

Unraveling the Social Position of Women in Late-Medieval Bengal: A Critical Analysis of Narrative Art on Baranagar Temple Facades

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Abstract

The genesis of the present study can be traced to an aspiration to work on the narratives of religious architecture. The Terracotta Temples of Baranagar in Murshidabad, West Bengal offer a very insightful vantage point in this regard. The elaborate works of terracotta on the facades of these temples patronized by Rani Bhabani during the mid-eighteenth century possess immense narrative potential to reconstruct the history of the area in the given time period. The portrayals on various facets of society, environment, culture, religion, mythology, and space and communication systems make these temples exemplary representatives for studying narrative art. While a significant portion of the temple facades depicts gods, goddesses, and mythological stories, the on-spot study also found a substantial number of plaques observed mainly on the base friezes representing the engagement of women in various mundane activities. This study explores the narrative intentions of such portrayals. The depictions incorporated are validated with various types of archival evidence facilitating cross-corroboration of the sources. The study sheds light on the crucial role played by women in domestic spheres and their engagement in social activities. The portrayals act as indispensable visual evidence for a holistic understanding of the life of women in Late Medieval Bengal. However, with the passage of time, the temples have been susceptible to the processes of decay necessitating the need for conservation and urgent restoration of this invaluable heritage site.

Keywords: Terracotta temples, Baranagar temple facades, women of Late Medieval Bengal, narrative art, Murshidabad temple architecture.

Introduction

Since eons, human beings have used narratives as a medium of communication. Prehistoric humans, more than 20,000 years ago, have carved out various marks on the surface of rock shelters, especially on the walls. The works of Rock Art demonstrate the fact that they are not merely for self-satisfaction i.e. art for art's sake, but to communicate and share upcoming plans for hunting-and-gathering (Gupta, 2009, pp. 31-32). Thus, narratives do serve certain intended purposes. Terracotta Temples of Bengal, more specifically the temples built during the late medieval period are abundantly decorated with carved terracotta plaques. Various eminent authors acknowledged that the ornamentation on the facades and the structure of the temples have certain narratives and messages to communicate and stories to tell (Sarawati, 1962; Sanyal,

1968; Bandyopadhyay, 1984; Chakraborty, 2012; Haque, 2014 and Bandyopadhyay, 2016). The present work takes up an area for exploration i.e. terracotta temples of Baranagar in Murshidabad, West Bengal, India. The narrative art and architectural artefacts of these temples are some of the best examples for the study of narratives (Figures 1 to 7). The place has some astonishingly decorated terracotta temples patronized by Rani Bhabani during the mid-eighteenth century. Views of various authors about the temples of Baranagar elucidate the same. (Dikshit, 1926; Ganguly, 1959; Biswas & Haque, 1995; Biswas, 2014, August 3; Nath, Mukherjee, & Mandal, 2017; Pal, 2017, July 15; Tarafdar, 2017, December 14; Silliman, 2017, December 28; Dey, 2019, September 5). It was discovered that a substantial portion of the temples' facades portrays images of gods, goddesses, and mythological stories. However, a considerable number of plaques have been found mainly on the base friezes depicting the involvement of women in various quotidian activities (Drawing 1). The study primarily investigates such narratives to find out if there is any connotation in the depictions which helps comprehend the different aspects of the life of women prevalent in the late medieval Bengal. The study comprises both primary as well as secondary data. The primary data mainly include the portrayals on the facades of the Baranagar temples. The secondary sources were collected through different libraries and digital platforms which mostly comprise books, reviews, and references on the subject, journals, published and unpublished theses, periodicals, district gazetteers, exhibition catalogs, and conference proceedings. The formal method of Art History has been employed to study the portrayals carved on the terracotta plaques (Bandyopadhyay, 2008). The application of the method provided an in-depth description of the formal elements that have been incorporated by the artisans. The detailed critical inspection of the plaques has been complemented with literary references, archival images, drawings, etc. with the objective that these two kinds of evidence validate each other, each giving profundity and explanation to the perspective which the other provides.



Figure 1 (a): Char-Bangla Temple (east), Built in 1755 A.D.



Figure 1 (b): Char-Bangla Temple (north), Built in 1755 A.D.



Fig.1 (c) Char-Bangla Temple (west), Built in 1755 A.D.



Figure 1(d): Char-Bangla Temple (south), Built in 1755 A.D.

