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"Echoes of Clay: Pottery in Colonial Murshidabad and Present Crisis"

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ABSTRACT

The very name of Murshidabad evokes the enduring legacy of Bengal's glorious past. Once the capital of Subah Bengal, Murshidabad emerged under the leadership of Murshid Quli Khan as a significant centre of political power, economic prosperity, and cultural heritage. Although the splendour of its former glory has gradually faded, the region continues to bear the historical imprints of its prosperous past. Driven by the necessities of everyday life and the innate human desire for beauty, various traditional crafts and industries evolved through the interaction of human needs, social relationships, and cultural exchanges. The historical landscape of Murshidabad witnessed the development of numerous artisanal traditions that contributed to its economic and cultural life. Among these, pottery occupied a distinctive place as an essential craft closely associated with rural livelihoods, domestic requirements, and religious practices.

Keywords: Echoes, clay, kumbhakara, pottery, evolution, Surahi, Chaks.

INTRODUCTION

Pottery, an important component was not merely a means of producing articles for everyday use; it also represented the accumulated knowledge, technical skills, and creative expressions of generations of traditional artisans. The potters, known as Kumbhakars, transformed locally available clay into several objects that served the practical and cultural needs of society. Their craft reflected a close relationship between human labour, the natural environment, and the social structure of rural Bengal. The colonial period provides a particularly significant historical context for examining this traditional industry. The political and economic transformations that took place under British rule raise important questions about the continuity of traditional occupations, the changing conditions of artisan communities, and the relationship between local production and wider markets. In this context, the history of pottery in Murshidabad offers an opportunity to explore not only the evolution of a traditional craft but also the social and economic experiences of the people whose livelihoods depended upon it. Thus, the study of pottery in colonial Murshidabad seeks to recover an important yet often overlooked dimension of regional history. By examining the craft through its historical, social, and economic contexts, the present study aims to bring the experiences of traditional potters into the broader narrative of Bengal's artisanal heritage. Historically Pottery is one of the oldest human inventions, dating back to prehistoric periods. Early pottery artefact's have been found in various regions, including China, Japan, Africa, South America, and the Middle East.

Objectives of the Study:

The present study aims to explore the historical development and contemporary condition of the pottery industry in Murshidabad district, West Bengal. Pottery is an important traditional craft that reflects the cultural heritage, indigenous knowledge, and socioeconomic life of the local artisan communities. Despite its historical and cultural significance, the industry faces several challenges in the modern era.

The major objectives of the study are as follows:

1. To trace the historical origin and development of the pottery industry in Murshidabad, with particular reference to traditional potter communities.
2. To examine the socio-economic conditions of the Kumbhakar community and understand the role of pottery in their livelihood.
3. To investigate traditional production techniques, tools, raw materials, and the processes involved in manufacturing earthenware.
4. To identify important pottery-producing areas, particularly Jitpur, Jiaganj, Kanthalia, and other relevant localities of Murshidabad district.

5. To analyse changes in production and marketing practices resulting from technological advancement, changing consumer preferences, and competition from plastic and metal products.
6. To identify the major challenges faced by potters, including declining demand, inadequate financial support, and limited market access.
7. To assess the possibilities for preserving and promoting the traditional pottery industry through government initiatives, improved marketing, and sustainable development.
8. Ultimately, the study seeks to document the historical continuity and contemporary transformation of Murshidabad pottery.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The pottery industry of Murshidabad forms an important part of the district's traditional handicraft heritage. However, the historical development, occupational structure, production techniques, and socio-economic conditions of the potter community have not received sufficient attention in regional historical studies.

W. W. Hunter's A Statistical Account of Bengal, particularly the volume dealing with the districts of Bengal, provides a useful starting point for understanding the historical geography, economy, and traditional occupations of the region. H. H. Risley "The Tribes and Castes of Bengal (1891)" is relevant to the study of occupational communities and castebased traditional professions, including pottery-related social practices. Nevertheless, the specific details of pottery production in individual villages of Murshidabad require further investigation. Colonial administrative reports, district gazetteers, and census records may also provide valuable information about the occupational distribution, population, and economic conditions of the Kumbhakar community. These sources need to be examined alongside field surveys and oral histories to understand the continuity and transformation of pottery production in places such as Kandi and other parts of Murshidabad.

The present study seeks to address this gap by examining the historical background, production techniques, traditional knowledge, marketing practices, and contemporary challenges of the pottery industry in Murshidabad. By combining documentary evidence with field-based research, it aims to highlight the contribution of potters to the district's cultural and economic heritage.

