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A feminist reading of the radical early tantras

von Olga Serbaeva Saraogi

Practically unknown to the large public, there exists a body of the texts privileging the women and the feminine as having more chances to reach the top state of this *tantric* tradition - the state of the absolute goddess. An unknown tradition written for and by women? The article argues for an altogether different interpretation...

The *śaiva tantras* of the Vidyāpīṭha group¹ contain the kind of material that those who might well discover the historical proofs of the existence of the cult of the supreme divine feminine might well discover them. The goddess (in most of cases a form of Kālī) is represented as the absolute power, higher than any male deities in any form — male deities who only serve her as vehicles, seats, or even earrings. It is possible to gain access to her and she may be merged with, but the practices necessary to achieve this are often extreme, and are said to be revealed specifically for women. As for an outstanding male practitioner, he can reach the same condition, sometimes by being obliged to pretend to be a woman imitating the goddess in clothing, make-up, speech and other aspects of behaviour. The crucial aspect of this set of radical *tantric* texts lies in the fact that the goddess becomes accessible only through contact with and subsequent transformation by multiple female entities. In the texts, these are called by some forty different names, of which the terms *yoginīs*, *ḍākinīs* and *khecarīs* appear to be the most important.

The four main aspects of the term *yoginī*

1. The terms may denote a real woman, initiated in the *tantras*, who, by means of her ritual practices has acquired various supernatural abilities — termed *siddhis* in Sanskrit — and who is able to transmit her knowledge to male as well as to female disciples. Semi-historical accounts concerning real women transmitting *tantric* traditions can be found in both the Trika and the Krama.



Shiva with a sacrificed skull in his hand.

Such transmission can also occur by blood descent: Abhinavagupta for example, one of the most eminent of eleventh-century *tantric* philosophers, attributes the title of *yoginī* to his own mother, thus suggesting that he was born of an enlightened, perfect being, and so shares that nature himself.

2. By far the most frequent occurrence of the terms *yoginī/ḍākinī* in the *tantras*, however, refers to the concept of a supernatural being or spirit, who either manifests herself spontaneously, in moments when the person thus visited is between life and death, or after a prolonged period of invocation involving the repetition of *mantras* and burnt offerings of various substances (often extremely transgressive ones, such as human flesh or blood). These female beings are often depicted as deformed, having animal heads or feet. Their nature is ambivalent and they are just as likely to tear the practitioner invoking them to pieces as to grant their heart's desire. In some cases, they are able to enter into «union» with a male practitioner. Often interpreted in sexual terms, the practice of «union» belongs rather within the psychological

realm of what may be termed altered states of consciousness, for the «union» suggests rather a form of fusion of consciousness.

3. The third important aspect of *yoginī* lies in how her nature is conceived of as being an abstraction. She, or rather in this case «it», may be a symbol, or a code for an invocation, or the invocation itself. In the texts in question, the names of the *yoginīs* encode specific spaces and times, phases of the moon, sacred sites and temples, the thrones of the goddess (śaktipīṭhas) which together constitute loci and moments that are particularly potent for the practice of rituals. Such loci can be real external places, located all over India, but they can also be interpreted internally. Thus the *yoginīs* are populating the subtle body of the practitioner, in which they operate various transformations. Present at all sorts of spatial and temporal limens, junctions and frontiers within the human realm — such as birth or death — the *yoginīs* also encode those states of the universe and are actively involved in its creation or destruction.

4. Finally, the great and absolute goddess herself is also sometimes addressed as a *yoginī*. Having presented these introductory reflections so as to demonstrate the high degree of importance that the *tantric* texts of the Vidyāpīṭha place on the feminine in general and on *yoginīs* in particular, I would like to discuss the encounters with *yoginīs* in order to answer the following questions: Could a figure of the *tantric yoginī* be a sort of a feminist ideal? How real is her femininity? And what does it mean to be female in these *tantric* cultural contexts?



Camunda: How real is her femininity?

The encounters with the *yoginīs*

The encounters with *yoginīs* of the second type referred to above, termed *melaka* or *melāpa*, take place in lonely, dangerous places: on mountain tops, near solitary trees or on cremation grounds. The practitioner, called *sādhaka*, usually inebriated, repeats the invocation and makes various burnt offerings. He suddenly hears confusing sounds, falls into a visionary state and finds himself surrounded by the *yoginīs*, as described above. On being addressed by them in a particular manner, he offers them a bloody *argha*, by piercing a limb on the left-hand side of his body, usually the arm.

