



Rethinking Feminism from the Lens of Indian Philosophy – A Case Study of the Vijñāna Bhairava Tantra

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ABSTRACT

The core framework of feminism proposes that subjectivity, which is the power to be a subject, an observer and a decision-maker has been historically taken away from women and feminism is an idea to restore that agency.

However, dominant strands of feminist scholarship has been criticized by scholars like Chandra Talpade Mohanty and Uma Chakravarti as it places feminism for non-Western regions like India, influenced both by the socio-religious networks of caste as well as colonial oppression, into the monotonous and arbitrary category of the “third world ” and clubs all women under one label.

The framework of Tantra on the other hand, places subjectivity as an inherent quality and something which is not to be attained but recognized. Texts like Vijñāna Bhairav Tantra are the perfect example of this. The focus of this paper is to gain a deeper understanding of Tantra as opposed to popular representations which pose it only as a ritual aspect of spirituality and sexuality and analyze if Tantra can be seen as feminist- or rather to propose a rethinking of feminism from the lens of Indian Philosophy.

Vijñāna Bhairav Tantra is the focus of this paper because this text offers epistemological agency to Parvati who asks the questions from Shiva and the conversation describes 112 techniques of meditation to attain transcendental bliss. Additionally, the state of Bhairava and its energy Bhairavi are described as being fire and the power of burning, both of which are not different. The importance of a goddess asking questions about universal phenomena cannot be ignored as didactic texts like Ramayana have for a very long time defined the norms for conduct of people.

But it is important to keep in mind that while the questioning goddess can signal philosophical openness, it certainly does not translate into social or historical power for women. Therefore, this paper also engages in the study of both the situation of women as a heterogeneous category in Early Medieval India and Trika Shaivism- the root of this text, to examine the practicality of this symbolic subjectivity.

INTRODUCTION

Feminism in its centrality has been concerned with the question of subjectivity in its history as both a political movement and an intellectual tradition. It argues that women have been denied the power of being a subject, which can be understood as the capacity to think, observe, decide, and act autonomously in almost all spheres whether be political, intellectual, economic or social. This exclusion at all fronts is understood to be the founding as well as maintaining factor behind the mechanism of patriarchy and feminism is the response to this exclusion which demands the recognition of women's agency.

Early articulations of this response are popularly said to have developed under Western philosophical and political traditions. Texts like *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* by Mary Wollstonecraft have served as a foundation which led to the building of movements in Europe and North America for women's liberation in terms of rights, equality, and access to public and intellectual life. Therefore, Western feminism has often been seen as the point of origin of women's fight for liberation. However, this framework has been increasingly brought to question and South Asian scholars have contributed significantly to this discourse.

HISTORIOGRAPHY ON WOMEN AND FEMINISM

Initially, Nationalist historiography was primarily concerned by countering the colonial narrative of oppressed Indian women and the past was seen as a golden age for women. R.C. Dutt claimed that "*No ancient nation held their women in higher honor than the Hindus*," while A.S. Altekar argued that "*Indian society was much more receptive to the cause of women's liberation*", but this approach could not separate religious or philosophical symbolism from lived social and political conditions completely.¹ Marxist historiography moved one step ahead and brought to attention the impact of material conditions, class, and social structures, but kept gender and caste secondary to class, often viewing women as dependent on household economies.

Feminist historiography emerged in the late 1970s, bringing gender to the forefront of historical analysis and broadening the source base beyond prescriptive texts to include religious literature, inscriptions, narratives, and cultural practices. This marked a significant change. Scholars such as Uma Chakravarti, Kumkum Sangari, Sudesh Vaid, and Nivedita Menon have challenged the unilateral understanding of feminism and argued that Indian feminism cannot be understood solely through the lens of liberal individualism, because gender relations in India are deeply influenced by religious traditions, caste and kinship structures as well as colonialism.² For instance, Chakravarti, through her work on Brahmanical patriarchy, demonstrates how

¹ Monica Bisht, *Unveiling Womanhood in Early Medieval North India, circa 650–1200 CE* (PhD diss., Panjab University, 2022), Department of Ancient Indian History, Culture and Archaeology, 18, accessed via Shodhganga, <http://hdl.handle.net/10603/464224>

² Bisht, *Unveiling Womanhood in Early Medieval North India*, 5



women's autonomy has not only been structured by gendered norms but also through caste-based control over reproduction, sexuality, and labor³. Similarly, Chandra Talpade Mohanty draws attention to the homogenization of women in non-Western societies into a singular and passive figure of the "Third World Woman" by western feminist scholarship. She shows that this understanding helps colonial hierarchies position themselves at the root of production of feminist knowledge.⁴

Sangari and Vaid emphasize the vitality of reading Indian women's agency within specific historical and cultural contexts and not just as universal definitions and history of feminism which is under a geography much different than our own.⁵ This nuanced understanding of feminism enables us to see it beyond as a movement for rights and agency and question the very concept of subjectivity. Philosophical traditions like Tantra can be examined under this lens as they do not see subjectivity to be fought for but something to be realized. For testing this framework, a case study of *Vijñānabhairav Tantra* will be undertaken along with analyzing the condition of women in Early Medieval India especially Kashmir. Before doing this, it is important to understand Trika Śaivism's core principles and how it nurtures a discourse like the one in *Vijñānabhairav Tantra*.

