

## SPECIAL FEATURE

# A tale woven in terracotta

Etched in the heritage of Bengal is a delicate artform that has been perfected over centuries. From the early days of the Indus Valley, to the grander reigns of Mughal emperors, terracotta art has always been an integral part of the Bengal culture. Requiring nimble dexterous hands and a fine eye for details, village artisans would spend hours along the river banks, sculpting divine figurines or capturing the everyday lives of ordinary men.

## GOING BACK TO THE BEGINNING

Granted that the lush land of Bengal had no marbles or abundant hardwood to carve; but what it did have was a wide variety of alluvial soil that could be moulded into any shape you could imagine. Differing in colour and textures, it didn't take long for the creatives of the early civilisation to realise the varied possibilities of this blessing. Even in the days of Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro, sculptors had carved detailed statues of deities. Adorned in a headdress and long necklaces, the Matrika (Mother Goddess) is just one of the examples of the terracotta wonders by early Indus artisans.

The terracotta you find at museums or even at shops these days hardly resemble the primitive carvings of the ancient Indus valley. Instead, they are a combination of intricate designs and modern techniques consisting of various local and global influences. Have you ever wondered how that evolution came about?

## THE ARRIVAL OF BUDDHISTS

Perhaps the earliest influencers of the artform were the Buddhist kings of the Deva dynasty. Determined to spread the word of the wise Buddha across their empire, the Devas built huge temples adorned with

terracotta figurines. Intricate walls or stupas with Buddha's teachings were built across the empire, the largest remains of which can be found in Mainamati.

When the devout Palas took over after



the Devas, they further encouraged the art to flourish. Elaborate terracotta plaques telling stories of gods and gorgeous statues of the Buddha were put up all over their lands. If you look at the works of this dynasty, such as in Mahasthan (present-day Bogura) or Paharpur, you would be amazed at the vast range of topics covered by terracotta art. Terracotta wasn't just decor for temples, but was also used to portray everyday lives of ordinary people. Whether it was a young woman staring from behind a half closed window, or farmers throwing stones at rogue elephants ruining their crops, artisans have immortalised the everyday lives of the people through their works. Buddhist motifs mostly focused on animal figurines and subcontinental fauna such as monkeys, elephants and snakes were prominent during that time.

## MUSLIM INFLUENCE

The dying world of terracotta was revived by the Muslims when they took over Bengal. As the Afghan-heritage Sultans looked for materials to build their massive Islamic monuments, they stumbled across the age-old terracotta for decoration. The fauna carvings of the earlier times were replaced by sophisticated abstract, geometric and floral patterns. With inspiration from the central Asian techniques of the Turkic world, exquisite mosques with terracotta panels sprouted all over Bengal. Combined with local motifs, Muslim terracotta art in Bengal thus developed a hybrid style, with a distinct personality of its own. Although most of the famous mosques, such as the Adina Mosque or the



Eklakhi Mausoleum are in West Bengal, there are structures on this side as well, like the Bagha mosque and the Darasbari mosque.

## TERRACOTTA POST BHAKTI MOVEMENT

Bhakti movement, or the practice of devotion to Lord Krishna, marked the regeneration of Hinduism in Bengal. As the 16th

century Bengalis devoted more of themselves to spirituality, terracotta temples were built all over Bengal. In fact, most of the terracotta temples you see are actually from this period. From the famous Kantaji temple in Dinajpur, to the lesser known beauties of Pabna, Jashore and Rajshahi, terracotta decorations now told mythological tales of Ramayana, the Mahabharata and Krishna, as well as everyday lives of ordinary people. While that does sound like the Buddhists from the Pala Dynasty, the reliefs were much deeper, and the art itself more sophisticated. The wide walls and the curved arches of the temples depicted both floral patterns and animal figurines. Terracotta art was finally immortalised.

So, where is it now?

Scattered across the country, from simple one-room temples to elaborate mosques, you'll find terracotta almost everywhere you go. If you follow a specific route, then you wouldn't need a history book to notice just how much the style changed over time. Start at the sites of Mainamati and Paharpur. Then, move to Bhasu Vihara in Bogura. Subtle changes in the art shows how the artisans became more skilled. With mosques like the Atia Mosque in Tangail, you could see how Islamic influences affected terracotta. Finally, end your visit at Kantaji temple of Dinajpur. The evolution of art over the centuries is hard to miss, especially if you compare those of Mahasthan to that of the ones in the nineteenth century.

By Adiba Mahbub Proma

Photo: LS Archive/Sazzad Ibne Sayed

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