

Preserving Indigenous Craftsmanship: A Study of Larnai Pottery in West Jaintia Hills District, Meghalaya

Dr. Treemmi Lamare

Assistant Professor, Political Science, Kiang Nangbah Government College, Jowai

Abstract

This article explores the traditional craft of pottery-making in Larnai village, located in the West Jaintia Hills district of Meghalaya, as a vibrant and living indigenous knowledge system. Rooted in the matrilineal traditions of the Jaintia community, this women-led craft represents a harmonious integration of ecological sensitivity, spiritual belief, and communal identity. The article aims to document the ecological, cultural, and ritualistic dimensions embedded within the practice, while also interrogating the socio-economic constraints and policy gaps that threaten its continuity in the face of industrialisation and modernisation. Employing a mixed-methods approach, the study draws from various disciplines to provide a comprehensive understanding of the craft's significance in the broader discourse on sustainability, gendered labour, and cultural preservation. The qualitative findings are complemented by empirical data on market access, intergenerational knowledge transfer, and livelihood patterns, offering a nuanced view of the challenges and prospects faced by the craftswomen of Larnai. Despite the decline in popularity and economic viability, the study reveals that the craft holds considerable potential for revival through well-targeted policy support, community-led cultural tourism, and the integration of indigenous practices into heritage education and vocational training. In doing so, the article not only contributes to the preservation of an intangible cultural heritage but also advocates for its recognition as a viable and sustainable model of rural development.

Keywords: Larnai pottery, indigenous knowledge, cultural heritage, women-led craft, sustainable rural development.

1. Introduction

The traditional art of pottery-making in Larnai village is more than a means of subsistence; it is a living testament to the indigenous wisdom, ecological ethics, and gendered heritage of the Jaintia community in Meghalaya. This artisanal practice, primarily sustained by women, follows a matrilineal lineage of knowledge transmission and is rooted in the cultural rhythms of the community. From sourcing clay by hand to shaping pots without the use of a wheel and firing them with organic fuel, every step is a demonstration of harmony between humans and nature. Craftswomen in Larnai employ sustainable methods passed down informally over generations. These methods are marked by precision, ecological sensitivity, and cultural symbolism. The Pottery of the Larnai is not only functional but also ceremonial and spiritual, often associated with rituals, festivals, and community identity. Despite this, the craft today

faces serious threats. The encroachment of industrial products, lack of youth interest, and insufficient market recognition have diminished the vitality of this tradition.

India's growing interest in promoting its indigenous knowledge systems (IKS) has rarely extended to tribal pottery practices such as those in Larnai. Consequently, this valuable heritage risks being lost without documentation, policy integration, and strategic revitalisation. This article seeks to fill that gap by providing an in-depth, interdisciplinary study of Larnai pottery, assessing its historical relevance, current challenges, and future prospects.

2. Objectives

1. To document, analyse, and interpret the traditional tools, techniques, cultural practices, and spiritual significance associated with pottery-making in Larnai village, with particular emphasis on its role in preserving indigenous knowledge and sustaining gendered community traditions.
2. To investigate the contemporary challenges facing Larnai pottery—including socio-economic decline, policy neglect, and generational disinterest—and to evaluate its potential for sustainable development through integration into livelihood schemes, heritage education, cultural tourism, and policy frameworks.

3. Methodology

The study adopts a mixed-methods approach combining qualitative and quantitative techniques. Ethnographic fieldwork was undertaken, including participant observation and in-depth interviews with elder potters, community leaders, and local youth. Oral histories and narrative interviews were employed to understand traditional knowledge transmission and spiritual dimensions of the craft. Visual documentation through photography and video recording was also utilised to preserve intangible aspects of the process, such as gesture, technique, and spatial arrangement. Quantitative data was gathered through structured questionnaires administered to potters and households involved in pottery-related work. The data focused on income levels, production outputs, generational involvement, and market reach. The use of software tools such as NVivo assisted in qualitative analysis, while descriptive statistics were applied to economic and demographic data. This triangulation ensured reliability and depth in the research findings.

