

Traditional Temple Terracottas: Intrusion of Western Subject-matter and Imagery

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The discovery of many terracotta figurines in various ancient sites throughout the Indian subcontinent shows that this medium is one of the most popular mediums of artistic expression among the people at large. Bengal has a long tradition of constructing brick temples. During the 17th century, a uniquely Bengali style of temple architecture and sculpture established itself as the Hindu artistic expression of new social, religious and cultural development. This paper is an attempt to study and analyse the changes in the themes and form of the surface decoration of these temples which was largely based on finely fashioned terracotta relief sculpture. While the folk art style continued to operate in this region during the late 18th and 19th centuries, a process of Westernization of Indian traditions also began in a planned manner in this period in the field of art as well. To iconographic and narrative elements that formed the basis of mythological sculpture was added an emphasis on naturalism, particularly in relationship to European subject matter leading to a hybrid style combining local folk mannerism with Western stylistic modes.

Earth or clay has been regarded as the primeval plastic material not only because of its ready availability, but also on account of its malleable character. Due to these qualities of clay, the scope for thematic and formal experimentation has been much more in this material than in any other. Moreover, these works possess freshness and spontaneity of expression as the clay modelers made liberal choice of their subject-matter. Clay, thus, satisfies the creative impulse of the ordinary man, as much for aesthetic expression as for domestic and ritualistic requirements. Its use was extensive and purposes varied. A more or less durable form is imparted to productions in clay, either by hardening through exposure in the sun or by firing. In view of this, it is not surprising therefore that from the times immemorial, the burnt clay or terracotta has served as an easy and convenient plastic material.

The making of sculpture in India appears to have begun with the terracotta figurines of the peasant cultures of Kulli and Zhob about 5000 years back. The discovery of fairly enormous mass of terracotta figurines in various ancient sites throughout the Indian subcontinent indicates that this medium seems to have continued in the succeeding phases and remained one of the most popular mediums of artistic expression among the people at large.

Bengal has a long tradition of constructing brick temples since the rule of the Malla Rajas, a dynasty that held sway for several centuries. There are many examples of this type of structure distributed throughout the townships and villages of Bengal especially in Birbhum and Bankura districts (Plate: 1). In direct response to a new wave of Vaishnavism that swept Bengal during the 17th century, a uniquely Bengali style of temple architecture and sculpture established itself as the Hindu artistic expression of new social, religious and cultural developments. The principal temples of this group date from the 17th and 18th centuries though this exclusive style of temple building continued to be practiced till the late 19th century. The architecture of these temples never followed the traditional classical norms of temple building and remained closely related to the vernacular idiom.

One of the outstanding features of most of these temples is the surface decoration that is in the form of finely fashioned terracotta relief sculpture. Spread over the entire surface of the façade it resolves itself into a diaper of square panels depicting mythological, religious, literary and genre themes.

Dedicated to Rama, Krishna and Radha in the beginning and subsequently to Siva and Durga as well, the reliefs on the walls of these temples were specifically devoted to illustrating the relevant myths in the indigenous folk style with an emphasis on the narrative. This sculptural decoration on temples was closely linked with parallel developments in Bengali religious literature. Many iconographic compositions were simply visualizations of Bengali versions of the epics and the puranas. Thus, method of narration indicates at once an adoption of the age-old practice of 'patachitra' formula. Gradually, the range of themes of the artists widened perceptibly and they started working on subjects of secular intent as well such as royal processions, boating, receptions, entertainment, and hunting. Needless to say the objective of presenting such narratives and secular subject-matter reflected the tastes, beliefs, tradition, culture and ideology of the patrons. Beside these aristocratic themes, the artists also took keen interest in day to day life and started recording scenes such as woman fetching water or preparing fish, men smoking hookas, boating in the river, village bride, watchmen, yogis, domestic animals, and birds. Treated descriptively the works also give an insight into the beliefs, customs, manners and costumes of the people of the period.

These representations in relief were, as a rule carefully modelled in a stylised manner, special attention, however, being given to the iconographic details and ornamentation. All types of figures represented in these sculptures, human or animal, were characterised by a modelling that reduces the form to a simple description of the main volumes of the natural form corresponding to the principal parts of the body, such as the head, the torso, the hands and the legs. The human figures were fashioned and the details, there on, were worked out mainly with hands by pinching up or pressing down the clay by thumbs and fingers as per the requirements of the form. The features such as lips, nose, eyes, ears, hair, etc. were indicated either by mere scratches or incisions, or by following the additive process using strips and pellets separately fashioned and thereafter applied on to the main form. Besides the use of this modeling, process moulds were also used for making sculptures. This

TRADITIONAL TEMPLE TERRACOTTAS: INTRUSION OF WESTERN SUBJECT-MATTER AND IMAGERY

has been proved by a general resemblance in respect of head dresses, hair styles and ornaments observed in many of these sculptures.

