

TANTRISM AND WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT IN INDIA

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Abstract: It is the purpose of this paper to explore some aspects of Tantrism, an esoteric system of spiritual advancement by the cultivation of physical and psychic resources rooted in the ancient Hindu philosophical concept of *shakti*. Between 900 and the fifteenth century it not only contributed immensely to feminizing and galvanizing Hinduism, but it also gave rise to a scriptural corpus, rewriting goddess theology, her relation to male deity, her cosmic functions, being at the same time subversive of dominant Brahmanical values and speaking directly to women's experiences.

Keywords: Tantra, Buddhism, Hinduism, goddess, empowerment, shakti, bhakti

Introduction. Tantra from a Western Perspective

Tantra is a heterodox movement within Hinduism and Buddhism, an esoteric system of spiritual advancement carried out by the cultivation of physical and psychic resources rooted in the ancient Hindu philosophical concept of *shakti*. *Shakta* Tantrism gave rise to a scriptural corpus, it rewrote goddess theology, her relation to male deity, her cosmic functions, and it creatively undermined patriarchal assumptions of women's roles. The *shakti*, or life force, manifest both in the make-up of the universe and in women vivified culture and social institutions, restructured family relations and religious ritual kingship.

Although by 600 the female goddess started to compete with male deities, between the ninth and the fifteenth centuries she made a sweeping comeback, feminizing and galvanizing Hinduism. The main consequence of this development was an unprecedented liberalization of attitudes regarding the status of women that marked Buddhism, Hinduism, Jainism and Sikhism

alike. Disciple Ananda, personal attendant and close follower of Buddha is famous for having persuaded Buddha to set up an order of nuns, whereas the *Bhakti* movement of late mediaeval India, hinging on the individual's relation with a personalized deity, gave women the right to be religious teachers in their own right. Kabir and Nanak encouraged women's attainment of saintly status, Lalla, and particularly Mirabai serving as examples of such poets-cum-mystics (Thapar 5-15).

However, most Western exegetes reflecting their own values and hermeneutical lens comment negatively on such pro-woman developments which they think do not reflect women's lives or accomplishments, many Western scholars averring that Tantra is an oppressive movement in which women are degraded and marginalized, as the human counterparts of the powerful yoginis of Tantric iconography were abject prostitutes, low-caste women totally devoid of agency, whose sexual services were exploited for ritual ends. David Snellgrove in his *Hevajra Tantra* and Mircea Eliade in *Yoga: Immortality and Freedom* underscore time and again the fact that the more depraved and debauched the woman, the more fit she was for the rite. This, however, proves to be a fundamental misunderstanding of the cultural roles of such women in Indian society.

As ethnographer Frédérique Marglin argues in *Wives of the God-King* (1985) women of low caste such as dancers, courtesans, washerwomen may occupy a low rung socially, yet their cultural meaning is high as they master the powers of fertility and auspiciousness and they possess and embody energy, transformative power, *shakti*. It was from such sites that Buddhism and Hinduism were receiving infusions of cultural energy at the time of the Tantras--a particular synthesis of soteriology, archaic religious practices, symbols and rites of fertility being all part of the genius of the Tantras. For the great Romanian historian of religions, Mircea Eliade, Tantra stands for a new "valorisation" of the powers of nature, a vindication of the human body and sexuality, which had been repressed by the dominant patriarchal society; it represents a rekindling of remnants belonging to the foundational, most primordial layer of Indian consciousness, dating back to the pre-Aryan days, when popular religion and worship of the Goddess had not yet been overtaken by the priestly, androcentric Aryans; it embodies the "great underground current of autochthonous spirituality". (202-12; 259)

Whilst some Western scholars acknowledge the egalitarianism and a few of them even the gender-inclusiveness of the Tantras, they keep to their sexist perspectives unaware of the

radical inconsistency of their views: the Tantric methods serve only for male liberation and privilege men while exploiting women. The evidence gathered by ethnographers, anthropologists in the last century witness the fact that women not only participated fully in the Tantric movement but that this meant an unprecedented valorisation of the feminine in Hindu and Buddhist religions, advancing at the same time a new and revolutionary model of partnership between the sexes, one of cooperation and mutual enhancement, a transformative and liberating relationship.

