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# A Lajjā Gaurī in a Buddhist Context at Aurangabad

by Robert L. Brown

In a recent volume of *Lalit Kalā*,<sup>1</sup> V. H. Sonawane has discussed and illustrated a number of images of Lajjā Gaurī, the Indian goddess who displays her pudendum by squatting with her legs widely spread (see figs. 2 and 6). Sonawane shows that the goddess is associated in many instances with Śaiva iconography (Nandin, *triśula*, *liṅga*, Gaṇeśa) and concludes that “Thus... she can very well be considered as a manifestation of the Śakti aspect of Śiva.”<sup>2</sup> In this light, it is interesting to consider a female figure in a Buddhist panel in Cave 2 at Aurangabad (figs. 1a and b). She appears to be naked, except for jewelry, and squats to display her pudendum. Yet, she is placed in a panel with a Buddha image. How should we identify such a figure?

The panel in which the female figure appears is on the south wall of Cave 2, one of several panels that because of their various sizes and haphazard arrangement were presumably commissioned by a variety of donors and are not part of the planned iconographic organization of the cave. The subject of these intrusive panels hardly varies; there is a single seated Buddha, either in *pralambadāsana* or (as in fig. 1) in *padmāsana*, and usually performing *dharmacakramudrā*. As in our panel, the Buddha is often flanked by two *bodhisattvas*, has two flying *vidyādharas* above, and is raised on a lotus the stalk of which is upheld by two *nāgarājas*. Finally, flanking the *nāgarājas* are donor or worshipping figures, seen in profile. In the case of the figure 1 panel, the squatting, front-facing female takes the place of the proper right-hand donor figure. Thus, the iconography of the panel, except for the appearance of the female figure, is standard, although the precise meaning of this

arrangement is not certain.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, it is likely that even a sure identification of the iconography, if one indeed exists,<sup>4</sup> would be of little help in explaining the surprising appearance of the “shameless woman” (Lajjā Gaurī),<sup>5</sup> as it is difficult to imagine in what ways she might relate to the iconography of the Buddha.

Is she, in fact, a Lajjā Gaurī? As the numerous publications on the subject have made clear, what identifies the goddess, whatever name she takes, is her act of exposing herself by raising her knees. It is not clear, however, whether this posture is a sexual one, or whether it indicates paturition. The goddess is worshipped today by women in order to promote fertility, particularly for barren women.<sup>6</sup> It is reasonable to suppose that this would have been the purpose of the goddess earlier as well, although the 3rd-century inscription on a Lajjā Gaurī from Nāgārjunikoṇḍa (fig. 2) specifically states that the donor is *jīvaputā* (one who has her child or children alive).<sup>7</sup> The donor, the Ikṣvāku Queen Khamḍuvulā, could of course be dedicating an image in thanks for success in worshipping the goddess.<sup>8</sup> Fertility, in any regard, is what is (or was) desired, and either a sexual or birth-giving posture could be seen as facilitating it.

The most likely explanation, in fact, appears to be that the posture was used with both meanings; and it is probable that the “two” postures, representing (potential) sexual intercourse and resultant birth, are linked in the worshipper’s mind as they are in reality. That the position is a sexual one, however, is somewhat difficult to support from artistic and textual evidence. The Lajjā Gaurī figures appear frontally and almost always without male partners, with the artist’s intention being the exposure of the *yoni* and not the presentation of a sexual act. Nevertheless, we see the association of the posture with sex in reliefs in the *sikhara* of the 12th-century temple at Bagali, where a male literally aims his exaggeratedly large and erect phallus toward a female who looks his way and is in the knee-raised posture, but who occupies a completely separate relief panel.<sup>9</sup> In a relief on the 8th-century Huchchimalli Temple at Aihole, the squatting female actually reaches out and grasps the enormous phalluses of two flanking males.<sup>10</sup>

