

THE SWEETENING OF DEATH

BAMAKHEPA'S VISUALIZATION OF TARA

AT BENGAL'S TARAPITH TEMPLE

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ABSTRACT – Tarapith in West Bengal is regarded as one of the most powerful holy places in India. This paper explores the ways in which the many facets of death have been articulated and conceptualized in Tantric ritual through an analysis of its local goddess, Tara. In particular it will examine the relationship between this deity and the site's most famous Tantric practitioner, Bamakhepa (1837-1911). This will reveal a major development in late nineteenth-century understandings of Tara, as he fundamentally 'sweetened' this once terrifying goddess through his interactions with and visualizations of her. Her reimagined role as a fierce mother would appeal to the Bengali nationalists who hailed India as Bharat Mata (Mother India) and, as her sons, were willing to sacrifice their lives to obtain her freedom from British colonial rule.

INTRODUCTION

A plaque inside Tarapith temple (Fig. 1) explains that it was constructed by businessman Jagannatha Ray and completed by 1818. The original, however, was much older – its foundations are believed to date back to the ninth century. Despite its status, there has not yet been an adequately comprehensive study of Tarapith apart from informative introductions by Gangopadhyay, Morinis, and Banerjee.¹ Its fame today can be largely credited to the charisma and popularity of Bamakhepa (1837-1911), a Tantric practitioner or *sadhaka* who became a *pujari* or priest there during the late nineteenth century and gave the site its spiritually

1 Bipula Kumara Gangopadhyay, *Mahapith Tarapith* (Kolkata: Jaytara Publishers, 2010); Alan Morinis, *Pilgrimage in the Hindu Tradition: a Case Study of West Bengal* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984); Sumanta Banerjee, *Logic in a Popular Form: Essays on Popular Religion in Bengal* (London: Seagull, 2010).

2 According to the temple's *pujaris*, the *murti* dates to the early nineteenth century.

3 Surprisingly little has been written about Bamakhepa, despite his major role in modern Bengali history. Some of the more important events of his life are discussed by Morinis

(*Pilgrimage in the Hindu Tradition*), Banerjee (*Logic in a Popular Form*), Gangopadhyay (*Mahapith Tarapith*), and by

Malcolm McLean, "Eating Corpses and Raising the

Dead: the Tantric Madness of Bamakhepa," in *In the Flesh: Eros, Secrecy and Power in the Vernacular Tantric Traditions of India*, ed. Hugh Urban et al.

(Albany: University of New York Press, forthcoming), as well as by June McDaniel, *The Madness of the Saints: Ecstatic Religion in Bengal* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989). These details are gathered from oral sources compiled by Bengali biographers including Sushil

Kumar Bandopadhyaya, Tarapith Bhairava (Calcutta, 1376 B.S.),

Gangescandra Cakravarti,

Banglar Sadhaka (Calcutta: Nabendu Cakravarti, 1387 B.S.)

and S. K. Banerjee, *Sri Sri Bama Ksepa* (Calcutta: Sri Byomkesh Bysack, 1971).

powerful reputation. Biographers of Bamakhepa stress his intimate relationship with the temple's resident deity: the inner sanctum enshrines a three foot tall metal *murti* or divinely embodied icon of Tara, a fierce goddess closely associated with mortality and destruction (Figs 2 and 3).² However, scholars have largely overlooked the complexity of this relationship, and its accompanying Tantric rituals.³ Bamakhepa's esoteric practices included meditation on corpses and skulls in cremation grounds, symbols of mortality which revealingly accompany images of Tara. Such rituals were deliberately shrouded in secrecy and were often misunderstood by Orientalist scholars and colonial missionaries. One late nineteenth-century writer commented:



Fig. 1
Tarapith temple
(Imma Ramos)
2012

[Tantric] worship assumes wild, extravagant forms, generally obscene, sometimes bloody. It is saddening to think that such abominations are committed; it is still more saddening that they are performed as part of divine worship. Conscience, however, is so far alive that these detestable rites are practised only in secret.⁴

This article will demonstrate that an examination of the indigenous reception of the iconography of Tara in late nineteenth-century Bengal reveals and illuminates the 'secret', cryptic meanings behind these rituals which are so closely tied to emancipatory death. Focusing on this tumultuous period of colonial rule in

⁴ John Murray Mitchell and William Muir, *Two Old Faiths* (Delhi: Asian Educational Service, 1996 [1891]), 53.



Fig. 2 and 3
Murti of Tara (and detail) in the inner sanctum
 of Tarapith temple
 (Imma Ramos)
 2012

5 Particularly penetrative definitions of Tantra, a concept which is famously difficult to define or categorize, have been suggested by Hugh Urban in *Tantra: Sex, Secrecy, Politics, and Power in the Study of Religion* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003) and by David White in *Tantra in Practice* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000). *Hindu Tantrism* by Sanjukta Gupta, Dirk Jan Hoens and Teun Goudriaan (Leiden: Brill, 1979) also provides an excellent introduction to the subject.

6 Contrary to popular belief in the West which sees Tantra as mainly concerned with sexuality, the sublimation of material reality through a confrontation with death is one of the most important goals. Hugh Urban offers an insightful look at the way Tantra was 'deodorized' and distorted in the West during the twentieth century in *Tantra: Sex, Secrecy, Politics, and Power*.

