

See discussions, stats, and author profiles for this publication at: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/352197163>

Terracotta Ornamentation

Chapter · February 2015

CITATIONS

0

READS

38

2 authors:



Muhammed Shohrab Uddin
Comilla University

10 PUBLICATIONS 1 CITATION

[SEE PROFILE](#)



Sharmin Rezowana
Comilla University

9 PUBLICATIONS 1 CITATION

[SEE PROFILE](#)

Some of the authors of this publication are also working on these related projects:



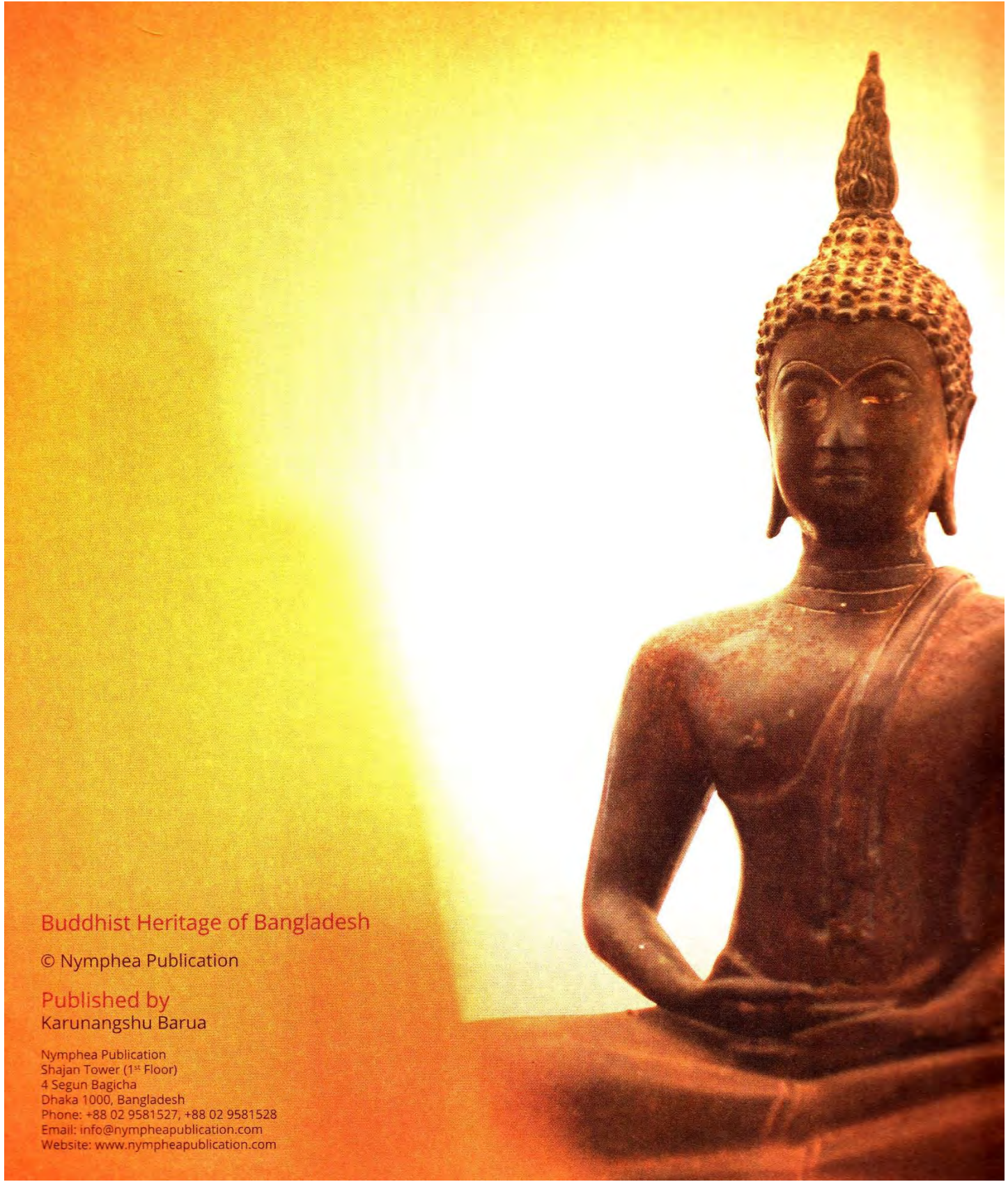
Cultural Survey of Bangladesh Series-1, Bangladesh Asiatic Society [View project](#)



Buddhist Heritage of Bangladesh [View project](#)

BUDDHIST  **HERITAGE**
OF BANGLADESH

Editor
Bulbul Ahmed



Buddhist Heritage of Bangladesh

© Nympha Publication

Published by
Karunangshu Barua

Nympha Publication
Shajan Tower (1st Floor)
4 Segun Bagicha
Dhaka 1000, Bangladesh
Phone: +88 02 9581527, +88 02 9581528
Email: info@nympheapublication.com
Website: www.nympheapublication.com

First Published
August 2015

Adviser
Anisuzzaman
Bandana Mukhopadhyay
D P Barua
Muhammad Zamir
Syed Manzoorul Islam
Ziaul Karim

Editor
Bulbul Ahmed

Creative Editor
Sabyasachi Hazra

Coordinator
Shimul Kibria

Graphics
Kazi Sujan
Shamim Ahmed
Mohamed Shariful Islam

All rights reserved. This book contains material protected under copyright and publishing law of Peoples' Republic of Bangladesh. Any unauthorized reprint or use of this material is prohibited. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electrical or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system without express written permission from the copyright owner.

