



Terracotta Reliefs of Bhattabati Ratneshwar Temple, Murshidabad *A Study of the Contemporary Socio Religious Scenario of West Bengal*

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Accepted: 11 June 2021 / Published online: 26 June 2021

Introduction

Bhattabati, a remote village in Murshidabad district, is located just opposite to Motijheel palace and mosque near Lalbagh, on the other bank of River Ganges. It is geographically positioned at 24°10'01" (N) 88°13'08" (E). The five pinnacles Ratneswar Shiva Temple is very famous for its terracotta panels fixed in the niches of various shapes and sizes on four walls of the edifice. The terracotta works are very remarkable historically, socially as well as artistically. Artistically the works are of superb quality which proves the dexterity of Bengal artisans of early eighteenth century. The subjects dealt with in the panel are also very meaningful and reveals a piece of social as well as religious history of the contemporary period.

History

The founder of the temple either Jaynarayan or his Son Kalinarayan was Bangadhikari- a designation pertains to the Mughal Revenue system. Status wise in Nawabi Period Bangadhikari was the third powerful position after Nawab himself and Jagat Seth –the banker of the Nawab. Ramjiban a Kayastha of Mitra dynasty was appointed as Bangadhikari (Principal Kanungo of half of Bengal Subah) in 1671 AD in the twelfth renal year of Aurangzeb. While the other half were assigned to Bangadhikari Hari Narayan. In 1704 when Murshid Kuli Khan, the Nayeab Diwan of Bengal shifted his head quarters from Dhaka to Murshidabad both the Bangadhikaris worked under him also shifted their office to Murshidabad. By this time due to expiry of both Ramjiban and Harinarayan their inheritors Jay Narayan and Darpanarayan were appointed as Bangadhikaris. Darpanarayan began to live in Dahapara. It is also located on the opposite bank of Ganga but about six km north of Murshidabad. Jaynarayan began to live in Bhattabati just in the opposite bank of Murshidabad and built there palaces and temples. Jaynarayan built the temple in early eighteenth century during the reign of Nawab Murshid Kuli Khan (1704-25 AD). According to legends the temple which was located near a tank named Kalisagar, was built in mid eighteenth century by Kalinarayan, descendant of Jaynarayan during the reign of Nawab Alibard Khan (1740-56 AD) (Roy, 1903). According to an anecdote prevalent in the area, 1200 (twelve hundred) Bhatta Brahmins from Karnataka made a settlement here during the reign of Sultan Hossain Shah (1494-1519 CE). That is why the name of the place is called Bhattabati. However at present there is no one of the Bhatta Brahmins at Bhattabati (Murshidabad.net).



Architecture of the temple

The temple is of famous Pancharatna style of Bengal but the base is of triratha style. The smaller spires in four corners of the first floor and the central main spire are of Kalinga Peeda style. The spires are placed on a cuboid base having openings in all sides. The temple is 8.75 meter square at the base and 10 meter high (Murshidabad.net). A small arched door in front leading to the sanctum and in all other sides false arched doors were built for ornamental purpose.

Terracotta Panels

The temple is very famous for its terracotta panels. All four sides of the temple are decorated with terracotta panels. But before discussion about terracotta plaques of the temple it will be better to delve into the prevalent socio religious scenario of Bengal because the prevalent socio religious culture has been depicted in the terracotta temples. The socio religious culture of the period from 17th to 19th century AD has its root in Gupta period also in Pre-Gupta period. Hence It is pertinent to discuss the evolution of socio religious culture from Gupta period not losing sight the pre-Gupta period.

