

Women as Donors of Inscribed Buddhist Sculptures in Early Medieval Bihar and Bengal

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Abstract

Through an analysis of dedicatory inscriptions on Buddhist sculptures donated by women in early medieval Bihar and Bengal, this paper explores the nature of female patronage of Buddhist religious centres in this area. It argues that there were important regional differences in the sculptures donated by women. Buddhist religious centres of Magadha were very enthusiastic in attracting and retaining patronage from such donors. Similar patterns prevailed in the Kiul-Lakhisarai area of Aṅga. Women from diverse social backgrounds donated sculptures to Buddhist religious centres in both areas as objects of worship, which may be one of the reasons for the survival of the Bhikṣuṇī saṅgha in the Kiul-Lakhisarai area as late as the late 12th century AD.

East of the Kiul-Lakhisarai area in general, and Bengal in particular, Buddhist religious centres seem to have been reluctant to enter into ritual engagements with their non-monastic non-aristocratic women devotees. This had a significant bearing on the social history of Buddhism in that area.

Introduction

In some Pan-Indian theorisations on the decline of Indian Buddhism during the early medieval period (c. 600- 1200 AD), it has been argued that the lessening participation of women in Buddhism was one of the central factors

in precipitating this decline.¹ One would hardly underestimate the role of female patronage in the institutional survival of any religion: women devotees play a great role in inculcating affiliation to any particular religion not only in their own generation but also in the next generation. For this reason a study of evolving feminine patronage of Buddhism from a regional and sub-regional perspective assumes significance. This kind of study may force us to question some commonly held Pan-Indian theorisations. In this paper, an attempt will be made to understand the issue of patronage of Buddhism by women in early medieval Bihar and Bengal through an analysis of dedicatory inscriptions on Buddhist sculptures donated by them.²

A study of participation by women in Buddhism in this period through an analysis of dedicatory inscriptions on Buddhist sculptures donated by them has some important bearings on the issues of the social bases of patronage of Buddhism and its eventual decline. The donation of sculptures to Buddhist religious centres involved considerable monetary expense on the part of the donor: the donor needed to find a sculptor and pay him for making the sculpture. As these Buddhist images were donated to Buddhist monasteries, shrines and sanctuaries as objects of worship, the donor also needed to pay something to the ritual specialist who would perform the *Prāṇapratīṣṭhā* ritual for the donated image, without which it would not acquire the required sanctity to become an object of worship.³ Even with the involvement of this kind of monetary expense by the donors of sculptures, only some Buddhist religious centres in early

¹ Ronald Davidson, *Indian Esoteric Buddhism: A Social History of the Tantric Movement*, New York, 2002, pp.91-98.

² Excluding the dedicatory inscriptions on the sculptures of Kurkihar, the reported corpus of dedicatory inscriptions on Buddhist and Brahmanical sculptures of early medieval Bihar and Bengal has 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*, Delhi, 2020, pp. 231-381. Dedicatory inscriptions on sculptures donated to the Buddhist establishment of Kurkihar were analysed in 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, pp. 116-152. Most of the inscriptions discussed in the present paper were also discussed in the book and paper referred to above, but without analysing the evolving pattern of feminine patronage through the donation of Buddhist images and its implications for the decline of Buddhism. The present paper hopes to fill that gap.

³ 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. 239-40.

medieval Bihar and Bengal were able to attract or willing to accept donations of sculpture by women donors. The question which needs to be explored, then, is: which Buddhist religious centre was willing to accept donations from women donors? Which part of the religious space of such religious centres was made available to women donors? How did the pattern evolve as one move from Bihar to Bengal? What kind of bearing did it have on the decline of Buddhism in this area in the long run? In some Pan-Indian theorizations, it has been argued that not only the *Bhikṣuṇī saṅgha* declined by the 7th century AD, but ‘more broadly, though, the early medieval period saw the dramatic deterioration of support for and involvement of women in Buddhist activities at any and every level, whether in the monastery, in the lay community, or in the newly evolving Siddha systems’⁴ Do the patterns observed in early medieval Bihar and Bengal conform to this broad pattern? This paper hopes to explore some of these issues.

