

A NOTE ON A HITHERTO UNPUBLISHED VOTIVE TABLET FROM ABHANA/AVANA IN THE DISTRICT OF BALASORE, ODISHA

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The present paper is a note on a votive tablet (hitherto unreported), from the site of Abhana/Avana (21°14'59" N, 86°49'23.59" E) in the district of Balasore, Odisha. Being discovered during the post doctoral field work of the first author in this region, the object enticed us to look into its counterparts in eastern India and the adjoining areas of South-east Asia. Though, the present work does not seek to bring any path breaking observation, but it certainly adds significant database to the known repertoire along with its implication.

What is a votive tablet and what was its real significance have been the forte of several scholarly works. It was Georges Cœdès (1926: 1-24) for the first time who felt the urge for a systematic study of votive tablets from Siam. Similar approaches have also been taken by H.G. Quaritch Wales (1935: 1-31) and Alastair Lamb (1964: 47-59) in the Malay Peninsula. It is to be mentioned here that, the scholars working on such objects have identified them as the cultural signifiers of the spread of religion and voyage across South and South-east Asia.

Very interestingly, John Guy (2002: 23) while working on such objects from Burma pointed out the fact that most of the provenances (in Siam, Malay Peninsula, and even in Burma) share the common feature of physical inaccessibility. There are located along high cliff faces to be reached by steep jungle paths. These inaccessible caves certainly provided the practitioners with favourable place for meditation and retreat. Here lies the question of tracing the context of the present finding. Abhana is certainly not a place where Buddhist practitioners, either monks or lay communities might have frequented since no other artefact regarding its monastic identity has been found here. The provenance is at a small distance from the courses of five small streams, viz. Baranai, Kainchakholia, Baincha, a branch of Kanshabansa river, collectively called Pancuvisa meeting the Bay of Bengal (Agasti 1986: 124-128). However, the site is a storehouse of assorted archaeological remains.

Abhana was first reported in 1980 when a considerable number of stone sculptures, terracotta figurines and terracotta seals (votive tablets) containing 'Buddhist *dhāraṇīs*' (palaeographically assignable to tenth- eleventh century CE), were unearthed. The said materials were recovered during the digging activities around a dilapidated temple complex (locally known as Brahmani temple) at the site with a view to expose the entire structure by a team consisting of villagers, volunteers from the NSS wing of the Belabhumii College and the Gopaljiu Cultural Association. The presiding deity of the present temple (which was built upon a

dilapidated one) is of three-headed and eight-armed Cāmuṇḍā (127 × 72 × 36 cm) seated over a corpse. The pedestal over which the figure of the deity is installed is quite large, about 124 cm in length. The sanctum cella also has a four-armed *jaṭāmukūṭa* Lokeśvara/Mahākaruṇā (see Donaldson 2001: 33, pl. 244). The temple complex also preserves small sculpture of Viṣṇu (16 × 7 × 2.5 cm), two figures of Mahiṣāsūramardīnī (9.5 × 6 × 3 cm and 15 × 8 × 2 cm) etc. It has been also informed that the reported votive tablets have been yielded not from the concerned temple complex, but from a place known as Mudhuabari (21°15'3.6" N, 86°49'15.56" E) within the village. The mound at the concerned place has now an excavated pond, thereby making it difficult to trace the primary archaeological context/s. However, the bank of the said pond is strewn with a number of grey and red ware potteries. The site has also yielded a good collection of sculptural remains of which mention may be made of *Bodhisattva* (36 × 20 × 7 cm), Neminātha (33 × 22 × 5 cm), Ṛṣabhanātha (32 × 24 × 6.5 cm), Candraprabha (25.5 × 19 × 4 cm), Dūrgā (35 × 23 × 8 cm), pedestal of Ṛṣabhanātha (24 × 25 × 9 cm), Cakra, possibly of a large Viṣṇu image (23 cm in height), etc. (see, Acharya and Halder 2017: 213-6).

