

Kumbhar (Potter) Community of Odisha in Historical Background: A Review of Sources

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Abstract

The potting community (Kumbhar/Kumhar) is one of the Major indigenous communities of Odisha, belonging to the artisan groups in India. Pottery is one of the ancient crafts of man and is an integral and inseparable component of his culture. A chronological account of the growth and development of pottery, discovery of potsherds and potteries from different archaeological sites of Odisha as well India validates the continuity of the potting tradition. The ceramic tradition indicates the continuous flows of ceramic culture from one generation to the next. The large quantities of pottery fragments at archaeological sites raise questions concerning where they came from and how and by whom they were made. The archaeological investigation in Odisha from post independent provides insights into the prehistoric settlements of the area and material remains demonstrate a trajectory of cultural succession from the Palaeolithic to the Medieval period. This cultural succession provides an ample opportunity to study the Kumbhar (potter) community of Odisha on the basic of ethnographic context, as it is the first-hand study of people, culture and subject in local settings, and to their description and analysis in written texts. This ethnographic study is highlighted the origin and growth of Kumbhar community of Odisha through various sources, which are available in India as well as Odisha from ancient times to present day.

Keywords: community, ethnography, Kumbhar, Odisha, pottery, potting.

Introduction

The term ethnography refers to the first-hand study of people, culture, and subject in local settings, and to their description and analysis in written texts. Ethnography is as much the practice of investigation as the reporting of the observation findings. The investigator is on the one hand the research instrument that accesses reality through personal observation, experience, and interactions, and on the other hand, the author of ethnographic knowledge whose texts interpret the study object through different forms of argumentation and writing. The history of ethnography reflects its dual meaning as research and representation. It is a qualitative research method where researchers observe and/or interact with a study's participants in their real-life environment. It was initially popular in the field of anthropology but is now used across a wide range of social sciences subjects. Ethnographic studies are usually conducted through interviews, participant observations and surveys. The ethnographic

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work has been carried out widely in all over the world from the last centuries and provided the scope to explore the new communities which are still terra-incognita in the state as well as country level.

Study Area

The present name of the state is changed from Orissa to Odisha in 2011 derived from the Sanskrit word 'Odra Vishaya' or 'Odra Desa'. In ancient time Odisha was known in different names as per its historical geography such as Utkala, Kalinga, Kosala, Tosala, Odra, Mahakantara, Khinjali mandala, Kodalaka Mandala, and so on and bounded by the state of West Bengal on the North East, Jharkhand on the North, Chhatisgarh on the West, Andhra Pradesh on the South and Bay of Bengal on the East. The present state of Odisha has 30 districts and divided into five parts morphologically in the form of the Coastal plains, the middle mountainous country, the rolling upland, the river valleys and the subdued plateaus. The state is spread over an area of 155707 km² and extended for 700 km from north to south and 500 km from east to west, along with a coast line of 450 km (Sinha, 1971). All of these regions of Odisha are inhabited by the different communities' people along with the potting community (Kumbhar/Kumhar). As most of the districts of Odisha provided the evidences of the existence of pottery in the archaeological context and the people are still found all over Odisha, it provides an ample opportunity to look after this community in different background. Before discussing about the Origin and Growth of Potting Community, we have to learn about the potteries of Odisha in the Context of archaeological background.

Meaning

The potting community (*Kumbhar/Kumhar*) is one of the major indigenous communities of Odisha, belonging to artisan groups in India. The Odia term '*Kumbhar*' is derived from the Sanskrit words '*Kumbha*' (water pot) and '*Kar*' (maker/ to make), which indicates that *Kumbhakar* (*Kumbhar*) means the maker of water pots (Russell, 1916). There are also two other similar terms in Sanskrit, *Kulal* and *Ghatikar*, meaning makers of earthen pots. The term *Kulal* is also found in Vedic texts such as Taittiriya Samhita, Vajasaneyi Samhita, Kāthaka Samhita, Taittiriya Brahmana, Satapatha Brahmana etc., which refer to *Kumbhar*. The primary profession is the same for most of the *Kumbhar* (pottery maker) people, but they are known by various terms in different parts of India, such as *Kumbhar* or *Kumhar* in Odisha, *Hira* and *Kumar* in Assam, *Prajapati* in Gujarat, *Kumbharan*, *Kulalan*, *Velaan*, *Odan*, *Kusavan*, *Andhuru Nair* and *Andhra Nair* in Kerala, *Kumor* in West Bengal, *Kumhar* in Chhattisgarh, and many others, but commonly known as *Kumbhar* all over India. The equivalent term for *Kumbhar* in English is potter which suggest a person who makes dishes, plates, and other objects from clay, usually by hand or on a wheel.¹ In contemporary times, the potters' community are found all over Odisha and are divided into nine groups on the basis of their place of origin, language used, typology of pots and technology used in the pot manufacture. These nine groups include Odia, Bathauli, Magadha, Kannaujia, Telenga, Jhadua, Rana, Sanbhatia, and Badbhatia.

