

Spiritual Materialism/ Material Spiritualism: Shakta Tantric Approaches to Matter

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Abstract

In opposition to ontological discourses that denigrate matter and uphold the superiority of the spirit, one can foreground the Shakta Tantric conceptualization of matter and spirit as interchangeable forces that inform the dynamics of the universe. Rather than seeing matter and spirit as incommensurable poles of a binary, Shakta Tantric yoga integrates them. This approach informs the Shakta Tantric universe of the renowned twentieth-century Bengali yogi, Vishuddhananda Paramahansa whose Akhanda Mahayoga (Integral Great Yoga) integrates certain aspects of classical Yoga with Shakta Tantric discourses of dynamic matter, thereby enthusing the Shakta Tantric yogi to radically re-epistemologize “matter”. This paper explores how Vishuddhananda’s mode of yoga, through theory and praxis, gives rise to a unique philosophy of spiritual materialism or material spiritualism, foregrounding the ways the Divine Feminine – by revealing the fluid interplay of matter and spirit – forces us to jettison the binarization of these two aspects of existence. In the course of this exploration, the paper investigates whether and how the spiritual materialism/material spiritualism of Shakta Tantra may be seen as prefiguring the western discourses of New Materialism and Posthumanism. As Vishuddhananda hailed from Bengal, a tropical region of India celebrated for its association with Shaktism, the paper explores how his view of spiritual materialism may contribute to an emergent episteme of Tropical Materialisms by proposing a possible connection between such spiritual materialism and certain specific aspects of tropical nature that might have led to the Shakta “spiritualization” of its material dimensions.

Keywords: Tropical Materialisms, New Materialism, material spiritualism, Shakta Tantra, Akhanda Mahayoga, Bengal, India

Introduction: Material Spiritualism/ Spiritual Materialism

While certain ontological assumptions in Indic, as well as Western philosophical traditions, denigrate matter as something inferior to the spirit, Shakta Tantra conceptualizes matter and spirit as interchangeable dynamisms of the universe. Samkhya and Yoga philosophies dissociate matter from the spirit, while in Shakta Tantric yoga they are integrated. This integrative approach lies at the heart of the Shakta Tantric universe opened up for us by the renowned twentieth-century Bengali yogi, Vishuddhananda Paramahansa whose Akhanda Mahayoga (Integral Great Yoga) combines tenets of classical Yoga with Shakta Tantric epistemologies of matter, thereby making possible a new departure in theorizing “matter”. Vishuddhananda exemplifies the way in which, paying attention to the Divine as a feminine-maternal entity, the Shakta Tantric yogi may come to respect the relation between the material and the spiritual, rather than trying restlessly to break that connection.

This paper explores this unique philosophy of spiritual materialism or material spiritualism from the Shakta Tantric perspective, with specific reference to the paradigm of yoga practised by Vishuddhananda. In the course of this exploration, it attempts to dialogize the western philosophies of New Materialism and Posthumanism with the Shakta Tantric philosophy of spiritual materialism as emanating from a yoga practice from Bengal in order to contribute to a notion of Tropical Materialisms, indicating, in addition, the possible links between the philosophical premises of such Shakta Tantric spiritual materialism and certain specific dimensions of tropical nature that facilitate the Shakta “spiritualization” of material nature.

Matter-Spirit Dualism

While in Western metaphysics Atomists like Leucippus, Democritus, Empedocles, and Anaxagoras propound that the atom is the rudimentary substance of all things, Aristotle vociferously denounces this reductionist approach to matter (Fuchs, 2020, p. 27). “Aristotle sees matter (*hyle*) as standing in relation to form (*morphe*, *eidos*). Matter and form together constitute essence” (Fuchs, 2020, p. 27). In his perception, matter seems to be an integral part of form. Matter has the capacity to transform into a different object; it carries the potential for metamorphosis. Matter is non-static.

It is relevant to remember that the Aristotelian understanding of matter is dependent on “objective possibility” (Fuchs, 2020, p. 28). Furthermore, Aristotle's notion of matter is free from the alleged biases towards the spirit which are often suspect in anti-logocentric discourses – his philosophy does not revolve around a condemnation of matter as something inferior to the spirit. Therefore, it has a unique

space in the spectrum of Western philosophy. As we understand it, any idealist philosophy that is biased towards onto-theological assumptions (Parmenides' or Plato's idealism, for instance) would tend to denigrate matter as inert, insentient, passive and mortal (or even dead); hence, matter would be relegated to the periphery of ontological discourses foregrounded by such philosophical frameworks (Cavarero, 1995, pp. 24-28, 98-106). In any such metaphysical discourse, the materiality of matter is grossly distanced from the *spirituality* of the "truth". The spirit is connotative of energy, activity, life, consciousness, and motion. Therefore, spirit is conceived as superior to matter. "Spirituality" as idea and as practice, thus, becomes grounded in the prioritization of the metaphysical over the physical, the non-material over the material; and is expressed in dualistic discourses of spirit and matter, spirituality and corporeality, mind and body, life and death. The Cartesian mind/body dualism reinforces such a "split" (Jones, 2016, p. 4). Similarly, in some Indic philosophical traditions and orthodox Hinduism, materiality often occupies an inferior position compared to the spirit. This binaristic opposition of the conscious spirit and unconscious matter is emphasized in Samkhya philosophy (Pflueger, 2003, p. 73). In classical Yoga, the ontological discourse is grounded in Samkhya (Pflueger, 2003, p. 73), the two terms Purusha and Prakriti imply the spiritual and material principles, respectively (Whicher, 1998, p. 272). In Samkhya philosophy, Prakriti is *jada*, that is, inert (Bhattacharya, 2008, pp. 207-208). However, this inert Prakriti, paradoxically "dances" in order to enchant Purusha. The dance of Prakriti is an invitation to Purusha to get enmeshed in the creative rhythm of the universe (Biernacki, 2007, p. 3).

