

ЭКСПЕРТИЗА И АТРИБУЦИЯ  
ПРОИЗВЕДЕНИЙ ИСКУССТВА  
WORKS OF ART: EXPERTISE AND ATTRIBUTION

DOI 10.15826/izv2.2021.23.4.063  
УДК 7.03(540) + 7.033.37 + 069.5:730(540)

**Abira Bhattacharya**

<sup>1</sup>*National Museum*

<sup>2</sup>*Institute of History of Art, Conservation  
and Museology  
New Delhi, India*

**MOTHERHOOD IN THE REALM OF EASTERN INDIAN  
AND HIMALAYAN ART: AN ICONOGRAPHIC STUDY  
OF VISUAL FORMS OF PRAJÑĀPĀRAMITĀ  
FROM THE NATIONAL MUSEUM, DELHI**

This paper aims to outline and explore the development of iconographic forms and metaphysical grounding of one of the most venerable and distinguished Buddhist female deities, Prajñāpāramitā. The Buddhist female pantheon gained a paramount pre-eminence with the idolization of Prajñāpāramitā, establishing the significance of female figure and, especially, mother symbolism during the early medieval period under the liberal patronage of the Pala dynasty of Eastern India. The religious imageries and practices of this deity gradually disseminated to the adjoining Himalayan kingdoms of Nepal and Tibet through pedagogic and religious linkages, and became an integral part of their society. To understand the factors of cross-cultural assimilation through the study of representational forms and its metaphysical grounding, the paper explores and shows the metaphorical meaning of ‘prajñā’ propounded in the Prajñāpāramitā discourse, and its representation in cultic icons of the goddess Prajñāpāramitā and the manuscript. This thematic narrative opens up new avenues of interpretations on gender-subjectivity in Buddhist cosmology and pantheistic belief system which are touched upon in this paper. The idea of pronouncement and expansion of female-oriented texts and icons is highlighted through a study of select devotional icons of this deity, Prajñāpāramitā, from the collection of the National Museum, Delhi.

**Keywords:** iconographic forms; mother symbolism; cultural linkages; cultic icons; colour symbolism; gender-subjectivity; Buddhist cosmology

### Acknowledgements

This work is based on the collection of the National Museum, Delhi and I am extremely grateful to *Shri. Subrath Nath*, Additional Director General, National Museum, Delhi, for his consistent support, encouragement, and guidance. I would like to acknowledge with gratitude, the support, and guidance of Prof. *Victoria Demenova*, Director of the Art History, Cultural Studies and Design Department, Ural Federal University, Russia, for showing confidence in my work and for her inputs and guidance. I would like to thank Dr. *Sama Haq*, Consultant (Central Asia), National Museum for her consistent feedback in my research and for providing photographs.

**Citation:** Bhattacharya, A. (2021). Motherhood in the Realm of Eastern Indian and Himalayan Art: An Iconographic Study of Visual Forms of Prajñāpāramitā from the National Museum, Delhi. *Izvestiya Uralskogo federalnogo universiteta. Seriya 2: Gumanitarnye nauki*, 23(4), 9–22. <https://doi.org/10.15826/izv2.2021.23.4.063>

*Submitted: 01.06.2021*

*Accepted: 12.10.2021*

**Абира Бхаттачарья**

<sup>1</sup>Национальный музей

<sup>2</sup>Институт истории искусства,  
консервации и музеологии  
Нью-Дели, Индия

## МАТЕРИНСТВО В ВОСТОЧНОИНДИЙСКОМ И ГИМАЛАЙСКОМ ИСКУССТВЕ: ИКОНОГРАФИЧЕСКОЕ ИЗУЧЕНИЕ ВИЗУАЛЬНЫХ ФОРМ ПРАДЖНЯПАРАМИТЫ ИЗ НАЦИОНАЛЬНОГО МУЗЕЯ, ДЕЛИ

В статье исследуется и описывается развитие иконографических форм и метафизической составляющей одной из самых почитаемых буддийских женских богинь, Праджняпарамиты, — «персонифицированной мудрости», которой обладают будды и бодхисаттвы, и связанного с ней ключевого текста махаяны Астасакхасрика Праджняпарамита-сутры («Беседа о совершенстве мудрости»), в которой разъясняется «пустотность» (шуньята) природы и дхармо-частиц. Буддийский женский пантеон развился и приобрел важнейшее значение благодаря обожествлению Праджняпарамиты, определив тем самым значение женского образа и, в особенности, материнской символики в раннесредневековый период, во времена правления династии Пала в Восточной Индии. Религиозные образы и практики, связанные с Праджняпарамитой, постепенно распространились по территории и достигли соседних гималайских территорий, Непала и Тибета, с помощью религиозных и культурных связей и стали неотъемлемой частью жизни общества. Для того чтобы оценить подобную межкультурную ассимиляцию при помощи изучения репрезентативных форм и их метафизического обоснования, в статье исследуется метафорическое значение слова «праджня», предложенное в дискурсе Праджняпарамиты, и его представление в культовых образах богини

Праджняпарамиты и связанных с ней текстах. Это исследование открывает новые возможности для интерпретации вопросов гендерной субъективности и в буддийской космологии, и в пантеистической системе верований, которые затрагиваются в статье. Идея, заложенная и развитая в сфокусированных на женском образе «запредельной мудрости», анализируется в процессе изучения отобранных из коллекции Национального музея в Дели визуальных образов Праджняпарамиты.

