

Chapter Five

The Tantras and Religion of the Shaktas

(What follows this bracket is a translation, done in literal fashion, from the German, of an article by the learned Sanskritist, Professor Winternitz, entitled "Die Tantras und die Religion der Saktas" published in the Berlin monthly, the *Ostasiatische Zeitschrift*, 1916, Heft. 3. The article does not show a complete comprehension of its subject-matter, nor was this to be expected. In European fashion Sadhaka is translated "Magician" and Sadhana is thought of as "magical evocation" and Mahayogini as "Great Magician". This is the more unfortunate, as the Professor evidently does not like "magic". It is true that in *Indrajalavidya* there is Sadhana to achieve its purposes, but what is of course meant is Sadhana in its religious sense. We hear again of "idolatry" though idolatry is not (in the sense in which those who make the charge use the word) to be found in any part of the world. Mantra is still "gibberish," "trash" and so on. After all, many of these matters are as much a question of temperament as argument. The mind which takes these views is like that of the Protestant who called the Catholic Mass "Hocus Pocus". It is superstitious trash to him but a holy reality to the believer. Such criticism involves the fallacy of judging others from one's own subjective standpoint. Moreover, not one man in thousands is capable of grasping the inner significance of this doctrine and for this reason it is kept secret nor does any writing reveal it to those without understanding. The learned Professor has also evidently no liking for "Occultism" and "India-faddists" (Indiensschwärmern). But the former exists whether we like its facts or not. Nevertheless, in reading this article one feels oneself in the presence of a learned mind which wills to be fair and is not to be stampeded from investigation on hearing the frightful word "Tantra". Several appreciations are just. Particularly noteworthy is the recognition that the Tantra Shastras or Agamas are not merely some pathological excrescence on "Hinduism" but simply one of its several presentations. Nor are they simply Scriptures of the Shaktas. Their metaphysics and ethics are those of the common Brahmanism of which all the sects are offshoots, whatever be the special peculiarities in presentment of doctrine or in its application. Before this Professor Albert Grunwedel had said (in his *Der Weg Nach Sambhala*, Munchen 1915): "The Tantras are nothing but the continuation of the Veda" (Die Tantras, sind eben die fortsetzung des Veda). He calls also the Tantras the "model-room" (Akt-saal) of Indian Art (the Akt-saal is a room in an Academy of Art in which casts are kept as models for the students). "These Scriptures," he adds, "furnish the aesthetics and in fact we find that in the later books (of the Kalacakra) the whole figurative mythology (of that system) has been built upon this scheme. Whence this evolution of forms arises is indeed another question which will bring many a surprise to the friends of 'National Indian Art' (sic!). Talking is easier. The Jains too have such things." I may add that the fact that some Jains carry out some so-called "Tantrik rites" is not generally known. Vaishnavas and Bauddhas also have these rites. Notions and practices generally charged to Shaktas only are held and carried out by other sects. It is to be remembered also that there are many schools of Agama. Some of them state that other Agamas were promulgated "for the delusion of men". It is needless to add that, here as elsewhere, to the adherent of a particular Agama his particular scripture is good, and it is the scripture of his opponent which is "for delusion". Orthodoxy is "my doxy" in India also amongst some sects. Shakta liberalism (being Advaita Vedanta) finds a place for all.

It cannot, therefore, be said the Agamas are wholly worthless and bad without involving all Hinduism in that charge. On the contrary the Professor discovers that behind the "nonsense" there may be a deep sense and that "immorality" is not the end or aim of the Cult of the Mother. He also holds that if the Tantrik Scriptures contain some things to which he and others take objection, such things in no wise exhaust their contents. There is nothing wonderful about this discovery, which anyone may make for himself by simply reading and understanding the documents, but the wonder consists in this, that it has not hitherto been thought necessary (where it has been possible) to read and understand the Tantra Shastras first and then to criticize them. All the greater then are our thanks to the learned Sanskritist for his share in this work of justice.-- J. W.)

