



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Cultural continuity and change through ceramic ethnoarchaeology: A comparative analysis of Rang Mahal and contemporary pottery in Nohar, Hanumangarh district, Rajasthan

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Abstract

This paper explores the cultural continuity of ceramics in Nohar, Hanumangarh district, Rajasthan. The study employs qualitative research methods and comparative analysis to analyze the collected data. The data was obtained through documentation methods, archival research, and historical documents. The study reveals through the comparative analysis that Rang Mahal pottery and contemporary pottery show a remarkable continuity of the Rang Mahal culture, also recognized as Kushan pottery, within the contemporary context. The implications of these findings are significant for understanding the cultural continuity and change in human societies and for preserving the traditional knowledge and practices of pottery-making.

Keywords: Ethnoarchaeology, Ceramics, Nohar, Culture, Heritage, Rang Mahal.

Introduction

Ceramics, an ancient artistic expression, has exerted a profound influence on human history and culture throughout the ages, bequeathing to us a rich legacy of ceramic artifacts that offer glimpses into our shared past.

Ethnoarchaeological studies play a crucial role in validating and refining archaeological interpretations by establishing connections between observable behaviors and material patterns. Through comparisons between ethnographic data and archaeological ceramic

as-assemblages, researchers can draw informed conclusions about past human behavior and societal structures based on the study of present-day practices (Sinopoli, 1991). The preservation and documentation of traditional ceramic practices through ethnoarchaeological research contribute to the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage. Many traditional pottery-making techniques are facing challenges in the modern world, and ethnoarchaeological studies serve to document and preserve valuable knowledge, skills, and cultural practices that might otherwise be lost (Costin, 2000). Ethnoarchaeology offers a holistic approach to the study of ceramics, integrating archaeological, anthropological, and ethnographic perspectives. By examining contemporary ceramic traditions, researchers can gain valuable insights into the technological advancements, social dynamics, and cultural significance associated with ancient ceramic production (Varma and Menon, 2017).

In the 1950s, Hanna Rydh carried out pioneering research on Rang Mahal pottery, establishing its unique ceramic attributes using archaeological evidence primarily from the Rang Mahal site in northern Rajasthan. Rydh's seminal contribution concentrated on delineating the pottery's characteristic forms, ornamentation, and production methods. The findings led to propose that this pottery type was fashioned during the Kushana period. The early historical site of Rang Mahal excavated by the Swedish Archaeological Expedition from 1952 to 1954, unveils a rich

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historical narrative. Its inception dates to approximately A.D. 250 during the Kushana period, flourishing until the sixth or seventh century A.D. Notable discoveries during the excavations include coins dating to Kanishka III, as well as earlier coins from Kanishka I, Huvishka, and Vasudeva. A seal, datable to A.D. 300 was also found (Rydh, 1959).

Significantly, this site is renowned for its production of the distinctive ceramic industry known as Rang Mahal ware culture. Characterized by wheel-made pottery with a reddish or pinkish hue, the collection includes various forms such as globular or oval jars, handi with pronounced rims, spouted vases, sprinklers, cooking vessels, storage jars, beakers, bowls, lamps, incense-burners, and more. Some carinated handis bear textile marks on their surfaces (Ghosh, 1990). The pottery is adorned with applied and incised patterns, as well as paintings. The cultural assemblage extends beyond pottery to include faience figurines, terracotta animal figurines, carts, wheels, weights, balls, flesh-rubbers, discs, dice, votive tanks, potters' stamps, pendants, ear-ornaments, and beads made from materials like coral, paste, lapis lazuli, and shell.

Extensive research has unveiled a significant concentration of Harappan sites along the course of the Ghaggar river, accentuating the archaeological significance of the region. During a survey conducted by Vikas Pawar in Nohar Tehsil, the presence of rich archaeological wealth was observed, as evidenced by the discovery of 204 ancient settlements belonging to diverse cultures (Pawar *et al.*, 2013).