UNDERSTANDING TRIKA ŚAIVISM AND ITS OUTLOOK OF ŚAKTI

Kashmir Śaivism also known as Trika Śaivism emerged between the eighth and eleventh centuries CE in Kashmir and represents the core values of non-duality with an emphasis on consciousness (*samvid*) as the ultimate reality and inculcates metaphysics, ritual, and yogic practice. Its major understanding can be found in the formulative works of thinkers such as Vasugupta, Somananda, Utpaladeva, Abhinavagupta, and Kṣemarāja.⁶

Vasugupta's acceptance of the *Śiva Sūtras* is said to be the foundational point of Trika as it led to base for the doctrine of recognition (*pratyabhijñā*).⁷ Trika Śaivism in its essence, sees the world as a manifestation of divine consciousness through the dynamic and creative principle of Śiva and Śakti. This is what sets it apart from other Indian philosophical systems that either foster renunciation or strict ascetic discipline. One of the

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⁴ Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses," *boundary 2* 12, no. 3 (Spring–Autumn 1984): 334–336, <http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0190-3659%28198421%2F23%2912%3A3%3C333%3AUWEFSA%3E2.0.CO%3B2-Y>

⁵ Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid, eds., *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History* (Delhi: Kali for Women, 1989)

⁶ M. L. Pandit, *Trika Śaivism of Kashmir* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 2003), 1–25.

⁷ Pandit, *Trika Śaivism of Kashmir*, 1–15.

most significant yogic works in the tradition, the Vijñānabhairava Tantra, is based on this viewpoint both intellectually and spiritually.⁸

The term *Trika* refers to a triadic structure, and it does not operate at just one level. It represents Śiva, Śakti, and the individual (*nara*); *prakāśa* (light of consciousness), *vimarśa* (self-awareness), and *ānanda* (bliss); and the three principal goddesses, *Parā*, *Parāparā*, and *Aparā*.⁹ In this school of thought, Śiva is inert without Śakti and Śakti is the force that makes manifestation, perception, agency, and liberation possible. According to M. L. Pandit, Trika philosophy views Śakti as inseparable from consciousness rather than being secondary.

The world is viewed as *māyā* or illusion in Advaita Vedānta and the attribute less Brahman must be achieved through knowledge (*jñāna*) while removing the obstacles of embodiment, desire, and sensory experience. Similarly, Pātañjala Yoga emphasizes the isolation (*kaivalya*) of *puruṣa* from *prakṛti* through mental restraint (*citta-vṛtti-nirodha*).¹⁰ Trika Śaivism articulates a philosophy of integration rather than isolation by recognizing (*pratyabhijñā*) the world as one's own expanded consciousness.¹¹ It advocates for the assimilation of the world into awareness rather than its rejection as a self-expression of Śakti.

As Beinorius analyzes *vāc* (word) in Kashmir Śaivism which demonstrates the role of sound, breath, and vibration in becoming modes of knowledge, we understand how knowing is seen as something organic and attainable and not preordained.¹² The emphasis on *ajapā japa* (spontaneous mantra repetition), *kuṇḍalinī* ascent, and inner resonance positions Śakti as an autonomous force guiding realization. Moreover, Mudrās, āsanas, and even erotic experiences are seen as valid yogic ways if they do not collapse into indulgence and can be traced back to their source in consciousness.¹³ Therefore, the feminine body is not viewed as a site of moral danger but a medium of revelation.

WHAT MADE TRIKA ŚAIVISM DIFFERENT?

⁸ Jaideva Singh, *Śiva Sūtras: The Yoga of Supreme Identity* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1979), Introduction.

⁹ Pandit, Trika Śaivism of Kashmir, 34-47

¹⁰ Gerald James Larson, *Classical Sāṃkhya: An Interpretation of Its History and Meaning* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1998), 43–47.

¹¹ Pandit, Trika Śaivism of Kashmir, 1–25.

¹² Audrius Beinorius, “The Word (*Vāc*) in the Cosmology and Soteriology of Kashmir Śaivism,” *Acta Orientalia Vilnensia* 2 (2001), 115–140

¹³ Alain Daniélou, *Yoga of Kashmir Śaivism* (Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions, 1992), 89–94.



The emergence of Trika Śaivism developed in a dynamic as well as heterodox background where intellectual openness was possible. The region had an anti-ritualistic, anti-ceremonial, and anti-caste approach for spirituality which is reminiscent of the Tamil Siddha movement.¹⁴

Rulers like Lalitāditya and Jayāpīḍa fostered a courtly and intellectual culture that allowed thinkers like Abhinavagupta to move fluidly between the domains of ritual, poetics, dramaturgy, and metaphysics, treating spiritual realization and aesthetic experience (*rasa*) as structurally analogous. In the practical sense, Kashmiri Śaivism maintained the middle path, placing a strong emphasis on inclusion and accessibility; it did not impose any limitations based on sex, caste, or creed. Aspiring practitioners were urged to integrate the strict meditative techniques of the Trika and Kaula systems with ritualistic Śiva worship in temples and homes.¹⁵

In particular, the Kaula praxis approved the use of makāras, such as fish, meat, wine, and ritual cakes, in regulated, meditative settings. These were tools to help aspirants reach *jagadānanda*, the boundless happiness of oneness with Parama Śiva, by teaching the mind to sustain meditation and inner awareness amid worldly enjoyment, rather than indulgences for their own sake.¹⁶ The universe is viewed as a tangible reality that emanates from Parama Śiva in the form of *Spanda*. It cannot be said that Trika Śaivism advocated social gender equality in a modern sense, but this cultural and intellectual environment made it possible for women to participate.

THE QUEST TO BHAIRAVA: THE VIJÑĀNA BHAIRAVA TANTRA

The *Vijñāna Bhairava Tantra* signifies the journey of realizing awakened consciousness or Bhairava as pure *vijñāna*. Abhinavagupta has described it as the *Śiva-vijñāna-upaniṣad* and claims to boil down the essence of *Rudrayāmala Tantra*.¹⁷ It is hard to trace its date, and we find its first mention in Vamananātha's work, suggesting its popular knowledge by the 8th century A.D. and possible compilation earlier. Some significant commentaries were made by Kṣemarāja in the tenth century, Bhaṭṭa Ānanda in the seventeenth century, and Śivopādhyāya in the eighteenth century.¹⁸ Kṣemarāja and Abhinavagupta have explained it to embody all the three divine aspects being manifestation, maintenance, and withdrawal of the universe.

