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Background and Influence of Bengal Terracotta Temple Architecture (16th -19th century AD) on Arts and Crafts of Bengal

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Abstract:

The period between 16th to 19th centuries is regarded as the golden period of temple architecture in Bengal characterized by small-sized, clay-made temples with elegant decorations on their walls known as terracotta. Terracotta plaques are well known for their descriptive nature and the narrative storytelling. This paper concentrates on the geographical, philosophical, historical, socio-religious and cultural background of these temples and their influence on the arts and crafts of rural and urban Bengal after 19th century.

Data from secondary sources like journal research papers, edited and published books, documentaries, etc. was used to build up the conceptual discussion in this paper. Analysis of the background of these temples and their influence on other art forms was also studied.

The study revealed that the terracotta temple architecture became the symbol of Hindu artistic expression of Bengal. Bengali culture of this period was under the influence of strong Vaishnavite and Shaivite philosophy. The historical changes, the rise of the Bhakti movement and the influence of Muslim and Anglo- Indian culture are reflected in all the finely modeled terracotta plaques of these temples. These heavily ornamented terracotta plaques greatly influenced the contemporary and later art and crafts i.e. textile design, wood craft, dolls, painted scrolls, manuscripts and metal crafts of Bengal.

Keywords: *Terracotta temple architecture, philosophy, background, Bengal terracotta, Bengal arts, Bengal crafts.*

1. Introduction

Bengal is a land of temples. Of the many temple architectures of India, the terracotta temple architecture of Bengal is well known for its brick construction and decoration on the walls/surfaces. The terracotta decorations are very popular for their graceful and stylistic quality. The structure of the building has imparted it its uniqueness. For the present discussion, only the 16th to 19th AD temple constructions have been taken into account as these 400 years are considered to be the golden era in the history of Bengal temple architecture. The purpose, philosophy and related background behind the brick temple architecture have been discussed. How this temple architecture and its surface decorations (terracotta) later on influenced the other arts and crafts of Bengal such as textiles, metal crafts, wood craft, painted manuscript and scrolls, – is the major concern of this paper.

2. Philosophy and Purpose behind Temple Construction

Temples had established themselves as a means of expressing the social, religious and cultural evolution among the Hindus, artistically. These were closely related to the popular idioms as expressed in cult affiliation, Vernacular forms and illustrations of religious texts and never divorced from development of contemporary society. Temples show the inherent philosophy of the Bengalis. A temple is considered to be the sacred abode on earth of the ‘ruler of the Universe.’ Hence the word ‘Prasad’ (originally meaning Palace) probably applied to the temple. Temples are believed to be the dwelling places of Gods and Goddesses.

Hindu temples were not meant for large congregational worship only. A strong religious zeal inspired human beings to build temples in the vicinity of their dwelling places. This practice came through tradition: when people began to give a human character to their favorite deities. At the very dawn of human civilization, deities were worshipped purely as natural Gods and had remained only in their glorious imagination. At that time there were no idols of these Gods. As time elapsed, human beings came closer to one another through their imaginary deities and began to worship them according to their spontaneous rites, customs, wishes and needs. Numerous concepts of gods (Vishnu, Shiva, Kali, Durga, Radha- Krishna, etc.) gave birth to a number of icons for which several types of temples came into existence over a period of time. The Indian architects of different time periods fulfilled the spiritual thirst of the Hindus by their skilful and varied architectural construction. Under the patronage of different royal families, temples began to be constructed in large numbers in Bengal exhibiting new styles and techniques. The simplicity of rural Bengali life, where these temples mostly flourished, had a great impact on those especially low vernacular structures. The low height of the temples of Bengal is a unique feature among all the temple architectures of India. The philosophy behind this low height is that the house of God need not be a palace or sky scraper.

