

1 The Return of the Yogini – Part 2

2
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4
5 In the first installment of this
6 paper, we reviewed a sampling
7 of respected academic sources,
8 both Western and Indian. We
9 looked at sources that named
10 themselves subaltern, as well
11 as spiritual

12 bio/autobiographical sources
13 focused on male saints.
14 However, in none of these
15 sources was the focus on the
16 role of women as adepts,
17 gurus, or yoginis. Yet in each
18 source, we found references to
19 the presence of women of
20 power, to yoginis. I would like
21 to now demonstrate that this



22 was, in fact, only the tip of the iceberg, as Schussler-Fiorenza’s hermeneutics of suspicion would
23 claim. By surveying articles and books specifically focused on the role of women in India, I will
24 demonstrate the return to the Hindu Tantric foreground of the female yogini adept.

25
26 Lynn Gatwood, in *Devi and the Spouse Goddess*, charts the spousification of the independent,
27 sexual tribal goddesses by the Brahminic priestly caste as reflecting the historical effort to
28 ‘domesticate’ the ancient Dravidian peoples, and their wild, untamable goddesses. When
29 discussing the role of the goddess Kali in left handed Tantra, and the transformation of sexual
30 energy into psychic energy through identification with the male and female aspects of divinity,
31 she states “there are references in the literature to female gurus and initiators.”¹

32
33 In a book called *Oh Terrifying Mother*, by Sarah Caldwell, an ethnographer who lived in India for
34 over a year, what could be the history (herstory) of the yogini in South India is discussed. In
35 describing the tribal roots of low caste possession performances, Caldwell identifies the public
36 religious lives of young women during the 1st to 4th centuries as including festival rites where
37 women would get into a frenzy, dance, sing and participate in possession trances and divination.
38 She also cites documentation of the existence of female shamans in tribal mountain cultures,²
39 and goes on to note that female oracles still existed in 1983 in the hilly tribal area of the Palghat
40 region of India, as the last of the female shamanic priests.³

41
42 In the book *Twilight Goddess* by Cleary and Aziz, in the chapter called ‘Tantric Goddess Worship,’
43 there is a discussion of women suitable for partnership in the Tantric yoni-puja, or worship of
44 the feminine sex. In noting the ages of women involved—from girl to mature woman, from
45 unmarried to married—and discussing the categories: dancer/actress, skull wearer, accessible
46 woman, washerwoman, hairdresser, Brahmin, Shudra, cowherd and garland maker’s daughter,
47 there is reference to women of the lower castes not only participating in Tantric rites, but

1 *becoming gurus.*⁴ Some of these terms were said to be given to aboriginal tribes of the
2 mountains or forests by Vedic scholars, *many of which were matriarchal, matrilineal, or*
3 *matrilocal, and who, it is thought by many, may be the forebears of Goddess religion and*
4 *Tantra.*⁵

5
6 Specifically, the term 'skull wearer,' refers to a "member of the cult of naked or rag-clad ascetics
7 know for such extreme practices as frequenting cemeteries, wearing garlands of bones, and
8 drinking wine from skulls ..." The authors go on to state that " in spite of their asceticism, these
9 cultists did not believe in seeking a liberation in which there was no pleasure; they concentrated
10 their meditation on the idea of the supreme power resident in the female generative organ, and
11 the men and women of the cult practiced free sexual relations with each other."⁶

12
13 In further discussion of women involved in Tantric rites, the authors note that one of the
14 categories names "*regal, accessible woman,*" or *woman who is free and independent like a*
15 *king.*"⁷ There is also mention of the freedom of women from aboriginal tribes, often integrated
16 into society as 'untouchables,' the skull bearers who deliberately outcasted themselves, and
17 *independent women known as svairini, who had very free attitudes towards sexuality.*⁸ These
18 references certainly indicate the presence of women in tantra, women that could fit the
19 definition of yogini....

20
21 In the article "Women in the Saiva and Sakta Ethos," by Sanjukta Gupta (from *Roles and Rituals*
22 *for Hindu Women*), the author discusses women poetess-saints of a specific Tantric tradition,
23 the Saiva, that "were able to subvert their social roles and so achieve self-determination and
24 spiritual fulfillment." She states that this is due to the Sakta theology of the Tantras that was
25 "apt to revere women's spirituality and to *respect the autonomy of women saints.*"⁹ She names
26 three saints of this tradition, and states that one of them left home to practice her devotion in
27 the seclusion of the forest, defying genteel society and deliberately *choosing the extreme life of*
28 *a skull bearing ascetic (kapalika) in the wilderness.*¹⁰

29
30 The second woman saint Gupta identifies left her marriage to a king and "discarded everything
31 she possessed, including her clothes, *she wandered alone and naked, her long disheveled hair*
32 *covering her nudity.*" The Saiva group was impressed by her *spiritual wisdom and her command*
33 *of metaphysics,* and she was thus accepted into the group of saints....¹¹

