



Research article

Regional Narrative Expressions of the *Ramayana* in Terracotta Temples of West Bengal

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Abstract

The *Ramayana*, attributed to the sage Valmiki, has profoundly influenced Indian art and culture for centuries. In Bengal, the epic's narratives have inspired a wide range of visual and performance forms, including manuscript and miniature paintings, *patachitras*, sculptures, modern paintings, songs, folk dances, folk dramas, films, and television serials. West Bengal, India, is celebrated for its terracotta temples. The walls of these temples, especially those built from the medieval period to the end of the nineteenth century, are richly adorned with a diverse range of subjects, including key episodes from the *Ramayana*. The present study primarily aims to identify visual representations of the *Ramayana* and to examine the extent to which the regional and cultural factors of Medieval Bengal influenced these representations. Further, the study explores possible sources of inspiration for terracotta artisans behind such visual innovations. The primary materials for this research consist of terracotta panels depicting episodes from the *Ramayana* on temple walls across West Bengal. Secondary sources include books, journals, theses, and conference proceedings accessed through libraries and digital repositories. The study employs the formal analytical approach of art history to examine compositional structure, iconography, and stylistic features, complemented by close literary comparisons to achieve a nuanced understanding of the narratives.

Keywords: *Ramayana*, Terracotta Temples, Visual Storytelling, Regional Interpretation, Medieval Bengali Culture, Krittibas Ojha



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Introduction

The *Ramayana*, ascribed to Valmiki, is an ancient Indian epic composed in classical Sanskrit over several centuries (Ghosh, 2017; Goldman, 1984). The text reflects the manners, customs, social structures, and cultural values of early Indian civilization (Vivekananda, 1958). Its influence extends beyond religious boundaries and continues to inspire audiences worldwide (Chandrashekhar, 2024). Few works of world literature have had such a profound and lasting impact on the lives and thoughts of a people as the *Ramayana* (Chatterjee, 1960, p.9; Macdonell, 1918, p. 574). Paula Richman (1991) notes that throughout Indian history, numerous authors and performers have created diverse retellings of the *Ramayana* across various media, often supported by many patrons (p. 4). Notably, the first serialized adaptation of the *Ramayana*, directed by Ramanand Sagar, began broadcasting on Doordarshan on an experimental basis every Sunday at 9: 30 a.m. starting on 25 January 1987 (Lutgendorf, 1990, p.127). The programme attracted millions of viewers. However, precise figures are difficult to determine, as most people did not own televisions, and many viewers gathered at relatives' homes or local tea shops to watch the broadcast. In some cases, entire villages pooled resources to rent a television set to watch the epic collectively (Richman, 1991, p.4). While Tripathi et al. (1988), in an article in *India Today* titled "Epic Spin-offs", mention an audience of sixty million viewers, the *Illustrated Weekly of India's* "The Ramayan" (1987) reported more than 80 million viewers (p. 9). The size, response, and nature of the television audience of the *Ramayana* led Philip Lutgendorf, a scholar of Hindi *Ramayana* traditions, to remark: "Never before had such a large percentage of South Asia's population been united in a single activity " (Lutgendorf, 1990, p. 128). This proves the immense popularity of the epic. The epic has remained a continuous source of literary inspiration, motivating later authors to compose Sanskrit dramas and poetic works over centuries (Macdonell 1919, p. 574). As Robert P. Goldman (1984) states, "Few works of literature produced in any place at any time have been as popular, influential, imitated, and successful as the great and ancient Sanskrit epic poem, the *Valmiki Ramayana*" (p. 3). Over the centuries, the *Ramayana* has been translated into numerous regional languages of India and many languages globally, making it one of the most widely read and revered texts worldwide (Bhowmick, 1960, p.2; Ghosh, 1960, p. 145; Lutgendorf, 1990, p. 127; Misra, 1960, p.74). This global reach has ensured that the *Ramayana* continues to inspire and guide people, regardless of their linguistic or cultural background (Chandrashekhar, 2024).

Besides intensely inspiring the literary thought of India, the epic has been a major subject of Hindu art throughout the centuries. These include drama, painting, sculpture and bas-reliefs, mask plays, puppet plays and shadow plays, song, poetry, film, web series, and others (Bawa, 2018; Ghosh, 2006; Ghosh, 2017; Pollock, 1993; Ramanujan, 1991, p. 25; Reynolds, 1991, p. 58). Depictions of scenes from the *Ramayana* on temple walls across India and Southeast Asia stand out as some of the most remarkable sculptural representations of the epic stories (Long, 2011, p. 251; Sivaramamurti, 1989, p. 636; Vatsyayan, 1989, p.683). The brick temples of West Bengal, India, are renowned. In addition to a diverse range of subjects, the walls of these temples are also adorned with exquisite carved panels and plaques depicting scenes from the epic, particularly those constructed from the medieval period to the end of the nineteenth century (Ghosh, 2006; Haque, 2014; Michell, 1983, p.3; Ray, 1999). The present study primarily aims to identify visual

representations of the *Ramayana* and to examine the extent to which the regional and cultural factors of Medieval Bengal influenced these representations. Additionally, it explores possible sources of inspiration for terracotta artisans behind such visual innovations.

The primary data source includes depictions related to the *Ramayana* found on the temple walls in West Bengal. Secondary sources comprise books, journals, theses, and conference proceedings accessed through libraries and digital repositories. Photographic documentation was conducted during field visits to various temple sites across West Bengal, constructed in different historical periods. Background information has been collected from temple caretakers, priests, and neighbors. A good number of photographs, wherever found necessary, have been incorporated. The prose English translations and Bengali translation of the *Ramayana* attributed to Valmiki, along with selected editions of the *Krittibasi Ramayana* (also known as *Srirama Panchali*) and its prose English translations, have been followed to identify and interpret the portrayals where necessary (Krittibas Pandit, 1926; Krittibas Pandit, 1997; Krittivasa, 1997; Valmiki, 1870; Valmiki, 1908; Valmiki, 1952). The study employs a formal analytical approach from art history to examine composition, iconography, and stylistic features. Moreover, the insights from the analyses are supplemented by prior literature to better understand the intended objectives. The following section examines selected terracotta panels to trace the impact of regional and cultural factors of medieval Bengal on depictions of the *Ramayana* in the terracotta temples of West Bengal.

