



nācayi, *Babita Gopali*

Caryā of Vajrayāna Feast: Gaṇacakra

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Abstract

Silence is the great tool of secrecy, and so is the secrecy of ignorance. In the guhyasāmjatantra text, tathāgatas go silent whenever secrecy is revealed. Silence is the mark of ignorance. Esoteric and mystical are words coined for the practice of tantric vajrāyana Buddhism but tantric gaṇacakra pūjā emphasizes to adhere to Buddha, dharma and saṅgha, a religious practice so common to every Buddhist, despite being called a highly secret ritual practiced by vajrācārya priests. Camouflaged in the garb of a prapañca caryā, caryāgīti, aṣṭakṣetrapāla, gajajina, and viṣaya are symbolic representations of vajrayāna philosophy and the practice of adherence to Buddha, dharma, and saṅgha, commonly known to one and all. A secret known to all is a secret non.

Keywords: gaṇa, cakra, sahabhojana, viṣaya, gajajina, aṣṭakṣetrapāla, dākinī, Buddha, dharma, saṅgha, prapañca

Introduction

Gaṇacakra is a secret tantric ritual feast and spiritual gathering or assembly practiced in tantric vajrayāna Buddhism by vajrācārya priests of Nepal.

When defining gaṇacakra, we encounter two words: gaṇa and cakra. Gaṇa means the gathering and cakra is defined as maṇḍala, a circumscribed circle or sphere. It has also been linked to cakra- nerve centers in the body aroused during yoga practice. A caryāgīti links guhyamaṇḍala with tatvagyānacakra, whereas merumaṇḍala is linked to hṛdayacakra.

According to Snellgrove, cakra literally means 'wheel' or 'circle'. In the literal sense of 'wheel', it is the symbol of the Buddha-family of Vairocana. Cakra also refers pre-eminently to the circle of divine forms of which the maṇḍala consists. Cakra is also used in a technical sense to refer to the 'psychic center within the yogin's body, envisaged as lotuses with radiating petals.

As was seen in ahorātrapadasādhana, the ritual begins with sindura pūjā followed by manda pūjā, āgama pūjā of maṭṭ and ādi divinities, kalaśa saṅghamata pūjā, māmaki pūjā and cakra pūjā in given sequence. With completion of gaṇacakra pūjā, we come

across the ceremonial feast of sahabhojana in which three of the caryāgīti are sung and dances executed (or performed) - aṣṭakṣetrapāla, gajajina and viṣaya. The caryāgīti derive their names through the first letter of the song. In the process of the ritual of singing, caryāgīti aṣṭakṣetrapāla represents saṅgha, gajajina Buddha or guru and caryāgīti viṣaya signifies vajrayāna dharma or religion.

Caryāgīti aṣṭakṣetrapāla is descriptive of ḍākinī. It has a reference to pañca ḍākinī, gyāna ḍākinī, ḍākinī dvīpiyinī, vajraḍākinī and betāla ḍākinī. They are described as ‘pañca mudrābharaṇa bhūṣitā’ holding khaṭvāṅga, paraśū, ankūśa daṇḍa, khaḍga, pheṭaka, vajra, ghaṇṭha with an echo of ḍamaru and ghaṇṭa. Four of the dakini are being named as sinhinī, vyāghrinī, jambuka and urokinī. They have also been called catura devī, jina janani devī and gyāna devī. He stands in āliḍha pada like a ‘bhairava cāpayiyāre kālī rātri’ in bimbu mudrā.

Caryāgīti gajajina depicts the guru as śrī sambara with his māyā in embrace - cāpayiyāle māyā. He holds in his hands kamala and kuliśa, a symbol of advaya rūpa. He also holds ḍamaru, karati, trīśūrā, khaṭvāṅga and kapāla. He has ‘pāśa bramha mūdvara vāṇa’ and wears nara śira mālā. He is four faced or of cau mukha having different colors or varṇa – nīra, harita, lohita and kanaka varṇa. He is adorned with vyāghra carmma and ṣaṭa mudrā. He reflects karuṇa and śṅgāra.

