

The Potters of Bhaktapur, Nepal.

After an exciting trek towards Everest we had a free day in Kathmandu. Sadly, with the traffic and smog spoiling this once iconic city and having done "The Tour" last year, we decided to go to Bhaktapur where I had heard was a village pottery.

There was no break in urban sprawl between the two cities, so we were surprised when we were told that we had arrived. A pedestrianised area indicated that we were about to enter the cultural capital of Nepal. In the early 8th century until 15th century Bhaktapur was the capital of Nepal and until the 18th century, was a sovereign city surrounded by walls and gates. Sadly the 2015 earthquake caused tremendous damage to the ancient buildings but there are sufficient temples, stupas and ancient houses remaining to ensure one or more days of a fascinating visit. The houses were brick built with high wooden balconies. Large cracks from roof to basement were common. Some monuments were demolished with bases remaining leaving the remainder to imagination.

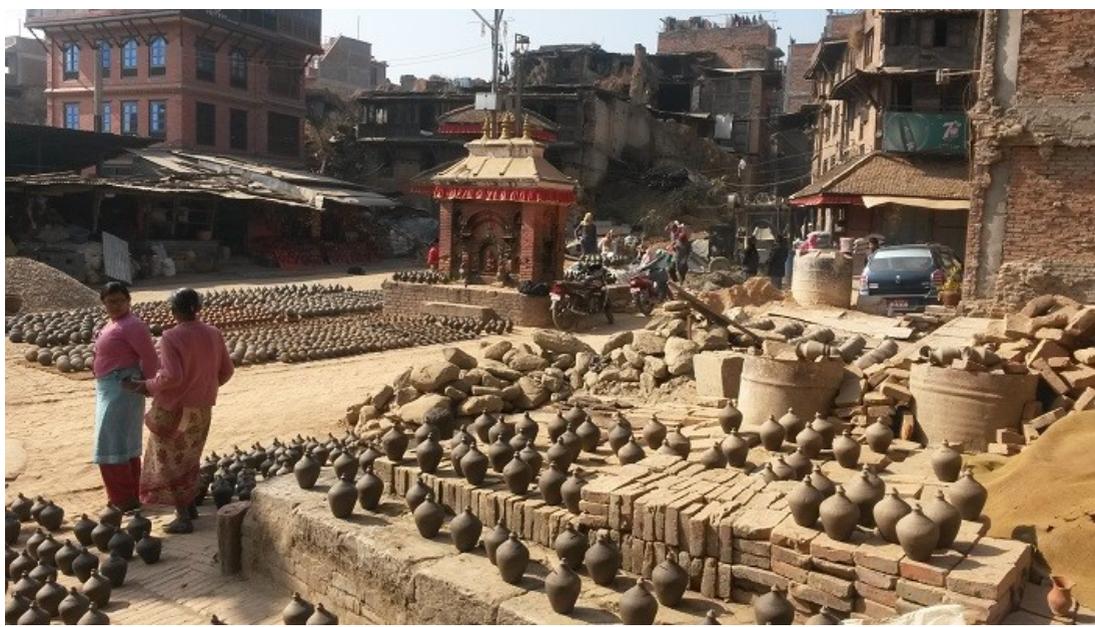
As we walked over the beautiful red brick paving my husband immediately started sketching some old men gathered at an ancient public meeting place. Aware of my interest our guide dragged me down an alley to show me a pottery. In the middle of a building site was one potter making yogurt bowls but, in the past, there had been many making wall tiles. Those tiles on display excited the guide who wanted to have some made for the hotel he hoped to own one day. They illustrated potters at work, before electricity.

Ceramic wall tiles



Potter making yogurt bowls





Pottery Square



Bhaktapur is a living heritage of Nepali culture with areas devoted to various crafts as well as hosting festivals throughout the year. We visited the famous Durbar Square, numerous temples, stone sculptures, stone water tanks and wood carvings. Finally, I saw a notice which said Pottery Square. We had arrived.



This was as far from a “village pottery” as I could imagine, a whole square covered in thrown pots drying in the sun surrounded by earthquake damaged buildings. All around were small workshops with potters throwing on electric wheels rather than the original momentum wheels depicted on those panels I had seen.

The clay was grey earthenware which fired to a dull red but was enhanced by dipping into a red slip.

I talked to a potter who spoke English who said how devastating the earthquake had been as it destroyed his workshop and the original communal kiln which was a clamp kiln fired with rice straw.

However, I was pleased to see the two modern woodfired kilns that had been funded by the World Craft Federation and other organisations. I told him that I collected the local style of water pot, but he had to scabble behind a shelf and dust off a pot as he said no one bought these.

For other tourists it was obviously unusual to see this village type pottery in the middle of a city. They were having a go on the wheels and taking photographs.

However, I found it sad that these skilled potters were now reduced to making money boxes, oil burners and votive items instead of the beautiful water and cooking pots they had once made. It is the same story all over the sub-continent as plastic and metal pots take their place.

I bought the lovely black carved pot the potter had found at the back of his shelf.

Jane Gibson

www.janegibsonpottery.com



A potter applying red slip



Modern communal woodfired kilns



The author with her pot and the potter