**Ключевые слова:** иконографические формы; символ матери; культурные связи; культовые изображения; цветовая символика; гендерная субъективность; буддийская космология

### **Благодарности**

Эта работа основана на коллекции Национального музея в Дели, и я благодарю *Шри Субрам Нат*, дополнительного генерального директора музея, за его постоянную поддержку, содействие и руководство. Мне бы хотелось отметить благодарностью поддержку, доверие и руководство профессора *Виктории Деменово*, директора департамента истории искусств, культурологии и дизайна Уральского федерального университета, Россия. Также мне хотелось бы поблагодарить доктора *Саму Хак*, консультанта Национального музея, за ее частые отзывы о моих исследованиях и за предоставленные фотографии.

**Цитирование:** *Bhattacharya A.* Motherhood in the Realm of Eastern Indian and Himalayan Art: An Iconographic Study of Visual Forms of Prajñāpāramitā from the National Museum, Delhi // Известия Уральского федерального университета. Сер. 2: Гуманитарные науки. 2021. Т. 23, № 4. С. 9–22. <https://doi.org/10.15826/izv2.2021.23.4.063>

*Поступила в редакцию: 01.06.2021*

*Принята к печати: 12.10.2021*

The devotional icons of Prajñāpāramitā are venerated as the spiritual symbols of matriarchy and eulogised as the ‘mother of all Buddhas’ in Buddhism. The concept of motherhood is celebrated in the corpus texts and devotional images, rooted in the Mahāyāna phase, but reached its culmination under the Tantric movement. The emergence is marked with the foundation of the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā sūtra* (‘Perfection of Wisdom’ Discourse), which explicates the centrality of the ultimate nature and truth of the femaleness and motherhood in Buddhism. This trend was followed in other Mahāyāna scriptures. The same concept is also cited in Chapter II of the *Mahāyānasūtrālamkāra*, which eulogizes the exalted rank of transcendental wisdom as the mother and womb of compassion, bestowed with all auspicious marks. Supportive arguments show the changing attitude towards women, wherein the archaic notion of gender transformation is refuted, and rather an inclusive pattern is presented, exalting the female physical form considered as capable of attaining Buddhahood [Jamspal, Clark, Wilson et. al., p. 19]. Another noteworthy example is the *Tathāgatagarbha sūtra* referring to feminine nouns and their multivalent meanings. Concomitantly, the term ‘garbha’ denoting womb is a female noun, referring to the intrinsic location within (living beings), which is compared and designated

as the inside of the lotus, the calyx (*padmagarbha*), occupied by the *Tathāgata*, having an embryo-like state, sheathed with the lotus petals, connotative of the hidden Buddha-nature, spotless and unaffected by the abhorrent surrounding [Zimmermann, p. 105–106]. Besides, a parallel concept to the association of wisdom with the femaleness established by the *Prajñāpāramitā* discourse is also found in the *Sūtra of Queen Śrīmālā* of the Lion's Roar that conceives the *Tathāgatagarbha* as a higher form of wisdom, exemplifying the meaning of the noble truths [Paul, p. 33].

The personification of wisdom also presented the female figures in the *Mahāyāna* by different epithets, like *dhāraṇī* ('the bearer') and *vidyā* ('knowledge'), in which the female deities and related mantras were termed as *vidyā-dhāraṇī* [Shaw, p. 185]. The concept of *bija*-mantras, *vidyā* and *dhāraṇī* appeared in the *Prajñāpāramitā* literature, expounding the absorption of the Tantric elements and ritual magical powers of the *Prajñāpāramitā* for penitential powers, removal of pestilence and accumulation of merit [Conze, 1978, p. 12–13]. For example, the *Hṛdaya sūtrā* elaborates upon the potency and protective power of the mantra by quoting the '*Om gaté gaté paragaté parasamgaté bodhi svaha*', emphasizing that these seed sounds contain the entirety of Perfection Wisdom and also mentions the term *Prajñāpāramitā-dhāraṇī* [Hixon, p. 81]. However, in Tantric discourses, these terms were supplanted by the appellation '*prajña*', referring to the goddesses as the spiritual consorts of the *Dhyāni* Buddhas or the female counterparts of the Tantric adepts [Ibid., p. 186]. This premise led to the creation of female images, endowed with mystical qualities. Several early Buddhist scholars, like *Nāgārjuna*, *Asanga*, and *Vasubandhu*, widely discussed and eulogised the core idea of motherhood rooted in the supreme power of transcendental wisdom (*prajñā*), which is synonymous with the feminine principle as well.

