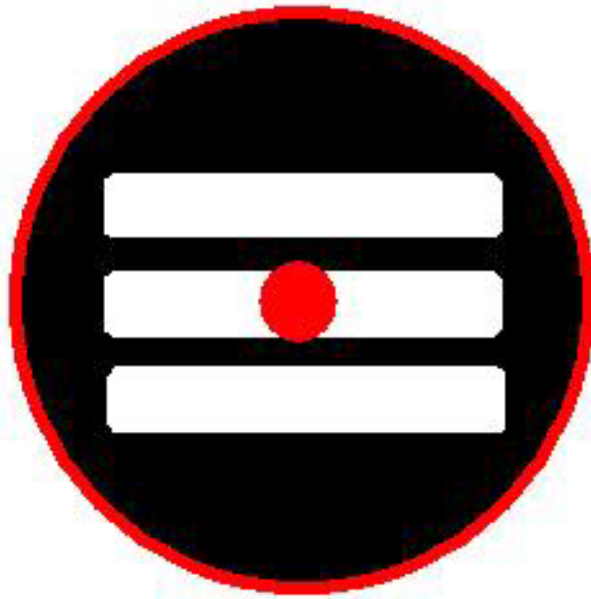


# **POWER AND GENDER IN 'SHAIIVIST' TANTRA**



**Peter Wilberg**

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## POWER AND GENDER IN 'SHAIVIST' TANTRA

The gendering of the gods in Shaivist tantra goes entirely against the grain of the classic 'Me Tarzan, you Jane' model of gender, in which the 'masculine' is identified with physical size, strength and aggressive controlling power, whereas the feminine is associated with relative weakness, submission or passive adoration. For in tantric terms, the 'me' or 'I' of the 'masculine', whether as Brahman or Shiva, is identified with a pure awareness that is absolutely quiescent and still, whereas the 'you' of the feminine is identified with autonomous and aggressive *power of action* (Sanskrit *Shak*) and of bodily physical manifestation in every shape and form.

Every truly creative act is aggressive in essence. Thus there is no more aggressive biological act than birth, which is not an exercise of controlling power *over* action, but an active surrender to the creative power *of* biological action.

In tantric terms, irrespective of their association with the biological gender of individuals, the essence or 'truth' of the masculine and feminine principles respectively is understood (in a most un-Jewish, un-Christian, un-Islamic and un-Buddhist of ways) as pure, quiescent awareness on the one hand (Shiva - 'masculine') and pure power of action (Shakti - 'feminine') on the other. The language of Shaivist tantra may nevertheless give the impression that the 'masculine principle' is privileged, since Shakti as 'power' is seen as the power *of* Shiva, related in the same way as a flame and its power to burn, shed heat and light etc. Yet such expressions as 'Shakti is the power of Shiva' can be read with two quite contrasting intonations:

1. Shakti is the power OF Shiva, all power of action stemming from pure awareness and therefore belonging to it.
2. Shakti IS the power of Shiva, pure awareness being impotent and powerless without expression as the pure and autonomous power of action that is Shakti.

This second reading and intonation is lent credence by the famous tantric saying that: '*Shiva* without *Shakti* is *Shava* ('Shava' meaning a lifeless, powerless corpse). Shiva and Shakti, as 'Shiva-Shakti' are absolutely distinct yet also absolutely inseparable, like two sides of the same coin. The masculine, as pure awareness serves as a road to the feminine, its entire role being to 'let go' and thereby 'let God' the

latter – releasing the infinite potentialities of expression, embodiment, manifestation and materialisation latent within it. Yet those very potentialities, despite being latent in awareness and therefore inseparable from it, nevertheless remain distinct from it, coming to actualisation only through and as that pure power of action that is Shakti.

In tantra, the ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ aspects of the absolute or foundational reality, are not opposites but united in all things and in all beings, human or divine, and irrespective of gender. Pure awareness exists only to delight in its manifestation in all things and in that pure power of action through which they first come to manifest. Even if personified as a ‘male’ god therefore, Shiva’s whole existence is nothing but a meditation and reverential worship of Shakti, just as the female tantric deities of tantra adore and worshipfully revere that pure awareness whose pure power they ARE.