¹⁴ Younus Rashid, "Kashmiri Shaivism: A Historical Overview," *Journal of Kashmir Studies* 7, no. 8 (2019), 133–135

¹⁵ Gavin Flood, *The Tantric Body* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2006), 90–93.

¹⁶ Chandra Jagadish Chatterji, *Kashmir Shaivism* (Varanasi: Chowkhamba Sanskrit Series, 1914), 21–23

¹⁷ Jaideva Singh, *Vijñānabhairava Tantra or Divine Consciousness: A Treasury of 112 Types of Yoga* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1971), introduction

¹⁸ Singh, *Vijñānabhairava Tantra*, introduction



In essence, Bhairava is *Parama Śiva*, where all three divine aspects of manifestation, maintenance, and withdrawal are present. In this state, consciousness (*prakāśa*) and self-awareness (*vimarśa*), Śiva and Śakti, transcendence and immanence are but one. Metaphysically, Bhairava's is *mahabodha* (absolute awareness), which manifests as knowledge, will and action and is distinguished by *svātantrya* (absolute freedom). The universe is simply a mirror of this awareness. Bhairava transcends time, space, direction, and conceptual thought and can be only achieved through non-conceptual consciousness or *nirvikalpa vijñāna*. Spiritual seekers' aim is to maintain this bliss of non-duality which negates the difference of gender. The structure of this text is as the Devi's questions (verses 1–7), Bhairava's responses (up to verse 21), her request for means to realization (verses 22–23), and Bhairava's exposition of 112 *dhāraṇās* (verses 24–138), concluding in the Devi's satisfaction and union with Bhairava.

DEFINITIONS AND PARADIGMS OF SHAKTI

We can understand three paradigms of Śakti here, the first is Parvati, the divine consort of Śiva who asks the questions and wants to seek truth; second, Śakti, which is the dynamic force that can be described as the power of burning if Śiva is the fire. Bhairava is attained through Śakti and thirdly, Bhairavi, which is the very transcendental bliss achieved in the renunciation of thought constructs.

Parvati, also known as Paradevi and Bhairavi, is the Śakti (power or energy) of Bhairava. Śaivi mukha, or "means of approach to Śiva," is another name for Paradevi. The state of bliss of non-duality which Bhairava entails as being free from time and space is itself Bhairavi.¹⁹

VERSES 18-19 clearly state this:

शक्तिशक्तिमतोर्यद्वत् अभेदः सर्वदा स्थितः ॥

अतस्तद्धर्मधामत्वात् पराशक्तिः परात्मनः ॥ १८ ॥

न वह्न वीहिका शक्तिः व्यतिरिक्ता विभाव्यते ।

केवलं ज्ञानसत्तायां प्रारम्भोऽयं प्रवेशने ॥ १९ ॥²⁰

Devi asks about Bhairava's *parāvasthā* i.e highest state or essential nature in verses 2 to 6 of *Vijñānabhairava*, mentioning some well-known claims about him. In lines 14 and 15, Bhairava categorically dismisses the

¹⁹ Singh, *Vijñānabhairava Tantra*, introduction

²⁰ Singh, *Vijñānabhairava Tantra*, 16



different widely held beliefs regarding his greatest state and swiftly but effectively explains what his fundamental nature encompasses. Bhairava replies through 112 dhāraṇās—practices or yogic techniques for communion with the Divine. Unlike Patañjali’s limited sense of dhāraṇā as mental fixation, here it broadly signifies yoga or concentration, encompassing diverse means to transform human consciousness into divine consciousness.

दिक्कालफलनोन्मुक्ता देशोदेशाविशेषिणी ।

व्यपदेष्टुमशक्यासावकच्या परमार्थतः ॥ १४ ॥

अन्तः स्वानुभवानन्दा विकल्पोन्मुक्तगोचरा ।

यावस्था भरिताकारा भैरवी भैरवात्मनः ॥ १५ ॥

तद्वपुस्तत्त्वतो ज्ञेयं विमलं विश्वपूरणम् ।

एवंविधे परे तत्त्वे कः पूज्यः कश्च तृप्यति ॥ १६ ॥

एवंविधा भरवस्य यावस्था परिगीयते ।

सा परा, पररूपेण परादेवी प्रकोतिता ॥ १७ ॥²¹

These verses highlight how Bhairava’s parāvastha or the highest state can be accessed by realising his *niskala* aspect which is free from time, direction or designation. It can be realized in a state free of thought constructs and ego, and this state is Bhairavi herself and is her highest form or *pararūpena*.

Verse 1

श्रीदेव्युवाच

²¹ Singh, *Vijñānabhairava Tantra*, 13-17

श्रुतं देव मया सर्व रुद्रयामलसम्भवम् ।

त्रिकभेदमशेषेण सारात्सारविभागशः ॥१॥

अद्यापि न निवृत्तलो मे संशयः परमेश्वर ।²²

Through these verses we understand that *Vijñāna Bhairava Tantra* presents Bhairava and Bhairavī (Śakti) as non-different, but these dialogues are possible because of *anugraha* (grace), one of Bhairava's five cosmic functions (*sr̥ṣṭi*, *sthiti*, *saṃhāra*, *tirodhāna*, *anugraha*). Anugraha is actualized through Śakti to make transcendent truths accessible to human understanding. These truths exist in the cosmos at the *parā-vāk* level, and through Bhairavī's questioning at the *paśyantī* level, they are revealed in human language or *vaikharī*.

