

A Lesser Known Terracotta Motif Depicted in the Shyama-Raya and Madana-Mohana Temples of Bishnupur: Some Preliminary Observations

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Introduction

This essay discusses the cultural significance of a lesser known terracotta motif *Navanarigunjara* in the temples of Bishnupur and relates it to various types of representation of the same motif found in *Pata* paintings. Moreover, it looks into its origin and evolution and its position in temples.

Bishnupur (23°05' N and 87°19' E), like the neighbouring regions of West Bengal, forms part of the eastern fringe area of the Chotanagpur plateau and at the same time it extends in the west to the lower Gangetic delta. Bishnupur, in spite of being a small town, is quite rich in archaeological data—in the form of temples, sculptures, handicrafts and heritage. The town derives its name from Lord 'Bishnu', to whom many temples were dedicated by various Malla kings at various periods. In the days of its glory, Bishnupur was the capital of kingdom of legendary kings of the Malla of the late medieval period. This kingdom was a large territory known as Mallabhum, which comprised besides the entire district of Bankura, extensive areas in the district of Midnapur and Bardhaman. The religious heritage of Bishnupur is closely associated with the rise of Vaisnavism in Bengal in the post-Chaitanya era. The relevance of Vaisnavism and the religious character of the Bishnupur are most significant feature, so far as the rise and development of Vaisnavism in *Rarh* of Bengal is concerned. This region has still retained its a wide reputation as a living centre of crafts in terracotta, metal, cotton weaving.

Historical Background

Since medieval times Mallabhum¹ has been well recognized as the seat of art and culture. Bishnupur has a long history since c. 695 CE; the throne of this kingdom was occupied by many kings. Besides their political and socio-cultural interest, they spread their spiritual spirit and beliefs among their subjects.

The most noteworthy component of Hinduism which, to a large extent, shaped the cultural history of Bankura from the beginning of the 16th century onwards has been the *Gaudiya* Vaisnava Bhakti cult. The advent of this new religious faith in the Bankura region under the aegis of the Malla kings of Bishnupur has been dealt with Radha-Krishna worship among their subjects. It should however, be pointed out that Vaisnavism in the form of Vishnu or Narayana worship was not unknown in Bankura before. As far back as the fourth century CE we find an example of Vishnu (Chakraswami) worship in Bankura²

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from an inscription on the wall of a cave in the Susunia hill. There is also dependable evidence to prove that the Vaisnava text *Bhagavata* used to be performed regularly in the Malla Court prior to the conversion of Bir Hambira to Chaitanya-Vaisnavism. Among the upper-caste Hindus as well as the Bagdis of Bishnupur sub-division, the *Gaudiya* Vaisnava Bhakti cult has taken a very deep root.

General features of the Temples

The temples of Bishnupur mainly follow a style exclusively developed in Bengal with a slight variation of north Indian type. There are also some *deul*-type temples showing how the Bengal *sthapatis* (architect) had acquired considerable proficiency in erecting temples in different style.³ The monumental temples which are magnificent in their architectural style and the terracotta decoration formed upon the walls of most of these temples, preserved in an excellent state. The Malla kings of Bisnupur patronized the evolution of the Bisnupur style. Late mediaeval terracotta art in Bengal was filled with Vaisnavism.⁴ The Radha-Krishna legend became the favourite subject of the unknown terracotta artists.

The Shyama-Raya Temple

The temple of Shyama-Raya (fig.1) stated to have been built by Raghunatha Singha in 1643 CE and dedicated to Radha and Krishna, is a temple of the *pancha-ratna* style and may be regarded as the most outstanding one because of the decorative engravings on its walls. Besides floral and vegetal designs, the decorations reveal *Krishnalila* scenes, scenes from the *Puranas*, *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*.⁵ The most outstanding feature among these decorations, a representation of a circular *Rasamandala*, showing Krishna in the centre surrounded by dancing *Gopis* in one or more concentric circles.⁶

