

Worship of Mother Goddesses in Buddhism

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Abstracts: The study of Worshipping of Mother Goddesses in Buddhism may be revealed the importance of maternal feelings in Buddhism. In the study, we find the different form of Buddhism generally accepted the importance of Mother Goddesses and their worship being dominant with the origin of Tantrik Buddhism.

Introduction

The concept of the worship of Mother Goddesses is very old and related with the creations of the world. We have ample evidence about the worship of the Mother goddesses. In Indus civilization Archaeologist found some female figuring which were identified as the Mother goddesses, the goddesses of fertility.¹ In the early civilizations of the world we find the worship of Mother Goddesses. Inanna or Nana, Ester, Athena, Ila, Bharati like goddesses are worshipped in different civilizations. The birth place of Buddhism is India. The idea of Buddhist philosophy began with self consciousness and improvement of the self soul. After all it also converted with the idea of super natural powers that dissolved all the human problems. From the origin and development of Mahayan the teacher Buddha became the God Buddha (Bhagwan Buddha). After that we find the versification of so many gods and goddesses in Buddhism.

The gods and goddesses of early Buddhism were borrowed from the existing religious systems of India. The Buddhist Siri-Lakkhi for example, was conceptually a combination of Brahmanical Lakshmi and sarasvati since she is also a goddess of wisdom. There is also a separate goddess called Sarasvati. The Chulavamsa mentions Viralakkhi, the goddess who gives success to warriors.²

¹ P. K. Agrawal, Bhateeya Kala, Prithvi Prakashana, Varanasi, 2010, p. 34-35.

² Bhattacharya, IMG, p. 111.

The Mahayana pantheon is based on a conception of the Adi Buddha and Adi-prajna; also called pragya parmita. The universal Father and universal Mother, from this pair emanate the five Dhyani Buddha.³

The Buddhist pantheon is rich in a varied range of fascinating female divinities; these range from tree spirits to compassionate healers and from wrathful protectors to a cosmic mother of liberation. These female Buddhist divinities can be broadly grouped in two categories. The first represents cosmic power in a feminine form leading to the highest truth and attainments of liberation, often tagged as 'Female Buddhas'. This group includes Mahayana goddesses such as Prajnaparamita and tantric goddesses such as Vajrayogini and Nairatmya. The other group consists of goddesses who are invoked to accomplish a range of practical aims such as protection from diseases and enemies, pursuit of knowledge, mental purification and for promoting a gradual progress towards awakening. The iconographic traits and rituals differ according to the contrasting roles and statuses of these goddesses.⁴

In Mahayanism, the goddesses came to exert an ever-increasing influence. Most of them were more abstractions of some ideas, for the Buddhists deified almost all objects, cosmic and philosophical principles, literature, letters of the alphabet, directions and even the desires into gods and goddesses, with forms, colour, poses and weapons.⁵

The conceptions of Sunyata and Karuna of Mahayana Buddhism later developed into those of Prajna and Upaya in Tantrika Buddhism. Prajna and Upaya symbolized the female and Male Principles respectively. Prajna is viewed as a goddess (Bhagavati). In some Buddhist Tantras, a beautiful girl of sixteen adopted for *sadhana*, is styled Prajna. Elsewhere Prajna denotes the female organ, which is the seat of *mahasukha*. Upaya and Prajna are also called thunder (*vajra*) and the lotus (*padma*) respectively, the former symbolizing the male organ (mani, linga) and the latter, the female yoni.⁶

³ Mazumdar, R.C., History of Bengal, Page 4-67.

⁴ P. Samdarshi, the Delhi University Journal of the Humanities and the Social Sciences, Vol. I, 2014, p. 94.

⁵ Ibid., p. 114.

⁶ For details vide RHAI, I, p. 346 ff.

As a result of the influence of Saktism the Adi Buddha of the Vajrayana group found a consort in Prajnaparamita known by many other names. His emanations, the Dhyani Buddhas, also obtained the divine consort or Sakti of his own. Later Buddhism is, in fact, nothing but a disguised Tantrika cult of the Female principle.