By accommodating the clay into a reverse ceramic or metal mould, the positive impression was generated. The present object is an ill-fired ceramic product and of course not a sun dried one. The uniformity of its beige/buff colour certainly leads us to the assumption that, it was fired in kiln. The object is circular with the impression, oval in shape having conical upper and lower ends. It is an interesting South Asian variety of Buddhist triad. The impression shows Buddha seated in *vajrāsana* within a *stūpa/caitya* displaying *bhūmisparśamudrā*. Behind the head of Buddha, an aureole is delineated. He is seated on a lotus pedestal and fringed by two boldly carved pillars/sides continuing upwards to make slightly projected curved roof thereby conceiving the form of a *stūpa/caitya*. Above this, rises the broadly sculpted four-tiered *chatrāvalī* (parasol) and the lower *chatra* is flanked by some indeterminate small decorations. Outside the *stūpa/caitya*, stand two *Bodhisattvas* in flexion on either side of Buddha, identifiable as Avalokiteśvara and Maitreya/Vajrapāṇī. The above-stated composition takes slightly more than half of the impression, below which is inscribed *ye dharmā* stanza. A bold straight line demarcates the former from the latter.

It will be a mere reiteration to investigate what was the real significance of the objects. As already discussed by many scholars, it was originated in India, and was known as *saccā* or *samcā* in Sanskrit which later influenced the Tibetan name of *tsha tsha*. They are known as *phra phim* or *Braḥ Bimb* implying 'Sacred Imprints' in Thai (Coedès 1926: 1-24; Tucci 1988: 55-57; Chirapavati 2000: 175; Ghosh 2014:190). While exploring the aspiration behind making such objects, one may refer to certain verses of *Saddharma-Puṇḍarīka* (see, Kern 1884: 49-51). In chapter 2, it has been recorded that apart from the beings who heard the law from the Tathāgata and who followed moral precepts and accomplished all the religious rites, there was other ways of acquiring merit for enlightenment. "others also, who paid worship to the relics of the departed Ginas, erected many thousands of Stūpas made of gems, gold, silver, or crystal (Verse 77), Or built

Stūpas of emerald, cat's eye, pearls, egregious lapis lazuli, or sapphire; they have all of them reached enlightenment (Verse 78)".



Plate 54.1: Votive Tablet from Abhana.

More interestingly, it is said in the verse 81, “The little boys even, who in playing erected here and there heaps of sand with the intention of dedicating them as Stūpas to the Ginas, they have all of them reached enlightenment”.

So far as the images are concerned, it is said that, “...who caused jewel images to be made and dedicated... (verse 82). Others who had images of Sugatas made of the seven precious substances, of copper or brass... (verse 83), of lead, iron, clay, or plaster... (verse 84). Those who made images (of the Sugatas) on painted walls, with complete limbs and the hundred holy signs, whether they drew them themselves or had them drawn by others, have (verse 85) ... Those even, whether men or boys, who during the lesson or in play, by way of amusement, made upon the walls (such) images with the nail or a piece of wood (verse 86), have all of them reached enlightenment... (verse 87)”.

The second point that has to be made in this regard is the prevalence of *ye dharmā* stanza inscribed on these tablets. Regarding its implication, we must go back to Boucher's work on

Pratītyasamutpāda where he investigated two tendencies in the Buddhist development (Boucher 1991:1-27); (i) “to locate the Buddha in his corporeal body, especially as left behind in his relics; (ii) or to locate the ‘true’ Buddha in the *dharmā*, his teachings”. The manifestation of this dichotomy can be seen in the cult of *stūpa* on one hand and equating Buddha with his teachings on the other. Interestingly, the *Mahāyāna sūtras* gradually tried to connect the place of Buddha’s enlightenment i.e., Bodhgaya (*bodhimaṇḍa*) with the written *dharmaparyāya* (Buddha’s *dharmā*) (Boucher 1991:1-27; see, Salomon and Schopen 1984: 117; Boner 1995: 251). It has been resolved that, a loci where *dharmaparyāya* has been recited is the true place of enlightenment and here the essence of past, present, and future Buddha resides. The practical expression of such philosophical and literary innovation is seen in the reliquary inscription of the *Pratītyasamutpāda* as evident from many archaeological sites. The earliest known evidence is found from Kharoṣṭhī inscription on a relic casket shaped like miniature *stūpa* from Peshawar, epitomizing not only Buddha’s bodily remains but also his enlightenment experience (see, Konow 1929: 53-67; Aiyar 1983: 16-20). This tradition has been gradually supplanted by making clay tablets and miniature *stūpas* inscribed with the verse (*dharmaparyāya*) symbolizing *Pratītyasamutpāda* and were deposited in *stūpas* during the post-Gupta period onwards. This *dharmaparyāya* (short exposition of *dharmā*) means: “Those *dharmas* which arise from a cause, the Tathāgata has declared their cause, and that which is the cessation of them. Thus the great renunciant has taught” (see, Boucher 1991:11).

