

SRI LANKAN POTTERY PRACTICES AS A FUNCTION OF SOCIO-ECONOMIC FACTORS: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS BETWEEN PANDUWASNUWARA & ERAVUR

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Abstract

Each culture's pottery practices are governed by the social and economic context in which it evolves. This paper explores Sri Lanka's pottery practices as a function of socio-economic factors through comparative analysis between two pottery villages – Panduwasnuwara (Kurunegala) in the West and Eravur (Batticaloa) in the East. The study hypothesizes that socio-economic status impacts the overall pottery practices. It determines the extent of resource availability, technological integration, scale & economies of production, and the pottery income thereof. These factors form a virtuous or vicious circle for potters depending on their socio-economic status.

My research is primarily based on fieldwork, where I visit the two villages to gather firsthand information through on-site observations and personal interviews with village potters using semi-structured interviews.

The study found that in Panduwasnuwara, pottery is the mainstay for majority of families. They have big pottery workshops, where most family members work. Potters, therefore, spend lot of time, money and effort in running an efficient, large-scale and profitable business. This socio-economic background influences all their pottery practices such as heavy dependence on electric wheels and press mould machines, investment in big kilns and diverse go-to-market strategies. Potters' strong 'network effect' also attracts subsidized raw material, government support and wholesale customers from across the country. In Eravur, however, pottery is a women dominated profession in which men do not participate at all. Pottery is not the main, but an incremental income for the family. Women work under small rooms/sheds and manage to devote only a couple of hours each day out of their busy household schedules. Limited resources restrict their scale of production and, in turn, discourage heavy investment in the business. Therefore, no Eravur potter owns electric wheels or individual kilns. They still work with labour-intensive methods of the past and fire pots in open bonfires.

Government and non-profit organizations can play a critical role in breaking this vicious cycle and bridging the technological and economic divide between potters. Taking into account the cultural and socio-economic challenges, these organizations need to assist potters with easy access to raw materials, subsidized access to machinery, and better marketing avenues.

Keywords

Sri Lankan Pottery, Socio-Economic Factors, Comparative Analysis, Panduwasnuwara Potter, Eravur Potter

Introduction

Each culture's pottery practices are governed by the social and economic context in which it evolves. Pottery production and the socioeconomic arrangements involved in practicing the craft, as opposed to the mechanics of building pots, have not yet been comprehensively addressed. (Rice, 1987) Pottery practices are a function of how, where, by whom and under what circumstances pottery is produced, distributed and used.

I explore this complex relationship between pottery production in Sri Lanka and the socio-economic fabric within which manufacturing decisions are made. I do this study through a

comparative analysis of two Sri Lankan pottery villages – Panduwasnuwara (Kurunegala) and Eravur (Batticaloa).

Hypothesis

The study hypothesizes that pottery practices would vary significantly based on the following socio-economic factors:

- Pottery as a primary or secondary source of family income
- Gender related social status of potters
- Location in terms of access to raw materials and markets
- Financial support especially government subsidies and easy bank loans

These factors invariably determine the extent of resource availability, technological integration, scale of production, related economies, and the pottery income thereof. (Galobardes, et al., 2006) These form a virtuous or vicious circle for potters depending on their socio-economic background.

Methodology

The research is primarily based on fieldwork, where I visit the two villages to understand their socio-economic context and its impact on pottery practices. The fieldwork comprises:

- First-hand observation of the potters' working environment, culture and techniques
- Detailed personal interviews with potters using semi-structured questionnaires

Among the many challenges faced with this methodology, language was the biggest barrier. Being from India and not well versed with local languages, I required translators. Information being lost/ twisted in translation was a potential error I had to keep in mind.

Socio-Economic Context of the Villages



Big production workshop of a potter in Panduwasnuwara



An Eravur woman standing in her small pottery workshop next to her house

Figure 1: Pottery Workshops in Panduwasnuwara and Eravur

Panduwasnuwara is in the Kurunegala district, in North Western Province of Sri Lanka. It is a traditional pottery village where almost 230 out of the 250 families pursue pottery as their main family business. Potters spend lot of time, money and effort in running an efficient, profitable business. This mind-set influences all their pottery practices such as big workshops, machine heavy production and high capacity kilns, which in turn support a larger scale of production.

The 'network effect' thus created attracts lot of government support in subsidized cost of clay and electric wheels.