As Anway Mukhopadhyay observes:

For Prakriti, there is no "liberation," as she is *Jada*. But for the Purusha, the absolute and ultimate stasis is liberation, *kaivalya*.... In this philosophical framework, don't we see a continuous dynamics of the nirvana principle, a kind of thanatotic drive? And if the *Kaivalya* of Samkhya resembles death and the liberated Purusha a corpse, is the liberation offered by this framework a happy one? Liberation here becomes totally dissociated from a vision of simultaneously spiritual and material eudaimonia, which the tantras foreground (Mukhopadhyay, 2018, p. 8).

Mukhopadhyay infers that the liberation offered by Samkhya yoga is not holistic as it dissociates "spiritual and material eudaimonia" (Mukhopadhyay, 2018, p. 8). This vague and non-holistic notion of liberation propounded by the Samkhya doctrine reinforces its obsessively dualist approach to the material and the spiritual. An integrative sense of liberation can be ushered in only when the mind and the body receive equal significance.

Debiprasad Chattopadhyaya in his seminal work, *Lokayata: A Study in Ancient Indian Materialism* (1959) presents Tantra as offering a materialist or proto-materialist worldview. He “materialistically” reads Tantra, underlining its preoccupation with corporeality and materiality which he associates with the maternal-feminine (Chattopadhyaya, 1959, p. 232). However, we would like to insist that Chattopadhyaya fails to grasp the unique approach of Tantra toward matter and the spirit as *his* materialism seems to be different from, and less integrative, than what one might identify as *tantric* materialism. A Shakta Tantric practitioner-philosopher aims to remain involved in the materiality of the mundane, while enjoying an enlightened state (Tigunait, 2004, pp. 1-3). This engagement with the corporeal world is an integral part of their journey towards achieving enlightenment, an enlightenment that does not privilege the spiritual over the material but rather erases the spirit/matter dualism (Willoughby, 1999, p. xi; Tigunait, 2004, pp. 16-17, 56). Hence, Chattopadhyaya fails to understand that Tantra recasts the epistemology of “matter” by underscoring the ways in which matter and spirit coalesce, crisscross or intertwine fluidly. One may insist that the materiality celebrated in Tantra has a “spiritual” dimension, as there is no rigid borderline between the material and the spiritual in this epistemology. Therefore, tantric materialism can be described as spiritual materialism or material spiritualism. Alain Danielou reinterprets the Samkhya doctrine of matter and spirit from a new perspective. According to him, Samkhya Yoga posits that the universe consists of two essential elements: consciousness and energy. For Danielou, matter is a form of “organized energy” (Daniélou, 1987, pp. 57-59). All material elements must be accompanied by consciousness. The conscious element depends on “an energy-giving support” (Danielou, 1987, pp. 57-59). Energy (*shakti* in Sanskrit), thus becomes a third term mediating between and hyphenating matter and consciousness, and opens up the possibility of radically interrogating the fixed ontologies of “matter” and “spirit” and their binarization. It is through energy, or *shakti*, that the material and the spiritual bleed into each other, coming into relation. Shakti, seen as the maternal-feminine figure of the divine, thus continuously moves between matter and spirit, and remains material and spiritual simultaneously (Mukhopadhyay, 2017, p. xvii).

Shakta Tantric Approaches to Matter and Spirit

Tantra radically modifies the matter/spirit dualism posited by Samkhya by recasting Prakriti as the conscious energy that actively and creatively brings the universe into being (Bhattacharya, 2008, pp. 68-69). The “dancing Prakriti” (Mukhopadhyay, 2018, p. 10) is essentially an inert being in the Samkhya doctrine. This is not the case in the teachings of Tantra, where she is animate. Thus, whereas in the Samkhya tradition the “dancing Prakriti appears as a dancing corpse, the tantric vision would

see the Great Goddess as the Immanent Energy in matter and Spirit who can dance..." (Mukhopadhyay, 2018, p.10).

As Tigunait illustrates:

...Shakti, the Divine Mother, is the origin of all that exists. Everything – all forms of matter and energy – emerge from Her. It is not that the universe as a distinct entity evolves from Her; rather, She *becomes* the universe, She *is* the universe.... Considering anything to be different from Her is ignorance, and experiencing anything as other than Her is bondage. Liberation is experiencing Her alone, within and without. Becoming one with Her in every respect is the highest achievement. (Tigunait, 2004, p. 56)

This paradigm shift vehemently rejects matter-spirit dualism and initiates Shakta Tantra's deconstruction of that binarism. This radical non-binarism in Shakta Tantra offers the possibility of reinterpreting the epistemic dimensions of both life and death. The corpse of the Great Goddess, a trope that Mukhopadhyay explores through the figuration of Sati's corpse in puranic and tantric texts, gives rise to the fifty-one holy Shakta *pithas* which are palpable instances of this material spiritualist or spiritual materialist aspect of Shakta Tantra. In these holy places of the Goddess, parts of her corpse, turned into material objects (stones, for instance) are unified with the *material* environment (Mukhopadhyay, 2018, pp. 71-82). This form of matter, however, is perceived to be alive and hence capable of offering spiritual enlightenment as well as material well-being (Mukhopadhyay, 2018, pp. 71-72). In this context, Mukhopadhyay analyzes the "sacred secular" (Mani, 2009, p.1-4) thrust of Tantric theism:

So, in the Shakta-tantric doctrine, a radical reconciliation is required between Devi-as-pure-transcendence and Devi-as-pure-corporeality, Devi as the ultimate source of universal life and Devi as a corpse...it is this profound problematic which gives rise to the most exciting, "heroic" and challenging eco-theological exploration ever undertaken in the subcontinent. The solution to this problem would mean the solution to the essential questions of existence: what is life? What is death? Can they ever be reconciled?... Can we find a divinity that occupies the most palpable forms of materiality as well as the transcendental realms? (Mukhopadhyay, 2018, p. 12)

