

Traditional Pottery Making as a Local Asset for Sustainable Development in North East India: Larnai Village, Jaintia Hills, Meghalaya

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Traditional Pottery Making in North East India

Northeast India is one of the regions with diverse human-environment relationships. Although the region is known to be rich in research results in various fields of empirical science, it has not attained any importance to date when it comes to the study of the production of pottery. The proximity to the South Asian junction, East Asia and South Asian countries, as well as the natural and cultural linkages, can explain the diverse culture of the people living in this region. The unique climatic conditions favour the region with high to very high rainfall (Mawsynram and Cherrapunji in Meghalaya are known to be the wettest places in the world), along with its diverse natural vegetation, natural resources, and various plant and animal species. All of these shapes and influences the lives and culture of the people of northeast India (Hazarika 2006, 25).

However, the northeast of India is destined to play a crucial role in shaping India as a nation, especially in the eastern region of the country (Medhi 2003), as this area is referred to as 'the great Indian means of access'. The region lies between 20°N and 29°30' N latitudes and between 89°46' E and 97°30' E longitudes, commonly known as the land of seven sister states, namely Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura, with the state of Sikkim being the most recent addition. The area includes several geographical subdivisions, such as

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the Assam Valley covering the eastern Himalayas, Purvanchal and the Meghalaya-Mikir region, and the Brahmaputra Plain covering the hilly areas of the valley. Several tributaries and streams drain this region of the Brahmaputra and Barak rivers (Medhi 2003).

From a historical point of view, the production of handicrafts can be considered as having a well-thought-out logic and structure. However, since these traditional pottery products are unique and different from other products, they also convey a sense of attachment to one's cultural heritage. The replacement of indigenous handicrafts with industrial products can lead to the destruction and erosion of indigenous skills and knowledge. Clay cooking utensils, for example, would fit well with both the traditional lifestyles of indigenous societies and the environment. In contrast, plastic pollution is now considered one of the fundamental problems that developing countries like India need to address (Ziaee, Nadalian, and Marasy 2017, 297–8).

This study presents the environmental characteristics of the traditional production of pottery in a village setting. It conducts a case study because the article is an attempt to give a summary of the production of '*khiew ranei*'. In this article, a definition of the standards and criteria of traditional pottery production in relation to the environment is introduced, the process of pottery production in Larnai is described, and the environmental characteristics of Larnai pottery are explained.

The Objective, Data Source, Area and Methodology of the Study

This article provides an overview of pottery production in northeastern India and specifically of the Larnai women involved in traditional pottery making. It also explores the characteristics of Larnai pottery and how these traditional practices have helped them maintain their indigenous skills and preserve the culture of making traditional pottery (*khiew ranei*) that they inherited from their grandparents. Further research into the process of pottery making and how this has affected people's lives is also important and will be considered here.

Larnai is a small hamlet in Thadlaskein community and in the rural development block of Meghalaya. It has a population of 900 with a total number of 114 households. Larnai is located between latitudes 25°59'N and longitudes 92°19'E. It is about 51 km from Shillong, the capital of Meghalaya, and is located on National Highway No. 6, which is part of the Nartiang *Doloiship*.

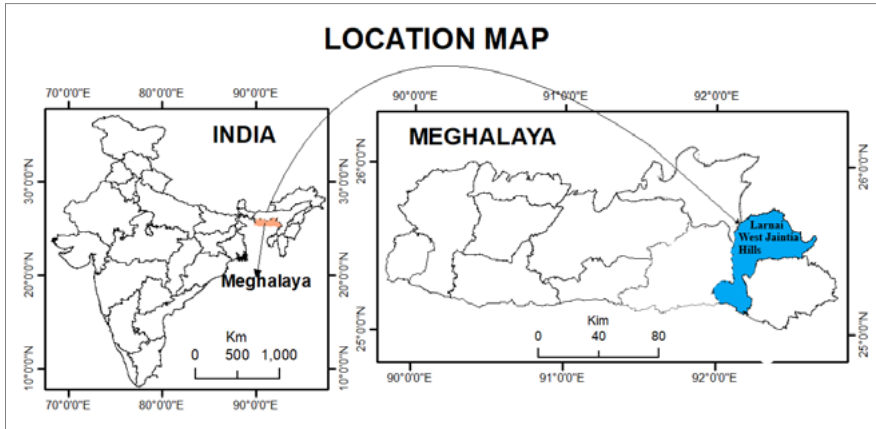


Figure 1 Location Map of the Study Area (Author: Monica Mawlong)

Primary data were collected through field observations and visits to active pottery workshops, and interviews were also conducted with artisans in Larnai. The secondary data were also obtained from various on-line sources such as documentations, newspapers, journals, etc. In this context, the important research questions of the current study are as follows:

- (i) What are the characteristics of the local pottery of Larnai (*khiew ranei*)?
- (ii) Which characteristics are compatible with environmental standards?