Eravur is in the Batticaloa district, part of the country's dry zone in East Sri Lanka. Pottery there is a woman-dominated profession; men do not undertake it. Pottery is therefore, not considered the main, but an incremental source of income for the family. Women have to do pottery along with other household responsibilities. They practice pottery in a small room/shed in the house, where they manage to devote 1-2 hours every day, resulting in a small scale, labour-intensive production. The small scale and secondary income status prevents the families from further investing in labour and machinery.

Comparative analysis

Given below is a detailed breakdown and comparison of pottery practices in their socio-economic context in the two villages.

Clay Procurement: Potters in both villages purchase clay from suppliers. However, clay cost is significantly lower in Panduwasnuwara than in Eravur, affecting their overall profitability.

- Panduwasnuwara: Every year, government assigns specific rice fields close to the village from where suppliers extract clay and deliver it to the potters. Typically, potters require 20-30 loads (1load = 1 tractor = 2000kgs) of clay per year. One load costs LKR1,500 for clay and LKR1,000 for transportation. Potters divide this expense by purchasing 10-15 loads of clay every 6 months.
- Eravur: The National Crafts Council (NCC) Pottery Training Centre in Eravur procures clay from Koduvamadu, Pankudavell and Karadiyanaru areas close to the village. Village potters buy clay mostly from Koduvamadu suppliers. Clay is measured in a local unit called 1D, costing LKR1,500-2,000. Potters estimate 1 tractor of clay may equal 8-10D loads, costing LKR12,000-15,000.

Clay Preparation and Storage: Potters in both villages manually break big chunks of clay into smaller ones, and simultaneously remove any non-clay matter. They add water and let the clay soften for a while before mixing it. However, the mixing process is very different in both the villages. While Panduwasnuwara potters use pug mills to prepare clay, Eravur potters rely on labour-intensive foot wedging.

- Panduwasnuwara: Almost all potters own a pug mill and do not use foot wedging anymore. A pug mill costs about LKR3,00,000 for which potters take bank loans on interest rate as high as 18%. Despite high costs, potters invest in it to increase their scale of production.
- Eravur: There is no pug mill in the village, even at the Training Centre. Potters prepare clay manually using foot wedging. They pour buckets of water on clay and let it sit for five or more hours. Once soft, potters temper (Bronitsky & Hamer, 1986) clay with fine local sand and prepare it using foot wedging. Clay is then stored under sheets of plastic and wet cloth to avoid water evaporation.

Forming and Finishing Tools and Techniques: Panduwasnuwara potters rely heavily on machines to make pots in higher quantities. Whereas, Eravur potters still use hand-building techniques of the past.

For finishing, potters in both the villages use manual methods, but the process differs significantly. Panduwasnuwara potters use anvil and paddle to slowly bring clay together and close the base; while Eravur potters use blade to scrape away excess clay.

- Panduwasnuwara: Potters work exclusively on electric wheels and press mould machines to form pots. An electric wheel costs more (LKR50,000-55,000) but helps in increasing the scale of production. Along with traditional pots (such as Äthili, Muttiya etc.) potters also make newer, complex forms such as Anagi Stoves that have become an important income source. (Amerasekera, n.d.)

Potters practice hump throwing on the wheel, centering a big lump of clay and throwing multiple pots off it with open bases. Once leather hard, a pot is beaten rhythmically using anvil and paddle to compress its walls and close the base, avoiding wastage of clay and related re-wedging.

Younger generation of potters mostly operate press moulds to form curry pots (Sinhala - Äthili). These potters either lack the skills necessary to work on wheel or are eager to increase production quantity. Potters can produce 600-700 curry pots per day on presses, compared to about 100 using electric wheels.

Press mould machines are of two types – manual and hydraulic. Manual costs LKR1,00,000, which is lesser than hydraulic; but requires two people to operate it. One person steers the wheel and controls its vertical movement that compresses clay into the mould. The other person feeds clay into the mould, removes finished pieces, and oils it for the next compression.

Hydraulic machines operate on electricity. They are expensive (LKR2,65,000) but need only one person, which frees labour and increases resource availability. The person can sit and control all the operations.



Panduwasnuwara potter making curry pots on an electric wheel



Eravur potter manually making curd pot on a concave plate

Figure 2: Contrasting Pot Making Processes in Panduwasnuwara and Eravur.¹

- Eravur: Although most potters have kick wheels, hand-building techniques are still more prevalent in Eravur. Women use prebaked concave clay plates to form pots. They sprinkle sand as parting agent on the plate, place clay in the center and use rhythmic hand motion to create a cavity and shape the pot's wall. Potters use right hand to form the pot; and left to rotate the plate on its axis, creating a slow wheel-like rotation. Once clay takes a rough shape, potters use wet piece of cotton cloth to form the upper body of the pot. Seashell is used to smooth the interior of the pot. Once leather hard, pots are manually finished using a long iron tool to scrape away excess clay. Small pots used to serve curd and boil milk are the most common type of pots made in Eravur village. Potters estimate production of 3,000-5,000 pots per month.

