



The Ten Avatars of Lord Vishnu in the Terracotta Plaques of Shridhar Temple of Bhadra Family in Kotulpur of Bankura District-An Archaeological Documentation

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ABSTRACT

Temples of Bengal are of paramount importance not only from their sculptural aspects but also represent the socio-economic scenario of that time. The religious culture, social status of different classes of people, their work culture and economy are well picturized in the terracotta plaques of the temple. Their critical study is therefore significant. Amongst the several terracotta temples of the Bankura district of West Bengal, India, the Shridhar Temple of the Bhadra Family in Kotulpur is unique in its feature of five pinnacles and terracotta textured in the front wall. In the terracotta plaques, the ten avatars of lord Vishnu have been well picturized which shows the religious thought of the people of that time.

Keywords: Terracotta; Avatar; Vishnu, Shridhar; Culture; Mahavarata.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Terracotta is a fired clay ceramic type often used for artistic and functional purposes. It has been used for thousands of years in various cultures around the world. Terracotta art can encompass many sculptures, pottery, and other artifacts [1]. Terracotta has a rich history and has been used for centuries by civilizations such as the Greeks, Romans, and ancient Chinese. Terracotta figurines and pottery were often used for religious, decorative, and practical purposes. Terracotta is commonly used to create sculptures and figurines [2-3]. Artists mold and shape the clay before firing it in a kiln. Terracotta sculptures can range from small, detailed figurines to large, intricate statues. Terracotta is widely used for creating functional pottery, such as pots, vases, and containers. The fired clay is durable and porous, making it suitable for holding liquids and food. Terracotta tiles and decorative elements have been used in architecture, particularly in ancient buildings. These tiles can be used for flooring, roofing, and decorative facades. Terracotta typically has a reddish-brown color, but it can vary depending on the specific clay and firing process. Some terracotta pieces may have a more natural, earthen color, while others may be glazed or painted. Different cultures have their unique styles and traditions when it comes to terracotta art. For example, the ancient Greeks created terracotta votive figures, and the ancient Chinese produced intricate terracotta warriors. Terracotta has a rich history and has been used for centuries by civilizations such as the Greeks, Romans, and ancient Chinese [4]. Terracotta figurines and pottery were often used for religious, decorative, and practical purposes. The historical significance of terracotta is substantial, and it has played a crucial role in the development of various civilizations throughout history [5-8]. Terracotta has been used since ancient times by civilizations such as the Mesopotamians, Egyptians, Greeks, and Romans.

