From Earth to Heritage: The Tradition of Indian Pottery and the Cultural Identity of Assam

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ABSTRACT

Pottery is one of the oldest and most enduring forms of craftsmanship in human civilization. Through the processes of shaping clay, drying it, and firing it to ensure durability, human beings have not only created objects for everyday use but have also given material expression to their social life, religious beliefs, aesthetic sensibilities, technical knowledge, and cultural memory. From the ancient civilizations of the Indian subcontinent to modern folk crafts, pottery reflects a long and continuous historical tradition. Terracotta artefacts from the Indus Valley Civilization, mould-made terracotta figurines of the Shunga–Kushan period, terracotta ornamentation of the Gupta period, and the association of pottery with later temple architecture demonstrate its multifaceted development. Within this broader Indian tradition, pottery in Assam has acquired a distinct regional identity. The riverine geography of Assam, its alluvial soil, folk life, religious traditions, and family-based artisanal knowledge have played significant roles in its development. Archaeological and architectural remains at Ambari, Maghnowa, and Namathar reflect different phases in the historical use of clay and terracotta in Assam. At the same time, the pottery tradition centred on Salmora in Majuli and the terracotta craft of Asharikandi in Dhubri represent two distinctive forms of Assam's living folk pottery heritage. This paper analyses the pottery traditions of India and Assam from historical, archaeological, cultural, and economic perspectives.

Keywords: Pottery, Terracotta, Indian Artistic Tradition, Assam, Ambari, Majuli, Salmora, Asharikandi, Folk Culture, Cultural Heritage.

INTRODUCTION

The relationship between the earth and human beings is deeply rooted in the history of human civilization. As humans learned to shape the clay obtained from nature according to their needs, clay ceased to be merely a natural resource and became an important medium of human creativity. Through its diverse uses in making containers for storing food and water, cooking utensils, household articles, objects of worship, toys, and, in later periods, sculptures and architectural decorations, a profound creative relationship developed between humans and the earth.

Pottery is one of the significant outcomes of this creative relationship. In its general sense, pottery refers to the process of making vessels, figurines, toys, everyday objects, and various decorative items from clay. However, within the framework of cultural studies, the concept of pottery has a much broader significance. The ways in which a society uses clay, collects raw materials, employs techniques to produce objects, develops particular forms and designs, and transmits this knowledge from one generation to another reflect its way of life, environment, beliefs, economy, and aesthetic sensibilities.Therefore, viewing pottery merely as a craft would diminish its cultural significance. From an archaeological perspective, objects made of clay are important sources for studying past societies. From the perspective of folk culture, pottery represents a living tradition and serves as a carrier of social memory and cultural identity.The terms pottery and terracotta are not synonymous. Terracotta primarily refers to objects made by shaping clay, drying it, and firing it to achieve hardness and durability. Therefore, terracotta can be considered an important artistic tradition within the broader field of pottery.

Objectives of the Study

The principal objectives of this study are as follows:

1. To provide an overall understanding of the historical development of Indian pottery.
2. To analyse the archaeological and cultural background of pottery in Assam.
3. To identify the ancient and medieval pottery and terracotta traditions of Assam through the study of archaeological and architectural remains at sites such as Ambari, Maghnowa, and Namathar.
4. To analyse the traditional techniques, socio-economic roles, and cultural significance of pottery in Majuli.
5. To examine the terracotta craft of Asharikandi in Dhubri, with particular reference to the Hatima doll and its relationship with the livelihoods of artisan communities.
6. To identify the challenges faced by traditional pottery and explore its prospects for preservation and modernisation.

Main Topic Discussion

The Indus Valley Civilization represents a significant phase in the history of Indian pottery. Archaeological discoveries at Harappa and Mohenjo-daro include clay vessels, terracotta human and animal figurines, toys, carts, and various miniature artefacts. The Pre and Protohistoric and Terracotta Gallery of the Assam State Museum also houses terracotta objects from the Indus Valley Civilization, along with various terracotta artefacts from Assam and the northeastern region.In earlier scholarship, the female figurines of the Indus Valley Civilization were sometimes associated with the concept of the "Mother Goddess." Although contemporary research approaches this interpretation with greater caution, these figurines continue to generate important discussions regarding the possible roles of women, fertility, motherhood, and religious beliefs in ancient society.Similarly, terracotta representations of animals such as cattle, buffaloes, dogs, and birds demonstrate the capacity of ancient artisans to observe and represent the natural world. Toys such as clay carts and wheels also illustrate the relationship between pottery, childhood, and everyday social culture.

