

# A SOCIO-STYLISTIC STUDY OF TERRACOTTA ELEPHANTS AT AHICHCHHATRA: A MULTICULTURAL SITE OF UPPER GANGA PLAIN, CENTRAL INDIA

Deepali More<sup>1</sup>, Bhuvan Vikrama<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Ms, Deccan College Post Graduation & Research Institute, INDIA, [ramsuta30@gmail.com](mailto:ramsuta30@gmail.com)

<sup>2</sup>Dr, Archaeological Survey of India, Guwahati Circle, INDIA, [bhushri007@gmail.com](mailto:bhushri007@gmail.com)

## Abstract

Ahichchhatra, (20° 22" N; 79° 08' 12" E), the ancient capital of Northern Panchala kingdom as mentioned in Mahabharata, is located near the Ramnagar village of Bareilly district, Uttar Pradesh. The site is located between Aril and Peria rivers, the tributaries of Ramganga. Geologically, this area forms a part of Indo – Gangetic alluvium formation prominently consisting of clay and sand. This site roughly spread across 5.50 sq.km area is prominently located above the surrounding agricultural fields was identified and excavated primarily by Cunningham in 1862 followed by A. Ghosh in 1940. This revealed the chronology dating from 600 B.C.E to 1100 C.E. Culturally the site dates back to period of Ochre Colored Pottery (OCP), Painted Grey Ware (PGW), Northern Black Polished Ware (NBPW) and early historic phases respectively. Among all the regions within the Indian sub-continent, the region of Ganga-Yamuna doab has yielded majority number of terracotta objects both in the exploration and excavation. This site has yielded various terracotta figurines consisting of animals, humans and miscellaneous terracotta objects. Within this, elephant appears to be the most prominent in the category of animal figurines at the site. The site seems to have been gradually transformed into a large city along with a rich artistic tradition. Artistic expressions are usually guided and shaped by society through its evolving concepts and developing beliefs. This ancient city has so far produced plenty of examples to prove it. This paper is an attempt to understand the cognition behind the artistic expressions considering the variety of creative elephants. This paper thus intends to prove the stylistic evolution of terracotta elephant figurines and its correlation to artistic development of the society at the ancient settlement of Ahichchhatra.

**Keywords:** Ahichchhatra, Multicultural site, archaeological excavations, Elephant figurines, Indo-Gangetic plain.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Terracotta is derived from a Latin word which literally means "baked earth". It is a type of earthen ware which is a type of ceramic made of clay either glazed or unglazed. Terracotta is the term normally used for sculpture made in earthenware, and also for various practical uses including vessels, flower pots, water and waste water pipes, roofing tiles, bricks, and surface embellishment in building construction. In archaeology and art history, "terracotta" is often used to describe objects such as figurines not made on a potter's wheel. Vessels and other objects that are or might be made on a wheel from the same material are called earthenware pottery. However, terracotta differs from pottery, mainly on the basis of utility purpose.

Terracotta art today is accepted as one of the major mediums of Indian art. An art is a creative process which goes through different stages of evolution and reflects the type of society and its culture. Two major reasons which probably made this art popular since the ancient times are the plasticity and the abundant availability of clay. These two aspects played a dominant role in the gradual development of its production. These art forms are significant from the archaeological point of view, as such art forms can be used to reconstruct past

society's socio-economic status and religious beliefs. Among all the regions within the Indian sub-continent, the region of Ganga-Yamuna doab has yielded majority number of terracotta objects both in the exploration and excavation. Many historical sites located in Uttar Pradesh such as Mathura, Kampil, Hastinapur, Atranjikhhera, Ahichchhatra, Sonkh, Rajghat have yielded a mass of terracotta material consisting the variety of animal, human and various other forms. Ahichchhatra is a site that had yielded more than 1000 terracotta figurines of Animal, birds and human. Among the animal figurines, Elephant seems to be the most favorite animal of ancient man that has been depicted in the art, while the bull comes second. Apart from this the other animals represented are ram, horse, nilgai, monkey etc. This paper is an attempt to understand the cognition behind the artistic expressions considering the variety of creative elephants.

