

Artistic Heritage of West Bengal in Terracotta Masterpieces of Bishnupur Temples

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ABSTRACT

This research paper explores the artistic heritage of West Bengal, focusing on the terracotta masterpieces of Bishnupur temples. Bishnupur, renowned for its exquisite terracotta temples built between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, showcases a unique blend of artistic and cultural influences. The study examines the historical significance, artistic techniques, and cultural narratives depicted in these terracotta works. It highlights the intricate craftsmanship and symbolic meanings embedded in the terracotta plaques, which illustrate stories from Hindu epics and daily life. Additionally, the paper addresses the challenges in preserving this heritage, including the lack of comprehensive excavation reports, limited access to unearthed materials, and the need for interdisciplinary approaches to fully understand the socio-cultural context of these artifacts. By delving into the continuity and evolution of terracotta art, the research underscores the importance of preserving and studying these masterpieces to appreciate their contribution to West Bengal's cultural legacy and their role in enriching India's artistic heritage.

KEYWORDS: Bishnupur temple, Terracotta art, Terracotta temple, Terracotta architecture.

INTRODUCTION

Art embodies human cognition and imagination, evolving through various stages of modification. It serves as a medium for communicating and expressing human emotions, behaviors, ideas, and various life aspects. Among various artistic media, clay, due to its profound availability and easy-molding nature, became a popular medium for artistic expression. Clay objects are fragile, but firing them makes them durable, leading to the creation of terracotta art. Terracotta, derived from the Italian "terra-cotta" and Latin "terra-cocta," means baked earth or clay. When mixed with water, clay forms a malleable substance that can be shaped and fired to create durable, brownish-red, hard, and porous objects known as terracotta. This art form fulfills human creative urges and domestic, aesthetic, and ritual needs, being considered auspicious due to its association with the earth.

Terracotta objects have been used since ancient times for household, ritual, aesthetic purposes, and sculptures. Historical findings in Egypt, Mesopotamia, Greece, Rome, and India reveal a long tradition of terracotta art. West Bengal, in particular, has a rich terracotta tradition dating back to the Early Historic period, evidenced by discoveries at sites like Chandraketugarh, Tamluk, Mangalkot, and Pandu Rajar Dhibi. This study aims to understand the cultural significance of terracotta objects from West Bengal using an ethnoarchaeological approach, focusing on both ancient and modern terracotta art objects.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The scholarly works of various authors shed light on the significance of terracotta art in Bengal. In her 2002 publication "Style and Chronology: Problems in Evolving a Temporal Framework for the Early Historical Terracottas from Bengal," Seema Roy Chowdhury emphasizes the importance of terracotta art in the region. Sachindra S. Biswas, in "Terracotta Art of Bengal" (1981), delves into the diverse artistic expressions found in Bengal's terracotta art and its societal underpinnings. Arputha Rani Sengupta's "Art of Terracotta: Cult and Cultural Synthesis in India" (2005) focuses on terracotta temples' religious and cultural significance in Bishnupur. Roy Chowdhury and Chakraborty's "Chandraketugarh – A Site in Lower Bengal" (2007) meticulously catalogs terracotta materials from Chandraketugarh and other sites. Amita Ray's "Terracottas from Excavations at Mangalkot (Burdwan)" (1996) explores the impact of foreign art on Kushana period terracotta and the emergence of new artistic styles. Gourishankar De, in "Narrative Plaques from Chandraketugarh" (2001), analyzes the narrative art depicted in terracotta, showcasing stories from various sources. S.C. Mukherji's "Treasures of the State Archaeological Museum West Bengal" (1991) provides an in-depth look at the various terracotta forms discovered in West Bengal. Rita Dutta, in "A Note on the Mother-Goddess from Farakka in the Collection of State Archaeological Museum Behala West Bengal" (1991), draws connections between terracotta plaques and the concepts of Siva and Sakti. Gautam Sengupta, in "The Mangalkot Plaque" (1993-1994), situates a unique plaque from Mangalkot within the broader context of Bharhut and Mathura. Stella Kramrisch, in "Indian Terracottas" (1939), categorizes Indian terracotta into timeless types and timed variations, emphasizing their functional attributes within a social framework. S. K. Mukherjee's "Early Terracottas of West Bengal" (2002) offers a stylistic comparison of terracotta art across different periods, highlighting the continuity in artistic style.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- Understanding the processes involved in terracotta making, including clay sourcing, preparation, molding, firing, and decoration.
- Examining the terracotta supply chain and distribution patterns.
- Interpreting symbolic meanings through oral histories and myths.
- Investigating the usage of terracotta in rituals and society over time.
- Exploring the spatial production and symbolic continuity of terracotta usage.
- Tracing the continuity of terracotta art forms from past to present.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study uses both primary and secondary data sources. Primary sources include ancient or medieval records, museum collections, and monuments. Data were collected from various museums, including the Indian Museum, Kolkata, Asutosh Museum, University of Calcutta, State Archaeological Museum, Kolkata, and regional museums. Private collections, such as the Berachampa collection of Mr. Dilip Maite, were also studied. Secondary data were gathered from books, research papers, unpublished theses, and official reports from art galleries and museums.

