



References :

Iconography of Gaja-Lakshmi , O.P. Singh

Gaja.Lakshmi images from Hinayana Buddhist caves of Western Maharashtra , Ajit Kumar Torana Goddess in the Buddhist Pantheon ,ArputhaRani Sengupta

SriLakshmi and Her Association with Other Deities in Early Indian Art, Vinay Kumar Gupta The Various Forms of Lakshmi on Ancient Coins :, Pratima Durugkar

Crowns, Horns and Goddesses: Appropriation of Symbols in Gandhāra and Beyond *Angelo Andrea Di Castro* Trio of Prosperity: A Gupta Terracotta Plaque from Bangladesh, GOURISWAR BHATTACHARYA Gajalakshmi sculptures in Dharwad District, Dr. B. Jayamma

Simhavahini Gajalakshmi A Unique Icon in Indian Sculptral Art , A.L. Srivastav

Sri-Lakshmi Art: Incorporating The North Western Evidence, Doris Meth Srinivasan A Solitary Vote Favouring Goddess Flanked by Elephants as Gaj=Bhu Devi J Manuel Gajalakshmi – The Cult and its Origins, Kanika Gupta

A Note on Ashtasahasrika Prajnaparmita Manuscript Painting (With Special reference to Bharat Kala Bhavan Collection)

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ABSTURCT

Bharat Kala Bhavan, a reputed museum of Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi is well known for its great treasure of antiquities of varied nature. The Institution possesses a magnificent collection of miniatures and illustrated manuscripts belonging to different sects, pantheon and period. This painting of note deals with some of the important characteristics of a Buddhist text *Ashtashasrika Prajnaparamita* (Acc. No. 4799-4793). *Ashtashasrika Prajnaparamita*, or book of Perfection of Wisdom, widely known only as *Prajnaparamita*. Comprising 8,000 sections, is considered the great landmark in the growth of miniature Painting. The *Prajnaparamita*, a large sized second century C.E text, is one of the earliest works of Mahayana Buddhism.² which is unique on many counts. This painted Pothi (manuscript) sheds valuable light on religious, cultural and artistic aspects. It belongs to Pala period.

Key Words : *Ashtashasrika, Prajnaparamita, Pothi, religious, cultural.*

INTRODUCTION :

Ashtasahasrika Prajnaparmita Manuscript

This palm leaf pothi contains only four leaves. It has twelve illustrations- Birth of Buddha at Lumbini, *Sambodhi* at Bodh Gaya, *Dharma Chakrapravartana* at Mrigadava (Risipattama, Sarnath) and Mahaparinirvana at Kushinagar and four miracles of Buddha-Subjugation of elephant, Nalagiri at Rajgrih, the offering of monkeys at Vaishali and descent of Buddha from the *Trayastrimsas* heaven at Sravasti after preaching his mother and showing his thousand forms at Sravasti. The artist has also painted a figure of Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara along with a scene. A stone panel from sarnath of seventh century CE is important. It has eight panels' depicting scenes from Buddhas life and miracles.²

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Both the sides of each leaf are bound by a narrow red band with geometrical decorations, probably the religious symbols. Further, the leaf is divided in three sections by two slightly broader red bands. These two dividing bands have some Tantric symbols in the upper half of the leaf and a standing or sitting devotee in the lower half with an exception in one band, where three devotees are painted. All the painted rectangle-spaces separated from the text part by a thin red or white band with black (khatkasi) towards the text side.

DISCUSSIONS :

The text is written with black ink. These palm leaves are 54 cms X 6 and ½ cms in size, covered by two wooden covers, 55 cms X 7, and ½ cms in size, for the protection. They also have nine illustrations. None of these illustrations is related to the theme of the pothi. S.K. Saraswati is of the opinion that the dochasmi female figure in the Mrigadava scene could be *Pranaparmita*.³

The scribe of Pala period has copied these texts with utmost care and precisely on palm leaf in Devanagari script (kutil). The letters are well arranged and are in proper alignment, which rarely appear in the contemporary western Indian paintings, Generally, in Pala manuscripts, the text and the illustrated rectangular panels are arranged alternatively and each leaf carries two or three painted illustrations.

