

Sculptures of the Goddess *Cāmuṇḍā* from Early North Bengal: A Study Based on Iconography and Epigraphy

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Abstract: *The images of various sculptures of the goddess Cāmuṇḍā as terrible aspects of the mother goddess (as icons of Śakti) have been unearthed from various parts of North Bengal during the early medieval period. Different types of sculptural forms of the goddess Cāmuṇḍā seen sitting, standing, or in dancing postures have been discovered from North Bengal during the period of our study. Almost all the images of the goddesses Cāmuṇḍā belonging to the Pāla-Sena period are made of black basalt, few of them of brass, bronze or octo-alloy found from different parts of North Bengal. These artistic activities and the images are considered valuable resources in Bengal art as well as in eastern Indian art from iconographic and epigraphic point of view.*

Keywords: *Cāmuṇḍā, Emaciated Body, Naramuṇḍamālā, Sculptural Art, Terrible Aspects.*

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Introduction

There are various opinions regarding the area of North Bengal or *Uttarbanga* as it is called *Greater Uttarbanga*, *Abibhakta Uttarbanga* and *Bibhakta Uttarbanga*. In general, the northern region of the state of West Bengal is known as North Bengal which politically consists of eight districts- Darjeeling, Kalimpong, Jalpaiguri, Alipurduar, Coochbehar, Uttar Dinajpur, Dakshin Dinajpur and Malda. The region is separated by the river Ganges from the western part of West Bengal which is generally referred to as South Bengal. In ancient period, Bengal was divided into many geographical units such as *Puṇḍravardhana*, *Vaṅga*, *Samataṭa*, *Rārḥ*, *Harikela*, *Gauḍa*, *Varendra* or *Varendrī*, *Tāmrālipta*, *Dandabhukti* etc. (Sarkar, 1950:125-130). Modern North Bengal or ancient Northern part of Bengal was consisted of *Puṇḍravardhana*, *Gauḍa*, *Varendra* or *Varendrī*, etc. North Bengal is a rich cultural

and heritage centre of Bengal. Huge numbers of artifacts, images, temples, terracotta etc. have been discovered from North Bengal. Lots of images of different religions such as Brāhmanical, Buddhist and Jaina images have been found from different districts of North Bengal. Sculptures of the Brāhmanical goddesses which have been found in different parts of North Bengal have special significance in Bengal as well as in entire eastern India and are considered to be valuable resource of art. The art and sculptures were well developed over a period of four hundred years and more in eastern India under the Pāla and Sena rulers. During these four centuries under the Pāla and Senas. Gods and goddesses, whether Buddhist or Brāhmanical or Jaina, have well established iconographic types of different images during this four centuries (Bhattacharya, 1983:3).

Cāmuṇḍā, one of the important *ugra* or one of the terrible aspects of goddess *Dūrgā* or *Śakti*, in the group of Seven-*Mātrikās* (eight?), is very common in Bengal as well as in eastern India. *Cāmuṇḍā* images are numerous among the *Mātrikās*. The author has been able to identify ten (10) images of the goddess *Cāmuṇḍā* from different places of North Bengal during the period of his study. According to *Nispannāyogāvalī*, (Bhattacharyay 1949:62) the worship of *Cāmuṇḍā* was also embodied or incorporated in Buddhism and the goddess has great popularity in Brāhmanical Hinduism and Buddhism (Chakraborty, 1993:135). But, no iconographic form of *Cāmuṇḍā* has been found in Bengal corresponding to the description given in *Nispannāyogāvalī*. As a result, the Buddhist origin of the images remains in doubt. According to *Devīmāhātmya* section (87.25) of the *Mārkeṇḍeya Purāna*, *Kālī*, the outburst of *Devī* obtained the title of *Cāmuṇḍā* for killing two demons named, *Caṇḍa* and *Muṇḍa* (F.E. Pargiter, 1904). According to *Agni Purāna* (Chap.135), the goddess lives in the burial place, sits, rides or dances on dead body or corpse, surrounded by vultures or jackals, etc. She wears tiger or elephant skin, a garland of the human skull (*naramuṇḍamālā*), and her ornaments is black serpents. Her body is emaciated with sunken belly, protruding ribs and swollen veins. The goddess is three-eyed; her eyes are depressed, hair ends are in a standing condition like flames; holds various attributes in her hands and she exposes a fearful appearance.

