

APSARASES: THE BUDDHIST CONVERSION  
OF THE NYMPHS OF HEAVEN \*

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The *Saundarananda*, a *mahākāvya* composed by the Buddhist monk and poet Aśvaghōṣa in the early second century of the common era, contains amongst its *dramatis personae* a pivotal character – or rather, 500 pivotal characters – of whom little notice has been taken by modern scholars but who aroused a great deal of interest in earlier times. This is the minor female divinity known in Sanskrit as an *apsaras* and in Pali as *accharā*, commonly depicted in Indian mythology as an inhabitant of heaven. An accomplished singer and dancer, and always ravishingly beautiful, the Apsaras was a popular subject for artists and sculptors. Sometimes she is shown in flight, sometimes standing in the typical *tribhaṅga* or triple bend pose, which accentuates her curves.<sup>1</sup> Both Indian folklore, especially in its epic-purāṇic phase, and Pali Buddhism include the Apsaras in the heavenly package with which the virtuous are rewarded in the afterlife. However, Buddhism tended to shy away from the open eroticism which the epic-purāṇic imagination invested in the Apsaras, preferring to envisage her as a demure lady-in-waiting. This article summarises these two opposing conceptions of the Apsaras, and also investigates a few traces of her sexuality that remain in early Buddhist literature.

The origin of the Apsarases is attributed in the *Rāmāyaṇa* to the churning of the ocean. However, it is said that when they emerged, neither the gods nor the *asuras* would have them for wives, so they became common to all. Although Vedic literature associates them with trees and

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<sup>1</sup> At Angkor Wat in Cambodia there are over 1,600 representations of Apsarases. They are also found in carvings at Borobudur in Indonesia and in frescoes at Sigiriya in Sri Lanka.

water, in later literature they are conceptualised as residing in *svarga* – heaven, specifically the Trayastrimśas heaven presided over by Indra, and in particular, as amusing themselves in the heavenly garden of delight known as Nandana. A man reborn here would find that his experience of heaven consists of the perfect satisfaction of his senses, which all continue to operate. The *Bhagavad Gītā* (IX 20d), for instance, mentions that those who reach the domain of Indra ‘enjoy the divine pleasures of the gods’ (*aśnanti divyān divi deva-bhogān*). The underlying metaphor of eating – *aśnanti*, literally, ‘they eat’ – reveals that this is a heaven in which physical functionality endures. Heaven is beautiful to look at, smells nice, and it is cooled by pleasant breezes. There is plentiful food and drink of a celestial standard, while entertainment is offered by the Apsarases, the heavenly nymphs, who dance and sing divinely. Music and song are not all that they offer, though, for they are also strongly associated with sex, nor do they confine their favours to the Gandharvas, the heavenly musicians with whom they are often paired. Already in the *Ṛg Veda* (RV) passing reference is made to the sexuality of the Apsarases; one passage<sup>2</sup> refers to the Apsarases as taking lovers (*jāra*), while another<sup>3</sup> relates the myth of the Apsaras Urvaśī, casting her as a decidedly sexual being. Temporarily banished from heaven, she comes to earth and becomes the adored lover of King Purūravas, who, it is said, makes love to her three times a day (this story is most famously rendered in Kālidāsa’s drama *Vikramorvaśī*). The *Atharva Veda* (AV) specifies that in heaven the virtuous man is blessed with a perfect body, free of disease and distortion. It also bluntly informs us that a man’s penis is not incinerated in the funeral fire, but is retained in heaven, adding that for such a man, many womenfolk – *bahu straiṇam* – are his.<sup>4</sup>

The popular perception of the Apsarases as celestial paramours for those who have been virtuous in their conduct, zealous in their ritualism, or courageous in battle is embodied chiefly within the epic-purāṇic tradition. The *Mahābhārata* (MBh) stresses the Apsarases’s physical attributes, seductiveness and immodest gestures, and often depicts them

<sup>2</sup> RV x 123,5.

<sup>3</sup> RV x 95. The story is also found at *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* XI 5,1.

