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The Poetics of Clay: Aesthetic Reflections on Pottery and Terracotta in the Vedic Saṁhitās

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Abstract:

Vedic age can be considered the beginning of cultural and aesthetic development of the Indian Civilization. Clay did not only serve as an art for the production of beauty, but as a very deep aspect of the moral, philosophical and socio-religious life. The clay art is well written about in the Saṁhitās and Brāhmaṇas, along with its symbolism, and many forms of traditional art. It is through these that one can well see the development of the consciousness of the ancient Indian arts. The four Veda in the religious and philosophical aspects of mṛttikā are very rich.

Clay was an integral part of the Vedic culture in ritual, symbols and art. It is emphasized in rituals through worship of Pṛthivī as the Earth Goddess; clay vessels used in Agnihotra, and clay sacrificial altar built. Mṛttikā was also a symbol of purity, renewal and sacredness beyond its physicality. Clay vessels are described in the Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa and Taittirīya Brāhmaṇa in terms of their preparation, usage and symbolic value. Altars and vessels for sacrifice are carefully crafted, showing aesthetic sensitivity and technical skills. Therefore, Vedic clay art has been a complete convergence of beauty and function, which have been brought together by artistic creativity and ritual purpose.

This research paper attempts to look into the mention of mṛttikā-kalā in the Vedic Saṃhitās, and Brāhmaṇas, its interpretation, and its ritual use, both within and beyond the Vedic culture; to understand the process of it being codified, spiritualized and embedded into ritual and aesthetic concerns of the Vedic tradition.

Discussion:

Indian cultural understanding of mṛttikā (clay) is more than just a raw material, it is a highly humanistic symbol of the Earth and birth, renewal and dwelling, craftsmanship and day-to-day life. In the Sanskrit literature the terracotta sculpture and its forms can be traced in the different strata: from the Vedic rituals, Puranic ethnography, epic life-worlds, the realism of dramatic literature, the artistic structure of the Arthaśāstra and the aesthetic theory of the Kāmaśāstra. As can be seen from this vast body of literature, the use of clay in ancient Indian society was not simply for everyday use; it was a medium essential to spiritual, symbolic and aesthetic expression. It is a pivotal period of transition in the economic history of ancient India that has been termed as the Vedic or post-Vedic period. The never-ending resort of everyday living encouraged the growth of various crafts, and pottery (or clay craftsmanship) was far from being ignored. In this rich literary profusion, there are many references to potters (kumbhakāra). This is partly because these texts focus on the religious problems and partly because they are closely integrated with various śāstric disciplines such as economics, polity, grammar, and other allied field of knowledge.

1

Clay in the Vedic Age: Ritual, Symbolism, and Material Culture:

In the Vedic Saṃhitās, clay occupies a foundational place among ritual-related materials. In the Vedic Saṃhitās the clay is given a basic significance with regard to ritual matter in general. Clay is embedded in the fire altar, in the sacrificial pit, in the pūrṇakumbha (ritual container with water), in earthen vessels and in the various sacrificial objects used in Brāhmaṇical ceremonies. In the Atharvaveda, nature is seen as a mother and the human being as her child:

“Mātā bhūmiḥ putro ’haṃ pṛthivya”¹

Clay is a symbolic depiction of the womb of sacrifice. Clay is used in the building of the altar, indicating the creation of a holy space for Divine presence. Thus, clay is a symbol of ritual stability, sanctity and purity. Clay was a connecting link in the mind of the Vedic people between God and man: it is on it that sacrifice is offered, on it that God comes down, and on it that the entire ritual programme was played out as a symbolic act of regeneration and recreation.

In this regard, there is invaluable historical evidence that comes from the Brāhmaṇa and Āraṇyaka texts, the early Buddhist literature, the Aṣṭādhyāyī of Kauṭilya, the Vārtikas of Kātyāyana, the Arthaśāstra of Kauṭilya, the Gṛhya- and Śrauta-sūtras, the Mahābhāṣya of Patañjali, the Manusmṛti, the Rāmāyaṇa, and the Mahābhārata. It is obvious that the potters of this time were at least artisans, extremely well aware of form and taste, and incredibly skilled at making beautiful clay forms.

