

Empowerment and Equality in Buddhist Tantric Traditions: A Feminist Theological Inquiry

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Abstract: Most of the religious scriptures are often accused of containing various types of prejudices against women. However, such allegations cannot be made against Buddhist Tantras, which do not exhibit the slightest doubt about the intellectual and spiritual capabilities of women. The women mentioned in Tantras are highly intelligent, powerful, and dominant. They are yoginīs, scholars, and gurus. Tantras do not support gender discrimination on any basis. Thus, keeping in mind the concepts of ‘gender equality’ and ‘women empowerment’, this paper analyses the status of women in Buddhist Tantras.

Keywords: Gender Equality, Women Empowerment, Honour and Dignity of Women, Buddhist Tantras

1. Introduction

If we want to achieve the holistic development of human society, then the question of women’s empowerment must be prioritised. This is because all beings are so interconnected and interdependent that if any member or group is left behind, it will negatively impact the others. And if the issue concerns half of the population - women - it becomes even more critical. Ignoring women makes the progress and upliftment of society impossible. However, it is also true that historically, women have always been discriminated against. Ever since patriarchy established itself as a dominant ideology, the decline in the status of women began. In both secular and sacred spheres, they have been denied opportunities for centuries. They have faced, and continue to face, various forms of discrimination and mistreatment in all arenas of socio-religious life.

Depriving anyone of equal opportunities is against the principles of natural justice. Doing so hinders the growth of their natural talents and inherent capabilities. In such circumstances, people are unable to choose work aligned with their hopes and aspirations. In a way, they are forced to live lives that do not bring satisfaction or happiness. Therefore, in the context of women's empowerment, Naila Kabeer equates "power" with the "ability to make choices" (2005: 13). She writes: "To be disempowered means to be denied choice, while empowerment refers to the process by which those who have been denied the ability to make choices acquire such an ability" (Kabeer 2005: 13).

Obviously, the reason for women being 'disempowered' is not that they are inferior to men. The main reason is that they have been deprived of opportunities for centuries. These historical wrongs must be rectified; and this is the real aim of women's empowerment. Kabeer highlights three dimensions of women's empowerment: "agency, resources, and achievements" (Kabeer 2005: 14). Explaining the first of these terms, she says: "Agency in relation to empowerment, therefore, implies not only actively exercising choice, but also doing this in ways that challenge power relations. Because of the significance of beliefs and values in legitimising inequality, a process of empowerment often begins from within" (Kabeer 2005: 14).

Those in a privileged position always tend to retain the status quo. But it is obvious that the victims of any unfair socio-religious system want to change it. The oppressed can be persuaded to accept the status quo either by use of force or through ideological propaganda (see Gramsci 2015). The first method may be effective only for a short period. Therefore, beneficiaries of the system often rely on ideological propaganda to legitimise injustices. Over time, such ideas gain strength, and even the people being exploited begin to believe that this situation is natural. This kind of internalisation is quite dangerous. Questioning the institutions and social relations that legitimise inequality is an essential part of empowerment.

Thus, all beliefs and values that legitimise a discriminatory social system must be challenged. In this sense, empowerment is also a psychological process.

Kabeer elaborates the second term ‘resources’ as follows: “Resources are the medium through which agency is exercised. They are distributed through the various institutions and relationships in a society” (Kabeer 2005: 15). And “Resources and agency make up people’s capabilities: that is their potential for living the lives they want” (Kabeer 2005: 15). Based on the above-mentioned three dimensions, it can be said that for the holistic development of both the individual and society, it is necessary to eradicate unjust power structures. Only then can people live happy and prosperous lives.

Keeping these three dimensions of women’s empowerment in mind, as suggested by Naila Kabeer, studying the role of women in Tāntric Buddhism can be quite enlightening. Regarding women, Tantras were not ready to accept orthodox socio-cultural norms; they refuted every idea that demeaned women. According to them, women are as capable as, if not more than, men. Undoubtedly, Tantras hold women in great esteem. Therefore, when given equal opportunity and a supportive environment within the Tāntric path, women made tremendous progress in both secular and spiritual domains. It is no exaggeration to say that Tāntric women are exemplary models of women’s empowerment.

