
A Study on the Kurkihar Bronzes of Goddess Tara

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Abstract: The art of making sculptors with bronze has been prevalent in the Indian sub-continent from the time of the Harappan Civilisation. Kurkihar bronzes are a group of bronze sculptures found from the region of Kurkihar (24.8129° N, 85.2075° E), near Gaya, in South Bihar. Kurkihar bronzes along with the various famous bronzes found from the early historic periods, such as the Nalanda bronzes, Sirpur Bronzes, Chola Bronzes, Jhewari bronzes and more, showcases the continued development of the artform and its popularity in the society. The Kurkihar hoard yielded about 226 bronze sculptures and these objects belong to the period between ninth to twelfth centuries CE. The period thus coincides with the Pala period (750-1161 CE) in Bengal and Bihar. Goddess Tara was a common figure depicted in sculptures under the patronage of the Pala rulers. This paper aims to discuss few of the Goddess Tara sculptures in the collection of the Kurkihar Bronzes and their significance.

Keywords: Tara, Kurkihar, Bronzes, Buddhism, Patronage, Art, Sculpture

Introduction

Indian bronzes have a long history starting from the Harappan times (Lal 1956). After the decline of the Harappan culture, bronze sculptures seem to have disappeared for some time from the subcontinent. The bronzes again appear from the fifth and sixth centuries in northern India, with a well-developed style and flourishing centres in Bengal and Bihar region, from where the fine bronzes of Nalanda and Kurkihar are found (Chandra 1985). The following centuries only saw the growth of the artform and style, especially in the eleventh and twelfth centuries when the craftsmanship and plasticity of the bronze sculptures peaked and even exceeded the stone sculptures (Chandra 1985). Noticeably, the style and composition of the metal sculptures from Kurkihar resemble the stone images of the respective period from Kurkihar and other sites (Kramrisch 1936). Major centres of this art include Nalanda, Sirpur, Kashmir, Banpur, in North India. Other famous bronzes which cannot be left out include the Chola bronzes of southern India, the Jhewari bronzes from present day Bangladesh and Newari bronzes from present day Nepal (Chandra 1985).

The traditional method of bronze casting in India has been the method of lost wax or *cire perdue*. In this method the subject to be made is first modelled in wax and then

evenly covered in clay to dry. Afterwards, the wax is removed by melting and then into the clay mould the molten metal or alum for casting is poured (Lal 1956). In the case of hollow sculptures, the subject's core after being modelled in clay is evenly covered with wax and then dried. After the wax is removed through melting, the mould is used for casting the bronze (Lal 1956). Other than wax, other commonly used materials for making moulds are tallow, resin, and tar (Miller 2007). The Kurkihar bronzes have been made using the lost wax method.

Kurkihar and the Kurkihar Bronzes

Kurkihar (24.8129° N, 85.2075° E) is a Buddhist monastic site, midway between Gaya and Rajgriha, in Bihar. The village is approximately three miles north-east of Wazirgunj (Figure 1). The site was situated on the pilgrim and trade route to Bodhgaya. Massive number of metal sculptures have been unearthed from the site, with around 250 ritual objects. There were several votive stupas found from the site as well. The hoard was found from the monastery called *Apanakain* or *Apanaka*, which has been referred to in the *Ashtasahasrika Prajnaparamita* manuscript (Pal 1988). Many of the objects were stored in earthen ware by the monks to be kept safe (Marcus 1967).

As many bronzes have been found from Kurkihar and Nalanda, it can be inferred that the craftsmen must have had an easy supply of copper for casting the images. Hazaribagh district in Bihar was an ancient copper-yielding site, and the site produces tin ores as well, which would have been necessary for making bronze (Lal, 1956).



Figure 1: Location of Kurkihar (Courtesy: Google Maps)

The site of Kurkihar was visited initially by Major Markham Kittie twice in 1847 who collected carts full of images, some of which are preserved in the Indian Museum, Kolkata and some with the British Museum. Kurkihar was also visited by Cunningham, twice, in 1861-62 and in 1879-80 (Ray 2020). Kurkihar was identified by Cunningham with the ancient site of *Kukkutapadagiri* or Cock's feet mountain, which was visited by both Hiuen Tsiang on the seventh century and Fa Hien (Banerji 1940).