<sup>4</sup> AV vi 120,3 and iv 34,2.

as underdressed, such as Tilottamā who wears just one piece of red cloth,<sup>5</sup> or even naked, such as Menakā after the wind whips off her skirt.<sup>6</sup> The epic provides a list of the quintessential features of the Apsaras: she has lotus eyes with which she casts flirtatious glances, a narrow waist, heavy buttocks, and breasts that jiggle as she dances. She invariably disturbs the mind of any man who beholds her.<sup>7</sup> Typically, an Apsaras is sent by Indra to distract a sage from his *tapas*, since Indra is notoriously jealous of and alarmed by the ascetically derived power of sages. Ironically, those same sages are rewarded for their ascetic restraint by the sexual possession of those very Apsarases in heaven.<sup>8</sup> In contrast to St. Augustine's wish to be chaste later<sup>9</sup>, it seems that Indian sages are chaste first and are later rewarded with the fleshpots of heaven. At other times the nymphs do act independently. So Urvaśī, bent on the seduction of Arjuna, says:

All [Apsarases] are unconfined in their choice ... [Those] that have come here as a result of ascetic merit enjoy us without incurring any sin. Please do not to send me away tormented and burning with desire. Make love with me who loves you, O hero.<sup>10</sup>

Turning to the Pali textual tradition, one discovers that the Accharās appear frequently in similes, where they figure as the conventional *upamāna*, or object of comparison, for the dancing girls who grace the courts of kings. In these similes, the number of dancing girls, and hence of the Accharās, often seems to be fixed at either 8,000 or 16,000.<sup>11</sup> The use of an Apsaras as a sexual weapon deployed by Indra is also retained

<sup>5</sup> MBh I 204, 9

<sup>6</sup> MBh I 66, 5

<sup>7</sup> *etāś cānyās ca nanytus tatra tatra varāṅganāḥ | citta-pramathane yukṭāḥ siddhānāṃ padmalocanā || mahā-kaṭi-taṭa-sroṇyaḥ kaṃpamānāḥ payodharaiḥ | kaṭākṣa-hāva-mādhuryaiś ceto buddhi-manoharāḥ ||* (MBh III 44, 31–32)

<sup>8</sup> MBh XIII 109, 52; 110, 12, 15, for example. In the first of these, 'a hundred virgin Apsarases will pleasure that man [who honours the gods]' (*śataṃ cāpsarasāḥ kanyā ramayanti taṃ narām*).

<sup>9</sup> *Confessions* VIII, 7: 'Give me chastity and continence, but not yet.'

<sup>10</sup> *anāvṛtās ca sarvāḥ... || ... ye ... tv ihāgatāḥ | tapasā ramayanty asmān na ca teṣāṃ vyatikramāḥ || tvat prasīda na mām ārtāṃ viśarjjayitum arhasi | hycchayena ca santaptāṃ bhaktāṃ ca bhaja mānada ||* (MBh III 1858–60, Calcutta edition, 1834)

<sup>11</sup> e.g. *Jātaka* I 470, III 408.

in one *Jātaka* story. Indra, here named Sakka, sends the nymph Alambusā to seduce the ascetic Isisiṅga. However, in an interesting Buddhist twist, when Alambusā is later offered a boon, she asks never to have to seduce another ascetic again.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, she had previously requested that some other Accharā be given the job. Such moral misgivings are entirely absent in the stereotypical Apsaras of the *Mahābhārata*. This *Jātaka* story reflects the dilemma for Buddhism which, with its ascetic bent and its emphasis on containment and dispassion, was uncomfortable with holding out a promise of celestial prostitutes as a post-mortem reward for its adherents. Where such a promise is made, as in the well-known story of Nanda to be discussed shortly, it is hedged about with exculpatory justifications. The general unease felt by the tradition in respect of the Accharās is evident in the *Accharā Sutta* of the Saṃyutta Nikāya, in which the Accharās are labelled ‘demons’ (*pisācas*), while Nandana, the Grove of Delight in which the Accharās traditionally besport themselves, is renamed Mohana, or delusion. In his commentary on this *sutta*, Buddhaghosa explains that these words are spoken by a monk who dies of exertion during meditation and is reborn in the Tāvatiṃsa heaven. Fearfully disappointed because he has missed liberation and attained heaven, the wrong goal, he perceives the beautiful Accharās coming towards him and hails them as demons.<sup>13</sup> How then could Buddhism cope with the wayward reputation of the Apsaras? The answer lay in ignoring their sexual aspect more or less entirely and turning them into heavenly attendants and ladies-in-waiting – still very beautiful, still musical and graceful, but definitely chaste.