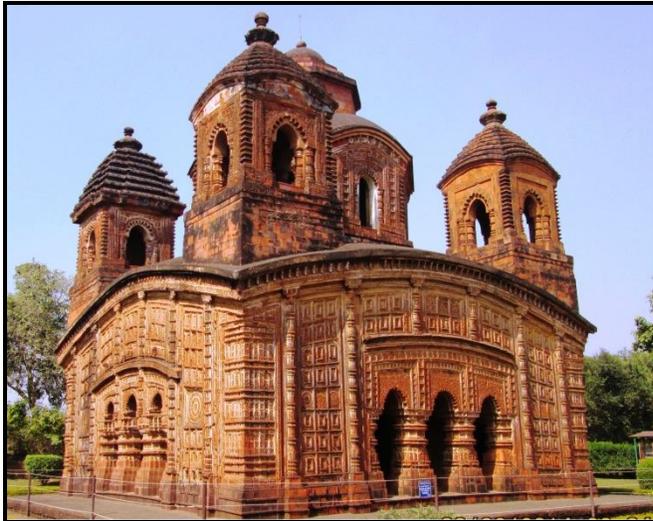


Fig. 1. Shyama-Raya Temple: General View.

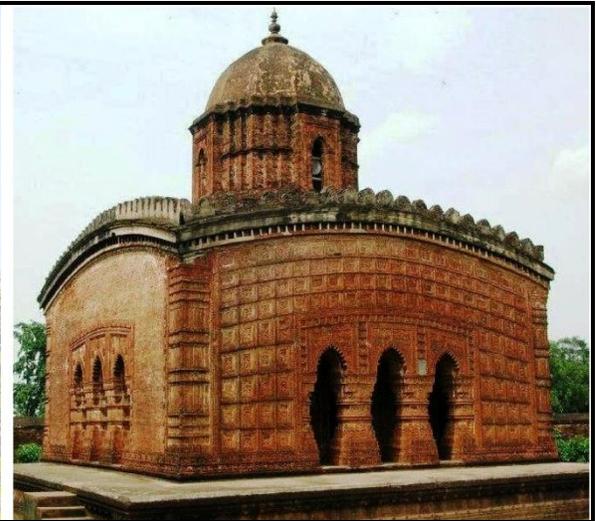


Fig. 2. Madana-Mohana Temple: General View.

The Madana-Mohana temple

Of the *eka-ratna* variety, the temple of Madana-Mohana is built in brick. This temple was erected to enshrine the tutelary deity of the Mallas in c. 1694 CE. The façade of the temple was decorated with scenes showing *Krishnalila* episodes, scenes showing dancers and dancing party and a row of ascetics. The area upon the arches are found covered with scenes depicting war while the lower parts are found decorated with figures of animals and birds, *Krishnalila*, *Dasavatara* (ten incarnation of Vishnu) scenes, legends and stories from *Puranas*.⁷ The pillars display groups of figures engaged in dancing and singing and the arched facades are found filled with battle scenes from the *Mahabharata*. The Madana-Mohanatemple (fig. 2), dedicated to Krishna as Madan Mohan (the alluring form in which Krishna seduces even Madan, the God of Love)⁸ was decorated with the stories of Krishna's life drawing upon the *Gaudiya* perspective reflected in the literature and songs of the tradition.

The pillars framing the entrance, on the temple's south facade, depict Krishna's adventures with Radha and the *Gopis*. The upper segments present rows of figures that dance around the column in rings. The individual panels depict Krishna, either alone or accompanied by one or more *Gopis*, drummers, and other musicians, reflecting the activity that takes place in the courtyard. Together, they perform *rasalila*, the circular dance formation in which Krishna multiplied himself to dance with each of the *Gopis*. This dance is resonated in the spandrel medallions of the sanctum doorway arch framed by the pillars.

The Lesser Known Terracotta Motif

The terracotta panel (Fig.3), installed in the lower portion on the right column of entrance gate in the inside portion of the Madana-Mohana temple, is an exceptional one: an elephant formed by varied positioning of nine women with a couple seated on the back of this elephant in an amorous posture.. The question is what was the purpose of this motif?