ISBN: 978-984-90160-5-2

Price: ৳ 4000 | \$ 50 | € 46



Terracotta Ornamentation

Terracotta ornamentation is a significant artistic expression of human societies. The dynamic representation of terracotta art is found mainly in South Asia, especially in Bangladesh, as rock is not naturally available here. Besides, the procedure of making metal sculpture was not an easy task even a hundred years ago. Therefore, the ancient artisans of Bangladesh found a way out in clay modeling. The most attractive example of this art are the terracotta plaques used mainly for the outer decoration of the Buddhist shrines during the 6th-13th centuries AD. They mainly depicted contemporary flora and fauna and religious stories, males and females with different postures and gestures and realistic scenes of social life. The representation of deities was rather limited. Paharpur Vihara (Somapura Mahavihara; c. 8th-12th centuries AD), Halud Vihara (c. 8th-9th centuries AD) and Satya Pir Bhita (c. 8th-10th centuries AD) of Naogaon District; Salban Vihara (Bhavadeva Mahavihara; c. end of the 7th/beginning of the 8th-13th centuries AD), Bhoja Vihara (Bhoja Rajar Prasad; c. 9th-10th centuries AD), Rupban Mura (c. late 6th/ early 7th-12th centuries AD), Ananda Vihara (c. 7th-13th centuries AD) and Rani Mainamatir Prasad (c. 11th-13th centuries AD) of Comilla district; Bhasu Vihara (Narapatir Dhap; c. 6th-11th centuries AD) and Bihar Dhap (Totaram Panditer Dhap; c. late 6th/early 7th-12th centuries AD) of Bogra district and Rajasan (c. 6th-11th centuries AD) in Dhaka district are noteworthy for producing the finest terracotta plaques. This custom was practiced till the mid-nineteen century in the Hindu and Muslim architectures.

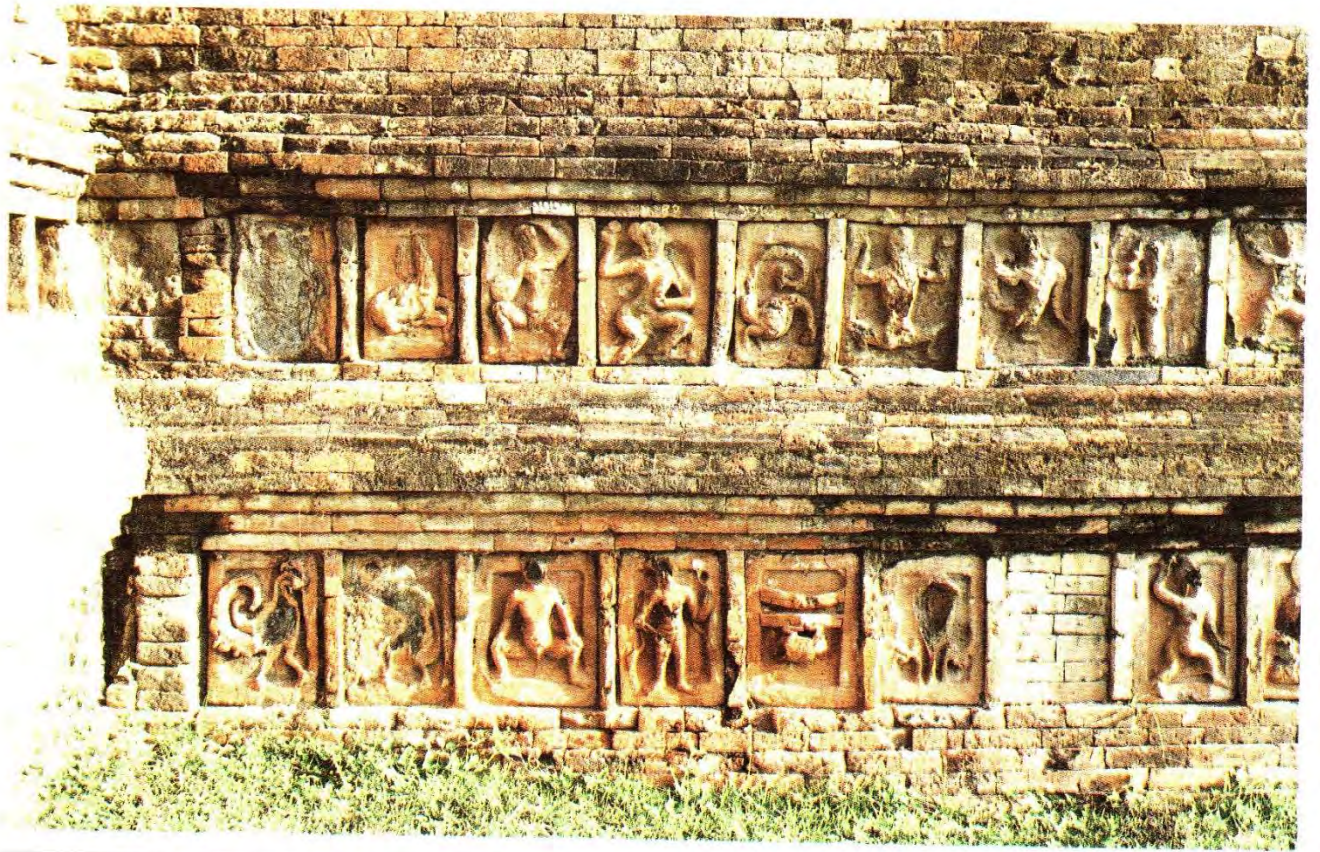


Plate 1 Rows of panel with terracotta plaques on central shrine of Paharpur Vihara, Naogaon

Terracotta plaques are found in various sizes in Bangladesh. The height ranges from 21.5 cm to 41.5 cm; the variation in breadth is much higher, ranging from 16.5 cm to 43 cm on average. Nonetheless, in Paharpur Vihara, the standard height of the plaques ranges from 35 cm to 38 cm and the standard breadth from 25 cm to 30 cm. Among 487 *in situ* plaques at the Vihara 114 plaques are 36 cm and 103 plaques are 38 cm in height.¹ In most cases, terracotta plaques are made by the base-relief system.² Working in the system, artisans made sculptures or designs on a flat surface, which was higher from the surface level. One way of making relief is to make flat planks by beating a piece of soil and cutting the soil according to the design in order to give it a three dimensional effect. Another way is to make the three dimensional figure, and then attach it on the flat plank while it is still soft. The figure is then completed by making necessary changes and additions.