The environment demanded that the village folk must be familiar with Lord Krishna, Lord Shiva or for that matter any other God or Goddess so that they would associate with Him or Her more through love rather than through awe or fear. This psychological aspect was predominant in the basic philosophy of GeetaGobinda by Javadeva (Court poet of king Laxmana Sena). The treatment of Lord Shiv or Goddess Kali by their devotees point towards the same philosophy. This feeling of closeness, intimacy and simplicity was mainly responsible in determining the shape and dimensions of these vernacular temples. The social significance of these temples lie in the numerous festivals that took place in the temple complex, where people mingled together forgetting their social status. Temples were specifically intended for public occasions as suggested by their locations in the centre of town or village prominently. The open and raised form of these structures permitted the deities within to be visible from all sides, promoting social interactions between devotees, priests and the founder / patron of the temple.

3. Geographical, Historical, Socio-religious and Cultural Background of Temple Construction

Bengal is a fertile alluvial plain with laterite tract over western part of Midnapur, Bankura, Bardwan and Birbhum and also over Dinajpur, Bogra and Malda districts. The river system played an important role in shaping the destiny of this province. The constant shifting of river beds played a vital role in making large cities and towns flourish with beautiful buildings and temples.

During the Pala and Sena period, stones were used abundantly for architecture. The lowlands of Bengal are surrounded by rivers and canals and its alluvial plains are a paradise for architectural growth. In this area there is a peculiar relationship between the warm, humid climate and the earth. It is very natural that clay, instead of stone has been used as the material through which the Bengali sentiment and culture found expression for thousands of years. Basically, stone, in this deltaic Bengal, is a foreign imposition. It came through political and religious dictates.



Figure 1: Jor Bangla (Shyam-Rai) temple, 1655 AD

<http://www.vina.cc/2009/02/01/vaishnava-places-in-bishnupur/>, accessed on 29/03/2016

From the childhood itself, the Bengali people learn to accept the philosophy of the impermanent nature of everything. They make the idols of their Gods and Goddesses with clay (Kshanikamurtis), enjoy to the fullest during the puja days, but finally immerse the idols in the river after the worship is over. It is thus a system of borrowing from Mother Earth and returning it to the same corpus. In Bengal, the Earth is a part and parcel of Bengali life. The relationship between creation and destruction (which is the ultimate truth) shows that nothing can be permanent in this dynamic force of time. The shift in building material from stone to terracotta or brick was due to a change in the historical, social and political scenario, not only of Bengal but the country as a whole. From the evidence of the great epics of Ramayana and Mahabharata and from Buddhist and Jaina literary sources it is clear that in the centuries before the birth of Christ, Aryans of North India came in and made contact with the different tribes of Bengal. The discoveries of Maurya and finds in large numbers from Tamruk (Midnapur), Harinarayanpur, Berachampa and Chandraketurgarh (24 Parganas) proves this beyond doubt. The original inhabitants of Bengal never totally accepted the Aryan religion and culture. Many centuries passed before the Aryan culture and the culture of the people of Bengal merged together in the rigid framework of the Aryan society.

In the early phase, during the Gupta period, the people of Bengal became closely associated with Puranic Brahmanism which paved the way for the growth and development of the cult / idol worship. Brahmins from the other parts of India began to migrate and settle in Bengal in this period.



Figure 2: Shyam rai temple, Bishnupur, 1643 A.D.

http://4.bp.blogspot.com/MkQ_ppwQcPs/TnTYe5_X9rI/AAAAAAAAAiY/qiJTVggByYo/s1600/Temple+of+Shyamrai+Bishnupur.JPG
accessed on 3/4/2016

The Pala rulers established themselves in 1710 AD. Bishnu Krishna cult of Hinduism became very popular during this period. It was also the period when Bhakti movement was rising, under the patronage of Varmana and Sena kings (in the 11th and 12th centuries), who were devoted followers of Puranic Brahmanism. Brahmanism made a great headway in Bengal. Puranic Brahmanism started the cult of Ganapati, Shiva, Vishnu, Surya and Shakti.

In the Gupta period, Vaishnavism introduced Bhakti or loving adoration of personal Gods and Goddesses. In the later period, Vaishnavism introduced the Radha- Krishna cult and introduced the ten Avataras of Vishnu and these became well established during the time of Jaydeva, the court poet of Laxman Sena.

