The Traditional Terracotta Temple Architecture of the Temple Town Bishnupur: 
A Study on Structure, Style, Themes and Motifs of Ornamentation

Sujay Kumar Mandal¹*, Tanaya Mukherjee² & Bidhan Mondal³

¹Associate Professor & Head
Department of Folklore, University of Kalyani, Kalyani-741235, Nadia, West Bengal, India
Email: drsujaykmandalku@gmail.com

²Junior Research Fellow, SVSGC (UGC)
Department of Folklore, University of Kalyani, Kalyani-741235, Nadia, West Bengal, India
Email: mukherjeetanaya02@rediffmail.com

³M.Phil Student, UGC JRF
Department of Folklore, University of Kalyani, Kalyani-741235, Nadia, West Bengal, India
Email: bidhan.mondal.eng@gmail.com

*Corresponding Author

Abstract
Bishnupur is one of the important and popular places of Radh Bengal or Bengal of India which is known as ‘Temple Town’. This temple town is situated in the district of Bankura of West Bengal. It is historically and culturally significant. There are four important terracotta temples situated in this place and these are architecturally magnificent and significant. These were built by the Malla Dynasty. The Malla rulers were the followers of Lord Vishnu and they built many legendary and amazing terracotta temples in the Radh Bengal. Particularly terracotta plaques fixed on temples comprises valuable elements for reconstructing the mythological, historical and socio-cultural heritage. The themes of the terracotta plaques are mainly based on the stories of Ramayana, Mahabharata and myths. Incredible architectural and decorative skills can be traced through the terracotta temples of Bishnupur. These are unique pieces of art and architecture. Architectural style and designing style of the temples of this area reveal the profundity of the artisan. This heritage site has significant values in the society as cultural heritage resources. Moreover, the temple architecture of Bishnupur reveals a rich heritage of the Indian architecture. The present paper will analyze the styles, types, themes, designs and motifs of these terracotta temples of Bishnupur.

Keywords: Terracotta, Temple, Architecture, Heritage, Motif, Plaque, Decoration
1.0 Introduction
Bishnupur is one of the popular places of Radh Bengal or Bengal of India which is known as ‘Temple Town’. This used to be capital city of Mallabhum state in the past. This state used to be expanded throughout Bankura, Burdwan, Medinipur, Murshidabad and some parts of Bihar’s Chhotonagpur plateau. The terracotta temples were built by the Malla Dynasty. When the king of Malla Bir Humbir ascended the throne and became the disciple of Acharya Srinibash, from that period the terracotta temples of Bishnupur started to be constructed. There are four important terracotta temples situated in this place and these are architecturally magnificent and significant. Particularly terracotta plaques fixed on temples comprises valuable elements for reconstructing the mythological, historical and socio-cultural heritage. Moreover, this temple-town is famous all over the world as the tourists from different countries have been astounding with the charm of these terracotta temples. It is only in Bishnupur in the whole of West Bengal that such a concentration of temples in numbers and varieties can be found. The present paper has tried to analyze the style, type, themes, design and motifs of ornamentation of these terracotta temples of Bishnupur.

