
Ellora Cave 12: Image of Vairocana in *Bodhyangi Mudra* and Its *Tantric* Significance

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Abstract: Ellora functioned as an important religious centre for three major religions- Buddhism, Hinduism and Jainism. The images from this site are important as they are preserved *in situ* which is significant at least in the case of Buddhist studies where all the other contemporary and later sites are disturbed and most of the images are found out of context. It is very difficult to identify the Buddhist divinities at the site as they differ from the descriptions in the known texts and we do not know about specific texts if any that were consulted while sculpting these images. Such disparity also results in wrong identification of deities. One such image and its significance in the Buddhist scenario at Ellora is discussed in this paper.

Keywords: Ellora, Vajrayana Buddhism, Vairocana, Garbhadhatu, Vajradhatu, Bodhyangi Mudra, Tantra

Introduction

Ellora, with its magnificent art and architecture has the power to deliver an ethereal experience to its visitors. The gigantic images of Buddhist, Hindu and Jain gods carved on rock surface are awe inspiring as well as scholastically important as it preserves them *in situ*. This is especially important for the Buddhist images as most of the contemporary and later Buddhist sites are built sites and have been subjected to disturbances which have displaced the images from their context. Having said so, what remains as fact is that the Buddhist caves of Ellora have been least studied. Also, the need to identify the Buddhist iconography of Ellora in the light of Vajrayana pantheon and not as individual deities has been stressed by scholars (Chandra 1988; Malandra 1993).

Ellora's Buddhist cave temples were excavated during the seventh and early eighth centuries AD. So far, we have not come across any text that gives an idea on the overall iconography of Ellora's Buddhist caves. But we know that Buddhist teachings, texts and art incorporating new ideas were popular during this period and were getting disseminated. Ellora's images can help push back the horizon for the development of a

kind of Buddhism which was expounded throughout most of Asia (Malandra 1993: xvii).

Cave 12

Cave 12 at Ellora belongs to the last phase of Buddhist excavations at the site and is very important as it preserves the images of many deities belonging to the later *tantras in situ*. This is a three storied monastery with a rock-cut gateway and a huge courtyard. A flight of steps leads to the monastery which has shrine chambers and beautiful images of Buddhist divinities. The main shrine image of the ground floor is Buddha in *dharmacakrapravartana mudra*. The other two main shrines have image of Buddha in *bhumisparsa mudra*. The sanctum image of all the three floors is accompanied by images of Bodhisattvas, *Dhyani* Buddhas, Tara, Cunda, Jambhala etc. The walls of the monastery are also adorned with images of Buddha and other Buddhist divinities. The nine-deity *mandala* images representing the *Astamahabodhisattva mandala* (Banerjee 1994) is also an important feature of this cave. Many scholars have also pointed out the *tantric* nature of the images of this cave (Gupte 1964; Chandra 1988; Malandra 1993). Many sculptures of this cave have been identified and many are waiting to be identified. Some have also been wrongly identified. One such image is that of Vairocana on a pilaster of the antechamber of the second storey shrine.



Figure 1: Vairocana in bodhyangimudra, Cave 12, Ellora



Figure 2: Vairocana in bodhyangimudra, Cave 12, Ellora

This image has been identified as Vajrasattva by Gupte (Gupte 1964: 30) and Vajradhara by Lokesh Chandra (Chandra 1988: 136). Malandra gives reference of both but leaves it without identification (Malandra 1993: 82).



