

# Socio-Economic Study on Black Pottery Artisans in West Jaintia Hills, Meghalaya, India

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## Abstract

The black pottery craft of the West Jaintia Hills in Meghalaya, India, represents a rich cultural heritage that affects local communities' socio-economic status. This study examines the rich heritage and economic significance of Indian handicrafts, with focus on black pottery from West Jaintia Hills in Meghalaya. Handicraft in India deeply intertwined with country's cultural and historical fabric, providing substantial rural employment and acting as a catalyst for poverty alleviation. The West Jaintia Hill Black Pottery, showcases the artisan's dedication to preserving ancient techniques without using modern advancements. This study examines the demographic, educational and economic aspect of nearly 86 artisans in Larnai and Tyrshang villages in WJH district. The finding underscores the need for youth engagement in traditional craft to ensure growth and cultural preservation. The study emphasizes the need for comprehensive legislative interventions and community-driven activities to protect and improve black pottery's socio-economic benefits. The survey aims to shed light on the enduring legacy and economic potential of versatile Indian handicraft, advocating for greater support and recognition of this becoming extinct craft.

**Keywords:** Black pottery, Heritage, Rural employment, Sung Valley, Traditional Craft, West Jaintia Hills

## Introduction

The crafts of India are characterized by their diversity, as well as their historical and religious significance [1]. The craft of each state in India is a reflection of the influence of various empires [2]. Crafts have been ingrained as a cultural and traditional practice in rural communities for centuries. Pottery is synonymous with the Indian landscape, and crafting items from black natural clay is one of the oldest technical skills developed in India [3]. The lightness, flexibility of natural clay products is suited to functionality as well as artistic applications, and the material has been used to create many important utilities as well as decorative, kitchen utensils, children's toys, etc. [4]. As everyone knows India is the country of Rich Traditional Industries; Pottery Craft is one of the best examples of traditional Industries [5], [6]. It provides huge rural employment opportunities. Pottery craft is another powerful sector to remove poverty in India. The handicraft sector has experienced significant growth since India adopted the Economic Philosophy of Inclusive Growth as a pathway to sustainability [7]. This approach emphasizes that for the stability of Indian economy, all sector must give equal importance including handicraft. Inclusive growth required attention to both rural and urban sector, handicraft provide vital income to rural communities, aiming to reduce poverty and ensure that India is independent in its handicraft requirements. A wide array of

household and decorative items is produced such as vases, pots teapots, bowls, vessels and many more [8]. The pottery industry also generates significant revenue for many rural and small-scale households [9]. The Indian handicraft sector is a significant contributor to the country's economy, with a strong presence in both domestic and international market [10]. However, it faces a range of challenges, including competition from small businesses, supply and demand issue, and managerial challenges [11]. Despite these challenges, the sector has the potential to meet global consumer demand and generate substantial foreign exchange for the country.

As far as black pottery concerned, the Kutch region of Gujarat is the birthplace of the art of black pottery [12]. It is hypothesized that it was transported to Nizamabad during the tenure of the Mughal Emperor, Aurangzeb [13]. The Qazi introduced the art and craft of black pottery from Kutch, Gujarat, where it was initially developed [12]. The unique color is a result of the procedure of firing the articles in an enclosed kiln with rice husks.

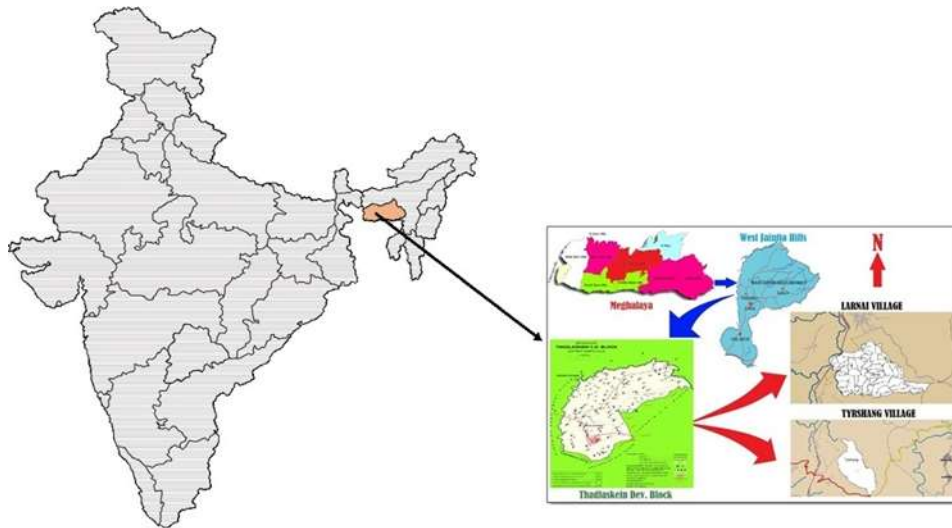
Meghalaya black pottery stands out from other black pottery crafts in India due to its unique clay and manufacturing process. The Sung Valley is situated in the West Jaintia Hills districts of the state of Meghalaya [14]. It is renowned for its black pottery and the numerous varieties of rice that are cultivated there. In reality, the Sung valley is referred to as the "rice bowl of Meghalaya." [15]. The state in the Northeast of India is home to a diverse array of naturally grown medicinal plants, spices, and botanicals due to its hilly terrain and pristine lands. For many years, the women of the villages have been involved in the production of pottery items that are locally referred to as khiew larnai or khiew ranei. The inhabitants of these regions are adept potters who create artistic and functional crafted items from earthen clay [16].

