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Clay, Culture And Community: A Comprehensive Study Of Potters In Kerala

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ABSTRACT

In India, pottery making dates back countless years. The first group to disengage from food production and engage in a full-time profession was likely the group of potters, who were also likely the first engineers in the history of human civilisation. Along with the ability to control fire, the potter's wheel was a revolutionary technology that had a significant impact on how humans evolved. The traditional potters have historically been among the most underprivileged groups in Indian culture. This is a kind of human creation which is as old as human civilisation. Pottery serves as a means of artistic expression and is highly significant in conveying traditional wisdom and information about human history. Originally thought to be a craft for poor men, it has gained access and a distinct identity among all social strata over time thanks to its aesthetic appeal. Potters typically reside in communities in rural interior villages in Kerala. Each village is associated with a specific caste of potters. There are traditional potters in each of Kerala's 14 districts

Keywords; pottery, problems, kusava, ceramic, dropout

INTRODUCTION

Pottery is derived from the French word 'Poetic' or the Latin word 'Potium'. Its literary meaning is "drinking vessel." Pottery refers to all things composed of clay and solidified by fire. Making clay artefacts is a distinct art form. It has been an essential aspect of human life from the dawn of time. From an Indian perspective, the Neolithic, also known as the New Stone Age, was a transformative time. During this time, man established a stable way of life, domesticated animals, initiated small-scale agriculture, and started producing pottery. Pottery was present around the Nile River before 10000 years ago, according to historical data. This is a cottage industry centred around clay. This industry relies on local raw materials and technology. The people involved in this industry are facing different kinds of challenges or problems like shortage of raw materials, manpower, and lack of space to dry the formed pottery, firing pottery, to store the finished goods along with the different raw materials.

Even before technology created a space for science communication, it disseminated the information. The people who devote their artistic minds to this particular branch of handicraft, which gives the soil life, are those who are passionate about creating pottery and terracotta. The cultural and creative industries are among the world's fastest expanding sectors. They cover a wide range of subjects and rely on knowledge, creativity, and innovation gained from local cultures and civilizations. Many different types of earthenware, ceramics, and porcelains are now employed for everyday use, scientific investigations, and electrical devices. The pottery industry is not very huge now, but it operates efficiently through small scale

cottage industrial organisations. Pottery artists are typically from rural areas.

The ceramic industry produces a variety of products. The traditional objects of the ceramic industries are products made from locally available raw materials and employing traditional technology. These items are made of clay, and they are coloured using red clay. The contemporary items produced by the pottery industry are ceramic objects. Different chemicals or glazes are employed in this ceramic work. These products are produced using contemporary machinery and tools. Items like cups, plates, and other decorative materials and gift items are examples of ceramic products. These goods are also exported as handicrafts to several nations

The people involved in this industry are facing different kinds of challenges or problems like shortage of raw materials, manpower, and lack of space to dry the formed pottery, firing pottery, to store the finished goods along with the different raw materials. This sector is being influenced by changes in lifestyle and other replacement items. The intermediates make good profits, but they confront challenges such as product damage, seasonal demand, transportation issues, and so on. It demonstrates that the allure of this industry is gradually fading as a result of numerous other issues. As a result, this industry faces extinction. It was discovered that all of the respondents have been involved in this business since their parents' time. The makers are dealing with raw material, storage, and fire place issues. Similarly, in the present environment, there is no industry expansion. There is no organised group to solve problems relating to this industry.

CLAY

All of the communities in all of the districts prefer to gather clay from sources that they are familiar with. They used to gather it from the nearby paddy fields without paying any money in the past, but today they are required to pay the landlords. The analysis of the selection and processing of the raw materials used in their manufacturing serves as the beginning point for the technological study of earthen wares. Clay is typically extracted from paddy fields since there is good grade material there. Clay needs to be prepared with both considerable physical effort and good skill. Children and women must also participate in this effort. Some people in this network of potters specialise in trading pots solely. The wide dispersal of raw materials and their weak financial position necessitates that their small requirements of raw materials need to be made available at the needed time and close to their work place. It is suggested to set up raw material depots at suitable places to facilitate uninterrupted supply of standard raw material to the artisans in appropriate quantity and quality at reasonable rates. In such circumstance the state governments should supply raw material at cheaper rates which will encourage artisans to continue their production. While some potters transport their goods to far-off locations, community members in the

