

The Livelihood Patterns of Potters Community: A Study on the Village at Uchabazar under Bhanga Upazila of Faridpur District

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Abstract

For ages, potters have contributed significantly to society by creating earthen products from clay for daily use, thus keeping the pottery industry alive. Pottery has been a livelihood for many generations. In Bangladesh, the origins of pottery date back to the Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa civilizations, as evidenced by the earthenware found at the Mahasthangar excavation site in Bogra. However, this profession is currently facing numerous challenges. Modern societies have shifted their preference towards plastics and other synthetic materials, leading to a declining demand for pottery products. Additionally, the lack of support and initiatives to promote pottery is causing this traditional craft to fade from society, leaving those involved in the profession to lead miserable lives. This research utilized a qualitative approach, with case studies being the primary data collection method. The findings indicate that the increasing use of plastics and aluminum products has significantly reduced interest in pottery, resulting in a decrease in potters' income and severe economic challenges. Consequently, many potters abandon their traditional profession as it no longer provides sufficient income to meet their family's basic needs. To address the current situation, the government must intervene by implementing programs and policies at the grassroots level to sustain the pottery profession and improve the livelihoods of potters.

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1 INTRODUCTION

For ages, potters have supported society by creating earthen products from clay for daily use. Potters play a crucial role in keeping the tradition of pottery alive. They have been practicing this craft for generations, using it as their primary source of livelihood (Ahmed, 2019). The origin of pottery in Bangladesh dates to the Mohenjodaro and Harappa civilizations, as evidenced by the earthenware discovered in the Mohasthangar of Bogra. The folk arts found in these excavations continue to influence modern artifacts. The potters in Bangladesh are predominantly Hindus, with many sharing the surname Pal. Pottery is often a family tradition passed down through generations. Artifacts made of clay, such as earthen pots, yogurt pots, pat, bank, sara, bowls,

surai, matka, jala, pie molds, and various toys, have been integral to Bangladeshi households for ages. Additionally, pottery is used to enhance home decor, with items being decorated in various colors today.

The primary material for pottery is clay; however, not all soils are suitable. Pottery requires clean clay soil, water, small tools, and wooden wheels. The process demands significant effort, manual dexterity, and technical knowledge. Potters skillfully shape the clay on a spinning wheel, dry the products, and fire them to make them durable. However, the firing process can sometimes destroy the products. Potters face challenges due to rising prices of clay and firewood and the struggle to sell their products at expected prices. Consequently, they are among the poorest, illiterate, and most marginalized populations in society. Pottery is a seasonal occupation. During the monsoon, potters cannot produce items, and their ready products often get ruined. Their living conditions are generally poor, and they rely solely on pottery for their livelihood. Despite their hard work, they earn insufficient income, leading to ongoing financial struggles. The lack of government support and competition from modern pottery has worsened their situation. The widespread use of plastic has diminished the demand for traditional earthenware, pushing the craft to the brink of extinction of Bangladesh (2017).

The potters of Uchabazar, who make a living by creating earthen pots and pans, face significant hardships. Their daily lives are filled with difficulties, and they often experience hunger and poverty. Once a vital part of meeting people's needs, clay pottery has been largely replaced by plastic, steel, and silver utensils, leading to the decline of this traditional craft (R. A. Chowdhury & Rahman, 2018). The rising costs of production materials, such as soil, paint, labor, and chalk, have not been matched by an increase in the price of earthenware (S. Chowdhury & Rahman, 2016). Most potters live in remote areas, with little assistance from NGOs or government organizations (Akhtar & Mahmud, 2019). In Uchabazar, people have relied on pottery production for generations but now face economic challenges due to limited capital and rising commodity prices. This research aims to investigate the livelihood patterns of potters in rural Bangladesh and recommend strategies to address the challenges faced by those in Uchabazar village under Bhanga Upazila of Faridpur district (Ahmed et al., 2015). This study provides insights into the current conditions of potters, their livelihood patterns, and the challenges they face, focusing on the socio-economic and demographic conditions of the Uchabazar potters and offering recommendations to improve their situation (M. Hossain & Uddin, 2021).

Bangladeshi potters have produced exquisite products for ages, with pottery in the region tracing back to around 1500 BC. Members of the potter's community, known in Bangla as 'kumar' and often bearing the title 'pal,' are typically found in large settlements in potters' villages across the country. The primary research question is to investigate the livelihood patterns of these potters and analyze the causes of the problems they face in their lifestyle, health, education, and social aspects. Over the centuries, potters have encountered significant challenges in their livelihoods and daily lives. Various issues in potter communities include difficulties in soil collection, low product prices, inadequate product preservation, and transportation. Additionally, they face inadequate educational facilities, a lack of modern technology, and unemployment due to limited involvement in other occupations (Haque, 2019).

