

FLORA AND FAUNA MOTIFS IN ANCIENT SCULPTURAL ART OF WEST BENGAL: A BRIEF SURVEY

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Abstract: Close acquaintance with nature has been a unique feature of Indian art. All of us are always charmed by nature. Artists and poets have shaped pleasing forms of designs being especially induced and enthralled by nature since the time immemorial. Plants and animals were considered important in the life of early man and in his aesthetic practices. Flora and fauna motifs have been developed from simple natural forms to stylized motifs in the early phase of Bengal art. The research paper mainly focuses on the flora and fauna motifs seen in ancient sculptural art of West Bengal from the sixth century BCE to twelfth Century CE. Factually, this period is referred to as the Mauryan period to Pala-Sena period. There are numbers of surviving sculptures in this area that provide us with an accurate concept of the sculptural art of the period. Since this is an abundant area for research, it was tried to concentrate upon art practices in West Bengal. Possibly this analytical research will prepare a prolific ground for further researches that can be undertaken in the future. The paper is based on all known and hitherto unknown materials, which have been gathered through, field survey and visiting various museums, and private collections.

Introduction:

The sculptural art provides great pleasure as well as aesthetic contentment in the observer's mind. From early time, images have been the auspicious and essential part of Indian art. It seems that most of the sculptures have been developed by religious thoughts. Therefore, it can undoubtedly be said that the sculptural art and religion are closely associated. The motifs on the body of any kind of sculptures are inseparable from each other. Without motifs, the images will lose their full significance.

Indian sculptural art is conventional; new perceptions are not easily adapted. It continued the same from very early times with the associated mythology and legend. Hence, the scenes and motifs are based on those legends. The Indian artist skillfully used certain basic motifs. Symbols and motifs are essential components of Indian sculptural art. Symbols emblemize deities. Again, a motif has been described as a repetitive element that has symbolic and stylistic implication in a story. We know that different types of motifs have been shown conspicuously in sculptural arts. Most of the common motifs of Indian sculptural art are the part of the domain of flora and fauna.

In ancient Bengal, veneration of flora and fauna was an existing belief in society. Most of the sculptures, plaques, etc. are carved with flora and fauna motifs. Almost all flora and fauna motifs are represented in stylized forms and those cannot be identified easily.

The objective of the study was to identify the flora and fauna motifs in stone and terracotta collections in some of the major museums in Bengal; to find out the relevance of flora and fauna motifs in sculptural art; to make a rational inference regarding different types of flora and fauna motifs.

Methodology:

For this research work, the primary data have been collected from museum survey and interview to the scholars through a questionnaire. To collect the secondary data, literary sources, Websites, unpublished documents have been studied. In this study, both types of data have been used in the equal importance and they have provided useful information to write this article.

Literary Sources:

Since sculptural art of Bengal is based largely on the mythology and beliefs of people, it becomes essential to study ancient literature for an understanding of decorative motifs. Mentions have been made of different types of flora and fauna in the early Indian texts. It is noticed that the flora and fauna motifs in Bengal sculptural art have not received adequate attention of the scholars. Literary evidence tends to show that methodical study of the overall Indian art by Aryans near about 1800 BCE. The ancient texts especially represent the period between the ages of the *Vedas* and classical literature (Sensarma, 1989: 1-6). The early Indian literature, both religious and secular, emphasized the importance of flora and fauna motifs and significant role in Indian religion and society, which gives us information about these motifs. The four *Vedas* along with the *Brahmans*, *Aranyakas*, and *Upanishads*, also give us information about the flora and fauna life. In the same way the other Indian sacred texts like epics, the *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata* and *Puranas* like *Vishnu*, *Bhagavata*, *Agni*, *Vayu*, *Skanda*, *Vamana*, *Matsya*, *Garuda*, and *Siva Puranas* supply information of flora and fauna motifs. Indian secular texts like Kautilya's *Arthashastra*, the literary works of Kalidasa and Banabhatta and treatises of Varahamihira, *Amarkosa*, *Ramacaritam* of Sandhyakaranandin etc. present remarkable evidence about flora and fauna motifs from early historic to Pala-Sena period.

Flora and fauna motifs also play a significant role in Buddhist and Jain literature. Literature like *Jataka*, *Pancharatna*, and *Hitopodesa* revealed a wonderful relationship between human beings and the animal world with their moral implications.

Ancient Sculptural Art of Bengal:

Art is naturalistic as well as creative. It may be described as theological, hieratic, traditional and communicating the great truths to humankind. Bengal art is not a rare phenomenon.



Plate 10.1: Paddy plant on a terracotta plaque.



Plate 10.2: Gouri with Banana tree, bull and deer.

