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In the name of myself: donors of images at Bodhgaya

Rajat Sanyal

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heritage and sustainability

symposium participants

- 10 THE PROBLEM**
Posed by **Abhishek S. Amar**, Associate Professor, Hamilton College, Clinton, New York, and **Sanjay Kumar**, Founder, Deshkal Society, and researcher, Delhi
- 13 BODHGAYA: THE TANGIBLE HERITAGE**
Frederick M. Asher†, till recently Professor Emeritus, University of Minnesota, USA
- 21 SEEING MAHABODHI**
Janice Leoshko, Associate Professor, The University of Texas at Austin
- 26 THE NEED FOR A DIGITAL HERITAGE CENTRE**
Abhishek S. Amar, Associate Professor, Hamilton College, Clinton, New York
- 29 THE CENTRE OF CENTRES:
BODHGAYA IN CHINESE SOURCES**
Max Deeg, Professor, Cardiff University, Cardiff
- 34 MOVING AND RESETTLING THE SACRED CENTRE**
Claudine Bautze-Picron, Honorary Research Fellow, National Centre of Scientific Research (CNRS, Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique), Paris
- 40 DIALOGUES ON BODHGAYA: SOME REFLECTIONS**
Sanjay Kumar, Founder, Deshkal Society, Delhi
- 42 WORLDING OF BODH GAYA**
Ritika Rajput, Nalanda University, Rajgir and **Aviram Sharma**, Assistant Professor, School of Ecology and Environment Studies, Nalanda University, Rajgir
- 47 WHY AND HOW THE AFTERLIFE OF A HERITAGE SITE MATTERS**
Shashank Shekhar Sinha, independent scholar and public historian, and Publishing Director, Routledge (South Asia), Delhi
- 53 INTERVIEW**
With **Sachchidanand Joshi**, Member Secretary, Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, Delhi
- 56 GROWING UP IN BODH GAYA:
NARRATIVE OF A NATIVE**
Manish Sinha, Director General, National Institute of Communication Finance, Delhi
- 59 IN THE NAME OF MYSELF:
DONORS OF IMAGES AT BODHGAYA**
Rajat Sanyal, Assistant Professor, Department of Archaeology, University of Calcutta, Kolkata
- 65 BOOKS**
Reviewed by **Manish Sinha**, **Pritha Mukherjee** and **Kaveri Gill**
- 72 COMMENT**
The Sound of One Hand Clapping
Satish C. Aikant, Former Professor and Head of the Department of English, H.N.B. Garhwal University, and former Fellow, Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla
- 74 IN MEMORIAM**
Frederick Asher 1941-2021
- COVER**
Designed by www.designosis.in

In the name of myself: donors of images at Bodhgaya

RAJAT SANYAL

IN the domain of South Asian Buddhism in general and that of eastern Indian monastic Buddhism in the early medieval period in particular, the act of the proclamation of donation of images by means of a permanent inscriptional record seems to have had its genesis from two principal layers of inspiration: donation as a manifestation of patronage and donation as a corollary to the rites of pilgrimage.¹

Of these two layers, the latter had a much wider socio-economic

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1. The very term 'donor', or its close parallel like 'devotee' has recently been questioned, based on a quantified and representational study of the figures of the 'sponsor couples' carved on the pedestals of images, by Rob Linrothe, 'Deeply Rooted Ritual: The Plurality of Sponsor Couples in Eastern Indian Sculpture, C. Eighth to Thirteenth Century, and an Explanatory Hypothesis', *Journal of Bengal Art* 24, 2019, pp. 123-150.

base, as reflected simply from the quantitative profile of the documentary evidence. And in both the cases, for undertaking an examination of the vicissitude and ramification of the act of donation and the perceptions of person/s involved in that act of donation, the primary source is the often short and sometimes even cryptic pieces of epigraphic texts that accompany these works of art.