2. Related Works

Leaving aside a few exceptions like Miranda Shaw’s *Passionate Enlightenment* (1994), not much literature has been written directly on this topic. However, in the broader literature related to Tantras, women are certainly mentioned, from which we can gather information about their status in Tāntric religion. In the initial phase, some of the major works providing information about Tantras include: *Literature and Religion of the Buddhists* (B. H. Hodgson, 1841); *Introduction to the History of Indian Buddhism* (Eugène Burnouf, 1844); *The Buddhism of Tibet or Lamaism* (L. Austine Waddell, 1895); *Literary History of*

Sanskrit Buddhism (G. K. Nariman, 1920); *History of Indian Literature* (Winternitz, 1927), and others.

The intellectual vigour and deep understanding of the authors of these works are not in doubt. However, it is important to remember that every scholar is also a product of their time. As such, the influence of "orientalist" approaches and Victorian morality is clearly visible in their writings. According to most scholars of this phase, Tantras represent a "degenerate" phase of Buddhism, composed primarily of "magic," "spells," "rituals," and sexo-yogic practices. This assessment influenced their views of Tāntric women, who were often seen as symbols of debauchery and promiscuity. These writings contributed significantly to the misconceptions about Tantras that still persist today.

Over time, some of these misconceptions weakened, and Tantras began to be analysed more sympathetically. Books written from this perspective include: *An Introduction to Buddhist Esoterism* (Benoytosh Bhattacharya, 1932); *Obscure Religious Cults* (S. B. Dasgupta, 1946); *An Introduction to Tantric Buddhism* (S. B. Dasgupta, 1950); *The Buddhist Tantras: Light on Indo-Tibetan Esoterism*; *Bouddhisme: Études et Matériaux* (Louis de La Vallée Poussin, 1898) [interpreted with the help of Christian K. Wedemeyer's article in *History of Religions*, Vol. 40, No. 3, Feb. 2001]. However, despite their sympathetic approach, the powerful presence of women in Tantras was not adequately recognised in these works either.

Another body of literature includes works by Lama Anagarika Govinda (*Foundations of Tibetan Mysticism*, 1959), Alexander Csoma de Körös (see *Life and Works of Alexander Csoma De Koros* by Theodore Duka, 1885), Kazi Dawa-Samdub (translator and editor of famous Tibetan texts like *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, *Tibet's Great Yogi Milarepa*, *Shrīchakrasambhāra Tantra*, etc., with W. Y. Evans-Wentz and Sir John Woodroffe), and Herbert V. Guenther (*The Tantric View of Life*, 1972). These scholars had great respect for the

Tāntric tradition. Accordingly, their writings explore its religious and spiritual dimensions thoroughly, and the dignified status of women in Tantras is discernible in their works.

By the time of the next phase in Tāntric historiography, knowledge about the history and archaeology of the regions where Tantric religion flourished—India, Tibet, Nepal, Mongolia, Japan, China, etc.—had advanced considerably. Scholars of this period benefited from these developments. Notable works from this group include: *A Cultural History of Tibet* (David L. Snellgrove and Hugh Richardson, 1968); *Indo-Tibetan Buddhism: Indian Buddhists and Their Tibetan Successors* (David L. Snellgrove, 1987); *Civilized Shamans: Buddhism in Tibetan Societies* (Geoffrey Samuel, 1993); *The Tibetan Assimilation of Buddhism: Conversion, Contestation and Memory* (Matthew T. Kapstein, 2000); *Secret of the Vajra World: The Tantric Buddhism of Tibet* (Reginald A. Ray, 2001); *Early Medieval Indian History* (see chapter: “Economic and Social Basis of Tantrism,” R. S. Sharma, 2001); *Indian Esoteric Buddhism: A Social History of the Tantric Movement* (Ronald M. Davidson, 2002); *The Origin of Yoga and Tantra: Indic Religions to the Thirteenth Century* (Geoffrey Samuel, 2008); and *Hardships and Downfall of Buddhism in India* (Giovanni Verardi, 2011).

By the standards of modern scholarship, these works are certainly praiseworthy. However, it should be noted that modern research methodologies alone are insufficient to analyse a highly technical and esoteric yogic tradition properly. Full comprehension of the various dimensions of Tāntric sādhanā requires initiation into the sect and guidance from an accomplished guru. In this group of literature, the presence of women in Tantras has been approached with mixed views. Some scholars describe Tāntric Buddhism as more egalitarian than other contemporary religious sects and acknowledge the dignified status of women. However, others have challenged this view. While these scholars pay proper attention to the socio-economic and cultural background of Tāntric women, few have explored their religious, philosophical, and spiritual roles in depth.