Following the Indus Valley Civilization, Indian pottery underwent various historical transformations and gradually developed more refined artistic forms. During the Shunga and Kushan periods, the use of terracotta figurines and plaques increased. One of the significant characteristics of this phase was the expansion of mould-making technology alongside the traditional technique of hand-modelling. The use of moulds made it possible to produce multiple figurines of similar forms. Consequently, pottery offered greater possibilities for organised production alongside individual artistic creativity. Figurines representing deities, Yakshas and Yakshis, men and women, musicians, dancers, soldiers, and other social figures reflect various aspects of the social and aesthetic life of the period.

During the Gupta period, Indian art attained a distinctive level of aesthetic maturity. Terracotta figurines of this period exhibit restrained beauty in their facial features, bodily proportions, postures, and expressions. A particularly significant development was the integration of pottery and architecture. The use of terracotta decorations in brick-built structures such as the Bhitargaon Temple demonstrates that clay had already transcended the realm of small artistic objects and had become an integral component of architectural expression.One of the significant developments in the history of Indian art was the integration of terracotta with architecture. Terracotta plaques were incorporated into the walls of brick-built temples to depict mythological narratives, religious beliefs, social life, animals, music, and dance. This tradition attained a remarkable level of artistic excellence in the temples of Bishnupur in Bengal.

From this perspective, an important theoretical conclusion can be drawn: terracotta is not merely a decorative art form; it is also a visual cultural document. Many aspects of social life that may remain unrecorded in written history can be preserved and interpreted through terracotta art. Thus, terracotta serves as a valuable

source for understanding the cultural practices, beliefs, artistic expressions, and social experiences of earlier communities. Determining the exact year in which pottery originated in Assam is not an easy task. Since clay objects are susceptible to natural deterioration, artefacts from all historical periods have not been preserved equally. Nevertheless, archaeological remains, pottery, terracotta objects, and brick architecture provide evidence of a long-standing tradition of clay craftsmanship in Assam.

The natural environment of Assam—particularly its rivers, wetlands, alluvial soil, and readily available raw materials—has created favourable geographical conditions for the development of pottery. In this context, clay is not merely a raw material; rather, it establishes an interrelationship between craftsmanship, the regional environment, and the local economy. Thus, the pottery tradition of Assam can be understood as an expression of the close interaction between natural resources, human creativity, and the socio-economic conditions of the region.

Ambari occupies an important place in the archaeological history of Assam. Among the publications of the Directorate of Archaeology, Government of Assam, *Ambari Archaeological Site: An Interim Report* is particularly noteworthy. Official archaeological records indicate that various artefacts, including stone sculptures, Shivalingas, terracotta objects, pottery, oil lamps, beads, and ornaments, have been recovered from the Ambari archaeological site. The diversity of these artefacts suggests the possibility of a significant environment for artistic activities in ancient Kamarupa.

Information provided by the Assam State Museum also refers to sculptures associated with the pre-Ahom and Ahom periods recovered in connection with excavations at Ambari. Therefore, Ambari is not merely an archaeological site in the history of Assam's pottery and sculptural traditions; it is also an important source for studying the material culture of ancient Kamarupa. Its archaeological remains provide valuable insights into the artistic practices, religious beliefs, and material life of the region's historical communities.

The relationship between clay, terracotta, and brick architecture in Assam is particularly significant. The architecture of Maghnowa and other structures of the Ahom period reflects a combination of brick, stone, and decorative art. The Na-Math temple at Kamakhya is a distinctive example of terracotta architecture in Assam. According to information provided by the Directorate of Archaeology, Government of Assam, the structure is built of brick and is richly adorned with terracotta sculptures and floral decorations. Official records identify it as a distinctive terracotta temple that survives in Assam.

The terracotta plaques on its walls depict a variety of subjects, including nature, deities, human figures, animals, floral motifs, and different aspects of public and religious life. These artistic representations demonstrate how clay in Assam evolved from a material used for constructing buildings into a medium of aesthetic expression and visual storytelling. Thus, the terracotta architectural tradition of Assam provides valuable evidence of the region's artistic creativity, cultural practices, and historical imagination. Among the living pottery traditions of Assam, Majuli occupies a particularly significant place. According to official Assam Tourism information, pottery in Majuli is a traditional cottage industry, with Salmora, Chinatoli, and Dakhinpat identified as some of its principal centres. Official tourism records indicate that approximately 5,000 people are economically associated with this traditional craft.

Recent research has also identified the handmade pottery of Salmora as a distinctive expression of traditional artisanal knowledge. The production techniques, skills, and practices associated with this craft reflect the transmission of indigenous knowledge across generations. However, research indicates that families engaged in this occupation face several challenges, including low income, irregular employment opportunities, limited market access, and transportation difficulties arising from Majuli's riverine environment. These challenges demonstrate that the survival of Majuli's pottery tradition depends not only on preserving its traditional techniques but also on strengthening the livelihoods of artisan families, improving market access, and ensuring the sustainable development of this distinctive cultural heritage.