In epigraphic terminology, such epigraphs are labelled 'image inscriptions', though more generic terminologies like 'dedicatory' or 'donative' are favoured over the former. These are engraved mostly on the pedestal/stela of the sculptures. There are instances, however, of their occurrence on the back of the image and even on the underside of the pedestal.²

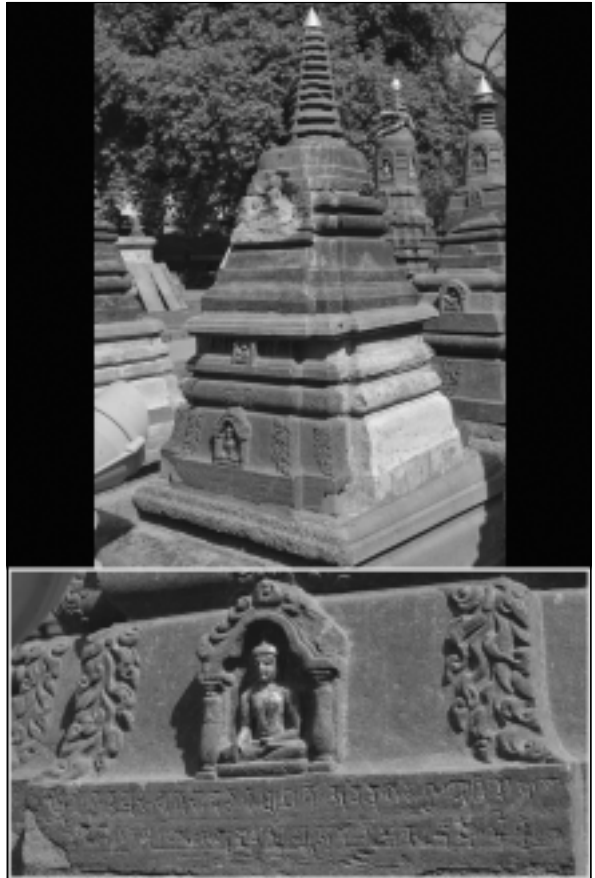
2. One major example, among others, of the first category, i.e. of an inscription on the back of the image, is the well known Jambhala image from Ratnagiri, Odisha, published by Debala Mitra, *Ratnagiri (1958-61)*, vol. I. Archaeological Survey of India, Delhi, 1981, pp. 229-232. The rather rare example of the second category, i.e. on the underside of the image is represented by a medieval metal image of Radhika from Mohanpur, West Bengal; see, Rajat Sanyal, 'Artisans of Shared Origin: Revisiting the Mohanpur Radhika Image' in S.N. Bhattacharya, R.K. Chattopadhyay and Goutami Bhattacharya (eds.), *Sanskriti Vichitra: Essence of Art and Archaeology, Museums, Museology and Heritage Manage-*

PLATE 1



Inscribed image of Buddha dated in the 64th year of king Trikamala (Photo Author; courtesy Indian Museum, Kolkata).

PLATE 2



Tenth-century dedicatory inscription of the monk Dharmapalita, in the Mahabodhi complex (Photo Author, March 2016).

While the act of donation is evident from the very object that is donated, the world of the donors can only be viewed with the lens of these inscriptions. Again, the majority of Buddhist donative inscriptions on images from the Bengal-Bihar region are composed of the quintessential *Ye dharmah* stanza, without recording the name of the donor. The philosophy of this essentially intentional act of the donor to stay anonymous might be an equally important theme of inquiry, but our questions in this note relate to the images where the donors explicitly record their names and also often cause their images to be carved on the feet of the deities they are donating, either in a monastic environ, or at a shrine away from the

neighbouring cluster of human settlements and, in many of the cases, at a site of pilgrimage.³

An attempt is being made in the following to very briefly study, with only representative examples dating between the 4th and the 11th centuries CE, the varying layers of identities of the donors of images, at possibly the most vibrant site of Buddhist pilgrim-

age in eastern India – Bodhgaya. It is probably the only centre of Buddhism in eastern India that witnessed a continuous growth of a sacred place of pilgrimage right from the early historic period till the modern times.⁴

I may pause here to note that like many other material evidences from the site, the inscribed images, found at

ment in Honour of Dr. S.S. Biswas. Kaveri Books, New Delhi, 2016, pp. 211-217.

