

Icons of Buddha from Early Historic Buddhist Art of Gujarat, Western India

AMBIKA B. PATEL

Introduction

By 1st century BC Buddhism was one of the prominent religions in South Asia. Buddhist worship was focused upon stupas (either rock cut or free standing) containing relics and smaller (votive) stupas within monastic establishments. The monasteries were centers of learning, teaching and writing of religious treatises. Buddhist religious centers received the patronage of kings, guilds, merchants, bankers etc. Buddhist institutions were perhaps instrumental for expansion of trade and economic growth.

Archaeological examination of Buddhist stupas by Alexander Cunningham in mid 19th century brought the Buddhist art and architecture in to the forefront of academic study for the first time. Consequently, the remains of Buddhist stupas assumed a prominent position in art and architecture studies during the second half of 19th and early 20th century. The main goal of the study of carved architectural and sculptural remains was to determine the chronology of stylistic development. Some scholars viewed architectural and sculptural remains of stupas in the light of the “psychology” and “meaning” of art as expressed in the philosophical and aesthetic traditions (Hawkes & Shimada 2009). The reconstruction of ancient Buddhism through critical reading of ancient texts or using the narrative sculptural representations correspond with episodes from the texts or using narrative panels as visual proof of wider socio-economic practices identified in the texts were focal areas of research during the early 20th century. Various narrative episodes appeared to represent commodities of production, trade, historical existence of things, social hierarchy etc. Studies by Coomaraswamy (1927) and Bachhofer (1929) on architecture and sculptural remains of a number of stupas and have taken the field history of Indian Buddhist Art into commendable heights.

Over the last two decades, the studies of South Asia’s ancient past and Buddhism in general have shown vivid growth and began to open up many exciting new areas of research. These decades witnessed growing critical historiographical approaches to seek better understanding of ancient Buddhism and Buddhist archaeology (cf. Almond 1988;

Lopez 1995; Guha 1998; Leoshko 2003; Singh 2004; Shaw 2005) by providing valuable insights into the ways in which various archaeological, art historical, textual historical approaches have been defined and shaped. These new wakefulness created reappraisal perspectives among various aforesaid disciplines and generated a platform for inter and multidisciplinary approaches for Buddhist Studies.

As an Assistant Professor of Archaeology and Ancient History, I had the opportunity to teach Buddhism as an academic subject to first year undergraduates of Archaeology course from 2001-2007. For teaching third year undergraduate course “Monuments of Gujarat” (where Buddhist Art and Architecture (2008-2010) becomes a part), I deliberately started broadening my understanding of Buddhism by blending perspectives of doctrine and monumental architecture.

The sequential events of designing and preparation of an exhibition entitled “*In Search of the Seer*”: An Exhibition of Buddhist Heritage of Gujarat, from August-December 2009 and later curating the exhibition in January 2010 as part of the International Seminar on Buddhist Heritage of Gujarat organized by the Maharaja Sayajirao University, followed by an analysis of one year visitor’s profile, made me to realize the strength and need of multi-disciplinary research on Buddhism of this region. As far as Buddhist studies concerned, Gujarat neither received popularity as in the case of Deccan region of Maharashtra nor attracted scholar’s attention which otherwise it deserves.

The excavations in various parts of Gujarat till date provided tremendous material evidences to understand the early historic period. However, rigorous multidisciplinary studies have not attempted yet for this cultural period as compared to the preceding Chalcolithic period. However, the archaeological study of the cultures of this important and long but relatively neglected period thus merits detailed studies in its own (Allchin 1968; Allchin *et.al* 1995; Chakrabarty 1994). The present paper is such an attempt to understand the evolution of Iconic representation of Lord Buddha from early historic Gujarat.

