

SOME OBSERVATIONS ON HINDU ICONOGRAPHY OF BENGAL

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The foregoing treatises are largely adopted from the author's earlier presentations. Decades have gone but I am happy to say that very little of these earlier works have been challenged or superseded.

The pioneering work of T.A. Gopinath Rao done before more than a hundred years ago is recognized respectfully. The next important work devoted to the subject was by N.K. Bhattasali. He mainly aimed to catalogue the Buddhist and Hindu sculptures of the Dacca Museum and his efforts resulted in a *de facto* iconographic survey of the sculptures of East Bengal which became one of the principal North Indian sources on the subject of Hindu iconography. Bhattasali's identifications of many unique images, which he proposed for the first time, have remained substantially unchallenged ever since. But like every other pioneering enterprise. His study suffered from the lack of any sustainable method or system of classification. Having referred to some iconographic texts, he simply provided descriptions of the sculptures he noticed and did not do much beyond dividing the deities into gods and goddesses. However, this volume is little used for sculpture from Northern India.

At almost the same time as Bhattasali's study was published, attempts were made for the stylistic assessment of Bengal sculpture by Stella Kramrisch and J. C. French, shortly followed by R. D. Banerji. S. K. Saraswati studied specially the pre-Pala sculptures of Bengal both from the points of view of stylistic as well as iconographic evolution. He paid particular attention to the stone reliefs at Paharpur and provided improved identifications of some of them.

J.N. Banerjea, probably the foremost Indian iconographer, in his chapter on iconography in the comprehensive *History of Bengal*, classified the Hindu images "according to the respective creeds to which they belong, and describing some of the outstanding specimens selected from each group". N.R. Ray, in his monumental Bengali work *Bangalir Itihas*, noticed these images in a similar way. Frederick M. Asher and Susan L. Huntington in their sumptuous volumes examined the development of the sculptural art of Bihar and Bengal together covering the centuries between 300 A.D. and 1200 CE. Both the authors, in course of making stylistic assessment presented a large number of well documented sculptures, thereby facilitating the study of iconography in future.

The present author studied the iconography of a record number of 1860 Bengal sculptures (Haque 1992). He corrected many conclusions of standard authorities by applying a new method of quantitative assessment. He referred extensively to many iconographic texts hitherto unapplied. In 2008, Haque worked as a co-editor with A.J. Gail to prepare a descriptive

catalogue (Haque & Gail 2008) of 547 sculptures from different museums and private collections of Bangladesh.

The unscrupulous treasure-hunters, are ever ready to feed the over-eager foreign buyers had been the cause of the disappearance of many images from their permanent abodes. As a result of these clandestine transactions, the actual provenance is usually suppressed or neglected.

Two upheavals of unprecedented magnitude during the last few decades have disastrously affected a sizeable number of sculptures. The partition of Bengal in 1947 inaugurated a mass exodus of Hindus from East Bengal. Many sculptures which were being worshipped as household deities or in temples, were either taken away or thrown into tanks by the departing devotees to prevent their deities being desecrated by fanatics of a different religion. As feared, many were destroyed or became untraceable. The same story was repeated with greater ferocity and determined ill-will when the sculptures became a priority target of the enemies of Bengali culture during the War of Independence in 1971. A few of these lost sculptures were retrieved but their correct provenances are now lost.

Presently, we have brought together many new texts relevant to the subject, hitherto unapplied to the study of Bengal sculptures. We have also re-examined most of the previously noticed iconographic literature in an all-India context. In course of our investigation, we found that there is ample scope for improvement in the understanding of Indian Hindu iconography. In many cases, we had occasions to correct the observations of the standard authorities.

It is generally believed that each of the *puranas*, has taken several centuries to reach its final stage of compilation. We would like to accept similar puranic passages as a tentative source of identification, as long as their compilation would reasonably seem to be not later than the extant sculpture in question. Even a late date of compilation does not automatically nullify the claim of the antiquity of an iconographic text. Many a mediaeval text, compiled over a period of several centuries, retains the same details for particular deities, e.g., Hemadri's description of Parvati in the *Vratakhandā* (c. 12th century CE), is identical to Mandana's in the *Rupamandana* (c. 15th century CE). Therefore for example, the fact of the terminus date of the *Brahmavaivarta-purana* being the 16th century CE, in our opinion, does not eliminate the possibility of some of its sections having been compiled and retained unaltered from a much earlier date, when the same *purana* is known to have been studied by Alberuni at the beginning of the 11th century A.D.

