TORANAŚĀLABHAÑJIKĀ:
The Transformations of a Motif

avalaṇbya gavākśapārśvamanyā śayitā/ cāpavibhugnagānnayashtih//
virarāja vilaṇbicāruhārā racitā/ toranaśālabhañjikéva//[1]

1. Bhārhut and Sānchi

Śālabhañjikā is a motif of a woman standing under a tree holding a branch. In some motifs, one of her legs entwines the tree. In others, she wraps an arm around

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[1] *Buddhakarita* (v:52: Cowell:1892:42), *Buddhacarita* (v.52:Johnston:1934:1984:52)

Another, leaning on the side of the window,
with her willow-form bent like a bow,
shone as she lay with her beautiful necklace hanging down,
 like a statue in an archway made by art (Cowell:1896:1969:57).

Cowell is not sure about the meaning of *toranaśālabhañikéva*. Perhaps Sānchi gateways were not yet fully understood. Therefore he translates it as "a statue in an archway made by art. In a footnote to his translation (n1. P.57) he suspects whether this is *śālabhañjikā*. In his edition of the text he shows that in the manuscripts in Cambridge University and in Paris the text gives, he suspects, mālabhañjikéva (Cowell:1892: n.7. p.42). The following is Johnston's translation.

Another lay, leaning against the side of a window
With her beautiful necklace dangling,
And seemed with her slender body bent like a bow as if
Turned into a statue of a *śāla*-plucker on a gateway (Johnston:Op.Cit: Part II:71).

Johnston footnotes (n.52), "The verse is an exact description of the statues below the crossbars on the Sānchi gateways." He refers to Vogel's study of the *śālabhañjikā* figure in Sānchi. Vogel does not identify the motif as *śālabhañjikā* by 1935, as his preface to the English translation of Buddhist Art in India, Ceylon and Java indicates. In that work he still calls such motifs female yakshas and other deities whose "female counterparts are more graceful and usually seize with outstretched hand the branch of a blossoming tree above their heads" (1935?:1977:13). Johnston, too, refrains from using the term *śālabhañjikā*.

Hanging on to the side of the window-frame
another slept, with her slender body bent like a rainbow,
an elegant string of pearls dangling from her neck and glowing,
placed like a sal-wood figurine in a gateway (author's translation).

the tree or a branch while holding another branch with her other hand. She rests her body on one leg, balancing her posture with the other crossed leg poised on the ball of her foot. In some motifs, her other leg is bent and the foot rests on the tree trunk. She has an ample, even exaggerated, bosom and her hip protrudes as she rests herself on the leg.

Śālabhañjikā is an ancient motif in the Indian artistic tradition. Its earliest known sculptural expressions appear in the decorative arts of the stūpa in Bhārhut, constructed during the Sunga period around the second century BCE. However, it is likely that in the pre- Bhārhut era the motif, similar to other such images, was sculpted out of perishable materials such as unbaked clay, wood, and flour.

Etymologically, the term *śālabhañjikā* has two roots: *śāla* and *bhañjikā*. *Śāla* refers to the Sanskrit name of a particular species of trees.[2] *Śāla* could also mean just any tree, or even wood.[3] *Bhañjikā* means a doll, a puppet, a figure carved out of some material. It also means courtesan and harlot.[4] Another meaning of *Bhañjikā* is "the one who breaks." Some lexicographers define *śālabhañjikā* as "wooden doll, doll or puppet made of *sal* or *śāla* wood" as well as the "*sal* tree breaking maiden," depending on the literary context.[5] The term and the motif *śālabhañjikā* could thus be employed to refer to a wooden doll, puppet made of *sal* wood, *sal* tree-breaking-maiden, courtesan, harlot, *vrkshikā* or tree deity, dryad or a man-eating tree spirit, *yakshi* or *yakkhini* - a demoness.[6] The reference to a doll or puppet made of *sal* wood indicates the perishable nature of the material used to

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[2] *Shorea (vatica) robusta.* Monier-Williams (1899:1979: at 1067). Also see Apte (1985: at 915), Rhys Davids and Steed (1921:1993:at 706), Edgerton (1970: at 593), and Sri Sumangala (1965:at 503).

[3] Apte (ibid.).

[4] Apte (ibid.).

[5] Apte (ibid.), and Edgerton (ibid.). There are problems with regard to the lexicographic definitions. The compilers use literary sources to define terms but do not chronologize their references. As a result, it is difficult to find which among many meanings of a term existed in usage during a given historical era. There is a danger in applying meanings found in later works to define earlier usages because these meanings may not have existed at that time. For example, the meanings of words in the *mahābhārata* may be different from the meanings of the same words in, say, the *mahāvastu*.

[6] Coomaraswamy (1927:1965:63-66). For a full treatment, see Coomaraswamy (1993:83-90).

construct the motif during the pre- Bhārhut era and, perhaps, this explains why there is no material evidence of its existence in that era.

Romila Thapar and Himansu Ray suggest that the royalty and the urban mercantile classes of the Maurya and Sunga periods became wealthy and powerful because of international trading that prospered during these eras.[7] They patronized the construction of Buddhist vihāras, stūpas, *śālabhañjikā* and other decorative motifs around these monuments.[8] In Bhārhut, the *śālabhañjikā* motif was carved on marble slabs. Little is known about its exact position in the larger structure of the building complex. Perhaps, *śālabhañjikā* was used on the outer walls of a temple or a gateway. In the Bhārhut motifs the *śālabhañjikā* figure has an arrogant, aristocratic charm (Figure 1). Sivaramamurti speculates that these *śālabhañjikā* figures represented the female patrons or the wives of the patrons, thus attributing to them a political character.[9] The artists may have constructed the motifs in this manner to please the patrons. The artists may also have been required to depict their female patrons in this flattering manner, as a part of the overall understanding between the patron and the artist.[10]

From the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, archaeologists and art historians, such as Ananda Coomaraswamy, prompted by the motif's prominent bosom and pelvis, concluded that the motif was a symbol of voluptuousness and fertility.[11] Coomaraswamy used the *dohada* ritual to understand the fertility

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[7] Thapar (1966:1982; 109-135), Ray (1994:1998; 121-150). The inscriptions in Bhārhut show that some of the donors of various elements in the Bhārhut complex were monks and nuns. See Cunningham (1879:1998; 127-143).

[8] These trade routes were an extension of the northern Silk Roads that connectèd China with Europe through Central Asia and the Middle East.

[9] Sivaramamurti(1972).

[10] This is a feature shared by many other cultures. For example, the donor's likeness was generally included in the Christian iconography of the Byzantine Empire, Renaissance Italy, and early twentieth century Sri Lankan Buddhist iconography and religious art. Sometimes the donor is presented as an onlooker. Sometimes the donor is a principal actor in the drama depicted. Here, as Sivaramamurti suggests, the donor or someone important to him or her appears as a supernatural being in a large religious complex where she has no specific Buddhist role to play but a role associated with the pre-Buddhist religion. On the other hand, it could well have been that a man had them constructed in the likeness of a known female simply to please her without intending any other use.

