

Tāntric Cult In Eastern India

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The Tantras may rightly be termed as “so many encyclopaedias of the knowledge of their time” as they deal with all matters of “common belief and interest from the doctrine of the origin of the world to the laws which govern kings and the societies...medicine and science generally. The Tantra is...the repository of esoteric belief and practices, particularly those relating to yoga and *mantra-tattva*”.¹ In them we find the description of the Supreme Being, the creation and destruction of the Universe, the classification of creatures, the origin and worship of the gods, the heavenly bodies different worlds and hells, man and hells, man and woman, *cakra* (centre of the human body), *dharma*, *āśramas* and the sacraments, *mantra*, *yantra* (magic diagram on which to worship), various forms of spiritual training, *Japa*, *Vrata*, worship (internal and external), medicine, science and many other things.

It has been argued that the Tantras are a recent Śāstra and are largely the creation of the people of Eastern India which is supposed to be its stronghold. The antiquity of the Tantra has, however, been proved beyond doubt to be as ancient as the Śruti itself.² In fact, not only in Eastern India, But throughout the whole of India the upper classes of Hindu community are governed by the Tantric religion as far as initiation (*dīkṣā*) is concerned. There are Śāktas, Vaiṣṇavas and Śaivas all over the country. The Śāktas are initiated by the Śakti-mantra, the Vaiṣṇavas by the Viṣṇu-mantra and the Śaivas by the Śiva-mantra. All these mantras are the exclusive properties of the Tantra. Like Mithilā, Madras, Bengal, Bombay, Kāśī (Banaras), Kashmir, Assam and other such notable places of India have Śāktas, Vaiṣṇavas and Śaivas in a large number following the Tāntric system. It is, therefore, absurd to argue that this system is the exclusive creation of the people of

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1. Bhattacharya, *Mātrkābheda Tantram*, Intro. 3, Avalon, *Principles of Tantras (Tantra-tattva)* pref. lff, 49-50
 2. Bhattacharya, Intro. 7ff, Avalon, Intro. 58ff, D. N. Bose, *Tantras : Their Philosophy and Occult Secrets*, pp. 2ff, Upendra Thakur, *Studies in Jainism and Buddhism in Mithilā*, chap. II, pp. 29-38.

इतिहास और पुरातत्त्व : ८३

Eastern India only. Sādhakas have appeared on the scene almost everywhere, and the Maithila Sādhakas and Paṇḍitas, like those of Bengal and other places, have “only prepared compendia and developed the practical side of it to a considerable extent” for the benefit of humanity at large.¹

It is interesting to note that the Śakti-devatā (the Mother-Goddess) is worshipped and revered and the Śaktipīṭhas (the seat of the Mother-Goddess) are established in almost all parts of India : Kāmakhya is worshipped at Kāmarūpa; Vindhyaśinī on the Vindhya hills; Yogamāyā and Pūrṇamāsī at Vṛndāvana; Annapūrnā, Saṅkaṭā, Tripurābhairavī, sixtyfour Yoginīs, Kālabhairavī, Durgā, Śītalā, Maṅgalā and other Devis at Kāśī; Guhyesvari in Nepal; Gāyatri and Sāvitrī in Rajputana; Lalitā at Prayāga; Ugratārā in Mithilā (Tirhut); Jayakālī in Calcutta; Jvālāmukhī² and Chinnamastā in and near Jalandhar; Kṣīrabhavānī near Kashmir and other Devis in almost all parts of India. Vimalā, Sarasvatī, Bhuvaneśvari, Kālī and Lakṣmī are worshipped and paid obeisance to in Utkala, the seat of Lord Jagannātha.³ To say that Raghunandana Bhaṭṭācārya of Bengal was the first to prescribe for the worship of Durgā, as provided for in the Tantra, would be quite wrong and misleading, for we know that previous to him many other thinkers in Mithilā, Bengal and elsewhere had done so. Vidyāpati. Śrīdatta, Harinātha Upādhyāya, Vidyādhara, Ratnākara, Bhojadeva, Jimūtavāhana, Halāyudha, Vācaspati Miśra, Mādhavācārya and even Saṅkarācārya had admitted the authority of the Tantra while explaining philosophical doctrines. Vācaspati Miśra, the celebrated Maithila thinker and commentator on the six Darśanas, has in his commentary on the Patañjali-Darśana recommended *Dhyāna* of Devatās as prescribed in the Tantras.⁴ Moreover, many well-known books written in Mithilā and elsewhere, before the age of Raghunandana, contain provisions for Durgā-Pūjā, such as the *Durgā-bhakti-taraṅgiṇī*, *Saṁvatsaraṅgī*, *Kālakaumudī*, *Jpotsāṅava*, *Smṛti-sāgara*, *Kalpa-taru*, *Kṛtya-masāṅava*, *Kṛtyaratnākara*, *Kṛtyatattvāṅava*, *Durgābhaktiprakāśa*, *Kāla-nirṇaya*, *Pūjā-ratnākara* and others pertaining to the worship of Durgā and Kālī.⁵

