

The Choice of Characters in the Buddha's Life Story: Traits and Imagery

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Abstract: “A picture is worth than thousand words” and “action speaks louder than speech”, but how much the Buddhist artist was successful in depicting the social setup of their time and traits – characteristic qualities, of the people. This study analyses selected scenes to discern artistic agility in revealing personalities.

Keywords: Buddhist narrative art, Buddhist iconography, characterization, visual traits

Abbreviations: Bc: Buddhacarita; DN: Digha-Nikaya; J: Jataka; LV: Lalita-Vistara; MN: Majjhima-Nikaya; Sn: Sutta-Nipata.

Introduction

Characters are always inevitable for audience, because they make conclusions and perceive a message by focusing on the appearance and actions of characters in the story. Although, characters are understood through the temporal stretch and plot of the story but viewers and listeners commonly configure characters as these appear in subsequent events of the story. They judge characters from their own social and empirical perspectives. In response, the art of characterization becomes one of the most tactful concern for a narrative artist. In representation, authors develop and define characters, and artists and performers follow these instructions within their socio-cultural getup.

The art of ancient India has been largely influenced by cultural and philosophical ideas, and artist (painter and sculptor) was almost regarded a spiritual person. Art along with other sister arts; such as, music, dance, and literature, are also regarded as sacred, and rules are devised for them when they perform the holy act of visualization and performance. The Chitrasutra of Vishnudharmottara and Natyashastra are important treatises dealing with several issues related to the present study. The Chitrasutra

detailing the conventions and principles of image creation, whereas the Natyashastra highlights different aspects of performance and theatre art. For example, Chitrasutra says that “Kings in general are to be depicted in pictures like the celestials ... (42:1), and the Natyashastra suggests that “Actors ... who have beautiful eyes, eyebrows... and possessed pleasant appearance and dignified gait, and neither fat nor lean, and are well developed ... should be employed to represent the role of kings and princes (kumara).” (35:9-11).

Looking into detail accounts of these two texts; either visualization or acting, personality traits are prime concerns of the sacred art. Buddhist artists had never been an exception, and they were to provide a correct and appealing representation of characters who performed their roles in the romantic legend of the Buddha. Though, Buddhist art has a great diversity in the representation of characters and rendering of events from the Buddha's life story; as it was the product of a syncretic society, yet everything is fairly discernible.

Characters and their Pictorial Traits

Dramaturgical Assessment – Plot and Setting

The structure (plot) and environment of events (setting) in the story are vital components in understanding the personality of characters. At first, complexity in the story seems to revolve around the dilemma of Suddhodana, the Sakya raja of Kapilavastu, who is worried about his kingdom. Raja has two wives; Māya and Prājapati (sisters), but for many years he has no child to whom the throne might be shifted. However, the seer; Āsita, interprets the miraculous dream of Queen Māya that she will give birth to a male child, having extraordinary qualities and will become a universal monarch if he would take interest in the worldly affairs. The prince born of a miraculous birth in the presence of gods; Indra and Brahma, amazingly walks, and announces his supremacy in the world. The Namakāra (naming ceremony) gives more support to this complexity when the raja gives him the name Siddhartha; to fulfil all the raja's wishes. The prince also shows his intelligence in the school of Visvamitra, and competes other boys of the clan in customary arts. On the other hand curiosity of the prince does not accept worldly affairs and seeks a refuge. The raja makes attempts to keep his son entailed in luxury and avoid him from every misery of life. These attempts culminate in the wedding of the prince, and here the storyline provides a clear and major conflict of the story. These minor complexities denote a firm attachment to life; plenty desires; and sufferings and miseries caused by these are the powers Gautama Siddhartha; the protagonist, is opposing.

The most promising point of craving and attachment to life is shown in the tension of the raja. He is incessantly striving to keep his kingdom last for as long time as possible. He decides to create an environment of comfort, pleasure and delights for Prince Siddhartha to

devoid any boredom that his son might not renounce the palace. Therefore the raja, Buddha's father, is the most active opponent in the guise of craving and sufferings of the life. However, Buddha's struggles are not against his father, but the forces of disturbance.

