

MATERIAL

TERRACOTTA ARCHITECTURE IN WEST BENGAL

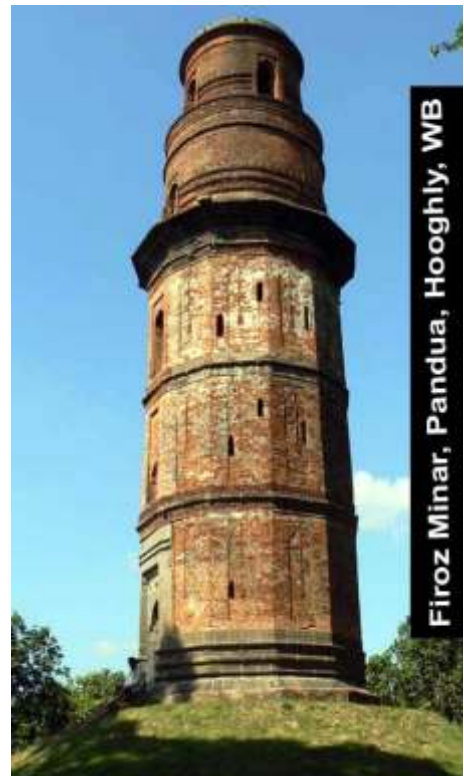
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The word **terracotta** has its etymology in the Latin phrase "**terra cocta**", which became "**terra cotta**" (meaning 'baked earth') in the Italian language, and subsequently the term 'terracotta' came into being in the 18th century.

Terracotta Sculpture and Murals are Bengal's own wealth. Since Bengal lacks stone and has only alluvial deposits, Bengali sculptors choose this reddish clay material for their artwork. The history of Terracotta sculptures start from the Mauryan age (324-187 BC), though there are some evidences of pre-Mauryan sculptures also as found in *Harinarayanpur* and *Pandu Rajar Dhibi* of West Bengal. Although there is plenty of evidence of human settlement in Bengal from prehistoric times but there are regrettable dearth of evidence. This is because of the soil structure of Bengal. The community being spread on the alluvial plain of the mighty rivers of Ganges, Brahmaputra the whole region is susceptible to flood and its resulting unsettling geographical pattern. The only somewhat undulated regions being the western chotnagpur and the Himalayan ridges of east and the north. This soil structure is reflected in the building material chosen by the Bengali temple designers. Mainly the terracotta temples with elaborate surface decorations and lettering written in nagari alphabets. The roof structure also has been the effect of the heavy rainfall that the Ganges river delta and the Terai experiences throughout the monsoon, it has been curved effectively in most cases to get rid of the huge amount of water as soon as possible and thereby increasing the life time of the structure.



The architectural evidence generally has been from the Gupta Empire period onwards. There has been a recent discovery of terracotta plaques from the times of Chandraketurgarh and Mahasthangarh that is situated presently in Bangladesh throwing additional light on the architectural styles of Sunga and Gupta periods.

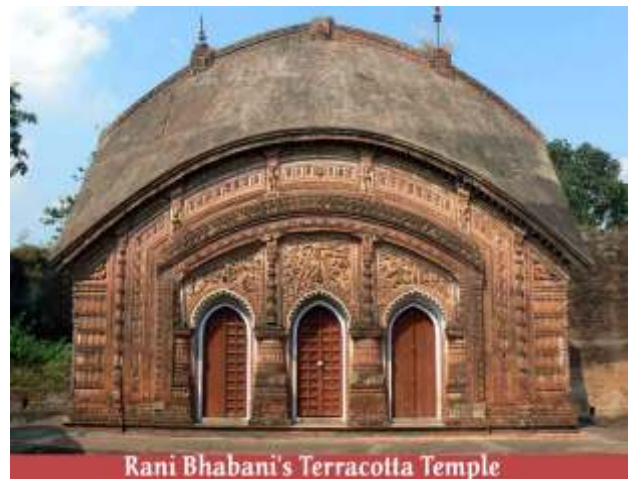


Apart from the Palavi and Phamsana influence on the architectural style it is also closely connected to the Bhanja style of temples from Mayurbhanja district of Orrisa. But the temples of south Bengal is a distinction due to its roofing style so unique and closely related to the paddy roofed traditional building style of rural Bengal. Bishnupur in the southern district Bankura of West Bengal has a remarkable set of such temples which being built from the Malla dynasty are examples of this style.

