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## Woman in Tantra

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(The word "Tantra" has various meanings. In its present widely accepted sense, Tantra means a literature which spreads knowledge of profound things with the help of mystic diagrams (Yantra) and words possessing esoteric meanings (Mantra) and help the attainment of salvation. Woman has been given the highest position in Tantra. Tantra differs from the Vedas, the epics, the Puraṇas, the Sūtras and the smṛtis regarding the status of woman. Tantra asserts that it is better and auspicious for a Sādhaka to be initiated by a woman Guru. It strongly advocates women's education. It prohibits a householder from torturing his wife. It warns that even an ugly woman should not be neglected. It says that all women the forms of Devī. It introduces Kumārī puja. The mother cult of Tantra is reflected in the concept of Mother India. The root of the song "Vande Mataram" lies in the mother cult of Tantra. In the song Vande Mataram, Mother India is identified with the Tantric Goddesses - Durgā, Lakṣmi and Sarasvatī.)

Despite tremendous achievements of science and technology, the tragedy of the present day civilization compels the masses to utter the prayer that was said by gods after the killing of Śumbha by Goddess Kātyāyānī and that still echoes each and every corner of India.<sup>1</sup>

devi prasīda paripālaya no ribhīteḥ  
nityam yathāsurabādhādhūnaiva sadyaḥ  
pāpāni sarajagatāncea śamam nayāṣu  
utpātapākajanitāngśca mahopasargān.<sup>2</sup>

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O Goddess, be gracious, protect us always from the fear of enemies, just as you have now promptly saved us from bondage by the *Asuras*. Quickly may You bring the sins of all the world to tranquility, and the great calamities born of the ripening of the portents.

This prayer reminds us of the importance of the feminine divinities in Tantra. It is reflected in the position of women in Tantric cult.

### Meaning of Tantra :

Various derivative meanings and definitions of Tantra are given. Some of those meanings are<sup>3</sup> loom, chapter, medicine, unbleached cloth, a system of study or a school of discipline, dress, weaving, conclusion, principal doctrine, paraphernalia, Administration, Āyurveda, Scientific treatises, procreation, method, composition, herbs, oath, the scriptures by which knowledge is spread etc.

In its present widely accepted sense, Tantra means a literature which spreads knowledge and particularly knowledge of profound things with the help of mystic diagrams (Yantra) and words possessing esoteric meanings (mantra) and helps the attainment of salvation.<sup>4</sup>

### Position of Women in India Through Ages :

According to an age old tradition<sup>5</sup>, there is no distinction between man and man, all being equally Brahman-<sup>6</sup> *ayamātmā brahma*- the Atman is Brahman,<sup>7</sup> *tattvamsi-thou art that*. In some places it is asserted that no distinction between man and woman is ever tolerated by our holy books. A woman is even said to be superior to man. *It is perfectly true that as mothers, as creators and sustainers of life on earth, women have some special duties to perform, some special paths to follow, some special ideals to strive after. But these no means lower their dignity and status.*<sup>8</sup>

### Women in the Vedic Literature :

The Indian women reached the zenith position during the Vedic period. In intellectual life they occupied the same position as men. There

were Vedic poetesses, warriors and philosophers. Women received highest education and were called *Brahmavādinīs* and *Sadyobadhūs*. The *Brahmavādinīs* were given *Brahmasūtras* and were allowed to study the Vedas and Utter Sāvitrīmantra<sup>9</sup>. *Sadyobadhūs* were given the *Brahmasūtras* and married<sup>10</sup>. They took part in sacrifices along with their husbands and were called Patnī. This period produced a good number of women personalities like *Viśavārā*, *Romaśā*, *Ambhrī* Vāk, Juhu, Paulomi, Kaksivatī, Ghosā, Jaritā, Śraddhā, kāmayāni etc.<sup>11</sup>

The Rgveda contains hymns by as many as twenty seven women seers<sup>12</sup> There is evidence to show that women followed a number of professions like those of the dyers, embroiderers, and basket makers, which also indicate the absence of the purdah.<sup>13</sup>

#### Women in the Later Vedic Ages :

During the later part of the Vedic ages, women could not enjoy all the privileges that they got earlier. But an upward trend again appeared in the status of women during the Upanisadic period. *Gārgī* and *maitreyī* were the most learned women personalities of that period.<sup>14</sup>

