

Contribution of Tantric Women for Promotion of Buddhism in India

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1. Introduction

It has been observed, from the Vedic period down to the Buddhist age, that women in India, at least quite a few amongst them, held high positions in the society. The names of Maitreyī, Gārgī etc. in Pre-Buddhist age, i. e. in the Vedic period, are immortal ones. So is the case with Jainism where we come across with the names of Brammā and Sundarī⁽¹⁾, two sisters who were eminent Ajjas in Jainism. In Buddha's period, too, women devotees and Therīs like Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī⁽²⁾, Yosodharā⁽³⁾, Ambapālī⁽⁴⁾ and a host of other women devotees of Buddha's period occupied a very lofty place in Buddhism. Their entry into the Saṅgha was not a facile one. Buddha was very much opposed to the idea of permitting women into the Saṅgha, but he gave his consent ultimately. Buddha, however, cautioned that this would not augur well for the Saṅgha in years to come. His apprehensions proved correct.

The split in the Saṅgha started, mainly, on the question of interpretation of the sayings of Buddha as well as on the topic of discipline on the part of monks. The controversy gathered momentum as councils were held to settle the issue. The dispute centred around stands taken by the orthodox elders and the radicalists. The latter, known as the Mahāsaṅghikas, formed a school of thought of their own. The difference of opinion as regards the procedure to attain the goal with its change of conception was responsible, mainly, for the split. The adherents of the Mahāyāna (the great vehicle) believed every being in the world has the potentiality of Bodhisattvahood

on condition of attaining perfect knowledge and having a universal compassion.

2. Transition from Mahāyāna to Tāntric Buddhism

The exponents of Mahāyāna, in apprehension of the difficulties of the common people to grasp high philosophical sophistications, called other Hīnayānists and gave the dispensation that Bodhisattva is attainable through the cultivation of sacred hymns⁽⁵⁾. Thus, Mahāyāna Buddhism, with the passage of time, got divided into two parts, Mādhyamika and Yogācāra. In the initial stage of the Mantrayāna, which was a branch of Mahāyāna, the component parts of Tantra, such as chanting of Mantras, resorting to postures and gestures, different types of meditations and obeisance and Yogic practices etc. were predominant. The most striking trait of Vajrayāna lies in the concept of Vajra, i.e. Śūnyatā or void⁽⁶⁾.

Hīnayāna, in the process, with its ramifications (Theravāda, Mahāsaṅghika etc.) gradually receded from its birth place and started flourishing mainly in Sri-Laṅkā, Myanmar, Thailand and Cambodia etc. That is perhaps the reason Hīnayāna is sometimes termed as Southern Buddhism. Mahāyāna, in other words, Kālacakrayāna, Vajrayāna and Sahajayāna kept the whole of the eastern India being mesmerised for about four hundred years between eighth century A.D. and twelfth century A.D. Sahajayāna is the ultimate stage of Vajrayāna. Sahajayāna aims at attaining perfect bliss. From this point of view, nirvāṇa implies bliss, No Sanskrit texts written by the advocates of Sahajayāna are available. It is possible to have a rough idea of Sahajayāna through the translation of Tibetan texts and also old Bengali sources. Those who are known as Siddhācāryas in Tibet are preachers of Sahajayāna. This Sahajayāna had a profound influence on Magadha, Orissā, Bengal and Kāmarūpa between tenth and twelfth century A.D. The followers of Sahajayāna, in course of time, exerted much influence, directly or indirectly, on the popular religions, practices and

customs of the religious cults, such as Vaiṣṇava, Āul Bāul and Sufi.