Figure 3: Stupa relief, Cave 12, Ellora

Discussion and Identification of the Deity

With the advent of tantric Buddhism, many new deities were added to the pantheon and many *tantras* were introduced to record the esoteric details of religious practices. The *tantras* are divided into four classes each headed by a different emanation of the Buddha: Amitabha presiding the *kriya tantras*, Vairocana presiding the *carya tantras*, Sarvavid Vairocana presiding *yoga tantras*, and Aksobhya presiding

anuttarayoga tantras. The early *tantras* are centred around the historical Buddha Sakyamuni while the later *tantras* are centred around the Dhyani Buddhas. In *Sarvatathagata tattvasamgraha*; a *yoga tantra* text, there is description of the Buddhas of ten directions escorting Sakyamuni to the *Akanishta* heaven. Here, he achieves five stages of enlightenment, becomes Vairocana, preaches the doctrine to multitude of Bodhisattvas and then descends to defeat Mara. Vairocana is generally described as displaying the *dharmachakrapravartana mudra*, but his appearance differs as per the descriptions in the *charya* and *yoga tantras* of the *Vairocanabhisambodhi*, *Tattvasamgraha* and *Sarvadurgati-parishodhana tantras*. In the *Vairocanabhisambodhi-tantra*, Vairocana appears with one face and two hands and is described as seated above a white lotus and a moon, hair piled on the top of the head, with a crown and draped in garments of Golden colour while his two hands display the *dhyana mudra* (Giebel, 2005: 21). In *Tattvasamgraha*, Vairocana is described as seated in *vajraparyankasana* on a *simhasana* displaying *bodhyangi mudra* and is decked in various ornaments, heavenly garments and a jewelled *mukuta*. (himalayan art.org). Thus, the Buddha in *dhyana-mudra* and *bodhyangi-mudra* are basically the forms of Vairocana appearing in the *Garbhadhatu-mandala* and the *Vajradhatu-mandala* respectively.

With this knowledge, the image from the first floor of Cave 12 can be re-examined. The image is in the second storey and is sculpted on a pilaster of the antechamber of the shrine. The deity is shown seated in a *visvapadma* in *vajrapayankasana* and is accompanied by Padmapani and Vajrapani on either side. All the three deities are profusely ornamented with *mukuta*, *kundalas*, *grivayakas*, *yajnopavita*, *keyuras* and *valayas*. While observing the *mudra* displayed by the main deity, it appears that both the hands are at the chest level, but they are not crossed across the chest as described by Gupte (Gupte 1964: 30). Even if the hands were crossed, the deity cannot be identified as Vajrasattva (as done by Gupte) as the attributes of Vajrasattva are a *vajra* held in the right hand at the chest and a *ghanta* held in the left hand resting on the thigh (Bhattacharyya 1958: 75). Description by Gupte must have prompted Chandra to identify this image as Adibuddha Vajradhara who holds *vajra* and *ghanta* across his chest (Chandra 1988: 136). But on close examination, it is seen that the hands of the deity are not crossed at the chest, but they make the *bodhyangimudra*. Here, the forefinger of the left hand is clasped tightly in the right fist and represents the unity of five worldly elements with spiritual consciousness. Another interpretation is that the erect forefinger represents knowledge which is hidden by the world of appearances. This *mudra* transforms ignorance into wisdom. It stresses the importance of knowledge in the spiritual world and is also known as the *mudra* of the supreme wisdom. According to A. Jetty, the two hands represent the union of the spiritual with the material world corresponding to the Vajradhatu (represented by the index finger) and Garbhadhatu (represented by the five fingers) respectively (Jetty 1978: 32).

We have seen earlier that *bodhyangimudra* is assigned to Vairocana, the presiding deity of various *mandalas* of the *yogatantra* which implies that the image under discussion is of Vairocana (Figures 1 and 2). Just above the Vairocana image is a relief of a stupa (Figure

3). Vairocana is considered as the oldest and the first Dhyani-Buddha by the Nepalese Buddhists. He is regarded as the master of the whole temple and therefore most of the time he is not depicted outside the stupa (Bhattacharya, 1958, p. 53) but conceived as resting inside a stupa. So, the depiction of a stupa relief just above the image also supports the identification of the image as that of Vairocana. A similar unfinished image (Figure 4) from the shrine chamber of the second storey has also been identified as Vairocana during this study. This image is placed below that of a seated Tara. The placement of Vairocana inside the main shrine suggests its importance in the Buddhist ideology and practices prevalent during that time at Ellora.



