



# National myths and Shifting identities of Terracotta Temple Panels and its impact on various craft practice in Birbhum District, West Bengal

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**Abstract:** Birbhum district, of West Bengal, has a significant number of terracotta temples from early age. Each temple has distinctive quality in terms of their design feature, compositional arrangement, and visual narrative. Interestingly, in Birbhum district, there are many craft traditions as well, such as – ceramics, textile, embroidery, batik, dokra-toy, leather craft and so on. These craft designs nowadays, are greatly influenced by the terracotta temple panel designs and narratives, because the design patterns and design approaches are embedded in the artistic practices of the artisans.

In this study, some specific temples like - Surul, Supur and Itonda temple architectures have been observed in detail, so that the design can be understood clearly and their impact in the terracotta culture. After that, the available crafts in Birbhum have also been analyzed systematically in order to understand the relationship between the terracotta temple panels and the craft designs.

The results of the study reveal that there are significant amount of convergences among these two different genres (terracotta panels and different crafts) in terms of design elements.

The purpose of this study is to understand the impact of terracotta panel design on local crafts for the sustainable development of the existing craft traditions. It is observed that, if the crafts are made from the influences of the terracotta temple panel designs, the crafts become more aesthetically appealing and attractive.

**Keywords:** Terracotta temple panel, craft design, sustainable development, tradition

## INTRODUCTION

Rabindranath Tagore's Santiniketan, in Birbhum district of West Bengal is referred by the Bengali community as well as in the world as a pride for culture and heritage of craft and design. Birbhum is geographically preferred as a place of red soil and the district differs from other districts for its individual character (geography and demography) in the state.

Birbhum district is located in the state of West Bengal, India. It is situated in the eastern part of the state and is known for its rich cultural heritage, historical significance, and natural beauty. The district headquarters is located in the town of Suri. Birbhum district is bordered by the districts of Murshidabad to the north, Bardhaman to the south, and Burdwan to the west. The eastern part of Birbhum shares its border with the state of Jharkhand. Ajay River separates the district from Burdwan. The district has a diverse population with people belonging to various ethnic and religious communities. The major languages spoken in Birbhum are Bengali, Hindi and Santhali. The district is also known for its natural landscapes, including the picturesque Bakreshwar Dam, Jaydev Kenduli, and Tarapith, which is a famous pilgrimage site dedicated to the goddess Tara.

Additionally, Birbhum is home to several tourist attractions, including the famous Visva-Bharati University in Santiniketan. Established by the Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore, Visva-Bharati is a renowned educational institution and a cultural hub. The annual Poush Mela, a festival of music and dance, attracts a large number of visitors to Santiniketan. This land is also famous for Baul culture. Every year, during the wintertime, Joydeb Kenduli, which is located on the bank of a river, celebrates the Baul festival.

Birbhum district is renowned for its folk art and handicraft tradition. Nakshi Kantha, Shola Pith, clay doll, Basketry, Sherpi measuring bowl, Mat weaving are some notable example to traditional craft of Birbhum district. These folk handicrafts of Birbhum district have been passed down through generations and continue to thrive, representing the cultural heritage and artistic prowess of the region. They are not only aesthetically pleasing but also contribute significantly to the local economy and preserve traditional craftsmanship.

According to our history, which dates back to the Indus Valley Civilization, the art of terracotta has been discovered. This method was only used in a few locations in Bengal and Jharkhand to adorn temple masques and other places of worship. The availability of geographic clay led the Bengali artist to embrace terracotta tiles. Added approach Due to the lack of stone and the simplicity of using terracotta, artists in Bengal chose to use it for their tile designs. Bengal saw a surge in the building of terracotta temples; nowadays, the majority of these buildings are from the 16th and 17th centuries.

Bengal is renowned to one of the richest in terracotta temples, Bengal temple designs are very distinctive among the many temple designs in India due of its brick building construction with a specially brick designed, surface decoration, and style terracotta embellishment is quite

common. Only temple buildings from the 16th to the 19th century AD have been included for the current discussion because these 400 years are considered to be the "golden year" in Bengali temple architecture history and Birbhum is known as the Land of Terracotta Temple.

Birbhum district has a unique Terracotta temple including Temple of Surul, Temple of Supur,

Temple of Itonda, Temple of Joydeb, Temple of Ghurisha, Hath-tala Mahaprabhu Temple, Dewanji Temple etc. The main focus of this study is how the terracotta surface embellishments on this temple's exterior impacted later Bengali textile embroidery, batik, dokra-toy production, and leather craft.

