

## **AQUATIC SPECIES IN TERRACOTTA ART OF PRE-MEDIEVAL BENGAL**

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People and their cultural activities have a very close relationship with their environment. The geographical location of Bengal has determined its environment. The full monsoon system was established in this region in the Holocene period (c 10000 B.P to present) (Rashid, 2007: 11). During the monsoon season Bangladesh and most of the Bengal Basin became a large wetland. This huge wetland contained large swamp forest and deep forests. These forests and wetlands were full of various animals and plants. The first people who move into this riverain swamp forest would have lived on boats and sustained mainly on fishing (Rashid, 200: 13). After settling down, they gradually started rice cultivation. The rice farming becomes a vital element in transforming the landscape of Bangladesh. For the benefit of rice cultivation, early settlers chose relatively flat land, pushed back the forest frontiers and created small settlements (Rashid, 2007: 15). These settlements would be near waterways to benefit both land and water communications. Gradually the towns of second urbanization were established in place of these early village settlements by the time. In the previous continuation, most of these towns were located on the bank of various rivers and water bodies. Naturally everyday life of the people of ancient Bengal, their subsistence activity, and communication were mostly depended on river. Water shapes the life of all, its rhythms the agriculture and social life. There is hearsay that “fish and rice make a Bengali”. Rivers not only influences the subsistence activity of people, but also has a great impact on the religion, culture and art consciousness. Therefore, the inspiration of river on the life of the people of ancient Bengal is indisputable.

Clay-art is a significant example of the artistic works of ancient human civilization. The tradition of clay-art industry was developed and flourished for the necessity and artistry of the people from the ancient time. The huge amount of terracotta artifacts found in Bangladesh proves that from the dawn of its civilization, in absence of stone quarry, the most common medium of art was clay. The most attractive evidences of that art are the plaques of terracotta which were mainly used for the outer decoration of the Buddhist shrines during the 7<sup>th</sup> century AD to 12<sup>th</sup> century AD. In Bangladesh the terracotta plaques were mainly found from Paharpur, Mahasthan and Mainamati regions. Thousands of terracotta plaques have laid bare a dramatic panorama of life of princes and peoples, nobles and warriors, sages and beggars, animals, birds, fishes, snakes, various kinds of plants, flowers, fruits etc.

A large number of aquatic species identified out of 3166 terracotta plaques. This kind of representation on the wall of these great architecture survive as a sign of relationship between

life and aquatic environment and the artistic perceptions of the past era's clay artists. It is possible to reconstruct a possible picture of the river and water-based life of the ancient Bengal by studying these plaques. It can also provide valuable enlightenment regarding contemporary environment and its impact on human society.

Animals and plants are very important part of our environment. Like human being, all of them are elements of nature. Water is the main component of nature. Without water it is impossible to create a harmonious and comfortable environment for living things. In this regard, all the living species of the earth directly or indirectly live by water. Among them, some species are completely depended on water or aquatic environment, like fish, crocodile, mollusks, lotus etc. For their importance in environment and culture, ancient clay artist did not forget to choose these aquatic plants and animals as notable subject on their art.

Total three thousand, one hundred and sixty-six architectonic terracotta plaques have been studied from three main pre medieval Buddhist Vihara of Bangladesh (Paharpur vihara-2450, Mahasthan region-229 and Mainamati region-487) (**Plate 46.1**). Among them 247 plaques have been identified as aquatic species, in which 65 plaques contained various form of fish, 27 has conch, tortoise on 20 and 135 plaques have lotus. Description of the plaques are given bellow:

#### **Fish:**

Fish is an integral part of the lifestyle of Bengal people from the very beginning of civilization. Fish and meat were not usually eaten by Brahman in various part of India, but in Bengal they were allowed to eat fish! As regard to fish the *Brihad-dharmapurana* recommends that a Brahman can eat *rohita*, *sakula*, *saphara* and other fishes which are white and have scales. *Jimutbahana's* inclusion of the fat of *illisha* along with other vegetable and animal fat tend to show the fact that fish was largely consumed in Bengal (Ray, 1959: 611). Beside this, fish has always fascinated and attracted artists for their extraordinary shape, colors and their movement across water. In Indology fish is considered to be an auspicious symbol. Especially it is venerated by the *Loukalisa* cult of Saivism of Southern India. According to *Matsyapurana*, *Vishnu*, the second of the Brahmanical triad of gods, once appeared on earth as a form of *Matsha* (Fish) to save the distressed people from the grasp of an evil spirit. Hence, fish is often depicted not only on the terracotta plaques; the numerous punch-marked series of coins of the early historic period also contained various forms of fishes on them.