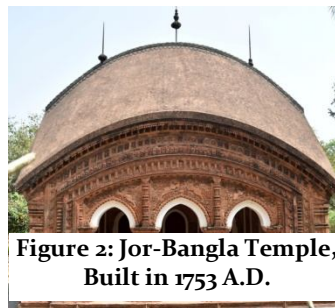


Figure 2: Jor-Bangla Temple, Built in 1753 A.D.



Figure 3: Bhabaniswar Temple, Built in 1755 A.D.



Figure 4: Panchanan Temple, Built in 1741 A.D.



Figure 5: Octagonal Temples, Built in 1755 A.D.



Figure 6: Octagonal Temple, Built in 1755 A.D.

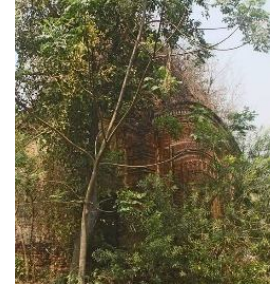
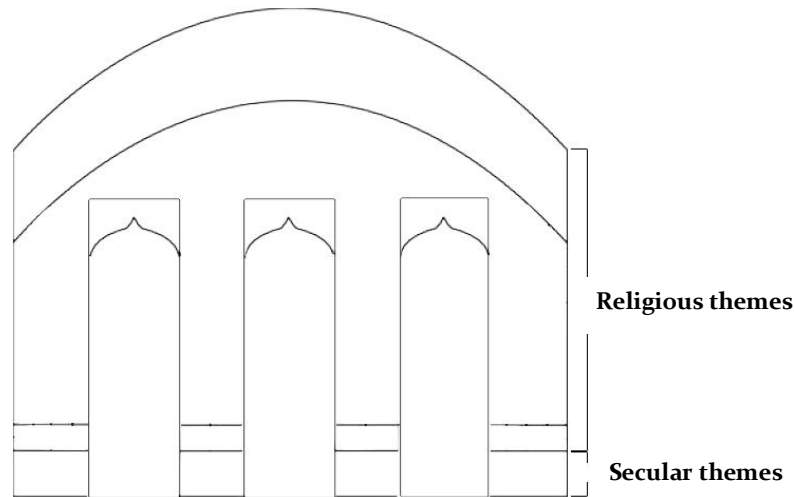


Figure 7: Rameswar Siva Temple, Built in 1741 A.D.



Drawing 1: Illustration of Schematic planning of Triple-entrance Facades

The Manifestations of the Life of Women

The following sections and subsections are mainly focused on the portrayals which denote the specificity in the lifestyle of women, their habits, and participation in various rituals and events. Such portrayals are conveniently grouped and sorted based on thematic content which helps to develop the objectives for the present study. These include the life of the royal women, the portrayals of the women in general, the religious beliefs and the practices by the women, and some other side of women's lives prevalent in Society.

The life of the royal women

Portraiture of Royal women is found in various characters in the portrayals of the terracotta plaques. In a depiction, a wealthy woman is shown as wearing a rich dress along with a long-covered headgear seated on a decorated podium in the presence of a maidservant. She is profusely ornamented with various kinds of jewelry. It somehow indicates that she belongs to a well-to-do class (Figure 8). Often, the wealthy women are identified through signifiers such as their forehead being adorned with *tikli*, *sinthi*; ears being embellished with *kanbala*, *jhumka*; the necks being ornamented with necklaces; and their arms being bejeweled with, *kankana*, *bajubandha*, *ananta*, *ratanchur*, etc. These embellishments denote the wealth and prosperity of the owners. In another plaque, a woman is shown regally seated in a palanquin (Figure 9). Though horses were generally portrayed as used for official purposes, in a terracotta plaque, a royal woman has been depicted as

enjoying horse ride along with her husband (Figure 10) in the presence of a royal guard. Besides the portrayal of the richly ornamented human figures, the horse is also found equally embellished with jewelry. It has been elaborately decorated with tasseled saddles on their necks and head which made the horse attractive. These embellishments denote the wealth and prosperity of the owners. Besides, women are also observed as taking rest by sleeping and sitting or lying in a relaxed mood. In a terracotta plaque found from Char-Bangla temple (north), a royal woman is carved as lying down on a bed with a pillow under her head in a relaxed mood in the presence of maidservants (Figure 11). In another plaque of the same temple, a woman is carved as if she is in deep sleep and a man, most probably her husband, is carved as holding their child on his lap (Figure 12). One observation is that the female aristocrats are mostly found as accompanied by attendees of different categories, including guards and soldiers. Besides the protection, it also projects their social status.