ANCIENT ART OF THE TERRACOTTA TECHNIQUE OF WEST BENGAL

Ancient Bengal, mentioned in various literatures as Vanga, Vangala, and Suhma, has a rich archaeological history revealed through excavations at sites like Bangarh, Birbhanpur, Chandraketugarh, Tamluk, Ballal Dhupi, Rajbaridanga, and others. These sites show evidence of a rich cultural history from the Lower

Palaeolithic to the Medieval period. (Majumdar) The Early Historic period (mid-1st millennium BCE to 500 CE) saw urbanization in Bengal, with major sites in the southern and coastal regions, such as Chandraketugarh and Tamluk, yielding a variety of terracotta objects (Roychoudhury 2009).

Despite the prolific presence of terracotta art, dating these artefacts is challenging due to the lack of proper reports and absolute dates (Goswami, K. G., 1948). A stylistic analogy, comparing Bengal terracotta with stone sculptures and terracottas from other parts of India, is used to determine relative time frames. The material culture of Early Historic Bengal, including terracotta figurines, plaques, toys, ornaments, and more, reflects a blend of local traditions and external influences (Chattopadhyaya, B. D., Sengupta, G., & Chakrabarty, S., 2005).

MAJOR ART FORMS OF TERRACOTTA IN WEST BENGAL

West Bengal's terracotta art forms include figurines in round and plaques. Figurines encompass human figures (both male and female), animal figures, and heads (Saraswati, Sarasi K. 1962). Plaques, mostly mold-made, depict a wide range of motifs, including Mother Goddess, mother and child figures, Panchachuda (Yakshi or Apsara), and male forms like pot bearers ("Pratna Samiksha - CENTRE FOR ARCHAEOLOGICAL STUDIES & TRAINING, EASTERN INDIA"). Other forms include toys, rattles, toy carts, animal riders, and ornaments like beads and pendants. The thematic diversity and artistic intricacy of these terracotta objects highlight the cultural and aesthetic richness of Bengal's terracotta tradition (Dutta).

HISTORY OF BISHNUPUR

Bishnupur is renowned for its beautiful temples, showcasing nearly all forms of medieval Bengali temple architecture. Once the capital of the Mallabhum territory, it included the districts of Bankura, Medinipur, and Bardhaman. Today, the region is known for its terracotta, metal crafts, silk weaving, and the Bishnupur Gharana of classical music. Despite past decay, preservation efforts by the Archaeological Survey of India have restored many temples. The illumination of key monuments has made Bishnupur a major tourist attraction. Visitors can admire the temples' magnificent carvings and terracotta art while walking along the 'Bandhs' or large tanks (Biswas).