Evolution of socio -religious scenario in Bengal from Gupta period

The religious beliefs as was prevalent during 17th to 19th century, the period during which the terracotta temples were built in Bengal, was crystallised due to interactions of various cross currents of religious streams for about more than thousand years from Gupta period (300 AD to 550 AD) to Chaitanya period (sixteenth century AD) .Though Aryan culture started percolating to Bengal from pre Christian period through Buddhism and Jainism but it took its root deeply during Gupta and post Gupta period when Bengal (Sumbha, Rarh, Pundra ,Samatata) came under Gupta administration, due to mass advent of Aryan people during the period, establishment of Buddhism and north Indian Brahmanical culture. In Bengal, local religious culture which was predominantly consisting of worshipping of mother goddess as goddesses of fertility, ancestors ,different folk deities for wish fulfilments and different rituals to propitiate evil forces, began to interact with each other. The interactions and the process of acceptance and rejection took place for several centuries and ultimately the Aryan concept of religion along with their gods and goddesses were assimilated into Bengali culture. However the religious practices as followed locally were not abandoned. In a number of cases the deities of pre-Gupta period were modified and Aryanised. Bengal also did not accept the north Indian religious culture intact but modified it to suit its own belief, outlook and world view and developed a unique culture which was its own. Three phases have been observed of this religious assimilation and new developments.

- a) **Gupta and Post Gupta period (350-750AD)** - Establishment of north Indian Brahmanical culture and Buddhism in Bengal. Bengal gradually attracted towards North Indian Brahmanical cultures during the period. Buddhism though was established and subsequently became royal religion, was restricted to people of upper echelon. The eighth century Paharpur Buddhist Stupa (Bangladesh) has revealed terracotta and stone figures of Krishnayan and Ramayana. There are also figures of Hindu gods and



goddesses like Shiva, Balaram, Jamuna etc. It proves that by eighth century AD north Indian Brahmanical culture has taken deep root in Bengal(Ray,2009:313,314,499).

- b) **Pala Period (750 – 1162 AD)** -Pala kings were devout Buddhists but were also great patronisers of Hindu Gods and Goddesses. During Pala period the Aryan Brahmanical religion greatly flourished in Bengal. Practically in various epigraphs related to Pala Period like Buddhagaya inscription , (Dharmapala- 765-800 AD) Khalimpur copperplate (Dharmapal) Munger Prasasti (Devapala, 800-40 AD) Jagajivanpur Copper Plate (Mahendrapala, 840-56 AD) (Bhattacharya,2007) Badal Prashasti (Narayanapala, 874-930 AD) , Bhagalpur Prasasti (Narayana Pala) etc we have found mention of various Hindu gods and goddesses like Brahma, Vishnu ,Maheswar, Krishna,Surya Devaraj Indra , Saraswati, Uma Lakshmi and various Hindu mythological characters like Daityaraj Bali, Vamanavatar, Devaki ,Karna . Sagar, Nala, Yayati. It transpires from above that during Pala Period Hindu religion was at its helm inspite of Royal religion being Buddhism. In closing period of Palas, five streams of Hindu religious sectsviz, Soura (worshippers of Sun), Shaiva (worshippers of Shiva), Vaishnaba (worshippers of Vishnu) Shakta (worshippers of Shakti- mother goddesses) and Ganapatya (worshippers of Ganesha) (Banerjea, 1960) were observed. Another stream also evolved from the declining tantric cult of Buddhism – Tantricism.

- c) **Sena Period – Period of decline of Buddhism.** Unlike Palas, Sena kings were not liberal. They were antagonistic to Buddhists and Buddhism. During this period attempts were made to unite the five streams of worshipping. This was called ‘Panchopasana’- worshipping of five gods.

Famous poet Jaydeva, composer of ‘Geeta Govinda’- court poet of Raja Laxman Sena was Panchopasak(Ray, 2009:510-11).Elaborate Hindu religious practices were at its highest level during the period. Another important factor of this period is emergence of ‘Radha’ and introduction of ‘Radha Krishna’ cult. Though sometimes earlier, the concept of Radha as principal gopiniwas evolved in Bengal butin famous ‘Geeta Govinda’ for the first time Radha was introduced by Jaydevaas consort of Krishna in twelfth century AD.(Ray, 2009). This issue had great impact on Bengali culture from sixteenth century onwards. Moreover this period is the period of declination of Buddhism. Most of the Buddhists of higher status embraced Hinduism but the Buddhists of lower status were marginalised. Number of Buddhist Gods and Goddesses were also absorbed into Hindu fold which were depicted in terracotta temples.

