

**A Note on an Image of Tārā from Dumnitala (Beldanga) of
Murshidabad District, West Bengal**
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Abstract:

The present paper examines a hitherto unpublished image of the Buddhist deity Tārā discovered at Dumnitala in the Murshidabad district of West Bengal, a region that historically functioned as a cultural corridor between Puṇḍravardhana/Varendra in the north and Dakṣiṇa Rāḍha in the south. Situated near an ancient spill-off channel of the Bhagirathi, the site forms part of a broader archaeological landscape enriched by monastic establishments such as Raktamṛttikā Mahāvihāra at Rajbadidanga, Paharpur, Jagajjivanpur and Bharatpur. Drawing upon epigraphic, literary, and sculptural sources, the paper contextualizes the antiquity and diffusion of Tārā worship across eastern India within the frameworks of Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna Buddhism, noting parallel developments in Brahmanical and Jaina traditions. While sharing compositional similarities with Tārā icons from Agradigun, Bamangola, and the Guneri–Kurkihar region, the Dumnitala image is comparatively crude in execution. Its stylistic traits, including the depiction of Amoghasiddhi and votive stūpas, underscore regional artistic idioms informed by the Pāla-Sena sculptural repertoire. Through comparative iconographic analysis, the study argues that the distribution of Vajrayāna sculptures, including Tārā, reflects patterns of monastic expansion, political patronage, and mercantile networks active along the middle and lower Ganga valleys.

Keywords: Tārā, Vajrayāna, Dumnitala, Raktamṛttikā Mahāvihāra, Rajbadidanga

Introduction:

The present paper focuses on an image of Tārā, a Buddhist deity, recorded during an exploration at the village of Dumnitala (23°54'53.61"N and 28°15'53.86"E). Dumnitala has a small temple, located 4 km east of Beldanga railway station in the district of Murshidabad, West Bengal (Bandopadhyay 1982: 94-95). The said temple complex is on the bank of a spill-off channel left by the river Bhagirathi. Since there is a possibility of the change of river course, one may consider the local myth about the significance of the said spill-off channel, i.e., it was a navigable water course and was operative in the distant past.

Before detailing the major objective of the present paper, it may not be unwise to give an overview of the historical geography of the region. The present area, being an intermediary zone between the Puṇḍravardhana/Varendri or northern Bengal and the Dakṣiṇa Rāḍha (Majumder 1971: 20) or a part of southern Bengal, must have played a significant role in the historico-cultural development. The cultural past of the region can easily be gauged by the findings of epigraphic and archaeological evidence from this area. The temple organizations, prolific sculptural evidence pertaining to both orthodox and heterodox

ideologies, besides monastic developments under the patronage of local lineages, were in co-lateral existence during the concerned period. While discussing the historical background of the present image, one must take into consideration the monastic developments in Paharpur (Dikshit 1938) of the Dinajpur district (undivided Bengal), Jagajjivanpur (Roy 2002: 555-611) in the district of Malda, Raktamṛttikā mahāvihāra (Das 1968) in the district of Murshidabad besides, the evidence of a Buddhist complex found at the mound of Bharatpur in the district of Burdwan. (*IAR* 1971-1972: 50)

