

Pottery on the wane

Pottery is disappearing in Bangladesh, so are the artisans. Even worse, no one cares to stop the downslide.

By Fateh Osmani

MALOY Pal's fingers work fast on the revolving disc that shapes a heap of wet clay into a cooking pot. The 40-year-old potter's wife brings him drinking water in a tin glass. These days, Maloy looks a weather-beaten man whose skills and hard work do not earn his five-member family three meals a day.

He cannot afford to send his children to school. "The use of hand-made clay pots, dishes and cooking wares is declining fast. We are losing our markets to ceramics, tin and glass wares," says Maloy at his Kumarkapani village in Kamalganj thana in Sylhet district.

Maloy, who has never gone to school, has inherited the profession from his father, who died as a potter. Today, he regrets his choice. But had he any other choice?

"I guess I had no choice but to take up my family's profession. We have no land to cultivate and we have no skills for an alternative job," he says, his voice tinged with sadness.

Pottery is disappearing in Bangladesh, so are the artisans. Even worse, no one cares to stop the downslide. Maloy and other potters in this region also face shortage of clay that is used as the main raw material.

"Once potter's clay was available everywhere, now it's a rare item and we have to buy it these days. Besides, demand for clayware is falling day by day," Maloy points out.

Pottery that has developed in the coastal villages is a family-oriented enterprise. But this potential industry could not keep up its pace when the modern life has geared up with the advancement of science and technology.

There was a time when all kitchen appliances like drinking container, mug, cup, flagon, Stein, tumbler, goblet, jigger and children's toys were made of clay.

In those days, potters, most of whom were from low-caste Hindu families, had good business and they used to earn a lot. But the golden days are now

gone.

Although emotionally devastating, many potters want to change the profession because it does not pay as it did before.

According to the Bangladesh Small and Cottage Industries Corporation (BSCIC), there are 680 potters' villages in 19 districts of the country. Apart from these districts, potters also live in coastal areas of the country, where quality earth is available.

Many potters are so poor that they cannot even support their families despite putting in tremendous labour every day.

Potters in the country are known as *Pal*.

Maloti Pal married a man of her caste, Narayan Pal. They have trained two sons — Nirajan Pal and Hiratal Pal — and one daughter, Rita Pal, as potters as they have no croplands for farming.

"In those fairs clay-ware would dominate any other goods and items," recalls Ashwini.

Experts say that modernisation of designs of earthenware is a must to revive its lost market because the society has undergone many changes. There is no reason to think that people would buy anything available. They have now choices.

"But our potters could not develop their designs over the years," says a craftsman of Sylhet town.

