

WOMEN OF CHANDRAKETUGHAR IN SCULPTURE

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ABSTRACT

Chandraketugarh, the old urban centre with thriving trade and commercial activities of the 4th Century BCE is a haven of archaeological antiquities ranging from coins, beads of semi-precious stones, terracotta, stone sculptures to gold coins and objects made of bone, ivory and wooden artifacts. The quality and artistic skill of the excavated artifacts indicate that Chandraketugarh was once a very elegant and refined urban centre of ancient India. A polygonal brick temple facing north, known as Khana Mihirer Dhipi was recovered from this site. Since this area in all probability was connected to the Bidyadhari River, it can be mentioned as a significant port city. This site was known as 'Gangaridai' to the ancient Greek and Roman writers.

This 'Gangaridai' (Bengali: Gonggariddhi meaning wealth of the Ganges. In Sanskrit: Ganga Rashtra meaning nation of the river Ganges) was an ancient state established around 300 BCE is described by the Greek traveler Megasthenes in his work 'Indica'. Again Ptolemy mentioned that Gangaridai occupied the entire region around the five mouths of the Ganges. In 'The Periplus of the Erythraean sea', the location of Gangaridai was mentioned to be close to the Bay of Bengal, north of the port city of Dosarene of Kalinga (ancient Orissa).

Chandraketugarh is situated within the Bengal basin, which is the largest deltaic sedimentary system. Here accumulation of sediments in the basin mainly contributed by the Ganges - Brahmaputra - Meghna (GBM) river system and is finally dispersed into the Bay Of Bengal, forming the largest submarine fan of the world. Geomorphology of the area is presently dominated by the Holocene GBM floodplain and delta. The mineralogy is dominated by detrital quartz, some feldspar, and minor amount of carbonates; illite and kaolinite are the major clay minerals. The heavy mineral assemblages include amphibole, proper and epidotic. Difference in the sediment provenances are reflected from mineralogy and sedimentology of the area.

Key Words: Gold Coin, Accumulation, Mineralogy, Heavy Mineral

1. INTRODUCTION

The basin is a peripheral foreland formed by continent- continent collision. It is a consequence of the seduction of the Indian plate below the Eurasian and Burmese plate. Formation of Bengal basin initiated with the break-up of Gondwanaland during the late Mesozoic period. Basin development process in the late Jurassic – early Cretaceous period initiated by the extrusion of basalt in both the Rajmahal, South Shillong plateau areas. It was followed by slow subsidence of Bengal shelf in the late Cretaceous. In the middle of Eocene, basin wide subsidence was initiated by movement along the basin-margin fault. This led to marine transgression, resulting in deposition of Silet limestone. Probably the basement fault movement embossed on the limestone and that led to separate evolutionary history of both the eastern and western halves of the basin. Lagoon argillaceous and erinaceous sediments were deposited on the western part of the basin, whereas eastern and northeastern halves were occupied by open neritic sea. Later on intense tectonic activity led to basin wide regression resulting to the development of modern Bengal basin, which is an alteration from marine-estuarine environment to fluvial- tidal dominated environment.

The interconnection between Bengal and Bangladesh came to an end, leaving Chandraketugarh a dead place. According to a report of Geological Survey of India (GSI), the site shows various geomorphic features like palaeo-levees, palaeo-channel, and point bars etc. Their stratigraphic analysis showed lesser amount of sand and more than 80% of silt and clay revealing alluvial nature of the deposition. The region of present Bengal, previously known as Gangaridai, had its capital at Kotalipara. Ptolemy also mentioned the location of the said region around the five mouths of the Ganges namely the Kambyson, the Mega, the Kamberikhon, the Pseudostomon and the Antibole. He further mentioned that the royal residence was in the city of Ganges. During Alexander's invasion, Diodorus Siculus (c.90 BCE-c.30 BCE) described the country beyond Indus from Phegeus, king of Greece. He came across a desert after twelve days of traverse and beyond it was the river Ganges, thirty-two stadia in width, was of greater depth than any other river. This river flowed from north to south and emptied into the ocean forming the eastern boundary of Gangaridai. Excavation around Chandraketugarh proved that it was a part of the city 'Gangae'. Historian Paresch Chandra Dasgupta said that most probably 'Gangae' was the port town of Chandraketugarh. Various description from different travellers are the important sources to locate Gangaridai and also in broader sense to locate Chandraketugarh.

