

## NON VEDIC ORIGIN OF TĀNTRISM

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The archeological evidences and the literary sources are the two basic tools for historians to trace the history of any culture. As far as the origin of the Indian culture is concerned, the remnants of the great Indus valley civilization are the only earliest archeological evidences to trace its antiquity. Some of the cultural artifacts unearthed from these sites provide ample evidences of the cultural and social set up of that time. As regards the literary evidences of the pre-historic Indian culture Vedas are the earliest sources. From a historical point of view, the so called Vedic culture was given its shape by Āryans who invaded the subcontinent thousands of years ago.<sup>1</sup> What they did after invading the Indian territory is that they established a new form of culture by conquering the existing pre-Āryan culture. The term Veda denotes not only a corpus of literature ranging from Vedas proper up to Purāṇas but also a particular stream of culture, more precisely Vedic sacrifices.

India is a land of various cultures. It is not wise to say that the Indian culture is predominantly Vedic in nature even though it is believed so. But there were some other cultures parallel to it or even before it. Definitely, those streams of thoughts which emerged after the time of Vedas also have a tremendous impact on shaping the Indian culture. Tāntrism is believed to be such a stream of culture having its origin back in pre-Āryan times. This paper is an attempt to trace the historical evidences of pre-Vedic origin of Tāntrism.

### The definition of the word Tantra

The meaning of the word Tantra varies from discipline to discipline<sup>2</sup> or culture to culture. It is used in Vedas in the sense of looming<sup>3</sup> where as Kośas<sup>4</sup> provide numerous meanings for the term including a particular branch of philosophy. It is used to denote particular branch of literature also. It holds true in case of Tantra because the tāntric literature has some unique characteristics<sup>5</sup> compared to Vedic and post-Vedic literatures.

Etymologically, the word is derived from the root 'tan', meaning to expand. Here, the expansion of knowledge means both the intrinsic and extrinsic expansion. The intrinsic expansion refers to the expansion of consciousness i.e. from the consciousness of a human being to that of a supernatural awareness.

### Tantra as a śruti

Tantra is reckoned as a part of śruti. It is Kullūkabhaṭṭa, a celebrated commentator on *Manusmṛiti*, who first refers to Tantra as a one of the two fold

division of sruti by quoting *Hārītasamhita*<sup>6</sup>. It can be inferred from this statement that by his time Tantras were also accepted as authentic as Vedas.

It is a historically proven fact that Tantras have been ignored or rejected completely by the upholders of Vedic religion. In course of time Tāntrism grew stronger as a rival to authority of Vedas. The hope of surviving became lesser. When, it was felt that it is no longer possible for these religions to survive as two separate entities, a compromise was made by adopting materials from each other. By so doing, each group saved their position for once and forever without being extinct.<sup>7</sup> At present, the state of interaction between these two religions have reached at a point where tracing the source of particular idea is becoming more difficult.

#### **A brief survey of Tantric literature**

The oral and textual streams are the two life sustaining aspects of a tradition. As far as the existence of Tāntrism is concerned, these two streams play important roles. A great majority of tantric texts are written in Sanskrit. The oral tradition plays an important role in the interpretation of these texts and their practice.

#### **A brief note on Tantric literature**

Tāntric literature is mainly of three kinds viz. (1) Tantra (2) Āgama and (3) Samhitā. The subject matter of these texts is almost same but they are distinct from each other in terms of their conception of reality and its attributes. There are a few more varieties of the Tantra literatures like *Kalpaśāstras*, *Paddhatis*, *Rahasyas* etc. but the above three categories are said to be the important ones.

#### **Main features of Tantra, Agama and Samhita**

1. Tantra (sākta)-These are the texts dealing with descriptions of different forms of goddesses and the practices of different types of rituals and their governing body of theories.
2. Agama (śaiva)-Āgamas are śaivic in nature. Traditionally Āgamas are classified in to three, based on whether they preach dvaita, dvaitādvaita and advaita nature of the ultimate. They are 10 Śivāgamas, 18 Rudrāgamas and 64 Bhairavāgamas. These are dualistic, non dualistic and monistic respectively.
3. Samhita (Vaiṣṇava) - This class of texts is vaiṣṇava in nature. Samhitas are of three kinds namely (1) Vaikhānasa (2) Pāñcarātra and (3) Bhāgavata. The fundamental difference between these groups of texts is Vaikhānasa corpus obsessively sticks on to Vedic line of practices where as Pāñcarātra group are more tantric in its outlook.<sup>8</sup> Bhāgavata texts are mainly concerned with popularization of the bhakti cult.