## 2. EXCAVATIONS AT AHICHCHHATRA

The site Ahichchhatra (20° 22" N; 79° 08 12" E) is presently confined to the great fortress, situated at a distance of 11 km north of Aonla, the tehsil headquarters of Bareilly District, Uttar Pradesh (Fig.1). It was formed a part of the ancient country of Panchala which was later, divided into north and south Panchala. It is also mentioned in the Mahabharata as the capital of North Panchala located in the Northern Ganga-Yamuna Doab region. Excavations at Ahichchhatra have been carried out at several instances by different excavators such as Alexander Cunningham in 1862-63 (Cunningham 1871), Fuhrein 1888 (Fuhrer, 1892, pp 1-4) and after the recommendations of L. Woolley in 1939, by Rao Bahadur K.N. Dikshit in 1939-40, A. Ghosh in 1940-44, in 1963-65 by N.R. Banerjee (IAR 1963-64, pp 43-44, 1964-65, pp 39-42) in ACT<sup>1</sup> I and II<sup>2</sup> and later in 2004 by D. Dyalan near north-western gateway. Excavations at the site continued under different directors- in 2007-08, 2008-09 by D.N. Dimri, in 2009-10 by Siddiqui, in 2010-11 by I.D. Dwivedi in 2012-13, and in year 2013-14 by B. Vikrama in different localities both inside and outside of fortification at this site. The excavations by A. Ghosh had given a stratigraphical chronology of the site, however, the position regarding the earliest horizon of the cultural sequences got clarified in 1965 when Dr. N.R. Banerjee brought into light the definite evidence of the chalcolithic phase designated by Ochre colored pottery, further confirmed in excavation during 2012-13 and 2013-14 ( Vikrama, 2016, pg 202).

Table 1 shows the chronology of site allotted to different strata by A. Ghosh. This chronology is based on stratigraphical evidence at the site.

**Table.1 Stratigraphical chronology vs Historical period**

Stratum no.	Historical Period
Stratum VIII	300-200 BCE
Stratum VII	200-100 BCE
Stratum VI and V	100 BCE-100 CE
Stratum IV	100-350 CE
Stratum III	350-750 CE
Stratum II	750-850 CE
Stratum I	852-1100 CE

After almost 150 years of intermittent investigation, with ever growing body of evidence and intelligence, a clear zeal for fresh understanding of stratigraphy was understood after the excavation of A. Ghosh. According to B. Vikrama, this new cultural sequence acknowledges the cultural commonality that of sites belonging to Ganga plain with that of individual uniqueness of Ahichchhatra. He divided the cultural sequence of the site in different periods on the basis of excavated settlement which revealed various phases further on. As per his observation, from the cultural period of Ahichchhatra he termed Period V as Mitra - Panchal dating to 3<sup>rd</sup> BCE- 4<sup>th</sup> CE, the longest surviving local dynasty of Ahichchhatra who formed a major power in Northern India during 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE and continued until the rise of emperor Samudragupta. The stability and the cultural enrichment reached its zenith during the rule of "Mitra-Panchala" period. Ahichchhatra stabilized as the center of Panchala style of terracotta art and architecture (Vikrama, 2016, pp 202-203). The site achieved its maximum expansion during this particular cultural period.

<sup>1</sup> ACT is a abbreviation used for site Ahichchhatra.

<sup>2</sup> Roman numerals such as I & II and so on placed after ACT are represented by the mound numbers at the site.

