

# Krishnalila in Terracotta Temples of Bengal

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## Introduction

The brick temples of Bengal are remarkable for the intricately sculpted **terracotta panels** covering their facades. After an initial period of structural and decorative experimentation in the 17th and 18th centuries, there was some standardization in architecture and embellishment of these temples. However, distinct regional styles remained. From the late 18th century a certain style of richly-decorated temple became common, particularly in the districts of **Hugli and Howrah**. These temples, usually two-storeyed or *atchala* and with a triple-arched entrance porch, had carved panels arranged in a fairly well-defined format (Figure 1). Ramayana battle scenes occupied the large panels on the central arch frame with other Ramayana or Krishna stories on the side arches. Running all along the base, including the base of the columns, were two distinctive friezes (Figure 2). Large panels with social, courtly, and hunting scenes ran along the bottom, and above, smaller panels with **Krishnalila** (stories from Krishna's life). Isolated rectangular panels on the rest of the facade had figures of dancers, musicians, sages, deities, warriors, and couples, within foliate frames.

This paper is an iconographic essay on Krishnalila stories in the base panels of the late-medieval terracotta temples of Bengal. The temples of this region are prone to severe damage from the weather, and from rain, flooding, pollution, and renovation. The terracotta panels on most temples are broken, damaged, or completely lost. Exceptions still remain, such as the **Raghunatha temple at Parul** near Arambagh in Hugli, which is unusual in having a well-preserved and nearly-complete series of Krishnalila panels. It is therefore a good

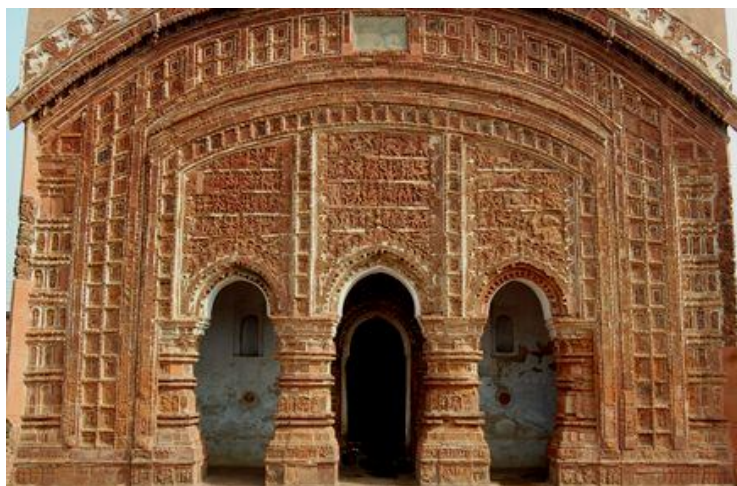


Figure 1: Decorated Temple-Facade (Joydeb Kenduli)

reference for this essay. Although the iconography of Krishnalila scenes is similar across temples, there is also a great deal of variation in selection and depiction of stories, and this paper will also explore these variations by comparing Krishnalila panels in several temples from the Hugli, Howrah, and neighbouring regions.



Figure 2: Base Panels, Krishnalila and Social scenes (Baronagar)

It is interesting to speculate on the process by which patrons and architects agreed on the scenes to be depicted and how they would be portrayed. It is very likely that the architects carried with them **painted scrolls** (*pata*) with Krishnalila and Ramayana scenes, and the patron and his or her family selected the stories they liked, perhaps even requesting certain details to be added. Mythological stories were also popularized through Ramayana and Krishnalila **plays** (*pala*) enacted by itinerant theatre groups (*jatra*) that traveled through villages in rural Bengal. A strong tradition of **storytelling**, mainly children hearing stories from their grandparents, meant that family favourites and variations were handed down over generations. The ultimate sources for these forms of cultural expression were medieval Bengali religious and literary texts from the 16th century or earlier. These texts were localized translations of pan-Indian myths such as the Ramayana, the Mahabharata, and the Bhagavad Purana. Of the many avatars of Vishnu, Krishna and his miracles and exploits were singled out for special attention.

The patron's influence on scene-selection is clear when we compare temples built by **merchants** (who liked stories such as Kamale-Kamini and depictions of ships or river-boats) with temples built by **zamindars** (who preferred courtly and hunting scenes and central depictions of Rama and Sita enthroned). The sutradharas (chief-architects) also had considerable independence and influence, particularly from the early 19th century, when we can even start identifying individual architects from artistic styles. Architectural and aesthetic constraints also placed limitations on the number and sequence of scenes that were depicted. Certain scenes such as Krishna's birth and escape, Mathura-gaman, and the death of Kamsa were always present and remarkably similar across temples. They seem to have been markers for general viewers to recognize and follow the storyline.