The origins of Bishnupur are mysterious, with inscriptions from Samudra Gupta's period referencing the area. By the tenth century CE, it became known as Bishnupur, governed by local rulers who paid tribute to the Guptas. After a period of obscurity, it emerged as the capital of the Malla dynasty's kingdom, Mallabhum, encompassing modern-day Bankura, Onda, Bishnupur, Kotulpur, and Indas. The Malla kings' rule, dating back to the seventh century CE, extended Mallabhum to regions like Damin-i-Koh, Midnapore, Bardhaman, and parts of Chota Nagpur. Bishnupur gained prominence politically and culturally during the reign of Hambir Malla Dev (Bir Hambir) in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Bishnupur's rise as a religious and cultural hub with its unique temple architecture is closely linked to the sixteenth-century Gaudiya Vaishnava devotional movement, founded by Chaitanya Mahaprabhu. This movement emphasized emotive devotion to Krishna. Bishnupur sought to recreate Vrindavan, Krishna's mythical youth site, transforming its forests into a sacred "Gupta Vrindavan" for Gaudiya Vaishnavas (Mukherjee).

According to Gaudiya Vaishnava literature, Chaitanya selected six disciples, known as the Goswamis, and established them in Vrindavan during the sixteenth century. The theological writings that define their tradition were assembled by these Goswamis, the second generation of Gaudiya Vaishnava leaders. In

order to revive their efforts in Bengal after Chaitanya's death and the movement's downfall, the Goswamis selected Srinivasa Acharya as their next head. Carrying manuscripts of their essential teachings, Srinivasa lost them while traveling through Bishnupur. Discovering that local chief Bir Hambir of the Malla dynasty had taken them, Srinivasa visited Bishnupur and captivated the court with his narration of Krishna's life. Deeply moved, Bir Hambir confessed to arranging the theft, mistaking the manuscripts for treasures. In remorse, he invited Srinivasa and his devotees to stay, providing land and resources to establish a sacred Vaishnava center in the region.

This narrative, derived from various Gaudiya Vaishnava texts, highlights Bishnupur's political support for the Gaudiya Vaishnava faith, which enabled the tradition to thrive and establish a cultural and religious center. This alliance with Bishnupur's political authorities ensured that Gaudiya Vaishnavism significantly influenced the region's distinctive art, craftsmanship, and temple architecture. As a result, numerous temples were built over the next century and a half. British surveys and administrative reports from the mid-eighteenth century estimate that there were between 150 and 450 temples, solidifying Bishnupur's reputation as a religious center.

GEOGRAPHICAL STUDY OF BISHNUPUR

Bishnupur is a beautiful West Bengal town located about 160 kilometers from Kolkata. Bishnupur is a town in Bankura district, West Bengal, India. The village is famed for its terracotta temples made of locally available laterite stones. The Malla rulers were Vaishnavites, and they constructed notable terracotta temples in the 17th and 18th centuries.

PHYSICAL FEATURES

The district of Bankura is divided into three distinct parts based on its physical features:

- 1. Hilly Areas:** Located in the northern and western sectors, this area marks the beginning of the descent from the Chhotanagpur plateau to the Bengal deltaic lowlands. It includes mountains like Shushunia and Biharinath, along with laterite ridges.
- 2. Central Portion:** This region is more open, featuring a series of rolling downs with isolated hills that gradually merge into the alluvial plain.
- 3. Eastern Portion:** Characterized by loamy soil formed by silt from the Gangetic rivers, this area includes the Bishnupur subdivision. The town of Bishnupur is situated at the border of the rolling plains and the alluvial region.

CLIMATE

Bishnupur experiences a notably drier climate compared to the eastern part of the state. From mid-March to early June, hot westerly winds make daytime heat oppressive, though they are replaced by cooler southern breezes around sunset. Bishnupur's average annual maximum temperature is 45°C, and the average annual minimum temperature is 12°C. Norwesters during these months bring relief with thunder and lightning but little rain. The rainy season, from June to mid-September, offers a more pleasant climate with less humidity compared to other Bengal districts, with an average annual rainfall of 1,150 mm. The cold season is enjoyable with clear air and rare fogs, providing a bracing climate.

