

Terracotta Plaques of the Kantajew Temple in Dinajpur: A Comprehensive Study of the Social and Cultural Milieu During the Late 18th Century in Bengal

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ABSTRACT: This essay discusses a recent trip to Bangladesh's Kantanagar Temple, which is located in the northern Dinajpur area and is well-known throughout Bengal for its exquisite terracotta ornamentation. The exquisite 18th-century temple presents significant socio-political and cultural insights into the Bengali people as perceived by the highly trained terracotta craftsmen through the many terracotta plaques. This dissertation examines the terracotta tiles of the temple to understand the socio-political and cultural background of the temple's construction in the late eighteenth century. The terracotta tiles serve as a reflection of several aspects of that era's culture, including religious beliefs and mythology, social hierarchy and positions, everyday life and customs, artistic styles and techniques, cultural diversity, influences and historical context. Through a careful examination of these terracotta tiles, this study aims to provide information on the historical background, beliefs, daily activities, and artistic traditions of the late eighteenth-century community in northern Bengal.

KEYWORDS: Terracotta plaque, Terracotta artist, Temple, History & Society

INTRODUCTION

From the mid-17th to mid-19th centuries, Bengal experienced a significant increase in art and architecture patronage and experimentation. This period saw the construction of hundreds of brick temples in various villages, all in a new architectural style. The religious revival coincided with economic prosperity in Bengal, initially due to changes in the Mughal administration and later trade with Europe and Southeast Asia. Some temples were sponsored by merchants and small landholders, while large zamindars decorated their capitals with monumental temples. This period saw a surge in creativity and patronage in Bengal.

Famous for its terracotta tiles, the Kantajew Temple in Dinajpur, Bangladesh. A unique glimpse into the late eighteenth-century social and cultural milieu is offered by these tiles. In order to comprehend the contemporary political history, religious, social, and artistic aspects of that time period, this article investigates the significance of the terracotta tiles by looking at the temple's historical context and examining the exquisite clay embellishments. This essay also clarifies the social mores, artistic customs, and religious beliefs of that time period. This research study utilizes a multidisciplinary approach that encompasses art history, archeology, and cultural studies to present a thorough understanding of the Kantajew Temple, which stands as a witness to the rich legacy of Bengal's late medieval period. Since the temple's terracotta tiles serve as a canvas reflecting different facets of contemporary society and offer fascinating insights into the beliefs, lifestyles, and artistic traditions of the era, they offer an intriguing glimpse into the social and cultural milieu of the late 18th century when the temple was constructed.

Terracotta temples, like Vantage, are known for their intricate decoration, which covers every inch of the temple's surface. This comprises rows of burnt-brick panels with geometric patterns, arranged in specific ways. The organization of these panels became standardized in the 18th century. Large panels above the arches usually feature elaborate battle scenes from Ramayana, while panels on corners, arch frames, and columns feature images of deities, dancers, and musicians.

Terracotta art is unquestionably the first art form that demonstrates ancient artists' creative ingenuity. Numerous terracotta toys, seals, and other useful artifacts from the Indus Valley Civilizations were discovered by archeologists. The Indus Valley arts first appeared in the latter part of the third millennium BCE. Artworks discovered in several locations of the civilization consist of sculptures, seals, jewelry, ceramics, terracotta figurines, and more. There is no doubt that the painters of that time period had keen creative senses and active imaginations. People in South Asia have been on the same path since those times, and as a result, there are many remnants for researchers to study. Thousands of seals featuring exquisite images of animals such as unicorn bulls, rhinoceroses, tigers, elephants, bison, goats, buffalo, etc. were found from this civilization. The seals were mostly made of steatite, although rarely were they made of agate and terracotta. These seals were mostly used for commercial purposes. Regarding the terracotta plaques from the Pala era, several specimens can be seen surrounding the Buddhist monasteries' walls, in

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the *Sompura mohavihara* in particular. The artistic perspective of Bengali Pala artists, who were active between the ninth and twelfth centuries, is exemplified by these clay plaques. The researchers could easily identify the socioeconomic and cultural context of the time from these plaques, in addition to their expression of aesthetic value. In the same way, between the ninth and the eighteenth centuries, terracotta painters and other artisans passed down ancestral wisdom through their colorful creations. In Bangladesh, the Kantanagar Temple, which is sometimes called Kantajew, is the best example of its sort. The temple's name indicates that it is a Krishna temple, where devotees of the Sanatana religion worship Lord Krishna and keep His idol. However, the subject matter and clay artworks reveal much about Bengal's socioeconomic and cultural background in the eighteenth century.

