

## **The portrayal of the Buddhist healing goddess Parnasabari**

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The goddess, Parnasabari/Parnashavari in the Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhist traditions is identified with her tribal nature and healing powers. She derives her name from two words, 'parna' that is Sanskrit for leaf and 'sabari' which refers to a sabara woman (Sabara being an indigenous tribe of India residing across Bengal and Orissa, as well as Madhya Pradesh in the heartland of India). Hence, her name literally translates to the 'leaf-clad women from the Sabara tribes', who traces her origins to the tribes of central and eastern India and is later assumed to be appropriated as a Buddhist goddess. Described in various Buddhist texts such as the *Sadhanamala*, the *Heravajra Tantra*, *Ekallavira Canda Maharosana Tantra*, and several other Tibetan manuals in current usage, Parnasabari is primarily imagined as stout in appearance with three faces and six arms, fangs, and a bulging belly. She is a demi-goddess, half-human and half-demon and her principal attribute is to heal diseases, epidemics and infections.

### **Buddhist Text and Imagery**

Parnasabari is referred to by different names, such as Sarvasavaranam Bhagavati (Goddess of all Savaras/Sabaras) in Sanskrit [2], Sarvamariprasamani (healer of all epidemics) as mentioned in her *sadhana* and Ritro Lo-ma-gyon-ma which in Tibetan means "mountain dweller dressed in leaves". [3]

The portrait of the healing goddess along with her tribal attributions has its foundation in Mahayana Buddhism that was subsequently incorporated into the Vajrayana traditions followed in the Himalayas. Though it can be presumed that in her ancient genesis she was a *grama devi* or a village deity of forest dwellers of central and eastern India, her portrayal was later

concretized with Buddhist canonical sophistications. The goddesses' form and iconography can be understood by referring to the *Sadhanamala* texts composed between the fifth and eleventh centuries A.D. Literally translating to a 'garland of realisations' or invocations, this Buddhist tantra text provides detailed written instructions and chants (*mantras*) on how to realise or meditate upon a particular deity. Such texts would often provide references for painters and sculptures other than the lay practitioner to visualise a deity. Translated by Benoytosh Bhattacharya in 1929, the *Sadhanamala* comprises a collection of around 300 *sadhanas* (realisations). It presents two *sadhanas* on Parnasabari which describe two different forms and lay out the *mantras* that are dedicated to her. These forms each emanate from the cosmic family of *Dhyani* or transcendent Buddhas, Aksobhya and Amoghasiddhi [4].

The *sadhanas* describing the forms of Parnasabari, are almost identical, with few differences such as she is yellow (*pitah*) in colour when emanated from the second Dhyani Buddha Aksobhya and is green in colour (*haritam*) when emanated from the fifth Buddha, Amoghasiddhi. Since the Amoghasiddhi Buddha's colour is green even the Amoghasiddhi Parnasabari is said to be primarily green, while her right face is blue, and the left face is white in colour [5]. Buddhist tantra gods and goddesses appear in different colours that symbolize deeper meanings, emotional tones, and spiritual messages.



**Fig.1** Buddha Amoghasiddhi with Eight Bodhisattvas.  
ca. 1200-50 AD. Central Tibet  
Image courtesy: The Metropolitan Museum of Art

She is three-faced (*trimukham*) and three-eyed (*trinetrām*). In the upper half, her six arms extend from each side. In her left arms, she holds a vajra or a thunderbolt, a hatchet or a *parasu*, and an arrow. In her right hand, she holds a cluster of leaves, a *trajani pasa* (*noose held in a trajani mudra*), and a bow [6]. The *trajani mudra* is described as a gesture where the hand is held up in a loose fist with an extended forefinger. This hand gesture is a threatening one, one of warning. Parnasabari is described in her *sadhana* as holding a noose in that extended finger. She further holds a bow in the other hand that is positioned for shooting the arrow, caught in the momentum to hunt. The deity also wears a *jatamukhuta* or a crown of hair, formed of piled up matted hair that is tied with either flowers, snakes or skulls and bones, and carry an effigy on the crown denoting either Amoghasiddhi (*Amoghasiddhimukhutum*) or Aksobhaya (*Aksobhayamukhutum*).

Another difference between the two forms is the *vahana* or the mode of transport for the deity. Under Aksobhaya, her *vahana* is a 'vighna' which literally translates to 'obstacles' in Sanskrit. The *vahana* under the Amoghasiddhi Buddha are personified diseases that she seems to be trampling upon [7].

