

POTTERS AND POTTERY FROM EASTERN INDIA: AN ETHNO-ARCHAEOLOGICAL STUDY ON CULTURAL HERITAGE

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Introduction

Pots are the most important cultural items for human beings. From Mesolithic period onwards Pottery appeared in the material culture of man. It appeared in full-fledged form with the appearance of Neolithic culture. Earliest pottery was handmade and crude. Wheel made pottery appeared in Neolithic times. Earthen potteries are equally important today in India. Large number of people in India use earthen ware to store water, food and other items as well as for cooking. Pot making is a specialized craft. The craftsmen traditionally belong to a specific caste group.

Objective

Prehistoric potteries hardly give any idea about their makers. Research was carried out among the modern potters to learn about the socio-economic condition of the pot makers and to know about the methods of manufacturing earthen pots. The purpose is to make an ethno-archaeological understanding of the past, especially of the pots and potters.

Material and Method

For this research the tri-junction area of three states, West Bengal, Bihar and Orissa of eastern India was chosen. Reason for such selection was that the area is rich in prehistoric sites. A large number of potters' villages are located in the region and the area is the homeland for tribal communities who are the main customers for pots but are without the skill of pot making.

For this work anthropological methods were followed. Observation method was followed for recording the total process of pot making, starting with collection of raw materials, processing of the pots, firing and finally marketing. Information about the potters was gathered with the help of both structured and unstructured schedules. Interview, narration and case history methods were also applied. Prehistoric potteries, those found from the sites located in the research area were studied meticulously. Characteristic features of the prehistoric potteries were compared with the potteries used and manufactured in the region in modern times.

Result

Potters of the area belong to a Hindu caste group known as *kumar* or *kumbhakar*. Within the caste there are sub-castes and are showing Social hierarchy. This is observed in their marital system and some other social phenomena.

Potters live in area largely inhabited by tribal communities. In the present study Santhals predominated. Pottery is in great demand among the tribal communities. They need them for their for feeding and keeping animals, for cooking food, for storing water, seed and other products of necessity. Tribals also need pottery and some specific terracotta objects for ritualistic purposes. They have tradition and custom of discarding pots by the end of the year of the local calendar. This is usually done on a day in the middle of the month of January. Local solar calendar is followed for that. They purchase new pots from the local potters. Potters sell their ware either by peddling within the tribal villages or in the weekly market or at a shop located in the permanent market place. There is distinctive gender and caste based role for selling of the pots. Most interesting is that in weekly market and in the house to house sell the potters take the payment in paddy or rice, instead of cash. There are set values for each pot sold. This is followed through traditional practice. No one argues on it, though bargaining is found in the permanent shops in the market places.

Manufacturing technique of earthen pots is unique. Detail analysis has been

made of the raw materials. Clay, sand and fuel are the main materials needed. There are both handmade and wheel made pots. There are also pots, which are made on wheel as well as with hand. Parts of such pots are made on wheel and rest is shaped by beating with hand on paddle and anvil. When compared with the prehistoric pots it appeared that there is a continuity in the method of manufacture of pottery in the area from prehistoric times. Firing and decorating of the pots also show a close link with the prehistoric times. Moreover the gender segregation for such work throws interesting light on the social aspect.

Finally, threshold study had been made in terms of raw material, customers and market. Tribals in the area are considered as the indigenous people in eastern India. This area also has yielded continuous cultural record, especially in respect to pottery but the tribal communities do not make pottery but are largely dependent on the Hindu potters for their supply of pottery. Some sort of linguistic evidences are also used to understand the situation. Threshold model shows that potters' villages are located strategically for supplying the tribals with pots. In the same way potters' villages are also located at the easy access to raw materials for making pots. All these not only help to learn about the prehistoric potters and pot but also throw some light on the peopling of the area. The paper will discuss in detail the findings of the research.