Exploring the *Ramayana* Depictions on the Walls of the Terracotta Temples of West Bengal through the Lens of Regional Narrative Expression

Humanization of Epic Characters

In the portrayals related to the Hindu epic, the *Ramayana*, on the walls of several temples, the eternal relationship between mother and child has been quite beautifully depicted, where the ambience clearly conveys the essence of everyday life. For instance, a panel on the wall of the Char-Bangla temple (north), Baranagar, Murshidabad, depicts affection between mother and child with various gestural expressions (Figure 1). The panel depicts three female figures in a seated posture, gently cradling their newborn babies in their laps or holding them close to their chests, emphasizing care, protection, and maternal affection. Shyamal Kumar Ghosh, known for his research on Bengal's terracotta art, has identified them as the wives of Dasharatha (Kausalya, Kaikeyi, and Sumitra) with their newborn babies (Rama, Lakshmana, and the twins, Bharata, and Shatrughna) (Ghosh, 2025, p. 31). Their sitting posture, the way they are holding their babies, their facial expressions, and their particular manner of wearing the sari as worn by simple village housewives, and the pattern on their saree all indicate that the artisan has transformed royal mothers into recognizable figures of everyday rural life. The same essence could be noted in



Figure 1: Kausalya, Kaikeyi, and Sumitra are nursing their newborn babies; from the Char Bangla temple (north) (c. 1755 CE), Baranagar, Murshidabad, West Bengal

another panel found on the wall of the Atchala Raghunandan Temple (1768) at Parul, Hooghly (Figure 2). The horizontal terracotta panel is composed of two adjoining plaques. The plaque on the left portrays a seated woman protectively holding two children. One child is shown seated comfortably on her right thigh, while the other is shown standing at her left side, gently touching her knee. The woman's arms are protectively encircling her children, and her calm, gentle facial expression and affectionate gestures convey the warmth of motherhood. Based on the narrative of the *Krittibasi Ramayana*, these characters have been identified as Sita and her sons Lava and Kusha (Chattopadhyay, 2021, p. 127; Ghosh, 2025, p. 31). The children's attentive posture suggests they are listening intently to their mother, leading to the inference that Sita is recounting the story of Rama to her sons. The plaque on the right, a bearded male figure, possibly a sage or ascetic, is depicted in a seated posture. His raised hands, typical sitting posture, and facial expression suggest the act of meditation or penance. The figure may be identified as Valmiki. Notably, Sita is represented wearing a sari, which is rendered with rhythmic folds, and subtle decorative detailing enhances the sense of movement, and is draped in a style characteristic of rural Bengali women. The decorative motifs on her clothing further reinforce this vernacular aesthetic.

Besides the manifestation of Sita as a mother imbued with a vernacular aesthetic, easily recognizable in everyday rural life, she is also portrayed as a woman who is always respectful to her husband. In several depictions, her gestures reveal her inherent love and respect for him. She is often represented as a shy figure, with her head covered, sometimes holding the end of her sari over it (Figures 3 & 4) (Haque, 2014, 223). Her seated posture and the manner in which she holds the sari highlight an important characteristic attributed to women in rural Bengal, which is



Figure 2: Sita with Laba and Kusha at Valmiki's *ashrama* (hermitage); from the Atchala Raghunandan Temple (c. 1768 CE), Parul, Hooghly, West Bengal



Figure 3: Rama, Sita, and Lakshmana; from the Char Bangla temple (North) (c. 1755 CE), Baranagar, Murshidabad, West Bengal



Figure 4: Coronation of Rama; from the Char Bangla temple (west) (c. 1755 CE), Baranagar, Murshidabad, West Bengal

to be submissive to their husbands. She is also dressed in a manner typical of a rural Bengali housewife. Altogether, these features demonstrate how the epic narrative assumes a distinctly local form and becomes integrated into the cultural landscape of Bengal.

Even while portraying King Dasaratha and his wives, they are often shown in an ordinary household setting. For instance, in a portrayal of the Jor Bangla (Gangeshwar) temple, Baranagar, Murshidabad, Dasaratha is portrayed as a middle-aged potbelly man, wearing common, ordinary attire, and his wives are carved as attending their husband, standing with uplifted hands in the manner of ovation in front of Dasaratha. They have been conceptualized within the sphere of earthly realities. Overall, the portrayals contain picturesque descriptions of Bengali social life and its values in the Middle Ages (Figure 5).



