

## COMPOSITE SCULPTURES OF NORTH BENGAL (C. 800- C.1200 A. D): AN ICONOGRAPHIC STUDY

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### **Abstract:**

The present study is ‘Composite Sculptures from North Bengal (c. 800-1200 AD): An Iconographic Study’ and the author wants to undertake a critical study of the composite sculptures of North Bengal. Most of the images of composite sculptures have been found in different parts of North Bengal and these generally belonging to the period ranging from c. 8<sup>th</sup> Century A.D to the c. 12<sup>th</sup> Century A.D. Metal, black stone or sand stone, wood, clay were used for manufacturing these images. Umā-Maheswara, Siva-Gouri, Laxmi-Nārāyana, Ardhanarisvara form of Siva-Parvati etc are the best specimen of composite sculptures of North Bengal. Most of the sculptures of male and female figures of deities and human beings have been preserved in different Museum of North Bengal and in private collections. These artistic activities are considered to be valuable resources in Bengal as well as in the entire Eastern- India.

### **Key Words:**

Sculptural art, Ardhanarisvara, Varada pose, octo-alloy, metal-casting, women-folk

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**Introduction:**

Most of the images of composite sculptures discovered in North Bengal, like those found in other parts of undivided Bengal are made of black stone and these generally belong to the period ranging from c. 800 A.D to c. 1200 A.D. This stone is remarkably suitable for manufacturing images and in durability it has hardly any peer (Bhattacharya, 1983:1-2). This variety of stone, used to supply to the different centers of the sculptors art in Bengal on river ways from the Rajmahal Hills. Besides stone, other materials such as metal, wood, clay were used for manufacturing images. It is true that gold and silver were used as materials for manufacturing images but such images are very few in numbers (Bhattacharya, 1929:29-30)

The standard metal used for making of images was an alloy known as *asta-dhatu* (*eight metals*) or octo-alloy and this was considered sacred by the manufacturers. The art of metal-casting became extremely popular and had reached a degree of excellence almost equal to that of stone – carving (Bhattacharya, 1929: 10). Besides metal and stone, images were also made from wood and clay and the four materials are said to have been sanctioned as suitable for the manufacturing of images.

Prior to the 8<sup>th</sup> Century A.D Indian art displayed all Indian character in emotional , intellectual and spiritual expression of which Gupta Classicism in the literature of Kalidasa, the sculptures of Sarnath and the paintings of Ajanta were superb climaxes ( Majumdar, 1943).

**Objective of the Study:**

The topic of the present study is '*Composite Sculptures from North Bengal (c. 800-1200 AD): An Iconographic Study*' and main objective is to undertake a critical study of the Composite Sculptures form which have been found from North Bengal .The author wants to highlight and interpret with a new dimension about the composite forms of different images of god and goddess in sculptural art from North Bengal and to make an in-depth study of various manifestations of the Composite Sculptures in Pala-Sena period of Bengal.

**Methodology:**

The methodology followed in the study in both library works and field study. I have combined archaeology with anthropology and Iconographic study with Epigraphic study to complete the study. Primary sources are collected and consulted meticulously. Secondary data such as District Gazetteers, Journals, periodicals, Weeklies, Newspapers, research articles and various other reliable sources are used for the preparation of the paper. In this regard, the author visited various archeological sites and different museum of West Bengal closely observed the images of composite sculptures and to take photographs.

**Analysis and Discussion:**

From the 8<sup>th</sup> Century AD onwards the regional spirit gradually got better of the Indian tradition in all sphere of life. This is true of the Indian art and in Bengal under the Pālas a new local idiom of expression evolved developing its own characteristics and had continued for about 400 years till the advent of Muslims. The art and sculpture were developed over a period of four hundred years and more in eastern India under the Pāla and the Senas. It is natural that art could not remain the same all through; the laws of evolution would play its role in finalizing the general features of the school, which was known as the 'Pāla-Sena School.' The artists and sculptors of the Pala period made some image of composite sculptures of god and goddess which have been discovered from different regions of Bengal.

