
Sculptural Art of the Images of the Mother Goddess Vārāhī of Bengal (c. 7th Century CE to the c. 13th Century CE): An Iconographic Study

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Abstract: Goddess Vārāhī, an important mother goddess of a group of Saptamātrkā or Aṣṭamātrkā (seven mother goddesses or eight mother goddesses) has occupied a very important and prominent place in early medieval Bengal sculptures. The exact number of the images of the goddess Vārāhī are not available, only few images have been found in Saptamātrkā or Aṣṭamātrkā panel of Bengal sculptures. The Number of independent images of the goddess Vārāhī is fairly good. The author has brought to light fourteen (14) images from all over Bengal (West Bengal and Bangladesh). Most of the images have been found from West Bengal and only two have been found from East Bengal (Bangladesh). This boar-faced goddess is seen seated or standing in a lalitāsana pose in a slightly vertical position with four arms. Most of the images of the goddess Vārāhī belongs to the c.10th century CE to c.12th century CE and have been preserved in different Museums of West Bengal and Bangladesh, or sometimes in private collections. They were also found as remains lying under open sky. The sculptors or the artists of Bengal skilfully sculpted to represent the images of the goddess Vārāhī as mother goddess and these artistic activities are considered as valuable resources of Bengal as well as for the entire world.

Keywords: Lalitāsana, Mother Goddess, Saptamātrkā, sculptures, Vārāhī, Iconography, Bengal

Introduction

Mātrkāś, the divine mothers who are also called Mātār or Mātr, are a group of mother goddesses who are always depicted together in Hinduism (Kinsley 1988:151). The Mātrkāś are often depicted in a group of seven called the Saptamātrkā(s) (Seven Mothers). They are also depicted as a group of eight called the Aṣṭamātrkā(s). They are: Brāhmanī, Vaisnavī, Māhesvarī, Indrānī, Kaumārī, Vārāhī, and Cāmunḍā or Nṛsinghi and these mother goddesses are associated with gods as their spouses or their female powers such as Brāhmanī who emerged from Brahmā, Vaisnavī from Viṣṇu, Māhesvarī from Maheś or Śiva, Indrānī from Indra, Kaumārī from Skanda, Vārāhī from Varāha and Cāmunḍā from Devī (Pārvatī or Dūrgā). These mother goddesses are worshiped as Saptamātrkā in South India and worshipped as Aṣṭamātrkā in Nepal (Van den Hoek 1993: 362).

Vārāhī is one of the *Mātrikās*, a group of seven or eight mother goddesses (*Saptamātrikā* or *Astamātrikā*) of Hindu religion. With the head of a *Varāha* (boar-), *Vārāhī* is the *Śakti* (feminine energy) of *Varāha*, the boar incarnation of the lord *Viṣṇu*. She is popularly known as *Barahi* in Nepal. By and large, *Vārāhī* is worshipped by main three practices of Hinduism viz Shaivism, Brāhmanism, and especially Shaktism. She is generally worshipped at hours of darkness and using mysterious *Vāmamarga Tāntric* practices. The Buddhist goddesses *Vajravārāhī* and *Mārīci* have their origins from the Hindu goddess *Vārāhī*.

Objective of the Study

The present study is ‘Sculptural Art of the Images of the Mother Goddess *Vārāhī* of Bengal (c.7th Century CE to the c.13th Century CE): An Iconographic Study’ and the author wants to undertake a critical study of the sculptures of the mother goddess *Vārāhī* in Bengal including modern Bangladesh. The study deals with analytical studies of iconographic and epigraphic features of sculptures of the goddess *Vārāhī* in different parts of Bengal (West Bengal and Bangladesh).

Source Materials

Primary Sources and Secondary sources have been collected for the completion of this article. For the collection of primary source materials, the author has visited various historical places, archaeological sites, monasteries, temples, *Śākta-pīthas* and different Museums of West Bengal. A good number of books, articles, journals, and periodicals have been published in this field of study. All reliable sources related to this article have been collected and consulted meticulously.

Methodology

The methodology followed for the study was historical, based on both library works and field study. The author has depended on the in-depth study of the epigraphic and iconographic records of Bengal from c.7th century CE to the c.13th century CE. In this regard, the author has visited different archaeological sites, various important places and Museums of West Bengal (India) while closely observed the images of the goddess *Vārāhī* with his own eyes to obtain a first-hand view as well as to take photographs and to make use of a questionnaire at the time of field study for a vivid presentation of the whole matter of this present paper.

