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E-ISSN: 2582-0400

litinfinitejournal@gmail.com

Penprints Publication

India

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Litinfinite, vol. 2, núm. 2, diciembre, 2020, pp. 11-20

Penprints Publication

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Femininity in Tantric Buddhism: A Study of Sanmatrananda's *Nastik Panditer Bhita*

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Abstract

Femininity is a part and parcel of various religious practices since time immemorial. Tantric Buddhism is one such religion that gives equal importance to its male and female practitioners. The honour and respect that women enjoyed in this religious sphere has been reflected in the content of the Bengali novel *Nastik Panditer Bhita* (2017) by Sanmatrananda. Apparently speaking, the book deals with the life of Atisa Dipankara, an eminent Buddhist scholar of eleventh century. In reality, this piece of indigenous literature sings the glory of female divinity in Tantric Buddhism. This book also celebrates the multifaceted role of a woman as a daughter, lover as well as a mother. The pivotal role of a woman as a mentor is also a part of this writing. This paper will try to dissect the novel historically. It will try to make an effort to discover the feminine essence of Tantric Buddhism. The paper will also find out the glory enjoyed by the female deities and the role of women in Tantric Buddhism. The study will be made from both historical and socio-religious points of views. This study is significant and relevant in today's context to express a woman's potentiality to shape a society and to make it free from all promiscuities.

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Keywords: Divinity, Femininity, Socio-Religious, Mentor, Esoteric Practices

Introduction

Gender-religion is a recent genre of study. It deals with the woman's position in a particular religious doctrine. It often tries to explore the role of women, the significance of female divinity in a particular religious domain. The mystical and the esoteric practice in Tantric Buddhism gives importance to the male and female consorts equally. The term Tantric Buddhism reveals the fact that it was formed by the amalgamation of two religious doctrines viz. Tantrism and Buddhism. Tantrism developed as a religious dogma in the remote past. The mystical yogic practice of Tantrism depicted the importance of a woman as a Supreme divine power. The yogic practice in

Tantrism remains incomplete in the absence of the female body and soul. Bhaskar Bhattacharya in *The Path of the Mystic Lover* (1993) has explained how robust the Cult of Goddess in Tantrism. Shakti, the feminine principle is worshiped in all her forms: a virgin, a seductress, a whore, a benevolent mother and a terrifying destroyer (Bhattacharya 20). Buddhism on the other hand emerged in 6th century as a religious doctrine, the fundamental aim of which is the pursuit and eventual attainment of a state of ultimate bliss. It came to be divided into two forms: Hinayana (Lesser Vehicle) and Mahayana (Greater Vehicle). In 7th century there was a shift in the religious flow of Buddhism. The gradual institutionalization of the religion paved the way for Tantrism to get merged up with the doctrines of Mahayana Buddhism. This led to the birth of Vajrayana Buddhism or Tantrayana. Vajrayana Buddhism (Diamond Vehicle) developed in Northern India and reached Bengal with the progress of time. The primordial practice of sexuality and yoga gradually crept into Buddhism. This contributed to the development of different feminine ideas in Tantric Buddhism. Tantric Buddhist doctrines became very popular in China, Nepal and Tibet. The deep philosophical content of Tantric Buddhism started to talk about attainment of the ultimate salvation through the mystical esoteric practice. Hence the female deities and the divinities came to garner significant presence in Tantric Buddhism.

Time-frame

Nastik Panditer Bhita (2017) by Sanmatrananda is a piece of Bengali novel that deals with the world of Atisa Dipankara, the eminent Buddhist monk of 11th century. This Bengali scholar carried Mahayana Buddhism beyond the boundary of India and preached it in Tibet. The book gives a clear sketch of femininity in Tantric Buddhist practice of the contemporary time. Through a deconstructive reading of the text, this paper will try to understand the role and significance of femininity in the religion in 11th century.