Worship of Shiva in 'Linga' form was established in the 5th century AD as can be seen from the Damodarpur copper plate. In the early part of the 7th century AD, during the period of Shasanka, Shiva was worshipped mainly in his phallic Ihwara, Chandrashekara, Kalyansundra, Ardhnarishwara, Bhairava etc.

Cult of Sakti or Mother Worship is prevalent in Bengal from the earliest time and is very popular among the people. The development of the Tantric cult in 11th and 12th centuries AD further encouraged the worship of Sakti in Vamachara tradition.

In the Medieval phase with the Muslim/Islam conquest and occupation of Bengal in 13th century, the socio-political life of her people was rudely disturbed. The patrons of heretic art lost their position and influence in the society. The dark period continued till the end of the 15th century AD when the Hussain Shah dynasty (1439-1519 AD) was established. Strong Islamic reign weakened the roots of Brahmanism which became oppressively rigid, too orthodox and extremely class-conscious. Tantricism and Vaisnavism took its place and became very popular. The religion preached by Sri Chaitanya (1445-1533 AD) not only enabled the status of the common man but gave unprecedented impetus to the growth of literature, art and architecture. Bir Hambir, the independent king of Bishnupur (Bankura district) was converted to Vaisnavism by Srinivas Acharya. By the grace of royal patronage, Vishnupur became a centre of this faith, and the rulers adorned the capital in the style of Vrindavana, by introducing Vaisnava festivals as well as erecting many beautifully decorated temples.

In 1574 the Mughal dynasty not only established peace and security but also brought Bengal in contact with North-India. Further, the European trade and its huge annual investment effected a profound change of economy of this province. Political stability, economic development and the organization of Vaishnavism into a sect ushered a new age in Bengali history. As a result of all these factors, the vernacular literature, traditional pictorial art and temple building activities received great impetus.



Figure 3: Rupesvara Temple, Kalna, 1765

<http://www.aishee.org/essays/classification.php>, accessed on 26/03/2016

In the first half of the 18th century Bengal passed into hands of capable Nawabs- Murshid Quli Khan and Alivardi Khan who maintained peace and increased the prosperity of this province.

Among the upper class of Hindu society, the worship of the Goddess Kali and Durga became very popular. Krishnananda Aramvagish, the author of 'Tantrasara' introduced the worship of Kali who was also known as Mangala- Chandi. Among the other folk Gods and Goddesses, Manasa and Basabi, Banadevi, Dharmathakur, Sitala, Shashthi, Dakshin Roy, Kalu Roy, Satyapir, Bibima etc. became popular, and both Hindus as well as Muslims offered offerings to them.

In the Modern Phase, towards the middle of the 18th century, when the Mughals became weak and the Marathas invaded the province, the socio-political condition became unbalanced. Political insecurity invited the Portugese Moughs and Arkanese pirates and gradually the Dutch, French and English traders. English asserted the East India Company's privileges and became the rulers of the land.

Thus in June 1857 Bengal entered into a new age. British quite settled down in 19th century. The people of Bengal became hybrid in dress, in thought, in sentiment and in culture. This change of outlook of the nobility -a conflict between tradition and change, disturbed the long- aged artistic tradition and aesthetic sensibility. In the face of these cross currents, the traditional artists and temple builders of Bengal made desperate efforts for survival, and in the process compromised with western architectural forms and patterns. The entire story of the cultural evolution of Bengal is represented by the growth and development of her temple architecture. The history of temples in Bengal reveals that amidst cultural conflicts, successive invasions by alien hordes and the darkest days of oppression, her spark of culture was not blown out, because Bengal maintained her spirit of assimilation, comprehension and synthesis at the same time maintaining a remarkable continuity of her own traditions and the growth of the soil.



Figure 4: Temple in Marketplace, Ilambazar, 19th century
<http://www.aishee.org/essays/classification.php>, accessed on 26/03/2016

4. Influence on Art and Crafts of Bengal

Brick temple architecture of Bengal is mostly well known for its ornamentation of terracotta sculptures on the temple walls. The ornamentation of temple facade is designed on a grand scale. Not only in facades, but from base to cornices and from ceiling to interior wall, the terracotta relief is done with variegated form i.e. human, animal, vegetal and geometrical.



