



## FAUNAL DEPICTION IN EARLY HISTORIC TERRACOTTA ART OF GANGA VALLEY

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### **Abstract:**

Fauna and flora play an integral part in environmental ecosystem since time immemorial. Its diversity depends on the climate, topography, rainfall and other geomorphological characters of the particular landscape, place and time, that are intricately related with each other. Upper Gangetic valley has an elaborate network of perennial rivers, monsoonal climate whereas lower Gangetic valley has swampy southern part that is merging with Bay of Bengal. As a result the geographical character of the whole region is riverine in character that has a very strong impact on the floral and faunal world of this region. On the other hand, terracotta plays a significant part in Indian art parallel to stone. There was a prolific production of terracotta's in early historic period in India with special reference to Ganga valley. Gangetic valley has an elaborate network of perennial rivers as a result the region is riverine in character. The easy availability of suitable clay in riverine plains has made terracotta or "baked clay" as the most common and cheapest medium of art expression from the ancient time. The beautiful depiction of flora and fauna is one of the most outstanding representations of sensitiveness of artistic activity. The present paper throws light on the faunal diversity represented in terracotta art of concerned period.

**Key words:** Terracotta, Early historic period, Fauna, Archeological sites, excavation

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## 1. Introduction:

The term 'Early Historic' broadly refers to the period stretching from 300 BCE to 600 CE, is a very important phase in Indian history. This is the period when India witnessed the most remarkable changes in the material life of the people. Besides the agricultural surplus, transformation from village economy to organized urban economy with the growth of new towns and cities, consolidation and expansion of political apparatus and change in technological, economic and social life took place in this concerned time frame. Scholars like Ghosh (1973) [1], Thakur (1981) [2] have termed this

phase as 'Second urbanization' in Indian context. In broader sense, in India, early historic period led to the growth of urbanization with all significant traits for the first time after the disappearance of Indus valley civilization which has been considered as 'First phase of Urbanisation'.

The epi-centre of this early historic urbanization was the 'Ganga valley' region of northern India. River Ganga, the lifeline of northern India originating from Gangotri Glacier and flowing in the south-east direction with its numerous tributaries and distributaries has made the valley as one of the largest fertile land of the world. (Plate 1).

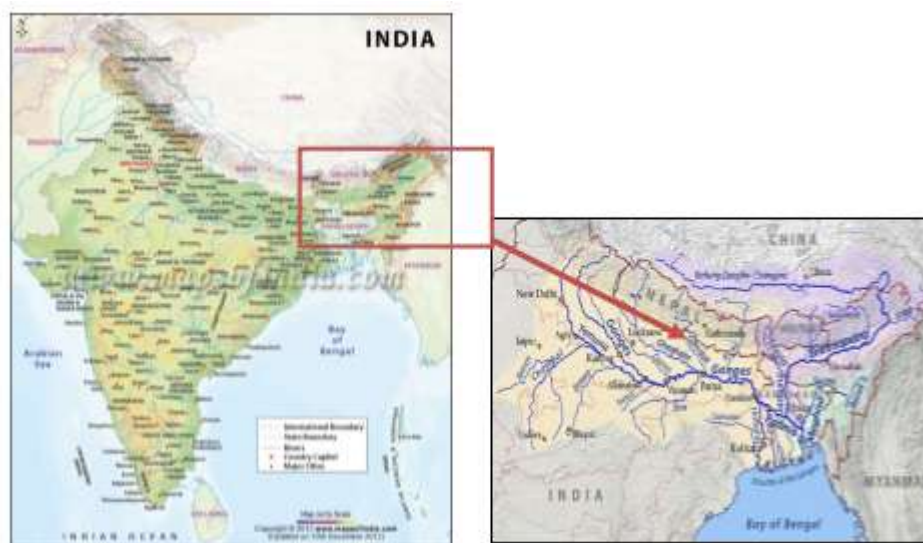


Plate 1 : Ganga Valley Region of Northern India

On the basis of the prevailing climate, drainage system, soil character, crop pattern, and other geographical features, the entire stretch of this plain can be into three sub-regions: Upper (lying between Hardwar to Allahabad), Middle (Allahabad to West-Bengal-Bihar Boundary) and Lower Ganga plains (comprising the area of Bengal - presently West Bengal). The leading urban centers flourished in the early historic period on the Upper and Middle Ganga plain are Kousambi, Ahhichatra, Hatnapura, Bhita, Atranjikhhera, Vaisali, Mathura, Sonkh, and Rajghat, Pataliputra, Chirand, Buxar, Kumrahar etc and in lower Ganga plain are Bangarh, Tamluk, Mangalkot, Chandrakhetgarh, Tilpi etc.