There are no archaeological and historical evidences available to support the legendary theory of Yadava occupation in Gujarat under the leadership of Lord Krishna prior to the Mauryas (Bhowmik 1980). Though the evidences of occupation of this region prior to 4th century BC from the archaeological excavations of Dwaraka (Ansari 1966; IAR 1979),

Nagara (Mehta and Shah 1968) and Prabhas Patan (Nanavati *et.al.*1971) supplement the view expressed by Allchin (1995); i.e., “*it appears that the period between the Harappan and Early Historic was less of a dark age, but more of a period of gradual stable growth and innovation which culminated in the emergence of the Early Historic world*”. Allchin *et.al* (1995) further proposed that urbanism in the Early Historic Period in Gujarat emerged after the conquest by Mauryans around 3rd century BC. Asokan rock edicts of Dhamma, at Girnar stand as the earliest evidence to support the prevalence of Buddhism in this region. However, evidences of human activity during the Mauryan period in Gujarat are scanty and are represented by the isolated occurrence of punch marked coins and Northern Black Polished Ware.

The literary sources which draw information on early historic Gujarat are traditional records of Pandits, Yatis, Bhatas, folk-literature and travelogues (Majumdar 1960). Apart from the Northern Black Polished ware and punch marked coins; Black and Red ware, Red polished Ware, Roman Amphorae, Rangmahal Ware and objects of glass, lead, iron and shell represent the archaeological evidences. The other traits of this period are agro pastoral economy, development of script, rise of urban settlements, brick built structural remains, monumental buildings, international trade and prevalence of Jainism and Buddhism and Vaishnava sect. The excavated sites like Devnimori, Vadnagar, Amreli and Siyot revealed art and architectural material remains of the Buddhist.

The strategic location of this region might have played a major role in its continuous cultural growth. During early centuries of Christian era, this area might have served as an area of amalgamation between the indigenous rulers and Kushan and Greek invaders. Gandhara school of Art under the Kushanas also influenced the north western states of modern India including Gujarat and the influence of the foreign elements are well illustrated in the artistic representation of this period.

Buddhist Art in Early Historic Gujarat

When we think of Buddhist art, it is possible to see the Buddhist practicing autonomous and distinctive aesthetic art tradition which perhaps act as the first mature expression of Indian Art following the collapse of the proto-historic (Harappan/Chalcolithic) period. Buddhist art tradition was increasingly favored by the special characters of its doctrine especially

meditation (which remained as the central discipline leading to the attainment of spiritual grace). The most characteristic images represent the seer seated in deep contemplation or dispensing the fruit of his meditations, the *Dhamma*. Though, the doctrines were later divided into separate sectarian lines, they nonetheless exerted a pervasive unifying power over the realm of artistic expression (Rosenfield 1965). Buddhist Art in Gujarat represents diverse forms of sculptures, decorative motives on architectural edifices, rock paintings and sealings. Among the sculptures, Buddha images remain as the dominant category.

Buddha Sculptures/Images

The genesis of the Buddha image is one of the inexplicable issues in Indian art (Foucher 1917; Rowland 1936; Krishnan 1996). As per the Buddhist scriptures, after the death of Great Master, Buddhism got divided into two schools; Hinayana (relied preaching of Buddha in original form) and Mahayana (made human Buddha a Sakyamuni, an eternally supreme deity). Early Buddhist art being an-iconic never depicted Buddha in anthropomorphic form, instead, his presence was generally indicated by a footprint, an empty throne, royal umbrella/parasol. However, with growing practice of *Buddha-puja* (the cult of devotion of the Buddha as lord), creation of images as manifestation of bhakti, growing popularity and prevalence of Mahayana cult perhaps occurred hand in hand. Texts such as *Suddharma Pundarika* (lotus sutra) and *Mahavastu* emphasize worship as supreme means of salvation, brought an end to an-iconic stage of Buddhism and provided a suitable climate for the creation of the anthropomorphic image of Buddha. Image making was known by the end of 3rd century BC as a figural style (Fisher 1993). Based on the concept of *Mahapurusha* (great man) with distinctive *lakshanas* (identification features), the images of the great master was created in different regional styles based on certain art traditions and techniques (Sharma 2004). The first images of Buddha are generally said to have produced either in the ancient province of Gandhara, in the northwest of the Indian subcontinent or at Mathura (flourishing commercial and religious center 125km away from Delhi), once formed the focus of southern part of the Kushana empire. The earliest Buddha images are those that bear dates in the reign of Kanishka, viz., the Saranath Bodhisattva dated to the 3rd regnal year of Kanishka (Agrawala 1965). Buddha images became popular by middle of second century AD, and in the case of Gujarat, their early appearance is assigned to 1st/2nd century AD and dominantly seen in Kshatrap period (2nd-4th century AD).

