

Baked in the Sun, Consumed by the Smoke: The Potters of Delhi's Kumhar Gram

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As the sun dips below the cityscape, some stay awake trying to make a living from clay in a world heading toward a concrete jungle. Within the labyrinth of Kumhar Gram (potter's colony) in Delhi's Uttam Nagar, more than 700 families work relentlessly to put forward the finest terracotta products for a public that doesn't realise the genius behind it.

Over the past few months, field researchers, as part of an ethnographic project undertaken by the Centre for New Economics Studies' Visual Storyboard team, tried to interact with the masters, craftspeople, and entrepreneurs of Uttam Nagar's potter colony.

The colony has been home to its potters since the late 1960s when the community migrated from Alwar – known for its traditions and palaces – to the urban enclave of Uttam Nagar. It was the existential need to combat unemployment and poverty that triggered their move to Delhi.

The village, now adorned with statues of revered gods, was merely a piece of land when the potters first arrived. They converted the barren land into a settlement that eventually became a hub for handcrafted earthenware.

Having seen their fathers and grandfathers be involved in the craft, third and fourth-generation potters diligently labour their days away to expand their business further.

“I have been a silent observer of my father and the neighbours immersing themselves deeply into pottery and the close-knit community that revolves around it since as far as I can remember. Gradually, I picked up the craft from them. I tried my hand at corporate jobs after graduating but it did not bode well for me. The craft of pottery gives me more comfort and joy,” said Rakesh Kumar, a resident of the potter's colony.

As we moved away from the main street – filled with stalls and shops – towards the narrow alleyways, we observed the actual life of the colony. It is in these alleyways that one gets to



see the entire process behind the craft. It starts with the mound of clay in front of every house, usually sourced from Haryana. Naturally, this clay is impure and requires sieving to remove pebbles and dust particles that hinder the process.

A resident of the potter colony. Photo: Special arrangement

Once the impurities are removed water is meticulously incorporated into the clay, transforming its coarse texture into a more pliable form, making it ready for further processing. This is the clay that is thrown onto the wheel to give it shape.

As the wheel head rotates at a steady pace, artisans' hands work to shape the clay in a desired form. After using an array of tools to change the design of their products, artisans leave them alone to dry naturally.

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Typically, it takes a few days for the terracotta to dry and for the potters to prepare for the more enjoyable phase of the process. Once the product is dried, it goes into the kilns for baking. Sawdust or *buradda* is most commonly used for fueling these kilns to reach the desired temperature. The right mix of air and heat in the kilns completes this stage of the production process.

The concluding step is the several rounds of detailing that takes place, usually through hand work or colouring. It is this stage of the process that sets all the artisans apart. No matter what type of product it may be, you will never find two pieces similar to each other in the Kumhar Gram. Once painted and designed, the products are left to dry once again, bringing us to an end of the production.

Inspired by the rich tapestry of Rajasthan's culture, these meticulously crafted products are embellished with the intricate designs.

Nevertheless, it's disheartening to observe that the largest pottery community in India has yielded to market forces, transforming from a tradition into a commercial endeavour. "While I rarely visit Rajasthan, a lot of our designs are inspired by the art and culture there. All of the simplistic and minimalistic designs that you see here have been deeply influenced by Alwar. It is very demoralising to see these designs being overshadowed by the flashy/attractive items demanded by the customers," observes Niranjana Singh Prajapati.



Clay pots drying before being sent to the kilns. Photo: Special arrangement.

According to Indian art critic [Geeta Kapur](#), “tradition” and “modernity” are used as metaphors in decolonisation-related cultural conflicts in debates about the third world. When used to describe India and the developing world, the word “tradition” does not imply an impersonal heritage. The Indian handicraft industry, which makes up a sizeable portion of the decentralised sector of the economy and has seen impressive growth in exports, makes this abundantly evident. At the same time, local consumers continue to request new patterns and are reluctant to purchase classic themes.

With the cost of production being at an all-time high, the potters earn a profit of no more than Rs 2 per product. “The clay that we get from Haryana was sold at a rate of Rs 1000. It now has reached Rs 4500 just within a couple of years,” mentioned Narayani Devi, whose entire family works to produce flower pots and *nazarbattus* (*evil eyes*), “With the mud that costs us Rs 4500, we are barely able to fill one of our kilns. So, with more cost and less return, we barely make enough profits to live, let alone save.”

The minuscule profits, along with long working hours suggest a bleak future for this exquisite craft. The younger generations feel alienated from the community, which is further encouraged by the parents who’d rather have them get a more stable job.

“Being involved in pottery for the past 18 years has taught me a lot. One of the things is that this is not the future I wish for my children. I am stuck here, but I would rather have my daughters study and get a stable job than be stuck in this one-bedroom house with me,” Reena Kumar commented. In our next article in this two-part series, our objective is to delve deeper into the myriad challenges faced by these cultural stalwarts, as well as explore the assistance and support extended to them by governmental authorities.

Despite these challenges, the community’s commitment to their craft remains unwavering, and the artistic diversity among them ensures that each creation is a masterpiece in its own right. Their hands continue to serve their craft to wholesalers at a suboptimal price, trying to make a living for themselves and their families.

This is the first of a two-part article series from CNES’ Visual Storyboard team from a field project focusing on the lives-livelihoods of West Delhi’s pottery makers and their endangered craft.

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