

An Iconographic Study of an Unnoticed Early Medieval Surya Sculpture from Anandipur Village in Noakhali District, Bangladesh

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Abstract: This article observes the distinctive iconographic features of an unpublished stone sculpture of Surya, discovered in 2010 in Anandipur village of Noakhali District, Bangladesh. Although historically associated with the ancient regions of Samatata and Harikela, Noakhali has yielded limited archaeological evidence, with no surviving monuments from the Hindu-Buddhist or Sultanate periods. A few scattered finds including images of Marichi and Dancing Siva suggest the region's participation in early medieval religious and artistic traditions. The Surya sculpture is presently preserved in the reserve collection of the Bangladesh National Museum, has not yet received scholarly attention. It represents a significant addition to the corpus of Surya sculptures from Bengal. This study seeks to analyze the iconographic characteristics of the sculpture and interpret its religious and artistic significance within the broader context of early medieval Bengal.

Keywords: Surya, Iconography, Noakhali, South-East Bengal, Early Medieval Period.

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Noakhali is a southeastern district of Bangladesh, located along the coast of the Bay of Bengal. Its history is closely linked to the broader cultural and political developments of eastern Bengal, particularly the ancient regions of Samatata¹ and Harikela². Although the region lacks extensive direct archaeological evidence compared to other parts of Bengal, its coastal position and riverine connectivity suggest it held historical importance in trade, communication and cultural exchange. Noakhali was known as Bhulua and formed a part of the Pundra Kingdom for much of the early period. Over time, it came under the control of various regional powers, including the Khadgas, Harikelans, Chandras, Varmans, Senas and Devas. Despite this layered historical background, Noakhali appears to be an area of relatively recent settlement, as no ancient monuments either from the Hindu-Buddhist or Sultanate periods; have yet been discovered within the district.³ Only a few archaeological evidences have been identified in the region. Among these, a stone image of Marichi likely dating to the early medieval period (approximately from the 7th to the early 13th century CE), is currently worshipped at a temple in Amishapara Village of the Sonaimuri Upazila.⁴ An image of Dancing Siva has been

reported from Noakhali on a website, though further details regarding this artifact remain unavailable.⁵ Interestingly, an inscribed image of Surya, originally from Hatia Island at the mouth of the Meghna River in Noakhali District, was later brought to Kulkuri (now in Shariatpur District) and subsequently acquired by the Bangladesh National Museum. The accompanying inscription dates the image to the 12th regnal year of Govindachandra⁶, providing a rare and valuable historical reference. This sculpture represents the most significant known example of Surya imagery from the Noakhali region, both for its artistic merit and epigraphic importance.

Another significant find is a sculpture of Surya (**Fig. 1**), discovered on 28 April 2010 by local workers while digging up a tank known as Pandit Bari Dighi (23° 02' 49" N 91° 01' 57" E), located in the village of Anandipur⁷ in Noakhali District, Bangladesh. The sculpture was subsequently recovered by the local police and taken into custody at Sonaimuri Thana. On 29 December 2010, the Bangladesh National Museum⁸ officially acquired the piece. It is currently preserved in the museum's reserve collection under the accession number 2011.1. The Surya sculpture remains academically unpublished to date.⁹ The present article seeks to examine and interpret the distinctive iconographic features of this image in the context of early medieval religious art in Bengal. Before focusing on the iconography of this sculpture, it might be worthwhile to give a brief introduction to the origin of the Sun-god and his role in Bengal's artistic tradition in detail.

The antiquity of Sun worship in India, as well as the depiction of Surya in Indian art, has been the focus of numerous scholarly studies.¹⁰ Determining the precise origin and development of the Surya sect (Sun cult) in the Indian subcontinent remains challenging due to the limited and scattered nature of available evidence. There are many pre-historic seals, beads and terracottas found in Indus civilization contain the symbols, looking very close to Surya.¹¹ It has been documented that Sun worshipping in India emerged as early as the Neolithic period. The evidence of the Sun worship cult in ancient India began from the beginning of the proto-historic period to the early medieval period.¹² During the Vedic period, Surya was venerated as a luminous celestial body. A hymn from the Rigveda (VII.6.3) describes Surya as rising from the lap of the dawns, shining upon both mortals and gods, dispelling darkness with his light, and driving away disease and evil dreams. Surya and his different aspects as Savita, Pusan, Bhaga, Vivasvat, Mitra, Aryaman and Visnu; were prayed several times in Vedas, out of whom most prominent was Surya. The *Rigveda* (II.27.1) also mention the six names of Adityas: Mitra, Aryaman, Bhaga, Varuna, Daksa and Ansa. References to Surya and his various aspects are also found throughout both of the great epics, the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, where the concept of the Dvadasadityas is also mentioned.¹³ Depending on the date of the literatures of ancient India, Panini and Patanjali's descriptions in early Buddhist and Jain texts, early images and coins reveal that it was originated as early as 2nd or 3rd century BCE.¹⁴ A deep-rooted tradition of Sun worship left its imprint on the early epigraphs of Bengal as well. These inscriptions attribute numerous names and epithets to the Sun deity, reflecting his multifaceted nature and widespread veneration. Among the appellations used are: Sahasrarasmi, Bhuvanapati, Savita, Bhanu, Ravi, Chandamsu, Divaskara, Divakara, Bhaskara, Martanda, Maunaditya, Vijayaditya and Mihir.¹⁵

