

Some Reflections on the Hero in Tāntric Texts

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Dissemination

'Hero' (*vīra*) is a technical term signifying an advanced type of adept following Tāntric practices. The hero has been mentioned in numerous Sanskrit texts pertaining to various Tāntric traditions. These texts include *Bhāvacūḍāmaṇi*, *Guptasādhana Tantra*, *Kālivilāsa Tantra* (KVT)¹, *Kaulajñānanirṇaya* (KJN), *Kubjikāmatatantra* (KMT), *Kulārṇavatantra* (KT), *Mātrkābheda Tantra*, *Rudrayāmala* or *Uttaratantra* (RY), *Tantrāloka*, *Tārā Tantra*, *Yoginīhṛdaya* (YH) which is the last part of the *Vāmakeśvaratantra*, and *Yoginī Tantra*. There are many more texts which deal with this subject, especially the *nibandha* texts, above all the *Puraścaryārṇava*, the *Śaktisaṅgamatantra* and the *Tārābhaktisudhārṇava*. The manner and the length of the descriptions vary.

Description of the Hero

A complex description of the hero and a detailed analysis of this concept will be presented in a forthcoming study; here a few examples will give an idea of the subject. The hero (*vīra*) is defined as an advanced adept of the Tāntric *sādhana*. The KVT says that his mind is raised (*vīraścoddhata-mānasaḥ* VI. 9d). The same text repeatedly emphasises that such adepts do not exist in the Kali age.² However, this text admits that adepts of the heroic disposition existed in the Tretā and Dvāpara ages.³ It refers to Rāvaṇa and Kumbhakarṇa as examples of heroes.⁴

Various texts declare that a hero (*vīra*) has achieved a high degree of insight into supreme reality. He has accomplished a different quality in his cognitive experience. According to the KJN the hero averts his thought from the manifold external objects; he concentrates on internal processes and is steeped in meditation. In this way, he reaches the non-dual experience. Endowed with knowledge and wisdom he is devoted to the practice of non-duality.⁵ He thus becomes indifferent to external stimulants to the extent that the smell of a perfume or a foul stench is the same to him.

The dualistic vision is discredited as the enemy which must be destroyed and replaced by the non-dualistic experience of the self in everything. No notion of an object outside of the experience should remain. He should recognise everything as the Supreme Self who is identical with his own self. This has been explained in the commentary YHD on YH 1.65ab by a much cite passage.⁶ Heroes are such kind of adepts, who are intent upon effecting dissolution of the enemy [which is] objectiveness in the battle-field [which is the thought

of] ego. “Worshipped by the heroes” [means] worshipped by these. [The goddess is] visualised by means of [intense] contemplation on the [divine] subject (/ego) as [one’s own] self. It has been said in the *Parāpañcaśīka*: “Effecting the dissolution of the opponent [which is] the objectiveness, in the subject, he who is intent upon power (/heroism) enjoys the natural state (/innate disposition) [which is] the destroyer of [all that is] not *śīva* (/inauspicious).”

In a well-known metaphor the same text (YHD) describes the dualistic apprehension as a disease (*roga*) which one should get rid of. The cure, however, can only be brought about by a change in the quality of one’s cognitive experience. The experience of duality must be replaced by the clear apprehension of non-duality. Once the non-dual vision is gained the person is cured.⁷ The pain and suffering which come along with the cognition of differences have ceased.

Besides his advances in the cognitive experience, the hero has made considerable progress in self-control. The texts define that a hero is no longer a victim to emotions like passion, pride, affliction, anger, envy. He has overcome delusion as well as doubt and fear. He has lost shame and curiosity.⁸ It does not matter to him when the people turn away from him in disgust. He remains indifferent even when he transgresses the Vedic rules of purity (*śauca*). It is on account of his self-control that his contact with and consumption of forbidden substances such as liquor, meat, fish and women pose no harm to him. He uses these substances on the instruction of his teacher. He also meditates at the cremation ground at night sitting on corpses.⁹ Endowed with exceptional courage and determination a hero succeeds in mastering fearsome and repugnant ritual practices. The extreme Tantric practices provide for him an opportunity to stabilise and prove his indifference. It is said that a hero performs these rites in order to gain perfection of his powers (*siddhi*).