The study of the Hindu sculptures of Bengal leaves no doubt that the iconography of an image while principally determined by the prescriptions of the relevant sectarian texts or traditions, is substantially conditioned by the distinctive hands of the artist, by the artistic tradition of the locality, by the state of technology and the material chosen as medium and, not least, by the individual demands of the donor reflecting his conceptual or aesthetic orientation.



Plate 57.1: Visnu accompanied by two consorts and also showing the *padma* held in the upper right hand.

In my long journey of iconography, I came across, as far as possible, a number of problems for which I could not find an appropriate text or a satisfactory solution. In the developed phase of Visnu from 9th to 12th century (Haque 1992: 57 ff.) we found that in a previous study (*Ibid*: 62) Visnu is generally accompanied by two consorts (**Plate 57.1**). In a previous study, of the better preserved 479 specimens collected from all over Bengal, 460 show representations of the two consorts and 19 with no consort (**Plate 57.2**). What is surprising that the consorts Laksmi and Sarasvati/Pusti are always uniformly depicted, Laksmi on the right and Sarasvati on the left. In all important texts like *Brhatsamhita*, *Visnudharmottarapurana*, *Hayasirapancaratra*, *Agnipurana* and *Matsyapurana* the iconography of Visnu is described in some details, mentioning the consorts, but with no direction of their placements. Therefore, the text prescribing the position of the consorts which was so religiously followed by all the sculptors, is yet to be discovered. It appears that these inalterable commands lasted for nearly 400 years. More than a thousand of Visnu images from Bengal those I had the privilege of personally examining; I did not find any deviation from this arrangement.

We do not know about when, why and under what circumstances, Buddha was incorporated within the Hindu pantheon, giving him the place of the 9th Avatara of Visnu. Prior to Buddha, the other eight incarnations were depicted as combatants, to vanquish their adversaries. Buddha, certainly cannot be visualized as a combatant, taking up arms in hands. As far as I know scholars have always

identified the extant Buddha images belonging to Buddhism only. What prevents such sculptures to be a part of the Hindu Dasavatara (**Plate 57.3**)?



Plate 57.2: Visnu without consorts.

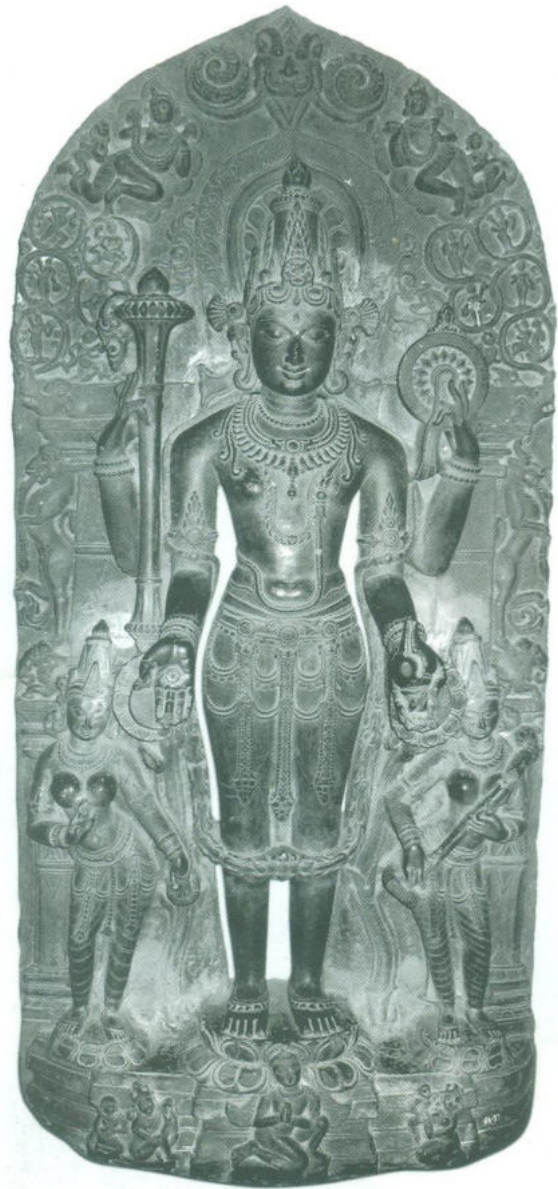


Plate 57.3: Dasavatara showing on the sculpture stele.