Socio-Economic and Cultural Importance of Pottery Industry in Murshidabad:
The pottery industry has played a significant role in the socio-economic and cultural life of rural Murshidabad, West Bengal. Traditionally associated with the Kumbhakar (potter) community, this craft represents an important aspect of the district's indigenous knowledge, occupational traditions, and rural economy. Pottery is not merely a means of livelihood; it also reflects the continuity of traditional craftsmanship across generations.

Socio-Economic Importance:
The pottery industry provides employment and supplementary income to numerous rural artisan families. Potters manufacture a variety of products, including earthen pots, pitchers, cooking vessels, storage containers, lamps, and ritual objects. These products serve domestic, agricultural, commercial, and religious purposes. The industry also supports associated occupations, including clay collection, transportation, marketing, and the sale of finished goods.

Traditionally, pottery production has been a family-based occupation in which knowledge and technical skills are transmitted from one generation to another. Men and women may participate in different stages of production, decoration, finishing, and marketing, although the division of labour varies between communities and households. Local markets, village fairs, and seasonal festivals provide important opportunities for artisans to sell their products.

However, the industry faces several challenges, including rising raw-material and transportation costs, competition from plastic and metal products, declining demand for certain traditional goods, and limited access to modern marketing facilities. These challenges have affected the economic security of many artisan families.

Cultural Importance:

The cultural significance of pottery in Murshidabad is closely connected with Hindu religious practices, rural customs, and Bengali folk traditions. Earthen pots, lamps, ritual vessels, and images made from clay are widely associated with religious ceremonies, festivals, marriage rituals, and other social occasions. During festivals such as Durga Puja and Kali Puja, clay products play an important role in ritual practices and artistic expression.

Pottery also reflects the relationship between human beings and the natural environment. The transformation of locally available clay into useful and decorative objects demonstrates the practical knowledge, creativity, and technical skills of traditional artisans. The designs, forms, and production methods of pottery provide valuable evidence for understanding the material culture of rural Bengal.

The pottery industry of Murshidabad represents an important intersection of livelihood, social identity, and cultural heritage. Its preservation requires appropriate institutional support, improved marketing opportunities, skill development, and documentation of traditional production techniques. Studying this industry from socio-economic and cultural perspectives can contribute to a deeper understanding of rural artisan communities and the historical development of traditional crafts in Bengal.

Occupational caste Kumbhakara:

Risley s and castes of Bengal volume II p312, among the nine castes, KUMAR and KUMHAR belongs to Navasakha. The name Kumhar is delived from the Sanskrit *Kumbhakara*, a potter, from *Kumbha* a pot. The porter who make earthenware vessels, pitchers and tiles, water-jars which are sold in the local market. They are also called Kumhars, almost entirely Hindu, in some districts and work Chiefly in clay, moulding pot and are the lamps for household and religious use. He also stated, kumhar engaged in coarser pottery., water vessels and pipe for smoking. Hunter noted 11278 kumar involved p50. Walsh also noted number of Kumhars declined to 9087 within 1891

(Bengal) p58. According to 1911 census report 4812 Potter or kumbhars widely distributed in Murshidabad district and also mentioned 3992 male and 3662 female involved in potary noted by 1941 census report p116. mentioned Khagra Jiaganj Beldanga Baranagar , where there men spot pottery in Murshidabad District Gazetteers

Murshidabad p79. Socially, their marriage system is prohibited within the same caste and strictly arranged by the parents. In social customs, they worship Shiva, Durga and Kali and observe the usual Hindu festivals particularly Durga Puja and Kali Puja.

Preparation of clay product :

Basically *pottery* is a handicraft made chiefly by *Kumbhar* .The industry is carried on by simple methods, handed from generation to generation with little change since early times. The *Kumbhakara*, traditionally known as the porter specially occupation based community, has played an important role in the rural society of Bengal. For generations, potters have produced a wide variety of earthenware used in everyday life, religious rituals, festivals, and domestic activities. Their products include water pots, cooking vessels, ritual pots, oil lamps, saucers, and other household items.

The study of traditional pottery-making techniques is essential for understanding the history of rural craftsmanship in Murshidabad district, West Bengal. The production process involved several stages, beginning with the collection of suitable clay and ending with the firing and marketing of finished products. These practices reflected the potters' traditional knowledge, technical skills, and adaptation to local environmental conditions.

Collection and Selection of Clay:

The first stage of pottery production was the collection of suitable clay. Traditionally, potters obtained alluvial clay from banks, the surroundings of water bodies, riverine areas, and other locally available sources.