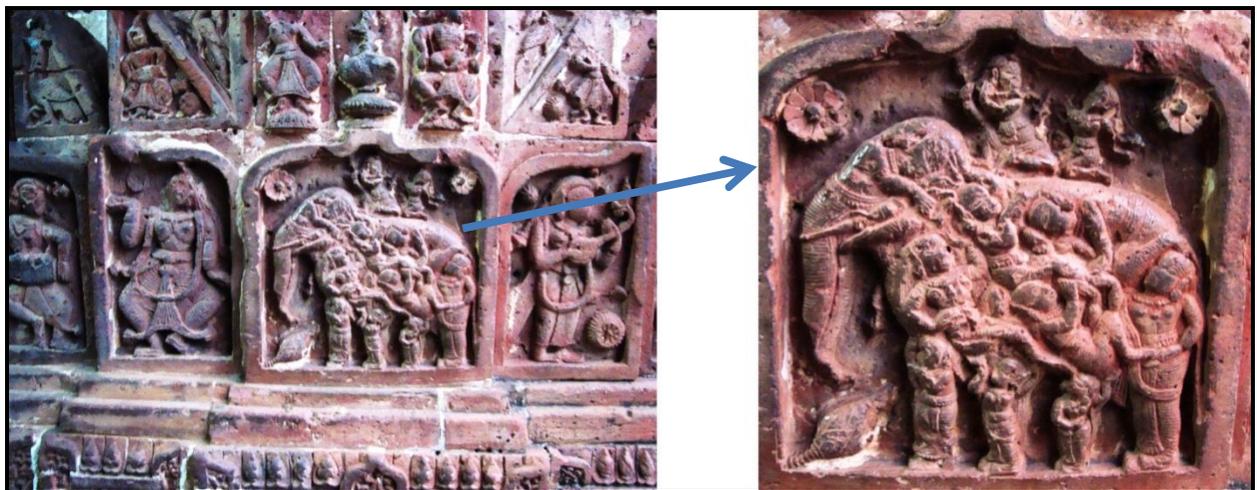


Fig. 3. Position and close-up view of the *Navanarigunjaramotif*, Madana-Mohana Temple.

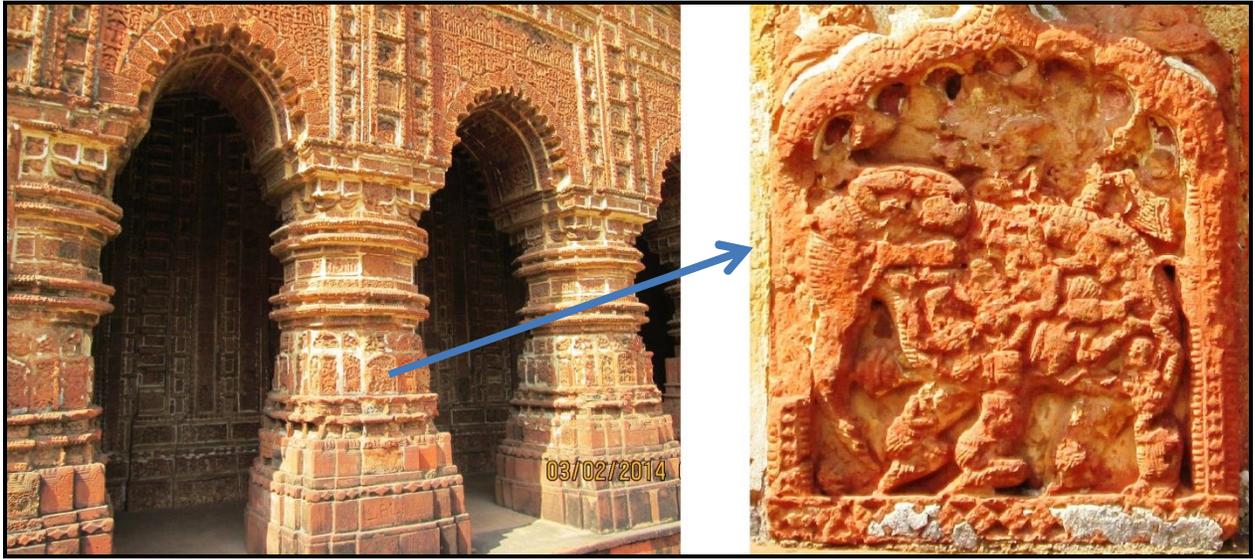


Fig. 4. Position and close-up view of the *Navanarigunjara* motif, Shyama-Raya Temple.