Figure 5: Ayodhya King Dasharatha and his wives; from the Jor Bangla (Gangeshwar) temple (c. 1753 CE), Baranagar, Murshidabad, West Bengal

Placing the epic narrative within a familiar and recognizable everyday contemporary life is also found in the right section of a large terracotta panel on the wall of the Raghunandan temple at Parul in Hooghly (Figure 6). The panel depicts a standing figure engaged in communication with a seated figure positioned on a raised platform. Just behind the standing figure, two palanquin bearers are shown carrying a palanquin. Writers such as Chattopadhyay (2021) and Ghosh (2025) have identified the portrayal as the depiction of Rama and Bharata's meeting at Chitrakuta. The



Figure 6: Meeting of Rama and Bharat at Chitrakuta; from the Atchala Raghunandan Temple (c. 1768 CE), Parul, Hooghly, West Bengal

epic characters are rendered in garments that closely resemble late medieval Bengali attire, and the differences in status and role between Rama, Bharata, and the palanquin bearers are marked by clear differences in costume. Bharata is shown wearing a long, flowing upper garment extending below the knees, closely resembling the *Jama* or *angarkha* commonly worn by Mughal nobility and officials in Bengal during the Mughal period (D'Mello, 2025). In contrast, the palanquin bearers are dressed in short dhotis with bare upper bodies, a mode of dress that corresponds closely to that of the ordinary or working classes in late medieval rural Bengal. This deliberate differentiation in clothing visually reinforces contemporary social hierarchies between elites and laborers. Rama's attire is distinctly different from Bharata's courtly dress and reflects his ascetic identity during exile. He is clothed in simple garments, which express his renunciation of

royal life and moral authority. Besides, the specific type of palanquin depicted in the panel resembles those commonly used by zamindars, wealthy merchants, elites, or officials in late medieval Bengal for short- to medium-distance travel, particularly in urban and semi-rural settings.

Integration of Contemporary Social Reality and Ritual Practice within Epic Narratives

It has been observed that, while depicting episodes from the epic, the artisans often incorporated rituals and customs deeply rooted in local tradition into the epic narratives. A portrayal associated with the *Ramayana* found on the wall of the Jor Bangla (Kesto Rai) Temple, Bishnupur, serves as an appropriate example in this regard (Figure 7). According to various authors, it is a visual representation of the *Sindhu-badha* episode (Chattopadhyay, 2021; Chattopadhyay, 2024; Ghosh, 2025). The sculptor has depicted the event in four panels. The panel located at the bottom-left

portrays King Dasaratha, likely shown in the act of shooting an arrow at Sindhu, the son of the blind hermit Andha Muni. In the upper-left panel, Dasaratha is depicted carrying the lifeless body of Sindhu in his arms; to the left within the same panel, the blind hermit couple is seated. Andha Muni is shown with a slightly inclined head, his right arm extended toward Dasaratha. The bottom-right panel shows Sindhu lying on the laps of his blind parents, highlighting the emotional gravity of the situation. To the left, King Dasaratha is depicted standing in a posture that



Figure 7: Narrative sequence of the *Sindhu-badha* episode in four terracotta panels — Dasaratha shoots Sindhu (bottom left), carries his body to the blind hermit couple (top left), witnesses their grief (bottom right), and offers prayers following the cremation of Sindhu and his parents (top right); from the Jor Bangla (Kesto Rai) Temple (c. 1655 CE), Bishnupur, Bankura, West Bengal

reflects repentance, with his body language conveying deep regret and grief. The top-right panel depicts the final scene of the *Sindhu-badha* episode, portraying the cremation of Sindhu together with his blind parents. The left part of this panel shows a funeral pyre, where three figures are set within a rectangular structure formed by vertically and diagonally arranged logs, likely representing the bodies of the hermit couple and their son Sindhu. The vertical lines suggest stylized flames that are rising from the wooden funeral pyre. The flowing lines at the lower part denote the riverbank, thereby situating the scene near the Sarayu River. The right portion of the panel portrays King Dasaratha seated in a posture of prayer, with his hands cupped in *anjali mudra*

as he offers his respects to the deceased. The typical visual representation of the funeral pyres, cremation at the riverbank, and Dasaratha's prayerful gesture closely aligns with the Bengali *sraddha* rituals related to death and ancestral rites, highlighting the fusion of local ritual customs into the epic tale.

Another depiction, found on two adjacent terracotta panels on the wall of the Char-Bangla Temple at Baranagar in Murshidabad, most probably depicts Jatayu's last rites (Figure 8). The left panel depicts a standing male figure with a bow slung over his left shoulder. He is seen holding the wings of a large, wounded bird with one hand, while in the other he carries a rounded, pot-like vessel. The gesture suggests that he is offering water to the dying bird, an act reminiscent of the Bengali death ritual of providing water to the departing soul. A stylized tree motif in the extreme right situates the scene in an outdoor setting.



Figure 8: Last Rites of Jatayu; from the Char-Bangla temple (North) (c. 1755 CE), Baranagar, Murshidabad, West Bengal

Another bird, positioned slightly apart, appears to observe the scene and may be identified as Sampati. The depiction, therefore, can be interpreted as Rama performing the last rites of Jatayu in the presence of Sampati. The adjoining panel continues the narrative, portraying the cremation of Jatayu. At the middle of the composition is a raised structure formed of stacked wooden logs, forming a funeral pyre, upon which the bird's body rests. Stylized flames rise from the pyre, clearly representing the act of cremation. Two male figures stand on either side of the pyre, their hands held close to their chests in gestures of reverence. These figures are identifiable as Rama and Lakshmana. This portrayal reflects a distinctly regional visual expression, aligned with Bengali funerary customs.

Apart from funerary customs, in several terracotta temples and walls of West Bengal, representations of the marriage scene of Rama and his brothers often carry the essence of Bengali marriage rituals and social customs rather than the ancient courtly wedding described in *Valmiki's Ramayana*. Opinions of scholars elucidate the same (Ghosh, 2025, p. 53; Haque, 2014, p. 109). A panel from the Jor Bangla (Gangeshwar) temple in Baranagar, Murshidabad district, depicts the grand marriage of Rama and his three brothers, with various musicians and social gatherings (Ghosh, 2025, p.52) (Figure 9). The panel is divided into multiple frames, each contributing to a continuous narrative. The central frame depicts a priest at the extreme left, followed by Rama and



Figure 9: Ram and his three brothers standing within a marriage pavilion, and bringing Sita to the wedding ceremony; from the Jor Bangla (Gangeshwar) temple (c. 1753 CE), Baranagar, Murshidabad, West Bengal

his three brothers, standing within a marriage pavilion (locally known as *chadanatala* or *chaya mandapa*). Another priest is shown standing beside them. Rama and his brothers are dressed in *dhotis* and wear *topor*, the traditional conical headgear associated with Bengali marriage ceremonies. The pavilion is decorated with banana trees, a significant element in Bengali wedding rituals. On the right side of the frame, Sita appears to be carried toward the marriage pavilion by relatives, seated on a *piri* (a low wooden stool). A standing figure beside her, possibly King Dasharatha, seems to be offering blessings. The presence of relatives, neighbors, and musicians playing instruments on

both sides of the central frame contribute to a lively and celebratory atmosphere.

