

Influence of Buddhism in Sculptural Art of Assam: An Artistic Appreciation

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Abstract- The present paper focuses on the impact of Buddhism in sculptural art of Assam. A controversy has been continuing since antiquity on the existence of Buddhism in Assam. Though, mostly Brahmanism sculptures are observed in the temple sites of Assam, but the sculptures carry sometimes the message of Buddhism. Several archaeological sites display the image of Buddha and Buddhist female goddess. Buddhism is closely related to Tantricism which was predominant in ancient Assam. Therefore, it is observed that image of Buddha is sometimes illustrated with the erotic figures.

Index Terms- Assam, Buddhism, Tantricism, Temple, Sculptures

I. INTRODUCTION

Assam was prominent place for the sculptural activities in ancient time. Sculpture is closely related with the architecture where sculpture is used for decoration as well as religious significance. Temple plays a major role in the growth of the sculptural work. Three rulers namely Varman dynasty, Salastambha dynasty and Pala dynasty took responsibility to build temple architectures in ancient Assam in the period between 4th century AD - 12th century AD. But most of the temples are in ruin condition now. Numerous ancient temple sites display the Buddhist sculptures along with the Brahmanical images. Ancient sculptures of Assam were usually influenced by Hinduism, but the sculptures reflect sometimes the influence of Buddhism, though Buddhism was not practised as a major religion in ancient Assam. Buddha images are found in the depictions as single and sometimes found attaching with some other figures. Many references can be found from the historical sources that Buddhism connected with ancient Assam. The Mauryan emperor Ashoka was considered as first major patron of Buddhist art in India. In Buddhist art, different phases of art development can be noticed. During Hinayana Buddhism of before 1st century AD, Buddha was never represented in human form. The presence of Buddha was shown symbolically like a throne, an umbrella, a riderless horse, footprint, *Bodhi* tree, wheel, *stupa* etc. During the second phase of Buddhism which was Mahayana Buddhism, Buddha was represented in human form. Archaeological evidences indicate that Buddhist art of Assam was started from Hinayana phase. Besides these two main forms, there was other form called Vajrayana or Tantric Buddhism which also influenced the ancient sculptures of Assam.

II. DISCUSSION

Numerous archaeological records indicate that Buddhism influenced Kamarupa partially (ancient name of Assam). Many Buddhist ruins, including Buddhist antiquities, monolithic votive *stupas* etc. have been excavated throughout Assam. Antiquities including the stone, bronze images of the Buddha and other divinity like Tara have been discovered. Several archaeological sites display the Buddhist images like Buddha, Buddhist female image, image of *Bodhi* tree etc. Major Hannay observed several archaeological sites throughout Assam and remarked that the temple ruins were undoubted Buddhist origin [1]. 16th -17th century Tibetan historian Taranath mentioned that Buddhism was widely spread in Kamarupa during the time of Buddhist preacher Dhitika who came to be focused as early as third century BC [2]. Many references inform that Buddhism somehow connected with ancient Assam. The historical references which are inscriptions, sculptural evidences, travellers' note etc. inform about the prevalence of Buddhism in ancient Assam. The authentic political history of Assam was started from the Varman dynasty in the 4th century AD. Before that period *Danavas* and *Asuras* were the legendary traditional rulers where Bhagadatta was the prominent ruler in ancient Assam. He was mentioned as a powerful warrior in Kurukshetra war of *Mahabharata*. It was said that king Bhagadatta was a Buddhist, but his successors became Hindus in the ninth century [3].

From the inscriptional records, it is known that though the emperors of Kamarupa right from the Varman rulers to Pala rulers were the followers of Brahmanism Hindu, but some of them showed deep respect to Buddhism. Number of inscriptions recorded the words '*Dharma*' and '*Tathagata*.' According to some scholars, the words '*Dharma*' and '*Tathagata*' indicate the nature of Buddhism. The word '*Dharma*' occurs in Nidhanpur copper plate of emperor Bhaskaravarman of 7th century AD. Here it is narrated, "Victorious is *Dharma*, the sole friend of the creation, the cause of prosperity in both the worlds, whose form is the good

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of others, unseen whose existence is inferred from the results” [4]. The Puspabhadra copper plate grant of Dharmapala of 12th century AD mentions about king Dharmapala’s declaration of the glory of *Dharma*. The inscription describes, “O future kings, listen to this prayer of mine; the glory of sovereignty is uncertain like the flash of lightning, and is to be shunned, but ‘*Dharma*’, the root of eternal bliss, is never to be given up” [5]. The Gauhati grant of Indrapala of 11th century AD mentions the word ‘*sasana*’ which connected with *Tathagata*. Moreover, Khonamukhi grant records Bharata as *Sakya* (Buddha) [6]. According to the historical information, in early life of Indrapala, he was devotee of Lord Siva, but in later life he embraced Buddhism and then became a Buddhist monk who was known as Darika-Pala. In this new name he composed many songs dedicating to Buddhism [7].