Later I found this same motif from Shyama-Raya temple installed on one of the columns of the backside (western) of the temple (Fig. 4). It is fragile in comparison to Madana-Mohana Temple and the seated couple is not clearly visible. Literary corroboration also confirmed regarding this particular motif in D.P. Ghosh's work on *Medieval Indian Painting*⁹. However not much discussion is there about it.

The first mention of this type of motif, was found in the Odishan *pata* (Fig.5) paintings. This motifi known as *Gajarasa* in Odisha *pata* paintings. It is otherwise known as *Navanarikunjara*. Many scholars also call it as *Kandarpa Hasti*. The reason for such nomenclature is that nine numbers of maiden ladies of *Gopapur* designed themselves like an elephant. They actually intersect and entangle among themselves in such a way that the ladies appear like that of an elephant. This design is also known as *Kamakunjara*.¹⁰

The above mentioned terms are related to elephant, firmly in erotic sense. Therefore we adopted *Navanarigunjara*, most suitable for the motif depicted in Bishnupur temples. It is revealed from the Vaisnava literatures from Bengal that this *Navanarigunjara* occupies a prominent place amidst the *Rasalila* (Love making) of Sri Krishna. The story goes like that¹¹

“Once upon a time Krishna and Radha got separated due to some reason and both were having a sorrowful life without the presence of the beloved. At that time Radha along with her other eight friends embrace each other to fulfil their sexual urge and lust desire; in the shape of an elephant. Their actual intention was to attract Krishna towards Radha. In the meanwhile Krishna appeared on the spot, searching his beloved Radha and saw the strange posture of the ladies designed like an elephant. He then sit on the back of the designed elephant and started to play flute. Sri Radha felt sigh of relief from the pain of love. The Gopis got back to their original position; as a result Krishna fall down. The Gopis united Radha and Krishna in their way and performed dance and music.”

Literally speaking, *Navanarikunjara* means an elephant comprising nine women. In Vaisnava literatures, elephant has been used as an erotic symbol, especially in context with limbs and gait of Radha.

Almost similar kind of description with comparative example has been observed in D.P. Ghosh's masterpiece on *Medieval Indian Painting*.¹² He mentioned a fantastic creation of painted *Navanarigunjara* (Fig. 6), nine naked *Gopis* in the shape of an elephant (Fig. 6), carrying on its back, Radha and Krishna playing with the flute is a multifaceted product of elusive imagination.

A far superior execution of the multi-coloured *Navanarigunjara* scene is provided by *Krishnalila* scroll from Bankura probably of the 17th century CE which depicts Krishna playing with a flute in seated posture on the back of an elephant replicated by nine *Gopis* who have cleverly inclined themselves in a mutually interlocked position as to create a complete in the masterly treated terracotta *Navanarigunjara* in the Shyama-Raya temple relief, Bishnupur, of the 17th century where the composition is much more compact revealing the lumbering gait of the strolling elephant.¹³ Ghosh's account is unlike from others in the way as the painting showing them in the naked postures.

While describing *Krishnalila* depiction on the temples of Bengal, George Michell writes, "*Gopis* are sometimes combined to form elephant bodies. This theme appears infrequently, and then only as a decorative motif on wall panels, column panels and sometimes as part of large compositions as the principal wall panels above arches".¹⁴

