

BEYOND THE BOUNDARIES OF RELIGION: FOLK LIFE IN THE SCULPTURES OF BISHNUPUR TEMPLE IN WEST BENGAL

Tanmay Sen

Assistant Professor, Amity University, Kolkata

ABSTRACT

This paper analyses from the perspective of Fine Arts how the sculptures of the terracotta temples of Bishnupur region of Bankura district of West Bengal reflect diverse aspects of folk life beyond religious depictions. In addition to gods and goddesses, the Malla dynasty temples of Bishnupur also depict agriculture, dance and music, politics, hunting and general public life. Through these scenes, the temples are considered not only places of worship, but also as a moving social and cultural document. The article analyzes the patterns of terracotta panels from temples like Jor Bangla, Shyam Rai, Madan Mohan and Rasmancha, where the daily lives of farmers, musicians, soldiers, kings and subjects are depicted with imagination and artistic technique. The similarities and differences between the terracotta art of Bishnupur and the depiction of daily life in Ajanta cave paintings and Mughal miniatures are also discussed. This article proves that folk culture and social reality are an important part of temple-based pictorial language. Through sculpture, artists have not only highlighted religion, but also the underlying form and rhythm of life. From this perspective, the terracotta art of Bishnupur is not only a symbol of religious practice, but also a historical and aesthetic socio-pictorial.

Keywords: 1. Bishnupur Temple Sculpture 2. Terracotta art 3. Folk life and culture 4. Social history of Bishnupur 5. Visual documentation and art theory

INTRODUCTION

Bishnupur, a city in Bankura district of West Bengal, is famous not only for its music and art, but also for its terracotta temple sculptures. Although these temples, built under the patronage of the Malla kings between the 16th and 18th centuries, are primarily symbols of Vaishnavism, the sculptures transcend religious boundaries and reveal a multidimensional picture of folk life. The Shyam Rai Temple, Madanmohan Temple, Jorabangla Temple and Rasmancha, built during the reigns of kings such as Raghunath Singh (reign: 1700–1720), Birham Malla and Hambir Malla, are not just architectural monuments—they are a complete script, where society, culture and time are present together. In the terracotta panels of Bishnupur, we see images of farmers plowing, beharas carrying palanquins, soldiers riding horses, hunting scenes, women carrying water on their heads with pitchers, or musicians playing musical instruments. These are not just decorations—but a living document of the lifestyle, class structure, and folk culture of the time. These scenes create a "visual narrative" that juxtaposes the everyday reality of ordinary people with the mythological stories of gods and goddesses. In this article, the aesthetics and iconographic methods of Fine Arts are used to analyze this distinctive feature of the temple sculpture of Bishnupur. Comparisons are made with Mughal miniature art and the cave paintings of Ajanta—where we also see reflections of the royal court, dance, music, and public life. This perspective helps us understand—the temple art of Bishnupur is not just a means of religious worship, but a pictorial language rich in the history of society, which has become an indispensable document of the folk life of Bengal. There is a pictorial difference in the motifs of the Bishnupur terracotta temple built during the Malla kings. The influence of all types of

painting from Mughal to Chinese can be seen in these. Mughal painting, dragons prove it. In Jorbangla, Shamra, these temples depict the Mughal court, the Mughal-Portuguese struggle. Only in the temple sculptures of Bishnupur has such a diverse and diverse collection of motifs been found. (Mukherjee, T. (2018).)

Aims and objectives of the research

1. Identify and analyze elements of folk life in the temple sculptures of Bishnupur.
2. Observation from an artistic perspective of the representation of farmers, dancers, musicians, hunters, soldiers, etc.
3. These sculptures are documents of society and culture.

Context and Historical background

Between the 16th and 18th centuries, the city of Bishnupur in Bankura district of West Bengal became an important cultural center under the Malla kings. During this time, under the patronage of Raja Birham Malla, Raghunath Singh and Gopal Singh, several terracotta temples based on Vaishnavism were built, the architecture and sculptures of which are indicative of a special artistic consciousness of the Bengal region.