Another beautiful visual representation of a ritual related to the marriage of Rama and his brothers is found on the wall of the Jor Bangla (Kesto Rai) Temple, Bishunpur, Bankura (Figure 10). The ritual has been identified by scholars as *mala badal* (the exchange of garlands) between Rama and



Figure 10: Garland exchange scenes of the four couples—Rama–Sita (top left), Lakshmana–Urmila (bottom left), Bharata–Mandavi (top right), and Shatrughna–Shrutakirti (bottom right); from the Jor Bangla (Kesto Rai) Temple (c. 1655 CE), Bishunpur, Bankura, West Bengal.

Sita, Lakshmana and Urmila, Bharata and Mandavi, and Shatrughna and Shrutakirti (Chattopadhyay, 2021; Ghosh, 2025; Haque, 2014, p.109). The portrayal of the exchange of garlands between each brother and their respective bride is shown in four individual frames. Each panel depicts the bride and groom standing face-to-face, with garlands in front of a mangal ghat, and the priests standing, possibly reciting mantras from scriptures and giving them the necessary

instructions. *Mala badal* is an important Bengali wedding ritual, symbolizing mutual acceptance. In this ritual, the bride and groom formally accept each other in front of the assembled guests. The hand-tying ceremony is also illustrated with minute care by the terracotta artisans. The ceremony in a Bengali wedding, known as *kanyadan* or *Kanya Sampradan*, involves the bride's father (or a senior male relative) placing her hand into the groom's and tying them together with a sacred thread or cloth while the priest chants Vedic mantras. It symbolizes the formal transfer of responsibility for the bride to the groom. The ritual takes place at the *chadanatala* after *mala badal* and before the *yajna*. A horizontal terracotta panel from the Sridhar Jiu Temple in Chamka village of Paschim Medinipur district beautifully depicts the hand-tying ceremony of Rama and Sita (Figure 11) (Chattopadhyay, 2024). The figures are arranged closely in a linear composition, each facing forward. The scene unfolds in two parts. On the left, Sita is likely being escorted to the decorated *chadanatala* (marriage mandapa) by her relatives. A female figure at the extreme left appears to be producing *uludhvani* (ululation), while the adjacent woman is shown blowing a



Figure 11: Hand-tying ceremony of Rama and Sita; from the Shridhar Jiu Temple (c. 1778 CE), Chamka, Paschim Medinipur, West Bengal.

conch shell, enhancing the ceremonial atmosphere. On the right, Rama and Sita are seated beneath the *chadanatala*, placing their hands on a *mangal ghat*. The space is populated by relatives, guests, and priests. The priests' distinct hand gestures suggest the recitation of Vedic mantras or the offering of ritual instructions, reinforcing the sacred nature of the ceremony. Another beautiful visual representation of the same ritual is found in a panel from the Pancharatna (five pinnacles) Ratneswar Shiva Temple in Bhattabati village of Mushidabad district (Figure 12). At the centre of the panel, Rama and Sita are depicted seated face-to-face beneath a decorated *chadanatala*. Their hands extend toward a *mangal ghat*, evoking the moment of *Kanya*

Sampradan, the ceremonial hand-tying. Flanking them are two figures, likely priests or close relatives, whose gestures suggest the guidance of ritual procedures. This focal event is encircled by relatives, guests, attendants, and musicians, creating a sense of collective participation. On the right, a cluster of female figures appears engaged in celebratory activities or witnessing the sacred event. In the lower part of the panel, a female dancer entertains a royal figure, accompanied by a group of musicians performing various instruments, thereby enhancing the festive atmosphere. Above the *chadanatala*, three sages are shown seated in relaxed yet attentive poses; to their left, a regal figure likely represents King Dasharatha. Beneath him, two figures are probably identifiable as King Janaka and his brother Kushadhwaja. Although the figures represent characters from the epic, they are rendered in contemporary Bengali attire rather than ancient royal dress.

Sita wears a sari draped in the style of a Bengali bride, while Rama is shown in a *dhoti* with headgear resembling a traditional Bengali *topor*. The *chadanatala* has been adorned with banana trees along with flowers made of shola pith and mango leaves, elements that signify auspiciousness and reflect customary practices of Bengali Hindu weddings. All such things reflect the essence of a typical Bengali marriage ceremony (Haque, 214, p. 109).



Figure 12: Hand-tying ceremony of Rama and Sita; from the Pancharatna (five pinnacles) Ratneswar Shiva Temple (early 18th century), Bhattabati, Murshidabad, West Bengal

The artisan has also depicted a scene commonly associated with rural Bengali wedding traditions, wherein the groom returns home with his bride on the day following the ceremony. A panel from the Shridharlal Navaratna temple in De Para, Jaipur village, Bankura district shows Rama and Sita returning to Ayodhya in a palanquin carried by four bearers (Figure 13) (Ghosh, 2025). The couple is accompanied by a lively musical procession, with performers playing instruments such as the



Figure 13: Ram returns to Ayodhya after marrying Sita; from the right arch panel of the Sridharlal Navaratna Temple (c. 1843 CE), De Para, Joypur, Bankura, West Bengal

nagara, *dholak*, cymbals, bugle, and *shehnai*, enhancing the festive and ceremonial atmosphere of the homecoming.

