

# TERRACOTTA ART AND CRAFT OF BENGAL: A LIVING TRADITION OF INDIA

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## Abstract

Bengal has a long tradition of excellence in terracotta art and craft from ancient times. It ranges from highly decorated terracotta tiles to variety of temple architecture and diversity of pottery and ornaments. Since Harappan times, the art of making clay tiles was known to citizens but the concept of terracotta architectural artistry was flourished in Bengal. From ecological point of view, terracotta pottery and ornaments have been popularised for their environment-friendly character mainly among contemporary generations. This has become a trendline of tradition as well as aristocracy among high class urban society. Durga Idol during Durga Puja festival is a perfect manifestation of excellent terracotta artistry of West Bengal clay workers.

This paper deals with the origin and development of terracotta art and craft of West Bengal, which has popularised through various clay works of different districts. A revival of this age-old rural eco-friendly folk-material through the conceptualization of educated urban designers also extends the scope of this paper. Based on secondary source of information, this research paper will create an awareness for the world regarding an age-old folk culture of Bengal in particular and an Indian living tradition in general.

**Keywords:** Terracotta, Craft, Tradition, Folk culture, Revival

## INTRODUCTION

A society's art, craft, literature, music, ritualistic traditions and other cultural expressions are together regarded as the cultural essence of that society. In other words, culture is the expression of ideas, values, behaviours, customs and social attitudes of a particular society. Bengali culture consists of a special category of traditions and forms, which is believed as an amalgamation of the Austric, the Dravidian and North Indian Aryan cultures. It has a long history of cultural development with the main characteristics of contemporary hybrid nature as well as plurality of cultural attributes due to increasing rate population dynamism in this part of the country. Therefore, the globalized and technologically advanced present-day mainstream Bengali culture of Indian state of West Bengal experiences a mixed culture. Bengali culture is famous worldwide due to its intellectuals and its literary traditions. Regarding the development of traditional art and craft, the state population also reveals their excellent artistry in terracotta craft, textile and weaving, shola craft, conch shell and bamboo-cane works etc. Besides, they are also marvellous in expressing their literary practices through their writings, their varieties of folk music, dance and drama. Bengal's terracotta art and craft can be observed in different form ranging from tiles for making buildings to daily used ornaments. Highly decorated terracotta tiles were used in temple architecture from historical periods before that of Sultani era. Diversity of pottery items are used in rural areas of Bengal as kitchenware, dishes, for storing water and other materials. Terracotta items are also used in different parts of Bengal as diversity of usable goods. Since the Indus Valley Civilization, Indian people developed their artistry in terracotta items, but it is believed that the concept of terracotta architectural artistry was flourished in Bengal temple architecture. From ecological point of view, terracotta pottery and ornaments have been popularised for their environment-friendly character mainly among contemporary generations. This has become a trendline of tradition as well as aristocracy among high class urban society. Durga Idol during Durga Puja festival is a perfect manifestation of excellent terracotta artistry of West Bengal clay workers.

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## OBJECTIVE AND METHODOLOGY

The present research aims to find out the following two objectives-

- 1) Significance and present status of terracotta craft of West Bengal and
- 2) The process of revival of this folk craft in contemporary period

