12

BRAHMANICAL-BUDDHIST SCULPTURES:
LOOKING FOR 'BENGAL'NESS

Jinah Kim

Introduction

In the institutions in West Bengal and Bangladesh, such as the Indian Museum in Kolkata, India, and the National Museum of Bangladesh in Dhaka, Bangladesh, most sculptures collected from Bihar, West Bengal and Bangladesh are identified with their reported find spots. In the case of National Museum of Bangladesh where a spacious and carefully lit gallery is dedicated to the Brahmanical and Buddhist sculptures of early medieval Bengal, an image's find spot is mentioned quite meticulously, often down to a name of a village in a district where the image was originally found. Thanks to the unflagging efforts of the first curator of the collection, Nalini Kanta Bhattasali in the 1920s and those who served the museum since, we have detailed information about the find spots of many images as well as the conditions in which some of them were installed for ritual use in the early 20th century in the Dhaka district and adjacent districts of Faridpur and Comilla. The National Museum of Bangladesh, in fact, holds the finest examples of early medieval sculptures that, we would suggest, signal the emergence of a unique "Vaṅga" style of sculptural production.

This chapter examines the Brahmanical-Buddhist sculpture of Bengal. It is not difficult to recognize Bengal as a place with distinct regional characteristics today despite the political line dividing the region into two countries. There is a unique language, Bengali or Bangla, with its own script, which is one of the main markers of a region's cultural identity. There is also the Bengali cuisine with fish (*ilish* or *hilsa māch*, a fish in the herring family, is the national fish of Bangladesh) and rice as main staple. The festive communal celebrations of homecoming of the Hindu goddess, Durgā, during the Durgā pūjā in various parts of Bengal and now in overseas Bengali communities are also tied to Bengal's unique cultural identity. One may find "Bengal-ness" in handmade clay cups used ubiquitously in the tea stalls and in the sweet shops (for *misti doi*) on the streets of Kolkata or in a clay sculpture of "Mā Durgā." Given the riverine delta that defines more than half of

Bengal's landscape where humble material of clay can be found plentifully, it seems reasonable to assume the use of clay in artistic production as signaling the region's character. But can we speak of "Bengal"-ness in Brahmanical and Buddhist sculpture of early medieval Bengal discussed in this chapter? This may be an ahistorical question to ask since the formation of Bengali identity described above owes much to the complicated experience of more recent centuries, such as colonial rule and independence.[1]

The external cognition of the geographical area of today's West Bengal and Bangladesh as a distinct region in eastern India (*pūrvadeśa*) seems to have been solidified with the Mughal designation of the region as a political unit, a province (*sūbah*), in the 16th century, which recognized an already established understanding of a political territory from at least the 13th century onward.[2] Prior to the 13th century, what we consider as the general geographic area of Bengal was divided into historical sub-regions, most notably, Puṇḍra/Varendra (northern Bengal, demarcated by the rivers Padma and Karatoya), Rāḍha (western Bengal, west of the Padma river; the Bhagirathi river runs through it), Vaṅga (southern-central Bengal, Ganga Delta proper surrounded by the rivers Bhagirathi, Padma and Meghna) and Samataṭa (eastern, especially southeastern Bengal, east of the Meghna river). The physical borders of these regions were porous and fluctuating, and surviving textual sources suggest that the regions signified by these names changed depending on the political situations of the time.

I pose this rather ahistorical question to emphasize the growing regional characters of Buddhist and Brahmanical sculpture of Bengal dating between the 8th and the 12th centuries and to recognize the artistic impetus developed at various locales within the region to counter a strong 'Bihar-centric' approach to Buddhist and Brahmanical sculpture of Bengal in existing scholarship.[3] Sculptures hailing from Bengal up to the early 11th century are characterized as displaying 'almost total dependence on stylistic and iconographic forms which had developed in Magadha.'[4] This is not an unreasonable characterization given the geographic proximity and the formal similarities found in the surviving evidence. But much of the interpretation that led to such characterization is in a way driven by a centre-periphery, west to east, diffusion model with the ancient area of Magadha in today's Bihar, India (mainly south of the Ganga river) as the political center and the area to the east of Magadha as the receiving end of this diffusion. If we look at the material afresh from the perspective of thinking about Bengal as a region, especially focusing on its sub-regions, we can begin to appreciate artistic choices and styles at regional and even local levels. Such a local level understanding of artistic style was perhaps not possible in scholarship a few decades ago, but now we are helped by more archaeological findings in Bengal and more rigorous historical studies analyzing epigraphic and archaeological data.[5]

This is not an exhaustive survey of the Brahmanical and Buddhist sculpture of Bengal. In fact, my analysis will focus on only a handful of examples. Generalization of the Bengal-ness of the Brahmanical and Buddhist sculpture of Bengal will not be attempted. However, it is worth noting at the outset that the wider use of the term "Vaṅgāla", from which the Anglicized term Bengal may have come about, was tied to the rise of the political powers in the dynastic houses ruled in the area around Munshiganj near Dhaka city, in the geographic center of "Vaṅga" (ancient Vikramapura, capital of the Candras, the Varmans, and the Senas, identified with today's Rampal in Munshiganj district) in the 11th and the 12th centuries. We may even suggest a genesis of the Vaṅga style that may be associated with the formation of a regional identity.

The chapter is organized chronologically, and it begins with the discussion of early terracotta images to emphasize the local context. Unique local styles are identifiable about the beginning of the 11th century. This observation can be further corroborated with the regional and local characteristics of literary production at the Pāla and Sena courts in the context of the political and economic regionalism.[6] Various historical and theological factors can be considered to explain the 12th century elaborations seen in Bengal sculptures of all areas, and trans-regional and intra-regional connections should be considered more carefully. One of the more obvious but overlooked trans-regional connections is to South India, especially to Karnataka, where the Sena kings came from. For example, an architectural motif with *kīrtimukha* and swarming foliage pattern taken as a supra framing device for designing a stone stele in 12th century Bengal is relatable to those seen in Cālukya territories in the South.

One of the main themes of the chapter addresses a fluid nature of sectarian boundaries in early medieval Bengal. The fact that surviving Brahmanical sculptures outnumber Buddhist ones in Bengal seems to have led to a faith-based regional characterization of sculptures from eastern India, i.e. Buddhist sculptures with Bihar and Brahmanical sculptures with Bengal. However, dividing the images along the sectarian line does not accurately reflect the local level context in which these images were made and used. We would like to emphasize the larger cultural and social milieu that they were commissioned, made, and put to use. Unfortunately, we lack specific historical information on each image's construction and use in most cases. When we put the region before the religions and consider the place and the people together in our interpretive frame, however, we believe it is possible to see the connection beyond the sectarian divide not only in shared stylistic and iconographic features, but also in the vignettes of the human world that appear on the surface of the sculptures.

Miniaturized human figures that frequently populate the bottom register of many stone steles represent the lived world of the images. As idealized portraits of donors, their individuality may only be confirmed through accompanying inscriptions, as in the case of a male donor of a Viṣṇu stele identified as "Paṇḍita Śrīrāktvoka" (Fig. 1). They provide important visual clues to understand the function and use of images. In some cases, these human figures seem to bear out Bengali physiognomic characteristics that Stella Kramrisch once noted in 12th century sculptures from Bengal.[7]

Fig. 1: "Paṇḍita Śrīrāktvoka," Donor of a Viṣṇu stele now in the National Museum, New Delhi, Stone Acc. No. 65.148. Inscription reads, "*Pratimeyaṃpaṇḍitaśrīrāktvokasya*" "This statue belongs to Paṇḍita Śrīrāktvoka."

Articulation of individuality attempted in some examples of donor portraits seems closely relatable to the practice of representing a historical religious person like an *ācārya* or a *siddha* in a divine mould, in a uniquely Bengali manner of the late 11th and the 12th centuries. This practice can be connected transregionally to the Tibetan Buddhist tradition of making hierarch's portraits.

Sculptures of Bengal up to the 9th century

Early Terracotta Art of Bengal

Chandraketugarh, a site located 38 kilometers northeast of Kolkata provides us with the earliest surviving evidence of sculptural art in Bengal. The terracotta

plaques and figurines were found in abundance at the site during the excavation in 1955-67 period and surface finds and finds from clandestine excavations by treasure hunters flooded the art market in the 1980s and the 1990s since the official excavation closed in 1967. Most findings from excavation are kept in the State Archaeological Museum, West Bengal in Kolkata.[8] The site's lower limit of human occupation lies in the 5th or 4th century BCE, and the upper limit around the 10th century CE.[9] Many exquisite terracotta plaques of heavily bejeweled and ornamented female figures are believed to have been prepared during the period between the 1st century BCE and the 3rd century CE. Introduction and extensive use of moulds for making terracotta images and objects led to refinement of sculptural techniques. It often depicts a female figure with narrow waist and full breast standing tall, looking straight out, often with one or both hands on her waist, often touching her thick, three-tiered belt that accentuates her wide hip (Fig. 2).

Fig. 2: Female figurine (*yakṣī*?) from Chandraketugarh, West Bengal, ca. 50 BCE-100 CE, State Archaeological Museum, Acc. No. 99.119, 20.1×10.1cm, moulded terracotta. [Courtesy: State Archaeological Museum, Government of West Bengal].

It is not entirely clear what these terracotta figurines depict or how they may have functioned. A voluptuous female image is often associated with fertility in many ancient cultures. In one plaque, we find a heavily bedecked female figure standing confidently amidst huge blooming flowers, forming a shape of a tree branches above her (Fig. 4). The flowering plant or tree seems to grow from her body. Here it does not seem too difficult to associate her with *yakṣiṇī* or *vṛkṣadevatā* (female tree spirit) like "Culakokā Devatā" adorning a railing pillar of the Bharhut *stūpa* now in the Indian Museum, Kolkata. In the terracotta image from Chandraketugarh, she is literally a *vṛkṣadevatā* with her body as the trunk of a heavily flowering tree.

Terracotta and temple architecture of early medieval Bengal

Terracotta continued to be a choice material for sculptural production in Bengal in the subsequent centuries and well into the 9th century. Terracotta

Fig. 3: Terracotta plaques in situ, central shrine complex, northwestern corner, Somapura *mahāvihāra*, Paharpur, Naogaon district, Bangladesh

plaques adorn Buddhist monastic complexes in the ancient regions of Varendra and Samataṭa. Among all the terracotta plaques retrieved from the post-6th century context of Bengal, those found in and around Mahasthangarh (Bogra district, Bangladesh) appear closest in style to the later Gupta terracotta sculptures and plaques from various parts of north India. Terracotta plaques were often placed in a row on the basement (plinth) level of a cruciform central shrine in Buddhist context (Fig. 3).[10] The terracotta plaques of Salban Vihara in Mainamati in today's Comilla district (Samataṭa) belong to the first phase of occupation of the main shrine in the late 8th century. Praised for their "whimsical" and lively character, they depict animals, *mālādhāra-s*, warriors and hunters.[11] Elsewhere, too, terracotta plaques seem to be often secular and earthly. Those retrieved from the massive central temple structure of the Somapura *mahāvihāra* in Paharpur convey a sense of brisk movements not only through the composition but also through the use of casual and rhythmic lines carved on the surface. Even an unmoving object like a conch is presented with a flourish, evoking a sense of movement.[12] One of the noticeable features of terracotta plaques across various sites in Bengal is the playful and unrestrained use of the framed space of a plaque: a figure is rarely contained within the border of a plaque.

Even when a panel depicts a stagnant object, like a tree or a plant, this tendency to spread out of the frame makes the image participate in the overall movement on the base. This is in stark contrast to what we observe in a monastic site in ancient Magadha.

