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The Creators A Look at the Changing Work of Potters and the Future of Their Craft in Thimi, Nepal

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The Creators
A Look at the Changing Work of Potters and the Future of Their Craft in Thimi, Nepal



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Asia, Nepal, Thimi

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Abstract

The Newari sur-name Prajapati has been associated with those who are of the potter caste in the Kathmandu valley. In the past 30 years ceramics in the historic pottery town of Thimi has changed drastically from being an essential and necessary craft and the only occupation for Prajapatis, to a struggling population of visually aging potters. This paper examines the workshop Everest Pottery in Thimi Nepal as a case study for the state of ceramics in Thimi today. The author traces the origins of the workshop's founder Shiva Prajapati and examines the shift that Shiva made from traditional Newari pottery practices to modern techniques. The author discusses the success of Everest Pottery and the shift of their market from local to global. The author concludes that with the rise of aluminum, plastic and the fact that Nepali's are no longer looking to buy terracotta pots, the traditional forms that have inhabited the houses of the Kathmandu Valley for generations may be all but gone in the next few years.

As a secondary focus the author discovered that while Everest Pottery has left behind most traditional Newari pottery practices, Newari traditional values and customs remain present in the workplace and can be witnessed through the stark division of labor by gender. The women of Everest Pottery all have different stories of how they came to work in ceramics. The author discusses the stories of the women of Everest Pottery, their perceptions of their own roles in ceramics and the perceptions of the female role from the point of view of the men of Everest Pottery. The author found that while there is no spoken rule against women throwing on the wheel, even in a modern ceramic workshop, this tradition remains. Most women who learned to throw in their youth stop throwing when they get married, and additionally do not want to try again for fear that it is too difficult. Similarly, the men of Everest Pottery express doubts about women's ability to throw due to their lack of strength. While the women of Everest Pottery seem to be happy with the status quo, the author offers a counter observation that while some women aren't interested in the wheel, the ones that are given no space to learn. Additionally the author offers potential futures for ceramics if women are eventually included in this integral part of the process.

Methodology

I spent almost four weeks in an apprenticeship with Shiva Prajapati at his workshop Everest Pottery, in Thimi Nepal. During my time there I did an intensive study of throwing on the wheel and learned how some of the only glazed table ware in Nepal is being made. I worked for seven hours every day in the workshop.

During my time there I interviewed a select group of workers from Everest Pottery with the help of Sunil Prajapati as my interpreter.

Acknowledgments

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Introduction

Prajapati is the hindu god of creation and traditionally the family name of Newari potters in the Kathmandu Valley. Just five miles east of Kathmandu lays the ancient town of Thimi which is still the home to many of the Prajapatis, and a center for ceramics. As the “creators,” the Prajapatis are potters by caste and up until the second half of the 20th century, they were supplying the community with most of it's wares. This paper will attempt to add something new to the academic literature on pottery in Nepal. In this paper I examine the workshop of Shiva Prajapati and how his movement *away* from traditional pottery processes have enabled him to survive and thrive in a new global market. In turn, I highlight how in spite of Shiva's success, pottery has become less attractive to young Prajapatis and being born a Prajapati no longer dictates one's profession. Additionally, the success of modern techniques success have not changed the fact that traditional ceramics in Thimi has declined immensely since 1980 and the future of Prajapatis may not lay in being a creator any longer. The pots of the Prajapatis heritage are disappearing, to be replaced by aluminum, plastic and or in Shiva's case, western style table ware.

My secondary focus in this paper will be on the status of women involved in ceramics and the way labor is divided by gender. I will specifically focus on the women working in the Everest Pottery workshop. There is no rule in Newari culture against women throwing on the potters wheel, however it used to be that women would never even touch the wheel let alone throw on it. Many of the women at Everest Pottery trim other's pots on the wheel and do all of the decorative and finishing work on the pots, but they never throw on the wheel. Some of the women learned to throw when they were younger, but always stopped after they got married, or when they came to work at Everest Pottery. I will examine why there is such a division of labor, it's origins and if this division has any broader cultural implications.

Chapter 1: Everest Pottery and the Future of Ceramics in Thimi¹

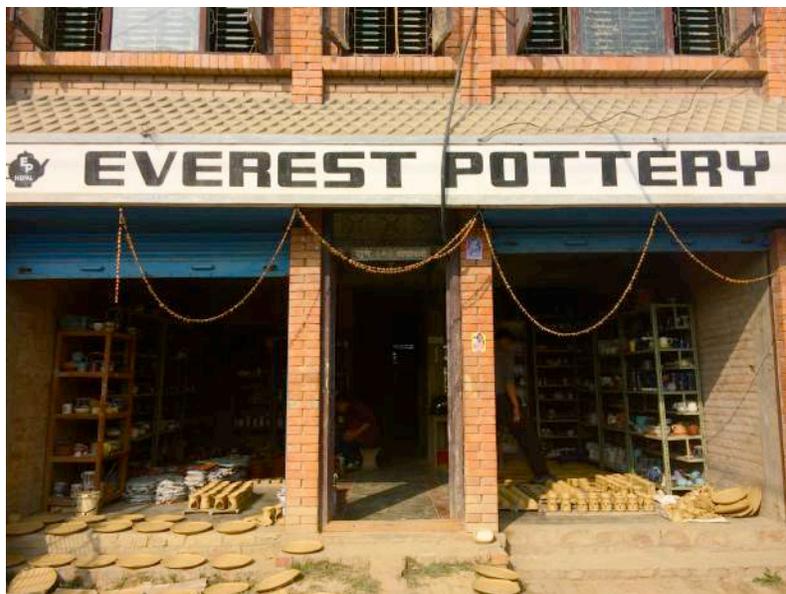


Figure 1: The workshop

Shiva Prajapati was born the second child of seven children. He has five brothers and one sister. All of the children grew up in Thimi. Their father Laxmi Prajapati was a potter, and their mother Krishna Prajapati assisted him as is the Prajapati custom. Shiva began learning to throw when he was 12 years old. All of the brothers were involved with ceramics when they were younger, but today only Shiva and his younger brother Tulsi still work in clay. The rest of the siblings do different kinds of work. His sister never was involved with ceramics and has a store in Kathmandu with her husband.

