

The Concept And Iconography of Buddhist Goddess Parṇaśabarī: A Case Study

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The two most important iconographic Buddhist texts namely **Sādhanamālā** (c. 1165 C.E.) and **Niṣpannayogāvalī** (Abhayakargupta - latter half of 12th century C.E.) conceived a number of goddesses under the tāntric impact of Vajrayāna. These goddesses were mainly the emanatory forms of supreme Buddhist goddess Tārā. According to The **Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa**, Tārā was the personification of compassion (*karuṇā*) and she is visualized as the remover of obstacles and fear (*vighna* and *bhayanāśinī*) and also boon conferring (*varadāyinī*) goddess¹. The entire process of evolution of Buddhist as well as Jaina pantheon is based on the socio-religious needs and concepts having multi-dimensional interactions with Vedic-Puranic traditions of greater antiquity. This has to be accepted as historical truth and the study of Buddhist and so also Jaina and other religions and their art forms must be undertaken in this backdrop. It is with this historical perspective that we have endeavoured to take-up the study of Buddhist goddess Parṇaśabarī, who is said to have been an emanatory form of Tārā (*Pītatārā*). Like Tārā she is also conceived in the *dhyānas* enunciated in the **Sādhanamālā** as the healer of all the epidemics and diseases (*sarvamārīpraśamanī*). She is also very close to the tribal people and thereby the Nature to derive the immense power of pacifying and curing various epidemics and diseases through the medicinal property of nature itself. It is due to this fact that she not only tramples under her feet, various *vighnas* (shown in visual examples as the personified diseases lying prostrate) but also carries cluster of leaves (*parṇamañjarī*). She wears tiger-skin and cloth of leaves (*parṇavaśanā*) along with garland of leaves.²

According to Grunwedel, *Parṇaśabarī* was worshipped by the aboriginal tribes of India specially Śabaras and Kirātas. Her name, the leaf garment, and the characteristic epithet *paiśācī* distinctly indicate her association with the leaf-clad Śabara tribe. Thus as the remover or pacifier of diseases she assumes the form of a Mother Goddess on the one hand and through her name, dress and leaf like symbol penetrates into the tribal people on the other.³ D.C. Bhattacharyya and Parnasabari Bhattacharyya have lucidly shown that the Mahāyāna Buddhists adopted Parṇaśabarī in their pantheon from the non-Aryan Śabaras for their multifarious ritualistic practices as is proved from her name and attributes. At first she was the goddess of Śabaras, later when she was inducted in

the higher religion, she came to be known as *sarva-śabarāṇāmbhagavatī*, i.e. goddess Bhagavatī of all the Śabaras.

On the basis of **Agni-Purāṇa** (c. 9th century C.E.), **Skanda-Purāṇa** (c. 12th century C.E.) and **Tantrasāra**, N.P.Joshi⁴ and D.C. Bhattacharyya⁵ have discussed some forms of Pārvatī or Durgā as Tvaritā, Kairātī and Śabarī who were provided with leave cloth or peacock feathers dress and ornaments. D.C. Bhattacharyya has further mentioned that it is significant that the Buddhists did not take the *Parṇakairātī* for a form of Tārā, rather they preferred the name *Parṇaśabarī* - evidently to give more importance to the Śabaras than to the Kirātas. Incidentally it may also be interesting to note that in about 10th-11th century C.E. the Śvetāmbara Jain tradition (**Nirvāṇakalikā**) also visualized Mānavī (12th Vidyādevī) as four-armed and showing *viṭapa* (tree leaves) alongwith *varada-mudrā*, noose and rosary.