Comparable examples in Magadhan sites are rare partly because terracotta was not a favoured artistic medium in Magadha. Instead, stone and

stucco were main media of artistic expressions in religious establishments of Magadha.[13] As we see in surviving stucco panels depicting images of the Buddha and Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara on Great stūpa of site No. 3 at Nalanda, the 7th-century stucco panels are designed to convey the doctrinal and devotional significance of the monument, similar to the stone images that would be placed in exterior niches of a shrine structure in subsequent centuries (Fig. 5). Luckily, we find a similar plinth-level decorative program on the temple of the "Site No. 2" at Nalanda.[14] The nature of this temple in relation to the rest of the Nalanda's monastic buildings and temple structures is unclear. The temple lies in ruined state but we can still see that its perimeter is decorated with sculpted panels in a manner similar to what we see in the brick-built Buddhist temples

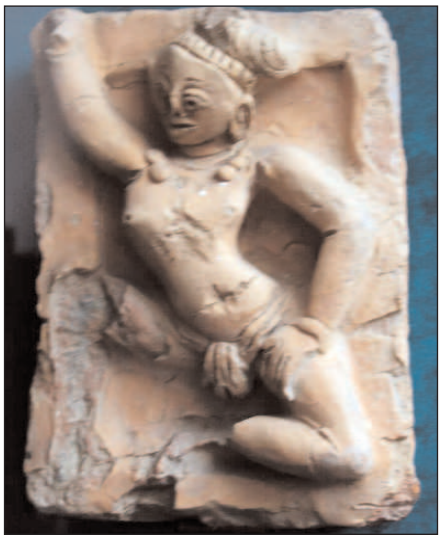

Fig. 4: Dancing figure, terracotta plaque from the central temple, Paharpur, c. 9th century. Archaeological Museum, Paharpur.

Fig. 5: Stucco panels, Buddha (left), Avalokiteśvara (right)
Site No. 3, Nalanda, Bihar, India, c. 7th century.

of early medieval Bengal (Fig. 6). Here in these stone panels, the framing devices are prepared in distinctive niche-like shape and decorated with foliage patterns. Even when depicting an active figure with bent arms and legs, Nalanda artists seem to have refrained from violating the confinement of the space within the framing device. Preparing a terracotta plaque is generally a speedier process than carving a stone panel, and may encourage freer expressions. Whether it is due to the material choice or not, the terracotta plaques from Bengal appear more lively and expressive in comparison to the examples from Nalanda.

Fig. 6: Stone panels decorating the plinth level, Temple of the site no. 2, Nalanda, Bihar, India. c. late 7th century.

Dharmapāla, who established Somapura *Mahāvihāra* (Paharpur), also founded a sister monastery, Vikramaśīla *Mahāvihāra*. The excavated site of Vikramaśīla monastery is laid out in an almost identical manner as the site of Somapura *Mahāvihāra*: a massive cruciform shape temple built of brick is located in the center of a large, square perimeter of the monastic complex with 208 cells, 52 on each of the four sides, facing the center. The site is located near the village of Antichak in Bhagalpur district of Bihar, India. It lies in the ancient Aṅga region, which is understood to be an important "interface" region that connects Magadha and Varendra.[15] Surviving terracotta plaques appear in situ on the exterior wall of the second terrace, which, in current condition, one can view circumambulating on the first terrace. Even when a figure showing an active movement like a flying garland-bearer or an archer is depicted, they are usually confined within the frame of the plaque. In comparison to the lively figures that often burst out of the frames with their movements seen on the terracotta plaques at Pahapur, the terracotta plaques of Vikramaśīla monastery appear a little bit more contained and controlled (Fig.7).

Fig. 7: Terracotta plaques in situ, central temple, Vikramaśīla *Mahāvihāra*, near Antichak, Bihar, India, c. 9th century.

Moving further east from Vikramaśīla, about halfway between Vikramaśīla and Somapura, in today's Malda district, West Bengal, India, we find another important Buddhist monastic site that yielded exciting terracotta plaques in a small town of Jagjivanpur. The site was fully excavated under the directorate of Archaeology and Museums, Government of West Bengal from 1996 to 2005.[16] A chance discovery of an extremely important copper plate charter in 1987 not only confirmed the identity of Mahendrapāla as an early Pāla king, but also suggested the existence of a Buddhist monastery built by a military official, Vajradeva who served under him. The copper plate charter and numerous seals found at the site suggest that the monastery was known as *Śrī-vajradevakārita nandadīrghi-vihāra*, the Nandadīrghi monastery built by Vajradeva, or more colloquially, the Vajradeva Nandadīrghi monastery.[17] The Nandadīrghi monastery is considerably smaller than the royally endowed and sponsored monasteries like Vikramaśīla and Somapura. It does not feature a massive cruciform central structure. Instead, it follows an older model, with an open courtyard in the middle and a central shrine in the back of the complex facing east towards the main gate, located on east-west axis.

According to the archaeological analysis, it was a mid-9th century establishment and lasted into the late 11th century.[18] Given the period of operation, absence of stone sculptures at the site is curious. A black stone image of the Buddha and a tiny bronze image of the Buddha were discovered near the site before the excavation, and nearly ten years of excavation yielded a single bronze image of the Buddhist goddess Mārīcī in her six-armed form.

From the mid-9th century, the corpus of surviving stone sculptures from Bihar increases substantially. The lack of stone sculptures in the Nandadīrghi monastery suggest that this small monastery did not receive many pilgrims and devotees that could make substantial donations to refurbish the space and add stone sculptures as people did at famed monastic centers like Nalanda. In fact, the excavation report notes that the second phase of construction used poor quality material than the first phase, indicating the waning fortune of the monastery after the initial endowment and construction.[19]

On the other hand, the structure was decorated with charming terracotta plaques, which we may take as suggesting that terracotta remained a more favored artistic medium over stone well into the 9th century. Flying *deva*s, zodiac symbols, animals appear along with various types of human figures, such as kneeling devotees, musicians and warriors. Images of the Buddha and Mahāyāna Bodhisattvas, i.e. Mañjuśrī, Avalokiteśvara, and Tārā appear in identifiable iconography and images of Brahmanic gods, especially different forms of Śiva, are placed alongside the Buddhist deities. A number of images convey active movements, and most of the figures are depicted with their heads above the border of the frame. Some human figures are remarkably impressionistic. A wide chested male figure makes a funny frowning face while pointing and touching his eyes with his middle fingers. Cursory lines carved to indicate the pleats of his scarf add to the expressiveness of a character made of clay (Fig. 8).

Fig. 08: Terracotta plaques Snake Goddess Manasā/Jagulī (left) and Frowning Man (right) from the main monastery building of Jagjivanpur, Nandadirghi *Vihāra*, the reign of Mahendrapāla. [Courtesy: State Archaeological Museum, Government of West Bengal].

Early Images in Stone

Stone sculptures datable to the period before the 9th century are rare in Bengal. Most stone sculptures datable up to the 9th century seem to function in a similar manner as terracotta images discussed above. In Varendra (northern Bangladesh), Paharpur yielded a group of intriguing early stone sculptures found in situ adorning the bottom level of the main cruciform temple structure of the monastery. This level is currently buried under ground, and the terracotta plaques discussed in the previous section adorn the floors above this level. Many depict Brahmanic (Hindu) deities and include a group of fascinating panels depicting the story of Kṛṣṇa.[20] That individual panels depicting Brahmanic deities and narrative moments captured in simple compositions are placed around the very bottom plinth of a temple structure is similar to the arrangement of stone panels on the temple No. 2 at Nalanda.

Fig. 09: Vāyu, c. 6th century CE, Basement of the central temple, Paharpur. Archaeological Museum, Paharpur.

Fig. 10: Balarāma, c. 6th century CE, Basement of the central temple, Paharpur. Archaeological Museum, Paharpur.

The panels are rectangular and vertically long. Prepared with greyish sandstone, each panel features a deeply carved surface with the central deity protruding out from the background. The figures feature a stocky proportion with small but full torso, weighty legs, and rather boxy head. As seen in Fig. 9 and Fig. 10, the deities depicted in non-narrative context look straight ahead with wide open eyes and they have defined eyebrows, indicated by thick seagull like raised lines. This image of Balarāma has certain sweetness to its face. The lively treatment of garments and sashes add to the energy that the panels exude as seen in the long scarf of Vāyu blowing over his head with dramatic tails on either side. While soft modeling of the body and certain swirls representing drapery folds and flowing fabrics remind us of the stylistic idioms of Sarnath Gupta workshop and their legacy at the sites in ancient Magadha such as Nalanda, the early stone sculptures of Paharpur show distinctive stylistic traits, such as the treatment of physiognomic features, preference for stockier and heavier figures.

In Samataṭa, two stone images datable to the late 7th or early 8th century are known from a stūpa site of Kutila Mura in Mainamati, Comilla district, and they too showcase distinctive stylistic features. Carved out of the locally available soft grey "clay-stone", these two rectangular steles look much like the terracotta plaques, especially noticeable in soft modeling of bodies and limbs that are gently animated with relatively deep carving. In one of them, we see a unique example of what may be a unique configuration of Avalokiteśvara *maṇḍala* found in Indic context: a four-armed pensive Avalokiteśvara sits sideways on a giant lotus, surrounded by an array of miniature figures all seated on lotus seats stemming from the tall, central lotus stalk.[21] There are eight male Bodhisattvas, four on each side, and two Buddha images on the top, while four attendant deities and a donor are arranged around the bottom center of the panel. This unusual iconography finds interesting parallels in the materials found in Mogao Caves in Dunhuang, like the Amoghapāśa *maṇḍala* on a 9th century silk scroll (*thanka*) painting now in the Muse´e national des Arts asiatiques-Guimet in Paris (Pelliot collection MG 26466). The distinctive pensive gesture of Avalokiteśvara, on the other hand, finds an interesting parallel in the images of Cintāmaṇicakra Lokeśvara popular in East Asia.[22]

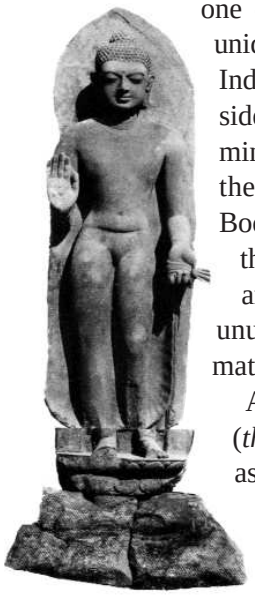

Fig. 11: Standing Buddha from Rupban Mura.

Stone images used in cultic context seem to have been rare but one important example was recently found in

situ in Samataṭa. A colossal sand stone stele of the standing Buddha image was discovered installed on a stone pedestal in the main eastern chapel at Rupban Mura in Mainamati, Comilla district in Bangladesh (Fig. 11).[23] The low slopes of Mainamati-Lalmai Hill range are dotted with archaeological sites, many dating to the period between the 8th and the 13th centuries. The smooth, abstract rendering of the body in the Rupban Mura Buddha image is reminiscent of the famed Sarnath Buddha images, but it is certainly a local production, possibly of the late 7th or early 8th century, given the heavy volume suggested in chest, shoulder, and thighs.[24] Even the left hand holding the pleated end of the monastic robe and the right hand shown in *abhaya mudrā* are quite large and voluminous. A squarish treatment of the head differs from the Sarnath idiom. The colossal size (h: 2.44 m) of the image and its architectural context suggest that the image served as a focal point of devotional activities.[25]

Metal Sculptures

In lieu of stone sculptures, metal sculptures are abundantly found in various parts of Bengal. The earliest dated metal image among the surviving examples from all over eastern India, a bronze image of a goddess named "Sarvāṇṇī" dated to the late 7th century CE prepared during the reign of King Devakhaḍga, was found in a ruined temple site in the village of Deulbadi, 20 miles south of Comilla.[26] This image's current location is unknown. A number of bronze (bronze-like alloy) images recovered from the area around Mainamati demonstrate advanced metal casting skills and capable artistic talents that created charming and serene images of various Buddhist divinities in compact scale. They compare well with the contemporary metal sculptures from Nalanda, but they showcase the talents of the artists in the Samataṭa region where metal images may have held a more important place in cultic context than being a personal, devotional object. For example, the eastern wing of Rupban Mura's main cruciform temple was divided into three image chambers, and the colossal stone image of standing Buddha mentioned above was installed on a stone pedestal in the central chamber, while the two side chambers contained the fragments of bronze sculptures on brick pedestals.[27]

A hoard of bronze sculptures accidentally discovered in 1927 in Jhewari, further south in Chittagong district adds to the prominence of metal casting in Southeastern Bengal. The hoard included 61 Buddhist images, one votive *stūpa* and one miniature replica of Mahābodhi temple of Bodhgaya studded with semi precious stones, and three fragments of images. Majority of the sculptures are of Buddha images in *bhūmīsparśa mudrā* (earth touching gesture), datable between the mid-9th and the mid-10th centuries.[28] Inscriptions declaring donors' dedication of merits are carved on the front of the seats, but many are abraded and difficult

