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Publication History

Received: 2025-09-04

Reviewed: 2025-09-06

Accepted: 2025-09-08

Published: 2025-10-01

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.70042/eroth/90322>

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Tantra Sadhana: Feminist Interpretation of Ancient Indian Spiritual Practice

Abstract: *This paper explores the roles of women in tantra, an ancient spiritual practice that is still practised today. In tantra, women are worshipped as whole, affectionate and fearsome. It talks about how women's body, sexuality and desire are considered taboo from a patriarchal perspective but it is actually the very fabric of reality, the centre of the cosmic and social order. It is considered in Tantra that Shakti or these feminine energies, are all-pervading; they are present in all the objects this universe holds and are the only way to attain spiritual liberation.*

Keywords: liberation, patriarchal, feminine, emancipation, cosmic, centre, Goddesses, body, sacred, taboo, fierce, aggressive, nurturing, ideal.

Tantra Sadhana: Feminist Interpretation of Ancient Indian Spiritual Practice

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Introduction

Tantra is an ancient Indian tradition, practised for centuries and is a practical approach to spiritual awakening and liberation of the soul. It is deeply rooted in Hindu and Buddhist philosophies. This ancient practice, which is still performed in various regions, is deeply concentrated on worshipping Devis or Shakti (Goddesses) more than Devs (Gods). Devis or Shakti (energy) are often seen as the dynamic creator of the universe.

Lord Shiva, also known as the first yogi, is a representation of consciousness and is one of the principal deities of Hinduism, forming a trinity with Brahma and Vishnu as the creators of the universe. Goddess Parvati is the consort of Lord Shiva. She is the powerful manifestation of Shakti, or the supreme feminine energy, without whom life would be motionless. Even though Shiva is one of the trinity, “Shiva without Shakti is Shava,” which means that consciousness (Shiva) without energy (Shakti) is a corpse (Shava). Shiva is consciousness and Parvati (Shakti) is the dynamic energy; she is not subordinate to him but equally essential without whom life would be inert. So even though Shiva is the consciousness, it cannot move, create or destroy without Shakti. Many scholars such as McDaniel, Brooks and Rita Gross, have argued that tantra celebrates the feminine body and desires. That is why tantra sees Goddesses as the very fabric of consciousness and reality, which complicates patriarchal structures.

Transforming Taboo into a Pathway of Liberation

Tantra solely focuses on the ten Goddesses or the ‘Ten Mahavidyas’ as the creators of the universe; these ten Mahavidyas represent different aspects of life and soul while embodying within themselves the pure as well as the impure. Although human beings (or their soul) have their own positive (pure) as well as negative (impure) aspects, as per tantric philosophy, each and every human soul deserves and seeks liberation. This is the sole reason why tantra or the ten Mahavidyas, accept all, pure or impure. For instance, Kali is one of the ten Mahavidyas in tantra, with her wild hair, fierce appearance, garland made up of human skull and her dark complexion sharply contrasts with the image of an “ideal woman”. Kali does not only contrast in appearance with an ideal woman, but she is wild, fierce, assertive, aggressive and destructive. She is the feminist icon who accepts all the taboos that pervade society,

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challenging conventional femininity. While worshipping Kali in tantra, offering of alcohol and sexual union are necessary, which are considered 'taboo' in society. In the mainstream traditional Hindu ritualism, offering alcohol, sexual union or any other intoxicants is forbidden, as they are considered impure. But in tantra, alcohol is considered and associated with life and blood due to its vermilion colour; and as a substance which leads to loss of control, it is considered that when a devotee offers alcohol, he is surrendering his consciousness, his ego, his anger and his greed to the divine feminine energy or the cosmic energy (shakti). As per tantra. Nothing within the creation can be 'outside the creation'; everything is divine in the hands of the shakti, hence it challenges the traditional norms of being pure or impure. Offering alcohol to Kali stands as an act where she challenges conventional patriarchal societal structures, women's sacredness and purity.