Westerners like Sir John Woodroffe (better known as Arthur Avalon) and Lilian Silburn who spent long periods of time in India as Tantric novitiates, together with a whole array of Indian scholars reported on the great respect in which women were held in both Hindu and Buddhist Tantrism. Tantric women were independent, rebellious, they flouted conventional constraints, they served as gurus, they performed rituals of initiation (*diksa*) and initiation performed by them was considered to be even more efficacious than that given by men; they were even regarded as preferable to men as gurus. In her anthropological fieldwork on women ascetics in Varanasi, Lynn Teskey Denton found female Tantrics who were independent women, choosing their own male partners and life styles. (Shaw 6)

The views held by Western scholars are typical reactions to aspects of India that seemed alien, repugnant and incomprehensible to their own outlooks; it is a reaction marked by lack of cultural empathy, on the one hand, and on the other, it is a prude expression of Victorian indignation not only at nonmarital sexual activity but above all at the religious exaltation and worship of women. In this context, Swiss theologian Hans Küng remarks that religious awe of women is so antithetical to Jewish and Christian values that it poses a major barrier to understanding. (Shaw 9)

Tantras epitomize a cultural realm animated by dualities entirely different from those shaping the Western mind: the polarities of purity/pollution and auspiciousness/inauspiciousness, and not the prevalent Western dualism of nature/culture, matter/spirit, humanity/divinity. The Western understanding of personhood regards the self as substance bounded by flesh that may undergo certain changes but retain an identity throughout, allowing a process of commodification that turns the self into an object that can be used as a means to an end. Yet, this commodified version of the self is at variance with traditional Indian and Buddhist understandings of personhood. The concept of women's bodies being subjected to promiscuous uses implies the

Cartesian dualism of mind and body that is alien to the Indian context where there prevail more fluidic and dynamic concepts of the human body and of its exchanges and complex interactions with the outside world, biological, ritual or social.

Embodiment, which is understood to be not a 'soul' in a 'body', but rather a multilayered mind-body continuum of corporeality, affectivity, cognitivity, and spirituality whose layers are subtly interwoven and mutually interactive. This nonessentialist self ... the site of a host of energies, inner winds and flames, dissolutions, meltings, and flowings that can bring about dramatic transformations in embodied experience and provide a bridge between humanity and divinity. It is in light of this model of a dynamic, permeable self, without fixed boundaries, that the Tantric Buddhist paradigm must be interpreted. (Shaw 11).

In his *History of Sexuality* Foucault identifies specific strategies whereby sexuality became an object of knowledge and thus a particular instrument of wielding power in the industrializing West, beginning in the seventeenth century as part of the rise of specific movements and disciplines. Foucault himself contrasts the Western objectification, pathologisation and manipulation of sexuality (*scientia sexualis*) with the *ars erotica* of the East which he characterizes as sexuality developed and explored for its own sake, for a bliss that leads to transcendence (57-58).

Tantric Hinduism and Buddhism offer a model not of exploitation but of complementarity and mutuality and hence, the erotic being of woman was not condemned and far from being conceived of as a sin, the sexual act was symbolic of creative energy. Tantra means a distinctive understanding of maleness and femaleness and of the ideal, spiritually transformative relation between them. At the same time, Tantra encourages a sense of reliance on women as a source of spiritual power.