Cœdès (1926: 1-24) followed by Foucher (1911: 55-79, 1914: 10-13) considered these objects as ‘souvenirs of pilgrimages’. Casting a bronze image or sculpting a stone or wood one according to them was beyond the reach of the poor people, and the latter aimed at acquiring merits ‘to assure their rebirth under more prosperous conditions’ must have produced such objects. Skilling (see, Skilling 2005: 677-85; 2008a: 508; 2008b: 248-262) in fact conveyed objection against the terminology of votive tablets and preferred to adhere to the term ‘sealing’ for implying this group of objects. He opined that these sealings were the material signifier of a ritual ideology. He based on prescriptive texts negated the idea of restricting the practice within low-income bracket. For this, he cited examples of Jayasena, an *upāsaka* and a respected *kṣatriya* from Saurāṣṭra eventually lived and taught in Magadha, as referred to by Hsüan-Tsang (Xuanzang), and the story of Chach in *Chach-nama*, and the journey of Kamalaśīla and Atiśa, two important monks of Bengal who traversed along the roads of Tibet.

As mentioned earlier, the present specimen shows Buddhist triad which is in fact a common theme in *Mahāyāna* Buddhism (a number of specimens showing triad have been reported from Nalanda and other parts of eastern India). The work of Chirapravati [he gave the example from Khao Ok Thalu in Phattalung Province, datable to eighth century. However, this particular specimen has two levels with the upper level showing three Buddhas seated, with the hands in the meditation posture (*dhyānamudrā*) and the lower level representing a triad with a seated Buddha in *pralambapadāsana* flanked by two standing *bodhisattvas*] shows that the Peninsular Thailand region is in fact replete with the repertoire depicting such effigies (see,

O'Connor 1974, Chirapravati 1997, 2000: 172- 193). Such style in votive tablets has also been reported from Śrīkṣetra (in the Pyu region of Myanmar) in profuse numbers (see, Thein 2018: 159-174; also see Mya 1961). Examples may be cited from Taung Lone Nyo village, Mathaw village, etc. Among 1350 specimens yielded from Catubhummika, Hngak monastery, Thaton (Mu, 2018: 1-29), the Type 5 of Group I: Buddha on Khou nan gjou: throne flanked by *Bodhisattva* (generally datable ninth-tenth century) is similar to the present specimen. Triadic version (though Buddha seated in *bhadrāsana*) is also found in the clay tablet from Candi Gentong in eastern Java (see, Sanyal and Ghosh 2019: 143, Fig. 6.10), or the excavated clay tablet from Batujaya, dating from the seventh century CE (Manguin and Indradjaya 2006: pp. 249-250, fig. 23.6). Another example of triad, and similar to the present specimen (Buddha, seated in *vajrāsana* posture flanked by two *bodhisattvas* standing in flexion) showing Buddha in *vyākhyānamudrā* is now in the collection of the Asutosh Museum of Indian Art, Kolkata (Ghosh 2014: 195, fig. 9.7). Most of these triadic representations have been taken by the scholars as those of Buddha flanked by Avalokiteśvara and Maitreya probably deriving from the earliest images of this type from Ajanta datable to fifth century and other areas of Maharashtra assignable to sixth-seventh centuries (see, Weiner 1977). However, it is interesting to note that Chutiwongs in her research on Dvāravatī art shows that Avalokiteśvara and Maitreya are mostly portrayed as bearing similar iconographic features. Their headdress and attributes are in fact synonymous. Avalokiteśvara and Vajrapāṇī, on the other hand are marked by certain iconographic differences. The former is characterized by the presence of *jaṭāmukuṭa* and lotus bud and the latter shows elaborate crown and probably holds a *vajra* as an attribute in his hand (Chutiwongs 1984: 226; 1994: 17-64). Interestingly, in the present specimen, those two *bodhisattvas* are also not identical, as the one at our right does not hold lotus flower in his left hand and his headdress shows marked contrast from that of the left one. The rubbed condition of the clay restricts us from its proper identification. However, overall impression leads us to recognize it probably as Vajrapāṇī.

