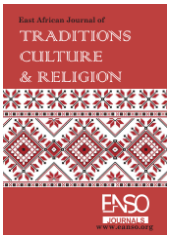

East African Journal of Traditions, Culture and Religion
eajtcr.eanso.org
Volume 7, Issue 1, 2024
Print ISSN: 2707-5362 | Online ISSN: 2707-5370
Title DOI: https://doi.org/10.37284/2707-5370

EAST AFRICAN NATURE & SCIENCE ORGANIZATION

Original Article

Kohar, the Potters of Terai: An Ethnicity Sustaining the Art of Pottery

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Article DOI: https://doi.org/10.37284/eajtcr.7.1.1761

Date Published:

18 February 2024

Keywords:

Kohar, Pottery, Ceramics, Earthenware.

ABSTRACT

Potters are artists, and pottery is an ancient art of making artifacts from clay. The earthenware mainly includes items like lamps, pots, idols, etc., which are baked in fire and have been used in day-to-day activities, including cooking, decorations, and religious functions since the earliest date of human civilization. This paper is based on the descriptive method and aims to assess the traditional lifestyle of Kohar, the potter community in the Terai of Nepal. The direct interview was conducted with active pot makers residents of Rupandehi district, Nepal, to know they utilize what raw materials and equipment, what procedures for making a typical pottery are, what kinds of general earthenware are being produced, and what current difficulties affecting their tradition and culture. This cross-sectional study was conducted on the occasion of Dipawali, a Hindu festival in November 2023, and leads to the conclusion that the Kohar community of Nepal is encountering issues like shortage of quality soil, lack of market, and decreased interest of new generation in the pottery.

APA CITATION

Tharu, M. K. (2024). Kohar, the Potters of Terai: An Ethnicity Sustaining the Art of Pottery *East African Journal of Traditions, Culture and Religion*, *7*(1), 1-13. https://doi.org/10.37284/eajtcr.7.1.1761

CHICAGO CITATION

Tharu, Manoj Kumar. "Kohar, the Potters of Terai: An Ethnicity Sustaining the Art of Pottery". *East African Journal of Traditions, Culture and Religion* 7 (1), 1-13. https://doi.org/10.37284/eajtcr.7.1.1761.

HARVARD CITATION

Tharu, M. K. (2023) "Kohar, the Potters of Terai: An Ethnicity Sustaining the Art of Pottery", *East African Journal of Traditions, Culture and Religion*, 7(1), pp. 1-13. doi: 10.37284/eajtcr.7.1.1761.

IEEE CITATION

M. K. Tharu, "Kohar, the Potters of Terai: An Ethnicity Sustaining the Art of Pottery", *EAJTCR*, vol. 7, no. 1, pp. 1-13, Feb. 2024.

MLA CITATION

Tharu, Manoj Kumar. "Kohar, the Potters of Terai: An Ethnicity Sustaining the Art of Pottery". *East African Journal of Traditions, Culture and Religion*, Vol. 7, no. 1, Feb. 2023, pp. 1-13, doi:10.37284/eajtcr.7.1.1561.

Article DOI: https://doi.org/10.37284/eajtcr.7.1.1761

INTRODUCTION

Pottery, one of the oldest innovations of human beings (Lienhard, 1989), is a traditional cottage industry with a remarkable contribution to the economy and has a long history and value in human civilization (Pal, 2021). On the other hand, it supports thousands of families by creating employment opportunities and alleviating poverty (Tasneem & Biswas, 2014). Pottery is the art of preparing different artifacts from clay, including earthenware, stoneware, and ceramics like bowls, cups, plates, flowerpots, cooking utensils, idols, etc. (Shreshtha, 2018).

Pottery, the art of making artifacts from clay, is the oldest craft and has been a vital part of human civilization from the start of human history (Ghimire, 2020). Pottery provides important information about potential human interaction in ancient civilizations (Odelli et al., 2020), and it is treated as a predominant category of social artifact especially, in the context of linguistic and migratory patterns (Bostoen, 2007). Archaeologists also give a major focus on ceramics because of their virtually unbreakable properties and presence in large quantities at nearly all archaeological sites dating back to the Neolithic period (Tite, 1999).

