

TORANAŚĀLABHAÑJIKĀ: The Transformations of a Motif

*avalaṅbha gavaṅkṣapārśvamanyā śayitā/ cāpavibhugnaḡānnayashṭih//
virarāja vilaṅbicāruhārā racitā/ toranaśālabhañjikéva/*¹

1. Bhārhut and Sāñchi

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

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 *toranaśālabhañjikéva*. Perhaps Sāñchi 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 Sāñchi gateways." He refers to Vogel's study of the *śālabhañjikā* figure in Sāñchi. 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

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

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 connected 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 (*tribhaṅga*). 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 *dharmaśāstras* (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

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 *nāsadiya gīta* of the *puruṣa śukta* of the tenth book of the Rg Vēda. According to this account, Prajāpati created the cosmos in the image of a man, *puruṣa*. The *brāhman-s* arose from its mouth, *kshatriya-s* from its arms, the *vaiśya-s* from the thighs and the *śūdrā-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

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 *mokṣa* 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 *saṅsār* (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 *asōka* 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

¹⁴ Brahmins 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 worshipping. The deity represented by *śālabhañjikā* appreciated the meritorious deed of worship and the merit that the worshippers 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

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 Sāñchī. 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 Sāñchi main motifs. It is a peripheral motif, used outside the representations of the soteriological religion. If the *torana*-s of Sāñchi 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 Sāñchi. 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 Amarāvātī 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 Amarāvātī and Gandhāra.

2. Amarāvātī and Gandhāra¹⁸

The Amarāvātī 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 Amarāvātī, 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 Amarāvātī frieze involves at least three points that clash with the earliest account of the birth scene found in the *āccharyaabhūtaḍḍhammasutta* 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

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 Śāka 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 Amarāvātī 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 Amarāvātī 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 *śālabhañjikā* 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 Amarāvātī she stands under an *asōka* tree. It is likely that the Amarāvātī artists were influenced less by the *āccharyaabhūttadhammasutta* 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 (*aśōkāvdhāna*), or *plakṣa* (*lalitavistara*).²¹

Second, in the Pali texts, Mahāmāya is middle aged with a sober personality and serene manners. But the Amarāvātī 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 Āśvaghōsha 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 Amarāvātī motif signify the *dohada* of the *aśōka* 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.

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 *aśōka* tree idiom was meaningful in areas where *aśōka* was a significant tree and where the *sāla* tree did not grow or had no particular cultural meaning. Thus in Andhra, where the Amarāvātī stūpa was created, *sāla* probably did not grow whereas *aśōka* flourished and was poetically much admired. Hence the *divyāvadhāna* account. The *aśōkāvdhāna* was composed in another region where neither *sāla* nor *aśōka* trees had any special meanings but mango was significant. The same reasoning applies to the *plakṣa* tree in the *lalitavistara*. Regional realities had influenced the regional literature and iconography. However, Āśvaghōsha in his *buddhacarita* is silent about the identity of this tree.

²² Āśvaghōsha 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 Sānchī (*buddhacarita*:V:52). The *mahāvastu* states that the king permitted the queen to go to the forest to break a *sāla* branch. This is a problematical statement. For details see Appendix.

The employment of the *śālabhañjikā* motif to depict Mahāmāya in the railings of the Amarāvati 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

²³ Later texts such as the *viśvudharmottarapurana* 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 Māyādevī 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 Amarāvati 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 Amarāvātī and Gandhāra and when the artists of Amarāvātī 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 Amarāvātī 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.

building. The Amarāvātī and Gandhāra artifacts are the oldest available artifacts that depict the nativity of the bodhisattva. Between Bhārhut / Sānchi and Amarāvātī / 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 Sāñchi. It is as if the girl in Sāñchi 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 Sāñchi and Bhārhut, *śālabhañjikā* was a peripheral figure, left at the outer limits of the main scenes as a useful but alien spirit. In Amarāvātī, the texts are concretized in the friezes and she has assumed a dignified role to represent Mahāmāya. In Sāñchi 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 Amarāvātī 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

²⁹ "...kittam pan' assā āyuṇṇ." *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 Amarāvātī, a paradox, an aporia.

The ancient South Asians confronted aporetic moments in various contexts. In the Sanskrit tradition contradictions are called *parasparavirōdhatā* where *parasparavyāvṛitti* or mutually exclusive conditions co-exist giving rise to *prahēlikā* or puzzles that cause *cittavikshēpa* and *cittavaiklavya* or perplexity.³⁰ In the Pali tradition aporias are known as *paravāda* or the contrary views of others that create *pahēlikā* or puzzles causing *vikkhēpa*, *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

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. Ricoeur 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 devices 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 Mahāmāyā 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 Amarāvātī but it would not have recurred elsewhere.