This study aims to investigate and analyze the problems affecting the potter community's livelihood patterns. It will also explore other aspects such as health conditions, education, accommodation, limited recreational opportunities, and the support provided by governmental and non-governmental organizations to address these problems (Siddiqui & Hossain, 2017).

The General objectives of the study are livelihood patterns of the potter's community, and the specific objectives are: a. To know the socio-economic and demographic condition of potter's community; b. To analyze the daily activities of the potter's community; c. To find out existing problems and responsible factors for obstacles in their business; d. To investigate existing GOs and NGOs to support their development; e. To give suggestions and mitigation for coping with their problems.

2 METHODOLOGY

This research employs qualitative methods to delve into the root causes of the issues and describe contributing factors using descriptive data. Primary data were gathered from the study area as an in-depth case study, while secondary data were collected from journals, reports, articles, and newspapers.

2.1 Location of the Study

The study was conducted in the Uchabazar village under the Bhanga Upazila in the Faridpur district.

2.2 Population of the Study

The study population includes all individuals working as potters in the Uchabazar village.

2.3 Sample of the Study

Given the qualitative nature of the study, purposive sampling was employed to select a sample from the population. Five respondents were chosen to provide information.

2.4 Data Collection

In-depth interviews and case study methods were used to collect information from the respondents.

2.5 Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted systematically and thematically. The research utilized descriptive data analyzed through an open-ended questionnaire.

3 DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS

The researchers have identified five main themes: (1) Socio-demographic and Economic Factors: This includes codes related to age, education, present occupation, past occupation, living place, income, expenditure, etc. (2) Vulnerability Context and Livelihood Patterns: This encompasses codes such as possession, basic needs, financial support, position in the family, views of society, and expectations from society and the state. (3) Existing Conditions of the Potter Community: This theme explores the current state of the community. (4) Existing Problems of the Potter Community: This includes codes related to barriers in decision-making, socio-economic problems, views of the family, and religious superstitions. (5) Suggestions for Improving and Sustaining Conditions: This theme provides recommendations for enhancing and maintaining the community's conditions. The researchers have conducted a thematic analysis based on our objectives.

3.1 Analysis of the Socio-Demographic and Economic Information

The researchers conducted their study in Uchabazar Pal Para, located in Bhanga Upazila of the Faridpur district. The sample consisted of 15 respondents from this area. The interviews revealed that the potters are both men and women, all Hindus. A significant portion of the potters are illiterate: 6 respondents can only write their names, three respondents had education up to class 5, 2 respondents had studied up to class 3, and the remaining four are completely illiterate.

The monthly income of these potters ranges from ten to fifteen thousand taka or less, which makes it difficult for them to cope with the rising prices of commodities (Das & Rahman, 2020). They work approximately 8 to 10 hours daily. One respondent mentioned, "We have been doing

this for generations. This is our only profession. My entire family is involved in this. As pottery product use decreases daily, our occupation is now on the verge of disappearing. Due to the rising cost of raw materials and lack of adequate modern machinery, we have to spend our days in difficulty."

In Bangladesh, pottery products are declining, and they are being replaced by plastic, silver, steel, and ceramic items, causing potters to lose interest in their traditional profession (of *Statistics, 2021*). Another respondent stated, "Due to low income, we are not able to ensure that our children receive a good education, and as a result, we cannot advance the next generation and society." Another respondent highlighted their socio-economic condition, saying, "We are largely excluded from the affluent sections of society due to poverty and this dying profession. Another reason we are not valued in society is our lack of education. Lack of money is holding our next generation and society back."

3.2 Analysis of the Vulnerability Context and Livelihood Assets

The majority of respondents faced significant problems in their workplaces. They worked from morning until midnight, leaving no time for recreation. Prolonged work in mud resulted in their feet and hands getting stuck in the mud and water. Additionally, they experienced many complications when collecting soil, which was challenging. This work exposed them to various diseases, such as asthma and shortness of breath. Their economic and educational statuses were substandard, and their earnings were insufficient to support their families adequately. We interviewed 15 respondents. One respondent stated, "While working, I face many problems like back pain, and my hands get stuck in mud and water for a long time." Most respondents reported similar issues, including bone loss, shortness of breath, and asthma, due to their long working hours and the difficult nature of their work. Another respondent mentioned, "This work is in demand during pujas, fairs, and Eid. In other seasons, it is not as demandable." The demand for their work is seasonal, and during the rainy season, they face additional difficulties as they store materials outside, making it harder to manage.

A third respondent expressed dissatisfaction with their income, stating, "I am not satisfied with my income. It is not enough for me to support my family easily." They explained that they could not earn sufficient money from their work. The cost of soil has increased dramatically, from 100 takas to 5000 takas, and paint now costs 10 takas per kilogram. They were satisfied with their occupation a century ago, but now they are not, as their work is often viewed with disdain. Neighbors frequently complain about the air pollution caused by their activities.

