

EXOTIC IMAGES OF EARLY MEDIEVAL BENGAL

Introduction

Primitive men believed that he could have everything he wanted through the good services at the fathers he looked around for the powers that might be available to help him. Thus the worship of ancestors or god merciful come in the hoary part. A land of faith India has been a nursery of many religions. Every men believed in one spiritual power and they required images for worship.

Most of the images discovered in Bengal, like those found in other parts of undivided Bengal are made of black stone and these generally belong to the period ranging from C. 1000 A.D. to C. 1200 A.D. This stone is remarkably suitable for making images and in durability it 'has hardly any peer'.¹ This variety of stone, it is believed, used to be supplied to the different centres of the sculptures, art in Bengal on river ways from the Rajmahal hills, where the Ganges enters Bengal. The large number of images discovered in Bengal would testify to the flourishing trade in Rajmahal stone. Image making industry centres grew up in the different parts of the country. One such centre has been noticed among the ruins of the present hamlet known as Amati in West Dinajpur. About five unfinished images of black stone, discovered from this place are now preserved in the Balurghat College Museum. Earlier another such centre was noticed by Bhattashali in the vicinity of Dacca.² From the 8th century onward the regional spirit gradually got better of the Indian tradition in all spheres of life. In the political arena the kingdoms began to assert their identities in their respective boundaries and this had its repercussions in other aspects of culture as

well. The local script and dialects began to take shapes during the next couple of centuries. This is also true of Indian art in Bengal under the Palas a new local idiom of expressive evolved developing its own characteristic and had continued for about 400 years till the advent of the Muhamaddan. This particular school has come to be generally known as the Eastern Indian School of Art. The art of Bengal during the four centuries under the Palas and the Senas is essentially religious and evitably reflects the religious experiences of past centuries. Gods and goddesses, whether Buddhist or Brahmonical or Jaina have all well established iconographic types.

From the analysis of stone used in the Indian sculptures that there are varieties even in this black stone and geologist have different scientific names for each variety viz. Hornblende, Basalt, Dolomite Chlorite, Scist etc. Whatever may be correct scientific name for this black stone there is no doubt that this is extremely weather resisting and fine grained stone was pre eminently suitable for the purpose for which it was employed. In durability also this stone has hardly any peer. Among scores and scores of images that are found there is not a single one that shows any trace of the passage of about seven hundred years and over them. Most of them no doubt owe their extra-ordinary preservation to their long immersion under loam and water but not all stones would resist so wonderfully the corroding action of even these two element. The black stone so universally used for image making purposes. The nearest and the most easily accessible quarry of this variety at stone is said to be the Rajmahal hills, just were the Ganges leaves Bihar and enters Bengal, slabs big and small were quarried loaded in boats and floated down the river and supplied to all the centres of the sculptures art in Bengal. The vast number of images discovered in Bengal would testify to the vastness of the trade in Rajmahal stone that once used to flourish. Some unfinished stone images were discovered near Atimati village, Dakshin Dinajpur and preserved in Balurghat College Museum.

Besides stone, other materials, used for manufacturing of images have been metal, wood and clay. It is true that gold and silver were used as materials for

manufacturing images, but such images, are for obvious reason, very few in number. The standard metal used for making of images was an alloy known as asta-dhatu (it looks like brass, but it is not a simple alloy like brass, but a mixture of many metals³ and this was considered sacred by the manufacturers. The art of metal casting became extremely popular and had reached a degree of excellence almost equal to that of stone carving. The clay modellers art of the pre-Muhammadan period has however, survived in a large number of terracotta plaques and figures exhumed from the ruins of Nalanda (Bihar), Bangarh (West Dinajpur), Paharpur (Rajshahi District, Bangladesh) and Mainamoti in Comilla and such other places, they illustrate various themes, religious and mythological in character and also every conceivable subject of ordinary human life. The use of terracotta seems to have been discontinued in later ages. We, however, come across profuse illustration of terracotta plaques on the temples of late mediaval periods.

