

Buddha in Brahmanical Art and Literature

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In Brahmanical sculptures we do come across Buddha but his images are hardly intended for worship. Buddha was well accepted as ninth incarnation of Viṣṇu by most of the authorities, so much so that even in the *saṅkalpa* text, which is daily recited, the words '*bauddhāvatāre*' are there to mark the time sequence. In spite of this, worshipping him in image or symbolic form was prohibited; obviously because the very aim of this incarnation, as the Purāṇas inform, was to mislead people by advocating false doctrines (*māyāmoha-sāstra*) and dissuade them from following the right path advocated by the Vedas, that is śrutis and smṛtis. This position of controversial nature was a hard pill to swallow. On one side Buddha was to be accepted as *avatāra* of Viṣṇu, but on the other side his preachings were not to be venerated and followed. It is interesting to see how the Brahmanical sculptors and artists did face this paradoxical situation.

Among the ten incarnations of Viṣṇu independent figures of Varāha, Narasimha and Kṛṣṇa as Vāsudeva, that is the four handed form, appeared right from the early centuries of the Christian era. Trivikrama that is Vāmana, Paraśurāma and Rāma came to be added later. No images of Matsya and Kūrma *avatāras* assignable to the early age have yet been reported. Images of Buddha and R̥ṣabha too were there, but that was in the Buddhist and Jaina context. Appearance of all the ten incarnations together either on a slab (*daśāvatāra-paṭṭa*) or on the back-slab of the images of Viṣṇu, Śeṣaśāyī (Bhopal Museum no. 156), Hari-Hara (Khajuraho Museum no. 558), Varāha (State Museum, Lucknow no. O.84), Sūrya (Mathura Museum 88.19), etc. are post-Gupta features. Earliest *daśāvatāra-paṭṭa* from Paṭhārī in Madhya Pradesh has been attributed to late Gupta age. another slab of 10th century A.D. is there in the Bharatpur Museum (21/117) in M.P. Daśāvatāra representations on the back-slab, even with Buddha as the ninth one, served as decorative elements. A number of Viṣṇu figures from eastern and central India, and some from south (e.g. Kolhapur Museum no. 63 Viṣṇu from Bay bag Maharashtra; Archl. Museum Goa no. 320 Viṣṇu from Sawāi-verā) show Buddha in the following poses as the ninth *avatāra* :

- (i) Standing with right hand in *abhaya* (SML. 57.73) 7th Cent. A.D.
- (ii) Seated in *lalitāsana* (SML. 59.34) 7-8th Cent.
- (iii) Standing with right hand in *vara* and the left holding hem of the garment (SML. 42.189) 8th Cent.
- (iv) Standing as above, but the right hand has been brought near the chest in *abhaya* (SML. 51.73) 8-9th Cent.

- (v) Seated in *padmāsana* with right hand placed near the navel, left holding hem of the garment (SML. H. 115) 10th Cent.
- (vi) Seated in *bhūmisparśa mudrā* (SML. 41.55) 11th Cent.
- (vii) Seated in meditation (SML. O.239) 12th Cent.
- (viii) Seated in *padmāsana* with both hands in *abhaya* (SML. O.275) 12-13th Cent.

Besides these *avatāra* depictions the sculptors of the eastern school sometimes carved syncretistic images such as Hari-Hara-Sūrya-Buddha, Sūrya-Lokeśvara, Viṣṇu-Lokeśvara etc. where in Buddha or Lokeśvara also appeared in subordinate position.

Independent figures of Buddha in Brahmanical context is a rare phenomena, but not totally absent. One comes from Orissa and the other from Karnataka¹. On the rear wall of the sanctum of the Jagannātha temple at Puri there appears independent depiction of Buddha assignable to C. 12th Century. He is seen seated in meditation with an uprising long stemmed lotus on his right and left. He is surrounded by small Buddha figures, apparently his disciples, or perhaps other Buddhas. The other case is more interesting. Near Badami (ancient Vātāpi, the capital of the Western Cālukyas) there is a large lake called Agastya-tīrtha. Near this lake upon the cliff face a large enthroned male image has been carved, which is locally known as *Koṣṭhī-rāya* or the 'laper king'. The bejewelled person depicted here is seated in *padmāsana* on a lion-throne under heavy foliage of a tree. His right hand raised in *abhaya* carries a rosary and the left rests in the lap. His head bears no *uṣṇīṣa*, that is the bump of knowledge, but knobby curves are there. The circular halo behind his head suggests the divine character of the figure. He is being flanked by well dressed and crowned chowrie bearers. What is most interesting is appearance of miniature *cakra* and *śaṅkha* on the terminals of the throne-back, which further add to the divine nature of the main figure. Though the local tradition takes him to be a king originally suffering from leprosy, but got cured after bathing in the Agastya-tīrtha, it is something more than that. Delineation of the image after the Buddha seated on *vajrāsana* under the *bodhi*-tree, halo behind, *abhaya* pose and appearance of *śaṅkha* and *cakra* in the composition call for deeper consideration. Working on these lines B.V. Shetti has identified the figure as Buddhāvatāra or Māyāmoha-Viṣṇu. Viṣṇu was the family deity of the Cālukyas of Badami, and therefore, his depiction as Māyā-moha in a secluded cave is not improbable.