7 McDaniel, *Madness of the Saints*, 121.

8 Gangopadhyay, *Mahapith Tarapith*, 110.

9 Ibid. 281. In her benevolent manifestation, Tara is also a Buddhist goddess and is regarded as a Tibetan national deity. She is generally understood

Bengal, the centre of British power in India, will also uncover the nationalistic sentiments which the British-educated Bengali middle classes (*bhadralok*) would attach nostalgically to indigenous practices, including Tantra, guru, and image worship. Bamakhepa related to Tara as an adoring son might to a mother, subsequently 'sweetening' and popularizing the fierce aspect of her character, which appealed to a widespread desire to promote India as Mother (*Bharat Mata*) in response to British rule.

UNDERSTANDING TARA

Tarapith is a centre of Tantra, a body of beliefs and practices within Hinduism that aims to sublimate material reality.⁵ This includes an affirmation of and confrontation with death itself, since material reality is characterized by transience and decay.⁶ All phenomena are considered to be the concrete manifestation of divine feminine energy, which *sadhakas* seek to ritually channel through various practices or *sadhanas*, including the invocation of deities such as Tara through rituals of visualization. Through this unity with the divine they strive to attain *moksha* (liberation). In Tantric terms, this liberating union represents the 'ecstasy of death' of the self or the 'I.' As June McDaniel states, "there seem to be two forms [of ecstasy...] One is the realization of radical detachment from the world [...] The other form is the realization of total dependence on the Mother."⁷ When this union is achieved all desire vanishes and the cycle of endless rebirths (according to the dominant Hindu belief in reincarnation) comes to an end. As the *Gupta-Chinachara Tantra* explains: "Death in Tarapith immediately grants *moksha*. Even gods wish to die in Tarapith. Thus, go to Tara [...] with deep devotion and respect."⁸

Tara is often referred to as the cheater of death; since Yama, the god of death, is believed to preside over the gates of mortality in the south, the Tara *murti* deliberately faces north, protecting her devotees from demise and granting the blessing of a long life.⁹ Tara's iconography exhibits her paradoxical nature, however, and highlights the notion that she is not only the protectress against death, but is

simultaneously death itself, just as a tenth-century Tantric text reveals that Tara is both “frightening and removes fear.”¹⁰ The *murti* is adorned with a silver necklace of human heads. Her unbound, wild hair suggests dissolution and chaos, in contrast with the hair of other goddesses which is always braided, symbolic of cosmic order.¹¹ Her mouth is smeared with red *sindoor* or vermilion, resembling blood. In the tenth-century *Mundamala-tantra* she is called ‘She Who is Smeared with Blood’ and ‘She Who Enjoys Blood Sacrifice’.¹² To meditate on Tara is thus to meditate on death itself. Through this esoteric ritual the *sadhaka* directly confronts his fear of impermanence, and thus overcomes it. It also motivates the *sadhaka* to seek a state of consciousness that is beyond life and death, and beyond duality itself. Tara’s macabre iconography reveals a fundamental truth behind Tantric ritual: the universal and inclusive nature of death breaks down conventional social differences between practitioners, a sentiment that would acquire political relevance during the colonial period when Bengali writers stressed the need to unite a country fragmented by caste division.¹³ According to a Tantric practitioner who was a contemporary of Bamakhepa, “[i]n Tantrik philosophy, there is no difference between castes, communities, religions, etc. [...] In this sense, [Tantra] is a protest against the Vedic and Brahmanical religion.”¹⁴

Late nineteenth-century lithographs of Tara which were produced in nearby Calcutta and subsequently circulated around Bengal and the rest of India (Figs 4 and 5) provide a more complete iconography of the goddess, as so much of the *murti* is obscured beneath marigold garlands and the sari she is wearing.¹⁵ The blue lotus she holds in one of her right hands represents her creative aspect, while the left hands, holding a bloodied sword and a knife, represent her destructive aspect.¹⁶ She thus embodies the inherent rhythm of the cosmos, which is created, then destroyed, only to be recreated, according to the Hindu concept of time as cyclical. *Sadhakas* approach her to gain access to this immeasurable power. The origin of Tara’s iconography lies in the *dhyanas* or icon descriptions which define her physical form in detail for the purpose of visualization rituals. They stress her fierce, often horrifying appearance, inviting submissive surrender by the devotee.

to have become prominent in Indian Buddhism first, and then gained greater importance when introduced into Tibet. Her place in the Hindu pantheon is less central and she is usually associated with a group of nine other Tantric goddesses, the *Mahavidyas*. For references on the history of Tara in Tibet, see Stephan Beyer, *The Cult of Tara: Magic and Ritual in Tibet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), and for more on her role as a *Mahavidya*, David Kinsley, *Tantric Visions of the Divine Feminine: the Ten Mahavidyas* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

10 Rajesh Diksit, *Tara Tantra Shastra* (Agra: Sumit Prakashan, 1987), 116.

11 Kinsley, *Tantric Visions*, 84.

12 Diksit, *Tara Tantra Shastra*, 117.

13 Swarupa Gupta, *Notions of Nationhood in Bengal: Perspectives on Samaj, c.1867-1905* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 311.

