The tradition of *tantra* in India is very ancient. Historians fail to determine exactly when it began. However, the majority of Scholars and Researchers agree that *tantrism* flourished at some point of time between 5th and 6th century. We get ample references to *tantrism* in the ancient Vedic literature. In course of time we find evidence of the application of *tantra* in Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism. The latter Buddhism is popularly known as *Tantric Buddhism*. It flourished between 8th and 12th century A.D. Historians argue out that owing to the favourable attitude and circumstances of Buddhism, *Tantrism* could flourish luxuriously. *Tantrism* became almost an inseparable part of Buddhism right from the time of Nagarjuna, one of the celebrated Buddhist monks. In the mainstream of Indian religious practice we notice two courses; one *Vaidic*, the other *Tantric*. As the trend of history shows, *tantrism* gained its popularity all across the Indian sub-continent during the medieval period and was practised widely by the religious preachers of almost all faiths and creed.

*Tantra* or *tantrism*, as we commonly perceive, refers to the Holy Scriptures relating to Shaktism. This however is a narrow perception. In fact *tantra*, as a concept and branch of knowledge, is quite broad and versatile. In its broader perspective *tantrism* refers to the branch of knowledge that protects and liberates its practitioners. As a Western scholar Sir John Woodroff looks at it, *tantra* is the holy Bible of the Hindus that they practise for the liberation of their souls. Thus *tantrism* is not at all theoretical. Rather, it is a lively, vibrant branch of knowledge that is practised and applied directly in life. In this we find a very sophisticated and exhaustive analysis of human body system and the practical ways to realize spiritual excellence. *Tantrism*, in other words, is the most direct, the surest and the safest path to gain knowledge and achieve realization.

The other name of *tantra* is *Agama*. The branch of knowledge that is capable of giving both enjoyment and detachment is *Agama*. *Tantrism*, however, is divided into three major streams—*Agama*, *Nigama* and *Yamala*. The one that comes directly from the lips of Lord Shiva is called *Agama*; the one that comes from Shakti is called *Nigama*; the third one that comes neither from Lord Shiva nor Shakti is called *Yamala*. Though *Yamala* comes neither from Lord Shiva nor Shakti, still it has its intimate links with both. As a matter of fact, there is not much of difference between *Agama* and *Nigama*. *Agama* is further divided into two sub-branches—*Sadagama* and *Asadagama*.

The *Sadagama* creed prescribes in all details the *rituals* and the *code of conduct* for the follower or practitioner. Whereas, *Asadagama* is relatively more flexible and accommodating. However, *tantra* is a much broader field of knowledge that includes *medicine, philosophy,* and so on.
chemistry, astrology, mantra, yantra and yoga.

It is fascinating to note that both tantrism and the Vedas are very intimately related. Often their relationship is compared with Jeevatma and Paramatma.

The tradition of tantrism in Orissa is very ancient. Since as early as the third and the second century B.C. tantrism has been there in the ancient Kalinga, the modern Orissa. Different kings and rulers patronized tantrism and helped promote this sect. Especially during the tenure of the Bhaumakara dynasty it got a lot of attention and patronage and reached the pinnacle of its glory. Evidences are galore that in the ancient Kalinga there were a great many tantra Sadhakas who could do spectacular things that amazed the kings and rulers. And in turn they gained the royal confidence and support. That took them a long way in consolidating their position and popularity.

Since the historic invasion of emperor Ashoka, ancient Kalinga has been the nourishing ground of Buddhism. The two sects of Buddhism (Sahaja Yana and Vajra Yana), those were heavily influenced by tantrism, flourished in ancient Kalinga. In course of time Saivism, Vaishnavism and Shaktism all fused themselves with the Buddhist Sahaja Yana and Vajra Yana and created a wonderful integration. We may recall how the celebrated Buddhist monk Nagarjuna had mastered the Mayura Vidya and popularized his own creed “Sunya Vada” during 6th century A.D. In the 7th Century three great Buddhist scholars (Manjushree, Budhisree and Chandragami) popularized the Buddhist Nagantaka philosophy. This Mayura Vidya was basically Tantric in its approach. Both the Nagantaka and the Yogantaka philosophy ended up in the Tantric activities like tarana and marana.

