

Exploring the Changing Connotation and Unfolding the Historiography of Tantra

Nilam Kakati

PhD History, Department of History, University of Hyderabad, Pin: 500046, India

Abstract: *Tantra is represented as one of the most mysterious and demonized forms of scared space in Indic religious traditions. This received understanding is often synonymized with words like dark and evil edges of sacred spaces. Tantra has developed as a fascinating theme for exploration in the writings of both Indian and Western scholars. This fascination can be said to have augmented as 'Tantra' itself have undergone through a phase of shift and transformation in respect of its meaning and historiography. Meaning of the word 'Tantra' had transformed, which gave away different versions with each phase. In the initial phase, it meant knowledge of the objective world, whereas recent phase represents it as an esoteric sect. Likewise, the historiography of Tantra also had transformed from claiming it to be an inevitable part of Vedic tradition to viewing it as a separate entity from it which had an individualistic domain of its own. Both Western and Indian scholars have contributed to enrich the historiography of Tantra. This paper will attempt to examine these shifts in meaning and historiography of Tantra, its relevance and effect from an esoteric religious tradition to an 'exotic' substratum of Hinduism constructed during the Romantic period. It will also make an attempt to study the bearing and growth of Tantra as an esoteric sect which was influenced by the shift in meaning and historiography along with the writings of few eminent scholars on the subject.*

Keywords: Esoteric sect, Historiography, Tantra, Tantrism.

1. Introduction

'Tantra' is one of the religious sects which is invariably encircled by perplexity and argumentation. It is often equated with the dark side of Indic religious traditions. The origin of Tantra itself is encircled in debate and discussion. Utmost misfortune of Tantra is that it is frequently amalgamated with aspects like sex, magic and sacrifice, which comes beneath left-handed practices. The drive for this amalgamation can be assumed to be that it draws more curiosity. Tantra is frequently referred through its left-handed practice rather than right-handed practices. Perplexity revolves not only regarding the origin of Tantra but also its meanings and historiography, which could be viewed to have shifted with varied approaches with times.

Origin of Tantra could be separated into two divisions. Scholars like Lalan Prasad Singh, M. C. Joshi, and David White debates in support of Indian origin of Tantra and Scholars like H. P. Sastri, the debate in support of foreign origin of Tantra. "... it can be said with certainty that Tantra is the cult and spiritual faith of ancient India. It is the gift of the non- Aryan civilization."¹ "Sakta Tantrism has its roots in pre- historic concept of a fertile mother goddess and ancient systems for her worship."² "Perhaps the earliest reference to sects that have subsequently come to be classified as Tantric is a passage from a fourth-century C.E. portion of the great Hindu epic, the Mahabharata (12.335.40), which names the (Saiva) Pasupatas and the (Vaisnava) Pancaratras as 'non-Vedic.' The founders of every major Tantric tradition, school, or sect either trace their guru-disciple lineages back to an Indian source or are considered to be incarnations of bodhisattvas of Indian

'origin.'"³ H. P. Sastri thinks that Tantra has been imported to India by "by the priests of Turkestan, who were driven out by the Islamic invasion."⁴ Evidence regarding the foreign origin of Tantra is not distinct and in abundance. On the other hand, evidence of it originating in India itself is apparent with illustrations in the writings of the scholars mentioned above.

2. Meanings of 'Tantra'

The word 'Tantra' could be viewed to have shifted its meaning several times, which represents different approaches. "In its earliest stage, Tantra arose as the sum total of man's knowledge of the objective world around him."⁵ In ancient texts, the word Tantra did not specify any religious significance. However, the Sanskrit word Tantra is visible since the Vedic times with several meanings like "Siddhanta (conclusion), srutisakha (a branch of Sruti i.e. the Vedas), itikartavyata (set of duties), prabandha (composition), and sastravisesa (a particular Sastra)."⁶

Its earliest appearances were in Rig Veda and Atharva Veda. There the term indicated a kind of weaving machine or loom. These Vedas represented people who wanted to live long, keep off diseases and thwart the activities of ghosts, supposed to cause harm to them. Magic both beneficial to themselves and harmful to their enemies, figures prominently.⁷

³David Gordon White (ed), *Tantra in Practice* (Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Limited, Delhi, 2001) p 20.

