

*The paper argues that within social sciences, efforts to represent the "other" are simultaneously efforts at understanding major social science problems and the representations of self within them. In this perspective psychoanalysis and tantric thought are compared. Tantra is seen as having an element of transcendence which, despite its similarities with Freudian thought, makes it unique to Indian cultural tradition. The essay tries to show how the tantric system of thought is also a profound critique of the classical Brahmanic worldview of India, and how the tantric system is ancient and postmodern at the same time in its formulations and intentions.*

## **Tantra, an Ancient Postmodernist's Lure: Overcoming the Dichotomy of Self and Others**

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**The writings of** Mannheim (1952), leading up to the post-structuralists, have shaken the claims of innocence, value-neutrality, objectivity and verifiability in social sciences. Through language our value, biases and "*a priories*" are expressed and continue to stay with us. Hence, at the epistemological level cultural biases guide what is taken to be knowledge. The argument is that one can never separate knowledge or science from the likes of language which imply a value orientation. Moreover, the root assumptions of "time"

<sup>1</sup> The implied audience of this essay are Western scholars or persons trying to understand Indian traditional and non-traditional thought through Western categories. The circumstances in which this essay was written makes it imperative to use Western references. The author is acutely aware that this representation of *tantra* is deeply coloured by the language used and the purpose of comparing Western and Indian viewpoints. The essay should be read as one of the many possible and prevalent constructions of *tantra*. The author is indebted to Profs R.C. Tripathi, S.C. Bhattacharya and F.B. Tyler, who encouraged the author to write this essay by going through various discussion sessions and drafts. Without these encouragements the ideas expressed here would not have taken a publishable form.

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and “being” underlie all social sciences and philosophical discourses—where one assumes “being”, even if one but cannot define it. Since any discourse begins with a notion of being, the model of man which is presupposed in studies becomes central to the critique of that study and the enterprise of philosophy (Heidegger, 1972). The conundrum that man “is” is now regaining its centrality. There is a realisation that the totality of man can never be known as there is no fixed entity as such. Man is creative in the sense that he creates himself. C. W. Mills (as quoted by Berlin, 1981), suggested the same: “In our time, what is at issue is the very nature of man, the image we have of his limits and possibilities as man. History is not yet done with its exploration of the limits and meaning of human nature”. (p. xiii) Therefore one can see that all studies of human action, be it history or sociology or psychology, are but inputs in man’s creation of his own self.

With the writings of postmodernists like Derrida (1974), Foucault (1979) and Lacan (1979) the comfort of value-neutrality of rationalism along with objectivity and verifiability, is also gone. We have to accept that all knowledge, apart from being conceptual and socially constructed and situated, is also political. All knowledge tries to expropriate realities and define for others their reality, and also shapes the life and being of others. However, this loss of political naivete and certitude has opened up some possibilities. One such possibility is the emergence of self in psychological studies. The lost stream of Aristotelian notions, continued by William James (1890), Mead (1934), Cooley (1902) is being readmitted into psychology. This has given a fresh lease of life to the tolerance and plurality of conceptualisation of self (Scheibe, 1985). It has also allowed the study of cultures and cross-cultural studies, not necessarily like the ones cross-cultural psychologists are presently doing. Now that there are possibilities of indigenous psychologies standing their grounds, not as emics but in their own rights as etics, one can have more than one universal!

It is at this juncture that an attempt is being made here to look into, reread and understand an Indian system called *tantra*. Our object is, first, to see what it stood for and what it signified, and second, to explore how in the process of understanding it, one can hope to throw some light on the understanding of self and social sciences and many of the present issues within it. This hope is based on the assumption that no understanding of the “other” can

be achieved without simultaneously looking at one's own self and that all attempts to represent the other are also a journey into one's own self. Hence efforts to represent *tantra* are also efforts at understanding major social science problems and representations of self within them.

The intention here is not to present the reader with the idea that one can "know" what *tantra* is about. *Tantra*, like some of the other systems in Indian tradition, is completely wedded to praxis, where to "know" and "to do" are one and the same process so that just "knowing" is artificial. Therefore an attempt would be made in this paper to show the similarities between *tantra* and certain social theorists within the context of psychology so as to give a feel of the kind of problems *tantra* attempts to address within the Indian tradition.

