

A Unique Image of Ganesha from North Dinajpur

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Among the Hindu deities, Ganesha is one of the most universally adored ones. He was the principal object of worship of the *Ganapatyas*, one of the five principal Brahmanical sects. The elephant-headed and pot-bellied god was the object of separate worship in other parts of India, but there is very little evidence that the *Ganapatyas* ever prevailed in Bengal. However, the tremendous frequency of the Ganapati images in Bengal can be explained by the fact that as he was regarded as the remover of all obstacles (*vighnavinasana*) and bestower of success (*siddhidata*), he had an assured position not only among the different Hindu sectaries, but also even among the Buddhists and Jainas to some extent.¹ Hence, he is worshipped before starting a new undertaking or a journey² or at the beginning of any religious ceremony and on special occasions without reference to any particular sect.³ In all the Ganesha-sects of Bengal, especially among the merchant-businessman class, he is worshipped and esteemed as the giver of success⁴ and this is corroborated by the inscription on the image of the deity from Narayanpur (Comilla) dated in the 4th regnal year of Pala king Mahapala II (c. 1078 A.D.), which reveals that one merchant named Buddhamitra, son of lambhalamitra; donated the sculpture.⁵ Though he is regarded as *Siddhidata* in the *puranas*, he is also *Vighnadata* or *Vighnaraja* (King of obstacles) in case of not being worshipped. In the *Manava Grihyasutra*, he is the god of obstacles. The *Yajnavalka Smriti* contains a list of almost of all kinds of obstacles, which may occur due to the anger of the god Ganesha.⁶ In Verse 53 of the Sian (Birbhum) Stone Inscription (approx. 1043 A.D.), Ganesha has been described as *Vighmanayaka*.⁷ Originally, he was probably a god of fertility, viz. of agriculture, as many of his symbols prove.⁸ He is also the god of the month *bhadrapada*.⁹

In several *puranas* and *agamas*, Ganesha is variously described as one of the sons of Siva and Parvati, or of Parvati alone before her marriage with Siva, or of Siva

alone or even having an independent origin.¹⁰ These legends seem to indicate a non-Aryan origin of the god and his later absorption into the Hinduism, associating him largely with the Saiva cult. A small black stone image of Ganesha¹¹ measuring 12.5" in height and 10.5 in width has been found from a small village of Islampur in the district of North Dinajpur .It is curious because the image of Ganesha is rare in the district where most of the images are those of Vishnu. He is seated in *padmasana*, while most of the images of Ganesha in Bengal show the god in *lalitasana* or *maharajalilasana*.¹² *Padmasana* denotes deep meditation and concentration. On the other hand, *lalitasana* symbolizes the gracious presence or serenity of a deity and *maharajalilasana* symbolizes the royal ease. According to the *Brahmavaivarta Purana*, Ganesha was fond of staying engaged in *tapasya*.¹³



The deity has four hands. Based on the number of hands, the four-armed Ganesha forms the biggest group. The texts like *Amsumadbhedagama*, *Uttarakamikagama* *Suprabhedagama*, *Vishnudharmottara Purana*,¹⁴ *Rupamandana*,¹⁵ *Agni Purana*,¹⁶