Caryāgīti viṣaya represents tutelary divinity symbolic of dharma. Some of the expressions in this caryāgīti like jvaliya caṇḍālī nābhi kamala; Suratavajra; name manjughoṣa, kālacakra hevajra samvara viśva rupam; akṣobhya dhyāna; dāyakam yoga dharma; guru vākya dṛḍha dhariyā; svapna māyā sadṛśa; Buddha dharma saṅgha saraṇā gatiyam and Buddha saraṇam are

of tremendous significance. Viṣaya is the last of the caryāgīti sung during gaṇacakra puṇjā which signifies the basic concept of vajrayāna doctrines that is compassion or karuṇā. After the ceremony followed by a feast is over, a part of the feast is kept aside and placed in a bahāla meant for all the living creatures that have missed the feast. The final goal of salvation attained through the vajrayāna religious practices arouses deep compassion for the suffering lot and this act is nothing but a compassionate gesture. This caryāgīti represents the doctrinal aspect of the vajrayāna religious practice, which should be understood as a pronouncement of yoga through different manifestations deified as deities for all the practical purposes.

David Snellgrove affirms that gaṇacakra puṇjā represents the expression of faith in the early Buddhist idea of Buddha, dharma and sangha. Guru becomes the Buddha, tutelary divinity dharma and ḍākinīs saṅgha. Guru is well described in gajajina caryāgīti, dharma in viṣaya and saṅgha in aṣṭakṣetrapāla. (Buddhist Himalaya by David Snellgrove p.226)

Cakrapūjā is a worship of four directions deified in four female goddesses: These four goddesses are locanā, tārā, pāṇḍurā or pāṇḍuravāsini and māmaki. They are also mystically referred to as ‘four goddesses of enjoyment’ (caturbhoga) in guhyasamājatantra.

Discussion

During the ritual of gaṇacakra, two sacred acts take place - sacred eating or pañcagrāsa bhojana and sacred offering or pañcaśālī.

Pañcagrāsa bhojana is the ritual of eating performed through the act of eating with finger in different combinations. The act of eating in different combination of fingers used derives a name according to the

combination of fingers used in the act of eating. If the thumb gets the number one and the subsequent fingers number up to five in sequence, the combination of the use of finger number two and five is called ‘prāṇāya’, use of finger number three and five combination derives the name ‘gyānāya’, number four and five is ‘aprāṇāya’ and finally the combination of the use of all the five fingers is known as ‘samānāya’.

Likewise, pañcaśāli consists of five ‘kumbha’ – a kind of a container filled with liquor – is prepared and worship or ‘pujā’ is performed. This worship is considered to be the first of the worship – a ‘prathama pujā’ of vajrayāna religion. A song sung during the pujā is gokudahana.

The only reference to pañcaśāli in caryāgīti is to be found in caryāgīti gokudahana.

Terminological interpretation of pañcaśāli hints at rice or sali, five in number. An attempt at interpretation of the word gokudahana, which is the only referral caryāgīti to pañcaśāli, we derive the meaning of the word as ‘heaven cry out in distress consuming or consumed by fire’: go or heaven, ku or cry out in distress and dahana or consuming by fire. The affiliation to the deity in the gīti leads to caṇḍamahāroṣaṇa, who is assigned the epithet tribhuvanavira and pañcabuddha.

Pañcabuddha is identified as pañcaskandha in the gokudahana gīti. The first of the verse narrates: heaven cries out consumed by fire (seeing) the nature of pañcagyāna which is the immortal potion (pañcāmṛtarasa) (such as) pañcaśāli is respected. These two verses, first and the fourth, clearly establish a link of pañcaśāli with pañcabuddha. Elsewhere in the gīti, two specified stages of ānanda – saha-jānanda and vira-mānanda – along with samayānanda and hṛdayānanda is mentioned,

besides the pronouncement of purification mantra ‘om a hum hṛm kham’ and the sound of ḍamaru and ghaṇṭha.

Another caryāgīti madhyameru, one of the caryāgīti included in ahorātrapadaśādhana vidhi, is also the one sung during pañcaśāli pūjā, as referred to in Caccā Munā by Ratnakāṭī Vajracārya. Here again, a clearly linked relationship of pañcaśāli with pañcabuddha is established where a reference to pañcabuddha occurs along with pañcavarṇa, pañcajina and pañcamūrti. This caryāgīti specifically locates and describes the placements of pañcabuddha.