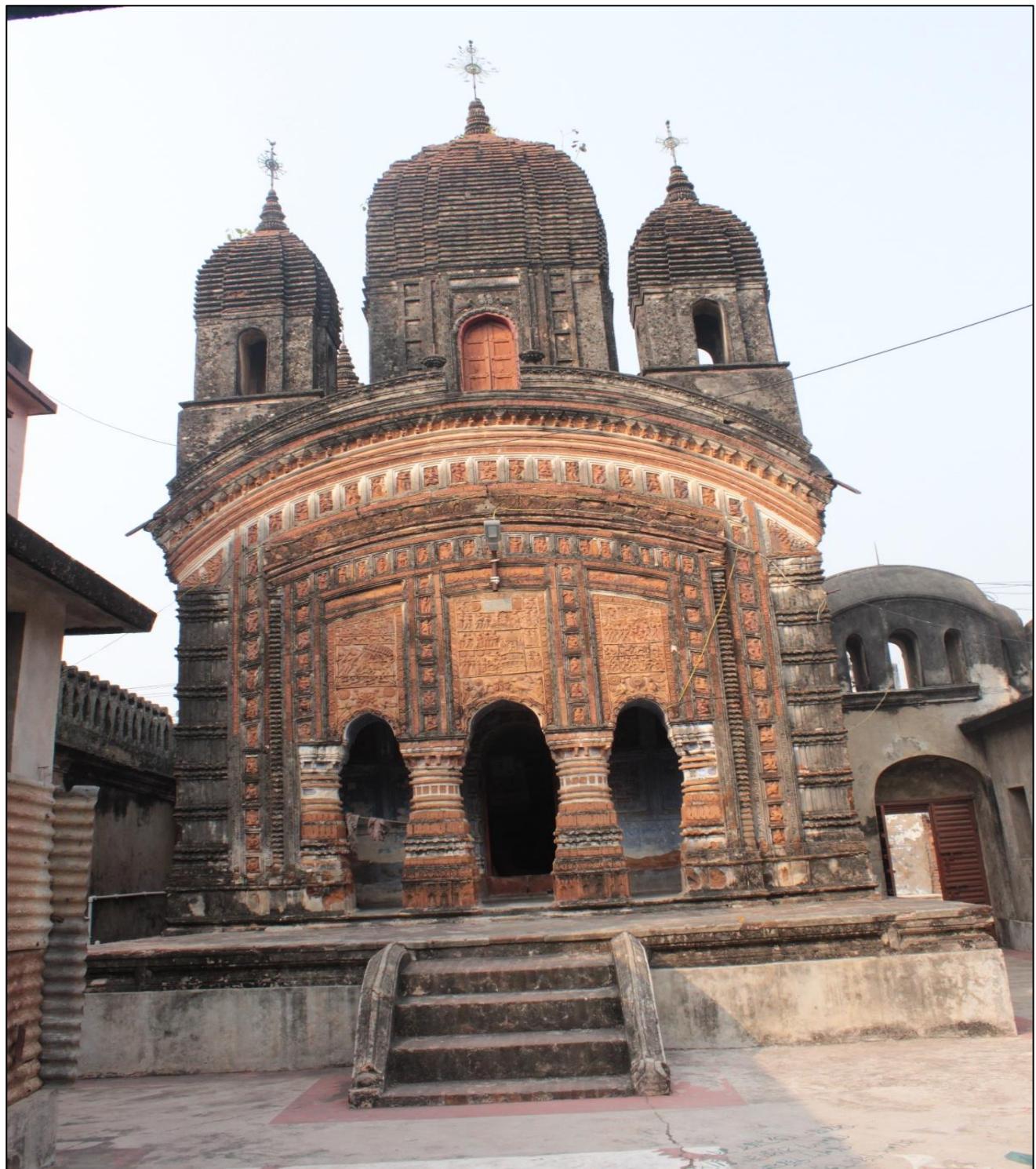


Figure 1. The Shridhar Temple of the Bhadra Family (Established in 1833).

Each of these cultures utilized terracotta for different purposes, including pottery, sculptures, and architectural elements. Terracotta was a preferred medium for sculptors in many ancient cultures. Artists used terracotta to create detailed and expressive sculptures, ranging from small figurines to life-sized statues. These artworks often served religious, ceremonial, or decorative purposes. In many ancient cultures, terracotta objects held religious and ritualistic significance.

For example, in ancient Greece, terracotta figurines were commonly used as offerings in religious ceremonies. In India, terracotta has been used for creating votive objects and sculptures related to Hindu and Buddhist traditions [9-12]. Terracotta was employed in architecture for practical and decorative purposes. It was used for creating tiles, bricks, and decorative elements in buildings. The ancient Romans, for instance, used terracotta extensively in their architectural designs. In some cultures, terracotta was used in burial practices. Notable examples include the terracotta army found in the tomb of the first Emperor of China, Qin Shi Huang. Thousands of life-sized terracotta soldiers were buried with the emperor to accompany him in the afterlife. Terracotta objects were often traded between ancient civilizations, contributing to cultural exchange and the spread of artistic techniques. This is evident in the archaeological findings of terracotta artifacts in regions far from their places of origin. Terracotta pottery, including vessels for storage and cooking, provides valuable insights into the daily life and practices of ancient civilizations [13-17]. The shapes, sizes, and designs of these pottery items can offer clues about trade, diet, and domestic activities. The historical significance of terracotta lies not only in its functional uses but also in its role as a medium for artistic expression, religious practices, and architectural innovation across diverse cultures and periods.

Several terracotta temples are spreading all over the southern part of Bengal. Bankura district of West Bengal has a rich history of terracotta temples, especially in Bishnupur [13-22]. The Giri Gobardhan temple of Kotulpur, Bankura is also an important terracotta temple not only from the spiritual perspective but has also rich archaeological sculptures and the socio-economic life of that time. Here, in this article, we have tried to archaeologically document this temple as an icon of the rich terracotta art resembling the spiritual, social, and economic status of the Bhadra family people of Kotulpur.

2. LOCATION OF THE TEMPLE

The temple is located in the locality of the Bhadra family in Kotulpur of Bankura District, West Bengal. The Google map can be used to locate the temple. It is located near the Netaji more bus stand, about half a kilometer from the Kotulpur-Bishnupur road. It is about 14 km from Jayrambati, the heritage house of Mata Sarada Devi. Kamarpukur Math, known as the birthplace of Shri Ramakrishna, is also 18 km from Kotulpur. Kotulpur can be accessed by train from the Bishnupur railway station, which is 45 km away. It can also be accessed from the Arambag railway station, situated at 27 km.

