



Instead of reserving seats for the fishes that cannot fly in universities designed by birds and for birds (where fishes feel alienated), there should be universities that celebrate fishes that swim as well as birds that fly.

Contemporary Ceramics Education in India

By Raja Mohanty

To understand possible approaches for an academic programme in ceramics at IIT Bombay, Raja Mohanty and Yann-Pierre Montelle travelled to parts of Tamil Nadu, Pondicherry, Odisha, West Bengal, Maharashtra in March'24 and to Gujarat, Delhi, Uttar Pradesh in October'24. They met with traditional and studio potters involved in teaching pottery and ceramics as well as academicians who have shaped ceramic programmes in public institutions (Santiniketan, Sri Niketan, NID Ahmedabad, BHU Varanasi, MSU Baroda). They studied personal initiatives for teaching pottery and ceramics; such as those at Golden Bridge Pottery (Deborah Smith and Ray Meeker): Delhi Blue Pottery (Sardar Gurcharan Singh) and Andretta (Mary and Mansimran Singh). Several interesting insights and approaches to teaching, were shared by the pioneers as well as by contemporary practitioners, entrepreneurs and researchers working with ceramic materials in very different socio-economic contexts.

ceramics education that will be accessible to traditional potters as well? The question may be generalized to include the situation in other crafts such as weaving and textiles. Various think-tanks and high-level policy makers regularly publish schemes for skilling India; such committees suffer from a deep structural flaw where the extremely intelligent and articulate attempt (with their heads) to "help" those that live by their bodies. The same structural flaw is echoed in India's affirmative action policy of reservations – instead of creating an education system that celebrates the manual and the intellectual – right from early schooling till higher education, India's university education focuses on the mind (and not the body). This "head-hand" dichotomy is very clearly because of an ancient caste system that privileged the head over the hand. A truly affirmative policy would have been to create universities that celebrate equally the creativity and cognitive possibilities that come from a "hands-on" approach.



Students at BHU Varanasi, NID Ahmedabad, Santiniketan and Sriniketan

Many institutions have sought to engage with traditional *kumbhars* / *prajapatis* - either as supporting staff members or as skilled throwers, but in India (unlike in China) the forces of modernity seem to have bypassed the large community of traditional potters. University education in India, with its emphasis on examination for selecting students has been inaccessible to craft communities. How can a new academic programme address this gap?

The Potters Paradox

Traditional potters in India declining swiftly; except for a few who shall adapt and survive, the rest are likely to become extinct. The paradox is that, studio potters are a vibrant and emerging group, mostly in larger metropolitan centres.

Is it possible to formulate an academic programme in

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This hierarchy got amplified by the industrial age with its obsession with machinery and efficiency (but actually for the pursuit of mindless profit that disregards social and environmental costs). Nearly five hundred years after industrialization – human ingenuity in assembling sophisticated machinery is remarkable (the largely automated vitrified tile industry in Morbi is a good example) human societies increasingly regard the manual as "drudgery". Reports on skill-education place significant emphasis on new-age "skills" such as data-analytics and artificial intelligence. Globalized liberal education today leans

to the conceptual (head superior to hands; curatorial superior to artisanal, etcetra). The environmental and social costs of mindless industrialization are evident externally as climate-change and internally as world-

wide conflicts. Future societies would need to invest far more in the kind of awakening that Tagore suggested when he conceptualized not just Santiniketan, but also, Sriniketan.

The vision and key role played by Kala Bhavan and Sriniketan at Santiniketan set up by Ravindranath Tagore (1922) and Sevagram by Mahatma Gandhi in the subsequent development of art's and craft's and ceramics in India is enormous and needs to be underlined. Tagore clearly saw that economic and social well being of the country rested not only on farming but equally on artisans. Unlike Europe, here, multitudes of craft practices were still alive. All it needed was a fresh, modern approach and with this in mind he started Sriniketan. Devi Prasad, K G Subrahmaniam, Nirmala Patwardhan, Ira Chaudhuri, Kripal Singh Shekhavat were all graduates of Shantiniketan. Devi Prasad came to Sevagram in 1944 and was later joined by S K Mirmira(who will later head Bhadravati pottery). Kalindi Jena (who later headed the ceramics department at BHU) Dashrath Patel (who started the ceramics department of NID), B R Pandit and Haku Shah also associated with Sevagram and carried forward the Gandhian ideal of Nai Taleem, an education aimed at skilling, all round development and self reliance.

