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RESEARCH ARTICLE

POTTERY: A UNIQUE TRADITIONAL CRAFT IN INNER SIRAJ VALLEY OF NORTHWESTERN HIMALAYAN DISTRICT OF KULLU, HIMACHAL PRADESH

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Abstract

Pottery is a century old craft used by human and is one of the most tangible and iconic elements of Indian art. This craft system shows the lifestyle of native communities, their belief, faith, customs and tradition through their craft. This paper documents the traditional pottery art of the Siraj community living in the inner Siraj Valley of Kullu district in Himachal Pradesh. The uniqueness of the art is wheels are not used for making different pots as in other parts of the country. Paper also documents the procedures involved in making the pots and its current status. Study revealed that this traditional craft system will not survive if some urgent measures are not be taken in near future.

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Introduction:-

Traditional knowledge generally refers to the cultural experience, creations, innovations and indigenous practices adopted by the native community of any region (Anonymous, 2002). This practice includes the traditional health care system, ethnobotanical knowledge, agricultural practices, climate knowledge, midwifery and various kinds of tools and techniques etc. (Mishra, 2006) which includes pottery also. This knowledge system on various aspects passes from one generation to next generation mainly orally (Anonymous, 1999; Geedh, 2013). Pottery in our country is also regarded as a very ancient craft of human civilisation (Hazra and Barman, 2017). The same can be recognised from the Neolithic Era with some of the beautiful examples of traditional pottery from ancient Indus valley civilization (Sekdar and Chaudhuri, 2015). From time immemorial, group of people commonly known as "Kumhaar" (Faley, 2013) uses clay with their bare hand to mould it into different shapes. There are various ethnic communities in the country who still practices pottery, which are culturally being transmitted from centuries (Khevaria, 2017).

Kullu district of Himachal Pradesh is famous for various types of traditional handicrafts such as bamboo basketry, pattu-making, pattal-making and pottery making etc (Sharma et al. 2008). In spite of an exhaustive work carried out on different traditional handicrafts in the region, no such attempts have been made on the traditional knowledge of pottery making. If efforts are not made timely to conserve the traditional knowledge of pottery, it will not survive. Therefore, a focused study is required to understand the entire procedure of pottery, current status, socio-economic conditions of people associated with it to conserve the time immemorial art and to facilitate people to continue using this art to preserve and flourish it. That's why the study has been conducted in Faryadi village of inner Siraj Valley which is known for its traditional potter's family.

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Study area

Siraji Community in Faryadi Village

Kullu is one of the twelve districts of Himachal Pradesh. It is one of the richest biodiversity areas of the State and supports one National Park (Great Himalayan National Park) and six Wildlife Sanctuaries i.e., Manali, Kanawar, Khokhan, Kais, Sainj and Tirthan Wildlife Sanctuary (Singh et al. 1990). It is very well known for its forests, alpine meadows, gurgling rivulets, tiny fields and fruit orchards. Kullu district has been divided into five blocks viz. Naggar, Kullu, Banjar, Anni, and Nirmand. Total population is 4,37,474 as per 2011 Census comprising 2,24,320 Male and 2,13,154 Female (Census, 2011). The Northern part of the district is divided into two valleys i.e., outer Siraj and inner Siraj (Bhardwaj et al. 2014). In Inner Siraj Valley, one of the villages, called Faryadi is known for its traditional potter's family. The specialty of *Siraji* potters is that they do not use any kind of rotating wheel for making wares contradictory to common practice. They perform it with bare hands with wooden stick. In this village, pottery production is mainly done in family units. Data collection was done in 2018 to 2019, through questionnaires, interview and field visits.

Socio-Economic Profile of Faryadi Village

The village is sparsely populated with 77 households with 33 general categories and 44 schedule caste family. From earlier times pottery is mainly done by the schedule caste population of the village who still practicing pottery for their livelihood. It was also found that the demand of the pottery products is decreasing due to the availability of relatively cheap plastic wares. This decrease in the demand of pots, these potters started shifting their economic activities to other activities like tourism, farming, etc.

Results:-

Pottery: Ingredients and process

Clay:

Traditional pottery requires locally available resources, such as clay as the primary material, firewood as fuel and other wooden implements (Dogan et al., 2008). Clay is a type of soil which is essential and cheapest raw material that is used in pottery making (Gupta, 2008). The soil type used by the community for making pots is red clay which is locally known as *Lal-matta*. They collect clayey soil from a particular mountain's creeks which are 10 Km away from the village. According to the potter's clay of this area is soft and flexible hence easy to blend and mould. Area is quite far and difficult to approach as there is no *pakka* path and often, people carry clay on their back. This makes the process quite cumbersome and expensive/adds to the final cost. To get the desirable quality of clay, they dig ground around 1-3 meters depth and collect it. As per the potters the type of soil (red soil) needed for making pots are available in this part of the valley only.

Water:

It is used to easily mixing and moulding of clay into different shapes.

Wood:

Wood is the primary material used in fuel kilns for baking. All potters in the area use especially Kail (*Pinus wallichiana*) and Chil (*Pinus roxburghii*) woods for baking. *Teetne* (Pine tree cones) and layers of grasses are also used during baking.

