



## **Buddha Worshipped as Siva in Murshidabad District- A Local Tradition**

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### **Abstract**

The present essay focuses on the fact that the images of the Buddha found in Murshidabad district region is now being worshipped as Rudradeva, Shiva or Bhairava. There is no doubt that at one point of time Buddha worship was very popular in Murshidabad district region. This is attested by the fact that many Buddha images are still found in this region. Some of these images were unearthed during excavations whereas others are located in various temples of the district region. The essay will focus on four case studies of Buddha being worshipped as Hindu gods- Rudra Deva of Kandi, Shiva of Lahapara Durgamandir, Bhairava of Kiriteswari temple of Lalbagh subdivision of Murshidabad district and that of Madaneswar Shiva in a temple of Barwa. The essay is mainly written on the basis of field survey by the author.

**Key Words:** Murshidabad district, Buddha images, Hindu gods, Rudradeva, Shiva, Bhairava, Madaneswar Shiva

### **Introduction**

Murshidabad district lies approximately in the middle of the state of West Bengal. It is the northernmost district of southern West Bengal. At one point of time Buddhism had an important

presence in this area and many stone Buddha images are still found in this region. With the waning of Buddhist influence and Hinduism gaining popularity the images of the Buddha started to be worshipped as Hindu gods like Rudra, Shiva or Bhairava. It is difficult to ascertain with any degree of certainty when this change took place. At present it can be seen that an image of Buddha in *bhumisparsha mudra* is being worshipped as Rudradeva in Kandi subdivision of Murshidabad district. Similarly another image of the Buddha in *bhumisparsha mudra*, housed in a local Durgamandir at Lahapara village of Kandi subdivision is being worshipped as Shiva. The third image discussed in this essay is that of a Dhyani Buddha housed in Murshidabad District Museum, Jiagunj, which is considered to be the Bhairava of goddess Kiriteswari, a Hindu goddess whose temple is located in Lalbagh subdivision of Murshidabad district. The fourth image is of Buddha is of Barwan village in Kandi Subdivision. The main purpose of this essay is to show how Buddha images were transformed into Hindu gods in Murshidabad district region.

### **Geography of Murshidabad district:**

Murshidabad district is called after the name of the metropolis Murshidabad (on the eastern side of the river Bhagirathi), capital city during the days of the rule of the Nawabs of Bengal. The soil of the Murshidabad has witnessed many historical events. Since lithic period to national movement the district played an important role in every stage of history. Presently the district is bounded along its north and east sides by the Ganges or the Padma, which separates it from the districts of Malda and Rajshahi (Bangladesh), the Jalangi river forms the south-east frontier for a considerable distance and divides the district from Nadia. To the south is Purba Bardhaman and to the west Birbhum (Bhattacharya, 1979: 9).

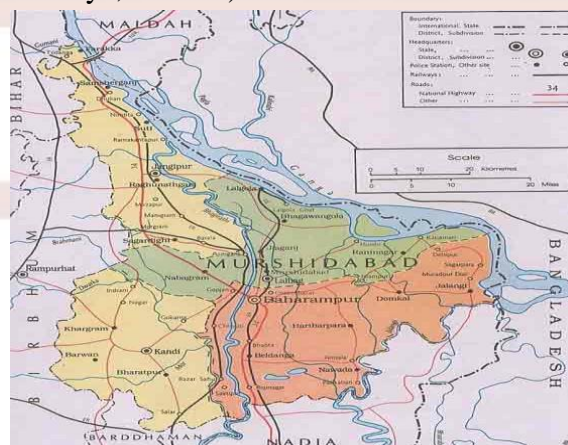


Fig. 1. Map of Murshidabad District

(Source: [map of murshidabad district - Google Search](#))



The Bhagirathi flowing from the north to south intersects Murshidabad district cutting it into two almost equal portions, which in their geology, their physical characteristics, agriculture and if we notice minutely the religion of the inhabitants are different from each other. The tract to the west of the river is locally known as Radha or Rarh (this part of the land is part of Uttar Radha) the earliest land formation of Murshidabad District. This type of land is noticed in the Khargram (Kandi sub-division), Burwan (Kandi sub-division) Nabagram (Lalbagh sub-division) and Sagardighi (Jangipur sub-division). Bagdi is the tract to the east of the Bhagirathi river. This part of the land was formed later from that of Rarh. The eastern part of the Bhagirathi is covered with recent alluvium soil. It consists of sandy clay and sand along the course of the river and fine silt clay on the plains. The western tract of the Bhagirathi is characterized by very high bank of stiff clay, gravel and calcareous nodules (*glutting*). It consists of older alluvium which decreases as one proceeds towards the south. From the archaeological point of view Hijol is most important area of the district. It is situated in the south west of the district near the confluence of the Mor and the Dwaraka rivers. Suti, Samsherganj and Farakka cover this area (Bhattacharya, 1979: 10).

