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A Note on the Age and Authorship of the

By CHINTAHARAN CHAKRAVARTI.

THE AGE OF THE TANTRAS.

An attempt has been made in another paper to prove the antiquity of the Tantra system of religion or what may be called Tantricism.¹ It is now necessary to enquire as to when a separate class of works called the tantras came to be compiled. The orthodox view attributing a divine origin to it and thus claiming for it a hoary antiquity (works like the *Vṛhaddharma-Purāna* [II, 6. 139] and *Nārāyaṇī Tantra* as mentioned in the Bengali work *Sādhanakalpatatikā* even claiming a pre-Vedic antiquity) is not found to have been universally accepted even by the ancients. There seems to have always been a lurking suspicion with regard to the genuineness of that attribution some even going to the extent of dubbing at least a part of them as modern. Modern scholars also have questioned the antiquity of tantra works in general. It is argued that tantra as a class of literature is not found mentioned in any early work. Lists mentioning various branches of learning also do not include the name tantra. It is true the word is met with even in the Vedic literature but there it is not used in the sense of a particular class of literature. Even in as late a work as the *Amarakośa* the word is not given this sense.

But it should be noted that non-mention cannot be taken as an argument in favour of non-existence, for if the *Amarakośa* does not assign to tantra the sense of a particular class of literature or a particular form of worship, almost a contemporary work, the *Bṛhatsamhitā* of Varāhamihira (circa 5th-6th century) is found to use the word in this or a similar sense (XVI, 18). The silence of Amara who was a Buddhist may be explained by the supposition of his unfavourable attitude towards the tantras.

More than one Purāna work (like the *Kūrma Purāna* as quoted in the *Tantrādhikāri-nirṇaya*) have given elaborate descriptions of the origin of the tantras. Even the detractors of the tantras tried to read denunciation of tantricism in admittedly old Dharmasāstra and Purāna works.²

Pāsupata and Pañcarātra systems are found to have been mentioned by name in some of the Purāna and Dharmasāstra works. They are referred to in the *Bṛhatparāsara*, *Viṣṇudhar-*

¹ *Antiquity of Tantricism*, C. Chakravarti, — *I.H.Q.*, Vol. VI, pp. 114ff.

² Cf. the present writer's paper on the *Authoritativeness of the Tantras* in the *K. B. Pathak Commemoration Volume*.

mottara, Yogiyājñavalkya, etc.¹ Pañcarātra is also mentioned in the Mahābhārata. Śivaśāsana is referred to in the Devī-Purāṇa.² The Laṅkāvatāra sūtra which was translated into Chinese as early as the 5th century was evidently aware of the Pāśupata system the tenets of which it discusses.

These references to the tantras in some of the Purāṇas do not, however, help us in any way in deciding the relative antiquity of the Purāṇas and the tantras. For some of the tantra works are also found to refer to the Purāṇas both collectively and individually. The term *aṣṭādaśapurāṇa* is found to occur in many a tantra work (e.g. Nirvāṇa Tantra, Paṭala IX). Besides the Kātyāyani and the Vārāhī tantras give elaborate rules that are to be observed in reciting the Devīmāhātmya section of the Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa.

And though some works of the tantra system may be all fairly old, even most of the original works belonging to that system cannot be supposed to be so. On the other hand, many of them are palpably very modern. Thus though the earliest of the tantra works may possibly belong to the beginning of the Christian era, if not earlier, the latest of them come down as late as even the 18th century. As a matter of fact no particular age is possible to be assigned to the tantra literature which took a long period of time to develop; the age of each individual work has to be determined on the basis of the available evidence—both internal and external.

Some of the tantra works are undoubtedly very old. Manuscripts in Gupta characters of several tantra texts have been found. Even the Sarvajñānottara Tantra, which seems to be a comparatively later work having been composed when other tantras had been completed, has a fragmentary manuscript in Gupta characters.³ A manuscript of the Kubjikā Tantra in Gupta characters is in the Manuscripts Collection of the Asiatic Society of Bengal. A manuscript of the Nīśvāsa-saṃhitā in the Durbar Library of Nepal is written in the transitional Gupta characters.⁴ In the opinion of MM. H. P. Sastri this manuscript may be a century older than the Cambridge manuscript of the Parameśvarī Tantra which was copied in 859 A.D.⁵ At the end of the manuscript of the Saurasaṃhitā in the Durbar Library of Nepal there are two leaves stated to be in Gupta characters giving a number of tantra formulæ.⁶

¹ Tantrādhikāri-nirṇaya of Bhattojidiḥṣita.