Objective of the Study

In the present study, titled ‘Sculptures of the Goddess *Cāmuṇḍā* from Early North Bengal: A Study Based on Iconography and Epigraphy’, the author wants to undertake a critical study of the images of the goddess *Cāmuṇḍā* discovered from early North Bengal from iconographic and epigraphic point of view.

Source Materials & Methodology

Primary sources have been collected from various historical places, archaeological sites, and monasteries, temples, *Śākta-pīthas* and different Museums of West Bengal for the completion of this article. A good number of books, articles, journals, and periodicals have been published in this field and the author has keenly followed and used these as secondary sources. The methodology followed for the study was historical, based on both library works and field study.

Analysis and Discussion

According to *Agni-Purāna*, *Cāmuṇḍā* is one of the forms of *Seven-Mātrikās*, mentioning eight varieties of *Cāmuṇḍā* (50.36b). N. K. Bhattasali (Bhattasali, 1929: 209-211) has discussed in details regarding

various iconic forms of *Cāmuṇḍā* given in various texts and has these as *Rudra-Canḍīkā*, *Rudra-Carcikā*, *Rudra-Cāmuṇḍā*, *Mahālakṣmī*, *Sidha-Cāmuṇḍīkā*, *Siddha-Yogeśvarī*, *Rupavidyā*, *Kṣamā*, and *Danturā*. Later, Marie-Therese de Mallmenn (1963:155-156), T. A. Gopinath Rao (Gopinath Rao, 1914: 382-388), J. N. Banerjea (Banerjea, 1956: 230-237) and Enamul Haque (Haque, 1992: 267-284) have observed and studied the various iconic forms of *Cāmuṇḍā* on the basis of literary texts and archaeological evidences found from Bengal. The author has been able to identify fourteen (14) images of *Cāmuṇḍā* including fragmentary conditions from different parts of North Bengal and the extant images can be divided on their number of hands and their cognizance's as follows:

The author has noticed only one four-armed black stone image (size: 63×36 cm) of the goddess *Cāmuṇḍā* (**Fig.1**) from Itahar of Uttar Dinajpur district of West Bengal and now it is safely preserved in the State Archaeological Museum, Kolkata (*hereinafter*, SAMK). Goddess *Cāmuṇḍā* is seen seated in a *lalitāsana* pose on a full blown lotus pedestal, with her right leg rests on the dead body lying below in the pedestal, while her left leg is tucked upon the seat. The pedestal is surrounded by a standing jackal to the left and a female devotee is in *anjālimudrā* attitude to the extreme left side of the pedestal. The goddess showing clockwise *varadamudrā* in her lower right hand, holding a *kapāla* (skull) with in her upper right hand, a trident is seen in between two left hands and upper left hand slightly touches her neck and the lower left hand is seen resting on the left lap. According to *Agni Purāna* (50.22b-23a), the four-handed *Cāmuṇḍā* may have *kapāla* (skull) and *paṭṭiśa* in her left hands, *karṭṛ* and *śula* in her right hands. This image does not match or fit with this view or any other textual descriptions of four-armed *Cāmuṇḍā* (Haque, 1992: 270, pl. 216); Sengupta et al, 2014: 145, pl. XXVII).

