An Analysis of Vedic and Tantric Tradition with Special Focus on Kalika Purana

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Abstract: The article will try to map Tantric practices and methods as mentioned in the Kalika Purana in reference to Kamakhya temple and make meaning of the same. Tantra as a movement in Indian religious milieu has a distinct orientation. Albeit its origin is a debatable subject, its eminence in the religious setting cannot be overlooked. Tantra succeeded in establishing a prominent place of its own. If it owes its roots to Vedic or Puranic tradition will be looked into the article. Kalika Purana as an authentic literary composition plays moderately an impressive role in upholding the Tantric tradition. Resemblance and contradiction between Bhakti and Tantra are sharp. These facets of each mark their appearance. Tantra could establish a separate space of its own which is independent of any other tradition.

Keywords: Tantra, Vedic tradition, Kali, Bhakti, Kalika Purana, Kamakhya temple

Vedic reference to Tantra

Vedas and Tantra often overlaps and various scholars have debated and discussed on the same. Mircea Eliade put forward that ‘there was no Tantrism in Vedic and Brahmanic times, merely elements that later evolved and became part of Tantrism. References to the Vedic tradition in Tantric texts must not be taken as proof either of the Vedic nature of Tantrism or of direct links with the Veda. Quite likely such references were later introduced to facilitate the acceptance of Tantric texts or sects by orthodox circles.’ S.C. Banerji on the other hand argues that elements of Tantrism are found in Atharva Veda and in lesser degree in Rig Veda. They occur in the form of remedies to keep away disease, thwart activities of ghosts and magic both beneficial and harmful. However, Banerji is also of the opinion that ‘In the magic spells and demonology of the Atharva Veda lay the germs of Tantra. In fact, Tantra is sometimes described as Upaveda of this Veda.’

Difference of opinion can be observed amid Mircea Eliade and S.C. Banerji. Eliade argues that ‘The Tantric tradition appears as a revelation different from that of the Vedas and Upanishads and especially as having different rites and practices. It is not necessarily opposed to the Vedic tradition, which it often refers to be authoritative, but differs from it in being more adapted than Vedism, to the present age of mankind, and in procuring benefits, worldly or non-worldly that the other cannot give.’ In opposition to Eliade, Banerji in his book “A Companion to Tantra” say that various Tantric elements make their appearance in Vedic texts and Upanishads. Even the belief of Supreme Power of Shakti (Female Energy) according to him has established from the Upanishads. He concludes by saying that Tantras are not totally opposed to Vedas. However, Eliade is seen to be in agreement with Banerji on the question of total opposition to Vedas.

One may not dispute Eliade but can work with Eliade and also disagree on one point, i.e. the Vedic reference to Tantrism, as Eliade’s approach is too meaningful to be ignored. His advocacy of a compassionate understanding of the past informs
this study and is thus an important shift in the study of history of religions.

N.N. Bhattacharyya, on the other hand, regards Tantra as a separate branch of knowledge which remained outside the pale of Vedic tradition. Tantra, according to him can survive as a parallel tradition along with Vedas and this was due to the fact that it was the adherence of so-called lower people. Sinha also provides his opinion regarding the subject. He says "Tantric practices are of two types- pro-Vedic and non-Vedic. The remarkable difference between the two being that in the non-Vedic Tantra greater concessions has been given to the sensual pleasures and feelings of the common human beings, while in the pro-Vedic Tantra greater emphasis has been given to the restraint to the common human feelings. Most of the Tantric practices exist in some form or other or, at least, in the form of a seed in the Vedic practices relating either to karma-kanda or to jnana-kanda. Almost all the elements of the Tantric practices can be traced to the Vedic literature, and, hence, they must be regarded as originating from the Vedas."

Tantric elements could be viewed present in Vedic literature, predominantly in Atharva Veda. But it was not matured completely, it could be observed in its initial phase. In later stage, it got amalgamated with some additional elements and Tantrism as a tradition could developed fully. However it ascended as it disapproved some of the principles of Hindu religious scriptures which looked down upon a section in the society which included women and the section who were not encompassed into the caste hierarchies. But, it also cannot be denied that Vedas and Tantra cannot be separated in order to grasping it in complete sense.

Deities in Kalika Purana

Focal deities in Kalika Purana are Siva and Shakti. However Brahma and Vishnu also finds mention in the text. Brahma is mentioned in relation to Mahamaya as being prayed by Brahma. The text provides a detailed description of Siva in the form of Hara, Devi's husband. When Siva is concomitant with Shakti, he is perceived in the form of Bhairava. In the text, Goddess Kamakhya is identified as the manifestation of Kali who is Shakti and all powerful. Kali is described 'as possessing a soothing dark complexion, as perfectly beautiful, riding a lion, four-armed, holding a sword and blue lotuses, her hair unrestrained, body firm and youthful.' She is often associated with death and destruction. Variation could be noticed in the portrayal of Kali in other Tantric texts composed during the time. As in Sakti - samgama Tantra, Kali is portrayed as 'naked, and is seated on the supine body of Siva, immersed in the pleasure of reverse sexual intercourse with him." It can be observed that these variation portals of Kali have influenced to a large extent in the creation of her modern iconography.