### **Selection of Area**

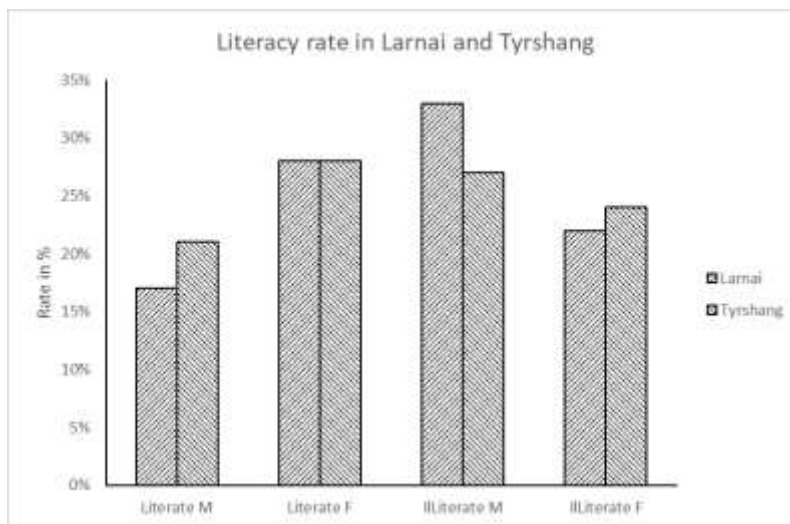
The proposed cluster is 20 km away from its district HQ, West Jaintia Hills and proposed two villages (Larnai & Tyrshang) are situated within about 10 kms radius of its Block Development Office Thadlaskein as shown in Fig. 1. The targeted people are belonging to Schedule Tribes (ST) only and they are popularly known as Pnar & Jaintia community who basically depend their livelihood upon pottery craft only. Unless their black pottery made headlines and established them on the indigenous clay pottery map of the country, they would have remained two unremarkable villages. Through centuries of tradition, the inhabitants of these two villages have refined their craft. The combined population of the two localities is 1,987 individuals. Remarkably the female outnumber the male (971 male and 1016 female) according to the 2011 census.

Larnai has a total population of 773 individuals, with 386 males and 387 females, as per the 2011 census. The literacy rate of Larnai village is 45.28%, with 37.43% of the population being male and 67.57% being female. There are about 114 houses in the village as shown in Fig. 2.

Tyrshang is a medium size village located in Thadlaskein Block of West Jaintia Hills, Meghalaya with total 179 families residing. According to the 2011 population census, the village has a total population of 1214, with 585 males and 629 females. Tyrshang village has lower literacy rate compared to Meghalaya as per the census, which is 49.51% as shown in Fig. 2.



**Fig. 1** Location of Meghalaya at North-Eastern state of Meghalaya and map of study area of Thalaskain Block, West Jaintia Hill, Meghalaya



**Fig. 2: Literacy rate in Larnai and Tyrshang**

A study of 140 families (110 families from Larnai and 30 families from Tyrshang) has been initiated. Out of total reported families, there are 86 traditional and registered pottery artisans found in those 2 villages (63 artisans from Larnai and 23 from Tyrshang), who are basically involved in this sector under Thadlaskein Block of West Jaintia Hills District, Meghalaya. A team of five social workers from the reported locality were trained to administer the structured questionnaire behind the personnel of MGIRI & the hired resource person. Each family selected for collection of data was interviewed by the team along with MGIRI staff and other associates.

