

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

Satyasikha Chakraborty  
PhD Researcher, Rutgers University

---

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-Gobindo*! 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.



Image 1. Sukhoria



Image 2. Baranagar

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 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century, the presence of Europeans had become an integral part of the visualscape of rural Bengal.



Image 3. Malancha



Image 4. Jhikira

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<sup>i</sup>. 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<sup>ii</sup>. 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<sup>iii</sup>.



Image 5. Bishnupur



Image 6. Jhikira

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 (Halisahar. 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.



Image 7. Kalikapur



Image 8. Sukhoria



Image 9. Malancha

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 flouncy 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).



Image 10. Halisahar



Image 11. Bankati

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'<sup>iv</sup>. Collectibles and etchings of the 'bizarre' Oriental people with their strange costumes had a growing market in 18<sup>th</sup> 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<sup>v</sup>.



Image 12. Hadal Narayanpur



Image 13. Kalikapur



Image 14. Kalikapur



Image 15. Sukhoria

The process of 'othering' involves reciprocity and so does the process of 'seeing'<sup>vi</sup>. 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'.



Image 16. Hetampur



Image 17. Kalikapur



Image 18. Kalikapur

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.



Image 19. Jhikira



Image 20. Hadal Narayanpur



Image 21. Kallikapur

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 *memsahabs*. Consequently, in the earlier terracotta temples, such as in Hadal Narayanpur (Image.20), the Europeans and the local *rajās* looked just the same in face and physique, except that the former wore hats and coats and sometimes carried guns. Similarly, the *memsahabs*, 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 19<sup>th</sup> 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 *memsahabs* are no longer homogenized and depersonalized but they can be identified with Queen Victoria, Lord Clive, Byron and even Shakespeare<sup>vii</sup>. 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 *rajās/zamindars* (Image.22). The artists may have been specifically instructed by their patrons and provided with European models to copy from<sup>viii</sup>. 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.



Image 22. Hetampur



Image 23. Hadol Narayanpur



Image 24. Halisahar

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<sup>ix</sup>. 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).



Image 25. Kenduli



Image 26. Sripur



Image 27. Kalikapur



Image 28. Kalikapur

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 *dwarvals* 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 *dwarvals* 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 *memsahab* accompanied by a donkey could also have satirical implications<sup>x</sup> (Image.28).

The de-eroticization of the *memsahabs* 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 women<sup>xi</sup>. The colonial imaging of native women had to meet both ethnographic and voyeuristic interests of a colonial white male gaze<sup>xii</sup>. 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, *memsahabs* 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 *memsahabs* 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.

**Acknowledgement:** *Photographs by Sarbajit Mitra*

## Notes

---

<sup>i</sup> David McCutcheon, 'The Impact of the Europeans on Temple Art and Architecture in Bengal', *Quest*, 1967, No.54, pp.12-18



<sup>ii</sup> Jean Deloche, 'Boats and Ships in Bengal Terracotta Arts', in *Bulletin de l'Ecole française d'Extrême-Orient*, Tome 78, 1991, pp.1-49

<sup>iii</sup> Julekha Haque, 'Mritshilpir Drishtite Europeo Agantuk', in *Paschim Banger Mandir-Terracotta (Temple Terracotta of West Bengal) A Collection of Articles by Binod Bihari Mukhopadhyay, Amiya Kumar Mukhopadhyay, David McCutchion, Tarapada Santra, Hitesh Ranjan Sanyal, Mohit Ray, Julekha Haque*. Bangiyo Sahitya Parishad, Kolkata, 2008, pp.92-94

<sup>iv</sup> Kay Dian Kriz, 'Curiosities, Commodities and Transplanted Bodies in Hans Sloane's *Voyage to...Jamaica*', in Geoff Quilley and Kay Dian Kriz (eds), *An Economy of Colour: Visual Culture and the Atlantic World, 1660-1830*, Manchester University Press, 2003, pp.85-103

<sup>v</sup> Mildred Archer, *Company Drawings in the India Office Library*, London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1972, pp.3-7

<sup>vi</sup> John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, British Broadcasting Corporation and Penguin Books, 2008, p.9

<sup>vii</sup> Mukul Dey makes this identification, according to Julekha Haque, 'Mritshilpir Drishtite Europeo Agantuk', in *Paschim Banger Mandir-Terracotta*.

<sup>viii</sup> David McCutchion, 'The Impact of the Europeans on Temple Art and Architecture in Bengal', *Quest*.

<sup>ix</sup> Durba Ghosh, *Sex and the Family in Colonial India: The Making of Empire*, New Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2008, pp.1-34. Ghosh argues that miscegenation continued even after the large-scale arrival of white women.

<sup>x</sup> 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*.

<sup>xi</sup> Ratnabali Chattopadhyay and Tapati Guha Thakurta, 'The Woman Perceived: The Changing Visual Iconography of the Colonial and Nationalist Period in Bengal', in Jasodhara Bagchi (ed) *Indian Women: Myth and Reality*, Hyderabad: Sangam Books, 1995, pp.147-167

<sup>xii</sup> Suryanandini Narain, 'Photographing the Feminine', *Marg, A Magazine of the Arts*, June, 2011

---

*Satyasikha has done her bachelors and masters in History (gold medalist in both BA and MA) from Jadavpur University, India. She is primarily interested in gender history and visual culture of colonial India, particularly Bengal. After completing her MPhil coursework in Women's Studies, she is about to join the PhD program (in September, 2012) in the History Department at Rutgers University, New Brunswick, USA with an Excellence Fellowship. Email: satyasikha@gmail.com*

---