

---

# Terracotta Plaques of Pilak in Tripura: A Hidden Cultural Heritage

Subrata Dey<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>. Department of Fine Arts, Tripura University, Suryamaninagar, Agartala – 799 022, Tripura, India (Email: subbiart@gmail.com)

---

Received: 23 July 2019; Revised: 09 September 2019; Accepted: 16 October 2019

Heritage: Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies in Archaeology 7 (2019): 945-953

---

***Abstract:** Pilak is a very well-known Buddhist site in Tripura has representations of good numbers of terracotta architecture and terracotta plaques. Buddhist divinities and Hindu deities, with Purana and Ramayana story images have been depicted in the temple's outer wall. The plaques have included images of Rama, Laxmana, Hanuman, Varaha, Ganesha, Kartikeya, Goddess Shakti, head of Shiva, Narasimha, Buddha, Vajra, Tara, Marici and many more. Historically, clay has been used for multiple conceivable purposes having its abundance and universal supply and it has taken the second place after stone as far as the oldest building materials have been concerned. The baking clay with its permanent feature, black colour, globally known as terracotta have been extensively used as a lighter building material.*

---

***Keywords:** Terracotta, Plaques, Architecture, Pilak, Folk Art, Excavation, Sculpture*

---

## Introduction

Tripura, one of the smallest states of India with 10491 square kilometer long and surrounded by Bangladesh in three sides has a very unique and diverse mixed cultural heritage of migrated Bengalese and indigenous tribes. It has a rich heritage in art and culture comprising, among others, architecture, terracotta relief sculpture and terracotta plaques. The state has a unique cultural heritage with a number of archeological sites have been explored such as in Pilak and Boxanagar having unique terracotta plaques. Pilak, an Archeological Survey of India (ASI) recognized site located in Jolaibari, South Tripura district, around 100 km away from the capital city of Agartala (Figure 1). Boxanagar, is another ASI recognized site, around 40 km far from the capital city of Agartala located in Sepahijala district. Historically, clay has been used for multiple conceivable purposes having its abundance and universal supply and has taken the second place after stone as far as the oldest building materials have been concerned. The baking clay with its permanent feature and black colour, globally known as terracotta have been extensively used as lighter building material.

Baked clay or baked earth (Oxford dictionary, 2013) means terracotta. Clay is a sticky hard material which contains silica, usually mixed and composed with iron, lime, magnesia and other coloring oxides. The well-known fact is that whenever clay is mixed

with water, it transforms into a soft substance with diverse shapes. Notwithstanding that, clay is a fine-grained material in wetted plastic form but converted into rigid and durable forms after being dried and fired. Artists have been manipulating such clay and simply moulded these into different art forms and/or sculptures by using different sophisticated tools. The fired clay items converted into brownish red color and popularly acquainted with terracotta which becomes hard, permeable and strong in nature. Besides the extensive use of terracotta in the aesthetic world, it has a substantial commercial and domestic uses such as crockery and even in performing the multiple rituals across religions.



Figure 1: Location Map of Pilak

Literally, the influence of Buddhism has been witnessed in Tripura, but the panorama was unexplainable in the early centuries of Christian era. The ASI has discovered the evidence of the religion in the first part of 7th century A.D. in Pilak. The artistic works on Buddhism and Brahmanism as evidenced from Samataka–Harikela mandala from the 7th to the 8th century A.D. have their close symmetry with the arts discovered in Pilak. Such extraction has provided evidence of spreading Buddhism from Bengal to Arakan and Burma (now Myanmar) via Tripura.

## Terracotta

In the Harappan civilization terracotta art practice was predominant, which expanded in between 2700 and 1750 BCE (Jayaswal & Krishna, 1986). Lots of amount of animal and human figurine have so far been excavated at Harappa (Vats, 1974) Chanhudaro (Mackay, 1943), Mohenjodaro (Mackay, 1998, 1938), and other sites. In the most cases of the Harappa region, the animal figurines were hand crafted. In almost all the animal figures the anatomy was realistic. The animal figures have mostly represented as Bull. The maximum of bull intuition has proven that probably Indus Valley had a bull cult. Apart from that, other animals like elephant, pig, dog, buffalo, sheep, tiger, squirrel, rhinoceros, tortoise, etc. and so many bird representations have revealed in the Indus Valley civilization, like cock, duck, sparrow, pigeon, parrot, etc. (Mackay, 1998, 1938).

