

Reflections on the material and making of an image in ancient/early-medieval northern Bengal (Varendrī region) during the Pāla-Sena period (6th-13th C.E.)

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Abstract— In this short-paper, at first, the established notions regarding the origin of the black coloured stone that is used in making most stone sculptures in the region, including during the Pāla-Sena period are problematized. Then it is shown how the processes of appropriation, assimilation and preservation with respect to art from the Indian subcontinent, especially from the region associated with modern day Bengal are not devoid of complexities. Through this we seek to understand the historiography of Pāla-Sena art, as well as the factors which play significant roles in order to give form and shape to an object of antiquity, from Bengal or from the subcontinent, as we see them today in museums all over the world.

Keywords— Indian art, Indian art history, Pāla-Sena art, image and materiality, northern Bengal, heritage, heritage conservation.

I. INTRODUCTION

On a study from available resources and antiquities discovered so far, of the materials involved in the process of image making, manuscript-writing and architecture in Varendrī, we know that stone was a popular medium of image-making, so were terracotta, wood and bronze; the preferred medium for manuscript writing was the leaf of various types of palm trees. In the field of architecture, though we do not have any sufficient information or resources for research, from the study of available ones, it can be claimed that, though activities of temple building in stone were perhaps lesser than the rest of the subcontinent, they were not altogether absent. Stone was not quarried locally in the region. Also, the choice of other materials for temple building in a region that receives generous monsoon in the context of unpredictability of its mighty rivers might be the reason behind the lesser prevalence of construction in stone; so, other materials for example wood must have been prevalent.

Precious metals were of course, even if not on a large scale, also used in the production of images. The use of bronze was marked by the mixing of other metals along with it, including traces of precious metals, for which the term ‘oct-alloy’ was coined by Nalini Kanta Bhattasali (Bhattasali 1929) which is a literal translation of the Sanskrit word *aṣṭa-dhātu* as mentioned in textual sources. Not always were the percentile proportions of various metals uniform across various examples, so most differ in composition. Not always are these images hollow inside, at times they are totally solid. The other three materials that were most prevalent in the production of images were wood, stone and clay (both moulded and hand-made).

II. NOTES ON THE BLACK STONE USED IN SCULPTURES FROM BENGAL

Images carved in stone from Bengal are mostly worked on two types of stone- the first is the well-known black stone; and the other category includes sculptures from various regions of the eastern part of the subcontinent, mostly from the modern-day Bihar region, where the stone is lighter in texture and yellowish-brown in colour, within which there are many varieties to be found. From the beginnings of the scholarly study of stone sculpture from Bengal, there was a need to identify the source of these stones. At first, the source was attributed to be the Rajmahal hills, few miles upstream from Farakka near today’s Bengal-Bihar border, but that turned out to be problematic as the stone presently quarried at Rajmahal has no similarity with the black stone of Bengal sculptures, as has been established by modern technology-aided geological studies. Frederick Asher in *Stone and the production of Images* set out, based on his field work, to determine the exact source of this black stone. Asher first pointed out the problem in nomenclature of this material—“Beside pursuing the literature on eastern Indian sculptures, one need only read museum labels for

sculptures to see the varied ways the rock is customarily described: basalt, chlorite and Rajmahal Schist. None of this is accurate¹. Basalt is an extremely hard rock not particularly easy to work for sculptors [...] chlorite is a mineral, not a rock type and there are only minuscule amounts of chlorite in the rock most commonly used for the sculptures. Rajmahal Schist is a misnomer [...] the rock they yield is basalt, excellent for road surfaces, but not for sculptures; it is certainly not schist ..." (Asher 1998). According to him, as suggested by his field work, the source of the stone is around quarries in Munger, specifically- 'The quarry is located at N25°17'16" E86°30'17"'. The nearest village is Matadih'. He was initially following the Munger region because of Richard Newman's suggestion that Munger was the source for the 'chloritoid phyllite used extensively for sculptures from Bihar and Bengal.' However, at the insistence of the Geological Survey of India which suggested that 'no chloritoid phyllite was known from anywhere near Munger' he had a setback on his quest for empirically identifying Newman's claim. Only later, after consultation with local artists by showing them a piece of Bengal sculpture in 'black stone' that he carried around with himself, was he able to determine the 'exact' source near Munger.

