

**AN ENQUIRY INTO THE NATURE OF MONOLITHIC MINIATURE
STŪPAS WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO RATNĀGIRI,
ODISHA (INDIA)**

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Introduction

Stūpa is the highest object of veneration in Buddhist rituals and practices of lay devotees as well as the gone forth (Avadansataka Story No. 62). Recently western scholars have criticized relic worship on the ground that when soul is impermanent how come body parts be permanent (Strong, 2004). They actually miss the dynamic symbolism of Stūpa in Buddhism which is just not confined to relic worship. With evolution of Buddhist thought and philosophy, Stūpa acquired new meanings and its functions became diversified, still its sanctimonious paramount remains the same across the sectarian lines. Since the earliest times depictions, line drawings and structures of miniature Stūpas have been found, but they have attracted little scholarly attention. This study upon nature and functions of miniature Stūpas with special reference to Ratnāgiri, Odisha (India) as it is probably the richest site having yielded more than seven hundred structural monolithic Stūpas.

Material and methodology

The seven hundred monolithic miniature Stūpas are primary object of this study. Around three hundred of them are arranged as an open gallery at the entrance of Ratnāgiri site. Many more are scattered around the Mahāstupa and in the vicinity of the two monasteries and in the courtyard of Avalokitesvara shrine. Some minor Stūpas are displayed in gallery no. 3 of Ratnāgiri. Besides, the Stūpa carvings on the casing stones of the Stūpas of Bharhut, Sanchi, Amaravati and the line drawings along the Karakorum highway will be observed.

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A comparative and analytical methodology is adopted in this study. Structural modelling of the miniature Stūpas will be studied and compared with the main Stūpa of the site and also with similar finds from other sites. As the Stūpas bear figures of Buddhist deities, an iconographic observation is attempted to ascertain nature of the Stūpas. Epigraphic material is collected and interpreted in perspective.

Results

It is found that miniatures Stūpas are architecturally different from the main Stūpas of the site. There is no uniformity in size and shape of the miniature Stūpas. Bare Stūpas are exceptions but Stūpas with deities carved in niches are a rule. Iconography and style of rendering is almost religiously followed. Epigraphic material found in association with miniature Stūpas is scarce.

Results

Generally miniatures Stūpas are labelled as votive Stūpas caused by devotees on pilgrimage. They are also viewed as commemorative formations or reliquaries of prominent monks. The study evaluates and examines Ratnāgiri miniature Stūpas along these paradigms to determine their real nature and corresponding functions. Epigraphic material collected from Ratnāgiri. Complex consists of inscribed dharanis, copper plates, monastic seals and donative records as sculptures. It is seen that the information gathered from this evidence has any reflection on the subject of study. It is noticed that the miniature Stūpas are portable and seldom bear dedicatory lines. Whereas at other Buddhist site donation of even a single cross bar of railing is sincerely engraved (Marshall, 1940). Figured representation of different Gods and Goddesses of Buddhist pantheon adds another dimension to the issue which is deliberated upon.



Conclusions

Tibetan writer Taranath has written that Ratnāgiri was an important religious and philosophical academy (Lama Chimpa and A. Chattopadhyaya, 2010) and it is affirmed by other sources that students graduating from Nalanda, came over to this place for further perfection of their knowledge. This large assemblage of miniature Stūpas might be a part of monastic curriculum. They may have been instruments of medication. Portability of Stūpas supports this argument. It is concluded that miniature Stūpas, particularly at Ratnāgiri, are not just indicators of horizontal expansion of the faith but of the vertical penetration of Buddhist ideals and practices.

Keywords: miniature Stūpa, votive, iconography, meditation

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