The Novelty of Tantrism

Tantra Buddhism represents the most vibrant cultural achievement of the Pala period in India (eighth-twelfth centuries) a time of flourishing monastic universities. Tantric Buddhism arose in protest against the mainstream Mahayana Buddhism, outside the powerful Buddhist monasteries, yet building heavily on their achievements; initially they were championed by lay people desiring the reform of Mahayana, envisaged as a return to classical Mahayana universalism, a protest against ecclesiastical privilege and arid scholasticism and for making

Buddhism a more accessible and socially inclusive system. In several ways, this reformation attempt is reminiscent of the Western monastic reform of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries and of the emergence of canons and canonesses regular who defied the cloistered and vow-centred monasticism, in order to preach and be part of their communities--Premonstratensians, Beguines, Franciscan friars, Poor Clares, Cathars, etc (cf. Bynum 14-21). Self mastery was no longer to be tested solely within the austere precincts of the monastery, but in the midst of family life, in the tumult of the marketplace, in the spectacle of the cremation grounds or in isolated wilderness. Desire, passion, ecstasy were no longer demonized but they were to be embraced on the religious path, a major paradigm of Tantric meditation and practice being the mastering of desire by full sexual intimacy leading to enlightenment.

Tantrism gained popular and royal support, made its way into the monastic university curriculum at Nalanda, Vikramsila or Somapuri (Shaw 21). Tantrics drew adherents from competing faiths, expanded geographically into every region of the subcontinent and continued on a triumphal sweep of the Himalayas, East Asia and South-East Asia. A new body of scriptures was created, for which the status of divine revelation was claimed. Tantra takes over Mahayana Buddhism's creed in emotions as the nourishing substratum in which the lotuses of compassion, generosity and sensitivity can take root and blossom but goes beyond it when it perceives passion, desire and the experience of the senses as pure.

Mahayana decrees that the gradual purification is processual, and therefore many lifetimes of arduous meditation and perfecting of wisdom, compassion and patience are necessary for its attainment. Tantra Buddhism revolutionizes this belief by insisting that enlightenment is attainable in a single lifetime and that it consists in a fearless confrontation of every aspect of the psyche--anger, desire, fear, guided throughout by an experienced guru. At the outset of the path the guru performs an initiation *abhiseka* that prepares the disciple to receive esoteric knowledge ("no psychic stone is left unturned": long repressed memories, childhood traumas and longings, buried sources of pain from the present and previous lifetimes), helping the disciple to get rid of all kinds of mystifying pretensions, personal or cultural. Tantra offers many practices but no single method or path is formally required to cut through ordinary awareness as directly as possible to attain enlightenment in a single lifetime (Shaw 21-27).

Tantric methodologies create with language, image and motion an aesthetic realm that the practitioner initially enters by means of meditation and ritual. A well-known path and

technique is deity yoga (*devayoga*) in which the meditator envisions herself as a deity, the mandala being central to such practices of meditation. The celestial mandala is a means of visualizing the perfection of the world and is one of the templates used for remodelling the practitioner's subjective reality--it becomes the objective correlative of enlightened vision. The basic pattern of the mandala is a palace resting on a lotus flower that rises out of the cosmic sea and analogically the journey through the mandala symbolically asserts the unity of the universe with its worldly, bodily and celestial realms, recreating thus the path to enlightenment. (24-26) The meditator enters by the eastern gate and encounters a series of Buddhas that represent different aspects of the personality and their enlightened counterparts. Somatically, the meditator envisions her body as containing the entire world, with its subterranean, earthly and celestial spheres. She then mentally arrays the divine yoginis within the world, thereby turning her body into a yogini mandala. Visualization and imagination are used to turn the five poisons of self-centred existence into the five nectars of Buddha-wisdoms: anger, arrogance, desire, ignorance and jealousy, become mirrorlike wisdom, wisdom of equality, all-accomplishing wisdom, and panoramic wisdom of all encompassing space or discriminating awareness.

Female Buddhas added a dramatic dimension to Buddhist soteriology and iconography as they confirmed the possibility of attaining Buddhahood in a female body. Although earlier Buddhist texts aver that women can attain enlightenment they also decree that there could never be a female Buddha. When a woman becomes enlightened (a *bodhisattva*) she completely relinquishes womanhood, because on the throne of enlightenment she is never reborn as a woman.