¹ Georgia Hole and Sara Hawker (Ed.), *The Oxford English Dictionary*, Sixth Edition, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2004, p. 430.

Origin of the Potting Community

The contribution and work of human beings led to the development of human civilization. In the early stages of human civilization, there was no division of labour and no group was associated with any specific tasks. Gradually, with the passage of time, a specific group came to be associated with specific work, which led to formation of distinct group defined by their work. These groups were later converted into *Varna*. According to Lord Krishna the *Gita* described, *Chaturvarnang Moya Sristong Guna - Karmang- Vibhagasa*, meaning that division of people are based on their qualities and activities (<https://bhagavadgita.io/chapter/4>, n.d.). The fourth chapter of the Bhagavad Gita is “Jnana Karma Sanyasa Yoga”. The verse 13 deals with the creation of four Varna according to quality and deed. According to this text the creation of *Varna* is attributed to Lord Krishna. Thus, the work of teaching and worship was entrusted to Brahmanas, while the Kshatriyas looked after administration and state affairs. The Vaishya engaged in business and agriculture while the Shudras were service provider to the upper three *Varnas*. However, in contemporary times not all member of a particular *Varna* is engaged in the work associated with their specific *Varna*. Moreover, with the rapid rise in population, people can no longer stick into their ancestral occupation and have to search for alternate work for their better livelihood.

In his Sanskrit Dictionary, Sir Monier Williams, describes a potter as the offspring of a Kshatriya Woman by a Brahmin male (Russell, 1916). However, there are diverse views regarding the origin of potting communities in different sources. Below we discuss the origin of potting communities under three broad headings:

- (i) Mythological sources
- (ii) Literary sources
- (iii) Archaeological sources

Mythological Origin of the Potting Community

There are a number of myths and legends on the origin of the potting community and they are discussed below.

(i) According to Hindu mythology, the first *Kumbha* (earthen pot) was a gift from the gods. When the *Devas* (Gods) and the *Asuras* (Demons) were churning the ocean for nectar, there was no vessel to collect the ambrosia. So, Vishwakarma (the builder of heaven), picked up some earth and shaped it into a pot (Sinha P. N., 1901). The pot was used to store ambrosia, which was distributed among the *Devas*.

(ii) In *Satya Yuga*, when Mahesvara (Shiva) wanted to marry Parvati (daughter of Himavan), the *Devas* and *Asuras* assembled at Kailash mountains to discuss the necessary arrangements for marriage ceremony where upon they realised that there were no pottery or earthen pots (*kalasa*) needed for the ceremony. Therefore, Lord Shiva created a male and a female out of his two *Rudraksha* beads and entrusted them to make earthen pots. The couple so created requested the assembly of *Devas* and *Asura* to provide the materials for manufacture of pots. Lord Vishnu responded to the request by giving his *Sudarsana Chakra* (discus) to be used as a

wheel, and the Mandara mountain was added as the pivot beneath the *Sudarsana* to hold it up. The *Adi kurma* the tortoise incarnation of Vishnu, was used as a scraper, and the cloud was used as water. After that, the couple manufactured the earthen pots and gave them to *Devas* and *Asuras* to be used in the marriage of Mahesvara (Shiva). After this the couple continued the work of pot making, leading to the evolution of pot making group, and their descendants came to be known as *Kumbhar* or maker of water-jars (Russell, 1916).

(iii) In Uttar Pradesh and Gujarat, the *Kumbhar* are known as '*Prajapati*' which comes from ancient myths that alludes to God Brahma as the creator. Baidyanath Saraswati recounts a myth about the *Prajapati* version of the word *Kumbhar*. Once upon a time, God Brahma cut a sugarcane and divided it among his sons. All of his sons ate the sugarcane, but one his son Kumar forgot to eat it and planted it into the ground, which gradually grew and thrived. After some days, God Brahma asked his sons for sugarcane, but only his son Kumar was able to provide him with the sugarcane. Lord Brahma was pleased with of the honesty of Kumar and give him the titled of '*Prajapati*'. The Potter of Uttar Pradesh and Gujarat traced their ancestry with Kumar (Saraswati, 1979).

iv) When the Yajurveda was compiled, Lord Brahma (the creator of the universe), produced a section of people from his own body to make pottery required for religious functions and rituals. According to Medhi Brahma created a man to make pottery and he is considered as the first *Kumbhar* and called as Damu Kumar (Medhi, 1992).