One of the distinctive features of Majuli's pottery tradition is the practice of shaping vessels by hand. Throughout the entire process—including clay collection, purification, mixing with water, achieving the appropriate consistency and plasticity, hand-shaping, drying, and firing—the experience-based knowledge of

artisans plays a vital role.This knowledge is transmitted primarily through families, practical training, and everyday work rather than through written texts. The skills involved are acquired through observation, repeated practice, and intergenerational learning. Consequently, the preservation of pottery should not be understood merely as the conservation of finished objects; it must also include the preservation of traditional techniques, artisanal skills, and indigenous systems of knowledge. In this sense, safeguarding Majuli's pottery tradition is essential for maintaining both its tangible cultural heritage and its intangible cultural legacy.Majuli

is an important centre of Assam's Satra-based cultural tradition. Pottery has developed within this broader cultural environment. In addition to producing vessels for everyday use, the use of clay objects for various social and religious purposes has maintained a close connection between pottery and folk life. Thus, the pottery tradition of Majuli represents an important interaction between craftsmanship, cultural practices, and the everyday needs of the community.

Asharikandi, located in Dhubri district, is one of the most significant centres of pottery and terracotta art in Assam. According to official information published by the Dhubri District Administration, men and women, young and old, from numerous families in Asharikandi are engaged in producing a variety of terracotta and pottery items. The distinctive characteristics of Asharikandi's craft tradition are closely associated with the use of *Hiramati* (a special type of clay), the technical expertise of artisans, climatic conditions, and the intergenerational traditions of the potter community. Official records identify Hiramati as one of the principal raw materials used in this craft. Information from the North East Centre for Technology Application and Reach (NECTAR) also recognises Asharikandi as a major pottery and terracotta cluster, highlighting Hiramati as a fundamental component of its artistic production. Furthermore, the area's association with the Gadadhar River has provided advantages in terms of access to raw materials and connectivity with markets. These geographical and material factors, combined with inherited artisanal knowledge, have contributed significantly to the development and continuity of Asharikandi's distinctive terracotta tradition.

One of the most well-known creations of Asharikandi's terracotta tradition is the Hatima doll. According to information published by the Dhubri District Administration, the Hatima doll, created by artisan Sarala Bala Devi, brought widespread recognition to Asharikandi's terracotta tradition. She received the National Award for terracotta craftsmanship in 1982. The artistic significance of the Hatima doll extends beyond its external form. Through its representation of a mother and child, the doll expresses a folk aesthetic that embodies motherhood, affection, and familial emotions. The traditional products of Asharikandi include everyday household items such as pitchers and vessels, as well as decorative objects and figurines of elephants, horses, rhinoceroses, and various deities. According to official information, these products were traditionally sold in nearby local markets, weekly bazaars, and fairs. Today, they are also marketed through trade fairs and government and non-government exhibitions.This transition indicates that traditional pottery and terracotta craftsmanship in Asharikandi is gradually expanding beyond the fulfilment of local needs to reach wider commercial markets. While this development creates opportunities for artisans to increase their income and gain broader recognition, it also highlights the importance of maintaining the traditional artistic identity and cultural significance of their craft.A comparison of the pottery traditions of Majuli and Asharikandi reveals the regional diversity of pottery in Assam.

The pottery tradition of Majuli is particularly characterised by the practice of hand-shaping vessels, the riverine island environment, local livelihood patterns, and the influence of Satra culture. In contrast, the terracotta tradition of Asharikandi expresses its folk aesthetic more prominently through figurines, dolls, and decorative forms Despite these differences, both traditions share common foundations: locally available clay, traditional artisanal knowledge, family-based skills, and the necessity of earning a livelihood. This comparison demonstrates that pottery in Assam is not a uniform tradition. Raw materials, production techniques, designs, uses, and market conditions vary from one region to another. Nevertheless, the creative relationship between human beings and clay remains a common thread connecting these diverse regional traditions. Together, Majuli and Asharikandi illustrate how local environments and cultural practices shape distinct forms of craftsmanship while sustaining a shared heritage of pottery in Assam.

Pottery is an important medium for the material expression of Assamese folk culture. Through its use in religious rituals and festivals, social ceremonies, food storage, water storage, and other domestic activities, clay objects have remained closely associated with everyday folk life. Although many beliefs, narratives, and symbols of folk culture are transmitted orally, pottery sometimes gives them a tangible and visible form. Terracotta figurines and dolls, therefore, are not merely artistic objects; they also represent the material expression of folk beliefs and collective social memory. Through their forms, motifs, and cultural associations, these objects provide insights into the values, traditions, and lived experiences of the communities that produce and use them. From this perspective, pottery can be studied as a form of "material folk memory," through which cultural knowledge and collective experiences are preserved and transmitted across generations.