3. ARCHAEOLOGICAL STRUCTURE OF THE TEMPLE

The temple, established in 1833, is a Pancharatna (five pinnacles) type- four pinnacles at the four top corners and a large pinnacle in the middle of the top of the temple (see Fig. 1). It is an east-facing temple. The front side is decorated with different terracotta plaques. The foundation of the temple is about 4 ft in height, 13 ft in length, and 10 ft wide. The height of the temple from the foundation is about 18 ft.

The four columns in the front face of the temple are well decorated with terracotta plaques representing the cultural sense of the people. The curved arc on the temple top is decorated with the weight-carrier monkeys, sitting men and women statues.

4. THE TEN AVATAR OF VISHNU AS DEPICTED IN BHADRA TEMPLE

In the top arc of the temple along with the family of goddess Durga, the ten avatars of Lord Vishnu are finely depicted in the terracotta plaques. Those are usually drawn in the following sequences- *Matsya*, *Kurma*, *Varaha*, *Narasimha*, *Vamana*, *Parashurama*, *Rama*, *Balarama*; *Buddha*, and *Kalki*. In few places, Buddha is replaced by the Jagannatha. It is believed that Lord Vishnu assumes several forms to defend the universe and his devotees from evil forces. Each avatar, or incarnation, has a distinct purpose and duty to achieve.



Figure 2. The Matsya and Kurma avatar.

One of the most significant incarnations of Lord Vishnu is thought to be the Matsya avatar in his first avatar, Dashavatara. Hindu legend claims that Matsya is Lord Vishnu's fish avatar, who first materialized to save the earth from a massive flood. The story goes that as King Satyavrata (also known as Manu) was bathing in a river, a small fish approached him and pleaded to be protected.

The fish got larger and larger under the king's care, and one day the fish informed him that a tremendous flood was approaching and that he needed to construct a boat to save everyone on Earth. The fish transformed into Lord Vishnu as the flood arrived, and it pulled the boat to safety. Frequently, Lord Vishnu is portrayed as a fish clutching a discus and a conch, while possessing a human upper torso and arms.

It is thought that the tale of the Matsya avatar serves as a reminder of the cyclical cycle of creation and destruction as well as the significance of maintaining the universe's equilibrium.



Figure 3. The Varaha and Narasimha avatar.

One of the most significant avatars of Vishnu among his ten incarnations is regarded as being the Kurma avatar. Kurma is Lord Vishnu's tortoise incarnation, who came to aid the gods and demons in churning the cosmic ocean of milk (Ksheera Sagara) in order to extract the nectar of immortality. In the tale, the Devas were on the losing side in their conflict with the Asuras. When they approached Lord Brahma for assistance, he gave them advice to drink the elixir of immortality from the cosmic ocean of milk, also known as Ksheera Sagara. They needed a pivot and a huge churning rod to accomplish this, but nothing worked well. The huge tortoise Kurma made an appearance, and Lord Vishnu offered to act as the pivot for the churning rod.

Then, using the serpent Vasuki as a churning rope, the Devas and Asuras agitated the water. The elixir of immortality and Lakshmi, the goddess of prosperity, were among the many priceless objects that surfaced from the water. Lord Vishnu is frequently portrayed in this incarnation as raising Mount Mandara in the ocean, with a human upper body with arms holding a discus and a conch, and a tortoise lower body.

It is thought that the legend of the Kurma avatar represents the strength of willpower and teamwork. It demonstrates that with the assistance of others, even the most challenging jobs can be completed.

