3 Identification of the Regional Styles in Astylistic Terracotta Figures of Modern and Ancient Times

Vidula Jayaswal

One of my deductions after interviewing potters of eastern Uttar Pradesh and Bihar in 1980s was that the baked clay votive animal forms are the folk expression catering to the ritualistic requirements of the contemporary society.[1] Utilized in one or the other ritual, these terracotta compositions are prepared throughout this region, Fig.3.2, essentially by the potters. The votive elephant and horse figures made to the order and transacted through *jajmani* system, are products of subordinate craft to pottery and tile-making. These votive terracottas are addressed "pottery-figures" after Mackay.[2] The stages like selection of clay, preparation of the parent form on the wheel, drying, slipping and firing, essential to the production of utilitarian pottery and modelled figures, are markedly similar, Fig.3.1. The major difference between pots and figurative images is, while an earthen pot is prepared mostly as one or two units on the wheel, the votive animal is a composite structure having a number of wheel-produced parts, fused skillfully with modeller's precision and enhanced with applique detailing. All the basic units of the elephant figure namely, large vase, *ghara*, for belly, small globular pot, ghuria, for head, two dishes, *tashtari*, folded or cut for ears, four or two tiles, *khapada*, split or un-split for legs, and a cylindrical form for trunk, are made individually and conjoined subsequently. The figures are often painted in post firing stage, but not the utilitarian pots.

A certain uniformity is conspicuous in the diverse range of ritual terracottas of Bihar. The base of such votive figures is invariably a pot of common use, around which it is modelled. But, the shape of the base pot, mostly globular, *ghara* or *mataka*, varies from region to region. The diversity in composition is further noticeable in the portrayal of stylized anatomical details and decoration. A scrutiny of clay animal effigies of eastern Uttar Pradesh and Bihar reveals at least three regional styles. Named after the culture-areas, these are - Purvanchal, Mithila and Bhojpur Styles, which are confined respectively to north-west, north-east and south, Fig.3.2. This nomenclature, though adopted after old and recent administrative territory, has been used here in the sense of culture-zones. The present article focuses on the Bhojpur and Mithila Styles.

In north and south Bihar, quite a few typological variations are found in the production of main pottery shapes. Ritual requirements also govern the shape and form of terracotta compositions, like the typology of pottery. The three main ritual practices of this region involve the use of terracotta figures namely, elephant for *Kosi-bharan* during *Chhath Puja*, installation of elephant-set in *mandap* during marriage and sacred-thread ceremonies, and baked-clay image of elephant and horse during propitiatory worship at *Devi-than* and *Baba-than*.[3] The composition for *Kosi-bharan*, is completely overtaken by the ritualistic requirements, as to cover stylistic elements. Contrary to this, the stylistic features are glaring in elephant figures used as part of the offering at *Devi-than* and in marriage and *Janeu*, the sacred thread ceremony.
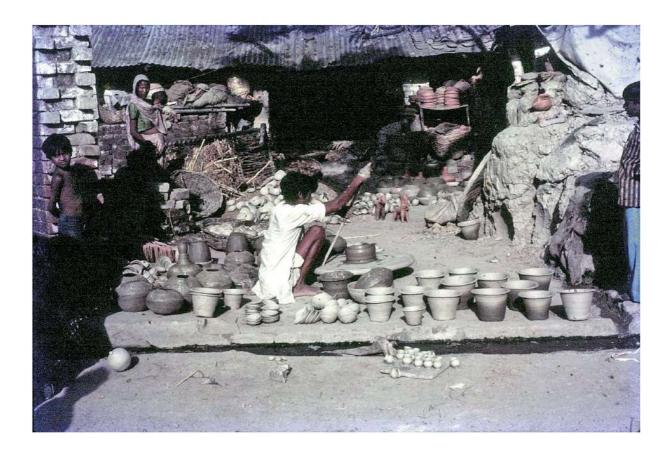
Fig.3.1 : *Potter's workshop, Kumhar-tola, Gorakhpur, 1980-1981*

Bhojpur Style

The linguistic and culture-area of Bhojpur in Bihar is confined within boundaries formed by the rivers Karamnasa (west), Ganga (north) and Son (east). The main centres for the production of votive elephant compositions in this region are located in Gaya, Patna and Arrah. The simplified forms of elephant figure in Arrah have close similarities with those made in Gaya, Figs.3.3, 3.4 & 3.4a. Godavari and Pamarganj in Gaya were the two most prominent centres for the production of elephant with *saj* for *mandap*. Large scale production of *ghara*, prompts potters to create the entire figurative form on this globular shape body, enhancing the massive appearance of the modelled elephant of average size being 42 x 32 cm, Fig.3.4. In comparison to this, the figures made in Arrah are structured over a small and shallow *handi* to which are attached *khapda*, long un-split tiles for legs, Fig.3.3. Therefore, the terracotta elephants of Arrah look tall with slender body, the average size being 50 x 42 cm. The elephants made in Gaya have smaller un-split tiles which projects further the bulk of their globular body. The minor details like small ears, tails and even slim and short trunk of the elephant figures from both the regions are similar to a great extent.

