



Male Vision Dominates Female Presence in the Shakta Tantra

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Woman is the creator of the universe. The universe is her form. Woman is the foundation of the world; she is the true form of the body. Whatever form she takes is the superior form. In woman is the form of all things, of all that lives and moves in the world” (SHST 2. 13. 43-45).

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“For women there is no necessity to go on pilgrimage, to fast or to do other similar acts, nor is there any need to perform any devotion except that which consists in the service to their husband. Husband, for a woman, is the place of pilgrimage, the performance of penance, the giving of alms, the carrying out of vows, and her spiritual teacher.” (MT 8. 100-101)

In Shakta tantric and some of Shaiva tantric traditions which contribute to the Shakta tendency women seem to have been positively valorized and the female manifestation called Shakti has been viewed as a significant agent in the cosmogony and the material cause of creation. However, there are substantial differences in this matter among various tantric schools and texts. The universe is Shakti—the primal energy of the cosmos, and all material objects as well as conscious souls are nothing but limited manifestations of her. As the world is both created from her and held in her, she is looked upon as the cosmic mother who has created the world as if from her womb (often symbolized by a triangle) and who nurtures it herself (S. Gupta 1991, 206).

The goddess as an embodiment of Shakti occupies a distinctive position in the Shakta Tantra texts from the early medieval period onward. The *Tantras of Shrikula* claim an exclusive status for Tripurasundari and represent one of the most sophisticated models of Shakta Tantra. Shiva, the male principle, is the static or inert principle, and Shakti is the dynamic aspect of creation (NSA 4. 5-6). In the *Kalikula Tantras*,

awesome Kali occupies the supreme position. She is the nurturing mother of created beings as well as the sovereign cosmic ruler who maintains cosmic law and order through her invincible power and irresistible energy (S. Gupta 2001, 462). She is affirmed in many places to be the most important of the *Mahavidyas* (the circle of Ten Goddesses in tantric traditions), the primordial or primary *Mahavidya*, the *adi Mahavidya*. (NT 1.6f.; TT 1. 1-2, 3. 9-13).

Exaltation of Women

Most of Shakta Tantras proclaim the exalted position of women as the physical incarnation of Shakti and as the embodiment of the Great Mother. “All women at birth are naturally the bearers of an intrinsic Shakti. This Shaktihood is not extrinsic to their female experience as something to be acquired from outside of their own

selfhood, but a spark that inheres naturally as a part of their being at birth” (M. Khanna 2000, 14). Shakta Tantras recognize that women can be spiritual preceptors, and initiate lineages and thus are a source of spiritual power.

Therefore, some scholars have been inspired by the divine, passionate and independent images of women and by the egalitarian aspects of tantric traditions. Outside mainstream Hinduism, Tantricism is considered by some as a kind of attempt to create a distinct “world-of-their-own” setting, in which women can engage in religious discipline freely and seriously on their own initiative, beside the patriarchal ethos of brahmanical religion (N. N. Bhattacharyya 1992, 5; M. Khanna 2000, 110). Furthermore, it has been suggested that the tantric goddesses presented ‘anti-models’ for women who violate approved social values, customs, norms or paradigms and mock the *pativrata* (D. Kinsley 1998, 6). In comparison with the earlier Orientalistic and androcentric hypotheses, which have cast the stereotypical passive and oppressed

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images of women as 'ritual objects' or 'downtrodden prostitutes' (K. Smith 1987, 219-231; J. McDaniel 1989, 171-175), indigenistic and feministic discourses trying to re-evaluate and re-interpret women's roles in Tantra (to demonstrate that they do not accord) are in contrast with religious traditions that unequivocally highlight male dominance (M. Shaw 1998, 4-19, 2000, 166-178; M. Khanna 2000, 109-122). Theory has tended to depict women's participation in Tantra either as the result of their unequivocal oppression or as a vehicle for their self-empowerment. However, Davidson proposed that "in the case of early medieval India, it was neither of these two extremes, for they imply an essentialization of, and binary structure between, agency and accommodation" (R. M. Daidson, 2004, 97).

