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Some Hindu and Buddhist Bronzes from Bangladesh

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This article was originally published in: Studies in South Asian Heritage, Essays in Memory of M Harunur Rashid, Mokammal H Bhuiyan, editor, 2015, Bangla Academy, Dhaka.

July 15, 2015

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1.

Prior to the departure of the British from the Indian subcontinent in 1947, leaving behind two sovereign states – India and Pakistan – the history of Indian art was relatively easy to study as it was not coloured by issues of nationalism. After 1971 when East Pakistan declared independence and transformed itself into Bangladesh the task of the art historian became more complicated. Works of art which could once be attributed to Bengal now had to be assigned to either West Bengal or Bangladesh to establish their precise geographical origin. This task becomes even more difficult when one is uncertain about the circumstances of the discovery of an object and remains so with the further fragmentation of India into an ever increasing number of states with sub national identities, such as Jharkhand in the east.

Before 1947 although there were collectors in British India and several museums in Europe and America had Indian collections, there was no outrage about the passage of art from one country to another. As early as 1917 Ananda Coomaraswamy had assembled a vast collection of art in India and Sri Lanka (then Ceylon) that was characterized simply as Indian (though now they would have to be categorized as Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Nepali and Sri Lankan), which he first offered to the then British Indian government. They, however, showed no interest and so he simply left the country with it and through the auspices of Denman Ross, a patron and trustee, the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston was able to acquire it; thus the first major collection of Indian art was initiated in a museum in U.S.A. The story of the Indian collections in the British museums is much older, of course, and much of it was taken out of the subcontinent without any hindrance by the colonists, both private and official. The biggest haul was the Amaravati sculptures that now are well looked after in the British Museum.

It is interesting to note that the only alarm about the exodus of an Indian collection was sounded by the Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941) in the early 30s when the collection formed largely by his nephews Gaganendranath Tagore (1871–1951) and Abanindranath Tagore (1867–1938) was put up for sale. In a letter to a friend from Europe he expressed his concern that Ananda Coomaraswamy was about to visit India and unless a buyer was found quickly, the collection would be lost to the West. Fortunately, the Lalbhai family of Ahmedabad finally acquired the collection.

An important collection of Indian art was also formed by Stella Kramrisch (1896–1993) during her long career in Calcutta (now Kolkata) between 1922 and 1952. Much of this collection was out of India before she left the country in 1952 for Philadelphia where she continued to augment her collection with further acquisitions. A formidable and diverse collection, it now resides in the Philadelphia Museum of Art. It is particularly rich in the arts and crafts of undivided Bengal, as is evident from a recent exhibition of the patchwork and embroidered quilts known as *kantha* (D. Mason (ed) 2009. *Kantha, the Embroidered Quilts of Bengal* (Philadelphia, Philadelphia Museum of Art and New Heaven, Yale University Press)).

In the second half of the 20th century appreciation of ancient art from the subcontinent, especially sculpture, became a global phenomenon and both private collectors and public institutions began acquiring Hindu, Buddhist and Jaina art with great enthusiasm. Although many Indians, mostly the rich and well educated Hindus and Parsis, had formed large and important collections in British India, the strict antiquity laws discouraged collecting within the newly formed Republic of India. Neither in

Pakistan, which is an Islamic republic, nor in Bangladesh, can one expect to see much enthusiasm for collecting what was called antiquities, especially by private collectors. On the contrary, because of greater demand in the West and Japan, the exodus of art from the subcontinent became a flood. By and large, the Japanese taste was limited to Buddhist art from Gandhara, for which Japan became the largest market and an important repository. Until the Nixon Kissinger initiative with China in 1972, arts from that nation could not be imported directly into the U.S. which was one reason why American museums and collectors turned their attention to South Asia. The flow of antiquities, both Hindu and Buddhist increased exponentially from the region. As well, many portable objects once created in the subcontinent, left Tibet due to the upheaval caused by the Chinese invasion in the 50s of the last century. The most impressive object to go out of Bangladesh is the monumental stone image of Viṣṇu from Sialdi (N.K. Bhattasali 1929. *Iconography of Buddhist and Brahmanical Sculptures in the Dacca Museum* (Dacca: Dacca Museum).). When it was published first by N.K. Bhattasali, it was still in worship in a local temple. It can be viewed now in the National Gallery of Australia, Canberra.

2.



Fig. 1: Viṣṇu

An important bronze from Bangladesh to enter an American public institution was also a Viṣṇu image (fig. 1). This complete and perfectly preserved ensemble was first exhibited in Boston as part of the Heeramaneck Collection in 1966 and published in the catalogue (J. M. Rosenfield, et. al. 1966 *The Arts of India and Nepal: The Nasli and Alice Heeramaneck Collection*. (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts), p. 72, no. 65). Subsequently, it entered the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) where it has been published again in the catalogue of the collection (P. Pal 1988. *Indian Sculpture* vol. 2, (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art), pp. 201–204). Several other bronzes, also in this collection, can be given a Bangladesh provenance with some certainty (P. Pal 1988. *Indian Sculpture* vol. 2, (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art), nos. 88, 90, 92, 95–96).