² Aparārka's commentary on *Yājñavalkyasamhitā*—Anandaśrama Sanskrit Series, pp. 16 and 18.

³ H. P. Shastri, Nepal Catalogue, I, p. 85.

⁴ H. P. Shastri, Nepal Catalogue, I, pp. 10 and 137; Preface, p. lxxvii.

⁵ Bendal, Cambridge Catalogue, p. 27.

⁶ H. P. Shastri, Nepal Catalogue, I, Preface, p. lxxvi. Of other old tantra MSS. copied as early as the 10th, 11th or 12th century in the

The twenty-eight Śaiva āgamas of the South are referred to as early as the time of the Pallava king Rajasimhavarman, in his Kailāsanātha temple inscription. Tamil Śaiva poets of the 9th-10th centuries and Kashmir Śaiva works of the same period also refer to these works.¹ Works of Kashmir Śaivas as early as the eighth or ninth century are found to refer to works like the *Svacchanda Tantra*. Besides mentioning the views of a few tantra sects, as Śaṅkarācārya is supposed to have done by his commentators commenting on the *Vedānta-sūtra* (II. 2, 7-8), Śaṅkara has referred to sixty-five tantras in his *Ānandalaharī* (v. 31) pointing to one at least by name, e.g. the *Svatantra Tantra*. It has been shown by Dr. P. C. Bagchi (I.H.Q., V, pp. 754ff; VI, pp. 97ff.) on the basis of epigraphic records that a number of tantric texts were introduced into Kambuj as early as the beginning of the 9th century, thus indirectly proving their antiquity.

Of the Buddhist tantras also some at least are fairly old. Buddhist Dhāraṇīs may be looked upon as precursors of the tantras, and the Suramgama-sūtra, which Fa-Hian is said to have repeated for his protection, contained the most complete list of Dhāraṇīs. Considering that the book was held in reverence by Fa-Hian in the 5th-century, Beal assigned it to a period not later than the 1st century.² We may thus find traces of the beginning of the Buddhist tantras as early as the 1st century of the Christian era. According to Yuan-Chwang the Dhāraṇī or Vidyādhara-piṭaka belonging to the mantrayāna is as old as the Mahāsāmghikas (1st-2nd century A.D.).³ Several Buddhist tantra works are known to have existed as early as the 5th or 6th century A.D. Thus the Horiuzi palm-leaf MSS. in Japan contain besides Dhāraṇīs, five tantras.

Amoghavajra, a śramaṇa of North India and a Brahmana by caste who resided in China between 746 and 771 A.D., translated 77 works including Uṣṇīṣacarkravartī Tantra, Garuḍa-garbhaga Tantra, and Vajrakumāra Tantra.⁴ Atīśa Dipaṅkara was proficient, among other things, in the four classes of tantras.⁵ Padmasambhava of Udyāna was in charge of the tāntrika part of Buddhist liturgy.⁶

Tāranātha helps us to some extent in his history of Buddhism to determine the dates of some of the Buddhist

Durbar Library of Nepal, cf. H. P. Shastri, *Nepal Catalogue*, I, Preface, pp. lxxvi and lxxix. The MS. of the Saurasamhitā was copied in the 10th century (*op. cit.*, p. lxxvi), that of the Kiraṇa Tantra in 924 A.D. (*op. cit.*, Vol. II, p. 99), that of the Jayākhaarasamhitā in 1187 A.D. (*op. cit.*, Vol. I, p. 76).

¹ Farquhar, *An Outline of the Religious Literature of India*, p. 193.

² Introduction to Beal's Fa-Hian, p. lxxii.

³ Beal—*Si-yu-ki*, II, 165; Kern—*Manual of Indian Buddhism*, p. 6.

⁴ Nanjio, *Catalogue of Chinese Tripitaka*, App. II, p. 445.

⁵ S. C. Das, *J.B.T.S.*, Vol. I, Pt. I, p. 8.