Real vs Ideal Woman

Most textual traditions, but particularly the Sanskrit texts, have been perpetuated by men to reflect their social and religious preoccupations. The images and positions of women and gender relations in them are "theoretically constructed" rather than simply presented in the texts. Feminist writings on the gender issue within tantric traditions propose very important interpretive strategies. However, some of them tend either to view the divine female images of the texts without considering socio-historical contexts within which tantric texts were formulated or interpret them solely in the context of what some feminists want to see reflected in them. They look for what they consider compelling, liberating, provocative and inspiring.

In fact, the question of the relationship between divine female images and women is multifaceted and complex, which frequently leads to contradictory conclusions,

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depending upon how the question is framed and who is doing the asking and answering (A. Hildebeitel and K. M. Erndl 2000, 11). An essentialist and a historical understanding of religious tradition as stemming from a timeless source needs to be reconsidered. As Brooks said, "there is no primordial Tantrism, only historical appropriations of it" (1999, xii). The perspective of historians of religion should provide not only an interpretation of this complexity but also a careful consideration of the context in which it was formulated.

Thus, the main question relates to whether the texts are describing a "real" situation or an "ideal" situation: are the "texts which insist that reverence be shown...literally true", or are they "representative of a situation where attempts were being made to create and enforce a situation where women were to be ideally treated as divine?" (K. Roy 1999, 226) The focus on the female images within tantric traditions provides a fruitful and fertile area of investigation for exploring the relationships between gender, religion and society.

Initiation and Guruship

It has been suggested that religious traditions themselves are complex, and that the positions ascribed to or occupied by women

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even within a single tradition may vary and are not necessarily consistent. Women may have a number of religious roles and their positions as subjects of religious discourse may be developed somewhat differently in each of them. (A. Cameron 1994, 152) In fact, in Shakta Tantra texts, even within a single text, a number of passages presenting inconsistent perspectives with exalted and liberated female images can be discerned. Take *Kularnava Tantra*, which is one of the important Kaula Tantras of Shakta Tantra, as a representative example.

In the first place, the possibility of autonomous determination of women's religious life - particularly in regard to the tantric *diksha* - should be taken into consideration. The initiation rite, indeed, is the most essential preliminary or precondition for worship and spiritual training in Tantricism. Although women were entitled to initiation, permission for it was required from men. According to the text, "The competence of the widow for initiation is subject to the consent of the son, of daughter to the father, of the wife to the husband, a woman has no right of her own for getting initiated" (*KT* 14. 105). In the same manner, *Mahanirvana Tantra* ordains the duty of women as the Vedic or Smritic creeds do. (8. 100-101, 106) A woman was required to gain her religious status only through her relationship to a man, i.e. by being the daughter of this father, the wife of that husband, or the mother of such and such a son. If such is the code that was (actually?) imposed on women, or if male members in the Tantric circle directly or indirectly (actually?) required their observance of it, it is very doubtful that a woman could attain an autonomous status and exercise initiative in the religious domain. The tale of Devi's incarnation in the house of Brahman, which may be the outcome of the appearance of a famous female guru, provides us

how others, probably the male side, perceived female guruship—

“The Isvara then tells his consort – ‘I gave you that knowledge out of kindness but you communicated it to your followers without my permission. You were therefore cursed by me for having thus abused the sacred knowledge. But when you implored and begged for pardon I ordered you to go and incarnate yourself in the house of the Brahmin Meghadatta in the village of Kanavira near Prayaga. There you worshipped me for thirteen years and attained spiritual perfection by propitiating me in the form of a linga’ ” (*BrahmayAmala* 1, cited in P. C. Bagchi 1975, 102).

This story may allude to a group of Brahmins who follow the tantric rituals and shows how brahmanical perspective of women was incorporated into the Tantric circle. According to the story, despite the fact that (Shakta) tantric tradition accepted women as guru, all her religious activity should have been under the command of a male and even her guruship was considered as a kind of compensation for her misdeed – in this story represented in her not asking the male god for permission to transmit her tantric religious faith and practices.