### INFLUENCE ON CRAFT PRACTICE:

The craft practices in Birbhum district of West Bengal, India, are influenced by various factors, including historical, cultural, and socio-economic aspects. Birbhum is known for its rich artistic traditions and skilled artisans who produce a wide range of handicrafts and handloom products. Birbhum has a diverse cultural heritage, with influences from various communities, including the tribal population. The craft practices in the district often reflect the artistic traditions passed down through generations, preserving the cultural identity of the region. The history of the region, including the influence of various rulers and dynasties, has played a role in shaping the craft practices. For example, the Malla dynasty that once ruled Birbhum patronized the art of terracotta, leading to the development of intricate terracotta work in the region.

Birbhum Terracotta temple by the artisans in different field of craft personal are also Influenced by the design patterns as well as motifs. It can be seen as aesthetic inputs used by the craft designers of various field consciously. Dockra craft is a traditional art form and its pattern design motifs very much resemble with the motifs pattern and design of terracotta. Historically both the craft persons exist from the ancient craft society. Those traditional trends of Dockra casting craft design is continue in the same manner from the contemporary time.

During the study, it was found that the influence of terracotta pattern and motifs design on contemporary craft, the function and purpose are completely different from the influence found mostly in the design motifs and decorative motifs.

This influence of decorative motive some time comes from the direct study made by the designer. The designer collected those motifs from traditional example like terracotta temple and use on their own product. But it is also true that sometimes the influence is not coming directly from the original source but coming from various other mediums. There is a continuation of certain motifs and design panels still applied on textiles, leather products and others forms of art and craft today.



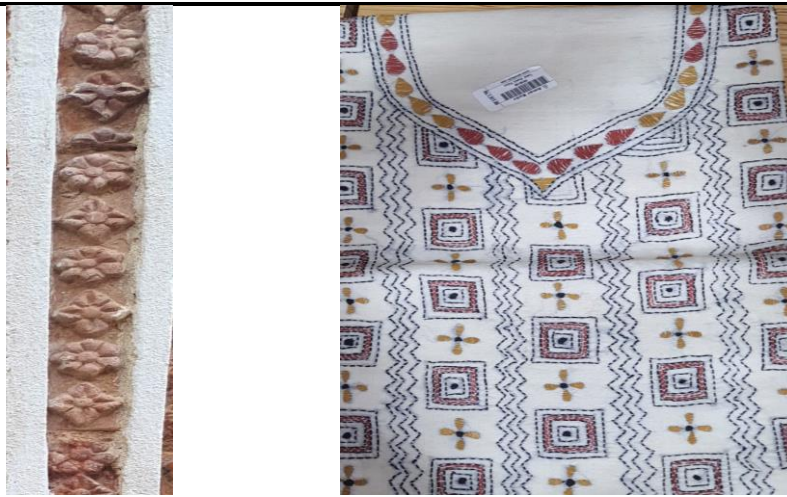
### TEMPLES OF SURUL, BIRBHUM

The Sural temple of Lakshmi-Janardan, is a distinctively decorated terracotta crafted temple located in Birbhum district. The locals claim that it is older than 200 years. The temple is constructed in the Pancha Ratna (five pinnacled) and Aachala (eight roofed) styles of Bengal huts. The three arched doorways supporting the clay temple. There are two other temples within that complex, both of which are primarily devoted to Lord Shiva.

The Pancha Ratna temple decorated with clay relief that represents the mythology of the Ramayana is the most remarkable Pancha Ratna temple, dedicated to the Lord Lakshmi-Janardan.

The front entrance of the Lakshmi-Janardan temple contains three terracotta panels organised in three rows, each of which depicts a scene from the Ramayana. The fight between Rama and Ravana is depicted on the major panel directly over the door. Rama's coronation is seen in the left panel's middle row. One can see the great sage Valmiki and other sages attending "the horse sacrifice of Rama" directly above this row. Stories from the Krishnalila are also depicted on the temple's arched dome. On each of the temple's four corners, there are two leaping lions.

The design motivation of the temple are also influenced the local artisans and it can easily shown in different craft like stitching in cloths as Kath stich and in different wall. The terracotta temple design motive we can found in different kind of local craft like.



The flower motifs depicted in the wall of Surul terracotta temple are very much resemble with the motifs of hands stitch decorated Panjabi kurta and in some dress materials by local craft person, which are very attractive to the tourists.



The above are some glimps where the Surul temple craft has been used to decorate the wall and handbags by the local artisans. It is also seen in the Birbhum leather product includes the flower motifs and other design elements of the Surul temple in different items.