Kiln:

Use of a particular type of fuel kiln/shed is the uniqueness of these potters which is made up of stone walls near the water source. It is locally known as *odhi/gar*. The potters use these fuel kilns for baking pots traditionally and no modern or gas fire unit is used. It is always constructed near the water source to maintain the temperature of the kiln due to the inflow of cool air from water source.

Procedure

As per their traditional belief, head of the family is mainly involved in the pottery craft and other family members work simultaneously. Male usually go to collect the clay and female members work on the clay preparation like clearing, drying, sieving, grinding, moulding, etc. They believe that if the clay is not prepared properly, pots break down easily even before the baking process. Therefore, clay is being made very carefully by slowly adding the water for rehydrating and blending it. The process is repeated till it reaches its desired smoothness. After that the clay is smashed with the stone tool called '*battu*' until it is converted into fine and sticky form. Then they start making pots or different crafts by using their bare hand which is the speciality of this pottery system. In this traditional method of

pottery, no rotating wheels are used which is usually being used in pottery making. Another uniqueness of this pottery system is pots or any craft they make it in two equal halves' separately and then join them together to make it one piece. As per the desired shapes potters beat the clay with a wooden plank from outside while placing one hand inside the clay. These wooden planks are of different sizes and shapes as per the shapes and requirement of pots (Fig. 1). Once a piece of pot is made, first of all it is dried in sun and then stacked and kept in the kiln. The entire stack is covered with *teetne* (Pine tree cones), a layer of grasses and wood one by one or sequentially or one after another. Then the fire is ignited to start the baking process. The entire baking process takes around one week. After completion of the process, the various pots/craft were sold in village level fairs and festivals. In some cases, potters also sell their crafts to the middleman for reselling.

Type of crafts

The pottery produces different useful products based on the requirement of the native people of different regions (Duary, 2008). These *Siraji* families still practice this craft from a very long time without any specific change in wares/craft making system. Different types of products (Fig. 2) and their uses are given below:

Handi:

A small pot used for various purposes.

Charti:

A big vessel used to make butter. Fresh curd or *dhahi* is put in the *charti* (matka) and churned. The first extract is *lassi* (buttermilk) and when churned more forcefully, the butter is made.

Ghara:

A big vessel used for storage of drinking water.

Thuthi:

Upper pot of *Hukka* (traditional tobacco smoking equipment).

Gheyuli:

Small vessel used to store *ghee*/Butter.

Paru:

A small bowl-shaped vessel used for pouring grains and pulses.

Diya:

A small earthen lamp that is used for worship of God. Oil/*ghee* serves as burning fuel and cotton wick is used for lighting of diyas.

Traditional earthen pipe (Chilam):

A straight conical pipe made up of clay. In the old days, monks and sadhus use this *chilam* for smoking purposes. Nowadays these are made of different metals.



Fig. 1:- (a) Implements used (b) Clay (*Lal-matta*) (c) Stone (*Battu*) (d) Fuel Kiln (*odhi/gar*) (e) *Kurpi* (f&g) Husband and wife involved in pottery making.



Fig. 2:- (a) Questionnaire survey (b) *Handi* (c) *Matka* for whey (*Charti*) (d) *Ghara* (e) *Tuthi* (f) *Gheyuli* (g) *Paru* (h) *Diya* (i) Traditional earthen pipe (*Chilam*).

Discussion:-

Pottery in the region is unique itself as it is made without using wheel and at the same time its physically challenging and time consuming. Traditionally due to lack of economic inputs in terms of wheels and kilns natives continued the method as it was being practiced by their ancestors. Temperature regulation in the traditional fire kiln is one of the major issues which reduces their output up to 40 percent. Due to temperature fluctuation in the kilns only 60 percent of the pots come out properly. In last 3 to 4 decades, traditional ceramics are being threatened by modernisation viz. introduction of plastic wares and steel utensils which is cheaper. Also, lack of market and middleman reduce the income level so as the interest of potters. These factors led them to shift their occupation to other activities like tourism, farming and bamboo basketry for their sustainable livelihood. Lack of interest among younger generation towards the craft and occupation with high economic return also imposing a serious threat to this traditional craft of pottery in the region.

Conclusion:-

From the above study, it was concluded that the craft is slowly declining and in the forthcoming years if timely action has not been taken it will not survive in the near future.

Recommendation:-

This traditional pottery needs redesigning and technical adaptation to reduce the overall cost and time taken, only then this craft will act as a major source of income generation for this community which ultimately will conserve or promote the craft technique. There is also an urgent need to create linkages between organizations and markets for their crafts recognition and good returns. Financial aids for promoting the craft through various fairs, festivals and trade fairs are needed to conserve, facilitate, revive and revitalize this traditional craft of the region. This traditional technique also requires a stable place for the kiln and modern or better kiln with thermoregulation. This will minimize the breakage during baking process and cost of production plus time involved. Value addition in terms of diversity in the products and its looks will also fetch a good market price for the produces which will in return conserve and flourish this traditional pottery of the region.

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Conflict of interest:

Authors declares there is no conflict of interest.

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