



In Praise of the Great Liberator: The Worship of Ārya Tārā in Nepal

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Abstract

This paper examines the worship of Tārā as a central female Buddha in Nepalese Mahayana and Tantric traditions, focusing on her enduring significance in Newar Buddhism of the Kathmandu Valley. Regarded as a savior who liberates beings from the cycle of suffering, Tara's origins are rooted in mythic narratives, including her emergence from the compassionate tears of Avalokiteśvara, as well as historical accounts linking her to Princess Bhrikuti and the spread of Buddhism to Tibet. The study explores major forms of Tara, such as Green Tara, White Tara, and the protector form associated with protection from eight fears. It highlights important sacred sites in Nepal, including Swayambhu Stupa, Itum Bahal, Hiranyavarna Monastery, Tara Tirtha, and Sankhu Vajrayogini, showing the deep integration of Tara worship into local religious life. Ritual practices such as Tara worship ceremonies and devotional observances are analyzed for their roles in healing and spiritual benefit. The paper also notes Tara's presence in Hindu traditions, demonstrating her continuing importance in Nepalese religious life.

Keywords: Tara, Avalokiteśvara

Introduction

Tārā means she who carries across, savior, protector, and “Star Lady.”¹ The names of Tārā are associated with the two features of stars i.e., light and guidance.² Stars have often guided the maritime travelers who used to cross dangerous seas under the night sky.³ Similarly, she liberates the sentient beings from the suffering of Saṃsāra. Ārya Tārā is one of the mother goddesses or female Buddhas in Mahāyāna and Tantric Buddhism. The earliest depiction of Tārā in Buddhist art as Avalokiteśvara's female companion can only be found in 6th century C.E.⁴ In Nepal, Princess Bhṛkūtī was born in 617 CE⁵. She was believed to have been an emanation of Green Tārā. The second wife

¹ Miranda Shaw, *Buddhist Goddesses of India*, 310.

² Susan A Landesman, *Tārā Tantra: Tārā's Fundamental Ritual Text (Tārā-Mula-Kalpa)* (Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2020) 6.

³ Susan A Landesman, *Tārā Tantra*, 6.

⁴ Susan A Landesman, *Tārā Tantra*, 6.

⁵ Min Bahadur Shakya, *The Life, and Contribution of the Nepalese Princess Bhrikuti Devi*, 38.

of Tibetan King Songtsen Gampo was Princess Wencheng Gongzhu from China. She was believed to be White Tārā.⁶ During the marriage of Princess Bhṛkūtī with Tibetan King Songtsen Gampo, Bhṛkūtī took many gifts as dowry to Tibet along with her such as the image of Maitreya, Akṣobhya Buddha, a sandalwood image of Tārā.⁷



Tibetan King Songtsen Gampo with Princess Bhṛkūtī (Left) and Princess Wencheng Gongzhu (Right)

It is believed that Bhṛkūtī played a significant role in introducing the cult of Tārā and Nepal's Buddhist culture to Tibet. The elaborated description of Tārā is given in *Ārya Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa*. Regarding Tārā's association with Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara, the legend has it that she was born out of the tears of Avalokiteśvara who has been liberating infinite sentient beings.⁸ Among various forms of Tārās, in Kathmandu, Green Tārā, White Tārā, Saptalocanī Tārā, and Aṣṭamahābhaya Tārā are mostly favored. Aṣṭamahābhaya Tārā gives us protection from eight different kinds of fears. They are fears from lions, elephants, fire, snakes, thieves, drowning, captivity, and evil spirits.⁹ Tārā is depicted as a Buddha and as Consort of Amoghasiddhi in *Pañca Jina Maṇḍala*.¹⁰

⁶Min Bahadur Shakya, *The Life and Contribution of the Nepalese Princess Bhrikuti Devi*, 42.

⁷Min Bahadur Shakya, *The Life and Contribution of the Nepalese Princess Bhrikuti Devi*, 10.

⁸Min Bahadur Shakya, *Hiranyavarna Mahavihara*, 28.

⁹Miranda Shaw, *Buddhist Goddesses of India*, 318.