It was the time when Bengal was under the rule of Pala dynasty. The dynasty patronised Buddhism. Beside this the various universities of India had already started to nurture the Tantric doctrines in Buddhism. The universities like Sarnath, Odantapuri, Vikramshila and even Nalanda¹ practiced the cult of Tantric Buddhism. Based on this context, the paper has chosen 11th century. It was the time when Tantric Buddhism had flourished in a full-fledged manner in India and reached Tibet. The paper will make an attempt to find out the spirituality in women. It will also deal with the Supreme female divinity in Tantric Buddhism. It will try to search out the dominant part of a woman as a mentor from socio-religious point of view. To be very specific, the pivotal role of a woman in Tantric Buddhism of 11th century is the cynosure of this paper.

¹ The names of ancient universities in India

Source

NastikPanditerBhita by Sanmatrananda is a very recent work that has dealt with the Buddhist ideals and philosophy. It has come to be feted as one of the most important books to study the religious life and practices of 11th century Bengal. In this 21st century the book is valuable enough because it revisited the remote past and for the first time has given an outline about the world around Atisa Dipankara. The book is important for this paper because it has reflected the eternal feminine, submerged in collective unconscious that prompts mankind to hold and to let go, to embrace and to renounce. From literary perspective, the author has composed other imaginative characters dated to 13th century like Chag Lochaba. He had arrived from Tibet to Bengal in search of gaining knowledge about famous and renowned scholar, Atisa Dipankara. The author is skilled enough to contemporize this historical novel by sketching the character of Amitayudh who is an archaeologist of 21st century. He has received a box of garland and a statue of Goddess Tara and a scripture which was actually a possession of Atisa Dipankara. He has also the zeal to explore the history of Atisa Dipankara and has visited Bikrampur, Bangladesh. This has been assumed as the birthplace of Atisa Dipankara. All of them are deeply motivated by the female characters in the novel as well as the feminine conscience. Atisa Dipankara was from Bengal and in childhood, he had a deep affection towards Kuntala, his childhood friend. This feeling of love and pang of separation had been borne in his mind throughout his life. He learned about Tantric Buddhism from his family mentor. Mythically, it is said that he was guided in his path of Buddhism by Goddess Tara, the female divinity in Tantric Buddhism. ChagLochaba when came to Bengal was also deeply motivated by a woman named Swayangbida, who secretly practiced Buddhist Tantrism. Lastly Amitayudh of 21st century had an affair with Jahnabi, an ordinary woman from Bikrampur, Bangladesh. In this novel she is an epitome of all the delicate feelings of love, pang of separation and a woman with responsibility towards her family. Atisa Dipankara's journey from Vikramshila University to Tibet as a Buddhist scholar has been presented vividly. In every aspect all the vital characters in the novel are deeply influenced by the feminine ideals. All the characters are in nexus to each other by the narrator of the novel, Sayon. The author has intricately linked the Tantric practices with the various characters of the novel. Thus the novel is more fictional than it is historical. However one can easily draw out the historical and religious contents by dissecting the novel thoroughly.

Different Views

A search for womanhood in Buddhism, specifically, Tantric Buddhism is not at all a very old aspect of study. There are very few works on femininity and Buddhism until now. A number of books have been written on esoteric practices and philosophy of Tantric Buddhism. A shift in this

study arrived in the last phase of 20th century. Rita M. Gross, an American feminist Buddhist scholar wrote an article Buddhism & Feminism in the year of 1981. She made a comparative study of Buddhist Sanghas² (monasteries) of India and Tibet with the American monasteries. She had viewed both qualitative and quantitative differences between the Eastern and the Western institutions. She had discovered a number of similarities between feminism and Buddhism. She claimed that women had to be more serious and active in religious practices. She wanted more sophisticated attitude towards the female members of the American monasteries. This would help to increase the number of female Buddhist practitioners. Following the Tibetan lineage of Buddhism, this eminent scholar had praised the equal status given to men and women in Buddhist philosophy. However there is very little mention of Vajrayana Buddhism in her writing.

