



Fig 1: Marichi ; blackstone; 121 X 58 cm; c. 11th/12th century; found in Panditsar, Faridpur district; Bangladesh National Museum collection.

Fig 2 : Gauri with sadyojata Siva; blackstone; 74.93 X 33.02 cm; c. 12th century; found in Dubalhati, Naogaon district; Bangladesh National Museum collection.

Fig 3: Buddha Sakyamuni; blackstone; 103 X 53 cm; c. 11th century; found in Ujani, Gopalganj district; Bangladesh National Museum collection.

# Costumes and ornaments, as reflected in ancient Bengal sculpture

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## COSTUME

The potters of the present day whose business it is to prepare clay images for worship, never dream of dressing the gods and goddesses made by them in any other garb than those ordinarily worn by the present-day inhabitants of Bengal. We have no reason to assume that their brethren of pre-Muhammadan days in the stone-cutting profession did anything different. If that be so, it will have to be admitted that both male and female costumes in Bengal have undergone very notable changes. Ibn Batuta, who visited Bengal in 1345 A. D., has left us a list of the prices current in Bengal in his time. It appears from his list that while articles of every-day use like rice, sugar, ghee, oil, etc. were sold at amazingly cheap rates, cloth was comparatively dear, and people, therefore, had to be content with little cloth. Things were not much different 150 years before Ibn Batuta's time and the parsimony of people with regard to cloth is reflected in the short Dhotis in which the sculptors clothe the gods, which stop shorter than even the present-day skirts of European ladies!

The present-day standard of a Dhoti, 5 yds. long and 44 inches broad, was unknown. The standard in pre-Muhammadan days would appear to lie nearer 3yds. x 24 inches for the males. This custom of wearing short and narrow Dhotis continued down to even early British days. The short Dhotis of the males may be seen in all the figures of the gods. They are most conveniently seen in the images of Visnu. From the fact that Samudra Gupta is represented similarly

rest of the Sari covers the upper portions of the body and ultimately also serves as a veil to cover the head.

The Sari by which the ladies represented in these stone images are found covered appears to have been of a different nature. At first sight they look like petticoats, but careful observation reveals the fact that they are not so. For purposes of observation, a scrutiny of standing figures gives the most satisfactory results and the attention of the reader is therefore directed to the figures of Laksmi and Sarasvati on the images of Visnu, images of Marichi, images of Mahismarddini and images of Chandī. It will be seen from these images that the Sari does not cover the front like a flat piece, but goes round the legs and exhibits their contours. It will further be observed that while the outer corner of that portion of the Sari which meets the leg is left at a right angle to the leg, the inner corner is drawn up, suggesting tucking up between the legs and fastening of both the ends behind like a Kachha. This is suggestive of the South Indian fashion of wearing the Sari. This method leaves the legs much wider freedom of movement than the petticoats or the Saris as worn at present in Bengal. With the Saris worn at present, the attitude of Marichi (Fig-1), Sitatapatra, Tara, Parnasavari, Gauri, Manasa would have been difficult, if not impossible of performance retaining the Sari in position, as required by decency.

The tucking up is particularly noticeable in almost all the figures of Laksmi and Sarasvati on the images of Visnu. That the cloth was tucked up can also be

The Sari having thus been finished at the waist, it remains to be seen how the upper portion of the body was covered. It is inconceivable that sewn garments like bodices or jackets were not in use, at least in the upper stratum of society; but examples in support of this supposition is surprisingly rare in the female figures represented in Bengal sculpture. One of the two instances of the use of a bodice that I have succeeded in finding out is that worn by Marichi from PanditSar. The bodice is observed here as a tight-fitting garment with short arms ending in fringes, and stopping midway between the breasts and the navel. The other instance is to be found in the image of Bhirkuti. The bodice here is similar, but descends lower and covers the navel.

The covering in general use, however,

by a sort of hunting boot. The legs of the attendants and wives of the Sun-god are also found similarly covered in some images.