As Shiva grew up his throwing skills surpassed that of his father and Laxmi “was so proud of him. He was true Prajapati, a potter.”² Shiva practiced traditional pottery for 15 years.³ In the winter months, Shiva and other Prajapatis would travel to the warmer Terai region of

1 This chapter is based on a series of interviews conducted by the author with Shiva Prajapati, his son Sunil Prajapati, his wife Radika Prajapati, and American potter and Ceramics Promotion Project founder, James Danisch.

2 Personal interview by the author with Sunil Prajapati 11/13/2014

3Traditional pottery- In this paper this term refers to the process of making pots that potters in Thimi and Bhaktapur used up until the introduction of western ceramics technologies in 1983. Traditional potters can still be seen working on the streets of Thimi today. They throw locally dug terracotta clay on large concrete wheels, spanning 3 or 4 feet in diameter sometimes, and spin the wheels manually with a large stick. Potters are often assisted by their wives who may wedge the clay that is piled high under a tarp to the side of street, and the women will smooth the pots after they are finished, stamp them with designs and set them to dry in the sun. Traditional pots are fired in large piles of straw in the street and both men and women will monitor the pile together.

Nepal to make and sell ceramic products and bring home the money they made. While Shiva was working in the Terai when he was 22, he met an American potter named James Danisch. Danisch approached Shiva and told him about The Ceramic Promotion Project he was operating back in Bhaktapur. Danisch told Shiva to get in touch with him when he returned. Shiva says he owes much of his success and his knowledge to James Danisch and the Ceramics Promotion Project.

The Ceramics Promotion Project

The Ceramics Promotion Project (CPP) is at the heart of the origins of Everest Pottery. Shiva met his wife Radika while they were both training there, and Shiva's two other most experienced workers, Vimsen and Kamale Swori were also trained in the project. Vimsen was trained extensively in glazing techniques and Kamale is an expert in carving, trimming and decorating work, commonly called “finishing.” It was the training that these four people received with the project that has enabled Everest Pottery to produce such high quality modern glazed table ware.

The CPP's founder, James Danisch had come to Nepal for the first time in 1979 on a trekking expedition. He returned in 1981 and wrote a piece for Ceramics Monthly on the traditional ceramics process and photographed the potters the piece was focused on. Those same potters approached Danisch while he was back in Nepal in 1983 and connected him with the German funded project that would turn into the Ceramics Promotion Project. The CPP was founded with the intention of helping potters in Thimi and Bhaktapur cope with changing times. They set out to find a way to help potters keep their heritage and tradition alive. Even in 1984 traditional pottery was slowly declining in popularity, says Danisch. “There used to be over 100 varieties of terracotta pots in thimi. Rice storage pots, planters, yogurt bowls. Things like that. Nowadays it's really only flower pots and pots for rakshi (nepali wine).”⁴ The decline in use of terracotta pots is a combination of the rise in availability of aluminum and plastic, and also the fragility of ceramic pots. Terracotta is also incredibly porous and thus liquids and foods seep into it and are breeding grounds for bacteria. Nepali's are opting for more reliable hygienic plastic options.

Danisch had to figure out *how* exactly one could make pots in Nepal that would allow potters to be competitive in the modern market. The goal was to be able to glaze pots. Until this point glaze was not used in Nepal. Glaze would allow pots to be water tight and more attractive to the modern consumer. Danisch tried to build everything using local materials so that potters would be able to use what they had around them. The first thing was to build a kiln. The CPP developed insulating bricks out of rice husks and used kerosene to fuel it. Danisch invented a kerosene burner, which is still the Kerosene burner being used by Shiva Prajapati at Everest Pottery today. Danisch's most revolutionary invention was probably the electric wheel. This allowed potters to make many more pots in half the time.

Danisch recalls that even in 1984 the younger generation wasn't interested in the family business. They were more educated than their fathers and for the first time pursuing another occupation was a viable option. “They were essentially the first literate generation of Prajapatis,” says Danisch.⁵

4 Personal Interview by the author with James Danisch 11/15/14

5 Personal interview by the author with James Danisch 11/15/14



Figure 2: Danisch's kerosene burner at work



Figure 3: Glaze mixer



Figure 4: Kiln used at Everest Pottery for bisque and glaze firings

Shiva got involved with the project around 1985, and by then Danisch had developed a reliable glaze and the CPP had a large office in Bhaktapur. The office in Bhaktapur had people developing products as well as running the training program for local potters. Danisch says that is potters were really serious about learning this new way they could work with the program. The training was extensive. Making the shift to this new way wasn't easy. Shiva spent six months learning to throw on the electric wheel and how to make the table ware products the CPP was developing. He then worked at a pottery workshop for another eight months and a workshop in Kathmandu for two years. Part of his training through the CPP was learning how to market his

products and run a successful business. At the end of the whole program, Shiva received one electric wheel, a small kiln, 20 kg of glaze and 500 kg of clay.