Potteries can be handmade (cord-impressed) and wheel-made, and they are practiced all over India (Rao & Lal, 2019). Some primitive methods of making earthenware include modelling by simply pinching or beating a lump of clay, pressing into a mould, building by hand from coils and slabs of clay, and throwing on the potter wheel (Tite, 1999). The Indians have been expertly moulding clay with their hands to form various things of daily utility, such as toys and worship deities, since the ancient period (Paul, 2022). For centuries, pottery has been an eco-friendly and economically viable cottage village industry (Geedh & Nadgauda, 2013).

In Central India, the tradition of cord-compressed pottery evolved during the Mesolithic period (Petraglia, 2007), which was also discovered in neighbouring regions in the later Proto-Neolithic Period (Singh, 2008). The cord-compressed pottery is the oldest known pottery tradition in South Asia and was found in Uttar Pradesh of India at Lahuradewa, which dates back to 7000-6000 BC (Bellwood & Ness, 2014; Schug & Walimbe, 2016; Barker & Goucher, 2015; Cahill, 2012). Wheel-made pottery was believed to have been developed later in the Kachhi plain of Baluchistan in Pakistan in the Mehrgarh Period II and III of the Neolithic Era (Archaeology of UAE). In the cities of the Indus Valley civilizations like Harappa and Mohenjo-daro have discovered many amazing pottery fragments during excavation (Rao & Lal, 2019).

As the name argues, cord-impressed potteries bear partial or complete cord imprints, generally on the external surface. The leather-hard pots, which have little moisture before drying completely, are beaten with a cord-wrapped paddle to shape them. The cord prevents adhesion between sticky clay and the paddle while beating. Often, the paddle is carved with different designs for the same purpose, and in either case, it sets out a beautiful impression on the pot externally. Cord-marked earthenware usually has three types of impressions, which are obtained by using paddles with (1) single strand of rope, (2) double strands of rope, and (3) net-like knotted thick rope. Pebble-wrapped pads or even tortoise shells have also been found to be used to print such impressions (Hazarika, 2013). In this pottery method, clay tempers containing fibres, shells, sand, or even stones are added to the clay, providing additional strength, and preventing it from cracking or collapsing when processed. These potteries are made using the anvil and paddle method, where a stone anvil is held inside the pot, and a wooden paddle is used to beat from outside to form and thin the pottery. They are then dried and fired.

Later on, the hand-made method of pottery evolved into the wheel-based one after the invention of a rotatory device called the potter's wheel (Ceccarelli et al., 2021), in the Iron Age in Central Europe (Thér et al., 2017), but it was already introduced in the

Article DOI: https://doi.org/10.37284/eajtcr.7.1.1761

Late Bronze Age in case of Greece and during the fourth millennium BC, at beginning of Bronze age in Mesopotamia (Berg, 2007; Choleva, 2012). However, a debate exists on the first introduction of the potter's wheel in the Indus Civilization of South Asia (Ceccarelli et al., 2021; Berg, 2020). The modern-day wheels are very much distinct from those ancient slow wheels called tourneys, rotated by hand or foot when the pot was being coiled (Roux & Miroschedji, 2009), which have almost disappeared (Sini, 2004). In the conventional view, it is assumed that the linear evolution of fast-rotating wheel and wheel-throwing technology is the source of the emergence of wheel-thrown pottery in the archaeological record (Alram-Stern, 2004; Berg, 2020). In this context, the potter's wheel facilitated the mass production of pottery of superior quality, which became necessary in an urbanized society (Amiran & Shenhav, 1984).