Reading the verses on extreme Tāntric practices one must consider that the language used is deliberately cryptic; it has hence been called ‘intentional language’ (*sandhā-bhāṣā*)¹⁰ or ‘twilight language’ (*sandhyā-bhāṣā*)¹¹. The teaching was meant for initiates only and passed on orally. Therefore it remains difficult to determine whether a term has been employed in its literal sense or metaphorically, e.g. whether *madya* signifies ‘liquor’ or refers to “the nectar in stream issuing from the cavity of the brain where the soul resides”.¹² It is generally acknowledged that different practices existed side by side.

Development of the Description and the Scheme of Three Mental Dispositions

The importance and length given to the description of the hero varies. Some texts mention the hero briefly in connection with an epithet of the goddess, e.g. *vīravanditā* (YH 1.65ab), *vīrāvalī* (KMT 2.2) and *vīramātr* (KMT 21.45). Other texts, however, such as the KVT, describe the hero in a larger scheme which classifies persons in three ways according to their respective mental disposition (*bhāvatraya*), the other classes being characterised by the dispositions of the limited being (*paśu*) and the divine (*divya*). Some later texts, such as the RY in the form which has come down to us, elaborate on this concept in long passages. It seems that while the notion of the hero as an advanced adept given to extreme practices is widespread and present from the early Tāntric texts onwards, the threefold classification termed *bhāvatraya* is less common and much later.

Theory and Practice

The theory of the hero (*vīra*) sketched out above is based on written sources in Sanskrit. This fact involves a few problems in regard to the correspondence between the descriptions of the rituals and the performing agents in the texts on the one hand, and the actual practices and standards on the other hand.¹³ It is well known that Sanskrit is a difficult language requiring years of disciplined study to master. Some practitioners knew Sanskrit and acted as authors and commentators of Tāntric texts; famous among these is Abhinavagupta who lived in the second half of the 10th century to the beginning of the 11th century A.D. in Kashmir. However, it remains doubtful that knowledge of Sanskrit was common among the practitioner. It is not surprising that in general Aghorin ascetics today are not reputed for their command of Sanskrit. The written texts are not of much avail to them as their teachings are passed on orally from teacher to disciple. Some may have some reading knowledge of Sanskrit and possess certain manuscripts which they recite and hold in high esteem; in case there should occur a language problem they can consult a well-trained Paṇḍita. To some practitioners Sanskrit texts may not even be well-known.

It is therefore possible that theories propounded in the Sanskrit texts do not fully agree with actual practices. We do not know whether the Sanskrit descriptions of the hero tally with the definitions given by adepts themselves; the texts may depict highly idealised norms. Vulgar practices may have been secondarily re-interpreted in a more acceptable theoretical scheme. The high standard of self-control and cognitive preconditioning may have been introduced apologetically. It is possible that the textual descriptions correspond to some cases, but not to all. When the famous poet Kṣemendra points out the mischief that can be done by the use of ink he would not go so far to say that every court writer (*kāyastha*) is a cheat.¹⁴ In the same way, we should not assume that licentiousness was the common interest of Tāntric practitioners, although it could have been the case with some as the criticisms from renowned poets as Kṣemendra express.

The facts are known to the initiates. It would therefore be interesting to know how a practitioner defines the qualities and duties of a hero. What was or is the actual standard of self-control and non-dualistic vision achieved by him? This issue needs to be carefully investigated by interviews and observations in the field; here we can only mark out its importance. While scrutinising the complex theories of the Sanskrit texts we should remember that the texts do not necessarily coincide with the practices. We must be aware of the restricted relevance of written texts and the influence of oral transmissions. Although the hero is described in numerous Tāntric texts, the facts about real heroes and their actual practices are yet to be explored.

