



## BOOK DISCUSSION

# *Tantric Visions of the Divine Feminine*

by David Kinsley

### ○ Review : Pradip Bhattacharya

In the uproar over the patriarchal and male chauvinist prejudice that is said to infest India's scriptures like a black plague, a basic fact is lost. No other living religious tradition in the world presents such a continuous and richly diverse record from prehistoric times of worshipping the Divine as Feminine. It was in *Hindu Goddesses* that David Kinsley provided a synoptic view of this beginning from the prehistoric Indus civilization and the pristine Vedic theogony, through the *itihasa-purana* and *tantric* pantheon, down to the village deities. His work inspired several investigations into this neglected area by Hawley, Wulff and Coburn.

But how to make sense of a tradition that worships a hag, or a goddess who chops off her own head and directs the spouting blood into the mouths of two yoginis and her own; or one who, seated on a corpse, plucks out a demon's tongue; another whose terrifying form has to be worshipped with polluted offerings in a cremation

ground; and yet another who straddles her consort on a funeral pyre? David Kinsley's book *Tantric Visions of the Divine Feminine* (Motilal Banarsidass pp 318) is the most recent study to be published in response to this puzzle, and its particular importance lies in examining how the "left-handed way" conceptualises the feminine principle.

Being intensely individualistic, this form of worship is very different from the Vedic and Puranic sacrificial ceremonies that involved the community. This group of goddesses presents a veritable "anti-model" for women, quite the opposite of the doormat of a housewife. In them the predominant theme is the oxymoronic coupling of death and mating, with the goddess almost invariably naked and in the dominant ("reverse") position. In some cases even the offerings are of items that are traditionally branded as polluting. The sacrifices these goddesses demand are invariably of male victims. This curious phenomenon, that this in which conceptualisation is entirely by male devotees, needs deeper research. Kinsley provides information, hitherto unknown, that there are female sources on Tantric Buddhism which scholars have ignored. Yet another instance of chauvinistic blindness? None of these western scholar have noted that the earliest hymn devoted to a goddess occurring in the *Rigveda* X.125 is also the only one composed by a woman: the seer Vak, daughter

of *rishi* Ambhrin This oldest *mantra* is also the most sublime of all invocations to the Divine Feminine. Vak, experiencing the Supreme Goddess, *Adi Shakti*, as her Self declaims, "It is I who, creating the universe and all worlds, wholly pervade them like the wind. Though I transcend the heavens and this earth, yet by my glory have I manifested creation." It is precisely this sublimity that one seeks for in the *tantric* vision and is left baffled and bewildered by the deliberate piling up of horror upon horror. The essence of the left-handed path is achieving transcendence through plumbing the depths of the other extremity.

Actually, this group of ten spans the spectrum from the horripilatingly dreadful to the sublimely benign exemplified with its celebration of *Chinnamasta* at one end and *Kamala* at the other. One could, perhaps, argue for a gradual progression towards the latter end and even a successive attenuation of the horrifying aspect. The concept of *Kamala* comes as the last, after *Tripura-sundari*, the beauty of the three worlds is celebrated in the *Lalita Sahasranama*, whose symbol is the *Shri Chakra*, *Bhuvaneshvari* and whose body is

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the world symbolised by the inverted triangle and Matangi, the outcaste, who insists upon being worshipped with offerings of leftover food. These three are represented as lovely sixteen year old maidens, the latter two appearing without any consort while Lalita appears seated upon a reclining Shiva. Similarly, the other *MahaVidyas* are quite independent of him and indeed their very manifestations are in defiance of him. Dhumavati, of course, appears as a widow, consort-less, originating, like Bagalamukhi, in Sati swallowing Shiva when he would not assuage her hunger. However, the purpose behind worshipping this form remains quite obscure. Despite being a widow, the hymn invoking her makes her the creatrix of dance and enjoyer of erotic activity and liquor.

Kinsley's research reveals an important fact that each *MahaVidya* is a facet of the multifaceted Great Goddess, each containing all the others. This is revealed in the invocatory versus addressed to any of them which usually ascribe to her the names of many of the other nine. He does not, however, take into account the very different version found in the *Devi Purana* 139.135. Here Shiva invokes the Supreme Shakti of eight *Vidyas* to destroy Subal and Dundubhi at the request of Vishnu and the gods. Knowing weapons will be ineffectual, she discards her youthful form and becomes over a hundred years old with withered skin, networked with veins, and with sunken eyes. She has pale lips, gaping mouth-cavern, limbs a-tremble, a snake on the head, her left hand on the left thigh, the right hand on her back, encircled by eight *Vidyas* astride ox, lion, elephant, peacock, garuda, bear, black-spotted deer respectively. These *Vidyas* dwell specially with women in the inner apartments as clan-deities. To the

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*pulinda* and *shabara* tribes they give *siddhi* in the left handed way. They are established with prostitutes, *gopis*, tribals (Hun, Khas, Turani, Kol) and in Hastinapur, Ujjaini, Kamakshya, Kishkindhya, Bhot country, Koshala, Raadh, Mahodaya, Varendra land, Vidisha, Jalandhar. This crone obstructs the Danava Sharabh's way, telling him to lie with her and not discard her as old. The moment he holds her hand to lift her up, he falls dead.

Another version in this Purana narrates that after Parashurama brought Kalika from Yashoda beside the northern sea and established her in Ayodhya, nine Durgas emerged from her and were established in Mahodaya. Chapter 150 of *Devi Purana* speaks of her form as Vaivasvati, riding a buffalo, with boar-like face, drinking from a skull and holding a staff. As Aghora, she has a terrifying face, clad in lion and deer skin, wearing a necklace of heads with skull and pike in hand. As Karali of the terrible face, her hair is put up, she wears a necklace of skulls, her mouth is full of meat and she delights in black coloured offerings. As Vikata she rides a camel, holds noose and staff in huge hands, sports a terrifying mein, has black sandal paste smeared on her body, is surrounded by scorpions and cockroaches, delights in fish, fat and bloody meat. Thus, the ten *MahaVidyas* are by no means unique. Their multiforms exist in the nine Durgas, the eight *Vidyas*, and the seven *Matrikas* (sometimes 16 and even 92 in the *Vana Parva* of

*Mahabharata*). This last group is equally intriguing, for they are associated with Karttikeya and steal or torment children until puberty. Like the ancient Greek goddess Hecate, they are said to reside at crossroads, in caves, mountains, springs and cremation grounds and speak a variety of tongues. All of these characteristics point to a non-Vedic, folk or tribal character celebrated so powerfully in the icon of Vindhya Vasini even today which has been well analysed by Hawley and Wulff's *Devi*.

One problem with Kinsley's work lies in his failure to grapple with the riddle of the Tantric approach. One is disappointed that he restricts himself to putting together painstakingly whatever details are available regarding the form and functions of each of the ten *MahaVidyas* and does not seek to resolve this riddle. The tantric's *tapasya*, as M.S. Srinivasan explains so lucidly in "The yogic vision of Tantra," is to see the adorable mother behind all the passions of the lower nature. The terrible and repulsive forms of the *MahaVidyas* are worshipped precisely in order to train the *Tantric yogi* systematically to envision the Divine Mother even in all that appears to be dark and disgusting in life. Thereby, he grasps the key to sublimate and master the forces of his own lower nature, rising spiritually by those very things that cause man's downfall. However much distorted by the ego, every desire is in essence the expression of some power of the imminent Divine. Removing the distortion leads to each taking its proper place to perform its right function according to the supreme law of bliss infusing all creation. Sri Aurobindo put it so well in *Savitri*: none can gain heaven who has not passed through hell. □

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