3. Siddhācāryas, Caryāpadas and Vernacular of Bengal

Siddhācāryas are those preceptors who attained perfection and belonged to the Bauddha Sahajiyā Cult. They composed quite a few songs which are rather familiar as Caryā-padas. Dr. Shashibhusan Dasgupta states in his “Obscure Religious Cults” that poems which are popularly known as caryāpadas (literally verses on practices) were first published by Mm. H. Śāstrī under the caption of Caryā-Carya-Viniścayaḥ, which was the title found in the Nepalese Manuscript. Mm. Bidhusekhara Bhattacharya, however, suggested that the correct caption should be—Āścarya-Caryā-Caya (a collection of verses on mystic practices), which was found in the commentary of Munidatta in the opening verse⁽⁷⁾. Though doubt has been cast from some quarters as to whether the linguistic character of the Caryā-padas is genuine Bengali, Dr. S. K. Chatterjee, after a thorough examination of the linguistic character of these songs, has emphatically expressed his opinion that the language of the Caryās was the genuine vernacular of Bengal at its best. The language of the Dohās which was published with songs, was admittedly Western Apabhraṃsa ... “Leaving aside purely linguistic questions, if we discuss the nature of these Dohās and songs from the religious, cultural and literary points of view, we shall find that they belong to no particular province of India but may be regarded as representative of the earliest stage of Indo-Aryan vernacular religious poetry inasmuch as their influence in thought and presentation on a considerable portion of the medieval vernacular literature of Western, Northern and Eastern India is palpable”⁽⁸⁾. Apart from these personalities, there appeared a man who refused to remain satisfied only with the mastery over Tibetan language and going through the Tangyur. He is Rāhul Saṅkriyāyana, the great scholar⁽⁹⁾. In search of India’s lost wealth and glory, he travelled not only once but four times to Tibet, in the guise of a Lama. He brought back,

secretly, huge number of books, papers and manuscripts all of which had been lost in India, along with some of paintings, examples of fine arts etc. He searched out the biography of eighty numbers of Siddhas who composed the Caryāpadas and also ‘Dohākoṣa’ of Siddha Saraha.⁽¹⁰⁾

With the publication of Mm. H. Śāstrī’s “Thousand Years Old Buddhist Songs and Dohās in Bengali”, the culmination of age-old Buddhist heritage was reached. The poets of Caryāpada turned the negative path of Nirvāṇa into the source of natural enjoyment.⁽¹¹⁾ The composers of Caryāpada are known as Siddhācāryas and, as already stated, they number eighty four. But that number is not exhaustive. Dr. P. C. Bagchi brought more Dohās into light. Paṇḍit Saṅkṛityāyana discovered even larger numbers of Dohās of Saraha-pāda. They were not included in Mm. H. Śāstrī’s list. This later addition results in much larger number of Caryāpadas. These Dohās and songs of Caryāpada are presumed to have been composed during the time of Pāla kings of Bengal which lasted from 8th to 12th century A.D. It, however, is not possible to state authoritatively the exact period in which these were composed.

4. Later Womens’ Contribution to Buddhism

The list of Siddhās include the names of a few poetesses like Mekhalā, Kaṅkhalā, Lakṣmīṃkarā and Maṇibhadrā. It may be noted here that, in addition to these female Siddhās, we come across names of about twenty women who performed as poetesses and are also known as Dākinīs⁽¹²⁾ whose conditions for initiating was that the disciples have to discard the superstition of caste and creed, lead a very simple life and would take even stale food. Before describing the lives of some female Siddhās (Dākinīs), it may not be out of place to point out that the word Dākinī used in the Caryās is not synonymous with the word Dākinī in Brahmanical texts; the former means female ascetics while the latter has a derogatory connotation. Further, Abhayadatta Śrī, the narrator of these stories had, predominantly,

a feeling of dismay and devotion in place of materialistic historical facts. As a result, many of these stories seem to be miraculous, absurd and flights of imagination. This is a natural process because, in the case of culture heroes, such supernatural elements appear for the sake of rural people who generally do not appreciate higher philosophical presentation.