The elephant figures for *mandap* rituals produced in Patna is a prominent variant group in Bhojpur style. Here, instead of one, a set of two elephants are installed in the *mandap*. The larger one, being the main figure, is surmounted with *saj*, while the smaller one is independent figure, which is placed by the side of

the main composition. The basic pot used in this case is elongated storing vase, *labani*, used for collecting palm juice in and around Patna city. The votive terracotta compositions here are produced over this pot. As a result, the elephants look slim with average size being 72 x 43 cm. The Patna elephant compositions are embellished with multi-colour bands and floral designs, Fig.3.5, painted with opaque pigments in bold strokes mostly over a coat of white-clay priming.
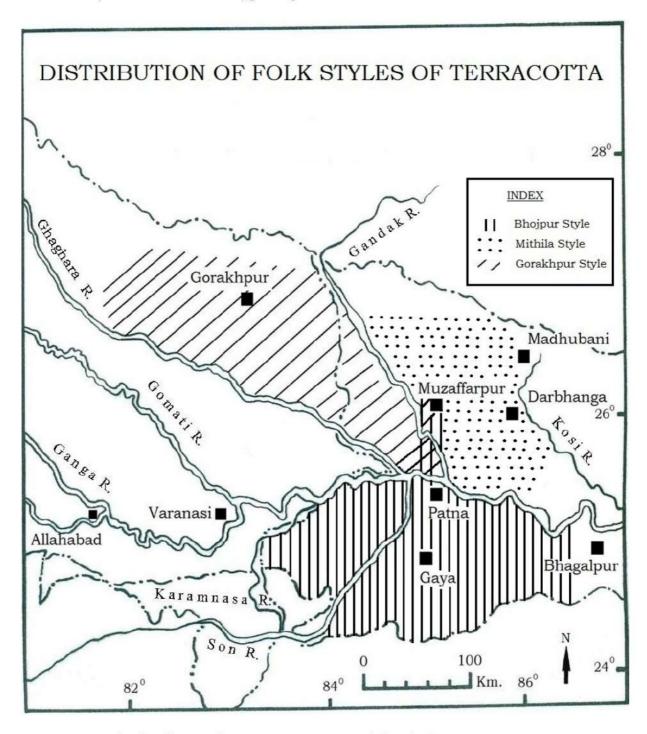

Fig.3.2 : *Regional styles of pottery-figures in Eastern Uttar Pradesh and Bihar*

Fig.3.3 : *Votive elephants, t erracotta, Bhojpur Style, Arrah, 1980-1981*

Fig.3.4 : *Elephant set for mandap, terracotta, Bhojpur Style, Gaya, 1980-1981*

These Bhojpur style examples demonstrate that prevalent shape of utilitarian pottery in Bihar predominates the appearance of the elephant-set for *mandap* rituals. The two sub-styles, Arrah-Gaya and Patna could be easily demarcated on this basis. The majestic and heavy appearance of Arrah and Gaya elephants with *ghara*-shaped belly forms contrast to the slim and sleek figures of Patna, because the principal form has *labani* as the foundation.
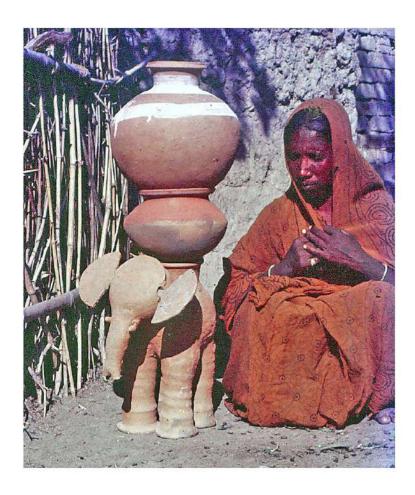
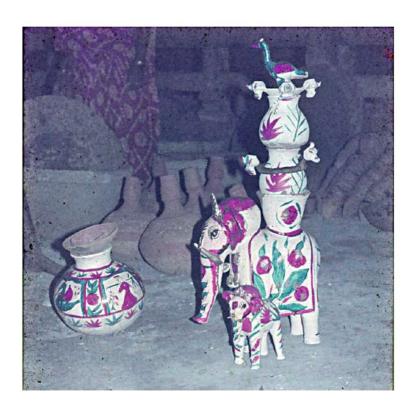*Fig.3.4a* : *Elephant set for mandap, terracotta, Bhojpur Style, Gaya, 1980-1981*

Fig.3.5 : *Elephant-saj used in mandap during marriage, painted terracotta, Bhojpur Style, Patna, 1980-1981*

Mithila style

People residing in the region north of river Ganga celebrate elaborate social rituals. This fertile landmass is bordered by Ganga in south, Kosi in east and Gandak in west, forming a significant cultural unit, known as Mithilanchal. Besides votive elephant figures for *Chhath Puja*, adorned elephant figures with *saj* are in constant demand for *mandap* rituals during wedding and *janeu* ceremonies.