### Some common features of Āgamas, Samhitās and Tantras.

These three groups of texts share some common features. They are;

1. The terms Āgama, Samhitā and Tantra are used as synonyms in these texts.
2. The subject matter of these texts is grouped under four heads namely (1) Jñāna (2) Yoga (3) Kriyā and (4) Caryā. Jñāna section contains the discussion on the philosophical aspects of a given text. Yoga section deals with the Yoga principles and practices. The point is to be noted that the Yoga of Āgamas slightly varies from that of Patañjali. Kriyā section contains procedures of temple construction and rituals associated with it. Caryā portion deals with the practice of varying degrees of rituals. It is to be noted here that this is not a hard and fast rule strictly followed by the Āgamas.
3. Initiation is the only pre-requisite to follow the path prescribed in these treatises. The one who gives the initiation is known as guru and the one who receives it is known as sisya or Sādhaka.
4. Guru is held high among all other divinities in all tantric literatures.
5. The attributes of the ultimate varies depending on the basic principles of a cult to which the text belongs.

Apart from the above categories, the repertoire of tantric literature consists of Buddhist and Jain Tantra works also.

### The relative chronology of Tantric works.

It is very difficult to determine the exact date of tantric works owing to the fact that many of them are remaining silent about the authorship and time of its composition. Tantric texts are also considered as revelations just as the Vedic texts. Because of the absence of sufficient information on the authorship of Tantras, scholars have to rely upon the cross-references or deduce the date of a text from the references given in commentaries.

*Pāśupatasūtra* of Pāśupata sect of saivism is the earliest available tantric text which belongs to 2<sup>nd</sup> cent. AD.<sup>9</sup> It is during the period 400 and 800 AD some of the principal tantric works were composed.<sup>10</sup> Despite relatively early references to the existence of Āgamic Śaivism in the South, it seems that the Śaivāgamas originally flourished in Northern India, which spread to the South later times. *Madhyadeśa* (an area covering eastern Uttar Pradesh and west Bihar), was, according to Abhinavagupta considered to be the “repository of all scripture” –hence also of the Śaivāgama and the Kulaśāstra.<sup>11</sup> Subsequently, from about the middle of the ninth century, Bhairavāgamas of monistic nature came into existence and all kinds of literary productions reached their Zenith by the time of Abhinavagupta (11<sup>th</sup> century). Later phase

of compositions is marked with emergence of a numerous excellent commentaries (between 9<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries) on principal tantric treatises. All of these kinds of literary activities in Kashmir started to decline after the Muslim invasion in the 13<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>12</sup> Later developments, in terms of rewriting and adding some more material to the existing repertoire, took place in south India, especially in Tamilnadu.<sup>13</sup>

It becomes very clear while examining the chronological list of tantric literature that none of tantric works has been composed before the compilation of Vedas. Moreover, many of the canons of Tantrism were written after the emergence of major texts of Vedic Literature.

### Origin of Tantrism

Scholars hold divergent views regarding the origin and development of Tantrism. The conclusions they reached were mainly relying upon two basic tools of a historical research viz. (1) Archeological findings and (2) Literary evidences.

There are two distinct views of on the origin of Tāntrism. They are (1) non-Vedic and (2) Vedic origin of Tāntrism. This paper is mainly concerned with the non Vedic origin of Tāntrism. The two tools used here to trace the history of non-vedic origin of Tantrism are the archeological evidences and references to Dāsas/Asuras (as a group of people whose practices resemble certain types of tāntric rituals) made in Vedic literature.

