



Terracotta Artifacts in Ambika Kalna: A Socio-Cultural and Stylistic Study

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Abstract: *The terracotta temples of Ambika Kalna, a town in the East Bardhaman district of West Bengal, are believed to be one of the finest manifestations of late mediaeval temple architecture in Bengal. These temples were mostly built in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries under the patronage of the Bardhaman Raj and the local zamindars. These temples combine unique architectural forms with a vast terracotta decoration programme. The present study investigates the architectural features, socio-cultural meaning, artistic values, and stylistic characteristics of the terracotta artefacts by employing an interdisciplinary approach comprising architectural history, art history, archaeology, and iconography analysis. The study explores the major temple types – Chala, Ratna, Dalan, Chandni and Mancha – and the narrative and decorative terracotta plaques representing mythological episodes, historical events, political authority, religious symbolism and scenes of day-to-day life. The thematic classification of the plaques is based on their compositional strategies, carving techniques, spatial organisation and symbolic motifs, including the Mrityulata. The terracotta temples of Ambika Kalna, the study argues, are not just sacred monuments but also visual archives of the cultural, religious and social history of early modern Bengal. By establishing the intimate relationship between architecture, narrative, patronage, and artistic innovation, the paper situates these temples as important expressions of Bengal's regional heritage and an indispensable resource for the study of South Asian architectural and visual culture.*

Keywords: *Ambika Kalna, Terracotta Temples, Bengal Temple Architecture, Terracotta Artifacts, Socio-Cultural Heritage, Stylistic Analysis, Visual Culture.*

Introduction: Bengal's terracotta temple architecture holds a special place in the history of Indian art and architecture due to its unique use of locally available materials, innovative architectural forms and remarkably rich sculptural decoration. In many parts of India, monumental stone architecture prevailed. In Bengal, however, the alluvial landscape resulted in widespread use of baked brick and terracotta as major construction materials. The selection of this material, however, was not a technological constraint but rather the beginning of an autonomous architectural tradition of superior craftsmanship and sophisticated artistic expression.

Ambika Kalna holds a special place among the many temple centres that flourished during the late mediaeval period. Kalna, on the west bank of the Bhagirathi River, in what is now Purba Bardhaman district of West Bengal, was one of the most important centres of temple building between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries under the patronage of the Bardhaman Raj and prominent landed elites. In this period, the town witnessed construction of many temples representing different architectural typologies such as Chala, Ratna,

Dalan, Chandni, Mancha, and a number of hybrid forms. The extraordinary concentration of temples in a relatively small geographical area made Kalna one of the most important architectural landscapes of Bengal.

Structural innovation and decorative refinement are the harmonious combination that defines the architectural identity of Kalna. The high Ratna temples create a vertical skyline and the softly curved Chala roofs take their cue from the indigenous thatched homes of Bengal to form a regional architectural vocabulary. The open Dalan and the Mancha structures also further illustrate the adaptability of temple architecture to ritual performances and communal religious practices. These different forms together testify to the continuing nature of vernacular traditions, and to the creative reinterpretation of established architectural conventions.

But the most striking feature of the architecture of the temples of Kalna is the extensive use of terracotta ornamentation. The outer faces of the temples are almost completely covered in intricately modelled plaques, arranged in carefully planned narrative sequences. The sculptural panels depict episodes from the Ramayana, Mahabharata, Bhagavata Purana and other Vaishnava traditions, with special attention to the stories of Krishna-līlā. The sacred themes are enlivened by lively depictions of social life, including royal processions, military activities, musicians, dancers, merchants, hunters, artisans, agricultural labourers, domestic scenes, and encounters with animals and nature. This visual diversity makes the temple façades complex narrative compositions, where religious symbolism and social reality coexist in a single artistic programme.

From an archaeological and historical point of view this terracotta panels constitute an invaluable visual archive. In the absence of large bodies of contemporary textual evidence, they contain valuable information on religious practices, systems of patronage, political authority, economic activity, costume, ornamentation, musical traditions and the material culture of early modern Bengal. Thus, the temples of Ambika Kalna should also be understood as sites of collective memory and historical knowledge, not merely as places of worship.