³³ Derrida: (1993).

³⁴ Ricoeur (1983:V.I, 3-12).

³⁵ I use this term 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

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 sūtra* 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 sūtra* 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 Kālī. 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 *śālabhanjikā* by the indological archaeologists, and by

³⁹ This too is problematical. The general western view is that t̄antric art and acts are erotic. But anyone who is even marginally familiar with t̄antric literature and art knows that eros (*kāma*) is not the emotion exalted in t̄antric activities. One might even say that transcendence of eroticism is the aim of t̄antrism 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 t̄antrism (1975: 11. See 243, 261 for the doctrinal basis for the conversion of a 'spade' into something else.) He discusses how the t̄antric specialists reject individuals who attempt to define the rituals as erotic orgies. He also postulates that the demise of t̄antrism resulted from the gradual decay of t̄antric 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 *sālabhaṇjīkā* is a signifier of fecundity, prosperity, voluptuousness and so on, is that *sālabhaṇjīkā*, 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 *pañchasīla*, 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 *sālabhaṇjīkā* 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 *sālabhaṇjīkā* motif. Many statues of deities also use this posture to show a relaxed pose. Thus, in Amarāvātī, the artist presented Mahāmāya as relaxed and completely unaware of the normal pain and suffering associated with parturition.⁴¹

⁴¹ Coomaraswamy (1993:88-89:n15) asserts that the *sālabhaṇjīkā* position is one of relaxation, that this pose could have once been adopted for parturition, and that its being used to represent *yakshīs* who were symbols of pregnancy was a later invention. However, he criticizes Le Coq who found Mahāmāya in Amarāvātī 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 *sālabhaṇjīkā* motif. The Abhiseka 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 Amarāvātī 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

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 Amarāvātī 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 *śālabhaṇjīkā* pose (Figure 4).⁴³ However, the Perso-Greek colonial artists of the Gandhāra used the motif differently. Their Mahāmāyā is akin to a Greek or Persian woman. She is conservatively attired in a toga-like dress that hides the curves of the *śālabhaṇjīkā*'s body. It may be that the Gandhāra Buddhists found a curvaceous body incongruous with the sacred personality of Mahāmāyā.⁴⁴ If so, perhaps they disapproved of or

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

⁴³ 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, Mahāmāyā is represented in the *śālabhaṇjīkā* position. Perhaps the Nepalese version is the closest to the Amarāvātī 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 Nikē 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 *śālabhaṇjīkā*. 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 *śālabhaṇjīkā* 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 Amarāvati 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.

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 bodhisattva'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 (*sañjnā*) 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

culture as represented by the contemporary Sanskrit literature. Let me present an outline of the basic debates that occurred during this era.⁴⁷

From approximately the sixth century BCE, Sanskrit linguists debated the meaning of signs. Some held that signs had intrinsic meanings irrespective of how they are used. Thus, every word had its own meaning and analysis of the lexicon of the culture had to be given priority. A school of linguists known as Yāksa thus engaged in the etymology of words. These linguists were known as the *khandakapaksha* or the analytic school because they dissected sentences into separate words and attempted to interpret the meaning of a sentence, say in a *śloka*, that prescribed and proscribed activities in ritual, legal, literary and perhaps even medical and other procedures. Later, other major linguists such as Pānini, Kathyāyana, Patānjali, Sābara, the Mimānsaka-s, Naiyāyika-s and Vaiseshika-s held the same view.

In contrast, Audumbarayāna, an early linguist, professed that the linguistic sign was constituted of the statement that should be considered in its entirety to determine its meaning, and that the individual words derived their meanings from the way they related to the other words in that context. Audumbarāyana's views were furthered by the Buddhist philosopher Bhartṛhāri. These theorists and their schools of thought were known as *akhandakapaksha* or those who interpreted sentences in *śloka*-s as complete linguistic signs without dividing them into separate words. Hence their emphasis on grammar or *vyākaraṇa*. That brought them the epithet *Vaiyākaraṇika*-s. In modern terms, we could say that the *akhandaka*-s emphasized a holistic approach to the meanings of signs or, to use Kunjunni Raja's terminology, the *khandaka*-s may be called an analytical school whereas the *akhandaka*-s could be called gestalt theorists.

