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Evolving Traditions: A Comparative Study of Terracotta Artefacts from Panchmura and Asharikandi Villages in India

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Abstract

The tradition of terracotta artefacts holds a prominent place in India's cultural heritage, significantly contributing to artistic imagination and creativity. In India, the evolution of terracotta artwork shows an unapparelled development from their initial rudimentary forms to their current aesthetically refined designs, as well as to elucidate the techniques employed in their creation. Additionally, this study investigates the religious and mythological significance of terracotta artworks from Panchmura village in Bankura, West Bengal, and Asharikandi village in Dhubri, Assam, by examining their adherence to, or deviation from, traditional methods and concepts in contemporary practice. Both regions produce numerous artefacts that distinguish them in terms of traditional knowledge, transition from traditional to modern designs, folklore themes, and cultural exchanges in artwork communication. The objective of this study is to ascertain their distinct identities and stylisations which are influenced by local themes, motifs, and compositions. This research examines the development of distinct terracotta artefacts in these regions and seeks to understand aesthetic considerations in the preparation of such toys across generations. This form of art continues to be practiced in various regions of India to preserve this tradition. Although terracotta artwork is produced for both functional and decorative purposes in many parts of India but terracotta toys result from the spontaneous creative process of artisans in rural areas, which enhances the beauty and simplicity of these artwork. This article focuses on the primary influences, cultural identity, and comparison between the two regions in terms of techniques, forms, and incorporation of contemporary design.

Keywords: Artefacts, Identity, Terracotta, Traditional, Aesthetic.

Introduction:

Terracotta represents a significant art form from the Neolithic era to the present, with forms, designs, and cultural significance evolving over time, location and context. The term "terracotta" is widely recognized within the artistic community, and the organic hues that emerge following the firing process consistently captivate observers. The development of terracotta artefacts can be traced back to the Neolithic era, including the Yangshao culture¹ of painted pottery (Fig.1) from Neolithic China, excavated in 1921, the terracotta figurine Dogu (Fig.2) from the Jomon culture² of Neolithic Japan, Etruscan pottery cultures, as well

as Early Egyptian, Minoan, Mycenaean, and Ancient Greek cultures, which developed terracotta figurative sculptures around the Mediterranean Sea. In India, the tradition of terracotta art began during the Indus Valley Civilization, encompassing magical elements in terracotta artworks. The Indus Valley was renowned for its terracotta figurines, toys, dolls, beads, and jewelry. The tradition of crafting terracotta artefacts in India remains prominent, with significant activity observed in the states of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Tamil Nadu, Gujarat, Himachal Pradesh, Haryana, Madhya Pradesh, West Bengal, and Assam. Notably, Panchmura village in Bankura, West Bengal, and Asharikandi village in Assam serve as important centres for the production of terracotta toys and artefacts, offering a diverse array of designs that contribute to the ongoing artistic endeavours in these regions. It is noteworthy that the majority of mother goddess terracotta figurines from both regions exhibit stylistic similarities to those of the Indus Valley civilization. The fertility symbols of mother goddess made today in Assam, Bengal, Bihar, and Orissa are the same as those which were worshipped by people 5,000 years ago.³ The making process of such hand-pressed dolls and toys also resembles the ancient tradition terracotta artform of India. The terracotta artefacts from India exemplify the intuitive imagination of the community, as Stella Kamrisch aptly categorised these dolls into two groups: those that are contemporary and those that are reminiscent of the past, characterised as 'ageless' and 'timeless' types (Kamrisch 89).⁴ The creation of such terracotta artefacts is deeply embedded in Indian religious beliefs. Sheren Ratnagar asserts that 'the purpose of female figures of Harappa and Mohenjo-daro is to be sought in a religious or magical or symbolic association' (27).⁵

The creation of terracotta artefacts represents a venerable tradition that has been passed down through successive generations. These figurines are crafted with meticulous attention paid to details and artistry. They typically embody the essential aspects of the subject matter, often depicting the mother-child motif. This theme is frequently observed in rural contexts, where the mother is portrayed with her child on her lap, symbolizing the perpetuation of traditional customs and value.



