Visualizing the *Firingee*, the *Saheb* and the *Memsahab* on Bengal Temple Terracotta: the Articulation of a ‘Native Gaze’

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It is common knowledge that the premises of many South Asian Hindu temples are out of bounds for non-Hindus. Since it is not always possible to visually distinguish between Hindus and Muslims/Christians of Indian origin, the prohibition is often imposed specifically on non-Indians, especially whites. We can speculate that in popular imagination, white people are perhaps stereotyped as ‘more impure’ due to their different cleaning habits in addition to their consumption of ‘forbidden’ foods like beef and alcohol. So, in the *Jagannath, Lingaraj, Kashi-Vishwanath* and several other Hindu temples, foreigners, particularly whites, are debarred from entering. However, if we come to Bengal, in several far-flung villages, we are confronted with the curious spectacle of white people carved on the terracotta panels of local temples of popular and much revered deities like *Shiv* and *Radha-Gobind*! This brief article seeks to understand the very surprising practice in the early colonial period of inscribing *firingees, sahebs* and *memsahebs* on the walls of sacred sites, the ‘abodes of the Gods’, though the actual physical entry into these consecrated spaces was bound by the rules of ritual purification and various categories of the ‘unclean’- non-Hindus, low castes, menstruating women - were forbidden to enter the sanctum sanctorum.

The walls of the early modern temples of Bengal provided a canvas to the local terracotta artists not only for displaying the iconography of popular deities, mythical and semi-divine figures, but also for visually recording contemporary rural social life. So
we see the juxtaposition of the Dasavatar and the vision of Ram battling Ravan with scenes of the local zamindar smoking a hookah and folk musicians entertaining villagers. The carvings of equestrian or rifle-wielding Europeans on the walls of several temples suggest that in the 17th, 18th and 19th century, the presence of Europeans had become an integral part of the visualscape of rural Bengal.

The earliest encounters of Bengal’s rural society with Europeans were probably in the form of Portuguese, colloquially referred to as firingees, who came up the rivers of South Bengal in long narrow boats. Soldiers depicted on temple plaques wearing hats, short coats and breeches and carrying guns have been identified by scholars as Portuguese pirates. Usually these figures appear marching in a very coordinated manner as we see in the lower friezes of the temples of Sukhoria, Baranagar, Bankati, Malancha, Kalikapur, Jhikira and many other villages (Images.1,2,3,4). Very often these figures are shown on dragon boats, which were sometimes flat-bottomed, as in the temples of Bishnupur (Image.5) and Bansberia and at other times crescent-shaped, as in the Purusottampur temple. The hulls of the water vessels sometimes depict windows through which human heads are visible while the decks are manned by Portuguese soldiers standing with rifles, such as on the temple of Jhikira (Image.6). These torso-less heads could be depictions of native people carried away as slaves by the Portuguese who made great profits from the Oriental slave trade.
As the Portuguese pirates and slave traders started being gradually displaced by British indigo planters, merchants and administrators, these new classes of foreigners also started appearing on the temple walls (Image.7). Certain specific practices of these sahebs captured the imagination of the native population and the local artists. The sahebs are predominantly shown engaged in stereotypical Oriental activities like game hunting (Sukhoria, Malancha. Image.8), riding palanquins, sitting atop an elephant (Malancha. Image.9), smoking hookahs or enjoying a nautch party (Halishahar. Image.10). Sometimes they also appear riding on an open carriage (Bankati.Image.11) or on horseback (Hadol Narayanpur.Image.12) or walking with a dog (Kalikapur. Image.13). Sometimes again, their heads are visible on passenger ships perhaps arriving to or departing from Bengal, as we find in the temples of Atpur, Krishnapur and Kalna. These were probably some of the only instances when the sahebs were visible to the native rural public eye even in the early colonial period when interracial social intermixing was sanctioned in Anglo-Indian society. Again, sometimes the sahebs are simply depicted full length standing frontally in their characteristic attire and staring right back at the viewer, as we see in the temples of Hetampur, Kalikapur and Sukhoria, among others (Images.14,15). Another common depiction in several terracotta temples is that of only the head or bust of a European, often as part of a series of heads or busts.

