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Historiography of Tantra traditions from cross-cultural religious perspective

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Abstract

The roots of *Tantra* are very old, presumably as old as the Indus valley civilization. Gradually, the *Tantra* traditions became integral parts of several ancient Indic religions, including Hinduism and Buddhism. All of the *Tantra* traditions have connection with the feminine divine. With the passage of time, it has witnessed changing connotations in its meaning, understanding and historiography. This paper probes into the interaction and influence of tantric traditions on different Indic religions. On the one hand this paper explores rituals and practices associated with tantric goddesses and on the other, the functional aspects of tantric goddesses in ancient religious settings. Different facets of *Tantra* like historiography of *Tantra*, *Tantric* Traditions in Hinduism and Buddhism, the influence of tantric traditions in other religions, etc. are discussed. The features of three strands of *Tantra*, i.e., *Dakshina*, *Vama*, and *Madhyama marg* are also deliberated. In this article, the *Tantric* methods of worship are covered in detailed which included the categories of *mantra*, *yantra*, *mandala*, *mudra*, and *nyasa*; the various ways of *mantra sadhana*, *panchamakaras sadhana*, *shava sadhana*, *yoga sadhana*, etc. The paper has special mention about the cults of *dasamahavidyas* and sixty-four *yoginis*. The misinterpretation of *tantric* symbols and rituals as obscenities and superstitions by some scholars who are ignorant about the science and mysticism of *Tantra* is also covered.

Keywords: Tantra, Hinduism, Buddhism, *Sadhana*, *Dasamahavidya*, sixty-four *yoginis*

Introduction

Tantra is a Sanskrit word which literally means “loom or weave”. Verbally, *Tantra* means to extend or to spread or to spin out. It is often interpreted as system or doctrine or work. The tantric practices developed in Indian subcontinent as Yogic tradition in Hinduism and Buddhism from the middle of the 1st millennium CE. A key feature of this tradition is the use of *mantras* (sacred utterance), and thus they are commonly referred to as *Mantramarga* (Path of Mantra) in Hinduism or *Mantrayana* (Vehicle of Mantra) and *Guhyamantra* (Secret Mantra) in Buddhism (Kongtrul, 2005) [14]. With the passage of time, it has witnessed changing connotations in its meaning, understanding and historiography. In Buddhism, the Vajrayana traditions are based on Indian Buddhist Tantras (Gyatso, 2000) [9]. They include Indo-Tibetan Buddhism, Chinese Esoteric Buddhism, Japanese Shingon Buddhism and Nepalese Newar Buddhism. Tantric Hindu and Buddhist traditions have also influenced other eastern religious traditions such as Jainism, the Tibetan Bon tradition, Daoism, and Japanese Shinto tradition (Gray, 2016) [7].

Historiography of Tantra

The orthodox scholars believe that the *Tantras* may have existed from the time of the Vedas or may be even older than the Vedas. The word *Tantra* appears in the hymns of the *Rigveda* with the meaning of warp (weaving). It is found in many other Vedic era texts, such as in *Atharvaveda*. In these texts, the contextual meaning of *Tantra* is principal or essential part, framework, and feature (Monier *et al.*, 2002) [16]. In the *Smritis* and epics of *Hinduism*, the term *Tantra* means doctrine, rule, technique or chapter and the word appears both as a separate word and as a common suffix, such as *atma-tantra* meaning doctrine or theory of *Atman* (Self). The 5th-century BCE scholar Panini in his Sutra of Sanskrit grammar, explains *tantra* through the example of *Sva-tantra*, which means self-dependent (Pontillo and Candotti, 2014) [18].

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Medieval texts present their own definitions of *Tantra*. As elaborates (*tan*) matters, especially relating to the principles of reality (*tattva*) and provides liberation (*tra*), it is called *tantra* (Wallis, 2012) [27]. In modern era, *Tantra* has been studied as an esoteric practice and ritualistic religion. Many definitions of have been proposed for *Tantra* since, and there is no universally accepted definition (Harper and Brown, 2002) [10]. *Tantric* traditions have been studied mostly from textual and historical perspectives. Defining *Tantra* is a difficult task because *Tantra* traditions are manifold, spanning several religious traditions and cultural worlds. According to Gray (2016) [7], *Tantrism* is an overarching term for "Tantric traditions" that combine Vedic, yogic and meditative traditions from ancient Hinduism as well as rival Buddhist and Jain traditions.

