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Prajñāpāramitā: from Concept to Icon

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Abstract

In the Mahāyāna tradition, the doctrine of emptiness and Selflessness of the person holds a great place; which is also known as the second turning of the wheel of law. This doctrine or philosophy has been preserved in a category of texts, known as *Prajñāpāramitā* literature. The concept of *Prajñāpāramitā* flourished in these texts over many centuries; before the influence of Tantric elements, which became very popular in the Indian subcontinent after the 5th -6th century, became a part of it. With the development of the Vajrayāna school of thought, a huge change in the idea of *Prajñāpāramitā* took place. In the later books on *Prajñāpāramitā*, we can see that, by the end of the 5th Century, *Prajñāpāramitā* had become a deity; an object of worship that also was a female deity and hence, *Prajñāpāramitā* became the first true Buddhist goddess. This first incident of deification of an idea started a process of deification of many more things within the Tantric Buddhist world. This paper is an enquiry into this process of deification of an idea. This paper will discuss the concept of *Prajñāpāramitā*, with focus on the ways in which *Prajñāpāramitā* acquired the form of a deity such as the iconography of the goddess, ways in which she has been otherwise represented, range of epiphanies which have been used for her in various texts and how her worship was evolved. The development of the cult of *Prajñāpāramitā* reflects a huge change in the social processes in the Indian subcontinent during the 5th -6th Cent. A society in which, man and woman were understood in terms of their comparison with mind and nature/body respectively; a philosophical idea which was supposed to be so difficult to understand that it was not there for everybody to read or practice. Only people with some sort of earlier Tantric understanding were capable of grasping the true essence of this doctrine. The question of how in these circumstances, *Prajñāpāramitā* became a feminine deity arises. Also of how an aspect of mind, which was an attribute of man, got associated with a feminine form? The objective of this paper is to understand the gender relations, within the Tantric Buddhist community. I intend to do this on the basis of religious practices of Tantric Buddhism and the development of a female fraction in the pantheon. This paper works with the idea that the changes in the mythological world reflect the changes which are taking place in the actual world and hence, the recognition of the feminine divine within religions reflects the change in the social perception of gender. Hence, at large this paper is trying to understand the changes in the social perception of gender, with the coming in of Tantric ideas.

Keywords: Gender, Tantric Buddhism, *Prajñāpāramitā*.

Introduction

In the Mahāyāna tradition, the doctrine of emptiness and Selflessness of the person holds a great place; which is also known as the second turning of the wheel of law. This doctrine or philosophy has been preserved in a category of texts, known as *Prajñāpāramitā* literature. The concept of *Prajñāpāramitā* flourished in these texts over many centuries; before the influence of Tantric elements, which became very popular in the Indian subcontinent after the 5th -6th century, became visible. With the development of the Vajrayāna school of thought, a huge change in the idea of *Prajñāpāramitā* took place. In the later books on *Prajñāpāramitā*, we can see that, by the end of 5th Cent CE, *Prajñāpāramitā* had become a deity; an object of worship that took a female deity and hence, *Prajñāpāramitā* became the first true Buddhist goddess.¹ This first incident of deification of an idea started a process of deification of many more things within the Buddhist world. In fact, during this period, Buddhists started an unrelenting process of deification by turning all objects and subjects within human comprehension into divine concepts.”²

This paper is an enquiry into the process through which such humongous and long lasting changes took place.

Prajñāpāramitā Literature

The composition of *Prajñāpāramitā* texts extends over about 1000 years. Linnart Mäll argues that these texts were first written down around the first century BC. He goes on to argue, that the earliest Mahāyāna Sūtras are those whose titles contain the word *Prajñāpāramitā*. Approximately 30 of these were written over several centuries.³

Edward Conze distinguishes, nine steps in the development of *Prajñāpāramitā* thought:

The initial formulation represented by the first two chapters of *Ratnaguṇasaṃcayagāthā* (*Rgs*), Chapters 3-28 of *Ratnaguṇasaṃcayagāthā*, Incorporation of matter from the Abhidharma, Concessions to the Buddhism of Faith, The last part of the Large *Prajñāpāramitā*, The short Sūtras, Yogacarīn commentaries, The Tantra and Ch'an.

