
Vasudhara Image from Ratnagiri, Odisha

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Abstract: Ratnagiri, a famous Buddhist centre in Odisha has representations of a good number of female Buddhist divinities as independent images and also in the niches of votive stupas. It includes images of Tara, Vasudhara, Marici, Parnasavari, Hariti etc. Of these, a standing image of a female deity from Monastery 2 has been identified as different deities by different scholars. In this article, an attempt is made to re-identify the image based on iconographic features and context of the sculpture.

Keywords: Iconography, Buddhism, Odisha, Female Divinities, Vasudhara, Dhanya-manjari, Varada-mudra

Introduction

Vasudhara is the Buddhist goddess of wealth, prosperity, and abundance. She is the consort of Jambhala and is the emanation of Dhyani-Buddha Ratnasambhava or of Akshobhya and on her crown she bears the image of either of these gods (Bunce 1998: 602). Three *sadhanas* are devoted to her in the *Sadhanamala* in which one associates her with Akshobhya and two others to Ratnasambhava (Bhattacharyya 1958: 244). The origin of Vasudhara in Buddhism appears in a Buddhist text *Vasudhara dharani* which expounds the benefits of worshipping Vasudhara to attain prosperity. Shakyamuni is also believed to have instructed Ananda to also practice the *Vasudhara dharani* and 'impart it to others for the good of many'. Thus, the *mantra* is meant more as means of alleviating suffering rather than obtaining wealth through Vasudhara, who not only grants physical wealth and abundance but also spiritual wealth and abundance (Wikipedia). According to Taranatha's history, Vasudhara also granted the monk Buddhajnana three hundred pearl necklaces every day with which the monk made generous donations to the monastery (Chattopadhyaya 1990: 278).

In Buddhist iconography, Vasudhara is typically seated on a *padmasana* in *lalitasana* and may also be represented in a standing position. When represented as standing, Vasudhara may have representation of a full vase underneath each of her foot symbolizing abundance. In her hands, Vasudhara holds a variety of objects attributed to her. Most representations show her holding *dhanya-manjari* in her left hand, symbolising an abundant harvest, while her right hand displays the *varada-mudra*. Her skin has a golden hue in bronze and painted images. This colour is associated with

precious metals and symbolises opulence, fertility, and generosity (Wikipedia). According to the *sadhanas* associating her with the Dhyani-Buddha Akshobhya, she is yellow in colour and originates from the syllable 'Vam'. She holds the *dhanya-manjari* in her left hand and displays her right in *varada-mudra*. She is represented in seated or standing posture and decked with all sort of ornaments. She may be accompanied by four goddesses- Srivasundhara to the front, Vasusri to the right, Srivasumukhi to the west and Vasumatisri to the left and they are identical in form to the principal Goddess (Bhattacharyya 1958: 203). When she is associated with Ratnasambhava, the attributes are the same, but the *dhanya-manjari* is in a vessel that showers gems. Sometimes, Vasudhara is depicted as six-armed seated in *lalitasana*. Her three right hands exhibits the *namaskara-mudra*, *varada-mudra* and the *dhanya-manjari*, the corresponding left hands hold a *pustaka*, *dhanya-manjari* and a vessel containing jewels on her lap (Bhattacharyya 1958: 245). Four images from Ratnagiri represent Vasudhara. All of them were retrieved from Monastery I. Three are seated in *lalitasana* and the fourth one is standing. Apart from these, there are eight votive stupas which house the image of Vasudhara. In all these images, she is represented as seated in *lalitasana* displaying *varada-mudra* in the right hand while the left holds the *dhanya-manjari*. She is draped in a *sati* held by a *katisutra* and decked in *hara*, ear-studs in the left and *kundala* in the right ear, a *mukta-upavita*, *keyura* and *valayas*. None of these images have the effigy of any Dhyani-Buddha. But, as Vasudhara is of a greater antiquity than the Dhyani-Buddhas (Bhattacharyya 1958: 202), that is acceptable.

Image from Ratnagiri

Among these images, the standing image (135x83cm) of the deity is of particular interest. It was retrieved from the eastern flank of the front porch of Monastery I and is housed in a niche (Figure 1). In this sculpture, the main deity at the centre is surrounded by some other figures as well. The principal figure is draped in a *sati* held at the waist by a chain linked *katisutra* with a central clasp, rows of *valayas*, *keyuras*, *griva*, *channavira* type of *hara*, *makara-kundalas*, *padavalayas*. The hair is tied as a bun at the top and has a small *mukuta* with a triangular central projection at the base. There is a plain oval halo behind the head. Over the head is depicted the branches of a tree laden with flowers, on either side of which are the flying *vidyadharas* holding garlands. Below the *vidyadharas*, on either side of the main figure are depicted two emaciated figures with a *kamandalu* in their left hand. The right hand of the figure to the right extends a flower in offering while the figure to the left has his right hand extended in *vandanabhinayi-mudra*. They are depicted as standing on lotus pedestals. Near the feet of the main image, on either side are depicted two female figures. The figure to the left of the main image is an attendant figure holding a *chamara* in her right hand is shown in a leaning posture with her left hand placed on a lotus. The figure to the right is depicted as holding two bundles tied with a rope hanging from her left shoulder with her left hand while the right is in the act of extending a flower as offering. This image is stylistically comparable with the images of Avalokitesvara and Vajrapani in the rear porch niches and may be dated to the 8th century CE.



Figure 1: Vasudhara, Monastery – I, Ratnagiri

Discussion and Conclusion

This image has been tentatively identified as a river goddess by the excavator (Mitra 1981: 158) while, Donaldson identifies it as Ashokakanta-Marici and opines that the image would have served the function of a *dvarapala* and the corresponding missing image on the western pylon was probably Tara (Donaldson 2001: 307). But, generally we see that in the conception of *dvarapala* images, they are represented as grotesque

figures and not in peaceful boon bestowing form. So this particular figure in *abhaya-mudra* must have served the purpose of bringing good fortune, similar to the installation of Gajalakshmi for good luck and prosperity. Vasudhara is believed to be the deity who not only grants physical wealth and abundance but also spiritual wealth and abundance (Wikipedia). She is also described in some *sadhanas* as accompanied by her female companions. Here, we see two female figures along with the deity as attending to the main figure and also some ascetics who must have approached her for the boon of spiritual abundance. Also, the bunch of foliage in the hand of the deity appears to be the representation of *dhanya-manjari*. So, this image appears to be a representation of Vasudhara whose presence at the entrance of the monastery assures prosperity to the establishment and also spiritual wealth to those who come here in search for it.

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