How the ladies of those days did their hair can be studied from the interesting chignon on the head of Sarasvati. This method of doing the hair is also illustrated on some of the figures of Laksmi and Sarasvati, represented on either side of Visnu. This method appears to have been the most favourite fashion, as it is the one most frequently met with. Tara from Khaikair has her hair done in a different fashion, viz, a round flat chignon at the back of the head. In the lower panel of ladies assembled to wish the hunter Revanta godspeed, the one standing on the extreme proper left has her hair done in a similar fashion. It may be noted in passing that the lady to her right has both of her breasts restrained and covered by urw in a manner which suggests that the urna, after covering both the breasts, is fastened in position by a knot on the back behind.

Of late years, this fashion has been adopted by the Bengali stage in dressing the dancing girls in the Pauranic dramas. It may further be noted that the lady to the right of the last-mentioned one shows, again, no vestige of a covering on her breast.

## ORNAMENTS

Both males and females are represented heavily ornamented in Bengal sculpture. Let us begin with the head.

The males almost invariably, while the females less frequently, have their heads covered by tapering conical mukutas, while a simple crown serves to cover the head of a few males and a large number of females.

These headgears are probably to be taken as signs of divinity and royalty and cannot be taken to have been in general use in society. In the absence of secular sculpture, it is difficult to say what the headgear in general use was like. But we have no reason to assume that the fore-fathers of the bare-headed Bengalis of the present day habitually used any head-gear in pre-Muhammadan days, except on ceremonial occasions. The tradition of these ceremonial head-gears has been preserved unbroken down to the present day in the shape of the mukuta and the crown of cork (Sola) which the bridegroom and the bride are given to wear respectively, at the time of the marriage ceremony.

In the Buddhist images, some varieties in the mukuta will be noticed. In images of Buddha, the head of the great teacher will be found covered by a series of knots arranged in the shape of a pyramid. The knots represent the curls of his hair, while the conical shape is supposed to be due to a protuberance in the skull of the Buddha, which is believed to be the most important sign of his Buddhahood.

In Brahmanical images, the mukutas are of two different classes. In Saiva images, both males and females will be found wearing Jata-mukuta, i.e. the mukuta looking like a bundle of matted locks. The head of the Vaisnava images will be found covered by what the South Indian texts call Karanda-mukuta, (Karanda meaning a basket).

Ear-lobes pierced and weighted down was the universal rule among both males and females. Buddha is generally represented without any ornament whatever. But even in these images, the ear-lobes are represented pierced and elongated, though no ornament is represented weighing them down.

The usual ornaments for the ears of

the ladies were circular pendants of large size. In the case of males, the style was the same but the size was generally a little smaller. Some of the male figures, however, are given pendants equal in size to those worn by ladies.

The fashion among the ladies in Bengal, even fifty years ago, was to use huge and uncouth nose rings hung from a hole perforated in the loose skin at the end of the cartilage. In addition to this, the skin covering the left nostril was perforated and a tiny ornament in imitation of a flower-bud was worn through the hole. At present, the nose-ring has almost disappeared and small nose-pendants are used by girls until puberty. The flower-bud ornament, however, is still in general use. The ancients had the good sense to leave this beautiful limb, the equivoise of the face, un battered and no nose-ornament whatever is found in the female figures in Bengal sculpture.

Necklaces worn by the male and female figures are interesting studies. It would appear from a comparative study that the older pieces of sculpture are distinctly less ornamented than the later productions, in which profuse ornamentation became the rule. A comparison between Visnu from Sialdi and Visnu from Laksmankati will be instructive. In the female figures, three lines of necklaces became finally the rule, viz, one short necklace of pearls or other material of similar beady appearance; then an inflexible thick flat band; and finally a flowing long necklace falling gracefully over and beyond the bosom. In the male figures, the last item is generally omitted, but this one and some more appear with a vengeance in highly decorated figures like Visnu from Sialdi and Manju-Sri from Jalkundi.