Preconditions of Shakti

Further, the different characteristics required of men and women respectively, offer their notion of the gender identity and expected role within the Shakta tantric tradition. For example, the woman who is called a Shakti (female partner) “should be beautiful, young, grave, pious, devoid of suspicions, free of greed, of pleasant smile on her face, soft-spoken, of good thoughts, free from jealousy and envy, pleasing in



personality, and so on” (*KT* 7. 46-48); whereas the male *shisya* chosen should be one “who is wise, deep-thoughted, heroic, enthusiastic, brave, intelligent, skilful in all actions, liberal, clever, and achieves the impossible...” (*KT* 8. 23-30). There are, of course, common qualities that might be asked for regarding both men and women, but ‘bodily features’ and ‘conventional morality’ seem to have been more significantly required for women. Intelligence and strong will were scarcely considered as the important characteristics of women - at least in the text.

Next, the qualities expected in a female guru and ritual partner (Shakti) in tantric texts denote the moral values and ethical codes conforming to the existing social hierarchy of that

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society. Family background or belonging to the *Kula* circle was regarded as the necessary condition for a female guru. Also, a widow was to be excluded from guruship (*RT* 2. 107f.) On the other hand, it is well known that girls of low castes, and courtesans played a role in some forms of Tantra. In these cases, the more a woman can be characterized in her society as depraved and debauched, the more fit she is for the rite (*M. Eliade* 1958, 261). This situation poses certain questions which have no easy answers: Who was able to be guru or be accepted as guru among women? Why was a good family background considered as one of the qualities of a female guru in some situations, while in others a woman of the lower castes and

despised occupations was regarded as an excellent partner?

This brings us to an important issue: one should not deal with women as a ‘homogeneous group,’ as their positions and roles may vary within various tantric traditions, as some tantric texts said that one should worship a woman of any of the four classes (*KT* 4, 45), while others stated that widows and prostitutes are worthy of respect (*KAN* 21-96).

Gender and Caste in Tantra

The participation of widows, prostitutes and low caste women in many tantric texts has been considered evidence of the exploitation of women within the tantric circle. A more sophisticated theory regarding low caste women in tantric sources is the notion that association with these women provided men with an opportunity to overcome their social prejudice. Pride in social identity and virtue was considered the most insidious and crippling of all the mental blocks on the road to spiritual liberation.

Mingling with a social inferior—a woman of low caste—was meant to attempt to force a male practitioner to abandon social pride and concerns about ritual pollution (M. Shaw 1998, 59-60). As Bolle has already emphasized, association with these women in tantric rites was considered a part of “religious reevaluation of worldly data”, i. e., a vital part of the practice of realizing the double-sided nature of existence by an intentional, regulated contact with socially disapproved persons and substances as wine, meat, or bodily excretion (1975, 69). If such religious speculations served to help a tantric male practitioner proceed along the path of spiritual emancipation, could a woman also proceed in the same manner? As one can easily guess, tantric texts rarely if ever indicate that low caste men should be regarded as the best partner of a tantric female practitioner. In fact, there are restrictive regulations about the choice of partners; a Brahmin woman should never be the partner of a man of lower social status, (*YT* 6. 37) and if *parakiya* (another’s wife) is not available, one should ordain one’s own wife (T. Goudriaan and S. Gupta 1981, 79). Low status women from despised occupations or tribal groups were listed as “eight *kula-shaktis*”, such as Chandali (untouchable), Charmakari (leather worker), Matangi (mountain tribal), Pukkasi (hunter), Shvapachi (who boils dog), Khattaki (meat seller?), Kaivarti (fisher) and Visvayosita (wife of all, i.e. prostitute?), and as “eight non *kula-shaktis*”, for example, Kanduki (cook), Shaundiki (liquor seller), Shastrajivi (fighter), Ranjaki (dyer), Gayaki (singer), Rajaki (sweeper), Shilpi (artisan) and Kauliki (weaver) (*KT* 7. 42-43). Most of those social group names and their probable meanings are mentioned in the list of “Varna-sankara” of *Manu Smriti* (*MS*, ch. 10). Though, there must be a certain change of social status of

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each group, it is still clear that those groups were in the fringe of society and out of brahmanical social norm. According to the text, “in the absence of any of the above shaktis”, one can worship a woman of any caste. It indirectly means women from despised occupations or tribal groups were preferred as the Shakti in the tantric circle. On the other hand, a high caste housewife was hampered by many restrictions from participating. According to the *Kularnava Tantra*, “Daughter, sister, grand-daughter, daughter-in-law and beloved wife” are categorised as prohibited women, (11. 54) and one can go only amongst women who have been “purified by ritual” (8. 110).

