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Rakhaldas Bandopadhyay and the Historiography of the Eastern Indian School of Medieval Sculpture

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Abstract

The enigmatic sculpture of Eastern India has attracted the attention of the historians in general and the historians of art in particular right from the beginning of the process of the reconstruction of the history of Bengal in a systematic manner. Rakhaldas Bandopadhyay's comprehensive study of the distinctive characteristic of the art and sculpture of the eastern part of the country may be considered as a great contribution to the history of the region, if not pioneering. The present paper attempts to locate the position of Rakhaldas's Eastern Indian School of Medieval Sculpture along with some of his articles published in different journals in the historiography of Bengal art. It also attempts to understand the methodological and ideological difference of the scholars who worked on the same topic.

[**Keywords:** Eastern Indian School of Medieval Sculpture, Indian Museum, Vaṅgiya Sāhitya Pariṣat, Varendra Research Society, Patna Museum, Archaeological Survey of India, Gauḍīya Śilpa.]

Rakhaldas's scholarship in the field of art history is known from the works like *The Temple of Siva at Bhumara*, *Caves of Badami*, *Haihayas of Tripuri and their Monuments* and the chapter on Gupta architecture and sculpture in *The Age of the Imperial Guptas*. He did not add a chapter on art in his *Bāṅgālār Itihāsa*, volume I, probably because he had a plan to write a separate book on Eastern Indian art. It was under the inspiration of Theodore Bloch that Rakhaldas undertook the task of writing a 'thesis' on the chronological sequence of artistic development in the North Eastern Provinces of India on the basis of palaeography ¹. At the suggestion of Bloch, Rakhaldas undertook the palaeographical examination of inscribed images from Bengal and Bihar, preserved in the archaeological section of the **Indian Museum** as early as 1904 ². Gradually, he brought under his study the sculptures preserved in the Museums of **Vaṅgiya Sāhitya Pariṣat**, **Varendra Research Society**, and the **Patna Museum**. Besides, he used those sculptures,



which he came across in the course of his exploratory tours as a field-archaeologist in different part of Bengal and Bihar.

Eastern Indian School of Medieval Sculpture, completed probably sometime before 1928 and posthumously published in 1933 as a *Memoir* (No. 16) of the **Archaeological Survey of India**, was the most outstanding contribution of Rakhaldas to the history of Bengali art and culture. Taking a clue from the seventeenth century Tibetan historian Tāranātha, who mentioned in his *History of Buddhism in India* that there flourished a School of Art in Eastern India under two artists, Dhīmāna and Bīṭpalo, Rakhaldas Bandopadhyay in the nineteenth century gave the same appellation to his work. The sculptures that have been discussed in this work mostly belong to the Pāla-Sena period extending from the eighth to the twelfth century AD. In Crown Octavo size, it consists of more than two hundred pages and about four hundred illustrations of Eastern Indian sculpture.



The work is divided into eight chapters. The first chapter, which is an Introduction, has discussion on the sources of materials used, the methodology adopted and a preliminary discussion on Indian sculpture. This chapter concludes with the following observation, which indicates the aim of his work:

The conclusion which I have sought to establish in these pages is that from the eighth century to the twelfth, in the eastern provinces of North India artistic activity is evident on a scale, which other provinces of the north and the south failed even to approach in magnificence, excellence and extensity. Here the Pāla and the Sena excelled and even the proud Gurjara-Pratihāras of Kanauj, the Haihayas of Tripuri, the war-like Chahamāna lords of Śākambharī, the learned Pāramāra chiefs of Ujjayini and Dhārā and the proud Chāulukyas of Anahilapāṭaka were compelled to yield the first place to them. Mediæval sculptures have been discovered in varying numbers, in Maharashtra, Gujarat, Rajputana and the *Antarvedi* but nowhere is their total number comparable to the output of a single century in Bengal and Bihar.³