Debate and discussion has been going on among scholars on placing Siva and Kali as Aryan deities or non - Aryan deities. S. N. Sadasivan, in his book ‘A Social history of India’ described Siva as a non-Vedic or non — Aryan God as there is no direct mention of Siva in Rig Veda. They try to see him as a Vedic god only by linking him as Rudra. Many western scholars also look at Siva and Kali as Vedic or Aryan deities. Some western scholars, however, try to identify Siva with Vritra who was the chief god inimical to the Aryan and who was defeated by Indra. Whereas S. N. Bose locates Siva - Kali cult as of purely Aryan origin, 'because no trace of Tantric rites is found among the wild savages of India.' The idea of savage is also an ethnocentric understanding of the other which was there from the early period but gained in momentum after Britishers inaugurated the Para dynamic shifts.

Practice of Worship

Kalika Purana mentions comprehensive evidence regarding the practice of worship, followed in Kamakhya temple. Goddess is first offered worship by meditation. She is then pleased by offering various objects of material enjoyment. This is followed by the service of goddess's spouse, Siva, and then the minor gods and goddesses encircling her.

To offer oneself to the deity symbolizes offering all the merit he has gained from the service. It requires leaving behind one’s ego and greed. Offering oneself entirely in front of the deity is a concept homogeneous to Bhakti, where a devotee surrenders himself entirely to one's adored deity. The devotee offers all that belongs to him and then offers his individuality as well. This forms a theme of resemblance between Tantra and Bhakti. The resemblances between Tantra and Bhakti are well essayed in many secondary sources but it is the distinctions that defines each of them.

Tantric tradition states that a devotee can conjoin with the divine. Practices accomplishes when a devotee reaches the phase when he/she can identify themselves with the divine. Bhakti, on the other hand, preaches that a devotee can submit himself/herself to the divine but cannot conjoin with him. A devotee can also become a companion of the God but, still there remains a separation amid the divine and a devotee, which is not observed in Tantric practices. Tantra enables a
devotee to visualize the divine by recitation of mantras and magical gestures, which places the deity in the body of the practitioner.

Another significant facet of Tantric tradition is that in its practices female deities are placed on a higher platform than the male deity. Like, in contrast to Siva, Shakti, his consort takes a prominent position. Woman in Tantra are venerated in all her features. Females are believed to be of supreme Shakti. It is alleged that a male devotee to accomplish himself must contemplate himself as a female. He should encounter the emotions of a woman to realize or feel her in absolute sense. Thus, a eunuch or hermaphrodite finds space in Tantric tradition.

Methods of Worship

Kalika Purana mentions the methods which are followed for adoring Devi Kamakhya. Both right-hand path i.e. dakshinachara and left-hand path i.e. vamaacharya are followed. When Tantra comes in, it is usually overlooked that adoration or rituals can be conducted by following right-hand path. Usually, Tantra becomes synonymous with left-hand path. Thus, in case of Kamakhya also left-hand path or method of worship becomes more highlighted in contrast to right-hand path.

Kali Prasad Goswami in his book ‘Kamakhya Temple: Past and Present’ have put forward “the worship of the goddess Kamakhya is performed according to ‘kram’ method. According to it, the worship centers round Shakti as opposed to ‘trik’ where the chief deity is Siva. Further, the ‘kram’ method is earthly being associated with the fulfillment of all human desires whereas ‘trik’ method is spiritual; its object being the liberation of human soul i.e. merging with Brahma.”

“Materialistic outlook dominates the worship of Kamakhya. The ‘kram’ system is earthly, which seeks to satisfy the wants of human life through the propitiation of the deity. This materialistic aspect of worship is also supported by the Vedas.”

Kalika Purana states that worship in the Kamakhya temple begun during the reign of Naraka. He is said to be the founder of Kamarupa dynasty and establisher of worship in Kamakhya temple. But, it cannot be overlooked that Kalika Purana is a later literary composition and adoration in Kamakhya took place since past. Perhaps the structure was not in a prosperous setting but, it was reflected as a sacred space where reverence used to take place. But, the practice and method of adoration in Kamakhya temple during that period is obscure. It can only be presumed that during that time, it was performed according to ‘traditional verbal injections of the original inhabitants.’

Kamakhya temple becomes unique in the sense that it represents a mixture of traditions, both Hindu and non - Hindu. Kalika Purana gives elaborate description concerning various manifestation of the goddess. In some, she appears to be loving, whereas, in some, she appears to be terrifying. In her most loving manifestation, she appears in the form of the goddess of sexual desire i.e. Kama who is seen engaged with Siva in love play. In her terrifying form, she appears as Kali. Kamakhya Devi is associated both with local deities like Kesai Khati and Savari and also with mainstream Hindu goddess like Durga and Kali.

Conclusion

Observing Vedic and Tantric tradition as two distinct paths will benefit in its enhanced understanding. In contrast of attempting to locate their origin in relation to each other, discrete study of both the tradition will further augment their knowledge. An extensive diversity of Tantric practices in the Kalika Purana and these practices are the result of a long evolution over a vast historical canvas. In this course, they have also incorporated many significant concerns that were overlooked by the Vedic and Puranic form of worship. Notably among them is the adoration of female deities. Distinctness of Bhakti and Tantra defines them entirely. Noteworthy attribute of Tantric tradition is allocation of a scared space to eunuch or hermaphrodite. Tantric tradition have attempted to bring out the different voices in public sphere, which were not in a position before to make themselves heard. Thus, locating it in a separate space is indispensable, which would be more appropriate alternately of bracketing it with various traditions like Vedic and Bhakti.

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