If we try to understand *tantra* by looking at philosophical traditions within psychology that deal with similar issues, we might be able to make a connection between the works of Freud, Derrida, Foucault and Lacan, among others, and the philosophy of *tantra*. The "fit" between them is by no means exact, and yet both these systems try, in their own way, to collapse certain dichotomies that have been central to their respective traditions. In this endeavour, therefore, it may be useful to explore the relationship between *tantra* and psychoanalysis.

### ***Tantra and Psychoanalysis: Similar yet Different***

At a superficial level there seems to be a similarity between *tantra* and psychoanalysis. The emphasis on sexuality and symbolism is central to both. Kakar (1982) compares *tantra* as a healing system to "the depth psychology" of psychoanalysis. Both use a kind of dialectical model that attempts to get at the hidden nature of the self/individual. The Freudian model specifies that there is a tension between the id (or the nature of the self) and the superego (or the constraints of society on the self). The id has primacy as all psychic energy stems from it. Such energies are constrained by the superego, and the social morals of society are internalised. The dialectical tension is resolved by the ego, which channels the natural desires of the id in such a way that it conforms to the requirements of

society. This synthesis is an uneasy one and Freud seems to feel that humans can never be truly happy or free (Freud, 1961). Sublimation thus becomes a tight rope which threatens to plunge an individual into the abyss of psychosis and a society into anarchic disintegration.

*Tantra*, by contrast, posits a dichotomy (if indeed the term “dichotomy” can properly be used here) between Shakti, the active principle of the universe (or better still, the universe objectifying itself to itself) and Shiva,<sup>2</sup> the non-differentiated dynamic universe. But the synthesis here does not involve balancing these two principles; it rather consists in transcendence and the realisation that no dichotomy ever existed. *Tantra* arrives at the construction and understanding of self by deliberately setting up a dichotomy between Shiva and Shakti, only to transcend it. As the dynamic element of the universe, Shakti represents both human nature as well as society. The idea of both id and superego would be included within the concept of Shakti. One can see that although there seems to be a certain affinity between psychoanalysis and *tantra*, the two systems are actually predicated on entirely different assumptions and claim to construct individual and self differently.

If we approach Freud, as did Marcuse (1955) or Lacan (1979), we might be able to gain insights into the nature of Freudian theory as well as *tantra*. For Marcuse, Freud presented us with a real dialectical relationship between the id and the superego. Thus the id is not a simple biological fact, but is defined only in relationship to a specific historical context. That is, the superego changes from one historical context to another, and with changes in the superego the very nature of the id also undergoes changes. In the original undifferentiated self—the self of primary narcissism—there is no differentiation between subject and object, between the self and other, between the individual and the universe. The central dichotomy of Freudian theory thus ultimately collapses into a non-dualistic view of personality. Sex here, like the mirror of the

<sup>2</sup> Shiva is one of the Holy Triad and is attributed the power of creation, maintenance and destruction. Shakti, also known as Devi, is a goddess as complex and as powerful, having many attributes mostly as consort of Shiva. Both Shiva and Shakti have many interpretations, not because they are vague and ambiguous conceptualisations, but because they are conceptualised as omnipotent, and that there are many truths, without any of them being the correct or the erroneous one. For an introductory definition of Shiva and Shakti, see J. Dawson's *A Classical Dictionary of Hindu Mythology & Religion* (1976). For more historical and textual deliberations see W.D. O'Flaherty's *Hindu Myths* (1976).

narcissist, becomes the free play of the self, a symbol of the collapse of the dichotomy between id and superego that is maintained, not because of the nature of the individual, but because of the needs of the society. In his discussion of the myths of Orpheus and Narcissus, Marcuse clearly shows this collapse of the Freudian dichotomy. These mythical characters love themselves, and abandon themselves to the (socially defined) dysfunctional but nonetheless pleasurable eros of life. This ultimately results in the fusion of the animate and the inanimate (the *nirvana* principle, or the death instinct). Once this fusion has occurred, all things become eroticised. Since there is no difference between the self and the other, the love of the self becomes the love of the world. Here, one may note the similarities between the eroticised individual and the enlightened individual as enshrined in Eastern philosophy. Because such an individual is past the difference between the self and the other, between the individual and the universe, his love of himself entails an eroticisation of all experience. Experience is no longer predicated on the reality principle (which is guided by the superego) but rather on the pleasure principle which eroticises all things.

