

Hindu Tantric Practices of Kathmandu Valley

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Abstract

Tantric Practices in Nepal have formed the bedrock of Nepali culture and have shaped Nepal profoundly. This research article has been formed to specifically outline and shed light on the various tantric practices that are in use in the Kathmandu Valley. It discusses the anthropological origins of this form of Hinduism, its mythology and pantheon, as well as its daily practices and some of its core philosophical concepts. We discuss its origins with the idea of the “divine feminine” or Shakti, and we also recognize the hand tantric practices that have played in shaping the Kathmandu Valley, the various Mahaviyas as well as the ashtmatrikas.

Keywords: Ashtamatrika, Mahavidya, Shakti, Esoteric, Shaivite, Pujari

Introduction

Tantricism is a very vague and large term, but in Nepal, one thing that unites all tantrics is the worship and reverence of a *devi* or female goddess (*shakti*). This differs from the traditional Vedic practices of either worshipping Shiva or Vishnu. The term *shakti* can be used to mean various things, from power to divine female energy (MacCracken, 2018).

Despite its connotation with esoteric practices and “black magic”, Tantric practices are one of many schools of thought for Hinduism. Tantricism is a set of core beliefs, practices and philosophies that are principally used by tantric to attain unity with *Aadi Shakti* (MacCracken, 2018). Their core philosophy lies in the non-dualistic nature of the world, where all things - immaterial, material, animate, inanimate - all originate from the original *Shakti*, and this is what every tantric aims to realize. This belief lies closely with the sect of Hinduism known as *Shaktism*, which also believes in the concept that everything in the world is a manifestation of the original *Shakti* (Gates 2024). However, where tantric practices differ from *Shaktism* is in their acceptance of worldly pleasures. While *Shaktism* regards worldly pleasures as obstacles towards *moksha* (spiritual liberation), stating that you must let go of all desires and greed. Tantra, on the other hand, believes that both *moksha* and pleasure can be attained (Chand 2023). However, another key influence of Tantra is the *Shaivite* traditions (worship of Shiva). This can be seen through the various

origin stories of the *Mahavidyas*, which all involve Shiva and Tantric philosophy and ontology.

As discussed earlier, Tantra deals with the worship of the *divine feminine*. While it takes a non-dualistic stance on the world (that everything is but one entity), it has a whole pantheon of goddesses. These goddesses are collectively referred to as the *Mahavidyas* (great knowledge). Although a concrete list of all the pantheons of tantric practices will be impossible, due to the various contradictions between which goddess to include or not and the various epithets for the same goddess, I have decided to only focus on the ones that are primarily worshipped in the Kathmandu Valley.

Methodology

This study details the tantric Hindu practices that are currently in use in Nepal, and its origin and philosophy. As such, this study requires qualitative methods, which have been acquired from various books and private collections that are available online on archive.org. While the study is based on secondary sources, I have conducted my own personal fieldwork, going to the Naxal Bhagwati Mandir in Kathmandu and discussing with the head priest (*pujari*) of the temple.

Historical Origins of Tantra in Nepal

Tantra originates from the Sanskrit root word of “tan” - which means to weave, or to extend. Using this metaphor for weaving, the word “tantra” took a connotation of “system” or “process”, in words such as “Pachantantra(digestion)”. Thus literally, the word tantra refers to a process of connection ideas. While the term tantra to address the esoteric practices people associate with the word today, was a colonial term, tantra has been in practice for many centuries.

Tantric practices are often seen as non-brahmanical and heterodox to the traditional vedic Hinduism. These tantric practices often included the offerings to the *Mother Goddess* of meat, alcohol and blood (Flood 1996). These practices often caused the stereotype of the “black magic” tantric, which is still pervasive to this day. In Nepal today, there is what is called - *panchbali*(five sacrifices) in the Naxal Bhagwati Mandir. These include buffalo, goat, sheep, duck and hen. There are heated debates on the origins of Nepali tantric practices. Possible locations include Bengal, South India, Rajasthan. However it is also incorrect to assume that Nepali tantricism is nothing but a off-shoot of Indian tantric practices. Kathmandu Valley, in particular, has been heavily influenced by Vajrayana Buddhism.

