

Tantra (Overview)

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Synonyms: Tantric traditions; Tantrism; Āgamic traditions

Definition: Religious traditions and teachings based on scriptural texts known as *tantras* or *āgamas*

Introduction

Tantra or Tantrism is an historically influential and widely misunderstood dimension of Hinduism. This is equally true of Buddhism, both in and beyond South Asia. Tantric practices flourished within Jainism as well, and even had influence in Indian Sufism. While this article concerns Hindu tantric traditions, these cannot truly be understood in isolation, for Tantra has historically transcended religious boundaries. Moreover, the rubric of ‘Hindu Tantra’ is at least partially misleading: in the period of their greatest influence, tantric forms of Śaivism and Vaiṣṇavism were considered by the Vaidika orthodox to be heterodox (*vedabāhya*), like Buddhism and Jainism. And if formal acknowledgement of the Vedas, however nominal, defines the boundaries of Hinduism, early Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava tantric traditions would not necessarily be considered Hindu.

Although possessing earlier roots and broad influence, Tantra is primarily associated with the genre of scriptural literature known as *tantras*, which emerge in the post-Gupta or early medieval period, from the fifth or sixth century C.E. Initiatory religious traditions centered around the rituals and doctrines of the *tantras* flourished throughout the subcontinent and the lands of its influence particularly through the twelfth century C.E., and some remain vital living traditions today. Paradoxically, tantric traditions are not always recognized as such, for their

success was such that the boundaries between orthodoxy/orthopraxy and Tantra blurred over time, especially in ritual. Crucially, also, the category “Tantra” acquired an air of disrepute in the colonial period, being associated in turn with outlandish superstition, black magic, and/or debased sexuality.[1] Tantric traditions have received a more sympathetic appraisal in the contemporary world, and a wave of new scholarship allows for a much richer understanding of the *tantras* and their historical contexts than was previously possible.[2] The most up-to-date and comprehensive introduction to the subject is André Padoux’s *The Hindu Tantric World: An Overview*. [3]

Tantras, Tantra, and Tantrism: the problem of definition

There is little agreement concerning the definition of “Tantra,” and likewise its boundaries. At the heart of this problem lies the fact that Tantra, as an abstract noun designating a religion, spiritual practices, or philosophy, seems to have no premodern precedent. It is, in other words, an etic, modern category. In premodern usage, the Sanskrit word *tantra* primarily designates a genre of revealed scripture. While not calling themselves “Tantra,” the religions which treated *tantras* as scriptural authorities certainly did have names for themselves: for instance, the Śaiva Mantramārga (“Way of Mantras”), the Buddhist Mantranaya (“Mantra Method”) or Vajrayāna (“Adamantine Vehicle”), and the Vaiṣṇava Pāñcarātra. One might hence reasonably object to the use of “Tantra” as an abstract noun. A particularly unsatisfying alternative is the neologism “Tantrism.” Use of the descriptive adjective “tantric” is far less problematic, calqued as this is upon the Sanskrit *tāntrika*, “based upon *tantras*.” Recent scholarship hence tends to favor expressions such as “Tantric Śaivism” over “Śaiva Tantra” and the problematic (what to speak of inelegant) “Śaivite Tantrism,” and also to avoid the monolithic category “Tantra” or “Tantrism.” Another trend, particularly among Buddhologists, is to use the English term “esoteric” rather than “tantric.” Regardless of terminological preferences, it is crucial to bear in

mind that tantric religious systems were diverse, and that the boundaries between these and more mainstream traditions varied widely.

What, then, characterizes *tantras* and tantric traditions, distinguishing these from other Indic religious systems? Traditional etymologies (*nirukti*) of the word *tantra* emphasize, for instance, the power of tantric mantras to effect spiritual liberation (*mukti*, *mokṣa*) as well as supernatural powers (*siddhi*) and pleasures (*bhoga*). Modern scholarship has tended to approach the definitional problem through polythetic or multifactoral classification: identifying key shared characteristics of tantric traditions, rather than a single essential defining property.[4] One of the earliest of such attempts outlined eighteen “constituents of Tantrism,” which “need by no means to be present in their entirety in a Tantric text.”[5: 7–9]. This expansive list highlights numerous important features of Hindu tantric traditions, such as the centrality of initiation, the guru, and secrecy; the existence of a tantric ritual paradigm distinct from the Vedic; forms of yoga involving an esoteric physiology, manipulation of bodily energies, and deity-visualization; ritual applications of tantric mantras (distinct from the Vedic), geometric diagrams (*maṇḍala*), and ritual gestures (*mudrā*); complex theories of mantra and sacred sound; and a distinctive outlook on the nature of spiritual practice (*sādhana*) and liberation. Similar definitional endeavors have generated, for instance, descriptions of eight “significant features of tantric Buddhism;”[6: 197–202] twelve “features which characterize the spirit of Buddhist tantric thought;”[7: 4–5] and, in the case of Douglas Brooks, a detailed polythetic definition of “Hindu Tantrism.”[8: 52–72]

