

Change, Continuity and Complexity: The Mahāvidyās in East Indian Śākta Traditions

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Historically grounded scholarship on the tantric goddesses known as Mahāvidyās has been lacking to date. Jae-Eun Shin's monograph thus fills an important vacuum in the study of Indian religions, complementing the phenomenologically-oriented monograph of the late David Kinsley.¹ The book is based upon the author's doctoral thesis from the University of Delhi (Department of History) and more recent published articles. Shin's principal contention is that the Mahāvidyās, best known as a set of ten, are products of complex historical processes associated with Brahmanical Hinduism's localization in eastern India, in a dialogical relationship with local cultures.

This is a work in five chapters, inclusive of the introduction and conclusion. Its heart is Chapter 3, "Making of the Mahāvidyās in the Śākta Upapurāṇas and Tantras in Eastern India," and Chapter 4, "Locating of the Mahāvidyās in the Sacred Landscape." It is here that the author makes her most original contributions, in my view. Chapter 2, "Grouping of Multiple Feminine Divinities," concerns the background and precursors to the Mahāvidyās in first- and early second-millennium sources. This long chapter (pp. 56–161) first chronicles the development of goddess groups identified as precursors to the Mahāvidyās: early first-millennium mother-goddess (*mātrī*) groups, the mid-first-millennium Brahmanical Seven Mothers (*saptamātrīs*), and the still later tantric goddesses known as *yoginīs*. The third section mainly concerns Tārā and Chinnamastā, two prominent Mahāvidyās with Mahāyāna Buddhist roots, as well as the Jaina tantric goddesses known as *vidyādevīs*. Making this chapter ambitious are its long forays, based largely on secondary literature, into such complex issues as the formation of Śāktism, the rise of tantric goddess cults and *yoginī* temples, and the histories of Kālī and Tripurasundarī. Important insights emerge, such as parallels between the Mahāvidyā Mātāṅgī and the Jaina Vidyādevī Vajrāṅkuśī, who is also a Vajrayāna goddess (pp. 133–34); locating these jewels nonetheless requires shifting through a rather long review of often outdated scholarship.

Chapter 3 begins with a useful account of brahmanical expansion and state formation in eastern India, then proceeds to the compilation of the east-Indian Śākta *Upapurāṇas*, carrying forward the arguments of Kunal Chakrabarti.² The highlight of this chapter is its examination of Mahāvidyā narratives from the *Devībhāgavata*, *Bṛhaddharma*, and *Mahābhāgavata Purāṇas*, which the author interprets in light of evidence from the *Kālikāpurāṇa*, *Devīpurāṇa*, *Devīmāhātmya*, and other *purāṇas*, Smṛti literature, and Śākta *tantras* (such as the the *Toḍala*) and digests. Here Shin offers a fascinating account of the Brahmanical negotiation of tantric traditions and of the Mahāvidyās' transformation – their "subjugation" and "domestication." As she observes, the puranic incorporation of material from *tantras* was "selective and contradictory" (p. 186), shaped by multiple religious agendas and dispositions. Shin's nuanced readings probe the construction of Vedic authority *vis-à-vis* the *tantras*, the negotiation of religious identity and social hierarchy, and the influence of Vaiṣṇavism and Śrīvidyā. Less convincing is the suggestion (pp. 178–80) that the emaciated, fierce goddess Kṣemaṅkarī of the *circa* eighth–ninth century *Devīpurāṇa* (chapter 39) is a precursor to the cult of Kālī and the Mahāvidyās. The only basis for this seems to be the fact that Kṣemaṅkarī has an entourage of eight unnamed *vidyā*-goddesses (*vidyāṣṭaka*); but this is a weak link, for fierce deities with retinues of eight mantra-goddesses are not unusual in period *tantras*.

¹Kinsley 1997.

²Chakrabarti 2001.