Fig.1: Yangshao culture, painted pottery
Source: <https://www.shine.cn/news/in-focus/2111027383/>.



Fig.2: Dogu, Jomon culture Source:
http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/jomo/hd_jomo.htm.

Objectives of the study:

The aims of this study of the research paper are as follows:

1. To study the ancient terracotta artefacts of Indus Valley civilization that simultaneously developed this culture to associated regions.
2. To explore and analyze the terracotta artefacts of Panchmura and Asharikandi villages, conducting a comparative analysis from the contemporary perspective of the terracotta art tradition in both villages.

Application of Methodology:

In preparation for this study, a qualitative research methodology has adopted. This investigation centres on the terracotta artefacts of Panchmura and Asharikandi, a prominent terracotta site in India. The research approach involved semi-structured interviews with local residents, scholars, and academicians. Documentation of various artefacts has achieved using photographic and videographic methods.

Historical Development of Terracotta Artefacts:

In ancient times, terracotta artefacts were generally fabricated by women through manual manipulation of clay to create forms. Initially, these were produced for the purpose of occupying children or providing entertainment; however, over time, they evolved into aesthetically pleasing objects and gradually became indicative of the advancement of terracotta artefacts through cultural exchange. In India, the evolution of terracotta artefacts commenced with the Indus Valley civilisation, and to date, some of the states in India are renowned for the production of terracotta artefacts, either as a personal interest or as a generational tradition.

The tradition of crafting terracotta artifacts in the villages of Panchmura and Asharikandi in India is distinct in its character, despite the largely uniform methods of production. Historically, these dolls and toys were primarily created by women to entertain and engage their children. This specific type of terracotta doll was meticulously crafted for girls to cultivate a vision of marriage. According to Tarapada Santra, 'while playing with these dolls, little girls receive early lessons about the values of life that are firmly rooted in love and affection' (79).⁶ Indian terracotta dolls exhibit notable similarities with those from other cultures, including Egypt, Minoan, Crete, Neolithic Japan, Maya Civilisation, and others. It is significant to note that the development of terracotta dolls and other artefacts were closely associated with various civilizations; however, it is also pertinent to consider how early humans conceptualized hand moulded artefacts prior to the invention of clay tools or supporting materials. This raises questions regarding the potential for cross-cultural exchanges in ancient times. D. H. Godon says, 'linking of all the terracotta of the Hellenistic period from the Eastern Mediterranean to Bengal is necessary, but before this can be done it is imperative that the terracotta already found at sites such as Dura-Europos should be brought into greater prominence, and that this Hellenistic Parthian culture should be linked up through Bactria and Afghanistan into India and Chinese Turkestan, following the trade routes (179).'⁷ The examination of terracotta artefacts provides a crucial perspective on the development of various trade routes. These artifacts, often associated with rural simplicity and intuitive craftsmanship, are evident in the Indus Valley Civilization and have been found in other regions as well. For instance, the "Standing Woman" (Fig. 3), holding a diya, appears to symbolize the welcoming of guests or preparation for a ritual. This artefact originated in Pakistan or Western India,

dating from approximately 2800 BC to 2000 BC, and measures 23.5 cm in height. Similarly, the "Terracotta Idol" (Fig. 4) of the Syrio-Hittite culture depicts a standing figure with attire that exhibits plasticity, reminiscent of the "Female Figure" (Fig. 5) from the Indus Valley, Mehrgarh culture. The contour lines of the fingers are notably sophisticated, and the Syrio-Hittite artifact is dated to circa 2100 BC to 1800 BC. It features wide, expressive eyes in a circular form, deeply incised to create a sense of light and shade in the eyeballs. The figure is adorned with a hat or cap and has its hands positioned with one on the left chest and the other on the stomach, measuring 142 mm in height.



Fig.3 : Standing Woman Source:
<https://www.barakatgallery.com/lander>.