The first two chapters, define the new key-terms, which are, first *bodhisattva* (I v, 16) and *mahāsattva* (I vv. 17-20), by which the incipient Mahayana proclaimed its allegiance to a new type of saint, different from the "Arhats" of the preceding period, and then *bodhiyāna* (I vv. 21-23), by which a new goal was proclaimed, nothing less than the full enlightenment of a Buddha.⁴

¹Before her, we can find many goddesses within the Buddhist pantheon, but if we take a closer look we can see that all earlier forms of goddesses were 'borrowed' by the Buddhist from the other Indic traditions.

²Dipak C. Bhattacharyya, *Studies in Buddhist Iconography*, Munshiram Manoharlal, Delhi, 1978, p 1.

³Linnart Mäll, *Studies in Aṣṭasāhasrika Prajñāpāramitā and other essays*, Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, Delhi, 2003, p. 96.

⁴Edward Conze, *Thirty Years of Buddhist Studies*, Oxford, London, 1968, p. 124.

The second stage of *Prajñāpāramitā* thought is represented in chapters 3-28 of the *Ratnaguṇasaṃcayagāthā*.

As a next step, two items concerning Buddhist faith were added on. They are A). The reference to Akṣobhya and B). The *avadāna* of Sadāprarudita. These were certainly later than chapters 3- 28 of *Ratnaguṇasaṃcayagāthā*, and in all probability later than the *Abhidharma* insertions.

Short though they are, the references to Akṣobhya are nevertheless important, and here we can see a deep undercurrent in *Prajñāpāramitā* thought, which will come to the fore in the tantra four or five centuries later: the tantric system of five Jinas associates the *Prajñāpāramitā* with the “family” of the Buddha Akṣobhya. Finally a substantial section was added to the Large Sūtra which deals almost exclusively with one of the facets of “Skill in means”.

Short Sūtras in 25, 300, 500, 700 and 1250 *ślokas* aimed at providing handy summaries of its contents. In regard of these short sūtras, the point to think is that whether they are mere abbreviations of the Large Sūtra, or propound original ideas of their own. Generally speaking, these documents of the fourth to seventh centuries follow the doctrines outlined in the Large Sūtra.

The next stage is marked by the production of *systematizing commentaries*. There had, of course, been commentaries before that time, especially the *Mahāprajñāpāramitopadeśa*, but they had been the work of Madhyamikas who had been content with bringing out the actual meaning of the Sūtra and did little violence to the existing text and confined themselves to explaining just what it said.

The *Adhyardhaśatikā*, the one truly tantric exposition of the *Prajñāpāramitā*, represents an entirely new departure. It employs a literary form which it calls *prajñāpāramitānaya*, foreshadowed to some extent in the “litanies” of the later parts of *Abhidharma*.

In short, these developments can be understood in terms of 4 phases: 1) the elaboration of the basic text (ca 100 BCE to 100 AD); 2) the expansion of that text (ca. 100 AD to 300 AD); 3) re statement of the doctrine in a) short sutras and b) versified summaries (ca. 300 to 500 AD); 4) the period of Tantric influence and of absorption into magic (600 to 1200 AD).⁵

The *Prajñāpāramitā* texts emerged at a time when Buddhist circles were arguing about whether “Buddha’s word” was finally fixed after many canonical volumes had been written. The majority answered: Yes. However, some people found that what Buddha has said and taught was not meant as the eternal dogmatic truth. Buddha’s purpose was to create in his students the ultimate of state of mind that he had attained, rather than to proclaim abstract truths. Therefore, the tradition can not be aimed at maintaining and forwarding the so called pure original text.⁶ Unlike, the canons of other schools, the *Prajñāpāramitā* sutras did not finish the production of text. On the contrary, it declared that more sutras will appear in the future.