Figure 8: A wealthy woman is seated on a podium in the presence of a maidservant. Char-Bangla temple (north)



Figure 9: A woman seated in a palanquin, Char-Bangla temple (east)



Figure 10: A royal couple is enjoying a horse ride, Char-Bangla temple (west)



Figure 11: Royal woman is taking rest, Char-Bangla temple (north)



Figure 12: A woman is in deep sleep, Char-Bangla temple (north)

Besides, all such things, the study also found two interesting plaques showing extreme courage of women. The first one depicts probably a nude lady with wine glasses in both her hands dancing as if in a drunken state. Two well-dressed women, most probably her maids are carved as if they are offering drinks to the lady (Figure 13); and the second one is the representation of two highly bejewelled naked women who are seen as embracing each other, and they could be inferred as lesbians. This shows that lesbianism possibly was not unknown in the then-contemporary society (Figure 14).



Figure 13: A drunk naked woman is dancing along with her two maid servants, Char-Bangla temple (west)



Figure 14: Lesbianism, Jor-Bangla temple

Portrayals of the Women in General

Women dedicate most of their energy to being a mother and wife. They spend most of their time to perform the duty of a wife, taking care of their child and household activities. The following discussion elucidates the same. One can find several portrayals on the facades of the temples where the eternal relationship of mothers with their child has been carved quite realistically. Some of them are closely associated with religious themes culled out from there as they convey the essence of day to day life. It facilitated to give a wider perspective on this specific issue (Datta, 1975; Mangaonkar, 2011). A plaque with three adjacent frames from the Char-Bangla temple (north) depicts affectionate mothers with various gestural expressions (Figure 15). The first frame shows, a mother seating while holding twin children in her lap. The next two frames depict, mothers showing affection to their newborn child by holding the baby with their hands. The portrayal of another affectionate mother is seen in a plaque of the Jor-Bangla temple where the mother is depicted as playing with her child (Figure 16). The child has been placed in a rocking cradle which is swung by the mother. In another plaque of the same temple, the helpless condition of a mother of two children is very realistically carved where the mother is shown in a seating position while holding her two children who are shown resting on both her thighs (Figure 17). Besides, depictions that show a mother standing with her child in her arms or sitting or walking with her child or carrying a kid affectionately in her lap are frequently noted in the portrayals (Figures 18, 19 & 20). It is worth mentioning here that such kind of identical characters is repeatedly noted in the eye witness accounts of several European painters who were mostly employed by the British officers and distinguished Europeans who traveled to the newly conquered land of India were fascinated by the subcontinental scenery and unfamiliar customs (Archer, 1953) (Figures 21 & 22). A part of another artwork referred here was made by Frans Balthazar Solvyns, a Belgian painter who lived in Calcutta between 1791 and 1803. He began a series on the everyday life of the people of India. His almost ethnographic depictions of not just the people but their customs fed the curiosity of the Europeans about the residents of the new colonies (Figure 23). Foregoing discussion somehow reinforced the idea that women used to dedicate a significant amount of their energy and time to take care of their child.



Figure 15: Possibly, wives of Yodhya king, Dasaratha with their child, Char-Bangla temple (north)



Figure 16: Mother is playing with her child, Jor-Bangla temple



Figure 17: Mother is seating with her two children, Jor-Bangla temple



Figure 18: Possibly, Yashoda and baby Krishna, Jor-Bangla temple



Figure 19: Possibly, Yashoda and baby Krishna, Jor-Bangla temple



Figure 20: Lord Ganesha and Kartikeya with their mother, goddess Parvati, Jor-bangla temple



Figure 21: Detail of the work 'Government House' - by Charles D'Oyly, c. 1835, Source: 'Ghare Baire' art exhibition, Old Currency Building, Kolkata



Figure 22: Detail of the work 'The Village Gossips' -by Belnos & Colin, c. 1832 (Belnos & Colin, 1832)



Figure 23: Detail of the work 'A poaad' - by Solvyns (Solvyns, 1799)

Women were also portrayed in other significant roles such as being submissive to their husbands and being a good helpmate to them. This could be easily perceived from the following discussion. In a portrayal of the Bhabaniswar Temple, a wife is most likely showing her affection to her husband by touching his head with one hand and what seems like massaging the leg of her husband with another (Figure 24). In another depiction, a man and a woman are shown talking

with each other by seating underneath an unusual room like structure (Figure 25). From the gestural position and the direction of the faces of both the figures, it appears that the woman is trying to concentrate on the words which are being delivered by the man. Almost the same kind of expression could be observed in another plaque where a couple is also shown engaging in a thoughtful conversation by facing each other while seating and demonstrating similar gestures (Figure 26).