TERRACOTTA TEMPLES IN BISHNUPUR

The temple town of Bishnupur is remarkable for its numerous medieval Bengali temples, showcasing var-

ious architectural styles (Bishnupur). The oldest temple, Mrinmoyee, is renowned for its clay idol of Durga and the unique Nababriksha, a cluster of nine trees growing as one, located in its courtyard. According to McCutchion, Bengali temples in Bishnupur can be categorized into three major groups based on their spires, form, and structure (Mitra).

First, there are traditional temples constructed in the nagara or north Indian style, such as the Orissan rekha (towered) and pidhadeul styles. Many of Bishnupur's extant temples incorporate these styles. Second, hut-style temples, like the Bangla and Chala, have sloping roofs and arched cornices that resemble Bengali cottages. Combinations of these buildings include ekbangla (single hut) and jorbangla (double hut), which may accommodate up to 12 chalas. Third, Indo-Islamic varieties include ratna (pinnacle towers on a flat roof) and domed designs. Common types in Bishnupur include the ek-ratno (single-spired) and pancharatno (five-spired) temples, with the rare naba-ratno (nine-spired) temple highlighted by the Sridhara temple, built by a local Bose family in the early nineteenth century.

Many Bishnupur temples are terracotta-based, a hallmark of the Malla kings' construction from Bir Hambir to the last temple built in 1758. According to Pika Ghosh, the Goswamis aimed to establish Bishnupur as a 'Gupta Vrindavan' or hidden Vrindavan, reflecting its significance in Vaishnavism as noted in texts like Bhaktiratnakar (Dasgupta, 2000). Ghosh also highlights the dual axes of Bishnupuri temples, with most temples facing south, emphasizing community participation, while the east-west axis serves functional purposes. These axes intersect at the garbagriha, the sanctum sanctorum, characterized by triple-arched openings on all sides (Ghosh, P. (2005).

Influenced by Vaishnavism, Bir Hambir constructed the first temple in Bishnupur, the Rasmancha, near the city center. This unique pyramidal structure features large, stepped masonry and a pyramid-shaped or composite chala-type roof, serving as an anchor stage. Each side of the oldest brick temple measures 24.5 meters, with the base covering 80.3 square meters. The actual temple, excluding the roof, stands 10.7 meters tall and is built on a 1.5-meter-high laterite plinth. Four pyramids adorn the roof's corners, with smaller pyramids interspersed along the sides and a larger pyramid at the center. The temple is divided into three portions, with vaulted pillared porches that let light into the dark interiors while casting deep shadows on the exterior façade. The exterior arches of the enclosed galleries are decorated with terracotta lotuses, while the eastern wall displays dancers and musicians.

Many academics believe that the Rasmancha temple, which is embellished with only a few images, started the custom of terracotta tiles in this region during the late medieval period. Terracotta art has a long history in Bengal, but the Mallas were chiefly responsible for its resurgence in the 15th or 16th centuries. The Rasmancha was largely used by the royalty to commemorate Krishna's Ras festival, gathering all Radha-Krishna icons throughout the region and displaying them in the temple's sanctuary sanctorum. During the occasion, 108 Brahmins lit 108 lamps to worship Radha-Krishna idols, as this number is considered exceedingly auspicious (Bishnupur).

According to an inscription, Bir Hambir built the Malleshwar temple in 1622. This laterite temple, constructed in the deusi style, features a base measuring 22.5 square meters, with each side 6.9 meters long and a height of 10.7 meters. Notable for its base moldings and stone elephants, the temple originally housed an image of Madanmohan but now enshrines Shiva as the kula devata. The temple initially had a rekha-type sikhara, later replaced by an octagonal tower.

