Sexual Ambivalence in Western Scholarship on Hindu India: A History of the Idea of Shakto-Tantrism

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There is probably no other facet of Hinduism which has been treated with so much ambivalence by Westerners, or remains so ambiguous in definition, as Shakto-Tantrism. The extreme response to Hinduism by Western scholars and by the popularizers of Western scholarship on India appears to have been prompted by strong values on what was held to be the proper relationship between sexuality and religion. Because Shakto-Tantrism seems to express something alarming, or liberating, to each new generation of Westerners, it could never achieve even a modicum of objectivity in scholarship. For two hundred years, Western scholars have gone through the motions of their craft authenticating Hindu texts, translating them, making pedantic observations about their meaning, but they were, in fact, only responding strongly to varying contemporary Western images of pornography or erotica as applied to Shakto-Tantrism in particular, or Hinduism in general. There is no way of defining Shakto-Tantrism, or possibly even Hinduism, outside of the definitions scholars have rendered at different periods of time. Each definition belongs to a fixed point of view about sexuality and religion at a fixed time in recent Western history.

1. The Orientalist Conception of Classical Hinduism

For generations after the establishment of the Asiatic Society of Bengal in 1784, Western scholarship on India was shaped largely by the attitudes, ideas and historical endeavors of a group of intellectually-Indianized British officials in Company service known as Orientalists. Because Orientalist scholarship was an
As Others See Us

outgrowth of British cultural policy in India between 1780 and 1830, it was characteristically functional, pragmatic and reformist in purpose. Reports given at Asiatic Society seminars on textual translations, excavations, Hindu religious sects and the historicization of charismatic heroes of Indian civilization, were not so much esoteric monographs for the initiated few as they were eagerly read declarations containing startling revelations about the long lost pre-Muslim Hindu past.

It was the scholarship of missionaries, surgeons, judges, collectors and others in Company service which together constituted our first set of influential images of historic Hindu India. For the most part, it reflected the classically-oriented, elitist sentiments of high-born and high-ranking British officials. And no doubt, Orientalism was also conceived to facilitate British control of South Asia. In this sense, scholarship was useful intelligence about manners and customs. According to William Jones, the first president of the first Asiatic Society in modern history, Orientalist scholars aimed at “inquiry into the History, Civil and Natural, the Antiquities, Arts, Sciences and Literature of Asia as a means to discovering truths about Man and Nature.”

In fact, Orientalism served many purposes in the nineteenth century; its pragmatic scholarship reached out in several directions. In Europe, the results of Sanskrit research produced what one scholar has called a “second renaissance.” The new scholarship and the systematic study of Asian languages were incorporated in the curriculum of the College of Fort William after 1800, as part of a training program for British civil servants in India. Perhaps most important, at least from the point of view of Indians themselves, was the gift by Orientalists of a historic consciousness without which the so-called Bengal or Indian Renaissance would have been inconceivable.

With few exceptions, the Orientalists were biased in favor of the classical tradition over the so-called medieval, and the great tradition or high culture over the popular, regionally-oriented indigenous cultures. Moreover, some Orientalists, both missionary and secular, already expressed an ambivalence to sexuality in popular Hinduism which they transmitted to later generations of Western scholars and also to the Hindu intelligentsia itself. What is important at this stage is the Orientalist legacy of a contrasting set of images between a golden age which is Indo-Aryan, classical, Brahmanical, elitist and a subsequent dark age which is medieval, popular or tribal, orgiastic and corrupt. The Orientalist historic view might be thus summed up as a golden age from the earliest Aryan aggressive migrations to the Guptas, whose dynasty contained all that was glorious and authentic about Hindu civilization. Then came the darkness. An age of Kali literally descended upon the subcontinent as Indian culture became tribalized, its heroic classicism swamped by orgiastic religion and witchcraft. There is a direct causal relationship between the Orientalist set of contrasting historic images and the puritanical reformism of modernistic Hindu movements such as the Brahmo Samaj and the Ramakrishna Mission.

H.T. Colebrooke’s scholarly research on the “golden age” of Vedic India directly influenced the social reformism of Rammohun Roy, founder of the Brahmo movement.