In Bengal, the worship of Surya is perhaps attested from as early as the Sunga period, as suggested by a number of Surya images discovered in North Bengal that have been stylistically attributed to this era.¹⁶ But some scholars such as P.C. Bagchi, Gerd J. Mevissen and other; think that the worship of Surya is more reliably attested from the Gupta period onwards.¹⁷ The Jagadishpur copperplate of the Gupta year 128 (447 CE), refers to a land grant made in favor of two Buddhist *viharas* as

well as a temple dedicated to the Sun-god at Gulmagandhika. This record indicates that the donor, Bhuyila, was likely a devotee of both the Buddha and Surya, reflecting a syncretic religious landscape during the period. In 1992, Enamul Haque documented a total of 210 Surya sculptures from Bengal based on an empirical investigation.¹⁸ Later in 2006, Gerd J. R. Mevissen recorded over 250 such sculptures.¹⁹ Since then, the number has increased significantly due to the discovery of numerous additional examples. Nevertheless, a good number of specimens have also been reported from South-East Bengal.²⁰ A bronze image of Surya was discovered at Deulbari, while a bronze image was found in Cell No. 41 of the Salban Vihara at Mainamati. A large black stone sculpture has been unearthed at Uriswar, and another stone image has been reported from Cumilla. These are the major findings from this region. Collectively, these specimens underscore the widespread veneration of Surya and point to the deity's considerable popularity in southeastern Bengal during the early medieval period. The Surya image from Deulbari depicts the deity seated on a chariot drawn by seven galloping. He is flanked by Pingala and Dandi, both shown in seated postures, while Aruna, his charioteer, is depicted seated behind the *makara*-headed device at the front of the chariot. Noteworthy are the fully bloomed lotuses, held by their stalks and the intricately rendered jewelry including a prominently detailed girdle, all of which reflect the skill of a highly accomplished sculptor. This bronze image, attributed stylistically to the late Gupta tradition, dates approximately to the 7th–8th century CE and is presently preserved in the Bangladesh National Museum.²¹ This is undoubtedly a remarkable specimen of Surya image in Eastern Indian art. However, most of the Surya sculptures discovered in Bengal date to the Pala-Sena period and exhibit a set of standardized iconographic features. The deity typically stands in *samapadaasthanaka*, holding two full-bloomed lotuses at shoulder height. He is accompanied by attendants such as Pingala, Dandai, Surenu, Nikshumbha, Usha, Pratyusha and occasionally Mahasveta. His attire includes high boots, a girdle, pleated waistcoat or breastplate (*kavacha*), *upavita*, tight-fitting *dhoti*, and a *vastrayugamsamopetam*. A sheathed sword hangs from his left, and a dagger is tucked into a decorated girdle. He wears a flat *kirita-mukuta* and is sometimes flanked by the Adityas, Navagrahas and Rishis.²²

The Surya sculpture from Anandipur village in the Noakhali District, now preserved in the Bangladesh National Museum, is executed in quartz-chlorite-schist and remains in a good state of preservation except for the right hand being broken off (**Fig. 1**). The sculpture measures 71 cm in height and 37 cm in width. It is a unique specimen in that, despite its elaborate detailing, the entire composition maintains a remarkable sense of clarity and precision. The back-slab has been skillfully scooped out and each element of the artwork is rendered with meticulous attention to detail (**Fig. 3**). The sculpture under discussion shares the characteristic iconographic features commonly observed in numerous other Surya images found from Bengal. Surya is shown standing in *samapadaasthanaka* pose on the upper plane of the pedestal, wearing high boots, indicative of his martial aspect and is positioned on a chariot. The deity holds the *dandas* (stalks) of two eight-petalled and fully-bloomed lotuses which rise just above his shoulder. His body is protected by a *kavacha* (breastplate/amour), the contours of which are intricately designed, with intertwining lines that culminate in a floral motif or the Surya symbol at the centre of his belly. Surya is richly adorned with an elaborate array of ornaments and garments. He wears *ratna-kundalas* (gem-studded earrings), multiple *haras* (necklaces), *valayas* (bracelets), *vajuvandas* (armlets), an undulating **beaded** *yajnopavita* (sacred thread) which descends from the left shoulder reaches up to the right thigh, a finely decorated *uttariya* (upper cloth) and an intricately designed *kativandha* or *avyanga* (**waistband**). His head is crowned by a profusely