The custom of covering images of baser metal with gold leaves or thin sheets of gold was however common. The image of Sarvani from Chauddagam, District Tippera is a historic instances of early gilding.

It may be mentioned here that proper identification of images becomes extremely difficult if we do not have a text describing the details of those images. Sometimes however, we discover images with names inscribed on them, which do not conform to their dhyana given in current Tantra texts. This may be explained away either there were other texts not yet discovered, or the iconoplastic art in Bengal did not always scrupulously follow them.⁴ For determining the date of an image it is always safer to be guided by the inscriptions on the images. When there is no inscription, the age of any such detached piece of sculpture has to be conjectured on the basis of style. The art of Bengal during the four centuries under the Palas and Senas is essentially religious and evitably reflects the religious experiences of past centuries. Gods and goddesses, whether Buddhist and Brahmonical or Jaina, have all well-established iconographic types. It is curious to observe that this black stone

appears to have been a rather late adaptation into Bengal, as the undoubtedly old pieces of sculptures appears all to be in other kinds of stone. The Vishnu at Lakshmanvati which is the oldest piece of sculptures possibly reaching as far back as the Gupta period, is in a kind of hard greyish-black stone altogether different from the ordinary black chlorite stone. Bhrukti from Bhabanipur is in a similar⁵ kind of stone. The Tara from Sukhataspur is a noble piece of sculpter and antiquity is on its very face and style. The stone from which it is made or red stone not very correctly It is a kind of hard, coarse-grained stone, in the composition of which sand appears to have entered largele.⁶ Similar but softer is the stone of the mutilated image of Gouri. Sand stone appears to have been very rarely used for image making purposes. The only instance is the image of Mahisa-Mardini and image of Kali. This sand stone of very bad quality and was probably obtained from the local hills. Some years ago found a fragmentary image of Hara-Parvati. As it is a mere fragment, it has not been included in the present work. The stone used was a puzzle, as it had resisted long emersion in water, it was undoubtedly stone, but it looked like sun dried black clay at first sight. It appears to be a very soft variety of clay stone, found fragments of similar soft clay stone in the Chandar hills of Chittagong, at the famous spring of Sahasradhara. The huge piller from the Sonarang Deul is in granite. It appears to be composed of white crystals enclosed in a thin veneer of black with mica particles sparkline all through. There is no doubt that gold and silver were used as material to manufacture images, but for obvious reasons the number of such images was not large.

The art of Bengal during the fourth centuries under the Palas and the Senas is essentially religious and inevitably reflects the religious experiences of past centuries. Towards the end of this period Pala power began to decline and dynasty after dynasty rose in East Bengal in quick succession. The first prince to rise to independent power in East Bengal would appear to be a Buddhist, one Kanti Deva, an unfinished but genuine copper plate inscription of whom addressing the future kings of Harikela now in the Dacca Museum has revealed his existence. This one generation dynasty was

succeeded by that of the Buddhist Chandras, which also appears to have been a one generation. The rise of Karnasuvarna (Murshidabad district) Kotivarsa (Dinajpur) is to be placed earlier than the rise of Palas. Early sculptures appears to be almost non-existence in comparison with the state of things which reasonably except society under an well-established government. It should be noted that all the images of the middle period viz. Tara, Bhrukti, Loknatha, Buddha, Vishnu etc. with the exception of the Vishnu from Baghaura are Buddhist in denomination while in over whelming majority of the images of the period following are of the Brahmonical faith.⁷

The Vaishnava Varmans who succeeded, held sway for a longer period. Finally, the Senas who were worshipper of the Sun-god, Siva and Vishnu held sway roughly for a century and a quarter from about 1100 A.D. to about 1225 A.D. North Bengal and the northern part of the Burdwan Division had passed on to the Muhammadan in 1202 A.D. but in East Bengal the Senas held sway for some more. They were succeeded by a family of Vaisnava princes of which Dasaratha Deva is known from his still copper plate inscription. This family appears to have held sway up to about 1300 A.D. after which the whole country was overrun by the Muslims.

