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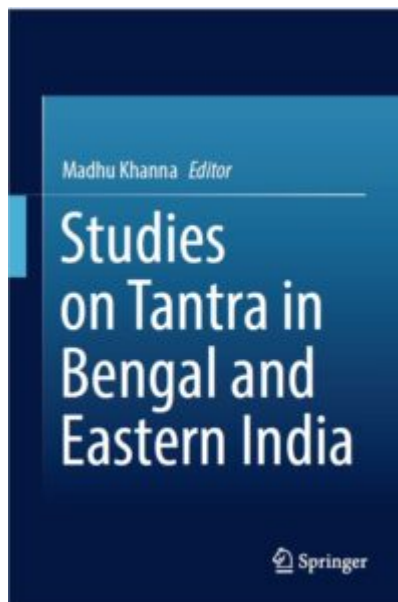
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# Book review: Studies on Tantra in Bengal and Eastern India – I

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New from professor Madhu Khanna is her edited collection *Studies on Tantra in Bengal and Eastern India* (**Springer 2022** (<https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007/978-981-19-3022-5>)). This collection brings together both established and emerging scholars in its focus on tantric influences across a region encompassing the states of Assam, Bihar, Bengal, and Nepal. This is a rich field for exploration, as Madhu Khanna points out in her introduction. The diverse religious currents of the region, ranging from Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism to Tantric Śākta streams coexisted and cross-fertilized each other. The essays in this collection demonstrate the myriad ways in which adaptations and dialogue between religious traditions influenced and shaped Śākta tantra in Bengal.

Professor Khanna was one of the first contemporary scholars to produce a comprehensive examination of Srikula with her Ph.D dissertation – *The Concept and Liturgy of the Śricakra Based on Śivānanda's Trilogy* (Oxford University, 1986) – and her publications include *Yantra: The Tantric Symbol of Cosmic Unity* (1994), *Rta, The Cosmic Order* (2004), and *Asian Perspectives on the World's Religions After September 11* edited with Arvind Sharma (2013). She is a former director of the Centre for the Study of Comparative Religion and Civilizations, Jamia Millia Islamia, New

Delhi, co-creator of the Centre for Indic and Agamic Studies in Asia (CIASA) and a founding member of the Tantra Foundation, New Delhi. A review of the compendium of tantric ritual manuals she edited in 2014, *Śāktapramodaḥ of Deva Nandan Singh* can be found [here](https://enfold.org/book-review-saktapramoda%e1%b8%a5-of-deva-nandan-singh-edited-by-madhu-khanna/) (<https://enfold.org/book-review-saktapramoda%e1%b8%a5-of-deva-nandan-singh-edited-by-madhu-khanna/>).

For the first part of this review, I will examine the three essays (chapters 2-4) making up section one, titled “Cult Inclusiveness”.

The second chapter is Madhu Khanna’s *The Making of Tantric Rādhā: A Reading from the Kṛṣṇayāmala*. Beginning with an overview of the development of Rādhā – from her literary origins to her rise to prominence in Jayadeva’s *Gīta Govinda*; Madhu Khanna moves on to explore Rādhā’s tantric identity via a select reading from the sixteenth-seventeenth century *Śrīkṛṣṇayāmala* (ŚKY), which, she argues, has been influenced markedly by the Śrīvidyā tradition. Although the travails of Kṛṣṇa and Rādhā are the dominant theme of the narrative, the goddess Tripurasundarī, in her aspect of Kāmeśvarī, plays a key role in the narrative as a mediator between the two.

One of the key themes in ŚKY is Kṛṣṇa’s inability, despite all his efforts, to enchant Rādhā. Despairing, he considers employing the tantric techniques of vaśīkaraṇa-prayogas; spells, herbs, and mantras, identifying with each in turn. Tripurasundarī’s role as mediator takes the form of her sending various subordinate emanations of her power forth to attract Rādhā. She first sends forth 64 crores of yoginīs, but they are unsuccessful. She then sends the nine circles of goddesses who preside over the layers of the Śrīcakra, from its periphery to the centre, but even these powerful groups are unsuccessful in drawing Rādhā from the forest – and they end up serving Rādhā as her handmaidens. In one passage, Tripurasundarī calls upon her Nītyas, ordering Kāmākarsinī to pervade all of Rādhā’s senses so that she is excited with passion. Buddhiyākarsinī is charged with becoming Rādhā’s thoughts, all turned towards Kṛṣṇa. The other Nītyas are instructed to use their powers to bend all of Rādhā’s attention towards Kṛṣṇa – but again they fail. The final group of goddesses are those who embody speech, and the sacred phonemes; headed by Tripurasundarī herself, they offer up a hymn of praise to Rādhā, and it is at this point that Rādhā reveals herself to be the supreme Śakti, demonstrating a fusion of bhakti and Śakti religious currents.

Following this reading from the ŚKY, Khanna moves to consider the *Rādhā tantra* (translated into English by Māns Broo in 2017). The main theme is that of Vāsudeva/Viṣṇu, in search of magical powers (siddhis). Śiva tells Viṣṇu that, in order to attain liberation, he must worship the ten Mahāyidyās, and that only Tripurasundarī, foremost among them, can grant siddhis. The goddess appears before Viṣṇu, saying that siddhis and liberation may only be achieved if he follows kaulācāra-sādhana. Again, this represents a fusion of tantric ideas with the more orthodox Vaiṣṇavisa movement.