According to Dr. Vikas Pawar in his exploration in 2005, he reported 25 early Harappan sites and 5 Harappan sites, shedding light on the region's ancient past. Interestingly, there was no evidence uncovered for the late Harappan period. However, the region yielded a remarkable total of 167 historical sites, attesting to its rich historical heritage. Additionally, Pawar's exploration unveiled 61 medieval sites. In 2012, Dr. Chandrashekhar conducted an exploration that unveiled intriguing archaeological findings in the region. His research identified 22 sites from the pre/early Harappan period, 28 sites dating to the mature Harappan era, enriching our understanding of this advanced civilization. Additionally, he identified 24 sites associated with the painted grey ware culture. Lastly, Dr. Chandrashekhar's research revealed 15 sites linked to the Rang Mahal historical period.

Studying cultural continuity and change can provide insight into the interplay between tradition and transition within the realm of pottery production in the Nohar region. Through the lens of ceramic ethnoarchaeology, this research aims to unravel the historical and cultural threads that connect Rang Mahal pottery, a traditional craft with deep roots, to the contemporary pottery practices emerging in the area.

Material and Methods

Study Area and Population

The study was conducted in Gogamedi in Nohar to gain a deep insight into their craft, techniques, and culture. Nohar

Town is divided into 223 villages and has 30 archaeological sites. Nohar town is in Hanumangarh district which is one among 33 districts of Rajasthan state, India. It is in the extreme north of Rajasthan at 29° 5' to 30° 6' North latitude and 74° 3' to 75° 3' east longitude. Nohar is a town in Nohar tehsil in Hanumangarh district of Rajasthan state, India (Figure 1). Nohar city occupies an area of approximately 2450.92 sq.km. Nohar town in Hanumangarh is positioned at 29.18°N 74.77°E. It has an average elevation of 186 meters (610 feet). The population of the district is 17,74,692 (Census, 2011).

The data was collected from the local potters, artisans, and residents. Collection of pottery and other remains from the surface and exposed sections was done. The main emphasis was on exploring the sites and observing the cultural remains in the area. A systematic approach was rigorously employed to explore the archaeological sites based on the pottery culture reported in the published literature and survey reports.

The archaeological artifacts from the historical site of Rang Mahal and the contemporary pottery were selected on typological, morphological, and certain unique features. Each artifact was thoughtfully selected, carefully collected, washed, and documented with contextual information. The methods for documentation were employed to record and preserve data accurately. Photography was employed to visually document the pottery tools facilitating the presentation of findings. This methodical process ensured the precision and comprehensiveness of data collection.

Incorporating archival research and historical documents was an essential aspect of the study. By examining existing records, such as government documents, historical accounts, and artifacts related to pottery in the study area, certain valuable insights into the historical context, evolution, and cultural significance of pottery were obtained. The collected data were analyzed using archival research contributing to evaluation of various typological features like *part of the vessel (rim/handle/base/bowl/basin/etc.)*, *shaping method (wheel-thrown/slab build/fast-wheel/slow-wheel)*, *ware (black and red ware/red variety/bi-chrome/etc.)*, *fabric (method of manufacturing)*, *surface treatment (glazing/burnishing/*

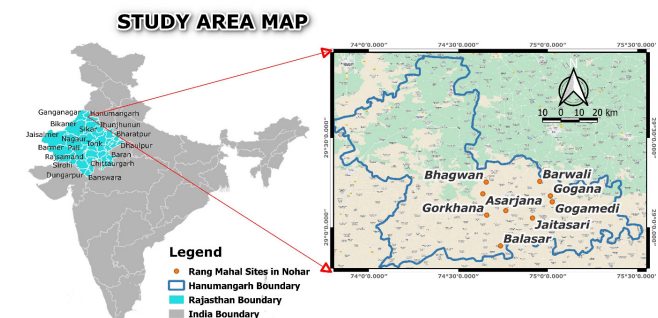


Figure 1: Map of Rang Mahal sites in Nohar, Hanumangarh district of Rajasthan, India

etc.), evidence of use (soot marks), slip (pink/red), decoration (pattern/applique/incised/painting) for a comprehensive comparative analysis in Rang Mahal and contemporary pottery in Gogamedi, Nohar.

