

A Brief Study on Sacred Pots of West Bengal

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Abstract

Background: Clay pottery in India dates back to prehistoric times, symbolizing one of the earliest expressions of human creativity and utility. Archaeological excavations have revealed clay vessels used by early humans for storing food and liquids. Over time, these utilitarian objects evolved into artistic creations, decorated with geometric patterns and natural dyes. The dual purpose of these pots—both sacred and domestic—has remained a cultural constant through the centuries.

Purpose: This study aims to explore the historical continuity and cultural relevance of clay and terracotta pots in India, with a specific focus on West Bengal. It seeks to understand how these vessels have maintained their significance in daily life, festivals, and sacred rituals, despite changes in techniques and materials over time.

Methods: The research draws on archaeological evidence, ethnographic observation, and regional craft studies. It examines traditional pottery-making processes, artistic practices, and the role of potters in local communities, particularly in West Bengal. Visual and functional analyses of sacred clay objects used in rituals and festivals are also included.

Results: Findings reveal that while modern tools and techniques have refined the quality and detail of clay pots, the core artistic and cultural essence remains intact. In West Bengal, artists continue to shape a variety of clay and terracotta vessels, deeply embedded in the region's daily life and ceremonial practices. Decorative approaches—mainly through color application or incised designs—reflect both tradition and innovation.

Conclusions: The enduring tradition of clay pottery in India, especially in West Bengal, illustrates the resilience and adaptability of indigenous art forms. Despite technological advances, the sacred and cultural functions of clay pots persist, affirming their integral role in rituals, festivals, and household life. This study highlights the importance of preserving such crafts as living heritage.

Keywords: Clay, Terracotta, Artist, Pots, Sacred, West Bengal

1. Introduction

The art and craft of Bengal is majorly based on clay and terracotta [1]. Probably in every house of village, town and city of Bengal one can find small, big, renowned, unrenowned artists and craftsmen born with in his hand the skills of art. And with their unique creations we also see numerous varieties originated and developed in the art and craft of Bengal. And all this happened also due to the enthusiastic cultural love of the inhabitants which connect themselves with this art through rituals, customs and ceremonies [2]. Artists with his creative mind and magical hands give shape to numerous types of art and craft. Clay and terracotta pots are part of the day-to-day routine life of the people of West Bengal; [3] either it can be the festival or sacred occasion or the simple household task [4]. The Kumbhakar (potter) on his rotating wheel made several shaped pots. Each utensil has its own purpose and use. Moreover, the decoration of clay pots is an essential part in the process. It can be done with the help of colors either, or with incision. The forms are simple and quite interesting. The examples of such few pots are Manasa Ghata, Enyo Sara, Handi etc. Manasa Ghata (image 1) is a sacred utensil. On spiritual occasion of worship of Devi



Figure 1: Manasa Ghata

Source: <https://www.dsourc.in/>, accessed on 15th April, 2025

Manasa [5]. It is placed aside to the Deity's (Devi) idol. Sometimes only Ghata or Kalasha is also worshiped which

resembles with the small household Ghata for carrying water. These Kalashas portray the painted image of Manasa Devi on them and are often called Manasa Ghata. In Barishal of east Bengal worship of Manasa Devi is done with the assimilation of this Ghata. It was during the partition of Bangladesh when most of the Ghata Shilpis or Kumbhakars migrated from Bangladesh and settled in North 24 Parganas of West Bengal and started the tradition of worshipping Manasa and incorporating Manasa Ghata in their Worship [6]. Manasa Ghata is elongated in shape and resembles the shape and form of flower vase. The image of female deity Manasa is usually carved or painted on the body of Ghata which has a very pious and deep spiritual meaning. The upper and neck portion of the vase is stylized in the form of crown of Deity (Manasa). The image of Manasa is depicted holding snakes in her clinches. These lines of lips and chin of the face of Manasa Devi are done in a single brush stroke suggest the utmost skills of the artist. Nose ring, eye brows and third eyes are also painted very delicately and with the swift storks of the brushes. The jewellery articles of the deity image are painted like snake skin's pattern. The body colour is painted yellow. And the corners of lips are painted vermillion red. [7]. But the costumes of Manasa can be seen different in colours in different regions of west Bengal like somewhere in green or somewhere in red. Eyes of Manasa Devi is painted wide open and her hands are shown with a small scorpion (Brischick) painted on them. The lower portion of the Ghata is painted as the pedestal or the base. Sometimes a lotus or a pair of Hamsas can be seen on the pedestal. This painted Manasa Ghata is an important part in the folk, sacred culture of West Bengal.