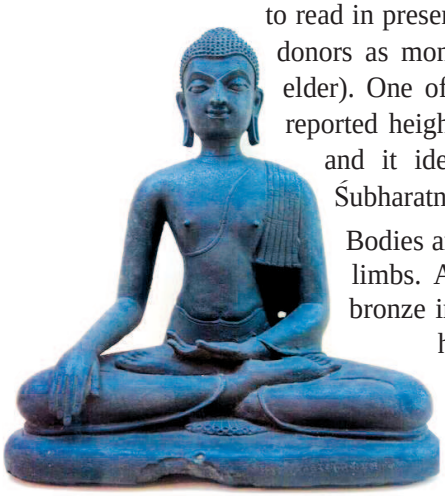

Fig. 12: Buddha in bhumīsparśa mudrā (earth-touching gesture), donor: senior monk (*sthavira*) Śubharatna, c. 10th century, Jhewari, Chittagong. Indian Museum, Kolkata, No. A24317/8142, Ht.36.5 cm, bronze with traces of gild.

to read in present condition. Legible inscriptions identify donors as monastic persons, like a *sthavira* (monastic elder). One of the largest images of the horde with a reported height of 38.6 cm bears a legible inscription, and it identifies the donor as a monastic elder Śubharatna (Fig.12).[29]

Bodies are moulded softly with slightly elongated limbs. As seen in figure 12, a typical Jhewari bronze image of the seated Buddha in *vajrāsana* has an accentuated, high waist that forms almost an hourglass shape of the upper body.[30] They also feature slightly downcast but large, wide eyes and low rising, less pronounced *uṣṇīṣa*. Another typical feature is the treatment of the end of a monastic robe that hangs over the left shoulder of the Buddha: the pleated end of the monastic robe looks more like a wide strap with pleats that are depicted rather flat and schematic. These stylistic features are somewhat unique to Jhewari hoard of bronzes, which may relate closer to the Buddha images made further southeast in the areas of Arakan and Pagan in today's Myanmar.

The closest aesthetic sensibility among the examples from South Asian subcontinent seems to be with the sculptures found in the Comilla district. Crisp treatment of lines and slightly elongated, elegantly rendered limbs, and the wide and clearly defined angular eyes and eyebrows are to a certain degree relatable to the features seen on an impressive metal sculpture of Vajrasattva (140×120×72 cm) found in pristine condition at the Bhoja *Vihāra* in Mainamati, Comilla.[31] The image was found in 1995 in the northern side central chamber of the cruciform shaped main temple of the Bhoja *Vihāra* (Fig. 13). Its considerable size and the masterful execution of sculpture's ornaments, diaphanous garments, subtle yet stern physiognomic features and iconographic details point to the involvement of master artisans and a religious master with a clear understanding of the iconography and its

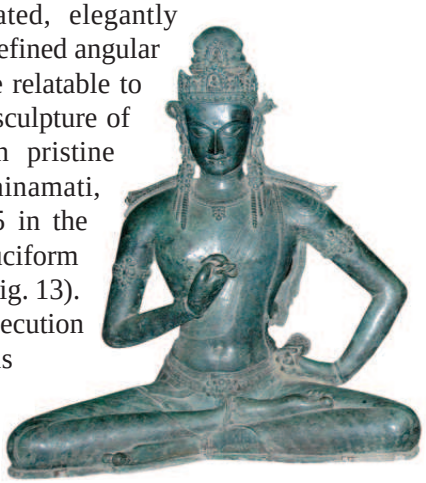

Fig. 13: Vajrasattva from Bhoja Vihāra, Mainamati.

meaning: Vajrasattva is a divine ritual master and a teacher, and holds a *vajra* and a *ghaṇṭa* (bell). While we suggest certain stylistic affinities between the Jhewari bronzes and the 10th century bronze sculptures from Mainamati area, this is not to suggest a direct link between the two groups. Refined aesthetic qualities of the Mainamati Vajrasattva image are something to beckon in the genesis of the Vaṇga style of sculptures as we will see shortly.

In addition to the religious centers in the ancient region of Samataṭa, the sites in northern Bengal, such as the area around Mahasthangarh in Bogra district and Paharpur in Naogaon district yielded a substantial number of metal sculptures dating to the period up to the 9th and the 10th centuries. One image in particular supports the importance of bronze images in cultic context of Bengali Buddhist sites suggested so far. An upper half of a bronze image of the Buddha was discovered during an archaeological excavation in the monastic site at Paharpur in 1982. The image was damaged by fire and we only have less than half of the original image (Fig. 14). Yet, it is an impressive sculpture. The image in current state measures 130 cm in height, and if this was a standing Buddha like the stone sculpture from Rupban Mura, it would have been even taller than the colossal stone image from Mainamati, measuring somewhere between 240-260 cm. It is not difficult to suggest the importance of this image from material perspective given the amount of base metal required to create such an image. The head of the Buddha is mostly intact, and it exemplifies the master artists at work. The face is realistically moulded in a slightly oval shape with a gentle smile and down cast eyes. The lines that define the physiognomic features and the pleats of the monastic robe are subtle but clean. It is difficult to date the image without any corroborating historical data and stylistically similar images, but it may date to the early 9th century: it may have been prepared at the time of or immediately after the initial royal endowment and construction of the monastery.

Fig. 14: Buddha (upper half), c. 9th century, Somapura Mahāvihāra, Paharpur. Archaeological Museum, Paharpur, Ht:130 cm. Bronze.

Sculptures of Bengal during the 10th Century: Magadha Connection

Not too many surviving images from Bengal can be assigned to the 10th century. The images that are datable to the 10th century on the stylistic grounds often bear close formal proximity to the 10th century images found in Magadha (Bihar), perhaps leading to the prevailing characterization that stone sculptures of Bengal up to 1025 CE have almost "total dependence" on artistic practices developed in Bihar. It is indeed remarkable that an image of Gaṇeśa dated with the first regnal year of Gopāla (III), a Pāla king of the mid-10th century was found in Mandhuk near Chandina in the middle of the Comilla district.[32] The image's donor is identified as Jambhalamitra, and the inscription follows an established Buddhist formula of dedicating the merits for the attainment of supreme enlightenment by all sentient beings (*sakalasatvarāse-anuttarajñāna-lābha*).[33] Here we should note that the sectarian boundary between Brahmanical and Buddhist must have been rather fluid especially in regards to a popular god like Gaṇeśa whose main function as the destroyer of obstacles still holds a broad appeal. A second image of Gaṇeśa inscribed with another Pāla regnal year, the fourth year of Mahīpāla I (c. 982 CE), was also found in the Comilla district. The inscription identifies the donor of the image as a merchant (*vaṇik*) Buddhamitra who was the son of Jambhalamitra, also a merchant. The image was found in Narayanpur, a town considerably closer to the coast.

Fig. 15: Varāha, c. 10th century, Silimpur, Bogra (within Bogra city), VRM 1018. Ht: 109.2 cm. Dark grey stone.

That both Jambhalamitra and Buddhamitra are identified as merchants who were inhabitants of a town (named Vilikandhaka) in Samataṭa may explain the choice of Gaṇeśa for their image donation and the use of the Pāla regnal years instead of the regnal years of Candras whose political and cultural centers have been identified as the area around Mainamati in the early part of the 10th century, which was moved to Vikramapura during the mid to late 10th century. The Mitras (Jambhalamitra and Buddhamitra) may have had much wider trans-regional connections through trade networks, and the use of Pāla regnal years suggests that Pālas must have been considered more cosmopolitan than the region-based dynastic house of Candras, at least among the merchant communities engaged in presumably trans-regional and intra-regional trade activities. Both images of Gaṇeśa display an interesting formal connection with the

Fig. 16 Right: male attendant of Bodhisattva Mañjuśrī, Guneri, Gaya district, India, c.10th century, ASI site museum, Bodhgaya, #217. Ht. 127 cm.
Left: Nāga paying homage to Varāha, Varāha, Silimpur, Bogra district, Bangladesh, c.10th century, VRM 1018, Ht. 109.2 cm.

contemporary images from Magadha, especially in the treatment of the double-banded decorative borders. 10th-century Buddhist images collected from Kurkihar, a site of a forgotten Buddhist monastery named Āpanaka *mahāvihāra* known for its trans-regional monastic connection with South Indian centers, feature remarkably similar double-banded borders along with flying *māladhāra*-s carved with defined backdrop of clouds that we also see prominently featured in the images of Gaṇeśa from Comilla.

A third image bearing a Pāla regnal year is known from Samataṭa: An image of Viṣṇu dated to Mahīpāla's third regnal year (c. 983 CE) was found at Baghaura in northern Comilla. This image, too, is a donation by a merchant (*vaṇik*) and discovered outside Mainamati, where all the earlier Buddhist sites are located.[34] The inscription clearly identifies the donor as "*paramavaiṣṇava*" (a great Viṣṇu devotee) and the language used here is similar to the Mahāyāna Buddhist formula, but the religious merit is claimed for his mother, father, and himself instead of all

sentient beings. This image also compares well with the contemporary images from Magadhan sites in Gaya district. Whether the artists may have been brought from Magadhan artistic centers to work on these merchants' commissions or the merchants were able to order these images remotely and have them shipped to their locations is difficult to establish. The former is more likely. Either hypothesis presupposes the movements of people and goods along the river Ganga following the extensive river system of Bengal.[35]

Given the relative proximity to Magadha, it is perhaps no surprise that the images found in northern Bangladesh (for example, Rajshahi, Naogaon and Bogra districts) display similar stylistic traits with those hailing from specific Magadhan artistic centers. For example, in a Varāha image from Silimpur, in Bogra district, now in the Varendra Research Museum (Fig. 15) we see interesting stylistic connection to the known 10th century images from the Gaya district in Bihar (Fig. 16). The facial features and the shapes of the heads of the subsidiary figures of *nāga* and *nāginī*s under Varāha's feet look very similar to those seen on the attendants of a 10th century image of Bodhisattva Mañjuśrī from Guneri now in the Archaeological Survey of India [henceforth ASI] Site Museum at Bodhgaya. A stone image of a twenty-armed goddess from Rajshahi now in the National Museum of Bangladesh [henceforth BNM] in Dhaka displays many sculptural qualities recognizable in a 10th century image from another Magadhan site, in this case, Nalanda. Although much mutilated, the image retains its original charm conveyed through careful and deep carving (Fig. 17). The image features a unique iconography and possibly represents a form of the formidable goddess Durgā.[36]

Fig. 17: Dūrgā, c. 10th century, Simla, Rajshahi district, BNM Acc. No. 69.111, grey stone.

If we compare this goddess image with a contemporary image of Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara from Nalanda, a few similar formal features are noticeable despite their obvious differences in gender and iconography. The way her many limbs are carved to indicate soft and subtle modeling is quite similar to the gentle modeling seen on Avalokiteśvara. The Rajshahi Durgā is also comparable to a mid-10th century image of the goddess Vāgīśvarī found in Nālandā and currently housed in the Indian Museum (Fig. 18). Although the face of the Rajshahi image is much

mutilated, its shape and the structure seem to have been quite similar to what we see in Vāgiśvarī image dated with Gopāla III's first regnal year. The roaring lion mount with his right front paw raised is depicted in a similar manner in both images but the lion of the Rajshahi image is carved with more clarity and flourish: his tail is curled and wavy and looks almost like a foliage unfolding on his back, and his fur and mane are carefully articulated.