Moreover, one must keep in mind that the locality is not far away from the important Buddhist monastic complex of Raktamṛttikā mahāvihāra (mentioned above), i.e., Rajbadidanga under the jurisdiction of Berhampur Police Station of the district of Murshidabad. The site was excavated by Sudhir Ranjan Das of the Department of Archaeology, University of Calcutta, during 1962-63. This place was also visited by the Chinese traveller *Hiuen Tsang*, and he mentioned this place as *Lo-to-wei- (or mo)-chih*. (Watters 1973: 191) The excavated data from Rajbadidanga and explored remains in and around the site substantially prove that it was one of the most important Buddhist settlements of the *Uttara Rāḍha* area, assignable to the early medieval period. The major findings of the excavations were bases of *stūpas* (*IAR* 1962-1963: 46), a *dharma cakra*, a bronze figure of Buddha (*IAR* 1963-1964: 63) depicting the lord seated in *bhūmisparśa-mudrā* and a specimen in lime showing Padmapāṇi standing on a lotus-pedestal. (*IAR* 1963-1964: 64) Among the retrieved specimens of seals, mention may be made of the one which bears the legend *Raktamṛttikā mahāvihāra* (*IAR* 1963-1964: 63) and another containing the legend: *śri raktamṛttikā- mahāvaiḥā- rik- ārya -bhikṣu -saṅghasya*. (*IAR* 1972-1973: 37) Besides the excavated repertoire, an image of Tārā recorded from the village of Jadupur, located to the south of the excavated area of Rajbadidanga, should also be taken into consideration. (Mukherjee 1996: 89)

Antiquity of Tārā, and Their Geographical Distribution:

Several Buddhist texts, especially ascribable to the early medieval period, have enough references to the iconographic details of the Buddhist goddess Tārā. The earliest reference to the goddess Tārā is found in the *Mahāvairocanasūtra*, a literary treatise of the eighth century CE, in which the goddess is described as an emanation of Avalokiteśvara. (Tucci 1949: 388) Another Buddhist text, *Ārya-Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa*, also frequently refers to several aspects of the goddess Tārā. The most elaborate description of the goddess occurs in the fourth chapter of this text. The text clearly mentions that Tārā is closely associated with Avalokiteśvara. In fact, she is noted as the personification of the *karuṇā* of Avalokiteśvara. (Vaidya 1964: 45) Reference to Tārā (*To-Lo*) is also found in the accounts of *Hiuen Tsang* during his visit to Nalanda, though he did not specify whether the deity was a male or a female. (Watters 1973: 105) *Sādhanamālā* has also elaborately described different aspects of the deity Tārā. This text also prescribes sacred Tārā *mantras* as '*om Tāre tuttāre ture svāhā*'. (Bhattacharya 1925: 207-208) Another earliest available text composed in her praise is the *Arya-Tārā-sragdhara-stotra* (Ghosh 1980: 8) of the eighth century CE by Sarvajñamitra. Other references to the goddess Tārā are found in the

Guhyasamājatantra, a work of the eighth century CE and *Mahāpratyāṅgirā-dhāriṇī* datable to the seventh century CE (Ghosh 1980: 14).

Interestingly, Brahmanical texts also widely referred to the iconic forms of Tārā. The earliest reference to Tārā is found in the *Lalitopākhyāna* section of the *Brahmāṇḍa-purāṇa* (Ghosh 1980: 16) of the fourth century CE. It is to be mentioned here that some scholars opine that Tārā is a manifestation of Durgā. Etymologically, Durgā and Tārā convey the same idea. One of the forms of Tārā is *Durgottāriṇī Tārā* or *Durgottārā*. While explaining the conceptual relationship between the Buddhist and Brahmanical goddess Tārā, Ghosh stated that, “The fundamental concept of Buddhist goddess Tārā as a saviour and the *śakti* is latent in the Brahmanical goddess Durgā or *Devī* who evolved long before the Buddhist goddess.” (Ghosh 1980: 14)

Iconic forms of Tārā also received special attention in the Jaina canons. So far as Jaina iconography is concerned, she is the consort deity of the Tūrṭhankara Aranātha. B.C. Bhattacharya, in his work entitled *The Jaina Iconography*, observed that “The Śvetāmbara texts described *Dhāraṇī Yakṣiṇī* as seated on a lotus and possessing four hands with citrus, two lotuses, and a rosary. Tārā, the *Yakṣiṇī* of the Digambara, is to appear, according to them, as riding on a swan and holding a snake, *Vajra*, deer and *Varada Mudrā*.” (Bhattacharya 1974: 101)

