CHAPTER VIII

FOLK ART
The word 'folk' is an archaic term which conveys the meaning of a people, tribe or race. The art created or used by people or tribe is designated as folk-art or people's art. According to S.K. Ray, "Folk-art or People's art of India naively manifests the soul of her people".¹

"Folk art also represents the 'National Art'. The meaning of the word "folk" should be understood, as the English lexicon stipulates it to be used for nation".²

Folk-art is not merely the primitive art. According to Professor K.D. Bajpai, it no doubt incorporates the traditional elements of the culture or a region, but at the same time in its natural developing processes it assimilates necessary elements suited to its nature and genius.

Folk art is an expression of joy, created out of plenty and at leisure, that permeates the mind of the people. Hence the art that belongs to them is not actually produced but it grows from the soil.

Clay figurines or terracottas are comprised in the folk art. According to S.C. Kala terracottas represent a
layman's art. It by no means occupies a high place among plastic art. They are specimens of what might be called popular art. Terracotta art is distinct from stone sculptures in form and character.

The clay figurines of India occupy an important place in the domain of her artistic activity. The terracotta art in India is of a high antiquity and covers a wide range of subjects. It shows aesthetic qualities. Right from the Indus Valley to our own times, clay figurines have remained a constant feature of Indian art.

At several ancient sites in India both human and animal clay-figurines have been exposed in a profuse quantity and on their basis a period-wise typological classification can be made.

Literary references to terracotta art are found in the epics and subsequent literature. According to the Mahābhārata, Ekalavya, a pupil of Drona, made a likeness of his teacher in clay for the purpose of worship.

In the Bhaddasāla Jātaka, reference is made to princes receiving presents of elephants, horses and other toys from their mother and father. In the Markandeya Purāṇa, a clay image of Durgā is mentioned as an object for worship. Kālidāsa refers to a painted clay peacock in the hands of child Bharata, son of Duṣyantā and Sakuntala.

A wheel toy-horse being pulled with a string by a Yaksa figure is represented in one Māgārjunikonda sculptures.
The various historical sites in India offer individual styles. Technical and cultural links can also be traced between one site and the other. Like sculptures, terracottas can also be classified under several groups.

Clay from which the art has originated, is one of the cheapest and bountiful gifts of God to mankind. In course of time, terracotta art developed into a very important craft.

The plasticity of clay offered an excellent opportunity to the ancient potters for experimenting in a variety of human and animal figurines.

This art is a pleasant exponent of popular life and mind, of transient moods and modes and a common social life.

It is distinguished from the official and hieratic life and on this account it has more permanent values.

Terracotta art served the religious and secular ends of the contemporary society. Some of these figurines must have been worshipped as household deities, some were votive offerings, some must have carried merely a decorative purpose while a large number of them were meant as play-things of children.

The technique usually followed in the terracotta figurines of this country roughly falls under the following divisions:

I. Human and animal figurines are given a shadowy shape in lumps of clay. The limbs are straight and without
movement. The face is pinched and the nose is made out by pressing both sides of the cheeks. The eyes and mouths are marked by incised lines or are applied at the relevant place. In some figurines eyes and mouths are not indicated.

II. In the second stage modelled figurines continue but the faces are still pressed out of moulds. The jewellery and head-dress is elaborate and applied on the hands and the legs have painted ends. Usually the breasts are very prominent and the hips are shown broad.

III. In the third stage we find completely moulded pieces. Moulds were mostly used for the front and rarely for the back. The gradations depended mainly upon the thickness of reliefs. Graceful figurines wearing a heavy transparent apparel are found in these plaques. The movements of bodily limits still continue to be rigid.

The art of painting terracotta figurines was also known in ancient India. The picturesque description of painted terracotta figurines in the Gupta Period is supported by the references found in several ancient Indian texts, such as the Šakuntalam of Kālidāsa.

Vidisha was an important centre of plastic art in the media of stone, wood and ivory. Some terracotta figurines also have been recovered from the mounds of Vidisha. The excavations conducted at Besnagar by Bhandarkar and Khare have yielded a good number of terracotta figurines representing
human and animal figures and toys, besides a few clay sealings and beads.