If rationality itself is defined by the performance principle, then any enlightened self which is no longer working under this principle would necessarily appear dysfunctional. To put it in another way, since the truths sought by *tantric* practitioner explicitly wish to collapse the dichotomies within himself and within society, the very dichotomies that Marcuse, along with Freud, feels are central to the creation and perpetuation of society are lost. The *tantric's* goals must be "irrational", beyond the rationality dictated by the social order. Thus, the *tantric* philosopher becomes a profound critic of the social philosophy expressed by such sacred Indian works as the *Bhagavad Gita*. The *Gita* is predicated on the idea of what Marcuse calls the "mastery instinct". Here, one does a job for no other reason than that it needs to be done. This is the height of anti-eroticism, and therefore also height of alienation. In a similar fashion, sacred texts such as the *Gita* put forth a vision of a stratified society in which people do their work because it needs to get done—it is their duty to do it. This alienated view of life is what the *tantric* philosophers challenge. Hence one finds, in the various *tantric* schools, the deliberate collapsing of purity/impurity categories, embracing of low caste women, especially the washer-woman, as the perfect object of love, and the acceptance of all

regardless of gender and caste. There is then a similarity between Freud and *tantra*, but only via Marcuse.

This link between Freud and *tantra* can, perhaps, be pursued further. Both approaches use sex as an overdetermined symbol as there is no ultimate reference point to sexuality (Lacan, 1979). Sex becomes an overdetermined symbol, and thus, a phallus does mean penis, but this is not all it means. *Tantra* deliberately makes all its discourses simultaneously at the level of the physical, the symbolic and the philosophical. It would be inaccurate to collapse the discourse down to only one of these levels. But then why the emphasis on sex? Sex becomes a symbol here of the individual's ability to objectify himself. However, this objectification comes about only by reference to the other. As in Lacan's view of desire or drive, the energy of the libido will reach fulfilment no matter what course it takes. That is, the energy does not have a set object of desire. Libidinal energy can be fulfilled in sexuality, but if thwarted, it will be fulfilled by sublimation. It is a kind of drive that has no unilinear directionality. But when the drive is used to lure the desire of the other, then it is possible for the self, which is only a signifier caught in a chain of signification, to manifest itself. That is, desire becomes a lure to make one's self the object of the other's desires, and in the act of becoming this object of desire, one objectifies oneself too (Lacan, 1979). To put it another way, desire is the mechanism by which the self attempts to objectify itself. As the self is but a signifier, with no specific referential, it is only when this signifier is recognised by the other, by becoming an object of desire, that the connection between the self and the signifier is manifest and the self is actualised.

For Lacan, this objectification is never complete. The knowledge that the other too is but a signifier in search of objectification leaves the encounter of objectification incomplete; the object (self) is caught in a chain of deferment that can never be closed. If we recall one of the renderings of the myth of Kali, we might be able to make a connection between this view and *tantra*. Kali goes on an erotic (thanatos) rampage, an orgy of destruction. She is stopped only when she acknowledges the link between herself and her consort, Shiva. The moment, when she touches Shiva with her foot, is the moment of her manifestation. This is the moment that all icons that depict her refer to. Her desire is being used as a lure—a lure for the desire of the other, Shiva. It is only in the other, in the relationship

between her and Shiva, that she becomes manifest. It is the back and forth desire of Shiva and Shakti that is responsible for all objectification. Significantly, the couple is often depicted in sexual union, and this act of sex is the central icon of *tantra*. By extension, *tantra* uses sexuality as a moment when the possibility of self-objectification is achievable. All energy, Shakti, is viewed as positive. However, the energy is quickly dissipated. It has no specific goal, and although all desire produces energy, this energy is not fixed on any specified object of desire. Sexuality that quickly dissipates the energy of the libido, in and of itself, is not capable of objectifying the individual. However, if the couple can channel this energy and reflect upon it, that is, make it merge into the totality of one's being, then the desire of each can be suspended. This unfulfilled desire becomes the perfect point of collapse when the difference between the self and the other is defined and negated. The energy of this desire (Shakti) goes back and forth between the two partners and if sustained can activate the *kundalini* within the self, which finally ends the deferment of the self.