Armlets, bracelets and anklets are common to both female and male figures. The bracelets worn by males, as a rule, are found to be thinner than those worn by ladies. In the case of the latter, the bracelets are generally barrel-shaped ornaments extending over four or five inches of space, beginning near the wrist. It may be noted that this fashion in bracelets is still current among the women of Bihar. Elaborate waist-bands, often several lines deep, appear encircling the waists of both male and female figures in Bengal sculpture. A very good comparative idea of the male and female waist-bands can be formed from the images of Visnu, in which the god is usually represented with a wife on either side.

Anklets appear on the feet of both males and females. Bengalis boys up to the age of 7 or 8 and girls, even after attaining puberty, used to wear anklets even thirty years ago; but the custom is fast falling into disuse. The girls in villages still use them up to the age of ten or eleven, and their use is ceremonial at the time of marriage. But soon after the event the anklets are discarded and are never taken up again.

This article is taken from Nalini Kanta Bhattasali's famous work *Iconography of Buddhist and Brahmanical Sculptures in the Dacca Museum*. The book was published in 1929.

Nalini Kanta Bhattasali was a historian, archaeologist, numismatist, epigraphist and antiquarian. He was the first curator of Dacca Museum (now, Bangladesh National Museum).

PHOTO COURTESY: SCULPTURES IN BANGLADESH, EDITED BY ENAMUL HAQUE AND ADALBART J. GAIL, THE INTERNATIONAL CENTRE FOR STUDY OF BENGAL ART, DHAKA, 2008.