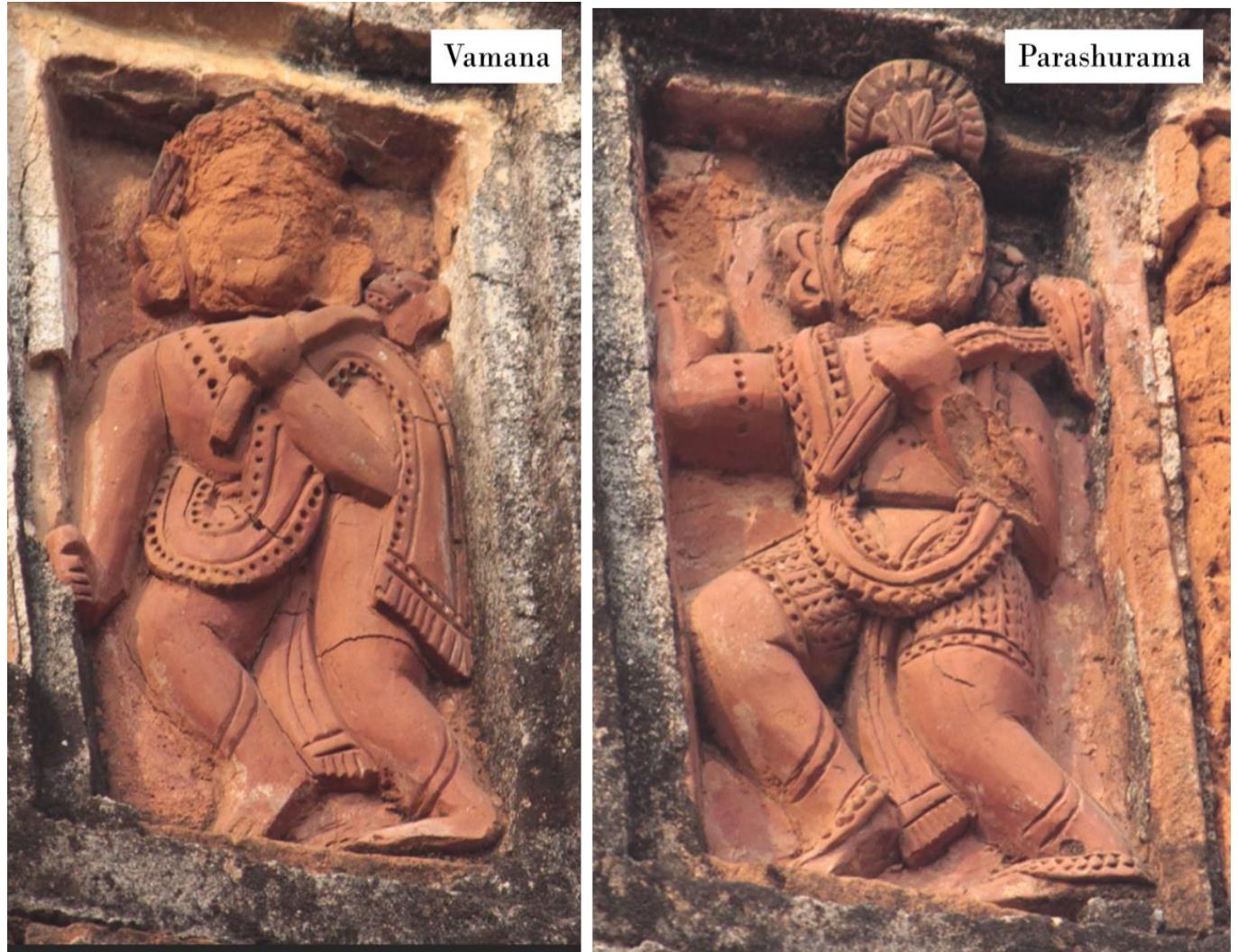


Figure 4. The Vamana and Parashurama avatar.

One of Lord Vishnu's Dashavatara avatars, Varaha, is a boar that saves Mother Earth (Bhudevi) from the evil grasp of Hiranyaksha, the demon ruler. In the tale, Bhudevi, or Earth, was kidnapped by the demon king Hiranyaksha, who concealed her in the cosmic ocean. To save her, Lord Vishnu, in the avatar of Varaha, dove into the water. After defeating Hiranyaksha, Lord Varaha used his tusks to lift the earth out of the ocean and return it to its rightful position. He then performed the Ananta-Vishnu-Nritya, a cosmic dance, to commemorate his victory over the demon king.

This legend is thought to represent the triumph of virtue over evil, the value of the planet, and environmental preservation. Another interpretation of the Varaha avatar is as a symbolizing Lord Vishnu's ability to uphold and defend the universe.

The Narasimha avatar, which features Lord Vishnu in a half-human, half-lion form, was the fourth of the ten avatars of Vishnu. The Bhagavad Purana and the Vishnu Purana, two Hindu texts, include the legend that explains it. The tale states that in order to vanquish the evil ruler Hiranyakashipu, Lord Vishnu assumed the shape of Narasimha. With the boon of invincibility, the demon king terrorized the earth and attempted to slay Lord Vishnu's devotee, Prahlada, his son. With his claws, Lord Vishnu tore Hiranyakashipu's chest apart, killing him while defending Prahlada. Like the last legend, this one is said to represent the strength of devotion to Lord Vishnu and the victory of good over evil. The Narasimha avatar is also thought to symbolize Lord Vishnu's ability to defend his followers and the significance of devotion in achieving redemption.



Figure 5. The Rama and Krishna avatar.