14 Banerjee, *Logic in a Popular Form*, 166.

15 For more information on the studio behind these prints, Calcutta Art Studio, see Christopher Pinney, *Photos of the Gods: the Printed Image and Political Struggle in India* (London: Reaktion, 2004) and Partha Mitter, "Mechanical Reproduction and the World of the Colonial Artist," *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 36 (2002): 1-32.

The *dhyana* mantra from the sixteenth-century *Mantra-mahodadhi* states that: In her left hands she holds a knife and a skull and, in her right hands, a sword and

in her left hands she holds a knife and a skull and, in her right hands, a sword and a blue lotus. Her complexion is blue, and she is bedecked with ornaments [...] Her tongue is always moving, and her teeth and mouth appear terrible. She is wearing a tiger skin around her waist, and her forehead is decorated with ornaments of white bone [...] She is seated on the heart of a corpse, and her breasts are hard. Thus should one meditate on Tara.¹⁷



Fig. 4
Tara
Lithograph
c. 1885
Calcutta Art Studio, Calcutta
Collection of Shubhojit Biswas



Fig. 5
Tara
Lithograph
c. 1885
Calcutta Art Studio, Calcutta
Collection of Shubhojit Biswas

Dhyanas were written for the mental contemplation of gods by *sadhakas* to evoke and invoke their presence by filling his or her mind with this description of the goddess while ritually approaching her. The aim of Tantric practice is total union or identification with the deity, or to be granted a vision of the deity, and the *dhyanas* are meant to help achieve this. In the case of Tarapith, Bamakhepa famously achieved both, and his vision granted him *moksha*. The combination of written *dhyanas* and the *murti* of Tara shaped his vision. Such rituals of visualization are insufficiently treated in the sphere of visual studies, considering they form such an important part of Hindu iconography and image devotion.¹⁸ Most significant for this case study is the way in which Bamakhepa's relationship with and visualization of Tara shaped his followers' attitudes towards her. For example, his union with Tara led to his consuming offerings left for Tara's *murti* himself, before passing them on to her. This was a subversive act that not only articulated the intimacy of their relationship as Divine Mother and adoring son, but also represented the domestication of this fierce goddess.

UNDERSTANDING TANTRIC RITUAL THROUGH TARA

In order to fully identify with Tara, Bamakhepa, like other *sadhakas*, partook in certain Tantric rituals associated with her. The iconography of Tara informs and reinforces Tantric ritual focusing on death, i.e. the setting, which is the cremation ground, and the ritual instruments, which include skulls, weapons and corpses. *Sadhakas* at Tarapith frequently seat themselves on or near five human and animal skulls in the cremation ground in order to access the power of the goddess (*pancha-mundi-asana*). Meditation while seated on a recently-dead human corpse is also practised (*shava-sadhana*). These *sadhanas* are considered ego-transcending spiritual practices. In depictions of the goddess, cremation fires are visible in the background, which represent another aspect of her character: she is recognized as the cremation fire itself, enabling the cathartic transition from life to death and from one mode of being to another.¹⁹ According to Hindu belief, cremation is the final rite in the course of an individual's existence and

16 Symbolic interpretations of her iconography here are based on interviews with informants I carried out in and around Tarapith. Harish Chandra Das, *The Iconography of Sakta Divinities* (Delhi: Pratibha Prakashan, 1997) is also a helpful source for understanding the iconographical implications of a multitude of Hindu goddesses.

17 Mahidhara, *Mantra Mahodahih*, Vol. 1, ed. and transl. Ramkumar Rai (Varanasi: Prachya Prakashan, 1992), 179-180. Note that Tara's iconography is not always consistent and there are occasional variations. In contrast to this *dhyana*, for example, the Calcutta Art Studio prints represent her with knife and sword in her left hands, and lotus and skull in her right hands.

18 This point is made by Corinna Wessels-Mevissen in a special issue of *Marg* (December 2011) entitled "Visuality of Indian Rituals" in which the relationship between image and ritual as a subject of visual anthropology was introduced from a variety of perspectives. Wessels-Mevissen refers to such rituals as 'mind objects,' suggesting their importance as iconographical 'artefacts' in their own right.

19 Kinsley, *Tantric Visions*, 103.

it ceremoniously affirms non-attachment to the body. As a threshold where transition from life to death regularly takes place, it is a numinous space offering unparalleled access to the spirit world and the beings that inhabit it. *Sadhakas* often attempt to make contact with this spirit world in order to gain supernatural powers, particularly through the practice of *shava-sadhana*. Initiation into Tantric rites is carried out in this setting, involving the symbolic death and rebirth of the practitioner.²⁰ Appropriately then, the serpents adorning Tara are symbols of transformation, able to shed their skins and become new beings. The cremation ground also represents a ‘polluted’ space. Bamakhepa is said to have practised his meditation on the skulls of five unclean beings: a human that had died a violent, unnatural death, as well as the skulls of a monkey, snake, mongoose, and vulture.²¹ This relates to the Tantric engagement with the impure which, for a *sadhaka*, can be used as an instrument of auspicious power.²² The affirmation that all is sacred in the material world, including those forbidden things rejected by society, ultimately liberates the *sadhaka* from the material world. Since death represents an aspect of the polluted, Tara herself is an emblem of the forbidden.²³ During the ritual, the *sadhaka* boldly confronts Tara and thereby assimilates and overcomes her, transforming her into a vehicle of salvation.