### 1. Archaeological evidences

During the year 1922-23 a group of archeologists headed by John Marshall excavated certain sites of Indus valley civilization(2600 and 1900 BCE), especially Mohenjo Daro Harappa which is big mound situated in the Larkana district in sindh. What they found at these sites later turned out to be epoch-making discoveries. The most remarkable findings were some seals which depict animals and divine figures like Siva and mother goddesses. Among the male gods the figure of Siva seated on a throne with legs crossed in the fashion of a Yogin attracted special attention of scholars. R.C Majumdar describes the features of the figure as follows;

‘He wears a horned head-dress, a pectoral round the neck, and a number of bangles. He has three faces, though there may be the idea of fourth, which is, of course, invisible. He sits, with *penis erectus*, surrounded by a number of animals such as tiger, buffalo, and rhinoceros, with a deer under the seat. Many scholars regard him as a representation of Siva, for the latter is described as Trimukha (three faced), Paśupati (Lord of animals and Mahāyogin (the great ascetic).’<sup>14</sup>

This shows the prevalence of the cult of Śiva even at that time. This assumption is proven by the discovery of a great number of various kinds of Śiva Liṅgas.

Another important aspect of the excavation is the discovery of the figurines of mother goddess. The prevalence of the practice of worship of mother goddess is proved by the discovery of a number of semi-nude female figures, with elaborate head dress and collar. It is worth mentioning here that the worship of mother goddess was very popular among the primitive people everywhere in the world.<sup>15</sup>

Surprisingly, the mother goddess and the Śiva were worshipped not only in human forms in the remote past but their iconic representations of Yoni and Liṅga also. The worship of male and female sexual organs forms the part of many other cultures all over the world. In this regard, N.N. Bhattacharya's observations are worthy of mention here. He writes:

'The Zhob and kulli sites in northern and southern Baluchistan, belonging to 4<sup>th</sup> Millennium B.C, have furnished a fair number of terracotta figurines in which we recognize the earliest embodiment of the primitive mother goddesses. The Kulli figurines finish at the waist on a splayed pedestal, arms bent with hands on the hips, breast usually shown, eyes fashioned from small stones, hair elaborately dressed, ornamented by oval pendants resembling cowrie shells and bangles on arms and wrists. In the cultures to the north and north-east of Quetta grouped around the Zhob river, a number of identical terracotta figurines have been found at the sites of Dabar-kot, Periano Ghundai, Sur-Jangal and Mughal Ghundai.....'

That they had a fertility significance is shown by the representation of the cowrie shells and by that of phallus carved in a stone at the mound of Mughal Ghundai near the left bank of the Zhob river and at the neighboring mound of Periano Ghundai on the right bank of the river where a yoni is depicted with great prominence.<sup>16</sup>

As above mentioned, the instances of the worship of the mother goddesses are found in many of pre-Vedic cultures. It shows the existence of a universal concept of a mother goddess. It is a striking fact that a parallel cult of mother goddess cannot be found anywhere in the Vedas. It may be due to the fact that Vedic culture is predominantly a male dominating culture.

#### **The origin of phallus worship**

Agriculture is found to be one of the major activities of people of the Indus valley civilization. They are said to have held certain magical beliefs and rituals for improving the fertility of a field. The belief is that the productivity

of the nature can be enhanced or induced by the symbolical representation of human reproduction.<sup>17</sup> This primitive belief of an agricultural-oriented people led to evolving new form of fertility rites.

The Fertility rites are of several types. One kind of such fertility rites consists of the practice of sexual union either by couples or a group in a field before setting it ready for cultivation. It is believed that by doing so the field will yield to better productions. The iconic representations of Linga and Yoni unearthed from the sites of Indus valley civilization points to the practice of such fertility rites. It is on the basis of the evidences of such practices scholars like Debiprasad Chattopadhyaya<sup>18</sup>, N.N. Bhattacharya<sup>19</sup> etc put forth the idea that the earliest form of tantric rituals can be traced back to primitive fertility rites.