In the early medieval times, *Vajrayāna* added an impetus to the growth of the Buddhist pantheon thereby expanding the scope of sculptural outgrowth and literature. The rich literary sources contributed immensely to the development of iconography in a fixed codified form, such as the *Guhyasamāja tantra*, the *Sādhanamāla*, etc. These canonical injunctions, describing the iconography and ritualistic practices were widely transmitted throughout Asia and variedly rendered in the representational forms. The wide scale popularity of *Prajñāpāramitā* coincided with the *Pāla* reign, which flourished from the late eighth to twelfth centuries CE. The *Pāla* kings were protectors of Buddhism, giving it a vigorous resurgence after the decline of the *Gupta* Empire and expanded the influence in north-eastern India at a time when it was limited only in *Kashmir* and as far as the south. Under the liberal patronage, both goddesses reached a point of efflorescence and became a symbol of their state religion. A large number of visual forms of *Prajñāpāramitā* were commissioned and propagated to remote lands to ensure the spread of the associated cultic practices. The monastic establishments (*mahāvihāras*) commissioned by the *Pāla* rulers, including *Nalanda*, *Kurkihar*, *Vikramaśīla*, *Odatanpuri*, and *Somapuri*, *Devikota*, the *Pandita vihara*, *Phullahari*, *Sannagara* and *Pattikera*, etc., situated in the large expanse of *Bihar*, *Bengal* and northern *Odisha*, acted as cosmopolitan centres of holistic learning and arts centres, attracting Buddhist monks, pilgrims and travellers across Asia with

a quest of knowledge and promoted the development of Vajrayāna. Famous Buddhist adepts, Śāntarākṣita, Padmasambhava, Atisa, Dharmasvamin, Vajradeva, etc. were responsible for the dissemination of the cult of Buddhist female deities in Tibet and Nepal. Similarly, the tradition of the eighty-four great adepts (*mahāsiddhas*) commenced about the tenth century CE and is comprised of eccentric yogi masters, like Naropa, Tilopa, Marpa, etc., who played a significant role in the amalgamation of the esoteric practices with the female imageries that added a new dimension to the concept of motherhood and rise of wrathful forms.

The rise of this mystic cult of Buddhist goddesses associated with the Pāla dynasty played a great role in its dissemination throughout India and across Asia. However, the dissemination of the cult of female deities in the Himalayan region is much earlier than the Pāla regime, established from the reference found in the biography of the Tibetan ruler, Srong-brtsan sgam-po (ca. 617–650 CE), who established the first powerful Buddhist empire in Tibet. He married a Chinese and a Nepalese princess, wherein the Chinese princess, Whencheng from the Tang dynasty was considered a personification of another venerable Buddhist goddess, White Tārā, also known as Sita Tārā, while the Nepalese princess was an embodiment of Bhṛkuṭi. The Tibetan king envisioned himself as a manifestation of Avalokiteśvara attended by his two female companions [Dargyay, p. 255]. But the subsequent political turmoil and the revival of Buddhism in Tibet was again overlapping the timeline of the Pāla regime. Thus, it is right to say that the Pāla iconography and manuscripts provided the material substance of which Himalayan Buddhism was reformed and revived during the contemporaneous phase, particularly, Nepal and Tibet. These kingdoms held the rank of preserver and the heartland of Buddhism and its art after the destruction of the monasteries in India after the eleventh century CE.

From an aesthetic perspective, the Pāla idiom and iconographic tradition had a huge impact on the art of Nepal and Tibet and was considered a principle source of inspiration for artists. The earliest literary evidence referring to a school of art production flourishing in the region of Bihar and Bengal during the eighth and twelfth centuries appears in the writings of Tārānatha. The account states the emergence of the Pāla school during the regnal period of the second and third Pāla emperors, Dharmapāla and Devapāla, by the duo of craftsmen, father Dhiman and son Bitpal, who founded sub-schools, ‘the followers of the father were known as the Eastern School (presumably Bengal) and those of the son, the Madhyadesa school, since they were most numerous in Magadha (south central Bihar)’ [Schroeder, vol. 1, p. 215]. The stylistic variations based on regional schools are seen in the sculptural forms of the Pāla School that reflect a combination of the Gupta-Sarnath and Mathura styles. Therefore, based on the contemporaneous Indian prototypes, two dominant art schools emerged. Firstly, the central Tibetan from the eleventh century until the early fifteenth century CE; then, the artistic culture of the Kathmandu valley, whose artists were favoured by the monastic order of the Sakyas in Tibet beginning at least as early as the thirteenth century CE [Kossak, Singer, p. 3]. Nepal and Tibet shared a strong cultural and religious bond, leading to inter-exchange of Buddhist texts,

icons, rituals, and workmanship, however, their stylistic distinctiveness is equally apparent. Between the seventh and ninth centuries CE, Tibet encountered Buddhist art at the Central Asian centers, such as Khotan, Kashgar, Kucha, and Dunhuang in Gansu province, but after the dominance of the Eastern Indian style increased by the tenth century CE onwards. Pratapaditya Pal opines that Nepal became the direct inheritor of Pala art and the Tibetans inclined increasingly to Nepal, as many Nepali artists were responsible for painting murals in many monasteries of Tibet, and also the Newari metalsmiths enjoyed a special reputation in Tibet for their extraordinary skill in casting images [Pal, p. 21]. Thus, Nepal largely contributed to the shaping of the Tibetan tradition and the influence of Nepali art on Tibetan paintings and bronzes. They borrowed the Pala idiom of exuberance in ornamentation and opulence and grace in delineations of the figurative manner. However, a sense of uniqueness was achieved through infusion of indigenous styles and textual traditions. The artistic refinement and technical dexterity seen in the intricate and delicate workmanship led to the development of the highly sophisticated style.