Temples such as Shyam Rai (1643), Jorabangla (1655), Madanmohan (1694) and Malleshwar (1726)—their decorations not only depict mythological or religious stories, but also various scenes of contemporary society and folk life. Farmers, hunters, musicians, women carrying water, soldiers riding horses—such sculptures bring to our eyes an aesthetic and realistic social picture of a time.

These sculptures are not just decoration—they are an alternative reading of history; it can be called “Visual Social Documentation.” This coexistence of religion and folk culture shows that the artists have taken on the responsibility of highlighting reality and life practices along with aesthetics. (Massachusettsian, 1972; Santra, 1980)

The influence of folk paintings and Mangalkavya: Living stories within sculpture

The stories and metaphors of the Patachitra and Mangalkavya genres, which are closely related to the soil of Bengal, such as Chandimangal, Manasamangal or Dharmamangal, have found their unique expression in the temple sculptures of Bishnupur. Although these temples are mainly symbols of the Vaishnavism religion, many of the narrative sculptures present there are actually influenced by folk literature and painting. The main attraction of Mangalkavya was the depiction of divine powers as well as public life—such as the procession of the beharas pulling palanquins, women carrying water, fishermen catching fish, snake flute playing, etc. We see exactly these scenes in the terracotta panels of the Jorabangla, Shyamraya, and Madanmohan temples.

Jorabangla Temple: Scenes of cavalry and hunting

The decoration of the terracotta temples of Bishnupur not only depicts mythological stories but also the daily activities of ordinary people. One of them is agriculture, which clearly shows the economic basis of the society and the labor-centered lifestyle of the time.

In particular, the terracotta panels of the Jorabangla Temple (1655) and the Shyamraya Temple (1643) depict many scenes of agricultural life. Here, a farmer is seen cultivating the land with the help of an ox, while a woman is carrying a basket on her head or a load of rice on her shoulders. These images are not mere decoration, but rather they reflect the family-based production system of Bengal, where women's labor is also represented equally (Michell, 1983, p. 84; McCutchion, 1972, p. 41).

Notable Scene:

A panel on the west side of the Jorbangla Temple shows—Two oxen pulling together, a farmer wearing a dhoti tied around his waist, cultivating, and a woman carrying a basket on her head, collecting crops, walking next to him.

Analysis of this scene shows—the sculptors were not limited to religious interpretations. Rather, they gave space to social reality in their sculptural language. This presentation is a kind of visual ethnography, where agriculture is not only a means of livelihood, but also the creative basis of society.

These images reveal the interrelationship between man and nature—where oxen, land, and farmers participate in a natural cycle of production. The presence of women shows—although there was a gendered division of labor in the agricultural society of the time, women's role was not secondary.

The eminent art historian Thomas Donaldson has called these sculptures “socio-ritual compositions,” where the basic structure of society also developed within the framework of religion (Donaldson, 1987, p. 103). On the other hand, McCutchion (1972) believes that such plaques “provide an unparalleled insight into the material culture of pre-colonial Bengal.”

Here, the artist's role is not only technical, but also socio-philosophical—who provides a deep reading of the reality of the time, the structure of production, and ethnicity.

Bishnupur is famous not only for its terracotta temples but also for a distinct genre of Indian classical music—the Bishnupur Gharana. This genre began in the early 17th century, when musicians expelled from the Mughal court took refuge in Bishnupur. Under the patronage of King Raghunath Singh, music became a noble art form. As a result, music and dance emerged as visual elements in the religious architecture of Bishnupur.

In particular, the terracotta panel on the south side of the Madanmohan Temple (1694 AD) shows five musicians sitting together playing musical instruments. One of them is playing the flute, another the mridangam, a third the cymbals, and another the veena or sarod. A woman is depicted dancing next to them, whose posture and facial expressions clearly indicate a performing situation. Although the subject matter can be assumed to be part of the Radha-Krishna Leela, the sculptural arrangement, the type of musical instruments, and the attire suggest that it is a reflection of the actual musical practice of the time (McCutchion, 1972, Plate 18; Santra, 1980, p. 26).