Fig.4: Female Idol Source:
<http://www.ancientresource.com/images/hittite/Hittite-Syrian-Figure-271045.jpg>



Fig.5: Female Figure Source:
<https://www.bidsquare.com/online-auctions/artemis-gallery/indus-valley-mehrgarh-pottery-female-figure-5027886>

Terracotta Art Tradition of Panchmura Village:

The terracotta artworks of Panchmura village of Bankura district of West Bengal are worldwide acclaimed. Artisans perpetually produce terracotta artefacts both utilitarian or decorative purposes. Generally, the artisans of Panchmura are belongs to kumbhakar community. Only the 'Kumbhakar' community of Panchmura is still struggling to keep this craft tradition alive with their sincere effort and dedication.⁸ The Panchmura village is located at a distance about 42 kilometres from Bishnupur and primarily has acclaimed its worldwide attraction for traditional terracotta horse, Mansha Jhar, mother and child dolls

and other craftworks. After discussion of local artisans, the answers are not well defined but according to researcher the tradition took into shape during the time of Malla kingdom and some other says it was developed from traditional art practices through generation in Panchmura. But at present, most of the youth of this village are not showing interest to continue this tradition.

The terracotta art of Bengal can be broadly classified into figures of divinities and semi divine beings, narrative panels, toys, animal figurines, decorative and erotic or mithuna motifs as well as seals and sealings.⁹ The terracotta artifacts of Panchmura also falls under this category that shown the refinement of the artifacts is noteworthy. The practice of the terracotta art in this village has diverse forms of stylization such as intricate designs on pottery, low relief sculpture, and decorative items. The terracotta low relief sculptures (Fig.6) of this village are for decorative purpose that is the direct influence from Bhisnupur Terracotta temples such as Jor Bangla or Keshto Raya temple (Fig.8). The relief terracotta artwork is very simplified in nature and the contour lines, distinct designs on the clothes make the artwork appeal to the viewers. Most of the works are related to the religious themes, historical scenes and some of the plates are replica in terracotta of the Sahaj Path (woodcut print was done by renowned artist Nandalal Bose). Although, the creativity of artefacts of Panchmura are dynamics in shape, size, designs and level of finishing of terracotta artwork always captivating but the introduction of modern technology is also important to excel the artefacts. Despite of its charm and increasing fame the craftsman needs to be trained through various soft skills, managerial skills and aptitude, production technique and marketing strategy along with proper communication in major languages for betterment of their craft business (Gangopadhyay and Sen, 44).¹⁰ It is noteworthy that continuous training, skill development, gain technical knowledge on particular terracotta artwork always enhance the quality of a work.



Fig.6: Relief sculpture, Panchmura, Bankura.



Fig. 7: Jor Bangla or Keshto Raya temple, Bishnupur

Terracotta Artefacts of Asharikandi:

The tradition of terracotta artefacts in Asharikandi village, located in the Dhubri district of Assam, has garnered both national and international recognition, akin to the acclaim received by Panchmura village. In Assam, two primary communities, the Kumar and the Hira, are engaged in the practice of pottery and the creation of terracotta artefacts. Historically, the production of terracotta artefacts was prevalent in the five villages of Palpara, Madikhali, Sikhasipara, Bangapara, and Bogurapara. However, this artistic tradition is now predominantly confined to Bilasipara, Shaptagram, and Asharikandi. The inhabitants of Asharikandi predominantly migrated from East Bengal (present-day Bangladesh) prior to the partition. The crafting style of Asharikandi dolls is common to West Assam, North Bengal and the contiguous parts of East Bengal.¹¹ The term "Asharikandi" is derived from two words: "Ashar," the third month in the Bengali calendar, and "kandi," meaning shedding tears. Asharikandi serves as a prominent center for the production of various artifacts, including household utensils, decorative items (Fig. 8), flower pots, pitchers, idols of deities, toys, carts, and notably, the Hatima dolls (Fig.9). The term coined by the late Nilima Barua, sister of renowned filmmaker Pramthesh Barua—the first India's most popular screen tragic hero Devdas, showcased them in different parts of the world.¹² artisans have developed innovative ideas and creative designs to exhibit aesthetic craftsmanship in their works. In 2024, the Asharikandi terracotta craft was awarded a Geographical Indication (GI) tag by the Government of India.



