

Tantric religion and social change

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Abstract

During the period between the seventh and 11th centuries, several religious innovations occurred in Indic religions (which I refer to anachronistically as ‘Hinduism’). In particular, during this period, we see the rise of tantric traditions based on a new revelation of texts, some of whose followers regarded themselves as transcending the older revelation of the Veda. This article explores a period of rapid religious transformation that significantly influenced mainstream society and politics, raising serious concerns within the orthodox Brahminical order. Despite the swift pace of change, I argue that the concept of convergence offers a valuable lens through which to understand the evolving dynamics of the belief systems that followed.

KEYWORDS

caste, Hinduism, innovation, tantra, text, world system

1 | INTRODUCTION

During the period between the seventh and 11th centuries, several religious innovations occurred in Indic religions (which we refer to anachronistically as ‘Hinduism’). In particular, during this period, we see the rise of tantric traditions: traditions based on a new revelation of texts that referred to themselves as tantra and whose followers, the Tāntrikas, regarded themselves as transcending the older revelation of the Veda, whose followers, the Vaidikas, maintained cultural values that had been the bedrock of Brahminical society. This article examines this religious change, which occurred quite rapidly after it began and affected mainstream society and politics in ways

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that were a major concern to the orthodox Brahminical order, especially in Kashmir. These texts mostly developed within the religion focused on the god Śiva, and Sanderson (2009a, 2009b), the most prominent scholar of these traditions, calls the period from about the seventh to the 13th centuries ‘the Śaiva Age’. Conversion to these new tantric forms of Hinduism took place over a relatively short period over the history of Indic religions, from the eighth to the early 11th century. This period of about 200 years is about eight generations. Although it might not be appropriate to call this a ‘sudden’ conversion, it nevertheless falls into the paradigm of conversion if, by that, we mean a process of realignment over time, rather than a sudden event (Rambo, 1993). This realignment can be, I argue, best understood as convergence of older, Vedic tradition with the new, emergent tantric. In terms of convergence we see social trends that come to be voiced through the emergence of tantric texts and traditional models of kingship.

In this article, I use the period of the development of the tantras, with particular reference to Kashmir, as a case study of relatively rapid change and religious innovation in which the beliefs of many people changed and how this change affected politics and society. I frame the early history of Śaivism within what we call the rapid religious change theoretical structure and consider how we can account for this. Although the socioeconomic paradigm has explanatory force, it is not the whole story and, in specifying the constraints that led to the outcome of tantric religion, we also need to take into account the internal, theological concerns.

2 | THE RELIGIOUS INNOVATION FRAME

The general thrust of what I call the religious innovation frame is the idea that there can be rapid religious revision that generates a cultural and political reorientation. In plotting such changes, theorists and fieldworkers have mostly concentrated on Christianity in relation to modernity—the ways in which fundamentalism, for example, has affected the wider society (Chua, 2012; Engelke, 2004; Lampe, 2010; Robbins, 2017). This idea of rapid social change responds to ideas of religious continuity as developed, for example, by Sahlins (1985), who emphasises the conservative nature of religion and its persistence.¹ In the context of medieval India, we see both continuity and change and earlier practices and ideas converge with later ways of thinking, as we will see. The older sphere of Brahminical values was replaced by new values embodied in the tantras that sometimes regarded themselves as simply restating tradition and sometimes saw themselves as challenging tradition and going beyond it. The medieval Indic state was not secular, but it could be pluralist and support a variety of institutions. Both the cultural forces of tradition and change operated during the early medieval period. The structure of the old state is recapitulated but replaced with new content, as it were. Thus, the Vedic priest as the king’s chaplain (*purohita*) comes to be replaced by the tantric Śaiva priest, which is a convergence of the old pattern with the new form (Sanderson, 2004). There is continuity at state level, even with the replacement of Vedic with Tantric forms of religion, although marginal social groups might express a rupture with the old. Kashmir makes an interesting case study.