¹⁰Miranda Shaw, *Buddhist Goddesses in India*, 350.



Green Tārā, c. 1260s, from Central Tibet, painted by the Nepalese artist Aniko @ The Cleveland Museum of Art

Nepalese Mahāyāna Buddhists have strong faith in and devotion for Tārā and worship her as a sacred personage. The story of Sarvajña Mitra of *Vicitra Karṇikāvadāna*, probably written in Nepal, gives some references to Ārya Tārā's activities of protecting people at the period of Krakucchanda Buddha in the Treta Yuga.¹¹ The Newars recite 108 names of Ārya Tārā hymn (*Aṣṭottārāśatanāma Tārā stotra*), and *Arya Tārā Sragdhara stotra*, Tārā Dhāranī daily at home and recite during the Tārā puja rite.¹²



On folio 15 recto of Dhāraṇīsaṃgraha, representation of Tārā in her Aṣṭamahābhayatāraṇī ("Saving from the Eight Great Dangers") form at Cambridge University Library

Chanting the names of Tārā in many Buddhist monasteries has been one of the spiritual practices of Newar Buddhists of the Kathmandu Valley. Some of the important shrines are White Tārā or Talking Tārā Shrine at Tārā Nani-Dharma Cakra Vihāra, Itum bāhal, Kathmandu, Five Tārās of Svayambhu Stūpa, Green Tārā Shrine at Hiranyavarṇa Mahāvihāra, Patan, Self-arisen Tārā at Pharping, Ugra Tārā of Ekajaṭī at Sankhu Vajrayogiṇī or Gum Bāhā, Bhaktapur, "Talking Tārā" statue in king's place, Bhaktapur and others. Several stories, ritual texts such as the guide to the Ārya Tārā vrata and sacred shrines associated with Tārā have come into existence in Nepal.

¹¹ Vaidya, *Buddhist Traditions and Culture of the Kathmandu Valley*, 142.

¹² Vaidya, *Buddhist Traditions and Culture of the Kathmandu Valley*, 140.

In this paper, an attempt is made to examine all the local legends related to Tārā in the Kathmandu Valley and shed some light on main sacred shrines of Tārā and analyze the associated practices to understand the extent to which the cult of Tārā has permeated Newar Buddhism.

The Origin of Tārā

The Legends of Origin of Tārā are somehow mysterious and magical. There are many legends about the origin of Tārā. One famous legend says that Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara has been saving and liberating countless sentient beings from the sea of birth and death. One day, Avalokiteśvara found out that the number of sentient beings suffering from the sea of birth and death had not decreased. He was so dejected and shed copious tears out of great compassion. The two drops of his tears turned into lotuses from which originated Green Tārā and White Tārā¹³

However, Hem Raj Shakya writes in the Svayambhu Mahacaitya that those two drops of Avalokiteśvara turned into Arya Tārā and Bhrikuti Tārā.¹⁴ After that, Arya Tārā and Bhrikuti Tārā consoled Avalokiteśvara saying, "Please don't be desponded; we will help you ferry over countless sentient beings. Though the number of sentient beings may be countless, the power of our vow is immeasurable. This we swear."¹⁵ Similar vow of Arya Tārā can be found in the 108 Names of Ārya Tārā Stotras.

108 Names of Ārya Tārāstotra (verse 17) says:

O, Lord Amitābha! I shall liberate sentient beings from the ocean of suffering

Of all kinds of fear. My name is remembered throughout the world as "saviourness" by enlightened sages of the past. Because I liberate them from terrifying disasters, I am also called "Ugratārā". I am also called "Enhancer of wisdom". Since I destroy the darkness of ignorance which envelops them. Since I give them the ultimate happiness of pure Nirvana, I am also called "Ekajata."¹⁶

Another popular legend recorded by Tārānātha in another universe says Tārā was a princess named Jñānacandrā (Moon of Knowledge) who was a devout follower of Buddha. She has been offering precious gifts to the Buddha for millions of years with a goal to attain full enlightenment.¹⁷ She was asked to practice because of which she would be able to transform herself into a male form to get full enlightenment. However, she refused to practice for the change, thinking that there is no male and female. She took a vow that until the enlightenment of all sentient beings, she would remain in the female body. She became known as "Tārā" because of effort in saving all sentient beings. Later she attained Buddhahood and got the title "Mother of all Buddhas".¹⁸