In spite of all what has been said above depiction of Gautama Buddha, the scion of the Śākya clan and preceptor of a heretic sect as an *avatāra* of Viṣṇu was not readily accepted by all. The persons of this school of thought took recourse to the following ways for depiction of the ninth incarnation :

- (A) Some in the name of Buddha preferred to substitute Viṣṇu himself in some form. For example, the **Matsya-purāṇa**² describing *Nakṣatra-puruṣa-vrata*

recommends worship of Vāsudeva figure specially his fore-head, on Citrā nakṣatra in the name of Buddha. Similarly the **Varāha-purāṇa**³ prescribes worship of the gold figure of Dāmodara in connection with celebration of Buddha-dvādaśī.

- (B) In Maharashtra figure of Viṭṭhala or Pāṇḍuraṅga was sometimes used as substitute of Buddha.
- (C) In Orissa, Jagannātha served the same purpose, a fact which can clearly be noticed in the sets of Daśāvātāra Ganjiffās⁴ or playing cards current in Orissa. Here one can see the god standing with upraised hands and nine conches or lotuses or any other symbols indicating the serial number of avatāra. The type from other regions is also interesting.

In the Savantawadi set⁵ from Maharashtra Buddha has been shown as four handed god seated cross-legged carrying lotuses in the upraised extra hands. His normal hands have been brought near the navel.

In Rajasthani ganjifa⁶ sets Buddha is again four armed richly dressed seated on throne flanked by two devotees on right, and two attendants carrying 'chowrie' and 'morchela' on the left side.

The symbolic and colour representations of the ninth incarnation in Dasāvātāra ganjifa sets is no less interesting. It, is being tabalized below⁷:

| Region | Deity | Colour | Symbol |
|-------------------|------------|--------------|-------------------------------|
| Rajasthan | Buddha | Yellow | Five petalled flower or lotus |
| Deccan (Nirmal) | Buddha | Ocher Yellow | Turbaned male head |
| Deccan (Karnool) | Buddha | Red | Turbaned male head |
| Deccan (Cuddapah) | Kṛṣṇa | Gold | Seated male in profile |
| Maisur | Kṛṣṇa | Brown | Cow |
| Sawantawadi I | Buddha | White | Conch |
| Orissa | Jagannātha | Green-brown | Lotus bud |
| Orissa | Jagannātha | Dark gray | Three petalled lotus |
| Orissa | Jagannātha | Yellow | Three petalled lotus bud |

Buddha in the Purāṇas⁸

Since Buddhism and Jainism commanded wide popularity inspite of their being totally adverse to the Puranic doctrines, the Purāṇas could not afford to neglect them altogether. Though some like the Viṣṇu, Vāyu and Brahma-Purāna omit

mentioning Buddha as an incarnation, others like the Matsya, Varāha, Agni, Padma, Skanda, Bhāgavata, Bhaviṣya do accept him as the ninth *avatāra* of Viṣṇu, but portray him altogether in a different colour. He has been described as one produced by Viṣṇu from his own body to mislead the invincible demons by teaching them false doctrines. The idea was to make them quit the 'right path' laid down by the Vedas and Smṛtis, embrace the foul principles (*pākhaṇḍa, māyāmoha śāstra*), and thus making them weak easily to be defeated by the gods. The **Viṣṇu-purāṇa**⁹ describes this form, not *avatāra*, as Māyā-moha, or *Nagna*, who was naked (*digambara*), had his head shaven (*muṇḍī*), and carried peacock feathers in his hands (*barhi-piccha-dharaḥ*). This fellow, later on wore red garments (*raktāmbara-dharaḥ*), talked of nirvāṇa in sweet tone, kept on murmuring 'know' and 'understand' (*buddhyata, buddhyadhvā*) and asked the asuras to refrain from killing the animals (*paśughāta*). This episode of Māyāmoha finds mention the Agni-purāṇa¹⁰ also. It is said that Viṣṇu in the form of Māyā-moha became son of king Śuddhodana and his followers became the Bauddhas. Later on he became Arhat and converted other group of the Daityas. Some other Purāṇas like the *Liṅga*¹¹ and the *Śiva*¹² state that Māyāmoha created by Viṣṇu was the author of voluminous Māyāmoha-śāstra in apabhramśa language. He dissuaded Tripurāsura and his people by preaching the Buddhist texts (*bauddhāgamas*). As per **Padma-purāṇa**¹³ this Mayāmoha was Buddha himself. The **Bhaviṣya-purāṇa**¹⁴ makes mention of Buddha in a very confusing way. As per this work Kāśyapa produced god Gautama, who ruled and preached at Paṭṭaṇa-nagara. His successors were Śākya muni, Śuddhodana, Śākya-simha, Buddha-simha, Candragupta, Bindusāra and Aśoka.