3. Research Methodology

Using a qualitative research methodology, both primary and secondary sources have been analysed to write this paper. However, since Tantras are enigmatic texts, many precautions must be taken in their interpretation. Tāntric authors were aware of the potential misuse of Tantras. Therefore, according to the Tibetan historian Lama Tārānātha (1990), for approximately 300 years, Tantras were secretly transmitted from one generation to another through the guru-śiṣya tradition. Even when they were eventually written down, they remained largely confined to Buddhist monastic communities.

However, this changed in the mid-twentieth century due to Chinese aggression against Tibet. As a result of this unfortunate event, Tibetans—along with His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama—were forced to leave their homeland in 1959, where they had practised Dharma for centuries. One consequence of this displacement was that global interest in Tāntric Buddhism increased dramatically. It has since spread from the Himalayan region to the USA, Europe, and other parts of the world. Consequently, much literature once considered "esoteric" has now been translated into many European languages and is easily accessible. However, this accessibility has also given rise to many misunderstandings and misconceptions.

The main reason for this is that Tantras are highly technical texts. If studied without the guidance of an accomplished guru, there is a high risk of misreading and misinterpretation. We must not forget that this literature was originally transmitted orally through the guru-śiṣya tradition, in which it was understood that its complex symbolism would be explained by an expert guru. Unfortunately, in modern Tāntric historiography, there have been two extreme approaches to interpreting Tantras: one extreme is to take everything literally, and the other is to take everything figuratively. In this paper, leaving aside both extremes and following the middle path, an attempt has been made to analyse the status of women in Tantras while taking into account the socio-cultural and religious-philosophical

context of the time. Lastly, Naila Kabeer's scholarly article "Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment" has been extremely helpful in understanding the various dimensions of women's empowerment. In light of those dimensions, the role and status of women in Tantras have been analysed.

4. Results and Discussions

4.1 Honour and Dignity

In a society that underestimates women in every possible way, Tantras give top priority to their honour and dignity. According to Tantras, one who disrespects women can never succeed on the path of Dharma. Tsoṅkhapā, in his commentary on the *Cakrasaṃvara-Tantra* (CST), says (cited in Shaw 1994: 48): "If one who aspires to enlightenment / generates anger toward a female messenger // the merit accumulated over ten million eons / will be destroyed in an instant."

Tantras strictly warn that women must not be ill-treated in any way. In fact, "to despise a woman is a transgression of one of the root tantric vows" (Gyatso 1988; see also Ray 2002: 206). Tantras disapprove of attempts to demean women, such as "saying that women are without spiritual merit and made of unclean things, not considering their good qualities" (Janice Willis, cited in Ray 2002: 206). Disrespecting a woman is like disrespecting *ḍākiṇī* herself (Dhargyey 2001: 26). And *Ḍākiṇīs* are not ordinary beings—they are none other than the "female Tantric Buddhas" (Kelsang Gyatso 1991: 527). Seeing or meeting a *Ḍākiṇī* is said to be the greatest achievement for a *sādhaka*. This is because "Dakini is viewed as the supreme embodiment of the highest wisdom itself. Embracing such wisdom, one becomes Buddha" (Willis 1987: 56). Equating women with *ḍākiṇīs*, Tantras clearly indicate how important the support and cooperation of women are in the journey of Dharma. Because every woman is the embodiment of wisdom, all of them should be honoured without any bias.

As such, Tantras give clear instructions that one should never discriminate against women based on caste, varṇa, or social position. In *Advayasiddhi*, Lakṣmīnkarā, one of the most renowned yoginī scholars, states: “Women in all social positions must never be despised. A woman is divine wisdom (bhagavatī prajñā). Only in this world she assumed bodily form” (cited in Guenther 1952: 73). The *Caṇḍamahāroṣaṇa Tantra* (CMT) (cited in Shaw 1994: 50) instructs the sādḥaka that the women of all classes must be respected “without any distinction”, and:

“If he makes a distinction,
Caṇḍamahāroṣaṇa will be provoked
and slay the practitioner,
throw him into Avīci Hell,
and threaten him with sword and noose.”