Since the ‘masculine’ is understood tantrically as the ‘royal road to the feminine’, pure awareness as the royal road to pure power – and vice versa – ‘Shaivism’ and ‘Shaktism’ cannot in essence be seen as opposing schools or denominations of tantric religiosity at all. Nor can the *Shiva-Shakti* principle of *Tantra* be equated with the *Yin-Yang* principles of *Taoism*, which in line with Western patriarchal stereotypes identifies the ‘masculine’ principle (‘Yang’) with aggressive action and controlling power, and the feminine (‘Yin’) with all that is passive.

The primordial masculine principle personified by Shiva in the Shaivist tantrism on the other hand, is not associated with aggressive action, let alone *controlling power over action* (itself a form of action) but rather with stillness and *quiescent awareness of action*. The long-standing and still dominant identification of the ‘masculine’ with patriarchal power of control over action, expression, experience – indeed the entire world of manifestation associated tantrically with the divine feminine – constituted a loss of an earlier understanding of the divine masculine - not as a power *over* action and creation but rather as that universal awareness which first releases the creative power *of* action – the divine-feminine.

The distortion of the masculine principle was therefore at the same time a distortion of the feminine principle – power – fear of the power *of* the feminine leading to a confusion and substitution of ‘power of’ with ‘power over’ – not least the power of men over women. The patriarchal identification of masculinity with power *over* is symbolised in many ways - by the idea of God as a Great Judge with power over life and death, of man ruling nature (and woman) as God rules man, by Popes

and priests judging and imposing restrictions on the actions of others – and by the whole exercise of religious, legal, state or military power over others and their actions.

Of course the exercise of such ‘power over’ action is itself a form of action. Hence the idea of Man as ‘active’ and Nature (including woman) as ‘passive’. In social terms this idea became reality, with men ruling over and exploiting both nature and woman. In natural terms the idea of nature as ‘passive’ is of course nonsense – as any natural storm, volcano, earthquake, tornado or tsunami will let us know in no uncertain terms.

Along with the distorted patriarchal identification of the masculine principle with *controlling power over* – itself an attempt to compete with the *power of* the feminine - came the identification of the masculine with the *competitive principle* as such, and with it the belief in reacting to, countering or opposing one action, account, power, force or mode of expression or experience to another. Hence the idea of life being a *battle of opposites* in which every action goes together with an opposing reaction, or a *competitive struggle* against opposing forces - for controlling power over nature, other people, land, labour, markets, wealth and women.

The distortion of the feminine power principle was brought about by the loss of the primordial masculine principle – ‘the awareness principle’. For as that universal awareness which embraces all diversity and all *apparent* opposites – the primordial masculine has no need to separate or oppose them to one another, logically or through the exercise of ‘power over’. It therefore undermines all world views based on the idea of competing and opposing forces or mutually exclusive opposites - including the very separation and opposition of ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ principles.

The religious relevance of Shiva, Shaivism and Shaivist Tantra for today’s world in contrast to the Shakta tradition lies precisely in *not* opposing the feminine principle and aspect of divinity to ‘masculinist’ religions and their patriarchal social cultures - but instead undermining the historic *distortion* of the masculine principle itself that underlies them - restoring a true understanding of the *divine-masculine*. For again, it was the loss of understanding of the *divine-masculine* that lay the basis for a loss of understanding of the *divine-feminine*. As a result, the feminine *power principle* was distorted from ‘power of’ into ‘power over’ – a power then exercised by men over nature, other men and women within all patriarchal religions and cultures.

The feminine principle cannot reassert itself in society through a challenge to or counter-exercise of male power *over*, nor can it do so by competition with or opposition to patriarchal distortions of the masculine principle – for the very attempt to do so can only *reinforce the masculine principle in its false and distorted form*.