Broadly speaking of the settings or stage, three kinds are depicted in the narrative panels: the countryside, urban, and wilderness. The early scenes are represented in an outdoor setup where the child takes birth, walks, being washed, and transported to the palace. The urban setting is commonly portrayed in various scenes and events inside the palace while there are also glimpses of city carved in reliefs. In the later parts of the story almost all scenes are represented in wilderness including the barren mountains and jungles. There are many interesting elements in the setting, but the above-mentioned locations are visualized metaphorically that help in establishing the major conflict. These locales denote pleasures, desires, and miseries respectively.

The places depicted in visual narrative are not realistic, but are carved with minimum visual components. The groves and garden are only shown with a single tree, the city is represented with its gate, the palace simply has a throne and guards, and the mountainous areas or jungle are to be interpreted with wild animals or niche-like structure or shrines. Moreover, the seats and belongings of characters are properly rendered for their status; such as, the king and queen are seated on a throne with footstools in its front, the rishi Āsita on a basketry stool and the entertainers are simply sitting on the ground.

Formal Analysis of Characters in Narrative Panels

Suddhodana

Throughout the Buddha's life story, Suddhodana plays his role in two important scenes; the

Interpretation of Māya's Dream and in the Horoscope of the Child, where he appears in his court sitting on throne alone or with his queen when Āsita speaks of the child. In this he seems to be more concerned about his state and love for the queen rather than a father. He got very little attention of the Buddhist artist in depiction as well as for iconographic representation as compare to Queen Māya.

Raja Suddhodana is robed in Indian costumes; dhoti and stole (uttariya), with elegant folds. He always appears setting in the inner court of his palace where a simple bench-like throne is arranged with footstools for the royal couple. The Sakya Raja wears here a ready-made but simple and lightly ornate turban. The folds of the turban are knotted in the facing centre and making a low crest above. He wears a necklace studded with heavy gems. In his left hand he holds an unidentified royal insignia; possibly sceptre of unique kind. He wears wristlets on his both hands.

In the Interpretation of Māya's Dream, the Raja is staring Āsita with his right hand raised gesticulating the conversation. The very moment seems to be captured by the artist that if he is asking the soothsayer, and in return Āsita also talks to him. In such, it seems that he is impatient and wants quickly to inquire and listen more and more about his son.

Mahāmāya

Queen Māya; a flat but major character in the story, is depicted in five representative scenes: in the Queen Māya's Dream, Interpretation of Māya's Dream, Birth and/or Seven Steps of Siddhartha, Transportation of the Child, and the Horoscope of the Child.

In most of the scenes, she is clad in Indian Sari. On various occasions she wore it in different manners; such as, in some scenes part of her Sari is wrapped round her waist and part is pleated behind while in some cases she has covered only

the lower part and the upper is complete missing where she is depicted bare, or part of the Sari is passed over the left shoulder leaving the right breast naked. There are also some regional differences in her representation, such as; in some specimen she is depicted in Parthian dress; a loose voluminous and baggy trouser and tunic, but in such a case she has tied a band around, or some often has a beaded belt around her waist.

She has a fair round face and seems to have nicely combed her hair back while few locks of hair fall on the forehead. Though the headdress conceals the top of her head but it is probable that she has rolled up her hair and covered with head ornament. This may be deciphered from the profile figure of a female; probably Māya's sister Prājapati, in the scene of the Birth of Siddhartha where the bun of her hair seems to be tied with a string. In another instance, Mahāmāya has secured the bun of hair at the left side. There are also glimpses wherein she wears headgear with simple material but pleasing to the eyes. Other ornaments she wears are earrings, necklace and anklets.

Throughout the story she has always been depicted wearing the court attire and heavy jewellery; even when she is sleeping in her harem in the scene of Queen Māya's Dream, she is dressed in this way. In this, her character is of a proud woman who always wants to be remained distinctive and never lose her status of royalty. The Buddhist artist seemingly has given her a due attention, and in the scene Birth of Siddhartha she is represented in a divine pose, the tribunga; an allusion to an earlier yakshi cult. Her characteristic pose is called Salabhanjika (lit. the one who is breaking the branch of a Sal tree). Similarly in her release, the Child Buddha is emerging from her side but prevents her from any impurity and pain.

