

Facets of Ceramics in Early Historical Period of Tamilnadu – A Review

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Abstract

Pottery, also called ceramics the conception of objects, primarily cooking or storage vessels, made out of wet clay and then hardened by firing in the kiln which was one of the first functional arts to emerge during the stone age. Ceramics for an archaeologist represents the source material, which is sturdy and most widely used and easily obtainable from the sites of Proto Historic period, Early historical period and historical periods. In India it is considered as one of the most iconic rudiments of traditional art. During the chalcolithic period, mainly Indus Valley Civilization, pottery became the most inevitable item for the people though the prehistoric period in India shows the origin of pottery. The main raw material used to craft pottery is clay which is abundantly available in the Indian subcontinent. The source and history of ceramic industry in ancient tamil nadu has great antiquity. This article covers the craftsmanship of pottery and the material culture of different type of pottery existing during the early historical period of tamilnadu known from archaeological excavations.

Key words: *Pottery, Early Historical Culture, Ceramics*

Introduction:

The earliest well known ceramic industry in peninsular India is black and red ware which is associated with iron age. The practice of pottery making has come into view during the Neolithic period with hand made type of potteries. Burnished grey ware was the earliest type in Neolithic period which was very coarse and crude in nature. The black and red ware in other hand is a very smooth and polished variety and most popular characteristic feature of megalithic culture. The ceramic types are gradually developed from Neolithic period to iron age along with new technologies. In early historical period the ceramic industry has reached in a standard position with variety of potteries in including imitated potteries of foreign ceramics. The major ceramic industries which were brought to light the black and red ware, russet coated ware, black polished

ware, black slipped ware, red slipped ware, red polished ware, coarse red ware, grey ware. Besides the wares, certain imported wares like roulette ware, amphorae ware and terra sigillata wares. The imported ware seem to have found their way into tamil nadu largely on account to the trade and cultural contacts that south Indian maintained with roman empire during the few centuries before and after the Christian era.

Distribution:

In tamilnadu the early historical period covers 3rd century B.C to 3rd century A.D tentatively. There are many sites have been explored and excavated throughout taminadu. They yielded a valuable sources for reconstruct the early historical culture at the region. Among the sources pottery plays a vital role to enlighten the cultural history of ancient tamilnadu. The sites like thirukampuliyur, alagarai, uraiyur, kanchipuram, vasavasamudram, kaverippompattinam, keeladi, alagankulam and pattarariperumbudur have yielded a good number of potteries which marks the condition of the ceramic industry as well as material culture of the people.

Classification of potteries in Early historical period

Pottery, the imperative and enlightening antiquities helps the archaeologist to reconstruct the ancient material culture and economic life. Before the invention of metal, pottery was the prevailing medium for usage of utensils in the houses. In day to day life, the people of ancient period dependent on the pottery vessels for cooking, storing and many other purposes.

The classifications of the pottery list are as follows.

1. Black and Red ware , 2. Black ware, 3. Black slipped ware, 4. Black polished ware, 5. Coarse red ware, 6. Red polished ware , 7. Red slipped ware, 8. Brown slipped ware, 9. Russet coated painted ware, 10. Grey ware , 11. Imported potteries, 12. Perforated ware, 13. Decorated ware 14. Potsherds with graffiti marks and 15. Inscribed potsherds

Black and Red ware

This was the characteristic ceramic type of the iron age. It has been continued to early historical period. It is the diagnostic pottery found in massive amount from many of the iron age and early historical

sites in Tamilnadu. The most important facet of the pottery relates to the method of inverted firing in the kiln. The interior and exterior portion of the top turn black due to firing under reduction whereas most of the lower outer portion its fired under oxidizing condition, i.e, having access to the oxygen and thus has a red in colour. Some times slip has been applied on both sides of the pottery. Generally this ware occurs throughout the period of early history. In early phase it was found in plentiful quantity and remained as sort of table ware. In the mid level the characteristic feature of this ware change into medium fabric. (Figure- 1)

It is generally turned on a fast wheel with well levigated clay as made it retained thin sections in evenly fired conditions. On account of constant burnishing the pottery gets a lustrous surface. The shape in this ware designated that they were mostly for utilitarian purpose. It comprised of deep shallow bowls with a futureless or sharpened rim, larger bowl, medium sized jars, pots, plates, dishes, medium size carinated jars, cups miniature vessels etc.

