

# **Cultic Relationships Between Buddhism and Brahmanism in the ‘Last Stronghold’ of Indian Buddhism: An Analysis with Particular Reference to Votive Inscriptions on the Brahmanical Sculptures Donated to Buddhist Religious Centres in Early Medieval Magadha**

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## ABSTRACT

*In this article, an attempt has been made to understand the patterns of cultic relationships between Buddhism and Brahmanism through the prism of dedicatory inscriptions on the Brahmanical sculptures donated to Buddhist religious centres in early medieval Magadha. I have looked into the social background of the donors and the expressed motives for donation of such images. I have argued that the Buddhist Saṅgha accepted the donation of Brahmanical sculptures to effect a maṅḍalic appropriation of Brahmanical cults to Buddhism, though this does not seem to have been how the donors saw it. In the process, it exposed its own flank to a counter-appropriation by Brahmanism.*

## Keywords

Late Indian Buddhism, Brahmanism, Buddhist sculptures, Brahmanical sculptures, Magadha.

## INTRODUCTION

Buddhism, it has been rightly argued, contains a hierarchy of teachings and it has co-existed with other systems in a structured hierarchy (Gellner 2003, 51). It may be added that the relative positioning of elements in this ‘structured hierarchy’ and fluctuations in this evolved with the interplay of various interrelated processes: socio-economic and religious. Buddhism, being just one of the religious systems in the poly-religious landscape of India, had to negotiate the

presence of other religious systems in general and Brahmanism in particular. It also had to negotiate various animistic cults, which formed an important part of the religious life of ancient and early medieval India. Trajectories of its encounters with animistic cults and Brahmanism were not uniform in different parts of India. That is true even in the context of early medieval Bihar and Bengal. Within these, Magadha offers a particular kind of encounter between Buddhism and Brahmanism: it was only in Magadha where we see a regular donation of inscribed Brahmanical sculptures to Buddhist religious institutions by those donors who have recorded their names in such inscriptions. At the available stage of our knowledge and database for early medieval Bihar and Bengal, this practice largely appears to be a Magadha-specific phenomenon.<sup>1</sup> This development in the 'last stronghold'<sup>2</sup> of Indian Buddhism raises some interesting questions regarding cultic relationships between Buddhism and Brahmanism. In this paper, an attempt will be made to understand such cultic relationships through the prism of dedicatory inscriptions on Brahmanical sculptures donated to Buddhist religious centres in early medieval Magadha. Most of such sculptures have been discovered in definite archaeological contexts: in archaeological excavations and explorations within or nearby important monastic centres, so they can be correlated with developments within important Buddhist religious centres of Magadha (Nālandā, Bodh Gayā and Kurkihār) with greater certainty. We will also try to situate our analysis in the theoretical debate on the ritual aspects of the decline of Indian Buddhism in eastern India.<sup>3</sup>

#### CULTIC RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN BUDDHISM AND BRAHMANISM IN EARLY MEDIEVAL INDIA: A HISTORIOGRAPHICAL OVERVIEW

Broadly speaking, four models have been postulated for cultic relationships between Buddhism and Brahmanism during the early medieval period (c.600 CE–1200 CE): peaceful coexistence; congenital incompatibility and protracted conflict between Buddhism and Brahmanism till the final 'defeat' of Buddhism by Brahmanism; Brahmanical appropriation of a passive Buddhism; and the Buddhist attempts of integrating rival cults in a manner of subordinate union through the agency of the Saṅgha. We shall analyze these models briefly.

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1. The inscribed image of Gaṇeśa, discovered at Mandhuk in the Comilla district of eastern Bengal, is probably the only exception. For an earlier analysis of votive inscription on this image, see Prasad 2010, 33.
  2. We have borrowed this term from Andre Wink. Wink has argued that by the eleventh century CE, Islam replaced Buddhism as the 'greatest trading religion of Asia' while the agrarian world within India was gradually lost to the Brahmins by the Buddhists. This simultaneous loss of agrarian and mercantile space precipitated a systemic crisis within Indian Buddhism, which led to the spatial contraction of Buddhism into select areas of strength: some portions of Bihar, Bengal and Orissa. Within this area too, there were spatial variations: Magadha emerged as the 'Well of Buddhism', the last stronghold of Indian Buddhism (Wink 1999, 340–50). While we largely agree with his characterization of Magadha being the last stronghold of Indian Buddhism, his theory of a generalized loss of mercantile and agrarian space by Indian Buddhism by the eleventh century needs some revision. For a review of his arguments, see Prasad 2008, 78; 2008a, 160–161.
  3. For some earlier analysis of functional aspects of the decline of Buddhism in different parts of early medieval Bihar and Bengal, see Prasad 2008, 80–83; 2008a; 2010; 2010a; 2010b; 2012.

The first model, advocated by R.C.Mitra (1954) and Rama Chatterji (1985), emphasizes the peaceful coexistence of Buddhism and Brahmanism, and frequent borrowing of cultural idioms and practices between the two. To some extent, this appears to be true in the context of early medieval Bihar and Bengal, where we see a simultaneous presence and expansion of both religions in most of the sub-regions. We have noted the same thing in the archaeological landscape of big monastic centres such as Nālandā (Prasad 2010c; Prasad 2013). This feature has been noted even in a village that was officially donated to the Nālandā Mahāvihāra (Prasad et al 2009; Prasad 2011, 81–83), or in the archaeological landscape of Bodh Gayā (Amar 2012, 160–175). But the simultaneous presence and expansion of these religions does not negate the possibility of sectarian rivalry and conflict.

The second model, advocated by Gail Omvedt (2003), D.C. Ahir (2005)<sup>4</sup> and G. Verardi (2011), postulates that Buddhism and Brahmanism had some congenital incompatibility due to their differing attitudes to the institution of caste, hence peaceful co-existence was out of question. They were in a state of protracted conflict in which Buddhism was finally ‘defeated’ and destroyed due to many factors. In the context of early medieval Bihar and Bengal, while not denying the possibility of sectarian confrontation and rivalries, the theory of ‘congenital incompatibility’ and ‘protracted conflict to the finish of Buddhism’ does not appear to be tenable. Had confrontation been the only element in the encounters between Buddhism and Brahmanism and had ‘congenital incompatibility’ been such a pronounced phenomenon, Buddhist institutions in early medieval Magadha would not have accepted inscribed Brahmanical sculptures in the first place.

