

# Sculptural Art of the Buddhist Goddesses *Mārīcī* of Pre-Medieval Bengal with Special Reference to West Bengal: An Iconographic Study

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**Abstract:** The images of various sculptures of the Buddhist goddess *Mārīcī* as mother goddess have been discovered from various parts of Bengal during the early medieval period. Different types of sculptural forms of the goddess Buddhist goddess *Mārīcī* are seen standing *pratyālīḍha* posture have been found from Bengal including Bangladesh during the period of our study. The sculptors or the artists of Bengal skillfully sculpted to represent the images of the goddess *Mārīcī* as one of the chief deity in the *Mārīcī Maṇḍala* and she is closely associated with *Vairocana*, one of the important *Dhyāni Buddhas*. These artistic activities are considered as valuable resources in Bengal as well as in the entire world.

**Keywords:** *Mārīcī*, *Sādhnamālā*, Solar deity, Tantric Buddhism, valuable resources.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

The three religious systems of India such as Brahmanism, Buddhism, and Jainism are known to have developed their respective groups of pantheons from an early period. As a result of a free and frequent interchange of ideas, it becomes difficult to determine which of them should be assigned as a particular image. A large number of scholars devoted themselves to the studies of Buddhist iconography, but with the publication of *Sādhnamālā*,<sup>[1]</sup> the task of identification of Buddhist images becomes easier. Besides, *Sādhnamālā* entitled as *Dharmakoṣasaṅgraha* of *Amritananda*, and the *Niṣpannayogavālī* of *Mahāpaṇḍita*, *Abhayākara Gupta* are of great importance from the point of views of studies on Buddhist iconography. The numerous Tantric texts like *Hevajra Tantra*, *Heruka Tantra*, *Vajravārāhī Tantra*, *Yoginījāla Tantra*, and others also supply ample testimonials of information in this respect.

The very affluent and different variety of the area of the image of ancient Bengal allows us to an imminent into the highly developed and vibrant cult during the last period of Buddhism in Indian subcontinent. Apart from numerous Buddha sculptures, there is a strong presence of *Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara* and *Mañjuśrī* in different forms, the female goddesses like *Tārā*, *Mārīcī*, *Cuṇḍā*, *Mahāpratisarā*, and *Parnasabari* as well as the minor divinities *Jambhala* and *Heruka*. The recognition and amalgamation of figures and symbols from other religions and philosophical contexts furnish the impression of gracefulness and enthusiasm.<sup>[2]</sup>

The images of Buddhist sculptures from early medieval Bengal are well-known and distinguished by iconographic complexity and artistic workmanship. The development already starts in the Pre-Gupta period; however, the greater part of this development may be assigned to the 11<sup>th</sup> or 12<sup>th</sup> century CE. In all probability, some of these images belong to the first half of the 13<sup>th</sup> century CE. Strong tantric influences and unique features are already evident in the earlier pieces of the 9<sup>th</sup> or 10<sup>th</sup> century CE.

Exquisite Buddhist gods and goddesses in Indian sculptures as well as in Bengal sculptures during the early medieval period are of important themes. A large number of female counterparts representing the Buddhist goddesses in Tantric

Buddhism in Bengal during the Pāla-Sena period have been found from different parts of Bengal. Most popular Buddhist goddess is *Tārā* and her different forms, *Prajñāpāramitā*, *Aparājitā*, *Parṇasābarī*, *Mārīcī*, *Cuṇḍā*, and *Hārītī* are other Buddhist goddesses. The sculptors or the artists of Bengal have skillfully sculpted the Buddhist female representations in the sculptural art of Bengal during the period of our studies. Various Tāntric Buddhist goddesses *Mārīcī* with their different forms, features, and attributes may be studied under the following heads from iconographic and epigraphic points of view:

## II. AIMS AND OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

In the present study, entitled '*Sculptural Art of the Buddhist Goddesses Mārīcī of Pre-Medieval Bengal with Special Reference to West Bengal: An Iconographic Study*', the author wants to undertake a critical study of the sculptural art of the Buddhist goddess *Mārīcī* found from different parts of West Bengal and few from Bangladesh during the early medieval period. The study deals with analytical studies of iconographic and epigraphic features of the images of the goddess *Marici* of Buddhist pantheon in different parts of West Bengal and in Bangladesh.