¹ All pictures were taken during the field visit by myself. I also drafted schemes and tables.

- Wheel throwing is also done using a wet piece of cloth, instead of bare hands, which reduces friction between hand and clay. Moreover, only one hand (holding the cloth) is used to support both inside and outside of pot, the other hand is not used.

Decoration: Both the villages apply minimal decorations on their pots. Currently, they do not consider decoration as a value adding process. (Asmah, et al., 2013)

- Panduwasnuwara: Cooking pots are mostly kept as it is with a natural orange colour. Most common form of decoration is incising a repeated pattern on the shoulder of pots using a wooden tool with two or more teeth. For water filters, flower patterns are painted on belly of pots using commercial paints.
- Eravur: The NCC Centre uses red cement to colour inside and outside of pots. Pots such as coin banks for kids are decorated using wall paints. Village potters mostly keep their pots as it is with minimal decoration.

Firing: In Panduwasnuwara, each potter has a simple box kiln that fires about 1,500 medium sized Äthili. Eravur potters, however, conduct open bonfires, firing 100-200 pots each time. Firing infrastructure used in these villages further elaborates the difference in scale of production governed by their socio-economic factors.



Pots being fired in a simple box kiln in Panduwasnuwara



Left over ashes and damaged pots after an open bonfire in Eravur

Figure 3: Comparison of Firing Set Up in Panduwasnuwara and Eravur

- Panduwasnuwara: All potters have their own family kilns. They use simple box kilns, covered on three sides with small brick channels (gullies) at the bottom to put firewood. Top of the channels are covered with a layer of damaged pots, followed by multiple layers of pots to be fired. The final layer is again that of damaged pots, which is then covered with a paste of mud, water and paddy to trap the heat inside the kiln.

The size of kiln in Panduwasnuwara village is generally big enough to hold close to 1,500 medium sized Äthili, which are fired over a period of about 30 hours. The first day of firing is mostly smoking to evaporate moisture trapped within pots. A sudden rise in temperature can cause pots to explode due to expansion of trapped moisture. After smoking, high fire is done for 6-7 hours until the kiln is evenly red hot.

Coconut husk, coconut branches, timber dust and firewood are used as fuel. Smoking starts using coconut husks and branches, but continues with big logs of firewood that burn slowly and therefore require minimal supervision during night. Coconut branches, small and big firewood are used during high fire when the kiln is continuously fed to achieve red-hot temperature.

- Eravur: None of the village potters has a proper kiln at home. Most potters make open bonfires or use the simple box kiln at the NCC Centre. The Centre does not charge any service fee for firing pots. The simple box kiln can fire about 1000 medium sized curry pots in one firing that requires 2-3 days. However, conducting such long firing is cumbersome for Eravur women, who prefer firing their pots in open bonfires. These are small firings with 100 or lesser pots fired using coconut husk and small firewood. The fire may last 5-6 hours including 3 hours of smoking and 3 hours of high fire.

Pottery Economics: Panduwasnuwara potters are economically better off as compared to Eravur, because of lower cost of raw material, higher selling prices for pottery products and better access of markets.

- Panduwasnuwara: One load of clay costs LKR1,500, with which potters estimate they can earn LKR50,000. This estimate of course differs when the same clay is used to produce press moulded curry pots that sell for LKR30-35, compared to handmade ones that sell for LKR60-65. Handmade pots command higher prices because they tend to be more durable. However, when produced in large numbers, the impact of higher production outweighs lower per unit selling price of machine made pots, positively affecting a family's monthly income and justifying their investment decisions.

Earning capacity also varies with festive seasons. Months that correspond to new calendar year or Sri Lankan New Year in April are high demand seasons when potters earn more.

Particulars	Price
Cost per load of clay	LKR1,500
Transportation per load of clay	LKR1,000
Cost per cubic yard of wood	LKR1,000*
Cost for 50kg of timber dust	LKR35
Cost per coconut branch	LKR6-7*
Cost per coconut husk	LKR5*
Cost per load of paddy	LKR3,000 (can last for 3 months)

Figure 4: Raw material costs in Panduwasnuwara

* In one firing, potters estimate consumption of 200 coconut husks, 300-500 coconut branches and 2 cubic yard of wood. Source: Data collected during fieldwork in June 2018.

