



Feminine Fragrance in Śākta Tantra

--Sujith V¹

1) ISRO, Associate Researcher, DAKSHI

sujith.govt@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

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This paper is a small attempt to return to the heart of the tantric tradition itself, looking at Śākta Tantra through its own metaphysics and lived ritual imagination. Rather than relying on external theories, it approaches the feminine as the tradition sees her—an inner principle, a presence, and a way of knowing. The paper explicitly places a strong Indic perception of the feminine notion, not as a social construct but as the ontic principle of Śakti, by taking tantric hermeneutics based on primary texts like the *Kulaṅṇava Tantra*, *Vāmakeśvarī Mata*, and texts pertaining to the Spanda–Pratyabhijñā schools of Trika philosophy. The paper consists of two parts. The former undertakes a philosophical exploration into the notion of Śakti by upholding the soteriological and epistemological greatness of Śākta Tantra, wherein Śakti is the sole definitional principle of absolute consciousness, Paramśiva. It shows how Śākta Tantra is unique and different from other Indic philosophical traditions through its ontological standpoint—beginning with Śakti as *spanda*, sustaining the systematic soteriological approach through Śakti as *kaula-krama* rituals, and culminating in unifying with her or realising the self as *aham-vimarśa*. Realising Śakti is nothing but the recognition of Śaktimān, with the Pratyabhijñā doctrine serving as the reflective epistemological base for Śākta Tantra, which is strongly echoed in the Śrīvidyā pantheon. The latter part seeks to sacralise the concept of feminine embodiment, senses, and their role in rituals—not merely as co-doers with men but as central to Śākta praxis; not as subjects of eroticisation and objectification but as the central subject and meta-ontological object (*anuttara*). In doing so, it attempts to decolonise the Indic perspective of the feminine and unfetter it from Western feminist ideas by deploying strong tantric ontology and Śākta hermeneutics based on selected primary texts of Śrīvidyā. Finally, the paper concludes by presenting Śakti as the *hṛdya-sāra*, the heart-essence of the Absolute (*Śivātmikā*), corresponding to the physical feminine as the aesthetic fragrance that emanates from the masculine bosom.

INTRODUCTION

शिवः शक्त्या युक्तो यदि भवति शक्तः प्रभवितुं

न चेदेवं देवो न खलु कुशलः स्पन्दितुमपि ।

अतस्त्वामाराध्यां हरिहरविरिञ्चादिभिरपि

प्रणन्तुं स्तोतुं वा कथमकृतपुण्यः प्रभवति

The introductory verse of the *Saundaryalaharī* puts forward a powerful Śākta theological and philosophical standpoint: only when Śiva is in *yamala* with Śakti does he become capable of illumination and manifestation. The term *prabhavitum* corresponds to the very idea of Śakti as the self-differentiating awareness (*aham-vimarśa*) of the Absolute, and thus forms the *sine qua non* for universal manifestation. The root *prabh-* implies “to illuminate” and “to make manifest,” and this directly points to the doctrine of Pratyabhijñā. The situation can be imagined as fire without the property of light; in such a case, what would be the significance of that fire? In the same way, without Śakti, the Absolute Śiva is in no way capable, potent or efficient to even pulsate—underscoring the fundamental insight of the Spanda school. It is further inferred that whether it is the supreme forces responsible for *śṛṣṭi*, *sthiti* and *saṁhāra*, or the embodied soul, nothing can function without Her free will, for She is the very form and source of *icchā-śakti*.

परोऽनिहि शक्तिरहिताः शक्ताः कर्तुं न किञ्चन शक्तस्तु परमेशानी शक्त्या युक्तो यदभावेद्(Pg No 64, verse-6, 4th patala, Vamakeswarimatam, Dr Suvarna Nalappat) Śakti, in all her inclusivity, is *viśvātmikā*, the heart-essence (*hṛdaya-sāra*) of all sentient beings. As *viśvātītā*, She is transcendental reality itself (परापराणां परमापरमेश्वरी — *Durga Saptashatī*). This paper does not attempt to argue that Śakti is greater than Śiva or that the feminine is superior to the masculine. Rather, it rests on the eternal Indic understanding that **Śakti is the greatness (*mahattva*) of Śiva**, grounded in the notion of *Śiva-Śakti-samarasya*—the single ontic referent of all reality. Śakti is visualised as the *cakra* and Śiva as the *ādhāra* (ground), unfolding Śakti as the cosmic dance of the subject upon the object, with Śiva as her stage. This quintessential qualitative homogeneity, transcending all *bheda-abheda-kalpanā-s* of the Śiva-Śakti *yamala*, forms the guiding thread of this article.

