

Vaiṣṇava Mythology in the Terracotta Temples of Bishnupur - Behind the Visuals

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Terracotta of Bengal is evocative of the Bankura Horse made famous by having been adopted by the Central Cottage Emporium as its logo. However, the district of Bankura has a far greater significance in the history of art in the country. Bishnupur (Viṣṇupura) in the Bankura district of West Bengal boasts of a group of some of India's most exquisite temples - a treasure house of art and religious iconography. These were built under the reign of King Raghunath Singh. A few of the temples are in laterite while the majority are in brick. On the basis of their form, construction and the number of spires, there are five distinctive types of temples: Śikhara, Ratna type (of Bengal) with one, five or nine towers.¹

These temples are mostly brick structures covered with a layer of burnt brick tiles which helped to protect the structure against the humid climate, and keep the interior cool. The tiles are small and thin with a veneered surface. The terracotta tiles were produced in one of two basic ways. The bulk of the decoration, comprising of repetitive patterns, were made using moulds, while the narrative scenes were sculpted. The tiles were then fired in kilns and then assembled to decorate the walls.

The Malla era started in C.E. 695 indicates that the area was ruled by Mallas for a long time before that. Raghunath, also better known as Ādi Malla, for his prowess in wrestling, is credited with being the founder. However it was² the time of Bir Hambir that it shot into prominence. He was a cruel and tyrannical ruler but when Śrīnivāsa, a follower of Śrī Chaitanya converted him to Vaiṣṇavism, he became a noble and benevolent ruler. He introduced the practice of Vaiṣṇavism into the kingdom and his descendants consolidated it by building tanks and some very fine temples. This strong bond with Śrī Chaitanya and thus Śrī Kṛṣṇa and Śrī Viṣṇu permeated throughout the kingdom and inspired the artists who were entrusted with the task of decorating the temples to carve panels depicting episodes from *Bhāgavata-purāṇa*, *Viṣṇu-purāṇa*, *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Mahābhārata*.

An artist is a person of free will. He has the freedom to play around a basic story

line and execute it to incorporate his own emotions, reactions and readings - all of which are influenced to some extent by the local culture. The panels under discussion further serve to demonstrate this truth rather effectively.

The stories connected with the life of Kṛṣṇa have always been fascinating for the narrator and the listener. As the story unfolds, a dynamic picture plays out in the mind's eye and at the end of the narration one particularly impressive incident stays on to become representative of the story. While many of us carry these pictures in our heads, an artist executes the particular scene which inspires him and encapsulates the episode in his chosen visual medium. The viewer, thus, has to visualize the entire episode by looking at that one frozen moment, which demands familiarity with mythology. This obviously was not a problem in the Malla kingdom since Vaiṣṇavism had taken strong root thanks to the influence of Śrīnivāsa.

The episodes under discussion - dealing with *Bakāsura-vadha*, *Vatsāsura-vadha* and *Śakaṭāsura-vadha* appear as part of the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa*. The fact that the artists were conversant with the Puranic texts is brought home forcefully by the details that have been incorporated into the carved panels. The literary references have been taken from *Śrīmad-Bhāgavata-purāṇa*, Gita Press, Gorakhpur, 2003.

Kṛṣṇa-līlā, the divine sport played by the Lord in this incarnation has the power to capture the imagination. While playing the role of an ordinary human being, the Lord nonetheless displays his divine nature to those ready to understand and enjoy it. Thus, the stories connected with Lord Kṛṣṇa have deep underlying messages along with references to other Purāṇas. While viewing such narratives, it is essential for the viewer to be familiar with the mythology and its implications.

Bakāsura-vadha (Pl. 4.1)

Kaṁsa, Kṛṣṇa's uncle in a further effort to get Kṛṣṇa killed, enlisted his friend, Baka who took the form of a heron to help him. Baka waited near a water body to try his hand at devouring the child. However, he was no match for the young boy, who in reality was the Master of the Universe.

