

Becoming God and subjugating the creation:

The science of Tantra

*(Gott werden und die Schöpfung unterwerfen:
Die Wissenschaft des Tantra)*

Vanamali S. Gunturu

A short perusal of most books on Hinduism leads one to notice that the subject of Tantra gets a step motherly treatment in them. Most of the introductions to Hinduism give lot of importance to the Vedas, the holy scriptures of this religion. There is also a general, at least among the western scholars, accepted point of time in the pre Christian centuries about the question when the Vedas arrived in the subcontinent and got established there. We have also a huge vedic literature available, although many parts of it are said to have been lost. Surprisingly the Tantra, although this is a very powerful current within this “pagan” religion, and is as such an essential feature of it, a “Wesensbestimmung” (to borrow an expression from Phenomenology), it does not get the attention due to it. There are many examples for this.

John Dowson’s *Hindu mythology and Religion*¹ is a typical example. He allocates in his widely used Work less than one page for the treatment of the Tantra, but seven and half pages for the Vedas. In his 70 page long essay on Hinduism Helmuth von Glasenapp treats the Tantra scantily. It gets not more than a paragraph for mentioning the commonplace information regarding this esoteric science of practice². The same holds true for the most of the western writers treating Hinduism. Surprisingly the Tantra fares no better at the hands of the Indian writers. Even these seem not to fully recognise the vital role Tantra plays in Hinduism. In the book of Swami Bhaskarananda, *The essentials of Hinduism* (pub-

¹ John Dowson, *A classical dictionary of Hindu mythology and religion* Calcutta, etc. 1989

² Helmuth von Glasenapp, *Die fünf Weltreligionen*, München 1996. Page 48

lished by the Ramakrishna Math!), Tantra occupies just one page whereas the Vedas and the themes related with it occupy five pages and more in the whole book³.

Nonetheless, the author of the present essay holds the opinion that the structure of Hinduism does not rest solely on the Vedas as popularly believed. The Vedas are only one of the two central pillars. The other less acknowledged, but equally important central pillar, the substructure, is the Tantra.

Overestimating the role of the Vedas and undervaluing the contribution of the Tantra to the present day, Hinduism does not escape the eyes of a serious student of Hinduism. The present essay tries to address this problem and tries to describe Tantra, as a science of esoteric-philosophical practice and goes on to show its inseparable relationship with Hinduism.

Serious prejudices and misconceptions against Tantra were prevalent all through the ages. In the olden times, it was denounced by the Buddhists. Sir John Woodroff quotes extensively from a Buddhist Scripture called *Lalitavistara* (of 2. or 3. century A.D.) in which Lord Buddha condemns those people, who worship many Gods, meditate sitting on the “burialgrounds”⁴, or at the crossing of four roads. He condemns those “sinful men and heretics who use wine and flesh”⁵ in their ritual practices – that means the followers of the Tantra.⁶

It was condemned likewise by the Hindus.

The holy scripture *Sutasamhita*⁷ warns us, it would be foolish to leave the path of the Vedas. I.e. to take to the tantric way. It is like “licking the elbows of someone who is holding a bowl of nectar in his hand. Instead of drinking it straight from the bowl.”⁸ Agnipurana quotes the dwellers of hell lamenting, that having been foolish they had abandoned the Vedic path and took to the Tantra out of greed, and thus landed in hell.⁹ Padmapurana lumps the heretics, the Tantricians and the atheists together, although this grouping is not justified – atheism is not the credo of the Tantra.

³ Swami Bhaskarananda, *The essentials of Hinduism*, Chennai 1998

⁴ Burialgrounds are a favorite Place of Meditation for the followers of the Tantra.

⁵ Wine, meat, fish, alcohol and Sexual copulation are employed by some tantricians in their rituals. These are rejected by the orthodox Hindus.

⁶ Sir John Woodroff, *Principles of Tantra – Part I*, 1986 Madras (India), Page 67

⁷ Differently dated by different scholars between the 1st and the 10th century.

⁸ Malladi Suryanarayana Shastri, *Sanskrita vaangmaya caritra*, Hyderabad 1961

⁹ *ibid*

Today commercial misuse mixes up with the age old antipathy and prejudice.

Just as the word yoga means for many people physical exercise, the word Tantra means today in the west a doubtful approach to sex. It evokes in the present day western world fantasies of free sex - a willing suspension of sexual inhibitions. TV programs with the "tantric" themes promise the viewer nude scenes, men and women with sleepy, half closed eyes, oblivious of what is being done to their bodies through other members of the group. The alarmed church fights such movements, branding them sectarian.

A different type of prejudices are prevalent in India. The general antipathy of the bygone ages has subsided as the Tantra has been absorbed and integrated into the mainstream Hinduism, a process which we are going to notice in this article. Still some reservations persist, it is as though fear has taken over the place of hatred. The Tantra has a general reputation of being radical and vigorous in its approach to religious or earthly problems. Tantra is often associated with meditation rituals on the burialgrounds, employing dead bodies, and ferocious Gods and Goddesses, powerful Mantras etc., which could misfire and ruin the one practicing them. It is generally held that the tantric methods give quick results but are dangerous, as the risk of committing a mistake in the ritual and displeasing the divine forces is too large. The Vedic methods on the other hand are said to be slow in showing the results but they are steady without extreme reversals or pitfalls, as in the case of the Tantra. So it is not "wise" to take to the Tantra, one can only be greedy if he does so.