Tantric Traditions in Hinduism

The philosophical foundation upon which *Hindu Tantrism* rests is the *Sivadvaitya* school of Hinduism which maintains that the Supreme Reality is *Shiva* himself. *Shiva* is endowed with a *Shakti* (a female principle) which is a part of Him and eternally coexisting in Him. Hinduism encompasses various tantric traditions. In *Shaivism*, *Shaktism*, and *Vaishnavism* sects of Hinduism, the tantric traditions are different (Sanderson, 2012) [21]. There are also tantric Upanishads and tantric Puranas which are influenced by tantric ideas (Padoux, 2017) [17]. Besides, *tantric sastras* (treatises) comprising of commentaries, digests, compilations, monographs, collections of hymns, names of deities, mantras, etc. do exist. While some *Tantriks* (*tantra* practitioners) consider the *Tantras* to be superior to the Vedas, others consider them complementary (Smith, 1996). *Hindu tantras* are broadly divided into two classes, *Agama*, and *Nigama*. In the former *Shiva* answers questions asked by *Parvathi* and in the *Nigama* *Parvathi* answers questions asked by *Shiva*. In accordance with the predominance of the deities *Hindu Tantras* are also classified into *Shakta*, *Shaiva*, *Vaishnava*, *Saurya* and *Ganapatya*. The works of *Shakta*, *Shaiva* and *Vaishnava* are called respectively *Tantras*, *Agamas* and *Samhitas*. Some divide tantric texts into the following group - *Agama*, *Damara*, *Yamala* and *Tantra*. The *Damara tantra* is dedicated to Lord *Shiva* and his mystical teachings. The *Damara tantra* includes *Yogadamara*, *Shivadamarā*, *Durgadamara*, *Sarasvatadamara*, *Gandharvadamarā*, *Brahmadamarā*, etc. The *Yamala tantra* contains the secret conversations between different deities and their respective consorts. The *Yamala tantra* includes the texts like *Rudra-yamala*, *Vishnu-yamala*, *Brahma-yamala*, *Lakshmi-yamala*, *Uma-yamala*, *Skanda-yamala*, *Aditya-yamala* and *Bhairava-yamala* among others (Prajnananda, 2006) [19]. The religion of *Agamas* had developed through two channels, one exoteric and the other esoteric. The former continued as a part of *Shaivism* with greater emphasis on the devotional aspect of the worship of *Shiva* and *Pashupati* with a view to attain liberation. The latter centred as *Shaktism* with greater emphasis on various *Shakti* cult not so much as to attain liberation but to gain ascendancy and control over the forces of nature, liberation was too small a goal for them. In course of time (Around 10th Century A.D.) the literature of pure *Shivism* ceased to be called *Tantra* and *Tantra* proper became more *Shaktic* in character (Basu, 1986) [2].

The development of *Tantric Hinduism* reached its zenith in Bihar, Bengal and Orissa under the Pala kings who ruled

these parts of eastern India from 760-1142 A.D., in Kanyakubja under the Pratihara kings from 800-1019 A.D. and in Bundelkhand under the Chandella kings from 950-1203 A.D. (Victor, 2003) [26]. *Tantras* endeavoured to provide a common platform for differing and wrangling sects of *Vaishnavas*, *Shaivas* and others by putting forward *Devi* as the object of worship for all (Kane, 1962) [11]. The popularity of *Tantra* compelled the orthodox *Brahmanical sastra* to incorporate *Tantra* practices. For instance, the Tantric concepts of *mandala*, *mudra*, *yantra*, the mystic *bija* mantras like *hrim*, *krim*, *kumara puja*, etc. crept into the traditional works of the *Brahmanas*. Art and architecture was also influenced by *Tantra*. There are many images of various Tantric deities particularly of *Kali* in her different forms. Many temples sculptures particularly of Odisha and south India show an abundance of tantric motifs. Several temples in south India worship *Sri Chakra*, the *yantra* associated with the *Sri Vidya* cult. There are also painting of *Kali* and other tantric deities as also of *mandalas*, *mudras*, *yantras* and *Kundalini* (Banerji, 2000) [1].