Modelled on wheel, the clay-elephants in Mithila style are not overshadowed, unlike those in Bhojpur style, by the shape of locally-produced pottery and tiles. Prepared on wheel, the main cylindrical parts of the body in this case are pronouncedly elongated. The products of Maulaganj and Hasnachak in Darbhanga, especially elephant with *saj* for *mandap* rituals, demonstrate that body parts of the animals were conceived in a totally different manner compared to the shape of pot common to the region. The main parts like, head, trunk and ear were mould casted. As a result, when joined together the elephant with *saj* stands as an imposing composite form acquiring an average size of 46 x 40 cm without revealing distinct typological features of pottery, Fig.3.6. The trunk marked by stylized folds, and the ears with the wavy ends reveal efforts of the artisans to represent the natural form of the animal. The ornamental decoration for the crown does also differ from the Bhojpur style.

Fig.3.6 : Elephant for mandap ritual, painted terracotta, Mithila Style, Muzaffarpur, 1980-1981

Noticeable is the weakened impact of Mithila style beyond the Kosi plain. In Muzaffarpur district, for example, at some of the workshops, the elephant with *saj* was modelled in Bhojpur style. Similarly, terracotta elephant and horse figures here were close to the votive figures offered to *Devi* and *Baba-than* in Gorakhpur region. Mithilanchal is a demonstrative instance where folk religious customs and artistic styles had inflow from the neighbourhood regions.

Ethnographic model for drawing historical inferences

Classification of ancient Indian terracottas by Stella Kramrisch into the "stylistic" and "archaic" or "time bound" and "timeless" categories facilitated the typological chronology to a great degree.[4] The time bound changes in terracottas of the stylistic category, which also goes hand in hand with the classical styles of stone carvings, has drawn attention of the archaeologists and art historians. The other important category,

the timeless or the archaic category, however, has not received the desired attention. The pottery-figures fall within this astylistic or archaic category. Associated with religious practices followed by the masses, the craft has potentiality to throw significant light on the socio-religious practices, of past and present. The modern pottery figures of Bihar and Eastern Uttar Pradesh discussed above, suggest models for the interpretation of ancient clay compositions.

Pottery figures have also been noted in archaeological collections of historic settlements of the sub-continent.[5] However, the nature of findings is so fragile and restricted that the ethnographic model proposed for the identification of regional styles and sub-styles does not give adequate results. But, taking clue from the modern practices, my efforts to identify technique, contemporary artisans and folk rituals of ancient times had been satisfying. It was possible to conclude from scrutiny of ancient collections from city-sites like Rajghat, Ahichchhatra, Kaushambi, Kheradih, and, even, Hastinapur, etc., that a wide prevalence of folk rituals in the middle Ganga plain had nurtured a number of folk styles of terracotta figures during historic period, Figs.3.7 & 3.8. Further, it was also possible to outline the chronology of such prevalent rituals and ceremonies observed by the masses in which clay animals or human figures were required.[6] For instance, the female figures of clay and the bull of the Neolithic and Chalcolithic periods represent the earliest ritual effigies of the Indian sub-continent, representing two sets of rituals. The female figure was the prime object in the propitiation of mother-goddess, while the bull effigy was used in rites performed by the pastoral communities. This model can be stretched further to cover the entire span of historical era and identify a number of possible religious performances using astylistic terracotta figures.

Figs.3.7 : *Pottery-figure, Hastinapur, terracotta, from the excavated layer datable 11th-15th century CE*

Fig.3.8 : *A royal elephant with canopied howdah and rider, Saraswati Udyan, Varanasi, from the excavated layer datable 10th-12th century CE, terracotta, incised and applique decoration, L. 23.5 x W. 9 x H. 22 cm*

References

1. Jayaswal, V. and K. Krishna, *An Ethnoarchaeological View of Indian Terracottas*, Delhi, 1986.

2. Mackay, E.J.H., *Further Excavations at Mohenjo-Daro*, Vol.I, reprint: Indological Book House, Varanasi, 1976, p.68.

3. Jayaswal and Krishna, *op.cit.*, pp.25-74, pl.45.

4. Kramrisch, Stella, "Indian Terracottas", *Journal of the Indian Society of Oriental Art*, Vol.VII, 1939, pp.89-110.

5. Jayaswal and Krishna, *op.cit.*, pp.104-032; Jayaswal V., *Varanasi in Legend and History: Excavations at Shooltankeshwar and Saraswati Udyan*, New Delhi, 2022, pl.CI, p.214.

6. Jayaswal, V., *Clay Art for the Folk Rituals of the Middle Ganga Plain*, Aryan Book International, Delhi (in press).

Prof Vidula Jayaswal, after four decades of teaching carrier at Banaras Hindu University, joined Jnana-Pravaha, Varanasi as Fellow, Prof. R.C. Sharma Chair for Art and Archaeology. She has excavated numerous ancient sites and conducted ethnographic surveys of traditional crafts. She authored about 80 research papers and more than two dozen books. She published excavation reports of Bhitari, the Gupta period temple site; Aktha, the oldest settlement of Varanasi; ancient quarries of Chunar and sculptors' villages, Kotwa, Asapur, Rajghat, Ramnagar and Saraswati Udyan at the heart of varanasi. ***vidula.bhu@gmail.com***