CHAPTER FIVE

Main types of early historic terracotta female figures.

1) Lajjagauri or squatting mother. Lajjagauri images or birth giving mothers were worshipped by the barren woman or by those women who desired to bear a child. The peculiar birth giving posture of the Goddess, in which she is shown seated, was not only worshipped for procuring offspring but also for warding off droughts.1

In India the concept of the worship of mother goddess in the form of Lajjagauri or the goddess in her birth giving posture (Fig 60 a&b) occupied a place in the life of ancient society right from the remote past. At Chandraketugarh as the study reveals that the representation of this female is rather rudimentary with hardly any attempt to define the features of the figure. Moreover, the childbirth plaque of Chandraketugarh is unique for the explicitness in its depiction and for not taking recourse to symbolism. The very small size of the plaques, their shape and perforations meant for suspension suggests that they were some short of charm or amulet used to ward off evil and probably even worn by expectant mothers. In other primitive society like the Birth Goddess of Malta (fourth millennium B.C) is usually interpreted as a pregnant woman about to give birth, with the nine lines on her back representing the nine months of gestation.2
Birth Goddess of Malta

In many parts of the world, from very early age the opulent mothers or interpreted as 'Venus' figurines have been found. Most notable is the Venus of Willdrof in France.

Venus of Willdrof in France

During the third millennium B.C the fertility cult is dominant in the cities of Indus Valley. The nude goddess with bangles and her male counterpart, the proto-Shiva, were the
divine of this civilization. The trading cosmopolitan people brought their influences and
skills in the Indus Valley specially the Sumerian from Ur, the main powerful civilization of
that period. They worshipped Inanna, their divine fertility goddess simply represented
nude spreading her legs, showing her vulva for well make understand that it is the way
of procreation and birth. She is surrounded by scorpions which are the symbol of genital
and sexual organ.

The representation of this goddess was probably conceived by the Indus people and
appeared on seals of the Harappan Civilization to become the forerunner of the 'Goddess Lajjagauri' in India. The first evidence of squatting goddess surrounded by
scorpions was found in the earliest excavation level at RehmanDheri (3200-2800 B.C).

These symbolic representations of sexual topic appear acceptable in the fertility cult,
main religion of this early civilization. A cylindrical seal (2700-2300 B.C) of the Mature
Harappan period show 'shameless lady' in her squatting position. According to
Dr.Devangana Desal the plant-bearing female figure on a seal seems to represent a
vegetation goddess and reminds one of the Pauranic goddess Sakambhari, though
there may not have been any direct connection between them as they are separated by vast stretch of time.

2) Yakshi Panchachuda- (Fig 82a,82b,82c,82d & 82e) Distinguished by her headgear, she represents, perhaps, the most popular iconographic type with distinction between this goddess and other such cult figures of the period is that her headgear consists of what appears to be five emblematic hairpins. The emblems cannot be distinguished in all specimens, but certainly they are elephant goad, battleaxe, sword, trident and arrowhead. Sometimes these enigmatic hairpins are seen on one side only of the headdress, sometimes they are seen on both sides of the headdress. The decorative elements in the headdress have some other verities. The stylized hairpins were substituted by hair braids ears of com or palm fronds. The identification of this goddess remains highly controversial. Classified generally as the panchachuda (five-crested) type, she has been variously identified by Yakshi or Apsaras especially the celestial nymph called Panchachuda. In some specimens stalks of grain attached to her hair-do, there by indicating her relation to cults associated with prosperity and vegetation. This female figurine according to some scholars probably prefigures the idea of the Sakambhari, the goddess of plenty. However, it is worthy to be noted that the representation of Yakshi or such a female with hairpins have been found only in terracotta and not in stone either from Gangetic Valley sites or from Bengal. Probably the superb example of this type is the Yakshi from Tamluk, now preserved in Ashmolean Museum, Oxford. (Fig 6)

