

## Pilak Terracotta Plaques: The Ancient Art of Tripura

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### Abstract

Architecture and terracotta is the concrete record of the history, the hallmark of an age and its people and of their tests, beliefs and achievements, ideas, feelings, and skills. It is not exactly known when temple building activities were started in Tripura. Through comparative studies of bricks, sculptures, and terracotta plaques found in Pilak in Jolaibadi region, historian holds the view that the Pilak civilization was contemporaneous with the Maynamati culture complex, which is now in Bangladesh. Pilak is located in the hilly region of Beloniain South Tripura, almost 100 kilometres away from Agartala and is spread over an area of about 10 square kilometres. This region is geographically connected with Maynamati through Arakan range of hills. The dominant form and style of the rock-cut images and the terracotta sculptures in Pilak carried the influence of Palas and Guptas of Bengal and is connected with the mixture of religious culture of Buddhism and Hinduism in a vast region stretching from the Arakan in Myanmar (formerly Burma) to Paharpur, Maynamati, Pattikera and Baxnagar. Scholars have noted that Pilak terracotta plaques from the Shyamsundertila Buddhist temple have close similarity with exposed remains at Paharpur and Buddhist Biharas of Maynamati in Bangladesh. The outer wall the Shyamsundertila Buddhist temple is decorated with the terracotta plaques on the lower part of the sidewalls. The molded terracotta plaques are of outstanding characteristic and stylistically dated to circa 9th to 12th century A.D.

**KEYWORDS:** Terracotta. Terracotta Plaques, Art and Architecture of Tripura. Pilak, traditional art.

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### Objectives:

- To identify the multicultural nature of the ethno-social visual culture of Pilak region in the ancient period of Tripura
- Emphasize on the diverse sources behind any ethno-social identity and their visual culture by studying the mythological and stylistic sharing

### Introduction:

1049–square-kilometre-long and three side bordered by Bangladesh, Tripura is the 3rd smallest state in India. Its population coming up to 3,671,032 constitutes 0.3 per cent of the population of India. It can boast of a rich heritage in art and culture comprising, among others, architecture, terracotta relief sculpture and terracotta plaques. About 30 per cent of the population are indigenous people belonging to as many as 19 different communities and they are described as scheduled tribes/ There are also a good many sub-tribes inhabiting Tripura. Kokborok people have formed the major community. The major ethno linguistic people living in Tripura are Bengalis. Among all archaeological sites there are two sites famous for terracotta architecture and terracotta plaques, one at Pilak which belongs to Jolaibari district in south Tripura

and the other at Boxanagar in Sepahijala districts in west Tripura, both site is very much famous for Buddhist architecture and cults.

In the literary logic, the word terracotta (Italian terra-cotta and Latin terra-cocta) means “baked clay “ or „ baked earth “ (Oxford Dictionaries 2013). Clay is the solid sticky material which contains silica, usually mixed and composed of lime, iron, magnesia and other colouring oxides. When mixed with water, clay forms a soft substance that can be shown in diverse shapes. Usually, clay is a fine-grained material which is plastic when wet. It turns out to be rigid, stable and durable when it is dried and fired. Clay is relaxed to manipulate and a well-levitated lump of clay can be simply moulded into different art forms or sculptures by using diffident tools. Clay is easy to function and a well-levitated lump of clay can be easily shaped into different art forms or sculptures by using simple tools. These fired clay items become a brownish red colour known as terracotta and becomes hard, permeable and strong in nature. Terracotta fuels the creative urge of human beings and also meets their domestic and aesthetic needs. Since clay is considered auspicious (earth = mother) terracotta objects made of clay several ritual purpose of a community.

### **Terracotta:**

The terracotta practice predominated during the urban time of Harappan civilization, which grew between 2700 and 1750 BCE (Jayaswaland Krishna 1986). A great number of human and animal figurines have been revealed at Harappa (Vats 1974), Mohenjodaro (Mackay 1998 [1938]), Chanhudaro (Mackay 1943), Lothal (Rao 1979), Kalibangan (Lal et al. 2003), Banawali (Bisht 1982) and other sites (see also Dhavalikar 1977). The animal figurines were mainly hand--modelled and Practised almost in all the Harappan sites. In maximum cases the implementation of their anatomy was realistic. Most usually represented animal was the bull (see Fig. 1.2). Amajority of bull figures give us the impression that probably Indus Valley had a bull cult (Sankalia and Dhavalikar 1969). Other animals include monkey, elephant, dog, pig, squirrel, buffalo, tiger, sheep, rhinoceros, antelope, tortoise, etc. In addition, birds, such as peacock, pigeon, cock, sparrow, duck, parrot, etc. also speak of the clay modelling quality and ability of the Harappan people (Mackay 1998 [1938]).