The root of Tantricism is developed from Buddhism. “Buddhism gave a turn to the thoughts and ideas that prevailed at the time, shaped the character of the nation, and sent Hindu civilization running through a new channel. A new era dawned, which lasted for five hundred years or so, as predicted by Buddha himself; and then it was replaced by new thoughts, new rites and new philosophy, - an admixture of the past and the present. The improvement which Nagarjuna introduced into original Buddhism in the 1st century AD, and which was known by the name of Mahayana system, assumed a new phase on the revival of Brahminical doctrines during the early Gupta period, and gradually developed into Tantrism from the 8th century when the Pala kings began to rule over Magadha and Gauda. The worship of the images of Buddhas and Bodhisvattas with their female energies (*Saktis*) and other Buddhist gods came into vogue, which during the continuance of the rule of those monarchs still further developed into mysticism and sorcery. The Mantra-yogacaryas maintained the popular propensity for magic rites and mystic practices by the performance of marvellous feats. Hinduism also imbibed the spirit of the time, and the Buddhist Tantric rites were absorbed in its system” [8]. The later form of Buddhism is called Vajrayana or Tantric Buddhism, is considered as originated in the 7th century AD [9]. This Tantric Buddhist form was mostly prominent in ancient Kamarupa. Baruah mentions, “Both Mahayana and Vajrayana and possibly Hinayana Buddhism also prevailed in Kamarupa and in the Tantric-Buddhist days it was one of the important *pithas* in eastern India securing patronage of the Pala rulers” [10]. Pala king Dharmapala established the Buddhist university at Vikramasila and became prominent centre of the Tantric doctrines [11]. Ancient Buddhist scripture records some Buddhist sacred sites of Assam. The Vajrayana scripture *Sadhanamala* mentions four *pithas* or sacred places namely, Kamakhya, Sirihatta, Purnagiri and Uddiyana. Scholar had identified that Kamakhya and Sirihatta are evidently in Kamarupa. According to the authority, Tantric Buddhism was first developed in Uddiyana [12]. It can be said that this religious form spread rapidly from Uddiyana to Assam or other places. It is mentioned in Tibetan works that Buddhist *Siddha* Mina was a fisherman who hailed from Kamarupa [13]. “Jayaratha, in his commentary on the celebrated *Tantraloka* of Abhinavagupta, refers to the story of the origin of Kaulaism. He quotes a verse, presumably from an original Tantra work, which states that originally it was acquired by Bhairavi, the goddess, from Bhairava, the fearful god, and then from her by Mina-the Macchanda, the great-souled, the *Siddha* in the *Mahapitha* of Kamarupa” [14]. The word *Mahapitha* surely indicates the place of *Saktipitha* Kamakhya temple.