While hearing the story, the listener finds himself experiencing horror at the thought of a young child being swallowed by a monstrously huge heron. In order to emphasize the fact that this is no ordinary child, but the Lord of the Universe playing a sport, the artist decided to depict the story in two contiguous panels. The first shows Kṛṣṇa standing in front of the heron which has its beak open. The second depicts Kṛṣṇa killing the heron while a figure stands looking on.²

Panel 1

Panel 2



Pl. 4.1: Bakāsura-vadha



Pl. 4.2: Vatsāsura-vadha

The artist has depicted the largeness of the heron and the sharpness of the beak convincingly. In the first panel the open beak appears larger than Kṛṣṇa and the edges have been raised significantly to look razor sharp.

The artist has verily applied his imagination effectively in capturing this part of the story. The panel shows Kṛṣṇa landing on his feet out of the heron's mouth and the act of vomiting and expression of the agony of being burnt is shown by the heron's tongue hanging out of the open beak. The heron's body too depicts the agony it is undergoing by the way the heron's feet are placed. It seems like the artist has frozen the flapping of a tortured heron in mid action - the wings are open yet constrained, the feet look as though it has been hopping on them and the entire body posture conveys agony in full measure.

In the second panel the artist has deviated from the description in the text where Kṛṣṇa is stated to have torn the two halves of the beak apart to kill Bakāsura. Kṛṣṇa's action in this terracotta panel appears more that of a wrestler who has defeated his opponent and is now delivering the final blow. If we recall that the first king of this area was famous for his wrestling skills, it seems natural for the artist to have had more familiarity with wrestling moves. It could also be that the viewers would have readily understood and applauded a feat like this in connection with wrestling. Behind Kṛṣṇa stands Balarāma who appears to be encouraging Kṛṣṇa to vanquish the heron while Kṛṣṇa is depicted as actively doing just that, with his foot placed firmly on the heron's neck and pushing its head to break it.

This panel depicts the heron in abject defeat - the feet are close together, the wings are closed and laid back and the artist appears to have frozen the final moments of total surrender on the heron's part.

Kṛṣṇa too is depicted so imaginatively in both the panels. In the first he appears to have just landed on his feet and his body posture is suggestive of a certain satisfaction at having bested the heron and getting disgorged. He also appears to be warning the heron that he is not going to spare him - the outstretched hand, the aggressive stance, all point towards that. In the second panel, there is no doubt that he is the ultimate victor - the confident stance, the hands pushing the body of the heron with a strong, confident hand while he keeps his balance and strength by placing his foot on the herons' body.

The surrendering posture of the heron reminds one of Jaṭāyu in his final moments when he calls Rāma and gives himself up to death. The eyes of the heron appear to be having a similar appealing look. Bakāsura's story conveys the lesson that if one associates with evil persons, then having to pay for one's sins is a foregone conclusion. Baka was Kamsa's friend and it was this association that made him suffer. However, he managed to attain liberation by losing his life at Kṛṣṇa's hands.

Vatsāsura-vadha (Pl. 4.2)

This is a story that brings the divinity of Kṛṣṇa to the notice of the reader/narrator/listener. An *asura* disguising himself as a calf tries to kill Kṛṣṇa but ends up at death's door.³

This panel is a beautiful dynamic representation of a fight between a human and an animal. Although the text specifies that Kṛṣṇa grabbed the calf by the legs and tail, following the same predilection previously exhibited, this artist too has stuck to wrestling characteristics in depicting the fight. Kṛṣṇa is seen grappling with the horns of the calf and appears ready to pick it up. The feet, the body and the stance are reminiscent of an accomplished wrestler - perfectly balanced on the feet and using the arms and legs to best advantage. The muscles of the legs also show the strain being undergone. Kṛṣṇa's raised head gives an indication of what he intends doing next - which is hurling the calf onto the treetop.