It was Danisch and the CPP's goal to have the potters they had trained be completely self sufficient by the time the project came to an end in 1993. Part of the CPP's work was "helping the potters start a cooperative with the idea that they could produce the necessary frits and glazes."⁶ This cooperative is still running today under the name The Nepal Ceramics Cooperative. Another notable CPP graduate are the owners and operators of Thimi Ceramics. Thimi Ceramics makes glazed table ware much like Everest Pottery, however in recent years they have pioneered the use of stoneware in Nepal. Stoneware is a much lighter clay and very different from terracotta, in color and texture. "You can't get all ingredients for the glaze in Kathmandu. For flint, feldspar, potash, quartz, and chromium oxide we have to go to India. We go once a year and get enough materials for everyone in the collective," says Santa Kumar of Thimi Ceramics⁷. Without being able to make their own glazes, Danisch says, the CPP's work would have been for nothing. The potters had to be independent, and now 30 years later, Everest Pottery and Thimi Ceramics demonstrate just how independent they are.

The Workings of Everest Pottery

As Shiva sits at the wheel, he tells me that he will probably throw 150 cups that day for one of his newest orders. Shiva's skill with the clay is mesmerizing. Cups spring out of the large spinning mound as he throws off the hump. Within minutes 12 cups stand on the board in front of him and his son Sunil quickly supplies him with a new board and sets the cups on the rack to dry. Shiva says he's very grateful for what he learned during his time with the CPP. "This new way is better than the old way," he says, "this way sets me apart. All of the Prajapati's were doing traditional pottery, everyone... but this is new and unique." It certainly has set Everest Pottery apart as one of two workshops making glazed table ware. Shiva says there is no competition between Everest Pottery and Thimi Ceramics because their products are different enough that they have different customers. Additionally, they are the *only* two workshops that are producing glazed tableware in the area. Other CPP graduates are still in operation, however they are not making cups, plates and bowls. The other workshops have gone into ceramic fields like tile work or fountains.

Things most definitely have changed since 1985. The process and materials for making pots are remarkably similar to that in my own studio in the United States. Shiva now has four electric wheels, four kilns, a machine that pugs clay, a glaze kitchen where glazes are made and developed on site, and he imports smooth earthen ware clay from the Terai. Shiva employs about eight full time people who work directly with clay and then a few more part time workers who do the packaging of the pots when they are ready to be shipped.

Each worker at Everest Pottery has their own area of expertise. Each day Shiva and his brother Tulsi will throw around 150 to 200 pots depending on the order they are working on that day. Dry pots will be trimmed on the wheel by either Suza, Chandra, Tulsi or Shiva himself. After the trimming the pots are brought to Kamale Swori who does all of the "finishing." All of

6 Ibid.

7 Alter, Alexandra. "Feats of Clay." *Nepali Times*, May 3, 2002. <http://nepalitimes.com/~nepalitimes/news.php?id=6805#.VHQVCleUe1c>.

Kamale's work is according to Shiva's designs or the specific designs of the customer. Next the pots go downstairs to Shiva's wife Radika, who smooths out each dry pot with sand paper and sets them to dry more before the first firing. Finally the glaze master, Vimsen, will load the pots into the bisque kiln. The pots are fired without glaze at 700-800 degrees celsius. This initial firing makes the pots more durable and solidifies their shape. The pots are then ready to be glazed, and Vimsen will often glaze over 100 pots in a day. Vimsen mixes all the glazes himself in a large barrel like machine (pictured below). After the pots are glazed they will be fired again at 11,000 degrees celsius. All of these things happen in the course of one day at Everest Pottery, and in turn the place is an ever buzzing hive of activity.

One of the biggest changes for Shiva since his transition to glazed ceramics, is his market. Most traditional potters sell their pots on the streets of Thimi to locals or tourists, and more often they load up baskets and balance them across their backs with a stick and set out for Bhaktapur or Kathmandu to sell pots in busier areas. Everest Pottery's market is a global one. Shiva sells to four or five hotel's in Kathmandu as well as a few craft shops, but his biggest shipments go to Italy and the United States. In 1994, Shiva got involved with Sana Hastakala, a non profit NGO based in Kathmandu that states that it's mission is to promote the exportation of Nepali crafts and support local artisans. This organization is how Shiva has found his market abroad and helps him with shipping costs. Thimi Ceramics and Everest Ceramics are the only ceramic producers that work with Sana Hastakala; they do not sponsor any traditional potters.



Figure 5: Shiva throwing



Figure 6: Kamale carving plates



Figure 7: Plates drying in the sun after finishing



Figure 8: Vimsen glazing pots after bisque



Figure 9: Glazed pots and pots ready to be glazed



Figure 10: Pots wrapped and ready for shipping

Problems Potters Face and the Next Generation

We all stand in an assembly line from the front gate to the yard of the workshop, up the stairs into the main floor. Shiva tosses mounds of clay at me and I try not to let them fall out of my hands before I can heave them up the line to Sunil, and then eventually to the pile that is growing on the workshop floor. We continue like this for a half hour until the whole load of clay stands piled chest high amidst drying racks with hundreds of pots, wheels, and busy workers.

This clay has just arrived from the Terai. It is not the traditional Terracotta, but instead a smooth brown earthen ware. One of the issues facing traditional potters in Thimi is the decline in land where clay can be found. Due to the population increases in Thimi in the past 20 years, people have migrated from the urban center of Thimi and begun to settle in the surrounding areas. The urban development of the area surrounding Thimi has been largely unplanned and much of the land where clay has been dug for generations has been replaced with apartment buildings. Professor Bhatta Kishan Datta of Nepal Engineering college writes in *Urban Heritage Conservation and Sustainable Community Development* : “The pattern of such urban growth neither follows historic urban character nor is developed in a planned way...As a result, the historic environment of Thimi, particularly the urban heritages, is disappearing with the new development.”⁸ Kishan Datta highlights what traditional potters in Thimi are struggling with today. “The government doesn't protect the land...for ceramics you need a lot of space,” Shiva says.⁹ Shiva continues on to say that the tradition of a father dividing his land equally among all of his sons has also raised the issue of lack of space. When a father has six sons like Shiva's the land is divided into smaller and smaller portions. In conjunction with the rapid urban development in Thimi potters simply not having enough room to do their work.