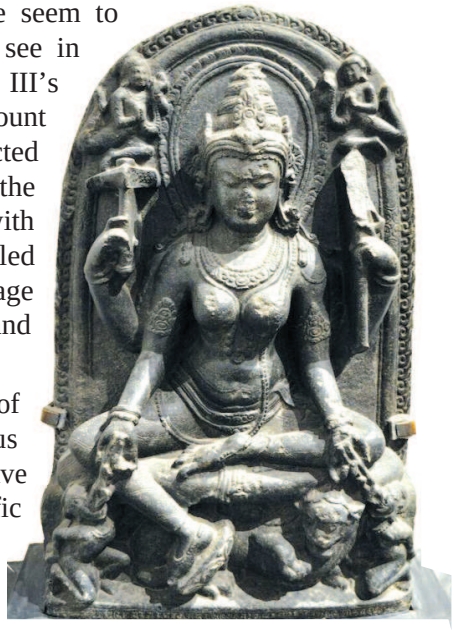

Fig. 18: Vagīśvarī, dated 1st year of Gopāla (III) (c. mid 10th century), Nalanda. Indian Museum, Kolkata No. 3947. Ht: 88 cm.

We do not have a clear picture of how sculpture workshops of various towns and sites in Magadha may have operated, but we know that site-specific workshops existed thanks to specific stylistic traits noted in previous studies.[37] The pattern of linkage with specific Magadhan workshops seen in these two examples suggests that we should consider point to point or node to node connectivity between and amongst regional centers to understand the artistic style of a period and/or a place rather than following a diffusionistic model in which a style somehow autonomously spreads from the center to the periphery without much agency of any actors involved. We may never find direct historical evidence to confirm these links between places, but we should look for circumstantial evidence that may connect various parts of eastern India and beyond, through trade networks and political exchanges. Another fruitful venue for consideration will be considering networks of religious institutions and specialists, for example, looking for evidence of Buddhist monastic networks or networks of various Brahmanical lineage traditions.[38] Dated late 10th century stone images found in the region of ancient Samataṭa discussed above also lend some support to the validity of this nodal-network model in understanding sculptural production and the development of artistic styles in early medieval Bengal, owing to their association with merchant families.

While we may not have historical documents to help us write a detailed historical account of commission and production process of a sculpture like the Rajshahi Durgā, we can have a glimpse of the social context of such images as religious donations thanks to inscriptions and accompanying miniature human figures representing donors. For example, under the lion mount of the Rajshahi Durgā is an inscription that reads,

Fig. 19: Donor Sūśaka (to the left corner) and the lion mount with a swirly tail, Dūrgā, detail of fig. 17.

deyadharmoyasūśakasya— this image is 'a religious gift of Sūśaka'. This Sūśaka must be the kneeling male figure right behind the lion's hind (Fig. 19). He wears a garment bearing an almost identical pattern of circular design as the lower garment worn by the goddess. Sūśaka's social identity is unclear but he seems to have been a well off individual, given the elaborate quality of the sculpture. Donor figures like him are frequently seen in many stone steles from eastern India dating between the 9th and the 12th centuries.

Emergence of the "Vaṅga" Style: Late 10th-mid 11th Century

The late 10th century seems to have been a twilight period that foreshadowed emergence of the Vaṅga style in the area around ancient Vikramapura in today's Munshiganj district near Dhaka in Bangladesh. Candra kings who were Buddhist and ruling in Samataṭa rose to prominence in Southern Bengal during the 10th century.[39] According to the Rampal (the site of Vikramapura) copperplate inscription of Śrīcandra (r. c. 930-980 CE), Candras originally came from "Rohitagiri" or the hill of red soil, which may refer to Lalmai in Comilla where ample Buddhist sites are known.[40] Śrīcandra moved the capital of his kingdom to Vikramapura. This move seems to have brought the area of today's Munshiganj to cultural and political limelight and bridge the core cultural area of Samataṭa with a new centre in Vaṅga. As we have seen, the region of Samataṭa was rather well known both within the region – as attested in epigraphic records identifying a specific location as a place within Samataṭa—and outside the region, as in epigraphic records and textual references to the region from outside from as early as the 4th century.[41] Govindacandra (r. *c*. 1020-1045 CE) is referred to as the lord of Vaṅgāla-deśa in an inscription of Rājendra Coḷa of the Coḷa dynasty dated 1025 CE.

A number of images found in the area around Munshiganj display distinctive visual traits. We may identify a Vaṅga style that was formulated during the first half of the 11th century when Candra kings were still in power. Three stone sculptures bearing Candra regnal years belong to the first half of the 11th century: Śiva Naṭarāja found in Bharella in Comilla district bearing the 18th regnal year of Laḍahacandra (c. 1018 CE), a Sūrya image found in Kulkudi in Faridpur district, bearing the 12th regnal year of Govindacandra (c. 1032 CE), and a Viṣṇu image found in Betka in Munshiganj, Dhaka district bearing the 23rd year of Govindacandra (c. 1043 CE).[42] Clarity in which parts are rendered to make a harmonious whole, crispness of lines, and fullness of volume are some of the defining formal characteristics seen in the group from Vaṅga.

An impressive stone stele depicting an eight-armed, three-headed goddess (BNM 69.111) is a good example (Fig. 20). According to Bhattasali, the image was found somewhere in Vikramapura near Munshiganj. The goddess holds a sword, an arrow, a *triśūla* (trident) and a *cakra* (wheel) on her right four hands, and a *tarjani-mudrā* (threatening gesture) holding a *pāśa* (noose), an *aṅkuśa* (elephant goad), a *vajra* (thunderbolt) and a *śarāsanam* (bow) in her left four hands (read in counter clockwise order). Her attributes and other features come very close to the description of the goddess Mahāpratisarā, one of the five protectresses known as Pañcarakṣā in one of the *sādhana*s collected in the *Sādhanamālā* (compendium of ritual texts). Given the size and the regal presence conveyed through confident carving and polishing of the stone, it is likely that the image was a cultic image installed in a shrine setting as a focal point of devotional activities.

Fig. 20: Mahāpratisārā, c. first quarter of the 11th century, Vikramapura, in the Munshiganj District of the Dhaka Division, BNM.

The image appears three-dimensional even though it is technically a very high relief. It almost gives a sense that the image is seated in front of a backdrop rather than carved out from a single piece of a stone. Every limb is full and well defined. Her breasts are full and round and her torso is slightly

elongated. Multiplicity of arms and heads is rendered so surely that the image gives a sense that the goddess is present in multiple sequences of time and space but represented in one successfully compressed image. In comparison, the Rajshahi Durgā discussed above has spraying arms that appear to be mushrooming out from behind a two-armed goddess; every feature is softer and more gently defined in Durgā image. Instead of subtlety and softness, we see confidence and clarity in the Mahāpratisarā image, which reminds us of the colossal bronze image of Vajrasattva found in Comilla (mentioned earlier). Arched eyebrows and wide meditative eyes are well defined and sharply carved, which makes it comparable to the Vajrasattva image.

Artists working in the vicinity of Vikramapura may have been making images for patrons in nearby regions. A stone stele depicting the eight-armed goddess Mārīcī, a Buddhist goddess of light and victory, found in Panditsar in Faridpur district, share so many formal features with the Mahāpratisarā image that one wonders if artists from the same workshop or trained in the same workshop were responsible for it (Fig. 21). The similarity with the Mahāpratisarā image is noticeable in the treatment of ornaments on the goddess and the physiognomic features as well as the way the body and the limbs are carved. Mārīcī being an active martial goddess has her eyes wide open whereas Mahāpratisarā retains sereneness in her principal face. But their faces are rendered remarkably similar. Their tall conical crowns with multiple rising flame shapes (the three of which are part of a diadem) are nearly identical in their execution. The type of crown seen here is common among the 11th century sculptures from Vaṅga and Samataṭa, and seen on both Brahmanical and Buddhist images. Crispness of lines and fullness of volume of the Mahāpratisarā image are found here as well.

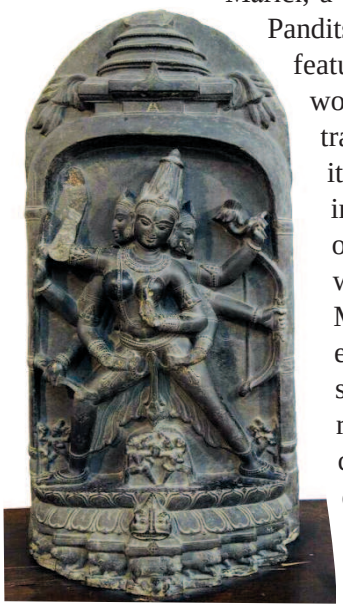

Fig. 21: Mārīcī, c. first quarter of the 11th century, Panditsar (Faridpur district), BNM E-46. Ht: 120 cm.

A blouse on Mārīcī is an interesting formal feature that may be unique to Bengal. Questions like whether a goddess should be depicted with a blouse or not, or what types of jewelries should be depicted, and more importantly, how they should be rendered, are most likely addressed and answered by artists rather than religious specialists with iconographic knowledge. Their execution depends on training and ability of the artists. Without other historical documents on artistic practices of a specific workshop, it is in these

details that we get a glimpse of what might have been the extent of artistic knowledge shared among a group of artists within a region and beyond. In this sense, that this image of Mārīcī from Vaṅga is depicted with a short-sleeve blouse like a *choli* is an interesting artistic choice because Mārīcī images from Magadhan sites rarely feature it. Mārīcī images found elsewhere in Bengal, including northern Bengal (Varendra) consistently have a short blouse on. A *coli* like blouse is also seen on the images of Durgā in her active buffalo-demon killing (*mahiṣāsuramardinī*) militant form in various parts of Bengal (Fig. 22). A benign, peaceful goddess, whether Brahmanical or Buddhist, does not have such a blouse, and it is only seen on the martial goddesses: Mārīcī and Durgā.[43] It suggests that the idea of a warrior goddess was understood and shared regardless of her sectarian identity.

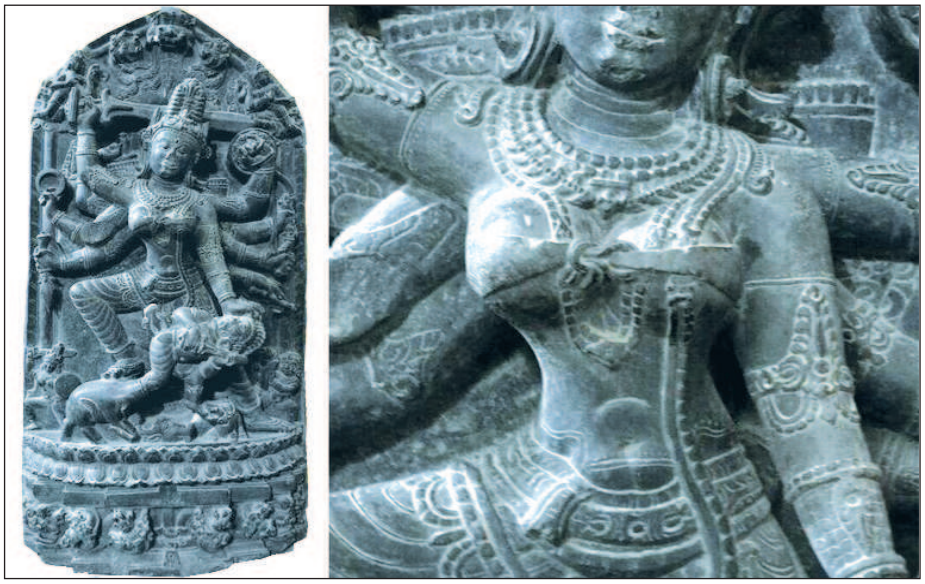

Fig. 22: Durgā, c. 11th century, Dhorsa, Bagmora,Rajshahi, VRM 145. Ht: 99 cm; Right: detail of Durgā's *choli* and breast band.