3. These locational contexts of eastern Indian donations were considered by Gautam Sengupta, 'Donors of Images of Eastern India (c. 800-1300 AD)', *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 43, 1984, pp. 158-164. Issues related to the identities and practices of donors of northern and eastern India are also discussed with case studies in, Gouriswar Bhattacharya, *Essays on Buddhist Hindu Jain Iconography and Epigraphy*, (ed. Enamul Haque). International Centre for Study of Bengal Art, Dhaka, 2000, pp. 363-

503. For an excellent recent study based on the images from the site of Kurkihar, Sayantani Pal, 'Donors of Kurkihar Images: An Investigation into their Socioeconomic Background', R. Mahalakshmi (ed.), *Art and History: Texts, Contexts and Visual Representations in Ancient and Early Medieval India*. Bloomsbury, Delhi, 2020, pp. 208-223.

4. For a brief but insightful discussion on the growth of Bodhgaya as a centre of pilgrimage, see Abhishek Singh Amar, 'An Archaeological Study of Pilgrimage and Ritual at Sacred Bodhgaya', *Pragdhara* 19, 2008,

Bodhgaya and subsequently either shifted to museums or kept within the larger Bodhgaya ‘complex’ of locales, are almost irretrievably removed from their original contexts. As a result, the imagery that one extracts from these materials, have to remain sometimes in a shroud. Yet, a brief revisit to these inscriptional texts is expected to reveal facets of a perpetual process of transformation that the site witnessed through the late early historic and early medieval periods.

In terms of a classificatory scheme, the dedicatory inscriptions at Bodhgaya can be divided into three ‘categories’: comparatively long and elaborate texts of dedications recorded on stone slabs, formulaic dedications recorded on clay tablets and the largest gamut of records in the form of inscriptions on images. The earliest evidence of the third type – the one we are concerned here with – is that of a stone image of the Buddha, called ‘Bodhisattva *pratima*’ in the accompanying mutilated inscription, is dated in the sixty-fourth ruling year of an elusive king named Maharaja Trikamala (Plate 1). It records the consecration [*prathapayati*] of the image by one Siharatha (i.e., ‘Simharatha’) for ‘a teacher of the *vinaya* and who was

pp. 37-46. The varying contours and layers of transformation of sacred spaces of the site has been critically demonstrated by Michael Willis, ‘Bodhgaya: From Tree to Temple’, in Inamoto Iasuo (ed.), *Modes of Representing Sacred Sites in East Asian Buddhist Art*. Kyoto University, Tokyo, The Institute for Research in Humanities (Jinbun Kagaku Kenkyusho), 2016, pp. 204-189. For a recent examination of the genesis of ‘sacredness’ of the site in the light of evidence on sectarian religious contestations witnessed by the site, see Nikhil Joshi, *The Mahabodhi Temple at Bodhgaya: Constructing the ‘Sacred Placeness’, Deconstructing the ‘Great Case’ of 1895*. Manohar, Delhi, 2018; see also, David Geary, Matthew R. Sayers and Abhishek Singh Amar (eds.), *Cross-Disciplinary Perspectives on a Contested Buddhist Site: Bodh Gaya Jataka*. Routledge, London, 2012.

the companion of another monk [*bhiksu*] who was also a teacher of the *vinaya*’.⁵

Palaeographically and stylistically datable to the 4th century CE, neither the script used in writing the inscription nor the stone employed in making the image were ‘local’ to southern Bihar. Thus, it remains a shady evidence for the student of art history.⁶ But, if one takes the evidence of the inscriptional reference to the acquaintance of the donor and/or executor with one of the *Vinayas*, it might suggest that a group of monks of the ‘Theravada’ order being connected with the act of donation of a deity who is iconographically the Buddha but was ritualistically being perceived as a Bodhisattva by its donor, as late as the 4th century.