A general affinity in the mode of execution seems to suggest similar stylistic features that connect the clay modeling activities at the various sites as belonging to one common artistic movement. As was the traditional practice in India there were regular guilds of artisans who worked under the heads of these guilds following their instructions. According to Mukul Dey, "The heads of these art- guilds had several well laid out plans ready from which they could build new temples of different shapes and sizes. When a particular plan was chosen by a donor, the head would prepare a complete design and give detailed directions to his workers. At once the expert clay-modelers and the potters went around searching for the most suitable clay procurable nearby, and started experimenting with the samples of local clay. When the best clay available in the locality was found, the brick makers began to make thin bricks for the temple." Next came the turn of the modelers who fashioned various panels depicting a large variety of themes and patterns as per the original plan. When these clay images dried up the expert craftsmen took moulds in clay of these panels which later were burnt and made into terracotta moulds. From these moulds several casts were taken in finely prepared clay. Before these casts were fully sun dried the modelers would carefully clean them and work out the finer details and polish them with chisels and give final touches. Finally, the finished casts would be carefully baked in kilns made especially for this purpose. Out of these plaques the best would be selected and put up on the temple walls. When one such temple was completed the members of the guild would proceed to their next job.

This folk art style continued to operate in this region even during the late 18th and 19th centuries within an indigenous sphere of tastes and practiced with an inherited pool of images, conventions and clientele. However, with the changing socio-political environment of the country during the colonial period a new turn is perceptible even in this traditional folk art form. From the beginning of the nineteenth century, there arose in the area of Birbhum several indigo factories which, in turn, brought in large number of Europeans more specifically British residents. Houses in neo-classical style sprang-up all over the region. Within the rural folk tradition these foreigners impressed their presence through their exclusive life style, dresses, architecture and superior status. The new settlers and their strange cultural ethos attracted the attention of the local clay modelers as well who were always looking for new and interesting subject-matter.

During the same period in the country a process of westernization of Indian traditions had begun in a planned manner in the field of art as well. The British, assuming a superiority of the European art over the Indian art, proceeded to introduce a new form and method of art work that was in vogue in England at that time. As part of a country-wide programme of art education in India they started establishing art schools in different cities of India where training was to be imparted to the students in the academic-realist style through the copying of imported western models.¹ However, the adaptation to new tastes, techniques and professional opportunities in art had preceded the establishment of schools of art and spanned many levels of native art practices outside its realm. The orientation of

native folk artists in Western style and subject-matter occurred less through direct training and more through such exposure to European works and their coming directly into contact with those.

It is observed that certain forms and images started appearing on the walls of the temples which had nothing in common, formally or content wise with the traditional images which mainly revolved around sacred or secular themes with an emphasis on iconography. Thus, within the rural folk tradition a small but significant departure is noticed. Actually, this was the result of the changing social order in the area. The local artisans took note of these developments in their surroundings that expanded their repertoire of themes and images and they started documenting these on the walls of the temples. Some of these were drawn from subjects typical of British culture, while most emerged from the immediate social scenario. The new subject-matter also led to a shift from the usual continuous narrative mode of depicting the religious themes to single frame images.

So, now, other than the images of the gods and goddesses there appeared on the walls of the temples the images of foreigners, Sahibs and Memsahibs with their pet dogs, ladies wearing gowns, hats and carrying umbrellas in their hands or sitting comfortably on low seats made of split bamboo and pretty women in their transparent muslin frocks looking out of windows or fondling their pet birds (Plate:2). Displayed on the walls are architectural designs of bungalows, shutter windows, doors, and typical Corinthian and Doric columns which were derived from the contemporary European structures constructed in this area. The artists found these new forms of buildings, which had recently been incorporated, of great interest as those were unique and very different from the local traditional architectural forms traditionally popular in the area.