⁵Stephen Beyer, *The Cult of Tārā: Magic and Ritual in Tibet (Hermeneutics: Studies in the History of Religions)*, University of California Press, 1978.

⁶Linnart Mäll, *Ibid.*, p. 97.

Most of the sutras of this class, although in prose, are named after the number of lines which they contain. The place of the origin of the *Prajñāpāramitā* has been the subject of some controversy. But, mostly authors claim that it had its origin somewhere among the Mahāsaṅghikas in southern India, in the Āndhra country, on the Kṛṣṇā River.⁷

This text for a long time worked as the basic source and at about the beginning of the Christian Era, this text was expanded into a “Large *Prajñāpāramitā*”, which is today represented by three different texts: 1) *Śatasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra* 2) *Pañcaviṃśatisāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra*, and 3) *Aṣṭadaśasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra*. On the basis of references and commentaries, it has been concluded that there existed a version *Perfect Wisdom in 125,000 Lines*, which is lost now. Apart from these, two short texts also belong to the same time period.

By this time, the Large *Prajñāpāramitā* was a huge, extremely abstract text, which commended high amounts of respect for itself, but was very hard to understand. Since the work was a combination of a number of disjointed treaties composed over 3 centuries, depending upon the needs and ideas of the later generations of Buddhists, it became a text which was not understood by the current generation of Buddhists. The response to this problem was a two fold response: generation of new shorter sutras and the condensed summarization of the large Sutras.

Next texts, to be composed (Before 400 CE) were the “Heart Sutra” in 25 or 14 Lines. In Sanskrit it’s called the *Mahā- Prajñā- pāramitā -hrdaya-sūtra*. It represents the heart of a much longer sutra of 600 volumes called the *Mahā- Prajñā- pāramitā -sūtra* and the “*Vajracchedikā Prajñāpāramitā sūtra*” in 300 Lines, also known as *Triśatikā Prajñāpāramitā sūtra*. Both belonging to the period before 400 CE.⁸ In contrast to western scholarship, Japanese scholars have traditionally considered the *Vajracchedikā Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra* to be from a very early date in the development of *Prajñāpāramitā* literature.

Towards the end of 6th century, we find three more texts, *Saptaśatikā Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra*, *Sārdhadvisāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra* and a rather undistinguished *Prajñāpāramitā ardhaśatikā*. A new feature in the Perfect Wisdom in 2500 lines is its endeavor to look for the hidden meaning of the sayings of Buddha, for this new development we have to take into the account, the simultaneous development of Tantric philosophy.

After CE 600, with the spread of Tantric ideas, we find a new kind of *Prajñāpāramitā* literature, which catered to the current needs of the time. Almost all the text of this category contains some basic feature like 1) we can see an attempt to shorten the length of the text. In this literature the *Prajñāpāramitā* has been expressed through the medium of *Bij- Mantras*, *Mantras*, *Dharnis* etc. 2) between CE 600 and 1200, we find a number of tantric abbreviations of the earlier *Prajñāpāramitā* texts, all very short. Some texts from this category might be seen as the counterparts of the older texts. While, the older texts were addressed to the spiritual elites, these new counterparts were addressed to the “less endowed”. 3) Last and most

⁷Edward Conze, *Ibid.*, p. 9.

⁸Edward Conze, *Ibid.*, P18.

important development of this time was the, anthropomorphication and personification of the *Prajñāpāramitā* as a deity and now, *Prajñāpāramitā* was inserted into the pantheon of mythological figures, becomes the object of worship and we also find number of text describing methods of rituals by which her spirited powers can be evoked.