3 | CONSERVATIVE CULTURAL VALUES

The region of Kashmir, somewhat isolated by surrounding mountains, was of great religious innovation over the centuries, as a centre of Buddhist learning from the early centuries BCE until around the 11th century (Sanderson, 2009a). The kings of Kashmir gave patronage to

various religious groups who vied with one another for political favour. King Śaṅkaravarman (883–902 CE) is noteworthy as a supporter of new religions, to the consternation of conservative practitioners, the Brahmins. The cultural values of the Brahminical class can be summarised in the Sanskrit phrase *varṇāśrama-dharma*, one's duty (*dharma*) with regard to one's caste or place in the social hierarchy (*varṇa*) and according to the stage of one's life as a student, householder, hermit or renouncer (*āśrama*) (Olivelle, 1993). In Kashmir, the Brahmins formed a powerful and influential lobby at the top of the status hierarchy but not the group that wielded direct political power, which was the prerogative of the ruling class (*kṣatriya*, *rājanya*).

The values embodied in the phrase *varṇāśrama-dharma* had been developed through a long tradition that began with the revelation of the Veda, the sacred scriptures of Hinduism, and with secondary revelation in the law books (*Dharmaśāstra*/*Smṛti*) that followed from it. The law books in particular, such as the *Laws of Manu* (*Manusmṛti*), articulated traditional Brahminical values of obedience to caste hierarchy (a low-caste person could not hear the Veda, at risk of mutilation), obedience to patriarchy (a woman has no freedom [*svatantra*] as she is subject to the authority of her father, husband or son), and obedience to the king, who is the walking embodiment of the gods on earth (Olivelle, 2009). This was a religion of great, public sacrifice (which is known as a Śrauta ritual that stems from revelation or *śruti*), supported by the king and other noble patrons. By the time of medieval Kashmir, orthodox Brahminism was not monolithic and various philosophical positions were held, such as the school of Vedic exegesis (*Mīmāṃsā*), the monistic philosophy of Vedānta, as well as theistic traditions focused on the most prominent gods, namely, Śiva, Viṣṇu and the Goddess (*Devī*). The Brahminical religion of Śiva was based on texts known as Śivadharmas, which articulated norms of worship for lay devotees of Śiva as well as for royal patrons. Attracting royal patronage was particularly important in this tradition, and it seems to have been highly successful, guaranteeing a long period of enjoying the pleasures of Śiva's heaven before returning to earth as a king (Sanderson, 2009a). This orthodox Śaivism also followed texts regarded as secondary revelations called *Purāṇas*, 'the ancient stories' of gods and kings.

The religion of Śiva therefore covered a broad social spectrum, from orthodox worship of Śiva completely aligned with Brahminical social values, supported by royal patronage, to popular worship of Śiva through making offerings and performing worship, such as bowing, to an image of Śiva in either the aniconic form of the *liṅga*, a phallic representation of the god, or an anthropomorphic icon (Sanderson, 2009a). In contrast to this lay religion of worship along with its royal patronage, there were initiatory forms of the religion that were esoteric and not concerned with a sojourn in heaven but, rather, with the complete salvation of the practitioner from the cycle of reincarnation (*saṃsāra*) either in this life or at death. These forms of initiatory Śaivism nevertheless influenced the mainstream society and, in turn, attracted royal patronage, even though the rituals advocated were to be performed in secret. However, as Sanderson observes, what is important is that they were performed for the benefit of the king, and celebrations such as military parades could be held to that effect (Sanderson, 2009a). The benefits bestowed on the king were supernatural powers (*siddhi*) that entailed the destruction of enemies, the warding off of obstructions such as interference by malevolent supernatural powers through appeasing them (*śānti*), the restoration of vitality (*puṣṭi*) and the production of rain (Sanderson, 2009a).

Although these initiatory forms of religion are esoteric, they developed quickly and produced innovation in the religious landscape—innovation that influenced civil society and became the concern of the orthodox, who wished to maintain social boundaries and promote adherence to orthodox religion and forms of worship. As an example of relatively rapid religious recasting, we turn to these traditions.