Figure 5: Multiple terracotta reliefs of 17th century
<https://physicsswagata.wordpress.com/2015/06/26/poetry-in-brick-and-clay-part-2/>, accessed on 26/03/2016

Usually the front face is treated in this manner. The figural works are employed to depict the various legends and myths, not excluding secular and homely scenes from contemporary life and are composed in a number of plaques to complete the narration. The vegetal and geometric devices are put into the band-like panels primarily to emphasize the structural formation and to demarcate the areas of the narrative themes. The plinth and certain sections of the columns are usually reserved for depiction of contemporary life and for Krishnayana and Ramayana theme as well. The scenes from episodes of Ramayana are very popular and are found scattered over other sections of the facades. Among the many motifs derived from the legend of Krishna, Rasa Leela is particularly superbly composed in a rounded medallion. The bands surrounding the composition are made by floral scroll work. The motif became very popular and is used very often in temple decoration with the most elegant effect.



Figure 6: Delicate terracotta ornamentations, one above another, in the arched doors of Pratapeshwar temple, Kalna.
<http://sadanandsafar.blogspot.in/2014/03/trip-to-west-bengal-feb-2014-part-1.html>, accessed on 28/03/2016



Figure 7: Terracotta ornamentation on the wall of Brick temple of Bengal
<http://g4.img-dpreview.com/65D02B5B92304A58844C15658E8919EA.jpg> accessed on 3/4/2016

The vegetal theme usually consists of the meandering creeper and floral patterns, often having the effect of linear panel-like line pattern works. Separate and individual lotus and ribbon ornament like floral design are seen throughout. Among the geometric motifs, the chequers are the most effective and are arranged in vertical and horizontal bands. It gives a pleasing effect of light and shade all along the surface. Bracket figures of graceful and stylistic shapes are made to support the curved cornices.



Figure 8: Terracotta plaques depicting some events of celebrations above the arched door of Shiva temple, Surul.

Among the various sculptures adorning the temple walls, the scenes from the Mahabharata, representations of semi-divine beings like Kinnars and Gandharvas as well as some hybrid animal figures are important. A dancing party, a row of ascetics, scenes of war, Krishna Leela, Dashavtara, legends and stories from the puranas, Anantasayin Vishnu, Shiva, Brahma, widely recurring figures of Radha-Krishna, Durga, Kali, Jagannath and Jain tirthankars are also depicted in terracotta sculptures. Due to the Bhakti movement preached by Shri Chaitanya, the sculptures related to Radha-Krishna are very popular and importantly depicted in the temple panels. The Shiva and Shakti cult is also an important subject frequently depicted. Rather than human figures, many animals and birds are also shown in the terracotta sculptures. In some temples the influence of the European culture can also be seen in dresses. A feeling of form delineation of lively action is an important character of these relief sculptures. Everything is ordered and organized in a coherent scheme, though in the later works, the pattern tends to become weak and mechanical, expressing the doctrine of a vital tradition.



Figure 9: Terracotta Panels from the Madan Mohan Temple
<http://www.harekrnsna.com/sun/features/09-06/features428.htm> Accessed on 3/4/2016

Terracotta sculptures of these temples are related to some other art forms that flourished simultaneously in the surrounding regions. The resemblance of Bankura horses, toys, textiles, woodwork, painting, metal work and ivory work, which are not part of architecture, to the 17th to 19th century terracotta sculptures, also proves that temple art has a vast influence on the other arts and crafts of Bengal. Certain characteristics of temple sculptures such as division of wall surfaces into square panels and the preference for long friezes on bases and cornices- bear a striking similarity to woven silks, painted manuscripts, covers, pages and scrolls, Kalighat paintings etc. The craft of carving in wood, a few examples of which are preserved in Bengal displays strong links, both stylistically as well as technically with the terracotta temple plaques.