While one thus could see in the exposure of the *yoni* a sex-



ual posture, the evidence tends to suggest that it is above all a birth-giving posture. This position, called *uttānapad* and glossed by Monier-Williams as “one whose legs are extended (in parturition),”<sup>11</sup> finds graphic depiction in late Chalukyan (12th century) sculpture showing women giving birth (fig. 3). Its association with birth and fruition, however, is seen as well in much earlier art, as in this small, 1st-century B.C. terra-cotta in which a goddess removes (gives birth to) a sheaf of grain from her vagina (fig. 4).<sup>12</sup> As several scholars have pointed out, this imagery goes back even to the Indus civilization,<sup>13</sup> and whoever this goddess might be, she is seen as the creator of vegetation and must have associations with the earth.<sup>14</sup> The birthing posture of the earth or vegetation goddess is that used by the Lajjā Gaurī when human birth is desired.

The Aurangabad figure does not spread her legs as widely as the Lajjā Gaurī figures usually do, an exaggerated posture that often produces an unnatural, frog-like form (as in figs. 2, 4 and 6).<sup>15</sup> She looks more to be in a squatting posture (*utkuṭāsana*), which in the context of Indian goddesses is the posture frequently taken by the *mātrkās* (fig. 5), particularly during the Kuṣāṇa period (1st–3rd c. A.D.).<sup>16</sup> *Mātrkās* always, however, are clothed. The Aurangabad figure compares to both the *mātrkās* and the Lajjā Gaurīs in having the right arm raised with the elbow resting on the knee. The lowered left arm, with the hand lying on the left knee, is more suggestive of the *mātrkās*, however, than of the Lajjā Gaurīs, who raise their left arms in parallel with their right arms (fig. 6). Nevertheless, the objects held by the Aurangabad figure are unlike those held by either the Lajjā Gaurī or *mātrkā* figures. She holds in her lowered left hand a large circular object. The identification that comes to mind is a gem, a *cintāmaṇi* or *ratna*. The object in the raised right hand is not distinct enough for a sure identification. It is not a solid object, and gives the appearance of being a bouquet of flowers or sheaf of grain. If the latter, we may be able to connect our figure to the earlier imagery of the goddess who removes sheafs of grain from her vagina, as seen in figure 4. We may, furthermore, see in the Aurangabad female an association with the Buddhist goddess Vasudhārā, whose most characteristic attribute is the sheaf of grain (*dhānyamañjarī*). Is the Aurangabad figure therefore a Tārā, and specifically Vasudhārā?

Again, as with the identifications of her as Lajjā Gaurī or a *mātṛkā*, the identification of her as a Vasudhārā can be made only partially. Vasudhārā, like our figure, is frequently described in iconographical texts as two-armed, and, as B. Bhattacharyya has pointed out, she may “be represented in any attitude, standing or sitting”;<sup>17</sup> thus a squatting posture may be possible, although I know of no other examples of any Tārā in this posture. Further, Vasudhārā, according to the texts, holds gems (*ratnamañjarī*),<sup>18</sup> and even is mentioned in one text as holding a *cintāmani*.<sup>19</sup> But, Vasudhārā always (according to the texts as well as to artistic evidence) holds the sheaf of grain in the left hand; and the right, which holds the gems, is lowered in *varamudrā*. Of course, self-display is unknown in textual descriptions and images of Tārā.

The Aurangabad female thus appears not to fit any of our usual categories for goddesses, but, rather, has characteristics of several. We may say that all of them—the goddess giving birth to vegetation, the Lajjā Gaurī, the *mātṛkā*, and Vasudhārā—relate to one another in a general way,<sup>20</sup> as goddesses of fertility and fruition, and this is clearly the meaning of the Aurangabad figure as well. Nevertheless, that she displays her genitals, however discretely as compared to the usual Lajjā Gaurī images, must put her most fully into the Lajjā Gaurī category, and into a unique category for a goddess in a Buddhist context.