All four-armed Visnu of developed phase invariably, with a few exceptions, show the *padma* in the right upper hand (**Plate 57.1**). But in some cases the *padma* is shown as a tiny *padma* bud. We have described it as a *padmankitahasta* (**Plate 57.4**). Sometimes it is described as showing *varada* fashion. This was the period when the Mahayanist-Buddhists were



Plate 57.4: Visnu shows the *padmankitahasta* in the right lower hand.

multiplying sculptural manifestations of Buddhist pantheon. At times, Buddhist sculptures were created to match the Hindu deities, so were created Jambhala for Kubera, Marichi for Surya etc. As far as the texts are concerned, it was always prescribed to be a *padma*, and never a *varada*. May be it was a compromise between the Hindu and Buddhist emblems.

There are certain historical inaccuracies which recur in most if not all of the scholars who have previously dealt with the iconography of Bengal. Those scholars appear to have considered historical Bengal as one unit, in the political sense of the term, particularly during the four centuries following the establishment of the Pala dynasty. The impression is given that the whole of Bengal may have shared a common political patronage as well as clientele of worshipping communities. This may only be true for a small part of this period. There is no doubt that during a certain period an all-Bengal spirit and a basic unity in the major cult icons can be recognized which may be more an effect of the common iconographic texts procured from outside Bengal than reflecting any internal reality. The

discovery of new historic records reveals a separate 'personality' of East Bengal for most of the period under consideration. We have yet to discover any firm evidence of the Mauryas, the Kushanas and the Guptas having sway over this area at the time when they were ruling over North and probably West Bengal. On the other hand, we have substantial epigraphic records of the fact that prior to the rise of the Palas, several independent dynasties such as the Khadgas

and the Devas were ruling over this region during the post-Gupta period. Epigraphic records of the Palas in East Bengal are few and not free from doubt as to their real import. In any case, the Pala-rule in East Bengal must have been a short-lived one, for we see at the beginning of the 10th century CE the establishment of the Candras dynasty which lasted for at least a century and a half. Quite a few images are inscribed with the names of different monarchs of this dynasty and at least more than two dozen copper plate grants issued by them have come to light.

As was to be expected, different kingdoms began slowly to evolve a consciousness within their respective frontiers and this regional outlook gradually affected aspects of culture as well. Political stability or military powers can to a large extent influence the development or decline of artistic activities. When the Candras were ruling in East Bengal, the Palas lost their hold on North Bengal for some time to the rebellious Kaivarttas, and probably Gopala II was restored to his throne with the help of the Candra king Sricandra. These vicissitudes must have told on the art activities in North and West Bengal. It is not surprising that after the fall of the Candras and the succeeding short-lived Varman dynasty, when East Bengal came under the Sena rule creating an all-Bengal sovereignty, the art tradition of East Bengal along with its iconographic characteristics, so vigorously nourished for so long under the powerful local dynasties, should remain substantially unchanged or at least show great durability. Fairly soon, moreover, it was revitalized after about another century and a half, when towards the end of the 12th and beginning of the 13th centuries it received a new impetus with the transfer to the Sena capital from Laksmanavati (North Bengal) to Vikrampur (East Bengal) resulting from the fall of North and West Bengal to the invading army of the Muslim Turks. However, our task here is only to indicate the possible factors for the development of regional variations in the iconography and not to trace the factors themselves.

Having briefly noted the historical perspective of the later part of our period, it is required of us either to do away with or at least amend the common appellation of only Pala or Sena for sculptures found from East Bengal. By long standing use, the Pala-Sena denominations have become synonyms of a sort for Bengal sculptures. The dynastic names given to periods are questionable on many accounts and certainly when applied to regions which were not under the rule of the dynasty in question. They suffer, moreover, from uncertainty as to dates and durations and the extent of ever changing empires. Nonetheless, if they are to be retained, then both by the number of discoveries of contemporary specimens and by the duration of the dynasty, the name of Candra should be given to a large number of East Bengal sculptures, hitherto termed otherwise.

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