Tara and the Cult of the Female of Buddhism
The female in Buddhism, despite its Master's reluctance to admit women folk into the order, was its psychological need and comprised its spiritual structure. Compassion - the softest aspect of being, man or divine, which was the core of Buddhism, best revealed itself in a female frame. Hence, in the course of time, feminineness dominated the Buddhist ambience so much so that even the images of the male gods like Avalokiteshvara were conceived with a feminine touch in their appearance and as an essential aspect of personality.

The feminine tenderness and grace with which subsequent Buddhist images were conceived define the epitome of Buddhist iconographic perception and art. After benevolence and protectiveness, other virtues which a female best represented, were added to the cardinal of compassion this feminine aspect was more thrusting and diversified with the result that during Mahayana phase, more so in Tibetan Buddhism, the number of female deities reached in thousands.

Such psychodynamics apart, factors outside Buddhism, especially plurality cult of Brahmanism and preponderance of feminine elements, played a vital role in determining the male-female ratio and their relative significance in Buddhism too. By sixth century or so mutuality of Brahmanical male and female 'devatas - gods, was completely revolutionized, the female gaining supremacy and priority over the male, even the great Trinity - Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva. Texts like Devi-Mahatmya in the Markandeya Purana and Devi-Bhagavata among others installed Devi not only as possessing attributes and cumulative energies of all male gods but also as preceding them, even creation. Invoking a different form or aspect in each of the 'dhyanas' - meditative visions, these texts perceived Devi - Divine Female, as one and also as many, the former defining unity, and latter, diversity. To this plurality were added her 'shaktis' - subordinate powers. Aboriginals as well as Vedic Aryans had some early female deities but while those in the former tradition were just regional inoperative boon-bestowing icons, most of the latter represented aniconic elements or aspects of nature - usually terror inflicting, they appeased by laudation and 'havya'! - offerings. The more accomplished post-Devi-Mahatmya form of Devi was, however, completely different from them both.
Early Female Deities in Buddhism

The Buddhism, too, had some early female deities, mostly inherited from erstwhile cults, as the Earth goddess and some yakshinis, Hariti in particular, from aboriginal tribes, and Lakshmi and Saraswati, from the Vedic. Interestingly, the Earth goddess who had iconic presence in pre-Buddhist cults was in Buddhism a symbolic presence, while Lakshmi and Saraswati, the aniconic Vedic deities, had in Buddhism well-defined iconographic forms. When the Buddha invoked the mother earth to be the witness to his act of conquering Mara and its hosts, he perceived her as all-seeing formless one competent to certify genuineness of his act.

Except the Lalitavistara that talks of her as appearing in person, or the Nidanakatha and Mahavastu that talk of her quaking and dispelling Mara and its hosts, in the entire Buddhist literature the mother earth remains a non-operative aniconic spiritual presence. The earth goddess is alluded to in texts time and again sometimes as Sthavara - Steadfast, having ten lac forms, and at other times as Aparajita - Undefeatable, in Buddhist narratives she does not appear again. In the Mahayana narratives she appears before the pilgrim Suthana but only to proclaim that she has been the witness of the 'spiritual transformations of all Buddhas when they were to almost attain enlightenment', a role identical to her earlier one.

Later, after Buddha's mother Mayadevi was deified around Lumbini, where the Buddha was born, the role of mother-goddess shifted to her.
This human-born mother of their Master was more intimate a mother and inspired greater reverence than did the symbolic earth goddess. As the tradition has it, Mayadevi gave up her mortal frame soon after the Buddha was born, only to seek greater freedom to roam and revisit her son as and when wished. Consequently, each time a Bodhisattva was born Mayadevi re-created herself to be his mother. She was thus the mother of all Bodhisattvas and all Buddhas. She was present on all eventful occasions in Buddha's life, as at river Niranjana where he emaciated due to fasting. Her eyes melted into tears the moment she saw him. Buddha visited her in Tushita or Trayastrinsha Heaven and delivered sermon. She is said to descend from Heaven on the Buddha's Mahaparinirvana and weep over his robe.