On terracotta plaques fishes are presented mainly in their natural form. There are several designs for the depiction of caudal fin (tail), dorsal fin and scales of fishes. Variation are mostly found on illustration of scales and five types of design is implemented there:

1. Spot marks all over the body (**Plate 46.2**). Fish with rounded caudal fin.
2. Cross lines from head to tail (**Plate 46.3**).
3. Cross line arrangement with spot marks (**Plate 46.4**)
4. Oval shaped appliqué design (**Plate 46.5**)
5. Several straight-line marks from head to tail (**Plate 46.6**).



**Plate 46.1:** (Location of Main terracotta plaque yielded sites in Bangladesh with research T.C plaque qty).

All the fishes have homocercal (equal-lobed) caudal fin, in which two shapes are mainly found-truncate (**Plate 46.7**) and forked (**Plate 46.8**). Few of them have rounded caudal fin also. This is to mention that, the homocercal caudal fin is the characteristic of the higher bony fishes (Helfman, Collette Facey & Bowen, 2007: 33). The fins and tails are decorated with linear line marks.

Some plaques contain full image of fish with dorsal fin, pelvic fins, caudal fin, gill cover and scales (**Plate 46.9**), some are depicted without any fin (**Plate 46.10**). One of these plaques has the predatory appearance of fish signified by sharp visible teeth. Fifteen terracotta plaques have been found where fish is depicted as prefixed with ornamented hook and the ornamented string of hook is hanging down from the fish's mouth. These fishes are also having all the natural physical features. Some of these fishes have distinct similarity with carps (Rohu and *Catla Catla* fish?). For example, a magnificent plaque from Paharpur, the fish is depicted with

(fig-2389) large broad head, upturned mouth, crescent shape grill rakers, large cylinder-shaped body with forked tail, dorsal ray-fin which has a close physical resemblance with those of carps namely Rohu or *Catla Catla*.



**Plate 46.2:** Scale by spot mark, Paharpur.



**Plate 46.3:** Scale by cross-line Paharpur.



**Plate 46.4:** Scale by cross-line and spot mark, Salban vihara.



**Plate 46.5:** Scale by appliqué design, Paharpur.

In one plaque fish is depicted with lotus leaf and bud, where the plants are pictured on the lower portion of the plaque (**Plate 46.11**). It may represent the aquatic environment. In another plaque, the tail of the fish is interestingly segmented by two parts (**Plate 46.12**), which may be a fantasy thought of the artist or he tried to represent the forked shape tail. Double fishes have been found in several terracotta plaques, where fishes are depicted mainly in cross arrangements (**Plate 46.13**) and only one is alongside in inverse direction (**Plate 46.14**). Cross fish is

considered as an auspicious symbol even as early as the Jaina stupa of Mathura, where it occurs in an *ayagapata* (Dikshit, 1938: 70). Two plaques of cross fish having a close similarity with *hilsa* fish, found in Bhoja Vihara and Salban Vihara, Mainamati. The fusi form body of the fishes, which are deep and laterally compressed, absence of dorsal fin, big sized scales slightly curved gill rakers, forked shaped tail indicate that the artist might have wanted to represent *hilsa* fish on their art work.