Early Assam was known by different names in Buddhist tradition. The second Buddhist synod was held in the early part of 400 BC in Assam and at that time in the Buddhist tradition, Assam was known as Wesali Long [15]. The accounts of Chinese traveller Hiuen Tsang inform that emperor Bhaskaravarman of Kamarupa had deep respect to Buddhism. During 7th century AD, Hiuen Tsang visited Kamarupa at the invitation of Bhaskaravarman. The Chinese pilgrim had written about Kamarupa in his valuable book ‘Si-Yu-Ki,’ where he mentioned Kamarupa as ‘Kia-mo-lu-po.’ He revealed that the people of Kamarupa believed on *Devas* and had no faith in Buddha. Any Buddhist temple was not available for the Buddhist priests to assemble, but the Buddhist people performed their devotion to Buddha secretly [16]. It indicates that he had known some disciples of Buddha lived in ancient Kamarupa. Hiuen Tsang also mentioned that though kumara Bhaskaravarman had no faith in Buddhism, but he showed deep respect to the Buddhist *Sramanas*. Historical record informs that Bhaskaravarman had also interest in Buddhist scriptures. Because Bhaskaravarman once met the envoy of the T’ang dynasty, Li Yi-Piao and asked the envoy to get him a portrait of Lao-tseu, a Chinese philosopher of 6th century BC and a Sanskrit translation of the ‘*Tao-to-king*’ [17]. The Chinese writers recorded that during 6th century AD three Buddhist monks namely Jnanabhadra, Jinayasas and Yasogupta who belonged to Eastern India specially Bengal and Kamarupa, worked in China [18]. It was said by Kalhana in *Rajatarangini* that Amritaprabha (daughter of a Kamarupa king of 5th century AD), wife of Meghavahana of Kasmira went to Kasmira with her father’s Tibetan Buddhist guru known as Stunpa who built a *vihara* in Kasmira and *vihara* was called Lo Stunpa [19]. Some scholars had ideas that the Buddhism prevailed in ancient Assam. It is thought that originally there was a Buddhist shrine at the place of Kamakhya temple of Guwahati. It is believed that at the place of Ugratara temple, another *Saktipitha* of Assam, the worship of Buddhist goddess in the form of Ekajata or Ugratara was introduced by Nagarjuna, founder of Mahayana system. The temple was reconstructed by Ratnapala or Indrapala in later period. *Saktas* belief that on the place of Ugratara temple, Sati’s navel dropped [20].

It is widely accepted that Buddha’s *Mahaparinirvana* occurred at Kushinagar of Uttar Pradesh. Archaeologists like Sir A. Cunningham and Vincent A. Smith identified the place of Kushinagar where Buddha died. Surprisingly, Assam was associated with Buddha’s *Parinirvana*. There is a tradition in Bhutan, Tibet and Burma that Buddha died and attained *Mahaparinirvana* under two *sal* trees at Hajo of Assam. Following this belief, in every year Buddhists visit Hayagriva Madhava temple of Hajo. The Buddhist people claimed that originally Hayagriva Madhava temple was the *chaityagriha* which was erected over the cremated relics of Buddha and huge stone image of *garbhagriha* is of Buddha, but Hindus consider the image as Madhava. Dalton remarks on the image of *garbhagriha*, “Its modern votaries have, to conceal mutilation, given it a pair of silver goggle-eyes and a hooked, gilt or silvered nose, and the form is concealed from view by cloths and chaplets of followers, but remove these, and there is no doubt of the image having been intended for the “ruler of all, the propitious, the asylum of clemency, the all-wise, the lotus-eyes, the comprehensive Buddha” [21]. Presently the temple is considered as Vishnu temple where Vishnu is worshiped in the form of Hayagriva. According to the inscription which was inscribed on the temple wall, the temple was

reconstructed by Koch emperor Raghu Deb in 1583 A D. It can be observed that the temple was reconstructed many times. This temple is undoubtedly an ancient one. There is a possibility that the Vishnu temple was constructed on the original structure of a Buddhist temple. Numerous references are found in this regard. Waddell mentions that Assam contains a most holy Buddhist pilgrimage place known as '*Tsam-ch'o-dun*' and next to the great temple at Bodh-Gaya [22]. Jaschke's Tibetan dictionary defines the word '*rtsa-mcog-gron*' as a town of west Assam, Kamarupa, where Buddha died [23]. It was mentioned in Tibetan Buddhist texts, *Kangyur* and *Tengyur* that the older shrine of Hajo was a great *chaitya* which was constructed over the cremated relics of *Tathagata's* body [24]. Csoma Korosi, a Hungarian traveller, remarks, "The death of Shakyas, as generally stated in the Tibetan books, happened in Assam, near the city of Kusha or Cama Rupa (Kamarupa), under a pair of *Sal* trees" [25]. Csoma Korosi also mentioned on after *Mahaparinirvana* of *Tathagata* how relics were arranged. He describes, "The corpse being burnt, they gather together the ashes. There are found 8 measures of them. They are put in 8 urns. These 8 precious vessels being placed upon 8 richly adorned stately seats or thrones, sacrifices and adorations are offered up to them during several days, after which they are deposited in a magnificent pyramidal building in the City of Kusha or Kamarupa. The princes in central India, among whom Shakyas had lived, hearing of his death, and being desirous of obtaining his holy relics, some of them go themselves, others send their men to take a portion of them. The people of Kusha permit them to visit the *chaitya*, and to pay their respects to the holy relics, but they refuse to give them any share of those remains" [26].