Thus in order to assess the position of Chandraketugarh against the chronology of Indian history and to identify the palaeo-channels and its impact on Geo-spatial shifting of the river courses affecting Chandraketugarh's history, various methodologies are suggested to meet up the above mentioned objectives.

Community Life in Chandraketugarh

West Bengal, rather the undivided Bengal since antiquity presents an array of visual documentation of the styles and proclivity of the period. Regional, geographical specification of the terrain and lack of availability of stones in the sub-terrain of greater Bengal has triggered the creativity to attribute shapes modeled to pliable terracotta. Elasticity of the material enables the artist to form the desired shape only by touch of finger tips. The easy availability of clay in the riverine plains of Bengal might be one of the reasons for its enriched terracotta tradition. Another plausible reason was the easy-molding nature of clay and the scarcity of stone in Bengal. Bengal is a lucrative region for studying terracotta as it has a long, rich and a continuous presence of terracotta art from ancient times to present day. Though the terracotta repertoire of Bengal was overshadowed with the terracotta specimens from Mathura, Amaravati in the larger regime, but the surprising and overwhelming presence of the terracotta figurines and its continued addition has marked Chandraketugarh as one of the most crucial site.

Styles And Techniques

The clay used in terracotta craft is generally a blend of two or more types of clays, found in river beds, pits and drains. They are blended together and then given beautiful shapes and patterns. The folk theme is used in the craft most of the times. The pattern is beautifully highlighted with traditional expertise and precise artwork. The items are between 700 and 800 BCE. Most of the times local fuel like twigs, dry leaves or fire wood are used in the kiln. The iron content, reacting with oxygen during firing, gives the fired body a reddish color, though the overall color varies widely across shades of yellow, orange, buff, red, terracotta, pink, grey or brown. In some contexts, such as Roman figurines, white-colored terracotta is known as pipe clay, as such clays were later preferred for tobacco pipes, normally made of clay until the 19th century.

Features (According to different phases of Bengal)

The terracotta sculptures, figurines and other objects excavated from the area of Chandraketugarh are divided into subgroups depending on its social, religious, economic implications. Relying on the religious inculcation the terracotta sculptures can be identified in different diversification that demands specific attention of the scholars. And rest of the objects can be grouped as,

Mother Goddess:

Figures portraying the cult of mother worship are generally having broad hips, heavy breasts and narrow waists as evident in the figure no 12. Mother Goddess figurines are mostly of 'timeless' type with simplistic features. Mother Goddess figurines are historically associated with fertility cult. In present research the contemporary mother figure of Natai-Chandi explicates an alternative interpretation. The myth related to Natai Chandi reflects the mother figure as a symbol of a tortured woman in a malechauvinist society who does not challenge but finds way to survive in the existing social orders by performing Nataibrata. Sometimes the mother figure is associated with gender rather than fertility cult. The mother figure unearthed from Chandraketugarh reveals sameness with the mother figure of contemporary Sunga period.

Votive Figures:

Votive figures are usually minimalistic ally mounded forms of human beings and animals submitted to the God for the purpose of wish and wish fulfillment.

Female Figures:

There are evidences of plaques portraying single female figure, with attendants posed in different postures; as for example female figure carrying a child in her arms called mother and child etc.

Dolls and Toys:

Dolls and toys were used as play thing for the children. Thus we can find fully finished kind of toys and even toys made by the children themselves, which are primitive and amateurish in nature. A large number of animal and bird and other figures served as toys including toy carts as wheeled figurines, animals including ram, horse, elephant, etc. These figurines have two holes at the bottom, providing space to attach wheels.

