

The Return of the Yogini

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Preface

The term “yogini” has several meanings, according to Miranda Shaw (1994, p. 38) Quoting Monier-Williams, Shaw states that the term can mean a female practitioner of yoga, or ritual arts, a female being with magical powers, or a type of female deity. Though I am interested in all of the above, in this paper I will focus on the human female adept, guru or yogini.

When I first read in some depth about the cult of the yoginis, I was a bit put off by their connection to left handed Tantric practices (development of magical abilities, group sacred sexual practices, wandering naked, meditation in the cremation grounds – Dehijia, 1986). However, it seems that as I am drawn more into understanding of my own relationship with a particular tantric goddess, I am also drawn into a need to understand who these anti-nomian yoginis were (are). On an intuitive level, after working with Kali, reviewing several sources, and hearing presentations on the yogini/dakinis (Noble, CIIS, July 2001), I became absolutely convinced of their existence not only in the Buddhist Tantric tradition, but in its sister Hindu Tantric tradition as well. Though it has been said that there isn't much in the way of academic sources to support this claim, coming from a feminist spirituality standpoint as I do, I believe that their presence must be teased out from the rather masculinist sources that make up much of academia.

Though I am not an Indian scholar, and can not hope to accomplish a comprehensive search of the literature - on a limited basis, from a sampling of class texts and other texts I have come across in my research - I would like to utilize some of

Miranda Shaw's methodology and review the references to left hand yoginis in the Hindu Tantric tradition. I would like to see where these references lead us, what conclusions if any one can draw from their presence, and whether or not there could be any basis for my intuitive hit that they are there (here) waiting to come out of the shadows and make their presence known.

The Yogini Trail

Let us begin with a review of Miranda Shaw's methodology, which I believe can and should be applied to the Hindu Tantric situation. As she discusses her goal of contributing a chapter on the reclaimed history of Indian women, Shaw also discusses how in the "study of women and religion in India, previous opinions are being revised and overturned," that "Indologists in the past have tended to accept male religiosity as normative and universally representative," and that "many factors have predisposed scholars to fail to recognize the existence of women's religious activities," such as "uncritical acceptance of reports of male informants in the field, unwitting participation in sectarian polemics, and an inability to gain access to women's gatherings and religious practices," to name a few (Shaw, 1994, p. 5).

Shaw states that theoretical considerations that contribute to the need for a hermeneutics of suspicion from the Indologist perspective include the presence of colonialist judgments, Victorian values impressed on Indian traditions, and western dominance psychology (indiscriminate application of western categories of gender relations) [Shaw, 1994, p. 9/10]. For example, Shaw notes that the assumption that women's bodies were used as a physical instrument of male purposes in tantric ritual

“implies a Cartesian dualism of mind and body, a separability of spirit and matter that is alien to the Indian context” (Shaw, 1994, p. 10).

Shaw goes on to discuss the need for reclaiming the historical agency of women – concentrating on how women acted rather than how they were acted upon (Elizabeth Schussler-Fiorenza, as noted in Shaw, 1994, p. 12). And states that “available information about women cannot be accepted as numerically representative” but rather, in Fiorenza’s words, “should be read as the tip of an iceberg indicating how much historical information we have lost” (Shaw, 1994, p. 13). Shaw emphasizes “women’s presence and points of view can sometimes be reconstructed by going beyond the statements made in a text to imagine the world of discourse in which the text occurs, controversies to which it is responding, practices or social arrangements it seeks to legitimize, and assumptions it leaves unstated” (Shaw, 1994, p. 13). For example, Shaw discusses, related to the oft described story in tantric literature of the yogi searching for a yogini, the possibility that there existed a movement in which men apprenticed themselves to women. As tantric texts (including Hindu) often describe how a man is to approach the yogini, what he is to offer her, and what forms of respect and obeisance he is to show, it is easy to imagine, states Shaw (1994, p. 13). Such an approach raises the possibility that women helped to create and dictate the categories within which men viewed them, the terms on which men approached them and the conditions under which they would accept male companionship (Shaw, 1994, p.37).