The art of Bengal during these four centuries under the Pālas and the Senas is essentially religious and inevitably reflects the religious experiences of past centuries. All the images God and goddess of all religious whether Buddhist or Brahmanical or Jaina has well-established iconographic types.

Numerous images of god and goddesses of different religions such as Buddhism, Shaktism, and Jainism have been placed in sculptural art in North Bengal. *Candi, Durgā, Manasā, Laxmi, Sarasvati, Mahisāsura-Mardini* etc are numerous in numbers among goddesses and these sculptural arts which have been preserved in different museums of North Bengal and in personal collections. Large number of female figures of deities and these evidences remain unknown to us. Most of the sculptures of male and female figures of deities and human beings have been

preserved in different Museum of North Bengal and private collections. Some composite sculptures also have been discovered like *Umā-Maheswara*, *Siva-Gouri*, *Laxmi-Nārāyana*, *Krishna-Yasodhā* etc. A unique image of *Ardhanārīsvara* has been found in Dakshin Dinajpur, now it is preserved in Dakshin Dinajpur District Museum.

### *Umā-Mahesvara (Shiva-Pārvati):*

This is one of the commonest forms of images associated with the *Saiva* cult found in Eastern India. It is very common form of Siva which became popular and still enjoys great popularity among Hindu believers. In general it is form where *Siva 'dampati'* is shown together, i.e. Siva is not alone but along with his wife *Pārvati*. This is the commonest form of images with the *Saiva* cult found in Eastern India. The *Mricchkatika* and the *Matsya Purāna*<sup>1</sup> contains very detailed information about these images. They may be seated on the seat, keeping a small space between them, but they may also be seated very close to each other.

Some images of *Umā-Mahesvara* have been found different parts of North Bengal. An Alingana image of *Umā-Mahesvara* noticed from a tank of Tapan village of South Dinajpur district of West Bengal is remarkable for its simple and suggestive treatment (Figure No.1). This image is made of black basalt. The goddess embraces the neck of the God (Siva) with her right hand and holds a mirror in her left hand. The face of the goddess is partially damaged. *Umā* sits on *Mahesvara*'s thigh. Her right leg hangs out and placed similarly on her *Vāhana*, the lion. Seated figures of *Ganesa* and *Kārtikeya* are shown on either side of the lotus pedestal upon which the image of *Umā-Mahesvara* is placed. The sculpture datable to the 12<sup>th</sup> Century A.D is remarkable for its simple treatment, direct appeal, restraint ornamentation and effective figural arrangement (Bhattacharya, 1983:24-25).

### Figure No. 1

Name of the Image: Uma-Mahesvara

Finding Spot: Tapan, South Dinajpur

Size: 58cm x 26cm



Date: c.12<sup>th</sup> Century A.D.

Parvati as Siva's consort is generally shown with him when the god Siva is represented in his benign or peaceful form in standing or seated position. In sitting images *Pārvati* is represented, seated on the left thigh of Siva and the bull, Nandi is generally shown supporting the divine couple. Their sons, *Ganesa* and *Kartiya*, along with are also shown in such images (Trivedi, 1981:77-78). An important image of *Umā-Mahesvara* from Gazole in the Malda district is an interesting illustration of this type preserved in the Malda museum.

The image of *Umā-Mahesvara* is seated on a full-blown double-petalled lotus in the *Sukhasana* pose. The pendant right leg of *Mahesvara* rests on his vehicle bull (Nandi) and the left leg of *Umā* rest on her vehicle lion. *Umā* is placed on the left thigh of *Mahesvara*. Both the vehicles, bull and lion, are placed on two small separate lotuses below the main lotus pedestal, facing each other. The front right hand of *Mahesvara* is bent at the elbow and his right palm is in *Varada* pose, while the front left hand embraces *Umā* and touches her breast. Two other hands of the god, namely the back right and left hands holds lotus or bunches of flowers and trident respectively. The right hand of *Umā* rests on the left holds a mirror. *Mahesvara* wears a *jatamukuta* and his hair hangs down to his shoulder. His elongated ears are decorated with *kundalas*. He also wears a necklace, *upavita*, bangles and anklets. The lower part of his body is wrapped by a decorated cloth. *Uma's* hair is arranged and decorated and wears a *ratnamukuta*. She also wears a necklace, heavy *kundalas*, bangles and anklets. The lower part of her body is wrapped with a fine cloth. . The pedestal shows, apart from the vehicles, two obscure dancing figures on the right and left corner. These type images of *Umā-Mahesvara* also have been found in Rarh Bengal and other parts of Bengal and preserved in different Museum of Bengal and Bangladesh (Chattopadhyay and Rangan Kanti Jana, 2001).

