

# **Merchants and Their Family Members as Donors of Inscribed Sculptures in Early Medieval Bihar and Bengal**

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## **Abstract**

Through an analysis of dedicatory inscriptions on Buddhist and Brahmanical sculptures donated by merchants and their family members in early medieval Bihar and Bengal, this paper explores the nature of mercantile patronage of Buddhism and Brahmanism in this area. An overwhelming percentage of such reported inscriptions record mercantile patronage through donation of a Buddhist image, indicating that merchants and their families sought social mobility primarily through their patronage of Buddhism

## **Introduction**

Over the years, Indian historiography has witnessed an important debate on the nature of the economy during the early medieval period (c. 600- 1200 CE). The proponents of the 'Indian Feudalism' school of historiography, who preferred to build Pan- Indian models, have generally argued that this period was largely marked by a decline in long distance trade, commerce and urbanisation. This theorization gradually impacted some studies on the decline of Indian Buddhism as well. Thus, in a significant study, Ronald Davidson has argued that during the early medieval period, Indian Buddhism entered into a spiral of 'Systemic Crisis', which had its genesis in a combination of factors: evaporating mercantile

patronage due to decline in the long distance trade and the Arab domination of the high seas, rendering it increasingly dependent on royal, feudal patronage; lessening participation of women in Buddhism<sup>1</sup>; militant Śaiva competition; and a serious dent in the 'previous Buddhist monopoly of dealing with the barbarians, outcastes, tribals, and foreigners' made by the Brahmins who were now willing to travel great distances in search of land and patronage.<sup>2</sup> All this resulted in a gradual spatial shrinkage of Buddhism, and its contraction to select areas of strength. Thus there was a creeping realization within the Indian Buddhist community that their faith was a 'tradition in duress'<sup>3</sup> and the evolution of esoteric, Tantric Buddhism was the result of adaptations by a 'tradition in duress' to feudalism for its very survival.

Some other studies in the decline of Indian Buddhism emphasize the Buddhist monastic failure on agrarian frontiers and in the detribalisation process.<sup>4</sup> Andre Wink has added one more variable: 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.<sup>5</sup> More recently, K.T.S. Sarao has argued that the decline of urbanization and long distance trade were among the central factors that precipitated the decline of Indian Buddhism.<sup>6</sup>

As more micro studies of select regions and sub-regions of different parts of India were undertaken by historians, these Pan-Indian theorizations were increasingly challenged. In the context of early medieval Bihar and Bengal, it has been generally argued that the Samatāṭa-Harikela sub-region of early medieval Bengal, comprising the areas to the east of the Surma-Meghna rivers, witnessed the continuation of long-distance trade and high-quality metallic

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<sup>1</sup> Ronald Davidson, *Indian Esoteric Buddhism: A Social History of the Tantric Movement*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2002, pp.91-98.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p.85.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.111-112.

<sup>4</sup> R.S.Sharma, *Urban Decay*, Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd., Delhi, 1987, p.131. For a review of this approach, see Birendra Nath Prasad, "Major Trends and Perspectives in Studies in the Functional Dimensions of Indian Monastic Buddhism in the Past One Hundred Years: A Historiographical Survey", *Buddhist Studies Review* (Journal of the UK Association for Buddhist Studies, London), Vol.25, No. 1, pp. 78-79.

<sup>5</sup> Andre Wink, *Al-Hind: The Making of the Indo-Islamic World*, Vol. II, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1999, pp.349-350.