But now Shiva says, “only ten families maybe, in Thimi doing this” in reference to pottery. Of the actual numbers, I am unsure. However it is clear that there are far fewer potters than even a decade ago. Shiva's son Sunil sits and listens to his father talk. “People are going to school,” Sunil adds. Sunil is 23 years old and has just started training with his father to become a potter. However, Sunil is the only one of his friends from Thimi, and the only Prajapati under the age of 40, that I met who is training in his father's craft. In the past few years, Sunil continues, people have started to become more educated. People want different jobs.¹⁰ While what Sunil says appears to be true, it appears that this is true in Shiva's generation as well. Of the seven siblings, Shiva and Tulsī are the only two Prajapatis who are potters. Shiva's sister was never involved in ceramics at all. Sunil and Shiva are indicative of a larger change in lifestyle for Prajapatis. Kishan Datta writes:

There is an increasing tendency of changing traditional occupation to trade, commerce and services...Out of the 50 households of Prajapatis, 42% replied that they are not satisfied with their traditional occupation of pottery and majority of people are interested to change their profession because of the lack of proper market, return and scarcity of clay. It is surprising that not one respondent is interested in adopting pottery as a profession for their children.¹¹

⁸ Kishan Datta, Bhatta. "Urban Heritage Conservation and Sustainable Community Development: A Case Study of Historic Town Thimi, Nepal." *Sci Tech Nepal* 11, no. 2 (2011): 12-15.

⁹ Personal interview by the author with Shiva Prajapati 11/11/14

¹⁰ Personal interview by the author with Sunil Prajapati 11/11/14

¹¹ Kishan Datta, Bhatta. "Urban Heritage Conservation and Sustainable Community Development: A Case Study of Historic

Shiva echoes Kishan Dattas findings: when asked if he was happy that Sunil was studying with him he replies “I did not want Sunil to be a potter. I wanted him to get educated and get a nice job. To be a potter is a hard life and a lot of work.” However, he is now happy and proud to be teaching Sunil, because it is the Prajapati way of course. However he wouldn't have chosen this life for his son. Sunil was enrolled in college for a while, but decided it wasn't for him. Sunil is also happy to working with his father.

Sunil and Shiva both say that most young people in Thimi are doing precisely what Shiva had hoped Sunil would do. Most of the young men have left for school in Kathmandu, or to get jobs abroad in Qatar or Bangladesh. In fact, four years ago 20% of Nepal's GDP was from remittance, and now it is over 28%.¹² James Danisch remarks that Santa Kumar of Thimi Ceramics has been struggling to find labor in the past few years because there aren't enough young people around. Similarly Suza Rai, 24, a worker at Everest Pottery says that she is the only one of her female friends working in ceramics. Most of her friends work in shops or are going to school in Kathmandu.¹³ Tulsi Bahadur, a potter in Thimi, says that all of his four children have chosen other trades. It is now just him and his wife working in his workshop. He had hoped all of his children would work in pottery, but times have changed.¹⁴ Danisch says that in fact, that the demographic of people leaving their villages and in many cases, leaving Nepal all together, are men between the ages of 20 and 40.¹⁵ What we can conclude is that young people across both genders are largely not choosing pottery as a profession.

Shiva acknowledges that Prajapati's are doing other things now, but for him, what it meant to be a Prajapati when he was growing up, is the same today. To be a Prajapati is to be a potter, Shiva says. Sunil disagrees. “Before, if you were a Prajapati it meant you worked in ceramics... that's what you did. It was your job. But now things are changing.” Sunil continues on to say “I think the change is good. People should do what they want to do.”¹⁶ Thus, it seems that ceramics in Thimi is resting on a precarious ledge. All signs point to the fact that this may be the last generation of Prajapatis as potters. In spite of this, everyone at Everest Pottery says they are not concerned about the future of ceramics. Kamale Swori says “there will always be a need for clay. Maybe in the future it will be less (there will be fewer people working in ceramics) but it will always continue on.”¹⁷ Similarly, Sunil and Shiva think that maybe more people will join. People who aren't necessarily Prajapati. When asked how that might happen, Sunil says he doesn't know. But he hopes that it would happen anyway. Shiva says that perhaps ceramics will continue for two more generations, and with a laugh he says “but after that who can say!”

Town Thimi, Nepal." *Sci Tech Nepal* 11, no. 2 (2011): 12-15.

¹²"Personal Remittances, Received (% of GDP)." Data. Accessed November 26, 2014. <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/BX.TRF.PWKR.DT.GD.ZS>.

¹³ Personal interview by the author with Suza Rai 11/13/14

¹⁴Alter, Alexandra. "Feats of Clay." *Nepali Times*, May 3, 2002. <http://nepalitimes.com/~nepalitimes/news.php?id=6805#.VHQVCleUeIc>.

