



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

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Abstract :

The 16th to 19th centuries are considered the golden age of Bengali temple architecture, with small clay temples with elegant terracotta decorations on their walls. The descriptive design and narrative storytelling of terracotta plaques are well known. The geographical, philosophical, historical, socio-religious, and cultural background of these temples, as well as their influence on the arts and crafts of rural and urban Bengal after the nineteenth century, are the focus of this paper. The conceptual discussion in this paper was built using data from secondary sources such as journal research articles, edited and published books, documentaries, and more. The history of these temples, as well as their influence on other art forms, were investigated. According to the research, terracotta temple architecture has become a symbol of Bengali Hindu artistic expression. The strong Vaishnavite and Shaivite philosophy influenced Bengali culture at this time. The finely modelled terracotta plaques of these temples represent historical shifts, the emergence of the Bhakti movement, and the influence of Muslim and Anglo-Indian culture. These ornate terracotta plaques had a major effect on Bengali textile design, woodwork, sculptures, painted scrolls, manuscripts, and metalwork.

Keywords: Architecture, philosophy, Bengal terracotta, Bengal arts, and Bengal crafts.

Introduction

Bengal is known for its temples. The terracotta temple architecture of Bengal is well known for its brick construction and decoration on the walls/surfaces among India's many temple architectures. The graceful and stylistic quality of terracotta decorations has made them very famous. The building's construction has given it its individuality. Only temple constructions from the 16th to 19th centuries AD have been considered for this debate, as these 400 years are considered the golden age of Bengal temple architecture. The brick temple architecture's meaning, philosophy, and history have all been discussed. The main concern of this paper is how this temple architecture and its surface decorations (terracotta) later inspired other Bengali arts and crafts such as textiles, metal crafts, wood crafts, painted manuscripts, and scrolls.

The Purpose and Philosophy of Temple Construction

Temples had developed themselves as a means of artistically communicating the Hindus' social, religious, and cultural evolution. These were inextricably linked to common idioms as articulated in cult association, Vernacular types, and illustrations of religious texts, and were never divorced from contemporary society's growth. The Bengalis' inherent philosophy is expressed in their temples. A temple is thought to be the 'ruler of the Universe's' holiest abode on Earth. As a result, the term 'Prasad' (which originally meant Palace) was most likely added to the temple. Temples are thought to be the abodes of Gods and Goddesses.

Hindu temples were not designed to accommodate huge crowds of worshippers. Humans were motivated to build temples in the vicinity of their homes by a deep religious zeal. This practice arose from custom, as people started to assign their favorite deities human characteristics. Deities were worshipped solely as natural Gods at the dawn of human existence, and had only existed in their magnificent imagination. There were no idols of these Gods at the time. Human beings became closer to one another over time as their imagined deities grew in popularity, and they started to worship them according to their own spontaneous rituals, customs, desires, and needs. Various god concepts (Vishnu, Shiva, Kali, Durga, Radha-Krishna, and so on) gave rise to a variety of symbols for which various forms of temples arose over time. Through their skillful and varied architectural architecture, Indian architects of various time periods satisfied the Hindus' spiritual thirst. Temples began to be built in large numbers in Bengal under the patronage of various royal families, displaying new styles and techniques. The simplicity of rural Bengali life, where most of these temples grew up, had a big influence on those particularly low vernacular structures. The temples of Bengal are distinguished by their low height among all temple architectures in India. The idea behind the low height is that God's house does not have to be a castle or a skyscraper.

The village folk needed to be familiar with Lord Krishna, Lord Shiva, or any other God or Goddess for that matter, so that they could identify with Him or Her more through love rather than awe or fear. This psychological component was prominent in Javadeva's Geeta Gobinda's basic philosophy (Court poet of king Laxmana Sena). The way Lord Shiv or Goddess Kali are treated by their devotees reflects the same

philosophy. The form and dimensions of these vernacular temples were primarily determined by a sense of closeness, intimacy, and simplicity.