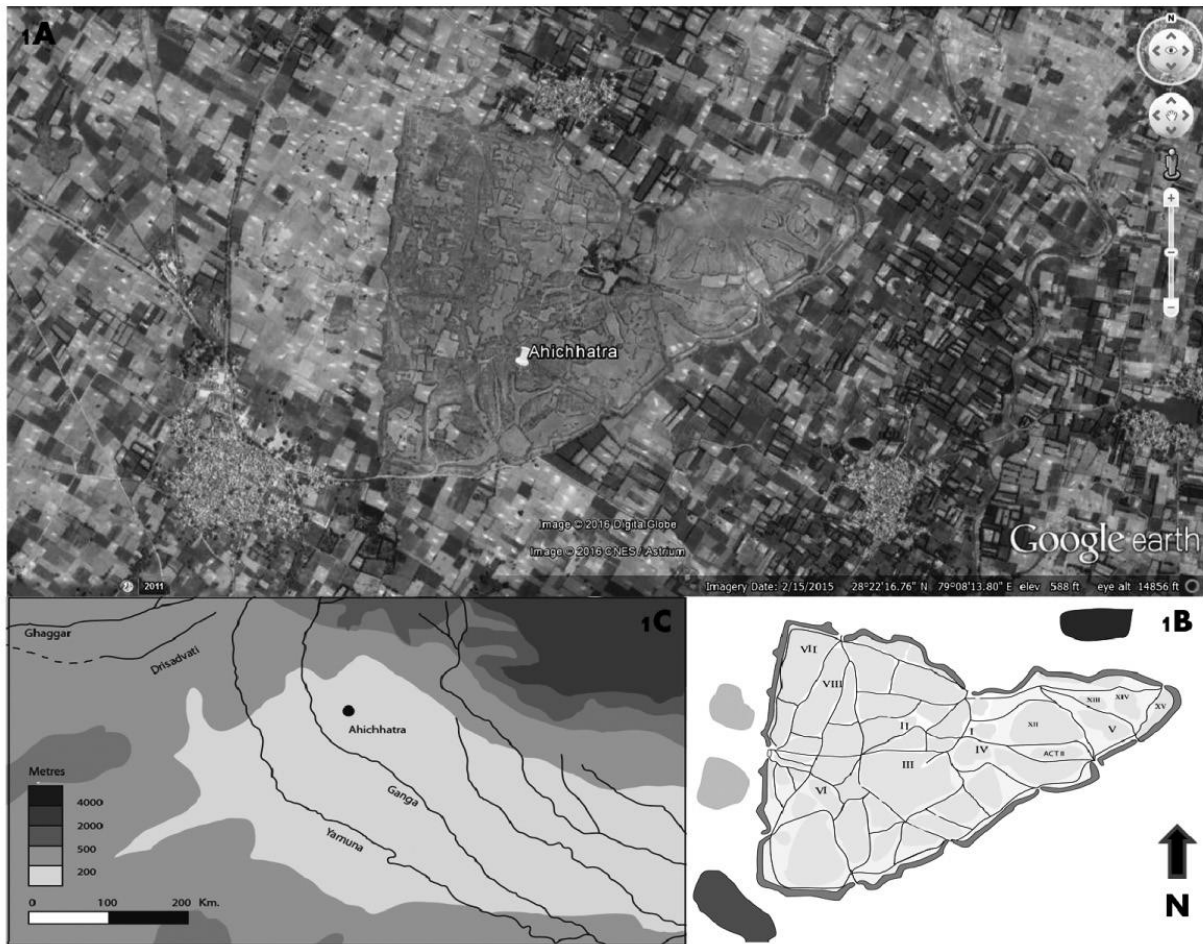


Fig. 1: The site of Ahichchhatra: 1A. Location in the Ganga plain :1B<sup>3</sup>. Google Earth Image of the site 1C.

### 3. DATA AND METHODOLOGY

To study the stylistic and behavioral aspects behind the production of variety of elephant figurines, they are categorized into different types, stylistically. Every distinguished type shows a particular stylistic feature.

The material of the excavated site is currently housed in Agra circle of Archaeological Survey of India. As stated above, this paper is concentrated only on Elephant terracotta figurines. Among the animal figurines, the elephants count to 103 in number as revealed the excavation. All the 103 elephants have been included in this study for documentation. The standard process of documentation has been applied in this study. All the elephant figurines were initially cleaned and made presentable for photography. Later these figurines were measured on the basis of weight and dimensions. Based on this primary documentation, all the selected figurines were categorized under the standard parameters for analytical purpose. This included categorization under measurements, weights, motifs, decorative patterns and so on. On the basis of these categories it was further divided into subcategories like small elephant figurines, undecorated figurines, decorated figurines, elephant riders for the better understanding of the material. Due to lack of sufficient information of primary site data regarding the documentation of antiquity with reference to its mound, trench number and various other lacunae, periodic study seems to be a difficult task in this research. Though an attempt has been made to study the stylistic features of figurines. The following subsections mentions the detailed categorization based on the data collected.