Prajñāpāramitā as a Concept

As simple as the etymology of the word is, it is equally difficult to understand the sense in which the term has been used in the literature and the idea which it is supposed to propagate. In his work, *Buddhism*, Edward Conze notes: The Sanskrit word, *Prajñāpāramitā*, literally means ‘wisdom gone beyond’, or ‘Transcendental wisdom’.⁹ While, Linnart Mall argues against the use of the etymological meaning of the term. He says that *Prajñāpāramitā* is a completely independent term, the semantic field of which does not coincide at all or partly coincides with the meaning of its elements *Prajñā* and *Pāramitā*.¹⁰

On the basis of the study of *Aṣṭasahasrikā Prajñāpāramitā*, he further argues that the term majorly refers to two things:¹¹

- I. *Prajñāpāramitā*, is a text generated by following special rules. This text can appear as inner speech, oral speech or a written text called *Prajñāpāramitā*, the purpose of which is to create the ultimate state of the human mind.
- II. *Prajñāpāramitā*, is one of the names of the ultimate state of mind reflecting the ability of a person to fully understand the *Prajñāpāramitā* text and create new texts of the same type.

The term *Prajñāpāramitā* also denotes the ultimate state of mind on the list of “six *Pāramitā*”, as mentioned in *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā*.¹²

- *Dānapāramitā*
- *Śīlapāramitā*
- *Kṣāntipāramitā*
- *Vīryapāramitā*
- *Dhyānapāramitā*
- *Prajñāpāramitā*

Many tantric texts quote a list of six *pāramitās*. In the *Prajñāpāramitā* Sutras, *Prajñāpāramitā* is the primary and predominant member among the six *Pāramitās*. The other *Pāramitās* only exist as the elements of the *ṣaṭpāramitā* list. Other *Pāramitās*, alone can not bring merit to the

⁹Edward Conze, *Buddhism*, Oneworld Publication, USA, 1993, p. 124.

¹⁰Linnart Mall, *Ibid.*, p. 65.

¹¹*Ibid.*, p. 66.

¹²*Ibid.*, p. 78.

Bodhisattava, they have to be accompanied with *Prajñāpāramitā*. It's the presence of *Prajñāpāramitā*, which brings the greater merit.¹³

Anthropomorphisation of Prajñāpāramitā

As mentioned earlier, the element of the worship of *Prajñāpāramitā*, was present even in the early Mahāyānic *Prajñāpāramitā* literature.¹⁴ Mäll attributes the need for the worship of *Prajñāpāramitā*, to the new processes that took place within the Buddhist community in the first centuries BC: the schism and the appearance of many new schools, the emergence of written texts etc. he further argues that, the authors of the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā* thought that the main goal of the worship of the *Prajñāpāramitā*, was to prepare the reader or the listener for the process of the subjectivization of the text.

Although *Prajñāpāramitā*, like her namesake wisdom, is supposed to transcend all categories and to be beyond form, but she has the traits of gender and femaleness is central to her character. She hypostatizes the wisdom that is most often designated in this literature by feminine noun *Prajñā*. But Miranda Shaw, in her book, *Buddhist Goddesses of India*, argues that, *Prajñāpāramitā* was personified before she was cast into iconographic form. The literature characterizes her as a female being and describes her as mother, teacher, and guide of seekers of spiritual awakening. There is, however, no attempt to envision her as a deity with specific bodily attributes. Shaw argues that the primary reason for this initial lack of iconographic presentation may be that *Prajñāpāramitā* by nature transcends symbolic representation. She is identical to highest wisdom and represents a vision of reality that lies beyond all conceptual, linguistic, and symbolic constructs. *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra* emphasizes that the non dual wisdom she personifies is inconceivable and indescribable. Hence, there is no philosophical impetus within the philosophy to cloak the wisdom mother in a figural form that might disavow her transcendence.¹⁵

Further, she goes on, supplementing this philosophical reason is an historical one. The literature in which *Prajñāpāramitā* makes her debut predates the worship of votive images as a major Mahayana practice. Moreover, the Perfection of Wisdom literature promotes manuscripts, rather than effigies of the Goddess, as objects of ritual devotion, giving rise to the term the "Cult of the Book."¹⁶ Hence, she argues that, on both theological and historical grounds, it is unsurprising that *Prajñāpāramitā* is not vested with bodily attributes in this literature.

