

Encountering the Other: Tantra in the Cross-cultural Context

Sthaneshwar Timalšina*

*Corresponding author: timalšin@mail.sdsu.edu

Abstract: This article focuses on the cultural appropriation of Tantra in India and the West. The term 'Tantra' evokes one sentiment in contemporary India, the birthplace of Tantra, and a widely divergent meaning in the West. In these contrasting understandings of Tantra as the black magic or as sex, the sacred of some has been turned into an object for appropriation and commodification for others. This shift relies on identifying Tantra as the 'other', in relation to what the mainstream culture defines itself as the 'self'. Due to secretive nature of Tantric tradition since the classical times, Tantra has never found its own voice, and with the mainstream culture claiming the power over truth, marginal voices repressed within the rubric of Tantra have never been heard. The emergence of religious consumerism has assisted in peeling off this secretive Tantric body, bringing the heart of sacred practices from India to the consumers in the West.

Brands will become religions and some individuals, who are seen as an expression of their brands, will themselves become religions
–Jesper Kunde¹

Introduction

This article assumes the categories Tantra and the West in a very limited sense. Thus the topic of the discourse itself demands explanation. The problem is, any conversation about cultures leads to some reduction, and the only thing we can do is to be aware of this reduction and its limitations. Tantra here stands for the religious practices emerging in the Indian sub-continent that predominantly worship goddesses identified as 'power' (*śakti*). It is secretive in nature, shares practices within the close circles identified as 'families' (*kula*), is transgressive of the societal ethos and norms, and introduces diverse images in visualisation practices. Again, this is not a definition of Tantra but a selection of categories that concerns

the current discourse.² The West here stands for power, the power of cultural hegemony and capitalism, and this again is a selection of categories.

Relying on these assumptions, this article explores the nature and consequences of the depiction and appropriation of Tantra in contemporary societies, primarily the migration of Tantric practices to the West and re-introduction of these practices that have been repackaged in the West to its homeland. Hindus in practice often blend and mix multiple ingredients out of the Vedas, Smṛtis, Tantras, Bhakti, Yoga, and so on. Although indigenous practices in the Indian sub-continent that survive in various forms and can be collectively identified as Tantric are widespread, these indigenous practices have mostly remained in the periphery of the wider Hindu culture. Tantric texts instruct the practitioners to remain in obscurity and many Tantric practitioners that I have met were little interested in public conversation. The terms such as 'secret' (*rahasya*), 'supreme secret' (*parama rahasya*), 'to be hidden' (*gopya*), 'to be hidden as secret as one's vulva' (*sva-yonir iva*), are found everywhere in Tantric literature. Traditionally speaking, Tantric practitioners have endeavoured to keep their practices from the reach of non-practitioners. Assuming this secrecy as a cultural category to define Tantra, it stands as the opposite of missionary religions that want, with all their means, to spread their teachings. Even when a missionary religion, Buddhism in this case, has developed a branch of practice identified as Tantra, this specific branch has, in the traditional settings, remained out of the domain of the public. This secretive nature of Tantra is at odds when it comes to the West, as this aspect is completely 'other' to the mainstream society. But this is just the beginning of Tantric otherliness. The broader Hindu culture is in debt to Tantras for the worship of images that the Abrahamic traditions have labelled as idolatry. Tantra is polytheistic, as the very notion of *maṇḍala* does not exist in the absence of multiple deities. These two additional categories complete the circle of making Tantra not just the 'other' but a perfect stranger. But Tantras do not stop here. There are some reputed transgressive practices of blood and flesh. And if this is not enough, there are skull-bearing Kāpālikas and Aghoris at extreme odds with societal norms. These 'left' (*vāma*) forms of Tantra generate fear even among the traditional Tantric practitioners. Tantra itself is not a single doctrine but an amalgam of practices, often incorporating conflicting paths. While the very appropriation of Tantra as a category and the identification of some practices as Tantric are both problematic due to the diverse nature of Tantras, the application of this category to identify select religious phenomena in monotheistic cultures is what invites problems. To engage in discourse on Tantra, thus, is to enter into the virgin jungle. If the very premise of Tantra is the discourse of obscurity, also addressed as the 'twilight language' (*sandhyā bhāṣā*), to even unravel and limit the meaning is to violate its premises.

Bringing Tantra into discourse is not merely encountering another subject. The other subject here is not just unwilling, but also misrepresenting itself. The classical depiction of a Tantric residing in the cremation ground and practicing under

the cover of darkness gives the discourse a platform. In the cremation ground, bodies are burnt to ashes, and in ashes, there lies no individuality. The darkness of night stands for the same dissolution of difference. Applying the metaphor of the dark, the discourse on Tantra is not to unmask the 'unknownness' of the other but to relinquish the never-known otherliness. 'Speaking for' is an effort to confront the character of a Tantric, as to reveal is not his nature. If Tantra is secretive in nature, it not only does not speak about itself, it also does not speak for itself. This is not because Tantra rejects its otherliness or its existence. It assumes its existence in its otherliness.