2.0 Terracotta Temples Architecture of Bishnupur
Radh Bengal is a total territory of Bengal that includes within it the districts of Birbhum, Burdwan, Bankura, Purulia and some parts of Murshidabad. This zone is commonly known for its laterite soil or red soil, as this region is not so famous for hill areas so due to the crisis of stones, the architectures of these temples are made of red soil rather than stones. We can divide the architectures of the terracotta temples of Radh Bengal into four types: Chala, Ratna, Deul and Dalan (Roy, 1998: 57). The Chala temples are distinguished because of the diversities in the structures of its roofs, even from Ek-chala this could be even extended into twelve Chalas as well. These Chala temples’ roofs are flattened in the comparison to other temples (Roy, 1998: 57). To say something about the Ratna style, in the roofs of Chala, Chandni and Dalan temples new kinds of Deuls are constructed as the acme of the temple. This particular type of style is known as Ratna that can be categorized into different classes: Ek-ratno, Panchoratno, Naboratno, Ekbingshatiratno, Trayodashratno, Panchabinshatiratno etc. (Roy, 1998: 58). In Radh Bengal most of the Deul temples had been constructed, Bankura is one of the districts where most of Deul temples can be traced out. Even in the villages of Radh Bengal we can found many temples of Deul technique which can be considered to be short type of Deul temples (Roy, 1998: 58). In Bishnupur most of these temples are still existed that combine both North-Indian Nagor style and Rekha style of Orissa Rekha and Pida style of Orissa is mostly found in the temples of Bishnupur in comparison of other places of Radh Bengal (Roy, 1998: 62). Though Bishnupur has lost its fame as the seat of powerful family of rulers, the opulence attained by the town still survives to a great extent in the monumental temples which are magnificent in their architectural style and the terracotta decoration found upon the walls of most of these temples, preserved in an excellent state (Biswas, 2003: 9). During the dynasty of Mallaraja most of temples had been started to flourish that lead to the current scenario of the Bishnupur temples (Roy, 1998: 62). Although temples made of bricks and stones are also could be found there, still Bishnupur is famous for the terracotta temples. Among these temples Rasa-mancha is very famous being an antique piece of Ratna architecture. On the other hand, Malleshwar temple is famous for the Deul style of architecture. Madana-mohana temple is famous for the architecture of Ekratno temple, and most of the temples of Bishnupur are of this type. This temple is made of bricks, in the fort area of Bishnupur Keshta-Raya’s Jorbangla and Shyama-Raya’s Panchoratno is very famous for being outstanding model of brick temples with splendid architectures. According to the monograph named Bishnupur published by the Archaeological Survey of India (Biswas, 2003: 9):
“From the point of style and structural formulation the temples of Bishnupur can be classified into different groups known to be of deul, chala and ratna style. Besides these temples, one of the early structures at Bishunapur built by Bir Hambir and known as the Rasa-mancha is a formation quite unique of its kind” Jorbanglo temple which is still the splendid creation has created by king Raghunath Singha with respect to Keshta Raya in 1655. In the last decade of the Middle Ages the epoch-making revolution in the style and ornamentation of temples of Bengal, influenced the Bishnupur temples (Biswas, 2003: 62-70).

3.0 Structure of the Terracotta Temples of Bishnupur

Although the archeologists and the researchers opine claimed Bishnupur as the ‘temple town’, most of the temples have been dilapidated in the progress of time due to the lack of preservation and nurture (Plate-1 &2).

Plate-1: Brittle Temple of Bishnupur
Plate-2: Brittle Temple of Bishnupur

Right now it is only four terracotta temples that exist in Bishnupur. But it is hopeful regarding the current status of these four terracotta temples as the Indian archeologists are now trying their best to establish these temples as World Heritage Site with the help of ASI and it has already been established as a National Heritage Site. These temples combine both North-Indian ‘Nagor’ style and ‘Rekha’ style of Orissa (Biswas, 2003: 61). Even being close to Orissa in Bishnupur temples we can find a tendency of worshipping the lord Jagannatha and Shiva. Even in the outside areas of Bishnupur anyone can found models of temples like ‘Chala’, ‘Ratna’, ‘Deul’, which are made of bricks and stones (Biswas, 2003: 62). The brief description of the structure and ornamentation of these temples are in the following:

3.1 Rasa-mancha

Rasa-mancha is the most dignified one among these four temples that held the terracotta architecture of Bishnupur temples in front of the world. It looks like a stage or mancha, while the top of this temple is built in the shape of pyramid, the latter half of the temple is made in the shape of Chala of Bengal and the entrance of the temple is an imitation of the architectural styles of Islam (Plate-3, 4 & 5). The structure with the ramifications of its different components, the arched galleries, the terrace around pyramidal elevation and the domed finial provide an architectural form quite unparalleled in the entire domain of temple architecture of Bengal.

Bir Humbir, the king of Bishnupur constructed this temple during the year 1587-1600. This oldest temple of Bishnupur is 35ft high and 80ft 30cm at length, placed upon a square plinth, 1.5m high, each side of it measures 24.5m long and rises to a height of about 10.7m to reach a flat roof above. In each year during the Rash festival 108 Brahmins used to worship 108 numbers of idols of Radha-Krishna along with 108
numbers of candles. During this festival these idols were used to be shifted into garbho-griha of the temple or into the inner house of the temples. The entire temple is divided into three distinguished parts.

