

**TANTRA A SYNCRETIC THEOLOGICAL
DOCTRINE WITH PRAXIS**

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Abstract

All multiple religious & spiritual traditions that emerged and evolved in the Indian subcontinent since antiquity, tantra or tantrism is probably the only tradition that evokes skepticism due to the profanity and notoriety attached to it. The western scholars describe it as pagan, indigenous, pre-Aryan, heretical, non Vedic etc. It is generally considered antithetical to the metaphysical & speculative Vedanta tradition, the emotionally charged Bhakti tradition and the heterodox, ascetic & monastic, Jainism and Buddhism. This is a gross misconstrual and misinterpretation of tantra. The followers of Hinduism, Jainism & Buddhism are not even aware that many of their regular religious and spiritual practices have originated from tantra. Tantra, in fact is a syncretic theological doctrine which amalgamates much of the spiritual knowledge hitherto discovered and practiced in the Indian subcontinent.

Keywords: multiple religious, spiritual, traditions, Vedanta...

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Introduction:

Of all the multiple religious & spiritual traditions that emerged and evolved in the Indian subcontinent since antiquity, *tantra* or *tantrism* is probably the only tradition that evokes skepticism due to the profanity and notoriety attached to it. The western scholars describe it as pagan, indigenous, pre-Aryan, heretical, non Vedic etc. It is generally considered antithetical to the metaphysical & speculative *Vedanta* tradition, the emotionally charged *Bhakti* tradition and the heterodox, ascetic & monastic, Jainism and Buddhism. This is a gross misconstrual and misinterpretation of *tantra*. The followers of Hinduism, Jainism & Buddhism are not even aware that many of their regular religious and spiritual practices have originated from *tantra*. *Tantra*, in fact is a syncretic theological doctrine which amalgamates much of the spiritual knowledge hitherto discovered and practiced in the Indian subcontinent.

Definitions/Meaning of Tantra: It is highly challenging to arrive at a single, precise and cohesive definition of *tantra*, which is an accumulated set of practices and ideas derived from various sources, practiced in varied ways across groups and also within the same group, varied, across geography and history. According to David Gray (2016), '*Tantra* traditions are manifold, spanning several religious traditions and cultural worlds. As a result they are also diverse, which makes it a significant challenge to come up with an adequate definition.' McDonald (2006) rightly remarks, 'Because of the multifaceted nature of Tantric Teachings, which include multiple goals and methods of practice, the task of defining Tantra is arduous at best.' He also adds, 'Due to the esoteric nature of Tantric instruction, it is difficult to understand and properly define it in its entirety.'

Etymologically it is derived from Sanskrit word *tantra* which literally means 'loom' or 'to weave.' Ron Barrett (2008) states, 'It is based on the metaphor of weaving, where the Sanskrit root "tan" means the warping of threads on a loom. It implies "interweaving of traditions and teachings as threads' into a text, technique or practice." Later, the term '*tantra*' came to mean any systematic broadly applicable 'text, theory, system, method, instrument, technique or practice.' In the *Smritis* and epics, the term means 'doctrine, rule, theory, method, technique or chapter' and the word appears both as a separate word and as a common suffix, such as '*atma-tantra*' meaning "doctrine or theory of *Atman*." Medieval texts such as *Kāmikā-tantra* give the following explanation of the term *tantra*: because it elaborates (*tan*) copious and profound matters, especially relating to the principles of reality (*tattva*) and sacred *mantras*, and because it provides liberation (*tra*), it is called a *tantra*. There also is a definition of *tantra* wherein '*tanu*' means body & '*tra*' means that which liberates. Thus, according to this definition *tantra* means a spiritual path wherein one gets liberation through or even within the 'physical body.' For Teun Goudriaan (1981), the term *Tantrism* usually refers to a 'systematic quest for salvation or spiritual excellence by realizing and fostering the divine within one's own body.' According to another accepted definition, the word *tantra* is derived from two words, *tattva* and *mantra*. *Tattva* means the science of cosmic principles, while *mantra* refers to the science of mystic sound and vibrations. *Tantra* therefore is the application of cosmic sciences with a view to attain spiritual ascendancy. One more definition, popular according to Padoux (2002) among the *tantra* practitioners is any "system of observances" about the vision of man and the cosmos where correspondences between the inner world of the person and the macrocosmic reality play an essential role.'