The mould-made terracotta relief plaque is one of the most characteristic types of votive offering. Salapatra (1993). Among the many Archaic and Classical terracotta relief plaques discovered in the sanctuary are such plaques as were discovered with other offerings in two votive deposits excavated at Amyklai, the fifth dome of Sparta, located about five kilometres to the south and a short distance south-west of the famous Amyklaio. (Salapatra (1993).

In Comilla district of Bangladesh, there is 16 km long stretch found in Meghna plains. Maynamati is known to be the Northern part of the long ridge and the Lalmai is known to be the southern part. It starts 8 km west of Comilla town. The widest part it is 5 km across and its crest reaches the height of c.50 m.

In 1984 the department of Archaeology and Museum of Bangladesh conducted the excavation of the site for the first time. It contains the structural remains of a Buddhist formation such as, among others, (a) a large four – faced cruciform temple (salbanVihara type) and (b) a small detached monastery. Alam (1992). The first one reveals a three-phase building activity while the second one two phases. Out of the three different phases of the temple, the first (earliest) phase has been exposed partly, the second phase fully and the third very superficially. A colossal stone image of the standing Buddha, a large number of terracotta plaques, ornamental bricks and other miscellaneous objects have also been recovered from the site.

It is not exactly known when temple building activities were started in Tripura. Bricks, sculptures, and terracotta plaques found in Pilak in Jolaibadi region, Unakoti and Boxanagar region prove the existence of brick temples at those places. Historians had dated them approximately to the 7th to 8th century A.D (Das, 1987). Through comparative studies historian holds the view that the Pilak civilization was contemporaneous with the Mainamati culture complex, which is now in Bangladesh. In these associations it is evident that this is one of the significant sites of the later phase of Buddhism known as Sahajana or Vajrayāna, practised during the mediaeval time of undivided Bengal, Tripura, and other regions of North East India. (Das,1987). The temple architecture of Tripura will remain incomplete without a brief note on the temple of Shyamsundartilla of Pilak. The outer wall is decorated with the terracotta plaques on the lower part of the sidewalls. The terracotta plaques are of outstanding characteristic and stylistically dated to circa 9th to 10th century A.D(Bhattacharjee,2002)

Clay can be considered one of the oldest building materials in the history of man after stone. Clay was and is being used for all conceivable purposes owing to its abundance and universal supply. The discovery of baking clay provided the permanence to the clay objects. This baked clay is called Terracotta. All over the world, across the ages people have transformed this heavy, dark and formless material into a lighter building material. They created their living spaces and adapted their architectural and constructive answers on the basis of the behaviour and properties of the soil

Terracotta as a material came into use out of the making of objects for daily needs like vessels, pottery, toys, seals etc. In ancient times continued to be used in the building of temples in the 15th-16th centuries AD in West Bengal. Until this period Stone had been the main material used in building temples. For the unavailability of stone and the availability of good clay, the terracotta was used in West Bengal to depict the stone carving and some time it looks like the enunciation of a wooden door. In the same period, from the 15th to the early 20th century terracotta was used as cheaper and easily available option for marble in some parts of Europe

Terracotta as a material till now has been exposed to different influences to reach up to the urban scale. From a material predominantly used for household and domestic use, it has been slowly shifted to building and construction industry. Nowadays with the help of technology terracotta has been experimented to its fullest. Considering its qualities and has been used in construction in certain parts of India. This paper strives to understand one stage of its transformation where terracotta was explored and modified in conformity with the need of that time in West Bengal

The direct influence of Buddhism can be traced here in Tripura. But it is not possible to tell the actual conditions of Buddhism and Brahmanism in Tripura in the early centuries of Christian era. The archaeological evidences, discovered from the Pilak in the Jolaibari region reveal the prevalence of these faiths in the first part of 7th century A.D. Buddhism and Brahmanism, which were prevailing in Samataka–Harikela mandala from the 7th to the 8th century A.D. in all likelihood influenced the southern part of Pilak-Jolaibadi zone. It is the fact that Buddhism spread from Bengal to Arakan, Burma and route Tripura.

### **Methodology:**

The proposed research paper will be done on the basis of frequent visual observation of the architecture sites of Pilak region and particularly by focusing the study on the unique moulded terracotta plaques of Shyamsundertila Buddhist temple. The research will also be concentrated on a comparative study of the different developments in

deferent areas such as Mainamoti of Bangladesh and Pilak region to locate their influences on the designs and shapes of the explicit forms and characters.