The origin and date of this pottery is a matter of great controversy among scholars; however on the basis of evidence obtained from Adichanellur excavation, the early date for this ware goes to 8th century BC in iron age context. It may on sure grounds be assigned to 5th or 6th century BC as the early date of this ware pertaining to the early historical level.

Black ware

The Black ware is continued from the iron age. A good number of black ware sherds were collected from the lower level compare to upper level in early historical period. It is of a high quality ware among the south Indian pottery. Generally it is found with black and red ware as Iron age period. Most of the pot sherds are in rudimentary condition. Vases, miniature pot, stand, carinated pot, dish, bowls are common types of this ware. Among these lids are encountered in more number. Some of the sherds having shiny black in the outer surface. These sherds are found with black and red ware. Normally the potteries having thin section with polished and thick section with less polished. The pottery is made up of well levigated clay . it has a uniform slip largely on exterior but a considerable number of sherds the slip applied on both the sides.

Black slipped ware

This ware is found with black and red ware, black polished ware and all black ware. The black slip is generally noticed on the exterior but some of the sherds having inner side also.(figure 2) The slips are tedious condition due to the age and usage of the potteries.

Black polished ware

It was found with black and red ware and black slipped ware. It occurs in the iron age level from most of the sites in tamilnadu. It has a fine surface and thin section. It is fully with black polish it is often compared with the northern black polished ware which has similar character. The shapes are mostly those of flat dishes with straight or incurved rims, varieties of deep and shallow bowls with straight or convex sided and carinated vessels, lids etc. Besides , pot with long neck and flaring mouth and moulded bands and sometimes decorated with leaf pattern occur on the exterior of the pottery.

Coarse red ware

The coarse red ware was the primary variety found in all early historical sites in tamilnadu. Generally This type of pottery accounts for more than 65% of the total ceramic assemblage throughout the existence of early historical sites.. The upper level yielded more potteries compare to other levels. It was fabricated both in slow and fast wheel . This type of pottery normally having thick section . It was dull red ware made of impure clay mixed with sand particles and lawn. The surface is rough and not uniformly fired. The workmanship is far inferior to that of another types of pottery. The shapes are mostly consisting of wide mouthed storage vessels, big to small pots, carinated vases, dishes, bowls in various sizes, dish on stands lid, dishes, corrugated bowls with a flat or circular base,dishes etc. Bowls with broad mouth and truncated bottom are the common shape which resemble kushana ware of north india. The colour range from dull red to dark red and in most of the cases retained core in dull grey colour. Red ochre was found occasionally sprayed on the bowls in various designs . (figure 3)Both slipped and unslipped varieties of this ware are met with. This pottery generally beautified with incised and impression patterns, wavy bands, slashed strokes, leaf like patterns on the exterior particularly mouth and shoulder part.

Red polished ware

It is found comparatively less quantity than other potteries at this period. It has a medium fabric, grey core, colour varying from dull red to dark red. The sherds bear a soft, smooth and glittering surface. Dishes with beaked rim, dished with incurved sides and round bottom. In the later levels of black and red ware period is seen the gradual appearance of a fine red polished pottery consisting mainly of pots with different types of rims. This is continued to next level and seems to have been in large use.

Red ware

This ware occurred in all the levels of the period. Most of the potteries having well fired and made with well fine clay.(figure 4) The predominant types of this ware were bowl, vases, basins and medium sized jars.

Red slipped ware

This type of pottery are reported from a number of sites in Tamil Nadu. In early historical period it was found in later phase compare to early phase. The ware is recognized as one of the most important ceramic industries of the early historical period. It is highly polished; well fired and found with fine to medium fabric. The Slip is applied on both sides on some pottery. Some potteries having thick slip on the mouth portion which extended inner side upto the neck level. This ware stands next to coarse red ware in terms of number from many sites. It has represented with various types like vase, bowl, dish, miniature pot, carinated dishes with straight sides, storage jar, goblet and lids. (figure 5)

Brown slipped ware

This ware is commonly associate with red slipped ware during the early historical period. . The slip applied on both insdie and outside. The shapes are mostly bowls and dishes with stray occurrence of pots.