Figure 24: A couple in romantic mood, Bhabaniswar temple



Figure 25: Couple is in conversation, Char-Bangla temple (north)



Figure 26: Couple is in conversation, Char-Bangla temple (north)

Apart from dutiful wife and affectionate mother, women are also noted for their engagement in various types of mundane household activities. For instance, the images that have been shown below (Figures 27,28 & 29) are different in terms of their creators, usage of mediums, and year of executions, but the content is perceptually identical. These also provide support to the assumption that the continuity of the tradition such as this has been created in three different periods. The first one is borrowed from the Jor-Bangla temple and the second one is a detail of the picture titled ‘The Village Gossips’ made by Mrs. S.C. Belnos (Belnos & Colin, 1832). The work has been referred to as the eyewitness account of Mrs. S.C. Belnos. The letters quoted below written by two eminent personalities reinforced the same argument (Letters 1 & 2). The image on the extreme right is created by Nandalal Bose (Figures 29). The curator’s annotation on Bose’s drawing reads thus:

‘a new bride, as the title suggests, near the river, returning home after filling an earthen pot with water for her family’.



Figure 27: Women are standing with water pot in their hip, Jor-Bangla temple



Figure 28: Detail of the work ‘The Village Gossips’, Drawn on the stone by A. Colin from sketches by Mrs. Belnos (Belnos & Colin, 1832).



Figure 29: ‘Gramer Bodhu Ghara Niye’ by Nandalal Bose, Water colour on Paper, Source: ‘Ghare Baire’ art exhibition, Old Currency Building, Kolkata

ROYAL ASIATIC SOCIETY'S HOUSE,
Grafton Street, Bond Street,
18th of February, 1832.

MADAM,

I HAVE the pleasure to inform you, that at a Council of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland, held this day, it was unanimously resolved, that your work, illustrative of Hindu and European Manners in Bengal, should be subscribed for, and placed in the Society's Library.

It affords me great satisfaction to avail myself of this opportunity of expressing to you how much pleasure every one who has seen your beautiful lithographic drawings feels at the truth and elegance with which they represent the peculiarities of Hindu Society. They not only convey a better idea of the national customs and rites of that singular people than I have hitherto seen, but moreover, by the fidelity with which they portray the every day scenes of life, afford the person who has never visited the East, a faithful picture of the prominent characteristics of the Hindu and European population of India; and they agreeably recall, in general, those associations which travellers who have been in India, delight most to dwell upon. The drawings too are coloured with an exact knowledge of the costume and exterior appearance of the Natives, and in saying so, I am happy to feel fortified by the high authority of Dr. Wilkins. In short, it may be truly said, that you have made Art subservient to the faithful representation of nature; while in general, those who have preceded you, have made nature bend to their own peculiar style of execution.

I am quite sure that when their merits come to be generally known, they will be duly appreciated, and in the hope that you may receive that patronage and encouragement from the public, to which your beautiful drawings so fully entitle you,

I remain,
MADAM,
Your most obedient Servant,
GRAVES C. HAUGHTON,
Honorary Secretary.

To MRS. BELNOS.

“they portray the every day scenes of life, afford the person who has never visited the East, a faithful picture of the prominent characteristics of the Hindu and European population of India”

Letter 1: The letter was written by Graves C. Haughton, Honorary Secretary, Royal Asiatic Society to the company artist, Mrs. Belnos (Belnos and Colin, 1832)

To MRS. BELNOS.

48, BEDFORD SQUARE,
March 5th, 1832.

MADAM,

I have with great pleasure looked over your drawings, and read your descriptions of them, and I now have the satisfaction to inform you, that they are true representations of nature, so much so, that they have served to bring to my recollection, the real scenes alluded to of that unhappy country.

The drawings are so expressive in themselves, that the descriptions however excellent, are scarcely necessary to any one acquainted with India.

I have retained the copy handed over to me, and wishing you every success in your present undertaking.

I remain,
MADAM,
Your most obedient Servant,
RAMMOHUN ROY.

MRS. BELNOS.

“they are true representations of nature”

Letter 2: The letter was written by Rammohun Roy to the company artist, Mrs. Belnos, (Belnos and Colin, 1832)

The images helped to ascertain the truthfulness of the content as a true representation of the then society and also to cross-verify each other. As one can see, women are depicted as carrying drinking water in water-pots (*kalash*) which was a daily duty performed by women of the household, where the *kalash* is placed on their hip. It implies that to collect water women had to go to nearby well or pond, which was one of the important sources to collect water in that period.