Goddess Theology and Indian Women

We cannot underline enough the importance held by the Tantric system in furthering the status of women, because particularly in the most revered codes of conduct--*dharmasastra*--women's subordination is emphasised and although both in *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* we come upon idealized versions of femininity, the epics prevalently advance male interests and causes. (Gupta 87-108)

It certainly represents a first effort of its kind in Hindu religion, aiming to introduce an ethos of equality and respect for women, thus attempting to take a stand against social evils besetting women such as wife beating and sexual abuse of women. As the *Kularnava Tantra*

states: “One should not beat a woman even with a flower, even if she is guilty of a hundred misdeeds, one should not mind the faults of women and should make known only their good points” (7.97-98). All aspects of women’s anatomy and physiology are considered sacred; they can become priestesses, gurus, hold positions of power, as female saints, they can impart initiation--*diksa*. All in all, it is no exaggeration to call it a “pro-woman code” as it marks a subversion and undercutting of the dominant Brahmanical values and it is a rare instance of gender inclusive *dharma* in Indian religious history, speaking directly to women’s experiences.

The *bhakti* movement in its turn as a synthesis of beliefs advancing the unconditional love between humans and divinity, further subverted gender and caste divides, so that even *sudras* (the lowest caste of labourers) could become gurus. *Bhakti* devotion represents a non-violent, yet firm and functional defiance of the brahminical canon, which first decreed that *jnana* or knowledge through the sacred texts is the only means to salvation and subsequently denied to *sudras* and women the right to seek or acquire such knowledge (Chitnis 259).

Devi-Mahatmya, the classic text of Hindu goddess worship, one of the major religious documents produced on the subcontinent features Devi as a singular and unique *Shakti*. The most celebrated story in the text is that of the creation of the goddess out of a flood of energy emitted by the male gods as they were outpowered by a demon and on the point of being shunned from their celestial paradise. Out of that spectacular pool of energy a woman was born, who thereupon was given an animal vehicle, weapons and thus she was created to contain the *shakti* of the universe and, moreover, was placed above the gods with her power to delude and defeat the demons. It is impressive how the goddess was not only empowered by gods with their potency but was also invested with the most ponderous task, that of restoring the balance of the cosmos.

The great *Shakti* is represented as Durga, Kali, Tripura, Camunda, Bhairavi, or the goddess Kundalini, who dwells in the subtle body of the adept. She is acclaimed as the highest principle of the cosmos--the power of creation, preservation and destruction, the ground of being. The goddess herself explains that her function is to intervene like an *avatara*, an incarnation and to restore the balance of the cosmos. Although all goddesses of the Hindu pantheon embody the *shakti* of the male gods, they are only partial *shaktis*, never given the occasion to manifest their power fully and openly, but Durga represents the epitome of the full blossoming of the *shakti* concept in its totality (Khanna 111-112).

Durga, the overarching example of *shakti* embodiment in the Hindu pantheon, a vessel of polarities, can be both benign and maternal but when outpowered as a battle queen she will split into her most terrible form as Kali:

At the time of giving birth she is a mother
At the time of worship, she is a divinity,
At the time of union, she is a consort
And at the time of death she is Kalika herself. (*Maharthamanjary* 7)

However, the creativity of Tantras is boundless in iconographic and ritualistic practices. One of the most exclusive deities of Tantra is Tripurasundari, often referred to simply as Tripura, who is a most sublime personification of the goddess, worshipped as an iconic symbol—*Srichakra*, consisting of nine interlacing triangles, two rings of lotus petals and a square centred around a *bindu* (a sacred symbol or energetic vortex that is hailed as the point of creation or where the turning of multiplicity into oneness is effected), recalling the two dynamic flows of the cosmos—emanation and involution. She has a triadic nature, as Bhakacharaya, the great authority on mother Goddess devotion and theology, explains: “There are three gods, three vedas, three fires, three energies, three notes, three worlds, three abodes, three lotuses, three categories of Brahman and three letters of mantra. Whatever in this world is threefold as the three objects of human desire, O Goddess, your name is in accordance with all these” (qtd. in Khanna 112).