Epigraphic evidence refers to the popularity of the goddess Tārā during the early medieval period. The Kalasan Stone Inscription of Panankarana, Saka 700 (778 CE) (Sarkar 1971: 35) is possibly the earliest epigraphic evidence that opens with an invocation to the goddess Ārya Tārā. This inscription has been found in Java. The Dambal (Karnāṭaka) inscription of the Cālukyan king, Trivuraramalla Vikramāditya IV, assignable to c. 1095-6 CE (Fleet 1881: 185-190) also opens with an invocation to Buddha and Tārā. A Buddhist Stone Inscription from Sravasti (Kielhorn 1881: 61-64) of Vidyādhara, assignable to 1119 CE, also refers to Tārā. The Nesarikā grant of Govinda III (Gupta 1963: 123-137) specifically refers to an image of Tārā. According to this inscription, Govinda III brought from Dharmapāla an image of the goddess Tārā. The Nālanda inscription of Vipulaśrīmitra (Majumder 1933: 97-101), palaeographically assignable to the twelfth century CE, has identified the deity Tārā as *jagat-tāriṇī*.

There are different opinions among scholars regarding the place of origin and the antiquity of the Buddhist deity Tārā. Hirananda Shastri advocates a non-Indian origin of this goddess (Shastri 1925: 14-16). *Ārya-Maṅjuśrīmūlakalpa*, a Buddhist text, mentions that her own area is eastern India, particularly the geo-cultural units of Harikela, Karmaranga, Kāmarūpa and Kalasa (probably Java) (Shastri 1925: 21). According to M. K. Dhavalikar, Tārā originated in western India (Dhavalikar 1964: 18). He also opines that the earliest iconic form of Tārā, as represented in sculptures, was found at the caves of Kanheri, Nasik, Ellora, Aurangabad, and Ajanta. R.S. Gupte also rendered similar views (Sircar 1967: 108). D.C. Sircar and Mallar Ghosh are in favour of the eastern Indian origin of the cult of Tārā. Mallar Ghosh advocates that Nalanda and Ratnagiri were the main centres that popularized the cult of Tārā (Ghosh 1980: 28).

The antiquity of the image of the Buddhist deity Tārā (either as principal deity or in association with Avalokiteśvara) ascribable to the Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna sects of the Buddhist pantheon does not go beyond the fifth century CE. Incidentally, *Saddharma puṇḍarīka* of the third-fourth century CE and *Kāraṇḍavyūha* of the fourth century CE do not mention the Buddhist deity Tārā (Ghosh 1980: 10-11). There is no literary and archaeological evidence of the image of Tārā prior to the fifth century CE. According to Hirananda Shastri, there are no representations of Tārā before the sixth century CE (Shastri 1925: 8). In western India, especially in the rock cut caves of the Western Ghats there are a number of sculpted images of Tārā of different types (Dhavalikar, 1964: 18). Tārā was enrolled among the northern Buddhist deities as early as in the sixth century CE, and between eighth and twelfth century CE, a number of Tārā images were carved in different parts of the subcontinent. This substantially attests to the fact that the deity became quite popular during this time period. According to R.D. Banerji, Buddhist *tāntrika* images made their appearance for the first time during the ninth–tenth century CE, and Tārā was one such image (Banerjee 1933: 97-100).

Eastern Indian Scenario and the Repertoire from West Bengal

Several centres devoted to the Mahāyāna-Vajrayāna faith were established in different parts of eastern India. Both excavated and explored data, along with a vast corpus of literary sources, attest to this development. Among the deities that were worshipped, the Tārā form seems to have received a special position, especially from the eighth century CE onwards. Maitreya, Mañjuśrī, Vajrasattva, Avalokiteśvara, Vajrapāṇi, Simhanāda Lokeśvara, Mārīcī, Cundā, Prajñāpāramitā, Jambhala, Vasudhārā, Heruka, Nairātmā, Hevajra, Yamāntaka, Samvara, Trailokyavijaya, Hālāhala Lokeśvara, Uṣṇīśavijayā Aparājitā, Parṇaśavarī, Pañca Dhyānī Buddhas, etc., were the popular deities worshipped by the followers of Vajrayāna Buddhism. The followers create multiple iconic forms of Buddhist gods and goddesses.

