

Sculptural Art of the Images of Buddhist Goddess Tārā in Early Medieval North Bengal: An Iconographic Survey

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Abstract: - *Tārā is one of the most important and popular female divinities of Mahāyāna as well as Tantrayāna Buddhist pantheon. The White Tārā and the Green Tārā are the two most common forms. She later one was very popular in Eastern India as a protective goddess against all sorts of dangerous, calamities and sufferings. She holds a very high position in Buddhism, goddess Dūrgā occupies the same place in Brāhmanism. The goddess Tārā is considered to be the great Mother goddess, the symbol of primitive female energy or 'Śakti', consort of Avalokiteśvara, just as Dūrgā is regarded as the consort of Śiva. She is the mother of all Buddhas and Boddhisattvas, at least in Mahāyāna Buddhist pantheon. The images of various sculptures of the Buddhist goddess Tārā as chief deity of Buddhism have been found from various parts of North Bengal during the early medieval period. Different types of sculptural forms of the goddess Tārā in sitting, standing, or in dancing postures have been discovered from North Bengal during the period of our study.*

Keywords: - *Buddhist goddess, chief deity, North Bengal, Sculptural art, Tārā.*

Introduction:

There are various opinions regarding the area of North Bengal or Uttarbanga as it is called Greater Uttarbanga, Abibhakta Uttarbanga and Bibhakta Uttarbanga. In general, the northern region of the state of West Bengal is known as North Bengal which politically consists of eight districts- Darjeeling, Kalimpong, Jalpaiguri, Alipurduar, Coochbehar, Uttar Dinajpur, Dakshin Dinajpur and Malda. The region is separated by the river Ganges from the western part of West Bengal which is generally referred to as South Bengal. In ancient period, Bengal was divided into many geographical units such as Puṇḍravardhana, Vaṅga, Samatāṭa, Rārh, Harikela, Gauḍa, Varendra or Varendrī, Tāmralipta, Dandabhukti etc. (Sarkar, 1950: 125-130). Modern North Bengal or ancient Northern part of Bengal was consisted of Puṇḍravardhana, Gauḍa, Varendra or Varendrī, etc.

North Bengal is a rich cultural and heritage centre of Bengal. Huge numbers of artifacts, images, temples, terracotta etc. have been discovered from North Bengal. Lot of images of different religions

Such as Brāhmanical, Buddhist and Jaina images have been found from different districts of North Bengal. Sculptures of the Buddhist goddesses which have been found in different parts of North Bengal have special significance in Bengal as well as in entire eastern India and are considered to be valuable resource of art. The art and sculptures were well developed over a period of four hundred years and more in eastern India under the Pāla and Sena rulers. During these four centuries under the Pāla and Senas. Gods and goddesses, whether Buddhist or Brāhmanical or Jaina, have well established iconographic types of different images during this four centuries (Bhattacharya, 1983: 3).

Tārā had her origin during the early centuries of the Christian era, as a cult already prevalent amongst aboriginals or in others and the liberal Buddhism was readily adopted. Being mightier and more popular cult Tārā merged with other concurrent similar cults and ultimately emerged as the most influential one. Although a visual transformation of Tārā was emerged late, not before fourth century

CE, early Avalokiteśvara images are without Tārā, which suggests that her form as his consort was a later development, perhaps in pursuance to Ardhanārīśvara model of Śiva and Śakti. Originally, she seems to have been the goddess who was invoked from the safe crossing of waters and who saved her worshippers from the calamities caused by floods (Bhattacharya, 1958: 49-50).

Tārā is one of the most important and popular female divinities of Mahāyāna as well as Tantrayāna Buddhist pantheon. Her integration into the Buddhist pantheon as a female Bodhisattva has been confirmed approximately since the 5th or 6th century (Kumar, 1974: 1-27). The meaning of her name is 'star' but related to the Sanskrit root 'ṭr' which means 'to lead over' or 'to rescue'. The legend claims when the Bodhisattva was looking down from his heaven at the world, suffering and weeping at his inability to save all beings from pain, Tārā was born from a lotus floating in one of his tears. The White Tārā and the Green Tārā are the two most common forms. She later one was very popular in Eastern India as well as in Bengal particularly in North Bengal as a protective goddess against all sorts of dangerous, calamities and sufferings.