The Bengali practice of worshipping earthen images of Durgā or Kālī with great pomp and ceremony is followed all over eastern India. It is true that this practice does not receive the same favour, as in Mithilā and Bengal, in other parts of India but it is also true that She is everywhere worshipped in *ghaṭas* (earthen

1. Bhattacharya, 7, Avalon. 5 ff, Also, C. S. B. Dasgupta, *Obscure Religious Cults*, 13ff.
2. Jvālāmukhī, Caṇḍī. Tārā, Kālī, Durgā etc. are also worshipped in Mithilā at different places. (Vide-U. Thakur, *op cit*, p. 31 fn 5).
3. For further details, see Avalon, 63-64, U. Thakur, *Op. cit*, pp. 31-32
4. Cf. Avalon, 67.
5. For other details, see *Ibid.*, 65ff, U-Thakur, pp. 31-32.

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jars). Shrines containing her images are reverentially visited, nine-day *Vratas* performed, fasts duly observed and the sacred *Caṇḍī* read on the Mahāṣṭamī day. Even now women folk bathe in the rivers or tanks early every morning for the first nine days of the bright fortnight of the month of Āśvina and worship the small images of the Devī, made of clay, with all devotion. All these undoubtedly show that this practice of worshipping the Devī has been followed from times immemorial.

The most peculiar characteristic of this religion is that women and Śūdras are not at all prohibited from practising the Sādhana. The *Rudrayāmala* says that a woman may also be a Guru who is a Kulīna (practising Kulācāra), of auspicious appearance, fair-faced and lotus-eyed, endowed with intellect, calmness of mind, proficient in mantras and in their meanings, ever engaged in japa and devoted to the worrhip of her Iṣṭadevatā.¹ The *Gautamiya Tantra* declares that the people of all castes, irrespective of sex, may receive its mantras.² In the *Cakra* there is no caste at all, even the lowest Caṇḍāla being deemed, whilst therein, higher than the Brāhmaṇas. The *Mahānirvāṇa Tantra*³ says : "That low Kaula who refuses to initiate a Caṇḍāla or a Yavana into the Kaula dharma, considering them to be inferior, or a woman out of disrespect for her, goes the downward way. All two-footed beings in this world, from the *vipra* (Brāhmaṇa) to the inferior castes, are competent for Kulācāra." This is no doubt the most revolutionary aspect of this religion which in the course of centuries attracted millions of followers to its fold.