Tantric Traditions in Buddhism

Broadly, Buddhism is classified into three divisions wherein *Tantra* or *Vajrayana* is considered as the third major *yana* (vehicle) alongside of *Theravada* and *Mahayana*. However, there exists another classification which suggests the twofold division of *Mahayana*: *Paramitayana* (the Sutra vehicle) and *Mantrayana* (the *Tantra* vehicle). The *tantra* tradition, which happened to be an esoteric tradition initially, was later popularized among the common masses by the *Siddhacharyas* through their miraculous yogic powers. A reference to magical and occult elements could be observed even during the period of the Buddha. There are references in Pali and Sanskrit sources about the inclination of some of Buddha's disciples towards this. Tantric literature claims that Buddha himself preached the doctrine of *tantra* (Upadhyaya, 1999) [25].

Buddhist *Tantric* texts began appearing in the Gupta Empire period, though there are texts with elements associated with *Tantra* that can be seen as early as the third century. By the eighth century, *Tantra* was a dominant force in North India and the number of texts increased with numerous *Tantric pandits* writing commentaries. Buddhist *Tantra* then quickly spread out of India into nearby countries like Tibet and Nepal in the eighth century, as well as to Southeast Asia. Buddhist *Tantra* arrived in China during the Tang Dynasty (where it was known as *Tangmi*) and was brought to Japan by *Kukai* (774-835), where it is known as *Shingon* (Gray, 2016) [7]. It remains the main Buddhist tradition in Nepal, Mongolia and Tibet where it is known as *Vajrayana*.

Visualization is a major component to tantric practices. Most of the tantric goddesses are visualized with multiple heads, arms, and legs; representing the multi-functional nature of an enlightened mind which they embody. They have key identifiers such as postures, hand gestures or symbols and colours to tell who they are and what they represent. The appearance of goddesses in tantric Buddhism has twofold facets: one is the esoteric side and other facet is devotional practices and rituals.

In the Tibetan tradition, *tantra* has been classified into a fourfold system: *Kriya Tantra*, *Charya Tantra*, *Yoga Tantra* and *Anuttarayoga Tantra*. In *Kriya* and *Charya Tantra*, goddesses are visualized as external entities and their

practices consist of devotion and rituals. In *Yoga Tantra* and *Anuttarayoga*, goddesses are embodied in more advanced yogic practices. *Anuttarayoga Tantra* is further divided into Mother *Tantra* and Father *Tantra*. Most of the Mother *Tantra* practices consist of self-visualization in which the practitioners visualize themselves as the central meditational goddess of an elaborate, elegant mandala (Gyatso, 2000) ^[9].

Tantric Traditions in other religions

The Hindu and Buddhist *Tantric* traditions significantly influenced many other religions such Jainism, Sikhism, the Tibetan Bon tradition, Daoism, Shinto, Sufi Islam, and the Western "New Age" movement. In the Sikh literature, the ideas related to Shakti and goddess reverence attributed to Guru Gobind Singh, particularly in the *Dasam Granth*, are related to tantra ideas found in Buddhism and Hinduism (Rinehart, 2011) ^[29]. The Jain worship methods, states Ellen Gough, were likely influenced by Shaktism ideas, and this is attested by the tantric diagrams of the *Rishi-mandala* where the *Tirthankaras* are portrayed. The Tantric traditions within Jainism use verbal spells or mantra, and rituals that are believed to accrue merit for rebirth realms.

Three strands of Tantra (Dakshina, Vama, and Madhyama marg)

The *Brahma Yamala*, a *Tantric* text says there are three strands of *tantra* tradition: *dakshinachara* (Right-Hand Path), *vamachara* (Left-Hand Path), and *madhyamachara* (Middle path). These are characterized by the predominance of each of the three *gunas*; *sattva*, *rajas*, and *tamas*. *Dakshinachara* or *Dakshina Margis* characterized by *sattva*, and is pure; *Madhyama* is characterized by *rajas*, and is mixed; and *vama* is characterized by *tamas*, and is impure. The *Tantras* of each class follow a particular line of spiritual practice. The *Dakshina Marg* of the *Agamas/Tantra* are followed by the 4 bonafide *sampradayas* mentioned in *Padma Purana*, namely *Sri*, *Nimbarka*, *VishnuSwami* and *Madhava sampradayas*. *Dakshina Marg* is recommended in *Kaliyuga*. They follow the *Pancharatra Agamas*. *Dakshina Marga* is not risky and is open to all. *Sri Vidya cult* belongs to *Dakshina marga* tradition according to many.