With regards to the tantric rituals of this nature, sexual worship forms the central part of the Vāma and the Kaula sects of Tāntrism, but the belief behind the ritual differs from that of fertility rites.<sup>20</sup> It is mainly due to the ignorance of the significance of such rituals in Tāntric practices scholars, especially tending to project Tantra with a negative focus. The question may arise as to whether it is possible to establish that tantric form of rituals have its origin in pre Vedic times merely on the grounds of the discoveries of linga and yoni? The answer is very clear that by the mere presence of the Liṅga and Yoni as a symbol of fertility rites, it is not possible to establish that the tantric form of rituals is as old as Indus valley civilization. But the fact remains yet undeniable that such a sort of rituals was in existence even before the time of the emergence of Vedas. Certainly, the philosophical advancement is found to have achieved gradually.

## 2. Reference of non Aryan people in Vedic literatures

It has been pointed out by scholars that the word Asura appears many times in Vedic literatures which deserve a close examination. Many of them hold that Asuras are a group of people who were early occupants of the land invaded by Āryans. Their religious practices, it is said, resemble some of tāntric ritual practices<sup>21</sup>, especially the practices of so called six kinds of black magic. While referring to the significance of the term Asura, Asko Parpola in his scholarly essay titled 'The pre-Vedic Indian background of the Śrauta rituals' introduces another Ṛgvedic word Dāsa which, according to him, refers to a group of non-Āryans. Here he put forth the idea that there were two kinds of pre-Vedic traditions flourished in the Indian soil. His account of these two traditions is as follows;

‘One of these traditions is that brought to India from the outside, probably around 1200 BC., by the invading Āryans who also introduced the poetry that the Ṛgvedic hymns perpetuate. The other tradition is that of the Dāsas, the people who occupied the so-called Vedic areas before the arrival of the Āryans in India. Subsequently he describes the distinct characteristics of Dāsas as follows;

‘The Ṛgvedic hymns refer to battles with people called Dāsas and Dayus, who are clearly distinguished from the Ṛgvedic Āryans themselves (Zimmer 1879, 101,104-118); they are “non-Aryan” (*an ārya*), have a dark skin colour, do not worship Indra (*an-indra*) or perform the Soma sacrifice (*a-yajña*), and either do not speak (*vi-vāc, an-āsya*) or use inimical speech (*mrdhra-vāc*), which probably refers to ritual silence and curses, respectively; their black magic (*yātu*) is much feared. In two hymns (RV 7.21.5; 10.99.3); Indra is invoked against, or as the slayer of, “those who have the phallus as their god,” or alternatively “tailed deities” (*śiśna-devāḥ*; Wackernagel 1905, II, I, 275), which can be reasonably taken to refer to these same enemies.”<sup>22</sup>

Further he observes that the rituals of Dāsas seem to be tantric in nature.<sup>23</sup> It is interesting to note here that the six magical rites were in commonplace in pre-vedic primitive culture. So it can be inferred that magical rites might be the earliest form of rituals. Such magical rituals can be seen scattered in many of the Vedic literature also.<sup>24</sup> It shows that the tantric and Vedic form of rituals have some features in common. Therefore it can be concluded that there might be some common source of origin for these two streams of Indian spirituality.

To put the proposed ideas in a nutshell:

• The iconic representation of Śiva in Paśupati form unearthed from the sites of Indus valley civilization shows the popularity of Śiva worship at that time. This civilization is said to be earlier than the time of Vedas.

• The existence of the symbols of Liṅga and Yoni prove the observances of fertility rites. Some scholars suggest that tantric form of worship is originated from the fertility rites. Worship of Śiva in his phallus form was in vogue even in pre-Vedic times.

• Other than these rituals there are other evidences of tree worship and worship of animals. Some seals even depict sacrifice of human beings and animals before a goddess.<sup>25</sup>

• Non-Āryan people were often referred to in Vedic literatures as Dāsas, dasyus and asuras. Their religious practices resemble that of certain form of tantric ritual practices.

The references of six magical rites can be seen in Vedic and tantric literatures, which points to a common source. This presumably is the early non-Āryan tradition.