As the European merchant adventurers were slowly replaced by British administrators, doctors and lawyers, there was a steady stream of white women coming to Bengal, either in the form of wives, sisters and daughters of the sahebs or in the form of husband-hunting spinsters - the objects of much pun and caricature in Anglo-Indian literature. These memsahebs also appear on the temple wall friezes. Usually, as in the temples of Hetampur and Kalikapur, the European women, clad in typical high-waist flouency gowns and bonnets, are depicted with their male counterparts (Images.16,17). Sometimes they are also depicted standing alone or two European ladies are shown standing side by side (Kalikapur. Image.18). Young European girls staring out of the windows of their grand mansions also caught the fancy of the local folk artists. In the Moukhira temple, we find a white girl curiously peering out of a half-open window and in the Jhikira temple again, we see a pretty European girl playing a violin and staring out
of the balcony of her miniature mansion flanked by miniature Corinthian pillars (Image 19).

It is interesting to contextualize Bengal’s rural terracotta artists’ representations of Europeans within the larger framework of visual politics of the early colonial period. Right from the onset of colonial contacts, European artists had started visually documenting the colonized people of Asia, Africa and the Americas. Visual recording and ethno-typing of the ‘exotic’ flora, fauna and human inhabitants of the tropics was an important aspect of Europe’s ‘production of knowledge’ of the ‘other’\(^\text{ix}\). Collectibles and etchings of the ‘bizarre’ Oriental people with their strange costumes had a growing market in 18\(^\text{th}\) C Europe with increasing popular curiosity about the Orient. Not only were the native people of Bengal visually documented in the ethnographic etchings of Solvyns and Mrs. Belnos, but they were also represented in portraits and landscapes by Zoffany, D’Oyly and other renowned European artists. Additionally, the provincial court painters of Murshidabad were also harnessed into this colonial project of visual documentation and they started producing sets of castes and tribes of the native population and these so called ‘Company paintings’ were carried back to Europe as souvenirs of Oriental people\(^\text{iv}\).
The process of ‘othering’ involves reciprocity and so does the process of ‘seeing’
vi. Just as the Europeans who arrived at a foreign land like Bengal found the
native people, their customs and costumes strange and imagined them as an ‘other’,
similarly, in the collective minds of the population of rural Bengal too, the firingees,
sahebs and memsahebs, with their different clothes and manners must have appeared
equally ‘exotic’. Again, just as the Europeans were viewing and visually representing the
native people, the Europeans themselves were part of the visible world of the natives.
Art historical studies of the colonial period generally focus on the colonizer’s
representations of the colonized, that is, on the ‘colonial gaze’ and tend to ignore the
reciprocal gaze of the colonized. The representations of Europeans on temple walls by
the terracotta artists of rural Bengal remind us that neither the process of viewing nor
the process of otherizing/exoticizing is unilinear but both are dialogical and operate in
two directions. More significantly, these representations provide the possibility of
reading visuals of the colonial period from the vantage point of the colonized and testify
to the existence of a ‘native gaze’ that reciprocated the ‘colonial gaze’.

Just as the ‘colonial gaze’ often homogenized all natives overlooking their
regional, linguistic and other identities and individual facial features, all Europeans too
must have appeared similar looking in the ‘native gaze’ and hence they were similarly
standardized. So, as in the contemporary anthropological visuals of natives produced by
Europeans, in the representations of Europeans by native terracotta artists too there was
hardly any attempt at individualization. There was almost no engagement with
individual faces. Just as the exterior of the native bodies were objectified and made to
bear the weight of a group identity in the colonial visuals, in the terracotta panels too
certain external signs like a wide-brimmed hat, a short buttoned coat, a dog, a cane, a
gun or a chair could be read as signifiers of a European identity. The depictions of
Europeans by the terracotta artists were extremely stylized and the same kind of attire,
posture and gait were used repeatedly and certain stereotypes, especially the hat and
gun were enough to establish European identity.
Unlike the native artists of the ‘Company school’, who sometimes produced portraits of Europeans for a European market, which is for the white gaze itself, the terracotta artists produced carvings of Europeans on temple walls for the native rural popular gaze. So, unlike the ‘Company painters’ who had to meet the standards of Western art and thereby learn the rules of proportion and perspective, the terracotta artists of Bengal did not have to fulfill any foreign parameters of art. They worked in their traditional style and used the same technique to carve out the faces and bodies of gods-goddesses, zamindars, the common people from the scenes of social life as well as the firingees, sahebs and memsahebs. Consequently, in the earlier terracotta temples, such as in Hadal Narayanpur (Image.20), the Europeans and the local rajas looked just the same in face and physique, except that the former wore hats and coats and sometimes carried guns. Similarly, the memsahebs, in their figures and facial features appeared exactly similar to the numerous local women depicted on the panels and the difference was invoked just with the gown and bonnet (Image.21). A rare departure from the traditional flat pattern and stylization of the terracotta carvings can be seen in the Chandranath temple of Hetampur, built in the mid 19th century. The Europeans depicted here bear striking resemblance with contemporary European portraits of lords and ladies, suggesting that the rural terracotta artists were imitating colonial self-representational styles. Also, in these plaques, the sahebs and memsahebs are no longer homogenized and depersonalized but they can be identified with Queen Victoria, Lord Clive, Byron and even Shakespeare vii. The East India Company’s coat of arms right at the centre of the main panel suggests an attempt by the terracotta artists to appease the British overlords of their patron rajas/zamindars (Image.22). The artists may have been specifically instructed by their patrons and provided with European models to copy from viii. The local rural artists’ imitations of European style must have been welcomed by the zamindars as it offered them the scope to display their European taste and the power and prestige that was gradually becoming associated with it. These temple panels provide instances of colonial interventions in the native popular gaze. The terracotta
artists’ imaging of the Europeans was being shaped by European portrayals of themselves and the phenomenon was clearly facilitated by native elite encouragement.