Chapter 4 concerns the religious history of Nilācala hill in Assam, site of the famous Kāmākhyā temple. Unusually, the hill also features temples of the Daśa (ten) Mahāvidyās. Shin weaves together more than a millennium of this site's history, from its possible origins as a tribal sacred site and Gupta-era cave temple to its emergence as the seat of Kāmākhyā, its early-modern reconstruction, and ongoing patronage. Shin provides an illuminating account of the social history of the site and its evolving place in sacred geography.³ One of the chapter's highlights is its analysis of the *Kālikāpurāṇa*'s "reformulation of Tantric sacred geography in a regional context" (p. 268), part of the larger process of the "Puranic reshaping of Tantric sacred geography" (p. 273). The chapter also advances an intriguing hypothesis: that the ten Mahāvidyās on Nilācala supplanted an earlier *yoginī* cult – possibly a *yoginī* temple – around the twelfth century. In this regard, the material evidence Shin adduces is not on its own convincing: period images of Cāmuṇḍā, Vārāhi, and Bhairavī (if correctly identified) found in the area do not necessarily intimate a larger set (or sets) of *yoginīs* or *mātrīs*, since these goddesses could be cult deities in their own right. On the other hand, the *Kālikāpurāṇa* speaks of *yoni* shrines of eight *yoginīs* surrounding Kāmākhyā, the original *yoni*, and Shin's hypothesis that these were later supplanted by shrines of the Mahāvidyās is tantalizing. The chapter's final section concerns Kāmākhyā's later transformations, including the site's restoration by the Koches at the height of their political power in the mid-sixteenth century, and subsequent patronization by the Ahom rulers. In this process the Mahāvidyās became increasingly benign, puranic goddesses, despite their roots in tantric *yoginī* cults. Chapter 5, the conclusion, weaves together the historical picture painted in earlier chapters and offers further reflections on the socio-religious implications of the Mahāvidyās.

This book certainly enriches our understanding of the history of the Mahāvidyās. Shin assembles a detailed genealogy for each of the main goddesses, from the ubiquitous Kālī to the obscure crane-faced Bagalāmukhī, and provides the best account to date of when and how the famous group of ten and less well-known groupings of twelve or more came together. No doubt further advances are possible given how vast and poorly charted medieval tantric literature remains. For instance, Michael Slouber has recently clarified the history of Tvaritā, a tantric goddess associated with cure of snakebite sometimes included among the Mahāvidyās.⁴ Two of the Mahāvidyās, Mātāṅgī and Dhūmāvati, are attested somewhat earlier than Shin notes, appearing in the *circa* twelfth-century *Śāradātilaka*, though they are not there called *mahāvidyās*.⁵ Dhūmāvati also appears in the *circa* thirteenth-century *Matsyendrasaṃhitā*.⁶ The contention that Mahāvidyā groups are first attested in the *Mahākālasaṃhitā*, and that this text dates to as early as the tenth century, surely requires revision, for it only comes into evidence in citations in very late sources, such as the seventeenth-century *Tārābhaktisudhārṇava*.⁷ Further research is needed to clarify the chronology of the east-Indian Kaula literature composed between the twelfth and the fifteenth centuries, where the Mahāvidyās likely first appear.

One of the concerns of Chapter 1 is the history of the terms *vidyā* and *mahāvidyā*. Shin notes correctly that *vidyā* is a term for mantras "almost exclusively applied to goddesses in Tantric traditions" (p. 25). There is much more to be said, though: the evidence from first millennium Śaiva *tantras* (of which one branch is the Vidyāpīṭha, the "Vidyā-mantra Corpus") is scarcely considered, and likewise early Buddhist tantric and *dhāraṇī* literature, which includes texts such as the