This paper depends for all its information on various secondary materials like research articles, documentaries, Government portals and websites, book chapters, books etc. All these information is then analysed elaborately. Finally, it results into the writing of this paper's analytical section covering the two objectives of this research.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Gulam Murshid (2018) worked on the Bengali cultural traditions and tried to talk about the history and culture of the Bengali people over the past thousand years. Bengal as a region, the Bangla language, and the Bengali people - all have emerged with distinct cultural indications through the past sixty to seventy years. The prehistory of literary traditions of Bengal, its cultural practices and geographical formations highly influenced by the region's wide alluvium deposits of many rivers, which has made the land into a home of fertile agriculture. Actually, Bengali culture is not homogeneous rather it is pluralistic and is also shaded with many colours of people coming from different parts of the world. Chattopadhyaya (1991), in her thesis mentioned that, among all the village crafts of Bengal, terracotta pottery was the most significant and as old as the Mesolithic times. In some inscriptions like, the Kamauli Copper Plate of Vaidyadeva, the Nidhanpur Copper Plate etc, mentions about Kumbhakara or potter group, which reveals that Bengal villages were familiar with terracotta artefacts since ancient past. Archaeological excavations have brought to light several terracotta items of the beginning of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Century BC. Terracotta objects of that period include domestic utensils, ornaments and a large number of terracotta panels for decorating buildings. Such terracotta artistry is believed to started during the Gupta-period and continued even in medieval period. However, the terracotta-art on religious architectures within a specific period, when this tradition of folk-craft flourished well, involved in a highly complicated relationship among the people of contemporary upper caste with high-skilled rural-artisans of lower social strata (Sen Gupta, 2020). Terracotta temple architecture of Bengal, started its journey since ancient past before the coming of Islami rulers, has become a symbol of Bengali Hindu artistic expression. The finely designed terracotta plaques were placed to make every temple unique of that period. Effects of both- the Vaishnavite and Shaivite philosophy can be observed in every temple architecture. Later, the Bhakti movement, and the Muslim as well as Anglo-Indian culture also influenced temple architecture of this region (Patua, 2022). If we consider the spatial distribution of the Bengal terracotta temples, it may be characterised with the concentration of these temples along the alluvial delta part of Ganges River. It explains that, due to availability of suitable type of clay made this concentration. Thus, it is well known fact that, the Bengali temples are the important representation of Bengal's culture, religion, literature, arts, political patronage and socio-economic development of the region (Mangaonkar, 2011).

## SIGNIFICANCE AND PRESENT STATUS OF TERRACOTTA CRAFT OF WEST BENGAL

Edward Taylor defined the term 'culture' during the second half of the 19th century, where he stressed on a comprehensive pattern of beliefs, values, behaviour and knowledge that develops gradually over centuries. Ideas, religion, beliefs, behavioural pattern, socio-ritual values and rules, festivals, language, literature, art, craft and the artistic mind setting of people in everyday life—all this makes up a culture. These attributes refine our minds and tastes and differentiate a human being from an animal. Terracotta craft of Bengal is such a representation of the region's cultural expression, that is closely associated with the region's physiography, climate, soil character, religious beliefs, political patronage and their cultural attributes at different ages, as well as human skill and artistic mind-setup.

From the perspective of the physiographic character of Bengal, clay is a very popular material for making utensils and for constructing a house. Due to its location in the lower Ganga plain, clay is easily available here. Not only that, from historical explanations of archaeological excavations, clay can be considered as the oldest building materials after stone. This fact is supported by the discovery of baking clay materials at several archaeological sites, i.e., terracotta materials which were used to provide permanence character to the objects. Terracotta was predominantly used for household materials, but it has been shifted subsequently to construction industry.

In present day urban living, terracotta has become a material, well documented in every aspect for its eco-friendly character. Nowadays improved technology has transformed simple clay into highly decorative, durable and artistic terracotta objects that has experimented to its fullest qualities in certain parts of India. In recent decades, various parts of the West Bengal state have popularised the terracotta craft through the unique artistic character applied by the terracotta artists. These are- terracotta horse of Bankura; terracotta dolls of Nadia; Idol making in Kumartuli etc. Two or more types of clay are mixed to make a particular clay that are

easy to give the desirable shape and structure. In majority of the times, folk-theme and folk-stories are depicted in making this craft. Traditionality is also maintained in every object with the artistic touch of traditional experts in this regard. The items are then put under the 700–800-degree centigrade temperature in the kiln to be baked.