Russet coated painted ware

This ware also continued fro Iron age like Black and red ware. It has been reported from a number of excavated and explored sites in Tamilnadu especially in western parts of Taminadu. It is popularly known as

Satahavahana or *Andra ware* which was coined by Martimer wheeler as the ware usually found with satavahana coins. J.Babington has discovered this type of pottery for the first time and later it was reported by Walhouse. It was made from fast wheel with well levigated clay using fine grained and mixed with organic materials and charcoal straw. This ware represented mostly bowls and dishes of this ware. on basic russet coated Potteries with slip appearance on both inner and outer surface. This ware was treated with a red slip which turned into a lustrous colour after firing. Once the pot is made and the clay is still wet, the decorations made by kaolin. After dried condition a coat of painting is given and the ceramic are well fired. So the painting got a high polish after firing and which have looks as if they have been glazed. The colour of the painting designs have been faded from russet to pale yellow colour. They bear decorations with dotted design and criss cross pattern, wavy designs. The shapes of this ware consisting of small to medium sized bowls, dishes, saucer, flat bottomed vases etc. in tamiolnadu place like tirukakampuliyur, alagarai, kanchipuram, korkai, perur, keeladi and pattaraiperumbudur yielded goo number of potsherds.

Grey ware

It is dressed with a thin slip which under reducing condition of the kiln has burnt ashy. The fabric is very coarse. This ware are similar to the sherds occuring in pre-arretine layers of Arikamedu excavation. The shapes are however utilitarian in character dishes, lids , vases etc.The common shape of the pottery is dish with a flaring rim and ring-foot vase is decorated with a row of depressed curvature at the rim and stamped leaf motif around grooved circles on the interior base.

Conical jars

Conical jar is yet another ceramic type in early historical period. Many jars in full shape found at kanchipuram excavation. It is considered as imitation pottery of roman amphorae jars. Recent excavation at Pattaraiperumbur yielded twelve jars in a row which are placed horizontally. A full sized conical jar with perforation found at the same site which might have used for filtering purpose. Almpst most of the early

historical sites in tamilnadu yielded this type of pottery. It is mainly used for storing items like oil, wine or other liquid items.(figure 6)

Perforated ware

This excavations from early historical sites yielded a good number of perforated sherds. The holes might be made with the help of small stick. This process was probably done when the clay was in wet condition. This perforated ware might be used to filter the boiled grains like rice, horse gram etc., generally, the lids are also found having perforation in the bottom portion of the pottery. (figure 7)

The imported wares

The imported wares fall into three categories : they are arretine ware, roulette ware and amphorae ware. It may be mentioned in this connection that both original and imitated varieties of these wares have been found.

Amphorae:

The vessels of this ware commonly used in the country of their origin to store wine or oil. It has a pink fabric with yellow slip. It is reported from sites like kanchipuram, arikamedu, alagankulam and kanchipuram. It is dated to the middle of the first century A.D.

Terra Sigillata:

It belongs to a class of pottery known as terra sigillata meaning stamped pottery of the second century bc. It has been ascribed to the first quarter of the first century b.c at arikamedu. This ware recovered in Alagankulam excavation in early level of early historical period. It is a red glazed ware, unreliable from sealing wax to deep orange red colour. It is decorated by being pressed into a stamped mould. The main shape of the pottery is bowl with beautiful stamped decorations on the exterior.

Rouletted ware

It was the distinct invasive pottery found at few sites in tamilnadu. It is considered as a fine source material for the history of early historical period of tamilnadu from the pottery. This pottery is well defined at Arikamedu (Pondichery), salihundam (Andhra Pradesh) and Alagankulam (Tamilnadu). The occurrence of this

pottery at any given site presumes the external trade contacts especially with western countries. This ware usually found along with amphorae and terra sigillata of Mediterranean potteries. It has a astonishing smooth surface, thin, brittle and well burnt and has an almost metallic ring. It is made of very fine and compact verity of clay. It should have the clay selected for the manufacture of this ware is practically free from impurities like sand particles, quartz and mica. The manufacture of this type is entirely on the fast wheel with special craftsmanship. (fig 8)

The pottery shows perfect firing under reducing condition. The slip applied on the outer surface which due to firing turned black or grey inside and showed variegated shades like orange red or sapia colour, grey, black, and brown. Sherds with black and magnetic luster on both sides also occur at this ware. A large number of peculiar red polished fragments were collected from the Alagankulam. It also seems that this ware is not yet encountered from other sites in India. The polishing or the luster obtained was apparently due to burnishing effect. The shapes represented in this ware are mainly dishes include incurved and convex side with beaded rim with or without a mild carination near the base. The flat interior is normally decorated with concentric bands of rouletted pattern. Patterns like hypen marks in a row, concentric rings with dots, a row of wavy lines within wavy bands, concentric rings with slanting lines are designed on the interior. In tamilnadu some imitated potteries also found along with original potteries.

