



A NEWLY REPORTED INSCRIBED IMAGE OF AVALOKITEŚVARA IN BANGLADESH: SOME ICONOGRAPHICAL AND EPIGRAPHICAL NOTES

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Abstract: *The present article is focused mainly upon a stone image of Avalokiteśvara which is inscribed with the so-called Buddhist creed, ye dharmā hetu-prabhavā, etc. This representation aligns with the conventional depictions of Avalokiteśvara typically found in Bengal and Bihar. It can be dated to the 10th-11th century CE, during the period of the Pāla Empire (8th-12th century CE), a period marked by the flourishing of Buddhism in this region. Buddhism in Bengal during this period experienced significant developments influenced by the political, cultural, and social dynamics of the Pāla Empire. This period is crucial for understanding the evolution of Buddhist practices and artistic expressions in the region. This image, therefore, possesses a distinctive significance, reflecting the artistic and doctrinal characteristics of the time while also underscoring the unique cultural heritage of Bengal and Bihar within the broader context of Buddhist iconography. Its craftsmanship and inscriptions contribute to our understanding of the religious landscape during the Pala period, highlighting the continuity and evolution of Buddhist practices in the region. This paper is primarily based on field study.*

Keywords: *Iconography; Epigraphy, Inscription, Buddhist creed, Avalokiteśvar*

Received : 10 October 2024
Revised : 27 November 2024
Accepted : 30 November 2024
Published : 30 December 2024

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Bishwas, M. (2024). A Newly Reported Inscribed Image of Avalokitesvara in Bangladesh: Some Iconographical and Epigraphical Notes. *Journal of History, Art and Archaeology*, 4: 2, pp. 127-130. <https://doi.org/10.47509/JHAA.2024.v04i02.04>

Introduction

A stone image of a deity, identified as Avalokiteśvara was discovered as a chance-finding in the Bogra district¹ of Bangladesh. It measured approximately 7.62 cm × 5.08 cm,

this small statue is crafted from black basalt. After discovering this image from Bogra, it was purchased by Mahir Yasir² of Chapainawaganj district from the person who discovered it and is

now in his personal collection. The inscription is engraved on the back and right side of the stone image. The present paper aims to study the iconographic features of the deity and seeks to decipher the inscription. This is the first instance of the details of the inscribed image being discussed.

Iconography of the Image

The deity is shown seated in the usual *lalitāsana* or *lalitākṣepa* on a stool type *triratha* pedestal, the right foot being placed on the extension of the pedestal (Fig.5.1). The deity's right hand is in *varada mudrā*. It rests upon his knee and a stalk of a full-blown lotus is held in the left hand. However, the left hand is partially damaged. Avalokiteśvara is adorned by a beautiful *jaṭāmukuta*, *upavītamala* and various pieces of jewellery. The simple back-plate is neatly carved with simple lines and oval-circular shaped designs. The image is quite mutilated.

The Inscription

There is a four-line inscription on the backside of the pedestal and another two-line inscription on the right side of the pedestal (Fig.5.2a). The inscription is written in Sanskrit and in the Gauḍī or Gauḍīya script. It contains the so-called Buddhist doctrine or creed, *ye dharmā hetu-prabhavā*, etc. It is the Buddhist ethical principles of *Pratītyasamutpāda* and the famous Buddhist *dharaṇī*.

The text of the inscription is as follows (Fig. 2.b):

Line 1. *siddham³ yedharmma[ā] hetu-prabhavā[h]*

Line 2. *hetuṃ teṣāṃ tathāgato*

Line 3. *hyavadatateṣāṃchayo*

Line 4. *niriodha evaṃ-vādī ma*

Line 5. *hāśra*

Line 6. *maṇaḥ*

The inscription can be read as

“*Siddhamyedharmmāhetu-prabhavāḥhetuṃteṣāṃtathāgatohyavadatateṣāṃchayoniriodha evaṃ-vādī mahāśramaṇaḥ*”

This is generally the form of the next and although, in some cases, minor variations can also be noticed but the basic sense remains the same. It may be translated as follows:

May there be success! Tathāgata (i.e. Buddha) has revealed the cause of those phenomena, which spring from a cause and also (the means of) their cessation. So says the Great Monk.