2

The Significance of Clay in Vedic Sacrificial Culture and Altar Construction

Sacrifice (yajña) is the core of the Vedic culture. It is a ritual of great importance in the Vedic religion, one that plays a pivotal role in the creation and upkeep of the cosmos. The Vedic karma involves all the rites performed according to the mantras, injunctions and ritual rules

mentioned in the Vedas. The term sacrifice comes in various forms and is mentioned in all the Saṁhitās, Brāhmaṇas, and Kalpasūtras, and is generally divided into two categories: Śrauta and Smārta. Vedic literature also mentions three main sacrificial systems (yajña-saṁsthās) – it states that:

“Agnir yajñam trivṛtaṁ saptatantum”.²

The Vedic thinkers saw a very close connection between heavenly creation and the building of the sacrificial altar (vedi). Selection, examination and ritual purification of an appropriate site occurred by removing soil from the surface, prior to the construction of the altar. The phases of its construction during the time of Agnyādhāna ceremony represent the steps in the process of creation in the cosmos. The universe arose from the primordial waters and the manifestation of Hiranyagarbha, the altar slowly comes to life through ritual movements, which symbolize the cosmic order. Therefore, the Veda sees the altar (as a sacrifice) as the Earth itself and thus establishes the unity of the two. The Veda itself asserts the absolute sameness of earth and sacrifice altar:

“Iyam vedih paro antah pṛthivyāḥ ayam yajño bhuvanasya nābhih”.³

The conception clearly reveals that Vedic religion endowed the sacrificial altar with profound symbolic significance. It was not merely a ritual platform but a microcosm of the terrestrial world. Clay, as the primary material of the altar, became a sacred medium through which the human, natural, and divine realms were ritually united, represented, and continually renewed.



3

Types of Vessels Used in the Vedic Age

Vedic literature mentions a wide variety of vessels used for domestic, ritual, and sacrificial purposes. The general term for a vessel was *pātra*, commonly derived from the root $\sqrt{pā}$ (“to protect”), though some scholars connect it with $\sqrt{pā}$ (“to drink”), suggesting its original meaning as a drinking vessel. By the early Vedic period, however, *pātra* had acquired the broader sense of any receptacle or container, a usage also reflected in its feminine form, *pātrī*.

Clay and wood were the principal materials used in the manufacture of vessels, while metal, gourds, leather, stone, and brick were employed for specialized purposes. It is often observed that great antiquity itself contributes to the sacralization of an object or practice. From this perspective, it may be inferred that Aryan society gradually progressed from the use of wooden vessels to the wider adoption of earthenware. This transition bears a striking parallel to the history of ancient Indian architecture, where the replacement of wood by more durable materials such as stone and brick was likewise a slow and gradual process. The evolution from wooden to ceramic vessels thus reflects not merely a technological change but also a broader cultural transformation in material practices, craftsmanship, and ritual life.

4

Diversity of Pottery in the Vedic Age

Among the various types of earthen vessels employed during the Vedic period, the most prominent and widely used were the **Ukhā**, **Kalaśa**, **Kumbha**, **Sthālī**, and **Kapāla**. These vessels served both domestic and ritual purposes and occupy a significant place in Vedic material culture.

Ukhā & Upayamanī:

The **Ukhā** is one of the most frequently mentioned earthen vessels in Vedic literature. References to it occur in numerous Vedic texts, including the *Rgveda* –

“Yannikṣaṇam māmśpacanyā ukhāyā yā
pātrāṇiyūṣṇa āsecanāni”.⁴

Ukhā was an earthen vessel mainly used for cooking food and boiling liquids at home and in sacrifices. It is often used in Vedic rituals but had also been in common use as a household implement, and is referenced in burial ceremonies, as in *Atharvaveda*⁵. The Vedic texts clearly refer to it as *mṛṇmayī* (“made of clay”), and the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* suggests that it was a flat-bottomed pot which had its walls constructed in layers. The importance of its use in cooking, sacrifice and funeral ceremonies shows the close association of material culture with ritual use in Vedic society and the Ukhā is one of the most important examples of Vedic earthenware.

