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# Bengal Terracotta: Bishnupur’s Temples and the Bankura Horse

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# Bengal Terracotta: Bishnupur’s Temples and the Bankura Horse

What is Bishnupur terracotta? Bishnupur is a town in Bankura district, West Bengal. Its temples are built of brick and covered in carved clay panels. Terracotta means baked clay. The Malla kings built these temples in the 17th and 18th centuries.

## 1 What is Bishnupur terracotta?

Bishnupur lies in Bankura district of West Bengal. It is known for temples with walls of carved clay. The carvings are called reliefs. A relief is a picture that stands out from a flat surface.



Terracotta reliefs, Kalachand Temple, Bishnupur. Photo: Pinakpani, Wikimedia Commons, CC BY 4.0.

## What do the carvings show?

They show scenes from the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. They also show the childhood of Krishna. The Malla kings were Vaishnavas, so most temples honour Krishna.

## What is the memory hook?

Bishnupur: Bankura, Malla, clay, Krishna.

> **Quick check 1.** Bishnupur is in Bankura district of West Bengal. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: esamskriti.com; bankura.gov.in

## 2 Who built the temples?

The Malla dynasty built them. The Malla kings ruled from Bishnupur. Their great building age was the 17th and 18th centuries.

## Which temples should I know?

Rasmancha dates to about 1600. King Bir Hambir built it. It stands on a laterite plinth. Jor Bangla, also called Kesta Rai, dates to 1655. King Raghunath Singh built it.

## Which king built which?

Bir Hambir built Rasmancha. Raghunath Singh built Jor Bangla. Exams may swap them.

## What is the memory hook?

Ras with Hambir; Jor with Raghunath.

> **Quick check 2.** The Malla kings built most Bishnupur temples in the 17th and 18th centuries. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: sahapedia.org; esamskriti.com

## 3 Why clay, not stone?

Bengal lies on the Gangetic delta. This land is made of river mud. It has little good building stone.

### What did builders do?

They burned local clay into bricks. They also made carved clay panels. Clay became the main material for both walls and decoration.

### Why does this matter?

The shortage shaped the whole style. Terracotta was a choice forced by geography. It then became an art form.

### What is the memory hook?

No stone, so clay.

> **Quick check 3.** King Raghunath Singh built the Rasmancha around 1600. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: en.banglapedia.org; bankura.gov.in

## 4 What are chala temples?

A chala temple copies a Bengal village hut. Its roof curves down like thatch. *Chala* means roof.

### How many roofs can it have?

A do-chala has two sloping roofs. A char-chala has four. An at-chala repeats a smaller roof above to gain height.

### Where is Jor Bangla?

Jor Bangla is in Bishnupur. It joins two hut-shaped roofs into one temple. The name means “twin huts”.

### What is the memory hook?

Chala: curved roof like a hut.

> **Quick check 4.** Bengal builders used clay because the delta had little good stone. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: en.banglapedia.org; sahapedia.org

## 5 What are ratna temples?

A ratna temple has small towers on its roof. *Ratna* means jewel. The number of towers gives the temple its name.

### What are the main kinds?

An ek-ratna has one tower. A pancha-ratna has five. Four sit on the corners and one on top. Madan Mohan, from 1694, is an ek-ratna temple. Shyam Rai is a famous pancha-ratna temple.

### How is ratna different from chala?

Chala is about the roof's curve. Ratna is about the towers above it. Some temples, such as Jor Bangla, mix both ideas.

### What is the memory hook?

Chala: roof shape. Ratna: tower count.

> **Quick check 5.** A chala roof is flat. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: sahapedia.org; en.banglapedia.org

## 6 What is the Bankura horse?

It is a clay horse with a long, arched neck. Potters of Panchmura village in Bankura district make it. Panchmura is its main centre.

### What is it used for?

Villagers offer such horses to local gods, such as Dharmaraja. Many homes also keep one as a lucky symbol. It is a craft, not a temple.

### Why is it famous?

It was the crest motif of the All India Handicrafts Board. The craft now has a GI tag. A GI tag protects a product's place name.

### What is the memory hook?

Panchmura horse: long neck, board crest, GI.

> **Quick check 6.** A pancha-ratna temple has five towers. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: icharchive.intach.org; deccanherald.com

## 7 What do exams ask?

Exams ask where Bishnupur is and who built it. They also ask the roof styles and the horse.

### What are the common questions?

Which dynasty built the temples? The Malla dynasty. Which material was used? Terracotta, or baked clay. Which village makes the horse? Panchmura. Which style has curved hut roofs? Chala.

## What traps do exams set?

Some options call chala a flat roof. Chala is curved. Some options give Rasmancha to Raghunath Singh. Bir Hambir built it. Some options mix the temples with the horse. They are two different crafts.

## What is the memory hook?

Malla, clay, chala curved, Panchmura horse.

> **Quick check 7.** The Bankura horse is a temple building. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: en.banglapedia.org; sahapedia.org

## Practice MCQs

**1. Which dynasty built the terracotta temples of Bishnupur?**

**A.** Malla dynasty

**B.** Pala dynasty

**C.** Gupta dynasty

**D.** Sena dynasty

See answer ↓

**2. Who built the Jor Bangla temple in 1655?**

**A.** King Durjan Singh

**B.** King Bir Hambir

**C.** King Raghunath Singh

**D.** Raja Man Singh

See answer ↓

**3. Why did Bengal builders use burnt clay instead of stone?**

**A.** The delta had little good building stone

**B.** Clay was holy

**C.** Kings disliked stone

**D.** Stone was banned

See answer ↓

**4. What does a chala temple copy?**

**A.** A Mughal dome

**B.** A Greek column

**C.** A curved Bengal village hut roof

**D.** A Buddhist stupa

See answer ↓

**5. Which village is the main centre of the Bankura horse?**

**A.** Sonamukhi

**B.** Kalna

**C.** Panchmura

**D.** Bishnupur

See answer ↓

# Answer Key

1. **A.** The answer is the Malla dynasty. The Malla kings ruled from Bishnupur and built most temples in the 17th and 18th centuries. Memory hook: Malla, clay, Krishna. ↑ Q1
2. **C.** The answer is King Raghunath Singh. Jor Bangla means twin huts and is dated to 1655. Bir Hambir built Rasmancha. Memory hook: Jor with Raghunath. ↑ Q2
3. **A.** The answer is the shortage of stone. The Gangetic delta is river mud. Builders fired local clay into brick and carved panels. Memory hook: no stone, so clay. ↑ Q3
4. **C.** The answer is the curved hut roof of Bengal villages. Chala means roof. Do-chala has two roofs and char-chala has four. Memory hook: chala is a curved roof. ↑ Q4
5. **C.** The answer is Panchmura in Bankura district. Its potters make the long-necked clay horse. The craft has a GI tag. Memory hook: Panchmura horse. ↑ Q5

## Quick-check answers

1. **True.** It is a Malla-era temple town. ↑ 1
2. **True.** That was their building age. ↑ 2
3. **False.** it is false. Bir Hambir built Rasmancha. ↑ 3
4. **True.** No stone, so clay. ↑ 4
5. **False.** it is false. A chala roof curves like a village hut. ↑ 5
6. **True.** Four corners and one on top. ↑ 6
7. **False.** it is false. It is a clay craft object from Panchmura. ↑ 7

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