Needless to say, such definitions usually diverge, and offer abundant scope for disagreement concerning the properties identified and their relative priority. Moreover, definitions which lay claim to wide applicability in some cases can be shown to emerge from and reflect more narrow contexts. For instance, the ten defining criteria Brooks adduces privilege Śākta traditions in their late-medieval, orthodox Brahmanical varieties—Śrīvidyā in particular. Furthermore, absent from Brooks’ list is at least one important criterion: the ontological identity of mantras and deities, which is surely a defining characteristic of the Śaiva “Way of Mantras” (*mantramārga*).

Given these limitations, some scholars eschew a polythetic approach to the category *tantra* altogether and advance reductionistic definitions.[9: 7–9] Others seek to reconcile essentialistic and polythetic approaches. Ronald Davidson, in particular, drawing upon insights from cognitive science into the role of metaphors in category formation, proposes to define esoteric (i.e. tantric) Buddhism by identifying its central “sustaining metaphor”—that of the practitioner assuming divine kingship—in a manner that also satisfies “polythetic (or feature bundle) category construction.” In Davidson’s words, “the central and defining metaphor for mature esoteric Buddhism is that of an individual assuming kingship and exercising dominion.”[10: 118–23] Gavin Flood affirms Davidson’s approach but offers an alternative, and in my opinion more broadly applicable, central metaphor—that of the practitioner’s *divinization*. [11: 9–12] Yet another approach, inspired by poststructuralism, has been to emphasize the contingent, dialectically constructed nature of the category: Donald Lopez thus highlights the ways in which “tantra” takes on meaning in various discursive contexts in opposition to other categories: *sūtra*, “original Buddhism,” etc.[12: 83–104] This is useful, especially since in the Hindu context the categories *tantra* or *tāntrika* often take on meaning in opposition to *veda* and *vaidika*. Going further, Hugh Urban argues that Tantra is “a social construction, a category that is by no means stable or fixed”—one “born through the creative interaction between the scholarly imagination and the object of study.”[1: 271–72] While this discourse-analytical approach leads to important insights, philological and historical approaches may have more to offer in a field where so large a proportion of primary sources still await serious study.

The roots and early history of Tantric Śaivism

Tantric forms of the Śaiva religion—an important branch of what we now call Hinduism—come into evidence around the sixth century C.E. While having complex roots, these develop most immediately from the Pāśupatas and other closely-related Śaiva ascetic orders, known collectively as the Atimārga, “The Path Beyond.” Much of our knowledge of the formative

period of Tantric Śaivism derives from the *Niśvāsattattvasaṃhitā*, which has close connections with the Atimārga. Its editors place the text’s oldest portion in the mid-fifth to early-sixth centuries.[13: 30–73] Within a relatively short period, though, Tantric Śaivism, or rather the Mantramārga (“Way of Mantras”), became integral to the religious landscape of early-medieval South and Southeast Asia, with records of royal initiation appearing already in the second half of the seventh century. Indeed, Śaivism—including, if not especially, its tantric varieties—became so prominent that Alexis Sanderson describes the early-medieval period as “the Śaiva age.”[14]

Tantric Śaiva accounts of revelation posit scripture emanating from the five faces of the supreme deity, Śiva, in “streams” or “currents” (*srotas*). Two of these correspond to the primary historical divisions of Mantramārga Śaivism. First and probably more ancient is the Śaiva Siddhānta, for which texts called *Siddhāntatantras* form the principal scriptural authorities. The second and more diverse “Bhairava current” (*bhairavasrotas*) comprises cults of Bhairava—Śiva in his guise as a fierce, skull-bearing ascetic (*kapālin*)—and a variety of associated goddesses. The scriptural sources for these cults in their early forms are called *Bhairavatantras* (“Tantras of Bhairava”). It is within this stream that the Kaula tantric systems emerged. Though belonging to Tantric Śaivism, much of this literature is “Śākta” insofar as the supreme Goddess—the *parā śakti*, “supreme female power”—occupies a position of cultic and/or theological preeminence. The remaining three streams are historically important but poorly preserved: the cult of the Sisters (*bhaginī*) of Tumburu (Śiva as celestial musician) taught in the *Vāmatantras* (“Tantras of the Leftward Stream”); and those of the *Bhūtantras* and *Gāruḍatantras*, focused upon apotropaic and/or medicinal magic.