Objective of the Study:

In the present study, titled '**Sculptural Art of the Images of Buddhist Goddess Tārā in Early Medieval North Bengal: An Iconographic Survey**', the author wants to carry out a detail study of the sculptural art of the images of the Buddhist goddesses Tārā in North Bengal during the early medieval period. The study deals with critical studies of iconographic and epigraphic features of the images of the goddess Tārā of Mahāyāna Buddhism in various parts of North Bengal.

Source Materials:

The author has been collected Primary Sources and Secondary sources for the completion of this article. For the collection of Primary source materials, the author has visited various historical places, archaeological sites, and Buddhist monasteries, and different Museums of West Bengal. Secondary

sources such as good number of books, articles, journals, and periodicals related to this article have been collected and consulted meticulously.

Methodology:

The methodology followed for the study was historical, based on both library works and field work. The author has depended on in-depth study of the epigraphic and iconographic records of Bengal of Early Medieval Bengal. In this regard, the author has visited different archeological sites, museums and private collections of West Bengal (India) and closely observed the images and taken photographs of the images.

Mythology:

Tārā holds a very high position in Buddhism, goddess Dūrgā occupies the same place in Brāhmanism. She is considered to be the great Mother goddess, the symbol of primitive female energy or 'Śakti', consort of Avalokiteśvara, just as Dūrgā is regarded as the consort of Śiva. As various Brāhmanical goddesses appear like different forms of Dūrgā, likewise Buddhist deities are similarly manifestations of Tārā. As the goddess Dūrgā preceded all gods, Tārā as Prajñāpāramitā - 'Perfection of Wisdom in highest metaphysical principle', is claimed to have priority even over Buddha. She is the mother of all Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, at least in Mahāyāna Buddhist pantheon (Dasgupta, 1950:115-120).

Based on the study of Sādhanamālā, Benoytosh Bhattacharya (Bhattacharya, 1958: 48-58) has mentioned and prepared a list of 24 forms of Buddhist goddesses Tārā such as Khadirvānī Tārā, Ekajātā Tārā, Mahāttari Tārā, Bhrukuti Tārā, Vajra Tārā, Shyama Tārā, Dipa Tārā, Dhupa Tārā, Gandha Tārā, etc.

Many carvings represent the form of Khadirvānī Tārā. The meaning of the name Khadirvānī Tārā is uncertain; it may be translated as 'Tārā of the Sandal Forest' (Kumar, 1974:74). Commonly the goddess is accompanied by Aśokakāntā Mārīcī bearing vajra and the aśoka-flower as well as Ekjātā holding kartṭ and kapāla. The type of Āryāṣṭamahabhaya Tārā is flanked by the depictions

of the Great Eight Dangers or eight miniatures Tārā images. The Eight Great Dangers are lion, elephant, snake, prison, fire, demon, shipwreck, and robber. The iconography follows the descriptions of Sāadhanamālā (Mallmann, 1975: 365-370). In all probability, the topic of the Eight Dangers has been adapted from the iconography of Avalokiteśvara mentioned in the Sadharmapuṇḍarīkasūtra (Burnouf, 1852: ch.24).

Iconographic Survey of the Images of the Buddhist Goddess Tārā:

The independent images of Tārā are available in eastern India particularly in Bengal (North Bengal) either in sitting or standing pose. She is often seen holding a lily in her left hand and the right hand is in varada gesture. A lot of images representing independent aspects of the goddess Tārā scattered in various places of Bengal may be studied under the following heads from the iconographic and epigraphic point of view. The author has able to identify at least ten (10) images including fragments of different types of the Buddhist goddess Tārā from North Bengal are as follows:

A small size (size: 9.7 ×6.8 cm) stone sculpture of the goddess Tārā (Figure 1) with two hands has been discovered from Raiganj of Uttar Dinajpur district, West Bengal and now it is preserved in the State Archaeological Museum, Kolkata (hereinafter SAMK). The goddess is shown seated in a lalitāsana posture on a full-blown double petalled lotus pedestal with right leg pendant. The lower portion of the pedestal is adorned with floral decorative motifs. It is interesting to note that a seated figure of Buddhist goddess Mārīcī is engraved on the back slab to the right side of the deity. The right hand of the goddess shows varada mudrā (gesture), while her left-hand holds stalk of a flower. The left portion of the upper back slab is broken and the seated figure of Buddha is placed to the right corner of the upper back slab. A single line inscription is inscribed on the backside of the image and the inscription is written in the Gauḍiya script and the Sanskrit language. The text is 'śihara dānapati' i.e. 'donor śihara' (the image is donated by śihara) (Sengupta & Saha, 2015: 217; Appendix, p.274, fig. 23) Based on its epigraphic features, it may be presumed that the assignable date of the image is the c.12th century CE.



