

Terra Cotta - In Bengal and Tripura

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The evening twilight casts its parting glance on the good Earth. It is golden. It falls on the fields, on the river waves, on the receding sails of the boats. But it also falls on the golden terra cotta temples which are somehow showing their despised heads through the dense leaves of the forests. The temple bells do not toll any longer, homage and 'arati' have stopped. Will terra cotta be remembered again ?

Terra cotta in this part of the world is generally confined to temple sculpture. The term, "Terra cotta", borrowed from Italy, is really no more than baking the clay, in the same way a common flower-pot or a water-pitcher is produced. The result is the same in texture, and usually varies in colour from gray brown to brickred. It includes, among other things, dolls, toys, and particularly in this part of the world, outer decoration of the temple-walls with plaques or slabs. Subject matters vary from images of Dashabatar (ten incarnations of Vishnu), side-foes of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, episodes from Krishna-Lila to ordinary day-to-day social life, even rare moments of wild life, like a hard dappled deer. A very ancient, cheap, durable, quick and effective medium, terra cotta travelled along the Mediterranean coasts towards Middleeast, further to the Indus valley, and then down to Bengal and Tripura. Not so much known to other parts of the globe, terra cotta of Nok culture in Nigeria, was, incidentally, produced between 500 B. C. and 200 A. D. Till the closing days of the middle age, and even further later, Bengali artists were used to working with wood, stone, clay and paints in a concerted manner. But working in a spirit to produce monumental art work as a composite whole was nothing new in India, and if we look back at Ajanta, produced in early Christian Centuries, we find a concerted effort made by the genius in the fields of architecture, sculpture and fresco, using profound insight into bringing out the composite pic-

ture of a monumental art. This system, anyway, helped continuity of temple architecture combining bricks, woodwork and the art of terra cotta. Kanai Samanta in his 'Chitradarshan' cites a tale from "Vishnudharmottar Upapurān" in which the sage Markandeya explained to an inquisitive king that knowledge about the characteristics of an image of a deity calls for a knowledge of the principles of art, dance and music.

In Bengal and Tripura terra cotta has covered vast subject-matters, and in Bengal the places are almost innumerable. Let us have a quick look at them. In Tripura, Pilak is a new discovery, but the school is very close to Mainamati in Bangladesh. Excavation at pilak is still in progress, but in the meantime we have been proud recipients of several admirable works like a fierce bear, or flying 'Kinnars' (divine bodies), which will remind us of the flying monkey of Mainamati. Atgarh in West Bengal has revealed terra cotta seals and moulded terra cotta wearing Hellenistic costume, besides fragmentary pottaries of Sunga and Kushana periods. Bangarh, in West Dinajpur, revealed female figurines, seals, toys and plaques, some of which seemingly belong to pre-Mauryan tradition. Boral and Chandraketurgh, very near to Calcutta also have the remains of pre-Mauryan to Gupta times. Farakka, besides showing ancient terra cotta animal figures, contains hidden vestiges of an ancient port, playing an important role in the Far East. While Haroa and Harinarayanpur have yielded significant terra cottas of Sunga-Kushana affiliation, Karnasuvarna in the district of Murshidabad probably continued to show three distinct cultural phases from 2nd century A.D. down to 13th century A.D. Important seats, sealings, and potteries have come to light. In the seventh century A.D. Karna Suvarna was the capital of the king Sasanka. Mahanad has discovered terra cotta objects of different historical phases, namely, Maurya, Sunga, Kushana and Gupta. Mahasthangarh showing terra cottas of Sunga to Gupta age, has in one plaque a charioteer engaged in hunting. Mainamati in Comilla is very close to our place, and to Pilak. An important terra cotta Buddhist establishment, Mainamati has unearthed terra cotta sealings and plaques. The terra cotta panels and the carved bricks recall the terracottas of Paharpur. The antiquity of Paharpur probably ranges from Gupta period, and has shown remains and terra cotta plaques of innumerable varieties. Panna in Midnapur has offered a good number of

terra cotta figurines of Gupta affiliation. From Pokharna, in Bankura, Dr. Suniti Kumar Chatterjee collected a beautiful 'apsara' of pre-Mauryan era. Tamruk, the ancient Tamralipta, lying on the right bank of river Rupnarayan, has yielded by far the most varied and aesthetically significant terracotta objects. The Maurya period is represented by a very good number of terra cotta figurines, whereas the Sunga phase has an outstanding specimen, popularly known as the 'Oxford Yakshi' having been in the collection of a museum at Oxford. Some of the female figurines from Tamruk are visualized as wearing 'Chiton' like the 'Yavanis'. A terra cotta double headed deity wearing helmet, now preserved in the Asutosh Museum of Indian Art, appears to be the representation of Janus, the ancient Italian deity of war and enterprise. Tilda has yielded several Gupta terra cottas, one of which has a Greek inscription, which means 'The Wind that comes with the Dawn.'