The other woman who rose to divine heights and attained Buddhahood was Mahaprajapati Gautami, Buddha's maternal aunt, who brought him up after his mother Mayadevi died. However, Gautami appears in Buddhist narratives only after Sakyamuni attains Buddhahood and accepting his path she embarks on her quest for liberation, as a regular monk. She was the first woman to seek monastic life on par with men and establish the order of female monks. She was the founder of nuns' order and was the ever first preceptor of its first batch. She had thus an outstanding role in the growth of institutional life in Buddhism. The Buddhist tradition venerates Gautami as the female Buddha, who destroyed all her imperfections, acquired great powers, knew others' thought, heard divine chorus, and was beyond the cycle of birth and death. No shrines are dedicated to Gautami but her legends figure in Buddhist sectarian art and faithful heads have always bowed in reverence over them.

**Hariti and Yakshani Cult**

Yakshas-yakshanis, often interchanged with 'devatas', were an integral part of pre-Buddhist cosmology and their worship a major cultic activity of Indian populace. Buddhism neither questioned or prohibited nor ignored yaksha-worship. Rather, yakshas-yakshanis were a recurring theme in early Buddhist art. Buddha even advised people to honor, worship and make offerings to yakshas as it brought prosperity. He even ordained that Hariti, the yakshani, would have a shrine at every monastery and also daily offering. Since then Hariti shrine became a monastery's essential feature, and Hariti, its protecting deity. The benevolent matron surrounded by children, Hariti represented female procreativity, abundance and fertility.

Hariti, meaning thief, was initially a devourer of infants. Buddha transformed her into a protector of children and benefactor of humans. As the Mulasarvastivada Vinaya has it, Hariti was the daughter of Sata, patron yaksha of Rajagraha. Her name was Abhirati. After Sata
died, his duties towards Rajagraha devolved on Abhirati and her brother Satagiri. Abhirati had, however, a different mind. Instead of serving as protector she had a vow to prey on children of Rajagraha and the same she revealed to her brother. When nothing could dissuade her, Satagiri married her to Panchaka, the son of the patron Yaksha of Gandhara. She had by him five hundred children. Before long, impelled to act by her baneful pledge she along with her offspring came back to Rajagraha and began abducting and devouring infants and children. Reports reached the king, and on his counselor's advice offerings were made to the unknown yaksha but all without result. Meanwhile, a yaksha disclosed all that Abhirati was doing. The term Abhirati meant a 'joyful girl', something not co-relating with her act. People hence changed her name to Hariti, the thief. Finally, townsfolk approached Sakyamuni who moved by their grief decided to deal with Abhirati in her own coins. He concealed Abhirati's youngest son Priyankara under his alms bowl. Not finding him anywhere, Abhirati broke into tears blinding her almost. Eventually, advised by a senior yaksha she also went to Sakyamuni and pledged that she would end her life that very day if her son was not restored. It afforded to Buddha the opportunity to make Abhirati realize the grief of parents who lost their only son when the loss of just one out of five hundred crazed her.

Realizing her ills Hariti empathized with parents whose children she had stolen and promised not only to desist but also protect and nourish them since onwards. She turned to Buddha as her spiritual guide and to his path. Buddha restored her child. He ordained that she would have a part of offerings, and with it she would nourish her offspring. He also revealed to her what turned her into a devourer of infants and children. In one of her previous birth she was a herdswoman in Rajagraha. One day when in market to sell her buttermilk, a huge crowd of people celebrating some festival invited her to dance. Accepting the invitation she participated and danced and aborted in exhaustion. Despite all that, she sold her buttermilk for five hundred mangos and staggered homewards. On her way she met a Pratyeka (solitary) Buddha. Impressed by him she offered him all her five hundred mangos. In her moments of deep reverence she pledged to avenge people of Rajagraha for her miscarriage by devouring their children.

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This Gandharan masterpiece, carved in a warm-toned schist, portrays Hariti as the epitome of maternal grace, a regal yet figure.
Lakshmi and Saraswati are two Rig-Vedic deities in the Buddhist line. Their absorption into the Buddhist stream was perhaps necessitated by what they represented - Lakshmi, abundance, prosperity, fertility, happiness, beauty, luster, sovereignty among others, and Saraswati, art, culture, learning and all fruits of intellect. With followers from ranks and upper strata Buddhism could hardly ignore Lakshmi. And, an order as was Buddhism, esteeming wisdom, reasoning, oratorical skill as the best of man, might not reject Saraswati who besides harnessing them had a lot in common with Prajnaparamita, the most venerated Buddhist divinity.