The Śaiva Siddhānta

The Śaiva Siddhānta, so-called for having the *Siddhāntatantras* as its principal scriptures, represents the historical mainstream of the Mantramārga. The earliest *Siddhāntatantras*

established fundamental ritual forms and doctrines followed or further inflected in many other tantric traditions. In cultic terms, the *Siddhāntatantras* center upon the pacific, five-faced deity Sadāśiva—“Eternally (*sadā*) Auspicious (*śiva*)”—whose body is constituted by the five *brahma mantras*, which also correspond to his five faces. This tradition developed a vast scriptural canon and rich exegetical literature by the early second millennium, and was influential throughout the subcontinent as well as maritime Southeast Asia, from Kashmir to Indonesia. Teachings of the Śaiva Siddhānta are preserved in the *Tutur* or *Tattwa* literature in Old Javanese.[16] Today the Śaiva Siddhānta is nonetheless almost exclusively associated with South India, especially Tamil Nadu, where exists a rich living tradition. While a continuous tradition, it is useful to distinguish the South Indian Śaiva Siddhānta from the early, i.e. pre-12th century Śaiva Siddhānta, for these differ in key ways.

Early *Siddhāntatantras*, many of which survive and several of which have been published with English or French translations, expound upon a variety of subjects. The fifteen chapters of the *Parākhyantra*, for example, treat such topics as the nature and interrelationship of the soul, body, and Lord; scriptural revelation, the creation of the universe, and cosmography; mantra and language; the disciplines of yoga; the rite of initiation; and the nature and attainment of spiritual liberation.[17: lxiii–lxxiii] Although the earliest sources were not initially organized in this manner, a *Siddhāntatantra* is conventionally considered to possess four sections (*pāda*): those of doctrine (*jñāna*), meditation (*yoga*), ritual (*kriyā*), and the comportment of ascetic ‘vows’ (*caryā*). Among the important surviving early (pre-9th century) sources are the *Niśvāsattattvasaṃhitā*, multiple recensions of the *Kālottara*, the *Rauravasūtrasaṃgraha*, *Svāyambhuvasūtrasaṃgraha*, *Kiraṇa*, *Matāṅgapārameśvara*, and *Mṛgendra*. The *Mṛgendra* is perhaps the most learned of these in character, approaching the exegetical works of authors such as Sadyojyotis in doctrinal sophistication. In contrast, earlier works such as the *Sārdhatriśati Kālottara* were written in comparatively rustic Sanskrit, are mainly concerned with practice, and lack some of what came to be core doctrines of the Śaiva Siddhānta.

Contrary to the view that ‘Tantra’ is private, esoteric, and antinomian, the ritual manuals (*paddhatis*) compiled by Śaiva Siddhānta exegetes, and a variety of other evidence, paint the picture of an institutionalized religion with a strong civic dimension. While the early *tantras* mainly expound practices meant to benefit the individual practitioner, the Śaiva Siddhānta also developed rituals performed by officiants to benefit patrons, from royal consecration to ritual for public temples. Śaiva gurus presided over what were sometimes large and well-endowed monasteries, and played important roles in royal courts. An entire genre of scripture, called the *Pratiṣṭhātantras*, was dedicated to the construction of temples, iconography, and the consecration of religious images. This institutionalization and integration into the religious, political, and economic fabric of early-medieval India was probably a factor in the Śaiva Siddhānta’s increasing conformity to orthodox social values.[14: 252–303] If Bhaṭṭa Rāmakaṇṭha, writing in tenth-century Kashmir, seems to uphold Brahmanical caste and gender norms, such orthodoxy is greatly amplified in late-medieval South India, where the Tamil Śaiva Siddhānta also possesses a hereditary brahmin priesthood. This situation obscures the fact that early traditions broke radically from Vaidika values in offering tantric initiation to those qualified, regardless of caste and gender.

The early Śaiva Siddhānta developed an influential school of philosophy. First crystallized in scriptural texts such as the *Svāyambhuvāsūtrasaṃgraha*, Śaiva doctrine was systematized most notably by Sadyojyotis (fl. c. 675–725 C.E.),[18] the 10th-century Kashmirian Bhaṭṭa Rāmakaṇṭha, and South Indian scholars of the early second millennium, such as Aghoraśiva. The ‘classical’ Śaiva Siddhānta advanced a dualist ontology premised on the fundamental distinction between Śiva (*pati*, the Lord), the “bound soul” (*paśu*), and matter (*pāśa*, “fetter”). The soul’s true nature is *śivatva*, the omniscient, liberated state of Śiva. To regain this—to attain liberation—first and foremost requires the Lord’s grace in the form of tantric initiation (*dīkṣā*). Distinctive to the Śaiva Siddhānta is its emphasis on the material nature of primordial impurity (*mala*), which binds the soul but may be destroyed by the power of ritual. The Śaiva Siddhānta shares with other branches of Tantric Śaivism a distinctive emanationist cosmology.

