

The archeological evidences and the literary sources are the two basic tools for historians to trace the history of any culture. As far as the origin of the Indian culture is concerned, the remnants of the great Indus valley civilization are the only earliest archeological evidences to trace its antiquity. Some of the cultural artifacts unearthed from these sites provide ample evidences of the cultural and social set up of that time. As regards the literary evidences of the pre-historic Indian culture Vedas are the earliest sources. From a historical point of view, the so called Vedic culture was given its shape by Aryans who invaded the subcontinent thousands of years ago . What they did after invading the Indian territory is that they established a new form of culture by conquering the existing pre-Aryan culture. The term Veda denotes not only a corpus of literature ranging from Vedas proper up to Purānas but also a particular stream of culture, more precisely Vedic sacrifices.

India is a land of various cultures. It is not wise to say that the Indian culture is predominantly Vedic in nature even though it is believed so. But there were some other cultures parallel to it or even before it. Definitely, those streams of thoughts which emerged after the time of Vedas also have a tremendous impact on shaping the Indian culture. Tantrism is believed to be such a stream of culture having its origin back in pre-Aryan times. This paper is an attempt to trace the historical evidences of pre-Vedic origin of Tantrism.

The definition of the word ‘Tantra’

The meaning of the word Tantra varies from discipline to discipline or culture to culture. It is used in Vedas in the sense of looming where as Kōśas* provide numerous meanings for the term including a particular branch of philosophy. It is used to denote particular branch of literature also. It holds true in case of Tantra because the tantric literature has some unique characteristics compared to Vedic and post-Vedic literatures.

Etymologically, the word is derived from the root ‘tan’, meaning to expand. Here, the expansion of knowledge means both the intrinsic and extrinsic expansion. The intrinsic expansion refers to the expansion of consciousness i.e. from the consciousness of a human being to that of a

supernatural awareness.

Tantra as a Śruti

Tantra is reckoned as a part of Śruti. It is Kullukabhata, a celebrated commentator on Manusmṛiti, who first refers to Tantra as a one of the two fold division of Śruti by quoting Hārītas amhita*

. It can be inferred from this statement that by his time Tantras were also accepted as authentic as Vedas.

It is a historically proven fact that Tantras have been ignored or rejected completely by the upholders of Vedic religion. In course of time Tantrism grew stronger as a rival to authority of Vedas. The hope of surviving became lesser. When, it was felt that it is no longer possible for these religions to survive as two separate entities, a compromise was made by adopting materials from each other. By so doing, each group saved their position for once and forever without being extinct

. At present, the state of interaction between these two religions have reached at a point where tracing the source of particular idea is becoming more difficult.

A brief survey of Tantric literature

The oral and textual streams are the two life sustaining aspects of a tradition. As far as the existence of Tantrism is concerned, these two streams play important roles. A great majority of tantric texts are written in Sanskrit. The oral tradition plays an important role in the interpretation of these texts and their practice.

A brief note on Tantric literature

Tantric literature is mainly of three kinds viz. (1) Tantra (2) Āgama and (3) Samhita. The subject matter of these texts is almost same but they are distinct from each other in terms of their conception of reality and its attributes. There are a few more varieties of the Tantra literatures like Kalpasūtras, Paddhatis, Rahasyas etc. but the above three categories are said to be the

important ones.

Main features of Tantra, Āgama and Samhita

1. Tantra (Śākta)-These are the texts dealing with descriptions of different forms of goddesses and the practices of different types of rituals and their governing body of theories.

2. Āgama (Śaiva)-Agamas are Śaivic in nature. Traditionally Āgamas are classified in to three, based on whether they preach dvaita, dvaitādvaita and advaita nature of the ultimate. They are 10 Sivāgamas, 18 Rudrāgamas and 64 Bhairavāgamas. These are dualistic, non dualistic and monistic respectively.

3. Samhita (Vaiṣṇava) - This class of texts is vaiṣṇava in nature. Samhitas are of three kinds namely (1) Vaikhānasa (2) Pāñcarātra and (3) Bhāgavata. The fundamental difference between these groups of texts is Vaikhānasa corpus obsessively sticks on to Vedic line of practices where as Pāñcarātra group are more tantric in its outlook* . Bhāgavata texts are mainly concerned with popularization of the bhakti cult.

Some common features of Āgamas, Samhitas and Tantras.