Types of Temples in Medieval Bengal:

The 'mandir' (temple) served as a pivotal structural element in the evolution of Hinduism, signifying a shift from Vedic sacrifices to a faith centered on Bhakti (devotion), characterized by love and devotion towards a communal or individual deity. Temple architecture can generally be categorized into four distinct groups: 1. Rekha deul or shikhara, 2. Pidha deul or Bhadra, 3. Stupa xirsha bhadra, and 4. Shukha xirsha bhadra or Rekha. David McCutcheon (1972) was instrumental in establishing the classification of Bengal's temples. He identified four primary types of temples in Bengal, which are as follows:¹

1. Traditional style, which is further divided into two subtypes: Rekha and Pidha deul.
2. Hut style, recognized as the most prevalent and straightforward form of temple architecture. This style is categorized into two types: a. Bangla temple, which includes Ek Bangla (do- chala/jor Bangla), and b. Chala type, which encompasses char chala, aat chala, and baro chala.
3. Indo-Islamic style, characterized by a blend of Hindu and Muslim architectural elements that emerged during the late medieval period. This style is divided into two categories: a. Ratna type (temple structure with a rooftop) and b. Domed type.
4. European-influenced style, which developed in the 19th century. Additionally, the flat-roofed temple design emerged during this period, with smaller flat-roofed temples referred to as „chadni“ and larger ones known as „dalan“. The „pancha ratna“ and „naba ratna“ types of superstructures are exclusive to flat-roofed temples.

Kantajew Temple is a Hindu temple and it is known as the "nine spires" or *Nava-Ratna* (Nine jewels), which is an Indo-Islamic styled temple, characterized by a blend of Hindu and Muslim architectural elements. This is an excellent presentation of a *Ratna* style structure and a prime example of Bangladesh's vibrant terracotta art. From the bottom to the top of its three stories, every accessible inch of its wall surface is a breathtaking display of floral and figurative art in a continuous sequence. Stories from the Mahabharata and the Ramayana are among the many subjects showcased, along with a number of incredibly intriguing contemporary social scenes that show the landed aristocracy's favorite past times, professional groups and their daily tasks, relationships between different classes, and their mental and physical well-being, among other things. Bengal rarely has mural artwork of this level, compared to its amazing variety, delicate modeling, and masterfully woven friezes. Using a few chosen images of the terracotta plaques from the temple, my study of the temple seeks to grasp the socio-psycho-political state of people from different classes of the then-society as seen by the Bengali terracotta artists of the eighteenth century.

Bengali artisans during the 9th and 11th centuries created large-scale Hindu architecture and sculpture under the Pala and Sena rulers. Most of these temples have been lost, but stone sculptures in the Pala/Sena style can be found in makeshift shrines and museums worldwide. Five centuries after Islamic rule followed, and Bengali artisans were employed by Muslim patrons to build mosques and tombs. They created a unique Bengali Islamic architectural style using imported and local elements. When Hindu patronage returned in the 17th century, architectural experimentation led to a Hindu temple style based on Islamic domes, vaults, arches, and Hindu elements.

Bengal in 18th Century: Historical Background

The eighteenth-century political formations in India along with the Bengal Subah (during the Mughal period, Bengal was one of the Mughal Subahs) were very striking and the entire system was changing rapidly. During the first half of the century, the Mughal Empire was declining because of the emergence of independent kingdoms across the region. Aurangzeb's death in 1707 confirmed the decline of the Mughals. His son Bahadur Shah, who was already in his sixties, hastily ascended the throne but could not survive, the constant turmoil from the Marathas and Sikhs for long and died soon. The Mughal Emperors had appointed Nawabs to look after the administration of different provinces. With the provinces becoming independent, the Nawabs also went astray. The successful province of Bengal was run by Nawabs Aliwardi Khan and Murshad Quli Khan. After the death of Aliwardi Khan in 1756, his grandson, Siraj Ud Daulah took his position. Upon the new takeover, court politics and several plots in the Bengali court of Murshidabad created an unintended opening for the English East India to set foot into the territory and take control. Hence, the battle of Palashi in 1757 helped the Company take control over Bengal. Over the next hundred years, they continued to expand their control over vast territories in rest of the Indian subcontinent, including Burma. Before that after the