So far, 19 Buddhist sculptures inscribed with the names of their women donors have been reported from early medieval Bihar and Bengal. None of them indicate donation of sculpture by any woman from royal background. The data from them are summarised in Table 1 below:

Table 1: Buddhist sculptures donated by women donors in early medieval Bihar and Bengal

Sl. No	Cultic identity of the image	The place where the image was discovered	Donor	Social background of the donor	Places where donors came	Expressed motive behind donation	Period
1	Tārā	Mahābodhi	Nattukā	A merchant’s wife, without expressed Mahāyāna identity	Not mentioned	Not mentioned	early 8 th century
2	Pancika, Bronze	Nālandā	Vikhākā (Viśākhā?)	probably from aristocratic background, without expressed Buddhist identity.	village <i>Purika</i> in the <i>Viṣaya</i> of Rājagṛha	None expressed	c. 813 A.D.

⁴ Ronald Davidson, *Indian Esoteric Buddhism: A Social History of the Tantric Movement*, New York, 2002, p.91.

WOMEN AS DONORS OF INSCRIBED BUDDHIST SCULPTURES

Sl. No	Cultic identity of the image	The place where the image was discovered	Donor	Social background of the donor	Places where donors came	Expressed motive behind donation	Period
3	Buddha in BSM, stone	Nalanda	<i>Paramopāsikā</i> Gangākā, a woman	non-monastic, non-aristocratic, with expressed Mahāyāna identity	Not mentioned	<i>Annutara Jñāna</i> by all creatures	8 th or 9 th century A.D.
4	Tārā	Kurkihar	Śākyabhikṣuṇī Guṇamati	A Mahāyāna nun	Not mentioned.	None expressed	9 th century A.D.
5	Buddha in BSM	Kurkihar	Paramopāsiki Mañju.	A female Mahāyāna lay follower	Not mentioned.	None expressed	9 th century A.D.
6	Tārā	Kurkihar	Umādukā, wife of Iddāka.	non-monastic, non-aristocratic, without expressed Buddhist identity	Not mentioned.	None expressed	9 th century A.D.
7	Avalokiteśvara	Kurkihar	Bhadevī (?)	non-monastic, non-aristocratic, without expressed Buddhist identity	Not mentioned	None expressed	10 th century
8	Tārā	Kurkihar	Upāsakī Gopāli-Sāuka	Female Mahāyāna lay follower	Not mentioned.	None expressed	10 th century
9	Tārā	Kurkihar	Upāsakī Duvajha	Female Mahāyāna lay follower	Not mentioned	None expressed	10 th century
10	Vasudhārā	Kurkihar	Vāṭukā, wife of Gopālahino	Female without expressed Buddhist identity	Not mentioned	None expressed	10 th century
11	Vasudhārā	Kurkihar	Gāukā, another wife of Gopālahino	Female without expressed Buddhist identity	Not mentioned	None expressed	10 th century

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Sl. No	Cultic identity of the image	The place where the image was discovered	Donor	Social background of the donor	Places where donors came	Expressed motive behind donation	Period
12	Crowned Buddha	Kurkihar	Yekhoḱā, the wife of Mahattama Dūlapa	Wife of a Mahāyāna lay worshipper	Not mentioned	None expressed	11 th century
13	Avalokiteśvara	Kurkihar	Upāsakī Duvajha	A female Mahāyāna lay worshipper	Not mentioned	None expressed	11 th century
14	Mañjuśrī Kumārabhūta	Kurkihar	Jākhyā	non-monastic, non-aristocratic, without expressed Buddhist identity	Not mentioned	None expressed	11 th century
15	Avalokiteśvara	Nalanda	Apparikā, daughter of Rambhu	Non-monastic, non-aristocratic, without expressed Mahāyāna identity	Not mentioned	None expressed	Late 10 th or 11 th century A.D.
16	Vasudhārā	Nauagarh, Begusarai district	Āśokā, wife of Dhāmmajī	non-aristocratic non-monastic without expressed Buddhist identity	Daughter of a merchant of Kṛmilā	None expressed	Latter half of the 11 th century
17	Puṇḍeśvarī	Lakhisarai	<i>pravara-mahāyāna-yāyinyā-paramopāsikā Śoma</i>	non-aristocratic non-monastic with expressed Buddhist identity	Not mentioned	None expressed	11 th century
18	Buddhist Tantric Siddhāchārya	Somewhere in Varendra (North Bengal)	Ālasī	Non-monastic non-aristocratic woman without expressed Mahāyāna identity	Not mentioned	None expressed	11 th century
19	Khasarapaṇa Avalokiteśvara	Kiul-Lakhisarai area	Śākya-Sthavirā Vijayaśrībhadrā	A nun with expressed Mahāyāna identity	Not mentioned	None expressed	12 th century