## III. ICONOGRAPHIC FEATURES OF THE BUDDHIST DEITY *MĀRĪCĪ*

*Mārīcī*, the Buddhist goddess of light and victory, was very often represented in Eastern India during the *Pāla* period. The oldest image comes from Bodhgaya.<sup>[3]</sup> According to *Sādhanamālā*, the Buddhist goddess *Mārīcī* looks like the Hindu Sun god i.e. *Surya* who has a chariot. Her chariot is drawn by seven pigs while the chariot of the sun is drawn by seven horses. She is often accompanied by the *Graha Rāhu*, the demon stands for darkness and causes solar and lunar eclipses. *Rāhu* is the only *graha* represented as a subsidiary figure on an image of a Buddhist goddess. She may have one, three, five or six faces, and two, eight, ten or twelve hands, and three eyes according to the *Sādhanā*. She is generally accompanied by four attendants' viz. *Varttālī*, *Vadālī*, *Vārālī*, and *Varāmukhī*.<sup>[4]</sup> Three faced and eight-armed *Mārīcī* is very popular in India, particular in Bengal sculptures. Her right face is red and the left one is a hideous pig face of blue colour. The four right hands are with the thunderbolt, the elephant-goad, arrow, and needle: while *asoka* leaf, bow, noose, and *tarjjanimudrā* are in four left hands. Goddess *Mārīcī* is the chief deity in the *Mārīcī Maṇḍala* of the *Nispannāyogavalī*. The goddess *Mārīcī* is closely associated with *Vairocana*, one of the important *Dhyānī Buddhas*.

A few numbers of stone sculptures of the goddess *Mārīcī* were discovered from different places of West Bengal and Bangladesh. Now, these are the preserved specimens of different museums of West Bengal and Bangladesh. We have identified and recorded only sixteen (16) images of the Buddhist solar goddess *Mārīcī* from Bengal in particular.

An inscribed stone sculpture of the Buddhist goddess *Mārīcī* (Fig.1) belonging to the c.10<sup>th</sup> century CE, found from Rajnagar of Birbhum district of West Bengal, now in the Gurusaday Museum, Kolkata shows standing *ālīḍha* pose on a *saptaratha* simple pedestal adorned a chariot drawn by *Rāhu* with the help of seven pigs. The goddess has three-faces, the left one is of a pig and the rest two faces are in anthropomorphic form with eight hands. The present deity is accompanied by three female attendants with four hands, sow-faces *Varttālī* and *Varālī* to the right and left side, respectively while the seated *Vadālī* in between her two legs of the image. The *Aṣṭabhujā-Mārīcī* holds a clockwise needle, arrow, elephant goad in her right hands, while she carries clockwise the thunderbolt, Asoka leaf, bow, thread and *tarjanimudra* in her left hands respectively. The goddess is well adorned with various ornaments and she wears a beautiful coiffure, round-shaped heavy necklace, elongated ear-rings, a long *upavīta*, and well-decorated armlets and waistband. The lower portion of the image is wrapped with beautiful folded drapery of the *śāḍī*. The upper back slab of the image is decorated with two standing boar-faced female figures on either side or a miniature pilaster at the apex. It is very important to note that some inscriptions in the *Brāhmī* scripts are inscribed on the bottom of the pedestal of the image. The text is 'sa [?] paṇu [...] ddrakāritaśrīmārīcībhaṭṭarikāya'. The inscription may be translated as the [image of] the illustrious goddess *Mārīcī* made (i.e. donated) by ....*Bhadra*'. This is a very fine specimen of Bengal art during the early medieval period.<sup>[5]</sup>