Another sacred utensil is 'Enyo Sara', (image 2) which is used in wedding ceremony in West Bengal [8]. In Bengali, Enyo means married and Sara means a bowl shaped utensil. The shape of this Enyo Sara is like a small vessel (Handi) with a lid placed on it. The lid of the Enyo Sara is shaped in a form like the shikhara of temple incorporated with the peacock with its wings stretched outside. The base of Enyo sara is assimilated with the small dolls in a row around. Apart from this depiction and incision of flora is done on this type of Sara's. This is the unique creation with the amalgamation of two different art forms i.e. doll making and Pata painting. Though the utility of this Enyo sara is limited in contemporary urban society now a days but the folk of west Bengal is completely associated with the importance and use of this sacred utensil [9]. Enyo sara is also placed for exhibition as a craft art object in Ashutosh Museum, Kolkata [10]. Another sacred object of west Bengal is Handi, which is used in wedding ceremony for exchanging sweets. It is a painted object made of baked



Figure 2: Enyo Sara

Source: <https://livingwithart.blog> accessed on 15th April, 2025

clay. It has a lid also. It has two handles to hold it. The body of Handi is painted with different types of foliage and flora such as lotus, the betel leaf; creatures like butterflies, fish are also painted on it. These symbols are associated with the traditional ritual of typical Bengali culture and their relevance is also pious [11]. The design made on the body of Handi harmonized with the design of the lid on it. The harmony in the colour scheme applied on the body and lid of this sacred utensil project, the very folk nature associated with the romance and spiritual aspect of the wedding ceremony and the new life of the couple going to be married. There is a tradition of placing six to eight Handi's in the wedding ceremony in Rajnagar of Birbhoom District. [12, 13]. In region Kandi at Murshidabad the belongings used in wedding called (Tatwa in Bengali) is carried in this painted Handi. We find that this sacred utensil is also used in the Muslim wedding ceremonies with a small difference in colours comprise to the Hindu wedding rituals. The craftsmen from Midnapore district still sell these kinds of painted Handi's in their local markets.

Pitcher is one of the common used paraphernalia in the households and rituals in Bengal. These pitcher are prepared on the potter wheel of potter and then baked thereafter these are baked and then painted. Incisions on these pitchers are also done with different geometric, flora and fauna design. Sometimes we find resemblance among these pitchers with the Greek art [14]. The geometric lines on these pitchers resembles with the geometric images on the Greek Vases and Exekias. Sometimes the native drawings in incision can also be seen on the body of these pitchers with a layer of paint on them. These pitchers turned black while baking. Some of the craftsman paints them in red brown colour. And sometimes these pitchers are coloured bright. Majorly

the utensils are done in riverine clay and mineral pigments enhances the local sustainability and cultural ecology of craft [15].

We find that the folk of Bengal is extremely associated with these sacred pots and how these paraphernalia become the essential part of their life and culture [16].

2. Various Categories of Pots (sacred)

Handi: It is a very popular clay utensil. It is identified according to its name and size. The upper portion of this Handi is more expanded which is covered with a utensil named 'Sada'. The lower portion of the Handi is of hemispherical shaped. The upper half of Handi is prepared on potters' wheel and after that it is pitched where as the lower hemispherical portion is made with the help of 'Bola'. Sometimes according to the need sand and dry mud is added in it. The lower portion of the Handi is designed even when it is un-dried with the help of seashell or scratching stick. In some regions this design is made with colors also. Apart from household tasks, cooking or for domestic use, this Handi is also known with different names such as Tijel Handi, Darpan Handi, Varan Handi/Hanti, Kundu Handi, Jug Handi, Jhanjhari Handi, Maina Handi, Jagran Handi, Mangal Handi, Dahi Handi and so on. At some places this Handi is know by the place's name.