## Birth and Escape

The sequence of Krishnalila base panels usually begins at the bottom of the left wall. The first panel shows the **Janma Lila** or Krishna's miraculous birth as a crowned four-armed deity. His parents, the imprisoned Vasudeva and Devaki, are shown standing at Parul (Figure 7) or more commonly, sitting (Figures 3, 4, 5), on either side of this figure. The group is placed under a curved eave framed by pillars. The parents always have their hands folded in supplication and they either face the deity or, more commonly, the viewer. Being the leftmost panel, this scene is prone to damage and in many temples it is broken, but some good examples remain as at Kalna and Gurap. In some rare instances (as at Bhalia, damaged), the supplication scene is replaced by Devaki actually giving birth to the baby, surrounded by midwives.



Figure 3: Birth and Sleeping Guards (Amadpur)



Figure 4: Birth and Sleeping Guards (Kalna)

The birth scene is usually followed by a narrow panel showing Vasudeva carrying Krishna, now transformed back to an infant. In many temples, as at Parul, this scene is omitted and the story moves directly on to the next, popular scene showing three or four sleeping prison guards. The guards are usually shown sitting within separate cusped, pillared niches (Figures 4, 5) representing Kamsa's palace. They hold swords and



Figure 5: Birth and Escape (Kalna)

shields, and their heads are tilted to one side and resting on raised palms. Often, a fourth guard is shown sprawled on the ground in front of the seated group as at Kalna (Figures 4, 5). Sometimes, the separate niches are omitted, as at Parul, and sometimes they are multiplied and arranged as a two-by-two grid of four niches as at Bhalia or Rautara or even a two by three grid of six niches as at Rajbalhat.

The next scene shows Vasudeva standing with the infant again, past the sleeping guards. Following this is the well-known story of **Vasudeva crossing the Yamuna**. He is usually shown standing in the rising, stormy waters of the Yamuna, with his garments fluttering in the wind (Figures 5, 6), and bending down to touch the baby Krishna's feet on the river, which causes the waters to part. The Yamuna shown as a series of wavy lines at the bottom, curls up in a tree-like flourish at the right of the panel. Also in the scene is a jackal (a form taken by Mahamaya, the personification of illusion), leading

Vasudeva across the Yamuna (Figures 3, 5, 6). The myth mentions Vasudeva and child protected by a naga during their crossing but depictions of this are rare. The Yamuna-crossing panel ends with Vasudeva holding the infant again, having crossed the Yamuna. The final panel in the sequence, often omitted, shows



Figure 6: Crossing the Yamuna (Chandannagar)

**Krishna being exchanged** with Nanda and Yashoda's child. Yashoda is shown seated in a miniature arched pavilion with an infant, presumably Krishna, in her arms. To her right are a few or several women—seated or standing, some with their children—witnessing the divine spectacle. To her left is Vasudeva again, facing the other direction, departing with an infant whom he has exchanged with the baby Krishna, and heading back to Kamsa's prison (Figures 2, 5, 7).



Figure 7: Birth and Escape (Parul)

### Childhood at Gokul

Several stories and scenes from Krishna's happy and eventful childhood at Gokul were available to the sutradharas and patrons. Regional variations of the myths, or aesthetic preferences of the patron or sutradhara, determined the selection and sequence of these panels. Very common, however, is the story of **Putana**, a demoness sent by Kamsa to kill all one-year-old infants in Gokul. This she decides to do by

applying poison to her breasts and then suckling the babies. In the panel, Putana is shown as a large reclining figure, hands flailing in distress and eyes popping out, with the baby Krishna at her breast, sucking her life out (Figure 8). Other women are often shown standing by or holding (perhaps restraining) the baby, as at Parul.