Shared stylistic and formal traits like those seen on the details of ornamentation noticeable among the sculptures of Vaṅga and Samataṭa also suggest that artists were probably not quite restricted by sectarian boundaries in terms of commission and production. A gracious stone image of Gaja-Lakṣmī (the goddess Lakṣmī with two elephants performing ablutions above her) from Joradeul, Munshiganj, belongs to an early group of Vaṅga style sculptures (Fig. 23). Her sweet smile and petite stature may belie any connection with the formidable images of Mārīcī or Mahāpratisarā. Yet the clarity of execution not only in terms of iconography but also in the able portrayal of a deeply carved three-dimensional body, even if it is

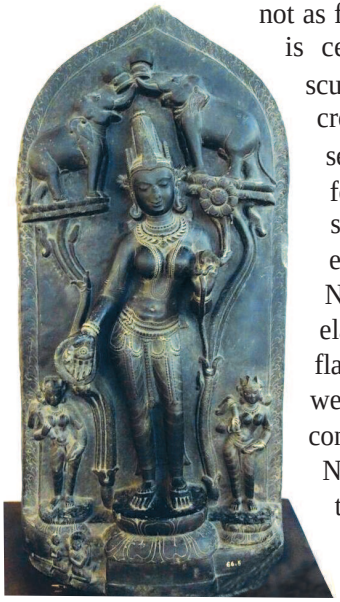

Fig. 23: Gaja-Lakṣmī, Joradeul, Dhaka, c. late tenth century, BNM E-66.5.

not as full as what we see in the image of Mahāpratisarā, is certainly one of the defining characteristics of sculptures of the greater Dhaka area (Vaṅga). A tall crown and a tiger claw necklace are also commonly seen among the Vaṅga sculptures. Another noticeable formal feature in the early sculptures of Vaṅga is the simplicity of the background. Only those formal elements required by the iconography are included. No other subsidiary elements are introduced to elaborate the sculpture other than a concisely carved flame pattern on a relatively wide band of border. As we will see shortly, this no-frill approach is in great contrast to the busy and baroque tendency seen in the Northern Bengal sculptures of the late eleventh and the twelfth centuries.

Lakṣmī's gentle smile compares well with the smile on the face of an impressive ten-armed image of dancing Śiva from Palgiri, Comilla district, in ancient Samaṭata, which seems to reflect the close political connection between Vaṅga and Samaṭata brought by Candra rule. The Śiva Natarāja image (Fig. 24) may depict a much more complex iconography than that of Gaja-Lakṣmī, but it is executed with the same kind of clarity we see in other Vaṅga sculptures. Śiva dancing excitedly on the back of his bull, almost in mid air, appears to exist in round. Ten spraying arms look as if they are actively transgressing time and space with impressive and heavy weapons held in his hands: a sword (*khaḍga*), thunderbolt (*vajra*), a trident (*triśūla*), a staff (*daṇḍa*) in his right hands and a club (*khaṭvāṅga*), a skull cup (*kapāla*), a snake noose (*nāga-pāśa*), a shield (*kheṭaka*) in his left hands (Fig. 25). His limbs are heavier and more tubular than what we see in other multi-armed images

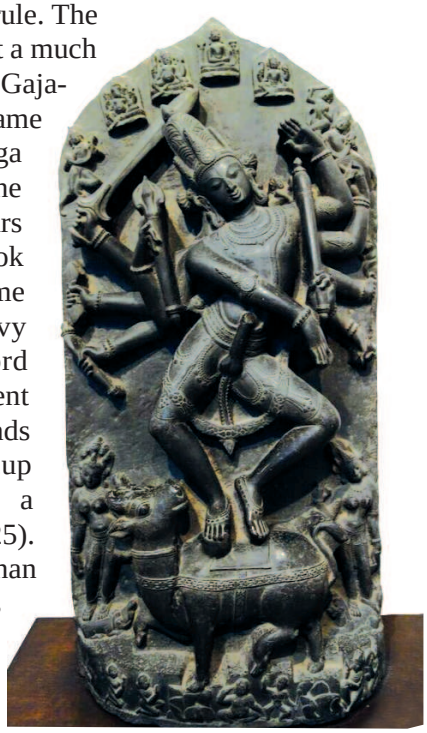

Fig. 24: Naṭarāja Śiva, 11th entury, Palgiri, Comilla, BNM, Dhaka E-70 387. Ht:130cm.

Fig. 25: Left: Naṭarāja Śiva, detail of fig. 24, Right: Lakṣmī, detail of fig. 23.

from Vaṅga, like Mahāpratisarā and Mārīcī, but the image as a whole follows the same visual language as the images from Vaṅga: clarity in execution of iconographic details is unsurpassable, and simplicity seen in the backdrop is a common feature of Vaṅga sculptures of the 11th century. Even when the iconography is extremely complicated, as in the image of Cāmuṇḍā from Rampal, Munshiganj district, now in BNM (Acc. No. E-33), the artists managed to create a clear and bold image. In a fantastic image of a haggard, ten-armed goddess Cāmuṇḍā (Fig. 26) dancing atop the shoulders of a chubby *yogi* figure, only iconographically necessary details are included. While the stele appears packed with iconographic details, reservation towards ornamentation, which Huntington characterizes as "stylistic austerity", makes it appear controlled and readable. Most images that we can categorize as belonging to this Vaṅga group of the 11th century hail from the area around Vikramapura (Rampal).

Fig. 26: Cāmuṇḍā, c. 11th century, Rampal, Dhaka (Munshiganj), BNM Acc. No. E-33. Ht: 77 cm.

Fig. 27: Heruka, c. 11th century, Subhapur, Comilla, BNM E-47, Ht: 162 cm.

As seen in the Natarāja image, a few magnificent sculptures prepared within the stylistic parameters favoring clarity, simplicity, and boldness, are found in Samataṭa. Another good example is a stunning, over life size image of two-armed Heruka, an important Tantric Buddhist deity found in Subhapur, just outside Mainamati in Comilla district (Fig. 27). Although slightly damaged and missing his attributes, probably a *vajra* in his raised right hand, a *kapāla* and a *khaṭvāṅga* in his left hand, there is no mistaking the full energy of the invoked deity contained in a masterfully carved form. With the plain backdrop with a wide band of flames as border, the image of Heruka seems to dance gracefully almost detached from the backdrop. Elegantly carved severed heads worn as a long body garland, and his frowned wide-open eyes and slightly open mouth with fangs portray unforgettable fearsomeness (Fig. 28). An ascetic or yogī-like figure actively dances with a frightful garland around him, but he is also rendered with such suave lines and flowing beauty, which is emphasized by the details of charming tailfin like pleats of scarfs, one rhythmically swaying next to his bent left leg and another from his staff. The paradox of forms artfully sublimates the physical reality to that void-ness (*śūnyatā*), a difficult concept which is so prevalent in late Indian Buddhist texts, yet so hard to grasp and invoked in about every *sādhana* text.

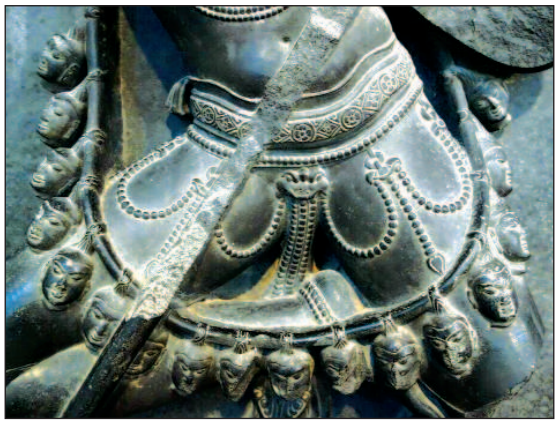

Fig. 28: detail, garland of severed heads on Heruka.

While studies on Tantric Buddhist images focus mainly on their iconographic meanings, stylistic features are not superficial elements. Formal aspects do not just add to the manifold meanings of the image. Artistic talents and skills determine the efficacy of their impact. On the other hand, confidence and clarity seen in the execution of the images examined here would not have been possible

without religious experts that could confer authority on the production of such images. Southeastern Bengal, *i.e.* Vaṅga-Samataṭa must have had advanced religious centers with able experts on divine visions and charismatic leadership especially during the late 10th through the 12th centuries.

Architectural Sculpture: Vaṅga, Rāḍha and Intra-regional Connections

Another unique element often noted in the discussion of Vaṅga ("Southern Bengal") sculptures is the representation of enshrined Buddha images in stone steles. Depiction of the Buddha images framed within a shrine structure is relatively common in late Indian Buddhist art, as many votive clay seals and plaques represent the Buddha seated inside a soaring tower *(śikhara*) structure topped by a schematic tree, invoking the Mahābodhi temple at Bodhgaya, the most important Buddhist pilgrimage site (Fig. 29). These clay objects are found in multitude in Magadhan Buddhist sites. They are miniature in size and meant to be portable and personal. Interestingly, Magadhan sites lack any stone stele depicting a Buddhist image seated under an elaborate shrine structure.[44] It is in Vikramapura in the present day Munshiganj district (i.e. centre of ancient Vaṅga) where we find concentration of sculptural examples of this kind, as seen in a stone stele depicting Ratnasambhava, a transcendental Buddha (one of the five Buddhas or *Tathāgata*s), from the Vikramapura area (Bejgaon, Lauhajang), now in the collection of Varendra Research Museum in Rajshahi, Bangladesh [henceforth VRM] (Fig. 30). An image of the Buddha holding a jewel-like object in his right hand is seated inside a tiered, rising tower structure (so-called *bhadra* type) with a trefoil arch shaped opening. This shrine structure is topped by an *āmalaka* (lobed discus shape) and a *stūpa*. The Buddha sits on a double lotus seat raised exceptionally high under which we see the depiction of *saptaratna*, the seven jewels of *cakravartin* (universal monarch) and a standing donor figure with an offering of a garland in his hands. Does the image depict an image inside a shrine? Or is it supposed to represent an enshrined image that can serve as a focal point of devotional activities without any other architectural members?

Fig. 29: Clay votive tablet with Buddha in *bhūmisparśa mudrā* seated under a shrine structure and the *yedharma hetuprabhava*- verse, ASI Site Museum, Nalanda.

Fig. 30: Buddha Ratnasambhava, c. 11th century, Vikrampur, Munshiganj, VRM 138.

An even more impressive image of the Buddha seated in *bhūmisparśa mudrā* now in BNM, suggests that this artistic device of an architectural frame may have been intended to increase a stone stele's cultic function and meaning (Fig. 31). The image also hails from the Vikramapura area, and it is one of the sculptural masterpieces of the Vaṅga region. The Buddha is seated inside a trilobed arch of a tiered shrine structure with *āmalaka* and *stūpa* finial as seen in the previous image, but here, a little detail of tree branches is added on top hovering over the architecture portrayed in stone and a small detail of *kīrtimukha* is discernible on the center of the trilobed arch. The image of the Buddha is carved in deep relief, and projected forward in space. Adding to the remarkable sense of volume is the incredible polish on the surface of the sculpture, most noticeable on his broad chest and shoulder. The Buddha, in fact, appears as if it is a massive metal image installed inside a shrine. On the central area of a raised, double tiered pedestal we see a clear announcement of ownership carved in striking letters: '*dānapatiśrīnirupamasya*', this (stele) is of (belongs to) the donor Śrī Nirupama, probably the male figure represented with his wife on the bottom left. It may have been installed inside a temple space built with brick, but it already comes with the built-in shrine structure more accessible and immediate for any human devotee. While elevating the sculpture's sanctity, the architectural frame may also bring the image down to a more accessible human world, by representing the architectural context that must have been already part of the lived world of people who commissioned, made, and used the image, just in a slightly miniature scale.

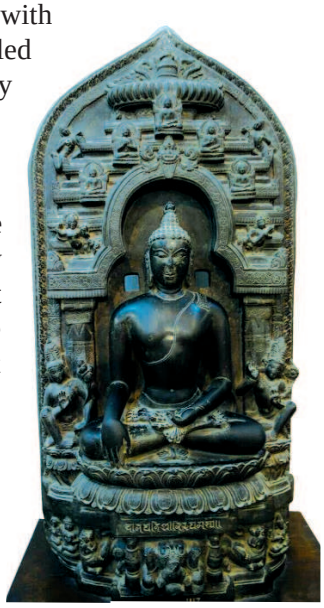

Fig. 31: Buddha in *bhūmiṣparśa mudrā*, Vikrampur, Dhaka district. c. late 11th century. Black stone: chrolitoid phyllite. BNM . Acc. No. 1117.