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Battle of Buxar in 1765, the Company took control of the state of Bengal, and Robert Clive was appointed as governor. The new English administration appointed „Residents“^[i] in the different states. These Residents were commercial or political agents who helped the Company do their jobs and expand their power. Through these Residents, the Company started to insert itself in the internal affairs of the various states. They used their power to influence the major decisions in these states such as the successor to the throne or appointment of major administration roles. Warren Hastings came into power in 1772. His administrative focus was to capture the supreme power and his regime began with the battles. After the battles of Panipat and Buxar, the main agenda of the English shifted from trade to territory expansion. Under the new Governor-General, Lord Warren Hastings announced the policy of „paramount“. According to this policy, the authority of the Company was supreme or paramount, and their power and command were greater than that of any Indian state.

Prior to this, Murshid Quli Khan, the deputy to the governor of Bengal, had received the power to control of the tax administration in Bengal province in 1700 A.D. During his time additional revenue had been taken in cash from the zamindars^[ii] [By the terms of the permanent settlement, the *rajahs* and *taluqdars* were recognized as zamindars in 18th century Bengal.] Finally, in 1793, the *zamindari* system was introduced by the British and the main aim was to increase land revenue, under which the settlement landlords were declared the full proprietorship of land and the zamindars were made responsible for the collection of taxes. They were recognized as landowners and were bestowed with the right to collect rent for those lands. Elegant Kantanar temple was constructed during this period by the remarkable Dinajpur zamindars in the northern part of Bengal.^[iii]

Origin of Kantajew Temple

During the rule of Mughal emperor Akbar, a holy man known as Kasi Thakur, who was also familiar as *Brahmachari* (wanderer) and *Mohanto*, acquired considerable lands in Dinajpur and Maldah districts. It is reported to have bequeathed his whole estate to Srimanta Dutta Chaudhury, one of his favorites *Kayastha*² disciples. Srimanta was succeeded by his daughter's son Sukdev who, besides inheriting vast zamindaris in parts of Rangpur, Bogra, Maldah, Dinajpur and Thakurgaon districts extended his estate to include Bogura, Nawabpur, Khetlal, Shibganj, Panchbibi, Badalgachhi and Adamdighi thanas. Considering the vast extent of his estate, Aurangzeb, the Sixth emperor, conferred on him the title of „*Raja*“ (the King) in 1677. His youngest son, Prannath, succeeded him in 1682.

Prannath was the most famous and powerful potentate of the family who began the construction of the fabulously ornate terracotta rich Kantanagar temple (*nava-ratna* or Nine Turrets temple) in 1722, but could not complete during his lifetime. It took 30 years to complete by his equally able adopted son Ramnath in 1752.^[iv]

Construction of the Temple and the Socio-Economy of Medieval Bengal:

With this historical and political context, the Kantaji Temple, dedicated to Lord Krishna, was built. The exact construction date of the temple can be settled from the record of a chronogram in the Sanskrit stone inscription, which was fixed on the northeast corner plinth of the temple.^[v] This record witnessed that Maharaja Prannath of Dinajpur began its construction in about 1722. His son (adopted) Maharaja Ramnath completed it in around 1752 AD (Shaka era^[vi] 1674) in order to propitiate the consort of Rukmini in fulfillment of his father's wish. However, in the early 20th century Maharaja Girijanath Bahadur [*Maharaja: The great King*] was the tenth heir of the Dinajpur dynasty, and it was restored substantially, except for the missing nine turrets.^[vii]

In the history of Bengal, the mid-18th century marked a critical juncture, as it saw the region transitioning from medieval times into the early modern era. The temple is a testament to the socio-cultural dynamics of the time, characterized by the fusion of architectural styles and the coexistence of diverse religious and cultural traditions. Political influence and its rapidly changing political phases also played a vital role with the designs in the plaques of the temple.

Style of the Structure

The Architectural design of the temple is inspired by the Navaratna Style, notable for its nine (09) turrets. This approach is rooted in traditional Hindu temple architecture but has been adapted to include elements of Islamic art. Features like the rounded dome and minarets-like structure reflects the impact of Islamic design. These elements not only improve the aesthetic value but also represent the fusion of diverse architectural traditions.

