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## Buddhist and Jaina Minor Deities Found From Early Medieval Bengal: An Iconographic Survey

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**Abstract:** *The present article deals with the sculptural art of the images of the Buddhist and Jaina minor deities found from early medieval Bengal. Various images of the Buddhist minor goddesses such as Jambhala, Heruka, Cuṇḍā, Parnasabari, Prajñāpāramitā with their different forms, features, and attributes and few minor deities such as Sarasvāī, Śāsanadevis or Yakṣinīs related to Jainism have been found from Bengal and these are the important and valuable resource of Bengal sculptures as well as eastern Indian sculptures from artistic points of view. We found that the Jaina goddesses had little influences and accessibilities to the common people as compared to two main religious pantheon i.e. Buddhism and Brāhmanical religions. The Jainism was flourished in a particular area mainly in the Rāṅh region.*

**Keywords:** *Aparājitā, Cuṇḍā, Heruka, Parnasabari, Prajñāpāramitā, Sarasvāī, Śāsanadevis etc.*

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### Introduction:

The very affluent and different variety of the area of the image of ancient Bengal allows us to an imminent into the highly developed and vibrant cult during the last period of Buddhism in the Indian subcontinent. Apart from numerous Buddha sculptures, there is a strong presence of *Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara* and *Mañjuśrī* in different forms, the female goddesses like *Tārā, Mārīcī, Cuṇḍā, Mahāpratisarā,* and *Parnasabari* as well as the minor divinities *Jambhala* and *Heruka*. The

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recognition and amalgamation of figures and symbols from other religions and philosophical contexts give the impression of flexibility and dynamism.<sup>1</sup>

The images of Buddhist sculptures from early medieval Bengal are well-known and distinguished by iconographic complexity and artistic workmanship. The development already starts in the Pre-Gupta period; however, the greater part of this development may be assigned to the 11<sup>th</sup> or 12<sup>th</sup> century CE. In all probability, some of these images belong to the first half of the 13<sup>th</sup> century CE. Strong tantric influences and unique features are already evident in the earlier pieces of the 9<sup>th</sup> or 10<sup>th</sup> century CE.

## Different Types of Buddhist Minor Deities and their Iconic Forms

Exquisite Buddhist gods and goddesses in Indian sculptures as well as in Bengal sculptures during the early medieval period are of important themes. A large number of female counterparts representing the Buddhist goddesses in Tantric Buddhism in Bengal during the Pāla-Sena period have been found from different parts of Bengal. Most popular Buddhist goddess is *Tārā* and her different forms, *Prajñāpāramitā*, *Aparājitā*, *Parṇasabarī*, *Mārīcī*, *Cuṇḍā*, and *Hārītī* are other Buddhist goddesses. The sculptors of Bengal have skillfully sculpted and exquisite Buddhist female representations in the sculptural art of Bengal during the period of our studies. Various Tāntric Buddhist minor goddesses with their different forms, features, and attributes have been found from Bengal and these may be studied under the following heads from iconographic and epigraphic points of view:

### Prajñāpāramitā

The Buddhist goddess *Prajñāpāramitā* is the embodiment of the *Mahāyana* Scripture and holds a very high position and status in the *Mahāyana* Buddhist tradition. The goddess is regarded and personified as ‘the perfection of wisdom’ i.e. *Transcendental Knowledge*.<sup>2</sup> She is the counterpart or consort of the *Bodhisattva Mañjuśrī*. According to the *Sādhnamālā*<sup>3</sup>, the goddess must have two arms, one face, white or yellow, beautiful appearance, half curly hair sitting on a white lotus carrying in her right hand, and a red lotus and *Prajñāpāramitā* book in her left hand. She sits in the *Vajraparyanka* or *vyākhyāna mudrā* and is decked with celestial ornaments. The image of *Aksobhya* is stamped on her crown (*jaṭāmukuta*).

