Chapter I: Introduction
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Introduction

The discipline of 'art history' as a tool has been used by art historians to explore the artistic history of Bengal (West Bengal and Bangladesh) and Bihar in the early medieval period. The sculptural art of Bengal and Bihar from (c. 7th century-13th century A.D.) forms an important chapter in the history of Indian art. Most of the writings on Bengal and Bihar of approximately 8th-12th centuries refer to the art of the period as the "Pala and Sena" schools of art. In a certain sense, the dynastic appellation is apt since during the period concern, the geographical space of Bengal and Bihar were largely under the control of the Pala kings, and subsequently, to a more limited extent, of the Senas. In addition, the rise of the independent ruling dynasties like Rattas, Khadgas, Devas, Candras and Varmans in south-eastern Bengal, played a much more significant role in the politics and culture of the time than had been previously believed. The regions of Bihar and Bengal were host to prolific production of both stone and metals icons which were religiously inspired sculptures.

The sculptural art of the Pala-Sena period has been the subject of many voluminous books. Scholars like N. K. Bhattasali, R. D. Banerji, Susan L. Huntington, Enamul Haque have studied these art materials mainly from the iconographic and stylistic point of view and have given passing reference to the inscriptions found on these art objects. However, a closer examination of the art materials from books and published documentation has revealed hundreds of images with inscriptions both in stone and metal. The epigraphic records found on a large number of sculptures both in stone and metal were dedicated by the devotees of the region mainly to acquire religious merit and happiness of all sentient beings. These dedicatory records were religious in character, mainly found on the pedestals, back-slab of the images, around the aureole encircling the prabhāvali, and at the back of the images of figurative stone stelae and metal pieces. The inscriptions range from a single word to a single line or even a verse. The structure and content of the image inscriptions are largely homogenous. Usually they bear the names of the donor and the merit of such gifts. The lengthier inscriptions provide some additional information. For
instance, they often give references to categories in terms of which the donors define themselves. These include geographical data i.e. residences of the donors or the names of places where the pious religious act was performed, the donors occupational or professional categories, family organizations or references to position within the kinship structure which is evidently noted in case of women donors, and the relationship of the donors to the existing religious beliefs, Buddhism, Brāhmaṇical and Jaina faith. The significant aspect of the inscriptive evidence on images is from our point of view is to record the donor's identity for posterity.

Thus the images with beautiful epigraphic records demand a separate study and not a mere passing reference. The sculptures included in this study have been limited primarily to figurative stone stelae and metal images. I have restricted myself from including stūpas of the votive order in this study because they are found in abundance in Bihar and Bengal during this period and demands a separate holistic study. Secondly, the stūpas or caityas are independent piece of architecture or miniature votive temples, and the inclusion of these objects in this study is beyond the scope of the present research. Script and image complement and elucidate one another. Taking note of the famous statement of Immanuel Kant one could say that “script without image can be an empty vision, and image without script, a blind composition”.1 The present dissertation primarily aims to juxtapose judiciously the two significant sources i.e. images and inscriptions and understand the inherent relationship between art history and epigraphic studies. It should be mentioned here that the significant aspect of inscription i.e. paleographical examinations of the epigraphic sources and the significant aspect of image i.e. stylistic study are absent from this volume since these complex subject is best left for specialized studies.2

The first real discussion of Pāla-Sena period sculptures is to be found in the Catalogue and Handbook of the Archaeological Collections in the Indian Museum (1882-3) by John Anderson3

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2 The stylistic study on Pāla-Sena images have been the subject of research by scholars like Stella Kramrisch, Frederick M. Asher, Susan L. Huntington, A. K. Shamsul Alam to name a few.
and subsequently by Theodor Bloch in his *Supplementary Catalogue of the Archaeological Collections of the Indian Museum* (1911). In 1965, *The Patna Museum Catalogue of Antiquities* (hereafter *PMCA*), edited by P. L. Gupta was published. These volumes discuss very briefly the iconographical aspect of the images and texts of the epigraphic records are given with translations or without translations, in most cases. In Bengal, the sculptures of the Pāla-Sena period was first brought to notice in Catalogue form by Radhagovinda Basak and Dinesh Chandra Bhattacharyya in the *Catalogue of the Archaeological Relics in the Museum of the Varendra Research Society* and then the path breaking volume on Bengal iconography by N. K. Bhattasali in 1929, *Iconography of Buddhist and Brahmanical Sculptures in the Dacca Museum* (hereafter *IBBS*) Bhattasali volume deals with those sculptures which have been found in Bengal alone and the vast majority of Buddhist and Brāhmanical images from Bihar have been omitted. However, with detail iconographic descriptions, very few inscribed images from Bengal have received attention in Bhattasali’s Catalogue. In 1928, J. C. French published his book, *The Art of the Pāla Empire of Bengal*, in which he gives the lineage of the major Pāla kings as it was known to him, and cites several examples of sculpture bearing dated inscriptions in the eras of the various Pāla kings. Almost at the same time, Stella Kramrisch lengthy article on “Pāla and Sena sculpture” was published in *Rūpam* and the author cites a good variety of Pāla-Sena sculptures as examples. The posthumous work of R. D. Banerji *Eastern Indian School of Mediaeval Sculpture* (1933) deals with the majority of the Pāla-Sena sculptures, particularly in Indian Museum Collection, giving due recognition to the inscriptions on the images of both