Recognising the categories

The romantic and orgasmic Tantra and the scary ghoulish Tantric as imagined by contemporary Indian and Western societies has its roots in classical India. If the Orient of Edward Said stands for the irrational and the orgasmic in the Western imagination, the Tantric bears this identity in the heartland of its home culture. While the rejection of the Tantric identity, in its own category, comes in denial of the ego and the hierarchy that in the eyes of Tantric practitioners is merely a hindrance for recognising oneness with the divine or having the experience of cosmic oneness, this rejection opens up a space for a drama of social impositions wherein the Tantric represents the repressed identity of the obscure.³

The secretive practices of Tantrics and their flat-out rejection of the societal subject is what invites the outside imagination. The strict instructions not to engage with the public goes back to the *Pāśupata Sūtras* that teaches the practitioners not only to stay away from the public but also to give negative ideas about oneself, so that the public does not endanger his solitude.⁴ This lack of self-projection, or the sometimes false projection results in making them the object of imagination, particularly as a boogeyman of the public. This opacity of Tantric identity initially allows the construction of the layers of cultural presuppositions in its homeland where the practitioner is first projected as a living ghoul. This Tantric as the scary 'other' can be exemplified with Bhavabhūti's *Mālatimādhava*, where Aghoraghaṇṭa prepares the sacrifice of Mālatī, or with *Prabodhacandrodaya* of Kṛṣṇamiśra that gives a graphic depiction of a Kāpālīka. Imagining Tantra in light of one of its most obscure streams, such as Kāpālīka, reduces innumerable varieties of Tantric practices to one marginal sect. In this consistent trend, the multiplicity of Tantric practices becomes reduced to one of its obscure streams. The second encounter is more nuanced. In this trend, select elements of Tantra are appropriated and incorporated into the mainstream culture, while the Tantric identity retains the early stereotype. This depiction can be found in the biography of Śaṅkara by Mādhava-Vidyāraṇya. This text presents Śaṅkara as a master of the Tantric Śrī Vidyā while also depicting him as a victim of a Kāpālīka. In this depiction, like in the story of Bhavabhūti, the Tantric is a cannibal, a worshipper of the ferocious black goddess Kālī or Caṇḍī who is placated

with offerings of liquor, human blood, and flesh.⁵ This rejection of Tantric identity while embodying the Tantras comes to its culmination with Vidyāraṇya, who authors the lengthy *Śrīvidyāraṇyatantra*, an anthology of various Tantric practices that surround the deity Tripurā, while retaining the lineage of Śaṅkara. In this subsequent mode, while Tantras do not remain untouchable, Tantric identity does.

This domestication and appropriation of Tantra also parallels the prominence of the goddess of beauty and eros, Tripurasundarī, over the goddess of time and death, Kālī.⁶ The degree to which Tantra becomes benign is inversely proportional to the perception of a Tantric as more and more scary. With the appropriation of Tantras into the Mutts of Śaṅkara, the practice becomes an understood secrecy, while the Tantric identity becomes completely denied. In this new scenario, black magicians and cannibals receive the title of a Tantric, while the practices that emerged under the title of Tantras become a subordinate but still valid practice, *Sādhanā*, among monks and householders.

This depiction of a Tantric is consistent even today, now being a theme of the Bollywood movies. The change is, the old lustre of a scary cannibal is replaced by the Tantric as a sex beast. For instance, the Malayalam movie 'Tantra' brings the imagination about Tantric practices to the fore, with an on-screen BBC reporter Kiran identifying the contemporary context. The film centres around a Tantric, Acharya Sudharman, who is hungry for paranormal powers and conducts his practices on the fearsome and forlorn mountain peak of Vikramaśilā. His wife, Yoginī Vedāvati, is the assistant in this power quest. Against this backdrop arrives Kiran, a BBC reporter along with a charming woman, Śvetamukhī, the one with a fair face. The climax comes with the protagonist asking Śvetamukhī to assist in his Tantric quest to participate in the ritual worship of one thousand virgins, of which she is the last.⁷

In both classical and contemporary depictions, a Tantric is commonly portrayed as someone who is constantly searching for power and is rejecting norms, whether by human sacrifice and cannibalism, or through sex. In both scenarios, transgression lies at the core. And in both depictions, a Tantric lacks compassion and love. Bodies, particularly human bodies, are their ritual objects. Blood, either sacrificial or menstrual, is meant to flow out for sacrificial reasons. This Tantric as the scary other outside of societal norms, while remaining constant in the contemporary depictions, become somewhat romanticised, with its particular affirmation of sex.