### Reference

1. T. Burrow, *A cultural history of India* (etd. by A.L. basham), p.20.
2. Cf. 'The *śrautasūtras* use the word in the sense of a process of a work containing many parts and in that of an act serving the purpose of many other acts. The latter interpretation is confirmed in the *Mīmāṃsā* tradition according to which Tantra is an act- process- a method of doing or making something. In the *Mahābhāṣya* the word Tantra signifies a branch of knowledge, while the writers of the science of polity and medicine used the word *Tanrayukti* to mean 'cannons', 'propositions', 'principles', 'expositions', etc. The scientific treatises comprised in India are generally known as Tantras; their sections and subsections also bear the same title. Any system or thought- structure was also known as Tantra. Śāṅkara used the term *Kapilasya-tantra* to denote the system expounded by Kapila, i.e., the Sāṅkhya philosophy and *Vaināśikā-tantra* to denote the Buddhist philosophy of momentary existence.....Bhāskara-rāya referred to *Mīmāṃsā* philosophy as *Jaimini-tantra* in his common *Devīmāhātmya*. Bhattoji in his *Tantrādhikārinirṇaya* had used the terms *Pūrvatantra* and *uttara-tantra* to denote the *Pūrvamīmāṃsā* and *Uttaramīmāṃsā* respectively'. N.N Bhattacharya, *History of the Tāntric Religion*, pp.1-2. See also P.V. Kane, *History of Dharmaśāstra*, Vol-5, pp. 1031-33 and S.C Banerjee, *A Brief history of Tantric Literature*, p.1.
3. *History of Dharmaśāstra*, op. cit., p.1031.
3. TNÇ< KUQU<BK«TYE SYAT+ ISÖANTE CAE;XAEĀME,  
àxane tNtuvane c zaSÇĒede pirCDde .  
ÏUITZAOANTRE HETAVUÉYAWRĀYAEJKE .
5. ( As quoted from *Medinīkośa* by E.V Raman Namboothiri in his Introduction to *Tantrasamuccaya* (Malayalam), p.3.
6. The Unique characteristics include four-fold classification of subject - matters, linguistic peculiarities etc.
7. ïuiti iÖivxa vEidkl taiNÇkl c, E.V Raman Namboothiri in his introduction to *Tantrasamuccaya* has pointed out that the extant manuscript does not contain the verse.
8. Andre Padoux, *Vac*, p.36.



9. ingmStaiNÇkae imiïðivx> àaeKt Aagm> ,  
ingmae ivon> àaeKtae imiïae Éagvt> Sm«t> .  
ctu> isġaNsht> paÁcraÇStu taiNÇk> , AanNds<ihta 8-23-24
10. Alexis Sanderson, Śaivism and Tāntric Traditions, p.644.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 663.
12. Mark S.G. Dyczkowski, The canon of Śaivāgama and the Kubjika Tantras of the Western Kaula tradition, p.6.
13. *Ibid.*, p.7. 'Many of these tantras and related works must still have existed in the thirteenth century when Jayaratha commented on the Tantrāloka and quoted extensively from these sources'.
14. Dominic Goodall, *Hindu Scriptures*, p.xxxiii.
15. Ancient India, p.25.
16. *Idem.*
17. History of the Tāntric Religion, p.158.
18. Debiprasad Chattopadhyaya, Lokāyata- A study in Ancient Indian Materialism, p.xxi.
19. *Ibid.*, p.xxii.
20. *op. cit.*, p.vii. 'Historically one has to admit that certain tantric ideas and practices are evidently rooted in primitive sex rites based on the magical association of natural and human fertility. One should not fail to recall in this connection that such primitive sex rites contributed everywhere to the development of religious ideas and, in a broad sense, to the evolution of the human thought as a whole'.
21. Unlike the goal of fertility rites, the purpose of sexual rites in the vṢma and kaula traditions is the spiritual progress of the practitioner.
22. *op. cit.*, p, 60. 'The ritual practice of putting sacrificial oblations into their own mouths sounds highly peculiar. However, the rituals of the Tantrikas are something that sort; they drink wine and eat meat, whatever might be the significance they attach to such practices'.
23. Agni-The Vedic Ritual of the Fire altar (edt by Frits Staal), vol-2, p.44.
24. *Ibid.*, pp. 41-42. ' the chief feasts of Dāsa ritual appear to have been half-yearly seasonal rites, they are essentially "Tantric" in character, and are intimately connected with the mythology of Prajāpati and Rudra, which includes the Sunahśepa legend.
25. See *History of Dharmasāstra*, vol-5, pp.1035-39.