The Pre and Protohistoric and Terracotta Gallery of the Assam State Museum preserves and displays artefacts from the Indus Valley Civilization, along with various terracotta objects from Assam and other parts of Northeast India. Similarly, the Purvajyoti Museum at Srimanta Sankaradeva Kalakshetra houses a dedicated collection of terracotta and clay art. The objective of this museum is to collect, preserve, and exhibit artefacts representing the material culture and indigenous technologies of Assam and Northeast India. These museums serve as important cultural bridges between the material remains of the past and contemporary society. By preserving and displaying pottery and terracotta artefacts, they facilitate an understanding of historical craftsmanship, traditional knowledge systems, and the cultural practices of earlier communities. Thus, museums play a significant role in safeguarding regional artistic heritage and transmitting cultural knowledge to future generations.

Traditional pottery is currently facing several challenges. The widespread use of plastic and factory-manufactured products, difficulties in obtaining raw materials, rising production costs, limited market access, transportation problems, and the growing interest of younger generations in alternative occupations are affecting the future of this craft. Recent research on Majuli has also highlighted issues such as limited market opportunities, low income, irregular employment, transportation difficulties arising from its riverine environment, and the risk of younger generations gradually moving away from the pottery profession.

Therefore, providing financial assistance to artisans alone is not sufficient. An integrated approach is necessary, encompassing the supply of raw materials, technical training, design development, modern firing technologies, packaging facilities, market connectivity, online marketing, branding, exhibitions, and government recognition. In particular, engaging younger generations in traditional pottery centres such as Majuli and Asharikandi is one of the most important conditions for preserving and sustaining this cultural heritage.The objective of modernisation should not be to eliminate traditional practices but to revitalise them by integrating traditional artisanal knowledge with modern technologies and contemporary market opportunities. This approach can strengthen the economic sustainability of pottery, encourage the transmission of traditional skills across generations, and ensure that this valuable craft continues to remain a living expression of Assam's cultural identity.

An analysis of the aforementioned information reveals three significant aspects.

First, the history of Indian pottery is a history of continuous transformation. Its scope has expanded from the production of vessels to figurines, from figurines to terracotta plaques, and subsequently to architectural ornamentation. This evolution demonstrates how pottery gradually transcended its utilitarian functions and emerged as an important medium of artistic expression, cultural representation, and architectural decoration.

Second, although the pottery tradition of Assam is not detached from the broader Indian tradition, it possesses distinct regional characteristics. The geography of Assam, its rivers, soil, religious traditions, and folk life have collectively shaped its unique identity and artistic forms.

Third, Majuli and Asharikandi are significant examples of living heritage. In these places, pottery is not merely an old artefact preserved in a museum; rather, it remains closely connected with people's livelihoods, families, communities, and cultural identities. The involvement of various organisations, cooperatives, and government support initiatives in the craft of Asharikandi also highlights the socio-economic dimensions of preserving this living heritage.

CONCLUSION

Clay is one of the oldest creative companions of human civilisation. From the moment human beings began shaping clay, it ceased to be merely a natural material and evolved into vessels, figurines, architectural elements, ornaments, and repositories of cultural memory. The history of Indian pottery reveals a long and continuous narrative of this transformation. From the pottery and terracotta figurines of the Indus Valley Civilisation to the mould-made art of the Shunga–Kushan period, the aesthetic maturity of the Gupta period, and the subsequent tradition of architectural terracotta, clay has carried forward a profound legacy of Indian art and culture. Within this broader tradition, the pottery of Assam has developed a distinct regional identity. The

archaeological remains of Ambari, brick architecture, and terracotta ornamentation reveal significant aspects of Assam's ancient and medieval artistic and cultural heritage. The terracotta architecture of Namathar has preserved this tradition in a distinctive architectural form. Meanwhile, the pottery of Majuli and the terracotta tradition of Asharikandi represent two distinct yet interconnected forms of Assam's living folk heritage.

The handmade pottery of Majuli reflects the relationship between river-island life, traditional technical knowledge, and livelihood practices. In contrast, the terracotta craft of Asharikandi demonstrates a synthesis of Hiramati clay, the skills of potters, folk aesthetics, and market-oriented craftsmanship. Therefore, preserving Assam's pottery tradition does not simply mean conserving clay vessels or terracotta figurines. It also entails safeguarding the artisans, technical knowledge, family-based training systems, folk beliefs, production methods, livelihoods, and cultural memories associated with the craft. Future conservation policies must consequently extend beyond a grant-oriented approach and adopt an integrated framework that incorporates raw-material availability, skill development, design innovation, technology, market access, digital marketing, tourism, and cultural recognition. Ultimately, pottery is not merely the art of shaping clay; it is an ancient yet living cultural practice through which human beings preserve their history, memories, beliefs, and identity in the very substance of the earth.

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