This specific orientation to materiality, fostered by such epistemologies in a tropical country like India, as discussed here, can be useful in our "postcolonial" appreciation of the Indic traditions of materialist thinking that have been different from, and yet

can be placed on a comparative spectrum, with the Western philosophies of new materialism and posthumanism. It has been observed by many scholars that the tropical nature of India, with its seasonal rhythms of alteration in the animate and inanimate worlds, has contributed greatly to the conceptualization of the Indic Great Goddess whose energy runs through the co-rhythmic alterations in the human consciousness and the material domain in tune with the seasonal cycles (Dasgupta, 1985, p.25; Gupta, 2018, pp. 11-15). The material aspects of the changing seasons, thus, manifest a “spiritual” dimension in the domain of Shaktism: the Goddess, worshipped majestically in specific seasons, has the seasonal shifts as the material-spiritual coordinates of her dynamism as *shakti*. Tropical nature in India gives rise to a unique Shakta approach to the forms and transformations of matter: natural phenomena and objects, natural processes such as seasonal changes, natural disasters as well as natural calm, are all contextualized within a Shakta semantics of spiritual-materiality. One of the most interesting instances of this might be seen in the identification of the Great Mother (Ambika) with the tropical Indian autumn (*sharat*) through the assertion: *sharatvai Ambika: sharat* itself is Ambika (Dasgupta, 1985, p.25).

Differences between Samkhya Yoga and Shakta Tantric Yoga

Shakta Tantric yoga is essentially different from the dualist principle celebrated in Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras*. The dualism of Samkhya imbues Patanjali's doctrine of Yoga. One may even enunciate that “*Samkhya-yoga* presents us with a totally binary system” (Pflueger, 2012, p. 259). As a result, Patanjali's Yoga celebrates a *telos* of liberation grounded in the principle of redemption from the material world. Samkhya philosophy conceptualizes “its materialism in terms of “primordial materiality (*mulaprakriti*)” (Larson, 2013, p.195). Prakriti is insentient and consists of three *gunas*: *sattva*, *rajas*, and *tamas*. Sometimes one *guna* takes a predominant role while other *gunas* remain in a dormant state. Nevertheless, these three *gunas* are inseparable. These *gunas* must inhabit Prakriti, or primordial materiality. Without these *gunas*, Prakriti cannot exist (Larson, 2013, p. 195). The Samkhya yogi aims to achieve *kaivalya* or liberation. Purusha can achieve this heightened consciousness of *kaivalya*, the ultimate liberation, by forsaking Prakriti, the fundamental materiality of the universe (Pflueger, 1998, pp. 47-53). Therefore, Gerald James Larson redefines the Samkhya doctrine of materialism as an “eliminative materialism” (Larson, 2013, p. 199). Even the form of spirituality foregrounded by Samkhya philosophy is based on the eliminative principle: liberation can be achieved only by renouncing matter. It is a form of spirituality that mandates separation from the material dimensions of life. Life and death, spirit and matter, liberation and engagement cannot be reconciled in this dualist doctrine. The exclusionist principle of Samkhya-yoga is highlighted by Larson in the following words:

Renunciation means turning away from ordinary everyday life as well as conventional religion (*Yoga Sutra* 1.15). Moreover, an ultimate renunciation (*para-vairagya*) entails turning away from the realm of materiality (*triguna*) in its entirety. (Larson, 2013, p.199)

As Lloyd Pflueger points out:

...I see no reason to debate whether Samkhya-Yoga really means what it says with regard to its vision of radical dualism and the necessity of separating out matter from spirit.... Here one's only home is pure consciousness (Pflueger, 2003, p. 73).

Patanjali's Yoga, thus grounds liberation in a dissociative principle, rather than an integrative one. In the yogic meditation for attaining liberation, Prakriti is an obstacle and a potent threat to the achievement of *nirvikalpa samadhi*, or the highest form of liberation (Larson, 2013, p. 199).

Clearly, Patanjali's conceptualization of Yoga denigrates matter as an obstacle to a yogi or yogini on their path of attaining the highest state. A yogi or yogini must acquire all the miraculous powers only to master the world of materiality (*Yoga Sutras*, 3.29,3.21,3.23, 3.25, 3.26). The yogic powers acquired by him or her make them the sovereign of the corporeal world, and their power bequeaths them an absolute knowledge about the corporeal aspect of the universe. This knowledge helps to demystify the enchantment of matter. Furthermore, the practitioner becomes liberated from the entanglements of matter embodied in the form of mundane life. Therefore, Patanjali's notion of yoga focuses on yogic self-distancing from life in the material world. Despite having miraculous powers, a yogi/yogini does not get engaged in the human drama of the corporeal world. Corporeality is marked by pain, suffering, and engagement that restrict them from achieving liberation (Pflueger, 2003, p. 73).

Shakta Tantric philosophy vehemently opposes this dualism of Patanjali's Yoga, thereby initiating the articulation of an alternative – an integrative – paradigm of yoga. Tantra believes in the conservation of energy. Energy never dies. It only changes its form and runs through all things and beings (Mukhopadhyay, 2018, pp. 19, 90). In the Shakta Tantric traditions, energy is worshipped as the (feminine) Absolute which is not transcendently detached from the material world, but rather actively and constantly operates between matter and consciousness. Shaktism believes that the Goddess inhabits both the realms of materiality and spirituality. Matter, in this vision, is not inert and insentient, but is potentially spiritual. The Great Goddess is present even in matter, and, since she is neither material nor spiritual,

but both at once, she forces the tantric philosopher and practitioner to acknowledge the inefficacy of the binarization of matter and spirit. As Rishi Aurobindo points out, the Divine Mother represents the processual nature of the universe, where matter and spirit are involved in a cyclical movement (Aurobindo, 2012, pp. 16-17). The spirit gets evolved into matter, and matter evolves into spirit. For a Shakta Tantric yogi, engagement in the material universe paves a path toward spiritual salvation. In Kundalini Yoga, a Shakta initiate's body becomes the pivot that hinges his/her sadhana for achieving the ultimate enlightenment and bliss (Tigunait, 1999, pp. 12-13, 88,104). The corporeal world never threatens a Shakta practitioner. Rather, the material realm offers an opportunity to start *sadhana* from that realm, and receive the energy required for the Tantric enlightenment from the material domain which does not denote the absence of the (feminine) divine (Mukhopadhyay, 2018, pp. 90-96). Therefore, the ontological and epistemological grounds of Patanjali's Yoga and Shakta Tantric Yoga are radically different.