Earthenware is prepared through a series of processes, including collecting soil, preparing clay, throwing a pot on the wheel, drying and colouring, oven preparation, and firing pots (Rathore et al., 2020). Earthen pots are eco-friendly, sustainable, and self-replaced materials; hence, no modern material has yet replaced them. The food materials cooked in earthen pots are healthier due to the addition of minerals from the pots (Tripathy & Jayabrata, 2019). However, the conventional pottery industry has now faced rapid growth in equipment and technology (Kiradoo et al., 2022). The new generation faces a dispute with the continuation of pottery due to the availability of a wide range of other financial options (Rothenberger, 2016). Moreover, the lack of raw material (soil) and the low selling price of earthenware are other problems potters face (Shrestha, 2018).

In general, pot makers in most parts of India are called 'Kumhar' or 'Kumbhar' but 'Kumor' in West Bengal, 'Kusavan' in Tamil, and 'Kummara' in Telugu. The etymology behind all these names is the Sanskrit word 'Kumbhakara', meaning the 'pot maker'. They have to depend on other communities to sell their products. Similarly, other communities also have to depend on them to buy clay articles for domestic and ritual purposes (Sikdar & Chaudhuri, 2015). In the Mid-western Terai of Nepal, in the local language, they are called 'Kohar' or sometimes they call themselves 'Prajapati'.

There are several ethnic groups in Nepal having their separate language and caste showing their ethnic identity. They share a common culture and are endogamous, both carving out their ethnicity in Nepal (Mishra, 2020). The Kumal ethnic group is one of the least studied groups by sociologists (Sigdel, 2011). There are more than 145 castes or ethnic groups in Nepal and the Kumhal ethnic group constitutes 0.33% of the national population according to the 2021 National Census of Nepal. Kumhal belongs to the Madhesi (Low) broad ethnic group (NPHC, 2021).

Research objectives

- To assess different tools used in pottery with their function.
- To assess the pottery items prepared by the potters of Rupandehi, Nepal.
- To assess the methods of earthenware preparation.
- To investigate the current problems encountered by professional pot makers in pottery.

MATERIAL AND METHOD

This cross-sectional case study was conducted among the local Kohar community, also known as Kumhal or Kumal, in Rupandehi District on the occasion of the Hindu festival Dipawali in 2023. Rupandehi district (27º20'00''- 27º47'25'' N, 83º12'16''- 83º38'16'' E) belongs to the Lumbini province of Nepal. The district's total area is 1360 km2 and is distributed in three geographical ranges: Shivalik, Inner Terai, and Terai (DCC. Office,

Article DOI: https://doi.org/10.37284/eajtcr.7.1.1761

Rupandehi). The required information was accumulated through personal interviews since all the respondents were found to be illiterate and could not fill out any questionnaires. Nine potters were interviewed from nine villages: Harnahiya, Laxmipur, Sisawa, Parroha, Badsari, Chhapiya, Chhatarpura, Baragadawa, and Ramawapur. The names of each tool and earthenware were noted on a notebook, and pictures of all materials were taken. The price of each item was also noted. Only the old people were interviewed to get enough authentic information.

RESULTS

Twelve different tools were found to be used by the potters in Terai. This equipment are used for digging soil, preparing clay, throwing, shaping the pots, and colouring the items. In the same way, seventeen different artifacts were found to be prepared from clay and they are majorly used in household activities and reverence of deities. These items are sold in the market or exchanged for rice in villages. All potters followed a similar process of earthenware preparation which includes six steps before launching them to market. All the items are produced from common soil. They were found to be selective regarding the quality of the soil only to avoid cracking of materials upon drying or firing. Lack of raw materials, a decreasing trend in the usage of earthenware, depreciation of potteries, and deviation from traditional pottery by young generations are some problems faced by the Kohar community in Nepal.

Major Tools Used in Pottery

Peetan is a wooden paddle about 1 foot in length and resembles a table tennis racket. It has a long handle and a rectangular or oval biconcave blade. It is used to beat the leather-hard pot to provide a rounded shape.

Gahani is a small dumbbell-shaped ceramic structure used to support the pot from the inside when beating it from the outside with the *Peetan*. Its smaller and non-functional end is used as a handle, while a larger one with a convex surface supports the pot interiorly.

Peend is a modified form of the *Gahani*. But, unlike *Gahani*, it is a wooden structure with a long handle.