Historical Overview: Scholars differ considerably regarding the origin of *tantra* traditions in India. Some believe it to have begun in the first millennium. Frederick Smith, a professor of Sanskrit and Classical Indian Religions, views *tantra* to be a religious movement, parallel to *Bhakti* movement of the 1st millennium CE. Few others perceive its origin during 5th to 6th centuries. Whatever the exact time may be of origin of *tantra*,

undoubtedly by the 10th century an extensive corpus of *tantra* literature & practices were in vogue in the subcontinent of India. Same as regards to the time of its origin, there are different opinions regarding the founders of *tantra*. Flood (2006) states, 'The *tantra* pioneers may have been ascetics who lived at the cremation grounds, possibly from "low-caste groups" and these were probably non-Brahmanical.' These Hindu renouncers and ascetics can be traced back to far more ancient traditions. They are also mentioned in the Buddhist *Pali* canon. These ascetics would have been supported by low castes living at the cremation places.

David Gordon White (2005) traces *Yogini* cults as foundational to *tantra* but disputes scholars who see their roots in an "autochthonous non-Vedic source, "the indigenous tribes" or the Indus Valley Civilization. However, considering the pervasiveness of *tantra* elements in most of the spiritual & religious traditions it is better to view it as an evolutionary syncretic all-arching theological doctrine spanning since the antiquity to the modern times. All forms of *Saiva*, *Vaisnava* and *Smarta* religions, even those forms which wanted to distance themselves from *tantrism*, absorbed elements from *tantras*. It has become so deeply absorbed in the Hindu, Jain & Buddhist traditions that it has lost its independent existence except the '*Vam tantra*.' Padoux (2002) suggests that *Tantra* may have been so pervasive by the 13th century that "it was not regarded as being a distinct system." It can be affirmed that *tantra* has been an integral part of the ever evolving, rich and pluralistic Hindu religious tradition and not an alien fifth or sixth century phenomenon, which surfaces suddenly in Hinduism.

Major Features/Elements of *Tantrism*:

1. **Anthropomorphic God:** *Tantra* revolves around the anthropomorphic concept of God. It has humanized and personalized the Vedic deities. Each deity symbolizes certain human qualities and aspects of life. For example *Saraswati* is the presiding deity of knowledge & Arts. A devotee chooses his/her personal deity from amongst the pantheon of huge number of gods/goddesses. An aspirant visualizes the form of

the chosen deity and even identifies with the deity. This is supposed to endow a devotee with a sense of divinization and also inspire to imbibe the divine qualities that the deity is supposed to symbolize.

2. **Ritualism:** The worship (*puja*) of anthropomorphic forms of God is at the center of *tantrism*. The practice of having a home shrine with idols of deities installed in it & worshipping them with prescribed rituals using flowers, lamp, incense sticks, etc which is practiced in majority Hindu homes is derived from *tantra*. The rituals were also part of *Vedic* worship but there it used to be collective event to be celebrated by community. *Tantra* gradually evolves toward more individualized and customized pursuit of divine. *Diksha* (initiation) is the foremost among the several rituals prescribed for Tantric *sadhana*.
3. **Chanting of mantras:** *Mantras* are sacred formulas which act as aids to worship. The repetition of certain sacred words in a musical way helps a devotee to cleanse off all the worldly thoughts and concentrate on the deity. The power of sound has always been known in Hinduism. In fact, one of the basic beliefs of Hinduism is that this phenomenal world is born out of the sacred primordial sound, 'Aum' (a concept similar to the Christian concept of 'logos.' *Mantra* is derived from the Sanskrit root 'man' which means to think and 'tra' means instrumentality hence *mantra* is an instrument which supports in experiential *tantric sadhana*. *Tantra* replaced the complex Sanskrit *mantras* with 'bijmantras,' very short & easy to pronounce so as to reach to all including the people of lower castes. *Tantric Sadhana* employs several 'bija Mantras' associated with various deities, which aid the aspirant in accessing and realizing the cosmic energy in his/her body. What is important is that an aspirant is given a special *mantra* (which is a secret between the *guru* and *shishya*) during the initiation by the Guru who understands the 'bhava' (disposition) and the ability of the aspirant and accordingly gives a suitable *mantra*.
4. **Ritual use of yantra:** *Yantras* are the codified sacred diagrams which like *mantras* help a devotee to clear his/her mind of the worldly thoughts and concentrate on the