Though Shaw focuses her work on the reclaiming of the female adept’s presence in the Buddhist Tantric tradition, she makes important points relevant to the reclamation of the Hindu Tantric woman adept. She talks about the Buddhist tradition as “tapping

into the same wellspring as *Hindu Tantric and Sakta (goddess) movements*” (Shaw, 1994, p. 22). And notes that it draws from *Hindu Vedic ritual and mantra, mystical theory, hatha-yoga, kundalini-yoga, Saivite iconography, and Sakta beliefs* (Shaw, 1994, p. 31). She even goes on to state that “foremost among the pan-Indian influences were those of the {Hindu} Sakta and Saivite (god-Shiva oriented) traditions,” and that “Tantric Buddhists *encountered their [Hindu] counterparts at the cremation grounds and pilgrimage places where they congregated, as these were also the gathering spots of yoginis and yogis of Saivite and Sakta persuasion*” (Shaw, 1994, p. 31/32). Shaw also notes that Tantric Buddhism and Hindu Saktism share an emphasis upon female deities and women as embodiments of female divinity, *including a deference to women in social and ritual contexts* (Shaw, 1994, p. 32).

Considering the existence of such connections between Buddhist and Hindu Tantra, there are obvious reasons to utilize Shaw’s methodology in this reclamation project. However, Shaw goes even further. She references the Hindu tradition as *already having identified the presence and respect for the position of women in the Tantric tradition* (Shaw, 1994, p. 6)! And goes on to document Western scholars like Sir John Woodruffe – who she states, spent long periods in India and was a Tantric initiate – as reporting that *women can be gurus and perform initiations* [quoted in Shaw, 1994, p. 6, cited from Woodruffe (1918), pp. 160-63].

Lilian Silbourne, another scholar said to be a Tantric initiate by Shaw (1994), enters into a complex discussion of Tantric Yoga that informs our topic. In *Kundalini, The Energy of the Depths* (1988), Silbourne touches on the role of women in various Tantric texts. In a treatise where Siva is questioned by the Goddess “What is it that

should be worshipped? *Women are worshipped.* Who is the worshipper? Man is the worshipper” (Silbourne, 1988, p. 184). In discussion of the esoteric gatherings of the ‘yoginimelaka,’ “where all members of the same mystical lineage commune”, Silbourne describes the sexual union that takes one to the ultimate reality, the mystical union that transfigures ordinary union (1988, p. 165). She discusses each partner as “*acting separately and each for oneself.*” And “if one of the consorts perceives that the other has not reached the emergent state, he must remain in this state until *inducing it in his partner.*” During a later phase of the rite, “*man and woman act in conjunction,* according to alternate movement of appeasement and emergence” (Silbourne, 1988, p. 169).

This description of the woman acting for herself, the responsibility of each to help the other achieve a ritualistic state, and the emphasis of man and woman acting in conjunction certainly implies an expertise on the part of the woman, as well as the importance of her role in the ritual union. The woman involved in such a rite must be a woman of knowledge....

In the same chapter Silbourne continues, regarding the rise of kundalini energy, “prana is more abundant in the woman,” and “while the man emits, woman absorbs, she is able to assimilate great powers and *may prove mightier than man*” (Silbourne, 1988, p. 175). In discussing what sort of woman participates in this ritual, Silbourne notes the partner is referred to as “divine duti who, infusing boldness and power into her partner, *acts as an initiator to him*” (Silbourne, 1988, p. 181). And later Silbourne states “on the subject of woman...*to her alone* should the guru impart the whole of the secret doctrine; *and through her, by the practice of union, it is imparted to men*” (Silbourne, 1988, p. 190). In commentary then “A great master, therefore, is in possession of this function

through an initiated woman.....the founder of the Krama (a particular anti-nomian sect of tantric practice) school did not impart his doctrine to a disciple but to three yogini who in their turn, initiated some men.” And finally, and most directly: “To become fit for the esoteric way the adept must be initiated by a master belonging to a reliable tradition, Krama, Kula, Sakta, *or better still, by a yogini who appears to him in a dream...or else by a woman initiate, herself also called yogini, who will act as a master for him* (Silbourne, 1988, p. 158).

Intrigued? Now we shall move on to another academically respected source, that of Gupta, Hoens, and Goudriaan in *Hindu Tantrism* (1979). Discussing Tantrism in Indian history, the authors state “among the yogins and other Tantric saints there have been a *substantial number of women who may have acted independently....*” (Gupta, et al, 1979, p. 31) And “*the frequency of terms like yogini ...in Tantric literature renders this conclusion unavoidable.*” Citing Tantric literature, the authors go on to state “there are *many references to female sadhakas and even gurus*” (Gupta et al, 1979, p. 33). Later they state that among the Saiva ascetics and linga worshippers *there were women* (Gupta, et al, 1979, p 39). In the chapter titled “Tantric Transmission,” the authors, citing further references, state “at least in circles of the Kulacarins (a particular tantric tradition) one knew the *possibility of women to become pupil and guru*” (Gupta et al, 1979, p. 79). In fact, the authors go on to say “*Nowadays female pupils and gurus are quite common*” (Gupta et al, 1979, p. 80)!