(v) According to another legend mentioned in the *Padma Purana*, when pottery was necessary for the worship goddess Manasa, Lord Brahma created a potter (*Kumbhar*) named Damu Kumar and entrusted Lord Vishwakarma to teach Damu Kumar the art and craft of pot making (Medhi, 1992).

vi) There is another mythological story about the origin of the *Kumbhar* community of India, which is also related to God Brahma. According to this myth, God Brahma had a son named Dakshya Prajapati, a great scholar of the Yajur Veda. After being given a prestigious rank by Brahma, he decided to perform a great *yagna* to which he invited *Rishis*, *Munis*, *Devas*, and Brahmins. On his arrival at *Yagna Mandap*, all of them stood up in respect, except Brahma and Mahesvara. Prajapati became angry at the apparent disrespect display by Mahesvara and disallowed him from taking part in the *yagna*. Where upon Mahesvara's gatekeeper, Nandi, cursed all Brahmins, saying that their entire lineage would live on the pity of others and would henceforth be called Demon-Brahmins. However, no such curse was given to the honest, hardworking group of *Kumbhar* who were continued to be called *Prajapati*. The *Prajapati* have surnames such as Atris, Bharadwaja, Gautam, Dhadhichi, etc., suggesting that they did not study Vedas but they were hard working people which came to be associated with the *Kumbhar* community (<https://thekumhars.wordpress.com/origins-of-kumhars.htm>, , 2023).

(viii) In the context of Odisha, there is a myth that traces the origin of *Kumbhar* in the *Kural Purana* composed by Dinakrushna Das in 16th century C.E. According *Kural Purana* after the creation of the three worlds (*Swarga* (Heaven), *Martya* (Earth), and *Patala* (under the earth)), Lord Vishnu instructed Narada to find out the condition of people of *Martya*. He was told that they have food to eat but they have no container to cook or store food. When Lord Vishnu

heard about that condition, sweat from his forehead drop on to the earth from which sprang a man named Rudrapala by Lord Vishnu. Thereafter, Lord Vishnu bestowed on Rudrapala the Knowledge of the craft of pot making (Das, 1974).

Thus, above myths and legends traces the craft of pot making to divine Origins including the accessories used in the pot making. Further, the *Kumbhar* came to be associated with the characteristic of honesty and hard working.

Literary Origin

India has an ancient literary tradition, is an important source material for historical research and reconstruction. The following are some of the references in literary texts that throw light on the origin of *Kumbhar*.

(I) While, there is no direct references to the origin of the potters' community in Mahabharat (Ganguli, 2004), but there are references to potters' with in a village along with other communities which testifies to their existence and recognition as a distinct group in the period of Mahabharat. There is also another story related to Drapaudi *Swayambara* where the reference of potters, as the king of Panchala Drapaud ordered a potter to supply dishes, glasses, cups, and other earthen items for his Daughter's *Swayambara*. From the above description, it is evident that the potting community were known from the period of Mahabharat.

(III) The tenth chapter of *Brahmakhanda* of *Brahmavaivarta purana*, mentions the nine sons of Lord Vishwakarma and his wife Ghritachi. With the passage of time, these nine sons were known as *Malakar* (wreath maker), *Karmakara* (carpenter), *Sanghakar* (bracelet of shell maker), *Kubindak* (weaver), *Kumbhakar* (pottery maker), *Tanti* (weaver), *Swarnakar* (jeweller), and *Chitrakar* (portrait maker). Thus, the fifth son of Vishwakarma and Ghritachi is Kumbhar or Kumar, who learned various crafts from his father Viswakarma (Nagar, 2003).

(IV) In P. V. Kane work, the *Kumbhar* accept as the off-spring of the clandestine union of a Brahman with a Vaishya female. He further state that while potters were born out of the union of a Brahmana male with a Vaishya female, in the caste system they are *Sudras* (Kane, 1930).

