

1 The Return of the Yogini – Part 1

2
3 **By Mari P. Ziolkowski, Ph.D.**

4 5 **Preface**

6
7 The term ‘yogini’ has several
8 meanings, according to Miranda
9 Shaw. She states that the term can
10 mean a female practitioner of yoga, or
11 ritual arts, a female being with
12 magical powers, or a type of female
13 deity.¹ Though I am interested in all
14 of the above, in this paper I will focus
15 on the human female adept, guru or
16 yogini.



17
18 When I first read in some depth about
19 the cult of the yoginis, I was a bit put
20 off by their connection to left handed

21 Tantric practices (development of magical abilities, group sacred sexual practices, wandering naked,
22 meditation in the cremation grounds).² However, it seems that as I am drawn into further
23 understanding of my relationship with the Tantric Wisdom Goddess Kali, I am also drawn into a need
24 to understand who these antinomian yoginis were (are). On an intuitive level, after working with
25 Kali, reviewing several sources, and hearing some presentations on the yogini/dakinis,³ I became
26 absolutely convinced of their existence not only in the Buddhist Tantric tradition, but in its sister
27 Hindu Tantric tradition as well. Though it has been said that there is not much in the way of
28 academic sources to support this claim, coming from a feminist spirituality standpoint as I do, I
29 believe that their presence must be teased out from the rather masculinist sources that make up
30 much of academia.

31
32 Though I am not an Indian scholar, and cannot hope to accomplish a comprehensive search of the
33 literature—on a limited basis, from a sampling of English language texts I have come across in my
34 research—I would like to utilize some of Miranda Shaw’s methodology and review the references to
35 yoginis in the Hindu Tantric tradition. I would like to see where these references lead us, what
36 conclusions if anyone can draw from their presence, and whether or not there could be any basis for
37 my intuitive hit that they are there (here) waiting to come out of the shadows and make their
38 presence known.

39 40 **The Yogini Trail ...**

41
42 Let us begin with a review of Miranda Shaw’s methodology, which I believe can and should be
43 applied to the Hindu Tantric situation. As she discusses her goal of contributing a chapter on the
44 reclaimed history of Indian women, Shaw also discusses how in the “study of women and religion in
45 India, previous opinions are being revised and overturned,” that “Indologists in the past have tended
46 to accept male religiosity as normative and universally representative,” and that “many factors have
47 predisposed scholars to fail to recognize the existence of women’s religious activities,” such as
48 “uncritical acceptance of reports of male informants in the field, unwitting participation in sectarian

1 polemics, and an inability to gain access to women’s gatherings and religious practices,” to name a
2 few.⁴

3
4 Shaw states that theoretical considerations that contribute to the need for a hermeneutics of
5 suspicion include the presence of colonialist judgments, Victorian values impressed on Indian
6 traditions, and western dominance psychology (indiscriminate application of western categories of
7 gender relations).⁵ For example, Shaw notes that the assumption that women’s bodies were used as
8 a physical instrument of male purposes in tantric ritual “implies a Cartesian dualism of mind and
9 body, a separability of spirit and matter that is alien to the Indian context.”⁶

10
11 Shaw goes on to discuss the need for reclaiming the historical agency of women— concentrating on
12 how women *acted* rather than how they were acted upon.⁷ And states that “available information
13 about women cannot be accepted as numerically representative” but rather, in Fiorenza’s words,
14 “should be read as the tip of an iceberg indicating how much historical information we have lost.”⁸
15 Shaw emphasizes “women’s presence and points of view can sometimes be reconstructed by going
16 beyond the statements made in a text to imagine the world of discourse in which the text occurs,
17 controversies to which it is responding, practices or social arrangements it seeks to legitimize, and
18 assumptions it leaves unstated.”⁹ For example, Shaw discusses, related to the oft described story in
19 tantric literature of the yogi searching for a yogini, the possibility that there existed a movement in
20 which *men apprenticed themselves to women*. As tantric texts (including Hindu) often describe how
21 a man is to approach the yogini, what he is to offer her, and what forms of respect and obeisance he
22 is to show, it is easy to imagine, states Shaw.¹⁰ Such an approach raises the possibility that women
23 helped to create and dictate the categories within which men viewed them, the terms on which men
24 approached them and the conditions under which they would accept male companionship.¹¹