The most fundamental teaching of the Tripura theology is that the entire universe is androgynous, composed of the two opposite but complementary categories—male and female, underscoring that at all levels of the manifest creation, from the minutest atom of the universe to entire galaxies, everything has this androgynous kernel and is an amalgamation of the two principles of creation: Siva the male principle static and inert, pure consciousness in the all-inclusive transcendent essence and Shakti the dynamic, energetic aspect of creation, her potent energy empowering her male consort. Siva being devoid of energy is unable to accomplish anything unless empowered through his union with Shakti.

Several sources nevertheless reiterate that the power and strength of the holy trinity comes from the goddess alone, as she appropriates the attributes of the holy trinity, she thus not only contains the functions of the trinity but transcends them.

The tradition of female saints is not uncommon in Tantric tradition, where we often come upon semidivine and legendary women such as Lopamudra who started her own lineage and transmitted her knowledge to her husband, sage Agastya or Muktakesini, a seeress and prophet of the cult of goddess Tripura in the eleventh century. Women were endowed with the authority to become priestesses and gurus, to initiate disciples but also to act as the purest source of the transmission of sacred revelation and traditional knowledge. The author of *Maharathamajari* recounts how a yogini revealed the text to him in a dream. The text of the *Kaulajnana Nirnaya* speaks of the yogini kaula sect. It embodies an orally transmitted tradition by a line of female ascetics who were accomplished (*siddha*) in the *kaula sadhana* tradition originating in Assam in Northeastern India (Khanna 120). Surviving stories about female Tantrics tell of magical and ritual attainments, many of them serving as gurus: Dinakara was an expert in ritual gazes (the ability to control people, animals and objects with one's stare), she had the power of flight and like many other women Tantrics had other *siddhis* or supernatural gifts.

Dombiyogini, another guru, was a master of the gazes but also of the four types of ritual activities (peaceful, prospering, conquering and destroying) and she could walk on water. Lakshminkara, Yasodatta or Yasobhadra wrote manuals giving instructions on the use of mantras, on rituals to accomplish specific ends and imparted detailed esoteric knowledge, ritual substances and action. (Shaw 79; 84-5)

Tantric women introduced rituals that feature even nowadays in Tibetan Buddhism. They created new female deities such as the Wrathful Red Tara presented as Buddha Tara practice introduced by Vajravati and the Severed-headed Vajrayogini practice introduced and taught by Laksminkara, Mekhala and Kanakhala.

In Tibetan Buddhism the foremost female Buddha is Vajrayogini, whose iconographic rendition is dramatic in the extreme, she looks ferocious, blood red with flowing black hair, with bone ornaments, dancing and brandishing a skull-cap full of ambrosia. Sometimes she tramples corpses underfoot. *Vajra* in the name of the goddess is a Sanskrit word meaning both "thunderbolt" and "diamond" and thus representing absolute firmness of spirit and spiritual power, a great spiritual and ritual tool symbolically used in Buddhism, Jainism and Hinduism. In the Tantric traditions of Buddhism, *vajra* is a symbol for the nature of reality, or *sunyata*, indicating endless creativity, potency, and skilful activity.

The Severed-Headed Vajrayogini is a spectacular iconographic representation detailing some recurrent motifs of Tantric philosophy: the illusory character of duality--the couple at Vajrayogini's feet representing the originating couple, the duality from whom all creation springs but which she mocks, being herself the unique source of everything; swords and knives do not signify aggression but they are symbolic of the arduous path of removing obstacles to omniscience; arrows stand for clear understanding and penetration of the ultimate experience. What is severed with the sword of wisdom is the narrow and arrogant ego and what is celebrated in such images is the triumph over the self-centredness at the root of all suffering; dualistic thinking is cut off in order to reach a level of direct knowing beyond conceptual dualities.