4.1. Textiles



Figure 10: Baluchari Motif – Krishna driving Arjun
<http://bongfeed.com/bengali-sarees-100sareepact/>, accessed on 26/03/2016



Figure 11: Terracotta relief motif of Bengal temple
<http://i1.trekearth.com/photos/100654/pppn.jpg> accessed on 3/4/2016



Figure 12: Terracotta relief of Bengal temple
<http://www.bengalpixbd.com/var/albums/BPL000113.jpg?m=1403583529> accessed on 3/4/2016

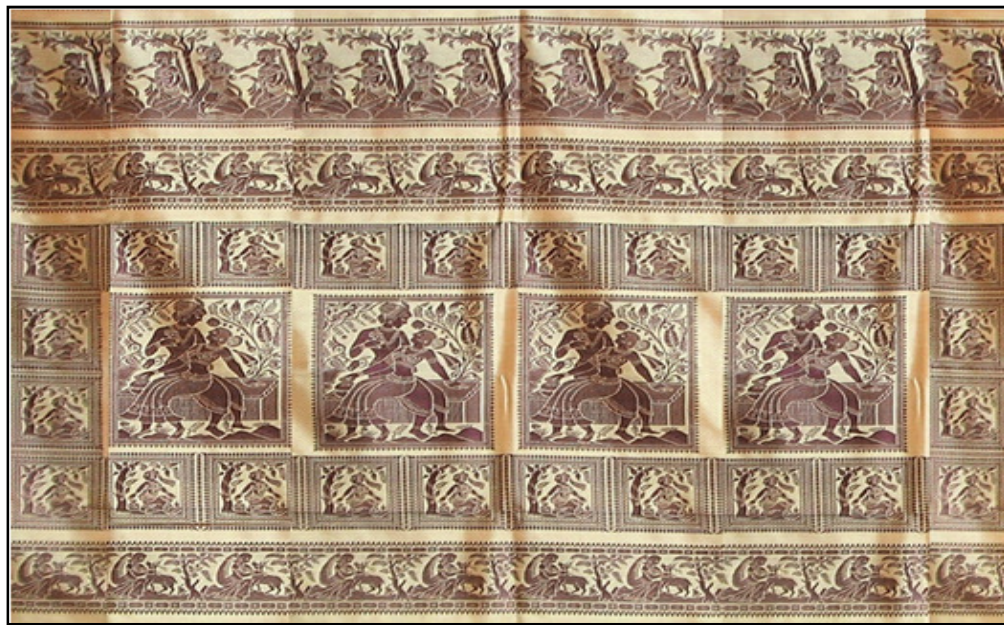


Figure 13: Baluchari saree design

<https://www.pinterest.com/pin/269441990177134567/>, accessed on 4/4/2016

Among all the distinctive textile products, the embroidered quilts (Kanthas) from Jessor, Khulna and Faridpur are very much renowned. Occasionally, these quilts display a basic resemblance to the scenes on temple bases, particularly soldiers in European dress, couple in neo-classical settings and important personages in elephant drawn chariots, along with traditional themes drawn from the Ramayana and Kamale- Kamini stories (form of Durga/ Sakti). Silk butidar sarees from Murshidabad, mostly dating from the 18th and 19th centuries are the important textile designs of Bengal. The composition on these sarees are generally organised in a number of vertical and horizontal rows around a central rectangle. In these rows, motifs in square shape from terracotta sculptures are seen, which include figures, both Indian and European, seated on cushions or European furniture- chairs, stools with back supports, tables and couches, European ladies and men in contemporary long sleeved and flowing gowns and coats respectively, with typical shoes and hats worn by Europeans of the time, like the officers of the East India Company. Other subjects that are also found on Baluchari sarees (Bankura district) include paddle streamers and railway trains with Europeans, at least one instance of the later subject is known in temple art.