With the change in the subject-matter is also perceptible a change in the modes of representations of the artist. Certain sophistication in the treatment of form is added to the earlier simple stylised folk idiom. Along with iconographic and narrative elements that formed the basis of the mythological sculpture, now an emphasis on naturalism is noticed in the articulation of human figure especially when the sculptor is working on European subject-matter. Thus, these works on the walls of the temples at Birbhum are probably the first of the kind where at least a tenuous contact between the traditional form of sculpture and the new European naturalist style and subject-matter was established. This syncretism is perceptible particularly in the facial features of the portrait heads of children and women as also in the individualised depiction of British personages of great significance. These terracotta plaques are believed to have been executed after the European engravings or early photographs which were probably available with the artists or were seen by them in the collections of European inhabitants.

Sometimes the intrusion of new European imagery on these temple walls becomes very pronounced and dominant as is evident in certain temples where the traditional imagery has been totally replaced by the Christian and European themes. In the Chandranatha Temple at Hetampur (Plate:3) a strikingly innovative conceptualization of the Devi makes its appearance in the centre of the tympanum as 'Simhavahini Durga' (Plate:4). Shown standing in front of an elaborate temple like structure,

TRADITIONAL TEMPLE TERRACOTTAS: INTRUSION OF WESTERN SUBJECT-MATTER AND IMAGERY

interestingly, surrounding the deity are the images of Europeans only and not a single depiction of any other local deity or traditional theme is there. On the top of this image is the portrait of Queen Victoria and just below is the heraldic device of the Imperial British depicting three lions with the Victoria Cross. On either side of the Durga segment are two interesting panels: in the one on the left is portrayed an invalid being brought to the goddess as if in supplication of her grace and on the right a girl is being led, by a couple, into the presence of the goddess apparently for the same reason (Plate:5). Next to these reliefs are displayed naturalistically executed portrait images identified as those of Queen Victoria, Shakespeare, on the left side and Lord Clive, and Byron on the right side of the central panels.² The rest of the space on the sides of the jambs has also been occupied by plaques with foreign subject-matter. One of these reliefs depicts 'Child Christ riding a Donkey' and another one shows a figure of an old man that has been identified as 'Moses'. In these works the modeller has combined folk simplification with Western naturalism to create evocative images in terracotta. There is also a rudimentary attempt at using gestures for making sculptures more expressive as was quite common in the western art.

The presence of such European themes and images on the temple walls in some inconspicuous corner could have been attributed simply to the curiosity of the local artisans about these foreigners and their life style. However, seeing certain images on the façades of the temples and that too next to the image such as that of 'Simhavahini Durga' is quite shocking and raises questions regarding the significance of their being at a place that is traditionally reserved for the main deity or the subsidiary deities whom the temple was dedicated. Thus, it is difficult to surmise as to why such themes were depicted on these religious structures. It is not possible to say with certainty whether it was done merely as a novel experiment or to please the Sahibs who lived amidst them working on indigo plantations, in lacquer, and silk factories and holding administrative posts of the district. However, it is most likely that the artist saw them as a part of his total milieu and was attracted by their distinctiveness from what he was used to look around and so, probably, he thought of documenting these on the temple walls. Or perhaps it could be that the patrons of these temples who were generally zamindars, brahmins, kayasthas, jewellers, betel leaf growers, lac traders, coal merchants, distillers and sellers of wine to be precise, in order to appease and associate themselves with the new social elite, desired the depiction of such themes prominently on the temples walls. There could be several reasons for this development but the presence of such imagery does clearly point towards the increasing foreign influence and power in the region and so these images actually appear to be in concordance with the new emblems of power and authority of the emerging British Raj in India. At another level the presence of images such as those of Europeans coming for seeking solace or cure from the intercession of the Goddess, may be, was the result of some settlers' growing faith in the healing powers of the local gods and goddesses.

In some other reliefs a pungent comment comes through sharply as the modeller adopted a popular earthy mode of satire, which hit out precisely against the rapidly changing social scenario all around him. An interesting example of this type of work is a panel from a temple at Surul where a native is being ridiculed for asking favours from a European lady (Plate: 6). Caricatured as a donkey standing on its hind legs, with hands folded and a muffler tied around his neck the man is looking at the lady beseechingly; she, standing straight, is amused at his antics but pays no attention to him. Besides, there appear images of prostitutes and nude women. Such works are few in numbers but are expressive of the artist's sense of moral discomfort and disorder in the new social order.