The *khandaka/akhandaka* perspectives were not limited to linguistics and the theory of signs. The Mimānsaka-s, Naiyāyika-s and Vaiśeṣika-s, who adopted the *khandaka* perspectives, were philosophical schools that dealt with the nature of the universe. However, by the turn of the millennium the *akhandaka*-s seem to have gained influence, with Bhartṛhāri making a strong impact on the Buddhist use of signs. Since this essay is about a sign that the Buddhists of his time employed it is necessary to briefly introduce the basic contours of his point of view, particularly his theory of *sphota*.

Sphota, in Bhartṛhāri's usage, is an integral linguistic *saṅketa* – a relationship between the sign and the thing it signified. Pre-Bhartṛhāri linguists such as Pānini, Kathyāyana, and Patānjali also advocated this notion but what they, as *khandakapaksha* analysts, had in mind was the individual word as a self-sufficient

⁴⁷ This discussion is based largely on Kunjunni Raja (1963:17-148) and Kane (1971).

symbol that contained the *sphota*. For Bhartṛhāri and his followers, *sphota* meant the entire expression, the complete arrangement of individual words in a given syntax. According to Bhartṛhāri, words as well as sentences have two aspects: sound patterns or *śabda*, and their meanings or *artha*. Although individual words possess the *śabda* aspect they are never independently meaningful (never carry the *artha* component of an independent *sphota*) and are incapable of conveying intelligible messages unless they are combined with other words to constitute a sentence or an intelligible phrase thereof. The rules for combining words form the grammar of the sentence and only within such a structured context can words become meaningful, only as constituents of a message but not as the message itself. The message dictates the vocabulary to be employed to convey the message. The *khandaka*-s upheld the reverse: the vocabulary contained the message.

These views are important in our contexts for several reasons. The school of Buddhism involved in the construction of the *śālabhañjikā* images discussed here used Sanskrit as its official language and thus was influenced by Sanskrit grammar and poetics. Bhartṛhāri as well as Aśvaghoṣa were monks and were contemporaries. It is likely that the rules of grammar and poetics that they elucidated and employed derived from or were foundational to a larger theory of interpretation of signs where the constituent elements of a signifying statement – a story as told or as depicted in freezes, for example – were meaningful only as parts of a whole but not as independent and self-sufficient units.

The above clarifies the parameters within which signs of the early Buddhist art must be interpreted. Most likely, the *śālabhañjikā* motif in itself had none of the meanings that the indological archaeologists, lexicographers and Coomaraswamy attributed to it. Fertility, prosperity, voluptuousness, harlot, courtesan, *vrkshikā*, demoness are all context bound. If the artist wished to represent a deity or a person characterized by one or more of these properties, they merely employed a motif that carried no inherent meanings but received one or more meanings from the context. In different contexts, the motif acquired different properties. *Śālabhañjikā* herself was only the willowy form of a woman under a tree and nothing more; a convenient and often used casing in which durable goods were elegantly packaged. The use of *śālabhañjikā* to depict Mahāmāyā only expanded the motif's semiotic openness. To use Saussurian terms, the arbitrariness of its use as a signifier increased as it began to float between diametrically opposed notions. In the process the motif itself became merely a decorative element with no inherent meanings except for the graciousness of its form. Exactly how it decorated an idea depended on how, as Wittgenstein would say, its users employed it.⁴⁸ The motif was a conventional frame

⁴⁸ Wittgenstein (212:1953:19970).

employed by craftsmen and poets to portray whoever the female they wished to flatter. *Śālabhañjikā* was an open sign.

But the late 19th and 20th century scholars and researchers in search of definite and predictable universals brought the *śālabhañjikā* motif under closure and established for it a fixed set of properties. What in the Bhārhut and Sāñchi phases was an open sign that could be used across a wide field of meanings, was converted to a fixed set of meanings to define the motif itself. They did so by trapping *śālabhañjikā* within a matrix of modernly attributed meanings. What I anticipated as the Buddhist closure of the motif in Amarāvati and Gandhāra actually challenges this modern closure. The *śālabhañjikā* -s of Amarāvati and Gandhāra confirm that there are no necessary or sufficient connections between the motif and the characteristics of voluptuousness and fecundity, attributed to them by the scholars, and compel the viewer to reopen the modern conceptual cage in which they are trapped.