He mentions numerous Buddhist images and large number of votive stupas, and rows of Chaityas extending from north to south (Banerji 1940). The hoard of 226 bronzes was found in 1930, along with five other objects categories including Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, Stupas, bells and ritual objects. Among this hoard, out of 87 images, 81 were Buddhist and 6 were Hindu, all found in one spot with the smaller images enclosed in earthen jars (Saraswati and Sarkar 1936). They were discovered 25 feet below the surface of the main mound while digging for bricks (Saraswati and Sarkar 1936).

The Kurkihar hoard yielded about 226 bronze sculptures, belong to the period between ninth to twelfth centuries CE. The period thus coincides with the Pala period (750-1161 CE) in Bengal and Bihar (Huntington 1984). Majority of the images found are Buddhist images. The fact that these huge number of sculptors have been found from one centre, apart from similarities in style and iconographies, portrays the possible presence of an organised workshop for a long period, to have been able to achieve such high production and standardised specialisation (Kramrisch 1936). The need and practice of pilgrims, monks, nuns and travellers to carry tangible memory of a sacred site or depiction of Buddha or Bodhisattva, boosted the image making industry and helped develop the iconographic prescriptions for standardisation and mechanical image production (Kramrisch 1936).

Pala period art was simple and not as complex. However, there was stylistic differences in the Pala art, not just due to chronological developments, but also because of regional and sub-regional schools of styles, as easily seen from the art found in Kurkihar (Huntington 1984). It has also been suggested by scholars that there is a possibility that the Nalanda sculptors (seventh to ninth centuries CE) might have shifted and settled in Kurkihar which flourished in period from tenth to twelfth centuries CE (Huntington 1984). This is assumed as many of the bronze images from Kurkihar has a resemblance with that found from Nalanda (Ray 2020).

Around ninety-three of the sculptures discovered have inscriptions on them (Banerji 1940). The inscriptions mention Devapala (810-850 CE), Rajyapala (908-940), Mahipala (988-1036) frequently (Banerji 1940). The name of the monastery *Apanaka* has been repeatedly mentioned in the inscriptions as well. The copy of the *Ashtasahasrika Prajnaparamita*, currently in Los Angeles County Museum of Art (Accession No. M.72.1.19a-b, Couth and South East Asian Art Collection), dated to 1100-1125 CE was copied in the monastery at Kurkihar during the rule of the Ramapala (Figure 2) (Pal 1988).



Figure 2: Two folios from a *Prajnaparamita* (The Perfection of Wisdom), Kurkihar, Bihar, India, circa 1100-1125, LACMA

Inscriptions on the sculptures highlight that the donors of the sculptures were not just local laity or monks but belonged to far away areas such as from Sakala in Punjab, Kerala, Bali in Indonesia, Malaya area and others (Banerji 1940). The site was popular among the monks and travellers from Kanchi in South India, who recorded their Kanchi origin in the dedicatory inscriptions on the images donated by them to the Buddhist centre (Prasad 2014).

Kurkihar Bronzes of Tara

Goddess Tara was a common figure depicted in sculptures under the patronage of the Pala rulers. As these bronzes are miniatures and easy to carry, they were probably functioning as cult-objects or votive objects, instead of sculptures made for public worship (Prasad 2020). The Kurkihar bronzes suggest that not all images were produced for public worship but were sponsored by monks and members of the laity for private worship and rituals (Bautze-Picron 2014). The Kurkihar bronzes of Tara are at par with the depictions of Tara on stone (Figure 3). The bronze sculptures acted as an object of visual pilgrimage as well for devotees and pilgrims to carry and keep with them.



Figure 3: Tara, 10th century, Pala Period, Kurkihar, Accession No. 11.03, Bihar Museum, Patna



Figure 4: Avalokitesvara and Tara, 9th-12th century, Pala Dynasty, Kurkihar, Accession No. 2017.9642, Bihar Museum, Patna

There is approximately a dozen or so image of Tara, some seated and some standing among the Kurkihar bronzes. All of the images of Tara portray *Khadiravani* type or

emanation of Tara, in her iconographic form as described in the *Sadhanamala* (Bhattacharyya 1924). She is also known as Shyama Tara or Green Tara. Tara's iconographic details include her right hand in *varada mudra* (boon giving gesture) and her left hand holding the stalk of an *utpala* (lotus). She has an image of the *Dhyani* Buddha Amitabha on her crown (Bhattacharyya 1924).

A bronze of Tara shows her seated beside Avalokitesvara with Amitabha Buddha depicted on top on a halo, presiding over them (Figure 4). This sculpture is important in tracing the rise in popularity of Tara and her cultic presence in Buddhism and in the region, as her portrayal with Avalokitesvara suggests an earlier period in her development, when Tara was a companion and consort of Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara and not a goddess by her own right.