The third model is provided by those scholars who, while not negating the elements of conflict and sectarian rivalries between Buddhism and Brahmanism, place more emphasis on the peaceful Brahmanical appropriation and assimilation of a largely passive Buddhism (Sarao 2012, 258–59; Chakrabarti 2001, 109–164). Buddhism did not even attempt a counter-appropriation of Brahmanical cults, perhaps being incapable of doing so, to guard its own ritual and institutional identity vis-à-vis a hegemonic and assimilative Brahmanism. The question was not *whether* Buddhism would be appropriated by Brahmanism but *when* it would be appropriated, as its eventual assimilation into Brahmanism was just a matter of time.<sup>5</sup> This argument is erroneous. We should not believe that Buddhism was totally incapable of attempting an appropriation of Brahmanical cults. As we shall see later in the present essay, Buddhism did try to do this in early medieval Magadha.

4. For a combined review of Omvedt and Ahir, see Prasad 2006a; 2008, 76.

5. One of the best examples of this approach is provided by Kunal Chakrabarti (2001). See particularly the fourth chapter of his book, which analyses the gradual establishment of Brahmanical hegemony in early medieval Bengal and the assimilation of Buddhism by Brahmanism. Despite acknowledging that the two religions ‘borrowed from and influenced each other, although Buddhist absorption of Brahmanical deities was more pronounced’ (p.140), he finds it ‘ironic’ that many of the Vajrayāna divinities, called ‘defenders of the faith’ (*Dharmapālas*) were taken from the Brahmanical pantheon (p.141). This is due to his reluctance to see this process as an attempt by the Buddhist Saṅgha to effect a subordinate integration of Brahmanical cults. It may also be due to this reason that in this chapter we don’t see any analysis of the measures taken by the Buddhists to safeguard their ritual and institutional identity and resist appropriation by Brahmanism.

The fourth model is provided by those scholars who, while accepting the elements of conflict and sectarian rivalries between Buddhism and Brahmanism, do not treat Buddhism as a dormant, passive recipient of Brahmanical hegemonic appropriation and eventual assimilation (Bautze-Picron 1996; Linrothe 1997; Amar 2012). Buddhist institutions attempted a similar appropriation of Brahmanical deities through the concept of *maṇḍala*. If the cult of some Hindu deity was very popular in a particular area, efforts were made to integrate the cult into Buddhism through a policy of subordinate integration, portraying the relevant deity as an attendant of the Buddha, performing some mundane task for Buddhism.<sup>6</sup> The success or failure of this process depended on many socio-economic factors also.

This process of subordination may not have been peaceful in all cases. In some, as we see in the imagery of Trailokyavijaya, Samvara and Aparājita, a powerful Brahmanical deity was portrayed as submitting to Buddhism after a violent conflict with a Buddhist deity. This was just the first step in their eventual integration into Buddhism in a manner of subordinate union. It has been claimed that:

The process can be understood as having three steps. Firstly, the Saṅgha questioned the existence of these Brāhmaṇa gods and the utility of worshipping them. Secondly, it degraded and insulted them by considering them the source of all evil, and often had them killed by a minor Buddhist deity. And thirdly, a Buddhist deity would then revive them, and accord them a respectable albeit subordinate position within the Buddhist pantheon. (Amar 2012, 180)

Once integrated into the Buddhist pantheon in a subordinate capacity, these Brahmanical deities perform an important function in Buddhism:

The Hindu gods are perceived as demons and as such they are conquered by the Buddha, which allows them to go back to their original divine nature. They go through a similar experience when they are trampled by Buddhist ferocious deities who assimilate their divine power by mastering them: their destruction becomes

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6. One of the best examples of this process is provided by the evolution of the cult of 'Buddhist Viṣṇu' in medieval Sri Lanka, which has been analyzed by Holt (2005). Penetration of the cult of Viṣṇu in Sri Lanka was a collateral development of the conquest of parts of Sri Lanka by the Chola rulers of Tamilnadu. But Viṣṇu could not become a major figure in the Sinhala religious life until the early eleventh century when Sri Lanka regained its sovereignty from the Hindu Tamils of Tamilnadu. Tamil rule on the island implanted certain ideas of kingship, which the Sinhala rulers tried to assert even after regaining sovereignty. The Sinhala kings began to style themselves as avatars of Viṣṇu, in continuation of Hindu notions of kingship, while retaining the traditional Buddhist archetype of a king being the defender and regulator of the (Buddhist) Dharma. This entailed invitations to the Brahmin priests to consecrate the semi-divine status of the Sinhalese monarchy. Popularization of the cult of Viṣṇu was the natural corollary. Despite the initial monastic antipathy to the popularization of the cult of Viṣṇu, veneration of Viṣṇu was a firmly entrenched phenomenon in the Sinhala culture by the end of the sixteenth century. It was embraced by the great majority of Buddhist monks and Sinhala peasantry. The Saṅgha, as a means of safeguarding the institutional and ritual identity of Buddhism, embarked upon the task of establishing a subordinate union and eventual appropriation of Viṣṇu. Viṣṇu was made the protector of the (Buddhist) Dharma, but stripped of any soteriological significance. Thus the Sinhala Buddhist theology reduced Viṣṇu to the material domain, identifying him with such mundane things as the ability to cure sickness and exorcise evil spirits, and the conferring of boons. Thus by the end of the sixteenth century, 'Viṣṇu's powers have not been reconceived in the process; rather they seem to have been reoriented and placed at the service of the Buddhist worldview' (Holt 2005, 125). For a review of Holt, see Prasad 2009.

positive inasmuch as they are assimilated by the one who tramples them and inasmuch as their dark aspects are destroyed. For the frightening and eventful sculptures of great Buddhist gods lead the path to and open the ways to Enlightenment. These Hindu gods thus share an ambivalent nature. They are at the threshold of two worlds: the one being the Buddhist way, symbolized by the inner mansions of the *maṇḍalas* which they have to protect from the second where chaos rules. Similarly the Hindu gods occupy the outer mansions of the *maṇḍalas* and combine both the wildness and ignorance of the external world and peace of the inner world. (Bautze-Picron 1996, 131)