Appendix

Introduction

The significations of the *śālabhañjikā* motif are both literary and sculptural. Though my essay focuses upon the sculptural expressions, the literary expressions of the motif are, perhaps, much older. Throughout the essay, I presented materials from various literary sources. But these sources are themselves controversial for many reasons. The original texts, such as the Pali Texts and the Sanskrit works, no longer exist. Copies of the original texts were prepared by scribes at various times in various locations were collected much later and edited by nineteenth and twentieth century European scholars. In studying the texts, I found several problems that demanded separate study within the framework of the main essay. As the issues are too divergent to be addressed in the main essay I present them in this appendix, under following sections.

In Section I, I examine the nature of the earliest sources of the Buddhist corpus that provides information on the bodhisattva's birth drama. I also briefly discuss the early Buddhist sect formation and how these sects constructed the early sources.

Section II discusses the nature of the bodhisattva's birth scene in Aśvaghosha's *buddhacarita* as it is found in Sanskrit, Tibetan and Chinese versions. I examine how the scribes and translators have introduced various interpretations of the role of Mahāmāya.

In Section III, I present materials from the *mahāvasthu* to show how the earliest information of Mahāmāya's position of the bodhisattva's birth drama was

later ritualized and how the ritual provided impetus to redefine the birth scene by the 4th century of the CE. This exemplifies the circular relationship between the textual/oral traditions and the ritual tradition.

In Section IV, I present further materials on the *dohada* literary and sculptural motif and the *dohada* ritual to show how they might have originated from the earlier constructions of the birth drama, as found in the *nidhānakathā*.

I

The *nidhānakathā* presents the basic elements of the bodhisattva's nativity scene. In the *nidhānakathā*, the bodhisattva was residing in the Tusitha heaven when the time arrived for him to leave for the world of humans. The bodhisattva looked for an appropriate womb to enter and found that queen Mahāmayā fulfilled all the requirements. He entered the womb of Māhamayā as the queen was sleeping and she dreamt that a white elephant had entered her womb. She found herself pregnant with a child. After nine months, Māhamayā went to Dévadaha, where her parents lived. On the way she entered the Luṇbini a forest and stood under a great *sāla* tree. She felt labor pains. A *sāla* branch bent towards her. She held and supported herself with the branch as the bodhisattva was born. The Mahābrahma received the infant and passed him on to the four guardian deities.

In contrast to the *nidhānakathā*, the *āccharyaabbhūtaḍḍhammasutta* focuses on the miraculous nature of the event and gives a detailed account of the conditions under which the conception, pregnancy and birth occurred. The idea is to distinguish the bodhisattva from mere mortals, although he was a mortal. The bodhisattva is a *mahāpurisa*, a great man, inimitable and unusual, whose existence is beyond the lot of ordinary people.

This apotheosis of the bodhisattva is the work of the Lokottaravādin, an early sub-sect of the Sarvāsthivādin. The Lokottaravādin held that the bodhisattva was superhuman and dwelt on these characteristics. Although the *nidhānakathā* also considers the Buddha as superhuman, it does not describe his superhuman character to the same extent as the *āccharyaabbhūtaḍḍhammasutta*.⁴⁹ The *āccharyaabbhūtaḍḍhamma* refer to the supernormal or miraculous (*āccharya*) and wonderful (*abbhuta*) nature (*dhamma*) of the hero.

Coomaraswamy considers the *nidhānakathā* account to have been constructed after the *āccharyaabbhūtaḍḍhammasutta* of the *majjhima nikāya*.

⁴⁹ The *nidhānakathā* presents the bodhisattva as an extraordinary being with supernatural abilities. It presents the birth drama with a description of the qualities of the mother of the bodhisattva entitled *bodhisattvamātā dhammatā*. (See The Jātaka, I: Fausebøll:Op.Cit. 51-52).

Perhaps, he thinks that the *āccharyaabbhūṭadhammasutta* is older because it is a part of the *tripitaka* whereas the *jātaka*-s, of which the *nidhānakathā* is a part, was developed later.

However, I believe it is likely that the Lokottaravādin expressed their ideas in Pali, *after* the *nidhānakathā* were composed, and incorporated them into the *majjhima nikāya* as a *sutta*. The Lokottaravādi ideas were later elaborated in Sanskrit after the segmentation of the early Buddhist community into the Sthavira (the monastics) and the Mahāsaṅghika (the greater Buddhist community constituted of the Sthavira and Putujjana (laymen)). The Mahāsaṅghika themselves further segmented because of differing conceptions of reality. The Viññānavādin or mentalists among them believed that nothing existed and that everything - including the natural world and the personal and collective definitions and concepts about it, values, customs and the like - was merely a matter of imagination. Others criticized this position and asserted that material reality had an existence independent of an individual's imagination. The Viññānavādin labeled their Sthavira critics Sarvāsthivādin (Skt. sarva: all; asthi: existence). The Sarvāsthivādin subsequently produced many other segments with their own orientations. Among them, the Lokottaravādin focused on the miraculous nature of the Buddha. The *āccharyaabbhūṭadhammasutta* was an early expression of this position, constructed before the segmentation of the early monastic community into the Pali oriented Sthavira and Sanskrit oriented Mahāsaṅghika.