Terracotta plaques were commonly placed on the outer surface of Buddhist shrines (Plate 1). The artisans used the concept of framing to place the plaques on the walls of the structure. But framing is not used for the terracotta plaques at the foundation rows in the central temple of Paharpur Vihara. That is, decorated bricks are not used either on the top or on the bottom of the plaques. No buttress is used to differentiate the plaques placed side by side. But, to place the plaques on the wall of the first floor

1 Muhammed Shohrab Uddin and Sharmin Rezowana, "Animal (Mammals) Representation in Somapura Mahavihara *in situ* Terracotta Plaques", *Journal of Bengal Art*, vol. 17, 2012, p. 190.

2 Shohrab Uddin Showrov, *Somapura Mahabiharer Podamatir Falake Jeebboichitro* (in Bangla) (Ilihas Academy, Dhaka, 2009), p. 93.

of the shrine, two or three layers of decorated bricks are used above the plaques with buttress. In this case, after placing the foundation plaques, the artisans might have used decorated bricks and buttresses on both sides of the plaques of the wall of the first floor to make them more attractive. Moreover, the decorated bricks were placed in such a way that these were not damaged by rain. These also protruded forward so that the water rolling down from the top of the temple could not directly reach the terracotta plaques.³ Hence, apart from the aesthetic designs, the artisans also thought about protection from natural calamities. Among the designs of the bricks used on the top and bottom of the terracotta plaques were petals of flower, pyramids with steps, geometrical and floral designs, designs of parallel and curved lines, designs of the stairs, notched-brick design are worth mentioning.

Deities

A number of deities of both Buddhist and Brahminical faiths are found on terracotta plaques of various Buddhist sites. The depiction of deities are three dimensional and they bear characteristics that are almost identical with the stone sculptures. Plaques containing the image of Aksobhya have been found in Paharpur Vihara, Ananda Vihara, Bhoja Vihara, Rupban Mura and Rajasan. Terracotta plaques featuring Buddha in *bhumisparsa-mudra* (Plate 2) and *abhaya-mudra* (Plate 3) have been found at the central shrine of Paharpur Vihara. Three plaques with the engraving of Dhyani Buddha have been found in Satya Pir Bhita. Moreover, a number of terracotta slabs representing Buddha and Bodhisattvas have been found in Rajasan. Paharpur Vihara, Salban Vihara, Ananada Vihara and Rupaban Mura have yielded plaques with Padmapani (Plate 4).

Manjusri, Vajrapani, Maitreya and Lokanatha have been identified on terracotta plaques found in Rupban Mura, Paharpur Vihara and Rajasan respectively. Tara (Plate 5) in different poses have been found on terracotta plaques in various Buddhist sites. Eight-armed



Plate 2 Buddha in *bhumisparsa-mudra* from central shrine of Paharpur Vihara, Naogaon



Plate 3 Buddha in *abhaya-mudra* from central shrine of Paharpur Vihara, Naogaon



Plate 4 Padmapani from central shrine of Paharpur Vihara, Naogaon

3 Shonrab Uddin Showrov, *Somapura Mahabiharar Podamatir Falake Jeebbochitro* (in Bangla) (Itihas Academy, Dhaka, 2009), p. 93.



Seated Tara from central shrine of Paharpur Vihara, Naogaon



Seated Siva with trident from central shrine of Paharpur Vihara, Naogaon

images of Tara have been found on terracotta plaques from Satya Pir Bhita and Salban Vihara. Besides these deities, the Buddhist god of wealth and prosperity Jambhala, has also been found on plaques from Paharpur Vihara.

Along with the Buddhist deities, Hindu deities are featured in terracotta plaques found in various Buddhist establishments. In a plaque from Paharpur Vihara, the four-armed Visnu is seated in *lilasana*, holding a conch, a discus, a mace and a lotus. No other seated sculpture of Visnu of the Pala period is found in Bengal.⁴ A good number of plaques containing two-armed seated Siva with a trident have been found in Paharpur Vihara (Plate 6). On a plaque found from the same site, there is a *chaturmukha sivalinga* on a round pedestal. Dikshit identified a god in a plaque of Paharpur Vihara, sitting with lotus in both hands, as Surya, the Sun god. His sitting position is comparable to the portrait of railing in Bodh Gaya, Bihar, India and other ancient sitting posture of Sun god.⁵ *Shiddhidata* Ganesa has been found in various *asanas* on terracotta plaques from

4 KN Dikshit, *Excavation at Paharpur, Bengal*, Memoirs of Archaeological Survey of India, No. 55 (Archaeological Survey of India, Delhi, 1938 reprint in 1999), p. 59.

5 KN Dikshit, *Excavation at Paharpur, Bengal*, Memoirs of Archaeological Survey of India, No. 55 (Archaeological Survey of India, Delhi, 1938 reprint in 1999), p. 60.



Figure 8 Four-armed dancing Ganesha from central shrine of Paharpur Vihara, Naogaon

Paharpur Vihara (Plate 7) and a recently excavated small cruciform temple of Salban Vihara (Plate 8). In the small cruciform shrine of Salban Vihara a series of 63 plaques have been found *in situ*. Here, we see the 10-episode of Krishna's life- birth of Krishna/ Janmastomi (Plates 9-11), *Venu Gopala* (Plate 12), *Putnabodh* (Plate 13), *Sakatvanga* (Plate 14), *Yamal-Arjuna* (Plate 15), *Kaliya-daman* (Plate 16), *Aghasurabadh* (Plate 17), *Aristhabadh* (Plate 18), the wrestling competition in Mathura (Plate 19) and killing of *kamsa* (Plate 20). These are the first representations of Brahaminical deities in terracotta plaques from Salban Vihara. The illustration of deity *Yama* has been found on two plaques of Rupban Mura and Bihar Dhap. Apart from Hindu deities, two plaques from Paharpur Vihara and Mainamati contain the Jaina ascetic's figures.

