

The Salt of the Earth *Irfan Quader*

Aarti Vir's Aesthetic Meditations in clay



Aarti Vir in her studio

Our city of Hyderabad, this maelstrom of cultures and values, of old and new, hides more treasures than most dyed-in-the-wool Hyderabadis suspect. One of these, an artist of diminutive form and fiery spirit, and one who is quite literally down-to-earth, is Aarti Vir. With her fascination for working with clay, one might even go so far as say to that this ceramics artist has gone to pot! But bad puns aside, Aarti has built both a niche for herself in a Hyderabad that is slowly waking up to good taste, and a reputation for exquisite artistry among those already in the know. Her salt-glazed ceramic pieces, whether functional or purely aesthetic, display the care, precision and love for her art that Aarti brings to every project. Her work, entirely hand-made, evolves through “a rather slow, almost meditative process,” she says, demanding that she spend a long time on each piece. And being the only one in Asia to use the salt glazing technique only adds to the uniqueness of her work.

Salt glazing is a technique that is believed to have evolved during the 12th century in the Rhineland in Germany. Unlike other types of glaze that are applied on the surface of a piece before firing, this involved adding salt into the kiln while the firing is actually in progress. The salt combines with elements in the clay to give the piece a thin layer of glaze that accentuates contours and patterns, and even produces different colours, while leaving the earthy texture of the clay intact. It is this last quality that drew Aarti towards this technique and, after years of experimentation, she now uses it to create ceramic pieces that are startling in their richness of colour and texture.

Aarti was in the middle of a Bachelor's Degree in painting in Baroda when she first tried working with clay. The instant fascination she felt almost made her abandon her painting Degree for one in sculpture instead. As it turned out, she did finish her Bachelor's in painting, followed by a Master's as well, simply because there was no available Master's programme in ceramics. At that point, wanting to work with clay and not knowing where to go to learn, Aarti was becoming understandably frustrated. That was when she heard of Ray and Deborah's Golden Bridge Pottery in Pondicherry.