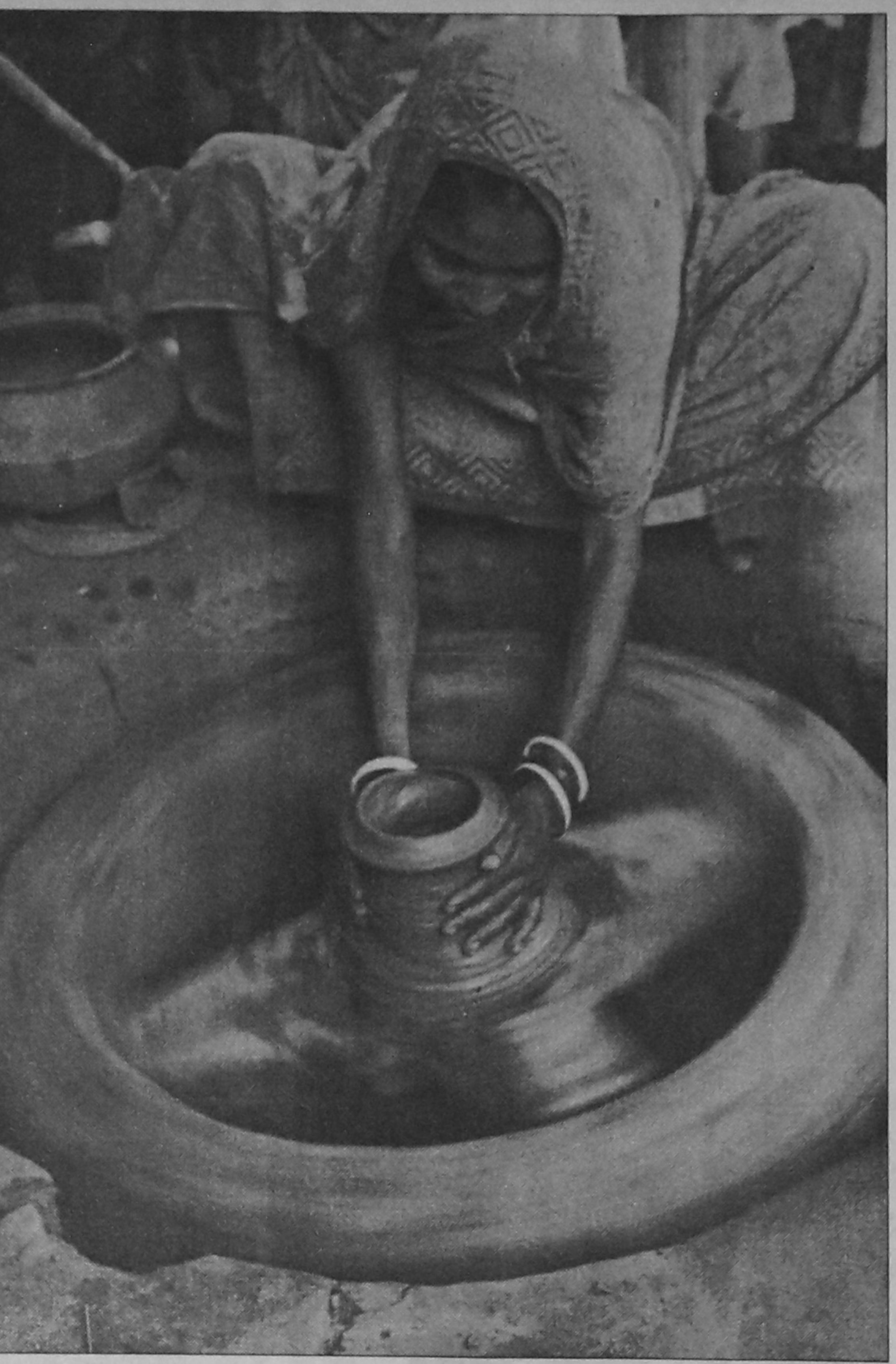
He points out the poor and illiterate people like potters, who live from hand to mouth, have no scope to think about improving the designs because it involves many things apart from expenses.

"It takes nearly one month in building a workable *Pujan*, she says listing the other necessary materials like firewood, paint and hays they need for making clay-ware.

Another potter of the village Ashwini Pal says these days the market for clay-ware is shrinking instead of expanding. He attributes the fall of clay-ware market to the change in the taste of middle-class people, typical designs, lack of marketing facilities and running capital.

"This sector has potential, the government can earn huge foreign currencies by exploring its markets in foreign countries," he said.

— News Network



Demining dilemma

Mine removal in war-ravaged Bosnia appears to have got snared in conflicting interests, corruption and mismanagement. About 80 million dollars has been spent on removing landmines in Bosnia. Yet a half decade after the war stopped, millions of mines are still scattered across a country roughly the size of Ireland.

By Melissa Eddy, AP
Sarajevo

An old man returns home after five years as a refugee but cannot cross the threshold because of the two land mines on his doorstep. Three children decide to play in a field — and three hours later they're dead, killed by an exploding mine.

About 80 million dollars has been spent on removing landmines in Bosnia. Yet a half decade after the war stopped, millions of mines are still scattered across a country roughly the size of Ireland.

Hundreds of people have been killed or maimed by mines since the three-and-a-half-year war ended in 1995.