These three groups of texts share some common features. They are;

1. The terms Āgama, Samhita and Tantra are used as synonyms in these texts.
2. The subject matter of these texts is grouped under four heads namely (1) Jñāna (2) Yōga (3) Kriyā and (4) Caryā. Jñāna section contains the discussion on the philosophical aspects of a given text. Yōga section deals with the Yōga principles and practices. The point is to be noted that the Yōga of Āgamas slightly varies from that of Patanjali. Kriyā section contains procedures of temple construction and rituals associated with it. Caryā portion deals with the practice of varying degrees of rituals. It is to be noted here that this is not a hard and fast rule strictly followed by the Āgamas.
3. Initiation is the only pre-requisite to follow the path prescribed in these treatises. The one who gives the initiation is known as guru and the one who receives it is known as Śiṣya or Sādhaka.
4. Guru is held high among all other divinities in all tantric literatures.
5. The attributes of the ultimate varies depending on the basic principles of a cult to which the text belongs.

Apart from the above categories, the repertoire of tantric literature consists of Buddhist and Jain Tantra works also.

The relative chronology of Tantric works.

It is very difficult to determine the exact date of tantric works owing to the fact that many of them are remaining silent about the authorship and time of its composition. Tantric texts are also considered as revelations just as the Vedic texts. Because of the absence of sufficient information on the authorship of Tantras, scholars have to rely upon the cross-references or deduce the date of a text from the references given in commentaries.

Pāsupatasūtra of Pāsupata sect of Śaivism is the earliest available tantric text which belongs to 2nd cent. AD . It is during the period 400 and 800 AD some of the principal tantric works were composed . Despite relatively early references to the existence of Āgamic Śaivism in the South, it seems that the Śaivāgamas originally flourished in Northern India, which spread to the South later times. Madhyadeśa (an area covering eastern Uttar Pradesh and west Bihar), was, according to Abhinavagupta considered to be the “repository of all scripture” –hence also of the Śaivāgama and the Kulaśāstra . Subsequently, from about the middle of the ninth century, Bhairavāgamas of monistic nature came into existence and all kinds of literary productions reached their Zenith by the time of Abhinavagupta (11th century). Later phase of compositions is marked with emergence of a numerous excellent commentaries (between 9th and 13th centuries) on principal tantric treatises. All of these kinds of literary activities in Kashmir started to decline after the Muslim invasion in the 13th century . Later developments, in terms of rewriting and adding some more material to the existing repertoire, took place in south India, especially in Tamilnadu .

It becomes very clear while examining the chronological list of tantric literature that none of tantric works has been composed before the compilation of Vedas. Moreover, many of the cannons of Tantrism were written after the emergence of major texts of Vedic Literature.

Origin of Tantrism

Scholars hold divergent views regarding the origin and development of Tantrism. The conclusions they reached were mainly relying upon two basic tools of a historical research viz. (1) Archeological findings and (2) Literary evidences.

There are two distinct views of on the origin of Tantrism. They are (1) non-Vedic and (2) Vedic origin of Tantrism. This paper is mainly concerned with the non Vedic origin of Tantrism. The two tools used here to trace the history of non-vedic origin of Tantrism are the archeological evidences and references to Dāsas/Asuras (as a group of people whose practices resemble certain types of tantric rituals) made in Vedic literature.

1. Archaeological evidences

During the year 1922-23 a group of archeologists headed by John Marshall excavated certain sites of Indus valley civilization(2600 and 1900 BCE), especially Mohenjo Daro Harappa which is big mound situated in the Larkana district in sindh. What they found at these sites later turned out to be epoch-making discoveries. The most remarkable findings were some seals which depict animals and divine figures like Śiva and mother goddesses. Among the male gods the figure of Śiva seated on a throne with legs crossed in the fashion of a Yōgin attracted special attention of scholars. R.C Majumdar describes the features of the figure as follows;

‘He wears a horned head-dress, a pectoral round the neck, and a number of bangles. He has three faces, though there may be the idea of fourth, which is, of course, invisible. He sits, with penis erectus, surrounded by a number of animals such as tiger, buffalo, and rhinoceros, with a deer under the seat. Many scholars regard him as a representation of Śiva, for the latter is described as Trimukha (three faced), Paśupati (Lord of animals and Mahāyōgin (the great ascetic).’

This shows the prevalence of the cult of Śiva even at that time. This assumption is proven by the discovery of a great number of various kinds of Śiva Lingas.