It has been noted elsewhere that in the Pāla- Sena period (c. 750-1210 AD) Bihar and Bengal witnessed a significant proliferation of Buddhist and Brahmanical sculptures.⁵ 158 Buddhist sculptures, inscribed with the names of their donors, have also been reported from this area and period.⁶ Of these, dedicatory inscriptions on 19 Buddhist sculptures record the name of their women donors, which forms 12% of reported Buddhist sculptures inscribed with the names of their donors. It is apparent that women were not the dominant group of donors of Buddhist sculptures in early medieval Bihar and Bengal. We may infer that it was not easy for women to access wealth and it was probably more difficult for them to come out of their homes. This paper is about those women who could mobilize wealth to visit some Buddhist religious centres and install Buddhist sculptures there as objects of worship.

Out of the 19 reported Buddhist sculptures inscribed with the names of their women donors, 15 have been reported from Magadha, 1 from North Bihar, 2 from the Kiul-Lakhisarai area of Aṅga, and 1 from Varendra (north Bengal). No such inscribed sculpture has been reported from other sub-regions (i.e. Rāḍha, Vaṅga, Samatāṭa-Harikela) of early medieval Bengal. It may also be noted that all pre-11th century examples are confined to Magadha. Within Magadha, Kurkihar has reported the highest number of inscribed sculptures donated by women, followed by Nālandā and Mahābodhi. It must however, be noted that such sculptures reported from Kurkihar are mostly miniature bronze sculptures, and, unlike big stone sculptures, they were unlikely to have been prominent cult-objects of public worship.

In terms of cultic preferences, Tārā was the most preferred deity (5 examples), followed by different forms of Avalokiteśvara (4 examples), Vasudhārā (3 examples), Buddha in Bhūmisparśamudrā (2 examples), Puṇḍeśvarī (1 example), a Buddhist Tantric Siddhācārya who was devoted to Tārā (1 example), Crowned

⁵ 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. 83-230. Within this general pattern, some significant variations existed. In South Bihar, Buddhism was practically absent in the areas to the west of the Sone river. In West Bengal, it was practically absent in the districts of Purulia and Bankura, where Jaina sculptures and temples dominated. On the whole, this period saw the proliferation of Brahmanical sculptures in all parts of Bihar and Bengal. Buddhism was an expanding religion, but Brahmanical expansion was more profound and its patronage base was more diversified (pp. 83-230.)

⁶ 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. 231-361. See particularly p.345.

Buddha (1 example), Pañcikā (1 example), and Mañjuśrī Kumārabhūta (1 example). Tārā was a saviour deity par excellence, especially in her *Aṣṭamahābhaya* form.⁷ Vasudhārā was a bestower of wealth and prosperity. Buddha in Bhūmisparśamudrā basically signified the Māravijaya episode of the life of the Buddha Śākyamuni and represented a continuation of Mahāyāna.⁸ Puṇḍeśvarī was local goddess in the Kiul-Lakhisarai area of Aṅga, who was gradually integrated into the institutional form of Mahāyāna Buddhism, most probably as a goddess who protected children and bestowed fertility to women.⁹ Pañcikā as a deity is often depicted in the company of Hārītī in the sculptural art of early medieval Bihar and Bengal. The Crowned Buddha was regarded as a form of Vairocana.¹⁰ It is apparent that the Buddhist goddesses associated with protection, wealth, prosperity and fertility were preferred objects of worship and donation by epigraphically recorded women donors of early medieval Bihar and Bengal.

None of the women donors have recorded their Varṇa-Jāti background. The same of their male relatives is not recorded either.

In Bihar and Bengal, the earliest epigraphically recorded instance of the association of a woman in the donation of an inscribed Buddhist sculpture is provided by the fragmentary dedicatory inscription on a stone image of seated Buddha, dated to the year 64 of Mahārāja Trikamala of an unknown dynasty, and found near the Mahābodhi temple. On stylistic grounds, this sculpture has been dated to the 4th century AD by Frederick Asher.¹¹ Asher has also shown convincingly that this sculpture, despite being heavily influenced by the Kuṣāṇa period Mathurā idioms, was made locally at Bodh Gaya by local sculptors. In other words, patrons who

⁷ For an analysis of the role of Tārā as a saviour deity, see N.N. Bhattacharya, “The Cult of Tārā in Historical Perspective”, in N.N. Bhattacharya (ed.), *Tantric Buddhism: Centennial Tribute to Dr. Benoytosh Bhattacharya*, Delhi, 2005, pp. 190-207.