⁶ *loc. cit.*

tantras. He gives the names of some persons who, according to him, introduced particular tantras. In a general way he says that Asaṅga, elder brother of Vasubandhu, introduced tantras into Buddhism and that they were handed down in the most secret manner possible up to the time of Dharmakīrti (600–615 A.D.).¹ In another place he associates particular names with particular works. Thus, we are told that Saraha introduced the *Buddhakaṭāla Tantra*, Luipā the *Yoginīsañcaryā*, Kambala and Padmavajra the *Hevajra Tantra*, Kṛṣṇācārya the *Samputatilaka*, Lalitavajra the three divisions of the *Kṛṣṇayamārī Tantra*, Gambhiravajra the *Mahāmāyā*, and one Pito the *Kālacakra*.²

But as has already been indicated, all works—Hindu or Buddhist—are not old. T. Gopinath Rao³ has shown that many works of Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava āgama have referred to things and persons belonging to 7th–11th centuries so that they cannot be very old. He however admits that they were probably based on older works. In the *Uttara-Kāranāgama* of the Śaivas, says he, it is laid down that on the 7th day of the Mahotsava of Śiva the impalement of the Jains, said to have been carried out at the instance of the Śaiva saint Tirujñānasambandha, ought to be celebrated. This Śaiva saint, however, is known to have flourished in the middle of the 7th century A.D. so that the work cannot be earlier than that period. This work as also many other works on Śaivāgama prescribe the recitation of the Draviḍa Vedas, i.e. the Devārāma hymns composed by Tirujñānasambandha, Vāgīśa, and Sundaramūrti, the last of whom lived not earlier than the 9th century.

The prose recension of the *Vaikhanasāgama* is perhaps the oldest among the āgamas of the Vaiṣṇavas. The metrical *Vaikhānasāgama* of the Vaiṣṇavas requires the Draviḍa Vedas, i.e. Prabandhas of the Śrī-vaiṣṇavas or Alvares (8th or 9th century) to be sung in the front of divine processions. The *Īśvarasaṃhitā* of the Pañcarātra mentions the saint Saṭhakopa (800 A.D.) and Ācārya Rāmānūja (1000 A.D.). The *Bṛhad-Brahmasaṃhitā* also mentions the latter.

According to some scholars the cult of Tārā, a very important tantric goddess in later days, is not very old. If this conclusion proves to be correct it would follow that works or rather portions of works dealing with the worship of Tārā must not also be very old. Pandit Hirananda Sastri⁴ depending on the finds of icons in old sites concludes that the cult of Tārā cannot be older

¹ Geschichte der Buddhismus, Tr. by Schiefner, p. 201.

² *op. cit.*, p. 275f. Dr. B. Bhattacharya has sought to show that these people flourished in the 7th–8th centuries (*J.B.O.R.S.*, xiv, p. 343).

³ *Elements of Hindu Iconography*, T. Gopinath Rao, Vol. I, Part I, Introduction, Section xvi, pp. 55ff.

⁴ Origin and Cult of Tārā, *Memoir, Archaeological Survey*, No. 20, Hirananda Sastri, pp. 99ff.

than the sixth or seventh century of the Christian era. In his opinion the statement that Nāgārjuna revived the cult of Eka-jaṭā, a form of Tārā, in the country of Bhoṭa (Tibet) should be taken with an amount of caution. It may be that the name of the well-known Buddhist reformer was associated with Tārā worship with a view to carry weight. Or it may be that this Nāgārjuna was a different person altogether.

Kulācāra section of the tantras is stated by Jayaratha in his commentary on the Tantrāloka of Abhinava Gupta to have been introduced by Minanātha and Matsyendranātha.¹ According to the *Gorakṣasiddhāntasamgraha* (pp. 18-19) and *Tantrarājatantra* also, the tantras, probably the Kaula ones, were introduced on earth by the nine Nāthas.² A manuscript copy of the *Mahākāulajñāna-vinirmāya* stated to be introduced by Matsyendra has been found in transitional Gupta characters, about the same characters in which the manuscript of the Parameśvara Tantra of the Cambridge University Library copied in 859 A.D. was written.³ Wassiljew also places the Nāthas at about this time, e.g., 800 A.D. This would therefore seem to fix the upper limit of the Kaula tantras.

