

A Walk on the Wild Side: Introduction to a Goddess-honoring Tradition Where the Witch and the Tantrick Meet

By Chandra Alexandre



Today, a robust and dynamic complexity of religious thought and engagement is being achieved through new traditions in which symbols, deities, and rituals (some only recently constructed) inform by connecting to passions, devotion and a desire for engaged spirituality not contained by country of origin—practitioner's or deity's. Add to this a confluence of feminism, goddess-focused spiritualities, and access to various forms of Hinduism, as well as a growing Indian-American population with Hindu diasporic roots and bi-cultural sensibilities, and we find a Western **Shakta Hindu** perspective and related forms of worship and practice emerging that assert both authenticity and independence from the Hindu source. One such emergence is the countercultural religious tradition known as **Sha'can**, what I fondly call a **(R)evolutionary Shakta Tantra**. [1]

Recognizing deep roots in India, Sha'can arose with a finger on the pulse of something larger—the critical work being done around the world to reclaim the power of womanhood and a **Feminine/Female Divine**. Whether in Kolkata or California, academic or activist circles, the past twenty years have seen subordinated communities and individuals finding ways to take back marginalized ideological and literal spaces, often using powerful and sometimes fierce goddesses as allies, inspirations, and provocateurs. Philosophies such as **ecofeminism**, through alignment of goddess spirituality with **Earth justice** and the fight for women's equality, have helped further the cause. So too has the work of Indian and Hindu feminists (for example, Rita Gross, Vandana Shiva, and Rani Jethmalani) who have utilized the goddess, often particularized as Kali, and the principles of Shakta Tantra, the goddess-honoring path of

embodied Hindu spirituality, to fight patriarchal religious and cultural norms, dictates, and oppressions. Finally, the field of women's spirituality and the rubrics of Pagan thought and practice have offered an embrace toward dynamic discourse and life-affirming ceremony that many have described as a distinct home coming for a fully integrated sense of self and purpose within the realm of living spirituality.

The Sha'can tradition arose in 1998 from this admixture, with an emphasis on



connection between the truths offered by Shakta Tantra and the realities of today's world—realities that are recognized as both freeing and limiting. Seeking “the bridging of East and West through (r)evolutionary, embodied spirituality, *sadhana* (spiritual practice), wisdom teachings, and worship of the Goddess in Her myriad forms,” especially as **Kali Maa**, “our beloved Dark Mother...a change agent for our times...helping to transform, empower, and heal individuals, communities, and the planet,” Sha'can originally evolved within the crucible of the [San Francisco-based SHARANYA](#) community in a hotbed of cross-cultural and diverse spiritual influences.[2] It has, since its formation, expanded to include a Southern California presence and larger global community through online courses and the work of practitioners and initiates, notably in the US, Canada, Europe and Australia.

The tradition, I believe, is potentially an exciting case study for the development of Hinduism in America with ramifications for the **new religious movement**. Sitting poised in a syncretism of faith honoring **Shaktism** and contemporary Paganism, Sha'can, much like American Buddhism, is co-created from ancient roots in a new land. Additionally, while Sha'can in my mind is not part of the Indo-Pagan movement (because it is an innovation of Shakta Hindu philosophy and the(a)ology rather than a tradition that offers space for Hindu deities and ritual within established or newly established Pagan pathways), others within the tradition do consider it a manifestation of the rise in popularity and awareness of Hindu deities increasingly incorporated into different varieties of Paganism. Either way, the tradition stands ready to welcome those seeking an expression for their devotion to and yearning for Goddess in and through the forms, symbols, tools and practices that She offers via-a-vis Hindu Shakta Tantra and its contemporary expressions. Sha'can seeks to make the experience of worship and devotion relevant to these times at the same time that it drives for an honoring of those

teachers and practitioners, past, present and future, who have grown and continue to grow Shakta Tantra in India and beyond.