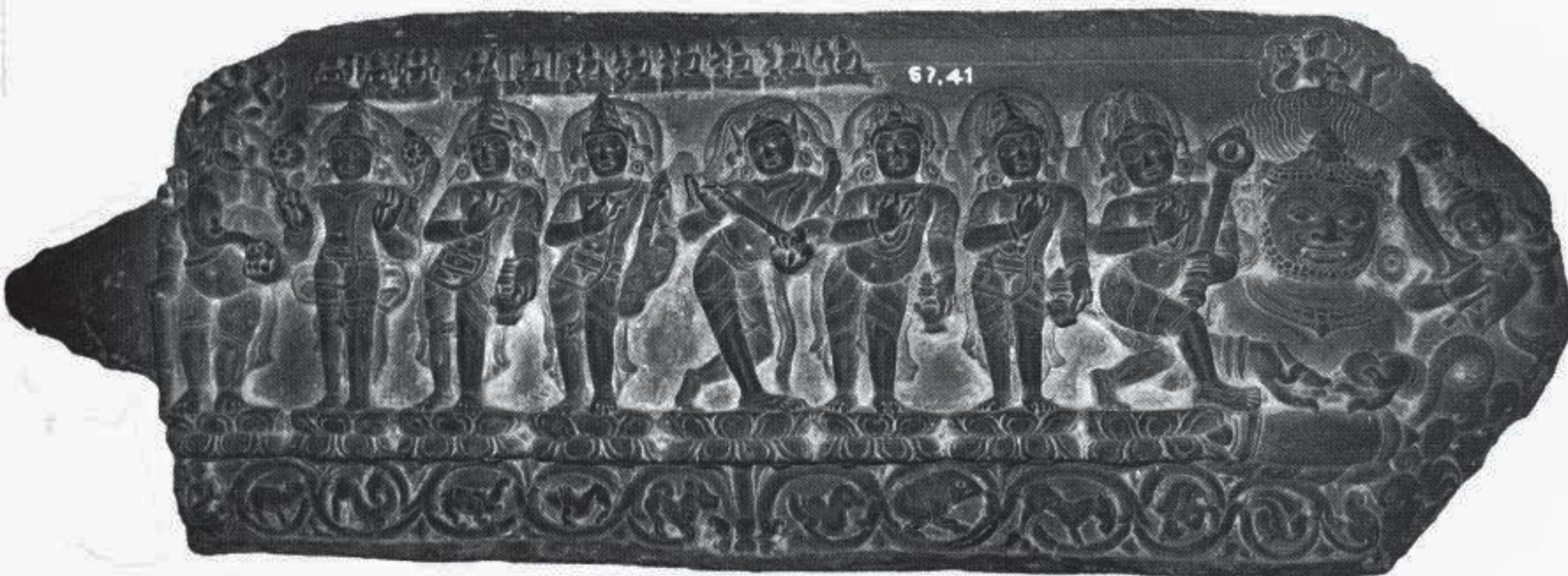


Fig 4: Navagrahas and Ganesa with Astadikpalas; blackstone; 58.4 X 24.1 cm; 12th century; found in Akhiliya, Nachol, Naogaon district; Bangladesh National Museum collection.

clothed on his coins, it would appear that the custom was an old one and probably all-India wide.

The Saris of the ladies, however, descended much lower and stopped short of the ankle by an inch or two. At present, the Sari as well as the Dhoti is 5 yds. in length. In the case of the males, about half this length is taken round the waist from right to left and fastened on to it like a belt by the action of the elasticity of the abdomen. The free end of this portion is tucked up between the legs and fastened behind on the border of the fold encircling the waist like a belt. This portion is called Kachha. The other half of the cloth is folded into folds about 3" wide, and suspended in front. This portion is known as Kocha. The garb of the males in pre-Muhammadan days appears to have been worn in a similar fashion, only with a shorter cloth. But the manner of wearing the Sari by the ladies appears to have undergone radical change. At present the Sari goes round the waist like a petticoat, and no portion is left to serve as Kachha as in the case of the males. The

proved from the Saris with line-designs, worn by many ladies. It will be observed that the lines do not run continuously, as they would have done in case the Sari were worn like a petticoat and lay like a flat flap in front. The lines on both the legs follow the contour of the leg they cover and are finally drawn inwards and upwards.

A scrutiny of most of the female figures appears to show that both the ends of the cloth were drawn in and tucked up behind. The evidence of the figure of Tara from Khaikair would, however, show that sometimes only the left end was tucked up and the right end after being fastened at the waist by the upper border was allowed to hang loose in folds on front. Folds ending in graceful curves in front are also found in the images of Mahapratishara and Bhirkuti. A number of folds are also to be found in the image of Marichi from Panditsar and they appear to be folds of the right end of the Sari. In the Marichi from Ujani, however, no folds appear and the Sari appears to be drawn in and tucked up at both the ends.

was a narrow long piece of cloth.

On only one image the lines on the Saris of Laksmi and Sarasvati run continuously over both the legs.

This urna or uttariya, as it is called technically, covers the left breast completely, and the right breast only partially. In images representing action, the breasts are restrained by a knot, as in the images of Mahismarddini. The knot appears in a placid image also, along with the urna. It is curious to note, however, that in some images e. g. Mahapratishara and Gauri no vestige whatever of a covering for the breasts is to be found!

The custom of wearing the cloth below the navel was universal among both males and females. The uttariya was used by the males also, as may be observed on several images. In the image of Buddha (Fig-3) from Ujani the right side of the figure is well-covered by an ample Uttariya. It may be observed here that the great preacher is not represented wearing the short cloth, usual for males, but his cloth descends down to the ankles and the folds in front are represented spread in a wavy circle. Manju-Sri is also similarly well-dressed and similar are the cases of the images of Lokanatha. In representing these images, the sculptors no doubt gave them the traditional wrappers of the Buddhist Bhiksus.

The designs on the male and female clothing are interesting studies and testify to a flourishing state of the weavers' art. Line-design was the most common pattern, while different patterns of floral and other designs can also be distinguished.

As it was probably thought improper and impious to cover the feet of the gods and goddesses, and as practically no secular sculpture has hitherto been discovered in Bengal, it is difficult to know what kind of shoes were in use. The feet of the Sun-god had to be covered up under religious injunction and this was done