



Amitrakshar International Journal

of Interdisciplinary and Transdisciplinary Research (AIJITR)

(A Social Science, Science and Indian Knowledge Systems Perspective)

Open-Access, Peer-Reviewed, Refereed, Bi-Monthly, International E-Journal

Rani Putul and the Terracotta Heritage: West Bengal Craft Showcases

Bipul Kumar Ghosh¹ & Dr. Maumita Sengupta²

Abstract: History constitutes various realms of creation, practice, strategy, and beauty. Sometimes, while studying history, we tend to overemphasize on conflict, political, social or religious, and aspects of everyday existence, social mores, rituals, interactions and creativity take a back seat. But it is this facet that tells us most about a people who live a particular space and time. The paper talks about a special kind of handicraft: the famous terracotta doll of Howrah district of Bengal, from the Domjur area that represents the lives, thoughts and society of the people during the time this art originated there and why, it still represents a landmark of the place.

Keywords: Realms of creation, Handicraft, Terracotta doll

History is the telling and re-telling of stories, the truth that represents a time, a point in human civilization. Sometimes, the telling is with words, and sometimes, the telling is with something visual, something evocative, something creative, aesthetic and original. Every period has its own language. It changes with the passing of time. The language of every epoch comes to the fore in art, literature and culture. In order to truly understand the taste, color and smell of regional history, it is necessary to get acquainted with its background, its people, and everything that constitutes the living of various lives at the time.³ We have various names that we give to these stories, the repeated name bring folk culture. When we use the term 'folk', what we essentially mean is the common man of the time, who perform the daily tasks that keep a civilization going, and who catch the flavor and essence of those tasks and that civilization in unique ways.

Folk culture is generally categorized in two parts - Tangible and intangible. Among the tangible folk cultures mention can be made of folk dance, folk customs and rituals, folk performing arts, folk games, folk visual arts etc. The intangible culture is those which come into existence out of emotion, imagination, piety, such as folk songs, literature, proverbs, riddles, rhymes, folklores, fables, bywords, so on and so forth. The practical aspects of a living civilization involve innovations and creations for making life viable and easier, like man has innovated ovens to use fire. Likewise, he has innovated wheels, created boats, utensils, wooden and metal machineries etc. As the wheel and other devices and implements were invented, at the same time music was invented to make participation in this laborious work enjoyable. This music, too exhibited the unique character of a place and its population so very evocatively. It may be said that principally, the intangible culture that has originated and thrived in the Domjur area, which has been studied in this paper, as a result of the emergence of many unique ideas, may be regarded as an important portion of regional folk literature.

Terracotta Dolls

Archaeological excavations and sudden discoveries in Bengal have brought forth terracotta dolls and their number is not small. The oldest terracotta specimens have been found at Mangalore and in the mound of King Pandu in Burdwan district. In terms of historical research, the archaeologists consider these terracotta dolls to be from the Copper-Iron age. Human ideas, technology, science and technical knowledge have increased with the passing of time and the dolls and toys have also changed in nature and shape. The toy cars with wheels found in the excavation at Chandraketurgh in Berachapa carry the testimony of how, these populations voraciously consumed knowledge to innovate in terms of sciences as well as the arts.

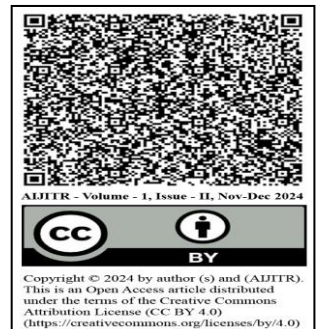
¹ Research Scholar, Techno India University

² Associate Professor, HOD, Dept of Education and Humanities, Techno India University

DOI (Crossref) Prefix: <https://dx.doi.org/10.63431/AIJTR/1.II.2024.14-19>

AIJITR, Volume-I, Issue-II, November - December 2024, PP. 14-19.

Revised and accepted on 7th December 2024, Published: 31st December 2024





Amitrakshar International Journal

of Interdisciplinary and Transdisciplinary Research (AIJITR)

(A Social Science, Science and Indian Knowledge Systems Perspective)

Open-Access, Peer-Reviewed, Refereed, Bi-Monthly, International E-Journal

Dolls and toys made of terracotta clay is an integral part of Bengali culture. The art historians opine that technological ingenuity brought certainty to human life in the Neolithic age. Innovation of agriculture during this period resulted in permanent settlement at a particular place. Man's way of life was a manifestation of his aesthetic imagination, which was reflected in his hand made clay dolls and toys. The practice of dealing with this vast history of the dolls and toys of Bengal has been quite disappointing in the decades after independence. Dr. Soma Mukhopadhyay expressed this view in a memoir entitled 'Banglar Putul o Khelna Alochanachakra O Prodarsani'. She also added that only some isolated essays or fragments of the pre-independence period have been found and explored in the context of our country and culture, wherein much more efforts are needed. The personal efforts of the scholar and intellectual like Gurusaday Dutta have enriched this practice.

