

Tibetan Buddhism

A Glimpse, through Syamatara

By Abha Dayal Kaul

Think of Tibet, and Buddha images spring to mind. Delve further into the world of Tibetan Buddhism and scores of celestial beings, from serene *bodhisattvas* (beings of wisdom) to menacing *lokapalas* (world guardians) greet the eye. Hindu gods and goddesses also abound in Buddhist narratives, emphasising the common Indian tradition of both major religions and philosophies. As Buddhist deities go, second in importance to the Buddha is the beloved goddess Tara, whose name in Sanskrit means 'star' and 'one who saves'.

The divine Syamatara at the Asian Civilisations Museum is one such 'star', the prefix indicating her dark complexion. *Syama* or *shyama* (pronounced 'sh(y)aam' with a slight 'y' sound) signifies evening or dark, referring to Tara's alluring dusky looks. Strolling through ACM's Buddhist section in its South Asia Gallery, we are overwhelmed by the imposing Kushana Buddha, riveted by the attractive Akshobya Buddha and bowled over by the bronze Sena Lokeshvara; one may possibly overlook the beguiling Syamatara just ahead.

This Indian Pala beauty is an important female icon; she highlights the development and spread of Buddhism to neighbouring regions, notably Tibet, from the same area where the historical Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama, was born and lived his 80 mortal years on earth. As often depicted, this exquisitely bejewelled Syamatara is seated in *lalitasana* ("relaxed pose"), her right hand open in *varada mudra* or boon-bestowing gesture, and her left hand holding a long-stemmed lotus, tantalising viewers with promises of spiritual blossoming from the muddy waters of a mundane worldly existence. A thousand years old, this expressive piece seems as crisply carved as ever, masterfully proportioned and intricately decorated even by today's exacting standards of supreme feminine beauty. Tara on her lotus throne woos us with her peaceful countenance, meditative smile and *yogic* wisdom.

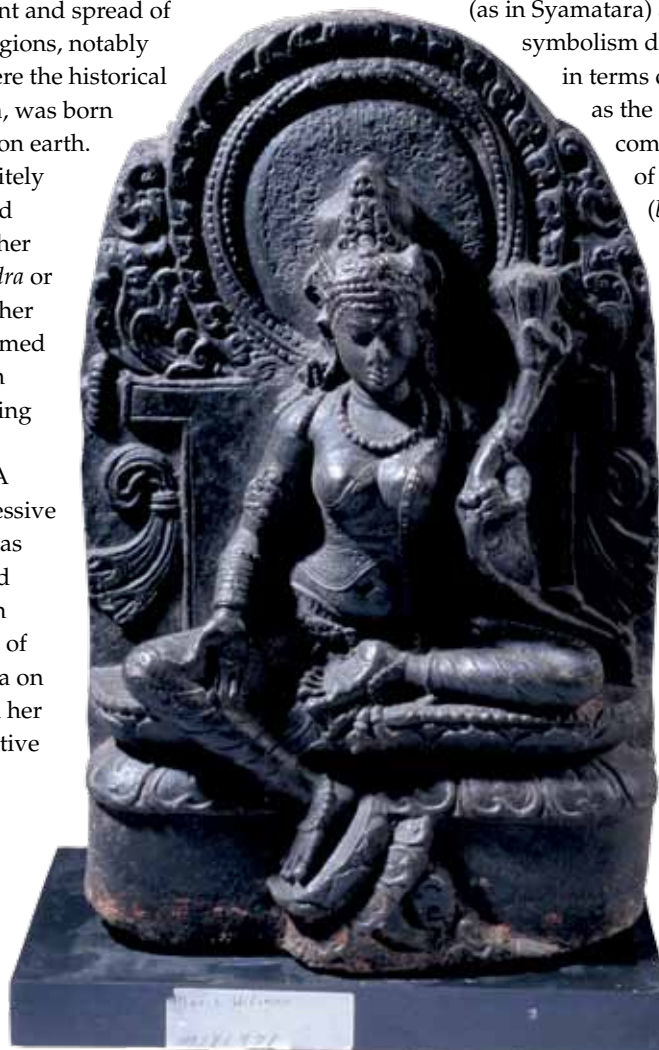
Superb stone sculptures in black basalt or dark schist rock in similar north-eastern style emerged under the active patronage of Pala and Sena Dynasty rulers (from 10th to 13th C. CE), followers of both Hinduism

and Buddhism. Highly elaborate and ornamental images of a range of deities, like our Syamatara, were revered by Hindus and Buddhists alike. At that stage, in the land native to Gautama Buddha, Indian Buddhism was infused by Tantrism, a belief system with a focus on the magical and mystical. This rich mix had travelled north with Indian teachers from the 8th century onwards, over the Himalayas to Tibet, to mingle with indigenous Bon beliefs and become established as Tibetan, Vajrayana or quite simply, Himalayan Buddhism.

Like Mahayana, Vajrayana Buddhists believed that *bodhisattvas* had consorts or wives, called *Taras* – representations of their active female energy, who were also prayed to. For the masses, this was the path of devotional Buddhism, with hosts of deities interceding to grant salvation to living creatures, especially via the compassionate, gentle and merciful Tara.

Tibetan *thangkas* or paintings and bronze sculptures often depict multiple versions of her – most popularly the Green (as in Syamatara) and White Taras. Sometimes their symbolism differs; otherwise, they vary only in terms of colour. They are both regarded as the mother of all Buddhas and the companion, counterpart or emanation of Avalokiteshwara or Chenrezig (*bodhisattva* of compassion). Devotees pray to Tara to bless them with a long life, free of all dangers. The goddess as guide and protector, offering ultimate knowledge and bringing about salvation, is worshipped as a universal mother. A meditation deity, as represented in the spectacular, ancient, western Indian rock-cut caves of Ajanta and Ellora, relied upon by the faithful to develop inner qualities and understand the teachings of *dharma* (universal law). Syamatara deserves our *dhyana* or attention.

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Syamatara; photo courtesy of ACM