A NOTE ON MAHACINATARA

The goddess Tara or Prajnaparamita is worshipped both by the Hindus and the Buddhists. In Buddhist delirium of Prajnaparamita into the goddess Tara is not at all unusual, but the inclusion of a non-Vedic goddess into the Hindu pantheon indicates apparently partial absorption of Buddhism into Hinduism in the early medieval period. The Hindu authors have tried to explain, how the worship of the non-Vedic goddess Tara came into vogue among the Hindu Tantrics. The explanation is found in the Śrāvakābha (Rajahahi, 1913): Śrāvakābha (Ch. XVII). śrāvakābhaśāstra (Ch. I-II), and वृद्धि-विकासाराम. The tradition preserved in these texts is as follows:

Ascetic-sage Vasishtha took the necessary instructions from his spiritual preceptor Bhrāma for visualization of the goddess Tara, but he failed to visualize the goddess. In spite of his long and arduous attempts through severe austeritys and meditations in the Himalayas, he made another attempt on a sea-coast, probably in Assam and he could not succeed this time also. In disgust he began to curse the goddess Tara, when the goddess condescended to appear before him and advised him to go to Mahacina, where he would find Buddha, an incarnation of Vānu. It is from him, that he would obtain the necessary instructions. Sage, Vasishtha then proceeded to Mahacina and found there his right spiritual preceptor, Suddhā. Evidently this Buddha, referred to in late texts of the medieval period cannot be the founder of Buddhism, but very probably a Buddhist saint like Bodhidharma, who became famous in China in the 6th Century A.D. as a Dharma master in ascetic practices.

The conversation the sage Vasishtha had with the so-called Buddha is given in these words in the Śrāvakābhaśāstra (Ch. XVII):

वृद्धि-विकास सारामः
ब्रह्माज्ञानी विद्यः कथान्
मूल उदाघाणः
वृद्धि
गौरि स्वप्नम् ब्रह्माज्ञानीनुमयः
मे प्रज्ञानविद्यम् भूत्स्व प्रज्ञानः

[As can be seen, the dialogue is filled with Sanskrit words and phrases.

Vasishtha asked Buddha how can a person attain perfection without recourse to Vedic rituals.

In reply Buddha said, O Vasishtha listen, there is the excellent path of the Kāśaka (a Tantric system), by knowing which a person becomes in a moment a god with a frightening look.]

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A person should stay in a lonely place and get rid of desires and anger, and practise meditations without a break and remain always firm in accumulating experiences of meditations.

The above tradition evidently has no historical basis but it has been invented to explain the importance of the Tārātantra as also to offer an explanation for incorporating a non-Vedic goddess into the Hindu pantheon. This will be apparent from the stanzas quoted below from the Tārātantra, in which Śiva explains to Parāvati how the Tārātantra was learnt by Buddha and sage Vaiśistha and what benefits they derived from the same.

[He is the greatest god, Visnu (Janardana) in the form of Buddha, By meditation and repetition of Ugratārakāhmantra, he became the Lord, the Creator of the Universe and attained immortality. Vaiśistha also by invoking her (through her mantra) was re-born in the sphere of stars.]

In his Indian Buddhist Iconography (pp. 189-190) Dr. B Bhattacharyya has referred to the Buddhist and Hindu conceptions of the image of Mahācīnatarā, that is, Ugra-Tāra as given in the Sadhanamala and the Tantrasara of Krishnananda Agamavagga of the 16th Century. He points out how the Buddhist conception was modified by the Hindu Tantrics.

In a few hymns invoking Tāra and particularly in the hymn of Tārāchārya it is clearly indicated that Tāra was identical with Prejnaparamita and thus was recognized by the Hindus and the Buddhists alike.

The Hindu Tantras may have borrowed a few gods and goddesses from the Buddhists but their ways and methods of practices were different from those of the Buddhists. The propounder of the Hindu Tantras was invariably Śiva, who is referred to in these texts as Bhairava. Likewise the interlocutor was always Parāvati or Sakti who is referred to as Bhairavi. Hence the Hindu Tantras owe their origin solely to Bhairava and Bhairavi. In later days there appeared a number of authors and saints, to whom also is attributed the authorship of many Hindu Tantric texts.

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