The first part of the paper seeks to posit Śakti as a powerful soteriological and philosophical category—as Absolute Consciousness—and to highlight her distinctness from other Indian philosophical traditions, including her overarching influence on Indian *vyākaraṇa* and aesthetics. A purely tantric hermeneutics is

attempted to view Śakti as the core principle of the Pratyabhijñā–Spanda schools of Kashmir Śaivism, and as the magnanimous ground for the abstractions of desire and fear through the Tripurā tradition and the Kālī-Krama—Śakti as the synthesising power of both in the Kula stream.

The second part explores the Śākta attitude toward the feminine, strongly echoed in the Śākta Tantras. It attempts to sacralise the feminine body, senses and experiences—challenging social taboos around menstruation, impurity, and the anti-women constructs embedded in conventional discourse. Śākta Tantra reverses and refines these notions, transforming what society labels as impurities of body, mind and senses into potent soteriological tools, thereby upholding the feminine as the embodied essence of the supreme Absolute Feminine, Parāśakti.

This paper also proposes to fill the gap for an indigenous study of the Indic concept of womanhood, firmly rooted in the Śākta Tantras. It seeks to unfetter Śākta studies from the colonised ideas of feminism and offer a desideratum-oriented platform to understand *Bhāratīya Nāri-Śakti* as the ontic principle of Śakti herself.

The methodology adopted is a literary exposition of traditional tantric sources such as the *Kulaṅṇava Tantra*, *Tripurānavam*, *Vāmakeśvarī Mata* and *Yoginī Hṛdayam*—the Śākta sources closely associated with the Śrīvidyā stream—towards a decolonised reading of Śākta studies. It also incorporates texts of the Pratyabhijñā–Spanda schools of Kashmir Śaivism to deliberately exalt Śākta philosophy as a strong, yet inclusive, gnosis seen through the standpoint of a Śākta-sādhaka (subject)

ŚĀKTAM VIŚEṢA DARŚANAM: THE PHILOSOPHICAL PREDOMINANCE OF ŚAKTI

This section makes a limited attempt to define the definitional concept of Śiva, i.e., Śakti—the very nature/being/self of Śaktimān—शक्तिर्हि नाम शक्तिमत एव स्वं रूपम् (Tantrāloka, with the Viveka of Jayaratha, Vol. 2, ed. R. C. Dwivedi and Navjivan Rastogi, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1987)—within the metaphysical framework of the Kashmir Śaiva Sampradāya. The two Indian streams of thought, orthodox and heterodox, based on Ātmavāda and Ānandavāda, constitute the Bhāratīya sense and values of spirituality and materiality. The former is characterised, rather curtailed, by purity, “freedom from” the world, seeking immunity from emotional involvement and sensual spontaneity, while the latter (Tantra) upheld the principle of unhindered omnipotent power and internalised impurity with all its inclusivity and the all-encompassing Śākta attitude of accepting the universe and the self as such, based on the *brahmāṇḍaiva piṇḍaṇḍam* notion. Hence, Tantra in general and Śākta Tantra in particular handled the soteriological scarcity

of the exclusivist, non-tantric group by wholeheartedly accepting the transgressive impurities imposed on women as the biological, aesthetic and soteriological tools to travel the mundane and transcend the spiritual realms.

“The heterodox internalised even the impure and the ugly, boasting maximum inclusivist tendency as a natural and instantaneous outflow of one's own creativity... the former found the latter as impure and morally transgressive; the latter viewed the former as impotent and escapist... Sanderson clearly gave a bolder orientation to the whole problem by putting forward purity and power...”

(Navjivan Rastogi, *The Notion of Śakti in Kashmir Śaivism*, p. 2)

The philosophical systems of Sāṅkhya, Nyāya, Vedānta, Buddhism and Mīmāṃsā either subsume Śaktism under one of their accepted categories or reject it altogether. These systems seem similar in treating the Śakti-category as different and falling outside the domain of the Absolute Self. For instance, in Sāṅkhya and Yoga, the feminine aspect of the real world, “Prakṛti,” is external to Puruṣa. Vedānta completely negated this feminine aspect as mere illusion or Māyā. But in tantric etymology, the idea of Māyā may be conceived as the power to represent infinity (*anantam*), since the word *Māyā* can correspond to the infinite concept of Brahman. “According to Tantras, *mā* = to measure, *yā* = the power that measures infinity.” (Jankinath Kaul Kamal, *Pañcastavī*, Sri Ramakrishna Ashram, Srinagar, 2010)

