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Tantric Iconography: Semiotic Matrix in the Visualization of Deities

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Abstract: My paper explores Tantric Iconography as a symbolic system operative within the ontological doctrine centering round the principle of Vāk or cosmic Speech, which, however, is to be distinguished from the postmodernist understanding of Logocentrism. The core matrix of the Tantric universe is a fluid and pluralistic semiotic structure, a nexus between ‘*śabda*’ and ‘*artha*’; with our seemingly objective and fixed ‘reality’ made into a metaphoric ‘translation’ of Vāk occurring through various stages. When it comes to iconography, the Tantric language operates through a signifying process of coding and decoding from *mantras* to *yantras* to anthropomorphic deity-forms. The visualization of Tantric deities is a fluid experience where an anthropomorphic image re-‘translates’ into subtle sonic vibrations that unfold higher dimensions of consciousness, yet as a ‘sign’ it never ceases referring to itself in its basic embodied form, and thereby dissolves the binary of transcendence and immanence. Within this larger ontological context, the paper explores the layered pattern of symbolism underlying the Tantric iconography of the Mahāvidyās with reference to a select number of paintings by myself. The presentation will focus particularly on the core doctrines of the Śākta system as articulated in the visualizations of Kālī and Tripurasundarī; as to how their pluralistic understanding of the universe dismantles the boundaries of the conventional ethics-defined world-order. Alongside depicting the pure *śāstra*-based meditative forms of the goddesses, my paintings also take the artistic liberty to revisit and re-interpret their iconographic features under the light of the core philosophy that underlies them. The paintings thereby themselves become ‘translations’ of the original *śāstra*-based images within newer interpretative contexts.

Keywords: *mantra, yantra, śāstra, ‘śabda’*

Tantra as a knowledge system encompasses a wide range of diverse areas such as Yoga, philosophy, occultism, astrology, medicines and even art and aesthetics. What distinguishes Tantra from the knowledge systems deriving from Vedic sources such as monistic Vedānta and

Sāṃkhya is its approach to the nature of divinity as well as to that of the world. The following observations might sum up the central points of difference.

In Veda oriented philosophical systems, the ultimate reality in its true nature is purely transcendent and static. Classical Sāṃkhya establishes two final principles, *prakṛti* and *puruṣa*. While *prakṛti* has activity but no consciousness, *puruṣa* has consciousness but no activity. However, at the final hour of liberation, *puruṣa* is dissociated from *prakṛti*. Advaita Vedānta on the other hand centres on the concept of Brahman as the ‘One without a second’, whose nature is pure Being-Consciousness-Bliss. Not subject to changes, it is devoid of any activity. Such Brahman can be anything but a creator, and hence to explain the nature of the world, Advaita Vedānta has to take recourse to the doctrine of *māyā*. The phenomenal world is an illusory projection upon Brahman like that of a serpent upon a rope.

As opposed to these doctrines, the non-dualistic Śaiva and Śākta ontological systems argue that purely inert consciousness can be anything but autonomous. Hence, Supreme Consciousness is not merely *cit* (pure consciousness) but also *citi* (pure consciousness as a dynamic power vested with absolute autonomy or freedom of Will). Stasis and dynamics cease to be at odds with each other and their polarity dissolves into the non-duality of Śiva and Śakti. This immediately highlights the central role designated to Speech or Vāk in this system. Here, the nature of the Absolute is not an already given ‘fact’ but a constant ‘process’ of signification whereby it perpetually refers to itself in terms of subjective awareness as ‘I’ or ‘*aham*’. The ontological doctrines of the Pratyabhijñā school of monistic Śaivism can be best understood with reference to Bhartṛhari’s statement,

If it is denied that the permanent essence of Awareness is Speech, then Illumination cannot shine. Hence Speech is Illumination’s power of cognitive self-awareness.ⁱ

It is interesting to see how cosmic creativity itself is seen as a metaphoric ‘translation’ of Speech from one stage to another. From the transcendental *parā* level, Vāk descends to that of *paśyantī* where it perceives the particularities to be manifested. Therefrom, it passes to *madhyamā*, and then solidifies into *vaikharī*, where all differences of objects are perceived. In other words, a signifying process lies at the core of absolute consciousness and what appears to be ‘objective reality’ is but related to this semiotic matrix. The hierarchical division between the two aspects of the Absolute as Śabdabrahman (Brahman as Sound) and Parabrahman (Brahman in Itself) is dissolved since here the latter itself culminates into the former.ⁱⁱ

My paper explores how Tantric iconography is woven into a linguistic structure whereby the otherwise ‘meaningless’ sonic formulae called *mantras* semiotically crystallize into anthropomorphic forms. The visual images of all different gods and goddesses are but sonic vibrations ‘seen’ at the *paśyantī* level of speech. Their individual materialization again depends upon the *bhāvas* and competence-levels of the *sādhakas*, as to whether the deities are to be received as real anthropomorphic entities with hands and feet, or as symbolic dramatizations of the potencies latent in the *mantras*. Or it should be said that these two levels of reception are not exclusive of each other. The literal and the metaphoric are but co-extensive. The deity can be simultaneously a) a personal entity with whom the *sādhaka* relates as a servant, a child, a friend or a lover, b) a visual symbol for the ends a *mantra* can accomplish,; and c) an anthropomorphic image referring to otherwise abstract qualities or philosophical concepts that go into the definition of the Absolute in the particular ontological and soteriological school to which the *sādhaka* belongs.

The paintings that have been presented with this paper relate to the last point discussed above. Tantric iconography has its own linguistic context that is provided by the ontological doctrines and ritual structures of *mantra*-application. However, owing to the public exposure of these icons, readings from unrelated disciples have flown into the popular understanding of these esoteric forms. Here I would specifically refer to the decontextualized application of Sāṃkhya and Vedānta concepts in the understanding of Kālī in most mainstream readings. My paintings are a humble attempt to provide a re-contextualized interpretation of Śākta iconography in terms of the ontological, soteriological and ritualistic doctrines that go into their formation and reception within the Tantric traditions. In other words, my paintings are visual translations of the semiotic implications of these icons.