India remains still the most important country on earth for the student of religion. In India we meet with all forms of religious thought and feeling which we find on earth, and that not only at different times but also all together even to-day. Here we find the most primitive belief in ancestral Spirits, in Demons and Nature Deities with a primeval, imageless sacrificial cult. Here also is a polytheism passing all limits, with the most riotous idolatry, temple cult, pilgrimages, and so forth. And, side by side with and beyond these crudest forms of religious life, we find what is deepest and most abstract of what religious thinkers of all times have ever thought about the Deity, the noblest pantheistic and the purest monotheistic conceptions. In India we also find a priestcraft as nowhere else on earth side by side with a religious tolerance which lets sect after sect, with the most wonderful saints, exist together. Here there were and still are forest recluses, ascetics, and mendicant monks, to whom renunciation of this world is really and truly a matter of deepest sincerity, and together with them hosts of idle mendicant monks, vain fools and hypocrites, to whom religion is only a cloak for selfish pursuits for the gratification of greed for money, of greed for fame or the hankering after power.

From India also a powerful stream of religious ideas has poured forth over the West, and especially over the East, has flooded Central Asia, has spread over Tibet, China, Korea and Japan, and has trickled through the further East down to the remotest islands of the East Indian Archipelago. And finally, in India as well as outside India, Indian religions have often mixed with Christianity and with Islam, now giving and now taking.

Indeed, sufficient reason exists to welcome every work which contributes in one way or other to a richer, deeper or wider knowledge of Indian religion. I would like, therefore, to draw attention in what follows to some recently published works of this nature.

These are the exceedingly meritorious publications of Arthur Avalon with reference to the literature of the Tantras. Through these works we obtain, for the first time, a deeper insight into the literature of the Tantras, the holy books of Shaktism, and into the nature of this much abused religion itself. It is true that H. H. Wilson in his essays on the religious sects of the Hindus which appeared from 1828 to 1832 has given a brief but relatively reliable and just exposition of this religion. M. Monier-Williams who has treated more fully of Shaktism, worship of the Goddess, and the contents of the Tantras, has only to tell terrible and horrible things. He describes the faith of the Shaktas, of the worshippers of the feminine Deities, as a mixture of sanguinary sacrifices and orgies with wine and women. Similar is the picture of this sect presented by A. Barth who on the one hand indeed admits that the Cult of the Mother is based on a deep meaning and that the Tantras are also full of theosophical and moral reflections and ascetic theories, but is not thereby prevented from saying that the Shakta is "nearly always a hypocrite and a superstitious debauchee", even though many amongst the authors of the Tantras may have really believed that they were performing a sacred work. R. G. Bhandarkar, to whom we owe the latest and most reliable exposition of Indian sectarianism, happens in fact to deal with the Shaktas very summarily. Whereas the greater part of his excellent book deals with the religion of the Vaishnavas and with the sects of the Shaivas, he only devotes a few pages to the sect of the Shaktas which evidently seems unimportant to him. He speaks, however, both about the metaphysical doctrines and about the cult of this sect, with in every way, the cool, quiet objectivity of the historian. The exposition is only a little too brief and meager. So, all the more are Avalon's books welcome.

The most valuable is the complete English translation of a Tantra, the Mahanirvana Tantra with an Introduction of 146 pages which introduces us to the chief doctrines of the Shaktas and with the exceedingly complicated, perhaps purposely confused, terminology of the Tantras. If we have been accustomed, up till the present, to see nothing else in Shaktism and in the Tantras, the sacred books of this sect, than wild superstition, occult humbug, idiocy, empty magic and a cult with a most objectionable morality, and distorted by orgies -- then a glimpse at the text made accessible to us by Avalon, teaches us that -- all these things are indeed to be found in this religion and in its sacred texts, but that by these their contents are nevertheless, in no wise exhausted.