The rejection or appropriation of Tantras in contemporary India is predicated in large part based upon these parameters. Under the influence of the Orientalists, the Samāj movement in India emerges, endorsing the romanticised Indian cultural past that it assumes was monotheistic. Based on this understanding, leaders such as Rāmmohun Roy (1772–1833) imagine a pure religion of the past and consider Tantras as a product of the second phase, the era of decadence.⁸ Another prominent Samāj leader, Dayānanda, finds similar problems in images and the worship of goddesses.⁹ His understanding of Tantra rests entirely on select Left-Handed (*vāmamārga*) practices, and what some rare Tantric practitioners do in their

solitude is used here as a broad category to define Tantra. As multiple Hindu Samāj practitioners function today with the ideal of reviving the glorious past that in itself is borrowed from the figment of the Orientalist's imagination, they all consider Tantra as a chapter of the dark past. The noteworthy difference in imagining Tantras in precolonial India, as in the case of Vidyāraṇya, and in colonial India, as in the case of Samāj movements, is the discourse on monotheism. Within the cultural subordination in the context of Indian cultural dialogue itself, worshipping images or goddesses was never problematic. It was only the societal taboos transgressed by the Kāpālikas that became problematic to the mainstream Hindus. But in the context of the discourse with the Hindu movements shaped by monotheistic Western culture, polytheism as the core of Tantras is considered to be the foremost problem. Tantras became one of the identificatory traits of the Hindus for Christian missionaries, as it allowed them to paint mainstream Hinduism based on isolated left-hand practices. For instance, the worship of Kālī is described as the most 'bloody of any system of idolatry that was ever established on earth'¹⁰ or, as Ward suggests, 'so singularly corrupt', and addicted to 'unutterable abominations'.¹¹ In their attempt to confront these appropriations, Samāj movements reject these practices while endorsing the 'pure' religion of the Vedas. Ironically, this concept of the original Hinduism, often depicted as monotheistic and as not worshipping images, in itself emerges from the fiction of the Orientalists' imagination.

Tantra in the Western mindset differs somewhat from the above depictions and stands for exotic and orgasmic practices coming from India and Tibet that blend sex and meditation. In the words of Hugh Urban, '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'.¹² Borrowing the chapter title from Urban, Tantra has been transformed to 'the Cult of Ecstasy' and the process of romanticisation has been binary, with the Western Tantrics like Pierre Bernard or Indian masters like Rajneesh both agreeing on the exotic depiction of Tantric culture.¹³ While this characterisation of Hinduism in general as that found among isolated Tantric left-hand practices empowers the imperial project, the romanticised version of it comes to the streets through workshops, and Tantric massage and spa. This cultural orgasm cannot be merely limited to Said's Orientalism alone, as it is giving birth to a much-awaited liberation from nuanced cultural repression. Or, if the imagination on Tantra is largely borrowed from Orientalists, Orientalism itself, as in words of J. J. Clarke, 'cannot simply be identified with the ruling imperialist ideology, for in the Western context it represents a counter-movement'.¹⁴

Tantra has been historically elastic in adopting practices that cannot otherwise be blended together to make one single consistent practice or belief. The stereotype of Tantra ignores this intrinsic diversity, its practices contradictory to each other, with philosophies that support different goals. As Tantra becomes grossly simplified, the market that consumes Tantra is little concerned with the problems

inherent to blending Hindu and Buddhist Tantras, left-hand and right-hand Tantras, various disciplines (*ācāra*) maintained by Tantrics, or different philosophies adopted. Once again, this homogenisation is not uniquely Western, as this can also be found in its homeland, where Tantra has remained a mystery for most people.

In the wake of the new trend of spreading one's beliefs and practices, the secretive garb of Tantra is stripped away even in its homeland where Tantra manifests in multiple brands to meet the consumer needs. As is evident, the classic hideous and ghoulish image of a Tantric cannot become a popular brand. The spiritual orgasm sold in multiple packages of 'hugging' or 'the emission of power' demonstrates the necessity that Tantra comes with a unique, immediately recognisable 'flavour'. Tantra in the West, following this argument, resides in the marketplace where it 'liberates' from its ancient self-rejecting anti-social mask of negation, and instead adopts 'cosmetics' to enchant its clients waiting for exotic experiences.

Based upon post-modern ethics guided by capitalism united with a missionary tendency that melds globalisation with free-market competition, religious value is determined by the marketplace, with its validity confirmed on the basis of its marketability. This commodification of Tantra becomes possible in the West, as the taboos that the Tantras confront in their homeland are not taboos in the West. Unlike the elite Smārta Hindu community, breaking the circle of caste purity, drinking liquor, and consuming meat are not Western taboos. Particularly, what makes Tantra marketable is its assertion of orgasm. In this new birth of Tantra in the West, 'sacred sex' manifests, being guided by 'capitalistic ethics'.

With consumers as their own masters of this capitalistic enlightenment, the monistic nature of Tantric teachings similarly takes a spin in this new age. The classical non-dual instructions remained silent about appropriating the messenger as deity. When Vivekananda came to America, he travelled only with his Advaita knowledge and did not carry a statue of himself so that his devotees could worship him. With the infiltration of Tantric non-dualism, the new Guru-isms enter an unprecedented phase, and deities are replaced by gurus. When the messengers themselves become the religion, their 108 names and *maṇḍala* worship becomes everyday practice for salvation. The original Gāyatrī mantra is replaced with new mantras extolling the qualities of each specific guru. The argument is plain and simple: since there is no difference between god and guru, worshipping the guru bears the same results. While the early gurus introduced images of multiple Hindu deities, now the bracelets and lockets of the gurus make good money. The classical prayers of the deities are still chanted, with a minor revision where the name of the specific deity is replaced with the name of the guru. The message of non-duality gets a completely different spin in this new marketplace.