Buddha and saṅgha are seemingly tangible but dharma is intangible therefore it needs substantial discussion.

Guhyasamājatantra cites a dharma song sang by tathāgatas exclaiming that the pure meaning of dharma is selflessness or dharmasuddhārtha nairātmya (guhyasamājatantra chapter 5 śloka 10).

In a mystical tone, attainment of dharma through the enjoyment of all desires by Buddha and bodhisattvas is hinted at:

buddhāśca bodhisattvāśca
mantracaryāgracāriṇaḥ I

prāptā dharmāsanam śreṣṭham
sarvakāmoṣasevanaiḥ II (gyhyasamājatantra chapter 7 śloka 6)

The practice of dharma, whose essential nature is pure and free from dualistic thought, is equated with drama or nāṭaka:

khadhātusamabhūteṣu nirvikalpasvabhāviṣu I
svabhāvasuddhadharmeṣu nāṭakoayam
prabhavyate II (gyhyasamājatantra chapter 12 śloka 1)

It is warned that during the practice of dharma ‘if the deluded one does wrong he will split into pieces’:

If someone would go beyond whether as a Buddha, a holder of dharma, as a vajrasattva; and if he is deluded, he would lose his life.

buddho vā vajradharmo vā vajrasattvoapi vā yadi I

atikrameddhadi mohātmā sṛṣṭeyurnātra sañśayah II (gyhyasamājatantra chapter 12 śloka 76)

With the practice of dharma it is vouched that ‘the ocean of wisdom is attained in this very life’:

prāpyate janmanīhaiva
gyānodadhivubhūṣaṇam II
(gyhyasamājatantra chapter 13 śloka 118)

The practice of vajrayāna dharma reaches its crescendo in mysticism when ‘naṭakanyām’ is mentioned with reference to the practice of dharma:

With the meditation of vajra dharma, the sādḥaka should always perform the practice with a dancing-girl, beautiful, fair-faced and wide-eyed, and he will become the very self of vajra dharma, established in the ten stages, a king, possessor of samaya speech, supreme lord over all. Identified with vajra dharma, he should perform the practice with a girl from the brāhmiṇa, kṣatriya, vaiśya or śūdra castes, this accomplishes the secret practice.

cāruvaktrām viśālākṣīm naṭakanyām
suśobhanām I

sādhayet sādḥako nityam
vajradharmavibhāvanaiḥ II 10 II

sa bhavedavjradharmātmā
daśabhūmipratīṣṭhitah I

vākasamayadharo rājā sarvāgrah paramēśvara
II 11 II

brahmakṣatriyavaiśyānām kanyām
śūdrakulodbhavām I

sādhayedvjadharmātmā idam
guhyasamāvaham II 12 II

(gyhyasamājatantra chapter 15 śloka 10-12)

To sum it all, dharmas are said to be like a dream or svpnopameṣhu dharmeṣhu (gyhyasamājatantra chapter 15 śloka 119); dharmas are without essence or niḥsvabhāveṣu dharmeṣu (gyhyasamājatantra chapter 15 śloka 133) and buddha-dharmas do exist in your own vajra body, speech and mind or buddhadharmāṇi svakāyacittavajrasthitāni (gyhyasamājatantra chapter 15 śloka 133).

Scholars on vajrayāna Buddhism are of the opinion that gaāacakra is a vajrayāna ritual feast most commonly known by its sañskṛta name gaṇacakra which means feast assembly or gathering circle. It is a highly sacred, communal tantric ritual where initiated practitioners gather to make sensory offerings, chant mantras, and consume sacramental food and drink. The assembly visualizes and invites the gurus, deities, and ḍākinis to descend and partake in the feast. The gaāacakra often comprises a sacramental meal and festivities such as dancing.

