

## Women in Pala's art: A study

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### Abstract

The establishment of the rule of the Pala dynasty towards the middle of the 8<sup>th</sup> century A.D. was event of great significance in the history of India in general and of Bihar and Bengal in particular. In ancient times, the fortunes of Bengal had been closely linked up with Bihar, more particularly with Magdha. The end of the later Gupta's had led to political anarchy in the land which was ended by the people themselves who assembled together and chose Gopala as their monarch. His son and successor Dharmapala and the latter's son devapala were powerful rulers of the dynasty, who were also great patrons of art and architecture. Art and architecture which had recorded considerable progress under the imperial Gupta, continued flourishing till the end of the 12<sup>th</sup> century A.D. In spite of political vicissitude, the period witnessed the development of great Buddhist monasteries at Nalanda, Odantapuri, Vikramasila and sompura (Paharpur in Bangladesh) under the patronage of the Pala ruler's. In para art, we have the image of goddess were made of stone, bronze and terracotta's. The main centre of the Pala's art were Nalanda, Kurkihara, Fatehpur (Ganga Distt) and Aluara. (Dhanbad Distt). Various other places brought to light from a sufficiently large number of icons of gods and goddess, which speaks highly of the artistic excellence.

**Keywords:** Tara, Vajra Tara, Sitatapatra, Bharkuti Tara, Aparajita, Marichi, Parnasabari Kurukulla, Chunda

### Introduction

**Tara:** Tara is one of the most important female divinity of the Mahayana Buddhist pantheon. Originally she seems to have been the goddess who was invoked from safe crossing of waters and who saved her worshippers from safe crossing of waters and who saved her worshippers from the calamities caused by floods <sup>[1]</sup>. From the account of Hieun-Tsang we came to know that the people of Magdha and neighboring countries used to adore her offering the performs and flowers and holding gem covered flags and canopies, while music was in vague. The independent images of Tara are available in eastern India either in seated or standing pose. She is often represented holding lily in her left hand and right hand in Varada pose. In the collection of the Nalanda museum the image of Tara in grey stone are available. Innumerable figures of Tara on stone, bronze and terracotta have been discovered in the excavations. The inscribed images of Tara are found in hills, it mentions Nalanda mahavihar and 35<sup>th</sup> regional year of Devapala. One almost life size image of Tara is displayed in gallery No. 1 In Nalanda museum. Other medium size figure of Tara was also housed in the Nalanda mseum (Act No. 13239, Nalanda museum) stylistically the image belongs to the 10<sup>th</sup> century A.D. One headless seated image of goddess Tara having eight arms is also lying in the reserve collection (Nalanda museum), displays her normal two arms are in the Dharmachakra pose. She is having sword, ankusa, rosary and kamandala also <sup>[2]</sup>. The Icon of Tara having eighteen arms are also discovered from Nalanda. A unique image of miniature figure of Tara on stone is also housed in the same museum. It is so minutely carved that every aspect is represented in details (Acc No. 00100, Nalanda museum). The bronze icons of Tara have also been discovered from the excavations. In

one bronze image she seems to be seated on a Pith, having one folded right hand and left hand puts on left knee. An another bronze image of goddess Tara found in the sum temple at Bargaon. It belongs to her later Pala age and in comparable to that of the fourth group of sculptures as stated by Dr. R.D. Banerjee (11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> century A.D). This group is well represented by three dated sculptures, two of which are dedicated in the reign of Rampala and one in the rule of Laksmana sena <sup>[3]</sup>.

Tara, the Buddhist goddess holds a position of considerable eminence in the Mahayan pantheon. She is of different varieties and of different colours. Tara took two distinct forms in the 7<sup>th</sup> century A.D. i.e. white Tara and blue Tara. But in the subsequent centuries her forms increased, making in all her twenty one forms. The popularity of the goddess Tara is attested not only by the fact that she is well represented in the Buddhist art; but also that her name become the common appellation applied to a large number of Buddhist goddess such as Janguli, Parnasabari, Ekajata etc. Of the several varieties of Tara particular mention may be made of Khadiravani Tara, Mahasri Tara and Sitatapatra Tara.