Tara is the most popular goddess of the Buddhist pantheon. She holds the same place in Buddhism which the goddess Durga has in Brahmanism. The Buddhists consider Tara to be the great Mother Goddess, the symbol of primordial female energy and the consort of Avalokitesvara, the symbol of the primordial male principle, just as Durga is conceived as the consort of Siva. She is the mother of all the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas'.⁷ Derived from the root tar, Tara is the name of the goddess, who makes others, i.e., the devotees, cross the sea or ocean. She enables her devotees to surmount all sorts of dangers and calamities. A mere prayer to this goddess is sure to remove the eight mahabhayas (great dangers).

On the basis of his study of the Sadhanamala B. Bhattacharya has prepared a list of 24 forms of Tara. According to S.K. Saraswati Buddhist texts enumerate nearly 100 varieties of Tara. That there were at least 108 names of Tara current among the Buddhists would be evident from the stotra styled *Aryatarabhattacharikanama-ashtottara satakastotra*.⁸

In the Manjusrimulakalpa Tara occur in her various forms like Bhrikuti, Lochana, Sveta, Pandaravasini, Sutara, etc. From the seventh century onwards, we find the exuberance of Tara stotras (e.g. the Sarangdhara-stotras composed in praise of Tara by the eighth century Kashmiri poet Sarvajnamitra). According to the Sammohatantra, Nilasarasvati or Ugratara was born in a lake called Chola on the Western side of the Meru which was included in the Chinadesa. We come across five varieties of Tara, classified according to colour-green, white, yellow, blue and red.

The Buddhists also knew Tara as a serpent-goddess under the name of Janguli. She was a near approach, ichnographically speaking, to the Jaina goddess Padmavati, Janguli is said to be as old as the Buddha himself who is said to have given to Ananda the secret mantra for her

⁷ Dasgupta, K.K. 'Iconography of Tara', SCT, pp. 115-2.

⁸ Ibid., p. 121.

worship. Of the eight kinds of 'fear' which are dispelled by Tara, to which fact she owes her name, the fear from serpents is one.⁹

D.C. Bhattacharya has drawn the attention of the scholars to a Buddhist goddess named Mahamayavijayavahini who was conceived as a fierce aspect of the supreme goddess Tara.¹⁰

Hirananda Sastri and B. Bhattacharya have attempted to show that the cult of Tara must have been Buddhist not Brahmanical, and also foreign, in origin.¹¹ Sastri believes that the Tara worship originated somewhere towards Lakakh and that she came to India via Nepal. Sylvain Levi agrees, on the authority of the Taratantra and some other Sanskrit works, that the worship of Tara and the Tantrika vamachara practices came from China.¹² P. C. Bagchi also insists on the Chinese and Tibetan influences on the Buddhist and Brahmanical Tantras.¹³ Joseph Needham has also concluded that Tantrikism was "really Taoist".¹⁴ But opponents of this theory¹⁵ point out that (a) Tarini and Tara as names of the Devi appear in the Mbh. and the Brahmanda P. (XXXI.12), (b) The Buddhist Tara is almost exactly similar to that of the Brahmanical Durga, the hoary antiquity of which is now a proven fact, (c) Parnasabari, a comparatively late form of Tara, is clearly reminiscent of the description of the Hindu Devi as 'deity worshipped by the Sabaras, Barbaras or Pulindas' in the HV (supra). Tara thus appears to be a Buddhist form of the Hindu Devi Durga, (d) A number of early representations of Tara are found in the Buddhist caves of the Western Deccan. But there is nothing in them to show that their artists either themselves came from the Indo-Tibetan borderlands or consciously illustrated a foreign deity in Indian garb, at places so much distant from the Indo-Tibetan borderlands, (e) A large number of the elements of Tantrikism are found in the Vedic literature itself.¹⁶ To us Sircar also seems to be right when he asserts that Tara was originally worshipped by some aboriginal people (probably of Eastern India) and was adopted in both the Brahmanical and Buddhist pantheons in the early centuries of the Christian era. However in course of time several goddesses, including a few Mongoloid ones,

⁹ Bhattacharya, A.K., 'Tara as a Serpent Deity and its Jain Counterpart Padmavati, SCT, pp. 152-68.