Different scholars have so far published about eight images (including four bronzes from Kurkihar, Bihar) of Parṇaśabarī found mainly from Bihar and east Bengal (now Bangladesh).⁶ These images are now preserved in Patna Museum (four examples), Indian Museum, Calcutta (one example), Sahitya Parishad, Dhaka (one image - mutilated showing three faced elephant-heads, two-armed Vināyaka on the pedestal) and Dhaka Museum (two examples with identical details from Vikrampur and Vajrayogini - three faced, three-eyed, six-armed goddess in *pratyālīḍha* with five *dhyānī* Buddhas overhead - Amoghasiddhi (in *abhaya*) being in the centre. She holds hatchet, arrow and thunderbolt in right hands and bow, *tarjanī* (in place of *tarjanī-pāśa*) and cluster of leaves in left hands. Of all the images, only the last two examples of Dhaka Museum with identical details conform almost fully with the *dhyānamantras* of **Sādhanamālā**. These images also contain some very interesting features and figures which speak of the positive interaction with Brahmanical cult and art which will be discussed in the following pages. All other images, however, need reconsideration as to their identification with *Parṇaśabarī* because their details (as we would see in case of bronze figures of c. 11th century C.E. in Patna Museum) do not conform to the injunctions as envisaged by the **Sādhanamālā**.

The available images of Parṇaśabarī and the *dhyānas* of **Sādhanamālā** suggest that the crystallization of iconographic form and its visual representation took place in about 11th-12th century C.E. It is interesting to note that the Brahmanical goddess Śītalā was also worshipped as the controlling goddess of diseases, specially small-pox. According to **Skanda-Purāṇa** she is propitiated for good health of children.⁷ She is referred to as a presiding goddess of diseases and she is supposed to remove all sorts of fear and diseases (*sarvarogabhayāpahā*).⁸ The goddess also reveals the *mātrkā* aspect.

The margosa (*nīm̐ba*) leaves and twigs are offered in oblation to the goddess which according to the pharmaceutical system of *Āyurveda* are employed in medication and natural relief to person specially suffering from small-pox. Like *Parṇaśabarī* the form and iconography of *Śītalā* was also crystallized sometimes in 11th-12th century C.E., as evidenced by the literary references of **Nārada**, **Skanda** and **Bhaviṣya Purāṇas** and also by the sculptures of the goddess from Sūrya kuṇḍa *devakulikā*, Sun temple, Modherā (Mahesana, Gujarat 11th century C.E.), Saccikāmātā temple, Osiāñ (Jodhpur, Rajasthan, 1177 C.E.) and a number of other places in Gujarat and Rajasthan.⁹ In conformity with the descriptions of the texts *Śītalā* rides a donkey and holds a winnowing basket (*śūrpa* - in two upper hands) and sweeping broom (*mārjanī*). She is also shown as nude. Thus the goddess *Śītalā* in Brahmanical and *Parṇaśabarī* in Buddhist traditions have close semblance in respect of being the goddess worshipped for removing all sorts of fear and diseases. *Śītalā* is nude while *Parṇaśabarī* wears apron of leaves.

It is further interesting to find the presence of *Śītalā* in diminutive form on left flank of two images of *Parṇaśabarī* from Vikrampur and Vajrayoginī (now in Bangladesh). Both the images preserved in Dhaka Museum, are datable to c. 11th century C.E. These images depict *Śītalā* as two-armed goddess riding on donkey and holding a sweeping broom and winnowing basket. This indeed was the positive interaction.

The prostrate figure of elephant-headed deity with sword and shield, usually identified as Gaṇeśa and as running away from the wrath of *Parṇaśabarī* may be taken instead as the form of Vināyaka (the proto type of Śiva *putra* Gaṇeśa). The texts like **Mānava Gr̥hyasūtra**, **Yājñavalkya Smṛti** and **Mahābhārata** describe the Vināyakas who were prone to possess men and women and make them failures in life. The Vināyaka is said to put obstacles in performance of good deeds.¹⁰ The elephant-headed figure with sword and shield and lying prostrate on the pedestal in such a way as if fleeing out of the fear of *Parṇaśabarī* has relevance as the deity of obstacles (*vighnarāja*). The elephant-headed figure however, does not have any distinctive features of Gaṇeśa such as *modaka* or *modaks-pātra*, *paraśu* and *mūṣaka vāhana*.

