

## FLORA AND FAUNA DEPICTED ON THE SELECTED TERRACOTTAS OF CHANDRAKETUGARH

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Chandraketugarh is a famous Indian archaeological site situated in Deoganga of North 24-Parganas district of West Bengal. Its coordination is latitude 22°41' North and longitude 88°42' East. It is 25 miles northeast from Kolkata. This ancient site now comprises of the villages of Berachampa, Chuprijhara, Dhanpota, Ghazitola, Ghorapata, Hadipur, Jhikra, Mathbari, Hadipur, Ranakhola, Shankhpukur, Shingerati, etc. (Haque, 2001: 24). This site dates back to the Pre-Maurya dynastic period and covers Maurya, Shunga, post-Shunga, Kushan, pre-Gupta, Gupta and late Gupta period according to artifacts and other dating methods. From this site, various artifacts like pottery, terracotta plaques, terracotta toys, punch-marked, and cast coins, stone beads, ivory beads, and ornaments and ruins of ancient architectures were found from the surface and during excavations. This article concentrates only on some of the selected terracottas of Chandraketugarh.

Ancient India, as well as Bengal, was full of forests. People lived in it, depended on it and related to it, even kings and their family also. Obviously, they depended on natural resources. So, their activities were surrounded by nature and controlled by nature. Therefore, there is no wonder that their arts and crafts would be nature or forests oriented. If we look at the *Vedas* and *Puranas*, we see all the activities and rituals are occurring or done by natural things like fire, water, animals, birds, plants, etc. Even now in the Hindu-Buddhist community, the rites are performed almost with the same ingredients. In *Vedas* and *Puranas* attachment between Gods and forests is inextricable. We find many events in sacred books oriented with flora and fauna. An event named “*Samudra manthana*”<sup>1</sup> (Churning of the ocean) (Barua, 1995: 28) was performed to find nectar to gain immortality. During the “*manthana*” many things came out of the ocean along with the nectar. The elephant or *haati* (*Elephas maximus indicus*) and the Indian coral tree (*Erythrina variegata*) or *Parijat* were two of them.

According to Shubhradip De, “Being ancient, the archaeological site, Chandraketugarh (c. 300 BC to C 300 AD) provides us many ancient artifacts including terracotta depicting floral and faunal motifs. A section of plant motifs was based on legends and myths. Some were purely decorative” (De S., 1999: 413).

Many of the floral and faunal motifs are unidentifiable, despite some of them are tried to identify.

### Floral Motifs:

The floral motifs depicted in the terracottas of Chandraketugarh are presented in a very beautiful and unique way. Among all the floral elements the lotus is mostly focused. A brief discussion of flora based on the Chandraketugarh terracotta is given below. In the Mauryan period terracottas, we do not find floral motifs. But many of the Shunga-Kushana period terracottas are highly decorated with flora. There are a lot of terracottas where deities or people are standing in the forests or having a makeover with floral costumes.

A *Yakshi* is wearing necklaces. One of them is longer which has a pendant of lotus motif. It might be a metal ornament or a floral ornament (**Plate 55.1**).

The same ornaments of *Yakshi* are seen in the other terracottas where she is standing in a flower garden (**Plate 55.2a**). Shubhradip De said that “These flowers or plants are not real” (De S., 1999: 413). But, it may not be real in full but has similarities with some real flowers. Like a terracotta figurine where *Yakshi* is standing in a posture holding her right eardrop with the right hand in a flower garden. There are a lot of flowers around her hanging from a tree (?). A noticeable thing, that there are some (at least four) parakeets around her, maybe eating from the flowers or eating the flowers. These flowers most probably are the Indian coral tree or tiger’s claw (*Erythrina variegata*). There is some similarity in the appearance between the coral tree flowers and the flowers of the terracotta figurines. Here one thing is to be mentioned that, there is a relation among parakeet with *Yakshi*, parakeet with coral tree flower and coral tree with myth. 1. *Yakshi*’s pet is parakeet (De G., 1999: 200); 2. parakeets love to eat the petals of coral tree flowers (*Erythrina variegata*),<sup>2</sup> while they need to eat, they travel in a group and eat in a group (Home, 1995, pp. 95-113), so they come to the tree in a group, that’s why maybe there are many parakeets seen in the flower garden (**Plate 55.2b**). On the other hand, the nuke part of the flower has a similarity with the nuke part of coral tree flowers.<sup>3</sup> The coral tree is also related to the myths as the tree came out from underneath the ocean during the churning of the ocean (*Samudra manthana*) as said in *Bhagavat Purana*, *Vishnu Purana* and *Mahabharata*. So this plant is divine to the Hindus. Then we can correlate the facts like this: *Yakshi* loves parakeet, parakeet loves eating coral tree (*Parijat*) and *parijat* is divine and favorite to divine gods. Therefore, there is a great chance of being *parijat* the flower, depicted on the terracotta. In the image of Coral Tree flower, we see a similar approach in it with the flower of the terracotta figurine.