4 | THE CHALLENGE TO ORTHODOX NORMS

Initiatory worship of Śiva or Śaivism came about because of a new textual revelation, distinct from the Śivadharma texts and Purāṇas of orthodox, Brahminical Śaivism, which called themselves tantras. Although the earliest tantra (the *Niḥśvāsātattvasaṃhitā*), or elements within it, date to the fifth century, the proliferation of the tantric revelation occurs from around the seventh century to its culmination around the 11th century (Flood, 2006). These texts are in the form of a conversation between Śiva and the Goddess, generally with the latter asking questions of the former. For example, the *Netra Tantra* (the tantra of the eye), which became popular in the Kashmir valley in around the eighth or ninth century, is a dialogue between Śiva, in the form of the Lord of Immortality (Amṛteśa), and his consort Amṛteśvarī. She opens the dialogue with a question about the eye of Śiva. This is the third eye in his forehead with which he burned Kāmadeva, the god of desire, who appeared before him, a ray of fire emerging from it, showing his transcendence of desire (*Netra Tantra* 1.14). This eye is also linked to the nectar of immortality within a person's head. The purpose of the text is therefore to praise the eye of Śiva and to offer a description of how it can be used in its manifestation in a mantra. I will say more about this text in due course, but what this and other texts in the genre represent is the emergence of new forms of religion from non-orthodox sources into the mainstream.

There is range of texts here with some tantras, those of orthodox Śaivism, called the Śaiva Siddhānta, which conform to orthodox values, and others that completely reject orthodox values, claiming that they were simply inhibitions that prevented people from having the enlightenment experience of realising oneself as Śiva (Inden, 2000; Sanderson, 2009a, 2009b). We have a picture, then, of a conservative, orthodox Brahminical tradition aligned with the Vedas being challenged by a new revelation emerging from non-orthodox and perhaps non-Brahminical social groups. This new revelation developed quite rapidly, with new texts being constantly produced and claiming authority, which was a concern to the orthodox. But although its origins might be on the edges of orthodox society, the new tantric religion came to be absorbed by political elites, and a vision of kingship developed in which the king is modelled after the tantric deity. We know this from the texts that describe the practices of non-Brahminical groups and the literature of the Brahmins, such as the play by Bhaṭṭa Jayanta called 'Much Ado about Religion [Āgamadaṃbara]'. We can therefore read these texts as a sign of change. The evidence for this comes from the non-tantric source, Bhaṭṭa Jayanta's play about religious change in his society. The story is very loose: a young Brahmin named Sankarṣana visits different religious establishments—a Buddhist monastery, a Jain hermitage, groups of Śaiva ascetics—to discuss doctrine and practice. It is a humorous diatribe against these non-Vedic religions, with the young Brahmin who is schooled in the tradition of Vedic exegesis (Mīmāṃsā) and has just completed his studies, arguing his case against these other ideas with senior monks and ascetics. The general conclusion is that these other traditions are flawed in their teachings and, perhaps more than this, are hypocritical in advocating celibacy, vegetarianism and teetotalism while, in fact, indulging in wild parties. This play is written from the perspective of an orthodox Brahmin who is concerned about what he thought was social degradation caused by non-Brahminical religion. The Black Blanket sect (Nīlāmbara) in particular attracted Jayanta's opprobrium. They were explicitly anti-Vedic and anti-Brahminical, singing songs, drinking and performing sexual acts in public wrapped simply in a black blanket. 'Oh, what asceticism!' Jayanta dryly remarks. Their claim, according to Jayanta, is that the Brahmins are simply dominated by inhibition (*śaṅkhā*) and that this prevents them from realising enlightenment, which is achieved through transcending ordinary social mores. In another of his texts, a work of



philosophy called the *Bouquet of Logic* (*Nyāyamañjari*), he thinks that new revelation could be legitimate, but if it threatened social mores, it could not be genuine, and such texts and groups that support them should be banned. In his philosophical work, Jayanta (2005) tells us that King Śaṅkaravarman banned the Black Blanket sect (Āgamaḍaṃbara 2.119, 3.40–50). With the black-clad sect banned, other groups—especially Śaiva ascetics, such as a sect called the Kāpālikās, famous for carrying a skull-topped staff and skull begging bowl (*kāpāla*)—are worried that they, too, will be banned. But Jayanta tries to reassure them that respectable Śaivas, who do not deny the authority of the Veda, will be safe (Āgamaḍaṃbara 3.59–60, 4.5–10). It is the Black Blankets who seek a break with the earlier tradition, and we can perhaps infer that its followers also sought to break ties with their families, as contemporary Aghori ascetics do and perhaps in a way not dissimilar to the ways in which converts to some contemporary churches in Africa do, in which conversion is akin to a rite of passage (Engelke, 2004).