To understand these prejudices we have to take a look into the remotest past of the Indian culture and religions. To begin with we should understand the nature of the earliest "religion" in India, the religion of the Indus valley civilization and its inhabitants.

An accidental discovery of a forgotten civilisation made in the year 1921 in the region of the river Indus, one of the most significant historical discoveries of the 20th century, extended the antiquity of the Indian culture and civilisation by a couple of thousand years. Till then the origins of Indian history were placed somewhere around the 18th Century B.C., corresponding with the arrival of the nomads from the Euroasia, the so called Indo-Arians with the Vedas, who settled down on the subcontinent and spread their Vedic religion. Till the Indus Valley discovery it was widely held that their religion became in course of time the religion of the whole subcontinent. But this view left many questions unanswered. The main features of the religion found in the Vedas are not in conformity with the Hinduism of the later day.

Whereas the fire rituals and worship of abstract forces of nature build the central feature of the “Vedism”, anthropomorphic, concretely conceived Gods and, most of all, Goddesses characterise the later day Hinduism. This and some other features of today’s Hinduism were difficult to understand for a long time till the unearthing of the Indus Civilisation. Objects discovered there, with probable implications for religion, threw a new light on certain aspects of Hinduism leading to a clearer understanding.¹⁰

It has been established with a relative certainty that this urban civilisation took its full developed form around 3500 B.C. and survived for several centuries without any considerable changes till the 19th century B.C. Around 1800 B.C. it suddenly disappeared from the map. Signs of mass panic, chaos have been noticed in the upper most layers of the excavations, suggesting that some radical change must have taken place at that time. One of the several theories put forth to explain this phenomenon is the conflict between the ensuing tall, white coloured, well built and fine featured “Indo-Arians” and the dark coloured, thick lipped native dwellers of the Indus Valley. The native dwellers seem to have lost the fight and fled to other parts of India.

Several texts in the Vedas and the chaotic state of the cities in the late Indus Valley correspond to each other. The orderly urban inhabitants of the Indus Valley had built cities with amazingly good closed drainage system, double storied houses and well planed cities with broad roads crossing each other at right angles. The intruders were nomads in search of the pastures for their cattle. They had no use of the cities built by the natives. They destroyed them ruthlessly and celebrated their commander mythifying him. The most important God of the Vedas, called *Indra*, bears the epithet ‘*Purandara*’, the destroyer of cities or strongholds. The natives had built small barrages across the streams for agricultural purposes. The intruders being nomads, and ignorant of agricultural practices could not make use of such structures. They saw in the barrages monsters lying across the rivers, hindering the free flow of the waters. Some Hymns in the Vedas describe heroic acts of *Indra*, who kills these monsters and sets the waters free.

The nomads were successful in destroying the cities and driving away and subjugating the natives, probably reducing them to a type of “slaves”. These

¹⁰ Ref. Basham, A.L., *The wonder that was India*, Calcutta etc. India 1990, See also, Basham, A.L., *The origins and development of classical Hinduism*, Boston 1989 and Wheeler, Mortimer, *The Cambridge History of India – Supplementary Volume – The Indus Civilisation*, Cambridge University Press 1953

“slaves”¹¹ have ever since remained outside the pale of the society, forming the later day lower castes, untouchables and menial workers.

Gods, not Goddesses, dominated the Vedic pantheon and this corresponded to the patriarchy in the society. The male dominated Vedic society was divided into three hierarchically structured castes with flexible boundaries between them, roughly corresponding to the division of labour. *Brahmanas*, the priestly caste monopolised learning and the liturgy and claimed the highest position in the society. This claim did not remain unchallenged by the other castes, most of all the *kshatriyas*, the warrior caste

We have no definite information about the social organisation or the religion of the Indus Valley civilisation, as their script has not been deciphered so far. All that we know is conjecture, rationally deduced conjectures based on the cult objects found in the excavations there.

Terracotta figures of mother Goddess are found there in a large number. The large extent of their distribution in all the cities and villages of the Indus Valley suggests that the Goddess was very popular among the inhabitants. The fine layer of soot on these figures suggests that they have been exposed to oil lamps and incense smoke, as it is normal in the later day religious practices of the Hindus.

Many phallus shaped and ring shaped stone objects of varying sizes are also found in the Indus Valley. The Shiva cult of later day Hinduism rests chiefly on the worship of *shivalinga*, a stone or metal phallus placed in a ring symbolising yoni, vagina. Some figures on steatite seals represent a naked person with his erect Phallus sitting cross legged under a tree, probably three eyed, surrounded by animals. This figure suggests unmistakably, that the later day Shiva as ‘*Pashupathi*’, the lord of the animals, has his origins in this figure. Another realistic figure of a humped bull on the seals is a further hint, that these cult objects were associated with the cult around Shiva and Shakti of later Hinduism, and Tantra. Bull is the venerated vehicle of Shiva.

The arrival and spread of Vedism in the Indian Subcontinent lead only to a temporary disappearance of the native religious practices and ideas. They had only to wait for the right opportunity to emerge again, like the suppressed Freudian drives.

In the following centuries as “Vedic Arians” got settled down, certain changes took place in their social organisation. The boundaries between the castes became rigid, with social mobility getting increasingly difficult, even impossible. At the same time, the male dominance increased, leading to a deterio-

¹¹ Although slavery in the classical sense of that word as in the west has never existed in India. *Author*

rated status of women. At the end of the Vedic period, they had only a subordinated roll to play in the family, society and even in religion.