The **Upayamanī** was primarily an earthen vessel employed in the establishment and transfer of the sacred fire. During the *Cāturmāsya* sacrifices, the *Adhvaryu* and the *Pratiprasthātṛ* collected fire from the *Gārhapatya* hearth in this vessel and subsequently installed it upon the *Uttaravedi* and in the *Āhavanīya* fire-altar. In addition, a particular type of *sruci* (sacrificial ladle), larger in size than the *Juhū*, was also known by the name *Upayamanī*. The *Śrautasūtras* attest to its ritual use in the pouring of clarified butter (*ājya*) into the *Dharma-pātra*:

“Upayamanyāsiṅcati dharme”.⁶

The *Vācaspatyam* lexicon likewise indicates the close association of the **Upayamanī** with the rite of *Agnyādhāna* (the establishment of the sacred fire):

“Agnyādhānāṅga sikaṭādaḥ”.⁷

This statement suggests that the vessel was employed in several subsidiary procedures of the *Agnyādhāna* ceremony, particularly those involving sand, clay, and the preparation of the ritual ground. The *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* further records:

“Upayamanīr upakalpayanti”.⁸

“Then the **Upayamanī** vessels are prepared.” Similarly, the *Kātyāyana Śrautasūtra* states:

“Upayamanīr upanivapati”.⁹

These references unambiguously make it clear that not the **Upayamanī** was an ordinary earthen vessel in the Vedic sacrificial system. Instead, it was important for it to be used for the preservation, transport, and re-establishment of the sacred fire, which was central to the Vedic liturgy. It thus represents a notable case of the religious and functional significance of ceramic technologies to Vedic culture and serves as an example of the close ties between the craft of making earthenware and sacrificial ritual.

Sthālī, Kalaśa, Kumbha, and Kumbhī:

The **Sthālī** was among the most familiar and widely used vessels of ancient India, retaining its significance from the Vedic period down to the present day. Owing to its long history of use, however, both its form and function have undergone considerable transformation over time. In



Vedic literature, the *Sthālī* is mentioned primarily as a cooking vessel rather than a serving utensil. These references attest to its central role in both domestic subsistence and ritual food preparation.

The Kalaśa and Kumbha were both essentially jars or large storage vessels. The Kumbhī was a type of earthen pot, usually made of fired clay, employed primarily for heating or boiling milk. Similar clay vessels continue to be used for this purpose in many parts of rural India even today, demonstrating both the practical utility and remarkable continuity of this ceramic tradition.

The Kumbhī and its variants were far more than everyday household items; they also became deeply embedded in the context of the Vedic sacrificial culture and religious rituals.

Kapāla, Rauhiṇa-Kapāla, Mahāvīra-Pātra, and Sānnāyya-Kumbhī:

The term **Kapāla** denotes both a small earthen bowl or cup and a fragment of a broken pottery vessel. The designation was probably inspired by its resemblance in shape to the human skull (*kapāla*). In domestic life, such earthen fragments were occasionally employed as lids or covers; however, they also played a significant role in Vedic sacrificial ritual. The ceremonial arrangement of *kapālas* according to prescribed ritual procedures was technically known as **Kapālopadhāna**.¹⁰

A *Kapāla* was a small, thin, fired-clay vessel resembling a potsherd or fragment of a broken earthen pot. During the preparation of the sacrificial cake (*puroḍāśa*), portions of dough or sacrificial paste were placed upon these *kapālas* and baked. In the Darśapūrṇamāsa sacrifice, a total of nineteen *kapālas* was required. The use of the *Kapāla* was of considerable importance within the Vedic sacrificial system.



A related vessel, the Rauhiṇa-Kapāla, was a special earthen receptacle prepared for the offering known as the *Rauhiṇaka Puroḍāśa*. Its form was generally fashioned in the shape of a small horse.

Another important ritual vessel was the Mahāvīra-Pātra. In Soma sacrifices such as the Agniṣṭoma, the Pravargya ceremony was regarded as the “head” (*śiras*) or supreme component of the sacrifice. The manufacture of the Mahāvīra vessel required various types of clay, cow-derived substances, and milk, all employed according to strict ritual prescriptions. The vessel measured approximately one *prādeśa* in height; its base and mouth were broad, while the middle portion was comparatively narrow. The *Kātyāyana Śrautasūtra* states:

“Mahāvīraṃ pariśiṅcati”.¹¹

These descriptions indicate that the Mahāvīra vessel was far more than a simple ceramic container. Rather, it functioned as a powerful ritual symbol embodying the Vedic concepts of sacred fire, divine energy, transformation, and regeneration. Equally significant was the **Sānnāyya-Kumbhī**. The term *Sānnāyya* is mentioned by Pāṇini –

“Pāyya-sānnāyya-nikāyyadhāyyā-mānahavīrnivāsa-sāmidhenīṣu”.¹²

Grammatically, the word derives from the verbal root *ṇī* (“to bring, lead, or collect”), preceded by the prefix *sam-*, and denotes an oblation that has been properly gathered, combined, and

prepared. Since Aindra Dadhi (curd offered to Indra) and Aindra Payaḥ (milk offered to the same deity) were dedicated to a common recipient, they were mixed together to form a special sacrificial oblation known as Sānnāyā. The earthen jar-like vessels in which this prepared oblation was stored were called Sānnāyā-Kumbhīs. These vessels constituted an important component of Vedic sacrificial practice, serving both in the preparation and preservation of ritual offerings.