20 Ibid. 235.

21 This story was told to me by several informants at Tarapith (August 2012). See also McDaniel, *Madness of the Saints*, 127.

22 See Urban, *Tantra: Sex, Secrecy, Politics, and Power*, for more on the relationship between ‘impurity’ and the ‘auspicious’ in Tantric philosophy and the role of transgression in the attainment of power.

23 Kinsley, *Tantric Visions*, 76.

24 Interviews with informants (August 2012). Also see Kinsley, *Tantric Visions*, 108.

25 Diksit, *Tara Tantra Shastra*, 682-683.

26 Interview with an informant at Tarapith (August 2012).

Iconographically, Tara’s bloodied sword of knowledge symbolizes the death of the ego, represented by her garland of severed heads, through the transformative destruction of ignorance.²⁴ Decapitation during animal sacrifice was and still is common in the Tantric tradition and at Tarapith it is a daily occurrence. The *khadga* ritual decapitation sword used at the temple has a curved blade commonly seen in images of the goddess. The *Tantrasara* stresses the importance of decapitation as the ideal form of sacrifice.²⁵ Several goats are beheaded daily to satisfy Tara’s hunger. Goats are considered symbols of greed, passion and lust so their sacrifice is a symbolic act. The head can be interpreted as a repository of the ego, which is then offered to the goddess to appease her or maintain favour.²⁶ As an enlightened ascetic or *sannyasi*, Bamakhepa had conquered the eight bondages of the ego or *ashta-pasha* and six cardinal vices or *shahra-ripu* (including hate,

shame, fear, reproach, sexual desire, anger, greed, vanity, and envy), his own symbolic sacrificial ‘decapitation’ for Tara.

Tara’s sacrificial heads also assumed an alternative meaning during the colonial period. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, images of ferocious Tantric goddesses such as Tara and Kali were very popular in Bengal, including the widespread prints circulated by the Calcutta Art Studio, which had an explicitly anti-British nationalist agenda. Christopher Pinney notes that one colonial official, Herbert Hope Risley, anxiously described a chromolithographic image of Kali as garlanded with what appeared to be European heads, a prediction of the fall of the British Empire (Fig. 6).²⁷ These goddess images were appropriated by the radical nationalist movement as icons of revolutionary awakening, and envisioned as the supreme images of Mother India (*Bharat Mata*) rising up against her colonizers. As a writer for the Bengali newspaper, *Jugantar*, stated in 1905:

The Mother asks for sacrificial offerings. What does the Mother want? [...] The fowl or a sheep or a buffalo? No. She wants many white Asuras [demons]. The Mother is thirsting after the blood of the Feringhees [foreigners] [...] With the close of a long era, the Feringhee Empire draws to an end, for behold! Kali rises in the East.²⁸

The British were not the only ones to be sacrificed – the envisioning of the nation as a suffering mother was popularized through Bankim Chandra Chatterjee’s 1882 novel *Anandamath*, which called upon the nation’s citizens to protect and restore her, and, if necessary, sacrifice their lives for her.²⁹

Tara is also shown standing upon the supine, corpse-like god, Shiva, who is her husband (Figs 4 and 5). According to Tantric ideology, reality is the result and expression of the interaction of male and female, spirit and matter, and Shiva and Shakti.³⁰ In many Tantric texts, the supine figure lying below Tara’s feet is also

27 Pinney, *Photos of the Gods*, 120.

28 Valentine Chirol, *Indian Unrest* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1910), 346.

29 See Julius Lipner, *Anandamath, or, The Sacred Brotherhood by Bankimchandra Chatterji* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

30 As Shakti, or divine feminine energy, Tara is considered superior to Shiva and Tantric texts assert that without her Shiva could not survive and the universe would perish.