In tantric practices, sexuality is not seen as a taboo but another form of supreme divine energy that is a pathway of liberation. It reclaims sexuality as neither shameful nor sinful, but sacred. Here, we get the context of challenging the patriarchal conventional norms of suppressing female desires and transcending the feminine soul into transformation and liberation, making the female body the centre of divinity and worship. In traditional Hindu rituals, the role of women is secondary but here both partners are essential but the female is given primary importance as she embodies shakti. Kali worship conforms female rights to sexual autonomy and desire, that women are not only obedient, nurturing or benevolent but wild, sexual and commanding.

Ten Mahavidyas – Ten Different Aspects of Life

Tantra sadhana mirrors the radical departure from the conventional notion of prioritising male Gods and has given primary concentration on Goddesses as the source of each and every object that exists in this abode of the universe. A rich and dynamic material for feminist interpretation can be found through the exploration of the Ten Mahavidyas in tantra sadhana. These ten mahavidyas are the ten dynamic feminine forces who do not fit into the image of an "ideal" woman; they are not docile or submissive. For instance, Goddess Kali is one of the ten Mahavidyas who refused to fit into the role of an ideal woman. Goddess Kali emerges from Durga or Parvati's wrath. She has wild hair, dark skin, an aggressive look, and a destructive and fearsome nature, who destroys the evil forces. Her ferocious nature grows so intense that to pacify her Lord Shiva had to lie beneath her feet. Kali's appearance does not align with the patriarchal notion of an "ideal woman"; she is dark-skinned, wild-haired, ferocious, destructive, assertive and loud. This mirrors a woman who is too outspoken, expressive, aggressive, assertive and angry, but is worshipped in tantric vidya as the essential source for liberation and emancipation, as the centre of divinity and worship who has the autonomy to take control of her body, mind and desires.

An exploration of the roles of these ten mahavidyas and the different aspects they represent in life highlights the contribution of Shakti in spiritual awakening and liberation, which also explains why only Goddesses are being worshipped and given primary concentration in tantric practices.

1. Kali– The Destructive Liberator

Kali is the fierce, destructive and the most paradoxical Goddess. In a patriarchal society, women are celebrated and respected if they are soft, obedient, gentle, fair-skinned, nurturing and submissive but on the contrary, Kali has wild hair, dark skin, fierce appearance, aggressive, assertive and wears garlands of skulls, challenging the patriarchal norms of an ideal woman. Traditionally, women were forced to suppress their anger, sexuality and desires which were considered immodest, but Kali redefines feminine anger, sovereignty and sexuality as sacred and not as shameful. She dissolves ego, greed, lust and all other obstructive forces which hinder the path of liberation and transcendence. Often depicted as naked, she represents the raw physicality of women reclaiming that women's sexuality and desire are not confined by the cage of society.

2. Chinnamasta–The Self-Decapitated Goddess

She is the symbol of self-sacrifice and is the Goddess of contradiction. She severs her own head, which represents the transcendence of the ego, which creates hindrance in the path of spiritual enlightenment. Chinnamasta symbolises the cycle of life and death, where she is both the creator and the destroyer. This radical act of severing her own head is not viewed as passive victimhood but is a symbolic representation of feminine autonomy to self-direct her life forces and energies to attain liberation. Even after severing her own head, she still has full control of body, mind and destiny.

3. Tara–Beyond Stereotypes

Tara is both the nurturing mother who rescues her devotees as well as the powerful warrior who can destroy the evil forces; she embodies both of these affectionate and aggressive natures. As the Goddess of 'Vani', she represents knowledge, truth, sound and speech challenging the expected conventional roles of women which obliged them to lower their voices and were restricted from seeking knowledge and truth. She is the harsh conveyor of the ultimate truth, representing the power of speech. Her form as "Ugra Tara" represents her fierce nature to protect her children, while her gentler forms represent her nurturing nature. This duality reinterprets motherhood in a way that it is not only confined to the role of a caregiver; instead, it can be both affectionate and destructive simultaneously. Tara is the unapologetic mother.