In Chandraketugarh we find the same five symbolic pins repeated on either side of the head but in northern Gangetic valley the symbolic hairpins shaped as weapons of war appear only on one side of the head, while on the other side we find stalks of grain.
3) Sri-Lakshmi- Originally Sri & Lakshmi were two different goddesses but their identities have been merged in the later ages. Lakshmi was originally the deity representing the signs of luck and prosperity and with the passage of time she came to be regarded as the goddess of wealth, for the idea of luck was inevitably related with material prosperity, well being and fortune. (Fig 84a,b,c,d) The word Sri denotes the sense of beauty, luster, glory and wisdom. Folk elements play a significant role in shaping the idea of Sri-Lakshmi. Usually goddess Sri-lakshmi depicted standing or holding lotus. According to some scholars Sri is a pre-Aryan goddess associated with lotus.

The fragmentary plaque depicted lower part of a female (Fig 83) standing on a full-blown lotus, is almost identical with the famous Gajalakshmi or Abhisekhalakshmi stone plaque of Kausambi.

4) Mithuna- The word mithuna refers to an amorous couple while the word dampati simply means a couple or a pair. (Fig 85 a,b) A possible interpretation of the depiction of copulating couples is that they were substitutes used in fertility rites which at one time involved actual sex play. On certain seasonal and agricultural festivals, the performance of the sexual act was considered necessary for rejuvenating the forces of nature, vegetation, soil, animal and human.
Crudely made terracotta couples found from different early-historic sites of Bengal mainly from Chandraketugarh and Tamluk and other sites of northern Gangetic Valley, suggest extra-artistic and non-sensual purpose. There was no dearth of technical skill in these places as is evidenced from finds of artistic images. Sir John Marshall and D.H. Gordon suggested that depiction of pairs were symbolic or votive in function. Instead of actual performance of sexual act such images were probably used in rituals.

Relation between fertility-fruitfulness with mithuna is further attested by a terracotta plaque from Awra in Mandasore district of Madhyapradesh. It belongs to the period of circa. 100 B.C - A.D 300. It depicts a female deity, identified as Sri, who touches her right ear ring and stands on a lotus. Her Joni can be seen despite the heavy girdle. She stands between two tusks alongside which are jewels and sheaves of corn. Two mithunas are shown on either side of the goddess. The pitcher in the foreground might have contained wine. On the reverse of the plaque is shown a twelve-petalled lotus. Moti Chandra points out the evidence of a developed form of the Sri cult in this plaque. “The ritual coitus in which her devotees indulge and the presences of wine in the pitchers draw our attention to sacred orgies of later Tantras.” He gives evidence from the early Buddhist literature to support the existence of the Sri cult and its esoteric nature. The depiction of mithunas flanking the goddess of fruitfulness and abundance reminds us of the performance of the sexual act in the sanctuary of goddess for the purpose of fertility. As for example the temple prostitute or devadasi, mates annually with her priest, the surrogate of the divine bridegroom, for performing the fertility rites and for promoting the fruitfulness of earth, corn and mankind. Devadasis were known to Kautilya in the Mauryan period. A devadasi is referred to in the 2nd century B.C inscription of the Jogimara cave in the Central India.
The depiction of coital couples and orgies is seen in terracotta of Chandraketugarh and Tamluk dating from circa 2nd century B.C onwards and in those of Kausambi and Bhita of the 2nd-1st century B.C, date before the period of full-fledged Tantric movement and disprove the belief that maithuna couples and orgiastic groups occur only in the art mediaeval temples.