Any explanation for her appearance in this panel at Aurangabad will fall largely into the realm of speculation. Still, if these small sculptural panels are individual donations, it may be that the donor of this particular panel was hoping or giving thanks for a particular boon, a child. The kneeling figure in the lower left corner appears to be a female. While she may be regarded as a donor or worshipper, it is not possible to know if her sex reflects that of the human donor as well. Nevertheless, only female donor figures are depicted with Lajjā Gaurī,<sup>21</sup> and it is assumed that she is worshipped only by women. There is no reason to assume that goddesses of the Lajjā Gaurī type were worshipped only by Hindus, however, let alone only by Śaivites. The 3rd-century inscription placed on a Lajjā Gaurī, mentioned above, was that of a queen who, like other Ikṣvāku queens, was a patron of Buddhism.<sup>22</sup> What is unusual about the

Aurangabad figure is not that she might be worshipped by a Buddhist, but that she has been brought into the official iconography of a monastery. This was done by softening aspects of her Lajjā Gaurī iconography, and giving her the guise of a Tārā: in addition to the arm positions (although reversed) and attributes, her jewelry and hair-do are typical of those of a Tārā.<sup>23</sup>

A similar motivation, that of bringing Lajjā Gaurī into an official temple context, produced comparable adjustments on the Lajjā Gaurī in Cave 21 (Rāmeśvara) at Ellora, a Śaivite cave.<sup>24</sup> The goddess here has the height of her knees lowered so that her posture, like that of the Aurangabad figure, is not so exaggerated; her head is, again like that of the Aurangabad female, coiffed similarly to that of other goddesses depicted in the cave's reliefs and is given prominence;<sup>25</sup> and she is flanked by two female attendants, as might befit an important Hindu goddess. As the dates of the Aurangabad and Ellora images are probably very close, and the two sites proximate, it is not unreasonable to see at play a similar interest in legitimizing the goddess in both cases.<sup>26</sup>

But that it was allowed at Aurangabad is due to the special nature of the Kalacuri-period (second half of the 6th century) caves,<sup>27</sup> which include Cave 2, when female imagery began to dominate. It is not only that the number of Tārā images dramatically increased in these later caves. According to John Huntington, explicit sexual imagery is suggested by some of the female figures in the caves' sculpture, making the genital display of our goddess less surprising.<sup>28</sup> In addition, there is in the so-called Brahmanical Cave at Aurangabad a set of *saptamātṛkās*.<sup>29</sup> The date for this cave, which combines Buddhist and Hindu deities, is also the second half of the 6th century, and argues for a period when some close relationship between Hindu and Buddhist practices took place.<sup>30</sup> It is tempting to suggest that at nearby Ellora, where a Hindu phase of cave construction was ending and a Buddhist phase was beginning around 600, there was a period of overlap of occupation of the site, when both Buddhists and Hindus were using the caves.<sup>31</sup> The Aurangabad *saptamātṛkas* find their direct Buddhist reflection at Aurangabad itself, where in Cave 7 there are six standing female figures who in their arrangement mimic the *mātṛkās*,

even to being bracketed by Avalokiteśvara and Buddha as the mothers are bracketed by Śiva and Gaṇeśa.<sup>32</sup>

In sum, I think the Aurangabad image can be identified as a Lajjā Gaurī who underwent certain modifications to enable her to fit into an official Buddhist context. The key characteristic of a Lajjā Gaurī, a display of the pudendum, remains. That she may be a proto-Vasudhārā is a possibility, but with only this single example it is impossible to argue this with any certainty. Finally, that the image is placed where one would expect a donor figure, and is apparently being worshipped by the female figure opposite, suggests some relationship to the donor of the relief. Ultimately, it was the nature of Buddhist practice at Aurangabad, when Hinduism was showing tremendous influence<sup>33</sup> and female and sexual imagery was becoming important, that allowed the appearance of our Buddhist Lajjā Gaurī.