The early Buddhist texts are, however, evasively silent about them both. Lakshmi has significant presence in early Buddhist art at Bharhut, Sanchi but Saraswati is completely missing. By around the 3rd century C.E., even Lakshmi disappears. Except a couple of them, Lakshmi images are not seen even in Gandhara sculptures. From around the sixth-seventh centuries Lakshmi images begin appearing on a larger scale but they are on Brahmanical lines, not Buddhist. Lakshmi's presence in early art but absence in texts, and in art, her icons decorating subordinate spaces, not forming part of the proper Buddhist theme, are enigmatic. Maybe, while rich donors commissioning construction of a stupa, or a part, at Bharhut, Sanchi or anywhere, insisted inclusion of Lakshmi icons for her favor, the order of the monks that determined the line of a text, or the body of the theme to be carved at a sacred site, was reluctant to admit her into the pantheon, at least
as regular deity. The conflict was perhaps resolved by including Lakshmi icons as subordinate motifs, not as official deity, or part of a regular Buddhist theme. Saraswati was the patron of intellectuals - poets, dramatists. Like rich donors these intellectuals weren't instrumental in constructing a shrine, and, hence, Saraswati images weren't patronized. Apart, Buddhism had Saraswati’s substitutes in Tara and Prajnaparmita, the deities with wider range of attributes and personality aspects. It was in late Tibetan Buddhism that the order of Lamas laid fresh impetus on Saraswati worship and consecrated her in Buddhist pantheon.

Tara

‘Whose smile made the sun to shine and frown made darkness to envelope the terrestrial sphere’ is how the 778 AD Nagari inscription of Kalasan Chandi sanctuary at Java pays homage to Tara. This apart, Prince Shailendra, the founder of sanctuary, lauds the goddess as the savior of men and the most noble and venerable one. The temple she then enshrined was just one but by around 12th century Java hardly had a household shrine which was without an image of Tara.

Tara, the principal Buddhist goddess conceived with a wide range of attributes and personality aspects, has in Buddhism the same status as Devi or Durga in the Brahmanical. As various Brahmanical goddesses look like different forms of Devi, most Buddhist deities look like Tara's 'bhedas' - manifestations. As Devi preceded all gods, Tara as Prajnaparmita - Perfection of Wisdom and highest metaphysical principle, is claimed to have priority even over Buddha. Like Devi who revealed to Vishnu who he was and what for he was there, in Buddhism, Tara was the light and the prime source of Buddhahood and thus of all Buddhas. Like Devi, who is Shiva's consort, Tara has been conceived as the consort of Avalokiteshvara. Like Devi who is the mother of the gods of the highest order, Tara, at least in Mahayana Buddhism, is the mother of all Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. Tara had an early presence in the Buddhist pantheon; however it was largely after the emergence of the Devi cult around the sixth-seventh centuries that Tara rose to a status on par with any other Buddhist god and was sometimes venerated like the great Master himself. Tibetan Buddhism has thousands of deities with local identities; Tara is the deity known to all, and her mantra - hymn, to every lip. In Tibet she is almost its national deity.
Tara in Brahmanism

Scholars have discovered in early texts like the Mahabharata a term 'tarini' meaning one that carried one's votaries across waters of tribulation and linked it with Tara suggesting her early origin and Brahmanical connection. The argument is little convincing. Tara's form, as emerged later in the Tantra, or as one of the Mahavidyas, was not known to the writers of the Mahabharata or of the main eighteen Puranas. Not so early, she undoubtedly preceded Mahavidyas, as when with one Mahavidya, not ten, the Mahavidya-cult was just evolving, Tara had her fully evolved form. Her transformation as one of the Mahavidyas occurred long after.

In her early form Tara was seen as commanding shaktis - powers that controlled rush of waters, protected navigators and guided boats.

Before her emergence as second Mahavidya Tara's concept continued to change. In Agni Purana, she is a Yogini, not devata.

In Mayadipaka, she has one form while as Mahavidya, another. Shaivite tradition considers her as the transform of Mahamaya, the great illusion. Shiva's epithet after he consumed arson during ocean-churning was Akshobhya - unperturbed, and Tara was his consort. Tara's prime presence is, however, in Tantra. Brahmanical Tantra-books do not go back beyond 6th century. Obviously, the Brahmanical Tara must have emerged only afterwards. The Java inscription, dated 778, and Chalukyan dated circa 1095-96, comprise her earliest known epigraphic records. Not as popular in South as in North, Tara is the principal deity of all significant Tantras. In Brahmanical texts too, Chinachara-krama - worship-mode as prevailed
in China, was the accepted mode of her worship. Apart, the legend that sage Vashishtha went
to Mahachina to learn the mode of worshipping Tara from Buddha, as the same was not
known to anybody else, as also her form different from all other Brahmanical divinities,
suggest that the Buddhist Tara was her prototype.