The role of art colleges initially set up at Madras, Bombay, Kolkata, Baroda and later at many other places is also important. However, here also the teachers usually came from Shantiniketan or from Gandhian background. Himmat Shah, Jyotsna Bhatt, P.R.Daroz, K P Soman to name just a few, were graduates from these art colleges. Interestingly, most of the pioneer ceramists were trained as painters and only later developed a passion for ceramics.

It is interesting to note that Sardar Gurcharan Singh, Devi Prasad, Kalindi Jena, Nirmala Pandit, Deborah Smith were all greatly influenced by Japanese pottery on the one hand and by Bernard Leach, the British Potter. Bernard Leach was himself greatly influenced by the ideas of Coomaraswamy, Gandhi and Tagore so much so that he had met all three of them personally.

Source: <https://icaf.org.in/history/>



Pioneers in contemporary ceramic education in India

Gurcharan Singh, Deborah Smith and Ray Meeker, Mansimran Singh. These pioneers in studio pottery in India, engaged with the traditional potters in a manner that was very different from government initiatives that were envisaged as skill-upgradation attempts. What is needed is micro-financing, technical know-how, better understanding of emerging markets that could lead to innovation.

"Do Hands Have A Chance?"

K.G. Subhramanyan

In order to nurture a sound handicraft sector within our modern economy we shall need the following:

- 1. Comprehensive survey and documentation of each major craft expertise with a collection of the finest historical specimens.**
- 2. Identification of craft areas which need special support, keeping in view their rarity, sophistication and vulnerability in the new circumstances.**
- 3. Analytic studies of the operational structure of each craft expertise to understand its component factors and their inter-relations and their potential for change.**
- 4. Nurture of an economy in which the crafts will mainly serve the internal market. (If the state plans to ensure that all the consumer goods the nation will use will be made in the handloom sector, this will be a great achievement; with due encouragement, our population will be large enough to support a handicraft scene as elaborate as it was in the past.)**
- 5. Operation of a universal educational system in which the cultivation of hand skills will have an important place.**
- 6. Setting up organizations or clubs for non-professional practice of handicrafts (A big and lively part of our traditional handicraft scene was non-professional, where people made paintings, images, quilts, tapestries, weavings or embroideries for their own use or ritual or decoration – not for sale).**
- 7. The conservation and supply of materials, tools, equipment and useful technical literature necessary for widespread handicraft training and practice.**

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The Perceiving Fingers

J. Swaminathan

The human fingers are remarkable creatures, they seem to have a volition of their own. They not only probe into the reality around us but also the deep recesses of the mind. They discover and cover, reveal and mould. Moving through water and sand they generate ripples and lines, they draw lines on surfaces and the mind wonders at what the lines reveal.

How do contemporary ceramic education programmes respond to the situation of the traditional kumbhar?

The traditional kumbhar in India has always used terracotta and created bisqueware.

So, how does one introduce new technologies to them? KVIC has been trying for over two decades with limited success - many of the traditional potters who went there could not practice what they had learnt, once they returned to their village.

Asking traditional potters to pass an exam and come to an institution in the city is an unrealistic expectation. Even if they do this and learn some new techniques, they do not have money to invest in materials and equipment when they go back; they have little understanding of markets.

Government policies have attempted to get kumbhars to stick to terracotta instead of introducing them to new materials. When villagers can transition from bullock carts to tractors and "bullets" (motorcycle) why can't they change their clay? This psyche needs to change.

The kumbhars have 5000 years of experience of handling the clay. Give them a new clay. Let them learn the new way of making and selling. If the product is good, people will come anywhere. But their products lack appeal for the urban clientele. They have lost their local market because that has been taken over by aluminum and plastic.