To understand the characteristics of Larnai pottery, a descriptive-analytical method was used.

The predominance of shouldered celts and the characteristic cord-stamped pottery characterise the pottery culture in northeastern India (Hazarika 2006, 29). Many excavation sites such as Sarutaru (Rao 1973, 1–9), Parsi-Parlo (Ashraf 1990), sites in the Garo Hills (Deshpande 1975) and Manipur (Singh 1992–1993, 21–35) have yielded numerous potsherds, especially cord-stamped and other handmade wares. The fast turning wheel was unknown to the Khasis and Jaintias. The pottery shows the survival of one of the oldest traditions of handmade traditional pottery production without any decoration or painting, as found in Larnai village in Jaintia Hills, Meghalaya (Hazarika 2006, 29). Pottery production may have been low because people used traditional materials.

In the modern communities of northeast India, the production of hand-made cord-stamped pottery is now a living tradition among the Oinam village of Manipur, a Mao Naga tribe in the Senapati district of Manipur. They are still at a very primitive technological stage and make pottery using a crude moulding technique and hand-beaten methods. However, the cord-stamped pottery found in the archaeological sites of Manipur is different from contemporary pottery except in certain aspects of production and manufacturing technology. The Nagas make handmade pottery without the use of the wheel.¹ To date, the potter's wheel is uncommon among the Khasi in Meghalaya. Modern communities use handmade pottery for various purposes, such as cooking, storage, and making rice beer. The handmade pottery production in these tribal communities in north-eastern India can reveal the behavioural aspects of the culture and tradition of the people (Alemchiba 1967, 37–8).

Pottery in Larnai Village

In a few parts of Meghalaya state, remnants of the indigenous art of firing clay pottery are still practiced. Larnai, a small village about 2 hours' drive from Shillong in the Jaintia hills, is virtually the only known place where traditional pottery is still made. The ecological distribution makes the Jaintia hills a distinctly rich region in mineral resources. In addition to coal and limestone, there are numerous other mineral deposits in the region, including shale, phosphate, and bauxite.

Since time immemorial, the people of the village of Larnai have used this fireclay to make pottery, and still practice the tradition to a lesser extent. More than 20 different types of vessels needed for cooking, storage, preparation of drinks and rituals are made by the women with their bare hands (MTI, ODC-H, *Larnai Clay Pottery*). A variety of black clay collected from the Sung Valley is tempered on a cowhide or an apartment disc with fine grains of sand coloured green until it acquires a smooth shape. First, two pieces of a vessel are made and joined together with the wooden beater while they are leather-hard. The pottery is dried in the sun and then

- 1 A few villages produce pottery, notably Viswema and Khuzama of the Angami tribe; Thenyezuma, Runguzuam, and Kholazumi of the Chakhesang tribe; Tesminyu village of the Rengma tribe; Tokikehimi and a few other villages of the Sema tribe in Wokha; some of the Ao tribe; Kong-sang, Yali and Nakhhao village of the Chang tribe; Wakching, Shiyong, Leangha, Chui, Choshachinguyu, Longkai, Sheanga and Tangjen of the Konyak tribe; Ngura and Lungmutra of the Sangtam tribe; Noklu and Sao village of the Khemungam tribe and a considerable number of villages in Phom region. See: Alemchiba (1967).

smoked in a smoke chamber until it becomes hard and brittle. Finally, it is fired in an open kiln until the black soot is gone and the vessels are glazed. Pottery made here includes spout vessels, bowls on stands, lawn bowls with lids, smoke pipes, spherical vessels with high necks, elongated cylindrical vessels with wide openings, and flower vases, among many others. Before firing, a brown coating made from the bark of a tree called Sohliya, scientifically known as *Myragi Nagi*, is applied with a brush. The outer part and the inner surfaces are completely plain without any decoration. However, the fabric of the pottery is thick and coarse, which gives it an antique appearance.