By the side of these we have also got works which bear undeniable marks of modernity. Gorakṣanātha is referred to in several works and hymns to him (attributed to the *Kalpadrūma Tantra* and *Rājaguhya*) are mentioned in the *Gorakṣasiddhāntasamgraha* (pp. 42-43). Caitanya, the Vaiṣṇava reformer of Bengal, is referred to in works like the *Īśānasamhitā* stated to be included in the *Kulārṇava*. The *Yoginī Tantra* gives an account of king Viṣṇusimha, the founder of Kocha dynasty.³ The *Viśvasāra Tantra* is said to give an account of the birth of the great Vaiṣṇava teacher of Bengal, Nityānanda.⁴ The *Meru Tantra* goes further. It refers to the English people and the city of London.⁵ Dialects of some Indian vernaculars found

1 भैरव्या भैरवात् प्राप्तं योगं व्याप्य ततः प्रिये ।
कासरूपे मद्भाषीते मच्छन्देन मद्भाषना ॥
तत्सकाशात् सिद्धेन सीनाख्येन वरानने ॥

—Tantrāloka (Trivandrum Sanskrit Series), pp. 24–25.

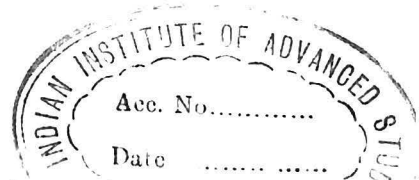
2 तन्त्रं मद्भक्तं भुवने नवनाथैरकल्पयत्—Tantrarājatantra—I. 7.

H. P. Shastri, Nepal Catalogue, II, p. 32; preface, p. xix.

3 The name of this king as given in an extract of the *Yoginī Tantra* in the Śabdakalpadrūma under the word Śiva is Viṣṇusimha while the edition of the work (Bombay, śaka 1825) published from the Venkatesvar Steam Machine Press reads *venusimha* (xiii, 14).

4 Mahānirvāṇa tantra (Eng. trans.), M. N. Dutt, Introduction, p. 11.

5 इरेजा नवषट्पञ्च लण्डजास्यापि भाविनः ।



in the mantras in what are called the Śābara tantras are evidence of their late origin.

These evidently modern works represented as having been revealed by divine Śiva would naturally rouse suspicion as regards their genuineness and it is refreshing to note that a similar suspicion was found lurking in minds of people even in days of old. Yāmunācārya makes pointed reference to it. It is stated that some people even in modern times would pose as teachers of tantras and promulgate doctrines that were not sanctioned by the tantras.¹

It thus seems that several of the tantras are fairly old, some going back as early as the beginning of the Christian era. But it is most likely that like the Purāṇa literature the tantra literature also swelled in course of time with the introduction of fresh material in the form of new works or interpolated passages.

AUTHORSHIP OF THE TANTRAS.

As regards the authorship of the tantras we must admit that we know very little, at least with regard to the oldest and some of the best known of the works. There is no room in most cases even to hazard a guess. All that we are told is that they are of divine origin, undoubtedly to give them an appearance of sanctity and antiquity. The word *āgama* is interpreted as consisting of the initial letters of the words *āgata* (come), *gata* (gone), and *mata* (approved). It is explained to refer to the *śūtra* that has been related by Śiva to his divine consort Pārvatī and has been approved by Viṣṇu. Similarly the *nigama* class of the tantras is supposed to have issued from (*nirgata*) the Devi (*Pārvatī*). Most of the tantra works of the Śaivas and Śāktas are thus represented as being interlocutions between Śiva and some aspect of his divine consort or his or her sons or attendants.² There are the Vaiṣṇava tantras again in which Viṣṇu in one of his various aspects is generally represented as the speaker while in the Buddhist tantras, called *Sanḡitis*, Buddha or a Bodhisatva is stated to have been the author or speaker. But

¹ अदलेपि चि दृश्यन्ते केचिदागमिकच्छलात् ।
अनागमिकमेवार्थं व्याचक्षाणा विचक्षणाः ॥

—*Āgamaprāmānya*, p. 4.