The couple who are manifest in their desire become the divine couple, Shiva and Shakti, spirituality and objectification, who are linked together by their desire. Shiva and Shakti are never manifest individually. The self, even the self of the divine, or the nature of the universe, exists only in relationship to the other. This link between the self and the other, which is crucial to the definition of the self, is maintained by desire. However, in *tantra*, unlike in Lacanian psychology (Dews, 1987) there is the possibility of breaking out of this deferment, not in the sense of the other being negated, but in the sense that it is possible for the individual to reach enlightenment. And once this happens, the self is manifest. This manifestation of the self is nothing but the collapse of the self and the other; thus the self becomes the object of its own desire. This leap to the complete self points to a profound difference between *tantric* philosophy and Lacanian psychology. The Eastern tradition of transcendental and the meaning of higher order of existence become the watershed between the postmodernist and Indian worldviews.

In psychoanalysis the narcissistic self incorporates the world into the self and learns to differentiate between the self and the world with gradual maturity. Therefore within Freudian thinking, it is ironic that awareness leads to the realisation that one's transcendental

existence is romantic and self-delusionary. Ultimately one comes to realise that one cannot internalise the world and that one is alone in it. *Tantra* allows for transcendence, which Kakar (1982) refers to as the romantic aspect, whereas psychoanalysis never allows for such a possibility. In *tantra* the transcendent self incorporates itself into the “non-differentiated dynamic universe”. Maturity comes from first differentiating the self and then reuniting with the “non-differentiated dynamic universe”. One is not alone but, with all. However, both systems require interactions with the other and consequently need an external feedback loop in which they can realise and objectify self.

### ***Tantra: Within yet beyond Traditional Indian Philosophy***

Thus far we have talked about *tantra* at the level of psychological theory. Let us now turn our attention to *tantra* as a philosophy. Before we proceed, let us ask ourselves what were the questions that *tantra* attempted to address. According to Hessterman (1985), Indian religion went through radical fragmentation. The unity between practical power (temporal world) and transcendental order, which is implicit in the rituals of sacrifice of the pre-classical sacred texts, was destroyed by the classical *Brahmanic* world. The reciprocal sacrifice, that made no distinctions between a Brahmin and a warrior (the transcendental and the temporal), plunged the society into a state of perpetual reciprocal violence—the kind of chaos talked about by Girard (1977). Unable to sustain the toll of perpetual reciprocal violence, the Brahmin renouncer brought this state of affairs to a close by creating a dichotomy between the world of consciousness and the world of the transcendental. Thus, every Indian philosophy since this time has been attempting to reconcile this “inner conflict” with only limited success. The dichotomy between the transcendental and the political may have ended the cycle of reciprocal violence, but it could not then link the two ends of the dichotomy back together. Hence, there was a profound problem of legitimisation, not only at the political level, but also at the personal level of how one should relate to one's body, or anything of this world.

The orthodoxy of Hinduism posited an external reality that

could be known by the predefined taxonomies of the *Vedas*. This objective external world was contrasted to the internal world of consciousness. Consciousness was beyond time and space. Thus cognition was apart from the world of action. The internal world of consciousness was related to the external by the laws of *dharmā* and *karmā*. This view was buttressed by such works as the *Gīta*, but was never quite palatable. There was no real logical connection between the transcendental world and the practical (Hessterman, 1985; Raju, 1985) but this connection was nonetheless legitimised by the *Vedas*. By mediating the tensions between action and consciousness, which was necessary for true consciousness, *karmā* and *dharmā* served as the tools which promoted a formal view of social structure. By strict adherence to the codes of *dharmā*, by acting without expectation of reward, the Brahmin could escape the wheel of *karmā*.

Such a dichotomy between external obedience to social rules and internal detachment from time and space was initially challenged by the *Upanishads*. The Vedantists attempted to collapse the separation between internal and external consciousness and sacrifice or ritual by attacking the external pole of the dichotomy. That is, they prioritised the idea of consciousness and felt that ritual or social norms were of no relevance to liberation. Thus, we see endless lampooning of the blindness of rituals and its total ineffectiveness in the literature on *Upanishads*. However, by simply setting up a hierarchy which prioritises one end of a dichotomy one cannot escape the dichotomy itself. As Derrida (1974) has pointed out, the "trace" of the other is always implicated in either of the polarities of a dichotomy. This means that internality will always imply externality. Indeed, *Vedānta* philosophy only makes sense when it is put within the context of what it hoped to challenge. As the back-and-forth movement between the poles of dichotomy is denied by the Vedantists, they fail philosophically to collapse the duality of the orthodox Hindu order. It is hard to imagine how they could have succeeded, for the very real problem of the political world is simply being negated.