This motif of architectural framing device is also seen in contemporary images found in the

ancient region of Rāḍha (western Bengal, for example in Hooghly, Bardhaman, Bankura, and Purulia districts) as well as northern Odisha (for example in Balasore and Cuttack districts). For example, an image of Khadiravanī Tārā (Patna Museum, Acc. No. 3745) from Baneswarnasi in Cuttak, Odisha, depicts the goddess, magnificently enlarged in the centre, seated inside a similar *bhadra* type shrine structure with trilobed arch face (Fig. 32). The architectural context is articulated and carved clearly, but the compositional prominence given to the goddess shadows the architectural setting. The sense of architectural presence that is quite palpable in the examples from Vaṅga is rather absent here. In the ancient region of Rāḍha in western Bengal, while the stylistic language seems to have been different from what we see in Vaṅga-Samataṭa region, the idea of making a stone stele of an enshrined deity like a self-contained shrine seems to have gained some currency as seen in an impressive ten-armed image of the goddess Durgā found in Dulmi in today's Purulia district (previously Manbhum) now housed in the Indian Museum in Kolkata, India (Fig. 33).[45] The goddess strikes her heavy trident in the chest of the demon Mahiṣāsura whose buffalo form has already been beheaded while pressing his head down with a shield. The action and her spreading arms dominate our view. Although not immediately noticeable, the shrine structure in which the goddess stands is fully articulated, almost three dimensionally: the finial and the *amalaka* are carved so deeply to modify the overall shape of the stele.

Fig. 32: Khadiravāṇī Tāra, Baneswarnasi, Cuttak district, Odisha, c. 12th century, Odisha, Patna Museum #3745.

Fig. 33: Durgā Mahiṣāsuramardinī, Dulmi, Purulia, West Bengal, c. early 12th century, Indian Museum, Kolkata.

The artists who worked on Śri Nirupama's Buddha image from Vikramapura successfully transformed a framing device from a backdrop to a functional element that can enhance the sanctity of the

Fig. 34: Sūrya, from Baria, Manda, Naogaon, c. 12th century, VRM 222. Ht: 133cm.

sculpture as a whole. Interestingly, a few sculptures found in the ancient region of Varendra in Northern Bengal demonstrate a very similar understanding of the architectural framing device as we see in the examples from Vikramapura in Southern Bengal. An image of Sūrya found in Baria, near Manda in Naogon district, is a great example where we see the framing device of architectural element is carved with such awareness of space that it makes the sculpture appear a self contained shrine of the god (Fig. 34). Sūrya stands erect wearing his fancy boots and holding two lotuses up while his attendants are hierarchically arranged in diminishing scale around his legs. The double-tiered pedestal is supposed to suggest a chariot as indicated by seven horses yet the structure framing them is clearly depicted as moulded *pratibhadra* projections. There is no mistaking their architectural nature. The supra structure is raised high above Sūrya and the space between the top of the trilobed arch and the god's head is deeply recessed. Perhaps signaling a slightly later date of its production sometime in the early 12th century, the *kīrtimukha* motif on the arch is rather elaborate and florid, a tendency greatly emphasized in Varendra during the 12th century.

"Varendra Style" and the Development in the Late 11th and the 12th Centuries

During the 11th century, a number of trans and intra regional political changes happened, shifting and shuffling the power dynamics of Bengal.[46] In southern Bengal, in its political center in Vikramapura, the Candras were replaced by the Varmans by the third quarter of the 11th century, following the incursions by the Coḷas and the Kalacuris. The ancient region of Varendra went through some political turmoil until Rāmapāla took control of the region with the support from his *sāmanta* allies and moved his capital to Rāmāvatī (identified as Lakhnauti near Gaur in Malda district, West Bengal) at the end of the 11th century.[47] In the ancient region of Rāḍha in western Bengal, the Senas came to power in the second half of the eleventh century at the wake of the Cālukya military campaigns in the middle of the 11th century. As it is well known, the Senas were originally from Karnataka, the homeland of the Cālukyas. By the mid-11th century, the Senas became the most powerful in Bengal replacing the Pālas whose later rulers were pushed to Magadha from Varendra, and the Varmans in the south. It is difficult to gauge what these movements of people

would have meant for artistic production in Bengal. If anything, we expect to find the evidence of changes rather than blind adherence to the existing aesthetic norms and artistic practices. Surviving sculptural corpus suggests that there were dialogues and exchanges trans- and intra-regionally. The most dramatic and distinctive tendency we can identify in sculptural production in 12th century Bengal may be the love for embellishment and grandeur with stylistic flourish. An image may not be colossal in size but can appear grand and dramatic and otherworldly, thanks to all the flourishes added to the top. Most elaborate examples with dazzling embellishment survive from the ancient region of Varendra, and here for convenience, we use the term "Varendra style" in comparative perspective to what we identified as the "Vaṅga style."[48]

A mid-12th century image of Sadāśiva from Rajibpur in Dinajpur district, West Bengal illustrates the Varendra style very well (Fig. 35). It is an amazingly intricate image, and except for the two main hands held in front of his chest, which are damaged and now missing, the image is in perfect condition with no other serious damage. The stele represents a ten-armed and four-headed form of Sadāśiva. The image is relatively wide in proportion, the ten arms of Sadāśiva fan out from below the elbow in the middle of the composition. It is not as deeply carved as the Vaṅga examples discussed above, and is relatively flat. The dizzying presentation of swirling foliage patterns on the top third portion of the stele adds to this impression. The artists cleverly compensated the lack of depth and volume by carving the silhouette around the contour of the torso and around his heads. In fact, thanks to the change in installation in 2012, we now see that his fourth head is carved out in the back showing the stern face, perhaps representing his "Tatpuruṣa (or Mahādeva)" aspect (Fig. 36).[49] Smooth and soft rendering of the body and limbs reminds us of the earlier images from the region, like the Rajshahi Durgā, but the limbs are not as organically rendered. All the ornaments, and jewelries, such as beaded bracelets, necklaces and anklets, and attributes in his hands (spear, trident, *khaṭvāṅga* [skull-topped staff], *varada mudrā* on the right four and wish-fulfilling jewel [*bījapūraka*], snake, *ḍamaru* [drum], and a heavy lotus [*padma*] in the left four with two principal hands displaying

Fig. 35: Sadaśiva, c. 12th century, Bangarh, Rajibpur, Dinajpur Gopāla's 14th year, mid to late 12th century, Indian Museum 10998/A25198.

Fig. 36: Left: faces of Sadāśiva. Right: fourth face seen from the back, detail of fig. 42.

preaching gesture [*vyākhyāna-mudrā*]) are meticulously carved. The image appears extremely ornate partly thanks to the amazing swirls ensuing from the *kīrtimukha* on the apex of the stele. Even the clouds on which the flying garland bearers appear are finished with ornate florid swirl. There is almost no empty space, and with heavenly flourishes showered from above, the image is appropriately grand looking despite its relatively petite size (h: 104 cm). Certainly, this masterpiece must have made the patron very proud, represented with his wife on the left corner of the bottom register. Wide-eyed and smiling, the couple pay homage to the lord Śiva above (Fig. 37). The projected bar right under Sadāśiva's seat carries an inscription written in clear and bold letters, which reads: *parameśvaretya*[?] *śrīmadgopāladevapādānāṃvijayarājye śrī/matsadāśivapādāḥ san*[*dhisa*?] *śrīpuruṣottamenapratiṣṭhitāḥ saṃ* 14/ [damaged letters], identifying the patron, Śrī Puruṣottama, and the date of its installation, Gopāla's 14th regnal year (c. 1140 CE).[50]

The dazzling arrangement of smiling *kīrtimukha* and swirly foliage pattern is a hallmark of the Varendra style prominently featured in Brahmanical images but this was not exclusively so. Buddhist images from Varendra often feature a similar busy arrangement, as seen on an image of Khaḍiravanī Tārā from Niyamatpur in Nimdighi, Naogaon district, Bangladesh (VRM no. 229).[51] An image of standing Buddha demonstrates that some artists manage to convey the sense of grandeur and ornateness without the hallmark

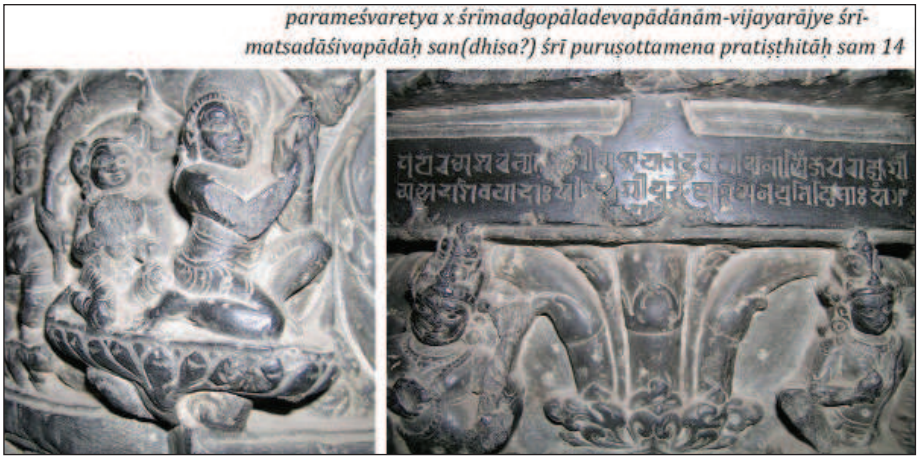

Fig. 37: detail of fig. 35, donor couple and donor inscription.

kīrtimukha motif (Fig. 38). The image was found somewhere in Dinajpur (VRM no. 266). Above the majestically standing Buddha unfolds lotus stalks dramatically swirling to support the five tathāgatas (Vairocana, Ratnasambhava, Akśobhya, Amitābha, and Amoghasiddhi, read from left to right of the viewer) seated and floating above on double lotus seats (Fig. 39). On the apex is an umbrella with a *stūpa* like finial in place of *kīrtimukha*. The Buddha's solid and smoothly carved body accentuates the contrast with the ornateness of the surrounding elements: the swirly clouds on which the flying garland bearers are represented, the florid patterns on the halo and the triangular shape above the throne back. Every line that defines a figure or a formal element in the background has a little flourish to it. Even the boots on garland bearers feature curved ends. The Buddha is dressed in simple monastic robe, but the pleats gathered near his ankles are rendered in undulating swirl. The main images of this stele are carved relatively deeply, conveying a great sense of volume. This aspect certainly reminds us of the formal traits we have seen in the Vaṅga sculptures. While embracing the love for flourish that was becoming pervasive everywhere in Bengal, the artists who crafted this magnificent image of the Buddha seems to have also adopted the artistic sensibility developed in Vaṅga. May be the unnamed male patron shown kneeling humbly on the bottom left corner of the stele preferred the formal clarity. May be Buddhist centers in Varendra and Vaṅga had a steady stream of

Fig. 38: Standing Buddha, c. 12th century , Dinajpur, VRM No.266. Ht:121cm.

Fig. 39: detail of fig. 38.

people moving back and forth in the context of a larger Buddhist monastic network.[52]

Just as movements of people between and beyond regions were multidirectional and happening at a rapid pace during the late 11th through the 12th centuries, artistic sensibility and style of a region seem to have traveled quickly to and from various locales. A number of images hailing from the Vikramapura area demonstrate that the Varendra style pervaded down south in Vaṅga. Whether their appearance in Vaṅga may be related with the Senas claim over the region ousting the Varmans in the mid 12th century is difficult to determine. The political move could easily follow the established routes of cultural and commercial interactions. The Vaṅga region had already been a political and cultural center for almost two centuries by the time the Senas made their move. A splendid image of a four-armed goddess adoring a liṅga found in Kagajipada (BNM E-69.171) is an excellent example to see the Vaṅga artists' response to the ideas elaborated in Varendra (Fig. 40).

A goddess bedecked with intricate jewelries stands tall hovering over a liṅga. Her principal hands are held in front of the chest with the left hand slightly lower than and in front of the right hand. On her right palm is a flower. The accumulation of her flower offerings are piled neatly on top of the liṅga in a small mound that looks like an upturned lotus. In her other hands are rosary and a broken attribute, often taken as a book.[53] Her full and round face has a gentle smile and her eyes are slightly lowered in meditative gaze towards *liṅga* she is offering flowers on. Her serene and smooth face is in great contrast to the swirly ends of

Fig. 40: Mahāmāyā or Goddess worshiping a liṅga, 12th century, Kāgajipādā (Dhaka), BNM E-69.171. H:139 cm.

ornaments, scarfs, and sashes flowing all around her. In addition, a serious looking *kīrtimukha* marks the pointed apex of the stele from whose mouth dangles a florid patterned triangular shape. Even the clouds on which the garland bearers are depicted are carved in undulating swirls. However, extravagant ornateness seen in the images from Varendra like Sadāśiva discussed above is checked under control. Some areas of the backdrop are still left empty and simple. More emphasis on volume is discernible: the image of the goddess is incredibly full and round, reminding us of earlier images from Vaṅga, and even the most linear elements like drapery folds are given indication of depth. While images depicting the goddess offering a *pūjā* to a liṅga are known in South Indian temples, they rarely depict this action frontally as seen here. The image exhibits amazing clarity in execution of such a spatially and sculpturally challenging iconography.

