

## Ancient Terracotta art of Bengal – a living tradition

**Dr. Meenakshi Thakur**

Head & Associate Professor, Department. Of Drawing and Painting,  
Faculty of Arts, Dayal Bagh Educational Institute, [Deemed University]  
Dayal Bagh, Agra – 282005  
Email - meenatk19@yahoo.co.in

**Abstract:** *Terracotta and clay sculptures occupy an important place in the golden pages of the history. In old times clay sculptures were exposed to sun to get dry and baked and later they were put in the ashes of open fireplace to harden them. After this process, these sculptures were kept in high temperature to give it a finishing of ceramic material. Basically the items that are made of terracotta and clay don brownish orange color. These objects have a very earthen look and it is this feel that attracts travelers from far and wide places to splurge their money on these. India has a rich heritage of Terracotta and unique and splendid works can be seen spread over different states and Union Territories.*

*Terracotta objects have been prepared and used by human beings from ancient times. Terracotta objects have been prepared and used by human beings from ancient time of human history in the form of household objects, ritual objects, aesthetic objects and sculptures. The pottery and votive figurines found from Egypt and Mesopotamia are claimed to be among the earliest findings of terracotta. India too has a long antiquity of terracotta assemblages, reported from a large number of Harappan, Chalcolithic and Early Historic sites. In recent times also several places of the country have notable terracotta traditions. West Bengal is one of such states where a rich terracotta tradition is found. This paper focuses on the ancient terracotta art of Bengal with emphasis to the present scenario of ancient terracotta art of Bengal and how the village painters express their creative skill through free hand clay craft. The present work attempts to understand different aspects of present day terracotta craft to throw light on ancient terracotta tradition of Bengal and its contemporary usage in modern times.*

**Key Words:** *Terracotta, Clay sculpture, Tradition, Skill, Contemporary, Bengal Terracotta art.*

### 1. INTRODUCTION :

Terracotta and clay sculptures occupy an important place in the golden pages of the history. In old times clay sculptures were exposed to sun to get dry and baked and later they were put in the ashes of open fireplace to harden them. After this process, these sculptures were kept in high temperature to give it a finishing of ceramic material. Basically the items that are made of terracotta and clay don brownish orange color. These objects have a very earthen look and it is this feel that attracts travelers from far and wide places to splurge their money on these. India has a rich heritage of Terracotta and unique and splendid works can be seen spread over different states and Union Territories.



FIG-1- Terracotta Mohenjodaro Mother Goddess.

The word terracotta means baked earth or baked clay. Clay is a dense, viscous substance which consists of silica, generally mixed together with iron, lime, magnesia and other colouring oxides. When mixed with water clay forms a tenacious substance that can be modelled into different shapes. Generally clay is a fine-grained material which is plastic when wet. It becomes rigid, stable and durable when it is dried and fired. Clay is easy to manipulate and a well-leigated lump of clay can be easily shaped into different art forms or sculptures using simple tools. The carved clay objects are first sun-dried and then fired in a kiln generally up to 750-800 degree centigrade, though the firing temperature and time duration of firing may vary considerably depending upon the size and amount of the objects. These fired clay objects develop a brownish-red colour and are known as terracotta, that are hard, porous and durable in nature. Terracotta satisfies the creative urge of human beings and also meets their domestic and aesthetic needs. Since, clay is considered as auspicious (earth = mother) terracotta objects also fulfil the ritual purpose of a community.



FIG-2- Female Artist making clay crafts of Bengal.

Terracotta objects have been prepared and used by human beings from ancient time of human history in the form of household objects, ritual objects, aesthetic objects and sculptures. The pottery and votive figurines found from Egypt and Mesopotamia are claimed to be among the earliest findings of terracotta. India too has a long antiquity of terracotta assemblages, reported from a large number of Harappan, Chalcolithic and Early Historic sites. A large sized mother goddess of terracotta is one of the best discoveries of Mohenjodaro excavation. The art of terracotta is still alive and thousands of families find livelihood in this age old handicraft. The traditional craft shows mastery of art and perseverance.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW:

- One of the earliest classifications was given by Stella Kramrisch in 1939. She stressed on the functional attributes of the terracotta in a particular social context. (Kramrisch 1939).
- Later on, A.K Coomaraswamy in 1956 classified the art forms into a) Popular art and b) High art.
- Calcutta University's Ashutosh Museum felt a need of preserving rural art heritage under Rural Art Survey Scheme and collected several terracotta materials. In consequence it becomes "one of the greatest depositories of the Indian Folk-arts" (Bhattacharya 2002).
- Among the descriptive studies one of the earliest studies was done by G. S. Dutt in 1938.
- More recently, Sengupta, Roy Chowdhury and Chakraborty in 2007 have published a comprehensive catalogue with detailed description and photographs of terracotta materials preserved in State Archaeological Museum, have also been covered in their book.