These social changes correspond with the increasing complexity and elaborateness of the religious practices centred around the fire rituals called the yajnas, practised by the “Indo-Arians”. Performance of these rituals presupposed thorough knowledge and expertise which was monopolised by the Brahmanas, the priestly caste. Thus the Brahmanas claimed the topmost position in the hierarchy of the society. This did not of course remain unchallenged by the other castes. A development, which had certain other accompanying features typical for the time between 11th and 6th centuries B.C. in India.

Whereas the main aim of the extraverted Vedic ritualistic striving was material prosperity – lots of cattle, progeny, especially male, wealth and health, in the post Vedic times some of the settled new comers had left these themes behind and became more speculative and introverted. They were no longer satisfied with worldly benefits. They challenged the system, some even rebelled against it. Some Upanishads¹² even condemned the rituals as a sign of stupidity. Mundakopanishad is for example too sharp tongued, when it says, “Only the deluded think these (*the rituals*) are salutary. But they end up again und again in old age and death.” (Mundakopanishad, I. 2. 7)¹³. Philosophical questioning about the nature of man, the world, and God began to concern them more. The intellectual world of India during this time was full of commotion, in a rebellious mood. We learn from the Buddhist sources that there were several (about 62 it is said) philosophical and religious movements in this time, each one of them formulating its own worldview¹⁴ protesting against the Vedism either completely as in the case of Buddhism or partly as in the case of the Upanishads or the Sankhya-Yoga-philosophy . This was the time when the suppressed martiarchal religious ideas of the Indusvalley civilisation began to re-emerge and reformulate themselves originating the Tantra. After all we generally think in the first place of the universal, primordial female power “Shakti” and then Shiva, when we hear the word Tantra.

Like most of the movements of that epoch, Tantra opposes the Vedas, the caste system, subordination of women and is anti priestly caste. In its rejection of Vedism and the Vedic injunctions, Tantra differs somehow from Buddhism or Jainism or even from the philosophical school called the *Carvakas*. It does not

¹² Upanishads can be described as the postvedic vedictexts, containing profound philosophical thoughts.

¹³ Gunturu, Vanamali, *Hinduismus: Die große Religion Indiens*, Munich 2000. page 64

¹⁴ idid, Pages 66-67

for example reject the Vedas outright and goes on to establish a separate religion like Buddhism or Jainism. It is also not atheistic like the Carvakas.

It applies other methods to reject the Vedas, more so to cut down their authority.

The Tantra never questions the infallibility of the Vedas. Nor does it assert that the Vedic Mantras or the Vedic rituals are just a farce to cheat the gullible masses, as the Carvakas do. The only problem with the Vedas, their Mantras, and the rituals, the Yajnas, says the Tantra, is that they are no more effective in our present age called the Kaliyuga. And as such they cannot solve of our present problems. The Vedas are antiquated. To solve the problems of the present day Kaliyuga we need different methods, strategies and altogether a different understanding of Gods and the cosmos and the human body. The Vedic concepts require to be revised and reformed. As such, the Tantra tries to reform Hinduism from within without completely abandoning the Vedas. At the same time, their antipathy towards Vedism is not of negligible quality or quantity. The Tantra can be looked upon as one of the biggest social and spiritual reforms in Hinduism.

Let us first understand this reformative aspect of the Tantra, before coming to the central themes like *yantras* or *bijaaksharas*.

It can be argued that the Tantra is the most powerful rejection of patriarchal religious systems in the world. In none of the other world religions are female forces so much idealised and empowered as in the Tantra.

Whereas Indra, Agni, Varuna, Surya, Rudra and the others were the important Gods of the Vedic pantheon, all males, the Vedas know only a very few Goddesses of importance. Of course there are the Ushas (the Dawn-Goddess), there is Sarasvati, the daughter of Brahma, also Bhudevi (the Earth-Goddess). But these are in no way equal to their male counterparts in their prowess or achievements. A complete reversal takes place in the Tantra.

The most important divinity according to the Tantra is the mother Goddess. In the form of infinite energy, "Shakti", existing prior to all time and space, she is the "*mulaprakriti*"¹⁵ (as one of her thousand names describes her), the primordial substance, (to use the word substance with many reservations), out of which Gods and Goddesses, all the souls and the whole cosmos, matter, evolve. As such, she is the cause of all causes and beyond all the causes. She is the unmoved mover, cause of all motion, and of the all change which takes place in the world. As Shankara Bhagavatpadas *saundaryalahari* states, "everything in the world is ineffective, if it is not prompted by the mother goddess. Without her support

¹⁵ Simhambhattla Ramamurti Shastri (Trans), *Shri Lalita sahasranamastotramu*, Hyderabad 2003

even the almighty Shiva, the destroyer of the Universe, is incapable, (*ashkatak*) to move himself", ¹⁶(*let alone destroying the world, Author's comment*).

This fundamental principle of female supremacy is glorified in the mythology dedicated to the mother Goddess. We read in "*Durgasaptashati*"¹⁷ how some dreadful demons terrorised the world, against whom even the Hindu-trinity, Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva, all male and the most important Gods of the Hindu pantheon, had to accept defeat and flee. Prayed ardently by her worshippers, the mother Goddess assumes several forms. Each time a different form to suit that particular demon, whom she has to slay. It is she, who saves heroically the world and even the other Gods in the face of the destructive evil forces.

Thus, Tantra is the first feministic theology the world has ever known.