[11] Coomaraswamy (1927:1965:64:n2.; 1993:83).

connotations of the motif. *Dohada* means "pregnancy craving." The ritual assumes
that some plants are afflicted with this condition and that the touch of a pregnant
woman or a kick from a maiden would relieve the tree from *dohada* and the
expectant tree would burst into flowers and fruits. The *śālabhañjikā* motif frames
this ritual instance as well.

        The next significant application of the motif is evidenced in the *torana-s* in
Sāñchi, Madhya Pradesh. The relevant artifacts in Sāñchi were probably
contemporaneous with those in Bhārhut.[12] The eastern gateway to the stūpa contains
the remains of the *śālabhañjikā* motif (Figure 2). The motif has been placed on all
the architraves of the *torana*. The best preserved is between the third architrave and
the volute. There, a *śālabhañjikā* wraps her right arm around the trunk of a fruit-
laden mango tree, holding a branch with her raised left hand. Her legs are crossed
and her left foot rests on the trunk. Her body is in triple torsion and triple flexion
(*tribhaṇga*). Thus hanging on the branch, the *śālabhañjikā* leans forward. Her
protruding breasts are voluminous. Her hips are ample. Whether she smiles or is
expressionless depends on the viewer's perspective. Also unlike her counterparts in
Bhārhut, she is sparsely attired. Except for her girdle, her ornaments are simple. She
looks like a tribal girl who wears many bangles and anklets. Unlike her Bhārhut
counterparts, who have names such as Chulakōkā Devatā, Chandā Yakhinī etc., she
is nameless.

        In both Bhārhut and Sāñchi, the art works around the stūpa include images of
the pantheon of deities propitiated by the Buddhist community of the era. The
deities were seen as worshiping the stūpa alongside the laymen. However, these
deities were soteriologically insignificant. The *śālabhañjikā* motif, as
Coomaraswamy suggests, represented fertility and sensuality, the aspects of life
significant for worldly success that the *dharmasāstras* (the brāhmanical compendia
of law and ethics for the first three layers of the *varna* hierarchy) of the post-vedic
religion elevated as the *dharma* (ethics) of the *grhastha* (household) life. [13] If we

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[12] Although Emperor Asoka had the main stūpa and the railings constructed in the third
century BCE, the Sātavāhana rulers from Andhra and or merchants commissioned the
construction of the *toranas* or the gateways to the stūpa around the second century CE when
that dynasty controlled the region. See Thapar (Op.Cit.) and Sivaramamurti (Op.Cit.).

[13] The oldest known source of information about the *varna* hierarchy is the *nāsadīya gīta* of
the *purusha śukta* of the tenth book of the Rg Vēda. According to this account, Prajāpati
created the cosmos in the image of a man, *puruśa*. The *brāhman-s* arose from its mouth,
kshatriya-s from its arms, the *vaiśya-s* from the thighs and the *śudrā-s* from the feet. These
four groups of people are known as the four *varna-s*. The *brāhman-s* were the priestly class
that interceded between humans and gods. The *kshatriya-s* were the warriors who ruled and

take the motif as such, *śālabhañjikā* represented success in procreation as well as rich harvest in agriculture, profit in business, abundance and prosperity in all areas of life, and power and social recognition. The *dohada* ritual and the motif to signify its climax seem to have been employed to dramatize the focus on fecundity in both the Bhārhut and Sāñchi pilgrimage centers.

However, from comparative religionist, anthropological and sociological perspectives, a few issues may be raised. How can we make sense out of the *śālabhañjikā* motif within a Buddhist context, when Buddhism ordinarily and emphatically rejects whatever that the *śālabhañjikā* motif represents? Let me go along with Coomaraswamy and attempt to understand, within his scheme of concepts, the presence of the motif in Buddhist contexts.

In the empirical world, soteriological interests are just some among many interests of an individual. For the laymen, success in the household is just as important as soteriological success, if not more. At this juncture, the margins between textual Buddhism and household beliefs and practices that are not included in the texts blur, and Buddhism becomes an inclusive social institution. Although the texts urge the *bhikkus* and *bhikkunis* to stay away from the rituals associated with success in *grhastha* affairs, the laymen, as long as they remain within the *pañchasīla,* are free to do as they please in order to better their worldly lot. These

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defended the community and enhanced its land resources. The *vaiśya*-s were the traders and agriculturists while the *śudra*-s were the laborers (Rg Veda:X:90).

Of these the first three were known as *dvijā* or twice born through a ritual known as the *upanayana.* The Dharmasutras such as those of Āpasthambha, Āsvalāyana and Gobhila, and the post-Vedic Dharmasāstras that arose from the Dharmasūtras , such as those of Baudhāyana, Nārada, Yāgñavalkya, Kātyāyana and Manu, codified this scheme of and for the society and detailed the ethics and ritual procedures appropriate for each class. The knowledge of Sanskrit and the corpus of religious knowledge were restricted to the *dvijā* groups. Only the males in these groups qualified to reach *mokśa* after death and every male participated, as they still do, in an initiation ritual known as *upanayana* during which a sacred thread is tied across his right shoulder. The thread socially signifies his *dvijā* membership and personally signifies the individual's social and spiritual rights and duties. This ceremony introduced the individual to the society. Each *dvijā* individual was thus introduced or initiated at an age specific to his inherited *varna* (Manu:1; 2:36).

The females, *śudra*-s and those that did not belong to the Vedic society, called the *candāla*-s had to be reborn as *dvijā* in order to achieve this soteriological and eschatological finale to the existence in the world, conceptualized as the *saṇsār* (Manu:2.16).

See Muller (1849:1975), Buhler (1879:1975; 1882:1984) and Jolly (1889:1877) for details.

features of the present day South Asian Buddhist communities were, in all probability, even stronger in the early Buddhist communities that existed within the majority culture of the post-Vedic religion.[14] Hence the application of the *śālabhañjikā* motif in Buddhist contexts.

For those early Buddhists who knew about *śālabhañjikā*, she was a *vrkshikā*, residing in magnificent trees.[15] She was seen under mango trees, clutching a branch heavy with bunches of unblemished mangos. They found her posing gaily under *aśōka* trees in full bloom. She lived in great *śāla* trees. She would bestow beauty, children, plentiful harvest, pleasure, and comfortable dwelling. She was a good-luck deity. However, for others, her darker sides might have been more important. She was a harlot, a courtesan, and a frivolous individual with tainted character. For yet others she had an even darker personality. She was a *yakshi* or *yakkhini*, a man-eating demoness, perhaps helpful in quelling enemies. They saw some kind of deity or a personality framed within her sinuous form.