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10 R. D. Banerji, *Eastern Indian School of Mediaeval Sculpture* Archaeological Survey of India, New Imperial Series, XLVII (Delhi: Manager of Publications, 1933) (hereafter *EISMS*).
dated and undated variety. His arguments for chronology are based on paleography. In fact, R. D. Banerji was the first amongst the scholars to categorize the votive inscriptions found on images into three distinct classes. During the contemporary period two brilliant contributions were made on the inscribed metal images from Kurkihar by K. P. Jayaswal (1934) and A. Banerji Sastri, (1940). In these literary contributions few dated inscribed metal pieces are taken into consideration and the reading of the epigraphic records given. In 1936, a significant contribution on the archaeological finds from Kurkihar Gaya and Bodhgaya was made by S. K. Saraswati and K.C. Sarkar. B. C. Sen in his monograph entitled Some Historical Aspects of the Inscriptions of Bengal (Pre-Muhammadan Epochs) (1942) have used the epigraphs (copper plate and image inscriptions) as sources for the political and administrative history of the Bengal Delta. Since Sen’s book, there has been only one major new history of Bengal that by Nihar Ranjan Ray, Bāṅgāḷīr Itikāśa (1356 B.S. [1949]), which is much more a study of social and cultural history of Bengal. A further research in this area was made by R. C. Majumdar, History of Bengal, I (1943) and later in the History of Ancient Bengal (1971) in both the works the author have used epigraphs as sources for the political, administrative and religious history of the Pāla-Sena period. The documentation of Tantric Buddhist images have been studied by S. K. Saraswati (1977) who however mentions nothing about the inscriptions found on these art specimens. Enamul’s Haque Bengal Sculptures Hindu Iconography Up to C.1250 A.D (hereafter BSHI) (1992) is a sumptuous volume that has contributed largely to the iconography of Bengal sculptures. The inscriptions on few brāhmaṇical images have been mentioned by the author in cursory manner. Two important works which deal with Bengal sculpture in the context of Eastern India are of Frederick M. Asher and Susan L. Huntington. It was S. L. Huntington who first grouped the dated images of the Pāla-Sena period in a chronological framework and placed it under the ‘Appendix of Inscribed Dated sculptures’ in her book. A. K. Shamsul Alam

11 Ibid. Chapter III for a discussion on the images basically on paleographical consideration.


(1985) work on the Sculptural Art of Bangladesh is a study based mainly on the stylistic assessment of sculptures from Bangladesh. Mukhlesur Rahman (1998) Sculpture in the Varendra Research Museum A Descriptive Catalogue (hereafter SVRM Cat.) is a collection of sculptures of the Varendra Research Museum. Rahman while making an iconographic analysis of the images in the Varendra Research Museum Collection, have referred to several images with inscriptions on them. His endeavour like other scholars mentioned above was to study the iconographical peculiarities of the images where the epigraphic content was of secondary importance. In the same year the publication of Claudine Bautze Picron (1998) The Art of Eastern India: in the Collection of the Museum fur Indische Kunst, Berlin (hereafter AEI, MIX) was a significant contribution. The author takes into consideration large number of images from Bengal and Bihar. The art materials have been discussed by the author on the basis of style and iconography. Significant enough, in this work is the section on Epigraphy and Paleography which is of great importance to scholars working in the area of epigraphic studies on images. The present dissertation owes much to Bautze Picron data and the section on Epigraphy and Palaeography deciphered by Gouriswar Bhattacharya has been of extreme help. Finally the collection of almost all the articles of Gouriswar Bhattacharya (2000) compiled in Essays on Buddhist Hindu Jaina Iconography and Epigraphy (hereafter EBHJIE) has been a ready reference to scholars working in the area of art history and epigraphic study of eastern India. The search for historiography is a never ending urge of a researcher, since it is not possible to accommodate all the valuable books and articles in this section, many of them have automatically found place in the list of Select bibliography.16

The above works of learned scholars and art historians are undoubtedly important in their own field of research. The books and articles mainly focus on the stylistic and iconographical evolution of eastern Indian sculptures, or are documentation of sculptures as a whole. The