Jayanta's main concern is not only practices of the Black Blankets but also doctrines that challenge the Veda, such as those of the Jains, Buddhists and Materialists. Arguing against the latter group, he urges an alliance between his own Mimāṃsā tradition and the orthodox Śaivism of the Śaiva Siddhānta, for to defeat such a group in debate would be of wider social benefit in that the king would not be influenced by them. In the last act, Jayanta faces a dilemma. Should he support the Vaidikas against the devotees of Viṣṇu because he seems to be a devotee? A new character, Dairyaraśi, a Brahmin who maintains the validity of all religious scriptures, enters, arguing that it is not so much the scripture but the degree to which it supports social order that is the criterion of authenticity (Āgamaḍaṃbara 4.65). The grounds of societal exclusion are less that there is religious innovation in the form of new scriptures and sects than whether they are supportive of the social order. Although the play is humorous—even now in English translation—the message is serious: new tantric religions are a threat to that order. We can see why Jayanta, even in his humorous way, is concerned about this challenge. He sees these new groups as questioning the Brahminical cultural values that he represents and to which he adheres, a regulated social order in which the king, as one of his duties, ensures that caste and gender boundaries are maintained (*Laws of Manu* 7.1234, 7.35). Jayanta is aware that these new religions, because of their promise of power, are attractive to the king and it is conceivable that Jayanta was banished perhaps because of his criticism of the king over this matter: he tells us that he wrote the *Nyāyamañjari* in exile, or perhaps even in prison, somewhat of an Indian Boethius (Dezso, 2005).

With Bhaṭṭa Jayanta's generation and during the time of King Śaṅkaravarman, we therefore have a period of rapid social change in which new forms of religion are developing that confront orthodox doctrine and cultural values. These texts, especially the more extreme, antinomian ones, dispute the orthodox understanding of a good society regulated by Brahminical rules of caste and stage of life, challenge traditional ethics—especially sexual ethics—and attitudes toward gender, and question the implicit relegation to a lower status of women, along with children, low castes and the mentally ill. The picture, however, is more complex in that tantras of the Śaiva Siddhānta adhere to the orthodox view of women and low castes, but a case can be made that these texts initially emerged from groups of esoteric practitioners seeking power and salvation, that they were conceivably composed by members of lower-caste groups, and that they represent an eruption at the level of discourse into mainstream culture, giving voice to those who were on the margins of the social order.

5 | READING TEXTS AS A SIGN OF CHANGE

Our second source of support for the thesis that these texts represent a non-Brahminical incursion into discourse is from the tantric texts themselves. First, within the scale of texts, we have middle-ground tantras, such as the *Netra Tantra*, in which we find material about magical practices that were part of wider popular tradition as well as concerns with possession and exorcism. It is especially the latter that provides evidence for such a thesis. The *Netra Tantra* has a few chapters concerned with this matter, classifying the types of creatures that possess people, the symptoms of possession and how to get rid of them. We can also draw on another text from Kerala, in southwest India, which has a similar chapter concerned with possession and indicates the pan-Indic nature of this new kind of religion.

