

RESEARCH ARTICLE

POTTERY INDUSTRY OF MAJULI: A STUDY OF TRADITIONAL CRAFTSMANSHIP AND LOCAL LIVELIHOODS

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Abstract: The pottery industry of Majuli district, is one of the economic pillars, supporting local livelihoods through traditional craftsmanship. Salmora is unique in its hand-crafted pottery, preserving a traditional method passed down through generations. The present study has tried to explore the economic scenario of households related with pottery industry. The study found that artisans experience low incomes, unstable employment, and limited market access, compounded by seasonal demand, transportation issues in Majuli's riverine setting, and natural disasters. This economic precarity discourages younger generations from continuing the tradition. Despite these difficulties, there is a strong cultural attachment and pride in pottery making. Revitalization is possible through policy support, market access, financial aid, and skill development, integrating modern approaches with traditional skills to foster economic activity and preserve cultural heritage in Assam.

Keywords: Pottery Industry, Economic Development, Hand craft, Majuli.

Article Received: 06 August 2025

Revised: 20 August 2025

Accepted: 22 August 2025

INTRODUCTION

The rural economy, encompassing sectors such as agriculture, cottage industries, and fisheries, plays a significant role in India's overall economic development. Assam's contribution to this rural economy is notable, with its populace actively involved in activities like agriculture, fishing, weaving, and pottery. Pottery, specifically, stands out as a key cottage industry within Assam. Potters in the state have historically satisfied the demand for clay artifacts, achieving financial independence.

They are broadly categorized into two groups: 'Kumar,' who produce items for religious use, and 'Hira,' who craft objects for daily life. While pottery production is widespread across Assam, the village of Salmora in the Majuli district is particularly recognized for its advanced pottery practices, supplying approximately one-third of the clay products consumed within Assam. Pottery making is a prevalent occupation in Salmora, involving nearly all residents.

The demand for Salmora's pottery exceeds that from other regions, with its products being distributed throughout Assam, including cities like Jorhat, Sibsagar, Dibrugarh, Dhemaji, and Lakhimpur.

Pottery represents one of Assam's most ancient traditional crafts, with Salmora village in Majuli district serving as a prominent hub for indigenous pottery traditions. Despite the cultural significance and the skilled craftsmanship of its residents, the economic circumstances of the potter families are often unstable. The industry grapples with numerous obstacles, such as cyclical flooding, insufficient access to contemporary tools and markets, waning interest from younger generations, and inadequate governmental assistance.

This investigation aims to analyze the socio-economic status of potters in Salmora, evaluate the viability of traditional pottery methods, and explore the relationship between this craft and the livelihoods of the

community. The research endeavors to ascertain the contribution of pottery to household income and identify the impediments to its potential as a sustainable economic activity within the modern rural economic landscape.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Gupta K.C in a 1988 study titled "Progress and Prospects of Pottery Industry in India: A Case Study of UP," highlighted the significant role of the pottery industry in both the national life and economy. The industry's importance has grown due to evolving lifestyles and socio-economic progress. It serves daily needs, supplies essential materials to various industries, and provides employment for a considerable workforce, both directly and indirectly. Indeed, a contemporary industrial society cannot be imagined without a diverse range of pottery products.

Shrestha Prakash (2018) in their article "Challenges and scopes of Pottery industry" studied that Pottery is unique art of making artifacts from clay. It produces different kinds of clay and ceramics items such as flowerpots, water and grain storage jars, large vessels for distilling rice spirits called rakshi, cooking pots, tableware, stoneware cups, bowls, and plates, stoneware pitcher and mug, etc. This research aims to examine challenges faced by the pottery industries and to examine scopes of the pottery industries in Nepal.

Kasemi Nnuzzaman (2014), in their study "Problems of pottery industry and policies for development: case study of Koch Bihar district in West Bengal, India" says that in the present day, the pottery industry in India has been put forward as a major cottage industry in both small and big pottery concerns. In a predominantly rural country with a very low income and simple needs, pottery plays an important role. Besides providing employment to artisans, the sector offers job opportunities to non-artisans during slack seasons of agriculture and to other tertiary sector employees.

Kiradoo Giriraj, (2021) in their article "the transition of traditional pottery-making into advanced ceramics in context to the Indian ceramic industry" studied that the

unexpected evolution in the science and technology sector has transformed India's traditional pottery making into advanced ceramic.