Early historic period ushered a new era by introducing many new elements of art and culture of profound historical significance in the society which were hitherto unknown. For example: introduction of coinage system, extensive use of burnt bricks in construction work, introduction of ring-wells for sewerage system, new ceramic types, time-bound terracotta's and overseas and overland trade were some of them. All these new elements brought about a basic change in the socio-economic perspective in this land. Here,

terracotta art with reference on the animal depiction on it of the period 200BCE -300CE will be highlighted, since this period has witnessed the efflorescence of terracotta artistic activities.

This period between 200BCE - 300CE is of considerable importance for the development of terracotta art. Gangetic valley has an elaborate network of perennial rivers as a result the region is riverine in character. The easy availability of suitable clay in riverine plains has made terracotta or "baked clay" as the most common and cheapest medium of art expression from the ancient time. Moreover, it's easy amenability for which one could mould it easily with the play of fingers and passive, least resisting character has made this most popular medium of art expression of creative urges.

The discovery of innumerable terracotta figurines and objects belonging to this period from the various excavated and explored early historic sites of Ganga valley suggest the growing popularity of this art tradition and style in this region. Early terracotta's from Ganga valley as a category of archaeological objects overshadow all other aspects of material culture. Their number is often next to pottery. A large number of terracotta

figurines and plaques of human and animals have been reported from these sites. The depiction of animal in terracotta has therefore, a bearing on the social and environmental condition of the period to which it belongs.

The important sites which have yielded animal figurines are Ahichhatra (Pd III)[3], Atranjikhhera(Pd IV)[4], Hastinapura(Pd III)[5], Mathura(Pd II)[6], Sravasti(Pd II)[7], Kausambi(Pd III)[8], Rajghat(Pd II)[9], Kumrahar(Pd II)[10], Pataliputra (Pd III)[11], Chandraketurgarh (Pd III)[12], Clive House (Pd III)[13], Bangarh (Pd II) [14], Tilpi (Pd III) [15], Mangalkot(Pd III-IV) [16], Tamluk(Pd III) etc.

### **1.2 Early Historic Sites (excavated) of Upper and Middle Ganga Valley with Animal terracotta findings are :**

- 1) Kousambi : Elephant, Camel, Crocodile, Parrot, Nilgaya [17], Boar, Rhinoceros, Dog, Crane, Fox, Wild boar, Horse, Peacock, Lion, Bull, Deer, Bird.
- 2) Vaisali : Bull, Elephant, Monkey, Tortoise, Goat, Ram, Lion, Horse, Dog, Camel, Bird, Sheep.
- 3) Ahichhatra : Humped Bull, Elephant, Ram, Camel, Deer, Horse, Pig.
- 4) Atranjikhhera : Elephant, Ram, Horse
- 5) Hastinapur : Elephant, Horse, Deer, Bull.
- 6) Mathura : Bull, Elephant, Monkey, Fish, Ram, Dog, Deer, Horse, Bird, Lion.
- 7) Sonkh : Elephant, Parrot, Ram, Horse, Buffalo.
- 8) Rajghat : Dog, Monkey, Crocodile, Buffalo, Ram, Bird, Naga figure, Camel, Lion, Rhinoceros, Bull, Elephant, Horse, Rabbit, Bull, Bird, Ram.
- 9) Bauxar : Elephant, Ram, Horse, Deer.
- 10) Kumrahar : Bull, Ram, Horse, Lion, Tiger.
- 11) Pataliputra : Elephant, Ram, Horse, Deer.
- 12) Bhita : Elephant, Pig, , Lion, Bull.