In the Interpretation of Māya's Dream, the artist has captured the very moment as the seer Āsita

has just revealed that she is pregnant and that the child will be a boy. She seems to be nervous as well as eager to hear the news from the fortune-teller. We can feel the emotional response of a woman when she feels it for a child.

Āsita

Whatever his role and status in the scripture, Āsita appears in the sculptures only twice; in the Interpretation of Māya's Dream and the Horoscope of the Child. In both scenes he is shown as an aged sage. His prototype here is a Brahman ascetic some often with beard and also with no beard but broad moustaches. His matted hair seems to be rolled up. He has a broad face and slim body. In depiction, Āsita may also be identified by kuja; a characteristic water flask of the Brahmans, held in his left hand. Traditionally he wears a long Indian dhoti almost reaching his ankle, while with his uttariya he has covered his left shoulder. Although the origin of the asceticism in India is not certain, but a similar picture is present in the Rig-Veda (10:136) where the muni (ascetic) is described as a person who has long hair, wearing garments of yellow colour, and drinks poisoned-fluid for an eternal ecstasy.

In the Interpretation of Māya's Dream, the seer Āsita is sitting on a basketry stool in a very relaxed position as either he had personal terms and relations with the royal family or being in the last of the four states of a devoted Hindu – an old homeless pilgrim, who takes no care of the material world. He is gazing upward as if he has entered into an imaginary or unseen world where to study the position and motions of stars and planets for the interpretation of the queen's dream. At the same time he has extended his right hand in conversational gestures and seems to deliver his prophesy to the royal couple. The seer seems to elucidate, admonish and reassure the royalty. The whole of his body language reveals that he is an intelligent, wise and clever man.

Gautama Siddhartha, the Buddha

Buddha is the protagonist, but his life is an allegory since there is a shock; the prince begins his life in every luxury but realizes that these are not sufficient. He sees the old age, sickness and death for the first time; eventually renounces desires (the world) and becomes a Bodhisattva; a journey from dejection to the salvation, and all these are symbolizing the lesson and practice of the Dharma; what he achieved through years' wanderings and meditations. In such the life of Buddha can be divided into three distinct phases: the first period from his miraculous birth to youth and princely life in the palace; the second from his renunciation to the attainment of enlightenment; and the last phase when he becomes Buddha and begins preaching his doctrines.

On the basis of such schemata it is not easy to explain position of the Buddha in the material culture and physical world. The early two phases, as mentioned above, have skilfully portrayed in relief panels and audience feels natural with some sort of climax in the events, but in the last phase now he was not only a human but more than a being. In art these are important because in the story, different episodes or scenes from his life have been depicted, while in the later phase a new mode was added; that of the individual representations rather narrative. It seems that the Buddhist artists looked him as a 'human being' in his early life who; to them, was known as Gautama, but in the second phase he became a 'spiritual principle' and now he is called Tatthāgata. In his last state he is considered something in between the two as a 'glorified body' (Conze 1953:34-38).

In visual traits he seems to be intelligent and wise who shows his quality since his childhood. Though there are many obstacles created by his father, but still he is obedient to him and when his father calls entertainers, he does not refuse to

participate. At the same time he is courageous and faces any hindrance daringly, and also has the power to make firm decisions for saying goodbye to the raj and throne, and renounces all enchantments of the palace. Furthermore, he is kind, fearless and determined person which appear in various mudras in the sculptures.

Indra (Sakra) and Brahma

Indra and Brahma; lords of the Brahmanic realm, appear almost together in the story on either side of the Buddha. Indra is depicted on the right whereas Brahma is shown on the left. They appear performing three roles in the story: the celestial lords who receive Prince Siddhartha; emerging from the side of her mother, and perform their duty to commemorate the event as a holy birth; the protectors of the Bodhisattva, most often in decision-making events; and devotees or attendants of the Buddha as they appear in devotional pose. At first look such a depiction seems to demonstrate the supremacy of Buddha over the Bramanical gods; however, their previous status has never been violated in Buddhism, and some often there are floating figures in the air that denote the celestial position of these gods. Both of them are portrayed as human.