The Diamond motifs of the temple panel depicted in the Shala pith handicraft product of Birbhum district's local crafts personals.

### TEMPLES OF SUPUR

Jora Mandir, a temple dedicated to the God of Shiva, was built in Supur in the 18th century and is its most famous structure. One of the outstanding examples of terracotta art is the Temple. According to Hindu Markandeya Purana mythology, the Supur lived under the rule of King Surtha of the Kalinga empire. Despite suffering a minor setback, the king Surtha made the decision to completely defeat the Karnat Empire. On the advice of Sage Medhas, he prayed to Goddess Chandi, and with her assistance, he won. He delivered one lakh sacrifices—humans, not goats—specifically, adversaries and traitors—to Goddess Chandi in recompense. This theory holds that the Suratha kingdom is referred to in the Purana as Swapur, and that the current name Supur was derived from that.

There are two buildings at Jora Mandir. One temple has octagonal Vimanan, while another has Rekha-style Vimanan. On the western side of the compound, there are two Rekha style Vimanas. On each of the temple's two sides, there are open verandas. Both temples' tops are embellished with a plaster Trishul, a plaster Chakra, and five stacked lotuses. On its southern side, the temple's western side is entirely covered with ceramic work. Ram and Sita on a throne, supported by members of Rama's court, are depicted on the single notable panel over the door's entrance.

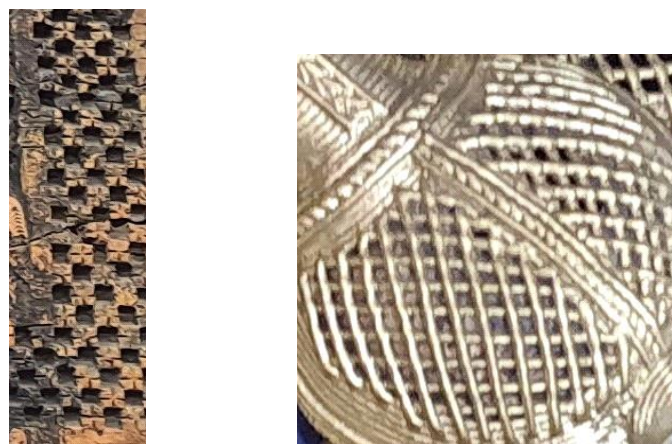
Terracotta may be seen on all eight sides of the octagonal temple on the eastern side. In addition to having a temple structure that is unparalleled, it also has distinctive terracotta panels. In addition to featuring panels with human beings, its floral decorations are impressive enough. There are many beautiful panels among the panels with human figures, however certain motifs are repeated. A big arch panel broken into three smaller pieces is located above each of the eight doors.

All arch panels have an identical lower sub panel. This subpanel includes images of Chaitanya Maha Prabhu dancing alongside a bearded guy, a man with five heads dancing among others, and a kid being bathed by four women. Krishna appears to be the child. In one of the sub-panels, armed soldiers (British?) sit atop an elephant and horses. Some depict Goddess Durga with her family. It's interesting to see the Goddess in the sub-panel. It is split into three sections. Durga is depicted as Mahishashur Mardini in the centre, beside Lakhmi and Saraswati. The whims of time have marred the features of the three Goddesses. Here, Ganesh and Kartick are given more prominence and space, respectively. In fact, they are accompanied by women in this picture. Ganesh is accompanied by two women, who are most likely his consorts Riddhi and Siddhi, as he sits on a lotus. A solitary woman, possibly his wife Devsena, the daughter of Indra, appears with Kartick while he is perched on his Vahana, the peacock. The arch panel depicting Gour Nitai dancing with other followers is one of the other panels that is comparatively less damaged.

The temple's bottom panels likewise exhibit a lot of subject recurrence. The frequent motifs included Krishna on Garuda, Krishna with King Bali, the Vastraharan Scenario, and troops marching in formation while brandishing weapons. A thin, little panel that was located immediately below the lower panels had similar-looking faces inside of spherical frames.



The hand stitch Geometric design similar to Itonda Temple design motifs. Depictions of Paisley pattern of Supur wall temple very much resemble with the hands stitch products of Santiniketan.



Similarly the design themes used in Jali depictions are very similar to those used in Birbhum District Dockra casting products.

## TEMPLES OF ITONDA



The Kali temple in Itonda village is of the Jora Bangla style. Terracotta sculptures are the Temple's basic attractions. According to history, which dates back 200 years, a band of Hadkata robbers stayed in the home and worshipped the Kali goddess, therefore it is likely that they were the ones who built the temple. It was also renovated by Portuguese colonists in the 19th century, and the Suri family took over management of the temple for a short while after that.

