



ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF RAMTEK POTTERS

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ABSTRACT

The land of Ramtek (ancient Ramgiri) has witnessed continuous past human activities since prehistoric, through early historic to historical period. Ancient Ramgiri enjoyed the prosperity during the early historical period, particularly during Vakatakar regime (250-550 CE). Ramtek is surrounded with number of satellite settlements. These satellite settlements yielded ancient artefacts such as pottery, stone objects, beads, terracotta fragments etc. Pottery is the major category of archaeological evidence found here. Hence ethnographic research will be carried out for an archaeological purpose, to understand the past manufacturing technique, source of raw material etc. Also, there is a necessity to document and record production activity or techniques for the future generations. Because, this tradition is fading away soon. There are number of reasons for diminishing the tradition but the most important are fast urbanization and steadily decreasing profit of margin. Therefore the potters are shifting to different trades. During the ethnographic work some questions kept in mind. Hence, direct observation field study of the technique, source, form, use, and function of artifacts within a living society.

KEYWORDS : Ramtek, ethnography, pottery, manufacturing technique, soil or clay, pits, kneading, drying, polishing, firing, bhatti etc.

Pottery is the first synthetic material ever created by humans. The term refers to objects made of clay that have been fashioned into a desired shape, dried, and either fired or baked to fix their form. Due to its abundance and durability, pottery is one of the most common types of items found by archaeologists during excavations, and it has the potential of providing valuable information about the human past (Cristian Violatti 2014).

INTRODUCTION

The ethnographic studies provide detailed accounts of the manufacture and the secular as well as ceremonial use of pottery. Study of present day pottery manufacturing process would be helpful to understand the ancient ceramic art. Also it is helpful to know the uses of the vessels, and in the interpretation of archaeological data. With this objective, Ramtek village was selected for the

ethnographic study as an aid for understanding manufacturing process of the Early Historic period and its particularly the pottery of the Vakataka period. The landscape of Ramtek (ancient Ramgiri) has witnessed continuous past human society from prehistoric, through early historic to historical period. Ancient Ramgiri has flourished during the early historical period, particularly during Vakataka times (250-550 CE). The landscape provided a number of satellite settlements in and around Ramtek hill. These satellite settlements yielded ancient artefacts such as pottery, stone objects, terracotta fragments etc. Pottery is the major category of archaeological evidence found here. While carrying out ceramic study, some questions need to be kept in the mind, such as

1. Was there any production centre nearby during the ancient period?
2. What was the source of clay/material?
3. What was the manufacturing process?
4. What were the uses of particular vessels?

The first question till now remained unanswered, but it is through the ethnographic study of the Ramtek potters rest of questions also resolved

METHODOLOGY:

The study of manufacture was based on direct observation of six pottery-making households — observing, measuring and photography. Interviews were conducted with members of the households including male and female members and children of the study area. The local dialect is Marathi mixed with Hindi, and the tape-recording was done. The two-seasons of fieldwork carried out in 2015-16 and 2016, covered most of the yearly cycle, apart from the monsoon and preceding high summer, when activities such as potting are comparatively restricted.

AIMS OF THE STUDY:

The aim of this study is to understand the pottery production activity of the present-day society. It will help us to understand the ancient technological process. Beside this, there is a need to document and record production activity or techniques for the future generations. Because, this tradition is going to vanish soon. There are number of reasons but for the most important are fast urbanization and steadily decreasing profit of margin. Therefore the potters are shifting to different trades.

THE STUDY AREA:

The Ramtek upland, northeast of Nagpur, is separated from the Arvi Upland in the west by the Kanhan river. Many of the tributaries of the river Wainganga, Pench and Dawantheri river emerge from the Ramtek hills with a general height of over 400 m. above the ground. Development of canal irrigation and building activities make it imperative to conduct proper archaeological investigations in the area. Ramtek village lies in the fertile plateau of the Vidarbha region of Maharashtra state (Fig. 1) (Dikshit 1986). A number of mounds with archaeological potential have been noticed around the village, from early historical (Satavahana, Vakatakas) to late medieval period (Maratha). The stratigraphical record ranges from prehistoric to historic periods, ending with remains associated with Bhosale period (Bhaisare 2012).

Technology:

Pottery/Ceramic of Ramtek village is entirely wheel-made. Most of the pottery is plain in color; decorated/painted variety is limited.

Tools and Implements:

The people of the study area used very simple and a limited number of tools/implements but the craftsmanship is remarkably good. The tools used are:

- i) *Pitni* is a local name, made of wood. It is rectangular in shape with a straight apex and a long handle. It is used for giving the shape by slightly beating.
- ii) Dabbing stone
- iii) Scraper type of iron object used for scraping off the unwanted clay from the potin making.
- iv) Thread for separation of prepared object from the lump of clay



Fig. 1: Tools/Implements

Source of Clay:

Clay is obtained from a nearby tank (*tali*), at the foot of the Ramtek hill, or from the agricultural fields. The clay is transported using tractors and brought to the work place/home. The cost of transport is Rs. 1000.00 per tractor load.

Micaceous red color soil (or sand) required for polishing is carted from Ambala Road which is approximately 2-3 km away from Ramtek village. And Black color soil is procured from Maharajapur which is 8-10 km away from the village for black color polishing.

Stages of Pottery Production:

There are five stages of pottery making which are mentioned below:

1. Preparation of Clay:

The potters usually prepare pottery within the periphery of their houses, mostly using the outer portico space. After clay is transported to their workplace or house, it is stored in one corner of the verandah.

There are two steps in the preparation of clay. These are: i) Preparing the clay and eliminating unwanted material/impurities, and ii) Kneading and transforming it into fine sticky mass.

i) Preparing the clay and eliminating unwanted material/impurities: They prepare three pit holes nearly 2 ½ fit deep in the veranda or backyard of the house. Each pit is used to serve different function.