A milestone has been created in this field of study by Miranda Shaw in the year of 1994. She wrote a book named *Passionate Enlightenment: Women in Tantric Buddhism*. The book gives us a holistic knowledge about the spiritual role of women in Vajrayana Buddhism. The role of different divine images in Tantric Buddhism like Dakini, Tara, Vajrayogini³ etc have been described in details. She has tried to interpret the whole spirituality of Tantric Buddhism that originated in India and spread to Tibet, from Western viewpoints. She has claimed about the primary and pivotal role of women practitioners in India based on Tantrism in medieval time. With the shift to Tibet the empowerment shifted to the male practitioners. Thus she has tried to establish the fact that reality is far away from philosophical outlook.

Meeting the Great Bliss Queen: Buddhists, Feminists, and the Art of the Self (1995) by Anne Carolyn Klein is another important book related to intricate relationship between Buddhism and feminism. Unfortunately, this book is also about the Western concept of feminism. She has applied the Buddhist philosophy to tackle selfhood. There is very little mention about the origination of Buddhism in India. There is also no mention about the Indian women's role in the practice of Tantric Buddhism. Another writing on Vajrayana Buddhism is *Women in Vajrayana Buddhism: the Embodiment of Wisdom and Enlightenment in Traditionally Male-oriented Buddhism* (2012). It has been written by Eneli Coakley. She has vehemently criticized the practical application of Buddhism in which female exploitation is always a part. She has made an effort to find the status of women in Tantric Buddhism. She has mentioned that women are treated as 'second class citizens' in the world of male-oriented Buddhism. However she is optimistic about the philosophical doctrines of Buddhism which give equal status to both men and women. Thus there is no indigenous writing on Indian origin of Tantric Buddhism as well as women's role in it. All these writings are rational enough but they lack the essence and the critical viewpoints of a third world country. They are more about the women empowerment in the era of post-modernism than

² Association for the Buddhist Practitioners.

³ Female divinities in Tantric Buddhism.

about spiritual, socio-religious status of women. The femininity in these writings is defined from modern and Western outlook. Even some of them are sceptical about the egalitarian aspect in Tantric Buddhism.

One recent writing on femininity in Tantric Buddhism is Shakti Rupa: A comparative Study of Female Deities in Hinduism, Buddhism and Bon Tantra by Urmi Chanda-Vaz. It is a dissertation on Comparative Mythology in the year of 2013-14 at University of Mumbai. She has studied Tantra in details and has made an effort to narrate about different deities related to Tantra vividly. However this comparative study lacks description of the deities associated with the Indian Vajrayana cult. The descriptions are flat enough and valuable from iconographical and mythological perspectives. The dissertation lacks the deep philosophical outlook of various indigenous religions. Dr. Sonia Gomes, another female scholar, has written an article named Female in Tantric Buddhism. The article mentions Tantra texts to be 'gynocentric' in nature. Thus the female views are given equal importance beside the views of the men. This leads Tantric Buddhism to be more aligned to women as the active participants in esoteric practices. To be very specific, she has wielded the deep egalitarian philosophy of Tantric Buddhism to enrich the women empowerment. In this post-modern patriarchal realm, she has depicted the deep ideologies of this religion as an aspiration for women to nurture their potentialities and qualities.

All of the above writings are written by erudite scholars. Most of the scholars are somehow related to the practice and the 'cult' of Vajrayana Buddhism. The scholars are more concerned about the Tibetan lineage of Buddhism rather than Indian Tantric ideologies. However it should be kept in mind that the origin of primordial form of Tantra was in India. Even Buddhism spread from India to the northern countries of Nepal, China and Tibet. Most of these modern writings lack the information related to Indian Tantric Buddhism. The book by Miranda Shaw is however an exception. It has contributed one of its chapters to narrate the background of Indian Tantric Buddhist origin. The dissertation by Urmi Chanda is totally dedicated to the comparative study of woman's spiritual power or Shakti in different Tantric scriptures and icons. It should be kept in mind that the sole concern of the writing is not Tantric Buddhism, rather it has discussed about the status of women in Tantra and other religious dogmas related to Tantra. Tantric Buddhism is a mere inclusion in this regard. Thus the books and the writings on feminine aspect of Tantric Buddhism are not beyond criticism.

