CONTEMPORARY TRADITIONAL POTTERY PRACTICES AT ARCHAEO-HISTORICALLY IMPORTANT SITES, DISTRICT KHARGONE, MADHYA PRADESH

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Khargone district is located at the southwest border of Madhya Pradesh. The district comprises of many archaeological and historical sites viz. Navdatoli, Maheshwar, Kasrawad, Mandleshwar. Archaeological excavations at these sites revealed vast cultural assemblage from Lower Paleolithic to Medieval Period. Pottery plays significant role in the reconstruction and understanding of past technologies and socio-economic-religious life. Present paper endeavors to understand contemporary traditional pottery practices at these sites. Besides documentation of degeneration of technology, authors aim to put forth the survival problems of the potters. Furthermore, an attempt has been made to examine the possible reasons behind their present socio-economic conditions.

Keywords: Traditional Pottery, Archeological-Historical site, Maheshwar, Kasrawad, Madhya Pradesh.

1. Introduction

Since times immemorial one can witness the value of pottery in day to day life. Societies are using potteries, tiles, terracotta artifacts and bricks in rural and urban areas. In India, amongst traditional artisans; potters play a major role in rural parts. A detailed study of pottery-making cultures has been carried out by the scholars which include the following aspects; manufacturing techniques, continuity of ethnic composition, caste framework and their technologies^{1, 2, 3}. The present study reviews socio-eco-technological life of potters of selected sites, their manufacturing technologies, traditional beliefs, and new strategies adopted by them for the survival.

1.1. Study area

Khargone district (previously known as West Nimar) is located at 21°49' N 75°36' E in the south–west border of Madhya Pradesh. The Vindhyaachal mountain ranges are situated to the north and the Satpura ranges to the south. The Narmada river flows across the

district covering a distance of 50 kms. The archaeo-historical sites of Navdatoli, Maheshwar, Kasrawad, and Mandleshwar are located in this district ⁴.

1.2. Archaeological-historical background

Maheshwar and Navdatoli (22° 11'N, 75° 36' E) are situated in one of the fertile alluvial stretches and on the opposite banks of the Narmada river. The sites were jointly excavated by H.D. Sankalia, S.B. Deo and Z.D. Ansari, first in 1952-53 and further horizontal excavations were undertaken in 1957-59. From the explorations and excavations archaeologists came across vast cultural assemblage, amongst which pottery plays an important role. The large scale excavations convinced the archaeologists that a broad sequence of cultures spanning from the Lower Palaeolithic period until the 18th century have existed at Maheshwar-Navdatoli. Scholars have identified seven different cultural periods: Prehistoric -Period I and II, Proto-historic -Period III, Early historic-Period IV, V and VI, and Mughal – Maratha - Period VII At Maheshwar-Navdatoli^{5,6}.

Kasrawad is located (22° 8'N, 75° 37'E) at a distance of 5 km south west of Maheshwar on the opposite bank of Narmada river. The site was excavated by former Holkar state under the directions of V.N. Singh, curator of the Indore Museum during 1936-39. The site of Itbardi (a mound of bricks) revealed stupa which indicates the early historic Buddhist establishment. Also a large quantity of different types of pottery, bricks, tiles have been documented from Kasrawad site. Historical site Mandleshwar is located (22° 11'N, 75° 40'E) on the northern bank of Narmada river. A Medieval Period fort built in stone is located near the river bed. This fort was constructed by Muhammadan rulers^{4,7}. Since 1890 it has been converted into jail.

2. Contemporary Traditional Potters

Contemporary potters from Maheshwar, Kasrawad, Mandleshwar, Navdatoli, and Bedhi were visited and documented for three seasons during 2010-2012. Potters are distributed all over the town of Maheshwar, Kasrawad, and Bedhi. However in Navdatoli the potters have relocated to the neighboring villages of Bedhi and Dharmapuri because of floods. The pottery manufacturing systems of these potters are discussed below.

Presently there are only 3-4 families each in Maheshwar, Mandleshwar and Bedhi which are engaged into pottery making. Most traditional potters in Maheshwar & Bedhi have taken up brick manufacturing business as their main occupation. Pottery making has become a secondary occupation. Authors came across a major change in the occupational system of all these potters. They have shifted to other professions as their primary earning source due to insufficient income from the pottery craft. But none of them have left practicing pottery-making. They carry out pottery making on part time basis during festivals and as a leisure activity except Kasrawad potters who work throughout the year. Their main working period starts from post-rakshabandhan, September to March.

These potters are locally called as *kumbhar*, *kumhar*. They are frequently referred to the Vedic god, *Prajapati* which has been identified with Brahma¹. Potters from Maheshwar, Mandleshwar, Kasrawad, Bedhi use *Prajapati* or *Prajapat* as their surnames.

3. Manufacturing Process

The pottery making process at these sites can be divided into six stages:

- 1) Clay procurement/ acquisition 2) Clay preparation 3) Pot making
- 4) Drying and surface finishing 5) Firing 6) Post firing finishing or designing.

It was observed that the current manufacturing process is similar to the one mentioned by the previous scholars^{1, 2, 3}.