In India, craft training is in sharp decline. We don't have craft school left. Everybody's talking about design. But where is the bank of potters to serve that? If I become a designer, I can sit and do the brain work, who is going to make it for me? I don't know. Today, even to appoint a studio-in-charge in the school, we don't have an appropriate person.

Instead of planning an academic programme for kumbhars in an institution, can we adopt a potters village, install a kiln there and impart training there? Can the white collared person conduct a three month course in the village? At my own studio at Anvi Pottery, three village people who initially joined as helping hands to clean the studio have become potters who now understand how to create glazed ceramics. Aakar Pottery at Indapur, started around 20 years back.

There are people who left their job at Aakar and started their own pottery. They are successful; they have cars, they have built their houses.

~ Sandeep Manchekar



Department of Ceramics and Glass, Santiniketan

The Department of Design (Ceramic & Glass) has academic programmes at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels. It has established an appropriate environment for the research and process based studio practice that is based on an active engagement with the environment, local context and multiple point of view of engaging with contemporary art practice in the global perspective. It has generated a critical, interactive and participatory method of art practice that encourages individual and collective approaches to thinking and art engagement. Students understand contemporary art practice and explore eclecticism as process of reconciliation of multiple traditions and individual identity.

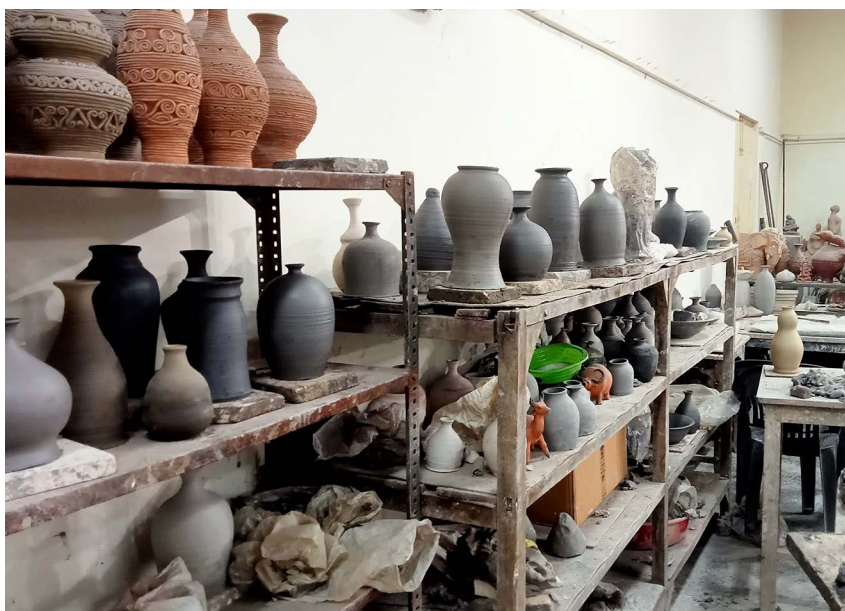


Department of Pottery, Sriniketan

Tagore regarded working for the villages as his "life's work". In "A History of Sriniketan" Uma Dasgupta observes that the goals of "rural reconstruction" were to revitalize the pesantry, rebuild small enterprises, spread cooperative values, and move towards localization". Sriniketan is mainly devoted to rural reconstruction, crafts and cottage industry such as pottery, leather work, batik print, wood work, agricultural education. With changes in the education policy, Sriniketan seeks to provide students with an understanding of basic design principles and entrepreneurial skills.



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Department of Pottery and Ceramics, BHU

BHU offers an academic programme in Pottery and Ceramics at the UG level (BFA degree) and at the PG level (MFA degree). The Faculty of Visual Arts was established in 1950 at the Banaras Hindu University. Kalindi Jena was among its founding teachers drew his influence from Gandhian ideas as well as Japanese aesthetics. UG students receive rigorous training in throwing skills in their foundation years and glazing techniques in their later years. At the PG level students undertake conceptual projects using both thrown and hand-built forms.