The Lokottaravādi scholasticism entered into the corpus like the *divyavadhāna* and *aśokavadhāna*, *lalitavistara* and the *mahāvasthu* as well as the *buddhacarita* of Aśvaghosha.

These traditions variously constructed the bodhisattva's birth drama. The *divyavadhāna* enacts the scene under a *aśoka* tree, while the *aśokavadhāna* does so under a mango tree. The *lalitavistara* uses a *plakṣa* tree. The *mahāvasthu* concurs with the *nidhānakathā* that the birth drama occurred under a *śāla* tree.⁵⁰ Aśvaghosha, in his *buddhacarita*, is silent about the identity of the tree. All, except Aśvaghosha, are in agreement with the *nidhānakathā* regarding all other basic elements.

II

Aśvaghosha's *buddhacarita* has two versions of the birth drama. The manuscripts edited by Cowell agree with the *nidhānakathā*. However, the

⁵⁰ But *mahāvasthu* is inconsistent. As Jones shows, elsewhere it gives *plakṣa* as the name of the tree (Jones:1952:16:n.3).

buddhacarita edited by Johnston provides a different scenario. According to Johnston's translation, Mahāmāyā entered the garden of Luṅbini and proceeded to a couch under an awning and the bodhisattva emerged from her side.

This is a much later rendition of Aśvaghosha's *buddhacarita*. Johnston used the *fo-sho-hing-tsan-king*, the Chinese translation of the *buddhacarita* by Dharmaraksha in 420 CE, and a Tibetan manuscript descending from 8th century, to fill the lacunae in the Katmandu manuscript that he translated.⁵¹ But, the Tibetan and the Chinese versions of the poem omit the first twenty-four verses in the Sanskrit. The birth drama is described in Cowell's edition in verse 24 of Canto I. Johnston's edition begins with verse 8 of Canto I, describing the birth drama. Both Cowell and Johnston filled the missing verses with materials from Tibetan and Chinese sources that do not always agree with one another. Both editors state that all manuscripts agree in all the major events from this point onwards. However, the most significant event in the Buddhist drama, the birth of the bodhisattva, is presented in two different motifs indicating that even the verse 24, Canto I in Cowell and verse 8, Canto I in Johnston are also thoroughly edited by the scribes. In Cowell, Mahāmāyā's pose in the birth drama is that of *śālabhañjikā*.

"*santāhpurajānā dévi kadācidatha luṅbini/
jagāmānusate rājāh sambhūton tamadohada* //(23)
*śakhāmālamāmānāyāh pushpabhārāvalaṅbini/
dévyāh kuksim vibighāśu bodhisattvoviniryayau*// (24)⁵²

Cowell translates these verses as follows.

Then one day by the king's permission the queen,
having a great longing in her mind,
went with the inmates of the gynaeceum into the garden of Lumbini (23).
As the queen supported herself by a bough which hung laden with
a weight of flowers, the Bodhisattva suddenly came forth,
cleaving open her womb(24).⁵³

Johnston's text reads as:

⁵¹ Beal (1883) and Johnston (1934).

⁵² *buddhakarita*: Cowell: 1892.

⁵³ Cowell:1894:1969:5

*tasminvané shraumati rājapatnau prasūtikālam samavēkshamānā/
saiyām vitanopahitam prapédé nārausahakhairabhinandanāyall*⁵⁴

He translates this as:

In that glorious grove the queen perceived that the time of her delivery was at hand and, amidst the welcome of thousands of waiting-women, proceeded to a couch overspread with an awning⁵⁵.

Clearly, the Kathmandu manuscript has a different notion about the bodhisattva's birth drama. Interestingly, while Johnston compared this manuscript with the one used by Cowell he did not notice this glaring difference.

Johnston says that a Nepali pundit named Amrtananda introduced many alterations to the editions used by Cowell and asserts that the Katmandu manuscript is older and less corrupt, and therefore more authentic. He shows many instances where scribes have changed the original construction by Aśvaghosha.