25
26 Though Shaw focuses her work on the reclaiming of the female adept’s presence in the Buddhist
27 Tantric tradition, she makes important points relevant to the reclamation of the Hindu Tantric
28 woman adept. She talks about the Buddhist tradition as “tapping into the same wellspring as Hindu
29 Tantric and Sakta (Goddess) movements.”¹² And notes that it draws from Vedic ritual and mantra,
30 mystical theory, hatha-yoga, kundalini-yoga, Saivite (god-Shiva oriented) iconography, and Sakta
31 beliefs.¹³ She even goes on to state that “foremost among the pan-Indian influences were those of
32 the [Hindu] Sakta and Saivite traditions,” and that “Tantric Buddhists encountered their
33 counterparts at the cremation grounds and pilgrimage places where they congregated, as these
34 were also the gathering spots of yoginis and yogis of Saivite and Sakta persuasion.”¹⁴ Shaw also
35 notes that Tantric Buddhism and Saktism share an emphasis upon female deities and women as
36 embodiments of female divinity, *including a deference to women in social and ritual contexts*.¹⁵

37
38 Considering the existence of such connections between Buddhist and Hindu Tantra, there seems to
39 be plenty of reason to utilize Shaw’s methodological concerns in reclaiming women’s position in the
40 Hindu tradition. However, Shaw herself goes further. She references the Hindu tradition as *already*
41 *having identified the presence and respect for the position of women in the Tantric tradition!*¹⁶ And
42 goes on to document Western scholars like Sir John Woodruffe—who, she states, spent long periods
43 in India and was a Tantric initiate—as reporting that *women can be gurus and perform initiations*.¹⁷

44
45 Lilian Silbourne, another scholar said to be a Tantric initiate by Shaw, enters into a complex
46 discussion of Tantric Yoga that informs our topic. In *Kundalini, The Energy of the Depths*, Silbourne
47 touches on the role of women in various Tantric texts. In a treatise where Siva is questioned by the
48 Goddess “What is it that should be worshipped? *Women are worshipped*. Who is the worshiper?
49 Man is the worshiper.”¹⁸ In discussion of the esoteric gatherings of the ‘yoginimelaka,’ (where all
50 members of the same mystical lineage commune¹⁹), Silbourne describes the sexual union that takes
51 one to the ultimate reality, the mystical union that transfigures ordinary union. She notes each

1 partner as “*acting separately and each for oneself.*” And “if one of the consorts perceives that the
2 other has not reached the emergent state, he must remain in this state until *inducing it in his*
3 *partner.*” During a later phase of the rite, “*man and woman act in conjunction, according to*
4 *alternate movement of appeasement and emergence.*”²⁰

5
6 This description of the woman acting for herself, the responsibility of each to help the other achieve
7 a ritualistic state, and the emphasis of man and woman acting in conjunction certainly implies an
8 expertise on the part of the woman, as well as the importance of her role in the ritual union. The
9 woman involved in such a rite must be a woman of knowledge ...

10
11 In the same chapter, Silbourne continues, regarding the rise of kundalini energy assisted by the guru,
12 “*prana is more abundant in the woman,*” and “while the man emits, woman absorbs, she is able to
13 assimilate great powers and *may prove mightier than man.*”²¹ In discussing what sort of woman
14 participates in this ritual, Silbourne notes the partner is referred to as “divine duti who, infusing
15 boldness and power into her partner, *acts as an initiator to him.*”²² And later Silbourne states “on
16 the subject of woman ... *to her alone* should the guru impart the whole of the secret doctrine; *and*
17 *through her, by the practice of union, it is imparted to men.*” In commentary then “A great master,
18 therefore, is in possession of this function *through an initiated woman ... the founder of the Krama*
19 *[tantric] school did not impart his doctrine to a disciple but to three yogini who in their turn, initiated*
20 *some men.*” And finally, and most directly: “To become fit for the esoteric way the adept must be
21 initiated by a master belonging to a reliable tradition (Krama, Kula, Sakta) *or better still, by a yogini*
22 *who appears to him in a dream ... or else by a woman initiate, herself also called yogini, who will act*
23 *as a master for him.*”²³