³For the early-medieval period, this might benefit from consideration of additional sources. I note that Kāmarūpa is absent from the sacred geography of the old *Skandapurāṇa* (*circa* sixth–seventh centuries) and *Brahmayāmala* (seventh–eighth centuries); for both of these sources, Koṭivarṣa or Devikoṭṭa forms the eastern frontier. Kāmarūpa does, however, appear in early Kaula sources such as the *Nityāśoḍaśīkārṇava* and *Kulasāra*, as well as the Buddhist *Cakraśaṃvaratantra* (41.7) and *Hevajratantra* (Shin notes the latter; however, the *Hevajratantra* may date closer to the tenth century than the eighth). The *Tantrasadbhāva* of the eighth–ninth centuries also knows of Kāmarūpa, but situates the *yoginī* Piṅgalā there, rather than Kāmākhyā (16.88ab: *vasate kāmārūpe tu piṅgalā yoginī śubhā*; electronic text of Mark Dyczkowski).

⁴See Slouber 2017, pp. 90–104.

⁵The goddess Mātāṅgī or Mātāṅgini features in chapter 12 of the *Śāradātilaka* (vv. 96ff.), while Dhūmāvati appears briefly in chapter 24. See Avalon 2003.

⁶*Matsyendrasaṃhitā* 48.12–13 (draft edition of Csaba Kiss).

⁷This is noted by Sanderson 2014, p. 82 (n. 331).

Mahāpratisarā-Mahāvidyārājñī (“The Great Amulet, Great Queen of Spells”).⁸ Shin advances the fascinating claim that *vidyās* represent religious lore and supernatural powers “owned by those living beyond the confines of settled agrarian society”; she claims that “the ambiguous power of the forest and its people were abstractly conceptualized and defined as *vidyā*” (p. 27). Examining literary representations of magic and marginal peoples is certainly important, but Shin’s conclusion here rests on limited evidence: two tales, from the *Bṛhathāślokaśaṅgraha* and *Divyāvadāna*, featuring a *vidyādhari* “sorceress” from the forest-dwelling *mātāṅga* community. I highlight this case because it exemplifies two larger issues in the book: first, there is a tendency to conflate “Tantra” with “tribal.” Simply put, more rigor and nuance are warranted. Second, the book takes pre-eleventh-century tantric literature rather haphazardly into account. Fortunately, these limitations do not usually detract from Shin’s core contributions in Chapters 3–4.

In some ways, the author’s historical perspective on the tantric traditions has much to commend: she explicitly disavows the simplistic views of earlier scholarship, which tended to equate “Tantrism” with autochthonous and indigenous traditions, matrilineal cultures, goddess worship, and fertility cults (p. 29). These views fail to account for the diversity of tantric traditions, the limited roles of goddess worship in the earliest Śaiva tantric literature and in the mainstream Śaivasiddhānta, and the formative influence of Brahmanical asceticism (the *Atimārga*), among other grave problems. Instead, Shin recognizes that tantric traditions “have never been a singular or static ... but multiple, diachronic and dynamic processes which have proceeded in many different directions according to sects, localities and periods” (p. 30). She highlights the complex, shifting relationships between tantric and Brahmanical traditions, which “have been both alternative and incompatible” as well as “dependent and complementary” (p. 33). This laudable view is nonetheless undermined by a tendency to identify the core of tantric traditions with “popular and heterodox religious customs” (p. 31).⁹ A more complete model might view tantric traditions in dialogue not only with Brahmanism (besides Jaina and Buddhist mainstreams), but also local traditions – all of these being dynamic and mutually constitutive. For instance, Shin quotes Chakrabarti’s observation that “there is no anomaly in [Kāmākhyā] remaining a tribal deity and also becoming a Brahmanical deity. One does not negate the other” (p. 181). This observation may be profitably extended: there is no anomaly in Kāmākhyā simultaneously being a tantric deity, which is not reducible to “tribal.”¹⁰

