2. The Importance of Ceramics

Although early stone tools from Africa are more than two million years old, the oldest objects of clay that archaeologists have found date only in tens of thousands of years. Humans may have experimented with soft, plastic earthy materials considerably before this, perhaps hundreds of thousands of years ago, in uses as ephemeral as painting their bodies with coloured clays. But the essential feature in the history of use of this resource is the application of heat to transform the soft clay into something hard and durable. Pottery was the first synthetic material humans created and it combines the four basic elements identified by the Greeks: earth, water, fire, and air. The term “ceramic” is derived from the Greek term keramos, which means “burned material” or “earthenware”. The bulk of low-fired, unvitrified material, referred to as pottery is of concern to the prehistoric archaeologists and anthropologists. Ceramic is a generic term which includes both the high-fired, glazed tableware, art objects and structural clay products and the low-fired unvitrified pottery. Pottery, that is relatively low-fired containers made of clay have constituted the batterie de cuisine of millions of households throughout the world over a period of at least eight thousand years. The use of clay to make pottery containers does not seem to have originated in any single time and place in human history. It has been developed independently in various centers. Like almost all prehistoric cultural developments, the beginnings of pottery may be the result of numerous lines of experimentation and accumulation of practical experience. A common reconstruction of pottery origins calls attention to the fact that in many parts of the world the earliest pottery known to archaeologists occurs in forms and with decorations that resemble earlier containers made of other naturally occurring materials like gourds, leather bags, wicker baskets and wood like hollow bamboo “bottles”. Clay then came to be
used to make containers that were sun dried and hardened to mainly store dry foods such as grains, seeds, fruits and nuts. The durability and impermeability of the hardened clay was further advanced by the application of fire to the clay.

The appearance of pottery in the archaeological record has largely been associated with the Neolithic technocomplex. This is an assemblage of tools and containers for food preparation and storage, together with the associated technology of their manufacture and use that correlates with the general changes in human life ways in the Holocene period. These changes were dramatic, involving the adoption of food production rather than collecting, and the shift from temporary encampments to a sedentary lifestyle. Even today pottery is primarily made in sedentary as opposed to nomadic societies (Arnold, 1985). The appearance and the widespread adoption of pottery indicates the new need for tool and resources both for storing and preparing the domesticated grains, which had acquired importance in the diet of the Neolithic people. In fact, one of the theories of the origins of pottery deals with the necessity of pottery to detoxify plant foods by heating (Arnold, 1985).

There is great potential of pottery as archaeological evidence. Since pottery has been used for a specific purpose at a specific time by a particular group of people or in a particular place, these are generally the questions that answers are sought to. Pottery can provide dating, distribution and functional evidence.

2.1 Pottery as Dating Evidence

Pottery repertoires do not remain static and vary frequently. In any site, pottery assemblages have slight or great variations in terms of technique of manufacture, materials used, variations in the form and decoration. Such differences are well reflected in the sherds excavated from different contexts. Applying the
method of seriation, relative dating can be achieved. Typological studies of pottery assign chronological significance based on relative dating so derived. A developmental trend in pottery production and increasing complexity can be observed in such sequences. Although coarse grey ware is generally considered to be the ware associated with the Southern Neolithic, there are considerable amounts of other wares like the black burnished, rusticated ware, black-painted red ware and very few red slipped ware too. The occurrence and increase in proportion and the gradual decline of the wares through the Neolithic occupation can be noticed in the developmental trend.

2.2 Pottery as Evidence of Exchange

Pots are transported by men from one place to another. They may be manufactured at a production centre and traded over long and short distances as commodities and they may also be used as containers in the transportation of other commodities. The study of fabric especially the inclusions in the clay will enable the identification of the source of pottery. This in turn will indicate plausible exchange networks between sites in different geological settings. It was accepted that the exchange of pots as commodities was limited only to the fine wares and the coarse ware were more or less geographically stationary. But Shepard’s work on the Rio Grande pottery in the 1930s disproved it. This study showed that coarse wares had indeed moved over long distances (Shepard, 1942).

The exchange of ideas can be attempted to be understood by the study of forms. The distinctive forms of pottery of a region are imitated or replicated by another region. This is also stimulated by trading of exclusive pottery. Studies
involving fabric and form can shed more light on the trade links and also identify the ceramic influences of one culture on the other.

In the context of southern Neolithic culture, such exchange systems are not unknown and it would be interesting to note the same being corroborated by pottery. There can also be seen in the typology and decoration of pottery an influence from the Chalcolithic cultures of the northern Deccan. While the direction of influence remains debatable, the similarities in form between the two regions are established beyond doubt.

2.3 Pottery as Evidence of Function or Status

Useful information can be obtained on the suitability of a pot for certain functions from a study of its form and physical characteristics. The form given to the pottery although limited to a great extent by the technique involved in its production, is largely governed by the use it is put to. The storage of solids and liquids require pots to have different morphology and pottery put to repeated heating and cooling required to be made with a different technique. The functions of fine ware and coarse ware are as different as there constitution and morphology. The form of pottery by indicating the dietary practices gives valuable information on the economy of the settlement. A very important study in this direction has been conducted by Fuller regarding the pottery forms and the culinary practices of the Neolithic inhabitants.

The distribution of pottery in a site can also lead the researcher to interesting observations. The presence or absence of a large number of fine ware in a part of the site can indicate the social status of the occupant. The pottery assemblages and their internal variations of a site reflect the social complexities as well as the spatial distribution of the settlements. Such studies on spatial distribution have not been
undertaken in the southern Neolithic sites but those conducted on pottery from later medieval sites were significant, a lot of which can be attributed to the increased nature of the complexities.

The pottery assemblage from a site can provide insights into the technological rank achieved by the culture. A study of the fabric of the pottery gives much understanding of the techniques of pottery production employed. The extent of utilization of available resources for pottery production is also reflected in the archaeological ceramics. There are diverse ways of pottery manufacturing and to know which of those was adopted by the Neolithic potters, the fabric of the sherds have to be studied.

This in brief gives the nature of the problem to be addressed in the following chapters and the methodology used is discussed separately.