In the post-independence period, especially in the sixties, Binay Ghosh, Amiya Kumar Bandyopadhyay, Ajit Mukherjee shed a lot of light on this issue. In this regard, late Tarapada Santra has done remarkable work. In the book entitled *Lokoshilpo O Shilpissamaj*, he had unearthed the search of various district-wise dolls in the state of West Bengal. Compared to the other aspects of Bengali folk culture such as folklore, folk music, folk rituals, folk customs etc., which are still practiced at the present time and are a matter of interest for tourists as well as anthropologists, there is a lack of interest and investment by the government in folk art. This is the reason why the practice of preparing clay dolls and toys in Bengal is at a crossroads, as artisans, though talented, don't earn much and their progeny is losing interest completely. However, it is noteworthy that in terms of cultural history, the tradition of clay dolls and toys of Bengal has triggered the interest of art historians and social scientists. A discussion Programme was held with various toys and dolls at the Vidyasagar Hall in the Asiatic Society, Park Street, Kolkata on 1st December, 2016, in order to understand and analyses this history in a completely new way. A memoir was inaugurated in the Programme on the clay toys and dolls of Bengal. The convener of this Programme was Dr. Soma Mukhopadhyay and different detailed information was provided in the memoir.

Cultural significance

Terracotta dolls hold significant cultural, artistic, and historical value in Bengali tradition. Their importance can be understood from various perspectives:

1. Traditional Craftsmanship

Terracotta dolls are handcrafted by skilled artisans, often using techniques passed down through generations. These dolls reflect Bengal's rich tradition of pottery and clay artistry, especially in districts like Bankura, Bishnupur, and Krishnanagar. There are very unique ways of glazing and painting the dolls that make them very decorative and durable, also every region uses different patterns and features.

2. Religious and Ritual Significance

- Many terracotta figurines represent deities, folk gods, and mythological characters. The walls of many temples, particularly from Bishnupur, are adorned with detailed terracotta carvings depicting, mythological stories from the Ramayana, Mahabharata, and Puranas, scenes of Krishna Leela (Krishna's divine play), Royal processions, battle scenes, hunting scenes, and daily life of the time.
- The themes and symbolism of these terracotta panels are profound, as they reflect a blend of Hindu and folk influences, with detailed depictions of deities, dancers, musicians, and social life.
- Many carvings represent the valour as well as the faith of the rulers as the Malla kings who fought against many invaders, were great patrons of Lord Krishna and Vishnu.
- They are often used in village rituals and as offerings in temples. A very famous example is the horse figurine that is offered to the goddess deity of Pachmura temple. On special worship days, it is considered, even today, very auspicious to offer these small horse figurines at the temple, and this has become a tradition for many tourists visiting the area as well.



Amitrakshar International Journal

of Interdisciplinary and Transdisciplinary Research (AIJITR)

(A Social Science, Science and Indian Knowledge Systems Perspective)

Open-Access, Peer-Reviewed, Refereed, Bi-Monthly, International E-Journal

- Some communities believe that these dolls bring good fortune and protect against evil, and so, these dolls are placed at the entrance of homes as auspicious talismans.

3. Cultural Symbolism

- Terracotta dolls depict scenes from daily life, folk tales, and epics like the Ramayana and Mahabharata. Terracotta dolls are sometimes used to highlight other craftsmen with famous handicrafts of that area. For example, in Bishnupur, terracotta dolls display silk weavers and embroidery experts.

- They represent Bengal's rural charm and simplicity, their materials and colours keeping in tune with local products, natural derivatives of dyes and decorations, even effective usage of waste materials. The representation of simple floral motifs, geometric patterns, and animal figures, are given depth and character, showcasing the artisans' creativity.

- Often gifted during festivals and ceremonies, they hold sentimental value. Dolls depicting bride and groom are given during marriage ceremonies, an owl figurine is given for Lakshmi Puja, elephant and turtle idols are considered very auspicious for all ceremonies.

4. Artistic Heritage

- Bengal's terracotta art, especially the intricate work seen in Bishnupur temples, is world-famous. The artisans of Bishnupur use fine terracotta tiles that were molded and baked before being affixed to the temple walls. Each panel is meticulously crafted, with lifelike expressions, movement, and depth in the carvings.

- The same artistic styles are used in making terracotta dolls, making them not just toys but also artistic collectibles, like the famous Bishnupur horse figurine, gracing so many national and international fora today.