Tara, Prajnaparamita and Vajrayogini: the Mother Images in Tantric Buddhism

The attainment of ecstatic bliss is the ultimate aim of Tantric Buddhism. This path is guided by the Supreme divinity. The female supreme divinity in Tantric Buddhism is Goddess Tara. In Nastic Panditer Bhita, she had been worshipped by Atisa Dipankara in his childhood. Mythically speaking, she had guided Atisa Dipankara in his path of salvation and journey to Tibet. In 21st

century Amitayudh, the archaeologist in the novel received a bronze idol of the goddess that was once possessed by Atisa Dipankara. The description of Tara in this novel is mystical and vibrant. The idol was sculpted neatly. It was not more than six inches in height. The idol stood over a lotus which is considered holy in nature. One foot was folded and another projected forward. The right hand was kept on knee and the left hand displayed gyanmudra⁴ (gesture of knowledge). The figure is thin and beautiful. The whole body was adored with different jewellerys. The crown had motifs of leaves. The eyes were big and she had a third eye on the forehead. The appeal of serenity was throughout the body. This was actually the image of White Tara (Sanmatrananda 25). The novel has also mentioned about other two idols of Goddess Tara. One was made of stone and another of wood.

History has claimed the presence of such idols in Bengal, particularly in South Eastern region. Suchandra Ghosh in an article dated 2013, Locating South Eastern Bengal in the Buddhist Network of Bay of Bengal (C.7TH Century CE-13TH Century CE) has mentioned about the presence of innumerable bronze sculptures related to Vajrayana and Mahayana Buddhism in South Eastern Bengal in 9th century. She has also added the presence of the idols of Tara in Post-Gupta era. The idols of Buddhist female deity Tara had been found from South Eastern Bengal were of different colours, viz. green and white. Philosophically, she is the Divine Mother who guides her disciples in the path of attainment of the ultimate bliss. She is the icon of love and compassion and of course motherhood. The significant role of this mythological character is immense in Tantric Buddhism. According to the practitioners of this school of Buddhism, this Goddess belongs to the Lotus family. Lotus is considered auspicious and is related to Tantric Buddhism. Mother Goddess Tara belongs to Amitabha family. She is always worshipped in two forms: Green Tara and White Tara. The manifestation of motherhood is also noticed in another Goddess. She is popularly known as Prajnaparamita. The concept of Goddess Tara and Prajnaparamita are nothing but the same. In the novel *Nastik Panditer Bhita*, an erudite scholar Dharmakirti narrated about her to Atisa Dipankar in Suvarnadweep (present Sumatra). In Mahayana Buddhism and Vajrayana Buddhism Prajnaparamita is the embodiment of compassion and wisdom. She is depicted as 'Mother of all mothers'. She has conceived all the Buddhas in her womb (Sanmatrananda 118). Her all feminine essences have been embodied by all Buddhas in their heart. She belongs to Tathagata family (Gyatso 44). From historical point of view, she was worshipped from 9th century onward and it is obvious that the ideologies related to this deity spread in different countries of Asia in no time.

Vajrayogini is the most popular Goddess in Tantric Buddhism. This can be assumed from the name of the village of Bangladesh which is said to be the birthplace of Atisa Dipankara. *Nastik*

⁴ The divine gesture of knowledge.

Panditer Bhita did not mention about the role of the goddess anyhow. Vajrayogini is the sexual or the female consort of Heruka⁵ in Tantric Buddhism. Miranda Shaw in her book *Passionate Enlightenment: Women in Tantric Buddhism* mentioned about this female divinity. She is the female divine essence in each and every woman. She is also an icon of female sexuality and should receive immense respect from the male devotees or practitioners. The sharp difference between Tara and Vajrayogini is that: the former is the symbol of motherhood whereas latter is the image of sexual consort in this cult. Both of them are given equal status and honour in Buddhism. Both of them guide a practitioner in one way or other to achieve the ultimate ecstasy.