What need further clarification in the case of the present specimen are the posture and the gesture of hands of the seated Buddha. It is needless to say that, Buddha seated in *vajrāsana* with the hands placed in *bhūmisparśamudrā* is quite a common feature in votive tablets. For example, in the work of Cœdès on Siamese tablets (1926: 1-24), the Plates V, VI (only the left and central figures), VII, IX (only the central and right figures), XIV (only the left figure) exemplify such gesture. From Śrīkṣetra, carving of two types of *bhūmisparśamudrā* was in vogue assignable to the Pyu period (see, Thein 2018: 159-174), i.e., (i) left hand on the lap and right hand touching the earth (usual *mudrā*) (ii) right hand on the lap and left hand touching the earth (unusual *mudrā*). Depiction of such usual *mudrā* is also enumerated in Type 4 and 5 of Group I of Catubhummika, Hngak monastery, Thaton (Mu, 2018: 1-29). Besides, in the work of John Guy, a number Buddha in *Māravijaya* have been recorded from Burma region (Guy 2002: 23), for example, figures 3.8 [enthroned Buddha, Pyu period, Burma, eighth-tenth century, private collection], 3.9 [Buddha seated under Bodhi tree/Bodhi *mandir*, flanked by *stūpas*,

Pagan period, Burma, eleventh-twelfth century, Victoria and Albert Museum], 3.10 [Buddha seated under Bodhi tree/Bodhi *mandir*, flanked by two *bodhisattvas*].

In this context, we must refer to six votive tablets/plaques from the Buddhist monastic site of Ratnagiri which shows Buddhist triad like the present specimen (Mitra 1981: 31, 98-99; Plate XLIX). Here again Buddha is seated in *vajrāsana* with the hands in *bhūmisparśamudrā* and he is flanked by two standing *bodhisattvas*. However, around the head of the Buddha there was an oval halo edged by tongues of flames. The branches of Bodhi tree are depicted around this halo. The palaeographic study of *ye dharmā* stanza engraved on these specimens ascribes them to ninth-tenth century. It is needless to state that, Nalanda and Bodhgaya yielded a good repertoire of such specimens. In this context, we would like to mention the object number F2002.44 in the South Asian Sector of Asian Art Museum originally hailed from Bihar (c. 800-1000). In this specimen the principal figure shows *bhūmisparśamudrā* and has two *bodhisattvas* standing in *ābhaṅga* posture on both sides. Behind the head of Buddha a halo is carved (<http://asianart.emuseum.com/view/objects/asitem/search@22?t:state:flow=c0ef1d30-91ca-89d-966e-ce9dec71aa2a>). Similar specimen from Bodhgaya is now in the collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum (<http://m.vam.ac.uk/collections/item/O64869/votive-seal-with-the-buddha-votive-seal-unknown/>). Another specimen from Bodhgaya (Buddhist triad and Buddha is seated within ‘Bodhi-*mandir*’), which now finds a place in the Ashmolean Museum, Youseef Jameel Centre for Islamic and Asian Art (Eastern Art Online) (http://jameelcentre.ashmolean.org/collection/8/per_page/25/offset/0/sort_by/date/object/11122), (Acc No. EAX.2071) datable to eleventh century shows enough affinities with the present specimen (also see, Sastri, 1931-2: 72).

However, a marked contrast between the afore-mentioned specimens and the present one lies in the fact that, in the latter, Buddha is seated within a well-delineated *stūpa*, and not within a Bodhi-*mandir*. The prevalent tradition of depicting Buddha in a temple-like structure signifying the temple of Bodhgaya found its expression in a number of tablets from Myanmar, eastern India, and Bangladesh. Though, in most cases, the *śikhara* carved on this tablet does not exactly look like the Bodhi-*mandir*, but one has to remember that, it must have served as ‘as an icon to evoke associations of the sacred power-centre of the Buddhist world’ (Guy 1991: 365). However, while explaining the implication of depicting Buddha within a *stūpa*, one may refer to the fact that Vairocana is regarded as the oldest and first transcendent Buddha thereby finding place in the sanctum of the *stūpa*. Therefore, he cannot be represented outside a *stūpa* (see, Bhattacharyya, 1958: 53; Since Mārīcī belongs to the *kula* of Vairocana, she also stands within the womb of *caitya* or *stūpa*, see, Bautze-Picron 2001: 277-278). While referring to the legend associated with the Nāgārjuna’s entry to iron *stūpa* as found in the Mikkyo Daijiten (see, 1971: *Encyclopaedia of Esoteric Buddhism*, 6 vols., Kyoto), Snodgrass informs us that the Sanskrit word *caitya*, synonymous to *stūpa*, is etymologically equivalent to *citta* or mind. Thus, the *caitya*, or the *stūpa* basically symbolizes the mind of the Buddha and the mind of enlightenment (*bodhicitta*) which is innate within the minds of all beings (Snodgrass: 1992: 376). In this context, we must refer to the right specimen of plate VII of the work of Cœdès (1926: 20), in

which the two flanking figures on either side of the central Buddha (in the attitude of touching the earth) are seated below a tower surmounted by a *stūpa*. However, as prescribed in the Pañcākāra section of the *Advayavajrasaṅgraha* (Adv. 41), Vairocana exhibits *bodhyaṅgīmudrā* (see, Bhattacharyya, 1958: 53). However, in the present specimen, the principal figure displays *bhūmisparśamudrā* thereby indicating his identity more as Akṣobhya rather than Vairocana.