Owing to the ceramic industry's market expansion, traditionally based pottery making industries have now experienced rapid modern machinery growth. Pottery manufacturing has been one of the prestigious arts in the ancient history of India.

Marwein Dashimti, (2024) in their article "Sustaining Family Business: Unveiling the Resilience of Majuli Potters in Assam, India" Says that The Kumars of Salmora village in the south-eastern part of Majuli, Assam, India, are an example of a family managed business of handcrafting river clay pots.

Salmora became the Kumhar village as a result of clay, which became the primary reason for the settlement of potters in the area. The hand-beaten pottery is a cottage industry of Majuli and has been passed down through generations. Currently, the policy restrictions and the dying art form have made people think about how to sustain the handicraft, their livelihoods woven around this art form, and continue their passion/skill in the given challenging situation.

Nath (2018) in their article "Pottery and Technological Change in Assam: A Study of Jorhat and Sivasagar Districts" says that Pottery is an essential element of the form of a civilization. It throws light on the food habits of the people; their religious and social customs and also technological advancement attain by the people even their economic conditions.

OBJECTIVES

- To study the economic status of the people involved in the pottery industry in Majuli.
- To investigate the occupation, income and marketing practices of pottery industry of Majuli.

Data and Methodology

Primary and secondary sources were utilized in this study. To gather information from pottery artisans in Salmora village of Majuli district is selected, regarding their economic circumstances and challenges, a meticulously designed interview schedule was employed.

This questionnaire was structured into three sections: the economic condition of the potters, the issues they encounter, and the market prospects for their craft.

Secondary data were sourced from academic journals, the Statistical Handbook of Assam and various online resources. For the purpose of examining the economic status of pottery artisans, including aspects like their livelihoods, income, expenditure, savings, and market interactions, 135 households were selected from a total of 210 households in Salmora village.

For the analysis of the data, the current study has employed simple statistical tools such as percentages and averages. Additionally, tables and diagrams were utilized to present the findings in a clear and concise manner.

ANALYSIS

Economic Status of the People Involved in the Pottery Industry

In the Salmora village, the creation of pots by the Kumar community is characterized by a divergence from conventional pottery-making techniques employed elsewhere, notably the exclusion of the potter's wheel. These ceramic vessels are meticulously shaped by hand, with the entire production process undertaken exclusively by women.

Despite the challenges confronting the pottery sector in Majuli, the economic outlook for its artisans is marked by considerable optimism and a forward-looking perspective. Although remuneration for potters remains modest, the community's inherent resilience, innovative spirit, and profound sense of cultural identity provide a robust foundation for economic advancement.

The industry, while deeply rooted in tradition, possesses substantial latent potential that could significantly transform the artisans' economic circumstances if supported by strategic opportunities and a well-defined vision. A particularly encouraging aspect of the economic landscape for Majuli's potters is their unwavering work ethic and the self-reliance demonstrated through their craft. This sector offers consistent, albeit limited, employment for entire families and frequently sustains

communities with scarce alternative livelihood options. Pottery production allows artisans to operate from their residences, thereby minimizing overhead costs and facilitating home-based economic activities, which in turn reinforces community cohesion and shared accountability.

Numerous artisans, particularly women, make substantial contributions to household income, thereby improving the overall financial stability of families. The intergenerational transmission of skills ensures the enduring viability of the craft as a reliable source of livelihood, even amidst evolving conditions. Furthermore, the integration of pottery with secondary occupations such as agriculture and fishing cultivates a diversified income stream, aiding families in navigating seasonal fluctuations in demand and production.

In recent times, there has been a discernible increase in the market demand for handmade, environmentally friendly products, both domestically and internationally. Majuli pottery, being entirely handcrafted and utilizing natural processing methods, aligns seamlessly with the global preference for sustainable goods. This trend presents a significant opportunity for artisans to enhance their economic status by attracting urban consumers, tourists, and online shoppers. As the distinctiveness of Majuli pottery gains broader recognition, its market value is expected to rise accordingly.

Moreover, a growing number of young individuals within the region are demonstrating a keen interest in preserving and promoting their cultural heritage, integrating traditional methodologies with contemporary design aesthetics. Some have actively participated in government-sponsored skill development programs, artisan fairs, and training initiatives, which have led to increased earnings and enhanced visibility. The strategic utilization of social media platforms and digital marketplaces can further expand their clientele and reduce dependence on intermediaries.

The expansion of tourism in Majuli represents an additional positive indicator.