#### Women in the Epic And The Purāṇas :

Women occupied glorious positions in the immortal epics of India, the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata*. *Kauśalya*, *Sīta*, *Anasūyā*, *Śramaṇī*, *Śabarī* were celebrated women in the *Rāmāyaṇa*.<sup>15</sup>

The *Mahābhārata* is resplendent with a galaxy of great women fulfilling their destinies, pursuing their ideals and attaining their ends in different spheres of life. They are *Gāndhārī*, *Kuntī*, *Draupadī*, *Sāvitrī*, *Damayantī*, *Sakuntalā* and *Satyabhāmā* etc.<sup>16</sup>

The celebrated women of the Purāṇas are *Madālasā*, *Devāhuti*, *Satī* and *Umā*.<sup>17</sup>

#### Women in the Sūtras and Smṛtis :

The position of women in India gradually deteriorated as the golden Vedic ideals of unity and equality began to fade off through the passage of time. During the period of the Sūtras and smṛtis, women were bracketed with Sūdras. They were denied the right to study the Vedas, to utter Vedic mantras and perform Vedic rites. But mothers were honoured as before<sup>18</sup>, manu says<sup>19</sup>,

yatra nāryastu pūjyate ramante tatra devatāḥ  
yatraitāstu na pūjyante sarvāstatrāphalāḥ kriyaḥ

Where women are honoured, there the gods revel; where they are not honoured all religious acts become futile. He also says<sup>20</sup>

upādhyāyān dasācārya ācāryānam satam pitā  
sahasrantu piṭṛnmātā gauraveṇātiracyate

An Ācārya excels ten Upādhyāyas in glory, a father excels a hundred Ācaryas, but a mother excels a thousand fathers.

#### Women in Tantra :

Tantra emerged as an invincible cult with its universal approach, catholic outlook, encyclopaedic literature, utilitarian principles, ideals of equality and nature of broad adaptability<sup>21</sup>. But Tantra's remarkable feature lies in its most liberal view about women's status and position.

#### Women and Tantric Rituals :

Tantra is basically a Sādhanaśāstra. It is full of rituals. The performance of rituals prescribed requires some techniques that are hidden. These techniques are known only by a qualified Guru. The Guru is the centripetal force of the Tantric cult. According to Tantra, a woman has every right to be a Guru. *Rudrayāmala* lays down some qualifications of a woman Guru<sup>22</sup>. This Tantra, of course, disqualifies a widow to be Guru<sup>23</sup>. *guruyogyā bhavet sāhi vidhavā parivarjitā*. If a mother is a widow, she can be a Guru. Tantra asserts that it is better and auspicious for a Sadhaka

to be initiated by a woman Guru. If he is initiated by his mother it will bring him in eight times more benefits<sup>24</sup>.

*Striyo dikṣā śubhā proktā mātuścāṣṭaḡuṇāh.*

Regarding worship, Tantra prefers goddesses. Tantric goddesses are specially Daśamahāvidyās<sup>25</sup> - Kālī, Tārā, Sodaśī, Bhuvaneśvarī, Bhairavī, Chinnamastā, Dhumāvatī, Bagalā, Mātangī, Kamalā. Women are allowed to worship these goddesses.

### Women education and Tantra :

Education was given much importance in Tantric period. Women were imparted almost all kinds of education existed in that period. Mahānirvāna Tantra says<sup>26</sup> - Kanyāpyevaṃ pālanīyā śikṣanīyatīatnataḥ. Girls should always be properly educated. The entire Gupta period falls under the flourishing period of Tantra when the mother cult of Tantra spread through-out the country. During this period, some of the women became accomplished poetesses and authorities on belles letters<sup>27</sup>. Four Vedas, Upa-Vedas, Purāṇas, Darśanas, Kāmasāstras, political science and literature were included in the education of women. Detailed accounts of women's education as well as of the prostitutes are given in Vātsyāyana's Kāmasūtra.