Mythology

Shumbha-Nishumbha episode of the *Devī Māhātmya* section of the *Mārkeṇḍeya Purāṇa* (Chap. 89, verse 8.11–20) narrates that the *Mātrikā* goddesses represented as *Śaktis* (feminine powers) emerged from the bodies of the gods. This religious text refers that *Vārāhī* emerged from *Varāha*, the third incarnation of lord Vishnu. She has a boar face with female body, holds a *cakra* or wheel (discus) and fights with an *asi* (sword) (Kinsley 1978: 489-506). After the battle, the *Mātrikās* dance and maddened on their wounded blood (Kinsley 1988: 156).

Raktabija story of the latter episode of the *Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa* (Ch. 90, verses 8.62) describes that the warrior-goddess *Dūrgā* creates the *Mātrkās* from herself and she slaughters the demon army with the help of the *Mātrkās* (Kinsley 1978: 489-506). According to the *Raktabija* episode, *Vārāhī* is described as having a pig form and fighting demons with her tusks while seated on a *preta* (carcass) (Swami Vijnananda 1923: 121,138,197,452-457).

The *Vāmana Purāṇa* says that the *Mātrkās* emerge from different parts of the Divine Mother *Caṇḍikā*; *Vārāhī* emerges from *Caṇḍikā*'s back (Bailey 1986: 1-16; Donaldson 2002: 158). The *Devī Bhāgavata Purāṇa* says *Vārāhī*, with the other *Mātrikās*, is created by the *Devī* (the Supreme Mother). The *Devī* pledges the gods that the *Mātrikās* will fight demons when required. The *Varāha Purāṇa* repeats the story of the *Raktabija* episode but in the text each of *Mātrikās* appears from the body of another *Mātrikā*. *Vārāhī* is seen seated on *Śeṣha-nāga* from the posterior of *Vaiṣṇavī*, the *Śakti* of Vishnu (Goswami et al. 2015: 1-9).

According to the *Matsya Purāṇa*, *Vārāhī*, along with the other *Mātrkās*, (Ch. 109) was created by *Shiva* to assist him slaughter the demon *Andhakāsura*, who has the capability to rejuvenate from his dripping blood like *Raktabija* (Goswami et al. 2015: 1-9). It is interesting to note that the *Devī Purāṇa* describes *Vārāhī* as the mother of *Varāha* (*Varāhajanani*) and "*Vaivasvatī*" (Pal 1997: 1844-45). Pratapaditya Pal, a great scholar, has clearly identified *Vārāhī* with *Yami*, the *Śakti* of *Yama*, who is also known as *Vivasvan* (Pal 1997: 1849).

Important Find Spots

The author has found fourteen (14) images of the mother goddess *Vārāhī* from all over Bengal (West Bengal and Bangladesh). Most of the images have been found from Uttar Dinajpur, Dakshin Dinajpur, and in the South 24 Parganas district of West Bengal and rest of the images have been found from Rajshahi and Dinajpur districts of Bangladesh.

Discussion

Among the Fourteen (14) *Vārāhī* images from Bengal (West Bengal and Bangladesh), seven are already discussed by various scholars and the rest of the images came to light in recent times. All the *Vārāhī* images are four-handed, boar-faced and pot-bellied seated (standing?) in *lalitāsana* pose. The goddesses carry the sword and shield in their upper hands and fish and bowl in their lower right and left hands, respectively. J. N. Banerjea pointed out that the holding a fish in one hand by the goddess perhaps indicates a tantric trait as *matsya* is one of the five 'ma's, i.e., *pañcamakara* (Sengupta, & Saha 2015: 156, pl. XIII, fig. 27).

A c.10th-11th century CE limestone image of *Vārāhī* (Figure 1) discovered from Berubari village of Jalpaiguri district, West Bengal, now in the State Archaeological Museum, Behala (Acc. No. 05.17), shows the deity seated in *lalitāsana* pose on a full-blown lotus pedestal along with a *Garuḍa* (?) figure. The four-handed goddess holds a sword in her

upper right hand and shield in her upper left hand and lower right hand is in *varada* gesture lying on her leg and she holds a fish (?) in her lower left hand. The boar faced goddess *Vārāhī* is bejewelled with beautiful *mukuṭa* (coiffure), *hāra* (necklace) and *karnakuntalas* (earrings). The upper back slab is plain and there is no figure or symbol engraved on the *prabhāvalī*. Another three (3) images of *Vārāhī* with four hands are preserved in the State Archaeological Museum, Behala. These images were collected from explorations in different unspecified places of West Bengal.