¹⁰ Bhattacharya, D.C., 'An Unknown Form of Tara', SCT, pp. 134-42.

¹¹ MASI, XX, p. 12.

¹² Levi, Le Nepal, I, p. 346 f.

¹³ Bagchi, Studies in Tantras, pp. 46-55.

¹⁴ Quoted by N.N. Bhattacharya in 'Chinese Origin of the Cult of Tara', SCT, pp. 143-4.

¹⁵ Cf. RHAJ, 1, p. 33 f.

¹⁶ Ibid.

merged in her.¹⁷ It is also possible that she was originally a goddess who was conceived as dwelling among stars (cf. Persian Sitara, Greek Aster, Latin Stella and English 'star' and also the names of such foreign goddesses as Ishtar, Astarte, Atargatis, Astaroth, etc). Many such streams seem to have later culminated in the conception of Tara whose cult was established in different parts of India by the sixth century A.D.

In tantric Buddhism some other goddesses were also in very dominant position. Vajrayogini is one of the most popular meditational deities of Mother Tantra. Conceptually, she is an embodiment of wisdom (prajna), representing the feminine aspect of one's innate nature and the clarity gained from the discriminating awareness in female form. She is one of the most often cited deities in tantric texts and there exists a number of praise verses (strotra) dedicated to her in different tantric texts.¹⁸ Most of the *Anuttarayoga Tantric* texts such as *Guhyasamaja Tantra* and *Hevajra Tantra*¹⁹ start with an opening verse which quotes the Buddha residing in the embryo (*bhaga*) of the Vajrayogini as she is the essence of the body, speech and mind of all the Tathagatas.

Chinnamunda is one of the forms of Vajrayogini in which she manifests in a three-body form. This form of Vajrayogini is also referred to as Trikaya Vajrayogini in *Guhyasamaya Tantra* and *Bhattacharika Vajrayogini* in *Sadhanamala*.²⁰

Chinnamunda, which literally means severed-headed, is the self-decapitated form of Vajrayogini. In this unusual form, Vajrayogini appears with her two attendant yoginis, Vajravairochani and Vajravarnani. In Sakta tantras Chinnamunda is named as Chinnamasta where she is amongst the ten great wisdom (*Dasmahvidya*) goddesses. Sakta practitioners visualize her as an external entity while in Buddhism she is a personal meditational deity, existing not outside the practitioner's own mind.

In tantric Buddhism, goddesses who embodied supreme enlightenment were designated as "the Buddhas" and "the mother of all Buddhas" in her left hand and a scimitar in her right hand... Three streams of blood spurt out from her severed body as falling into the mouth of her severed

¹⁷ Sircar, D.C., 'The Tara of Candradvipa', SCT, pp. 128-33.

¹⁸ Pandey 1994, 208-12

¹⁹ Shastri 1984: 1

²⁰ Bhattacharyya, 1968: 453.

head and into the mouths of the two yoginis, *Vajravarpani*, blue in color to her left and *Vajravairochani*, yellow in color to her right both of whom hold a scimitar in their left and right hand respectively, and the skull cup in the right and left hands respectively... Their hair is disheveled. On all sides in the intermediate space between the yoginis is the very frightening cremation ground.

Hariti is another most significant goddess in Buddhism. Hariti's immense popularity may be attributed in large part to her reassuring nurturing persona. Central to her character is an abundance of mother love, once directed to her children now extended to all humanity through the intervention of Sakya Muni Buddha. Her effigies provided Buddhism with a feminine face complementary the otherwise masculine coloration lent to the religious symbology by the male gender of the Buddha. Moreover Sakya Muni had revealed the path to liberation and then departed in to the transcendent realm of *parinirvan* while Hariti remained sufficiently emerged in earthly life to attend to the needs of the laity and answer their prayers for healthy children prosperity and success. Thus it may seem ironic from one perspective and yet recognized as symbolically apropos from another that Buddhism in the course of its pan Asian expansion established in its wake not only the teachings meditative practices and monastic regimens of the Buddha, but also the devotional cult of the mother goddess of the Hariti. It was Hariti then who emerged from this constellation of divine females to become an independent and canonically sanctioned object of Buddhist worship. Alfred Foucher finds in the elevation of Hariti evidence of a perennial human impulse, observing that "the most universally attractive role will always revert to those figures which incarnate the maternal ... grace of the eternal feminine."²¹ There can be no doubt that Hariti provided Buddhism with a feminine face that softened the austere sublimity of the renunciatory ideal and complemented the soothingly androgynous but nonetheless masculine object of worship represented by the Buddha.