### Women at home :

Women enjoyed special privileges and got honour at home. Mahānirvāna Tantra prohibits a house holder from torturing his wife. He is advised to protect his devoted wife like mother and not to leave her in times of greatest misfortunes.<sup>28</sup> It further says that one should please his wife by riches, clothes, love, respect and pleasing words-

*dhanera vāsasā premnā śraddhyāmṛtabhāṣaṇaiḥ  
satataṃ toṣayeddārān nāpriyam kvacidācaret.*

Nirvāna Tantra warns that even an ugly woman should not be neglected: A person who neglects an ugly woman, will lose his sons and wealth and become a Caṇḍala<sup>29</sup>.

### Most exalted Position of Women :

The most exalted position of women in Tantra invites the attention of all the philosophers of the world. No other religious philosophy of the world has given this position to women. Śrī Śrī Caṇḍī says,<sup>30</sup>

*vidyā samastāstava devi bhedāḥ  
striyaḥ samastāḥ sakalā jagatsu*

All the various knowledges, O Goddess, are portions of you, as is each and every woman in the various worlds.

A woman is considered to be the embodiment of the supreme Śakti who pervades with universe.<sup>31</sup>

Tantra reminds that women are gods and goddesses, creation and beneficent<sup>32</sup>, *striyaḥ devāḥ striyaḥ srstih striyaḥ kalyānakārini*.

Kaulāvalīnirṇaya Tantra says that the whole universe is the manifestation of woman<sup>33</sup> - *strīmayāṇca jagatsarvam*. Muṇḍamālā Tantra says<sup>34</sup> that all the girls and women irrespective of caste are to be worshipped. Yoginī Tantra advises<sup>35</sup> that virgins belonging to all castes are to be worshipped. Tarārahasya says<sup>36</sup> that all women are forms of Devī.

### Virgin Cult or Kumārī Pujā :

Mahākālasamhitā says that virgin worship is the best means to win Lord Śiva<sup>37</sup>. Kumārīs or virgins are categorized and named on the basis of ages<sup>38</sup>. They are worshipped on different tithis (39). They are specially worshipped on the auspicious occasions of great festivals, holidays, Mahānavamī tithi, Navarātri and Durgāpujā<sup>40</sup>.

### Female animals and fish :

The liberal attitude towards women is also transferred to female animals. According to Tantra<sup>41</sup>, female animals are not to be chopped off in the name of Animal Sacrifice which is an important part of Tantric rituals. Even female fish are not taken during their spawning period.

**Tantra, Women and Mother India :**

The mother cult of Tantra is also reflected in the concept of Mother India. Śakti Pīthas built on the pieces of the body of Sati is one of the elements of the concept of Mother India. In this context David Kinsley's comment is worth-mentioning<sup>42</sup>.

'The Pīthas found throughout India constitute or point toward a transcendent goddess whose being encompasses, underlies and unifies the Indian sub-continent as a whole. In short, the Indian sub-continent is the Goddess Sati.'

The concept of the divine mother is transformed into the concept of Mother India. The root of the song Vande Mātaram lies in the mother cult of Tantra. In the song Vande Mataram, Mother India is identified with the Trantric Goddesses- Durgā, Lakṣmī and Sarasvatī<sup>43</sup>.

tvam hi durgā dasapraharāṇa-dhāriṇī  
kamalā Kamal-dala-vihāriṇī  
Vāṇi vidyadāyini namāmi tvām

namāmi kamalām amalām atulām  
sujalām suphalām mātaram  
vande mātaram

durga bold who yields her arms  
With half a score of hands  
The Science-Goddess. Vani, Too  
And Lakshmi who on lotus stands  
What are they but, mother, thou,  
To thee in all these forms I bow!

To thee ! Fortune-giver, that art  
To fault unknown, beyond compare  
Who dost with sweetest waters flow  
And on thy children in thy are  
Dainty fruits dost rich bestow

To thee, mother, to thee I bow<sup>44</sup>

To sum up, we may quote a famous scholar.<sup>45</sup>

'No nation can rise without the worship of Śakti-Swamiji (Vivekananda) used to say, Saints like Ramaprasad and Sri Ramakrishna, heroes like Sivaji and Guru Govinda Singh, poets and writers like Bankim Chandra and Bharati and saint philosophers like Sri Sankara and Swami Vivekananda were all worshippers of Śakti. Our country is Matribhumi. We worship her with the mantra 'Vande mataram'. The whole atmosphere is saturated with this mother idea. And this is the contribution of Tantrics, the mother-worshippers of our Mother Country.

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