24
25 Intrigued? Now we shall move on to another academically respected source, that of Gupta, Hoens,
26 and Goudriaan in *Hindu Tantrism*. Discussing Tantrism in Indian history, the authors state “among
27 the yoginis and other Tantric saints there have been a *substantial number of women who may have*
28 *acted independently...*”²⁴ And “*the frequency of terms like yogini ... in Tantric literature renders this*
29 *conclusion unavoidable.*” Citing Tantric literature, the authors go on to state “there are *many*
30 *references to female sadhakas [practitioners] and even gurus.*”²⁵ Later they state that among the
31 Saiva ascetics and lingam worshippers *there were women*. In the chapter titled “Tantric
32 Transmission,” the authors, citing further references, state “at least in circles of the Kulacarins (a
33 particular tantric tradition) one knew the *possibility of women to become pupil and guru.*”²⁶ In fact,
34 the authors go on to say “*Nowadays female pupils and gurus are quite common!*”²⁷ (all my italics).

35
36 Even in a text discussing the Tantric philosophical perspective of Kashmir Shaivism, Dyczkowski,
37 though he uses particularly masculinist language, refers to the presence of women adepts in Tantra.
38 In the Introduction to *Doctrine of Vibration*, the author discusses a young scholar as “seated in the
39 midst of a great congregation of religious leaders, preceptors and *female ascetics (yogini)*, who
40 recognized him to be the foremost preceptor of the Saiva groups ...”²⁸ Later, still discussing this
41 scholar, he documents his eulogies of the land of Kashmir “as a place where *Tantric adepts, male*
42 *and female*, met to drink the wine for which his beloved land was famous ...”²⁹ In other of
43 Dyczkowski’s writings, Miranda Shaw cites him for stating “in some Tantric lineages *women are*
44 *regarded as preferable to men as gurus!*”³⁰

45
46 Clearly, even in historical and philosophical texts well respected in the area of academe—texts often
47 difficult to access because of the writing style of the authors (or their efforts to include so many
48 diverse aspects of the Tantric traditions), texts that have discourse that could be seen to marginalize
49 women because of their emphasis on the male adept’s role—even *there* we find the mention of
50 women gurus, initiators and yoginis.

1 Shall we continue with a rather subaltern perspective (a perspective that focused on marginalized
2 voices) – that of N.N. Bhattacharyya in the *History of the Sakta Religion*? In discussing the Kaula sect
3 of tantric worship states “A woman and even a Sudra (person of untouchable caste) *is entitled to*
4 *function in the role of the preceptor.*”³¹ In his discussion of the Yogini cult he also states “*originally*
5 *the yoginis were probably human beings, women of flesh and blood, priestesses who were supposed*
6 *to be possessed by the goddess, and later they were raised to the status of divinities.*”³²

7
8 Continuing along this line, in *A Post Orientalist History of the Fierce Sakti of the SubAltern Domain*,
9 Donna Jordan discusses the matriarchal social systems that were precursors to the medieval Sakta-
10 Tantric cults,³³ and identifies the presence of women adepts in these cults when she states that
11 “*whether as yogi or yogini, these subaltern Tantrikas were considered unrespectable, crazy...by*
12 *orthodox Hindus...because they perpetuated many tribal practices of fertility magic....*”³⁴

13
14 In *Aghora*, the biography of a wild left-handed Tantric who confronts death in the cremation
15 grounds, the author Robert Svoboda notes the Tantric Vimalananda’s encounter with a *woman*
16 *adept whom he calls Bhairavi*. Vimalananda states that “*the only way to learn tantric sexual practice*
17 *is to have an experienced partner who can make up for any deficiencies you might have. I think ...*
18 *the Bhairavi who taught me is the most experienced ... in India*. When she came to me she looked
19 like a fifteen-year old girl, but she is much, much older than that. Death cannot come to take her
20 until she herself desires it. *She remains naked, but covers herself with her long matted locks, and she*
21 *carries a trident, Shiva’s symbol ...*”³⁵ (all my italics).