Mithuna Sculptures:

The variety of Mithuna pose indicates that systematic body of erotic knowledge was prevalent in lower Ganga valley which is an important socio-historical issue. The similarity in art forms between Khajuraho reliefs as depicted in fig 15

and Bengal terracotta (fig no 14) signifies continuity of Indian erotic iconography. The continuity of erotic art forms demand causation, which requires iconographic data to relocate the connection between the Eastern Gangetic doab and the laterite plain of Madhya Pradesh

Animal Figures:

A wide variety of animal figures are represented which include horse, elephant, humped bull, goat, cow, deer, etc. and different species of unidentified birds.

Numismatics (Coins and beads):

A series of coins belonging to different periods have been found in Chandraketurgh. They are mainly cast and punch marked copper and silver coins of early period. Silver coins of Mauryan period, a gold coin of Kushana age, several gold coins of Gupta age and a silver coin of Skandagupta have been excavated from the site.

Potteries:

Potteries and its broken parts found from the archaeological sites of Chandraketurgh can be generally divided into two parts—A. Sun baked and B. Fired potteries. Few of the specimen of the potteries, definitely belonged to its culminating phases are intricately carved as is evident .

Mauryan period

Besides being famous for the polish of the monolithic shaft of Ashokan period terracotta is a group of no less importance, which have been found at several Mauryan sites during archaeological excavations. These are usually made from moulds. The tradition of making mother-goddess in clay, which goes back to the pre-historic period, is revealed by the discovery of these objects at Mauryan levels at Ahichchhatra. Terracotta was also used for making toys and these consist mainly of wheeled animals, a favorite being the elephant. We have remains of high quality sculpture from Mauryan period. Of the several stone sculptures the Yakshi and Yaksha bearing the distinctive polish of the Mauryan School are examples of extraordinary craftsmanship and are most attractive. Terracotta sculptures from Chandraketurgh of the contemporary times of Mauryan period shares the sameness in the basic visual representation. As in the case of female figurines of Mother Goddesses and the Cauri bearer from Mauryan era manifests the iconography of Indian beauty with full breasts, high hips and narrow waist. Even we can locate the common features in the case of depiction of the jewellerys and elaborate headgear as can be seen while comparing the Chandraketurgh Mauryan era.

Sunga Empire

The Sunga Empire is a Magadha dynasty that controlled North-central and Eastern India as well as parts of the northwest (now Pakistan) from around 185 BCE to 73 CE. The Sunga period saw a noticeable advancement in the Indian form of sculpture and ornamentation emphasizing the belief in folk deities like yakshas, yakshis and shalabhanjikas. The artifacts lack the polish of the Mauryas and are mostly set in low relief . Major centres of Sunga terracotta artifacts were Chandraketurgh and Tamluk in Bengal, and Mathura, Kaushambi and Bhita in Uttar Pradesh. It appears that terracotta objects were made at these centres and then exported. Sunga terracottas are found all over North and Eastern India. The sudden increase in fashioning of terracotta objects is credited to the technique of using a single mould to make the entire figure. These are pale red or orange in colour, uniformly baked and of extremely fine fabric. Chandraketurgh terracotta of the period are finely baked, mostly in terracotta color as appeared in figure no 21. The stylistic connection between the Sunga and the Chandraketurgh terracotta lies in the representation of elaborate head dresses and comparatively elongated bodies presented in low-relief. Posture, anatomical detail through incised lines is the stylistic thread that connects the art of both areas and also the stress on surface detail and nudity continued as before.