Sacred Shrines of Tārā in Nepal

1. Five Tārās of Svayambhu Stupa

The Svayambhu stupa is venerated as the heart of Newar Buddhism. The great self-originated Stupa consists of five Buddhas; Vairocana, Aksobhya, Ratnasambhava, Amitabha, Amoghasiddhi, and their five consorts; Vajradhātēśvarī, (prajñāpāramitā) Tārā, Saptalocana Tārā, Mamakī Tārā, Pandara Tārā, and Ārya Tārā.

a. Vajradhātēśvarī, (prajñāpāramitā) Tārā - There is no Vajradhātēśvarī (Prajnaparamita) image at the Stupa because she is depicted as formless and free from any mental construct. She is the personification of the doctrine of emptiness.¹⁹

¹³Miranda Shaw, *Buddhist Goddesses of India*, 307.

¹⁴Hem Raj Shakya, *Sri Svayambhu Mahacaitya*, 300-301

¹⁵ Hem Raj Shakya, *Sri Svayambhu Mahacaitya*, 300-301

¹⁶ Hem Raj Shakya, *Sri Svayambhu Mahacaitya*, 300.

¹⁷ Miranda Shaw, *The Buddhist Goddesses of India*, 307-9

¹⁸Miranda Shaw, *The Buddhist Goddesses of India*, 309-10

¹⁹Hem Raj Shakya, *Svayambhu Mahacaitya*, 510.



Vajradhāteśvarī, (prajñāpāramitā) Tārā

b. Saptalocana Tārā – Saptalocana Tārā is situated next to Akṣobhya Buddha at the east of Svayambhu Stūpa. She is the consort of Akṣobhya Buddha. She has seven eyes in the body: three on the face, two on the hands, and two on the legs. Her left-hand gesture depicts giving (varada), and her left hand depicts fearlessness and sitting in the vajraprayanka posture.²⁰



Saptalocana Tārā

c. Mamaki Tārā – Mamaki Tārā is situated next to Ratnasambhava Buddha at the south of Svayambhu Stupa. She is the consort of Buddha Ratnasambhava. She is holding lotuses in both hands depicting fearlessness and giving and seated in ardhaparyanka posture. She is also known as a Ratna Tārā²¹

²⁰Hem Raj Shakya, *Svayambhu Mahacaitya*, 510-11.

²¹Hem Raj Shakya, *Svayambhu Mahacaitya*, 512.



Mamaki Tārā

d. Pandara Tārā – Pandara Tārā is situated next to Amitabha Buddha at the West of Svayambhu Stupa. She is the consort of Amitabha Buddha. She is holding lotuses in both hands depicting fearlessness and giving and seated in ardhaparyanka posture. She is known as Padmini Tārā.²²



Pandara Tārā

e. Ārya Tārā, - Ārya Tārā is situated next to Amoghasiddhi Buddha at the north of Svayambhu Stupa. She is the consort of Buddha Amoghasiddhi. She is holding lotuses in both hands depicting fearlessness and giving and seated in Ardhaparyanka posture.²³

²²Hem Raj Shakya, *Svayambhu Mahacaitya*, 515.

²³ Hem Raj Shakya, *Svayambhu Mahacaitya*, 516



Ārya Tārā

Besides these five Tārās at the Svayambhu Stupa, there are two majestic and colossal Ārya Tārā statues in front of the Amitābha Shrine of Svayambhu Stūpa. Two Tārās stand with the same gesture displaying ardhāsamapada and tribhanga mudra, which depicts giving and fearlessness. It was established in NS 1007.²⁴



Colossal Ārya Tārā statue in front of the Amitābha Shrine, Svayambhu

²⁴ Hem Raj Shakya, *Svayambhu Mahacaitya*, 300



2. The Talking Tārā at Itum Bāhāl Tārāshrine at Itum Bāhāl

A very well-known White Tārā or Talking Tārā is located inside the courtyard of Nani Bāhāl which is part of Itum Bāhāl in Kathmandu. Her name can be seen on the wall of the temple. It reads as a Mahāsāntaśvetadharmacakratārā.²⁵ White Tārā is housed along with Green Tārā and Prajñāpāramitā statue in a small temple.