Figure 4: Vairocana, shrine chamber, Cave 12, Ellora



Figure 5: Vairocana, Ratnagiri, Odisha

The reason why scholars didn't identify this image as that of Vairocana could be because of the fact that similar images have not been so far reported from any western Indian caves. Also, there is the view that the tantric Buddhism practiced at Ellora is nascent

because of which chances of finding the *yoga* and *anuttarayoga* deities at the site is less. But preliminary investigations at the site shows that the Buddhists here had knowledge of various *tantras* based on which the imagery at the site has been developed. In caves 11 and 12 dating to the eighth century AD, there are seven *mandalas* with a central Buddha in *dhyana mudra* surrounded by eight Bodhisattvas. Chandra has identified this central image as that of Abhisambodhi Vairocana or the Vairocana of *Mahakarunagarbhadbhava-mandala* (Chandra 1988: 135). Huntington has also discussed Cave 6 at Aurangabad as a *tantrayana* monument representing the *Mahakarunagarbhadbhava-mandala* (Huntington 1981).



Figure 6: Vairocana, Langudi, Odisha

These evidences suggest that the Buddhists at these places had the knowledge of these *tantras*. But, the parallels to this site have to be searched outside Maharashtra or more precisely in Eastern Indian sites of Orissa, Nalanda Sirpur etc. Ellora's Odishan connection is discussed by various scholars who believe that Saraha from Odisha is responsible for the dissemination of *tantric* Buddhism in Maharashtra (Gupte 1964, Chandra 1988; Malandra 1993; Donaldson 2001). This Saraha is also identified by some scholars as the *mandalacharya* Rahulabhadra (Gupte 1964; Malandra 1993) mentioned in the Khadipada inscription (Ghosh 1941). If this is a fact, then Saraha had knowledge of *mandalas* which he would have expounded to the initiates at Ellora. The *mandala* images reported from Ellora also attests that the Buddhists here had knowledge on *mandalas*. A comparative study of images from both these places also brings out many similarities in the treatment of Buddhist imagery thus suggesting an influence or a common system that they followed. The similarities between Ratnagiri of Odisha and Panhale Kaji of Maharashtra were pointed out by Deshpande in his scholarly publication (Deshpande 1986). Parallels between Ratnagiri and Ellora has also been discussed by Malandra (1993). The several relief stupas on the first floor of Ellora Cave 12 also brings to mind the votive stupas found at eastern Buddhist sites like Bodhgaya and Ratnagiri.

Coming back to the image under discussion; comparative studies of the image with finds from Buddhist sites of Eastern India has given some positive results. From Odisha, this form of Vairocana (Figure 5) has been reported from five votive stupas at Ratnagiri (Mitra 1981). At Langudi, another Buddhist site in Odisha, two miniature stupas with Vairocana in *bodhyangi mudra* (Figure 6) have been identified (Sindhu 2014). Apart from these, an interesting find is from the excavated site of Udayagiri (Donaldson 2001: 106). This 10th century CE Vairocana image at Udayagiri is profusely ornamented and has a jewelled cone shaped crown with a centre crest. The loose ends of the crown are tied behind the head in the form of a large bow-tie with fluttering ends. His hands display the *bodhyangimudra* which signifies the union of the five knowledges of the Tathagatha into the single enlightenment. All these examples show that the Buddhist iconography at Ellora has tantric elements and also has parallels in Odisha.

Conclusion

Ellora is formally recognised as a tirtha from the early times which attracted worshippers as well as patrons of the three major religions. Ghrisnesvara *tirtha*, one of the twelve *vyotirlingas* of Saivism is also situated very close to the Ellora caves.