- d) **Islamic period (13th to 15th century AD)** -The darkage of Hindu religion and culture (Dutta,1975:712, 12). All the religious and cultural activities were suddenly stopped. Hindu religion relegated to underground. Its flow stopped. It lost its vibrancy. A dark age started in Bengali socio cultural life which continued for more than 200 years specifically up to ascension of the throne of Gaur by a Hindu King Ganesha in 1415 AD. As a result Hindu religious activities were to be performed in hiding. Secret rituals of Shakti worshipping (Guhya Sadhana) with Pancha Ma’ Kar (five Ms) Matsya (fish), Mangso (meat) Mudra(gesture) , Madya (wine) Mithuna (copulation) spread throughout Bengal. Immoralities, unsocial practices, illegal sexuality crept into the religious practices. (Mullick, 1910) Common people were divested from religious rituals. Society



was infested with various evil practices like widow burning, multiple marriage, removal of any one or people en masse from Hindu fold due to very small reasons like drinking water unknowingly from pond, where from Muslim soldiers or Muslims in general drank water previously etc. Society fell into a dark abyss. The then state of affairs can be expressed aptly by this composition of Rabindranath.

‘যে নদী হারায় স্রোত চলিতেনা পারে

সহস্র শৈবালদাম বাঁধে আসিতারে;

যে জাতিজীবনহারা অচল অসাড়

পদেপদে বাঁধে তারে জীর্ণ লোকাচার।’ রবীন্দ্রনাথঠাকুর

- e) **Chaitanya Period-** It is the most important era with respect to Bengali culture. Appearance of Sri Chaitanya in 1486 AD and advent of Gaudiya Vaishnavism based on ‘bhaktibad’ and humanism engendered renaissance in Bengali culture. Gaudiya Vaishnavism percolated every strata of the society irrespective of class, caste, creed, and religion. Bengali culture revived from its moribund state of 300 years. (Datta, 1975:7) This revival took place in every area of Bengali Hindu culture – art, architecture, literature and all related areas. Temple constructions started with renewed vigour. New religious rituals and practices emerged. Lord Vishnu gave way to Krishna. Radha became epitome of Bhakti towards Lord Krishna – the supreme god. Poets composed Padabalis and Kirrtandrenched with bhakti for worshipping lord Krishna. Bengali culture was overwhelmed with this Bhakti movement. Even Shaktas (worshippers of Shakti) changed themselves in favour of Bhakti. Mother Goddesses like Durga, Kali worshipped as Shakti were began to be worshipped as one’s own mother and daughter with Bhakti (devotion) as unique offering. Shyama Sangeets were composed by poets to worship Goddess Kali as mother. Durga (Parvati) also was worshipped as daughter coming to her parental house for three days. Agomoni songs were composed to celebrate the home coming of daughter Durga. Similarly Bijaya songs were composed to express grief for leaving the parental home by Uma (Durga). Thus Sri Chaitanya completely changed the religio-cultural scenario of Bengali Hindus. Socially it also stopped mass conversion of Hindus to Muslims.

Ramayana Plaques

Themes of Ramayana became very popular in Bengal probably from eighth century AD though Ramayana and Mahabharata cult were introduced in Bengal by north Indian Aryans during Gupta period which along with other Aryan cultural aspects began to be absorbed in Bengali culture since then (Ray, 2009: 219,364).



However during the process of assimilation of Aryan culture with local culture various changes took place and in the process a number of themes of Valmiki Ramayana underwent several changes as well as new themes were added. As documentary evidence of popularity of the epics we have had terracotta and stone panels in Sompura Mahavihara, Paharpur Bangladesh (8th century to 12th century AD) depicting various themes of the epics like Setubandha, battle of Bali and Sugriva etc (Ray, 2009: 500).

Ramkatha was so popular amongst common people that in Pala period that Sandhyakar Nandi court poet of Pala king Rampala (1072-1126 AD) composed ‘Ramacharita’ having a dual character. First one is, it is the heroic battle of Rampala the Pala king against Kaibarta King Bhima and second one is the heroic battle of lord Rama of Ramayana against King of Lanka, Ravana (Ray, 2009: 583). The popularity did not wane subsequently but increased to a great extent through translation of Ramayana of Valmiki from Sanskrit to Bengali by Poet Krittibas in 15th century AD.

In early eighteenth century the terracotta artists followed the popular culture and depicted the following episodes from Ramayana through terracotta plaques fixed in the temple.