Reflection upon Tantra in the West can be more meaningful, if observed within these parameters. The issue now is to unravel what in Tantra's 'alien other' entices the counter-culture and what remains appalling to the larger masses. Central to

this is the *atimārga* or the transgressive nature of the path that simultaneously constitutes the core of Tantra and makes Tantra alien to the West, for both Tantra-philes and Tantra-phobes. With the many subgroups of Pāśupatas, Kāpālikas, Kālāmukhas, Aghoris, and so on, Tantra emerged as the path that contravenes regular codes determining what is 'religious' and 'ethical' and embraces marginal paths and practices, rituals and philosophies, and worships violent and ecstatic forms. This disregard for norms shatters the hegemony of the elite by sidelining what is considered pure and benevolent and brings into the stream that what is 'outside': the outcaste, the horrific and fearsome, the hidden and neglected, etc. This reversal of the margin and centre breaks the established societal hierarchy, introducing a circular social *maṇḍala* that reverses the early vertical social structure, finding purity and divinity in blood, in drugs and drunkenness, and in prostitutes and the outcaste. The simple pantheistic or monistic argument is, as divinity constitutes all forms and norms, there is nothing that is not divine. This specific effort of Tantra to bring to practice what has been rejected by the larger society makes Tantra alien in its own land of origin, with mainstream Hindu literature conspicuous in its contempt towards Tantric practice.

The first noticeable difference between this post-modern Tantric enlightenment and traditional Tantric practice is that, although Tantra is traditionally liberal in embracing all rituals, individuals, and divinities within its scope, it considered itself as a means to transform mundane experience to the divine. The post-modern enlightenment is sanguine about its ability to commodify everything. This process does not end with constituting the sacred as marketable, but also includes selling the divine. This is the dilemma of the new age and of the post-modern and capitalistic enlightenment guided by the marketplace.

Making tantra more 'tantric'

The discussion upon 'Tantra in the West' is not possible without discussing the Western imagination of non-Western culture. Among select constituents, the foremost is the dynamic of the mystical 'Orient', which can be analyzed along the Saïdian lines. As King argues:

The denial of rationality to the Other has been a common strategy in subordinating the Other throughout human history ... (King 1999, p. 26)

The concept of the bipolarity of 'rational' and 'mystical', according to King, rests upon Kantian philosophy.¹⁵ Following this argument, the 'Orient' is mystical in a sense that it lacks scientific knowledge or rationality. Although various religious phenomena from the East that include Sufi mysticism, Vedanta, or Zen Buddhism were introduced before Tantra migrated to the West, Tantra most closely fits the Western imagination of the East, because among all the 'mystic' religions, Tantra is the most obscure, most strange, and thus, most alien. An Aghori living in the

cremation ground, consuming human flesh along with hard liquor and opium, eating excrement, walking nude, appearing insane with rolling red eyes and incoherent shouts: all of these elements depict a heathen savage unaware of the dawn of civilisation. The early description of Tantra found in Western literature and shared among the first generation of Westerners interested in Tantra aligns with the picture described above.¹⁶

The polarity of Oriental and Occidental has remained a common category in studying non-Western civilisation. The discussion about 'Tantra in the West' indicates an acceptance, even if partly, of this construct of bipolarity. This otherliness of Tantra is marked with orgasmic enlightenment in theory and practice, in scholarly and mass-market publications, in classrooms and workshops. Contrary to the religious tendency to deny the body and repress sexual desires, Tantras embraced this emotion, sometimes acknowledging it as an instrument for spiritual transformation. This single nuance of Tantra makes it alien, as it endangers the course of civilisations built on repressing human emotions. A mere surfing the web links can verify this depiction of Tantra. That Tantras bring sex into religious discourse challenges cultural mores, as it comes into conflict with the founding structure of civilisation built on patriarchy. Expanding the notion of the non-productive labour as irrational, the very idea of non-reproductive sex transgresses the norms.

Another element further embellished with the emergence of a 'new' Tantrism is its counter-cultural and anti-social aspect. Human beings share social constructs to the extent that this negotiation does not endanger the individual's autonomy to override the social and experience its individuality unbound by social constructs. This may include the end of rationality and embody transgression. As socio-ethical norms are human constructs, this again is a human possibility to liberate from the boundary that has been created. The tension between the 'social' and 'subjective' aspects of a human reflects this construction. Tantra, following this argument, is a need when the social overrides the subjective and an individual strives to find his liberation untrammelled by social morés. Tantra of the Atimārga category possesses this anti-social character. What Tantra adds to this asocial aspect is the acceptance of autonomous religious experience that comes without relying upon any religious institutions or texts. Abhinavagupta, the foremost Tantric theologian, claims that there are three sources of the gnosis that gives one self-realisation: the mentor, the text, and one's own self-experience.¹⁷ Interestingly, in his categorisation, the self-arising knowledge independent of gurus and texts is considered the highest. This understanding reflects the dilemma where salvation is sought outside of institutional boundaries. This tendency is not dead even in guru movements, as even here, while gurus present themselves as the final authority, they transgress existing institutional boundaries while being guided by the market for their very existence. Thus the real prophet in this new structure is the market that controls what is religious, and preceptors are merely the face of this unforeseen market power. In the process of branding the names and proselytising, accepting and renouncing the gurus and thus shifting the flow of masses and

money from one to another individual, the divine is shaped, branded, maimed, and abandoned. Just as no orgasm gives final satisfaction, religious practices cannot satisfy the market: there literally is a hunger for spirituality that is being satisfied through workshops and *darśans*, through hugging or through emission of powers. As long as spirituality remains out of the domain of the market, it undermines the supremacy of capitalism. On the contrary, in this new paradigm, nothing, including gods, is supposed to remain outside of the marketplace.