In short, the *śālabhañjikā* motif was used as a sculptural sign to make a statement. As with any other sign, the motif has a semantic structure that arises from the syntax in which it is used. The semantics of the pose are fertility, frivolity, sensuality, protection and danger that, in the terminology of the *dharmaśāstra*, are *artha* (economic prosperity and protection), *kāma* (sensuality and worldly pleasures) and *dharma* (ethical existence and sons to perpetuate the family and to conduct funerary rites). The syntax in which the motif is located determines which of the above semantic variants is emphasized and which de-emphasized or kept dormant. I do not assume that even within the syntax of a particular context a sign has only one meaning. As numerous scholars have elaborated, signs are polysemic. Even in a statement with a syntax that gives a definite meaning to a particular semantic variant, the other meanings stay latent or dormant, as surplus meanings, waiting to be invoked or reverberating, even against the conscious wishes of their author. The symbolism of *śālabhañjikā* in Bhārhut and Sāñchi does not appear to be fixed. As discussed above, it was simultaneously used to represent multiple contexts – sensuality, fertility, politics, aesthetics, economics and salvation. In such an unspecific expression, which semantic variant comes to play depends on in which context, i.e. in which syntax, a spectator locates the sign. In this person-centered micro-context, the construction of an interpretation depended on the viewer's social and personal dispositions that created, independent of the artist's and the donor's

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[14] Brahmans were frequently consulted in these matters (Ray:Op.Cit.).

[15] Coomaraswamy (1993).

intent, the syntax of the significant statement. The *śālabhañjikā* motif, as a sign, was open to multiple interpretations.[16]

Hanging onto a *torana*, the *śālabhañjikā* motif and whoever it signified reminded the Buddhists of their mundane concerns before they entered the yard of the stūpa; reminded them of the list of troubles and hopes that they brought with them and the necessity to address their troubles and hopes while worshiping. The deity represented by *śālabhañjikā* appreciated the meritorious deed of worship and the merit that the worshipers would share with her, and do them the favors. To this day, traditional Buddhists invariably offer merit to the gods, other spirits, and other beings with the hope that the propitiated gods and spirits will look at them kindly.

Though the *śālabhañjikā* motif was open to multiple interpretations, it is unlikely that the viewers' interpretations were completely independent of the artist's intent. In Sāñchi, because the motif has been situated as a stand-alone structure between the architrave and the volute the viewer was probably more free to associate the motif with the maximum possible referents. Elsewhere, however, for example in Bhārhut, when the contexts were more specific, she was not as free. There the viewer had to stay within such specific contexts and relate to the motif. There was no room for an unlimited semiosis in such situations. There the "author" of the statement or expression never really "died" and the "reader" was never completely free. The degree of openness of the sign depended on the degree of specificity of its context. I shall return to this issue later.

Interestingly, the *śālabhañjikā* good-luck symbol coexists with yet another figure of similar meaning structure. In Sāñchi, Sri or Lakshmi is also depicted, not as a peripheral deity but as a central one, in the middle of the architrave. Sri is so central to the sculpted drama that J. Ph. Vogel thought she represented Mahāmāya, the bodhisattva's mother. Coomaraswamy convincingly argues that this hypothesis is false.[17] In any event, there are two good-luck deities in the same religious

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[16] Public symbols have general schemes of meanings and may become personal and private symbols. See Obeyesekere (1981) for an analysis of public, personal and private symbols from a psychodynamic perspective.

[17] Coomaraswamy writes, "No recognizable representations of the Nativity are met with in the earliest Buddhist art at Bhārhut and Sānchī. It has been argued that the Abhisheka-of-Lakshmi composition, so common there and elsewhere, constituted a Nativity, but this is quite implausible; All the elements of the Abhisheka formula can be explained in terms of Vedic symbolism, while they do not in any particular suggest Nativity in the garden (it is true that in the *majjimanikāya* III.123 and *nidānakathā* versions the infant is bathed by two streams of water falling from the sky....but why should this have been translated into a lustration of the mother?..."(1993:88:n12).

complex. This is like saying the same thing twice but using different phraseologies. Perhaps Lakshmi represented the main expression and *śālabhañjikā* a trope, a restatement, a closer-to-the-ground, more accessible reminder or, perhaps, the *śālabhañjikā* motif represented something else in that context.

In any case, there are no depictions of *śālabhañjikā* in the Sānchi main motifs. It is a peripheral motif, used outside the representations of the soteriological religion. If the *torana*-s of Sānchi are any indication, we may conclude that even in Bhārhut *śālabhañjikā* was a peripheral motif. She did not represent specifically Buddhist themes. Although practical Buddhism was an inclusive institution, there was a separation of soteriological interests from the mundane interests. The former interests were at the center of the religious world and the latter at the periphery, as a large concern that would continually pull the pilgrim back into the household. In the contexts of lay Buddhism, the above syntaxes coexisted, as they still do, as the faces of practical religion. The same explains the inclusion of Sri in the *torana*-s of Sānchi. Her position at the center of the panel indicates the significance attributed to her as a principal deity of the post-Vedic Puranic pantheon within the Buddhist universe. On the other hand, mundane concerns were just as important as the soteriological ones and Sri represented these mundane interests while *śālabhañjikā* also represented them, adding emphasis as a minor deity in the periphery.

Against these positions, one might also speculate the *śālabhañjikā* motif did not represent a complex of meanings of sensuality, fertility, economics, etc., but was merely a decorative element used to fill the angle between the architrave and the volute and balance the overall structure of the *torana*. I shall return to this point also a little later.

As discussed above, the interpretation of *śālabhañjikā* probably varied, from sexuality and fertility to politics and economics or none at all. However, in time, the motif became less open to interpretation, as can be found in the next stage of Buddhist art in Amarāvatī and Gandhāra. We can also investigate whether the indological and Coomaraswamy's contention, that the *śālabhañjikā* motif was essentially a voluptuous fertility symbol, is also valid in Amarāvatī and Gandhāra.

2. Amarāvatī and Gandhāra[18]

The Amarāvatī stūpa in Andhra Pradesh was constructed in the second century BCE and was renovated between the first and second centuries of the CE. During the renovations, decorative friezes were added to the railings around the stūpa. Only a few of these remain and one provides us with information regarding the use of *śālabhañjikā* motif in specifically Buddhist contexts.

In Amarāvatī, queen Mahāmāya is represented in the *śālabhañjikā* pose, standing in the shade of an *asōka* tree, holding a branch (Figure 3). The miraculous virgin birth has just occurred. The bodhisattva has left Mahāmāya's womb from the right side of her body causing no pain as she stood in the *śālabhañjikā* pose. The gods hold the infant bodhisattva in a shawl. His footprints represent him. The construction of the bodhisattva and Buddha images has not yet been attempted.[19]

The Amarāvatī frieze involves at least three points that clash with the earliest account of the birth scene found in the *āccharyaabhūtadhammasutta* of the *majjima nikāya*, the *jātaka nidhānakathā* (hereafter the "Pāli texts"), and later in the Sanskrit *mahāvastu* and *lalitavistara*. The *jātaka nidhānakathā* was composed around the third century BCE while the former, although a part of the *tripitaka*, was

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[18] There is no apparent consensus between Western and Indian scholars as to which of the two is historically prior. The nineteenth and early twentieth century European archaeologists such as Fergusson (1876:1972), Grünwedel (1901?) and Cunningham (1879), as well as the recent historiographers such as Wolpert (1977:1982) think that Gandhāra was prior. They link the connection of the Kushana and Śaka kingdoms of the first and second centuries CE with the Indo-Greek kingdoms of the Mauryan times and assert that the Greco-Roman styles influenced almost all Buddhist art. Indian and Sri Lankan scholars such as Coomaraswamy (1908:1956), Thapar (Op.Cit.) and Sivaramamurti (Op.Cit.; 1942) reverse this contention and place the sculptural forms of Amarāvatī in the first century CE and Gandhāra in the second century CE. The controversy arises from the close chronological proximity of these sites and each scholar's particular nationalistic biases. In deference to Indian scholars, I shall discuss Amarāvatī first and in deference to the Western scholars, and due to lack of verifiable information to establish a causal connection, I shall not discuss which influenced the other. See Coomaraswamy (1993:88:n15) for a further objection to the consideration of the *śālabhanjikā* pose as a Greek motif introduced by the Indo-Greek artists of Gandhāra. Not all European scholars hold this position. Some, as Coomaraswamy (ibid.) shows, thought that the motif was "a truly indigenous element of decorative art."