⁴ Lalan Prasad Singh *Tantra Its Mystics and Scientific Basis* (Concept Publishing Company Pvt. Ltd. New Delhi, 1976) p 5.

⁵N.N. Bhattacharya *History of the Tantric religion* (Manohar Publishers & Distributors, New Delhi, 1982) p 19.

⁶Hugh, B Urban *The Cult of Ecstasy: Tantrism the new age and the spiritual logic of late capitalism* (History of Religions, The University of Chicago Press, Vol: 39, No. 3, 2000) p 268- 304.

⁷S.C. Banerji *A companion to Tantra* (Abhinav Publications, Delhi, 2007) p 12.

¹Lalan Prasad Singh *Tantra, Its Mystic and Scientific Basis* (Concept Publishing Company, Pvt. Ltd. New Delhi, 1976) p 4.

² M. C. Joshi *Historical and Iconographic aspects of Sakta Tantrism* in Katherine Anne Harper, Robert L. Brown (Ed.) *The Roots of Tantra* (State University of New York Press, Albany, 2002) p 39.

The term is later interpreted by Bhaskara Raya to denote Mimamsa- Sastra⁸ which signifies that Tantra is an act-process- a method of doing or making something.⁹ Tantras are generally denoted the scientific treatises that were composed in India, along with any system or thought structure.¹⁰ "Tantra is sometimes considered to be an Upaveda of Atharva Veda."¹¹ However later in Satapatha Brahmana range of the term is extended further.

As early as in 7th c the first clear evidence of reference of Tantric religion could be noticed in a series of Sanskrit texts. These texts were Banabhatta's Kadambari and Harsacarita, Mahendravarman's Mattavilasa, and Dandin's Dasakumaracarita.¹² Goddess worship in its most ferocious form is the prominent part of Tantric practice. Evidence of sculptural representations and inscriptions are available, which represents this aspect of Tantric practice since the Gupta period. Evidence of the earliest mention of Devi Mahisamardini is available during last part of 6th c in Nagarjuni Hill (Gaya District) cave inscription of Anatarman of the Maukhari Dynasty.¹³ "Two other important early epigraphic references to these goddesses appear in the Bihar stone pillar inscription of Skanda Gupta or Puru Gupta (fifth century C.E.) and the rock inscription of Svamibhata (sixth century C.E.) from Deogarh in Jhansi District."¹⁴

Banerji views Tantra as "Tantras were a set of scriptures, which arose as a protest against those scriptures which insisted on self- mortification and austerities etc. as means to the attainment of the emancipation of the soul from the bondage of rebirths....Tantra can be considered to be a class of literature which does not follow the conventional or traditional Veda based Brahmanical scriptures like Dharmasutra, Dharma Sastra, etc."¹⁵ Bhattacharyya views it as "The etymological interpretations point to the fact that Tantra was a general term for any system serving as the guiding principle of any work and that the use of the word in a strictly religious sense was a later growth."¹⁶ H .P Sastri views it as "Tantra means shortening. It attempts to reduce, to something like algebraic forms, mantras which would otherwise be very long."¹⁷

Victor M. Fic summarizes the meanings of Tantra as it is commonly viewed. "One meaning relates to a concept of

weaving, an activity in which several elements are woven into a cloth, implies several theories and practices woven together to form an integrated system, a Tantric doctrine... Another interpretation holds that the term is derived from a Sanskrit root 'tan' meaning to spread and from 'tantric' meaning knowledge of the origin of all things in the universe. A third interpretation implies a collection of sacred scriptures containing knowledge about the origin of the universe, as well as a guide to practices of various systems of yoga, through which this knowledge can be gained and on which basis mystic powers can be obtained by the devotees."¹⁸

As it could be viewed that meaning of Tantra had transformed with times including new approaches. This transformation of Tantra had elaborated its domain, which initiated with men's knowledge of the objective world to misrepresented esoteric sect. The esoteric aspect of Tantra could be said to have been influenced by Tantric literature, which was composed in an ambiguous language. "Tantric texts are often composed in an "intentional language" (sandhya-bhasa), a secret, dark, ambiguous language in which a state of consciousness is expressed by an erotic term and the vocabulary of mythology or cosmology is charged with Hatha-yogic or sexual meanings."¹⁹ The ambiguous language was misinterpreted, which contributed to its misunderstood and partial knowledge.