The question of patronage and patrons is important in regards to these bronzes, as most of them have inscriptions mentioning their donor's names, and because this information sheds light on the society and social practices of the contemporary period. Donation of sculptures required a lengthy and expensive process for the donor, who must not only find and pay a sculptor for the image, but also pay a monk who would sanctify the image to transform it into an object of worship (Prasad 2020). The importance of female patronage in the "*institutional survival of any religion*," is significant for the survival of the religion in the long run (Prasad 2020). Therefore, the study of the evolving feminine patronage of Buddhism from a regional and sub-regional perspective significant (Prasad 2020). It is an interesting fact that only nineteen Buddhist sculptures (both stone and metal) found from early medieval period in the Bengal-Bihar region have inscriptions bearing names of female donors, and none of these women come from a royal background (Prasad 2020). Furthermore, none of women donors mention their male counterparts in the inscriptions either (Prasad 2020).

Inscriptions were generally written on the upper portion of the sculptures, on the back-slab, with the writing running along the edge of the halo, to suggest that the words are emanating from them (Bautze-Picron 2014). The upper portion of inscriptions thus often contain the mantras of the deity or his/her teachings, the name of the deity the *deyadharma* is being offered to. Inscriptions located on the lower portion of the sculpture, on the pedestal and back, often contains the details of the donor and the date or regnal year of the ruler, when the donation was made (Bautze-Picron 2014). The most of the bronzes from Kurkihar follows this prescription on inscription placement, including the sculptures of Tara. Among the few sculptures of Tara, belonging to the ninth century, one of them was donated by a woman who identified herself as a housewife. This is one of the rare occasions that a woman described herself as a housewife in a donatory inscription (Prasad 2020). Interestingly, her husband's name and the monks' names are left unmentioned (Prasad 2020). Another donated bronze sculpture of Tara in Kurkihar, belongs to the ninth century, where the women donor has identified herself as the 'wife,' as Umaduka, the wife of Iddaka, in the donative

inscription. The inscription is short, simply stating that the sculpture is the '*deyadharmā*' of Umaduka (Prasad 2020). The identification of oneself as a housewife is unique, and the short inscription sheds no further light on their social status and background.



Figure 5: Seated Tara with a devotee
Kurkihar, Bihar Museum, Patna



Figure 6: Tara, Bronze, mid-ninth century,
(Courtesy: Sculptures of India, p. 137)

Figure 5 (Accession No. 182.9768, Bihar Museum, Patna) shows a seated Tara with a depiction of a devotee seated beside the pedestal. This depiction of the devotee at the bottom of the image is also representative of the hierarchy present in society under the Palas. The figure has a circular halo or back-slab depicted behind it, which is different from the common elongated *prabhamandala* or *prabhavali* used in the other sculptures. The depiction of the devotee below the sculpture is not a common feature among the bronzes (Bautze-Picron 2014). This suggests that the depiction of a devotee was not a prescriptive iconography for any specific deity or sculpture that was donated or not sponsored.

As mentioned earlier, Kurkihar had a significant presence of monks from Kanci in Tamil Nadu, and they left records of their Kanci origin in the dedicatory inscriptions (Prasad, 2014). From the inscriptions on the bronzes, it is found that in the tenth century, there were seven donations of images of Tara out of which two were made by monks belonging to Kanci region (Ray 2020). Such was not the case of ninth century Sakyabhiksuni Gunamati, who only mentions her name. This leaves the possibility of her belonging to a local Bhiksuni *theri* and contradicts the notion that Bhiksuni sanghas had disappeared by the seventh century in the region (Prasad 2020). The inscription of

Gunamati also does not mention any names of her male relatives or any monk (Prasad 2020). This highlights woman having the independence to access and manage their wealth by themselves (Prasad 2020). In this regard, the fact that Kurkihar has four bronzes of Tara with inscriptions mentioning female donor's names, is significant in the understanding of the monastic site and the position of women in the society.