<sup>6</sup> K.T.S. Sarao, *The Decline of Buddhism in India: A Fresh Perspective*, Munshiram Manoharlal, Delhi, 2012, p.208.

currency in gold and silver.<sup>7</sup> Prof. B.N. Mukherjee has extended this argument further. He has argued that in the whole of early medieval Bihar and Bengal, there was ‘no sign of unusual decline of trade and commerce in the period and zone under study; but evidences for brisk trading activities in the area’.<sup>8</sup>

It may be stated here that the issue of trade has been looked into in some available studies on the economy of early medieval Bihar and Bengal, but the issue of the religious behaviour of merchants and their family members remains understudied. Which religion did they patronise? How did the pattern evolve as we move from Bihar to Bengal? What implications did these issues have, if any, in the decline of Buddhism in early medieval Bihar and Bengal? In the present paper, an attempt will be made to understand the evolving pattern of mercantile patronage to Buddhism and Brahmanism as reflected in dedicatory inscriptions on sculptures. We will also try to situate our inferences in the broader debate on the decline of Buddhism in early medieval Bihar and Bengal.

Some limitations of our study must be put on record at the very outset. As this study is based solely on the use of only one genre of database (dedicatory inscriptions on sculptures), it has some limitations of its own. Most of the dedicatory inscriptions on sculptures we will analyse in the present paper come in a very short dedicatory format, just recording that the donated image was the *deyadharmā* of a particular donor. Very few of them are inscribed with the regnal year of the king when the donation was made. Only these inscriptions can be dated on a surer footing. Other inscriptions, assigned to a particular century on the basis of palaeographic features, do not offer this kind of surer dating. In this kind of situation, we cannot be sure if some inscriptions of the same century were spaced by decades, years, months or days. Due to these reasons, it is difficult to trace the transitions taking place within a particular century.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Birendra Nath Prasad, “Votive Inscriptions on the Sculptures of Early Medieval *Samatāṭa–Harikela*: Explorations in Socio-religious History” *Religions of South Asia*, London, Vol. 4, no.1, 2010, pp.29-30; Idem, “Brahmanical Temples, Mathas, Agrahāras and a Buddhist Establishment in a Marshy and Forested Periphery of Two ‘Frontier’ States: Early Medieval Surma Valley (Sylhet and Cachar) , c.600 CE -1100 CE”, *Religions of South Asia*, London, Vol. 6.1, 2012, pp. 36-37.

<sup>8</sup> B.N. Mukherjee, “Commerce and Money in the Western and Central Sectors of Eastern India (c. AD 750-1200)”, *Indian Museum Bulletin*, Vol. XVII, 1982, p.75.

<sup>9</sup> In an earlier study, similar problems were noted in the analysis of dedicatory inscriptions on sculptures donated to the Buddhist establishment of Kurkihar in early medieval Magadha. See Birendra Nath Prasad, “The Socio-Religious Dimensions of Dedicatory Inscriptions on Sculptures Donated to a Buddhist Establishment in Early Medieval Magadha: Kurkihar, c.800 CE-1200 CE” *Journal of the Oxford Centre for Buddhist Studies*, Vol. 7, 2014, p. 118.

Similarly, as this study is based solely on the use of one genre of database (dedicatory inscriptions on sculptures), it has some limitations of its own. The inferences arrived at through this study need to be contrasted with other kinds of sources.

### **The donation of sculptures by merchants and their family members in early medieval Bihar and Bengal: the evolving pattern**

The data from the published examples of donations of images by persons from mercantile backgrounds in early medieval Bihar and Bengal is summarized in the following table:

No	Cultic identity of the image	The place and sub-region where the image was discovered	Donor and his/her gender	Social background of the donor	Places where donors came from	Expressed motive behind donation	Period
1	Tārā	Mahābodhi (Magadha)	Nattukā	A merchant's wife, without expressed Buddhist identity	Not mentioned	None expressed	early 8 <sup>th</sup> century
2	Vāgīśvara	Kurkihar, Gaya district (Magadha)	Vaṇika Māṇeka, son of Jānu	male donor without an expressed Buddhist identity	Not mentioned	Do	9 <sup>th</sup> century
3	Seated Buddha	Guneri, Gaya district (Magadha)	Paramopāsaka Śrīpā(la), son of <i>Vaṇika</i> Haridatta	male donor with an expressed Buddhist identity	Not mentioned	Do	Latter half of the 9 <sup>th</sup> century
4	Aparājītā	Some unspecified site of Magadha	Krodhanandin, son of Vanika-Sresthi Kalyanandin	male donor with an expressed commitment to Vajrayāna	Not mentioned	Do	late 9 <sup>th</sup> or early 10 <sup>th</sup> century