[19] The Buddhists of the Kushana kingdom under Kanishka invented the Buddha image and the Indo-Greek Buddhists brought it to complete sculptural form. Developments in early Buddhism, through the *lokottaravādi* mystification of the buddhahood, provided the ideological rationalization and emboldened the Kushana and Gandhāra artists and their patrons to develop the Buddha image as an icon for worship.

probably composed later.[20] First, the Pali texts hold that Mahāmāya stood under a *sāla* tree in full bloom. But in Amarāvatī she stands under an *asōka* tree. It is likely that the Amarāvatī artists were influenced less by the *āccharyaabhūtadhammasutta* and the *nidhānakathā* than by the oral tradition represented by the *divyāvadhāna sutra*, a later text, that identified the tree under which the bodhisattva was born as an *asōka* tree. Other important Mahāyāna texts identify the tree as mango (*aśōkāvadhāna*), or *plakśa* (*lalitavistara*).[21]

Second, in the Pali texts, Mahāmāya is middle aged with a sober personality and serene manners. But the Amarāvatī artist represents her as a *śālabhañjikā*, young and curvaceous, a gay and vivacious *yakshi* or tree spirit, very similar in appearance to the *śālabhañjikā* of Sānchi. Even the contemporary Sanskrit work *mahāvastu*, and Aśvaghosha in his *buddhacarita*, do not present Mahāmāya as a *śālabhañjikā*.[22] How and why did the artist convert a middle-aged woman of tranquil habits into a *śālabhañjikā*?

Third, does the Amarāvatī motif signify the *dohada* of the *asōka* tree? If so, it reverses the order of events and significations of the textual tradition for the queen did not go to the tree to relieve it from its *dohada* but to enact the great drama of the birth of the bodhisattva.

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[20] See Appendix.

[21] See Coomaraswamy (1993:85) for details. The determination of the type of tree under which Mahāmāya stood probably depended on the region. In northern regions, i.e. where early Buddhist legends developed and where Bhārut is located, *sāla* trees were in abundance and the *sāla* tree idiom was included in the birth scene. This means, the *majjimanikāya* and the *jātaka nidānakathā* may have been composed in those regions. On the other hand, the *asōka* tree idiom was meaningful in areas where *asōka* was a significant tree and where the *sāla* tree did not grow or had no particular cultural meaning. Thus in Andhra, where the Amarāvatī stūpa was created, *sāla* probably did not grow whereas *asōka* flourished and was poetically much admired. Hence the *divyāvadhāna* account. The *aśōkāvadhāna* was composed in another region where neither *sāla* nor *asōka* trees had any special meanings but mango was significant. The same reasoning applies to the *plakśa* tree in the *lalitavistara*. Regional realities had influenced the regional literature and iconography. However, Ashvaghōsha in his *buddhacarita* is silent about the identity of this tree.

[22] Aśvaghosha employs the *śālabhañjikā* motif in a different context. He says that a drunken but beautiful woman stood in the balcony, looking like the *śālabhañjikā* of a *torana*, probably referring to the gateways of Sāñchī (*buddhakarita*:V:52). The *mahāvastu* states that the king permitted the queen to go to the forest to break a śāla branch. This is a problematical statement. For details see Appendix.

The employment of the *śālabhañjikā* motif to depict Mahāmāya in the railings of the Amarāvatī stupa gives credence to Sivaramamurti's assertion that in Bhārhut the *śālabhañjikā* and other structures representing female deities were modeled after important women. In Bhārhut and Sāñchi there is a clear distinction between Sri and *śālabhañjikā* because they are separately depicted. The image of Sri was not modeled after women of social significance. Sri was represented in a formal abstract motif, as *abhishekalakshmi*, sitting cross-legged on a lotus as two white elephants standing on either side shower her with water from their trunks. Perhaps, by convention, modeling great deities such as Sri after mortals was deemed inappropriate. If the artists used human models to define a deity, it was for the depictions of deities low enough in the sacred hierarchy. The *śālabhañjikā* motif fulfilled this need for she represented lesser deities. Additionally, unlike the Sri motif, *śālabhañjikā* has a playful image, a facet that the patrons and the models probably found attractive and flattering.[23]

However, this far, artists had not attempted to depict Mahāmāya or the birth of the bodhisattva in any stable medium except, perhaps, in Mathurā.[24] They knew the technique to create the motif and the birth scene as far back as the second century BCE in Bhārhut and in Sāñchi but none employed it to depict that scene.[25] It

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[23] Later texts such as the *vishnudharmottarapurana* that outline the normative frames for pictorial and sculptural representations require that images have a youthful appearance. Even when humans are signified the artists were required to use an appropriate motif of youthful appearance. This rule necessitated that the artists employ depersonalized stock motifs that conventionally represent immortals to signify even the mortals. See Kane (1919:1971).

[24] Cunningham opined that a *śālabhañjikā* figure found in Mathurā signified Mahāmāya. But Cunningham was speaking of a solitary figure of *śālabhañjikā* and his interpretation is thought to be erroneous. See Grünwedel (1901?:109), Vogel (1910:6: cited in Grünwedel (Op.Cit.) and Coomaraswamy (1993)). However, Coomaraswamy is skeptical about Grünwedel's and Vogel's skepticism and states, "...it is hardly illegitimate to infer that at some previous moment some painting or sculpture representing a veritable dryad had come to be regarded as Māyādevi in the Lumbini garden (ibid.:86). Hence, Coomaraswamy seems to endorse Cunningham's interpretation. Notice that Coomaraswamy adopts a late nineteenth century European theory. The proponents of the Kulturkries (culture-circles) held similar views and attempted to trace the origins of sociocultural forms, and the British diffusionists proposed a center-periphery theory of cultural production and dissemination (Kroeber: 1931:1962 at 139-142). Although Grünwedel generally used a similar approach he differed in this instance.

[25] Perhaps the scene was sculpted, using perishable materials. These were probably completely destroyed by the passage of time. Even the remains of Amarāvatī were rescued by Cunningham just as they were about to be used as materials for a nineteenth century

is likely that the birth scene was considered too sacred to be depicted iconographically. The depiction of the birth scene had to wait until the friezes of Amarāvatī and Gandhāra and when the artists of Amarāvatī and Gandhāra constructed their scenes of the nativity they employed the *śālabhañjikā* motif to depict Mahāmāya.