The Indian school of Vyākaraṇa alone stands out, unlike other Indic systems, in perceiving Śakti as internal to the Absolute, the external reality being the self-differentiation of the Self. The word “Self” in Sanskrit is *aham*, which constitutes the sixteen vowels in Sanskrit from “a” to “aḥ,” and the final two dots of *a* (Śiva) + *ha* (Śakti) + *m* (Śiva-Śakti union) as *nāda* and *bindu* constitute the *visarga* (ः). These form the epistemological and esoteric ethos of the Śrīvidyā Sampradāya. “Śakti is projected as the sole instrument that brings about both differentiation of the Self as well as internalisation of the differentiated reality... this is why the school of grammar constitutes one of the most formative influences on the Kashmir Śaivist formulation of Śakti.” (Navjivan Rastogi, *The Notion of Śakti in Kashmir Śaivism*, p. 4)

In Kashmir Śaivism, Śakti is frequently called *cit-camatkāra*. In that sense, it is the self-relishing power of Absolute Consciousness, Paramaśiva. Here the pure consciousness (*avikalpa-samvit*) is always in ineffable delight due to its perpetual recognition-repose of Self as Śakti-vimarśa, and therefore it is in an eternal bliss-state—that is *ānanda*. *Sat-cit-ānanda*—here Śakti is the *sat* and *ānanda* of *cit*. This concept of *camatkāra* and *ānanda*, corresponding to the very notion of Śakti, forms the metaphysical pedestal for Abhinavagupta's theory of aesthetics.

According to Abhinavagupta, *camatkāra* is *vimarśa*, which is the experience at the level of Śakti. In its broad framework, this theory of *camatkāra* and *rasa* exalted the feminine body, senses and experiences as soterio-aesthetic aspects for poetics and drama, which inimitably blended the concept of *bhoga* and *mokṣa* in Śākta theology. The term *bhoga-mokṣa-pradāyinī* (in *Lalitā-sahasranāma*) and the common term for the principal deity in the Śrīvidyā pantheon, “Tripurasundarī,” is endowed with all possible magnanimity and beatitude of the feminine.

“The essential nature of the aesthetic experience is nothing but the basic mental state (*sthāyin*) which figures in the consciousness free from all impediments... *vīta-vighna-pratīti-grāhyobhavo eva rasaḥ*... such consciousness, which is free from all impediments, is nothing but *camatkāra*. *Camatkāra* is an activity of the subject that has merged into *spanda*, which is essentially a wonderful *bhoga*. *Adbhuta* (= *camatkāra*) *bhogātmaka-spanda-viṣaya*.”

(G. T. Deshpande, *Abhinavagupta*, Sahitya Akademi, 1989)

Here the term *adbhuta* resonates with the idea of *spanda*, the primordial pulsation before manifestation, homologised with *aham*, the sound of “ownness/delight.” The vowel *a-ha*, the 16th vowel, has deep tantric connection with the Śoḍaśī aspect of Śrīvidyā. In the sādhana-praxis of Śrīvidyā, this aesthetic experience has to be conceptualised internally by powerful creative contemplation (*bhāvanā*), which explicitly reveals the internal mode of sādhana (*antaryāga*). It is “creative” because it should be potent enough to create—the fundamental aspect of the Supreme or embodied feminine at their corresponding levels. The whole idea forms the metaphysical crux of the *Bhāvanopaniṣad*, one of the principal texts of the Śrīvidyā tradition. “Aesthetic experience is thus conceptualised as mental visualisation, mental perception, mental operation akin to mental perception.” (Navjivan Rastogi, *The Notion of Śakti in Kashmir Śaivism*, p. 17)

According to Abhinavagupta, it is highly commendable to infuse the concept of Śakti and its resultant impact in defining the element of reality. He put forward two fundamental differences between the doctrine

of the Pure (Vedānta) and the doctrine of Power (Tantric). The former views the Absolute as simply transcendent, and its realisation seems to be an all-transcending, discreet and disconnected reality, and Ācārya calls it *vyatireka-turyātīta* (“the fourth beyond, marked by exclusion”), which negates the corporeal and cosmic aspects—realities in embodied sense. Terming Śākta philosophy as *viśeṣa-darśana*, and because of its Śakti-nature, the Absolute is dynamic, transcendent and immanent. As such, Śākta ontology is elevated to an absolute vision with an inner stream of objective reality and an outer current of subjective idealism, thus viewed as the ultimate and absolute blooming culmination of lived reality.

