



INDIGENOUS POTTERY MAKING AMONG THE APATANI: A STUDY OF THE ZIRO VALLEY IN ARUNACHAL PRADESH, INDIA

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Abstract: Arunachal Pradesh is known for its rich cultural heritage, each tribe exhibiting their way of life based on their own indigenous knowledge system. The Apatanis of Ziro valley, since time immemorial have developed and utilized their crafting skills in order to address their daily requirements. The skill of home crafts existed to this day and every household still continues to weave their own cloths, utility baskets, utensils, hunting and agricultural tools etc. Among the skills that the tribesmen possesses, pottery is one the significant art practiced by the Apatani tribe, which although is not commonly practiced by all members. Pottery items were extensively used by the tribes men till the advent of modern utensils. The present paper is an attempt to understand the manufacturing process, various types and classification of pottery used among the Apatanis.

Keywords – Apatanis, cultural heritage, Indigenous, Pottery

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Pottery in the Indian subcontinent has a long history and is one of the most palpable parts of Indian art. Pottery has for long time been closely associated with human civilization and earliest evidence of pottery in India can be traced back to the villages of Mehargarh dating back to Harappan culture (3300 BCE-1500BCE). Further, Pottery has also been discovered in early Lahuradewa towns of Ganga valley and later in the Indus Valley Civilization (Patil, 2023). It is a cultural art form that is still widely practiced among different tribes in India. Pottery is also one of the oldest conventional art form, which entails making objects of clay and hardening them with heat. These techniques of pottery art and their day to day uses share a strong Indigenous knowledge system, which have been passed on from one generation to another. The primary material of pottery is clay; although different styles have emerged in past few years and the art have witnessed several changes.

The North Eastern India considered as terra incognita with an ethnic mosaic of numerous tribal groups, is located strategically at the junction of South Asia, East Asia and South East Asian countries. Pottery making tradition of this region has been traced back to the Neolithic period in Northeast India as attested in stratified context at Daojali Hading in North Cachar hills of Assam. Numerous techniques including paddle and anvil, coil building and mat impressed were used to prepare earthenware which continued through the later periods as well until today, as can be observed among many present day potter communities (Garima, 2020).

Arunachal Pradesh like other states of the Indian Union also exhibits rich socio-cultural practices among different tribes of the state. Down the ages the people of the state have developed and utilized their crafting skills in order to address their daily requirements. The skill of home crafts existed to this day and every household still continues to weave their own cloths, utility baskets, utensils, hunting and agricultural tools etc. Although only few tribes in the state are associated with pottery art, like the Monpas, Membas, Khampiti and the Apatanis. Prof. Haimendorf writes 'the Apatanis- in many ways-stands on the cultural and economic level of Neolithic man's mastery over nature' (Haimendorf). The Apatanis have also been since early times have developed their own ways of traditional manufacturing items of their day to day use. Although the art of pottery was practiced only among few villages in the region, but the pottery items were extensively used by the tribes men till the advent of modern utensils. The present paper is an attempt to understand the manufacturing process, various types and classification of pottery used among the Apatanis.

2.1 METHODOLOGY AND AREA OF STUDY

The present study was concentrated Lower Subansiri district of Arunachal Pradesh also known as Ziro valley. While collecting relevant information, the study had covered all the villages of the Apatani valley namely Bamin-michi, Hong, Biila, Dutta, Hija, Hari and Mudang-Tage. As the present study is mainly based on the ethno-historical, so both primary and secondary data were collected primarily through oral tradition by conducting field works in the Apatani valley. Both open ended and closed ended interview based on questionnaire has been used in collecting primary data. According to the availability of archives, Ethnographic and historical accounts were also used in order to draw comprehensive understanding of subject.

Further, for secondary sources, both published and unpublished works were used as and when required. Journals and other research articles published by Research department, Arunachal Pradesh, Unpublished thesis and Apatani Literary and Cultural society (ALCS), providing insight into the ethno-history and oral history were also taken into consideration. In order to collect relevant first hand information on the topic, special discussions with old age members of the society were exclusively interview.

3.1 INDIGENOUS POTTERY

The most recent archaeological excavations were conducted at *Piichang Putu* and *Bamin Michi* villages in the year 2022 by the Arunachal Pradesh Archaeological Department in collaboration with Pamu Yalang Group (a local NGO). The excavations found dozens of pottery items and pottery making tools, knives, and ornaments (Eastern Sentinel 2022). The findings are very crucial from the point that there are no systematic records about the history of pottery making, but through these findings, a systematic ancient history of pottery making by the Apatani people can be constructed.

