
Acala, the 'Krodharaja' of Tantric Buddhism in the Sculptural Art of Ratnagiri, Odisha

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Abstract: Buddhism underwent many changes during various stages of its development. With the advent of Vajrayana, many new Buddhist divinities in the form of Dhyani-Buddhas, their shaktis, Bodhisattvas and wrathful deities were gradually introduced into the pantheon to make it as comprehensive as possible. Wrathful deities made their first appearance in the Buddhist art as subordinate deities of Bodhisattva. Later, they were identified as independent deities and in the third stage of development; some of these deities became more powerful and came to be identified as the central deity in a mandala (mandalesa). Acala is one such wrathful deity who made his first appearance in the Buddhist pantheon as a subordinate deity and later on gained independent status and even rose to the status of a mandalesa. Acala has an important place in Vajrayana Buddhism and the presence of images of Acala at Ratnagiri shows the importance of the site in this context.

Keywords: Acala, Candarosana, Tantric Buddhism, Ratnagiri, Votive stupa, Abhisambodhi Vairocana, Mahakaruna Garbhodbhava Mandala

Introduction

Acala 'the immovable one' is also known as Chandarosana, Maha-chandarosana and Candamaharosana. The god is called upon to destroy one's own *karmic* obstacles. In the *Mahavairocana-sutra*, it is mentioned that Acala's ritual is effective in averting all obstacles- he secures a plot where ritual takes place and protects the adept involved in the ritual (Linrothe 1999: 153).

Acala is described as 'krodharaja' (the king of wrathful deities), in *tantric* Buddhism. He is one of the ten gods of direction, whose realm is the north-east and aids in protecting the teachings of the Buddha (Bunce 1998: 2). Acala is also one among twelve *Bhumis* identified in Buddhism as the spiritual spheres through which a Bodhisattva has to move to reach *Buddhahood* (Gupte 1972: 45) and also one of five or eight *vidyarakas* (Lords of Knowledge) (Chandra 1999: 30). In *Sadhanamala*, four *sadhanas* are devoted to his worship where he is described to be in *yab-yum*. This form is known as Candarosana or Candamaharosana. In this form, his worship is always performed in secret and the image is kept away from public gaze (Bhattacharya 1958: 155). In the Candamaharosana *Tantra*, the deity is portrayed in kneeling posture while embracing a

consort, surrounded by a retinue of eight *mandala* figures. His oldest representation is in the *Garbhadhatu Mandala* (Chandra 1999: 31). In the *Sadhanamala*, he is described as one-faced with two-arms and is squint-eyed; his face is terrible with bare fangs. He wears a jeweled head-dress, bites his lips and wears a *munda-mala* on his crown. He holds a sword with his right arm and the noose round the raised index finger against the chest in the left. His *upavita* consists of a white snake; he is clad in tiger-skin, decked with jewels and bears effigy of Aksobhya on his crown. His bent left leg touches the ground while the right is slightly raised. This posture must be in accordance with his role to maintain the sacred ground (Linrothe 1999: 152). According to the *Mahavairocana-sutra*, Acala's ritual is effective in averting all obstacles which rise out of oneself.

Apart from the Candamaharosana *Tantra*, Acala finds mention in some *Kriya Tantras* and also in *Siddhaikavira Tantra*, which is a *Charya Tantra*. From *Siddhaikavira Tantra*, Acala takes his primary role as the remover of obstacles and secondly as the special protector for the meditational practices related to Manjusri. These two deities; Manjusri and Acala are also linked together in the *Sakya Tradition*. In the *Vairocanabhisambodhi sutra*, Acala is described as a *vidyaraaja* who is positioned below Vairocana in the direction of *Nairrti* (south-west). In this *sutra*, Acala is described as the servant of the Tathagatha who holds a wisdom sword and noose; the hair from the top of his head hangs down on his left shoulder, and with one eye he looks fixedly. Awesomely wrathful, his body is enveloped in fierce flames, and he rests on a rock. His face is marked with a frown and he has the figure of a stout young boy (Giebel 2005: 31). In addition, he should be invoked in the very beginning to ward off any type of obstacles (Giebel 2005: 55).