*Matsya Purana*¹⁷ etc. invariably endow the god with four hands, the attributes held by them being any four among the following: ‘Own tooth (*svadanta*), wood-apple (*kapittha*), sweet- meat (*modaka*), elephant-goad (*ankusa*), noose (*pasa*), snake (*naga*), rosary, lotus etc.¹⁸ However, the attributes held in hands by the Ganesha image in question is considerably different. Here the divinity holds a *sankha* (conch-shell), “the emblem of salvation”, in his lower right hand, which is very much unique because most of the seated four-armed Ganesha icons of Bengal depict *akshamala*, (rosary) in *varada* or *svadanta* (tusk) in the same hand.¹⁹ In the Hindu tradition, *sankha* is frequently associated with the Lord Vishnu, who overcame the demon Pancajanya, the grandson of Hiranyakasipu; hence, the name (Pancajanya) of the conch shell associated With this deity.²⁰ *Sankha*, though not found in any other sculpture of Ganesha in Bengal, does find mention as one of his attributes.²¹ The upper right hand, though not visible, might have carried *gada* (mace), “the emblem of destruction” and a symbol of strength and power. However, most of the Ganesha figures in Bengal of the seated, four-armed type are found with *mulaka* (radish) in their upper right hand, which symbolizes agricultural fertility²² in addition to being a favourite edible of the elephants. In the upper left hand, the god carries an object of the *chakra* type. *Chakra*, though not endowed in any other image of the divinity in Bengal, is also referred to as one of his attributes.²³ In almost all the images of this type, some weapon, especially *parasu*, is found in this hand. However, the attributes of *pasha* and *ankusha* usually occur in the south Indian images.²⁴ The god is represented with a full-blown lotus (*padma*), “the emblem of creation”, in his lower left hand. This attribute is, of course, found in a very few seated, four-armed images of Ganesha but in the upper right hand of the god, not in the lower left. However, majority of the images of this type hold *ladduka* or *modaka* in the lower left hand and the trunk is applied to the left to taste the sweets. The *modaka* refers to a sweetmeat that denotes fertility.²⁵

Thus, it is quite clear that the god, instead of being provided with the traditional attributes has been endowed with the *ayudhas* of Vishnu. At present also, *Sankha*,

Chakra, Gada and Padma are seen clockwise in the four hands of Ganesha.²⁶ It is said in the *Brahmavaivarta Purana* that Parvati, seeing Krishna with *Sankha, Chakra, Gada and Padma*, wished for a similar son and happened to obtain because of the boon given by Krishna.²⁷ In the same *purana*, Ganesha is sometimes described as one of the aspects of Krishna.²⁸ Therefore, once again we see the impact of the *Brahmavaivarta Purana* in this, icon of Ganesha.

The deity is endowed with a third eye, which is occasionally found in his images.²⁹ The third eye (in the centre of the forehead and pointing up and down) named *jnananetra* refers to the ability to see beyond the natural world, a superhuman power reserved for the gods. In addition, the same eye also stands for knowledge and wisdom.³⁰ In latter Hinduism, Ganesha is regarded as the god of wisdom and art³¹, which perhaps explains the depiction of the god with the third eye;

The Ganesha figures in Bengal are generally bedecked with various jewelleries, of which particularly remarkable is the pair of the *sankha-kundala*, present in most of the images. However, the ornamentation of the divinity in question is very simple. Except the wristlets (*valayas*) and one set of necklace (*hara*), there is no jewellery on his person, nor does he wear any *yajnopavita*, which is worn by members of the three “twice-born” (*dvija*) castes as a symbol of spiritual rebirth. He is not also endowed with the sacred thread made up of a long snake, as is the general feature of the Ganesha images. In between the chest and the belly of the divinity, there is a belt, which was probably meant to serve the purpose of an *udarabandha* to contain the *lambodara* (large, protuberant belly in which allegedly lies the whole world) of the god. Generally, the band or girdle round the belly of Ganesha is a *naga, nagabandha*.

The trunk is unfortunately missing. However, it seems that the trunk was bent upwards reaching the god’s mouth as it could not have been applied to the left or to the right in absence of the *modaka-purna-patra*. A remarkable feature of the Ganesha figures in Bengal is that contrary to both the ‘*karanda- or jata-mukutas*’ in other parts of India, the Bengal images uniformly show the *jatamukuta* for the god. However, the elephant head of the deity under discussion, is bare. The only other Ganesha image with bare

elephant-head is found at Paharpur.³² In the later texts, a mouse is very often described as his mount (*vahana*).³³ It is also represented in almost all the Ganesha images of Bengal. The image is made of black stone of inferior quality and claims no elegance from artistic point of view as well. It has neither any pedestal nor any stela. Probably it is Ganesha in a folk-style.