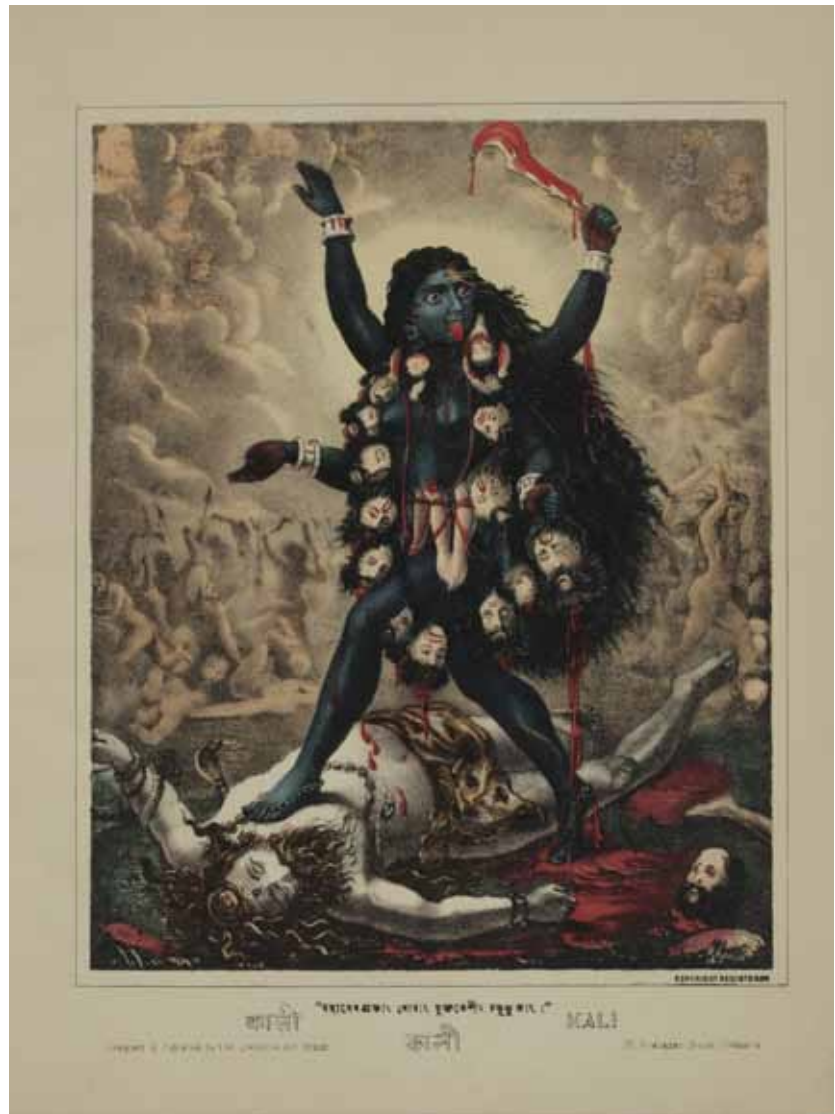


Fig. 6

Kali

Lithograph

c.1883

Calcutta Art Studio, Calcutta

Collection of Mark Baron and Elise Boisante

described as a corpse.³¹ Fresh corpses are a powerful means of communicating with the goddess and with the spirit world through *shava-sadhana*, during which the *sadhaka* sits on the corpse and meditates on Tara. The *Mantra-mahodadhi* states that such rituals will make a *sadhaka* “fearless and master of various *siddhis* [magical powers].”³² Troubled spirits who have not yet reincarnated and linger on in the body are the most effective.³³ Once pacified they can grant shamanic powers, including miraculous healing abilities, which Bamakhepa himself attained.³⁴ Throughout the nineteenth century, diseases such as cholera and malaria ravaged the Bengali countryside. Fear of disease and death, together with an overwhelming anxiety about the future, made Bamakhepa’s *siddhis* a popular attraction across the region.³⁵

Corpses and skulls are not only instruments for meditating on mortality, then, but also instruments of power. *Shava-sadhana* deliberately invites extreme peril, including ghosts and demonic forces, in order to attract the attention of the goddess.³⁶ Visionary experience is described most often in Tantric texts as occurring in the cremation ground at night, not only because it is Tara’s residence, but also because the proximity to death and primal fear encourage her maternal instincts to protect her devotee. Nigamananda Sarasvati, who took initiation from Bamakhepa, described this experience vividly.³⁷ Bamakhepa left him in the cremation ground at midnight with three burned bodies, and instructed him to meditate on Tara. Demonic apparitions haunted and distracted him. Bamakhepa would cry “Tara! Tara!” every time Sarasvati’s focus wavered. Eventually he felt his ego dissolve in a kind of ‘ecstasy of death,’ achieving divine union with Tara through a vision of her as a beautiful woman. He requested a vision of her cosmic form, and she became vast, with thousands of heads, tongues, bodies, weapons, grinding teeth, and eyes emitting fire. Tara’s transition from beautiful woman to cosmic form in this case reflects the view that Hindu gods and goddesses can be simultaneously represented as converging into a supreme deity, as well as splintering into innumerable minor deities. This paradox results from the belief, according to Hindu mythology, that the goddess is both formless (cosmic and

31 Mahidhara, *Mantra Mahodahih*, 179-180; Diksit, *Tara Tantra Shastra*, 116.

32 Mahidhara, *Mantra Mahodahih*, 214.

33 Interview with an informant (August 2012).

34 McDaniel, *Madness of the Saints*, 133.

35 McLean, “Eating Corpses,” 16.

36 McDaniel, *Madness of the Saints*, 120.

37 Nigamananda Saraswati, *Mayer Kripa* (Halisahar, 1382 B.S.), 3-13.

unified) and form-bound (in her local, individual manifestations of Tara, Kali, etc.). Each manifestation represents a *rupa*, or appearance, of the *mula-shakti*, the original, supreme goddess.³⁸ The transition from benevolent to terrifying also reveals Tara's fundamentally ambiguous nature. For example, Bamakhepa's contemporary, the famous mystic Ramakrishna (1836-1886), once described a vision of the goddess in her capacity as creatress, sustainer, and destroyer of the universe. He saw a beautiful, heavily pregnant woman emerge from the Ganges, give birth, and begin to lovingly cradle her child. Then, suddenly assuming a terrifying form, she devoured the child and re-entered the water.³⁹

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38 Tracy Pintchman (ed.) examines this idea of the goddess as one and many, regional and universal, in *Seeking Mahadevi: Constructing the Identities of the Hindu Great Goddess* (New York: State University of New York, 2001), while John Stratton Hawley and Donna Marie Wulff (eds.) examine the concept of Devi, the great goddess, and the ways various Hindu goddesses are related to her in *Devi: Goddesses of India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).