In the Pali canon, the Accharās appear most prominently in the *Vimāna-vatthu* stories of the Khuddaka Nikāya. The chief feature of the *Vimāna* stories is that acts of generosity to the Buddha or Sangha are rewarded by rebirth as *devas* in the Tāvatiṃsa heaven. Though generosity is the most celebrated virtue, those who revere their parents, readily pardon others and take no pleasure in quarrels are also reborn in the Tāvatiṃsa heaven. The characters thus rewarded are all lay people, since monks are not depicted as striving for heaven, and most of them

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<sup>12</sup> The *Alambusā Jātaka*, no. 523.

<sup>13</sup> *Saṃyutta Nikāya* I 33, commentary at *Sāratthappakāsinī* I 85–88.

are women, though some are men and two are animals. The underlying structure of the stories is provided by Mahāmoggallāna's visit to heaven, during which he asks those he encounters how they won their position, and they recount the good deed responsible for their current pleasant situation. Each *deva* lives in a sort of aerial palace or *vimāna*, studded with jewels and gold, in which they can travel down to earth, though they cannot go to any region higher than their own. The *devas* have a human form and are endowed with the five senses, but they are far more brilliant and dazzling than anyone on earth. They have unaging bodies, colourful garments and exquisite ornaments. The Tāvatiṃsa heaven in which they live is refined, delicate, and sensuous. There is an abundance of flowers, plants and creepers; breezes are soft and perfumed. The fortunate heaven-dweller frequently has a retinue of Accharās, up to 100,000. Interestingly, the devout lay followers here described are never reborn as Accharās themselves, but only as *devas* or *devatās* attended by Accharās. The Accharās of the *Vimāna-vatthu* appear as attendants, sometimes as ministering with song and dance, but never as potential sexual partners. Outside the Pali tradition there are the texts such as the *Mahāvastu* or the *Lalitavistara* in which the role of the Apsarases is confined to non-sexual activities such as tending to the bodhisattva's mother during her pregnancy and labour, or providing a kind of chorus that miraculously appears during the important moments of the Buddha's life to sing his praises.

It should be noted that in the Pali texts, heaven is softened into a place that women might actually want to be reborn into – perhaps early Buddhism had to find something to offer the female laity, who after all may have been the most regular alms-givers. Thus the promise of a woman-friendly heaven is held out to them, a heaven where women could move about freely, unshackled by husbands and domesticity, and with many attendants. They zoom around in splendid jewel-encrusted *vimānas*, and the Accharās become their servants – an attractive prospect, one should imagine, for the ordinary Indian woman whose life probably consisted of excessive child-bearing and endless domestic labour. Heaven is revised for women residents; in this heaven they are not just part of the engaging furniture, as in the epic-purāṇic conception,

but VIPs in their own right. As one modern Indian woman writer has said:

One day I realised that we [women] don't even have a heaven of our own! When I think of the pictures of Heaven in any religion, I see that it is a man's idea; whether it's apsarases or nymphs or houris, it comes to the same thing really. Only a man could dream of Heaven as a place where he can lie about all day, surrounded by beautiful women, being served by them.<sup>14</sup>