This experiment of Tantra brings both psychological and social challenges: it exposes the repressed and it threatens the existing social hierarchy. The human mind that gave rise to pagan beliefs and rituals, and that constituted the sacred and the supernatural is seen in the mirror through Tantra. Along the same lines, the doctrine of the Kaulas brings the 'family' to power instead of a single powerful entity. The rule-breaking role of an *atimārga* practitioner can be considered as meta-social, since it goes beyond social stratification or the moral codes imposed by the clergies. Although there are numerous incompatibilities between the experiments with Tantra in India and the West, the fundamental social character that Tantrics are 'outsiders' or intruders upon the pure domain of religion and transgressors of the norms, is consistent. Since all that is non-Western is outside of the mainstream culture, all the practices coming from India are thus Tantric.

Tantra is a complex cultural phenomenon. The Tantric argument of transgression is compatible with modernity. Modernity not only has the ability to deconstruct old values, it also has the self-reflexive ability to break itself down. Nevertheless, there is a limit. Just as accumulation of capital does not tend to break down the supremacy of capital, Tantric experience does not aspire to transforming the transcendent into mundane experience. But instead, it aims to transform all experiences to the esoteric or mystical state. This concept threatens dualistic modes of beliefs and practices.

Dualism of the mind and the body, the separation of the divine and individual, the world and the transcendent, all maintain the social hierarchy: just as the individual is permanently doomed to be subordinate to the divine, it is doomed in the same way to be subservient to the monarch. Tantric argument, however, is that an individual is the very totality, with its completeness or divinity hidden due to ignorance. According to Tantric philosophy, with the rise of the Kuṇḍalinī, the sleeping power that is dormant in all individual beings, every individual can achieve realisation of his true nature that is identical to the divinity. This divine autonomy, in a Tantric sense, functions in actualisation of the presence of the very self, vibrating in all that exists. The Tantric philosophy of transforming the objective domain to the subject matches the capitalistic autonomy that aims to transform the other to the self through economic power. The distinction is, Tantric philosophy discredits externality and otherliness, while this rejection threatens the power of the market to transform everything into commodity. In this chain of commodification of the 'other', whether that concerns the opposite sex, another human ethnicity, culture, language, or even divinity, Tantra manifests

itself as a new object with never-heard modes of enlightenment finding their market value.

Renunciation, commonly found in Hindu, Buddhist, or Jain traditions, allows individuals to follow certain norms that are not applicable to the laity while liberating the renounced ones from maintaining some of the societal rules and norms. This renunciation manifests in a new shape in the new age Tantric brands. Enlightenment, another concept associated with spiritual practices and particularly found in Tantras, is not marketable in its original form. It is not just Tantras, even Vedanta texts describe the enlightened ones as insentient (*jaḍa*), crazy (*unmatta*), or a ghoulish (*piśāca*). In the marketplace, enlightenment is translated into peace and some hypnotic bliss. This fits with the Tantric claim that one is liberated at the very moment of initiation.¹⁸ According to Tantras, the esoteric state of enlightenment can be revealed, as it is already given and innate to all sentient beings. The question relevant to this discussion is: can this experience be evoked on a mass scale or mass-produced so that individuals can achieve this so-called innate state with no individual effort or through just surrendering to the preceptor?

Commodified tantra

The traditional tendency of Tantras to deny their identity gives a potential ground for the rise of 'spirituality'. Religions, following this new brand of spirituality, are adherents to divisive and superstitious beliefs and practices. Spirituality, on the other hand, is inclusive and scientific. This new disguise, a religious child of capitalism, 'is a means of colonizing and commodifying Asian wisdom traditions'.¹⁹ This new market of spirituality allows the blend and fusion of all that exists: Kabbala Dzog-chen, Sufi Mahāmudrā practice, and so on. Following the strange argument of the spiritual masses, while one of these practices in itself can be exclusive and non-scientific, their fusion is liberating. To identify oneself as a Hindu or a Buddhist is problematic, to practice Tantra and yoga is not.

What this new trend of spirituality inherits from the missionary religions is the process of subordination of existing forms of religious practices, whether through branding them as irrational or through labelling them as extremist. And what facilitates the spread of the good words of Tantra is its exotic teachings when blended with charismatic males and enchanting females. Hedonistic in its appearance, this peculiarity of Tantra to embrace the body and thus emotions has not only been romanticised in the popular imagination, but also has been the tool for expanding the market.