Indra, throughout the story, is presented in royal appearance and is looking younger than Brahma. Indra has a kingly attire and also wears delicate jewellery. His turban more resembles that of Raja Suddhodana but sometimes wears kirita mukuta; a conical cap with ornamental top. The Brahma is a typical figure of a Brahman who wears monastic dress, and has long matted hair and a thick beard.

Visvamitra

In the scene Siddhartha in School, Visvamitra is depicted as a noble man in typical Indian dress; the turban and dhoti. He wears a necklace, and a bracelet on his right hand. From various narrative reliefs it can be deduced that men wore

bracelet on one hand while females were adorning both of their hands. Visvamitra and his students are barefooted. He is sitting on a stool and his expressions are well controlled; even teaching to the prince; a boy with extra-ordinary qualities, he does not lose the teacher's dignity. Unlike Brahmans or sages of the time; who hold long beard, Visvamitra is looking in his middle age. We are also able to know that during this time pen and ink were commonly used for writing on a wooden tablet.

Sotthiya (Svastika)

Sotthiya, the grass-cutter, is among the people who helped the Bodhisattva Siddhartha before attaining the Supreme Enlightenment. In the story he is represented as a reaper who helps the Buddha-to-be in preparing the seat for meditation. In addition, his attire comprises a dhoti and a scarp stuck in the folds of dhoti while his upper body is naked. He also wears a necklet; prepared of triangular beads, fits the neck very closely, and a tri-tier band on his wrist.

He is slightly in leaning pose as being in a devotional gesture. His expressions reveal that he is very happy to see the Lord and served him. When the Lord accepts the bundle of grass he poses his hands in Anjali mudra. This gesture is generally symbolizing the holiness of both figures; hence, such an act acknowledges spiritual status of both; the practitioner and the recipient, but it also denotes request.

Definitive and Interpretive Cues

A rich diversity of artistic execution makes the Buddhist narrative art more enigmatic. The artistic approaches of characterization are predominantly rely on the figures' getup and compositional scheme of the scene as compare to the physical features of characters. Besides major iconographical features, characters are commonly recognized by their attributes,

definitive actions, and place of action. Costumes are but least supporting components of identification, whereas scenes and events are identified by compositional scheme of visual rendering. The king, for example, is not the one who wears an ornate turban or other ornaments on his body but by the supporting characters around him. Because, similar dress and ornaments are also shown in the figures of Indra, Visvamisra and even in some royal guards. Therefore, common physical features are, though, valid but these are insufficient; especially, for the identification of minor characters. On the other side, certain attributes and artefacts designated to figures in narrative scenes assist in the identification of characters, their social status, behaviour, and key contributions to the story. Moreover, textual sources and contemporary culture are like the prime motives of characters development.

The Royal Family; Raja, Maharani and the Crown Prince

Suddhodana in the Buddhist narratives is represented as an Indian king; more correctly the *raja mukham manussanam*; 'the chief of men' (Sn 568) who possessed a petty state of Kapilavastu (Bc 1.2). It is further elaborated in Mahigovinda Sutta of Digha Nikaya that the king in ancient India was elected by a group of men called *rajakattaro*; the king-makers, but the prince had been their first choice (DN 2.233). In addition to this, the Agganna Sutta says that "Now the Sakyans are vassals of the King of Kosala" (DN 3.83). In fact, Suddhodana was elected by the Sakyans as their king, and he strived for his son; Siddhartha, to be the next heir of the throne; however, during the last days of Gautama Buddha the country of Kapilavastu was conquered by the King of Kosala (Law 1932).

Textual sources corroborate such a status of Suddhodana in the visual representation. The

king wears a similar attire; *anthariya* (dhoti), *uttariya* and *mauli*, and ornaments; earring, necklace, and bracelet on his right hand, as other royal figures as well as those people who were in the service of the royal family. With a similar approach, the queen was not different in costume. She is portrayed in traditional dress worn by women in the indigenous culture of the artist. Two varieties are more obvious; the Indian and Central Asian. Similarly, ornaments in structure do not differ from other women. The anklet of Queen Māya is not different from the female attendant in the birth scene. However, the dress and jewellery of elite and subsequent classes might have different in material rather than design, or the artist gave no heed to the functional aspect of costume and ornaments.