Even in a text discussing the Tantric philosophical perspective of Kashmir Shaivism, where the author uses particularly masculinist language, still there are references to the presence of women adepts (Dyczkowski, 1987). In the Introduction to

Doctrine of Vibration, the author discusses a young scholar as “*seated in the midst of a great congregation of religious leaders, preceptors and female ascetics (yogini)...*”

(Dyczkowski, 1987, p. 11). Later, still discussing the same scholar, he documents eulogies of the land of Kashmir “as a place where *Tantric adepts, male and female*, met to drink the wine for which his beloved land was famous....” (1987, p. 15). In other of Dyczkowski’s writings (1988), Miranda Shaw cites him for stating “in some Tantric lineages *women are regarded as preferable to men as gurus*” (Shaw, 1994, p. 6)!

Clearly, even in historical and philosophical texts well respected in the area of academe - texts often difficult to access because of the writing style of the authors (or their efforts to include so many diverse aspects of the Tantric traditions), texts that have discourse that could be seen to marginalize women because of their emphasis on the male adept’s role - *even there* we find the mention of women gurus, initiators and yoginis.

Shall we continue with a rather subaltern perspective – that of N.N. Bhattacharyya in the *History of the Shakta Religion* (1996)? In discussing the Kaula sect of tantric worship, the author states “A woman and even a Sudra (person of untouchable caste) is entitled to function in the role of the preceptor” (Bhattacharyya, 1996, p. 131). In his discussion of the Yogini cult he also states “*originally the yoginis were probably human beings, women of flesh and blood, priestesses who were supposed to be possessed by the goddess*, and later they were raised to the status of divinities” (Bhattacharyya, 1996, p.128).

Continuing along this line, in *A Post Orientalist History of the Fierce Sakti of the SubAltern Domain* (1999 Dissertation), Donna Jordan discusses the matriarchal social systems that were precursors to the medieval Sakta-Tantric cults (Jordan, 1999, p.

32), and identifies the presence of women adepts in these cults when she states that “*whether as yogi or yogini, these subaltern Tantrikas were considered unrespectable, crazy...by orthodox Hindus ...because they perpetuated many tribal practices of fertility magic....*” (Jordan, 1999, p. 46).

In *Aghora* (1986), the biography of a left handed Tantric who confronts death in the cremation grounds, the author Robert Svoboda notes the Tantric Vimalananda’s encounter with a woman adept whom he calls Bhairavi. Vimalananda states that “the only way to learn tantric sexual practice is to have an experienced partner who can make up for any deficiencies you might have.*The Bhairavi who taught me is the most experienced...in India.* When she came to me she looked like a fifteen-year old girl, but she is much, much older than that. *Death cannot come to take her until she herself desires it. She remains naked, but covers herself with her long matted locks, and she carries a trident, Shiva’s symbol...*” (Svoboda, 1986, p. 291).

Elizabeth Harding (1993) discusses the account of a more well known saint in India – Sri Ramakrishna – and his encounter with his first teacher. She describes her as a Sadhika (woman who practices austerities) *who goes into ecstasy and has visions* (Harding, 1993, p. 260) and as a *learned Tantric*, first to assure Sri Ramakrishna that his visions were true (Harding, 1993, p. 259). Convinced that he was an incarnation of God, the learned Brahmani invited scholars to debate at the Kali Temple (Harding, 1993, p. 261). Sri Ramakrishna *began to practice the prescribed rules of the heroic mode of Tantric worship under her guidance* (1993, p. 261). And after becoming perfect in practicing the major Tantric disciplines, *the Brahmani began to teach him Vaishnav sadhana* (a bhakti tradition) [Harding, 1993, p. 262].

In sum so far: we have reviewed a sampling of respected academic sources, both Western and Indian. We have also looked at sources that named themselves subaltern. As well we have perused some spiritual bio/autobiographies focused on male saints. However, in none of these sources has the focus been on the role of women as adepts, gurus, or yoginis (except Miranda Shaw, of course). Yet in each case, we have found references to women of power. In teasing out the presence of the Hindu Tantric yogini, have we only touched the tip of the iceberg then, as Schussler-Fiorenza's methodology would suggest? What would happen if we surveyed some articles/books specifically focused on reclaiming the role of women in India? What would happen then? Tune in to the next installment and see!