The Buddhist faith not only associated with the Hayagriva Madhava temple, but also connected to some other areas. At Hajo, there is another temple site called Kedarnath which is very close to the shrine of Kamalesvar or 'the lord of the Lotus.' The temple is located near a tank which is known as '*Tso mani Bhadra*' or 'the lake of the notable gem.' It is believed that in ancient time many water-sprites (*naga*, serpents or dragons) came out from the lake to offer jewels to Buddha. The lake contains a small cell where Buddha set down a mass of butter which had been brought to him as a gift, and the stone *linga* and *yoni* which are now enshrined at the shrine of Kamalesvar, are pointed to as being this petrified butter [27]. At Hajo, a hilly place contains a rocky area, about eight yards in diameter. Buddhists consider the place as sacred site where Buddha got *Parinirvana* and where his body was cremated. The Buddhists say that on the rocky place, there were some inscriptions in Tibetan characters of the mystic sentences '*Om mani padme hum*,' '*Om ah hum*,' '*Om*,' etc., but in the later period, a four-armed Vishnu is carved out on the surface where the Buddhist inscriptions were visible. The image is called *Dhubi* or the 'the washerwoman of the gods' by the Hindus [28]. Locally the place is known as *Netai Dhubinir ghat*. It is known from the ancient record that Mauryan ruler Ashoka reigned throne from 272 BC to 232 BC. After the incident of Kalinga war, he converted his religion to Buddhism and to spread Buddhist philosophy, he built numerous monasteries. For the worship of *Tathagata*, Ashoka rediscovered the relics from the *stupas* where remains of Buddha were preserved and distributed among the 84,000 monasteries [29]. From this reference, it is assumed that some remains of Buddha were carried to Assam during the time of Ashoka and established in the place of Assam. In this regard, Choudhury remarks, "Some relics of the Buddha were carried to Assam and enshrined in a place near Guwahati, probably at Kamakhya where a relic casket of stone has been found and which almost certainly contained some ashes of the Buddha, over which a *stupa* or *chaitya* was raised, or at Hajo" [30].

Several visual representations of the ancient temple sites indicate that the impact of Buddhism is prominent in the sculptural art of Assam. The oldest evidence of Buddhist art can be observed on the Sri Surya pahar of Goalpara district. A group of monolithic votive *stupas* has been excavated from this site. The structural feature of the *stupas* indicates that the votive *stupas* were created in the phase of Hinayana Buddhism of before 1st century AD. Two images of Bodhisattva and Buddha are observed at the Kamakhya temple site. Below the Sukresvara hill of Guwahati, there is a huge carved image of Janardana Vishnu. It is thought that originally the image was of a *Dhyani* -Buddha. The Buddha image was converted to Vishnu image in later period. The temple plinth of Hayagriva Madhava temple indicates that originally the temple was a Buddhist monastery (Figure 1). The temple plinth is decorated with brilliant stone carvings of elephant motif which is rare depiction in the temple architectures of Assam. Elephant is considered as sacred animal in Buddhism as well as in Hinduism. In Buddhism, elephant, lotus etc. are the symbolic representations of Buddha. Before the birth of Buddha, Queen Maya, mother of Buddha had seen a white elephant in her dream. In Buddhist architectures, elephant is given prominent place to decorate the architectures. Some significant architectural remains have been discovered at the temple campus. Among them, the fragments of stone pillars where lion motifs are illustrated, have been found. The pose and appearance of the lions are bold and energetic in the depiction. The lion motifs reflect the characteristic features of Lion capital of Mauryan art. Therefore, the original temple was possibly built in the high time of Buddhist period of Mauryan art which belongs to the 3rd century BC. The Madan Kamdeva temple site of 11th -12th century AD displays an image of Buddhist affinity (Figure 2). An image of *Dhyani* Buddha flanked by two *Bodhi* trees is found at the Pingaleswar temple site of 9th- 10th century AD (Figure 3). Interestingly, one erotic scene is placed near the image of Buddha. Possibly, due to the Tantric influence of Buddhism on the Pingaleswar temple site, the Buddha image is illustrated with the erotic figures. The Vajrayana is a queer mixture of monistic philosophy, magic and erotics, with a small admixture of Buddhist ideas [31].