4.2. Carved Wood Work

Though only a few examples are preserved, Bengal has a distinct wooden temple architecture in which posts, capital, brackets and beams are all curved with a variety of figures and decorative themes. Some of the finest wood carvings dated 18th and 19th century is found in open mandapas at Atpur (Hoogly) and Virnagar (Nadia). Posts are square and twelve sided with horizontal bands of lotus buds. Capitals and brackets have themes similar to those found in columns and wall panels in brick temple architecture. Though the style of these carvings differs from the low relief modelling of terracotta sculpture of the temples, there is still a great resemblance between the themes and the forms of these sculptures. The iconographies like female figure posture where their feet touch their heads, a figure standing on one leg with the hand raised, Durga on a lion with buffalo demon, Krishna embracing two Gopies etc. are very similar to the terracotta, especially cornice friezes of 18th and 19th century brick temples.



Figure 14: Wood Carving, Chandi Mandap, Sripur, 1707

<https://rangandatta.wordpress.com/tag/chandi-mandap/>, accessed on 26/03/2016

Numerous examples of carved doors, still found in many temples, have a close resemblance with the terracotta sculpture. The doors are divided into square panels by bands of foliage design just as they are in brick walls. The square panels are carved with repeated figures. Both stylistically and demographically, pinnacled doors bear close resemblance to false doors in brick on temple facades as well as wall panels.

4.3. Painted Manuscript Covers and Manuscript Paintings

The Bengali manuscript covers are painted with figurative art having close relation with terracotta sculptures. The covers are made of long pieces of flat wood, with a shape of horizontal format of paintings. The themes of paintings include the characters from Ramayana, Harivarnsa, Krishna Kirtan, Gita Govinda and Chaitanya. In 17th and 18th century examples, compositions became more embroidered. The painted manuscript covers may be closely compared to brick cornices and panels in contemporary temples, both in composition and in figurative style. The postures of dancers and the musicians, especially the bent legs, uplifted arms- sometimes holding hands- and flying scarfs and gaulans seen on the painted manuscript covers are identical to the 17th and 18th century Bengal temples. Krishna playing the flute and the enraptured Gopis are depicted in the same way as on terracotta plaques of temples. Yashoda dressing Krishna and Balaram, procession of herd boys with cows are almost identical in painted covers and temple friezes.



Figure 15: Manuscript page
<http://www.caluniv.ac.in/museum/museum.html> accessed on 4/4/2016

The most celebrated illustrated manuscript so far known from any part of Bengal is a copy of the Ramayana by Tulsidas from Midnapore district dated 1772. The painting of this manuscript is framed in square and rectangular panels with coloured borders, sometimes sub divided into narrow horizontal strips. The sharp linear treatment of figures, the angular postures and the application of the dots and strokes on costumes are very similar to effects in terracotta figurative art. Certain compositions like marriage of Rama and Sita attended by ascetics and kings are comparable to terracotta panels. The subjects and scenes i.e the meeting of Rama, Laxman and Sita accompanied by female companions in the forest, indicated by a tree and flowering bush, are exactly same as in terracotta plaques. Even the architectural elements of the palace setting are similar. The standing figures in somewhat stiff postures, with raised hands indicating conversation, are identical to accessory figures in temple art, such as those appearing on corner plaques.

4.4. Painted Scrolls



Figure 16: Kalighat Patachitra by Babun Ghosh
<https://campusdiaries.com/stories/9-handmade-foes-of-india-a-story-of-art-and-crafts>, accessed on 2/4/2016



Figure 17: Terracotta panels on Rajrajeshwar temple at Kotalpur, 1694 century
A.D. http://www.telegraphindia.com/1130310/jsp/calcutta/story_16653487.jsp accessed on 4/4/2016

The most widely distributed variety of painting in Bengal is the painted scroll (Pata) carried by artists (Patuas) from village to village to be displayed before gatherings to the accompaniment of music. The pictorial organization or composition of the scrolls is typical; continuous rectangular compartments, each with a self-contained panel, are arranged vertically. In this respect scroll composition often resembles terracotta friezes and panels.