4.1. Mekhalā

In an area called Devikot, a householder had two daughters named Mekhalā⁽¹³⁾ and Kaṅkhalā and a merchant had two sons. Matrimonial alliance was made amongst these girls and boys. People there, however, always spoke ill of these two girls although they had done nothing wrong. Learning of their adverse criticism, the younger girl proposed they moved to another place. The elder girl replied that they should stay there because those born with a bad luck would be spoken ill of no matter where they lived. At that moment a Yogī named Kāhṇapā arrived there with a retinue of seven hundred Yogī, Yoginīs and attendants. Fans of unreachable heights and unstruck tabours emitting sounds were adorning them. Those girls repented their fate and thought of practising austerity under the guidance of that Yogī. They narrated the antecedents and prayed for his advice. The Yogī relented and initiated them after several rituals. Both girls took great care and, after twelve years of arduous ascetic practice, attained divine grace. Then they prostrated themselves at the feet of the Yogī and, after worshipping him, expressed their gratitude. At the beginning the preceptor could not recognize them but when he recollected, he demanded gifts from the girls. The girls said they were ready to give whatever he desired. The Yogī demanded their heads. The girls then cut their heads off, offered those to their Guru and sang in praise of their guide. The Guru then spoke highly of their virtue, and extolled their sacrifice. As Kāhṇapā showered his blessing, girls' heads were restored as before. There was no wound. All were taken by surprise by what happened. The girls became known as "Chinnamastā sisters", which means beheaded sisters. They attained their

spiritual goal and departed for the eternal home in due course. Thus ends the story of Mekhalā, the elder sister.

4.2. Kaṅkhalā

The story of two sisters taking refuge at the feet of Kāhṇapā has been narrated before. The Younger sister named Kaṅkhalā⁽¹⁴⁾ became afterwards Kaṅkhalā, the Yoginī.

4.3. Maṇibhadra

A rich householder in a town named Agarche had a thirteen years old daughter named Maṇibhadra⁽¹⁵⁾. In conformity with the hereditary practice he gave his daughter in marriage. The girl stayed with her parents. One day Yogī Kukkuripā came and wanted some food. The girl asked him why he lived by begging though he wore a perfectly looking cloth and who stitched his clothes and why he could not arrange for a house-wife according to his ancestral practice. The Guru, in reply, explained through a verse he was not prepared to accept hands of a girl as that would desecrate his gain achieved through arduous ascetic practice for deliverance and bliss. He said he was averse to mundane matters and much hardship would crop up in his attempt to repress his desires. That is why he gave up the longing for a wife. Having heard this, the girl offered a lump of food to him with due respect and requested him to suggest a way to attain salvation. The Guru advised her to be present at the burning ghat where he lived. Ignoring her routine, she appeared at the crematorium at night. The Guru understood she was deserving and having her ceremonially washed, gave her required advice and made her perform ascetic practices for seven days.

On returning home she had to face thrashings and abuses from her parents. The girl stressed on her belief that there was none who were not her parents and there could be no riddance from the worldly affairs even if born in the best clan with the best pedigree. She further said she had embraced the right path of salvation shown by her Guru.

Even if beaten, she would make others walk on the virtuous path. Her parents said nothing further as a token of respect. She spent a year engaging herself absent mindedly to domestic works, always keeping her Guru's advice in mind. When her husband came and asked her to come to his house, she complied. She attended all the household works, keeping herself restrained in speech and deed and always remaining soft-spoken. In course of time she became a mother of two children and they, too, were in respect of all qualities like their mother. Everybody praised them. Thus twelve years passed after she had met her preceptor. One day, while bringing water, she had her pitcher broken after stumbling against a tree and was rendered motionless. Half of a day passed but she did not return home. It was found she was at the landing stage. In spite of being addressed, she remained unresponsive staring all along at the broken pitcher. All were of the opinion that she had been possessed by an evil spirit. When the sun was setting, the woman muttered in the form of a verse, 'All beings belong to eternity. What is the use of returning home when the pitcher of the body fails'.

“Jīva samūha anādi kāler / Deher ghaṭ bhenge gele / Ghare phire giye kī have? / Āmār ghaṭ āj bhenge geche / Phirbo nā ār tāi / Saṃsārer ghare, yāvo / Āmi mahāsukher dvāre / He āmār Guru / Āmār kāmanār sei āścarya mahāsukh / Dāo āmāy”

“My pitcher is broken to-day, I shall not therefore be back home—I shall rather make a sojourn to that blissful door. Oh! My guide, kindly give me that great and wonderful happiness”. Uttering these words, she flew away in the sky. For twenty one days she continued to deliver religious precepts to people and then departed for heaven.