By the first century AD., followers of the Buddha had elevated him to the status of a god and the stupa represents the presence of the Buddha. The human figure of the Buddha wearing a monastic robe began to dominate the art of India. *Asokavandana* refer to use of wood and clay for making Buddha images at many parts of India (c.f. Strong 1983). Based on the evidences from the early historic sites in Gujarat, it appears that, though there are iconic representation of Buddha in stone and metal; terracotta dominated as a major media of image making. The finely made Buddha images in terracotta media from Gujarat are master pieces of Kshatrap-Gupta Art highlighting the balanced blending of artistic expression and technical skill of the maker. Stone Image of Bodhisattava (sits on lotus in *padmasana* posture on *simhasana*) from Vadnagar is akin to Katara Buddha and the metallic image of standing Buddha in *abhyamudra* from Kutch is excellent iconic representation of Buddha in other mediums.

Seated Bodhisattva (Stone), Vadnagar

This Sakyamuni image (Height: 51.7cm; Breadth: 44.3cm; Thickness: 8.2cm) is shown seated cross legged in *padmasana* posture on a lion pedestal (*simhasana*) with two seated lions (symbol of sakya clan) on either end of the base of the pedestal facing outward. Buddha wears monastic garment with right shoulder bare. The feature of drapery pleated in a series of fine regular folds over the left arm is not completely seen due to breakage. The left arm is shown rests on the thigh in *katyavalambita* hasta and supports the garment. The right palm is partly broken and is in *abhayamudra*. The upper garment is transparent revealing the plumpness of the body with a deep naval and slightly projecting breasts while the lower garment is thick and reaches below knee up to three fourth of the leg and is shown with a thick fold. The face is oval with protruding almond shaped eyes with extended horizontal lines in their outer corners. The eyebrows are marked by a double line forming a ridge and the hair tied up in two folds indicated by the coil of hair (*kaparda*). The image also shows elongated ear lobes. The body features clearly displays fleshy Kushana elements. The figure is flanked by pair of attendants, Brahma with the *chauri* on the right side is visible and Indra is partly seen on the left side. The upper part of the body from the shoulder is missing. The remains of the halo is traceable, and it appears that the scalloped halo is encircling Buddha's head and around it is the bodhi tree which is clearly visible

from the branches and leaves depicted surrounding the attendant on the right side of the image.

The seated red sand stone image from Vadnagar (Figure 1) is identified as Bodhisattva from the inscription on its base and is dated to 1st/2nd century AD. The inscription reads as" *Sammatiyo Bhikhuno yo Devo Bodhisattvas tayo chataye kuteye Acharyen Mahasayaken pariyoh*" means that Acharya Mahasayak brought the image of Bodhisattva, who is the God of Sammatiya Bhikshus for installing in the chaitya. This image is very significant as it directs towards the existence of *Samitya School* in Gujarat during early centuries of Christian era.

