

## **Pottery as a traditional family occupation in India: Case study potters at Puri and Kolkata**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The basic objective of this paper is to locate the clay based workers as traditional family based workers in different potters' colony in India, the kinds of work they are involved in and the overt as well as covert patriarchal nature of the occupation, by understanding the unsaid gender division of work and how clay work is intrinsically related to religion of India. For this purpose we have selected two cities as sample areas – Kumbharpada in Puri and Kumartuli in Kolkata.

**Key Words :** Pottery, Family occupation, Workers

### **INTRODUCTION**

Traditional family based occupations in India is part of informal sector economy in India. So before we enter the main context of this paper, it becomes essential here to draw the connection between the two.

The concept of 'informal sector' has been extensively discussed since the beginning of the 1970s when in 1971, Keith Hart, an Anthropologist based in England, referred to informal income opportunities for the urban poor in Ghana. The International Labour Organisation (ILO), the International Expert Group on Informal Sector Statistics (called the Delhi Group), and WIEGO worked together to broaden the concept and definition of informal sector to incorporate certain types of informal employment that had not been included in the earlier concept and definition of the "informal sector" especially of Hart. In 1993, the ICLS had adopted an international statistical definition of the informal sector to refer to employment and production that takes place in unincorporated small and/or unregistered enterprises. This expanded definition was endorsed by the International Labour Conference (ILC) in 2002 and the International Conference of Labour Statisticians (ICLS) in 2003. At the 15<sup>th</sup> ICLS in 1993, the various categories of self employment work has been explained. These are:

**Non-wage workers or self – employed. This includes the following three groups:**

- Own-account workers: They are self-employed workers who operate their enterprises on their own account or with one or a few partners and who during the reference period,

by and large, run their enterprise without hiring any labour. They may, however, have unpaid helpers to assist them in the activity of the enterprise. They either perform their work in their household premises or outside.

- Employers: These are self-employed persons who work on their own or with one or few partners and by and large run their enterprise by hiring labour.
- Helpers in household enterprises: The helpers are a category of working persons who keep themselves engaged in household enterprises working full or part-time but do not receive any cash payment (salary or wage) or any share of the family earnings in lieu of the work performed. They are household members; a large number of them are dependent on the household head.

**Wage-workers:**

- Employees of informal enterprises
- Domestic workers
- Casual workers without a fixed employer
- Homeworkers (also called industrial workers)
- Temporary and part-time workers
- Unregistered workers

These non-wage self employment occupations may be further classified into two distinct categories in accordance with the type of work and location of work. The first category includes Own Account Worker, Employer and Helper. The second is location-based work which also has two sub-divisions – home-based and non-home based work.

Home based workers (HBWs) are a particular class of workers who work at home or elsewhere in accordance with their own choice to supply goods or services as per prior agreement with customers/establishment. Their remunerations are included in the price of the goods or services provided by them and they do not employ workers on a regular basis. Workers, especially women workers have found home-based work a way of combining work and care responsibilities with least strain on family and community norms and expectations. HNI defines Home-Based Workers as own-account workers and contributing family workers helping own-account workers, involved in the production of goods and services for the market, in their homes or in nearby areas. These home-based workers include own-account workers, employers and home-workers from the above mentioned categories of self employed workers. This definition was also developed by an Independent Group on Home-based Workers in India set up in 2007 by the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation of the Government of India.

The opposite of HBWs are Non-home based self-employment workers who are self-employed with own account trading but carry out the trading outside the household. They may work in areas near their household or may be in distant localities. They may be working as single entrepreneurs or may be helped by other family members or may in some cases employ wage labourers on a permanent as well as on a temporary basis, as part-timers or as full time workers.

This article deals with a special kind of home based work which have been prevalent in India for ages. They are known as traditional family based occupations. They may in some particular cases be placed under the wage-worker component of the unorganized sector of work, although in many other cases it may fall under self-employment.

