

# IMAGES OF BUDDHA IN TAMILNADU

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## Abstract

India is considered to be an embodiment of cultural and religious activities. The various faiths of the people had their centres in the capitals of kingdoms over many years like Pataliputra, Amaravati, Nagarjunakonda, Kanchipuram, Tanjore and Madura. Tamil Nadu had been the repository of many Buddhist Viharas and Buddha images throughout its length and breadth. This paper would present details about the images of Buddha that are found available in various place of Tamil Nadu.

The earliest inscriptions we have in the Tamil country belong to the third century B.C. They are written in Brahmi characters of the time, on the walls of the natural caves in the Tamil districts of Madura, Ramnad and Tirunelveli. From these inscriptions we understand that Buddhism had got established in the Tamil country even then.

The earliest Tamil literature of the Sangam age has very few references to Buddhism. The golden age of Buddhism, from the 2<sup>nd</sup> to the 7<sup>th</sup> Century A.D., can be comprehended from the Tamil classical works. The five great epics- *Silapadikāram*, *Maṇimekalai*, *Valaiyāpati*, *Kuṇḍalakesi* and *Jīvakacintāmani* and the great Tamil Bhakti literature, namely the *Tevāram*, *Nāḷāyiraprabandham* and the *Periyapurāṇam* contain references to Buddhism through the centuries.

Buddhists were the first to venturing into the art of sculptures and paintings. The earliest examples are those, belonging to such

places of Bharhut, Sanchi, Amaravati and Nagarjunakonda. They range in date from the 2<sup>nd</sup> to 3<sup>rd</sup> Cent. B.C. The Buddhist sculptures show a variety of styles due to the different regions to which they belong. Nevertheless the subject-matter remains the same, the difference in treatment conveying to us the capacity of sculptors to deal with the same theme in a variety of ways without prejudice to its contents.

The interesting thing to be noted in the Buddha images are that the representations of the Buddha occurring are in a variety of postures such as standing or seated or reclining. In the seated figures, Buddha in the *bhusparsa mudra*, in show their hands in *abhaya* pose and others in *varada* pose. As regards the Buddha figures in the reclining posture, it represents the death of the Buddha.

The various type of images as found in different parts of Tamil Nadu are presented herewith relevant architectural details.

## Images of Buddha from Kanchipuram District



### 1. Standing Buddha image :

A number of images of the Buddha are found during periods varying from 7<sup>th</sup> C. to 14<sup>th</sup> C. at Kanchipuram. The Buddha figure discovered at Kanchi in 1915, in the inner most *Prakara* of the present Kamakshi Amman temple is the 'most remarkable' findings of the great art historian Mr. T. A. Gopinath Rao : From his records, it could be understood that the total height of the image is 7'10". In spite of its two broken hands, from its conception, the boldness of its execution and from the style, the image stands as a proof of extraordinary workmanship. Its features resemble the style of

the sculptures of the early Pallava times.

The oval face, broad eyes and wide curls of hair proves the fact that traditions of art continue unbroken in the South. The nose of the image is much worn. The long flowing robes descending from the left hand and the folds of the same over the right hand are intricately worked. The design of drapery looks more or less in the same as found executed especially in the huge Viṣṇu images of 7<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> Centuries. On the basis of this the Buddha image from Kamakshi Temple at Kanchipuram can be attributed to the beginning of the 7<sup>th</sup> Cen. A.D. This figure is at present in the safe custody of Government Museum, Tamil Nadu.

## 2. Seated Buddha image :

- a) The Buddha is seated here in the *padmasana* posture. The face is of the Javanese style rather than that of the Chola type. Here the *civaras* are distinctly seen and the *ushnisha* is not a fully developed flame. This statue is said to belong to the first half of the 11<sup>th</sup> Century A.D. This image was



found near the Police Station at (Siva) Kanchipuram; at present it is preserved by the Government Museum, Tamil Nadu.