In some legends, high-caste women of a royal and priestly background were said to have relinquished their caste status in order to take a low caste consort, although in those cases no one suggests that it was because the men were socially disadvantaged, promiscuous, gullible or stupid (M. Shaw 1998, 61). This gender distinction indicates that ‘religious reevaluation of worldly data’ was only available for tantric ‘male adherents’;

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the Tantric circle had partly internalized the patriarchal and caste-hierarchical social values and imposed them for the construction of gender relations within the circle. Gender inequality or hierarchy is never independent of class, estate and ethnic hierarchy. In fact, they are inextricably linked; gender hierarchy is an expression of these other hierarchies and they of it. That is, they are various manifestations of a hierarchical ethic (Gerald D. Barreman 1993, 370).

Historical Contexts

Let us consider gender and caste hierarchical notions in tantric texts within broader historical contexts. Tantricism, like all other religious forms of expression, did not originate or develop in a vacuum but must have been conditioned on all sides by the economic and social settings in which it happened to prevail. Therefore, a number of contradictory perspectives on women and gender relations should be understood in terms of historical processes of formation of Tantricism, representing a response to a specific socio-historical situation, one that included maintaining the constraints of a sectarian order.

Generally speaking, notwithstanding multiple meanings and a complex set of interpretive problems involved in historical usage, the term ‘Tantra’ is most frequently used by Hindus to designate a body of literature, thought, and practice distinguished in various ways from Vedic tradition. It seems to have been a parallel tradition preserved within the cultural heritages of tribal or folk peoples in the peripheral cultural areas and lower social strata (N. N. Bhattacharyya 1992, 5-9). Hence, the formation of Tantricism, as a system of doctrines and rituals, can be explored from different angles in various historical contexts, especially after the post-Gupta period. These include penetration of the Brahmins

into tribal belts through land grants, establishment of the all-embracing caste system and acculturation of a number of tribes into the brahmanical social order, reciprocal interaction and infiltration between local religious traditions and other religious systems, the influence of the *bhakti* movement, and so on. Tantricism, as a distinct religious system, was “the result of a fusion between brahmanical religion and tribal or folk religions.” (R. N. Nandi 1973, 171) Such myriad local diversities and multiple levels of power relations within which the different strands of Tantricism emerged may have been much more various and complicated than we are yet aware of from our available historical sources.

This process, though it has proceeded with innumerable variations according to the localities and sects, must usually have been directed by intellectuals, as can be concluded from the prominence of Sanskrit among the tantric literary texts (S. Gupta, D. J. Hoens & T. Goudriaan 1979, 29). One of the discernable characteristic tendencies in tantric texts, particularly Sanskrit texts, is that they absorb or reshape popular religious elements with communal aims in the social as well as religious fields.

The textualization of Tantras involved the interplay of many levels of power relations in society; however the discussion of this process is outside the scope of this paper. Nevertheless, instances of brahmanical recognition of tantric tradition and *vice-versa* give us a glimpse of the context in which religious and ideological hegemonic conflicts, tensions, and mutual interrelations were very intricately intermingled. Some Puranas, for instance, tried to establish the notion that though different, the two traditions are not irreconcilable, that there are points of convergence

between them (K. Chakrabarti 2001, 188-194). For example, “Lalitasahasranama”, which is part of the *Brahmanda Purana*, shows a paradoxical conjunction of two traditions. It tries to incorporate Tripurasundari, who is the most important goddess in the *Shrikula Tantra*, in the brahmanical pantheon. It recreates her to legitimize brahmanical social values; she is called Varnashrama-vidhayini, the one who establishes the *varna* and *ashrama* (LSN no. 286), dharmadhara, the supporter of *dharma* (LSN no. 884) and vedajanani, the mother of the Veda (LSN no. 338).