From these terracotta panels we can understand how the artists of Bishnupur, going beyond religious context, gave space to their surrounding cultural reality on the temple walls. Analyzing the form and arrangement of the musical instruments, it is clear that these are not just mythological decorations, but continuous resonances of social life. Such depictions of music are not merely a commemoration of an event, but rather prove that the cultural exchange between folk culture and the royal court was firmly established through sculpture.

David McCutchion writes in this context:

“The representation of musicians in temple sculpture in Bishnupur is more than a devotional narrative; it reflects a living musical culture that flourished under royal patronage.” (McCutchion, 1972, p. 58)

Donaldson also says that this musical and performing arts presentation essentially transformed the temple into a social stage—where religion and culture complemented each other (Donaldson, 1987, p. 107).

Dance and the female image: The nexus of religion, aesthetics, and social life

The presence of women in the temple sculptures of Bishnupur is not limited to religious symbols, but is an expression of a larger aesthetic and social consciousness. Through terracotta, women's body postures, facial expressions, clothing, ornaments, and dance scenes have become a document of a real and folk way of life.

Shyamraya Temple: Depiction of Gopi Dance

The Shyamraya Temple (1643 AD) is one of the most pictorial temples of Bishnupur, and it is here that the 'Raslila Dance Painting'—the finest example of female dance expression in Bishnupur terracotta art—is found. One panel shows the Gopis standing in a circular formation, facing each other. Each has a different dress and posture, and is adorned with a necklace, earrings, and a nupur—purely Bengali folk jewelry (Donaldson, 1987, p. 103). This dance performance is not only a part of the mythological Radha-Krishna love, but also a reflection of the social status, cultural affiliation, and aesthetic taste of Bengali women.

"The Raslila scenes of the Shyam Rai temple go beyond the mythic to reflect the rhythmic presence of women in cultural expressions of the time"—(Donaldson, 1987, p. 104)

Jorabangla Temple

Here, women are seen engaged in household chores—carrying water, sweeping, and rocking babies. These terracotta sculptures are not just depictions of domestic life, but also visual representations of women's hard work, care, and active roles in society (Santra, 1980, pp. 24–25). The artists have depicted women's daily lives with sincerity and realism.

Madanmohan Temple

Here, there are female statues dancing in the context of musical practice. A dancer is seen bending her waist and raising one leg to the beat of cymbals and mridangam (McCutchion, 1972, Plate 18). This clearly reflects the style of folk dance.

The subtle expression of women's gestures and the precise depiction of jewelry are a distinctive feature of the terracotta art of Bishnupur. The expressions on the faces show a sense of calm, joy, or concentration—which conveys the heartfelt feelings within the dance. In addition, the jewelry collection clearly captures the traditional Bengali designs such as bangles, anklets, amulets, and flower ornaments in the hair (Michell, 1983, pp. 82–84).

"Unlike pan-Indian representations, the women in Bishnupur temples are distinctly local in ornament and attire, portraying regional aesthetics vividly."—(Michell, 1983, p. 84)

Household, family and women's roles

The depiction of women in the temple sculptures of Bishnupur is not limited to religious or mythological symbols, but rather reflects various aspects of the real life of the society of that time. Women's domestic responsibilities, child-rearing, fetching water, preparing food, etc., which are generally considered to be part of the household, have found a place here as individual sculptures.

The east and south panels of the Madanmohan temple show women carrying water in pitchers on their shoulders, cooking next to an earthen stove, and even rocking babies in their laps—although these images are apparently everyday life, their artistic expression is very delicate and sincere. Looking at these images, researcher McCutchion comments—

"The depiction of women with pitchers, children, and domestic utensils affirms the integration of household tasks into the temple's narrative program, beyond divine myths."

— (McCutchion, 1972, p. 61)

The panels of the Jorbangla temple show women kneading clay, carrying grain in baskets, or cooking. They inject a human reality into the religious narrative, where, alongside the idea of God, the main driving force of social life—women's labor—is acknowledged.