My works can be grossly divided into two categories. The first consists of simple visual renderings of *dhyāna* verses with their symbolic implications addressed rather implicitly. The second however covers those experimental works where these very forms are broken to work out more explicitly pronounced readings through overt statements.

I begin my demonstration by referring to the general visual features of the Dakṣiṇākālī icon popular in Bengal. Through my paintings titled ‘Ādyā’ and ‘Parama Brahman’, I would explore each significant detail of the icon.

It might be asked, "What is the significance of the name, 'Kālī'?" In the Tantras, the term ‘Kālī’ derives from ‘Kāla’, which means 'Time'. Kālī is the one who devours Time. Since

the entire cycle of creation and dissolution is contained in Time; when Time itself is transcended, one attains the state of Voidness or *nirvāṇa* in which all dualities and all polarities dissolve. Void does not mean a state of non-being or nothingness, not even that of exclusive transcendence; but that ultimate point of experience where even the duality between being and non-being, transcendence and immanence, emptiness and fullness, dissolves. Here lies the significance of Kālī's blackness. As the *Mahānirvāṇa Tantra*ⁱⁱⁱ explains, black is not an independent colour in itself, but is the absence of all colours; since in black all colours like red, blue, white and yellow dissolve. Although all-transcending, the principle of Voidness is vibrant with the dynamic pulsation of energy that bursts forth into all polarities yet retains its undivided non-dual nature. Such Void is the nature of Kālī, whose mad dance emphasizes this element of divine dynamism in the nature of the Absolute, constituting her very Śaktihood. This dynamism however does not subject her to any limitation owing to time and space. Hence, Kālī is unclad.

In the Bengal iconography of Dakṣiṇākālī, she is depicted as standing upon the supine body of Śiva. Popular mythology provides a narrative account whereafter a terrible battle with the *asuras*, a furious Kālī wreaks havoc all over the universe. Finally, to stop her, Śiva, her husband intervenes and lies on the battle ground. When Kālī steps upon him, she realizes her mistake and out of embarrassment bites her tongue. Philosophically, it is customary to interpret the icon in terms of the Sāṃkhya doctrine of *puruṣa* and *prakṛti*. According to these readings, Śiva is *puruṣa* or the principle of pure consciousness devoid of all functions and hence is lying inert like a corpse. Kālī on the other hand is *prakṛti* or the dynamic principle of materiality which although unconscious, behaves as if conscious when it comes to the proximity of *puruṣa*. Another common tendency is to apply a quasi-Vedāntic reading that interprets Śiva as the supreme unqualified Brahman (*nirguṇa* Brahman) and Kālī as its lower aspect conditioned by *māyā* (*saguṇa* Brahman or Īśvara) or as *māyā* itself

As I have argued in a great number of academic articles^{iv}, all these readings articulate the patriarchal fear of female autonomy that Kālī represents, and hence interpret the male figure (visually below) as being symbolically 'above' her, in order to contain and control her power. While the popular myth tries to reduce her to a submissive wife ashamed of her transgressive act; the Sāṃkhya based reading makes her into a lower ontological category representing the opposite pole of consciousness; since in the Sāṃkhya system, *puruṣa* ultimately transcends *prakṛti*. Again, when interpreted as *saguṇa* Brahman or as *māyā* in the Vedāntic sense, Kālī

becomes a mere principle of illusion which has no existence in the absolute sense, nor has any status as the ultimate reality.

What should be kept in mind at the very outset is that Śakti in the Śākta Tantras is not equivalent to either prakṛti in Sāṃkhya, or to Saguṇa Brahman or māyā in Vedānta. To philosophically understand Kālī, the prerequisite points of clarity are:

1. Although the ontological doctrines of the Śākta Tantras draw from Sāṃkhya, they depart on two major points. First, the emphatically non-dualistic Śākta Tantras dissolve the Sāṃkhya duality of *puruṣa* and *prakṛti* into the non-duality of Śiva and Śakti. Secondly, as a result of this non-dualization, *prakṛti* here ceases to be unconscious, despite her dynamic nature is pure consciousness par excellence.^v Personified as the Great Goddess, *prakṛti* is both transcendent and immanent.
2. The Tantric understanding of dynamism is not to be confused with that in Vedānta. In the Tantras, as we shall study in detail in course of this paper, the Absolute in its supreme state is dynamic par excellence. Hence, Śakti as the dynamic pole of divinity is not an illusion or a lower category like *māyā*.
3. The Tantras of Kālīkula also draw from the Buddhist doctrine of *śūnya* while explaining the nature of Kālī.
4. Finally, owing to their Śākta inclination, the Tantras of Kālīkula establish Śakti or Kālī as the supreme principle and treat Śiva as a derivative of her.

As my Guru Kulavadhuta Srimat Shyamananda Tirthanatha explains, the Śiva-figure lying at the feet of Kālī is not 'Śiva' at all but is '*śava*' or a mere corpse. It is a fundamental doctrine of the Śākta ontology that the letter '*i*' in the term 'Śiva' is Śakti herself without whom 'Śiva' would become '*śava*'. Śiva is the supreme autonomous Consciousness vested with the freedom to either remain in his state of transcendental repose or to express himself in the multiplicity of the universe. Śakti is the very power of autonomy, the principle of freedom that vests him with Śivahood. When Kālī as the Supreme Śakti withdraws this letter '*i*' from Śiva, she absorbs in all his autonomy or Śivahood and reduces him to a corpse. It is then that the adept attains the state of *nirvāṇa* where Kālī alone remains combining both Śiva and Śakti in herself. Śiva is no longer visible separately. In this supreme state, Kālī is the perfect eternal Absolute.