Archaeological Origin

(I) Pottery is the greatest resource for archaeologists. For its variety of form and texture, for decoration, for rapid change, for its quick fall into oblivion, and its incomparable abundance, in every respect it is the most important material for study, so it is considered the alphabet of archaeology (Petrie, 1904). In this context, pottery is the most popular archaeological remains to identify a specific period. For the first time in India, the significance of pottery in an archaeological context came from the excavation at Taxila. Later on, the excavation of Chopanimando in the Belan Valley of Uttar Pradesh by V. D Mishra (1967) provided the evidence of handmade pottery, which is considered as the earliest one in the world. In this context, the potters have their origin in the Mesolithic period in India.

(II) In the context of Odisha, the report of the Neolithic site of Baidyapur by Parmanand Acharya, and the excavation of Kuchai by B. K. Thaper, provided evidence of the existence of pottery from the Neolithic period. The description of the ceramics recovered from these sites

and other sites of Odisha in the form of vases, vessels, bowls, lids and basins of coarse to fine ware. These reports however do not link pottery with any particular group or community.

Potting Community and their Historical Background

Various pottery items have been discovered through excavation in various parts of Odisha from the prehistoric to the early medieval period, and the use of various colours show the sense of aesthetics and expertise in pottery making. Many pottery items such as *mahavira patra* (probably a lid top), *aspatra* (a drinking vessel), *habrani* (a type of ladle), *dhurba* (a big ladle used in sacrificial rituals), *kalpa* (a type of vessel), *Prasita Harana* (a type of vessel), *vayavya* (a drinking vessel), *chapyra* (a type of vessel) and many others are referred to in the inscriptions and literature of the Early Historic to Medieval period. Further there are references to the potters' community, receiving state endowment for their services, supplying pottery to the royal families and other groups in society. According to Jaina literature and the *Astadhayayi* of Panini, pottery making originated in the prehistoric period. References to pottery making are found in later literature and inscriptional evidence corroborates that the potting community received patronage from various ruling families from time to time. This patronage led to the formation of specific villages over passage of time, and there are several villages in modern times that dominated by the potting community.

India's oldest literature is the Vedic literature, which provided important references about the origin of the *Kumbhar* community. The Vedas, mention that *Kumbhar* was a skilled artisan of the Vedic period (1500 B.C.- 600 B.C.) in India, as evidenced by potteries such as *juh* (a tongue-shaped ladle), *darbi* (a type of ladle), *charu* (a type of kettle), *dronakalasa* (a jar meant to store soma juice), *tituna* (sieve), *upasacheli* (a spoon or a cup to pour down something), *sru* (cup), *chamas* (spoon), *kumbhi* (jar), and *sthali* (a cooking vessel). The *Satapatha Brahman*, the *Kalpa Sutra*, and the *Srauta Sutra*, give minute information regarding the use and technique of manufacturing of the *mahavira patra* (probably a lid top), *aspatra* (drinking vessel), *habrani* (a kind of ladle), *dhurba* (a big sacrificial ladle), *kalpa* (a kind of dish), *prasita harana* (a kind of vessel), *vayavya* (a kind of soma vessel), *chapyra* (a kind of dish) and many more, indicative the existence of the potting community in the Vedic as well as later periods (Rig Veda book I, V, VIII and X, Yajur Veda 19 (21), 19 (87), 20 (86-89), and Atharva Veda) (Eggeling, 1882) (Jacobi, 1879) (Thite, 2004).

In the *Manu Smriti*, there are reference to the various types of utensils made of gourd, wood, split cane, and clay, and their uses. It further refers to *sarava* as a dish, in which meals were served, suggesting that the potting community was wide spread (Roy, 1968).

According to the *Kaplasutra* the art of pot making is a remote antiquity. It states that the first Tirthankara Rishabhadeva introduced the three main occupations for the livelihood of man, namely viz., cooking, sculpture, and pot making. In Jaina literature the potter is referred to as *Bhandara* (Bhandakara). The Jaina monks often stayed with the potters and the description of their craft (Jacobi, *Lives of the Jinas*, 1964). Therefore, Jaina literature also corroborated the existence of the craft of pot making in the post Vedic period.

Panini, in his book *Astadhayayi*, refers to the terms *Kulala* and *Kullakam*, which mean potters and porcelain ware (earthenware) respectively, indicating that the potting community was well established between 6th and 4th century B.C (Vasu, 1896).