¹³Edward Conze (Tr.), *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā*, The Asiatic Society, Calcutta, 1958, p. 132.

¹⁴Edward Conze (Tr), *Ibid.*, p. 30.

¹⁵Miranda, Shaw, *Buddhist Goddesses of India*, Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, New Delhi, 2007, pp. 171-172.

¹⁶Miranda, Shaw, *Ibid.*, p. 172.

Visual Representation

Statues of the *Prajñāpāramitā* are attested in India as early as 400 AD by Fa-hsien's account. The images of the Goddess are found only after the beginning of the Pāla period. The earliest known image dates from the 7th Century and is found at the cave site of Ellora. Mostly scholars have done the classification of the artistic representations of *Prajñāpāramitā* according to the number of arms which the deity possesses. For the purposes of identification mainly three kinds of sources of information have been used: 1. Inscriptions on the images themselves. 2. The literary descriptions of the deities in the *Sādhanmālā* (late eleventh or early twelfth century). 3. The context in which the images are found. But there are many problems with the use of all of these sources. For ex. Inscribed images are comparatively rare. Many of the works of art which can be studied in museums, etc., have been removed from their original context. And the *sādhanas* which have come down to us are not by any means complete, nor do we really know very much about their affiliation to the various schools of Tantric initiates.

Attributes and Gestures

List of attributes from the *Sādhanmālā*, as well as from the visual depiction: the *lotus*, the *book*, which is *Prajñāpāramitā* and the *rosary*. The *rosary* has a threefold use in connection with the *Prajñāpāramitā sūtra*. 1) In meditation a rosary would ensure that none of the repetitions is omitted. 2) The *sūtra* contains a chapter on "dharani-doors" in which, forty-two letters of a mystical alphabet—the *Arapacana*—sum up the doctrine in all its aspects; e.g., the letter *B* is the door to the insight that the Bonds have departed from all the dharmas. 3. Later on, from ca A.D. 400 onwards, the teaching was summed up in a number of short mantras, which had to be repeated as often as possible. A rosary was used to count the number of repetitions. The *sword*, is said to cut through the darkness of ignorance. The *vajra* is a well known symbol of the emptiness which constitutes the core of the doctrine of perfect wisdom. The *begging bowl*, finally, reminds us that renunciation of all possessions is held to be a necessary prerequisite to full understanding.¹⁷

Gestures:¹⁸

- 1) The *Dharmacakra mudrā* is an essential mark of identification of *Prajñāpāramitā*. This *mudrā* of teaching is usually interpreted as a 'turning the wheel of the law'.
- 2) The *Vitarka mudrā*: the *mudrā* of argument—the hand is raised and the ring finger touches the tip of the thumb.¹⁹

¹⁷Edward Conze, *Thirty years of Buddhist studies: selected essays*, 1968, p. 245.

¹⁸Pushpa Niyogi, *Buddhist Deities*, p. 114.

¹⁹Edward Conze, *Ibid.*, p. 244.

- 3) Gesture which re- assures *Abhaya*— the arm is raised and the palm turned outward. This gesture symbolizes two aspects of *Prajñāpāramitā*: She is the supreme source of protection. At the same time, the absence of all fear is very often stated to be the sign that perfect wisdom has been understood.²⁰

Two Armed

The *book* and *lotus* are the decisive attributes of this form. The figure is either sitting or standing. One of the earliest literary descriptions of a *Prajñāpāramitā* image is found in a commentary to the *Prajñāpāramitā - sutra of a benevolent king*. She is said to sit cross-legged on a white lotus. The body is golden yellow, grave and majestic, with a precious necklace and a crown from which silken bands hang down on both sides. Her left hand, near her heart, carries the book. Her right hand, near her breasts, makes the gesture of argumentation. A statue in the Lama Temple in Peking is the one surviving work of art which corresponds to this description.