VERSES 2-4.

किं रूपं तत्त्वतो देव शब्दराशिकलामयम् ॥ २ ॥

किं वा नवात्मभेदेन भैरवे भरवाकृती ।

त्रिशिरोभेदभिन्नं वा किं वा शक्तित्रयात्मकम् ॥ ३ ॥

नादबिन्दुमयं वापि किं चन्द्रार्धनिरोधिकाः ।

चक्रारूढमनस्कं वा किं वा शक्तिस्वरूपकम् ॥ ४ ॥²³

These verses highlight the 8 questions Devi asks, firstly whether Vijñāna or Bodha Bhairava is identical with Śabda Brahman which simply means if ultimate reality is fundamentally consciousness expressed as sound. Secondly, if the essential nature of supreme consists of the ninefold tattvic structure (navātma) which are Śiva, Śakti, Sadāśiva, Ísvara, Suddha Vidya, Mahāmāyā, Mayā, Puruṣa, Prakṛti. Thirdly, she asks whether Bhairava

²² Singh, *Vijñānabhairava Tantra*, 1

²³ Singh, *Vijñānabhairava Tantra*, 5-9

is the integral unity of Śiva, Śakti, and Nara (jīva), symbolized by the mantra sauh, known as the parabīja, hṛdayabīja, or prasāda mantra.

Fourthly, she questions whether Bhairava operates through the three Śaktis—parā (transcendent), parāparā (mediating), and aparā (immanent). Fifthly, she asks if the essence of Bhairava lies in nāda—bindu, Bindu representing ever present undivided light and nāda representing the dynamic awareness or *vimarśa śakti* present in all meaning and sound. Sixth, she asks whether the nature of Bhairava is revealed through progressively more subtle stages of consciousness—*ardhacandra*, *nirodhikā*, *nādānta*, *Śakti*, *vyāpinī*, *samanā*, and finally *unmanā*—signifying the progressive disintegration of objectivity, sound, and mentation, leading to *niṣkala paramaṇiva*, the non-dual unity of Śiva and Śakti.

Seventhly, the Devi inquires as to whether Bhairava exists as *anāhata nāda*, the unstruck, spontaneous vibration of prāṇa-kunḍalinī (*haṁsa*) resonating inside the *suṣumṇā*, outside of human action or control. In the eighth and last question, she poses the question of whether the Supreme is absolute energy that transcends all distinction and is pure, unchanging Śakti.

VERSES 5-6

परापरायाः सकलम् अपरायाश्च वा पुनः ।

पराया यदि तद्वत्स्यात् परत्वं तद्विरुध्यते ॥ ५ ॥

नहि वर्ण-विभेदेन बेहमेदेन वा भवेत् ।

परत्वं, निष्कलत्वेन, सकलत्वे न तदभवेत् ॥ ६ ॥

प्रसावं कुरु मे नाथ निःशेषं छिन्धि संशयम् ।²⁴

The Devī further asks whether parāparā śakti (transcendent-cum-immanent energy) and aparā śakti (immanent energy) are composed of parts (sakala) and whether parā śakti (transcendent energy) can also be sakala. She argues that if parā śakti were composite, it would be contradictory to its very transcendence (Paratva) as it cannot coexist with division into letters, forms, colors, or bodies.

HOW TO ACHIEVE THE STATE OF BHAIRAVA

²⁴ Singh, *Vijñānabhairava Tantra*, 10-11

In these verses, Devi asks about the methods:

श्रीदेव्युवाच देवदेव विशूलाङ्क, कपालकृतभूषण ।

दिग्वेशकालशून्या च व्यपदेशविजिता ॥ २२ ॥

यावस्था भरिताकारा भैरवस्योपलभ्यते ।

कैरुपायैर्मुखं तस्य परादेवी कथं भवेत् ॥ २३ ॥

यथा सम्यगहं वेद्मि तथा मे ब्रूहि भैरव ।²⁵

Vijñāna Bhairava grounds its 112 *dhāraṇās* in embodied, experiential, and energetic practices, not abstract metaphysics. It is made very clear that Śakti is not auxiliary to liberation but constitutive of it. The techniques are classified into four categories: *anupāya* (minimal guidance), *anava*, *śākta* and *śambhava* (structured yogic methods), with aspirants progressing gradually from one to the next. Methods include postures, *mudrās*, *prāṇa* and *kundalinī* awakening, mantra, devotion, meditation, contemplation, and even subtle, observational practices tailored to the aspirant's disposition. The goal is identification with Bhairava—undifferentiated universal consciousness—achieved through:

1. Deep interiorization in the heart of the Supreme.
2. Transition from conceptual *vikalpa* to thought-free *nirvikalpa* awareness.
3. Dissolution of the limited ego, revealing the divine universal 'I' or *pūrṇāhanta*.
4. Merging the individual mind (*citta*) into universal consciousness (*cit*).²⁶

This tells us that the philosophy of Trika Śaivism is also applicable here, and there is no restriction on who can reach this state. The destination is the inner union of Śiva and Śakti—the ultimate realization is not just masculine Bhairava.

The doctrine of *madhyavikāsa* in Vijñāna Bhairava Tantra articulates liberation as arising in the *middle state* (*madhyadaśā*), the subtle interval between *prāṇa* and *apāna* or between two successive thoughts. Sūtra 17 of

²⁵ Singh, *Vijñānabhairava Tantra*, 18-19

²⁶ Singh, *Vijñānabhairava Tantra*, introduction

Pratyabhijñāhrdayam says: "मध्यविकासाच्चिदानन्दलाभः" which means "By the development of the *madhya* (middle or centre) is there acquisition of the bliss of *Cit*."²⁷

Dharaṇā 3 describes the middle state beautifully:

VERSE 26

न वजेन्न विशेष्यक्ति-मद्रूपा विकासिते ।

निविकल्पतया मध्ये तया भैरवरूपता ॥ २६ ॥²⁸

With the dissolution of all dualistic thought constructs, enters the middle state in which *prāṇa-śakti* does not move outward or inward. The cycle of breath stops through *Bhairavī*, which appears as a pause of both *prāṇa* and *apāna*, and the condition of *Bhairava*, pure non-dual awareness, emerges on its own.