In the image *Siva* and *Pārvati* are carved under the canopy of a tree bearing branches of fruits. The god Siva with prominent *jatabhara* on his head is seated *Nandi* with *Pārvati* sitting on his left thigh and intently looking towards the face of the Lord. Out of four hands of *Siva* two hands are missing while rest two hands are visible. On the right hands *Siva* holds a trident while one of his left hands caressingly touching the chin of *Pārvati*. Two handed *Pārvati* sitting on the lap of *Siva* has her right hand resting on the left shoulder of Siva while her left hand supported on her left knee hold an indistinct object. Here the image of *Pārvati* has been marvelously sculptured

with heavy coiffure well arranged in *dhamilla* fashion on her head and ornamented with *hara*(necklace),*mekhala* (girdle),*kankana*(bracelets) and *nupura*(anklets).

An exception and unusual image of *Umā-Mahesvara* has been discovered from Mathabhanga in the Cooch Behar district of West Bengal. The god is shown in yam-bum attitude with *Shakti* or *Gauri*. The four armed deity wears *Jatamukuta* and holds a kettle-drum (*damaru*) in upper right hand and trident (*Trisula*) in the upper left. The lower right hand touches the shoulder of the goddess, while the lower left hand is placed on her breast. *Ganesa* and *Kārtiya* are seated with folded hands in the sculpture. This figure may be assigned to the late 12<sup>th</sup> century A.D.

Another important image of *Umā-Ālingana* has been discovered from Haldibari in the Cooch Behar district of West Bengal. It is made of Black basalt. The Image is almost similar to mentioned above in details but the figure of here *Kārtikeya* and *Ganesa* are, however absent. It may be assigned to the 12<sup>th</sup> century A.D.

*Umā-Mahesvara* has been an ideal couple for Hindus for a long time and even in present day India. They stand as a model for middle class couples. In rural parts of the country *Gauri*, *Umā* or *Pārvati* still stands as a most respected lady for the women-folk.

#### ***Laxmi-Nārāyana (Ālingana Murti):***

The images of *Umā-Mahesvara* *Ālingana* murti are available in North Bengal but *Laxmi-Nārāyana* murti are very few in number. *Laxmi-Nārāyana* became more popular in Bengal not only Bengal but also in entire Eastern India. A lot of pair statue of *Laxmi-Nārāyana*, mainly *ālingana* murti have been found in different parts of Bengal proved the popularity. There are two number of *Laxmi-Nārāyana* images or murti have been discovered from North Bengal, one is from South Baluchar in the Malda District (West Bengal) and another is from Balurghat in the South Dinajpur district of West Bengal. Now, these images are preserved in the Dakshin Dinajpur District Museum (Figure No. 2) and Malda Museum respectively and are made of black stone also. The images of *Laxmi-Nārāyana* may be assignable date is c.12<sup>th</sup> Century AD. Here are the four hands of Vishnu i.e. *Narayana* holding the lotus in the upper right-hand, the conch in lower right hand and mace in the upper left-hand, the other left hand is on the left breast of *Laxmi*. *Laxmi* and *Nārāyana* are engaged as well as embracing sitting on a lotus pedestal. Here are the most obvious sign of affection, emotion and love. There is a romantic sentiment.