Starting from the Lichhavi Dynasty in the 4th centuries to reaching a focal point during the Malla dynasty in the medieval ages, tantric practices have been embedded in the framework of the Kathmandu Valley. Kings such as *Pratap Malla*(1624–1674 A.D.) were famous practitioners of tantra. While the *Mahavidyas* are extremely prominent, according to local priests, it is the *Ashtmatrika* who are the ones who have been blessing Kathmandu Valley. These 8 *matrikas*(mother goddess) are as follows - *Brahmani*, *Vaishnavi*, *Maheshwari*, *Indrani*, *Kaumari*, *Varahi*, *Chamunda* and *Narasimhi*. These matrikas are all considered incarnations of the One - the mother goddess. These show the Shakti influences in Nepali Tantra.

Each of the *Matrikas* are considered a feminine version of male deities.

Brahmani - *Brahma*

Vaishnavi - *Vishnu*

Maheswari-*Mahesh*(*Shiva*)

Indrani - *Indra*

Kaumari - *Skanda* / *Kartikeya*

Varahi - *Varaha*

Chamunda - *Chandi*

Narasimhi - *Narasimha* (Christoper 2016)

The matrikas are considered manifestations of *Durga*. They have been assigned to fight demons by the goddess. They are ascribed as assistants of *Durga*, goddess of the battlefield as well as having sinister characteristics. There is an ancient myth regarding the *Asht Matrika* and *Bhaktapur*, a city in the Kathmandu Valley. Each of the 8 goddesses have a shrine or a *pitha*, around the city forming a protective circle. (Kinsley 1997). In the center of the city curiously, stands the temple of *Tripurasundari*, a mahavidya goddess.

Mahavidya and its origin

The 10 *Mahavidyas* are similarly considered incarnations of the mother goddess. There are various myths surrounding the origins of these fierce goddesses. The general consensus of the names of the *Mahavidyas* are (1) *Kali*, (2) *Tara*, (3) *Tripurasundari*, (4) *Bhuvaneshvari*, (5) *Chinnamasta*, (6) *Bhairavi*, (7) *Dumavati*, (8) *Bagalamukhi*, (9) *Matangi* and (10) *Kamala*. The origin of these deities is hotly debated but one prominent origin story is of *Sati* and *Shiva*. The story goes..

King Daksha decided to undertake a great sacrifice, he invited all the inhabitants of the 3 worlds, except Sati, his daughter and her husband Shiva. Daksha disapproved of Shiva's ascetic and antisocial lifestyle and did invite the couple as a gesture of disapproval. Sati was outraged and decided to attend her father's

sacrifice in order to berate her father. Shiva, however, forbade her to go. Forbidden by Shiva to attend the sacrifice, Sati becomes enraged and seeing her fury, Shiva decides to close his eyes. As soon as he opens it, he sees a terrifying female standing before him, her appearance turns old, her eyes red, her hair disheveled and her tongue lolls out. Her clothes disappear and instead she adorns a garland of severed heads.

Shiva is afraid and tries to flee, he runs around in all directions but then in each direction Shiva turns towards, Sati fills the directions with ten different forms of her. According to Sati, these are her “friends”. When Shiva asks “Where is my beloved Sati?” She replies: “Do you not see Sati standing before you?” (Kinsley 1997)

This origin story for the pantheon of Tantricism shows the superiority of the feminine (*Sati*) over the masculine (*Shiva*). The account shows Shiva being afraid of Sati. They also stress on the *Mahavidya*'s terrifying aspects. The concept of *Shiv-Sakti* (Masculine and Feminine) are also philosophical ideas that will be essential to understanding the Tantric world view. The iconography of the *Mahavidya* in Nepal are usually side by side with the *Asht Matrika*. Each of the *mahavidya* has a particular depiction in conventional iconography.