On the contrary, we rather find that behind the nonsense there lies hidden after all much deep sense and that immorality is not the end and aim of the cult of the Mother. We find that the mysticism of the Tantras has been built up on the basis of that mystic doctrine of the unity of the soul and of all with the Brahman, which is proclaimed in the oldest Upanishads and which belongs to the most profound speculations which the Indian spirit has imagined. This Brahman however, the highest divine principle, is, according to the doctrines of the Shakta philosophers, no "nothing", but the eternal, primeval Energy (Shakti) out of which everything has been created, has originated, has been born. Shakti "Energy", however is not only grammatically feminine. Human experience teaches also that all life is born from the womb of the woman, from the mother. Therefore the Indian thinkers, from whom Shaktism has originated, believed that the highest Deity, the supremest creative principle, should be brought nearest to the human mind not through the word "Father," but through the word "Mother". And all philosophical conceptions to which language has given a feminine gender, as well as all mythological figures which appear feminine in popular belief, become Goddesses, Divine Mothers. So, before all, there is Prakriti, taken from the Samkhya philosophy, primeval matter, "Nature," who stands in contrast to Purusha, the male spirit, and is identical with Shakti. And this Shakti is, again, mythologically conceived as the spouse of God Shiva, Mahadeva, the "Great God". Mythology, however, knew already Uma or Parvati, "the daughter of the Mountain," the daughter of the Himalaya, as the spouse of Shiva. And so Prakriti, Shakti, Uma, Parvati, are ever one and the same. They are only different names for the one great All-Mother, the Jaganmata, "the Mother of all the living". The Indian mind had been long since accustomed to see Unity in all Multiplicity. Just as one moon reflects itself in innumerable waters, so Devi, the "Goddess," by whatever other names she may be otherwise called, is the embodiment of all Gods and of all "energies" (Shaktis) of the Gods. Within her is Brahma, the Creator, and his Shakti; within her is Vishnu, the Preserver, and his Shakti; within her is also Shiva as Mahakala, "great Father Time", the great Destroyer. But as this one is swallowed up by herself, she is also Adyakaika, the "primordial Kali"; and as a "great magician," Mahayogini, she is at the same time Creatrix, Preservatrix, and Destroyer of the world. She is also the mother of Mahakala, who dances before her, intoxicated by the wine of Madhuka blossoms. As, however, the highest Deity is a woman, every woman is regarded as an embodiment of this Deity. Devi, "the Goddess", is within every feminine being. This conception it is, which has led to a woman worship which, undoubtedly, has taken the shape, in many circles, of wild orgies, but which also -- at least according to the testimony of the Mahanirvana Tantra -- could appear in a purer and nobler form, and has as surely done so.

To the worship of the Devi, the Goddess, who is the joyously creative energy of nature, belong the "five true things" (Pancatattva) through which mankind enjoy gladly, preserve their life and procreate; intoxicating drink which is a great medicine to man, a breaker of sorrows and a source of pleasure; meat of the animals in the villages, in the air and in the forests, which is nutritious and strengthens the force of body and mind; fish which is tasty and augments procreative potency;

roasted corn which, easily obtained, grows in the earth and is the root of life in the three worlds; and fifthly physical union with Shakti "the source of bliss of all living beings, the deepest cause of creation and the root of the eternal world." But these "five true things" may only be used in the circle of initiates, and only after they have been consecrated by sacred formulas and ceremonies. The Mahanirvana Tantra lays stress on the fact that no abuse may be made of these five things. Who drinks immoderately is no true worshipper of the Devi. Immoderate drinking, which disturbs seeing and thinking, destroys the effect of the sacred action. In the sinful Kali age also, only the own spouse should be enjoyed as Shakti. In everything the Tantra takes all imaginable trouble to excuse the Pancatattva ceremonies and to prevent their abuse. In the Kali age sweets (milk, sugar, honey) must be used instead of intoxicating drink, and the adoration of the lotus feet of the Devi should be substituted for the physical union. The worship should not be secret, indecencies should not occur, and evil, impious people should not be admitted to the circle of the worshippers. True, it is permissible for the "Hero" (Vira) who is qualified to the Sadhaka or "magician" to unite in secret worship with other Shaktis. Only in the highest "heavenly condition" (Divyabhava) of the saint do purely symbolical actions take the place of the "five true things".