At Chandraketugarh, the various poses of sexual congress include frontal congress, oral congress(Fig 86a) of fellatio type, and congress from rear (Fig, 86e head down pose, sitting pose,(Fig 86b) standing pose(Fig 86c) and sleeping congress on bed. There are plaques showing scenes of erotic group activity.(Fig 86d)

One of the plaques of the Shunga period depicts a complex erotic group, where the central figures are shown in an act of maithuna. The woman is sitting in utthanapada pose with her legs outstretched. She is having relations with a man who is a head-down pose. The male figure is helped to stay in the position by two female attendants, both sitting with outstretched legs. It is difficult to suggest the exact significance of this orgy. Does it represent a fertility right or does it indicate the practice known to Vatsyana in which women dissatisfied with their polygamous husband smuggled men into the harem? Or may be the gestures are ritualistic in significance. Some plaques depicts woman in a clumsy pose bent from her waist backwards. She is involved in fellatio with the man on her side that has raised his hand making some gesture, and in a frontal congress with the man on the other side. Another type of plaque represents an erotic group where one or two or more attendants, most of the cases female, stand near a copulating couple. Many malpractices appear to have been common in the harems. Vatsyana is quite realistic about the situation of women in the harem when he says: “Since the women of the harem are not allowed to other men, being very well guarded,
and they have only one husband common to all of them, they are physically dissatisfied, and they therefore give pleasure to each other in various ways." Apadravyas means artificial penises (Fig87) were used by women.

There is other type with urban sophistication. It has been sometimes suggested that probably these were secular in nature and represented the leisurely life of the urban societies. At Chandraketugarh and Tamluk some terracotta plaques depict an aristocratic couple in a state of sitting coital union on a chair or high stool, reflect an urban approach to sexual theme.

There are festivals connected with seasonal celebrations of agricultural life. With the passage of time these festivals became urban in nature but still retained many features of sexual magic to stimulate powers of the fertility. The Kaumudimahatsava festival has been noted by Vatsyana and by Kalidasa in the season of spring. The chief features in the celebration of these festivals are merry-making, revelry, relaxation of sexual moral codes, decoration of houses and the wearing of rich garments and ornaments. There was a considerable relaxation of social restraint in respect of mixing of men and women on festivals. In Vatsyana's time urban people treated the vegetation festivals as Kridas or games. Married women of good families forget their socially cultivated shyness and indulge in obscenity. The use of obscene (asila) words and gestures are the essential features of most these festivals. The participation of courtesans in festive gaiety was considered auspicious.
Representation of bestially are also common in terracotta plaques of early historic Bengal,(Fig 88a, 88b) where man and women mates with animal. It seems to represent some ritual practice where a woman is made to have relations with an animal. The oldest surviving texts in the world, the Vedas reveal moral perspective on sexual marriage and fertility prayers. Sex magic featured in number of Vedic rituals most significantly in the Asvamedhayajna, where the ritual culminated with the chief queen lying with the dead horse in a simulated sexual act, clearly a fertility rite intended to safeguard and increase the kingdom's productivity and marital prowess.

5) Women with horn of plenty- Mother Goddess with horn of plenty, a term first used by Dr. moti Chandra, are surely associated with the fertility concepts she has an elaborate headgear with basket like bonnet holding the mass of the combed hair with conical projection or horn like projection on the right from which issues a palm frond or a corn stalk. This form is found only from Bengal. We have found this type from Chandraketugarh and on a fragmentary plaque from Harishpur, P.S. Bhangar, and 24 Parganas (South). So far no female figure with type of headgear has been found in other early historic sites of the Gangetic Valley. (Fig 89a, 89b)

6) Mother and child-

The figures of woman and child are quite common in almost all sites and phases. Especially the timeless variety has been recovered from all cultural phases from earliest
levels to the present day, probably its association with fertility and fecundity. (Fig 90a, 90b, 90c, 90d)

7) Salabhanjika—(Fig 26) Poets compare a lovely girl with delicate creeper, slender branch of flowering tree swaying on the gentle breeze, or fragment flower itself to underline her beauty and charm. There is another vital factor linking woman and nature together in poetic imagination. And it is their creativity.

In ancient fertility cults, these two symbols of creativity got brought together in close proximity forming a motif. As we have already seen that on one of the Indus seals a tree is shown sprouting forth from the woman. According to the ancient belief spirits of fecundity reside in the trees.