- a) Slaying of Taraka –the female demon by Rama Lakshmana. It is a very popular theme. Sage Viswamitra along with other sages being harassed by female demon ‘Taraka’ requested King Dasaratha to send Rama and Laksmana to kill the female demon. Accordingly Rama and Laksmana came to the hermitage of Viswamitra and killed her.
- b) Haradhanu Bhanga(breaking of bow of Lord Shiva) .It is also a very popular theme. Rama breaking the Bow of lord Shiva to marry Sita, the daughter of King Janaka. (Figure -1)
- c) Ram Laksman Sita strolling in the forest – while in Pancabati strolling in the forest was the pastime of Ram Sita and Lakshmana which enabled them to understand the forest in a better way.
- d) Slaying of Golden Deer (Mareech) by Lord Rama- Mareech was a commander of Ravana. He in the guise of a golden deer allured Sita staying in Pancabati to capture the deer . Though Rama was aware that the golden deer is not real someone was tricking them, but Sita forcibly sent Rama and Lakshmana to catch the deer. Rama followed the deer and ultimately killed it. (Figure-2)
- e) Hanuman bowing down to the feet of Rama- Hanuman, an accompany of Sugriva brother Bali, king of Kiskindhya met Rama while Rama and Lakshmana was searching Sita abducted by Ravana. Hanuman on seeing Rama realizes the divinity of Lord Rama and he being the epitome of Bhakti (devotion) and Shakti (power) is bowing down to his lord. Lakshman is standing beside Rama.
- f) Hanuman in front of Rama and Sita, both sitting on a table like structure- This is probably in Ayodhya after enthroning of Rama as the king of Ayodhya.
- g) Ramayana Panel above the space of the entrance door, consisting of Ram Sita on the throne in the right side along with people of Ayodhya expressing devotion to Rama. In the left side Yagna being performed by sages for birth of sons to King Dasaratha.



Three queens of Dasaratha are there. The people of Ayoddha are rejoicing, Various musical instruments are being played.

Krishna Leela Plaques

Krishna Katha (Anecdotes regarding Lord Krishna) was in vogue in Bengal from Gupta period. In Sompura Mahabihar, Paharpur, (presently in Bangladesh) 8th century AD, number of stone plaques regarding life of Krishna are found. Lifting of Gobardhan hill by Krishna, Slaying of horse demon Keshi, taking away of the new born child Krishna to Gokul by his father Basudeva from Mathura, Krishna grazing cows along with other cowherd, battle with Chanur and Mustik (commanders of Kangsa) by Krishna and Balaram, liberation of Yamalarjun etc are few of them (Ray, 2009: 499). But it is pertinent to mention here that though there are number of plaques regarding Balyaleela (childhood feats) and Aisharya Leela (Heroic feats) of Krishna there is neither any plaque in Sompura Mahavihar nor any inscriptions of Pala Period mentioning about 'Radha'-the consort of Krishna and the Madhura leela (episodes regarding love with Radha) . It appears from various evidences that though there may be mention of Radha as principal Gopini in 10th and 11th century that too very insignificantly, It is in twelfth century Jaydeva –the famous court poet of Raja Lakshmana Sena in his Geet Govinda conceptualised and established firmly the idea of Radha and her loving relationship with Lord Krishna (Ray, 2009: 548). Radha as per Nihar Ranjan Ray was conceptualised as the 'Shakti' of Krishna in line with the 'Shakti' concept of Shakta sect where there were individual mother Goddess as Shakti to Male Gods (Ray, 2009: 499, 548). Buddhist gods also had similar Shaktis (Ray, 2009: 518, 536; Sen, 2012). This concept began to take its root throughout Bengal in next centuries. Thus we have Shri Krishna Kirtan composed by Baru Chandidas in 15th century AD. Chaitanya Mahaprabhu absorbed the idea of Radha Krishna to the core of his heart and elevated the corporal love as propounded by Jaydeva and Baru Chandidas to transcendental love to God (Lord Krishna) (Sen. S. 2012) Radha became the epitome of Bhakti to the supreme lord. This concept due to his Bhakti movement was taken by storm in Bengali psyche. Thus in addition to Balyaleela and Aishrya Leela Madhura Leela also became very significant in Gaudiya Vaishnavism as propagated by Sri Chaitanya. Bengali terracotta artists made thousands of terracotta plaques of these three leelas of Krishna and ornamented the temples of Bengal profusely. In Bhattabati temple also there are very famous Krishnaleela plaques which are as follows.