⁸ Jacob N. Kinnard, “Reevaluating the 8th-9th Century Pāla Milieu: Icono-Conservatism and the Persistence of Śākyamuni”, *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies*, Vol.19, no.2, 1996, pp.290-92.

⁹ Birendra Nath Prasad, “A Folk Tradition Integrated into Mahāyāna Buddhism: Some Observations on the Votive Inscriptions on Sculptures of Puṇḍeśvarī/ Pūrṇeśvarī/ Puṇyeśvarī Discovered in the Kiul-Lakhisarai Area, Bihar”, in G. Mevissen (ed.), *Berlin Indological Studies*, Vol.21, 2013, p. 302.

¹⁰ Hiram W. Woodward Jr., “The Life of the Buddha in the Pāla Monastic Environment”, *Journal of Walters Art Gallery*, Vol.48, 1990, p. 20; Claudine Bautze-Picron, *The Bejewelled Buddha: From India to Burma*, New Delhi, 2010, p.141.

¹¹ Frederick Asher, “The Bodh Gaya Image of the Year 64: A Reconsideration”, *Journal of Bihar Research Society*, Vol. LVIII, 1972, pp.151-57.

donated this sculpture to the Mahābodhi undertook a pilgrimage to the Mahābodhi and installed this stone sculpture as an object of worship with the help of some monks. Thus, the dedicatory inscription on this sculpture records that a *Vinayadhara* ('expounder of the *Vinaya*') *Bhikṣu*, who was the companion of another *Vinayadhara Bhikṣu*, caused one Simharatha to dedicate this image of the Bodhisattva in the year 64 of Mahārāja Trikamala.¹² We are also informed of another *Vinayadhara Bhikṣu* and an *Upāsikā*, whose name is also not recorded.¹³ This sculpture was donated with the aim of *Mātā-pitunāma –Pujāye Bhavatu Upādhyāy*.¹⁴ Gregory Schopen has shown that this dedicatory formula is generally found in the cases of donation of sculptures by persons associated with some tradition of Hīnayāna.¹⁵

The much mutilated nature of this inscription does not allow us to draw many inferences. It is, though, very interesting to note that the names of the three *Vinayadhara Bhikṣus* and an *Upāsikā* are not recorded, despite the fact that they all had some role in the dedication of the sculpture. Only the name of Simharatha, who actually funded the installation of the sculpture, has been recorded. A woman with an expressed Buddhist identity (i.e. the *Upāsikā* referred to in the inscription) was present, but her role was considered not important enough to be recorded in the dedicatory inscription. We are also not informed what kind of relationship, if any, she had with Simharatha.

If contrasted with the next epigraphically recorded instance of the donation of a Buddhist sculpture by a woman donor, we see some fundamental changes in the initiative and agency of woman vis-à-vis her male relatives and monks. Thus, the dedicatory inscription on a stone image of Tārā (no. 1 in table 1), attributable to the 8th century Bodh Gaya area on stylistic grounds, records that this image was the *Deyadharmā* of *Vaṇijakī* ('merchant's wife') Nattukā.¹⁶ The name of the woman donor was recorded, but that of her husband was not. Similarly, the name(s) of monks, who must have helped her in the *prāṇapratīṣṭhā* rituals of the donated image, were also not recorded. This woman had access to wealth and agency, which were utilized in the donation of this image.

¹² S.L. Huntington, *The 'Pāla-Sena' Schools of Sculpture*, Leiden, 1984 p. 204.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ G. Schopen, *Indian Monastic Buddhism: Collected Papers on Textual, Inscriptional and Archaeological Evidence*, Part I, Delhi, 2010, p.37.

¹⁶ G. Bhattacharya, *Essays on Buddhist Hindu Jaina Iconography and Epigraphy*, Dhaka, 2000, p.464.