Figure 8: Celebration, Putana, Kicking the Cart (Parul)



Figure 9: Trinavarta, Milking the cow, Stealing butter (Chandannagar)

Another demon-vanquishing act, less common, is Krishna with the whirlwind demon **Trinavarta**, also sent by Kamsa. Krishna is shown standing, sometimes

enlarged as in the story, and subduing the fallen figure of the demon by his weight. Both figures are placed within a circle representing the whirlwind, sometimes with flourishes, as at Parul (Figures 9, 13). In another miracle, Krishna kills **Sakatasura**, yet another demon sent by Kamsa, who tries to crush the infant Krishna who is sleeping in a cradle under a cart loaded with pitchers of milk and butter. Krishna is shown lying on his back on a decorated cradle with posters and kicking the cart, depicted as a series of wheels on the top-right or top-left corner of the panel (Figures 8, 10, 11). At Parul, the series of wheels has a makara head and is placed on the right edge of the panel. Two or



Figure 10: Celebration, Purification, Kicking the cart (Kalna)

more women are shown standing over the bed, holding Krishna's hand as at Parul, or more commonly just looking in amazement. The demon that is killed under the weight of the overturned cart is not usually shown.

Krishna's childhood pranks, activities, and ceremonies are also depicted in several panels in this section. A favourite scene is of **Ukhalbandhan Lila** where Krishna breaks a jar of butter while trying to steal it and is punished by Yashoda. The infant is shown half-crawling, with his hand in a pot of butter (Figures 9, 12, 13). The pot has a ladle and ropes for churning the butter, and the ropes are being pulled by Yashoda. Other women are often shown helping, standing by, or pointing, some with children as at Atpur. At



Figure 11: Kicking the cart (Chandannagar)

Parul, this scene shows Krishna tied by a rope to a tree (punished by Yashoda), but he



Figure 12: Celebration, Stealing Butter (Atpur)

has uprooted the tree to get to the butter. Another common scene shows a purification ceremony, where **Krishna is bathed with pots of water** from the Yamuna. He sits (or sometimes stands, as at Kalna) on a raised platform and two women on either side hold

upturned pots over his head (Figures 10, 13). These two women also hold his hand, except at Parul, where another seated woman holds his hand. Other women are shown watching or holding more pots in readiness. At Parul, two women are also shown transferring water into a pot.



Figure 13: Trinavarta, Stealing Butter, Drinking the Forest Fire, Purification (Parul)

Joyous **scenes of celebration** with dancing and music at Gokul are also common and variously depicted. At Chandannagar and Atpur several women are shown playing drums or clapping surround a dancing baby Krishna (Figures 9, 12). At Kalna and Parul, the celebration shows mainly men surrounding

smaller figures, perhaps Krishna and Balarama (Figures 8, 10). At Parul, one of the figures carries a pole with food. Another scene, uncommon, but lovingly depicted at Atpur shows Krishna (and perhaps Balarama) being dressed by Yashoda and other women.



Figure 14: Bakasura, Dhenukasura, Milking the cow (Atpur)

Some women are shown kneeling and putting **anklets on his feet** while others tie his hair, others still watch with admiration, holding children of their own (Figure 15). Krishna, milking a cow is a slightly more common scene.



Figure 15: Wearing Anklets (Atpur)

He is shown seated **milking a**

**cow**, while women watch him. At Atpur, a calf stands nearby and the women are shown feeding the cow (Figures 9, 14).

## Boyhood and Miracles at Vrindavan

The narrative moves from the base of the left wall to the base of the columns and with it the setting for the stories usually move from Gokul to the nearby forests of Vrindavan, where Krishna wandered as a cowherd (Gopala). The panels here show Krishna and Balarama's encounters with more demons sent by Kamsa as well as with some envious gods. The other theme of the Vrindavan panels is Krishna's escapades and dances in the forest with enamoured Gopis. The selection and sequence of these episodes is even more varied than the Gokul episodes. A common and easily recognizable story, however, is Krishna's encounter with **Bakasura**, a giant stork, which he killed by tearing its beak apart (Figures 14, 16, 17, 26). The images show Krishna holding with both hands the beak of an outsize winged bird. Balarama is sometimes shown watching or following Krishna while blowing a horn, as at Malancha. Also, common is the story of **Aghasura**, another of Kamsa's demons who appeared to the cowherds in the form of a python and proceeded to devour them. The depiction shows Krishna and sometimes Balarama entering the open mouth of the python. Once inside, Krishna would enlarge himself, and thereby choke Aghasura to death (Figures 2, 16, 17).