39 Swami Nikhilananda, *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* (New York: Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center, 1952), 21.

40 Kinsley, *Tantric Visions*, 105.

41 Banerjee, *Sri Sri Bama Ksepa*, 36.

Despite Tara's strong connection with destruction, she is understood as a creative, nourishing presence as well. Tara is often represented with large breasts and a swollen belly, suggesting her maternal nature.⁴⁰ In her *Hymn of a Hundred Names* she is called *Jagaddhitri* or Mother of the World. Tara is thus the very principle of life: she takes it, but also gives it in an endless cycle of creation and destruction. It is this image of Tara as mother that Bamakhepa promoted in his own vision of the goddess. It is said that in 1863 he was granted a vision of her in her capacities as ferocious destroyer and benign creatress: dancing upon a burning corpse, he saw a 'demoness' with long teeth and fiery eyes, wearing a tiger skin and snake ornaments.⁴¹ This is popularly illustrated in contemporary comics about the life of Bamakhepa (Fig. 7). Affectionately she lifted him and took him on her lap and he lost consciousness as she took him to her breast. He has consequently become the symbol of devotion for millions of Bengali *Shaktas* or devotees of the goddess and his charismatic relationship with Tara had a profound impact on the sweetening of death at Tarapith.

The vision of Bamakhepa being taken to her breast echoes another form of Tara presented to devotees at the temple: inside the fierce *murti*, which is hollow and open at the back, is a relic which is only brought out for viewing once a day.

This is a rough, uncarved stone with no discernible features. It is now believed to represent Tara in the form of a mother, breastfeeding the god Shiva as an infant. Today it is depicted in popular prints sold to pilgrims as souvenirs (Fig. 8). Originally, however, this relic had been conceived of as the dismembered third eye of a goddess which had fallen from the heavens.⁴² It seems probable that Bamakhepa's famous vision of Tara as creatress, and his childlike devotion to her maternal aspect, helped cement the relic's identification with the former legend in popular imagination. According to myth, Shiva drank poison from the cosmic

42 According to several Puranic texts (namely the *Kalika*, *Mahabhagavata* and *Devibhagavata Puranas*), the Hindu god Shiva carried his wife, the goddess Sati, across India after her death. His grief risked the destruction of the world so Vishnu, God of Preservation, threw his discus and cut Sati's



Fig. 7
Photograph of illustration from a Bengali comic on Bamakhepa sold at Tarapith (Imma Ramos)
2012



Fig. 8
Contemporary popular print of Tara breastfeeding Shiva, considered to be the image represented on the rock inside the Tara *murti* (Imma Ramos)
2012

body into pieces; these pieces fell to earth, scattered across the Indian subcontinent, and temples were built to enshrine them. Pieces of Sati's corpse sacralised the earth. The temples became known as *Shakti Pithas*, or Seats of Power. Sati's third eye is said to have fallen and been enshrined in Tarapith. The most extensive work on the *Shakti Pithas* has been done by Dinesh Chandra Sircar in a very short but nevertheless comprehensive overview of the varying listings of *pithas* as found in a selection of Tantric texts written for the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal* (Calcutta, 1948), 1-108.

43 This story was told to me by several informants at Tarapith (August 2012), as it was to Morinis, *Pilgrimage in the Hindu Tradition*, 167.

44 Rachel McDermott, *Mother of My Heart, Daughter of My Dreams. Kali and Uma in the Devotional Poetry of Bengal* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

45 Ibid. 212.

46 As a movement it was stimulated by the court poet Jayadeva's twelfth-century *Gita Govinda*, a poetic text about the love between Krishna and his lover, the cowherdess Radha.

oceans to save the universe and Tara breastfed him to relieve his burning throat.⁴³ The 1989 Bengali film *Mahapith Tarapith* includes a scene dedicated to this story: temple priests reveal the concealed image to devotees, cutting to a re-enactment in which Tara comes to Shiva's aid. Shiva is simultaneously the goddess's son and husband precisely because her role as creatress implies that everyone is her child and devotee, including her own spouse.