This pro feministic trait of the Tantra does not restrict itself to the sphere of Gods and Goddesses. It transfers this attitude to the social sphere and holds women to be better and worthier humans than men in several respects.

It is a fundamental conviction of the Tantra, that all women are an embodiment of the one universal mother Goddess, asserts the Mahanirvana Tantra.¹⁸ As a result, they are all divine and deserve only to be respected and venerated. None of them is a inferior creature. Before all reform movements were born, the Tantra has decidedly opposed the practice of Sati (immolation of widows).¹⁹ According to the tantric notions, the capacities of women are many fold.

In the Vedic orthodoxy, the father is the automatic Guru of foremost importance. It is the father, who initiates his (male) children into the meditation on Gayatri. Not the mother. Mothers in the Vedic system seem to derive all their importance on account of their association with their husbands. The moment the husband dies, their status deteriorates in the family and in the society. A widow is neglected and looked upon as an inauspicious omen. Quite the contrary in the Tantra. A widow is worthy to be worshipped. A ferocious Goddess called "Dhumavati" is praised as a widow in a stotra: "vridhhaa, virupa, *vidhava*, Vidya..." , meaning Goddess Dhumavati is the aged, the ugly, a *widow* and she is the wisdom.²⁰

It is all together different in the Tantra. The women are esteemed for their intelligence and for their spiritual superiority. They are accepted to be bet-

¹⁶ Shri Shriyanandanatha (comment. and trans.), *Shri Saundaryalahari*, Tenali (India) 1993, Page 1.

¹⁷ The scripture of 700 Verses describing the heroic battles of the mothergoddess Durga against the demons.

¹⁸ Quoted from Sir John Woodroffe, *Principles of Tantra*, Part I, Madras (India) 1986, page25

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Vide *Brihatstrotra Ratnakara*, 1989 Hyderabad, India. S. 227

ter teachers, gurus, than men. If any one is initiated into a technique of meditation or spiritual practice by his mother, the effect of such an initiation is said to be eight times greater than that of an initiation done by a male teacher. The Tantra explicitly prefers women as teachers in the matters of religion. This tendency is reflected in the science of Tantra and in the origin of its texts. Tantric texts are divided into two categories, depending upon which of the two divinities, Shiva or Parvathi, teaches and who receives the knowledge. The tantric texts called "Agamas" are the teachings of Shiva, which are received by his wife Parvati. So she is his pupil. But in that category of texts, which are called Nigamas, Parvati is the teacher. She responds to the requests of her husband Shiva, answers them to impart him knowledge. So in the Nigama texts Parvati is the Guru and Shiva, her husband, is her shishya (pupil).

Tantra is along with Buddhism, Jainism and the Carvakas one of the earliest reform movements against the discriminative caste system with its roots in Vedism. The occupation and the status of a person are decided by the caste into which they are born. And they can under no circumstances change their caste. On account of one's birth, not through free choice, one is a priest, warrior or a cobbler. One can under no circumstance free oneself from the caste into which one is born. As such, the caste system abnegates every possibility of horizontal social mobility.

Tantrism ignores, even disregards, the caste system of the orthodoxy and replaces it with a typology of human beings, which is based more on the human constitution than on the birth. According to its ideology, Brahmanas, who considered themselves to be Gods on earth, can not be automatically better humans just because they are born in the caste of the priests. Nor can a Sudra, belonging to the lower castes, be inferior due to his birth. Not the birth, but the mental disposition, the inner potentialities and the conglomeration of various drives, instincts and propensities, constitute the type to which a person belongs.

According to Tantra there are three types of human beings: *pashu* (the beastly), *vira* (the valiant) and *divya* (the godly). This typology shows the unacknowledged allegiance of the Tantra to the Sankhya-Yoga-school²¹ of Indian Philosophy. In fact, this holds good for the entire Hinduism. More so for Tantra. It can be argued that Tantra is an attempt to religionize that school of philosophy called yoga. This point can be understood if we examine Tantra's concept of the Mother Goddess and the typology of human beings.

But let us first consider the tenets of Yoga.

²¹ For convenience now on referred to only as Yoga in this article.

According to Yoga the entire world has evolved itself out of an undifferentiated primordial substance called Prakriti. We can not comprehend the nature of this substance, as every thing we can think of - our thoughts and the objects, referred to by these thoughts - emanate from Prakriti. They are nothing but the evolutes of this self-evolving primordial substance, which is dynamic. This Prakriti has three constituting qualities called *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*.

Sattva represents lightness, buoyancy, also the light as against darkness. It is the principle which accounts for knowledge and revelation, recognition. If it is possible that a thing can be recognised, comprehended, it is because of the *sattva* present in that object. On account of *sattva* a thing reveals itself to us. On the other hand, we can know a thing only to the extent of *sattva* present in us, in the recognising subject. In the *sattva* quality lies the happiness, or the ability to be happy.

Rajas, the second quality of the prakriti, is the principle of motion, change and activity. It accounts for the motion seen in the world and its objects. If the wind moves, water flows, the earth rotates, living things grow and decay, i.e. if they change, it is because of the quality *rajas* present in them. If fire spreads, it is because of *rajas* present in fire. According to Yoga, all motion, and change is a form of motion (Aristotle), implies unhappiness, suffering. On account of *rajas*, our sense organs reach out for their objects – the ear seeks the sounds, eyes the light, tongue the taste etc.