**Table 1. Demography of West Jaintia Hills Dist., Meghalaya [17]**

<i>S N</i>	<i>Particulars / Demographic Label</i>	<i>Value</i>
<b>1</b>	<b>Land</b>	
	Dist. Area	1693 sq.km.
	Civil Sub Division	1 (Amlarem)

	Rural Development & Community Blocks	3 (Thadlaskein, Laskein and Almarem)
	Towns numbers	1 (Jowai)
	Villages numbers	293
	Households numbers	34401
	Assembly Constituencies numbers	5
<b>2</b>	<b>Population</b>	
	Population (Total)	270352
	population (Urban)	28420
	Literacy rate	63.23%
	Density	159.69 sq.km.
<b>3</b>	<b>Other Important data</b>	
	Hospitals numbers	Govt.=1 & Private=1
	Health centres numbers (Community)	3
	Health centres numbers (Primary)	12
	Dispensaries numbers	1
	Police stations numbers	4
	Beat house numbers	1
	Police outposts numbers	3
	Women cell numbers	1
	Patrolling post numbers	1
	Fair price shops numbers	219
	Wholesaler numbers	19
	Post Office numbers	1

### Research Methodology

The present study was conducted on socio-economic conditions of black potter's of Larnai and Tyrshang village of West Jaintia Hills district of Meghalaya. A total of 86 artisans were selected for purposive sampling and interview scheduled was used for the collection of data. Apart for this, interaction with various cluster stakeholder like master artisans, member of youth groups, traders and other concerned government official to take the real time data of black pottery craft and artisans. The study was based on both primary and secondary method. Both quantitative as well as qualitative data has been used in this study.



**Fig. 3. Interaction with different stakeholder during the survey**

### Making process of Black Pottery

Black pottery, also known as Khiew-Ranei, is a traditional craft produced from black clay and serpentine stone. This distinctive kind of pottery is distinguished not only by its materials, but also by ancient skills passed down through generations. The handcrafted pots are recognized for their unique beauty and durability. The making of black pottery is labor-intensive and mostly a community effort, with women creating the pots and men gathering the raw materials.

The procedure begins with the collection of raw material i.e. black clay, which can be found at depths of 40-50 feet in Sung Valley and serpentine stone found near Sung valley. Each craftsman collects approximately 1.25 tons of clay per year, which is stored in backyard pits and protected with tarpaulin sheets. Serpentine stone, found nearby, is crushed into a powder and combined with clay in a 1:0.1 ratio (1 kilogram clay to 100 g serpentine). This mixture increases the strength of the finished product. The clay is then hand-molded into basic shapes mostly cylindrical without using chemicals or machines. Following molding, the pieces are dried in the shade until they reach a leather-hard condition, at which point they are burnished for a smooth finish and burnt using open-air wood-burning techniques. The burning process reinforces the clay and keeps it from breaking.

Instead of blackening the pottery in a kiln, the artists utilize Sohlia tree bark (*Myrica nagi*). The bark is crushed and combined with water to form a milky solution. After fired, the pottery is dipped into this solution, which instantaneously transforms it into a permanent black hue using a natural dyeing process known as the "miracle cold process." After finished products will be packed using natural materials source locally.