It is mainly dynastic and it played a major role within strict geographical and chronological limits of the dynastic ambits (Asher, 1980: 6). A. K. Shamsul Alam has made an inclusive study of art and suggested that art can be identified as traditional and non-traditional classes (Shamsul Alam, 1985: 19). According to him, “Traditional art is always anonymous and the artist’s point of view is not realistic but conceptual. This art may also be regarded as functional. Whereas, in non-traditional art, personal moods of an individual artist are expressed in realistic terms; it displays his own technical skill through his creation”. It has many forms over the years. Although the concept of Bengali secular art is produced, it is best achieved where the object so created reflects an image in normal life and has no use in religious purpose.

The depiction of flora and fauna motif has been an intrinsic part of Bengal sculptural tradition. Bengal sculptures are almost synonymous with iconography. It has to be viewed as associated with the spiritual needs of the hundreds of generations of temples and other such places were intended to serve. Apart from aesthetic appeal, ritual and religious significance urged the Indian artists to use flora and fauna motifs in the decoration of the Hindu, Buddhist and Jain monuments with variant implications. Some motifs are purely decorative and some have a symbolic significance only.



Plate 10.3: Mango fruits with leaves on the stella of Ganesa.



Plate 10.4: Ganesha's ears resembling Asvattha leaf.

Although flora and fauna motifs played a significant role in early Bengal sculptural art and iconography, before the beginning of the Christian era, early artists depicted nature of human figure; among the elements in nature, flora and fauna motifs received greater attention. These motifs appeared on the pediments and friezes of the temple architecture and monuments, as well as a votive offering, coins, seals, sealing, ritual objects, painting and bronze objects.

The earliest Indian sculptural art came from the prehistoric settlements of Indus Valley culture during third-second millennium BCE. The civilization produced many statuettes in steatite and limestone. Also found in the region are square steatite seals adorned with a range of animals including naturalistically bulls and sculpture indicate a sophistication in craftsmanship rather than a major aesthetic development (Craven, 1976: 14-16).



Plate 10.5: Banyan tree as background of deity
Camunda.

Archaeological Sources:

To know aspects of the religious or secular life of any civilization one has to depend upon reliable sources of information. According to historians, archaeology is regarded as the most authentic source on which outline of a true history can be drawn without any hesitation. In West Bengal, the sculptural art has clearly developed prior to the Gupta period. Almost all art objects are either excavated or explored. Archaeological sites of West Bengal have yielded sculptures of early historic to Pala-Sena era. However, our scope of inquiry is limited to the examples

During the Mauryan-Sunga culture (c. sixth-first century BCE), the art repertoire laid bare remarkable productions of flora and fauna motifs. During this period, icon worship was not introduced and anionic symbols played a very significant role in Bengal sculptural art. In this period, the depiction of nature played a pivotal role and human figure served as a part of nature. The art of that period in stone and terracotta included figures of various animals viz. horse, bull, elephant, lion, deer, monkey, and birds like swans, geese, parrot, peacock etc. (Jain, 2015: 46-80).

During the Kusana - Gupta period (c. first – sixth century CE), human figurines become the main subject matter of Indian art and depiction of nature receded to the background (Craven, 1976: 106-121). Animals and birds appeared as the mounts of male and female deities as per the religious instructions. During the period, some composite and fantastic animals such as *kinnaras*, *makara*, etc. were portrayed. In this period, animals appeared on copper, silver and gold coins in which the artists seemed to have attained significant expertise in the representation of animals.

The Pala-Sena period (eighth to twelfth century CE) witnessed the depiction of birds and animals either as a mount of the male or female deities or as an essential part in a narrative and immensely stylized form (Jain, 2015: 315).

carrying flora and fauna motifs, which are depicted in sculptures on various purposes for proclaiming their significance in Indian socio-religious aspect.



Plate 10.6: Peacock and Sunflower on sealing.



Plate 10.7: Elephant toycart.

In West Bengal, the archaeological sites are mainly concentrated in North and South 24 Parganas, Nadia, Hooghly, Burdwan, East and West Medinipur, Murshidabad, Purulia, Birbhum, Malda, Dinajpur, etc. These sites are mostly situated on the banks of rivers.

The flora and fauna motifs are found from Chandraketugarh, Pokharna, Pandurajar Dhibi, Tamluk, Mangalkot, Bangarh and so on. Those are assigned to the early historic period. An early terracotta sculpture depicting a human couple has been discovered at Pokharna, Bankura (Majumdar, 1943: 520). This plaque is now collected in the Asutosh Museum of Indian Art, Calcutta University, and it belongs to the Sunga period. The lower part of the plaque depicts a female figurine standing and holding a bird. This plaque is revealed to us as bearing the earliest fauna motif. The oldest stone sculpture in West Bengal is the head and bust of Buddha and Bodhisattva, found at Chandraketugarh, North 24-Parganas (Biswas, 1995: 27). Stylistically, this sculpture represents Kusana period. The earliest example of Gupta period in this region is a standing Surya, which was found from Kasipur, South 24-Parganas. This sculpture is now preserved in the Asutosh Museum of Indian Art. It is also known that the sculptural art of West Bengal under the Palas expressed a new local concept developing its own characteristic. According to the copper plate inscription of Jagjibanpur in Malda district, the Pala ruler Mahendrapala was the donor of Buddhist monastery and during that time, Buddhism had flourished and Buddhist art became famous over the entire West Bengal. At last, during the Sena dynasty, sculptural art achieved a decisive step.