Besides collecting water, another mundane duty of women was to cook food. The images mentioned below confirm the same. The image on the extreme left shows, a woman is cooking on a hand-made oven (*unun*) which is still used in rural Bengal (Figure 30). The image that has been placed in the middle depicts a sequential scene from cooking to serving food by the housewives (Figure 31). The last one is a detail of a picture, which is once again quoted from the work made by Mrs. S.C. Belnos (Belnos & Colin, 1832) (Figure 32). One can easily measure the visual commonality among the following images.

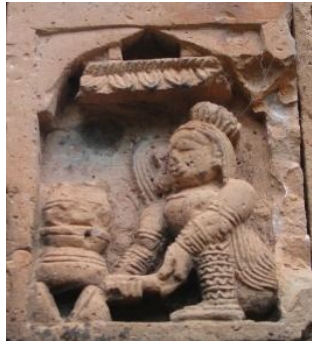


Figure 30: A woman is cooking food, Jor-Bangla temple



Figure 31: Scenes of cooking, serving and eating food, Jor-Bangla temple



Figure 32: The Detail of 'The Interior of a Native Hut' (Belnos & Colin, 1832).

It also appears that women also play an important role in household economics. From the depictions, it could be inferred that the wealthy families used to domesticate or keep animals or birds at home as pets, but for the common people, animals were mainly domesticated or kept at home to use them as a means of economic support in their livelihood. There are examples where milkmen are carved as milking cows and most probably their wives are helping them by holding the cows [Figures 33 (a) & (b)]. In continuation of the preceding activity, the next image shows two women who are carved as producing cheese or butter from milk by continuously rotating a long stick within a big pot with the help of a rope [Figure 33 (c)]. Though the depiction is related to Krishna's life, it somehow signifies the livelihood of the milk-men or *goalas* in the then society. In rural Bengal, the churning of milk is a popular cottage industry, and women are generally



Figure 33 (a): Milking, Jor-Bangla temple



Figure 33(b): Milking, Bhabaniswar temple



Figure 33 (c): Churning of milk, Jor-Bangla temple

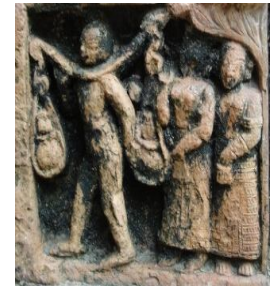


Figure 33(d): Panel depicting a group of sellers taking their product to the market, Jor-Bangla temple

engaged in this work. Then the image on the extreme right shows, in most likelihood a milkman who is carrying food in pots tied by a string which he balances on his shoulder and is accompanied by milkmaids [Figure 33(d)]. It could be speculated that they are going towards the nearest market place to sell their milk-made products. According to Haque (2014), these kinds of

scenes still exist in rural areas in Bengal. By citing the 18th-century drawing *dai-hara* drawn by the artist Balthazar Solvyns, done somewhere in Bengal, she has shown the resemblance between the milkmen depicted in terracotta plaques and in the drawing. It denotes the presence of *goala* in society at that time.

Apart from engagement in household economics, a section of women is also found to be actively associated with several types of service-oriented activities to earn their livelihood. Depiction of women as personal servants in the houses of wealthy people or carrying loads on the head was found in several portrayals (Figures 34& 35). Reference of this type of load bearer is not only found in the portrayals of the terracotta plaques, but the same element could also be noted in the several archival images, those that have certain connections to the then society. The image on the extreme right of the page is the detail of the work 'View of Court House Street from Near the South Eastern Gate of Government House', a hand-tinted engraving on paper, created by James Baillie Fraser in 1826 (Figure 36). According to the curator's note, Fraser usually drew picturesque landscapes of his journeys across India. This image is from Fraser's View of Calcutta and its Environs. One can find a similar type of lady in this work who is carrying two baskets, one on her head and the other one held by her hand.