- b) The Seated Buddha in the Karukkilaranda Amman temple at Kanchipuram, is about 3 feet 9 inches high. Here the image of Buddha is in the *bhuspasa mudra*, having the face of a Chola type. The face and head have features of classical style. There is a halo behind the head. Beautifully worked tassels are inside the halo, and there are flame tips on the outside margin. The makara heads at both ends of the halo touch the shoulders. Its date may be of 12<sup>th</sup> C. A.D.





c) This seated Buddha of Kuvam displayed at present in the Museum of Chennai is said to belong to 14<sup>th</sup> C. A.D. The main feature of this statue is its *prabhavali* which is supported on pilasters. It is a fine specimen, expressing vigor and strength. The halo is of the pointed type and is covering only the head.



d) On the walls of Ekāmbareswara temple, the figures of the seated Buddha are carved in high relief in the *dhyana* pose on *padmasana* within an elaborately worked *prabha*-on-pillar motif.



e) Seated Buddha on the walls of the Ekāmbareswara temple shows a separate *prabha* behind the head, within the one which encloses the entire figure. The second *prabha* is not touching the shoulders of the image and as though hanging in the air. The *ushnisha* adheres only to the top of the head, is structured as an elongated cone.

### 3. Reclining Buddha image :

The Buddha in reclining posture on the outer wall of the Ekambareswara temple at Kanchipuram may be assigned to Chola period. It represents the death of the Buddha. This figure is a unique one as there is no such image of Buddha in the form of *parinirvana*. Though the face of the image is much damaged, from the style of the *ushnisha* it can be dated to later period. Behind the head is the *prabha*. Both the head and the leg of the image are placed on cushioned pillows. The figure has an oblong *bhadra pitha*.

On the pedestal the double-lotus is made to cling on the feet of the reclining Buddha. Below the lotus a miniature figure with hands in *anjali* pose held above the head and the face indicating extreme remorse is depicted. This image is poor in its magnificent representations, when compared with Ajanta and Anuradhapura.



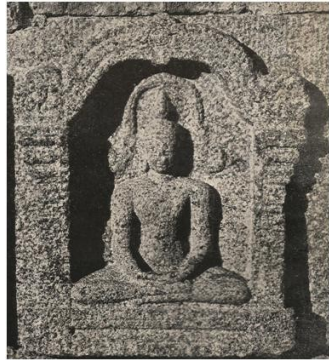
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## Images of Buddha from Tanjore District

### 1. Seated Buddha

#### a) Maitreya Buddha image :

The image was discovered in the village in Melaiyur in the Sirgazhi Taluk. A beautiful copper gilt image, it had been found by Mr. T.N. Ramachandran who identified as a figure representing Maitreya. This figure is not only a magnificent example of the art of bronzes of South India, but also of all the Buddhist bronzes of Tamil Nadu.



The beautiful ornaments and garments are characteristic of sculptures of the Pallava period.

The gold plated image popularly known as copper – gilded, is 39.5 cm in height with pedestal, and of 35 cm in height without it. Standing erect on a circular *padmasana*, it has a round face having a mark of *urna* on its forehead; the *Karaṇḍamakuta* is low and rising in tiers, with *stupa* in front and other decorative designs. It resembles much of Javanese type.



The *makarakuṇḍalas* in the ears, hair behind arranged in wig-like *sirascakra*, a broad necklace with pendants as in the images from Java and Nalanda, waist girdle are some of its distinct features. The image also had a garland like *yajṣopavīta* thrown over the right arm as in Pallava sculptures. A long strand like ornament thrown *yajṣopavīta* wise extends up to the feet.

A thick undergarment with lines, tassels, loops and secure strings arranged in elegant knots, a belt with clasp showing a flower in the place of the usual *simhamukha* are some of the interesting details in this image. The *stupa* design on the *mukuta* makes its identity as Maitreya. This figure is contemporary with the granite figures from Amaravati and can be easily assigned to 9<sup>th</sup> C. A.D.

#### b) Seated Buddha from Madagaram :



This image is now in the Tanjore Art Gallery. Seated on a beautiful *padmasana* posture, it possesses an *ushnisha*, not properly chiseled and has no indication of any halo. With the curls of hair, the *urna*, the *civara* and the ends of the lower garments of the legs are all well pronounced. The depression and the *trivali* on the neck are clearly seen. The face possessing sublime bliss is suggestive of grace rather than power. The square face is indicative of Chola style and can be clearly datable to be about 1000 A.D. The organizers of the Gallery have added a halo, throne and frilled cloth in front, all in cement, mar the beauty of the original.

