

[Tantra: Feminizing Divinity](#)

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## Tantra: Feminizing Divinity

Shikha Malaviya, New Delhi

God is not "He!" nor fully "She" for that matter--notes tantra scholar Dr. Madhu Khanna, co-author of the popular, beautifully illustrated book on occult Hinduism *The Tantric Way: Art, Science and Ritual*. I had seen her book in New Age bookstores in America, but was always a little afraid to look inside. After all, wasn't tantraHinduism's black magic world--sexual-religious sorcery rites and esoteric initiations into all-powerful mantras?

Next thing I knew I was on assignment for *Hinduism Today* to interview the author. I tracked her down at the Indira Gandhi Centre of the Arts in New Delhi, where she holds a post as associate professor. She greeted me. Cosmopolitan, youngish, very attractive, clad in a bright cotton sari, her jet black hair tied in a knot, with kind expressive eyes, composed and self-confident, she instantly destroyed all my preconceptions about tantra.

For two hours we talked about the need for a modern "Hindu woman's dharma" and a distinctly Indian, non-Western idiom for Hindu feminism. We delved, too, into the corrosive effects

on women of urban lifestyles and the continuing erosion of women's tacit bond with Mother Earth. It was a potent meeting, and I felt there was much more to be covered.

I started with basics. What is tantra? Simply a medieval cult which arose in revolt against the rigid brahmanical mold and hold on Hindus? "What is really interesting," Dr. Khanna responded, "was that the revolt within the existing religious tradition was to re-embodiment a woman with her inherent power. Thousands of texts were rewritten, and new ones added, to give renewed importance to women and the female principle. Accompanying this was a full transformation of Indian Goddess iconography." Old myths, legends and hymns ennobling women were exhumed from patriarchic burial grounds.

According to Dr. Khanna, tantra views the whole universe as a composite of two principles--the so-called "male," Siva, representing the quiescent transcendent, and the so-called "female," Shakti, "the kinetic verb of creation," as she terms it. I asked her bluntly how this admittedly beautiful, but dizzyingly lofty concept relates to me and other women, in a visceral way. "Shakti assumes the form of Goddess in every single woman of this world," resounded Dr. Khanna, eager that I didn't leave her office thinking Shakti was just some exciting bedtime fiction frolic for matronly book-worms. She continued, "Not only is each woman a physical incarnation of Shakti, but the very fact that she is born a woman automatically empowers her." This brought a shiver down my spine--that a woman could be considered Shakti-empowered just because of her female body and psyche.

"In mainstream Hindu writings the female is always inferior," said Khanna, "and looks upon her husband as pati,'lord.' But in tantratradition, your husband is looked to as sakha,your 'friend.'" I like that.

In tantratransmission of spiritual knowledge from a woman is considered especially potent and sacred. It is called yogini mukhaand a classic example of this is Sri Ramakrishna's learning kundalini yoga from a young yogini."In tantra," Dr. Khanna shared, "any woman can become a priestess. In fact, there are less codes for women following the tantricpath than for men." So I asked the obvious. What about our monthly menses and the idea that it makes us "impure?" "Actually, there are reasons that mainstream Hinduism called the menstruating woman 'impure,'" Dr. Khanna said. "A woman's body needs a rest amidst so many strong fluctuations and the excuse of impurity was one way of guaranteeing that rest. However, tantra views every aspect of the woman's reproductive cycle as sacred and pure! Women should not be ashamed of their bodies. Women have to recognize, acknowledge and harmonize these forces."

Easy to say these things, I was thinking, but how could the average, uneducated Indian village lady make sense out of "harmonizing the negative potentialities and dualities of my body." Dr. Khanna writhed when I used the word "uneducated" and then said: "I hate to use the term, but there is something called 'uterine memory.' It's amazing how much village women absorb through passive learning. Even though most have not been to school or college, there is so much these women learn from watching and interacting with each other. They are more skilled than educated urban women in many arts and crafts

and have an incredible understanding of traditional values. In fact, if I were talking with rural women, they wouldn't have any problem understanding these so-called abstract concepts. Urban women would! Urban minds are conditioned to view everything categorically with narrow definitions, rigid classifications, etc. Village women have an incredible capacity to absorb traditional, complex metaphors of life which we urban women have lost. Ask a village woman anything about the subtle role of Kunti or Dushyanta in the Mahabharata, and she could tell you immediately. Ask a city lady, and she would have to read a book."

It then really struck me how far women and men, like ourselves, had drifted from what we acknowledge as our roots. Urban and urbane, we have barricaded ourselves from a world of earthy celebrations and dramas linked to our epics which offer a solid moral framework. For example, "No mother in India has to advise her daughter how to behave with her husband," Madhu said. "She knows she has to be either like Sita or Savitri. It is in these role models that rural women find and express their Shakti powers."

Dr. Khanna then shared an example of this shakti. Years ago, the government insisted on cutting down many forests. Women organized themselves into the Chipko movement and literally wrapped themselves around trees to stop deforestation. "It was amazing how these women with no schooling went and embraced the trees. No environmental agency had to sit them down and teach them eco-awareness. They hugged the trees because their relationship with nature is still so strong and intimate that they feel personally responsible to protect it. They really believe that their wombs

and the womb of Mother Earth come from the same source."

Dr. Khanna is opposed to the creation of one monolithic feminist ideal for Hindu women--especially one framed by Westerners. India's women are too unique and diverse for that. "We still have nomadic tribes and also women in cities like Bombay where lifestyles resemble New York City's." And though she loves tradition, she deplores women following old traditions blindly. "There shouldn't be an uncritical acceptance of tradition. The deadwood in traditions should be plucked and thrown away. What is relevant for our unique circumstances should be retained."

Before I left, I wanted to find out how this yoga-practicing soul got so deep into tantra."I became interested in tantra at a very young age," she said. "At first, it was the images that attracted me--yantras, similar to modern art, and very geometrical. One day, I saw this yantra in a book and said, 'Wow, this is what I want to do. I want to know more about these images. So I started reading and writing on tantric aesthetics. Eventually, I realized tantra was so much more, a whole world view, a holistic, enlightened style of life. I then became very excited and studied Sanskrit so I could translate tantric manuscripts and also completed my PhD at Oxford University, England, where I worked on Goddess tradition in tantra."

I left upbeat. Here was a woman who was undoubtedly reading the same demoralizing headlines as I was. But, instead of getting "down" about it, she was out uplifting women to claim our innate spiritual strengths.

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### Sidebar: Tantrism Defined

"Tantrism refers to traditions, mainly within Saivism and Shaktism, that focus on the arousal of the kundalini force, and which view the human body as the vehicle of the Divine and an instrument for liberation. Tantrism's ultimate aim is a channeling of the kundalini life force through the sushumna channel upwards into the sahasrara chakra and beyond into Parasiva. Shakta Tantrism brings a strong emphasis on the worship of the feminine force. Depending on the school, this may be symbolic, or literal in rites involving sexual intercourse, etc. Tantrism's main principle is the use of the material to gain the spiritual. In the hands of the unscrupulous, tantra techniques become black magic." (Dancing with Siva)