Maybe the scribes found the *śālabhañjikā* position unnatural or improper, as the nineteenth century European scholars found it to be, and made it more appropriate for a sacred personage such as Mahāmayā and more like the birthing practices of their own community. On the other hand, it is likely that the Sanskrit traditions carried both these scenarios, depending on the region and the cultural orientation of the community. It is also likely that later scholars and scribes altered many of the scenarios as given in the Kathmandu manuscript and realigned the texts with the *nidhānakathā* version. Against all these speculations it may be asserted that since the iconography of the scene from Amarāvatiānd Gandhāra to Nepal and elsewhere follows the *nidhānakathā* scenario, Aśvaghosha also followed the same. It is remarkable that the "couch" scene appears nowhere else, in literature or in iconography that I have yet seen, except in the Chinese text translated by Beal and perhaps in the Tibetan text (I have not seen one yet) and in Johnston's translation of the Katmandu manuscript. Johnston trusted the Chinese and Tibetan versions.

A careful reading of the Katmandu text edited by Johnston reveals that the "couch" is an addition incorporated by Johnston. " *saiyām vitanopahitam* " means "lay down under a canopy." Just as the scribes edited the text instead of only copying it, Johnston introduced materials from the Chinese translation and from his own culture and times. The "couch" is a Chinese invention, a device that Johnston finds agreeable and in accordance with the European birthing practices. He

⁵⁴ *buddhacarita*:I:8; Johnston:1934.

⁵⁵ Johnston:1934:1984::I:8:3.

introduces it to smoothen the "lay down under a canopy" in the Kathmandu manuscript and to dramatize the text to his European readers. He probably regarded the absence of a couch in the Kathmandu text as an omission in the original text or in the copy that he edited. Therefore, he 'corrected' the perceived 'omission' in the text.⁵⁶

Perhaps, if Johnston had tested his rendition of the text against the iconography of the event he would have drawn very different conclusions about the scene of the nativity and about the relative authenticity of the manuscripts involved. Instead he only used chronological evidence and considered the 14th century Kathmandu manuscript as more authentic than the 15th century manuscripts that Cowell edited.

III

The *mahāvasthu* presents yet another interesting slant to the birth drama of the bodhisattva. In the *mahāvasthu*, King Suddhodhana allows the queen to go to Luṇbini and "break a *sāla* branch" (*śālābhañjakaṇ ca karisyathi*).⁵⁷ Here, the term

⁵⁶ Samuel Beal translates Canto I, (5-8) of the Chinese text as follows:

"Disliking the clamorous ways of the world. (she remembered) the excellent garden of Lumbini, a pleasant spot, a quiet forest retreat, (with its) trickling fountains, and blooming flowers and fruits.

Quiet and peaceful, delighting in meditation, respectfully she asked the king for liberty to roam therein; the king understanding her earnest desire, was seized with a seldom-felt anxiety (to grant her request).

He commanded his kinsfolk, within and without (the palace), to repair with her to that garden shade; and now the queen Maya knew that her time for child-bearing was come.

She rested on a beautiful couch, (surrounded by) a hundred thousand female attendants;...."

Chinese and Tibetan iconography of the bodhisattva's birth drama is structurally not different from the Amaravati, Gandhara and Nepali versions. There, too Mahāmāya is shown standing under a tree. If the Chinese and the Tibetan iconographers learned about the birth drama from the *fo-sho-hing-tsan-king* and its Tibetan equivalent it is likely that Darmaraksha provided that information, rather than a couch scene, in his translation, and that the couch was introduced by Beal. I have no way of testing this hypothesis at present.

⁵⁷ *sarvēṣhaṇ bodhisattvānāṇ mātā pratipūrṇa daśamē māśe prajāyati. subhūtīnā śākyēna prēshitaṇ rañño. āgacchatu dēvi prajāyishyati. rāja pratishēdhayati. āgamishyati śālabhañjikaṇ ca karishyati*// (Senart:1890:18:7-9).

śālabhañjikā refers to the *śāla* breaking woman, not a wooden doll, courtesan, harlot or yakshi.

I hypothesize that the Lokottaravādin supernaturalized the *nidhānakathā* version that states that the queen merely stood under a *śāla* tree. Her pose later became ritualized through their supernaturalization. Women in certain regions break a *śāla* branch in preparation for parturition hoping that their labor pains also might be reduced by this magical act.

Buddhist literature shows that great events were ritualized and individuals performed such rituals to obtain the same results. For example, certain monks of the early Buddhist community ritually meditated under bo (*ficus religiosā*) trees believing that the bo trees had a magical power to cause realization of Truth and buddhahood. This ritual was an imitation of Siddhārtha Gautama's act.