The *Sādhanamālā* (before CE 1100) has nine *Sādhanas* which describe the procedure of her worship. Out of these nine, eight *sadhanas* (151-155, 157-159) gives the description of the two-armed *Prajñāpāramitā*. Two armed *Prajñāpāramitā* is mainly found in two colours: white (*śukla* or *sita*) and yellow or golden (*pīta*, *kanaka* or *suvarṇa*).²¹ Apart from these two colours, the description of blue (*nīla*) colour has also been found.

A very unique description of *Prajñāpāramitā* is found in *Ekallavīra- Caṇḍa- Mahāroṣaṇa Tantra*. It describes the goddess as:

The goddess sits in the *sattvaparyāṅkāśana*, and who is sixteen years in age. She is blue in colour, full of good fortune, and is stamped with (the figure of Akṣobhya). Her right and left hands hold respectively a red and a blue lotus on each of which rests a book on *Kāmasāstra*. She has youthful and elevated breasts, large eyes, and pleasant speech.²²

As we have already seen that Goddess *Prajñāpāramitā* is almost invariably associated with a *Prajñāpustak* or a *Prajñāpāramitāpustak*, but in this description the replacement of the *Prajñāpustak* by the *Kāmasāstra*, is no doubt a very interesting replacement. If we look closely, we can see that the change in the book actually changes the very concept of the goddess. As D. C. Bhattacharyya writes, this change of the book, actually transforms her character, from the philosophical, or rather the metaphysical, domain to the realm of *Kāma* (Desire or worldliness), a realm around which tāntric mysticism seems to have flourished.²³

²⁰*Ibid.*

²¹Edward, Conze, *Ibid.*, pp. 246-248.

²²Thomas Eugene Donaldson as quoted in Edward, Conze, *Ibid.*, p. 278.

²³Dipak Chandra Bhattacharyya, *Tantric Buddhist iconographic sources*. Munshiram Manoharlal, 1974, p. 44.

Four Armed

Description of four armed *Prajñāpāramitā* in the texts, only mentions two colours: white and yellow. With her principal set of hands, she shows *dharmacakra- mudrā* while her other right and left hands hold respectively a rosary and the book. This form is apparently not found amongst the images which have survived.

Six Armed

A *six-armed* form is preserved only in the *Shingon* sect in Japan. It came to Japan, of course, from China, and to China from India through *Śubhākarasiṃha*, a monk from *Nālandā*, who arrived in 716 at *Ch'ang-an*, and translated the *Mahāvairocana- sūtra* in 724. The description of a magical circle of outstanding importance, the *garbha-dhātu-mandala*, has been found from this text. In this magical circle, *Prajñāpāramitā* sits in the centre of the "Light-bearing assembly". Her six hands are said to represent the six perfections (*pāramitā*).²⁴

Apart from these two, four and six armed representations, a few more representation have also been found from various places.

The Context

Mostly, *Prajñāpāramitā* forms either a part of 1). A *trinity*, or other numerical series, or 2) of *mandalas*.

1. In *Nepal* we frequently find the trinity Dharma, Buddha and Sangha. The Dharma is there represented by the normal four-armed *Prajñāpāramitā* (2A), the Sangha by a four-armed male Bodhisattva, Avalokiteśvara, with two arms held in front of the chest, while the other two hold, like the *Prajñāpāramitā*, a rosary, and lotus or book, respectively. In the earlier periods the "three jewels" were represented by aniconic symbols, such as wheels, tridents, etc. In the later Mahayana, the *Prajñāpāramitā* came to be considered as the quintessence of the doctrine (*dharmā*), and the compassionate activity of Avalokiteśvara as the model for the duties of the monastic community (*saṃgha*).²⁵ The covers of *Prajñāpāramitā* manuscripts usually show a *Prajñāpāramitā* in the centre, accompanied by various attendants.

Maṇḍala

In a few *maṇḍalas* (magical circles) the *Prajñāpāramitā* is the central figure. Three texts describing such a *maṇḍala* are preserved, one in Chinese, and two in Tibetan. In a ritual text, translated by Amoghavajra (T 1151), the

²⁴Edward Conze, *30 years of Buddhist studies*, p. 249.