Fig.1. *Mārīcī*,Rajnagar, WB(Courtesy: Gurusaday Museum, Kolkata)



An important stone sculpture representing the Buddhist goddess *Mārīcī* (Fig.2) found from Balurghat, now in the State Archaeological Museum, Kolkata (*hereinafter*, SAMK) shows the goddess stands in *pratyālīḍha* posture on a *pañcaratha* pedestal decorated as a chariot drawn by the charioteer *Rāhu* with the help of seven pigs. The lower portion of the pedestal is decked with *saptaranta* or seven jewels. The goddess has three faces and eight hands. The left face is that of a pig while the other two faces are in human forms. The eight-handed goddess carries clockwise *sūci* (needle), arrow, elephant goad, thunderbolt, Asoka leaf, bow, thread and in *tarjani mudrā*. She is accompanied by three female attendants, *Vadāli* in between two legs of the image, *Vaṭṭalī* to the right and *Varālī* to the left sides. All the attendants have four hands. The goddess *Mārīcī* is well decorated with valuable ornaments and she wears a beautiful coiffure, heavy necklace, adorned armbands and waistband whereas her lower portion of her body from waist to the knees is wrapped with beautifully folded cloths. Three eyes, naval coup of the goddess are prominently shown. She possesses well-developed bosoms though her left one is broken. The rectangular back slab is decorated with miniature pilasters on either side of the image. The life-size image measuring 77 cm×55.5 cm belongs to the c.11<sup>th</sup> century CE. [6]

**Fig.2. *Mārīcī*, Balurghat, WB (Courtesy: SAMK)**

Another c.10<sup>th</sup> century CE image representing the Buddhist goddess *Mārīcī* (Fig.3) is preserved in the SAMK (Acc. no.05.283) and the exact find-spot of the image is unknown. The iconographic features of the three-faced and eight-armed deity are the same as the specimen hailing from Balurghat, West Bengal. This specimen is short in size measuring 57cm×28 cm compared to the previous specimens.



**Fig.3. *Mārīcī*, Unspecified of West Bengal (Courtesy: SAMK)**

Fragment of the goddess *Mārīcī* is also preserved in the SAMK (Acc. No.05.70) and the find-spot of the image is unknown. The lower portion of the image from the waist is broken. The goddess has three-faced and probably eight hands but only five hands are seen and the holding attributes in hands are not identified due to its corroded condition. The beautiful coiffure, heavy necklace and round-shaped ear-rings of the deity are distinct. The stone sculpture of the female representation of the goddess *Mārīcī* may be assigned to a date c.11<sup>th</sup> century CE. [7]

Another interesting image of the goddess *Mārīcī* belonging to the c.11<sup>th</sup> century CE was found from Kalitala village of Sagardighi area of Murshidabad district, West Bengal. [8] The three-faced and eight-handed goddess is shown standing in a *pratyālīḍha* pose on a *saptaratha* pedestal adorned with a chariot drawn by *Rāhu* with the help of seven pigs. The goddess is flanked by three attendants, *Vattali* and *Varali* to the right and left side, respectively while *Vadāli* in between two legs of the main figure of the image. The hands are full of attributes followed by *Sādhana* and the goddess is adorned with usual ornaments. This is a superb and excellent creation of Bengal artist.





An interesting unpublished eight-handed three-faced of the Buddhist goddess *Mārīcī* (Fig.4) has been found in the village of Sivbari area of the Dakshin Dinajpur district, West Bengal. The image is now under a personal collection of Asok Nandi. The pedestal adorned with a chariot is drawn by *Rāhu* with the help of seven pigs. The goddess is flanked by three attendants, *Vattālī* and *Vārālī* to the right and left side, respectively while *Vadālī* in between two legs of the main figure of the image. The left face is that of a pig while the other two faces are in human form. The eight-handed goddess carries clockwise *sūcī* (needle), an arrow (?), elephant goad, thunderbolt, *aśoka* leaf, bow, thread and in *tarjani mudrā*, respectively. It is interesting to note that there is no figure or symbol without the miniature figure of Buddha engraved on the *prabhāvalī* (upper back slab). The hands are full of attributes following *Sādhana* and the goddess is adorned with usual ornaments. It may be conjectured that the image is assigned the date c.12<sup>th</sup> century CE. This is a superb and excellent specimen of Bengal art.