### Vajra Tara

Vajra Tara is variety of yellow Tara. Vajra Tara is described to have eight arms and four faces. Each faces has three eye. The faces are of yellow, black, white and red colour respectively, turning to right. She glows with all the distinctive signs of a young virgin. An image of Vajra Tara made of bronze now housed in the Calcutta museum is collected from chandipore, a small village situated close to patharghat in the distt. Of Bhagalpur. She is sitting in the middle of a lotus of eight movable petals. The image is

identified by Foucher and the image has been dated in the 10<sup>th</sup> -11<sup>th</sup> century A.D. The second bronze Icon of goddess Vajra Tara is obtained from the Faridpur district. Unfortunately the image is in a mutilated condition. Thought is also represented a deity in the middle of a lotus of eight movable petals. The image has lost three of the eight petals and the caping crown of the lotus <sup>[4]</sup>. Presently above mentioned image is housed in the Dacca museum. An image of goddess Vajra Tara holding Vajra now housed in Nalanda museum. The icon is only partly survived. Karanda mukuta and other usual ornaments are represented on her person. The portion below abdomen and to the left side prabhavati are broken and lost (Acc. No. 10738, Nalanda museum). This image belongs to the 10<sup>th</sup> century A.D <sup>[5]</sup>.

### Sitatapatra

Sitata, the Buddhist goddess is described by Getty, as a goddess white in colour, who may have three heads. "She has eight arms and with the two normal hands holds her special symbol, the parasol, under which she is believed to protect all true believers. The other hands of the goddess hold the, bow, book and Laso. A miniature image of the goddess in red stone is found in the collection of Nalanda museum. She is seated on a lotus in Ardhaparyanka asana. Her left leg is pendant and resting on small lotus. She is holding an arrow with her two normal hands. One half blown Lilly is also shown above her left shoulder. Besides this one bow is also shown placed on her left side, a part of which is visible just below lily. At her right shoulder level a quiver with full of arrows is represented. The head dress of the deity is noticeable. She is having one large beaded necklace (Matarmala) and big sized round earrings, bangles and anklet and a jewel embedded girdle are some of the usual ornaments found on her person. Mahasri Tarta: The goddess emanating from the Dhyani Buddha Amoghasiddhi of green colour is Mahasri Tara "Saviouress of great beauty." The single sadhana in the Sadhanamala describes her from along with her four companion deities, such as Ekajata, Asokakanta Marichi, Arya Jangulai and Mahamayuri. Two bronze images of Mahasri Tara have been traced out from fatepur in Gata district <sup>[6]</sup>. In these images the deity sit in the maharajalila posture on double petalled lotus seat i.e. padmasana. The two arms of the deity extended towards the chest are shown in the Vyakhyana-mudra. Her head is slightly tilted towards left hand side and her left, her eyes are gracefully half closed so that she leaved a captivating impression of meticulous artistry. She is well bejeweled having an ornamental head-gear, necklace, decorated armllets and bangles. The deity is decorated with two lotus plants on her either side fully blossomed and half bloomed lotus flowers in addition to them. The lotus plant on the left hand side has been shown so that its stalk touches the left arm of the deity. One stone statute of the deity is now housed in the Indian museum Calcutta. In conformity with the Sadhana the principal deity Mahasri Tara is shown as one faced and two armed exhibiting the Vyankyana or Dharmachakra mudra <sup>[7]</sup>. There are two night lotuses on either side. The goddess sits in the rajalila pose on a lion throne and bears on her crown the miniature figure of Amoghasiddhi with the abhyanmudra. The statuette also include the small figure of Mahamayuri to the extreme right of the principle goddess. She shows the

peacock's and the Varadamudra. The Indian museum Calcutta image seems to be only image representing Mahasri Tara where the sculpture does not deviate even a little from the description given in the Sadhanmala.