Mother Goddesses in Ichnographic

The icons of Mother Goddesses in Buddhism are found in different part of the world. One of the most interesting ichnographic types is the goddess Marichi and emanation of the Dhyani Buddha Vairochana. She is usually depicted with three faces the left one being that of a sow,

²¹ Buddhist goddesses of India, Miranda Shaw, Princeton University Press, 2006, page 141.

eight hands holding Vajra, Ankusha, Shara, Ashoka leaf, Suchi, Dhanu, and Pasa, with the figure of her spiritual father in her head dress, and riding in Pratyaleedha pose on a chariot drawn by seven pigs, driven by her charioteer. She is also generally accompanied by four other subsidiary goddesses' viz., Varttali, Vadali, Varali, and Varahamukhi.²² Very often this goddess is painted in bright and variegated colours on the covers of the Pragyaparamita manuscripts locally procured. She is shown seated in Padmasana in deep tranquility of wisdom, both of her hands placed against her breast, the right in the Vyakhyan and left in the Gyan mudra holding the book Ashtasahasrika, Pragyaparamita.²³ An elaborately carved image of Tara datable in the twelfth century A.D. found at Sompara is now in the Dacca museum. It is in a fairly well preserved condition and has the additional iconographic interest of having eight miniature figures of Tara on the Prabhawali (four on each side), and the figure of Vajrasattva on the extreme right corner of the Pedestal.²⁴

The metal image of an eight handed goddess described as Sitatapatra on insufficient data originally found in Tippera and now in the Dacca museum is an extremely rare icon. It is a very beautiful work of art and may be dated in ninth century A.D.²⁵ The acquisition by the Rajshahi museum of an eighteen armed female deity (plate XXVI 64) representing in all probability the rare Buddhist goddess Chunda, from Niyamatpur (Rajshahi), and datable in the 9th century A.D., is of great importance to the students of Bengal iconography.²⁶

The four armed unique stone figure from Paikpara now in the Dacca museum with a child in her two front hands clasped on her lap, and a fish and a bowl placed on her back right and left hands has been tentatively identified by N.K. Bhattasali with the goddess Hariti.²⁷ Another image of Hariti has been found in Sundarbans.²⁸

Conclusion

²² Majumdar, History of Bengal, p. 472.

²³ Ibid, p. 472.

²⁴ Bhatta- Cat., 56-57, pl. XXI.

²⁵ Ibid, 53-54, pl. XVIII.

²⁶ Ibid, 54-56, Pl. XIX and pp. 61-62, Pl. XXIV, B. T. Bhattacharya described both these figures as Mahapratisara in his Indian Buddhist Iconography, pp. 116-17, P., XXXV(b) and (e).

²⁷ Bhatta – Cat, 63, pl. XXV.

²⁸ Majumdar, History of Bengal, p. 461.

In the light of above description about the Mother Goddesses in Buddhism, I may observe that the worship of Mother Goddesses beginning in Buddhism from origin of Mahayana. With the development and spread of Buddhism in different countries of all over the world, the practice of the worship of Mother Goddesses with the central Indian idea, the local cultural impact were also going on with the Buddhistic spiritual practices. In Buddhism whether we find the worship of Lakshmi, Tara, Hariti, Chinnamunda, Vajrayogini like Indian name, we see also Vajradhara and Ralchikma (Tibetan), Lamenteri (Magnolia), Amaterasu (Japani, its Indian form Marichi), Okkin Tungari (Magnolian, the Indian form Mahakali) like foreign name of Mother goddesses in Buddhism.