The representations of Europeans by the terracotta artists often embodied the anxieties of Bengal rural society regarding foreign penetration and colonial rule. The depictions of the Europeans, particularly white men, almost always have an element of violence, articulated through the use of the gun, the canon, the cane, the scenes of hunting and fighting, the forceful confinement of natives in the slave ships manned by rifle wielding guards and finally the sexual exploitation of native women. Before the influx of the memsahebs and the colonial cultivation of a social and sexual distance from the empire, European men routinely extracted domestic, sexual and reproductive labor from the native women with whom they cohabited before abandoning them and returning to Europe. This practice must have generated tensions in the native society and we see this fear captured by the terracotta artists on the temple walls of Hadol Narayanpur, Halisahar, Kamarpukur and Hetampur (Images.23, 24).

The ‘native gaze’ not only personified popular fears and anxieties regarding colonial rule in the figure of the European, but few terracotta temple carvings can also be interpreted as embodying elements of subversion and derision. The representation of life size European terracotta soldiers as dwarps or guards in the temples of Senhat and Kenduli (Image.25) can be perhaps read as attempts to inverse the colonial power structure and racial hierarchy. The same can be said of the European dwarps carved on
wood in the Durga dalan of Sripur, some of whom resemble knights with shields (Image.26). Again, the excessively coordinated rhythmic marching of the European soldiers with guns depicted on the friezes of the Kalikapur, Malancha and Jhikira temples may be interpreted as a mockery of the colonial disciplinary measures imposed on the empire (Image.27). The depiction of sahebs as drunkards on some terracotta plaques and particularly a panel on the Kalikapur temple depicting a memsaheb accompanied by a donkey could also have satirical implications (Image.28).

The de-eroticization of the memsahebs in the terracotta plaques is also interesting and may be suggestive of the perception of white women in the gaze of the natives. Feminist art historians have pointed out that colonial visual representations not only exoticized but simultaneously eroticized native women¹. The colonial imaging of native women had to meet both ethnographic and voyeuristic interests of a colonial white male gaze². In native representations too, local women were often sexualized as the ideal spectator was always assumed to be male. So, in the terracotta panels we sometimes find local women made to put up their sexuality for display or sometimes engaged in amorous or sexual acts with either native or European men. However, memsahebs on the terracotta panels are never depicted in compromising postures and their desexualization in the ‘native gaze’ is perhaps symbolic of their sexual non-availability to native men.

The representations of the firingees, sahebs and memsahebs by the terracotta artists of rural Bengal on the local temple walls offer visual testimonies to the presence of a ‘native gaze’ that reciprocated the ‘colonial gaze’ and thereby challenge the normative art historical assumption of colonizing viewing subjects as opposed to colonized viewed objects. The Europeans on the terracotta panels remind us on one hand that even the white viewing subjects were viewed objects and on the other hand, that the colonized people could also be active viewing subjects. The natives of Bengal were viewed, recorded and commoditized by European artists and in turn, the terracotta artists of rural Bengal too actively viewed, documented and objectified on temple walls the foreigners they encountered.

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Notes

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v Mildred Archer, Company Drawings in the India Office Library, London: Her Majesty’s Stationery Office, 1972, pp.3-7


vii Mukul Dey makes this identification, according to Julekha Haque, ‘Mritshilpir Drishtite Europeo Agantuk’, in Paschim Banger Mandir-Terracotta.


x Mukul Dey interprets the donkey as an obsequious native, according to David McCutchion, ‘The Impact of the Europeans on Temple Art and Architecture in Bengal’, Quest.


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