Professor Miranda Shaw summarizes the experience of a gaṇacakra as tantric feast thus:

Tantric feasts, or communal assemblies (gaṇacakra and cakrapūjā), are among the paradigmatic tantric practices. The feast is an esoteric ritual that unfolds in many stages. The sacred space for the ceremony is demarcated by geometric designs drawn on the ground with powdered pigments, and an elaborate array of offerings and foods is laid out. The participants don special insignia like bone ornaments and crowns and use musical

instruments of archaic design... for inducing heightened awareness. Practitioners sit in a circle and partake of sacramental (dry) meat and wine (often liquor) served in skull-cups. The feasts also provide an occasion for the exchange of ritual lore, the ritual worship of women (śrīpūjā), and the performance of sexual yogas. The feast culminates in the performance of tantric dances and music that must never be disclosed to outsiders. The revelers may also improvise songs of realization or caryāgīti to express their heightened clarity and blissful raptures in spontaneous verse.

Professor Geoffrey Samuel thinks that gaṇacakra typically consists of five elements known as pañcamakāra - madya (alcohol), māṃsa (meat), matsya (fish), mudrā (grain) and maithuna (sexual intercourse). He further says that pañcamakāra is actually a vulgar term for the pañcatattva and worship with the pañcatattva generally takes place in a cakra or circle composed of men and women. The practice is of the anuttarayogatantra and is associated with a non-monastic origin and the Mahasiddha tradition which has roots in a complex and coterie of esoteric traditions. The presence of a woman or dākinī is required at high tantric initiation and also at the tantric feast of the gaṇacakrapūjā, but in the eleventh century reform, the actual dākinī physically present was replaced by a mind-consort, a visualization of the dākinī. One did the sexual practice only in visualization, not in actuality.

Note that mudrā has multiple connotations: hand gesture, ornament, and female, but Professor Geoffrey Samuel translates or justifies it as grain.

In contrast, David Snellgrove holds that there is a tendency oft-promoted by Tibetan lamas who disseminate teachings in the Western world to treat references to sexual

union and to sādhanā that engages with the 'five impure substances' (usually referred to as the 'five nectars') as symbolic. In the twilight language (or saṁdhyā bhāṣā) of correspondences and substitutions, there is no inconsistency. Although, when modern tantric apologists and scholars employ the term 'symbolic' as though no external practices were engaged in literally, they mislead and perpetuate an untruth.

Though there is no adequate definition, dākinī refers in Buddhist tantric tradition to a type of yoginī, with which word it is all but synonymous. The dākinī par excellence are the five yoginīs who are identified with the five Buddhas or pañcabuddha and represent the unity of existence (samvara).

As a closure of discussion on caryā of gaṇacakra feast a reference in yogatantramālā, a commentary on the hevajra-tantra by Kāṇha, is of utmost significance. It refers to bhojana or feast and prapañcacaryā of gaṇacakra puja vidhi with construction of a maṇḍala for caryā, consisting of caryāgīti:

bhojanaśabdenāprapañcacaryā
gaṇacakravidhiś ca kathyate yatreti gaṇa

maṇḍale caryāyāñ ca (yogatantramālā part II chapter vii)

Yogatantramālā also refers to pañcamudrā or five ornaments, which are worn or dhāraṇa during the ritual of gaṇacakra:

pañcamudrām iti caryākāle gaṇacakradau vā
pañcānām mudrānām dhāraṇā abhisandhih.

(yogatantramālā part II chapter vi)

Finding

Among caryāgīti sang in the caryā of vajrayāna gaṇacakra feast, a message conveyed in caryāgīti viṣaya is distinctly clear and is of utmost significance.

It is said in *ḍākinīvajrapaṇjara* that when the spirit, or *citta*, that is not different from *śūnyatā* and *karuṇā* together is realized then the teaching of the Buddha, the dharma, and the saṅgha is understood. Therefore, it is said in *caryāgīti viṣaya* ‘jagata dukhah nāśana bodhifala dāyakam yoga dharma moru bhava hṛdayam – Buddha dharma saṅgha saraṇa gatiyam’. Combination of *karuṇā* or compassion, and *śūnyatā* is *kālacakra*, as is said in *śekodeṣaṭīkā*.