But to the worship of the Devi belong in the first place Mantras (formulas) and Bijas (monosyllabic mysterious words like Aim, Klim, Hrim etc.); further also Yantras (diagrams of a mysterious meaning, drawn on metal, paper or other material), Mudras (special finger positions and hand movements) and Nyasas. (These last consist in putting the tips of the fingers and the flat of the right hand, with certain mantras, on the various parts of the body, in order by that to fill one's own body with the life of the Devi.) By the application of all these means the worshipper renders the Deity willing and forces him into his service, and becomes a Sadhaka, a magician. For Sadhana, "Magic," is the chief aim, though not the final aim of Devi worship.

This highest and final aim is the same as that of all Indian sects and religious systems; Moksha or deliverance, the unification with the Deity in Mahanirvana, the "great extinction". The perfected saint, the Kaula, reaches this condition already in the present life and is one who is liberated whilst living (Jivanmukta). But the way to deliverance can only be found through the Tantras. For Veda, Smriti, Puranas and Itihasa are each the sacred books of past ages of the world, whilst for our present evil age, the Kali age, the Tantras have been revealed by Shiva for the salvation of mankind (I, 20 ff.) The Tantras thus on the strength of their own showing indicate themselves to be relatively modern works. In the present age Vedic and other rites and prayers have no value but only the mantras and ceremonies taught in the Tantras (II, 1 K). And just as the worship of the Devi leads equally to thoroughly materialistic results through magic and to the highest ideal of Nirvana, so there is a strong mixture in the worship itself of the sensuous and the spiritual. Characteristic is Mahanirvana Tantra V, 139-151 (P. 86 K): The worshipper first offers to the Devi spiritual adoration, dedicating to her his heart as her seat, the nectar of his heart as the water for washing her feet, his mind as a gift of honor, the restlessness of his senses and thoughts as a dance, selflessness, dispassionateness, and so forth as flowers, but then he offers to the Devi an ocean of intoxicating drink, a mountain of meat and dried fish, a heap of roasted corn in milk, with sugar and butter, "nectar" and other things. Besides the "five true things" and other elements of this most sensuous worship which is calculated to produce the intoxication of the senses, and in which also bells, incense, flowers, lights and rosaries are not lacking, there is also the quiet contemplation (Dhyana) of the Deity. And likewise, we find side by side with mantras which are completely senseless and insipid such beautiful sayings as, for instance, V, 156: "O Adya Kali, who dwellest in the innermost soul of all, who art the innermost light, O Mother! Accept this prayer of my heart. I bow down before thee."

The Shaktas are a sect of the religion which is commonly designated "Hinduism," a term which is a facile one but which has not been chosen very happily. The word embraces all the sects and creeds which have originated from Brahmanism through a mixture with the cults of the aborigines of India and thus present a kind of degeneration of the old Brahmanical religion, but which still hold fast more or less, to orthodox Brahmanism and so distinguish themselves from the heretical sects (Buddhists and Jains). In reality there is strictly no sense in speaking of "Hinduism" as a "system" or as one "religion". For it is impossible to say where Brahmanism ends and where "Hinduism" begins. We are also altogether ignorant as to how much the old Brahmanic religion had already assimilated from the faith and the customs of the non-Aryan populace. For it is not admissible to classify without further ado all animal worship, all demon worship, all fetichism and so on as "non-Aryan". In reality, all sects of "Hinduism" which are related to a worship of Vishnu or of Shiva, are nothing but offshoots of the original Brahmanism, which they never, however, deny. So also Shaktism has as a special characteristic merely the worship of the Shaktis, of the female deities, with its accessory matter (of the "five true things," the worship in the cakra or "circle" of the initiates, and so on). For the rest, its dogmatics -- or if it be preferred, its metaphysics -- as well as its ethics are altogether those of Brahmanism, of which also the essential ritual institutions have been preserved. In dogmatics it is the teachings of the orthodox systems of the Vedanta and the Samkhya, which meet us also in the Tantras clearly enough, sometimes even under the trash of senseless magic formulas. And as far as ethics are concerned, the moral teaching in the VIII chapter of the Mahanirvana Tantra reminds us from beginning to end of Manu's Code, the Bhagavad Gita, and the Buddhist sermons. Notwithstanding the fact that in the ritual proper of the Shakta there are no caste differences but in Shakti worship all castes as well as the sexes are equal yet, in harmony with Brahmanism, the castes are recognized with this modification that a fifth caste is added to the four usual ones, which springs from the mixture of the four older ones, namely, the caste of the Samanyas. Whilst Manu, however, distinguishes four Ashramas or statuses of life, the Mahanirvana Tantra teaches that, there