The Return of the Yogini

In the first installment of this paper, we reviewed a sampling of respected academic sources, both Western and Indian. We looked at sources that named themselves subaltern, as well spiritual bio/autobiographical sources focused on male saints. However, in none of these sources was the focus on the role of women as adepts, gurus, or yoginis (except our initial focus on Miranda Shaw). Yet in each source, we found references to the presence of women of power, to yoginis. I would like to now demonstrate that this was, in fact, only the tip of the iceberg, as Schussler-Fiorenza's hermeneutics of suspicion would claim. By surveying articles and books specifically focused on the role of women in India, I will demonstrate the return to the Hindu Tantric foreground of the female yogini adept.

Lynn Gatwood in *Devi and the Spouse Goddess* (1985) charts the spousification of the independent, sexual tribal goddesses by the Brahminic priestly caste as reflecting

the historical effort to “domesticate” the ancient Dravidian peoples, and their wild untameable goddesses. When discussing the role of the goddess Kali in Left – Handed Tantra, and the transformation of sexual energy into psychic energy through identification with the male and female aspects of divinity, she states “*there are references in the literature to female gurus and initiators* (Gatwood, 1985, p. 162/163).

In another woman centered source, *Oh Terrifying Mother* (1999), by Sarah Caldwell, an ethnographer who lived in India for over a year, what could be the history (herstory) of the yogini in South India is discussed. In describing the tribal roots of low caste possession performances, Caldwell quotes Hardy (1983) as documenting public religious lives of young women during the 1st to 4th centuries as including festival rites where *women would get into a frenzy, dance, sing and participate in possession trances and divination*. She also cites Hardy as documenting the *existence of female shamans* in tribal mountain cultures, where ritual included eating of meat, drinking of alcohol and drumming (Caldwell, 1999, p. 24). Later she documents Hardy as stating that *female oracles still existed in 1983* in the hilly tribal area of the Palghat region of India, as the last of the female shamanic priests (precursors of the yoginis) [Caldwell, 1999, p. 25]?

In the book *Twilight Goddess* (2000) by Cleary and Aziz, in the chapter called ‘Tantric Goddess Worship,’ there is a discussion of women suitable for partnership in the Tantric yoni-puja, or worship of the feminine sex. In noting the ages of women involved – from girl to mature woman, from unmarried to married - and discussing the categories: dancer/actress, skull wearer, accessible woman, washerwoman, hairdresser, Brahmin, Shudra, cowherd and garland maker’s daughter, there is *reference to women of the lower castes not only participating in Tantric rites, but becoming gurus* (Cleary and Aziz, 2000,

p. 30). Some of these names were also terms given to aboriginal tribes of the mountains or forests by Vedic scholars, many of which were matriarchal, matrilineal, or matrilineal, and who may be the forebears of Goddess religion and Tantra (Cleary and Aziz, 2000, p. 31).

Specifically, the term 'skull wearer,' refers to a "*member of the cult of naked or rag-clad ascetics known for such extreme practices as frequenting cemeteries, wearing garlands of human bones, carrying blood-stained human heads, and drinking wine from skulls....*"

The authors go on to state that "...in spite of their asceticism, these cultists did not believe in seeking a liberation in which there was no pleasure; they concentrated their meditation on the idea of the supreme power resident in the female generative organ, *and the men and women of the cult practiced free sexual relations with each other*" (Cleary and Aziz, 2000, p. 31).

In further discussion of women involved in Tantric rites, the same authors note that one of the categories names "*regal, accessible woman,*" or *woman who is free and independent like a king* (Cleary and Aziz, 2000, p. 32). There is also mention of the freedom of women from aboriginal tribes, often integrated into society as "untouchables," the skull bearers who deliberately outcasted themselves, and *independent women known as svairini, who had very free attitudes towards sexuality* (Cleary and Aziz, 2000, p. 36/37). These references certainly indicate the presence of women in tantra, women that could fit the definition of yogini.

In the article "Women in the Saiva and Sakta Ethos," by Sanjukta Gupta (from *Roles and Rituals for Hindu Women*, 1991), the author discusses women poetess-saints of

a specific Tantric tradition, the Saiva, that “were able to subvert their social roles and so achieve self-determination and spiritual fulfillment.” She states that this is due to the Sakta theology of the Tantras that was “apt to revere women’s spirituality and to *respect the autonomy of women saints*” (Gupta, 1991, p. 195). She names three saints of this tradition, and states that one of them left home to practice her devotion in the seclusion of the forest, defying genteel society and deliberately *choosing the extreme life of a skull bearing ascetic (kapalika) in the wilderness* (Gupta, 1991, p. 196-198).

