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Studies on Tantra in Bengal and Eastern India.
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The volume, which is the outcome of a workshop organized in Kolkata by the Tantra Foundation (New Delhi), explores one of the most important but still not adequately researched subjects, namely Tantric traditions of Eastern India. According to the introductory statement, the prime focus of the volume is the concept of Śakti in its different aspects, be they theological or material like pilgrimage sites. Notwithstanding the often disparate and highly varied forms of Tantra found in Eastern India (such as multifarious strands of the Vajrayāna or Sahajiyā tradition), the cult of Śakti is undoubtedly one of the most important and strongest not only in this region but possibly in the whole of the Indian subcontinent. In spite of this, the Eastern India Tantra is still largely underexplored; hence, current volume fills up the glaring lacuna in the scholarship on Tantra, Śaktism, Vaiṣṇavism and other traditions permeated by Tantra, all interconnected through a complex network of mutual influences and appropriations. Eastern India is defined in the Introduction as comprising of an area equivalent to what is historically spoken of as Greater Bengal which includes the present-day Bengal, Assam, Bihar and Orissa in India, as well as Bangladesh and Nepal outside it.

The volume is divided into three parts. Part I, *Cult Inclusiveness, Tantric Śākta and Vaiṣṇava Synthesis*, touches on the processes of syncretism between Śākta and Vaiṣṇava traditions. Part II, *The Śākta Pīṭhas: Great and Small, Ancient and Modern*, provides an overview of the key component of Śākta Tantra, namely places where the divine dwells or the renowned pilgrimage site of Kāmākhyā. Finally, Part III, *Śākta Theology*, presents papers on the topic of Śākta doctrines which emerged in the medieval period. The first part is made up of three articles, while the second and the third comprise of two articles each. All articles are devoted to specific problems which are seldom discussed in academic discourse on Tantra.

The book opens with Introduction by the editor, Madhu Khanna, who gives an overview of the historical development and specificity of the regional religious traditions and particularly Tantric traditions. It brings attention to various forms of worship of female divinities and the prominence of Śākta tradition. It also highlights the issue of the fluidity of borders between various premodern traditions, an issue which is also emphasized in the papers that follow. It should be also mentioned that all papers are case studies focused on specific instances of Tantric tradition of the region, not a general history or an overview of the problems connected to Tantra.

First paper, by Madhu Khanna, “The Making of Tantric Rādhā: A Reading from the *Kṛṣṇayāmala*” analyzes the process of tantricization of the Vaiṣṇava goddess Rādhā and various features associated with this matter. The author introduces the reader to a less known text, *Kṛṣṇayāmala*, and supports the narration with numerous references to other sources like *Rādhā-tantra*. Goddess Rādhā, despite the significant presence in the Vaiṣṇava traditions (especially the Gauḍīya or the Bengali Vaiṣṇava), did not attract enough scholarly attention. In the Caitanya tradition, Rādhā is recognized as Kṛṣṇa’s *hlādinī śakti* (or Joy-rendering power), and in terms of Vaiṣṇava theology the topic was described also in a wider, Tantric context. The most striking element of *Kṛṣṇayāmala*’s narrative is the identification of Rādhā with the goddess Tripurasundarī. This Vaiṣṇava Śākta synthesis is an important feature of the regional Tantra.

Glen. A. Hayes, a specialist in Sahajiyā tradition, gives us valuable insights into the mysterious world of Vaiṣṇava Sahajiyās in his paper, “Prema and Śakti: Vaiṣṇava Sahajiyā Appropriations of Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism and Śaktism in the *Ānandabhairava* of Prema Dāsa”. The author focuses here on one of the early works, namely *Ānandabhairava* of the Sahajiyā corpus, which contains many elements of Śākta, such as the concept of Ādyā Śakti and the ‘garland of bones’. It provides possible proof of the significant Śākta influence on the early Sahajiyā lineages, influence which might be also deduced from other Sahajiyā sources like *Amṛtaratnāvalī*, *Amṛtarasāvalī* or *Nigudārthaparakāśāvalī* where we find various enumeration of internal bodily śaktis styled as Vaiṣṇava *sahkhīs* or *mañjarīs*, and the general process of adjustment of the Śākta material to the Sahajiyā tradition. The Sahajiyā sources are extremely murky and esoteric therefore every new step to understand this important tradition is welcomed. However, the exact source of the Śākta material and history of the transmission between Śaktism and Sahajiyā tradition still wait to be researched.