It may be helpful if I explain that as the tradition's initial conjurer, I affirm a Shakta lineage with initiation in India (into both dualistic and non-dualistic forms of Tantra) at the same time that I recognize my situatedness as a woman born and raised in the developed West. My cultural and initial spiritual influences therefore have been largely Abrahamic or Abrahamic-infused. This, when combined with a radical feminist stance and ecofeminist spirituality, have created in me a recognition of the importance of the



Witch and various manifestations of antinomian spirituality that honor Earth as well as the female and feminine (on both micro-and macro-cosmic scales) toward overcoming patriarchal religions and religious influences. Thus, I priestess our **puja** (worship) ceremonies by chanting mantras in Sanskrit, casting a circle in a Pagan-recognizable way, and invoking directions saying, “Hail and welcome! CA HUM PHAT, SVAHA!” at the end to concretize the energy. In this light, Sha’can rituals have been described by Pagans as immediately accessible despite some of the language barriers (we do our best to explain unfamiliar meanings and ask for a deepening into personal experience), and by Indian Hindus as, “feeling like I was in my home village temple.” We are humbled on both accounts and excited by what this portends.

The Role of Goddess Kali in Sha’can

Often, those who seek the Mysteries touch on the fringes of what Goddess Kali offers, yet stay away because they are afraid. Some are afraid, with due cause, of cultural appropriation. “I am not from India or Hindu,” some might say, “and therefore, worshiping a goddess such as Kali, with roots in a living goddess tradition, is out of bounds for me.” Others might just be afraid, period.

Certainly, it should be acknowledged that how this goddess is typically represented inspires reaction. No account of Kali could possibly leave out Her image and iconography, for even in India—let alone the Goddess-fearing West—She is something to behold. Many are already familiar with Her black-skinned, skull-adorned appearance; yet there is more than meets the eye to Her manifest presence and its significance. Not only do Her symbols convey spiritual revelations, but the fact of Her existence today in the minds and hearts of devotees around the world (some of Hindu birth, others not) is inspiring of something even greater, not the least of which is moves beyond the confines of religion with a call for social justice—sometimes born of spiritual longing.

Within Sha'can, we recognize the esoteric wisdom of opening to the presence of energy—**Shakti**—and consciousness—**Shiva**—within ourselves in order to harmonize and understand Self with regard for and in relationship to the life-force as present both in nature and the unseen world. We recognize that Goddess today is becoming a “transaction between contexts, encouraging us to discover how the two contexts [of human and divine] can illuminate each other in new and sometimes unexpected ways.” For us, Kali is that light, presenting us with a radical role model and helping those seeking expanded cosmogonies, cosmologies and consciousness to break through limiting fears so that the biases of the Western milieu, wherever it is found and particularized through agents of patriarchy (such as religious, educational, social and cultural institutions), may be overcome.

Through the ancient traditions of Goddess worship still practiced today in Hindu South Asia and especially as made relevant for those without otherwise religious or cultural access to the **Divine Female** and Divine Feminine in ways that are empowering for actual women, the Sha'can tradition offers a glimpse through Kali worship and the practices of Shakta Tantra at possibilities for the Feminine and female that lie outside of



limiting constructs. Certainly, patriarchy plays a role in religions everywhere, and religions of Goddess are no exception. Yet, within Hindu Shakta Tantra conjured in conjunction with ecofeminist spirituality, we are finding expanded notions of divinity and (r)evolutionary potentials for engagement in the world that promote healing and peace in response to patriarchy and its agendas.

I should note that as I type, an image of Kali greets my gaze. I focus on Her black feet sporting golden anklets, with the residue of *alta*, a red plant-based, semi-permanent dye, decorating the outline of the soles and spaces in-between the toes. Join me in this gaze for a moment. From this perspective, we are internally bowed low. We are spiritually naked before **Adya Maa**, the Primordial Dark Goddess, and here, we may come just a bit closer to an understanding of who She is and what She offers. I argue that here, the Witch and the Tantrick meet to create, enliven and empower us all!

[1] Shakta Tantra is a belief system whose cosmology reveres the immanence of spirit and in turn provides ritualized as well as lived practices in which the body acts as, and becomes substance for, the divine. Śākta traditions consider Female/Feminine energy to be fundamental and activating—the source of all creation without which the gods and humanity would perish. Although the Śākta and Tantric traditions are often conflated because of the importance of the goddess within Tantra generally, the followers of Tantra are not all primarily worshippers of Goddess. There are therefore distinct paths within Tantra, and it is Devī (Goddess) who engages the heart, mind and soul of Śākta devotees.

[2] SHARANYA (www.sharanya.org) is a 501(c)(3) federally-recognized devi mandir (goddess temple) performing public puja (worship) and offering classes and spiritual services to community in the San Francisco Bay Area and beyond in the Sha'can tradition.