Lehachhur is an iron-made wedge with two handles and a sharp surface in between. It is used to cut soft and moist clay into thin slices to knead it again.

Athari is a container made up of clay or concrete and used to hold round pots for beating or painting.

Chaak/chakiya: the potter's wheel is also called the *Chaak/Chakiya* in the local language. This is the main tool used to throw earthenware of radial symmetry. It is a circular disc-like concrete structure measuring about 3 feet in diameter and 2 inches thick. Its basal surface has a small central invagination which articulates with the iron pivot fixed firmly in the ground. The upper surface also bears an invagination but at the periphery, which articulates with *Chakaith* while giving momentum to the *Chaak*. It is a heavy structure and rotates for about 3-5 minutes when given the maximum possible velocity by hand. The harder the clay body, the shorter the wheel's revolution time because hard clay needs more pressure on it to get the desired shape creating resistance in a circular motion.

Chakaith is a simple wooden stick measuring about 3 feet and used to rotate the wheel.

Chhewan is a piece of thread used to separate/cut prepared pots from the clay body on the wheel.

Sieve: it is of various shapes and sizes, often rectangular, and is used to sieve the dissolved clay to remove any debris like stones and hence, to purify the clay.

Kaabis is a colouring material made by mixing red soil, mango tree bark, and washing soda. First, all the ingredients are crushed in a mortar called *Athari*, then shaped into balls of about 1.5 kg and dried before storage. A ball of *Kaabis* is mixed in water to paint the potteries.

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Chakaudh is a ceramic pot used to put a little water near the wheel while throwing. The water is used to moisten the clay which makes it slippery, ultimately it facilitates the shaping of pots.

Spade and shovel: these are used to dig soil from the ground and are also important during clay preparation.

Plate 1: A Lehachhur

Plate 2: *Peeta* (top three) and *Gahani* (at the bottom)

Plate 3: Peend of different size

Plate 4: An Athari with a pot on

Plate 5: Chakaudh with clay-dissolved water in it and a Chhewan placed on the circumference tied on a stick.

Article DOI: https://doi.org/10.37284/eajtcr.7.1.1761

Plate 6: *Chaak* (potter's wheel) with a Chakaith

Plate 7: *Kaabis* along with a pestle in an Athari (stick) on it.

Major Potteries and Earthenware

Gagari is a rounded flask-shaped, narrow-necked ceramic pot of various capacities measuring from 5 litres to 20 litres. It is used for carrying and storing water.

Metiya is a smaller form of *Gagari*, also called *Kalash* or *Kalsha*, and used on religious occasions.

Khonha is similar to *Gagari* but compressed from upside down so that it bulges in the middle and has a wide mouth. It is used to cook rice.

Khapari is even more compressed and bulged than *Khonha* and has a wider mouth. It is used to cook vegetables.

Lota is a small pot used to drink water.

Kosha is a cup-like pot for drinking water.

Bharki is a smaller form of *Lota* used to put oil for cooking.

Diya is a very small bowl-like lamp used to make light with the help of vegetable oil as fuel, and a wick. But also used during worship.

Parai is a larger form of Diya and is used as a lamp. It is also used to cover the pot while cooking.

Ulta Parai is different from *Parai* only due to its inverted circumference. It is used in witchcraft.

Piggy bank is locally called *Gullak* or *Bhudki* and is used to collect and save money, especially by children.

Haudi is a cattle bowl.

Tawa is a pan used to make chapati.

***Ghoda*/ Horse**: This horse idol is used in reverence of deities.

***Hathi*/ Elephant**: This elephant idol is also revered by deities.

***Bagh*/ Tiger**: This tiger idol is used to revere deities.

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Khapr: these are multiple lamps embedded together, either 22 or 121 lamp systems.

Plate 8: Common potteries used in the kitchen. From left to right: Gagari, Khonha, Khapari, Karahi, and Lota.

