

Padmapāṇi Avalokiteśvara Panel of Ajanta Painting

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In cave No. 1 of Ajanta the main attention is centered on a panel of painting representing the so-called Padmapāṇi Avalokiteśvara. This figure has been identified as the Bodhisattva Padmapāṇi Avalokiteśvara on the basis of a flower being held in the right hand. Another factor for its identification might be the serene type of facial expression betraying the concept of compassion (*karuṇā*) which is the characteristic of Padmapāṇi Avalokiteśvara. But there is some scope for doubts about the validity of this identification.

Before endorsing the above identification we should be clear about one thing that any figure holding a lotus should not be taken for granted as that of Padmapāṇi Avalokiteśvara. The benign expression of the face may bear other meanings as well. Moreover, it is pertinent to observe that in the iconographic prescriptions of Avalokiteśvara he is almost invariably known to hold the lotus in his left hand, that too having a long stalk (*sanāla*). In the present figure the so-called lotus is shown in the right hand which according to the prescription is supposed to display the *abhaya* pose or the gesture of protection, benediction and divine status. It is, thus, not very easy to jump to the conclusion that it represents a form of Bodhisattva Padmapāṇi Avalokiteśvara.

A detailed study of Avalokiteśvara has been carried out by Mallmann in her celebrated book.¹ In none of the forms she ascribes the lotus flower for Padmapāṇi Avalokiteśvara as the attribute in the right hand. In several other studies concerned with the iconography of the Bodhisattva also this formulation of the Lotus-attribute is emphasized.² Moreover, in the left hand of the figure concerned there is perhaps no item, the hand just dangles down. Not only these points but there are several other issues which need to be addressed to before accepting the representation as that of any form of Padmapāṇi Avalokiteśvara.

Normally in most of the publications this prominent figure of the so-called Padmapāṇi Avalokiteśvara is illustrated with emphasis. But there are several other figures nearby in the panel which are not given any importance while the question of identification is taken up. These figures will not have any meaning at all if the central figure is to be identified as that



Pl. 19.1: Padmapāṇi Avalokiteśvara, Cave No. 1, Ajanta

of Padmapāṇi Avalokiteśvara. At the same time, some hilly background in the pictorial representation might lend support to the identification in view of the fact that the abode of Padmapāṇi Avalokiteśvara is supposed to be known as mountainous Potala.³ But one could see some balconies of a palace structure clearly discernable at one of the sides. These features need to be explained for coming to an acceptable conclusion.

In all intents and purposes the pictorial panel seems to be of the narrative type in which the surrounding figures, as well as the locale and landscapes will have some definite relevance.⁴ Had it been Padmapāṇi Avalokiteśvara together with the mundane people around him on whom he bestows his benediction, the figures would not have been shown with differences of personal appearance of status and class. These figures seem to be of important characters in the narrative content of the panel instead of being the representations of the common people in general, for whom Padmapāṇi Avalokiteśvara is supposed to be a Savior figure. The latter is an emanation of the Dhyānī Buddha Amitābha which was required to be represented on the head of the central figure, as has been shown in other panels representing Padmapāṇi Avalokiteśvara as the Savior from the Eight Great Perils (*Aṣṭamahābhayās*).⁵ In order to offer an alternative suggestion for the identification of the theme one needs to refer to the biographical narratives related to the life of Siddhārtha who later came to be known as Gautama Buddha. There is detailed account of Siddhārtha's premarital anecdotes. In the *Lalitavistara*, there is a detailed account of how Śuddhodana, the father of Prince Siddhārtha persuaded the latter to get married.⁶ When Siddhārtha agreed he had a number of conditions imposed for the would-be bride. Accordingly, Śuddhodana arranged for a parade of the beautiful marriageable girls of the country. It was intended that if any of the beauties attracts the attention of Siddhārtha she will be considered for the marriage. The minister Daṇḍapāṇi was given the charge of keeping an eye on the possible selection in this manner. The beauty parade was arranged in the garden of the palace, and the girls were asked to pass by Siddhārtha and receive a beauty casket (*karandaka*) from him. The exercise continued for some time and all the gifts (*upahāras*) were exhausted and there was no other girls left in waiting for the process. The story refers to that suddenly at the last moment Yaśodharā came and presented herself before the prince offering apologies for her late arrival. She asked for the gift, and Siddhārtha offered her the pearl necklace that he was wearing. Yaśodharā did not accept this expensive gift, instead of this, she asked for a flower from the crown of the prince. Siddhārtha offered her the flower and she left being pleased by that. Later Śuddhodana came to know from Daṇḍapāṇi that the prince took notice of Yaśodharā and also briefly conversed with her. This pinpointed the selection of the bride on Yaśodharā, and later the nuptial exercise were followed up.

It is evident that the above narrative relates more closely with the contents of the pictorial representation of Ajanta painting under consideration. The flower in the right hand

of the principal figure has the gesture of being offered to someone in front. The lavishly bejeweled figure, particularly the prominently shown necklace of costly stones and also the attractive crown,⁷ that the figure wears can easily be fitted to the princely presence of Siddhārtha. The hilly background may not necessarily be that of Potala, the adobe of Avalokiteśvara. It could be the artists interpretation of the kingdom of Kapilvastu which is the hilly region of Nepal. The benign facial expression could be the artists, interpretation of the introvert nature of the Prince who, according to the narrative, was mentally withdrawn from accepting marriage.