As to which Brahmanical deity would be peacefully made the attendant of some Buddhist deity, and which deity would be made to submit to Buddhism after a violent conflict, this would depend upon the popularity of the cult of the particular deity in the relevant area. So in the Buddhist sculptures of south-eastern Bengal, where the cult of Durgā was very strong, 'Durgā is included among the Hindu deities that attack the Buddha' (Bautze-Picron 1996, 129).<sup>7</sup> In early medieval Magadha, where Śaivism was very strong, it is the family of Śiva (Śiva, Pārvatī or Gaṇeśa) that is shown to be trampled upon by Buddhist deities (Trailokyavijaya, Samvara or Aparājita). But Indra or Brahmā, who were no match to Śaiva deities in terms of actual following among the masses in early medieval Magadha, could be directly relegated to the position of attendant deities of the Buddha in Buddhist sculptures.<sup>8</sup>

To summarize, these studies expect us to believe that whenever the image of a non-Buddhist deity was donated to a Buddhist institution, and whenever the Saṅgha accepted such a donation, that was generally motivated by the desire for a Buddhist maṇḍalic appropriation of rival cults.

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7. In one of her later writings (Bautze-Picron 1998) on the regular findings of Brahmanical images in Buddhist religious centres of early medieval Bihar and Bengal, Bautze-Picron takes this as an indication of the poly-religious personality of major Buddhist religious centres rather than as an attempted integration of Brahmanical cults to Buddhism in a manner of subordinate union. It is better to quote her fully here: 'Images of Hindu deities were recovered in the sites considered to be traditionally as Buddhist (Nālandā, Bodh Gayā) but it is not required for an "integration process" by Buddhism of Hindu deities to explain this presence as could be at times done. Some Buddhist centres were major places which attracted Buddhist pilgrims and monks, but they were actually also Hindu sites' (p.13). She seems to have developed her arguments on the model of Frederick Asher who has argued that even Bodh Gayā was not an exclusive Buddhist site (Asher 1980, 79). Her arguments are not tenable. We may analyse this issue through a different paradigm. Every religious centre would have a 'core' character, and it would add additional features to its 'core' in the course of time, basically to negotiate changing socio-economic and religious situations. Nobody will deny that Buddhism formed the 'core' of the religious personality of Nālandā, Bodh Gayā or Kurkihār. Brahmanical deities were added to this 'core' personality under different circumstances and with different motives. The intended relationship between the 'core' and add-ons, at least from the perspective of the Buddhist Saṅgha, was not that of equality. The add-ons were expected to be subordinate to the core personality of these Buddhist religious centres.
8. A reviewer of this article suggested that Indra and Brahmā were already Buddhist deities. However, it is more appropriate to see them as Brahmanical deities previously appropriated by Buddhists to prove the superiority of Buddhism over Brahmanism. Magadha was not the only land where such an appropriation was attempted, nor was this process confined to the early medieval period. Even if Indra and Brahmā played a significant role in both Buddhist literature and iconography as far back as we have evidence, they remained Brahmanical deities.

The same logic has been extended to the patterns of interactions between Buddhism and various animistic cults: Buddhism, as an institutional religion, would attempt a hegemonic appropriation of animistic (Nāga etc.) and local cults<sup>9</sup>, which would, after being integrated to Buddhism in a subordinate capacity, lose their status of independent cults. Animistic deities would become attendants of the Buddha or some other Buddhist deity; or they would be transformed into 'protector deities', guarding and protecting Buddhist religious institutions at vital points (Cohen 1998; Decorali 2004; Shaw 2004).

These studies, giving a vivid picture of attempts of cultic appropriation and counter-appropriation by both Buddhism and Brahmanism, somehow miss a vital element of the whole matrix: the common person who generally did not have any fixed religious identity. Buddhism and Brahmanism tried to appropriate each other and Buddhist sculptures depicted Brahmanical deities in attendant positions or as trampled upon figures. Buddhist institutions also accepted donation of Brahmanical sculptures from common persons to effect a subordinate integration of these cults to Buddhism. But what was the perception of the person who actually donated these sculptures? Did he/she donate these sculptures as representatives of a subordinated cult? Or did he/she donate them as representatives of independent cults? It is in addressing this question that the role of epigraphy becomes important. Hence we will now examine in some detail votive inscriptions on Brahmanical sculptures donated to Buddhist institutions in early medieval Magadha.

#### EPIGRAPHY AND THE QUESTIONS OF THE CULTIC AFFILIATIONS OF DONORS OF SCULPTURES AND THE SUBORDINATE INTEGRATION OF A CULT TO BUDDHISM

In the context of early historic and early medieval Indian Buddhism, epigraphic sources have generally been used for the reconstruction of the evolving patronage base of Buddhist religious institutions.<sup>10</sup> In some other cases, we see an interesting use of dedicatory inscriptions on sculptures in reconstructing religious affiliations, identities and expectations of donors of sculptures.<sup>11</sup> We also see the use of dedicatory inscriptions on sculptures in tracing the evolution of a particular cult or tradition within Buddhism.<sup>12</sup> Schopen's studies of the dedicatory inscriptions on Buddhist sculptures have convincingly shown that many traditions within Buddhism devised their own dedicatory formulas to be recorded in votive inscriptions on sculptures. The adoption of a particular form of dedicatory formula in votive inscriptions on Buddhist sculptures was generally not an eclectic choice on the part of the donor, but a conscious adherence to a particular tradition of Buddhism. Thus in the dedicatory formula on the sculptures donated by those donors who opted to identify themselves as the followers of the Mahāyāna,

9. For a recent analysis of the process of integration of a local cult — Puṇḍeśvarī/Pūrṇeśvarī/Puṇyeśvarī — represented by the sculptures of a seated goddess having a child, who is shown touching her breast, on the left side of her lap, in the Kiul-Lakhisarai area of early medieval Bihar, see Prasad 2013d.