4. Discussion

The traditional pottery-making of Larnai exemplifies a symbiotic relationship between people, place, and practice. It is not merely an economic activity but a comprehensive cultural expression—integral to community rituals, seasonal rhythms, and collective memory. Every step in the pottery-making process—right from clay collection to the final firing—demonstrates an indigenous understanding of ecological stewardship. The deliberate choice to avoid mechanisation and chemical processing reflects a philosophy rooted in sustainability and respect for the land. These practices are passed down informally, mainly through mother-daughter relationships, solidifying the role of women as cultural transmitters and ecological custodians.

Crucially, the pottery is imbued with symbolic and ritualistic significance. Pots and other clay utensils are not only vessels for everyday use but also play roles in religious ceremonies, ancestral worship, and community gatherings of the Jaintias. This adds a metaphysical layer to the craft that is often ignored in policy discourses. These cultural codes are not written but preserved orally and through embodied

practices, making their documentation all the more urgent. Furthermore, this intimate relation with the environment fosters a deep-seated ecological ethic, with potters consciously limiting the amount of clay harvested to maintain soil balance and avoid desecrating sacred sites.

However, modernisation and globalisation have increasingly undermined this holistic way of life. The introduction of plastic, aluminium, and steel utensils has led to a declining domestic market for earthenware. In urban centres, clay products are often perceived as inferior, fragile, or outdated. This perception has percolated into rural consciousness as well, especially among the younger generation who equate craft-based livelihoods with poverty and stagnation. Many youths in Larnai express aspirations for white-collar employment or outmigration to cities, distancing themselves from what they consider to be a “dying art.” This cultural dissonance presents a major barrier to the intergenerational transmission of skills. The gendered dimension of this issue cannot be overstated. While the craft is predominantly practised by women, development schemes often fail to reach them effectively due to patriarchal control over public resources and bureaucratic processes. Women potters, despite their pivotal role, are rarely consulted in local governance or development planning. Their lack of access to capital, mobility, and market networks further marginalises them from formal economic spaces. As a result, their labour remains undervalued, both socially and monetarily. Addressing this gap requires not only economic intervention but a gender-sensitive approach that recognises the craftswomen as entrepreneurs, educators, and innovators.

From a policy standpoint, the absence of proper institutional support has exacerbated the vulnerability of Larnai pottery. Although Meghalaya is rich in tribal heritage, its crafts are seldom represented in national platforms such as the Dastkari Haat Samiti or state-level craft fairs. Moreover, there is no formal curriculum or apprenticeship model in local schools that incorporates traditional pottery as part of vocational training. This disconnect between traditional knowledge and formal education reflects a broader undervaluation of indigenous systems in contemporary development narratives. Policies that aim to promote Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) must therefore go beyond tokenism and ensure on-the-ground implementation through educational reforms and funding mechanisms.

There is also a pressing need to explore market diversification. Currently, the potters of Larnai are largely dependent on local markets, which are limited in scale and scope. The rise of e-commerce platforms presents an opportunity to expand the reach of their products, provided that infrastructural and digital literacy challenges are addressed. Additionally, collaborations with designers, NGOs, and tourism boards could help innovate product designs that appeal to both traditional and modern tastes, thereby enhancing economic returns without compromising cultural integrity.

Tourism, if carefully curated, can offer another revival pathway. Meghalaya’s natural beauty already attracts domestic and international visitors. Embedding Larnai pottery into cultural tourism circuits—through live demonstrations, workshops, and sales points—can create additional income streams and visibility for the craft. Such initiatives must, however, be community-led and ethically managed to avoid cultural commodification. In conclusion, the discussion reveals that Larnai pottery is more than an endangered tradition; it is a dynamic, adaptive, and richly symbolic practice that deserves serious academic, policy, and developmental attention. By understanding its multifaceted nature, stakeholders can co-create sustainable models that honour tradition while responding to contemporary challenges.

5. Findings

The study yielded several key findings:

- **Cultural Continuity:** Larnai pottery is deeply rooted in community rituals and beliefs, particularly

among women. The process reflects sacred relationships with land and ecology.

- **Gendered Labour and Knowledge:** Women are central to the preservation and production of pottery, acting as both cultural custodians and economic contributors.
- **Sustainability:** Traditional pottery techniques in Larnai represent an eco-friendly model of production, relying on biodegradable materials and non-industrial processes.
- **Economic Fragility:** Most potters earn less than ₹3000 per month from their craft. Market access is extremely limited, and there is a high dependency on local fairs and middlemen.
- **Policy Gaps:** No formal recognition such as GI tagging exists. Larnai pottery remains absent from government skill development, heritage, or MSME schemes.
- **Youth Disengagement:** A significant proportion of youth interviewed had no interest in learning pottery, citing poor financial returns and social mobility aspirations.