The other figures in the panel need now to be explained. There is prominently shown female figures of dark complexion in the front. It could not possibly be that of Tārā, the consort of Avalokiteśvara. Had it been intended so, she should have been shown to the left side of the principal male figure. It seems that this dark complexioned female figure is that of Yaśodharā or Gopā who has been described in the texts as kṛṣṇā (the dark complexioned lady). The intention of the artist seemingly was to convey the sense of Yaśodharā going out of the ceremonial parade after receiving the flower as a gift, shown in her hand. This will explain why she has been shown not looking at the Prince which was required if it was the actual moment of the presentation of the flower to her. It is obvious that the panel has been rendered in terms of the Indian concept of time and space in the narrative art.⁸

So far as the other figures in the panel are concerned, it should be noted that there is one male figure wearing a crown shown at the background. It could be that of Daṇḍapāṇi, the observer in-charge of the entire beauty parade ceremony. There are a few other smaller figures, almost out of focus, most probably of the female characters representing the other prospective candidates who could not catch the attention of the Prince.

The clouds shown in the sky and the balconied palace structure give the impression of the incident taking place in the outdoor, obviously in the garden of the palace as envisaged in the narrative. Some figures in the balcony are shown playing musical instruments. They obviously are the Gandharvas and Kinnaras, participating in the happy occasion. There is the representation of a monkey and a blue dove or a pigeon. They are symbolic of the episode of love dominated by amor (*srīṅāra rasa*).

In view of the above discussion we are of the opinion that the pictorial presentation is not of the iconic representation of Padmapāṇi Avalokiteśvara. It is the narrative related to the selection of bride for the prince Siddhārtha. Since the latter is the main character of the narrative panel and since he is the Buddha to be, he has been shown with a larger than life type of presence. This will explain why the figure is conspicuously larger than any other figure around.

However, it should be noted that the above suggestion for an alternate identification

of the theme of the pictorial panel is tentative. But another point needs to be emphasized that there are numerous forms of Lokeśvara of which Avalokiteśvara is doubtless the most distinctive one.⁹ Some scholars have interpreted this name Avalokiteśvara as reflection of the fact that the Bodhisattva looks down upon (*Ava*) the lowly (*Apa*) people (*Loka*). But the relevance of this needs to be examined. In no way the term Avalokiteśvara can be resolved in terms either of (*Ava*) or (*Apa*). In fact, it has to be related to the word avalokita (seen or observed) in that way, the name will mean that the Bodhisattva is the (*īśvara*) seen by the people irrespective of status and standing in the society.¹⁰ We bring in this possible reinterpretation of the term Avalokiteśvara in order to emphasise the fact that in the relevant pictorial panel of Ajanta, the concept of the Bodhisattva Padmapāṇi Avalokiteśvara has unnecessarily been dragged. Actually, the panel should be read as the visual presentation of the narrative contained in the *Lalitavistara* as has been already analyzed above.

Footnotes

1. M.T. Mallmann, *de Introduction a l'etude d' Avalokitesvara*. Paris, 1948.
2. B.T. Bhattacharyya, *Indian Buddhist Iconography*, Calcutta, 1958; S.K. Saraswati, *Tantrayana Art an Album*, Calcutta, 1977.
3. Saraswati, *op. cit.*, p. XXVI
4. Surprisingly Schlingloff who discusses the narrative art of Ajanta painting does not take this panel for detailed discussion. See D. Schlingloff, *Studies in the Ajanta Paintings Identifications and Interpretations*, Delhi, 1987.
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 175 ff.
6. P.L. Vaidya (ed.), *Lalitavistara*, Darbhanga, 1958.
7. It should be noted that the crown does not show the effigy of Amitābha which was required to be shown had it been the figure of Avalokiteśvara.
8. We are aware of the fact that starting from the Early Buddhist Narrative Art of Bharhut and Sanchi drawn to almost the entire span of Indian Art, there is the overlapping of several moments of a narrative shown side by side. Niharranjan Ray has made a detailed discussion on the Indian concept of time and span in art, in an article published in the *J.N.Banerjea Felicitation Volume*, Calcutta, 1960.
9. See Bhattacharyya, *op. cit.* which gives the names of forms of Lokeśvara painted at the Macchender Bahal at Kathmandu in Nepal. To them Saraswati, *op. cit.*, also refers to. The latter refers to several forms of Lokeśvara appearing in the paintings of the two manuscripts of the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā-Prajñāpāramita*, dated respectively C.E. 1015 and C.E. 1071, preserved in the Cambridge University library and in the library of the Asiatic Society, Calcutta respectively.
10. This unique interpretation is contained in an extract from Amritanada's Collection of Nepalese Buddhistic Traditions contained in the form of Hodgson Papers, preserved in the India Office Library, London. In a volume 27, part II of the papers. D.C. Bhattacharyya has brought attention of scholars to the importance of these papers in the study of Art History in general, and Buddhist Iconography in particular. See his article titled, "Art Historical Importance of Hodgson Papers", *Kalā : Journal of Indian Art History Congress*, Vol. IV, Guwahati, 1997-98.
I am indebted to him for allowing me to use this information from his collection of materials.