**Figure No.2**

Name of the Image: Laxmi-Narayana

Finding Spot: Balurghat, South Dinajpur

Size: 72cm x 40cm

Date: c.12<sup>th</sup> Century AD



On the other hand, the image of *Laxmi –Nārāyana*, preserved in the Malda Museum almost the same mentioned above but a little smaller than that, 33cm in height and 17 cm in length. Naturally, the face of this women figure with deep love and emotion seems to be known as the realistic portraits of a familiar woman in our society.

***Ardhanārīsvara:***

The name of *Ardhanārīsvara* is associated with three words, *Ardha*, *Nārī* and *Isvara*; meaning *Isvara* (i.e. *Siva*) with *Nārī* (i. e *Parvati*) as his *Ardha* (i.e. *Half*). A form where the same body is shared by *Siva* and *Parvati* each of who represent one half of the complete image.(Tewari, 1979) *Siva* seems to be closer to the famous myths of man –woman unity where as the cause of the creation, the male and female counter parts are always recited as being interdependent and merging together.

The form of *Ardhanārīsvara* of the deity signifies the merger of the bodies of *Siva* and *Shakti* into one, the right half being male and the left being female. In the other words, this *Ardhanārīsvara* image of *Siva* symbolizes the syncretic ideology- the union of *Siva* and *Shakti*, the primeval parents of the ‘Universe’.<sup>2</sup> (Raghuvansam, by Kalidasa) It is this ideological union of *Siva* and *Shakti* which has been described by many early Vedic Text and late texts.

Images of *Umā-Mahesvara* are available in Bangladesh but the *Ardhanārīsvara* form of Siva is comparatively rare in Bangladesh (Roy, 1412). Two-armed image of *Ardhanārīsvara* has been found from Purapara, Munshiganj District, Bangladesh (now preserved in the Varendra Research Museum, Rajshahi). This is one of the best specimens among Pala-Sculpture of West Bengal and Bangladesh (Majumder, 445). Another important and notable image of *Ardhanārīsvara* form of Siva has been excavated from Dehabandh village (under Kushmandi Police Station) in the District of North Dinajpur of West Bengal (Sarasvati, 1932:28) and another *Ardhanārīsvara* form of Siva also has been excavated from Panchanantala (Ray S., and Mandal B, 2013) near Sodpur in the District of 24<sup>th</sup> Parganas of West Bengal.

The image of *Ardhanārīsvara* form of Siva excavated from Dehabandh village (under Kushmandi Police Station) in the District of North Dinajpur of West Bengal now preserved in the Dakshin Dinajpur District Museum (*see Fig. No.3*) in Balurghat in the District of South Dinajpur can be treated as ideal patterns of sculptural work in Bengal as well as entire Eastern India. The date of this statue which may be assigned the 12<sup>th</sup> century AD in the Pala Period is made of black basalt stone. The statue is 46 inches (116.84 cm) in Height and 24 inches (60.91cm) in length. This image of *Ardhanārīsvara* is made of a full large carved black stone with well techniques and exquisite craft.

### Figure No.3

Name of the Image: Ardhanarisvara

Finding Spot: Dehanbandh, Kusmandi P.S (South Dinajpur)

Dated: c. 12<sup>th</sup> Century AD

Size: 116.84 cm × 60.91cm

Picture: Courtesy by Dakshin Dinajpur District Mesuem



The image of *Ardhanārīsvara* which has been excavated from Dehabandh village (under Kushmandi Police Station) is four-armed, standing on lotus pedestal, accompanied by four two-