Kalasha: Kalasha somehow resembles with Handi, but bigger in size, also used in different tasks such for carrying water, for carry juice of jaggery, used in different ritualistic occasions, for preparing liquor (called 'Besali'). The neck portion of Kalasha is narrower and long edge with an instant edge. Lower portion is round. The making process is like of preparing a Handi. We find different types of Kalasha in different regions with different styles and shapes such as Kafi kopa, Gagra, Pela, Dhaila, Ghara, Ghata, Chuka, Chukai, Dhili, Dhela, Dabbar, Dabbari, Kum, Nagri, Paela, etc. In ritualistic occasions Mangal Kalash is generally used. [17]. **Malsa:** This half round shaped clay utensil is prepared with the help of mould. Its name depends upon its size. It is like a small bowl and is used to bake rice flakes in villages. It is wide from its edges and tapered inward and forms a hemispherical shape. It is used in Yagnas and is called 'Holla' then.

Sara: It is hemispherical in shape and is used as lid. It is prepared in mould. It is used as a lid for Handi and Kalasha. It has different names according to the purpose in which it is used. Sara used for offering 'Naivediya' (food offerings to God) is known as 'Purna Patra'. The smaller sized Sara is known as Muchi Sara, it is used during the ritual of deceased. It is known as 'Pret Sara' during mourn.



Figure 3: Images of Sacred Pots

Sara used for fumigate the essence stick is known as ‘Dhup Sara’. Sara used after the birth of baby is known as ‘Atur Sara’/ ‘Phul Sara’. Sara used during marriage ceremony is called ‘Aeo Sara’. Sara made of five crowns is also popular. Sara used to cover the Puja Ghat is called Bakhi Sara. Sara used in Lakshmi Puja is known as Lakshmi Sara.

Machla: It is the bigger form of Malsa which is prepared in mould. And is also pitched on a mound of hard clay. The edge of this utensil is heavy and is prepared separately by adding clay and then joined on its upper portion. To feed cows, rice straw preparation is done in this Machla. It is known with different names in different regions of Bengal such as Nada, Nad, Sabar, Tar, Kuri, Pattna etc.

Khola: Its form is somehow like Malsa but at times it is made with two handles. It is used as a utensil for cooking, boiling milk and frying the rice. It is known with different

names such as Telani, Khapati, Charan, Marana, Khulla etc. It is also used in worship of Tushu Devi (local Goddess worship) and in different ritualistic occasions also.

Tava: This clay utensil is flat in shape and is used to prepare Chapatti (Roti). It is also used as a utensil to prepare different sweets in West Bengal. [18].

Ghata: Small shaped Kalasha is called Ghata which is used in worship rituals and marriage ceremonies. It is prepared on potter’s wheel and is named according to its shapes such as Dwar Ghata, Devi Ghata, Nava Ghat, Itu Ghata, Upa Ghata, Lakshmi Ghata, Ganesh Ghata, Mangal Ghata etc.22

- i **Dwar Ghat:** For sacred purpose, this Dwar Ghata is filled with water and placed on the both sides of the door with leaves of mango and a coconut is placed over it.

- ii **Devi Ghata:** It is placed in front of the image of Devi.
- iii **Mangal Ghata:** It is used in different ceremonial and ritual purposes
- iv **Bari Ghata:** Mansa Ghata is also called the Bari Ghata. A snake with hood is made on the top of this Ghata. Sometimes Goddesses on Hamsa holds a snake in her hand is called Bari Ghata.

Other Ghata are Nag Ghat- Bangladesh, Kaitari Ghata, Kartikaya Ghata, Dharam Ghata, Kamini Kendu, Bhoral etc.

Bhad: It looks like Handi, but small in shape. The upper portion (neck) of Bhad is like Kalasha. It is used to carry water, juice and money also. In Bakura district Bhad with lid is prepared which is called 'Ankh' Bhad. In Murshidabad district the Bhad used in marriages is named as 'Shasti Chouri'. It is also used as a utensil for carrying salt and spices and then it is called Nathi Bhad or Bobby Bhad. Chit Bhad, and Darpan Bhad are the other examples of its type. [19].

Jala: The bigger shaped Kalasha is known as Jala which may store food and water. It is made on potter's wheel. It is identified with different names e.g. Kola, Mete, Matka, Sang, Jar, Bani etc. [20].

Kujja: It is used to store water. Its shape is like a pot with a round base and long neck. Its mouth or edge has a ring around. It has a ringed base also. It is mainly done in red, black, red brown in colour. It is made in mould and also on potters' wheel. Its body portion is designed also.

