

The Warrior's Stones in Eastern India

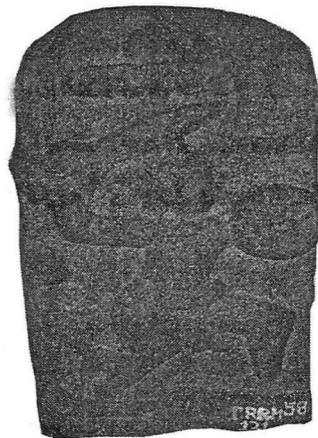
Pranab Kumar Bhattacharyya

Among a large number of stone Sculptures taken notice of in a recently published Catalogue of North Bengal University Museum, our attention has been drawn to a Warrior's Stone (mentioned in the Catalogue¹ as Hero-Stone) found in Eastern India.

In fact, hundreds of Hero-Stones and Sati-Stones have been discovered in Western and Southern parts of India.² In comparison, we come across a handful of Hero-Stones and a very insignificant number of Sati Stone in Eastern India. Most of the Sati Stones found in Eastern India, particularly from Bengal and Bihar are relatively of the modern period.³ Below we present the descriptions of the Hero-Stones so far recorded in the Museums of Eastern India.

A] From North Bengal University Museum

1. Hero-Stone: Sand Stone; 40 Cm. X 20 Cm. X 11 Cm. Depiction of the Hero in the act of fighting with one step forward and holding sword in one hand and the shield in the other. The figure is accompanied by small figure of a fighter with a weapon (indistinct) in one hand and an umbrella looks like a canopy over the head of the hero. The solar symbol appears on the top left. The slab with elliptical stela found from Rajshahi (Bangladesh) possibly belonging to early Christian era.⁴



Hero-Stone - North Bengal University Museum

B] The Varendra Research Museum preserves the following Hero-Stones:

2. The combatant Hero with raised sword and a shield under a cap Canopy represented in low relief on a rounded slab made of black Stone: (47 Cm. x 18.5 Cm). The Hero wears beard and moustache and ornaments on his ears, neck, arms, wrists and ankle. He is clad in a *dhoti* which is tied round the waist by a piece of cloth and his hair gathered in large bun behind the head. Above the Canopy to the left is the solar symbol. He is accompanied by another fighter wearing *kuntala* and holding spear in both hands below.

The two inscriptions, one at the top right and the other below the left foot of the combatant are *Devata* and *Thakura*, both implying 'god'. The slab was found from Deogram, Bogra District (now in Bangladesh) and is dated 9th Century A. D.⁵

3. Hero-Stone made of -black basalt (47.5 Cm. x 31.7 Cm.) found from Kashiabari, Atrai, Naogaon in Rajshahi (now Bangladesh). The Hero is standing in *alidha* pose on a pointed slab. He holds a sword in right hand (damaged) raised over his head and an indistinct object in the other hand. The figure wears a dhoti and an *uttariya*, and a pearl *upavita*, a necklace, *urujalaka* and round ear-rings. The curly hair arranged in *jatas* which are piled cap like on the head. The back slab is plain except for the double decorative borders. The figure may be dated c. 11th Century A.D.⁶



Hero-Stone: Kashiabari, Atrai, Naogaon, Rajshahi

It is possible to trace the origin of the cult of Hero-Stone to the Menhirs of the Megalithic cultures in India of the first millennium B.C. and their geographical distribution in the Indian peninsula seems to coincide with that of Megalithic settlements. The Hero-Stone is known as *kirttistambha* in Rajasthan, *paliya* (i.e. protector) in Gujrat and its transformation into a deity in the cult of *Vithoba* in Maharastra and in the Sangama literature (c300 B.C. to 200 A.D.). The counterpart of *ma-sati-k-kal* (Sati-Stone) may be found in *Vira-k-kal* (Hero-Stone).⁷ We have not come across any such terminology for eastern India indicating thereby less popularity of the cult in the region. The Hero-Stone found in Eastern India are much less elaborate in composition than those found in peninsular India. Hero is rarely shown on horse-back or seated on elephant.^{7a}

Hero-Stones are generally carved in locally available rocks like sandstone and chlorite schist in Purulia and Burdwan and laterite blocks in Midnapore but in eastern Bengal in black stone as it is a usual practice for Pala-Sena groups of sculptures. Hero-Stones preserved in the Varendra Research Society Museum bear close resemblance to Pala-Sena sculpture, similar to those found in Budhpur.

Memorial Stones generally dedicated to men who have met their death in an act of heroism or have died on the battle field. The soul of the hero goes out of the world of the living and enters into heaven (cf. *Hato Va prapsasi Svargam..*).⁸ A similar interesting tradition exists in Scandinavian mythology, where Odin, god of death and battle, was believed to welcome into his hall warriors who died a heroic death on the battle field.⁹

In Indian tradition, in heaven life is timeless, and the heaven is known by various nomenclatures: *Brahmaloka*, *Suryaloka*, *Indraloka*, *Kailasa*, and so on.