### c) Seated Buddha from Elaiyur :

From the style of its execution it can be placed in the late 11<sup>th</sup> C. The halo which we find in the later centuries is absent here. It should have been influenced by the foreign art traditions, since the face and the features are elongated and from the peculiar modeling of the torso to the broadness of the shoulders. This image is also in a seated *padmasana* with an *urna* on its forehead and an *ushnisha* has assumed the shape of a flame. The *trivali* on the neck is prominent.



### d) Seated Buddha from Manambadi:

A distinct Chola type sculpture belonging to 12 C. A.D., this Buddha figure is seated in the *bhadrasana* which has seven moldings. The halo behind the head is more developed when compared to other images shown above.

### e) Seated Buddha from Karur

Maintaining a *dhyana* posture with a *prabha* around etched on pillars as like that of the image of Kuvam, a beautiful Buddha figure of the height of two and half feet has been obtained from Karur. The other features of the image also resemble undoubtedly the later Chola artistic style.



## 2. Standing Buddha from Tiruvalanjuli :

This figure may be dated to 11<sup>th</sup> C. This image too, symbolizes the exquisite works of the end of the early Cholas. In its features, one doesn't find a halo; the *urna* which is shown as an inverted question mark is unique in appearance. Bronze image of Buddha in a standing posture is quite common, but not stone figures. The drapery of this figure covers its entire body and the ends of the

cloth have been adorned with beautiful frillings, similar to the images of standing Buddha in Nagapattinam.

## Images of Buddha in Nagapattinam District :

### 1. Standing Buddha

More than three hundred Buddha images made out of bronze have been discovered in Nagapattinam. Only a few of them belong to Chola period. Of them the image of standing Buddha, is the largest and most beautiful of all; also it is an iconographical specimen that is rare. Mr. T.N. Ramachandran who found this image describes this as – “Height with pedestal 89 cm; without pedestal 80 cm...\_\_\_ standing in a circular *padmasana*.... Long robe thrown over the body, leaving the right chest and arm bare. Right hand *abhaya*; left raised up in an attempt to hold the robe and both the hands without any palm mark. The fingers are delicate and slender (*Jalanguli*) suggesting smoothness at once, gentle and soothing. Face oval with nose, lips, chin, eyes, forehead and ears strictly proportionate. Ear lobes slightly elongated, more to indicate the convention than to subscribe to it and holes not bored. Hair is six rows of curls surmounted by a small flame like *ushnisha*....”

“The *padmasana* has four holes intended to secure the image to a basic stand, while the image is carried in procession....

“May be taken as the earliest, probably 10<sup>th</sup> Century A.D. in point of time”.





## 2. Seated Buddha :

About one of the late Buddha's bronze image, Mr. T.N. Ramachandran assigns this figure to late chola period i.e., end of the 11<sup>th</sup> century A.D. His detailed s summarized (in his own words) as below:- "Height with pedestal and *prabha* is 73 cm and without pedestal 29.8 cm-. Hands in *dhyana*.... Seated on an elegant triangular *padmasana* mounted on a rectangular *bhadra'sana*, the latter provided with holes, to hold the shaft spikes of *prabha*. The *prabha* are in 3 parts, lower, middle and upper. The lower part is designed



as the background of *simhāsana* is a broad and curvilinear plate with foliage, designs at the ends flanked by rearing *Sarduals* or *Yāli* and with a horizontal projection in the centre intended to serve as a cushion for the body of the Buddha to lean against.... The Robe of the Buddha .... The folded edge is so wide both in front and back that there is clearly the suggestion that the latter is a different cloth corresponding to the *uttariya*.... Ear lobes are bored and are proportionate to the face. Nose pleasant with nostrils, also indicated and lips quite real. Hairs in seven rows of curls surmounted by flame like *ushnisha*. The anatomy of the whole figure is smooth suggestive of flesh, hand, legs, nose and fingers being done to perfection.

"To the lower part of the *prabha* are attached the figures of *Nāgarājas*, one at either end. They stand on either side of the Buddha and function as the *cauri*-bearers of the Buddha, holding a fly-whisk in the hand that is farther away from the Buddha and

holding the hand that is nearer the Buddha in what is called the *vismaya-hasta* or pose of praise or wonder”.