According to Rajat Sanyal, Paleography of the *ye dharmā* stanza engraved at the base of the composition provides a fair estimate of the date of this artifact. The letters with solid square head-mark are quite akin to the Maukhari inscriptions from Nagarjuni and Barabar hills in Bihar, dated to the sixth century. The formation of the medial vowels in almost all the cases and the formation of the ligature as in *hya* in line 2, showing horizontal extension of the loop of the second element *ya*, further indicate developments between the sixth and the seventh century CE.

As far as the present knowledge goes, it is more relevant to identify the principal figure seated within *stūpa* as Śākyamuni rather than any particular transcendent Buddha. Here, we may take the cue from the argument put forward in the work of the Griffiths et. al. 2013, on the study of enthroned Buddha in *dharmacakramudrā*, from Rejoso. While tracing the implication of the word *jinajik* (which was engraved on their studied image before the *ye dharmā* stanza), they have categorically mentioned that, the *mantra jinajik* is not found in any text like *Vairocanābhisambodhi* ascribable to the period prior to tenth century where it has been connected with Vairocana. On the other hand, the text like *Mañjuśrīyamūlakalpa*, tried to relate this *mantra* not to a specific Buddha rather to all Buddhas. By quoting from an old Javanese text, like *Saṅ Hyaṅ Kamahāyānikan* datable to mid-tenth century, the work portrayed how the Buddhist triad had gradually transformed into pentad (originally there was Śākyamuni, on his right was Avalokiteśvara, and on his left was Vajrapāṇī. They are the Lord-Jewel Triad and they are the *tattva* [essence] of body, speech, and mind. After this Vairocana emanates from Śākyamuni, Avalokiteśvara became divided into Akṣobhya and Ratnasambhava and Vajrapāṇī became divided into Amitābha and Amoghasiddhi). Therefore, it will be more relevant to consider the principal figure of the present tablet as Tathāgata. However, apart from the feature of triadic representation, connecting the present specimen with those carved on the walls of western caves is little problematic. In the latter, Buddha in *bhūmisparśamudrā* is quite rare. Conversely, this is more an eastern Indian variety which in later period spread in the adjoining parts of South-east Asia. It is interesting to note that, during the excavation of Cave 13 of Kanheri (West 1862: 157-160), a votive tablet has been unearthed displaying Buddha in *bhūmisparśamudrā* and seated within an elongated *stūpa* as apparent from its hand-drawing by the author. In this context, it will be pertinent to mention about the work of Ray in the pursuit of searching cultural routes and maritime landscapes, which refers to an inscription in cave 11 of Kanheri speaking about the visit of an ardent follower of the Buddha from *Gauḍa* or Bengal and his endowment for the construction of a meditation room and clothing for monks residing at the *mahāvihāra* of Kṛṣṇagiri (see, Ray: 347-367).

In the light of above evidence, we would like to conclude that, the early medieval shift of Indian Buddhism conceived Buddha as both present and absent. While locating 'true' Buddha in his *dharma* on one hand and reconnecting him through his bodily remains, sacred sites, etc. on the other, the concept behind the concerned specimens must have taken shape. The assimilation of diverse elements like *stūpa* on one hand and *ye dharmā* verse on the other in a Buddhist triad must have been done to touch upon such concept of his presence and absence. However, these objects must be taken as a medium of merit-making (for enlightenment) as explained earlier and must have traversed hundreds of miles across various parts of eastern India and South-east Asia. Interestingly, quite an early date of the present specimen and its palaeographic affinity (as apparent from the *ye dharmā* stanza) with the inscriptions from Bihar region further confirm its identity and that of similar ones as voyaging objects. In fact, X-Ray Diffraction and X-Ray Fluorescence analyses of such objects must have been more useful to understand the origin of their production and the pathways of their diffusion.

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