Figure 1: Tārā (Inscribed), Raiganj, Uttar Dinajpur, WB (Courtesy: SAMK)

An excellent specimen of stone sculpture representing the Buddhist goddess Tārā with two hands found from Agradiguna of Dinajpur district,

Bangladesh, now in the Asutosh Museum, Kolkata (Acc. No.2002-1167/2/116), is seen seated on a full-blown lotus pedestal. The right hand of the goddess

is placed on the right knee and the left hand is broken. The two-handed Tārā is decked with various ornaments and having well-developed bosoms. The five miniature Dhyānī Buddhas are engraved on the prabhāvalī (upper back slab). It may be conjectured that the image belongs to the c.11th-12th century CE.

An outstanding inscribed big sized (size: 55.88 ×25.4 ×10.6 cm) image of the goddess Tārā, (Figure 2, 2a) discovered from Gangarampur of Dakshin Dinajpur district, West Bengal now in the Balurghat College Museum, Balurghat (hereinafter BCMB), shows seated in a lalitāsana posture on a full-blown lotus placed on a pañcaratha pedestal with pendant right leg. Few texts are inscribed in the Nāgarī script in two lines on the middle portion of the

pedestal and the text is “Siddham* ‘Danapati sā (dhu), Śri Chāgōkasā” means that the image is gifted by Sādhu Śri Chāgōka. The bottom of the pedestal is with some floral motifs and a female figure to the left. The other iconographic features of the goddess are similar to the preserved specimen of Murshidabad District Museum, Jiyaganj except for the back slab. The back slab is very simple in design and adorned with a Dhyānī Buddha at the apex and in between two miniature votive stupa on either side of the stela. From epigraphic records and iconographic point of view, it may be conjectured that the image belongs to the c.11th-12th century A.D. A fragment seated image with two hands representing the goddess Tārā is also found in the BCMB.



Figure 2: Tārā (Inscribed*), Gangarampur, Dakshin Dinajpur, WB (Courtesy: BCMB)



Figure 2a: (The text is “Siddham* ‘Danapati sā(dhu),

Śri Chāgōkasā” means that the image is gifted by Sādhu Sri Chāgōka.**

An excellent big shaped (size: 71 ×35 cm) two-handed black stone image representing the Buddhist goddess Tārā, (Figure 3) found from Bangarh, now in the BCMB, is shown seated in lalitāsana pose with right leg pendant on a full-blown double petalled on pañcaratha pedestal. Two worshippers with kneeling hands are seen depicted on the either side of floral motifs at the centre of the pedestal. The goddess is adorned, bejeweled with valuable

ornaments and crowned head. A halo is seen just behind the head of the main deity on back slab. The upper back slab is decorated with a kīrtimukha at the apex and vidyādhara to right and vidyādhārī to the left with garland of the kīrtimukha are depicted. Just below the vidyādhara-vidyādhārī on either side, two votive Buddhas are engraved. It may be conjectured that the image belongs to the c.12th century CE and it is an elegant and superb sculptural specimen of Bengal art as well as in Eastern Indian art.



Figure 3: Tārā, Bangarh, Dakshin Dinajpur, WB (Courtesy: BCMB)

An unrecorded and unpublished two-handed image of the Buddhist goddess Tārā (Figure 4) belonging to the Pāla-Sena period, discovered from Sivbari village of Dakshin Dinajpur district, West Bengal, now in under private collection of Asok Nandi, is seen seated in lalitāsana pose on a full-bloomed viśvapadma placed on triratha pedestal. The pedestal is decorated with two worshippers with kneeling hands on each side and few floral motifs at the centre of the pedestal. The right hand of the deity shows varada gesture and a bloomed water-

lily is in left hand of the image. The goddess is well decorated with various ornaments and she wears jaṭāmukha, big shaped earrings, heavy necklace, bracelets, anklets, waist band, and a long upavīta (sacred thread). She possesses well-developed bosoms, half-closed eyes and the third eye and navel coup are not prominent in this sculpture. The prabhāvalī is adorned with five miniature Dhyānī Buddhas. This is an excellent creation of Bengal sculptures during the period of our studies.