In *Parṇaśabarī* images of Dhaka Museum, the goddess tramples upon two prostrate human figures symbolizing diseases and pestilences. The figure under the right leg of goddess as remarked by Bhattacharyya is apparently that of the man attacked with small-pox as it shows certain circular marks over the body, while the figure under the left foot is probably attacked with some fatal disease. On right side of goddess in both the examples a horse-faced and two-armed figure, either facing the goddess or moving in the opposite direction with folded hands or with one hand being raised in adoration, is carved who

has been identified as Hayagrīva, the Hindu god of fever which is not acceptable. *Jvara* (Fever) visualised in the **Viṣṇudharmottara** a form of Śiva. According to this text *Jvara* should be made three-faced (each with three eyes), three-armed and three-legged.¹¹ Further the Brahmanical god Hayagrīva related to Viṣṇu is perhaps nowhere associated with fever. On the other hand the **Sādhanamālā** and **Niṣpannayogāvalī** refer to Hayagrīva with several forms of Avalokiteśvara but nowhere he is conceived as horse faced, instead he is to be shown with three faces, three eyes and multi-armed. Under the circumstance we propose to identify the horse-faced figures as Aśvinī Kumāra, the son of Sūrya, shown with folded hands in the images of Sūrya.

Further in both the *dhyānamantras* of **Sādhanamālā** referring to Parṇaśabarī, there is no mention of Śītalā, Hayagrīva, Aśvinī Kumāra and Gaṇeśa. However, the *dhyānamantras* refer only to *vighnas* being trampled by Parṇaśabarī which is represented through the two lying human figures under the feet of goddess suggesting diseases. The rendering of prostrate figure of elephant-headed Vināyaka (personifying obstacles) with sword and shield, making fast escape out of the fear of goddess, apparently has contextual relevance. The presence of Śītalā and Aśvinī Kumāra is virtually the outcome of some local Śāstric tradition of east Bengal, now lost to us. In any case it was an intelligent assimilation suggesting positive interaction which indeed was a localized tradition because no other figure of Parṇaśabarī from anywhere else does show these Brahmanical deities who are assisting Parṇaśabarī in her work of eradicating different diseases.

Thus the concept and iconography of Parṇaśabarī is a little bit different in terms of interaction with Brahmanical deities. Contrary to the forms like Aparājitā, Ucchuṣma-Jambhala, Samvara, Trailokya-vijaya, Hevajra, Vajrahūmkāra, Bhūta-dāmara, Vighnāntaka and Kālacakra showing Brahmanical deities like Brahmā, Viṣṇu, Śiva, Śakti, Gaṇeśa, Dhanada in subdued and humiliated positions, sometimes even trampled by the Buddhist deities, Parṇaśabarī is a unique example of positive interaction.

Reference

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4. N.P.Joshi, 'Goddess Tvaritā Śabarī, Manasā and Tulajā and Allied Problems', *Kalā*, No. VIII, p.11.
5. D.C.Bhattacharyya, op. cit.
6. N.K. Bhattasali, *Iconography of Buddhist and Brahmanical Sculptures in the Dacca Museum*, Dacca, 1929; Bhagawant Sahi, *Iconography of Minor Hindu and Buddhist Deities*, New Delhi,

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7. *Skanda Purāṇa* 7.134.2, 7.135.1-7.
 8. See for detail Jeanine Auboyer and Marie-Thérèse De Mallmann, "Śītalā-La-Froide, Déesse Indienne de la petite vérole" (Śītalā - the - cold, Indian Goddess of Smallpox), *Artibus Asiae*, Vol. 13, 1950, pp. 207-227; Maruti Nandan Tiwari, 'Concept and Manifestation of Goddess Śītalā', *Kalā*, Vol. VIII, 2000-2001, pp. 73-78.
 9. Maruti Nandan Tiwari, op. cit., pp. 75-78.
 10. J.N.Banerjea, *Development of Hindu Iconography*, Kolkata, 1975, p. 358.
 11. *Viṣṇudharmottara Purāṇa*, ed. P.Shah, Baroda, 1958, khaṇḍa III, chap. 73, śloka 40.