deity. The Buddhists call it *maṇḍala*. Modern religious practices of *rangoli*, *alpna* are simplified derivation from yantras or *mandalas*. They are used as tools, during the *tantric Sadhana*. *Yantra* takes the place of the emblem or image of the deity to be worshipped. *Yantra* worship has to pass through some necessary conditions. The worshipper has to first invoke the presence of the deity first into his own body and then pass it on the *yantra* through appropriate mantra. The *S'ri Yantra* is the most important *yantra* associated with Goddess *Laxmi* and supposed to bestow wealth and prosperity on the *Sadhaka*, if properly consecrated, propitiated and worshipped.

5. **Revaluation of the human body and Senses:** Unlike some of the ascetic theological doctrines which believe human body to be a barrier in the path of self realization, *tantra* does not condemn either human body or human senses as evil but as an instrument to self realization. Divine can be experienced within one's physical body. Human senses are naturally designed in such way that they pull a human being to the lure of external world. *Tantra* attempts to draw the same senses inward. The senses can be employed transcendently to realize the divine. At times, deliberate attempts are made to go beyond the conscious mind and arrive at 'altered ego states' in order to access the realms of higher reality. *Tantra* may also be regarded as an attempt to place *kama*, (desire) in the service of liberation.
6. **Importance of a Preceptor (*guru, acharya*):** *Tantra* lays a great emphasis on the role of *guru, acharya* . In this regard *tantra* follows our ancient tradition of having a preceptor. To lead the devotee to the right path of liberation. An inexperienced devotee will not be able to find a right path on his or her own. Guru initiates the devotee towards the path of liberation. Guru, a realized soul through '*shaktipata*' transmits his own spiritual energy to the disciple. Abhinav Gupta (10th century), a *tantric Guru*, whom many believe represents the pinnacle of *tantric* thought and practice, felt that this process was a ritual designed to sweep away the disciple's ignorance and instill in him the knowledge that will lead to liberation.

7. **Esotericism:** Esotericism or secrecy is an important aspect of *tantra* which has two meanings. Firstly, it means unlike Vedic worship which was collective and practiced together by entire community, *tantric sadhana* is a highly individualized private matter. Secondly, the spiritual aspirant starts getting mysterious experiences that cannot be comprehended or described logically through the guidance of guru. Moreover, whatever an adept learns or experiences must not be disclosed to anyone but remain a secret, to be shared only by a *guru* and *shishya*.
8. **Transgressive aspects:** This is the component which has earned a bad reputation to *tantra*. However, not all sects of *tantra* adopted this. Some sects known as *vāmācārins* (leftist) prescribed usage of '*panch makara*'(five 'm'), *madya* (intoxicants), *maas* (meat), *maithuna* (sex), *matsya* (fish) & *mudra* (parched grain or gestures). *Tantra* believed that the same worldly things that bind a human being to the world can liberate a human being. That is the reason why the worldly things which were considered taboos by other religious & spiritual sects were included by *tantra* in skillful ways so as to raise human consciousness to higher levels. Douglas Renfrew Brooks, states that the antinomian elements such as the use of intoxicating substances and sex were adopted in certain *Kaula* traditions to challenge the *Tantric* devotees to break down the distinctions between the ultimate reality of Brahman and the mundane physical world. In most Hindu and Buddhist *tantra* texts, extreme form of sexual ritualism is absent. In Jain *tantric* texts, this is entirely absent. Yet, emotions, eroticism and sex are universally regarded in *tantric* path as natural, desirable, a means of transformation of the deity within, to reflect and recapitulate the bliss of *Shiva* and *Shakti*. *Kama* (desire) is an aspect of life and a root of the universe, in the *tantric* view, whose purpose extends beyond procreation and is another means to spiritual journey and fulfillment. MacDonald (2007) states, '*Tantrics* discard the notions of purity, instead feeling that there is otherworldly power to be obtained and harnessed through the use of "impure" items. Menstrual blood and physical contact with a corpse were regarded as impure in the

conventional religions. In *tantra*, these things are vested with other worldly power hence to be utilized as an effective tool for liberation.

