Gritty	Handmade	15	
14.	1067 DWC(X)	0.2 cm	Vessel	nil	Dull brown	Smooth	Handmade	20	.
15.	3040 DWC(X)	0.2 cm	Bowl	nil	Dull red	Smooth	Handmade	18	.
16.	1051 DWC(X)	0.1 cm	Bowl	nil	Dull red	Smooth	Handmade	20	
17.	96DWC(X)	0.1 cm	Vessel	nil	Dull brown	Smooth	Handmade	19	
18.	1073DWC(X)	0.1 cm	Bowl	nil	Dull red	Smooth	Handmade	4	
19.	5024 DWC/(X)	0.1 cm	Bowl	nil	Dull red	Smooth	Handmade	8	
20.	609DWC(X)	0.2 cm	Bowl	nil	Dull brown	Gritty	Handmade	16	
21.	5063 DWC(X)	0.2 cm	Bowl	nil	Dull brown	Smooth	Handmade	14	
22.	4001 DWC(X)	0.2 cm	Vessel	nil	Dull brown	Smooth	Handmade	9	
23.	628 DWC(X)	0.2 cm	Vessel	nil	Dull brown	Smooth	Handmade	9	
24.	3027 DWC(X)	0.3 cm	Vessel	nil	Dull red	Gritty	Handmade	20	
25.	3027 DWC(X)	0.2 cm	Vessel	nil	Dull red	Gritty	Handmade	6	
26.	3091 DWC(X)	0.2 cm	Vessel	nil	Dull brown	Smooth	Handmade	5	
27.	4041 DWC(X)	0.1 cm	Vessel	nil	Dull red	Gritty	Handmade	11	
28.	599 DWC(X)	0.2 cm	Vessel	nil	Dull brown	Gritty	Handmade	18	
29.	602 DWC/(X)	0.2 cm	Vessel	nil	Dull brown	Smooth	Handmade	10	
30.	138 DWC/(S)	0.2 cm	Bowl	nil	Dull red	Gritty	Handmade	5	
31.	944DWC/(X)	0.2 cm	Vessel	nil	Dull red	Gritty	Handmade	15	
32.	4040DWC/(X)	0.3 cm	Vessel	Oblique incised lines	Dull red	Medium	Handmade	10	
33.	5072DWC/(X)	0.3 cm	Vessel	nil	Dull brown	Smooth	Handmade	8	
	34.630 DWC/(X)	0.2 cm	Vessel	nil	Dull red	Gritty	Handmade	4	
35.	947 DW/(X)	0.1 cm	Bowl	nil	Dull red	Smooth	Handmade	6	
36.	338 DWC/(X)	0.3 cm	Vessel	nil	Dull brown	Smooth	Handmade	7	
37.	4007 DWC/(X)	0.2 cm	Vessel	nil	Dull brown	Smooth	Handmade	2	
38.	661 DWC/(X)	0.2 cm	Vessel	nil	Dull brown	Gritty	Handmade	5	
	39.644 DWC/(X)	0.3 cm	Vessel	nil	Dull brown	Gritty	Handmade	3	
40.	3046 DWC/(X)	0.2 cm	Vessel	nil	Dull red	Smooth	Handmade	12	
41.	4036 DWC/(X)	0.3 cm	Bowl	nil	Dull red	Gritty	Handmade	11	
42.	646 DWC/(X)	0.2 cm	Vessel	nil	Dull red	Gritty	Handmade	14	
43.	126 DWC(S)	0.2 cm	Vessel	nil	Dull brown	Smooth	Handmade	16	
44.	872DWC(X)	0.2 cm	Vessel	nil	Dull brown	Smooth	Handmade	15	
45.	648 DWC(X)	0.3 cm	Vessel	nil	Dull brown	Smooth	Handmade	12	
46.	636 DWC(X)	0.2 cm	Bowl	nil	Dull red	Smooth	Handmade	5	
47.	1004DWC(X)	0.3 cm	Vessel	nil	Dull red	Gritty	Handmade	2	
48.	657 DWC(X)	0.2 cm	Bowl	nil	Dull red	Gritty	Handmade	7	
49.	1049 DWC(X)	0.2 cm	Vessel	nil	Dull red	Gritty	Handmade	6	
50.	4018DWC(X)	0.2 cm	Bowl	nil	Dull red	Gritty	Handmade	1	



Artefacts retrieved from Dhowachala Excavations



Artefacts retrieved from Dhoowachola Excavtions



Artefacts retrieved from layers (3) & (4) of Dhowachala Excavtions

Table showing body thickness of the Dhowachola potsherds

Sl No.	Thickness of body (in cm)	Nos. of sherds	%
1	0.4	10	7.63
2	0.3	24	18.32
3	0.6	16	12.21
4	0.5	14	10.68
5	0.8	9	6.87
6	0.7	27	20.61
7	1.0	23	17.55
8	0.9	4	3.05
9	1.1	2	1.52
10	0.2	2	1.52
		131	99.96

Note: Shape, size, and even the thickness of the potteries from centuries old Dhowachola materials have remained more or less same to that of Salmara potteries.