3.2 Pancharatno or Shyama-Raya Temple

In the year 1643, Mullaraj Raghunath Singha had constructed this marvelous temple. The God within this temple which is worshipped by people is known as Shyama-Ray, for this reason the temple is often called by people as Shyama-Ray temple (Plate-6). The most distinguished quality of this temple is its five Shikharas which are different in their shapes. The middle one is made in the design of Islamic octagonal shape, and there is also the existence of ‘deul rekh’ designs of architectures in the Shikharas (Plate-7). Bishnudas Sarkar who used to be the attendant of the temple planned to reconstruct this temple in the shape of Chala temples of Bengal, the temple is really attractive being designed fully of the ornamentation of terracotta plaques. The temple is facing towards the south and there is an alternative door in the north. The square sanctum is surrounded by an ambulatory pathway with a veranda opened by three decorated arches on four sides (Plate-8). This temple is 35ft high and 30ft 4 cm at length.

3.3 Jorbangla or Keshta-Raya Temple

In 1655, Raghunath Singha, the son of Bir Humbir constructed this temple, this is a terracotta temple or this temple is made of burnt soil. This terracotta temple is famous as Keshta-Ray temple in Bishnupur (Plate-9, 10 & 11). According to information board of the ASI, Kolkata: “Jorbangla also known as Kesta Rai Temple was erected by the Malla King Raghunath Singha in AD 1655 as evidenced from inscription affixed on the front facade of the temple. The temple, facing south raised on a square platform in the form of a pair of hut-shaped structures with sloping roofs joined together and surmounted by a charhala sikhara on the top. Both the exterior and interior walls and ceiling of the temple depict exquisite and elaborate terracotta ornamentation. These terracotta panels narrate scenes from epics, Krishnalila, hunting scenes, various other
depictions of contemporary social life etc. The excellent quality of art on this temple endows it as one of the finest among the terracotta temple of West Bengal.”

This temple is also faced towards the south, it is 35ft high and at length it is 38ft 6 cm. This base of the temple is made off makra stones and the roof in the tombs of the temple is covered with taalis which is made of terracotta. Two twine buildings with Ek-chala in the roof have been combined and one Charchala tomb is kept in the top, this new thoughts in the sphere of architecture give an enchanting look to the temple. Stairs has been kept there to connect the Dochala with the Charchala top. There is a door in the eastern side of the temple that makes it easier for the travelers to enter into sanctum or ‘garbhartiha’ or the innermost chamber within the temple. Revealing imagination in its widest extravagance, showing movements and action of dynamic nature, this temple can be held as the finest among the temples of Bishnupur.

3.4 Ekratno or Madana-mohana Temple
Mallaraj Durjan Singha had constructed this temple in 1694. The presiding god within this temple is Madana-mohana and this temple is facing towards the south (Plate-12). One ‘Natmandir’ is situated inside this temple premises (Plate-13). This temple is also 35ft high and 40ft 12cm at length. The structure is placed on a large plinth, made of laterite and the temple is much celebrated for the ornamentations which embellish the walls of this temple. The temple has a covered porch with three arched openings on the east, south and west sides, it has a single tower on a sloping roof (Biswas, 2003: 17). One of the prominent features of this temple is the existence of a 45ft high ‘vogagriha’ in the south of the temple; although at present most of the parts of the roof of this ‘vogagriha’ have been dilapidated. This temple is famous for the terracotta architecture comprised of three arches (Plate-14). That kind of huge Dochala temples made of brick as this Ekratno temple is very rare in this Radh Bengal.
4.0 The Themes, Styles and Motifs of Ornamentation in the Terracotta Temples

As Bishnupur temples are the oldest monuments of terracotta architecture, we can trace out many historical detail about this typical style of architecture from the designs of the plaques in the walls. In the seventeenth century temple construction projects, the architectures of Bishnupur temples were deeply influenced by the *Vaishnava Padabolics* and *Rasashastra*. In consequence, we can find out in the wall the *Krishnakatha* and *Ramakatha* had been inscripted within the wall of these temples which tells us about many historical data regarding Chaitanyadev and the *Bhakti* movement (Basu, 2015: 42). The motifs of ornamentation and designs of these terracotta temples have its own charm with its architectural innovations that help them to become the splendid models of terracotta art of Bengal. These innovative designs in the body of the temples, *khilans*, pillars use to rest the eyesight of the visitors it make them amazed (Dasgupta, 2000:354). Experienced and renowned researcher of Bishnupur Sri Chittaranjan Dashgupta commented regarding the terracotta architecture of these temples, he said that he believed the architects in the course of their project of temple constructions in Bishnupur, made due calculations before making the terracotta designs (Dasgupta, 2000:81).

