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The Moon with Two Stories: Reconsidering the 'Buddhist' Candras in East India, 10th-11th Centuries

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The Candras ruling over the southern and eastern part of early medieval Bengal has been known as a Buddhist dynasty in the historiography of South Asia. However, a close reading of their epigraphic records gives a somewhat different picture. To show how this marginal political power sought its line of descent in different ways in changing religious contexts, this essay looks into the epigraphic adoption of two well-known stories of the moon from the *Jātakas* and the *Purāṇas*. This examination enables us to understand multi-layered and complex identity politics of pre-modern South Asia.

The Bengal Rulers Who Practiced Buddhism

Bengal was one of the last strongholds of Buddhism on the Indian subcontinent during the early medieval period, the 8th–12th centuries. The rulers of the Early Devas (r.c. 720–800 CE) and the Pālas (r.c. 750–1165 CE), despite being the patrons of Brahmanical religions, called themselves *parama-saugata* (devout followers of Sugata, i.e. the Buddha) and invoked the Buddha regularly at the beginning of their copper-plate charters. They often transferred property to Buddhist monasteries and even established some

of them in their own names, like King Bhavadeva of the Early Devas, the founder of the Buddhist monastery Bhavadevamahāvihāra at Paṭṭikera, modern Mainamati, in the latter half of the 8th century. Buddhist institutions, which had emerged earlier as large landholders, achieved greater prominence in this period, as attested by the gigantic monuments extant as archaeological sites. The Candras (r.c. 850–1050 CE), who ruled Vaṅga-Samatāṭa, a historical region located in the southern and eastern part of Bengal with Vikramapura as their political centre, also followed the general religious trend of early medieval Bengal. Like the Early Devas and the Pālas, the Candras used the *dharmacakra* (the wheel symbolising the Buddha’s first sermon) as the royal emblem on their charters. Of 12 known copper-plate charters issued by four kings of this dynasty in the 10th–11th centuries, namely Śrīcandra, Kalyāṇacandra, Laḍahacandra, and Govindacandra, 9 began with the adoration of Triratna (Three Jewels): the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Saṃgha (the Community of Monks).

The *Dharmacakra* Seal of the Jajilpara Plate of Gopāla III (r.c. 969-975 CE)



Photograph by Ryosuke Furui, courtesy of the Malda Museum, West Bengal, India.

The Moon with the Hare Mark

However, what made the Candras different from the other dynasties with Buddhist leanings was their conscious identity-making based on their specific lineage name and the particular myth associated with it. The Candras were surely not the only dynasty whose rulers suffixed the word ‘*candra*’ (moon) to their names in eastern India. This custom was first found in the Candras (r.c. 370–729 CE) who ruled Arakan, the historic coastal region between the Indian subcontinent and Burma. Whether the Candras of Bengal adopted their lineage name from the Candras of Arakan cannot be confirmed due to the absence of definite evidence. Yet a certain continuity of royal representation with lunar symbolism was indicated by the epithets of the Early Deva kings, such as ‘*bāla-mṛgāṅka*’ (the waxing moon), ‘*vaṅgāla-mṛgāṅka*’ (the moon of Vaṅgāla), and ‘*śrī-abhinava-mṛgāṅka*’ (the illustrious new moon). Here the term ‘*mṛgāṅka*’ (deer-marked or the one marked with deer) means the moon, and this moon stands for each king of the Early Devas. The Candras seems to have continued this particular royal custom in a different way of representing themselves after the fall of the Early Devas in 10th-century eastern Bengal. Two important points should be noted here: first, the Candras directly used the word ‘*candra*’ as the name of their *vaṃśa* (lineage) or *kula* (family), not merely as an epithet, and second, they added the story of the *Śaśajātaka* (Hare Birth of the Buddha) to their lineage as a reason they were followers of the Buddha.