Among the 9th century donors, *Paramopāsikā* Gangākā, the donor of a massive stone sculpture of the Buddha in Bhūmisparśamudrā (no. 3 in table 1), Śākyabhikṣuṇī (i.e. Mahayana nun) Guṇamati, the donor of an image of Tārā, Kurkihar (no. 4 in Table 1), Paramopāsakī Mañju, the donor of a bronze image of the Buddha in Bhūmisparśamudrā, Kurkihar (no. 5 in Table 1), indicate the independent agency of women in donation of images and their access to wealth. None of them have recorded the names of their male relatives or the name of any monk. Barring the inscription on the image donated by Gangākā, other dedicatory inscriptions are in a very short dedicatory format, just recording that these images were *Deyadharmma* of Śākyabhikṣuṇī Guṇamati and Paramopāsikā Mañju respectively.¹⁷ In none of the cases, are the names of the male relatives (father or husband) of the donor women mentioned.

Among these donors, *Paramopāsikā* Gangākā and Śākyabhikṣuṇī Guṇamati stand out. The donation of an image of Tārā by Śākyabhikṣuṇī Guṇamati indicates the survival of the Bhikṣuṇī saṅgha in the 9th century as well, and contradicts those pan-Indian theorizations that argue for the disappearance of the order of nuns within Indian Buddhism by the 7th century. The question that needs to be explored, then, is: was Śākyabhikṣuṇī Guṇamati a local Bhikṣuṇī or from outside? Śākyabhikṣuṇī Guṇamati has not stated anything to this effect in the dedicatory inscription on the image, which renders our task difficult. One may, however, recall that Kurkihar had a significant presence of monks from Kāñcī in Tamil Nadu and they were very careful in recording their Kāñcī origin in the dedicatory inscriptions on images donated by them to the Buddhist establishment of Kurkihar.¹⁸ We don't see any effort of this kind in the dedicatory inscription on the image donated by Guṇamati. We cannot rule out the possibility that she was a local Bhikṣuṇī *therī*.

The dedicatory inscription, datable to late 8th or 9th century on palaeographic grounds, on a massive (almost 6 feet high) stone sculpture of Buddha in Bhūmisparśamudrā that was discovered amidst the excavated ruins of the Nālandā Mahāvihāra begins with the Buddhist Creed Formula and records

¹⁷ For the short dedicatory inscription on image donated by Paramopāsikā Mañju, see P.L. Gupta, *Patna Museum Catalogue of Antiquities*, Patna, 1965, p. 128, inscription no. 12. For the short dedicatory inscription on the image donated by Śākyabhikṣuṇī Guṇamati, see G. Bhattacharya, op. cit., p.463.

¹⁸ 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, pp. 116-152.

the names of Ārya Śāriputra, Ārya Mahāmaudgalyāyana, Ārya Maitreyañātha and Ārya Vasumitra.¹⁹ It also records that the image was the Deyadharmma of *Paramopāsikā* Gangākā.²⁰ As indicated by the use of the term *Paramopāsikā*, Gangākā was a woman with expressed Mahāyāna identity and she took care to get recorded the names of some famous Mahāyāna Ācāryas in the dedicatory inscription. Ārya Maitreyañātha was the founder of the *Yogācāra* or *Vijñānavāda* school of Mahāyāna and Ārya Vasumitra was the founder of the Vaibhāṣka school. Similarly, Ārya Śāriputra and Ārya Mahāmaudgalyāyana were the two chief disciples (*Aggasāvakas*) of Śākyamuni Buddha.²¹ Given the massive size of the donated image, its donation must have involved the mobilization of considerable resources on the part of the donor and it must have been a prominent object of public worship within the Nālandā Mahāvihāra.²² The authorities of the Mahāvihāra were willing to accept patronage from a Mahāyāna Upāsikā without any expressed aristocratic pedigree (no claim to this effect has been made by Gangākā in the dedicatory inscription) and allow the installation of this image as a prominent object of public worship.²³

The 9th century also witnessed donation by women who identified themselves as housewives. We have two reported examples of this kind: Umādukā, wife of Iddāka, who donated a sculpture of Tārā to the Buddhist establishment of Kurkihar²⁴; and Vikhākā, who donated the bronze image of Pañcikā to the Nālandā Mahāvihāra. The dedicatory inscription on the bronze sculpture of Pañcikā (no.2 in Table 1) records that “in the third regnal year of Devapāla, Vikhākā (Viśākhā), the sole wife of the ‘destroyer of the Kalchuris’, and a resident of the village of Purikā in Rājagṛha *Viṣaya*, together with the people, set up this image

¹⁹ B. Sahai, *The Inscriptions of Bihar (From Earliest Times to the Middle of the 13th century A.D.)*, Ramananda Vidya Bhavan, Delhi, 1983, p.126.