This Ashtashasrika Prajnaparmita manuscript has a colophon which provides some interesting information about the aim of the donors to get them copied and illustrated. For instance, the donor says that he got it copied with a belief in mind that it would provide supreme knowledge not only to his parents and teachers but also to all living beings.⁴

Prajnaparmita, a supreme goddess of learning is the most popularly worshiped deity of Mahayana Buddhist traditions. Buddhist text repeatedly stated the verses in her praise. 'Astasahasrika Prajnaparmita' is a creation of great philosopher Nagarjuna, compiled in eight thousand verses in the praise of this great goddess of learning. According to the Buddhists traditions, these are the timeless creations, which were lost as the time passes and collected by Nagarjuna in the Gupta period. The Buddhist chronicles further referes to the merit of these verses that by studying, reciting, or even listening them, one gains more goods fortunes (merits) than constructing a stupa of Tathagata. According to Mahayana traditions Prajnaparmita protects the writers, the listeners, and the donors of 'Astasahasrik' from all bad effects and evils. Tathagata himself acknowledges the merits of merits of Prajnaparmita at

one place that by the donation, reciting, listening and worshipping of this pious book, one can be relieved from all types of evils and bad effects of his previous life and no one can harm him.

It is believed by the Buddhists that it was more meritorious to get them copied for others, which provide them protection. The book was even more efficacious if it was illustrated with Buddhist subjects. According to the Indian traditions, the writer enjoyed the respectable position as he protected the religious text by copying them. Generally, Buddhist books like Prajnaparmita were given away to other devotees or the monasteries, with the belief that it was more meritorious to donate its copy than to own himself. It is also mentioned that the possession of such a book can avert all sorts of physical and spiritual evils.

Pancharaksa and Ashtasahasrika Prajnaparmita are the most popular and worshipped manuscripts among the Mahayana Buddhists as the possession of Buddhists texts are regarded to avert sorts of physical and spiritual evils. There was no tradition to keep Ashtasahasrika Prajnaparmita in the house. These were donated generally to the monasteries after being copied. However, devotees are permitted to keep a copy of Pancharaksa in the house which protects them.

Ashtasahasrika carries the depictions of the deities of Mahayana/Vajrayana sects and the important eight events life of Buddha's- Birth, Sambodhi, Dharma chakra pravartant, Madhudana, Preaching mother in heaven and Mahaparinirvana etc. It is worth mentioning here that the scene of Mahabhinishkramana a very important event of Buddhist's life is conspicuously missing. It appears that to present the greatness of Buddha, only the popular scenes have been selected. Probably, it was because of the instructions of Buddha to Anand to depict only these scenes- Birth, Sambodhi, Dharmachakrapravartana, and Mahaparnivana.

The depiction of the deities and Jataka stories has been painted on the wooden covers, which were used for the safety and protection of the manuscripts. It is not certain whether this tradition was started by the Buddhists or already prevalent in Hindu or Jaina traditions. It appears that depiction of gods and goddesses on these pious texts have been started with the belief that deities have their abode there and they dwell in it. These manuscripts have been worshipped, which is also corroborated by the presence of roli (red power) and sandalwood (Chandana powder).