### **Association with 'Hindu' equivalents**

The goddess today is almost unknown in the Indian Buddhist communities leaving behind archaeological evidence of a few stone sculptures and bronzes from Bengal, Bihar and Orissa dated between the tenth and twelfth centuries. As part of the stone sculptures, a stele found from northeast India, present-day Bangladesh, presides in the collection of Kapoor Galleries in New York with provenance that was privately owned by Wasim Zaman (fig.2). There are two other steles that are common in appearance, regionality and material currently held in the National Museum of Bangladesh in Dhaka. All three steles are dated between the eleventh and twelfth-century Pala period. The Dhaka steles were brought to light by historian N.K Bhattasali who mentioned them in his account 'Buddhist and Brahmanical Sculptures at the Dacca Museum' published in 1929. According to N. K Bhattasali, both the steles were found within four miles of each other in the district of Munshiganj, near Dhaka, which was formerly the Buddhist site of Bikrampur. One stele was found in the village of Nayananda, in Tangibhadi, where the goddess was being worshipped as *Jiyas Thakurani* or a local *grama devi* (village deity) at the time, while the second stele was discovered near the village of Vajrayogini where it was fixed to a front wall of a Kali temple [8]. This suggests the overlapping of many Buddhists and Hindu deities especially being locally worshipped as *grama devatas* in previously Buddhist dominated regions. Moreover, the healing nature of the goddess could be the primary reason for the stele's veneration and conservation in local village shrines up till the modern era.

Thereafter following the dissemination of the Pala dynasty in the twelfth century, Buddhism too declined along with it and Parnasabari was replaced with her Hindu equivalent-the smallpox goddess Sitala, who is still very popular as the Hindu deity of contagion. There seems to be an interaction between the two goddesses as evident from the Pala period steles illustrating Sitala's inferior status. All the three steles depict Parnasabari, flanked by two miniature Brahmanical figures of Hayagriva also assumed by scholars to be Jvarasura, [9] (a combination of *jvara* which in Sanskrit means fever and *asura* which means demon) on the left and an equestrian image of Sitala on the right. Scholars like Bhattasali and Bhattacharya have deduced and interpreted the presence of the two miniature Hindu deities at the bottom as a visual representation of animosity between the rise of Buddhism under the Pala period against dominant Hinduism [10] since the Buddhist goddess is shown monumental in comparison to the other two who are portrayed smaller and placed next to her feet. However, as contested by Miranda Shaw and Fabrizio Ferrari, the miniature presence of Sitala and Javrasura could hint at their subordination possibly portrayed as her attendants, which differs from the theory of victory of Buddhism over Hinduism. It could be a conscious decision to include the parallelly existing gods and goddesses with similar powers in Hinduism who also share great popularity in the region. Many worshippers would be aware of Sitala and Javrasura presiding as village deities or *grama devi/deva* in Bengal. The miniature representations of Sitala and Jvarasura, along with a Parnasabari could make for a wholesome image that was worshipped for its healing strength and potency. It is to be noted that this iconography of Parnasabari flanked by Hindu deities is exclusive to these steles, not found in any other depiction of the Goddess including the excavated Kurkihar hoard from Bihar, the later Nepalese and Tibetan bronze statues or in the painted Tibetan thangkas. Hence, this iconography is assumed region and possibly period specific.



**Fig. 2** Parnasabari, c. 11<sup>th</sup> century. 40 x 18 in.  
Image courtesy: Kapoor Galleries HAR no. 8033

Interesting to note are the figures at the feet of Parnasabari in this stele. The figures are infected with pustules, as evident from the circular marks on their bodies. The prostrated figures reinstate Parnasabari's powers of healing diseases and infections such as smallpox that cause pustules and eruptions on the body. Below them is visible another prostrate figure of the elephant-headed god, most likely Ganesha who is flying away with a sword-like weapon in his hand. In the *Sadhanamala* 'vighna' often refers to the Hindu elephant god, Ganesha [11]. Interestingly, Ganesha, who, here, contrary to popular imagery of puranic and Brahmanical traditions, is shown rather skinny in comparison to how he is commonly depicted as a plump, pot-bellied god who loves to eat sweets such as *laddoos* and *modaks*.