Juxtaposing the Shakta Tantric Yogi and the Samkhya Yogi

In Patanjali's discourse of Yoga, a yogic practitioner must be a renouncer of the material world and a strict vow of asceticism must be maintained in order to become liberated from the world (*Yoga Sutras*, 3.51). Patanjali's yogi/yogini is someone whose goal of liberation is self-oriented. They remain nonchalant about the suffering of ailing humankind, and use their miraculous power only for self-knowledge so that they can transcend the lifeless material world, the domain of Prakriti. On the other hand, a Shakta Tantric yogi/yogini gets happily enmeshed in the material world. Their miraculous yogic power gives them self-knowledge that illumines them. Simultaneously, their yogic power makes them a healer to suffering humanity. They cure people of malaises, both physical and spiritual (Sengupta, 2017, pp. 88-92, 107-109, 118-140). To them, holistic healing is possible only when an individual's spiritual and corporeal selves exist in proper rhythmic harmony.

A Shakta Tantric practitioner practices a unique philosophy of material spiritualism or spiritual materialism that Shakta Tantra underlines. Such a practitioner is not an indifferent ascetic who inhabits the spiritual domain while remaining stoic to the pain and suffering of lesser mortals. A Shakta Tantric adept often appears in the form of a healer-hero who saves the bewildered ailing humans from life's ordeals. For them, service to suffering humanity is no less significant than meditating on the image of the Great Goddess. They view the material world as an energy field inhabited by the Feminine Absolute's sacred energy (Sengupta, 2017, pp. 126-127, 137). In this context, we can relate the Shakta Tantric yogi/yogini to the discourse of an alternative materialism that can be articulated by utilizing the insights of Adriana Cavarero in her seminal work, *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood* (2000)

which introduces a unique approach to matter and spirit by erasing the boundary assumed by western ontology that separates the realm of materiality from that of spirituality.

Materiality of the Spirit and the Spirituality of Matter

Cavarero's emphasis on corporeality reveals the imagined gap between matter and spirit that has prevailed for so long in Western philosophical paradigms. She speaks of "the spirituality of the flesh" and "fleshiness of the spirit" (Cavarero, 2000, p. 112). This is what underscores the interminable interaction between the psyche and soma, spirit and matter, consciousness and apparent insentience. Our paper utilizes this concept from Cavarero's work as a nucleus to detect and analyze the philosophy of material spiritualism/spiritual materialism in the life and ideas of the twentieth-century Shakta Tantric yogi from Bengal, Sri Vishuddhananda Paramahansa. A Shakta Tantric yogi, he not only articulates a discourse of material spiritualism/spiritual materialism but also *performs* it. His thinking and practice offer a particular tropical materialism that is of value to the ontologies expressed in New Materialism and Posthumanist philosophies. As we shall argue in the later sections of this essay, the theoretical paradigms of new materialism and posthumanism may be engaged in a fruitful dialogue with the Shakta Tantric re-epistemologization of matter and the spirit.

From Khanda Yoga to Akhanda MahaYoga

The legendary Yogi, Sri Vishuddhananda Paramahansa, was born on 14 March, 1853, in Bondul village in the district of Burdwan, West Bengal, India. There the agricultural patterns have been blessed with regular rain cycles of the tropical climate of West Bengal, and although some parts of the district are dry, traditionally it has been known for its enormous agricultural production. Burdwan, like another adjacent district, Birbhum, is famous for its Shakta Tantric traditions and quite a few Shakti *pithas* are located in this region. Many Shakta *sadhakas* have been born and performed *sadhana* here. The practice of Vishuddhananda thus arises from this spiritual and natural environment. Vishuddhananda died on 14 July, 1937. In his childhood, he was named Bholanath (Kaviraj, 2016a, p. 16) and appears to have been a child prodigy. His spiritual bent of mind, compassion for the people around him, and his occasional performance of miraculous deeds signal the birth of a yogi of excellent calibre. In his seminal work titled *Shri Shri Vishuddhananda Prasanga* (2016a), Gopinath Kaviraj presents the anecdotes of certain miraculous feats performed by the child. One day Bholanath went to another village with his playmates. He made a Shiva linga of sand and began the ritual worship of Lord Shiva. Suddenly, a naughty boy broke down his Shiva linga. Infuriated, the Child Bholanath told him that, since he interrupted the worship, Lord Siva would curse him,