Kali (literally meaning black) stands on the body of the god *Shiva* and has 4 arms. Her hands hold a bloodied cleaver, a severed head and gestures suggesting “fear not” and another signaling the ability to bestow boons. She is naked apart from a garland of severed heads and severed arms.

Tara in appearance is similar to *Kali*. She is seen wearing a tiger skin, her hair in a tight braid. She is generally shown as pot-bellied which depicts her hunger for selflessness.

Tripura Sundari (Lalita) is generally shown as a beautiful sixteen year old girl. She is sometimes shown in sexual intercourse with *Shiva*. She is usually held on a pedestal which is supported by the gods *Brahma, Vishnu, Shiva and Indra*. This indicates her superiority over all the other gods.

Bhuvaneshwari, who is said to nourish the three worlds, holds a piece of fruit in one of her four hands, and a goad and noose in the other two. She has a bright, light complexion and smiles pleasantly.

Chhinnamasta has a disembodied head, her left hand hold her severed head on a plate, and the right hand shows the sword with which she cut her head off. She stands on the body of the copulating couple *Rati and Kama*, the gods of sexual desire.

Bhairabi has a fierce appearance, acting as the role of *Shiva*, the destroyer. She wears a garland of skulls and clothes made from demon skin. Her body is covered in blood.

Dhumawati has a pale complexion and a stern face. She is dressed as a widow, her clothes dirty and hair disheveled. She was shown as a crooked old hag, toothless and her nose pointed. She is often seen riding a crow.

Bangalamukhi (“she who has the head of a crane”) usually sits on a throne of jewels. She holds a club in one hand and with the other she is pulling out an enemy's tongue.

Matangi is shown as a beautiful woman with dark complexion. She wears a beautiful robe and her hands hold a goad, noose, sword and club. Her eyes are described as intoxicated from passion

Kamala is a beautiful young woman with a golden complexion. Two elephants flank her and she sits on a lotus (Kinsley 1997)

It can categorise the *Mahavidyas* into two main characteristics - fierce(*raudra*) and peaceful(*saumya*). The fierce goddesses are ones that have a terrifying appearance and are generally the cause of Tantric's association with black magic, these include - *Kali, Tara, Chinnamasta, Bhairavi, Dhumavati, Bagalamukhi*. The *saumya* forms of the goddess are *Kamala, Matangi, Bhuvaneshwari and Tripurasundari*. (Kinsley 1997). In fact this division of the goddess can be used to differentiate what type of worship pleases them. It is often referred to as Left and Right Handed worship. As Kinsley said

“The left-handed path is restricted to those of heroic nature, is described as dangerous and employs the infamous pancha tattva ritual in which aspirant partakes of five forbidden things: meat, fish, wine a particular type of grain (possibly a drug of some kind) and illicit sexual intercourse”

This type of worship should be used for particular *Mahavidyas* such as *Kali, Tara, Tripura Sundari, Bhairavi, Chinnamasta, Dhumavati and Bagalamukhi*. In contrast, *Kamala, Matangi and Bhuvaneshwari* prefer the right handed style of worship. (Bhattacharyya 1947)

Tantric Worship

As said before, tantric worship is primarily of the *Mother Goddess*. As all the *Mahavidyas* and the *Asht Matrikas* are all but one, it is not necessary to worship each one individually (Kinsley 1997), instead worshipping one goddess is considered enough. There are two ways of worshipping in tantricism - going to the temple and personal *sadhana* (spiritual exercise).

A worshipper going to any tantric temple assumes himself to be a humble servant to the goddess. Generally in Nepal, the puja is conducted daily and is referred to as *nitya puja*. The *pujari*(priest) for these pujas usually comes from the karmacharya caste, the secret mantras to these pujas have been passed down from generation to generation in the karmacharya family. Unlike vedic pujas, the mantras are not supposed to be chanted out loud, instead they are only uttered very quietly by the priest. The reason for this was given by the priest - “to ensure that the power of the *mantras* is not diminished”. According to Nepali tantric traditions, the power of the goddess is inversely proportional to how many people know about it. The secrecy (*gupt*) of the goddess is necessary to make sure the *mantras* work. Furthermore, the secrecy of these rituals are also kept to ensure that the power it provides is not used for malicious reasons.