*Table 1*

MERCHANTS AND THEIR FAMILY MEMBERS AS DONORS OF INSCRIBED SCULPTURES

No	Cultic identity of the image	The place and sub-region where the image was discovered	Donor and his/her gender	Social background of the donor	Places where donors came from	Expressed motive behind donation	Period
5	Dvādaśāditya	Rajauna or Valagudar (Aṅga)	Ranoka, son of <i>Vanika</i> Śrīdhara.	non-aristocratic; from a mercantile background	Not mentioned	Do	9 <sup>th</sup> century
6	Gaṇeśa	Mandhuk, Comilla district (Samataṭa)	<i>Vṛddha Sārtha</i> Jambhala-mitra	Mercantile, with an expressed Buddhist identity.	Apparently from within Samataṭa	Anuttara Jñāna by all creatures	c. 967 A.D.
7	Viṣṇu	Baghaura, Comilla district (Samataṭa)	Lokadatta	Mercantile	From within Samataṭa	for the increase of religious merit of his parents and himself.	c.995 A.D.
8	Vināyaka	Narayanpur, Comilla district (Samataṭa)	Buddhamitra, son of Jambhala-mitra	Mercantile, with an expressed Paramavaiṣṇava identity	Bilakandhaka in Samataṭa	for the religious merit of his parents and himself.	c.996 A.D.
9	Pedestal of an unidentified image	Arma in Munger district (Aṅga)	Sonikā, wife of a merchant	Mercantile	Not mentioned	None expressed	11 <sup>th</sup> century
10	Mahāśrī Tārā	Lakhisarai (Aṅga)	Jaśadevaka, son of merchant Cāju.	male donor without expressed Buddhist identity	Not mentioned	Do	12 <sup>th</sup> century

Table 1

No	Cultic identity of the image	The place and sub-region where the image was discovered	Donor and his/her gender	Social background of the donor	Places where donors came from	Expressed motive behind donation	Period
11	Khasarpaṇa Avalokiteśvara.	Chandimou, Nalanda district (Magadha)	<i>Paramopāsaka Pravara-Mahāyāna –Anuyā-yina</i> Vaṇika Sādhu Saharaṇa	male donor with an expressed Buddhist identity	Not mentioned	Do	c. 1129 A.D.
12	Khasarpaṇa Avalokiteśvara.	Giriyek, Nalanda district (Magadha)	<i>Dānapati Sādhu</i> Śrīkara and Sādhu Dāgonmata.	male donor without expressed Buddhist identity	Mathurā.	Do	first quarter of the 12 <sup>th</sup> century
13	Maitreya	Unspecified site of Magadha or Aṅga	Sādhu Chamviva	male donor without expressed Buddhist identity	Not mentioned	Do	12 <sup>th</sup> century

Table 1

An analysis of this table offers some interesting inferences. The total number of sculptures donated through mercantile patronage, which happens to be just thirteen, is certainly not impressive, especially given the fact that in the Pāla period Bihar and Bengal witnessed an impressive proliferation of sculptures inscribed with the names of donors.<sup>10</sup> In the reported assemblage of thirteen inscribed sculptures donated by merchants or their family members, six sculptures have been reported from Magadha; three from Aṅga; one from an unspecified site of either Magadha or Aṅga; and three from the plains of Comilla in Samatāṭa. No such sculpture has been reported from North Bihar, Varendra, Rāḍha or Vaṅga as yet.