Discussion

As already indicated, in Assam, conservatively two indigenous potter communities are well-established - (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 full-blown cottage industry producing varieties of economically viable and praise worthy 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 pottery industry of Majuli reveals numerous features which are nonconforming 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 managed 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; infact, 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 are essentially confining only to the potter and potteries of Majuli in the context of present and past-an anthropo-archaeological

move towards understanding of past-presents cultural readjustment.

Conclusion

Kumar as an occupational class still exist within broader economic network of the caste structure. What it is assumed that this group had been working so prior to the formation of this island. 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, and 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 become their mainstay economy. The prevailing legend coupled with archaeological evidence retrieve 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 of technology and sex in pot making was largely due to the following reasons: the Kumars of Majuli become economically integrated 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.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that the oral traditions which is prevalent at Salmara indicates that, initially they practiced wheel thrown pottery-a masculine job, but later on shifted to handmade manufacturing of pots-a job exclusively practised by females. The legend is verified through archaeological means and it proved to be correct that there happened a total shift around 13th -14th century CE. This total shift of technology and gender is an extremely rare phenomenon even in global context.

Acknowledgement

The author of this paper is thankful to the author's father Late Surjya Kumar Das who had been a great source of inspiration to the author all throughout her academic career,her mother Mrs Deba Bala Das, who always stood like a pillar to the author in all her journey of life ,the author,s brother Dr.Jyotiska Kumar Das ,who always extended his assistance to the author and last but not the least the author,s cousin Mr.Ajit Goyari,who always has been a guiding force in all her joys and sorrows.And above all the author,s guide Prof.Late Dr.Abdullah Ali Ashraf of Department of Anthropology ,Gauhati University and highly indebted to him and without whose cooperation and genuine guidance such an excavation and exploration would not have been brought to light. And the author also extends her gratitude to Late Dr. Sankar Roy and the Department of Anthropology and all her co researches who helped her a lot in writing this paper.

Illustrations



Fig. 7.1: Approach road of the Village Salmara

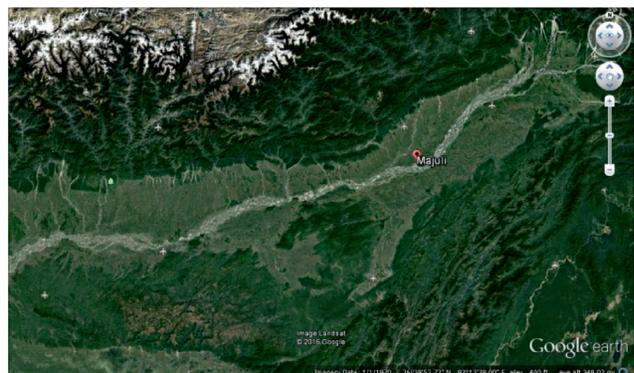


Fig. 7.2 (a): Geomorphology of Majuli



Fig. 7.2 (b): Drainage systems



Fig. 7.3: Accumulation of layers of silt at Dhowachala, Majuli.



Fig. 7.4: Potsherd with imperial insignia of Ahom Dynasty

Notes

1. 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.
2. Assamese and many other ethnic communities of Northeast India consider ground Celt as ‘thunder bolt’ (*Sarag pathar*) and regards it as prized possession and this superstition encourages them to preserve these items for generations. So a solitary finding of this cultural item denotes nothing about prehistoric activity in the island.
3. This limited excavation couldn’t ascertain whether the stratigraphic 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.
4. The Ryotwari system was introduced by Sir Thomas Munro in 1792.

References

- Ashraf, A.A and A.G.Duarah.2015: Pp23-32.Bambooti:A Neolithic Site in the foothills of Southern Assam *Bulletin of the Department of Anthropology ,Gauhati University* ,Volume XV 2013-14.
- Gait, E.A. (1891) *Hira. Census of India*, 1891, Vol. I: Assam, Report, Shillong, 1892, p.272.
- Hazarika, A (2004) Majuli: A Unique Ecological Entity: In N. Grover and K.N Singh (Eds): *Cultural Geography*, New Delhi. Concept Publishers.
- Rao, S.N (1977). Pp191-204 *Continuity and Survival of Neolithic traditions in North Eastern India*. Asian Perspective, XX(2).
- Saraswati, B. and N.K (1966): *Pottery techniques in peasant India*. Calcutta, Anthropological Survey of India.1966:175
- Sharma,T.C. (1967) *A note on the Neolithic pottery of Assam*. Man in India,2 (1). pp 126-128
- Siack, E. (1833) *Chandal and Hira. Report on the Census of India*,1833. Calcutta, p.96.