

Goddess Tara : A Short Study

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Both Hindu and Buddhist religious literature, particularly Tantrik, have retained a vast and vivid literature on the goddess Tara, and hence there arises a controversy whether the goddess has her origin in Buddhism or Hinduism.

One scholar Mr. M. K. Dhavalikar has reviewed the situation and has suggested Tara's origin in Hindu Tantrik literature and the Puranas.* According to him the doctrine of Bodhisattwa in Mahayana Buddhism had resulted in the creation of a complex conception of numerous deities.

As the feminine counterpart of Aryavalokiteshwara, Tara had been holding an esteemed position in Mahayana Buddhism. She has similar place like that of goddess Durga in Tantras and Puranas. While in Buddhism Tara is taken as the mother of Buddha and Bodhisattwas and has been an important role to play in rituals.

Protectress is the literal meaning of her name but otherwise she is believed to be the giver of salvation. Her name in Tibetan,

Chinese, Korean and Japanese also means the same. She is also invoked while crossing rivers and oceans.

Stone images of Tara are found only since 6th century A. D. and continues to be made up to the beginning of Muslim rule in India.

In his work—origin and cult of Tara—Hirananda Shastri has described Tara as the goddess of Buddhist origin. According to him Tara is not referred to in the old Brahmanic texts and when she is found mentioned in some Hindu texts she appears more in Buddhist guise than Hindu. In Puranas she has been taken from the Buddhist tradition, because Tara bears the image of Aksobhya on her head and is worshipped through 'chinachara' (Chinese method) rites and thus conforming her Buddhist origin.

Dhavalikar here quotes Bhattacharya who believes Tara having Buddhist origin. While comparing the descriptions of Tara in Sadhanamala with that of Tantrarahasya and Tantrasara, Bhattacharya found similarities.

* M. K. Dhavalikar—“*The origin of Tara*”,—Bulletin of the Deccan College Research Institute, Vol. XIV. 1963-64,

Hirananda Shastri believes that Tara was originated anywhere round Ladakh whence it went to Tibet and Nepal and thence in India.

Tara's existence can not be believed before fifth century A. D. because she is not found even in the later products of the Gandhara style of art. Her earliest images are found in the Buddhist caves of Western India dated 6th-7th century A. D. suggesting Shakti Cult encroaching upon the Mahayana Buddhism.

According to Shastri, Tara came into existence in 5th century A. D. and in 7th century A. D. when Tantra was developing, she was accepted by the Hindus as the second Mahavidya in the Ten Mahavidya group of the Shakti goddesses.

But Dhavalikar refutes Shastri's theories by reviewing Old Brahmanic literature and the works on iconometry, though he feels that the later Tantrik literature bears Buddhist imprint in the case of Tara.

Shastri says that the name Tara is found in Brahmanic literature as a synonym of goddess Durga and Lalita. In Puranas she (Tara) is mentioned separately. She finds mention as an impressive goddess in the Lalitopakhyana section of Brahmananda Purana. It is probable that the Hindus worshipped her in old times. In that Purana she is described as Maha-Shakti and Tara-Amba (mother Tara) and the patron of numerous vessels crossing the seas. She can also control floods.

In the Agnipurana she is described as Tara Yogini. These two references may suggest that Tara described in the Puranas is different from that of Tantras externally. In the Tantrik literature she has been given the status of Mahavidya. Puranic Tara seems to be the forerunner of the Tantrik literature.

According to Dr. Hazra's analysis Brahmananda Purana is a composition of Circa

A. D. 400. Thus it is proved that before 5th century A. D. goddesses Tara had got a place in the Hindu theology as the patron of crossing the seas. While the Buddhist literature mentions her not before 6th century A. D. and she is not related with the sea voyage. Her images are also found only since 6th century. Thus these facts seem to suggest that the Mahayana Buddhism borrowed her from Hinduism. The Mahayana Buddhists have also borrowed similarly Saraswati and Kubera, and several Avalokitesvaras also bear Hindu impression.

It is possible that those Hindus who had been converted to Buddhism had brought their Hindu deities and these became assimilated in the Buddhism in course of time.

Tara's devotees consisted mainly of trading sailors, navigators and boatmen related to sea because the Puranas describe her as related to water and water-course. Since very old time, 'Dhruva Tara' had been their guide during their sea journeys hence they had named her after that star. It was but natural to Buddhists to include the goddess Tara in Buddhist temple to wean the coastal peoples.