She possesses emaciated body, sunken eyes, pendulous breast and contracted belly. She wears a *naramundamālā* (garlands with human skull) and *sarpankuṇḍalas* (surrounded by serpent). An elephant skin creates a canopy-like structure on the stela over the head of the goddess. The image makes a fear psychosis to the audiences through her terrible appearance. It may be conjectured that the image may be assigned to c.11th century A.D. Another notable four-handed inscribed image of the goddess *Cāmuṇḍā* (**Fig.2,2a**) has been found from Gangarampur of Dakshin Dinajpur district, West Bengal and now it is preserved in the Museum and Art Gallery of the University of Burdwan, Burdwan (now, Purba-Bardhaman). The goddess is in a seated pose on a male corpse under a banyan tree with her slightly raised right knee. She has an emaciated body with shrunken belly showing the protruding ribs and veins, bare teeth and sunken eyes with round projecting eye-balls. She is just laughing horribly and from her socks, several snakes are peeping out. She carries clockwise the kettledrum, a knife, a trident and a human skull in her hands, respectively. The lower part of her body is covered with a tiger skin and she is bejeweled with an *hāra* (necklace), *yajñopavīta* (sacred thread), a garland of human skulls and bones, armlets, many bangles, anklets, and earrings. An oval-shaped *śiracakra* (head circle) and flame-screen are found on the stela. A row, a small *liṅga*, a devotee with folded hand, a vulture, three human skulls, an owl, a jackal, and an unidentified figure is engraved on the pedestal. An inscription is beautifully engraved on the pedestal and the text is '*Bhaṭṭārikāśrī...Suta Prahasita*' means 'the image is a donation of *Prahasita*, the son of the illustrious' (Jana, 2000: 51-52). The author assume that the text is '*Bhaṭṭārikā śrījña cāgjo (cāggo)...Suta Prahasita*' which means 'the image a donation of *Prahasita*, the son of the famous *jña cāgjo (cāggo)*'. The paleographical and stylistic features indicate that the image belongs to the c.11th-12th century CE.

Another two important and notable black stone images of six-handed *Cāmuṇḍā* have been found, one from Jordighi (1961-62:107) of Dakshin Dinajpur district, now in SAMK and another in Balurghat College Museum, Balurghat (*hereinafter*, BCMB). The upper portion of the *prabhābalī* (upper back slab or stela) and lower part of the six-armed image of the goddess *Cāmuṇḍā* found from Jordighi are totally broken. The SAMK specimen (**Fig. 3**) carries *kapāla* (skull-cup), *kartṛ* (knife) and *damaru* (kettledrum) in her right hands whereas she holds *tarjani*, *triśula* (trident) and *naramuṇḍa* (human head) in her left hands respectively. A *naramundamālā* (garland of skulls) representing as *yagnopovīta* (sacred thread) is clearly seen on her neck of the image. The goddess is seen seated in a *lalitāsana* pose on a *sava* or *preta* (dead body) who is lying on a *pañcaratha* pedestal under a *vatavrkṣa* (banyan tree) with a human skull. The pedestal is adorned with human heads between a donor couples, a jackal at the extreme left. These skulls and an animal figure on the pedestal suggest the environment of a *śmaśāna* (burial place of the dead body), the abode of the goddess. An inscription identifying it as ‘*carcikā*’ is inscribed on the upper *prabhābalī* (upper back slab or stela) of this image. The inscription clearly indicates the name of the image is ‘*carcikā*’, another popular name of the goddess *Cāmuṇḍā*. The specimen shows the sign of traces of trunk and a leg of elephant skin. It may be conjectured that the image belongs to c.11th century A.D.

The BCMB (**Fig. 4**) specimen (size: 76×39 cm) shows the goddess seated on *lalitāsana* pose on a corpse along with two standing male figures on each side. The goddess *Cāmuṇḍā* holds the clockwise *kapāla*, knife and *damaru* (kettledrum) in her right hands while she carries a trident, human skull (*naramuṇḍa*) and slightly touches her nose. A jackal, a vulture, a corpse to the left, *pañcanaramuṇḍa* (five human heads) in the middle, a vulture and a female figure to the right are engraved on the pedestal. The upper back slab is adorned with an elephant skin which creates a canopy over the head of the goddess. It seems that the elephant is tracing forward. The goddess belongs to the c.10th-11th century CE.