#### **Brief history of the Region:**

Various dynasties like Mauryas, Guptas, Palas, Senas ruled over this region at various times The Brahmana-Buddha-Sakta-Saiva-Jaina religions and philosophies influenced this region. Many archaeological remains and relics are scattered over various places in the district. The archaeologically important places of this district are Sagardighi, Mahipala, Bara, Jalbandha, Kusumkhola, Nabagram, Kandi, Bharatpur, Geetagram etc. Many highlands or mounds and archaeological ruins are visible in the district like Rakshassidanga, Rajbaridanga, Thakurbaridanga, Sannyasidanga, Bhimke-talao, Yamuna-talao, Hari Rajar Ghar, the famous Mahipaladhibi, Pachthupi (Pancha Stupa) Barkonadibhi, (which is mentioned in Shaktipur copper plate of Lakshman Sena) and identified as a Buddha stupas by the experts of the Archaeological Survey of India.

Murshidabad is very rich from archaeological point of view. The archaeological relics and the many Brahmanical images like Vishnu, Uma-Maheswara, Kartikeya, Ganesh, Parvati, Mahishasuramardini, Surya, Shiva linga, Mukhalinga etc. have been found here. Vishu images are the largest number of images found in this district. That is the reason why this region is called Vishnukranta. Very remarkable Buddhist images have been found in this region like Dhayani Buddha, Buddha in Bhumisparsha mudra, Buddhist goddess Tara, Hariti (the goddess of



cultivation), Abolokiteswara, the miniature image of Jambha etc. Relatively few Jaina sculptures have been found in this region. These images are housed in local temples or lie under a tree, and sometimes are unearthed during digging activity.

Eminent archaeologist S.R Das in his book *Rajbadidanga: 1962* discusses in detail about ruins of Karnasuvarna, where excavation was conducted under his leadership. He says that the nature and the character of structural remains speak of the Buddhist monastic establishment, more particularly those belonging to platform, stupa-basement staircase, pavement etc. The other two most important evidence are the stucco heads, and the copper chakra which throws direct light on the existence of the Buddhism in this district (Das, 1968). The excavated Buddhist monastic establishment is to be identified with the illustrious Raktamrittika Sangharama described by Hiuen Tsang in the seventh century A.D. as standing in the suburb of the capital city of Karasuvarna, the capital city of Sasanka, the first sovereign overlord of Bengal.

The eminent historian Nihar Ranjan Ray wrote in his famous book *Bangalir Itihas: Adi Parba* that the Buddhist Mahayana and the Vajrayana sects flourished all over Bengal because the largest number of Buddhist sculptures have been found in Bengal (Ray, 1959). In the case of Murshidabad District the Pala rulers ruled over this district region. In circa seventh century A.D. the Chinese Pilgrim Hieun Tsang came to Murshidabad District and he saw that the Buddhism was flourishing in the district region then. With the waning away of the influence of Buddhism and the growth of the influence of Hinduism Buddha images was co-opted into the Hindu pantheon of gods and goddesses. Since when Buddha images began to be worshiped as Bairava, Rudradeva, Shiva cannot be said with any degree of certainty.

### **Rudradeva of Kandi:**

First light may be shed on the image locally known as Rudradeva. Ichnographically it is Dhyanī Buddha in *bhumisparsa mudra* sitting in *padmasana* posture on full blown lotus. The image is made of black stone, 18x10 inch. The deity is sitting under the Bodhibrikha. Stylistically the deity belongs to circa 11 -12th century A.D. The exact find spot is not known but its origin is in Kandi subdivision of Murshidabad district. First the deity was identified as Buddha by the famous archaeologist Rakhaldas Bondhyapadhyay, Locally the image is worshiped as Rudradeva or Baha. At present four Shiva temples flanked the Rudradeva temple. The deity is worshiped with *shivamontra*. Not only that, *gajan*, *charok*, and all Shivaite pujas are performed here. A *mela* (fair) is also organized here in the Bengali month of Chitra (March-April). The deity is





worshiped as the god of human fertility especially worshipped for the begetting a child. The original image of Rudradeva was stolen and at present the replica of the main deity is housed there. The main temple houses the deity of the Buddha and adjacent temples houses *shivalingas*. Buddha is completely transformed into the Hindu deity Shiva.<sup>1</sup>

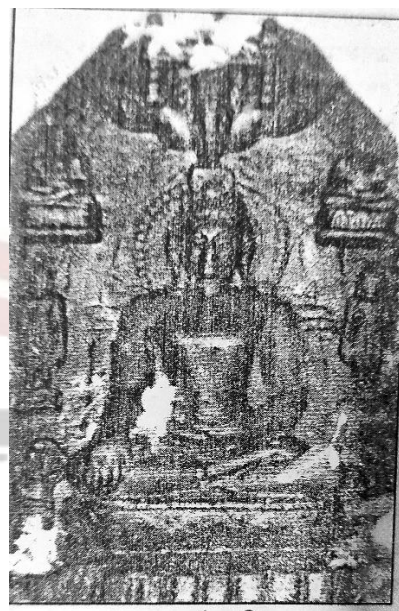


Fig 2. Original image of Rudradeva of Kandi.