Kushana Period

During Kushana Empire many images from Gandhara reveal similarities to the features of Greek, Syrian, Persian and Indian figures. Kushanas introduced a mixed culture that is best illustrated by the variety of deities produced under Greco-Roman, Iranian, and Indian influence. Two major stylistic divisions can be made among artifacts of the period:

- a. Imperial art of Iranian derivation and
- b. Buddhist art of mixed Greco-Roman and Indian sources

The style of Kushan artworks is stiff, hieratic, and frontal. It emphasizes the power and wealth of the individual. Here we find development in style and technique of carving figures. New methods of narrating long and continuous stories were invented by an effective combination of old and new styles. There is a keen interest in rendering of anatomy or drapery. Stylistic interpretation of both of the statues, Chandraketurgh and Mathura clearly indicates the pan-Indian

concept of linear progression. Robustness of the figures, incised lines to show the folds of the drapery, delineation of the geometric shapes while depicting the structure of the body, predominance of two dimensionality or quality of ba-relief are the prime features that have the potentiality to establish the close association between the two.

Community Life

Sun baked, hand modeled minimalistically represented basic shaped figurines found from almost every region of historic and pre-historic civilizations. Therefore these kinds of figurines can be regarded as the 'Ageless type'. Among the terracotta figures unearthed from Chandraketugarh, Statuettes of mother goddesses formed the major group. Mother goddesses are the great symbol of the earth's fertility, motherhood and creation. She was worshiped under many names and attributes. Similar figures have been known in every part of the world. Essentially she was represented as the creative force in all nature, the mother of all things, responsible particularly for the periodic renewal of life.

Mother Goddesses

Hand modeled, primitive form of mother goddesses with archaic appearance is common since the proto historic time to the present. The fragmented figure is a depiction of the mother goddess with pinched face. The figure was made using the most common methods prevailed all through the world.

1. Additive process in which people used fingertips to add pellets to the sculpture,
2. Subtractive process in which people used to etch out few portions of the clay to depict figural parts.

The face resembles a bird and eyes, etched out boldly. The rectangular head dress too has been decorated with lines. Similar mother goddess figurines have been recovered from nearly all archaeological sites in India and continued to be produced even today .

In another type Mother Goddess portrait with animal faces are also frequently encountered in early terracotta art of India. Mother goddess with goat's head has generally been identified as 'naigamesi', or a female counterpart of 'Harinaigamesa' figures. Harinaigamesa as a turtler deity of child birth has been mentioned in the Mahabharata, the Kalpasutra and early medical treatises. It is believed the figurines were associated with well being of the children and acted as their protectors. In the present instance we come across a depiction of a female figure with an animal head, probably that of a goat.

The second illustration of goddess, rendered in the round and decorated with an appliquéd necklace. The necklace has intricate floral motifs etched out on it and decoration hanging from it. The figurine possibly represents a Mother Goddess figurine. The figure bears marked resemblance to stone sculpture in delineation of human torso which can be consciously compared with full blown female sculptures of Maurayan period, vibrant with life.

The figures of mother goddesses sometimes flanked with the figure of a child on her lap, symbolizing the motherhood, sustenance of life and creation.

A fragmented plaque from Chandraketugarh has can be , showing a female figure holding a child in her arms and the child is clinging to her body as if it feels to be most secured on her mother's lap. The plaque perhaps stands for the protection of the children or the devotees. The drapery is indicated by a series of string like lines perhaps to show the folds.

Both the figures are bejeweled, which are intricately carved. Though the female figure is headless but the child wears a double layered headgear along with a huge earring on the earlobe. mother and child both having elaborated turban placed on the left side of her head, wearing a triple stand necklace, huge earring and bangles. It proves that there was a trend of wearing turban amongst the females besides male members of the society.

Fashion Statement of Female

Delineating the fashion statement of the particular time period, there is a bunch of sculpture of females with an elaborated hair dressing with hairpins, probably having some esoteric value. These are example of sacred female figures in figure no 42, with exclusively depicted enlarged headgear and ten hairpins. Clad in a diaphanous drapery, the diagonal lines represented the folds of the garments. The figure is fully ornamented with string of gems, bangles, waistbands, heavy earrings and elongated ends of the drapery. These kind of divine figures can be associated with the Goddesses like Devi Maya, Sri, and semi-divine yakshis or with apsaras.