### Bhrkuti Tara

The goddess Bharkuti is emanating from the Dhyani Buddha, Amitabha of red colour. Two sadhana in the Sadhanamala<sup>28</sup> are devoted to her worship. The goddess Bhrkuti should be conceived as four armed, one faced and yellow in colour; three eyed and as blooming with youth. She shows the Varadamudra and the rosary in her two right hands and carries the Tridandi and kamandalu in the two left hand. Another sadhana adds the information that she should be peaceful in appearance and should wears a crown of matted hair. From Nalanda have been found very interesting bronze images of a four armed goddess standing on a lotus placed over a pedestal. In one bonze image of Nalanda, the goddess, who is three eyed and four armed, stand in the sampadasthanaka pose, holding in three of her hands a rosary, a staff which with three off shoots i.e. Trisikha, Tridandi or Trisula and a water vesal (bhringara), the remaining hand being broken at the elbow. There is a creeper alligator near her right leg, and lion at the proper right side and another horned animal at the left are seen on the lower section of the pedestal. Another bronze image from Nalanda corresponds with the above mentioned image. It also represents the goddess standing and four armed, with her lower right hand held in the Varadamudra with a fruit in it. The siraschakra being partly broken, only the figure of the sun is preserved<sup>[8]</sup>.

### Aparajita

In Sadhanamala the attributes of goddess has been described. Aparajita is yellow in complexion, two armed, one faced, is decked in various gems, and tramples Ganesa. Her right hand, is raised displaying the act of dealing a slap, while the left carries noose round the raised index finger against her chest. Her face is awful, terrible and ferocious. She is the destroyer of all wicked beings, and her parasol is raised over her head by the host of wicked and ferocious gods, Brahma and others. "The Nalanda image of Aparajita testifies to this. In this figure, the right of the principal goddess is Indra who holds the parasol required to be held over her head by the gods led by Brahma. The second image of goddess Aparajita has been discovered at parchhar in the Gaya district of Bihar, made of stone. This image is in standing attitude and is tramping over the prostrate Ganesa by her foot at his feet. Her left hand is in front of her chest and her right hand is raised upward. Brahma is standing to her side holding parasol.

### Marichi

According to Sadhana the following is a description of the goddess. She is fair, with three faces, three eyes and eight hands. Her right face is red and the left one is a hideous pig face of blue colour. The four right hands the thunderbolt, the elephant-goad, the arrow and the needle: while asoka leaf, bow, noose and Tarjjanimudra are in the four left hands. An image of having the above mentioned attributes is procured from Panditsar District fradipur now housed in the Dacca museum. The image resembles in ever particular with the

above description, with the addition that the asoka branch with leaves held in one of the left hands, ends in a beautiful bunch of flowers. Three images of Ashtabhujā Marīchi two from Nalanda and the other one from Bodhgaya, at present all preserved in the Indian museum Calcutta, are the specimens of the most beautiful iconographical piece. The fourth image of stone Marīchi, on a rounded pedestal with seven pigs and the face of Rahu in the centre was recovered from Bihar sheriff. It belongs to the 10<sup>th</sup> century A.D. The image of the deity stands with the right knee bent in Alidhamudra. It was three faces and six arms, and carries her right hands: upper right vajra, second right hands: a arrow, third right a needle, upper left hand, a plant (Asoka leaves), second left Kapala, third left bow. The deity is defaced to some extent. At present the image is housed in the Patna museum (Acc. No. 1569). The Marīchi of Bodhgaya belongs to the 12<sup>th</sup> century A.D. The deity rides a chariot drawn by seven horses. The image is very beautiful and well preserved piece of Buddhist iconography and made of black pala stone. The Indian museum at Calcutta is in the possession of a very interesting and highly remarkable piece of goddess Marīchi, datable to 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> century A.D. which depicts the goddess having three faced and eight armed, standing in the alidha attitude, with her right leg somewhat bent and the left one thrown behind quite straight, over a double petalled lotus. She has her face to the left, as required by the text, the appearance of sow. In her four right hands, she goddess is shown carrying the needle, the elephant goad, the arrow, and the thunder bolt and the left hands having the string, the Asoka flower, the bow and a noose in the raised index finger against her breast (tarjani pasa). Below the principal figure on the pedestal are shown the seven pigs supposed to draw chariot. According to the Sadhana, the goddess is to be accompanied by four female attendants<sup>[10]</sup>. Another figure of goddess Marīchi, illustrated by Bhattacharya, is also from the Indian museum Calcutta. Although much similar to the preceding one, belong to the same period. The goddess having three faced and Eight armed, standing, in the alidha attitude. The fore arm of the front right hand which must have held the needle is damaged. The third right hand from below instead of carrying an arrow is seen holding the thunderbolt, which ought to have been held in the uppermost right hand. The upper most right hand, raised high above, is catching hold of the hilt of a sword. The arrow is held in the second right hand, in place of an elephant goad or spear. In this icon only three attendant figure are shown instead of four. The absence of the fourth figure is evidently due to the position of the uppermost right hand of the goddess that no space could be spared for her to be represented<sup>[11]</sup>. These above mentioned two figures of the Indian museum Calcutta profitably be compared with another figure of Marīchi hailing from Kurkihar now housed in the museum at Lucknow. The deity is three faced and eight arms and representing at standing in the Alidha pose.