4.4. Lakṣmīṃkarā

At the town of Sambhola in the country named Aurjana, two and a half lakhs people lived. Indrabhūti, the king of the land had a sister named Lakṣmīṃkarā. The girl, belonging to a good family, had much power and many qualities. She learnt many religious discourses from the great Siddha

Labpā (Kambalpā) and others, and became erudite in Tantra.

Jalendra, the king of Ceylon, proposed marriage of his son Sammol with Lakṣmīṃkarā⁽¹⁶⁾. Indrabhūti accepted the proposal. Messengers arrived to take the sister with them. Lakṣmīṃkarā, reached Ceylon with huge quantity of riches as gift and being accompanied by pious attendants. She could not be received in the palace due to unfavourable stars. At that time the sister had a chance to see people and was much pained to know that all of them were non-Buddhists.

The attendants of the prince were returning after hunting and carrying huge amount of flesh of the slain animals. They happened to be near Lakṣmīṃkarā. Seeing them, she asked who they were, who had killed the animals, wherefrom they came and where they headed for. Reply came that they had returned after hunting and her husband had sent them to kill animals. Having heard that, she became exceedingly displeased such a person who is offered food when he had already a bellyful of eatables. She lost her consciousness wondering why her virtuous brother sent her to people.

After she regained her sense, she distributed riches among the citizens and sent back the prince's attendants with her own ornaments. She ordered others not to allow anyone near her, then she sat alone in her room, smeared her body with oil and ink, disrobed herself and started feigning like a lunatic. But she was not moved from her path of mystic faith. The king and others became very sad finding her in that state and physicians were called to treat her. But the girl began to beat everyone who came to her. Her brother was informed and he was very much pleased to learn that his sister was averse to worldly affairs.

The lady continued to retain feigned lunacy. She lived by taking food which was left in the plate after being eaten by people of Ceylon and spent her days at the burning ghat. But she attained siddhi after seven years. One sweeper of the king looked after her and he acquired many qualities after instructions were bestowed on him. But others knew nothing of his

qualities.

Once king, Jalendra, went for hunting with his attendants. There the king himself fell asleep without paying heed to time. While returning home, he lost his way and had to wander about. As he could not avail of his room to sleep at night, he came down to Lakṣmimkarā's cave and wondered if that was the abode of a lunatic. On looking forward, he found lustre radiating from her body and daughters of heaven worshipping her by going around her. A pure devotional sense dawned on him. He returned to his palace at night only to return and pay obeisance to her, "Why do you prostrate yourself at the feet of a being like myself? You are enlightened, please initiate me. Lakṣmimkarā in the form of a verse said, "Duḥkhī saṃsārer sarbaprāṇī / Kāroo nei sukh ānanda / Janma-Jarā-mṛtyu-tār pīḍābhog / Karen prāṇider madhye sarbottama / Ye devatārā; tārāo / Ei tin durgatir duḥkha / Yatra-tatra khāo kintu kṣudhā / Tomār miṭve-nā/. Agṇi āṛ tuṣār deve asahya yantraṇā / Tāi, he rājā! / Sandhān karo / Paritrāner mahāsukh." "There is no joy anywhere—all beings are subject to Duḥkha (sorrow). Even the gods who are the best of all beings face birth, oldage and death. Your hunger for happiness will always elude you. There is no riddance from these three kinds of duḥkha. Fire and snow will give you unbearable pain. That is why, Oh, the king search after the way for deliverance. Having said this, the lady conveyed, "you are not my follower. Your sweeper is my disciple. He has attained Siddhi and he will be your well-wishing friend". "How am I to know who of my servants is the person?" "The same sweeper who offers food to all creatures. Go and find him out at night."

The king searched around and went to that particular sweeper. The king invited him, made him sit on the throne, saluted him and begged for his preachings. The sweeper gave the ceremonial bath and blessings etc. to the king and taught him the lessons on religious matters.