Fig. 8: Decorative item,
Asharikandi, Dhubri



Fig. 9: Hatima doll,
Asharikandi, Dhubri

Comparative Analysis of Terracotta Artifacts of Panchmura and Asharikandi villages:

Although both villages are renowned for their artefacts, they display distinct differences in their terracotta creations, which are deeply embedded in local influence and cultural identity. Several senior artisans from these villages have garnered national and international recognition and strived to preserve this tradition. In Panchmura, Pasupati Khumbar and his son Bauldas, and in Asharikandi, the late Sarala Bala Devi and her son Direndranath Paul have sustained the terracotta tradition through their persistent efforts and ideologies. They acknowledged the potential of this tradition to offer numerous opportunities for future generations. However, with the advent of technology and modernization, some artisans have fully embraced these changes, while others have

abandoned the practice. Despite this, many artisans continue to practice, providing new directions for their respective villages by organizing terracotta workshops to develop indigenous designs, forms, stylized compositions, and incorporating modern tools and techniques into their terracotta artifacts.

Pottery: The pottery traditions of both villages are distinct in forms and styles. In Panchmura, artisans utilize a traditional wheel to craft pottery, whereas in Asharikandi, a manually rotating wheel is employed to shape the pottery. The pottery wheel holds significant cultural importance in Panchmura village, where a variety of decorative pottery (Fig.10) are produced for religious, rituals, household and decorative purposes. The designs and processes remain traditional, with minimal innovation in pottery-making. Conversely, the pottery of Asharikandi village is characterized by well-designed and decorated pieces. Although they produce a variety of pots similar to Panchmura, the women of Asharikandi village frequently experiment with new motifs and designs, enhancing the aesthetic quality of the artefacts. They create distinct types of vessels and flower pots (Fig. 11) to elevate the quality of their artifacts compared to those of Panchmura. The pottery-making practices in the two villages reveal distinct differences. Panchmura is noted for its pottery that is meticulously finished, featuring stylized forms and sunken relief designs, with the primary shapes typically crafted using a wheel. Conversely, Ashrikandi pottery is distinguished by its modern designs, with some pieces created on the wheel and others through slab process techniques. Ashrikandi produces pots in circular, rectangular, and square shapes, often embellished with low relief sculptures. In contrast, Panchmura confines its pottery forms to circular shapes, without exploring other geometric variations.



Fig. 10: Flower pot,
Panchmura, Bankura



Fig. 11: Flower pot, Asharikandi, Dhubri

Terracotta Relief Sculptures: The relief sculptures of Panchmura village are notably influenced by the terracotta relief sculptures of the Bishnupur temples, which are prominently featured in the terracotta temples of Bishnupur. These terracotta relief sculptures predominantly depict religious narratives from the Ramayana and Mahabharata, which continue to be reflected in the Panchmura terracotta reliefs. Additionally, the artisans have developed stylized forms and elongated designs in their representations of deities, such as Goddess Durga (Fig.12), Goddess Kali, and Goddess Saraswati, as well as in depictions of folk musicians (Bowl) and decorative panels. In

contrast, the artisans of Asharikandi produce innovative relief sculptures that draw upon Assamese traditions such as “Weaver” (Fig, 13), folk cultures, and motifs, as well as scenes from the Ramayana and Mahabharata. Unlike Panchmura, there is no evidence that the relief sculptures of Asharikandi are influenced by ancient relief sculptures of Assam. Some artisans of Asharikandi village have received academic training in fine arts, which is distinctly visible in their stylization and has enabled them to blend traditional and modern styles in their artworks. The relief sculptures of Panchmura are inspired by the artworks of Jamini Roy and Nandalal Bose, indicating their awareness of modern Indian artists. Conversely, the composition of the terracotta relief sculptures of Asharikandi is entirely creative and innovative.



Fig. 12: Goddess Durga,
Panchmura, Bankura



Fig. 13: Weaver, Gokul Pal, Assam Start
Up, Ambari Guwahati.