Asher's account is really interesting; and the question that invariably comes up is that why even after so many years of the study of the arts of Bengal, we remain inconclusive about its most-preferred medium from the ancient to the medieval times- the black stone. Though Asher, for the first time, carried out extensive field-work to ascertain the origin of this stone, his field-work was in many respects, left incomplete. He didn't provide further information on the location and other important aspects of the quarry that he determined like- a) present-day trade practices: whether it is traded with artisans in Bengal, b) the history of its trade in recent history which can be only determined through extensive interviewing and archival study, c) the geography of the region and its geographical history: the rivers surrounding it- which might have been used for transportation of these stones, and the different courses of these rivers in recorded history, d) the archaeological profile of the region: whether there are any adjacent major or minor archaeological sites in the locality and if so, what is the extent to which the stone was used locally and

¹"There are exceptions, of course. R. Newman's work on the rock is scientifically on target: *The Stone Sculpture of India*, (Centre for Conservation and Technical Studies, Harvard University Art Museums, Cambridge, MA, 1984). See also, S. Huntington, *The 'Pāla-Sena' Schools of Sculpture*, Leiden 1984, p. 2, who noted something of the variety of rock."

d) the environmental issues like the legality of mining practices and the history of mining practices in the region; and detailed study of the mining process itself from the quarry to the store with cognizance of the developments in modern geological science, palaeo-geology, palaeo-geography and palaeo-climate. Asher's study provided no answer but instead only problematized the issue aptly and perhaps that is the first step in order to exactly determine the source of this stone.

On a slightly different note, we also have very less information on the production of copper-alloy images in northern Bengal in particular and eastern India in general. Also, as Dilip. K. Chakrabarti pointed out in *Issues in East Indian Archaeology*, that in most parts of northern Bengal the production sites of copper-alloy materials haven't undergone much change since historical times and that many ores and production sites which have been historically in existence, still produce copper-alloy materials and often in a manufacturing process that has undergone little change (Chakrabarti 1998). Copper-alloy became popular as an artistic medium in eastern India after the eighth century. Wood and ivory were widely available throughout Bengal owing to its extensive forest cover throughout history; very few of them survived till the modern times, but the ones that did are extraordinarily exquisite. Images in burnt-clay were produced on an industrial scale throughout the geography of eastern India; clay, like today, was perhaps the most popular medium for image making.

III. DESTRUCTION/RE-APPROPRIATION: THE FORCES OF NATURE AND THE FORCES OF HISTORY

The life of images in the context of northern Bengal is a complex of several issues. Just as, with the decline of Jainism and Buddhism in the subcontinent, Jain and Buddhist images were often either appropriated by some physical means within the new pantheon or became subject to destruction and deformation- starting through the pre-dominance of Brahmanism with the twelfth-thirteenth century to the iconoclastic invasions of the later decades; similarly, with the coming of an adversary, the Brahmanical images too were mostly deformed, mutilated and destroyed, the adherent population having perfect knowledge of such a future, in their desperate attempts to preserve their 'cultural heritage' by preserving the 'god', simply threw many images in stone, metal and clay into the nearest waterbody- pond, ditch, lake or river. Also, since we are accustomed to the fact that the Islamic invasion of Bengal took place after the Sena rule, we are lured to imagine that it was only Brahmanism that faced usurpation in the hands of iconoclastic invasions. As the term itself denotes, since the Islamic invasions were

aimed at mutilating and re-appropriating any kind of icon-Buddhist, Brahmanical or Jain and since the socio-cultural landscape of Bengal during Sena rule was a result of the historical amalgamation of all the three main religions, Jain and Buddhist images were also, alongside Brahmanical ones, systematically mutilated, destroyed or re-appropriated. And before the advent of Islam, it was Brahmanism and its different cults which were at odds with the Buddhist and Jains and their artistic depictions- numerous examples of which can be found all over South Asia. Figures 1 (A) and 1 (B) is of a stone sculpture of Buddha with the depiction of an intricately carved *mihrab* on the reverse at the British Museum.