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The worship of *Prajñāpāramitā* is very common and popular among the Buddhists but the images of this deity are very rare in Bengal. The author has been able to identify only three (3) images of the goddess *Prajñāpāramitā* from Bengal during the period of our study. N. K. Bhattasali, for the first time, noticed an image of *Prajñāpāramitā* found from Raghurampur village of Bangladesh though the identification of the image is beyond doubt.<sup>4</sup>

An important and properly identified the image representing the goddess *Prajñāpāramitā* (Fig.1) has been discovered from Gazole in the Malda district, West Bengal and now the image is preserved in the Malda Museum, Malda ( hereinafter MMM). The two-handed goddess is shown seated on *padmāsana* posture on a full-blown high *saptaratha* lotus pedestal. The lower portion of the pedestal is adorned with decorative floral motifs and two seated male figures with folded hands to the extreme left and right side respectively. She is flanked by two seated female figures. The hands of the image are broken so that the attributions in her two hands are not properly identified or understood. Two lotuses with thin stalk are engraved near her hands on either side. Probably, the goddess holds the stalk of the lotus in her right hand and the book of *Aṣṭasahasrika-Prajñāpāramitā* in her left hand.<sup>5</sup> The goddess is well adorned and she wears a *jaṭāmukūṭa* (crown), beautiful necklace, a long *upavīta*, well-designed armlets, waistband and the lower portion of the image is covered with beautiful folded garments. Her well-developed breasts, smiling face, half-closed eyes, third eye, and the navel are prominently distinct. Five miniature *Dhāyini Buddhas* are engraved on the back slab around the main deity. Overall, the goddess looks like a handsome young lady who has a beautiful appearance. This beautiful and excellent stone sculpture represents the goddess *Prajñāpāramitā* belonging to c.12<sup>th</sup> century A.D.

Another fragment of the image represents the Buddhist goddess *Prajñāpāramitā* (?) (Fig.2) discovered from Marar village of Bankura district now is in the Bangiya Sahitya Parishad, Bishnupur (hereinafter BSPB), Bankura. The goddess is very much eroded and the lower portion of the image from the breast is broken. The number of hands and holding attributes are not properly identified. It might be the six-handed goddess. The beautiful coiffure on the head, heavy necklace and elongated ear-rings are visible. The upper back slab is plain and only two male figures perhaps miniature Buddha are engraved on either side of the deity. The authority of the museum straightway labelled the image as '*Prajñāpāramitā*' without following any proper references and identification. The

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labeled identification of the image is beyond doubt. It might be the Tantric Buddhist goddess with regional influences. The assignable date of the image is c. 9<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> century CE.

### *Aparājitā:*

*Aparājitā* has been placed under the class of the Buddhist gods and goddesses who do not claim their origin from any of the five *Dhyānī Buddhas* or any combination of them. As her nomenclature, she possesses a distinct Brāhmanical association, but her adaptation has a definite iconographic orientation. In the *Dhyāna* of *Aṣṭabhuja Kurukulla* (eight handed *Kurukulla*), she is represented as a four-armed deity with the image of *Ratnasambha* on her head-dress.

*Aparājitā* is an interesting Buddhist goddess. A very short *Sādhana* is devoted to her worship, and the *Dhyāna* contained in *Sādhana* describes the form of *Aparājitā*. According to *Sādhanamālā*, *Aparājitā* is yellow in complexion, two armed; one faced, decked in various gems, and tramples *Ganeśa*. Her right hand is raised displaying the act of dealing a slap, while the left carries noose around the raised index finger against her chest. Her face is awful, terrible and ferocious. She is the destroyer of all wicked beings, and her parasol is raised over her head by the host of wicked and ferocious gods, Brahma and others.<sup>6</sup>

A stone sculpture representing the Buddhist goddess *Aparājitā* (upper portion lost) (Fig.3) found from English Bazar of Malda district of West Bengal, is now in the Akshay Kumar Maitreya Museum (hereinafter AKMM), North Bengal University. The extant lower part shows as trampling upon four-armed *Ganapati* or *Ganeśa* who is about to raise his *paraśu* (one type of weapon) in the upper right hand. This is, incidentally, the third image of the goddess *Aparājitā* found from entire Eastern India so far.<sup>7</sup> Of the two other images so far known, the upper part of the image found from Nalanda and the second is preserved in the Indian Museum, Kolkata (hereinafter IMK).<sup>8</sup> The images undoubtedly, like a few other Buddhist gods and goddesses of this period seek to demonstrate the superiority of Buddhist cult to the Brāhmanical cult thereby exhibiting sectarian rancor.