Building upon the Sāṃkhya theory of twenty-five ontic principles or evolutes (*tattva*), Śaivas extend this analysis to arrive at thirty-six, divided into the created, ‘impure’ universe and the higher, ‘pure’ universe, beyond the sphere of the material principle, *māyā*. The pure universe consists of the *tattvas* of *paramaśiva*, the wholly transcendent supreme deity; *śakti*, the supreme creative principle or energy; *sadāśiva*, God as transcendent-cum-immanent; *īśvara*, God as immanent; and *śuddhavidyā*, the subtle material principle of the pure universe. Below these are principles such as *māyā*, time (*kāla*), and fate (*niyatī*), and then the *tattvas* of Sāṃkhya, beginning with the soul (*puruṣa*).[19: xxxiv–xxxviii] Śaiva exegetes produced rigorous and learned expositions of their doctrines, including critiques of various schools of Atimārga Śaivism, Buddhism, and Vedānta, among others. Recent scholarship has done much to highlight the Śaiva Siddhānta contribution to Indian philosophy.[20; 21]

The Śaiva Siddhānta evolved considerably in Tamil Nadu. South Indian theologians of the mid-second millennium moved away from the views of their predecessors, developing a Vedānta-inflected nondualism that is effectively a new, self-consciously Veda-congruent school.[22: 38–44] The Śaiva scriptural canon was also significantly extended, with the composition of the so-called “South Indian Śaiva Temple Āgamas.”[23: 128] Attested neither in early manuscripts nor quoted by first-millennium exegetes, these scriptures are distinguished by their focus upon Śaiva temple rituals and public festivals (*utsava*). The titles of the temple *āgamas* are calqued on those of lost texts listed in authoritative accounts of the early Śaiva Siddhānta canon. The earliest (c. 13th-century) and most influential of the temple *āgamas* is the *Kāmika*, whose cosmology and ritual are brought to life vividly in Richard Davis’s *Ritual in an Oscillating Universe: Worshipping Śiva in Medieval India*. [24] This South Indian tradition, which modern authors typically have in mind when referring to the Śaiva Siddhānta, also draws on the riches of Tamil Śaiva *bhakti* literature.

The cults of Bhairava and goddesses

Cultic and scriptural diversity characterized the Mantramārga early in its history, perhaps already in the sixth century. The *Bhairavatantras*, revelation associated with the fierce southern or rightward face of Sadāśiva, rival the *Siddhāntatantras* in historical importance. This scriptural stream is associated with the deity Bhairava, “the terrifier,” and various goddesses, such as Cāmuṇḍā and the Mothers (*mātrī*), forms of Bhairavī, and Kālī. Also historically important was the cult of Tumburu-Bhairava and his four sisters (*bhagini*) taught in *Vāmatantras*, the “leftward” stream of revelation. Only one of these, the *Vṛṇāśikhātantra*, seems to survive, but the tradition was influential through at least the eighth century.[25: 33–38]

The ritual world of the *Bhairavatantras* diverges from the Śaiva Siddhānta mainstream profoundly, carrying forward otherworldly and antinomian elements of Atimārga asceticism. Centered upon deities whose iconography combines images of death, power, and eroticism, the ritual of the *Bhairavatantras* makes use of conventionally impure items, such as human skulls and offerings of alcohol and flesh. Mantric practices aiming at the attainment of supernatural power (*siddhi*) and all manner of pragmatic magic abound in this literature. The *Bhairavatantras* are themselves diverse, divided into the Mantrapīṭha and Vidyāpīṭha. In the latter, the cultic focus is upon goddesses—*vidyās*, in the sense of “female mantra-deities”—more than forms of the male god Bhairava. Fundamental to the Mantrapīṭha is the *Svacchanda* or *Svacchandālitabhairava*, whose doctrine and ritual are comparatively close to the early *Siddhāntatantras*. Early *tantras* of the Vidyāpīṭha, on the other hand, delineate radically antinomian practices, including ritual coitus, rites for controlling dangerous spirits, and all manner of tantric “sorcery.” As with the Atimārga’s Kāpālikas (“Skull-bearers”), the preferred ritual locus is the cremation ground (*śmaśāna*). Major branches of the Vidyāpīṭha include the cult of Caṇḍā Kāpālinī (“Grim Bearer of the Skull”) taught in the *Brahmayāmala* or *Picumata* (c. 7th–8th centuries); *tantras* of the Trika (the cult of the goddesses Parā, Aparā, and Parāparā), especially the *Siddhayogeśvarīmata* and *Tantrasadbhāva*; and *tantras* of the Krama (the cult of Kālī), such as the *Kramasadbhāva* and *Jayadrathayāmala*. These sources place much emphasis on *yoginīs*: variegated, wild, often therianthrope flying goddesses with whom