A few terracotta slabs stamped with the figures of Buddha is found and presently preserved at Assam State Museum. A beautiful terracotta tablet depicts a figure of *Dhayani* Buddha (Figure 4). The right hand of Buddha shows *bhumisparsa mudra*, in which the Buddha seated, touches with his finger the earth, indicating thereby that he asks the Earth goddess to bear witness to his attainment of *Sambodhi* against all Mara's temptations [32]. The legs are closely crossed and locked and the soles of the feet are visible. It seems that Buddha is in deep meditation. The image is placed within a *chaitya* window form where Buddha is seated on a full bloomed lotus pedestal. On the background some miniature *stupas* are seen. At the bottom of Buddha Mahayana creed in characters of the 11th century is engraved. This similar type of Buddha image has been discovered in large numbers in Bengal and Bihar [33]. Another fragment of terracotta plaque contains several niches with a figure of *Dhyani* Buddha in each (Figure 5). All miniature images of Buddha are placed diagonally in rows. The time period of the terracotta plaque is placed in 11th century AD.

Similar type of terracotta fragments of Buddhistic images are discovered from Surya pahar of Goalpara district. Possibly, this kind of terracotta slab of Buddha images was attached on the walls of the Buddhist temples.

The representation of Goddess Tara is commonly found in sculptural art of Assam. Between the 8th and 12th centuries her worship was equivalent that of any god in the Mahayana pantheon [34]. A female image as Buddhist goddess Tara is carved out on a block of basalt (Figure 6). The image (32cm×16cm) may be ascribed to the 10th century AD. The goddess is seated in *lalitasana* posture on a double petalled lotus. The right hand which is broken off rested on the knee in the bestowing attitude (*varada mudra*) and the left hand holds a lotus bud with the stalk. The right leg is partially broken. The goddess wears a lower garment, a scarf which is flying on the background and the usual ornaments. On both sides of goddess two miniature female figures in seated posture are observed. The face of the goddess is calm and pretty. A form of *chaitya* window which is illustrated like a halo is shown behind her head. Five miniature Buddha images are depicted around the head of the goddess on the stela. The Buddhas seated with legs closely locked in the *Dhyana mudra*. In Buddhist Tantric faith, Tara has several ferocious forms which signify five colours, red, yellow, blue, white and green. These five colours indicate five *Dhyani* Buddhas and they were believed to be the *Sakti* [35]. Four miniature devotees are placed on either side of the pedestal. Another beautiful image of Buddhist goddess Tara of bronze is preserved at Assam State Museum (Figure7). It is assumed that the image was created during 10th -11th century AD. The goddess Tara is seated on the lotus pedestal in *lalitasana* posture. Her right hand displays *varada mudra* holding with lotus stalk and rests on the right knee and the left hand holds a lotus stalk with *abhaya mudra*. The deity is decorated with a *karanda mukuta*, *kundalas*, *haras* etc. and wears a long skirt.

III. CONCLUSION

Thus, it can be concluded that Buddhism influenced the sculptural art of Assam partly. The literatures and archaeological evidences inform that possibly there were originally few Buddhist temples which were reconstructed as Hindu temple with the old materials in ancient Assam. Besides, merchants, monks carried small portable Buddhistic images to Assam from other places. Mauryan emperor Ashoka took responsibility to develop Buddhist art in India. During his time Buddhism was predominant in the country. He constructed numerous *stupas* dedicated to Buddhism throughout country. It can be assumed that during his period Buddhism also spread to Assam and the Buddhist *stupa* was constructed where relics of Buddha were established. Due to the influence of Tantric Buddhism, some sculptures of ancient Assam reflect the nature of Buddhism.

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Figures

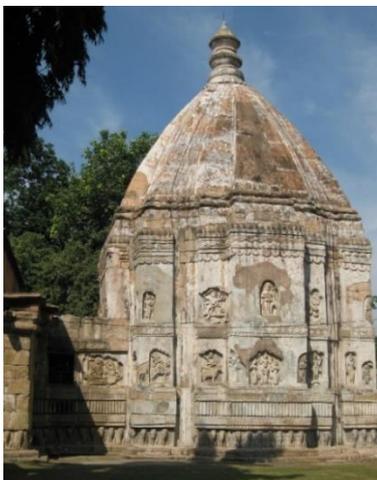


Figure 1: Hayagriva Madhava Temple



Figure 2: Image of Buddhist affinity, Madan Kamdeva Temple



Figure 3: Buddha image with Erotic figures, Pingaleswar Temple



Figure 4: Buddha Image



Figure 5: Buddha Images



Figure 6: Image of Tara



Figure 7: Image of Tara

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