and he would let loose his snake to bite him. Incidentally, that very day a snake bit the boy. Snakebites, as is well-known, kill many people every year in India. The folk healers could not neutralize the poison's effect on the boy's body, and his death was imminent. Bholanath then appeared and placed his hand on the ailing body of the boy. Miraculously, the boy recovered from the fatal poisoning (Kaviraj, 2016a, p.17). Kaviraj also mentions the belief of Bholanath's relatives and family members that whatever the child uttered would come to be true. Several times, Bholanath's family members had experienced this (Kaviraj, 2016a, p. 21). In spiritual matters, he was trained by Maharshi Mahatapa, a legendary yogi of Jnanaganja, a mystic place in Tibet that is supposed to be not wholly terrestrial (Kaviraj, 2014, pp.14-16; Sengupta, 2017, pp. 17-27). In Jnanaganja Bholanath progressed very quickly in his spiritual training. He not only mastered the yogic skills but also learnt *Surya Vijnana* (solar science) (Kaviraj, 2016b, p. 44-45). This *vijnana* is not "science" in the reductionist sense of Western science where rigidly empiricist methodologies are followed and a sharp distinction is made between the scientific and the non-scientific; rather, it integrates what may be loosely described as the occult sciences of mysticism and "physical" science. As Kaviraj argues, unlike the *jada-vijnana* (material sciences) in the Western scientific discourses, *Surya Vijnana* encompasses both *jada* (insentient) and *chetana* (conscious) entities, as, within its framework, nothing is actually exclusively insentient (Kaviraj, 2016b, p. 5). As we come to know from the writings of Kaviraj and others, the legendary yogis in Jnanaganja have mastered this ancient wisdom of an integral science of matter and spirit which informs *Surya Vijnana* (Kaviraj, 2016b, pp. 43-56; Kaviraj, 2014, pp. 14-32; Sengupta, 2017, pp. 17-29). *Surya Vijnana*, as Gopinath Kaviraj explains, integrates the physical energy of the sun – the power of its rays (along with its spiritual and mystic correlatives) – with the psycho-physical complex that constitutes the human self. The physical energy exuded by the sun and the psycho-physical, spiritual-material energy represented by the Kundalini, come to be integrated in the theory and practice of *Surya Vijnana*, thereby connecting the patterns of the work of *shakti*/energy in the cosmos with that in the human body. However, all pivots around the Maha Shakti, the Great Energy of the universe which moves all things and beings, all spiritual entities and material objects. Hence, the *vijnani*, or the knowledge-seeker, in this framework, is not an adventurous knowledge-hunter or "discoverer" of the laws of nature, but rather a humble explorer of the workings of *shakti*, and seeks to respectfully access, through all endeavours, the Ultimate Shakti, seen by Visuddhananda, as the Great Mother (Kaviraj, 2016b, pp.5-13). It becomes evident that this occult solar science bridges the gap between matter and spirit, nature and culture, the individual human body and the body of the cosmos. Nature is viewed in this discourse as the dynamic play of *shakti*, rather than static patterns of insentient things (Kaviraj, 2016b, pp. 8-11; Kaviraj, 2014, pp.34-35). The yogi is one who participates in this play, by becoming an "instrument" of the Great Goddess who is the embodiment of all energy (Kaviraj, 2014, p. 35).

Sri Vishuddhananda Paramahansa, steeped in this material-spiritual science, emerges as a chief apostle of the Shakta Tantric philosophy (and practice) of materially-inflected spiritualism or spiritually-inflected materialism. Materialism, in such a paradigm, ceases to be grounded in the ontological closure that a strictly “materialist” ontology of the world may insist upon. On the other hand, the spiritualism built upon this epistemology is also not the reductionist spiritualism that an anti-materialist idealism – both of Indic and Western types – may foreground. Such an epistemology may resonate with the assertion of process theology that the divine does not espouse anthropocentric sentiments, but rather urges humans to erase the apparently insurmountable gap between matter and spirit, the human and the non-human, the living and the non-living (Epperly, 2011, pp. 115-116). However, the point of departure of Vishuddhananda’s integral Yoga is grounded in a specifically esoteric form of Tantric philosophy which reworks classical Yoga through an emphasis on the maternal-feminine form of divinity central to a cosmology that figures forth both matter and spirit as part of a cosmic process and which are hence ontologically interchangeable (Kaviraj, 2016b, p. 9; Kaviraj, 2017, p.109-110, pp.119-128).

Vishuddhananda differentiates between *khanda* (partial) and *akhanda* (integral) yoga (Kaviraj, 2014, p. 87). One may be tempted to argue that Patanjali’s theorization of the yogic consciousness, grounded in the Samkhya dualism, is “*khanda*” or partial. It dissociates Prakriti from Purusha, matter from spirit, the body from the mind. This dualism gives birth to *khanda* yoga or incomplete knowledge of a yogi about yoga. As a Shakta yogi, Vishuddhananda Paramahansa proposes an *akhanda* (integral, or rather, integrative) *mahayoga* (great yoga) which would embrace the spiritually-inflected materialism that we have discussed previously, erasing the gap between the material body and consciousness, and the gap between the terrestrial and the supra-terrestrial (Kaviraj, 2017, pp.148-150). Interestingly, Kaviraj proposes that this grand vision can be actualized only by calling upon the Divine Mother (Kaviraj, 2017, p. 150). This proposition has two major implications. First, this non-dualist approach to matter and the spirit does not dissociate Purusha from Prakriti. The epistemological reconciliation of Purusha and Prakriti in the spiritually-informed materialist philosophy of Tantra, through underpinning the significance of the cosmic energy as the great maternal force, is important for the emergence of a holistic yogic consciousness. Secondly, the healing potential of Tantra is dependent on epistemic redefinitions of the body and the spirit and also on the dynamic interplay of corporeality and spirituality foregrounded in tantric philosophy and rituals. Here, the yogi’s self does not view the material existence of *other* embodied beings as insignificant. Rather, as Kaviraj points out, the grand vision of the ultimate healing or liberation of each and every being is central to Akhanda Mahayoga. It is, in other words, not just targeted at the individual’s emancipation, but also oriented towards

the liberation of all beings from the limited and limiting conditions of existence (Kaviraj, 2017, pp. 140-150, 165-171). There is an essential difference between a yogi and a *sadhaka* (Kaviraj, 2017, pp. 14-17). A *sadhaka* knows the corporeal world's pain, illness, and unhappiness, and he/she views them stoically as they journey on the path of self-liberation through their ascetic austerities. They eliminate the materiality of mundane life from the sphere of their *sadhana*. They seek to get unshackled from the snares of karma and rebirth. On the other hand, a yogi/yogini is someone who knows the heart of the material world as well as that of the world of the spirit. Therefore, also knowing the sufferings of mortal beings, he/she represents an altruistic Self, oriented to other suffering beings rather than to an abstract world of *pure* spirit. Thus, healing the living world from its material ailments is no less necessary than curing the spiritual agony of humankind. As they are compassionate and empathetic to the sufferings of all earthly beings, their meditation conjoins matter and the spirit, and seeks to achieve the integral goal of healing the body and the soul simultaneously (Kaviraj, 2017, pp. 14-17).