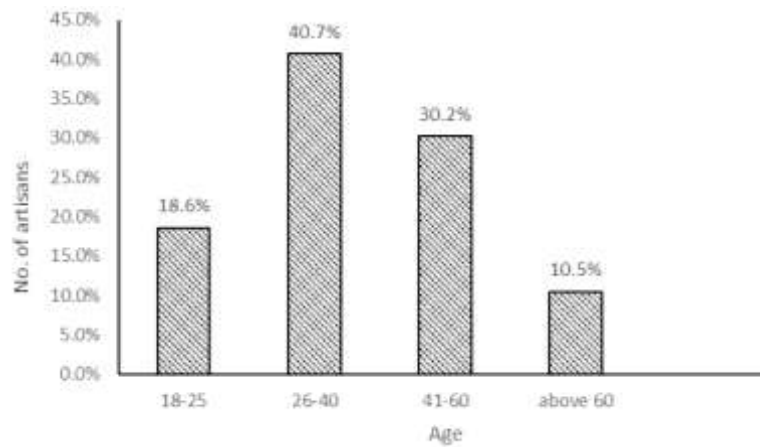


Fig. 4. Making process of black pottery

## Results and discussion

### Age of artisans

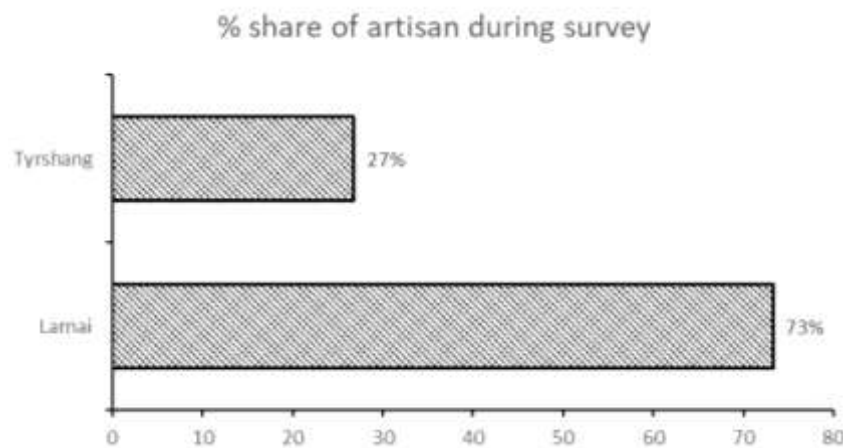
As shown in Fig. 5, the age distribution of potter artisans has been classified into four categories: 18-25, 26-40, 41-60, and above 60. The survey results shows that the majority of artisans fall within the 26-40 years age group. This age group of artisans has shared 41 % among all category of age group. The age group of 41-60 years represents the second highest number of artisans i.e. 30.2 % approximately. Whereas young potter artisans, i.e. age group of 18-25 years, shared 11% and remaining artisans above 60 % shared 11% of total surveyed artisans.



**Fig. 5: Number of artisans falls in different age group**

### Artisan share in two villages

During survey, the discussions with government officials and various stakeholders, including artisans, field officers from DCIC & MBDU, NGOs, etc. a history of the craft's origin emerged. It was observed that this craft originated in Larnai, and during the 19th century, a segment of the Larnai population migrated to Tyrshang village, as documented in the MBDU report. The Lumdiengiong locality of Tyrshang village, also known as Lum Khyriam, emerged as the exclusive area within the village where individuals are actively engaged in this craft [18].



**Fig. 6: Percentage share of artisans in both villages during survey**

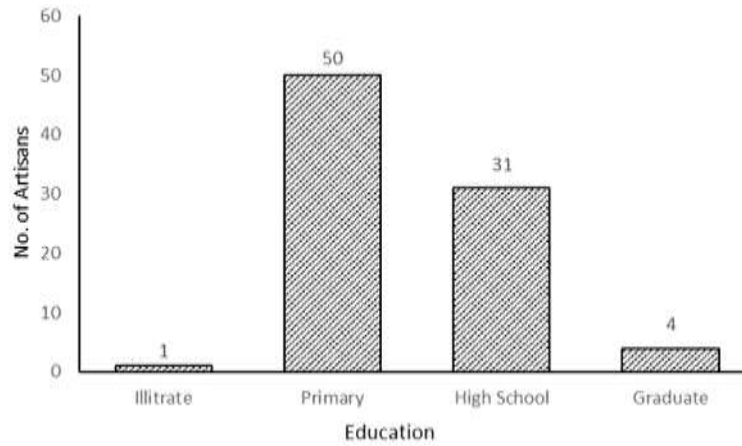
According to documentation and evidences found during survey, it was the Shylla clan that migrated to Tyrshang during 19th century, and bringing with them the art of black pottery. Since then, this skill has been passed down through generations within the same community through mother to daughter, becoming an enduring tradition within the community [18].

A maximum proportion, i.e. approximately 73% of artisans, are from Larnai village, who performed this craft. The remaining artisans are from Tyrshang village, as shown in Fig. 6, illustrating the distribution of artisans among the two villages.

### Education of artisans

According to the 2011 census data from the Government of India, the literacy rate in the state of Meghalaya is recorded at 75.48%. According to the 2011 census data from the Government of India, the

literacy rate in the state of Meghalaya is recorded at 75.48%. During the survey, it is found that literacy rate among the artisans are very high i.e. 98.33 % . As shown in fig. 7, it is also found that 58.14 % artisans have completed their primary education, while 4.65 % have completed their graduate degree. Whereas, 31 % artisans completed their higher education. In spite of high literacy rate, young once is not showing their interest in perusing the career in this craft.