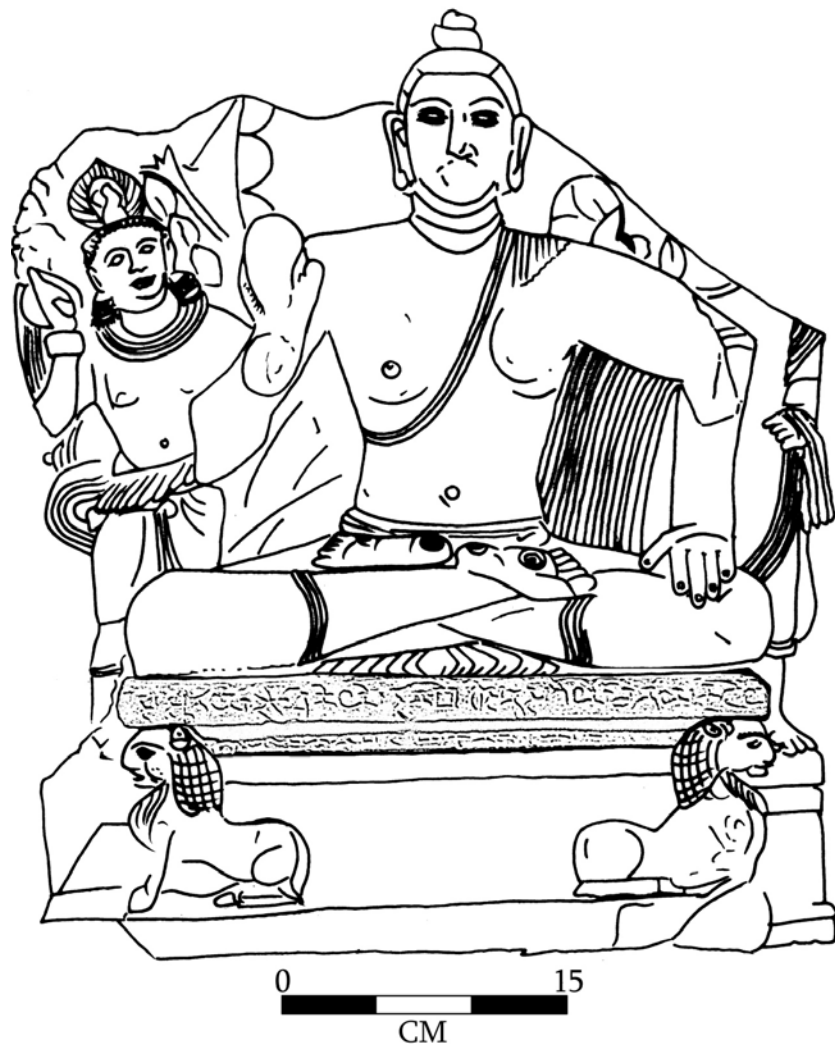


Figure 1: Bodhisattva Image, Vadnagar

(Courtesy: Vadnagar Museum)

Seated Buddha Images (Terracotta), Devnimori

Archaeological evidences from the excavation at Devnimori (North Gujarat) during 1963 to 1965 exposed a Kshatrap Mahastupa, ornated with Dhayani Buddha images and stylized bricks on its exterior. It showcases an excellent example of extensive use of Terracotta as the medium of art and architecture highlighting the splendor of the cultural period. Devnimori have yielded 26 terracotta images of Buddha out of which 12 were complete and the rest were fragments (Chowdhary 2010). The large number of images perhaps points to the fact that these images must have been the chief subject of the whole scheme of decoration or worship in the Stupa. The seated *Dhyanibuddha* images placed in the exterior walls of platform II of the Stupa might have been worshiped by the devotees while taking *pradakshina* (circumambulation) of the stupa. The Devnimori images stand as the most eloquent specimens of a balanced blending of artistic expression and expert technical skill of the sculptors. The alluvial beds of river Meshvo flowing nearby Devnimori stupa must have served as the source for fine clay for image making. Clay being plenty, inexpensive and easy to work was even a favourable material for Gandharan artists. The terracotta sculptures were generally attached to walls giving them an appearance of three dimensional reliefs. It was also a frequent practice to fashion bodies by hand, while molds were used for making heads, which were made separately and attached to the bodies (Figure 2). This explains why so many head survived while figures perished along with the buildings (Cuzuma 1985) and this statement stands absolutely true for Devnimori as well.