Obscure Practice of Mysticism: Body and Soul

The yogic practices like Pranayam and meditations are part and parcel of Buddhist ideologies and implications. Sexuality is intimately related to Tantra and is regarded as an age-old practice. The secrecy and the obscurity is always maintained in this religious practice and hence it is often known as *Guhya-sadhana* (secret practice). The concept of *Ardhanarishwar*⁶ or residing of masculinity and femininity in the same body is a part of Tantra in India. The ultimate salvation through bodily esoteric procedure is also a part of Tantric Buddhism. It requires equal participation of a male practitioner and a female practitioner for the attainment of the enlightenment. In this regard the woman plays a dominant and important role. She is the master who demonstrates the secrecy and the philosophy of Tantrism to her male practitioner. These female practitioners are often named as *yogini* (one who practises yoga), *sadhansangini* (female practitioner), *yogtantrasiddha* (one who is skilled in tantric yogic practice).

In the novel *NastikPanditerBhita*, there is mention of *BajradakiniTantra*. The male practitioner has been regarded as *Abadhuta* (the minstrel) and the female practitioner is known as *Abadhutasangini* (the female partner of the minstrel). They took Kuntala, the childhood friend of Atisa Dipankara in their sexo-yogic practice. Atisa Dipankara though in his childhood practised Tantric Buddhism but later he led a life of *Shramana* (the seeker of spiritual freedom). However Chag Lochaba, Tibetan monk was guided by *Swayangbida* in Tantric path (*Sanmatrananda* 127). She discussed about the basic erotic implementation in Tantrism that is prevalent centuries after centuries. The awakening of *Kulakundalini*⁷ (the serpent power) in one's self is the ultimate goal. *Kulakundalini* is the female divine energy inside human body. There are two nerve currents in the spinal column called *Pingala* and *Ida*. The left is *Ida* and the right is *Pingala*. A hollow canal called *Sushumna* runs through the spinal cord. At the lower end of the hollow canal is situated *Kulakundalini* in a coiled up manner. The energy is forced to rise up to the brain and ultimately

⁵ Male divine consort in Tantric Buddhism.

⁶ A divine image in which masculinity and femininity reside together.

⁷ The Ultimate divine power.

leads to enlightenment. This is attained by sexual practice in which the female practitioner is the mentor.

Geshe Kelsang Gyatso in his *Tantric Grounds and Paths* (2000) has written about the need of a male consort for a female and a female consort for a male. Heruka, the male divinity embraces Vajrayogini to attain the bliss and Vajrayogini has to embrace the male divinity to attain the same bliss (Gyatso 22). Tantric Buddhism talks about the enlightenment of body and soul for man as well as for woman. In every man there is manifestation of Heruka and in every woman there is manifestation of Vajrayogini. Even in one's self, one has to raise all of the divine and feminine moods to become Bodhichitta⁸ (the enlightened soul). The implementation of yogic practice is eternal and traditional. Ideologically, Tantric Buddhism sings the glory of femininity denying the hegemonic masculinity of Indian society of the contemporary time.

Different Identities of a Woman in Tantric Buddhism: The Socio-Religious Status

Buddhism is a discourse of following the middle path. The religion is applicable in our day-to-day life. Hence the religious ideologies reflect the society and status of a woman in her private domain. In this patriarchal society a woman plays the role of a daughter, a wife, a lover and a mother. Nastik Panditer Bhitaclearly demonstrates how a woman who was involved in Tantrism, suffered from pang of separation for her lover. On the other hand she performed her role as a Guru (mentor) with efficacy. In Sadhana (the divine practice) she took her male consort from the darkness to the rays of light. From the novel it is noticed that, the female practitioners are mostly from lower classes. Historically, it may be assumed that the social status of these women belong to the lowest rung. As for example Kuntala in Nastik Panditer Bhita was from lower class of Bengal and was involved in Tantrism by the minstrels.