The Pali texts, however, do offer a heaven for women too. As a result, in the Pali texts there is only very sporadic mention of the sexual bliss dispensed by the Apsarases. One such is the story of the monk Sudinna.<sup>15</sup> Sudinna's family try to tempt him back to lay life by showing him some enormous heaps of gold. When he tells them to dump it all in the Ganges, they try another tack and bring in his former wife, all decked in her finery. She comes in, touches his feet, and says, rather flirtatiously: 'What are they like, those Accharās for whose sake you practise *brahmacariya* (that is, the life of celibacy and self-control)?' He replies, 'O Sister, I do not practise *brahmacariya* for the sake of the Accharās.' And at being called 'sister' (*bhagini*), the former wife falls down in a faint. It would be difficult to understand why the former wife would mention the Accharās unless she sees them as sexual rivals. Indeed, she hopes that Sudinna can still be motivated by sex. When Sudinna asserts that he is not interested in any sexual relationship, either with the Accharās or with his wife, whom he now regards as a sister, she faints. What is noticeable in this story is the allusion to the epic-purāṇic 'pay now, buy later' conception that the sexual favours of the Accharās can be purchased in advance by a life of celibate restraint.

In the *Udāna*, one of the oldest Pali texts, the monk Mahākassapa is at one time described with the phrase 'having rejected those 500 deities',<sup>16</sup> without any further information as to what situation or context this phrase might refer to. Given their reputation, it is likely that he rejected the sexual blandishments of the Accharās, just as the bodhisattva re-

<sup>14</sup> The novelist Shashi Deshpande, from a talk given on 30 October 1997 in Zurich.

<sup>15</sup> Recounted at *Vinaya* III 17. The same happens to the monk Raṭṭhāpāla, as recounted at *Majjhima Nikāya* II 64.

<sup>16</sup> *Udāna* 4: *tāni pañcamattāni devatā-satāni paṭikkhipitvā*.

jected the temptations of the daughters of Māra. However, hundreds of years later the commentator Dhammapāla specifically identifies the deities as Accharās, and accounts for the phrase by having Mahākassapa refusing to take alms from the Accharās, saying to them ‘Be off with you! You have made merit, you already have great enjoyment; I will act sympathetically towards those who are badly off.’ At this they meekly return to the *deva-loka* whence they came.<sup>17</sup> Dhammapāla’s rather contrived explanation suggests a shift in the portrayal of the Accharās from heavenly temptresses to heavenly devotees interested only in alms-giving.

Apart from these half-hints and intimations, the sexuality of the Accharās is in the foreground in only one early Buddhist legend, and that is in the story of the Buddha’s half-brother Nanda, of which there are several accounts in addition to Aśvaghōṣa’s *Saundarananda*.<sup>18</sup> The basic story runs like this: the Buddha enters Nanda’s house on his wedding day, places his bowl in Nanda’s hand and then leaves. Nanda is forced to follow, with the bowl still in his hand. When Nanda’s new bride is interrupted with the news that the Buddha is taking her husband away, she rushes to the top of the house with her hair half-combed and calls out to him to return soon. In Aśvaghōṣa’s version, Nanda’s wife makes him promise to return before her make-up has dried. However, Nanda does not return; instead, the Buddha leads him to the *vihāra* and has him unwillingly ordained. Though ordained as a monk, Nanda finds the celibate life incredibly hard; as Aśvaghōṣa (*Saund* VII 1) mellifluously puts it, *na nananda nandaḥ* (‘Nanda did not rejoice’). The Buddha summons Nanda and enquires the reason for his depression, and Nanda replies that it is because he cannot forget his beautiful wife. The Buddha then takes Nanda by the arm, and the two immediately travel up to heaven. There they behold 500 Accharās. Nanda almost dies of lust on the spot. The Buddha asks Nanda who is fairer, his wife or the nymphs. Nanda enthusiastically replies that the Accharās are much

<sup>17</sup> *Udāna-aṭṭhakathā* 61–2.

<sup>18</sup> The Nanda story is a popular one and appears in full or in part in Pali sources (*Udāna* 21–24, *Dhammapada* 13–14, *Theragāthā* 157–58, *Jātaka* no. 182, also commentaries on the first three of these and on *Vinaya* I 82), the Chinese *Abhiniṣkramaṇa Sūtra* and the much later *Sundarī-nandāvadāna* by Kṣemendra.

more beautiful. When the Buddha promises that he can earn the five hundred nymphs through ascetic practices, Nanda agrees to persevere with *brahmacariya*. With that they swiftly return to earth. When the other monks come to hear that Nanda is practising *brahmacariya* in order to obtain the Accharās, they mock him, which so humiliates Nanda that he begins to practise diligently and soon attains liberation.