The social importance of these temples can be seen in the various festivals held within the temple complex, where people mixed without regard for their social status. Temples were built primarily for public events, as shown by their prominent positions in the town or village centre. The open and raised form of these structures enabled devotees, priests, and the temple's creator / patron to see the deities inside from all sides, encouraging social interactions.

Temple Construction's Geographical, Historical, Socio-religious, and Cultural Context

The western portion of Midnapur, Bankura, Bardwan, and Birbhum districts, as well as Dinajpur, Bogra, and Malda districts, are covered by a fertile alluvial plain with laterite tract. The river system played a significant role in determining the province's fate. Large cities and towns flourished with magnificent buildings and temples due to the regular shifting of river beds.

Stones were used extensively in architecture during the Pala and Sena periods. Bengal's lowlands are surrounded by rivers and canals, and its alluvial plains are ideal for architectural growth. The wet, humid climate and the earth have an unusual relationship in this region. For thousands of years, clay has been used instead of stone as the medium by which Bengali sentiment and culture have expressed themselves. In this deltaic Bengal, stone is essentially a foreign imposition. It came about as a result of political and religious pressures.

Bengalis learn to embrace the theory of the impermanent essence of everything from an early age. They make clay idols of their Gods and Goddesses (Kshanikamurtis), feast lavishly during the puja days, and then immerse the idols in the river once the worship is completed. As a result, it is a device that borrows from Mother Earth and returns it to the same corpus. The Earth is an important part of Bengali life. Nothing can be permanent in this dynamic force of time, as the relationship between creation and destruction (which is the ultimate truth) illustrates. The change in building materials from stone to terracotta or brick was prompted by a shift in the historical, social, and political landscape of Bengal, as well as the country as a whole. It is evident from the evidence of the great epics of the Ramayana and Mahabharata, as well as Buddhist and Jaina literary sources, that Aryans from North India came in and made contact with the various tribes of Bengal centuries before the birth of Christ. Maurya's discoveries in Tamruk (Midnapur), Harinarayanpur, Berachampa, and Chandraketurah (24 Parganas) confirm this beyond a shadow of a doubt. The Aryan religion and culture were never fully embraced by Bengal's original inhabitants. Many centuries passed until the Aryan culture and the Bengali culture were integrated into the rigid structure of Aryan society.

The people of Bengal became closely identified with Puranic Brahmanism during the Gupta period, which paved the way for the growth and development of the cult / idol worship. During this time, Brahmins from other parts of India started to migrate to Bengal and settle there.

In 1710 AD, the Pala rulers established themselves. During this time, Hinduism's Bishnu Krishna cult rose in popularity. It was also during this period that the Bhakti movement flourished, thanks to the patronage of Puranic Brahmanism devotees such as Varmana and Sena kings (in the 11th and 12th centuries). In Bengal, Brahmanism made tremendous progress. The cults of Ganapati, Shiva, Vishnu, Surya, and Shakti began with Puranic Brahmanism.

Vaishnavism introduced Bhakti, or loving adoration of personal Gods and Goddesses, during the Gupta era. Vaishnavism later introduced the Radha- Krishna cult as well as the ten Avataras of Vishnu, which were well known during the time of Jaydeva, Laxman Sena's court poet.

According to the Damodarapur copper plate, Shiva worship in the form of a 'Linga' started in the 5th century AD. Shiva was primarily worshipped in his phallic Ihwara, Chandrashekhara, Kalyansundra, Ardhnarishwara, Bhairava, and other forms in the early part of the 7th century AD, during the Shasanka period.

The Sakti or Mother Worship cult has been practised in Bengal since ancient times and is very common among the people. The Tantric cult's growth in the 11th and 12th centuries AD aided Sakti worship in the Vamachara tradition.

