CHAPTER ONE

West Bengal has been considered a hub centre of terracotta objects which reflect the early culture of human settlement from chalcolithic period to late medieval period.

The earliest reference to the ancient terracotta figurines of Bengal date from 1888. Gurudas Bysack, an important antiquarian of 19th century and a development functioning posted at Tamluk recovered officially the first terracotta female figure from Bengal. R.D. Banerjee in 1908 identified mother goddess figurine from Chandraketugarh along with several other early historic materials. Anand Coomaraswamy also identified some sites associated with early historic materials. Anand Coomaraswamy also identified some sites associated with early historic terracotta in Bengal. Little later in 1935 Kunj Govinda Goswami unearthed some terracotta figurines from the excavated sites of Bangarh now in Dakshin Dinajpur. The excavation of Bangarh was followed by the excavation at Tamluk by T.N. Ramchandran of Archaeological Survey of India. So it may be ascertained that Bengal was undergoing the same cultural stage similar to the sites of northern India.

The significance of terracotta art is its continuous history, right from the chalcolithic to late mediaeval period. "Malleability, easy availability and inexpensive nature of clay were responsible for making the terracotta art more
celebrated than any other medium of expression in early India. Its ductile and soft nature gives ample scope for innumerable shapes, rich variety and forms."

While the stone and metal sculptures are scanty in number, the terracottas have been recovered in abundance from different sites of Harappan Culture and later periods. But terracotta remains continue to be the base material for reconstruction of India's cultural history.

Clay is the most natural material to make functional objects to meet cultural and religious needs of a community. From the simple utilitarian medium for domestic use, clay from the earth is elevated in its form and function by popular cults and religion, which offer wider scope and status to the art of terracotta. In the terracotta of 'ageless' type the crude figurines of folk origin have retained the mode of execution and style throughout the ages. The stylistic continuity is remarkable phenomenon which may be observed in the terracotta of Harappan culture and the ones made during the early Buddhist period with an apparent interval of more than two thousand years.

What these tiny earthen items aimed at remains rather obscure or controversial. Conjecturally, this art purported to create devotional objects or votive offerings, magical items, gamesman, souvenirs and architectural members. Terracotta was also commissioned for documentation, education, royal command, seals, block printings, moulding weights, numismatic moulds, crucibles, floorings, lamps, models of houses etc. The terracotta also furnishes valuable data (pottery) for reconstruction of early history and grasps the moods and minds of the age.
The cultural relevance of terracottas is of great merit. The Indus sequence is preceded by Zhob and Kulli sites in Baluchistan. But while the former represents a primitive phase the latter reflects a careful handling with a touch of sophistication.

SECTION II

All over the subcontinent there is a continuity of cultural and religious belief ever since the pre-Indus period. The female terracotta figurines have been recovered from almost all the excavated prehistoric/protohistoric sites of Indian subcontinent in different phases. The crude varieties are so similar in different phases that they are marked as “ageless variety”. In this terracotta “ageless type”, the crude figurines of the folk origin retained the mode of execution and style throughout the ages. The continuity of tradition among women points to the manner in which clay has been integral part of religious rituals, often connected to fertility cults.

The female terracotta figurines, its iconic value, the purpose of creating these figurines interpreted differently by various scholars for many years. The earliest female terracottas had been recovered from the various prehistoric and protohistoric sites of our subcontinent. In the Harappan civilization the most
common type of female has wide hips, pelletlike breasts, and the tubular limbs, and abundant jewellery adornments including necklace, girdle, earrings and frequently an elaborate headdress. These figurines are often called "mother goddess", (fig.1) though the aptness of this designation is questionable. Perhaps it is best to assume that the popularity of the female as a subject in terracotta art is associated with the ideas of motherhood and hence fertility, procreation and the continuity of life, although the presence of any divine status is unknown. But early emphasis on the feminine aspect might be a strong basis for the later importance placed on women in the major Indic religions and consequently their prominence in Indic art.

The notion that these female figurines represent a Mother Goddess is so deeply entrenched in the minds of scholars that the immediate possibility which strikes the mind, under the circumstances that of a virgin goddess.

Subhangana Atre identified most of the terracotta female figures of Harappan culture as Virgin Earth or virgin goddess and relates it with the virginity cult of Greek culture – the worship of Diana. For support of her theory she explains that "the breasts and hips lack the extraordinary opulence of the more common type and the emphasis on sexuality is removed by the skirt worn by the Harappan figurines." She also adds that "the round breasts, prominent hips and the attenuated waist are indicative mature maiden. The clothing around her waist probably confirms her virginity."
But Atre’s this view is refuted by P.V. Pathak as he thinks that it is difficult to accept the preposition to relate cult in the Indus civilization with the very late Diana worship in the Greek culture around 495 B.C.