Furthermore, since there is divinity in every woman, no woman should be dishonoured based merely on her physical appearance. Indrabhūti gives clear instructions to a Tāntric sādḥaka that (in *Jñānasiddhi* I.80): “He must not despise a woman, even if all her limbs are attacked by leprosy” (cited in Guenther 1952: 48). Women are not just bodies; they should be seen beyond that. It is completely wrong to judge a person based on his or her body. Knowledge, wisdom, and character should be the main determinants of one’s personality, whether man or woman. For this reason, Tantras never demean or disgrace women.

Moreover, Tantras firmly believe that women are in no way inferior to men in intellectual and spiritual capabilities. They are as capable of achieving enlightenment as men, provided they are industrious enough. There are ample examples of women who achieved great success on the Tāntric path due to their own merits. In Tantras, we can easily find

women who are scholars, gurus, and yoginīs. They are free, intelligent, and enlightened. In Tāntric scriptures, they are always mentioned with great dignity and enormous respect.

Tantras use a wide range of honorific titles for women, such as Yoginī, Ḍākinī, Dūtī, Vīrā, Vidyādhārīnī (Shaw 1994: 38–39); Caṇḍālī, Ḍombī, Śabarī, Nairāmaṇī, Sahajasundarī (Dasgupta 1946: 116); prajñā (“insight”), vidyā (“occult science” or “know-how”), devī (“goddess” or “queen”), mātṛ (“mother”), śūri (“heroine”), mudrā (“seal” or “gesture”), and so on (Wayman 2009: 165–166). Needless to say, all these titles are highly dignified in the Tāntric tradition. It must be remembered: “To see in the woman a goddess is not simply a sentimentality; it rather indicates the uniqueness of such an experience and its content is inexpressible by another category” (Guenther 1976: 73). This indicates the highly prestigious position of women in Tantras.

According to the *Caṇḍamahāroṣaṇa Tantra*:

Women are heaven, women are the Dharma,

And women are truly the supreme austerity.

Women are the Buddha, women are the Sangha,

Women are the Perfection of Wisdom. (CMT 8.14)

As is evident, women are said to be the perfect embodiment of divine wisdom. In *Prajñopāyaviniścayasiddhi*, Anaṅgavajra says: “The Wisdom-Perfection must be adored everywhere by those who strive for liberation. Pure she stays in the realm beyond this empirical world (paramārthe); in this empirical world (saṃvṛtyā), she has assumed the form of a woman” (in Guenther 1952: 72). By comparing women with the *prajñā-pāramitā*, Tantras raise the status of women par excellence. Just as one cannot attain liberation without developed *prajñā*, in the same way, one cannot attain perfection in *sādhana* without the help and guidance of a woman.

According to the *Hevajra Tantra*, “Wisdom is the woman, and Means is the man” (HT 1.viii.28). Both wisdom and means are necessary for the ultimate realization of truth. As is evident, Tantras hold the firm belief that the wise cooperation of both genders can facilitate progress on the path of Dharma. Thus, the *Cakrasaṃvara Tantra* says (cited in Shaw 1994: 38): “The most excellent place for yogis is wherever there is a gathering of yoginīs; there all the magical powers will be attained by all those blissful ones.” Both man and woman fulfil and enrich each other. They are two aspects of the same life energy. Ignoring either would disturb the harmony of life. Therefore, in *Anuttara Yoga Tantra*, “the practitioner is advised to seek a consort, as an impetus for further realization of the path” (Gyatso 1988). Tāntric scholars had full faith in the spiritual capabilities of both sexes. Both could attain enlightenment. As such, no one is superior, no one is inferior. The *Cakrasaṃvara Tantra* asserts:

Just as the yogins attain accomplishment,

In exactly the same way do the yoginīs.

The men have the form of Vajradhara,

The women of the vajra-woman. (CST 9.16)

The greatest of the siddhas—like Saraha, Tilopa, Naropa, and many others—were guided by women at the most crucial moments of their lives. These siddhas did not hesitate to accept the advice of those highly talented women. On many occasions, the aura of these intelligent women seems to surpass the personalities of even the siddhas. Such was the wisdom and spiritual power of women, in the view of Tāntric authors. As is evident, women are highly esteemed in Tāntric Buddhism.

4.2 Gender Equality and Inclusion

The Tāntric approach to gender equality and inclusion was far ahead of its time. Tāntric yogīns and siddhas were certainly wise enough to realise that no society can achieve

holistic progress by ignoring or excluding half of its population. Nor can such a society be considered healthy. Consequently, the Tantras do not seek to exclude women from any of their institutions. It is true that some regulation exists, given the highly technical nature of sādhanās, but there is no gender discrimination involved.