10. Roy 1988; Dehejia 1992; Thapar 1992; Singh 1996; Prasad 2010; 2010a; 2010b; 2013a.

11. Schopen 1984; 1988–1989; Kim 2012

12. Schopen 1979; Prasad 2013a; 2013b; 2013c; 2013d.

there are recorded some characteristic technical, and definitive, words. In many inscriptions, they recorded themselves as *pravara-mahāyāna-anuyāyinaḥ* (follower of the excellent Mahāyāna). In many cases, the donor did not categorically identify himself/herself as *pravara-mahāyāna-anuyāyinaḥ*, but the occurrence of some characteristic technical, and definitive, words indicated that the donor wished to be identified as a follower of the Mahāyāna. Schopen has noted that in dedicatory inscriptions on sculptures, the words *Paramopāsaka* and *Paramopāsikā* respectively signified a man and woman who was a Mahāyāna lay worshipper. Similarly *Śākyabhikṣu* and *Śākyabhikṣuṇi* signified a Mahāyāna monk and nun respectively.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, the expression of the aim of attainment of *Anuttara Jñāna* by all sentient beings, the donor's parents, or the donor him/herself was almost exclusive to the Mahāyāna dedicatory formula on sculptures (Schopen 1979, 3–5). Similar was the case with the formula *yad atra puṇyama*, which was 'virtually the exclusive property of Mahāyāna' (Schopen 1979, 12).

It may be noted that in the dedicatory inscriptions on the Buddhist sculptures of early medieval Bihar and Bengal, generally whenever a donor wished to identify himself/herself with any tradition of Buddhism, that tradition happened to be Mahāyāna. That remained the case till the very end of this period. In such cases, we may discern the Mahāyāna affiliation of the donor either directly

13. For a different perspective on the significance of these terms, see Cousins (2003). In this paper, he has attempted to question the thesis of Schopen on the basis of the analysis of some Buddhist Pali texts, Brahmanical Sanskrit texts, some other Sanskrit works such as Varāhamihira's *Vṛhatasamhitā*, as well as some inscriptions. His emphasis is more on the pre-Pāla period. He argues that, in the context of Indian Buddhism, the terms *Paramopāsaka/Paramopāsikā* and *Śākyabhikṣu/Śākyabhikṣuṇi* 'do not in themselves carry any Mahāyānist meaning' (p.16). *Paramopāsaka* referred to a 'committed lay supporter of high standing' of any tradition of Buddhism, and not just Mahāyāna Buddhism (p.16). Similarly, the term *Śākyabhikṣu* referred to a Buddhist monk in general, and not just to a Mahāyāna monk: this term was used 'regularly by non-Buddhists (and sometimes by the Buddhists too) to refer to members of the Buddhist monastic order' (p.16). His argument, though quite interesting, has some gaps. Brahmanical Sanskrit works may not give a correct picture as we do not know the extent to which these works were aware of, or willing to acknowledge, the sectarian differences within Buddhism. Besides, Cousins largely ignores two major kinds of sources: Mahāyāna Sanskrit literature and dedicatory inscriptions on Buddhist sculptures. Had he taken into account the significance of these terms in the Mahāyāna Sanskrit literature, his analysis would have been more convincing. He does provide tabulation of inscriptions in which the term *Paramopāsaka* occurs, but without mentioning the cultic affiliation and identity of sculptures on which these inscriptions are inscribed. That gives an incomplete picture. In my ongoing analysis of dedicatory inscriptions on sculptures of early medieval Bihar and Bengal, I have noted that whenever a *Paramopāsaka/Paramopāsikā* donor claimed to be a follower of any Buddhist tradition, that tradition happened to be Mahāyāna. Similarly, whenever a *Śākyabhikṣu/Śākyabhikṣuṇi* donor claimed to be a follower of any Buddhist tradition, that tradition happened to be Mahāyāna. In all such cases, the general dedicatory format is something like this: 'this (image) is the *Deyadharmā* of *Pravara-Mahāyāna-Anuyāyinaḥ Paramopāsaka/Paramopāsikā/ Śākyabhikṣu/Śākyabhikṣuṇi* so and so'. This remained the situation till the very end of the Pāla period. To date, we have not come across any dedicatory inscription on any image of early medieval Bihar and Bengal in which a *Paramopāsaka/Paramopāsikā/Śākyabhikṣu/Śākyabhikṣuṇi* donor has claimed to be the follower of any other Buddhist tradition.

It may also be noted that whatever be his position for the significance of these terms in the pre-Pāla times, Cousins has largely accepted their Mahāyāna affiliation for the Pāla period Bihar and Bengal (p. 16). At the available stage of our data base, Schopen's thesis remains valid for dedicatory inscriptions on sculptures of early medieval Bihar and Bengal (for his critique of Cousins, see Schopen 2005, 244–246). We are justified in relying on Schopen's generalizations.

(by the use of the title *pravara-mahāyāna-anuyāyinaḥ* by the donor) or indirectly (by the use of the technical words *Paramopāsaka*, *Paramopāsikā*, *Śākyabhikṣu* and *Śākyabhikṣuṇi* by the donor). That remained the situation even in the case of donation of those sculptures which may be technically designated as Vajrayāna sculptures. The word Vajrayāna does not occur even once in the corpus of dedicatory inscriptions on sculptures of early medieval Bihar and Bengal, nor did a Vajrayāna dedicatory formula ever evolve.<sup>14</sup>

The same remained the situation even in the context of the donation of inscribed Brahmanical images donated in Buddhist contexts. If the donor wished to be identified as a follower of the Mahāyāna, he/she generally used the Mahāyāna dedicatory format. If a donor wished to identify himself/herself as a follower of Mahāyāna Buddhism (either as a monk/nun or a lay worshipper), he/she either claimed to be a *pravara-mahāyāna-anuyāyinaḥ* or used the technical words *Śākyabhikṣu*/*Śākyabhikṣuṇi*/*Paramopāsaka*/*Paramopāsikā*. Or the stated motive for donating the image was for the attainment of *Anuttara Jñāna* by all sentient beings, the donor's parents, or the donor him/herself.