### **Result and Discussion:**

It is revealed in the above discussion that in the early edges the artist had the richness of the art during that time. Tripura State Museum and Rajendrakirtishala of JaharAcharjee at JaynagarAgartala abound in a good number of the ancient art works. JaharAcharjee collected in his museum several articles ontheterracotta of Tripura from 1970 to1995 andpublished them in theRajendraKirtishala silver jubilee volume.in2002...The Terracotta plaques of Tripura are different sizes but usually they are 8 x 6 inch in size. They are described as follows: 1. Lion the royal insignia (2) running deer (3) elephants (4) ornamental lotus leaves (5) figure of hanuman (6) flower and leaves etc. The Museum Terracotta plaques express in detail, devotion, culture and the belief of the mass people. .It is the proven fact that the terracotta art of Pilak Tripura spread out to greater Bengal. But we cannot deny the influence of Bengal on the terracotta art of Tripura (Nandi) A specific lion form is very commonly found in the terracotta of Pilak region. In Unokoti similar lion form is also found in the relief. The Tripura State Museum contains some terracotta plaques 8th and 9th centuries old which show the features and flexibility of the Gupta art whereasthe terracotta of later period 16th and 17th centuries shows different stylistic features which are similar to the art of Ahom period and the forms became more stylized and decorative (Nandi)

In Bengal artist like to work with clay because of its availability. No hard medium like stone is not available in the plains of Bengal. Therefore, Bengal artists have been expert in doing such jobs. Tripura terracotta has followed the style of Bengal this matter. The forms of terracotta art of later period have been highly animated and folkish in appearance. Some specimens of pottery are found here and there in the state but these arts are not significant in this connection in Maynamotiof Bangladesh in theComilla district. Large number of potteries are found inSouth West Tripura which is very adjacent to the place. It becomes evident that in the early ages the art has been practised in the state.

Currently, Tripura and Bangladesh have a similarityin respect of art and culture. The influence of Maynamati terracotta is felt in some part of Tripura.Still after the partitioning of India. Bangladesh has so many Buddhist sites like Buddhist Viharas and temples. In Tripura State Museum houses a number of the images curved on stone representing Buddha. In Shyamsundartilla of Pilaka good many Terracotta Plaques have been found, attached to the lower plinth of the architecture. They have been pasted on to the plinth wall of the four externalsides. The sizes of plaques are 8 x 6 Inch. Thereare around 100 plaques found among the all thefour external sites, but most of the plaques have been either stolenor damagedowning to natural calamities. Some of the terracotta plaques have been preserved in the State Museum of Tripura. The external plinth wall is decorated with a plenty of scenes presenting Hindu and Buddhist canons and a few scenes of daily life of Buddhist monks.

At present the region of Pilak is not so well known for Buddhist architecture in India which was made during the 6th and 8th Centuries. There are two Buddhist archaeological sites possessing vast relics of Buddhist and Hindu deities. One isBoxanagar which is situated in the Sephaijala district of Tripura and another one is Pilak.

Some visual references of terracotta plaques found in Shyamsundartilla of Pilak Tripura.



Figure 1

figure 2

Figure 1. Terracotta plaque size 8 x 6 Inches, found at Shyamsundartilla Pilak, South Tripura. The figure wearing a turban on its head is seen playing a Dhol, Photography by the author 2016.

Figure 2. Turtle, terracotta plaque size 8 x 6 Inches, found at Shyamsundartilla Pilak, South Tripura, Photography by the author 2016.



Figure 3

figure 4

Figure 3. Title; Dhyanamudra, terracotta plaques, Size 8 x 6 Inch, Shyamsundartilla Pilak, South Tripura, Photography by author 2016.

Figure 4. Title; Apsara, terracotta plaques, Size 8 x 6 Inch, Shyamsundartilla Pilak, South Tripura, Photography by Author 2016.



Figure 5

figure 6

Figure 5. Title; terracotta plaques, Size 8 x 6 Inch, Shyamsundartilla Pilak, South Tripura, Photography Taken by author , 2016

Figure 6. Title; Demons, terracotta plaques, Size 8 x 6 Inch, ShyamsundartillaPilak, South Tripura, Photography Taken by author 2016.



Figure 7

figure 8

Figure 7. Title; Lord Ganesha, terracotta plaques, Size 8 x 6 Inch, ShyamsundartillaPilak ,South Tripura, Photography Taken by: Author SubrataDey, 2016.

Figure 8. Title; fighter bowing arrow , terracotta plaques, Size 8 x 6 Inch, ShyamsundartillaPilak,South Tripura, Photography Taken by author, 2016.

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