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References & Notes

1. Abbreviations are added of those texts which have been cited below.
2. *divya-bhāvo vīra-bhāvo nāsti kalau yuge /KVT IV. 3ab.*
divya-vīra-mataṃ nāsti kali-kāle su-locane. /
kalau paśu-mataṃ tataḥ siddhīśvaro bhavet //KVT VI.21.
3. *tretā-dvāpara-paryantaṃ vīra-bhāva itīritāḥ //KVT VI.11cd.*
4. *rāvaṇaḥ kumbhakarnaś ca vīrau śṛṇu sundari //KVT VI.15cd.*
5. *jñāna-vijñāna-sampannaḥ advaitācāra-bhāvitaḥ /*
kula-kaulāgame bhakti[r] īdṛśaṃ // KJN XX.22 //

Note : Edition Bagchi 1934 : 74 has no *sandhi* between *pada* a and b.

6. *vīra-vandite* /*idantā-ripor ahami samarāṅgaṇa pralaya-pratipādana-parā vīruāḥ*, tair vandite ātmāham-
bhāvanayā bhāvite /tad uktaṃ parā-pañcāsīkāyām-
ahamī pralayam kurvann idamaḥ pratiyogināḥ /
parākrama-paro bhunkte svabhāvam aśivāpaham //((ślo.50) iti /

This passage is repeated in YHD on YH III.19 lab (1988.378). As the original in the YH is in the feminine vocative singular, the same case is repeated in the commentary. This is not followed in the translation for stylistic reasons.

7. *sarva-roga-haram /bheda-lakṣaṇam ṣaṭ-triṃśat-tattvātmakam sarvam eva rogaḥ, tasya haram, abhedapratīti-*
hetutvāt/(YHD on 1988:100).
8. *vāta-rāga-mada-kleśa-kopa-mātsarya-mohataḥ /*
rajas-tamo-vidūratvād vīra ity abhidhīyate //KT XVII.25 //
niḥśaṅko nirbhayo vīro nirlajjo niṣkutūhalaḥ /
nirṇīta-veda-śāstrārtho vara-dāṃ vāruṇīm pibet //KT V.82 //
9. *madyam māsam tathā matsyam maithunam eva ca //*
śmasāna-sādhanam bhadre citā-sādhanam eva ca /
etat te kathitam bhadre siddha-vīra-mataṃ śṛṇu //KVT VI.19c-20d //

In the context of Hindu Tāntric texts *mudrā* is translated as “parched cereal”, a substance which is not forbidden. For a discussion of its meaning see Agehananda Bharti 1993:242.

10. Cf. A. Bharati 1993:164-184.
11. *ibid.*
12. D.N. Bose 1956:137 quoted in A. Bharati 1993:170.
13. On top of this problem (the descriptions in the texts versus the actual practices) there remains the problem of a correspondence between the practices and the philosophical theories which had been developed later in order to explain and sublimate the practices. In this way, Herbert v. Guenther notes (1969:4) : “First of all, the Tantras are not a philosophy. They are an experience of life (...) and the basic foundation of many a philosophy that has developed at a later stage.” Similarly, Sudhakar Chattopadhyaya says (1978:10) “(...) it must be agreed that philosophy can be formed in the background of any and everything (...). The Tantras (...) are more concerned with practices which have influenced the votaries more than philosophy.”
14. The satirical description of ink by Kṣemendra above all in his *Narmamālā* has been pointed out by the Italian scholar Fabrizia Baldissera in a lecture in Heidelberg on 24.1.01. In the same text as well as in two other satires (*Deśopadeśa* and *Samayamatrkā*), Kṣemendra parodies a Tāntric *guru*.



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Artikel: **Some Reflections on the Hero in Tantric Texts**

Pages: 77-81

in the book:

"Encyclopaedia of Indian Wisdom. Prof. Satya Vrat Shastri Felicitation Volume."

Editor: Ramkaran Sharma

Publisher: Bharatiya Vidya Prakashan, India

Year: 2005

ISBN: 81-2170184-8