Vamachara or *Vama Margis* particularly associated with the *pancha makara* or the "Five Ms". In literal terms they are: *Madya* (wine), *Mamsa* (meat), *Matsya* (fish), *Mudra* (cereal), and *Maithuna* (sexual intercourse). *Vamachara* traditions place strict ritual limits on the use of these literal forms and warn against non-sanctioned use. If so, used they encourage the person to sin. Practitioners of *vamachara* rituals may make symbolic substitutions for these literal things and said to have been practiced by numerous saints. Worship of *Bhairava* (Shiva), *Kali* and most of the *Devi* forms are a part of *Vama Marga*. *Preta* (Ghost) worship also falls in *Vama Marga*. *Vama Marga* is very secret due to its *tamashik* nature. *Madhyama Marga* is a mixture of *Dakshina* and *Vama marga*.

Tantric methods of Worship

Tantras are essentially *sadhana shastras*. *Sadhana* is that which produces *siddhi* (result sought for). *Tantric sadhana* consists of two parts ritual worship (*puja*) and meditation (*yoga*). Both are of equal importance to every *tantric*. The *Tantras* have classified mankind according to their *pravrittih* or *bhava* (natural aptitudes and dispositions). *Tantra* has classified mankind under three broad heads according to the

pravrittih of the individuals, i.e., *Pashu* (man with animal disposition), *Vira* (man with heroic disposition) and *Divya* (man with divine disposition). Closely associated with the *bhavas*, the *Tantras* have enjoined seven *acharas* (stages). An aspirant must rise step by step through the different *acharas* of self-realization till he reaches the highest stage of 'Life Divine'. The seven *acharas* mentioned in the *Kularnava Tantra* are *Vedachara*, *Vaishnavachara*, *Shaivachara*, *Dakshinachara*, *Vamachara*, *Siddhantachara* and *Kaulachara* (Kundu, 1974) ^[15].

Tantrics divide their ritual practices into three groups, *nitya*, *naimittika* and *kamyā*. *Nitya* covers the group of rites regarded as being compulsory for a *tantric* to perform every day. *Naimittika* rites are observed on particular occasions and *kamyā* rites are performed to fulfill a special wish or to avert a great misfortune (Gupta *et al.*, 2009) ^[8]. Initiation (*diksha*) is made an indispensable prerequisite for *Tantrik* practices. The importance of a teacher in the *Tantra* is very great and there can be no salvation without initiation and there can be no initiation without a teacher. The literal meaning of *diksha* is *di* (means to give or to endow divine qualities) and *ksha* (means to destroy or to remove the sins and obstructions thereby freeing the individual from shackles). Through initiation the *Guru* imparts the practical lesson to make use of *mantra* and *yantra*. *Kularnava Tantra* speaks of three kinds of *diksha*; *Sparsha Diksha* (initiation by touch), *Drka Diksha* (initiation by sight) and *Manasa Diksha* (initiation by thought), (Singh, 2010) ^[22].

Mantra Sadhana

The word 'Mantra' is derived from two Sanskrit roots, *man* (to reflect) and *rati* (to protect). The significance is that the *mantra* is a sacred word or formula that is capable of protecting the person who thinks of it or utters it. *Mantras* are grouped into three categories; Male- when they end with words such as 'hum', 'phat' and 'vashat'; Female- when they end with words such as 'vaushat' and 'svaha'; and Neutral- when they end with words with 'namah'. Male *mantras* are especially employed in magical rites, in the worship of ferocious divinities including goddesses. They are vigorous and quick in effect but their spiritual value is minimal. The female *mantras* are use in enterprises with concrete benefits. The neutral *mantras* have spiritual progress as their goal. *Mantras* are also classified on the basis of the number of syllables they contain. If there is a single syllable it is called *pinda mantra*. If there are two syllables, it is called *kartari*. If the number of syllables ranges from three to nine, it is called *bija* *mantra* and if the number of syllables exceeds nine but is not more than twenty it is called *mantra*. If the syllables are more than 20 the *mantra* becomes a *mala mantra* (string *mantra*). The repetition of a *mantra* is known as *japa* and there are three varieties of *japa*, i.e., *Vachika* (uttered), audible to others; *Upamsu* (muttered), audible to oneself only, and *Manasa* (thought), in entire silence (Ramachandra Rao, 1979) ^[20].