### **Parnasabari**

The worship of goddess Parnasabari, it is believed, is effective in preventing outbreaks of epidemics and in assuring safety to the terror-stricken. Parnasabari is female deity or Mahayan pantheon. Ichnographically she holds great significance. She is represented as pressing down under her feet the Hindu gods of

wisdom, Ganesa. The goddess has got a green complexion, three faces, three eyes and six arms. Her right and left faces are of blue and white colour respectively. She carries in her three right hands vajra-parasu and arrow and in her left hands bow, cluster of leaves and tarjanipasa. She is dressed with the tiger skin and wears a garland of leaves. Her faces shown an angry laugh. According to the description mentioned above as many as seven bronze images of goddess Parnasabari have been discovered from Kurukihara. The first image of Goddess Parnasabari well intact bronze statuette from Kurliharā, is iconographically of great significance. In this image goddess is shown seated on a lotus throne in a maharajalila pose. Her right is pendent and resting over the head of a figure of Ganesa. The goddess has four arms and holds vajra in her upper right hand and pasa in her upper left hand. The goddess has wide open eyes and angry appearance. She wears a broad triangular chignon. There is a massive oval sirsachakra behind her head<sup>[12]</sup>. The icon is datable to the 10<sup>th</sup> century A.D. and now housed in Patna museum, Bihar. In second image she is seated cross legged having four arms. Her right arm is shown with an arrow and lower right arm is shown in varadamudra. Her left knee holds long stalk of lotus flower. She wears a Karandamukuta (10<sup>th</sup> century A.D.). In third image of Kurkiharā she is seated in Vajraparayanika and tribhanga mudra on single lotus throne. She is having four arms, and holds an arrow in the upper right and her lower right hand rests on her body which is in abhayamudra. Her eyes glitter like silver. Deity is of about 10<sup>th</sup> century A.D. The fourth image of goddess Parnasabari is a rare specimen in Indian art. In this image she is shown without pedestal. In fifth image she is shown seated on the rectangular pedestal crudely impressed. Her left hand is shown with lotus raised. The goddess bears third eye on forehead which indicate special features (11<sup>th</sup> century A.D.). In the sixth image goddess is shown seated and her body is in tribhanga mudra. She carries thunderbolt in her hand (12<sup>th</sup> century A.D.). The seventh and last image of goddess Parnasabari of Patna museum is a crude specimen. In this image she is seated on a Mahabhujapitha<sup>[13]</sup>. (12<sup>th</sup> century A.D.). An icon of goddess Parnasabari is found from Nalanda. In this image she is represented with eight arms, four on either side. The front face is distinct and no doubt laughing appearance, by the side face is indistinct. She is seated cross legged on plain or simple pedestal. The two images of goddess Parnasabari have been discovered by Mr. N.K. Bhattacharya, from Vikrampur, Dacca. These two images follow the Sadhana most accurately in all details. Both the images of goddess are decidedly very fine specimens of the Bengal school of art. First image made of Blackstone, the head of the goddess has a bend to the left, but her right leg is bent at her knee. She has three faces, six hands. In the three right hands, she holds thunderbolt, arrow and hatchet and two of the three left hands she holds a small branch with leaves and bow. But the third hand has only the tarjanimudra and no lasso<sup>[14]</sup>. The god Ganesa is represented prostrate at the bottom with a shield and a sword in hand, evidently vanquished after a fight with the goddess. Second image made of Blackstone discovered near the village of Vajra yogini, P.S. Munsiganj, district Dacca, resemble with the above mentioned image<sup>[15]</sup>. The much mutilated image in the Indian museum at Calcutta, having three faces and six arms, depicts the goddess standing

in the Alidha attitude with the right leg is stretched and the left bent and pressing down under the left foot the corpulent belly of Ganesa<sup>[16]</sup>.