Although everyone, including Brahmins and kings, was prone to possession—demons could enter people through their shadows if they were in a vulnerable state, not having sufficiently protected themselves through ritual—those lower in the social hierarchy seem to have been most vulnerable. Some chapters in the *Netra Tantra* are particularly interesting insofar as they are signs of popular religious practice and indicate an expression of lower social groups. All people, the text says, highlighting women, children, ‘or even men’ (*manujā vāpi*), are prone to possession, including kings, their wives and sons (19.10), but especially people who dishonour parents and indulge in lust, drunkenness and gluttony (10.35–37). Śiva created these creatures to help the gods defeat another group of antigods called Daityas, but now they are troublesome for human communities, and, so, he caused millions of Mantras, divine beings from the pure realm embodied as sound, to descend to earth to defeat them (10.28). Let us look at two groups of people generally oppressed in a patriarchal, Brahminical culture, namely, women and low castes; women, in particular, are prone to possession if they behave in improper ways due to their bad character (*dauḥśīlya*), hatred of parents or infidelity (*vyabhicāra*) (10.40), as are girls who have begun their courses (i.e., menstruation) (10.42). Children are also prone to possession if they wake up crying at night (10.40) and so are vulnerable people such as those who are mad (*unmatta*), howling and shrieking, and with loose hair (10.43). Possession also affects people who are in a state of impurity through contact with the lowest caste (*caṇḍāla*) or who have come into contact with impurity, such as by contact with a corpse (10.44). This vulnerability to possession can spread through contamination if an impure person’s shadow falls on someone respectable (10.46–47) or on children, which causes the evil eye (*dr̥ṣṭipāta*) to fall upon them (10.48). Those of low social standing, the low castes, who perform impure tasks (*pāpācāra*), are also prone to possession (10.49). A text composed in Kerala, many miles from Kashmir, the *Īśānaśivagurudeva-paddhati*, records possession by fierce (*agneya*) and gentle (*saumya*) beings who attack vulnerable people such as those on their own at night, those who have lost their wealth, those intoxicated with love and those who wish to die. They attack women who have bathed after menstruation, are naked, filled with passion, intoxicated, or pregnant, and prostitutes (ISG mantrapāda 2.42.3b-8 in Śāstrī, 1988; Flood, 2006). These beings also attack different caste groups, notably those of lower castes pretending to be higher caste (ISG mantrapāda 2.42.26–29).

Protection and exorcism, the appeasement of these beings, can be performed through ritual procedures that the *Netra Tantra* describes in some detail (10.55–62, Chapter 6). The practitioner should protect his own family in this way, along with the king and his family (10.85–86). Rites are also prescribed for the king to perform in order to ward off famine and natural disasters, so that the kingdom will prosper (10.106–108, 120–122), poverty will be destroyed (10.131) and even mundane illnesses, such as boils and eye injuries, will be cured (10.125–26). All this is through the power of the ‘eye’ mantra. We might even see that these practices are an attempt to create a

kind of immunity in the social body against incursions by other forces. In sociological terms, we might say the Brahminical social body absorbs alien practices and ideas and, through absorbing those practices, creates a kind of social immunity—or release valve—which prevents the destruction of the collective body (Esposito & Hanafi, 2011).

We need to read such texts with sensitivity to the social reality to which they point. Here we see a concern with maintaining ‘good behaviour’, namely, conforming to social and gender roles that maintain social power. But they also point to a challenge to that power and the emergence of a discourse—here about possession—from lower social groups into the mainstream—to the point that supernatural protection was imperative for the king, not only to protect him and his family but to ensure victory and prosperity. Whether the emergence of these traditions represents a revolutionary force is a moot point. That these traditions quickly became absorbed into the mainstream and adopted by the ruling powers suggests not. But the emergence of tantric religion in the mainstream does demonstrate that a social movement at a more grassroots social level can affect higher social echelons.

It is difficult to make causal claims as explanation for the rise of the tantric tradition because of the complexity of social, political and cultural forces in the society. Multiple factors converge to generate religious change. There is a web of constraint and interacting economic, political and social powers that make it difficult to specify one set of constraints over another. We know little about the macroeconomy of the region during the medieval period. Burton Stein (1980) has referred to medieval Hindu kingdoms as ‘embedded hierarchies’ in which lesser kings paid ritual homage to overarching rulers who extracted symbolic tribute as well as taxation, in contrast to a centralised empire, as seen in Europe. Davidson (2002, p. 26) speaks of the ‘feudalization of divinity’ during this period, in which deities are perceived as kings and warlords, and, conversely, kings are regarded as divine. These tantric kings were initiated by tantric masters, as shown in Nepal and Vijayanagara, for example (Gupta & Gombrich, 1986; Sanderson, 1993). What seems to have begun as ascetic and ritual practices to seek power and final salvation among particular groups—as found in the earliest tantra, the *Niḥśvāsa*, whose earliest layers go back as far as the fifth century, reaching its final redaction around the seventh century—were adopted by the highest political powers (Goodall, 2015). This movement from marginal ascetic practices to mainstream official religion is striking and needs explanation.