In Tantric Buddhism, women are also engaged in different social relations. This is estimated from the status she enjoys in this religious domain. The Guru is the highest status that is enjoyed by a woman .Beside this female disciple is considered as 'daughter' by her mentor. Two female disciples of same religious mentor consider themselves as the sisters of each other. An autonomous social relationship prevails in the religious discourse of Buddhism. The female consort or the sexual consort is worshiped and given a higher status in Tantric Buddhism. Social history can cite innumerable examples in this regard. The lower class women who were exploited in the so-called patriarchal society, got engaged themselves in the esoteric practice of Tantrism and lifted to higher status in the sphere of Tantric Buddhism. Practically, women wanted to enjoy this higher status. Deeply motivated by the ideologies of Supreme divinity, women included themselves in the realm of this cult.

⁸ Enlightened soul in Buddhism.

Conclusion: Far Away From Philosophy

Hinayana Buddhism when was motivating for living a life of celibacy, chastity and abstinence, Tantric Buddhism was talking about the mystical sexuality. This cult tried to give equal opportunity for men and women to nurture the divine exemplification. Developing as a part of the protest movement, 7th century onward, it gave shelter to a number of women. This was a rational aspect of the cult. As it has been mentioned that these women were mostly from the lowest rung of the social ladder, they were given respect only in this autonomous domain of the cult. The religion never gave any provision for a woman to claim for her dignity in this male dominated society. It is to be kept in mind that women are the sexual partners of the male devotees. They act as the 'givers' of compassion, love, soul, and body. Hence the ultimate extract of Tantric Buddhism is more aligned to the male devotees. Women are idealized to get motivated and devote as an ardent sexual consorts. The scriptural and the high ideals may be regarded as 'deceiving' from this point of view. Women have often been used and exploited in the name of divinity but their status and divinity is still a matter of debate. Hence the Western scholars of today's world are in frantic search for the location of femininity in this religious genre.

The institutionalization of Tantric Buddhism started from India and spread to different parts of Asia. Gradually its popularity spread to different parts of the world and the cult got an international identity. Unfortunately, Tantric Buddhism shrank to the mountainous part in India with a number of foreign invasions. The legacy of Lama (Buddhist monks) started to prevail. In contemporary India, the place where this cult is most popular is Dharamsala (Himachal Pradesh). The age-old sexo-yogic practices of Tantric Buddhism are more theoretical than implemental now-a-days. The Lamas are living the life of celibacy. They are more inclined to Pranayam (breathing exercise) and meditation as the religious practice for the attainment of enlightenment. Hence the necessity for women devotees gradually dropped. The female divinities are only worshipped as idols rather than nurturing the ideologies of motherhood or sexual consorts. Tantric Buddhism is a discourse to learn for these Lamas or Buddhist monks. It is very rare to hear that the legacy of this cult is being carried out by the women. Though in Tibet and other parts of the world, there are monasteries of female devotees but in India (where the cult originated) we hardly find the monasteries for women. The narrations related to women are now found only in the Tantra Sutras (texts) rather than in reality.

Nastik Panditer Bhita by Sanmatrananda is a fictional work that has drawn our attention to the philosophical aspect of Tantric Buddhism. It cannot be denied that the philosophy is highly enriched and nurtures feminine essences. The philosophy though was originated in remote past, but it is rational enough to apply in today's life. The undue respect for women in the doctrines is praiseworthy. Religion has always set a moral guideline for the society. In this context, the revival

of the Tantric Buddhist philosophy is relevant enough. It will help to establish the concept of 'gender-equality' and respect for women. It will help the women to gain the confidence to channelize a society to a proper direction. The monasteries are the place to free the mind, body and soul. Naturally, it will be more convincing for this 'cult' to set a dogma for a new world free from promiscuities.

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