Similarly, no *opposition* of the divine-feminine to this divine-masculine can restore the theological equity of the feminine and masculine aspects of divinity - only a freeing of the *divine-masculine* itself from distortions and the restoration of its true essence. This was and remains the historic task of Shaivist Tantra, one which it accomplished by reaffirming that the essence of the *divine-masculine* lies in awareness rather than action. By reinstating the masculine principle as ‘the awareness principle’, Shaivist Tantra makes way for a resurgence of the feminine and the feminine principle as ‘the power principle’ understood in a new way - not as power over action but as power *of* action – as Shakti. In contrast, the Shakta schools of Tantra on the other hand, whilst they did and can indeed affirm the independence, equity and autonomy of the *feminine* principle, did not and cannot in themselves make way for what is most needed in order to overcome the distortions of patriarchy in practice – namely a newer and truer understanding of the *masculine* principle.

The gender issues of Tantra and of Hindu theology in general cannot be explored by focussing solely on their sexual iconography, nor can they be resolved by judgements based on pre-conceived intellectual notions of what constitutes the essence or basic principle of what we call ‘masculine’ or ‘feminine’.

Acts of intellectual, emotional or ethical ‘judgement’, are in themselves a distorted expression of discriminatory awareness or ‘intellectual intuition’ – not least if they arise from unaware intellectual preconceptions. The confusion of *discriminatory awareness* with acts of judgement or ‘discrimination’ by gender, class or caste is yet another way in which the masculine principle has suffered distortion, just as its essence – awareness as such – has been artificially projected onto and identified with the feminine in the vague and distorted form of ‘female intuition’.

By restoring and understanding the essence of the divine masculine, Shaivist Tantra unites it with the divine feminine – not only in principle but also in the practical form of *aware action* (Shiva-Shakti) and *discriminatory awareness* (Shakti-Shiva or *Dakshina*). This is the hidden but nevertheless great significance of Shaivist Tantra in relation to issues of gender. More important than the question of whether a political or spiritual leader or teacher is a man or woman is *what sort* of man or

woman they are. This in turn depends on how they themselves understand, embody, unite and transcend their masculinity and femininity. The same applies to the gendering of the gods. The important question is not whether Shaivist tantra encourages worship of a masculine or feminine divinity, but exactly how it understands and seeks to embody the essential nature of the 'masculine', the 'feminine' and their divine unity - and whether it also acknowledges them as distinct but inseparable aspects of an ultimate, gender-transcendent absolute.

The highest spiritual value affirmed in the Vedas is not a gods or gods but Truth (Ritam). That is why all the 'Hindu' gods - including those worshipped in pre-Vedic, non-Vedic or trans-Vedic traditions such as tantra - are ultimately understood as diverse *personifications* of the Truth of the Divine in its different aspects - and not seen as identical with it. What has become known as 'Hinduism' - an umbrella term embracing countless convergent and divergent streams and schools of thought - is unique in being the one 'world religion' which is truly inclusivistic and 'catholic', for it does not lay claim to the whole truth or to the sole truth, but instead recognises *no* religion, god or gender - as higher than Truth itself.

The Truth of the Divine in Shaivist tantra is recognised not only in the form of the divine masculine or feminine but also as the divine absolute - 'Anuttara'. Nevertheless Lord Shiva - that 'male' god personifying the *primordial masculine* as *pure awareness* - is of greater significance today than ever before. This is because we *no longer* live in an old-fashioned patriarchal world, but one increasingly imbalanced towards a distorted form of the *feminine principle* of action and expression. This finds expression in a global culture of materialism and violence, narcissism and exhibitionism - and is still countered only by the masculine principle in the old, distorted and redundant form of repressive state powers and religious laws and regulations.

Issues of gender and power are historically long bound up with conflict and contradiction. 'The battle of the sexes' is but one expression of humanity's persistent belief in a world of opposites - whether 'good and evil', 'self and other', 'male' and 'female'. And yet: "*There are no contradictions except those we need!* Need to secure our private ego-domain by the very (demi) god-like judgements of acts of cutting dictions or decrees in the first place: releasing dictions, contradictions dissolve, and the infinitely rich singular multidimensional universe of grace and light appears as it already is. Indeed: 'Let go - let God', it really is as simple as that."

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