**Plate 46.6:** Line Mark head to tail, Salban Vihara.



**Plate 46.7:** Fish in truncate shape, Paharpur.



**Plate 46.8:** Fish in forked shape, Paharpur.



**Plate 46.9:** Fish with dorsal fin, pelvic fins, caudal fin, gill cover and scales, Paharpur.



**Plate 46.10:** Fish with rounded caudal fin, Paharpur.



**Plate 46.11:** Fish depicted with lotus leaf and bud, Paharpur.



**Plate 46.12:** fish tail segmented by two part, Paharpur.



**Plate 46.13:** Fishes are depicted in cross arrangements, Bhoja Vihar, Mainamati.



**Plate 46.14:** Fish alongside in inverse direction, Bhoja Vihara, Mainamati.

Because of their extraordinary test and beauty, the hilsa has a long history of their popularity among the Bengal people, due to which it has got place in various religious rituals too. *Ilish* or hilsha is very popular fish in Indian subcontinent. It is the national fish of Bangladesh. Literary reference of *ilish* found from very ancient time. As stated before, *Jimutbahana* referred the fat of *ilish* can be used for various purposes. In many Bengali Hindu families, a pair of *ilish* fishes are bought on auspicious days, for example for special prayer days, like for the *Saraswati* puja (Goddess of music, art and knowledge), *Lakshmi* puja (Goddess of wealth and prosperity). Thus, it is normal for an artist to make a place in their art work for such an important fish.



**Plate 46.15:** Pectoral fins are replaced with lizard legs, Paharpur.



**Plate 46.16:** A man is fishing by using a polo, Paharpur.



**Plate 46.17:** Conch on lotus, Paharpur.



**Plate 46.18:** Conch with chain, Paharpur.

Besides these, various realistic and mythical representations of fishes, alongside with other associated animals are also depicted in several terracotta plaques. A mythical hybrid figure of

fish has been found in one plaque where it is depicted with gill cover, frightful visible teeth and a big round eye. Most interestingly, the pectoral fins are replaced with lizard legs (**Plate 46.15**).



**Plate 46.19:** Conch in architecture, Bogura.



**Plate 46.20:** Dakshinavarti shankha, Paharpur.



**Plate 46.21:** Snail head, Paharpur.



**Plate 46.22:** Tortoise with the upper shell, limbs and head, Paharpur.



**Plate 46.23:** Beautiful texture of the shell, Paharpur.





**Plate 46.24:** Two holes found on the tortoise shell, Paharpur.



**Plate 46.25:** Eight petal lotus with seed pod and stigma, Moinamati, Comilla.



**Plate 46.26:** Full bloomed Lotus with large pointed visible stigma and petals, Mainamati, Comilla.



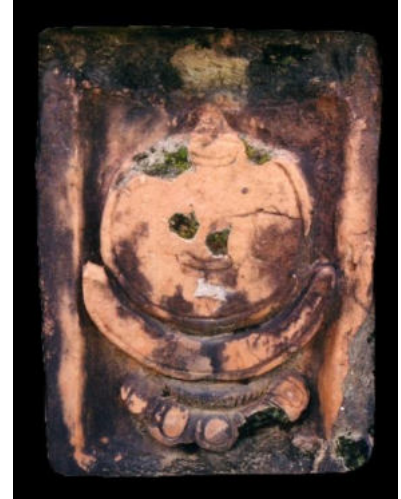
**Plate 46.27:** Full bloomed Lotus with large pointed visible stigma and petals, Mainamati, Comilla.

Fishes are important source of food for human and many other animals and birds. This is also depicted on terracotta plaques. Five terracotta plaques have been found where the fish is being eaten by swan. One terracotta plaque has been found from Ranir Banglow in Mainamati, where the fish is being eaten by cat. An interesting TC plaque found from Paharpur vihara where fishing scene is depicted. In this TC plaque, a bearded man is present in half sitting posture-like sitting on a chair. He holds a stick like object in his right hand and left hand placed on his cheek. The background of the TC plaque shows a man is fishing by using a *polo* (bamboo made cage)

(Plate 46.16). Still today, *polo* is used for traditional fishing in rural Bangladesh, usually after the rainy season when water level is reduced in low lands. Catching fish with bear hands is also depicted on a plaque from Bangarh, India.



**Plate 46.28:** Full bloomed large ornamented leaves and comparatively small size flower, Salban Vihara, Comilla.



**Plate 46.29:** Sun and moon placed on a full blown lotus, Paharpur.



**Plate 46.30:** Sun and moon in the form of full blown lotus, Mainamati.



**Plate 46.31:** Scared text on lotus with down wording patels, Paharpur.



**Plate 46.32:** Scared text on lotus with up wording patels, Paharpur.

### ***Shankha (Conch):***

Mollusks are large and diversified group of invertebrate animals with varied forms, structure, habits and habitats. They are both aquatic and terrestrial. Among them conch has a great impact on various culture and religion around the world. One of the renowned conchs is great Indian chunk, locally known as *sankha* or *baiddo shamuk*. Its shell is completely white, large, solid, thick and spindle-shaped.