Historical background:

History plays a significant role in the identification of the uniqueness of any site, such as the socio-cultural attitudes, traditions and continuities, diverse religious life, art, and architectural distinctiveness, dynamic trade and commercial linkages, and economic life.



Plate 10.8: Deity Varahi holding fish in her right hand.



Plate 10.9: Deity Saraswati with her vehicle ram.

Saraswati says, “Sculptural art was not an unknown feature in the early history of Bengal. However, early sculpture appears to be non-existent in comparison with the state of things, which we may reasonably expect, in a well-ordered flourishing society with the evidence of the



Plate 10.10: Deity Varaha standing on a serpent.

existence of every kind of religious edifices, known in other parts of India. An explanation for such circumstances is probably to be sought for in the fact that our collections consist chiefly of what we may call chance and accidental finds from tanks and ditches of the latest period and from the surface of the ground, and not in a paucity of artists or of art products in Bengal before the rise of the Palas.

“Archaeologically, Bengal has been a rather neglected territory, though there seems to be no dearth of prospective sites for archaeological exploration within her boundaries. It is the lack of proper exploration that may account for the comparative scantiness of early Bengal sculpture. A systematic exploration of the old sites in this region is expected to yield valuable results in the shape of earlier specimens of Bengal sculpture” (Saraswati, 1962: 7).

Evidence from archaeological excavations and explorations has thrown light on the history of Bengal. The early history of Bengal is legendary. It includes modern-day Bangladesh and West Bengal in eastern part of the Indian subcontinent.

The Vedic literature states that the ancient Bengal was one of the earliest cities of several major *Janapadas* (kingdoms) and this region was controlled by the *Vanga*, *Rarh*, *Pundrabardhana* and *Sumha* kingdoms. According to ancient texts, Bengal generally came under the Aryan culture in the fourth century BCE and Brahmi inscription of Mahasthangarh says that Bengal formed a part of the Mauryan dynasty in third century BCE, then known as *Pundrabardhana* (Bandhopadhyaya, 2002). In the second century BCE, the Bengal region was conquered by the emperor Asoka. Between the fall of the Mauryan dynasty and arise of the Gupta dynasty, few local kings were continuously involved in the war with each other. A number of Kusana coins have been found in different parts of West Bengal and those clearly proved that Kusana dynasty was extended in this region. In the fourth century CE, Gupta emperors established an independent kingdom in West Bengal. In the middle of sixth century CE, over the ruins of Gupta

dynasty in West Bengal arose the independent kingdoms of *Vanga* and *Gauda*. From the mid-eighth century, this region was ruled by the Pala dynasty. This dynasty was followed by the Sena dynasty and they succeeded in bringing West Bengal under one ruler during the twelfth century CE.

Significance:

The soul of Indian art is quite different from Western art philosophy. Even while based on realism, Indian art remains infused with a sense of spirituality. Indeed, this is standard to all oriental art form.

As author and art historian E.B. Havell noted in his book *Indian Sculpture and Painting*, ‘Nature, to the European, is always an obvious reality which must be studied, exploited and analyzed so that the exact composition of every organic and inorganic element in it may be ascertained and explained ... Realism to the Indian artist has a different meaning from what we attach to it; for Indian philosophy regards all nature as transitory, illusive phenomena, and declares that the only reality is the divine essence or spirit.’

Trees, flowers, shrubs, and leaves are frequently seen in many types of sculptures of Bengal. Foliage creates a certain ambiance against which important deities, royalty, palaces and shrines are created. Trees also have great socio-religious importance in Indian folklore and iconography. The roots of the tree have a footing on the underground, and the trunk links the earth and the heaven, an expression of a symbol that surpasses all three spheres of the earthly realms. The leaf, bud, fruit and flower of the tree represent birth, life and death – the comprehensive version of the life cycle.

Again, throughout the ages, all species of animals have been considered the friends and partners of people with whom they live on the earth. Animals have been portrayed attractively in sculptures as vehicles of deities, as signs of strength and beauty or simply as ornamental elements.