Although Roger's model of the innovation-decision process was developed in the context of rapid social innovation in Western societies, the traditions discussed here might be usefully seen in the context of the five-stage model that he develops (Rogers, 2003). If we can see this process in terms of collectivities, rather than individual decision-making, we can see that the earlier model of Brahmanical sacrifice and ritual purity did not address all areas of society. The ruling classes, in particular, were looking for new innovations to enhance their power and perceived standing in the world. The tantric religion provided this to some extent. This new tradition represents new knowledge (stage 1), such as the ritual mantra technology that was believed to enhance worldly power. Those who presented this new knowledge, such as Śaiva priests, promoted the effectiveness of the new religion, especially to kings who adopted the texts and practices, employing Śaiva priests to perform apotropaic rituals to enhance their domination and consolidate their power. The new Śaiva tradition was very successful in persuading (stage 2) royalty of its innovative power that transcended the earlier, Vedic tradition. Kings made a decision (stage 3) to adopt these practices and to reject more extreme practices, such as the Black Blanket sect, as shown by the adoption of the *Netra Tantra* by the Malla kings of Nepal in 1200. The new religion was implemented (stage IV) through the proliferation of manuscripts that were copied and produced, and the innovation was confirmed (stage 5) through the continued adoption of the tradition over the



generations. Indeed, the tantric tradition went into abeyance only with the rise of Islam at the end of the 12th century in the Ganges basin.

Because of the relatively rapid religious change in the medieval period with the tantric traditions, a number of questions arise. First, how do we account for this innovation in the particular context of its occurrence; second, can we infer general principles about rapid religious change that can be applied more widely; and, third, can we understand the particular situation in medieval Kashmir in terms of larger historical forces? The responses to these questions touch upon the problem of reductionism and what counts as explanation. What are the drivers of rapid religious change, or, perhaps more precisely, what constraints do we need to specify that control the outcome of the particularity of a situation of rapid religious change?² These questions are inextricably intertwined. In terms of the specification of constraints, I limit my comments to two realms that are needed to explain tantric religious innovation.

6 | TANTRIC INNOVATION IN THE CONTEXT OF THE WORLD SYSTEM

The issue of how the particular traditions of Kashmir in the early medieval period can be understood in terms of the convergence of larger historical forces is important because the change that we witness there might form part of a network of wider social and political transformations. Of course, it is difficult to establish causal relationships, but it is possible that wider cultural constraints are operative in this period, which control the outcome—that is, tantric religion. A wider network of trade and communication throughout Asia, and possibly beyond, has an impact—albeit indirect—on these religions. Kashmir functioned within a feudal economy that, in the medieval period, produced a surplus that allowed the support of religious groups and monastic institutions (Sanderson, 2009b). In terms of world systems theory, Kashmir falls within what Wallerstein calls the ‘West Indian sphere’, whose macroeconomy, characterised by trade routes, provided the surplus that, in turn, permitted the development of the traditions (Wallerstein, 2004). Certainly, Kashmir was part of a world trade system, open to the cultural influence of Gandhara to its immediate west, which can be described as an Indo-Greek kingdom. In particular, the rest of the subcontinent had a cultural influence. Abhinavagupta tells us, for example, that his parents came from Bengal, and texts composed in Kashmir made their way to the far south rather quickly. Indeed, we can speak of Śaivism as a pan-Indic religion and a cultural force during the medieval period, with rites adopted in Tamil Nadu whose origin is in Kashmir, where they are influenced by indigenous Tamil traditions of poetry and devotion (Sanderson, 2009a).

