Early Mediaeval Sculptures of Tripura : Some Observations

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Early Mediaeval sculptures of Tripura province have received short shrift from the art-historians. General studies on Indian Art make no room for the monuments of Tripura and surprisingly works with decidedly regional focus have hardly anything to offer. What little work have been done so far, concern themselves with mediaeval temples of Tripura. Archaeological reports dating from the early decades of this century however, alluded to some of the early monuments of Tripura. It is not without significance that R. D. Banerji, in his seminal study on the early mediaeval sculptures of Eastern India, made a passing reference to the Mukhalinga of Unakoti[1]. As early as 1928, J. C. French commented on the bronze image of Candi of Cuddagram[2]. N. K. Bhattasali's monumental catalogue discusses at some length the iconographic features of a number of sculptures of the erstwhile Tippera district[3]. The pioneering study of N. K. Bhattasali, for the first time, highlighted the regional dimensions of the Bengal sculpture. Since then much have been written on the art of Bengal and Eastern India, but, lamentably enough, there had been no coherent study on the early mediaeval sculptures of Tripura with reference to certain basic problems like (a) their broad chronological framework and (b) stylistic characteristics.

This small note seeks to understand the overall stylistic features of stone and bronze sculptures of Tripura province, datable between C. 9th and 12th centuries A. D. The chronological confine is, however, tentative and at times extends beyond this range. This is basically a study in style with three important questions before us. These are (i) the impact of dominant pala-Sena idiom on the region, (ii) the extent of interaction between the Pala-Sena idiom and the so-called parallel art trends of South-Eastern Bengal and (iii) the nature of autochthonous elements that characterise a group of stone-

carving of Tripura. Admittedly, this study is somewhat sketchy and new finds may alter or strengthen some of our hypotheses.

For obvious reasons, the early art of Tripura cannot be studied in isolation. As a geo-political entity. Tripura did not have an independent status earlier than the 13th century A. D. Between the 7th and the 13th Century A. D., a sizeable portion of Tripura seemed to have formed a part of Harikela.[4] It is difficult to determine as to how much of modern Tripura province was incorporated into Harikela. Because like Varendra the territorial limits of Harikela was in a constant flux.[5] In dynastic term, its fate had been linked up with the Khadgas, Ratas, Varmanas and Kings of Harikela and Pattekera. The geographical location of Tripura contributed towards this direction. Tripura is essentially a land-locked territory with Sylhet to its north, Chittagong hill tracts to the south-east, Noakhali and Chittagong to the south, Comilla to the west and Cachar to the north-east.[6] Historical and cultural developments in Tripura, as such was an integral part of what hapened in Harikela.

In a recent study of 'property transfer records', i. e. copper-plate charters of early Bengal, Barrie. M. Morrison has convincingly argued that south-eastern Bengal (an aggregate of Samatata-Harikela) assumed a distinctive cultural identity during the early mediaeval period.[7] A statement supported by impressive archaeological materials unearthed from Mainamati and related sites.[8] From around the 7th century A. D., art-activities in South-Eastern Bengal gathered momentum and started gaining definite character.[9] An almost unbroken currency system further distinguishes this region from the rest of Eastern India. Notwithstanding, the dynastic changes the region seemed to have enjoyed a kind of political continuity from the days of the Khadgas.

The genesis of art-activities in South Eastern Bengal can fortunately be dated with some amount of precision. The Deulvadi Sarvani of the time of Devakhadga (c. 675 A. D.) is probably the earliest piece of sculpture from this region.[10] It is an enigmatic piece in the sense that a matured plastic sense and a limited technical efficiency seemed to have worked together. The Surya from the same site is more pronouncedly dependant on the post-Gupta idiom. The stela is lineally descended from the Stela formats of the Post-Gupta sculpture. The rounded body is derivative of the same source. Inspite

of their relative isolation, the early monuments of South-Eastern Bengal owes much to the Gupta idiom and its derivatives. Even the terracotta panel of Mainamati,[11] which have a distrinctly popular overtone, draw heavily from the Gupta idiom. Apart from such cognizable stylistic elements as sweeping line and rounded limbs, even the themes and motifs belong to the classical milieu. Gandharvas, Vidyadharas, Kinnaras, Makara, Vyala, Muktaphalalobhi haimsa and similar other motifs can not be explained without reference to the range of motifs that became popular in the Gupta period. Mainamati made its impact felt on the Buddhist establishments of Tripura. Two terracotta plaques, one depicting a Kinnara or Kinnari and the other showing a wild boar, both discovered at Pilak, south Tripura district,[12] speak of the movement of Mainamati idiom towards the east. It may, however, be asked whether the Pilak terracotta plagues should be considered local products or imports from Mainamati. Unless the site is systematically excavated and similar plaques recovered therefrom, it would be difficult to argue for their local origin. Recent excavation has only indicated the immense possibility of the site.

Like many other major religious establishment, Mainamati had been the melting pot of diverse artistic and cultural traditions. The monks and pilgrim from differrent parts of the country converged into the monastery. In their trail came the artisans and craftsmen, who were either commissioned by the monasteries or suported by the pilgrims. Unfortunately inscriptional evidence on this process is not available for Mainamati, but a 9th century inscription of South Eastern Bengal, viz. Paschimbhag copper-plate makes categorical reference to two different monastic establishments Vangala and desantariya Mathas - existing within one religious complex.[13] The inscription further lists artisan and craftsmen who enjoyed the institutional support in the form of land grant. Diversity of artistic and cultural tradition in Mainamati is demonstrated by the terracotta plagues, bronzes and stone sculptures uncarthed from this site. While the terracotta plagues datable to C. 8th-9th century A. D. hurk back to the Gupta tradition, the bronzes follow a different path. Two distinctive groups can be identified, one adhering to the broad parametres of East Indian Style and the other conveying somewhat different features. The treatment of surface of figures pertaining to the second group is relatively coarse, their eyes are wide-open and shown by

incisious eyebrows raised and lower lips outturned, mouth at times shown by cut-silt.[14] Stylistic proximity of these bronze images to the dated Sarvant as well as the stratigraphic evidence point to a date not later than 8th-9th century A. D. This distinctiveness has rightly been identified as a trend running parallel to the dominant Eastern Indian or Pala-Sena style.[15] Evidently, the active atelier of Mainamati not only worked in different mediums, but adopted and interacted with different idioms.