In the Puranic period, each deity corresponded to one or more characteristics of divinity and was therefore with one or more animals. It shows the overall bond of gods, humans and animals. Over a hiatus of period, the animal figures as the *Vahanas* or vehicles of gods and goddesses presented in various stances, forms or expressions were taken as to signify the qualities of the deities or as identification marks of them. For example, Durga is easily identified by her vehicle – the tiger or lion. Archaeologists regard animal figures as the best sources to identify sculptures of divinities and the period of making. The duties and powers of gods are reflected by the animal and bird figures associated with them. Occasionally, fauna motifs were independently worshipped. Animals or birds also were believed protectors of temples and human society. However, artists created fauna motifs being inspired by observing the animal world.

In art, apart from *Vahana* or vehicle, the animals have been represented as a toy, as the symbol of sacrifice, talisman and bead, on a seal as political insignia and trade passport and on coins.

Therefore, flora and fauna motifs were sculpted not for the sake of embellishment; these denoted the Bengali culture, legends and rich traditions. This methodical and thorough study on flora and fauna motifs and their symbolic meaning found in sculptural art fulfills a great need and this will be of immense interest to students, scholars and researchers of arts and social sciences.

Flora motifs in sculptural art:

The depiction of flora motifs in Bengal sculptural art is not only found on stone objects but also reflected on other works of art, such as metal, terracotta and lac objects, wood, ivory and bone carvings etc. However, only the stone and terracotta sculptures preserved in some major museums in West Bengal from sixth century BCE to twelfth century CE have been studied and different types of flora motifs have been identified with careful observation of their morphological characteristics and visible identification marks.

Indian mind and creativeness have always been surrounded by nature. People throughout the ages worshipped nature in various form like the mountains, rivers, plants and trees dwellings of divine beings themselves. Tree worship was prevalent during the Indus Valley Civilization and it even now carried on with all its grandeur in rural areas.

Kamal or the lotus is believed to be the holiest flower. Lotus bears great religious significance and symbolic implications. Lotus symbolizes soul, fecundity and prosperity.

Lakshmi, the spouse of Vishnu, came out of a lotus originated from his forehead and so she is known as Padma. The lotus as a symbol of regeneration is noticed in one hand of the god Vishnu as well as of the goddess Kali.

The *Skanda Purana* mentioned that the lotus named *Shatapatrika* or of hundred petals is said to have appeared when Brahma created various types of flowers (Dange, 1986: 968).

According to Stella Kramrisch, the *yantric* character of the lotus pedestal is well defined by the *Vishnudharmottara*, which states, “that god only and no other should be worshipped on lotus by contemplating whom in mind it was set up” (Kramrisch, 1994: 272).

Lord Brahma, the ‘creator’ in the Hindu pantheon derives from the sacred “Lotus” which rose from the navel of Lord Vishnu. The sacred river Ganga dwells in Vishnu’s “Lotus” feet.

Trees are worshipped since ancient times. It is believed that they have consciousness. They naturally protect the followers of “*Sat, Chit and Ananda*”. In the Gita, Lord Krishna personified himself with *Peepal* tree and said “*Ashwatthahsarvrikshanam*”. Beneath the *Peepal* tree, Buddha became enlightened; likewise, the Mahaveera renounced the world under the branches of *Shala* tree. Trees, along with all natural objects had their splendors in Indian art and thus articulated with great care and reverence in Indian arts.

Trees are usually sculpted on the pedestal. Floral garlands offered by worshippers are also shown hanging from such trees. Men, women, children, celestial beings and animals are seen worshipping these trees. These trees are found in all Buddhist, Jain and Hindu sculptures. The trees sculpted are Nyagrodha (*Ficus benghalensis* L.), Ashvattha (*Ficus religiosa* Linn.), Kadamba (*Neolamarckia cadamba*), Kanthal (*Artocarpus heterophyllus*), Sirisha (*Albizia lebbek*), Udumbara (*Ficus racemosa*), Asoka (*Saraca asoca*), Shala (*Shorea robusta*), Banana (*Musa paradisiaca*) etc. Other types of floral motifs are also found all period. These are custard apples (*Annona squamosa*), mangoes (*Mangifera indica*), palms (*Arecaceae*) etc. They must have been commonly found near the temples and shrines. The most popular flower is the lotus (*Nelumbo nucifera*). Lotus and other water lilies are frequently found growing in ponds and lakes near villages all over West Bengal. These lotus flowers are depicted in various forms in sculptural art, such as Hindu, Buddhist and Jain deities are sitting or standing on a lotus pedestal and holding full-blown lotus flowers in their hands. By the time of the Mauryan, Sunga and Kusana periods, the women and tree motif became very popular in Bengal art. During these periods, *Shalabhanjika* figure has been fully carved on the brackets of the Buddhist and Jain *toranas*, pillars, *stupas*, monasteries and caves.