Figure 34: A wealthy Woman with her maid, Char-Bangla temple (North)



Figure 35 (a): women carrying pot on their head, Jor-Bangla temple



Figure 35 (b): Women carrying pot on their head, Jor-Bangla temple



Figure 36: A part of the work 'View of Court House Street from Near the South Eastern Gate of Government House', by Fraser in 1826, Source: 'Ghare Baire' exhibition, Kolkata

It seems that some women also earned their livelihood by singing, dancing, or playing musical instruments. They are known as court-singers (*sabha-gayak*), court-dancers (*rajnartaki*), and court-musicians (*badak*). They are referred to as royal servants. It could be seen that the content on the carved terracotta plaques on the left-hand side [Figures 37 (a) & (b)] and the detail of a painting, titled 'A Ruler encamped in a Village' made by Murshidabad painter in c.1770, housed in the Victoria & Albert Museum in London (Figure 38) which is placed on the extreme right-hand side of the page manifest similar visual experiences. The images depict court-singers with stretched or upraised arms over their head in a dancing gesture in front of a king or *zamindar*. It appears that the gentries are enjoying the performance of court-dancers and court-musicians while smoking hookah and are accompanied by an attendant. The performers' main aim was to please or entertain the rulers or zamindars by showing their skills in performance as a



Figure 37 (a): A local ruler is being entertained by professional dancers and musician, Char-Bangla temple (north)



Figure 37(b): A local lord smoking *gargara* while watching dance, Char-Bangla temple (north)



Figure 38: Detail of 'A Ruler encamped in a Village', c.1770, Murshidabad, West Bengal, Source: V& A Museum

singer, dancer, or a musician. Specifically, by citing the 18th-century painting, the study attempts to show the narrative resemblance between the content carved on terracotta plaques, and in the painting. It somehow helped to some extent to assess the truthfulness of the content. Besides the court, depictions of musicians, singers, and dancers are also often noted [Figures 39 (a) & (b)] who probably took these activities as their profession. They are portrayed as an individual or in a group and are shown playing various types of musical instruments, symbolizing the development of local skills and showing the development and knowledge of their uses.



Figure 39 (a): Dancer & Musician, Char-Bangla Temple (west)



Figure 39 (b): Possibly Singer with her musical instrument, Char-Bangla Temple (west)



Figure 40: Snake-charmer, Jor-Bangla temple

Women can also be seen showing tricks with a snake. In the then-contemporary society, one of the professions of women was showing tricks with snakes against payment. This is how they earned their livelihood through entertaining people. They generally belong to *domsabar*, *bede*, and other nomadic groups. They are popularly known as *Samperia* (Snake-charmer). Their other profession was working as *ojha* i.e. treating a patient after a snake bite. The reference of the activities of *Samperia* (snake-charmers) is also found in a sloka of Umapatidhar and Gobardhan Acharya (court-poet of Lakshmanasena) (Ray, 2013). In a terracotta plaque of Jor-Bangla temple, a female *Samperia* (snake-charmer) is carved as arousing a snake by moving her fist in front of it (Figure 40).

Religious Beliefs and Practices of the Women

Women are also found as exhibiting their faith in religious practices. Ample depictions of such activities are suggesting their intense faith in the power of God. In a terracotta plaque of the

Jor-Bangla temple, it seems that a group of richly dressed ladies is going towards a temple where a lady on the left-hand side is most probably holding flowers in one of her hands and the rest are holding pots which are generally used for worshipping in their left hands. They can be recognized as female worshippers (Figure 41). In another plaque of the same temple, goddess *Kali* is depicted as seated on a lotus and a group of two ladies and a male worshipper are in offering gestures with folded hands (Figure 42). Another portrayal shows a group of ladies showing their devotion by watching and listening to *hari-sankirtan*, performed by a group of devotees of Lord *Vishnu* with the rhythm of *khol-kartal* (Figure 43). They are recognized as Vaishnavas. Besides, women are also seen in a gesture of playing musical instruments or singing songs or dancing to the rhythm of the music as part of their religious practices. For instance, in a panel of the Char-Bangla temple (north), an idol of the divine gods *Radha-Krishna* has been carved on a rocking cradle which is swung by two lady worshippers and rest of the plaques of the same panel depicts worshippers showing their devotion by dancing to the rhythm of various types of musical instruments and the instruments are played by the female worshippers themselves (Figure 44). In another depiction, a group of three ladies is engaged in a dance performance with one of their hands lifted above (Figure 45). The most common musical instruments which had been used in worshipping deities are *dhak*, *dholok*, *esraj*, *vina*, *khol-kartal*, *kanshar*, etc.