As Majuli gains prominence for its natural beauty, cultural richness, and heritage, pottery has the potential to become an integral element of the island's tourist economy. Tourists are exhibiting a heightened interest in purchasing locally crafted items and learning about the stories behind their creation. This not only generates direct sales but also creates employment opportunities in related sectors, such as cultural tours, pottery demonstrations, and craft workshops.

Government and non-governmental organization interventions, while historically inconsistent, are beginning to exhibit signs of improvement. Initiatives focused on artisan welfare, financial inclusion, and the developments of rural enterprises are increasingly tailored to support traditional industries. With a growing emphasis on national campaigns promoting local production and manufacturing, there is a palpable sense of optimism that the pottery sector will receive augmented institutional support in the forthcoming years.

Occupational Structure of Potter

The occupational framework of the Majuli pottery sector presents a clear illustration of how traditional livelihoods adapt in response to economic pressures and environmental limitations. In Majuli, pottery transcends being merely a source of income; it represents

a profound heritage that unites communities through shared craftsmanship and collective identity. Nevertheless, due to changing market dynamics, seasonal difficulties, and insufficient institutional backing, many pottery households have been forced to seek alternative income streams.

A thorough analysis of 135 pottery households indicates that while most still regard pottery as their main occupation, a notable portion has branched out into agriculture, wage labor, or small-scale trade to sustain their families. These occupational trends are not static but rather adaptable—responding to seasonal availability, market needs, or even the physical capabilities of family members. Frequently, the same household may have older generations focused on pottery while younger individuals engage in labor or sales.

Pottery is inherently labor-intensive and time-sensitive, particularly in areas like Majuli where climatic factors—such as floods, erosion, and seasonal changes—significantly impact production. Consequently, households lacking alternative income sources often face challenges during off-peak seasons. Conversely, families that manage to combine pottery with farming or wage labor are somewhat better equipped to navigate economic uncertainties, although they may not be as committed to preserving the intricate skills associated with the craft.