The second chapter entitled **Early History of Sculpture in Eastern India** contains a complete description of sculpture recovered in the eastern provinces of Northern India, during the first seven centuries of the Christian era. The third chapter entitled **The Rise and Evolution of the Eastern School of Medieval Sculpture** is devoted to a detailed palaeographical analysis, which forms the framework of this monograph. The fourth chapter is named as **The Representation of the Buddhacharita**. The special style adopted by the artists of the Eastern School of medieval sculpture in the delineation of the life of the Buddha is described in this chapter. The fifth chapter entitled **Buddhistic Pantheon** begins with a discussion on the *Sādhana* literature and then deals with the



Buddhist iconography in the images of the Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, Lokeśvaras, Maitreya, Mañjuśrī and emanations of Amitābha, Akoṅya and four *dhyānī* Buddhas are described. Chapter VI deals with **The Orthodox or Brahmanical Pantheon**. In this chapter, the author has considered the iconography of the Vaiṣṇava images, the images of ten incarnations, the Śaiva images, the Śākta images and miscellaneous images of Sūrya, Kārttikeya, Gaṇeśa, Brahmā, Gaṅgā, Lakṣmī, Chaṇḍī, Manasā and Sarasvatī. The seventh chapter is entitled **Metal Casting and Jaina Images**. In the first section of the chapter, there is a discussion on metal images, *chaityas* and utensils of workshop. The second section of the chapter deals with the Jaina images discovered in different parts of Bengal and Bihar. Chapter VIII entitled **Temples and Architecture** contains a discussion on temple types in the first section and architectural members, such as decorated pillars, finials, *Toraṇa*, door flames, lintels, stone windows, arches etc. in the second section.



However, the methodology adopted by Rakhaldas was to establish the chronological sequence of the Pāla-Sena sculptures according to their epigraphical and palaeographical evidence. In his article entitled ‘Gauḍīya Śilper Itihāsa’ a significant statement has been made by Rakhaldas:

Ancient sculptures discovered in the Gauḍa kingdom, which bear no date or king’s name, but have on them inscribed the name of the donor only or a *mantra*, can be dated on palaeographical ground. Such an image bearing inscriptions can be decisively dated in the time of the kings belonging to the Pāla or Sena dynasty. It has become possible to trace the origin and development of the art style of Gauḍa on the basis of a chronological arrangement of the inscribed images preserved in the Museum of Calcutta, Patna, Dacca and Varendra Research Society of Rajsahi.⁴

Therefore, in tracing the stylistic evolution of the sculptures, Rakhaldas has attached more importance to the epigraphical data than on the cognizable stylistic features of the sculptures under study. His approach is more historical than aesthetic. On this question of methodology, Rakhaldas had an interaction with O.C. Ganguly who was of opinion that “spades, estampages and inscriptions form their (archaeologists’) aesthetic judgments.”⁵ In a personal discussion with Rakhaldas, Ganguly claimed that it is possible to determine the date of a sculpture or an image on consideration of its form and style even without knowing the date inscribed on it. He explained his view by determining the dates of five or six Indian sculptures by analyzing their stylistic features. Rakhaldas verified the dates suggested by Ganguly by examining inscribed dates of the images concerned. In O.C. Ganguly’s language:



...the famous archaeologist had to admit his defeat before the theory of aestheticism.⁶

We may also take into consideration Rakhaldas's understanding of the ideal of art. In his article entitled 'Śilper Ādarśa' published in the journal *Sachitra Śīśir* he observed:

The ideal of art is beauty. The concept of beauty is determined by the intellectual power of a nation. In different times and different places concept of images varied.⁷

Again, he has pointed out that the canons of art are for bearing the medium; an artist should supersede them in his creation. It is stated in the article mentioned above:

The *Śilpaśāstra* may teach about the proportion of the face in relation to the body; but what would be the expression of the face after its delineation that depends on the power of realization and self-consciousness of the artist himself. No teacher of the canonical injunction can advise him on it.⁸

Therefore, Rakhaldas believed in the spirit of freedom of expression in art.

The methodology adopted by Rakhaldas to trace the origin and development of the Gauda style of art has been explained in his Introduction to *The Eastern Indian School of Medieval Sculpture* thus:

A comparison between an image of the Buddhist goddess Tārā in the collection of the Varendra Research Society with an inscribed image of Tārā of the Indian Museum shows that the latter belonged to the eighth century AD in all probability, while the former has to be placed in the twelfth century AD.