### **1.3 Early Historic Sites (excavated) of Lower Ganga Valley with Animal Terracotta findings:**

- 1) Bangah: Crane, Ram, Fish.
- 2) Tamluk: Monkey, Elephant, Horse, Ram, crane.
- 3) Mangalkot: Horse, Bull, Ram, Elephant.
- 4) Chandraketurgarh: Horse, Elephant, Ram, Tortoise, Bird (Parrot), Lion, Monkey, Lizard, Cow, Crocodile, Rhinoceros, Bull, Deer, Dog, Owl, Peacock, Duck, Frog, Fish.
- 5) Tilpi: Horse, Elephant, Ram, Parrot, Monkey, Crocodile, Tortoise.
- 6) Clive House: Rhinoceros, Horse, Monkey, Crocodile.
- 7) Deulpota (Explored): Horse, Elephant, Duck, Monkey, Crocodile, Snake, Ram
- 8) Harinarayanpur (Explored): Tortoise, Horse, Ram, Crane and Elephant.

Among the above list ram and dog are mostly used as toys or toy-carts for children. Other animals like bird, horse, Bull, Deer, Rhinoceros, camel, wild boar, Owl, Peacock etc are made mostly in single figurines where as parrot, crocodile, tortoise, crane, deer, are mostly depicted in plaques. Monkey, elephant, horse, ram and bull seem to be very popular as they are depicted both in plaques and figurines and percentage of representation are more than any other animals. The figurines are either hollow or solid (Plate 2).

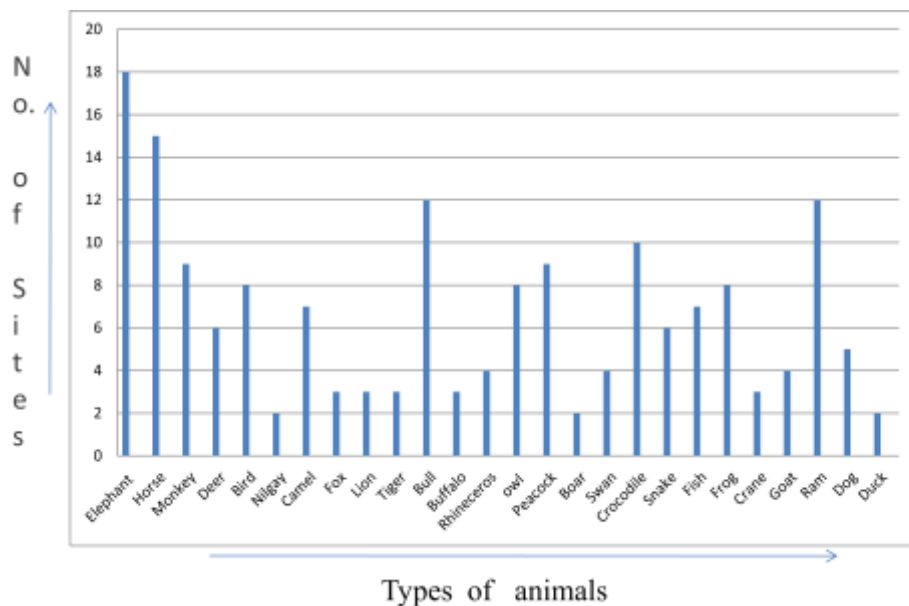


Plate 2 : Diagram showing the percentage of representation of animal types in terracotta in different early historic sites

The period under consideration can be divided into two distinct artistic phase depending on the typological and stylistic characteristics with directional changes in form and content, technique and decoration.

- 1) 200BCE -50CE.
- 2) 50 CE -300CE.

Period from 200BCE-50CE, considered as post Mauryan or Sunga phase in Indian history, is significant for the emergence of new technique in terracotta art. The hand modeled technique for preparation of terracotta figurines continued from the preceding era but introduction of single mould is most important landmark.

The study reveals that there was marked increase in the variety and number of animal figurines in

early historic period. Depiction of some animals like bull, elephant, horse and naga figures have been continued from the preceding period with certain changes in the first phase (200BCE-50CE). But among the animals represented for the first time in terracotta of this period are buffalo, crocodile, rabbit, monkey, camel, bear. Besides the above, certain special categories were introduced like 1) figurines with rider (Mathura, Chandraketugarh) 2) animals represented in medallions [17] (Mangalkot).