Another great factor that contributed to its tremendous growth and popularity is that in the Tantras, the duties of each of the castes as well as those of the king are not prescribed much differently from Manu, the great law-giver. The *Mahānirvāṇa Tantra* speaks very highly of the family-life. It rigorously prescribes that one should never be allowed to take to ascetic life who has children, wife or such like near relations to maintain. We have in the ninth chapter of the *Mahānirvāṇa Tantra* (*Samskāras*) "sacraments from conception until marriage", entirely in consonance with Brāhmaṇic texts. In the tenth chapter we have the direction for the disposal and the cult of the dead (*Śrāddha*). "A peculiarity of the Śāktas in connction with marriage consists in the fact that side by side with the Brāhma marriage for which the Brāhmaṇic prescriptions are valid, [there is also a Śaiva marriage, that is, a kind of marriage for a limited period which is only permitted to the members of the circle (*cakra*) of the initiates. But children out of such marriage are not legitimate and do not inherit."⁴ Thus, the Brāhmaṇic law also applied to the Śāktas and as such the section concerning civil and criminal law

1. *Ibid.* 807-08 ff.

2. Cf. "Sarva varnādhikāraśca nārīnām yogameva ca".

3. Chap, XIV, Vs. 137 and 134.

4. Avalon, 117. It is, however, incorrect to call them illegitimate children. on the other hand, off-springs of a Brāhma marriage are preferential inheritors.

in the eleventh and twelfth chapters of the *Mahānirvāṇa Tantra* substantially agrees with Manu.

The prevalent Vedic ritualism of the day was too powerless to face the new communities springing up all over the country. From the Karmakāṇḍa we have, there, to turn to Jñānakāṇḍa in the Vedic-religion which finds elaborate representation in the Upaniṣads. Besides the earliest ritualism of yajñas being philosophised upon in the earlier Upaniṣads, we find that the foundation for a new elaborate ritualism was fully laid in many of the later Upaniṣads. Keeping in view the new changes, the philosophy of pañca-upāsana (five-fold worship viz. the worship of Śiva, Devī, Sun, Gaṇeśa and Viṣṇu) was developed out of the mystery of Praṇava ('Om') of which some features are also to be clearly seen in the Brāhmaṇas.¹ As a matter of fact, such upakaraṇas of Tāntric worship as grass, leaves, water etc. seem to have been adopted from the Vedic worship along with their appropriate incantations. This may thus be regarded as the earliest configuration which Tantricism had on the eve of "these silent but mighty social upheavals through which the Aryanisation of vast and increasing multitudes of new races proceeded in pre-Buddhistic India, and which had their culmination in the eventful centuries of the Buddhistic *coup-de-grace*."²

The great problem to be tackled was the aryanisation of this new India that was rising and surging furiously from every side against the fast-dwindling centres of the old Vedic orthodoxy struggling hard for its existence. The religious movements of the Bhāgavatas, Śāktas, Sauras, Śaivas, Gāṇapātyas, Jainas and Buddhists absorbed many of the non-Aryan races and cast their life in the mould of the Vedic spiritual ideal which largely minimised the gulf existing between them and the Vedic orthodoxy, ending in their gradual amal amalgamation in the course of a few centuries. Thus, the pre-Buddhistic phase of Tāntric worship is a fact to be reckoned with in the early history of India much before the appearance of the Buddha. Its foundation was so widely and firmly established that, notwithstanding the ceaseless efforts, Buddhism could not dislodge it, but was in turn itself swallowed up by this Tantric worship within a short span of a few centuries. This wonderfully transformed Buddhism soon appeared on the arena in its new attractive garb as the Mahāyāna.³

The worship of Śakti was predominant throughout eastern India. Like the worship of Śiva, the worship of Śakti was equally widespread. There is, however, a great difference in that there is a marked paucity of legends and stories recording attainment of Siddhis by the worshippers of lord Śiva whereas the stories regarding Śākta devotees attaining miraculous powers are numerous.

1. Cf. the discourse about the conception of Śiva.
2. Avalon, *op. cit.*, p. 554.
3. For other details see *Ibid.* 556 ff, U. Thakur *op. cit.*, p. 37.