The colophon (puspika) reads as follows:

*"Rajno Gomindrapalaysa samvatasar-chatustaye Srimata Kasypeyeneyam
Likhitastasaharika"*

This provides the significant clue about the patronage of manuscript in question. It was copied (likhita) in the 4th regnal year of Raja (rajno) Gomindrapala. The colophon also states a name 'Srimata Kasyapa', who could be a donor. The title "rajno" suggests the Gomindrapal was a feudatory king, who was ruling under the Palas as his name does not occur in the genealogy of the main ruling branch. S.K. Sarawati has suggested that probably, he was a feudatory in Bihar, sometimes in the 12th century A.D. Similar epithet is also used for Laksamanasen in the Pala Manuscripts, preserved in the Bharat Kala Bhavan, Varanasi and Asiatic Society of Bengal, Calcutta. Generally, the epithet "Paramesvara Paramabhattaraka Maharjadhiraia Parmasaugata" is used for the ruling Pala kings of main branch. However, in some of the Pothis such as 'Pancharacksa'⁵ refer to the regnal years of 'Srimad Ramapaladeva'. The question now arises about the identity of Ramapaladeva, whether he was the king of main ruling branch or was only a feudatory. If we accept the suggestion of S.K. Saraswati⁶ that Gomindrapal was ruling in Bihar, it can be suggested that the present manuscript was prepared either in Nalanda or Vikramasila. Both the centres were producing illustrated Buddhist manuscripts. Ashtasaharika Prajnaparmita pothi was copied and illustrated in the 15th regnal year of Ramapala in Nalanda (Bodlien Library) and the copy of manuscript housed in the British Museum London was copied in the 15th regnal year of Gopaldeva at Vikramasila. Pratapaditya Pal⁷ has rightly pointed out that the pothis painted in Bihar are richer in style than the pothis painted in Bengal. The works of Magadha artists portray strong line and delineation of emotions and the details of the figures.

In the present pothi the artist has succeeded in depicting the rhythm in the birth scene of Buddha in illustrating the movement of Maya and her sister and the bhangima (posture) of both figures standing under the Sala tree. Similarly, the artist has successfully shown the violent and subdued attitude of Nalgiri Elephant, depicted twice. The artist also took liberty in depicting these scenes symbolically which is evident from the scene of Dharmachakrapravartana and the miracle at Sravasti, in the first illustration he showed four pupils instead of five. It has been done due to the limitation of space. It is surprising to note that the illustrations on the wooden patalis (wooden covers) are more charming and livelier in comparison with the illustrations in the *pothis*. It is difficult to say that the artist of wooden covers and manuscript illustrations was the same or different person. Though the present *pothi* is a fine example of Pala painting tradition yet the mediaeval trend of decadence is clearly visible in *Savachasmi* subordinate figures. The main figures still preserve the old

tradition and as their background areked with vegetation. Perhaps, it was the last phase that Magdhon artists could prevent medieval trend.

However, the antiquity of illustrated manuscript has been a long debate among the scholars. Neither, any illustrated example prior to Pala period has survived, nor reference in texts have yet come to light except for one vague reference in the travel accounts of the Chinese pilgrim Fa-hein in 5th century, who was collecting Buddhist manuscripts in India. He found manuscripts in the Viharas at Patliputra and other centers but he did not mention specially whether these, are illustrated or not. However, his accounts of manuscript being copied in Tamralipti, hardly suggest the presence of any painting.⁸ probably, this is the earliest reference of painted manuscript. The question now arises whether the manuscript painting is an innovation of Buddhism or it was already prevalent at that time. Some ancient Sanskrit texts refer *Patas* (cloth painting) with depiction of deities which could be taken as the source of manuscript paintings.

Conclusion :

Buddhism was flourished under royal patronage during the Pala period. Nalanda and Vikramasila became important centres of learning of Buddhism Rishipattan, (Mrigadeva, Sarnatha), and Bodhgaya were also the important, centres of Buddhism. In addition to these, Pataliputra, Tamralipti, Vikramasila, Vikramapura had also developed as Buddhist centres, though the available Pala pothis have evidence only for Nalanda and Vikramasila as copying and illustrating centres of Buddhist manuscripts. Unfortunately, only few Pala Pothis have colophon with the information about the place and scribe but the name of the artist is not mentioned in any of them.