This explanation however does not deny the non-duality of Śiva and Śakti since they are always one and the same, but dives into subtle distinctions of layers within the undivided non dualistic principle. Although Kālī is Śiva's inherent energy, inseparable from him; she is that supreme transcendental point of his consciousness that he himself cannot objectivate. Since the very subtle distinction between the Power (*śakti*) and the Power-holder (*śaktimāna* or Śiva) is but a projection of Śakti's play alone, at the final hour of liberation, she dissolves this distinction itself into her absolute non-dual consciousness. After that Śiva is left with no awareness of his separate existence. This is how, despite her non-dual relation with Śiva, Kālī in a way transcends him. Śiva's supine body is verily designated as the '*mahāpreta*' or the Great Dead, in the sense that he has been transcended (contrary to the Sāṃkhya and Vedānta based readings where he instead transcends Kālī).



Śrīmadakṣīnakālīkā

In the paintings 'Vidyārājñī' and 'Śrīmadakṣīnakālīkā', one might find a unique version of the Bengal iconography of Kālī, where she has been depicted as seated upon two male figures. Below there is the inert figure of the corpse-like Śiva, and above him reclines Śiva as Mahākāla, Kālī's Bhairava, with whom she is seen as engaged in sexual union. Having absorbed in the Śivahood of Śiva, reducing him to her corpse-throne, she re-energises him into Bhairava. This

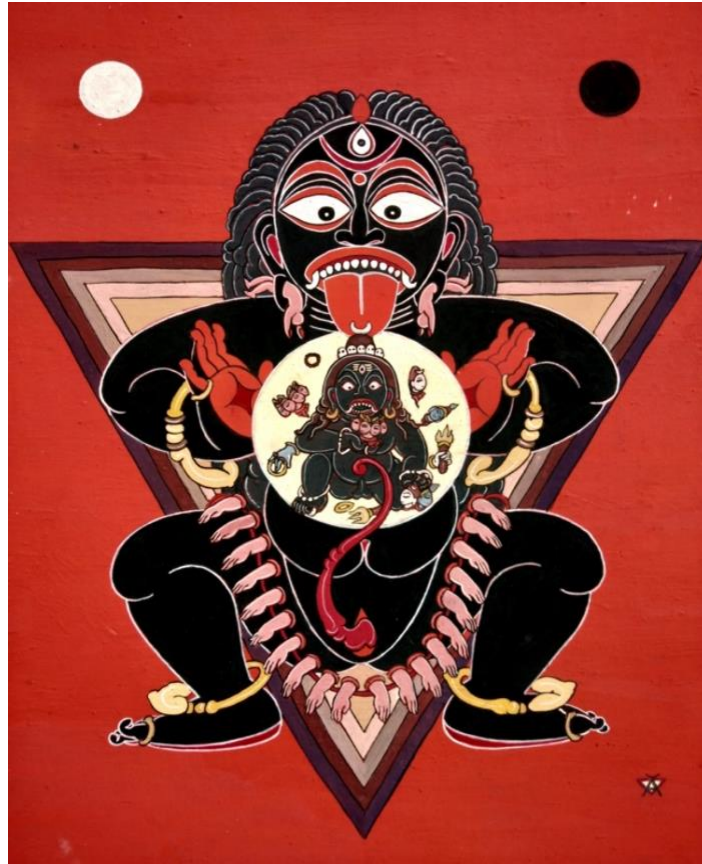
she effects through *viparītarati*, or the 'reverse mode of sexual union' where the female partner dominates from above. In usual sexual intercourses, the vital energy in the body tends to flow downward for the sake of procreation. But when through Yoga, the same energy is channelised upward through the *susumnā* nerve, it culminates into the blissful experience of Śiva-Śakti union in the *sahasrāra* lotus. At the climactic point of this 'reverse' (*viparīta*) mode of union, there is the symbolic death of Mahākāla as she devours him completely. This refers to the state of Yogic experience where the 'experient' or the 'knower' self of the *sādhaka* loses its awareness of separate existence in the intensity of the all engulfing transcendental principle of supreme Bliss that Kālī is. She in a way is symbolically a femme fatale, who allows her lover to unite with her only at the cost of his life.



Brahmarūpiṇī

The painting 'Brahmarūpiṇī' exclusively focuses on my Guru's understanding of this aspect of Kālī's equation with Śiva. Even when she devours Śiva, he exists in a subtle form within herself, completely one with her; although no longer perceptible from outside. In the visual rendering, the subtle Śiva merged into Kālī has been shown as an aniconic *bāṇalingam* or as a fertilised egg^{vi} inside her womb, as she exerts an overwhelming omnipotence, sitting

dominantly upon his corpse-like body. Overpowering him with her sexual union, she makes all his energy and consciousness flow into herself. The painting 'Mahākāla-kalanī' explores this theme further as it is based on the following verses from the *Mahanirvāṇa Tantra*.



Mahākāla-kalanī

Mahākāla, the Destroyer of the Universe, is Your form. At the dissolution of things, it is Kāla Who devours all, and for this reason He is called Mahākāla. Since You devour Mahākāla Himself, You are the Supreme Primordial Kālikā. Because You devour Kāla, You are Kālī, the origin of all things, and because You are the devourer (Kāla) and the Primordial Being, You are called Ādyā Kālī. Resuming after dissolution Your own form, dark and formless; You alone remain as the One beyond speech and mind.^{vii}

Mahākāla refers to Time-totality as distinguished from Time-fragments as experienced by the limited being. Not divided into past, present or future; it contains simultaneously all that was, all that is and all that will be. In the painting, one sees the god Mahākāla playing with the severed heads and limbs of Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Rudra; since each creative circle has its

respective set of creator-preserver-destroyer gods, and Mahākāla dissolves into himself all these creative cycles along with the gods presiding over them. However, ultimately Mahākāla himself is seen as emerging from the womb of Kālī, being shaped by her and finally he has her gaping mouth above his head. This painting also draws from the *Śaktisaṅgama Tantra* that states,