The *puja* begins with the painting of the goddess with red and yellow paint (turmeric). Rather than a random sequence, the priest follows a route which begins from her head, her necklace, her waist, her breasts and each of her 16 hands. Then he proceeds with the same sequence with red dots. After all her body has been covered with color, the priest begins the mantras. In his hand, he holds uncooked rice and often throws the rice while uttering the mantras to himself. Rice is thrown in a perplexing manner, from his right hand he throws to the left and with the left hand to the right. At the top of the temple lies a ring of statues of the *Asht Matrikas*, and he aims his rice towards them. Around the inner temple sanctuary, lies statues of the 10 *Mahavidyas*, which he aims at one by one with his rice.

Uniquely, during this entire ritual, it is perfectly acceptable for commoners to come in and bend down and attain the *mata's* blessings. Although all the recitations done by the priest are secretive, he also asks the devotees to hold his hand and recite the names of the 8 *Asht Matrikas*. In a way to get the energy of the Goddess inside all the devotees, they form a chain of human hands, with the priest holding the statue, and all the devotees forming a chain from the priest.

Soon, the dressing up of the statue begins. The priest ties a veil around the statue's face and hangs lots of wedding equipment, typical setup of the bride in a traditional Newari wedding. He throws flowers at the statue, and then proceeds to feed the goddess. The Tantric Goddess are known to be fond of the blood sacrifices, which although do not occur daily, are known to occur during *Dashain*. He smears the statues face with sweets and continues the chants.

However Tantric practices involve much more than just temple worship, it requires individual focus and meditation. This is called *sadhana* (spiritual exercise). In this, the aspirant seeks to achieve an awakened or enlightened state of consciousness through

techniques that are physical, mental, ritualistic and spiritual at the same time (Kinsley 1997). A very important part of tantric spirituality is the identification of the macrocosm with the microcosm. (MacCracken 2018). This means identifying that everything in the universe exists in some form inside the individual. *Sadhana* entails that the adept identifies parts or aspects of himself with parts or aspects of the cosmos (Kinsley 1997)

The aim of tantra is to establish identity with the deity worshipped, to appropriate it and to awaken that deity within oneself.

The process of tantric worship begins with purification. The adept bathes, sips water (signifying mental purification) and then asks the goddess to rid his mind of any impurities. He then purifies the place of worship by sprinkling water on the ground. He has to ensure the items to be offered, like flowers, must not be blemished. Then the adept draws a *yantra* (a schematic diagram) representing the particular goddess. Each goddess has her own *yantra*. (Shastri 1994)

The adept then aims to symbolically kill himself. This is due to the belief that our body is inherently made of impure elements - mucus, feces, urine- and as such our body is not fit to be an instrument of worship. Then the adept's symbolic death is followed by his mental re-creation of the world and by the appearance of the Goddess.

He begins a ritual that releases his life force, *jiva*, from his body. As the *jiva* passes through the different stages in the body, each stage is connected with the 5 elements - earth, water, fire, air and sound. This again shows the importance of the macrocosm and microcosm similar identity in tantric belief. As he finds his *jiva* exiting through the top of his head, he symbolically dissolves his body - which at the macrocosm level represents the world being destroyed. He finds his body being destroyed and being reduced to its elemental constituents. (Kinsley 1997)

Re-creation of the cosmos, and the re-birth of the adept are linked and they begin with pronouncing the seed syllable (*bija*) of the goddess. He then visualises the different parts of the cosmos, often in the forms of letters or *mantras*. His creation of the world is complete with the goddess seated on a throne in the center of the world. He then realises that He is nothing but the Goddess. The adept uses various *mudras* (hand gestures) and *mantras*(prayers) to identify himself with the cosmos. (Kinsley 1997)

He begins imagining the goddess and her attendants as residing in his heart. He pictures the goddess while reciting the *dhyana mantra* (concentration prayer) which describes the goddess in great detail. He then transfers the goddess into her *yantra* through exhaling from his right nostril onto a flower that he holds in his hand. The adept then dismisses the

goddess by circumambulating the flower that represents her and visualising her returning back to her normal abode.