The denial of the societal self is both the life-blood of and the scaffold for Tantric traditions. Because of its character of not wanting to be a mainstream social movement, or because of its very revolutionary character of eschewing social norms, it continually enchants individuals tired of the hollowness of the

claims of institutions, including the burgeoning ashrams of the gurus. What is self-contradictory here, though, is the claim sold in the spiritual marketplace that this self-realisation can be achieved only through the grace of a guru. This next claim reduces the autonomy of the individuals in their ability to have a direct experience of the divine. As the Tantras say, the individual is merely a mirror image of the totality and the divinity is the recognised mode of the self. What has been rejected in this new trend is the direct revelation of the truth, independent of the means. The Tantric assertion of self-effort as the means to liberation jeopardises the market. To say that one can experience the divine with greater clarity without the mediation of a preceptor is similar to say that the brand being sold is somehow inferior to what one can make on his own.

Tantra in the West is instantly liberating. By various forms of the grace of guru, by glance, by touch, or by hugging, people claim to have a liberating experience. The relaxing experience, considered as liberation, has the potential to be commodified, with mediums, capable of generating this experience to the masses, successful in the market-determined religion. A practitioner informed me that after having the first direct experience through hugging with his guru, he realised the hollowness of all the books he had read and burnt them in his Christmas fire. Another practitioner cited Kabir, just to confirm that one does not become a wise man by studies but by love. A common thread among the charismatic movements is the rejection of rationality. For most practitioners I have met, this mystic Tantric experience dawns only through the grace of the guru and not through any rational means.

Traditionally, grace has remained one of the key factors in spiritual progress. However, if Tantric traditions are all rooted on grace, the question remains, why are there so many texts and so many systems of practice, and so many lengthy practices? Yet another question arises: if individuals are mere puppets of gods or gurus, where is their autonomy in liberating themselves? For most practitioners, the quest for enlightenment is over once they have chosen their guru. They give the metaphor of a ferry in which they ride and the guru is the driver. As long as they sit quiet in his or her boat, they will reach the other shore. The more the movements focus on grace, the more the liberation market blooms. The measuring stick of surrender in the marketplace is transparent, that being money. Along the lines of Bhagavan Rajneesh, richness allows one to be closer to enlightenment, as poverty drives the individual to fulfil basic physical needs and hinders one from spiritual pursuit.²⁰

Commodification relies upon the image, the outlook of the object that has been offered for sale. This requires exposure of what is considered secret, as it is the market that determines what is authentic in its value or flavour, and its value judgement is determined by glamour. Here the Tantric practice reverses its old norm of hiding its identity and strives to find or establish its Tantric image. In order to demonstrate how 'Tantric' is the hidden side of practice in its origin, the

tradition found in the Mutts of Śaṅkara can be exemplified. Śaṅkara is the foremost Vedānta theologian of India. In my personal conversation with the Śaṅkarāchāryas of Dwaraka and Kanchi, it was confirmed that they worship the Śrī Cakra and Tripurasundarī, one of the ten Mahāvidyā deities worshipped by Tantrics. However, these Śaṅkaras are not Tantric in other respects and their Tantric practice is somehow concealed. In this mode, there is something more with the gurus than what is taught to the public.

The selective practice of Tantra, found in its homeland, further supports that Tantric practice remains in flux. This elasticity gets a new twist in the marketplace. The New Age argument of Tantric practice is, it is the initiate who determines what to practice and the role of a preceptor is to determine the price to reveal such practice. As Tantric practice has remained tolerant of all other forms of practice that includes Vedic and Śramana traditions, Tantra gives the unique opportunity to blend everything that is within the realm of spiritual awareness. The individuals with whom I have discussed this, or the altars they have made in their home for meditation, confirm the abovementioned argument that these practitioners find support in Tantra to incorporate all that comes to their mind. If not Tantric in totality, one of the arguments that supports this claim is that, this indeed is transgressive.

The essence of the argument is, what constituted ‘Tantric’ in ancient India was its secretive nature. This secrecy is never-exhaustive, as one can still maintain secrecy with a limited degree of exposure. I have observed this among many Śākta shrines in India and Nepal where the priests and practitioners are revealed to some extent while nevertheless maintaining the traditional mode of secrecy. Tantra in the West functions not in its ability to remain ‘secret’, but in its ability to reveal. In my personal meeting with one Western Tantric guru, he reported that when Śakti flows through his eyes, *dzzz . . .* the flash of light comes out, and sometimes it is so powerful that his eyes start bleeding. In my meeting with another guru, he persuaded me to touch my shoulder and told me that the physical pain I had was now gone. In yet another encounter, one guru claimed that he belongs to twenty-seven members of the chosen beings coming from different galaxies to rescue humankind. These claims are the means to enter into market: the bigger the claim, the bigger the market. Something secret, in the Western mindset, functions as dangerous or scandalous where reality is not conceptualised as hidden, but rather, as revealed.

