

Between Myth and Ritual: Clay and its Many Forms in India

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Abstract

It is only through the lens of the past, an appreciation of traditional form, rituals and history that one understands the complexities of the present and can cope with the uncertainty of the future. In an increasingly plastic and digital world, as an artist working with clay/earth I am interested in understanding the philosophical underpinning of my material and medium, the many references, symbolisms and stories connected to it, materially and spiritually especially in my own cultural context.

I present this paper not as a scholar but as a practicing artist and through my personal interests and travels in India. I will touch upon a few aspects of clay practices in India and discuss symbolism of clay, pot and clay forms, linking them through myth and ritual.

The complex Indian thought developed through the ages is circular and spiral in its movement keeping pre-historic elements alive within its arts and rituals. Through the uncoiling and recoiling of circular time and with every technological change we lose some traditions but others simply get transformed with much of their roots traceable to a distant past and philosophy. Myth allows re-interpretation of texts, and rituals make them tangible. Through ritual and tradition the new and alien are permitted to transform and become familiar symbols and metaphors, allowing for the primal thought to continue into our contemporary existence.

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Rural India has vast and diverse traditions where figures and forms in clay, from the functional to sculptural, fired to unfired, minuscule to gigantic have come down centuries virtually unchanged. Clay traditions in India are predominantly in terracotta or unfired clay terracruda. While there is a common thread seen throughout the country each place has its own specific tradition and forms. Most people don't realize that more potters live and work in India than any other country in the world. And without doubt clay and the pot are ever present in India and part of the Indian psyche.

*Earth, thy center and thy navel
All forces that have issued, from thy body
Set us amid those forces, breathe upon us.
I am the son of the Earth
Earth is my Mother
- Atharva Veda VII 3*

This phrase from one of the four Vedas (holy texts) – the *Arthva Veda* Chap. 7 verse 3 illustrates how important earth or clay is. Earth is the most primary of the *Panchamahabutas* or 5 sacred elements others being air, fire, water and space. Earth carries all the *Panchamahabutas* or elements within it.

The importance of the earth in Indian culture is illustrated by the metaphors of clay and pot that have been used repeatedly not only in Indian sacred texts but also in myths, poetry and literature to explain the eternal truth.

In India there are many mythological origins of the potters' craft – one prevalent myth is set in Satyuga, in a time when man and gods mixed freely. Shiva the god of destruction one of the three major gods wanted to marry Parvati the daughter of Himalaya. But they did not have a kumbha or an earthen pot without which the marriage could not take place. None of the gods or men assembled could make the pot, till one Brahmin man Kulaluk offered his services but he needed tools. So Vishnu the God of Preservation gave his Sudarshan chakra (his discus, his divine weapon) as the wheel. Shiva gave his Ghotana (his pestle for grinding bhang/intoxicant) to be used for turning the wheel. He also gave his langota (loin cloth) for mopping the water, kamandalu the water jar for using water to throw with and his jenau or sacred thread for cutting the pot off the wheel. Brahma the creator god gave his adi-kurma (primeval tortoise) to use as a scraper. The most important ingredient-clay, was provided by the only female in the story – Parvati, who very symbolically wipes her body to produce the clay. With these tools Kulaluk prepares the pots and the marriage was performed. The descendants of Kulaluk are called Khumbhars or the “pot makers.”

Even today at a Hindu wedding stacked pots containing grains and holy water-representing fecundity and the cosmos – stand at the four corners of the wedding mandapa or square surrounding the bride and groom

The *kumbhars* or potters are also considered the direct descendants of *Prajapati* an abstract deity invoked in the verses of Rig-Veda as the “lord of all created beings” also known as Brahma – the creator. *Vishwakarma* another name for Prajapati also comes up in the last chapter of the rigvega as the “craftsman of the gods” or the Vedic deity presiding over procreation.

Anyone who has seen a potter throwing on the wheel would understand why the potter is associated with procreation. The soft clay is always pulled up in a phallic lump first before any others forms can be created from it.

The pot plays an important role in rituals where Gods and Goddess are projected to descend into the *ghata* or the pot during a ritual, which then becomes the intermediary between the devotee and the deity.

The overflowing pot is called the *Puranaghata* that symbolizes both abundance and the void. The image of the overflowing pot is found in many Hindu, Buddhist and Jain architectural structures. The pot is used empty, full or broken in rituals as a symbol of transition from one stage of life to the other.

The *kumbha* or the waterpot represents fertility and prosperity while *kalasha* the pot filled with holy water and crowned with leaves symbolizes scared cosmos generally used in all rituals.