ornamented *kirita-mukuta* terminating in a jewel-like finial and backed by an elongated two-part nimbus framed by lotus petals. Two twisted locks of hair fall on each shoulder. A **dagger** appears to be attached at the right side of his waist, extending toward the left. The **lower garment** is skillfully executed with delicate, thin folds that add a sense of movement and realism. It is further embellished with **double-line strips** and a floral motif composed of nine circular elements, one central circle surrounded by eight smaller circles forming a stylized floral pattern.



Fig. 1: Surya, Quartz-Chlorite-Schist, 71 × 37 cm, c. 11th century CE, Pandit Bari Dighi, Noakhali District, Bangladesh (Photo Courtesy: Bangladesh National Museum)

The Sun-god is accompanied by the standard accessory figures: his two principal male attendants Pingala (on his right) and Dandin (on his left) (**Fig. 2**), both of whom are integral to Surya iconography. The attributes of the youthful Dandin, who stands to the left of the principal figure, is crowned with a *karanda-mukuta*. He shows his raised right hand in *vyakhyana-mudra* and his left hand resting on his thigh in *uruhadta* positioned just above the handle of a staff or sword. On the right, the pot-bellied and bearded Pingala is depicted holding a pen in his right hand and an ink-pot in his right hand held in front of his chest. According to legends, Pingala is supposed to record the good and the bad deeds of people. Pingala is also crowned with a *karanda-mukuta* similar to Dandin. Both attendants are adorned with jewelry similar to that of the central deity, reinforcing their elevated status within the divine retinue.



Fig. 2: Depiction of Pingala (right) and Dandin (left)

The stele of the Surya sculpture is richly adorned with five female figures associated with Surya, each contributing to the iconographic complexity of the composition (see the **Figs. 2 & 4**). Among them, the figure standing between Surya's feet is generally identified as the earth goddess Mahasveta. Positioned just in front of Surya's boots and behind Aruna Mahasveta's facial features are unfortunately now completely damaged. She stands in *samabhanga* pose, with her right hand in front of her breast holding an *aksamala* and the left near lowered holding a *kamandala* (water-pot) is loosely hanging down. Her legs are hidden by Aruna, and she is crowned by a high *jatamukuta*. Flanking the central figure are Surya's two consorts, Surenu and Chaya, who appear as understated attendants. They stand in *abhanga* posture, each holding a *cauri* or *chamara* (fly-whisk) in their right hands, emphasizing their role in divine service. On either side of the stele are two dynamic female figures, typically identified as Usa and Pratyusa²³, the personifications of dawn and twilight. They are shown in *alidha* and *pratyalidha* postures, respectively, each poised with bow and arrow in hand. According to legends, they are engaged in chasing darkness with their bows and arrows.

The pointed apex of the *prabhavali* has a prominent *kirtimukha* and on the two corners are shown two flying couples of garland-bearing Vidyadharas with consorts, *kinnara* pair on either side seated above the lintel at the back of the shoulder of the deity; enhancing the celestial ambiance of the composition. Vidyadharas are crowned with a *karanda-mukuta* and wear *karna-kundalas*, *hara*, *valayas*, *vajuvandas* along with various ornamentations. Vidyadharis are in *anjali-mudra* behind the Vidyadharas. The surface of the slab's upper half is ornamented with scroll design. The back-slab is further adorned with finely carved decorative motifs, including graceful *gaja-sardula*²⁴ with a male rider in *anjali-mudra* on the standing lion's back, and intricate floral patterns, contributing to the overall elegance and visual complexity of the image (Fig. 3).