practitioners sought visionary, transactional encounters.[15] Vidyāpīṭha sources and cults have notable parallels in the early Vajrayāna Buddhist *Yoginītantras*, especially the *Cakrasaṃvaratantra*, and Alexis Sanderson has made a compelling case for pervasive Śaiva influence.[14]

Kaula Śaivism, attested by the ninth century, departed from the Vidyāpīṭha by eschewing mortuary emblems and rituals, and attenuating the quest for occult power characteristic of so much of Vidyāpīṭha praxis. While having continuity with Vidyāpīṭha cults, the Kaulas developed a simplified ritual paradigm for both initiation and daily observances, placing more emphasis on ecstatic gnosis and the inward practices of yoga.[14] The Kaula reform is associated with the legendary guru Macchanda or Matsyendra, who also features among the Siddha “saints” of Vajrayāna Buddhism, and is one of the legendary gurus of the Nātha sect. Kaula *tantras* posit themselves as a higher, hidden stream of revelation beyond the five main currents of scripture. Kaulism came to be divided into four main traditions (*āmnāya*) with different cultic orientations: the Kaula Trika and Krama, and cults of the hunchback crone Kubjikā and the beautiful Tripurasundarī.[15: 679–90]

A school of nondualist Śaiva philosophy emerged in Kashmir in the late-ninth century with scriptural roots in the Kaula Krama and Trika. Commonly referred to as “Kashmir Shaivism,” this is distinct in numerous ways from the nondual Vedānta of Śāṅkara. The tradition was inaugurated by the *Śivasūtras* of Vasugupta, whose teachings form the basis of the “Doctrine of Vibration” (*Spanda*). This emphasizes the dynamic, creative nature of the all-embracing, wholly autonomous consciousness that is Śiva. Later teachers refine this conception by positing consciousness as having the dual nature of *prakāśa*, luminosity, and *vimarśa*, reflective awareness. A succession of authors of the tenth to eleventh centuries articulated nondual Śaiva doctrine in rigorously philosophical terms. The nondualists critiqued the ritualism of the Śaiva Siddhānta exegetes, emphasizing instead the liberating power of gnosis: “recognizing” (*pratyabhijñā*-) one’s essential nature as Śiva. This school is thus called the Pratyabhijñā, “the Doctrine of Recognition,” as formulated by Utpaladeva (mid-tenth century).

Like their Śaiva Siddhānta contemporaries, the nondualists engaged deeply with the views of other schools of Indian thought. The Buddhist Yogācāra or Vijñānavāda receives particularly incisive critique, though this form of Buddhist idealism shares a great deal with—and indeed directly influenced—nondual Śaiva thought.[26] The most distinguished proponent of nondual Śaivism was Abhinavagupta (fl. c. 975–1025), a Kashmirian polymath who, in addition to his considerable contributions as a Śaiva exegete and philosopher, wrote important works in the field of aesthetics, such as the *Abhinavabhāratī* commentary on the *Nāṭyaśāstra*. His magnum opus, the *Tantrāloka* (“Light on the Tantras”), accomplishes a virtuoso synthesis of Śaiva ritual, nondual philosophy, and aesthetics.

Kaula traditions developed in new directions in the second millennium, some fading into obscurity while others thrived, such as Śrīvidyā—the Kaula cult of Kāmeśvarī or Tripurasundarī. Having humble origins in a tradition of love magic, Śrīvidyā incorporated the doctrines of nondual Śaivism through the exegetical works of Jayaratha (12th century) and Amṛtānanda (13th or 14th century), its sophistication reaching its apogee in the learned works of Bhāskaraṛāya (18th century). Śrīvidyā flourished from Kashmir to Bengal and South India, and remains influential today. Disavowing antinomian or ‘left-handed’ ritual culture, the Śrīvidyā won acceptance in elite, orthodox circles, including the lineage of Śaṅkarācāryas at Śṛṅgerī and Kanchipuram. The Śrīvidyā adopted the influential six-chakra system of *kuṇḍalinī yoga* first attested in the root text of the Kaula cult of Kubjikā, the *Kubjikāmata*. This yoga is in fact best known today through a colonial-era translation of a Śrīvidyā text: the yoga chapter of the *Tattvacintamāṇi* of Pūrṇānandagiri (16th century), translated by “Arthur Avalon” in *The Serpent Power* (1918).[27]