Besides, when the subordinate integration of an animistic cult to Buddhism was attempted, that was generally reflected in the dedicatory inscription on such sculptures: in such cases, as has been shown in the case of early historic Mathurā where we have many examples of the donation of Nāga sculptures and figurines to Buddhist institutions, these sculptures were generally inscribed with a Buddhist dedicatory formula (Basu 2006, 174). Similarly, if some Brahmanical deity-image was donated in a Buddhist context — as of a deity integrated to Buddhism in manner of subordinate union — that was also reflected in the dedicatory inscription on the sculpture. In such cases, the donated sculpture was inscribed with the dedicatory formula of some Buddhist tradition. One of the best examples is provided by the inscription on a sculpture of Gaṇeśa, datable to c. 952 CE, that was discovered at Mandhuka in the Comilla district of eastern Bengal: the dedicatory inscription on this sculpture records that it was donated for the purpose of the attainment of *Anuttara Jñāna* by the parents of the donor. This goal (attainment of *Anuttara Jñāna* by a donor's parents) is generally met in the developed form of Mahāyāna dedicatory inscriptions on sculptures (Schopen 1979, 4–6). In some cases, only the Buddhist Creed Formula (*ye dharmā hetu-prabhavā hetunteṣān Tathāgato hyavadatteṣāṅca yo nirodha evamvādi mahāśramaṇaḥ*) was inscribed on a non-Buddhist deity. We may consider the example of a sculpture of Haragaurī that was discovered at Sringerikh near Kajara in the Munger district of Bihar. This Śaiva sculpture was inscribed with the Buddhist Creed Formula (Patil 1963, 552). It is apparent that this is an example of an attempted Buddhist appropriation of a Śaiva cult.

14. In fact, the use of the Mahāyāna dedicatory formula on the images generally believed to be the product of the Vajrayāna, and the use of the term '*pravara-mahāyāna-anuyāyinaḥ*' by the donors of such images in early medieval Bihar and Bengal has puzzled scholars of Buddhism for quite some time. One may see, for example, G. Bhattacharya's observations: 'It is known to the students of Buddhism that in Eastern India during the Pāla period the Mahāyāna form of Buddhism developed into the Vajrayāna form. But strangely enough, invariably in all the dedicatory inscriptions the donor is described as the follower of excellent Mahāyāna (*Pravara-Mahāyāna*) Buddhism. We, therefore, think that the expression *Pravara-Mahāyāna* most probably refers to Vajrayāna. But still one may ask what was the harm to call it as such?' (Bhattacharya 2000a, 53).



Let's summarize our arguments now. In the context of inscribed Brahmanical sculptures donated to different Buddhist religious centres of early medieval Magadha, we will not accept any inscribed Brahmanical image as Buddhistic unless it is inscribed either with the Buddhist Creed Formula or it includes the dedicatory formula of some Buddhist tradition. In early medieval Bihar and Bengal, where the Mahāyāna dedicatory formula was generally the most prevalent form in votive inscriptions on Buddhist sculptures, we may legitimately expect its use in the dedicatory inscriptions on those sculptures whose donors did wish to be identified as followers of the Mahāyāna. In general, we may expect to find the use of any of the characteristic terms (*pravara-mahāyāna-anuyāyinaḥ*, *Paramopāsaka*, *Paramopāsikā*, *Śākyabhikṣu*, *Śākyabhikṣuṇi*) or motive (for the attainment of *Anuttara Jñāna*) for undertaking the donation of an image by them.

One more issue should be addressed here. Most of the dedicatory inscriptions on the Brahmanical sculptures donated to Buddhist religious centres in early medieval Magadha record that donated images were the *Deyadharmā* of different donors. From the Gupta period onwards, this term (*Deyadharmā*) was used in the donation of Buddhist sculptures.<sup>15</sup> But in early medieval Bihar and Bengal, this term was used in the donation of both Buddhist and Brahmanical sculptures. Hence the mere occurrence of this term in the dedicatory inscription on a sculpture will not be sufficient to brand the sculpture Buddhist.

This discussion provides us the necessary background for understanding the significance of dedicatory inscriptions on the Brahmanical sculptures donated to some of the Buddhist institutions in early medieval Magadha.

#### VOTIVE INSCRIPTIONS ON THE BRAHMANICAL SCULPTURES DONATED TO BUDDHIST INSTITUTIONS IN EARLY MEDIEVAL MAGADHA: THE EVOLVING PATTERN

So far, eleven inscribed Brahmanical sculptures donated to different Buddhist religious centres in early medieval Magadha have been reported. Three sculptures have been attributed to Nālandā, one to the Mahābodhi area of Bodh Gayā, and seven to Kurkihār. At Kurkihār, these sculptures occur with striking consistency: for every century, there is reported at least one such sculpture here. Barring the ninth century example, Bodh Gayā has not reported any other inscribed image of the previous or later centuries. If we see the cultic breakdown of such sculptures, we have three inscribed sculptures of Viṣṇu; two of Sūrya; three of Balarāma; and two of Umāmaheśvara. Also, one inscribed sculpted lintel contains the depictions of Śiva, Sūrya, Viṣṇu and Lakuliśa.

The practice of donation of inscribed Brahmanical sculptures to Buddhist monasteries was not confined to any particular section of society. We see the donation of such sculptures by a senior Buddhist monk on the behalf of a non-monastic member; by a royal officer; by the wife of a village chief; by a member of a 'low' caste (*Carmakāra*); by the son of a sculptor, and also by a blacksmith. That is to say, this trend permeated practically all sections of contemporary soci-

15. It is better to quote G. Bhattacharya here: 'The Buddhist donative formula is finalized during the Gupta period. From now onwards, in the whole of northern India, the stereotyped text is written in connection with a donation. The object of donation is not mentioned, it is called *deyadharmā* now, a meritorious gift.' (Bhattacharya 2000a, 397).

ety. Theatres of such donations were among the most important centres of early medieval Indian Buddhism: Nālandā, Mahābodhi and Kurkihār.

A brief summary of votive inscriptions on such sculptures have been provided in Table 1, opposite

The first instance of donation of an inscribed Brahmanical sculpture to a Buddhist institution in early medieval Magadha is provided by the votive inscription on a sculpture of Sūrya that was discovered at Shahpur in the modern Nalanda district. This inscription is dated to the year 66, probably of the Harṣa era. In this inscription, we are informed that Sālapakṣa, the *Balādhikṛta*, installed this sculpture as *Deyadharmā* in the great *agrahāra* of Nālandā (*Nālandā mahāgrahāre*) for the purpose of increasing the religious merit of himself and his parents (Shastri 1942, 82–83); this is the only one of the inscriptions listed in table 1 in which a motive for the donation is expressed. This inscription refers to the regime of Ādityasēnadēva. The donor was apparently serving under this king.