On the other hand, the phrase read by R.P. Chanda as ‘*matapitum pujaye bhavatu upadha [ya]*’ in the last line of the inscription seems to reflect the phraseology of the later and much refined Mahayana formulaic expression starting with *matapitrpurvamgamam jad bhavatu acary opadhyaya* etc. In that case, of course at the risk of accepting R.P. Chanda’s reading beyond question, does this inscription demonstrate the layered identities of the monk embedded in the Mahayana monastic order but still acknowledging the pre-existing and well established Theravada tradition?

The next stage of the process is probably illustrated by the donation of the Ceylonese monk Mahanaman

5. The inscription was never reread after it was first published by R.P. Chanda, ‘The Mathura School of Sculpture’, *Annual Report of the Archaeological Survey of India 1922-23*. Government of India, Central Publication Branch, Calcutta, 1925, pp. 164-170.

6. For a discussion on the controversy surrounding this image, see Susan L. Huntington, *The ‘Pala-Sena’ Schools of Sculpture*. Brill, Leiden, 1984, pp. 13-14.

who dedicated a temple and an image, of which only the inscribed pedestal survived when it was discovered by Alexander Cunningham and was subsequently published by John F. Fleet in the late 19th century.⁷ The inscription records the donation of the image by the *sakyabhiksu* and *sthavira* named Mahanaman, a resident of Amradvipa. That he came to the site of enlightenment from Srilanka at the end of the 6th century CE is securely known from his second, and more well studied, inscription dated in 588/89 CE.⁸

The inscription begins with the expression *deyadarmmo yam*, followed by the name, geographical and religious affiliation reference to the donor, ending with the would-be ‘formulaic’ ‘*yad atra punyam tad bhavatu sarvasattvanam anuttara jnanavaptaye stu*’ stanza. This probably is the earliest reference to the use of the expression *deyadharma*, in the Bihar-Bengal region, denoting the act of donation/religious ‘gift’ of images. One has to note here that the monk is not only referring to himself as a *sakyabhiksu* but is also offering the merit acquired from this donation in terms of the widely recognized Mahayana formula.

After a thorough study of Mahanaman’s two inscriptions from the site, the ‘smaller’ one being the image

7. John Faithfull Fleet, *Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum*, vol. III (*Inscriptions of the Early Gupta Kings and their Successors*). The Superintendent of Government Printing, Calcutta, India, 1888, pp. 278-79.

8. For the date of Mahanaman and the broader context of the ‘religious message’ borne by his donations at Bodhgaya, Vincent Tournier, ‘Mahakasyapa, His Lineage, and the Wish for Buddhahood: Reading Anew the Bodhgaya Inscription of Mahanaman’, *Indo-Iranian Journal* 57, 2014, pp. 1-60. See also, Richard Salomon, *Indian Epigraphy: A Guide to the Study of Inscriptions in Sanskrit, Prakrit, and Other Indo-Aryan Languages*. Oxford University Press, New York, 1998, p. 39.

inscription under discussion, Vincent Tournier has come up with the following observation, with an appreciable element of caution.⁹

‘Even if some uncertainties remain, [...] it is fairly certain that [...] Mahanaman represents himself as *en route* for Buddhahood, an expectation that is characteristic of the Bodhisattvayana and certainly constitutes one of the unifying ties of the Mahayana nebula [...] Mahanaman and his compatriots, who express their wish for Awakening in the inscriptions of the period concerned, could indeed be representatives of the group which, according to Xuanzang, writing a few decades later, dominated the Bodhgaya religious landscape, namely the Mahayana-Sthaviras [...] residing at the Mahabodhi-samgharama.’