are only two Ashramas in the Kali age, the status of the householder and that of the ascetic. For the rest, everything which is taught in our Tantra about the duties towards parents, towards wife and child, towards relations and in general towards fellow-men, might find a place, exactly in the same way, in any other religious book or even in a profane manual of morals. As an example we may quote only a few verses from this Chapter VIII: (vv. 24, 25, 33, 35, 39, 45-47, 63-67).

The duties of each of the castes as well as the duties of the king are not prescribed much differently from Manu. Family life is estimated very highly by the Mahanirvana Tantra. So it is rigorously prescribed that no one is allowed to devote himself to the ascetic life who has children, wives, or such like near relations to maintain. Entirely in consonance with the prescriptions of the Brahmanic texts also are the "sacraments from conception until the marriage which are described in the 9th chapter of the Mahanirvana Tantra (Samskaras). Likewise in the 10th chapter the direction for the disposal and the cult of the dead (Shraddha) are given. A peculiarity of the Shaktas in connection with marriage consists in the fact that side by side with the Brahma marriage for which the Brahmanic prescriptions are valid, there is also a Shaiva marriage, that is kind of marriage for a limited period which is only permitted to the members of the circle (Cakra) of the initiates. But children out of such a marriage are not legitimate and do not inherit. So far Brahmanic law applies also to the Shaktas, and so the section concerning civil and criminal law in the 11th and 12th chapters of the Mahanirvana Tantra substantially agree with Manu.

Of course, notwithstanding all this, the Kauladharmas expounded in the Tantra is declared the best of all religions in an exuberant manner and the veneration of the Kula-saint is praised as the highest merit. It is said in a well-known Buddhist text: "As, ye monks, there is place for every kind of footprints of living beings that move in the footprint of the elephant, because, as is known indeed, the footprint of the elephant is the first in size amongst all, so, ye monks, all salutary doctrines are contained in the four noble truths." So it is said in the Mahanirvana Tantra, (probably in recollection of the Buddhist passage): "As the footprints of all animals disappear in the footprint of the elephant, so disappear all other religions (dharma) in the Kula religion (kula-dharma) ."

From what has been said it is clear that Avalon is right when he declares that up till now this literature has been only too often judged and still more condemned without knowing it, and that the Tantras deserve to become better known than has been the case hitherto. From the point of view of the history of religion they are already important for the reason that they have strongly influenced Mahayana Buddhism and specially the Buddhism of Tibet. It is, therefore, much to be welcomed that Avalon has undertaken to publish a series of texts and translations from this literature. It is true that we have no desire to be made acquainted with all the 3 x 64 Tantras which are said to exist. For -- this should not be denied, that for the greatest part these works contain, after all, only stupidity and gibberish ("doch nur Stumpfsinn und Kauderwelsch"). This is specially true of the Bijas and Mantras, the mysterious syllables and words and the magic formulas which fill these volumes. To understand this gibberish only to a certain degree and to bring some sense into this stupidity, it is necessary to know the Tantric meaning of the single vowels and consonants. For, amongst the chief instruments of the magic which plays such a great part in these texts, belongs the spoken word. It is not the meaning embedded in the mantra which exercises power over the deity, but the word, the sound. Each sound possesses a special mysterious meaning. Therefore, there are special glossaries in which this mysterious meaning of the single vowels and consonants, is taught. A few of such glossaries, indispensable helps for the Sadhaka, or rather the pupil who wants to develop himself into Sadhaka, have been brought to light in the first volume of the series of Tantric Texts, published by Avalon: The Mantrabhidhana belonging to the Rudrayamala, Ekaksharakosha ascribed to Purushottamadeva, the Bijanighantu of Bhairava and two Matrikanighantus, the one by Mahidhara, the other by Madhava. Added to these is one other auxiliary text of this same kind, the Mudranighantu, belonging to the Vamakeshvara Tantra, an enumeration of the finger positions as they are used in Yoga.