White Tārā is in the middle, with Green Tārā on the left and Prajñāpāramitā on the right

The legend says that the white Tārā has come from the northern region of the Himalayas to Nepal. It is probably from Tibet. She came here to preach the Dharma. It is believed that the shrine was built on the same spot where she gave a dharma teaching. This shrine was renovated by a local king named Gulochandra of Itum Bāhā in N.S. 709 (1588 CE?)²⁶ who also transformed the shrine into a two-storeyed temple and established the Samyak Guthi or Trust to preserve the temple. There is another exciting story told of this white Tārā. According to the legend, the white Tārā arrived in Nepal with a white Nāgā or serpent. This Nāgā is also known as Jona Nāgā. There is a well next to

²⁵Keith Dowman, *Kailash*, 235.

²⁶Vaidya, *Buddhist Traditions and Culture of the Kathmandu Valley*, 146.

the temple believed to be where the white Nāgā has been dwelling since its arrival.²⁷ The well contains the “white water” called “Tuyu-la” in Newari Language. The white water has supposedly some power that can heal any skin disease. This White Tārā shrine is famous for its mystical nature and power. It is one of the valley's sacred shrines, and many pilgrims from local and Tibet pay a visit and worship every day.²⁸



The well contains the “white water” called “Tuyu-la” in Newari Language

3. Green Tārā Shrine at Hiraṇyavarṇa Mahāvihāra



Ārya Tārā in the Hiraṇyavarṇa Mahāvihāra

²⁷Vaidya, *Buddhist Traditions and Culture of the Kathmandu Valley*, 145.

²⁸ Vaidya, *Buddhist Traditions and Culture of the Kathmandu Valley*, 146.

We can find another beautiful Ārya Tārā image in the HiraṇyaVarṇaMahāvihāra (Kwābāhā) in Lalitpur. The Tārā Shrine is located on the southern side of the central courtyard of Vihāra. This Tārāshrine is not that old like other shrines of Tārā. It was established in 1958 C.E. This Tārā shrine is becoming popular as many visitors from all over the valley, including the Tibetans, pay homage here every day. The shrine is maintained by the devotional song group called Jñānamālā Bhajana Sangha, which worships and chants devotional songs with music every full moon day and auspicious days.²⁹

4. TārāTirtha

Tārā Tirtha is a sacred spot related to Tārā in Kathmandu Valley. It is located at Bāgduvā headwaters of the Bagmati River on Shivapuri, Kathmandu Valley³⁰. Tārā tirtha, a place where Tārā had formerly appeared in person and performed a great act of salvation. The vrata-kathā of the Tārā Vrata narrates the story of a pious woman who had an abusive husband. She was expelled from her home by her husband then she tried to give her life but met a sage who guided her in her prayer to Tārā for removal of her misery. She remained in the forest and spent the rest of her life living on fruit and water, since then, she started meditating and performing the Tārā vrata. After her passing, she was born in the land of bliss (Sukhāvātī). We find the enormous benefits of the practice of Tārā Vrata.³¹



Bāgduvā headwaters of the Bagmati River on Shivapuri, Kathmandu Valley

5. SankhuVajra Yogiṇī (UrgaTārā/Ekajati) Temple

Sankhu Vajra Yogiṇī Temple is one of the power places of Kathmandu Valley. The Sankhu Vajra Yogiṇī is also known as the goddess Urgatārā (Tārā in the angry mood), or Ekajati. The Vajra Yogiṇī Temple is worshipped by both Buddhists and Hindus. She is red in color. She has one face and four arms, her two arms holding skull-cup (kapala) and knife (kar-patra) and her other two arms holding a sword (khaḍga) and a blue utpala lotus. Because of her attributes, she is also called NīlaTārā and Khaḍga Yogiṇī. There is another statue of Urgatārā in bell metal located on the second floor of the temple.³²

²⁹ Min Bahadur Shakya, *Hiraṇyavarṇa Mahāvihāra: A Unique Newar Buddhist Monastery*, 27.