In 1915, approximately 100 years after Colebrooke’s sojourn in India, E.B.
Havell, art historian and patron saint of the Bengal Renaissance of art, published *The Ancient and Medieval Architecture of India: A Study of Indo-Aryan Civilization*. The work represents the older form of Orientalism in which books were written to influence cultural policy, and it represents a popularized view of historical scholarship on the Hindu classical and dark ages which was intended to be liberal, but is from hindsight, racist and imperialist. Havell wrote the book "so that Britain doesn't make the mistake of Ireland in India." He went on to say that:

> I believe myself to be fulfilling a patriotic duty in endeavoring to remove the misconceptions of Indian civilization which have so largely governed Anglo-Indian policy. . . It is good for us to know that Indian civilization is a branch of the same tree which we are proud to call our own.

The one new feature of the Orientalist legacy which we owe to late nineteenth century race consciousness and cultural imperialism was the continual references to "the glory that was Aryan." For Havell's generation, the classical was still equated with the Aryan world and it was Aryan India which was the authentic Hindu tradition. The golden age, possibly due to the Darwinian stress on evolution, differentiation and refinement, had shifted from the earlier Vedic or Upanishadic stages of growth (first millennium B.C.) to the apex of Gupta culture in the fifth century A.D. Havell singled out Vikramaditya as the legendary symbolic hero of Indo-Aryan civilization who "saved India from the savage barbarians who [were] ravaging Europe." It should be recalled that the book was written during World War I. "It was a time," Havell continued, "when Indian culture was the inspiration of the civilized world."

Havell's Orientalist bias was apparent in the dismal way he dismissed medieval Hindu art and civilization. "The Middle Period," he wrote, "was saturated by the art of Hindu decadence." He did not want Europeans to be misled by the sculpture on the temples of Khajuraho and elsewhere which were "grossly obscene." This did not represent Aryanism in its finest hour, but was Hinduism during the "decadent period" when sects "indulged in the most depraved ritualistic practices."

Another interesting feature among classical Orientalists like Havell was the process of Aryan appropriation of medieval non-Aryan gods and cults into the Brahmanical fold. For a long time, scholars repudiated Siva, for example, not merely for his extravagant sexual exploits in myth, but because of his phallic-like emblem, or lingam, which to them was too incongruent a Dionysian symbol for a cult identified with ascetic austerities. Havell reminds us how "puzzled" Orientalists like H.H. Wilson and Monier-Williams were in trying to "account for the Saivities using a symbol associated with the licentious orgies of Western paganism." Havell himself took the classicist position in resolving the problem. Originally, there was no phallic image but a four-headed pillar which signified the universality implicit in the four cardinal directions. Later barbarians corrupted the original purpose and ritual, transforming the pillar into a licentious symbol and object.\(^8\)

Not insignificant is the fact that Havell ignored Shaktism or the worship of...
woman as god in India. Presumably, if the worship of the lingam was worthy of critical analysis in a respectable volume on Aryan art and civilization, yoni-worship was not. And, despite Vishnu’s amorous medieval incarnation of Krishna, even Vaishnavism was also increasingly accepted into the orthodox field.

2. Attempts to Defeminize and Desexualize Shakto-Tantrism

Before the publication, in the early twentieth century, of a vast number of Tantric texts translated into English, along with commentaries and polemical essays in defense of a new interpretation of Shakto-Tantrism—all under the pseudonym of Arthur Avalon—a—the sectarian branch of Hinduism centering around the worship of god the Mother, was held in extremely low esteem by most Western scholars. For almost a hundred years, scholars viewed the fusion of these two medieval cults in India rather much as had been conceived by missionaries such as the Abbé Dubois in Hindu Manners, Customs and Ceremonies and William Ward in A View of the History, Literature and Religion of the Hindoos. Shakto-Tantrism was treated in the same manner the Inquisition had treated European witchcraft. The rites and ceremonies they described took place at night, and in secret. The devotees, both men and women, married and unmarried, of high and low castes, it was said, stripped themselves naked, then indulged themselves in wine, forbidden food, sex and black magic.

Though not a single Tantra had been translated into English for Western consumption until 1913, eminent Orientalists such as Brian Hogdson, British resident in Nepal during the 1820s, dismissed the whole Tantric tradition as “lust, mummeriy and black magic.” A. Barth, whose Religions of India went through six editions, from 1879 to 1969, condemned the “sect for its unrestrained obscenity and sacrificial rites.” The Orientalist Monier-Williams pronounced that the Tantras “were manuals of mysticism, magic and superstition of the most silly kind.” “In Shaktism,” he wrote elsewhere, “we are confronted with the worst results of the worst superstitious ideas that have ever disgraced and degraded the human race.”