Trivandrum district *Velan* sell their goods at the closest markets. The outside of pots are rough in North Kerala, nevertheless. The material used by a potter, it is universally referred to as "clay" in its unfired state. Whether it is clay sourced from a backyard or a factory-made mixture with a lower clay content, the term "clay" is used to describe the material before it is fired.⁵ Because of the wide distribution of raw materials and their poor financial condition, their tiny raw material requirements must be made accessible at the required time and proximity to their work site. Currently, Kerala produces three different types of pottery products. They are: pottery manufactured by hand, pottery made on a wheel, and pottery made by a mould. The *Velan* community, however, uses "spokeless wheels" in Trivandrum, Kollam, and Ernakulam. Traditional tools for polishing and colouring are used. There is neolithic pottery production evidence from all around India, both handcrafted and wheel-thrown. This powerful art form advanced through technological advancements throughout the Indus Valley Civilization **3**. All of these pots are finished and polished with specially created stones, and the colouring is red mud. Earthenwares were once made by potters and used for both cooking and storing food and other objects. All groups also utilised pots for rites at the temples. All of the villages utilised these products often. Some of them manufacture kitchenware, flower pots, studio ceramic products, etc. Typically, a woman spins the horizontal wheel, and the male uses his

hands to delicately sculpt and shape it to make the vessel⁴

CULTURE

This sector has made significant contributions to the creation of traditional and cultural goods. The customary products of the pottery industry are connected to everyday objects in addition to cultural and religious practises. In Tamil Nadu, *Aynar* figures are placed outside villages to protect them from evil spirits, with each area producing its own unique forms. The significance of these clay figures lies in their ability to embody and preserve local traditions and beliefs. They are not just decorative objects but are imbued with spiritual and ritualistic meaning. They serve as a visual representation of the cultural practices and beliefs of their respective regions. The variety and intricacy of shapes distinguish ornamental porcelain (such as vases, statuettes, bas reliefs, etc.) from everyday porcelain. Since it requires individual painting and physical application of the artist's design, this sort of porcelain is produced using a variety of casting procedures ⁷. The majority of the time, potters do not have good living circumstances. A shrine or temple that is shared by all the households is present in the majority of the communities. The majority of potters worship *Maariamamma* or *Karuppuswamy*. In Tamil Nadu, *Aynar* figures are placed outside villages to protect them from evil spirits, with each area producing its own unique forms. The significance of these clay figures lies in their ability to embody and preserve local traditions and beliefs. They are not just decorative objects but are imbued with spiritual and ritualistic meaning. They serve as a visual representation of the cultural practices and beliefs of their respective regions.

The Attukal Bhagavati temple located at Trivandrum, South Kerala is famous for the ritual and it commemorates Kannaki. Offering *ponkala* to the goddesses is the most important aspect of the ceremony. *Ponkala* is made from cooked rice, jiggery, and coconut. *Ponkala* is traditionally prepared in earthen pots, while metal pots are sometimes used in their place. Thousands of people visit the Attukal Bhagavati temple because of the popularity of this ceremony. The potters are creating a new vessel for this purpose called the *ponkalakalam* (a mix of the two terms *ponkala*, which denotes the ceremony, and *kalam*, which means vessel). The introduction of new forms into the assemblage in this manner demonstrates that potters' historically acquired knowledge and skill base expand to satisfy the demands generated as a result of changing cultural circumstances. The utilitarian use of clay vessels span from storage, food preparation (e.g., soaking, grinding), cooking (e.g., boiling, roasting), serving, and individual eating or drinking to socio political and ceremonial. The later non-utilitarian functions include gifting and using as a prestige object to demonstrate accomplishment or dominance.