¹⁵ Personal interview by the author with James Danisch 11/15/14

¹⁶ Personal interview with the author with Sunil Prajapati 11/13/14

¹⁷ Personal interview with the author and Kamale Swori 11/13/14



Figure 10: Father and son- Shiva and Sunil

The Success of Everest Pottery and the Loss of Traditional Forms

An interesting trade off has occurred as a result of the work of the CPP and Sana Hastakala in Thimi. While both organizations enabled a few Prajapatis to continue working in pottery, and not only that, but be successful in the craft, both workshops operating today have abandoned traditional forms. Everest Pottery and Thimi Ceramics are both products of the CPP's work and are both models for a way that Prajapatis can keep being “creators.” However, the wares that these Prajapatis are producing are completely different from those of Prajapatis of the past. One of the biggest differences between traditional pottery and modern pottery are the forms of the pots themselves. In Thimi today, potters are making mainly large flower pots, rakshi holders and curd bowls. Other potters make small jugs and little decorative figurines. According to Danisch, 20 years ago huge water jars, rice containers and many other pots could be seen, but these have been largely replaced by plastic and aluminum.

Danisch says that the CPP originally wanted to find a way to preserve some of the traditional forms in the new glazed ware. It became apparent that the market for those pots had all but disappeared and that the potters working with the CPP weren't interested in those old forms. Danisch recalls: “They wanted it to look different and modern. We wanted to keep some feeling of nepali culture in it even with the glaze. But that really hasn't happened so much.”¹⁸

¹⁸ Personal interview with the author and James Danisch 11/15/14



Figure 11: Thimi, 1984. Perforated rakshi distillers to the right, and large rice containers being carried by the woman in the street

Thimi Ceramics products have a simple and modern silhouette and a smooth single color glaze application. One would be hard pressed to see if any trace of traditional Nepali forms remain in the product line at Thimi Ceramics. Everest Pottery on the other hand makes a few products with Buddhist symbols painted on them and their “eyes of Buddha” lamp is very popular at Kathamandu Hotels. However, most of their table ware could be “a staple in any expats kitchen,”¹⁹ and looks very similar to western ceramic works. The two workshops ability to make their products modern and attractive to the western eye is perhaps part of their global success.

The Nepali Times and Ceramics Monthly like to use Thimi Ceramics as an example of how potters are surviving in Nepal. In reality its actually just how a singular pottery family is surviving. “Nepalis don't want to pay for handmade pots that break easily. Potters need to find new methods,” says Santa Kumar of Thimi Ceramics. He is right. But it is not as simple as just deciding to find a new method after 20 years of producing ceramics a certain way. Thimi Ceramics and Everest pottery are the products of over three years of intense training and instruction by foreign potters in modern methods. Shiva says it took him three additional years of to set up his new operation and really make money. The probability of traditional potters making that switch today is slim. There is no operation like the CPP operating today in Thimi or Bhaktapur, and thus no real opportunity for potters to be taught different methods unless by the potters already practicing those methods. However it seems that there is no movement towards a project like this, and the Nepali government has shown no interest in investing in ceramics. Additionally Sana Hastakala, does not sponsor any traditional potters, only potters making glazed wares.

Despite Everest Pottery's lack of concern about how ceramics will continue in Thimi, Danisch believes that the ceramic tradition in Thimi has already gone the way of traditional ceramics in India and Thailand. Both countries had a thriving ceramic tradition 20 years ago, and today it is all but dead.²⁰ Perhaps the time for the ancient forms of terracotta wares is simply

¹⁹Alter, Alexandra. "Feats of Clay." *Nepali Times*, May 3, 2002. <http://nepalitimes.com/~nepalitimes/news.php?id=6805#.VHQVCleUeIc>.

over. Crafts change and evolve throughout history to fit the trend or the need of the population. I feel that with the loss of those forms goes with it the history of hundreds of years of makers. Maybe Prajapatis either need to innovate (somehow) and change as Shiva has, or cease to be “creators.” Maybe this is the loss of one meaning of “Prajapati” and the beginning of a new one.

Each day I saw the 40 years of work in ceramics at work in Shiva Prajapati. Shiva throws pots as if they were an extension of himself. The clay spins perfectly centered, and it is almost hard to tell if it is spinning at all until it morphs into vases, bowls and plates in front of my eyes. Clay is ingrained into his very person. He is Prajapati, this is in his blood. “Chicksa?” Good? He asks with a smile, as if anything he makes is less than perfect. We all laugh and I watch as Tulsi, Shiva and Sunil all throw side by side. Three Prajapatis creating. Even if the traditional forms of their father's time completely disappear, it saddens me more to think that perhaps one day soon, the days of Prajapatis as creators will be but a memory.



Figure 12: A sample of jars from Thimi Ceramics Pottery



Figure 13: A sample of products from Everest Pottery

Chapter 2: The Women of Ceramics: Exploring Their Origins and Roles

Women are an integral part of the ceramic process in Thimi, both in traditional pottery workshops and modern pottery workshops. Women and men have been working side by side as Prajapatis for as long as Prajapatis have been potters. However, it is the male Prajapati that receives the title of potter, not his wife, or his daughter. Prajapatis pass down skills from father to son. The definition of Prajapati is, as Shiva says, to be a potter, for what else could a Prajapati be, but it seems that one is a potter only when they throw on the wheel. Women take part in every aspect of ceramics but they don't throw on the wheel. Women never throw on the wheel in traditional ceramics, and in the history of Everest Pottery there has only been one exception. While women may bare the name Prajapati, they are excluded in Shiva's definition of the name. Women and men work *together* to create pots but women are not *the* creators, they are not the potters. I focused on the stories of three of the women at Everest Pottery in an attempt to show how women are involved in the ceramic process and how they perceive their own roles. In turn I examine how their male co workers view the female's role in ceramics. Finally I examine how the status of women in ceramics may have broader implications for the future of ceramics as a whole.