However, coining the term "Tantrism" was European understanding as pointed out by Andre Padoux "the abstract category of 'Tantrism' was formed in the 19th C.E., coined from the Sanskrit word Tantra. Tantra refers most commonly a kind of text—through one which may or may not contain materials that we would today label as 'Tantric'. It was in such texts that European scholars first discovered certain beliefs and practices which we now identify as Tantric-- specifically, practices which were considered not only bizarre but also repulsive, sexually licentious and morally offensive."²⁰ The understanding was fundamentally an orientalist construction and fancy interpretation of India.

3. Historiography of Tantra

Historiography of Tantra had been a contribution of both Western and Indian scholars. Representing an esoteric sect, Tantra had been a fascinating and mysterious domain for these scholars. Ample writings are dedicated to Tantra by these scholars, which distinguishes a shifting approach in it. However, the paper will quote few eminent scholars on the subject to highlight this shifting approach.

Sir John Woodroffe could be named as the first who attempted to study and popularize Tantra in its comprehensive aspects. He initiated his writings under the

⁸ S. C. Banerji *A brief history of Tantra literature* (Naya Prokash, Calcutta, 1988) p 1.

⁹ N.N. Bhattacharya *History of the Tantric religion* (Manohar Publishers & Distributors, New Delhi, 1982) p 19.

¹⁰ Ibid, p 19-20.

¹¹ S.C. Banerji, *A companion to Tantra*, (Delhi, Abhinav Publications, 2007) p 12.

¹² David N. Lorenzen *Early Evidence for Tantric Religion in Katherine Anne Harper and Robert L. Brown (Ed.), The Roots of Tantra* (State University of New York Press, New York, 2002) p 26.

¹³ Ibid, p 29.

¹⁴ Ibid, p 29.

¹⁵ S.C. Banerji, *A companion to Tantra*, (Delhi, Abhinav Publications, 2007) p 7, 11.

¹⁶ N.N. Bhattacharya *History of the Tantric religion* (Manohar Publishers & Distributors, New Delhi, 1982) p 20.

¹⁷ S. C. Banerji *A brief history of Tantra literature* (Naya Prokash, Calcutta, 1988) p 2.

¹⁸ Victor M. Fic *The Tantra: Its Origin, Theories, Art, and Diffusion from India to Nepal, Tibet, Mongolia, China, Japan and Indonesia* (Abhinav Publications, New Delhi, 2003) p 23.

¹⁹ Tenant C. Wright *Left Handed Hindu Tantrism* (Religious Studies, Cambridge University Press, Vol. 6, No. 4, 2013) p 352.

²⁰ H.B. Urban, *The Extreme Orient: The construction of 'Tantrism' as a category in the Oriental imagination* (Religious Studies, Oxford University Press, Vol. 29, No. 2, 1999) p 123.

pseudonym of Arthur Avalon. However, he preferred to use the term Shaktism or Tantrasastra instead of Tantrism.²¹ He can be considered as the father of the modern study of Tantra. He took it upon himself to defend the traditions of Tantra. He was the first who attempted to rescue tantric traditions from its many critics, like Rev. William Ward, H. H. Wilson and Sir Monier- Williams who viewed it through the lens of sexual rites and black magic. He had also translated the Mahanirvana Tantra (The Tantra of the Great Liberation) from Sanskrit to English. According to him, the tradition of Tantra was not opposed to teachings of the Vedas and Upanishads.

During 19th C.E. Western scholars from German, Dutch and French also contributed to the writing of Tantra. Authors like Auguste Barth, Maurice Winternitz, Louis La Vallee Poussin and many others have contributed.²² More or less, they also represented the same picture of Tantra, which highlighted one-sided and biased image. Tantra became a misunderstood category not only in the western world but even in India. Indian scholars, intellectuals and social reforms like Raja Ram Mohan Roy²³ and Sir Aurobindo²⁴ influenced by the western writings had a low opinion of Tantra.