Although, the prince has been elegant and appears in similar costume but he is the only round character and protagonist in the story, thus some iconographical features and attributes are distinct from the rest of people in the story. For example, when Sakyamuni was a child, his character and identification is cued with a halo behind his head which denotes the dignified status of his character.

The Divinities

Indra and Brahma are divine characters in the Buddhist narrative art. Indra is treated in like a royal personage, since gods and kings, in Buddhism, are thought to be of the same level. The Brahma is personified as a *rishi*. Although Buddhist philosophy does not support the idea of Creator or Supreme God, instead in other divine beings or *devas* are believed to be existed and these might be powerful but not necessarily be superior or wiser than human (Nyanaponika 1981; Cf. J iii.129). Thus, despite supreme status of Indra and Brahma in Brahmanism, for Buddhists, they were treated like *arahants*; who are pure and free from any defilement, and not destined for future rebirth; whereas Brahman is

not the one of priestly caste but his excellence is based on the qualities he has attained (Davids 1921:89). In visual representation, they appear in anthropomorphic form. Indra is depicted in regal apparel with characteristic turban kirita mukuta, and vajra in his hand, and Brahma as a rishi holding a kuja, and wears paridhana and uttariya.

The Brahman Seer

In ancient India, the raja would call a priest for horoscope and naming the new-born child. According to Tipitaka text, the sage Āsita noticed a triumph of thirty-three gods with Indra and Brahma at their top in the heaven, and thereby knew about the birth of Sakyamuni Buddha (Sn 679-83). He went to Suddhodana's palace and predicted the greatness of Sakyamuni by examining marks on child's body (Sn 690). Thus he was expert of signs. However, the 'either chakrvarti or Buddha' prophecy was post-canonical insertion. The scripture also describes Āsita as having 'matted lock' (Sn 889). Moreover, in Nakkhatta Jataka, the Buddha calls fool to those who rely on astrological prediction.

The Teacher (Acharya)

Two kinds of education systems can be inferred from the textual sources of the story: one is the monastic training where Ālāra Kalama and Uddāka Kalama were teaching the rules of meditation (MN i.163-7). On the other side, in specialized subjects or skills, people were getting secondary lessons other than Vedic and Brahmanic education, such as literature, law, astronomy and martial arts etc. For Kashtriyas and Vaishyas the course was attenuated to focus on their future concerns (Keay 1918). In monastic practice one guide was responsible for many disciples, but in specialized subjects, one teacher for one student was a custom in ancient India. However, from narrative reliefs it can be

decoded that one teacher for many students was revolutionized in the Buddhist learning and education system. Teachers were usually seasoned only in art, science or skill; for instance, Visvamisra, was noted for his extraordinary knowledge in literature, mathematics, and pictography or script (LV 10.124).

The Grass-cutter

Grass-cutters were from a social class refer to in the Buddhist texts as kāmākāra (hired-labourer). They had neither specialized craft nor land to cultivate. Esukara Sutta indicates that the wealth of a worker is sickle and carrying-pole (MN ii.180). According to Visayha Jataka, the grass-cutter was used to mow grass, tied up into bundles, and sell it in the market, and also give in alms (J iii.130).

Guards, Entertainers, Attendants and Worshippers

Besides main characters, there are people in the story that have no identity (or name) but are stereotypes. However, they are supporting characters and play an active part in the story, and one can imagine a clear picture of society of the time; the political, social, and cultural indications in their appearance as well as in actions. These include royal guards, court musicians and dancers, common people, and attendants, devotees and worshippers.

The guards depicted are generally in Greek or Scythian appearance. There are both male and female guards illustrated in the story. Yavanis (female Greek guards) are performing their duty in the harem of Queen Māya while the male guards are protecting the royalty as depicted in the Transportation of the Child. The female guards are equipped with spears and male guards have both bows and spears.