16 Few works on Pāla-Sena epigraphic sources from Bihar by R. K. Choudhary, Select Inscriptions of Bihar, Patna, 1958 and B. Sahai, The Inscriptions of Bihar, Ramanand Vidya Bhavan, New Delhi, 1983 deserve mention in this context. A study of inscriptions remains incomplete without highlighting the contributions made by D. C. Sircar in this area of research. Besides his contributions in good number of monographs, several articles on inscriptions from Bihar have been of great help in this study. The published references of D. C. Sircar have been cited throughout this study. Finally the contribution made by Debala Mitra in her monumental work Bronzes from Bangladesh: A Study of Buddhist Images from District Chittagong (1982) have been exhaustively used as a source material in this research work.
inscriptions on the images have received marginal importance. Nevertheless, to the present no work has satisfactorily dealt with the analytical study of image inscriptions from Bengal and Bihar in the period (c 7th century-13th century A.D.). This study attempts to take up a separate and comprehensive study only on the inscribed images of Bengal and Bihar within the chronological framework of (c 7th century-13th century A.D.) in order to give a holistic approach to the subject from the point of view of iconographic study, understanding the epigraphic content of inscriptive evidences given and ferreting out material for the social, economic, cultural (including religion) study from the content of the inscriptions which has been a long felt desideratum.

At the outset I would like to admit that my exercise in this study is mainly based on published inscribed images belonging to Brāhmanical, Buddhist and Jaina religious creed. The vast corpuses of undated and unpublished dedicatory records found on the images, housed in different Museums that have received no attention have also been included. The art objects included in this study do not aim at constituting a comprehensive catalogue of all the dated and undated material under scrutiny. Many inscribed images have certainly escaped my attention, while others still wait to be discovered. But on the whole, this compilation of data based on a verification of available published sources and photographic documentation can be considered as a first research endeavor. The published epigraphic records suffer from several lacunae. The text of the record is given in Devanāgarī or Bengali scripts in maximum number of dated and undated images. An attempt has been made to transliterate all such inscriptions in Roman. In the second place, many of the published inscriptive records do not have translations or in most cases the translations are incomplete. An attempt has been made in such cases to read the epigraphic content with the help of an expertise in this field and give a proper translation to the text. However this exercise has been limited in scope. The present study as mentioned above has incorporated a large number of undated and unrecorded images with inscriptions from the spatial region of Bihar, West Bengal and Bangladesh. However, the final remarks for each dated and undated, published and unpublished records solely rests on the translations (given by the scholars) of the epigraphic content. Besides, the epigraphic content of the inscribed images, the iconographical and iconological study of each specimen has been dealt exhaustively. I have practically discussed the iconographic construct of majority of unrecorded inscribed images
noticed for the first time and have included them in this study. The final remarks of each inscribed object (approximately three hundred and eighty eight) have been given under the caption ‘Observations’.

A brief review on the chapterisation of the present work is given below for a cursory glance. **Chapter II** titled Geographical and Historical Background of the Pāla-Sena rule in Eastern India is divided into two sections: Section I: Geographical provenance of the inscribed images and Section II: Historical background of the region. The purport of this chapter is to locate the geographic provenance of the inscribed art objects viz; images, fragmentary pedestals, architectural members of both dated and undated variety from the spatial region of Bengal and Bihar that has been included in this study and correlates it with the historical perspective of Pāla-Sena rule during the four centuries. **Chapter III and Chapter IV** deals with the analytical study of inscribed images (Brāhmaṇical, Buddhist, Jaina and religious Preceptors) and other votive objects including fragmentary sculptures, pedestals, architectural members like door lintels etc, based on epigraphy and iconography. These two are the central chapters of the thesis, divided into several sections and sub-sections. Besides the analytical study of the dated records for which I have maintained a chronological sequence, I have been unable to set a chronology of the vast corpus of undated images. But the only exception being a single undated inscribed image, the well known Sarvāṇi from Deulbadi, Comilla district that have come to our notice. This sculpture is tentatively dated to late seventh century or early eighth century A.D. and pre-dates the vast corpus of Pāla-Sena image inscriptions included in this study. It is for the same reason that the chronological frame work of my dissertation begins from (c 7th century-13th century A. D.) as I have not used the traditional chronological time bracket assigned to the sculptures of the Pāla-Sena period i.e. 8th-12th centuries A. D. A large corpus of images from the ateliers of Bengal and Bihar are inscribed only with the Buddhist religious dhāraṇī or formulae. I have made a separate study of the images only with the ye dharmma verse and approximately ninety images with the dhāraṇī have come to my notice and has been recorded in the appendices [ see Table I and I(a) ]. **Chapter V** aims to study those images of the Pāla-Sena period which are engraved with dedicatory records in Arabic and Persian languages i.e. the language of the Sultanate period.