- 1) Extraction of butter by Yasoda and Krishna (Balya Leela) (figure-3)
A very popular theme. Krishna just after his birth was shifted to the family of Nanda, the clan leader of Gopa (Cowherds) of Gokula, due to fear of Kangsa. Yasoda, wife of Nanda brought up him as her own son. Extraction of butter by churning milk is a common practice of a cowherd family. Butter was very favourite to Krishna. He used to come to his mother when she churned the milk for extraction of butter. Sometimes he also helped his mother.
- 2) Slaying of Dhenukasur in a palm forest by Krishna (Aisarya Leela)
Dhenukasur was the donkey demongurading a palm forest in Brindaban. He was hiding in the palm forest. Sridam and other companions were interested to consume palm fruits. But Dhenukasur attacked them. Thereafter Krishna and Balaram came to save his companions and after a fierce battle with the demon killed him.



3) Rasa Mandal (Madhura Leela)

It is a very popular theme of Gaudiya Vaishnavas. Rasaleela has its root in Shrimad Bhagwat Gita. In the five chapters (29th to 33rd) of tenth canto of Bhagwat Gita Rasaleela has been described. It is a transcendental dance performance of Gopinis (Damsels of Brindavan) around Lord Krishna along with the principal Gopini (the name of the principal gopini as Radha was not ascribed till then). It is like a ritual performed by gopinis to unify themselves with supreme lord. The theme assumed great popularity throughout Eastern India.

The large Rasaleela terracotta panel in northern wall of Bhattabati temple where gopinis are dancing around Radha and Krishna is artistically unique and very famous. It is largest in West Bengal(Figure-4)

Chaitanya Leela

Though Shri Chaitanya was instrumental in introducing and propagating Gaudiya Vaishnavism based on complete devotion to Supreme Lord (Lord Krishna) and also in engendering renaissance of Bengal, the terracotta plaques depicting his life was few and far between in comparison to Krishna Leela Panels, especially in seventeenth and eighteenth century AD temples. Two reasons may be attributed here

Kheturi Mahotsab of 1574AD. After disappearance of Shri Chaitanya in 1534 AD followers of Chaitanya became divided into various groups (sampradayas) who followed different procedures of worshipping lord Krishna. With a view to unifying all sampradayas six vaishnav Gurus (famous Sadagoswamis – Rup, Sanatan, Shri Jiva, Raghunath Bhatta , Raghunath Dasa and Gopala Bhatta of Vrindaban) congregated at Kheturi in 1574 AD in invitation of Narottam Das Thakura another famous vaishnav Guru having Sripata in the same place . There they decided that henceforth worship of Radha and Krishna will be the sole objective of Gaudiya Vaishnavism (Source:<http://gaudiyahistory.iskcondesiretree.com/history/>). Thus worshipping Chaitanya Mahaprabhu took a back seat.

- a) Another historical reason is throughout eighteenth century AD Maharaja Krishna Chandra of Nadia was at the helm of Hindu Society. He was a devout Shakta. He did not recognise Chaitanya as incarnation of God, being a human being. He also opposed Chaitanya worshipping at Nabadwip. Several Chaitanya temples were closed down for want of patronage. Even the famous wooden image of Gauranga which was made during the lifetime of Chaitanya and handed over to Vishnupriya for daily worshipping before His departure to Puri, had to be kept in hiding. Krishnachandra established number of Shakta temples of Kali, Shiva at Nabadwip and introduced Shakta Raas at Nabadwip to counter Vaishnava Rasa.

However Bhattabati Temple being constructed in early eighteenth century when reign of Krishnachandra not yet commenced and Murshidabad being a principal centre of Gaudiya Vaishnavism, we have two very famous Chaitanya Panel in the temple.