1. First Pit (Clay and Water): Clay is poured into the pit so that it is half full, then water is added to it. When it is properly mixed, men/ women enter the pit and trample it with their feet. Sometimes they do it with their hands.
2. Second Pit (Slush): The properly mixed slush is sieved into the second pit. After the slush settled down in the pit, the impurities are hand-picked and thrown out.
3. Third Pit: The slush is then sieved into the third pit, it turns into mud/mires. This mud is covered with plastic bag and used when they start turning pottery on the wheel.



Fig. 2a Eliminating impurities

2b: Preparing the mud

ii) Kneading the mud and transfer into the fine and sticky clay:

Desired quantity of mud is taken for pottery making. It is placed on a plastic bag on the ground. Over the mud lump, some ash is sieved and water is added by sprinkling with the hands. It is then mixed by feet, carefully removing any unwanted materials noticed while blending. This process takes 20-30 minutes. This mixing activity is done by women. With the addition of ash and water as well as continuous kneading, the clay becomes sticky. The clay is then turned into cylindrical lumps. The ready lump of clay is kept in one corner and covered with plastic sheets. The clay is kept in airtight till the making of pots in order to retain its plasticity.



Fig. 3a: Kneading the mud

Fig. 3b: Kneaded mud

2. Shaping of Pots:

It is usually done by male potters. Before shaping of pots, the potter takes desired amount of clay and kneads properly so that it becomes soft and sticky enough. The clay is kneaded for

nearly 10/15 minutes. Shaping of pots can be done immediately after the preparation of the clay. The prepared clay is kept on the wheel and shaped into required shapes of vessels.



Fig. 3b: Kneaded clay on the wheel



Fig. 3b: Preparing Gangar



Fig. 3b: Iron tool (scraper type) used for scraping off the unwanted clay



Fig. 3d: Completed object separated by thread from the lump of clay

3. Drying:

The pots are kept in the sunlight for drying. Drying of the pots/pottery takes a week or more depending on the weather.



Fig. 4: Drying the vessels in Sun light

4. Slip or Polish:

They use red/ black colored soil for applying slip/polish on the vessels/pottery. Majority of the pots are in red color. They use 4 different shades of red color and coat them one by one. The job of applying slip/polish is done mostly by women. After applying color/slip on the pot, they are left to dry till all pots are completed, same procedure continues repeatedly till four coats of the color are applied.



Fig. 5: Applying Slip or Polish

5. Open Kiln Firing:

When the polished pots are completely dried in sunlight they are subjected to firing. Open kiln firing is used in Ramtek village. It is done mostly in the evening, because during the day the pots are placed in sunlight and therefore there is very less chance for cracking. Open kiln is made by brick and soil. In one episode / lot of firing, nearly 80-100 vessels are placed in the kiln. The pots are brought near the kiln in the baskets by women. Vessels are then placed in the kiln. Small rough red ware bowls, and brick bats are used to give support to the unbaked pots/vessels from the bottom. When all pots/vessels have been set in the kiln, broken pots are used to cover the pots; dry grass is then set on top. Furnace ash mixed with water locally called *zhari* is then used to, cover nearly one third of the kiln. Very little space is left between the pots on the ground level so they can add fuel (wooden twigs, plastic bags, and kerosene) for firing. The pots are fired for nearly two hours, and the fire is allowed to settle down by itself. A well fired pot sounds like metallic sound and is brownish red in color.



Fig. 6: Bhatti/Potter’s kiln



Season:









Pottery is manufactured after *TipuriPonima* or *Diwali* to May. From rainy season to *Diwali* the potters get engage in making images for various kinds of festivals or *puja* such as Ganapati, Durga, Laxmi etc.

Forms and Functions:

Pottery has been used for a number of utilitarian and ceremonial functions in the ancient period and even in present-day society. But currently, the use of pottery is restricted to only certain purposes and that too mostly in rural areas.

Pottery is made in a number of forms and used in multiple functions. These are follows:

Forms	Functions	Photo
<i>Gangar</i>	Bath tub (particularly during marriage ceremony)	
Miniature pot	Used along with <i>Gangar</i> for pouring water or sometime it is used for ritual purpose during the marriage ceremony	

<p><i>Tapeli</i></p>	<p>preparing vegetables</p>	
<p>Pan or <i>Tava</i></p>	<p>Preparing <i>chapatti</i> (bread)</p>	
<p><i>Handi</i></p>	<p>Preparing food</p>	
<p>Math</p>	<p>warming water,</p>	
<p>Flower vase</p>	<p>Decorating flowers</p>	
<p><i>Btaei</i></p>	<p>preparing for firing at the base of vessels</p>	
<p><i>Gadaga or Galla</i></p>	<p>Money-box</p>	
<p>Lamp or <i>Diva</i></p>	<p>Lighting lamp</p>	

CONCLUSION:

The pots of the current study area are found wheel made; only some parts of the vessels and images are handmade. The potters at Ramtek use very simple tools and implements. It has been noticed that the potters of Ramtek village fire their pots in the porch of their houses. The pots are well fired with a metallic finish. Nowadays the pottery making is restricted to few families due to dwindling profits.

On the basis of ethnographic study, early historic communities procure the clay from nearby pond/tank, at the foot of Ramtek hill or agricultural fields. Vakataka ceramics were in course and fine in fabric, might be made by hand or wheel. Majority of ceramics were use for domestic purpose and some of for religious activity. Such as small miniature pot, ageless goddess, sprinkler were used for religious activity however fine dish, bowl, carinated *handi*, pot, storage jar, lid were used for day to day life etc.

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