Among the Malla kings, Raghunath Singha, who reigned from approximately 1643 to 1656, was the greatest patron of temple architecture and Indian classical music. The Shyamrai, Jorbangla (1655), and Kalachand temples, built during his reign, are considered the finest Bishnupuri temples. The Pancharatna

Shyamrai temple is the most exquisite, located next to the fort northwest of Rasmancha. Each side of its square base measures 11.4 meters, and the structure rises to a height of 10.7 meters. The central tower is taller than the four sikhara-type ratnas at the corners. While one corner tower was reconstructed by the ASI after severe damage, the remaining towers are elaborately decorated. The temple inscription refers to it as naba-ratna (nine-spire), where 'naba' likely means 'new' rather than 'nine.' The temple features around 5,000 tiles, both inside and out, with intricate terracotta work. It is the only Bishnupur temple with an ornamented sanctum sanctorum housing seven inscribed plaques, some with artisan names.

East of the Radhamadhab temple, on the south bank of the Lalbandh, is the ek-ratna Kalachand temple. This temple faces south and is 9.2 meters tall with a square base that is 31.4 meters on each side. It has carvings made of stucco and laterite in low relief. An amlaka, or flattened coggled stone, sits atop a sikhara, or solitary tower, which rises from the middle of a nearly flat roof with curved cornices.

In 1665, two laterite temples were built under Bir Singha II's reign, both patronized by his wives. Chudamanidevi sponsored the pancha-ratna Madangopal temple, while Shiromanidevi dedicated the char-ratna Muralimohan temple. Another royal lady, Manikyavarsi, built the at-chala Radha-Vinoda temple in 1659. The east-facing Radharaman temple was built by Hemlata near her father's samadhi tomb. During Durjan Singh's reign (1678–1694), the remarkable ek-ratna Madanmohan temple was constructed. Raghunath Singh II built the ek-ratna Gopal temple in 1703. In 1726, Gopal Singh sponsored a complex of seven laterite ek-ratna temples near Lalbandh. Krishna Singh built the Radhagovinda temple in 1729, and his wife constructed the ek-ratna Radhamadhab temple in 1737, featuring significant stucco work and relief decorations.

The last temple built by the Malla kings was the Radheshyam temple, constructed in 1758 by Chaitanya Singha. This square building features a curved roof, a single tower, and dome-like structures above the triple-arched gateway. Influenced by Islamic architecture, its niches and terracotta tile borders reflect the mihrab of mosques, merging multiple artistic traditions into unique forms ("Temple to Love: Architecture and Devotion in Seventeenth-Century Bengal").

Bishnupur is renowned for its historical structures, including the Pathar Darwaja and Garh Darwaja, built by Bir Singha in the 17th century as fortifications, and the Gumghar, used for executing prisoners. The town's architecture, particularly its terracotta temples, showcases skilled craftsmanship with intricate carvings depicting scenes from the Ramayana, Mahabharata, Puranas, and daily life. Influenced by Hinduism, Jainism, and Sufism, the temples display Krishnalila scenes and social activities. Artisans, known as bhaskars, karigars, and silpins, created these dynamic structures. The terracotta plaques feature floral patterns, mythological stories, and depictions of contemporary fashion, political unrest, and warfare, reflecting the era's social status and influences from the north Indian court (Mitra and Ghosh).

Bishnupur's terracotta temples vividly depict scenes of warfare, daily life, and animal imagery. These include weaponry such as lathis, axes, bows, and shamshirs, as well as transportation methods like bullock carts, horses, elephants, boats, chariots, and palanquins. The carvings also feature domestic and mythical animals. The temples served as cultural hubs, showcasing classical music and dance, with Gandharvas playing instruments and figures in dynamic dance postures. Bishnupur flourished under Bir Hambir, who fostered good relations with the Mughals and revived Vaishnavism, making it a center of art and learning. Despite its decline under Raghunath Singha II and attacks during Gopal Singh's reign, Krishna-bhakti and local legends, like Madanmohan's miraculous defense, endured.

TECHNICAL ASPECT OF BISHNUPUR TEMPLE

The terracotta temples of Bishnupur reflect the socio-political conditions of Bengal during their construction. Sri Chittaranjan Dashgupta notes that these temples' designs incorporate not only stories of Krishna but also Shaiva and Shakta themes, contributing significantly to the evolution of terracotta architecture.