The canonical literature of early Buddhism follows a common motif in the descriptions of the bodhisattva's birth scene.[26] All describe Mahāmāya as standing under a tree holding a branch when the miraculous birth occurred. From the *jātaka nidānakathā* and *āchcharyaabhutadhammasutta* of the *majjimanikāya* to the later *mahāvastu* and Aśvaghosha's *buddhacarita,* the above motif has been consistently employed.

The Amarāvatī artists followed the canonical literature except that they depicted Mahāmāya as a gay and vivacious *śālabhañjikā* with, to use E.B.Cowell's words, a willowy form.[27] As is normally the way with all *śālabhañjikā* motifs, it is not in best of proportions: the arms are a little too long in comparison to the overall figure. Nevertheless, the image is so dynamic the viewer is compelled to participate in her exuberant mood. Mahāmāya stands under an *asōka* tree, holding a branch with her raised left hand. Her right hand is on her protruding right hip, a "hip-shot" pause as Coomaraswamy saw it.[28] Does she kick the *asōka* tree with her left foot or lean on the tree as she stands on her right leg? Her body is slightly turned to the left, in a suitable angle to show her large bosom and protruding right hip. Her chin is up. Her face is turned slightly to her right. The way light breaks up on her face, I detect a smile. She is looking straight ahead. Clearly, she is very comfortable and seems to be enjoying herself. One god stands in the path of her gaze but I cannot say whether she looks at him or not. Three other gods stand behind her, to her right, looking at her, holding a shawl. The gods are not as tall as Mahāmāya. The bodhisattva was born only moments ago and his footprints are on the shawl.

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building. The Amarāvatī and Gandhāra artifacts are the oldest available artifacts that depict the nativity of the bodhisattva. Between Bhārhut / Sānchi and Amarāvatī / Gandhāra other versions of the scene might have existed, and the artists who constructed them might have employed the *śālabhañjikā* motif to frame Mahāmāya.

[26] The only exception is Aśvaghosha's *buddhacarita* edited by Johnston where the queen enters the garden and lies down in a couch. The manuscript that Cowell edited follows the motif in the Pali Texts. For a discussion see Appendix.

[27] Cowell (1894: 1969: V, 52; 57).

[28] Coomaraswamy (1993).

A diminutive Prajāpatī Gōtami - Mahāmāya's sister, King Suddhodhana's second queen and, a week later, the bodhisattva's caretaker and stepmother – herself in a quasi *śālabhañjikā* pose - devoutly looks up at her statuesque elder sister. She has turned towards Mahāmāya and we see only her back, in right profile. There is a low pedestal at the foot of the tree, between the queen and the gods. There is a large bowl on it. Two streams fall from above into the bowl. It is waiting to be used in a few minutes, to bathe the bodhisattva.

This image is a storehouse of information about the Andhra Buddhist culture. Mahāmāya is virtually nude except for the girdle and the numerous anklets and bangles that she wears. So is her sister. Even the gods are scantily clad. There is a kinship between the *śālabhañjikā* here and the one in Sānchi It is as if the girl in Sānchi climbed down the *torana* and walked into this frieze. She, perhaps for the first time in Buddhist iconography, plays an active role in the overall Buddhist drama. In Sānchi and Bhārhut, *śālabhañjikā* was a peripheral figure, left at the outer limits of the main scenes as a useful but alien spirit. In Amarāvatī, the texts are concretized in the friezes and she has assumed a dignified role to represent Mahāmāya. In Sānchi and Bhārhut, as mentioned before, the birth scene was not sculpted. But when the artists tried their hands at it, *śālabhañjikā* walked right in and was assimilated into the Buddhist drama.

3. Aporias

Let us return to the theme that Coomaraswamy introduced - that *śālabhañjikā* was a fertility symbol. How could Mahāmāya be a fertility symbol? As discussed above, the *dharmasāstra* culture of the Vedic and post-Vedic society emphasized the household where the *dharma* could be practiced. The primary values of the household life are begetting sons and prosperity. Thus, arguably, it is possible that the artists, patrons, and worshipers at these temples thought that Mahāmāya could be honored by depicting her as a great woman, as a signifier of fertility and prosperity.

However, the bodhisattva's birth drama celebrates the very opposite of the *dharmasāstra* recommendations. In the Amarāvatī application, the *śālabhañjikā* position of the mother is associated with her one-time fertility at the age of fifty,[29] and demise within a week of parturition. The son advocated and practiced celibacy

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[29] "*...kittam pan' assā āyuṇ.*" *nidānakathā*, Fausbøll ed.(1877:1962:49); Piyatissa (1926:I:48). Malalasekera (1960:II:609) says Maya's age was between forty and fifty and cites *sammoha vinodani, abhidhamma pitaké vibhangatthakathā*(P.T.S. ed.) at 278. I failed to locate this reference on that page. Instead of Maya's age the text, carrying on the discourse on the *satipatthānavibhanga*, mentions "*evaṇ uppannassa pan' assa arahattamaggéna bhāvanā pāripūri hotīti pajānāti.*"

and renounced the household after begetting only one son who, in turn, became a monk in his childhood, signifying the end of the genealogical line and the demise of the Śākya kingdom. What could be more contrary to the *dharmasāstra* notions of fertility and prosperity? It is clear that if we accept the contention that *śālabhañjikā* was a fertility symbol we introduce into the birth scene, as depicted in Amarāvatī, a paradox, an aporia.

The ancient South Asians confronted aporetic moments in various contexts. In the Sanskrit tradition contradictions are called *parasparavirōdhatā* where *parasparavyāvritti* or mutually exclusive conditions co-exist giving rise to *prahélikā* or puzzles that cause *cittavikshépa* and *cittavaiklavya* or perplexity.[30] In the Pali tradition aporias are known as *paravāda* or the contrary views of others that create *pahélikā* or puzzles causing *vikkhépa*, *vicikicchā* and *vimati* or perplexity.[31] Both traditions didactically constructed such moments to test students as in the *jātaka* stories and the *pancatantra*.

Aporia is a Greek word that has a complex semantic structure built around the core concepts of enigma, puzzlement and perplexity, comparable to the Sanskrit and Pali notions mentioned above. Herodotus (5th century BCE) found aporias in dealing with certain personalities exhibiting contradictory characteristics.

Euripides (5th century BCE) thought an aporia involved a doubt, an embarrassment. For Thucydides (471-400 BCE) aporias were questions of poverty, of being in need of, or wanting an explanation, and the impossibility of keeping quiet under confusing circumstances. Aristophanes (448-380 BCE), Plato (428-348 BCE), and Aristotle (384-322 BCE) used the term to indicate a question for discussion, a difficulty or puzzle.[32] In sum, the Greeks used that term to signify confrontation with a perplexing moment of confusion, anguish, being at a loss, and disquiet that demands clarification and exegesis.