Decorative artefacts: The incorporation of designs and dynamic impressions of clay necessitates a meditative mindset during the creative process. Artisans from Panchmura and Asharikandi are adept at imparting aesthetic impressions of clay through their intuitive designs. Although the methods and materials employed are similar, each region exhibits its own unique stylization of decorative artefacts (Fig.14). In Panchmura, artisans apply a variety of designs to diyas, lanterns, pots, and functional and decorative utensils. They carve designs into the clay during the leather-hard stage, employing a minimalistic approach to enhance aesthetic appeal. In contrast, Asharikandi artisans, while utilise similar techniques and methods, often draw inspiration from local influences and collective knowledge. In Asharikandi, artisans produce decorative artefacts (Fig.15) such as rectangular pots, light lamps with distinctive styles, decorative pots, slab-processed pen stands, and other items. Compared with Panchmura, the design finishing quality in Asharikandi is still developing and often retains a deliberately rough impression. However, the designs of Panchmura's decorative artwork are polished, refined, and maintained commercially to attract viewers.



Fig. 14: Decorative artefacts, Panchmura, Bankura



Fig. 15: Decorative artefacts, Asharikandi, Dhubri

Iconic terracotta artefacts: The comparison of iconic terracotta artworks from the villages of Panchmura and Asharikandi presents a challenge, as both have established a global identity through their distinctive terracotta artefacts: the "Bankura Horse" (Fig.16) of Panchmura and the "Hatima Doll" (Fig.17) of Asharikandi. In Panchmura, terracotta horse offers as a symbol of devotion to the village deities. The development of terracotta flourishes in Panchmura and Krishnagar because of two reasons firstly, the encouragement of Malla Kingdom and Secondly, solid horses and other terracotta creatures of animals were utilised to worship the local god Dharamraj, who is the common god of the entire "Rarh" area (part of Bengal province) is another form of Sun God, the rider of horses.¹³ Consequently, these horses became emblematic of all rituals. In contrast, the Hatima dolls of Asharikandi originated as children's toys as well as rituals which bear a resemblance to the Sashti Putu (Fig.18) of Panchmura and the Tapa Putul¹⁴ (Fig.19) of Bangladesh. Although the making processes are similar, the designs of the clothing, ornamentation, and jewellery of the Hatima dolls are notably creative, incorporating Assamese traditions into their artefacts. In Panchmura, the Bankura Horse is considered a masterpiece, with many individuals desiring a pair for home decoration. These horses are available in various shapes and sizes; however, their design and decoration remain largely unchanged, adhering to traditional patterns. Conversely, the artisans of Asharikandi continuously experimented with Hatima dolls, maintaining their fundamental forms while representing them in religious and mythological scenes, rituals, and folk tales. Recently, a larger Hatima doll was created and displayed at Guwahati Airport, which is regarded as the most innovative design produced on the Hatima theme. Both iconic images possess unique characteristics in terms of practice, knowledge, and innovation, rendering them significant in terracotta art. Despite the technological era, these artefacts endure because of the artisans' patients and their consistent efforts.



Fig. 16: Hatima Doll, Asharikandi, Dhubri



Fig. 17: Bankura Horse, Panchmura, Bankura



Fig. 18: Sashti Putul, Panchmura, Bankura



Fig. 19: Tapa Putul, Bangladesh Source: <https://www.kunstveiling.nl/items/niet-of-onleesbaar-gesigneerd-tepa-putul-moeder-en-kind-bangladesh/517395>.

Conclusion and findings:

The terracotta artefacts of Panchmura and Asharikandi represent a resilient art tradition in India, with continuous efforts to preserve this heritage. However, the absence of modern infrastructure, art education, and soft skill training poses challenges to the innovation of new ideas. Both villages strive to produce aesthetically pleasing artefacts that meet the demands of art enthusiasts. The development of terracotta in Asharikandi is intricately linked to Panchmura, as evidenced by the interaction between artisan Dhirendranath Pal and Pasupati Khumbar during the SAARC Festival 'Traditional Terracotta Workshop' in 1988, where they exchanged ideas, techniques, and creativity. Currently, both villages exhibit notable differences and take pride in their renowned artefacts. In conclusion, the advent of plastic materials has supplanted eco-friendly terracotta artifacts. Most contemporary artists in India are directly influenced by folk art, culture, and traditional techniques, which they incorporate into their artistic styles.

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