Noteworthy terracotta representations of demi-gods and goddesses likes *naga*, *vidhyadhara* (Plate 21), *yaksha* (Plate 22) and *yakshi*, *gandharva* (Plate 23), *kinnara* (Plate 24) and *kinnari* (Plate 25), *garuda*, *kirtimukha* etc. have been found at various Buddhist sites. This may indicate that along with the chief gods, these demi-gods and goddesses had a special honour among the people of the society.⁶ Three terracotta plaques



Figure 9 Four-armed deity from the cruciform shrine of Salban Vihara

6 Shahanaia Husain, *Everyday Life in the Pala Empire* (Asiatic Society of Pakistan, Dacca, 1968), p. 194.



Plate 9 Giving birth to Krishna by Devoki at small cruciform shrine of Salban Vihara, Comilla



Plate 10 Devoki and Vasudeva with baby Krishna at small cruciform shrine of Salban Vihara, Comilla



Plate 13 Krishna and Balaram killing the demon *putna* (*putnabodh*) at small cruciform shrine of Salban Vihara, Comilla



Plate 14 Krishna breaking the *sakata* (*sakatavanga*) at small cruciform shrine of Salban Vihara, Comilla



Plate 17 Krishna killing of demon *aghasura* (*aghasurabadh*) at small cruciform shrine of Salban Vihara, Comilla



Plate 18 Krishna killing bull demon *arishta* (*arishtabadh*) at small cruciform shrine of Salban Vihara, Comilla



Plate 19 *gandharva* from Paharpur Vihara, Bogra

of Paharpur Vihara have the image of *gandharva* holding garlands and worshipping *sivalinga*.⁷ The depictions of *naga* and *nagini* are presented in different postures and positions. Some of them consist of a human head with a serpent body. Some plaques containing *naga* in a human figure with a human head with the hood of snake are also

⁷ KN Dikshit, *Excavation at Paharpur, Bengal*. Memoirs of Archaeological Survey of India, No. 55 (Archaeological Survey of India, Delhi, 1938; reprint in 1999), p. 62.



Plate 11 Vasudeva going towards Gkula with Krisna and Seshnaga at small cruciform shrine of Salban Vihara, Comilla



Plate 12 Venu Gopala at small cruciform shrine of Salban Vihara, Comilla



Plate 13 Krisna uprooting yamal and arjuna trees at small cruciform shrine of Salban Vihara, Comilla



Plate 14 Krisna with Kaliya at small cruciform shrine of Salban Vihara, Comilla



Plate 15 Krisna and Balarama fighting with Chanura and Mustaka at small cruciform shrine of Salban Vihara, Comilla



Plate 16 Krisna killing kamso at small cruciform shrine of Salban Vihara, Comilla

found on some terracotta plaques (Plate 26). The modelers were not only interested in depicting different gods and goddesses, they also portrayed semi-divine and mythical figures with care. The author of *Early Sculpture of Bengal*, Saraswati has rightly remarked that 'mythical animals, composites and grotesques always prevail upon popular fancies and such subjects have also been depicted, not often, among the Paharpur terracotta.'⁸

⁸ SK Saraswati, *Early Sculpture of Bengal* (Sambodhi Pub., Calcutta, 1962), p. 109.



Plate 20 Yaksha at small cruciform shrine of Salban Vihara, Comilla



Kinnari from Saccari Vihara, Comilla



Gandharva couple from Bhasu Vihara, Bogra



Kinnara from Bhasu Vihara, Bogra



Elephant from central shrine of Paharpur Vihara, Naogaon



Elephant with erect genital organ from central shrine of Paharpur Vihara, Naogaon

Flora and Fauna

Flora and fauna are very common themes in terracotta plaques found in Buddhist sites of Bangladesh. These plaques represent the relationship between life and environment and their connection with the artistic perceptions of the clay artisans of past eras. Among the animal figures, lion, elephant, horse, deer, monkey, pig, *makara* (Capricorn), bear, leopard, hippopotamus, donkey, ox, dog, entellus, hare, snake, mongoose, tortoise, snail and different kinds of birds like peacock, swan, duck, eagle, cock, hen, etc. are common in the terracotta plaques. Most of the elephants engraved in plaques are female elephants of Asia. Their species can be identified from their small ears, notchless trunk and the absence of tusk.⁹ In one plaque from Paharpur Vihara, an elephant is shown with erected genital organ accompanied by an excited physical expression, which indicates the eagerness of the elephant for sexual mingling. This sort of expression, undoubtedly, sums up the unique perception of the artist. Here, the artists proved to be keen observer of life around them.¹⁰ Two other plaques from Paharpur Vihara portraying camel and horse also show similar representations of phallus (Plate 27). In some plaques the elephant is depicted with the uplifted trunk in the style of greeting. This style reflects most attractive gesture of elephants which the artists were fascinated by. A combined dancing figure of elephant and man is depicted on one plaque in Paharpur Vihara. Here, the elephant is dancing on his two hind legs, while his front legs are thrust upright and he is portrayed smaller than the human figure. While engraving this plaque, the artist applied his great imaginary power, since in reality, except for circus elephants, commonly seen elephants don't dance like this. He might have been influenced by the mythology of dancing Ganesa of his time.¹¹ The depiction of dancing Ganesa on terracotta plaques is quite common.