Self-employed women come under both the categories of home-based and non-home based workers. Here it is important to mention that WIEGO (Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing) is a global action-research-policy network that seeks to improve the status of the

working poor in the informal economy, especially women. Economic empowerment of these workers is at the heart of WIEGO's mission. It seeks to increase the voice, visibility, and validity of the working poor, especially women, in the informal economy. It is also necessary to mention that SEWA (Self –Employed Women's Association), a trade union registered in 1972, at the initiative and leadership of Ela Bhatt, under WIEGO. It is an organization of poor, self-employed women workers who earn a living through their own labour or small businesses. According to WIEGO, self employment workers are those who own their own businesses, and are exposed to financial risk as they bear the cost of faulty or substandard work done under business contract; moreover, they have control over the job they do, how they do it, when and where they do it and whether they do it themselves, or hire other people on terms of their own choice to do the work that they have agreed to undertake, and can provide the same services to more than one person or business at the same time, provide the required materials to complete the job; provide equipment and machinery necessary for the job other than the small tools of the trade; have a fixed place of business where, for example, materials and equipment can be stored; they further agree on a price for the job, provide their own insurance cover, such as public liability; control their own working hours in fulfilling the job obligations.

The traditional family based workers are known by their occupations for instance potters, fisher folk etc. Such kinds of jobs are still surviving in the present scenario but are facing extreme challenges, especially from newer job opportunities in the economy. These jobs fall under the self – employment work category of the informal sector, both as home-based as well as non-home based types of work. Some pockets of cities, towns and villages are occupied by the original inhabitants of these areas, whereas some others grew long before the advent of the present era of liberalization-privatization and globalization, through migration, so much so that the migrants became residents similar to the original inhabitants of the areas. Though the social composition of these pockets are different, they possess similar characteristics. The people belong to the same community or caste and are popularly known as *biradris* or as *jaat-bhais* (people belonging to the same *jaat* or caste/ community. They speak a similar language and the same dialect and possess a special bonding, areas retain characteristics of two systems at the same time – the traditional and the modern, *i.e.* the village and the slum. They are like the prismatic societies of the Riggsian model which combine the characteristics of fused and diffracted societies.

This paper highlights a typical home based family occupation known as pottery.

There is a good deal of controversy in respect of the exact time of origin of pottery in India. Various references and authors have advocated different dates of origin of Indian pottery. In the book entitled "Economic Study of Ceramic Industry in India", Dr. N.S. Bist states that the history of pottery dates back to the later stages of Mesolithic culture (8000 - 4000 B.C.). Existence of pot making art during the Neolithic Age was unearthed from some excavations in Bellary in Bareilly district.<sup>1</sup> Dr. D.R. Bhandarkar maintained that there is proof of existence of pottery during the Vedic in India. The existence of potters in various places of India has also been mentioned in different books and references during Indus Valley Civilization, Pre-Mauryan period, the ancient times of Upanishad as and Ramayana.<sup>2</sup>

Though there are controversies and differences of opinion regarding the exact time of the rise

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1. 'Economic Study of Ceramic Industry in India', N.S. Bist, Ariana Publishing House, New Delhi, 1981, p 10-13
  2. 'Potteries in Ancient India' ed. Dr. B.P. Sinha, Patna University, Patna, 1969

of this industry in India, however, there is no doubt on the fact that women were and is the constant source of support in this industry either as paid or as unpaid help to their male counterparts.

An important reference is available from H. B. Walter's book entitled 'History of Ancient Pottery – Greek, Etruscan and Roman' on this subject. While recording an admiration of the beauty of Indian pottery he comments. "The pottery of the Indians is artistic in the sense of being an expression of an indigenous art and much of it is beautiful, but whether the makers possessed any real appreciation of beauty is open to doubt. The pottery was exclusively the work of the women".<sup>3</sup>

Based on the above mentioned different documentation it has been observed that pottery is not only concentrated in a particular rural area, but is also found in different urban pockets. Besides, the geographical segregation, there are some documents that have connected pottery to different aspects of life and religion is one such area where pottery has an immense role to play.

### **Sample areas :**

In this study we shall describe in detail two communities of potters working for a major religious institution, and to reconnoiter the understanding of the potter's work. In Puri, the religious centre that is in context is the Jagannatha temple, which has become a destination of national importance over the years and in Kolkata the religious institution is primarily Durga Puja alongwith the other pujas taken place all throughout the year.