On occasion the divinization of the hero, it is compared to such other religious activities, like the sacrificial ritual and asceticism, which are said to be conducive to the attainment of heaven or of release from rebirth. The metaphors which like battle, sacrifice and asceticism are found in various texts.¹⁰ Great hero Arjuna is welcomed in Indra's heaven, 'the abode of heroes. Incidentally, Arjuna was, in fact, the son of Indra.'¹¹

The austerities and practices of the ascetics are compared to the painful death of the hero in the battle, or the voluntary death (sometimes, of course, against her will) of the sati on the funeral pyre of her husband. All are seen as superhuman feats, and were assured of the bliss in highest heaven. The symbolic death of the as-cetic leads him,

however, to a different life from that of the hero in heaven, For example, the ascetic denies himself sexuality, whereas the hero is waited upon by damsels (*Apsaras*) in heaven and lives a life of enhanced sexuality.¹² The Sati, on the other hand, also attains heaven, after self-immolation and is destined to live a bliss-ful life in company of her beloved husband.¹³

As mentioned earlier that though the Western and Southern parts of India yielded a large number of Hero-Stones and Sati-stones, we have come across a very few of such stones in eastern India.

C] From other places of West Bengal:

In recent years, a few more Hero-Stones have been found in Purulia, Bankura, Midnapore and Burdwan districts of West Bengal. Again, it is only in the extremely western Asansol sub-division and the upland areas rather than the coastal or alluvial plains of Midnapore, Hero-Stones have been discovered.¹⁴ It appears, however, that Hero-Stones become fewer in agriculturally fertile areas.¹⁵ When agriculture became mainstay of the people, the necessity of fighting for snatching live-stocks from other hordes became unnecessary, for which the services of the heroes was very much sought after on earlier occasions.

The Hero-Stones were generally related to the exploits of the people who remain unnoticed in royal charters and Panegyrics, and the oral traditions preserve the memoirs of heroes. The Hero-Stones, it may be pointed out, show clearly 'a substratum cult',¹⁶ and the veneration of these is rooted in tribal and folk religion'. Hero-stones, perhaps, commemorate the conflict between the emergent political elite and autochthons population of the region. Sengupta¹⁷ has drawn our attention to the new geopolitical formation called *bhums* (cf. Birbhum, etc.) of the Hindu tribal chiefs in the medieval west Bengal to the conflicts mentioned above.

The presence of the Sun and the Crescent Moon usually at the top of Hero - Stones and Sati-Stones, possibly signify the indestructible time, and the land-grants usually contain a phrase indicating perpetuity i.e. 'as long as the sun and the moon exist'.¹⁸ Thapar has drawn our attention to the *Mahanirvana Tantra*, a later text, mentions that the *nada* and the *vindu*- two nerve centres of the human body - actually stand for the Sun and the Moon and their union is sought in yogic practices.¹⁹ The rituals which are being performed by the *sadhaka* also known as *vira* (hero), are the same as are

associated with the worship of the Hero-Stone, like male animal sacrificing and use of intoxicants for libations.

But in course of time some sort adjustment and assimilation between the cult of Hero-Stone and Brahmanical became inevitable as the Hero-Stones are in many cases situated close to Brahmana grantees. 'The upward mobile family of the hero and the newly settled Brahmana grantee may well have had to make major adjust-meats.²⁰ The establishment of Hero-Stones in temple court-yards was, however, considered to be concessions made by the Brahmanical system to local tradition, and this practice apparently enhanced the prestige of Hero-Stones, and the worship (*puja*) of Hero-Stones, were to be performed in accordance with the Brahmanical practices, shedding the earlier Tantrika form of worship. It is interesting to note since 9th century A.D. onwards, the perceptible changes in popular attitude towards the Hero-Stones began to be felt. Hero-Stones are now made of black stone and their ornamentation and sophisticated method of wearing cloths and above all inscribing inscriptions on them as Thakura and Devata i.e. god, tended to show that they began to come loser to the main deity for which the temple was dedicated.

In the process some elements of high culture are borrowed and some elements of folk culture are elevated and became visible. Hence, it becomes difficult to categorize Hero-Stones as belonging to either the folk or the high culture.²⁰ But definitely represents unrecorded accounts of the heroic resistances of the people who tried to save their own stocks from attacks of wild animals, also sometimes, the clutches of the more Sophisticated predators who attempted to profane their soils.