armed attendants, *Mahākāla* and *Nandin* (right, behind *Siva's Bull*, *Kārtiya/Skanda* and *Ganesha*(left, behind *Uma's Lion*). A peculiar *Trisula*(trident) is in the right upper hand of the statue, at the bottom of the right hand there is nothing, but it is in the *Varada* pose. The statue is standing on the lotus pedestal (Mevissen Gerd, J.R., 2013). Coronet head of the statue is rich in ornaments, *Trinayana*(Third Eye) and *Simanta* or *Tilaka* mark is on the forehead and other two eyes is half-closed. Lifting the hood of a serpent (*Naga-ynapavita*) on Shiva's neck is on the right. The actual representation of *Siva-Ardhanārisvara* wearing *Nāgayajnopāvita* where the breast from the Parvati side is nicely shown covered with the serpent hood. (Tewari: 50) The left part of the body i.e. the part of the *Parvati's*, *Kundala*(earring) is in the ear, holding a trident at the upper left hand and holding a small jar(*ghata*) at the lower left hand. It appears that the Sari is draped around the female sculpture in a particular fashion-the lower part of the yard is draped around the waist while the upper part goes across the shoulder and falls down at the back though it is not visible in the statue. The left foot of the image i.e. the foot of *Pārvati's* is beautifully tied with fold of Sari's and the lower left hand is bejeweled with bangles (*Keyura*) and other ornaments. On the other hand, the male part of the image (i.e. part of *Siva*) is dressed in men's clothing. Surprisingly, sex organs of the image are beautifully covered with beautiful ornaments and dresses of *Siva-Pārvati*. The navel coupe of the image is very clear in the figure.

The special features of this image of *Ardhanārisvara* that at apex the three niches occupied by four armed seated figure of the *Trimurti* i.e. *Siva* (centre), *Brahmā*(right) and *Visnu*(left) all with their *vāhanas*(carrier);two kneeling worshipers(male right, female left) in *navaratha* pedestal; another kneeling worshiper is beneath of the central *Siva* at apex (Mevissen Gerd, J.R., 2013:286-287). Structures, height, artistry, gesture of these images are distinguished among each other.

*Kārtikeya* and *Ganesha*, (left, behind *Umā's Lion*) two sons of *Siva-Pārvati* are standing at the bottom left of the image and *Mahākala* and *Nandin* at the right behind the *Siva's Bull*. The owl, *Vāhana* of goddess *Laxmi* is just above the *Nandi* and a male figure is above the owl. Just above the owl, a running horse is present and a female figure is on the running horse in praying pose. Exactly in the same way, in the left side an image of a carved elephant in a sitting posture is sculpted *Kartiye* and *Ganesha* image. A male figure is standing on the elephant. A running horse is positioned just above the elephant, there is a man identified as *Devaraja Indra* (?) sitting on a

horse who perhaps riding it. Right and left, on both sides of the statue there are two two-Crocodiles which are biting the legs of the male figures. A dancing is girl dancing on the head of these Crocodile. This is really rare and a fine specimen of sculptural art of Bengal.

## Conclusion

Through this study we come on conclusion that worship of *Siva-Pārvati* or *Umā-Mahesvara Laxmi –Nārāyana*, *Ardhānarisvara* form of Siva became very popular in North Bengal. Artists of Bengal, particular in North Bengal would imagine the beauty of the love making scene, embracing scene and they tried to make the portraits of real picture through their artistic skills on either the sand stone or black stone even on the wood or clay. Contemporary artists of Bengal had unquestionable skills. These artistic activities are considered to be valuable resources in Bengal as well as in the entire Eastern- India.

The artists of Bengal engraved and sculpted the images of whole family of *Siva-Pārvati*, love making scene of *Umā-Mahesvara*, embracing image of *Laxmi –Nārāyana* etc. It is great achievement and a commendable act for the artists of Bengal, particularly belonging to North Bengal. The sculptors of Bengal not only created this superb form of art from a religious point of view but also contributed in the upliftment of the society by emphasizing the equality of men and women; thus giving women their rightful place in the social above the hierarchy.

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**Notes:**

<sup>1</sup> Chapter 260, p.898

<sup>2</sup> Cf. *Bagarthaviva samprktau bagartha –pratipattaye*

*Jagatah pitarau vande Parvati-Paramesvarau*

Raghuvansam, by Kalidasa

Canto 1, v.1

(I.e. *Parvati* and *Paramesvara* means Siva, the parent of the universe are eternally connected with each other like words and their significance).

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