The one-sided and biased opinion regarding Tantra had shifted defining new approaches with the writings of Mircea Eliade, David Lorenzen, Gavin Flood and more recently Hugh B. Urban. Indian scholars like Debiprasad Chattopadhyaya and Narendra Nath Bhattacharya and later R. S. Sharma have also contributed to the shifting approach.

Eliade thinks that “Tantra can be thought to be the paradoxical path. It is the path that brings together apparent opposites: the male principle and the female, unity and complexity, discipline and enjoyment, the pleasant and the terrible, self-empowerment and self-surrender. Tantra is about acceptance of death (the principle Freud calls Thanatos) as well as about the pleasure principle (eros).”²⁵ David Lorenzen has worked on both Hinduism and Tantra. Regarding Tantra, he has “recognized four major components which will fulfil its basic character. 1. Sources relating to shamanic and yogic beliefs and practices. 2. Sakta worships particularly the worship of the matrikas and fierce goddesses. 3. Sources relating to the particular schools of Tantra and 4. “Tantric” texts themselves.”²⁶

Regarding Tantra Flood has focused his discussion mainly on the representation of the body in Tantric tradition. He argues that “within Tantra, the body is a vehicle for the spirituality that is fundamental to people’s lives. The tantric body cannot be understood outside the traditions and texts that give it form. Through practice (ritual, yoga and ‘reading’) the body is formed into a pattern determined by tradition, and the practitioner thereby moulds his or her life

into the shape of the tradition.”²⁷ Urban has written immensely on Tantra in general and Tantra in Bengal and Assam in particular. He can say to have written on almost every aspect of Tantra which comprises both books and articles. He thinks that “Tantra is now celebrated as a ‘cult of Ecstasy’: an ideal wedding of sexuality and spirituality that provides a much needed corrective to the prudish, repressive, modern west.”²⁸

Viewing Tantra, Chattopadhyaya argues, “Primitive materialist traditions like Tantra give us evidence that private property and class divisions are not permanent or immutable, but that they had their origin in a particular historical formation and will one day be overturned.”²⁹ Bhattacharya was much influenced by his mentor Debiprasad Chattopadhyaya. He does not share the same view as Woodroffe, who looks at the Vedic origin of Tantra. Rather Bhattacharya attempts to “trace the origins of Tantra to an archaic matriarchal society based on agriculture and fertility cults with the earliest known inhabitants of India—the Indus Valley civilization—which he in turn associates with the Dravidian cultures of south India and with the tribal groups that survive throughout India today.”³⁰

Sharma views the growth of Tantra through the lens of economic basis. He says that “land grants led to the brahmanisation of the tribal areas, which resulted in the Sanskritisation of the mother cult and the compilation of the tantric texts. . . Medieval Tantrism was the ultimate product of the brahmanical colonization of the tribal areas through the process of land grants. . . The institutional aspects of Tantrism both at the human and divine levels, developed as an integral part of the early medieval economy and social system. The tantric mathas, temples and teachers were supported by land grants, which in general created a kind of feudal system.”³¹

Gaps in the understanding of Tantra could be viewed to have abridged with the shifting approaches in the historiography of Tantra. Initially, it was highlighted with the aspects of sexual rituals and black magic and thus dubbed as evil and dangerous. The initial western writings contributed much for the demonized version of Tantra. However, the Tantric texts itself were liable for such a demonized version. As the texts were composed in an ambiguous language which was not meant for common understanding, they were translated and read incorrectly. Attempts have been made by later scholars to overcome this hurdle by making a sincere effort to read and understand the texts correctly. Thus it could be viewed

²⁷Gavin Flood, *The Tantric Body : The Secret Tradition of Hindu Religion* (I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd, London, 2006) p i

²⁸Sthaneshwar Timalina, *Encountering the Other: Tantra in the Cross-cultural Context* (The Journal of Hindu Studies 2011, pp: 274–289, October 2011) p 278.

²⁹Hugh B. Urban, *Tantra Sex, Secrecy, Politics, and Power in the Study of Religion* (University of California Press, London, 2003) p 200.

³⁰Hugh B. Urban, *Tantra Sex, Secrecy, Politics, and Power in the Study of Religion* (University of California Press, London, 2003), p 194-95.