The third guna is *tamas*. It is essentially the quality of resistance, inertia, darkness, sleep, lethargy, ignorance etc. *Tamas* sets the limitations of our knowledge, our ability to understand the thing subjectively. In the same way it conceals an object, makes it difficult to be recognised. The extent to which a thing discloses itself to the eyes of the observer depends on *tamas*, inherent in the thing.

Nonetheless, these three qualities are not to be understood as opposing each other. They cooperate with each other, to make a thing what it is. Oil, wick and the flame together make up a lamp. This lamp is the supposed metaphor to explain Yoga's concept of the physical world.

According to Yoga, everything in this world should consist of these three qualities as they all have evolved out of the Prakriti. Depending upon the fact, which of the three qualities is predominant in a thing or person, they can be categorised as *sattvic*, *rajasik* or *tamasik*. This metaphysics of Yoga influences the typology of Tantra.

The three types of men, which Tantra postulates, the *pashu*, the *vira* and the *divya*, correspond to the three gunas of Yoga's concept of Prakriti.

It is in the type *pashu* we see an open disrespect of Tantra against Vedism.

The word *pashu*, meaning an animal, is derived from the Sanskrit word *pasha*, meaning a noose, a rope which binds or fetters an animal, a goat or a buffalo for instance, to control them. A rope to control is necessary because the primitive, untamed drives and urges govern an animal. The term *pashu* applied to a human being means that someone belonging to this type is on the same level as an animal and he should be bound, controlled by the religious morality – its prohibitions and injunctions. Tantra says there are eight types of bondages, controlling factors (“*pashas*”): 1. compassion, 2. ignorance, 3. fear, 4. abasement, 5. disgust, 6. family, 7. character, and 8. the caste (the Hindu social order). Most of these are contained in the moral order of the orthodoxy.

Tamas is the dominant quality in men belonging to the *pashu* type. According to Tantra - this is the surprising part of its typology - all the injunctions of the Vedas, its ‘dos’ and ‘do not’s’, apply only for men of this *pashu* type. So being at the same level as the animals, they require to be bound, chained by religious morality. They should follow the moral rules of the Vedas! They should take only vegetarian food, abstain from alcohol, and be celibate. These prohibitions imply that the beastly type of men have uncontrollable drives and longings. The strictest followers of the Vedas and their morality are the Brahmanas, the priestly caste, and to some extent the other three upper castes, namely the warriors, businessmen, and the workers. Declaring them to be the *pashus* is like declaring an open war against the orthodoxy. This explains to some extent the resentments against tantra we find in some scriptures mentioned above.

Rajas is the quality predominant in men belonging to the second type called the *vira*, meaning the hero. *Rajas*, being the principle of motion or change, lets the man change his constitution, type, through effort. So a *vira*-type of man can change over to the *divya* (godly) - type or the *pashu*-(animal)-type. In this conviction, that man can change, that he is not condemned forever to one caste or category on account of his birth, Tantra rejects one of the fundamental principles of Vedism. The caste in which someone takes his or her birth, and to which he or she belongs, is immutable, according to Vedism.

To the men of the *vira*-type, Tantra prescribes the five famous ‘*makaras*’, the five *ms*²². The belief is that through the controlled usage of these five elements in the rituals one could overcome the longing for these things. In overcoming the longings lies the key to the liberation – a much sought after experience of all Indian religions.

²² *mamsa* (meat), *madya* (alcohol), *matsya* (fish), *maithuna* (sexual conjugation) and *mudra* (mystical gestures) are the five *makaras*.

Divya, the godly type is the third category of men. The quality *sattva* is predominant in this type. As the men of this type have overcome all their bodily drives and worldly longings, they are best suited for the Tantric practices. The five 'ms' mean something totally different to them. In the context of the divya-type, they seem to undergo a process of sublimation. So alcohol here symbolises the stupefying experience of God realisation. Dedicating all actions, rituals or other ceremonies to the divinities is seen as the consumption of meat; fish only implies the empathy one feels for all living things; *mudras*, the mystic gestures, mean the renunciation of all relationship with the evil. And the much abhorred *maithuna*, copulation, is nothing but the lofty union of the slumbering kundalini power with the thousand petalled lotus-cakra in the cranial region.

This dynamic typology of man tries to supplant the immutable, static caste system of Vedism. Tantra is in its social aspect emancipatory – its concept of man goes a long way in the betterment of the status of the various social groups and women. In its religious aspect, it formulates the first profound feminist theology in the world.

The metaphysics of Tantra shows on the one hand a great relationship with Yoga and, that is the surprising part of it, on the other hand a great affinity to Advaita Vedanta – although *Yoga and Advaita are not compatible with each other*.²³

Let us see for the time being the relationship between Tantra and the metaphysics of Yoga in regard to the concept of the mother goddess, the central figure of Tantra and her consort Shiva.

According to the Yoga, the entire universe can be explained with the help of two substances, which are absolutely independent of each other – purusha (consciousness) and prakriti (matter which is pure, dynamic and undifferentiated).

The purusha is pure consciousness, a passive observer, a witness of all that which happens in the world. Purusha does not move, nor does he change. He comes close to the God of Aristotel, an unmoved mover.

In its original state, there is an equilibrium among the three qualities of prakriti. Sattva, rajas and tamas are in a state of dynamic harmony. It is here that purusha gives prakriti the initial impetus and then the evolution gets into motion, leading to the emergence of various things, the visible world, and the apparatus of cognisance like mind, intellect, senses, sense organs etc.

Hinduism takes over the basic ideas of the Yoga and constructs its own system. Tantra does the same thing.