22
23 Elizabeth Harding discusses the account of a more well-known saint in India – Sri Ramakrishna – and
24 his encounter with his first teacher. She describes her as a *Sadhika who goes into ecstasy and has*
25 *visions*³⁶ and as a *learned Tantric*, the first one to assure Sri Ramakrishna that his visions were true.³⁷
26 Convinced that he was an incarnation of God, she invited scholars to debate at the Dakshineswar
27 Kali Temple.³⁸ Sri Ramakrishna *began to practice the prescribed rules of the heroic mode of Tantric*
28 *worship under Brahmani’s guidance.*³⁹ After becoming perfect in practicing the major Tantric
29 disciplines, *the Brahmani began to teach him Vaishnav sadhana* (where bhakti, intense love for God,
30 is the only thing needed to realize the divine).⁴⁰

31
32 In sum so far: we have reviewed a sampling of respected academic sources, both Western and
33 Indian. We have also looked at sources that named themselves subaltern. As well we have perused
34 some spiritual bio/autobiographies focused on male saints. However, in none of these sources has
35 the focus been on the role of women as adepts, gurus, or yoginis (except Miranda Shaw, of course).
36 Yet in each case, we have found references to women of power. In teasing out the presence of the
37 Hindu Tantric yogini, have we only touched the tip of the iceberg then, as Schussler-Fiorenza’s
38 methodology would suggest? What would happen if we surveyed some articles/books specifically
39 focused on reclaiming the role of women in India? What would happen then? Tune in to the next
40 installment and see!

-
- 1 Miranda Shaw, *Passionate Enlightenment* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1994): 38
 - 2 Vidya Dehija, *Yogini Cults and Temples* (New Delhi: National Museum, 1986)
 - 3 Vicki Noble, *Tantra Workshop*, California Institute of Integral Studies, July 2001
 - 4 Shaw, 5
 - 5 Ibid., 9-10
 - 6 Ibid., 10.
 - 7 Ibid., 12.
 - 8 Ibid., 13.
 - 9 Ibid.
 - 10 Ibid.
 - 11 Ibid., 37.
 - 12 Ibid., 22.
 - 13 Ibid., 31.
 - 14 Ibid., my italics, 31-32.
 - 15 Ibid., my italics, 32.
 - 16 Ibid., my italics, 6.
 - 17 Ibid., my italics, 6.
 - 18 Lilian Silburne, *Kundalini, The Energy of the Depths* (State University of New York Press, 1988): 184.
 - 19 Silburne, 165.
 - 20 Silburne, all my italics, 169.
 - 21 Silburne, my italics, 175.
 - 22 Ibid., my italics, 181.
 - 23 Ibid., 158.
 - 24 Ibid, 31.
 - 25 Gupta, Hoesn, Goudriaan, *Hindu Tantrism* (Leiden/Koln: brill, 1979): 33.
 - 26 Ibid., 79.
 - 27 Ibid, 80.
 - 28 Mark Dyczkowski, *The Doctrine of Vibration* (State University of New York Press, 1987): 11.
 - 29 Ibid., 15.
 - 30 Shaw, 6.
 - 31 N.N. Bhattacharyya, *History of the Sakta Religion* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharial Publishers, 1996): 131.
 - 32 Ibid., all my italics, 128.
 - 33 Donna Jordan, *A Post Orientalist History of the Fierce Sakti of the SubAltern Domain* (Dissertation, 1999): 32.
 - 34 Ibid., 46.
 - 35 Robert Svoboda, *Aghora* (Washington: Sadhana Publications, 1986): 291.
 - 36 Elizabeth Harding, *Kali: The Black Goddess of Dakshineswar* (Maine: Nicolas Hays, 1993): 259.
 - 37 Ibid., 260.
 - 38 Ibid., 261.
 - 39 Ibid.
 - 40 Ibid., 262.