4.5. Woodcuts



Figure 18: Woodcut print of 19th Century AD
<http://www.harekrsna.com/gallery/woodcuts-1-gallery.htm>, accessed on 28/03/2016



Figure 19: Terracotta relief motif – dancing figure
http://bengal-terracotta.blogspot.in/2010_06_30_archive.html accessed on 3/4/2016

This little known art flourished in Calcutta in the second half of the 19th century. It depicts both religious and non-religious subjects. The graphic style of woodcuts is closely associated to terracotta rather than contemporary miniature painting. The figures are somewhat angular shadows that stand out against white background areas.

4.6. Metal Work

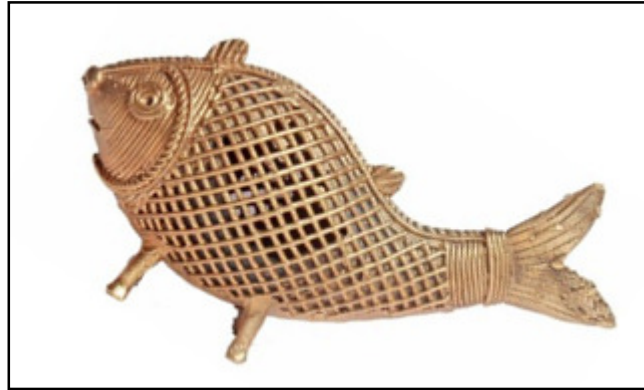


Figure 20: Dokra Fish of Benga (Brass)

<http://www.flipkart.com/slice-bengal-dokra-fish-showpiece-6-5-cm/p/itme6g75mgdsztgp> accessed on 4/4/2016



Figure 21: Terracotta plaque depicting a chakra with fish in the frontage of Radha-Damodar temple, Chhototaraf, Hadal-Narayanpur.

<http://sadanandsafar.blogspot.in/2014/03/trip-to-west-bengal-february-2014-part.html> accessed on 4/4/2016

The sharply modelled rearing animals with their open snouts and curling tails are identical to terracotta animals particularly those on panels above the entrance arches of 18th century temples. Metal mounts of Gods and Goddesses occasionally imitate architectural setting in the same way that terracotta images are placed within miniature buildings.

5. Conclusion

Influence of terracotta temple architecture, especially decoration of the walls with fantastic relief sculptures are primarily evident in the arts and crafts of Bengal. Subjects, style, motifs, figures, elements etc. of the terracotta sculpture are completely or partially reflected in the related style of contemporary Bengal fine art. Brick temple architecture and temple terracotta sculptures by the end of 16th century became the symbol of Hindu artistic expression of the new social, religious and cultural revolution. The wide range of temple style is typical in the dynamic but traditional Bengali society.

Brick is the natural and available material for building architecture in Bengal. In late medieval period (16th -19th century) Bengal was enriched by so many eye-catching vernacular temple architectures. The coming of Shri Chaitanya and Bhakti movement and the already prevalent orthodox doctrines of the Brahmins together influenced the contemporary Bengali social, cultural, religious lifestyle and art - giving rise to the construction of these temple architectures. During this time, i.e. around 16th century, the human form representing God was worshipped more by the common man – fear of God was replaced with worship out of love (Bhakti cult ideology)- a part of the village genre.

Terracotta temple decoration is renowned for its terracotta plaques. Terracotta panels with their graceful and stylistic enrichments reflect the contemporary period from socio, religious, political and historical point of view.

During this time in Bengal, temple erections were mainly dedicated to Lord Shiva and Lord Krishna. The well-known terracotta ornamentations of these temples were fully related with the shape and form of the temple structure. The terracotta art influenced the

subjects, arrangements, composition, space division, style, decorative motifs, figures and elements of the other art works i.e. textiles, woodcut, manuscript cover, metal works and other related art and crafts of Bengal.

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- xix. Figure 13: <https://www.pinterest.com/pin/269441990177134567/>, accessed on 4/4/2016
- xx. Figure 14: <https://rangandatta.wordpress.com/tag/chandi-mandap/>, accessed on 26/03/2016
- xxi. Figure 15: <http://www.caluniv.ac.in/museum/museum.html> accessed on 4/4/2016
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