Furthermore, the terracotta artisans introduced a significant element into their visual representations of the marriage ceremonies of Rama and his brothers, and that is the practice of marrying off young girls to adult men, which is seen in several terracotta panels. For instance, in a depiction found on the wall of the Jor Bangla (Gangeshwar) temple located in Baranagar, Murshidabad, a series of standing male and female figures with certain gestures is arranged in a way that suggests the progression of an event (Figure 14). The portrayal most likely represents the welcoming ceremony of newlywed brides Sita, Urmila, Mandavi, and Srutakirti to their in-laws' house with their husbands Rama, Lakshmana, Bharata, and Satrugana. From the left, each of the first two adjacent frames depicts three standing female figures in almost identical poses. They are



Figure 14: Welcoming ceremony of newlywed brides and Grooms; from the Jor Bangla (Gangeshwar) temple (c. 1753 CE), Baranagar, Murshidabad, West Bengal

likely Dasharatha's wives, Kausalya, Kaikeyi, and Sumitra. Their gestural expression suggests that

they are awaiting the arrival of their sons with their newlywed wives to welcome them. In the next part, the queens of Dasharath are welcoming their sons and brides, where all are shown in certain ceremonial gestures. Their facial features are minimal but expressive enough to convey attentiveness and solemnity. Rama and each of his brothers are shown with a young girl. They are probably Sita, Urmila, Mandavi, and Srutakirti. A female figure is shown standing just next to each young girl, as if guiding them with care. This visual representation aligns with historical social practices prevalent in premodern Bengal. Farquhar (1993), in his book 'A Primer of Hinduism', mentioned that "*a girl should be given in marriage before puberty*" (p. 165), a principle already articulated in the Gautama Dharmasutra (XVIII.21). The practice of young girls being married off to grown-up males was quite predominant in Bengal till the end of the 19th century (Chakrabarti 2016). So, it could be said that the terracotta artisans have embedded a contemporary social reality within an epic narrative. Furthermore, the female figures are depicted wearing long, draped garments like saris. The ordinariness of the attire is closer to the everyday attire of ordinary rural Bengali housewives, rather than royal attire. Even the style of wearing the sari also resembles that of ordinary Bengali village housewives. Their simplicity indicates that the artisan has transformed royal mothers into recognizable characters of everyday rural life. Even the concerned ritual of welcoming brides into their in-laws' home closely reflects local wedding customs. The typical conical-shaped crowns worn by the grooms are very similar to the *topors* of Bengal, and their attire reflects the traditional clothing worn at weddings in the region. This suggests that the artisans visualized epic events through the lens of their own social environment. This kind of fusion makes the epic events familiar or more relatable to regional audiences.

Visualization of Ramayana Episodes within a Devotional Atmosphere

Several panels adorning the walls of terracotta temples in West Bengal suggest that artisans frequently rendered episodes from the *Ramayana* within a deeply devotional atmosphere. In these visual interpretations, epic characters appear imbued with *bhakti-rasa*. This devotional sensibility is conveyed primarily through gestural representation, with figures often depicted with folded hands or in kneeling postures characteristic of devotional practice. Such portrayals reflect a distinctly regional visual expression. In this context, the characterization of Lakshmana sets a perfect example. His profound love and unwavering devotion to his elders are vividly conveyed across numerous depictions. The artist has portrayed Lakshmana as the ideal younger brother—consistently respectful and deeply loyal to his elder brother. Similarly, his behavior towards Sita is marked by restraint and respect, further reinforcing his position as the epitome of decency and moral discipline. Several panels depict him in various gestural expressions, including standing with folded hands (Figure 15), standing outside the dwelling as if guarding it (Figure 3), or standing with an umbrella over the

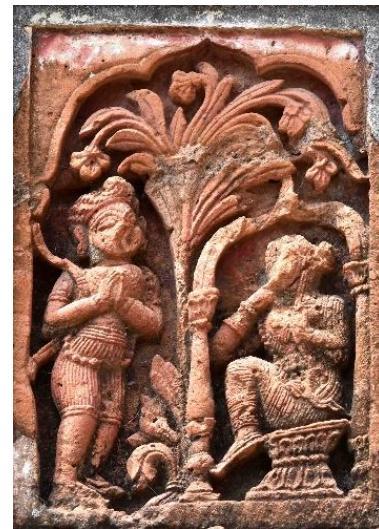


Figure 15: Sita and Lakshmana; from the Char-Bangla temple (west) (c. 1755 CE), Baranagar, Murshidabad, West Bengal

heads of Rama and Sita (Figure 4), visually communicating his inherent sense of duty, humility, and respect toward his elders. A similar devotional sensibility is evident in the portrayals of Hanumana and the monkey king Sugriva, who are frequently depicted kneeling or bowing before Lord Rama, Lakshmana, and Queen Sita. A terracotta plaque on the wall of the Jor-Bangla Temple at Baranagar in Murshidabad, West Bengal, depicts two closely positioned figures beneath an arched niche (Figure 16). On the right, an archer adorned with a *vanamala* (a garland of flowers) and holding a bow in his left hand may be identified as Rama, suggested by his calm and composed posture. On the left, perhaps Hanumana is portrayed kneeling with his head bowed and touching Rama's feet. This gesture expresses the intimacy of the devotee–Lord relationship, as well as the emotional bond of the guru–disciple tradition. The arched frame functions as a sanctified space, almost like a shrine, intensifying the sacred feeling of the moment. Hanumana's body language conveys humility, respect, and emotional surrender. This depiction closely aligns with the episode of the first meeting between Rama and Hanumana as narrated in Kṛttibas Ojha's *Ramayana* (Krittibas Pandit, 1997, p.105). Another portrayal shows a monkey figure, identifiable as Hanumana, standing before Sita, likely delivering Rama's message along with his ring. Sita, in turn, is shown blessing Hanumana by gently touching his head (Figure 17). Here too, the sense of *bhakti* is strongly expressed through gesture and posture. Hanumana's calm physical posture and body language reflect the aesthetics of devotion, suggesting that his heart is overwhelmed with divine love upon meeting Sita. The presence of *bhakti-rasa* is also clearly seen in a depiction found on the left-side panel above the arch of the Char-Bangla Temple (west), which presents a panoramic battle scene from the *Ramayana* (Figure 18). While Rama and Ravana are engaged in fierce combat, several monkey warriors and accompanying figures are shown standing with folded hands, resembling devotees rather than active warriors.