We can observe the uniqueness of the artist's viewpoint in these terracotta panels. The terracotta motif depicted both social and spiritual activity, such as a lion hunting scene, women producing curd, combat scenes, Goddess Kali, Devi Chandi riding a lion, and engaging in combat with demons. Soldiers are marching in rows with their firearms just above the base panel. Multiple panels on the walls that all appear to depict elite noblemen with their hands folded and wearing a crown-like headgear are present. This relief depicted the British era at the time.

Additionally, there are intricately detailed Dasvatar and Dasamahavidya motifs on the wall panels. Chariots can be seen on the upper wall's corners. One of them was very simple to understand—Ravana's chariot was being attacked by the bird Suparsha, as it is depicted in the Kritibas Ramayana. A young Hanuman is seen battling Surya, the Sun God, in one motif. Arun, the brother of Garuda, is the winged charioteer pulling Surya's chariot. The chariot's horses also have wings, which is necessary for Surya to be able to soar through the air. This tale was inspired by a time in Hanuman's youth when he attempted to swallow Surya after mistaking it for a crimson ball.



The Itonda Temple's architecture is extremely similar of Birbhum's Shala pith handicrafts.



Depiction of animal pattern of Itonda wall temple are very much resemble with the Dockra products of Santiniketan



We can see similarities between the birds' pattern on the temple wall and the Dokra product's bird design.



The Itonda temple wall panel's linier line design pattern is represented in the Dokra, ceramics, handicraft item from Birbhum District.

#### FACTORS AFFECTING THE CRAFT OF THE DISTRICTS:

Several factors affect the craft of Birbhum district in West Bengal, influencing the production, techniques, designs, and sustainability of the craft practices. Here are some key factors

- **Cultural Heritage:** The cultural heritage of Birbhum, with its diverse communities and artistic traditions, significantly impacts the craft. The craft practices often embody the cultural identity and traditional knowledge passed down through generations.

- **Economic Factors:** Economic considerations, such as the demand for crafts, market trends, and pricing, influence the craft of Birbhum. Artisans may adapt their products and techniques to cater to the market and generate income. Economic stability and market opportunities also affect the sustainability of craft practices.

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- **Availability of Raw Materials:** The availability and access to raw materials impact the choice of craft practiced in Birbhum. Crafts like pottery, terracotta, and woodwork require specific raw materials, and their availability influences the feasibility and continuity of those crafts.

- **Technological Advancements:** Technological advancements and modern tools affect craft practices in Birbhum. While traditional techniques are often preserved, artisans may incorporate modern tools and equipment to enhance efficiency, quality, and production.

- **Education and Training:** Access to education and training programs can impact the craft practices in Birbhum. Skill development initiatives, workshops, and formal education can help artisans improve their techniques, design capabilities, and business management skills.

- **Government Support and Policies:** Government support, policies, and initiatives play a vital role in shaping the craft sector. Subsidies, financial assistance, infrastructure development, and marketing platforms provided by the government can enhance the growth and sustainability of craft practices in Birbhum.

- **Social and Environmental Factors:** Social and environmental factors can influence the craft practices. Social aspects, such as changes in consumer preferences, trends, and lifestyles, impact the demand for specific crafts. Environmental concerns may drive artisans towards sustainable practices, using natural materials and eco-friendly processes.

- **Tourism and Market Exposure:** Tourism and exposure to a wider market can have a significant impact on craft practices. Increased tourism can create new markets for crafts, provide opportunities for artisans to showcase their skills, and encourage the preservation of traditional craft practices.

- **Artisan Communities and Networks:** The dynamics within the artisan communities and networks in Birbhum also influence the craft practices. Collaboration, knowledge sharing, and collective initiatives among artisans contribute to the development and evolution of craft techniques, designs, and innovations.

## CONCLUSION

These factors interact and shape the craft practices in Birbhum district, reflecting the region's cultural heritage, economic conditions, market forces, technological advancements, and the support received from various stakeholders. Various government initiatives at the state and central levels have aimed to promote and preserve traditional craft practices in Birbhum. These initiatives provide support to artisans through training programs, exhibitions, financial assistance, and marketing platforms, encouraging them to continue their craft practices. Recession and Covid pandemic has create a misbalance to the the artisan societies in the district. They were bound to leave their traditional craft and to choose other livelihood options which led these culture in a non priority situation.

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