Last paper of Part I is also focused on the vernacular sources and the so-called ‘Bāul-Sahajiyā’ tradition. Kaustubh Das, in his article titled “Tantra in the Vernacular: Secrecy and Inclusivity in the Yogas of the Bāul-Sahajiyā Traditions”, tries to enlarge our understanding of this esoteric Tantric Bengali tradition. By considering the Bāuls and the premodern Vaiṣṇava Sahajiyās as representing doctrinally coherent Tantric communities, Das proposes the interpretation of the Bāul-Sahajiyās as framed in a wider Eastern Tantric stream and seriously influenced by the Kashmiri traditions while simultaneously inheriting the Vajrayāna traditions of Eastern India. Detecting Trika and framing Sahajiyā tradition in a wider philosophical context seems to be the main contribution of the paper and is ambitious in terms of reconstruing such doctrinal basis. However, my serious doubts relate to the use of the composite term—Bāul-Sahajiyā tradition—and the essentialization of these two groups as belonging to one tradition. We know that for centuries various lineages were transmitting esoteric knowledge; also, the use of the esoteric vocabulary was neither coherent nor consistent. Considering

the contemporary Bāul tradition as equivalent to the premodern or late medieval Vaiṣṇava Sahajiyā traditions is only partially justified. Moreover, the historical evidence for the continuation of the Vajrayāna tradition in Eastern India and the Mahāsiddhas heritage (which does not appear to be critically examined in the academic literature) is weak and needs further research.

Part II opens with paper by Brenda Dobia, “Power and Desire in the Worship of the Goddess Kāmākhyā”, which gives us valuable information on the importance of Kāmapīṭha (which is actually Yonipīṭha or the womb of the goddess). Mythologically rooted in Assam, this specific *pīṭha* joins two primeval notions of Tantra or power (*śakti*) and desire (*kāma*). The author leads the reader through the various aspects of the Śākta cult connected with Kāmākhyā including rituals, transgressive issues, and the role of the female principle. The article is based not only on textual sources, but also on field research conducted by the author in the Kāmākhyā temple. The concept of female principle glorified and worshipped in Tantric rituals connected with Kāmākhyā is carefully examined on the basis of various sources which ultimately give an ambivalent picture of the whole issue. According to the author, the rituals and religious life revolving around the Kāmākhyā temple could be understood primarily as the concept of *śṛṣṭi* or creation where goddess power (*śakti*) brings living beings to life and maintains them, and where the ritual cycle reflects the biological schemes and rhythms (such as menstruation).

Kamal K. Mishra in his paper, “The Metamorphosis of the ‘Gāchh Tar Vālī’ and the Making of an Śakti-Pīṭha in Mithila”, presents the fascinating and complex world of the Śākta related traditions in Mithila, an ancient region situated in North India and comprising parts of today’s Bihar and Jharkhand. The picture which emerges from Mishra’s paper is of an astonishing syncretism related to various manifestations of Śakti through centuries, connected either with Hinduism and Buddhism, or with Tantra and regional, vernacular cults. Mithila represents somehow a separate example of Śakti-pīṭha with a strong Vajrayāna history and connection to Tibet (Māhācina?). The crucial event is related to the establishment of Śakti-pīṭha in Mithila and the

cult of goddesses Tārā and Mahāvīdyās, with the same, interestingly, strongly influenced by the Buddhist elements.

The last two chapters constitute Part III of the book. “Gynocentric Cosmogony in the *Devībhāgavata Purāna*” by Arghya Dipta Kar is focused on the selected themes from one of the important *upapurānas* (secondary *purānas*) which originated in Bengal, namely the *Devībhāgavata Purāna*. The current study is based on the analysis of the mythological tripartite narrative structure focused on the process of creation. Author investigates the multilayered textual work by paying special attention this topic; this is followed by taking a close look at the three goddesses connected to the creation myth. The set of the three goddesses seems to reflect other divine triads, important for Hindu traditions. The important feature of the paper is the presentation of the gynocentric cosmogony in terms of the evolution trajectory from the Viṣṇu myth to the Śākta themes. The text of *Devībhāgavata* provides evidence of the process of development of Śākta theology in the premodern Bengal.

The last study, by Sthaneswar Timalisina, “Revisiting Śākta Advaita: The Monistic Śākta Philosophy in the *Guhyopaniṣad*”, is a reprint from the journal *Zeitschrift für Indologie und Südasiastudien* (34: 247–258. 2017). It brings to light the issues of the appearance of non-dualistic and monistic philosophy in Śākta sources in terms of the autoreflexion of the tradition and in reference to the classical Upaniṣadic corpus. The reworking and the synthesis of these concepts are crystallized in the cult of Guhyakālī (esoteric, cryptic form of the worship of goddess Kālī), found in the Kathmandu Valley. Crucial in this context are Trika Tantric concepts blended with Upaniṣadic ideas. The author considers various sources in this process of fusion, namely the autochthonous rituals, Tantric sources, and Upaniṣadic ideas. The main source is the *Guhyopaniṣad*, text derived from larger *Mahākālasaṃhitā*. The nondualist and monistic aspects of Tantric tradition (with the exception of Kashmir-Śaiva tradition) are still not widely present in academic literature, hence paper fills the lacuna, highlighting the specific Śākta Advaita philosophy.

To conclude, the volume is a valuable contribution to Tantric studies, with articles potentially of interest not only to those specializing

in Tantra or South Asian Studies, but also scholars of religious studies, art historians and anthropologists. However, it must be emphasized that the content of the volume is highly specialistic and selective, focusing on the Śākta features of Tantra in Greater Bengal, and not Tantra in the region of South Asia in general. One critical remark is also necessary: the volume is marred by some typos; this problem, I believe, can be easily corrected in the e-book version.