The herculean task of redeeming Shakto-Tantrism from its abysmally low status among Western scholars of India became the self-inspired burden of John Woodroffe, British High Court Justice in Calcutta between 1904-1922. Woodroffe was among the greatest of Orientalists, surely not only for the wealth of new texts he translated with meticulous care, but for his single-handed resurrection of a tradition which, in fact, as with most such reformation attempts, was a new tradition, and in this case, was based on the processes of defeminizing the image of Shaktism and desexualizing the image of Tantrism.

It was the ill repute of Shakto-Tantrism which prompted Judge Woodroffe to use the alias Arthur Avalon for his numerous publications. Avalon (or Woodroffe) removed the much maligned tradition from its orgiastic setting, elevated the ritual spiritually by transforming fish, meat, wine and sex into sublime and symbolic attributes of a higher meaning, and built a philosophic structure out of Brahmanic sacred tradition to win orthodox approval. Thus, Woodroffe was never
an apologist for the religion of woman worship, as such, nor for any aspect of Tantric erotic spirituality.

As for defeminization, he was continually trying to silence his critics by denying that Shaktism was "religious feminism run mad" or the "feminization of Vedanta for the suffragette movements." Quite simply, Woodroffe argued that God was neither masculine nor feminine for the Vedantic Brahma had no attributes.

On desexualization, Woodroffe contended rather consistently throughout his life that Tantric texts were in no way different from other Hindu texts in the ultimate goal of salvation. Of course, he never denied that Tantras differed from earlier texts by virtue of the considerable attention which was given to forbidden practices which ran counter to the established ethical rules of conduct. The explanation for this, which Woodroffe was among the first to offer, was that the Tantras were the appropriate texts for the imperfect age of Kali, just as the Vedas were the appropriate text for an earlier golden age of belief. In any case, there is nothing obscene or perverse in the Tantric Sastras. On the contrary, wrote Woodroffe, they teach "that there is a God who transcends Nature, that Dharma or morality governs all men, that there is sin, and that such acts as fornication, sodomy, lesbianism, and masturbation are impurities leading to Hell."15

3. Western-Trained Bengali Scholars and the Reevaluation of Medieval Hinduism

To understand the proper chain of cause and effect relationships which led to the radical historiographical reevaluation of medieval Hinduism—particularly Shakto-Tantrism—it is necessary to start with the work of Western-trained Indian scholars who, at least forty years ago, turned away from the study of classical India to a study of their own historical experience within their own regional cultures. In 1943, Romesh C. Majumdar brought out the first volume of The History of Bengal, which incorporated the results of an ambitious multi-disciplinary survey of the region during its post-classical and pre-Muslim period.16 Though the book lacked an integrated conceptual framework, it established medieval Bengali cultural history as a respectable area of scholarly concern.

One of the principal reasons Bengali scholars promoted medieval studies, despite its ill repute, was the recognition that Bengal's proudest achievements in the arts and literature were in fact direct expressions of anti-establishment sentiments by notorious members of counter traditions. Early in the century, this peculiar situation caused considerable ambivalence in a literary historian like Dinesh Sen, who would have won the admiration of the staunchest Victorian British critic in the manner he subjected Bengali spiritually erotic poetry to an uncompromising set of moral criteria. For Sen to condemn Buddhist Tantrism in particular, and Shakto-Tantrism in general, was perhaps understandable in the first decade of the twentieth century. But while Sen found the Sahajiya movement profoundly disgusting for its promiscuity and general lack of moral behavior, he nevertheless betrayed an admiration for the beautiful lyric poetry of Sahajiya poets in spite of their bohemian lives and frank eroticism.
By mid-century, Bengali scholarship had matured to a point where literary masterpieces could be subjected to dispassionate critical judgment without being hampered by the onlooker's blushing sensitivity at indecent or even obscene passages. Nevertheless, the Bengali intelligentsia, shaped largely in the nineteenth-century Bengal Renaissance and the modernistic puritanism of the Brahmo Samaj and the Ramakrishna Mission, had chosen the right-hand alternative of John Woodroffe and had actually continued his work by modifying their erotic legacy, not by suppressing it, but by allegorizing and philosophizing it.