34
35 The third woman, who due to a difficult relationship with her mother-in-law was turned out of
36 her home, then took up the life of a *female tantric renouncer and ascetic practicing yogini.* *She*
37 *followed the 'left-hand' tantric tradition,* wandering about in a minimum of clothes and used
38 both wine and meat in her religious offerings. She followed no guru, but her own judgment, and
39 yet, her poetry is found to have sound understanding of the central tenets of Saiva non-dual
40 philosophy.¹² She was said to *have lived the life of a tantric master,* and commanded great
41 respect among the Saivas of Kashmir, and also with the Sufis of that time (all my italics).¹³ As a
42 Saiva tantric, Gupta states that this poetess Lalla had the option of renouncing social life and
43 *following the ways of a ... yogini, or even of emulating the stance of the more witch-like dakini ...*

44
45 Kathleen Erndl, in her article "Is Shakti Empowering for Women?" discusses *current* evidence to
46 suggest that Shakta traditions tend to be more inclusive of women as practitioners, and more
47 accepting of *women as leaders or gurus,* citing the Shakta influenced Anandamayi Ma, research
48 on Shakta women saints, as well as a study of Shakta women ecstasies. The author states "in

1 *tantric circles, women gurus are commonplace.*¹⁴ She documents the work of an artist-activist
2 whose photo exhibits were inspired by a pilgrimage to Kamakhya, “*where female and male*
3 *ascetics perform Tantric practices in caves on the hillsides.*” These exhibitions are excursions
4 “into the lives of “women who dare to define themselves in relations to the metaphysical rather
5 than the social ...”¹⁵ And she notes the work of another Indian woman who has established a
6 Tantra Foundation in Delhi “whose aim is not only to preserve Tantric traditions but *to promote*
7 *Tantra as relevant to the lives of contemporary women.*”¹⁶

8
9 In her article “Varieties of Hindu Female Ascetism,” (from *Roles and Rituals for Hindu Women*)
10 Lynn Denton makes a definitive statement about *current tantric ascetism among women* in
11 Varanasi, India. I would like to quote a significant passage from her writing:

12
13 Female tantric ascetics may be divided into three groups. The first consists of
14 female yoga practitioners (yogini): women who practice yogic postures, breath
15 control and various other ‘acts’ in order to render the body supple, to aid in
16 meditation, to gain a vision of the deity, and to achieve the blissful state of
17 absorption. The second category consists of women who are called perfected.
18 These women may engage in yogic exercises, but are best known as practitioners of
19 the feared ‘left-hand’ Tantric path ... Female ascetics of this type are free to have
20 sexual relations ... perform meditation at night on the cremation ground. They also
21 seek bliss, but in addition aim to cultivate the psychic of occult power that
22 accompany intense meditative and yogic practice....¹⁷

23
24 Denton goes on to state:

25
26 All female tantric ascetics believe they have very special powers, and none
27 separates the acquisition of power from the notion of spiritual liberation. Tantric
28 ascetics describe their goal in different ways, emphasizing the state of bliss or
29 madness which it brings. To be intoxicated and wanton or mad is evidence both of
30 spiritual attainment and of the freedom which their type of asceticism expresses.¹⁸

31
32 And:

33
34 More prevalent among tantric female ascetics as a class (many of whom never
35 perform yoga at all) is their full identification with a deity ...Those who do not act as
36 oracles none the less consider themselves to be the embodiment of a deity ...
37 Tantrics believe (and act as if) they are already divine.¹⁹

38
39 In case the reader is not yet convinced of the presence of female adepts in the Tantric tradition,
40 let me present further evidence. In *Yogini Cult and Temples*, the author (Vidya Dehejia) touches
41 on a critical issue almost immediately in the preface: though the tantric scriptures are almost
42 written in code, it is there that one can find the most information on the yogini tradition.²⁰ She
43 sources her work on Indian manuscript libraries she personally visited.²¹

44
45 Though Dehijia’s work mainly focuses on non-human yoginis of the temples, those who are
46 considered patron goddesses of the Kaulika Tantrics, however, in her introduction, she discusses
47 the different meanings of the word *yogini—three of which fit our purposes: a female devotee, a*

1 *sorceress/witch, and a yogic adept who acquires magical powers.*²² Regarding the existence of
2 yoginis as followers and adepts in yoga, Dehijia references paintings, *where they are often*
3 *portrayed as ascetic mendicants or seated in shrines visited by male and female devotees.*²³
4 Magical powers of these yoginis are cited as breath control, levitation, and control over living
5 creatures. *Regarding their independent status, the author documents no fixed place of residence*
6 *for these yoginis, stating they wander the country-side acquiring followers and teaching them*
7 *difficult path of yoga.*²⁴

8
9 Regarding the sorceress and yogic adept, the author documents through various stories the
10 *specific powers of yoginis, dakinis, and sakinis*, to include the following: power to shapeshift,
11 power to fly through the air, power to resurrect the dead, power to become small, power to
12 become gigantic, the power of compelling will, control over body and mind, control of the
13 elements, and fulfillment of all one's desires (let alone other more controversial powers)...²⁵
14 The author also discusses the very Tantric-sounding practices of gathering in cemeteries,
15 sacrificing of animals, eating of flesh and the corpse ritual (offering of wine, ritual breathing and
16 sexual union on top of a body) as methods for gaining these magical powers.²⁶ *Later she*
17 *specifically documents some of these sorceresses as following the unorthodox path of the*
18 *Kapalika Tantrics.*²⁷