On the walls of the temple at Hetampur can be seen a rather sensual depiction of a "Nude Woman" (Plate : 7) where a clear departure from the stylised depiction of the human body is noticed. European naturalism becomes the apparent feature as evidenced from the rounded body and individualised features. A similar naturalistic treatment is noticeable in the figures of a couple from the same temple, "European Soldier with a Girl". It is interesting to see the efforts of the clay modeller occasionally working out various types of textures in clay, especially of clothes, flesh and varied surfaces which are very life like in their execution.

The eyes of the artist were always looking for new and interesting motifs beside the day to day life around him. Depiction of a "British Locomotive" in the Raghunath temple dated 1893 at Anandpur, (Midnapur district) and a "European Gailley" in one of the panels from an eighteenth century temple at Krishanapur (Hooghly district), executed in a direct and simplified way show the sculptor's keenness to document whatever is unique even though it had no relevance to the place where it is shown.

It seems that coming into contact with a foreign culture led to the expansion of the range of the subject-matter of the terracotta sculptors. The emphasis on physical details, a concern for varied textures and the apparently sensual characterization of some figures seem to have been inspired by a non- indigenous source.

This hybrid style that had evolved by the coming together of local folk mannerism and the Western stylistic modes, gradually began to be employed by the sculptors for the traditional religious and mythological subject-matter as well especially at Hetampur and Surul where, as has been discussed earlier, the artists liberally interpreted the secular themes in a photo-realist manner. Making certain concessions in the use of traditional norms of iconography and decoration, as for instance in the panel depicting "Siva and Parvati with Infant Ganesa" (Plate: 8) from Rasa- Mancha temple of nineteenth century, the modeller in an attempt to present the Gods in a naturalist manner has cast these figures in the academic-realist style of the West with an emphasis on individuated features. The

TRADITIONAL TEMPLE TERRACOTTAS: INTRUSION OF WESTERN SUBJECT-MATTER AND IMAGERY

family of the God Shiva sits on a high pedestal while his ride Nandi is crouching on the ground. The multi armed child Ganesa, in the centre, is trying to maintain his balance on the back of the bull while Parvati, whose face is modelled heavily, supports Ganesa by holding one of his arms. On the other side sits pot-bellied Shiva, his one hand put on the thigh of Ganesha. Even though all the figures have been provided with rounded limbs and realistic facial features it is the treatment of the bull figure that is most revelatory of the changing artistic intentions. The massive body of the bull with its head resting on one of the front legs is placed underneath the feet of its master. Its quietude and repose are realistically attained by modelling the massive body in broad planes and the detailed anatomical structure of the head and legs. The skillfully modelled soft creases of the flesh impart a natural feel and texture to the body. This kind of realistic treatment can also be seen in some panels in the temples of Kalikapur, such as in the one depicting “Siva with Brahma, Bhiringi and Narada Muni” and “Rani Bhavani with Female Attendants” where a striking mix of traditional iconography and naturalism is once again employed.

The number of such images is not large but their significance lies in the fact that these provided one of the first points of conjunction between the traditional iconography and subject-matter and Western artistic modes of presentation. The inventiveness of these folk artisans lay in the way they adapted to their changed environment, to its new facilities and pressures, and reached out to themes and imagery from within the enclosed space of their traditional community and work practice.

This tradition of building terracotta temples and decoration of wall surfaces with sculptures gradually lost its significance and completely disappeared by the end of the nineteenth century due to the major changes in the socio-cultural set up of the region that led to the break-up of village communities. The traditional artisans started looking for better avenues and many of them shifted to cities.

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TRADITIONAL TEMPLE TERRACOTTAS: INTRUSION OF WESTERN SUBJECT-MATTER AND IMAGERY



Plate : 1

TRADITIONAL TEMPLE TERRACOTTAS: INTRUSION OF WESTERN SUBJECT-MATTER AND IMAGERY





Plate : 3

TRADITIONAL TEMPLE TERRACOTTAS: INTRUSION OF WESTERN SUBJECT-MATTER AND IMAGERY





Plate : 5

TRADITIONAL TEMPLE TERRACOTTAS: INTRUSION OF WESTERN SUBJECT-MATTER AND IMAGERY

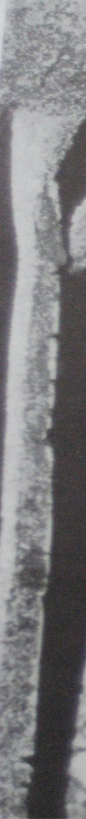




Plate : 7