9. Muhammed Shohrab Uddin and Sharmin Rezowana, "Animal (Mammals) Representation in Somapura Mahavihara *in situ* Terracotta Plaques" *Journal of Bengal Art*, vol. 17, 2012, p. 191

10. Shohrab Uddin Showrov, *Somapura Mahabiharar Podamatir Falake Jeebbochitro* (in Bangla), (Itihas Academy, Dhaka, 2009), p. 36

11. Muhammed Shohrab Uddin and Sharmin Rezowana, "Animal (Mammals) Representation in Somapura Mahavihara *in situ* Terracotta Plaques" *Journal of Bengal Art*, vol. 17, 2012, p. 192



Plate 28 Hunting of elephant from Bhasu Vihara, Bogra

A magnificent plaque from Bhasu Vihara shows an illustration of elephant hunting (Plate 28). Here, the elephant is depicted with closed eyes as if it was running in fear for life; two arrows having pierced its body. The hunter is sitting on the back of the wounded elephant in an aggressive posture. Some plaques tell stories through the images depicted on them. Illustrations of mice freeing an elephant by gnawing at the rope that binds it (Plate 29) on terracotta plaques have been found in Paharpur Vihara and Mainamati terracotta plaques. These scenes clearly indicate that the story of the mice setting free an elephant has been taken from *Panchatantra*. On several plaques from Paharpur Vihara, the face and mane of a lion are arranged in a semicircular way in such a manner that it seems the lion is sitting in a cave. Renowned archaeologist Dikshit has referred to this image as that of "a lion at the entrance of the 'talking cave'."¹² According to the story, a clever fox was used to tell imaginary tales standing before caves to find out whether the lion was in the cave or not. The lion realized the fox's trick and left the place. In these plaques, no image of fox is shown; they only have the face of a lion and a glimpse of cave. One plaque of Paharpur Vihara preserved in the Varendra Research Museum and two other *in situ* plaques of the same site depict the image of a lion or lioness looking at its own face in a well (Plate 30). These plaques may be related to the story of the clever rabbit and the arrogant lion named Madanamatta in *Panchatantra*, where the rabbit gives the lion a lesson. The plaque does not have the rabbit's image, only those of the lion or the lioness. In another plaque, a lion is seen sleeping and a monkey is trying to wake it up by pricking into its ear. Most probably this image is also the depiction of some ancient stories. One plaque of Bhasu Vihara has the image of a lion and a rabbit (Plate 31). The background of the plaque is ornamented by a half-circular design to indicate a cave. Most likely, this plaque is also a representation of the 'rabbit-lion story'. The image seems to suggest that

12 KN Dikshit *Excavation at Paharpur, Bengal*. Memoirs of Archaeological Survey of India, No. 55 (Archaeological Survey of India, Delhi, 1938; reprint in 1999), p. 64.



Plate 29 'Mice freeing elephant' (cutting the story' of *Panchatantra*) from terracotta shrine of Paharpur Vihara, Bangladesh



Plate 30 'Lion watching his face in a well' (the story' of *Panchatantra*) from terracotta shrine of Paharpur Vihara, Bangladesh



Fig. 32. 'Lion and rabbit story' of *Panchatantra* from Bhasu Vihara, Bogra

the rabbit is feeling guilty for being late in coming to the lion as its meal and the lion is listening to its excuse.

In the plaques with the images of lions, the artists have made variations on the mythical stories according to their preferences and imaginations. For example, on a plaque from Paharpur Vihara the end of the tail of a lion looks like a leaf. In another plaque, the back of a lion is ornamented with small flowers and half-circled leaf-like designs. In this regard, mention may be made here of a plaque of Salban Vihara which exhibits a decorated lion which contrasts with reality. In the plaque, the lion's mane is the petal-like and its eyes and eyebrows are also slightly engraved. A corner plaque of Salban Vihara's small cruciform shrine has an image of two lions with a single head and joined body (Plate 32). In this plaque, the mane of the lion consists of three bunches of curly hair on both sides of the head. From its middle, two sides of the plaque seem to be mirror images. This kind of plaques is also found at Paharpur Vihara.



Fig. 33. Deer and fawn from Bhasu Vihara, Bogra

A popular folk tale about the marriage of a woman with a tiger is portrayed on a plaque of Paharpur Vihara. The figure of a deer with a scarf tied around the neck is engraved on many terracotta plaques. Three such plaques from Bhasu Vihara are presently preserved at Mahasthan Archaeological Museum (acc. no. 626). In these plaques, a mother deer and fawn are presented. Both the mother and the fawn have rings around their necks and the fawn is sleeping with its head on the body of its mother (Plate 33). The scarf of the deer is seen fluttering in the wind. This technique of representation is considered a special one in modern art.¹³ Among the deer images of all the plaques, this is the most beautiful and

¹³ See Shreemati Uddini Showmya, *Sarnapatna Mahabiharar Podamahir Falake Jeebboichitra* (in Bangia) (Illias Academy, Dhaka, 2009), p. 47.



Plate 32 Single headed joined figured lion at small cruciform shrine of Salbari Vihara, Comilla



Plate 33 Child and mother deer from Bhasu Vihara, Bogra

suggests a highly developed artistic method and aesthetic beauty. As a consequence, it can be assumed that this clay art developed gradually to assume an advanced artistic form. In one plaque of Paharpur Vihara, a deer couple is depicted. Here, the male one, which is drinking water, is larger in size than the female one which stands behind it. The image is very much realistic because the artist maintains a balance of perspectives as an object short distance looks bigger than an object at long distance. These plaques are proofs of the artist's close observation, imagination, skill and knowledge about perspective.

Varendra Research Museum has a plaque from Paharpur Vihara where a deer with horn is portrayed. The most important characteristic of the image is that it has epistles just above the hooves of each leg. These epistles suggest that the plaque is not earlier than the 10th century AD.¹⁴ Examining the epistles, Dikshit commented that the plaques used for decorating the central shrine of Paharpur Vihara were manufactured in between the 9th to 10th centuries AD for at least 200 years,¹⁵ though the temple was built in the 9th century AD. The engraved epistle around an animal's leg is unusual. The motive behind this is not clear. From this plaque, it is possible to guess how much time it took to manufacture the huge number of terracotta plaques of Paharpur Vihara.

In our time, the rhinoceros is not a well known animal in Bangladesh. However, some plaques of Paharpur Vihara have its image. From their appearance, it can be assumed that during the Pala era rhinoceroses lived in the northern forests of the country. In one plaque, the artist has drawn two banana plants behind the rhinoceros, most probably to suggest a forest. In another plaque from the same site depicts a man and on a rhinoceros where its thick skin is presented in a wavy design carved on its body (Plate 34). Considering the rhino's physical expression, strong movement, ornamentation and clothing of that man it seems that he was an indigenous Shabara- a hunter tribe of India.