The images were executed in “*ultorelief*”, in which the back side of the image is hidden from view. The back slab of the image is flat and wedge shaped towards the top, i.e., towards back side of the head portion (Mehta and Chowdhary 1966) thus presenting the images frontally. These images are in seated *Padmasana* posture (legs bent inward at knee to an acute angle in such a way that their toes are brought together in the lap near the abdomen, with heels turned upward) in *dhyana mudra* (hands resting in the lap just above the heels with upturned palms and full stretched fingers). With fully developed chest the torso is kept erect and the sunken belly and abdomen created slim waist. The body is draped in *Sangathi*, which flows around the upper body. The rhythmic folds of it continue in the lower part of the body and around the middle part of the crossed legs are clearly depicted by bands. The thick folded lower garment is shown till above the knee and the transparent one layer of the *Sangathi* continues to wrap the lower part of the leg and has given transparent

feeling by regular incised lines. Though, at a glance all the images look similar, there are variations in the representation of each one. They differ in the form and features of face, hair style, depiction of urna (presence and absence), drapery and the lotus seat (full blown, half blown, inverted etc.). Based on the facial features and shape, the Buddha heads fall mainly in three groups; viz., oval, almond and round (Chowdhary 2010).



Figure 2: Buddha Head, Devnimori (Mathura Style)

(Courtesy: Department of Archaeology and Ancient History, M. S. University of Baroda)

In order to distinguish the great master from an ordinary man, the *sutras* endowed him with various superhuman features, known as *lakṣaṇas*, borrowed from ancient Indian concept of universal king (*Chakravartin/Mahapurusa*). Among the thirty two superior and

eighty inferior laksanas, the best known are *ushnisha* and *urna*. Though only a few images of Devnimori show *urna*, all the images were represented with *ushnisha* or the topknot and long ear lobes. The *ushnisha*, the bulge or topknot on Buddha's head, represents his supreme wisdom and the *urna*, or dot on his forehead, symbolizes his ability to understand all things and super knowledge. The Buddha images from Gujarat are shown with *ushnisha* (a round bump on the top of the head covered with locks) in curly form (Mathuran style), wavy form (Gandharan style) or as normally tied up plain hair lobes. The stylistic blending of features of two dominant schools of art indicate the significance of Devnimori as a center and meeting point of two great schools of art (Figures 3 and 4).



**Figure 3: Seated Buddha Image, Devnimori
(Gandhara Style)**

(Courtesy: Department of Archaeology and
Ancient History, M. S. University of Baroda)



**Figure 4: Seated
Buddha Image, Devnimori (Mathura Style)**

(Courtesy: Department of Archaeology and
Ancient History, M. S. University of
Baroda)

Standing Buddha (Bronze), Kutch

Standing image (height:48cm; Breadth:13cm; Thickness:12cm) of Buddha in *abhayamudra* (Figure 5) preaching no fear is one of the unique images in the collection of the Kutch Museum which bears an inscription on the front and the right hand side of the pedestal in

Brahmi characters of the 7th century AD. The inscription deciphered by Dr. B. Chhabra reads as; “(de)yadharmoyam Nagasimgha bhikshutasya bhikshunikasamah. mata... devasya Kirttiḥ sthapitah. According to the inscription, the image was dedicated in memory of his mother, Devakirti who had entered the order of *bhikshunis* (the female order of the Buddha mendicants) by a *bhikshu* named Nagasingha (Majumdar 1960). This standing image of Buddha in the *samabhanga* posture measures 19 inch in height along with the lotus pedestal. It is encircled with an oval *prabha valaya* (holy halo frame) which is broken and missing from the left hand side, perhaps originally was complete all around the image. The image represented with half opened eyes is glowing with spiritual smile. The right hand is shown in *abhaya mudra* and left hand seems to be holding a lotus-stalk which is difficult to recognize. The body is conspicuous by the presence of *yajnopavita* which runs from the left shoulder across the right side of the chest. The body is covered by a thin semi transparent cloth below the shoulders reaching the legs which represents the *wet drapery style* in which the robe appears to be clinging to the body. The curled hair dress, long lobed ears, the waving fingers, the serene face with spiritual smile and wet drapery effect on the body obviously demonstrate the beauty, reality and power of this master piece (Bhowmik 1995). The image is standing on a special type of lotus pedestal placed on a raised moulded platform in two levels. The bronze image belongs to 7th century AD shows similarity with Akota and Vala Jain bronzes (Majumdar 1960).