Thus, the image of Ganesha under consideration agrees with the description and legend of the deity found in the *Brahmavaivarta Purana* in respect of the meditative aspect and *ayudhas* of the god. It is very different in the sense that here the god is represented in deep meditation, while his other images discovered in Bengal depict him in the mood of earthly enjoyment, relishing sweetmeats with the help of his proboscis. The appearance of the god in the traditional role of a happy, well-to-do and well-fed householder or a businessperson is conspicuous by its absence. The exceptional representation of the god without any *mukuta* or with scanty ornaments points to the emphasis laid on the meditative and spiritual features of the deity. The conspicuous absence of *mulaka* (radish), a symbol of agricultural fertility as well as *modaka*, which also denotes fertility and of which Ganesha is also very fond of, as common attributes of the god clearly reveals that the image was neither made nor worshipped by its devotee out of any material objectives, rather to pay his heart-felt veneration with fullest devotion. The depiction of Ganesha with the attributes of Vishnu shows a tremendous impact of the cult of the latter over that of the former in, addition to demonstration of syncretism, which had brought the two different sects very close to each other. It is not unlikely that the worshipper of this Ganesha image in question might have been a devout Vaishnava.

It is not easy to determine the date of the image. However, as its iconography mostly agrees with his account in the *Brahmavaivarta Purana*, which came to its present form in the 15th/16th century A.D. and as it possesses the same *ayudhas* as those of the present-day Ganesha images, it may be dated in the 13th or subsequent century A.D.

Notes and References:

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3. Bhandarkar, R.G., *Vaisnavism, Saivism and other Minor Sects*, (Rep.) Varanasi, 1965, p.150.
4. Ray, Nihar Ranjan, *History of the Bengali People*, (Tr.) John W. Hood, Calcutta, 1994, p. 421.
5. Haque, Enamul, *Bengal Sculpture: Hindu Iconography up to . c 1250 A.D.*, Bangladesh National Museum, Dhaka, 1992, p. 318.
6. Bandopadhyay, Amal Kumar, *Pauranika* (Encyclopedia Hinduism in Bengali), Vol. I, Calcutta, 1985, p. 444.
7. Sircar, D. C., *Silalekha Tamrasasanadira Prasange*, Calcutta, 1387 B. S.
8. Gosta, *op. cit.*, p. 90.
9. *Ibid.*
10. Rao, T.A.G., *Elements of Hindu Iconography*, Vol. 1, New York, J 968. pp. 35-45.
11. The image is now kept in the Islampur police station and briefly described in Ghosh, Smarajit, *History of North Bengal- Archaeological Probing in the District of North Dinajpur*, (unpublished) Ph. D. dissertation, University of North Bengal, 2000, p. 32- 33.
12. Haque, *op. cit.*, p. 314.
13. Bandopadhyay, *op. cit.*, p. 450.
14. 14. III, 71.13-16; also quoted in the *Vratakhandā*, p.77.
15. *Elements of Hindu iconography*, 1(2), App. C, p. 5, 7, 8.
- 16.50.23-26; 348.21 b-22a.
17. 260.52-54.
18. Banerjea, *op. cit.*, p. 358.
19. Haque, *op. cit.*, pp. 317-22.

20. Bunce, F. W., *A Dictionary of Buddhist and Hindu Iconography*, New Delhi, 200 I, p.269.
21. Gosta, *op. cit.*, p. 90.
22. *Ibid*, p. 179.
23. *Ibid*, p. 90.
24. Haque, *op. cit.*, p. 322.
25. Bunce, *op. cit.*, p. 186.
26. Bandopadhyay, *op. cit.*, p. 446.
27. *Ibid*, p. 450.
28. Banerjea, *op. cit.*, p. 355.
29. Haque, *op. cit.*, pp. 315, 319, 322.
30. Bunce, *op. cit.*, p. 312.
31. Gosta, *op. cit.*, p. 90, Banerjea, *op. cit.*, p. 356.
32. cr. MASI, no. 55, plate XXXIId.
33. Banerjea, *op. cit.*, p., 358.