In Bangladesh, brick temples from the late medieval and colonial periods are often found clustered together in specific areas, highlighting the significance of these sites for their patrons. Numerous temples exist independently or as individual structures. The evaluation of this architectural style, which is characterized by terracotta, can be linked to transformations resulting from the regional interchange of artistic styles, ideas, and techniques.

The characteristics of these temples illustrate a historical period during the Mughal and colonial times in Bengal, marked by significant changes, progress, and continuities in social, cultural, religious, and economic dimensions. The region's rich clay resources facilitated the emergence of distinctive architectural styles and artistic forms. Clay served as a crucial construction material, utilized in brickwork and as a medium for artistic creations. The temple complexes from this era exhibited unique features that distinguished them from previous architectural styles, both in their physical structures and artistic depictions. The

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typically unadorned exteriors of these temples drew inspiration from the formal elements and techniques of Muslim architecture, particularly the elaborate vaulting systems. Elements such as corner towers and small shops, influenced by Muslim religious architecture, were integrated into the Ratna style (decorative turrets) of the temples. Additionally, Muslim patrons in this Bengali region began to emulate traditional thatched houses, resulting in the development of unique monumental forms through a syncretic and reciprocal exchange among various artistic traditions, including Hindu styles from the pre-medieval period, diverse influences from the colonial era, and Muslim styles that introduced Central Asian, Persian, and even European techniques and forms during the Mughal period in Bengal.

During that era, Bengal was characterized by significant inequalities. The social and economic framework was starkly divided between affluent and influential nobles who indulged in opulence and comfort, and the marginalized, oppressed, and impoverished peasants who struggled to subsist on limited resources, continuing various forms of injustice and inequality. Consequently, the 18th century witnessed Bengal falling behind in economic, social, and cultural progress. The increasing demands for revenue from the state, the oppression exerted by officials, the greed of nobles, revenue-farmers, and zamindars, along with the movements of rival armies and the plundering by numerous adventurers during the early 18th century, exacerbated the widespread suffering of the populace. Interestingly, the themes depicted in the terracotta plaques of the temple offer a less harsh portrayal of the society and economy of that time. The terracotta tiles of the Kantajew Temple serve as a reflection of the prevailing societal, political, economic, and other conditions of the period.

Terracotta Plaques Ornamentation: An Open Book of the then Royal and Civil Life

The terracotta plaques embellishing the temple walls provide a vibrant depiction of the royal life and civil society in Bengal during that period. The largest plaques measure 12 by 8 inches, accompanied by various rectangular and square shapes. The themes represented on these plaques are varied and encompass:

- Stories from the Ramayana and Mahabharata

The Kantanagar temple is a Hindu shrine dedicated to Lord Krishna. Initially, the founder concentrated on its religious significance. Approximately two-thirds of the temple's terracotta plaques, from the upper to the mid-level, depict themes from the Ramayana and Mahabharata, including the birth story of Lord Rama, his consort, and Lord Krishna.

- Spiritual beliefs and mythological ideas

- The traditional lifestyles of Hindu aristocrats

The Hindu aristocracy, including nobles and zamindars, led opulent lives and enjoyed excursions with their families beyond their villages. They had a passion for hunting in the forests, which necessitated the involvement of a substantial support staff, considerable expenses, and royal patronage. Certain plaques distinctly depicted the lifestyle of the royalty during that era.

- Hunting expeditions undertaken by Mughal officials

This document presents hunting expeditions undertaken by Mughal officers in collaboration with zamindars and their associates, as depicted on the plaques. The expeditions utilized elephants, large boats, and horses for transportation. Members of the royal family, including wives and children, accompanied these pleasure trips. Typically, such expeditions were funded by the local zamindars.

- Interactions involving European officers

- Activities of the supporting workforce

Supporting staffs of the royal force or the noble people played an important role in the then society. Even when they were out of their palace, during any expedition, their duties were to ensure comfort of their masters and the family members.