## NOTES

1. V.H. Sonawane, "Some Remarkable Sculptures of Lajjā Gaurī from Gujarat," *Lalit Kalā* 23 (1988):27–35.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 32.

3. The proper left-side *bodhisattva* in the figure 1 panel is Padmāpaṇi (Avalokiteśvara); the other *bodhisattva* is probably, based on the iconography of the flanking *bodhisattvas* in the Aurangabad caves, either Vajrapāṇi or Mañjuśrī. The significance of the Buddha being raised on a lotus stalk held by two *nāgarājas* is uncertain. It was Alfred Foucher's contention that it indicated the Śrāvastī Miracle. [Alfred Foucher, "The Great Miracle at Śrāvastī," in *The Beginnings of Buddhist Art*, L.A. Thomas and F.W. Thomas (trans.) (1914; reprint, Varanasi: Indological Book House, 1972):176. Originally published in French in *Journal asiatique* 13 (1909).] This identification continues to be made by scholars; Carmel Berkson, for example, identifies the figure 1 panel as the Great Miracle at Śrāvastī. [Carmel Berkson, *The Caves at Aurangabad: Early Buddhist Tantric Art in India* (New York: Mapin International, Inc., 1986):203; see my review of this book for a general warning regarding Berkson's iconographical identifications at Aurangabad in *Journal of Asian History*, 22, no. 1 (1988):79–80]. The assumption that the upheld lotus stem indicates the Śrāvastī scene is, however, doubtful. See my discussion in Robert L. Brown, "The Śrāvastī Miracles in the Art of India and Dvāravātī," *Archives of Asian Art* 37 (1984):79–95. See also G. v Mitterwallner, "The Brussels Buddha from Gandhara of the Year 5," in *Investigating Indian Art* eds. Marianne Yaldiz and Wibke Lobo (Berlin: Staatliche Museen Preussischer, 1987):236–239.

4. There is no reason that this particular arrangement need have recalled one specific scene or textual reference. It is perhaps best to see such images as layered with readily identifiable associations, but used in a generic sense by the donor as an image to produce merit.

5. Lajjā Gaurī, which literally means "modest" Gaurī, Gaurī being a name of Pārvatī, is explained by the story in which Pārvatī is caught in dalliance with Śiva when they are interrupted during lovemaking by a devotee. But Sankalia has noted that glossing Lajjā Gaurī as "'a shy woman' . . . is euphemistic. Really it means 'a shameless woman.'" [H.D. Sankalia, "The Nude Goddess or 'Shameless Woman' in Western Asia, India, and South-Eastern Asia," *Artibus Asiae* 23, no. 2 (1960):121.] This is substantiated by the etymology of the word *lajjā* proposed by R.C. Dhere as coming from old Kannada *lanji* or *lanjikā* which means an "adulteress" or "harlot." (See M.K. Dhavalikar, "Lajjāgaurī," *Bulletin of the Deccan College Research Institute* 39 (1980):31.]

6. Sonawane, "Some Remarkable Sculptures of Lajjā Gaurī from Gujarat," p. 33 and D.C. Sircar, "Aspects of the Cult of the Indian Mother Goddess," *Journal of the Indian Museums* 36 (1980):14.

7. H.K. Narasimhaswami, "Nagarjunikonda Image Inscription," *Epigraphia Indica* 29:138-9.

8. Dhavalikar mentions that the goddess (at least in an earlier form) may be worshipped for the welfare of children as well as to protect against drought. (Dhavalikar, "Lajjāgaurī," p. 33.) Also see Sircar, "Aspects of the Cult of the Indian Mother Goddess," pp. 15-16.

9. See Devangana Desai, *Erotic Sculpture of India* (New Delhi: Tata McGraw-Hill Publishing Co., 1975):ph. 104.

10. See Devangana Desai, "Shades of Eroticism in Temple Art," *Symbols and Manifestations in Indian Art* (Bombay: Marg Publications, 1985):fig. 4.

11. Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary* (Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1974):177.

12. See Pratapaditya Pal, *Indian Sculpture Volume I* (Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1986):141 and Gerald James Larson, et al., *In Her Image: The Great Goddess in Indian Asia and The Madonna in Christian Culture* (Santa Barbara: University Art Museum, 1980):41; cf. Desai, *Erotic Sculpture of India*, fig. 9.

13. Madho Sarup Vats, *Excavations at Harappa, Being an Account of Archaeological Excavations at Harappa Carried Out Between the Years 1920-21 and 1933-34*, vol. 2 (Delhi: Government of India, 1940), pl. xciii, no. 304.

14. P.K. Agrawala, *Goddesses in Ancient India* (New Delhi: Abhinav Publications, 1984): 31-32.

15. This pose reminds one of a yogic posture, the *uttānamaṇḍūkāsana*, which literally means "posture of a stretched out frog (*maṇḍūka*)." Interestingly, *maṇḍūka* also means "a wanton woman" and "a kind of coitus." [Monier-Williams, p. 776.]

16. N.P. Joshi says Kuṣāṇa *mātrkās* with children are always seated. [N.P. Joshi, "Mātrkā Figures in Kuṣāṇa Sculptures at Mathura," in *Investigating Indian Art*, p. 159.] In the Gupta period the *mātrkās* with children stand as well as sit. The seated *mātrkās* in both the Kuṣāṇa and Gupta periods are often shown squatting on low stools; in some instances the seats are so high as to give

the appearance of chairs, with the mothers seated with both legs pendant (*par-yañkāśana* or *pralambapadāsana*).

17. Benoytosh Bhattacharyya, *The Indian Buddhist Iconography* (reprint: Calcutta: Firma K.L. Mukhopadhyay, 1968):245.

18. Dipak Chandra Bhattacharyya, *Studies in Buddhist Iconography* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1978):23.

19. Pratapaditya Pal, "Two Buddhist Paintings from Nepal," *Bulletin of the Museum van Aziatische Kunst* (Rijksmuseum Amsterdam) 5, no. 43 (1967): appendix III.

20. These associations could be pursued. For example, Gaurī, which means yellow, may refer to corn or grain, thus giving Lajjā Gaurī a possible association with both the goddess giving birth to corn and Vasudhārā who holds the sheaf of corn.

21. Sonawane, "Some Remarkable Sculptures of Lajjā Gaurī from Gujarat," p. 33. Sonawane illustrates several Lajjā Gaurī images in which worshippers are included, and, as with the worshipper in our Aurangabad panel, they are kneeling female figures with their hands held in *añjalimudrā*.

22. See note 7 above. Elizabeth Rosen says that of the Ikṣvākus "all the men of the royal family were Hindus, usually Śaivites... while most of the royal women were Buddhists and patronized Buddhist monuments for the benefit of their Hindu spouses and kin." Rosen, "Buddhist Architecture and Lay Patronage at Nāgārjunakoṇḍa," in *The Stūpa: Its Religious, Historical and Architectural Significance* ed. Anna Libera Dallapiccola (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1980):114.

23. Cf. Berkson, *The Caves at Aurangabad*, p. 223

24. See Sankalia, "The Nude Goddess or 'Shameless Woman' in Western Asia, India, and South-Eastern Asia," Fig. 7. This image is unfortunately badly worn and is broken in the pubic area, so that it cannot be stated categorically that she is nude. Nevertheless, the posture of the legs indicates that she was.

25. As with the Lajjā Gaurī in figure 6, the goddess is often depicted without a head.

26. Geri H. Malandra finds that "there is a clear connection between Caves 21 [Ellora] and 6 [Aurangabad], especially the shrine doors and sculptural styles of some images." She suggests there was a common workshop and, by inference, a common time period when these caves were being made. (Personal letter)

27. I am following Walter Spink here in assigning these to the Kalacuris: Walter Spink, *Ajanta to Ellora* (Bombay: Marg Publications, n.d. [1967]):9. The caves that date to this period at Aurangabad are 2, 5, 6, 7, 8, and 9.