The idea of objective reality is constituted by the ontic hierarchy of thirty-six tattvas from Śiva to Pṛthvī, as stated below:

षट्त्रिंशत्तत्त्वानि विश्वम् (*Prathama-khaṇḍa*: Dīkṣā-vidhi, *Paraśurāma-Kalpasūtra* with Rameśvara's Commentary, ed. A. Mādhavaśāstri, Baroda Oriental Institute, 1950)

Thus, the Śākta system, being all-inclusive and all-integrating, contains within itself the strands of aesthetics, language, bhakti, yoga, esoteric praxis, rituals and, above all, a canon of ultimate soterio-epistemology—rightly exalted by Ācārya Abhinavagupta as *viśeṣa-darśana* in contrast to *sāmānya-darśanas*. This integral integration makes Śākta Tantra a phenomenological reality with strong embodied experientiality, making it an *avyatireka-turyātīta*, the “trans-fourth” marked by non-exclusion.

विशेषदर्शनेषु इति शक्ताद्वैतप्रदानेषु, विशेषः शक्तिलक्षणः। (*Īśvara Pratyabhijñā-Vivṛtti Vimarśinī*, p. 331)

इति अव्यतिरैक-तुर्यातीत-समता एव। (*Īśvara Pratyabhijñā-Vivṛtti Vimarśinī*, p. 328)

The all-encompassing perfection—wholeness and totality (*pūrṇatā*)—of Śākta-darśana is further concretised by Ācārya Abhinavagupta by upholding Śakti as the pure abstract of *pūrṇatā* via *yamala* (pairing), *saṃghaṭṭa* (rubbing)—a self-dissolving fusion between being and its substrate:

पूर्णतैव अस्य शक्तिः

(Ahnika 4, *Tantrasāra*, ed. M. R. Shastri, KSTS, Srinagar, 1918)

स्पन्दशक्तिः : The Pulsating Prodigy

“Kṣema Rāja goes so far as to talk about the power of spanda as *spanda-śakti*, a term unknown to other commentators... Spanda, which Rājanaka Rāma equates with the principle of power (*śakti-tattva*), is none other than the Goddess (*Parameśvarī*) who manifests herself as all the principles (*tattvas*) constituting the one reality—including Śiva himself. Therefore, spanda is the Goddess, who is the highest principle” (p. 29, *Doctrine of Vibration*).

Spanda is *śakti* herself, which literally differentiates the self from self as *aham* (I-ness) and *idam* (This-ness), and provides us a ground-breaking perception to witness and experience consciousness—not merely as witnessing consciousness, as maintained by Sāṅkhya and Vedānta, but as a pulsating and creative consciousness. Spanda is not simply a logical system of abstract categories but an idealistic, real, living experience of energy.

The Spanda school takes its name from one of its root texts called *Spanda-Kārikā*, the seminal work of Kallaṭabhaṭṭa, who is the prominent disciple of Ācārya Vasugupta, the illuminator of *Śiva Sūtras*. The *Śiva Sūtras* are treatises on a definite system of yogic-philosophy, which elaborate the metaphysical, mystic, and meta-cognitive principles mainly from the viewpoint of *śakti*. Hence, it is well appreciated and accepted that *śakti* is the philosophical pedestal for *Śiva Sūtras* in particular (and for Spanda in general).

According to *Spanda-Śāstra*, the ultimate reality is *para-samvid*—the changeless principle of all changes—in which the feminine term “*para*” is *Parameśvarī-śakti* only. She is the meta-ontological category which manifests, mobilizes, modifies, and multiplies consciousness as relational and non-relational, vibrating and vibrationless, immanent and transcendent, sentient and insentient—beyond all possible ultra-cognitive and meta-dimensions of time and space (*deśa-kāla paricchinna*, in *Lalita Sahasranāma*).

In simpler terms, spanda is the pulsation of pure consciousness, where Śiva is the pristine bosom and its rhythm/beat (*spanda*) is *śakti*. Then, what is the difference between the heart and its beat? Experiencing the subtle and cosmic dance of Śiva is the ecstatic experiencing of spanda as the expression of *śakti*.

“According to the Doctrine of Vibration, man realizes his true nature to be Śiva by experiencing spanda, the dynamic, recurrent, and creative activity of the Absolute” (p. 21, *The Doctrine of Vibration*, Mark S. G. Dyczkowski, Divine Books Indological Publishers, 2013).