As opposed to its negative representations in the popular imagination, Shakta Tantra actually aims to cure the world of its maladies. The maladies, in Shakta Tantric perspectives, can be of diverse types. They are both psychic and somatic, and they may emerge from both corporeal and spiritual crises. Renowned Shakta yogis such as Sri Vishuddhananda Paramahansa, Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa, V. Raghunathan, and Swami Nigamananda Paramahansa, harmoniously bridge the gap between the material world and the spiritual. In innumerable tales of Shakta yogis in India, we find certain common threads: they cure people of their physical and spiritual ailments and simultaneously strive to find a perfect union with the Divine Mother. Furthermore, such yogis/yoginis do not renounce their worldly responsibilities, thereby transcending the duality of samsara and nirvana. They are aware of and sensitive to their responsibilities towards their children, and family members. Despite living a householder's life, a Shakta yogi/yogini may remain focused on the spiritual path. Their profound wisdom and yogic powers make them capable of eliminating the agonies of lesser mortals. This Shakta altruism assumes a universal dimension in Vishuddhananda's vision of Akhanda Mahayoga.

Akhanda Mahayoga and Shakta Tantric Spiritual Materialism

Vishuddhananda Paramahansa practiced this materially-inflected spiritual philosophy in his everyday life and through *akhanda*-yogic principles. Following his Guru's counsel, he got married. He fathered two sons and a daughter. Simultaneously, he loved his disciples as heartily as he would his own biological offspring. Gopinath Kaviraj's *Shri Shri Vishuddhananda Prasanga* eloquently documents the innumerable instances of Vishuddhananda saving his disciples from various perils. He cures people of their incurable diseases, including, of course,

ailments specific to the tropical climate. Using yogic powers, he cautions his disciples about future dangers so they can accordingly change their course of action in the present. More often than not, he draws out his disciples' mortal illness, which would have been fatal to them, keeping them safe by taking it upon his own body. He often asked his disciples not to travel on a specific date. Later on, they would realize that their Guru had forbidden them to travel so as to avert a tragic incident (Kaviraj, 2016a, p. 68).

In his *Yoga Sutras*, Patanjali has mentioned all the miraculous powers that a yogi/yogini can master: they can read another person's mind (*Yoga Sutras*, 3.20); can remain invisible to mortal eyes (*Yoga Sutras*, 3.21); can forecast the time of their death (*Yoga Sutras*, 3.23); and can see objects which are physically far from them (*Yoga Sutras*, 3.26). While, to a non-believer or sceptic, these yogic feats may appear to be merely hypnotic or magical acts, Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras* explains the miracles performed in terms of spiritual science. In his commentaries on Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras*, Swami Vivekananda explains verse 3.51 in the *Vibhuti Pada* section: *tadvairajnadapi doshabijakshaye kaivalyam* "by giving up even these comes the destruction of the very seed of evil; he [yogi] attains kaivalya" (*Yoga Sutras*, 3.51). After attaining divine or quasi-divine omnipotence and omniscience, a Samkhya yogi/yogini becomes detached from the pleasures associated with his/her power. Nothing is left for them to learn. They have touched the climactic point of yogic power, and this highest attainment of power makes them a stoic. It liberates them from every tie. Though they become God-like in their power, this power annihilates their egoistic self or *asmita*. Ego, zeal for power, pleasure in their yogic potential – all melt away into a yogic consciousness, detached completely from the material universe, giving rise to a purely blissful state known as *kaivalya* or liberation. This transformative moment comes when a yogi/yogini becomes one with the Absolute. However, whereas the God-like power of the yogic practitioner within the Samkhya-yogic framework presented by Patanjali makes him/her detached from the world, Shakta Tantric yoga foregrounds the necessity for such a wielder of divine-yogic power to reconnect themselves with the *material* world of *embodied* beings, in an enlightened and enlightening way. The light achieved by the Shakta yogi/yogini is not supposed to take him/her away from the world of "darkness"; it is supposed to be shared with those who are in need of that light, as Shakti, the Divine Energy as Goddess/Mother, pervades both light and darkness and urges her devotee to bridge the gap between them (Kaviraj, 2017, p. 150).

Therefore, there might be significant differences between a Shakta Tantric yogi's and a Samkhya yogi's answers to the question: who is a yogi? As we would see, while Vishuddhananda follows the tenets of classical Yoga in maintaining that a yogi is omnipotent, the *God-like* yogi is ultimately less important in his view than the Great Mother. The Great Goddess, one might argue, transcends even the furthest point of

divinity imaginable by the yogi, as far as Vishuddhananda's yogic world is concerned (Kaviraj, 2016b, p.9).

Vishuddhananda Paramahansa emphasized that nothing is impossible for a true yogi. He is omnipotent and omniscient. Vishuddhananda believed that God is a yogi and a yogi becomes God. They are identical to each other. Without fully actualizing one's potential divinity, one cannot be a yogi (Kaviraj, 2016a, p. iv). Without achieving this divinity, one cannot become a healer for the ailing mortal world. According to Vishuddhananda Paramahansa's philosophy, in a single object, the characteristics of all other objects are latent. He uses a rose as an example to explain this theory. A rose contains all the essential material qualities of the universe. The entire universe is present in a rose in a microcosmic form. The features of the hibiscus are also there in a rose, though they remain latent therein. By his yogic power, he activates the dormant features of the hibiscus in a rose, and, from a rose, produces a beautiful hibiscus (Kaviraj, 2016a, p. vi). Often, in order to fulfil the request of his disciples, using the principles of Surya Vijnana, Vishuddhananda presented sweets in an apparently "miraculous" way, yet the sweets were not magical or insubstantial things but rather tangible and edible. These sweets were, in other words, *real* sweets. Nobody could differentiate them from the sweets made by non-yogic methods (Kaviraj, 2016a, p.190). What is more astonishing is that Vishuddhananda would even create living beings such as insects from the rays of the sun (Kaviraj, 2016b, p. 17). The material energy of the sun ray is thus transformed into the energy of life, thereby highlighting, in the most palpable way, the interchangeability of matter and life through the transformation of energy – energy that is both spiritual and material. Materiality, thus, is not dull, doomed, or dead. It is joyously miraculous, alive and thrilling. Neither spirituality nor materiality signifies a closure: both of them open us up to the cosmic wonder at the centre of which one might perceive the presence of the divine feminine (Kaviraj, 2014, p. 52).