In addition to agriculture and livestock rearing, the production of traditional handmade pottery from clay, *khiew ranei*, is an alternative source of income for several households in Larnai in the western Jaintia Mountains. The village of Larnai was the first to start making pottery by hand, and recently the village of Tyrchang, a neighbouring village of Larnai, has followed suit by making clay pots to meet the demand for clay products. They are located about 7 km from Ummulong village and are the only two places where this indigenous craft continues (Shillong Times 2015). This art originated in the hills and was passed down from grandparents to village women. The vessels look antique without losing the traditional flavour. The vessels and pots are unique and special because they are made for artistic representations and not for geometric accuracy.

In the villages of Larnai they want to preserve and carry on their traditional pottery craft and heritage without using the spinning wheel, a piece of traditional craftsmanship made only from palms. Larnai pottery demonstrates a true ancient tribal heritage. The most common products of Larnai pottery are the clay items intended for making Khasi pancakes, called '*kpu tharo*', and for the local distillery brew (Shillong Times 2015). Some distinctive shapes and forms have been passed down through generations, and some new forms have developed, but the tradition and its simplicity and crudeness remain. Although they were intended for the local market and had their basis in the rituals and the everyday needs of local people, the demand for these products today is mostly as faux-antiques (MTI, ODC-H, *Larnai Clay Pottery*).

Unlike in the rest of the world, only female artisans perform this craft – a craft that their grandmothers have passed down to their daughters for many generations. They have honed these skills over centuries, producing the finest handmade pottery and utensils for baking '*pu-tha-ro*' (a local rice-based snack) and other rice snacks, and for performing

religious rituals (MTI, ODC-H, *Larnai Clay Pottery*). The craft of pottery in Larnai is very rudimentary and crude. Without the use of spinning wheels, the traditional technique of pottery making is a craft that uses only the hands. These women are neither wealthy nor economically prosperous, but they are self-sufficient and willing to help each other in times of need. The women artisans of Larnai do not intentionally and purposefully want to adopt the modern spinning wheel or modern tools and techniques and technological advances. They know that while the introduction of modern tools and techniques would increase their income and make it easier for them to make the pots, they would not reap the desired quality. They firmly believe that they can reconnect with the people of the past by maintaining the skills passed down from their grandparents. In this way, they can preserve and maintain the cultures and traditions for future generations. By practicing the skills they received from their grandparents, they can learn from their imperfections and adversities and strive to become better. They believe that by working with their bare hands, they leave impressions on their hearts (Zizira 2019).

Considering the sustainability aspect of Larnai pottery, where much smaller pieces are developed by women artisans, it is easy to aim for a better market value that can benefit women through this traditional pottery making. An artisan from the village remarked, 'This craft is a part of us; we try to preserve the skills by introducing new designs and artefacts that a tourist can take as a souvenir and that helps us preserve the indigenous skills we are already equipped with.'

The artisans of Larnai inherited the technique from their ancestors, who believed it was gifted by God. In the past, the artisans of Larnai made pots to cook various things, but now they only make pots to cook 'pu-tha-ro' (rice snacks). Recently, however, there has been a great demand for these clay products, not as cooking vessels, but as souvenirs, as they have a touch of antiquity.

Method of Production

Firstly, black clay locally known as '*khyndew iong*,' and grey clay known as '*khyndew khluit*' were collected from Sung Valley in West Jaintia hills, which is also known as the rice bowl of the Jaintia hills. Another special ingredient is also collected there from a depth of about six feet, the green stone called serpentine stone, which is tempered on cows' hide with fine granitic sand grains that have a greenish tint until it becomes like a smooth mould. Then the clay is mixed with the blue-green colour of

sandy clay materials, and beaten with hand tools to improve the potency and durability of the hide. After the clay is beaten to a certain consistency that makes it a smooth mould, the women potters begin shaping it into the desired contours with great care and skill. The raw clay profiles are then placed on wooden boards and first dried in the sun. Then they are placed in a smoke chamber in a kiln until they are completely dry. Finally, they are fired in a kiln at 500 to 1200 degrees Celsius for up to nine hours until the black soot is gone. The blue-greenish, sandy material facilitates the strength of the pots and helps them withstand temperature shocks (Zizira 2019).