Donaldson says in this regard,

“Scenes of women engaged in cooking or household tasks, subtly embedded in the sculptural friezes, highlight the silent labor economy that sustained the larger community.”— (Donaldson, 1987, p. 109)

Hunting, Politics, and Military Power: Sculptures of the Glory of the Malla Kings

The terracotta sculptures of Bishnupur not only depict religious stories, but also the political realities and glory of the state. During the rule of the Malla dynasty, especially Birham Malla and Raghunath Singha, Bishnupur was an independent and well-organized feudal state. That political power, valor and military prowess are recorded in the temple art of Bishnupur in the form of symbolic sculptures.

The western panel of the Jorbangla temple contains several hunting scenes. In one scene, a king is seated on an elephant, flanked by guards and a pack of dogs, chasing wild animals. The use of bows, arrows and spears here suggests the reality of historical hunting, while at the same time symbolizing royal power.

Through this scene, the Malla kings used hunting scenes as a symbol of their power, courage and the extent of their kingdom. This is not just a story of joy, but also a political.

Terracotta panels from the Malleshwara temple depict soldiers on horseback, carrying shields, swords and sometimes spears. Their dress, adornment and posture suggest that they are preparing for war, or are engaged in guard duty under the orders of the ruler.

These scenes depict the military administration of the Malla kings, which is evidence of their organized power against local landlords and external attacks (Michell, 1983, p. 90).

Some terracotta panels also depict scenes from the court of the Malla kings, where they hold meetings, judge their subjects, or perform some formality. Through these, the artists also highlight the legal and administrative legitimacy of royal power in the society of the time. A western panel of the Madanmohan Temple shows a king seated on a throne, with a few men standing before him—like subjects, some of whom are thought to be holding documents or papers. Their expressions show a look of respect or submission.

This scene could be a courtroom or a moment of administrative decision. The artists here have presented the king not as a mere mythological figure, but as a living ruler, a just and controlling figure in society.

Analysis of the terracotta panel

The temple sculptures of Bishnupur are unique in their depiction of the folk life of Bengal. They are not limited to religious interpretations but create artistic translations of a complex socio-political reality. Each panel is a visible sociology. First, the depiction of music and dance, such as the five musicians and dancing women seen in the southern panel of the Madanmohan temple, clearly reflects the cultural life of the time (McCutchion, 1972). The intricate carvings of musical instruments such as the mridangam, cymbals, veena, flute, etc. are not just instruments, but also evidence of the classical and folk music practice of Bengal. In these sculptures, the artists have expressed the inner aesthetics of rhythm through the emotions of body language and facial expressions. Secondly, the depiction of agricultural

work and rural life—such as ploughing, pulling ox carts, transporting crops—has a sensitive approach to reality. These are not just crafts, but also continuous documents of economic life.

In the depiction of women, the Gopinritta of the Shyamraya temple, the water-carrying woman of Jorbangla, the mother holding a child in her arms, the cooking scene—all have transformed the social and domestic role of women into a humanistic art form. Ornaments, clothing, and body language can be considered as the industrialization of women's real being.

The political and hunting scenes, such as those seen in the Malleshwara temple—the king riding an elephant, the guard with a sword in his hand, the hunting dog—are not only mythological forces, but also political descriptions of the ruler. The depiction of the royal court or the courtroom reveals administrative reality. The artistry of these sculptures is evident in their exquisite carvings, deep grammatical knowledge of each scene, mastery of framing, balance of composition and repetition of form, which have created a distinctive style. This is where the skill of the terracotta artists of Bishnupur lies—they have not given reality a mythological transformation, but rather have re-established reality within mythology. These paintings are historical documents, cultural documents, and living expressions of art. Therefore, these sculptures are not just temple decorations—they are self-portraits of society through the eyes of an artist.

CONCLUSION

The temple sculptures of Bishnupur are not merely religious art; they are an unprecedented visual document of the social, cultural and economic life of Bengal. This study has revealed that each terracotta plaque represents a segment of society, which is of great value for historical research.

In the future, comparative studies of these sculptures can be further expanded with folk art from other regions of India and the terracotta tradition of Southeast Asia. In addition, 3-D mapping of these sculptures and creation of interactive archives with the help of digital technology will help to open this treasure to the world culture.

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