The terracotta plaques are exceptional in their mastery of composition, proportion, rhythm and spatial organization artistically. Sculptors created visually coherent architectural surfaces with various scales of relief, well-balanced narrative sequencing, ornamental framing devices, and rhythmic motif repetition. Floral scrolls, lotus medallions, geometric borders, mythical creatures and symbolic motifs such as the Kalpalata (or Mrityulata) enrich the decorative vocabulary and convey philosophical ideas of fertility, cosmic order, mortality and spiritual transcendence. The highly sophisticated modelling of human and animal figures demonstrates an advanced understanding of movement, anatomy, gesture and emotional expression rarely achieved in the medium of baked clay.

The socio-cultural importance of these temples is far greater than their artistic value. They reflect the religious pluralism, social hierarchy, patronage networks and cultural interactions that were typical of late mediaeval Bengal. The presence of Shaiva, Shakta and Vaishnava iconography along with secular activities indicates a society where religious devotion and everyday life were closely related. The temples act both as sacred monuments and as public art and as historical documents and as expressions of regional identity.

The present study analyses the terracotta temples of Ambika Kalna in an integrated approach considering the architectural forms, artistic values, iconographic programmes and stylistic characteristics. Through a synthesis of architectural history with visual and socio-cultural analysis, the paper attempts to show that Kalna's terracotta temples are one of the most successful regional artistic traditions in India. Their architectural sophistication, narrative richness and symbolic complexity make them essential sources for the cultural history, artistic development and religious life of late mediaeval Bengal.

Architectural Characteristics and Stylistic Development of the Terracotta Temples of Ambika Kalna:

The terracotta temples at Ambika Kalna is one of the finest examples of temple architecture of late

mediaeval Bengal. These temples were mainly built in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries under the patronage of the Bardhaman Raj and powerful zamindar families and represent a unique regional architectural tradition that blends local building techniques with sophisticated artistic expression. They are important architecturally not only because of the variety of structures, but also because of the perfect fusion of architecture, sculpture and ornamentation into a single visual and symbolic programme. The Ambika Kalna temple complex is a case study in how regional craftsmen transformed locally available materials into monumental religious architecture with aesthetic sophistication and cultural value.

The geographical conditions of Bengal led to the extensive use of baked brick, terracotta, lime mortar and suraki (powdered brick mixed with lime) as the main construction material, compared to the stone temple traditions of north and south India. The lack of available building stone did not limit the creativity of the architect, but rather encouraged the development of an independent architectural language where terracotta became the leading medium for structural decoration and sculptural expression. The artisans' high quality of firing techniques produced unusually durable bricks and plaques, many of which have survived for more than two centuries with outstanding structural integrity. The fired clay's fine-grained surface permitted detailed modelling and fine carving. Craftsmen could achieve sculptural effects comparable to those of stone architecture.

Kalna's temple architecture is marked with an exceptional diversity of architectural forms. The temples represent almost every major typology of Bengal temple architecture including Chala, Ratna, Dalan, Chandni, Mancha and several hybrid forms. This architectural pluralism shows both the persistence of native traditions and the readiness of local patrons and artisans to experiment with new structural forms. Rather than adhering to a single architectural model, the temples as a whole represent the evolution of Bengal's regional temple architecture through creative adaptation and innovation.

Of these forms, the Ratna temples are the most visually striking architectural type. They are distinguished by one or more towers (ratnas) that extend above the roof, creating a strong sense of verticality and monumentality in the temples. Kalna is unique in the architectural history of Bengal in that it has one of the highest densities of Ratna temples in the region. The famous Panchabingshati Ratna (Twenty-five Towered) temple complex is an example of the mature development of this architectural style. The rhythmic pattern of the small towers around the central spire creates a balanced shape that adds to the visual effect and symbolic magnificence of the temple. The superstructure's verticality symbolically accentuates the link between the earthly and the divine, echoing the spiritual aspirations embodied in temple architecture.

Conversely, the Chala temples draw their architectural vocabulary from the traditional thatched huts of rural Bengal. Their gently curving cornices and sloping roofs turn the vernacular domestic architecture into monumental religious structures. The adaptation of the indigenous house forms to sacred architecture indicates the close relationship between everyday life and religious practice in Bengal. The curved roof profile is not merely for aesthetics but a good response to the heavy monsoon rainfall that the region experiences. The Chala style is thus a reflection of environmental adaptation and continuity of local architectural traditions.

The Dalan and Mancha structures add another dimension to the architectural landscape of Kalna. These were structures with large pillared halls and open verandas that were used as venues for religious congregations, ritual enactments, devotional singing (kirtan) and community festivals. As opposed to the enclosed sanctum of traditional temple structures, their relatively open spatial organisation highlights the multifunctional role of religious architecture in the social life of the community. These architectural forms bear witness that temples of Kalna were not only places of worship but also important centres of collective cultural activity.