4. Types

Potters from the selected sites produce only the earthenware type of pottery. They fire their products only once and do not apply any kind of glaze on pottery. This single fired pottery is also known as *Terracotta*, which means fired earth or clay. Maheshwar and Mandleshwar potters produce only red colored pottery. According to them black colored pottery is made only by lower caste *kumhars* therefore they themselves do not produce black colored pottery. They import black pottery from Dhamnod especially big *matakas* during summer season for sale at Maheshwar. Whereas Bedhi and Kasrawad potters produce both red and black type of pottery.

Authors have grouped the pottery types of all sites into five categories according to their usage which is as follows; 1.Cooking 2.Liquid storage 3.Granary storage 4.Ceremonial 5.Miscellaneous.

5. Systems associated with Pottery Production

5.1. Working area

Kasrawad potters have separate working and storage places than their houses. They use their courtyard as firing place and to store the wet clays. Bedhi potters stay partly in Dharmapuri, a nearby town; they use their house for pottery storage and backyard for firing and storing the clays and fuel; whereas Maheshwar potters do not have separate working and storage space. They prepare clay and store it in one corner and work on wheel in another. The pots are dried in the same place and the kiln is also laid in the same working area. Verandas are also used as a drying place during sunny season and for designing activity, storage of fired pots and sale. Similar to Maheshwar potters Mandleshwar potters also use their courtyard as their common activity area. Selling is done in the nearby markets.

5.2. Genderwise job distribution

Learning process occurs through the transmission of knowledge from older person to younger ones for example from mother to daughter. Women do not participate in tasks such as transportation of clays or working on wheel. In the process of manufacturing pottery, men work on wheel, as females are not allowed to work on wheel because their menstrual cycle is considered to be inauspicious.

Pottery production in Maheshwar is prominently a feminine activity because men have shifted from their traditional business and thus do not get time to be involved entirely in pottery-making apart from wheel-throwing. Clay preparation, beating, designing, gathering fuel, setting kiln / entire firing process, selling goods are done only by females. Only a few youth are seen involved in the process.

Kasrawad, Bedhi, Mandleshwar potters both work together and help each other for firing process. Selling is done only by men in the weekly markets except Mandleshwar where women are engaged in the selling activity in the nearby markets. In Kasrawad big storage jars are made by women by coiling method.

5.3. Barter system

Despite urbanization, Maheshwar, Kasrawad and Bedhi potters continue the traditional system of barter. They exchange their goods such as *matakas*, *galla*, *dhupdanis*, *diyas* for the fuel and food resources such as dried cotton branches, semi dried stalk of *jowar*, dried wheat stalk's powder (*gehu ka sukla*), dung cakes (*kande*), dried banana roots (*gatte*) and grains.

5.4. Domestic use of pottery

Potters from selected sites use certain products for themselves on daily purpose. Certain types of pottery is seen more likely to be made for household production. A few of the potter's families from Maheshwar and Bedhi make some pottery forms for themselves which they do not make for sale such as hearth, *matakas*, *diyas*, pan.

However, a clear distinction is seen between pottery exchange and pottery manufacturing for own use.

5.5. Selling

Maheshwar potters do not prefer to go to weekly markets of Maheshwar or nearby towns or villages because most of the potters stay in the main market; and so they sell their products from their verandas by arranging their fired products. Selling and marketing is also done by women of the house in Maheshwar and Mandleshwar, whereas in Kasrawad and Bedhi, potters sell their products in the weekly markets of town and nearby villages. This job is done only by men.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

Potters from selected sites strictly follow their traditional manufacturing systems taking into consideration genderwise work distribution. Although pottery manufacturing is now a feminine activity in Maheshwar, females are not allowed to work on potter's wheel, as they strictly follow their religious taboos. Small scale trading is seen in Maheshwar potters as an extension of the female's daily duties in the household. Many opportunities are available for men such as laboring at factories, fields, and farms. Thus the pottery production in Maheshwar is going through a downfall.

None of the potters of selected sites, however, have completely left practicing pottery. These sites can be classified as small scale localized pottery production centers, which have satisfied some of the local demands. They, however, are on the verge of extinction and their restoration is the need of the hour.

Though pottery is ecologically suitable due to its biodegradable nature, production on the larger basis is not encouraged in rural parts of India. As all over India most of traditional potters are diverting from their traditional occupation system, due to urbanization and decreased use of local pottery, besides increase in the use and production of various metal and fiber products at cheap rates.

Pottery in Indian cities has developed in recent years because of new scientific researches. Though new modern ceramic factories, units, studios have emerged in large scales all over the country, it is seen that in rural parts still traditional pottery practitioners have not fully adopted new techniques. Instead they are shifting from their traditional business to more lucrative jobs.

Selected sites are not only archaeo-historically significant but also have a tourism potential. Despite urbanization in Maheshwar, Kasrawad, Mandleshwar it looks as if not much effort is taken by potters to sustain and expand their traditional business. It has been observed that with the present practicing generations of potters the craft of traditional pottery will vanish soon. They have adopted and shifted to new economical sources for their survivals, as youth is not taking much interest in learning explored and new unexplored technologies which are applicable for making pottery.

Appropriate development policy using experiments and new technologies for pottery production can help to preserve and conserve the biodiversity and to improve economic conditions of traditional potters at these archaeo-historical sites, as their craft is a cultural heritage. This can lead to evolution and overall development of the potters and their craft.

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