Fig 3. Replica of Rudradeva, worshipped now.

(Source of Fig 2.: Bijoy Kumar Bandopadhyay,  
*Prachin Murshidabad: Karnasuvarna o Mahipal*,  
Radical, 2002, cover page)

( Source of Fig 3: author)

### Lahapara Buddha image:

Second, Buddha image to be discussed was found at Laharpara village which is situated in Kandi sub-division of Murshidabad district. The image is housed in the local Durgamondir, the image is locally worshiped as Shiva. Ichnographically the image is that of Dhayni Buddha in *bhumisparsa mudra*. The deity is sitting on a full blown lotus. Here the remarkable point is that the Dhyan Buddha is ornamented by the *mukuta* (crown), and the *kanthahara* (necklace). The hair of the deity is quite stylish. The main deity is accompanied by the two standing Bodhisattvas on both

sides. On the upper part of the Boddhisatva is curved one votive stupa and a Sayana Buddhisattva curved on the top of the stela. The sculpture is less ornamented and stylistically the deity belongs to circa 10-11th century A.D. The deity is also worshiped in *sivamontra* and the all kind of rituals which are connected to lord Shiva is performed here. Here also Buddha is transformed into the Hindu god Shiva.<sup>2</sup>



Fig 4. Laharpara Buddha image worshipped as Shiva  
(Source : author)

### **Dhyani Buddha in Murshidabad District Museum:**

The third image to be discussed is of Dyani Buddha which is presently in Murshidabad District Museum. Ichnographically the Buddha in *bhumisparsa mudra* sitting on *singhasana* (two lions curved on the lower part of the *singaasana*). Full decorative *singasana*, two sitting lions curved on pedestal and two lions also curved on stela. The deity is without any ornamentation. A tiger skin also hanging from the *singhasana* (throne). The image is made of sand stone. Stylistically the deity is not before circa 10th-11th century A.D. A less ornamented *prabha* is in the back side of the main deity. Actually, this Buddha image was worshiped as Bhairava in the Kiriteswari temple in Lalbagh Sub-division of Murshidabad district. The temple of Kiriteswari is known as the one of the Saktipith, which is mentioned in Puranas, There are many legends or *gathas*



about Kiriteswari in this district. Once upon a time the image was stolen by a smuggler. Then the image recovered by the police. Then the founder of the Murshidabad District Museum Rai Bahadur SurendraNarayan Singha recovered this image from police station and donated the Buddha image to the District Museum. From then onwards the image is in Murshidabad District Museum.



Fig 5. Bhumisparsha Buddha image persevered in Murshidabad District Museum  
(Source of pic: author)

The priest of the Kiriteswari temple told that this image was worshiped as Bairava or Shiva and the rituals of Shivite worship had been followed in the worship of this Bhairava. At present the *vahana* of Bhairava, a dog, is curved in the side wall of the temple and it is now replaced by a Shiva linga without Gauripatta. This image of Buddha is now Murshidabad District Museum.<sup>3</sup>

#### **Buddha of Barwan village in Kandi Subdivision:**

Another Buddha image is worshiped as Shiva in a temple in the Kandi sub-division in Barwa village. Ichnographically the image of the Buddha in *bhumisaprsa mudra* sits on a full blown lotus.

The stela and the pedestal of the sculpture is highly decorated. Gaja and saradulla figures are curved on both side of the stela. Top of the stela curved by the upper part of the temple. The big size sculpture is made of black stone. Here we have seen the script, according to the character of the script and the stylistically the image may be in circa 9th-10th century A.D.



Fig 6. Buddha from Madaneswar Temple at Kandi  
(Source of pic: author)

Here the Buddha is worshiped as Madaneswara Shiva in the local temple of Barwa. The priest of the temple informs that the deity is worshiped in Shiva mantra as well as the rituals of Shaivite worship are also maintained here. The one noticeable point here is that the Buddha image is flanked by two Shiva lingas on either side<sup>4</sup> (Mitra, 2017).





### Conclusion:

All above four Buddha images locally worshiped now as the forms of Shiva and the rituals of Shiva worship and festivals such as Charak, Gajon, Nil puja, and also Shiva Ratri are performed here. One interesting thing is clear that the all the four Buddha images are in *bhumisparsa mudra* and they belong to tentatively the same period. This is how Buddha images were transformed into Shaivite deities in Murshidabad district region.

### Notes :

1. Field survey done on 15<sup>th</sup> January 2020.
2. Field survey done on 22<sup>nd</sup> January 2020
3. Field visit to Kiriteswari temple on 29<sup>th</sup> January 2020
4. Field survey done on 5<sup>th</sup> February 2020

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