Before taking a look into the possible third stage of this development in the domain of essentially Buddhist donations, let us consider the chronologically next piece of evidence, viz., the celebrated Kesava ‘*prasasti*’, dated in the 26th ruling year of the Pala king Dharmapala. In an inscriptional corpus essentially dominated by Buddhist donors, this not only is the most prominent exception of a donation of Brahmanical sculpture, but also marks the beginning of the journey of dated ‘Pala inscriptions’ at the site.

Although it has been recently argued convincingly to have been a product of at least 7th century,¹⁰ the inscription is datable to the second half of the 8th century. This inscription is historically significant on many scores. The one that relates to our discussion

is the reference of the donor Kesava to himself as the son of the ‘sculptor’ (*silabhit*) Ujjvala. Thus, this is one of the very few records from eastern India referring to a donation by a member of the artisan community. Second, though the objective, *prima facie*, of engraving this inscription is to record the donation of a Caturmukhalinga, for which the donor selected, curiously, a pre-existing carved lintel depicting the Brahmanical triad consisting of the icons of Visnu-Surya-Lakulisa, he does not forget to refer to himself as a benefactor who aspires to gain merit by causing ‘welfare’ of the *sramanas* residing at Mahabodhi.¹¹

The specific reference to Mahabodhi clearly indicates a conscious attempt by the donor to acknowledge the ‘sacredness’ of the place. The inscription further records that this Kesava spent no less than 3000 *drammas* in excavating a tank for the use of the resident monks at the site. Thus, this is a donation by the son of a very successful professional sculptor, who must have been used to carving sculptures of deities of all pantheistic systems under the order of his clients. Then, his act of donation of an image of Siva for the welfare of the Buddhist and resident-monks of Mahabodhi appears to have crossed the trans-religious boundaries. Or, was it, again, an attempt to draw a balance between the ‘lay’ donor’s individual sectarian identity and the ‘professional’ donor’s larger world of transcending boundaries of varying religious orders within a given sacred space?

Getting back into the domain of Buddhist donations of a later phase, I shall draw on some inscribed pieces, including two images dated in the reigns of two of the later Pala rules, viz., Gopala III (mid-10th century) and Mahipala I (late 10th-early 11th century). The first one, read by T. Bloch and later reproduced by D.C. Sircar, records the donation of a 10th-century image of a standing Buddha by a monk named Viryendra, who refers himself as ‘*srisomapuramahavihariya vinayavitsthavira*’, hailing originally from Samatata in south-eastern Bengal.¹²

This inscription is the sole epigraphic evidence from Bodhgaya that talks of a resident monk from the Somapuramahavihara excavated at Paharpur,¹³ in the Bogra district of Bangladesh. Further it represents a rare narrative of a monk’s place of origin, his place of official affiliation and his act of donation in course of his pilgrimage to a different centre of Buddhist faith. More importantly, it represents an epigraphic testimony to a *sthavira* versed in one of the Vinayas, recording his donation along with the formulaic Mahayana expression *yad atra punyam* etc, marking yet another phase of donative activity at the site. As we shall see, this process will further intricate itself with a more complex inscriptional vocabulary within the same chronological frame of 10th-11th century.

The second one is again a 10th century work of a master artist, depict-

12. T. Bloch, *Annual Report of the Archaeological Survey of India, 1908-09*. Superintendent Government Printing India, Calcutta, pp. 157-58; D.C. Sircar, *Select Inscriptions Bearing on Indian History and Civilization*, vol. 2. Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1983, p. 59.

13. Rao Bahadur K.N. Dikshit, *Excavations at Paharpur, Bengal* (Memoirs of the Archaeological Survey of India, No. 55). Superintendent of Government Printing, Calcutta, 1938.