Denunciation of Tantras

Notwithstanding open recognitions accorded to Tantra and the many adjustments with it, Puranas, for example, *Varaha Purana* and *Devibhagavata Purana* (VII. 39.26-30) are often not comfortable with them and at times show evident reluctance, even denunciation of practitioners. They do not only try to undermine their value as being un-Vedic but also assert that they lead astray unwary people. Rudra, for example, says in *Varaha Purana* that the Tantras were compiled by the sage Agastya for “deluding the people fallen from the Vedic path” (VP 70.41; 71.9,53-55).

This tendency, however, is not confined to the Puranas. Denunciation of the Tantras can be traced in early Dharma Shastra works

and even in other sectarian and sub-sectarian texts. The Vaishnavas were outspoken in their attack of the views of the Shaivas and Shaktas and vice versa. Thus Pancharatra school of the Vaishnava denounced the Shiva and Shakta rites in very specific terms (C. Chakravarti 1972, 34). Mutual vilification was even common among the tantric sub-sects. Among the Shaktas, for example, we find the Kaulas finding fault with the Pashus (KT 2. 99) and others, leveling criticism against the view and practices of the Kaulas. In such a complicated situation during the period when tantric texts were formulized, strategic responses were probably required of the Tantric circle in general, or each tantric text writer and compiler in particular.

Tantra vs Vedas

Tantric writers sought a Vedic sanction for the sacredness of their literature, as did their modern disciples such as Sir John Woodroffe. They claimed that from the ocean of Vedas and *Agamas*, with the churning rod of *Jnana*, Shiva extracted the essence of Kula-dharma (KT 2. 10). The fact that the Vedic way is regarded as the one of the four *acharas* belonging to the general category of *Dakshinachara*, i.e. *Vedachara*, *Vaishnavachara*, *Shaivachara*, and *Dakshinachara* reveals brahmanical superimposition on the tantric texts. (N. N. Bhattacharya, 1992, 316-342). These texts can be clearly contrasted with explicitly anti-Vedic, anti-brahmanical strands of tantric tradition. Therefore, it may be erroneous to think we can extricate “pure” Tantricism from its “tainted” brahmanical interpretations (D. R. Brooks 1999, xii).

On the contrary, the tantric texts, especially Shakta Tantras, accentuate the superiority of Tantra over Veda. There are explicit claims that even the scholars of all the four Vedas who are ignorant of Kula are inferior to a

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Chandala. On the other hand, if a Chandala knows the Kula he is superior to a Brahmin (KT 2. 37). Furthermore, *Kularnava Tantra* represents “the order of superiority” within a very strategic manner; “Veda is superior to all; Vaishnava is superior to Veda; Shaiva is superior to Vaishnava; Dakshina is superior to Shaiva; Vama is superior to Dakshina; Siddhanta is superior to Vama; Kaula is superior to Siddhanta; and there is nothing superior to Kaula” (2. 7) In their hierarchical ordering, they show seemingly inconsistencies, but in fact convey the position that the Kaula ideally wants to uphold, viz. establishing tantric, especially Kaula, supremacy while creating minimal disruption to the authority of the Veda and existing religious orders.

Esoteric and Exoteric

A tantric dictum regarding the secrecy of the left-hand path gives us an idea about how they identified themselves in private and public or inwardly and outwardly; “Keep your Kaula identity secret, outwardly behave like a Shaiva, but when in society behave like a Vaishnava” (KT 11, 83). Thus, by retaining a “double norm” - one esoteric and private, the other exoteric and public – (D. R. Brooks 1999, 26), Tantrics seem to seek to exempt themselves from criticism and denunciation and assert their own ritual and theoretical superiority within the ‘Hindu’ tradition.

The inconsistent or ambivalent ordinances mentioned in tantric texts show how they have applied the double norm to the religious and social sphere. Many of tantric practices were deliberately intended to breach the caste hierarchy and rule. It is even asserted in the texts that during the rite there is no difference whatever among those who belong to different castes, because all men are Shiva and all women are Shakti. *Kularnava Tantra* says, “Shudrahood of a Shudra and Brahmanhood of a Brahmin all go away. There remains no distinction of caste

when the ritual of initiation is fulfilled.” (14. 91) All the castes participating in a *Bhairavichakra* are considered twice born (KT 8. 96- 97 & 100). However, the dissolution of caste identities does not continue outside the ritual context. For example, “...at the end of the *Chakra*, of course, all the castes become separate again, i.e., the social order of castes become effective again” (KT 8. 96).