(*Yoga of guhyasamājatantra* p.194-202))

As is mentioned in *caryāgīti viṣaya* ‘*svapna mayā sadṛśa*’, *vajrayāna* philosophy characterizes the external world, with its movable and immovable objects, as reduced by reason to mere appearances, in much the same way as dreams. They are no more real than dreams, and their reality cannot be proved by reason. In *sādhanaṁālā* p.135 it says:

*carācaram tat sarva pratibhāsamātram
vicārana pratibhāsaopam mayāsvapna
sadṛśam*

(An Introduction to Buddhist Esoterism p. 99-100)

With reference to ‘*jvaliya caṇḍālī nābhī kamale*’ occurring in *caryāgīti viṣaya*, *pañcaḍāka maṇḍala* of *niṣpannayogāvalī* describes her as follows:

*caṇḍālī nīlā vahanikuṇḍabhṛt
(niṣpannayogāvalī p.75)*

‘*Caṇḍālī* is blue in color, and holds a fire-pot in her right hand’ and therefore she is referred to as ‘*jvaliya caṇḍālī*’ in *viṣaya caryāgīti*. Her left hand shows the common gesture of *tarjani*. She is one of the eight deities of the Gouri group. They are violent in character with fearful appearance and ornaments, and garlands of heads. They dance in *pratyālīḍha* and show the raised index finger with clasped

fist against the chest, as the common gesture. (*The Indian Buddhist Iconography* p.310-312)

An internal psychological process of the union of the yogin and yoginī is the desired condition and therefore the whole symbolism is transferred within the body of the yogin, which is conceived as representing the unity of wisdom and means, or, in other terms, of yogin and yoginī. It becomes the active repository of the process of the realization of the ‘two-in-one’. Thus, its main arteries are three: the one to the left is known as *lalanā* and as like wisdom is feminine; the one to the right is known as *rasanā* and like means is masculine; the one in the centre is known generally as *avadhūtī*, sometimes as *caṇḍālī*’ or just as the yoginī. Likewise, in the yogin’s body there are three or four psychic centers, envisaged as lotuses, transpierced by the central vein and level with the navel, the heart, the throat and the top of the head. The notion of two-in-one can be envisaged in different manners, for although the chief representation is that of the veins to left and right, the base and head of the body serve the same symbolism. Thus, the union of the psychic energies at the base of the central vein brings *caṇḍālī*’ or the yoginī blazing into life (as is referred to in *viṣaya caryāgīti*).

There is bliss when *caṇḍālī*’blazes in the body.

There is bliss when the veins *lalanā* and *rasanā* enter *avadhūtī*...

Six fold is the bliss of the experience of yoga.

(*Buddhist Himalaya* p. 88-90)

Control and ultimate destruction of the human senses on a path leading to salvation is a key to the yoga process adhered to in the practice or *caryā* brought forth by the originators of the *vajrayāna* religious philosophy.

Those descriptive of gods and goddesses are described as ‘prapañca caryāgiti,’ and those explanatory of vajrayāna concepts were termed as ‘niṣprapañca caryāgiti’. Prapañca represented the ‘body’ of the religious practice, and niṣprapañca represented the ‘mind’ of the religious practice. These terminological distinctions, of ‘prapañca’ and ‘niṣprapañca’, arose out of contention that caryā was an ‘aesthetic spiritualism’. Vajrayāna philosophy emphasizes the superiority of mind over body or matter. Aesthetics is the subject of the senses, whereas spiritualism entices one to rise above the senses. These two contradictory trends depict the complete picture of caryā. It accepts the existence of the body to achieve higher goals of the mind. On the ultimate stage of achieving its goals in the mind, it advocates abandoning the senses of the body. Under this backdrop, ‘prapañca’ form of religious practice is for the ‘visualisation’ and the ‘niṣprapañca’ form of religious practice is for the ultimate goal of ‘realisation’ as propounded in vajrayāna. Both amalgamate well in the practice of caryā.

Conclusion

Sermons of vajrayāna philosophy have no boundaries. It stops nowhere. On completion of the ritual, divine caryā is sung to enlighten the seeker. Every caryāgīti needs decoding and a placement has to be found. In conclusion, so called esoteric and secret ritual has a commonly known message for the practitioner - Buddham saraṇam gacchāmi, dhammam saraṇam gacchāmi and saṅgham saraṇam gacchāmi.