4.1 Style of Terracotta Temple and Themes of the Terracotta Plaques

From the art and architectures of these terracotta temples we can trace the socio-political scenarios and conditions of the contemporary Bengal when the project of constructing these temples gets started. Regarding this, Sri Chittaranjan Dashgupta comments that there is not only *Krishnaktha* but also other *shaiba* and *shakta katha* can be also found out in the wall designs of these temples of Bishnupur that lead to the future inventions into the field of terracotta architecture (Dasgupta, 1998:81). Now in the following we shall focus on the style of architecture of these temples.

*Rasa-mancha*: Although this temple is the oldest form of terracotta architecture, but still there is little contribution of the terracotta art to the architecture of the temple. At present we can still observe some pictures, engraved in the body of the plaques made of terracotta. As it is told already, there are 108 gateways in the temple, in the two sides of the gateway there are designs of lotus flowers (Plate-15) and *mangol ghats*. Even in the lowermost fringes of the pillars there are designs of lotus and other flowers as well as leaves. In the eastern gate there is a picture of Sri Chaitanyadev, doing *namasamkirtana* with his followers (Plate-16). Apart from that other pictures like a tribal woman with drums, goddess Saraswati (Plate-17) could be also found in the plaques, although the situations of these plaques has been becoming decayed.

![Plate-15: Lotus in terracotta plaque](image1)
![Plate-16: Image of Sri Chaitanyadev doing Nam-Samkirtana in terracotta plaque](image2)
![Plate-17: Image of Saraswati in terracotta plaque](image3)
Panchoratno: As we have mentioned earlier this temple which is also known as Shyama-Ray temple is distinctive veranda with three khilans which have many terracotta ornamentations in its body. Brahma, Vishnu, Maheshwar, Krishnakatha and other mythical designs of Rasachakra or Rasmandala (Plate-18) are inscribed over there. In the opposite side of the entrance door we can find the pictures of the great epic fight between the Pandabas and Kaurabas, the Sarasajya of Bhishma, Sri Krishna’s assurance to Arjuna in Kurushetra Yuddha as described in Mahabharata. Again in the western side there is the picture of Sita’s agneepariksha as described in Ramayana, on the south there is the pictures of Krishnaleela (Plate-18) and in the east there is the picture of the battle between Rama and Ravana as described in Ramayana (Plate-19 & 20). But the most striking thing in these architectures of this temple is that there we can also found many picture that reflect the society, the lifestyles of common men in the society.