The potter produces the characteristic black colour of the pots by quenching red-hot sintered pots in cold organic liquid immediately after the pots are removed from the hot kiln. The red-hot pots turn permanently black immediately after quenching, another unique technique used by Larnai potters. The organic liquid resembles a milky solution made from the crushed bark of a certain tree called '*Sohliya*', scientifically known as *Myrica nagi*. Foods prepared in such black pots taste better and have a longer durability. Once the baked pots are removed from the kiln and cooled, they are polished, shipped and sold in large quantities to traders in different parts of the Jaintia and Khasi hills (Zizira 2019).

Studies have been conducted to reduce the environmental damage in the production of pottery in modern times. These studies can identify several environmental standards for pottery production. Based on the current trend and conditions, pottery makers have followed certain standards. They mainly aim to use resources sustainably, thereby reducing pollution, increasing user satisfaction and prolonging the durability of a product (Ziaee, Nadalian, and Marasy 2017, 300).

The soil for the large potteries of Larnai is supplied by the surrounding fields. Due to the high iron content of the soil in this province, the colour of the pottery after firing is visually striking. Another characteristic of the soil is its resistance to thermal shocks, which has resulted in various dishes and objects that have been directly exposed to fire.

In the potteries of Larnai, the women artisans form SHGs (self-help groups). The latter usually take the main responsibility for making the pots, and the men help them with the more difficult tasks and work, such as collecting clay from the Sung Valley and transporting it from the fields to the workshop, or transporting the objects to the kiln or to the urban market. The activities up to making and drying are confined to the bound-

aries of the house, but for firing and marketing, human relations may extend to the village or neighbouring villages.

Pottery production is a seasonal occupation in Larnai, which villagers usually adopt as a second source of income in addition to farming. Therefore, extra time and energy are devoted to pottery making. The production of pottery in Larnai has taken place completely apart from technological progress. No machines and chemicals are used for the production of Larnai pottery.

Conclusion

Unlike most local pottery making centres in other parts of India, where pottery is produced for decorative and symbolic purposes, and pottery in Larnai plays an important role in the lives of local people, being an inseparable part of cooking in the region. The target market for these products is often the local communities, who are familiar with their use.

The beautiful ensemble of lawn bowls, kettles, teapots, mugs and trays are sold in the market and in various online stores. These clay products are also sold to traders from different parts of Khasi and Jaintia hills and travel as far as Mumbai and beyond. In the Jaintia hills, the pottery is used for baking '*pu-tha-ro*' (a local rice snack) and other rice snacks. These pots are also used for ritual purposes. The '*Dolloi*' of Nartiang – a village where Durga Puja is celebrated every year – orders these products for various rituals. These vessels are also sold overseas, with Thailand being one of the largest buyers. Modern and new designs are also being planned to expand the product variations and beautify the existing pottery. Apart from the Dolloi, who use the pottery made by the women artisans of this village for religious practices, their products are also recognized internationally and are in high demand, especially in countries like Japan and Korea, who also import and use their goods for their religious practices.

Environmental issues have become more important, so many practical studies have been conducted on the production and use of pottery. With the aim of spreading the culture and reducing the environmental impact in this field, the Larnai potters have created a product that serves as a valuable example of research and practical action.

Studies have shown that traditional pottery in this region has many local and environmental aspects. The explanation of these characteristics may lead the government or private institutions to initiate planning and policies to activate the current situation. To answer the main research question of the study, the aspects of Larnai pottery and the evaluation of

ecological characteristics, this study showed that some ecological standards are followed by local potters, thanks to their local knowledge that production and use are environmentally friendly. Promoting and encouraging local skills and potentials can lead to important steps in improving the production process, achieving sustainable development, and spreading the traditional pottery culture. From the study, it appears that the management by the women artisans of the village of Larnai is in harmony with the environment (Ziaee, Nadalian, and Marasy 2017, 314–5).

Therefore, raising people's awareness of the environment, spreading the culture, informing people about the benefits of using clay pottery, and improving the cycle of design, production, and marketing play an important role in preserving local pottery. Pottery can be an important source of income for the people in the villages of Larnai, and the government must pay special attention to it. Villagers have developed and improved their traditional pottery art skills. Therefore, this art of the villagers should be supported and promoted so that they can develop and expand their business. The residents of Larnai village need proper marketing and training techniques and know-how for manufacturing and packaging. These products can then be sold and promoted in the international market through social networks.

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