The *sankha* is religiously important in Hinduism and Buddhism. In the legendary past, we find that during *Samudra Manthana* or churning of the ocean, the *sankha* was used. The *sankha* is one of the eight auspicious symbols of Buddhism. Apart from *Sankha* being a spiritual symbol, it also played a vital role in the warfare of ancient glory and was counted as marshal factor. Bengali bride wears bangles called *shakha paula*, made from coral and conch-shell powder. They have been a part of Bengali custom and tradition. Bengals of *shankha* or *shakha* is also known as poor-man's ivory, as they were cheap substitute for ivory bangles. In an ancient era, the Bengali farming community is thought to have resided near the river. They collected conch shells and powdered them to create bangles. In Hindu temples *shankha* is blown to invoke god at worship times. It is also used as an amulet against the evil eye. Burnt chunk powder (*shankavhasma*) is used in traditional ayurvedic medicine.

Various arrangement of *shankha* has been found from Bengal terracotta, such as conch on lotus (**Plate 46.17**), conch with chain (**Plate 46.18**), conch in architecture (**Plate 46.19**) etc. In these presentations, most of the conchs are *dakshinavarti sankha* (**Plate 46.20**). Conch shells which spiral to the right are called *dakshinavarti sankha*. It's very rare and considered especially sacred, the right spiral mirroring the motion of the sun, moon, planets and stars across the sky. *Dakshinavarti sankha* is used for worship, and sadhana or spiritual practice among the Hindus and it is also important for Buddhist (Lingham, 2013: 42).

Most of the terracotta plaques found from Paharpur regarding the representation of conch are depicted along with a chain. In many terracotta plaques, swan, peacock and fish are also depicted with a chain. The existence of this chain is still unexplained and demands a detailed research. So, it can be assumed that the conch with chain is also another representation of similar thought of the artists which has been followed by the ancient terracotta artists.

Conch is used as an architectural decoration in one terracotta plaque, found from Totaram Panditer Bari, Palashabari, Bogura. In this plaque a temple gate is visible which is decorated vividly with two conches at each upper corner of the gate and a full-bloomed lotus in the middle of them (**Plate 46.19**). A female figure pictured in front of the gate as if her entering through the gate. As *sankha* and *podma* (lotus) are two important symbols of Vishnu, thus the illustration indicates that may be the female figure is entering into a Vishnu temple.

Few plaques, mostly from Paharpur have an interesting hybrid depiction of conch. Here a human face with all the details is attached on the spire of the conch (**Plate 46.21**). Paharpur excavator K. N. Dikshit refers to them as snail head (Dikshti, 1938: 72) bearing testimony of artisan's own fictitious implementation.

### **Tortoise:**

In Indology the tortoise is considered to be the symbol of wisdom and knowledge. It personifies water, the moon, the Earth, time, immortality and fertility. It is also believed that the tortoise bears on its back the burden of the whole world. In Hindu mythology, in particular, the universe is thought to rest on the back of four elephants who stand on the back of a turtle

(Cobb, 2005: 102). In another Hindu genesis the tortoises appear to be the first created of living creatures (Ball, 2004: 44). Once Vishnu appeared on the world in the form of giant turtle (*Kurma*) to save the mankind from an upcoming destruction.

In present study twenty terracotta plaques has the depiction of tortoise. In each of them, tortoise has been depicted with the upper shell, limbs and head (**Plate 46.22**). In three plaques, only head and limbs of tortoise are found and one TC plaque is identified with head, tail and two limbs due to their broken condition. But in one terracotta plaque beautiful texture of the shell and its variety are captured by the ancient terracotta artists (**Plate 46.23**).

In a thought-provoking plaque from Paharpur, there are two holes can be found on the shell of the tortoise (**Plate 46.24**). This kind of sort perforation on lower edge of the shell is found in one particular type of tortoise in Bangladesh called as '*Jolpairongee*' (Olive Ridley sea turtle), a sea tortoise. If the terracotta artists saw this type of tortoise in their surroundings and tried to represent its image on TC plaques, then this matter definitely demands profound research. It may help to understand the ancient geological context of this area as well as river system (Showrov, 2009: 67).