The loss of caste identity when the initiation has been completed is not always the case for all circles. In fact, there are on the contrary many traces of caste distinctions in tantric texts. A familiar instance is the classification of people to be qualified for initiation with regard to their social estate; a Brahmin is qualified after a pupilage of one year, a Kshatriya after two years, etc. (KT 14. 104). Shudras and mixed castes, though they are entitled to tantric *diksha*, have to undergo a primal purification (KT 14. 103). The existing social hierarchy was partly denied in the religious domain but clearly admitted in the social sphere.

Tactical Compromises

With regard to gender issues, thus, the inconsistent perspectives and norms regarding women and the ambivalent images of them that appear in Shakta Tantra texts can be considered as a tactical attempt to codify creeds and norms of behaviour as much as possible to the existing social order, while retaining the re-evaluation necessary for worship of Shakti and the goddess. At a theoretical level, the great and divine goddess was supremely important and women were valorized as the embodiment of her. However, in practical terms, women’s actual social position was still rather uncertain or subservient, even marginalized. As K. Roy has claimed, “men were expected to worship women symbolically and literally.” (K. Roy 1999, 229).

By worshipping the ideal Shakti and goddess, they tried to occupy

theoretical superiority and gain popular support. On the other hand, by accepting the superimpositions of brahmanical social order—basically patriarchal and caste oriented—on the gender relation, they might still exempt themselves from social condemnation, religious denunciation and ideological conflict. In the exoteric and public sphere, they helped to confirm the Smarta ideal by requiring a subservient position for women; in the esoteric and private domain, they offered a secure religious niche for both male and female practitioners by associating women with divine image. Women are power bearers, but have little or no authority.

Therefore, women from tribal circles or low social strata were preferred as the favourable Shakti in esoteric rituals. By choosing a Shakti from among such backgrounds, male tantric practitioners could fulfill their religious aims while retaining conventional gender relations and causing only minimal disruptions to the social order. Hence, despite the fact that they were asked to treat all the women in a respectful way and not to condemn one’s Shakti if she had “ugly” face and/or “black” skin, the relative dignity of a high-born wife (*kulavadhu*) was still considered as higher than the dignity of a public-woman (*ganika*) (KT 11. 85).

Some authors suggest that Tantricism in general, in contradistinction to Vedic religion, “incorporated elements of protest, combining a claim to universality with social inclusiveness” (M. Shaw 1998, 21). The inclusion of low class or even outcaste categories such as the Dombas has been viewed as an attempt to reverse social hierarchies within the tradition. Inclusiveness, however, within the Tantric circle asserts ‘neither equality nor a lack of hierarchical differentiation’. The religious egalitarianism of Tantricism in practice paradoxically acted as “a caste-confirming” (S. Gupta, D. J. Hoens & T. Goudriaan 1979, 32) and ‘patriarchy-confirming’ strategy.

Silent Voices

However, there are still lots of problems to resolve, before we will be able to decode the complicated female images in tantric texts. Most of tantric texts written in Sanskrit have been preserved, perpetuated and transmitted by men and reflected their preoccupations. Therefore, female authors or participants and their voices and figures within the textual tradition tend to be rendered silent and invisible. In fact, Shakta Tantras present the positions and roles prescribed for women, and not those occupied by them, and concentrate upon how women were acted upon rather than how women acted and on how women were viewed rather than how women viewed events. As Brooks clearly pointed out, “an accurate reading of tantric sources leaves us with only a preliminary understanding of what given texts say... What tantric texts say, what Tantrics say they do, and what they actually do are not necessarily the same.” (1999, 7).

The positions prescribed for women and the gender ideologies imposed on women in tantric texts are probably just the tip of the ice-berg of the very intricate gender relations within the Tantric circle. In order to reveal the invisible images and hear the silent voices, we should move away from a unitary perspective and attempt to investigate more the various sources— (textual, iconographical and oral)—in a socio-cultural context and probe their meaning and significance beyond a literal and speculative understanding of Tantricism.

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