Plate 9: From left to right: Diya, large Diya, and Parai

Plate 10: Idol of elephant and horse

Plate 11: Multiple lamps (Khapr)

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Method Used in Wheel-Thrown Pottery

The steps used in the preparation of almost all potteries are similar. A typical lamp requires the following processes:

Collection of Soil

They prefer a special soil suitable for pottery. This soil contained less humus, less dark in colour, and was sticky when mixed with water. It is generally found in certain depths of lakes, rivers, and fields. The dry soil is transported on baskets or cycles or by hiring tractors.

Preparation of Clay

About 50 kg of soil is selected for a single batch of pottery and dissolved in water to make a thin lotion-like mixture. It is then sieved to separate any materials other than clay and then dried for one day (sunny day) to evaporate excess moisture. The clay having the required texture is kneaded multiple times by feet and doughs weighing about 10 kg are prepared and stored by covering it with a plastic sheet followed by wet clothes to preserve the texture.

Throwing

In this stage, the wheel is rotated with the help of a stick/*Chakaith* up to the maximum possible velocity. Then a clay mass shaped like a big dough is placed on the wheel at the centre. Now the potter applies a little pressure laterally with both his hands at the apical portion of the rotating clay to produce the required shape, size, and thickness of the lamp. At last, the potter uses a *Chhewan*, a thread to separate the lamp from the main clay body and then it is shifted on a wooden plank.

Drying

When newly thrown lamps fill up the plank, it is shifted to the sun for drying. After drying for about 1-2 days, depending on the intensity of sunlight, it is ready for the next step. Pots need to be deep-dried to minimize breakage during baking.

Colouring

A special colouring material called *Kaabis* is prepared by using red soil collected from hills, properly beaten bark of mango trees, and washing soda dissolved in water. The fully dried pot is simply dipped into the *Kaabis* and dried in the sun once again. The characteristic red colour appears only after the firing.

Firing

It requires a lot of preparation. They collect a sufficient amount of fuel to continue the fire for 12 hours. The fuel sources are rice husk, straw, firewood, dry leaves, fire cake, etc. Thick iron bars are placed parallelly over the readymade firing pit. Now the dried coloured pots are placed on the bars one above the other to make a pile. The whole pile is covered by straw and then plastered with clay. They make fire below the rods and continue it for 12 hours. The lamp before firing is called *Kachchaa Diya* after firing, it is called *Pakka Diya* which is ceramic. Firing is a special occasion for pot makers.

Marketing

They attend weekly markets to sell their products in nearby villages and towns. Some attend two or even three markets. They exchange their products with grains, particularly rice and wheat, or they accept money. In Hindu culture, ceramics are necessary for every occasion like marriage, funeral, and religious ceremonies where they sell their products. Festivals are also major opportunities for pot makers, and Dipawali is the most beneficial for them. Nearly all respondents accepted that Dipawali is the peak season of income that is sufficient for more than six months to sustain their family. They sell lamps and prepare for more than one month for this special occasion.

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Table 1: The value of major items sold or exchanged with rice by potters on the occasion of Dipawali, 2023 in Rupandehi district, Nepal.

Particulars	Price (NPR)	Rice
Small lamp	30-40 per dozen	1 kg per 10 units
Big lamp	10 per unit	1 kg per 4 units
Parai	20 per unit	1 kg per 2 units
Ghanti	30 per unit	1 kg per unit
Gagari	200 per unit	-
Kalash	100 per unit	-
Khapari	250 per unit	-
Khonha	200 per unit	-
Hathi	500-1000 per unit	-
Ghoda	500 per unit	-
Bagh	500 per unit	-
Khapr-22	200 per unit	-
Khapr-121	500 per unit	-

Main Problems Faced by Pot Makers

Upon interview, it was concluded that this traditional culture has become vulnerable due to countless major and minor difficulties. A few of them are listed below:

Decreased Charm over Earthenware

The respondents realized that the comparative quantity of earthenware purchased in the community has fallen drastically. This is possibly a result of evolution of more durable plastic and metal items replacing earthen products. Candles and electric bulbs are replacing local *Diya* in Dipawali.

Depreciation of Earthenware

This earthenware are competing with durable and reusable electrical bulbs, consequently decreasing their price in the market.