The *Jātaka* (Cowell, 1897: 34–37) recounts that a hare lived in the forest with his three friends: an otter, a jackal, and a monkey. When a Brahmin priest begged for food from them, the otter offered seven red fish and the jackal gave a lizard and a jar of curds, while the monkey provided a ripe mango. Knowing only how to gather grass, the hare instead offered his own flesh by throwing himself into a fire which the Brahmin had prepared. Surprisingly, however, the hare was not burnt. The Brahmin, having revealed himself as the god Indra, explained that he had come to test the hare’s virtue. The hare told Indra that he would have done the same for even the lowliest person. Deeply touched by his virtue, Indra squeezed a mountain and used its essence to paint the picture of the hare on the moon for all to see for a whole eon. The hare was in fact the Buddha, who had given his own body as food in a former life. This *Śaśajātaka* was one of the representative stories

exemplifying *dānapāramitā* (the Buddhist Perfection of Generosity), and was thus often depicted in Buddhist art and architecture since the 3rd century BCE. However, its presence in a royal eulogy was rare and its association with a royal lineage was rather unusual. The Candras' conscious identity-making based on this *Jātaka* story should therefore be understood in the historical context of the time of Śrīcandra when they first claimed their lineage.

A Relief with the Scene from the *Śāsajātaka*, Goli, Guntur, Andhra Pradesh, 4th Century CE



Photograph by Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, Ministry of Culture, Govt. of India.

Śrīcandra (r.c. 925–975 CE) was son of Trailokyacandra (r.c. 905–925 CE), the king of Candradvīpa as well as a subordinate ruler of the king of Harikela. With his military strength, Trailokyacandra held Vaṅgāla, the coastal region of south-eastern Bengal, and conquered Samataṭa, the eastern margin of Bengal, thereby paving the way for his son Śrīcandra's ascendancy. Śrīcandra made a further military expedition into the north-eastern corner of the subcontinent including Śrīhaṭṭa (Sylhet) and Kāmarūpa (Assam): the former he conquered immediately after ascending the throne and the latter he defeated but did not annex to the Candra kingdom. Having thrown off the Candras' allegiance to the king of Harikela, Śrīcandra ruled a considerable part of southern and eastern Bengal as an independent ruler and made Vikramapura the new political centre due to its strategic importance in the control of river traffic.

In this context, it is important to note that the Paschimbhag plate of Śrīcandra, the earliest known charter of the Candras, issued in his 5th regnal year (around 930 CE), emphasises his military

achievement in great detail, whereas the Dhulla plate, the charter issued three years later, and other later plates rather narrate his family history with great care. Especially noteworthy is the description of the low status of Suvarṇacandra (r.c. 876–904 CE), his grandfather, in the former record. Its wording subtly conveys that he neither was born into *agnikūla* (one of the distinguished Kshatriya lineages) nor performed *tulāpuruṣa* (the ritual weighing of a king against gold and its distribution among Brahmins) (Sircar, 1968: 301, v.3). The latter group of records, on the other hand, state that Suvarṇacandra was the son of Pūrṇacandra, the ruler of Rohitāgiri, belonging to the majestic lineage of the moon, and was a Buddhist born into the family of the moon which devotedly carries in its curve the Buddha’s hare birth story (*buddhasya yaḥ śāsakajātakam*) in the form of a mark (Mill, 1993: 79, vv. 2–3). This change indicates that the narrative framing of the Candras as a devout Buddhist family was made retrospectively after the great military success of Śrīcandra. By connecting his lineage name ‘Candra’ with ‘the moon with the hare mark’ of the *Jātaka* story, this rising political power could locate the Candra dynasty within the ambit of the Buddhist world of eastern India. Otherwise he might have faced difficulty in legitimising his rule due to the low status of his grandfather, who appears not to have been a member of any established Kshatriya family.

The Moon Emanated from the Eye of the Sage Atri

Śrīcandra’s religious policy seems to have been followed, on the surface at least, by his three successors, Kalyāṇacandra (r.c. 975–1000 CE), Laḍahacandra (r.c. 1000–1020 CE), and Govindacandra (r.c. 1020–1045 CE), who successively ruled the Candra kingdom. They continued to use the Buddhist symbol of *dharmacakra* as the emblem on their seal and the Buddhist epithet *parama-saugata* as one of their titles. These practices

The Mainamati Plate of Govindacandra
(r. c. 1020-1045 CE)



Photograph by Ryosuke Furui, courtesy of the
Department of Archaeology, Government of Bangladesh.