स्वच्छन्दानन्दवृन्दोच्छलदमृतमयानुत्तरस्पन्दतत्त्वम्

(First Section, First Verse, Prayer to Śaṅkara, *Śiva Sūtras and Commentary Vimarsinī* of Kṣemarāja, Ed. and Trans. by Jaideva Singh, Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Pvt Ltd, Delhi, 2017)

The term “*svacchandā*” literally means unimpeded free will, reposing in itself, which is nothing but the *svatantrya-śakti* of Śiva, which is *para-śakti*. She illuminates, being the self of Śiva as complete sovereignty—that is *Mahesvarāya*, which makes Śiva, Mahesvara. This repose of the self in the self accounts for its ineffable effulgent bliss, i.e., *vimarśānandam*, as *cit* is always with *ānanda*, and hence

chidananda-svarūpa. The *ānanda-śakti*, which forms the very *svarūpa* of *cit*(Śiva), is of infinite creative potency. It starts emanating or expanding from the single substratum of consciousness.

This expansion of *śakti* corresponds to the *śakti-cakra*, and she does it in succession (*krama*) and without order (*akrama*) simultaneously. This notion homologizes the concept of *Śrīcakra* in the Śrīvidyā tradition, resonating with the expansion of consciousness from *bindu* to *bhūpura* and beyond, at the apex of creation. The *sādhaka* is supposed to take a recognitive recourse to this *śakti* stream—from the external world (*pṛthvī*)

to the innermost point of solidified consciousness (*ghaṇibhūta-bodham*), which is *Mahābindu*, where Śiva and śakti are immersed indistinguishably in eternal euphoric union (*saṃghatta*). It is apparently placed in the *Śiva Sūtras*:

In this reverse process called *śakti-sāadhanā*, the subject—*sādhaka*—is resorted towards śakti through *śakti-vṛnda*, i.e., *vṛnda-cakra*, the collective whole of *yoginīs* and evolutes of śakti. Here occurs the disappearance of the impression of “universe as something separate from consciousness”; rather, śakti is distinct from Śiva, or vice versa, and that stateless state is *anuttara*—the ultimate, unsurpassable.

The term *saṃdhāne* (absorption) can be equated with *sāadhanā* (i.e., *śakti-sāadhanā*), as it is a soteriological journey from *sāadhanā* to *saṃdhānam*—practicing śakti, perceiving śakti, and being in ultimate absorption with śakti. Śakti is *spanda*—the subtlest *sound-tattva*—of soundlessness (*aspanda*).

KULA – THE SACRED FRAGRANCE

This section bridges the Śakti as a philosophical category with the bodily aspects of feminine, based on the tantric notions that women in the social-physical plane are the extended expression and essence of the divine feminine. As such, their senses, experiences, and especially body-related aspects and attributes form the theological thread that weaves the soteriological shape of Śakti.

सर्वनार्यस्त्वमेवासि, सर्वोऽहं पुरुषः प्रिये।

एतद्विज्ञानमात्रेण जायते सिद्धिभाजनम्॥

(*Kulaṇṇavatantra*, Ch. 2, V. 64)

(Oh beloved, all women are you (thee), all men are myself (Śiva). Merely by apprehending this, he becomes the receptacle of *siddhi*.)

The word “kula” refers to the clan of female *yoginīs* or highly accomplished females; they are the real reflections of Śakti. If Śakti is the sun, then *yoginīs* are its scintillating reflections. *Kula* also means body with all its physical and metaphysical qualities, where it shows a strong semblance to the etymology of the word *tantra*. The root word for *tantra* is “tan,” i.e., *tanu*; तनुः = शरीरः, and one of the common definitions for *tantra* is तन्यते विस्तार्यते इति तन्त्रं, तनू-त्रय-तारणम् इति तन्त्रम् (*Jñāna-Śaṅkalinī Tantra*, p. 7, Paramahansa



Prajñānānanda), which means “that which expands the body/body of consciousness is tantra,” or we can say *tantra* is that which makes one transcend the three bodies (sthūla, sūkṣma, kāraṇa), and it has direct relation with the triad concept of the Tripurā school. So, the body-consciousness dichotomy is the tangible and intangible realistic idealism of *tantra*.

“It is held in tantras that we do not experience our consciousness as external to our body... Tantra has evolved a very elaborate symbolic code of the chakras, energy vortices and subtle channels together with a yoga to unfold the mysteries of creation. Śākta tantra also absorbed the traditional knowledge system on the biological basis of the biorhythms that govern a woman’s body.” (p. 47, *The Goddess–Women Equation in Śākta Tantra*, Dr. Madhu Khanna)

In Kashmir Śaivism, the letter **a** (short *a* in Sanskrit) is the symbol of Śiva, the short form of *anuttara* (the transcending transcendent). And when it is energized with Śakti, it is *ākula*, i.e., the *kula* of *anuttara* (the body of “a”), simply the body of Śiva, which is Śakti only, and hence it is inferred as Śakti is *kula* and Śiva is *ākula*.