Acala in single form is depicted both in standing as well as in kneeling postures. Acala in standing posture was popularized by Lord Atisha (982-1054), the founder of Kadampa School followed by Mitra Yogin (twelfth-thirteenth century AD) (<http://www.himalayanart.org>). Here, the deity is depicted standing in *pratyaldha* posture wielding the sword and the *tarjanipasa*. The Acala in kneeling posture is found in many traditions but it became important in the *Sakya tradition* in the late twelfth century AD (<http://www.himalayanart.org>). Acala is described in *tantras* as having one face, two hands. The right hand is raised up above the head and wields a sword fiercely flaming with a mass of wisdom fire and the left hand placed at the chest in *tarjani-mudra* holds a *vajrapasa* wound around the index finger. The three-eyed deity displays his fangs and bites his lower lip. The right eye of the god gazes upward, eliminating the heavenly demons. The left gazes down, destroying *nagas*, spirits of disease and earth lords. The middle gazes forward, eliminating all types of obstacles. He wears jeweled ornaments and various silks as garment. The heel of right foot and the left knee are pressed down on the seat in a manner of rising, dwelling in the centre of a flaming mass of pristine awareness fire (<http://www.himalayanart.org>). He stands up threateningly to destroy the devils who try to do harm to Buddha's teaching (Chandra 1999: 30). He crushes the four demons with his right foot and threatens the

earth with his left knee placed in the front (Donaldson 2001: 219). With his sword of wisdom, he cuts away illusions and also the *karma* that determines the cycles of rebirth and causes beings to attain birth in the Great Void. With the noose, he draws people to liberation within *bodhicitta* and binds beings who wish to harm the worshipper (Chandra 1999: 32). As one of the *Bhumis*, his symbol is a *vajra* in the right hand and a *vajra* on lotus in the left hand. *Sadhanamala* describes that the god carries the *pasa* in order to bind the enemies who cause sufferings to humanity such as Visnu, Siva, and Brahma who are terrified by the *tarjani-mudra* displayed by the god. The *sadhana* also says that Candarosana should be conceived as looking towards miserable people who are subjected to constant revolution in the cycle of existence by the wicked gods such as Vishnu, Siva, Brahma and Kandarpa. By Candarosana's intervention, the hosts of Maras are hacked into pieces with the sword. After this, the god gives them back their lives and places them near his feet so that they may perform pious duties in future (Bhattacharyya 2011: cxxxi).

Ratnagiri is an important excavated Buddhist site in India and along with Lalitagiri and Udayagiri; forms the famous Buddhist golden triangle of Odisha. The foundations of many stupas at Ratnagiri have been dated to the fifth-sixth century AD; while the last active phase of the site is probably the thirteenth century AD (Mitra 1981: 25). But the flourishing period of the site is between the seventh to twelfth century AD and we find maximum number of images belonging to this period. Two phases of sculptural activity have been identified at this site; the first one corresponding to the Mahayana phase, dominated by the images of the Buddha and the Bodhisattvas and the second one corresponding to Vajrayana dominated by the *tantric* imagery. Such a shift took place in around the tenth century AD as discerned from the sculptural remains.

Among the images at Ratnagiri, Acala appears as an independent deity in one of the votive stupas (Figs. 1a & 1b) and as an attendant deity in Temple No. 4 (Fig. 2). The votive *stupa* with the relief of Acala was retrieved from the south-western side of the *stupa* area immediately outside the compound wall of the *Mahastupa* where more than five hundred monolithic *stupas* were revealed (Mitra 1981: 109). This *stupa* under discussion has a height of 55 cm and consists of a plain square platform, a drum with a band bordering the base and the top, a high dome and a broken *harmika*. The relief of the deity is carved within a plain bordered arched niche in the drum area. The image appears to be kneeling down on the lotus pedestal with left knee where as the right foot is placed on the pedestal. He is dressed in a short *antariya* and a swaying *uttariya* and decked in a conical *mukuta*, *kundala*, a *valaya* in each hand and a *hara*. He holds a sword in his raised right hand and a *pasa* in his left hand. There is a flower design relieved towards the top left corner of the niche. Stylistically, this image is not earlier than tenth century AD and belongs to the Somavamsi Period in Odisha. Similar images of Acala have also been reported from Vikramshila (Verma 2011: 255, 257). A similar figure of Manjusri (Krishna Manjusri) in kneeling posture from Tibet has been described by some scholars (Getty 1978: 113). Though Krishna Manjusri also stands in a kneeling posture similar to Acala and wields a sword in his upraised right hand; he

must invariably have a lotus in his left hand. Since lotus is substituted in this figure by *tarjanipasa*, the image under discussion may be identified as that of Acala.



1a

1b

Figure 2: Acala as Attendant Deity, Temple No. 4

Figures 1a & 1b: Acala, Votive Stupa Image

The Temple 4 at Ratnagiri has a seated image of *Abhisambodhi Vairocana* on its west wall. The image of Acala is carved in relief on a separate khondalite slab and is placed towards the left of the lotus seat of the main deity. The image is conceived as standing on a *visva-padma* in *pratyahidha* attitude wielding a sword in its raised right hand where as the damaged left hand is placed near the chest. The face is also damaged. The image is conceived as a fierce, three-eyed, pot-bellied figure with moustaches, protruding eyes and fangs. He is dressed in a short *antariya* and is adorned with *valayas*, *keyuras*, *udarabandha*, *hara*, ear ornaments and a *mukuta*. This image had been identified by some scholars as Yamantaka accompanying *Dharmasankhasamadhi* Manjusri (Mitra 1981:290; Benisti 2003: 306). The description of this form of Manjusri seems to tally with the physical appearance of the image though Amitabha is conspicuously absent in the *jatamukuta* of the image. Recently, some Japanese scholars have identified this main image as *Abhisambodhi Vairocana* (Donaldson 2001: 109) which seems to be more acceptable. Since the image is still in-situ along with other two images, the context may also be considered while attempting to identify it.