This iconographic hypostasis of the Vajrayogini can certainly be related to the representations of the Goddess beheading her consort, although this is an instance of symbolical castration that frees him to copulate with her. The Goddess is sometimes holding a severed head while engaging in intercourse with the corpse of Siva or straddling a copulating couple. We can cite several other mythical instances of death as an erotic release or of the severed phallus of Siva as an instrument of universal fertility, the cosmogonic dismemberment of Purusa or the self-sacrifice of the Mother Goddess. In an ancient ceremony the queen copulates with a dead stallion or in a medieval myth Siva dances with the corpse of Sati. (Doniger 94;115)

Another revolutionary novelty featuring in Tantra iconography is the representation of Buddha couples--male and female Buddhas--in *maithuna* (sacred union). A lot of ink has been spilt on the sexual yogas and in this area Western exegesis was often contaminated by sensationalism and yet again by lack of empathy and of properly contextualized cultural knowledge. Practices preparatory to the sexual yogas are meant to inculcate a sense of universal responsibility, of compassion and understanding and of abandoning the illusion of a separate, isolated ego. Tantric union involves passion and intimacy without hysterical attachment; it is a passion free from desire and common lust--sex in reverse. As it is aimed at annihilating the ego it involves detachment, the yoga of union being predicated upon the ability of the fluidic body to be infused by the energy and mental states of another person. These mental and spiritual aspects of the union are paramount since in the process the karmic and spiritual destinies are merged, hence the name of the practice: *karmamudra*. (Shaw161-171)

Only when sensuality is truly satiated, entirely internalized is lust truly conquered and, when truly united, there is no longer desire. As Alan Watts remarks the Tantric androgyne

symbolizes a state in which the erotic has no longer to be sought or pursued because it is always present in its totality. (204-205) Yet again, in the sexual yogas the threatening dominance of the male principle is not only challenged but also turned on its head as the Tantric goddess is represented as a life-giving figure that revives the corpse of her husband and infuses him with her own powers. As we have already seen the supreme goddess is a vessel of polarities, she is concomitantly erotic and maternal, but by reversing the flow of energies and power from the female to the male, from the orthodox tradition to the esoteric, Tantric myth and ritual create a washback effect on mainstream Hinduism and Buddhism to release some of the tensions between male authority and female power--be it at the celestial level from Shakti to Siva and on earth from high caste male to low caste male or woman (Doniger 78).

The attempt to actualize the divinity of women on the social level, to introduce an ethos of equality and reverence for them is undoubtedly one of the most compelling consequences of Tantrism. One of its most important traits is that women share with their goddess a continuity of being: all women irrespective of caste, creed, age, status are regarded as the physical incarnations of *Shakti*, they are already at birth vehicles of an intrinsic *Shakti*.

In several Tantra texts we can catch glimpses of this pro-women code, as ordinary and secular women are regarded to be on a par with their male partners:

Every woman in this world, is, indeed my [human] form (*Durgasaptasati* 6.2)
All women are Thee, and all men are myself, O beloved
Merely by knowing this, the devotee attains spiritual powers (*Niruttara Tantra* 6.4)
Every woman is born into the family (Kula) of the Great Mother. (*Kularnava Tantra* 11.64).

Woman is the creator of the universe.
The Universe is her form
Woman is the foundation of the world
She is the true form of the body,
Whatever form she takes
Is the superior form.
In woman is the form of all things.
Of all that lives and moves in the world.
There is no jewel rarer than woman,
There is not, nor has been, nor will be

There is no kingdom, no wealth,
To be compared with a woman
There is not, nor has been, nor will be,
Any holy place like unto a woman.
There is not, nor has been, nor will be
Any holy yoga to compare with woman,
No mystical formula, nor asceticism to
Match a woman.
There are not, nor has been, nor will be
Any riches more valuable than her.
(*Shaktisamagama Tantra*, ch.2 13.43-49 qtd. in Khanna 116)

As the body is seen as divine and a miniature cosmos, all its aspects, pertaining to physical appearance or physiology are revered, her breath, physical acts, postures, her bodily substances, including her menstrual blood are all sacred and loci of purity. It can also be placed in the context of the Kundalini Shakti yoga and the intricate symbolic code of the chakras, energy vortices and subtle channels. Accordingly, there is an etheric double behind the corporeal frame that manifests subtle forms as pulsations of cosmic energy. The Shakta Tantras apply a subversive gloss to the orthodox brahmanical traditions concerning the female body and its generative powers. The idea of menstrual pollution is linked to the episode from the Dharma Sastra of Indra slaying the demon Vrtra, and later on being punished for the crime as Vrtra has assumed the status of a learned Brahmin; he is aware of his heinous deed and runs for protection, asking the women to take upon themselves part of this guilt of Brahminicide:

The menstruation of women
Emanates from her body,
How can it be impure?
[It is a substance] through which [the devotee]
Attains the supreme state. (qtd. in Khanna 118)

Conclusions

Indian women under Western eyes are a mind-boggling intermeshing of low legal status, of ritual contempt, yet at the same time they are subjects of deification and of sophisticated sexual partnership. The Women-goddess equation performed in the Tantras continues to haunt

Indian women and to inspire their social, political and cultural aspirations. The esoteric, subversive beliefs fuel many extraordinary expressions of the Indian religious and artistic genius. We still have Shakti pujas, during which unmarried girls are worshipped on certain auspicious days during the autumn festival of goddess Durga, particularly in Kolkata where they are looked upon as incarnations of the weapon-wielding Durga. In the Suvasini Puja both married and unmarried women are worshipped by their husbands as living incarnations of Lalita or Tripura. At the beginning of the twentieth century, following the model of Tantrics some centuries before him, a man has passed his spiritual prowess to his wife (SriRamakrishna to Sarada Devi, who is considered to be a divine embodiment). Madhu Khanna relates in her study that she has come across several Tantric yoginis of a very high calibre. Her Holiness Madavi Ma had five male gurus who passed their spiritual mantle to her who is regarded as a living human icon of Goddess Kali and Tara: a guru, a ritualist and a healer.

On an artistic level, in his famous study *The Women Painters of Mithila*, Yves Vequaud finds a distinct Tantric vein underlying a unique genre of painting handed down from generation to generation among women in the Indian state of Bihar (whose capital Patna is the ancient Pataliputra--the seat of emperor Ashoka, who made Buddhism an official religion and who contributed so massively to the dissemination of Mahayana Buddhism throughout Asia; Buddha was Mithili, as was his contemporary Mahavira, founder of Jainism). The first to draw attention to this expressive manifestation of Indian art was W. G. Archer who happened to travel in the area in the aftermath of the 1934 earthquake, which broke open the rural mud houses and consequently exposed their interior beauty to outsiders. (9-31)

From times immemorial such paintings were executed on the mud walls of women's homes, illustrating a variety of religious and ritualistic practices ranging from Hinduism, folk-Buddhism but having a common Tantric foundation. The main iconographic motifs recurring in the *Kohbar* (marriage painting) usually depict Shiva and his erect member and Durga as *yoni*, the six surrounding yonis standing for the endless possibilities of the feminine principle or Vishnu the Preserver and his 10 avatars; the divine couples, Rama and Sita or Krishna and Radha; Chinnamasta, the decapitated Kali intoxicated with divine energy feeding upon her own blood, while drenching two others of her aspects, symbolic of the illusory character of duality (57-58); Kali as Divine energy dancing on the body of her sleeping consort, Shiva (59-60).

Vequaud's reading of Mithili Women's painting was criticized by ethnographers like Henning Brown for indulging in "free-floating symbolic interpretation and bad ethnography", revealing the Western fascination with India's Tantric tradition, so that "Tantric discourse tends toward hegemonic domination of the whole field: anything shakti, anything about Devi, anything valorising women, even anything about reproduction is potentially captured by Tantric discourse".

Despite such criticism, we cannot dismiss the fact that this traditional genre of painting does certainly celebrate the feminine principle in cosmic and social terms and detecting the Tantric streak in the generative structures and artistic genealogy of that particular genre of painting is certainly not to be contested or regarded as too far-fetched.

Such occurrences, cultural or social stand witness to the boundless creativity of the Tantras. Not only did they undercut dominant patriarchal brahminical values, acknowledging femaleness as ontologically primary but they also show that the Shakta tradition is still speaking directly to women's experiences and to their innermost dreams and aspirations, a "rare instance of gender-inclusive dharma" (Khanna 121) in Indian religious history.

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