The temples are characterised by their well-proportioned elevations and balanced architectural compositions. The façades are divided into distinct horizontal and vertical sections, separated by mouldings, pilasters,

arches, cornices and recessed panels. These architectural divisions are designed to produce ordered surfaces which can accommodate the extensive terracotta decoration without obscuring the structural clarity of the building. The symmetry of the entrances, arches and decorative panels reflects a refined sense of architectural composition and visual balance.

The most characteristic artistic feature of the Kalna temples is the profuse terracotta ornamentation. Virtually every architectural surface, from façades to arches, columns, cornices, spandrels and entranceways, is clad with sculpted plaques, placed according to a carefully conceived decorative programme. Unlike isolated decorative elements, these plaques together create an integrated visual narrative that enhances the architectural character and religious significance of the temples.

The terracotta plaques are rather different in size, format and compositional layout. Large narrative panels are positioned in prominent architectural locations, especially above entrance arches and central façades, depicting major episodes from the Ramayana, Mahabharata, Bhagavata Purana and the Krishna-līlā tradition. Small panels are placed on the walls, pilasters and cornices and represent floral motifs, geometric designs, mythical beings, musicians, dancers, animals and scenes from daily life. This hierarchical distribution of imagery is a deliberate compositional strategy, the scale and placement of individual plaques correlating with their narrative and symbolic significance.

The treatment of relief sculpture is also sophisticated and impressive. Within the limits of low-relief terracotta the artisans achieved convincing spatial effects by using different depths of carving. Figures are modelled with attention to anatomical proportions, expressive gestures and rhythmic postures suggesting movement and emotional intensity. Drapery, jewellery, hair styles, and decorative details are rendered with remarkable precision, revealing both technical mastery and close observation of contemporary material culture. The subtle play of light and shadow across the relief surfaces enhances the illusion of depth and sculptural vitality.

The organisation of decorative motifs displays a high level of visual rhythm. The narrative scenes are set off by repeating floral scrolls, lotus medallions, rosettes, geometric borders and vegetal arabesques, which bind the separate compositions together into a unified decorative system. These motifs are far from mere ornamental filler; they generate visual continuity across the surface of the temple and guide the viewer's movement through the architectural composition. The variation and repetition of the decorative elements create a rhythmic harmony which contributes much to the aesthetic character of the temples.

The architectural planning of the terracotta decoration also shows a sophisticated understanding of narrative sequencing. Sacred narratives are mostly located in the most prominent places around the entrance and upper façades, emphasising the spiritual importance of the temple. The lateral walls, in contrast, and the lower registers, are usually decorated with representations of social life, hunting scenes, musicians, dancers, merchants, soldiers and agricultural activities. This spatial hierarchy represents a movement from the profane world to the sacred one, but also the incorporation of secular life into the larger religious cosmos.

As for the technology, the construction of these temples shows a fair amount of engineering knowledge. The structural durability in the humid climate of Bengal was provided by the carefully bonded baked bricks with lime mortar and suraki. The terracotta plaques were produced individually and then placed precisely into prepared niches in the masonry, indicating the careful planning of the construction process. This systematic merger of sculpture with architecture demonstrates that the decorative programme was conceived at the same time as the architectural design, not an afterthought.

Thus the architectural accomplishments of Ambika Kalna are not simply a matter of stylistic variety or decorative abundance. They are examples of a successful merging of structural design, sculptural ornamentation, symbolic meaning and local craft skills into a consistent architectural tradition. The temples

of Kalna, with their pioneering use of local materials, intelligent compositional planning and outstanding artistic sophistication, are lasting monuments to the creative output of late mediaeval Bengal. They are examples of how local architectural cultures could achieve startling technical virtuosity and aesthetic refinement, while remaining firmly rooted in local cultural, religious and environmental contexts.

Socio-Cultural Significance and Artistic Values of the Terracotta Artifacts: The terracotta temples of Ambika Kalna are not merely architectural monuments or religious institutions but a vast visual archive that records the socio-cultural, religious and artistic history of late mediaeval Bengal. Built mostly in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries under the patronage of the Bardhaman Raj and powerful landed elites, these temples stand testimony to the political stability, economic prosperity and cultural dynamism which characterised the region in this period. The terracotta façades preserve a remarkable repertoire of visual stories which illuminate contemporary religious beliefs, social practices, political power, artistic conventions and daily life. The temples, then, are to be read not only as sacred structures, but also as cultural texts from which we can reconstruct the historical identity of Bengal.