³⁰ Todd T. Lewis, *Popular Buddhist Texts from Nepal: Narratives and Ritual of Newar Buddhism*, 107

³¹ Miranda Shaw, *Buddhist Goddesses of India*, 353

³² Keith Dowman, *Kailash*, 274.



Ugra Tārā or Ekajaṭī at Sankhu Vajrayoginī Temple

According to Hinduism, Tārā is one of the forms of Durgā and one amongst the Daśamahāvidyā. But the Hindu tradition accepts that “she was originally a Buddhist deity and even today a Hindu Guru will direct his disciples to practice ritual meditation according to the Buddhist liturgy.”³³

Recent research of Prof. Gudrun Buhnemann finds that “Form of Ekajata and Mañjuḥṣa were adopted from the Buddhist pantheon into the Hindu and worshipped by the same name. In the case of Mahācinakrama-Tārā, a special form of Tārā, it has long been surmised that the goddess was imported from the Buddhist Tantric pantheon into the Hindu Pantheon”.³⁴

Her research also highlights that “Śāśvatavajra’sādhana of Mahācinakrama-Tārā/Ugra-Tārā (eleventh Century) was almost completely incorporated in the Hindu Pheṭkārīnītantra (thirteenth Century?), which included not only the iconographical description of the goddess but also the typically Buddhist tantric visualization pattern”.³⁵

³³Keith Dowman, *Kailash*, 275.

³⁴ Gudrun, *The Goddess Mahācinakrama-Tārā (Ugra-Tārā) in Buddhism and Hindu Tantrism*, 472.

³⁵ Gudrun, *The Goddess Mahācinakrama-Tārā (Ugra-Tārā) in Buddhism and Hindu Tantrism*, 479.

6. Self-arising Tārā at Pharping

At the foothill of the famous Asura Cave of Padmasambhava, Pharping, Nepal. There is a Tārā shrine adjacent to the Tibetan monastery. It is believed that in the shrine, the small Tārā image had self-arisen on the solid rock, which was human made. It has miraculously grown over time from four inches to ten inches in height.³⁶ Many Tibetan and Local devotees visit this shrine when they visit Vajrayoginī temple and Asura cave in Pharping.



Self-arising Tārā at Pharping

7. Talking Tārā (Bolne Tārā) in Bhaktapur

Talking Tārā of Bhaktapur is a little challenging to locate because Taleju Temple or Aagche is found in the Bhaktapur Palace, and people are not allowed to go inside the Palace. Only Hindus are allowed to visit that temple. It is believed that Talking Tārā in Bhaktapur had instructed the King of Bhaktapur to invite Milarepa from the nearby mountain retreat to the city. It is also possible that that image of Tārā was originally located in the Taleju temple complex in Bhaktapur. Keith Dowman highlights that “there is an image of Green Tārā in this agama-che, and if his assertion is true, then this must be the older deity who spoke of Milarepa to the king. The most likely king to have sent an invitation to Milarepa is Hasadeva (Ca. 1090-1097), or perhaps Sivadeva (ca. 1101-1123) or Singhadeva (ca. 1111-1121), the last two kings ruling concurrently.”³⁷ Usually inside the Taleju temples in the Kathmandu valley, there are shrines of two female deities; Taleju Bhavānī and Kumārī.³⁸

But a question arises.³⁹ Where is Green Tārā? Tārā is a popular goddess among Hindu goddesses. Tārā is depicted as a manifestation of Durgā in Hinduism, as mentioned earlier, and she is considered as one of the Daśamahāvidyā goddesses. Did the Tārā image later replace Bhavani or Kumari, or was she transformed as such?