Here two things must be taken into account. The first recorded instance of donation of any sculpture to the Nālandā Mahāvihāra is this one, and it records the donation of a Brahmanical sculpture. Nālandā has not been referred to as a Vihāra or Mahāvihāra, but as a great *agrahāra* (*Mahā-agrahāra*). This word (*agrahāra*) is, undoubtedly, of Brahmanical origin and it generally referred to the tax-free land granted to an individual Brahmin or a group of Brahmins. It is apparent that for the donor, there was hardly any difference between this Buddhist Mahāvihāra and a *Mahā-agrahāra*. This was the perception of at least one donor regarding the nature of the Mahāvihāra. The Mahāvihāra accepted this donation in a phase when Brahmanical sculptures were quite rare in the archaeological landscape of Nālandā (Asher 1980, 46–51; Prasad 2010c; 2013). But also in the seventh century, the Mahāvihāra accepted not only the donation of a Brahmanical sculpture by a non-monastic member, but incorporated Brahmanical themes and sculptures in its very monastic architecture also: on the outer walls of the temple at Site 2 of the Mahāvihāra (Asher 1980, 49; Huntington 1984, 24). This iconographic program has been explained as an example of a Buddhist attempt at maṇḍalic appropriation of rival cults (Huntington 1984, 24; Linrothe 1997, 194). One may be tempted to offer the same reasoning in the acceptance of the donation of the sculpture of Sūrya donated by Sālapakṣa. We don't know why the Mahāvihāra needed to be so active in a phase when Brahmanical sculptures were yet to proliferate in the immediate neighbourhood of Nālandā. True, Nālandā Mahāvihāra was not a local institution and it had to respond to distant (pan-Indian) challenges as well, hence this attempt at maṇḍalic appropriation. This attempt, of course, could evoke an altogether different impression for persons like Sālapakṣa; who perceived the Mahāvihāra as not radically different from contemporary Brahmanical religious institutions. Sālapakṣa donated this sculpture as the representative of an independent cult. He did not donate it as the image of a deity of a cult that was being or to be integrated into Buddhism in a relationship of subordinate integration. That was quite natural from a person who did not claim to be a committed lay follower of Buddhism.

The second example of donation of an inscribed Brahmanical sculpture to a Buddhist institution in early medieval Magadha is provided by the votive inscription on a sculpted lintel that was discovered amidst the ruins of the Mahābodhi by Alexander Cunningham. This lintel contained depictions of Sūrya, Viṣṇu and

Table 1. Inscriptions on Brahmanical sculptures donated to Buddhist institutions in early medieval Magadha.

	<i>Cultic affiliation of the sculpture</i>	<i>The place where the sculpture was discovered</i>	<i>Donor</i>	<i>Social background of the donor</i>	<i>Places where donors came from</i>	<i>Period</i>
1	Sūrya	Shahpur, in the modern Nalanda district	Balādhikṛta Śālapakṣa	A royal official	–	Year 66 (of the Harṣa era?), i.e. 672–3 CE?
2	A sculpted lintel containing depictions of Śiva, Sūrya, Viṣṇu and Lakuliśa	Mahābodhi area, Bodh Gayā	Saka	Son of sculptor Sāyanabhara	–	c. 809–10 CE.
3	Balarāma	Nālandā	Mahāthera Dajjaka or Ujjaka on the behalf of a common person	Monk	–	The regime of Devapāladeva (first half of the 9th century)
4	Balarāma	Excavated out of the northern veranda of Monastery Site No.1, Nālandā.	Nisīnghikā, wife of Śaujeka	–	Mallapore	9th century
5	Balarāma	Kurkihār	Ajhuka	Rural aristocracy (wife of a village chief, Sidhmaka)	Madhugrā-ma in Vāhiravana	In the 9th regnal year of Devapāladeva, c. 819 CE
6	Viṣṇu.	Kurkihār	Carmakāra Thisavī	Probably from an untouchable background	–	the year 12 of Surapāla (i.e., 2nd half of 9th century)
7	Umā-Maheśvara	Kurkihār	Mulūka, Wife of Gopāla Mahiaru	–	–	The year 32 of Rājyapāla, c. 935 CE.
8	Sūrya	Kurkihār	Padaka, son of Bhaṭa	–	–	11th century
9	Viṣṇu	Kurkihār	Subalamati	–	–	11th century
10	Umāmah-eśvara	Kurkihār	Kalāṇḍa	–	–	12th century
11	Viṣṇu	Kurkihār	Mangane	A blacksmith (Karmakāra)	–	12th century

Lakuliśa, so we may assume that this might have formed part of a Brahmanical temple or the outer walls of a Buddhist structure. This inscription is dated to the 26th regnal year of the Pāla king Dharmapāla. Given the importance of this inscription, it is important to quote it fully:

For the endless virtue, and for the good of the inhabitants of the Mahābodhi, an image of the four-faced Mahādeva was consecrated by Saka, the son of the noble sculptor Sāyanabhara (?). A tank, holy as the river born of the feet of Viṣṇu, was also excavated by him at a cost of three thousand *dramas*,<sup>16</sup> in the 26th year of the great king Dharmapāla. (Mitra 1880, 80; Cunningham 1892, 64)

R.R.Mukheji and S.K.Maity's reading of the inscription is a little different, but they too have noted that this sculpture was installed for the benefit of the monks of the Mahābodhi (Mukheji and Maity 1967, 112). This inscription is one of the biggest evidences of the penetration of Brahmanical cults to the holiest of Buddhist shrines. At Mahābodhi, a sculpture of Śiva was installed, 'for the good of the inhabitants of the Mahābodhi' by invoking the name of the ruling Pāla king who took pride in being *Parama Saugata* (great devotee of the Buddha). A tank was also constructed for the benefit of the monks of the Mahābodhi by mobilizing a sum of money by the donor. This could have been very useful in a dry region like Gayā. But this tank too was described in a typical Brahmanical motif (*Viṣṇupadī Samā*).