Majority of animal figurines from Ganga valley belonging to this period were highly decorated. Almost all of the elephant figures, which were a dominating figure of the age, are richly decorated (Plate 3 a &b).



Plate 3 a &b : Decorations on Elephants.

The common decoration patterns were 1) Wheel 2) Leaves 3) Knobs of floral design 4) Hole 5) Punches 6) Clay band with stamp design 7) Swastika design done by Punching and stamping technique. The profuse decoration on animal figures belonging to this period show a decline in the succeeding period and absent in preceding period.

The **second phase** that is 50 CE – 300CE coincides with the Kushan period. The Kushan, were the nomadic people of Central Asia and hailed beyond the Pamir and Oxus region. Sometimes around the beginning of the Christian era, they crossed the river Indus and stepped down in Northern India and became the ruling power for next three centuries. Pataliputra of Bihar, that is located in the middle Ganga valley was the eastern most extension of the imperial Kushana empire in this subcontinent. New stylistic developments were there due to influx of new racial elements. i.e: Introduction of double moulds. Double mould came in use with continuation of single mould as well as hand modeling.

Figurines of this period were generally made of larger size and decoration was nominal than the preceding period. Probably this large size figures owned their inspiration from the prevailing stone medium of sculptural art. As the terracotta animal figurines were meant to be handled by people, the figurines were made hollow from inside to reduce their weight.

Elephant, horse, bull, ram and many other animals figures like dog, camel, tortoise, naga, monkey, bird etc were noticed in terracotta from this level, which were already represented in the terracotta art of preceding period. Among the new animals represented in the terracotta during this period are lion, tiger, goat, nilgaya, wild boar and Rhinoceros. It has been particularly noted on sites like Mathura (PdII) [18], Ahichhatra, Rajghat (Pd III), Bhita

[19], Kousambi [20], Vaisali [21]<sup>i</sup>, Kumrahar, Chandraketugarh, Mangalkot, Tilpi. Excavations of these sites indicate a large scale increase in the building activity also during the time under review. It is therefore, not surprising that overall development in cultural sphere is also reflected in the modeling of different kinds of animals in clay.

#### **1.4 Significance of Depicted Animals:**

There are 31 types of animals which have been depicted in the terracotta plaques or figurines in our concerned time frame. Among them 24 species are aerial or atmospheric habitat (8 are domestic and 17 are forested) and 6 (tortoise, frog, fish, snake, crocodile, crane,) are aquatic in nature. They certainly illuminate very deep and positive reflex of the society and creativity of the people with whom they were associated.

The incorporation of animals in the themes and subjects of terracotta art of our concerned time frame give us a comprehensive and coherent picture of social life. This period reached its climax in economic flourishing through the proliferation of trade and commerce and witnessed a stable and powerful governance, experienced socio-cultural affluency with the touch of urban sophistication. This has been symbolized through the depiction of different themes where animals play an authentic part to make it more realistic and meaningful. They have depicted the animals which were commonly found in their surroundings and associated with their daily life.

#### **1.4.a Birds:**

Among the birds, 'Sarasa' (Plate 4) or crane, peacock, dove, owl and parrot seem to be the most favorite birds of this region.



Plate 4 : Crane, Bangarh



Plate 5: Peacock, Chandraketugarh

It is oftenly represented along with the female figure and shown playing or pecking at the flower or feeding them (Mathura, Chandraketugarh, Pataliputra, Sonkh). A torso of an woman holding her pet near her breast possibly teaching the bird to talk, Mother bird feeding her chick, cock with chicks playing merrily, bird flattering its wings etc are some of the good examples of the study of nature. Depiction of peacock (Plate 5) in the architectural part for its beautification reflects the artist's aesthetic sense.

These two animals have been most abundantly found in terracotta art of this period. They were given the special treatment in execution and decoration in keeping the importance attached to them. Undoubtedly, both of these animals are related to transportation and communication during the period under review and above all, as symbol of royalty and power, they attracted the attention of people specially the elite class. Elephant riding, hunting scene on elephant, elephant is trying to uproot a coconut tree (Plate 6), elephant pulling the chariot, elephant playing with the ball, etc are some common social themes of this period.