A host of scholars are of the opinion that the practice of adoration to Tārā must owe its actual origin to eastern India. The origin of different canonical literatures pertaining to Vajrayāna Buddhism in eastern India seems to be the basis of such postulation. In sculptural art, the present states of Bihar, Odisha, West Bengal, and Jharkhand, besides Bangladesh, have an array of her varied representations carved out of different materials. The earliest of these can be stylistically dated to the seventh–eighth century CE. Tārā images are found in profusion in association with different monastic complexes. However, their independent occurrences have also been recorded. In the golden triangle of Odisha, Tārā is found in plenty, as corroborated by both excavated and explored remains. The monastic complexes of Bodhgaya, Nalanda, Kurkihar, etc., also have a substantial number of such images. Mainamati of Bangladesh has also yielded a few such sculptures. One may have come across quite a marked contrast in delineating the nature of the distribution pattern of such images in West Bengal.

In West Bengal, these images are mostly datable (on stylistic grounds or otherwise) to the period between the late seventh century CE and the late twelfth century CE. Among them, mention may be made of the Pandua bronze image from the district of Malda, stylistically

assignable to the twelfth century CE (Huntington, 1984: 196). A Khadiravāṇī-Tārā artistically datable to the tenth-eleventh century CE originally hailed from an unknown place of Puṇḍravardhana, now housed in the Cooch Bihar Palace Museum. A Mahāsī Tārā, an Aṣṭamahābhaya Tārā and a broken part of Tārā are now in Ashok Nandi's collection of the Bangarh area of Dakshin Dinajpur. Another specimen found from Alampur of the district of Malda is now preserved in the collection of the State Archaeological Museum, Kolkata. A black basalt Tārā image is now kept in the Bamangola Police Station of the Malda district (Bhattacharya, 2001: 265). A Vajra Tārā icon now in the collection of the State Archaeological Museum, Government of West Bengal, was originally found in the Bara village in Birbhum district (Chakrabarti, 2009: 67-77). An abraded image of the Tārā is now worshipped in a modern temple of Debipur under Mallarpur Police Station in the district of Birbhum. The District Museum, Murshidabad, also has a beautifully executed life-size Tārā image in its collection (Bandyopadhaya 2007: 97-98). Another fine specimen of Tārā found from Haroa of North Twenty-Four Parganas bears Islamic calligraphy on the back side of the stela (Sattar 2010: 63). Tārā sculptures have also been frequently found from different sites in Bangladesh. A recent excavation at Jagaddala Vihāra, located 20 km to the northwest of Paharpur in Bangladesh, has yielded images of Tārā (Miah 2008: 146-147). One may also take into consideration some significant specimens of Tārā, now in the collection of the Indian Museum, Kolkata, and they have mostly been found from different provenances of Bihar. Several Tārā icons presently in the collections of the Patna and Nalanda Museums were originally reported from different sites of Bihar. Several Tārā images found in the present state of Odisha are now exhibited at the site Museum of Ratnagiri and the Odisha State Museum, besides others. Apart from the above, a number of Tārā icons found in eastern India are now in museums and private collections of different countries.

Dumnitala Specimen:

The present specimen (Pl I), made of black basalt stone (41×23×6 cm), is carved in relief form. Unfortunately, the lotus held in her left hand is broken, and it seems that the nose, forehead and crown are intentionally broken. Compared to the specimens mentioned above, this image is quite heavily built with a not-so-accentuated slender disposition. The deity sits in *vāmālitāsana* on a double-petalled lotus or *viśva-padma*, which is placed on a *pañcaratha* pedestal. Below this pedestal, there is a small peg. Her right leg hangs down from the seat, and the foot is placed on a small lotus, and the other one rests on the seat. This posture is also known as *sukhāsana*. The left hand of the deity holds a *sanāla nīlotpala* (blue lotus), which is partially broken, and the right hand is in boon or *varada mudrā*. On the palm of her right hand, there is most probably an auspicious mark which cannot be clearly identified. This type of mark is also found depicted on the right palm of an image of Mahattarī Tārā found from Nalanda, Bihar, and now in a private collection of West Berlin (Bhattacharya, 1982: 23). The present image wears a scarf and a skirt marked with double lines and flowers in between. The goddess wears a diadem with fluttering ribbons. The compact *prabhāmaṇḍala* with petal motifs seems to have been the work of a not-so-skilled carver. Anyway, the crowned head of the goddess has a contrasting backdrop. The top of the stela is pointed so that the upper portion forms a triangle rather