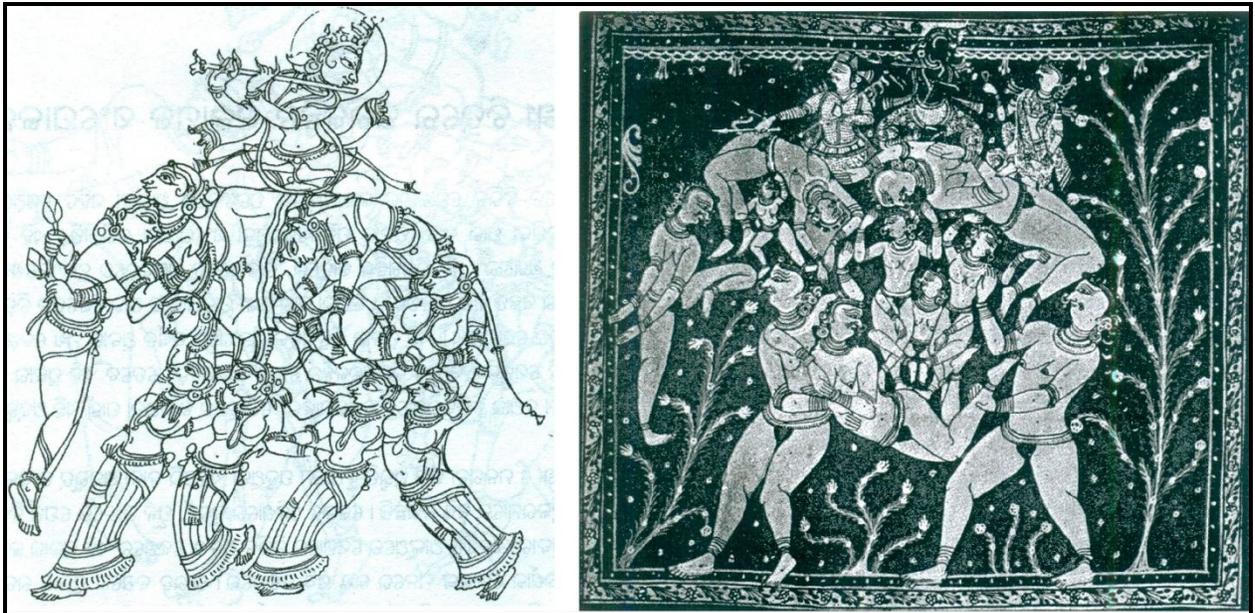


Fig. 5. Gajarasa in Odishan Pata Paintings. Fig. 6. Navanarigunjara in Odishan Pata Paintings.

(After Sahu, 2009: 170)

(After Ghosh, 1982: plate 43)

During the Mughal period few motif paintings like *Navagunjara* (a mythical animal consisting of several human and animal forms), *Kamakunjara* (an elephant formed with composition of women figures), etc. were very much popular in Odishan paintings. Interestingly earlier they did not appear in Odishan sculpture, though all these paintings

are religious in nature. The *Navagunjara* motif is also found in the Pahari and Deccani School of paintings.¹⁵ Scholars from Odisha are of the view that this motif purely has the Odishan origin as its reference available in the *Sarala Mahabharata* (Odia translation of the *Mahabharata*).¹⁶

Concluding Remarks

The motif, amorous and playful Krishna and Radha riding on this elephant, shows that the love between Krishna and Radha, a divine manifestation of *Shringar* is above all other emotions or *Rasas*. It can be assigned the nine *rasas* to the nine *sakhis* of this image. This specific sculpture is purely related with the erotic insignia. Several palm leaf manuscripts and *pata* paintings of Odisha also depict of sexual activities among Krishna and *Gopis*, where influences of *Gitagovinda* and other classical literature of eastern India can be detected. Probably these paintings influenced the sculptor of this region to carve this theme regarding *Rasalila* and place on the temples. Interestingly this motif found in both the temples on the columns only. It needs further investigation regarding this specific motif, why it was installed on the columns, not any other place.

The motif no doubt was Odishan in origin and it was very much popular in Odishan *Patachitra*. It was not seen in the temples of Odisha. The possible reason for the absence can be attributed to the fact that most of the temples are devoted to Saivite tradition. Another reason that speaks of its absence in Odishan temples is that the motif came into existence during Mughal and later Mughal period when most of the Odishan temples were already constructed.

Bishnupur group of temples were made during the late medieval period (16th to early 19th century) and specifically the Shyama-Raya (1643 CE) and Madana-Mohana (1694 CE) temples bear this motif. Local artist adopted this particular motif and other design due to influence of Vaisnavite sect because of the geographical and cultural proximity of Odisha and Bengal. It is surely a very rare decorative motif in the temples of Bengal as George Michell stated.¹⁷

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Notes and References

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¹⁰Rabindra Nath Sahu., *Odisi Patachitra*, State Institute for Development of Arts and Crafts, Bhubaneswar, 2009, pp. 170-171. (in Odia)

¹¹ Ibid.

¹²Ghosh, *Medieval Indian Painting*, p. 55.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴'Iconography', George Michell, Chapter 7, In George Michell, ed., *Brick Temples of Bengal*, p. 139.

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