



### **INCENSE, JASMINE & CASUARINA**

It felt like we were at a ceramic conference. The who's-who of the pottery scene in Pondicherry and Auroville were present, as were Golden Bridge Pottery students, ex-students, staff & ex-staff. (Should have taken a group photo!)

Only, this was at the Sri Aurobindo Ashram cemetery in Muthialpet. We had come to bid our farewells to a special someone. As a heady aroma of flowers and incense filled the air, they built a brick kiln around our Debby, who was dressed in a pretty white frock, looking like translucent porcelain, serene and at peace, ...and I promise I spotted her fleeting embarrassed smile for a fraction of a moment at the fuss around her.

Soon a slurry of red clay and straw signaled the business we had come over for. Quietly, she went up with the fragrance of jasmine and the heat of casuarina wood, her fuel of choice for her production firings. The irony of the situation was not lost on the clutch of dewy-eyed potters present; what a beautiful way for a potter to move to another realm.

Deborah Smith once said to me, "The flower-power, hippie culture of Haight-Ashbury somehow by-passed me. I never even wore flowers in my hair till I reached South India!" Instead, she graduated in Japanese language at Stanford University, where, in 1967, she met Ray Meeker in the ceramics department of USC. She had just spent two years in Japan studying pottery-making and apprenticing with master potter Yamamoto Toshu in Bizen. She was now, again, heading to Japan as an interpreter to Susan Peterson, who was researching her book on Japan's National Living Treasure, Hamada Shoji.

A route from Mashiko led her to the Coromandel Coast of India, to Pondicherry's Sri Aurobindo Ashram. An Ashram secretary upon hearing of her ceramic background, asked if she would be interested in starting a pottery workshop for the Ashram. "Yes", she said, "if my friend comes and agrees to build a kiln." The friend, Ray, arrived a few months later, and the rest, as we say, is a melee of history and folklore.

Ray and Deborah had discovered in each other, a vague interest in the philosophy of the East, not uncommon in the era of the Beatles and Ravi Shankar. What began as a 200 square feet thatch-shed on a “lucky spot” assigned to them by the Mother at the Ashram, has today grown into a legacy. Golden Bridge Pottery, got its name from a line from Sri Aurobindo’s epic poem, *Savitri*, describing the Divine Mother,

*“She is the golden bridge, the wonderful fire,*

*The luminous heart of the Unknown is she.”*



Ray and Deborah have literally started a culture of stoneware ceramics in a hinterland known only for its local red-clay and terracotta. Once the production of stoneware pottery started in earnest, Ray began taking on students who were clamouring to learn the craft. In 1987, he put down his pottery tools to rediscover the architect in him; south India is dotted with his fire-stabilised mud houses. Since then, Deborah had carried on refining the wood-fired ceramics Golden Bridge Pottery (GBP as we know it), is famous for and has become a benchmark in quality functional handmade tableware in India; all the works coming out of the studio, being hand-painted by her, ...family heirlooms and collectables today.



Although she was not our “official” teacher at GBP, (Ray had that mantle), several of us remember her quiet observations and thoughts over two tea breaks during the day, as we learnt the ways of clay. Nearly 25 years later, every time I make a teapot spout, every time I pull a mug handle, every time I trim a vase’s foot, I think of Debby’s tips. She even taught me how to pack a pot, telling me, “If you don’t know how to pack a pot for transportation, you might as well not make the pot. The client doesn’t want to receive elements of tile-mosaic.” Point noted Deb. Amen.

Today students of Golden Bridge Pottery are all over the map of contemporary ceramics. As important as that, is the community of studio potters that has grown in the villages and towns around GBP. Auroville, an international community outside Pondicherry, and its bio region, itself boasts of over 30 studio potters known for everything from functional to sculptural ceramics, often referred to as “Pondicherry Pottery”. The magnitude of this spread of craft and knowledge hit me in the gut a couple of years ago, when I was making a movie, Golden Bridges, to screen at the 50th Congress of the International Academy of Ceramics in Geneva. The outpouring of gratitude, respect, regard and love for GBP from all quarters I was interviewing, was an emotional rollercoaster.



Today, Ray carries on making his monumental sculptures. The swansong exhibition that he’s has been threatening us with, is thankfully, nowhere in sight. Deborah gave up

actively participating at the studio in 2019, deciding to take the time to pen her memoirs. She met her date with jasmine garlands, incense and casuarina cut-offs on the 21<sup>st</sup> of July 2023.

Our Golden Bridge Pottery is in a state of flux.

Let us see what tomorrow brings.

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A link to my movie, "Golden Bridges", screened at the 50th Congress of the International Academy of Ceramics in Geneva, 2022.

<https://youtu.be/4Qdtlwx6i2s>

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A quote from Deborah's friend, Sunaina Mandeem, co-founder of PondyCAN. This was at the break of dawn, a day after the funeral, when friends and family assigned Deborah's ashes to the Pondicherry sea.

"A subdued sky with beautiful and delicate brush-strokes as if painted by Deborah herself, letting a pale sun peep through, as it greeted her into the golden realm, her new abode."

Photo credit: Dharmesh Jadeja