A number of terracotta figurines were found from the excavations at Besnagar. Of the human figures nearly half are male and half are female. The backs of the figures are usually flat. Several clay figurines such as ducks, parrot, elephant, horses, rams, bulls, fish, etc. have been found. These must have served as playthings for children. Of these the neck of a tortoise and the mouth of a horse are pierced with a hole, for passing a string through it and pulling the animal with it. The bull is represented as squatting, and through the knees of its forelegs a similar perforation is seen. Five miniature wheels were discovered which must have originally formed a part of toy-carts.

A few terracotta incised stamps with round knobs to handle, have been found from the excavations at Vidisha. A few contemporary terracotta figurines wearing garments of stamped cloth, were found in the excavations. Some of the clay toys are rather crude and clumsy.

Pawaya (ancient Pādamāvatī), on the main route between Vidisha and Mathura, was an important centre of art. Apart from the stone images, some of the highly artistic male and animal figurines have been discovered at Pawaya. They include male and female figures, tastefully decorated human heads and figures of animals and birds. Beautifully carved bricks have
been found in large numbers at Pawaya. This indicates that the terracotta art had greatly developed at this important site, particularly during the Gupta Age.

Dr. V. S. Agrawala has recognised the tradition of folk art in a group of free standing statues which have been found at Vidisha and several other sites in North India. These colossal images are of Yaksas and Yakšīs. They carry with them a distinct plastic tradition, distinct from the finished production of the court art.

Among the other arts, the jeweller's art occupies a prominent place. Both males and females had a great liking for ornaments. This is attested to by a large number of stone and terracotta figures from Vidisha and the region around. The Yaksas and Yakšīs are shown wearing various heavy ornaments. The bas-relief at Sanchi also throw light on the ornaments of the contemporary society. The carving of the bas-relief shows earrings, necklaces, rings, bracelets, anklets, girdles, etc. These were made of gold, silver, copper, ivory, shell, etc.

Ivory carving was an important craft of Vidisha. The ivory carvers of the city of Vidisha used their fine skill in carving the reliefs of the Sanchi gates. A highly artistic Yaksa figure made of ivory has been discovered at Avara.

A well-known capital with Kalpa-Vrikṣa found at Besnagar is now preserved in the Indian Museum, Calcutta. It represents the mythical wish-fulfilling tree which produced food, drinks,
dresses, ornaments and even beautiful maidens. 9

Coomaraswamy calls it a banyan tree and believes that it must have been the capital of the pillar (dhvai̍āštambha) of the temple Kubera. At the roots of the tree are pots, bags of money, a lotus and a conch emitting coins. The banyan tree was worshipped by those desirous of getting children. 10

The Besnagar Kalpavrikṣa has long pendant roots, from which wealth in the shape of square pieces of money is dropping in such a large quantity that all the vessels placed below are overflowing. The upper part of the tree which is nearly spherical in shape, is carved with large leaves and small berries. The stem and pendant roots are represented on a cylindrical neck, below which they are divided into eight compartments. In these are placed alternately four vessels full of money and four skins probably containing wine or jewellery. The open vessels are all different in shape, one is a large shell standing on its end and the second has a band round the neck. The third is a common water vessel. Between the shell and the bag, on its right there is a curious rounded shaft with leaves in straight lines pointing upwards. 11

Terracottas therefore give an indication of popular tastes, customs and religious beliefs, which cannot easily be obtained from other forms of art.

The region of Vidisha was one of the important centres of Yakṣa worship in India. This worship associated with it a
number of rituals. The stone sculptures and terracotta figurines from Vidisha and the contiguous region clearly indicate the prevalence of several popular folk elements which had their impact on the art of this art culture.
REFERENCE TO CHAPTER : VIII

2. Ibid.; p.3.
3. Agrawala, V.S.; *India art*, p. 308.
4. Ādiśarva, Ch. 123, 12 *Kritva Dronam Mahimavam*.
5. Jātaka, 466 text, p. 146.
7. Longhurst; *Sculptures at Nagarjunikonda*, Pl. IX (C).
   See also *Indian Archaeology - A Review*, 1963-64, 19 65 66.
10. Ibid., p.