- Daily life and professions of various occupational groups

- Other related subjects

The representation of epics such as the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, along with narratives concerning Lord Krishna, offers profound insights into the prevailing narratives and spiritual principles that influenced the community's religious customs. It is my assertion that these plaques were affixed to the temple wall during the initial stages of its construction, as they exemplify an earlier style of decoration and were discovered in a notably deteriorated condition. Primarily, the terracotta plaques of the temple depict a variety of deities, rituals, and religious tales. The entire surface of its walls, from the foundation to the apex of its three stories, both inside and outside, is embellished with an extraordinary collection of intricate figurative and floral motifs that blend harmoniously. Analyzing these artworks can provide significant understanding of the religious dynamics of society during that period. These narratives likely possessed considerable cultural and moral significance, imparting lessons and values that resonated profoundly with the people of that time.

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The Conceptual Themes of the Subjects Represented on the Plaques can be Classified as Follows:

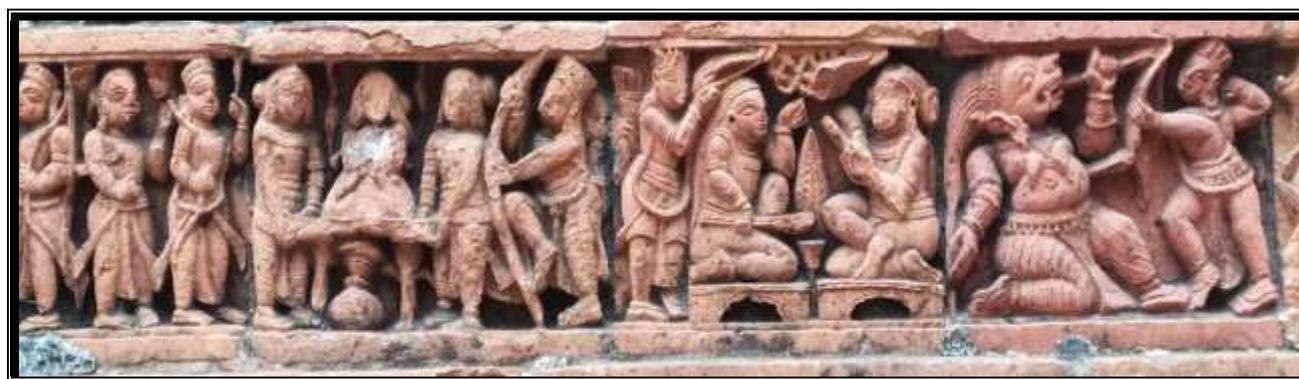
1. Religion and the mythology

Maharaja Prannath brought the Krisna icon from Brindaban in 1704 and initially installed in an old temple.³ Subsequently, the icon was relocated to the Kanta temple upon its completion. [pic- ruined temple.



2. Social Hierarchy and Roles

Certain terracotta plaques may illustrate the social hierarchies and power dynamics of the time. These artifacts could feature kings, nobles, and priests in elevated roles, mirroring the societal structure of the era. The terracotta art includes representations of deities, monarchs, warriors, and ordinary citizens, highlighting the social stratification and the various roles within the community. Furthermore, these depictions provide insight into the values and ideals that were held in high regard during that period, such as courage, loyalty, and moral integrity. Additionally, they reflect the existence of a subordinate class that was dominated by the elites.



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3. Daily Life and Customs

The terracotta plaques depict different facets of daily life, emphasizing activities like hunting, farming, and domestic chores. These depictions offer valuable insights into the traditions and lifestyle of the community in the late 18th century. Additionally, the architectural elements, clothing, and tools represented in the terracotta enrich our understanding of the material culture of that era. These visuals provide a glimpse into the occupations and ways of life of the people living in the area during the temple's construction.



5. Artistic Styles, Techniques, and Architectural Trends:

The terracotta plaques depict different facets of daily life, emphasizing activities like hunting, farming, and domestic chores. These depictions offer valuable insights into the traditions and lifestyle of the community in the late 18th century. Additionally, the architectural elements, clothing, and tools represented in the terracotta enrich our understanding of the material culture of that era. These visuals provide a glimpse into the occupations and ways of life of the people living in the area during the temple's construction.

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6. Embracing Religious Diversity, Cultural Interactions, and Influences

Terracotta art serves as a testament to the influence of diverse cultures and regions, highlighting the historical cultural interactions between Bengal and its neighboring areas. Examining these influences offers significant insights into the cultural diversity and intercultural exchanges of the late 18th century. Specific terracotta designs may exhibit traits derived from surrounding regions or cultures. Analyzing these designs can shed light on the cultural exchanges and influences among various communities. I observed individuals adorned in different clothing styles, with hats atop their heads. The English East India Company's rule significantly impacted the burgeoning power of the Mughals. Muslim individuals were often recognized by their distinctive dress styles, armors, and overall appearance. It is well-known that the Mughals were the dominant power during this period, and the construction of temples received patronage from the prevailing authority. From these plaques, we can infer aspects of society, including their lifestyles and typical dress styles, which reflect their social class or status.