### **The fierce yet benign healer**

Parnasabari was evoked for healing purposes, for the eradication of epidemics, diseases, and infections and hence, her powerful persona and violent attributes are meant to defend the inflicted and attack the evils that cause sufferings. Although she is a benevolent goddess, she is also referred to in her mantra (mentioned below), as a *pisachi*, which refers to a “flesh-eating demon, described to have a dark complexion and protruding red eyes” [12]. This emphasizes her demonic nature and so she is projected as a wrathful and fearful character.

|| *om pisachi parnasavari sarvopaprasamani svaha* || [13]

There is a notion of ‘savageness’ that is applied to the goddess, especially, with her sharp teeth, potbellied form and the wild garment made from leaves that she is named after. Her iconographical attributes such as the axe and the bow highlight her warrior persona. Unlike many goddesses in the broader ‘Hindu’ pantheon who are given the status of a mother- *matr*, *matrika*, or *mata*; Parnasabari is mentioned as a *pisachi* in her *sadhana*. More than her appearance though, this exemplifies the ferocious and dangerous nature of the beings that dwell in the darkness of the forests. Yet, primarily a healer she is also benign and thus ferocity can be seen as an inherent part of the goddess, which makes her of an ambivalent nature.

There is also a commonality of origin and interpretation of the healing goddesses in Buddhist and Hindu traditions. Sitala or “the cool one”, being most popular in Hindi speaking regions as an eradicator of smallpox, is taken here for comparison. Both Sitala and Parnasabari are virgin goddesses of indigenous origins, being village deities, and having tantric and nature-related attributes. Although included in the families of transcendent Buddhas, Parnasabari is perceived as an emanation and not a consort bound by marriage. Sitala too is an independent goddess unlike the greater goddesses of the Hindu pantheon. Prof. Susan Wadley has extensively worked

on the cult of Sitala and gender politics in the Hindu tradition points out that the benign goddesses in the Hindu pantheon are those who have transferred their power and untamed sexuality to their consorts (the husbands and greater gods) thus becoming benevolent [14]. This hypothesis can be applied to Parnasabari as she too is not associated with any male consort thus putting her in control of her nature, sexuality and power which essentially makes her a ‘pisachi’.



Green Tara, c.1260s  
Thangka; gum tempera, ink, and gold on sized cotton  
Image courtesy: Cleveland Museum of Art

Gender and caste politics are often interrelated when looking at potentially “malevolent” goddesses. This perception also pervades the status of goddesses in the divine pantheon. For example, in contrast to Tara, Parnasabari is not considered to be greater goddess in the Buddhist pantheon. Tara who is worshipped as a ‘universal mother’ in Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhism is important and popular Buddhist goddess; in one of the lores of her origin she is described as born from a lotus that bloomed under the compassionate tears of Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara [15]. Thus, Tara is also considered a female aspect of Avalokiteshvara. Her nature is portrayed as calm, kind and nurturing, she has a smile on her face and holds a



beautiful, non-threatening attribute—a lotus stem in her hand. In another account by the Buddhist monk and scholar, Taranatha, Tara's previous life as a human being was of a princess called *Jnanachandra* or “Moon of the knowledge” [16] suggesting her royal, upper caste origins. This proves that there is a stark difference in the rendition and treatment of goddesses depending on the social, cultural, and political undertones based around their genesis, even though theoretically and conceptually their visions result from meditations.

In the Dhaka stele for instance, the miniature Sitala is seen as an emaciated figure. This questions her conventional imagery of a robust goddess found in other regions of India and makes us question whether she had a different form developed exclusively in Bengal because of the prevalence of tantric Buddhist and Shakta faiths. Sitala's emaciated physiognomy mirrors the esoteric beliefs in Bengal Shakta cults, which Fabrizio Ferrari and Professor Jinah Kim have compared to that of Chamuda, thus echoing the iconography of ghosts and beings that dwell in the charnel grounds and netherworlds. Buddhist and Shakta tantrism embraced practitioners from the lower and outer strata of the society. This was in turn reflected in the visual representation of their deities who were portrayed as dark, demonic, and emaciated beings who engaged in the *vama* or left-leaning rituals. Hence, an emaciated Sitala alongside the *pisachi* Parnasabari together display casteist and esoteric undercurrents as well as the inclusiveness in the religions.

Goddess Parnasabari is portrayed as a hunter, a healer, an enlightened being holding the indigenous knowledge of medicinal herbs and plants. Her aspect of violence and destruction is directed not towards her devotees but the disease-inflicting demons. Nevertheless, there are no nurturing attributes applied to the goddess, even though she heals the young and old. She is never invoked as a mother but always as a *pisachi*. This non-motherly, non-domestic treatment of the goddess is correlated to her ‘outcaste’, tribal identity that remains essential even after

being included in an orthodox Buddhist pantheon. Parnasabari is a goddess who is demon-like, dangerous, and wild. Hence, it is to be noted that although the Buddhist gods and especially goddesses are visualized through deep meditation, their imagery is often influenced by the deeply conditioned social norms and past origins that even the pious monks and nuns were subjected to whilst creating these texts and the images.

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