The building of temple architecture at Ambika Kalna was intimately linked to systems of regional patronage. The building of monumental temples had both devotional and political significance; it allowed rulers, zamindars and wealthy mercantile families to display religious piety, but also their wealth, power and cultural legitimacy. Architectural patronage was thus a tangible expression of political power and social prestige. The extraordinary concentration of Ratna temples at Kalna, especially the famous Panchabingshati Ratna complex, demonstrates the significance of the town as a major hub of architectural patronage in the late mediaeval period (McCutchion, 1972; Michell, 1983). The commissions served both to satisfy religious obligations and to create lasting monuments that asserted the social status and influence of the patron in his locality.

The artistic programme of the terracotta temples reveals the close relationship between religion and daily life in Bengal. The walls of the temple are adorned with elaborate narrative plaques portraying scenes from the Ramayana, Mahabharata, Bhagavata Purana and Vaishnava traditions, particularly the divine exploits of Krishna. These stories were visual scriptures, teaching religious ideals and ethical principles to a largely non-literate population. Temple architecture itself, rather than textual transmission alone, became an educational medium through which sacred narratives were made accessible to devotees of different social backgrounds. Thus the visual representation of mythology reinforced both devotional practices and the religious imagination of the community.

Secular images are used in a sacred architectural setting, which is one of the most noticeable features of the Kalna temples. In addition to mythological scenes there are depictions of royal processions, military expeditions, musicians, dancers, hunters, merchants, agricultural labourers, craftsmen, domestic activities and scenes of public celebration. These reliefs offer a complete visual record of the society of the time in the temple. Rather than preserving a strict dichotomy of the sacred and the secular, the sculptural programme presents them as interconnected dimensions of human existence. The insertion of daily activities into the sacred landscape suggests that religious life was embedded within the larger social and cultural fabric of late mediaeval Bengal.

The representation of social life is important historical evidence of the material culture of the time. Costumes, jewellery, hairstyles, weapons, musical instruments, modes of transportation, and architectural settings are reproduced with astonishing accuracy, enabling historians to piece together details of everyday life that are frequently missing from written records. Agricultural labour, river transport, hunting expeditions, artisanal production and commercial exchange are further scenes illustrating the economic foundations of regional society. These visual documents therefore supplement the archaeological and textual sources in providing a detailed understanding of the occupational diversity and social organisation of early modern Bengal.

The iconographic diversity of the Kalna temples also reflects the religious pluralism of Bengal in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Although many temples are dominated by vaishnava themes, representations of Shiva, Durga, Kali, Narayana, Ganesha and other Hindu deities are represented throughout the sculptural programme. The existence of several religious traditions at the same time illustrates the syncretic character of Bengali devotional culture, in which Shaiva, Shakta and Vaishnava beliefs often shared a common sacred landscape. Instead of advocating sectarian exclusivity, the temples are an inclusive religious vision open to diverse forms of worship and devotional practice.

Just as significant are the symbolic motifs that go beyond the traditional religious iconography. Other decorative elements in the decorative programme include lotus medallions, floral scrolls, mythical animals, composite creatures, tridents, vajras and the distinctive Kalpalata or Mrityulata motif which add philosophical and cosmological dimensions. The Kalpalata, with its elaborate vegetal scrolls associated with mortality and regeneration, symbolises the cyclicity of being and death in the larger scheme of cosmic renewal. Such motifs indicate that terracotta ornamentation was not merely decorative, but that it also served as a vehicle for conveying complex metaphysical ideas via visual symbolism.

Another interesting aspect of Kalna's terracotta tradition is the sparse but meaningful use of erotic imagery. Representations of erotic themes in Bengal are relatively restrained compared to the more explicit sculptural programmes of temples at Khajuraho or Konark. However, the erotic panels found in temples such as Gopalji have significant symbolic value. These images do not function merely as such expressions of sensuality, but participate in a larger philosophical tradition in which human sexuality signifies fertility, cosmic creation, prosperity and the continuity of life. Their integration into sacred architecture is an illustration of the holistic worldview of the Indic artistic traditions in which the physical and the spiritual are not seen as oppositional but as mutually reinforcing aspects of reality.