कुलं गोत्रं समाख्यातं तच्च शक्तिशिवोद्भवम्।

अकुलं शिव इत्युक्तं कुलं शक्तिः प्रकीर्तिता॥

(*Kulaṇṇavatantra*, Ch. 17, V. 26)

The primordial reflections of the human body are fear and desire... the ever-desiring pleasure to please this body and eternal fear to lose this body. This basic tenet of corporeal philosophy incarnated in Śākta tantra as Mahātripurasundarī—the magnificent epitome of beauty, plenitude, and prowess—and Mahākālī, the devouring, dreadful, and death.

जन्मकाले भवेन्माता पूजाकाले च देवता।

रतिकाले भवेद् दूती मृत्युकाले च कालिका॥

(*Mahārthamañjarī*, p. 104)

The same principle is employed in the outer cosmos as projecting and linking the moon’s phases to a woman’s body. “It was accepted that rays of the full moon act as a regulating device on the pineal gland, causing ovulation at full moon and menstruation at new moon in the dark fortnight of the month.” (p. 47,

The Goddess–Women Equation in Śākta Tantra, Dr. Madhu Khanna)

The same Sundarī and Kālī are the divine representations of *pournami* and *amāvasyā*. It is interesting to note that the moon’s symbolic semblance with femininity makes Śrīvidyā *candra-kālā vidyā* (lunar gnosis), where the 15 phonemes of the Śrīvidyā mantra evince 15 *nityās*, the 15 lunar digits (*amā-kala*), and the 16th is the all-inclusive Tripurasundarī only. The fertility-creativity-menstrual cycles of the feminine are also influenced by the moon, like calculating the prompt time to plant the seeds.

THE STORY OF RAKTA-ŚAKTI: SANCTIFYING FEMININE

The huedness of blood/menses is the intense symbol of *Śakti*, which is aesthetically employed in Śākta tantra as the very dynamism of *Śakti*. It is further signified in the *Lalitāsahasranāma* (of Śrīvidyā sampradaya) as the first word of the first verse in the opening *dhyāna* (contemplative verse):

सिन्दूरारुणविग्रहम्... रक्तोत्पलम्... रत्नघटस्थरक्तचरणम् ध्यायेद् परामम्बिकाम्॥ Here Devī is venerated as *Parā* with a red-hued body, holding a red lotus, and red feet glowing in their hue-ness.

“The woman’s body and her five senses are made into loci of purity, which is radically different from the orthodox perceptions. The latent or manifest spiritual energy (in her) is equated with consciousness... Her breath, her physical acts and postures, her gestures, her biological processes such as the menstrual cycle... are considered to be sacred and manifestations of the Goddess.” (pp. 46–47, *The Goddess–Women Equation in Śākta Tantra*, Dr. Madhu Khanna)

Śākta tantra audaciously dissolves the impurities and temporary untouchability imposed on women by normalising it with a spiritual fillip and feminine undertone. For instance, thousands of *sādhus* and tantrics are drawn to Kāmākhyā (Śakti-pīṭha in Assam, reputed for *yonī* worship)—Ambubachi Mela—because of its power-centredness and further popularity, to transcend the duality of purity and impurity. And it has deep tantric-yogic ripples, like where a tantric adept experiences only *ānanda*, there is no experiencing and experiencer.

The bodily stigmas socially cursed on women are well accepted by tantra to transcend the same via the concepts of yoga–kuṇḍalinī śāstra. According to the doctrine of Kundalini , Usually temples are manually installed except *svayambhū* and *mokṣa-dhāms*. Manually installed temples work at the lower (not lower qualitatively) chakras like *mūlādhāra*, *svādhiṣṭhāna* etc., pertaining to material benefits in life. The architecture of the temple is the mere *pratibimba* of subtle anatomy of the body with invisible *nāḍīs* and

their junction points called chakras. The temple construction and sacred architecture derive from the *ṣaḍ-adhāra* concept (six chakras from *mūlādhāra* to *svādhiṣṭhāna*) of tantra; the internal technique is employed outside to harmonise self and cosmos. And these temples, after construction, are imbued with *prāṇa-śakti* via the tantric process called *prāṇa-pratiṣṭhā* (consecration/infusing *prāṇa*—the vital energy).