The paper discusses the artistic and iconographic trends of Nepal and Tibet and the role and impact of Pala art through a close analysis of the sculpted and painted images of the goddess created in different cultural domains and chronological phases. Through the comparative study and cross-referencing of the archaeological data with the primary sources and textual records, the paper demonstrates the iconographic specificities and variations seen in Himalayan art and also the confluence of Eastern Indian and localized elements. As a case study, select artefacts belonging to the art schools of Pala period and Himalayan kingdoms of Tibet and Nepal, from the Reserve collection of the National Museum, New Delhi, are discussed at length in this paper. Moreover, the iconographic analysis of Prajñāpāramitā would help in closely situating the aspects of gender symbolism within artistic trends, rituals, and visualization practices. From the art-historical viewpoint, one of the constructive ways of outlining the theological progression of the gynocentric ideology is to examine the depictions of goddesses both as independent powers and as a relative spiritual counterpart to the Buddhist male deities.

Prajñāpāramitā is venerated as the embodiment of supreme transcendental wisdom, originating from the deification of the *Prajñāpāramitā sūtra* or the 'Perfection of Wisdom' scriptures. The etymology of the Sanskrit term '*prajñā*' comes from the root *jñā*, meaning 'to know', and '*pra*', an emphatic prefix; identified as a mental event or a state of consciousness of reality; while the Sanskrit term '*pāramitā*' is derived from the word *pārama* meaning 'highest' or 'most excellent'. Similarly, in the Pāli canon, the term '*paññā*' corresponds with *prajñā*, derived from the common verbal root *jñā* and also reflected in other terms, such as *aññā*, *ñāñā*, *adhipaññā*, *appaññātika*, *nippaññā*, etc. [Choong, p. 86]. Thus, it is discernible that the cognitive entity identified as '*prajñā*' is not an ordinary form of knowledge acquired by observation or contemplation or reading or hearing or any other type of conventional forms, nevertheless, it gives rise to metaphysical understanding and investigation that eliminate doubts of worldliness [Hirakawa, Groner, p. 225].

Modern scholars have interpreted and translated the meaning of the term '*prajñāpāramitā*' as 'Perfection of Wisdom' or 'the absolute wisdom of Buddha' [Kimura, p. 112]. *Prajñāpāramitā* is the 'foremost of all wisdoms (*prajñā*)' that bestows the cognition of the true nature of all dharmas, leading to the cultivation of virtues and ultimate realization of Buddhahood.<sup>1</sup> The *Advayavajrasaṃgraha* states that *Prajñāpāramitā* is the root cause of other five *pāramitās*, connoting its significance in the Bodhisattva ideal. The same is ideated in the Nāgārjuna's *Mahā-Prajñāpāramitā-Śāstra*, Chapter XVII, Vol. 2, in the passage 'the Method of Non-Dwelling' (p. 656F) that states 'abiding in the *Prajñāpāramitā* by the method of non-dwelling (*asthānayogena*), the bodhisattva is able to perfect (*paripūri*) the six virtues (*ṣaṭpāramitā*)'.<sup>2</sup> Kumārajīva, an early Chinese scholar of the fifth century CE, interpreted the *prajñāpāramitā* as 'crossing by wisdom (to the shore of enlightenment)' [Ibid., p. 299–300]. This highest spiritual level is regarded as the foremost principle of Buddhist soteriology, since it plays an imperative role in the path of salvation and emptiness (*śūnyatā*).

The teachings of the *Prajñāpāramitā* discourse are infinite (*apramāṇa*) and unlimited (*ananta*) in nature, so the corpus of literature is also vast [Lamotte, Vol. 1, p. 64]. The Perfection of Wisdom discourse is originally a compendium of several texts compiled and developed over a period of more than 1,000 years, dating from between 100 BC and 1100 CE, ascertained largely based on the dates of Chinese translations. It expanded over a long period and underwent continual development, influenced by the shifting doctrinal order and socio-religious milieu. The foundation of the *Prajñāpāramitā* literature established the most fundamental Mahāyāna philosophy, since it is regarded as the Buddha's 'second turning of the wheel of Dharma', which played an enormous role in the development of many Mahāyāna schools [Kim, 2013, p. 29]. The most systematic framework of chronological development is provided in the writings of Edward Conze. He stated that these texts were developed in nine developmental phases by providing a broad classification of the various stages of *Prajñāpāramitā* philosophy [Ibid., p. 48]. According to a popular legend in the Buddhist tradition, Nāgārjuna, a Buddhist scholar of Southern India from the second century CE, is greatly credited for the discovery and resuscitation of the *Prajñāpāramitā sūtras* from the nether world which had been lost to humankind since their exposition by the Buddha [Williams, p. 47]. Besides, from a very early phase, the *Prajñāpāramitā* discourse gained widespread popularity in the domain of Chinese and Tibetan Buddhist thoughts and multiple translations were undertaken by varied scholars that are preserved in the Taisho Tripiṭaka and Kanjur repository.

<sup>1</sup> In the Nāgārjuna's *Mahā-Prajñāpāramitā-Śāstra*, Chapter XVII, Vol. 2, on 'the Virtue of Generosity' (p. 650F), it is stated that 'the root (*mūla*) of pure wisdom is the distinctive characteristic of *Prajñāpāramitā*, because the foremost of all the wisdoms (*prajñā*) is called *Prajñāpāramitā*' [Lamotte, Vol. 2, p. 520].

<sup>2</sup> The concept is explained as 'Out of compassion for beings, the bodhisattva first makes the vow to liberate all beings. By the virtue of exertion, and even though he knows that all dharmas are unborn, unceasing, like *nirvāṇa*, he continues to exert his qualities (*guṇa*) and he fulfils the six virtues. Why? Because he abides in the *Prajñāpāramitā* by the method of non-dwelling. This is what is called abiding in the *Prajñāpāramitā* by the method of non-dwelling' [Ibid., p. 525].