²⁰ C.S. Upasaka, *Nalanda: Past and Present*, Nava Nalanda Mahavihara, Nalanda, 1977, p. 180.

²¹ 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, p. 269.

²² *Ibid.*, pp.269-70.

²³ At present, this image is locally known as Dhelvā Bābā. Some local villagers believe it to be a demon and throw stones at it to ward off evil and keep away calamity. This is one of the indications of the profound transformation Buddhism has undergone in Magadha.

²⁴ G. Bhattacharya, *Essays on Hindu Buddhist and Jaina Iconography and Epigraphy*, Dhaka, 2000, p. 464. The dedicatory inscription on this image is very short, just recording that the image was the Deyadharmma of Umādukā, wife of Iddāka.

at the famous Nālandā²⁵. No political epithet (*Sāmanta*, *Mahāsāmanta*, etc.) has been used for her husband. Even his name is not recorded. But the donation of this image to the Nālandā Mahāvihāra offered her an opportunity to announce that she was the sole wife of her husband.

All five reported examples of the donation of Buddhist sculptures by women donors during the 10th century are from the Buddhist establishment of Kurkihar. Among the donors who have not recorded the names of their male relatives are Upāsakī Gopāli Sāuka²⁶ and Upāsakī Duvajha²⁷, donors of the bronze images of Tārā (no. 8 and 9 in Table 1), and Bhadevī, the donor of a bronze image of Avalokiteśvara²⁸ (no. 7 in Table 1). Dedicatory inscriptions donated by them come in a very short dedicatory format, just recording that these images were their *Deyadharmā*. Due to this factor, it is difficult to read much social history in them. It may be noted that Upāsakī Duvajha appears as the donor of the image of Avalokiteśvara (no. 13 in Table 1) in the 11th century.²⁹ This indicates that she had a longer association with the Buddhist establishment of Kurkihar, yet she remained an Upāsakī and did not become a Bhikṣuṇī. Nor do we have any example of donation of a sculpture to the monastic establishment of Kurkihar after Guṇamati. All this indicates the decline of the Bhikṣuṇīsaṅgha at Kurkihar after the 9th century.

This decline was despite the presence of non-monastic non-aristocratic devotees who patronized the Buddhist establishment of Kurkihar for many years. We may infer this through an analysis of the dedicatory inscriptions on sculptures donated by a man named Gopālahino and his two wives. His two wives — Vāṭukā³⁰ and Gāukā³¹— donated images of Vasudhārā, the Buddhist goddess of wealth and prosperity (no. 10 and 11 in Table 1) to the Āpaṇaka Mahāvihāra as their *Deyadharmā*. In the dedicatory inscription on both sculptures, their husband Gopālahino has been simply referred to by his name.³² But, in the 11th

²⁵ H. Sastri, *Nalanda and Its Epigraphic Material*, Memoirs of the Archaeological Survey of India, no. 66, Delhi, 1942, p.87.

²⁶ P.L. Gupta 1965, op. cit., p. p. 145, inscription no.107.

²⁷ Ibid., p.146, inscription no. 116.

²⁸ Ibid., p.137, inscription no. 64.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 139, inscription no. 73.

³⁰ P.L. Gupta, op.cit.,p.150, inscription no. 134.

³¹ Ibid., p.150, inscription no. 135.

³² 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.134.

century, at least 35 years after the donation of images by Vātukā and Gāukā, Gopālahīno donated an image of the Buddha in Vajraparyankāsana.³³ In the dedicatory inscription on that image, he referred to himself as *Paramopāsaka* Gopālahīno.³⁴ That is to say, he was more emphatic in asserting his Buddhist identity now. Despite commanding the patronage of such committed devotees, the Bhikṣuṇī saṅgha at Kurkihar declined after the 9th century.