Contemporary European philosophy addresses this notion in many contexts relevant to issues such as the sense of time, death and the like. Jacques Derrida contextualizes his discourse on aporias in the experience of death. Only a dying man can experience death. Therefore, death can never be described because the only person capable of describing it dies. The particular experience of death can be brought within a generalization only if another, a listener or a reader, can share it with the dead. This is Derrida's dilemma: how can the particular and the unique in

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[30] Apte (ibid. and 1920: 339) and Monier-Williams (1899:1979 - 589).

[31] Buddhadatta (1955:1989 - 386; 1955:2002 - 168, 234, 241), Rhys-Davids & Steed (2001:615, 630).

[32] Liddell and Jones (1925:1940; 215).

the experience of death be generalized?[33] Paul Ricoeur, in the contexts of being and non-being of time finds aporias in the sense of perplexity arising from paradoxes that are theoretically, i.e. logically, irresolvable. Ricouer turns to poetry and narrative, both appealing to imaginative creativity, to grasp and overcome the disorder presented by aporias. His issue here is the larger hermeneutical problem of circularity of reasoning from within and without the philosopher.[34]

In general, and in instances of communication, aporetic phenomena involve contradictory messages that produce enigmas and mysteries and are frequently used in consciously and canonically constructed symbols in literature, religious art and other discourses. When consciously constructed, such contradictions are only apparent and can be used as pedagogical devises to instruct another to go beyond the surface to discover hidden harmonies in accordance with the interpretive code that constitutes the basis of the overarching semiotic that is accessible to those who possess the appropriate habitus.[35]

However, the perplexity and the confusion that a fertility symbol introduces into the bodhisattva's birth scene do not offer such pedagogical benefits. It has no didactic use because it goes against the Buddhist code whose focus is world renunciation. One can concoct an artificial resolution by equating the one-time fecundity that produced the most fertile mind as the greatest of all fecundity. But this completely abrogates the common sense notions regarding fecundity. In any case this laborious construction is unconvincing because nowhere in Buddhist literature is the concept of fecundity used in such a manner. Moreover, the concept of fecundity itself is outside the overall code of Buddhist culture and thus outside the sub-code upon which the bodhisattva's birth scene has been constructed.

One could also explain the use of a fertility symbol as the motif for Mahāmāya by arguing that it was a sleight of hand application by an unthinking artist who merely used an existing popular motif. But this, too, is unconvincing because the use of the *śālabhañjikā* pose continues to this day. Buddhist intellectuals who made fine distinctions about the meanings of concepts and who established new sects because of doctrinal disputes over such distinctions never found an aporia in the use of the *śālabhañjikā* motif in the birth scene. If they found it inappropriate, they would not have allowed the continued use of the motif. The mistake might have occurred in Amarāvatī but it would not have recurred elsewhere.

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[33] Derrida: (1993).

[34] Ricoeur (1983:V.I, 3-12).

[35] I use this tern following Bourdieu (1977:1986)

Now, if *śālabhañjikā* represented prosperity, the application of the motif would not generate an aporia. However, is prosperity the same as fertility? Lakshmi, the goddess of prosperity, is never seen as a goddess of fecundity or propitiated for fecundity. Indian imagination does not always fuse prosperity with fecundity. However, if *śālabhañjikā* does not represent anything specific, but can be employed to construct a larger motif that signifies a range of concepts, there is no contradiction regarding the fusion of *śālabhañjikā* and Mahāmāya. The aporetic confusion arises when the theme of fertility is injected into the *śālabhañjikā* motif as something that it *necessarily* represents.

The aporia in the use of *śālabhañjikā* to portray Mahāmāya has another facet. As noted above, art historians, archaeologists and theorists have concluded that *śālabhañjikā* represents voluptuousness because of her physiognomy.[36] Even a sweeping glance at Indian art reveals that prominent bosoms and pelvises are a part of the Indian vocabulary of beauty, and not necessarily of eroticism. Eroticism is an external concept indiscriminately projected into Indian art.[37] True, there is art, particularly of the tāntric variety and the secular art of the Mughal period, that addresses explicitly sexual themes.[38] But such sexuality has a specific context and the female physiognomy applied there is not different from its application in other contexts, thus indicating that eroticism is not in the shape of the body itself but in

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[36] Coomaraswamy (1993:82).

[37] This might be another European way of defining the "other" in South Asia. The difference here is the Indian preoccupation with sexuality as opposed to the restraints on sexuality of the nineteenth century Victorian Europe.

[38] Needless to say the often cited *kāma sutra* of Vātsyāyana, a fourth century CE work on the art of giving and receiving physical, mental, and social affection, is not a "sex book." It is a work on etiquette. Tragically, European translations of the *kāma sutra* are illustrated with pictures taken out of tāntric and Mughal contexts. As Burton and Arbuthnot (1984) point out, the *Perfumed Garden* by Cheikh Nefzaoui was composed around the sixteenth century as a poem and a work of art, not as an older version of "The Joy of Sex." In pre-colonial Indian contexts these works were not well known, being limited to privileged literary circles, and were treated with respect, not with the cavalier attitude that the sex manuals receive today. This European exaggeration of the sexual aspects in these works is partly due to the colonial creation of a cultural "other" who indulges in bizarre, unusual, and extraordinary practices that goes together with the rope trick, mind boggling feats of ascetics and other absurdities that point to inferiority and primitivism. See Said (1978:1979) for how these attitudes were applied to the Arab world to invent an 'orient.' Also see Clifford (1988) on the general theme of manufacturing the 'other.' The eroticism in Indian art is not different. More of this later.

the concept, the context and the act.[39] Practically all Indian sculptures of the female form include large eyes, full lips, ample bosoms, narrow waists, and wide pelvises. This is the Indian sense of the ideal female form. This ideal form is applied to define the graces of celibate deities such as Sarasvati - the goddess of learning and the arts; Lakshmi - the incarnation of beauty itself; the contemplative and dignified Durgā, Umā, and Pārvati, and the terrible Kāli. This formal image in itself has no erotic content. It may be used to define romantic moods, as the later, post-Gupta miniatures informed by Persian pictorial arts express. A viewer may introduce eroticism into it but that is an unanticipated consequence of the display of the feminine form.[40]

The point is that the mere presence of exaggerated bosom, pelvis, lips, or, to use a modern biological idiom, "secondary sexual characteristics," does not indicate voluptuousness. Even to apply the classification of "secondary sexual organs" is inappropriate in the context of the bodhisattva's birth drama because the context, both culturally and textually, simply does not permit sensuality. Hence the difficulty with the classification of the *śālabhañjikā* by the indological archaeologists, and by

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[39] This too is problematical. The general western view is that tāntric art and acts are erotic. But anyone who is even marginally familiar with tāntric literature and art knows that eros (*kāma*) is not the emotion exalted in tāntric activities. One might even say that transcendence of eroticism is the aim of tāntrism for tantra considers eroticism qua eroticism as mere wallowing in mundane obsession. Bharati puts this nicely: "Where a spade is a spade, it has to be called a spade. Fortunately, spades are not always spades in tāntrism (1975: 11. See 243, 261 for the doctrinal basis for the conversion of a 'spade' into something else.) He discusses how the tāntric specialists reject individuals who attempt to define the rituals as erotic orgies. He also postulates that the demise of tāntrism resulted from the gradual decay of tāntric discipline and erotization of the rituals.