The Women of Everest Pottery

Radika Prajapati's face is youthful and only a few strands of gray can be seen at her hairline. She is 43 years old. Radika was not born a Prajapati, but took the name when she married Shiva. She grew up in an orphanage in Kathmandu and lived there until she was 16. The head of the orphanage approached James Danisch and told him she had two girls she would like to place in the Ceramics Promotion Project. At 16, Radika clearly had some skill in drawing and was chosen to go and train with the CPP.

The CPP sent a few of their female trainees to study in Bangladesh in a Danish funded project for women in throwing stoneware. While in Bangladesh Radika learned to throw on the wheel and learned decorating techniques and trimming. When Radika returned to Bhaktapur she continued her training with the CPP for two years. She met Shiva upon her return from Bangladesh and they married at the end of her time with the CPP at the age of 20.

Radika didn't throw on the wheel after she and Shiva married. When asked why she says "Sunil was a baby and I was busy with him. I didn't work much at all during that time. I took care of Sunil, took care of the house." After she returned to work she says there were so many male throwers they didn't need her so she continued with the "finishing." Radika is happy with her job at Everest Pottery and does not wish to throw on the wheel now. "I am old now," she says with a laugh. She continues on "maybe women don't throw because they don't know how, also they have other jobs. Cooking, cleaning and the children."²¹

Radika's job at the workshop is to prep the pots to be fired. She sits and smooths the surface of each and every pot with sandpaper so that its skin its perfect. Radika gets up early each day to make her family breakfast and to do some housework. At 2 pm when all the workers get a brief break, Radika makes us food. When the day is finished she then cooks dinner and cleans the house. Sometimes Radika would not work in the workshop during the morning in order to clean the apartment. Radika has all of the responsibilities of the household.

Kamale Swori's story is similar to Radika's in that she was not born into pottery work by caste and both women are Newari. Kamale was born in Bhaktapur to an agricultural family. When she was 21 she was in school. She had heard that the Ceramics Promotion Project was giving trainings to people interested in ceramics at their office in Bhaktapur. The CPP seemed like a good opportunity for her to get good vocational training. She didn't want to just be at home, she wanted to have a job.²² At the CPP she was trained in making ceramic jewelry. After her training Kamale came directly to Everest Pottery to work for Shiva. "Shiva taught me the rest of what I know." She says not many women are working in ceramics workshops because there isn't much money in it. After her children were born, like Radika she also had to stay home with her children and then, in order to continue working she would bring them to Everest Pottery with her. Kamale has thrown on the wheel once or twice. "I know this better," she says of her finishing work, "so I stick with this."

Kamale's work is regarded as the best in the workshop and it is clear why. It is her job to attach all of the handles, carve and alter pots, and make pots from molds. Kamale has the ability

²¹ Personal interview by the author with Radika Prajapati 11/11/14

²² Personal interview by the author with Kamale Swori 11/13/14

to make handle's for 100 pots look identical and flawless. Her carvings are done free hand with no stencil and are also identical. One of the products made entirely by Kamale are the leaf shaped soap dishes. From the carving of the leaf to the attachment of the small feet on the dish, this product is made entirely by Kamale. I sit with her and try to attach handles to my own pots and she laughs at me as I fail miserably. She deftly makes one for me in half the time. Kamale is proud of the work she does and happy with her position at Everest Pottery.

Suza Rai is from the himalayan village Sankhuwa. She is 24 years old, she is not Newari. Five years ago, Suza came to Lalitpur in Kathmandu to take care of her aunts children for one year, however after her aunt's family moved she didn't have a job and did not want to return home. A woman from Suza's village lived just next door to Everest Pottery and set Suza up with a job. Suza is learning finishing techniques from Kamale and often works with Kamale on carving and the boxes made from molds. But Suza's favorite job is trimming on the wheel. Shiva has been teaching her for the past year. Suza is very interested in throwing and has never done it before. Suza thinks its “very nice” that I throw here. Suza likes her work and feels that this is a good job.²³

Both Radika and Kamale seem to have the sole responsibility for both their households. In addition to the work both women do at the workshop, they are expected to take care of their children and their homes. While only their work at the workshop produces money, both women are working much longer than their spouses with the added house work. The two older women had both had experience throwing, but as soon as they began working at Everest Pottery they never threw again. Neither woman has an interest in throwing any longer and is happy with her work. Suza on the other hand is very interested in throwing. She often stands quietly by my wheel as I work and watches me.



Figure 14: Kamale at work carving lamps



Figure 14: Radika

²³ Personal interview with the author and Suza Rai 11/13/14



Figure 16: Suza at work



Figure 17: carving detail on "eyes of Buddha" lamp

Investigating the divisions of labor

As I tried to find out why exactly women didn't throw on the wheel, I found that cultural values created logistical impediments to women learning a new skill within. Initially it seemed that women's exclusion from this part of ceramics had to do with ideas about female strength, both from the men and women themselves. "Its not that I think women can't do it," Sunil says in regards to women throwing on the wheel, "this is just the way it has always been. It is tradition" Sunil then contradicts himself and says "but perhaps they need to be a little bit stronger to do it yes? You need strength to throw on the wheel."²⁴ When asked about women throwing Shiva says that he actually wants the women in the workshop to throw, but that the women themselves say it will be too difficult for them. "If they think this way is hard, then they would never be able to do traditional pottery. But if they really want to, from their heart, of course they can do."²⁵ In traditional pottery, the turning of the wheel is indeed laborious and even *The Nepali times* attributes this as to why women don't throw.²⁶ Radika also says that women don't throw today because it is "just too hard for them to learn." While Sunil and Shiva assert that the women themselves say that throwing is too hard, Suza Rai expressed a strong interest in throwing, and while Shiva says he is willing to teach, Suza has been working at Everest Pottery for four years and still never thrown. Sunil says that his father has all of the women learn to trim on the wheel first for about a year, but in contrast, Sunil has been working in the workshop for only a month and began throwing his first day.