Seven inscribed Buddhist sculptures donated by women have been reported so far for the 11th century. They show one important trend. Unlike the reported examples of the previous centuries, which are confined to Magadha, this century witnessed the donation by women in the Aṅga area, North Bihar, and Varendra as well. In the previous centuries, images of the donated Buddhist deities were either of the Buddha Śākyamuni in different *mudrās* or of those deities that were worshipped for different *laukika* needs: Tārā, Vasudhārā, Pañcīkā and Avalokiteśvara. In this century, the donation of an image of Puṇḍeśvarī indicates the continuation of the trends of the previous centuries. However, the donation of an image of the Crowned Buddha and an image of a Tantric Siddhācārya indicates the patronage of Tantric Buddhism by women.

The reported examples from Kurkihar are miniature bronze sculptures. Only one donor (Yekhoḳā, wife of *Mahattama* Dūlapa, donor of a sculpture of the Crowned Buddha—no. 12 in Table 1) has recorded the name of her husband.³⁵ Two other donors to Kurkihar—Upāsakī Duvajha, who donated an image of Avalokiteśvara³⁶ (no. 13 in Table 1) and Jākhīyā, who donated an image of Mañjuśrī Kumārabhūta³⁷ (no. 14 in Table 1)—have not recorded any information regarding their social background or the names of their male relative, indicating their independent agency, initiative and access to wealth in the donation of Buddhist sculptures. They all appear to be from the non-monastic non-aristocratic section of society. Similarly, Apparīkā, who donated a large and beautifully carved stone image of Avalokiteśvara to the Nālandā Mahāvihāra (no. 15 in Table 1), was most probably from the same section of society.³⁸ As

³³ P.L. Gupta, op. cit., pp.130-31, inscription no. 25.

³⁴ Ibid., pp.130-131, inscription no. 25.

³⁵ P.L. Gupta, op. cit., p.133, inscription no. 33.

³⁶ For the short dedicatory inscription on this image, see Ibid., p.146, inscription no. 116.

³⁷ For the short dedicatory inscription on this image, see Ibid., p. 143, inscription no. 95.

³⁸ For the dedicatory inscription on this image, see Jinah Kim, “Unheard Voices: Women’s Roles in Medieval Buddhist Artistic Production and Religious Practices in South Asia”, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Vol. 80, No. 1, 2012, pp. 218-219. We agree with her

she has recorded the name of her father, and not of her husband, we have some reason to believe that she was an unmarried woman at the time of the donation of this image.

Three other reported examples of the 11th century— a stone sculpture of Vasudhārā donated by Āśokā, wife of Dhāmmajī, to some Buddhist religious centre of Naulagarh in the Begusarai district of North Bihar (no.16 in Table 1)³⁹; a stone sculpture of Puṇḍeśvarī donated by *Pravara-mahāyāna-yāyinyā-paramopāsikā* Śoma in the Kiul-Lahisarai area (no. 17 in Table 1);⁴⁰ and the stone sculpture of Buddhist Tantric Siddhācārya donated by a donor called Ālasī in some part of Varendra (no. 18 in Table 1)⁴¹— indicate two different trends. In the dedicatory inscription on the image donated by Dhāmmajī, not only the name of her husband but also that of her father has been recorded. In contrast, Śoma and Ālasī did not record the name of any male relative. In fact, in the dedicatory inscription on the image donated by Ālasī, we have the earliest epigraphically recorded example of devotion to a Buddhist Siddhācārya by any devotee in early medieval Bihar and Bengal. The Siddhācāryas, it has been rightly argued by Ronald Davidson, represented the non-institutional form of Buddhist esoterism, having an ambivalent relationship with monastic Buddhism.⁴² They were generally not mindful of the prevailing social norms on sexuality, *Varṇa* and *Jāti*. If a woman became a devotee of a Siddhācārya and publicly acknowledged her association with him by inscribing her name on the image of the Siddhācārya, it must have been an act of exceptional courage.

In the stone image donated by Ālasī, we see a central male figure, almost nude, surrounded by subsidiary figures, and a seated image of Tārā on the top of the relief.⁴³ The dedicatory inscription on this image records that this image

suggestion that the donation of this big and beautifully carved stone image must have involved the mobilization of considerable wealth on the part of the donor.

³⁹ For the dedicatory inscription on this image, see D.C. Sircar, “Some inscriptions from Bihar”, *Journal of Bihar Research Society*, Vol. XXXVII, 3-4, 1951, p.4.