Results

The outcomes of the comparative analysis show that Rang Mahal pottery and contemporary pottery unveil distinctive insights through an ethnoarchaeological study, it has come to light that there exists a remarkable continuity of the Rang Mahal culture, also recognized as Kushan pottery, within the contemporary context. This phenomenon manifests itself predominantly in a diverse array of present-day pottery vessels, each exhibiting distinct shapes. Notably, what becomes apparent is the striking resemblance between the pottery types denoted as Type 1A and Type 1B, which have persisted from the Rang Mahal culture era as described by Rydh, in 1959. Pottery of Type 1A is characterized by a

spherical body and pronounced rim. Most of such pottery types are pear-shaped and have a rare flatten bottom. While pottery of Type 1B is more elegant with a short inconspicuous neck and a broad thick rim which can be everted. The rims usually have internal grooves in Type 1B pottery (Table 1).

Similarities can be observed between Pottery Type 1A of Rang Mahal and Figure 2 (a) from Table 2 which depicts a globular pot of painted black on red ware having red slip with an outturned featureless pronounced rim which is a major characteristic of pottery Type 1A. As shown in Figure 2 (c) from Table 2, pottery continuity can be seen from the Type 1B pottery of Rang Mahal due to similarities in the globular pot of painted black on red ware with red slip and short grooved neck. Also flattened ridge and outturned rim in Figure 2 (c) is similar to pottery Type 1B which is the most prominent feature of this type.

The evolution of this pottery style is discernible in the various forms it assumes, serving both utilitarian and

Table 1: Description of Rang Mahal pottery sherds


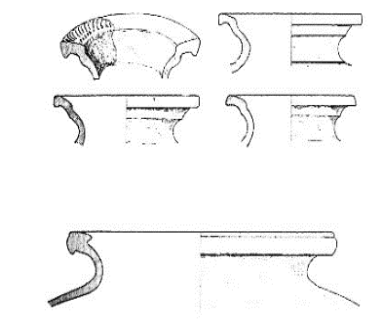

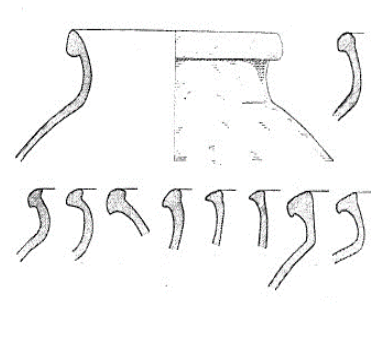

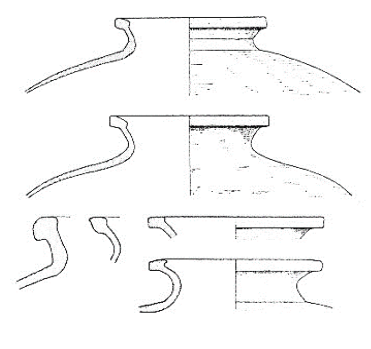
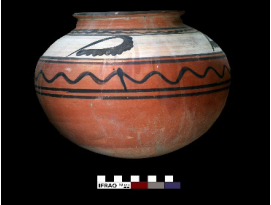


Types of pottery	Pottery	Description	Rim diagrams (Rydh, 1959)
Type 1B		<p>A constricted neck globular pot with everted beaked rim. A red color slip has been applied externally and internally up to throat over which mica has been dusted. It is fast wheel made, medium fine fabric and is medium fired. Three horizontal bands below the neck and rim are decorated with semi-circle pattern. It is thin in section.</p>	
Type 1A		<p>A constricted neck carinated globular pot with everted rounded rim. Red color slip has been applied externally and internally up to throat over which mica has been dusted. It is fast wheel made, medium coarse fabric and is medium fired. It is thin in section.</p>	
Type 1Ba		<p>A constricted neck globular pot with everted squared rim and a depression in the middle. It is fast wheel made, medium fine in fabric and is ill fired. It is thin in section.</p>	