Terracotta plaques of Indus valley are mainly associated as a votive offering (Salapatra, 1993). Terracotta not only has religious values, but also has social values as well. In the terracotta plaques, characters of heroic, religious and divine representation also related in the practices.



Figure 2: Depiction of a Snake and Mongoose in fighting mood, where the snake is shown with full hood



Figure 3: Representation of a crocodile and two fishes in crossing each other pose



Figure 4: Varaha and Hanuman



Figure 5: Depiction of Ramayana Story (Rama holding the bow for killing Bali)

### **Brief Summary of Pilak**

The main focus of the paper is to exhibit how the representation of divine goddesses and Buddhist religious practice associated with Pilak. Pilak terracotta plaques depicted so many human and animal figures and their activities. It is exactly not yet discovered, at what time the temple and building activities have started in Tripura. The existence of brick temple and terracotta manufacturing in Pilak and Boxanagar reveals the terracotta temple and architecture is existed at that time. With the references and historical

evidence historian dated around 7<sup>th</sup> - 8<sup>th</sup> century A.D. (Das, 1987). With the help of some specimen of Pilak terracotta plaques, historian believes that Mainamati cultural complex which is presently located in Bangladesh is more contemporary of Pilak, Tripura. The historical evidence assumes that Pilak Buddhist site is one of the significant sites of Sahajana and Vajrayana practice during the medieval time in the region. (Das, 1987). Shyamsundar Tilla of Pilak is one of the most significant site as an example of temple architecture of Tripura, which is also been treated as an integral part of Tripura's Archaeology. The Shyamsundar Tilla temple, the outer sidewall was designed with the terracotta plaques. The terracotta plaques (Figures 2 - 12) are outstanding and well moulded and dated to 9<sup>th</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup> Century AD (Bhattacharjee, 2012).



Figure 6: Representation of Cow and Kinnar



Figure 7: Man Playing Mridanga (Dhol)



Figure 8: Ram Killing Marichi (Deer)



Figure 9: Depiction of Ram (big size) and Laxmana (Small Size)

## Discussion

Literature indicated aesthetic beauties have been reflected in the works of earlier artists in the context of Tripura. The State Museum and Rajendra Kirtishala have been identified as the preservers of ancient artworks. Rajendra Kirtishala, in its Silver Jubilee volume in 2002 has emphatically published the summary of articles on the terracotta of Tripura from 1970 to 1995. The strand of studies has conceded that, terracotta plaques of varying sizes have been mentioned in the reviewed articles, but majority of these have

referred terracotta plaques of 8x6 inches. The studies have lucidly described arts of lion-the royal insignia, running deer, elephants, ornamental lotus leaves, figure of hanuman and flower and leaves etc. Further, a close review has also reflected the terracotta works have bundle of collections of devotional people, deities and their cultural fascinations. Interestingly, even though scholars have validated that the terracotta art of Pilak has its similarity with the works of undivided greater Bengal, but the influence of Bengal's works in the Pilak terracotta has unlikely be ruled out. The lion form of Pilak has its conformity with the forms of arts extracted in Unokoti. The state museum has collections of terracotta works of 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> centuries, which have shown the flexibility and variations with that of Ahom period terracotta works of 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries.



Figure 10: Pig and Monkey



Figure 11: Anthropomorphic Figure and Deer

The terracotta arts of the Pilak have remained a unique description of contemporary cultural life highlighting the customs, attire, amusements, ornaments and jewelry of the people. The artists have depicted such socio-cultural issues on the walls of the shrines as evidenced from the musical instrument playing figures built in terracotta. The terracotta of Shyamsundar Tilla at Pilak has its close associations with the Pala tradition. The *Puranic* episode has been well depicted in the multiple figures such as Shivalinga over a lotus, Varaha is shown on the aloes. Beside these, figures of Bramha, Vishnu, Kamadeva, Ram, Laxman, Narasimha and Hanuman have also been depicted in their usual religious forms.