One of the nature related ancient fertility rituals was visiting the forest groves or pleasure gardens on the outskirts of the city and sporting with tree and flowers, particularly shala tree. To this ritual sport of playing with shala trees, the birth story of Lord Buddha added a new dimension. Pregnant mother of Buddha, Mayadevi, on her way to her father’s city stopped at a beautiful shala grove named Lumbini-vana. Delighted by the trees in full bloom she desired to play with them. While holding the branch of shala tree she miraculously gave birth to the child Buddha in a standing position. Mayadevi holding the branch of shala tree became a great symbol in Buddhist art. Along the birth of a new woman and tree motif too was born depicting the trend of woman and tree together as seen on Indus seal.
8) **Woman with mirror**- The mirror was an essential item of toilet in ancient times. According to the *Jatakas*, mirrors were made of, shining to perfection. Kalidasa also mentions mirrors made of copper, brass and gold. (Fig 91a, 91b, 91c, 91d) The mirror itself is a cult object. The mirror signifies radiance of the divinity and in certain temples the goddess is personified as a mirror and used in rituals. A number of mirrors have been recovered from Indus Valley sites and Taxila. Quite often mirrors were placed in burials, attesting to its importance as a cult object.

9) **Women with Birds**- Birds were not alone used for playing. Some of them were certainly associated with deities as their vehicles. The dove was associated with fertility goddess in the mythology of Mesopotamia. At least some of the women holding birds depicted on terracotta plaques represent goddess. Playing with parrots, *Sukakrida*, was a favourite pastime in ancient India. It is included in the sixty-four arts described in *Kamasutra*. The birds were reared in gardens and also domesticated. They acted as messengers and even at times used for killing the snakes. Megasthenes has specially written on importance of parrot in Indian life. The peacock has also been a favourite bird in Indian art from very early times. (Fig 92a, 92b, 92c, 92d)

10) **Female Drummer**, (Fig 93a, 93b) **dancer** (Fig 94a, 94b, 94c) **and musicians** (Fig 96a, 96b)- The drummers associated with votive tanks have been found in large numbers at Sirkap, the city of Parthians at Taxila, votive tanks containing mother goddess figurines were spotted near the gate of a stupa, indicating that they were offered there as votive offerings. Similar tanks called *yamapukura* are still used by young women in Bengal to appease young women in Bengal to appease Yama, the god of death.
During the 1st millennium BCE in India, many texts were composed which attempted to codify aspects of daily life. In the matter of dance, Bharata Muni's Natyashastra is one of the earlier texts. Dance is performed with music and musical instruments in many cultures as a form of devotional and emotional expression, social interaction like court dance in the King's court and temple dance during the evening congregation of the temples in a spiritual setting, and is sometimes used to express ideas or tell a story. Dance is related to social and cultural norms and aesthetic, artistic and moral sensibilities. Fertility rituals were also performed with dance and music and often we notice depiction of female dancers and musicians in terracotta art of India as well as Bengal.

11) Women with Fish- One of the earliest depiction of female goddess associated with fish occurs on a copper object datable to 2nd century B.C. and hailing from Kausambi. On the obverse is seen a standing female goddess and on the reverse a standard topped by a fish. The latter is guarded by two women. This particular type showing mother goddess with fish is known so far from West Bengal (Fig95) in Tamluk and Chandraketugarh. V.S.Agrawala suggests that goddess Vasudhara was represented in the sculpture.

Fish was associated with mother goddess cult in Mesopotamia. Fish and pomegranate are symbols of Ashi, an Iranian deity. Like Middle East fish also appears to have been connected with mother goddess cult in India. But all the terracotta female figures associated with fish are not the goddess Vasudhara. In the opinion of Moti Chandra goddess Vasudharas a simple variation of the Iranian Goddess Anahita whose symbol was fish.
Notes:

1. Dr. M.K. Dhavalikar, 'Masterpieces of Indian Terracottas', pp17-19
2. Bahm, 'Cambridge History',
3. Enamul Haque, 'Chandraketugarh',
8. Ibid, p 16.