What is central to Tantrism in the market is that its mystical and erotic bodies are revealed. Along the lines of Blanchot, ‘bringing the words mystical, eroticism and atheism together attracts attention’.²¹ This desire for attention, unlike the original missionary zeal to bring the ‘heathen’ to the path of the only God, is to induce the masses to purchase the brand made available to the consumer. Money, in process of this transaction of faith, is the highest god that is sought and realised.

Peeling the secret tantric body

Deconstruction, from the beginning, has been a response to the other
James Smith²²

As has been noted, Tantra represents the occult, the pagan, and the 'flesh' side of beliefs. Its oriental origin makes it yet more occult and alien. Discussion of Tantra in the West requires deconstruction of the nuances that make Tantra unique and relevant to the study of non-Western culture. Analysing such nuances allows a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of cultural dynamism. It is essential to demonstrate the secret or unknowable character of the 'Other' that lies in the heart of Tantra in order to make sense of Tantra as an aspect of cultural dynamism.

The most prominent aspect that makes Tantra different is its 'secret' nature. Guhyeśvarī or the 'Mistress of the Hidden' has her temple located in Kathmandu, Nepal. Kāmākhyā, another Tantric goddess located in Assam and named after Eros, is considered to be the site where Satī's vulva fell to earth while Śiva was carrying her body. Subhagā or 'the one with the beautiful womb' is the common name of Tripurasundarī, the Tantric goddess of beauty and wisdom. All these goddesses are Tantric, and represent continuation of the secret Tantric culture. What is significant is that these Tantric sites are the temples of the female deities and furthermore, they are specific to female genitalia. The mythical link to the body of Satī often occurs in Tantric discourse, where Śiva instructs Pārvatī to maintain the secrecy of Tantra like her own secret organs.²³ The connection of the first and the second point is the continuation of the metaphor of vulva, and in this, the secrecy is compared with the vulva of the goddess. Significantly, this is the feminine metaphor for secrecy.

A further significant aspect of Tantra present in its origin is its orgasmic character.²⁴ Although scholastic Tantra has intellectualised rudimentary rituals that include sex, this nevertheless has not been rejected in most Tantric literature. This can be found in Abhinavagupta, the philosopher-aesthete whose writings give Tantra its intellectual depth.²⁵ Tantric inclusion of sex can be considered a metaphor for the inclusion of 'flesh' in order to actualise the 'self'. Recognition of the self as essentially divine, along the line of Tantra, manifests through consumption of food, drink, and physical contact. This can be synthesised for the current discussion as the inclusion of body within the realm of spirit and spirituality.

Last but not least is the 'otherly' character of Tantra. It has been noted that Tantra contrasts to some extent with Vedic teachings and practices, where Tantric rituals appear to be autochthonous while Vedic or Smārta rituals and codes appear to be overlaid. Unlike the co-optation of pagan beliefs in the West by monotheistic traditions, the Smārta traditions supersede or subordinate the Tantric culture of India by imposing the faith of the elites over the beliefs held by the masses.

Tantra in the West twice displaces Tantra from its original form of secrecy. First, Tantra is taken over by the Smārta culture and the Tantric secrecy is layered over by the elite societal concepts of purity. In this process, what is displaced is the feminine side of divinity. Tantra thus can be compared to the flesh of Indian spirituality. With metaphors of Tantric secrecy linked with vulva and Tantric goddesses having the myth of origin relating these deities with female genitalia, exposing the Tantric body parallels exposure of the most sensitive parts of the female body. The hegemony of the elite culture displaces this Tantric body once, while this culture being imported to the West, and twice displaces what is kept hidden and thus preserved (*gopya*) in Tantra.

Another significant aspect of this 'exposure' lies in the orgasmic character of Tantra that has been kept secret. As noted above, the exotic and erotic dimensions of Tantra contradict Puritan cultural norms. Connecting the bodily and orgasmic aspect to the feminine, religions tend to maintain their masculinity through the hegemony of purity. This purity functions through subordination of bodily desires and passions. The body, in this paradigm, becomes something dangerous, something that perverts and leads to hell, therefore requiring taming or subordination. Just as the Smārta culture displaces the bodily character that has remained as part of Tantra, importing Tantra to the West twice displaces this, significantly in the monotheistic context.

In the Indian culture, the 'otherness' of Tantra is established in relation to 'Vedic' Hinduism. This subordination displaces Tantra in its place of origin, with Tantras adopting a non-Tantric value system, or Tantric cultures being judged by the value system found in the Vedic culture. This displacement acts in the social realm through the displacement of the matrilineal values and social norms that are subsumed to patriarchal values and norms. In this displacement, Tantra represents the 'bloody' face of the savage that needs to be domesticated. Worshipping the beautiful goddess Tripurā in the front of the shrines of Kālī, the wrathful Tantric goddess, demonstrates this domestication. This 'Otherliness' of Tantra proliferates when it comes to the West. Where anything that encourages the worship of images or encourages a faith of a pluralistic divinity could be considered heathen, Tantra brings the most alien form with its acceptance of extreme otherliness, with the practice having been deformed in its own homeland. While commodification of Tantra parallels the commodification of the gendered body, this also coincides with commercialisation of the 'Other'. The ability to purchase in feudal society through power that transforms into money, and in capitalistic society through money which transforms into power, lies in its capacity to purchase the 'Other'.