Among these, one has been frequently published and is certainly from Bangladesh. In fact, Debala Mitra (D. Mitra 1982. *Bronzes from Bangladesh* (Delhi: Agam Kala Prakashan), p. 112, figs. 91, 93) included it in her important publication on Jhewari bronzes. Once in the collection of S.K. Saraswati in Kolkata, where I saw it first in the late 1950s, it represents the goddess Śrī devī as described in the inscription on the base (fig. 2). Because Śrī devī is venerated by Hindus, Buddhists as well as Jains one cannot positively assert its religious affiliation. I have elsewhere discussed the bronze in detail and hence will only remark here that this is the form of the goddess that is familiar in Indonesia both in ancient art and in the modern currency of the country. The sheaf of paddy she holds is also met in one of the hands of the Buddhist goddess of prosperity known as Vasudhārā as seen in a rare six armed representation of the goddess in LACMA, probably as well from Bangladesh (fig. 3). Although the iconographic form originated in India—in Kanchinagara (=Kanchipuram in Tamil Nadu) according to an eleventh century source—this particular contemporaneous representation is the first evidence of this six armed variety on the subcontinent (P. Pal 1988. *Indian Sculpture* vol. 2, (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art), p. 196). Most known Indian images are either two or four armed. In Nepal however the six armed Vasudhārā has remained as popular with Newar Buddhists as Laksmī is with Hindus.



Fig. 2: Śrī-Devī



Fig. 3: Vasudhārā

More impressive but related in style to the Vasudhārā is an abraded but impressive sculpture depicting *Garuḍāsana* Viṣṇu or Viṣṇu on his Garuḍa mount (fig. 4). Suitably crowned with a distinctive *kirīṭamukuṭa* and ornamented, the god sits in the unusual (for him) regal posture known as *mahārājajalīāsana* or royal ease (P. Pal 1988. *Indian Sculpture* vol. 2, (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art), pp. 184–190). The posture is encountered as early as the Gupta period for Śiva and Kevala Narasimha (J.N. Banerjea 1956. *The Development of Hindu Iconography* (Calcutta; University of Calcutta, 2nd ed.), pl. XXIII, 3 and pl. XXXIV, 1) but rarely for Viṣṇu. Missing its hand, Viṣṇu's forward right arm rests on his raised right knee, while the left arm balances the graceful posture as it is placed on the horizontal bar of the throne back beside the club or supporting it. Rising to the height of the backhand, the attribute looks more like a staff or baton than a club. The emblem in the back left hand is the conch shell while the wheel is clearly visible in the raised right hand.

His seat is a fully open lotus flower with two tiers of petals and a raised pericarp to accommodate the relaxed and elegantly postured god. The flower rests on a platform which is being supported by Garuḍa with his two additional hands. The attributes in his two normal hands however are unclear. He too is crowned and adorned like his master and if his wings had not been attached behind his upper arms he would be fully human. Snakes seem to be his anklets for he is known as the enemy of serpents. The tray like platform with the lotus seems in fact to be a table whose legs in the shape of the elephant's trunk descend on the two sides to the base which is moulded and is of the *triratna* variety with a central projection. The table is a rare example of a piece of furniture from this period. On the left recessed segment is attached a mirror like object. The columns supporting the crossbar on which rests the partially damaged circular halo are decorated simply with the bead motif but the halo is adorned with the combined bead and bold stylized flame motif. The head of an elephant with a raised trunk has survived on the crossbar on Viṣṇu's left, although it could be mistaken for a peacock with its neck turned back.



Fig. 4: Viṣṇu

There can be no doubt that this unusual Viṣṇu image with its complex composition, elaborate throne and handsome figures is from

Bangladesh. Closely comparable stylistically are two seated bodhisatva (for the correct spelling of bodhisatva with one t instead of two, see Bhattacharya, 2010) images from Jhewari, published by Debala Mitra (1982, figs. 52 and 76). In both the bodhisatva is seated in the *mahārājaliḷā* (also called *sukhāsana* or posture for pleasure) with the right arm supported by the raised right knee and with dangling hand. Indeed, one of the bodhisatvas, for which this posture is common, wears a crown of the same design as the LACMA Viṣṇu. Both Narendranath Law and Debala Mitra (D. Mitra 1982. *Bronzes from Bangladesh* (Delhi: Agam Kala Prakashan), pp.76–100) date the Buddhist bronzes to the 9th–10th century and considering the close stylistic proximity between them and the Los Angeles Viṣṇu, a similar date is not incompatible. Indeed, one of the bodhisatvas wears an identical crown as the Viṣṇu and both bronzes may have been produced in the same workshop, thereby convincingly demonstrating that style and aesthetic knew no religious barriers.