Figure 1: *Vārāhī*, Berubari Village, Jalpaiguri (Source: Sengupta & Saha, *Vibrant Rock*, p.156)



Figure 2: *Vārāhī*, Bahicha village, Dakshin Dinajpur, WB (Source: Sengupta & Saha, *Vibrant Rock*, p.160)

Another two (2) important specimens of *Vārāhī* image, one from Bahicha (Acc. no. 05.207) and another from an unspecified place in Bengal (Acc. no. 05.153) now in the State Archaeological Museum, Behala, shows the goddesses seated in *lalitāsana* pose with four hands holding various attributes. The Bahicha specimen (Figure 2) is adorned with *jaṭāmukuṭa* (crowned with matted hair), elongated earrings, a beautiful necklace and bangles. She possesses well-developed bosoms and her body is strong and stout. The upper back slab (*prabhāvalī*) is broken. Another specimen found from an unspecified find spot is very corroded and the attributes, *vāhanas* or stela are not accurately clear to understand. The Bahicha specimen belonging to the c.10th A.D. in the State Archaeological Museum, Behala show that the fragmentary image is four-handed with a fish and a sword in her lower right and upper left hand, respectively whereas a shield (*kheṭaka*) is seen in her upper left and the lower left hand is very much damaged and not clearly visible (Sengupta, and Saha 2015: 160, pl. XIII, fig. 36).



Figure 3: *Vārāhī*, Sivbari Village, Dakshin Dinajpur, WB (Courtesy: Asok Nandi, Sivbari, Dakshin Dinajpur, WB)



Figure 4: *Vārāhī*, Balurghat, Dakshin Dinajpur, WB (Courtesy: Balurghat College Museum, WB)



Figure 5: *Vārāhī*, Pichli, Malda, WB (Courtesy: Malda Museum, Malda, WB)



Figure 6: *Vārāhī*, Gokulnagar, Bankura, WB (Courtesy: Biplab Barat, Bankura)

A sandstone image of *Vārāhī* (Figure 3) measuring about 27.94 cm × 20.32 cm found from Sivbari village of Dakshin Dinajpur district of West Bengal, is now in the personal

collection of Asok Nandi, a local curator of the same village. The four-armed deity is shown seated in a *lalitāsana* pose with attributes in its hands. The goddess belongs to the c.10th century CE.

A Similar type of a seated image made of grayish-black stone from Dakshin Dinajpur (exact location unknown) now in the Balurghat College Museum, Balurghat measuring 10 cm × 8 cm, is an important and notable specimen of *Vārāhī* image of Bengal art. The goddess may be assignable to the c.10th century CE.

A black stone, c.10th century CE, four-handed and boar-faced goddess *Vārāhī* image (Figure 5), discovered from Pichli village of Malda district, West Bengal, safely preserved in the Malda Museum, Malda, is shown seated on a lotus pedestal. The goddess carries the sword, *dhāla*, fish, etc. and the lower right hand is placed on her right leg in *varada* gesture. She possesses well-developed bosoms, and is seen, pot-bellied wearing a crown, necklace, ear-rings, etc. This *Vārāhī* image is a notable and superb execution of Bengal art.

A unique inscribed image representing the goddess *Vārāhī* with four hands found from Kankan Dighi (North) under Mathurapur P.S. in the district of South 24 Parganas of West Bengal is safely preserved in Dakshin Anchalik Sangrahashala, Baruipur. The black stone image is seen seated in a *lalitāsana* pose on a *pañcaratha* lotus pedestal. The pedestal is adorned with human figures with folded hands and some floral motifs. The four-handed boar-faced image of the goddess *Vārāhī* carries a big, shaped sword (*khaḍga*) in her upper right hand, *khetaka* in her upper left hand, a *matsya* (fish) in her lower right hand and a *kapāla* in her lower left hand, respectively. The goddess is bejeweled with various ornaments and her heavy well-developed bosoms, thin waist, and massive hips makes her look like a beautiful female. The third eye is prominent on the forehead. Generally, a child is shown on the lap of *Mātrkā* images but in this sculpture, no child image is present. The upper back slab is bedecked with *vidyādhara*s on each side beneath a *kīrtimukha* at the apex. An inscription is engraved on the lower bottom of the pedestal in Sanskrit language and Gauḍīya script. The author is not able to read and translate the text because the remaining letters are in illegible conditions (Ray Bandyopadhyay 2010: 119-128; Mondal 2010: 219-223).