²³ This fact is not understood or ignored by some scholars, resulting in the advaitistic interpretation of Patanjali's Yogasutras.

Tantra adopts the concept of prakriti and superimposes it on the mother goddess. One of her thousands of names refers to her as “*mulaprakriti*”²⁴, the primordial matter or substance of the Yoga, wherein prakriti is in its undifferentiated, unmanifested, state. Accordingly, the mother goddess has the epithet “*avyakta*”²⁵. But she transcends every description and definition. Thus she is beyond the categories of manifest and non manifest forms – that is why she is the “*vyaktavyaktasvarupini*”²⁶, she has a “Gestalt” which is manifest and non manifest. As Prakriti she is the storehouse of the three gunas, “*Gunanidhi*”²⁷, the three gunas are in fact her essential features – “*trigunatmika*”²⁸. Just as she is beyond the manifest and the non-manifest, she transcends all the three gunas, she is “*gunatita*”²⁹. In fact, her most popular name “*Tripura*” means *prior to the three Gunas*, implying that the mother goddess is, although a store house of the gunas, is not bound by them. Because the whole world is an emanation of the mother goddess.

The second independent substance of Yoga is purusha, the consciousness. The concept of Shiva, the consort of the mother goddess, corresponds to the purusha of Yoga. Let us see this aspect.

Purusha is static, he does not move, as every form of movement implies imperfection and some sort of deficit. Shiva is praised with the name “*Sthirah*”³⁰ the motionless. He is also “*Sthaanu*”, the immovable. His main function lies not in acting, but in observing, being a witness to the happenings of the world. Accordingly, he is “*Sarvajna*”³¹, the one who knows everything, and the one who sees everything “*sarvalocana*”³². This Shiva is on the other hand understood as the individual soul in all human beings. Being the equivalent of the purusha, in its original form it is perfect in itself, without any deficit, so happy and content. Trouble, or to be philosophical, the suffering, starts with the mistaken identification of the soul, the purusha, the pure consciousness with the body, with the world. So the individual human being gets entangled in the mundane matters

²⁴ See Lalita sahasranamavali, 397th name.

²⁵ *ibid*, 398th name.

²⁶ *ibid*. 399th name.

²⁷ *ibid*. 604th name.

²⁸ *ibid*. 763th name.

²⁹ *ibid*. 961th name.

³⁰ See Shiva sahasra namavali, the very first name.s

³¹ See Shiva sahasra namavali, the 88th name.

³² *Ibid*. the 820th name.

and as a result suffers. In its pure, original state, the soul knows no suffering, it dwells in a state of beatitude.

The striving of the tantric devotee lies in overcoming the delusion that he is the body, bound to this world, and in realising with the grace of the mother Goddess that he is after all Shiva, the ever happy one. This is this state, which the Jagatguru Adi Shankara sings in his six hymns on the soul "*Atma shatkam*". He declares here, "I am not the mind, nor the intellect, nor ego, nor the inner sense-organ, not the five senses. Nor am I the five elements. I am bliss consciousness, I am Shiva, I am Shiva."³³ He goes on to sing, that he has neither jealousy, nor attachment, neither avariciousness nor any allurements. He is not bound by the four goals of life like the dharma, artha, kama and moksha,³⁴ because he is the pure soul, Shiva.

In the context of Tantra, the concept of Shiva gets a new meaning. He is not identical with the mythological Shiva or the Shiva of the hinduistic daily worship.

But one should keep in mind, that Tantra only makes use of the concepts of Yoga, not really making an effort to be a philosophy. It remains through and through a practice oriented religion, without claiming to be a philosophical system.

To sum up: Tantra has a humanitarian aspect. It tries to reform the society, aims at the betterment of the human lot, the emancipation of women. In the sphere of religion it is a practice oriented philosophy trying to help the individual to realise his true self, the original state of his consciousness, which is sat-cit-ananda –blissful conscious being.

Now it is time to consider the traditional definitions of Tantra. There are a couple of them.

The well known definition of Tantra is found in the traditional Sanskrit dictionary "*Halayudhakosha*³⁵": "That which expands and lets something³⁶ expand is

³³ Mano buddhi ahankara chitta ninaham
nach shrotra jihve na cha chrana netre
nacha vyoma bhoomir na tejo na yayu
chidananda rupa shivoham shivoham"

³⁴ morality, wealth, sexuality and religion.

³⁵ See Jayashankar Joshi (editor), *Halayudhakosha/Abhidhana ratnamala, Hindi samiti, Lucknow, India 1957*

"tanoti tanyate iti tantram"

³⁶ Meaning the consciousness Author's note

tantra.” An etymological definition can only explain the origin of the term, not the contents of a subject, which it is supposed to indicate. The same work continues to define it further, “it is a science preached by Shiva consisting of 64 works”³⁷.

Like most of the definitions, these also cannot give us a full idea of Tantra. So they need to be supplemented by additional information.

Tantra has a unique conception of the divinities and the human’s relationship to them.

The divinities in Tantra, unlike in Vedism, are represented in a human form (well, actually in a super human form!) with several attributes. Their body shape, skin colour, the mood, which is expressed by their face, number of arms and the type of weapons they carry etc., are clearly laid down in the *shastras*. At the same time, they embody certain universal powers. Such aspects of a divinity are described by the *dhyanaslokas* (verses of meditation). These are represented by the idols made of various metals, alloys, wood or just earth.