The main *prāṇa-vāyu* associated with *mūlādhāra* and *svādhiṣṭhāna* is *apāna-vāyu* (responsible for all downward movements; in feminine its function is smooth menstrual bleeding and birthing). *Mūlādhāra* is the cradle of dormant kuṇḍalinī, and when it reaches *svādhiṣṭhāna* its function relates to reproduction and fertility. During menstruation, the bio-vital kuṇḍalinī of feminine is vortexing one step above *mūlādhāra* in *svādhiṣṭhāna*, owing to their special, secret, and sacred biology. This stepping-up of kuṇḍalinī is potent enough to affect (or make ineffective) the *caitanya* (bio-magnetic field) of temples. In closed tantric parlance, the elevated kuṇḍalinī of feminine during menstruation literally absorbs the *caitanya*. Also, they are even purer, subtle, and sensitive than normal during the menstrual cycle, that others, probably men, are advised to desist from touching her. In other words, the creative potency inherent in feminine, focused on *svādhiṣṭhāna*, is strong enough to neutralise the creative energy embedded in idols. But the case is inimitably different in *kāvus* (sacred Śakti groves in Kerala—no idols, open nature is worshipped—centred on strong Śakti cults in northern Kerala called *Śāktheyam*), where feminine can enter, and *kāvus* are soteriological places completely transcending the pure–impure dualities.

“Her emotions, and her psychic evolution is definitely higher than that of a man. Awakening of the spiritual force, that is, *kundalini*, is much easier in the body of a woman than in the body of a man. In the realm of kundalini yoga also, the woman's body is charged by a particular centre. Mooladhara chakra in the male body is intricately situated in a very congested area. Men do moola bandha and still nothing happens. But in a woman's body, you can even touch mooladhara with your fingers. Therefore, awakening can take place in a woman's body much more quickly than in the body of a man. Woman has always been the main transporter of energy and man the medium. In tantra, the woman has to be dealt with very carefully because she is the high-tension line for kundalini energy. You do not have to be afraid of her, but you have to be very careful, because in her lies the potentiality of a great explosion, if you have a wife, well, she is your wife. But if she is going to be a tantric partner in your spiritual life, then it is for a different purpose and then the process is entirely different.” (*The Role of Women in Tantra*, Swami Satyananda Saraswati, 1981)

Thus Śākta tantra refines, reframes, and relocates the illogical impositions of menstrual impurity on feminine. The life-bestowing power of Goddess is equated with the life-giving power of the blood. The beauty of Śākta tantra lies in revisiting the female body in terms of micro–macro correspondence and re-



endowing it with the Goddess's sacredness, wiping the psychological guilt, fear, and shame attached to menstruation.

"Tantra considers the time of menstruation to be suitable for performing the ritual... for it is this time that a woman's real energy is at its peak." (Philip Rawson, *Art of Tantra*, p. 88)

In the realm of world religions and civilisations, the very *Bharatiya śāstra called Tantra*, a marvellous symphony of *bhoga* and *mokṣa*, places women as ritual equals, in which it unfolds feminine by enfolded into her non-procreative and non-objectification purposes, where menstruation is positive and spiritual, and the woman's body is the dwelling place of Śakti herself.

ŚAKTĀCĀRA

The final section of this paper makes a modest effort to deliberate on the attitude and approach of a Śākta (sādhaka) towards women in the physical plane.

Saktachara refers to the code of conduct and ethics elaborated in the texts of Kula Dharma, mainly the *Kularṇava Tantra*, *Bṛhannīla Tantra*, *Gandharva Tantra*, *Yoni Tantra*, and others. The subject matter of these texts emphasizes pro-women codes and their esoteric essence, which mandates that all Śākta sādhakas honour women and look upon them with great reverence.

सुवासिनी-समूहं च दृष्ट्वा भक्त्या नतिं चरेत्

(By seeing women, the Śākta should bow down with reverence.)

(*Tripurarnavam*, S.P. Upadhyaya, 14th Khanda, 80th śloka)

The reverential narratives towards women resonate strongly throughout the textual corpus of Śākta Tantra. These pro-women āchāras primarily emerge from ritual practice. For an "accomplished" Śākta sādhaka, his gaze upon a woman is not an object of mere physical arousal; rather, it is a contemplative, aesthetic, and ritualistic worship of the Mother Goddess.