However, the two concepts of the goddess are widely different. Despite that in
Buddhism Tara has many manifestations, she is almost always benevolent,
compassionate, gentle, playful, young, lustrous, and protective. The Brahmanical
Tara, especially as the Mahavidya, is almost always fierce, often horrible to behold, and
potentially dangerous, the same as Kali.

She is usually conceived as riding a corpse in the
cremation ground, or as standing in the attitude of
an archer - pratyalidha posture. Not that Tara does
not have a fierce form in Buddhism, or a benign
one in Brahmanism, in general, in the former
context she manifests gentle aspects, while in the
latter, fierce ones. Brahmanical texts allude to her
several forms, however, among them three -
Ekajata, Nilasaraswati and Ugra are more
significant. Tararahasya, Taratantra, Tantrasara
and Mantramahodadhi are the principal
Brahmanical texts on Tara's Tantrika-cult.
Origin of Tara

Ambiguity prevails in regard to both, place and period of the origin of Tara. Buddha was reluctant to admit womenfolk into the Sangh. Hence, an early worship-cult of female principle might be a remote possibility. Western scholars, misled by her 7th-8th century representations in stone, fix her origin around then and somewhere in Himalayan region, more likely Tibet, or around. No doubt, Tara’s early pictorial representations, in caves at Nishik, Ellora, Kanheri etc., are datable to 6th-7th centuries, but a concept or a metaphysical principle would emerge so extensively and with such pre-eminence in art in simultaneity to its origin is something difficult to concede. The journey of a religious concept from the mind it was born in to the mind that believed it, and further, to formal visualization into stone or any other medium, which represented it, might have taken pretty long time, a few centuries or so. More reasonably, Tara had her origin during early centuries of the Common Era, perhaps as a cult already prevalent amongst aboriginals or others, which the liberal Buddhism readily adopted. Being mightier and more popular the Tara-cult absorbed other concurrent similar cults and emerged as the mightiest. Tara’s visual transforms emerged late, not before 4th century at least. Early Avalokiteshvara images are without Tara, which suggests that her form as his consort was a later development, perhaps in pursuance to Ardhanarishvara model of Shiva and Shakti.

Such academic allusions that the worship of Tara was revived in Tibet by Nagarjuna, the founder of Madhyamika school, apart, the origin of Tara abounds in several interesting myths. It is said that all creatures of the world began lamenting when Avalokiteshvara was about to attain nirvana - final liberation. Avalokiteshvara heard them. His heart melted in compassion for their suffering and a tear rolled from his eyes which turned into Tara. The so-born Tara was the essence of the essence of compassion. The Swatantra-tantra relates her origin in a Cholana lake, which lay on the western slope of the mount Meru, the Indo-Tibetan borderland which had around it several lakes and many monasteries. People living there looked for a deity to help cross these lakes. Ultimately, their desire had divine sanction. On Cholana’s right bank close to village Tar was a mountain. People one day saw on it twenty-one figures of the goddess Tara which have come into existence of their own.

Since then the great goddess was always there to help cross the lakes. This form of Tara is essentially her original form. Root ‘tri’ from which the term Tara developed itself means to ‘swim across’. All her names popular in Tibet, China, Korea and Japan give this meaning. In islands like Java she was especially popular, perhaps for helping people against tempestuous seas. In Buddhism this aspect was not so significant but as ‘Tarini’ she enabled her votaries to wade across ‘bhavasagara’ - ocean of life.
Tara's Bhedas or Forms of Tara

Otherwise innumerable, Tara's main forms are five: Sita or White Tara,

Shyama or Green Tara,
Bhrakuti or Yellow Tara

Ekajata or Blue Tara,
White Tara manifests in seven forms, Green Tara in ten, Yellow Tara in five, Blue Tara in two, and Red Tara just in one. These five forms relate to five sacred colors associated with five Dhyani-Buddhas whose Shaktis these forms are. They also represent five cosmic elements. Her two other forms: Rajeshvari-Tara, equated with Gauri or Vishvamata, and the blue lotus-carrying Pitha-Tara also occur in the Sadhanamala. Apart, the sacred Tara-mantra commemorates her in eleven forms. In yet another classification her forms are twenty-one.