However, to specify the ways in which economic growth affected culture in medieval Kashmir would involve detailed study that has not, to my knowledge, been undertaken, although Sanderson (2009a) begins to develop this approach, detailing the importance of irrigation systems and new settlements in the development of Śaivism. However, I do not wish to reduce religious innovation to simply the product of an economic surplus, though economic change in the Kashmir valley is probably a necessary condition that allowed religious innovation—such as we find in the tantric traditions—to emerge. Arguably, this is the appeal and force of the new tantric religions, emerging as the voice of groups that had been socially disadvantaged beginning to find voice and, in a sense, pushing into the public discourse. Indeed, the tantras themselves are written in a lower register of language from the learned Sanskrit of the philosophers and poets, called *aīśa* (divine language), which indicates their composition

by people who were not conversant with the higher, learned register (Goodall, 2015). These texts represent a pre-philosophical level of discourse in the sense that they articulate a worldview and provide the material for the systematic arguments of the philosophers but are not themselves arguments and may contain diverse—although related—models for what a person is (Flood, 2020).

7 | TANTRIC INNOVATION IN THE CONTEXT OF THEOLOGICAL PRACTICE

To understand religious change solely through the lens of macroeconomic and political conditions is to overlook the crucial role of internal religious dynamics. These internal constraints, what we might term ‘theological’, reflect a deep conviction in the truth of new revelations and the efficacy of the practices they prescribe. Here, the concept of convergence becomes particularly useful: it draws attention to how doctrinal innovation, ritual practice and social context come together in ways that cannot be reduced to political expediency or instrumentalism. In the case of tantric innovation, the specificity of its textual traditions and the radical reimagining of cosmological order demonstrate a convergence of belief, experience and authority that surpasses merely strategic or transactional explanations.

For example, as Sanderson (2004) has demonstrated, the *Netra Tantra* is integral to the protection of kings from illness, demonic forces, the protection of the kingdom and the destruction of enemies. But this is not the whole story. The text also contains implicit anthropologies and accounts of human life that are soteriological in orientation, if, by that, we mean oriented toward individual transformation that the text regards as divinisation. A strong theological drive shaped the final redaction of the text and views humans as flourishing in terms of a psychophysical transformation that is ultimately aimed at the highest good. For example, three chapters of the text are described as three levels of meditation: the gross (*sthūla-dhyānam*), subtle (*sūkṣma-dhyānam*) and the supreme (*para-dhyānam*). The gross level is concerned with ritual practices to protect people from demonic intrusion and to cure sickness caused by possession; the second level is about meditation upon the body as a subtle anatomy through which power flows that can be harnessed to facilitate a higher realisation; and the supreme meditation is geared toward perceiving the person as divine, as one with Śiva, the ultimate source of the revelation but also of the universe itself. The yoga or meditation practice described in Chapter 7 is an esoteric practice that involves visualisation of the body as a vertical structure with levels of the hierarchical universe mapped onto it. The body thus becomes the central metaphor for the journey of the practitioner to salvation and power, envisaged as accessing the nectar of immortality at the crown of the head through a process of the self, rising up through the body and piercing various blockages, representing various cosmic levels, along the way. The chapter includes a micro religious change that marks the entry of a different model of the self from the religion of the goddess into mainstream tantric tradition. That is, the chapter describes two meditations: the first is the standard tantric practice of the self, rising up through the levels to the crown of the head, and the second one, in which the nectar of immortality is released and floods the body, filling the practitioner with bliss and ensuring immortality. The commentator on the text, Kṣemarāja, calls these the system of the tantra (*tantra-prakriyā*) and the system of the family of goddesses (*kula-prakriyā*) (*Netra Tantra*, 1926). Wernicke-Olesen has called this latter practice part of a Śākta anthropology distinct from an earlier yogic model of the person, in which holding power at the crown of the head is the goal (*bindu-dharaṇa*) (Wernicke-Olesen & Einarsen, 2018).