While the interchangeability of material forms such as those discussed above may be seen as "miracles" by the conventional scholar of religion and spirituality, one should in fact see these as hallmarks of Vishuddhananda's spiritual materialist philosophy. The principle of *sarvamsarvatmakam* – that the constituents of all things reside in everything – emphasized by Vishuddhananda (Kaviraj, 2016b, p. 15; Sengupta, 2017, p. 130), is a spiritual principle highlighting the integral and interconnected nature of cosmic existence, but it has the potential of blossoming into a holistic spiritual-materialism where spirit and matter are hyphenated in a rhythmic joy of co-transformation.

Vishuddhananda's role as a healer is integrally connected to this hyphenation of spirit and matter. The instances of his healing people in a yogic way indicate the Shakta yogi's capacity for understanding and utilizing the inter-working of matter and

spirit. Let us mention an example cited by Kaviraj. Narendranath Ghosh was a retired Sub-Judge and a disciple of Vishuddhananda. His son had been suffering from an incurable fever and was on his death bed. European doctors and scientific medicines failed to cure the ailing boy. Ultimately, the boy was cured by the yogic medicine offered by Vishuddhananda (Kaviraj, 2016a, p. 91). Curing people's illnesses, offering them remedies for their mundane problems, and easing their pains are symptomatic of Vishuddhananda's altruistic utilization of the matter-spirit interface for healing suffering humans. For Vishuddhananda, this matter-spirit interface is, of course, grounded in the play of shakti/energy. This kind of altruism is not opposed to, but rather runs parallel with, the Shakta Tantric yogi's journey towards enlightenment.

Spiritual Materialism and New Materialism

Vishuddhananda's spiritual materialism can be revisited through the lens of New Materialism and Posthumanism, though, as we have already seen, his philosophy is grounded in an age-old Indic religious and spiritual tradition, while new materialism as a theoretical paradigm remains primarily grounded in the genealogy of Western thought. Matter is not an inert, passive entity for a new materialist who rejects the dualistic opposition of matter and spirit and postulates an anti-binaristic principle. In this view, matter is always an "elusive and complex object" (Jones, 2016, p. 4). As an intellectual enterprise, new materialism demands more critical attention to the materiality of matter. The new materialists claim the agency of the material world. Therefore, they demystify the long-standing illusion of the subjective agency of living beings working upon matter. The "force of materiality" is considered to be a phenomenon of the "liveliness of living matter" (Jones, 2016, p. 5). Jane Bennett has coined the phrase "agency of matter," which is synonymous with the phrase "liveliness of living matter" (Bennett, 2010, p. 99). Nevertheless, this reversal of the subject-object roles includes "transversality," an intersection of multiple discourses (Jones, 2016, p. 2) within the theoretical paradigm of new materialism. Therefore, new materialism examines plurality in any critical understanding of matter. New materialism's acceptance of the "agency of matter" (Bennett, 2010, p. 99) does away with the privileging of human agency in handling matter. This theory nullifies anthropocentric dominance over the material object in order to posit the notion of the non-static, dynamic energy concentrated in matter. Therefore, human beings confront a universe that cannot be controlled by human agency. It is this dynamic materiality of the universe that determines and redesigns humans. In a comparable way, Posthumanism prioritizes the material dimension of the world to such an extent that it not only eliminates the human sovereignty over matter but also brackets off the "discrete entity in nature as the human" (Jones, 2016, p. 6). Drawing upon new materialist discourses and Cavarero's philosophy, one may seek to correlate and

find unifying threads between matter and spirit. Such a theoretical venture may effectively loosen the domains of materiality and spirituality from dualistic discourses.

Vishuddhananda Paramahansa propounds a somewhat similar (though apparently more esoteric) approach to the worlds of matter and spirit. We need to highlight that his philosophy of materially-inflected spiritualism, coterminous with his spiritually-informed materialism, was developed long before the academic acceptance of new materialism as an ontological philosophy in the West. In Western academia, quests for redefining the matter-spirit interrelation from the perspectives of cultural pluralism, feminism, post-structuralism, and materialism converge to give birth to the new approach to the matter-spirit relationship imbricated in the theoretical and methodological paradigms of new materialism (Rosa et al., 2021, p. 2). The theories of Rosi Braidotti and Manuel DeLanda set the trend of new materialism in the academic sphere (Rosa et al., 2021, p. 3). Vishuddhananda's yogic ramification of the Shakta Tantric mode of spiritual materialism, of course, historically precedes all of these movements of thought.

We need to note that though Vishuddhananda's "miracles" may apparently give the impression that the yogi's reworking of matter is essentially an anthropocentric agency privileged over the agency of matter itself, he, in fact, only *facilitates* the reprocessing of matter – the potential for which always remains latent in matter itself. It would be relevant here to hark back to the peculiar ontological status of energy, venerated as Shakti in the Shakta Tantric worldview, vis-a-vis matter and spirit. In the Shakta Tantric worldview, it is Energy/Shakti as the great mediatrix which bridges the gap between matter and spirit, and the co-transformation of matter and spirit is made possible by the fact that both matter and spirit partake of energy, energy being material as well as spiritual (Mukhopadhyay, 2018, p. 19, 26-27). This *shakti* is what forms itself as matter, and hence operates as the "agency of matter". As Prakriti, the (feminine) material principle, undergoes a conceptual shift while travelling from Samkhya Yoga to Shakta Tantra, it ceases to be insentient (Bhattacharya, 2008, p. 68-69; Sherma, 1998, p.105; Chapple, 2008, p. 212). *Prakriti*, which means "nature" in many Indic languages, becomes, for the Shakta, the creativity or creative force of nature (*shakti*) rather than *created* nature (Sherma, 1998, p.105-107). As Bijankumar Sengupta reminds us, when Vishuddhananda, in his occasional conversations, refers to Prakriti as the Great Reality, he does not see her as the insentient materiality of matter (the Prakriti of the Samkhya system); rather, for him, Prakriti becomes one with the primordial Shakti of the universe (Sengupta, 2017, p. 137). The energy of Maha Shakti (the Great Energy) fashions itself into matter and can refashion that matter in endless ways. This epistemology of matter underlines the agency of *shakti* rather than the agency of matter, and the human agency is replaced by the agency of *shakti*, figured feminine. Vishuddhananda's focus on the omnipotence of the feminine divine, in a way,

deconstructs and overwrites the apparently anthropocentric and androcentric view of the omnipotent yogi as equated with (male) God, and thus presents the yogi's agency as that of a mere participator in the *lila* (play) of *shakti* – a facilitator (and not initiator) of the endless, joyous interplay of matter and spirit.