Research Methodology

Literature on gaṇacakra pūjā and the feast was reviewed in the manual of vajrayāna religious practice. An investigation of caryāgīti sang during the ritual was

conducted. Some prominent vajrayāna religious texts and authentic works on vajrayāna Buddhism by scholars of repute was reviewed. In-depth study of caryāgīti for a long span of time has opened a horizon of knowledge of vajrayāna philosophy and its application in rituals. The research is based on these measures adopted for writing.

Note

Gaṇacakra feast caryāgīti:

1. aṣṭakṣetrapāla

aṣṭakṣetrapāla (1) (Sangha)

(ḍākinīs)

Rāga : Bhairavī

Tāla : Jhapa

Racayitā:

aṣṭachetrapāra digam vidigam bhūvane,

dvanśīramāra catura yugetā 2

gagana śeṣala gagana jhūnam

jhūnamkāra,

gagaṇam ḍamaru ghaṇṭa bājīyāre || dhu ||

hūm hūm namāmi panca ḍākinī panca yūgati,

gyāna ḍākinī sarana juḡe-juḡetā || ||

purva uttara paścima dakṣiṇa,

cau bhuvane vighnamāra vighna khaṇḍīyāre 2

ḍākinī dvīpiyinī causikam bijanī,

ghora betāla santrāsa karaṇam || ||

sinhinī vyāghrinī, jambuka urokinī,

khaṭvānga paraśū, ankūśa daṇḍa hastā 2

vajradākinī ghoram betāla dākinī,
 caṇḍāla dākinī catura devī ll ll
 jina janānī devī dākinī tunjupāya
 śaraṇam,
 pañca mudrābharaṇa bhūṣitā 2
 khaḍga pheṭaka vajra ghaṇṭha khaṭvānge,
 pātu parameśvarī gyāna devī ll * ll

2. gajajina

Gajajina (2)(Buddha) (Guru)
 Rāga : Bhairavī
 Tāla : Ekatāla
 Racayitā :
 gajajīna udvara hāthe dharīyā,
 kamala kuliśa advaya bāri 2
 ḍamaru karatī kuṭhāra triśurā, vāma
 khaṭvānga kapāla dharā ll dhu ll (1st stanza)
 śrī sambara rāyā vāyari tumha juge linā ll
 mārāyire cāpayiyāle māyā,
 śāsu bhavantu mudrā riṇā ll ll (2nd stanza)
 pāśa bramha mūdvara vāṇa hāthe
 dhariyāu nara śira mālā 2
 nīra harita lohita kanakāhbha cau
 mukha ati vikarāra adharā ll ll (3rd stanza)
 ālidha prayo bhairava cāpayiyāre,
 kāli rātri bimbū mudrā 2
 viśva kuliśa ardha candra jarā yakṣa

vyāghra carmma ṣaṭa mudrā ll ll (4th stanza)

kṣatri samvira vīreśvara nāyaka

trini cakra mebhō vira vīrā 2

karuṇa śṛṅgāra viram vīreśvara,

bhunjayi sayāra sansāra dharā ll*ll (5th last stanza)

3. viṣaya

Viṣaya (3) (Dharma) (tutelary divinity)

Rāga: Lalita

Tāla: Mātha

Racayitā:

viṣaya – viśaya vinaya sanjoge,

jvaliya caṇḍālī nābhi kamale 2

dahayi jina bimba śaśi jharayi

Suratavajra tini abhāsa samaya śyāma
 sayaram ll dhu ll

name manjughoṣa, kālacakra hevājra

samvara viśva rupam 2

payi pradumasa yoge sambhava

niśvarā sahaṇānanda maya gyāna rupam
 ll ll

vaja paryyaka śatata kumkuma ruṇa tanu,

nāma sangitiya akṣobhya dhyāna 2

jagata dukhah nāśana bodhi phara
 dāyakam

yoga dharma moru bhāva hṛdayam ll ll

guru vākya dṛḍa dhariyā arddha

pavana kuciya maṇi mukuṭa caṇḍā utotṭa
 dhariyā 2

cau cakra pādasa lina paramēśvarī
surya bhūme moru vārāha bhuvanam ll
ll
svapna māyā sadṛśa, bhāva paribhāvanā,
Buddha dharma sangha saraṇā gatiyam 2
guru caraṇa silanga dhariyā gāvanti
Suratavajra janma janma moru Buddha
saraṇam ll * ll

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