Different trees or plants are associated with particular deities or rituals. With religious concept, these trees may be divided into three categories (Mahapatra, 1965: 125). The first is that, trees are symbolized as particular deities. These are *Asvattha* tree, associated with God Vishnu, Banyan tree associated with Goddess Lakshmi, God Kubera and Goddess Sasthi, Amlaki tree being a symbol of God Shiva and God Vishnu, Banana tree symbolized as Goddess Parvati or Durga, Paddy plant associated with goddess Lakshmi, Durva grass being a symbol of God Vishnu, Tulsi plant symbolizing Vishnu's consort Radhika, Bilva tree associated with God Shiva. The second one is the sacred trees, which are shelters of the village divinities. There are Manasa tree (*Euphobia lingularia*) symbolized as Goddess Manasa, Jujuba tree (*Zizyphus jujuba*) associated with Kul-kulativrata and Itu-kumara vrata, Karam tree (*Adina cordifolia*) symbol of God Karam, Saora tree (*Streblus asper*) symbolizing Goddess Vana-Durga, Shala tree (*Sorea robusta*) associated with God Indra, Bamboo tree (*Bambusa arudinaea*) symbolized as Vastu Debata, Neem tree as a symbol of God Shiva. The third one is considered sacred plantation. These are -Dhutura flower (*Datura stramonium*) and Akanda flower (*Asclepias gigantia*) used for Shiva worship, Mango leaves and Bilva leaves and green coconut are used for any worship in West Bengal.

In West Bengal, less number of plants, fruits and flowers are sculpted on terracotta and stone objects. These are paddy plant, banana plant, mango tree, jackfruit, coconut tree, *tala* tree, *asvattha* tree, Banyan tree, lotus flower, *bakul* flower, sunflower, etc. These motifs are sculpted carefully and sincerely in West Bengal sculptural art.

Paddy Plant (*Oryza sativa*):

The most important crop in the world is paddy. This crop is very auspicious to Bengali people. A fragment of terracotta plaque from early historic period collected in State Archaeological Museum, Kolkata, depicts farmers cutting paddy plant (**Plate 10.1**). Another terracotta sealing, which is preserved in the same Museum, displays on its right side three paddy plants identified surrounded by a railing. A Sunga terracotta plaque from Chandraketugarh depicts two persons holding two bunches of paddy plant in upper portion.

Banana Plant (*Musa paradisiaca* Linn):

In the Gurusaday Museum, the sculpture of Vayu from Sena period is preserved, found from Birbhum district. On both sides of this sculpture banana plant is identified by its pseudo stem, leaves and fruits. Another sculpture of the goddess Gouri from Sena period is found from Raigunj, Uttar Dinajpur on both side of which banana plant is sculpted (**Plate 10.2**). This sculpture is stored in the Bangiya Sahitya Parisad, Kolkata.

Mango tree (*Mangifera indica*):

Two Ambika sculptures from Pala-Sena period are found in Uttar Dinajpur and Bishnupur, Bankura depicting mango fruits hanging on the twig of a tree. Now these sculptures are preserved in the State Archaeological Museum, Kolkata and Acharya Jogesh Chandra Purakriti Bhawan, Bishnupur, Bankura. From Malda district a Ganesa sculpture of Pala-Sena period have been excavated, which depicts mango fruits with leaves sculpted on the stella (**Plate 10.3**) and an Uma-Maheswara sculpture which has been found from Mangalkot, Burdwan district. Now these sculptures are preserved in the Malda District Museum, Malda and Museum and Art Gallery, Burdwan.

Jackfruit Tree (*Artocarpus heterophyllus*):

A fragment of a terracotta plaque from Chandraketugarh depicts on its left side a female figurine holding a basket on her head containing fruits. In this basket, two jackfruits are visible. This plaque is now in the State Archaeological Museum, Kolkata.

Coconut Tree (*Cocos nucifera*):

The coconut tree with fruits is identified in a plaque, which has been found from Chandraketugarh and now preserved in State Archaeological Museum, Kolkata. This plaque depicts two monkeys fighting and this tree is seen on left side of the plaque.

Tala Tree (*Borassus flabellifer* Linn):

A broken terracotta plaque from Sunga period depicts a female figurine, highly ornamented and palm fruit is stuck to her coiffure. Now this plaque is preserved in the State Archaeological Museum, Kolkata.

Asvattha Tree (*Ficus religiosa* Linn):

A unique sculpture of seated Ganesa from the Sena period is now in the Acharya Jogesh Chandra Purakriti Bhawan, Bishnupur, Bankura. Here the deity's ear is sculpted like asvattha leaf (**Plate 10.4**). This sculpture was found from Saragarh in Bishnupur, Bankura.