² The tradition that Śiva was the author of the Pāsupata system of the tantras goes back to the Mahābhārata (Śānti, 350. 67). Bhāskara-rāya in his *Setubandha* (VII. 47) has referred to the line of teachers of the tantras as follows: Supreme Brahman, Svachchanda Bhairava, (anāśrita) Īvara, Devī, Sadāśiva, Īvara, Vidyēśvara, Śrīkaṅṭha, etc. Bhāskara has quoted in his *Saubbhāgyabhāskara* (v. 118) the Devībhāgavata and Skanda Purāṇa to show how different works issued from different parts of the body of Śiva. Bhoja has made an attempt to establish Śiva as the author of tantras by means of logical arguments (*Tattvapraṅkāśa*, pp. 26ff.).

the Vaiṣṇava Pañcarātra work, *Ahīrbudhnyasaṃhitā*, is in the form of interlocution between Ahīrbudhnya, a form of Śiva, and Nārada, the sage. The *Nārada Pañcarātra* also has some chapters which are interlocutions between Mahādeva and Pārvatī while there are some between Mahādeva and Nārada.

But in spite of this assertion of the divine origin of the tantra works we are fortunately given some clue for finding out their real human authors, at least in some cases. Thus in some works, a particular devotee is represented as having been the fortunate person to whom the particular work was revealed by its divine author as the Vedic Mantras were revealed to the ṛsis (seers). We thus find human names associated with several works, some of which are definitely stated to have been brought down (*avatārīta*) on earth by these persons.

Some of the celebrated sages like Sanatkumāra, Dattātreya, Aṣṭāvakra, and Bharadvāja are found to be associated with tantra works bearing their names.¹

The *Śivasūtras*, the most revered work of the Śaivas of Kashmir, was according to a fairly old tradition revealed to Vasugupta in a dream on the mountain called Mahādeva.² The *Śrīmatottara* tantra, though represented as having been revealed by Śiva to Pārvatī, is at the same time stated in the colophon to have been brought down on earth by a human author Śrīkanthanātha (e.g. *Śrīkanthanāthāvatārīta*).³ *Mahā-kaulajñānavinirṇaya* is similarly stated to have been brought down by Matsyendranātha.⁴ *Yogavijayastavarāja* from the Brahmayāmala is stated to have been brought down from heaven by Pippalādāmuni, though it was originally spoken by Śiva to Pārvatī.⁵ The *Maheśvarīya Tantra*⁶ which deals with topics like *mārāṇa*, *ucāṭana*, etc., is said to have been manifested by Śiva to the sage Śivagiri and then published by his disciple.

But there are examples in which no such reference to revelation or bringing down is mentioned, but they are straightly given out as having been composed (*racīta*, *praṇīta*) by these persons. The *Pūrvāmnāya Tantra*, as is stated by the colophon of its manuscript in the Durbar Library, Nepal, was composed by Ratnadeva.⁷ Similarly the *Jñānalakṣmī* or *Jayākhyasaṃhitā* is stated to have been composed by one Candradatta.⁸

¹ It is curious that Dattātreya, considered to be the father of the yoga system, is associated with the *Ṣaṭkarmas* (the six vulgar rites) in his *Dattātreya Tantra*.

² *Kashmir Shaivism*, J. C. Chatterjee, 26ff.

³ H. P. Shastri, *Nepal Catalogue*, I, p. 255.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 236.

⁶ Published by Kshemraj Krishnadas, Bombay, 1842 S.E.

⁷ H. P. Shastri, *Nepal Catalogue*, I, p. 208.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 1, 76, 77.

*Pāradayogāsāstram*¹ like many other tantras is in the form of a dialogue between Śiva and Pārvatī. But it was composed by Śivarāma Yogindra as is mentioned in the colophons to some of the chapters. The *Tārāvilāsodaya*,² a tantra work in the form of an interlocution between Mahādeva and Pārvatī united in embrace, is definitely stated in the colophon to have been composed by Vāsudeva Kavikaṅkana³ who culled the verses, as we are informed in one of the introductory verses, from a work called the *Cinakramamantravāridhi*.

The human authorship of the Buddhist *Sanḡitis* is revealed by the introductory lines which begin 'I heard that one day Bodhisatva was in such and such a condition, etc.', thus pointing to the fact that in their present forms they are related by persons other than the Buddha or Bodhisatva.