Even before Woodroffe, Brahmo philosophers such as Sitaniath Tattvavabhusan and Hiralal Haldar elevated Shaktism in Bengal by wedding it to the Vendantism of Sankaracarya. Ramakrishna not only de-eroticized and desexualized Tantrism by means of unusual experiments with prostitutes and his wife, but he also defanged Kali and transformed her into a benign image of the Bengali mother. Vivekananda consummated the process as a religious reformer. In the 1940s and 1950s, the new composite tradition of medieval Bengali counter traditions was systematized in a series of brilliant publications by a philosopher, S.B. Dasgupta. Thanks to Dasgupta, among others, a hundred years of reinterpretation and fifty years of intensive textual research, translation and analysis were all brought together in a flood of revisionist scholarship and philosophic speculation. Under the influence of less Westernized Sanskrit scholars such as Panchanan Tarkaratna and Gopinath Kaviraj, the new Shakto-Tantric philosophy had finally lost its folk connection and revolutionary origins and ascended Brahmanical Olympian heights.

4. The Sexual Revolution in the West and the Eroticization of Medieval Hinduism

The period after World War II produced a virtual revolution in Western scholarship in India. Important contributing factors were the so-called sexual revolution in the West, the emergence of a counter culture with an affinity for Eastern forms of erotic mysticism, the rise of feminism or women's liberation, and the results of American South Asia area studies which identified more with the regional cultures than with classical civilization. Most likely, the reevaluation of sexuality as a critical force in the history of the world, and the freedom of sexuality from puritanical control in the 1960s, became instrumental factors in lifting taboos which had long prohibited the serious study of Hinduism. Feminism was also crucial because the study of women as a serious objective of scholarly inquiry meant that at long last, Shaktism with its worship of woman as god could be approached from a perspective free of male-entered contempt and the phallic bias.

The establishment of neo-Shakto-Tantric orthodoxy may have satisfied the yearnings of the modernistic Hindu middle class, but it no way obliterated the legion of left-hand cultists in rural Bengal, the most idealized of whom were the Bauls whose songs are said to embody the original revolutionary spirit of Sahajiya Tantrism. But they may have remained totally unknown in the West if it were not for the new interest there in such groups. The counter culture created an
atmosphere sympathetic to a complete reevaluation of what Kenneth Grant has called "the cults of the shadow." In a non-scholarly book by that title, Grant sought to do a comparative history of such cults from ancient Egypt to the present. Including Shakto-Tantrism among his cults of the shadow, Grant found a common sexual factor underlying their practices throughout history and arousing antipathy from the most established groups. In his own words:

The main cause of the vilification of the Left Hand Path . . . even to the present day . . . is its connection with the feminine aspect of the Creation Principle. It is the sex-magical use of woman in the rites of the Left Hand Path that has made it universally suspect.23

And so the one disreputable vamacari or left-hand side of Shakto-Tantrism became idealized, romanticized, eroticized, aestheticized and even philosophized along with Taoism as Eastern counterparts of contemporary Western ideologies of sexual liberation. For the first time, yoga ceased to be equated exclusively with celibacy or renunciation, but was coupled with bhoga or sensual enjoyment, and that could be accomplished only with a woman who was no longer simply an object of gratification, but a revered partner in the sacred quest for salvation. It could be said, in fact, that left-hand Tantrism became the first popular Indian religious sect which actually achieved relative popularity in the United States. Omar Garrison's Tantra: The Yoga of Sex (1964), Ashley Thilbe's Tantra: The Key to Sexual Power and Pleasure (1978), and Gabriele Mandel's profusely illustrated Tantra Rites of Love (1979) are examples of a literature which not only exaggerates the sexual side of a complex religion for popular consumption, but is sold in shops along with sensuous creams and oils for bodily massage, vibrators, hot tubs and other modern devices for the gratification of the senses.