9. Tournier, ‘Mahakasyapa, His Lineage’, pp. 42-44.

10. Gautam Sengupta, ‘Bodhgaya Lintel Bearing the Inscription of Dharmapala’, in Mokammal Bhuiyan (ed.), *Studies in South Asian Heritage: Essays in Memory of M Harunur Rashid*. Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, Dhaka, 2015, pp. 175-179.

11. The term I read as ‘srama(na)nam’ in the third line of inscription have been read by all the previous editors as ‘mallanam’ and has been translated in one of the editions as ‘superior monks’, see Ramaranjan Mukherjee and Sachindra Kumar Maity, *Corpus of Bengal Inscriptions Bearing on History and Civilization of Bengal*. Firma K.L. Mukhopadhyay, Calcutta, 1967, pp. 112-113.

ing a massive eighteen-armed image of the Buddhist goddess Cunda/Cunda. This image, among the sculptural assemblage from the site, probably has the privilege of having the longest history of research – from the early 19th century till the very recent years.¹⁴ The credit of identifying the image as that of Cunda and noticing rightly that the pedestal of the image contains an inscription goes to A. Foucher.¹⁵ However, the inscription was first successfully deciphered by Debala Mitra towards the end of the last century.¹⁶ In fact, there are two inscriptions on the body of this sculpture: one around the halo recording the Ye dharmah stanza and the other one on the pedestal containing the name and identity of the donor, both written in the Siddhamatrka script of about the 10th century.

The inscription on the pedestal records the donation of the image by a person named Sri Subhankara, who is called a *Mahaksapataladhyaksa*, an officer of the rank of ‘Director of the Superintendents of the Department of Records and Accounts’.¹⁷ That this was a prominent official post within the Pala dominion is also proved by its occurrence on other images of dona-

tion in southern Bihar in the 9th-10th century.¹⁸ If the term is juxtaposed against *Aksapataladhyaksa*, the ‘the superintendent of records and accounts’, it clearly indicates the sharp element of hierarchy that existed in the political administrative structure of early medieval eastern India.

Further, Subhankara is also called a *Karanika* or ‘scribe’, distinguishing his official rank from his occupational and often ascribed identity. What is even more interesting in this piece is the rather unusual and rare occurrence of the Ye dharmah stanza along with the common Mahayana formula starting with *pravara mahayana yayinya* etc., suffixed with the name of the donor. Thus, in this essential act of a royal patronage meant for a monastic temple,¹⁹ the donor introduces himself not only explicitly as a ‘follower of Mahayana’, but also couples the donative formula with the Ye dharmah stanza in underlining the larger esoteric matrix from which he, as the donor, perceives the deity to have emanated.

The next Buddhist donation from the site to consider is a rectangular stone slab preserved in the Asutosh Museum, Kolkata, showing a

Bodhisattva-*mandala* of nine figures with the Tathagata in *dharmacakra-pravartanamudra* at the centre. The simple one-line inscription records the deyadharmā of one Sri Valacandra, son of the Karanika named Jayacandra.²⁰ This only adds to the number of scribes donating images at the site. It is quite plausible, given the rising importance of the site as a centre of pilgrimage, that an office of the department of records and accounts was effectively functional at the site.

The two dated ‘Pala period’ records of Gopala III and Mahipala I also provide interesting insights into the donors’ profile at the site. The pedestal inscription dated in the reign of Gopala III records donation of a ‘pratima’ of the Buddha by one Dharmabhima, alias Sakrasena, who hailed from the northwest (*sindhudbhava*).²¹ Several such donors hailing from the Sindhu country are known from the dated Pala images from south Bihar. While here also one finds the Ye dharmah stanza accompanying the donative text, its significance also lies in the fact that here the donative text in verse is closer to the format of a eulogy than that of a formulaic donation.