During pre-modern period the Apatanis had extensively used earthen pottery for various purposes like cooking, dyeing and other rituals. Apatanis also had the tradition of making earthen clay pots, locally known as *Deking/Bamin Piichang*. It is significant to note that amongst the Apatanis, pottery is confined to certain clans of a village. Dr Furer Haimendorf observed, ‘Among the Apatanis pots are made only in one village ie; Bamin-Michi and even there only by certain clans. Many Apatanis therefore purchase pots from such Nyishi villages as Joram and Talo, paying usually in rice (Haimendorf, 1962) The technique used by the Apatanis and Nyishi potters is same, the potters starts with a large lump of clay, hollows it out and then, holding an oval stone against the inner wall, hammers against the outside wall with a wooden baton’ (Haimendorf, 1962). Since the earthen pots were made only in the village of Bamin-Michi, therefore this pottery were known as *Bamin Piichang*. And the earthen pot makers were called *piichan punii*.

4.1 MANUFACTURING PROCESS

Haimendorf describes the technique used by the Apatani for pottery work in these words: “the potters start with a large lump of clay, hollows it out and then, holding an oval stone against the inner wall, hammers against the outside wall with a wooden baton”.

The potters through their non-verbal feel recognize the quality of the clay. Thus, the collection of clay forms the first stage of pottery production. In Apatani valley, the clay known as *dekin* was fetched in baskets by the potters from the elevated lands locally called *tanyang puttu* and *yakha puttu* respectively. Due to this practice the site gained the name *piichan putu*. Prior to it the area had been locally known as *namii* which means elevated land (Tailang 2016). The collected clay was further cleaned to remove any impurities such as sand, gravel and pebbles etc.

Secondly, the next technique employed by the Apatanis was pounding of clay material followed by moulding it in desired shape manually. The lump of clay was vigorously thrashed by women folk with wooden pestle near the resource sites. While thrashing, the potters would sprinkle water from time to time on clay kept in large plate stone.

Thirdly, the clay from large plate stone was shaped into crude round shapes, locally termed as *alin* by moulding, pressing and slicing it. The lump of clay was then left for a day or two to oust the air pockets present in it.

Fourthly, on the following day, the potters hollow out the lump of clay by using *kele*¹ and a baton to create hollow or depression in the centre of clay, the wooden baton is referred locally as *piichan dannani*. The earthen pot makers would tenderly taper the outer wall of the pot with paddle while pressing the stone against the inner wall of the pot and shape it according to their needs. Finally the earthen pots were dried in the shade.

Finally, the last important technique employed by the potters to give sturdy to the clay object is by using firing or heating technique. The earthen pots are placed near the side of fire and rice broth² was poured inside the earthen pot to check for any cracks in the earthen pot. After heating, the pot is taken out and kept in the corner for cooling. Thus, in this way the potters managed to create inevitably useful earthen pots having high utility value.

5.1 Classification of pottery

The pottery of Apatani is classified on the basis of traditional utilities, taboos and significance.

a. *Deking piichan*

Deking means clay in Apatani language. This is a clay pot used for cooking purpose. It is made by molding the clay into a shape of pot with the help of hand and by hitting it repeatedly with a piece of wooden baton until the desired shape of pot is achieved. Then it is further dried with the help of heat of fire.

b. *Niire Piichan*

It is the smallest sized pot of Apatani community, which is used only for bathing new born baby and cooking in this earthen pot is strictly forbidden.³ In olden times, everyone did not possess this pot therefore; they borrowed it from their relatives whenever a baby was born. It implies that each clan (*Uru*) had a single *Niire piichan* for this purpose. Though, the affluent families had their own *Niire piichan*. If someone broke it accidentally, they would be reprimanded strongly (Hage, 1998).

c. *Pyali Piichan*

This clay pot is used for storing mature rice seeds to be sown in next agricultural season. The 'cow dung mixed in the clay for preparing this storage works as an excellent insecticide and clay maintains the cool temperature of the storage bins lower than the containers made of other materials' (Gupta 2008). This indigenous method of preservation acted as treatment required to protect rice seeds from all kinds of pests and other micro-organism (Tailang 2016)

¹It is a sharpened edge bamboo stick of 16cm and 2 to 3 cm width

² Which is locally known as *pilah-ala*.