- i) Sadavuja (six arms) Chaitanya - In this form Lord Chaitanya has six arms – lowest two arms with ‘danda’ (stick) and ‘Kamandulu’ (water pot) is of Himself as an ascetic, the middle two arms blowing flute are those of Lord Krishna and the upper arms with bow and arrow are those of Lord Rama. There is first mention of Chaturvuj image of Lord Chaitanya in the twelfth canto of Chaitanya charitamritam of KabiKarnapur. Chaitanya Mahaprabhu first showed His chaturvuj form to Sarbobhouma Pandit of Puri. Krishnadas Kaviraj in his famous composition ‘Chaitanya Charitamrita’ also mentioned about chartuvuj form of Lord Chaitanya. But Brindabandasin his book ‘Chaitanya Bhagbat’ added two more arms of Lord Rama, with bow and arrow. This form has become very popular in Bengal. (Basu & Basu, 2019:85-86)

In Bhattabati temple in the middle of the eastern wall there is a Sadavuja Chaitanya panel which is very famous. There are four other human figures two each in left and right side of Lord Chaitanya. The figures may be of Nityananda, Adwaita Mahaprabhu, Shri Basu, Damodar Goswami. Including Chaitanya Mahaprabhu in Gaudiya Vaishnav Parlour they are combinedly revered as ‘Panchatatwa’ (Basu & Basu, 2019:86) (Figure- 5).

- ii) A Panel of Lord Chaitanya and Prabhu Nityananda along with Radha Krishna - Nityananda Mahaprabhu is the alter ego of Chaitanya. In Gaudiya Vaishnavism Shri Chaitanya is considered as the incarnation of Lord Krishna and similarly Nityananda prabhu is considered as incarnation of Balaram. To the devotees prabhu Chaitanya and Nityananda are uttered in the same time as ‘Gaur Nitai’ or Nitai Gaur’.

The panel is in the eastern wall of the temple just above the Sadavuja panel. There is a vertical lotus motif in the middle of the panel dividing two pairs - Radha Krishna and Gaur Nitai. (Figure -6)

Dashavatar plaques

Dashavatar is the ten incarnations (Avataras) of Vishnu in different ages. These Avataras respectively are Matsya, Kurma, Baraha, Nrisinha, Bamana, Rama, Parshurama, Krishna, Buddha (Jagannath) and Kalki. Dashavatar plaques of Vishnu were very favourite to the terracotta artists. Dashavatar was also a very favourite theme to the temple artists throughout India. Up to Sena period large Vishnu images of various types having distinct names according to the positions of Shankha (conch shell), Chakra (disc), Gada (mace) and Padma (lotus) in four hands were sculpted by famous Bengali artists. Hundreds of such Vishnu images have been unearthed and still being unearthed in Bengal, which belong to Pala Sena period. But after Muslim invasion the worshipping of Vishnu practically was stopped and due to subsequent introduction of Gaudiya Vaishnavism in sixteenth century AD, Vishnu was replaced by Lord Krishna who became the supreme god for worshipping. But Vishnu remained in the psyche of Bengalis as Dashavatar - the ten incarnations of Lord Vishnu also in the psyche of terracotta artists. Thus we have Dashavatar figures in most of the terracotta temples of Bengal but very few temples have all the images of all ten Avataras – most have images of lesser number.



In Bhatabati temple there are images of two Avatars and both of those are famous

- i) Matsyavatara– the first Avatar of Lord Vishnu
A large Matsyavatara image having lower portion as the tail of a fish and upper portion as the four armed figure of Vishnu is there in the western wall. (Figure-7)
- ii) Vamanavatara (Dwarf incarnation of Vishnu- Fifth Avatar)
A very popular motif. Being defeated by Daityaraj ‘Bali’ or ‘Mahabali’ a just, benevolent, pious and generous king, Indra the king of Devaloka (heaven) took refuge in Vishnu and prayed to Him to vanquish Bali as Bali has become all powerful and invincible due to the boon of Lord Brahma. Vishnu reincarnated himself as a dwarf Brahmin (Bamanavatar). The Brahmin approached the King Bali who just completed his Ashwamedha Yagna and started the ceremony of offering to all and sundry in accordance to the choice of the offeree. The dwarf Brahmin asked him for a three step land (tripadbhumi). King Bali naturally agreed. The Brahmin then began to expand himself infinitely and one more leg emerged from his navel. With his first leg he occupied all the areas of earth and with the second leg he occupied heaven and asked Bali to provide space for the third leg. Bali realised that the Brahmin is none other than Vishnu. He bowed down and offered his head for placing the third leg. The Brahmin placed his third leg on the head of Bali thus vanquishing him.