Animals in a group from the shrine of Paharpur Vihara



Acrobat riding a rhinoceros from Paharpur Vihara

¹⁴ KN Dikshit. *Excavation at Paharpur, Bengal*. Memoirs of Archaeological Survey of India, No. 55 (Archaeological Survey of India, Delhi, 1938; reprint in 1999), p. 58.

¹⁵ KN Dikshit. *Excavation at Paharpur, Bengal*. Memoirs of Archaeological Survey of India, No. 55 (Archaeological Survey of India, Delhi, 1938; reprint in 1999), p. 58.



Horse from central shrine of Paharpur Vihara, Naogaon



Camel from central shrine of Paharpur Vihara, Naogaon



Fighting between mongoose and snakes from Manshatan Bogra

In two plaques, a monkey-like animal is seated on a leaning rectangular object. The plaque seems to be an account of *Panchatantra* story of the 'wedge-pulling monkey'.¹⁶ This kind of representation is also found at Ananda Vihara. Without a proper analysis of the image, however, it cannot be ascertained that this is *Panchatantra* story. However, the folded left hand of the monkey is kept on the rectangular object in a comfortable way and its right hand is raised in a manner of salutation. This expression matches the greeting act of circus animals.¹⁷ If the monkey was uprooting the wedge, its expression would have matched its deed. There are also some plaques with images of animals standing on their hind legs keeping a fine balance (Plate 35). Their gestures match those of circus animals of present time. A large number of terracotta plaques from Paharpur Vihara, contain, along with these acrobatic animals some acrobatic human figures (Plate 36) as well. From these various plaques depicting acrobatic human and animal figures, it may be assumed that acrobats were a popular as entertainers at that time.

In a plaque from Salban Vihara a baby monkey is portrayed on the back of an older monkey. From this image, it appears that the artists were careful observers of animals. A skillfully done picture of a hunchbacked ox is engraved on a plaque found at Mainamati and now in the collection of Bangladesh National Museum. Such pictures of oxen can be found in the seals of Harappan Civilization.¹⁸ On a plaque of Paharpur Vihara, the artist engraved a horse so flawlessly that it looks like a sculpture (Plate 37). A superb plaque of Ananda Vihara shows a gorgeously ornamented rider and two horses. The rider is wearing a pair of trousers more like those of recent times and a full sleeved upper wear.

Desert animals like camels with one and two hunchbacks have been found on terracotta plaques from Salban Vihara and Paharpur Vihara (Plate 38). Besides these animals, mongooses are also depicted on some plaques. Mongooses are known to fight with snakes (Plate 39) and the artist here has also summed up the everlasting conflict between the two creatures. In one plaque of Paharpur Vihara, two snakes are fighting with a mongoose. A plaque from same site depicts the fighting scene between a serpent and an eagle. Two very interesting plaques have been found in Paharpur Vihara with couples of snakes engraved on them. In one plaque snakes are seen dancing while the other plaque depicts the image of copulation. In most of the fish-engraved plaques the fish holds garlands in its mouth. But, there is a pair of cross-fish depicted on some plaques of Paharpur Vihara and Salban Vihara. They probably represented good signs. Similar symbols are noticed in the Jaina Stupa of Mathura.¹⁹ The clay artists also depicted the metamorphic mythical creatures on many plaques some of which are metamorphic. For example, the image of animals with mixed characteristics of man, animals, birds, fishes, snakes, etc. have been engraved. This kind of metamorphic god or animal can be found in the Sphinx of Egyptian civilization and in the Greek-Roman mythology. Some terracotta plaques of Bhasu Vihara, Rupban Mura and Salban Vihara contain the images

16 Md. Mokammel Hossain Bhuiya, *Prachin Banglar Poramatir Shilpo* (in Bangla) (Dibbhya Prakash, Dhaka, 2003), p. 80.

17 Shohrab Uddin Showrov, *Somapura Mahabiharer Podamatir Falake Jeebboichitro* (in Bangla), (Itihas Academy, Dhaka, 2009), p. 50.

18 Shohrab Uddin Showrov, 'Terracotta Art: From Early Historic to Pre-Medieval Period' in *Archaeological Heritage*, Sufi Mostafizur Rahman (ed.) (Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, Dhaka, 2007), p. 441.

19 KN Dikshit, *Excavation at Paharpur, Bengal*. Memoirs of Archaeological Survey of India, No. 55 (Archaeological Survey of India, Delhi, 1938; reprint in 1999), p. 70.



Plate 40 Merman from Bhasu Vihara, Bogra

of mermaids and mermen (Plate 40) figures. Two plaques of Paharpur Vihara, exhibit a man fighting with a mythical creature named *makara*. Here, the man's right leg is in the mouth of the *makara* and the man is resisting the *makara* with his right hand to get his leg out. The plaque depicts another story of Uma and Mahadeva from *Baraha Purana*.

The peacock is an important subject for terracotta plaques. These are usually depicted in the midst of lotus or holding/eating snakes (Plate 41). However, in some cases, they are shown clearing their feather, turning their neck backwards. The front pictures of the peacocks are very beautiful. In a plaque of Paharpur Vihara, the artist connected the feather tip with the back of the peacock and thus, made a circle in such a way that the picture evokes a brilliant motion. It seems that there is no end point in the picture.²⁰ Two peacocks joined together facing opposite directions are represented on a plaque from Paharpur Vihara. This pair of peacocks expresses some extraordinary ideas of the artist. Among the plaques with engraving of swans perhaps the most attractive one has a swan with a string of pearls around its beaks. It resembles the picture one imagines in the folk tale of 'the black swan desirous of pearls'. Among the swan-engraved plaques, the picture of a swan holding a necklace with a locket in its beaks (Plate 42), discovered at Bhasu Vihara is considered the best considering its realistic, artistic and structural beauty. Apart from these figures, other birds like doves, ducks, hens (Plate 43), herons, eagles, cranes, parrots etc. are also found on terracotta plaques from Paharpur Vihara.