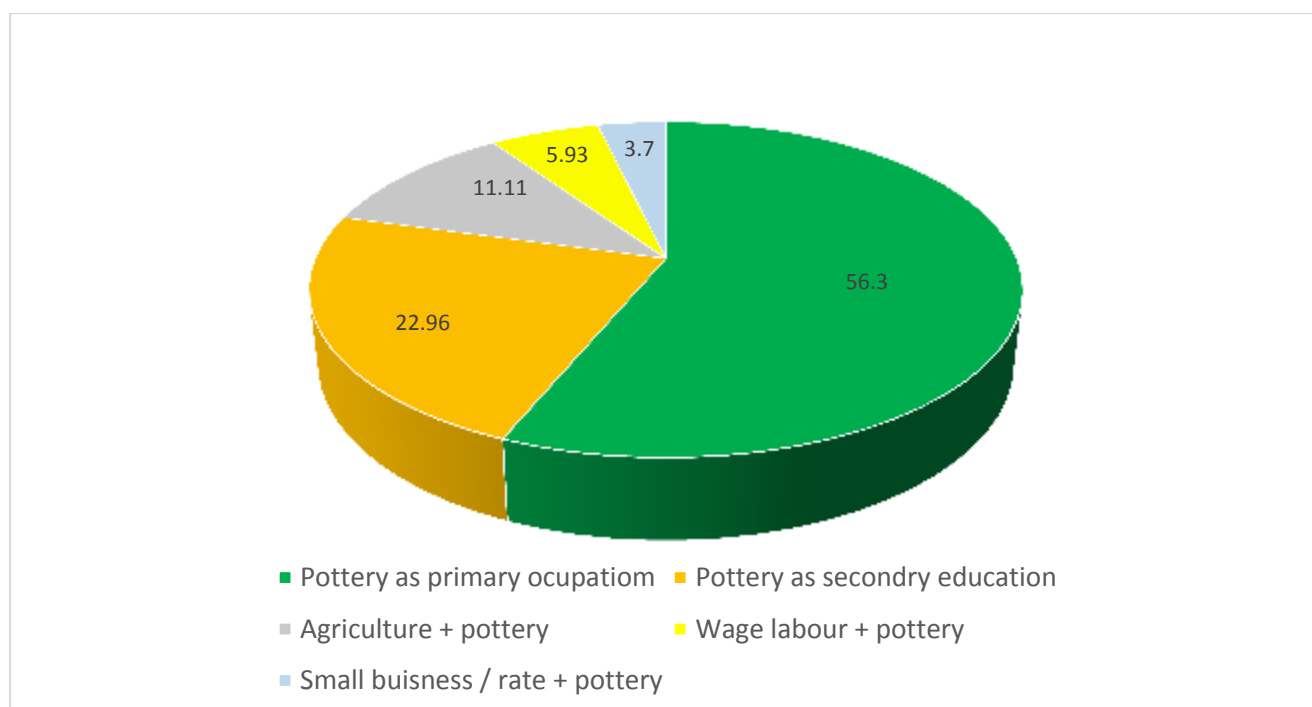


Figure 1: Occupational structure of potters

Source: Survey data

Pottery is the principal means of subsistence for a significant majority of households, with 56.30 percent relying on it as their primary income generator. This economic reliance is deeply embedded within the social fabric of these communities, often involving the concerted efforts of multiple generations. The entire production cycle, from the meticulous collection of raw clay to the intricate processes of shaping, careful drying, and ultimately marketing the finished products, is a collective endeavor. For these families, pottery is not merely an occupation; it is a cornerstone of their cultural identity and heritage.

Consequently, their economic well-being is inherently sensitive to a range of external factors that can disrupt the continuity of their work. Such disruptions can include, but are not limited to, a scarcity in the supply of suitable clay, damage caused by natural events like floods, or broader economic downturns that affect consumer demand and purchasing power. Notwithstanding these inherent fragilities, the level of skill and artistry demonstrated by these potters is exceptionally high, reflecting generations of passed-down knowledge and practice. Their enduring dedication to this craft makes them invaluable custodians of cultural heritage, ensuring its survival and transmission to future generations.

The occupational structure of pottery-making households in Majuli reveals a complex interplay between tradition and economic necessity. A significant portion, 22.96 percent, engages in pottery as a secondary occupation, primarily during periods of high demand like winter or festivals, supplementing income from primary activities such as fishing, rice cultivation, or animal husbandry.

This seasonal involvement ensures the continuation of skills across generations, even without full reliance on the craft. Another 11.11 percent of households identify agriculture as their main livelihood, viewing pottery as a supplementary income source during agricultural lulls. While these families may possess greater financial stability through land ownership, they are susceptible to agricultural risks like crop failure or adverse climate conditions, which

often limits investment in pottery tools and techniques. A smaller segment, 5.93 percent, combines pottery with wage labor in sectors like construction or maritime work, often driven by the inadequacy of pottery income alone. In these households, the craft is typically practiced by older or female members, while the able-bodied men seek daily wage employment off the island.

Finally, 3.70 percent of households integrate pottery with small-scale trade, such as operating tea stalls or convenience stores. These households generally demonstrate more robust economic resilience and occasionally produce or market value-added pottery items tailored for tourists or festive occasions, though they represent a minor proportion of the community.

The collective occupational patterns in Majuli's pottery-making families highlight the persistence of cultural heritage amid economic pressures. While over half of these families still prioritize pottery as their primary occupation, the increasing reliance on agriculture, wage labor, and trade signifies a growing need for economic diversification for survival. This occupational duality presents a mixed advantage: it helps families manage financial instability but also impedes their ability to dedicate themselves fully to the craft.

To foster the sustainability of pottery as a profession, a multifaceted approach is crucial. This includes enhancing access to raw materials, strengthening market linkages, and developing support systems that empower potters to rely more confidently on their artisanal skills. Governmental programs, collaborative initiatives, and tourism-focused interventions hold the potential to ensure that pottery in Majuli is sustained not only as a symbolic tradition but also as a viable and respected source of livelihood.

Income Level of Potters

The economic landscape of Majuli's pottery sector reflects a conventional rural economic model, heavily influenced by seasonality, limited market reach, and a focus on subsistence. While pottery constitutes the principal occupation for many families in villages like Salmora, the remuneration from

this craft is characteristically low and unpredictable. A deeper analysis of their earnings reveals the financial challenges faced by artisan families, underscoring the need for support in infrastructure, market linkages, and financial inclusion. Potters in Majuli largely rely on ancestral, handcrafted methods, employing tools passed down through generations.

