



Matka

The ancient water cooler

Matka (or matki or kumbha) i.e. an earthen pot, used all over the Indian subcontinent, as an ancient water cooler and storage. First Matka was emerged from Samudramanathana. Humans discovered sturdy containers to transport and store. It is a hollow spherical object with a neck and open mouth, made of clay / terracotta used for storage purposes, mostly red and black in color. For the manufacturing, 2 types of clays (surface and inderground clay) are used. Clay is stamped, shaped on the potter's wheel, shape is gained, separated with thread, put to dry to gain some rigidity. It is then cleaned and formed with a shaping pad and a wooden beater. Then painted with clay and fired in a kiln, cleaned and checked for defects. The earthenware fired in open kilns has a brownish red appearance and in underground closed kilns are black in colour. Designs and craftwork is done. India is the second largest earthenware producer, at 1.27 billion square meters that year, after China.

The science behind nature's refrigerator, is the process of evaporation. It is porous. When water evaporates, condenses, making a cool environment. It naturally cools down the water, increases metabolism rate and is alkaline in nature, clears impurities from the blood, prevents sun strokes, good for throat, has good taste of muddy water, maintains a normal temperature of the water, kills germ, prevents water-borne diseases, reduces body swelling, cleanses the body of infection, prevents cancer, sweats out the impurities.

From the types of earthenware, Matka, Earthen water bottles, terracotta carafe, Jug, Kulhads are the types of earthen water storage ware. Earthen Pots have become innovative Water Filters. It filters impurities, stores purified water. It can build an ecosystem that could support the traditional crafts, beginning with pottery. Matkas have antimicrobial activity and are highly efficient against bacteria than vessels made up of plastic, steel, aluminum, etc. Conventional water storage systems are not expensive but very effective, available to everybody. Matkas are most suitable containers to store water.

Seeking through the indian literature, movies are the best references to analyse an object. 1975, a village in Kutch where men perform garba to appease the goddess Amba for rain. Women aren't allowed for, but have to fetch water. The movie Hellaro, revolves around the Kutch community, and the pottery, introducing many earthenwares like Matka. One day, those women meet a drummer in the desert and begin their routine of doing garba everyday, but, get caught by men. The women, beaten by their husbands, but they dance bravely and let go of all their fears, which is when they had rains in the village and were blessed. Storyline is focused on the the culture and the water crisis. Garba is performed around the garbi (matka with 27 pores and diya) in navaratri. Also Matkas are used in a movie to store water and for transportation.



Left to Right:

- 1) Matka and earthen storage vessel from the movie Hellaro
- 2) innovations, designs, modifications

Looking to modern days, many regions in the country are drought-hit. About 2,00,000 people die every year in water scarcity. Almost 40% women in rural India have to fetch water, balancing multiple pots on their head. Water is carried in Matkas with 15-20 liters capacity with 2-3 trips, taking up to 6 hours. Women walk miles twice a day, wait in a queue, causing diseases and exhaustion. Men marry multiple wives for household duties and to collect enough water. Girls are forced to abandon education, health problems keep families in debt, where productive time is lost for the most basic human necessity.

Years ago when women were not allowed to practice pottery, are now major part of it. Most of the design, painting and crafting of Matka is done by them. In rural India, both men and women produce earthenwares and sell in local markets. Such earthenwares are used in Indian cultures and festivals like- Dahi handi, having a Matka, filled with 'dahi' (curd), Makkhan (white butter), hung at a height, followed by folk dances. Rann utsav has brought Kutch pottery in limelight, having stalls which bring out the Matkas as artifacts.

From cradle to coffin, in most Indian rituals, matka has a significant role. It brings prosperity and good luck. From the mud divas to Ghads used in the antmshaskar mud as a primary resource has been used for many spiritual and religious acts. Indians and Vaastu are like body and soul. According to Vaastu Shastra keeping earthen pots builds strong positive forces, influencing energy around. Its existence is validated spiritually.

The kumbhar community has 2 sections, Sindua (Islamic) and Prajapati (Hindu). As time passed, from barter to market system, craft became a business. Prajapatis changed to business ventures after independence. Sindhua potters are carrying pottery craft in Kutch, and run pottery markets. They tried to retain art in craft, to maintain the culture, and later started mass producing. Kutch is one of the main attractions in India. Doors to the international market opened due to earthenware production.

After independence and India-Pakistan partition, pottery areas were also parted in 7 clusters. Craft became a business. Matkas had to modernise, in size variations, with simple modifications. Potters came up with mitti bottles (wooden lid), with same concept, but different shape that hit the market. The portable, low maintenance bottles, organic, eco friendly and complemented both the go green project and make in India, leaving plastic bottles behind. Kutch Kumbhars come from lineage, making their products different from the other Indian potters, rooted in tradition and don't imitate other cultures, and only produce earthenwares. Newer designs are needed to make this craft sustainable. Now, it is the time when Matkas should make a comeback in this techno freak world.

{1} Movie Hellaro (2019) - Storyline - 1975.

{2} The evolution of matka (The ancient water cooler)- Sanjana Bhansali.

{3} Clay and Pottery- Brief History- www.lakesidepottery.com

{4} Kumhars of kutch- Arun Sankar, May 4, 2017, craft documentation- issuu.com

{5} POTTERY- BEYOND CRAFT Expedition Learning History- www.dishaindiaeducation.org

{6} The dying culture of pottery in India- www.thestatesman.com

{7} Women using traditional pottery- www.veniceclayartists.com