On paper, Bosnia's demining programme seems one of the most organised and best financed in the world. But less than four per cent of all designated minefields have been cleared, and Bosnia's Mine Action Centre — the organisational backbone of the effort — hasn't been allocated funds for after the end of May.

International donations, the lifeblood of the programme, are drying up as attention shifts to other trouble spots in the world. Allegations of mismanagement of funds and rigging of contracts have scared other donors away.

Demining is in trouble at a time it may be most needed. More than 7,000 refugees returned on their own to pre-war homes in the first quarter of the year — nearly four times last year's rate — according to the UN refugee agency. They are coming back to destroyed villages in minefields.

Efforts to establish an efficient demining programme have clashed with different strategies of donors and a business climate burdened with allegations of nepotism and corruption.

An example: in 1997, the US government donated three million dollars worth of mine detectors, vehicles, mine-sniffing dogs and other items to the Bosnian Demining Commission, the political body of the demining programme. The equipment was to be lent to companies for contract work and then returned after a job was finished.

But a US-based commercial company working in conjunction with three Bosnian subcontractors who won the next contract after the donation didn't return the equipment. That has given the three Bosnian subcontractors an advantage over other Bosnian deminers in competing for contracts.

According to a confidential 1999 report by an international observer made available to *The Associated Press*, the three Bosnian companies at one time have been linked to officials in government demining institutions.

The report also cites several other examples of conflicts of interest and hints at corruption and mismanagement.

But Bosnia's legal system is still ineffective. And without solid proof, even Bosnian High



Researchers trying out a deminer

Simplifying search for buried bane

Ex-Soviet scientist hopes vibrations will uncover buried landmines

AROUND the world every day, hundreds of people walk into minefields with metal detectors, then lie on the ground and gently poke the earth with a thin rod to determine whether the device located an explosive — or a soda can.

Often, the metal detector finds a can or shrapnel, according to those who have done it. As a result, it might take a day for a deminer working in an area with a high concentration of mines to cover a swath a yard (metre) wide and 15 yards (14 metres) long.

Work being done in a sandbox is half the size of Stevens' Davidson Laboratory, where he is associate director.

If the system works, researchers must then determine how its sensitive components can be packaged to withstand harsh conditions in minefields, which are often far from roads and electrical service.

About 60 million to 70 million anti-personnel mines are planted around the globe in 70 nations, according to the latest US State Department estimates. Humanitarian groups often use an earlier figure, 110 million, which the State Department says was based on incomplete information.

An average of about 2,000 people — nearly all civilians — are killed or maimed each month by landmines, which can remain dangerous for decades, according to the Red Cross.

Donskoy's work is encourag-

ing to Dave McCracken, a former Canadian military engineer who is training Thai crews on how to clear mines along the Cambodian border.

"There's a lot of technological challenges ahead of us," Donskoy captioned in a recent interview at Stevens' Davidson Laboratory, where he is associate director.

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Among the defused mines Donskoy uses to test his system is a "butterfly" plastic mine, thousands of which were sprin-

aled by air over Afghanistan by the Soviet Union, Donskoy's native land.

Although his system now uses several hundred thousand dollars worth of fragile equipment, Donskoy said it has the potential of being produced as cheaply as current hand-held or vehicle-based detection systems.

For instance, the computer screen could be replaced by an ear-piece that beeps when it finds a mine, as it does on metal detectors, he said.

The metal detectors used for mine clearance cost 6,000 US dollars to 12,000 US dollars each, and bear little resemblance to the 200 US dollars models tourists use on beaches, said Richard Kidd, programme manager at the Washington-based Survey Action Centre, a group involved in mine eradication in six countries.

Donskoy's system is among several techniques that Army researchers say show promise. One of those techniques is ground-penetrating radar, which shows buried mines as "blips" on a screen. It is in advanced testing in hand-held and vehicle-based systems, said Tom Broach, a senior scientist in the countermeasures division at Fort Belvoir, Virginia. —AP

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