The Vajrasana White Tara, her foremost form, represents Prajnaparmita. She is usually two-armed, right held in varada, and left in vitarka-mudra - teaching posture, besides it carries the stem of a full blown lotus. She generally has a third eye, symbolic of knowledge, but sometimes as many as seven, grafted on soles and hands. As the Shakti of Amoghasiddha, she carries stems of lotuses in both hands. Lotus supports a Vishvavajra - double thunderbolt. Texts perceive her as the timeless youth of sixteen, lustrous as moon, and adorned in white and with brilliant jewels. In Tantra, she manifests as white complexioned Janguli, with two or four arms, wearing white garment, white jewels and carrying white serpents. With original two hands she plays on vina, of the other, right is held in abhaya and left holds a white serpent. Rays of moon form her garland.

Green Tara carries a fully or partially closed blue lotus. With right leg pendent reaching a foot-rest made of a smaller lotus she sits on a lotus-throne. Sometimes her seat is supported on two roaring lions. She carries the image of Amoghasiddha in her head-dress. When with Avalokiteshvara, she is usually on his right. A urna mark defines her forehead. She is sometimes accompanied by her own eight forms, and at other times, by Ekajata and Marichi, or Janguli and Mahamayuri, her manifestations. When with Janguli and Mahamayuri, she becomes Dhanada, giver of wealth. As Dhanada she has four arms, upper ones in usual postures, lower ones carrying a goad and a lasso. Some texts perceive her as two-armed, one
carrying a lotus and other held in varada, and as three-eyed. Surrounded by Shaktis having various colors she is conceived with a smiling face, as adorned with bright pearls and wearing shoes set with jewels.

Yellow Tara or Bhrikuti, the goddess that frowns, is Tara's angry form. She carries Amoghasiddha in diadem, holds her right hand in varada and carries in the left a blue lotus. She is flanked by Marichi on her right and by Ekajata on left. She is conceived as a celestial maiden with timeless youth and adorned with jewels. Khadiravarni Tara and Vajra Tara are her forms. Adorned with all sorts of ornaments, she is represented as seated in the midst of Matrikas, divine mothers, having eight arms, right ones carrying vajra, arrow, conch, varada, and the left, lotus-bow, diamond-goad, noose and the forefinger of the fourth raised towards sky, four faces, yellow, black, white and red from left to right, and three eyes in each face. She sits on the moon placed on a lotus representing universe. In another innovation, she sits on a diamond-throne, has red body color and four Buddhas on her crown.

Blue Tara or Ekajata, one with single chignon, manifests Tara's ferocious - ugra aspect and is hence known as Ugra Tara. As represented in texts, she stands in archer's posture, has short stature, one face; three eyes and protuberant abdomen, is fierce and terrible-looking, wears necklace of human heads, and is adorned with a blue lotus. She rides a corpse, is adorned with eight snakes and five mudras - attitudes, has red and round eyes and protruding tongue, and is in the prime of youth. Always very happy she is resplendent because of her wild laughter and dreadful with her protruding jaws. She wears tiger-skin around her waist. In her two right hands she carries sword and scissors, in the left, blue lotus and skull. Her chignon is brown, and head adorned by Akshobhya.

The four-armed Red Tara or Kurukulla is red-complexioned, sits on red lotus and wears red garment. One of her right hands is held in abhaya, while in other is carried an arrow, in one of the left is held a quiver of jewels, and in other, an arrow made of red-lotus-buds set on a bow of flowers drawn up to ears.

Many of Tara's forms are merely her attributes. Over-emphasis make them look like her bhedas - forms. She is one throughout. Her attributes are two-fold, pacific and angry, or five-fold according to five sacred colors, pacific being white or green, and angry red, yellow or blue. Pacific forms have smiling expression, long and wavy hair and ornaments that befitted a Bodhisattva, and angry, fierce and awe-striking. Many of Tara's forms - Janguli, Prajnaparmita, Marichi, Bhrakuti, have emerged in the tradition as independent goddesses and have shrines dedicated to them.
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