At present twenty-four types of tortoises are available in Bangladesh. But due to extreme deterioration of the TC plaques it was quite impossible to identify all these types. According to the types, features and resting place of these tortoises found in Bangladesh it is evident that most of the images found in the plaques made by the terracotta artists are from the specific type called '*Kaitta*', such as '*Kali Kaitta*' (River turtle), '*Kori Kaitta*' (Indian Roofed turtle), '*Bhaital Kaitta*' (Brown roofed turtle), '*Sylheti Kori Kaitta*' (Assam Roofed turtle), '*Sheela Kochhop*' (Tricarinate Hill turtle).

### **Lotus:**

The size and color of lotus make it one of the most beautiful flowers. Apart from its physical beauty, lotus is also very useful to human. The tender rhizomes or farinaceous roots and stalks are eaten as vegetable; it has sufficient medicinal properties which are used curing various diseases. It has acquired an important place in Water Cosmology. The *Satapath Brahman* says, 'the lotus means the water, and this earth is a leaf thereof, even on the lotus leaf here lies spread on the water, so this earth lies spread on the water'. It is directly connected with theory of creation (Lahir, 1998: 232). Early literatures of Indian subcontinent frequently mentioned about this magical flower. It is by far, the most ubiquitous symbol in Hindu and Buddhist art and also a potent symbol of spiritual realization. According to the Buddhist philosophy "The closing of the *Padma* flower, and the opening of *Utpala*, determine the period of Day and Night in heaven" (Williams, 1974: 256). Moreover, in early Buddhist literature the lotus is used as a metaphor for essence (*pudgala*, *pundarika*), and one of the most important and early *Mahayana* texts is called the Lotus of the "True Religion" or 'Lotus Sutra' (Pal, 1986: 41). Hindu spiritual text state a person should be like a lotus that grows pure and untainted. Lotus leaves are covered with a

heavy waxy coating, upon which water bead up and flow off. The *Bhagavada Gita* uses this as a simile for the man who renounces all attachment and is untouched by the things of the world (James 2002, 485). Aside from its symbolic content; the lotus is also an important element in Hindu, Buddhist and Jain iconography. May have first adopted the lotus as both a divine seat and an emblem held by deity. The flower was also given to the Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara long before it became emblem of Vishnu. In latter Buddhist iconography the lotus certainly is often used as a support for other emblems such as the thunderbolt or book, while the widest uttered incantation associated with Avalokitesvara is “*om mani Padme hum*” (Pal, 1986: 41).

From the ancient time, lotus is used as a decorative motif in temples, sculptures, terracotta plaques, architecture and paintings. In the terracotta plaques found from different archeological sites of Bangladesh, a mentionable number of manifestations regarding the images of lotus can be observed. Lotus are in various forms as depicted in these TC plaques. Among the realistic forms full bloomed lotus, decorative Lotus in circular medallions, half bloomed lotus, lotus buds are common.

Full bloomed lotus in individual plaques obtains a vast portion of terracotta plaques found from Bangladesh. Present study contains 38 plaques of full bloomed lotus from Paharpur, Mahasthangarh, Vasu Vihara and Mainamati. Some of them have double row of petals, some are single row. The full bloomed lotus with multiple petals is an ancient symbol of Universal manifestation and of this world in particular. The full bloomed lotus is like wheel and the wheel is also a symbol of the cosmos or of the soul, or the spoke of the cosmos (Miller, 1994: 110).

An exceptional plaque from Mainamati illustrates an eight petal lotus with seed pod and stigma (**Plate 46.25**). This is to be noted that the eight-petal lotus symbolizes the cosmic harmony. It is frequently used in Hindu iconography with Vishnu asleep on the surface of the flower or the “causal ocean”, the aquatic element in nature (Knapp, 1998). It is also important in Buddhism.