The second woman saint Gupta identifies is one who left her marriage to a king and “discarded everything she possessed, including her clothes, *she wandered alone and naked, her long disheveled hair covering her nudity.*” The Virasaivas were impressed by her *spiritual wisdom and her command of metaphysics*, and she was thus accepted into the group of saints (Gupta, 1991, p. 198/199).

The third woman discussed, who due to a difficult relation with her mother-in-law was turned out of her home, then took up the life of a *female tantric renouncer and ascetic practising yogini*. *She followed the ‘left-hand’ tantric tradition*, wandering about in a minimum of clothes and used both wine and meat in her religious offerings. She followed no guru, but her own judgment, and yet, her poetry is found to have sound understanding of the central tenets of Saiva non-dual philosophy (Gupta, 1991, p. 199/200). This woman, Lalla Ded, was said to *have lived the life of a tantric master*, and commanded great respect among the Saivas of Kashmir, and also with the Sufis of that time (Gupta, 1991, p. 201). As a Saiva tantric, Gupta states that Lalla Ded had the option of renouncing social life and *following the ways of a ...yogini, or even of emulating the*

stance of the more witch-like dakini. (Most of Gupta's sources on Lalla are cited from the 1920's, though she doesn't identify when she lived).

Kathleen Erndl, in her article "Is Shakti Empowering for Women?" (2000) discusses *current* evidence to suggest that Shakta traditions tend to be more inclusive of women as practitioners, and more accepting of *women as leaders or gurus*, citing the Shakta influenced Anandamayi Ma, research on Shakta women saints, as well as a study of Shakta women ecstasies. The author states "in *tantric circles, women gurus are commonplace*" (Erndl, 2000, p. 93). She documents the work of an artist-activist whose photo exhibits were inspired by a pilgrimage to Kamakhya, "*where female and male ascetics perform Tantric practices in caves on the hillsides.*" These exhibitions are excursions "into the lives of Khepisi, Matajis, and *Yoginis*, states Erndl, women who dare to define themselves in relations to the metaphysical rather than the social..." (Erndl, 2000, p. 99). And she notes the work of another Indian woman who has established a Tantra Foundation in Delhi "whose aim is not only to preserve Tantric traditions but *to promote Tantra as relevant to the lives of contemporary women*" (Erndl, 2000, p. 94).

In her article "Varieties of Hindu Female Ascetism," (from *Roles and Rituals for Hindu Women*, 1991) Lynn Denton makes a definitive statement about *current tantric ascetism among women* in Varanasi, India. I would like to quote a significant passage from her writing:

Female tantric ascetics may be divided into three Groups. The first consists of female yoga practitioners (yogini): women who practice yogic postures, breath control and various other 'acts' in order to render the body supple, to aid in meditation, to gain a vision of the deity, and to achieve the blissful state of absorption.

The second category consists of women who are called

perfected... These women may engage in yogic exercises, but are best known as practitioners of the feared 'left-hand' Tantric path.... Female ascetics of this type are free to have sexual relations... perform meditation at night on the cremation ground. They also seek bliss, but in addition aim to cultivate the psychic or occult power that accompany intense meditative and yogic practice.... (Denton, 1991, p. 226)

Denton goes on to state:

All female tantric ascetics believe they have very special powers, and none separates the acquisition of power from the notion of spiritual liberation. Tantric ascetics describe their goal in different ways, emphasizing the state of bliss or madness which it brings. To be intoxicated and wanton or mad is evidence both of spiritual attainment and of the freedom which their type of asceticism expresses.

(Denton, 1991, p. 227)

And:

More prevalent among tantric female ascetics as a class (many of whom never perform yoga at all) is their full identification with a deity.... Those who do not act as oracles none the less consider themselves to be the embodiment of a deity..... Tantrics believe (and act as if) they are already divine.

(Denton, 1991, p. 229)

In case the reader is not yet convinced yet of the presence of female adepts in the Hindu Tantric tradition, let me present further evidence. In *Yogini Cult and Temples*, the author Vidya Dehejia touches on a critical issue almost immediately in the preface: though the tantras are almost written in code, it is there that one can find the most information on the yogini tradition (Dehejia, 1986, p. xi). She sources her work on Indian manuscript libraries she personally visited (Dehejia, 1986, p. x).