An alternative reading may be:

- Of all the things that proceed from a cause, the Buddha the cause hath told,
- And he tells too how such shall come to its end,
- Such alone is the word of the sage. (Agarwala: 1957:26)

Discussion

According to the *Vinaya-piṭaka*, the formula “*ye dharmā hetu-prabhavā*” was pronounced by Assaji, one of the earliest followers of the Buddha, in response to Sāriputta Upatissa's inquiry about his teacher and his teachings (Oldenberg:1879:40). This formula quickly gained significance within the Buddhist faith. The Chinese pilgrim I-tsing emphasised its value, equating it to the bodily relics of the Buddha, noting that placing both in *chaityas* would yield abundant blessings.

In addition to its placement in *chaityas*, tablets inscribed with the creed were often given as votive offerings at shrines. Many of these tablets were later returned to the donors, who sometimes enshrined them in village chapels or kept them as mementos. This practice underscores the formula's role in personal devotion and community worship.

The proliferation of this formula on seals in all probability aimed to propagate and popularise Buddhism, especially during periods of decline. Seals bearing the formula are particularly abundant, outnumbering other types found in India. They date primarily from the Gupta and post-Gupta periods, times when Buddhism faced significant challenges from the resurgent neo-Brahmanism. This movement increasingly

co-opted Buddhist figures, with the Buddha being reinterpreted as one of the incarnations of Viṣṇu. Overall, the enduring presence of the ‘*yedharmāhetu prabhavā*’ formula illustrates the efforts of Buddhists to sustain their faith amid growing competition and the cultural shifts occurring in India during this period.

The Avalokiteśvara image from Bengal inscribed with the Buddhist creed “*ye dharmā hetu-prabhavā*” is a significant artefact that exemplifies the region’s rich Buddhist heritage, particularly during the period of the Pāla Empire (8th-12th centuries CE). This image typically portrays Avalokiteśvara, the Bodhisattva of compassion, in an elaborate style that reflects the artistic conventions of Pāla sculpture.

The figure is often depicted with multiple arms, each holding symbolic objects, and is adorned with intricate jewellery and a crown. These elements not only signify divine grace but also enhance the image’s aesthetic appeal.

The inscription of the Buddhist creed on the image serves as a vital link to the core teachings of Buddhism. “*ye dharmā hetu-prabhavā*” articulates the principle of causality, highlighting that all phenomena arise from specific causes. This teaching is foundational to Buddhist philosophy and underscores the inter-connectedness of all beings, reinforcing the compassionate nature of Avalokiteśvara. The creation of such images occurred during a period when Buddhism was thriving in Bengal, supported by the Pāla rulers who promoted monastic institutions and artistic expression. This specific representation reflects the cultural and religious landscape of the time, showcasing how local traditions merged with broader Buddhist practices. Avalokiteśvara images with the creed likely played a central role in devotional practices. They would have been enshrined in temples and *chaityas*, serving as focal points for meditation and prayer. The combination of visual representation and inscribed teachings enhanced their spiritual significance, making them important tools for both learning and worship.

Conclusion

The Avalokiteśvara image with the Buddhist creed from Bengal is a remarkable artefact that embodies the artistic, philosophical, and devotional aspects of Buddhism during the Pala period. It highlights the rich cultural tapestry of the time and serves as a testament to the enduring influence of Buddhist thought and practice in the region. Such images are crucial for understanding the historical development of Buddhism in Bengal and its integration with local traditions.

Acknowledgment

The author is grateful to Mahir Yasir, the custodian of the stone image for permitting him to study the image and during preparing this article, he have helped them in various ways. The author is also grateful for the help provided by Professor Jayanta Singh Roy and Dr. Vinay Kumar.

Illustrations



Fig. 5.1: Image of Avalokiteśvara, Bogra District, Bangladesh (Photo Courtesy: Mahir Yasir)



Fig. 5.2 a & Fig.5 b: The inscription and its detailed view (Photo Courtesy: Mahir Yasir)

Notes

1. The archaeology of Bogra district in Bangladesh, is rich and diverse, featuring ancient sites like Mahasthangarh, one of the earliest urban archaeological sites in the country. Excavations have revealed artefacts, pottery and coins from various periods, highlighting the region's historical significance and its connections to ancient trade and culture.
2. Mr. Yasir, a resident of Ruhanpur village in the Chapainawabganj district of Bangladesh, is currently studying at Varendra University. He possesses a remarkable collection of antiquities, most of which he acquired through chance discoveries and archaeological explorations in the regions of

Chapainawabganj, Bogra and Rajshahi. Villagers often bring archaeological objects they find to him and he has amassed a significant number of coins and other artifacts in his personal collection. He is affectionately known in the village as 'Taruna Mudra Samgrahaka' meaning 'Young Coins Collector'.

3. It is expressed by symbolically.

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