A standing eight-armed black stone image (**Fig. 5**) of the goddess *Cāmuṇḍā* has been found from Raiganj (Uttar Dinajpur District, West Bengal), and now the image is safely preserved in the SAMK (Rahman, 1998: 222, pl.217). The goddess *Camunda* is depicted in standing pose on a recumbent carcass positioned on a lotus pedestal decked with a bowl of human heads, a bearded man kneeling in *añjalīmudrā* to right, floral motifs and a man standing to the left with head fallen by side and surrounded by a jackal to the left. Upper left and right hands are engaged in holding elephant skin. She carries clockwise the attributes, *kapāla* (skull-cup), *damaru* (kettledrum), *kartṛ* (knife); *prakāsanīmudrā* (?) (one type of gesture), *triśula* (trident), and *naramuṇḍa* (human head) in her rest six hands, respectively. She has a smiling face with a horrible appearance. Her left leg is broken. She wears a long *upavīta* (sacred thread) and a *naramuṇḍamālā* (garland with human skull) and she is accompanied by two standing male figures on either side holding a sharp knife (*kartṛ*) in the right hands. It is very important to note that *Mātrkā* images without a guardian figure are shown prominently on the edge of the *prabhavali* (upper back slab). The attributes, features of this eight-armed goddess do not match with the description of *Rudra-Cāmuṇḍā* or *Mahālakṣmī* described in the *Agni-Purāna*. On the basis of its iconographic features, it seems that the big sized image (size: 100 × 49.5 cm) belongs to the c.11th-12th century CE.

Ten-armed images of the goddess *Cāmuṇḍā* are most popular and very common in Bengal sculptures. The author has identified and recorded four (4) images of *Cāmuṇḍā* with ten-hands from

North Bengal, one from Bengakandi of Jalpaiguri district, now in a local temple of the same village; one from Harirampur village of Dakshin Dinajpur district, one from Jagaddala of same district and another from Sivbari village of the same district of West Bengal. Three of them are seen dancing on the shoulder of *Mahāpreta* (dead body) and rests one in sitting pose on the dead body which found from Bengkandi village of Jalpaiguri district of West Bengal. The Bengkandi specimen (**Fig.6**) is seen seated in *lalitāsana* pose on a full blown lotus pedestal placed on a half lying male human figure. A jackal to the left and a vulture to the right are seen standing near the pedestal of the image. The ten-armed goddess carries clockwise, a *kapāla* (skull-cup), a *damaru* (kettledrum), a *ghantā* (bell), a *naramuṇḍa* (human head); three hands are broken, and the upper two hands are engaged holding the elephant skins which creates canopy like structure on the stela over her head (Bhattacharyya, 1968:13, fig.2).

She wears *naramuṇḍamālā* (garlands of human heads), crowned heads made of snake peeping out, tiger's skin, *sarpakundalas* (earrings of serpent) etc and she possesses emaciated body, sunken eyes, pendulous breasts showing protruding ribs and veins, and contracted belly with a scorpion carved on it. Two flying celestials male figure are beautifully engraved on either sides of the apex of the *prabhāvalī* (upper back slab) (Santra, 2005: 50). The goddess *Cāmuṇḍā* is popularly known as *Petkātī Māo* or *Petkātī Devī* to the local people. Dr Charu Chandra Sanyal (Sanyal, 1956: 149), a renowned scholar, identified the image as '*Camuṇḍā Chanḍī*' but Girijasankar Ray (1965; Reprint 1999:46) refused the view of Sanyal and mentioned the image as a '*Tāntric goddess*'. From its iconographic features, it may be conjectured that the large sized (size: 213.36 × 78.74 × 19.7 cm) image of the goddess *Camuṇḍā* belongs to the c.11th-12th century CE and an excellent creation of the Bengal artists.