Then the sweeper and the woman showed many miracles in Ceylon and physically went away to heaven (Khasarpana). Indrabhūti and Lakṣmimkarā introduced 'Vajrayoginī' system of worship. Mm. H.

Śāstrī in one of his essays says, “From the view point of introduction of a novel method of Vajrayoginī worship, Lakṣmīṃkarā’s advayasiddhi is an important book. Fasting, religious activities, bath, cleaning of ones posteriors after evacuation are to be given up. There is no need to worship wooden, stone and earthen gods. Get engrossed and worship body only”.⁽¹⁷⁾ Benoytosh Bhattacharya’s comment on Lakṣmīṃkarā’s doctrine reads “... what Lakṣmīṃkarā advocates was quite out of the way and strange, even though since her time new teaching has gradually won many adherents who are styled as Sahajayānists, and who are still to be met with among the Nāḍhā Nāḍhīs of Bengal and especially among the Bāuls.⁽¹⁸⁾ Shendge has commented, “This short work (Advayasiddhi) has one unique feature; it is written by a woman who practised and preached Tantrism. From this point of view, I expected some unique doctrines but in reality all her teachings in no way differ from those preached by the male practicans of the doctrine, e.g. those were preached by Indrabhūti or Anaṅgavajra (Indrabhūti’s preceptor). So, naturally, the question poses itself whether there can at all be any such difference in the Sādhana prescribed for man and for woman?”⁽¹⁹⁾

4.5. Nigu

Nigu⁽²⁰⁾ was the wife of Nāḍa Paṇḍit (Nāḍa means wise). Nāḍa Paṇḍit was a student of famous logician Jitāri⁽²¹⁾ and was the Dwāra Paṇḍit of Vikramasīlā Mahāvihāra. He was one of the teachers of Dipaṅkar Srijñān.⁽²²⁾ Nāḍopā⁽²³⁾, the famous Siddhācārya, was also his student. In the list of Tangyur, names of his texts ‘Vajrageeti’ ‘Nāḍapaṇḍit Geetikā’, ‘Ekoviraherukṣādhān’ etc. occur. Nigu’s title is Jñān-Dākinī (The term was used in the case of learned female). Both Nāḍapaṇḍit and Nigu were devotees of Hevajra.⁽²⁴⁾ In the list of Tangyur⁽²⁵⁾, Dākinī Nigu’s works like ‘Upāyamārgacaṇḍālikābhāvanā’, ‘Cakrasambaramaṇḍalavidhi’, ‘Praṇidhānrāja’, Mahāmarajñāna are mentioned.

4.6. Maynāmatī and Gopīcānd

Nāth Dharma Originated from Mahāyāna⁽²⁶⁾. Out of four main Siddhas of Nāth Dharma, at least three belong to the Mahāyāna Buddhist Community. They are Kānupā (Kāṇhpā)⁽²⁷⁾, Jālandharipa and Mīnanāth⁽²⁸⁾. It is in the Nāth literature where Nāth Dharma and Nāth Community⁽²⁹⁾ live. In the Nāth literature of Bengal one is Gorokṣa Vijaya and the other is the Maynāmatī-Gopīcānd⁽³⁰⁾ episode. Two opposing forces clash in Maynāmatī's mind. On one side, she is a Siddhā, who has realised the greatness of Nāth-Dharma wholeheartedly. At the same time she is a woman who has her husband and a son. Above all, her unique personality is all pervading. She is a yoga exponent having supernatural powers. Even today people sing her praise and worship her image.

5. Conclusion

Thus although the number of women saints of later Buddhist period is not great, some of them, as stated in the preceding paragraphs, are of illuminating personality who contributed to the cause of Buddhism in the decadent stage of Buddhism in India.