The other one dated in the 11th year of Mahipala I, still located at the site in a small temple within the Mahabodhi complex, records the donation of a Gandhakuti. Although the published text of the epigraph does not provide any information on the donor,²² it is possibly the only image inscrip-

14. For a detailed note on the works on this image as well as the abstract of the inscription, Debala Mitra, ‘Images of Cunda from Bodh-Gaya’, in Amita Ray and Samir Mukherjee (eds.), *Historical Archaeology of India: A Dialogue between Archaeologists and Historians*. Books & Books, Delhi, 1990, pp. 299-305; see also, Claudine Bautze-Picron, *The Forgotten Place: Stone Images from Kurkihar, Bihar*. Archaeological Survey of India, Delhi, 2015, p. 229.

15. A. Foucher, *Étude sur L'iconographie Bouddhique de L'inde: Daprès des Documents Nouveaux*. Ernest Leroux, Éditour, Paris, 1900, pp. 144-146.

16. Debala Mitra, ‘Two Images from Bodh-Gaya’, in Claudine Bautze-Picron (ed.), *Makaranda: Essays in Honour of James C. Harle*. Indian Books Centre, Delhi, 1990, pp. 153-59.

17. D.C. Sircar *Indian Epigraphical Glossary*, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1966, p. 178, translates the term *Aksapataladhyaksa* as ‘the superintendent of records and accounts’.

18. Sayantani Pal, ‘Donors of Kukihar’, p. 211.

19. That this image was originally installed in a temple within the monastic complex to the north of the Mahabodhi temple is known from extant literature on the image; for an account of the history of its displacement from the site to its present location in a niche outside the Mahant’s compound, see Janice Leoshko, *The Iconography of Buddhist Sculptures of the Pala and Sena Periods from Bodhagya*, vol. 1. Ph.D Dissertation submitted to The Ohio State University, 1987, p. 323, n. 84. https://etd.ohiolink.edu/apexprod/rws_olink/r/1501/10?p10_etd_subid=92258&clear=10 (accessed November 2020).

20. Debala Mitra, ‘Lintels with the Figures of Eight Great Bodhisattvas and a Tathagata: An Iconographic Study’, in N.N. Bhattacharya (ed.), *Tantric Buddhism: Centenary Tribute to Dr. Benoytosh Bhattacharya*. Manohar, New Delhi, 1998, pp. 276-300; see also, Bautze-Picron, *The Forgotten Place*, p. 207.

21. Nilmani Chakravarti, ‘Pala Inscriptions in the Indian Museum’, *Journal and Proceedings of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* 4(3), 1908, pp. 101-109.

tion from the site recording donation of a Gandhakuti by a follower of the Mahayana.

The last of the inscriptions considered for this case study is engraved at the base of a *stupa* holding a miniature image of the Buddha in *bhumis-parsamudra* located to the western side of the Mahâbodhi temple (Plate 2). The inscription, to my knowledge, is still unpublished. It is written in Sanskrit language and Siddhamatrka script of c. 10th century. It records, again, the donation of a *sthavira* named Dharmapalita. This one represents the most commonly known donative formula from Bodhgaya, as from many other sites of eastern India – recording the name of the donor, who might be a monk or a lay devotee, after the omnipresent Ye dharmah stanza. A number of this specific variety of inscribed images are known from the site and deserve a detailed study.

To sum up, this note is aimed at making a framework for future studies on the identity of the donors at the site of Bodhgaya. An analysis of the representative samples dating between the 4th and the 11th century possibly buttresses the general argument that Bodhgaya witnessed myriad and layered processes of transformation throughout its journey from the Maurya to the Pala period. While the temple and the sculptural assemblage from the site have been subjected to generations of research, the inscribed images hailing from the site have not been either thoroughly documented or critically re-examined. A detailed study, taking into account the entire database of inscribed images from the site, will throw new light on the donors of images and their engagement with this important site, particularly in the early medieval period.

22. R.D. Banerji, *Palas of Bengal* (Memoirs of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, vol. 3), The Asiatic Society, Calcutta, 1915, p. 75.