As per other Puranic versions role of dissuading people from the right path was played by Bṛhaspati, the priest of the gods and Śiva also. Bṛhaspati approached the demons as imposter of Śukrācārya, who had then left the camp of the demons for practising penance, and preached them Jaina doctrines. The Varāhad-purāṇa refers to creation of Moha-śāstra by Śiva under the name of Niśvāsa-saṁhitā of the Pāsupatas for the *veda-bāhya brāhmaṇas* of Kaliyuga. The Mahābhārata calls Śiva as Ṛṣabha among the holy people. Iconographically there are a number of similarities between the images of Śiva and the first Tīrthānkara Ṛṣabhanātha.

For our present purpose the most interesting information comes from the Kāśi-Khaṇḍa of the **Skanda-purāṇa**¹⁵, which talks about the Buddhist activities in the regions of Varanasi. The account in brief runs as follows :

Once there were no rains for sixty long years. Thereupon Brahmā requested Ripuñjaya, a scion of Manu's family, who was practising penance at Varanasi to accept the throne and save the dying prosperity. The prince accepted the offer under condition that then the Devas would quit the earth, and he would be the sole

monarch. Brahmā agreed to this and Ripuñjaya under the name Divodāsa successfully started his mission. As settled before along with other gods Śiva too had to quit his favourite seat at Varanasi. He was very eager to come back, but this was never possible in the regime of Divodāsa, and ousting of Divodāsa depended on finding faults in his dealings and administration. Several people from Śiva's side tried in vain, but Gaṇapati impressed the King and his ladies and did prepare good ground for further action. He told the King, who had approached him to seek solace, that on 18th day from the day of the event a brāhmaṇa would appear from North before the king and that the king should follow the new comer's advice without any hesitation.

Next role was to be played by Viṣṇu. He assumed the garb of a Buddhist *bhikṣu* (*saugata rūpa*), Puṇyakīrti by name and found a sacred place (*dharmakṣetra*) for himself in the north of Varanasi. Garuḍa became his disciple under the name Vinayakīrti, and Lakṣmī too joined the party as Vijñana Kaumudī holding a manuscript in her hand. Bhikṣu Puṇyakīrti had mastered religion (*dharma*), polity (*arthaśāstra*) and different sciences (*jñāna-vijñāna*) and had great power of sweet, tender and distinct speech. He had also mastered several practices of black magic like *stambhana*, *uccāṭana*, *ākṛṣṭi*, *vaśīkaraṇa*, etc. His discourses were heard with deep interest by birds and the entire flock of deers around remained spell bound and paid reverence. The Purāṇa devotes thirty verses for describing the teachings of Puṇyakīrti, which very much reflect the Buddhist ways of thinking. Vijñānakaumudī preached the ladies of the town, but her teachings and activities were more akin to the cārvāka and tantric doctrines like achievement of happiness at every cost, use of *añjana*, *yantra*, *tilakaṣadha*, *vaśīkaraṇa*, etc. This group of the Buddhists successfully disturbed the subjects of Varanasi.

On the 18th day, as predicted by Gaṇapati, *bhikṣu* Puṇyakīrti from Dharmakṣetra assumed the form of a *brāhmaṇa* and appeared before Divodāsa. There is no indication that the king himself had embraced the Buddhist faith, but his superior and strong position was certainly torpedoed and Śiva's return to Varanasi was thus facilitated.

The Buddhist activities referred to in the purāṇa suggest the following points :

- (A) The Dharmakṣetra or the seat of Puṇyakīrti in the north of Varanasi with flocks of deers is the present day Sāranātha, old Mṛgadāva or Rṣipattana. Near the present Sāranātha there is a locality called Saraṅgā or Sāraṅga, which has got something to do with words sāraṅga (a deer) and sāraṅga-pāṇi (Viṣṇu). Sāranātha, we all know was a famous Buddhist seat for a very long time.
- (B) The description suggests a period, when the Buddhist church had come under the Tantric influence and a number of evil practices had crept in.
- (C) SML State Museum, Lucknow.

Reference

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