A Shakta yogi/yogini has to completely and unconditionally surrender his/her self to the divine will of the Great Mother (Aurobindo, 2012, p.12). An analysis of Sri Vishuddhananda Paramahansa's life, characterized by his unconditional love for his disciples, unfolds the magnanimity of his character. Under the protective shadow of his yogic presence, his disciples feel safe, loved, and protected — his every action being geared toward alleviating the pain of his disciples. However, rather than celebrating his yogic agency, he surrenders it to the Divine Mother. As Sri Aurobindo points out in *The Mother*, a moment comes in the life of a Shakta who is on the path of enlightenment when he realizes that his objective is “to become a manifesting instrument of the Divine Shakti in her works” (Aurobindo, 2012, p. 12). In this phase, the boundary between the *shakti*/energy of the Feminine Divine and Her active agent gets blurred. Vishuddhananda is such a yogi whose agency is surrendered to, and thus made one with, the agency of the divine Shakti through his selfless service to, and engagement with, the material world and its embodied beings. For him, matter, too, is inhabited by the sacred energy of the Great Goddess. Therefore, somewhat like the new materialists, he celebrates matter's liveliness that keeps the universe functioning; though, for him, this liveliness is the manifestation of the material-spiritual energy that is ultimately one with the divine-feminine.

Shakta Tantra worships the Goddess-as-matter as well as the Goddess-as-spirit. Jagaddhatri, a tantric goddess is essentially associated with tantric spirituality. In the *stotra*, or hymn to Jagaddhatri, the Goddess is referred to as both “*shavakara*” and “*shaktirupa*” (Gambhirananda, 2005, pp.333-337; Mukhopadhyay, 2018, p. 85). It implies that Devi is both a corpse and energy incarnate. It is this paradoxical nature of the tantric vision of the Goddess which makes us revise our view of “dead” matter, impressing upon us that matter is never dead, but rather throbs with the living energy that is figured as the Goddess. In Tantric rhetoric, therefore, matter and spirit are made one by being threaded through energy, and the sacrality of this energy forms the core of Tantric religiosity. Does it leave any space for human intervention? Or does this theory preclude the overarching emphasis on human agency? The Shakta Tantric yogi's answers to these questions would affirm the all-encompassing dynamic potential in matter that the Great Goddess represents. In Shakta Tantric spirituality, matter is the living body of the Feminine Absolute, and it remains alive even in the parts of the apparently “dead” body of Goddess Sati in the Shakti *pithas*. A human being is a tiny speck in the cosmic scheme of things and remains supplicant to the overwhelming force of the matter-spirit worshipped as Shakti in Tantra.

Conclusion: Tropical Materiality and Shakta Tantric Yoga

Any form of materialism would, obviously, resonate with a specific form of materiality and a particular orientation of the human consciousness occasioned by that form. Tropical materiality in Bengal, resonant with the alternating dynamics of natural turbulence and natural calm which marks this geo-cultural region, has always sensitized the perceptive Shakta Tantric yogi, who does not denigrate the materiality of Prakriti but sees it as a manifestation of the spiritual-material *shakti* that runs (and runs through) the universe. This recognition of the “vibrancy” of matter (Bennett, 2010, pp. vii-xiii) was understood, centuries before the advent of New Materialism. Similarly, when the material dimension of Prakriti is seen as the face of the Great Shakti to whom every yogi/yogini must surrender their specifically “human” subjectivity, any anthropocentric approach to matter is automatically crossed out. Again, we come to understand that, long before Posthumanism, Shakta Tantric yoga decentres the human subject and *subjects* them to the spiritual-materiality of the Great Shakti whose material coordinates are conspicuously operational in tropical nature. One might even wonder whether this specific Shakta orientation to material nature could be framed only within the material matrix of tropical nature in the eco-spiritual context of which Shakta Tantric philosophies took shape in India. The philosophy we speak of here is not just a matter of discursive formation but also that of intuitive and palpable understanding. Vishuddhananda’s Shaktism was, among other things, ritualistically associated with the seasonal worship of Devi – the forms of worship where the material coordinates of the tropical seasonal cycle are co-configured with the earthly manifestations of the Goddess (Sengupta, 2017, pp. 132-133; Dasgupta, 1985, p. 25). Whether it is the Durga Puja of Bengal or the pan-Indian Navaratri, seasonal Goddess worship in India is in intimate relation with the dynamics of tropical materiality – that of soil and water, cornfields and harvest work, breezes and clouds of autumn and spring, seasons which have completely different connotations in a tropical location like Bengal to any temperate country of the Western or Europe (Gupta, 2018, pp. 11-15). Vishuddhananda, being a Bengali, must have known well how the material dimension of the Goddess’s manifestation on (or rather as) earth, during every Navaratri or Durga Puja, could reaffirm the spiritual-materiality that informs our life and consciousness, how the vibrations in matter are always coterminous with the radiant waves of Shakti who erases, continuously, the *artificial* borderlines between the human and the non-human. His *akhanda* (integral), rather than *khanda* (partial) view of liberation and enlightenment, grounded in a tacit acknowledgement of the dynamics of tropical materiality, that, in many ways, informs the living force of Shakta spirituality in India, still remains crucial for a Shakta yogi/yogini who is supposed to remain free from all aspects of anthropocentric egoism and the ontological divisions encouraged by it. This integrative yoga revolves around a large and refreshing vision of *yoga* (union)



between nature and culture, mind and body, consciousness and matter, with the altruistic aim of serving the material world and healing its ailments.

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