About 1035 A.D. to about 1300 A.D. East Bengal was dominated by princes of Brahmonical faith and the overwhelming majority of Brahmonical images during this period is thus explained. Images were produced not by a amateur artists working under inspiration for self-satisfaction, but by a class of professional sculptures whose productions found ready sale among the public at large. Some sculptures naturally excelled their brother artists and produced pleasing images which the productions of the rest were very average once that are justified in calling even this last period a flourishing period. A careful observer will be able to distinguish some outstanding features of the sculptures of this period. Perfection in technical details has become almost the rule. The old vigour and breadth of conception and composition have grown scarce but there is a distinct gain in the loveliness and subtle gracefulness which give Bengal sculpture of this period a distinction, that marks it out from the productions of

the same period of any other province of India. Only the country that produced lyrical poet like Jayadeva was capable of producing sculpture (Vishnu) with such finely adjusted sense of the beautiful. The fact of this images will always remain an unending source of joy for the worshippers of beauty – an everlasting testimony to the height to which an artist.

The Pala kings were professedly Buddhist and though Buddhist establishments received their direct patronage, the people at large remained within the fold of Brahmonical religions. It appears that Pala art and culture flourished not merely on the patronage of court but of active interest of the rich individuals and evigencies of religious cults. Regarding the execution of a piece of sculpture the persons or persons under whose patronage it was being executed had nothing to suggest. It was the artist⁸ who from time to time within the principles of image making became successful in covering an image into a perfect piece of art.⁹

Arakan probably received its Buddhism through the districts of Tippera and Chittagong. In the later district, Buddhism is still a living religion amongst the hill tribes.

The potters of the present day whose business it is to prepare clay images for worship never dream of dresses the gods and goddesses made by them in any other garb than those ordinarily worn by the present day inhabitants of Bengal. But no reason to assume that their brethren of pre-Muhammadan days in the stone-cutting profession did anything different. It will have to be admitted that both male and female costumes in Bengal have undergone very notable changes. Ibn Batuta, who visited Bengal in 1345 A.D. has left us a list of the current prices in Bengal in his time.

It appears from the list that while articles of every day use like rice, sugar, ghee, oil etc. were sold at amazingly cheap rates, cloth was comparatively dear and people, therefore, had to be content with little cloth. Things were not much different 150 years before Ibn Batuta's time and the parsimony of people with regard to cloth is reflected in the short dhotis in the sculptures cloth the gods which stop shorter than even the

present day skirts of European ladies. The present day standard of a dhoti 5 yards long and 24 inches broad was unknown. The standard in pre-muhamadan days would appear to lie nearer 3 yards X 24 inches for the males. Thus custom of wearing short and narrow dhotis continued down to even early British days. The short dhotis of the males may be seen in all the figures of the gods. They are most conventionally seen in the image of Vishnu. From the fact that Samudra Gupta is represented similarly clothed on his coins, it would appear that the custom was an old one and probably all-India wide. The saris of the ladies, however, descended much lower and stopped at the ankle by an inch or two. At present the sari as well as the dhoti is 5 yards in length, in the case of the males about half of this length is taken round the waist from right to left and fastened on to it like a belt by the action of the elasticity of the abdomen. The free end of this portion is tucked up between the legs and fastened behind on the border of the fold encircling the waist like a belt. This portion is called and suspended in front. This portion is known as Kocha. The garb of the males to pre-muhamadan days appears to have been worse in a similar fashion, only with a shorter cloth. But the manner wearing of the Sari by the ladies appears to have undergone radical change. At present the sari goes round the waist like a petticoat and no portion is left to serve as kachcha, as in one case of males. The rest of the sari covers the upper portions of the body and ultimately also serves as a veil to cover the upper portions of the body and the ultimately also serves as a veil to cover the head. The sari by which the ladies represented in these stone images are found covered appears to have been of a different nature. At first sight they look like petticoat but careful observation reveals the fact that they are not so. For purposes of observation, a scrutiny of standing figures gives the most satisfactory results and the attention of the reader is therefore directed to the figures of Lakshmi and Saraswati or the image of Vishnu, images of Marichi and image of Chandi. It will be seen from these images that the sari does not cover the front like a flat piece, but goes round the legs and exhibits their contours. It will further be observed that while the outer corner of that portion of the