But it is as though to begin with these idols have no power, no life. Through a ceremonial process called “*pranapratishtha*”, which involves certain *mantras*, the particular divinity would be invited to come and take over the idol and “live” in it for worship.

It is the mantras after all which establish the connection between the divinity and the idol, which is being worshipped. It is only through those mantras that a lifeless thing like an idol, some times just a modelled “lump” of earth, derives its divinity and becomes worthy of worship.

What then is a mantra? The word *mantra* like many other Sanskrit words has several meanings. Etymologically it means ‘a means or an instrument for thinking’. Thinking in the religious context is thinking about gods or goddesses. But really speaking it is not that thinking, in which rationality is involved. The word also means a Vedic hymn or text or just Sanskrit verses employed in rituals. According to another definition, mantra is that which protects the one who is meditating on it. This definition comes close to the practical aspect of a mantra.

Mantra in its content is ‘a combination of speech sounds’ or just a speech sound. The most famous of them, the absolute mantra, is the *Gayatri mantra*³⁸. A mantra can have a meaning, like the Gayatri. But it is not the meaning which contains its power, but the speech sounds. The most famous speech sound is ‘om’. There are many interpretations of *om*. But a meditation on *om* is not same as repeatedly knowing these interpretations, however scholarly they might be.

³⁷ ibid. “sivokta shastram, catussasthi sankhyakam”.

³⁸ na gayatri paramo mantrah.

The important part of a mantra is the 'bijakshara', a 'seedletter', which consists of one or two consonants, a vowel and 'm' at the end (in Sanscrit bindu) for nasalisation. E.g. 'gam'. A bijakshara can have more than one consonant as in 'hrim'. A mantra contains these bijaksharas explicitly or ingrained in a series of words. Or it contains of just one bijakshara or a series of bijaksharas as in the 'Bala' mantra. Most of the tantric mantras consist of bijaksharas.

The mantras, the most important aspect of the Tantra, are not just a means to "divinise" idols through the ceremony of pranapratishtha. They are much more. According to Tantra, they are infact the divinity itself – gods have '*Mantrasvarupa*' (they have the form of the mantras). The power of each God or Goddess, with their qualities like wrath or pleasantness is contained in the mantras, and they are the devotee's access to these divinities.

The divinities are represented at the same time in the *yantras*, to put it very prosaically, in geometrical patterns, one or more triangles with enclosing circles sometimes with petals, drawn on paper, wood or metal plates. A yantra varies according to the divinity in question and the purpose with which it is being invoked. At times, the same divinity can have different yantras, again depending upon the purpose.

Yantras on the one hand represent the divinity, on the other hand, they represent the cosmos - the point out of which everything **has** emerged and evolved. It is the macrocosm.

The body of the individual is according to Tantra the cosmos in miniature form. It is the microcosm with various power centres, the so called '*chakras*' at the various parts of the body, the most important of them being situated at various levels of the spine. They are *muladhara* (at the end of the spinal column in the pelvis), *swadhisthana*, *manipura*, *anahata*, *vishuddha*, *ajna*, *sahasrara* (the last one located at the cranial region of the head). The mother goddess, who inheres every thing in the cosmos, is also present in the human beings in the form of energy. Like a slothful serpent in the form of a coil, she slumbers in the muladhara chakra.³⁹ It is the purpose of the tantric meditations (also yogic exercises) to wake up this sleeping energy and lead 'her' through the various chakras upwards into the sahasrara chakra (the thousand petalled energy circle).

Tantra then consists of four elements. Murti, mantra and yantra and the body.

At the beginning of the tantric worship an aspirant seeks a guru and gets initiated, he receives the *disksha*. Here the guru gives him the appropriate mantra

³⁹ Swami Satyananda Saraswati, *Asana, Pranayama, Mudra Bandha*, Munger (Bihar, India)2008. Page 528

whereby he considers the purpose and suitability of the aspirant. The worship itself thereafter is an individual process, although there are 'circle meditations'.

All forms of worship within Hinduism are dualistic. The aspirant worships a divinity seeking material benefits or salvation. Only the *advaita vedanta* has a different outlook with its conviction that the knower and the object are the same. But in practice it is dualistic and shows no effective way of realising the non-dualistic state of consciousness. In this context, the tantric method of meditation or worship is unique. One can say it is *advaita* philosophy in esoteric practice.

At the beginning of the worship, the aspirant invites the divinity to come, he installs it in the idol and the yantra. Before beginning with the meditation, he unifies himself step by step with the divinity he is worshipping. This he does with the help of the mantra he has received from his guru. With the mantra, he performs the 6 "karanyasas" and the 6 "anganyasas". The mantra, to remind, is the divinity itself. Every mantra has six parts or 'angas' (Sanskrit for parts of the body): these are the heart, the head, the pinnacle (*shikha*), the armour, the eyes and the weapon (that part of the divinity which removes all obstacles)⁴⁰. The aspirant places (*nyasa* = to place) or installs these parts of the mantra on his own parts of the body: on the fingers of both the hands and on his heart, his head, at the back of his head, on his eyes, on his shoulders and around his body (for protection). After this ritual unification, he begins to meditate.

In effect, he is becoming one with the god, and then meditating on him or her. This according to Tantra is an indispensable prerequisite for meditation. "When the mantra and he who repeats the mantra are separate there is no fulfilment", says Srikantha Samhita.⁴¹ The unification of the aspirant with the divinity is the purpose of the anganyasas. The Gandharva tantra says, "A man should worship a Devata (divinity, God or Goddess) by becoming a Devata himself. [...] he will not reap the fruits of that worship" otherwise.⁴² The same Tantra says further, "By means of these Nyasas a sadhaka (aspirant) becomes himself full of Devata".