Figure 41: Lady worshippers, Jor-Bangla temple



Figure 42: Worshipper are in offering gesture with folded hands, Jor-Bangla temple



Figure 43: Probably performing *hari-sankirtan*, Jor-Bangla temple



Figure 44: Worshipping the idol of goddesses *Radha-Krishna* by singing, dancing and playing musical instruments, Char-Bangla temple (north)



Figure 45: Worshipping by dancing, Jor-Bangla temple

Apart from worshipping different deities, women are also carved as paying obeisance to their *Gurus* or mentors or even plants. In a depiction of the Bhabaniswar temple, two lady worshippers are showing their respect by touching their foreheads with their left hands as if seeking the blessings of a seated figure, having a long *jata*. The figure has been carved as giving them blessings by raising his left hand in the form of a blessing gesture. From the depiction, it can be inferred that the seated figure would be a *Guru*, whom his followers or devotees are worshipping (Figure 46). In another depiction of the same temple a lady is blessed by an ascetic who is holding a long stick with his left hand and his right hand is placed in the manner of offering blessing by touching the forehead of a devotee who is holding the right leg of the ascetic in the form of showing her devotion (Figure 47). Lady devotees, enjoying the company of their *Guru* while worshipping is also seen frequently. Another interesting depiction is found in a plaque of Jor-Bangla temple, where a group of lady worshippers is busy in worshipping a plant that grows from a pot and the plant is identified as a *tulsi* (basil) plant. In Bengal *tulsi* plants are generally worshipped with the perception of its association with Lord *Narayana*. Here, all the ladies are showing their devotion by posing in different types of offering gestures where some of them are standing with folded hands in the form of *namaskara* (the salutation form of the Indians) while another seated worshipper is offering something by joining and stretching both her hands towards the top of the plant (Figure 48). Based on the depictions, it could be inferred that these could be considered as a routine course of events for the then society. It is also suggesting their intense faith in the power of God. Women are also found to be involved in various rituals. Drawing *alpana* on a floor by village women at the time of any festival is popular as well as a routine course of ritual in Bengal. This is still practiced in rural Bengal even today. Reference to drawing *alpana* has been found in a terracotta plaque of the Jor-Bangla temple where two women are seen as drawing a line on the floor with chalk, from which we can assume that they are probably drawing *alpana* during a festival (Figure 49).



Figure 46: Worshipping *Gurus*, Bhabaniswar temple



Figure 47: Worshipping *Gurus*, Bhabaniswar temple

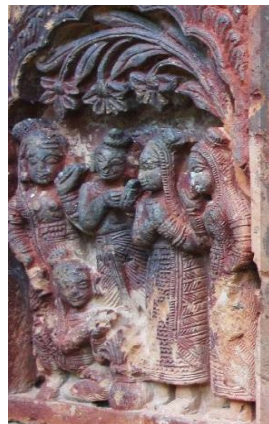


Figure 48: Worshipping plants, Jor-Bangla temple

Figure 49: Drawing alpana, Jor-Bangla temple

Some other side of Women's Lives Prevalent in Society

System of Marriage

Portrayals of marriage scenes provide a sort of information about the prevalent social norms of the then society. Portrayal depicts marriages between young girls and adult males. Though the portrayal is culled out from the mythological context i.e. from the Hindu epic *Ramayana*, the orientation carries the subtle nuance of day to day life (Datta, 1975; Mangaonkar, 2011). It depicts the departure and the welcoming ceremony of newly married brides to their in-law's house with their husbands (Figure 50). The practice of young girls being married off to grownup males was quite predominant in Bengal till the end of the 19th century (Chakrabarti

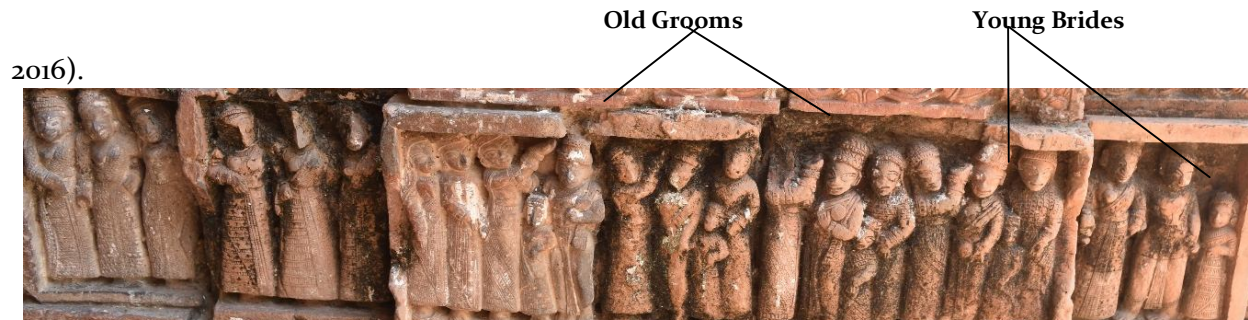


Figure 50: Scene of departure and welcoming ceremony of newly married brides to her in-law's house with her husbands, Jor-Bangla temple