There is a view that people create local centres to imitate an original pilgrimage sites because of various hardships in traveling to them. By such regional substitution, the pilgrims try to spatially transpose the holy centres to their locality. For example, the famous Kailasa temple at Ellora represents Siva's abode in the Himalayas, where Siva could descend in response to prayers offered at the temple. This view is supported by an inscription dated to 1234-35 on the image of the tirthankara Parsvanatha which reads as " . . . many huge images of the lordly Jinas . . . and converted the Charanadri

thereby into a holy tirtha, just as Bharata [made] Mount Kailasa [a *tirtha*] (Malandra 1993: 13). This implies that the idea was to recreate important pilgrimage centres here at Ellora. This is seen even in modern times; an example for which is the temple complex in South Sikkim which has replicas of all the important temples of India within a single compound.

Now the question comes as to which Buddhist religious centre is represented at Ellora Cave 12. Among all the Buddhist pilgrimage centres, the most important one is Bodhgaya, the place where the Buddha got enlightenment. This is the holiest pilgrimage centre which all Buddhists visit or wish to visit during their life time for attaining religious merits. In the Buddhist caves at Ellora, we can see that the earlier shrine images are of Buddha in *dharmacakrapravartana mudra*. But in Cave 12 only the ground floor sanctum has Buddha in this *mudra*. The other two floors have Buddha in *bhumisparsha mudra* as the main shrine image. This cave belongs to the seventh century AD. We see that in Odisha also, by the seventh century AD, the *mudra* preference seems to have shifted to the *bhumisparsha-mudra* and it continued to be popular (Sindhu 2014). Such continuity cannot be traced at Ellora as Cave 12 was the last Buddhist cave to be excavated here. But the change in the preference of *mudra* is clearly documented at this site. On close examination, it is seen that the pedestal of *bhumisparsha* Buddha has images of earth goddess appearing as witness, Aparajita overcoming the personified *vighna* and *Maras* supporting the throne of Buddha. This suggests that the image represents the moment of enlightenment where the Buddha invokes earth goddess to appear as witness for his enlightenment. And this event occurred at Bodhgaya. Accordingly, the representation is most likely intended to transpose this holy site to Ellora and to identify it as a *tirtha*. This idea was put forth by Malandra who says, “it appears that a conscious selection of features was made to convey the meaning of Bodhgaya, and to create an atmosphere in which worship could lead to enlightenment as profound as the Buddha's paradigmatic experience at Bodhgaya itself” (Malandra 1993: 114). Idea of specialisation of Buddhist centres is also advocated by Benesti (2003). Cave 12 also functioned as a monastery and the idea would have been to create the ambience of the very place where the Buddha got enlightenment and also to boost up the morale of the students waiting to get ordained as monks. The images of Buddhist divinities possibly served as visual aids for the students and also as meditational device for the monks.

There are many relief stupas in the first floor of this monastery which are identified as being votive stupas. If this is accepted, there is a possibility that the Vairocana image on the pilaster is also votive in nature. But, the relief of Vairocana displaying *bodhyangimudra* identified from inside the main shrine of the third storey points to the knowledge and practice of esoteric Buddhism at the site as Vairocana in this form appears in various higher *tantras* as discussed before. Absence of more esoteric deities can be assigned to the nature of the site. Since it was famous as a tirtha, the images of Buddha and other gods with specific duties like Jambhala, Tara, Mahamayuri, Manjusri etc. were probably meant for worship by the pilgrims. The ambiguity and esoterism in

the images possibly were reserved for the initiated. In addition, the monks also had personal devices like *tangkas* or metal miniatures to aid them in meditation. The esoteric practices were done only in privacy and such images were also supposed to be kept away from the public gaze. The identification of Vairocana in *bodhyangimudra* thus confirms that esoteric Buddhism was not unknown at Ellora. The Buddhists here had the knowledge of *Garbhadhatu* and *Vajradhatu mandala* and they have kept up with the contemporary developments in eastern Indian Buddhist sites.

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