In Bhatabati temple in the northern wall in lower recess there is a large panel of Bamanavatara. Two legs are visible. One leg is directed upwards to heaven, second one is placed on earth and the leg placed on the head of Bali is broken and not visible. (Figure-8)

Mahishasuramardini Panel

Mahishasuramardini images are very popular throughout India. We have panels of Mahishasuramardini in 7th century Mahabalipuram temple complex, 10th century Kichakeswari Temple of Khichng, Hallebidu 12th century Hoysala temple etc. (Bhattacharya.S.2009) In Bengal we have the oldest Mahishasuramardini terracotta figure in Gokarna (Murshidabad) Nrisinhadeva temple (1580 AD) (Basu.S. & Basu.A.2019). Thereafter so many Mahashasuramardini panels are observed in Bengal terracotta temples.

But the Devi Durga Mahishasuramardini panel in the middle of western wall is unique at Bhatabati temple because it shows Durga (Parvati) along with her whole family members, Lakshmi and Ganesha in right side of Durga and Sarswati and Kartika in the left side along with all their vehicles. This concept of Devi Durga is unique to Bengal. This is also a very famous panel. (Figure-9)

Vyala

Vyalas are hybrid creatures of man and animals or of different animals like lion and horse (popular in Bengal). According to DD Kosambi in his seminal compilation “Myth and Reality”



(Kosambi, 2016) the concept of hybridisation of different creatures dates back to cave painting period. In various Mohenjodaro and Harappa seals there are number of examples of these hybrid creatures. Man tiger combination with body of tiger and head of human is one such example. According to him first four avatars of Vishnu: Matsya, Kurma, Baraha and Nrisingha have been imagined from this concept of vyala. Though there are many examples of vyala in other temples here we find only one and that is of horse and lion in the upper right and left corner of front wall.

Other semi gods and goddess

Kirtimukha – Kirtimukha is a popular relief of Indian temples from early medieval period. It is also seen in most of the Bengal terracotta temples as protector of door. It is a fierce head only figure having open mouth and protruding eyes. Sometimes two hands are also observed. In the temple in right side upper corner four figures of Kirtimukha is placed in four niches in a row.

Gandharva- Gandharvas are musicians of the Swargolok(heaven) . They have their lower portion as that of a bird. A Gandharvarelieff is there just above the Mughal Soldiers' panel and by the side of a column. (Figure 10)

Mahabali– Depiction of a very strong personality catching hold of a pair of horses by his two arms and a pair of elephants by his two hands through terracotta relief work was very popular in Murshidabad and Bardhaman. Probably this very strong male figure was contemplated by the terracotta artists for protection of the temple. The terracotta relief is located just above the Mughal soldiers panel in lowest part of front wall, in the opposite side of Gandharva relief (Figure 11).

Social

Social Plaques are very common in terracotta temples. Throughout India in medieval temples we also have reliefs, sculptures images depicting contemporary social life of both aristocrats and common people. These reliefs and images are generally placed in the bottom panels.

Social plaques are there in Bhattabati temple in two places -

i)In the body we have two large social panels

- a) Hunters - In the top of the western wall there is a large panel of hunters. Two hunters are there carrying a nest each with a hawk inside in one hand. Bow is in the shoulder of each A dog is walking along each hunter. (figure 12)
- b) Vaishnab Akhada – A panel of Vaishnab Akhada in top of northern wall where two meditating Vaishnab Gurus in sitting posture and two disciples of them in folded hands in standing posture have been depicted.



ii) In the social plaques which are placed in the bottom of front wall there are rows of Mughal (Nawab) warriors. Since during the period founder of the temple Bangadhikari Jaynarayan was serving under Nawab Murshid Kuli Khan this Mughal soldiers panel might have been fixed to please the Mughal (Nawabi) administration. However we get the ideas about the dresses weapons, head dresses, foot wears etc of Mughal soldiers of eighteenth century (figure -13)

Ornamentation

Various types of flowers –lotuses predominantly, creepers, birds (preferably parrots) other geometrical patterns have been profusely used to decorate the temple as well as using it as fillers. Piers and pilasters in temple corners have been beautifully adorned by flowers, creepers, geometric designs and designer bricks. These ornamentations and keeping its balance throughout the structure also vouch for the skill and artistry of the artisans.