A noticeable thing in these terracotta figurines is the ear ornament which is held by the *Yakshi* is not hung from the earlobe. Instead, it is hung from the top of the ear. This seems like the conical flower buds of the coral tree flowers (*parijat*). She might use this as her temporary ornamentation (**Plates 55.1, 55.2**). Entering in a garden, seeing such beauty of this flower, wearing it as an ornament is not unnatural for a woman. Some of the other ornaments worn by the *Yakshi* maybe also made of natural flowers.<sup>4</sup>



**Plate 55.1:** *Yakshi* in a flower garden PC. Chandraketurgarh parakeets are being seen.



**Plate 55.2a:** *Yakshi* in a flower garden.

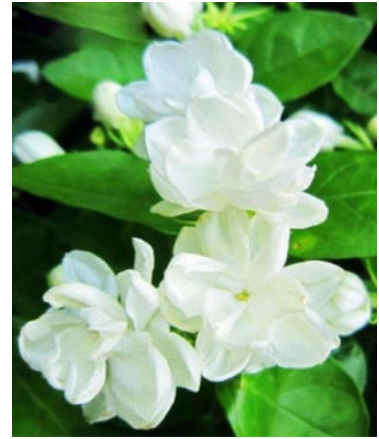
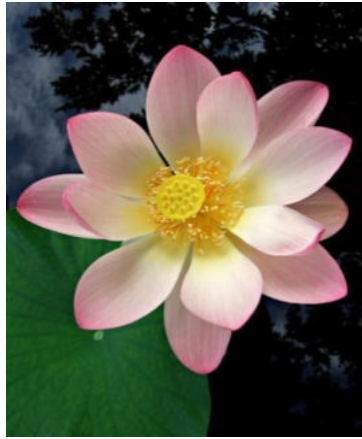


**Plate 55.2b:** Parakeet on the branch of the tiger's claw (*Parijat*) flower tree.

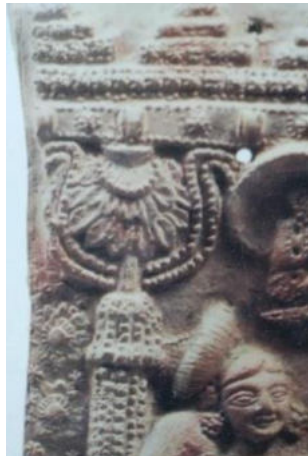


**Plate 55.3a, 55.3b:** *Yakshi* having a makeover with floral ornaments.

In the first image, those flowers are also maybe the same flower or maybe not. These flowers have two extra wings (**Plate 55.1**) like elements. Probably these are stamen of the flowers. In the book, Chandraketurgarh author has thought that the *Yakshi* is standing in a lotus garden, though the flowers have a little similarity to the lotus. But, since lotus does not have branches, the lotus flower can't grow from branches. The flowers surrounding *Yakshi* have branches and they are visible in a subtle way. There are some other terracotta figurines almost in the same way but the patterns of the flowers are different in cases. The ear ornament hanging from the upper portion of the ear is a floral element and the petals are sometimes visible very clearly.



**Plate 55.3c, 55.3d, 55.3e:** Probable Flowers depicted in the terracottas of plate 3a, 3b (chrysanthemum, lotus, jasmine respectively).