Preparation of Clay:

After collection, the clay was cleaned to remove stones, grass, roots, and other unwanted materials. Water was then added to mature for a fortnight, being kneaded daily until it acquires the requisite plasticity clay and make it suitable for shaping. In some districts a small proportion of sand is added to prevent cracking during firing.

The prepared clay was kneaded thoroughly by hand or foot. This process helped improve its consistency and workability. Depending on the properties of the clay, potters sometimes mixed it with other types of clay or suitable tempering materials.

The Potter's Wheel:

A traditional tool of pottery used is the common of hand spun wheel, called the Chak stated by Risley(p210) made in by wood rotated by the Potter with a sharp Jab or hard stick.

A suitable quantity of prepared clay was placed at the centre of the wheel. As the wheel





Image sourced via Google search rotated, the potter used both hands to raise and shape the clay. The vessel was gradually formed by controlling its height, width, mouth, body, and base. The surface was smoothed with wet hands or appropriate tools. After the desired shape had been achieved, the vessel was carefully removed from the wheel. Not every type of earthenware was produced on the wheel. Some objects were made by hand-building techniques, joining clay strips, or using moulds, depending on the shape and intended use of the product. After shaping, the potter refined the vessel and smoothed its surface. Particular attention was given to the rim, neck, body, and base. Depending on the intended use, decorative patterns could be created using fingers, wooden implements, or other simple tools. Handles and additional parts were sometimes attached separately. Different products required different techniques. A water pot, cooking vessel, ritual pot, and oil lamp, for example, differed in shape, thickness, and construction Drying was an essential stage in traditional pottery production. Newly shaped vessels were initially kept in the shade or in a suitable environment to allow gradual moisture loss. They were subsequently dried in the sun when weather conditions permit fring transformed dried pots into harder and more durable earthenware. Traditionally, potters in different regions used open firing, locally constructed firing structures, or traditional kilns. The process involved arranging the dried vessels carefully and using locally available fuel, such as wood, straw, or other combustible materials for 24-36 hours, the temperature being regulated by the experience of the Potter . The method varied according to the type of pottery, the properties of the clay, and the technology available in the locality. After firing, the vessels were allowed to cool gradually. They were then inspected for cracks, deformation, and other defects before being marketed.

Traditional pottery production often involved several members of a household. In many families, men participated in wheel operation, vessel shaping, and firing, while women contributed to clay preparation, surface finishing, lamp-making, drying, and other associated activities. However, the division of labour varied between families and localities. Finished products were commonly sold in local markets and rural fairs. In some cases, traders and intermediaries helped distribute pottery to wider markets.

Different articles made by Potter:
Traditional potters produced a variety of items according to local needs, religious practices, and market demand like Water pots, Storage of drinking water, Cooking pots, Preparation of food, Ritual pots, Religious ceremonies, Oil lamps, Worship and festivals, Clay toys, Clay idols. Risley noted *ghara* or water pot, *Surahi*, a smaller flask used for cooling water, *Chati*, a shallow pan or basin made by potters The Tribes and Castes of Bengal, vol







Image sourced via Google search

Present Condition and the Crisis of Pottery in Murshidabad:
The pottery industry of Murshidabad district is one of the traditional cottage industries of Bengal. It is closely associated with the livelihood of the Kumbhakar community, social identity, religious beliefs, and rural culture. Traditionally, earthen pots, pitchers, water jars, lamps, Manasa ghats, and *Lakshmi Sara* have played an important role in everyday life and religious ceremonies. However, changes in lifestyle, market competition, and various socioeconomic challenges have placed the pottery industry of Murshidabad in a state of crisis.

Declining Interest among Young People:

At present, a section of the younger generation is reluctant to pursue pottery as a traditional occupation. The demanding nature of the work, the considerable time required for production, and uncertain income discourage young people from continuing this hereditary profession. Compared with pottery, other occupations may offer better income opportunities and greater economic security. Consequently, the transmission of traditional skills and technical knowledge from one generation to the next is becoming increasingly difficult.

Limited Access to Modern Technology and Digital Platforms:

Many potters continue to depend on traditional tools and production methods. Limited access to modern pottery wheels, improved kilns, quality packaging facilities, and digital marketing restricts their productivity and market expansion. A lack of technical knowledge and digital literacy also prevents many artisans from effectively using social media, ecommerce platforms, and online marketing facilities. As a result, they often struggle to reach a wider customer base beyond their local markets.