### **Puri Jagannath Temple and the Potters :**

The temple requires earthenware in great quantities for the creation and distribution of the sacred food (Prashad/Bhog) that is an indispensable feature of daily rituals and offerings. This ritual of offering the deities with different cooked food is often prepared in earthen pots and approximately three hundred potters participate in this activity as temple servants. It is of a common parlance that temple kitchens in India use cooking pots made up of brass or bell-metal alloy, but in the Jagannatha Temple where thousands of pots are required on a daily basis, metal vessels would be an expensive venture and therefore earthen pots are used.

These temple potters live in a small village known as Kumbharapada, which is situated near to the Puri temple, however they are often unknown to the rest of the state and the nation. Nevertheless they have a huge contribution in terms of their task to the temple. The potters who serve at the Jagannatha Temple are but a small segment of the element of the great network of belief that resides in this huge religious institution. The temple potters as they are known contribute to a vital task of preparing the sacred food (mahaprasada) by contributing the different earthen vessels to the temple and this preparation of mahaprasad is a central driving force that draws pilgrims from all over the world and specially from India. The mahaprasad which is in context is cooked and then served in clay pots of various shapes, sizes and forms that are made by the Kumbharpada potters. It has been found that within the Oriya Kumbhara group, only these Kumbharpada potters serve as the servants of the Jagannath Temple and get the title of Kumbhara Bishoi or the "leaders of the potter community". In this context it has been understood that most male Puri potters have the surname of Bishoi and the women bears the surname of Bishiani. It has been claimed that the Bishois or the Puri potters are in higher echelons in the Oriya Kumbhara community. These Bishois perform the annual potters' festival of Kurala Panchami for five days, whereas the rest of the

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3. 'History of Ancient Pottery – Greek, Etruscan and Roman' — H. B. Walter Vol 2, John Murray, London, 1905

Oriya Kumbharas are not that financially strong to celebrate just more than a day. The Bishois or the Puri potters hire a Brahmin to perform the Kurala Panchami festival whereas the rest make that happen themselves. So here we can find a stark difference between the Puri and the rest of the Oriya Potters, where the former is considered to be superior as they serve lord Jagannatha and financially these potters are also in a stable position in comparison to the later.

Due to such a weak financial position of the other Oriya potters, they lack separate workshops and kilns. Most of them shape their pots in a corner of their home and roast them in small handmade earthen ovens.

On the other hand the Puri potters, have a separate work area apart from their dwelling place and they call this as shala ghara or just shala. These workshops are a clean, airy rectangular structure and have proper racks for storing the vessels. Cleanliness is an important factor for these workshops as vessels for mahaprasad are being developed here. It has been observed that the Puri potters look there workshops as a sacred place; every evening the women of a Puri potter's family lit a lamp in the shala at the same time as she keeps another at the main entrance of the house.

The women also help their husbands and son in developing the earthen pots, but they mostly use the balcony of their home as their workspace so that they could keep an eye on the house. These women help their counterparts in making ancillary stuff that hardly requires any specific pottery skills. According to rule, women should not work on the wheel. During the interview, it was asked many a times about the prohibition. The reasons various potters gave were more of practical rather than religious, *i.e.* women's body structure and strength. They say that their women counterparts are too weak to work on the wheel. If the women were strong enough, it might be all right for them to use the wheel. However, some of the male potters agree to the fact that even if the women do not work on the wheel, they make products that are far more beautiful than the men. Some women potters commented that when the men are out of the workshop, they take the opportunity to work on the wheels. At the same time they also agree to the point that if they get engaged with the wheels, who will make the small pots, which are also essential for filling up the kiln.

#### **Kumartuli – The Potters' Colony in Kolkata :**

Clay-based work and/or pottery also exist as a traditional occupation in the city of Kolkata, the land of culture, heritage, festivals and idol-worshippers. Kumartuli – a potters' colony in Kolkata is the sample area selected for this purpose. Clay- based work and the kinds of work that can be clubbed under this are:

- Pot making
- Bhar (small food containers) making
- Decorative item making
- Model making
- Idol making

Kumartuli is the hub and a revered hotspot for traditional Indian pottery; the community is basically divided into four categories of people – Clay modelers, shola shilpis, saaj and other shilpis and godown holders.