Fig. 3: Details of the back-slab

The chariot is a distinctive and consistent feature in Surya sculptures, typically comprising seven horses, one or more wheels and **Aruna**, the divine charioteer. In this particular specimen, Surya is similarly positioned on a chariot drawn by seven horses represented through a *saptaratha* pedestal, each horse placed within a separately projected *ratha* (**Fig. 4**). Aruna is depicted from the waist upwards, his raised right hand holding a whip while the left hand is broken. Unfortunately, Aruna's head is also mutilated, obscuring his facial features. His avian nature is clearly indicated by a distinct pair of wings extending from his back. The **central projection** of the pedestal is exquisitely carved in the form of a **pillared porch**, with the figure of a horse with the head turned backwards at its centre, appearing as though it is emerging from an entrance doorway. This dynamic and imaginative depiction adds a vivid sense of movement and architectural sophistication to the composition. The six lateral horses are shown in a downward motion, their folded legs suggesting they are resting on the ground. Each horse is carefully equipped with a **bridle** and **saddle**, reflecting meticulous attention to detail and enhancing the realism of the scene.



Fig. 4: Details of the pedestal

The sculpture is rendered with remarkable attention to detail. Notably, the central figure of the stele appears relatively smaller in proportion to the overall composition, allowing the background to occupy a significantly larger space. This expanded background serves to accommodate a range

of essential iconographic elements, including **Vidyadharas**, attendants and other celestial figures. Such compositional characteristics particularly the reduced scale of the principal deity in relation to the elaborately populated background are stylistically consistent with sculptural trends of the 11th century CE. Furthermore, specific features such as the standard high *saptaratha* pedestal, the flattened flame motifs around the rim of the back slab, the slender body of the main deity and the stylization of ornaments suggest that this image can generally be ascribed to that period.

The iconographic features and representation of Surya in Indian art have been extensively studied. Varahamihira, in the *Brhatsamhita* prescribes that Surya should be depicted as four-armed, attired like a northerner, with his body covered from the feet to the chest. He is to hold two lotuses, wear a crown and be adorned with a *viyadga* (sacred griddle), earrings and a long necklace. His figure is further embellished with a radiant halo, armor and various ornaments.²⁵ Notably, this textual description omits mention of a chariot, horses, consorts or attendants. Similar iconographic descriptions are also found in the *Agni Purana*, *Matsya Purana* and *Hayasirsa Purana*.²⁶ These texts describe a two-armed deity holding lotuses, riding a one-wheeled chariot drawn by seven horses, flanked by attendants Pingala and Dandi. The *Agni* and *Hayasirsa Puranas* also name Rajni and Nisprabha as Surya's consorts. While the *Matsya Purana* omits the consorts, it emphasizes the deity's armor-clad body, elaborate attire and the divine radiance that conceals his feet.²⁷ Since ancient times, Bengal has demonstrated a tendency to assimilate deities across religious traditions, often worshipping a god or goddess of one faith under different names in another. The Surya sculptures of early medieval Bengal appear to have been created primarily in accordance with these Puranic narratives, reflecting a syncretic yet canonical visual tradition.

An iconological analysis of the Surya sculpture from Anandipur village in the Noakhali District serves as a valuable supplement to the already documented corpus of Surya imagery from Eastern India, particularly Bengal. This sculpture not only enriches the existing repertoire but also offers nuanced insights into the regional stylistic and iconographic variations characteristic of the Bengal school during the early medieval period. Moreover, it constitutes a significant addition to the collection of Surya sculptures preserved in the Bangladesh National Museum.

The above study mainly focuses on the iconographic features of a hitherto unnoticed image of the Surya sculpture from the Noakhali District of Bangladesh. This is not an isolated artistic relic; it is a vital link in the evolving tradition of Surya worship in this region. Through its refined artistry, elaborate iconography and contextual significance, it provides invaluable insights into the religious, cultural and artistic milieu of early medieval Bengal. This study not only advocates for the inclusion of such previously unpublished finds into the mainstream academic narrative but also emphasizes the need for continued archaeological and iconographic investigations in understudied regions like Noakhali.

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NOTES

1. Samatata means 'flat coast land' and refers to a well-defined ancient sub-region of South-East Bengal. It comprised the Trans-Meghna territories of the Cumilla-Noakhali plains, along with the hilly region of

