

The Enigma of *Tara* Cult : An Ethno-Archaeological Study on Eastern India

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Tara, the saviour goddess, a central identity of *Vajrayana* Buddhism (Tantric Buddhism) in Eastern India, has enjoyed a high place of veneration both in Buddhism and Hinduism from early period till present. The religious scenario of Buddhism in 7th-8th century Eastern India was accompanied by an undercurrent of rivalry between Buddhist and Brahmanical traditions with each trying to retain its influence-sphere in the society. With the emergence of the *Vajrayana* tradition, the religious life entered into a complex and intricate scenario. Along with the religious assimilation, appropriation and domestication of cults and rituals, this phase saw the growth and the development of Tara cult.

The early medieval period which saw the decline of Buddhism and revitalization of Hindu faith (12-13th century A.D.), owns a dynamic history not only in the political events but also in the heart of the society within the life of common people. With the growing popularity of *Shakta* and tantric tradition, Tara was gradually incorporated in the fore fold of Hindu religious system and given the status of consort of Siva. 'Mahachina Tara' iconographic form indicates towards this slow transition which identifies 'Dhyani Buddha Akshobhay' as Siva and Tara as *Shakti*.

The gradual importance of Tara and later becoming an important deity, extensively worshipped and accommodating various forms of attributes may reveal about the complex socio-religious aspect of the period. A lot of work has been done on the art and different iconographic forms of Tara. However much space with more complex questions are left unanswered in this regard. The present work try to look into Tara's 1300 years journey to discover why she is what she is today, how Tara's worship was retained in context of eastern India.

Issues Unresolved

A number of questions are still prevailing in study of Tara, Did the Buddhist Tara originate in Central India or Western Deccan ? or Did it originate in Eastern India and then dispersed to rest of India and outside ? The facts like *Dharmapala's* banner bearing the effigy of Tara and construction of a temple dedicated to Tara by *Sailendrarajaguru* who hailed from *Gauda* indicate that the cult of Tara migrated from *Gauda* to the far eastern Islands. There is no clear evidence of Tara in literary form before 5th century. The initial composition may be dated to 5th century, the present form of available text, referring Tara, such as *Taramulakalpa* or *AryaManjushrimulakalpa* came into existence not before 8th century. Earliest references of Tara in sculptural forms comes from western Indian caves like

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