#### **Image – making Process in Kumartuli :**

The image-making at Kumartuli is done through various stages which are as follows:

- a) Preparation of the framework and the core with split bamboo, wood and straw. The foundation

for the idols and their base setting or kathamo (structure) is made of tall wooden planks, many of them circular. They have a special day for beginning this kathamo. Using the aforesaid wooden structures as support, they shape the figures with hay and mount them onto the wood. The hay structure is, thus, the deciding factor for the idols' final shape and appearance.

b) Initial application of clay (etel mati transported from Uluberia, Diamond Harbour) mixed with husk and jute – fibre (dhaner khola/tush– khor) reinforcement on the straw to bring the basic cut of the image figure, which is then allowed to dry<sup>4</sup>.

c) After having dried a finer layer of clay (bele mati from Ganga belt) is applied to conceal all the cracks etc. appearing due to shrinkage.

d) The model is then wrapped tightly with nekra or cloth-rags in order to develop a smooth finish; otherwise, the “skin” feels dusty and uneven.

e) The head, fingers are then added. The faces of the idols and their gahana or ornaments are made with the help of chhanch or lay -out. But, the fingers and the thumbs are to be shaped by the potters without the help of chhanch which they perform with a distinct sense of fair pride. The artisans have little electric light after sunset and work largely by candlelight.

e) Primary coat of white paint is applied after the images are dried.

f) Paints of various colours and pigments as may be necessary for the realization of the ultimate form are applied. As far as paints are concerned, spray guns are increasingly used these days, much apart from the traditional mixes. Spray guns offer a quick and better look. “We need to be faster as demands mount every year,” a Pal says. The finer parts of the models such as the fingers are done with pencil-guns. Talking about paints, another Pal says “The authorities have banned seese (lead) to be used in our paints,” he says. “But we have no substitute either!” He raises his voice and his eyes are passionate with emphasis on what he meant. “We need to run our families; this is our only way to earn. Our purva-purush (ancestors) has been using seese since ages but they were not refused to.” A wise man from our team ventured to remark in a soft tone, “But the ban has to be initiated by some generation, after all...” “Why us, then?” retorts Pal with full energy. Then we enter the room where sunlight almost does not stream in on account of the aforesaid apartments.

g) Eyes are painted, ornaments added and final touches are given to the gods and goddesses.

h) For the models, males and females have separate chhanch for their faces. But the image of the Narayana Devta employs the chhanch of a female. The models are referred to as putul or doll until the day the pujari or priest does the pran prathishthaa (invoking life).

i) Special images of fibre-glass material decked up with oil paints are also in vogue. Some artisans work for family celebrations as well.

Idols take months to be finished. They require a lot of hard work and tenacity. But Kumartuli's artisans are deft and bear their love and skill in their genes and in their positive outlook towards work and towards pottery.

Besides, wholesale, there shops undertake retail sales, too, on the advent of the festive season.

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4. Basically, there are two different types of clay — soft clay or sticky soil and sandy soil. In fact, Ganges soil is sandy soil and is available in any of the ghats of the river and is therefore, quite cheap. Sticky or chit soil however comes from Diamond Harbour and Budge Budge. Local unavailability of such soil makes it costlier. Sticky and sandy soils are quite different in character and one of them can be easily identified from the other. Sandy soil is whitish in colour white chit soil is dues black. Sandy soil does not stick with hand and leaves a faint impression only. Sticky soil on the other hand, sticks with fingers and cannot be easily separated.