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## *Parṇaśabarī:*

*Parṇaśabarī*, the Buddhist goddess of smallpox and occupies an important place in the *Tantrayāna* pantheon. She is also called *Piśācī* or *Sarvamāripraśamanī*, the destroyer of all diseases and epidemics. Originally she was worshipped by devotees living in the hills and forests. According to Mitra,<sup>9</sup> the goddess was associated with the *Śabaras*, an aboriginal tribe. So one iconographic feature viz. the leaves, resembles the garment tradition of the forest dwellers.

The worship of goddess *Parṇaśabarī*, it is believed, is effective in preventing outbreaks of epidemics and in assuring safety to the terror-stricken inhabitants. *Parṇaśabarī* is a female deity or *Mahāyana* pantheon. Ichnographically she holds great significance. She is represented as pressing down under her feet the Hindu gods of wisdom, *Ganeśa*. The goddess has got a green complexion, three faces, three eyes, and six arms. Her right and left faces are of blue and white colour respectively. She carries the *vajra*, the *parāsu*, and arrow in her right three hands while she holds in her left hand's bow, cluster of leaves and *tarjanipāsa*, respectively. She is dressed with the tiger skin and wears a garland of leaves. Her face is shown an angry laughing mood. According to the description mentioned above, as many as seven bronze images of goddess *Parṇaśabarī* have been discovered from Kurukihara.<sup>10</sup>

Artistic representations of *Parṇaśabarī* are rare in Bengal sculptures but N. K. Bhattasali<sup>11</sup> have noticed two interesting specimens of *Parṇaśabarī* discovered from East Bengal of Bangladesh and the iconographic concepts follow exactly the descriptions of *Sadhanamālā* most accurately in detail. The images have three faces, slightly protruding bellies, angry laughing mode, and are accompanied by two Hindu divinities *Hayagriva* and *Śītalā* to the right and left, respectively. The prostrated figures under the feet are the Diseases and Pestilences, in human form. Both the images of *Parṇaśabarī* are a decidedly very fine specimen of art. Strikingly, no images of the goddess *Parṇaśabarī* has been found from (modern) West Bengal.

## *Hārītī:*

*Hārītī* is worshipped both as a goddess and a demon in the Buddhist pantheon. It is believed that in Buddhist tradition Lord Buddha taught a lesson to *Hārītī* and henceforth *Hārītī* became the protector

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of children and women during childbirth like Hindu goddess *Saṣṭhī*. Representations of the goddess in sculptures in stone or metal are very rare in Bengal during the early medieval period. Only a few specimens of *Hārītī* images have been found from Bengal. An important image of *Hārītī* found from Dacca, was first noticed by N. K. Bhattasali.<sup>12</sup> The stone sculpture of the Dacca specimen shows holding a fish in her upper right hand and the upper left hand has a drinking bowl. With the two normal hands, she holds a baby in her lap.

A c.8<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> century CE sculpture of the goddess *Hārītī* found from unspecified place of Bengal and the image is now preserved in the Asutosh Museum, Kolkata (hereinafter AMK). The goddess is yellow in colour and very small in size measuring 6.35 cm×3.8 cm. Another bronze sculpture of the goddess *Hārītī* belonging to the c.13<sup>th</sup> century CE is also preserved in AMK. An image of *Hārītī* also found from the Sundarban region of the South 24 Parganas district of West Bengal and the image belongs to the *Pāla-Sena* period.<sup>13</sup> A sandstone sculpture of the goddess *Hārītī* has been discovered from the unspecified place of Murshidabad district, West Bengal and now the image is preserved in the Murshidabad District Museum, Jiaganj (hereinafter MDMJ).<sup>14</sup> The execution of these sculptures speaks the artistic excellence of the sculptors of Bengal.