So *nyasas*, the ceremonial placing of the divinity on ones own body, is the process of becoming the god himself.

This is the most important contribution of Tantra to *advaita vedanta*. The *advaita* shows on an argumentative-philosophical plane that there is no difference between human and God, that they are one and the same, the apparent

⁴⁰ Anandaghana (Dr. Aripirala Viswam) *Khadgamala darshanamu*, Parampara trust, Hyderabad (India) 2000. P. 27-30

⁴¹ Pandit; M. P., *The Gems from the Tantra*, Madras (India) 1976, P. 64.

⁴² Quoted from John Woodroff, *Principles of Tantra* Part II, Madras (India) 1986, page 442.

differences being only an illusion on account of maya. But advaita offers no way, no effective technique to transform this knowledge that God and man are not two different entities into an experience. Tantra does it without involving itself in a philosophical discourse. This could be one important factor, which enabled the Hindu orthodoxy to forget and forgive Tantra for its anti-vedic views and embrace it.

This embrace between Hinduism and Tantra is so close that today's Hinduism is thoroughly tantricised. Every ceremony or a serious meditation of this great religion shows tantric elements. Take for instance the "*sandhya vandana*", (worship of the meeting of the time segments)⁴³ the most ancient and the most important of all the Hindu rituals, which is performed every day mornings, afternoons and evenings by the orthodox Hindus. The sandhya vandana ritual consists of many Vedic hymns, praising the Vedic Gods like Varuna, Agni (Fire), Sandhya, Apas (water) and, the most important of them, Surya, the sun god. A verse from the Rigveda, called the Gayatri-Mantra dedicated to the sun god, builds the core of the ritual. This ritual authorises man to perform any other ritual, as such the initiation into the Gayatri is considered to be more important than all the other initiations one should undergo. But the meditation of the Gayatri mantra is preceded and followed by the tantric activity, the 'nyasa'. The aspirant unites himself first with the Gayatri mantra, recites the *dhyana shloka* (the meditation verse describing the form of the Gayatri) and only then begins to meditate. At the end of the meditation, he sets the divinity again free with the concluding act of 'nyasa'. Completely in accordance with Tantra, there are yantras of the Gayatri divinity.

The same holds good for almost all the divinities of Hinduism. Every god or goddess has an anthropomorphic form, clearly described in the dhyana shlokas (meditation verses). They have the *stotras*, Hymns in praise of gods, meant for the laymen. But for a serious seeker they have the mantras with the 'bijaaksharaas' specific for that particular divinity and the yantras. The laity is satisfied with the stotras, where as the 'fulltime seekers' get themselves initiated into the mantra, and the more serious among them worship the yantra along with the mantra.

It is interesting to study how two competing rivals, orthodox Hinduism and Tantra, have turned in due course of time into a co-operative unit, each supporting the other. One wonders what could have led to this development.

⁴³ The point of time of the day, where the night meets the day, the forenoon the afternoon, the afternoon the evening.

In this context, one has to think of the great philosopher and religious reformer Shankaracharya of the 8th century A. D., who apart from his other activities worked a lot in the field of Tantra. During his time Tantra must have had already attained the acceptability of the orthodox Hindus. Or it is the merit of Shankaracharya. Apart from writing a number of stotras on the mother goddess, he wrote the great tantric work called the “*saundarya lahari*” consisting of 103 verses praising the mother goddess Lalita Tripura Sundari.

Every verse in this work contains bijaksharas and as such is a mantra and each mantra has a yantra to be worshipped together with this mantra to achieve the aims of the meditation. The aims or goals can be mundane, aiming at the complete control over God’s creation meaning thereby the nature: control over the earthquakes, cyclones, or forest fires. Control over animals and humanbeings. It includes stalling of the enemies and obstructing the execution of their harmful plans; subjugating the king, making a woman or a man obedient, obedient enough to accept your proposals (including the sexual). The famous Hymn ‘Devi khadgamala’ formulates them extensively: The tantric worship arms the worshipper with such a sword, that he becomes the ruler of 18 worlds. He will be protected against forest fire, cyclones, earthquakes, against revolutions. It protects the devotee against deceit, theft, war and against floods. It protects the devotee on a seevoyage, against thunderbolts and black magic. Not to speak of various deceases like pox, fever, death (protection against death means against an untimely death!), and black magic. The tantric worship frees the human being from all such problems and makes him to be happy like Shiva.⁴⁴ Becoming again Shiva means realising that original state of consciousness, which was full of bliss. This on the other hand is the liberation.

Adiguru Shankaracarya must have been very active in the field of Tantra. According to a generally believed story, he fixed one yantra beneath the statue of Vishnu at Srirangam in Southindia, so that the temple attracts many devotees. He is believed to have fixed another yantra below the Vishnu statue at Tirumala to attract money in the form of donations from the devotees. Today, the Vishnu temple at Tirumala is the richest temple worldwide.

Hinduism today is so fully tantricised that every statue in the sanctum sanctorum of a temple in India rests on a yantra. Today’s Hinduism is so closely twined with Tantra, that it is not possible think of a pure Vedic Hinduism anymore.

⁴⁴ See Anandaghana (Dr. Aripirala Viswam), *Devi khadgamala phalastuti*, P. 198 – 202