I saw the most evidence of the idea that women's strength was insufficient through my own experience in throwing at Everest Pottery. Initially the men in the workshop would offer to wedge my clay for me, or even center it for me on the wheel. When I made it clear that these were things I could do by myself, I would often have a small audience of women and men alike watching me wedge a large amount of clay or while I centered. My success was met with

24 Personal interview by the author with Sunil Prajapati 11/13/14

25 Personal interview by the author with Shiva Prajapati 11/18/14

26 Alter, Alexandra. "Feats of Clay." *Nepali Times*, May 3, 2002. <http://nepalitimes.com/~nepalitimes/news.php?id=6805#.VHQVCleUe1c>.

surprised exclamations of “wow so strong” or “very nice.” In turn, the fact that I could throw well, better than Sunil in some things, was also a surprise for the male throwers of Everest Pottery. Sometimes men from the neighborhood would wander in and watch me throw. It began to be common place for three or four men to be standing inches from my wheel watching as I worked. This could very well have been because of my blonde hair and pale skin as well as my gender.

Despite these occurrences, Danisch refutes that the division of labor has anything to do with ideas about strength.

Our experience with training women was that they could throw as well as men. I think it is more about traditional distribution of work, and the symbolism of the potters wheel as Vishnu, and ideas about ritual pollution. Ask Shiva why men don't carry water or wash clothes or cook. It doesn't have anything to do with strength. Prajapati is the god from whom all things were created and is male. The potter plays the role of Prajapati when he works on the wheel. Thus it is not suitable for women. The wheel is a very important symbol as a microcosm of the universe, which rotates around a still central point. Also, we could stretch the symbolism to the throwing stick as phallus -- really not suitable for a woman to wield. The potter places the phallus in the small indentation on the rim of the wheel and the wheel begins to turn. That's very obvious symbolism. In the day of electric wheels, these old beliefs still are with us.²⁷

Danisch says that today there isn't a potter who could explain this to you. What is surprising is that in Newari culture today, there is no spoken rule that women should not work on the wheel. However it is possible that as Danisch says, there is a more ancient rule against this involvement of women that Newari's today no longer can articulate. Sunil laughs and agrees. Sunil had never heard of this before. “It's just how it is, it's the way things have always been,” Sunil says. While the ancient ideas of Prajapati as the male creator help illuminate why the identity of a Prajapati is singularly male, I am not willing to completely relinquish the idea that the perception of women as weak has nothing to do with their exclusion from the wheel. The women seemed to buy into the idea that throwing was beyond their physical capabilities just as much as the men did. I presented a problem for all parties however. While Sunil did concede that I had some skill, he couldn't explain why it was that I could throw and yet the women of Thimi could not. It was almost as if I was knocking on a door that had never been opened with him. To be told that as a woman you are weaker than your male peers is to have an inherent feeling of being lesser and I experienced this myself. To be a woman in ceramics is not be the creator but the helper. However, the women of Everest Pottery take pride in their work and enjoy their jobs. They are happy for things to remain as they always have.

Looking Forward

It is clear that women don't throw in the Newari potter caste. In fact, some of them don't even want to. If the women don't have an issue, then why is this a problem? It very well may not be. But I argue that the lives of these women do provide give some insight into the relationships between men and women in the ceramics world that can be applied to Nepal as whole. The women of Everest Pottery hold sole responsibility for the care of their children, their household,

²⁷ Personal interview by the author with James Danisch 11/15/14

food production on top of their work at the workshop. It seemed that their responsibilities to their families were an impediment to learning to throw. The expectation that the women are solely responsible for the house in conjunction with the time it takes to truly master throwing, has made it so the older women I interviewed never had an environment which fostered learning a new skill. Radika recalls that when she came to work at Everest Pottery there physically wasn't space for her to throw anymore, as there were male throwers occupying every wheel. Radika's duties to her household often eclipse her duties in the workshop. Often she would take the morning and clean the house, and even during our brief work break it was Radika who made all the food and then cleaned up afterwards. Both Radika and Kamale stopped throwing as soon as they were married, when they began to assume their duties as wives and mothers. What seems obvious to me is that of course the women are "better at trimming" because that is what they have been working on for the past 20 years, not throwing as the men have. It takes decades to master throwing on the wheel, and Everest Pottery is a business first and foremost. Orders need to be filled and production needs to continue. If everyone was learning to throw, who would attach the handles and decorate the pots? While it was assumed that when Sunil began working in the family business he would be throwing, it was also assumed that Radika, Suza and Kamale would be "finishing." The woman who used to throw at Everest Pottery stopped throwing when she got married and began working with her husband instead, Sunil says "She was good at throwing, but better at trimming." Usan Kiran Meghi writes: "The unequal division of labor and responsibilities within households based on unequal power relations also limits the women's potential to find the time and develop the skills required for participation in decision-making in wider public forums."²⁸ While Meghi is speaking about the social and political implications of the unequal division of labor, it can be applied to the situation of women learning new skills as well. Perhaps if women were sharing more household duties with their husbands they would have time to "develop the skills necessary" to push their careers to new levels as well.