### ***Cuṇḍā:***

The *Dhāranī* Goddess *Cuṇḍā* was well known in Eastern India as well as in South East Asia. *Cuṇḍā* originated from the religious context of the lower castes; the name can be translated as a prostitute. She was integrated into the tantric pantheon not earlier than 6<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> century CE.<sup>15</sup> *Cuṇḍā* may be the spiritual daughter of *Vairocana* and is required to be classed under the emanation of this vary *Dhyānī Buddha*.<sup>16</sup> The goddess is four-handed, one-faced, of the colour of the autumn moon. She shows the *varada* gesture in the right hand and holds the book on a lotus in the left. The two other hands carry the bowl. She is adorned with all ornaments.<sup>17</sup> Two images of *Cuṇḍā* have been identified from Bengal-one from Pattikera village of Tipperah district, Bangladesh<sup>18</sup> and another from Niyamatpur (Rajshahi) of Bangladesh<sup>19</sup> and the image is housed at Rajshahi Museum. The Pattikera specimen represents the goddess *Cuṇḍā* with sixteen hands while the Niyamatpur specimen is the figure of eighteen handed *Cuṇḍā* belonging to the c. 9<sup>th</sup> century CE. The iconographic features of these two images of the goddess *Cuṇḍā* do not agree with descriptions of *Sādhanamālā*. A black stone image *Cuṇḍā* from Bodhgaya district of Bihar<sup>69</sup> and an inscribed image of *Cuṇḍā* from Kurkihar, Bhagalpur<sup>20</sup> have been discovered. The four bronze sculptures in the Patna Museum, Bihar have been

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identified as the goddess *Cuṇḍā* although the identification of these images is not out of questions or doubt. These images indicate the highest artistic excellence of the sculptors during the period of our studies. No images of *Cuṇḍā* have been found from modern West Bengal.

## Minor Deities of Jainism and their Iconic Forms found from Bengal

The Chinese Buddhist pilgrim Hiuen-Tsang<sup>21</sup> describes Jainism as dominant religious sects in Bengal, but archaeological evidence is very rare in Bengal and Bangladesh. The images of the Brāhmanical and Buddhist god and goddess are available in Bengal sculptures but the Jaina images in lesser number compared to the other two main religious pantheons during the early medieval period. Moreover, the female deities of Jainism are also very few in numbers compared to the images of the Jaina *Tīrthankaras*. A few numbers of female counterparts representing the Jaina goddesses in Jainism in Bengal during the Pāla-Sena period have been found from different parts of Bengal. Most popular Jaina goddess *Ambikā* and their different forms, *Ambikā*, *Cakreśvarī*, *Padmāvātī*, *Siddhayikā* are another Jaina goddesses or *Śāsanadevis* or *Yakṣinīs* and the sculptors of Bengal have skillfully sculpted and exquisite these Jaina female representations in sculptures of Bengal during the period of our studies. Various Jaina goddesses with their different forms, features, and attributes may be studied under the following heads from the iconographic and epigraphic point of view.

Among the Jaina goddesses, the Jaina goddess *Ambikā*, a remarkable image of the Jaina *Devī* (goddess) have been discovered from different parts of Bengal, mainly from *Rāṛh* regions of Bengal i.e. Bankura, and Purulia district of West Bengal is close to the famous Jaina centre at Paresnath in Bihar. Few minor images of the goddess related to Jainism have been found from early medieval Bengal and these images may be studied under following heads:

### ***Sarasvatī:***

An image of the goddess *Sarasvatī* (Fig.4) related to Jainism has been found from the Atghara-Sita Kunda area and now it is preserved in Baruipur Anchalik Sangrahashala, Baruipur. The broken

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image is made of black basalt and the size of the image is about 38 cm × 28 cm. The lower portion of the image from the belly is broken.