Another important aspect of the excavation is the discovery of the figurines of mother goddess. The prevalence of the practice of worship of mother goddess is proved by the discovery of a number of semi-nude female figures, with elaborate head dress and collar. It is worth

mentioning here that the worship of mother goddess was very popular among the primitive people everywhere in the world .

Surprisingly, the mother goddess and the Śiva were worshipped not only in human forms in the remote past but their iconic representations of Yōni and Linga also. The worship of male and female sexual organs forms the part of many other cultures all over the world. In this regard, N.N. Bhattacharya's observations are worthy of mention here. He writes:

'The Zhob and kulli sites in northern and southern Baluchistan, belonging to 4th Millennium B.C, have furnished a fair number of terracotta figurines in which we recognize the earliest embodiment of the primitive mother goddesses. The Kulli figurines finish at the waist on a splayed pedestal, arms bent with hands on the hips, breast usually shown, eyes fashioned from small stones, hair elaborately dressed, ornamented by oval pendants resembling cowrie shells and bangles on arms and wrists. In the cultures to the north and north-east of Quetta grouped around the Zhob river, a number of identical terracotta figurines have been found at the sites of Dabar-kot, Periano Ghundai, Sur-Jangal and Mughal Ghundai.

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That they had a fertility significance is shown by the representation of the cowrie shells and by that of phallus carved in a stone at the mound of Mughal Ghundai near the left bank of the Zhob river and at the neighboring mound of Periano Ghundai on the right bank of the river where a yoni is depicted with great prominence'.

As above mentioned, the instances of the worship of the mother goddesses are found in many of pre-Vedic cultures. It shows the existence of a universal concept of a mother goddess. It is a striking fact that a parallel cult of mother goddess cannot be found anywhere in the Vedas. It may be due to the fact that Vedic culture is predominantly a male dominating culture.

The origin of phallus worship

Agriculture is found to be one of the major activities of people of the Indus valley civilization. They are said to have held certain magical beliefs and rituals for improving the fertility of a field. The belief is that the productivity of the nature can be enhanced or induced by the symbolical representation of human reproduction

. This primitive belief of an agricultural-oriented people led to evolving new form of fertility rites.

The Fertility rites are of several types. One kind of such fertility rites consists of the practice of sexual union either by couples or a group in a field before setting it ready for cultivation. It is believed that by doing so the field will yield to better productions. The iconic representations of Linga and Yōni unearthed from the sites of Indus valley civilization points to the practice of such fertility rites. It is on the basis of the evidences of such practices scholars like Debiprasad Chattopadhyaya, N.N. Bhattacharya etc put forth the idea that the earliest form of tantric rituals can be traced back to primitive fertility rites.

With regards to the tantric rituals of this nature, sexual worship forms the central part of the Vāma and the Kaula sects of Tantrism, but the belief behind the ritual differs from that of fertility rites. It is mainly due to the ignorance of the significance of such rituals in Tantric practices scholars, especially tending to project Tantra with a negative focus. The question may arise as to whether it is possible to establish that tantric form of rituals have its origin in pre Vedic times merely on the grounds of the discoveries of linga and yōni? The answer is very clear that by the mere presence of the Linga and Yōni as a symbol of fertility rites, it is not possible to establish that the tantric form of rituals is as old as Indus valley civilization. But the fact remains yet undeniable that such a sort of rituals was in existence even before the time of the emergence of Vedas. Certainly, the philosophical advancement is found to have achieved gradually.

2. Reference of non Aryan people in Vedic literatures

It has been pointed out by scholars that the word Asura appears many times in Vedic literatures which deserve a close examination. Many of them hold that Asuras are a group of people who were early occupants of the land invaded by Aryans. Their religious practices, it is said, resemble some of tantric ritual practices, especially the practices of so called six kinds of black magic.

While referring to the significance of the term Asura, Asko Parpola in his scholarly essay titled 'The pre-Vedic Indian background of the Śrautha ritulas' introduces another Rgvedic word Dāsa which, according to him, refers to a group of non- Aryans. Here he put forth the idea that there were two kinds of pre-Vedic traditions flourished in the Indian soil. His account of these two traditions is as follows;

‘One of these traditions is that brought to India from the outside, probably around 1200 BC., by the invading Aryans who also introduced the poetry that the Rgvedic hymns perpetuate. The other tradition is that of the Dāsas, the people who occupied the so-called Vedic areas before the arrival of the Aryans in India.’ Subsequently he describes the distinct characteristics of Dāsas as follows;