Hirananda Shastri's theory of Tara's origin in Ladakh and her travel to Tibet, Nepal and then Megadha is not convincing. If that was the case Tara's earliest images should have been found in those places. But instead of Tara's early images are found from Western India where she was adorned like Avalokiteswara.

Tara was a popular goddess in Western India is proved by her appearance in the Buddhist Caves of Northern Deccan and Western India (Kanheri, Ellora, Nasik, Aurangabad and Ajanta). These are datable 6th-7th century A. D. Tara's first appearance in these coastal

regions prove her relation to sea-faring and through the individual and collective enterprises of such sea-farers these caves were adorned with Tara images.

The similarity lying between Tara and Parvati is also remarkable. In early Brahmanic literature the name Tara is found used as a name of Parvati. Shiva's consort Parvati has her another famous name Durga. She is described as the mother of all deities and in Buddhism also Tara finds a similar position and is described as the mother of all deities. Thus to include Tara in Buddhism was to introduce a powerful mother goddess. The prayer verses of Tara images of Elora are also similar to those found in Markandeya Purana. Thus the Chandi worship of Hindus seems to have impressed upon the Buddhists to include a similar goddess for protection.

While in Buddhism Tara has developed her own complex pantheon and she is taken to have emanated from the Dhyani Buddha Amoghasiddhi.* Dr. Benoytosh Bhattacharya has described names and forms of goddess Tara as known from the Buddhist works in his esteemed work *The Indian Buddhist Iconography*. He refers to Janguli, Parnashabari, Maha-China Tara and Khadiravani as the forms of Tara as described in the work *Sadhanamala*. The said work also mentions these forms of Tara:-

- I. Mahashri Tara
- II. Vashya Tara
- III. Shadbhuja Sita Tara

- IV. Dhanada Tara
- V. Sita Tara

Dr. Bhattacharya again describes another form of Tara i. e. Vajra Tara, emanating from Ratnasambhava. In the Mandala of Vajra Tara, four Tara goddesses i. e. Pushpa Tara, Dhupa Tara, Dipa Tara and Gandha Tara are known to be worshipped as according to the custom recorded in the text of *Sadhanamala*. A Vajra Tara image has also been noticed by the said scholar in the Svayambhu Stupa area. Others have been found as far as China.

Ugra Tara has been very popular in Nepal valley who is taken in Buddhist pantheon to have emanated from Dhyani Buddha Ratnasambhava. Locally she is known as Vajra Yogini also.** The temple of Vajra Yogini in Sankhu, north-east of Kathmandu, does not contain image of any of the varieties of Vajra Yogini described in the text of *Sadhanamala*. According to Dr. Bhattacharya, she is Ugra Tara or Maha-China Tara, which was brought here by Bengali Buddhist priests from Dacca in about A. D. 1350 in the wake of Muslim invasion in Bengal. Since late seventeenth century Hindus have also been worshipping Vajra Yogini accepting her as goddess Bhavani.***

Another form of Tara has been noticed viz Prasanna Tara as emanating from Ratna Sambhava.

Dr. Bhattacharya has again described in detail the forms of the goddess according to their family units presided over by the five

* B. Bhattacharya-*The Indian Buddhist Iconography*, p. 226.

** *The Indian Buddhist Iconography*, pp. 247-49

*** King Pratapa Malla's, inscription dated Nepal Era 775 (A. D. 1655) Vide Dr. D. R. Regmi's *Medieval Nepal*, IV. 1966, pp. 101-5.

Dhyani Buddhas as shown below:*

A. Green Tara Group

- I. Khadiravani Tara
- II. Vashya Tara
- III. Arya Tara
- IV. Mahattari Tara
- V. Varada Tara
- VI. Durgottarini Tara
- VII. Dhanada Tara
- VIII. Janguli
- IX. Parnashabari

B. White Tara Group

- I. Ashtamahabhaya
- II. Mrityuvanchana Tara
- III. Chaturhhuja Sita Tara
- IV. Shadbhuja Sita Tara
- V. Vishvamata

VI. Kurukulla

VII. Janguri

C. Yellow Tara Group

- I. Vajra Tara
- II. Janguli
- III. Parnashabari
- IV. Bhrikuti

D. Blue Tara Group

- I. Ekajata
- II. Maha-China Tara

E. Red Tara Group

- I. Kurukulla

Maha-China Tara is believed to have come from Mahachina (China ?) where she was originally worshipped. Mahachina Krama Tantra deals with her and seems to have wholly incorporated into the Hindu Tantrik pantheon.

*. *The Indian Buddhist Iconography*, pp. 306-9.