Much as the Śaiva Siddhānta developed new scriptures in post-12th century South India, a new corpus of goddess-oriented, i.e. “Śākta,” Kaula *tantras* arose mainly in eastern India (“Greater Bengal”). The *Bṛhattantrasāra* of Āgamavāgīśa, a tantric digest composed in 17th century Bengal, looks back upon a large canon of such *śākta tantras*, surprisingly few of which belong to the first millennium. Distinctive to the Śākta *tantras* of Bengal is their synthesis of the

cults of Kālī (the Kālīkula) and Tripurasundarī (Śrīkula or Śrīvidyā), as well as, for example, their incorporation of deities from Vajrayāna Buddhism, such as Tārā. Such syncretism is exemplified by the Daśa Mahāvidyās, a popular pantheon of ten tantric goddesses possessing roots in Śaiva, Buddhist, Vaiṣṇava, and folk traditions.[14: 240–43; 28] Bengali Vaiṣṇava devotionalism impacted Bengal’s tantric Śāktism, as evident for instance in the poignant devotional songs of Rāmprasād Sen (18th century). Śāktism was integral to Bengal’s non-Vaiṣṇava brahmin communities, and the trend within elite Śākta circles towards brahmanical conformity is already pronounced in the 12th-century *Śāradātilaka* of Lakṣmaṇadeśika, an Orissan brahmin.[14: 252]

Tantric Vaiṣṇavism

Prior to Śaivism’s efflorescence in the post-Gupta, early-medieval period (c. 6th–12th centuries), Vaiṣṇavism was India’s dominant theistic tradition. A vibrant form of Tantric Vaiṣṇavism known as the Pāñcarātra developed alongside the tantric traditions of Śaivism and Buddhism, and is attested in the seventh century.[29] This likely had roots in a non-tantric Vaiṣṇava sect by the same name existing centuries earlier. Much like the Śaiva Siddhānta, the Pāñcarātra is today generally considered a temple-based Hindu sect of South India, but its earliest sources concern private ritual praxis more than public temples, and the tradition was present as far away as Kashmir, Nepal, and Cambodia in the early-medieval period.[29] Though viewed skeptically by the most orthodox, the Pāñcarātra, perhaps even earlier than the Śaiva Siddhānta, tended to position itself in a non-oppositional manner to the Vedas and Brahmanical norms.

The Pāñcarātra is an initiatory tradition founded on the authority of revealed texts, alternately called *saṃhitās*, *āgamas*, or *tantras*. Among the earliest (probably pre-ninth century) and most authoritative of these are the *Jayākhyasaṃhitā*, *Sātvatasamhitā*, and *Paṇḍarasamhitā*, sometimes referred to as the “three jewels.” The *Jayākhyā* and newly discovered early scriptures

such as the *Svāyambhuvapañcarātra* prove particularly close to, and indeed indebted in various ways, to early Śaiva *tantras*.^[14: 61–67] The practices of the early Pāñcarātra largely mirror those of Tantric Śaivism, sharing to a large degree a common ritual syntax and technical terminology, as documented extensively by the *Tāntrikābhīdhānaśāstra* project.^[30] Post-initiatory praxis centers on mantra-based inner-worship of Vaiṣṇava deities, as well as external worship using substrates such as maṇḍalas and religious images. The meditational disciplines of yoga are integral to the early Pāñcarātra, which, like Mantramārga Śaivism, also teaches practices specifically for the *sādhaka* who seeks occult powers (*siddhi*).^[31] The Pāñcarātra expanded its scriptural corpus in second-millennium South India, like the southern Śaiva Siddhānta, with newer scriptures such as the *Pādmasaṃhitā* focusing on the ritual life of Vaiṣṇava temples and civic religion more than private religious practice. Recent research has highlighted the sectarian diversity of the second-millennium Pāñcarātra.^[32]