The male opposition the CPP experienced is indicative that perhaps women learning to throw is more threatening to others than it is to the men at Everest Potter. During Radika's time training to throw with other women in Bangladesh, Danisch says there were issues. The program had setup 10 workshops to teach the women to throw and two were burned down by village men. Additionally, the CPP set up a throwing training in Surket (central Nepal) and local men came and physically beat the CPP instructors. Danisch conjectures: "I think part of it was not wanting women to have that skill, so that they could do something independently."²⁹ I posit that if Newari women learned to throw it may open a door towards economic and perhaps social independence. However, I recognize that the women at Everest Pottery seemed content with the status quo. The reality is that until women learn to throw they will never have the title of "potter." The throwers of Everest Pottery are the driving forces of the workshop. As it stands Shiva produces most of the thousands of pots at the workshop himself. He is the creator, and without him there would be no workshop. There would be no pots to "finish." While the men of Everest Pottery value the women's work and respect their skill, the throwers are the Prajapatis, the potters. It is possible that if women learned to throw, if they became the creators, perhaps there would be pottery

²⁸Kiran Meghi, Usan. "Gender Discrimination in the Dalit Community: A Case Study of Sarki Community; Katunje VDC of Bhaktapur District." 2008, 41-50.

²⁹ Personal interview by the author with James Danisch 11/15/14

workshops owned and operated by women. Perhaps a new age of pottery would begin, run by economically independent women.

Conclusion

Tourists walk around the Bhaktapur Potter's square with their cameras, admiring the pots drying in the sun and watching as one man deftly throws vase after vase of dark brown clay on his huge concrete wheel. I watch as couples pick up the small dragon figurines sitting on the side of the square and overhear her remark that "they have been making these forever." In fact, they've only been making those dragons for 30 years. The Ceramics Promotion Project brought in a foreign instructor who taught all of the potters training in Bhaktapur how to make dragon figurines, and in turn they can be found in Bhaktapur today.

The dragon figurines are one example of how traditional potters have changed their products to appeal to their remaining market demographic: tourists. The Nepali media is fond of highlighting the success of the potting community in Thimi. They site the example of Thimi Ceramics frequently and how they are suppling "local businesses" (high end Kathmandu hotels) with their hand made glazed pots. They briefly touch upon how young Prajapatis are choosing different careers these days but quickly reiterate the innovations in the craft and how the ceramic industry is booming. What is never mentioned however, is that 20 years ago there were over 100 varieties of terracotta wares being made in the streets of Thimi, that today the only traditional pots you can find are water and rakshi jars, that 25% of the male population between 20 and 40 have left the community in search of employment, and this may be the last generation of Prajapati's working in clay. While the media is correct that the innovations of Thimi Ceramics, Everest Pottery and a few others have propelled these workshops into new markets and revitalized their business. Aside from significantly decreasing the variety of pots they make, there is no evidence of traditional potters making a move towards modern techniques. It is clear from the tourists that flock to Bhaktapur potter's square (where many potters from Thimi sell their wares as well) that the allure of "authentic Nepali crafts" has been boosting the economy of the area, but the potters themselves aren't necessarily benefitting from this influx of money. It is possible the Nepali government may begin to subsidize potter's work in an attempt to keep this tourist attraction alive. It is possible that the government may protect the land where local clay has been dug for generations, and it is possible that this assistance could allow potters in Thimi hold on for a few more generations and perhaps have time to re-attract the younger generation. However, as it stands, the urban development continues, and potters continue to work incredibly hard for little money.

Briana Foley brings raises the question of where women fit into the future of the craft in her piece *The Social Lives of Pots and Potters in the Kathmandu Valley*. She posits that women may be the key to the "revalorization of the craft."³⁰ Adding to Foley's hypothesis I conjecture that that their exclusion and subsequent aversion to throwing on the wheel is limiting the expansion of the craft as a whole, which is unfortunate at a time where so few young people are choosing pottery to begin with. In Foley's interview with the President of the Dwarikas Hotel

³⁰Foley, Briana, "The Social Lives of Pots and Potters in the Kathmandu Valley" (2013). *Independent Study Project (ISP) Collection*. Paper 1744.

http://digitalcollections.sit.edu/isp_collection/1744

Kathmandu, which prides itself on displaying Newari crafts, the president commented that she was confident that more women and even non-Prajapatis will become involved in pottery in the coming years.³¹ This can already be seen at work in Everest Ceramics where there are six women, none of which are Prajapati save Radika, and four Prajapati men. James Danisch however disagrees, he doesn't for see ceramics expanding in Nepal and thinks people will continue to go towards easier professions.

On one of my last days working in the workshop I sit and watch “the expert” as Sunil and I have come to call his father. As we chat I am careful not to step on one of the hundreds of plates that lay drying on the workshop floor. Its clear that the demand for Everest Pottery products has made it so that the space in the workshop is no longer sufficient. As Shiva works on the wheel he tells me he is hoping to expand the workshop. He wants to build a larger kiln in order to fire more work and maybe expand the building itself. The future of traditional pottery in Thimi is in a precarious position and it's future is uncertain. I am confident that by the spin of its electric wheels, the sheen of its' glazes, at least one family of Prajapatis will continue on. As Sunil continues to throw under the tutelage of his father, he may be able to take over the business one day and be able to continue on as a creator, as a potter, as a Prajapati.

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Suggestions for Further Research

I wish that I had been able to more deeply investigate the lives of the women at Everest pottery, and in turn more women in the ceramics community. I think that gathering data in terms of the number of women working in Thimi, and women working in ceramic workshops would be interesting to know. Additionally, the intricacies of the Newari caste system are still hard to understand, and no one I spoke to was able to articulate them to me. Especially today when many rigidities of the caste system appear to be changing, it would be interesting to see what constraints are still on the younger generation.



The author with her co-workers at Everest Pottery



The author with Kamale, Chandra and Suza while working in the workshop