[40] I have seen vandalism in Hindu and Jain temples. It is unlikely that the average person who visits these places of worship engages in the desecration of these images. However, perverse attitudes do exist in the psychologically unbalanced individuals who are among the pilgrims and tourists. Need I remind the reader that a mad man once attacked the Pieta at St. Peters Cathedral in Rome? The public meaning may be the only meaning that the majority of the viewers derive from these works. A few viewers may personalize the public meanings of these works and impose their own interpretations upon them, whereas even a fewer number of viewers may, without their conscious awareness, find unconscious meanings in them. But the construction of private meanings is not usual and cannot be used to construct a paradigmatic concept to define the South Asian delineation of the female form. The wholesale eroticisation of the Indian female form is not of Indian origin but of European origin. See Obeyesekere (Op.Cit.) for a discussion of public, personal and private symbols. See Said (1979) for the construction of the "other" in the supposed "orient."

Coomaraswamy who followed them, as *necessarily* a signifier of voluptuousness, disregarding the contexts of its occurrence.

However, a theme that emerges if one assumes that *śālabhańjikā* is a signifier of fecundity, prosperity, voluptuousness and so on, is that *śālabhańjikā*, as a motif, is mundane, worldly. Perhaps, the artist desired to show that Mahāmāya felt no pain during childbirth. The artist reiterates, as stated in the Pali texts and the *mahāvastu*, that the bodhisattva did not cause his mother to sacrifice her mundane pleasures although these were restrained pleasures. The texts assure the reader that Mahāmāya was always a pious generous woman, living a clean life, upholding the *panchasīla*, and observing celibacy from the moment she conceived the bodhisattva in her womb. This canonical assertion further substantiates my earlier objection to the characterization of the *śālabhańjikā* motif as *necessarily* a signifier of voluptuousness. But it does not prevent us from speculating that the motif must have presented a pose that signified, as Coomaraswamy says, relaxation and absence of pain and suffering. Even today people hang on to branches of trees and relax as they converse with others or merely watch the birds in the yard. The triple torsion and triple flexion is not confined to the *śālabhańjikā* motif. Many statues of deities also use this posture to show a relaxed pose. Thus, in Amarāvatī, the artist presented Mahāmāya as relaxed and completely unaware of the normal pain and suffering associated with parturition.[41]

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[41] Coomaraswamy (1993:88-89:n15) asserts that the *śālabhańjikā* position is one of relaxation, that this pose could have once been adopted for parturition, and that its being used to represent *yakshi*s who were symbols of pregnancy was a later invention. However, he criticizes Le Coq who found Mahāmāya in Amarāvatī and Gandhāra in a "Tanzerinnenstellung" or dancing position. In any case, Coomaraswamy stands by his interpretation that the pose symbolizes pregnancy, reaffirming its fertility symbolism. What Coomaraswamy does not discuss in this rather vague essay is how a sign that signified fertility and eroticism could represent Mahāmāya.

Therein lies the most interesting aspect of Coomaraswamy's approach to the motif. He discovered the ethnocentric flaw in the "dancing pose" and "Abhiseka Lakshmi and the Nativity" issues. Both were purely European cultural constructions. The "Tanzerinnenstellung" indicated how the Germanic culture would define a bodily form like the *śālabhanjikā* motif. The Abiseka Lakshmi and the Nativity problem arose from compulsive over-interpretation, a characteristic of symbolism studies. I call this "compulsive" because whatever that was not meaningful in the European culture had to be nailed down with a heavy-duty meaning manufactured within the European world-view. These bizarre interpretations could have been the result of over-comparison as well. In tāntric iconography, particularly sculpture, there is a frequently noticed scene of birthing surrounded by the *gāndharva-s*. A woman, held by other women, in squatting position, is giving birth to a child who is emerging from the vagina, a traditional sign of extreme

Another feature of the Andhra artist's composition is the lack of garments on the body of the motif save the girdle and ornaments such as anklets and bangles. This is the same in Sāñchi although in Bhārhut, the *śālabhañjikā*-s are depicted wearing garments to cover the lower parts of the body, from the navel to the knees. Sivaramamurti asserts that the ivory carvers of Vidhisa, near present day Bhopal in Madhya Pradesh, had executed the Sāñchi toranas that the Sātavāhanas, an Andhrā dynasty, had constructed. If this assertion is true, and I have no doubt about it since epigraphic evidence and the close resemblance between the sociological information embedded in Amarāvatī and Sāñchi friezes and statues confirm the assertion, then we might add that the Andhrā dress of the period, even for the aristocratic groups, was fairly light, exposing much of the body to cool it from the heat of the semi-arid plateau.[42]

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pollution celebrated in the left-handed tantra. The archeological interpreter mistook the Abhisekalakshmi for this image. Transplant the story of the heavenly streams that fell from the sky to bathe the newborn bodhisattva onto this image where elephants shower Lakshmi with water in their trunks, there arises an archaeological myth of a birth scene.

Coomaraswamy found and criticized both these errors. But he did not extend this same critical gaze to the application of fertility/eroticism theses and did not find an aporia emerging from the application of these concepts to the Mahāmāya s of Amarāvatī and Gandhāra.

One reason for this oversight is his adherence to grand theories. Archeologists have generally engaged in large-scale comparative analyses of symbolic forms: symbolic because the natives say they signified things other than themselves or because these forms otherwise have no meanings within the European scientific world-view. If one accepts the proposition that prominent secondary sexual characteristics in statuary axiomatically indicate a desire to communicate fertility and sexuality, then one applies that theory wherever he finds statuary that fit the definition and goes on reaffirming the theory across eras and areas. And Coomaraswamy was very much a scientist, even in his grand explorations of the arts. As a geologist he was comfortable with the Linnaean classificatory system where phenomena are grouped in terms of common and visible characteristics. He believed in the universal validity of this system of classification and strove to apply it in his studies of cultural artifacts also to make universalistic generalizations. The drive to create universalistic propositions made him notice only one side of the coin. Whatever was inscribed on the other side, he found unnecessary to investigate. He ignored information that would have created problems for the axiom.

[42] Compare this with the fifth century CE works in Ajantā Caves in Mahārāshtra and in Sīgiriya in Sri Lanka. The lovely ladies in both places were bare-breasted and scantily clad. Interestingly, no one attributes any voluptuousness or signs of fecundity to these females of

Concurrently, the Gandhāra artists also exhibited the śālabhañjikā pose (Figure 4).[45] However, the Perso-Greek colonial artists of the Gandhāra used the motif differently. Their Mahāmāya is akin to a Greek or Persian woman. She is conservatively attired in a toga-like dress that hides the curves of the śālabhañjikā's body. It may be that the Gandhāra Buddhists found a curvaceous body incongruous with the sacred personality of Mahāmāya.[44] If so, perhaps they disapproved of or

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ample secondary sexual features who also, in Ajantā, often stand in triple flexion and triple torsion!