This book’s accounts of tantric sources and history frequently require revision, for outdated or clearly untenable views alternate with sound modern scholarship. For instance, Shin briefly revives the defunct “Kālachakrayāna” and “Sahajayāna” (pp. 115, 260), and gives credence to the existence of Śrīvidyā in seventh-century South India based on an improbably early dating of the *Tirumantiram* (pp. 101–2). Particularly problematic is near-silence concerning the *śākta tantras* composed centuries prior to the east-Indian Kaula corpus in which the Mahāvidyās feature. Most of the extant first-millennium *Bhairavatantras* and Kaula *tantras* are Śākta in orientation, to various degrees. The history of Kālī, in particular, can hardly be complete without consideration of this literature. Shin however maintains that “most of the Tantras inclined to Śākta faith seem to have been composed after the twelfth century or even later in the eastern region” (p. 35). Earlier *tantras* seem largely to have been excluded from consideration based on mistaken assumptions: (1) that they are Śaiva and

⁸Hidas 2012.

⁹Shin even quotes J. N. Tiwari approvingly to the effect that Tantrism’s “nucleus was formed of essentially popular, unsophisticated and non-Brahmanical cults, largely consisted of female deities like the mothers” (p. 65).

¹⁰In fact Kāmākhyā’s identity as a tantric deity invites further scrutiny. It seems that the god and goddess of Nilācala first appear in the historical record in the mid-ninth century by the names Kāmeśvara and Mahāgaurī, names which figure in eleventh-century evidence as well (p. 255). Shin is surely correct in positing that “Mahāgaurī and Kāmeśvara stand for the goddess Kāmākhyā and her associate Śiva” (p. 255). These names may have further significance: Kāmeśvara is more specifically Śiva as consort of Kāmeśvarī, i.e. Kāmākhyā, the two being cult deities of the Kaula *dakṣiṇāmnāya*, the precursor of Śrīvidyā. It seems fitting that a goddess worshipped in the form of a *yoni* should be identified with the beautiful, erotic Kāmeśvarī in the company of Kāmeśvara, who has the iconographic emblems of the love god, Kāmadeva. See Golovkova 2020.

therefore not Śākta (in fact the boundary between these categories is fluid); (2) that they belong to a Kashmirian tradition distant and distinct from the east-Indian Śākta *tantras*¹¹ (in fact this literature circulated widely and is only in part from Kashmir); (3) that they do not predate the early Śākta *purāṇas*¹² (the *Devīpurāṇa* in fact draws extensively on such *tantras*¹³). Not recognizing the critical contributions of early *śākta tantras* to the making of puranic Śāktism leads Shin, like many others before her, to overemphasize the *Devīmāhātmya*'s importance (pp. 74–75).

The book contains numerous illustrations, most of which are the author's own photographs. It is regrettable that the publisher did not include at least some of these in higher quality reproductions; what appear to be color photographs of the Daśa Mahāvidyās (figures 1.1–1.10), for instance, have been indifferently reproduced in black and white. The contemporary lithographs (figures 3.1–2) of Mahāvidyās would be particularly welcome in larger, sharper color reproductions. The book would also benefit from more careful copyediting: the English goes awry in places, and there are occasional errors in the Sanskrit diacritics. None of this detracts from the study's multiple contributions.

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The Indonesian Economy in Transition: Policy Challenges in the Jokowi Era and Beyond

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This book is a collection of papers addressing key dimensions of the Indonesian economy in the era of President Joko Widodo (Jokowi), particularly the first 3 years of his administration. In October 2014,

¹¹Citing Goudriaan and Gupta (1981), and P. C. Bagchi (1956), Shin (p. 97) writes, "Most of the old texts, such as the Yāmālas including the distinctive Kālī worship, are considered to have been composed in Kashmir and its adjoining areas."

¹²For example, Shin speaks of the *Kaulajñānanirṇaya* as "a Kaula text of the twelfth century" (p. 83), though this survives in a mid-eleventh-century Nepalese manuscript, which the text may predate by a century or more.

¹³On the *Devīpurāṇa*'s debt to the *Brahmayāmala*, see Hatley 2018, pp. 251–72.