With the Muslim/Islamic invasion and occupation of Bengal in the 13th century, the people's socio-political life was severely disrupted. Patrons of heretical art lost their social standing and influence. The dark period lasted until the Hussain Shah dynasty (1439-1519 AD) was founded at the end of the 15th century AD. Strong Islamic rule undermined Brahmanism's foundations, causing it to become oppressively rigid, overly orthodox, and class-conscious. Tantrism and Vaisnavism emerged in its place and rapidly gained prominence. Sri Chaitanya's (1445-1533 AD) religion not only elevated the status of the common man, but also accelerated the growth of literature, sculpture, and architecture. Srinivas Acharya converted Bir Hambir, the sovereign king of Bishnupur (Bankura district), to Vaisnavism. Vishnupur became a centre of this faith thanks to royal patronage, and the rulers adorned the capital in the style of Vrindavana by introducing Vaisnava festivals and erecting many beautifully decorated temples.

The Mughal dynasty established peace and stability in Bengal in 1574, as well as bringing Bengal into contact with North India. Furthermore, European trade and its massive annual investment influenced a significant shift in the province's economy. A new period in Bengali history began with political prosperity, economic growth, and the organisation of Vaishnavism into a sect. The vernacular literature, traditional pictorial art, and temple-building practises all benefited greatly as a result of all of these factors.

Bengal passed into the possession of competent Nawabs, Murshid Quli Khan and Alivardi Khan, in the first half of the 18th century, who kept the province peaceful and prosperous.

The worship of the Goddesses Kali and Durga became very common among Hindu society's upper classes. The author of 'Tantrasara,' Krishnananda Aramvagish, initiated the worship of Kali, also known as Mangala- Chandi. Manasa and Basabi, Banadevi, Dharmathakur, Sitala, Shashthi, Dakshin Roy, Kalu Roy, Satyapir, Bibima, and other folk Gods and Goddesses became famous, and both Hindus and Muslims offered offerings to them.

The socio-political situation became unbalanced in the Modern Phase, around the middle of the 18th century, when the Mughals became weak and the Marathas invaded the province. Political unrest drew the Portuguese Moughs and Arkanese pirates, followed by Dutch, French, and English merchants. The English claimed the East India Company's rights and established themselves as the country's rulers.

As a result, Bengal entered a new era in June 1857. In the nineteenth century, the British had largely settled down. Bengalis were hybrids in terms of dress, thought, emotion, and culture. The long-established artistic tradition and aesthetic sensibility were disrupted by the nobility's shift in perspective, which was a confrontation between tradition and reform. In the face of these crosscurrents, Bengal's traditional artists and temple builders made desperate attempts to survive, compromising with western architectural types and trends in the process. The growth and development of Bengal's temple architecture reflects the entire storey of the country's cultural evolution. Bengal's temple history shows that, despite cultural clashes, successive invasions by alien hordes, and the darkest days of tyranny, her cultural flame was not extinguished, since Bengal retained her spirit of assimilation, understanding, and synthesis while retaining a remarkable continuity of her own traditions and soil development.

Bengal's Influence on Art and Crafts

Bengali brick temple architecture is best known for the terracotta sculptures that adorn the temple walls. The temple facade is ornately decorated on a grand scale. The terracotta relief is done in a variety of forms, including human, animal, vegetal, and geometrical, from base to cornices and from ceiling to interior wall.

This is generally how the front face is handled. The figural works are composed in a number of plaques to complete the narrative and portray various legends and myths, not excluding secular and homely scenes from contemporary life. The vegetal and geometric devices are used to highlight the structural formation and to demarcate the areas of the narrative themes in the band-like panels. The plinth and some parts of the columns are usually used to represent contemporary life, as well as the Krishnayana and Ramayana themes. Scenes from episodes of the Ramayana are very common and can be found strewn across the facades. Rasa Leela is a superbly composed rounded medallion among the many motifs taken from the legend of Krishna. Floral scroll work creates the bands that surround the composition. The motif has become extremely common, and it is frequently used in temple decoration to achieve the most elegant effect.

The vegetal theme is typically comprised of meandering creeper and floral designs, which often resemble linear panel-like line pattern works. Throughout the piece, there are separate and individual lotus and ribbon ornaments that look like floral designs. The most effective geometric motifs are the chequers, which are organised in vertical and horizontal bands. It produces a pleasing light and shade effect all over the floor. The curved cornices are supported by bracket figures in graceful and stylistic forms.