Sarala Mahabharata is indeed a treasure-trove of tantra. There are extensive discussions on the various aspects of tantrism in this great epic. For example, Shatkarma (a tantric method capable of achieving impossible things like gratifying the sensual desires, getting rid of the incurable diseases and protecting oneself against natural disasters etc) has been mentioned widely in Sarala Mahabharata. We may recall how Agnidev (the God of Fire) was pleased with Arjuna after the great Khandava fire (in which the Khandava forest was completely destroyed) and taught the latter a number of tantric techniques such as Stambhana, Mohana, Basikarana, Uchattana etc. Similarly, Sarala mentions how Mayavati, had mastered most of these Tantric techniques such as Stambhana, Mohana, Basikaran, Uchattana and Gutika etc. Mayavati (the mother of the Pradyumna), the wife of Kamadeva, as Sarala mentions, offers princess Subhadra such Tantric techniques like mantra Anjana and Gutika that helps her win over Arjuna. In this context Sarala gives extensive references to mantra, tantra and yantra. At that point of time it was a usual practice to resort to those techniques to win over a man or woman.

Sarala further mentions how Kamaksya Devi knew all those tantric techniques like Stambhana and Mohana etc. She could serve lakhs and lakhs of people by cooking only a pot-full of rice. She was in fact the divine power who blessed all the tantric practitioners. In a similar account Sarala mentions how Krupti, the wife of Dronacharya, could feed thousands of soldiers of the king of Drupada. She too knew the Tantric method. Sahadeva, one
of the Pandava brothers, was a veteran in the art of Stambhana, Mohana and Anjana. Sarala mentions how Lord Shiva Himself was seduced by a demoness (Hiranyaksi). He forgot his wife Parvati (temporarily though) and enjoyed the demoness Hiranyaksi.

Sarala Dasa also mentions about various mantras those are effective in realizing various worldly ambitions and desires. For example, Gorekhanath had offered stambhana mantra to Nakula. Lord Shiva had also blessed Nakula with the mantra to restrain himself from sleep and sex. Sri Krsna, as Sarala mentions, had given the Ulluka mantra to the Pandavas that could make them invisible. It was a very effective strategy to evade enemies. In another episode we get the account of Sri Krsna who sustained injury on his forehead as he was trying to sneak into Sri Radha’s chamber. He bled profusely. Sri Brahma touched the wound reciting the Kataksya Mantra and Sri Krsna got instant relief. Brahma gave Sri Krsna a balm that was charged with mantra. When the latter applied that balm in his eyes he could even see clearly in the dark. Further, Brahma gave Sri Krsna some dust charged with mantra that made all the cow-herd boys fall into deep sleep instantly. All those mantras could make impossible possible. They could give super-natural powers to the mortals and cure incurable diseases.

Similarly, Arjun was an expert in Garedi mantra. As Sarala Dasa mentions prince Uttara Kumar was bitten by a poisonous Cobra while getting the arms out of the tree trunk. Arjun instantly cured him by reciting the Garedi mantra. Sarala mentions how Aswathama was shooting powerful arrows charged with some intricate Mantras. In another situation Sarala mentions how Agnidh (God of Fire) was pleased with Arjun after the latter set the Khandava Forest on fire and offered him a Mantra that could multiply the arrows that Arjun shot at his enemies. In yet another context Sarala mentions how Mayavati gave some Mantras (like anjana and gutika) to Subhadra that helped her quench the sex passion of Arjun. Here Sarala has mentioned about the mantra that could open any locked-room. It is called Ulluka.

Similarly, when Bhima advanced to fight with king Kamapala (of Kaumri) the latter refrained himself from it at the instruction of Goddess Kamakshi. At another point it is mentioned that Bhairavi of Kamrup had offered a mantra (Called Kamyak) to Bhima to win the war and to keep the army well-fed only with a handful of rice. Goddess Kamakshi was pleased with Bhima and taught him some mantra like Stambhana and Ulluka to help and facilitate the Raja Suya Yanja organized by Sri Ram at the end of the Mahabharata war.

In yet another episode Sarala talks about princess Bhanumati’s knowledge of the science of tantra that could take care of the hospitality of all the aspiring princes in the Swayamvara ceremony. It was Bhanumati herself who oversaw the whole affair by her Tantric power and everything ended in a grand manner.

Similarly, in the context of the abduction of Kamadhenu by the Astavasus Sarala talks of the Go Harana (abduction of cows) mantra. In another episode Sarala mentions how lord Shiva brought king Drupada back to senses (as he lays unconscious after doing penance for eighteen years) by applying tarana mantra. In yet another instance
we see how Arjun could bring back to life the dead Kaurava soldiers with the Jeevani mantra.