Full bloomed Lotus with large pointed petals visible stigma is found depicted in several plaques (**Plate 46.26**). In every case the pointed petals are closed and center of the flower is hidden by the petals. They have long stalk, buds and very much ornamented leaves (**Plate 46.27**). Two plaques from Mainamati show an exceptional feature in decoration. Here the plant is consisting of some large ornamented leaf with comparatively very small size flower with long pointed petals and stigmas (**Plate 46.28**). It has two half bloomed flowers and two buds on either side of the main flower. The main feature of these two plaques is that, unlike other plaques where the lotus resides only in the middle, here the lotus is rather stretched through the whole plaque, leaving no space inside the terracotta. This plaque manifests exclusive ornamentation like stone curving. Such kind of manifestation has not been found at any other archeological site in Bangladesh.

Analyzing the size and arrangement of the petals of full bloom Lotus flowers from these TC plaques, two types of flower can be noticed. One group has rounded broad petals which are

arranged separately from each other and clearly visible, sometime seed pod and stigmas are also presented. These physical characteristics hint that these are depiction of *Nelumbo nicifera* or Indian lotus, pink lotus. The second group has pointed and comparatively long petal which is loosely closed and center of the flower is hidden. It can be assumed that, here the artist has manifested the mainly the *Nymphaea cerulean* /Egyptian blue lily or sacred blue lotus or *utpal*. According to Alice Getty “in iconography and painting the blue lotus differs from the pink in that the petals are closed, elongated in from and presented in profile. Sometimes the first row of outside petals turned back, but the center of the *utpal* is always hidden by the petals. The pink lotus is represented full blown with the center apparent” (Getty, 1988: 112).

Along with the full and half bloomed lotus, only lotus buds are also found in individual terracotta plaques. In Hindu and Buddhist philosophy lotus bud is often used as a symbol of virtually awaiting realization. Eighteen plaques, all found from Paharpur, have been depicted with lotus buds with two leaves.

Besides this naturalistic form of lotus and some symbolic representations are also found—such as lotus shaped wheel (*chakra*) on pedestal, conch on lotus, mace on lotus, sacred text on lotus, ornamented stupa on lotus, treasure vase on lotus, sun and moon on lotus, lotus as an asana of deities, lotus as an emblem of deities, peacock and swan eating lotus etc.

Two plaques from Paharpur shows union of sun and moon placed on a full bloom lotus. The first plaque shows circular sun topped on crescent moon and the union is placed on a full opened lotus. The lotus has round, downward pointing petals and visible stigma. There is some mark on the top middle of the sun; it may be indicated dissolving point or nada (**Plate 46.29**). But it is not clearly visible because of deterioration. Next plaque of this series is found from Mainamati. This plaque is quite interesting and a fine example of craftsmanship. In this plaque the craftsman arranges the petals like half circular moon and its middle part stigma like sun (**Plate 46.30**). The sun and moon are two of the most important polarity symbols in *Vajrayana* Buddhism. The red or golden sun represents the feminine aspect of wisdom, and the white moon the male aspect of method or compassion. The union of the crescent moon and sun conjunction represents the union of method and wisdom, signifying the unified energies of the lunar and solar channels entering, abiding and dissolving into central channel (Beer, 2006: 6).

Sometimes *pustaka* or sacred text placed on lotus as a symbol of divinity. Sacred text on Lotus is also important in Buddhism. The sacred text or *pustaka* supported by lotus symbolizing wisdom or knowledge, as in representations of the Buddhist deities of wisdom such as Manjusri or *Prajanaparamita* (Beer, 2003: 138). Two plaques from Paharpur show Lotus with sacred text. In one plaque the book is positioned on an eight-petaled full bloomed lotus with seed pod (**Plate 46.31**). The flower is depicted with large oval petals in downward positioning, thick stem, a leaf and bud. Presently this plaque is placed on the wall of the temple. Another plaque, preserved at Varandra Research Museum, shows the book placed on a lotus bud (?). Here the flower has long

and pointed close up wording petals; center of the flower cannot be seen. There is a leaf and a bud beside the flower (**Plate 46.32**). In both plaques the size and shape of sacred text is same.

Lotus as an artistic and religious motif in Bengal art throughout the ancient time to present. During the mediaeval period under the rule of Pala and Sena dynasty in Bengal, lotus had taken as a favorite sculptural motif in accordance with the legends in the sacred text of Hindus and Buddhist. Along with these sculptural motifs, a vast number of terracotta plaques of this period contain single depiction of lotus. It may prove that lotus was highly popular in Bengal art.

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