³ As narrated by Hage Mamung, age 56 years of Hari village.

d. Ahi Piichan

Ahi means blood, and the pots are used for cooking blood meal of *Mithun* during *Murung* celebration in the month of January and also for cooking pig blood during *Myoko* festival in March. During *Myoko* festival, which involves rigorous rituals and ceremonies, pig sacrifice forms one of the most important rituals of the Apatanis. It is also obligatory for each household to sacrifice a pig as offering to divine couple *kirii* and *Kirlo*, who are associated with *Myoko* ritual. After sacrifice the blood is collected in an earthen pot specially meant for such occasion and kept for two days. On the third day it is boiled and shared among the members of 'tulu'. At the end of the *myoko* festival, in order to open ritual taboo, a fish called *ngliyan ngyi*⁴ is collected from the river and is boiled in this earthen pot, where the blood was kept in the belief that it will purify the pot and retain its sanctity (Hage 1998). The ritual is considered as purification and marks the end of *Myoko* celebration.⁵ However, the pig blood is never boiled in pots made up of metals. Hence, *Ahi piichan* is considered sacred and has a significant place during rituals.

e. Biyu- Bikykhiiin

The Apatanis believes in the concept of *yalo* (soul), i.e; life after death. To ensure that the *yalo* do not remain hungry in his afterlife, food is cooked in *Biyu-Bikykhiiin piichan* during funeral ceremony solely for the departed soul. The food is not cooked by the family members of deceased person, but by a grave-digger or a man in charge of disposing of the dead body, locally called *Kiidi bulyan* who are appointed by the clan members (Pura, 2004).

f. O piichan

This is the largest clay pot possessed by the Apatanis. This earthen pot is normally used for preparing 'O'⁶ an alcoholic beverage and also due to its large size it is often used for cooking food and meat during childbirth and marriage ceremony.

g. Uie Piichan

This earthen pot is used for cooking meat especially the heart and tongue of *Mithuns* and pigs, a symbolic offering usually associated with rituals during *Murung* and *Myoko* festivals, in order to appease and bid off farewell to *Uie* (spirits), which marks the end of festival. The size and measurements of the heart and tongue is taken before and after cooking with the help of string like material made out of *tajer*.⁷ The size of meat which is cooked in *Uie piichan* is expected to remain same size before and after cooking, if it vary, it implies that the existence of omissions or commissions in the mode of performance of the festival. Once the festival ends, the pot is kept aside in the corner of the house where it is not used for any other purpose (Tailang, 2016)

⁴*Ngliyanngyi* is local river fish, belonging to *Schizotorax* Fish species.

⁵ As narrated by Hage Hinda of Hari village.

⁶ O is an alcoholic beverage.

⁷ It is a type of bamboo grown wildly in forest.

h. Sankhi Piichan/Ahu piichan

This pot is solely used for dyeing purpose. The Apatanis obtained dye from plants *Symplocos paniculata* locally called *sankhi yahni*, collected from forest. Prior to availability of yarn in different colors originally, the Apatani weavers used indigenous dyes prepared from leaves, creepers and local plants resources. The coarse cotton yarns were organically dyed in their traditional ways from various plants species such as *Tamin* (*Rubiocordifolia*; which imparted red–orange colour) and *Sankhii* (*Eurya acuminata variegated euprista*; imparting brownish-yellow colour) to colour the yarn in *pyamin* (yellow color), black and *Pyalan* (red colour).

Ahu piichan is kept at *paro-piiri* (chicken coop) in the adjacent corner before the entrance door of traditional Apatani house.

i. Chanko piichan

it is a broken pot shards, which has multiple usage such roasting of maize, rice powder and also it was used as a protection cover to the firewood left in the hearth before going to sleep, as a mechanism to prevent fire accident. In the recent times, alternative to clay pots such as steel, aluminium, glass and plastic products have substituted the use of earthen pots.

The Apatanis also have tradition of making attractive clay models of animals which are used as toys (Tailang, 2016).

5.1 Concluding Remarks

One of the distinct feature of Arunachal Pradesh is that despite the existence of many ethnic tribes, these tribes have to a greater extent successfully preserved their cultural practices till the present time. The indigenous knowledge system plays a vital role in preserving the cultural aspects of tribal life. The Apatanis like other tribe's in the state have also preserved their rich cultural practices since time immemorial and have passed it from one generation to another. As already mentioned in the above discussions, that pottery making was not practiced by all the Apatani tribes men commonly, therefore the pottery art have also in due course of time and with the advent of modern utensils did not flourish. Other activities related to craft making- for instance, crafts related to cane and bamboo (*bifi minii*) are at present very demanded and also share a good amount of market.

Further, the art of pottery making among the Apatani community could not withstand the waves of modernity as during the post-independence period, as due to many developmental activities which linked the region with the outer world, the tribes men were more inclined towards cheaper, finer, durable utensils made out of aluminium, steel and plastic etc., thereby limiting the use of pottery products and coercing the potters to gradually swift away from their profession as there was 'lack of adoptive strategies to survive'. Pottery Art has proved to be important because it is an enduring resource for archaeologists and historians particularly to understand the past and reconstruction of history.

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