Notes and References

- (1) Das, Asha: Ananda The Man and monk. Mahabodhi book Agency, Calcutta, 1992, p. 52.
- (2) Bhattacharya, Bela: Buddhist Women Saints of India. Firma KLM Private Limited, Calcutta, 2000, pp. 60–63.
- (3) Ibid., pp. 63–66.
- (4) Ibid., pp. 66–69.
- (5) Das, Nirmal: Caryagiti Parikrama. Dey's Publishing, Kolkata, 1997, p. 48.
- (6) Dasgupta, Shashi Bhusan: An Introduction to Trantric Buddhism. University of Calcutta, Calcutta, 1958, p. 72.
- (7) Dasgupta, Shashi Bhusan: Obscure Religious Cults. Firma KLM Private Limited,

- Calcutta, 1995, p. 3.
- (8) Ibid., p. 5.
- (9) Chattopadhyay, Alaka: Curashi Siddhar Kahini. Anustup, Kolkata, 1998, p. 15.
- (10) Ibid., p. 15.
- (11) Das, Asha: Bangla Sahitye Bauddha Dharma O Sanskriti. Calcutta Book House, Calcutta, 1969, p. 33.
- (12) Chattopadhyay, Alaka: Curashi Siddhar Kahini. Anustup, Kolkata. 1998, pp. 36–37.
- (13) Ibid., pp. 111–112.
- (14) Ibid., p. 112.
- (15) Ibid., pp. 109–110.
- (16) Ibid., pp. 131–132.
- (17) Edited by, Choudhury, Satyajit, Bhattacharya, Debaprasad, Sengupta, Nikhileswar, Bhattacharya, Sumitra: Haraprasad Shastri Rachana Samgraha. Vol. 1. Paschimbanga Rajya Pustak Parsad, Calcutta, 1991, p. 399.
- (18) Edited by, Bhattacharya, Benoytosh: Sadhanamala. Vol. II, Oriental Institute, Baroda, 1968, p. iv.
- (19) Edited by, Miss Malati, J. Shendge: Advayasiddhi. Oriental Institute, Baroda, 1964, p. 11.
- (20) Edited by, Choudhury, Satyajit, Bhattacharya, Debaprasad, Sengupta, Nikhileswar, Bhattacharya, Sumitra: Haraprasad Shastri Rachana Samgraha. Vol. 1. Paschimbanga Rajya Pustak Prasad, Calcutta, 1991, pp. 393–394.
- (21) Jitāri, the author of the Hetutattvopadeśa, was a very prolific writer and was considered as one of the greatest Paṇḍits of the Mediaeval Bengal. He was renowned as a grammarian and an erudite scholar. The works which are credited to the name Jitāri were composed in different subjects, viz., Nyāya, Tantra, Sādhana etc. Prof. Tucci has edited a nyāya work of Jitāri and the work was published in the Annals of Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, Vol. XI, 1930. The title of the work is: Jātinirākṛti.
- (22) Bapat, P. V.: 2500 years of Buddhism, Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, 1971, pp. 199–210.
- (23) Ibid., p. 201.
- (24) God Akṣobhya is marked by the miniature figure of Vajrasattva. This Vajrasattva is not merely of the nature of Śūnyatā. It is a non-dual state of Śūnyatā and Karuṇā, to imply that the void-consciousness is also of the nature of an identity of both Śūnyatā and Karuṇā. Akṣobhya is marked by the Vajrasattva. Thus, the Vajrasattva is identified

by the bodhicitta. It is said that when prajñā or Śūnyatā-knowledge commingles with universal compassion, there remains no thinker, no thinkable, no thought. This is the state of non-duality; this is called the bodhicitta; this is truth; this is Vajrasattva-the perfect enlightened one (Sambuddha); this is perfect wisdom. This Vajrasattva (Vajradhara) is also described in Tantras with his consort. This Vajrasattva, the Lord Supreme of the Tantric Buddhists, is found in the Buddhist Tantras bearing many other names, of which the most important is Hevajra. Hevajra implies a god of Buddhist in pair.

(25) Waddell, L. Austine: Buddhism and Lamaism of Tibet. Heritage Publishers, New Delhi, 1974, p. 157.

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(26) Mukhopadhyay, Sukhomay: Banglar Nath Sahitya. Suvarnarekha, Kolkata, 1994, p. 2.

(27) Ibid.

(28) Ibid.

(29) Ibid.

(30) Ibid., pp. 37–40.

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