An excellent, superb, elegant and unpublished black stone image (**Fig.7**) of the goddess *Cāmuṇḍā*, found from Sivbari village, now under personal collection Asok Nandi of the same village of Dakshin Dinajpur district, West Bengal, is seen dancing in *trivanga* pose with ferocious mood under a banyan tree on the shoulder of a male figure (*Mahāpreta*). The male figure is placed on the pedestal bedecked with some flora and fauna motifs. Two male figures with various attributes in hands are also seen standing on either side of *Mahāpreta*. The ten-armed goddess carries, clockwise *kapāla*, *damaru*, an unidentified object (cup), *asi*, and *karṭṛ* on the right hands whereas she carries, clockwise, *tarjani*, *triśula*, *kheṭaka mudrā*, and a human head on the left hand respectively. The lower portion of her body is covered with a tiger skin and she is adorned with a beautiful *hāra* (necklace), a long *yajñopavīta* (sacred thread), a *naramuṇḍamālā* (garland of human skulls and bones), armlets, many bangles, anklets, and earrings. An orbicular-shaped *śiracakra* (head circle) and flame-screen are found just behind her coronet head on the stela. From its paleographic and iconographic features, it may be assumed that the large sized (size: 47×23 cm) image belongs to the c.12th century A.D.

All the ten-handed images except Sivbari specimen show elephant skin over their heads and create like canopy. The hands are full of attributes, *kapāla* (skull cup), *damaru* (drum), *asi* (sword), and *karṭṛ* (big knife) on the right and *tarjani* (index finger), *triśula* (trident), *kheṭaka* (shield) and *mudrā* (gesture) on the left, respectively. The pedestals always depict scenes of *śmaśāna* (burial place of the dead body) with numerous heads, vultures, jackals, animals, etc. The garland of skulls is common in all cases. In some cases, *triśula* (trident) shows a human skull just below its three bones. This type of attribute gives a hybrid appearance which may be called a '*khaṭvanga-triśula*' (Haque 1992: 273)

(skull-mace). The rest of the images have slight differences among themselves in an account of the attributes. The *Agni-Purāna* describes a ten-armed *Siddha-Camuṇḍikā* (50.33b-34b) having, besides the possessed elephant skin, a weapon, *asi* (sword), *damaru* (kettledrum), and *trika* (bone) on the right and the *khetaka* (one type of weapon), *ghantā* (bell), *khaṭvaṅga* (skull-mace) and *triśula* (trident) on the left. None of these images do match and agree with the descriptions of the *Agni-Purāna*.

Conclusion

Almost all the images of the goddesses *Cāmuṇḍā* belonging to the Pāla-Sena period are made of black basalt, few of them of brass, bronze or octo-alloy found from different parts of North Bengal. Maximum number of the images of goddess *Cāmuṇḍā* discovered from Uttar Dinajpur and Dakshin Dinajpur of North Bengal indicates her popularity, accessibility and acceptability to the common people in this area during the Pre-Medieval period. It is interesting to note that the artists of (North) Bengal have depicted feminity in these images and they followed the ancient traditions and textual references to represent these sculptures. But the artists of Bengal did not always follow the ancient traditions and textual references (*dhyānas*) to make the images; they followed their individual thoughts and ideas to engrave the *vāhanas*, attributes in hands and cognizance of the images. Sometimes, the artists were guided or influenced by regional tendencies or sometimes they had paid more importance to their own thoughts and ideas to execute the images in the sculptural art of Bengal.



Fig. 1: *Cāmuṇḍā*, Itahar, Uttar Dinajpur, WB

(Courtesy: Gautam Sengupta and Sharmila Saha, *Vibrant Rock*, p.145)



Fig. 2: *Cāmuṇḍā* (Inscribed*), Gangarampur, Dakshin inajpur, WB



Fig. 2a: (* The text is '*Bhaṭṭārikā śrījña cāgjo (cāggo)...Suta Prahasita*' means 'the image a donation of *Prahasita*, son of the famous *jña cāgjo (cāggo)*'



Fig. 3: *Cāmuṇḍā* (Inscribed), Jordighi, Dakshin Dinajpur, WB (Courtesy: SAMK)



Fig. 4: *Cāmuṇḍā*, Balurghat, Dakshin Dinajpur, WB



Fig. 5: *Cāmuṇḍā*, Raiganj, Uttar Dinajpur, WB
(Source: Gautam Sengupta and Sharmila Saha, *Vibrant Rock*, p.146)



Fig. 6: *Cāmuṇḍā*, Bengkandi, Jalpaiguri, WB



Fig. 7: *Cāmuṇḍā*, Sivbari, Dakshin Dinajpur, WB

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