The second volume of the same series of Texts contains the text of the Satcakranirupana, the "description of the six circles," together with no less than three commentaries. The "six circles" are six places in the human body, imagined as lotus-shaped, of great mystical significance and therefore of great importance for Yoga. The first of these circles is Muladhara, which is described as a triangle in the middle of the body with its point downwards and imagined as a red lotus with four petals on which are written the four golden letters Vam, Sham, Sham and Sham. In the center of this lotus is Svayambhulinga. At the root of this reddish brown linga the Citrinadi opens, through which the Devi Kundalini ascends, more delicate than a lotus fiber and more effulgent than lightning, and so on. The Satcakranirupana is the chapter of the Shritattvacintamani composed by Purnananda Swami. In addition the volume contains the text of a hymn, entitled Paduka-pañcakam, which is said to have been revealed by Shiva, and a voluminous commentary.

The third volume of the Series contains the text of the Prapañcasaratantra which is ascribed to the Vedantic philosopher Shamkaracarya, and by others to the deity Shiva in his incarnation as Shamkaracarya.

The name Samara appears fairly often in Tantra literature, but it is not at all sure that the works in question really come from the Philosopher. Avalon prefaces the text by a detailed description of the contents of the work. Prapañca means "extension," "the extended Universe" from which, "Prapañcasara" "the innermost being of the universe". The work begins with a description of creation, accompanied, in the first two chapters, by detailed expositions of Chronology, Embryology,

Anatomy, Physiology and Psychology, which are exactly as 'scientific,' as both the following chapters which treat of the mysterious meaning of the letters of the Sanskrit alphabet and of the Bijas. The further chapters which partly contain rituals, partly prayers, meditations and Stotras, are of greater importance from the standpoint of the history of religion. To how high a degree in the Shakti cult the erotic element predominates, is shown in IX, 23 ff., where a description is given, "how the wives of the gods, demons, and demi-gods impelled by mantras come to the magician, the Sadhaka, oppressed by the greatness of their desires". In the XVIII chapter, the mantras and the dhyanas (meditations) for the adoration of the God of love and his Shaktis are taught, and the union of man and woman is represented as a mystic union of the "I" (Ahamkara) with perception (Buddhi) and as a sacred sacrificial action. When a man honors his beloved wife in such a way, she will, struck by the arrows of the God of love, follow him like a shadow even in the other world (XVIII, 33). The XXVIII chapter is devoted to Ardhanarishvara, the God who is half woman -- Shiva, represented as a wild looking man, forms the right-hand half of the body, and his Shakti represented as a voluptuous woman, the left-hand half. The XXXIII chapter which seems to have originally closed the work describes in its first part ceremonies against childlessness, the cause of which is indicated as lack of veneration of the Gods and neglect of the wife. The second part is connected with the relation between teacher and pupil which is of extreme importance for the Shakta religion. Indeed, worship of the Guru, the teacher, plays a prominent part in this sect.