³¹R. S. Sharma, *Early Medieval Indian Society: A Study in Feudalization* (Orient Blackswan Private Limited, New Delhi, 2001) p 260-1.

²¹ Ibid, p 124.

²² Ibid, p 127.

²³Rammohun Roy, “A Defense of Hindoo Theism”

²⁴Jugantar, Bengali newspaper (1905) and Sri Aurobindo, “Bhavani Bharati”.

²⁵Mircea Eliade (Ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, (Macmillan Publishing Company, New York, 1985) Vol. XVII

²⁶David Lorenzen on Tantra.

that the study of Tantra in the later writings is not only restricted to any particular aspect but a comprehensive understanding of the same.

4. Conclusion

Tantra as a domain of Indic religious tradition could be said to have passed through a constant phase of changing connotation in its meaning, understanding and historiography. With each phase, it has expanded and developed. However, it cannot be denied that all the phases were interlinked. Expansion and development of the meaning of Tantra aided in its holistic understanding, which contributed to the creation of its historiography by filling the gaps.

The gap in understanding Tantra was the literature of ambiguous nature, which displayed it as an esoteric sect. This gap was not filled by the initial western scholars who further demonize it based on their biased and limited understanding. This, however, was mended and amended with the writings of later Western and Indian scholars, who made a sincere effort to grasp the true knowledge of the literature and portray a comprehensive understanding of Tantra. Thus it can be said that the gap in understanding of Tantra has been filled to an extent.

References

- [1] Banerji, S.C. (2007), *A companion to Tantra*, Abhinav Publications, Delhi, 2007.
- [2] Banerji, S.C. (1988), *A brief history of Tantra literature*, NayaProkash, Calcutta.
- [3] Bhattacharya, N.N. (1982), *History of the Tantric religion*, Manohar Publishers & Distributors, New Delhi.
- [4] Eliade, Mircea (Ed.), (1985), *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, Macmillan Publishing Company, New York, Vol. XVII
- [5] Flood, Gavin, (2006), *The Tantric Body: The Secret Tradition of Hindu Religion*, I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd, London.
- [6] Fic, Victor M. (2003), *The Tantra: Its Origin, Theories, Art, and Diffusion from India to Nepal, Tibet, Mongolia, China, Japan and Indonesia*, Abhinav Publications, New Delhi.
- [7] Joshi, M.C. (2002), *Historical and Iconographic aspects of Sakta Tantrism* in Katherine Anne Harper, Robert L. Brown (Ed.) *The Roots of Tantra*, State University of New York Press, Albany.
- [8] Lorenzen, David N. (2002), *Early Evidence for Tantric Religion* in Katherine Anne Harper and Robert L. Brown (Ed.), *The Roots of Tantra*, State University of New York Press, New York.
- [9] Singh, Lalan Prasad, (1976), *Tantra, It's Mystic and Scientific Basis*, Concept Publishing Company, Pvt. Ltd. New Delhi.
- [10] Sharma, R.S. (2001), *Early Medieval Indian Society: A Study in Feudalization*, Orient Blackswan Private Limited. New Delhi.
- [11] Timalisina, Sthaneshwar, (2011), *Encountering the Other: Tantra in the Cross-cultural Context*, The Journal of Hindu Studies 2011, pp: 274–289, October.
- [12] Urban, Hugh B. (1999), *The Extreme Orient: The construction of 'Tantrism' as a category in the Oriental imagination*, Religious Studies, Oxford University Press, Vol. 29, No. 2.
- [13] Urban, Hugh, B. (2000), *The Cult of Ecstasy: Tantrism the new age and the spiritual logic of late capitalism*, *History of Religions*, The University of Chicago Press, Vol: 39, No. 3.
- [14] Urban, Hugh B. (2003), *Tantra Sex, Secrecy, Politics, and Power in the Study of Religion*, University of California Press, London.
- [15] White, David Gordon (Ed.), (2001), *Tantra in Practice*, MotilalBanarsidass Publishers Limited, Delhi.
- [16] Wright, Tenant C. (2013), *Left Handed Hindu Tantrism*, Religious Studies, Cambridge University Press, Vol. 6, No. 4.