The Pāñcarātra teaches a Sāṃkhya-based emanationist cosmology, akin to the Śaiva Mantramārga but with unique Vaiṣṇava conceptions of the divine. Distinctive is its theogony of the fourfold emanations (*vyūha*) of the supreme deity, Vāsudeva (i.e. Krishna or Viṣṇu)—Saṃkarṣaṇa (i.e. Balarāma), Pradyumna, Aniruddha, and the *vyūha* form of Vāsudeva—as well as various lower manifestations (*vibhava*, i.e. *avatāra*). These deities and an array of female *śaktis*, especially Śrī or Lakṣmī, form the principal deities of the Pāñcarātra. Pāñcarātra theology was highly influential, for it informs Śrī Vaiṣṇavism, and hence the Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta of Rāmānuja. His teacher’s teacher, Yamunācārya, in fact wrote a spirited defence of the status of Pāñcarātra *āgamas* or *tantras* as scripture (the *Āgamaprāmāṇya*). The Pāñcarātra also influenced Bengali Vaiṣṇavism, whose theologians considered its *saṃhitās* authoritative and cited them extensively, especially in matters of ritual.^[29: 155]

Other regional forms of Vaiṣṇavism developed tantric traditions, notably the Vaiṣṇava Sahajiyās of early-modern Bengal. The Sahajiyās form a heterodox counterpart to Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism, a movement founded by Caitanya Mahāprabhu in the early sixteenth century. While mainstream Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavas cultivated loving devotion to Kṛṣṇa through worship and

collective chant (*saṃkīrtana*), the Sahajiyās sought to experience the ecstasy of Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa’s divine union through practice of sexual yoga. Sahajiyā ideas and practices are influential among the Bāuls of Bengal, a tantric sect whose teachings also draw on Sufism.[33, 34]

Medical *tantras* and the *Sauratantras*

In the model of Mantramārga revelation where Sadāśiva’s faces emit five streams of scripture, two of these are comprised of medical texts: the *Bhūtatantras* (concerned especially with spirit possession) and *Gāruḍatantras* (concerned especially with snakebite). These, along with *Bālatantras*, concerned with the magical protection and healing of young children, are the major branches of tantric, mantra-based medicine. Owing to the recent monograph of Michael Slouber,[35] our knowledge of these traditions is greatly enhanced—particularly of the *Gāruḍatantras*. These are named after their supreme deity: the divine eagle, Garuḍa, who is treated as a form of Śiva. While oriented towards health and healing, this literature presents complete systems of tantric ritual, and possesses a soteriological dimension. Although the early canonical sources appear to be lost, several important texts do survive, such as the *Kriyākālaguṇottara*, a digest of earlier *Bhūta-* and *Gāruḍatantras*. Moreover, teachings of the medical *tantras* were incorporated into Pāñcarātra, Buddhist, Jaina, and other Śaiva tantric sources, as well as various *Purāṇas*. Tantric medical practices were widely influential, and in some cases remain in use today.[35]

While few early medical *tantras* survive, none at all seem to survive of the tantric cult of the solar deity, Sūrya. Lists of text-titles reveal that there was once a substantial number of Saura (“Solar”) *tantras*, and the cult of Sūrya attracted royal patronage. Of its tantric literature, only the *Saurasaṃhitā* seems to survive in manuscript, a critical edition of which is being prepared by Diwakar Acharya. However, this teaches a syncretic cult of Sūrya as a form of Śiva, and draws on Śaiva sources.[14: 53–58]

Haṭhayoga and medieval monastic orders

In the early second-millennium, yoga took a corporeal turn. New body-centered techniques for longevity and spiritual perfection emerged, such as difficult non-seated *āsanas* (yoga postures) and *prāṇāyāma* (breath control), with an emphasis on retention of the life-energy (*bindu*) through celibacy and yogic disciplines. With roots in tantric yoga as well as *tapas*, forms of bodily mortification, these techniques crystallized into Haṭhayoga, “forceful yoga.” Haṭhayoga’s early history has strong Buddhist connections: the expression *haṭhayoga* first occurs in the context of Buddhist tantric yoga, and the earliest surviving text of Haṭhayoga,[36] the 11th-century *Amṛtasiddhi*, was composed by a Buddhist.[37] Haṭhayoga readily transcended religious boundaries, however; texts on the subject were authored by Buddhists, Śaivas, Vaiṣṇavas, and even Sufis. Kaula works such as the thirteenth-century *Matsyendrasaṃhitā* incorporated Haṭha techniques extensively, and Kaula *kuṇḍalinī yoga* became integral to Haṭhayoga, as reflected in sources such as the *Haṭhapradīpikā* (15th-century).[38]