<sup>10</sup> The reported dedicatory inscriptions on the sculptures of early medieval Bihar and Bengal have been analysed in Birendra Nath Prasad, *Buddhism in a Poly-Religious Context: An Archaeological History of Buddhist, Brahmanical and Jaina Religious Centres in Early Medieval Bihar and Bengal*, Manohar Publishers and Distributors, Delhi, 2020, pp. 231-381. Most of the inscriptions discussed in the present paper were also discussed in the same, but without analysing the evolving pattern of mercantile patronage of the donation of images. The present paper hopes to fill that gap.

Out of the thirteen reported sculptures, three sculptures (no. 5, 7, 8 in Table 1) are Brahmanical; nine sculptures (no. 1, 2,3,4,6, 10,11,12,13 in Table 1) are Buddhist. The cultic affiliation of one sculpture (no. 9 in Table 1) is difficult to determine due to the fragmentary nature of the sculpture. In the available state of our database, Buddhist sculptures seem to have been more successful in attracting mercantile donation than Brahmanical sculptures.

Out of the thirteen inscribed sculptures donated by merchants or their family members, only one (no.1 in Table 1) was donated in the pre-Pāla period. In the Pāla period, four were donated in the 9<sup>th</sup> century, three in the 10<sup>th</sup> century, one in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, and four in the 12<sup>th</sup> century.

The earliest available example of donation of a sculpture by a person from a mercantile background is the 8<sup>th</sup> century sculpture of Tārā (no.1 in Table 1), whose provenance has been traced to the Bodh Gaya area on stylistic grounds. The dedicatory inscription on this image records that this image was the *Deyadharmā* of *Vaṇijakī* Nattukā.<sup>11</sup> G. Bhattacharya has rightly argued that the term *Vaṇijakī* has been used in the sense of “merchant’s wife” in the present inscription.<sup>12</sup> This is the only epigraphically recorded example of feminine participation in the donation of any image at Bodh Gaya.

It must be noted here that the name of the husband or father of *Vaṇijakī* Nattukā is not recorded in the dedicatory inscription, indicating that she had access to wealth and she utilized that wealth in donating an image on her independent initiative. Given the fame of Tārā as a saviouress, it was but natural that Nattukā donated her sculpture, most probably to some shrine or sanctuary in Bodh Gaya.

Reported examples of donations of sculptures during the 9<sup>th</sup> century are the donation of an image of Vāgīśvara (no.2 in Table 1) as the *Deyadharmā* of Vaṇika Māṇeka, son of Jānu, to the Buddhist establishment of Kurkihar<sup>13</sup>; and an image of the seated Buddha discovered at Guneri in Gaya district (no. 3 in Table 1). The dedicatory inscription on the image of the seated Buddha records that this image was the *Deyadharmā* of Paramopāsaka Śrīpā(1a), son of *Vaṇika* Haridatta.<sup>14</sup> This image was donated in the 9<sup>th</sup> regnal year of the Pāla king

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<sup>11</sup> G. Bhattacharya, *Essays on Buddhist Hindu Jaina Iconography and Epigraphy*, The International Centre for Study of Bengal Art, Dhaka, 2000, p.464.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 464.

<sup>13</sup> P.L. Gupta, *Patna Museum Catalogue of Antiquities*, Patna Museum, Patna, 1965, p. 142, Inscription no. 90.

<sup>14</sup> R.D. Banerji, *Pālas of Bengal*, Memoirs of the Asiatic Society of Bengal 3, Calcutta, 1915, p. 110.

Mahendrapāla at the illustrious Guṇacarita (Śrī-Guṇacarita).<sup>15</sup> Guṇacarita was, most probably, the name of the Buddhist establishment where this image was donated. The modern name of the place (Guneri) is obviously derived from that, indicating that the Buddhist establishment of this site attracted patronage from a person from mercantile background. In early medieval Magadha, Buddhism was successful in attracting patronage from such donors not only in the case of its famous monastic and pilgrimage centres (Mahābodhi, Nalanda and Kurkihar) but also in the case of lesser known Buddhist religious centres like Śrī-Guṇacarita.