**Plate 55.4a, 55.4b & 55.4c:** Lotuses in various styles.



**Plate 55.5:** Man collecting date palm juice.



**Plate 55.6:** Farmers cutting paddy.



**Plate 55.7:** Father (?) giving a fruit (probably mango) to a child.





**Plate 55.8:** Lady holding a parakeet.



**Plate 55.9:** Parakeet with a dancing Apsara.



**Plate 55.10:** Parakeet perched on *Yakshi's* hand.



**Plate 55.11a:** Parakeet and its lowered beak.



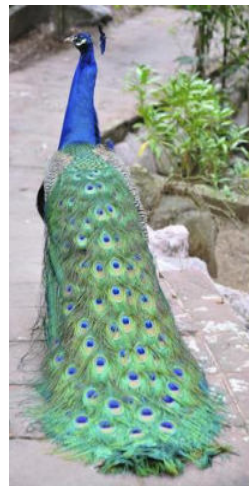
**Plate 55.11b:** Dove and its raised beak.



**Plate 55.12:** Parakeet and peafowls with an Apsara.



**Plate 55.13:** Peacock or peahen with an Apsara.



**Plate 55.14:** Peacock and peahen respectively.



**Plate 55.15:** Crane with a *Yakshi*.



**Plate 55.16:** Ducklings fed by a *Yaksha*(?) boy.



**Plate 55.17:** Cock eating a centipede.



**Plate 55.18a:** A terracotta owl.



**Plate 55.18b:** A live spotted owl.



**Plate 55.19:** Spotted cat or cub of an Indian leopard with a *Yaksha* boy.

There are some terracotta plaques where *Yakshi* is waiting for a makeover, while her attendants are waiting with a flower garland and other floral ornaments on a tray. The left side of the terracotta is florally decorated (**Plates 55.3a, 55.3b**). Probably the other parts of the terracotta were also decorated in the same way.

Perhaps, the flowers presented here are chrysanthemum (*Chrysanthemum indicum*), lotus (*Nelumbo nucifera*), Jasmine (*Jasminum sambac*) (**Plates 55.3c, 55.3d&55.3e**), etc. These flowers are used to make garlands or floral ornaments in modern days too.



There is another type of flower seen in a terracotta figurine. In it, there is a *Yakshi* standing with akimbo pose with left hand on the hip and right hand lifted like holding something. These two flower buds are mentioned as lotus (Haque, 2001: 168, 204) issuing from the pedestal. Though this is mentioned as lotus, the arrangement of petals is not like a lotus. They are arranged in gradual steps. On the other hand, we see a leaf at the right bottom of the terracotta does not seem like a lotus leaf. It can be a stylized flower just made by the artist for decoration.



**Plate 55.20:** Pet fawn with a *Yakshi*.



**Plate 55.21:** A single fish on the top-left corner of the *Yakshi*.



**Plate 55.22:** *Yakshi* holding a pair of fish.



**Plate 55.23:** A stylized winged lion

Among all the terracottas, most of the flowers are lotuses (*Nelumbo nucifera*). We see lotuses in various terracotta figurines of Chandraketugarh (Plates 55.4a, 55.4b, 55, 4c) in various styles. This flower has the most religious value among all the ancient Indian religions. That's why it is seen from the earliest remains till now.

There are other floral elements in various terracottas. In a terracotta figurine, we see an elephant charging a coconut tree (*Cocus nucifera*). There are also some coconuts hanging from the tree (Plate 55.24a). The plaque is decorated with flowers.



Plates 55.24a-55.24c: Elephants in various activities.



Plate 55.25: Three horses pulling a chariot.

Plate 55.26: Ram (toy).

Plate 55.27: Crocodile frightening a monkey.

A fragment of terracotta is found (Haque, 2001: 381) where a man is seen getting down from a date tree (*Phoenix dactylifera*) with a jar of date juice (Plate 55.5). It is a very common scene in Bengal during winter, this proves the popularity of date palm juice in the then Chandraketugarh.



Another terracotta figurine shows that some farmers are cutting paddy (Haque, 2001: 381) (**Plate 55.6**). Since paddy is the staple food in the Bengal region, the terracotta indicates rice was most probably their staple food.

In a terracotta plaque, three people are being seen where one child is sitting on an adult person's lap (maybe his father). The adult person is holding a fruit probably a mango (*Mangifera indica*) to give the child (**Plate 55.7**).

Thus we find eight to ten different floral elements among Chandraketugarh terracotta.