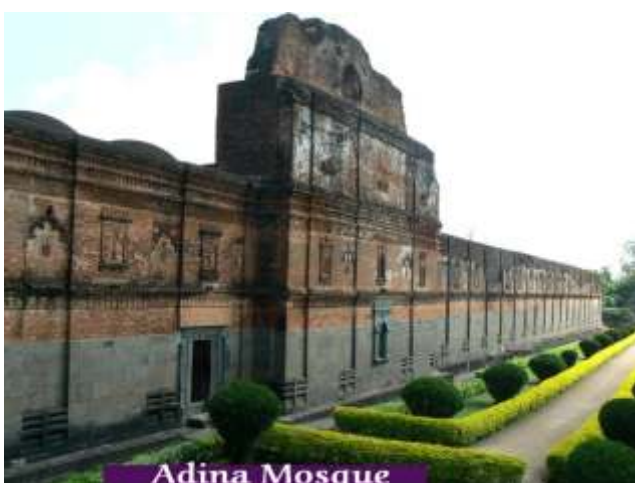
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Most of these temples are covered on the outer surface with terra cotta reliefs which contains plenty of secular materials making these important to reconstruct the social structure from these times. The temple structures contain gabled roofs which are colloquially called the chala, For example a gabled roof with an eight sided pyramid structured roof with be called "att-chala" or literally the eight faces of the roof. And frequently there is more than one tower in the temple building. These are built of laterite and brick bringing them at the mercy of severe weather conditions of southern Bengal. Dakshineswar Kali Temple is one example of the Bhanja style while the tdditional small temples of Shiva along the river bank are example of southern Bengal roof style though in much smaller dimension.



Like the temples of Paharpur, the pedestals of cross-shaped main temple of Shalvan Vihara at Mainamati was also decorated with a row of terracotta plaque sculptures. In this era the excellent art examples of Terracotta can be found from Bengal. Much sophisticated versions of plaques compared to that of Paharpur and Mainamati have been found from Bhasu Vihara, which are thirty-four in numbers. These plaques reveal much advancement of style. Half-man, half-fish or flower, pearl string on duck's beak, elephant, and archer are some noticeable examples of this plaques. In the period of thirteen hundred to fifteen hundred century Muslims ruled Bengal and thus Islamic architectural style and craftsmanship god mixed with Bengal's old tradition and heritage and led to the development of new style in sculpture and architecture. The local artists started intermingling Islamic calligraphy and geometric designs with elements of Hindu culture as lotus, bell with chain, intertwined flowers, creepers and leaves, and thus a unique tradition of architectural ornamentation developed. Examples of this new tradition can be found in Zafar Khan Ghazi's Mosque, Chhota Pandua Minar, Adina Mosque, Eklakhi Mausoleum, Tantipada Mosque, Bagha Mosque, Atiya Mosque and many more.



In the sixteenth century AD Vaisnava religion became very popular and as an influence there was resurgence of Hindu culture in Sculpture and architecture. Most Terracotta temples of Bengal were built during the period of late nineteenth century to early nineteenth century. Such wide and varied use of terracotta plaques as architectural murals has never occurred in the art history of Bengal. The Visnupur Temple of Bankura found in seventeenth century and Kantaji's temple of Dinajpur established on eighteenth century are best examples of this new spirit. Besides, many temples at Haorah, Hughli, Midnapore, Bardhaman, Birbhum, Nadia, Murshidabad of West Bengal, along with those at Pabna, Jessore, Faridpur, Rajshahi, Barisal and other places of Bangladesh can be considered as remarkable specimens of Terracotta murals. The archeological excavation in Chandraketurah during 1955-67 reveals its ancient glory as a capital of a small kingdom in the delta region of river Ganges. From Chandraketurah lots of pottery and Terracotta art have been discovered which are huge in number, widely varied and extremely well made and beautiful.



The artists of Bengal engraved innumerable numbers of Terracotta sculptures based on mythological tales on the wide walls, huge arches, Flat columns, bases of alters and also on the cornices of the temples and mosques. Stories of Ramayana and Mahabharata, Lord Krishna as well as contemporary social life, rituals, men-women, animals and birds, designs of creepers and flowers, hunting scenes and even the imaginary creatures were depicted, which reveal typical Bengali style. In colonial era the lifestyles of Europeans in Bengal along with sensual enjoyment by the zamindar class became the subject of the murals. The temple plaques of the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries are larger in size, of deeper relieves and made in modeling method compared to those of Mahasthan, Bhasu Vihara, Paharpur and Mainamati, which were done in older period. Later blocks were first made of earth, and then partially sun-dried and finally figures were cut out with thin chisels of bamboo or iron. The plaques made for the purpose of designs were made in moulds. The plaques were of limited size and of geometrical shape and enhanced the aesthetic as well as the ornamental values of temple. These temples were built at different places of rural Bengal under the patronage of zamindars and wealthy classes. This tradition came to an end with the beginning of European architectural techniques and Calcutta-centered culture. But in quest of heritage, terracotta art begins its new journey after the long discontinuation in the art schools of West Bengal and Bangladesh.