An interesting trend is seen in the dedicatory inscription on a big inscribed stone sculpture of Aparājītā (no.4 in Table 1), attributed to late 9<sup>th</sup> or early 10<sup>th</sup> century Magadha on stylistic grounds and palaeographic features.<sup>16</sup> Given its big size, this stone image was most probably enshrined in a public religious centre; it was not just an object of worship in a home shrine. The dedicatory inscription on this image, besides recording the Buddhist Creed Formula, records that this image was the *Deyadharmā* of Krodhanandin, son of *Vanika-Śreṣṭhī* Kalyānandin.<sup>17</sup> Bhattacharya interprets ‘*Vanika-Śreṣṭhī*’ in the sense of a ‘leading merchant of his times of the area’.<sup>18</sup> But, as has been noted in some other studies, Śreṣṭhī’ also functioned as bankers.<sup>19</sup> Krodhanandin, the son of a leading merchant-banker, patronised the donation of the image of a Buddhist deity (Aparājītā) that displayed an overt triumph of Buddhism over Śaivism after a violent conflict, to a public religious centre. In the context of early medieval Magadha, where Śaivism had an entrenched presence, Krodhanandin’s patronage of the cult of Aparājītā was a very audacious act: in early medieval Magadha, the general pattern was the coexistence of Buddhism and various

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 110.

<sup>16</sup> G. Bhattacharya, “An inscribed Stone Image of the Buddhist Deity Aparājītā” *Journal of Bengal Art*, Vol.8 , 2003 , pp.95-101.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p.99.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p.100.

<sup>19</sup> Birendra Nath Prasad, “Urbanisation at Early Historic Vaiśālī , c. BCE 600 –CE 400”, in D.N. Jha (ed.), *The Complex Heritage of Early India: Essays in Memory of R.S. Sharma*, Manohar Publishers and Distributors, Delhi, 2014, pp. 229- 231; Birendra Nath Prasad, “Some Observations on the Inscribed Stone Sculptures of Aparājītā and Trailokyavijaya from Early Medieval Magadha” *Kalā* (Journal of Indian Art History Congress), Vol. XXV, 2019-20, pp. 77-82; Birendra Nath Prasad, *Buddhism in a Poly-Religious Context: An Archaeological History of Buddhist, Brahmanical and Jaina Religious Centres in Early Medieval Bihar and Bengal*, Delhi, 2020, pp. 259-260.



Brahmanical sects (Vaiṣṇavism, Śaivism) at the sites located away from Buddhist monastic sites, and attempts at subordinate integration of Śaivism into Buddhism within the religious space of important monastic centres. An open display of violent conflict between Buddhism and Śaivism was not the general pattern in early medieval Magadha and Aṅga.<sup>20</sup> Brahmanism was not without mercantile support either.

This will be amply clear through the analysis of dedicatory inscriptions of some 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> century sculptures of Aṅga and Samatata. A 9<sup>th</sup> century inscribed sculpture of Dvādaśāditya (no.5 in Table 1), discovered at Rajauna or Valgudar near Lakhisarai, records that “these Dvādaśāditya were set up by Ranoka, son of *Vaṇika Śrīdhara*, a resident of Kṛmilā, during the fifth regnal year of the illustrious Surapāla”.<sup>21</sup> This image was an object of public worship, most probably in the shrine/temple caused to be constructed by Ranoka, to gain social prestige for his family. This image inscription may be contrasted with the inscription on a fragmented image of Vasudhārā, which was discovered at Naulagarh in Begusarai district. This inscription records that this image was donated by Āśokā, wife of Dhāmmajī, and the daughter of Śaundika (vintner) Mahāmati of Kṛmilā, in the 24<sup>th</sup> regnal year of the Pāla king Vīgrahapāla (latter half of the 11<sup>th</sup> century).<sup>22</sup> The daughter of a Śaundika donated an image of a Buddhist goddess (Vasudhārā), who was believed to offer material wealth and prosperity. We may presume that her father too could have been devoted to this deity. Apparently, the mercantile class in the city of Kṛmilā patronised both Buddhism and Brahmanism.