### **Faunal Motifs:**

We find various faunal elements in terracotta figurine a lady with a parakeet (Haque, 2001: 107) (**Plate 55.8**) is being seen. This belongs to the Mauryan period (Haque, 2001: 95-107) which shows that the lady is holding a bird with her right hand. Haque mentioned it as a dove (Haque, 2001: 104) and Gourishankar as well (De G., 1999). But, actually, it cannot be a dove, because the beak we see is no similar to a dove beak. It is a downward direction and thick (**Plate 55.11a**), whether the dove's beak is raised and thin (**Plate 55.11b**). The beak of the bird of terracotta figurine is similar to the *Psittaciformes* order bird. Therefore this might be one of the parakeet or *Shuka* family birds which are locally called "*Tiya*". This bird might be one of the *Psittaculinae* subfamily of the *Psittaculidae* family.<sup>5</sup>

We observe another parakeet which is on the left upper corner of the dancing *Apsara* of a fragmented terracotta figurine mentioned as a parrot (Haque, 2001: 124). Observing the size, the species can be specifically identified as a parakeet (**Plate 55.9**).

There are some other terracotta figurines where a parakeet is perched on *Yakshi*'s hand. In several terracottas, the hand is placed in several poses. It is also mentioned as a parrot. But it is not only a parrot but also a parakeet specifically (**Plate 55.10**).

There is a terracotta figurine found as a whole along with the *Yakshi* and her attendants. There are some lotuses (Haque, 2001: 143-144) (**Plate 55.12**) and three birds. The birds are two types here, two are peafowls and one is a parakeet. Right on the top of the *Yakshi*'s head, there is a female (peahen) and the left one is a male (peacock). On the right side, the bird seen is a parakeet. The bird over *Yakshi*'s head is a peafowl. Since it has a tiara on the head and the colorful tail is absent here like a peahen, therefore the bird is a peahen (Haque, 2001: 143, 144, 355). There are some other terracotta figurines that are fragmented but can be understood that the birds are similar to these ones. A standing *Yakshi* (Haque, 2001: 130, 131) with a bird is depicted in a terracotta figurine which is fragmented. We can see only the *Apsara*'s head and face and right hand lifted over her head and over that there is a peafowl (*Pavo cristatus*). Is that a peacock or peahen? That can't be identified because of the fragmentation (**Plate 55.13**). A peacock and a peahen are shown on **plate 55.14**.

Another bird is seen with *Yakshi* at her right side. Its beak is long and straight. It has a long neck and long legs. Therefore, the bird can be identified as a crane (*Gruidae* Family) (**Plate 55.15**).

A terracotta figurine depicts two ducklings (Haque, 2001) are being fed by a *Yaksha* boy (**Plate 55.16**). Probably these ducklings are domestic (*Anas platyrhynchos*). A cock (*Gallus gallus*) is seen eating a centipede in another plaque. Though the bird is told as a peacock by Haque (Haque, 2001: 291, 329), if we look carefully at it, we can clearly see that it is not a peacock. Neither, it has a long tail like a peacock nor has a spotted tail. Maybe it is a slip of pen of the author. Along with this, the centipede is defined as a snake, but we see many legs and stripes on the body of the creature that proves this is not a snake (**Plate 55.17**).

A feathered and winged creature is seen in a terracotta toy which is defined as a winged lion. But this is more similar to an owl. Maybe it is a spotted owl (*Strix occidentalis*) (**Plates 55.18a-55.18b**). It has beaks and circular eyes and spots all over the body. It is known that owls sit like this.

Not only birds but also other animals are found in the Chandraketugarh terracottas. One standing *Yakshi* has an attendant at her left side and between them, near her feet, there is a four-legged animal of *Felidae* family, which maybe a cat (*Felis catus*) or a cub of an Indian leopard (*Panthera pardus*). The four-legged animal has dots on its body, so there is a good possibility of it to be a cub of leopard (Haque, 2001: 132, 147) (**Plate 55.19**).

There is another terracotta figurine of *Yakshi* where another kind of animal is visible. Probably it is a pet fawn (Haque, 2001: 133, 145) situated on the left side near her left leg (**Plate 55.20**). Its ears, short tail reminds of a fawn. It has a necklace visible on its neck.

There are also some terracottas that have fishes depicted on them. In a figurine at the top left corner of *Yakshi* (**Plate 55.21**), there is a fish near a column (?) and lintel (?). Bautze thinks that it is a 'golden fish' of *Jataka* (Haque, 2001: 154). In other terracotta, the *Yakshi* is holding a pair of fish which are tied with cord and hanging from *Yakshi*'s right hand (**Plate 55.22**). The kind of fish presented here is not identifiable. According to the literature of Hindu, Buddhist and Jain religion, the fish is a symbol of good fortune (Chandra, 1996: 71). Two fishes together are called *Matsyayugma*. Whatever, one, two or more, all are considered as the sign of good fortune. Maybe that is why the fishes were depicted in the terracottas, or maybe just for decoration.