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7. Historical Context

The Kantajew Temple was constructed in a unique historical context, and the terracotta tiles provide valuable insights into the socio-political environment of that era. Analyzing the terracotta alongside historical events and developments allows for a deeper understanding of the period during which the temple was built. Specific plaques clearly suggest that the temple was founded with the support of the ruling authority in Bengal at that time, while European powers maintained a significant impact on the political and economic history of the area.



8. Social and Other Events

Terracotta plaques are significant artifacts that occasionally illustrate various social events and other noteworthy occurrences, while also showcasing prominent figures of the era. These artistic depictions provide valuable historical insights, revealing aspects of cultural practices, social structures, and community interactions that defined the region. Through the analysis of these plaques, scholars can extract information regarding the types of celebrations held, the roles of different individuals within these events, and the overarching societal dynamics present during the specified time. Such representations not only enhance our comprehension of historical narratives but also emphasize the role of social unity and public life in shaping the community's identity



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9. Cultural Evolution

The terracotta sculptures discovered at the Kantajew Temple serve as significant artifacts that may reflect the evolution of cultural symbols and motifs over time. By examining these sculptures in conjunction with earlier and later instances of comparable artistic works, researchers can identify both changes and continuities in cultural practices and modes of artistic expression. This comparative analysis can reveal how societal values, beliefs, and artistic techniques have transformed or remained stable across different historical periods, thereby providing a deeper understanding of the cultural narrative and heritage represented by these sculptures. Such an investigation not only enhances our appreciation of the artistic craftsmanship involved but also situates these works within a broader context of cultural development and exchange.



CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the terracotta tiles found at the Kantajew Temple are not merely decorative elements; they are vital historical artifacts that offer profound insights into the societal structures, cultural practices, and value systems of the late 18th century. The intricate designs and vivid illustrations on these tiles reflect the spiritual beliefs, cultural diversity, and artistic creativity that were prevalent during this period. The Kantajew Temple itself, which exemplifies the Indo-Islamic architectural style, stands as a significant symbol of the social unity and cultural vibrancy that characterized Bengal's late medieval era. The ongoing preservation and scholarly examination of these terracotta tiles are crucial for enhancing our understanding and appreciation of our shared human heritage. Furthermore, they serve as a source of inspiration for future generations, fostering interest and engagement in the fields of art, culture, and history.

This research paper presents a comprehensive examination of the role of terracotta in shedding light on the societal dynamics of

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its era. It delves into various dimensions, including religious beliefs and mythology, social hierarchies and roles, daily customs, artistic styles and techniques, cultural diversity and influences, as well as the historical context. A deeper exploration of terracotta tiles can significantly enhance our understanding of the late 18th-century community and its cultural heritage. In particular, the terracotta tiles found at the Kantajew Temple represent a crucial resource for investigating the cultural, social, and historical aspects of the society that constructed the temple. These artifacts serve as a gateway to the past, offering insights into the values, beliefs, and lifestyles of the people who lived during that time. By analyzing these terracotta representations, scholars and historians can attain a richer understanding of the social environment that characterized the 18th century in the region surrounding the temple.

Disclaimer: All photos are taken by the author* while visiting the temple site in Dinajpur, Bangladesh

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¹. McCutcheon, David, *Late Mediaeval Temples of Bengal: Origins and Classifications* (1972), The Asiatic Society; First Edition (January 1, 1972), Pp-17-18

² *Kayastha* is a sub-caste of Hindu religion, also known as Karana-Kayastha, which emerged as a sub-caste in Bengal during the 9th-11th centuries AD. Mention has been made of a class of people known as Kayastha in ancient scripts of Bengal, where they have been treated as Karana or Kayastha, writer or accountant. Their position in Bengal is after the Brahmans in the caste hierarchy. *Kayastha*, (2011), Hiralal Bala, Banglapedia, Asiatic Society of Bangladesh.

³ Note: the old temple is still there behind the Kanta temple in a ruined condition.