According to local tradition, Bamakhepa was believed to be an incarnation of Shiva, and his relationship with Tara expressed the same dynamic tension shared by the deities. Rachel McDermott argues that Tantric goddesses such as Tara were 'domesticated' during the nineteenth century, particularly through Bengali Shakta poetry.⁴⁴ Bamakhepa was very much influenced by the early nineteenth-century Bengali poet Kamalakanta Bhattacharya (c.1769-1821) who was also a Tantric practitioner at Tarapith. Bamakhepa used to recite Kamalakanta's poems, which included verses such as: "Who else but the Mother will bear the burden of Kamalakanta? Ma! Give me shelter at Your feet; take me home."⁴⁵ Kamalakanta was a product of a poetic literary movement in Bengal that described the goddess in devotional terms, beginning with Ramprasad Sen (c.1718-1775) in the mid-eighteenth-century. Both poets were influenced by Vaishnava *bhakti* poetry, which spread throughout India from the twelfth to the eighteenth century. *Bhakti* poetry expressed the love felt by the devotee towards a personal deity, usually associated with the god Krishna. Often that love was described in terms of pangs of separation and euphoric union, and this lover-beloved relationship was in turn articulated by poets like Kamalakanta in relation to Tara.⁴⁶ It is likely that the 'softening' of the goddess was also for the benefit of Bengali religious sensitivities that stemmed from the impact of colonialism and Victorian taste. As Hugh Urban suggests, "[the] sanitization of Tantra was tied to a specific political agenda: namely, the construction of a new Indian national and cultural identity in the face of two centuries of British colonialism."⁴⁷ Bengal was the ancient homeland of Shaktism and the Tantric cult of the mother goddess remains popular today.

In order to protect – as well as promote – this cult during the late nineteenth-century, it became necessary to make Tantric deities such as Tara palatable to colonial tastes, not only amongst the British but also amongst many of the Western-educated Bengali *bhadralok*. Bamakhepa was one of those who popularized Tantra and turned Tara from a terrifying esoteric symbol into a devotional goddess (Fig. 9), making her more accessible to a larger audience. Her horrific side was softened and tamed, thereby making her easier for an ordinary devotee to relate to. In this way one could argue that Bamakhepa contributed to the sweetening of death itself by transforming Tara into a

47 Urban, *Tantra: Sex, Secrecy, Politics, and Power*, 164.



Fig. 9
 Photograph of a contemporary pilgrim souvenir of Bamakhepa and Tara from Tarapith
 (Imma Ramos)
 2012

48 Parimal Kumar Datta, *Tantra: its Relevance to Modern Times* (Calcutta: Punthi Pustak, 2009), 263.

49 Banerjee, *Logic in a Popular Form*, 181.

50 Panckori Bandyopadhyay, *Sahitya* (Calcutta, July-August 1913).

51 Tanika Sarkar, *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation: Community, Religion and Cultural Nationalism* (Indiana, 2001), 252.

52 Gupta, *Notions of Nationhood*, 78. Such a sentiment would result in the invention of a new Hindu goddess: *Bharat Mata* (Mother India). A nationalist construct, she was meant to inspire patriotic sacrifice. Sumathi Ramaswamy has studied the cultural and visual phenomenon of *Bharat Mata* in *The Goddess and the Nation: Mapping Mother India* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009); "Maps and Mother Goddesses in Modern India," *Imago Mundi* 53, (2001), 97-114, and "Visualising India's Geo-Body Globes, Maps, Bodyscapes," *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 36 (2002): 151-189.

maternal icon. Members of the Bengali elite, coming from the increasingly urbanized – and by extension rationalized – environment of Calcutta, came to pay their respects to the famous *sadhaka*, including the following Hindu reformers, driven by spiritual yearning: Debendranath Tagore (1817-1905), Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902) and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar (1820-1891).⁴⁸ On a trip to the city during the 1890s Bamakhepa was also hosted by Jatindramohan Tagore (1831-1908).⁴⁹ According to Panckori Bandyopadhyay in a 1913 article for *Sahitya*, "study of the Tantras was confined to a certain section of the educated in Bengal. Maharaja Sir Jatindra Mohan alone endeavoured to understand and appreciate men like Bama Khepa."⁵⁰

More pertinently, Bamakhepa's popularization of the Tantric goddess also appealed to a wider nationalist agenda. By the late nineteenth century the concept of Mother India had assumed an explicitly political role in Bengal. Reacting against British rule, Hindu nationalists gendered the nation in literature as well as visual culture by borrowing the mythicized concept of motherhood from the prevalence of the Hindu mother cult in Bengal. The personification of India, subjugated by foreign rulers, was a rhetorical device designed to inspire patriotism amongst the indigenous population.⁵¹ The goddess-devotee as mother-son relationship subsequently took on patriotic overtones. Bhudev Mukhopadhyay, the Bengali nationalist and writer (1827-1894) identified the country as a mother goddess, "who always provided her children with nourishment and water to drink."⁵² One of Bankim's poems, *Bande Mataram* ('Hail, Mother'), which became the main slogan of the nationalist movement, begins by describing Bengal as a mother that nurtures the population as her children. Tantric goddesses also came to be identified with the land: Kali, for example, was regarded as Bengal personified. Bamakhepa's maternal treatment of the goddess was informed, therefore, not only by the tradition of *bhakti* poetry and colonial taste but also by the nationalist movement's attempt to rally Hindu citizens together by 'maternalizing' the nation. Simultaneously, Tara, like Kali, was a martial goddess that could be used as a symbol of revolutionary violence,

as articulated by the Bengali poet Mukunda Das (1878-1934): “Mother, come with your fierce aspect/ Come with your awful spirits/ Come and dance on this vast cremation ground/ Which is *Bharat* [India].”⁵³ In this context she could thus be envisioned as both fierce warrior and enslaved victim, both aspects inspiring maternal devotion. In 1921 the colonial administrator Charles Eliot described the *murti* of Kali at Kalighat temple in Calcutta and its role as a nationalist emblem:

[She is] adorned with skulls and horrid emblems of destruction. Of her four hands two carry a sword and a severed head but the other two are extended to give blessing and protection to her wor-shippers. So great is the crowd of enthusiastic suppliants that it is often hard to approach the shrine and the nationalist party in Bengal, who clamour for parliamentary institutions, are among the goddess’s devotees.⁵⁴

Though there is no evidence that Bamakhepa was involved in revolutionary politics, one of his principal followers certainly was. After Bamakhepa’s death, the position of high priest was inherited by his disciple Tarapada Banerjee, who went on to become a Tantric saint known as Tara Khepa. Before coming to Tarapith, Tarapada had been a member of the Jugantar group of anti-British, armed revolutionaries in Bengal. According to some reports, the revolutionary came to Tarapith in order to be initiated into Tantric practices.⁵⁵ Condemned by the British, such indigenous practices could be harnessed for their nationalistic potential. The worship of the Tara *murti* was also significant: the very act of image worship assumed nationalistic importance during the colonial period. In 1882 Bankim was engaged in a debate in the pages of the English Calcutta daily, *The Statesman*, with Reverend William Hastie. Hastie claimed, like many other missionaries and colonial officials of the period, that “idolatrous worship [is] sucking the life-blood out of the very hope of their community.”⁵⁶ Bankim responded in support of image worship, stressing its importance as an intrinsic part of Hindu ritual and, by extension, Hindu identity:

53 Jayadev Goswami, *Charankavi Mukunda Das* (Calcutta, 1972), 218.

54 Charles Eliot, *Hinduism and Buddhism: An Historical Sketch* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1921), 287.

55 Banerjee, *Logic in a Popular Form*, 157.

56 William Hastie, *Hindu Idolatry and English Enlightenment: Six Letters Reprinted from The Statesman* (Calcutta: Thacker, Spink and Co., 1882), 10.

[Hastie's] arguments are simply contemptible [...] There is nothing I am more desirous to see than the most competent explanation and defence of Hinduism possible [...] nothing is a more common subject of merriment among the natives of India than the Europeans' ignorance of all that relates to India [...] The image is simply the visible and accessible medium through which I choose to send my homage to the throne of the Invisible and the Inaccessible.⁵⁷

His reply can be interpreted as a patriotic promotion of indigenous practice, in reaction to the colonial presence.

CONCLUSION

Bamakhepa's visualization of Tara at Tarapith has revealed the nuanced layers of meaning underlying Tantric ritual. Tara's role as the embodiment of death, simultaneously protecting devotees from it while urging them to confront it, became a significant source of empowerment for Bengalis struggling under the colonial regime. Tantric rites deliberately rejected Brahmanical (Hindu orthodox) rules concerning caste and dichotomies between the pure and impure, and this radical transgression through sadhana attracted great power to the practitioner. These rites also assumed revolutionary potential in their assertion of resistance and personal freedom, making Tantra a veritable counterculture. Many of the Bengali elite sought to reinforce national Hindu identity through the protection of traditional practices and valorization of Shaktism, and were nostalgically drawn to sites such as Tarapith. Bamakhepa's own reputed divine madness ('khepa' literally translates as 'mad') signified resistance against the established social and religious order, instead of the British presence. Through an analysis of the relationship between Tantric ritual and iconography in the worship of Tara, as well as the relationship between Bamakhepa and the temple's *murti*, this article has sought to reveal late nineteenth-century perceptions of the goddess as both martial and maternal.

⁵⁷ Ibid. 8, 133, 140, and 149.

In 2007 a Bengali television series about the life of Bamakhepa (Sadhok Bamakhyapa) became an instant hit and ran for 1,500 episodes, testifying to this sadhaka's lasting popularity and resonance. Tarapith's cremation ground, a site of Tantric sadhana for generations, continues to be used today. Several sadhakas dwell more or less permanently there, and wandering sadhakas often visit it for extended periods. Today the temple has become a popular centre of devotional worship rather than a site of traditional transgressive rites, which are largely practised on the margins. Pilgrims approach the Tara murti as a benign matriarch, kissing her silver feet and leaving her offerings of coconuts, white silk saris, incense sticks, bananas and, perhaps more in line with her Tantric aspect, bottles of whisky. To have darshan or 'sacred vision' of the murti is the ultimate incentive for pilgrimage, and pilgrims are referred to as 'darshaniyas', those who come to 'see.'⁵⁸ Despite this, the significance of the macabre in her iconography as well as in contemporary Tantric practice continues to rest on the relationship between mortality and power, entailing the invocation of one's greatest fear, that of death, in order to give one strength.

58 The concept of *darshan* has been discussed in detail in Diane Eck, *Darsan: Seeing the Divine Image in India* (Colombia: Anima Books, 1981) and Lawrence A. Babb, "Glancing: Visual Interaction in Hinduism," *Journal of Anthropological Research* 37 (1981): 387-401.

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