A beautiful superb bluish chlorite stone sculpture of *Vārāhī* image (Figure 6) has been found from Gokulnagar village near Gokulchand temple under Joypur block of Bankura district, West Bengal. The goddess is seen seated on a walking or running tortoise on a plain pedestal. The goddess is two armed and the objects held in her hands are not clearly understood. A beautiful necklace is seen on her well-developed bosoms and her belly is similarly big in size. This is an exceptional representation because the goddess is seated on tortoise which is not seen in other Bengal sculptures. Influence of regionalism and tantrism is clearly observed on the image. This image is not only wonderful and elegant but also unprecedented from an artistic point of view. Such a magnificent image of *Vārāhī* measuring more than five (5) feet in height is not

commonly found in the whole of Bengal (Table 1). From the artistic point of view, it may be conjectured that the image belongs to the c.12th century CE.

Table 1: List of *Vārāhī* Images found from Bengal

Sl. No.	Name of the Images	Find Spot	Present Location	Special Features	Date
1.	<i>Vārāhī</i> (Figure 1)	Berubari village of Jalpaiguri district, WB	State Archaeological Museum, Behala, Acc. No. 05.17	Seated image of the <i>Vārāhī</i> is in <i>lalitāsana</i> with four hands holding attributes. She is bejewelled with a beautiful coiffure, earrings, and necklace. The <i>prabhāvalī</i> is plain.	c.10 th -11 th century CE
2.	<i>Vārāhī</i> (Figure 2)	Bahicha, Dakshin Dinajpur, WB	State Archaeological Museum, Behala, Acc. no. 05.153	Fragmentary image of a four-armed goddess in standing posture.	c.10 th century CE
3.	<i>Vārāhī</i> (Figure 3)	Sivbari, Dakshin Dinajpur, WB	In a personal collection under Asok Nandi.	Made of sandstone	c.10 th century CE
4.	<i>Vārāhī</i> (Figure 4)	Amati, Dakshin Dinajpur, WB	Balurghat College Museum, Balurghat	The image is in a seated posture and made of grayish-black basalt.	c.9 th -10 th century CE
5.	<i>Vārāhī</i> (Figure 5)	Pichli village of Malda district, WB	Malda Museum, Malda	Made of black-basalt	c.10 th century CE
6.	<i>Vārāhī</i> (Figure 6)	Gokulnagar village of Bankura district, WB	Under open sky in the same village	Big size and seated image.	c.11 th century CE
7.	<i>Vārāhī</i>	Unrecorded place of WB	State Archaeological Museum, Behala, Acc.No. 05.207	<i>Vārāhī</i> image sits in <i>lalitāsana</i> with four hands holding attributes which are very much corroded.	c.11 th century
8.	<i>Vārāhī</i>	Kankan Dighi, South 24 Parganas,	Baruipur Museum, Baruipur	Inscribed image and big in size. The inscriptions on the	c.12 th century CE

		WB		pedestal are illegible.	
9.	<i>Vārāhī</i> (Santra 1978:112)	Panna village, Medinipur, WB	Unknown	Terracotta figurine.	c.12 th century CE
10.	<i>Vārāhī</i> (Basak & Bhattacharya 1919: 17)	Manahali Dakshin Dinajpur, WB	Varendra Research Museum, Rajshahi, No. 654	The image is made of grayish buff sandstone. Her hair is piled up on the head and secured by a fitted jewel .	c.10 th century CE
11.	<i>Vārāhī</i> (Rahman 1998: 232, pl.231)	Mahanad Hooghly, WB	Varendra Research Museum, Rajshahi, No. 139	The goddess is two- armed and seated in <i>majārājālāsana</i> posture. Her figure is flabby and pot- bellied.	c.10 th century CE
12.	<i>Vārāhī</i> (Rahman 1998: 232)	Balurghat Dakshin Dinajpur, WB	Varendra Research Museum, Rajshahi, No. 223	The image is big but fragmented and the upper portion of the image is broken.	c.10 th century CE
13.	<i>Vārāhī</i> (Banerjea 1956:506)	Unspecified place of Hooghly, WB	Asutosh Museum, Kolkata, No. T3586	The goddess is two- handed and made of grayish-black stone.	c.11 th century CE
14.	<i>Vārāhī</i> (Ghosh 1980: 528- 529)	Dvarbasini, Hooghly, WB	Unknown	The image is very much eroded.	c.10 th century CE

Conclusion

From the above discussion, it clearly appears that all the images of the mother goddess *Vārāhī* having four-hands with various attributes belongs to the time period c.10th to the c.13th century CE and is made of black stone. The artists of Bengal did not always follow the textual references or *Shilpaśāstra* to execute these sculptures. The sculptors or the artists of Bengal skilfully sculpted to represent the images of the goddess *Vārāhī* as the feminine power of *Varāha* and these artistic activities are considered as valuable resources of Bengal as well as for the entire world.

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