This discourse laid the foundation for the sanctimonious rank of female deities in the pantheon, as the term '*prajñā*' synonymous to a female noun became a standardized epithet for goddesses. The connotation of femaleness and motherhood is metaphorically expressed in the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* text since several references have been construed by the scholars where the terms '*mātā*', '*janayitrī*' ('creator') and the '*darasayitrī*' ('guide') have been used as appellations for Prajñāpāramitā. Such epithets expressing her motherly nature, also serve as part of the 108 appellations interwoven in the form of mantra attributed to the discourse, whose recitation is considered efficient in attainment of mindfulness, and liberation from all states of afflictions, since it encapsulates the power and teachings of the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā* Prajñāpāramitā. This tradition is found in the Tibetan sources, and one is the Klong rdol bla ma's List of 108 dharmas of Prajñāpāramitā ('Bum gyi 'grel rkang brgya rsta brgyad ngos 'dzin) [Conze, 1993, p. 196–198]. According to the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa sūtra*, 'the perfection of wisdom is the bodhisattva's mother; skill in means is his father' [Hirakawa, Groner, p. 300]. Interestingly, the manifestation of Prajñāpāramitā in a female deity is not mentioned in discourse [Kinnard, p. 56]; however, by the advent of Vajrayāna practices, the Prajñāpāramitā *sūtra* became deified in an anthropomorphic representation of a female deity. This is evidenced in the Hevajra Tantra, which states: "In this union Wisdom, although unrealizable apart from the Means, yet predominates. It has behind it the whole tradition of the Perfection of Wisdom, already actually symbolized in a feminine divinity, the goddess Prajñāpāramitā. She is therefore herself the supreme truth of the Void (*sūnyatā*) which is the Perfection of Wisdom... it is in her that the yogin, as Means, is consubstantiated or united in substance, and dissolved" [Snellgrove, Kṛiṣṇācāryapāda, p. 24]. Thus, the visual forms of Prajñāpāramitā are quintessentially immaculate, benevolent, impassioned and meditative in nature, congruent to her sanctified role of universal mother.

The iconography of Prajñāpāramitā has been described in the nine *sādhana*s (nos. 151–59), which are dedicated to the procedure of worship, while a hymn (no. 160) is devoted to her praises in the *Sāadhanamālā* [Bhattacharyya, 1978, p. 42]. The *sādhana*s (nos. 151, 154, 155) are dedicated to her white form (Sita-Prajñāpāramitā), while the remaining five *sādhana*s (nos. 152, 153, 157, 158, 159) are dedicated to her yellow form (Kankavarṇa Prajñāpāramitā). In these descriptions, the goddess is prescribed to display three complexions: yellow, white, and blue; yellow is the most preferred colour and only *sādhana* describes her blue form [Donaldson, p. 276]. In Eastern Indian sculptures, representations of Prajñāpāramitā are mostly dating from the tenth century CE, strictly following the textual prescriptions systemized in the above-mentioned exegetical texts. She is invariably shown in four- or two-armed forms, seated cross-legged (*vajraparyāṅkāśana*) with her two principal hands in the conventional *dharmacakra mudrā* symbolizing the first sermon and the remaining two hands displaying her attributes, a book atop the lotus and a rosary.

A four-armed bronze image of Prajñāpāramitā from Nepal, dating from ca. fifteenth century CE, conforms to the textual prescription (Fig. 1). She is shown seated in *vajraparyāṅka* on *viśvapaḍma*, and her two hands are posed in *dharmacakra mudrā*.



Her right hand is in the *vitarka mudrā*, symbolizing transmission of the Dharma, while the left hand holds the manuscript. Unlike the *sādhanas*, this image shows slight variation by altering the orientation of the characteristic attributes. Similarly, there are many Prajñāpāramitā images where she does not display the *dharmachakra mudrā*, the right hand holds a red lotus with a book atop and she is seated in her usual posture. Richly gilded and adorned with semi-precious stones, the treatment of the adornments, prominent chin, tresses across the shoulders, and modelling of the body display naturalistic detail of the highest quality. The aristocratic features of her countenance are enhanced by the opulent crown with a beaded border, which is surmounted by a superbly rendered five-pointed crown. The hair, piled high atop the head, cascades over her shoulders. The graceful curvaceous form of the body and the swirling motion of the diaphanous robes add a sense of liveliness and rhythm.



Fig. 1. Four-armed Prajñāpāramitā, ca. 15<sup>th</sup> century CE, Nepal, Copper Alloy, National Museum, Delhi, Accession No. 48.4/2, (photograph courtesy of National Museum, Delhi, Negative No. 6039-1971)

In the case of Prajñāpāramitā, the concept of book worship (*pustaka pūja*) gained popularity, determined by the large scale commissioning by the patrons. The ideation of the discourse as the female deity is suggestive of the underlying esoteric cultic significance and also demonstrates the underlying concept of buddhānusmṛti which involves collective meditation and visualization through a cognitive process and emphasis on mimesis. It led to the iconographic representation of the cultic book as a venerable icon. Kinnard highlights the important role of buddhānusmṛti as an essential part of the artistic representations of the Pala period, in which he has emphasized as a vital component of the devotional and intellectual paramparā relating to Buddhist images created in medieval northeast India [Kinnard, p. 72–78]. The discourse eulogised the Perfection of Wisdom as the root of enlightenment, but also expounded that all dharmas are empty (*sarvadharmasūnyatā*) [Lamotte, Vol. 4, p. 1669]. The Hṛdaya-sūtra states ‘Form is emptiness, emptiness itself is form, emptiness is not other than form, and form is not other than emptiness’. But from a ritual perspective, this notion of transcendental wisdom required a physical mode of expression, which was expressed through the defied devotional forms of the goddess and book worship (*pustaka pūja*) that centred on the attainment of enlightenment through the visualization and identification with a chosen deity as described in the *sādhana* texts.