In *Vijñāna Bhairava Tantra* and its tradition of commentaries, *śūnya* denotes a state free from concepts, objects, conceptual supports, *tattvas*, and *kleśas*, but it cannot be understood as not being. It is described as a void since it is beyond linguistic, tangible and conceptual comprehensions and said to be *Parama Śiva* himself. This *aśūnya śūnya* or full void is the very root of creation and destruction as we know it. Both the *madhya* and *śūnya* function as in-between spaces and do not hold rigid connotations.²⁹ This opens the possibility for movement, fluidity, and ascension, typically associated with *Śakti* or the feminine archetype. In this way, *Parvati* does not explicitly speak throughout, but her agency and significance remain unparalleled.

VERSES 20-21

शक्त्यवस्थाप्रविष्टस्य निविभागेन भावना ।

तदासौ शिवरूपी स्यात् शैवी मुखमिहोच्यते ॥ २० ॥

²⁷ Singh, *Vijñānabhairava Tantra*, introduction

²⁸ Singh, *Vijñānabhairava Tantra*, 22-23

²⁹ Singh, *Vijñānabhairava Tantra*, introduction



यथालोकेन दीपस्य किरणैर्भास्करस्य च ।

जायते दिग्विभागादि तद्वच्छक्त्या शिवः प्रिये ॥ २१ ॥³⁰

Śakti here is described as the light of the lamp is Śiva's own essential self. Mudrās and āsanās are where Śakti exposes reality rather than acting as a barrier. Breath, sensation, sexual joy, posture, and sound are all treated in the text as valid pathways to liberation unlike other traditions.

Vijñānabhairava anchors freedom in Śakti-driven embodiment, subverting the masculine path of transcendence, here are a few ways:

Yogic Method	Role of Śakti	Practice Mechanism /	Philosophical Implication
Prāṇāyāma (breath & dvādaśānta)	Śakti as embodied, dynamic consciousness	Awakening of kuṇḍalinī through regulation of breath which ascends the central channel	Dissolution of Individual identity into universal awareness through embodied practice
Japa → Ajapā	Śakti as self-resonating mantra	Conscious repetition transforms into unconscious mantra through breath	Consciousness moves beyond language into luminous awareness
Bhāvanā	Śakti as creative, affective force	Imaginative and emotional introspection rather than rational cognition	Even the subject-object distinction ("I am Śiva") dissolves into non-duality

³⁰ Singh, *Vijñānabhairava Tantra*, 17-18

Overall Framework	Tantric	Śakti as primary yogic agent	Embodied, emotional, and experiential modes of knowing	Subjectivity is inherent and revealed, not attained through intellectual abstraction
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VERSE 30

क्रमद्वादशकं सम्यग् द्वादशाक्षरभेदितम् ।

स्थूलसूक्ष्मपरस्थित्या मुक्त्वा मुक्त्वान्ततः शिवः ॥ ३० ॥³¹

The meaning of this verse is explained here, these are the various points of ascent of the kundalini energy as well as their level of consciousness as material, intermediate or subtle i.e Parā, Parāparā, and Aparā and the sound associated with them:

STAGE	ENERGY CENTRE (Sthāna)	LEVEL OF REALITY	ASSOCIATED VOWEL
1	Janmāgra (generative point)	Aparā (bheda)	A
2	Mūla (mūlādhāra)	Aparā	Ā
3	Kanda	Aparā	I
4	Nābhi (navel)	Aparā	Ī
5	Hṛdaya (heart)	Parāparā (bhedābheda)	U
6	Kaṇṭha (throat)	Parāparā	Ū
7	Tālu (palate)	Parāparā	E
8	Bhrūmadhya (between eyebrows)	Parāparā	Ai
9	Lalāṭa (forehead)	Parāparā	O
10	Brahmarandhra (crown)	Parā (abheda)	Au
11	Śakti (pure energy)	Parā	Aṃ
12	Vyāpinī (all-pervasive energy)	Parā	Aḥ

³¹

Singh, *Vijñānabhairava Tantra*, 26-28



Pranava (AUM) is honored in *Śaivāgama* as a living, ascending power of Śakti that renews awareness, preserves vital energies, and supports life and not just a sound-symbol. According to Śaiva Tantra, *samvid* (universal consciousness) is initially *prāṇa* and the state of Bhairava is achieved when this consciousness becomes pure. AUM is unfolded through the following process: gross sounds A–U–M, associated with navel, heart, and mouth, to bindu (condensed luminous power), *nāda/ardhacandra* (subtle sound where objectivity dissolves), *nirodhinī* (restraining Śakti safeguarding non-duality), *anāhata nāda* and *nāḍānta* (where ego-body identification falls away), through pure Śakti, *vyāpinī* (all-pervasive energy), and *samanā*, which enables cosmic functions and yields *ātmavyāpti* (isolation of consciousness), finally culminating in *unmanā*, the supreme Śakti beyond mind and time, where *Śiva-vyāpti* occurs and complete identification with Parama Śiva is realized through *svātantrya-śakti*. Thus, in a way, Śakti is not a means leading to Śiva; Śiva is realized only through becoming Śakti herself.