19
20 Dehijia also documents *yogini practitioners in the Tantric tradition known as the Kaula Marga*
21 *path*, specifically discussing their role in aspects of the maithuna (sacred sexual) rite.²⁸ She
22 describes them as utilizing sexuality as a way of liberation--including circle practice in the yogini
23 temples. In the circle, a yogini is paired up with an unknown partner. Anointing of the body and
24 touching is emphasized. All women in the circle are the Devi and all men Shiva. The human
25 female yogini, representing the goddess, receives the yogi as a representative of Shiva.²⁹
26 *Kularnava Tantra mentions the female partners of the Ritual as yoginis* as well, documents
27 Dehijia.³⁰ And in Kamkhya these women adepts are known as Bhairavis.³¹

28
29 Dehijia gives indicators of the position of esteem in which the yoginis are held on this path.
30 Things that will anger the yoginis are listed as the following: insulting a woman, striking a
31 woman, speaking of her faults, being angry with a woman, and making caste distinctions.³²
32 Again regarding the independent status of these women adepts, the author notes that the
33 *yoginis of the Kaula Tantric path do not live with any yogi on a permanent basis*, but are called
34 upon for ritual on holy days ... And states that *there are yoginis currently practicing the Kaula*
35 *Cakra Ritual....*³³ (all my italics)

36
37 Several authors have tantalized us with documentation of yoginis not only in the Tantric history
38 of India, but their presence today (Svodboda, Caldwell, Denton). What about the following two
39 sources? Daniel Odier's 1996 account of his long term studies in Buddhism, Hinduism and
40 Tantra, his long search for a guru, and his initiation into the sacred sexual practice of the
41 Kashmir Shaivic tradition by a female tantrika, chronicled in *Tantric Quest?* And Amarananda
42 Bhairavan's spiritual autobiography documenting his childhood initiation in East India, in a
43 village where *"the matriarchies gave prime recognition to women in spiritual and temporal*
44 *matters,"* where *"women seers and tantrikas enjoyed superior standing compared to their male*
45 *counterparts,"*³⁴ where in fact he tells the story of his *initiation by a female preceptor/sorceress*
46 *(his aunt), and a local village female aghori (magical practitioner)?* Where he discusses the
47 female vallipachads (holy women) and healers throughout the story? Where his female cousin
48 is initiated with him? This man was in residence at the Kali Temple of Dakshineswar in Laguna

1 Beach, California (2002). His account was published in 2000 and provides more *current evidence*
2 *for female yoginis, sorcerers and aghoris practicing the Tantric path....*

3
4 So what do we ultimately have here? What exactly have we uncovered? What have we teased
5 out of accepted academic sources, rather subaltern sources, depictions of saint's lives, personal
6 lives, woman centered sources, sources from undiscovered manuscripts of ancient India and
7 current spiritual autobiographies? Have we discovered the presence of the female adept,
8 sorcerer, magician, yogini that has been there all along in the history of India? Hidden from
9 view but now rising to the surface, out of the shadows, to take her rightful place in the Goddess
10 worshipping traditions of India? You decide ...

11
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13

14 **Notes**

¹ Lynn Gatwood, *Devi and the Spouse Goddess* (Maryland: Riverdale, 1985): 162-3.

² Sara Caldwell, *Oh Terrifying Mother* (1999): 24.

³ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁴ Cleary and Aziz, *The Twilight Goddess* (Boston and London: Shambhala, 2000): 30.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 31.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*, 32.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 36-7.

⁹ Sanjukta Gupta, "Women in the Saiva and Sakta Ethos," in Julie Leslie's *Roles and Ritual for Hindu Women* (1991):195.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 197-8.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 198-9.

¹² *Ibid.*, 199-200.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 201.

¹⁴ Kathleen Erndl, "Is Shakti Empowering for Women?" *Is The Goddess A Feminist?* (New York: New York University Press, 2000): 93.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 99.

¹⁶ Ibid., 94.

¹⁷ Lynn Denton, "Varieties of Hindu Female Asceticism," *Julie Leslie's Roles and Rituals for Hindu Women* (Rutherford, Madison, Teaneck: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1991): 226.

¹⁸ Ibid., 227.

¹⁹ Ibid., 229.

²⁰ Dehejia, xi.

²¹ Ibid., x.

²² Ibid., 11-12.

²³ Ibid., 11.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid., 13-15, 53.

²⁶ Ibid., 15.

²⁷ Ibid., 17.

²⁸ Ibid., 11.

²⁹ Ibid., 13, 62-3.

³⁰ Ibid., 32.

³¹ Ibid., 63.

³² Ibid., 34.

³³ Ibid., 63.

³⁴ Amarananda Bhairavan, *Kali's Odiyya* (Maine: Nicolas Hays, 2000): xi.

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