were, however, merely a legacy of Śrīcandra. Though the details of Kalyāṇacandra's donation are uncertain at the moment, the donations of the last two Candra kings were neither made in the name of *Buddha-bhaṭṭāraka* (the lord Buddha) nor contained any other Buddhist elements. Instead, the two charters of Laḍahacandra record the grants of land in the name of *Vāsudeva-bhaṭṭāraka* (the lord Vāsudeva, i.e. Viṣṇu) in favour of *Laḍahamādhava-bhaṭṭāraka* (the lord Laḍahamādhava) installed by the king. As Mādhava was a well-known name of the god Viṣṇu, Laḍahamādhava was undoubtedly a form of Viṣṇu named after the king Laḍahacandra himself. His strong attachment to the Brahmanical creed is also attested in his pilgrimage to Vārāṇasī and Prayāga, where he made an offering to his ancestors and offered gifts of gold to numerous Brahmins (Sircar, 1970: 206, ll. 53–54; 205, vv. 16–18). The charter of Govindacandra, on the other hand, records the grant which has been made in favour of the dancing form of Śiva called *Naṭṭeśvara-bhaṭṭāraka*, in the name of *Śiva-bhaṭṭāraka* (the lord Śiva). It also refers to this king as an equal to Mahāsenā (i.e. Skanda, Kārttikeya), and his parents to the latter's parents, Śiva and Śivā (Sircar, 1970: 213, ll. 46–47; 212: v. 13). Laḍahacandra was a Vaiṣṇava, and Govindacandra had obvious Śaiva leanings.

The Moon God Candra, Odisha,
13th Century CE



Photograph by Jae-Eun Shin, courtesy of the British
Museum, London, UK.

It is therefore not merely a coincidence that the reference to the *Śaśakajātaka* disappears from the official records, and accordingly the lineage name 'Candra' associated with 'the moon with the hare mark' also loses its importance and relevance. The Candras' self-image is redesigned in accordance with a new genealogical claim which traces their descent from the moon god Candra, the light sprung from *atri-netra* (the eye of the sage Atri) (Sircar, 1970: 204, v.1; 211, v.2). This is obviously an epigraphic adoption of a story well-known in the epic-puranic traditions. The *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* (1999: 9.14.1–9.24.67), to take one example, tells us that the god Brahmā had a son called Atri, and the latter had a son called Soma (Moon, i.e.

Candra) who was born out of his tears of joy. Soma had a son, Budha (Mercury), by his spouse Tārā, and Budha had one offspring, Purūravas, by his consort Ilā. It then gives us a long list of the descendants of Purūravas, all who formed the renowned Lunar Dynasty called *Candravaṃśa/Somavaṃśa*.

Given a long absence of divine foundational myths and prestigious Kshatriya genealogies in the royal epigraphic records of Bengal, which were in fact widely observed among other regional dynasties between the 8th and 12th centuries, the Candras' conscious attempt to link themselves to the Lunar Dynasty is noteworthy. There are three external factors to consider: i) the increasing presence of South Indian migrants in Bengal which enhanced Brahmanical ideology and institutions and culminated in the rise of new dynasties with a strong inclination towards Brahmanical traditions from the last quarter of the 11th century, ii) the growing influence of Brahmins as a dominant social group, which was a result of their network building and royal patronage, and iii) the decline of Buddhism and its importance in the political sphere due to the gradual reduction of both royal and popular support. These realities of the period may have led the Candras to shift their religious affiliations away from Buddhism and anchor themselves to the Brahmanical faith.

However, the internal factors behind the Candras' enduring emphasis on the 'divine' lineage were their obscure origin in Rohitāgiri, probably a hilly region near Chittagong, and their political development on the edge of the Pāla imperial formation, the strongest polity of eastern India for over four hundred years. For such a marginal power, legitimacy was not something to be taken for granted. It could only be achieved through a conscious effort to invent a more respectable and reputable identity which would receive the wider acceptance of their society. The epigraphic adoption of the two different stories of the moon shows how a local power continued to arrogate to itself the symbol of kingly dignity, corresponding to the changing religious milieu of the region. Therefore, the old moon with the Buddha set and the new moon with the sage Atri rose. The two were incompatible, but both stood for the Candras who shone in the south-eastern Bengal where Buddhism eventually gave way to Brahmanical religions.

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