Lack of Raw Materials

The chief raw material in pottery is soil or clay. The potters used to collect soil from almost anywhere for free. But nowadays they must purchase the soil, and the availability of soil has also decreased.

Deviation from Traditional Pottery By New-Age Kohar

The old-age potters have accepted that their children are less attracted to their original profession. According to the local society, the young members of are seeking modern jobs, which are more respected and beneficial than pottery. They prefer sitting on chairs in modern dress in the office rather than working with clay and exchanging them with rice. Due to all these factors the potters are bound to practice some other works parallel to the pottery. They are involved in the local labour market, sell vegetables, practice farming, and grab every opportunity to make money.

DISCUSSION

Pottery is one of the most historical and eco-friendly traditions. Archaeological evidence of the use of ceramics has been found worldwide during excavations. According to a study conducted in Jharkhand, India, it was found that the procedure for making pottery is similar to the above-discussed one. The firing of pots is a sensitive part as the breaking or simply cracking of pots is a nightmare to the potters. Lack of raw materials and low price of earthen products were two main problems they faced (Tripathy & Jayabrata, 2019). According to Singh (2023), in Naga Hill of India, the duty of

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collecting soil is of females and young male potters. Men carry the soil in baskets made of bamboo. Females crush the dry soil in a large wooden mortar with a long wooden pestle at home. The pounded fine soil is mixed with water to make clay which after pounding repeatedly, is made into clay balls of the desired size which is ready for pottery making (Singh, 2023). Upon examining archaeological ceramic artifacts, an investigator from Oxford University, M.S. Tite found that both calcareous clays containing more than 10% lime and non-calcareous clay containing less than 5% lime were used. And, to prevent potteries from cracking and shrinking i.e. to maintain the plasticity, either non-plastic inclusions were removed or, tempers like sand; plant fibres; crushed flint, shell or limestone, and sherd were added (Tite, 2008).

Ghimire (2020) in research conducted on potters in the Bhaktapur district of Nepal, found that most of the family members are deviating from their original occupation due to changes in lifestyle and social values. Moreover, a decreased trend in pottery production was observed mainly due to a lack of raw material, which is soil, and the elevation of the price of soil, even if it is of low quality (Ghimire, 2020). Similarly, another researcher named Briana Foley who studied the social lifestyle of potters in Thimi of Kathmandu Valley in 2013, concluded that the pottery there is in its 'last stage'. The new generation was avoiding this old tradition. Some children in this community have never even touched the clay (Foley, 2013). But Prakash Shrestha (2018) a Nepali scholar found that the market of Nepali pottery items is increasing in trend, especially in the international market though the potters are facing difficulties like shortage of raw material, manpower, and sufficient space for drying, firing, and storage of earthenware (Shrestha, 2018).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

This study was performed to find out about local technologies currently applied by the tribal Kohar community of Terai in Nepal. Kohars are the potter of Terai. They make different artifacts using clay, and this earthenware is used for various purposes in society. They prepare major items like lamps, cooking utensils, idols, ornamental items, etc. The majority of the items are wheel-thrown and are fired to convert into ceramics. Currently, Kohars are facing socioeconomic problems in this developing era. The government and society should encourage the art of pottery to conserve a crucial section of historical knowledge and culture. The following recommendations are advisable regarding this work:

- A study focusing on cultural similarities and dissimilarities among geographically different potters of Nepal should be launched.
- The chemical nature of the soil and its importance while selecting it for the production of cooking utensils should be investigated.
- The role of *Kaabis* in human health needs to be tested.

ABBREVIATIONS

BC: Before Christ

UAE: United Arab Emirates

NPHC: National Population and Housing Census

DCC: District Coordination Committee

Acknowledgment

I am thankful to the Kohar community of Rupandehi district in Nepal for participating in the interview and sharing their precious technology of pottery. I give special thanks to Mr. Manchayan Kohar from Harnahiya village for providing permission to publish images of his products and tools, and for his contribution regarding this work.

Article DOI: https://doi.org/10.37284/eajtcr.7.1.1761

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