In the myth of Lord Vishnu's Vamana avatar, there once lived a just demon king by the name of Mahabali, whose burgeoning pride drove him to subvert the authority of the gods. Vamana, a dwarf Brahmin who took on the avatar of Lord Vishnu, requested from Mahabali a small plot of land that was no bigger than the area he could cross in three steps. Vamana sent Mahabali to the underworld by taking two enormous strides, covering the globe and the skies, and revealing his actual form as Lord Vishnu.

The tale of Lord Vishnu's Vamana avatar serves as a reminder of the value of humility as well as the perils of excessive arrogance and greed. Even though he was a just ruler, the demon king Mahabali let his ego develop and started to question the legitimacy of the gods and the stability of the universe.

Lord Vishnu took on the form of Parashurama with the intention of eradicating the corrupt Kshatriyas in order to bring justice and balance back to the earth. As he traveled the country, he destroyed any Kshatriyas who were abusing their position and gave the Brahmins back control. He is reported to have fought 21 wars in total, in which he faced and vanquished numerous strong monarchs and warriors. Parashurama is regarded as a great fighter and defender of the downtrodden because of his acts, which succeeded in bringing justice and balance back to the planet. Lord Vishnu's avatar also represents the struggle against power abuse and the need of bringing justice and balance back to the world.



Figure 6. The Buddha (Jagannath) and Kalki avatar.

The tale of King Rama of Ayodhya, who was exiled to the jungle for 14 years and encountered numerous difficulties there, including the demon king Ravana kidnapping his wife Sita, is told in Lord Vishnu's Rama avatar. Rama restored dharma, or justice and order, to the world by rescuing Sita and vanquishing Ravana in a bloody fight with the aid of an army of monkeys and bears. In Hinduism, the Tale of Rama is a significant and frequently recounted tale that serves as the foundation for the well-known Indian epic, the Ramayana. It is regarded as a story of moral values and virtues like dedication, duty, and loyalty and acts as a manual for appropriate human behavior.

Krishna, the avatar of Lord Vishnu, was nurtured in a cowherd village in Vrindavan despite being born into a royal family. It was predicted that he would vanquish King Kamsa, who had put his parents in jail and was out to get him. Even though Kamsa made multiple efforts to kill Krishna, the gods shielded him from harm, and in the end, Krishna overcame Kamsa in a fierce struggle to release his parents and bring peace back to the realm. As the Pandavas' charioteer and advisor during the Mahabharata battle, Krishna was instrumental in the Pandavas' victory over their rivals, the Kauravas. The Bhagavad Gita, a revered Hindu classic with lessons on morality, devotion, and the nature of reality, was also delivered by him. As the Pandavas' charioteer and advisor during the Mahabharata battle, Krishna was instrumental in the Pandavas' victory over their rivals, the Kauravas. The Bhagavad Gita, a revered Hindu classic with lessons on morality, devotion, and the nature of reality, was also delivered by him. As one of Hinduism's most venerated and adored deities, Krishna was renowned for his courage, intelligence, and divine abilities throughout his existence.

In several Hindu traditions, Buddha is regarded as the avatar of Lord Vishnu. A prince by the name of Siddhartha Gautama is said to have given up his regal existence to pursue enlightenment. After achieving enlightenment, he took on the form of the Buddha and taught everyone the Eightfold Path and the Four Noble Truths as a means of achieving spiritual freedom. Buddha, one of the incarnations of Vishnu, propagated the teachings of love, peace, and harmony by following the path of righteousness, compassion, and non-violence. This tale serves as a metaphor for the value of self-discovery and the rejection of materialism in the quest for enlightenment and spiritual development.

Lord Vishnu's Kalki avatar is the final incarnation of Lord Vishnu that is yet to come. The Kalki avatar is said to appear at the end of the current age, known as the Kali Yuga. It is believed that the avatar will vanquish the demon Kali, who is said to embody all that is evil and destructive in the world and restore balance and righteousness to the world. He is often depicted as a powerful warrior riding a white horse and is said to have the power to destroy evil and bring about the end of the current age, after which the world will be recreated.

It is believed that Lord Vishnu assumes several forms to defend the universe and his devotees from evil forces. Each avatar, or incarnation, has a distinct purpose and duty to achieve.

3. CONCLUSIONS

A critical observation of the terracotta plaques revealed that the people of that time were very much interested in the worship of Lord Vishnu. The ten avatars of Vishnu have been worshipped from time to time since the beginning of Hindu mythology. There are several other plaques also picturizing the daily life of the women of the society at that time. However most of the plaques are dedicated to the spiritual and Hindu religious deities, especially Vishnu.

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