9. **Female Deity and Revaluation of the status and role of women:** Although *Vedic* tradition includes the worship of female deities through hymns and stories, they are not central to the religion's practices. *Tantric* tradition considers the female deities as fundamental and adopts predominantly *Sakta* worship, especially worship of the ferocious goddesses such as *Durga*, *Kali*, *Matrkas* and *yoginis*. The *yoginis* play a vital role in *diksha*, the first and the foremost step in practicing *tantra*. Some *tantra* sects in fact worshipped real women whereas the others imaginary or symbolic women (goddesses). Women were put at a very high pedestal by *tantra*. This was radical at that time when patriarchy had a strong hold on social institutions. The ancient *samkhya* doctrine of bipolar cosmic reality (*prakriti & purusha*) given by sage *Kapila* was revised in *tantra* as 'Siva-sakti' principle. The bi-polar conception of cosmos is interpreted as the union of the masculine-feminine and spirit-matter with the ultimate goal of realizing the primal blissful state of non-duality.
10. **Analogical thinking:** *Tantra* emphasized microcosmic or macrocosmic correlation. Unlike the *Vedic* tradition, which granted higher status to human spirit in comparison to human body and monastic faith traditions such as Jainism and Buddhism which denigrated human body as an impediment to ultimate liberation, *tantra* elevated human body as a field wherein divine can be experienced in a tangible manner and highlighted it as a miniscule cosmic reality. Human body is the replica of macro cosmic reality. Whatever exists in cosmic reality, the same exists in human body.
11. **Tantric texts:** Over a period of time, there evolved a voluminous *tantric* literature. They were called *agamas* in *Shaivism*, *samhitas* or *Pancaratra* in *Vaishnavism*, and as *tantras* in *Shaktism*. The Atharva Veda is considered to be one of the prime *tantric* scriptures. The *Tantra-Agama* texts of Hinduism present a diverse range of philosophies, ranging from theistic dualism to absolute monism. Major *Tantric* texts

had been written by the 10th century, particularly in Kashmir, Nepal and Bengal. Abhinav Gupta, who lived in 10th century, has been considered a noteworthy writer of *tantra* texts.

Each *Tantra-Agama* text consists of four parts:

- i. *Jnana pada* or *Vidya pada*: It consists of the doctrine, its philosophical and spiritual meaning & interpretation and knowledge of reality and liberation.
- ii. *Yoga pada*: It contains precepts on yoga, the physical and mental discipline pertaining to the doctrine.
- iii. *Kriya pada*: It consists of procedures & rules for rituals, construction of temples; design principles for sculpting, carving, and consecration of idols of deities for worship in temples and different forms of initiations or *diksha*. Iconography, the science of construction of the idols of deities and *Vastu sastra*, the sacred geometry are also associated with *tantra*.
- iv. *Charya pada*: It lays down rules of conduct, of worship (*puja*), observances of religious fasts, rites, rituals, festivals and *prayaschittas*.

Conclusion: There needs to be a renewed awareness about the philosophy underlying *tantra*, to rescue it from notoriety and ignominy. It is not an alien philosophy but very much rooted in Indian culture and civilization. The labeling of *tantra* by the western scholars as primitive, heretical, non-Vedic, indigenous etc must be rejected. It is truly a culmination of all the religious beliefs, theories and practices & traditions evolved in India since antiquity to the present times. This provides an excellent testimony to the religious pluralism and liberalism of Indian culture. This also testifies that *Hinduism, Jainism and Buddhism* & even in *Sikhism* must not be perceived as compartmentalized rival faith traditions. The common elements of *tantra* in all of these faith traditions prove that there was fluidity among them which allowed them to borrow and absorb from each other. Moreover, it also needs to be reviewed and reevaluated from the modern feminist & *dalit*

perspectives as *sakta* worship was central to it and its origin is attributed to people of lower caste which proves that *tantra* transcends caste boundaries through rejection of traditional *varanashram* dharma.

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