Lakshmi er Bhad: It is made on potter's wheel or in mould. It is used as a money bank. The top of this Bhad resembles the shape of top portion of a north Indian temple. When the upper portion is dried up, an opening is made to insert money in it. It is given design on its body also and it is known by different names such as Kup, Boka Bhad, Bank, Nimoa, Sanchay Bhad etc.

- i **Glass:** It is made in burnt clay and is of 4 to 6 inches in height. It is prepared on wheel and the lower portion is tapered as we commonly see in other glasses.
- ii **Cha Bhad:** It is prepared on potter wheel. The neck portion of this Bhad is made a bit narrower but from its edges it is expanded.
- iii **Dhunchi:** It is used in worship and house hold tasks. It is prepared on potter's wheel. It seems somehow like Malsa, but its lower portion is narrow. It has a base also. It resembles like the amphora shaped. It has a design of different motifs around also.

Deepasana: It is prepared on potter's wheel. Basically it is a stand for earthen lamp which is to be placed on it. It is made in different sizes, 6 inches up to 2-3 feet. It has a designed pattern on it. Sometimes earthen lamp is fixed on its top where as it is also prepared separately. It is also known with the names Pilsuj and Gacha.

Pradeep (clay lamp/ Dia): It is made of clay, prepared on potters' wheel, with hands and also with mould now a day. A narrow opening is made for cotton to place in it for illumination. It has different types such as Swaran Pradeep, Jaag Pradeep, and four edged Pradeep.

Tulsi Manch: Tulsi Manch is prepared for Tulsi plant. It is very important artifact in ancient history and is also significant for the archeologists, scholars, researchers. It is prepared in different heights such as 10 to 45 inches and carries a length of about 20 to 90 inches. It has two openings. In general it is narrower from top but from its base it is flat, wide and expanded. It is made with 4, 6, 8 edges and sometimes it is made round only. Tulsi Manch is designed with different types of reliefs in clay. The motifs used for design on Tulsi Manch are flowers, trees, birds, geometric patterns, symbols and sometimes along with these motifs gods and goddesses like Radha Krishna, Gaur Nitai, Subhadra Balram Jaggannath, Dancers, Musicians figures are made in reliefs. It is prepared on wheel, mould and with hand also. It is famous in Midnapore district and also be seen in Hawrah and Bakura.

Kara Dhakkan: It is a lid and is used to cover the hot meals. It is prepared on wheel and also with mould. It is used wash the fish also and is famous with the names such as Minar, Kuri, Khala, Taatti, and Chuniotalli.

3. Conclusions

The enduring tradition of clay pottery in India—particularly in West Bengal—serves not only as an emblem of artistic continuity but also as a sustainable practice deeply rooted in the cultural identity and ethical values of its people. In an era of increasing industrialization and environmental degradation, clay and terracotta crafts offer an ecologically responsible alternative to plastic and synthetic materials. Preserving the tradition of using and producing clay pots is not just a matter of cultural pride, but a necessary step toward promoting environmentally conscious lifestyles. These handcrafted vessels serve both sacred and practical functions, reinforcing a lifestyle that honors nature, community rituals, and the cyclical rhythm of life. Their use in festivals, religious ceremonies, and everyday life connects generations and strengthens community bonds, making them more than mere objects—they are carriers of

collective memory, ethics, and identity.

Moreover, the artisans who craft these pots—often working in rural or marginalized communities—do so not merely for decorative purposes but with a sense of moral purpose and spiritual dedication. Their work is steeped in folklore, traditional narratives, and ancestral knowledge, making each pot not just a product, but a story molded in earth. These craftspeople often face economic hardship and limited access to modern markets, yet their commitment to preserving their heritage through their art is unwavering. Many potters operate within family traditions that span generations, keeping alive oral histories, spiritual beliefs, and community customs through their creations.

Empowering these artisans through education, fair trade practices, and governmental or institutional support can help ensure the survival of this invaluable heritage. It is through the recognition and revitalization of such living traditions that society can foster a deeper connection between cultural identity and ecological responsibility. By choosing to value and incorporate clay pottery into modern life, especially in urban and semi-urban Bengal, people are not only preserving a tradition but also embracing a holistic, sustainable way of living—one that balances material needs with moral and cultural wisdom.

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