Yantra

Yantra is a geometrical diagram with abstract symbols inscribed on a flat surface like palm leaf, paper, etched on a metal sheet or stone slab. It is an indispensable constituent of *tantric sadhana*. The Sanskrit word *Yantra* derives from word *Yam*, meaning to sustain, hold a particular element, object, or concept. The *yantra* is a sacred enclosure, a dwelling of *Ishtadevata* (the chosen deity) and a substitute

for an image of the deity. A deity's yantra bears no resemblance to the iconographic image and represents its abstract translation (*para rupa*). All yantras are inscribed with mantras and the most important mantra associated with the yantra is generally inscribed in the centre of the yantra, while other mantric letters are arranged in the spaces formed by the intersection of lines, either round the circle or on the lotus petals or on the outer square band of the yantra. These mantric letters are condensed with energy. Pronounced correctly, with the correct rhythm, intonation and mental attitude, a mantra becomes the soul of the yantra and a vitalizing force within the mind of the seeker (Khanna, 1994) ^[12]. There are three types of yantras, i.e., *Raksha yantras*, for magical purposes and act as protective yantras; *Pujana yantras* or *Devata yantras*, for actualizing divinities; and *Dhyana yantras*, to facilitate meditation. *Raksha yantras* are of two types, beneficent ones (*soumya* or *aghora*) and the malevolent ones (*krura* or *ghora*). The former kind of yantras are employed to ward off evil, cure disease, bring about peace of mind. The latter kind of yantras are meant to kill or harm the enemy, to drive enemy mad, to invoke misfortune.

Pranapratisthana and Visarjana ceremonies of Yantra

For worship, a yantra is infused with the vital force (*prana*) and this ritual is called *prana-pratisthana*. The transfer of power to the yantra is achieved in several ways but one of the chief methods is through the breathing technique (*pranayama*). While the priest is in complete concentration, the devata is exhaled by *pranic* transmission through the right nostril as he chants an appropriate mantra. The breath is exhaled over a red flower which he holds in his hand. He then places the flower at the centre of the yantra which begins to be permeated with the spark of consciousness. Another method of infusing vital force into the yantra is by the means of symbolic finger gestures (*Avahana mudra*). The priest exhales his breath on to the appropriate finger positions which he then slowly lets his closed hands descend on the yantra. Some ritual manuals also suggest a ceremony where the yantra is washed with several liquids which is symbolically suggestive of cleansing away impurities. At the end of the worship, the yantra is symbolically forsaken in a rite known as *visarjana* (the dissolution of the yantra). Using a finger gesture (generally yoni mudra) and pronouncing the appropriate mantra the priest dismisses the deity contained in the yantra. The deity is then brought back into the priest's heart from where it was first installed into the yantra either by the priest's inhaling his breath or smelling the flower through which, the deity was first installed during the *prana-pratisthana* ceremony (Khanna, 1994) ^[12].

Mandala

In tantric traditions the term mandala often refers to a space with a special structure that is enclosed and delimited by a circumferential line and into which a deity or deities are invited by means of mantras. This space is often a circle, but may also appear as a square, triangle or another shape. The various shapes and structures of mandalas are based on the traditions of the different schools, ritual applications, the deities worshipped and the practitioner's qualifications, and goals. Mandalas are prepared from various materials including coloured powders, precious stones, fruits and leaves and fragrant substances (Buhemann, 2007) ^[4].

Mandalas are used in ceremonial sequences like consecrating the place of worship, placement of the ritual jar or *kalasha*, placement of the lamp symbolizing god or goddess, preparing the ground for making food offerings or *naivedya*, in the initiatory rites (*diksha vidhi*) and as aids in meditations. The folk design known as *rangoli* which has now turned out to be a purely decorative art was originally meant as a protective device; to protect the house from evil influences. Mandalas are used in secret as well as public ceremonies whereas yantras have more restricted use.