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<sup>20</sup> For an analysis of these patterns, see Birendra Nath Prasad, *Buddhism in a Poly-Religious Context: An Archaeological History of Buddhist, Brahmanical and Jaina Religious Centres in Early Medieval Bihar and Bengal*, Delhi, 2020, pp. 544-569.

<sup>21</sup> Priyatosh Banerjee, “Some Inscriptions from Bihar”, *Journal of Ancient Indian History*, Vol. VII, 1-2, 1973-74, pp.107-108.

<sup>22</sup> D.C. Sircar, “Some inscriptions from Bihar”, *Journal of Bihar Research Society*, XXXVII, 3-4, 1951, p.4.

A similar pattern is discernible in the 10<sup>th</sup> century inscribed sculptures discovered in the plains of Comilla district in Samatāṭa. So far, five inscribed sculptures containing the names of donors have been reported from the plains of Comilla district, out of which merchants appear as donors in three instances.<sup>23</sup> All sculptures donated by merchants are datable to the 10<sup>th</sup> century. Dedicatory inscriptions on them show the evolution of an interesting pattern. In the earliest example of this century ( no. 6 in Table 1), we see a *vr̥ddha* (senior) *sārtha*[*vāha*] Jambhālamitra donating an image of Gaṇeśa (discovered at Mandhuk) in the first regnal year of the Pāla king Gopāla II (i.e. c.967 A.D.) for the attainment of *anuttara jñāna* by all creatures but firstly by his parents'.<sup>24</sup> This senior Sārthavāha (leader of the caravan of merchants) was, as indicated by the use of the developed format of Mahāyāna dedicatory formula in the dedicatory inscription on sculpture donated by him, was a Mahāyāna Upāsaka. The image donated by him was also donated as a Buddhist image. Gaṇeśa had an ambivalent character in Buddhist art: Gaṇeśa was worshipped as the remover of obstacles (*vighna-hartā*) and at the same time as the creator of obstacles (*vighna-kartā*) or the obstacle incarnate (*vighna*).<sup>25</sup> This Mahāyāna Upāsaka most probably worshipped Gaṇeśa as *vighna-hartā*.

It may be noted that Jambhālamitra appears in another dedicatory inscription on a stone image of Gaṇeśa/Vināyaka (no. 8 in Table 1), dated to the fourth regnal year of the Pāla king Mahipāla I (i.e., c. 996 A.D.), which was discovered at Narayanapur in Comilla district. The dedicatory inscription on this image informs us that this image of Vināyaka was caused to be established by *Vaṇika* Buddhāmītra, son of *Vaṇika* Jambhālamitra, for the religious merit of his parents and himself.<sup>26</sup> It has been rightly argued by D.C. Sircar that the Jambhālamitra mentioned in this inscription is identical with the one

<sup>23</sup> Birendra Nath Prasad, "Votive Inscriptions on the Sculptures of Early Medieval *Samatāṭa-Harikela*: Explorations in Socio-religious History", *Religions of South Asia*, London, Vol. 4, no. 1, 2010, pp. 27–43.

<sup>24</sup> D.C. Sircar, "Pāla Rule in the Tippera District", *Indian Historical Quarterly*, Vol., XXVIII 1952, p. 57.

<sup>25</sup> G. Bhattacharya, *Essays on Buddhist Hindu Jaina Iconography and Epigraphy*, ICSBA, Dhaka, 2000, pp. 97-106.