The trend of wearing elaborate auspicious headgear along with hairpins can be regarded as the ten weapons of war. These ten weapons can be equated with ten weapons of Goddess Durga. These are the symbolical allusion of the later association with Brahmanical pantheon. For example, the Vajra is associated with Indra, Parasu or axe with Ganesha

and Trishula with lord Shiva. These Figures can also be associated with the later development of Saptamatrikas. Emphasis on the reproductive organs in representation reiterates the association with fertility cults.

The second plaque with bicornate headgear and emblematic hairpins styled as the stack of weapons. The figure clad in transparent drapery gives prominence to the volumes and contours of the body. Rounded earrings, multi stringed girdle heavy bangles and the central rosette. The central rosette is one of the prime features that can be equated to the 'Hridayachakra'. It is the place of the chakra important in the diagram of tantra. The figure symbolically pronounced the interaction and assimilation into the pantheon of formal tradition. Few of these plaques have floral border and probably to hang these plaques perforated on the top.

Figures of Sri or Goddess Lakshmi

Amongst the figures of the Matrikas, there are few plaques which can be identified as the mother Goddess called Sri devi or Lakshmi devi. In the group of figures and surroundings are portrayed with opulence. Sri is the Goddess of prosperity and abundance. Thus the plaques are modeled intricately. She is posed amidst blooming garden and fluttering birds. She is holding a lotus in her left hand which is an iconographic representation of devi Lakshmi. She is adorned with heavy jewellerys as bangles, triple strand girdle, earrings, anklets etc. Here we find a decorative border rounded through the ends of the plaques that attribute a sense of completeness to the whole composition. In few plaques, the goddess is found standing on the lotus and flanked with her attendants. Sometimes she is surrounded by buds and blooming lotuses, probably in order to depict her as 'Padmalaya'. In a plaque Sri devi is adorned with an elaborate asymmetrical headgear. Her diaphanous robe stresses on her apparent nudity and the hieratic frontal pose reiterates her divine status.

2. CONCLUSION

Chandraketugarh an ancient city of Bengal, as old as 4th century BCE, located in North 24 Parganas of West Bengal. The area, as mentioned by various travelers in their piece of work, is situated within 'Gangaridai', an ancient state present at the current position of Bangladesh and West Bengal. Since numerous rivers drain this area, it is mainly a fertile deltaic land. The area was mainly drained by Bidyadhari River, and since it was connected with the Adi Ganga, the people of Chandraketugarh enjoyed an easy access through this route. But these days due to the shifting of the Bidyadhari River course, the easy communication between Chandraketugarh and other parts of India and outside came to an end leaving it as a dead place. Various relics uncovered from the study area reveal the settlements of Mauryas, Kushanas, Guptas and eventually PalaSenas. Hence these discoveries prove that this site is archaeologically very important to decipher the socio-cultural, economic aspects since antiquity.

The site has demonstrated an array of terracotta works depicting the subjects started from Mother Goddesses, figures of mother and child, female figurine showing auspicious head gear along with hair pins to the specimens showing cultural, social and architectural evolution. Thus, reflects the fashion statement of a particular time period. Many plaques show harvesting scene replicating their social life. Plaques showing musicians playing various instruments and dancers performing, reflects their cultural life. Plaques of goddesses like Parvati, Laxmi etc. are found. Different coins with wheel and boat motif have been unearthed. It shows that the people of Chandraketugarh used to maintain a trade relation with various countries through the sea route.

Through various methodologies like Geo-archaeological investigation, Hydrological investigation, Geophysical investigation, Sedimentary analysis, and Remote sensing methods attempts are made to relocate Chandraketugarh not only in Bengal but also in greater Asia and hence lies the importance of its location. Efforts are also to be made to trace back the palaeo-channels of the once flowing river courses and also the causes behind the shifting of their courses which left a huge impact on the settlements which were made centering those river courses.

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