#### 3.1 Small and Undecorated Figurines

Some of the handmade elephant figurines are small in size than the usual size of the other elephant figurines. The shape of eyes of this type of figurine is incised in small circle by a stamp, head is not well shaped but in crude round shape. Apart from this, all the hind and fore legs are small and uneven and the trunk is intentionally flat and attached to the lower body between the forelegs while both tusks are absent.

<sup>3</sup> Roman numerals in 1B represents various mounds scattered on the site.

With the observation of this type of figurines they must have been crafted by small children. Thus, it could be said that the figurines show an artistic perception and imagination of children behind crafting these elephant figurines. These figurines must have been used by small kids as their toys (fig. 2).



Fig. 2 Simple and Undecorated elephants

Another type of figurines is simple in nature and shows heavy body mass. Eyes of them are particularly incised in diamond or oblong shaped and head is in round or slightly pointed style. The trunk of these figurines is prominent and the tusks are depicted without decoration and are fixed with pinching or applied techniques. These figurines are partly moulded and partly handmade in type (fig. 3). Both the discussed types do not show any decorative pattern or motifs on them.



Fig. 3 Simple moulded and handmade variety of elephants.

### 3.2 Decorative Figurines

The main noticeable elephant figurines belong to this type. This type of elephant shows various decorative patterns and motifs from head to toe although the decorative patterns and motifs does not show major changes from period to period. The decoration or ornamentation has been done with incised, applique and pinching technique. Within this type, the facial features like eyes and fine lines on the body are mostly incised while the decoration is done with the mixture of incision and applique techniques (Fig. 4).



Fig. 4. Appliqued and incised figurine.

### 3.3 Elephant Rider & Toy Cart Figurines

Within the collected data a unique subcategory among these figurines was noticeable including the

elephant's rider and toy carts. The riders are shown as mounted on the back of elephant figurine wearing only dhoti as a lower garment. Most of the rider's upper body is broken and missing but their lower body from waist to legs is preserved in situ (Fig. 5). The number of riders on elephant varies from one or two in number. This type of decorative figurines is depicted in highly decorative and ornamented nature. It also has deep incised holes near the end of each legs in appropriate distance. The cavity of holes must have been deliberately left in order to attach the round wheels to toy cart (fig.6). Thus, these types of figurines must have been crafted considering the pure decorative and toy cart purpose.



Fig. 5. Leg portion of rider of elephant



Fig. 6. Hole like cavity at the bottom on all the legs of figurines.

A noteworthy finding of NBPW<sup>4</sup> period from the Ahichchhatra is a grey elephant figurine. It is a pot-based figurine of a majestic elephant of which its long tusks and trunk is raised showing a lug handle attached to its head and its back with a spiral incised line on it. It also has a small perforation on its back. Through the perforation on the back suggests that it was made for water or any form of liquid to be filled inside the belly which could be served through the trunk when tilted. Such kind of unique vessel suggests its special use on special occasions (fig.7).

<sup>4</sup> Northern Black Polished Ware ceramic prominently found in Mahabharata period in Central India.



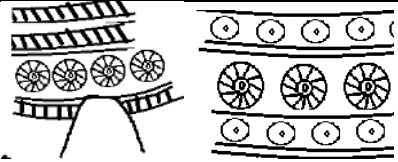

Fig.7. Pot based Grey elephant with perforation at back.

#### 4. TYPES OF DESIGNS AND MOTIFS

Every elephant figurine bears a certain design as well as motif. These decorated figurines are depicted in various types of motifs and designs on their body. Some of the designs can be seen repetitive in nature. Following are the designs and motifs seen recorded frequently on the figurines. Table 2.