Table 2: Description of contemporary pottery

Figures	Pottery	Description	Pottery resemblance to Rang Mahal pottery (Types)
Figure 2 (a)		Intact globular pot of painted black on red ware having red slip with an out turned featureless rim. Band painted in black and bands below the neck with wavy lines and white slip with four floral patterns. Fine fabric and mica present.	Type 1A
Figure 2 (b)		Intact globular pot of painted black on red ware with red slip and upright neck, flattened ridge and everted turned rim, two thick black bands painted below the neck. Pairs of two bands crossing each other making arch design. Fine fabric and mica present.	Type 1Ba
Figure 2 (c)		Globular pot of painted black on red ware without turned thickened rim, concave neck with grooves, semi-circular arch. Two bands are painted on rim. Below the neck thin black bands having double chain-like pattern is there. Fine fabric and mica present.	Type 1B

ritualistic purposes in the modern world. A particularly intriguing observation is the persistence of Type 1Ba of Rang Mahal pottery, prominently discernible in the design of contemporary milk pots (Table 1). The pottery Type 1Ba is the type of pottery that occurs in at all levels. It represents a medium-sized vessel with a shorter and upright neck, narrow mouth, and horizontally everted rim. As shown in Figure 2(b) from Table 2, this pottery resembles Type 1Ba pottery as it's a globular pot of painted black on red ware with a red slip and upright neck, also having a flattened ridge and everted turned rim.

This continuity can be primarily attributed to the distinctive border and outwardly flared rim, characteristics that have endured through the ages.

It is equally fascinating to note that the patterns adorning these pottery sherds exhibit a remarkable similarity to those from the pre-Rang Mahal culture era. Elements such as wavy lines and crisscross patterns, which were commonplace during the proto-historical period, continue to be prevalent in contemporary iterations. This enduring connection between the past and the present through the vessel of pottery serves as a testament to the rich cultural heritage and traditions that have persevered across centuries.

Discussion

As stated by Rydh in 1959, the term Rang Mahal pottery was given to the historical pottery recovered from the site of Rang Mahal in northwestern Rajasthan. Very few studies have been done on this pottery, however, the evaluation of Rang Mahal pottery by Rydh in 1959 is used without any critical review of the data since the 1950s.

The present study reveals that there exists a remarkable continuity of the Rang Mahal culture, also recognized as Kushan pottery, within the contemporary context. The Rang Mahal Swedish Archaeological Expedition to India from 1952-1954 by Hanna Rydh reports various pottery finds on the basis of the ware, slips, varieties, fabric, clay, decorations, etc. It characterized each pottery type with shape, size, and its distinctive features. As Type 1A of rang mahal pottery show a simple thickened rim, sometimes out-turned and Type 1B features a broad, thick rim, sometimes everted with usually an internal groove, such similar features are observed in the rims of the globular pots in the contemporary pottery in the present study.

Exploration conducted by Dr. Vikas Pawar in 2010 reported the names of different sites that represent the ceramic industry belonging to the Historical period. The term 'Historical period' is used for Mauryas, early Kushana, later Kushana, early Gupta and later Gupta periods. The evidence of the ceramic industry belonging to this period was supported after the excavations at Rangmahal which termed the sites showing similar features to it as Rang Mahal culture sites in this region. One of the sites belonging to such a period is Gogamedi in the Nohar district. Thus, the findings of our study show a similar continuity of Rang Mahal culture within contemporary pottery.

Similar to the results of the present study, some trial trenches at Nohar were taken by KM Dikshit in 1978 which yielded pottery evidence related to Early Harappan, Harappan and historical remains. This study was similar to the pottery evidence explained by Rydh in 1959.

In addition to the present study with a special focus on Globular pots in Historical periods and contemporary contexts, there is a need to study different shapes of pottery in detail.

Conclusion

In the exploration of cultural continuity through ceramic ethnoarchaeology, this research has uncovered a comparative analysis of Rang Mahal pottery and contemporary pottery. The analysis revealed that Rang Mahal and contemporary pottery has a transverse historical continuum that spans over centuries and delves into technological, stylistic, and contextual aspects of pottery. The persistence of certain pottery shapes across epochs underscores the enduring legacy of functional design in Nohar's pottery tradition. It speaks to the adaptability of artisans who have seamlessly merged heritage and innovation. Through the persistence of certain pottery forms and the adaptation of others, we witness the ebb and flow of cultural forces, both timeless and ever-changing. The findings of the study serve as a testament to the resilience of Nohar's pottery tradition in the face of evolving times. It underscores the importance of preserving and celebrating this heritage, not only for its intrinsic cultural value but also for its potential to inform contemporary craftsmanship and innovation.

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