Here we see a theological text concerned with individual meditation practice and driven by the internal goal of gaining access to the nectar of immortality symbolically located at the crown of the head. This is the integration of practices external to the text within the text's overall theological vision of the human good and what it means for human communities to flourish. The impulse here is theological, rather than political, and the chapter contains no information on or advice to the king but is taken up solely with soteriological concerns and with presenting a model of the person as integrated within a cosmos and the spiritual journey to salvation as a journey of the self that the text refers to as a sense of self-presence (*abhimāna*), harnessed to power (*śakti*) rising through the body (*Netra Tantra* 7.7 cd-8). This seems to be a concrete illustration of rapid religious change, for here we have a new understanding of the self entering into the tantric tradition, a vision of the self as processual, in which life is envisaged as a journey to immortality conceptualised and imagined as a journey through the body. This soteriological vision is distinct from the political expediency of the rituals of protection and the defeat of enemies in advocating a goal beyond the purely practical and in integrating the magical practices of protection into a total system at a lower level. Thus, the three levels of meditation—gross, subtle and supreme—map on to three levels of the body and three levels of the cosmos. The *Netra Tantra* thus represents an integrative vision of the person in relation to world, acknowledging the importance of sociopolitical transaction but offering a vision not restricted to that (Baumer, 2019). The theology of the *Netra Tantra* might thus be seen as the transmission of a culture, if by that we mean, using Wason's (2017, 16) phrase, 'a set of socially transmitted information that affects nearly all of our behaviour'. The culture that the *Netra Tantra* creates is not simply formed through the political forces but is inherent in the text itself.

The cult of the *Netra* mantra is still extant in Nepal. Tantric innovations from the medieval period retain importance in modern Hinduism, although, of course, they are no longer state sanctioned. With the rise of the Delhi Sultanate (13th century) and the Mughals, state-supported tantric religion was no more and newer forms of devotional religion (*bhakti*) emerged with Caitanya (1486–1534) in Bengal, in which individual devotion to deities, especially Kṛṣṇa, came to be salvific. Tantric religion came to be purely esoteric without state support and while contemporary temple worship is influenced by tantra, tantric forms of religion are often associated with black magic or the enhancement of sexuality and so elided with Kāma literature. Having said that, goddess worship is normative in Nepal and other regions, especially the Goddess shrine at Kamakhya. But the legacy of texts such as the *Netra Tantra* remain, in that it is an early example of inclusivism that Paul Hacker (1957) took to be a defining feature of modern Hinduism. So we might say that the spirit of the *Netra Tantra* in its inclusivism indirectly continues in contemporary Hinduism.

8 | CONCLUSION

Given the substantial work that is still needed to connect religion with broader social, political and economic factors in the history of Indic religions, our current assertions must remain provisional. However, the rise of tantric traditions appears to have occurred relatively quickly, and I have attempted here to highlight some key indicators of this change, from Jayanta's play to the tantric texts. Using the concept of convergence, we might propose that the origins of tantric texts were initially on the margins of mainstream social and political order, focused on practices for cultivating supernatural power and attaining final salvation. Yet, as these practices and beliefs began to converge with existing religious and social structures, they gradually infiltrated



and influenced mainstream society. In doing so, tantric Śaivism ultimately came to dominate much of Indic civilisation, from Kashmir to the Khmer kings of Cambodia. While the broader sociopolitical and economic context is undeniably important, it is insufficient to explain the rapid growth of tantric practices. We must also consider the internal, or theological, dynamics of the tradition itself. What begins on the periphery of the social order is gradually appropriated by that order, often in ways that neutralise potential threats, and then adapting them to reinforce and perpetuate the status quo.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data available.

Endnotes

¹ Marshal Sahlins (1985, pp. 147, 155) highlights the important point that cultural categories are not derived in themselves from experience but from relations within a symbolic scheme which itself is historically derived: 'The cultural categories by which experience is constituted do not follow directly from the world but from their differential relations with a symbolic scheme ...'; 'culture ... is the organisation of the current situation in terms of the past'.

² On the importance of constraint in contrast to cause, see Bowker (2018, pp. 133–164).

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