4. Bhairavi–The Fierce and Transformative Goddess

"Bhairavi", her name comes from the words "bhi" (fear) and "ravi" (burn) which suggests that she is the Goddess who burns away fear through her presence. As the Goddess of transformation, she embodies within herself death, decay and other bodily cycles such as ageing or menstruation not as taboo but as necessary sacred elements for liberation. She affirms that female rage is a divine necessity

for spiritual enlightenment and it is not limited to gentle devotion. She is the fierce and aggressive mother who is full of awakened rage to challenge the patriarchal notion that women should be soft, submissive and gentle. Her fearsome and destructive nature is significant from a feminist perspective. She has the capability to challenge all obstacles which restrain women and to create space for equality.

5. Bagalamukhi–Mastery over Speech

She is the embodiment of stambhana shakti, silence or stun. She paralyses the negative forces. Her power of “stambhana” or “paralysis” symbolises the paralysis of evil or destructive forces. She brings stillness to the tongue and teaches mastery over speech, while symbolising ‘silence’ as the most powerful speech. In patriarchy, women’s voices are oppressed or silenced but in tantra, this silenced voice is the supreme power. Bagalamukhi silences the internal conflicts such as self-doubt, that restrain women.

6. Dhumavati–The Widow Goddess

She is the wise crone, the widow Goddess who is associated with wisdom. Her appearance as an old widow challenges the traditional ideal image of women as being young and beautiful, which made them ideal for marriage. In a male chauvinistic society, women were valued for their youth, beauty and sexuality but Dhumavati appears as an old lady yet is worshipped for liberation representing that women are sacred even outside the patriarchal desirability. In a society where widows were seen as inauspicious, worthless without their husbands and were marginalised, Dhumavati emerges as a powerful Goddess whose identity is outside the realm of marriage and not tied to male companionship. She symbolises the wisdom that comes from experiences, losses, disillusionments and above all that comes through ageing as life goes by.

7. Matangi–Voice of the Marginalised

She is the voice of the marginalised and silenced voices. Her dark complexion symbolises her rejection of the ideal feminine beauty. She is the Goddess of speech and knowledge. In conventional society gaining knowledge was confined to the elite classes or other patriarchal spaces. But Matangi gives voice and knowledge to the marginalised, from a feminist lens, she gives voice to the outcastes or the Dalit or lower-class women whose education or attempt to seek knowledge was restricted.

8. Kamala–Wealth as Women’s Power

She symbolises prosperity in life- the symbol of wealth, abundance, fertility of Earth, spiritual and material prosperity. She is the tantric Lakshmi. Kamala empowers for material as well as spiritual prosperity. The lotus symbolises the seven chakras which are associated with spiritual awakening. In a traditional society, money was only controlled by men, but Kamala as the Goddess of wealth and abundance, represents that wealth is feminine power. She does not represent only abundance of money or material prosperity but reproduction and fertility which are all associated with femininity.

9. Tripura Sundari–Blissful Unity of Existence (Body, Mind and Spirit)

She is associated with both erotism and the empowered feminine. She reclaims the blissful union of the universe through body, mind and spirit, where female desire is sacred and not stigmatised. Tripura Sundari asserts that women's beauty, that is cosmic and her desires, both are essential for transformative expression as a whole, which is often stigmatised from a patriarchal perspective.

10. Bhuvaneshwari–The Ruler and the Universal Mother

“Bhuvana” means world, and “ishwari” means ruler; she is the ruler of the world and the universal mother. The mother of all creation who shapes the very fabric of this universe. In a male-dominated society, where authority, rulership and sovereignty are only associated with men, in tantra, it is associated with Goddess Bhuvaneshwari as the centre of the universe as well as the cosmic womb of the entire existence. She represents balance, where she is both a ruler and a nurturing mother, which challenges the patriarchal view that women can either be submissive or aggressive. Bhuvaneshwari affirms that women embody both the roles; they take authority while being affectionate.