**Different Goddesses associated with Tantra:**

In the Puranic age Hinduism was divided into five mainstreams. They were Shaivya, Vaishnava, Saura, Shakti and Ganiapathy. Orissa was especially dominated by the Shakti cult. As we notice in the Mahabharata Sarala makes elaborate mention of and attaches great importance to the tantric power and shows great reverence to the Goddesses associated with it. It sends a message loud and clear that during 15th century the Shakti cult had a very strong following in Orissa. The presiding deity of Kamrup or Kamakya is Goddess Kamakya who is the source of all tantric power. Interestingly, Goddess Kamakya was very popular in Orissa during 15th century. Sarala, in the Mahabharata, holds Goddess Kamakya in the highest esteem. The poet gives an elaborate account of this Goddess; how she takes on different forms at different hour of the day and night. In the morning she appears youthful, at noon she is old, in the evening she is passionate, and at midnight she is Mohini (enchantress) and Chamunda. She is above time and she possesses such mysterious powers as Stambhana, Mohana, Basikarana and Marana etc. The poet calls Goddess Kamakya by different names such as Katyayini, Aparna, Anadi, Anakara, Priya, Niranjani, Mahamaya and Maheswari. Goddess Kamakya is as effective and helpful in overcoming passions like sex and sleep as she is in fulfilling higher wishes and ambitions.

Poet Sarala Dasa visualizes and portrays his supreme deity, mother Sarala, as parama Vaishnavi, Vidyadatri, Palanakartri, Parama Maheswari and Parvati. Just as the ten incarnations of Lord Vishnu poet Sarala Das imagines ten incarnations of mother Sarala. They are, Ketuka, Parvati, Uma, Himavanta Duhita, Krupajala Nandini, Narmada Saraswati Pushkara Kanya, Sarala Sarva Mangala, Hingula and Shiddha Sarala (the daughter of Kirata). As the tantric literature has it, Goddess Parvati (during the Yajna of Daksya) created ten deadly forms out of Herself and obstructed lord Shiva from all sides. Those deadly forms were Kali, Tara, Chinnamasta, Bhubaneswari, Bagala, Dhumavati, Tripura Sundari, Matangi, Shodashi and Bhairavi. Sarala’s unique conception of the ten incarnations of the Goddess is based on it.

Moreover, we get an account of the specific deities who offer specific protection’ in the Mahabharata. As Sarala puts it, Narayani in the war field, Maheswari in water, Durga in the forest, Rudrayani for fever, Brahmayeni for cough, Varahi for gastro, Kamakshi for sex, Pingalakshi for illness, Ugratara for dyspepsia, Bhairavi during child-birth (labour-pain), Tripura for body-ache, Kalika for accident, Mangala for safe journey, Hingula for cooking, Mahakhali Devi for eating delicious food, Varunai for agriculture, Hiranyai for hunting-expedition, Jagulai for sound-sleep, Arunangi for good education, Vikhanda for night-mare, Bhadrakali to appease the Grahas (Planets) and Sarva Mangala for all purposes. Further, as Sarala Dasa has portrayed the seven mothers (Sapta Matrika); they are Maheswari, Varahi, Indrani, Chamunda, Vaishnavi, Bhairavi and Kaumari.
As the historical records show the sixty-four Yoginis (Chaushathi Yoginis) were being worshipped in Orissa during 10th and 11th century A.D. That strengthens the fact that Shakta cult was very popular and powerful during this phase of Orissa history. Sarala confirms this belief by elaborately describing the details of the Chaushathi Yoginis in the Mahabharata. He gives an exhaustive account of those Goddesses who were mostly war-mongers and had the ghosts, spirits and vampires under their command. Sarala Dasa, himself being a tantric yogi, had a first-hand realization of the beneficial aspects of tantra and thus gives a convincing and exhaustive account of the various aspects of this science in the Mahabharata. He highlights the knowledge and insight one gets about the intricacies of human anatomy and body system from the tantric studies. He shows how this helps bringing about a balance between body and mind which ultimately facilitates realizing the God-head. In Sarala’s account there is, however, no reference to base sensual gratifications through tantra. His version of the then prevailing tantric tradition is essentially aesthetic and elevated. All along the Mahabharata we come across nothing repulsive or obnoxious about tantra as we notice elsewhere. However, Sarala elevates the position of the Goddesses. We may refer to the episode that depicts how mother Parvati could subdue the two demons which Lord Shiva Himself failed to do. Further, in Sarala’s account Draupadi has consistently received the highest status. The critics are unanimous on the point that Draupadi was the best creation (of all the characters) of the poet. She received the best of his imaginative power and creative energy.

In the light of the above reasoning and facts we may conclude that tantric Buddhism has been there in Orissa since ancient times. And Sarala Dasa has taken the very essence and the best of tantrism to enrich the epic. His magnum opus, the Mahabharata in Oriya, is indeed a compendium of that.

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