Another respondent highlighted the lack of financial support: "I could not get any financial help from GO & NGOs. So I faced a financial crisis." They expressed a need for financial assistance from government organizations (GOs) and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and they also wanted their products to be valued more. They suggested that interest-free loans would be beneficial, allowing them to sustain their work more effectively.

This study concludes that the respondents desire better valuation of their products and access to loans, enabling them to continue their work more easily.

3.3 Analysis of the Existing Conditions in the Pottery Community

Pottery is an ancient occupation practiced by both men and women. Most respondents (15) stated that pottery is their only source of livelihood, and they are not involved in any other government or non-government occupation or profession. The demand for clay products is high in spring and winter but low during the monsoon season.

One respondent mentioned, "We face various problems collecting raw materials and preserving these products. For example, the perfect soil is not always available to make earthen products, and preserving these products is a big problem because soil-made materials break easily. Customers are not available all year round to buy our products." Nowadays, people are more attracted to

products other than earthenware. Due to these reasons, the sale of earthen goods is decreasing daily. Another respondent said, "We earn little money and belong to the low class in society." They cannot fulfill their basic needs, afford their children's education, and face discrimination from other people in society.

Another respondent mentioned, "We also face health problems such as back pain, there is no available drinking water, and we fall into financial crises trying to invest in pottery industries." They lack the capital needed for business and sometimes take loans from private institutions, which they must repay with extra interest. The lack of support from government and non-government organizations adds to the adversity the pottery community faces.

3.4 Analysis of the Existing Problems of the Potters Community

The respondents from selected areas face various issues, including economic hardships, irregular supply of raw materials, inadequate marketing facilities, lack of product diversification, obsolete technology, insufficient working capital, and a lack of research and development efforts (M. M. Rahman et al., 2016). One respondent stated, "I earn 12 to 15 thousand taka monthly. With this money, I face a lot of trouble running my family of five. I have stopped my daughter's education due to a lack of money." Most respondents indicated that they are suffering from an extreme financial crisis. Another respondent mentioned, "It is becoming difficult to survive on our incomes in the current rising commodity market."

The advancement of modern technologies and the increased demand for metal, ceramics, and plastic products have decreased the demand for pottery products. Many potters, unable to cope with the challenges of this age-old industry, have left their ancestral profession (Hasan & Rahman, 2016). One respondent said, "Our ancestors were involved in this occupation for centuries. I learned the techniques from my father and am still continuing the work. However, I do not want my children to continue this occupation because the earnings are insufficient to survive."

Currently, many potters have shifted to other occupations or businesses. Most potters are uneducated. This study showed that they are underprivileged, and due to their ignorance, they face discrimination and do not receive any help from either government or private organizations (Islam, 2018).

3.5 Analysis of the Suggestions for Improving and Sustaining Conditions for Pottery Workers

There is an urgent need to address the challenges faced by the pottery workers at Uchabazar Palpara in Bhanga Upazila (Miah & Rahman, 2019). This research focuses on analyzing the suggestions for improving and sustaining their conditions. The potters express a strong desire to preserve their craft (Ministry of Cultural Affairs, 2020). Below are the specific needs and suggestions they have shared:

1. Quality Raw Materials:

One potter mentioned, "We need good quality soil. The quality of pottery made from high-quality clay will improve, increasing its demand in the market. We also need the prices of raw materials like clay, brushes, and paint to be affordable."

2. Infrastructure Support:

Several potters highlighted the need for infrastructure (Ministry of Industries, 2018). They said, "We need a large open field from the government to dry our raw pottery in the sun. Additionally, a warehouse or a large room is essential to protect the pottery from rain after it has dried."

3. Financial Assistance:

The potters seek financial support; as one noted, “We need financial aid from the government and NGOs. Low-interest loans from banks would be beneficial. We also want our children to access free education at schools and colleges. Additionally, we need housing support from the Asharyan Project.”

4. Market Access:

One potter emphasized better market access, stating, “We want our pottery to be sold domestically and internationally. We aim to build an online presence for our products. Support from government and private organizations in acquiring machinery and providing training is crucial.”

5. Health and Safety:

Health and safety are significant concerns. The potters said, “We need health insurance and product compensation. For our health protection, we need masks, gloves, clean water, and health training. We hope that government and private organizations will help improve our quality of life.”

6. Fair Compensation:

Another potter stressed the need for fair compensation, saying, “We want fair value for our work. Public awareness of the importance and benefits of pottery should be...”