Figure 12: Yogi Riding a Lion or Tiger and Cow and calf

The dimension of the Shyamsundar Tilla architecture, where the plaques have been attached is in the outer side of the wall having 34.50 meter (Bhattacharjee, 2012) and the *medhi* is around 1.70 meter in width. Pilak in Joiaibari region has so many plaques which have been exported from the different sites; specifically, from the Shyamsundar Tilla plaques have very close resemblance to the Subhrata Bhadra Temple of Paharpur Bangladesh. The Pilak terracotta has a mixed cultural and mythological story, like *Ramayana*, *Purana* and Buddhist Jataka stories with auspicious symbols like Ghot (pot with flower), flower and *vajra* with sharp sides. (Bhattacharjee, 2012). The Hindu and Buddhist Mythological goddesses and *puranic* episodes and the story and life of lord Rama and the stories of Buddha are also become the part of the subject matter of the plaques. The images like Varaha, Shivalinga Kamdhenu, Narasimha and various other images of deities reflected in the plaques. The significant episodes of *Ramayana* have reflected on some plaques like Rama, Laxmana, Hanuman and Ravana, Marichi, Bali and Sugriva. Interestingly, noted that the good amount of Hindu deities depicted in the Buddhist temple like Shiva, Ganesh, Kartikeya, with Narasimha *avatara*. Most important fact about the Pilak terracotta plaque is the mixed mythological stories have been depicted in the Pilak Plaques, like the Buddhist images with the Hindu deities have been depicted; like Gautam Buddha, the *Jataka* stories and the story of Vaishali, etc. In the Pilak terracotta plaques, the wide range of animal figures also featured in the shrine. The popular animal images like buffalo, deer, lion, rhino, tiger, pigs and milking calf also have been depicted. A fighting scene of mongoose with a big snake has depicted very interestingly in the plaques. In the other side a big snake is trying to catch a lizard depicted very interestingly in the terracotta plaques. The exterior wall also has decorated with some auspicious symbols, along with the mythological figures like human action with snake and animal, and a full-blown lotus flower also depicted as a decoration of the wall. The extracted figure has included two fishes in crossing each other pose have been depicted very uniformly in the plaque. The iconographic images and semi divine images also have been depicted in the plaques, like Gandharvas, Kinnaras and kinnaris (Figure 2 - 12). The noticeable aspect is that, it included some anthropomorphic images been used in the plaques like the lower part of an animal and the upper part of a human figure.



## Conclusion

Pilak terracotta plaque has shown the evidence of significant story of Ramayana several times. The plaques have featured Rama and Laxmana were sitting while Rama has hold the bow in his left arm in the Abhaya mudra pose. Interestingly, the figures were in different sizes where Rama was larger than Laxmana. The famous golden deer as described in the Ramayana has also been beautifully depicted in the plaque where the deer was shown in running and being targeted by Rama with a bow. Another mythological hero, the great Hanuman has also been depicted in crossing the ocean position in the plaques of Pilak. At the bottom the fishes and crocodile have been depicted with the effect of waves in a zig- zag forms.

## References

- Alam, M.S. 1992. Buddhist Establishments at Rupban Mura, Mainamati, Bangladesh. *East and West*. 42 (2/4): 281-300.
- Bhattacharjee, P. 2012. *Temple Architecture of Princely Tripura*. Agartala: NabachandanaPrakashani.. 21-22.
- Das, R. 1987. *Art and Architecture of Tripura*. Agartala: Tribal Research Institute, Govt. of Tripura.
- Hoston, A. D. 1923. Anthropomorphic Carving from the Greater Antilles. *American Anthropologist*, 25(4): 525- .558.
- Jayaswal, V., and K. Krishna. 1986. *An Ethno-Archaeological View of Indian Terracottas*. Delhi: Agam Kala Prakashan.
- Mackay, E. J. H. 1938). (1998 reprint). *Further Excavations at Mohenjo-daro (Being an Official Account of Archaeological Excavations at Mohenjo-daro carried out by the Government of India between the years 1927 and 1931)*. Vol. 1. New Delhi: MunshiramManoharlal.
- Salpatra, G. 2013. Laconian and messenian plaques with seated figures: the socio-political dimension. *The Annual of the British School at Athens*. London: Nendeln/Liechtenstein.