Śivendra writes about the Mysterious image of Goddess Taleju “An image of Goddess Taleju is concealed in a cloth and is brought down from a room on the second floor of the temple. It is then carried in a procession led by the chief Taleju priest accompanied by musicians and sword bearers. Concealing the image induces a mystery, whether it represents the ‘true image’ of the goddess or not and mystifies the spectators eagerly watching the midnight procession.” There is a need for in-depth research on this topic.

³⁶Miranda Shaw, *Buddhist Goddesses of India*, 312.

³⁷Keith Dowman, *Kailash*, 279.

³⁸“Taleju Temple: A Fitting Tribute to Goddess Taleju Bhawani” ECS Media Pvt. Ltd., accessed May 2, 2022, <http://ecs.com.np/destination/taleju-temple-a-fitting-tribute-to-goddess-taleju-bhawani>.

³⁹“Patron Deity: Taleju Bhawani” ECS Media Pvt. Ltd., accessed May 1, 2022, <http://ecs.com.np/features/patron-deity-taleju-bhawani>.

Dowman highlights more on this issue that “it was not the Taleju image brought from Ayodhya in 1323 by Hari Singha Deva fleeing from the Muslim Tuklak Shah who spoke to the Bhaktapur King in the late 11th or early 12th centuries. Yet this Taleju image subsequently became the protecting Deity of Bhaktapur and later of all Nepal Kings and is believed to take pride of place in the Agama-che (the secret shrine of the Palace temple complex).”⁴⁰

Rituals Associated with Tārā

Satva vidhāna Tārā Pūjā or Chog Pūjā

A satva vidhāna Tārā Pūjā or Chhog Pūjā⁴¹ is organized among the Newar community to get a blessing of Tārā and protection from any diseases. If someone is ill and has a severe life-threatening illness, the family members sponsor the Tārā puja at home, in bāhā or bahi, or outside in public. During this satva puja ritual, 108, 360 or 1000 small tapers made of flour dough are offered to Tārā along with bowls of water, butter lamps, and cups filled with rice and coin.⁴²



Chog Pūjā Offerings

This worship is usually performed by a single priest called Bajracharya. But sometimes, more priests perform the worship together to shorten the duration of the worship. The Tārā puja commences with worshipping the five buddhas and triple gems (Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha). When the priest worships the Buddha, he will make an offering to all the Tathagatas. The prajnaparamita is also worshipped as a representation of the Dharma. During this process, every offering is 108 times and chant the 108 names of the Tārā. The Sangha is represented by the Lokeśvaras or Bodhisattvas, who help all sentient beings to lead to the path of Buddhahood.⁴³

⁴⁰Keith Dowman, *Kailash*, 279.

⁴¹Vaidya, *Buddhist Traditions and Culture of the Kathmandu Valley*, 140.

⁴²Buddhist Goddesses of Indian, 350-351.

⁴³Vaidya, *Buddhist Traditions and Culture of the Kathmandu Valley*, 141.

Tārā Vrata



Vajracharya priest performing the Tārā vrata at Patan Durbar Square, Lalitpur.

Tārā vrata is regularly performed at home or in public during auspicious days such as birthday, full moon days and Aṣṭamī (eighth day of the new moon). The Newar people believe that if someone takes part in this vrata, they will not die prematurely and will have a long life. If a person is very sick and his or her death is approaching, the family member will take part in this vrata on behalf of them. Tārā vrata usually is a daylong event. Most of the participants are generally female who wear green dresses in honor of Green Tārā. The ritual begins with the drawing of the Tārā Mandala. All offering and necessary materials are arranged for by the organizer. The participants bring offerings from their homes. The vrata can be held anywhere at home or any Buddhist temple courtyard. It is auspicious for it to be held at the Tārā shrines such as Itumbāhā, Tārā Tīrtha, and Svayambhu Stūpa.⁴⁴

To sum up, Tārā is one of the main goddesses of the Newar pantheon. Newar has been revering Tārā in Nepal. The worship of Tārā in the Kathmandu Valley is still being practiced, and we can feel her presence in the day-to-day life of the Newar Buddhist community as a liberator of sentient beings from the suffering of samsara.

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⁴⁴ Buddhist Goddesses of Indian, 351

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