Role of Middlemen:

Middlemen frequently play an important role in connecting pottery artisans with markets. In many cases, artisans

receive relatively low prices for their products, while intermediaries may earn a substantial share of the final selling price. Rising costs of raw materials, fuel, and transportation further reduce the profit margins of pottery producers. Their limited bargaining power and dependence on intermediaries contribute to financial insecurity and make it difficult for them to sustain their traditional occupation. Changing Consumer Preferences:

Changing lifestyles and consumer preferences have affected the demand for traditional earthenware. The increasing use of plastic, aluminium, steel, and other manufactured products has reduced the demand for earthen pots in certain areas of everyday life. Consumers often prefer alternatives that are durable, convenient, and easy to maintain. These changes have created challenges for traditional potters. Nevertheless, growing interest in environmentally friendly, handmade, and aesthetically appealing products may provide opportunities to develop new markets for traditional pottery.

Lack of Institutional Support:

Insufficient access to vocational training, affordable credit, modern equipment, marketing infrastructure, and information about government schemes creates additional difficulties for pottery artisans. Limited institutional assistance and inadequate cooperative arrangements may prevent small-scale producers from competing effectively in wider markets. Greater coordination among government agencies, financial institutions, training centres, and marketing organisations is necessary to improve the economic conditions of pottery artisans.

So, the crisis of the pottery industry in Murshidabad is not merely an economic problem; it also concerns the preservation of traditional knowledge, cultural heritage, and intergenerational occupational continuity. The revitalisation of this industry requires the adoption of modern technology, the expansion of digital marketing, reduced dependence on intermediaries, skill development among young people, and stronger institutional support. By integrating traditional craftsmanship with modern market opportunities, Murshidabad's pottery industry can achieve greater economic sustainability while preserving its cultural significance. dolls are made to depict scenes from a traditional Bengali household which adds to their pulses etc). The history of the communities or craft families behind each artisanship. For instance, their website confirms that Sandhan Pal and his family are the only artisans who are sustaining the art of making Kanthalia dolls in Murshidabad. pottery as the only one in the Province worth sending to a foreign country. At the Calcutta Exhibition of Indian Art Manufactures, 1882, which specially ooncernijd the Province, only 91 specimens were received to represent the industry in Bengal, lichar and Orissa.

Of those 31 from Sewan, 30 from Khanja, 12 from Gaya, 5 from kathaliya in Murshidabad district documented in T. N. Mukharji's Monograph on the Pottery and Glassware of (1895) p3. By Field surveys conducted in different parts of Murshidabad district reveal the continuing presence of traditional pottery practices among local artisan communities. In Jitpur village of Domkal, members of the Pal community were engaged in producing various earthenware items, including water pots, tea cups, clay cups (*bhar*), and other objects used in ritual fields. Similarly, in Sankowa village under Nowda Police Station, two or three Kumbhakar households were involved in pottery-making, producing both everyday household utensils and ritual objects made of clay observed by field study.

Furthermore, earthen pots and other clay products are still available in *Dasha karma* shops across different parts of Murshidabad, particularly for religious ceremonies and ritual observances. These findings suggest that, despite changes in traditional occupations and consumer preferences, pottery Pal Para is a small village located in the Debipur Bazar area of Domkol Subdivision, Murshidabad district. Of the twenty families residing in the village, sixteen are engaged in pottery-making. One of their notable products is the traditional earthen water jar, locally known as historically *Surahi* , which is particularly popular during the summer months due to its ability to keep drinking water naturally cool. The high seasonal demand for this product reflects the continuing relevance of traditional pottery in everyday life.

In 2025, CFC, a Samiti was inaugurated by DM of Murshidabad to make glazed pottery.and. ceramicproduct. Baranagar, an important part of Murshidabad, situated on Bhagirathi river, the kumbars or engaged with Terracotta ornamentation. The clay is obtained from the bank of Bhagirathi near Bara agar . The finished worked by the potters is used to decorate the facades, pillars. Although the Char Bangla Temple and the Bhavaniswar Temple of Baranagar, examples of Bengal's terracotta art, the local potter community had an indirect connection , decorative plaques were moulded and fired by local kumbhokara or pottery.

CONCLUSION

The pottery of Murshidabad is not merely an art of clay; it is a living symbol of history, culture, and faith. Through the skilled hands of the Kumbhakars, ordinary earth is transformed into objects of beauty and tradition. Despite the challenges of modernisation and changing consumer preferences, this age-old craft continues to preserve the rich heritage of Bengal. With proper institutional support, modern technology, and the involvement of younger generations, this fading tradition can find new life. Preserving pottery means protecting not only an ancient occupation but also the cultural identity of a generation.

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