Conversely, it could be that the *nidhānakathā* scenario was itself a literary representation of an ongoing ritual. However, I do not believe this hypothesis likely for numerous reasons.

First, the earliest literature does not speak of a *śāla* branch or flower plucking ritual. Even the *nidhānakathā* only uses the *śālabhañjikā* motif to say that the queen merely held a *śāla* branch and supported herself.

Second, as I argue in the main essay, the *nidhānakathā* motif, given its context, does not implicate any concern with fertility. Therefore it is highly unlikely that Mahāmayā's pose represented a *śālabhañjaka* ritual. Coomaraswamy cites the *avadāna cataka* to show the existence of the *śāla* branch breaking ritual in literary motifs.⁵⁸ But the *avadāna cataka* is a later work, composed during the first century Common Era.

Third, while Roy believes,⁵⁹ and Coomaraswamy affirms, that worshiping a *śāla* tree in full bloom was a pre-Buddhist fertility ritual, this is not the same as the

The mothers of all Bodhisattva's are delivered when the tenth month is completed. The Śākya Subhūti sent a message to the king, saying, "Let the queen come hither; she shall be delivered here." The king replied that she should come and break the branch of the Sāl tree (Jones"1952:16).

Jones, probably guided by the *nidhānakathā*, footnotes that "...break the branch of the Sāl tree" means that "the Bodhisattva's mother will be delivered as she clings to a branch of this tree. (ibid.:16:n.3).

⁵⁸ 1993 :86.

⁵⁹ Roy (as cited in Coomaraswamy:1993).

śālabhañjikā or *śāla* -branch-breaking ritual. The *nidhānakathā* does not say that Mahāmāya worshipped or broke a branch of a *śāla* tree. She merely held a branch that the *devatā* or deity of the tree pushed down. The *śāla* -branch-breaking notion is associated with Mahāmāya's visit to Luṅbini only in the *mahāvastu*. Even the *avadāna cataka*, as Coomaraswamy indicates, does not associate *śāla* -branch-breaking with the birth scene of the bodhisattva.

Finally, the *mahāvasthu* is a later work, composed around the fourth century of the CE. The ritualization had occurred earlier than the composition of the *mahāvasthu*. The sculptural remains of Mathurā show remnants of a larger structure that included depictions of what might have been the *śāla*-branch breaking rituals. Here a female figure is climbing a tree, holding a branch. Mathurā artistic tradition existed concurrently with the early Gandhāra traditions during the first few centuries of the Common Era. The *mahāvasthu* author seems to have redefined the birth scene by using the ritual practiced in his community as the motif for Mahāmāya.

This shows that there is a circular relationship between oral tradition, literature and ritual formation. Inventions in the oral and literary traditions lead to rituals that, in turn, becomes motif for oral and literary traditions of later periods.

IV

Another kindred concept is that of the *dohada*. It means the longing of a pregnant woman or a pregnancy craving. This, too, became ritualized. Ritually, a young or a pregnant woman touches or kicks a tree to cause it to bloom and or bear fruit.⁶⁰ Clearly, this is a fertility motif. Coomaraswamy gives Kalidāsa's *mālavikāgnimitra* as his source for this motif. Monier-Williams finds it in Kalidasa's *raghuvansa* as well.⁶¹ These appear to be the earliest Sanskrit literary occurrences of the concept. The word or the concept *dohada* does not appear in the *nidhānakathā*. But *dohada* appears in the *jātaka* stories, as *dohala* and its cognates, indicating that these occurrences could be post-Kalidasa additions.

The *dohada*, as it appears in *mālavikāgnimitra* and elsewhere, cannot explain Mahāmāya's pose in the birth scenario of the bodhisattva since *dohada* is a

⁶⁰ Coomaraswamy (Ibid.).

"The word is used to indicate the longing of a pregnant woman for particular objects (figuratively said of plants which at budding time long to be touched by the foot or by the mouth (Raghuvamsa:XIX:12) of a lovely woman; any morbid desire or wish" (Monier-Williams:Op. Cit. 499). Monier-Williams also gives the Prakrit term *daurhrīda* (ibid.). The Pali term is *dohala* and it means the same conditions. Rhys-Davids and Steed give the *jātaka* and *dhammapada atthakathā* as their sources (Op.Cit.:332).