VERSE 39

प्रणवादिसमुच्चारात् प्लुतान्ते शून्यभावनात् ।

शून्यया परया शक्त्या शून्यतामेति संरवि ॥ ३६ ॥³²

In Dharaṇā 16, Śiva says to Parvati, that by perfect recitation of *pranava* or the sacred syllable Aum etc. and by contemplating over the void at the end of the protracted phase of it and by the most eminent energy of the void the yogi attains the void.

Dharanā 46

VERSE 69

शक्तिसङ्गमसंनुब्ध-रत्याशावतानिकम् ।

वत्सुखं बातत्त्वस्य तत्सुखं स्वाक्यमुच्यते ॥ ६६ ॥³³

³² Singh, *Vijñānabhairava Tantra*, 37-38

³³ Singh, *Vijñānabhairava Tantra*, 66-67

This verse shows how sexual union can be used as a symbolic illustration to explain how this pleasure is the bliss of one's own self or *Ātmananda*. It also warns about taking this literally as a dictum for carnal pleasure is ignorance. When properly interpreted, this *Śāktopāya dhāraṇā* teaches that, like mystical connection with the Divine Energy, liberation results from the collapse of subject-object duality.

VERSE 83

चलासने स्थितस्याथ शनैर्वा देहवालनात् ।

प्रशान्ते मानसे भावे देवि दिव्यधमाप्नुयात् ॥ ८३ ॥³⁴

Dharanā 60 shows us how even in mundane experiences like gentle rocking or swaying of the body while travelling, naturally relaxes the mind and turns attention inward, allowing one to experience a direct sense of divine peace and joy (divyaugha). Augha literally means a flood and stands for the flow of spiritual knowledge. It can come from human teachers (mānavaugha), from enlightened ones (siddhaugha), or directly from the gods (divyaugha), which is the highest form.

COULD THIS SPIRITUAL FLUIDITY BE TRANSLATED INTO REALITY?

It would be naive to claim equality or flexibility in the real-world polity, society, and economy solely based on one text. Even though Trika Śaivism has had a history of heterodoxy embracing the middle path and *Vijñāna Bhairava Tantra* challenges how liberation can be attained, we cannot say the society reflected this completely. This calls forth for an examination of the religious, political and societal discourse and understanding regional and class variations.

The assumption of universal subordination in the case of feminist works has been challenged by scholars like I. B. Horner³⁵ and Mandakranta Bose³⁶ as their work on women and religion highlighted women's agency in religion. Similarly, the lives of women in Early Medieval India have been brought to light by Rajpal, Devika Rangachari, Kirti K. Shah and Shatarupa Bhattacharya where an emphasis for realizing regional variation and political agency is underscored.³⁷ Devika Rangachari calls for the acknowledgement of women as active

³⁴ Singh, *Vijñānabhairava Tantra*, 77-78

³⁵ I. B. Horner, *Women Under Primitive Buddhism: Laywomen and Almswomen* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1930), introduction

³⁶ Mandakranta Bose, *Women in the Hindu Tradition: Rules, Roles and Exceptions* (London: Routledge, 2010), introduction

³⁷ Bisht, *Unveiling Womanhood in Early Medieval North India*, 8

agents by examining political formations in Kashmir, Kanauj, and Bengal–Bihar and debates on feudalism in India.³⁸ Other sources for reconstruction include texts such as the *Nīlamatapurāṇa* which sheds light on the customs and social practices of early Kashmir; Bāṇabhaṭṭa's *Harṣacarita* which provides insights into courtly and political life in seventh-century North India; Kalhaṇa's *Rājatarāṅgiṇī*, which provides the chronicles of Kashmiri rulers till the mid-twelfth century, and depicts royal as well as non-royal women like courtesans, court participants, mediators, and agents in dynastic formation and destruction. Other literary works like Dāmodaragupta's *Kuṭṭanīmatam* and Kṣemendra's *Samayamātrikā* further highlight the social worlds of courtesans and prostitutes, while texts like Daṇḍin's *Daśakumāracaritam* and Somadeva's *Kathāsaritsāgara* are good for cross class comparisons of women in Early Medieval India and enrich our understanding of women's varied experiences in early medieval society.³⁹

POLITICS AND WOMEN IN EARLY MEDIEVAL INDIA

The coexistence of powerful women in a patriarchal framework can be found through looking at epigraphic and numismatic evidence. For example, the coins issued by Kashmiri queens such as Sugandhā and Diddā, bear masculine royal epithets and address them as *deva* and not *devi*.⁴⁰ The decline of the Gupta Empire was characterized by the decrease in political unity in North India and a conscious regional outlook, along with foreign invasions.⁴¹ Although several scholars that this period should not be seen as 'dark age' but it certainly brought forth several changes. Generally, during this time, castes developed, untouchability increased, child marriage increased, satī and jauhar systems developed, widow remarriage was strongly disapproved of, and the devadāsī system was encouraged.

In Kashmir, Queen Sugandhā (r. 883–902 CE) crowned her minor son Gopālavarmana and faced a revolt from feudal chiefs (Tantrins) when she attempted to choose a successor after his early death. She tried to challenge them in battle but was defeated and executed. Similarly, Queen Diddā of the Lohara dynasty (r. 980–1003 CE) ruled Kashmir effectively for twenty-three years as a regent and later as sovereign.⁴² Numismatic evidence and inscriptions including Buddhist image dedications, highlight her administrative acumen, military

³⁸ Bisht, *Unveiling Womanhood in Early Medieval North India*, 9

³⁹ Bisht, *Unveiling Womanhood in Early Medieval North India*, 12

⁴⁰ B. K. Kaul Deambi, *Corpus of Śāradā Inscriptions* (New Delhi: Agam Kala Prakashan, 1982), 100–101

⁴¹ Bisht, *Unveiling Womanhood in Early Medieval North India*, 111

⁴² Kalhaṇa, *Rājatarāṅgiṇī*, trans. M. A. Stein (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1961), vol. 1, Book VI, esp. 173–185



leadership, and use of religious donations as diplomatic tools. Diddā secured dynastic succession, suppressed rivals, and commissioned temples, towns, and monasteries, leaving an enduring political and cultural legacy.