[45] As Ray (Op.Cit.) points out, there is a lack of fit between the textual and sculptural traditions. It is likely that the artists were not acquainted with the finer details of the textual accounts and filled in the informational gaps with local motifs. This also explains the regional diversity of styles and sculptural details.

It is worth noting that in most Buddhist societies, irrespective of their sectarian orientations, Mahāmāya is represented in the śālabhañjikā position. Perhaps the Nepalese version is the closest to the Amarāvatī model concerning the overall structure.

[44] Grünwedel states, "It naturally occurs to one that here we have to do with an instance of Buddhist myth formation, which has been developed in connexion with a special artistic type. The application of an existing model to a distinct legend gives rise to a want of clearness, which unfortunately we too often meet with. In Gandhara, the model is artistically differentiated by modification of the costume and by the manifest adaptation of an ancient Niké for the representation of Gautama's mother" (Op.Cit.: 113). Thus, not only the ancient Indo-Greeks of Gandhāra but also early the twentieth century French, Germans and English were perplexed by the confusion of European semantic structures in the birth scene. Gandhārans artistically modified the motif to eliminate inappropriate characteristics of śālabhañjikā. It is interesting how the Gandhāran, modern German and English, and my Sri Lankan western educated perspectives overlapped. I had no idea that Grünwedel had made this observation when I made mine. It was certainly a pleasant surprise to discover two indologists also making the same observation. But, this is not surprising given that, as a western educated researcher, my academic thinking is modernist and that I do make modernist linear logical connections among phenomena in much the same way that modern Europeans do. What is surprising is how the modern patterns of preferences overlapped the Gandhāran patterns of preferences.

Did the Gandhārans have the same mindset as the modern Europeans as represented by the late nineteenth century indologists, archaeologists and art historians and, of course, people elsewhere who inherited the modernist thinking through colonial culture contacts? Did the Gandhārans actually think of aesthetic, ideological and logical propriety of employing the śālabhañjikā motif, "in the raw" as it were? Or are "we," modern researchers, using the modernist canons of explanation, imposing logical, aesthetic and ideological categories of our "own" times and places?

were disturbed by the aporia that the application of the southern *śālabhañjikā* motif introduced. It is likely that their Greek-influenced thinking did find voluptuousness in the southern delineation in the same manner as did their intellectual heirs, the nineteenth century indological archaeologists, art historians, and Coomaraswamy.[45] But, they *did* employ the *śālabhañjikā* motif to depict Mahāmāya. This indicates that the *śālabhañjikā* motif was used as a common sculptural standard to depict a woman under a tree holding a branch.

On the other hand, it might be that the *śālabhañjikā* motif did not signify to the Amarāvatī and Gandhāra artists any of the characteristics found by the indologists and Coomaraswamy. The question of nudity/clothing could simply be one of cultural preference. The Greek influenced Gandhāra culture had a concept of attire that was different from the South Indian values regarding dress. This is not because Mahāmāya was bodhisattva's mother but because, in general, given the Gandhāra artists' experience of life, people wore clothes of a certain type that was different from the clothing used elsewhere in the sub-continent. And if we view the motif merely as a piece of decorative art, that carried no more meaning than a sense of feminine grace, the aporia vanishes in the desert air.[46] In order to define an appropriate perspective to resolve or understand the aporia we should consider the perspectives of Indian literary theorists and grammarians who lived roughly in the same period as the artists of the works discussed here.

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[45] The same goes for the other meanings, such as *vrkshikā*, man-eating demoness etc. that some lexicographers attributed to the motif. How would an artist deal with these significations in the bodhisatva's mother? Here, too, the attribution of meanings to the motif had occurred out of context.

[46] In the South Asian indigenous civilization the mother/harlot aporia is an important theme. See Obeyesekere (1984:1987:451-456) for a discussion of how this aporia is resolved in contemporary Sri Lanka by completely separating the maternal image from sexual contexts and creating a wife/harlot image to absorb the oedipal sexual energies. But is difficult to apply this argument to discuss the aporetic figure of *śālabhañjikā* in Amarāvati and Gandhāra because I do not have the necessary ethnographic information. One may hypothesize that even in ancient Buddhist India the confusion of maternity and sexuality was resolved by displacement of erotic urges from the maternal images towards separate and identifiable harlot and courtesan images. For example, Aśvaghosha finds a courtesan in the *śālabhañjikā* pose in Prince Siddhartha's palace. But he does not associate this pose with Mahāmāya for the latter is chaste and celibate. However, in Amarāvati and Gandhāra friezes, she is represented by the *śālabhañjikā* motif. Here, the aporia is not about the queen but about the pose.

4. Signification

To understand the normative frames within which the production and employment of signs (*sañjñā*) were formulated it is necessary to discuss briefly and in general terms the larger social and cultural background in which the sculptural works and literature of the period were produced. As mentioned above, the context-bound nature of the meanings of signs does not end in the immediate context, as a word in a sentence. Rather, the immediate context must be taken as a micro-context of a larger semiotic environment made of concurrent socio-cultural factors. Included among these socio-cultural factors are the theories of meaning that determine how motifs can be constructed and employed within larger motifs, i.e., in poetry, drama, music, religion, law and the arts, all of which involve the use and interpretation of signs.

First, let me introduce the historical contours of the Buddhist society of the period. Needless to say that I use large totalizing concepts and am aware of the risks involved in over-generalization, which overlooks the regional and local micro-histories and brings the unique under the dictates of hegemonic generalizations. But my purpose here is to clear a tentative perspective to elucidate the unique local events with the available empirical information and I need to proceed with a general idea, a rough map about the sociocultural terrain. This is not too harmful, I hope, as my goal here is not to produce a history of the period.

Historians who hold divergent perspectives on the origins of many Indian cultural elements nonetheless agree that Indian communities underwent complex sociocultural transformations in the last few centuries BCE and the first few centuries of the CE. The emergence of a mercantile class that wielded significant cultural and economic power led to the growth of urban centers along the trade routes that spread throughout the subcontinent. The north-western regions were under the colonial domination, at first of the Greeks, and then of numerous other cultures from Western and Central Asia. The post-Vedic religion did not give the colonial rulers a dignified status in the native society. But Buddhism, at least theoretically, rejected the Vedic and post-Vedic *varna* hierarchy and advocated soteriological egalitarianism, accepting even foreigners into its community. This led to the development of Buddhist kingdoms of the Gandhara region. Of these, the Kushana and Śaka regimes are significant for discussions of Buddhist art in particular and of the use of imported motifs and non-perishable materials to construct Indian art forms in general. Concurrently, the Āndhrā based Sātavāhana dynasty spread to the west-coast and to the north and facilitated trade in ideas, arts, crafts and traditions among the regions that they contacted. These multifarious occurrences resulted in an intellectually charged atmosphere, at least in the upper strata of the urban communities that patronized the various arts. As I mentioned at the outset, these communities entertained the normative standards of the post-Vedic