In a broken terracotta figurine, the *Yakshi* or *Yaksha* or someone else is not visible but the leg, and there is an attendant standing at the left. The other portion is missing. The notable thing, that there is a winged lion (Haque, 2001: 153, 171) sitting at the left corner of the terracotta. There is no doubt that this creature is a stylized or mythical form of a lion (**Plate 55.23**).

In a terracotta plaque, an amorous couple with an attendant is seen (Haque, 2001: 157, 177). At their left (right edge of the plaque) there is situated an octagonal column. At the top of

the column, two addorsed bulls (*Bos taurus*) are seated. We don't know the purpose of these bulls yet. They are maybe for some symbolic reason, or they are just for decoration (?).

Elephants are also seen in various terracotta figurines and plaques. One is showing three people riding on an elephant. There are also some birds seen in a circular pattern around the terracotta figurine. The birds are permuted along with lotus flowers like one bird, one lotus, again one bird and one lotus continuing in a circle. The birds are not identifiable because most of them are weathered (**Plate 55.24c**). Another elephant on a terracotta plaque is charging a coconut tree carrying two riders on his back; a stag is fleeing away (**Plate 55.24a**). On other terracotta plaque, an elephant is showing circus (**Plate 55.24b**).

Several horses (*Equus caballus*) depicting terracotta figurines and toy-carts have been found. There is a terracotta figurine of three horses pulling a cart (**Plate 55.25**). As well several terracotta plaques and terracotta toys are found, among which sheep (*Ovis aries*) are identified as ram because of the coiled horns (**Plate 55.26**).

Along with this, other animals are also seen in several terracotta plaques and figurines like crocodiles (*Crocodylus porosus* or *Crocodylus palustris*) (**Plate 55.27**). In the same terracotta of crocodile, there is also a monkey climbing a tree frightened by the crocodile. Pet dog (*Canis lupas*) is also seen in some of the terracottas and so on.

There is no doubt that the terracottas of Chandraketugarh are a valuable source of knowing the past art of Bengal. These provide invaluable information about past society and cultures as well as the natural resources presenting floral and faunal motifs depicting terracottas. The floral and faunal motifs depicted on the terracottas are common in Bengal culture, though some are probably hypothetical and exaggerated mixed with natural ones. More study is needed for the proper identifying of the floral and faunal motifs.

#### **Acknowledgment:**

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#### **Photo courtesy:**

All of the photographs used in this article are taken from Haque, E., 2001, *Chandraketugarh: A Treasure House of Bengal Terracottas*, Dhaka: The International Centre for Study of Bengal Art (ICSBA) except the plates 55.2b, 55.3c, 55.3d, 55.3e, 55.11a, 55.11b, 55.14 and 55.18b. These are taken from google images.

#### **Notes and References:**

1. The *Samudra Manthana* is an important event in Hindu Mythology. This was performed by the gods to acquire the nectar of immortality from beneath the ocean. This event is narrated in several



texts like *Mahabharata*, *Bhagavata Purana*, and *Vishnu Purana*. Barua mentioned that story to value some plants and animals as heavenly according to Hindu Mythology.

2. Not only coral tree flowers but also most of the flowers which have soft or fleshy petals, parakeets eat them. Coral tree flower petals are very soft that are even edible for humans.
3. The coral tree flowers bloom from a branch of the tree. The flowers bloom from the back part and continue blooming forward. Thus some buds remain unbloomed on the front and the unbloomed bud makes a nuke part. Thus one by one flower blooms and dies and continues blooming until the last bud.
4. In Indian subcontinent, a makeover with flowers is a common phenomenon. Women use flower garland to wear as necklace, bangles, to decorate hair bun or hair. Sometimes used as earrings. It is used mostly on different occasions.
5. The parakeets are generally called parrots. But, the parakeet is a member of the vast parrot family. And there is a lot of color variation of these birds. Ours are found basically in green color (Wikipedia, Parakeet, 2019). And, the bird species we observe in the terracottas of Chandraketugarh are specifically the parakeets which are in the *Psittaculinae* subfamily.

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