Less common and shown only in large temples like Atpur, is the story of **Dhenukasura**, a demon who disguises himself as a calf and hides amongst Krishna's cattle. The divine brothers realise this and in depictions of this episode, Krishna is shown holding up the calf by his tail just before he twirls and throws it (Figure 14). Slightly more common is the episode of **Keshi**,



Figure 16: Bakasura, Aghasura, Kaliya (Malancha)

another demon sent by Kamsa, this time in the form of a horse. Depictions of this are fairly standard with Keshi shown rearing and Krishna holding it by the mane in one hand, and his other hand raised (Figures 17, 26). The



Figure 17: Bakasura, Aghasura, Keshin (Parul)

story of **Kaliya**, the many-headed snake-demon, is also common. In the story, Krishna confronts Kaliya by jumping into the water of the Yamuna that Kaliya has poisoned. After an underwater struggle, the

anxious cowherds see Krishna emerge from the waters, dancing victoriously on the head of the beaten serpent. This final scene is shown in the base panels. The Yamuna is a series of wavy lines at the bottom, from which emerges a hooded serpent upon which

Krishna is dancing (Figures 16, 22, 27). Surrounding them are the many wives of Kaliya (upto ten, as at Rajbalhat) emerging from the water. These naginis with serpent tails are shown with hands folded, pleading for Kaliya's life.

A complex and interesting scene is that of Krishna's strange **encounter with Brahma**. Suspicious of the miracles by a mere cowherd, Brahma wishes to test Krishna's divinity. He captures and hides Krishna's cattle and fellow cowherds, but when he returns to the pastures by the Yamuna, Brahma finds that the cattle and cowherds have magically returned. However, all the cowherds look exactly like Krishna, for the divine cowherd has replicated himself. Amazed by this, he acknowledges and submits to Krishna. The scenes selected for depiction on terracotta temples are the hidden cattle and cowherds, and the final act of Brahma's submission. The hidden figures are shown as faces of humans and cattle in a matrix of miniature square windows, with Brahma standing beside, or sometimes, as at Rautara, as several horizontally placed figures (Figures 18, 22). These depictions are probably based on how the scenes were enacted in plays. In the scene of Brahma's acknowledgement, the four-headed Brahma is usually shown twice, once standing with hands folded in supplication, and then bending to touch his head to the ground in front of Krishna's feet. Krishna is shown with hand raised or bending down to bless Brahma. At Bansberia, the replicated figures of Krishna with cattle are shown on either side of Krishna and Brahma.



Figure 18: Brahma's submission (Parul)



Figure 19: Lifting Govardhan (Parul)

In the **Govardhan** episode Krishna defies Indra by instructing his people to stop worshipping him. An indignant Indra unleashes seven days of rain on the region but Krishna lifts the Govardhan Mountain and his people gathered under it are protected from the flood. This scene is usually selected for depiction in temples. The mountain is usually shown as a series of wavy lines at the top of the panel (although at Bhalia, the sculptor has used a series of spiral squares to depict the mountain). Below this, a central, relaxed, *Dvibhanga* figure of Krishna holds up the mountain with his little finger (Figures 19, 20). Under the canopy, surrounding Krishna, are cattle (unusually depicted facing front at Parul), and men and women. At Bansberia, this scene spans several panels and has delightfully sculpted seated cattle along with many men



Figure 20: Lifting Govardhan (Bhalia)



and women. Some of these surrounding figures, who (again) resemble Krishna, are also holding up the mountain, but with poles held at an angle. This style of depiction may again be derived from jatra plays where a large canopy representing the mountain was presumably held up on stage by several Krishnas holding poles.

Scenes of Krishna with **Radha and the Gopis**, inspired by medieval epics such as *Gitagovinda*, are very common on temple walls, although less so on the base panels. An episode which is variously interpreted and which holds special meaning in Vaishnava philosophy is of **Ras Lila**, when Krishna miraculously replicates himself again, this time in the forest, so he can simultaneously be with each of the gopis. This is famously shown on the temple walls as a circle of dancing gopis each holding Krishna's hand (at the Shyamaraya temple at Bishnupur, this is shown in a large panel with three concentric



Figure 21: Rasleela (Kalna)

circles of figures). Alternatively, similar scenes of Krishna holding hands and dancing with gopis is shown on narrow panels placed around the octagonal porch columns. When depicted on a base panels, the figures of Krishna and a gopi is repeated several times (Figure 21), dancing and playing the flute, or sitting either under trees as at Rajbalhat or Atpur, or within arched frames.