Figure 16: Hanuman kneeling down before Lord Rama; from the Jor Bangla (Gangeshwar) temple (c. 1753 CE), Baranagar, Murshidabad, West Bengal



Figure 17: Hanuman's meeting with Sita at the *Ashoka Kanana* (a forest) at Lanka; from the Jor Bangla (Gangeshwar) temple (c. 1753 CE), Baranagar, Murshidabad, West Bengal

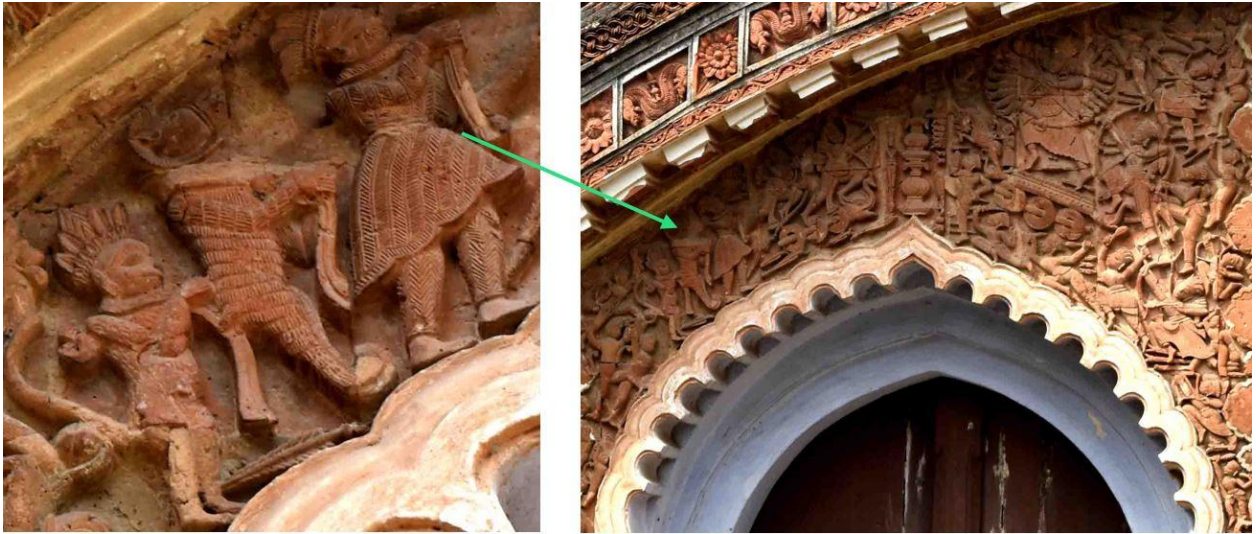


Figure 18: The battle scene; from the Char-Bangla temple (west) (c. 1755 CE), Baranagar, Murshidabad, West Bengal

Furthermore, an unusual yet significant portrayal found on the walls of several terracotta temples in West Bengal presents an unconventional characterization of Ravana (Figures 19 & 20). In these panels, when confronted by Rama, Ravana is shown praising him instead of engaging in combat. Rama commonly appears in an attacking stance with bow and arrow, while Ravana, depicted with his ten heads, is shown with folded hands in *anjali mudra*. These representations emphasize Ravana's devotion toward Rama and transform the demon king into a devotee. This episode is popularly identified as Ravana's final prayer before the war (Banerjee, 1960, p. 157; Haque, 2014, p. 153; Krittibas Pandit, 1997, p. 292; Michell, 1983, p. 134).



Figure 19: Ravana's last prayer; from the Char-Bangla temple (North) (c. 1755 CE), Baranagar, Murshidabad, West Bengal

The sources of Inspiration for the Terracotta Artisans behind such Visual Innovations

The study finds that the portrayals of Ramayana episodes on the walls of the terracotta temples in West Bengal have been shaped by multiple interrelated sources, among which the *Krittibasi*



Figure 20: Detail of the panel where Ravana begs the pardon of Rama with folded hands; from the Jor Bangla (Gangeshwar) temple (c. 1753 CE), Baranagar, Murshidabad, West Bengal

Ramayana, which has often served as a primary narrative foundation for terracotta artisans, deserves special attention.

Krittibasi Ramayan is a widely read version in Bengal written in the first half of the 15th century CE (Chandrashekhara, 2024; Ganguly, 1960, p. 159; Haque, 2014, p.108). In this version, the poet has unhesitatingly incorporated elements of his local surroundings, in which reflections of medieval Bengali life and culture are clearly evident (Ghosh, 1948, p.76). The text offers a picture of Bengali society, including its customs, ceremonies, and moral and religious values, thereby providing a thinly veiled representation of the contemporary social milieu (Annadasankar & Ray, 1942, p.34; Ghosh, 1960, p.146, & Haque, 2014).