3.



Fig. 5:
Bodhisatva
Maitreya

One of the great advantages of a museum job in America is the constant opportunity to see and study new material that comes into the market. Indeed, this allure for the unknown and constantly meeting new challenges was no less exciting than teaching young minds in a university. Even though I am no longer associated with museums and live in Los Angeles, I still cannot resist going to the art fairs and sales in New York at least twice a year. These fairs are scheduled around the sales in two auction houses – Sotheby's and Christie's – and draw dealers from around the globe. The array of material that can be viewed have an awesome diversity and the "fresh" objects offered constantly stimulate the grey cells. And there is always the issue of what is authentic, which cannot be learned in university classes or in laboratories alone. It is ultimately a matter of the art historian's eye and gut feeling.

Sometime in the early 1990s a group of bronzes appeared in the market that were among the strangest I had seen. I illustrate one such figure now in a private collection (figs. 5 and 6). Altogether there were about a dozen objects in the group, all Buddhist, and according to the dealers' grapevine, they were found in a hoard somewhere in Bangladesh. The fact that they all had the same green patina certainly corroborated that they were buried together underground. But there was no way to determine their physical source, though I see no reason for the dealer who handled the group to lie outright. In any event, it was clear that the only way to corroborate the claim was to compare the bronzes with the copious material available from the subcontinent. This opportunity came recently while cataloguing the private collection for an exhibition.

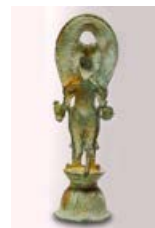


Fig. 6: Reverse
view of Fig. 5

As is clear from the two illustrations the figure is fully modeled in the front but the back is incomplete and concave. Indeed, this is a characteristic of all the bronzes in this group, which make them distinctive, since usually all bronzes from Bangladesh or for that matter from anywhere else on the subcontinent, have a complete and robust back, differing only in the degree to which the flesh is modeled. One wonders why this particular workshop opted for such a hollow and summary treatment of the back, as if an economy of metal had to be achieved.

As I have written in the Bhansali catalogue (P. Pal 2011. *The Elegant Image: Bronzes from the Indian Subcontinent in the Siddharth K Bhansali Collection* (Mumbai, The Marg Foundation and New Orleans Museum of Art), cat. no. 26), stylistically, the bronze and others in the group sharing a similarly incomplete hollow back do not conform to any known group of sculptures in South Asia. Other peculiarities which establishes the discrete character of these bronzes are the design of the base, not the usual square or rectangle, but kettle-drum shaped with a single tier of large pointed petals. Neither the figural form nor the proportions resulting in a stocky figure, the distinctive hairstyle nor the disproportionately large oval halo are recognizable in any work of the other styles. No less unusual is the treatment of the scarf whose ends come down to the base; it looks more like a garland with rope patterns rather than a piece of cloth.

There is no doubt however about the identity of the figure. That he represents the future Buddha Maitreya as a bodhisatva is evident from his hand attributes, the rosary in the right hand and elixirpot in the left hand. The identification is further clinched by the presence of the small stupa in his distinctive ascetic hairdo. The sacred thread across his chest is characteristic of his high birth. Noteworthy is the absence of the *nāgakeśara* flower in his left hand which became a desideratum in images of Maitreya after the eighth century. This too would indicate an earlier date, perhaps in the 7th century, for the unusual figure.

The only comparable sculpture I have been able to discover is the unique stone *Abhicārika* Visnu found in Burdwan district in West Bengal which J.N. Banerjea (J.N. Banerjea 1956. *The Development of Hindu Iconography* (Calcutta; University of Calcutta, 2nd ed.), pl. XXVIII, 2 + p. 202) dates to c. 7th century which seems acceptable. Particularly noteworthy are the similarities in the shape and features of the face in the two sculptures. The bodies of the two figures also reflect similar proportions though the stone example reveals more attention to musculature than the metal Maitreya. Thus, Burdwan district as well could be the source of the Maitreya and his companions, which are now dispersed in different collections. For the present, however, I see no reason to reject a Bangladesh provenance, though either way, it is likely a bronze from undivided Bengal, rather than any other region in the subcontinent.

That Buddhism was flourishing in Harikela denoting the south eastern part of Bangladesh is clear from the Chinese and Tibetan

sources, as discussed by Debala Mitra (D. Mitra 1982. *Bronzes from Bangladesh* (Delhi: Agam Kala Prakashan), p. 28). Moreover, a number of Chinese monks visited Harikela in the last quarter of the seventh century, one of whom is said to have built a temple, had books copied and images made (P. Pal 2011. *The Elegant Image: Bronzes from the Indian Subcontinent in the Siddharth K Bhansali Collection* (Mumbai, The Marg Foundation and New Orleans Museum of Art)). Could this group of bronzes with their distinctive style and technology represent the benefaction of the Chinese visitor?

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sphere of art.

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