The palaeographical examination of the inscribed specimens in the Indian Museum proves that the decline of the political fortunes of the Pāla kings in the ninth and tenth centuries (between the reign of Devapāla and Mahīpāla) was not parallel with the decline of artistic creations in the eastern provinces. In these two centuries, the artists of Eastern Bengal were much more active than those of Northern and Western Bengal. The specimens, which can be definitely assigned to these two centuries also, come from Magadha or South Bihar.

The reign of Mahīpāla I brought about an artistic renaissance in which Northern Bengal took the leading part. The new style, successor of the old style of the tenth century, lacked the supreme vigour of the eighth century in the reproduction of ideal beauty of form and benign expression with firm adherence to the canons of the *Śilpaśāstras*, Northern Bengal specimens of the eleventh century show that sufficient liberty was given to the artist's expression in accordance with individual capability.

With the rise of the Senas and the decline of the Pālas, Bihar and Eastern Bengal once more took the lead in the field of artistic activity. However, the sculpture of the twelfth century was degraded, disproportionate and limited within the boundaries of tradition. Yet the artists employed their skill in depicting significant smile on the face of



an image or in imparting to the countenance of Lokeśvara an expression of ethereal grace. The slavish obedience to the rules of the *Śilpaśāstras* made it possible to distinguish a Bihar image from an Eastern Bengal example. With the fall of the vast monastic establishment of Uddāṇapura and Nālandā in AD 1199 by the invasion of the Turks under Bakhtiyar Khilji, the history of Magadha art came to an end.

Lakṣmaṇāvātī fell within the next two decades by Turkish inroads and artistic activities were brought to a sudden end in North-Western and West-Central Bengal in the earlier decades of the thirteenth century. Eastern Bengal continued its existence as an independent kingdom till the first quarter of the thirteenth century. Its artists continued to produce decadent stylized imitations of the twelfth century specimens. The supply of slates and basalts from Bihar had stopped and the artists of Eastern Bengal were compelled to have recourse to wood as the only cheap material available for plastic work. Wooden images discovered in parts of Dacca district betray poverty of imagination, and sign of extreme decadence.



The Turkish kings of Bengal employed Hindu artists in decorating their mosques and tombs. The decorative motifs found in the Adina Mosques, the Eklakhi Tomb and the other specimens of pre-Mughal architecture of Bengal show an assimilation of pre-medieval style with that of the medieval period.

Modern stone carving of Bengal is but a mere shadow of its former grandeur. Modern sculptors imitate the soulless hybrid schools of stone carving prevalent at Benaras and Jaipur. It has no connection with the ancient school of sculpture of Bengal.

From the eighth to the twelfth century, artistic activity in Eastern India reached such a height that could not be reached by other provinces of the North and the South. From the above it appears that Rakhaldas traced the origin, development and decline of art activity of early medieval Bengal purely from a historical and chronological point of view. However, being a parallel publication of Nalinikanta Bhattashali's *Iconography of Buddhist and Brahmanical Sculptures in the Dacca Museum* (1929), *The Eastern Indian School of Medieval Sculpture* showed Rakhaldas's independent scholarship in the newly developing discipline of iconography based on his command over the ancient Brahmanical and Buddhist texts. He explained the myths behind and *dhyānas* of the Pāla-Sena images with the help of illustrations. Moreover, he succeeded in interpreting a number of enigmatic icons including one, which he identified as of Viṣṇu-Lokeśvara in cognizance of its combined features of the Brahmanical god Viṣṇu and the Buddhist Bodhisattva Lokeśvara.



