

POTTED TRAVELLERS TALES 99

Calcutta, Lucknow and Goa were the destinations for December 99. We had only a few days in Calcutta and so I tried to contact a couple of studio potters by letter before going. I had no replies. Our Indian doctor host had responded to my e-mails and found an area called Kumbartoli which sounded a promising lead because Kumbar means potter.

After a wonderful view of Everest we circled Calcutta and I noted many brick kilns with their tall chimneys glinting in the sun. Kumbartoli was not easy to find but once again my gallant hosts persevered and after asking numerous people we found the area dotted with pottery shops. I explored, noting the styles of the pots. I wanted a small water pot to add to my collection. Since the advent of plastic and aluminium for water and cooking pots, thousands of potters have gone out of business so most of the pots were being sold as decorative items for religious offerings and festivals. Some were being sprayed on the road side with a bronze lacquer giving off horrendous fumes. Others were painted with garish colours by numerous small boys, their hands covered in lethal looking paint and varnish. We were told that most of the potters had gone back to their villages for the harvest. The ones we found were making sculptures of the goddess Durga. Once a year at the end of the monsoon, the eight million Hindus of Calcutta commemorate the victory of Durga over the Demons whence she turned black and became known as Kali. Thousands of Durga replicas are ordered and potters compete to produce the most colossal and most sumptuous representation of the goddess. Having constructed a framework out of braided straw, the potters coat their models with clay before sculpting them to produce the desired shape and expression. They are sun dried and then painted and clothed.

We had one trip outside Calcutta to see the countryside and visit the 16th Century Bandel church on the banks of the Ganges built by the Portuguese. From the top of the church I spotted the village pottery and spent a happy hour there. The Hindu family made us very welcome and with the help of our host I managed to communicate. Interestingly, our host was intrigued that the potters spoke to me as an equal when, as very low caste people they should, in his eyes, have showed deference. I explained that potters are equal and always respond to one another positively.

The wheel, kiln and method of making were different from other areas of S.Asia. The husband demonstrated throwing on his wheel which was set in a brick circle on the floor of a hut. The spoked wooden wheel consisted of a round centre and an edge wrapped in coir and weighted with clay. The potter squatted at the wheel and turned it with a short stick put in a hole in the edge. The wheel spun on a turned, pointed Tamarind root which is very hard and was wedged by stones. Necks and upper bodies of pots were thrown and left to harden. The bottoms were hand moulded and joined to the tops by his wife. She showed us how she stood them on a couple of upturned pots so they were high enough for her to walk around beating out the edges with a wet stone inside and a wooden paddle on the outside to thin, join and shape them. The kiln had just fired and was bursting with pots from the entrance and top. It was a simple updraught kiln with no chimney which consisted of an oval shaped structure about six foot high with walls built of coir and clay. Underneath, supported by brick pillars was a firebox with an angled entrance from ground level and the whole structure protected by a high coconut palm roof. I presumed the heat either rose through holes between the pillars or at the end of the firebox. Pot shards, coir and clay must have covered the top and also the break in the wall where they loaded the pots. The firing was by wood and took 24 hours. The scene was completed by grandmother cooking over a clay stove and little children playing with broken pots.

I never managed to find a potters colony in Lucknow and was told that they had all gone away. However, on driving out to the Conference I spotted some pots by the road. Our bemused driver pulled up and sure enough there was a little old man throwing teacups off the hump on a stone momentum wheel. The wheel turned on a metal spike propelled by a short stick in a hole. Thousands of these little disposable cups are used for tea and thrown away each day all over

India. They cannot be reused, even if washed, in case someone of a lower caste had drunk in one before. However, even this market will eventually go as we noticed several tea stalls using plastic cups. The cups were fired, stacked inside each other in a small brick circle by the roadside. The kiln was filled with rice husks and left overnight to burn down as we would fire a sawdust kiln. From the old man I bought the local water pot which had an embossed body made in two moulds, a long thrown neck and a thrown foot. It cost 6 rupees and there are 68 rupees to the pound. When I gave him considerably more he wept and kissed my hand. I have never felt so humble.

On to Goa where I visited my potter friend Luzia. They had just finished firing the kiln and were removing the pots. I wished I had arrived a day earlier to have helped in the firing as I had done before. The next day we cycled early to the local market to see the pots on sale. Each year I expect the pottery to close as more people have refrigerators and electric cookers. However I was heartened to hear an Indian say that water never tastes so sweet as from a clay water pot and curry never tastes so good as from a clay cooking pot.

On one of our cycle rides I spotted some interesting roof tiles waiting to be put on a new house. They were tall, thrown cylinders about a foot long and cut in half. When in situ they overlapped each other with one layer facing up and the other layer facing down.

I came home with my beautiful water pots from Calcutta and Lucknow and a few of the discarded mini teacups.

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