Figure 22: Kaliya, Brahma hides the cowherds (Rautara)

At Chandannagar, more Radha-Krishna scenes are depicted. One panel (Figure 23) starts with Krishna with Radha standing next to a tree and a peacock, perhaps a reminder to the viewer of the **Natvin Lila** where Krishna disguised as a female acrobat amuses Radha by dancing like a



Figure 23: Krishna and Radha (Chandannagar)

peacock on the branches of a banyan tree. This is



Figure 24: Krishna steals clothes (Atpur)

followed by the scene where Radha wishes to be carried on Krishna's shoulders because she is tired. Finally, Radha and Krishna are shown playing a single flute, a well-liked

scene that is sometimes depicted on isolated wall or column panels. The most commonly depicted base-panel scene of Krishna with Gopis, however, is of the **Chirharan Lila** or stealing the gopis clothes. In the centre of this scene, a miniature Krishna is shown seated on a tree calmly playing the flute. Several nude gopis, sometimes standing in water are below pleading with Krishna to return their clothes. They are shown in various postures, some with hands folded above their heads, others with open palms asking for their clothes, sometimes kneeling to touch their heads to the ground (Figure 24). One gopi is usually shown even attempting to climb the tree, or shaking its branches.

In the richly allegorical episode of **Nauka Lila**, Krishna appears as a boatman, and agrees to ferry Gopis across the Yamuna. There are many regional and temporal variations to the scene. In the most basic depiction (Figure 26), Krishna is shown sitting at the helm of a river-boat, while the gopis sit or stand with baskets on their heads. He holds an oar dipped in the wavy lines depicting the Yamuna. In more complex depictions as at Dwarhatta, the scene takes place in a long, elaborately carved river-boat with peacock-prows, while crocodiles peer from the water (Figure 27). Krishna is sometimes shown multiple times, flirting with the gopis or stealing food from their baskets. In some depictions, Radha is shown seated in the boat with Krishna or separately in a pavilion. In some instances, as at Ajuria and Hatbasantapur, the figure of the widow Barai-buri is



Figure 25: Gopis bring curds (Parul)



Figure 26: Bakasura, Crossing the Yamuna, Gopis bring curds, Keshin (Rautara)

shown as a hunched figure leaning on a stick, standing next to Krishna and berating him with upraised hand for his pranks (Figure 31). This character was clearly recognizable to viewers from Krishna stories or plays, where she provided a comic or philosophical foil to Krishna's divinity.



Figure 27: Kaliya, Crossing the Yamuna, Gopis bring curds (Dwarhatta)

A similar episode, and usually depicted on a panel near the Nauka Lila scene is that of **Dan Lila**. Gopis bringing curds into Gokul are intercepted by Krishna and his friends who set up a toll post and demand tax, in kind. Krishna is always shown seated, sometimes on a platform, but always under a large tree (Figures 25, 26, 27, 31). His demands are challenged again by Barai-buri, shown as a bent figure leaning on a stick, and arguing hand-raised with Krishna while Gopis carrying baskets with pots of curd wait behind her, some impatiently or angrily with hands on their hips.

### Departure to Mathura and Kamsa's Death

The miraculous, sensuous, and sometimes humorous events of Krishna's life as a cowherd are brought to an abrupt and devastating close by his departure to Mathura in order to confront Kamsa. This departure scene was a favourite with both patrons and sutradharas and is shown in almost every temple. Krishna and Balarama are seated in



Figure 28: Mathura Gaman (Amadpur)



Figure 29: Mathura Gaman (Malancha)

single or separate arched frames, within in a chariot that is being driven by Akrura (Kamsa's minister who has turned against him). The brothers are either shown facing each other in discussion, or waving to the people following the chariot, or playing the flute as at Hatbasantapur (Figure 31). The chariot is shown with four to six wheels and a makara head over which a horse is sometimes shown jumping (Figure 30). Outside are scenes of distress at Krishna's departure. Gopis are shown wailing with outstretched arms pleading him to return, some are shown swooning and being held by others, some sit despondently (Figures 28, 29, 30, 31). In some depictions as at Amadpur and Parul, the gopis try to prevent the chariot from leaving by grabbing its wheels, or lying on the road before it, or pleading with the



Figure 30: Mathura Gaman (Parul)



Figure 31: Crossing the Yamuna, Mathura Gaman, Gopis bring curds (Hatbasantapur)

charioteer. This scene was very familiar to the 18th-19th century viewers because this journey was re-enacted in many medieval Bengali villages in the annual ratha-yatra or

chariot festival. In larger festivals as at Puri, the chariot's progress was accompanied by tremendous crowds and religious fervour, resembling the depictions on these panels.