The earliest anti-puritanism by Western scholars which accompanied a re-examination of Hinduism seems to have been in the defense of erotic sculpture. In an article on "An Approach to Hindu Erotic Sculpture" in 1947, Alain Danielou lashed out at older Orientalists and other puritan types who completely misunderstood Hindu art and religion. "The Hindus chose the act of love," began Danielou, not to challenge the Victorian sense of decency, but "as a means of expression for the most refined emotions and profound philosophical conceptions." Thank goodness for the "recent times when puritanism has given way to a revival of the human form." Hindu erotic images are "things of beauty," he went on to say, "because no religion is different from life and there is nothing on this earth that is not divine."24

Many Westerners capitalized on the scholarship of erotic Indian art to communicate its relevant significance to their own generation.25 Alan Watts, for one, was an effective popularizer of both Tantrism and Zen to the counter tradition of the West. His Erotic Spirituality: The Vision of Konarak (1971), contains little that is new or of any interest to scholars, but it is an attractive book, lucid and readable. The message of Konarak, he said, was not the pornography which the Victorians believed they had beheld, but was "only in the eyes of people with dirty minds." "The faces are innocent of the leer," wrote Watts,
“which always masks shame and guilt at finding ‘pleasure in filth.’ ” The message of Konarak was that spirituality was best achieved, perhaps, when religion was wedded to true love. As he put it, “religion without sex is a rattling skeleton and sex without religion is a mass of mush.”

The proper kind of sex which Watts, Herbert Guenther and others have for years attributed to Buddhist and Hindu forms of Tantric yoga seems often to be as much directed against Playboy and Hustler sexuality as against puritanism, Victorianism, or Christianity. What reformers like Guenther and Watts ultimately associated with Shakto-Tantrism and sought to convince other Westerners about was a revolutionary feminist conception dealing with the androgynyization of sexual roles. Conventional masculinity, to Guenther, made any sacred unity of the sexes impossible. The antidote to such masculinization which Shakto-Tantrism provided, was for a man to join “the cult of the woman . . . and to take her as a guide to the profound drama of integration.”

In Bengal, and in other South Asia regions as well, a scholarship has developed in recent decades which is as committed to serious historical study as to advancing contemporary Western ideas. Perhaps no other American scholar has better represented the new, anti-puritanical, anti-Victorian, regional historical study of Bengal, than Edward Dimock. To appreciate the pioneering achievement of *The Place of the Hidden Moon* (1966) as a work which redeems a much maligned counter tradition of medieval Hinduism, one should compare his treatment of a cult of the shadow with those of his contemporaries. Certainly, the river of Tantrism, along with its tributaries, were already being explored in the United States. Mircea Eliade, who encouraged Dimock to write the book, had, in 1954, already written a rather long, intensive study of Tantrism and Yoga in his *Immortality and Freedom*. In fact, Eliade, with a marvelous sense of history, was among the earliest of the great Indologists of this century to argue that Tantrism was the most important single religious current in the Hindu Middle Ages. Not only did its ideas radically change every strata of Indian society, but “in a comparatively short time, Indian philosophy, mysticism, ritual, ethics, iconography, and even literature are influenced by Tantrism.” As a “pan-Indian movement,” Eliade concluded, “it is assimilated by all the great Indian religions and by all the ‘sectarian schools.’” But Eliade never left the Olympian heights of the Brahmanical tradition to see Tantrism and its influences in its milieu of a regional cultural history. The same could be said for Heinrich Zimmer and Ananda Coomaraswamy.

In 1965, Agehananda Bharati, the linguistically brilliant Austrian convert to a Hindu monastic order, published *The Tantric Tradition*, which was probably the most technically proficient and existentially vital analysis of Tantrism ever written. Bharati tended to see Tantrism as a ritualistic process or discipline which alters an individual’s consciousness and enables him to achieve a transcending state of being. Nevertheless, Bharati, despite his identification with Tantrism as a human process, rather than as part of the Sanskritic great tradition, and his identification with the sexual candor of his own time, was really closer to Woodroffe on the meaning and significance of Tantrism than it would appear. Bharati was torn between his admiration for mysticism as a human desire or
experience for spiritual liberation and the pedantic quest for scholarly verification between the pages of a text. As with Woodroffe, though Tantrism is supposedly anti-system with a considerable diversity of expression among its practitioners, Bharati spent considerable time on lengthy philological analysis, implying that precise meanings of words will get us closer to what is essential in a mystical movement. And finally, as in the case of Woodroffe, Bharati seemed to conclude that the true Tantrism has little to do with drinking, fornication, or achieving better orgasms either under the mantle of religion or for its own sake. "The final target of the Tantric," said Bharati, "is the same as that of all Hindu and Buddhist religion, namely freedom from the misery of attachment." Bharati's most important concept was "enstasy" which he applied equally to all "meditative disciplines" in mysticism:

Enstasy, in all these traditions, is a non-discursive, quasi-permanent condition of the individual agent, and it is highly euphoric. In Indian theological parlance . . . it is tantamount with supreme insight or wisdom, and all other knowledge attained by discursive processes is thought to be vastly inferior; formal learning of any kind is, by implication, essentially opposed to enstasy, marring its voluntary repetition and intensification.  

