



For the love of burnt clay

The history of statues and sculptures is probably as old as the baking of household wares like pots, pans, jars, jugs and other utility products; or maybe the two are intertwined because, as the myth goes, the potters believe that when a pitcher was needed for Lord Shiva's marriage, he took a Rudraksha (*Elaeocarpus ganitrus*) from his garland, and made an artisan to create pots.

It is one of the most romantic myths, and I love to romanticise that one of the descendants of that potter came to Bangladesh, because our pottery here is so unique and beautiful if I had to sum it up briefly. My love for terracotta started when my mom brought a beautiful terracotta-bead strand, and put it around my neck, "This is from a new store in Dhanmondi called Aarong," she said some 40 odd years ago.

The oval shaped beads, in red, black and light beige or natural earth colour, caught her fancy, and thus began my new obsession of collecting all things terracotta. The love and fondness for burnt clay is still deeply embedded. I never polish my earthen flower pots, because I love the green moss growth on them, I love serving food in earthen dinner wares, and most importantly, I love sipping hot chai from a matir bhaar or throw away clay tea cups.

The burnt colour of clay, that reddish orange tint, the mesmerising black glint -- on flower pots, tableware, jewellery, decorative pieces etc.-- are hard to resist. Be it a fancy Baishakh lunch, or a puja feast, or even a ladies shutki only lunch, I love bringing out the terracotta crockery and arranging a lavish deshi spread.

However, being a true aficionado, I did not stop at just buying these products from roadside stalls near the High Court, or somewhere in Dhanmondi. I went one better, and I found out a way to a remote, lush riverine village in Modnapura of Bauphal upazila of Patuakhali. There, by sheer luck, I met Bisheshwar Pal, the very creator of those fancy clay beads from my childhood, and my ecstasy knew no bounds.

Burnt clay or terracotta has been used for art and everyday things since almost time immemorial, and has seen its fair share of ups and downs. In Bangladesh too, the clay artisans' story is not a smooth one; however, the lone but determined attempts of master craftsmen like Bisheshwar Pal and his disciples have kept the potter's wheel spinning till date.

PAL'S TERRACOTTA CRUSADE

Bisheshwar Pal is one of the few dedicated terracotta artisans to broke free from traditional craftsmanship and delve into an experimental and modern style of work. Young Bisheshwar, from the tender age of 12, sat behind the potter's wheel, and let the creative streak in him play with clay and try new forms. When his family was making clay pots or pans and selling those at village markets to make ends meet, he made his first tea set, and it became an instant hit; thus followed crafts like Christmas bells, ashtrays, foot scrubs, etc. Ornate pottery articles for decorating interiors like dinner sets, flower vases, pen holders, incense holders, and mosquito



coil holders flooded the market and grabbed a niche market. In fact, he is the one who re-invented the black terracotta pottery using natural dye; long extinct since its popularity during the Maurya rule thousands of years ago. Pal made it safe and eco-friendly, his innovative designs have made Bauphal's terracotta a sought-after craft in the country.

Hundreds of villagers around the country are his students, who are continuing to make traditional pottery like household items and fishing equipment, as well as modern pottery like tea sets and others, with great skill. This greatly helped to sustain the tradition of the art. His two sons are also following in his footsteps. The elder son, Tarun Pal, and younger son, Shishir Pal, have retained Bauphal's terracotta tradition and innovation by establishing organisations like Crafts Village Ltd. Recently, Bisheshwar was given the Master Craftsman Award from the National Craft Council of Bangladesh (NCCB).

"Thirty years ago, my ashtray was bought from me for only 12 paisa a piece. Handicraft stores like Karika and Aarong kept them on display and sold them; it has been a long journey from that day to date, and with the

help of my elder brother, my boudi (sister-in-law) and my wife, I have indeed stamped my footprint in the world of pottery in Bangladesh," Pal said in a humble tone.

"To make pottery, soil is the only ingredient needed. However, to make standard pottery, the soil, which consists of sand and mud, must have the correct proportions of both. There are various kinds of soil, but their properties can only be differentiated based on the quantity of these two fundamental ingredients in the soil. The more the mud, the more the elasticity of the soil, but we have to keep it on a standard level, so it makes the perfect shape. To do that, using materials like cow dung and jute for tempering, is needed. For the right colour, we use the red earth of Kapasia, and khoir (catechu, acacia extract), and soda brings that distinct red colour, and while we are baking our products, we trap the carbon inside the kiln at the last stage to give the required black colour," Pal spoke about his techniques, adding that even his wheel has adapted to the times. He started with the hand wheel which was operated by a stick, then came the wheel chain, with the ball and bearing, and now he uses a motorised wheel.

BANGLADESH'S TERRACOTTA AND POTTERY

BSCIC identified 680 villages and reported that more than 15 thousand families were fully dependent on this profession. Though, over the years, this number has gone down significantly; however, compared to other craft forms, the existing number of potter families is quite satisfactory. In the 1980s, potters from Patuakhali visited Dhaka and took advanced technical training at BSCIC's Design Centre. Some have learned the techniques quickly, and have been associated with designers for a long time; they have expanded their markets greatly, and have even been exporting abroad through craft organisations. In this connection, the potters of Bauphal deserve special mention. And the contribution of Bisheshwar Pal is especially commendable. For several years, he worked very hard to develop a wider market, not only for himself and his family, but for his whole community.

He mobilised his community to improve their skills in the traditional pottery of their ancestors and organised them into co-operatives so that their success could be shared by all artisan members of Bauphal. Today, Bauphal potters are famous all over

Bangladesh, and the credit for this goes to Bisheshwar Pal. It has been his life's goal to create the best products, and he remained resilient, even in the face of adverse circumstances. He introduced a variety of techniques, such as innovative packaging for transportation of the delicate products, taking the artisans to craft events, and including the educated members of the families in the business. The contribution of Bisheshwar Pal to the wellbeing of the potters of Bauphol, and the country in general, is outstanding, and he is an ideal and exemplary artist for us.

"We have a licensed godown in the capital's Rayer Bazar to store products not only from our factory, but also from fifty plus potters from all over the country, we buy in lots from these producer groups and market them to retailers," says Tarun Pal.

"When new potters approach us to sell their products, we help them with market surveys and ask them to make samples, and depending on demand, place orders for 200 or 500 pieces. This is our general practice. Corporate houses are our clients-- they place orders for Baishakh, corporate gifts items for New Years, and according to the demand, we place orders with our producers. We always pay whatever the potter asks for, and mark it up by Tk 1 for our profit. Those who are attached with us get a fair price, because my father knows the poor potters' stories all too well. Our family were once a marginalised producer group," he adds.

Tarun and his brother established Crafts Village, a handicraft company, and are looking into export. "Ours is a four-year-old company. Besides marketing other handicrafts like baskets and all, we are also trying to export pottery. Thus, the industry is not that plagued, and all we need are good patrons and fair commissions," he puts it squarely.

Fifth generation potters by family profession, Pal and his sons are given special credit in this field, that is marred with various shortcomings. However, the small window of opportunity of exporting, and the local niche market with patrons like us would keep the terracotta industry in the country spinning.

— RBR

Photo: LS Archive/Sazzad Ibne Sayed
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