COMMUNITY

The *Kusavans*, a community known as *Velan* in the Madura region. It mentions an inscription associated with the *Kusavans* that was discovered in Conjeeveram. In other languages, *Kumbhar* is known as *Kulal* (Sanskrit), *Kumhar* (Hindi), *Kusuvarya* (Tamil and Malayalam), *Kumbhar Rog* (Odyssey), *Kumbhrar* (Talagu), and so on. *Kumhar's* honesty regarding his duties pleased God Brahma, who bestowed the title 'Prajapati' on him. *Kumbhar* has thus referred to *Prajapati* since that time." Potters typically reside in communities in rural interior villages in Kerala. Each village is associated with a specific caste of potters. Depending on their place of origin and patterns of migration, they can be classified into 12 different communities, including the *Velan*, *Pandy Velan*, *Odan*, *Andhur Nair*, *Andhra Nair*, *Adi Andhra*, *Tamil Kumbaran*, *Mannudayan*, *Urali Kumbaran*, *Kulala*, and *Kusava*. The names *Kulala*, *Andhur Nair*, and *Andhra Nair* are essentially interchangeable. Even though one group of potters in the Palakkad district goes by the name *Andhur Nair*, they are referred to as *Kulala* in the government gazette. Some Potter groups in the Kozhikode district are referred to as *Kusava*. We have identified potter groups in each of Kerala's 14 districts through study. Idukki has the fewest potter colonies, and Palakkad district has the most. When compared to other underdeveloped communities, the social status of potter communities is relatively low. There aren't many professionals in any of these places. The traditional potters in Central Kerala belong to *Velar* or *Kushava* community. The potters usually work in a small shed constructed on the backyard of their houses. They mainly

work in the summer season for easy drying of the pots. Pottery making is a family based occupation. At present, men in most of the traditional families of potters are engaged in other jobs that pay better. The family's female members will make the pots, while the male member will market the goods. Typically, rural pottery production was a small-scale endeavour with a limited distribution target for daily usage. In fact, products included roofing tiles, votive terracottas for rural shrines, and household goods. Among the community of ceramic artists, the value of originality in creating glazes for ceramic decoration has grown significantly.

Few people work for the government or even in the organised private sector. Additionally, these people have subpar living conditions. Women participate more in pottery work than in other traditional occupations, regardless of towns and colonies. The main techniques used to acquire information regarding the socioeconomic situation of the potter villages were individual interviews and group discussions. The majority of people who leave their traditional occupations work in physical labour, agriculture, masonry, building, etc. Some also work in low-paying menial positions in stores and other institutions. No one in this neighbourhood who was professionally qualified could be located. In this town, graduates are quite uncommon. The majority of youngsters in this town drop out of school after first grade. Only a relatively small percentage of pupils among the children have completed higher education or professional programmes. Regardless of where they live, potters are uneducated and underprivileged economically. The potters are both educationally and economically illiterate. The potter's group lives in extremely harsh conditions. The ceramic trade is in serious trouble.

Following are the main reasons for drop out from one's traditional profession:

High drudgery in the work

- * High cost of production, cost of clay and fire wood
- * Lack of sufficient demand for products
- * Lack of proper remuneration* Lack of daily earnings
- * Scarcity of clay
- * Perceived inferior status of their profession.
- * Inflow of pots from neighboring state causing reduction in quantity of sales and profit.

Conclusion

One of the prominent artisans is the potter. Making pottery is a really fine art. One of the oldest industries is pottery production. Human evolution has been facilitated by tiny inventions. Ceramics as an art form are raised alongside civilization. The consumer culture was fundamentally altered by the invention of new materials, particularly plastic polymers. The traditional ceramic business was negatively harmed by widespread mechanisation and mass production methods. The community of potters has been receiving support from Local Self-Governments in the form of potters' wheels and financial aid to buy clay, firewood, etc. in the evolving circumstances to ensure the survival of the craft. It is recommended that raw material depots be established in strategic locations to ensure an uninterrupted supply of standard raw materials to craftsmen in adequate quantity and quality at competitive pricing. In such cases, state governments should supply raw materials at lower prices to encourage craftspeople to continue producing. They are unable to successfully translate product demand into earnings. The scarcity of raw materials is their most serious problem. A culture must be developed as part of the safeguarding of health and heritage. The potters must receive proper assistance in all areas. Whatever the strategy, a helping hand from the government is required to maintain this craft and livelihood. Unless and until the government decides that this ancient industry should be preserved and traditional craftspeople be safeguarded, this trade will gradually fade away. Pottery is a valuable resource for reconstructing the socioeconomic structures of various eras and societies

because it offers hints about trade networks and cultural practises in addition to technological prowess. Various artefacts created by artisans throughout their civilization have contributed to a work of art and provided insight into the historical context.

End notes

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