However, the art of terracotta is inseparable from art, religion, and magic. In the early terracotta tradition, the distinction between religious and secular image is ambiguous. Multiple styles coexist and undergo changes while still expressing the broad cultural viewpoint. The images are invariably of great importance and even when religious significance is indistinct and obscurity surround its unfamiliar iconography, their significant role in fertility and funerary rituals make terracotta objects essentially religious in content. As so often we called these terracotta figures as Yaksha and Yakshi. But it is beyond doubt that Yakshi was extensively worshipped as auspicious goddess with miraculous power to protect from malevolence. Yaksha and Yakshi are an appellation and their names generally personify fullness, increase and prosperity, (Fig 2) thus identifying them as fertility spirit embodied in water and vegetation.

In the passionate Yakshi figures of Chandraketugarh and Tamralipta, the personification of fertility is evident in the fullness of her breasts and splendid ornaments disposed as a fitting frame for her sexuality. Rows of gold beads strung to form a heavy girdle are emblematic of the auspicious goddess. As a symbol of fecundity she might hold a pair of fish (Fig 3a) or a vessel of abundance. She might stand by a flowering tree or wear an elaborate head ornament, which includes budding sprays of palm. The decorative details act as counterpoise to her suggested nudity underneath transparent drapery. The style of provocative adornment of undress may be West Asian origin and of religious
significance since the Syrian goddess of fertility and well being Atrgatis (fig.3b) has been traditionally conceived in the nude.  9

The post-Gupta art of terracotta evolved from the skill and expertise of past centuries and confined in Eastern India particularly in Bengal. The Palas gave tremendous impetus to art and architecture of terracotta. The Buddhist monastic complex in Paharpur, now in Bangladesh built during the eighth-ninth centuries marks a new era. Though the terracotta panels designed as architectural veneer in the Pala structure show a marked decline in quality. 10

The first notice of Paharpur was published in the journal of Buchanan Hamilton, who at the instance of East India Company surveyed Eastern India between the years 1807-1812. 11 The Paharpur mound struck Buchanan Hamilton as the most remarkable ruin in the then Dinajpur Division. It was next visited by Westmacott, whose description does not materially differ from Buchanan. Sir Alexander Cunningham visited Paharpur in the season of 1879 A.D. 12

The most numerous specimens of antiquity from Paharpur 13 are the terracotta plaques used for the decorative purpose of outside walls of monastic complex. The artists of Paharpur must have been keen of observation and fully responsive to their environment and produce a folk art racy of the soil to which it belongs. 14 In the words of Stella Kramrisch ‘an acute sense of frolicsome freedom and of vigorous action reveals the Indian artists from another side’. 15 The same is applicable to other excavated Buddhist monastic sites of Pala Period in Bengal and eastern India.

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After the eclipse of the Palas the major art form in clay was almost dormant. During these days (400-500 years) the art of clay was alive to satisfy the rituals and domestic needs of the indigenous people. The indigenous clay art of Bengal never lost its integrity and its fundamental distinctive characteristics in the course of its evolution through the centuries. It was the inner spirit of the common people which had never been dominated and suppressed by external imperial and Brahmanic influence. Thus it was a moving process of life. Whenever the outside influence came in its way, the indigenous culture assimilated it without losing its basic character.

The terracotta art form of late mediaeval Bengal inspired by the teachings of Sufi saints and Sree Chaitanya's neo-Vaishnavism and doctrine of love which swept fifteen century Bengal, accumulated by the literary works of Jayadeva and Chandidas. This Bengal renaissance was the result of spiritual self-expression of indigenous Bengali people. Moreover with the advent of Islam following the establishment of their empire there come the mansions and artists from central Asia especially from Anatolia where terracotta art has been profusely used in the decoration of architectural monuments. Bengali artists came into contact with these artists and the result was a tremendous outburst of creative activity on a national scale.

The indigenous sculptors now took pride in depicting the indigenous life style and contemporary society, which for the first time established a Bengali style of art distinguished by common characteristics and activating from numerous
centres. Thus the late mediaeval structural terracotta art was purely a localized innovation of the Bengali people.

Late Shri Gurusaday Dutta during his visits of the districts of undivided Bengal to collect the folk elements of rural Bengal first draws the attention of the Bengali intelligentsia towards the terracotta decorated temples of Bengal. He realised the importance of these terracotta plaques and their social relevance. Later the associates of Kaviguru Rabindranath Tagore in Viswabharati documented these temple terracottas in and around of Bolpur and other parts of Birbhum.

But the most noteworthy works in this field was done by late David MacCutchion, who documented almost all the terracotta temples of undivided Bengal. In the words of late Satyajit Roy —"the hobby soon developed into a remorseless study at the deepest level, and lasted till the last conscious moment of life."
Notes

1. R.C. Sharma, "Development of Sculptural and Terracotta Art in India. From the Beginning to the Mauryan Age", in Puratattva- No 22, 1991-92, K.N. Dikshit & B.R. Mani (Eds) p 66.

2. Arputha Ran Sengupta, 'Art of Terracotta Cult and Cultural Synthesis in India.' P20


7. P.V. Pathak, 'The Lady of Beasts or the Lord of Beasts: A Reappraisal', in Puratattva, No 21, 190-91, K.N. Dikshit (Ed) Joint Editor, B.R. Mani, pp 57-64.

8. Arputha Rani Sengupta, p, 42.


10. Ibid, p40.


13. Ibid, p 56


15. Ibid,