17The undated images and other votive objects certainly predominates the dated pieces. Since the dissertation do not aims to study the stylistic evolution and palaeographical examination of the images, the chronological sequence of innumerable undated images and art objects have received less attention in this work.
In this context it is to be noted that the present study has limited scope to explain the historical milieu of the regions contemporary to the date of the inscriptions, since the historical period after 13th century A.D. is beyond the scope of this study. In fact, most of the records are undated and do not refer to the ruling Sultans. This category of images though few in numbers are important historical, socio-cultural and religious document of the contemporary period. The dedicatory aspect of the records and its socio-religious implication will be unearthed in the light of this group of image inscriptions. A holistic study of image inscriptions from Bengal and Bihar within the chronological span (c 7th century-13th century A.D.) remains incomplete without an understanding of the existing polity, political and administrative structures, society, economy and cultural structures including religious beliefs and practices. The purport of Chapter VI is therefore to ferret out information on these aspects from the bulk of image inscriptions of the Pala-Sena period included in this study. Section I of this essay will focus on the socio-economic situation, polity and cultural (including religion) aspects. Section II on the other hand will take note of the meritorious tithis and muhurtas considered auspicious for setting up the image. This section primarily aims to give an account of the meritorious tithi and related astronomical data noticed in the inscribed images of our period. The auspicious occasion considered suitable for making dina/ dana (gift) of images by the people of the contemporary society will throw light on the their religious belief and practices. It is therefore a desideratum to analyze the astronomical data embedded in images to trace its socio-religious implication and an understanding of the cultural history of early medieval society of Bengal and Bihar. Chapter VII of the dissertation is based on the concluding observations gathered from the study of image inscriptions from Bengal and Bihar.

Methodology Followed:
The basis of judgments and conclusion made in this survey, were for the most part from published textual sources. The epigraphic records on images which have been used for this study were originally noticed in the pages of monographs, journals, and stray articles. I need to state here the methodology I have used for collecting data from textual sources and included them in my study. A brief summary on tentative numbers of figurative stelae (Chapter III) and other votive objects (Chapter IV) included in this dissertation is given below:
Brahmanical Dated Images: 20
Brahmanical Undated Images: 84
Buddhist Dated Images: 27
Buddhist undated Images: 88
Images with specific iconographic traits records only the Buddhist creed: 24
Images with fragmentary creed: 90 given in the Appendix
Jaina Images: 03
Inscribed images depicting religious Preceptors: Shaivaite: 03
Buddhist: 01
Dated Fragmentary Images / Pedestals: 12
Undated Fragmentary Images / Pedestals: 17
Dated Architectural Members: 07
Undated Architectural Members: 12

The above given statistical data enumerates that approximately three hundred and eighty-eight inscribed art objects including figurative stelae, fragmentary images, pedestals, and architectural members have been included. It was not an easier task to give an iconographic and epigraphic appreciation of each dedicatory record and to state its importance in polity, administrative, political structures, society, economy, religion and cultural study. However, I have collected data on Brahmanical and Buddhist inscribed dated images from Susan L. Huntington (PSSS, 1984), and have depended on data for undated images from Mukhlesur Rahman, (SVRM Cat. 1998). Claudine Bautze Picron (AEI, MIK, 1998) have been used exhaustively in this research work. The voluminous book of Gouriswar Bhattacharya (EBHJIE, 2000) have been used exhaustively by me. I have gone through each chapters of Bhattacharya’s compendia and have collected information on the vast majority of undated image inscriptions. Bhattacharya himself have not given much importance to most of the undated record found on images, emphasizing more on the iconographical aspect of the object. Besides my first hand investigation of inscribed images from literary sources, my personal visit to Museums in and outside Kolkata for data collection and documentation have been fruitful. My visit to the Patna Museum, Patna in last February for data and photographic documentations was helpful to a great extent. In Kolkata I visited different Museums mainly for photographic documentation of sculptures. My exercise was limited to
Ashutosh Museum of Indian Art, University of Calcutta; Indian Museum; and State Archaeological Museum, Government of West Bengal. I have also visited to two to three site Museums for data collection, Sundarban Anchalik Samgrahasala, Baruipur; Ananda Niketan Kirtishala, Bagnan, Howrah and the rich collection of Pāla-Sena sculptures housed in Malda Museum, Malda, West Bengal have also attracted my attention.

For preparing the documentation file of photographs I had taken resort to online access to the following (a) The John C. And Susan L. Huntington Photographic archive of Buddhist and Asian Art. (b) http://Huntington.wmc.ohio.state.edu/public (c) http://dsal.uchicago.edu/images/aiis.