Rasa-Mancha: As the oldest example of terracotta architecture, Rasa-Mancha features minimal terracotta art. However, it still showcases some terracotta plaques with engraved images. The temple, with its 108 gateways, includes designs of lotus flowers and mangol ghats on either side of the gateways. The eastern gate depicts Sri Chaitanyadev performing namasankirtana with his followers, while other plaques show images of a tribal woman with drums and the goddess Saraswati, although many plaques are now decayed.

Panchratna (Shyama-Raya Temple): Known for its distinctive veranda with three arches, this temple is richly adorned with terracotta ornamentations. It features images of Brahma, Vishnu, Maheshwar, Krishna, and Rasachakra (Rasmandala). The temple walls depict scenes from the Mahabharata, including the epic battle between the Pandavas and Kauravas, Bhishma on his deathbed, and Krishna's guidance to Arjuna during the Kurukshetra war. The western side illustrates Sita's agneepariksha from the Ramayana, while the southern and eastern sides depict Krishnaleela and the battle between Rama and Ravana, respectively. Additionally, the temple's architecture captures scenes from daily life, reflecting the society and lifestyle of common people.

Jorbangla Temple: This temple features an extensive collection of terracotta plaques compared to other temples in Bishnupur. The lower part of the temple showcases images of animals like tigers, lions, deer, and elephants in combat. Reflecting the surrounding forest areas and tribal communities, the temple also includes scenes of tribal people hunting pigs with arrows and tribal women braiding their hair. Social life is depicted through images of soldiers carrying zamindars in palanquins to the battlefield and a king riding a camel. A notable plaque, known as 'nabonarikonjo,' features nine women forming the shape of an elephant. Mythical scenes from the Ramayana, such as the story of the blind sage and his son Srabankumar, the death of Srabankumar by King Dasharath's arrow, the curse on Dasharath, the birth of Rama, the breaking of Haradhanu, the marriage of Rama and Sita, tales of Hanuman, the duel between Bali and Sugriva, Bali's death, and the duel between Rama and Ravana, are intricately inscribed on the terracotta plaques.

Scenes from the Mahabharata are also present, including Bhishma on his deathbed, the gadayuddha (mace fight) between Bhima and Duryodhana, the duel between Bhishma and Arjuna, and various depictions of Krishnaleela. Additionally, the temple displays scenes of warfare, with soldiers and pirates holding guns, dressed in war costumes, and heading to battle.

Ekratno Temple (Madana-Mohana Temple): Known for its terracotta architecture, this temple also features mythical scenes like the duel between Rama and Ravana and the Dashavatar of Vishnu, similar to Jorbangla Temple. Numerous Krishnaleela scenes are depicted, along with social scenes such as a woman washing clothes in a pond, men and women dancing with drums, royal court scenes, depictions of the king of Bishnupur and commoners, battlefield scenes, people heading to battle on horses or elephants, hunting scenes, and various 'nama sankirtana' (devotional singing) engravings ("Bishnupur: A Land of Terracotta Temples").

MATERIAL AND CONSTRUCTION TECHNIQUE

The temples of Bengal are among India's most distinctive sacred monuments, showcasing a variety of fo-

rms and techniques influenced by multiple artistic traditions. These temples faithfully depict the lives of the people through dynamic terracotta art. For the first time, local building forms were translated into permanent materials, with hut shapes recreated in brick vaulting, curved cornices, and terracotta façade decoration. Islamic architectural techniques, such as arches, vaults, and domes, were employed using locally available brick. Although stone was commonly used for construction elsewhere, Bengal's scarcity of stone led to brick becoming the primary material, with laterite and yellow sandstone found only in specific areas like southwestern Bengal and northern Burdwan.

Stone was utilized for pillars, lintels, and door jambs in the first brick temples built during the Gupta, Pala, and Sena periods. Bengal's brick temples, on the other hand, have wooden doors adorned with terracotta images of people, animals, flowers, and geometric patterns. Bricks were laid as stretchers and tapering voussoirs for arches to produce vaults and domes, and well-built horizontal brick courses formed the temples' brick cores. The swollen shapes of temple roofs and cornices were created by curved brickwork, while diagonal bricks adorned the supporting arches and pendentives.