The round-bottomed water pot is the cornerstone of every village in India. The same form has been unearthed from the archeological sites of the Indus civilization (3000 B.C.E.). Water pots are made in porous terracotta. As the temperature outside rises the skin of the pot sweats keeping the water inside cool. The round bottom pot allows for the maximum surface of the pot to breathe allowing the water inside to stay cool.

With changing climate conditions, urbanisation, scarcity of water and poor management, water sources are driven further and further away from villages. It is therefore not surprisingly that the lighter plastic pot is replacing the earthenware pot. With the use of refrigeration the traditional water pot is losing its prominent position especially in urban households. As recently as 30 years ago there might have been about a million potters in India serving the needs of society, however there are fewer traditional potters today and the next generation is not as interested in the craft.

Having said that there is no shift in the belief that clay or the earth is sacred, and it holds the power to create and destroy. Clay is revered and feared. Clay contains within it the mulch of life including ashes, sewage, refuse and can be contaminated in its untreated state. The potter is therefore considered to be the possessor of mystic powers and an alchemist as he converts earth purified by fire into usable

forms. Through his material he becomes the worshipper and intermediately of the five sacred elements earth, fire, water, air and space. In a dichotomous society like India, potters are in a separate class - their social order is monopolized by their craft and their caste hierarchy is very low.

However in some parts of India the potter can also play the role of a priest and as the intermediate between man and god. As seen in this ritual from Uttar Pradesh where the bride does a ceremony called *Chak puja* or worship of the potters' wheel to ensure fertility and happiness in marriage. The potters wheel is sacred and the instrument of *Prajapati* the creator.

Traditionally only men are allowed to work on the potter's wheel, as women are considered unclean due to their menstrual cycle. Women though work in all other aspects of pot making, from making of the clay to decorating the pots. In several parts of India women have circumvented this rule and have come up with new techniques of making a pot. In Manipur in the eastern end of India women rotate around the pot in absence of the wheel becoming the wheel themselves.

A variety of sculptural forms are made in clay. These are usually made for offerings to the gods in return for a favor bestowed upon the devotee or for the fulfillment of a wish. The horse for his virility, strength and speed has a special place in Indian myths and stories.

In Bengal in the Bankura district they offer a horse to the gods for the fulfillment of a vow. In Tamil Nadu in South India the devotee commissions 16 feet high horses (the largest terracotta sculptures in the world) for his god *Aiyyanar*. These are propitiated by the potter/priest at the temple and left on the temple grounds, to decay and disintegrate completing the cycle of life and death.

Today only a couple of potters built the 16 feet terracotta horses. The predominant trend is to make them in cement so that they last longer. Unfortunately they lack the elegance of the large terracotta horses but the tradition is very much alive. Outside every village in Tamil Nadu there is a shrine of *Aiyyanar* with the horses up front. He is believed to be the protector deity that rides on the horse every night to protect his devotees.

Gods and Goddesses are also made in clay in many part of India. Since clay is revered as mother earth, images made in unfired clay are considered to be best suited for making deities that have to be made fresh annually.

Eastern India (Bengal) witnesses the biggest annual goddess festival known as Durga pooja. Goddess Durga comes to earth to save the world from the fierce Demon Mahishasura. She is depicted as calm and serene riding her vehicle the tiger and crushing the demon of ignorance beneath her feet. The festival reflects the triumph of good over evil.

The goddess made in raw clay is worshipped through the 9-day festival before she is submerged in the river completing the cycle of life, death and rejuvenation.

The beautiful idealized body of the Goddess is formed on an armature of hay tied with rope. Layers of clay are added with the last layers dipped in muslin cloth eventually giving it a nice smooth finish.

The head is the last section to be added. The eyes considered the most powerful part of a deity, comes on at the very end. It is at this point that the goddess is believed to embody the sculpture, however she remains dormant till her devotee lights the first lamp in front of her.

Similarly the central belief of transience and impermanence of life is illustrated in Maharashtra at the festival of Ganesh. After the 10-day festivities the elephant headed god is returned back to the earth in the immersion ceremony.

Clay plays a large role in architecture too where it has been used in making and decorating homes for centuries. The clay house of Kutch is called a Bunga. Kutch is a desert, hot and dry and the clay keeps the indoors cool. The wall painting inside the Bhunga is called Lippankam which is made with clay, camel dung and limestone. The beautiful white lippankan keeps the bugs out due to the dung and the mirror work brings light into the dark space.

In Bengal, clay in form of carved terracotta bricks was used to build temples between 16th to 19th centuries. The temples reflected a beautiful blend of various artistic styles as well as the political, social and economic developments of the time.

I end my presentation with the image of an Indian pooja in front of a Japanese anagama kiln. This is where I believe the uncoiling and recoiling of circular time happens again and again keeping some traditions alive and letting go of others but somehow allowing us to trace and stay connected to our distant past.

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