#### **1.4.b Elephant and Horse :**



Plate 6 : Elephant: Mathura  
(Courtesy: Bharat Kala Bhavan)

On the other hand, horse was an item of trade. There are many evidential proofs that clearly reflect the horse trading from the ports of early historic Bengal. Works of scholars like Mukherjee (1993-94) [22], Chakraborty (1992) [23] on maritime trade of horses clearly indicate that, the horses, specially war horse were always a rarity in India and not the indigenous animal of this land. The Kushan people, who were very skilled traders used to bring horses from the north-western province and exported them to the South-East Asian countries through the ports of lower Bengal.

Seals, terracotta plaques of this period are convincing proof of this fact. Four horses drawing a chariot, galloping horse, horse as a mount or as toy-carts for children, female horse rider are some of the common type.

#### **1.4.c Ram:**

It has been depicted mostly as toy-cart, a playing item of children and abundantly found in terracotta on all early historic sites. Ram as a mount, is shown along with deity Agni. In the hunting scene goat (Plate 7), deer, dog are also commonly found.

Deer hunting was one of the common pass-time of elite and royal class people as a good number of this theme in terracotta have been found from

Mathura, Sonkh, Chandraketurag, Bangarh, Tilpi, Pataliputra.



Plate 7: Goat : Kausambi  
(Courtesy: Bharat Kala Bhavan, BHU)

**1.4.d Bull:**

This animal is most commonly employed in the agricultural operations and was the basic necessities to the people of fertile alluvial land of

Ganga valley for cultivation. Dancing bull, humped bull has been profusely found in terracotta from Ganga valley region which signifies its high demand in agricultural life (Plate 8).



Plate 8: Humped Bull : Mangalkot

**1.4.e Fish:**

This aquatic animal is among one of the favourite food items of the Ganga valley region. Fisherman community strongly depends on this profession for their livelihood specially in the lower Ganga valley still today. Fish is considered as an auspicious symbol (associated with fertility) in Indian art. Fish

in mould as well as in plaque like a man catching a fish from water by both the hands (Plate 9), female figure holding twin fishes are commonly found in terracotta that speak its popularity in our concerned time frame.



Plate 9 : Fisherman with fish : Bangarh

#### 1.4.f Rhinoceros:

This is the natural habitat of forested, marshy land. In the marshy, swampy land of lower Ganga valley in Sundarban region, rhinoceros were predominant. Depiction of this animal in the stone pillar gateway of Bhuteswar temple of Mathura of 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE (now preserved in the Indian Museum, Kolkata, Plate 10 a &b) also indicate its strong presence in the forested land of northern India during our concerned time frame. Not only rhinoceros, findings of animals like Crocodile, Snake, frog, crane etc of marshy and swampy land from early historic sites of Ganga valley reflect the environmental and geophysical condition of this region.

The presence of good number of forested animal in this list and their depiction in terracotta of the early

historic period in the Ganga valley region make us believe that the climate, landscape and the topography of the concerned region was congenial for those habitats. The entire tract was covered with thick forest in the ancient period, is known from texts like the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* [24], *Mahābhārata* [25], *the Purānas* [26]. It is known from these sources that the mythical forests like Bansudha (Ghaghara Gomati doāb), *Naimisāranya* (Sitapura district) and Khandaw were located in this region. This inference is not at all implausible in view of the references to jungles in the vicinity of Kausambi in the time of Lord Buddha. Even during the time of the Chinese pilgrims, Fa-Hien (5<sup>th</sup> century CE) and Huein-Tsang (7<sup>th</sup> century CE), the whole area were infested with dense forest [27]<sup>ii</sup>.



Plate 10 a: Rhinoceros : Bhuteswar Temple Stone Panel (Courtesy: Indian Museum)



Plate 10b: Rhinoceros : Chandraketugarh



So, we can conclude that Early historic period of Ganga valley region witnessed a flourishing and matured urban social character where depiction of animals were done in accordance with its natural environmental presence, social urban life and taste of people. The growth of urbanization during this period imparted a cosmopolitan character to the region which resulted in the flourishing socio-economic and cultural upliftment and had a major impact on the terracotta art of the region. Animals became an integral part of this art in the realistic and visual representations of the contemporary scenario where nature and environment played a holistic role in the growth and diversity

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