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This is probably because Śakti was supposed to give Siddhis only, but the god who could award *mukti* or salvation was Lord Śiva, which was certainly a higher thing. Some of the greatest saints and upāsakas of Mithilā, such as Devāditya, Vardhamāna, Madana, Upādhyāya, Gokulanātha Upādhyāya, Mahārāja Rāmeśvara Siṃha, Gananātha Upādhyāya, Lakṣminātha Gosāin and a host of others, were associated with Śakti. Every house-hold has a *Gosāuni* (Śakti goddess). There are still many pīthas and centres of Tāntricism where Sādhakas from different parts of the country come to practise Sādhana. Moreover, the first verse taught to a child is in praise of Śakti. The popularity of *Aripāna* or *Alipāna* (painted Yantras on the ground); the names of Maithilis and Bengalis such as Tantradharī, Tantranātha, Śaktinātha, Khaḍgadhārī, Tārācaraṇa, Ādya-caraṇa etc, the *Sābara* rites of women, the vogue of fish and meat eating, Pāga or Tāntric head-dress, the offering of sweet cooked rice in milk and the feeding of *Kumārīs* (Virgins) known as *Pātari* ceremony on all auspicious occasions, the widespread public worship of the earthen images of Durgā in Daśaharā or Vijayā-daśamī, the worship of the Liṅgam (a veritable Tāntric symbol), the Mātṛkā Pūjā, the performance of *Nainā-Yogina* and the prevalence of *Dikṣā* (*Iṣṭamantragrahaṇa*)—all these briefly point to the great importance of the Śakti cult in the life of the people of eastern India. But, all told, the fact remains that the glory and honour that the Tantras had, and received, in the time of those great Sādhakas and Mahārājas Kṛṣṇacandra and Śivacandra of Bengal and Lakṣmīśvara Siṃha and Rameśvara Siṃha of Mithilā no longer exist. This is the reason why the Tāntric Sādhakas of Bengal and Mithilā are not so well-known at present.

This reverence for and adoration of Śakti has immensely influenced the script and literature of the land. Not only there are a large number of Tāntric works written and compiled in Sanskrit, not only there are almost all writers praising Śakti or the Primal (*Ādyā*) Energy, but the very script of eastern India has developed in accordance with Tāntric Yantras. The history of this peculiar development of the Varṇas has been elaborately dealt with in the *Kāmadhenu* and the *Varṇoddhāra Tantra* ¹ The *añji* (F) sign in the beginning of Maithili alphabet is also due to the Tāntric influence, for it represents the *Kuṇḍalinī* (Mūlādhāra).²

Another very important result of this Tāntric predominance has been the composition of popular songs of the Goddess Durgā in local literature, without which no auspicious religious ceremony can ever begin. Besides a large number of songs, there is a great number of documents relating to incantations and charms which, though not fully understood now by the experts of the Mantra-Śāstra, nonetheless, serve their purpose very efficaciously.³

1. Also cf. Woodroffe, The Garland of Letters (Varnamala).
2. *Journal of the Assam Research Society*, Vol. I, p. 3; U. Thakur, *op. cit.* pp. 42-43.
3. JBRS., XXXIII. pts.-i-ii, pp. 50-52.

Thus, the influence of the Tantric practices has been so great upon the life of the people of eastern India, particularly Mithilā, Bengal and Assam, that all their daily activities are practically dominated and governed by the principles of the Tāntric religion. The Kaula and Daśa-mahāvidyā, however gained wide popularity in course of time. The Kaulas became the protagonists of Vāmācāra or Vāmamārga sect and Daśa-mahāvidyā. Kālī, Tārā and Bhuvāneśvarī have now prominent place in the life of the people. Āgama does not necessarily mean "a sacred book appealed to by Vāmācārins" as opposed to Nigama of the followers of Dakṣiṇācāra. Nor is the term Vāmācārin itself a synonym for Kaula, for a person may be the first without being the second.