<sup>26</sup> D.C. Sircar, "Narayanpur Vināyaka Image Inscription of King Mahipāla, Regnal Year 4", *Indian Culture*, IX, 1942-43, p. 125.

mentioned in the Mandhuk image inscription.<sup>27</sup> *Vaṇika* Buddhmitra belonged to the village *Vilikandhaka* of Samataṭa.<sup>28</sup> We may assume that his father too belonged to the same village.

If contrasted with the previous inscription, we get some interesting inferences. The name of the donor —Buddhamitra— like that of his father shows Buddhist influence. But this influence seems to be confined to his name only. Unlike his father, he did not use a Mahāyāna dedicatory formula in the dedicatory inscription on the sculpture, nor do we have any indication to suggest that the image donated by him was a Buddhist image. His father was no longer a *Sārthavāha*, and Buddhmitra too did not claim this status. In other words, this family of merchants witnessed an economic decline and this decline made Buddhmitra less emphatic in claiming an expressed Buddhist identity.

These two image inscriptions need to be contrasted with the dedicatory inscription on a stone image of Viṣṇu, discovered at Baghaura ( no. 7 in Table 1), dated to the third regnal year of the Pāla king Mahipāla I (i.e. c.995 A.D.). This inscription records that this image was donated by the *Paramavaiṣṇava Vaṇika* Lokadatta, a resident of the village Vilakīndaka in Samataṭa, in the kingdom of Śrī Mahipāladeva, for the increase of the religious merit of his parents and himself.<sup>29</sup> D.C. Sircar has rightly argued that Vilakīndaka and Vilikandhaka referred to the same village.<sup>30</sup> The three merchants —Jambhālamitra with an expressed Buddhist identity, Buddhmitra without any expressed Buddhist identity and *Paramavaiṣṇava* Lokadatta — belonged to the same village. What we noted in the context of the urban centre of Kṛmilā in Aṅga was true for a rural centre of Samataṭa as well.

No 11<sup>th</sup> century inscribed sculpture donated by persons from mercantile background has been reported as yet. Five such sculptures have been reported from the 12<sup>th</sup> century, all belonging to either Magadha or Aṅga. Four of them are Buddhist; the cultic affiliation of one image is not known due to its fragmented nature. Thus, the dedicatory inscription on the pedestal of a fragmented, unidentified image, discovered at Arma in Munger district (no. 9 in Table 1),

<sup>27</sup> D.C. Sircar, “Pāla Rule in the Tippera District”, *Indian Historical Quarterly*, XXVIII, 1952, p. 57.

<sup>28</sup> D.C. Sircar, “Narayanpur Vināyaka Image Inscription of King Mahipāla, Regnal Year 4”, *Indian Culture*, IX, 1942-43, p.125.

<sup>29</sup> N.K. Bhattasali, “Some Image Inscriptions from East Bengal”, *EI*, XVII, 1923-24, p. 355.

<sup>30</sup> D.C. Sircar, “Narayanpur Vināyaka Image Inscription of King Mahipāla, Regnal Year 4”, *Indian Culture*, IX, 1942-43, p.123.

records that this image was donated by Sonikā, wife of the merchant Vāmbha.<sup>31</sup> Due to the fragmented nature of the image, it is not possible to identify its cultic affiliation (Brahmanical or Buddhist). However, a short dedicatory inscription on an image of Mahāśrī Tārā discovered at Lakhisarai ( no. 10 in Table 1) informs us that this image was donated by *Vaṇika* Jaśadevaka, son of *Māthura*—*Vaṇika Dānapati* Cāju.<sup>32</sup> As per G. Bhattacharya, who deciphered this inscription, the term ‘*Māthura*’ may mean a person from *Mathurā* or may indicate the *Kāyastha* caste of the donor.<sup>33</sup> The use of the term *Dānapati* for Cāju indicates that this image was donated by his son Jaśadevaka to fulfil the religious vow of his father.