5

Vedic Reference to Black-and-Red Ware

The Atharvaveda contains numerous hymns concerned with the removal of the harmful effects of sorcery, witchcraft, and malevolent magical practices –

“Yā te cakrurāme pātre yā cakrurnīlahite.

Āme māmse kṛtyām yām cakrustayā kṛtyākṛtyo jahi”¹³

In Vedic literature, the term *nīla* generally denotes black or, at most, a bluish-black hue rather than the colour blue in its modern sense. Consequently, the compound *nīlahohita* should most appropriately be understood as signifying “black-and-red.” The question then arises as to what precisely is intended by this expression. In his commentary, Sāyaṇācārya explains that fire is called *nīlahohita* because it appears black (*nīla*) owing to the smoke that issues from it and red (*lohita*) owing to its flames:

“Dhūmodgamena nīlah jvālaya ca lohitah. Agnih nīlahohitah”¹⁴

But this interpretation is not entirely convincing, as there is no obvious reference to a similar use of the epithet in other places in the Vedic literature that we are acquainted with. The word *nīlahohita pātra* might therefore also apply to a special kind of ceramic vessel with a black and red colour scheme. This is especially significant in the context of archaeological finds of Black-and-Red Ware pottery, one of the most significant ceramic traditions of ancient India.



6

The Potter (Kumbhakāra) or Clay Artisan in the Vedic Age

The literature of this period furnishes detailed information regarding the potter, his position within society, and the significance of his profession. By around the sixth century BCE, we encounter evidence of the existence of potters’ villages, indicating a well-organized and socially recognized craft community. The occupation of the potter enjoyed such a high degree of social esteem that even members of the Kṣatriya class and wealthy mercantile elites (śreṣṭhins) could adopt this profession without experiencing any sense of social degradation. Pāṇini, in his Aṣṭādhyāyī, refers to the terms *kulāla* and *kaulālika*, where *kulāla* denotes a potter or clay artisan, and *kaulālika* signifies earthenware or objects fashioned from clay. This usage is attested in the sūtra:

“saṁjñāyām kulālādibhyō buñ”..¹⁵

Technical Terms for Potters’ Workspaces are following-

Kāruśāla– potter’s workshop.

Kumbhakārapāka– general firing area.

Īngāradāha – specific fire-pit for baking vessels.

Indhanaśālā– storage for fuel.

Bhāṇḍaśālā – store-room for fired vessels.

Paṇyaśālā – shop for displaying and selling pottery.

7

Conclusion

From the Vedas and Upanishads to the epics, Purāṇas, dramas and poetic works, Sanskrit literature, from its beginnings to the present, has maintained and transmitted a continuous tradition of Indian aesthetics, culture and philosophy of life. In this rich literary heritage, the art of clay and terracotta holds its own special and meaningful place. Clay is not just a physical material; it is also a symbolic resource of creation, a metaphor for the ever-changing processes of creation.

These are only a few of the references to clay in the Vedic and post-Vedic period that bear witness to the importance of clay during those eras. Clay craftsmanship in ancient India was not merely a functional requirement of living but was also an integral part of religious expression, social structure, economic system and art production.

Literary and archaeological sources show that clay occupied a significant place in the cultural, spiritual, and artistic life of ancient India. From ritual altars and sacred vessels to deity sculptures and everyday utensils, clay objects reflected the close relationship between human creativity and nature. Their transformation from earth into objects of ritual, utility, and beauty illustrates the symbolic and spiritual importance attributed to this humble material in Indian civilization.

Clay and Terracotta art is therefore not purely art history; indeed, its study is found in the Sanskrit literature much further than art history alone. It is an integral part of the intellectual heritage, religious beliefs and culture of India. Thus, it is still a monument of the creativity, aesthetic sensibility, technological expertise, and philosophy of ancient Indian civilization, and has continued to be relevant in the modern world.

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