The significance of this inscription has been read in different ways, as an indication of: the religious tolerance of the ruling Pāla king and the peaceful co-existence of Buddhism and Brahmanism, even at the holiest Buddhist spot; the multi-religious character of the sacred site of Bodh Gayā (Asher 1980, 79, 119; Lahiri and Bacus 2004, 321–322); the superimposition of Śaivism on a Buddhist site (Mishra 2009, 79; 2009a, 124–125); and, recently, as an attempt at the Buddhist maṇḍalic appropriation of Śaivism (Amar 2012, 178). As we have analysed the theories of peaceful co-existence of Buddhism and Brahmanism, and multi-religious character of the sacred sites of Indian Buddhism in the previous section, let us now analyse the arguments of Mishra and Amar. In framing his arguments, Mishra has not taken into account the social background of the donor of this sculpted piece. Son of an ordinary sculptor, without any kind of backing by the state, could hardly have the power to forcefully impose a Śaiva cult on the holiest of Buddhist spots. So the theory of 'superimposition of Śaivism on a Buddhist site' is not sustainable. That leaves us with the issue of attempted Buddhist maṇḍalic appropriation of Śaivism. Let's see this proposition in some detail. It has been claimed that:

Previous studies have failed to analyse the inscription's context or its implications for Buddhist–Śaiva relations. Why did the monastic centre at Bodhgayā allow the installation of a four-faced Mahādeva and a lintel with other Brahmanical gods within the Mahābodhi complex? A contextual reading of the inscription suggests that the Buddhist saṅgha attempted to appropriate Śiva and Śaivism within their

16. As per Cunningham 'the *dramma* was a silver coin, the descendant of the Greek *drachma*, and of the same weight' (Cunningham 1892, 64). As per his observations, as the sum of three thousand *drammas* was a small one so the tank excavated by Saka 'must have been a mere pond' (Cunningham 1892, 64). This inscription, as a whole, attests to the ability of Brahmanical cults to attract small scale patronage from a person from a humble background, and the willingness of the Buddhist Saṅgha to accept the donation of inscribed Brahmanical sculptures from him.

own order. This was widely practiced within Buddhist monastic complexes and village-shrines, the installation of statues of Umāmaheśvara within the Buddhist shrines being deliberately undertaken to prove Buddhist superiority and the subordination of Śiva as a lay-follower. (Amar 2012, 178)

This is another example of Saṅgha-centric historiography. For the Buddhist Saṅgha, acceptance of this sculpture could have been a method of appropriating Śaivism in a relationship of subordinate union. But what about the donor? Was he even remotely aware that he was donating a sculpture whose cult was to be reduced to the position of a subsidiary cult of Buddhism? If we read the inscription, the opposite appears to be the case. The donor was not only proud of his Śaiva leanings, but was also attempting to do some favour to the Buddhist monks of Mahābodhi by installing this sculpture ‘for the good of the inhabitants of the Mahābodhi’. This is what he inscribed on the sculpture.

In our third example from table 1, the votive inscription on a sculpture of Balarāma that was discovered during the excavation of the Nālandā monastic complex, we have unmistakable evidence of a senior monk donating and installing a Brahmanical sculpture on behalf of a donor from non-aristocratic background. This inscription, datable to the regime of Devapāla, records that this sculpture of Balarāma was the gift of Mahāthera Dajjaka or Ujjaka and was made for Padmadānasimha (Shastri 1942, 88–89). We don’t see the use of titles such as *Paramopāsaka* or *Mahāyāna-Anuyāyina* for Padmadānasimha, so we may assume that he was not willing to be identified as a lay follower of Buddhism. Nothing has been recorded of the social background of Padmadānasimha. Those donors who have not recorded their social status in dedicatory inscriptions were most probably from the non-aristocratic, non-monastic section of society, so we may assign the same status to Padmadānasimha. Mahāthera Dajjaka or Ujjaka could have hoped to effect a subordinate integration of the cult of Balarāma and expected to attract donations from the followers of this cult to the Nālandā Mahāvihāra. But for many common persons, this could have resulted in the blurring of institutional boundaries between Buddhism and Brahmanism.

If the previous inscription indicates a close cooperation between a Buddhist monk and a common person in the installation of a Brahmanical sculpture within the Mahāvihāra, another inscription (table 1, no.4) on a bronze sculpture of Balarāma, which was excavated out of the northern veranda of the Monastery Site No.1, Nālandā, reveals another important trend: independent initiative of a woman in installing a Brahmanical sculpture in the monastery. We are informed that Nisinghikā, wife of Śoujeka, who probably belonged to Mallapore, installed this sculpture as *Deyadharmā* at Nālandā (Ghosh 1939–1940, 334–35). Nālandā is referred to by her as Śrī-Dēvapālādēva-ḥaṭṭa (Ghosh 1939–1940, 334–335).<sup>17</sup>

What are the implications of the installation of this Brahmanical sculpture in the northern veranda of the monastery site 1, an important monastery within the Mahāvihāra, where the resident monks must have encountered it regularly? A woman, who has not even claimed to be a lay follower of Buddhism (no such

17. Another inscription from Kurkihār refers to Mallapore. As per A. Ghosh: ‘it is tempting to regard the word as an indirect derivation of Mallapura and to take it to mean a “resident of Mallapura”. But this meaning is hardly possible in the Kurkihār inscription, though it may suit the present record’ (Ghosh 1939–1940, 335).

title as *Paramopāsikā* etc. has been used for her) donated it to the Mahāvihāra and the Mahāvihāra accepted it due to diverse factors, either to attempt a maṇḍalic appropriation of this cult; or simply not to show disrespect to an entrenched religious tradition of the area. There was, presumably, no compulsion on the part of the authorities of the Mahāvihāra to install this sculpture, or to allow the installation of this sculpture, at a place where monks had to encounter it day and night. In the maṇḍalic schema, figures of appropriated cults are generally placed on the outer periphery of monastic architecture. This does not appear to be the case here, as this inscribed sculpture is installed deep inside the monastery. One wonders if it represented a case of ritual concession to the laity or a deep penetration of Brahmanical cults into the 'greatest centre for Buddhist learning' during the regime of those kings who officially claimed to be *Parama Saugatas*.