Figure 4: Tārā, Sivbari village, Dakshin Dinajpur, WB (Courtesy: Asok Nandi)

A black stone sculpture representing the Buddhist goddess Khadiravanī Tārā has been explored from Itahar of Uttar Dinajpur district, West Bengal, now it is safely preserved in the Varendra Research Museum, Rajshahi (VRM 1537). The two-armed goddess is in an ardhaparyāṅka pose on a damaged double petalled lotus pedestal with the right leg pendant. The right hand of the image is in the varada gesture while she holds a lotus by the stalk in her left hand. She is accompanied by Aśokākantā Mārīcī and Ekajaṭā Tārā to the right and left side respectively of the main deity. The adornments of the goddess have been practically wiped out by abrasions and mutilations except for earrings and sacred thread. A votive stupa is observed over the head of the goddess (VRSAR, 1934-35:19).

An medium sized (size: 49 × 27 cm) important stone sculpture representing the Buddhist goddess Tārā (Figure 5) with four hands belonging to the c.9th-10th century A.D., discovered from Gazole in the district of Malda, West Bengal, is the preserved

specimen of SAMK. She is shown seated in a lalitāsana pose on a simple lotus pedestal with right leg pendant. It is important to note that the pedestal is very simple and there is no figure without a male devotee with folded hands kneeling to the left depicted on the pedestal. The main right and left hand of the deity is in varada mudrā and rest on the left lap, respectively while her upper right-hand carry an akṣāmālā and the lower-left hands slightly hold a lotus with a thin stem. The goddess is adorned with ornamented coiffure, beautiful necklace, round-shaped elongated ear-rings, long upavīta, beautiful armlets and the lower portion of the image is wrapped with beautifully folded śāḍi. She possesses well-developed bosoms, the third eye is not prominent but the navel is distinct. The upper back slab is decorated with floral motifs at the apex and two attendant bearing garlands on either side. This is one of the superb and excellent female representations of Bengal art (Sengupta & Saha, 2015: 205).



Figure 5: Tārā, Gazol, Malda, WB (Courtesy: SAMK)

A black stone image of the goddess Khadiravani Tārā (Fig.122) with two hands found from Balurghat, now in the BCMB, is seen standing in a tribhaṅga pose on a double petalled full-blown lotus pedestal. The pedestal is decorated with floral motifs in the middle with a male and a female figure with folded hands to the right and left-hand side respectively. The goddess shows the varada gesture in her right hand and she carries a lotus with a stem in her left hand. She is accompanied by Aśokakantā Mārīcī to the right and Ekajaṭā to the left. The two-armed deity is decked with usual ornaments and she wears a concise jaṭāmukuṭa (crown), heavy

beautiful necklace, armllets, and anklets, etc. She possesses well-developed bosoms, prominent navel, and thin waist just like a youthful celestial virgin girl. Her half-closed eyes and calm and quiet face indicates the state of pensive mode. It is interesting to note that animal figures like an elephant, horse to the left and horse and bird to the right are found carved on the edge of the back slab. The upper back slab of the image is broken. The three-dimensional deity measuring 50.8 cm×27.94 cm×10.16 cm in size is dated c.12th century CE. A fragment standing two-handed image of the goddess Tārā is also preserved in the BCMB.



Figure 6: Tārā, Balurghat, Dakshin Dinajpur, WB (Courtesy: BCMB)

A two-armed bronze image representing the Buddhist goddess Tārā, (Figure 7) found from Balurghat of Dakshin Dinajpur district, West Bengal, is seen standing in dvi-bhaṅga pose on a simple pedestal. The image is very much eroded in condition and two hands are partially damaged. The

goddess wears a mukuta on head, heavy necklace, bracelets, and anklets and folded beautiful śāḍi tight with decorated two-folded waistbands. Smiling face, big-shaped ears, well-developed bosoms, prominent navel coup of the image makes herself an extraordinary and handsome youthful lady.



Figure 7: Tārā, Balurghat, Dakshin Dinajpur, WB (Courtesy: BCMB)

Conclusion:

From the above discussion and number of the images of the Buddhist goddess Tārā found from different parts of North Bengal, it appears that the worships of Buddhist goddess Tārā had wide influences among the people of the society mainly in the varendī or varena and samataṭa region of Bengal i.e. more or less all over North Bengal during the early medieval period. Buddhism, particularly Mahāyāna Buddhist pantheon was well flourished in Uttar Dinajpur, Dakshin Dinajpur and Malda district of West Bengal. Different types of Tantric Buddhist goddess Tārā among the goddesses of Buddhism had more popularity and acceptability to the worshipers of North Bengal.

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