### 3. Maitreya Buddha :

The description of this bronze statue of Maitreya Bodhisattva as given in Madras Museum Bulletin – “Height with pedestal 75 cm, without pedestal 62.5 cm.... Maitreya standing in *tribhanga* on a circular *padmasana*, having 4 holes for securing the image to a base while carrying in procession.... Four arms; upper right with rosary; upper left with a flower stalk lower right *varada*; lower left *kataka*.... Richly decorated. Hair arranged flame-like resembling a *jatamakuta* with design of *stupa* in front; *makarakuṇḍalas* in the ears, necklaces, four stranded *yajṣopavīta* and *sirascakra*. Comparable with chola type, hence indigenous. The presence of a *stupa* on the *makuta* points to the identity of the image as that of Maitreya”.



Among the other figures of the collection from Nagapattinam belonging to the end of the 10<sup>th</sup> Century A.D., mention must be made also of three images, smaller standing Buddha a *Śimhanada* in the *maharajalila* pose and *Tara*, although the latter two are said to date from a slightly later period.

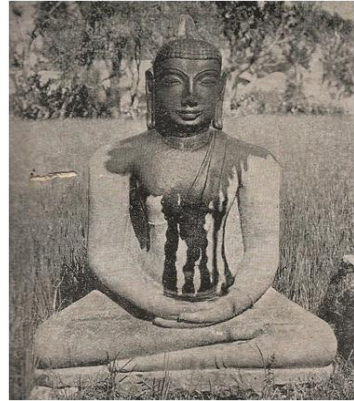
Besides the above-mentioned figures, the collection from Nagapattinam includes a few beautiful but small images of Avalokitesvaras or Lokeshvara, Taras, Jambhalas, monks and votive

*stupas*. These indicate the popularity of the Mahayana Buddhism in South India.

### Images of buddha from other districts :

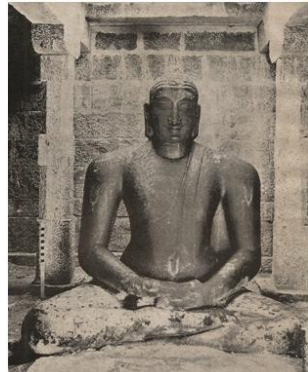
1. It is a seated Buddha of 10<sup>th</sup> C. A.D. from Tyaganur, Athur

Taluk, Salem District. This image is of a complete developed Buddha except for flame on head. Powerfully rendered, the figure is rather plump and the execution bold and vigorous. Instead of the supreme tenderness of facial expression, here it is a self confident type, similar to the late Buddha images from



Amaravathi. A neat a square face, prominent nose, full lips, strong and broad shoulders and proportionate limbs and torso prove the image to be a perfect specimen of sculpture of early Chola type. All these characteristics make this figure a magnificent specimen of sculpture of the 10C. A.D.

2. Seated Buddha from Tiruvatti, South Arcot district, may be belong to the middle of the 11<sup>th</sup> C A.D or a little later. Prominent are the features such as curls of hair and the *civaras*; but the hands and nose are broken and the pedestal is missing. The *ushnisha* works like a flame which is closely attached to the curls of hair. The expression of the figure indicates a sublime serenity.



### 3. Seated Buddha from Manikandi, Ramanathapuram district :

It is the only stone Buddha image having weathered inscription, on the upper rim of the pedestal in *Grantha* script. It dates being 13<sup>th</sup> Cen. A.D. when the Pañdyia Kingdom was well established in Tamil Nadu. Though the face is worn out, it reflects a sublime peace. The *padmasana* to *prabha*, the *ushnisha* and other features are seen fully developed.



### Conclusion :

Thus the existence of Buddhist images dating from before 7<sup>th</sup> Century A.D. to about the 15<sup>th</sup> Century A.D. at Kanchipuram, clearly shows that there continued to exist in Tamil Nadu a Buddhist settlement the members of which were probably in a flourishing condition so as to able to have their own temples which contained such important and large images as described above.

To the last phase of the history of Buddhism in the Tamil country belong a few large images also from Nagapattinam and from a few other places in the Tanjore district. Of these very late figures mention must be made of the standing bronze Buddha figure enclosed within an elaborately worked *prabhavali* dated to about the 16<sup>th</sup> Century A.D. and the Avalokitesvara image standing within a *prabhavali* dating from after 1600 A.D. The existence of such large figures as these dating from so late a period as the 17<sup>th</sup> Century A.D. is proof positive that there were Buddhists in the Tamil Country especially in the district of Tanjore till then, although it is a mystery as to what happened to those Buddhists and Buddhism after that date.

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