Scenes from the Mahabharata, depictions of semi-divine beings like Kinnars and Gandharvas, as well as some hybrid animal figures, are significant among the various sculptures adorning the temple walls. In terracotta sculptures, a dancing group, a row of ascetics, scenes of war, Krishna Leela, Dashavtara, purana legends and tales, Anantasayin Vishnu, Shiva, Brahma, widely recurring figures of Radha-Krishna, Durga,

Kali, Jagannath, and Jain tirthankars are also depicted. The Radha-Krishna sculptures are very famous and prominently depicted in the temple panels as a result of Shri Chaitanya's Bhakti movement. The Shiva and Shakti cult is another frequently depicted subject. Many animals and birds, rather than human beings, are depicted in the terracotta sculptures. The influence of European culture can also be seen in the dresses worn in some temples.

These relief sculptures are notable for their sense of form delineation of lively action. All is arranged and ordered in a logical manner, though the pattern appears to become frail and mechanical in later works, reflecting the doctrine of a critical tradition.

These temples' terracotta sculptures are similar to some other art forms that flourished at the same time in the surrounding areas. 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, further demonstrates that temple art has had a significant influence on Bengal's other arts and crafts. Temple sculptures share several characteristics with woven silks, painted manuscripts, covers, pages and scrolls, and Kalighat paintings, such as the division of wall surfaces into square panels and the preference for long friezes on bases and cornices. The art of wood carving, of which only a few examples have survived in Bengal, has clear stylistic and technological affinities with terracotta temple plaques.

Embroidered quilts (Kanthas) from Jessor, Khulna, and Faridpur are well-known among all the distinctive textile items. These quilts sometimes bear a resemblance to scenes depicted on temple bases, such as soldiers in European garb, couples in neo-classical settings, and important figures in elephant-drawn chariots, as well as traditional themes from the Ramayana and Kamale-Kmini stories (form of Durga/ Sakti). The significant textile designs of Bengal are silk butidar sarees from Murshidabad, which mostly date from the 18th and 19th centuries. These sarees' designs are usually organised in a series of vertical and horizontal rows around a central rectangle. Figures, both Indian and European, sitting on cushions or European furniture- seats, stools with back supports, tables and couches, European ladies and men in contemporary long sleeved and flowing gowns and coats respectively, with traditional shoes and hats worn by Europeans at the time, like the officers of the terracotta sculptures are seen in these rows. Paddle streamers and railway trains with Europeans are two other subjects that can be found on Baluchari sarees (Bankura district), with at least one example of the latter appearing in temple art.

Wooden Carvings

Bengal has a distinct wooden temple architecture in which the pillars, capitals, braces, and beams are all curved with a variety of figures and decorative themes, though only a few examples have survived. Open mandapas at Atpur (Hoogly) and Virnagar contain some of the finest wood carvings from the 18th and 19th centuries (Nadia). The posts are twelve-sided squares with horizontal bands of lotus buds. Themes present in capitals and brackets are identical to those found in brick temple architecture's columns and wall panels. Though the style of these carvings varies from the low relief modelling of terracotta sculpture found in temples, the themes and forms of these sculptures are strikingly similar. The iconographies are very similar to the terracotta, particularly cornice friezes of 18th and 19th century brick temples, such as female

figure pose 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, and so on. Many carved gate, which can still be found in many temples, bear a striking resemblance to the terracotta sculpture. The gate, like brick walls, are divided into square ponds by bands of foliage pattern. Repeated figures are cut into the square doors. Pinnacle doors are stylistically and demographically similar to false doors in brick on temple facades as well as wall panels.