The Prajñāpāramitā discourse proclaims several laudatory passages emboldening the study, worship and reverence of Prajñāpāramitā, prescribing it an empowered devotional object of the highest rank of religious or intellectual practices, to be

worshipped by every aspirant of enlightenment.<sup>3</sup> In the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā*, the Buddha states that the place where the Perfection of Wisdom is installed and worshiped is just like the Bodhimanda (i.e., Bodhgaya), where past, present, and future Buddhas attain enlightenment and are thus protected from evil beings [Conze, 1994, p. 105]. Hence, it gives precedence to the innate purity of the Buddha's perfected wisdom enshrined within his body over his corporeal form or relics [Kinnard, p. 55]. Besides, the *Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa* also emphasizes the manifestation of text as a cult image. It elucidates that the worship of the book in one's home or monastic cell has the capacity to ensure 'great protection, great wealth, a long and healthy life, constant increase in fortune', which indicates that the book was viewed not as a mere repository of words, that is, as something to be read only, but as a place of an image to be worshiped, encountered, and activated in one's life [Wallis, p. 67]. Similarly, the ritual significance of the discourse is particularly mentioned in the *Vairocanaḥhisambodhi sutrā*, which states the *ācārya* visualizing the *maṇḍala* of Vairocana should have generated the bodhi-mind and been well-skilled in the cultivation of *Prajñāpāramitā*, and wisdom and means, along with other essential qualifications to administer the rituals [Giebel, p. 17].

Thus, in the book worship rituals the manuscript becomes a cult object, playing a pivotal role in the ceremonial and ritualistic practices of Buddhism. J. Kim states that potency of the discourse was one of the foremost reasons why the text was chosen for making illustrated manuscripts by the Pala and Newari rulers, and also the iconographic configuration of the illustrations were conceived in a programmatic and holistic mode to communicate its doctrinal and cultic importance effectively, reminiscing the same ideology used in designing a temple [Kim, 2018, p. 510]. This interpretive and innovative mode to showcase the power and manifestation of the *Prajñāpāramitā* discourse became adopted in sculptural forms as well with an added metonymic value, wherein the representation of the ritual involving the worship of a book with a *Vajrācārya* becomes an integral motif widely seen in the pedestals.

This idea is well-demonstrated in a relief panel from the eleventh century CE which depicts the representation of esoteric rituals in a unique way (Fig. 2). The rectangular pedestal has a row of Transcendental Buddhas (*pancha Tathāgatas*) seated in a meditation posture (*dhyānasana*) with the *Prajñāpāramitā sūtra* at the top and on the lower panel kept on a high-rise throne pedestal, flanked by *Vajrasattva* and a series of symbolic motifs, like *purnaghata* with foliage, lotus plants, a full vase, and two kneeling female devotees. The *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā* text describes simple ritual activities surrounding a book (*pustaka puja*) performed as a process of merit-making by the devotees. Under esoteric influences, elaborate ritual practices flourished, which involved the inclusion of a ritual master as part of the book

<sup>3</sup> In the passage on the Great Disciple Receives Transmission, Lord Buddha preaches 'Prajñāpāramitā sūtra should be venerated ceremonially, contemplated profoundly, studied intensively, chanted melodiously, written beautifully by hand and expanded liberally by commentary... This is the unequivocal way to honour and meditate upon Awakened Enlightenment' [Hixon, p. 191].

cult worship, who preaches the initiator and guides him in the path of Enlightenment. In this stele, Vajrasattva is visualized as the ritual master, seated cross-legged and shown with a sceptre (*vajra*) and a bell (*ghanta*), which symbolizes the embodiment of nondual wisdom and emptiness. He is the preceptor of five transcendental Buddhas (*Panca Tathāgatas*), who embodies the ultimate goal of visual practices

in the *Sādhanamālā*. On the other side of the pedestal, lay devotees are shown meditating on the book. The role of Vajrasattva as the ritual master is emphasized therein; he channelizes the devotional activities of the mundane world to the spiritual sphere, transforming the visualization of the book of the *Prajñāpāramitā sūtra* into the form of goddess *Prajñāpāramitā*. Such representations of a ritual involving the worship of a book with a Vajrācārya holding a vajra and a ghantā are found on Buddhist sculptures from the tenth to the twelfth centuries from Bihar, Bengal, and Odisha. For instance, there are two prominent representations of *Prajñāpāramitā* goddess displaying similar pedestal configuration from Odisha firstly, the two-armed goddess, dating from the second half of the eleventh century CE, Bhaumakara period, found at Manglapur, Odisha and housed at the Orissa State Museum, Bhubaneswar [Donaldson, p. 276], and secondly, the four-armed deity from the Eastern Ganga dynasty, discovered at Choudwar, Odisha, and preserved in the National Gallery of Australia.<sup>4</sup> J. Kim identifies a similar feature seen on the pedestal of the *Aṣṭamahābhaya Tārā* stele, dating from around the twelfth century CE, which was found at Sompara in Munshiganj district of Bangladesh. She corroborated that the ritual text depicted in that image corresponds to the religious gift of the *Prajñāpāramitā (śrī-prajñāpāramitābhaṭṭārikā)* mentioned in the copper plate grant issued by Sāmalavarman, discovered from the find spot of the *Tārā* stele [Kim, 2018, p. 509].