We have very few examples left of image making in wood from ancient Bengal, owing primarily to the non-durability of the material. Of the surviving examples, most were preserved in water-bodies which point out the superior solidity of the material used. Even in the case of stone images, the ones recovered from water-bodies have, with time, become so different in material, that the original color and nature of the stone used remains far from being determined. Figure 2 is an image of a Viṣṇu at the South Dinajpur District Museum, Balurghat, West Bengal, in the heart of Varendrī, not far away from the important archaeological site Bangarh. This was recently recovered from a waterbody. Similarly, metallic images which are mostly made of various kinds of copper-alloy are heavily prone to corrosion by both atmospheric humidity and the physical presence of water, become disfigured once exposed to such conditions for a long time. Figures 3 (A) and 3 (B) show another Viṣṇu image in copper-alloy at the Blythe House storage facility of the Victoria and Albert Museum whose present state confirms it being subject to immersion/‘preservation’ in the recent past. As I was informed, the metallic plate attached to the image at the back, was an earlier addition- museum preservation when technology and museum studies were not so advanced as it is today, in the Western hemisphere. Today, many objects come up mostly through chance findings. Not all of them make to the public domain- for the international audience or for the scholar, because the processes involved are complex in a country where Antiquities laws are outdated and private collection discouraged by the government. Only in recent times, such objects have become very lucrative in international art trade, and are often subject to illegal practices. Some objects also retain their religious existence, and are continued to be worshipped, duly covered in vermilion, by the local populace, albeit in a different context or as a different deity.

IV. CONCLUSION

As a matter of fact, most of the artefacts of Bengal and of the Pāla-Sena period that we are familiar with today, or

which are in public view, have been discovered not by any systematized archaeological efforts, but by mere chance. The soil of the Varendrī is mostly acidic and loamy, sometimes with a high saline content. In the clayey regions, the top layer of the soil is often subject to constant natural churning. This makes archaeological practices very difficult, and the same methods that are used in the rest of the continent, don’t hold ground in Bengal. Of course, there is neglect and apathy on part of the government that we still do not have an indexicality of the arts and objects in different museums and storehouses all over the subcontinent. Archaeological exercises are done on a limited scale, on a shoe-string budget and without the latest technological aids. Bhattasali noted in 1929- “It will surprise many of my readers to know that almost all of these images [at the erstwhile Dacca Museum] are chance finds in stray diggings. With the creation of an Eastern Circle of the Archaeological Survey of India, Bengal is receiving some share of its attention and some serious, though small, excavations have been undertaken in Bengal within the last few years. But formerly, Bengal was left severely alone. Some private excavations, were, however, undertaken [...]” (Bhattasali 1929). Notwithstanding the fact that the Archaeological Survey of India was late in acknowledging the vast and numerous historical heritages of the region and the need for archaeological excavations; it is nonetheless quite astounding the enthusiasm of the local populace which had to overcome several odds in order to continue pursuing the study of cultural heritage in the region. And many stalwarts contributed to the study of arts and heritage and carried out private excavations through non-governmental sponsorships. But that was during the pre-Independence years and mostly under the cultural impetus provided by the Bengal Renaissance. After India’s Independence, the political geography of Bengal underwent a radical change. Large scale migrations and rehabilitation took place, which unlike the western frontier, became a continued process which continues till today. Also, after the creation of the nation-states, starting from the mid-twentieth century, the region, especially the hinterlands of Bengal came under the sway of industrial development and modernisation, which led to expansion of urban areas and the creation of industrial and manufacturing hubs. Today, while southern Bengal on both sides of the border is heavily industrialized, northern Bengal on the Bangladesh side is more industrialized than its Indian counterpart, but the process continues rendering the landscape an irrevocable change. In the future, we can only expect the trend to rise. So, the artefacts and art-objects that turns up in the market today, are not the result of systematized archaeological studies (though some archaeological activities have taken place in recent times, the most important being the joint French-

Bangladesh excavations at Mahasthan, on the Indian side such activities are nil) by institutions or persons, but rather of the random findings in the context of intense urbanization, rampant poverty, ignorance about heritage and illegal trade.



Fig. 1. (A) and (B). Buddha (obverse) mihrab (reverse), Gaur, Bengal, black stone, c. 10th C.E. and c. 15th C.E., British Museum (1880.145), photo by author 2018.



Fig. 2. Viṣṇu, northern Bengal (Recovered from waterbody), black stone/sandstone, c. 11th C.E., South Dinajpur District Museum, Balurghat, West Bengal, photo by author 2016.



Fig. 3 (A) and 3 (B). Viṣṇu, northern Bengal (Recovered from waterbody), copper-alloy, c. 9th-11th C.E., Victoria and Albert Museum store at Blythe House, photo by author 2018.

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