The terracotta temples also reveal the great artistic talents of the master craftsmen of Bengal. Within the limits of baked clay, the artisans developed sophisticated sculptural techniques able to express volume, movement and emotional expression with unusual refinement. The human figures are gracefully posed, well-proportioned, gesture expressively and are full of details of garments and ornaments. The animals are given equal vitality and the architectural backgrounds and ornamental borders add to the coherence of each composition as a whole. The technical precision in modelling and firing the terracotta plaques points to a developed artistic tradition which could rival contemporary stone sculpture in aesthetic quality and expressive potential.

The compositional organisation also enhances the artistic value of the sculptural programme. The narrative panels are arranged in carefully planned spatial hierarchies, with the larger mythological scenes taking the most prominent architectural locations, and smaller decorative motifs in the subsidiary spaces. The repetition of floral scrolls, geometric borders and ornamental medallions unify individual scenes into a coherent decorative system, achieving visual rhythm across the surface of the temple. The calculated arrangement of narrative, ornament, and architecture indicates a sophisticated understanding of visual composition that goes beyond simple decorative flourish.

The terracotta temples are repositories of collective memory as well as artistic refinement. These monuments preserve invaluable data on patterns of patronage, religious institutions, artistic production and social organisation in the relative absence of extensive documentary evidence on regional society. Their sculptural programmes record not only mythological beliefs but also historical processes, cultural interactions and daily experiences that formed the identity of Bengal during the early modern period. Therefore, temples have great archaeological importance as the main sources for the reconstruction of regional history.

From the point of view of cultural heritage, the terracotta temples of Ambika Kalna is one of the most important achievements of the artistic tradition of Bengal. They are the creative synthesis of architecture,

sculpture, religion and social life in a specifically regional aesthetic form. They are important not only in local or national terms, but also make a significant contribution to a wider knowledge of South Asian visual culture and architectural history. The continued conservation and academic study of such monuments is thus not only essential for the protection of material heritage but also for the study of the cultural dynamics that formed the artistic identity of eastern India.

To summarise, the socio-cultural value of the terracotta artefacts of Ambika Kalna lies in their ability to blend religious devotion, political patronage, social experience and artistic innovation into a single visual language. In their sculptural narratives there is the collective memory of a society where sacred belief, everyday life and aesthetic creativity were not separated. These terracotta temples are physical embodiments of Bengal's cultural heritage and they continue to provide crucial evidence for understanding the religious, artistic and historical evolution of late mediaeval eastern India.

Conclusion: The terracotta temples of Ambika Kalna is one of the finest achievements of the architectural and artistic heritage of late mediaeval Bengal. These monuments are not only religious structures but complex cultural expressions that combine architecture, sculpture, ritual practices, and local craftsmanship into a single artistic vision. The varied architectural forms, including 'Chala', 'Ratna', 'Dalan', 'Chandni' and 'Mancha', reveal the dynamic development of Bengal's indigenous temple tradition and its creative adaptation of local materials and building techniques. The profuse terracotta embellishment of these temples' façades turn them into visual texts that preserve significant evidence about the religious beliefs, social customs, political power, economic pursuits and cultural practices of early modern Bengal. The combination of mythological narratives and scenes of everyday life illustrates the relationship between sacred and secular spheres. Gods' representation, epic narratives, regal rituals, occupational activities, symbolic motifs and social interactions illustrate the complexity of the cultural world reflected by these monuments.

Technically, the terracotta plaques of Ambika Kalna are remarkable for artistic skill, compositional discipline and aesthetic refinement. The careful positioning of narrative panels, rhythmic ornamental patterns, sophisticated relief techniques and expressive modelling of human and animal figures show the high degree of skill of the terracotta artisans of Bengal. The symbolic elements, with motifs like 'Kalpalata' and 'Mrityulata', add to the philosophical and visual complexity of the temple decoration.

The study confirms the terracotta temples of Ambika Kalna to be an important archaeological-historical resource, particularly for reconstructing some aspects of late mediaeval Bengal where textual evidence is scarce. They keep alive collective memories of religious traditions, patronage systems, social organization and artistic practices. Therefore, these temples should be appreciated not only as regional architectural monuments, but also as important additions to the larger history of Indian art and visual culture.

There is a need to preserve and study systematically the terracotta heritage of Ambika Kalna to know the cultural identity and artistic achievements of the Bengal. These temples, standing as enduring examples of creative innovation and historical continuity, continue to represent the remarkable interaction between material, craftsmanship, spirituality and society that moulded the artistic landscape of eastern India.

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