5. Economic and Social Impact

- The craft supports rural artisans and contributes to the local economy, though due to economic pressure and changing mindsets and attitude of the present generation, this support is not seen as enough, and thus, many families do not want to keep pursuing this art anymore. Many rare and internationally acclaimed tribal and traditional art forms are facing the same situation.

- It plays a role in preserving traditional art forms in the face of modernization, which in itself, is a very important reason to encourage such artists and make these crafts thrive in our country.

6. Connection to Sustainable and Eco-friendly Practices

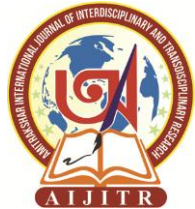
- Made from natural clay and baked in kilns, terracotta dolls are biodegradable and environment-friendly, unlike plastic toys. This is one of the reasons why at the present time, international agencies such as the UNESCO and UNDP are taking interest in the promotion and preservation of these arts, though still, a lot needs to be done, as if these artisans continue to be poor, such art will gradually fade away.

7. Representation in Festivals and Fairs

- These dolls are commonly sold in fairs like the Kolkata International Handicrafts Fair and Bankura's handicraft markets.

- They are popular during Durga Puja, Poush Mela (Shantiniketan), and other cultural gatherings.

Overall, terracotta dolls are not just playthings; they are deeply woven into Bengali identity, art, and tradition, reflecting Bengal's heritage and rural aesthetics.



Amitrakshar International Journal

of Interdisciplinary and Transdisciplinary Research (AIJITR)

(A Social Science, Science and Indian Knowledge Systems Perspective)

Open-Access, Peer-Reviewed, Refereed, Bi-Monthly, International E-Journal

The concept of the Queen Doll or the Rani Putul

Since yesteryears, majestic dolls called Rani putul are crafted in various areas of Howrah district. The structure of these dolls might have a resemblance with Shashti putul or Shashti dolls. People residing in South Patil, Narendrapur, Jagatballavpur refer to these magnificent dolls as 'Rani Putul.' The artisans of Howrah have been able to hold on to the legacy of the forefathers and still craft these queen dolls in present times. These artisans make these structures in a two-faced mould and fire them. The queen dolls are primarily made up of burnt clay, and they are crafted using 2 faced wooden moulds. The modern-day artists often apply a coat of paint or glitter to add lustre to these dolls. Some of them are also offered a coat of red paint with mica, which gives them a very shiny, smooth and radiant finish, so much so that they sometimes appear as carved from stone. Their legs seem to be covered by long ghagras which make the appearance seem royal, one might also feel that they appear to be wearing elegant royal gowns. Queen dolls stand out in terms of style or pattern in the white category of Bengals's dolls.

It may sound surprising but these queen dolls will not remind you of the queens of fairytale wonders like Thakumar Jhuli. Even the artisans say that their unique craftsmanship is not influenced by the myriad fairytales of Bengal. The round face of these dolls might further confuse you. The inspiration of the artisans rather lies in a real-life queen made up of flesh and blood. According to art researchers, the artisans make these dolls keeping Queen Victoria in mind. Particularly it seems so because of a high hair bun, topknot or 'khopa', that is a trademark of the Rani Putul, is a distinct reference to the toilette of high-born ladies of the West. Also, a very intricately crafted thin veil is also placed on the head of the doll which is again an indication of royalty, of Bengal as well as of the West. Queen Victoria's love and deep connection for Bengal is known to all. She had asked the royal officials to treat India with empathy and love and disestablished the rule of East India Company. There was a popular concept at the time that the queen wanted to encourage local culture, customs, art, education and literature. Her attitude towards India thoroughly impressed and touched the hearts of Indians. She became the empress of India in 1876 and also received the title of 'Qaisar-i-Hind'. The popularity of Queen Victoria had also left a deep impact in the Patachitra art of Kalighat. Similarly, the artisans of South Patil or Jagatballavpur crafted Queen dolls whose face had a striking similarity with Queen Victoria. According to the art historians, the attire and hair style of the magenta or red colored queen dolls also indicate the same.

The story of the artisans

Today, the artisan family of Dibakar Pal of Howrah still crafts these queen dolls with utmost love. Looking at these, it seems that a human has been transformed into a doll magically. Dibakar Pal is an educated man who started working on these dolls because he learnt the art on his father's feet, and moved towards choosing doll making as a vocation out of his passion and interest. He discusses in a Programme that the materials required for the art, particularly a form of soft clay that is available only at very specific locations, is getting more and more expensive. Such high cost of raw material will probably compel him to someday stop making these handcrafted dolls. His failing health is also a factor, at present, his son has taken over the mantle of the creator, but he is dissatisfied at the apathy of the government and its myriad agencies. He feels that that the craftsmen are an asset to any civilization, any society, and they need to be helped with funds, as well as subsidies for raw materials. Their art needs the right promotion and platforms of the Government, to be showcased to the world, also tourists and visitors to the locality.