Since Tantras involve complex yogic practices, non-serious practitioners are not suited for this path. Such individuals may harm themselves and others. Therefore, the Tantras made “initiation” (*abhiṣeka*) a prerequisite for entering the path. Only a guru has the right to confer such ‘initiation’ or ‘empowerment’ upon a practitioner. Understandably, initiation is one of the most sacred and powerful ceremonies in the Tantras. Unlike many religious sects that exclude women from crucial rites, the Tantras welcome them without the slightest hesitation. By providing equal opportunities to women who had been marginalised for centuries, the Tantras proved that women are in no way inferior to men. When given a chance, women can contribute significantly to society. The brilliant women produced by the Tāntric tradition are excellent examples. For instance, we cannot imagine Buddhist Tantras without Maṇḍāravā, the consort of Padmasambhava (the second Buddha for Tibetans); Lakṣmīṅkarā, the yoginī and scholar; the dancer-consort of Ḍombipā, for whom he renounced his kingdom; the consort of Saraha, the arrow-smith woman who led him to the Truth; Yeshe Tshogyal, the scholar and yoginī; and other independent yoginīs like Maṇibhadṛā, Kaṅkhalā, Mekhalā, and so on.

Tantras accept all these women as siddhas and mahāsiddhas without the slightest reservation, clearly indicating their capacity for the highest spiritual attainment. In fact, Tantras elevate their status to that of goddesses. The *Guhyasamāja Tantra* (GST) declares that women too can become Buddhas (Gyatso 1988). In this regard, Vajrayāna is even more progressive than Theravāda or Mahāyāna (Ibid.). Robinson rightly observes: “While all the

great masters of the Mahāyāna were men, women had a much more prominent place in the Vajrayāna” (1979: 15).

Unlike many religious sects, Tantras do not obstruct the freedom of women. The Tāntric path is open to all, irrespective of caste, creed, or gender. As such, we see enlightened beings of both sexes in the Tantras (Willis 1987: 64). In most Tāntric sādhanās, the participation of both men and women is required. Tantras do not promote any institutions where women’s participation is absent. Most siddhas were accompanied and even guided by enlightened consorts. This is because Tantras have a firm belief in the intellectual and spiritual calibre of women. The only requirement is not to obstruct their path—and whenever they have had the opportunity, women have proven their capabilities. The Tāntric path stands as the best example of this. Here, women are scholars, gurus, and yoginīs. They are dancers, musicians, and artists. They are dominant, powerful, and fearless. They are free, independent, and enlightened. Undoubtedly, the Tāntric emphasis on gender equality and the dignified inclusion of women in most institutions is a key reason for its tremendous progress.

4.3 Power and Participation

Contrary to patriarchal socio-cultural norms that emphasise women’s obedience, submissiveness, and pliability, the Tantras celebrate the power and proud participation of women in all arenas of socio-religious life. Confident, assertive, and intelligent women are highly appreciated. In the Tantras, beauty is always defined in terms of power and intellect. For example, Princess Maṇḍaravā, despite being the embodiment of feminine beauty, “frequently has to take on a wrathful or frightening demeanour in her activities to subdue evil and to teach” (Chonam and Khandro 1998: 10). Her wrathful form is known as “Simhamukha,” the Lion-headed Dākiṇī. On one occasion, when she was criticised for not having a husband, her “mocking response is to create a multitude of manifestations of herself,

all of whom proceed to join in sexual union with all the men in her presence” (Ibid: 13). This is what patriarchy means for the Tantras—just worthless!

Undoubtedly, the Tāntric path is more egalitarian than any other religious tradition in terms of women’s participation. Unlike most religious sects, Tantras do not demean, suppress, or exploit women in any way. Miranda Shaw rightly notes:

There are no pronouncements of women’s inferiority or religious incapacity. Conspicuously absent are portraits of submissive, oppressed women and depictions of abusive, exploitative relationships (1994: 35).