Figure 7: Standing Tara, Kurkihar, Accession No. 9631, Bihar Museum, Patna



Figure 8: Tara, 11th century, Kurkihar, Accession No. BM.2017.007.73, Bihar Museum, Patna

Tara is often depicted in sculptures as either a standing position or in a seated position. The Kurkihar bronzes have a variety of Tara sculptures in both positions. For example, as seen in Figure 6, Tara is depicted in a seated position, on the lotus, with her back resting against the bolster, and with her iconographic attributes. She has her right hand resting on a knee, depicting the boon giving gesture (*varada mudra*) and her left hand is holding the stalk of the lotus (*utpala*). The sculpture is a fine specimen of Indian bronze art, with the image's plasticity and fluidity well defined (Chandra 1985). In this regard, it should be mentioned that most halos in the Kurkihar hoard are found detached and separated from the sculptures, and so it is not always known which halo belongs to which image, but in case of Figure 6, there is little doubt otherwise (Chandra 1985).

Depiction of Standing Tara in the Kurkihar bronzes, as seen in Figure 7, shows the close association between the art styles and iconographies of the region with the stone sculptures (Figure 3). The slight smile in her expression is reminiscent of her description in the Manjusri-Mula-Kalpa (7th-9th century) text, where we find the earliest mention of Tara.

All five reported Buddhist sculptures, donated by women during the tenth century are from Kurkihar. Among the donors who have not recorded the names of their male relatives are Upasaki Gopali Sauka (Gupta 1965) and Upasaka Duvajha (Gupta 1965), donors of the bronze images of Tara (Prasad 2020). The dedicatory inscriptions are exceptionally short in format, just stating that these images were their '*deyadharma*'. It is important to note that *Upasaki Duvajha* appears as the donor of an image of Avalokitesvara in the eleventh century (Gupta 1965). This indicates that she had a longer association with the Buddhist establishment of Kurkihar, yet she remained an *Upasaki* and did not become a *Bhiksuni* (Prasad 2020). In the eleventh century, the Tara sculptures suggests the patronage to Tantric Buddhism by the women patrons, who belong to various social backgrounds (Prasad 2020). Taranatha's History of Buddhism in India highlights presence and popularity of Vajrayana Buddhism in the area, and ignores the centres of Nalanda and Bodhgaya which were centres of Mahayana Buddhism (Chattopadhyaya, Chimpa and Chattopadhyaya 1970). The popularity of Vajrayana Buddhism, and the introduction of tantric and sadhana rituals in worshipping Buddha and Bodhisattvas, helped in making the attainment of Buddhahood and happiness simpler and accessible. Recent excavations at Hazaribagh have revealed a monastic complex and with various sculptures including at least two stone images of Tara, and suggests the presence of esoteric Buddhism in the region.

In figure 8, Tara is shown in her known iconography, and the style of the bronze art is equivalent to the Tara stone sculptures found in similar form. The *prabhavali* or halo shown behind her sculpture with fire flame spokes circumambulating the back slab and going upwards to meet the chatra (umbrella) is a typical Pala period stylistic feature commonly used in Tantric Buddhism. This standing figure of Tara is the representation of the height of Pala art.

Conclusion

Tara was the most popular cultic goddess for female donors (Prasad 2020). The likely reason for this could be her association and role as a protector from various problems, as a female compassionate deity. Apart from donations of Tara images made to the Kurkihar monastery, it is also likely, that some of these images were created as votive objects to be carried or taken, when travelling or for merchants and monks to take to other regions.

The origin and development of the cult of Tara is still unknown but such artworks help us get a better understanding of the period and her growth. The bronzes of Tara from Kurkihar are an important source in understanding the interaction between Mahayana

and Vajrayana Buddhism, between the mainstream and esoteric practices prevalent in the then society. The images give us a glimpse of the patrons and the various classes of society, who were interacting and practicing the rituals and methods. In the period between eighth to twelfth centuries, esoteric Buddhism or Tantric Buddhism co-existed alongside cultic Mahayana Buddhism in the sites of Nalanda, Kurkihar, Udayagiri, Ratnagiri and others (Ray 2020). The Tara bronzes with its various iconographies and styles and donative inscriptions stand in testimony of the interactions and exchanges that occurred between these two schools of Buddhism mentioned and the other popular and cultic religious traditions that existed at ground level. Moreover, the inscriptions and patronage details that we find from few of the images act as an alternative source for the Pala period history. These epigraphic sources help understand Pala patronage and society under the Palas from a different point of view as opposed to royal records and inscriptions.

The study of the Tara bronzes of Kurkihar is needed for better understanding of the donor and art production relation, for understanding the interaction between institutional religion and local laity, for the role of patronage from all sections of society and for expanding on the relation between Buddhism and art as a medium of disseminating the Buddhist ideology.

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