What can be done?

Government and Institutional Support

- UNESCO and ASI (Archaeological Survey of India) Protection: Many terracotta temples and sites, and such unique forms of art need to be recognized as heritage art for better funding and legal protection.
- State and Central Government Initiatives: Grants, schemes, and projects to support terracotta artisans and ensure preservation of historical monuments. Also, the much-needed recognition and acknowledgement of their work can be best done through multiple government forums.



Amitrakshar International Journal

of Interdisciplinary and Transdisciplinary Research (AIJITR)

(A Social Science, Science and Indian Knowledge Systems Perspective)

Open-Access, Peer-Reviewed, Refereed, Bi-Monthly, International E-Journal

• Documentation and Digital Archives: Creating 3D scans, photographs, and research records of terracotta artwork for future reference. Museums need to come forth and create a repository of such works. A famous musician and museologist, who has been involved in the detailed archival descriptions and research of the artefacts of the Victoria Memorial, Dibyokamal Mitra, points out that 'Such art forms, which are part of the civilizational history and unique capabilities of humans, need to be showcased, researched and recorded for antiquity. Only then can we truly claim to be a vibrant progressive society. There has to be constructive interventions from various agencies for such a structure of information and connections to be developed and maintained.'

Training and Support for Artisans

• Workshops and Skill Development: Organizing training programs for local artisans to revive traditional techniques and improve craftsmanship. This will also be a great employment venture as expert trainers will be selected from the artisans only.

• Financial Assistance: Providing loans, subsidies, and market access to terracotta craftsmen to sustain their livelihoods, also subsidies provision for expensive, original and sustainable raw materials.

• Integration with Modern Design: Encouraging artisans to adapt terracotta art for home décor, jewelry, and urban architecture while maintaining traditional styles. This is a venture that is already happening, and the results are stunningly gorgeous, whether homes, decorative items, temple architecture, signature jewellery pieces etc., reflect the uniqueness of Bengal culture.

Promoting Sustainable Tourism

• Eco-Tourism and Heritage Walks: Promoting guided tours of Bishnupur, Bankura, and other terracotta-rich areas. This can be a great awareness programme that can transform into full-fledged educational courses as well.

• Strict Visitor Guidelines: Preventing vandalism, unauthorized touching, and damage to heritage structures.

• Souvenir Markets: Encouraging the sale of authentic terracotta souvenirs to generate revenue for artisans and heritage preservation.

Conclusion

There are many instances where popular culture in Bengal, be it films, drama or music, where doll making has been used as a theme or a reference. A very famous example is the Shyamal Mitra song of 1956, 'Putul nebe go Putul', with beautiful evocative descriptions of various types of dolls. The reason for such references is that the population identifies with them, there are various nostalgic stories in myriad Bengal households about clay doll making, the art and their use for bringing up so many generations. Thus, a connection is established in the psyche of Bengal regarding terracotta art, it's a unique identifying feature of this culture. Because of this characteristic, it needs to be talked about, discussed, featured, encouraged and showcased to represent our roots, the very foundations of who we are, and what we can be. The powers that be need to listen to this small, sweet voice and create a great art edifice which attracts the youth, the world and becomes one decisive cog of humanity.

References

B. N. Pandey, *Bharatiya Sanskriti*, Mallik Brothers, First Edition, 2014

Director of Information, Department of Information and Culture, Government of West Bengal, 2017

https://www.google.com/gasearch?q=dibakar%20pal%20rani%20putul&source=sh/x/g/m2/5#fpstate=ive&vld=cid:01d0f052,vid:RY_hhuB1Zus,st:0



Amitrakshar International Journal

of Interdisciplinary and Transdisciplinary Research (AIJITR)

(A Social Science, Science and Indian Knowledge Systems Perspective)

Open-Access, Peer-Reviewed, Refereed, Bi-Monthly, International E-Journal

<https://www.thebengalstore.com/blog/detail/rani-putul-the-treasure-of-howrah?srsId=AfmBOoo5FJ0RgpF6StgiaGvwU8GIPql6dI7yAIqOepTXhCsEfOUq7qJS>

Rabindranather Paribesh Bhabna, Ibid., Government of West Bengal, 2014

Ranjit Ghosh, *Adhunik Bharotiyo Shikshar Ruporekha*, Vol. - I, Kolkata

Shibendu Manna, *Howrawr Itihas O Oitihya*, Sahajpath, Kolkata, December, 2011

Tapan Kumar Sen, *Howrah Jelar Mandir, Puja, Utsab Mela*, Prabha Prakashani, First Edition, 2009, Kolkata, West Bengal Government, *Asun Ak Sange Egiye Choli Ogrogatir Pathe*