Śākta Tantra also enforces a strong pro-women policy against physical abuse and sexual coercion. The *Kularṇava Tantra* states:



एकदापि न सेवेत बलेन कुलयोगिनीम्।

(Not even once should the Kaula engage with a woman coercively.)

(Kularṇava Tantra, 11th Ullāsam, 56th śloka)

It further emphasizes that sādhakas should abstain from hating, ridiculing, or harming a woman. Instead, women must be specially honoured and pleased:

कन्यां कुमारिकां नग्नाम् उन्मत्तां वापि योषितम्।

न निन्देत् न जुगुप्सेत् न हसेन्नावमन्येत।

कुरूपा चेति कृष्णेति न वदेत् कुलयोषितम्॥

(Kularṇava Tantra, 11th Ullāsam, ślokas 61–62)

“Whether she is a young girl, an unmarried maiden, naked, or even a woman who is distressed or unsettled, she must never be ridiculed or looked upon with contempt. One should not laugh at her, judge her, or diminish her dignity in any way. A woman of the Kaula path must never be spoken of in words that wound—never called ‘ugly,’ ‘dark,’ or by any term that belittles her sacredness.”

The *Kularṇava Tantra* explicitly states that respect and reverence should extend to all women, not limited to yoginīs, regardless of social, economic, or cultural status. Their śakti-hood is intrinsic to their very experience of being; it is a spark that illuminates inherently from birth. Furthermore, the text instructs that a sādhaḥa should not strike a woman—even with a flower. Even if she is guilty of a hundred faults, one must not dwell on her mistakes but rather highlight her virtues:

या काचिदङ्गना लोके सा मातृकुलसम्भवा।

कुप्यन्ति कुलयोगिन्यो वनितानां व्यतिक्रमात्॥

स्त्रियां शतापराधांश्चेद् पुष्पेणापि न ताडयेत्।

दोषान् न गणयेत् स्त्रीणां गुणानेव प्रकाशयेत्॥

(Kularṇava Tantra, 11th Ullāsam, ślokas 64–65)

According to Kula Dharma, a sādhaḥa who lacks the virtue to respect women, or who fails to adhere to these rules of Saktachara, should be expelled from Śākta circles and devoured by yoginīs (*bhaved yoginī-pashu*).

One of the most important prerequisites for a disciple (śiṣya) to become a sādḥaka is that he must not be despised by any women. A Kula Guru must keep himself aloof from such persons with undesirable traits; such a disciple is not even eligible to continue in the path:

स्त्रीद्विष्टम् इत्यादि दुर्गुणोपेतम् गुरुः शिष्यं विवर्जयेत्

(*Kulaṛṇava Tantra, 13th Ullāsam, śloka 22*)

A Kula Guru should accept as a disciple one who is intensely devoted to women in the physical plane and fully apprehends them as embodied manifestations of the Divine Feminine:

कामिनी-पूजकम् परम् इत्यादि-लक्षणोपेतम् गुरुः शिष्यं परिगृहयेत्

(*Kulaṛṇava Tantra, 13th Ullāsam, śloka 37*)

CONCLUSION

These innumerable pro-women codes echo continuously in Tantric textual sources, especially within the basic canon of Kaulachāra, i.e., the *Kulaṛṇava Tantra*. However, this raises a crucial question beyond ritual: Is this veneration of the feminine truly realized by Śāktas?

It is a self-introspective question for every sādḥaka, and fundamentally soteriological: does the Śākta genuinely grant women the ontological status they deserve—not merely in ritual, but as a reverent fragrance emanating from deep within? Though Tantra may appear transgressive to the untrained eye, it places women at the core of praxis and philosophy.

It is important to note that female gurus and sādḥakas may be fewer in number than men, but this quantitative rarity enhances the qualitative significance of the feminine in Śākta Tantra. Their presence becomes more precious, pristine, and fragrant.

मानुषीहृदयं मर्त्यो वेति नैव तत्त्वतः।

योगिनीहृदयं ज्ञातुं कः समर्थः शिवं विना॥

(*Yogini Hṛdayam, Chakrasanketham, Verse 6*)

“Even understanding the heart of a woman is not easy for most people. If this is so, how can a human being, without the grace of Shiva, hope to comprehend the heart of a Yoginī?”



Understanding womanhood requires more than effort or intellect; it demands a transformation of consciousness. True insight arises only when one cultivates inner awareness, reverence, and the ability to perceive the sacred dimension of the feminine.

In the supreme bosom of flowering masculine consciousness, the fabulous feminine lies as elixir and fragrance, fluid essence and void (vyoma)—without her, it is merely a flower without attributes.

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