The Buddhist tradition feels considerable unease over this whole business of purposefully exposing Nanda to the irresistible Apsarases. Why would the Buddha seem to act contrary to everything he had ever taught about desire? Why would he actually try to aggravate lust in someone? In his commentary on the *Udāna* version of the Nanda story, Dhammapāla uses a medical model in the Buddha's defence. He explains that a physician, when treating a patient suffering from excessive humours, first exacerbates the symptoms of his patient in order thereafter to purge them completely. So too does the Buddha exacerbate Nanda's symptoms of lust in order to purge them with the medicine of the noble path (*ariya-magga-bhesajja*). He makes the same point in his commentary on the *Theragāthā*, comparing the Accharās to a drink of oil by which a doctor prepares a patient for purging.<sup>19</sup> The *Questions of Milinda* explains that the Buddha has a variety of methods (*anekapariyāya*) for liberating people, just as a physician has a variety of treatments at his disposal. In Nanda's case, the method chosen by the Buddha for the sake of liberating him (*bodhana-hetu*) was to show him the 500 dove-footed Accharās.<sup>20</sup> Thus the Apsarases become part of the Buddha's skilful means; they are themselves made an instrument of conversion.<sup>21</sup> In his poem, the *Saundarananda*, Aśvaghoṣa too justifies the Buddha's action on the grounds that he is like a doctor: just as a doctor expunges the humours from the body by initially exacerbating his patient's pain, so does the Buddha destroy Nanda's lust by first in-

<sup>19</sup> *Theragāthā-aṭṭhakathā* II 33.

<sup>20</sup> *Milindapañha* 169.

<sup>21</sup> The tradition recognises this to some extent: the *Theragāthā* verses attributed to Nanda (157–58) have him rejoice in his liberation 'by the Buddha, skilled in means' (*upāyakuśalena ... buddhena*). Dhammapāla (*Udāna-aṭṭhakathā* 171) reports that whilst ferrying Nanda to heaven, the Buddha thinks 'I must make his lust subside through [skilful] means' (*upāyenassa rāgaṃ vūpasamessāmi*).



ducing a far greater lust.<sup>22</sup> Thus the Buddha is exonerated by repeated comparison to a well-intentioned doctor who is unquestionably wiser than his patient, while the Apsarases are justified as a necessary medication, with nasty side-effects perhaps but efficacious in the long-term.<sup>23</sup>

In summary, it is likely that within early Buddhist culture the Apsarases were subject to a process of de-eroticization. While in the epic-purāṇic imagination the Apsarases were seen as dispensers of sexual bliss, in early Buddhism they are allotted the role of graceful attendants only. In the one obvious reminder of their sexual function, which occurs in the story of Nanda, Buddhist interpreters assuage their doubts by redefining the celestial sirens as themselves facilitators of spiritual progress. To conclude: the *Mahāvastu* contains a long hymn of praise for those who offer even the smallest service to the Buddha. Amongst them, it is said that he who has cleaned a *stūpa* will win thousands of Apsarases, lovely and sweet-scented, but never feel any lust for any of them<sup>24</sup> – a statement which nicely summarises the Buddhist conversion of the Apsaras from celestial concubine to decorative but decorous divinity.

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<sup>22</sup> Saund x 43: *doṣāṃś ca kāyād bhiṣag ujjihīṣur bhūyo yathā kleśayituṃ yateta | rāgaṃ tathā tasya munīr jighāṃsur bhūyastaraṃ rāgaṃ upānināya ||* ('And just as a doctor seeks to draw out humoral faults from the body by further paining it, so the sage, intending to destroy passion in him, first brought about a far greater passion.')

<sup>23</sup> The *Dhammapada* commentary (I 122), rather than resorting to the popular medical metaphor, describes the Accharās as 'bait' (*āmisā*).

<sup>24</sup> *Mahāvastu* II 386.