Banyan Tree (*Ficus benghalensis* Linn):

This tree is identified on the sculpture of Chamunda of the Sena period, found from Gangarampur, South Dinajpur. Here Banyan tree is carved as the background of the female deity Chamunda (**Plate 10.5**). This sculpture is now preserved in the Museum and Art Gallery, Burdwan.

Lotus Flower (*Nelumbo nucifera* Gaertn):

Lotus motif has been noticed in almost all terracotta plaques and stone sculptures. This motif has been used as the seat on which deities are standing or sitting or holding it in their hands. We can see the god Surya holding lotus in both of his hands in Bengal art. From Chandraketurgh, Pokharna, Pandurajar Dhibi, Tamluk, Mangalkot, Bangarh a good number of terracotta plaques have been unearthed, which depict female figurine and Yakshi as holding lotus or as standing against the background of a lotus garden.

Bakul Flower (*Mimusops elengi* Linn):

This flower motif was used for decorative purpose. In early historic period, most of the borders of terracotta plaques have been sculpted by linear arrangement of small sized star shaped bakul flower.

Sunflower (*Helianthus annuus* Linn):

This flower motif is identified on a terracotta sealing which is preserved in the State Archaeological Museum, Kolkata. On the left side of the sealing, the sunflower motif is depicted (**Plate 6**). The same motif is found on a terracotta vase preserved in the same museum. The neck portion of this vase is decorated with this flower motif.

Fauna Motifs in Sculptural Art:

The fauna motifs on sculptural art may be classified as of religious and secular types. Among these, some appeared as vehicles of gods and goddesses. Few animal and bird motifs have been regarded as the incarnation of gods and saints as protecting the universe.

The most important animals and birds are bull (*Bos taurus*), lion (*Panthera leo*), elephant (*Elephas Maximus indicus*), rhinoceros (*Rhinocerotidae*), peacock (*Pavo cristatus*), mouse (*Mus musculus*), boar (*Sus scrofa*), horse (*Equus caballus*), buffalo (*Bubalus bubalis*), crocodile (*Crocodylinae*), monkey (*Macaca fascicularis*), dog (*Canis lupus familiaris*), parrot

(*Psittaciformes*), swan (*Cygnus*), tortoise (*Testudinidae*), deer (*Cervidae*), ram (*Ovis aries*), fish (*pisces*), snake (*Serpentes*), crow (*Corvus*) etc. which are found on Bengal Sculptural art.

Bull:

The bull motif played a more significant role than the other animal motifs. This animal was associated with Lord Siva. Similarly, in the Jainism, it is an auspicious symbol and it is associated with the first Tirthankara Risabhanatha (Bhattacharya, 1974: 35-36). Belonging to the early historic period, a tiny clay sealing depicts a bull motif in standing posture in the centre and Brahmi inscription is inscribed around the motif. This object is preserved in the State Archaeological Museum, Kolkata. Mention may be made of an important sculpture from the Pala-Sena period, which has been found at Raiganj, Uttar Dinajpur and now in the Bangiya Sahitya Parisad. In this image, the female deity Gouri is shown in standing posture and on the left side of the pedestal, a seated bull is shown (**Plate 10.2**).

Other most notable animals of Bengali religious perspective are horse, elephant, and lion. These are the common vehicles of Surya, Indra and Parvati respectively. We, however, can find the portrayal of fauna motifs as decorative element on religious monuments and temples. There are sculpted horses and elephants carrying royal personages, engaged in war and hunting, and serving in public activities, bull and buffalo in daily life, monkey enjoying under the tree and birds for example doves and parrot bringing and crashing fruits, peacock and cock situating on the tree, etc. Mostly, the fauna motifs are represented as part of symbolism in life through all period.

Horse:

Horse denoted command, dynamism, and prosperity. It is the vehicle of the Sun and it is a sign of sovereignty. In Hindu mythology, when the ocean was churned, horse emerged as one of the fourteen jewels. In horse sacrifice, the horse was considered the symbol of the Sun (Bender & Dange, 1978: 83).

Elephant:

The elephant symbolizes vigor, knowledge, fecundity, prosperity and sovereignty. It is one of the Hindu *mangalas* (Gosta, 1986: 87) and is related with Indra, the Vedic deity. On the seals of Indus Valley Civilization, we may notice elephants. The elephants, mountains, clouds and the cobras were all believed to be a member of one family and were thought to be born from water (Dange, 1978: 96). It is believed that the *dig-gaja* or the elephants of the four quarters support the caryatids of the Universe, who support the dome-shaped shell of the firmament on their backs (Zimmer, 1955: 160).