At the time of the great dissolution, She Who rules over millions of universes exists with Her body combining Śiva and Śakti in oneness...O Pārvatī, She attains the state of Śiva-Śakti communion (*sāmarasya*) as everything is a form of Hers. As the all-pervading Consciousness, She assumes Her supreme form. At that time, She observes Her own reflection which transforms into *māyā* through Her mental ideation and becomes Śiva. For the sake of creation, She brings forth Her consort from Her imagination. From Her mind, She ideates out Her own consort who is the Primordial Guru. With Him She engages in reverse copulation and attains the state of the Great Void.^{viii}



Virāṭrūpā Kālī

The paintings ‘Virāṭrūpā Kālī’ and ‘The Revelation’ are based on a narrative featuring in the *Yoginī Tantra*. After the complete dissolution of the universe, when nothing remains other than Śiva and Śakti, Śiva mocks Pārvatī saying, 'O Devī, I am absolutely comfortable when there is no creation. But what will you do now, you being the ever-creative force?' To this the Devī replies, 'Never forget that you exist by virtue of my power. Without me, you are no better than a corpse.' Insulted, Śiva takes handful of ash from his body and creates the demon

Ghora whom he sends to Pārvaī. The moment Ghora meets the Goddess, he is enchanted by her beauty. The Goddess soon assumes the form of Kālī and projecting forth her tongue, she devours Ghora. Humbling Śiva's pride, Kālī reveals before him her cosmic form with millions of universes contained in it. Śiva enters into her vast body and passing through its various energy centres, he reaches her heart-lotus. There he beholds all the fifty letters embodying all knowledge and all power. With this vision, he attains the highest form of enlightenment and recognizes the Goddess to be the Supreme Reality. As she says, 'There is no state of Brahman higher than Kālī', he realizes that she is verily the Absolute. He offers himself as a corpse under her feet and enjoys supreme bliss.

The painting 'Virāṭrūpā Kālī' provides more or less an illustrative visualization of the above narrative with Kālī revealing her cosmic form and Śiva withdrawn into her womb. Within the lotus blooming in her heart region, the letters unfold themselves. 'The Revelation' compresses the cosmic form motif into the abstract visualization of Kuṇḍalinī with multiple coils, revealing all the letters as contained in her body. As the *Śaktisaṅgama*^{ix} expounds, although Kuṇḍalinī in the human body has only three and half coils, in the Devī's own body the number varies from one to fifty-one. As can be seen in the painting, the enlightenment unfolded through these letters culminates in the revelation of the ten Mahāvidyās and with this the individual self attains Śivahood.

One more work inspired by this theme is 'Devī Viśvarūpa', a life size painting combining both iconic and abstract motifs. Depicting the cosmic form of the Devī, it draws from both the *Yoginī Tantra* and the *Devībhāgavata Purāṇa*. In the latter, the witness to this grand revelation is the king Himalaya to whom she is born as a daughter. As the concept note provided with this painting explains,

'...The king suddenly found himself flung amidst an infinite cosmic space. Countless of suns, moons and galaxies revolved round his tiny existence. Hardly could he measure out his position in it, that the very next moment, this fullness around soon vanished into a silent void, as profound as finality itself; where all names and forms entered into an absolute point of negation, and where time itself meets its end. Then what remained in that unfathomable depths of transcendence, was the ultimate principle of Existence (*sat*) without any beginning or end, imperceptible enough for his mortal eyes: hence 'black' beyond description.'



Devī Viśvarūpa

That 'Being' (yes, his loving daughter's own self), although One, is known variously by the learned ones. Some adore It as Mahagaṇapati, to some it is Sūrya, some call It Ādinārāyaṇa, and some describe it as Paramaśiva. In whatever form it is worshipped, that 'Being' is never separable from its inherent essence of Power or Śakti. Hence, some aspirants perceive it directly as Mahāśakti, the Divine Mother. As the Supreme Consciousness-Force pervading all creation and yet transcending it by virtue of her absolute freedom, 'She' is Mahāvidyā who in her undivided wholeness is visualized in ten different *mantra*-forms, who are verily established in the Āgamas as the Daśmahāvidyā.

Though eternally non-dual, this Mahāśakti or Mahāvidyā posits a polarity of aspects as Śiva and Śakti, which during creation evolves into her gigantic body encompassing the entire scheme of the thirty-six *tattvas*. Her face and the twin breasts, form the primordial Triangle of Desire (*kāmakalā*) that embodies her core powers of Will, Cognition and Action. With its modes of vibration intensified further, this Śakti triad fully manifests as her Yoni, that is the origin of all. As creation proceeds, the non-dual Śiva-Śakti consciousness located in her crown pulsates into the duality of *puruṣas* and *prakṛtis*, who are like her twin feet. Her sound form as Parāvāk crystallises into fifty letters or *mātrikās* from ॐ to ॐ, that hang round her flawless body like a garland, all combining into the perfect subjective awareness of 'I' (*aham*). This 'I' is verily declared in the *śrutis* as the Ātman that supports the eleven Rudras, the eight Vasus the

twelve Ādityas and the Viśvadevas. All objects from an atom to the universe, the sun, the moon, myriads of galaxies, are contained in that vast cosmic body alone. Every time when from her indeterminate transcendental state, Ādyāśakti unfolds her universal form, she appoints a Brahmā, a Viṣṇu and a Rudra to carry out the various tasks of creation; and when like the limbs of a tortoise, she withdraws this body of hers into her own Self of pure consciousness, they all meet their end. There in her cosmic body, the king could behold the severed head of a previous *kalpa* Brahmā held in her claw, there the corpses of a Viṣṇu and a Śiva held in another hand, and again casting a glance at her gaping mouth decked with fierce fangs, with the blazing fire of the cosmic *yajña* lolling like a tongue, he could see millions of such Brahmās Viṣṇus and Śivas on their way to the holy temple of liberation. Below, there were Indra, Varuṇa, Agni and other gods, who all bound by their respective *karma* had their severed hands dangling down from her waistbelt since they all perished with periodical completions of the creative cycles. Nothing called past, present or future existed there separately. Time in its entirety or Mahākāla found himself insufficient to hold the fullness of her who was timelessness par excellence. Within the magnificent body of the Mother, brandishing the effulgence of crores of suns, the king was amazed to see millions of universes forming and dissolving like bubbles in water. The concept Note with the Painting is as follows:

‘Listen o King’, the almighty Goddess’s thunder-voice reverberated across the void around, ‘Count your fortune next to that of Śiva himself. This universal form of Mine, now being witnessed by you, was once revealed to him, long back when it was the dawn of creation. It was then that residing as Kuṇḍalini in his body, I withdrew his very Śivahood back into Myself. There, within Me as Mahakālī, Śiva was made to realise himself as Mahākāla, My consort and son, whom I repeatedly bring forth and devour at My mere will.

With his re-entering into My macrocosmic body of pure consciousness, commenced Śiva's journey through the successive energy-centres therein. Shaken from his ground, he for the first time beheld My own ever awakened Kuṇḍalini, which unlike the one in the Jīva's body with only three and a half coils, was perpetually coiling into fifty-one letters to produce infinite forms of Myself.

In My *mūlādhāra*, Śiva beheld the region of Brahmā and Savitrī, served by all the four Vedas. In this *cakra* was located the element of Earth. The energy centre called the *svādhiṣṭhāna* near My genitals, is Vaikuṇṭha, where dwells Viṣṇu flanked by Sarasvatī and Lakṣmī on either side, presiding over the element Water. To the right of Vaikuṇṭha, is Goloka, the abode of Kriṣṇa and Rādhā.

In My *maṇipūra cakra*, Bhadrakālī resides with her fierce consort Samhārarudra and embodies the essence of Fire

The *anāhata cakra* in My heart region is the place of Īśvara and Bhuvaneśvarī. In this *cakra* is stationed the element Air.

The *viśuddha cakra* located in My throat houses Sadāśiva and Gaurī and has Ether as its element.

Above it, between My two brows is the *ājñā* with Paraśiva and Siddhakālī. This is the region of the subtle most *bindu*, the dot above the three letters of AUM. As Śiva moved beyond, the half syllable of this *bindu*, which verily was the Mind, further reduced itself by half degrees as it consecutively passed through the subtle stages of *ardhacandra*, *nirodhikā*, *nāda*, *nādānta*, *śakti*, *vyāpinī*, *samanā*, *unmanā*, and reached the final *mahābindu*. Śiva then lost himself in my ultimate essence, without the slightest trace of any syllable and hence beyond all determinations of the Mind. That O King, is verily the Supreme Abode of Myself as MahaKālī, who eternally sports with Mahākāla, eternally making and unmaking him, and thereby embracing him into My infinite, non-dual, transcendence. There, My *viśvarūpa* form culminates into its own *viśvottīrṇa* essence.'

As opposed to 'Devī Viśvarūpa', paintings like 'Ādyā', 'Sons and Lovers' or 'Mūlaprakṛti' follow a simpler line in visualizing the birth of the trinity gods Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Śiva from Mahākāla, who himself is born from the womb of Kālī. Again, 'Kakāra-varṇanilayā' and 'Kālīpura' dive into the complex esoteric understanding of mystic diagrams called *yantras*. In the former, based on the *Kāmadhenu Tantra*, the letter 'ka' in Bengali or ক, itself becomes a triangular *yantra* for the goddess with its different parts presided over by their respective deities.



Ādyā'

'Kālīpura' provides a more elaborate visualization of the Kālīyantra, an esoteric diagram for the energy-patterns that constitute both the macrocosmic universe and the microcosmic human body. Kālī herself being the cosmic totality, is stationed at the central point or *bindu* as engaged in reverse copulation with Mahākāla. Though beyond the ultimate undivided point of Time, she is also the Creatrix of Time and herself plays with Time and is Time. The undivided cycle of Time that she embodies, projects itself forth into fifteen digits of

eternity, significantly called the Nityās, each presiding over a particular phase of the waxing and waning moon; which together constitute the totality of cosmic Time, with Kālī herself represented by the all containing yet all transcending seventeenth digit which being ‘Amā’ (the immeasurable) is not visible to the eye (though in essence Kālī is even beyond Amā). The fifteen goddesses are Kālī, Kapālinī, Kullā, Kurukullā, Virodhinī, Vipracittā, Ugrā, Ugraprabhā, Dīptā, Nīlā, Ghanā, Balākā, Mātrā, Mudrā and Mitā. They are followed by the eight Matrīkās with their respective Bhairavas, viz. Brāhmī with Asitāṅga Bhairava, Nārāyaṇī with Ruru Bhairava, Māheśvarī with Caṇḍa Bhairava, Cāmuṇḍā with Krodha Bhairava, Kaumārī with Unmatta Bhairava, Aparājitā with Kapālī Bhairava, Vārāhī with Bhīṣaṇa Bhairava and Nārasimhī Saṁhāra Bhairava. The Yantra is guarded on all the ten directions by the Dikpālas, viz. Indra, Agni, Yama, Nihṛti, Varuṇa, Vāyu, Kubera, Īśāna, Brahmā and Ananta. The weapons of these deities further protect the yantra from outside. The innermost sanctum, where Kālī secretly sports with Mahākāla, is hidden within an infinite void of absorption, verily comparable to a dreadful cremation ground where every outer manifestation is reduced to ashes. The deities of all the six energy centres- Brahmā, Viṣṇu, Rudra, Íśvara, Sadāśiva and Svayambhū meet their end here.