Despite these issues, the community retains pride in its heritage. There is strong support for interventions that combine preservation with livelihood generation.

6. Significance of the Study

The significance of this study lies in its interdisciplinary value and its potential policy impact. First, it contributes to academic literature on indigenous knowledge systems, particularly those practised by matrilineal communities in Northeast India. The documentation of Larnai pottery provides a rare insight into how traditional ecological knowledge is embedded within everyday livelihoods and social systems. Second, the study has practical relevance for rural development and cultural policy. It offers empirical evidence to support the inclusion of Larnai pottery in initiatives like the Skill India Programme and the Indian Knowledge Systems framework. Further, the research can aid efforts to apply for Geographical Indication status, which would enhance the visibility and market value of Larnai pottery. Third, the study highlights women's roles in heritage preservation and rural entrepreneurship. By framing Larnai pottery as both a livelihood and a cultural responsibility carried by women, the study promotes gender-inclusive development. Lastly, the research advocates for the integration of traditional crafts into educational and tourism programmes. Heritage education in schools, craft exhibitions, and eco-tourism packages can serve as tools for both economic and cultural revival. By viewing Larnai pottery as a dynamic, living tradition rather than a relic, this study calls for a future-oriented approach to cultural preservation.

7. Conclusion

Larnai pottery stands at the crossroads of tradition and transformation. It embodies the resilience of indigenous knowledge, the artistry of rural women, and the ecological wisdom of community-based production systems. Yet it is under severe threat from market forces, modernisation, and institutional neglect. This research has documented the craft's techniques, meanings, and challenges, while also providing a roadmap for its revitalisation. With appropriate policy support, community involvement, and integration into sustainable development frameworks, Larnai pottery can transcend its current marginal status and become a model for culturally rooted, eco-conscious rural livelihoods.

8. Bibliography

1. Appadurai, A. (1986). *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*. Cambridge University Press.

2. Bhuyan, A. (2015). Sustainable Indigenous Technologies in Northeast India. *Journal of Rural Development*, 34(2), 45–60.
3. Dhamija, J. (1970). *Living Traditions of India*. National Book Trust.
4. Gosselain, O. P. (1999). In Pots We Trust: The Processing of Clay and Symbols in Sub-Saharan Africa. *Journal of Material Culture*, 4(2), 205–230.
5. Government of India. (2022). *Geographical Indications of Goods (Registration and Protection) Act, 1999*. Ministry of Commerce and Industry.
6. Ingold, T. (2000). *The Perception of the Environment: Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill*. Routledge.
7. Jain, J. (1989). *Textile Tradition of India*. Mapin Publishing.
8. King, J. C. H. (2011). *The Arts of the Americas at the Dallas Museum of Art*. Yale University Press.
9. Ministry of Education. (2020). *Indian Knowledge Systems Division*. Government of India.
10. Ministry of MSME. (2021). *Skill India Programme*. Government of India.
11. Moeran, B. (1997). *Folk Art Potters of Japan: Beyond an Anthropology of Aesthetics*. Routledge.
12. Nongbri, T. (2003). *Development, Ethnicity and Gender: Select Essays on Tribes in India*. Rawat Publications.
13. Nongkynrih, K. K. (2014). Livelihood and Culture in Northeast India. *Eastern Anthropologist*, 67(3–4), 289–308.
14. Nongkynrih, K. (2019). Cultural Resilience and Revivalism in Meghalaya. *Indian Anthropologist*, 49(1), 112–125.
15. Sen, A. (2000). *Development as Freedom*. Oxford University Press.
16. Sharma, D., & Majaw, M. (2011). Traditional Arts and Crafts in the Jaintia Hills: An Ethnographic Survey. *Meghalaya Studies*, 7(2), 66–78.
17. Smith, L., & Akagawa, N. (Eds.). (2009). *Intangible Heritage*. Routledge.
18. UNESCO. (2003). *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage*. UNESCO Publishing.