One cannot imagine such an accomplished production without the involvement of highly skilled artists and a religious master with a clear vision of the form. The image may have been prepared for two ascetic figures hiding under the shadow of the *yoni* pedestal of the *liṅga*. On the left (proper right of the goddess) stands a chubby bearded male figure holding a garland. A knotted top bun on his tilted head and minimal clothing on the figure suggests that he is an ascetic. His fellow ascetic stands on the other side of the pedestal holding an offering in his right hand. They may represent Śaiva *ācārya*s, and perhaps this image was commissioned for their *maṭha* somewhere in the Dhaka region. At least one stone stele representing a Śaiva *ācārya* who must have been a master of a Śaiva lineage is known from Bengal, which is now in the Pritzker collection.[54] The inscription under a seated image of a meditating yogin reads "master-teacher, Śrī Vidyāśiva" (*paṇḍitācāryaśrīvidyāśivaḥ*)" while two of the four small human figures on the bottom register are identified with names "Hara" and "Tikko". A number of Śaiva *ācārya*s wearing their hair in knotted buns attend and pay homage to Śrī Vidyāśiva. While the provenance of the Pritzker collection image is unclear, the image certainly suggests the existence of a Śaiva ascetic community in Bengal. It is not difficult to imagine then that an exceptional image of the goddess paying homage to a liṅga would have been commissioned for a Śaiva ascetic community in the center of the Vaṅga region.

Epilogue: Human World in the Divine Mould

An interesting stone stele depicting a male ascetic figure is in the collection of Los Angeles County Museum of Art (AC 1992.208.2). It depicts a scantily dressed male figure seated facing to his left with his right knee raised and his right foot crossed over the left leg placed on the seat (Fig. 41). His left hand rests on the floor next to the left leg, while his right arm is placed on the raised right

Fig. 41: A Buddhist ascetic, Candragomī (?), ca. 12th century, Northern Bengal, LACMA AC1992.208.2. Ht:59.05 cm.

knee. His right hand is unfortunately broken and missing. A strap, i.e. yogapaṭṭa, is wrapped around his right leg and lower back, keeping his right knee in place. Other than the yoga strap, we see two strands of *mālā* (prayer beads) across his chest and a simple loincloth wrapped around his hip and groin. His face is tilted downwards to the left as his body is turned, and his eyes are downcast. With a fully shaven head and elongated earlobes, he is an ascetic, that too, a Buddhist one. While his head is fully shaven like an ordained Buddhist monk, his minimally clad bare body defies a straightforwardly monastic identity. The image is identified as a famed lay Buddhist master, Candragomī, known as one of the eighty-four *Mahāsiddha*-s (great *Siddha*s; lit. perfected ones) in Tibetan Buddhist context.

According to Tāranātha, a 16th century Tibetan historian, Candragomī had a "mark of vermilion cut deep into the flesh" on his forehead to mark his identity after immediate rebirth. While Tāranātha's account is not to be taken literally, we cannot but notice the correspondence between his description of Candragomī's birthmark, a scar-like *tilaka* mark on the forehead, and the straight line striking in the middle of the image's forehead. According to Tāranātha, Candragomī was born in Varendra and had spent many years teaching in Nalanda. He was an *upāsaka* (a Buddhist lay male) master (*ācārya*) who had many direct visions of the goddess Tārā and Bodhisttva Avalokiteśvara. A number of episodes in Tāranātha's account highlight Candragomī's devotion to āryā Tārā, and the Los Angeles image has an image of the preaching two-armed goddess on the apex, representing the goddess Tārā that Tāranātha identifies as Candragomī's tutelary deity. Two other male ascetic figures float on either side of his head forming a triad with the image of Tārā. Both are represented with long hair and nearly naked, signaling their *siddha* identity.

Whether the Los Angeles image represents Candragomī, whose proposed active dates fall in the 7th century, or not is beside the point. It is important to recognize that a human master is represented in the format established to represent a divine being. This image and a few rare surviving examples depicting human teachers all hailing from Bengal, like the stone stele depicting a Śaiva master, *paṇḍitācārya*, Śrī Vidyāśiva, mentioned above, in a way mark the trans-

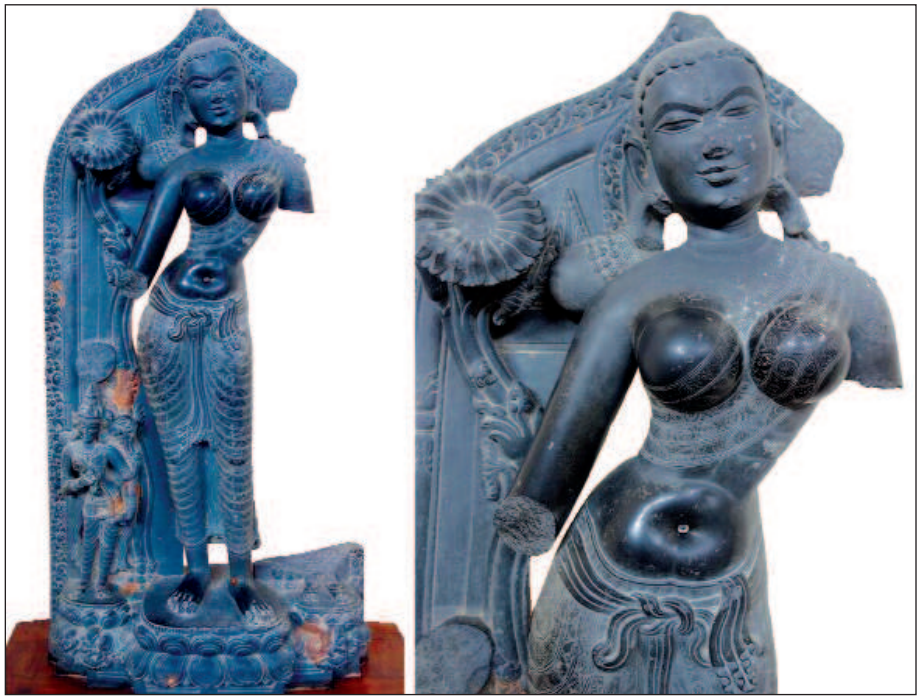

Fig. 42: Standing Tārā, c. 11th century, Jagaddala Mahāvihāra, Naogaon near Paharpur. Archaeological Museum, Paharpur.

regional connection between Bengal and Tibetan plateau. Portraits of hierarchs prepared in the same iconographic mode as images of Buddhist deities that we frequently find in the Tibetan Buddhist context of the 12th and the 13th centuries may be related to the practice of representing human masters in Bengal. Perhaps a seismic shift was happening in Bengal during the 11th and the 12th centuries regarding what could be portrayed in a divine mould: a local entity of a particular time could potentially become part of the transcendental. At the same time, it is important to note that a small number of images also suggest that the transcendental could be represented in an increasingly local, and possibly more human mould, perhaps suggesting a humanizing, localizing tendency in artistic production of 12th century Bengal.

A splendid image of goddess Tārā found in the site identified as that of the Jagaddala *Mahāvihāra* near Paharpur in Dhamurhat of Naogaon district is worth noting in this regard (Fig. 42). The goddess is remarkably bare in terms of ornamentation. All standard jewelries are missing: no crown, no necklace, no anklet, and given the absence of armlet on her upper right arm, her now broken arms probably were also bare without any bracelet. Large hoop earrings are only jewelry that she is depicted with. Yet, she is stunningly beautiful. There is no

Fig. 43: Detail of fig. 42, standing Tārā, Jagaddala *mahāvihāra*

doubt that master artists must have worked on this sculpture. A diaphanous garment wrapped around her body is carefully delineated with intricate geometric and flower patterns. Slightly swaying upper body with full breast and slender limbs are rendered round and smooth with full volume. The artists painstakingly represented her hair in tiny neat line, which is tied in a side bun and ornamented with multiple strands of flowers, much like women put *puṣpamālā*s on their hair today (Fig. 43). A delicately moulded face with wide, meditative eyes add to a real presence conveyed in this sculpture. More importantly, she is carved almost completely in round as the negative space behind her suggests. Her proportion in relation to the overall size of the stele is remarkable as the top of her head nearly reaches the apex of the stele, which puts this image in stark contrast to many contemporaneous images known from Varendra. The height of the goddess is nearly over life size. It is as if the goddess Tārā is no longer an image fixed to the background but a living presence, occupying the same space and time as the viewer/devotee. With her left foot placed slightly forward, she seems to have just stepped out of the frame or caught in the midst of that action and was miraculously turned back into stone.

Here we should go back to our Candragomī image, which is also shown in mid-action, also in almost full round, similarly protruding into the space. It is difficult to propose any direct connection between the two images except to speculate that the Los Angeles Candragomī image may also hail from somewhere in northern Bengal, and that they may be roughly contemporaneous. It is worth noting that Tāranātha's accounts of Candragomī's career are filled with references to images that came to life but were caught in mid action and turned back to stone. In addition, Tāranātha tells us a story of a painted image of Tārā that gave all her jewelry to Candragomī in response to his sincere prayer to help an old woman. The image was thus known as "Tārā without ornaments." We are not proposing to identify this magnificent sculpture from the Jaggadala monastery as representing this particular Tārā. The narrative connection we are suggesting between the Los Angeles image of Candragomī and the Jagaddala image of Tārā is tenuous at best. What connects them most strongly is a more human character of the main figure that evokes a sense of a specific moment in time in each case.

The most unique and local aspects of Bengal's sculptural heritage may be revealed in looking at their small details at their most human level, coming face to face with them, one by one. We may then find surprising connections that can penetrate through various temporal moments that we do not see now.

Notes and References

1 The awareness of Bengal's cultural identity amongst the people within the region already emerged with the development of vernacular literary culture and new religious movements such as Caitanya (1466-1534) *bhakti* movement during the 16th through the 18th centuries. Sudipta Kaviraj, "The Two histories of Literary Culture in Bengal," in Sheldon Pollock ed. *Literary Cultures in History*, Berkeley, UC Press, 2003: 506. Linguistically speaking, old Bangla began to take shape around 1000 CE and middle Bangla began to emerge around 1300 CE. Probal Dasgupta, 'Bangla' in George Cardona and Dhanesh Jain eds., *The Indo-Aryan languages*, London, 2003: 354.

2 Ryosuke Furui, 'Rural Society and Social Networks in Early Bengal from the 5th to the 13th century A.D.' unpublished PhD Dissertation, JNU, 2007: chapter 2.

3 For the recent critique of this "Bihar-centric" approach, see Eun-su Lee, 'On Defining Buddhist Art in Bengal: The Dhaka Region', unpublished PhD Dissertation, The University of Texas, Austin, 2009: 54-60.

4 Susan Huntington, *The "Pāla-Sena" Schools of Sculpture*, Leiden: Brill,1984: 157.

5 Ryosuke Furui's research, Eun-su Lee's PhD thesis, publications by Birendra Nath Prasad, Benjamin Fleming's studies on Candra inscriptions and excavation reports on Buddhist sites in Bengal such as Jagjivanpur are only a few examples of burgeoning recent scholarship on art and archaeology of Bengal.

6 Jesse Knuston, *Into the Twilight of Sanskrit Court Poetry: The Sena Salon of Bengal and Beyond*, Berkeley, 2014: 9-15.

7 Stella Kramrisch, 'Pāla and Sena Sculpture', in Barbara Stoler Miller (ed.), E*xploring India's Sacred Art: Selected Writings of Stella Kramrisch*, Philadelphia, 1983: 237.

8 Gautam Sengupta, Sima Roy Chowdhury and Sharmi Chakraborty, *Eloquent Earth: Early Terracottas in the State Archaeological Museum, West Bengal*, Kolkata, 2007.