This form of *sadhana* illustrates core Tantric philosophy - that everything is the Mother Goddess. Everything has her residing inside of her. This is precisely why, worshipping one of the *Mahavidyas* is considered enough to attain *siddhi* (enlightenment), because each of the *Mahavidyas* is nothing but a manifestation of the same goddess. So worshipping one is akin to worship all of them.

Philosophy of Tantra

A main focus on philosophy is the idea of *Shiva* and *Sakti*. These two forces of masculine-feminine, passive-active are assumed to be the primary forces of creation. However these forces are seen as nothing but one force - the Mother Goddess, in her multiple forms.

The apparent contradictions between *Shiva* and *Shakti* lie at the heart of Tantric philosophy and are essential to its spiritual and metaphysical framework. *Shiva* represents pure consciousness, stillness, and the unchanging, transcendent aspect of reality, while *Shakti* embodies dynamic energy, movement, and the immanent force that creates, sustains, and transforms the universe. At first glance, they seem to be opposites—*Shiva* as passive, *Shakti* as active; *Shiva* as silent witness, *Shakti* as the vibrant world—but Tantra emphasizes that these opposites are not in conflict. Rather, they are interdependent and mutually defining. (MacCracken 2018)

This duality-in-unity is a central Tantric paradox. Tantra teaches that neither consciousness (*Shiva*) nor energy (*Shakti*) has meaning or power without the other. As the *Kularnava Tantra* states, “*Shiva* without *Shakti* is a corpse” (*shava*), highlighting that pure awareness alone is inert without the activating power of *Shakti*. Their union is symbolized in the image of *Ardhanarishvara*, the half-male, half-female deity, expressing the inseparability of opposites—masculine and feminine, static and dynamic, transcendent and immanent.

In Tantric *sadhana* (spiritual practice), this paradox is not merely philosophical but deeply practical. The goal is to realize and embody the union of *Shiva* and *Shakti* within oneself, dissolving dualities and experiencing the non-dual nature of reality. By embracing both stillness and movement, asceticism and sensuality, destruction and creation, the practitioner transcends limited concepts of good and evil or sacred and profane. The contradictions of *Shiva-Shakti* are thus not obstacles to spiritual growth but pathways to liberation, revealing a reality where all opposites merge in divine unity. (Pandit, 2007)

Conclusion

The Hindu Tantric practices of Nepal, particularly within the Kathmandu Valley, reflect a profound synthesis of theological depth, ritual complexity, and philosophical insight. Grounded in the worship of the divine feminine and shaped by interactions with Shaiva and Vajrayana traditions, Nepali Tantra presents a unique and living expression of Hindu religiosity. The traditions surrounding the Ashtmatrika and Mahavidyas demonstrate not only the mythological richness of the goddess-centered pantheon but also its enduring presence in everyday temple worship and festival life. Through both communal rituals and individual *sādhana*, practitioners engage in a process of internal transformation that mirrors cosmic creation itself. Central to this path is the Tantric doctrine that the microcosm of the human body and consciousness reflects the macrocosm of the universe. The philosophical interplay between Shiva and Shakti—consciousness and energy—serves as both a metaphysical foundation and a meditative ideal, wherein realization arises from the integration of opposites into a non-dual awareness. This study, combining textual sources with ethnographic fieldwork, affirms that Tantric practice in Nepal is neither arcane nor obsolete. Rather, it is a vibrant, dynamic system through which devotees seek direct communion with the divine. As this paper has shown, Nepali Tantra continues to serve as a powerful mode of spiritual engagement that challenges dualistic boundaries and affirms the sacredness of both the inner and outer worlds.

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