However, the rituals and Mantras described in this Tantra are not exclusively connected with the different forms of the Devi and Shiva, but Vishnu and his Avatars are also often honored. The XXXVI chapter contains a disquisition on Vishnu Trailokyamohana (the Enchanter of the triple world) in verses 35-47 translated by Avalon. It is a description, glowing and sensuous (Voll sinnlicher Glut.): Vishnu shines like millions of suns and is of infinite beauty. Full of goodness his eye rests on Shri, his spouse, who embraces him, full of love. She too is of incomparable beauty. All the Gods and Demons and their wives offer homage to the August Pair. The Goddesses, however, press themselves in a burning yearning of love towards Vishnu, whilst exclaiming: "Be our husband, our refuge, August Lord!" In addition to this passage Avalon has also translated the hymns to Prakriti (Chapter XI), to Vishnu (Chapter XXI) and to Shiva (Chapter XXVI). Of these hymns the same holds good as of the collection of hymns to the Devi, which Avalon, together with his wife, has translated in a separate volume. Whilst many of these texts are mere insipid litanies of names and epithets of the worshipped deities, there are others, which, as to profoundness of thought and beauty of language may be put side by side with the best productions of the religious lyrics of the Indians. So the hymn to Prakriti in the Prapañcasara XI, 48, begins with the words:

"Be gracious to me, O Pradhana, who art Prakriti in the form of the elemental world. Life of all that lives. With folded hands I make obeisance to thee our Lady, whose very nature it is to do that which we cannot understand."

It is intelligible that the poets have found much more intimate cries of the heart when they spoke of the Deity as their "Mother" than when they addressed themselves to God as Father. So, for instance, it is said in a hymn to the Goddess ascribed to Shamkara:

2

By my ignorance of Thy commands

By my poverty and sloth

I had not the power to do that which I should have done

Hence my omission to worship Thy feet.

But Oh Mother, auspicious deliverer of all,

All this should be forgiven me

For, a bad son may sometimes be born, but a bad

mother never.

3

Oh Mother! Thou hast many sons on earth,

But I, your son, am of no worth;

Yet it is not meet that Thou shouldst abandon me

For, a bad son may sometimes be born, but a bad

mother never.

4

Oh Mother of the world, Oh Mother!

I have not worshipped Thy feet,

Nor have I given abundant wealth to Thee,

Yet the affection which Thou bestowest on me is

without compare,

For, a bad son may sometimes be born, but a bad

mother never.

Avalon looks with great sympathy on the Shakta religion which has found the highest expression for the divine principle in the conception "Mother". He is of opinion that when the European thinks that it is a debasement of the deity to conceive of it as feminine, then this can only be because he "looks upon his mother's sex as lower than his own" and because he thinks it unworthy of the deity to conceive it otherwise than masculine. That the conception of the Indian and especially of the Shakta is, in this connection, the more unbiased and unprejudiced one, we will freely concede to Avalon. He, however, goes still further and believes that the Tantras not only have an interest from the point of view of the history of religion, but that they also possess an independent value as manuals of Sadhana, that is magic. However grateful we might be to the editor and translator of these texts for having made us better acquainted with a little known and much misunderstood Indian system of religion, we yet would hope to be saved from the possibility of seeing added to the Vedantists, Neo-Buddhists, Theosophists and other India-fattest (Indiensschwärmern) in Europe and America, adherents of the Sadhana of the Shakti cult. The student of religion cannot and may not leave the Tantras and Shaktism unnoticed. They have their place in the history of religion. But, may this occultism, which often flows from very turbid sources -- (this word should not be translated as "Secret Science" thus abusing the sacred name of Science, but rather as "Mystery Mongering" Geheimtuerei) remain far away from our intellectual life.

(To the above may be added a recent criticism of M. Masson Oursel of the College de France in the Journal Isis (iii, 1920) which is summarized and translated from the French: "The obscurity of language, strangeness of thought and rites sometimes adjudged scandalous, have turned away from the study of the immense Tantrik literature even the most courageous savants. If, however, the Tantras have appeared to be a mere mass of aberrations, it is because the key to them was unknown. The Tantras are the culmination of the whole Indian literature. Into them How both the Vedic and popular cults. Tantricism has imposed itself on the whole Hindu mentality (le Tantrisme, est imposé a toute la mentalité hindoue). Arthur Avalon has undertaken with complete success a task which in appearance seems to be a thankless one but is in reality fecund of results."