Mudra

Mudra is another characteristic item in *Tantrik* ritual. *Mudra* denotes body posture in yogic practices. The word mudra is derived from 'mud' which means delight or pleasure. The *mudras* (ritual finger and hand poses) are displayed during worship to please the Gods and to make their minds melt with compassion for the worshippers. The five fingers, from thumb to small finger, represent the five elements namely sky or ether, wind, fire, water, and earth. Their contact with each other tends to make the deity favourable and delighted. The *Kalikapurana* states that there are total 108 mudras, out of which 55 are for general worship and 53 for special occasions such as collecting materials, drama and acting (Kane, 1962) ^[11]. In tantric works, *mudras* are practiced secretly under cover of a garment and not displayed or announced in public, as otherwise they become fruitless. *Mudras* in the Hindu and Buddhist tantric works are based on the poses that were evolved in ancient Indian dance and drama and we find their description as earliest extant in *Bharata natyasastra* and as later medieval works in *Abhinayadarpana*.

Nyasa

One of the important items in the tantric ritual and worship is *Nyasa* which means mentally invoking a god or gods. The word *Nyasa* literally means 'placing or depositing in or on' and it is done by touching the chest and other limbs with the tips of the fingers and the palm of the right hand accompanied by mantras. There are several kinds of *nyasa* such as *hamsanyasa*, *pranavanyasa*, *matrkanyasa*, *karanyasa*, *mantranyasa*, *anganyasa*, *pithanyasa*, etc. The aim of *nyasa* is to stimulate the nerve centre and consequently equitable distribution of powers (*shaktis*) so that the mind can keep the bodily centres steady (Basu, 1986) ^[2].

Panchamakaras Sadhana

According to Tantrics the performance of the *panchamakaras* (also known as *panchatattva*) *sadhana* helps one to attain *siddhi*. The expression *panchamakaras* derive its name from the initial letters of the ingredients, *madya* (wine), *mamsa* (meat), *matsya* (fish), *mudra* (cereals) and *maithuna* (coitus). The *Mahanirvana* says that wine which gives joy and dispels the sorrow of men is fire, flesh which nourishes and increase the strength of mind and body is air, fish which increases generative power is water, cereals grown on earth and which are the basis of life are earth and sexual union which is the root of the world and the origin of all creation is ether. The mother of the universe must be worshipped with *Panchatattva* (five elements) which include fire, air, water, earth, and ether.

Shava Sadhana

A peculiar type of Tantric ritual is *Shava Sadhana* (corpse ritual). Only a *Vira Sadhaka* is entitled to perform this rite. On a selected new moon day, a *sadhaka* acquires a fresh dead body in a cemetery which is disease free and one who has died of an accident. The corpse is washed and sanctified with *mantras*, *mudras*, and *nyasa*. The *sadhaka* then sits on the corpse and pours alcoholic drinks into the corpse mouth and feeds it with cooked meat. According to *Vira Cudamani*, the rituals also involves offering of wine and food to the 64 Yoginis and culminates with copulation performed by the *sadhaka* and his female partner over the corpse. It is said that the *sadhaka* will experience terrifying sights and sounds during the course of the rite and if he is not frightened by all these, he will have *mantrasiddhi* (Command over Every Aspect of Life), (Dehijia, 1986) ^[6].

Yoga Sadhana

Yoga is generally classified into four categories, *mantra yoga*, *hatha yoga*, *laya yoga* and *raja yoga*. Each of these forms has eight limbs (*astanga*) which are *yama*, *niyama*, *asana*, *pranayama*, *pratiharya*, *dharana*, *dhyana* and *samadhi*. The first five are known as exterior methods (*bahiranga*), chiefly concerned with the body and the last three are inner method (*antaranga*) employed for the development of the mind.

Mantra yoga is the simplest form of *yoga*. This *yoga* is helpful for an aspirant to gain control over his mind by uttering the mantras as imparted by his guru and by concentrating on images of gods, *yantras*, *mandalas*, emblems, etc. Human mind is controlled by *prana*. When the breadth is kept under control the outward movement of the mind comes to an end. In this connection Hatha yoga prescribes a number of *asanas*, *mudras*, and *pranayama*; by practicing which an aspirant can acquire control of his mind and body. Laya yoga is a higher form of Hatha yoga. It is specially connected with the functioning of *Kundalini* and that is why the tantras lay great emphasis on this form of *yoga*. *Laya yoga* corresponds to the fifth, sixth and seventh stages of the *astanga yoga*, namely *pratyahara*, *dharana* and *dhyana*. By practicing Laya yoga, an aspirant arouses his *Kundalini* and finds his prana merged into *vishwa prana*. Raja yoga is the fourth stage in yoga and corresponds to Samadhi as mentioned in *astanga yoga*. In this state the *sadhaka* loses his own entity in *paramatma* which he finds pervading the universe. It is the highest form of *yoga* through which *nirvikalpa Samadhi* is attained (Bhattacharyya, 2005) ^[3].