In the *Mahavairocanabhisambodhi sutra*, which begins in a timeless setting of Buddha's palace, the Buddha is described as seated in *dhyanamudra* on a lion throne in the guise of a Bodhisattva along with a congregation of a multitude of Bodhisattvas (Giebel 2005: 3). The *sutra* is in the form of a dialogue between Maha Vairocana Buddha and Vajrasattva where in the Buddha expounds knowledge of the *Mahakaruna Garbhodbhava Mandala* to the assembly while still in the state of *samadhi*. Here in Temple 4 of Ratnagiri, the main image is accompanied by Vajrasattva to his right and Vajradharma to his left. Vajradharma is described in the *Sadhanamala* as one who moves in the sanctum of the *chaitya*, the place for great performances. And, the worshipper who meditates upon him certainly receives the *Bodhi* (Bhattacharya 1958: 143). This would

imply that the whole setting with these four deities as a group represents the discourse of *Abhisambodhisutra* and accordingly, the main deity may be identified as Abhisambodhi Vairocana. Temple 4 is west facing, and so the Acala image in the temple positioned below Vairocana is in the direction of *Nairrti* (south-west) which is also in accordance to the description given in the *Mahavairocanabhisambodhi sutra*. So, this would also imply that the accompanying attendant figure to the left of the main deity may be identified as Acala. This image is not that refined in appearance and may be dated to the tenth century AD based on the characters of an inscription on the main image which it accompanies.

Conclusion

Acala is the symbolic protector of Buddhism and symbolises '*Prajna* Immovable'. To the uninitiated, he is a consistent reminder of what he stands for and refrain them from interfering with the spread of Buddhist Doctrine. And to the initiated, he is the destroyer of delusions and a symbol of immovability both of mind and body. Acala serves his worshippers faithfully without any discrimination and removes all types of hindrances to give them a firm mind in their troubles and to achieve the immovability of the *bodhicitta* (Chandra 1999: 30). He is believed to be effectual in overcoming disease, poison and fire, conquering enemies and tempters and bringing wealth and peace to his devotees (Chandra 1999: 31). Acala was worshipped as an independent deity in Japan in the late eighth-ninth century AD as the protector of the state and as a guardian of individual worshippers. Later on, around the tenth century AD, the role of Acala was identified as guardian of individuals and their families and to conquer their enemies (Chandra 1999: 31). In China also, Acala was worshipped in around the eighth century AD (Chandra 1999: 52). Nothing much is known about the worship of Acala in India, but the representation of the deity in the sculptural art of Ratnagiri shows that Acala was not totally unknown in this part of the Buddhist world. Also, the two phases of iconographical and career development of Acala in Buddhism; as an attendant deity as well as an independent deity has been identified at this site. Representation of Acala in a votive stupa suggests that it could be the donation of a pilgrim who had come to Ratnagiri from a place where worship of Acala was in vogue. There are references to the maintenance of a permanent atelier in Ratnagiri (Mitra 1981: 32) where the pilgrims could order for carving out a deity of their choice to be deposited at the site as a token of reverence or for some religious or personal merits. Such practices are not uncommon in Ratnagiri where we find some votive stupas with *ayaka* pillars, a feature common in the stupas of Krishna valley (Mitra 1981: 32). D. Mitra also perceives an extraneous influence in the *sarvatobhadra* type of stupas found at the site (Mitra 1981: 32). So, placing a votive stupa with Acala on it must have been to protect the donor and his family from dangers and enemies. Since Ratnagiri was a revered centre for learning and is believed to have preserved copies of the scriptural works of the *Mahayana* and *Hinayana* (Mitra 1981: 16), the installation of a stupa with the image of Acala must have also been done to ward off the enemies of Buddhist teachings. Presence of Acala as an attendant deity to *Abhisambodhi Vairocana* also reveals his role as the protector of the

teachings of Buddha and to ward off any kind of obstacles, as the whole setting of the images in Temple 4 corresponds to the discourse of *Maha Vairocanābhisambodhi Sutra*. Thus, the presence of Acala in the votive stupa and also in the sculptural art of Ratnagiri accentuates its status as an important pilgrimage centre and also as a *tantric* Buddhist Centre.

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