Figure 5: Standing Buddha Image, Kutch

(Courtesy: Bhuj Museum, Kutch)

Seated Pralambhapada Buddha (Bronze), Vadodara

The image represents seated Sakyamuni Gautama Buddha (height: 21cm; width: 15cm, breadth: 14.2cm) in preaching posture in a lotus seat on a square *simhasana* marked by figures of lions trampling over elephant at each side (Figure 6). The feet of Buddha rest on a beautiful small lotus flower which is supported by two stalks with two fine buds. The sitting posture of the image with legs extended downward as if seated in a chair, hence called *pralambhapada* is akin to Maitreya Buddha (Bhowmik 1995). This beautifully depicted

Buddha image shows peace and solace in his facial expression and the head is depicted with schematic curly hair style. The drapery is shown in flowing lines around the body. Both the shoulders are covered and the neck portion fold is stylized with a beaded border. The upper garment has noticeable lines of the folds and beaded neck border while the wet drapery effect is seen in the lower drapery. The evidence of a lug at the back side below the neck of the image suggests a probable halo/*prabhavalaya* originally attached to it. This seated Buddha image originally from Vallabhi, in Saurashtra initially was in Barton Museum, Bhavnagar and now housed in Baroda Museum and Picture Gallery, Vadodara. The preaching Buddha sitting in *pralambhapada* posture is popular in central Asia during 6th/7th century AD. Based on comparative study, the image is dated to Maitraka period of Gujarat (Shah 1973) and bears no inscription.



Figure 6: Pralambhapada Buddha, Vadodara

(Courtesy: Bhowmik1995)

Conclusion

Since Buddha belonged to *sramana parampara* or ascetic tradition, he was never shown with consort and all the Buddha images from early historic Gujarat follow the same. The images are individual representations of the great master. They never formed the part of thematic panels as generally seen in Gandharan School of art. The typical Mathuran style

bodhisattva image from Vadnagar highlights the existence of Sramana school of Buddhism prevalent in early historic Gujarat. Devenimori terracotta images are the excellent examples of co-existence of Gandharan and Mathuran schools of art in Gujarat during Kshatrapa time. The symbolism of floral representation such as acanthus leaves decorating friezes or pseudo-Corinthian capital's lotus motifs (the symbol of purity) used in the pedestals of Buddha images are excellent examples of the aforesaid blending of different schools of art. Buddha images vary in wearing Indian monastic garment (*sangahti*) which covers one or both shoulders. His hands positions reflect various moods and functions he performs such as gestures of meditation (*dhyana*), blessing (*abhaya*) and preaching. Terracotta, stone and metal images are represented with long ear lobes. Halo behind the head is not represented in the Terracotta images, but the stone image of Bodhisattva shows remains of broken halo and the standing metal image indicates broken *prabhvalaya* instead of halo and the Pralambapada Buddha perhaps originally had a halo at the back as indicated by the lug. Wet drapery style shown in the images is indicative of stylistic influence on Buddhist art in this region during 6th/7th century AD. Iconic representation of Buddha in various mediums shows the influence of different schools in the early historic Buddhist art of Gujarat from 1st/2nd century AD to 6th century AD. This further indicates slow evolution in stylistic representation from Mathuran and *Gandharan* elements to later Pala wet drapery style. The inscriptional references on the Buddha images establish the existence of Samitya School as well as *Bhikshuni* establishments during early historic Gujarat. The excellent making and installation of these images also highlight the prevalence of Mahayana sect of Buddhism during the aforesaid period.

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