Kālī’s play as Kuṇḍalini in the microcosmic universe, or the human body is visually translated into her iconographic representation as seated upon the corpses of the deities presiding over the energy-centres within the body. In the painting ‘Ṣoḍaśī Kālī’, she sits upon the *ṣaṭśivāsana* or the throne composed of the bodies of six Śivas. Brahmā, Viṣṇu, Rudra, Íśvara, Sadāśiva stationed respectively upon the *mūlādhāra*, *svādhiṣṭhana*, *maṇipūra*, *anāhata* and *viśuddha cakras*, are the five pedestals of her throne. Upon them Paraśiva reclines upon the *ājñācakra*. Rising beyond him is the thousand petalled *sahasrāra* lotus that rests upon a stalk stemming out of his navel. On that lotus, Kālī unites with Mahākāla and sits upon his lap. However, in another version of the throne, depicted in the painting ‘Saptapretāsanā’, or the One upon the throne of seven corpses, even Mahākāla is reduced to a corpse like the other gods, and Kālī as Kuṇḍalini rises beyond him. This time she unites with him in the *viparītarati* mode, instead of sitting on his lap. The burning pyre represents the gross body of the *sādhaka* being consumed by the fire of consciousness. Each of the five deities has a trident piercing his body, as he has literally been pierced through by Kuṇḍalini. The stalk of the lotus that emerges from Paraśiva’s navel upto the highest *sahasrāra* contains all the nine subtle forms of *nāda* depicted in their aniconic forms.



Triśakti-sāra

The painting ‘Triśakti-sāra’ combines the three prime Mahavidyas, viz., Kālī, Tārā and Tripurā; respectively designated as Ādyā (the First), Dvitiyā (the second) and Tritīyā (the third); into the single image of Dakṣiṇākālī. As Kālī, she is the supreme pitch-black void where Mahākāla dissolves completely through the act of *viparītarati*. At the next stage she bears him again in her womb as the undivided point (*bindu*) of pure selfhood. The blue womb therefore embodies her aspect as Tārā who first conceives Śiva as Sadyojāta Mahākāla. At the next stage, his Śivahood is fully unfolded as he experiences himself as *prakāśa* with the aid of Śakti who is his cognitive self-awareness or *vimarśa*. Here, the Devī manifests as the red Tripurasundarī or *kāmakalā*, the Triangle of Desire with its three *bindus* constituting her face and two breasts. Śiva now explores his fullness as ‘*aham*’ or subjectively experiences himself as the undivided ‘I’ embodying the cosmic totality. The journey from Ādyā to Tritīyā dissolves the polarity between Void and Fullness (*śūnya* and *pūrṇa*).

The painting ‘Pūrnabrahma-sanātani’ is my humble attempt to address the giant question put forth by Sādhaka Kamalākānta in the lines,

आदिभूता सनातनी शून्यरूपा शशीभाली

ब्रह्माण्ड हिलना यখন मुण्डमाला कोथा पेलि?

(O Mother, You are the First Cause and the Eternal Being. The Great Void is Your form, yet You wear the moon on your forehead. Tell me, wherefrom did You get Your garland of human heads when the universe had not come into existence?)



Pūrṇabrahma-sanātānī

How can the one who is the ultimate Void, the all-transcending bodiless Consciousness, ever have a forehead to adorn with the moon? If her garland of human heads represents the fifty-one letters that constitute the *varṇamālā*, where were all these letters when there was no creation?

The answer is to be traced in the mystic occult science of the Tantras. If the fifteen digits of the moon's waxing phase represent a journey from void to fullness, those of the waning phase mark a reverse journey from fullness to void. The no moon (*amāvasyā*) and the full moon (*pūrṇimā*) are the twin poles of being and nonbeing. The ultimate Reality that transcends this polarity is the sixteenth (and seventeenth) digit where *amāvasyā* and *pūrṇimā* cease to be at odds with each other. There, Fullness is the other aspect of Void and *vice-versa*. This non-dual Alogical Whole is Kālī when considered in terms of its being; the Supreme Void and Tripurasundarī when celebrated as the principle of Supreme Fullness. This verily is the nature of the ultimate digit of the moon that adorns the crown of the One who is the Great Void (*mahāsūnya*), Great Transcendence (*mahānirguṇā*), and is simultaneously the Great Whole (*mahāpūrṇā*) and Great Immanence (*mahāsaḡuṇā*).

Since this Void is the same as Fullness, there is nothing called 'non-existence' in Her. The individual letters from 'a' to 'ha' too exist there; but in the undivided state of '*aham*' where each letter embodies all the rest. As a result every individual unit of the universe attains a holistic dimension as it combines within itself all the other units. This is how the Yogi experiences the universe when his/her Kuṇḍalini reaches the centre of the thousand petalled lotus above the head and this is precisely why the *mātrkā*s or letters are depicted as human heads in the garland adorning Kālī. It is the head alone where this mysterious cosmic unity is fully experienced. In this painting, the letters posited in the *sahasrāra* lotuses of the individual heads imply each letter's oneness with all other letters, so that they are to be perceived as merged into an undivided whole.