The entertainers appear only in the scene of Renunciation of Buddha. These musicians are playing various instruments while female dancers are trying to keep amused Prince Siddhartha and his consort, performing inside their harem. They are clad in common dress. The examples of common people are to be seen in the Ascetic Banquet.

The royal attendants are depicted in the Birth of Siddhartha and Transportation of the Child. They are there to assist the royal family. The female attendants are helping Māya while males are serving them in their journey. The palanquin-carriers wear short dhoti probably not to hinder them in walking. In the later parts of the story worshippers are depicted to pay reverence to the Lord Buddha.

Conclusion

The oral tradition of storytelling, prevalent during the life time of Buddha, was an effective medium of communication and preaching the Buddhist faith. This medium was continued by his followers for many centuries, but was least reliable and left much confusion for the historian community as well as for the believers. Other modes through which the legends about the life and teachings of Gautama Buddha were transmitted include compiled corpus of scriptures and narrative relief panels. The genesis of these two were also based on the oral tradition but these were more trustworthy and permanent in nature. Each of these modes; though all share a common theme with each other but, has its unique and individual character. These are distinguished in the way how these narrate the sacred biography of the Buddha. However, all these speak of events from the Buddha's life have little concern regarding resemblance and similarities. In effect there developed a rich diversity in the representation of Buddha's anecdote. This diversity occurs not only among different modes but also can be

noticed within each mode. In visual production, this variety is due to different factors; such as, the manner of instruction the artist had received, ethnic or geographical background and social activities of the people, empirical and technical approaches of the sculptor, and early prototypes.

The present scholarship does not rely on a single theory but provides more hypotheses what became referents for the visual communication. Among these, some argue that the earliest Buddhist artist was instructed verbally, or depended on his personal knowledge about the chronicle, before rendering scenes from the life story. Inversely, the difference between scriptures and visual representation, there are people who speak of a written record of these events lost long before in mists of time and could not survive till present (Stoye 2008:187). On the other side, scholars are in the opinion that much of the iconographic vocabulary was added to the scripture when the imagery was enriched in due course of time (Swati 1997). Despite these consequences the fact is still remaining that the mode of verbal or written instructions cannot evade differences and diversity in the rendering of scenes, the appearance of characters, and displaying their traits.

In understanding the choice of characters, the most appealing assumption is that the human figures acted in these scenes were from the ethnic groups, and the cultural elements were borrowed from indigenous society. The backdrop against which the artist has arranged these events was not less than a glimpse of the surrounding he lived in. Likewise, geographical background of creator, and the patron community as well, was also a factor in diversifying imagery and demonstration of the traits. Yet another reason was social activities in the community or in the immediate environment that how they behaved and acted in the daily life.

Personal experience of the artist also brought many changes in the manifestation of figures, their props and stage. He was likely competent enough to integrate what was his personal curiosity in dealing with figures and their appearance. There are examples which reveal the fact that the artists have used real and life models in portraying people. Moreover, the artist was talented to personalize foreign elements and incorporate them skillfully. Medium, tools, techniques and proficiency in these also play a considerable role in transferring ideas on to the surface of stone.

Assuming the fact that the Buddhist artist was successful in visualizing characters, their personality traits and the social status of the people. As such, realism was a key component of the Buddhist artist in representation; however, his art was much appreciated for its psychological impacts rather than aesthetic quality. Moreover, the artist did not underestimate the role of text which is also essential in deducing events and personalities or group of people who took part in sacred story of the Buddha.

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Illustrations (for reference may or may not part of the article)



1. Queen Māya's Dream (detail)



2. Birth of Siddhartha and Interpretation of Māya's Dream



3. Bath of the Siddhartha



4. Transportation of the Child to Kapilavastu



5. Siddhartha in the School of Visvamitra



6. Ascetic Banquet



7. The Departure from Palace



8. Sotthiya offering Bundle of Grass to Bodhisattva



9. Indra and Brahma Entreating Buddha



10. Cremation of Buddha and Death of Buddha

Image Source: 1, 2, 3, 5, 7, 9 Butkara III; 4, 6, 8, 10 Marjanai (Swat), SSAQ Museum, Peshawar University