The meaning of *Kundalini* is 'coiled-up'. The *Kundalini* is the female energy existing in latent form in every human being. It is the infinitesimal part of the cosmic energy (*shakti*) which lies asleep in the individual *muladhara*. Ranged vertically along it are the six centres called wheels (*chakras*) each of which is conceived as a stylized lotus inhabited by a deity and containing the constituents of both physical and sonic creation. The six *chakras* that lie along the axis of the spine are consciousness potentials and are to be understood as situated not in the gross body but in the subtle or etheric body. These *chakras* are: (i) *Muladhara* (situated at the base of the spine), (ii) *Svadhithana* (situated around the generative organ), (iii) *Manipura* (situated around the navel), (iv) *Anahata* (situated near the heart), (v) *Visuddha* (situated behind the throat) and (vi) *Ajna* (situated between the eyebrows). Through certain prescribed

discipline the *Kundalini Shakti* rises through above six chakras (psychic centres) until it reaches its full flowering that is fusion with the Absolute in *Sahasrara* as *Kula Kundalini*, generally bliss consciousness (*Ananda*) from the union of Shiva-Shakti (Mookherjee, 1971) ^[28].

The Cult of Dashamahavidyas

The *Tantrik* texts speak of ten *Vidyas* or cultic goddesses (*Dashamahavidyas*) whose worship is performed for health, happiness, wealth, and welfare here and liberation from phenomenal bondage hereafter. Regarding the origin of *Mahavidya* many theories have been put forth; the first version is that the *Mahavidyas* are different forms of Goddess Sati, the second version is that they are form of Parvathi, the third version is that they arise from goddess Kali, the fourth version is that they are forms of goddess Durga, and the fifth version is that they are said to arise from goddess *Shataksi* who is identified with Shakambari and Durga (Kinsley, 1998) ^[13]. The ten divinities of *Dashamahavidyas* are classified into three categories, i.e., (i) the extraordinary *vidyas* (*maha vidyas*) where the divinities are Kali and Tara; (ii) the ordinary *vidyas* (*vidyas*) with divinities like *Shodashi* or *Tripurasundari*, *Bhuvaneshvari*, *Chinnamasta*, *Bhairavi* and *Dhumavati*; (iii) adept *vidyas* (*siddha vidyas*) where divinities like *Bagalamukhi*, *Matangi*, and *Kamala* are worshipped. The *Mahavidyas* are in fact the manifestations of *Shakti* or the Great Mother in the process of creation, preservation, and destruction of the universe.

The Cult of sixty-four Yogini

The culture of sixty-four *Yoginis* is the expression of extreme form of tantricism in about 8th century A.D. when the occult and esoteric *Sadhana* reached the peak. Origin of sixty-four *yoginis* is covered in mystery. The vedic and post-vedic literature mention the names of some individual *yoginis*, but never sixty-four manifestations together. The *Puranas* and *Upa-purans* which are the source of different cults are referred to find out the origin of sixty-four *yoginis*, who are basically the mother-goddesses. The Markendeya Purana relates that the gods created goddesses from their own *Shaktis* to assist Durga in killing the demon *Raktavirya*, the ally of *Sumbha*, who had the power to multiply himself into demons of the same stature and prowess from the drops of blood oozing out of his wounds and touching the ground. They were *yoginis*, who drank blood of the demon before felling on the grounds. The same story is recorded in the *Mahabhagavata Purana* to kill *Andhaka* demon, who had the power of creating numerous demons from his oozed blood touching the ground.