Elephant motif is found on stone and terracotta sculptures in West Bengal art. According to Jain Text, the symbol of elephant is represented with the second Tirthankara Ajithanatha

(Bhattacharya, 1974: 36-37). Cunningham also describes that Maya Devi, the mother of Gautama Buddha saw an elephant in her several dreams (Cunningham, 1879: 41). In Chandraketurgarh, a large number of elephant motifs has been found as plaything and as plaques and those are now preserved in the State Archaeological Museum, Kolkata and Asutosh Museum of Indian Art, Kolkata. The terracotta wheeled figurine generally represented as toy cart and have two holes at the bottom (**Plate 10.7**). A scene of fighting of two elephants is depicted on a small terracotta plaque. Another terracotta plaque depicts the scene of harvest festival. Here a queen is riding on and driving a caparisoned elephant.

Tortoise:

Tortoise is the second *avatara* of Vishnu, and the mount of Yamuna, the river goddess. It is also a *lanohana* (cognizance) of some Jain *Yakshas* and *Tirthankaras*. The tortoise symbolizes the Sun, the waters and is denoted as the 'Lord of creation' in Vedic mythology. Because of its shape, the tortoise is regarded as a symbol of the three worlds; its lower shell is this terrestrial world, upper shell the sky and in between is the atmosphere (Cirlot, 1962: 87).

The tortoise is believed to bear the earth on its back. Its prolonged existence undoubtedly symbolizes it as the symbol of longevity. *Kurma* is adept to draw its limbs within its shell. This imagery gives rise to the concept of the tortoise as a model of self-restrained man, who has command over his *indriyas* (senses) and withdraws from sense objects (Desai, 2008: 36).

Early historic terracotta plaques discovered from Boral, South 24 Parganas, and Chandraketurgarh, North 24 Parganas depict a boy playing with the tortoise and two monkeys holding tortoise with their hands respectively. Yamuna standing on tortoise, a stone sculpture from Pala period is now in the State Archaeological Museum, Kolkata. This sculpture is found from Baheri, Uttar Dinajpur.

Peacock:

Peacock is an attractive bird who can eat snakes and thus symbolizing power. The *Rigveda* and *Atharvaveda* refer to its effectiveness against venom, having to do with its role as a snake-killer. It is also well associated with the coming of the monsoon. Because of its plumage, the peacock is believed to safeguard a person from the malevolence. It is also later considered bird of immortality and as a type of the sunbird. In Hindu mythology, the decorations on its wings, similar to countless eyes, represent the starry sky. It signifies love and beauty and is a vehicle of goddess Saraswati (Cirlot, 1962: 239).

Peacock is associated with the deity Kartikeya as his vehicle in Hindu pantheon. A number of peacock motifs have been found from Chandraketurgarh, North 24 Parganas, Jagjivanpur, Malda, Pokharna, Bankura, Pandu Rajar Dhibi, Burdwan etc. through excavation. Peacock is also noticeable on terracotta plaques, toy carts, stone sculptures, preserved in the State Archaeological Museum, Kolkata; Asutosh Museum of Indian Art, Kolkata, Archaeological

Museum, Tamluk, Purba Medinipur. A small sealing from early historic period bears a peacock motif standing on the gateway like 'torana' (**Plate 10.6**). This sealing is now preserved in the State Archaeological Museum, Kolkata. Another terracotta plaque depicts a human figurine wearing peacock feather on the head as crown.

Fish:

The fish is believed a symbol of good luck among the Hindus. *Matsya-yugma* motif is considered one of the *ashta mangalachinha* or eight auspicious signs by the *Shvetambara* Jains. In the Jain literature, eighteenth Thirthankara of Aranatha is symbolized as fish motif (Bhattacharya, 1939: 53). In the *Lalitavistara*, fish motif is taken as an auspicious symbol on the palm of Buddha. The motif of fish may be taken as the earliest motif in sculptural art. The antiquity of fish motif can be dated back to the Indus Valley Civilization as we find the representation of a fish in faience at Harappa and in ivory at Mohenjo-Daro apart from their representation on pottery and the seals. Likewise, among the un-deciphered semi-pictographic scripts of the Indus Valley we find a sign, which is almost in the form of a fish. Afterward, we find it in the early punch-marked coins. According to Coomarswamy, this symbol was invested with amuletic value in the course of time and began to be used in various contexts (Chandra, 1996: 76).

Some terracotta plaques from the early historic period show that a female figurine holds two fishes in her right hand. This type of plaques has been unearthed from Chandraketurgh, Harinarayanpur, Pandu Rajar Dhibi, Tamluk, etc. and the plaques are preserved in the State Archaeological Museum, Kolkata and the Asutosh Museum of Indian Art, Kolkata. The stone sculpture of the deity Varahi belonging to the Pala period that holds fish in her front right hand has been excavated at Pichhli, Malda (**Plate 10.8**). Now this sculpture is displayed in the Malda District Museum.