Tantra in this sense can be compared with the commodified body that is priced on the basis of its outlook, on the basis of its 'sexy' appearance, and on the basis of the cosmetics used to make this Tantric body look orgasmic. For this, the Tantric visualisations will give preference to those that can draw the masses, the Mantras will be homogenised and will be mass-distributed so that it can be sold at a

relatively lower price, while personal encounter with gurus will be extremely expensive, based on the ranking of the gurus. Like the commodified body, the role of Tantra also remains the same: to grant ecstatic and orgasmic experience that has been likened to enlightenment in the New Age market. It is less relevant to discuss whether Tantra in fact embodies such properties, as it is the market and the outlook of the market that guides its distribution.

In conclusion, the undomesticated side of Tantra is violent, with blood being part of its ritual. The goddess to represent this aspect is Kālī, the dark goddess who represents the 'dark-skinned other', and the domesticated goddess, for instance, Tripurā, who is enchanting and orgasmic. While Tantra reveals the repressed side of the human psyche, this also fits with the depiction of the 'heathen' other. This Tantric body becomes the commodity in the marketplace when offered in the process of 'hugging' or in the 'emission of power'.

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Notes

- 1 Kunde (2000, p. 6).
- 2 For the definition, or general characteristics of Tantras, see Brooks (1990, pp. 46–72).

- 3 For discussion on co-creation of the image of Tantric deity during the colonial times, see Humes. 2003. 'Wrestling With Kālī: South Asian and British Constructions of the Dark Goddess,' in McDermott and Kripal (pp. 145–68).
- 4 The *Pāśupata Sūtras* instruct the practitioner not to reveal one's signs (*avyaktalingī* Ch. 3.1) and teach that one should conduct oneself like a ghoulish (*pretavac caret* Ch. 3.11). So that people do not engage him in their worldly matters, the text suggests that the practitioner should pretend snoring (*krātheta vā* Ch. 3.12) or shake the body (*spandeta vā* Ch. 3.13). Teaching that 'a wise man becomes pure when subdued [by the world]' (*paribhūyamāno hi vidvān kṛtsnatapā bhavati* Ch. 3.19), the text teaches one to be insulted by the world in all possible ways.
- 5 For the classical and contemporary depictions of Tantra, see Caldwell in McDermott and Kripal (2003, pp. 249–72).
- 6 This is only to say that domestication of Tripurā has become easier due to her mild character. For domestication of Kālī, see Gupta, S. 2003. 'The Domestication of a Goddess: Caraṇa-tirtha Kālīghāṭ, the Mahāpīṭha of Kālī,' in McDermott and Kripal, pp. 60–79.
- 7 There are a number of documentary films and videos related to Kālī. Caldwell gives a list of twelve of these in McDermott and Kripal 2003, pp. 297–8. *Shaitan Tantrik* is another Bollywood movie to give a grim depiction of Tantra. For discussion, see Urban (2003, p. 39).
- 8 For discussion, see Urban (2003, pp. 203–7).
- 9 Section 11 in the *Satyārthaprakāśa* is particularly noteworthy for the depiction of Tantras in the Aryasamaj literature.
- 10 Ward. *History, Literature, and Mythology*, 3: ciii. Cited in Urban, 'India's Darkest Heart.' In McDermott and Kripal (2003, p. 174).
- 11 Ibid (McDermott and Kripal, 2003, p. 175).
- 12 Urban (2003, p. 204).
- 13 The chapter 'The Cult of Ecstasy' in Urban (2003, pp. 203–63) gives a good account of the romanticised history of Tantra in the West.
- 14 Clarke (1997, p. 9). Cited by Kripal, 'Being John Woodroffe: Some Mythical Reflections on the Postcolonial Study of Hindu Tantra,' In Cabezón (2004, p. 185).
- 15 King (1999, p. 25).
- 16 See Urban (2003, pp. 14–22).
- 17 *Tantrāloka* 4.78–79. In this passage, Abhinavagupta cites the texts, *Kīranagama* and *Nīsatana* in order to confirm his categorisation of the gnosis.
- 18 *yadā guruvāraḥ samyak kathayet tan na samsayaḥ | muktas tenaiva kalena yantras tisthati kevalam || Kularatnamālā*, cited in Śīva Sūtra 3.43.
- 19 Carrette and King (2004, p. 87).
- 20 Urban (2003, pp. 235–43).
- 21 Blanchot, M. 1993 [1969]. *The Infinite Conversation*, 202, cited in Carrette (1999, p. 13).
- 22 Smith (2005, p. 13).
- 23 *Gopaniyam prayatnena svaguhyam iva suvrate | Yoginīhṛdaya* 3.202. *gopaniyam prayatnena svayonir iva pārvati | Siddhakuñjikā Stava* (generally published as a chapter in the Gorakhpur publication of *Durgāsaptasatī*).
- 24 White (2006, pp. 94–122).
- 25 *Tantrāloka* of Abhinavagupta, Ch. 29. *Tantrasara*, Ch. 22.

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