Ceramic and Glass Design NID Ahmedabad

This department imparts multiple design approaches through extensive engagement with materials, people, technologies and work cultures. The discipline provides opportunities to learn from the craft traditions of the country and global art practices. While recognizing its potential in future technologies and applications in emerging domains, the discipline offers tremendous expressive and creative possibilities in the realm of craft, architectural spaces, healthcare, hospitality, home décor, hi-tech products and lifestyle product categories.

The overall understanding of technology, production techniques, material skills enable the students to work within a variety of industry, producing tableware, tiles, sanitary ware etc.. Graduates are also well equipped to work with NGOs, design studio set up's, craft sector or else set up their own enterprises and generate wealth and employment for the times to come.

Another Department of Ceramics?

By Yann Pierre Montelle

During our visits to four major ceramics departments in India, we observed a remarkable versatility in the curricula offered, which encompassed all aspects of pottery, including production pottery, and artistic pottery. However, we did not find significant initiative, to incorporate traditional potters into the curriculum. The ceramics department at IIT Bombay would address this disparity and prioritize providing a platform for traditional potters to engage in discussion.

This program to provide students with a distinctive opportunity to receive training in qualitative ethnographic methods (fieldwork, participant observation, interviews, and archival research) while simultaneously developing their skills in the medium (ceramics) they are investigating. Given the current state of welfare of traditional potters in India and the high likelihood of a cultural bottleneck, it is imperative to preserve these ancestral traditions. In light of the imminent cultural extinction, it is deemed necessary to establish an academic platform for archival research and facilitate a dialogue between traditional potters (TP) and an emerging tradition of studio potters (SP) in India. Paradoxically, the colonial influence in the form of studio potters is thriving and becoming normalized as the established pedagogical options for students in ceramics in India. Historically, attempts at integrating the *kumbhars* with emerging studio techniques have been limited but significant.

Efforts to integrate traditional potters into the dynamic growth of studio potters have been sporadic but significant. When reluctance to depart from tradition is overcome, the traditional potter brings a historical texture to the studio potter's work and contributes to providing potters in India with their own signature—a welcome departure from what can only be described as a lasting and pervasive colonial influence. The primary motivation behind establishing the program we propose is to provide an academic structure to urgently salvage the *kumbhars* ancestral ceramic technologies. The program is dedicated to this objective. It differs from contemporary ceramic programs in that it offers students courses in social sciences (particularly ethnography, history, material culture, and ceramics), as well as promoting full immersion with traditional potters and studio potters. This creates an academic opportunity for students to learn simultaneously from a dyad of curricula, namely a praxis-based and a research-based curriculum.

Despite some notable efforts to provide traditional potters with opportunities to integrate recent technological advancements in ceramics, the majority of *kumbhars* in India have not had access to these platforms. While the reasons for this disconnect between traditional potters, studio potters, and academia are multifaceted, they present an opportunity for remediation. The program we propose aims to bridge this gap by establishing academic connections, reviving traditional ceramic manufacturing processes, and fostering the vibrant studio-based pottery scene.

The program we are outlining here is structured around three pillars that provide students with a comprehensive and multidisciplinary pedagogical framework. These pillars are tentatively titled “connection,” “immersion,” and “sustainability.” They embody the core principles of our philosophy. The cornerstone of our program's research is the pillar of connectivity. By recognizing the need for students to immerse themselves in the historical complexities of a dire socio-economic collapse that has befallen traditional potters as a consequence of the cultural impact of plastic-based technologies, we aim to investigate the technological lineage that connects potters of the Harappan period to contemporary traditional potters. This research will highlight the urgent cultural imperative to preserve this ancestral connection, which is currently on the verge of extinction. Through ethical research training, students will acquire proficiency in contemporary data-collection techniques. Equipped with a comprehensive toolkit of research methodologies, they will diligently collect critical data from informants selected from both contemporary traditional potters and studio potters. This engagement with potters will be conducted in accordance with the most recent ethical guidelines regarding observation, participation, and data collection. To provide students with a robust understanding of ceramics, a diverse range of courses will be offered, encompassing fundamental pottery-making techniques and advanced glazing methodologies. By integrating a corpus of courses in social sciences and ceramics, students will be adequately prepared to bridge the gap between a dying tradition and foster dialogue between traditional potters and studio potters.