Availability of raw materials usually determines localization and selection of a particular medium. This consideration alone nevertheless brought terra cotta into lime light. In the same place, and almost under the same roof, we have found in Tripura the stone sculpture and Terra cotta at Pilak. Flexibility of the raw material, simplicity of the process, scope for limitless repetition with moulds, durability and economy in respect of time and money, together with the easy availability of suitable clay by the river side contributed to the survival and success of terra cotta. Rivers were very close by, in each of the above places, even in Nok or Ifa in Nigeria, which I have earlier mentioned. In many cases, of course, stone was really not available. It could not offer the massive style of stone, but as S. K. Saraswati observes, "What it lacks in size is amply compensated for by the more abundant productions which indicate a more extensive and popular idiom of plastic expression,"

Generally speaking, terra cotta in India can be conveniently classified into two categories. The very ancient variety, which was found in the Indus Valley the form of which was carried on in later Magadh and in Bengal. It did not change, rather it chose to remain eternal. Stelle Kramrisch has termed this variety as 'ageless' and calls the other changing variety as 'timed variation'.

S. S. Biswas writes, "The terra cottas of 'ageless' type, representing the human and animal figures essentially of folk

origin, are generally made by hand and there is hardly any change in their execution and style through the ages." As a matter of fact, we still find this variety in 'Melas' and fairs in towns and villages. He goes on to ask, "Is it an ancient dictum that has guided the artists and artisans of this class of art to create such figures in a particular fashion from the beginning of civilization till today? The ritualistic use of terracotta mother Goddess or fertility cult figures and the similar use of animal figures produced even today in archaic form and style, may be the only answer." He goes on further to say, "It is therefore no wonder that the 'ageless' terra cottas which abound in the Indus valley sites also appear in the Gangetic valley of Bengal in diverse form without any significant difference in the simplicity of expression and technique."

The 'timed variation' style or the time-bound variety, on the other hand, has undergone the process of evolution of artistic movement and technique. Moulds have been abundantly used for temple decoration plaques and other purposes. But generally this variety is a variety of monumental constructions, of large-scale production, which was evidently patronized by the rulers or big people and had to change itself to cater to the need of time.

By the time the light faded on Tamluk and the places of very ancient terra cottas, the spot light was cast on other places of Bengal, on Karnasuvarna, in particular. Subject matters continued to be the day-to-day life, archers on chariots, musicians, the whole world of animals and representation of popular stories from the ancient texts. All these examples possibly sum up the pre-muslim terra cottas of Bengal and Tripura. Morning draw towards noon, and noon faded into dusk. Zulekha Haque writes, "The use of terra cotta art in adorning architectural buildings seems to have undergone a total eclipse in Bengal after the Palas.... For centuries after Paharpur and Mainamati we do not find evidence of continuity of this art form." Haque traces the reappearance of carved bricks in the ornamentation of the architectural early examples to the Muslims. She cites examples of several mosques.

Religious bindings restricted this period from producing human forms in terra cotta. There were no animals and birds. Instead geometrical forms and floral designs predominated. Close on the heels of this period, the eighteenth and nineteenth century temples are numerous. Latest excavation at pilak

yields specimen of both pre-muslim and new revival eras. Simha vahini temple of Ghatal belongs to fifteenth century, the Gokorna temple is of the sixteenth century. In seventeenth century, we saw the temples of Shyam Roy at Vishnupur and of Vasudev at Jorbangla and Bansheria. On the walls of the later two centuries are pictures depicting the European life; evidently prompted by increasing European advents in lower Bengal. But usual social life of Bengal also were depicted on these walls.

Artists were also named after schools in those days. Just as we term the musicians according to their "gharanas" (Vishnupur, Jaipur, etc), artists also belonged to "thaks" (Burdwan thak, Astakul thak, Chourashi thak, and so on).

In conclusion, one has to wonder why after eighteenth or early nineteenth century terra cotta temple architecture lost its glorious existence. All the rivers of Bengal still gently flow, the Ganga and the Gomati are still saving the ancient civilization relentlessly. Why then terra cotta ceased to survive? Is it because the wheel of history refuses to be on the reverse gear? Or is it because cement and the modern materials have arrived on the scene? But we are still using clay-bricks, the potter's wheel still produces utensils for our daily use. It reminds us of a saying which suspects that with the introduction of new architecture Europe has destroyed our eternal architecture.

In the words of the Vedic sages, "I (Vani) happen to be the foremost among the materials necessary for a sacrificial worship. The gods have placed me in numerous (forms and) places, immeasurable are my places of dwelling" ('Shilpayan,' Abanindranath Tagore). Terra cotta just happens to be one of them.

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