Deer:

The deer motif is very popular in West Bengal region and depicted in Hindu, Buddhist and Jain art during the early historic to Pala-Sena period. According to Jain Text, sixteen Thirthankara Shantinatha carries with him the symbol of deer motif (Bhattacharya, 1974: 51). The terracotta plaques belonging to the early historic period found in Chandraketurgh depicts two deer in moving posture. A noteworthy terracotta plaque of Pala period has been found from Jagjivanpur, Malda, which depicts a standing spotted deer. Two stone sculptures from Birbhum and Raiganj, Uttar Dinajpur during Sena period depict two deer in sitting posture below the deity Vayu's legs and another seated spotted deer is shown on the right side of the pedestal near the goddess Gouri (**Plate 10.2**). Now these sculptures are preserved in the Gurusaday Museum, Kolkata and Bangiya Sahitya Parisad, Kolkata.

Tiger:

This tiger motif discovered at Chandraketugarh and now in the Asutosh Museum of Indian Art, Kolkata depicts a divine couple riding on the tiger. Few tiger motifs have been found as plaque from Jagajivanpur, Malda.

Monkey:

The Jain Text says that the monkey is symbolized as fourth Thirthankara of Abhinandanana and his mother dreamt about the monkey (Bhattacharya, 1974: 40). A terracotta plaque from Chandraketugarh shows a scene of wrestling of two monkeys. Another plaque depicts a monkey riding on crocodile. The next plaque represents two monkeys playing with a tortoise.

Ram:

Many terracotta ram toy-carts, plaques and decorated bricks of early historic period have been revealed from Chandraketugarh, Harinarayanpur, Pandu Rajar Dhibi, Tamluk, etc. and of Pala period from Jagajivanpur. The unique stone image of Saraswati discovered from Malda district bears the distinctive Sena style. In this image, the goddess Saraswati is shown seated. On the right side of the pedestal, a seated ram is shown near the right foot of the deity (**Plate 10.9**). Here ram motif is symbolized as vehicle of Saraswati (Dasgupta, 2000: 127).

Rhinoceros:

This motif on terracotta plaques of Pala period is found at Chandraketugarh in early historic period and Jagajivanpur, Malda.

Snake:

Naga (cobra) is venerated as a deity as early as in Indus Valley Culture and subsequently in all Indian religions. It is believed that the cult of *naga* has autochthonous ethnic associations. In Hinduism, *nagas* are said to be offspring of *Kashyapa* and *Kadru* and considered main foes of *Garuda*. *Naga* is also connected with Vishnu and his incarnations and also Siva and Ganapati and hence is an auspicious symbol. During the churning of the cosmic ocean by the gods on one side and demons on the other, they used *Ananta*, the celestial serpent that entwined the whole world, to hold it together. This event is shown in many sculptural arts.

In Jainism, the serpent hood is found with Jina Parshvanath. Since the early times, the worshippers venerated both *naga* (the masculine) and *nagin* (the feminine) forms widely.

Iconographical evidence testifies to numerous female snake divinities and serpentine figures, not only in well-known temples but also in forgotten village shrines, as in Buddhist and Jain art (Zimmer, 1955: 56).

In West Bengal, an important Sena sculpture of Varaha avatar of Vishnu stands on a serpent where Naga King and queen are coiled together (**Plate 10.10**). This stone sculpture is found in Murshidabad and now is in the Bangiya Sahitya Parisad.

In West Bengal, huge number of fauna motifs find from different sites. It may be noted that perfect identification is very difficult without literary sources. But, few number of fauna motifs like deer, elephant, bull, snake, parrot, lion, rhinoceros, boar, goat, ram, horse, bear, dog, cow, monkey, buffalo, tiger, swan, tortoise, fish, peacock, crocodile, mouse, lizard have been depicted in sculptural art. These motifs are identified truly and they appeared naturalistically.

Epilogue:

The present study has revealed that Bengal art was bound to have religious motifs and legends depicted on sculptures, temples and monuments. Since there are mostly dedicated to a particular cult, the legends connected with that cult were bound to a particular cult; the legends connected with that cult were depicted and that includes flora and fauna motifs. We have been able to identify flora and fauna motifs from their depiction on sculptures, which are displayed in the museums and sculpted in temples and monuments. Most of these identified flora and fauna motifs were utilized by the early Indian people in their daily life. We have already noticed that early people regarded most of the plants and animals as deities, which were worshipped everyday by the people. The various art motifs in India indicate that not only religion and the way of life but flora & fauna motif played a vital role in their creations. Therefore, plants, animals and art never were separated and they helped each other to enhance their prestige in the religious and cultural life of people. In Indian art, generally it is accepted that flora and fauna came to be of great symbolic importance, which is a common legacy of all primitive cultures. The depiction of flora and fauna motifs is as old as the history of Indian sculptural art and indicates changing the emphasis from symbolic metaphor to normal decoration.

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