In the districts of Purba Bardhaman, Bankura and Birbhum, majority of potters use the clay from fields or ditch (Bill) surrounding their working areas. The potters of North and South Dinajpur collect clays from rivers, while the Konnoujia and Maghaiya potters and the tribal potters of Malda and South Dinajpur use alluvial clay for their work (Rauth, 2021). Terracotta, in the present-day Bengal (West Bengal in this research), is used in various forms like terracotta feeding bins for cattle, tea mugs, clay pots for cooking, plates, yoghurt pots etc for rural areas; home decorative items like clay pots for kitchen gardens and balcony, wall hangings, candle holders, show pieces for decoration, diyas, worship offerings plates, tea mugs in tea shops, biriyani serving utensils in modern biriyani restaurants etc. in urban areas. Large figurines of gods and goddesses are also made in clay like the famous Durga idol making of Kumartuli in Kolkata.

Another significance of terracotta craft in the society and culture of West Bengal can be the side or off-season employment of rural people. This house-hold industry provides employment to artisans in whole the year round and also offers job opportunities to non-artisans (mainly agricultural labours of rural Bengal) during the slack seasons of agriculture and also provide employment to other tertiary sector employees, marginal workers including housewife of labourers in villages. Not only that, during the Durga puja festival, numerous artisans get employment in different idol making workhouses to fulfil the huge demand of terracotta Durga idol.

**Clay Dolls of Nadia-** The terracotta doll making sector of Krishnanagar city of Nadia district of the state of West Bengal occupies an important position in the terracotta craft of Bengal. It also contributes the economic development of the whole district through generating employment for local people. Sometimes they earn more revenues when they supply to the abroad. Study reveals that, low capital investment, high employment potential, high value addition and a constant demand both in the domestic and overseas markets- mainly broadens the scope of this industry. This craft of clay doll is about 200-250 years old, when Maharaja Krishna Chandra (1710-1783) patronized this craft in Krishnanagar, of West Bengal. He encouraged the local artisans of this craft and potters of Dhaka districts (present Bangladesh) to settled in Krishnanagar, Nadia district (in India). From then, the tradition of clay doll making of this place continues till present day.



Pic 1: Clay doll of Krishnanagar, West Bengal



Pic 2: Terracotta Horse of Bankura

**Terracotta Horse of Bankura-** Bankura's art form is an ancient form of terracotta art. This part of the state is also famous for the unique terracotta temple architecture. The place namely Panchmura, 16 miles away from Bishnupur city, where kumbhokars started to make the famous Bankura horses. The 'Bankura Horse' is now has become the face of the artistic brilliance of Indian rural handicrafts. The rich alluvial soil of Bankura district left by its major rivers- Damodar, Dwarakeswar and Kansabati. A perfect soil characterised with high density encourages potters to produce terracotta crafts, among which Bankura horse become highly famous.

Various objects made from terracotta are especially depend on the quality and condition of raw material. Here clay is the main raw material of the Terracotta items. Thus, the collection of clay means a highly important work in this industry. Traditional wheels were used by elder potters, which is a rotating wooden dial consisting of various parts and different pottery items are prepared accordingly. These items are then left for drying in shed and then in kiln to bake well. After the baking process done, it remains for cooling up to 5-6 hours. Finally, artists add different colours to give accurate shape and structure to each object.

## THE PROCESS OF REVIVAL OF TERRACOTTA CRAFT IN CONTEMPORARY PERIOD

Folk culture is associated with tradition, regional identity, historical continuity, attachment to the place of origin, collectivism and overall belongingness. It includes the both- the folk products and folk practices of relatively homogeneous and isolated small-scale social groups. In this age of globalization, it is obvious to change the character of every cultural attribute of society in accordance with the requirement and demand of the present generation. The cultural change of any society is, however, well documented through the changing nature of cultural craft and artefacts and their condition of demand and supply. With the growing consumerism and industrialization, every folk tradition is now facing existence problem all over the world. Simultaneously, there is a wave that has develop to protect and conserve these traditions of folk culture. This refers to the revival of folk culture and traditions in order to make the original items more acceptable to the present generation, keeping all the traditional essence intact. West Bengal's terracotta craft also facing problem of its existence and government as well as local people are trying to revive this age-old tradition in a more attractive way.