5. The Feminization of Hinduism

Dimock's book is the first full-length study by a Western scholar on what Kenneth Grant had called the cult of the shadow. When ordinary human beings unlocked the prison of divinity within their hearts by means of sacred rites and rituals, they became manifestations of Siva and Shakti or Krishna and Radha, and their sexual act, wrote Dimock, "reduplicates in microcosm the love of Radha and Krishna, a love that had both phases, separation and union." Dimock equated this kind of love between two actual persons with a similar experience of divine joy within the microcosm of one's self: In either situation, the objective was to transform kama or carnal love into prema, or non-carnal love. Though Dimock did refer in his analysis to the importance of women in Sahajiya, due to Tantric influence, their importance was limited to being accepted as gurus in the model of Radha "who conducts the worshipper in his search for realization." The Sahajiyas he studied were Vaishnavas who worshipped the male god, Krishna, and were not Shaktos who worshipped woman as god.

It was not until the 1940s, presumably because of a serious interest in indigenous tradition, or folk culture, that the Mother Goddess in India began to be studied seriously. S. K. Dikshit's The Mother Goddess: A Study Regarding the Origins of Hinduism (1945) contributed little that is new to her study in India, but contained a few generalizations about her comparative study from Egypt to South Asia. A new kind of book which reflected the growing concern for regional studies is B.K. Kakatia's The Mother Goddess Kamakhya—Studies in the Fusion of Aryan and Primitive Beliefs in Assam (1948). Kamakhya, it should be noted, as
her name alone suggests, was a goddess of love in a province which was strongly Shakto-Tantric.

Two doctoral dissertations at London University on the mother goddess, one published and the other not, constituted important pioneering scholarship on Shakto-Tantrism. P.K. Maity’s *Historical Studies in the Cult of the Goddess Manasa* (1966) was the first monograph to treat the literature and mythology of the Bengali snake goddess as part of a regional folk tradition which owes little to the Great Tradition, but is nevertheless of vital importance in understanding the cultural history of the Bengali people. A year earlier, a Bengali Muslim, Muklesur Rahman, had done a doctoral dissertation on “The Early History of the Cult of the Mother Goddess in North Indian Hinduism with Special Reference to Iconography.” This is perhaps still the only fully comprehensive study on the Indian goddess in which a careful historical distinction is made between Indo-Aryan and indigenous goddesses and which attempts to trace the vicissitudes of their worship by means of various strategies of survival.

Most likely, the Indian interest in Shaktism is derived in large part from the increasing interest among Westerners in the history of woman as god. Eric Neumann’s *The Great Mother: An Analysis of the Archetype* (1955), a Jungian study, included Indian goddesses in its ambitious comparative survey, but not Indian scholarship on Shaktism. More influential in India was the *Cult of the Mother Goddess* (1959) by the eminent historian of religion, E.O. James. Recent feminist scholarship on women and religion has certainly contributed to Shakti studies, however indirectly, because it made such inquiries respectable and relevant.

Much of the literature on woman as god in India has been written by regionally-oriented area specialists of South Asia who are mostly North American. Ralph Nicholas has written articles on Sitala, the goddess of smallpox. W.L. Smith also identified with the regional culture in his *Myth of Manasa: The Popular Hinduism of Medieval Bengal* (1976). David Kinsley wrote the first analytical study of the historical Kali in a work which he combined with a study of Krishna in a book on *The Sword and the Flute: Dark Visions of the Terrible and the Sublime in Hindu Mythology* (1976). In 1977, Wendell C. Beane, a historian of religion under Eliade’s inspiration, again made Bengal the pivot of his study on *Myths, Cults, and Symbols in Sakta Hinduism: A Study of the Indian Mother Goddess*.