### **Kurukulla**

Of the goddess emanating from the Dhyanī Buddha Amitabha, Kurukulla is the most important and popular, claiming no less than fourteen sadhana's in the Sadhanamala. She is one faced and may have two, four, six, or eight arms. When she is six armed, she bears the effigies of five Dhyanī Buddha's on her crown. When two armed, she is called Sukla Kurukulla and when she is four armed she is called by the names of Tarodhava Kurukulla, Uddiyana Kurukulla, the Vajrakrma and Kalpotka Kurukulla. The recital of the mantra of the goddess Kurukulla: "Om Kurukulla hrīh amukam me vasam-anay hum svaha" is said to confer in the tantric rite of Vasikarna or subjugation of men, women, asura's and even the gods. She is worshipped by unhappy lovers, but can only be invoked when no women is near, says Getty. From Kurkiharā three specimens of the six armed variety of the goddess Kurukulla has been found. These three images from Kurkiharā representing the goddess are all miniatures ranging from three to six inches in height<sup>[17]</sup>. Each of the specimens represents the goddess as seated cross legged on a lotus with the first pair of her hands seated crossed at the breast and turned outwards, holding respectively a vajra and bell indicative of the trailokya-vijaya pose, the second one is holding a goad and a lotus and the third pair charging the bow. The images thus correspond completely to the Sadhana, excepting that the effigies of the five Dhyanī Buddha's are missing.

### **Chunda**

According to a definite statement contained in the Nispannayogavali under the majuvajra mandala, Chunda is affiliated to the Dhyanī Budha Vairochana and thus Chunda is the spiritual daughter of Vairochana, and a required to be classed under the emanation of this very Dhyanī Buddha. An image of Chunda has been traced from Bodhgaya. The icon bears one face, sixteen arms, and the principal pair of hands exhibiting against the chest. The remaining seven right hands shows in the (1) Varadamudra, (2) thunder bolt or Vajra, (3) discus (4) club (5) dagger (6) not clear and (7) scepter. There are some other names of this deity chanda, Chandra, chundavjri etc. The Patna museum is in possession of four bronze's from Nalanda which represent a female deity, having four arm and seated in Vajrasana on a lotus seat. The goddess holds a rosary in her upper right hand in three of the specimens, the upper right hand of the remaining image<sup>[18]</sup> which may have held the rosary, being broken, while in the upper left hand she carries a lotus by its stalk with a book placed upon it in three cases. The lower right hand of the goddess is displayed in the varadmudra in all four images. These images have been catalogued in the Patna museum under the name of goddess prajnaparamita. No doubt, the four armed form of goddess Prajnaparamita, the Buddhist goddess of learning, holds a rosary and a book on lotus in the two upper hands, but she is never to be represented as displaying the Varadamudra by the lower right hand, and carrying a bowl in the lower left resting on the seat. So the goddess represented by four Nalanda bronze cannot be identified with

the goddess Prajnaparamita and she is definitely the goddess Chunda. A much similar bronze image from Kurkiharā, again in the Patna museum represented the goddess seated in Vajraparuyanka on a single lotus placed over a tri-ratha pedestal. The goddess is holding a rosary in her upper right and a book on lotus in the upper left while she shows Varadamudra by her lower right hand; she has a bowl in the lower left hand resting in the lap. The image is of a gift from the son of the goldsmith Kesava is dated in the 31<sup>st</sup> year of the Pala ruler Mahipala, and as such it, belongs to the first half of the 11<sup>th</sup> century A.D. The figure has been regarded as that of the goddess chudna by K.P. Jayaswal<sup>[19]</sup>.

In para art, we have the image of goddess were made of stone, bronze and terracotta's. The main centre of the Pala's art were Nalanda, Kurkiharā, Fatehpur (Ganga Distt) and Aluara. (Dhanbad Distt). Various other places brought to light from a sufficiently large number of icons of gods and goddess, which speaks highly of the artistic excellence.

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