In the 18th and 19th centuries, numerous temple façades were plaster-coated and adorned with terracotta statues. Fired bricks were put in mortar consisting of powdered brick and lime, which was manufactured by grinding snail shells. The roofs, vaults, and walls of the temples were covered in exquisite yet hard pankha plaster. The surface of the terracotta plaques was carefully blended into the brick core of the buildings, producing a cohesive architectural and sculptural series unique to Bengal (“Terracotta Temples of Bishnupur”).

AESTHETICAL ASPECTS OF BISHNUPUR TEMPLE

The temples of Bengal, known for their terracotta facades, feature unique innovations in form and structure, setting them apart from other architectural traditions. Adorned with terracotta panels, these temples depict Krishna's life, scenes from the Ramayana and Mahabharata, and stories from the Vishnupurana. David McCutcheon notes that Bengal temple terracotta art, evolving from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries, represents a distinct tradition. Unlike the bold carvings of earlier Buddhist monuments, Bishnupur temples feature finely detailed terracotta patterns. While terracotta became less popular in later periods, broad brickwork with stucco decoration was used instead (“Terracotta Temples of Bishnupur”).

The Shyam Raya temple (1643), one of Bishnupur's oldest terracotta temples, exemplifies this rich decoration. Constructed in the pancha-ratna style, it is covered with intricate terracotta work, including plaques of Krishna with Radha, Krishna's battles, and other Vaishnava themes. Expansive battle scenes with gods and demons adorn the archways, while rows below depict Puranic legends and contemporary scenes of the raja in battle or in his palanquin.

The Keshto Raya temple, also known as the Jor Bangla temple, built 12 years after the Shyam Raya temple, features lavish terracotta work with systematic rows of illustrations depicting linear narratives from Krishna's life. These include scenes like Krishna and Balaram's nursing, their battle in Mathura, the Kurukshetra battle, and Bhishma on a bed of arrows, along with scenes from the Ramlila. The terracotta temples' artistry emerged alongside the Gaudiya Vaishnava movement in Bengal during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, creating a visual narrative of Krishna's life. This visual storytelling catered to an illiterate audience, serving as visual aids for priests or elders narrating epic tales. The tradition continues today, with adults and guides using the panels to illustrate stories to children and visitors. These terracotta panels, combined with devotional music and drama, reinforced Gaudiya Vaishnava narratives and

theological messages, establishing Bishnupur as a center of pilgrimage and devotion (“Temple to Love: Architecture and Devotion in Seventeenth-Century Bengal”).

MOTIFS PLAY A SIGNIFICANT ROLE IN TERRACOTTA ART, PARTICULARLY IN THE ARCHITECTURE OF THE FOUR MENTIONED TEMPLES:

PLANT MOTIFS:

Rashmancho Temple: Features lotus motifs on either side of its 108 doors, with designs of lotus and other flowers and leaves on the pillar fringes.

Pancharatno Temple: Showcases motifs of lotus buds and other flowers.

Jorbangla Temple: Includes lotus motifs and other floral and tree designs on the doors.

Ekratno Temple: Displays wheel-like lotus motifs and tree motifs with four-leaved flowers on the backside.

ANIMAL MOTIFS:

Rashmancho Temple: Swans and peacocks.

Pancharatno Temple: Fish, tigers, lions, monkeys, elephants, horses, and ostriches.

Madanmohan Temple: Swans, peacocks, monkeys, tigers, lions, snakes, pigs, horses, and elephants.

Solar Motifs: The terracotta architecture includes motifs of the sun (Surya), moon (Chandra), and stars (Tara).

GEOMETRICAL MOTIFS:

Various geometric patterns such as triangles, squares, circles, half-circles, lines, and rectangles are present. The designs often feature horizontal bands around the circumference, filled with decorative motifs like zigzags, triangles, meanders, and swastikas.

ABSTRACT AND DECORATIVE MOTIFS:

Abstract elements and motifs depicting humans, animals, and floral designs.