The terracotta artisans of Bengal were deeply influenced by the *Krittibasi Ramayan*, which resonated more with the masses' understanding than Valmiki's Sanskrit text (Ghosh, 1960; Islam, 1960, p. 101; Ray, 2012). Though Dinesh Chandra Sen (1911) noted that artisans read this version (p.97), several scholars argue that this influence was not direct; rather, it was transmitted through oral and performative traditions (Kim, 2021, p. 4; Pal, 2021, p.108; Sen, 2023). The version was widely circulated in the form of *Panchalisongs*, performed at village gatherings through recitation, singing, and acting (Chattopadhyay, 2017; Ghosh, 1960, p. 145; Haque, 2014, p.108; Mahapatra, 1960; Sen, 2013). As a result, his *Ramayana* was carried from mouth to mouth among the masses (Ghosh, 1960, p. 145). Therefore, in addition to reading them, the terracotta artisans were more likely to hear these stories.

The study has drawn on selected printed editions of the *Krittibasi Ramayana* to examine the impact of Krittibas Ojha's retelling on the visual representations of the epic in the terracotta temples of West Bengal (Krittibas Pandit, 1926; Krittibas Pandit, 1997). However, it should be noted that, as Sukhendusundar Ganguly (1960) has observed, these printed versions differ significantly from the original manuscripts (p.160). The editors of these recensions exercised considerable freedom in shaping the text, often to enhance its popular appeal. As a result, such editions cannot be regarded as fully authentic or as critical recensions of the original work. The task of establishing a critical recension of the *Krittibasi Ramayan* is further complicated by the absence of an autograph manuscript or any single dependable base text (Mahapatra, 1960, p. 140 & Bhowmick, 1960, p.2). Considering these limitations, the present study relies on available printed editions

preserved in national digital archives, particularly those accessible through Archive.org, to correlate temple depictions with Krittibas's narrative descriptions.

A close examination of the descriptions of the wedding ceremonies of Rama and his brothers in these editions suggests that the narrative transforms the epic wedding into a wedding ceremony closely aligned with contemporary Bengali Hindu marriage practices. Krittibas has incorporated detailed accounts of rituals that closely resemble those observed in traditional Bengali wedding ceremonies (Ghosh, 1960, p.147). This veneration of the wedding ceremony is not limited to written form, but parallel visual manifestations can also be seen in the terracotta temple of West Bengal (Michell, 1983; Haque, 2014, p.109). That is evident when one closely compares the vividly described rituals found in the selected verses from the *Bibaha Parba* (marriage episode) in the *Adikanda* of the concerned editions of the *Krittibasi Ramayana* and their corresponding iconographic representations in the terracotta panels (Krittibas Pandit, 1926, pp 79-90; Krittibas Pandit, 1997, pp 27-32). In these verses, recurrent reference of typical Bengali marriage rituals such as *kanyadan* (giving away of the bride), *galar mala karila badal* (exchange of garlands), *shankh dhwani* (conch-shell blowing), *uludhwani* (ululation), *kalasi upara amra sakha* (mango leaves on a pitcher), *mathay topor* (crown on head) etc, and beyond these marriage rituals, the mentions of *nimantranna* (invitation), *nana badya baje* (a variety of music plays), *chaya mandapa* (marriage pavilion), *chaturddeole chariya* (travelling on a palanquin) are essential parts in Bengali marriage vividly noted. The same ritual elements or motifs mentioned in the text are visually echoed in the terracotta panels. For instance, the ritual of *kanyadan* (giving away the bride) is visually represented on temple walls through the iconic gesture of the bride's hand being placed into the groom's, mediated by a priestly figure beneath a decorated *chaya mandapa* (marriage pavilion), where women are often seen gathering joyfully to witness the wedding (Figure 12). Further, the central event is seen surrounded by the active participation of the invited relatives and guests, while the musicians are seen playing their respective instruments. Next, the presence of the *mala badal* ritual on the temple's wall (Figure 10). The moment of *mala badal* is visually depicted through the frontal positioning of the bride and groom figures, each holding garlands, while the priest is performing the marriage rites. Similarly, references in the text to *Shankha Dhwani* are echoed in terracotta panels in the presence of female figures holding conch shells (Figure 11), further reinforcing the connection between textual description and visual representation.

Besides the resemblance between the textual descriptions and the visual representations of the marriage rituals, the characterizations of epic figures also deserve special attention. The epic characters in the *Srirama Panchali* are not mere imitations of those in the *Valmiki Ramayana* (Annadasankar & Ray, 1942, p.34). Instead, the poet reconfigures their supreme divinity within the framework of everyday human experience; he endowed them with earthly attributes while carefully preserving their supernatural and divine nature (Ghosh, 1960, & Haque, 2014). The characters retain their original names of Rama, Sita, or Lakshmana, but they are representations of Bengali men and women (Ghosh, 1948, p.76). The same essence can be noted in the portrayals. In these portrayals, the epic characters become closely identified with the people of the rural setting and appear not as distant deities but as familiar figures. They emerge as real, sympathetic, and lovable, reminiscent of their depiction in the *Srirama Panchali* (Figures 1 & 2).

Further, the intense feelings of love and devotion are evident in the terracotta artisans' characterization of epic figures, where the emotional and devotional framework of Krittivas Ojha's *Ramayana* likely plays a significant role. Krittibas was deeply moved by the theme of *bhakti*, and that is evident in the narration of several episodes of the *Srirama Panchali*. The poet lived in the Vaishnava era, and no wonder that the devotional elements have been introduced in his creation, probably under the Vaishnava influence (Das, 1926, p.34; Ganguly, 1960, p. 161, & Ghosh, 1960, p.146; Haque, 2014, p.109). A close examination of the visual representations of Hanumana reveals a deep sense of *bhakti* (devotional love) (Figure 16). In such depictions, artisans have depicted him through gestures that reflect a devotional aesthetic, closely aligned with his representation in the *Krittibasi Ramayana*. In this version, the poet places considerable emphasis on Hanumana's devotional identity as Rama's servant (Ganguly, 1960, p. 159), whereas in the *Valmiki Ramayana*, his character is represented more through duty, intelligence, and acts of selfless service.