My paintings on Kālī also include works on the Krama Śaivism of Kashmir. One such daring project has been to visually translate the rare account of the Trika *tattva*-scheme provided by Abhinavagupta in his *Tantroccaya*. The author in his *Tantrāloka*, that addresses a mainstream erudite Śaivite readership, establishes Paramaśiva as Anuttara (That beyond which there is nothing) who transcends all the thirty-six *tattvas* and is the ultimate reality. However, in the more Krama-oriented, ritual based and esoteric *Tantroccaya*^x, the thirty seventh principle Paramaśiva is himself transcended by Śakti as Chaṇḍayogeśvarī, who is verily the thirty eighth *tattva*. I am indebted to Mr. Sujith Kesavan from Kerala for helping me with the *dhyāna* of Chaṇḍayogeśvarī as is followed in the Ruruḷita Bhadrakālī tradition of Kerala, which is based on the Mahārtha doctrine of Krama. In the painting 'Anākhyā', the thirty-six *tattvas* have been represented by the Triśūlābja Maṇḍala of Trika. On the three lotuses housing the goddesses Parā, Parāparā and Aparā, Paramaśiva or Bhairava reclines in the form of a corpse and serves as a throne for Chaṇḍayogeśvarī surrounded by her twelve rays who are the twelve Kālīs of the Anākhyā Chakra. The painting 'Kālasaṅkarṣinī' depicts the supreme goddess of the Krama system as devouring the skeleton of Time and as surrounded by the five goddesses Vyomavāmeśvarī, Khecarī, Bhūcarī, Saṁhārabhakṣinī and Raudreśvarī, representing the five cognitive powers that flow from the rise of subjective awareness to the perception of objects and then back into the re-absorption of the object into the subject.



Kālasamkarṣiṇī

My paintings on Śrīvidyā repeatedly use visual symbols for the motif of Śakti's role as the supreme principle of dynamism that lies at the core of all Śivahood. As established in the Pratyabhijñā school of monistic Śaivism,

She is the inherent principle of Pulsation (*sphurattā*), the great Existence (*mahāsattā*) which is beyond time and space. Being the core essence of Śiva, the Supreme Lord, She is known to be His very beating Heart.^{xi}

It is this cognitive self-awareness that enables Śiva to experience himself subjectively as 'I' or '*aham*'. Śrīvidyā texts like *Kāmakalāvīlāsa* of Puṇyānandanātha draw upon this doctrine of transcendental dynamism while expounding the concept of *kāmakalā* or the primordial Triangle of Desire. When the pure consciousness of Śiva is reflected in his own pulsating dynamic energy or Śakti, this reflection results in the intensification of consciousness into the great bindu (*mahābindu*) which further splits into two *bindus* - the divine couple Kameśvara and Kameśvarī, representing *prakāśa* and *vimarśa*, which in the esoteric symbolic language of the Tantras are respectively Fire and the Moon. Together they constitute the third

bindu which is the Sun. The Great Goddess is called Tripurasundarī as she has all the triadic dimensions of the universe contained in the triangle formed with these three *bindus*. While the Fire and Moon *bindus* are her two breasts, the Sun *bindu* is her face. The *hārdhakalā* from which all creation proceeds is her genital.



Aham

My paintings ‘Aham’ and ‘Sisṛkṣā’ based respectively upon the *Kāmakalāvilāsa* and the *Yoginīhṛdaya* depict cosmic creativity as an aesthetic experience of the Supreme Goddess perpetually luxuriating in the wondrous play of Consciousness-Bliss as she gracefully watches her own image reflected in her clear mirror of pure *vimarśa*. Such is the nature of Mahātripurasundarī, who for the sake of creation splits into Kameśvara and Kameśvarī. The painting ‘Paramapada’ explores how the one Supreme Śakti is ‘Śiva-Śakti-Aikya-rūpiṇī’, one of her epithets in the *Lalitā Sahasranāma*. The painting titled ‘Kāmakalā’ uses both iconic motifs and abstractions to dramatically visualize this concept.

The unfolding of *kāmakalā* verily underlies Śiva’s self-awareness as the complete undivided ‘I’ or ‘*pūṇāhantā*’. Without this subjective awareness, Śiva’s consciousness would have been no better than unconsciousness. Hence, the *Saundaryalaharī*, a celebrated verse attributed to Ādi Śaṅkarācārya proclaims,

Only when united with Śakti, is Śiva capable to exert himself. Or else he cannot even stir.^{xii}



kāmakalā

My series on a select number of verses from the *Saundaryalaharī* includes the painting ‘Svadhīna-vallabhā’ based on this particular verse. Also my ‘Kalyāṇasundara’ celebrates the happy marriage of a pure white inert Śiva with a dynamically red Śakti who energizes him by putting the garland of fifty letters from ‘a’ to ‘ha’ round his throat, enabling him to experience the fullness of his being as ‘aham’. The Śākta spirit of this imagery is rendered patent in depicting the Bride as a dominantly large figure taking her position above the Groom who submissively receives her grace from below with folded hands. By virtue of this union, he is enabled to perform the fivefold function of creation, preservation, dissolution, withdrawal and grace, presided over by his five forms Brahmā, Viṣṇu, Rudra, Ívara and Sadāśiva. These five deities are the five corpses who constitute the Goddess's throne as she is ‘Pañcabrahmāsanāsana’ which is also the title of one of my paintings exploring this subject.

The central symbol in Śrīvidyā worship is the mystic diagram of Tripurasundarī, called the *Śrīcakra*. In ‘Śrīman-nagara-nāyikā’, I have tried to visually depict all the deities stationed in various parts of this *yantra*. For their iconographical details, I took help from the *Gandharva Tantra*. Besides, my old works include a number of series based on the Yogic interpretation of the *Devīmāhātmya*, focusing on the functions of the Great Goddess in her triadic roles as Mahākālī, Mahālakṣmī and Mahāsarasvatī. I have also produced series on the narratives based

on the Goddess's incarnations as Satī and Parvatī, drawing from the *Mahābhāgavata Purāṇa*. Two of my paintings are based on my reading of the *Lalitopākhyāna*, a section from the *Brahmāṇḍa Purāṇa* dedicated to the exploits of Lalita, particularly her grand battle against Bhaṇḍāsura.