The feminization of Hinduism during the height of Shakto-Tantrism in medieval India has seldom been the object of serious historical interpretation or theory. Dinesh Chandra Sen, who attempted to write the first complete literary and linguistic history of Bengal from a series of lectures at Calcutta University in 1909, was very much influenced by contemporary European preconceptions about the Orient. He began by identifying the “femininity of God” with “primitive Asiatic races” such as the Mongolians and Dravidians, the latter of whom in India, he guessed, produced a civilization which preceded that of the Aryans. Quite rightly, he pointed to the fact that the Vedas contain little on the “worship of god as mother.” Only later, when Aryans combined their culture with that of the indigenous inhabitants, did a form of Shaktism arise. Sen believed that
Tantrism was neither Aryan nor native to India, but was “imported into the religious system of the Aryans from China.” The Shakto cult, on the other hand, was not only native to India, but in the early Middle Ages it became so important that the Aryans could no longer ignore it. They “raised it into a highly refined and spiritual faith, Sanskritized its vocabulary and Aryanized its modes of worship.” As for Bengal, interestingly enough, Sen found evidence in Shakto epic literature such as the poems in honor of Manasa Devi to suggest a religious struggle based on sexuality. Saivism, which Sen believes was also a non-Vedic creed based on the male principle, “had a great fight with the creed of the people believing in various forms of the mother-worship.” In Sen’s own words:

_Bengali literature begins, so to speak, with this account of a fight between the Saivas and the worshippers of those local deities who claimed to be Sakti, but whom the worshippers of Siva called witches and regarded as quite unworthy of worship. . . . At a later time, the Saiva creed was blended with the Sakti-cult even in its crude local forms, but this could not happen before a hard fight on either side._

In Kunwar Lai’s _The Religion of Love_ (1971), the feminization of Hinduism and the central theme of love have been put together to conceive a different interpretation of Shakto history. According to Lai, the Shakti element in Sahajiya Vaishnavism was expressed historically by Radha as an ideal feminine type representing “all that is lovable, beautiful and attractive in a woman.” In the _Bhagavata Purana_, compiled between the sixth and ninth centuries, Radha was not mentioned by name, but was only alluded to as one of Krishna’s countless gopis or mistresses who are the wives of other men. Then, after 1000 A.D., her name appeared from time to time until in the late twelfth century, the poet Jayadeva gave her full recognition as Krishna’s beloved in the _Gita Govinda_. At this point in the evolution of her image, Radha had no divine status, but was clearly subordinate to her masculine god-lover. According to Lai, in the fourteenth century poetry of Vidyapati, a radical change took place as the relationship between Krishna and Radha is no longer seen from the standpoint of the ego-centered male. The focus was on Radha’s moods and feelings, hopes and despair, longings and fulfillment.” To Lai, this represented a “general upgrading of woman all around in the Tantric . . . philosophies.” In the next stage, she became a goddess regarded as an incarnation of Lakshmi, spouse of Vishnu. In one source, she replaced Rukmini as the central object of Krishna’s love and adoration. And finally, Radha reached her fullest development as Shakti:

_Gradually, Krishna worships Radha instead of the reverse. The male will worship the female and find liberation in the religion of love and surrender. The culmination of this development is reached in the cult of Radha, in which she becomes the supreme divinity._

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Kanwar Lal’s erotic Shakti Theory of medieval Hinduism was based largely on the new research in the 1960s on Jayadev, Chandidas and Vidyapati by Dimock, Deben Bhattacharya and W.G. Archer. The challenge to his approach and conceptualization has come from Marxists and other social realists.

As in the West, where radical feminism has joined forces with the sexual revolution on the one hand, and with Marxism on the other, so in Indian studies, Hindu feminization in Shakto-Tantrism has been viewed from the angle of erotic emancipation, or seen from the leftist perspective of ideological protest by the anti-Aryan Hindu masses. In addition, two intellectual currents, pro-feminism and anti-classical Orientalism, have come together to support a totally different view of the meaning of Shakto-Tantrism in Indian history. The first current is the matriarchy theory of early civilization family and social structure based on Mutterrecht (mother-right). The second current is a Marxist conception of the birth of private property as related to the birth of patriarchal institutions as first formulated in 1884 by Frederick Engels in The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State.

