

Bridging the Gender Gap: Reflections on the Pronounced Femininity in the Buddhist Art of Ratnagiri, Odisha (India)

Sushma Trivedi

ABSTARCT

Gender gap has been identified as a new crisis having adverse bearings on the economic and cultural growth of human kind. It is generally defined as a disproportionate difference between the sexes, specifically referring to the differences in the outcome of achievements of man and woman. Gender gap may be a modern terminology but Buddhism seems to have realized this in both Physical and Metaphysical sense and had attempted to bridge this gap in its own unique way. It would be interesting to study this through the evolution of Buddhist pantheon and its manifestation in art forms. This study focuses upon *Ratnagiri*, located in Jajpur district of the state of Odisha in India. The sculptural wealth and art of *Ratnagiri* belongs to 8th to 13c A.D. which has its beginnings in the Mahayan and saw its heydays in the esoteric phase of Buddhism. The most striking feature of *Ratnagiri* art is that a large number of female deities with due prominence and esteem are represented here. A comparative study of male and female deities is made to gather information about the position of gender gap and the process of bridging it. The variables adopted for analysis are symbolism, attributes and potencies of the divinities. The gender based survey of the icons revealed that *Ratnagiri* has not only produced probably the highest number of female deities as compared to the other Buddhist sites of India and other countries but also the forms that are rarely found at other sites. Till recently one hundred and fifty images of *Avalokitesvara* have been documented from all over Odisha whereas *Ratnagiri* alone has yielded more than hundred *Tara* figures. The incorporation of the female principle in Buddhist philosophy and its later anthropomorphisation is simply understood as borrowed from Hindu tantrism. It is argued and discussed that acknowledgement of female principle is an indigenous development in Buddhist philosophy and it may have an earlier date of origin than Hindu tantra. It is concluded that in later Buddhism as gleaned from the art of *Ratnagiri*, there are not just ideological propositions of female gods, but they appear as fully empowered to independently perform miracles and salvage their devotees. The frequency of occurrence of deities such as Tara, Marici, Hariti etc. suggest that they rose to the level of cultic figures and were among the most popular members of Buddhist pantheon.

Keywords: Gender gap, Iconography, Esoteric, Female principle