Women in the Tantras are free, independent, and powerful. They do not permit anyone to control their lives—they are their own masters. Their moral standards are very different from the norms of what Nietzsche termed “slave morality.” Hence, their behaviour might appear shocking to those who think within patriarchal confines. As noted earlier, the women in the Tantras are not meek or weak. Instead, they are:

Women who always speak truthfully and [are] proud of their strength; women whose minds are powerful and energetic; women who delight in shrewish behaviour and speak boastfully; women who are fearless, revel in their own ferocity, and like to eat meat and frequent cemeteries; and women who derive pleasure from the fact that they are untamable (Shaw 1994: 54).

Furthermore, in the eyes of the Tantras, women of all castes and *varṇas* are embodiments of divinity; therefore, all deserve respect. Particularly by assigning the status of goddesses to women of so-called lower castes (Snellgrove 2002: 181), Tantras demonstrate that caste and gender distinctions are meaningless on the path of Dharma. Indrabhūti asserts

that “women of low castes and degraded families like the chāṇḍālas are eminently suitable for esoteric sādhanā” (Baruah 2000: 167).

However, some scholars have viewed women’s participation in Tāntric sādhanās with suspicion, assuming that their presence—especially that of lower-caste women—was a form of patriarchal exploitation. Such doubts are baseless and often stem from experiences of patriarchal institutions. Those with first-hand, authentic knowledge of the Tāntric tradition would never entertain such claims. Lama Anagarika Govinda, a learned scholar and accomplished practitioner, emphatically states:

If we only take the trouble to investigate the still living traditions of the Tantras in their genuine, unadulterated forms, as they exist up to the present day in thousands of monasteries and hermitages of Tibet, where the ideals of sense-control and renunciation are held in high esteem, then only can we realise how ill-founded and worthless are the current theories, which try to drag the Tantras into the realm of sensuality (Govinda 1987: 102–03).

Miranda Shaw similarly argues that “the presence of low-caste women in the Tāntric movement is much more complex than a matter of sexual availability” (1994: 62). In fact, they came to the Tantras “with skills and cultural knowledge that were directly applicable to Tāntric methodologies” (loc. cit.). Women such as dancers, courtesans, “wine-makers and wine-sellers,” ḍombs, and others (loc. cit.) mentioned in the Tantras were highly talented. Tantras gave them a platform to fully develop their inherent capabilities. In return, women enriched the Tantras with their knowledge, wisdom, and skills. The remarkable progress of Tāntric Buddhism in dhyānas and sādhanās, religion and culture, art and architecture, and more, was acknowledged even by its critics. Undoubtedly, these brilliant women made a significant contribution.

Conclusions

The Tantras have a healthy, progressive, and wise approach to life—and this is evident in their treatment of women. One reason is that Tāntric knowledge, both secular and sacred, was co-created by men and women (Shaw 1994: 36). That is, Tāntric wisdom is grounded in the lived experiences of accomplished yogīns and yoginīs. Unlike most religious scriptures, the Tantras do not reflect a solely male perspective. Since women were not excluded from this path, the Tāntric tradition directly witnessed their capabilities. Accordingly, Tantras have complete faith in women's talent, skills, and abilities. They were acutely aware of the futility and falsehood of gender-based prejudice.

According to Tantras, those who disrespect women cannot succeed on the path of Dharma. Thus, Tantric texts give explicit instructions that women must not be denigrated. We do not find in the Tantras any form of prejudice, discrimination, or mistreatment of women. It is clearly stated that women are in no way inferior to men. Tāntric siddhas fearlessly opposed injustice and exploitation of women. They rejected orthodox socio-cultural norms that confined women within patriarchal boundaries. Tantras hold a firm belief that knowledge and wisdom are not the monopoly of men. Accordingly, most Tāntric sādhanās were designed for both sexes. As a result, this path has produced highly accomplished female gurus, yoginīs, and scholars.

However, caution is needed when drawing conclusions about women's status in the Tantras. We must remember that Tantras are not ordinary literature; they are highly technical and esoteric, relying heavily on symbols, metaphors, and sexual imagery—tools meant to express the profound and ecstatic experiences of yogic sādhanās. Without getting entangled in their symbolic language, a deep, unbiased study of Tantras—under the guidance of accomplished gurus and over a long period—is essential to reach the depths of their truth.

We must also acknowledge that the social context in which the Tantras emerged was far from ideal, and Tāntric practitioners themselves came from the same milieu. Hence, despite the Tāntric emphasis on gender equality and women's empowerment, full social implementation of these ideals was not always successful. But the fault does not lie with the Tantras; rather, the society was perhaps not ready to accept such forward-looking ideas that were ahead of their time.

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