Plate-18: Rashamandala

Plate-19: Scene of the battle between Rama and Ravana

Plate-20: Rama on Rath

Jorbangla: This temple has many plaques which have been designed with terracotta art in comparison to the other temples of Bishnupur. In the lower part of the temple there are pictures of animals like tiger, lion, deer, and fight between two elephants. As Bishnupur is surrounded with forest areas and tribal peoples, the temples are covered with pictures of tribal peoples hunting pigs by shooting arrows, pictures of tribal women binding braids with their hair. Apart from these pictures of social life there is picture of palanquin drawn by the soldiers to carry the jeminders in the battlefield, the riding of the king in a camel. There is a famous plaque known as ‘nabonarikunjo’ (Plate-21), where nine women are standing to create the shape of an elephant. There are mythical pictures in the temple as well, such as the picture of the blind sage and his son Srabankumar, the death of Srabankumar through the arrows of king Dasharath, the curse given to latter by the former’s father, the birth of Rama, the breaking of haradhanu, the marriage of Rama and Seeta, the stories of Hanumana, Bali-Sugriv dual, death of Bali, Rama-Ravana dual, all these popular scenes from Ramayana have been inscribed in the terracotta plaques of this temple. Moreover, the Sarasajya of Bhishma (Plate-22), gadayuddha between Veema and Yurdhoyana, Bhishma-Arjuna dual, Krishnaleela are also there that has been taken from Mahabharata. Apart from that, here we can also found many scenes related to fight, soldiers with gun in their hands; pirates with guns in their hands, the scenes of their visit on their way to fight wearing war costumes (Plate-23).
Ekratno: This temple which is also known as Madana-mohana temple is also famous for the terracotta architectures. In this temple we can also observe mythical pictures like Rama-Ravana dual, Dashavatara of Vishnu, just as the Jorbangla temple. Apart from that several pictures on Krishnaleela are also there, and in this temple social picture is also engraved on the terracotta plaques like— the picture of a lady washing clothes in the basin of a pond, the dancing of men and women with drums, royal court, king of Bishnupur and the commoners of Bishnupur, battlefield, going towards to battlefield riding in a mare or in an elephant, hunting and many a few pictures on ‘nama samkirtana’ have been manifested through the engravings in the temple.

4.2 Motifs in the Terracotta Plaques
Motif is one of the important matters to be focus while someone having a discussion on terracotta art. In the following we have mentioned the detail of the motifs used in the architectures of these four above mentioned temples:

a. Motifs related to Plant World: As it is told already, there are 108 doors in the Rashmancho temple, in the two sides of the door there are motifs of lotus flowers. Even in the lowermost fringes of the pillars there are designs of lotus and other flowers as well as leaves. In Pancharatna temple there are motifs of the buds of lotus and there are motifs of other flowers. In Jorbangla temple also there are motifs of lotus and other flowers and trees in the doors. Even in the ekratno temple there are also motifs of wheel like lotus flowers, in the back side of the temple there are motifs of trees with flowers particularly flowers which have four leaves in each branches.

b. Motifs related to Animal World: Among the motifs related to animals, the pictures of swan, peacock in Rasa-mancha; in Pancharatna temple there are pictures of fish, tigers, lions, monkeys, elephants, horses, ostrich birds etc. In the Madana-mohana temple there are pictures of swan, peacock, monkeys, tigers, lions, snakes, pigs, horses, elephants etc.
c. Motifs related to Solar World: In the terracotta architecture of these temples surya or sun, chandra or moon, tara or stars have taken positions.

d. Geometrical Motifs: Moreover one can find there many geometrical motifs and patterns in the temples like triangular, square, circle, half-circle, lines, rectangular etc. Geometrical motifs are architectural designs characterized by several horizontal bands about the circumference covering the entire vase. Between these lines the artist used a number of other decorative motifs such as zigzag, the triangle, the meanders, and the Swastika.

There are abstract elements as well as other decorative motifs such as humans, animals and floral designs (Plate 24 & 25) in the temples.

![Plate-24: Floral motif](image)

![Plate-25: Motifs related to animals](image)

Apart from these specific motifs there are other motifs related to myths and legends like the pictures of many Hindu deities, palanquins, guns, bows-arrows, kings etc.

5.0 Conclusion

Thus in this paper we have tried to bring forward the main features of the terracotta temple architecture, its structure, style and motifs of ornamentations of the terracotta temples of Bishnupur. But gradually with the progress of time these temples have been suffering the process of decaying. According to David J. McCuthion (McCuthion, 1972: 15): “It would be interesting to know what the architects themselves called these various designs. Unfortunately, the tradition has been dead for a generation, and was dying for several before that, and most of the sutradharas have turned to other works like carpentry.” So, we would like to conclude this paper with our concern for the serious initiatives to preserve these heritage temples. We are hopeful that this paper will draw the attention of the governments, archeologists and folklorists to do some needful steps to preserve the glory of these temples and save them from extinction.

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**Informants:** Fieldwork: February 17-23, 2015, Name of the Informants: Chittaranjan Dasgupta (90), Sabyasachi Sarkar (40), Samir Majhi (34), Balai Das (60), Ranu Sarkar (70), Madan Majhi (45), Nila Banerjee (65), Raju Rai (40), Bishnupur, Bankura, West Bengal.