Other regents, like Śrīlekhā (r. 1028–1063 CE) and Suryamatī, continued this tradition. Śrīlekhā neutralized threats from ambitious nobles to guard the throne of minor king Ananta and oversaw the construction of monasteries. Beyond Kashmir, Harṣa's sister, Rājyaśrī, through her marriage alliance with the Maukhari king of Kanauj, influenced political and religious affairs. Inscriptions, such as those of Ādityasena, record women's active engagement in public works like temples and tanks.⁴³

WOMEN AND THE PRIVATE SPHERE

Control over women's sexuality was a central instrument of subordination in early medieval India, enforced through social, familial, and religious codes. Men were held to a lower standard of sexual morality than women, and women's dress, mobility, and behavior were strictly monitored through purdā, restrictions on public space, and limits on interactions with men.⁴⁴ Instances of polygamy among kings and high officials of dynasties such as the Gāhaḍavālas, Pratihāras, Candelas, and Pālas were common, while polyandry was non-existent; widows were often compelled to live as *sanyāsinīs* or commit satī. Medhātithi, a Kashmiri commentator, reinterpreted *Manusmṛiti* norms, allowing less hierarchical family interactions, acknowledging room for procreative women, and granting women some power over household resources.⁴⁵ This can indicate that patriarchal authority was neither consistent nor total.

In comparison to Kashmir, regions such as Kanauj, Bengal, and Bihar show more limited visibility of royal women, with Bengal's Pāla records reflecting relative invisibility, and Sena records granting minimal recognition to non-royal women.⁴⁶

Several sources describe the birth of a daughter as a source of misery and the birth of a son as a blessing, for example-Bāṇabhaṭṭa's *Harṣacarita* notes that the birth of a girl was often a cause of sorrow: "*The worst of this fire of grief is that though both son and daughter are equally one's offspring, people get grief stricken the moment a daughter is born.*"⁴⁷ Alberūnī's *Kitāb-ul-Hind* (1017 CE) also observes the unpopularity of girls, and the *Kathāsaritsāgara* portrays sons as bliss and daughters as roots of misery. But not all sources suggest this; Bāṇa's *Kādambari* celebrates the birth of girls.

⁴³ Bisht, *Unveiling Womanhood in Early Medieval North India*, 120

⁴⁴ Bisht, *Unveiling Womanhood in Early Medieval North India*, 28

⁴⁵ Bisht, *Unveiling Womanhood in Early Medieval North India*, 19

⁴⁶ Bisht, *Unveiling Womanhood in Early Medieval North India*, 3

⁴⁷ Bisht, *Unveiling Womanhood in Early Medieval North India*, 7-8



In the sphere of education, Medhātithi justifies the substitution of *upanayana* by early marriage for girls and equating the fulfillment of household duties as equal to formal education. We find some evidence from queens of Kashmir like Sugandhā and Diddā of considerable agency which would not have been possible with formal training. Similarly princesses like Rājyaśrī received training in music, dance, administration, and military skills. Literary sources and inscriptions, such as those of Kalhaṇa, also give evidence of marriage alliances for political purposes which has always been a common function of political consolidation.

COMMON WOMEN

Nīlamatapurāṇa shows evidence of participation of common women in religious activities and along with Kalhaṇa's chronicle, it identifies Kashmir with Goddess Pārvaṭī in her incarnation as Kaśmīra and accords her a higher place than Śiva.⁴⁸ This highlights the ideological centrality of the feminine in the region. Non-royal women like Sussalā, Rilhaṇa's wife, and Valgā, Diddā's porter woman, are found to have engaged in construction and endowment works. Palaces lodged a large number of ordinary women who provided services ranging from making cosmetics, jewelry, and baskets to painting, dying cloth, planting flowers, and acting as palace guards. Bāṇabhaṭṭa mentions the presence of numerous attendants, many of slave origin and wet nurses (dhātrīs) who played a crucial role in childcare and training the next generation.⁴⁹

Despite patriarchal constraints, some women exercised autonomy over ritual authority and money as demonstrated by inscriptions from 12th century Gaya where we find Gaurī, performing her husband Mallikārjuna's *śrāddha* and queen mothers exercising control of temple endowments according to the Chamba Copper plates.⁵⁰

IDENTITY AND PROSTITUTION

Kashmir shows the example of more authority by women in contrast to other regions such as Kanauj, Bengal, and Bihar where female visibility is often limited to ceremonial roles. There is little evidence of a strictly enforced purdā system, and most sculptures and paintings fail to depict veiling which can indicate that textual references suggesting purdā were neither obligatory nor universally observed.⁵¹ The *Harṣacarita* of Bāṇabhaṭṭa and North Indian inscriptions suggest that women were expected to live for the family and were

⁴⁸ Bisht, *Unveiling Womanhood in Early Medieval North India*, 86

⁴⁹ Bisht, *Unveiling Womanhood in Early Medieval North India*, 126

⁵⁰ Bisht, *Unveiling Womanhood in Early Medieval North India*, 60

⁵¹ Bisht, *Unveiling Womanhood in Early Medieval North India*, 170

discouraged from burning on their husbands' pyres.⁵² *Rājataranṅiṇī* documents women negotiating satī: as Kalhaṇa contrasts Sahajā, who immolated herself voluntarily, with Kayyā, who chose remarriage. He also records many instances of forcible burning of widows, for example- Jayamatī, the queen of Uccāla, who gave her entire treasure to her minister Garga to save her life, but she was burnt against her will. Buddhist and Jain traditions offered partial agency where married and widowed women could pursue asceticism even if certain sects like Digambara did not believe in the possibility of attainment of nirvāṇa in a female body.⁵³