The absence of mechanization and modern firing techniques constrains their production output. The distribution of pottery occurs within local markets or via intermediaries, who often retain a significant share of the revenue, thereby substantially reducing the artisans' net earnings. Furthermore, product pricing is depressed by a lack of branding and

standardization. Income variability is attributed to several factors, including the number of contributing family members, seasonal demand fluctuations, festival periods, transportation accessibility, and established relationships with vendors or non-governmental organizations. Families with higher production volumes or a consistent customer base tend to achieve greater incomes, whereas others depend on intermittent market sales, particularly during festivals or religious gatherings.

Below is a numeric table that depicts the average monthly income of pottery-making households in Majuli, based on a field-based estimation of various household categories:

Table 1: Income structure of potters

Income Range (₹ / Month)	Number of Households	Percentage (%)
Below ₹ 3000	18	13.33
₹ 3001- ₹ 5000	52	38.52
₹ 5001 - ₹ 7000	34	25.18
₹7001 - ₹ 9000	17	12.59
Above ₹ 9000	14	10.37
Total	135	100

Source: Survey data

The economic assessment of pottery-making households reveals a stratified income distribution. A substantial proportion, 38.52%, falls within the monthly earning bracket of ₹3,001 to ₹5,000, indicative of a subsistence-level existence. These artisans largely rely on traditional implements and methodologies, with market reach confined to local avenues like weekly markets and small-scale vendors. Factors such as limited production capacity, restricted market access, and minimal exposure to diverse consumer demands contribute to their subdued earnings.

At the lower end, 13.33% of households subsist on less than ₹3,000 per month, representing the most economically precarious segment. This group frequently comprises elderly artisans, widows, or households without a substantial working-age population. Their pottery output is typically small-scale and sporadically sold, often hampered by challenges in sourcing raw materials or the physical limitations for consistent production. Furthermore, they may face barriers in accessing governmental

aid due to administrative hurdles or incomplete documentation. The middle-income tier, earning between ₹5,001 and ₹7,000 monthly, accounts for 25.18% of households, signifying a moderate engagement with the craft. These families often have multiple working members, enabling more regular production cycles, and potentially better access to materials, with sales extending beyond immediate localities, possibly through intermediaries or regional markets. However, their growth potential is constrained by the absence of modern tools and the considerable transportation costs inherent to an island district like Majuli.

Higher income brackets, though smaller in number, demonstrate the potential for enhanced returns when coupled with appropriate opportunities and market access. Specifically, 12.59% of households earn between ₹7,001 and ₹9,000, and 10.37% report monthly incomes exceeding ₹9,000. These artisans tend to exhibit greater entrepreneurial drive, participating in fairs, exhibitions, and forging collaborations with tourism entities and handicraft retailers.

Some have diversified into artistic and decorative items such as clay toys, festival lamps, and bespoke pottery, which command premium prices in niche markets. A subset has adopted modern equipment, including electric potter's wheels and semi-mechanized kilns, thereby improving both output and product quality. Notwithstanding these instances of economic advancement, the prevailing condition for over half of Majuli's pottery households is a monthly income of ₹5,000 or less.

This concentration in lower income strata highlights systemic challenges, including inadequate infrastructure, a lack of credit facilities, limited training provisions, and insufficient market linkages. Consequently, even highly skilled artisans find their work confined to labor-intensive, low-remuneration, small-scale operations. The income dynamics within Majuli's pottery sector underscore a fragile economic structure where traditional expertise is abundant, but financial rewards are often disproportionately low.

Without significant improvements in production techniques, market expansion, financial support systems, and governmental intervention, household earnings are likely to remain depressed. Nevertheless, with strategic support, this traditional craft possesses the potential to evolve into a more sustainable and lucrative economic activity for a larger segment of the region's population.

Marketing and Distribution of Pottery industry

The pottery industry of Majuli, primarily situated in the village of Salmora within Assam's Majuli district, is deeply entrenched in traditional methodologies. Notwithstanding its rich cultural legacy and the demonstrable skill of its artisans, the industry's marketing and distribution frameworks are characterized by informality and underdevelopment. The prevailing mechanisms for marketing and distributing Majuli pottery are influenced by a confluence of traditional approaches, fluctuating seasonal demand, and limited engagement with broader commercial channels.

Marketing Practices

The economic activities surrounding pottery production in Majuli are predominantly

characterized by conventional sales channels and direct engagement with consumers. Artisans typically patronize local markets, participate in weekly bazaars, and conduct direct sales in neighboring villages. The distribution network often involves intermediaries and local merchants who connect producers with a broader customer base in adjacent towns and other regions of Assam.