The article of Dr. Winternitz deals largely with the Mahanirvana Tantra. Because objections cannot be easily found against this Tantra, the theory has been lately put forward by Dr. Farquhar in his last work on Indian Literature that this particular scripture is exceptional and the work of Ram Mohun Roy's Guru Hariharananda Bharati. The argument is in effect "All Tantras are bad; this is not bad: therefore it is not a Tantra." In the first place, the MS. referred to in the Preface to A. Avalon's translation of this Tantra as having been brought to Calcutta, was an old MS. having the date Shakabda 1300 odd, that is, several hundreds of years ago. Secondly, the Mahanirvana which belongs to the Visnukranta, or as some say Rathakranta, is mentioned in the Mahasiddhisara Tantra, an old copy of which was the property of Raja Sir Radhakant Dev (b. 1783 -- d. 1867), a contemporary of Raja Ram Mohun Roy (1774-1833) who survived the latter's son. The earliest edition of that Tantra by Anandacandra Vedantavagisha was published from a text in the Sanskrit College Library which is not likely to have had amongst its MSS. one which was the work of a man who, whatever be the date of his death, must have died within a comparatively short period of the publication of this edition. In fact, the Catalogue describes it as an old MS. and an

original Tantra. Dr. Rajendralala Mitra in his notice of a MS. of the Tagore collection speaks of it as containing only the first half of fourteen chapters. This is so. The second half is not published and is very rare. The Pandit's copy to which reference was made in the Preface to A.A.'s translation of the Mahanirvana contained both parts. How comes it that if the Tantra was written by Raja Ram Mohun Roy's Guru that we have only the first half and not the second containing amongst other things the so-called magic or Shatkarma. It should be mentioned that there are three Tantras -- the Nirvana, Brihannirvana and Mahanirvana Tantras, similar to the group Nila, Brihannila and Mahanila Tantras. It is to be noted also that in the year 1293 B.S. or 1886 an edition of the Mahanirvana was published with commentary by a Samnyasin calling himself Shamkaracarya under the auspices of the Danda Shabha of Manikarnika Ghat, Benares, which contains more verses than is contained in the text, commented upon by Hariharananda and the interpretation of the latter as also that of Jagamohan Tarkalamkara, are in several matters controverted. We are asked to suppose that Hariharananda was both the author of, and commentator on, the Tantra. That the Mahanirvana has its merits is obvious, but there are others which have theirs. The same critic speaks of the Prapañcasara as a "rather foul work". This criticism is ridiculous. The text is published for any one to judge. All that can be said is what Dr. Winternitz has said, namely, that there are a few passages with sensuous erotic imagery. These are descriptive of the state of women in love. What is wrong here? There is nothing "foul" in this except for people to whom all erotic phenomena are foul. "This is a very indecent picture," said an elderly lady to Byron, who retorted "Madam, the indecency consists in your remark". It cannot be too often asserted that the ancient East was purer in these matters than the modern West, where, under cover of a pruriently modest exterior, a cloaca of extraordinarily varied psychopathic filth may flow. This was not so in earlier days, whether of East or West, when a spade was called a spade and not a horticultural instrument. In America it is still, I am told, considered indecent to mention the word "leg". One must say "limb". Said Tertullian: "Natura veneranda et non eru-bescenda"; that is, where the knower venerates his unknowing critic blushes.

The Prapañcasara which does not even deal with the rite against which most objection has been taken (while the Mahanirvana does), treats of the creation of the world, the generation of bodies, physiology, the classification of the letters, the Kalas, initiation, Japa, Homa, the Gayatri Mantra, and ritual worship of various Devatas and so forth; with facts in short which are not "foul" with or without the qualifying "rather".

(J. W.)

Next: Chapter Six: Shakti and Shakta