How did the merchants perceive their profession? Two 12<sup>th</sup> century image inscriptions from Magadha help in looking into this issue. The dedicatory inscription on an image of *Khasarpaṇa Avalokiteśvara* (no. 11 in Table 1), besides recording the Buddhist Creed Formula, records the donation of this image in the 42<sup>nd</sup> regnal year of Rāmapāla (i.e., c. 1129 A.D.) by *Pravara-Mahāyāna- Anuyāyina Vaṇika Sādhu* Saharaṇa, son of *Sādhu* Bhādūlva, for the attainment of *Anuttara Jñāna* for all creatures, keeping his Ācārya, *upādhyāya* and parents in the forefront.<sup>34</sup> *Sādhu* Saharaṇa was originally an inhabitant of Rājagṛha.<sup>35</sup> Similarly, the dedicatory inscription on another image of *Khasarpaṇa Avalokiteśvara* ( no. 12 in table 1) , discovered at Giriyeek , records that this image was donated as the *Deyadharmā* of two merchants (*Vaṇikas*) from Mathurā: *Dānapati Sādhu Śrīkara* and *Sādhu Dāgonmata*.<sup>36</sup> As four *Vaṇikas*—two from within Magadha (*Vaṇika Sādhu* Saharaṇa and *Sādhu* Bhādūlva) and two from distant Mathurā (*Sādhu Śrīkara* and *Sādhu Dāgonmata*)— have used the epithet *Sādhu* for themselves, it may be reasonably inferred that the use of this epithet in 12<sup>th</sup> century Magadha was a common trend. These *Vaṇikas* believed that they were in a noble profession and trading was a pious work, hence they adopted this epithet.

<sup>31</sup> *IAR* 1960-61, p.44. The full inscription has not been published. Only the summary of the same has been provided, so we do not know the exact Sanskrit term for ‘merchant’ used in this inscription.

<sup>32</sup> G. Bhattacharya, op.cit., p.467.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 467.

<sup>34</sup> R.D. Banerji, “Four Inscriptions from Chandimou”, *Annual Report of the Archaeological Survey of India*, 1911-12, pp.161-62.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 161-62.

<sup>36</sup> Priyatosh Banerjee, “Two Medieval Inscriptions”, *Journal of Asiatic Society Letters*, Vol. XIX, 1953, p. 107. This inscription records the name of the Samvata of an unspecified era. Dating has been based on stylistic grounds.

The case with Sādhu Chamvivra, who donated a miniature metal image of Maitreya, either from southern Magadha or the Aṅga area of south Bihar,<sup>37</sup> could have been similar.

### Some concluding observations

It may be difficult to attempt any macro theorisation on the basis of thirteen dedicatory inscriptions on sculptures spread across Bihar and Bengal, and donated in a period spanning not less than five hundred years. Yet some broad trends stand out. We see an overwhelming preference for Buddhist sculptures in the donation of sculptures by persons from mercantile background. Brahmanism too attracted mercantile patronage in the donation of inscribed sculptures. But, at the available state of our database on inscribed sculptures, Buddhism seems to be the primary beneficiary of mercantile patronage in the donation of inscribed sculptures, especially in Magadha, where it also had assertive patrons like Krodhanandin, who used their weight in favour of Buddhism in the Buddhist-Brahmanical sectarian rivalry and conflict. This pattern demands some explanation.

Some clues to the factors behind mercantile preference for Buddhism in the donation of inscribed sculptures may be found in the dedicatory inscriptions on the sculptures donated by merchants, who used the *Sādhu* epithet for themselves. In the early medieval phase, when the Brahmanical normative texts equated the ritual status of a Vaiśya with that of a Śūdra, the donation of sculptures provided a mechanism to traders for claiming that they were in a noble profession.

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<sup>37</sup> S.L. Huntington and John. C. Huntington, *Leaves from the Bodhi Tree: The Art of Pāla India (8<sup>th</sup> - 12<sup>th</sup> Centuries) and Its International Legacy*, Dayton Art Institute in association with the University of Washington Press, Dayton, Ohio, 1990, pp.176-77.