Table 2. Motifs and Designs depicted on elephants.

Motifs and Designs	Description
	This type of designs can be seen on the neck portion of the figurines.
	This design is mainly depicted on forehead of the figurine.
	This is depicted on the back.
	These decorative designs could be seen in repeated pattern on the back of figurine. It denotes the decorative cloth on elephant's back.

	<p>These designs are depicted on forelegs</p>
	<p>These motifs are depicted on body of the figurine. As per the recent survey to the Ahichchhatra these motifs are still used for the religious and decoration purpose.</p>

## 5. ETHNOARCHAEOLOGICAL SURVEY

Ethnoarchaeology is an analogical technique of research that involves using information from living cultures to understand the patterns found at an archaeological site. An ethnoarchaeological study involves acquisition of evidence related to ongoing activities in any society and uses those studies to draw analogies from modern behavior to explain and better understand patterns seen in archaeological sites.

On the basis of recent survey carried at Ahichchhatra considering ethno-archaeological perspective, it was observed that the decorated animal figurines like elephant, bull, camel and horse are still being used for decorating the houses mainly during the time of festivals and weddings as the symbol of wealth and purity. Elephant is being depicted in Indian mythology as a symbol of prosperity. Certain designs similar to designs on ancient terracotta were recorded in the nearby villages of Ahichchhatra still being used as decoration. (Fig 8). The survey interview revealed that this symbol is painted deliberately on the walls of main entrance of the house during the festive seasons like Diwali. The villagers believe that this symbol is auspicious in its nature and prevents evil entering to the house. The symbol in figure.8 is documented from the village Baragaon (28°24'17"N 79°10'08"E) located 4.85km to North of the Ahichchhatra excavated mound.



Fig. 8 Decorative symbol on the entrance wall of a villager's house.

Elephant is seen to be commonly depicted on many coins as well as in form of sculptures in ancient Indian architecture. In cave temples of western India like Ajanta, Nasik, Ellora etc. elephant is shown depicted along with figure of Hindu goddess Lakshmi. Such a combined figure of elephant associated with Lakshmi is known as "Gajalakshmi". Lakshmi being a symbol of prosperity and wealth associated with elephant is a common sighting in ancient architecture. Thus, a depiction of elephant is associated with prosperity in many Hindu families seen even today.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Most of the terracotta figurines are dated from 300 BCE to 850 CE. This period is associated with the period of Mitra-Panchala to Guptas. During the Mitra-Panchala period, Ahichchhatra must have been stabilized as a center of Panchala style of terracotta art. The clay being a major factor in the production of terracotta figurines signifies that Ahichchhatra must have served as one of the important manufacturing sites of ancient period. This hypothesis could be supported by ethnoarchaeological relevance as abundant availability of favorable clay in the vicinity of ancient ruins of Ahichchhatra. A detailed systematic laboratory procedure needs to be implemented on the clay samples to understand the mineralogical properties of clays from the two contradictory time frames. There is a possibility that similar stylistic terracotta figurines found at nearby sites of similar cultural periods must have been manufactured in the ancient city of Ahichchhatra itself. As

mentioned above, an elephant is symbol of wealth and prosperity. In a resemblance of wealth with elephant, we get plenty of evidences of sculptures of goddess 'Gaja-Lakshmi' at different archaeological sites like railings from the Buddhist site of Bharut, doorway of the Buddhist Monastery at Ratnagiri, Orissa etc. This signifies the presence of elephant figurines at this site could be associated with the religious as well as social purposes in ancient times. Apart from these various techniques are seen to be applied in manufacturing of the final product. The categorizations revealed two broad types mainly, simple and crude product as well as decorated and finished product. This could either signify the stages of evolution of manufacturing technique or different age groups involved in manufacturing the figurines. The crude form of figurines suggests a figurine being handled by a minor child going through a learning process. However, a finished product like grey elephant (fig.7) and similar other figurines, justifies a considerable trade practice prevalent in ancient city of Ahichchhatra.

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