The museum holds a pair of two painted folios of palm-leaf manuscripts *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā*, dating from the fourteenth century CE, from the Varendra Bhumi, Eastern Indian (Acc. No. 51.212). The text is in hybrid Sanskrit script in Ranjana form. The first one displays the four-armed *Prajñāpāramitā*, yellow in complexion, seated *vajraparyāṅkāsana* on a lotus throne. Her two principal hands form the conventional *dharmachakra mudrā* and the remaining two hands hold a rosary and a lotus supporting a book atop. The second one displays the two-armed Mañjuśrī, seated in a similar posture and also showing the *dharmachakra mudrā*. Mañjuśrī is recognized as one of the eight Bodhisattvas, and is worshipped widely for conferment



Fig. 2. Worship of *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā sūtra* and Vajrasattva by Devotees, ca. 11<sup>th</sup>–12<sup>th</sup> centuries CE, Nalanda, Bihar, India, Pala period, H: 18.4 × W: 43 cm, D: 9.2 cm, Accession No. 60.567 (photograph courtesy of National Museum, Delhi)

<sup>4</sup> *Prajñāpāramitā*, ca. twelfth century CE, Eastern Ganga dynasty, Choudwar, Cuttack, Odisha (Orissa), India, Stone, 60.0 h × 28.0 w × 14.0 d cm, National Gallery of Australia, Accession No. NGA 90.531 URL: <https://cs.nga.gov.au/detail.cfm?irn=146283> (date of access: 30.05.2021).

of wisdom, a retentive memory, intelligence, and eloquence. This kind of systematic orientation echoes the iconographic and philosophical interconnectedness of the two deities.

It is noteworthy that Mañjuśrī shares a deep intrinsic association with Prajñāpāramitā and both are conceived as the embodiments of transcendental wisdom. There are implicit references of Prajñāpāramitā as the *prajñā* of Mañjuśrī in the textual traditions. The earliest iconic description of Mañjuśrī appears in the Arya Mañjuśrīmulakapa, but his reference is found in many scriptures, like the Prajñāpāramitā *sūtras*, the Mañjuśrīnamasangiti, Guhyasamaja Tantra, etc. The Jnanpada tradition was founded by Buddhashri Jnana in the late eighth century CE, who studied the Prajñāpāramitā literature under Acarya Haribhadra and received instructions in teaching from Mañjuśrīmitra, an incarnation of Mañjuśrī [Huntington, Bangdel, p. 435]. The tradition was propagated to Tibet by Atisa. In the *Sādhanamālā* and *Niṣpanṇayogāvalī*, many forms of Bodhisattva Mañjuśrī developed, representing different attributes and gestures. The presence of the goddess in the Mañjuśrī images is invariably implied in symbolic form, as the Prajñāpāramitā manuscript acts as the chief attribute in the variety of his manifestations Mañjuvajra, Manjughosa, Vagishvara, etc. Besides, two subsidiary female deities, Kasini and Upakesini, along with Jaliniprabha and Candraprabha, also appear in some of the manifestations of the Mañjuśrī's maṇḍala.

One of the finest bronze images of Mañjuśrī attended by manifestations of Prajñāpāramitā comes from Nepal, belonging to ca. the fourteenth century CE (Fig. 3). This bronze piece represents a balanced composition of a four-armed



Fig. 3. Mañjuvajra Attended by Manifestations of Prajñāpāramitā, ca. 14<sup>th</sup> century CE, Nepal, Bronze, Gilded, H: 38.2 × D: 42 cm, National Museum, Delhi, Accession No. 64.4 (photograph courtesy of National Museum, Delhi)

Mañjuśrī, flanked by two four-armed manifestations of Prajñāpāramitā, alike in appearance, denoting the concept of *svābha*, which means reflection of oneself [Ghosh, p. 91]. Seated cross-legged on a lotus pedestal, the four-armed male deity exhibits different hand gestures and attributes, such as the *vitarka mudrā*, a flaming sword, and a pair of bow and arrow. The flaming halo around his head extends to and wreaths the bodies of all the seated deities. As personifications of Prajñāpāramitā, the female deities are seated in *lalitasana* on separate pedestals. They also hold the Prajñāpāramitā *sūtra* in the upper left hands. The decorated vegetal aureole surrounding the deities brings out the confluence of local stylistic tradition.

To sum it up, the Prajñā ideal served as a leitmotif of Buddhist theology, but its role and philosophical perception in the Mahayana time underwent a strategic change with the deification of the goddess under the Vajrāyana realm. It laid emphasis on the gynocentric ideals, which became reflected in the religious practices, image worship and rituals, showcasing a more radical and egalitarian approach, infused with Tantric elements.