They are the Ten Mahavidyas of tantra sadhana. From Kali, who is the destroyer of the evils to Bhuvaneshwari who is the universal mother and the ruler, all of them symbolise each and every aspect of life symbolizing how feminine agency is the crux in tantra for spiritual emancipation. David Kinsley's *Tantric Visions of the Divine Feminine: The Ten Mahavidyas* is an influential work in the study of Shakti Tantra. Kinsley shows how each Goddess represents different aspects of a woman's life: mother, lover, warrior, widow, destroyer and preserver. He also points out the paradox that these goddesses are worshipped, but real women who live in real society surrounding us are not empowered in the same way, and explains how these ten Goddesses empower women to break the shell of patriarchal norms and elevate their energies and desires for the enlightenment of the soul. Many feminist scholars bring out this issue to critique the disconnection between spiritual empowerment and social disempowerment. He also portrays how these Goddesses are associated with the “taboo” aspects of womanhood and how they embody these taboos such as menstruation, sexual union and others which are often considered impure. The ten Mahavidyas in tantra embody within themselves both the pure and impure, as the very existence of this universe has both of these elements.

Tantra in Shakti-Piths

In most orthodox traditions, male deities are given primary focus, but in Shakti-Piths, which originated when Sati's body parts fell on Earth, the female deities are given primary focus as the centre of the cosmic universe. They are not dependent on male deities but are independent of their own. Women are the carriers of these supreme energies in Shakti-Piths. Tantra often takes place in these sites due to the prevalence of the divine feminine as well as to awaken Shakti (energy) within oneself. Unlike the orthodox traditions, women are not passive here rather they take an active role. There are 51 Shakti-

Piths each of these is associated with Sati's different body parts, symbolising that even if a woman's body is scattered throughout several countries, it is not at all weak rather it is powerful everywhere. For instance, in Guwahati (Assam, India), the temple of Maa Kamakhya is one of the most sacred Shakti-Piths where tantric practices take place. Here, the 'Yoni' (the female genitals and the womb) of Sati had fallen, which is also associated with menstruation. In tantra, the female body is celebrated and considered sacred, and the offering of blood is an essential part of tantric traditions. This Shakti-Pith is one of the most visited sites for tantric practices. Female body, menstruation and female sexuality are considered taboo in society but by worshipping 'Yoni', tantra claims the female body as sacred, divine and the centre of the universe. David Kinsley in his work *Hindu Goddesses: Tantric Visions of the Divine Feminine in the Hindu Religious Tradition*, argues that as per societal standards, women in tantra are 'anti-models', who by embodying both the pure and impure (taboo), challenge the dualistic and the stereotypical ideas of society where a woman can either be nurturing or terrifying, destructive or creative. By embodying both the elements, these Mahavidyas awaken the human mind and soul to expand their consciousness.

Social Taboos and Empowerment

Tantra ritualises what society rejects, such as menstruation, sexuality, cremation ground and alcohol. These are associated with the notion of controlling women. It breaks the social hierarchy. McDaniel in his book *Offering Flowers, Feeding Skulls: Popular Goddess Worship in West Bengal*, emphasises that Goddess worship in tantra legitimises women's desires as sacred and how the legitimisation of the female body (ageing, menstruation) challenges the societal norms that view the female body as impure. He also argues how tantra portrays the diverse roles of women throughout their lives and how these roles resist the patriarchal notion of keeping women in secondary roles (only nurturing and affectionate).

Tantra reclaims the sacred feminine as a whole, both nurturing and aggressive, creative and destructive. In tantra, women take on the roles of leadership; they assert, rule and show the path to their disciplines. Rita Gross in her book *Buddhism After Patriarchy: A Feminist History, Analysis and Reconstruction of Buddhism*. Says that in Hindu tantra, women serve as 'guru-mata', which challenges the patriarchal structure of confining women's authority. She also argues how women are seen to be occupying primary and diverse roles in tantra as compared to any other religious or spiritual activity in the world.

Conclusion

Feminism in tantra embraces women as a whole- they are both creators and destroyers, calm and wild, obedient and radical, nurturers and warriors, mothers and rulers. They are not marginalised but are the

crux and centre of the social and universal order. The ten Mahavidyas represent the varied roles of women and how they challenge the binaries of pure and impure, subjugation and emancipation. It claims that the female body is associated with liberation not limitation. Tantra has a global impact on empowering women throughout the world, which rectifies the male authority in religion and prescribes the importance of women's roles. It offers diverse views rather than the rigid confinement of gender roles in religious activities.

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