This distinction becomes particularly evident when one examines key episodes such as Hanumana's first meeting with Rama and his encounter with Sita in the Ashoka Vatika, as narrated in the two texts. In the *Valmiki Ramayana* (1908), when Hanumana first encounters Rama, he (disguised as an ascetic) impresses him through linguistic refinement. Rama explicitly praises the grammatical precision, clarity, and intellectual depth of Hanumana's speech (Kishkindha Kanda, Sargas 3-5) (pp.559-564). By contrast, in the *Krittibasi Ramayana*, Hanumana's response is more emotionally charged; his speech and actions reflect a distinctly devotional mood rather than merely diplomatic skill. This sensitivity is clearly sensed in the following transliterated verses, where Hanumana addresses Rama and Lakshmana:

"Munibese hanumana dekhe duijana I
Tapasbira besa dhari kare sambhasana II
Hanumana bale, prabhu ye dekhi akara I
Abasya haibe kona rajara kumara II
Chandra suryya jini rupa bhrame bhumitale I
Gaganamandal chari kena banasthale II "

(Transliteration from *Sachitra Saptakanda Ramayan*, Ed. Ramananda Chattopadhyay, 1926, p.163)

Translation: "O Lord, I have seen this (ascetic form of yours), but you appear to belong to a royal family. It looks as if the sun and the moon have descended on earth. Leaving the sky, they have started moving in the forest" (Krittivasa, 1997, p. 187).

This contrast is further evident in the episode of Hanumana's meeting with Sita in the Ashoka Vatika, which is also frequently depicted on temple walls. In the *Valmiki Ramayana* (1908), Hanumana worries about his choice of language, fearing that speaking in Sanskrit might cause Sita to mistake him for Ravana. He therefore chooses to speak in a human dialect to gain her trust (Sundara Kanda, Sarga 30, verses 17–18) (p. 782). When he finally addresses her, he introduces himself in formal and diplomatic terms as *Ramaduta* (the messenger of Rama), emphasizing his mission (Sundara Kanda, Sarga 34, verses 1–2) (pp. 788-789). His approach thus appears measured, strategic, and task-oriented. In contrast, the *Krittibasi Ramayana* presents a more intimate and devotional interaction. In one instance, upon hearing Rama's name from Hanumana, Sita responds with maternal affection, "Where are you, O my son?" Within moments, "the great warrior Hanumana appeared before Sita and prostrated before her in reverence," and identified himself not merely as a messenger of Rama but as his devoted servant. He also added that, "... accept my

prayer; I am your son, and you are my mother” (Krittivasa, 1997, pp. 266–267). This emotional dimension is echoed in visual representations, where Hanumana is often depicted in a posture of devotion with folded hands before Sita (Figure 17).

Besides Hanumana, another panel frequently found on terracotta temple walls depicts the rakṣasa king Ravana with a distinctive gesture that reflects his devotion toward Rama (Figures 19 & 20). In these representations, Rama is shown in an attacking stance, armed with a bow and arrow, while Ravana is depicted with folded hands in *anjali mudra* (Haque, 2014, p. 109). This unusual iconographic feature of Ravana is closely aligned with his representation in the *Krittibasi Ramayana*. Krittibasa introduces this notable trait to the character of Ravana, that is, a sense of devotion toward Rama (Banerjee, 1960; Ganguly, 1960, pp. 161–162). The following transliterated verses illustrate Ravana’s revelation of his true identity to Rama just before his death, clearly expressing his devotion:

*Anathera natha tumi patitapavana I
Daya kare mastakete deha sricarana II
Ciradina ami dasa carane tomara I
Sapete raksasakule janama amara II*

(Transliteration from *Sachitra Saptakanda Ramayan*, ed. Ramananda Chattopadhyay, 1926, p. 431)

Translation: “You are the Lord of destitutes, and the purifier of the downtrodden. Kindly place your feet over my head. I have been a slave at your feet always and was born in the demon race because of a curse” (Krittivasa, 1997, p. 197).

Conclusion

It is clear from the above discussion that the process of translating the Ramayana into visual form on temple walls is not merely a textual illustration of the *Valmiki Ramayana*. Instead of recreating the ambience of Valmiki’s ancient India, it reflects Bengal of its own time. Terracotta artisans have skillfully embedded elements of social life, material culture, and the contemporary social reality of medieval Bengal within the epic narratives. These features closely align with the *Krittibasi Ramayana*, indicating that this version served as an important source of inspiration for the visual representation of the Ramayana created by temple artisans across Bengal.

Concerning the aesthetic sensibility of West Bengal’s terracotta artisans, these sculptural representations of the *Ramayana* episodes stand as a testament to their artistic excellence. The way they have beautifully rendered multiple moments of an event within the limited space of a small terracotta plaque or panel reflects remarkable skill and ingenuity. Notably, the size of these plaques typically ranges from 6 to 8 inches (Ray, 2013). Consequently, they have adopted a compact storytelling approach, in which each panel captures the climactic moment of an episode. This highlights their ability to capture and portray the most critical narrative moments with precision and creativity. In this context, a statement by John C. McCrae (writing as Wildbow) is particularly relevant: “Limitations foster creativity. Tell an artist to paint anything, and he may struggle, but tell him to create something specific, in a set amount of time, for a certain audience, and these constraints might well push him to produce something he might never have come up with on his own. We grow and evolve by testing ourselves” (McCrae [Wildbow], 2011–2013).

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