Panduwasnuwara potters generally sell pots in groups of 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 and 8. For example, 8 small curry pots, 5 medium-sized curry pots and 2 large-sized curry pots all are sold for LKR300. Therefore, wholesalers buy small curry pots in multiples of 8 and so on.

In addition to selling to wholesalers, the village also has a very strong culture of roadside markets along the highway or in temples during festivals providing additional selling avenues.

- Eravur: The women dominated nature of pottery results in smaller scale of production (relation established on Page 2). Their income is also limited because they produce small curd and milk pots with very low selling price. This limits their capacity to further invest in machinery or firing infrastructure, forming a vicious circle.

Additionally, clay cost is much higher, affecting their overall profitability.

Particulars	Price
Cost per load of clay	LKR12,000-15,000
Cost per coconut husk	LKR3
Cost per tractor of wood for NCC Centre	LKR6,500 (enough for 1 firing)

Figure 5: Raw material costs in Eravur Source: Data collected during fieldwork in June 2018

Women sell pots to supermarkets close to the village. Vendors come and collect pots directly from them. Potters seemed apprehensive to sell pots in Batticaloa town due to the distance and transport involved, limiting their selling capacity. The NCC Centre on the other hand sold its pots to wholesalers from distant places such as Kurunegala, Habarana and Polonnaruwa.

Pot type	Price per pot
Small Curd Pot	LKR10
Small Pot for Boiling Milk	LKR20
Small Curry Pot	LKR50
Large Curry Pot with Cover	LKR200
Stove	LKR150

Figure 6: Prices for different pots sold in Eravur Source: Data collected during fieldwork in June 2018

Conclusion and Recommendations:

The in-depth analysis illustrates how different socio-economic backgrounds result in varying pottery production practices. Most significantly, socio-economic factors determine the input of labour, raw materials and machinery, and the overall working conditions of the potters. These, in turn, govern the scale of production, pottery outcome and income thereof. Income informs further investment into the business. All these factors are more favourable in Panduwasnuwara than in Eravur, forming a virtuous circle for the former and vicious circle for the later.

- Pottery being a full-time family business in Panduwasnuwara enjoys more labour input. In Eravur, women struggle to devote more than a couple of hours every day.
- Panduwasnuwara has a definite advantage in terms of subsidized raw material cost. Compared to Eravur, clay costs one sixth in Panduwasnuwara.
- Eravur potters still use labour-intensive methods using foot wedging to prepare clay, hand building to make pots. Whereas Panduwasnuwara potters are heavy machine users, improving their overall productivity. Some families have received subsidized electric wheels from government, while others have invested in them using bank loans.
- Panduwasnuwara potters mostly produce medium- and large-sized cooking and storage vessels that command higher prices, compared to smaller sized curd- and milk-pots produced in Eravur.

- Panduwasnuwara potters use location to their benefit to diversify their market prospects and strike better deals. Eravur potters, however, restrict themselves to supermarket vendors close to the village, limiting their negotiating power.
- Size of the production set up explains why Eravur potters use open bonfire, whereas, Panduwasnuwara potters use big box kilns.

Government and NGOs need to play an important role in breaking this vicious cycle and bridging the socio-economic divide between potters.

- They should organize island-wide information exchange programs to share best practices and technical knowledge about better means of production. Such knowledge trickles down and benefits a larger section of the society. For example, Eravur needs to learn the advanced pottery practices followed in the Western Province.
- Government needs to play an active role in improving access to raw materials, machinery and markets to help expand potters' scale of production.

However, to improve overall health of the industry, potters need to improve demand for their existing products and/or diversify their product line to ensure sustainability. As people move to metal cooking vessels and plastic storage containers, demand for clay pots is expected to decline. This basic problem needs to be addressed. Potters need to move up the value chain and grow their market. Special programs are needed to help potters think out-of-the-box and evolve with changing market trends.

- Leveraging the growing demand for sustainable products, potters can diversify into home-improvement clay products such as sustainable cooling solutions and decorative items.
- In addition to local market, potters should cater to foreign tourists who value handmade items. Potters can tie-up with high-end handicraft stores (Barefoot, Lakpahana, and Lanka crafts); and supply in retail shops close to tourist hubs.
- During fieldwork, potters express keen interest in leap-frogging to glazed pottery that has better durability, appeal and market value. Taking best practices from countries such as Japan, government can support program to help potters with resources, skills (glaze formulation, application and firing techniques) and infrastructure (kilns) needed for ceramic production.

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