⁴⁰ For the text of the dedicatory inscription on the image of this deity, see Frederick Asher, “An Image at Lakhi Serai and its Implications”, *Artibus Asiae*, Vol. LIX/3-4, 2000, p.301. For an analysis of this inscription, see Birendra Nath Prasad, “A Folk Tradition Integrated into Mahāyāna Buddhism: Some Observations on the Votive Inscriptions on Sculptures of Puṇḍeśvarī/Pūrṇeśvarī/Puṇyeśvarī Discovered in the Kiul-Lakhisarai Area, Bihar”, *Berlin Indological Studies*, Vol. 21, 2013, p. 303.

⁴¹ For the text of the dedicatory inscription on this image, see G. Bhattacharya, op.cit., p.380-81.

⁴² Ronald Davidson, op.cit., pp. 293-335.

⁴³ G. Bhattacharya, op.cit., p.380.

was the *Deyadharmma* of a woman called Ālasī.⁴⁴ It has been rightly argued by G. Bhattacharya that the central figure of this sculpture was a Siddha and he was the preceptor of the donor. This Siddhācārya, as indicated by the depiction of Tārā in the upper portion of the sculpture, was a devotee of Tārā.⁴⁵ We may add that Ālasī too, like her preceptor, could have been a devotee of Tārā.

To sum up the patterns in the 11th century, we see the donation of images by women donors of diverse social backgrounds. Even Tantric Buddhism was not without its women patrons.

This diversity probably explains the survival of a *Bhikṣuṇī saṅgha* in the Kiul-Lakhisarai area of Aṅga in the 12th century. The inscription (datable to c.1150 A.D.) on an image of Simhanāda Avalokiteśvara that was discovered at Jaianagar near Lakhisarai (no. 19 in Table 1), records that this image was the *Deyadharmma* of Śākya-Sthavirā Vijayaśrībhadrā belonging to the branch (*Viṭapi*) of Mallikādevī (*Mallikādevī -Viṭovi-Sthitā* –Śākya-Sthavirā *Vijayaśrībhadrāya Deyadharmmoyama*).⁴⁶ Though J. Kim takes the term ‘Śākya-Sthavirā’ in the sense of ‘elderly Buddhist nun’, on the analogy of Śākya-*bhikṣuṇī* we infer that this term may have been used in the sense of a Mahāyāna nun. It has been rightly argued that the ‘*Viṭovi*’ mentioned in this inscription is an incorrect rendering of *Viṭapi*.⁴⁷ Mallikādevī was the head of a *Bhikṣuṇī saṅgha* and Vijayaśrībhadrā belonged to that *Bhikṣuṇī saṅgha*. Like Guṇamati of Kurkihar, Vijayaśrībhadrā did not record if she was a local nun or came from outside. It has been noted elsewhere that those non-local monk-donors of sculptures, who came to Bihar on pilgrimage, were very careful in recording their place of origin.⁴⁸ We don’t see any attempt of this kind in the dedicatory inscriptions on sculptures donated by nuns Guṇamati and Vijayaśrībhadrā. This indicates that a *Bhikṣuṇī saṅgha* existed in the late 12th century Kiul-Lakhisarai area.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p.380.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p.380.

⁴⁶ J. Kim, “Unheard Voices: Women’s role in Medieval Buddhist Artistic Production and Religious Practice in South Asia”, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Vol.80, no.1, 2012, p.207.

⁴⁷ J. Kim, op.cit., pp.207-210.

⁴⁸ 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. 231-381.

Summing up

The limited database of just 19 inscribed Buddhist sculptures donated by women in early medieval Bihar and Bengal does not allow us to offer macro theorizations. Some broad patterns, though, stand out. Major Buddhist religious centres of Magadha —Bodh Gayā, Nālandā, Kurkihar— were willing to accept donations of inscribed Buddhist sculptures from women donors of diverse social backgrounds. Buddhist religious centres of the Kiul-Lakhisarai area of Aṅga too displayed a similar pattern. The pattern seems to change when we move to the areas east of Kiul-Lakhisarai. No example of an inscribed sculptures donated by a woman has been reported from Vikramaśilā or any monastic centre of Bengal. It has been noted elsewhere that monastic centres of early medieval Bengal were reluctant to enter into ritual engagement with their non-monastic non-aristocratic devotees.⁴⁹ One wonders if this reluctance was responsible for some women devotees like Ālasī finding spiritual solace in the *Siddhācāryas*.

⁴⁹ Ibid., pp. 231-381; 493-533.