**Fig.4. *Mārīcī*, Sivbari, WB (Courtesy: Ashok Nandi)**

Another nine (9) important images of the goddess *Mārīcī*, one from Ujani village of Faridpur, Bangladesh are now in the Bangladesh National Museum, Dacca, one from Panditsar of Faridpur district, Bangladesh, one from Atpara near Beltali of Dacca district, Bangladesh now in the Varendra Research Museum, Rajshahi (*hereinafter*, VRMR), one from Dauli of Dacca district and now it is also preserved in the VRMR,<sup>[9]</sup> and another two hailing from Rajshahi, and Tippera Bangladesh are preserved in the VRMR. The Dacca Museum specimen is the same as the SAMK specimen from Balurghat but slightly differenced. The goddess is accompanied by four attendants while the previous specimen is accompanied by three attendants. There are some sculptures representing the Buddhist goddess *Mārīcī* in the collection, one in the Mahasthan Museum (Acc. No. is not available and the image is partially damaged), and one in the Mainamati Museum (Acc. No.2997) and two specimens in the Khulna Museum (Acc. No. KM 61 & 48) safely preserved.<sup>[10]</sup> All the preserved specimens are mentioned earlier follow the description of *Sādhanamālā* and iconographic and stylistic features of the image are more or less similar in characters.

Three images of eight-handed *Mārīcī*, two from Nalanda and the other one from Bodhgayā, at present preserved in the Indian Museum, Kolkata (*hereinafter*, IMK), are the specimens of the most beautiful iconographical pieces. The IMK is in the possession of a highly remarkable piece of goddess *Mārīcī*, dated in between to c.11<sup>th</sup> to the c.12<sup>th</sup> century CE. The images depict the goddess having three-faced and eight-armed, standing in the *ālīḍha* attitude, with her right leg somewhat pendant and the left one thrown behind quite straight, over a double petalled lotus.<sup>[11]</sup> The goddess is shown carrying the needle, the elephant goad, the arrow, the thunderbolt and the left hands having the string, the Asoka flower, the bow and a noose in the raised index finger against her breast (*tarjani pāsa*). Below the main deity or principal figure on the pedestal showing seven pigs are seen supposed to draw the chariot. According to the *Sādhana*, the goddess is to be accompanied by four female attendants.<sup>[12]</sup>

A notable and important image of the Buddhist goddess *Mārīcī*, is already illustrated by B. Bhattacharya, and is also found in the IMK. Although much similar to the preceding one, the image belongs to the same period. The arrow is held in the second right hand, in place of an elephant goad or spear. In this icon, only three attendant figures are seen instead of four. The absence of the fourth figure is evidently due to the position of the uppermost right hand of the goddess that no space could be spared for her to be represented.<sup>[13]</sup>

#### IV. CONCLUSION

From the above discussion and a number of the Buddhist female representations of the goddess *Mārīcī* found from different part of West Bengal and Bangladesh, it appears that the worships of Buddhist goddesses *Mārīcī* had wide influences among the people of the society mainly in the *vanga*, *samatata*, and *varendī* or *varenda* region of Bengal i.e. more or less all over Bengal during the early medieval period. The find-spots of different types of the images of the Buddhist goddess *Mārīcī* indicate that during the pre-medieval period, Dakshin Dinajpur, Murshidabad i.e. *Varendrī* and *samatata* regions, and Rajshahi district of Bangladesh were regarded as important, notable cultural and religious centres of Buddhism. Different types of Tantric Buddhist goddess *Mārīcī* had wide popularity and acceptability to the worshipers.

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