**Gender division of Labour :**

Image – making process is a very labour intensive activity and for a majority of the activities they need specialized labours. This industry is heavily dependent on the supply of temporary labour from Krishnanagar, Shantipur, Nadia etc. Per day rate varies from Rs. 200-300/-. Alongwith these hired labourers the women workforce play a commendable role in these clay based industry. Women are employed (mostly on without pay basis) *i.e.* as unpaid help in large numbers in dressing and decorating images of goddess kali for making sponge wood decorations, separating tufts of hair and fixing crowns. They work hard even throughout the night. Women and even the children are all engaged in different types of work to save expenses during periods of heavy work. Women would not, however, be available in making frameworks comprising tightening and fastening of bamboos and hay. But in the months of Sravana and Bhadra (July – Mid September) of the Bengali calendar the entire family of the artisans actively participate in work. Daughters and daughter-in-law are engaged in works involving painting, putting ornaments on the neck and arms, dressing the deities in saris and dhotis and are fixing decorative borders on them. They are also engaged in untying the bundles of false hair and pasting them on the heads of the idols. The cost of labour during this period becomes so high that larger participation of women family members in the jobs done by workers from outside becomes highly convenient. On the issue of non-involvement of the women members of the family throughout the entire process of making idols one of the heads (male) of an artisan family failed to suppress his feeling and stated that the women do not find time to involve themselves in image making after taking care of the household. Moreover, he went on to state further in an offended tone that if women come forward, to perform the entire job of image making then what would the menfolk do. When asked about the possibility of any social taboo in the matter, he became visibly soft and tried to explain that in the prevailing economic stringency, there is hardly any time for going a serious thought on the issue and whoever can earn anything comes to benefit the needy family. Another head (male) of an artisan family stated that his wife excels in the job of dressing the female idols with saris which is beyond his capability. Moreover, womenfolk, according to him, possess an excellent sense about which is beautiful and which is not. Anything that fails to pass the test of beauty to a woman-folk would not seem to be beautiful to him too.

The job of making big images might call for adequate muscular strength but in his childhood, he said, he had seen some woman making bigger than 5 foot high images goddess Durga right from the beginning to the end single handedly. The quality of her work was exquisite. She used to make the framework, apply paint over it and dress the idol all by herself. Nobody spoke ill of her because she was a child widow. People had great sympathy for her. But nowadays people have abandoned all such noble sentiments like sympathy, love and respect. Nobody thinks about the others. This is why he thought women like her are not obtainable nearby.

He went on to relate reminiscences about his mother. They belonged to a poor family. His mother used to make beauty puppets in between household jobs. Those puppets were sold in the market. Father used to make images. But mother had to make puppets to cope with the families needs. During the Jhulan festival, the women and children of the families sit on both sides of the road selling clay artificial fruits, puppets etc. In Kumartuli, there is a smaller market for buying and selling these types of puppets. Kalipada Pal, a famous artist, related the distressing story about how once a time used to make images of goddess Durga. But now he is suffering from an acute shortage of funds. The daughters and daughters-in-law make puppets nowadays to earn something for the family. He has two unmarried daughter.

There were puppet making artisans in every home here in Kumartuli. But now the number has

decreased. One of them was Kamakshya Bala Pal, who along with her two daughters became confronted with imminent disaster resulting from the untimely premature death of her husband. But she survived. She used to travel all the way from her residence upto her own shop on foot. Besides, puppets she used to make big images herself. There is obviously some difference between these two types of jobs. Whereas the making of a small sized model requires adequate skill of the worker's hand; the making of big images calls forth physical strength in addition to the skill of the hands. Especially, the tying of hay requires a great deal of strength. Because of the relatively smaller physical strength in performing heavy jobs, it does not become possible for them to undertake the preliminary jobs fully. But the daughters and wives of almost all the artisans are required to participate in the work during periods of heavy business for the sole purpose of reducing the pressure on the requirement of funds. There are only a limited few women who own their business, manage the entire process of image-making and employ under them some labourers as well. But that is only exceptions. Majority are men. Teamwork or collective effort constitutes the basis of image making. It may be possible to make one or two small sized images single handedly. But the good number of human hands specially women hands become essentially necessary to perform ancillary jobs like bringing raw materials, preparation of soil, making frameworks, making idols, application of decoration etc. As a consequence, the personal control of the artisan over items like raw materials, labour and production cost remains high.

### **Conclusion :**

Thus in conclusion we can say that pottery is an intrinsic part of Indian culture and heritage and it has a close connection with religion. The culture of pot-making or image making will continue in India and the occupation will never decay because of the fact that Indian Hindus who holds the majority portion of the India population believes in image worship. The ancillary materials required for image worship are also mostly clay made. It also has to be considered that this extensive and traditional occupation is surviving and flourishing because the women counterparts' are relentlessly and uncompromisingly supporting their male counterparts even though they know that they can never become the owners of the business or the main decision makers in the business.

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