In 1970, N.N. Bhattacharyya brought out his first edition of The Indian Mother Goddess, which may have been the earliest repudiation of the erotica school of Shakto-Tantrism accompanied by an alternative interpretation. Bhattacharyya sought to prove that Shaktism was the Indian version of a worldwide process of mother worship that predated the patriarchal revolution of which Indo-Aryan conquests were a major contributing factor. Secondly, Bhattacharyya adapted Engels to the Indian situation and sought to prove that though the Aryans destroyed communal property, Shaktism continued to survive, not simply as the mother-oriented religion of the Hindu masses, but as an ideology of social protest against Aryan oppression. Though Bhattacharyya was unsure about Tantrism’s place of origin, he was convinced that the spread of Shaktism in the Hindu Middle Ages was a reemergence of the pre-Aryan popular beliefs and attitudes in a regional garb. Many of his examples of matriarchy among tribals in Eastern India, or of matriarchal survivals among the folk practices of Bengalis, have been known for some time, but they were never put together until now as integral parts of an elaborate framework.

In 1975, Bhattacharyya published his History of India Erotic Literature which was again a significantly radical departure from the bulk of literature on this theme. It was the critique by a leftist scholar whose social consciousness and moral indignation prompted him to expose aristocratic-courtly and Brahmanical-temple erotica as forms of female exploitation by the dominant classes of Hindu male society. Bhattacharyya’s depiction of Konarak erotic sculpture as a “reflection of abnormal sex desires” gives the reader the impression that the nineteenth-century Orientalists were perhaps right after all in their blanket condemnation of Hindu licentiousness.

But Indian social realists like Bhattacharyya, in the 1970s, had little in common with the Orientalists of a century ago. The Orientalists were classicists...
who saw medieval Hinduism as a degradation of a golden age, whereas Bhattacharyya favored the medieval tradition as the true Hinduism which had been suppressed by the alien, male-authoritarian Aryans. In his view, courtly erotic literature and temple erotic sculpture had little to do with true Shakto-Tantrism and at best were used to camouflage sexual excesses. The true Shaktism was the religion of the people whose purpose was fertility and survival. When a farmer and his wife copulated in the field in performance of a ritual, it was productivity and the agricultural cycle which were foremost in their minds and not fornication or sensuality for its own sake. Only the privileged could afford such a luxury.

Davangana Desai's *Erotic Sculpture of India, 500-1400 A.D.: A Socio-Cultural Study* (1975), like Bhattacharyya, identified sexuality in Hinduism with fertility, and offered an impressive fund of evidence to prove that the people believed copulation had magical power, and was ritualized in agricultural festivals in association with the planting of seed and the gathering of harvest. One of Desai's conclusions was that from the fourth century, temples were an integral part of the Tantric revolution in Hinduism based on the belief in the "magical efficacy of sex." After 900, however, the erotic theme began to change in *maithuna* (sculpture of coital poses), until the art form lost its popular simplicity and became an ostentatious display or orgiastic art representing, sociologically, the interests and pleasure of the dominant feudal class.

In the final analysis, the historiographical approach is important for enabling us to begin distinguishing between what is, in fact, historical fact, and what is, in fact, a product of the times. Is Tantrism akin to witchcraft or was witchcraft a product of the nineteenth-century missionary imagination? How much of the erotic association with Tantrism is historical and how much of it do we owe to the sexually emancipated writers of the 1960s? And, as we have seen, the new emphasis on Shakto-Tantrism as a people's religion of fertility as against an elitist philosophy of hedonism, obviously is influenced by puritanical Marxist trends in post-Independence India.
Notes

9. For a list of these texts, their commentaries, and analytical references to them, see pre-paginated section of the 7th edition of J. Woodroffe, *Sakti and Sakta* (Madras: Ganesh & Co., 1969).

https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr/vol13/iss13/12
32. Rahim’s thesis was submitted to the University of London in 1965.
37. Mutterrecht was a concept originally advanced by a Swiss jurist named J.J. Bachofen in 1861. Bachofen believed that women were dominant in society, the economy and even politics during the early stages of agricultural based civilization. The idea was supported with evidence on the Iroquois Indians in a study by L.N. Morgan in 1877. The predominance of mother worship in early religions, alleged promiscuity in premonogamistic families, the transmission of family names through the mother, the crucial role of women in agricultural technology and production led many anthropologists to support the Bachofen thesis. The mutterrecht school culminated with the publication of *The Mothers* in three volumes by R. Briffault in 1927.