Monica Saxena examines the institution of prostitution through and in literary sources like *Daśakumāracarita* by Daṇḍin and *Prabandhacintāmaṇi* by Hemacandra. She observes how Gaṇikās were accomplished women trained in literature, arts, music, and dance, and served as educators guiding men in social and cultural refinement⁵⁴. Texts like *Matsya Purāṇa* confirm the state's support for these professions.⁵⁵

Samayamātrikā by Kṣemendra is a satirical fictional work of 11th century Kashmir which describes the versatile skills of Kaṅkāli, a courtesan and her wit when it comes to survival.⁵⁶ Kalhaṇa also exemplifies the intermingling of courtly life and political power with the example of Jayamatī, who saved Bhikṣācara, the future heir. The hereditary devadāsī system in Kashmir, noted by Hiuen-Tsang and in Kalhaṇa's *Rājataranṅiṇī* also highlights how it enjoyed economic autonomy.⁵⁷

These cases collectively illustrate that women in early medieval north India were not passive pawns but much more active than we credit them for. Their presence in governance, military, and administration challenged prescriptive norms of male succession, revealing that political authority could, under certain conditions, be exercised effectively by women. As Pauline Stafford notes, “*each marriage, each succession, each queenly action was a specific event with its own particular context,*”⁵⁸ a principle clearly reflected in the Indian historical landscape of this period. In Kashmir, Lallā (Lal Ded), a 14th-century mystic and poet, exemplifies female spiritual authority, producing *vaakh* that articulates Śaiva philosophy in ways comparable to male contemporaries.

CONCLUSION

⁵² Bisht, *Unveiling Womanhood in Early Medieval North India*, 88

⁵³ Anjali Verma, *Women and Society in Early Medieval India: Re-interpreting Epigraphs* (New York: Routledge, 2019), 5

⁵⁴ Monica Saxena, “Gaṇikā in Early India: Its Genesis and Dimensions,” *Social Scientist* 34, nos. 11–12 (November–December 2006): 2.

⁵⁵ Bisht, *Unveiling Womanhood in Early Medieval North India*, 141

⁵⁶ Uma Chakraborty, *Kṣemendra: The Eleventh Century Kashmiri Poet* (Delhi: Sri Satguru Publication, 1991), 3.

⁵⁷ Sudha Jha “Social Status of Devadāsī–Nityasumaṅgalī,” *Journal of the Oriental Institute* 51, nos. 1–2 (September–December 2001): 85–86.

⁵⁸ Bisht, *Unveiling Womanhood in Early Medieval North India*, 125

The quest to attain independence is the aim of both political and intellectual movements like feminism and spiritual texts like *Vijñāna Bhairava Tantra*. On the one hand, subjectivity is something to be taken while on the other it is to be recognized. The agency of Parvati as the truth seeker sets her as an example of the empowered feminine and the entire text stands as a testimony to the fact that even though the state of Bhairava is the end goal, the one who reveals herself is Bhairavi. Bhairava is the directionless, timeless and attributeless and the state without though dicotomies is Bhairavi. The universe is said to be the reflection of this very awareness, and it is Śakti that materializes it. According to *Vijñāna Bhairava Tantra* both Śiva and Śakti are one, but it is the quality of *anugraha* due to which the goddess asks questions in order to make the seekers understand. So, it can be argued that it is because of Śakti that divine knowledge reaches the human medium.

Parvati, displaying her vast knowledge of various attributes of the cosmos, asks about the true nature of Bhairava and Śiva explains along with giving 112 dharanas or techniques to achieve it. In these verses, the Devi does not directly speak but her importance is unparalleled as all the techniques of breathing, imagination, contemplation, chanting and getting acquainted with the void require the dynamic force of Sakti. For example, the process in which conscious Japa transforms into Ajapā which is spontaneous and self-induced is also Śakti herself. All the different points that are part of the *kundalinī* ascent like Mūla (mūlādhāra), Kaṇṭha (throat) etc. correspond to the three aspects of Sakti, *Parā*, *Parāparā*, and *Aparā*. *Vijnana Bhairava Tantra* does not impose restrictions on anyone and talks about feeling the bliss of non-duality and employing imagination to achieve this supreme state, which is beyond all dicotomies, something which is also possible because of the heterodoxy and fairly open attitude of Trika Saivism.

When traced to the situation of women in Early Medieval India and especially Kashmir, there is something we can confidently agree on, that women were never a passive category who just accepted whatever was told to them. They actively participated in politics, had some level of formal training, and were more fluid. In the case of Kashmir, we find that the concept of Kashmira, an incarnation of goddess Parvati and see powerful queens like Didda and Sugandha. We also find material to look closely at common women who worked at royal palaces as well as courtesans through texts like Kalhaṇa's *Rājataranginī*, Kṣemendra's *Samayamātrikā* and Daṇḍin's *Daśakumāracaritam* respectively.

This does not mean however, that women were treated the same everywhere or that there were no constraints on them. The encouragement of the devadasi system, reducing women to ceremonial roles in places like Kanauj, Bengal, and Bihar, the existence of polygamy and the very fact that the coins issued by queen Didda bear the epithet Deva not Devi highlights how women were actively negotiating their roles and agency in a predominantly patriarchal framework. Finally, it can be said that the *Vijñāna Bhairava Tantra* does not fight for social gender equality in the modern framework, but it ascends the entire concept of duality or hierarchy which is the reason for institutions like patriarchy.

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