The third chapter, Glen Hayes’ *Prema and Śakti: Vaiṣṇava Sahajiyā Appropriations of Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism and Śaktism in the Ānandabhairava of Prema-Dāsa*. I’ve been interested in the Sahajiyās ever since I read Edward C. Dimock’s 1989 book *The Place of the Hidden Moon*. Hayes explores how, during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth-centuries, pioneering Vaiṣṇava Sahajiyās fused fundamental Gauḍīya doctrines with elements drawn from Śaiva Tantras, and argued that every human being possessed male and female cosmic powers that could be accessed via Sahajiyā initiation and practice. They also claimed that hagiographies of Caitanya – notably Kṛṣṇadāsa’s *Caitanya-caritāmṛita* – supported their views, producing commentaries that asserted that Caitanya and other prominent Gauḍīyas were, secretly, Sahajiyās. Hayes goes on to outline the various Sahajiyā practices, ranging from the initial stages of vaidhi bhakti through to the secret, transgressive sexual rituals. He also discusses the various subtle body schemas developed by the Sahajiyās. The meat of

the chapter however, is Hayes' careful examination of the *Ānandabhairava* ('The bliss of Bhairava'), an eighteenth-century Sahajiyā text that combines elements of Sahajiyā doctrine with Nāth, Siddha, and Śaiva- Śakti themes.

The final chapter in this first section is Kaustubh Das' *Tantra in the Vernacular: Secrecy and Inclusivity in the Yogas of the Bāul-Sahajiyā Traditions*. I found this a difficult chapter to digest at times, hence the lengthy discussion.

Das begins with an extensive critique of scholar's over-reliance on textual and visual sources at the expense of oral, sonic or experiential knowledge. For example, Das cites how Frederick Smith has pointed out that western notions of the self as an isolated, bounded unit has limited the study of possession with respect to the tantric traditions. This critique is particularly relevant to the study of Bāul- Sahajiyā sādhanā, given that these forms of practice rely primarily on song for transmission, rather than texts and exegetical commentaries. Das argues that there is insufficient attention paid to song as a carrier of feeling – and that orality for tantra includes not only audible utterances, but also articulations that are felt rather than heard. Das writes: "it is not possible to study the oral cultures of tantras purely objectively. We may translate them and outline their philosophy, treating them carefully as cultural artefacts and remaining within the bounds of objective materialist scholarship. However we can never experiment with and understand its applications without involving subjective experience."

Das then moves on to consider the term *sahaja* and its significance in relation to nondual traditions such as the Trika or Vajrayāna Buddhism. He argues that modern scholarship on the Bāuls and Sahajiyās has over-focused on the sexual ritual aspects of sādhanā to the detriment of non-initiatory and non-ritualistic practices. Das proceeds to examine Bāul songs from a nondual tantric perspective. First though, Das examines both the pre-Caitanya sources of *sahaja* – both Buddhist and Śaiva. He points out that the Mahāsiddhās (who were neither exclusively Buddhist or Śaiva) were concerned with transmitting the doctrine to 'unlettered' social groups, necessitating the simplification of practices. He shows how sahaja practices represent a radical movement away from asceticism and ritual and argues, contrary to the received wisdom of colonial-era scholarship that Buddhism did not die out in India, but rather, became invisible to an extent, and that Buddhist Sahajiyā practices became 'Vaiṣṇavaised' from the fifteenth century onwards. Das supports this argument by reproducing a Bāul song that ascribes the tantric revelation to the Buddha's teachings, and that the Vaiṣṇava Sahajiyā added an affective dimension to Kaula concepts – that liberation could be cultivated through love in its highest form. He then examines the philosophy of the Gauḍīya and Sahajiyā schools – their differences and convergences, and the parallels between the Bengali Sahajiyās and the nondual Trika. He shows how, for the Sahajiyās, love, and devotion supersede the emphasis on ritual and yoga in the earlier Trika tradition. He also points to the Sahajiyā emphasis on the utilization of aesthetic experience as a route to liberation, although that is present in the 'classical' tantric traditions as can be seen in the ninth-century *Vijñāna-bhairava-tantra*.

Having established this background, Das considers the importance of listening to Bāul-Sahajiyā songs. Drawing on the work of Guy Beck (Sonic Theology) Das highlights the centrality of sound as a cosmological and soteriological category (NB: I'd recommend Annette Wilke & Oliver Moebius's 2011 book *Sound and Communication: An Aesthetic Cultural History of Sanskrit Hinduism* as highly useful in this context). Das points out that just as mantra and ritual transform the subtle body, so too does musical sound, citing several verses in the *Vijñāna-bhairava*. He then goes on to discuss how the nature of Sahajiyā songs is not merely that of articulated speech, but that singer, listener and song exist within an interconnected network of prāṇa. He draws a provocative distinction between two modes of listening: affective and informative. Informative listening is familiar, consisting of attention to meaning or the contemplation of content. Affective listening, however, is when a listener opens

themselves out to sound – aligning themselves with the prāṇa of the performer (and performance). This is a key distinction that Das employs with respect to the analysis of Bāul-Sahajiyā sonic practices. He argues against the scholarly consensus that the complex metaphors of Bāul songs provides a secretive function – concealing meanings from non-initiates. He points out that the tradition itself stresses that anyone with an open heart and mind can apprehend the meaning of the songs, and also that the tradition shares some metaphoric language with that of the ‘classical’ nondual tantric traditions.

In the final section of the chapter, Das turns to a selection of Bāul songs and their interpretation, approaching them from a nondual perspective, and finding within them allusions and references to teachings and practices of the Trika and Pratyabhijñā schools.

In the next part of this review, I will discuss the essays in parts two and three – that focus on the Śākta Pīṭhas and Śākta theology.

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