The familiarity of the artist with the text is revealed in the trees depicted in the panel. Besides the vertical vine of leaves which serves as a border, there are leaves carved on to the top of the panel to indicate the treetop.

The import of the story is that even though one may disguise oneself as a devotee and mingle with the crowd, the Lord immediately recognizes the falsehood and takes appropriate action. The cows were very dear to Kṛṣṇa and taking advantage of that, Kamsa persuaded his friend to adopt the disguise of a calf. But whether the impersonator is aware or not, the Lord sees through the intentions. However, it is certain that the Lord is very generous in his dealings. By simply associating with those devoted to the Lord, the *asura* was granted the grace of liberation at the hands of the Lord.

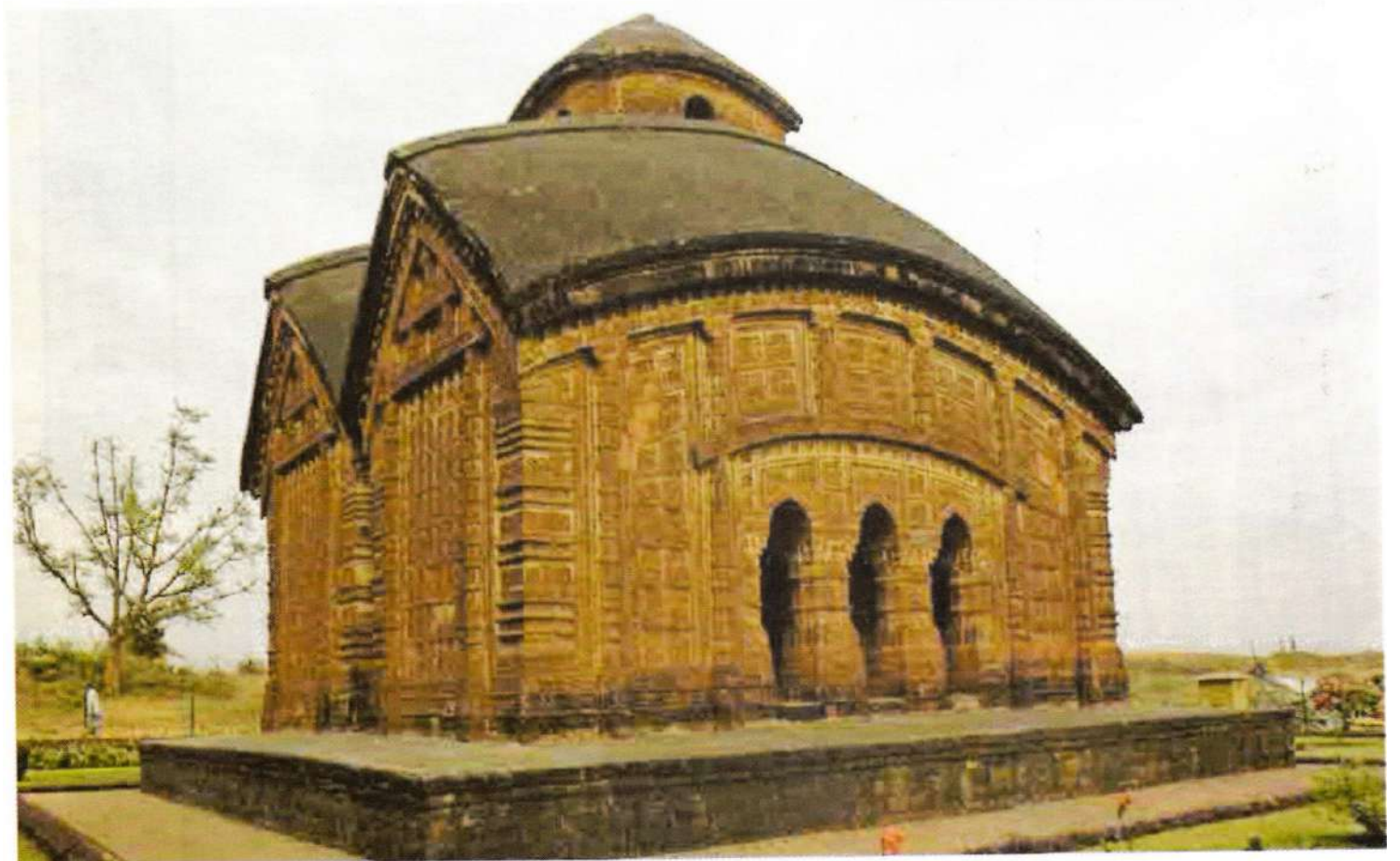
Śakaṭa-bhañjana (Pl. 4.3)