Another example of the installation of a sculpture of Balarāma in an important Buddhist monastery through non-monastic initiative is shown by the votive inscription on a sculpture of Balarāma discovered at Kurkihār (table 1, no. 5). This inscription, dated to the ninth regnal year of the Pāla king Devapāla, records that this sculpture was donated to Mallapore (possibly a monastery) by the wife of Sidhmaka, who was a resident of Saddhu village in Vāhīravana (Banerji-Sastri 1940, 251). Sidhmaka appears to be a village chief (Banerji-Sastri 1940, 251). Mallapore may refer to some Buddhist establishment at Kurkihār.

It was not the case that only the privileged members of society donated inscribed Brahmanical sculptures to Buddhist institutions in early medieval Magadha. The votive inscription on a stone sculpture of Viṣṇu (table 1, no. 6), probably discovered at Kurkihār, but now kept in the Gayā museum, informs us that this sculpture was the *Deyadharmā* of Carmakāra (cobble) Thisavī at the illustrious Āpaṇaka during the twelfth regnal year of the Pāla king Surapāla.<sup>18</sup>

A similar pattern is visible in a votive inscription on a metal sculpture of Umāmaheśvara (table 1, no. 7), dated to the 31st or 32nd regnal year of the Pāla king Rājyapāla. This sculpture was discovered at Kurkihār. Its inscription states that it was the religious gift of Mulakā, the wife of Mahiaru, who was a resident of the Āpaṇaka Mahāvihāra (*Śrimada-Āpaṇaka-Mahāvihāre-Vāstavya-Mahiaru-Bhāryā-Mulakāya-Devadharmakṛtama*) (Banerji-Sastri 1942, 250; Gupta 1965, 153). The question which demands some explanation is: in what capacity was a married man living in the monastery? Was he an *Ārāmika*, a person associated with the management of the monastery? This inscription doesn't throw any light on this issue, but it has nothing to suggest that the donor had any notion that the sculpture was that of a cult figure that was to be integrated into Buddhism in a subordinate capacity.

Evidences of donation of inscribed Brahmanical sculptures to Buddhist religious centres in eleventh and twelfth century Magadha are confined to Kurkihār (table 1, nos. 8–11). Donors have generally not left any detail of their social background, but we may assume that they were from non-aristocratic and non-monastic backgrounds. None of them has opted to assume an explicit Buddhist identity in dedicatory inscriptions. In all probability, these images were donated as representatives of independent cults. Subalamati, the donor of the image of

18. S.L. Huntington has referred to this image inscription on the basis of a personal letter from D.C. Sircar. This image is now kept in the Gayā Museum and its accession number is 76.1 (Huntington 1984, 211)

Viṣṇu (no. 9), has not left any detail of his/her social background, so much so that we are not even sure of the gender of the donor (Banarji-Sastri 1942, 247; Gupta 1965, 153). The dedicatory inscription on an image of Sūrya (no.8) records that this image was the *Deyadharmma* of Bhaṭaputra-Padaka (Banarji-Sastri 1942, 249; Gupta 1965, 153). We are not sure if 'Bhaṭaputra' is an incorrect rendering of 'Bhaṭṭaputra' (son of a Bhaṭṭa, a title commonly used by the Brahmins). During the twelfth century, we see the donation of an image of Viṣṇu (no.11) by a blacksmith (Karmakāra) named Mangane (Banarji-Sastri 1942, 251; Gupta 1965, 153). That is evidence of flow of artisanal patronage to the monastic complex of Kurkihār. Kalāṇḍa, the donor of an image of Umāmaheśvara (no. 10; Gupta 1965, 153) has also not left any detail of his/her social background.

### CONCLUSION

Before we wrap up this article, we may proffer some tentative generalizations. One may note that, barring the example of Mahāthera Dajjaka or Ujjaka, none of the donors — including the wife of a resident of a monastery — has claimed a Buddhist identity: none of the donors has claimed *Paramopāsaka/Paramopāsikā* or *Mahāyāna-Anuyāyina* status for himself/herself. In none of the cases was the attainment of *Anuttara Jñāna* the stated motive for undertaking the donation of image. None of the inscriptions betray any influence of the dedicatory formula of any other Buddhist tradition. Similarly, no Buddhist influence is visible in their names either. Most probably, these donors did not have any fixed religious identity. For them, there was hardly any perceived institutional or cultic differentiation between Buddhism and Brahmanical cults. They donated these sculptures as independent cult figures and not as representative of cults that were to be integrated into Buddhism in a manner of subordinate union. In the long run, the end result was somewhat similar to what Kunal Chakrabarti has argued on the basis of analysis of textual sources of early medieval Bengal:

In popular understanding Buddhist and Brahmanical icons came to perform the same function. Even in the realm of underlying metaphysical premises Tantricism brought the Buddhist and Brahmanical ways of worship close. When both the religions began to receive royal patronage irrespective of the personal faiths of the rulers it carried the universal message that the differences between them, if any, were marginal and that both were entitled to be venerated in almost equal manner. (Chakravarti 2001, 142)

As a whole, these inscriptions indicate an increasing chasm between the expectations of the Saṅgha and the end result that was produced by its decision to allow the installation of these Brahmanical sculptures in important Buddhist centres of early medieval Magadha. The Saṅgha expected to induce a Buddhist maṅḍalic appropriation of Brahmanical cults, but for the masses this development indicated a gradual blurring of ritual and institutional boundaries between Buddhism and Brahmanism. The eventual result, for the common masses, was a slow metamorphosis of Buddhism. With the Turkic destruction of big monastic centres of Magadha and elsewhere in Bihar and Bengal, Buddhism was left without any institutional nucleus to resist its slide towards merger in the popular mind with various animistic and Brahmanical cults.<sup>19</sup>

19. For an analysis of this process with reference to a village donated to the Nālandā Mahāvihāra,

Attempting a subordinate integration of Brahmanical cults to Buddhism by accepting the donation of inscribed Brahmanical sculptures in early medieval Magadha was an ambitious, and adventurous, endeavour on the part of the Buddhist Saṅgha. But it came with the risk of exposing its own flank to Brahmanical appropriation. In the long run, this adventure backfired. Instead of repeating a 'Buddhist Viṣṇu' phenomenon of the type we see in medieval Sri Lanka, the Saṅgha ended up inducing a process by which the Buddha ultimately became an avatar of Viṣṇu in Magadha.

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see Prasad et al 2009, 225–234.



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