²⁵Edward Conze, *30 years of Buddhist Studies*, p. 256.

Prajñāpāramitā is represented as a Bodhisattva, encircled by the ten pāramitā, and surrounded by sixteen deities. In a few cases Prajñāpāramitā occurs as a subordinate figure. The *Mañjusrī-mūla-kalpa* describes two such maṇḍalas, one of them being a very elaborate one of Śākyamunī in which the Prajñāpāramitā figures twice.²⁶

Conclusion

In the earlier category, while *Prajñāpāramitā* was a concept, a philosophy through which ‘spiritual elites’²⁷ were supposed to spend their lives, in the later category of text, *Prajñāpāramitā*, from being an idea, becomes a goddess. She is a goddess who was there for everybody, and the change in the audience might explain the change in the nature of the idea *Prajñāpāramitā*. Earlier, it was for monks or other such people, who are not supposed to have much of materialistic desires, later, it came to cater the needs of common people and hence now it was addressing day to day issues like success in work, success over enemy etc. It was this context in which *Prajñāpāramitā* lost its philosophical content and came to be represented in a form in which anybody could approach it and worship it, that is in the form of a deity. After saying this, the question which remains in front of us, with which I also started this chapter, is in a society which traditionally has always associated women with nature and body; while men are the ones who have been associated with the mind; how did the icon of *Prajñāpāramitā* took a feminine form? The same question can be posed another ancient development i.e. the development of the idea of *Dasa Mahāvidhyā* and other such cults of goddesses which are associated not with child birth; with which most of the older goddesses cult have been associated; but with the matters of mind and enlightenment? Was the development of all these cults in the Indian subcontinent in the middle of the first millennium CE a mutual development?

As we can understand by now, there can not be one particular answer to this question. It is not possible that any one specific reason could have brought such huge change in the perception of gender and gender roles. A change as huge as this one, which led to the role reversal of genders, has to be a confluence of many perspectives. One such perspective is presented by the linguistic side of this whole phenomenon. If we go into the details of the gender of the term *Prajñāpāramitā* itself, we can find one reason for *Prajñāpāramitā* getting female identity in the iconic form. *Prajñāpāramitā* is a Saṃskṛit term, which has the ending of the sound ā, which makes it an “ākārāṇṭ” term. In the grammar of Saṃskṛit language, any term which ends with the sound ā is called “ākārāṇṭ”. These terms in Saṃskṛit have a

²⁶*Ibid.*, p. 257.

²⁷I am using the term ‘spiritual elites’ in the sense of people, who had renounced the world and had devoted their whole lives for religious works such as monks and nuns in Buddhist and Jaina traditions. Also the group which, according to the social hierarchies had more ‘right’ to get indulged in the religious and spiritual activities such as Brahmans in Brahmanical religion.

feminine gender. There is this possibility that the gender of the term itself might have also contributed in deciding the gender of the idea of *Prajñāpāramitā*.

Another dimension in this development could have been the cultural context of development of many more goddess cults around this time, in other Indic traditions as well; which might have led to the development of goddess cults within Buddhism also as a result of cultural exchange between all of these traditions. The other Tantras, which were in the process of development during this time period, were Śiv and Śakti tantra. One of which was totally devoted to the feminine aspect of the divine.

Few scholars give the credit of the invention of the mother of Buddha aspect of the *Prajñāpāramitā* cult and for the feminine representation of *Prajñāpāramitā* to the place of its origin. It has been argued that if we accept the theory of south Indian origin of *Prajñāpāramitā*, whose people were descendants of the ancient matrifocal Dravidian people; the cult of Buddha's mother would represent an irruption into Buddhism of the devotion to the Mother-Goddess current in the more matriarchal Dravidian society in which it originated.²⁸

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²⁸Edward Conze, *30 years of Buddhist Studies*, p. 125.