Krishna and Balarama receive a mixed welcome at Mathura. They encounter and battle with demons and warriors sent by Kamsa, but are also joyously greeted and welcomed by the people of Mathura. Demons from the Vrindavan period such as Aghasura and Keshin are also sometimes, perhaps mistakenly, shown in this section as at Malancha. The sequence, number, and selection of these scenes is varied. Scenes of welcome include

**Kubja Kritartha Lila**, where Krishna meets the humped-back woman Kubja who supplies sandalwood-paste to Kamsa. She transfers her allegiance to Krishna and is blessed by him and thereby cured of her deformity. The scene selected for temples shows



Figure 32: Kuvalayapida, Welcome with tika (Parul)



Figure 33: Welcome with garland, wrestlers, Kamsa (Parul)

Krishna and Balarama facing an old, bent woman, and Krishna touching her forehead (Figure 34). Also shown at Parul are two separate scenes of welcome by the women of Mathura (Figures 33, 34). One shows Krishna and Balarama standing before a woman who is putting a tika on Krishna's forehead. In another similar scene, a woman offers a garland (shown as a miniature circle) to Krishna.

Such scenes are interspersed with fight sequences. Most commonly depicted is the fight with the elephant-demon **Kuvalayapida** (Figures 32, 34). Krishna is shown holding and grappling with the trunk of the elephant, which is shown either alone as at Parul or with a rider as at Halisahar. At Chandannagar, Krishna pulls down the rider with one hand while he entwines his leg around the elephant's trunk. In some examples as at Gurap or Amadpur, the elephant is shown prostrate with feet in the air, while Krishna continues to grapple with its trunk. The other commonly depicted encounter is with Kamsa's bodyguards. A wrestling scene is usually included where the combatants have their arms and legs intertwined. This is sometimes followed by a conclusion where the bodyguard is subdued by Krishna or flung in the air as at Parul (Figures 33, 34).

The depiction of the final scene and the climax of the story is **Kamsa Badh Lila** which is depicted on nearly every decorated temple. This panel, like the opening Janma Lila scene is prone to damage and therefore broken in most buildings. The compositions of the scene, however, are fairly standardized. Krishna marches into the scene followed by Balarama and sometimes Akrura who are holding their daggers and blowing their curved battle-horns. Meanwhile, Krishna grabs hold of Kamsa who is seated on a



Figure 34: Kubja, Kuvalayapida, Wrestlers, and Kamsa (Gurap)

pavilion, and drags him down by the hair. In some cases, Krishna is shown fighting violently with Kamsa or even kicking the tyrant. Kamsa is usually shown trying to draw his sword and shield, but his efforts are futile.

### Conclusion

Gaudiya Vaishnavism, a reformist religious movement centred on personal devotion to Krishna, was started by the mystic Chaitanya in the 15th century. This movement along with religious texts such as Jayadeva's *Gitagovinda* provided the spiritual and artistic basis for the surge in medieval Hindu architecture in Bengal. It is therefore no surprise that Krishna stories are so commonly and lovingly depicted on 17th-19th century Bengali temples. However, the selection, depiction, and arrangement of stories vary considerably with time and place. This essay discusses Krishnalila panels on temples built in the 18th-19th centuries in a limited geographical area i.e. two districts of Hugli and Howrah in central Bengal.

The temples of Bishnupur, especially the Shyamaraya, Keshtaraya, and Madanmohan temples have many Krishna scenes on them, usually depicted in large wall panels and arranged in unusual, experimental styles. The isolated groups of temples built by Rani Bhabani near Murshidabad (especially the Gangeswara temple) also have extensive Krishnalila panels. In Medinipur, it is more common to find Krishna scenes on the arch panels, and here too a distinct regional style of selecting, depicting and arranging the stories evolved. The temples of Bangladesh, especially those at Puthia, and the massive temple at Kantanagar, are filled with base and wall panels and the Krishna iconography on them can be the subject of separate monographs. A somewhat large change in iconographic conventions seems to occur in the early 19th century. The Krishnalila panels on temples from this period are considered less aesthetic, with stylised figures and objects, but they depict unusual and non-standard scenes such as **Parijat**

**Haran** at Debipur. Examples of this style can be seen at Mankar, Sribati, and some temples at Birbhum.

The terracotta temples of Bengal contain hundreds of Krishnalila scenes with myriad variations and stylistic innovations. Only a small proportion of Bengali Krishna iconography is discussed in this paper. There is much more to be researched and discovered in the temples of Bengal.

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