- Tripura to the east. The Bay of Bengal marked its southern boundary, while the Meghna River defined its northern limit. To the west, the Meghna is joined by the Padma River, further demarcating the region's extent. For more details, see Bhattacharya 1977: 65-68; Rashid 2008: 11-16; Islam 2014: 2.
2. Harikela was another distinct sub-region in the Trans-Meghna region, geographically and politically separated from Samatata. As Mukherjee (1975: 115-119) has clearly demonstrated, the Harikela kingdom initially encompassed the present-day Chittagong region along with some adjacent areas. It emerged as an independent political entity within the coastal tract of Chittagong. With the expansion of its political power, the territory of Harikela eventually extended to include parts of Noakhali, Cumilla, Tripura and the Sylhet regions. For more details, see Mukherjee 1975: 115-119; Rashid 2008: 11-16; Islam 2014: 2-6.
 3. See Zakariah 2011: 774.
 4. See Bhattasali 1929: 272. The worshippers identify this deity as the Hindu goddess Varahi. Bhattasali (1929: 272) notes that this deity served as the patron goddess of the kings of Bhulua, who likely worshipped this Buddhist deity probably in ignorance of the fact that it belonged to the Buddhist faith.
 5. See the website www.alamy.com, accessed on 10 January, 2024. Only some photographs of the Siva image, along with limited information regarding its provenance, are available. Based on its iconographic features, the image can also be attributed to the early medieval period.
 6. See Bhattasali 1947-48: 24-26; Huntington 1984: 242-244, no. 67.
 7. This village is located in Jayag Union, within the newly established Sonaimuri Upazila, and is situated in northwestern part of the upazila. Jayag Union is bordered by Nadna Union to the east, Deoti Union to the south, Panchgaon Union of Chatkhil Upazila to the west, Mohammadpur Union of Chatkhil Upazila to the northwest, and Saraspur Union of Monohargaj Upazila of Cumilla District to the northeast.
 8. It is worth mentioning that the reserve collection of the Bangladesh National Museum is one of the richest repositories of Buddhist and Brahmanical sculptures, acquired from various regions across Bangladesh. This collection has already been the subject of numerous scholarly articles and publications. Many of its unique and significant pieces were acquired through purchases and field explorations. The assemblage of sculptures from different parts of Bangladesh represents the artistic heritage of Bengal understood here as the combined region of present-day West Bengal in India and the country of Bangladesh as well as Eastern India more broadly. Despite the richness of the collection, many sculptures have remained overlooked or insufficiently studied. The present study examines one such unpublished sculpture of Surya.
 9. A news report regarding the discovery was published in the newspaper 'Dainik Amar Desh' on 30 April 2010. In this news, the stone image was reported as Narayana. See also the official correspondence from the Bangladesh National Museum, Letter No. Ba.Ja.Ja./I-Nih Sah/8-Si-1/08-09.
 10. Cited in Mevissen 2009: 99, 107, n. 2 and see also Gopinatha Rao 1914-16, I, 2: 299-318; Bhattasali 1929: 148-173; Banerjea 1948: 47-93; Banerjea 1956: 428-441; Pandey 1971; Srivastava 1972; Pandey 1989; Haque 1992: 177-195; Nagar 1995; Shah 1996; Gail 2001; Haque and Gail 2008: 44-60; Rezowana 2023: 15-20.
 11. See Marshall 1931: pl. LXXXVII, fig. 4; pl. XC, figs. 19, 22; pl. XCI, figs. 27, 33; pl. XCIII, fig. 7; pl. XCVI, fig. 18 etc.; Pandey 1971: 1-9; Srivastava 1972: 22-27.
 12. See Srivastava 1972: ix.
 13. See Banerjea 1956: 428-430.
 14. Cited in Jana 2019: 113.
 15. See a brief discussion in Bag 2010: 240-252.

16. See Haque 1992: 177-178; Rezowana 2023: 15.
17. Cited in Haque 1992: 177-178; Haque and Gail 2008: 44; Rezowana 2023: 15. See Mevissen 2009: 99.
18. See Haque 1992: 181.
- 19 The data is taken from Mevissen 2006.
20. See Bhattasali 1947-48: 24-26; Bhattasali 1929: 171, Huntington 1984: 242-244, no. 67; Haque 1992: 263-364; Rashid 2008: 24, 57, 109, 115, 187; Haque and Gail 2008; Rezowana 2023: 15.
21. See Haque 1992: 192, pl. 169; Rezowana 2023: 16, pl. 1.
22. See a brief discussion in Bhattasali 1929: 148-177; Haque and Gail 2008:44-56; Mevissen 2009: 99-112; Rezowana 2023: 16-17.
23. The head of the female figure on the left side is mutilated, rendering her identity and expression indistinct.
24. A decorative motif in which a lion is on shown rampant on a crouching elephant.
25. Haque 1992: 178.
26. See Haque 1992 for detailed description of iconic marks of Surya mentioned in Matsya Purana.
27. Haque 1992: 178.

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