The semiotic matrix of the Śākta Tantras involves several other esoteric symbols that are deeply embedded with ontological and soteriological implications, which are to be interpreted within the ritual contexts set by Guru lineages. Relishing the aesthetic beauty of Tantric iconography would at times entail a destabilization of all the fossilized social, cultural and moral codes that shape our 'civilized' discourses. This verily accounts for the element of discomfort and stigmatization in the reception of Tantra in the mainstream when it comes to the sexual explicitness and goriness in the visualization of the Mahāvidyās. The grotesquery in their iconography is literally a challenge to all conventional notions of beauty. My paintings are a humble effort to articulate an insider's perspective by providing visual commentaries on Tantric texts which include both written accounts and codified symbols like *yantras* and icons. Since the very nature of the Absolute in the Tantras is perpetual signification, painting as a metaphor repeatedly features in the context of cosmic creativity which being a play of Vāk or Language, always involves a complex matrix of signs and symbols. I end the essay with a favourite verse of mine quoted in the *Yoginīhṛdaya-dīpika*,

Having painted the universe with his own free will as the brush, Lord Śiva himself plays the onlooker and is immensely pleased.^{xiii}

Notes

ⁱ *vāgrūpatā cedutkrāmedavabodhasya śāśvastī na prakāśa prakāśeta sā hi pratyavamarśinī* -----*The Vākyapadīya* (of Bhartrhari), ed. K.Raghavan Pillai, New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1971, Canto 1, verse 124, p. 28

ⁱⁱ See for instance, John Woodroffe, *Garland of Letters*, Madras: Ganesh &Co., 1955.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Mahānirvāṇa Tantram*, Kulavadhutacharya Srimat Jaganmohan Tarkalankar, ed., Nababharat Publishers, Calcutta, 2009, chapter 13, verses 5-6, p. 680.

^{iv} See for instance, Arghya Dipta Kar, "Kālī's Mount: Śiva/Śava: Śiva's Position in the Bengal Iconography of Kālī", *Journal of the Asiatic Society*, Vol. LXIII, No.3, Kolkata, 2001, pp. 119-121.

^v Knut A. Jacobsen, “The Female Pole of the Godhead in Tantrism and the *Prakṛti* of Sāṃkhya”, *Numen* 43 (1996), pp.56-81.

^{vi} Referring to his potential for future manifestation as Sadyojāta Mahākāla.

^{vii} *tava rūpaṃ mahākālo jagatsamhāarakārah| mahāsamhārasamaye kālah sarvaṃ grasiṣyati|| kalanāt sarvabhūtānām mahākālah prakṛtitaḥ|mahākālasya kalanāt tvamādyā kālīkā parā||kālasamgrasanāt kālī sarveṣāmādirūpiṇī|kālatvādādibhūtatvādādyā kālīti gīyate||punah svarūpamāsādyā tamorūpaṃ nirākṛtiḥ|vācātītam manogamyam tvamekaivā 'vaśiṣyase|---* *Mahānirvaṇa Tantra*, Arthur Avalon, ed., New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 1929 (repr.)

ullāsa 4, 30-33, p. 61.

^{viii} *mahā-pralayamāsādyā koṭi-brahmāṇḍa-nāyikā|śiva-śakti-mayam dehomekīkṛtya sadā sthitā|...sāmarasyam samāsādyā sarvarūpā hi pārvati| cid-vyāpaka-svarūpeṇa svayam ca vibhratī parām||etasminneva kāle tu sva-bimbaṃ paśyati śivā| tad-bimbaṃ tu bhavenmāyā tatra mānasikam śivam ||sṛṣṭerutpādanārtham tu bhartṛ-rūpaṃ prakalpayet| ādi-nātham tu manasā kalpātīta-svarūpiṇam|| tam vilokya mahesāni! sṛṣṭyutpadana-kāraṇāt| ādi-nātham mānasikam sva-bhartāram prakalpayet|| viparīta-ratiṃ kṛtvā mahāśūnyam vidhāya ca|---* *Śakti-saṅgama-tantra (Kālī-khaṇḍa)*, ‘Kula-Bhushan’ Pandit Ramadatta Shukla, ed. and tr, Kalyan Mandir Prakashan, Prayag, *saṃvat* 2039, *paṭala* 1, verses 21-31, pp.2-3

^{ix} *Ibid.*, verses 56-81, pp. 5-7

^x *tatra śaktitrayātmā yo 'sau paramaśivaḥ saptatrimśo bhairavastamapyullaṅghya tamāsanapakṣīkṛtyāṣṭātrimśattamī yāsau bhagavatī parasamviduktā saiva caṇḍayogīśvaryātmikā viśvagrāsasṛṣṭicakravāhinī dvādaśābhirmarīcirūpābhirdēvatābhiḥ saha kevalā vā viśvāvibhedavṛtyā pūjyā|.....* *Tantroccaya*, p. 177

The Tantroccaya of Abhinavagupta (Gnoli-Torella, ed.)

<https://www.academia.edu/resource/work/4610993>

^{xi} *sā sphurattā mahāsattā deśakālāviśeṣṇī saīṣā sāratayā proktā hṛdayaṃ parameṣṭhinaḥ*---

Īśvarapratyabhijñā, (with *vimarśinī* commentary by Abhinavagupta), Krishnananda Sagar, ed., published by editor, 1981, 1.5.14, pp. 106-109.

^{xii} *śivaśśaktyā yukto yadi bhavati śaktaḥ prabhavituṃ na cedevaṃ devo na khalu kuśalaḥ spanditumapi*' ---- *Saundaryalaharī*, ed., A. Kuppaswami, Naga Publishers, Delhi, 2006, verse 1, p.

1.

^{xiii} *jagaccitraṃ samālikhya svecchātūlikayāhahatmaniḥ svayameva samālokya prīṇāti bhagavān*

śivaḥ--- *Dīpikā* commentary on *Yoginīhṛdayam*, ed., Upendrakumar Das, Calcutta: Nababharat Publishers, 1393 *baṅgābda*, chapter 1, verse 50, p. 49.

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