*Tantra*, by contrast, is closer to a Derridaian deconstruction of the central dichotomy of Hinduism. Instead of denying one pole of the dichotomy—which in turn perpetuates the dichotomy itself—*tantra* positively revels in the dichotomy between the external and the internal. Or more accurately, it attempts to collapse the

dichotomy by focusing—exactly as does Derrida's deconstruction theory—on the movement between the two ends of the dichotomy, that is, on what is said, and what is left unsaid in any system. This either/or movement finally collapses the distinction between internal and external, between body and cosmos, language and meaning, sexuality and spirituality, etc. The *tantric* answer to Hessterman's "inner conflict" of the Indian tradition has great affinity to deconstruction theory. Rather than denying these polarities of thought, and thus, defining the very core of philosophical discourse within the Indian context, *tantra* plays around with the movement between the poles of any and all of these dichotomies to really show that they were meaningless to begin with. Therefore, they must be collapsed by such back-and-forth oscillations before the individual can understand the limitations these dichotomies impose on his consciousness. In this way the blindness or the impediment to learning that they foster is overcome, but the dichotomies themselves remain. This model for understanding *tantra* seems to explain what otherwise can appear to be an inexplicable body of work. In *tantric yoga*, one starts from an understanding of the external (Shakti), but moves to focus on the internal (Brahma), only to re-merge into the external. A similar logic underlies the *pranayama*, the breathing exercises that attempt to suspend the moment between the inhalation and the exhalation, so that again the dichotomy between interior and exterior is collapsed. It is important to note that this transcendence is definitive to all Indian philosophical system, and is not a position that Derrida, or for that matter most other Western philosophers, would agree with.

Although a similar analysis could be done for each of the dichotomies that *tantra* addresses, this analysis is confined to the central image of Shiva and Shakti. What is pertinent here is that *tantra* is a non-dualistic school of thought; thus Shiva and Shakti can never be seen as separate. Ever before the universe is objectified (Shakti is manifest), there already exists in the *bindu* (point)—from which the universe unfolds—the dichotomy/unity of Shiva and Shakti. Before Shakti (the differentiated universe) manifests herself, this point is called the Chinchini Shakti. It is similar to Derrida's "trace" or "non-ordinary origin", in that it is the primary origin of all things, and yet the dichotomy or at least the potential for dichotomy is already always manifest within it. So even before the universe is manifest, there is the opposition/unity between Shiva and Shakti,

and before that there is a dichotomy/unity between the two. In order to collapse the dichotomy between movement (flux, power which can be differentiated, Shakti) and rest (the undifferentiated which cannot be labelled, Shiva) *tantra* presents us with a continual "movement"; a movement that emphasises Shakti—as we are born into the world of action— then Shiva, then Shakti/Shiva, then neither Shiva nor Shakti. Any energy (anger, sex, love, etc.) can, at an emotional level, remind the individual that the differences he sees between aspects of himself and the universe, are but social conventions. Thus, *moksha* appears as something remembered. What is being remembered, of course, is the original undifferentiated individual or universe that still exists alongside the differentiated one. Passion of any sort can momentarily unite our fragmented social selves, and awaken the primary narcissism of Freud, or the delineated fragmented social self central to the theory of Marcuse. But such passion is hard to sustain. *Tantra* wishes to prolong these moments of insight by channelling the energies of human passion, so that these moments of insight become a permanent view of the integrated self, for at the base it has an assumption of altered state of consciousness or transcendental reality.

Thus, *tantra* attempts to integrate the individual by acting as a critique of the fragmentary view of the self that has its origins deep within the Indian cultural tradition. In this, *tantra* seems to be similar to deconstructionist approaches. However, the process through which such a deconstruction is attempted differs and so, also, does the reality which such deconstructions signify. The traditions within which the two deconstructions are embedded give the apparently similar processes their different flavour. The self is not the only category by which the self is recognised or is delimited, either by itself or by others; it is also integrally related to why and how one arrives at these categories. Self, at any given juncture, is situated historically in a culture and in "traditions of meanings". However, it is both the artefact of the juncture and its attempt at growing out of the confines of that tradition; it simultaneously is, and is not, within the tradition!

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