However, these middlemen often capture a significant share of the revenue, diminishing the artisans' earnings. Pottery sales also see a notable increase during festive periods and cultural gatherings, especially coinciding with Bihu celebrations when the demand for earthenware escalates. Furthermore, the practice of barter trade persists, particularly in remote rural areas, where potters exchange their wares for essential goods such as rice, fish, and vegetables with neighboring Mising and Deori communities.

In recent times, governmental and non-governmental bodies have initiated efforts to boost the visibility of Majuli pottery through participation in handicraft expositions and trade fairs. Despite these initiatives, the adoption of online marketing strategies and digital platforms is considerably limited, largely attributable to insufficient infrastructure, low levels of digital literacy, and a lack of technological assistance among the local artisan population.

Distribution Channels

The distribution channels for Majuli pottery are currently underdeveloped. Most sales are confined to the Majuli district, with a small quantity extending to urban areas like Jorhat, Sivasagar, and Guwahati. Distribution relies on riverine transport or small trucks, contingent on the available infrastructure. The island's remoteness and vulnerability to seasonal floods pose significant logistical challenges, particularly during the monsoon season.

There is a notable absence of structured supply chains, wholesale intermediaries, and branded retail outlets for Majuli pottery. As a result, distribution is largely dependent on personal connections and informal networks. This situation has not only restricted the market reach of the craft but has also hindered the expansion of production and innovation in artistic styles.

The subsequent table presents a statistical summary of the marketing and distribution

trends identified within the Majuli pottery sector.

Table 2: Market distribution of pottery industry

Distribution Aspect	Details / Estimation
Local weekly markets	45.93 percent of total sales
Direct village level selling	14.81 percent of total sales
Middlemen/ Traders	24.44 percent of total sales
Exhibitions / Fairs	7.41 percent of total sales
Online / Digital Platforms	Less than 3.70 percent (Almost negligible)
Mode of transportation	70 percent by boat, 25 percent by cycle/van, 5 percent by motor vehicle
Major Selling Seasons	Bihu Festivals (30 percent of annual Sales), wedding Season (15 percent), winter fairs (10 percent)
Geographic spread of sales	75 percent within Majuli District, 20 percent in neighboring district, 5 percent beyond Assam
Role of barter system	Practiced by 35 percent of families involved in pottery
Access to formal marketing schemes	3 percent of artisans are linked with government marketing or promotion schemes

Source: Survey data

The marketing and distribution channels for Majuli's pottery industry are largely characterized by traditional, localized, and informal practices. This limits the economic potential for artisans and impedes the sector's overall development. Hindrances to market expansion include underdeveloped infrastructure, a lack of modern marketing knowledge, poor connectivity, and restricted access to digital technologies.

Strategic interventions, such as offering training in digital marketing, improving logistical capabilities, fostering cooperative organizations, and facilitating connections between artisans and regional/national craft outlets, could significantly enhance the efficiency of marketing and distribution within this culturally rich industry.

CONCLUSION

The pottery sector in Salmora village, Majuli district, offers a compelling illustration of community resilience, entrenched traditions, and economic adversity. Salmora is notable as one of India's few villages where pottery is crafted entirely by hand, eschewing the potter's wheel and thus preserving a unique method and significant cultural heritage.

In this community, pottery is more than a craft; it is a way of life transmitted across generations, fundamentally defining the village's identity and providing livelihoods for a substantial segment of its population.

However, this valuable heritage faces considerable socio-economic and environmental challenges. The potters' financial status is marked by meager incomes, precarious employment, and limited access to formal markets. Their economic vulnerability is exacerbated by dependence on seasonal demand, the logistical complexities of transportation in Majuli's riverine geography, and the impact of natural disasters like floods and erosion.

Consequently, despite their diligent work and dedication, many families grapple with financial instability and limited opportunities for advancement. This economic precarity has led to a decline in enthusiasm among younger generations to continue the craft, raising concerns about the long-term viability of Salmora's pottery tradition.

Research indicates a strong enduring cultural attachment to pottery production within the Salmora community, with many artisans expressing pride in their inherited trade, even when confronted by economic difficulties. This dedication presents an opportunity for revitalization, contingent upon the implementation of appropriate policy support, market linkages, financial assistance, and skill development initiatives. By integrating modern interventions with traditional expertise, the Salmora pottery industry can be revitalized, serving not only

as a source of economic activity but also as a heritage industry contributing to the cultural economy of Assam.

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