The terracotta horses of Bankura have become a type of traditional cultural representation of Bengali urbanites. It displays the skill and excellence of Bengal craftsmen and thus, a pair of terracotta horses decorated in a corner of a room adds a traditional touch to any Bengali interior. It also remembers the glorious history of kings, soldiers and wars, that encourages potters. The Bankura pottery is mainly used for ritualistic purposes, like the rituals associated with local village gods and goddesses in various tribal and folk festivals. In recent years, new designs have been adopted by the craftsmen as these may attract customers in urban markets.

An effort was taken by the local artisans to modernize terracotta craft through the addition of new designs and applying new concepts. Such introduction in style is done with the help of some trainee artisans from other parts of the country like Ahmadabad (Gujarat) (Satpathy, 2011). Thus, it should be mentioned that, artisans must focus on new designs of contemporary trends by using both traditional and modern techniques. Though it is also believed by some other researchers and policy makers that, the authenticity of traditional craft will be in danger if innovation parameters are applied to any traditional craft. But promotion of handicraft, if modified in such a way that, it preserves the essence of traditionality. Thus, the survival of traditional handicrafts should be required to be taken by the government, NGOs and corporate houses. Subsidy should be provided by the government to those artisans who are actively involved in traditional craft making in this case terracotta craft.



Pic: 3 and 4- Terracotta Ornaments



Pic. 5 and 6: Durga Idol as home decoration made of terracotta



Pic. 7 and 8: Various designer items made of terracotta

## CONCLUSION

Folk culture is a manifestation of local tradition, regional identity, vernacular architecture, region specific festive rituals, expression of folk song, dance, storytelling and mythology, representation of specific artifacts and clothing, habits, values, attitudes, diet, social rules and practices. Folk practices include work performances in farming and craft production, religion, and worldviews. Recent research emphasizes on the place occupied by folk culture in the modern world in terms of originality in tradition, indigenous knowledge system, region specific craft making and ritualistic practices. Hence, any folk culture is evident in a variety of local cultural adaptations, applicable to individuals and groups that circulates within the periphery, in which they live. In recent years, a new trend has begun, which includes the displaying and showcasing of region's folk crafts to the world consumers and attract outsiders so that, the folk craft would create some place in minds of people of other cultures of other regions.

Cultural heritage sites in the world have become a centre of attraction for tourism industry. A current trend in tourism have evolved based on handicraft making centres of the region, so that local people will be encouraged to upgrade their products to serve the foreign tourists without the interference of any middlemen. These places are generally become the centre of attraction with homestays and rural tourism, eco-tourism and above all the concept of craft tourism. In west-central Taiwan, Lukang is developed in order to revive the town's economic stability by initiating community-empowerment programs. West Bengal has also the scope and possibility to introduce such craft tourism to attract tourists to visit the eco-friendly terracotta craft making of the state.

The initiative taken by the state government during 1999-2000 to cope up with the impact of globalization and consumerism. This effort includes an initiative namely the SARAS mela under the Swarnjayanti Gram Swarozgar Yojana (SGSY) for promoting rural crafts and opening up of income opportunities of rural artisans. Community Based Tourism, however, may add more essence to motivate rural artisans in order to engage their skill in craft making and it will also attract the new generation educated skilled youngsters to put their knowledge to improve the quality of traditional crafts. It also includes the components such as traditional knowledge, Geographical Indications and indigenous region-specific flavour to the folk craft. For the self-sufficient village economy, promotion of traditional craft is highly significant. Revival of traditional crafts should be emerged as an important policy issue to improve the economic condition of craftsmen families. Various ritualistic objects as well as decorative articles for festivals and other celebrations are of high demand

for domestic as well as foreign tourists. Thus, it is necessary to develop a tradition of new and attractive craft, where certain mythological representations become identified with particular locations, regional identity, caste traditions, folk themes and community's engagements.

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