Some of the detractors of tantra rites reluctant to recognize the divine origin and sanctity of the tantras have expressly declared their human origin and consequent unauthoritativeness. According to the *Kūrma Purāṇa* one Sātvata Aṃśu was the author of a śāstra prevalent among bastards and low-class people. This śāstra, after the name of the author, came to be known as *Sātvata Tantra*. This fact seems to have been referred in the *Bhagvata Purāṇa* as well.⁴

The *Parāsara Purāṇa*, as quoted in the *Tantrādhikārinirṇaya* (p. 12) of Bhaṭṭojidikṣita, also, seems to refer to the human origin of the Pañcarātras, etc.⁵ Vedottama, in his *Pāñcarātra-*

¹ Published by Matilal Banarasi Das and Co., Lahore.

² *Descriptive Catalogue of Sanskrit MSS. in the Sanskrit College, Calcutta*, V, 30.

³ This title has almost become a proper name in Bengal referring to the author of the *Caṇḍimaṅgala*, e.g. Mukundarāma Cakravartī.

⁴ कौर्म्ये—

अथांशुः सालतो नाम विष्णुभक्तः प्रतापवान् ।
महात्मा दाननिरतो धनुर्वेदविदां वरः ॥
स नारदस्य वचनाद् वासुदेवार्चने रतः ।
शास्त्रं प्रवर्त्तयामास कुण्डगोलादिभिः त्रितम् ॥
तस्य नाम्ना तु विख्यातं सालतं नाम श्रीभनम् ।
प्रवर्त्तते महाशास्त्रं कुण्डादीनां क्षितावहम् ॥ इति

श्रीभागवतेऽपि—

तेनोक्तं सालतं तन्त्रं यज्जाला मुक्तिभाग्यवेत् ।
यच्च स्त्रीशूद्रदासानां संस्कारो वैष्णवो मतः ॥

—*Vīramitrodaya*, Vol. I, p. 24.

⁵ तथा पराशरपुराणे दशमाध्याये—

धर्माधर्मादिविज्ञाने लागमाः पुरुषोदिताः ।
पाञ्चरात्रादयः सर्वे न प्रमाणमिति स्थितिः ॥

prāmāṇya has gone so far as to declare that the original tantra works of the Śaivas that are believed to have been revealed by Maheśvara were compiled by an ordinary human being named Maheśvara and some credulous people were mistaken to identify him with the god Maheśvara only on the flimsy ground of the similarity of names.¹

A similar charge appears to have been brought against the Vaiṣṇavas as well. It is stated that their scriptures were not the composition of Vāsudeva, the god, but of a deceitful person named Vāsudeva who promulgated his doctrines for the delusion of the people.²

That some of the tantra works were comparatively modern and were the composition of ordinary human beings was also believed by persons having no marked bias against the tantras. Aparārka in his commentary on the *Yājñavalkya Saṃhitā* (I. 7) specially condemns the works of human authors.³ The sect Laukuliśa Pāśupata system is definitely known to have been founded by one Laukula who was supposed to have been an incarnation of Mahādeva.⁴

¹ केनचिद्वाक्यतनेन चेत्रजेन महेश्वरसमाननाम्ना त्रयौसार्गवदिष्कृतेयं प्रक्रिया विरचिता । तन्नामसामान्येन केचिद् धान्था महेश्वरोपदिष्टसार्गमवलम्बितवन्तः ।
(From a copy of a MS. of the work borrowed from Mr. Sarat Kumār Ray's MS. Library.)

² वासुदेवाभिधानेन केनचिद् विप्रलिप्तुना ।
प्रणीतं प्रस्तुतं तन्त्रम् इति निश्चिनुमो वथम् ॥

—*Āgāmaprāmāṇya* of Yāmunācārya, p. 25.

³ तत्रापि यत् पौरुषेयं न केवलमननुष्ठेयं तद् यावद्प्रमाणमपौति हेयम् ।
(p. 19 of the *Yājñavalkyasamhitā* as published in the Ānandaśrama Sanskrit Series of Poona).

⁴ *J.R.A.S.*, 1907, p. 337 ; *J.B.R.A.S.*, XXII, pp. 15ff.