Assimilation of Shaiva, Shakta and Vaishnav religious ideals as depicted in the temple

The terracotta plaques reveal the religious characteristics of later medieval Bengal (17th - 18th century). Though there are various streams of antagonistic Hindu religious philosophies upto 16th century Bengal like Tanticism, Shakticism, Shaivism, Vaishnavism (worshipping of Vishnu), Folk religions, from seventeenth centuries onwards assimilation of different Hindu religious streams are observed. Two factors can be attributed for this assimilation. First is to resist the onslaught of the ruling religion-Islam and secondly due to overwhelming influence of Shri Chaitanya. Thus we have various Shaiva and Shakta panels in vaishnav temples along with Krishna Leela and Chaitanya leela Panels and similarly the panels of Krishna Leela and Chaitanya leela in Shakta and Shaiva temples are in plenty. Moreover this is the period when the Gaudiya Vaishnavism as propounded by Shri Chaitanya was at its helm. Consequently the worshipping of Vishnu which was prevalent up to Sena period, as is evident from discovery of innumerable number of different types of Vishnu sculptures throughout Bengal, gave its way to worshipping of lord Krishna especially Radha Krishna. Moreover during this period Shakta cult (worshipping of Mother Goddess) also underwent key changes. The fearful Tantric rituals involving worshipping the mother goddess with Pancha Ma' Kar (five Ms) Matsya (fish), Mangso (meat) Mudra (gesture), Madya (wine) Mithuna (copulation) in isolated places like cremation ground, forest etc, began to lose the support of common people. Bhakti (devotion) movement of Shri Chaitanya overwhelmed entire length and breadth of Bengal and Bengali culture. It also overwhelmed the shakta cult also. Mother Goddesses like Durga, Kali began to be worshipped through bhakti by common people. Songs like Shyama Sangeet, Agomoni Bijoya songs began to be composed and sung. The terracotta plaques of the temple depict this transformation and assimilation of different cults as well as overwhelming



influence of Shri Chaitanya over the socio religious scene of Bengal. The instant temple inspite of being a Shaiva temple has accommodated number of panels of Krishnaleela and Chaitanya Leela.

Conclusion

Bhattabati Ratneswar temple, a Hindu temple of repute apart from revealing the contemporary art and culture along with religious status of the society throw light on the prevalent Mughal revenue administration. Unlike early Sultani period of Bengal, from the reign of Raja Ganesh (1415 -1419 AD) Hindus were also appointed as top officials of Sultani and Nawabi administrations. Moreover Murshid Kuli Khan (1704-25 AD) felt comfortable with Hindu administrators; consequently his administration had more Hindus than Muslims. Apart from respecting the honesty of Hindu administrators he felt that Hindu administrators and zamindars can be squeezed to any length for collection of revenue. That was why punishment awarded by him towards defaulting Hindu zamindars sometimes was very severe and stretched beyond civilised norms.

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Illustrations



Figure 1 Haradhanu Bhanga



Figure 2 Mareech Slaying



Figure 3 Milk Churning by Jashoda and Krishna



Figure 4 Rasamandal

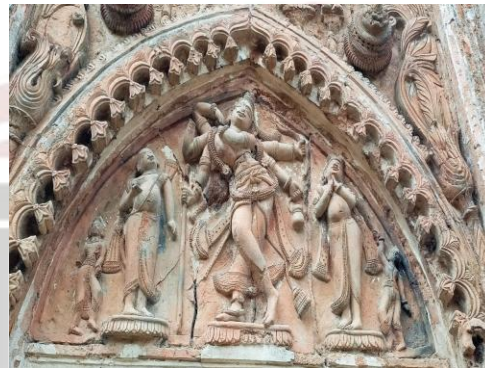


Figure 5 Sadavuja Chaitanya



Figure 6 Gaur Nitai & Radha Krishna



Figure 7 Matsyabatar



Figure 8 Vamanabatar



Figure 9 Mahisasuramardini



Figure 10 Gandharva



Figure 11: Mahabali



Figure- 12: Hunters



Figure13 Mughal Soldiers