In ancient times Dakṣiṇācāra was more popular and widely practised. It produced great Sādhakas. But in course of time (probably about a century ago) people came to be intensely influenced by the Vāmācāra practices. The mode of worship in the two mārgas is quite different. It is true, one who follows the Vāmācāra attains Siddhi soon; but it is very difficult to practise it successfully and as such there is every chance of a fall in this mārga. Vaśiṣṭha and other Sādhakas followed Dakṣiṇācāra and were great devotees of the goddess Tārā. Great Sādhakas have from time to time appeared on the scene and inspired people to practise this religion. Dakṣiṇācāra was therefore, (and is still) looked upon with high regard innumerable Sādhakas followed this path, whose life-history, full of miraculous feats and wonderful achievements, has now passed into legends handed down from generation to generation and is yet an object of popular study and reverence.¹

Side by side with Dakṣiṇācāra, Vāmācāra and Kaula also gained much popularity and soon gave rise to Abhicāra-Karma² (black magic, mummery, witchcrafts etc.) among the low classes and women. This had no doubt a dangerously demoralising effect on the morale of the common people, and it was this Karma that largely contributed to the unpopularity of the Tantras in general and the growing hatred for the Sādhakas in particular. Indeed, the divine qualities inherent in this sect are very difficult to practise, and, therefore, in the absence of the right interpretations and understanding people took to degrading forms of debauchery

1. Umesha Miśra, *Maithila Samskriti o' Sabhyatā* (in Maithili), pt. II. p. 181 U. Thakur, *op. cit* pp. 44-45.
2. This Abhicāra-karma was unfortunately the indirect result of the *Arimardana Homa* or *Nigraha Homa* i. e. "the object of punishing an enemy" fully dealt with and enumerated in the thirtyfirst chapter (*Arimardana Homa*) of the celebrated work *Tantrarāja-Tantra* (The King among Tantras), edited by Sir John Woodroffe (Arthur Avalon). verses 3-6 of this Chapter speak of certain things which should be known regarding the enemy before a Homa is begun (*Ibid.*, pp. 94-95)

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under the garb of the Tantric Sadhana. The result was obvious. The divine Tantras came to be stigmatised as a libidinous phallic necromancy.

Lakṣmīdhara, in his commentary on the thirty-first verse (śloka) of *Saundaryā-Laharī* of Śaṅkarācārya has given the names of sixty-four Tantras, i. e. *Candrakālā*, *Jyotsnāvati*, *Kalānidhi*, *Kulārṇava*, *Kuleśvari*, *Bhuvaneśvari*, *Bārhaspatya* and *Durvāsamata*, in which the Brāhmaṇas, the Kṣatriyas, the Vaiśyas, the Śūdras and even the mixed castes have been given equal rights to perform meditation.¹ The first three are advised to attain Siddhi through Dakṣiṇācāra practices and the Śūdras and the mixed castes are required to undergo Sādhana through Vāmācāra. It is due to this liberal attitude that there has been no sect-rivalry since hoary past to the present day. One finds Śaivas, Śāktas and Vaiṣṇavas living together in perfect harmony in one and the same family. Whenever fish or meat is prepared in one family the members, though belonging to the different sects, sit together in one row and take their meals ungrudgingly, the only difference being that the Vaiṣṇavas keep away from taking fish or meat. The Brāhmaṇas daily worship the Śālagrāma (Viṣṇu) and rub Śrīkhaṇḍacandana and ashes (*bhṛīṣma*) of Śiva on their forehead, arms, ears and other parts of body. Side by side with these gods, they worship Iṣṭadevī, the symbol of Śakti and also put vermillion marks on their forehead. Durgā Pūjā is celebrated with the same zeal and vigour as Kṛṣṇāṣṭamī or Janmāṣṭamī and Śivarātri.² All this has resulted in wonderful blending of different religious sects and perfect harmony among their followers, a feature hardly to be seen elsewhere. Even the most orthodox Brāhmaṇas participate in Muslim religious festivals and also those of the low castes, and vice-versa. It is, therefore no exaggeration to say that in this part of the country we have the real Indian culture in all its broad aspects, still flourishing, to which the celebrated Tāntric religion has made its singular contributions.

1. Umesha Miśra, *op. cit.*, p. 18ff.

2. U. Thakur, *op. cit.* p. 45.