MYTHICAL AND LEGENDARY MOTIFS:

Representations of Hindu deities, palanquins, guns, bows and arrows, and kings.

These motifs collectively contribute to the rich tapestry of the terracotta art and architecture, enhancing the visual and cultural narrative of the temples.

CONTRIBUTION OF BISHNUPUR TEMPLE TO THE FIELD OF ART AND ARCHITECTURE

The terracotta industry of Bishnupur is highly respected in India and admired internationally. Terracotta figures like horses, elephants, and bison are Bengal's pride. Bishnupur's temples, adorned with carved terracotta plaques, are globally renowned. Built between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, these brick temples are distinctive sacred monuments. Influenced by various artistic styles, Bengali temples showcase a wide range of forms and techniques in brick and terracotta. These temples, mostly located in the Ganges River delta, highlight the region's cultural significance, reflecting movements in religion, literature, and the arts, as well as political, social, and economic developments (“Bishnupur”).

Terracotta plaques reveal early Bengali culture, supplementing Bengal's literary history. Two main artisan castes, the Acharyas and Sutradharas, collaborated, drawing inspiration from daily life and Shilpa Sashtras' standards. Over time, Sutradharas mastered materials like stone, ivory, and metal, evolving into skilled artists. Divided into regional groups, they specialized in wood, clay, painting, and stone. Traveling teams, guided by Acharyas, carried temple plans and tailored them to donors' preferences, ensuring the precise execution of terracotta themes and patterns.

CONCLUSION

As a result, we have attempted to highlight in this study the key elements of Bishnupur's terracotta temple architecture, including its structure, style, and ornamental themes. Yet, these temples have been experiencing the process of deterioration throughout time. Governments, archaeologists, and folklorists must take decisive action to protect these historic temples. The purpose of this study is to draw attention to how crucial it is to keep these temples from going extinct.

The terracotta tradition of West Bengal has complex significance. Contemporary terracotta manufacture and usage can illuminate the past. It's important to consider the explanatory power of terracotta art in its usage context. Various dimensions of contemporary terracotta use reveal intangible aspects of human society, aiding in archaeological interpretation and understanding cultural continuity. However, the lack of extensive excavation in West Bengal has hindered the establishment of direct linkages. Still, the usage patterns, oral histories, myths, and spatial and cognitive dimensions of modern terracotta objects can help interpret archaeological records and preserve the heritage of these temples.

The study shows that serpent forms (Naga or Nagi) were common in ancient Bengal and other parts of India. Ethnographic evidence highlights the importance of the serpent god cult, particularly Manasa, in rural West Bengal, indicating continuous serpent worship from the Early Historic period to the present. In Bastu puja, forms have evolved, but their symbolic meanings persist, suggesting that ethnoarchaeological studies should not rely solely on form similarities. Oral narratives and textual references provide valuable insights. Myths and local stories about horses, elephants, rider forms, mother figures, and mother-child forms offer alternative interpretations, enriching our understanding of archaeological findings. The spatial dimension of terracotta usage includes the physical arrangement of terracotta materials in culturally significant locations, serving functions like marking boundaries, alerting people to these boundaries, fostering social cohesion, and signifying sacredness. Symbolically, these markings link the larger cosmos with the known and limited cosmos, bridging past and present, and natural and supernatural realms.

West Bengal's rich terracotta heritage offers a valuable opportunity to study the craft's social and cultural significance. However, several constraints hinder research. Many ancient materials are surface finds, lacking chronological information, and the absence of horizontal excavations complicates understanding their context. Additionally, many unearthed materials are inaccessible, with only select pieces displayed in museums. Comprehensive excavation reports are scarce, except for a few sites like Bangarh, Pandu Rajar Dhibi, and Rajbaridanga, forcing researchers to rely on limited published papers and reports in *Indian Archaeology: A Review*. Moreover, disagreements over the identification and chronology of certain forms further complicate research efforts. These challenges highlight the need for more extensive and accessible archaeological studies.

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