Yaśodā was busy organizing a celebration on the occasion of the baby having turned in the bed (normally at the end of the third month). She put the baby to sleep on the cart and was fully engaged in looking after her guests. The baby on being ignored after crying to be fed kicked the cradle and upset the cart above it. A demon who had entered the cart in which baby Kṛṣṇa was placed was killed.⁴

The artist depicts the cradle lovingly - decorating it with figures of birds and intricate patterns. In keeping with the general architectural style prevailing in the region where the pliability of bamboo was used to make delicately arched roofs (Pl. 4.4), the cradle too has a curved top. In fact, it looks as if a little hut has been shrunk to make the cradle. The birds on top are also executed with some thought. One of them appears to be singing while the others look like they have just landed for some rest. Overall, a realistic picture of nature is depicted.



Pl. 4.3: Śakaṭa-bhañjana



Pl. 4.4: Bamboo-made arched roofs

This is the part of the episode from which the artist picks up the manner of executing the figure of Yaśodā. She is bejeweled as befitting the mother of the child for whom the festivities have been arranged. She looks preoccupied which is shown by her stance. She looks as if she is on the move, while giving instructions to someone - verily the picture of a busy hostess.

The baby is depicted as lying down, but is anything but quiet. The hands and feet are being flailed recalling to the viewer the sight of a baby bawling for attention. The fact that the baby had just started turning in his bed has also been very cleverly incorporated. The baby is not lying down straight in the cradle but has turned a bit on the side. The upraised foot has made contact with a plank on which are seen round items rolling down. An interesting touch given to the panel is the folded cloth placed at the head and foot of the cradle to prevent the baby from hurting itself. It is a realistic, everyday detail that we are all familiar with. This is probably the artist's way of reminding the viewer that Kṛṣṇa was a normal child, in a normal family but also extraordinary since he had divine powers.

The artist has picked a part of the episode which can be used dynamically - the actual kicking and breaking of the cart to kill the *asura* hiding in it.

The story behind the appearance of this *asura* is interesting. Hiraṇyākṣa's son Utkaca was very sturdy and strong. Once, while wandering around, he crushed some trees in Lomaṣa ṛṣi's *āśrama* upon which he was cursed by the ṛṣi that he would lose the body that had caused the damage. When his body started dissolving, he fell at the ṛṣi's feet and asked for pardon. The sage was pleased and granted that he would be liberated in the Vaivasvata *manvantara* by the touch of Kṛṣṇa's feet. This *asura* who was waiting for the advent of Kṛṣṇa on earth had hidden himself in his disembodied state in the cart covering the baby's cradle. When Kṛṣṇa kicked the cart, the *asura* was liberated by the touch of the Lord's feet.

This story tells us that those, who can curse, can also bless and that true penitence is always accepted. The *asura* had a lot of good deeds to his credit and that stood him in good stead when he committed the mistake that could have cost his another life.

The episodes connected with Kṛṣṇa's life have some message to give us. The underlying recurring message in all of them is that surrender at the Lord's feet ensures liberation.

Footnotes

1. S.S. Biswas, *Bishnupur*, New Delhi, 1992.
2. *Bhāgavata*, X-11.45-51
3. *Ibid.*, X-11.41-43
4. *Ibid.*, X-7.5-7