Notes and References:

1. Pranab Kumar Bhattacharyya, *Catalogue Part II*, Akshay Kumar Maitreya Museum, etc. North Bengal University, K. P. Bagchi & Company, Kolkata, 2005.
2. G. D. Sontheimer, 'Some memorial Monuments of Western India' in *German Scholars on India*, II, Bombay, 1976, pp. 264 ft. Also G. D. Sontheimer and S. Setter (eds.), *Memorial Stones*, Dharwar, 1982. Also see II. Vanamamalai, 'Hero-stone Worship in Ancient South India, 1997, 34, PP. 40 - 6.
3. Shyamalkanti Chakravati, 'Sati in Bengal Epigraphy' in *Journal of the Varendra*

- Research Museum, Vol. 2, Rajshahi, 1973, pp. 41 Ft.
4. Pranab Kumar Bhattacharyya, *op. cit.*, p.22, pl. 24.
 5. Mukhlesur Rahaman, *A Descriptive Catalogue: Varendra Research Museum*, University of Rajshahi, 1998, p.334, pl. 319.
 6. Mukhlesur Rahaman, *op. cit.*, p.345, .pl.329.
 7. Pranab Kumar Bhattacharyya, *op. cit.*, pp. 42-43, fn.16.
 - 7a. In Budhpur (P.S. Pancha) of the Purulia district of West Bengal, Hero has been placed on an elephant. In some cases, Hero has been shown as fighting, while the crowning lion shown above the stela. See Gautam Sengupta, “Hero Stone of West Bengal: A Preliminary Report”, *Journal of Bengal Art*, Vol. 4, Dhaka, 1999, pp. 77ff; see also his article published in *Banglapaedia*, National Encyclopedia of Bangladesh, Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, Dhaka, 2004, Vol. pp.328f. We may refer to three riders on horse-back of the Varendra Research Society Museum as belonging to this class of sculptures. See Mukhlesur Rahaman, *op. cit.*, plate no. 326, pp. 340-41.
 8. *Mahabharata, Sri-mad-Bhagvat-Gita*, Ch. II.37 Again. It has been cautioned that “if anybody flees from the battle field and meets death at the hand of the enemy, he becomes guilty not only of desertion, but a sinner taking all the burden of sin of his master; *The Manusamhita*, 7. 94-95.
 9. It is said that each night Odin used to entertain the fallen brave warriors with a feast in Valhalla. Odin wanted to collect a mighty host from among the noble dead to wage war against monsters and giants. See H.R. Davidson, *Scandinavian Mythology*, Paul Hamlyn, London, 1969, p.28.
 10. *Satapatha Brahmana*, (2.33.15) refers to heaven-bound boat for the *agnihotra* sacrifice. *Mahabharata, Santiparvan* (21.18-19; 78, 28-31) mentions that one will go to heaven for protecting, cows and Brahmanas. The *Dana-Stuti* hymns of *Rig-Veda* refer to the exploits of the persons connected with the successful raids for capturing cattle. See R. Thapar in *Ancient Indian Social History: Some Interpretations*, New Delhi, 1978, pp. 105-21.
 11. *Mahabharata, Vanaparva*, pp. 43ff.
 12. Cf. *ahave tu hatam Suram na
socheta kathanchana /*

*Asochya hi hatah surah
svargaloke Mahiyate //
varapsarah Sahasrani suram
ayodhane ham /
tvaramanani dhavanti mama
bhartta bhavediti //*

i.e. one should not lament the death of a hero who goes to heaven. In heaven thousands of celestial damsels rush after him to have him as their consort. *Mahabharata* (12/98/44-47). The same story of rushing of the *Apsaras* towards Damodaragupta who died in battle field is given in the Apsad Inscription of Adityasena. Also see Rajatarangini, 8/453. See D. C. Sircar, *Samskritik Itihaser Prasange* (Bengali), Sahitya-loka, Kolkata, 1983, pp. 105 ff.

13. The merits of immolation of *Sati* has elaborately been narrated in the *Brihaddharma-purana*, see *History of Bengal*, Vol. I (ed.) R. C. Majumdar in 'Society'. See Edward Thomson John, *Suttee – A Historical and Philosophical Enquiry into the Hindu Rite of Widow-Burning*, London, 1928.
14. See Gautam Sengupta, *Banglapaedia*, *op. cit.*, pp. 327ff.
15. See Romilla Thapar, 'As long as the Moon and the Sun Endure' in *Sontheimer Memorial Seminar*, Puna, 1993, 32, p.696.
16. Romila Thapar, 'Death of the Hero' in S. C. Humphrays and Helan king (Ed.) *Morality and Immorality, The Anthropology and Archaeology of Death*, London, 1981, pp. 293ff.
17. Gautam Sengupta, *op. cit.*, p.328.
18. Romila Thapar, 'As Long as the Moon and the Sun Endure', *op. cit.*, pp. 696 ff. She has also suggested that folk religion symbolism is being expressed at the Dhangar festival in which *Khandaba* standing for the Sun is taken out from the temple for bathing into the Karha River representing the moon. J. M. Stanley, 'Special Time, Special Power: The Fluidity of Power in a popular Hindu festival in *Journal of Asian Studies*.1977, 37, 27-43.
19. *The Mahanirvana Tantra*, 14.66; 14.89-90.
20. Romila Thapar, *op. cit.*, p.703,