After the twelfth century, new pan-South Asian monastic orders played important roles in shaping yoga’s development. These include the Nātha Sampradāya, a Śaiva monastic order with Kaula tantric roots flourishing from the thirteenth or fourteenth century. Its legendary gurus, especially Matsyendra and Gorakṣanātha, are credited with many of the teachings and texts of Haṭhayoga, though the Nāthas themselves seem not always to have prioritized physical disciplines.[39] Like the more orthodox Śaiva Dasnāmīs, who gradually eclipsed the Nāthas in most regions, Nāthas practice the tantric ritual and yoga of Śrīvidyā. The Vaiṣṇava Rāmānandī ascetic order, prominent in North India from around the fifteenth century, also incorporates Haṭhayoga into its otherwise devotionally-oriented praxis.[40, 41] Vaiṣṇava engagement with Haṭhayoga began much earlier, however, for the earliest list of non-seated *āsanas* comes from a Vaikhānasa source,[42: 87-88] and a Vaiṣṇava wrote the *Dattātreya yogaśāstra* (c. 13th century), one of the earliest texts of Haṭhayoga.[42: xx–xi]

While modern postural yoga has distanced itself from all things tantric, and indeed religion itself, the tantric traditions' contributions to its development are considerable.

Tantra in the modern world

The modern legacies of India's tantric traditions are manifold. Arguably, Hinduism as we know it was shaped through a synthesis of Vedic and tantric traditions, with additional impetus from *śramanic* and various local traditions. Modern Hinduism as a whole has however moved away from its tantric roots—in theology and in rhetoric, to be sure (for the very word *tantra* conjures unsavory images), but also in matters of ritual and devotion. By the twentieth century, all but the most orthodox-congruent tantric traditions had declined in influence or fallen into disrepute. Nonetheless, some traditional tantric systems retain high status today and are seeing something of a revival, especially Śrīvidyā, and perhaps also the so-called Kashmir Śaivism.

Colonial Bengal was a crucible for the tantric traditions' encounters with modernity. Tantric sects have been prominent in the Bengali religious landscape since their inception, extending into the modern period and cutting across sectarian and class boundaries. In the colonial era, tantric scriptures and ritual still held high status among the Śākta brahmins of Bengal, despite Tantra's disrepute in reformist circles. It is their traditions which came to the attention of global anglophone audiences in the early twentieth-century with the prolific publications of 'Arthur Avalon'—the pen name of a British judge in India, Sir John Woodroffe, and his collaborator, Atul Bihari Ghosh. Still in print today, their books have, more than any other texts, shaped modern knowledge of Hindu Tantra within and beyond India.[43: 134]

A number of new religious movements of Indian origin have drawn on or sought to revive tantric teachings, beginning in the early-twentieth century with the Ramakrishna Mission. This influential monastic order was founded by the charismatic Swami Vivekananda, a disciple of Ramakrishna Paramahansa, a rustic and saintly priest of Kālī. In contrast to the Brahmo Samaj, the Ramakrishna Mission embraced some traditional forms of religious practice,

alongside its Vedāntic theology and mission of social service. Its relationship to Ramakrishna's practice of Tantra is nonetheless ambivalent.[44] In the postcolonial period, several gurus founded transnational new religious movements which more explicitly embrace Tantra. Those whose teachings mainly emphasize tantric yoga and who have international followings include, for example, Harbhajan Singh Yogi (founder of 3HO), Swami Muktananda (Siddha Yoga), Shrii Shrii Anandamurti (Ananda Marga), and Shri Mataji Nirmala Devi (Sahaja Yoga). There have also been novel efforts to engage with Tantra philosophically, most notably by Sri Aurobindo (1872–1950) and Shrii Shrii Anandamurti (1921–1989), both of whom were prolific and highly original. In point of contrast, Rajneesh/Osho (1931–90) developed a lucrative global brand of “neo-Tantrism” that was decidedly hedonistic. Appearing to perpetuate antinomian strands of “left-handed” Tantra, his neo-Tantrism is in fact “a kind of postmodern pastiche,”[1: 235–43] like much of new-age spirituality. Synergy between Tantra and new-age thought, and likewise Tantra and Western esotericism, in fact has much older roots, having been pioneered by the Theosophical Society in the late-nineteenth century.[1: 208]

Cross-references

Abhinavagupta
Anandamarga
Bhairava
Guru, Hinduism
Kālī
Kāpālikas
Kaśmir Shaivism
Kaula
Kuṇḍalinī
Pāñcarātra
Pāśupatas
Pratyabhijñā
Rajneesh
Sahaja
Śiva
Śāktatantras

Śaiva Āgamas
Śaiva Siddhānta
Śaivism (Overview)
Siddha Yoga
Śrīvaiṣṇavism
Śrīvidyā
Trika
Vaiṣṇava Āgamas
Yantra
Yoga
Yoginī

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