Manuscript Paintings and Painted Manuscript Covers

The covers of Bengali manuscripts are decorated with figurative art that is similar to terracotta sculptures. The covers are made of long flat pieces of wood in the shape of horizontal painting formats. Characters from the Ramayana, Harivarnsa, Krishna Kirtan, Gita Govinda, and Chaitanya are among the paintings' subjects. Compositions were more embroidered in 17th and 18th century examples. In terms of composition and figurative nature, the painted manuscript covers are similar to brick cornices and panels found in modern temples. The dancers' and musicians' postures, especially the bent legs, uplifted arms—sometimes holding hands—and flying scarfs and gaulans seen on the painted manuscript covers, are identical to those seen in Bengal temples in the 17th and 18th centuries. The enraptured Gopis and Krishna playing the flute are portrayed in the same way as on temple terracotta plaques. In carved covers and temple friezes, Yashoda is dressed as Krishna and Balaram, and a procession of herd boys with cows is almost similar.

A copy of the Ramayana by Tulsidas from the Midnapore district, dated 1772, is the most famous illustrated manuscript known from any part of Bengal. This manuscript's painting is divided into narrow horizontal strips and framed in square and rectangular panels with coloured borders. The sharp linear treatment of figures, the angular postures, and the application of dots and strokes on costumes are all very terracotta figurative art-like effects. The marriage of Rama and Sita, which was attended by ascetics and rulers, is comparable to terracotta panels. The subjects and scenes, such as Rama, Laxman, and Sita meeting in the forest with female companions, as shown by a tree and flowering bush, are similar to those on terracotta plaques. Even the palace setting's architectural features are identical. Standing figures in rather stiff postures with raised hands suggesting dialogue are similar to accessory figures found on corner plaques in temple art.

Scrolls that have been painted

The painted scroll (Pata), carried by artists (Patuas) from village to village to be displayed before gatherings to the accompaniment of music, is the most widely distributed form of painting in Bengal. The scrolls have a traditional pictorial arrangement or composition, with continuous rectangular compartments arranged vertically, each with a self-contained column. Scroll compositions also imitate terracotta friezes and panels in this regard.

Carvings on wood

In Calcutta in the second half of the nineteenth century, this little-known art flourished. It includes religious as well as non-religious topics. Rather than modern miniature drawing, the graphic form of woodcuts is closely associated with terracotta. The figures are angular shadows that contrast against the white background.

Work on Metal

The sharply model-led rearing animals, with their open snouts and curling tails, are terracotta animals, particularly those found on panels above the entrance arches of 18th century temples. In the same way that terracotta representations are mounted inside miniature houses, metal mounts of Gods and Goddesses sometimes mimic architectural settings.

Conclusion

The arts and crafts of Bengal are primarily influenced by terracotta temple architecture, especially the decoration of the walls with fantastic relief sculptures. Subjects, form, motifs, figures, objects, and other aspects of terracotta sculpture are reflected entirely or partially in contemporary Bengal fine art. By the end of the 16th century, brick temple architecture and temple terracotta sculptures had become symbols of Hindu artistic expression of the emerging social, religious, and cultural movement. The diverse range of temple styles is characteristic of Bengali culture, which is both dynamic and traditional. In Bengal, brick is a natural and readily available building material. Bengal was enriched by a plethora of eye-catching vernacular temple architectures during the late mediaeval era (16th-19th century). The arrival of Shri Chaitanya and the Bhakti movement, as well as the Brahmins' already prevalent orthodox doctrines, influenced contemporary Bengali social, cultural, religious, and artistic lifestyles, resulting in the construction of these temple architectures. The human form representing God was worshipped more by the common man during this period, i.e. around the 16th century – fear of God was replaced with worship out of love (Bhakti cult ideology)- a part of the village genre. Terracotta plaques are well-known in terracotta temple decoration. Terracotta walls, with their elegant and stylistic embellishments, represent the contemporary era in terms of sociology, religion, politics, and history. Temple construction in Bengal at this period was predominantly dedicated to Lord Shiva and Lord Krishna. The well-known terracotta ornamentations of these temples were inextricably connected to the temple's shape and form. The subjects, arrangements, compositions, space division, design, decorative motifs, figures, and elements of other art works, such as textiles, woodcuts, manuscript covers, metal works, and other related art and crafts of Bengal, were inspired by terracotta art.

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