Social Interactions

Scenes of gossip. Conversations and interactions among women in their leisure times are also amply found in the terracotta plaques. In a plaque of Jor-Bangla temple, it seems two bejeweled women are carved as gossiping with each other (Figure 51). In another plaque of the same temple, women are found engaged in gossiping while they are walking in a group (Figure 52). Besides, in a plaque of the Jor- temple, a lady is seen as attempting to foster friendship between two children by drawing their hands towards each other (Figure 53).



Figure 51: Scene of gossiping, Jor-Bangla temple



Figure 52: Scene of gossiping, Jor-Bangla temple

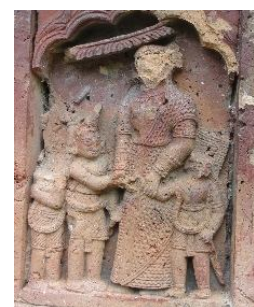


Figure 53: A lady is playing a role of a mediator in making a friendship between two children, Jor-Bangla temple

Private life

During the period, the sanitary system of the country was so poor. Men and women had to depend on jungles and abandoned water bodies to urinate or defecate secretly and separately at a distance from their residences. It was one of the major issues more specifically for women. They use a covered place for this activity which is unobserved by men. In terracotta plaques, women are shown as carrying a water-vessel in their hand which is generally used to fetch water from the pond for urination and defecation (Figures 54 & 55).



Figure 54: A woman is holding a water- vessel which is generally used at the time of urination or defecation, Char-Bangla temple (north)



Figure 55: A woman is holding a water- vessel which is generally used at the time of urination or defecation, Jor-Bangla temple

Discussion and Conclusion

The outcome of the study is being summarized here below. It is clearly understood that there was a certain gap in lifestyle among wealthy women, women who belonged to the middle class or lower-middle-class families, and the working-class women. The study reveals that women in different strata were closely associated with precise and various levels of activities. Their diverse representations with specific dress code, various gestural communications, precise accessories, hairstyles, and garments can be considered as some of the significant visual archives. These help to identify them separately as well as to understand the various facets of the life of the then society. Generally, women of wealthy families are deemed to be superior in this race. Often, they are found as bejeweled with various kinds of jewelry and frequently seen in relaxed mood accompanied by attendants, maid, or some time with their pets. In turn, women who belong to the middle class or lower-middle-class families are generally portrayed as engaged in various household activities, performing the duties of a wife, housewife, and affectionate mother. Besides, some sort of participation in religious and cultural activities as well as in household economics are also noted. They are rarely seen in the public sphere, whereas working-class women are generally engaged in various types of service-oriented activities such as musicians, singers,

dancers, royal servants as well as various types of menial activities like load bearer, maid, etc. for the sake of earning a livelihood are also prominent. Elaborately ornamented court-dancers, court-musicians, and court-singers indicate that they led a prosperous life. Various types of hairdressing styles have been noticed in the terracotta plaques and such themes of hair treatment suggest the taste of people in general and ladies in particular, as they were conscious of presenting themselves with a more graceful appearance by ornamenting themselves.

Though, some women took to singing, dancing, and playing musical instruments to earn their livelihood, for some women these were part of their religious practices. Women are portrayed as performing diverse kinds of dances. These include the *Gaudiya-nritya*, the *bai*-dance, the court-dance, and other local styles of dances that coexist in the society. Representation of women with various types of musical instruments and those made with hide, string, wind, and metal reveals their expertise in playing all such instruments which also demonstrate their development of local knowledge and skill. Besides, their engagement with *Dotara*, *Sitar*, *Esraj*, *Vina*, *Violin*, and *Shatatantri* they are also found to be playing the musical instruments like the drum called the *Khol*, and the cymbals or *Khanjani* which are similar to those that are still prevalent and used in by the women of Bengal. Both solo performances of female and group performances are found in the depictions. The presence of a diversity of male-female combinations in groups manifests the growth of liberal ideas in contemporary society. Another observation is that the system of marriage between young brides to older grooms which is recurrently depicted in the temple facades somehow portrays its solidity and regularity in social practice. At the end, it could be said that this works as visual support for existing knowledge which is generally found in the form of written materials, historical records, inscriptions, coins, etc.

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