The importance of Mainamati in the early Mediaeval art of Tripura can hardly be over-emphasised. This would be evident if we take into consideration the fact that Tripura bronzes are over-whelmingly Buddhist in affiliation. Of the 16 known pieces, Visnu of Tulsipahur is the lone exception. Bronze images have been reported from pilak, Balhalbari and Tulsipahur villages in South Tripura.[16] And here too, coexistence of two trends - the dominant and the parallel - are evident. The bronzes range in date between C. 9th and 12th century A. D. An Avalokitesvara from Pilak is set against an impressive semi-circular stela with an ornate triangular crowning member. Though somewhat stunted in appearance, it closely approximate Nalanda prototypes. In its unadorned Stela and unexaggerated physical features, one can discern the characteristics of the late 9th century imageries as evolved in South Bihar.[17] By contrast, a seated Buddha or Ratnasambhava is informed by features referable to the parallel trend. Its weind look, flattened face and summary treatment of the body remind us of the similar features noticed in the tiny Buddhas of Mainamati. A few other pieces also correspond to the Mainamati bronzes of the parallel trend. It is reasonable to assume that the bronzes were either manufactured at Mainamati and carried over o different sites of Tripura as votive offerings or cast by an itinerant group of artisan who had been associated with the flourishing atilier of Mainamati. In any event, the art of bronze casting in Tripura can not be explained without reference to Mainamati.

Unlike the bronze images, stone-sculpture of the province can not be explained as imports. Their affiliation with the dominant early mediaeval idiom of Eastern India is unmistakable, although these are fashioned out of a local variety of coarse grained sandstone instead of black basalt. This point needs some emphasis, because sizable number of sculptures in

adjoining Comilla, Tippera and Noakhali districts are carved out of black basalt, the standard material for early mediaeval statuary in Bihar and Bengal. About half-a-dozen stone sculptures bearing votive inscriptions, dated between C. 940 A. D. and C. 1032 A.D., have been noticed from the above mentioned districts. The dated pieces indicate the historical context of the radiation of Pala-Sena style to the South Eastern Bengal.[18]

The sculptures from Pilak and Jolaibari are worth some discussion.[19] Most of them belong to the Buddhist pantheon. In structural term each sculpture is characterised by tall and slender legs supporting a slim and compact Torso. The visual effect is one of reduction of volume of weightlessness. Their nearest stylistic equivalent is the bronze Lokanatha from Bandarbazar, Sylhet.[20] A comparison of an Avalokitesvara, and a Headless Buddha from pilak-jolaibari with the Sylhet bronze distinctly brings the connection into focus. Much of the stylistic elements of Sylhet bronze figure is derived from Nalanda bronzes of the 9th century A. D.[21] although it is devoid of ornamental details to a considerable extent. As such, the stone sculpture of these sites are dependent on Nalanda archetypes and their connection with the black basalt sculptures of the neighbouring areas are inconsequential.

A significant example of Tripura sculpture is an image of Deir from Hrsyamukha Devi stands in rigid samapadasthanaka stance on a lotus, her attendants on either side are distinguished by exaggerated body flexion which contrasts well with the frontality of the main figure. Devi has an elongish face conveying a malevolent mood. The evolved nature of the stela and sharp angles of the rathaka mouldings tend to suggest a 10th century A. D. date. A bronze image of Hevajra recovered from Dharmanagar[22] shows an extremely crowded composition and compares with an 11th century bronze from Sahebganj, Rangpur district.[23] The similarities are so much pronounced that one is tempted to view it as an import rather than cast locally.

The problem of identifying the autochthonous elements in the art of Tripura is best illustrated by the rock-cut images of Unakoti.[24] They defy any stylistic affiliation. There are a number of detached, worn out sculptures and a series of colossal heads and figures 'carved on the rocky bed of a stream and partly on the face of rocky slopes'. A colossal Siva head is characteristic piece of Unakoti carving. The face is almost rectangular, the huge third eye is carved in the middle of the

head, the other two eyes are indicated by incised double lines without any representation of the pupil, the nose comes down in a straight line. Incidentally, this is the only part of the head that shows an awareness of modelling. The mouth is delineated by a long narrow slit with vertical strokes to indicate the teeth. The incised monstache takes an upward turn and ends in a loop. The ears are indicated by curved double-lines, the lower part of the ear-lobe is decorated with flower motifs. Despite its awe-inspiring height and dimensions, the carvings are essentially flat and two-dimensional. Modelling is virtually non-existant, the forms are rendered in terms of line. The composition is devoid of any co-ordinating elements and real point of focus. It would be more appropriate to view these carvings as a kind of pictography etched on stone. They have no parallel, whatsoever, in Eastern India. Any attempt to date them precisely is necessarily inconclusive. But a number of detached stone sculptures from the site in usual 11th-12th century style probably marks the change to the standard Brahmanical iconographic norms. An inscribed Sivalinga bearing a votive record in 12th century character[25] indicates the shift from ethnically distinct and artistically different view point to a refined but generalised style. The process is of immense historical significance but its intricacies are difficult to work out.[26]

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