## 3. MATERIALS AND METHOD:

This paper focuses on the ancient terracotta art of Bengal with emphasis to the present scenario of ancient terracotta art of Bengal and how the village painters express their creative skill through free hand clay craft. The present work attempts to understand different aspects of present day terracotta craft to throw light on ancient terracotta tradition of Bengal and its contemporary usage in modern times. A huge literature review, plan for collection of different data from different sources and various methods and techniques such as a mixture of descriptive, empirical, qualitative, theoretical, historical, and observational tools were used to obtain multi-faceted information.

## 4. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY :

- To understand cultural diversity by recognizing different traditional terracotta art forms prevalent in the Bengal.
- To preserve, innovate, develop and promote the rich diversity and uniqueness of various traditional terracotta arts of the Bengal.
- The present work attempts to understand different aspects of present day terracotta craft to throw light on ancient terracotta tradition of different parts of Bengal and its contemporary usage in modern times.
- Therefore an attempt is being made to revive and bring terracotta into the mainstream of the visual art language.

## 5. ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS :

It is amazing that the art not only survived the upheavals of the ages but has excelled with the passage of time. The Early Historic period of the state is characterized by its fine terracotta art as evident from sites such as Chandraketurgarh, Tamluk, Mangalkot, Pandu Rajar Dhibi, etc. Traditional Terracotta art sculpture was made throughout India--in the Indus and Ganges river valleys in the north, Rajasthan to the west, and the Deccan Plateau, Karnataka, and Tamil Nadu to the south. However, because the quality of the soil of the Indus and Ganges regions was especially suited to the production of these clay objects, the greatest quantity of ancient terracotta's has been found there. Terracotta artists have produced sculpture that combine a high degree of technical expertise with considerable artistic inspiration, and the diverse range of cultural patterns and ideas they embody are frequently liberated from the usual stylistic and iconographic conventions. In recent times also several places of the country have notable terracotta traditions. West Bengal is one of such states where a rich terracotta tradition is found. This paper focuses on the ancient terracotta art of Bengal with emphasis to the present scenario of ancient terracotta art of Bengal and how the village painters express their creative skill through free hand clay craft. The present work attempts to understand different aspects of present day terracotta craft to throw light on ancient terracotta tradition of Bengal and its contemporary usage in modern times.

Bengal has a long, rich and a continuous presence of terracotta art from ancient times up to present day. Highly decorated terracotta tiles of the- past centuries still adorns numerous temples and adjoining structures in the districts of Bankura, Birbhum, Hooghly and Midnapur. The art of making clay tiles was known to the clay workers since Harappan time, but the idea of utilising these tiles for architectural purpose is, perhaps, an ingenious brain –child of the Bengal artisans. From archeological excavations, it appeared that terracotta tiles were used to logical excavations, it appeared that terracotta tiles were used to decorate temple facades in Bengal long before the Sultans came. At present some communities, mostly kumors (by caste pot makers), from different parts of West Bengal are engaged in making terracotta objects. The rich assemblage of West Bengal terracotta art forms can broadly be categorized as figurines in round and plaques. Figurines in round consist of human figures both male and female and a variety of animal figures. Female figurines mostly include Mother Goddess and mother and child figures. Male figures were also prevalent. Male and female heads are also found. Plaques were most numerous among the terracotta findings of Early Historic Bengal. As plaques were mould made these were manufactured in large scale. A wide range of motifs were depicted on these plaques. These can be divided into several categories on the basis of their thematic depiction. Other terracotta forms include toys, rattles, toy carts, animal riders, ornaments like beads, pendants etc. Among the terracotta female forms of West Bengal most common are the Mother Goddess, mother and child and the lady with auspicious hairpins commonly denoted as *Panchachuda* or *Yakshi* or *Apsara*.