28. See John C. Huntington in Suan L. Huntington, *The Art of Ancient India* (New York and Tokyo: Weatherhill, 1985):267-68 and John C. Huntington, "Cave Six at Aurangabad: A Tantrayāna Monument?" in *Kalādarśana: American Studies in the Art of India*, ed. Joanna G. Williams (New Delhi: Oxford & IBH Publishing Co., 1981):52.

29. See Berkson, *The Caves at Aurangabad*, p. 226.

30. At least I see no reason, based on the style of the admittedly badly eroded images in the Brahmanical Cave, to place this cave in a different period

(roughly second half of the 6th century) than that which appears reasonable for the later caves (Caves 2, 5, 6, 7, 8, and 9) at Aurangabad. Needless to say, any certain dating of the Brahmanical Cave will require a detailed analysis. The central image in the cave, centered on the back wall, is Gaṇeśa, who serves to end the row of *saptamātrkās* which continues around onto the back from the proper right wall, the first image of which is Śiva. A Durgā is to the left of Gaṇeśa on the back wall. The proper left wall has images of the Buddha. See Berkson, *The Caves at Aurangabad*, pp. 226–8, and R.S. Gupte, "A Note on the First Brahmanical Cave of the Aurangabad Group," *Marathwada University Journal* 1, no. 1 (1960–61):173–176.

31. Most scholars feel there was a clear break between the Hindu and Buddhist phases at Ellora. (See Spink, *Ajanta to Ellora*, pp. 9–10.) This may be true for the construction of the caves, but we cannot say whether the occupation of the Hindu caves ended when construction on the Buddhist caves began, particularly in light of the Aurangabad Gaṇeśa Cave that indicates a shared religious practice.

32. Compare illustrations on pp. 226 and 120 of Berkson, *The Caves at Aurangabad*. The identification of these six female figures is uncertain. Berkson, *ibid.*, p. 117 identifies them as "prajnas." I assume by this she means *pāramitās*, the sixth of whom would be Prajñāpāramitā. Also, see R.S. Gupte, "An Interesting Panel from the Aurangabad Caves," *Marathwada University Journal* 3, no. 2 (1963):59–63.

33. The Hindu influence could be argued in much greater depth, for example in terms of the architectural design of the caves.

## ILLUSTRATIONS

1a. The Buddha. 6th century A.D., Cave 2, Aurangabad. (photo: Robert L. Brown)

1b. Detail of fig. 1 showing Lajjā Gaurī. (photo: Robert L. Brown)

2. Lajjā Gaurī. 3rd century A.D., Stone. From Nāgārjunikoṇḍa. Nāgārjunikoṇḍa Museum. (photo: Robert L. Brown)

3. Birth Scene. 12th century A.D., Bhatkal, Karnāṭaka. (photo: Archaeological Survey of India)

4. Goddess. Ca. 2nd–1st century B.C., Terra-cotta, H:5.7 cm. From Chandraketugarh. Indian Art Special Purposes Fund, Los Angeles County Museum of Art. (photo: Los Angeles County Museum of Art)

5. *Mātrkā* (proper left figure) with Kubera. 2nd century A.D., Stone, H:17.8 cm. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Subhash Kapoor, Los Angeles County Museum of Art. (photo: Los Angeles County Museum of Art)

6. Lajjā Gaurī. 7th–8th century A.D., Stone, H:91 cm. From Alampur. Alampur Museum. (photo: Robert L. Brown)



(Figure 1a.)





(Figure 1b.)



(Figure 2.)



(Figure 3.)



(Figure 4.)



(Figure 5.)



(Figure 6.)