The history of Gauḍa art that we find in the Eastern school of medieval sculpture was also traced by Rakhaladas in a series of essays in Bengali published in the journal *Pravāsī* between 1927 and 1930. Those essays are:

- ‘Gauḍīya Śilper Itihāsa’⁹
- ‘Gauḍīya Śilper Ādiyuga’¹⁰
- ‘Daśam Śatake Gauḍīya Śilpa’¹¹
- ‘Gauḍīya Śilper Punarutthān’¹²
- ‘Dakṣiṇ – Paśchim Vaṅger Śilpa’¹³
- ‘Gauḍīya Śilper Dākṣiṇātya Prabhāv’¹⁴

The following outline of the history of Gauḍa art may be reconstructed in the light of the articles mentioned above, as it has been done by Kalyankumar Dasgupta.¹⁵

1. In *Gauḍadeśa* art flourished in the eighth-ninth century under the patronage of the Pāla Kings Dharmapāla and Devapāla, as it once flourished with new inspirations under the Indo-Greek rulers in Gandhāra region and at Mathurā under the Śaka-Kuṣāṇas. (‘Gauḍīya Śilper Itihāsa’)



2. During the early centuries of the Christian era, the art of Mathurā spread to different parts of the country as the most dominant style of the time. Similarly, the art of Gauḍa travelled to distant parts of Northern India, from Śrāvasti in the west to Assam in the east, as the leading style of the period extending from the eighth century to the twelfth century AD. (‘Gauḍīya Śilper Itihāsa’)

3. The artistic activity at Dhāra in Malwa, Tripuri in Baghelkhand, Kharjuravāhaka in Bundelkhand, Kānyakubja in the United Provinces and Mathurā in the Delhi-Agra region was consolidated in the tenth-eleventh centuries AD. But, the art of Gauḍa flourished much earlier in the eighth-ninth centuries due to peace and prosperity established in Bengal (*Gauḍarājya*) in the time of Dharmapāla and Devapāla. (‘Gauḍīya Śilper Itihāsa’)



4. Although the history of Gauda art covered four centuries, from the eighth to the twelfth century AD, the artistic activity sometimes flourished and also met decadence at some stages. The excellence and magnificence of the Gauda art did not enjoy an unbroken continuity. (‘Gauḍīya Śilper Itihāsa’)

5. The influence of the Karnataka sculpture on that of Gauda is marked sometime before the Turkish invasion of Bengal. The influence of the Karnataka style was brought to Gauda in course of the conquest of Bengal and Mithila by two military chiefs coming from Karnataka country in the Western Deccan sometime in the eleventh century. A new stylistic trend blended with the prevalent Gauda style to give birth to the fully developed medieval style. (‘Gauḍīya Śilpe Dākṣiṇātya Prabhāv’)

6. A comparison between the Hindu and Buddhist images could show that a common ideal of art emerged by way of synthesis in *Gauḍarāṣṭra*. ('Gauḍīya Śilper Punarutthān')

7. The images of the Buddhist and Brahmanical deities followed the same art ideals in portraying the anthropometric forms and attires. Therefore, the classification of Indian art in terms of their religious affiliations such as Buddhist, Jaina and Hindu, has to be discarded. On the other hand, emphasis should be laid on the study of art in relation to chronological and regional developments. ('Gauḍīya Śilper Punarutthān')

8. The regional stylistic development of sculpture is found in south-west Bengal. It indicates the existence of a sub-school within the Gauḍīya or Pāla-Sena school. ('Dakṣiṇ-Paśchim Vaṅger Śilpa')

Whereas Rakhaldas Bandopadhyay's approach was historical and chronological at the same time, at a later period the art historians like Niharranjan Roy attempted to trace the stylistic evolution of Bengal sculpture from the eighth to the twelfth century AD.¹⁶ It is pointed out that in the eighth century AD, there were very features of the contemporaneous Māgadhī style of sculpture in the short, stocky body as well as in the facial expressions. The modest bodily adornment and elegance of figure were artistic ideals of the early stages of the Pāla period. In the ninth century, a gentle fleshiness within the inert physique and body-outline of the body emerged as an ideal of art. In a very few cases there is an indication of lofty thought or profound insight. Going beyond the fleshly elegance within a strong, sharply defined outline, the tenth century ideal was in the creation of bold, strong bodies. There was, in the posture and form, a clear suggestion of self-consciousness and restrained vigour illuminating the entire body. It is the grand vivacity, which transforms the soft fleshiness of the ninth century into the immeasurable vigour of the tenth century.



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