Satisfied, the *yoginīs* transform the practitioner by a variety of means into a superhuman being possessed of omniscience and the ability to fly. This transformed being is often compared to Bhairava, the leader of the *yoginīs* and the absolute deity in the earliest set of the radical tantras. But the desired change is also described in a different way, and it is said either that one will „reach the domain or the state of the *yoginīs*“ (*yoginīpada*), or even become a *yoginī* oneself (*yoginī bhavet*, *khecarī bhavet*).

Leaving to one side for the moment the astonishing fact that, in a society as male-oriented as mediaeval India, a male practitioner might become a female being as a part of his successful practice, let us rather concentrate on the question of what it actually means to be a *yoginī* in these texts?

What does it mean to be a *yoginī*

Yoginīs — types 1 and 2 are virtually indistinguishable in this context — undertake a very particular ritual practice that enables them to acquire a great number of super-abilities — the *siddhis* — the most important of which is the capacity to shift shape at will. In order to achieve this, these ambivalent beings or women are said to extract blood, life-force and other vital substances from the beings they encounter. In doing so each individual *yoginī* acts in a particular manner: one, for example, drinks the blood of the victim by singing, another by touching a victim with her clothes, yet another by urinating around the victim's house, and another by offering a future victim some gift which serves as a marker. In addition to such vampiric practices, *yoginīs* or *ḍākinīs* are also said to sacrifice living beings, especially those described as «the seven times born»: those reborn again and again specifically for the purpose of such sacrifice, and who are thus charged at every death with an

ever-higher degree of the transformative potential. Having partaken of the substances from the body of such a victim, *yoginīs* obtain knowledge of past, present and future, the ability to fly and to perform every sort of miracle.

All of these abilities are primarily used to cheat victims. And a male practitioner who is said to have obtained the state of a *yoginī*, gains access to exactly the same set of the supernatural abilities, becoming able to extract blood or to find and kill suitable victims of his own.

Practices of this kind are presented in the texts as constituting a tradition created especially for women, who, because of their very nature, are unable to follow regular *tantric* observances. In *tantra*-influenced medieval literature, there are descriptions of cases where these practices are transmitted from one woman to another.

Conclusions

Though we indeed do have a model in the early *tantras*, in which the feminine aspect is given the predominant place, and where male practitioners must follow a feminine mode of achievement, we have to conclude that its meaning is altogether different to what a feminist interpretation, of the kind mentioned above, might want to find. For it does not in fact reflect in any way whatsoever on the real position of women in medieval India. The material analyzed for this article suggests that such radical and provocative ideas as the preponderant role of the female in these *tantric* traditions cannot in anyway be transposed onto Indian social and historical reality. On the contrary, this female predominance serves only as one of the many and various aspects of transgression by which these *tantric* traditions distinguish themselves from the *brahmanical* world. Such transgression includes human and animal sacrifices, offerings of flesh, blood, alcohol and products of the body to deities who themselves appear terrifying — decorated with skulls and coming straight from cremation ground — and as such are altogether different in nature to the pure *brahmanical* gods who desire only lacto-vegetarian offerings. These *tantric* deities — predominantly female, wild and demonstrating all the signs of possession — require the practitioners of their cult to behave in the same radically antisocial way. It's precisely in this context of extreme practice that the preeminent character of the feminine should be seen. Even if we do have a few extremely rare references to female *gurus* in these traditions, it appears that the overwhelming majority of real women would



Kali: Combining feminine and demonic features.

have known nothing whatsoever about such practices. For, as women, they would necessarily have been excluded from any access to such secret texts, which were in practice reserved entirely to initiated men. Some real women indubitably do appear in the texts. But these are all very young tribal girls or girls from untouchable castes, who are merely used in the practice of the male practitioners, while appearing to perform no practice of their own. Thus what we are dealing with here in fact constitutes no more than a «feminist» fantasy written for and by male practitioners, for whom the feminine is simply another manifestation of the transformative potential of transgressive *tantric* practice.

Anmerkung

¹ Classification proposed by Sanderson, Alexis: Śaivism and the Tantric Traditions, in: Sutherland, S./Houlden, L./Clarke, P./Hardy, F. (Hg.): The World's Religions, London 1988, S. 660-704.

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Olga Serbaeva Saraogi, University of Zurich, wrote her M.A. and Ph.D on the *yoginīs* in medieval Sanskrit texts (the *tantras* and the *purāṇas*). At present, she is writing her Habilitation dealing with altered states of consciousness in the Vidyāpīṭha *tantras*.

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