than a half circle. The stela is bordered by a two-fold carving, a floral one skirting the stela, followed by a raised band with floriated intersections. A similar two-fold carving outlining the stela is apparent from an icon of *sthānaka* Āryā Tārā made of sandstone and stylistically assignable to the tenth century CE. This Āryā Tārā image reported from Sukhabaspuṛ, Munshiganj district, Bangladesh, is now in the collection of the Bangladesh National Museum (Haque and Gail, 2008: 146). Two worshippers or devotees seated in a kneeling posture are carved on the *pañcaratha* pedestal. The devotees (probably the donor couple), a male on the proper right and a female on the left, depict *añjalimudrā*. The stela is more or less bereft of ornamentation, though the apex bears the depiction of the transcendental Buddha Amoghasiddhi seated on a double-petalled lotus pedestal. His right hand is in the *abhaya mudrā*, and the other hand rests on his lap. Representations of two votive *stūpas* resting on double-petalled lotus pedestals are found on both sides of the head of the principal figure. A throne/architectural motif is depicted on the back of the goddess.

Here, it is perhaps worthwhile to compare the Dumnitāla icon with two other images reported from the adjoining region (within the same geo-cultural niche), i.e., from the Bamangola region of Malda district and another from Agradigun in the district of undivided Dinajpur. It should be recalled here that the location of the Raktamṛttikā mahāvihāra is linearly linked to the provenances of the above icons. The following comparisons have been attempted (by emphasizing the iconographic similarities and disparities between them) to highlight the nature of iconographic development of this region and also to draw their possible connections with the Raktamṛttikā mahāvihāra, i.e., with reference to the nature of patronization rendered by the ruling authority/ authorities or mercantile communities and the simultaneous sponsorship of artistic traditions.

Observation:

What is striking is that iconographic details of the image under study (Dumnitāla specimen) do not correspond to any particular form of Tārā as described in the Buddhist texts. While comparing its iconographic details with those of the specimens of Agradigun and Bamangola, certain features are noticeable. These features have been enumerated below.

- 1) In all the specimens, the principal figure is seated in the *vāmalalitāsana* posture.
- 2) The depictions on the pedestal and on the stela, in all three specimens, are almost identical.
- 3) So far as the depiction of expression, mass, volume, and the intersection of planes, besides, the nature of execution is concerned, the Agradigun specimen is the finest. In contrast, the Dumnitāla icon is quite crudely carved, and its body proportions are not so meticulously rendered.
- 4) While five transcendental Buddhas are depicted on the stela of the Agradigun specimen, the Dumnitāla specimen has a single such Buddha, and the Bamangola icon is completely devoid of such depictions. Thus, the organization of space within the stela is quite different in each case (incidentally, the shape of the *stūpa* depicted on the concerned stela perhaps reflects the contemporary trend).

Besides the above two, the Dumnitala specimen also has enough similarities with the inscribed Tārā images found from Guneri and Kurkihar, Gaya district, Bihar. Both these icons are now in the collection of the Indian Museum, Kolkata. The Guneri Tārā image is seen seated in *vāmālitāsana* posture on a double-petalled lotus placed on a throne. The right hand is in *varada mudrā*, and the left hand holds a *sanāla padma*. The *prabhāmaṇḍala* is absent, and the depictions of two votive *stūpas* are found on both sides of the head of the principal figure. The deity is wearing the usual garments and ornaments.