Roulette ware normally found at sea shore areas in more umber. In interior place like uryur, kanchipuram and keeladi which has encountered few number compare to Alagankulam and Arikamedu. The available of the original potteries here is definite indication of trade contact with outside india. MorimerWheeler and Casal opinion that this roulette ware was imported to India from western countries, Dr.Vimala Begley has a different thought that this ware was of indigenous origin, but the technique seems to have been introduced from the Mediterranean region, since it was not known to this pattern of India at that time. The evidences like Greek and Roman coins, amphorae sherds, arretine ware of Mediterranean region found at tamilnadu has proved that the external link between tamil and wetern world. Similarly the rouletted ware should also have been brought from west as far as original sherd is concerned. It is dated in first century B.C and found from excavation and explorations in the following sites Arikamedu, Alagankulam, Bramhagiri, Chandravali, Amaravathi, Sengamedu, Nathmedu, Kaveripumbattinam, Alagarari, Uraiur and Keeladi.

Decorated sherds

Ceramics can be festooned in a variety of traditions. (a) It can be glazed, using a array of mineral based colour pigments. (b) It can be hand-painted over the pottery (c) Slip painting is another decorative method, whereby a thin combination of water and clay, called slip, is applied to the pottery's surface like paint. (d) Incising patterns or engraving in the clay surface (fig- 9)

Decorations:

The common decorations of the pottery are Combed designs, thumb impression, fingernail impressions, leaf, cord design, herring bone pattern, criss cross lines and other appliqué designs are common decorations in the potteries. Coarse red ware, red ware pottery types having more decorations compare to other pottery types.

Painted designs:

White painted black and red ware and white painted red ware are the predominate types of this category. The painting was made with some natural or kaolin where the occurrence of paintings only in selective shapes like small to medium sized bowls and pots indicate its importance as a deluxe variety. The dot and dash pattern was the most preferred used in this ware to produce different designs. In white painted red ware, the paintings over the body displayed dots, wavy lines, floral patterns are generally found. Ochre coloured painting were also found in considerable number of potteries mainly coarse red ware where the ochre paint seems to be spattered in the shoulder part. The actual design is created for decoration in the shoulder and neck part by ochre paint in seeping manner from the upper portion.

Potsherd with graffiti marks

Almost all the early historical sites in Tamil Nadu have yielded several pottery pieces with graffiti marks. All these marks are found on broken pottery pieces. It is not possible to get all the graffiti marks in their full form. Most of the graffiti marks are seen only in the small table wares. The graffiti marks are mere scratches found on the potsherds of the period. This scratches consist of different symbols which are variously interpreted by scholars as owner marks potters marks marks of authority of organizations, family or group marks. The graffiti symbols consist of sun, fish, moon, boat, flower, leaf, ladder, star, river, mountain, tree,

swastika etc. which probably pertain to the religious or auspicious and practice of the people in those days. The marks are found almost all tpe of potsherds like black and red ware, black ware, grey ware, rouleted ware, russet coated painted ware etc.

Inscribed potsherds

Inscribed sherds are the main source for early historical period. Tamil brahmi is the earliest type of Script which are used in the potteries for conveying the message. . Concerning the script on the pot shared obtained from this period, it is certain that most captions were post firing. In general the full lexis are not available from the excavation due to the broken pieces. A unit having two letter and brief single worded line are common in he available pot sherds.

Conclusion:

The ceramic industry has a long history right from prehistoric period to modern period. This industry has been developed from period to period through new innovations in product profile, quality and design on different pottery types. A large number of potteries are collecting through exploration and excavation in various parts of tamilnadu. It has given valuable information about material culture, art, and economic system of ancient people .

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fig 1- Black and Red ware



fig 2 - Black slipped ware



fig 3 - coarse red ware



fig- 4- Red ware



fig 5 - Red slipped ware



fig- 6 . Bottoms of conical jars



fig .7 -perforated ware



fig . 8- Rouletted ware



fig.9- Decorated potteries