9 No official excavation report is available. Enamul Haque, 'Chandraketugarh: Enigmatic Entrepot of Ancient Bengal', in P.Pal and E. Haque (eds.), *Bengal: Sites and Sights*, Mumbai, 2003: 38-49.

10 The plaques found near Mahasthangarh seem to have belonged to a Brahmanical temple, but we do not know their architectural context.

11 See Gouriswar Bhattacharya, 'Mainamati: City on the Red Hills', in *Bengal: Sites and Sights*, 2003: 74-75; A.K.M. Shamsul Alam, *Mainamati*, Dhaka, 1975.

12 K.N. Dikshit, *Excavations at Paharpur, Bengal*, New Delhi, Pl. XXXIX-b.

13 It is possible at one point stucco may have been the main artistic material used for embellishing the temples and other religious structures that were predominantly built with brick all over eastern India. While we have very little surviving material to understand the stucco art due to the fragile nature of the material against the humidity and heat, it is important to keep this in mind for further investigation as it will also help us see trans-regional connections, for example, to abundant remains of stucco-covered brick structures

in Bagan, Myanmar, or to the stucco sculptures and temple decorations in western Himalayan sites like Alchi and Tabo.

14 Frederick Asher, *The Art of Eastern India, 300-800,* Minnesota, 1980: 46.

15 Huntington, *The "Pāla-Sena" Schools*, 1984, 123-129.

16 Amal Roy, *Jagjivanpur: Excavation Report*, Kolkata, 2012.

17 Nandadīrghi refers to the water-body nearby.

18 Amal Roy, *Jagjivanpur*, 2012: 113-116.

19 *Ibid.*

20 Dilip K. Chakrabarti, 'Paharpur: Buddhist Complex of Early Bengal', in Pal & Haque eds. *Bengal: Sites*, 2003: 50-63.

21 See Asher, plate 112.

22 Lee, 'On Defining Buddhist Art', 2009: 353-355; Anusua Sengupta, *Buddhist Art of Bengal*, Delhi, 1993: 118.

23 See Gouriswar, 'Mainamati: City', fig. 5.

24 The late 7th or early 8th century date is suggested based on the epigraphic evidence found at the site that links the site's establishment and use with the Khaḍga dynasty, active in the region during the 7th century.

25 Md. Shafiqul Alam, 'Buddhist Establishments at Rupban Mura, Mainamati, Bangladesh', *East and West* 42, no.2/4, 1992:281-300.

26 N.K. Bhattasali, *Iconography of Buddhist and Brahmanical Sculptures in the Dacca Museum*, Dacca, 1929: 203-205.

27 Md. Shafiqul Alam, 'Buddhist Establishments', 1992: 281-300

28 Asok K. Bhattacharya, *Jhewari Bronze Buddhas: A Study in History and Style*, Calcutta, 2000.

29 D.C. Sircar read the inscriptions of the Jhewari bronzes in 1970s. His reading of the name is "Subhadatta", but I believe what he read as "*da*" is clearly a "*ra*" as it lacks the angled line connecting from the top of the letter to the lower half to make it a "*da*". There are also other clearly identifiable "ra" and "da" letters in the same inscription that makes it possible to read it as "ratna" rather than "datta". For a monastic name Śubharatna (splendid jewel) seems to make more sense than Subhadatta since "datta" ending seems to suggest a caste origin rather than a monastic lineage.

30 This image was also donated by *Sthavira* Śubharatna.

31 See cat. No. 53: Vincent Lefèvre and Marie-Françoise Boussac, eds. *Chefs-d'Oeuvre du Delta du Gange: Collections des Muse´es du* Bangladesh, Paris, 2007: 176-177.

32 See Huntington, fig.50. G. Bhattacharya suggests that the Mandhuk Gaṇeśa should be dated to Gopāla(II)'s reign in the mid-9th century rather than Gopāla (III)'s reign based on palaeographic differences seen in the Nalanda Vāgīśvarī image also dated with a Gopāla's reign. G. Bhattacharya, 'Nalanda Vāgīśvarī and Mandhuk Gaṇeśa: Are they of the Same Period' *Journal of Bengal Art* 4, 1999:376. A 9th century date seems rather too early for this image. Another Gaṇeśa image donated by his son is dated with a late 10th century date. I wonder if it isn't possible that the epigraphic differences that Bhattacharya notes in the two inscriptions as temporal may be spatial, i.e. local variations. While the sculpture may have been commissioned from a Magadhan workshop, the inscription is most likely added at the time of, or after, its installation in Samataṭa in front of the patrons.

33 B.N. Prasad takes this as evidence that "donations of Buddhist and Brahmanical images were believed to fetch the same result" and proposes that Jambhalamitra and Buddhamitra were

"influenced by Buddhism" but were "devotees of Gaṇeśa", essentially categorizing them as "Hindu" merchants. B.N. Prasad, 'Votive Inscriptions on the Sculptures of Early Medieval Samataṭa-Harikela, Bengal: Explorations in Socio-religious History', *Religions of South Asia* 4.1, 2010: 33. The specific donative formula used in Jambhalamitra's Gaṇeśa is quite specific to Buddhist context, and has a long history of development in Buddhist context as seen in epigraphic evidence. See for example, Gregory Schopen, 'Mahāyāna in Indian Inscriptions,' *Indo-Iranian Journal* 21, no.1, 1979:1-19; G. Bhattacharya, 'Dāna-deyadharma: Donation in Early Buddhist records (in Brāhmī)' in *Investigating Indian Art*, Berlin,1987: 39-60. While Brahmanic donor inscriptions at times appear to be moulded similarly to the Buddhist ones, they are careful in modifying the language to signal their sectarian affiliations. In this regard, it is interesting to note the change in Buddhamitra's inscription where we see the use of the phrase the attainment of supreme enlightenment by all sentient beings (*sakalasatvarāse-anuttarajñāna-lābha*) disappears. Instead, the donation is dedicated to accrue merit for his mother, father, and himself (*mātāpitrorātmanaścapuṇya*), which is the same formula as seen in on the Viṣṇu image discussed below. If anything, this may be taken as suggesting that Jambhalamitra may have been a Buddhist merchant who named his son "Buddhamitra" whereas Buddhamitra may have started to fashion himself after other "Hindu" merchants of the region, like Lokadatta who was also a merchant and a devout Vaiṣṇava devotee (*paramavaiṣṇava*).

34 See Bhattasali, Plate XXX: 84-85.

35 H.P. Ray, 'The Archaeology of Bengal: Trading Networks, Cultural Identities', *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, vol.49, no.1, 2006: 68-95.

36 Enamul Haque identifies it as Caṇḍī. Enamul Haque, *Bengal Sculptures: Hindu Iconography upto c. 1250A.D.*, Dhaka, 1992: 218.

37 Huntington, *The "Pāla-Sena" Schools*, 1984. Claudine Bautze-Picron's numerous publications identify specific regional artistic centers in Bihar. For example, see Bautze-Picron, 'Lakhi Sarai, an Indian Site of Late Buddhist Iconography and its Position Within the Asian Buddhist world', *Silk Road Art and Archaeology* 2, 1991/92: 239-84; *The Forgotten Place: Stone Images from Kurkihar, Bihar*, New Delhi, 2015.

38 R.K. Chattopadhyay, S. Ray and S. Majumder, 'The Kingdom of the Śaivācāryas', *Berliner Indologische Studien* 21, 2013: 173-256; Tamara Sears, *Worldly Gurus and Spiritual Kings: Architecture and Asceticism in Medieval India*, New Haven, 2014.

39 A.M. Chowdhury, *Dynastic History of Bengal*, Dacca, 1967: 154-188.

40 Dani suggests this may refer to the lateritic deposits that link Chittagong Hill tracts with Arakan, making a tantalizing connection between them and the Candra kings of Arakan who ruled in the 6th through 8th centuries.

41 According to D.C. Sircar, Samataṭa is mentioned in the Allahabad pillar inscription of Samudragupta (*ca*. 340-76). Sircar, *Studies in the Geography of Ancient and Medieval India*, Delhi, 1971: 156. This mention happens in the context of naming the rulers of the "frontier regions" (*pratyanta-nṛpati*) the list of which includes, "Samataṭa, Ḍavāka, Kāmarūpa, Nepāla, and Karttṛipura." *Inscriptions of the Early Gupta Kings*, New Delhi, 1981: 213.

42 All three are in BNM. See the discussion and accompanying plates in Huntington, *The "Pāla-Sena" Schools*, 1984: 62-63 and figs. 64, 65, 66, 67.

43 Seated images of the goddess Durgā rarely feature this upper garment. One rare example is an eight-armed image of Durgā supposedly from somewhere in Bihar now in the Indian Museum.

44 Examples with trilobated arch structure are known in Magadhan sites, but a fully constructed shrine structure soaring with finial is rarely seen among Magadhan sculptures. See the discussion in Huntington, *The "Pāla-Sena" Schools*, 1984:168.

45 The image was found sometime around 1865 amidst a ruined temple site.

46 A.M. Chowdhury, *Dynastic History*, 1967: 113-136; 189-264.

47 Depending on the recent discovery of a number of old bricks, reservoirs, roads etc, the present name 'Amair' a colloquial miss accentuation of historian Rāmāvatī, and its location in between Somāpura Mahāvihāra and Jagaddala. [However, the identification of Rāmāvatī is still uncertain]. See, Md. Mosharraf Hossain, *Itihāser Naogaon O Aitijyer Naogaon*, Dhaka, 2010: 40.

48 This is a term chosen for convenience and also to indicate the pervasiveness of the style in the Varendra region of the 12th century, especially after the arrival of the Senas in the region. However, unlike the Vaṅga style with which we could identify a regional core in the genesis of the style, the Varendra style does not necessarily have its genesis in Varendra. I find a firmer ground for the Vaṅga style thanks to the recent research focusing on the Dhaka region's Buddhist sculptures by Eun-su Lee. Further study on the sculptural heritage of the northern and western Bengal regions, especially in the ancient Rāḍha region from which the Senas grew in power, will improve our understanding greatly. For example, sculptures hailing from Bardhaman, Nadia, Birbhum and Murshidabad districts in West Bengal and their accompanying inscriptions need to be thoroughly documented and analyzed. Pervasive use of the *kīrtimukha* motif in sculptural production and the taste for ornateness seen in the Varendra sculptures of the twelfth century connect them with the sculptures from early medieval Karnataka. There may be an underlying historical connection that merits further investigation behind the formal links between some Hoysala sculptures and Bengali sculptures of the 12th century.

49 His faces are differentiated and well defined. His right side face (viewer's left) shows Bhairava aspect with bearded and frowning face. His left side face (viewer's right) shows gentler face while the back face is stern. This arrangement seems to fit the directional assignment given in the descriptions of Sadāśiva in the puranic texts. For example, the *Viṣṇudharmottarapuraṇa* has the four faces as Sadyojāta-west, Vāmadeva- north, Aghora-south, and Tatpuruṣa- east and the fifth one as Īśāna facing upwards.

50 The cultic importance of Sadāśiva in Bengal is historically related to the rise of the Sena power in Bengal as Sadāśiva was the royal insignia of the Senas, often found soldered on their copper plate grants. This image demonstrates that Sadāśiva worship probably existed in Varendra even before the paramountcy of the Senas in the region.

51 See Vincent Lefèvre and Marie-Françoise Boussac, eds *Chefs-d'oeuvre du delta du Gange*: 209, Cat. No. 73.

52 In the History of Indian Buddhism, Tāranātha, a 16th century Tibetan historian, includes the accounts of Buddhist masters born in Samataṭa (i.e. Candrakīrti) and Varendra (i.e. Candragomī) becoming active members in a Magadhan monastic center like Nālandā. P.198-199. He also reports that people from "Bhaṃgala [understood to be the southern area of Vaṅga; also a later name for the larger region of Vaṅga and Samataṭa] used to come to Vikramaśīla for offering worship." 279.

53 A small swirl hanging to the right from the broken top of this attribute suggests to me that this may not have been a book.

54 While its provenance is unclear, there is little doubt about the image's Bengal provenance. Cat. No. 2A: Deborah Diamond (ed.), *Yoga: The Art of Transformation*, Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 2013: 114.