Though Dehiya's work mainly focuses on non-human yoginis of the temples, those who are considered patron goddesses of the Kaulikas (a particular tantric sect), she also discusses the different meanings of the word *yogini* – *three of which fit our purposes: a female devotee, a sorceress/witch, and a yogic adept who acquires magical*

powers (Dehejia, 1986, p. 11-12). Regarding the existence of yoginis as followers and adepts in yoga, Dehijia references paintings *where they are often portrayed as ascetic mendicants or seated in shrines visited by male and female devotees* (Dehejia, 1986, p. 11). Magical powers of these yoginis are cited as breath control, levitation, and control over living creatures. Regarding their independent status, the author documents *no fixed place of residence for these yoginis, stating they wander the country-side acquiring followers and teaching them difficult path of yoga* (Dehejia, 1986, p. 11).

Regarding the sorceress and yogini adept, the author documents through various stories the *specific powers of yoginis, dakinis, and sakinis*, to include the following: power to shapeshift, power to fly through the air, power to resurrect the dead, power to become small, power to become gigantic, the power of compelling will, control over body and mind, control of the elements, and fulfillment of all one's desires (let alone other more "black magic" powers) [Dehijia, 1986, p. 13-15, 53]. The author also discusses the very Tantric sounding practices of gathering in cemeteries, sacrificing of animals, eating of human flesh and the corpse ritual (offering of wine, ritual breathing and sexual union on top of a body) as methods for gaining these magical powers (Dehijia, 1986, p. 15). *Later she specifically documents some of these sorceresses as following the unorthodox path of the Kapalikas* (Dehijia, 1986, p. 17).

Dehijia also documents *yogini practitioners in the Tantric tradition known as the Kaula Marga path*, specifically discussing their role in aspects of the maithuna (sacred sexual) rite (1986, p. 11). She describes them as utilizing sexuality as a way of liberation - including circle practice in the yogini temples. In the circle, a yogini is paired up with an unknown partner. Anointing of the body and touching is emphasized. All women in

the circle are the Devi and all men Shiva. The human female yogini, representing the goddess, receives the yogi as a representative of Shiva (Dehijia, 1986, p. 13, 62-63). *Kularnava Tantra mentions the female partners of the Cakra Ritual as yoginis* as well, documents Dehijia (1986, p 32). And in Kamkhya these women adepts as known as Bhairavis (Dehijia, 1986, p. 63).

Dehijia gives indicators of the position of esteem in which the yoginis are held on this path. Things that will anger the yoginis are listed as the following: insulting a woman, striking a woman, speaking of her faults, being angry with a woman, and making caste distinctions (Dehijia, 1986, p. 34). Again regarding the independent status of these women adepts, the author notes that the *yoginis of the Kaula Tantric path do not live with any yogi on a permanent basis*, but are called upon for ritual on holy days...And states that *there are yoginis currently practicing the Kaula Cakra Ritual...*(Dehijia, 1986, p. 63).

Several authors have tantalized us with documentation of yoginis not only in the Tantric history of India, but their presence today (Svodboda, Caldwell, Denton). Shall we also consider the following two sources? Daniel Odier's 1996 account of his long term studies in Buddhism, Hinduism and Tantra, his long search for a guru, and his initiation into the sacred sexual practice of the Kashmir Shaivic tradition by a female tantrika, chronicled in *Tantric Quest?* And Amarananda Bhairavan's spiritual autobiography documenting his childhood initiation in East India, in a village where "*the matriarchies gave prime recognition to women in spiritual and temporal matters,*" and "*women seers and tantrikas enjoyed superior standing compared to their male counterparts*" (Bhairavan, 2000, p. xi). Where in fact the author tells the story of his

initiation by a female preceptor/sorceress (his aunt), and a local village female aghori?

Where Bhairavan discusses the female vallipachads (holy women) and healers throughout the story? Where his female cousin is initiated with him? This man is now in residence at the Kali Temple of Dakshineswar in Laguna Beach, California. His account was published in 2000 and provides *more current evidence for female yoginis, sorcerers and aghoris practicing the Tantric path...*

So what do we ultimately have here? What exactly have we uncovered? What have we teased out of accepted academic sources, rather subaltern sources, depictions of saint's lives, personal lives, woman centered sources, sources from undiscovered manuscripts of ancient India and current spiritual autobiographies? Have we discovered the presence of the female adept, sorcerer, magician – yogini - that has been there all along in the history of India? Hidden from view but now rising to the surface, out of the shadows, to take her rightful place in the Goddess worshipping traditions of India? You decide....

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