Plaques with banana plants are larger in number among the plant-depicting plaques. A sugar cane is identified on one plaque of Paharpur Vihara. Jackfruits are engraved on two plaques, one from Paharpur Vihara and another from Mainamati. One of the plaques of Paharpur Vihara exhibits a monkey-like animal eating jackfruit (Plate 44).



Plate 41 Peacock holding snake from central shrine of Paharpur Vihara, Naogaon



Plate 42 Swan holding necklace from Bhasu Vihara, Bogra



Plate 43 Hen from central shrine of Paharpur Vihara, Naogaon



Plate 44 Monkey eating jackfruit from central shrine of Paharpur Vihara, Naogaon

²⁰ Shreebhadr Lalit Showrov, *Somapura Mahabiharar Podamatir Falake Jeeboichitro* (in Bangla) (Itihas Academy, Dhaka, 2009), p. 73



Plate 45 Palm tree from central shrine of Paharpur Vihara, Naogaon



Plate 46 Blue lotus from Salban Vihara, Comilla



Plate 47 Swan eating lotus bud from Salban Vihara, Comilla



Plate 48 Sun and moon on lotus at central shrine of Paharpur Vihara, Naogaon

A good number of terracotta plaques from Paharpur Vihara contain palm trees (Plate 45), plantain, coconut and date trees. These confirm the popularity of banana, mango, coconut and jackfruit at the time.²¹ Among the flowers engraved on the plaques, the lotus (Plate 46) appears to hold a prominent place. Many phases of the life cycle of a lotus have been engraved on the plaques. Moreover, in some plaques gods are seen holding lotuses in their hands. Snakes and swans also hold them in their mouths in several plaques (Plate 47). The sun and the moon on a full blooming lotus have also been depicted on terracotta plaques of Paharpur Vihara (Plate 48). This could have been influenced by Hindu symbolism where the lotus symbolizes both sun rise and sun set. The lotus-engraved plaques of Salban Vihara are much more decorative than the plaques of Paharpur Vihara.

Ancient Architectural Evidence

Terracotta plaques from various Buddhist sites also represent house types of the time. A round cottage on a plaque of Paharpur Vihara and a double roofed (*do-chala*) hut on a plaque of Mainamati are found on some plaques. Double (*do-chala*), four (*chou-chala*) and eight (*at-chala*) roofed houses are accepted as a custom of Bangladesh architecture.²² Plaques suggesting religious architecture have been discovered in Paharpur Vihara and Bihar Dhap. On a plaque in Paharpur Vihara, there is a temple with a curved roof, projected ends and *amalaka* on the dome. It has resemblance with similar structures in the illustrated manuscript of the Pala Period (c. 756-1161 AD). The models of Buddhist *stupa* are found on some plaques of Paharpur Vihara. A *stupa* with a cylindrical drum on the foundation platform. A plaque shows with a gradually thinning

21 Shohrab Uddin Showrov and Sufi Mostafizur Rahman, "Paharpurer Poramatir Falakchitre Udvaidboichitrer Protikayan" (in Bangla) *Bangladesh Asiatic Society Patrika*, vol. 28, 2010, p. 19.

22 Md. Mokammel Hossain Bhuiyan, *Prachin Banglar Poramatir Shilpo* (in Bangla) (Dibbhya Prakash, Dhaka, 2003), p. 101.



Plate 50 Women in judicial proceeding (?) small cruciform shrine of Salban Vihara, Comilla



Plate 49 Woman beside door from central shrine of Paharpur Vihara, Nadgaon

dome and rectangular finial has been engraved on a plaque. Only doors and windows are engraved on some plaques. A woman in a *sari* and waiting beside a door has been engraved on some plaques of Paharpur Vihara (Plate 49). The doors seem to be wooden.

Contemporary People and Life

Terracotta plaques express different aspects of the lives of their time. Weary wanderers, ploughmen, a mother playing with her child, intimate couples sitting or standing side by side scenes of hunting, women waiting at the door, men fighting with wild beasts, men and animal in action, women kneeling in front of religious icons, women beaten by men—everything seems to be reflections of the society through the artists' eyes. A woman wearing ornaments with two persons beside her (Plate 50) is engraved on a plaque from Salban Vihara's small cruciform shrine which might indicate a judicial proceeding (?). The social situation of women is indicated by some of the plaques, such as the picture of a man beating a woman with his foot, which is engraved on a plaque of Paharpur Vihara. Some plaques also depict boats and boatmen (Plate 51) from Paharpur Vihara. One plaque from Salban Vihara shows toy boat.

The terracotta plaques suggest that popular means of entertainment in ancient times were hunting (Plate 52), acrobatics, singing, dancing and music. A large number of terracotta plaques from Paharpur Vihara and Mainamati contain images of dance, music and musical instruments. The graceful depiction of hands, feet and physical movement of dancers on these plaques represent basic gestures of Bharata Natyam and traditional Odissi dance.²³ These gestures are similar to those described in *Natya-sastra* of Bharat Muni. These plaques clearly prove that classical dance was practiced



Plate 51 Boat with boatman from central shrine of Paharpur Vihara, Nadgaon



Plate 52 Hunter from central shrine of Paharpur Vihara, Nadgaon

23 Sharmin Rezowana and Shohrab Uddin Showrov, "Poramatir Falakchitre Prachin Banglar Nitto-Geet" (in Bangla), *Pratnatattva*, vol. 20, 2014, p. 164.