⁶¹ Monier-Williams (Op.Cit.:499).

later cultural construction. We cannot apply meanings of signs retroactively although older meanings of signs may be invoked, depending on the context and the syntax, to define the later applications of the signs. *Dohada* appears in Cowell's edition of the *buddhakarita* as "*jagamānusatē rājah sambhūton tamadohadā*" and is used to show the longing that Mahāmāya had to go to Luṣṭhini. However, these lines in Cowell's edition come from Chinese and Tibetan sources and they are extraneous to the Sanskrit manuscripts that Cowell and Johnston edited. Thus, the notion of *dohada* might have been added by the Chinese and the Tibetans or by the Sanskrit scribes who prepared the manuscripts for the Chinese and the Tibetans later.⁶² Clearly, the Chinese and the Tibetans had changed the manuscript to suite their imagining of the Buddha's story. The recasting of the birth scene by the Chinese and the Tibetans as discussed in II above provides further information on this matter.

Special Note:

¹ Many individuals helped me with this work. I am specially thankful to Professor Gananath Obeyesekere for reading and commenting on an initial draft and to Dr. Nihal Fernando and Leslie Hurst Goonasekera for editorial suggestions.

Note on transliteration. For the most part, I relied on Gonda (1966). However, I failed to find appropriate diacritical marks in Microsoft Word, for certain Sanskrit syllables. For those, I used ṇ (avaṇṇya, viṇṇita) and ṅ (bhaṅṅika) as they seemed fit depending on the context.

Figures given here are from Bussagli & Sivaramamurti (1972), Cunningham (1879:1998).

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⁶² Dharmaraksha translated the *buddhacarita* into Chinese in the fifth century CE (Beal:Op.Cit.). Kalidasa also lived during this period.

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SUNIL GOONASEKERA

Figure 1

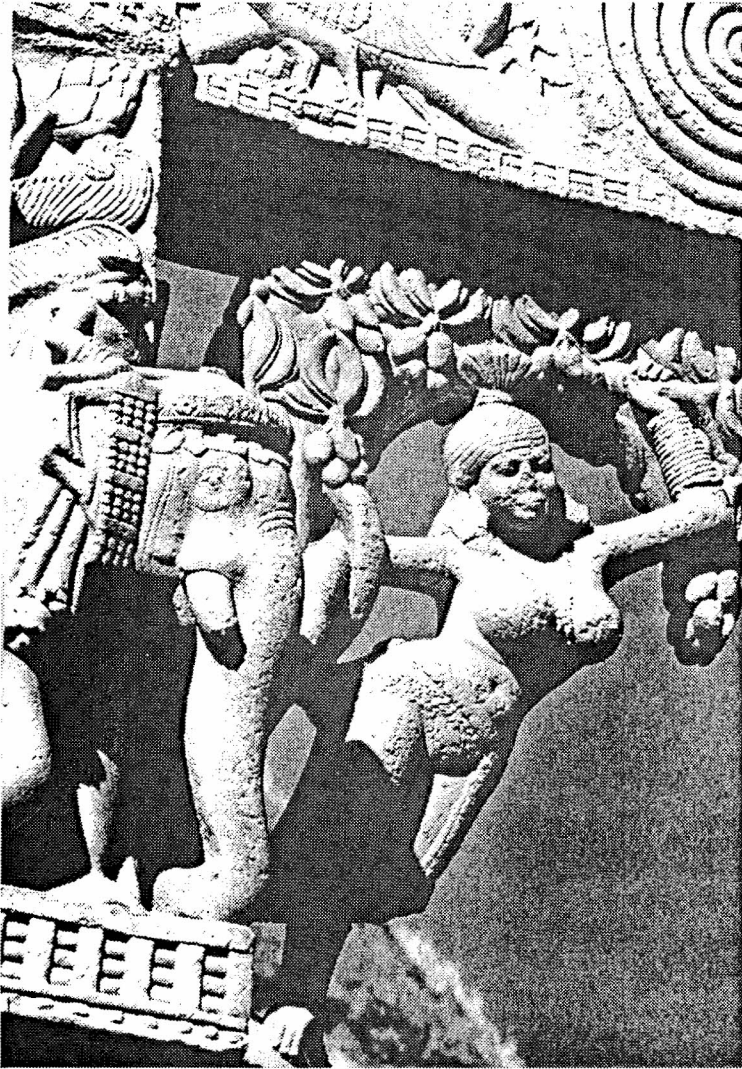


Canda Yakshi



Culakoka Devata

Figure 2



Sanchi

Figure 3



Amaravati

Figure 4



Gandhara