The goddess is well ornamented with crowned head, wide necklace on her neck, bangles and anklets, waistband and fine folded garments. She holds a *vīṇā* by her two lower left and right hands, while she carries an *akṣamālā* (rosary) and manuscripts in her upper right and left hands respectively. Well-arranged hair, wide forehead, big shape eyeballs, coarse nose, well-developed bosoms, thin waist, the middle shaped body of the image makes herself as a very attractive young handsome lady. The upper back slab is adorned with a symbol of miniature Jaina *Tīrthankara* and two fly whisks with garlands on either side. Holding *vīṇā* in her two hands, *akṣamālā* and manuscript, a symbol of a miniature Jaina *Tīrthankara* on the upper back and face of the image indicate the image represents as *Sarasvatī*, the Jaina goddess. From the iconographic attributes and stylistic features of the image, it may be assigned that the image belongs to the c.10<sup>th</sup> century A.D.<sup>22</sup>

## ***Yakṣinī:***

A broken image of *Yakṣinī* related to Jainism has been found in Kankandighi of South 24 Parganas, West Bengal preserved in the Khāḍi Museum, South 24 Parganas. The small-sized black stone image (about 18 cm × 12 cm) is badly eroded and from the waist, the image is in totally broken condition.

The almost square typeface, crowned head with well-arranged hair, wide forehead; big shape hollow eyes of the image overall makes a fear appearance to the visitors. The two hands emerging out from the big shaped shoulder of the goddess are parallelly stretched to downwards such as *Kāyotasarga* pose of the Jaina *Tīrthankaras*. The goddess is adorned with usual ornaments. It appears that the image represents a Jaina demon or *Yakṣinī*. The image may be assigned to the later Gupta period.<sup>23</sup>

No images of the other female goddess or *Yakṣinī* or *Śāsanadevī* related to Jainism such *Padmāvatī*, *Cakreśvarī*, *Siddhayinī*, *Aparājitā*, *Tārāvati*, *Rohinī*, *Kusmāṇḍinī*, etc. were found in West Bengal and Bangladesh at the time of our investigations.

## **Conclusion**

From the above discussion and few number of the Jaina and Buddhist minor deities found from different parts of West Bengal and Bangladesh, it appears that the worships of Buddhist and Jaina minor goddesses had little influences among the people of the society mainly in the *vanga*, *samatata*,



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and *varendī* or *varenda* region of Bengal i.e. more or less all over Bengal during the early medieval period. On the other hand, the Jaina goddesses had little influences and accessibilities to the common people as compared to two main religious pantheon i.e. Buddhism and Brāhmanical religions. The Jainism was flourished in a particular area mainly in the *Rār̥h* region, very close to the adjacent part of Chotonagpur Plateau.

## List of Figures

Fig.1

Name of the image: *Prajñāpāramitā*

Find-Spot: Gazole, Malda, WB

Size: 106.68 cm × 55.88 cm

Dated: c.12<sup>th</sup> century CE

(Courtesy: MMM)



Fig.2

Name of the image: *Prajñāpāramitā*

Find-Spot: Marar Village, Bishnupur P.S, Bankura

Size: 66 cm × 61 cm

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Dated: Pāla-Sena period

(Courtesy: BSPB)

Fig.3

Name of the image: *Aparājitā*

Find-Spot: English Bazar, Malda

Size: Unknown (Broken)

Dated: c.12<sup>th</sup> century CE

(Courtesy: AKMM)



Fig.4

Name of the image: Jaina Goddess *Sarasvatī*

Find-Spot: Athgara-sitakundu, South 24 Parganas, WB

Size: 38 cm ×28 cm

Dated: c.10<sup>th</sup> century CE

(Courtesy: Barauiipur Anchalik Sangrashala, Barauiipur)

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