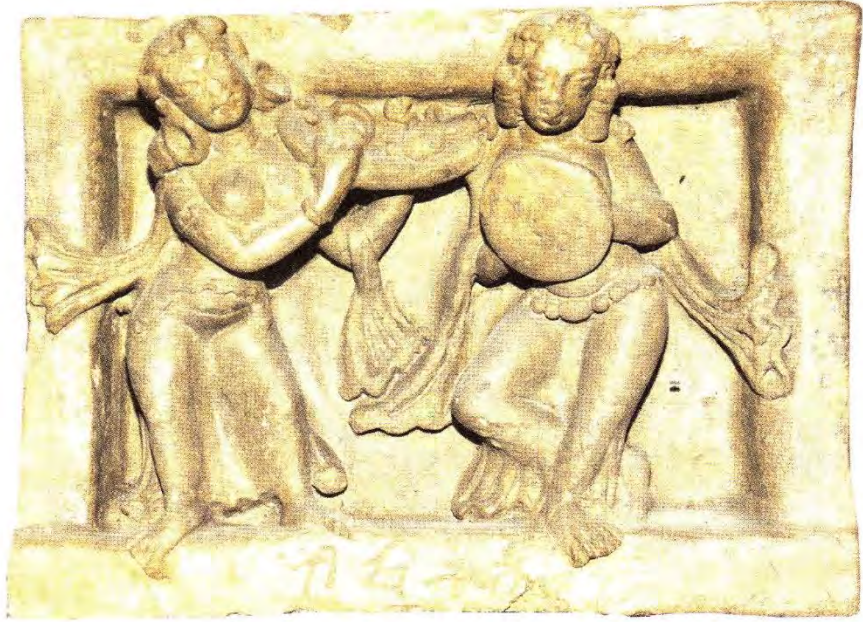


Plate 54 Dance of Hrisikanyas on the occasion of Sita's marriage ceremony from Palashbari, Bogra

in ancient Bangladesh and it was influenced by the South Indian style.²⁴ Besides these, plaques from Paharpur Vihara and Mainamati also depict the popular 'War Dance' of that time (Plate 53). Such 'war dance' gestures of armed soldiers resemble the Mayurabhanja Chou dance of Odissi.²⁵

Not only the dance sequences, terracotta plaques also portrayed wedding ceremonies (Plate 54) and harvesting festivals celebrated with music and dance. Examples of music are seen in ancient literary works, but the theme is rare in terracotta plaques or stone sculpture. It may be mentioned that some plaques from Paharpur Vihara show depictions of musical performance, which is probably the most ancient example of musical practice in Bangladesh in terracotta plaque art (Plate 55).²⁶

The diversity of costumes, attires and ornaments of the people at the time is also represented on the terracotta plaques. The common garments of men were *dhoti* of various sizes for the lower part of the body. The upper part remained bare. But sometimes, wrappers were used for the upper part of the body. Children and old men are seen to be wearing small loin cloths (*nengti*) on the lower parts of their bodies on some plaques of Paharpur Vihara. Sometimes, warriors are seen wearing cross-belts on the upper half of their bodies. Women commonly wore *saris*. Breasts were covered by a kind of close fitting blouse (*kanchuli*) (Plate 56) or by a part of the sari, or remained bare. The attire of the hunters was made of leaves. The breasts were covered by a cross attire



Plate 55 War dance from central shrine of Paharpur Vihara, Naogaon

24 Sharmin Rezowana and Shohrab Uddin Showrov, "Poramatir Falakchitre Prachin Banglar Nritto-Geet" (in Bangla), *Pratnatattva*, vol. 20, 2014, p. 158

25 Sharmin Rezowana and Shohrab Uddin Showrov, "Poramatir Falakchitre Prachin Banglar Nritto-Geet" (in Bangla), *Pratnatattva*, vol. 20, 2014, p. 164

26 Sharmin Rezowana and Shohrab Uddin Showrov, "Poramatir Falakchitre Prachin Banglar Nritto-Geet" (in Bangla), *Pratnatattva*, vol. 20, 2014, p. 164

like a holy thread by the Brahmin (*upabita*), which was made of leaves or by *kochabanda*. Both men and women wore earrings, necklaces, bangles, armlets, anklets, etc. Boot-like footwear were depicted on the feet of *gandharva* and *vidhyadhara* on some plaques. On a plaque of Ananda Vihara, a horse rider seen clad in a full shirt and a *pajama*. This is certainly an exception.

On the basis of the themes of terracotta plaques in the Buddhist architectures of Bangladesh it may be said that they were the bearers of religious, social and environmental aspects of the time they were manufactured. Besides Buddhist deities, Hindu deities and stories from the *Mahabharata*, *Ramayana*, *Panchatantra* etc are represented a large extensive number of plaques in various monasteries. It indicates the multi-religious cultural assimilation of different communities of Bangladesh of those days. Analyzing the plaques it is noticed that Hindu religion was strong mainly in the Varendra region but not in the Lalmai-Mainamati region. But, the Buddhist religion expanded in the entire Bangladesh because of royal patronage. It can be gathered from the image-plaques that the goddesses Padmapani and Tara were popularly worshipped by the Buddhists. Tara is depicted as a common village woman of Bangladesh on the plaques, only a symbolic lotus indicates her divinity. One terracotta sealing of Salban Vihara depicts an eight-armed Tara. Maybe, the followers worshipped the deity to protect themselves from eight dangers: shipwreck, thunderbolt, theft, snake, wild elephant, and evil spirit and also danger of imprisonment. Siva's prominence among the Hindu deities is noticed in the terracotta plaques. Visnu, Krisna, Brahma, Ganesa and Manasa were also been worshipped as is evident from the plaques.

The terracotta plaques of various Buddhist monasteries of Bangladesh represent rural art of the time. The theme and the difference ways of presentation of the plaques are also noticeable. The abundance of the plaques suggests that these were made by many artists. Indeed, an entire class of artisans might have been engaged in this work. The artisans had their creative freedom; therefore, the terracotta plaques of every artist became unique in features. When they were attached together on the wall of the architecture, their works were not identifiable according to artists. As a part of architectural surface the plaques depicting various subjects became a source of knowledge for the pilgrims and visitors. These also built a bridge between people of a particular time with their ancestors. Terracotta plaques thus played an important role in sharing and exchanging traditional knowledge with the generations and transforming it in the process.

**Muhammed Shohrab Uddin
Sharmin Rezowana**



Plate 13. Gesture of offering
from central shrine of
Paharpur Vihara, Bangladesh



Plate 14. Woman washing
kanchuli from central shrine of
Paharpur Vihara, Bangladesh