### References

- Bhattacharyya, D. C. (1978). *Studies in Buddhist Iconography*. New Delhi: Manohar.
- Choong, M. (1999). *The Notion of Emptiness in Early Buddhism*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.
- Conze, E. (1978). *The Prajñāpāramitā Literature*. Tokyo: The Reiyukai.
- Conze, E. (1993). *Perfect Wisdom: The Short Prajñāpāramitā Texts*. Totnes: Buddhist Publ. Group.
- Conze, E. (1994). *The Perfection of Wisdom in Eight Thousand Lines & Its Verse Summary*. Delhi: Sri Satguru Publications.
- Dargyay, E. K. (1989). 'Sriong-Btsan Sgam-Po's Biography' In The Maṇi Bka' 'Bum. *Acta Orientalia Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae*, 43(2/3), 247–257. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23657797>
- Donaldson, Th. E. (2001). *Iconography of the Buddhist Sculpture of Orissa* (Vol. 1–2). Delhi: IGNCa and Abhinav Publications.
- Ghosh, M. (1980). *Development of Buddhist Iconography in Eastern India: A Study of Tārā, Prajñās of Five Tathāgatas and Bhṛīkuṣī*. New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal.
- Giebel, R. W. (2005). *The Vairocanaḥhisambodhi Sutra*. California: Numata Center for Buddhist Translation and Research.
- Hirakawa, A., & Groner, P. (2007). *A History of Indian Buddhism: From Śākyamuni to Early Mahāyāna*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publ.
- Hixon, L. (2004). *Mother of the Buddhas: Meditation on the Prajñāparamita Sutra*. Kolkata: Alchemy.
- Huntington, J. C., & Bangdel, D. (2003). *The Circle of Bliss: Buddhist Meditational Art*. Chicago: Serindia Publications.
- Jamspal, L., Clark, R., Wilson, J., Zwilling, L., Sweet, M., & R. Thurman (Trans.). (2004). *The Universal Vehicle Discourse Literature (Mahāyānasūtrāṅkāra)*. By Maitreyanātha/Āryāsaṅga. Together with its *Commentary (Bhāṣya)* by Vasubandhu. New York: American Institute of Buddhist Studies, Columbia University's Center for Buddhist Studies, and Tibet House US.
- Kim, J. (2013). *Receptacle of the Sacred: Illustrated Manuscripts and the Buddhist Book Cult in South Asia*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Kim, J. (2018). Illustrated Buddhist Manuscripts. In A. M. Chowdhury, & R. Chakravarti (Eds.), *History of Bangladesh: Early Bengal in Regional Perspectives (up to c. 1200CE)* (pp. 509–534). Dhaka: Asiatic Society of Bangladesh.
- Kimura, R. (1927). *A Historical Study of the Terms Mahāyāna and Hīnayāna and the Origin of Mahāyāna Buddhism*. University of Calcutta.
- Kinnard, J. N. (2013). *Imaging Wisdom: Seeing and Knowing in the Art of Indian Buddhism*. London: Routledge.
- Kossak, S. M., & Singer, J. C. (1999). *Sacred Visions: Early Paintings from Central Tibet*. New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art.
- Lamotte, E. (2001). *The Treatise on the Great Virtue of Wisdom of Nāgārjuna (Mahā-Prajñāpāramitā-Śāstra)* (Vols. 1–5). (G. K. M. Chodron, Trans.). Retrieved from <https://blog.daum.net/gomildo/13761343>
- Pal, P. (1975). *Nepal, Where the Gods Are Young*. New York: The Asia Society.

Paul, D. Y. (Trans.). (2004). *The Sutra of Queen Srimala of the Lion's Roar*. Berkeley, CA: Numata Center for Buddhist Translation and Research.

Shaw, M. (2015). *Buddhist Goddesses of India*. In *Buddhist Goddesses of India*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Schroeder, U. von (2001). *Buddhist Sculptures in Tibet: India and Nepal* (Vol. 1). Hong Kong: Visual Dharma Publication Ltd.

Snellgrove, D. L., & Kṛṣṇācāryapāda. (1980). *The Hevajra Tantra: A Critical Study*. London: Oxford University Press.

Wallis, G. (2002). *Meditating the Power of Buddhas: Ritual in the Mañjuśrī-mūlakalpa*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Williams, P. (2009). *Mahāyāna Buddhism: The Doctrinal Foundations*. London: Routledge.

Zimmermann, M. (2002). *A Buddha Within: The Tathagatagarbhasutra, the Earliest Exposition of the Buddha-Nature Teaching in India*. Tokyo: The International Research Institute for Advanced Buddhism.

### **Bhattacharya, Abira**

<sup>1</sup> Assistant Curator

Department of Anthropology  
National Museum

Janpath, 110011 New Delhi, India;

<sup>2</sup> Doctoral Scholar (History of Art),

Institute of History of Art, Conservation and  
Museology (Noida Campus)

A-19, Block A, Industrial Area, Sector 62,

Noida, 201309 Uttar Pradesh, India

Email: abiradca@gmail.com

### **Бхаттачарья, Абира**

<sup>1</sup> помощник хранителя

департамента антропологии  
Национальный музей

Janpath, 110011 New Delhi, India;

<sup>2</sup> докторант

Институт истории искусства, реставрации  
и музеологии

A-19, Block A, Industrial Area, Sector 62,

Noida, 201309 Uttar Pradesh, India

E-mail: abiradca@gmail.com

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6322-5141>