Sixty-four *yoginis* are associated with sixty-four *Kalas*, sixty-four *Ratibandhas*, sixty-four *Bhairavas*, sixty-four *Nayikas* and sixty-four emotions of human-being. Name of these sixty-four *yoginis* are: 1. *Chhaya*, 2. *Maya*, 3. *Narayani*, 4. *Brahmayani*, 5. *Bhairavi*, 6. *Maheswari*, 7. *Rudrayani*, 8. *Baseli*, 9. *Tripura*, 10. *Ugratara*, 11. *Charchika*, 12. *Tarini*, 13. *Ambika Kumari*, 14. *Bhagabati*, 15. *Nila*, 16. *Kamala*, 17. *Santi*, 18. *Kanti*, 19. *Ghatbari*, 20. *Chamunda*, 21. *Chandrakanti*, 22. *Madhavi*, 23. *Kachikeswari*, 24. *Anala*, 25. *Rupa*, 26. *Barahi*, 27. *Nagari*, 28. *Khechhari*, 29. *Bhuchari*, 30. *Betali*, 31. *Kalinjari*, 32. *Sankha*, 33. *Rudrakali*, 34. *Kalavati*, 35. *Kankali*, 36. *Bukuchai*, 37. *Bali*, 38. *Dohini*, 39. *Dwarini*, 40. *Sohini*, 41. *Sankata Tarini*, 42. *Kotalai*, 43. *Anuchhaya*, 44.

Kechamukhi Samuha, 45. *Ullaka*, 46. *Samasila*, 47. *Mudha*, 48. *Dakhinai*, 49. *Gopali*, 50. *Mohini*, 51. *Kamasena*, 52. *Kapali*, 53. *Uttarayani*, 54. *Trailokya Byapini*, 55. *Trilochana*, 56. *Nimai*, 57. *Dakeswari*, 58. *Kamala*, 59. *Ramayani*, 60. *Anadi Shakti*, 61. *Balakshatrayani*, 62. *Brahmani*, 63. *Dharani*, and 64. *Matangi*. All these names of sixty-four yoginis are described in *Chandi Purana* of Sarala Das (Choudhury, 2004).

There are five known 64 yogini temples in India and are believed to have been built between the 9th and 12th centuries (Times of India, 2023). These temples are in Hirapur (20 km southeast of Bhubaneswar, Odisha), Ranipur-Jharial (In Balangir district of Odisha), Khajuraho (Chhatarpur district of Madhya Pradesh), Bhedaghat (5 km from Jabalpur, Madhya Pradesh) and Mitaoli (in Morena district of Madhya Pradesh). These yogini temples do not show uniformity in iconography. In Hirapur (Odisha) Yogini temple the images are all standing associated their Vahana, whereas at Ranipur Jharial they are in dancing poses. The images of Bhedaghat (Madhya Pradesh) Yogini temple the images are seated in *Lalitasana* (royal position).



Fig 1: Yogini Temple, Hirapur



Fig 2: Yogini Temple, Mitaoli



Fig 3: Yogini Temple, Ranipur-Jharial



Fig 4: Yogini Temple, Khajuraho

Conclusion

Tantra Sadhana and its literature are very important to the Hindu and Buddhist culture. *Tantra* as a domain of Indic religious tradition has passed through phases of change in its meaning, understanding and historiography. In each phase, it has expanded and modified with time and need. However, all the phases are interlinked and aided in its holistic understanding, which contributed to the creation of its historiography by filling the gaps. This gap was not filled by the initial western scholars who were biased and failed to understand the core philosophy of *tantra* practices. This, however, was mended and amended with the writings of later Western and Indian scholars, who made a sincere effort to grasp the true knowledge and portrayed comprehensive understandings of *tantra*. Now, the *Saiva*, *Buddhist*, *Vaisnava*, and *Jaina tantric* traditions are integral to the religious and cultural landscapes of South, Southeast, Central, and East Asia.

Tantra with its vast literature containing intricate ritualistic and theoretical details occupies a significant place in the religious and social life of India. But *Tantra sadhana* today is much maligned and neglected. According to some, *Tantra* is full of obscenities and superstitions. Some even relegate it to the class of black magic and medieval sexual ritual. This only reflects the ignorance about the science and mysticism of *Tantra*. There is no doubt that some *tantric* works which deal with black magic and apparent obscenities, but they do not form the basis or the main trunk of *Tantra*. This misconception is only due to the fact that the *Tantric* literature is full of symbolism with great esoteric significance which a layman cannot comprehend it.

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