4 DISCUSSION

Bangladesh harbors a diverse range of occupational groups, each with unique challenges. Among these, the potters currently endure the most hardship. Their lifestyle differs markedly from the mainstream, residing in secluded corners of villages and belonging to a distinct lower-class group. Historically part of the traditional Hindu caste system as Pals, their ancestral occupation revolves around pottery making (R. Ali et al., 2020).

In the past, places like Uchabazar village in Bhanga Upazila, Faridpur district, resonated with the craftsmanship of Palpara’s skilled potters, supplying earthenware throughout the region (M. Hossain & Uddin, 2021). However, Palpara has lost its former renown today, with dwindling demand for earthen products diminishing their livelihoods (Karim & Akter, 2017). Many now seek alternative employment, working in hotels, driving vans, or engaging in day labor.

A visit to Palpara reveals their precarious living conditions, characterized by meager attire and daily struggles for sustenance. Despite these hardships, they prioritize education for their children, hoping for a brighter future through their offspring’s success. The decline in demand for clay products, overshadowed by aluminum and plastic alternatives, compounds their challenges (R. Ali et al., 2020). Yet, they persevere, crafting and selling mud tubs, pots, toys, and other items to make ends meet.

The potters emphasize the need for government and private sector support, including access to low-interest loans, to sustain their craft. Their income from pottery sales is often unpredictable, forcing them into debt to feed their families during lean times. Health issues like skin ailments from clay, respiratory problems from pottery firing, and poor sanitation add to their burdens. Despite these challenges, earthenware remains integral to their culture, and it is known for health benefits such as enhanced food taste and cooling properties of water stored in earthen pitchers. However, rising costs of clay and paint and unaffordable machinery threaten their livelihoods further. Their workload peaks during festivals and fairs, yet the rest of the year often languishes with insufficient orders.

To preserve this ancient Bengal pottery tradition, urgent intervention from governmental and non-governmental entities is crucial (A. Rahman, 2010). Without concerted efforts to support and promote their craft, this cultural heritage faces extinction (M. Ali, 2012).

5 RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the above discussion on the socio-economic and livelihood patterns of the potter's community, it is evident that they are living in vulnerable conditions within society. Therefore, the government and the country's people must improve their socio-economic status, enabling them to lead happier and safer lives like other citizens. Here are the key recommendations:

1. **Innovate Designs:** Potters should innovate new designs to avoid monotonous patterns and stay competitive.
2. **Training in Modern Techniques:** Provide training in modern, machine-made pottery techniques aligned with market demands. The government and private sectors should support this initiative by funding equipment and training.
3. **Ensure Quality Raw Materials:** Ensure a steady supply of high-quality clay to enhance the quality of pottery products and meet market demands. Keep raw materials like clay, brushes, and paints affordable for potters.
4. **Facilities for Production:** Provide open fields for sun-drying clay products and warehouses to protect them from rain.
5. **Education and Housing:** Ensure free education for their children and provide accommodation through housing projects.
6. **Health and Safety:** Provide health insurance, including coverage for work-related injuries, along with necessary safety equipment such as masks, gloves, and clean water. Health training should also be provided.
7. **Promotion and Marketing:** Promote pottery through handicraft fairs, social media, and other platforms to increase market demand. Support should be provided to facilitate international sales and promotions.
8. **Financial Support:** Governments and NGOs should offer financial assistance, and banks should provide low-interest loans to potters.
9. **Online Presence:** Help potters establish an online presence to tap into the digital market, educating them on its benefits and opportunities.
10. **Producer Group Formation:** Encourage the formation of producer groups to strengthen the potter's community and facilitate collective initiatives.
11. **Research and Development:** Invest in research and development to enhance the attractiveness and appeal of pottery products.
12. **Fair Pricing and Awareness:** Advocate for fair pricing of pottery products and raise awareness among the public about the value and benefits of pottery.

6 CONCLUSIONS

Potter communities are an asset to Bangladesh. They play a crucial role in preserving traditional culture through pottery-making. Just 30 years ago, these communities formed the backbone of the middle and lower classes. Earthenware has been essential for daily use, such as cooking utensils, tableware, teapots, water pots, and decorative items in palaces. Pottery was valued for its health benefits, affordability, and accessibility to the common people.

However, potters face significant socio-economic challenges today, including severe financial crises (A. Hossain & Rahman, 2021). The government of Bangladesh must provide financial assistance to sustain this ancestral occupation. Both governmental and non-governmental organizations should step forward to enhance their quality of life. Comprehensive social, emotional, economic, political, and environmental support is crucial for potters' socio-economic development. Only through such support can their quality of life improve and pottery reclaim its former vibrancy.

This study reveals that to sustain this ancient craft, which is nearing extinction, it is essential for the government, private organizations, and the public to support and collaborate with the pottery workers. Providing the necessary resources, financial aid, infrastructure, market access, health protection, and fair compensation will significantly improve and sustain their livelihoods.

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