Several inscriptions mentioned the donation of land for the making and supply of pottery on different occasions by the potting community, which revealed the historical development of the potting community in Odisha in general and the Sundar River Valley in particular. In this context, the Khurda copper plate charter of Śrī Mādhavarāj, alias Śrī- Sainyabhīta or Madhavaraja II, mentioned that a particular caste organization or community inhabiting in a particular area of a village is named after that caste suffix with the word *cheda* which means community. Thus, the Khurda copper plate mentioned the *Kumbhāra cheda*, which is identified as a potter's village by Tripathy (Tripathy, 1997). From the 6th century C.E onwards it is evident that every village of the subsequent Sailodbhavas period has the suffix *cheda* in the Kalinga region, and the potting community who reside in a village also identified as *Kumbhāra cheda*.

The Chinese pilgrim Hiuen-Tsang (Yuan Chiang) who visited Odisha in 639 C.E mentions that Odisha or Kalinga was then divided into three separate kingdoms, such as Wu-cha (Odra), Kong-yu-to (Kongoda) and Ki-ling-ka (Kalinga). In his account he mentioned that most household used mainly earthen ware with a few utensils of brass. His account suggest that pottery was an important craft in the first half of the 7th century C.E (Watters, 1904).

The Midnapore plate of Sōmadatta, the illustrious feudatory of Sasanka, who was a keen follower of the law code of Manu, records that the grant of the village a Mahākumbhāra padraha in favour of the meritorious Bhaṭṭēśvara of Kāśyapa (gōtra), in which a large number of potters family were inhabited. From Khurda and Midnapur copper plate grant, it is clear that the potting community was involved in religious activity from the 7th to the 8th century C.E (Tripathy, 1997).

From the 8th to the 10th centuries C.E, during the rule of Bhaumakara, several crafts are mention of which the craft of pottery is an important one. The sculptural representation of pots, particularly *kalasa*, is found in the Vaitāla and Śisireśvara temples belonging to the Bhaumakara period. The Talcher plate of Śivakara III also refers to pots (Misra, 1934).

The Madalapanji (12th century C.E), the temple chronicle of Lord Jagannath at Puri, mentioned that Ananga Bhimadeva III, established the traditional 36 kinds of services or *niyoga*, at the Lord Jagannath temple and made an extensive land donation to the temple (In a temple life, the potters provide pottery, milkman supplies milk and ghee, gardener gives flower and garland and other people provided vegetables, woods, water and cleaner of temple premises so on. This is known as the 'Chhattishā *niyoga*' or 36 kinds of services to Lord Jagannath in the puri temple). In this context, the potters also received the land donation as they were one of the servitors to the temple of Lord Jagannath (Kulke, 2001).

The Votive inscription in the Lingarāj Temple, describes that pāncavātikā or five vāti were donated by Govinda, the commander-in-chief of the Gaṅgavaṃśi king Ananga Bhimadeva III, in the village of Lakshmīsāgara pattana. The land was gifted for the smoother function in the temple of Lord Kṛtivāsa (at Bhubaneswar) and out of five vāti of land, two were allotted to a potter (*Kumbhakar*) for the supply of pots that would be used for the daily cooking of the

Mahaprasad (food) for Lord Lingaraja. The potters' community received the land grant in favour of pottery manufacturing from the ruler not only for domestic purposes but also for religious purposes from the 13th century C.E onwards, which promoted the development of the pottery industry in Odisha (Mahapatra, 1998).

The fragmentary stone inscription of the Siddhesvara temple, records the donation of a plot of land in favour of a potter for making provision for the supply of earthenware and earthen lamp to the temple by Siddhesvara Jena an officer under Narasimha Deva- IV of Ganga dynasty who has been described as *Ranaka* and *Paramavaisnava*. The inscription can be traced to the 14th century C.E.

A Study on Traditional and Migrant Potters

Odisha is the hub of various communities, including the potter community and the present study is solely focused on the study of potting community (Kumbhar/Kumhar) in ethnographic contexts, an attempt is made to distinguish between traditional and the migrant potters to understand differences in their socio-economic background.

- (a) Potters who have resided in a particular district for more than five generations are considered as traditional potters while those residing for less than five generations are considered as migrant potters.
- (b) The traditional potters belong to families of patriarchal lineage within the district, own houses, bullocks etc. while migrants owning land, which is usually newly acquired, are economically less off that the traditional potting families.
- (c) The population of the traditional potters' community is always much higher than the migrant one. However, once the migrants live in a district for more than five generations and form a bulk of the population they also gradually transform into a traditional potting community.
- (d) The traditional potters have their patriarchal family relatives within the village as well as district whereas migrants have only selected family members living with them.
- (e) The *Vamsa* (lineage among non-Aryan) and *Gotra* (lineage among Aryan) of the migrant potters in the villages of the Odisha is always decided by the traditional potters in accordance with the socio-religious requirements of the community.

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