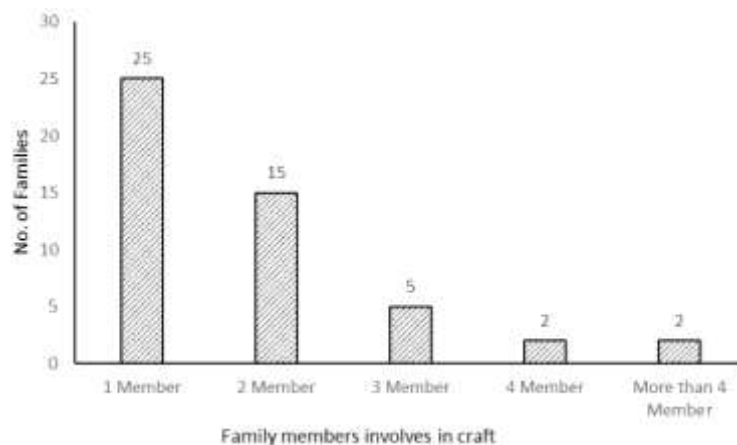


**Fig. 7: Education of artisans**

**Family members involved in the sector**

In the course of the conducted survey, a comprehensive participation of 86 artisans was observed. Despite this, a notable aspect emerged concerning the overall involvement of families, considering both villages under consideration, which amounted to only 49 in total as shown in Fig. 8. Within these families, a diverse pattern was identified, 25 of them exclusively comprised a solitary artisan, with the other family members seeking their livelihood through labour jobs unrelated to artisanal activities.

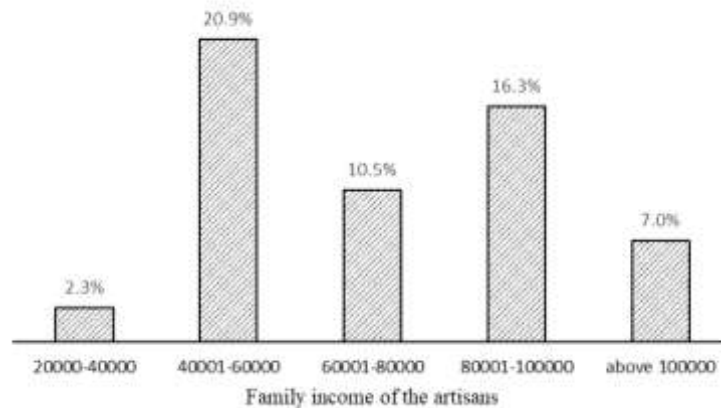
Conversely, in the remaining 24 families, a different structure was observed. In these survey, two or more family members were actively engaged in this craft activities, as shown Figure 8. This variation in family structures and the engagement in artisanal pursuits adds clarification to the understanding of the socio-economic structure of these two villages



**Fig. 8: Family members involve in a business**

### Economic status of Artisans

From the survey, it was found that potter artisans in Larnai and Tyrshang villages are mostly engage in pottery as their main source of income for their livelihood. Fig. 9 shows that family income of Potters ranges from Rs. 20,000 to above Rs. 100,000 annually. The data also reveals that about 21% of the household earn their annual net income from pottery in a range of Rs. 40001 to Rs. 60000 and about 16 % Potter were earning between Rs. 80,001 to Rs. 100,000 annually. The income revealed is excluding the secondary income of their families.



**Fig. 9: Family income of the craftsmen**

### Conclusions

The survey of potter artisans in Larnai and Tyrshang villages reveals key insights into their demographics, family involvement, and economic conditions. The majority of artisans fall within the 26-40 years age group (41%), with significant representation in the 41-60 years group (32%), and younger artisans (18-25 years) at 19.6%. The survey identified 49 families engaged in pottery, with 25 families having only one artisan and remaining 24 families involving members in the craft. Pottery is the main source of income for most artisans, with income level ranging from Rs. 20,000 to above Rs. 100,000 annually. Specifically, 21% of household earn between Rs. 40,001 to Rs. 60,000, and 16% earn Rs. 80,000 to Rs. 100,000. Despite of high literature rate of 98.83% among artisans, younger, educated individual show limited interest in pursuing pottery as a main business. From number of family members involves in this craft, shows the social aspect of the craft and reliant upon artisanal work for their sustenance.

To ensure the sustainability and growth of this traditional craft, it is crucial to engage the youth, provide economic support, promote community programs, and integrate artisanal training into the education system. These steps will help preserve the cultural heritage and enhance the livelihoods of potter artisans in these villages.

### Acknowledgement

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