‘The Rgvedic hymns refer to battles with people called Dāsas and Dayus, who are clearly distinguished from the Rgvedic Aryans themselves (Zimmer 1879, 101, 104-118); they are “non-Aryan” (an-ārya), have a dark skin colour, do not worship Indra (an-indra) or perform the Soma sacrifice (a-yajña), and either do not speak (vi-vāc, an-āśya) or use inimical speech (mrdhra-vāc), which probably refers to ritual silence and curses, respectively; their black magic (yātu) is much feared. In two hymns (RV 7.21.5; 10.99.3); Indra is invoked against, or as the slayer of, “those who have the phallus as their god,” or alternatively “tailed deities” (śiśna-devāh; Wackernagel 1905, II, I, 275), which can be reasonably taken to refer to these same enemies.’

Further he observes that the rituals of Dāsas seem to be tantric in nature .

It is interesting to note here that the six magical rites were in commonplace in pre-vedic primitive culture. So it can be inferred that magical rites might be the earliest form of rituals. Such magical rituals can be seen scattered in many of the Vedic literature also . It shows that the tantric and Vedic form of rituals have some features in common. Therefore it can be concluded that there might be some common source of origin for these two streams of Indian spirituality.

To put the proposed ideas in a nutshell:

- The iconic representation of Siva in Paśupati form unearthed from the sites of Indus valley civilization shows the popularity of Śiva worship at that time. This civilization is said to be earlier than the time of Vedas.
- The existence of the symbols of Linga and Yōni prove the observances of fertility rites. Some scholars suggest that tantric form of worship is originated from the fertility rites. Worship of Siva in his phallus form was in vogue even in pre-Vedic times.
- Other than these rituals there are other evidences of tree worship and worship of animals. Some seals even depict sacrifice of human beings and animals before a goddess .
- Non-Aryan people were often referred to in Vedic literatures as Dāsas, dasyus and asuras. Their religious practices resemble that of certain form of tantric ritual practices.
- The references of six magical rites can be seen in Vedic and tantric literatures, which points to a common source. This presumably is the early non-Aryan tradition.

Ajithan.P.I

Research Scholar, Dept. of Sanskrit Sahitya, S S U S, kalady.

(1) Cf. 'The Śrautasūtras use the word in the sense of a process of a work containing many parts and in that of an act serving the purpose of many other acts. The latter interpretation is confirmed in the Mīmāṃsa tradition according to which Tantra is an act- process- a method of doing or making something. In the Mahābhāshya the word Tantra signifies a branch of knowledge, while the writers of the science of polity and medicine used the word Tanrayukti to mean 'cannons', 'propositions', 'principles', 'expositions', etc. The scientific treatises comprised in India are generally known as Tantras; their sections and subsections also bear the same title. Any system or thought- structure was also known as Tantra. Śankara used the term Kapilasya-tantra to denote the system expounded by Kapila, i.e., the Sāmkhya philosophy and Vaināśikā-tantra to denote the Buddhist philosophy of momentary existence.....Bhāskara-rāya referred to Mīmāṃsa philosophy as Jaimini- tantra in his comm. on Devīmāhātmya. Bhattoji in his Tantrādhikārinirṇaya had used the terms Pūrva-tantra and uttara-tantra to denote the Pūrvamīmāṃsa and Uttaramīmāṃsa respectively'. N.N Bhattacharya, History of the Tantric Religion, pp.1-2, See also P.V. Kane, History of Dharmasastra, Vol-5,pp. 1031-33 and S.C Banerjee, A Brief history of Tantric Literature, p.1.

(2) तन्त्रं कुटुंबकृत्ये स्यात् सद्धान्ते चौषधोत्तमे □

प्रधाने तन्तुवाने च शास्त्रमेदे परच्छिदे □ □

(As quoted from Medinikōśa by E.V Raman Namboothiri in his Introduction to Tantrasamuccaya (Malayalam), p.3.

(3) श्रुतशिखान्तरे □

श्रुतशिखं द्विविधा वैदिकं तान्त्रिकं च □ □

E.V Raman Namboothiri in his introduction to Tantrasamuccaya has pointed out that the extant manuscript does not contain the verse.

(4) नगिमस्तान्त्रिके मशिरस्त्रविधिं प्रोक्त आगमं □ □

नगिमो वखिनं प्रोक्तो मशिरो भागवतं स्मृतं □ □

चतुर् सद्धान्तसहतिं पाञ्चरात्रस्तु तान्त्रिकं □ आनन्दसंहति 8-23-24