Since the post-Gupta period, the Vajrayāna ideology steadily gained popularity and was sponsored both by the local kings and the followers of the faith. As a result, different centres devoted to the Vajrayāna faith were established in different parts of eastern India. Both excavated and explored data, along with a vast corpus of literary sources, attest to this development. Among the deities that were worshipped, the Tārā form seems to have received a special emphasis, especially from the eighth century CE onwards. In her earlier representations, she has been conceived as the consort of Avalokiteśvara. Subsequently, especially from the eighth century CE onwards, her single representation has become a common practice. Most of the reported specimens are portable except for the massive images of Bamangola, Jagunj Museum, State Archaeological Museum (Bara), etc.

The distribution of sculptures related to Vajrayāna ideology, particularly Tārā, in the study area, apparently suggests a political affiliation, if not patronage. If one believes that the Pālas were the chief patrons of the Vajrayāna Buddhism in eastern India, then the sculpting of such figures must have followed the so-called Pāla-Sena idiom of art. It is worth mentioning that the proximity of the monastic complex of Raktamṛttikā mahāvihāra (generally identified with the ancient site of Kaṇhasuvarṇa and more precisely at the excavated mounds of Rajbadidanga) with Dumnitala might be significant to explain in terms of a diffusion over a wider area. Dumnitala, along the Bhagirathi, may be treated as an extension of this major monastic establishment. On the other hand, this development or diffusion may not be treated as an isolated one; rather, it was well connected with the developments associated with a cluster of sites in south Bihar. The potency of the Vajrayāna tradition, evident from the monastic sites like Vikramsila, Odantapuri, Somapura mahāvihāra, and even Nandadīrghivihāra, certainly influenced the same. It may not be ruled out that during the Pāla-Sena period, large-scale developments along the middle and lower Ganga valleys accelerated the process of incorporating 'sub-centres' within the settlement dynamics of the whole. The archaeological findings related to the village settlement of Dumnitala substantiate the above. Interestingly, habitational remains mainly in the form of ceramics suggest a long cultural sequence of Dumnitala.

Baragram, located in the district of Birbhum, can also be identified as another such sub-centre, and it might have shared a homogenous status with Dumnitala. A comprehensive field survey at Baragram and its adjoining villages encountered a substantial number of Vajrayāna icons. Unfortunately, most of these are now missing or are in the collection of the local museums. As a result, it is difficult to trace the archaeological context wherein the reported images may be placed. For example, two Tārā images recorded from Baragram

are presently in the collection of the District Museum, Murshidabad, and the State Archaeological Museum, West Bengal

Here, I would like to recall Chattopadhyaya’s work entitled ‘Urban centres of early Bengal’ (Chattopadhyaya 2003: 88), where he identified Rājībādīdāᅅga and its surroundings (identified with Karnasuvarᅅa) as an ‘ideal sample’ of such centres. While comprehending its ‘urban character’, he emphasized that “located on the ‘west side’ of the river Bhagirathi, Rājībādīdāᅅga was definitely a major point not only in the communication line between Varendra and the lower delta but also between the sub-region of *Rādᅅha* and southern Bihar and other sub-regions of Bengal to the east. These locations which fostered linkages in terms of both overland lines of communication as well as along the Bhagirathi would explain the incidence of several artifacts, obviously of non-local origin at the site”. Thus, the trading connections of Rajbadidanga and its surroundings, at least ascribable to the post-Gupta period, are quite evident. If Dumnitala, with its archaeological assemblage, can be associated with the Rajbadidanga region, then its connections with the said trading activities cannot be ignored. Moreover, since it is well known that several trading communities were worshippers of Tārā, the problematic context of the present icon can be resolved.

To sum up, I conclude by professing that the above line of investigation requires more substantial data to consolidate the proposed observations. There are enough possibilities to explore more records in the same region, so as to strengthen this viewpoint.



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