The finest patterns of terracotta panels can be found in Bengal towns of Murshidabad, Birbhaum, Bishnupur, Hooghly and Digha. The theme is generally folk and the patterns are fairly highlighted with traditional skill and explicit artwork. The clay used is generally a blend of two to three clays found in river beds, pits and ditches. More often than not the fuel used is one of the local resources available in the form of twigs, dry leaves or firewood. The kilns where the clay pots are baked are operated at temperatures between 700 -800 degrees Celsius. The womenfolk in the khumbkar families are the potters who work on the wheels making the round necks and the upper halves of the pots. They also make solid clay toys and dolls which are cast in burnt clay moulds. Large figurines of gods and goddesses are also made in clay and generate a lot of income for these families. Terracotta, which is found mainly in rural parts of West Bengal, has found inroads into mainstream lifestyle with many household using the suraii, a clay pitcher used to keep water cool. Most rural households use terracotta feeding bins for cattle, tea mugs, clay pots for cooking rice, plates, tumblers, yoghurt pots. Most of the items though are of the use and throw variety.



FIG-3- Terracotta Tile Temple decoration of Bengal.

## 5. SUMMARY:

The terracotta Bankura horse of Bengal is quite famous all over the world. Visit any village in this state and you are bound to find the kumbhakars (potters) creating items of daily use on the potter's wheel. The source of their raw material is the rich, alluvial clay found in Bengal's rivers. These are shaped and fired in simple kilns. From pots, containers, plates for food to toys and ritual figurines, the Bengal potter moulds it all. Bankura horses are counted amongst the most famous crafts of West Bengal. They are used for decorative as well as religious purposes. These attractive horses, made from terracotta, can add class to any Bengali living room. The tools used for shaping them are made up of bamboo and stones. The body parts of the horse are created separately. Apart from Bishnupur, you can also get these unique horses in Biboda, Kamardiha, Jaikrishnapur, Nakaijuri and Keyaboti cities of West Bengal. The terracotta art is at its liveliest from in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century but gradually loses its rhythm. In the recent years this has again revived and now a days it is finding increasing popularity for interior and exterior decoration of buildings, shops, pavilions etc. A Good number of units in the districts of South and North 24-Parganas, Bankura and Nadia are engaged in production of Terrocotta tiles and other terracotta products. Terracotta manufacturing is one of the important crafts of West Bengal. As already been noted profuse availability of suitable clay and its plastic, easy-moulding nature might be one of the reasons for which terracotta holds a significant position in West Bengal's art and craft.

Nowadays terracotta items are becoming very popular in both urban and semi-urban places. Common form of aesthetic use of terracotta items is a variety of ornaments. Pendants, earrings, necklaces, and bangles with various designs are regularly used by girls and women. These are sold at good price in regular markets, fairs and different government sponsored shops in urban, semi-urban and tourist places. Terracotta tiles and furniture are increasingly becoming popular in urban centers. Terracotta tiles, terracotta furniture are commonly used as aesthetic items. Forms such as large decorative horses, elephants, along with others like pen stands, incense stands, conchs, flower vases, table lamps, decorative male and female forms, wall hanging decorative plaques, etc. are regularly used in aesthetic purpose. These are sold in different fairs and markets and have considerable demand among the urban folks.



FIG-4- Bankura horse of Bengal.

The terracotta art is at its liveliest from in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century in Bengal but gradually loses its rhythm. In the recent years this has again revived and now a days it is finding increasing popularity for interior and exterior decoration of buildings, shops, pavilions etc. A Good number of units in the districts of Bengal such as, Bankura and Nadia are engaged in production of Terracotta tiles and other terracotta products such as Bankura Horses. Terracotta manufacturing is one of the important crafts of West Bengal due which terracotta holds a significant position in West Bengal.



FIG-5- Contemporary Terracotta Jewellery of Bengal.

## REFERENCES:

1. Biswas, Sachindra S. (1981) *Terracotta Art of Bengal*. Delhi: Agam Kala Prakash.
2. Dasgupta, C. C. (1961) *Origin and Evolution of Indian Clay Sculpture*. Calcutta: University of Calcutta.
3. Dutt, G. S. (1938) "Bengali Terracottas." *Journal of the Indian Society of Oriental Art* 6.
4. Ghosh, Sankar P. (1986) *Terracottas of Bengal (with Special Reference to Nadia)*. Delhi: B. R. Publishing Corporation.
5. Kala, S. C. (1993) *Terracottas of North India (in the Collection of State Museum Lucknow)*. Delhi: Agam Kala Prakashan
6. Kramrisch, Stella. (1939) "Indian Terracottas." *Journal of the Indian Society of Oriental Art* 7.
7. Tripathi, Vibha, and Ajeet K. Srivastava. 1994. *The Indus Terracottas*. Delhi: Sharada Publishing House.