sari which meets the leg is left at a right angle to the leg, the inner corner is drawn up, suggesting jucking up between the legs and fartening of both the ends behind like a kachha. This is suggestive of the south Indian fashion of wearing the sari. This method leaves the legs much wider freedom of movement than the petticoat or the saris as worn at present in Bengal. With the saris worn at present, the attitude at Marichi. A scrutiny of most of the female figures appears to show that both the ends of the cloth were drawn in and tucked up behind. The evidence of the figure of Tara would however show that sometimes only the left end was tucked up and the right end after being fastened at the waist by the upper border was allowed to hang loose in folds on front. Folds ending in graceful curves in front are also found in the images of Mahapratishara and Bhrukti. The sari having thus been finished at the waist, it remains to be seen how the upper portion body was covered. It is inconceivable that sewn garments like bodices or jackets were not in use at least in the upper stratum of society, but examples in support of this supposition is surprisingly rare in the female figures represented in Bengal sculpture. The design on the female and male clothing are interesting studies and testify to a flourishing state of the weavers art.

The Bengal school which is contemporaneous with the Magadha school is distinguished by the high class of art it developed and for its beauty of execution. Its flourishing period ranged from the 10th Century till the conquest of Bengal by the Muhammadans. Many of the specimens of the Bengal school are preserved in the museums at Calcutta, Dacca, Rajshahi and Vangiya Sanitya Parishad and a large number of them are scattered about in the Pargana Vikrampur and in the districts. In this school are to be found in such images. After the destruction of Buddhism from India the priests of the celebrated monasteries of Bengal and Magadha now in Nepal who could save their heads from the hostile sword of the Muhammadans.

A large number of distinguished scholars tried to analyse the distinguished feature of the development of the history of Indian art. The names of Coomarswamy 'History of Indian and Indonesian Art'; N.K. Bhattasali 'Iconography of Buddhist and

Brahmonical Sculptures in the Dacca Museum'; R.D. Banerjee 'Eastern Indian School of Mediaeval Sculpture'; J.N. Banerjee, 'The Development of Hindu Iconography'; S.K. Saraswati 'Early Sculptures of Bengal' and others may be mentioned in this paper. Under this perspective we would like to make an attempt to present the following paper in the developing of some interesting features of Bengal Art during the early medieval period.

Here precisely we are mainly concerned about a large number of composite images found in different parts of Bengal. Sometimes we get of the Shaktic injunction though are of much later period, some appears to have derived purely from artist, imagination and possibly at the latest of the local patrons. The rationale of the emergence of such a large number of exotic images have baffled art sociologists. We have however tried to understand the problem on the basis of the social realities of the period of their production.

References and Notes

1. P.K. Bhattacharyya Iconography of Sculptures,
Darjeeling, 1983, p.1.
2. N.K. Bhattashali Iconography of Buddhist and Brahmonical
Sculptures.
in the Dacca Museum, India (Delhi), 1972, p. XVII-
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3. Cf. Vishnu images from Rangpur, published in 'Annual Report of
Archaeological Survey of India, 1911-12.
4. R.C. Majumder (ed.) History of Bengal,
Vol. I, Dacca, 1943, p. 430.
5. Ibid, 532.
6. N.G. Majandar Inscription of Bengal, Vol. III, p. 42-56.
7. N.K.Bhattasgali Op.cit. XVIII.
8. N.R. Roy Bangalir Itihas, Adi Parva- Pt. II,
Third edition. Calcutta, 797.
9. Cf. The Image of Goddess Vaisnavi.