



Abhinavagupta in Assembly

Light on Abhinavagupta's Contribution to the Advaita Shaiva Spiritual Philosophy of Kashmir

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OUT OF THE EIGHT SCHOOLS of Shaiva spiritual philosophy that had their origin and development in different parts of India in different periods of time, the Advaita Shaiva spiritual philosophy of Kashmir is the

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most prominent one on account of richness in terms of literary output and the depth in its spiritual thought projections. Eight schools of Shaiva spiritual thought arranged in chronological order are: the Pashupata Shaiva school, the Lakulisha Pashupata school, the Nandikeshvara Shaiva school, the Shaiva Siddhanta, the Virashaiva school, the Raseshvara Shaiva school,

the Advaita Shaiva school of Kashmir, and the Shaiva school founded and propagated by Shrikantha in Kashmir. The first three schools of Shaivism mentioned above originated in the beginning as religious cults in chronological order in the pre-Christian era in the north-western and south-western parts of India. Very limited literature that was created later is available pertaining to them, shedding light on their spiritual thought projections.

The Shaiva Siddhanta school of spiritual thought is also one of the ancient schools of Shaivism that has extensive literature and also following even today in Tamil Nadu. The original texts were created in Tamil based on the oral teachings of Shaiva saints. Later works were written in Sanskrit by some writers for dissemination of their spiritual philosophy in North India, especially in Kashmir. The Virashaiva school that flourished in Karnataka was founded by Revana, later developed by Basava. It has a fairly rich literature written in Sanskrit and also a large following even today in Karnataka. The followers of this school wear an idol of Shiva on their body, a practice started by Basava in the twelfth century. The followers of this school are now called *lingayatras*. The existence of the Raseshvara school of Shaivism is known to us only from the description of the main tenets of its philosophical thought given by Madhava-charya in his well-known Sanskrit compendium, *Sarva-darshana-samgraha*.

The Advaita school of spiritual philosophy was founded in Kashmir by sage Vasugupta in the last quarter of the eight century CE. It is said that he was an ardent devotee of Lord Shiva and was very keen to learn the Shaiva mode of spiritual practice. But he could not find a suitable guru, who could satiate his thirst for learning the Shaiva mode of spiritual practice. His intense yearning for learning the spiritual philosophy of

Advaita Shaivism and the mode of their spiritual practice to realise his true nature was fulfilled by Lord Shiva himself, who appeared before him in his dream and told him: 'Here, on this mountain [Mahadeva mountain], there is the Secret Esoteric Teaching under a big stone. Having obtained it, reveal it to those who are fit for receiving [my] Divine Grace.'¹

On waking up next morning, Vasugupta went there, and by a mere touch that particular stone slab turned upside down, and he found the *Shiva Sutra* inscribed on it. The mountain and the stone slab still exist in the valley of Harvan stream, behind the Shalimar Gardens, near present-day Srinagar in India. Thus, Vasugupta was *not* the author of *Shiva Sutra*. It is a revealed text, technically called *Agama*. Other works belonging to the category of *Agama* and also those that are oft-quoted in the later works describing the spiritual philosophy of this school are the *Malinivijaya Tantra*, the *Svachchhanda Tantra*, the *Netra Tantra*, the *Vijnanabhairava Tantra*, and the *Rudrayamala Tantra*.

Vasugupta taught Kallata (c. 855 CE) the spiritual philosophy contained in the *Shiva Sutra*. Kallata grasped the purport of the spiritual thought conveyed in the *Shiva Sutra*, which were reproduced by him in his own way in the work *Spanda Karika*. In this way, he gave rise to a distinct phase in the development of the Advaita Shaiva thought, called *Spanda*. Kallata wrote a *vritti*, gloss, on these *karikas*, which together with the commentary is known as *Spanda Sarvasva*. Three commentaries on the *karikas* are available: *Vivriti* by Ramakantha (c. 925 CE), *Pradipa* by Utpala Bhatta (tenth century CE), and *Nirnaya* by Kshemaraja. Kshemaraja also wrote a bigger work, *Spanda Nirnaya*, which he summarised in *Spanda Sandoha*.

Vasugupta's disciple Siddha Somananda (c. 850 CE) gave a new turn to the development of

the Advaita Shaiva spiritual philosophy by writing *Shivadrishti*, in which he made an attempt to rationalise the philosophical thought projections by introducing dialectics for the first time. He is therefore spoken of as 'Tarkasya karta; the creator of logic'. His pupil, Utpaladeva (c. 970 CE) wrote *Ishvarapratyabhijna* or *Pratyabhijna Karika*, in which he tried to present the summary of the thought projections of his teacher. But this work assumed so much importance that the Advaita Shaiva philosophy came to be known as the *Pratyabhijna Shastra*, even outside Kashmir. Abhinavagupta wrote two commentaries on this work: *Vimarshini*, a shorter commentary and *Vivriti Vimarshini*, a detailed commentary.

Abhinavagupta (950–1020 CE) was a master

syncretist, who discovered the thread of unity underlying the divergent spiritual thought-currents that had their origin and development in successive periods of time. In his magnum opus, *Tantraloka* and *Paratrimshika*, he has said that the spiritual thought-currents known as *Agama*, *Spanda*, and *Pratyabhijna* are not divergent in nature, but these are mutually complementary.² Historically speaking, these represent three successive phases in the development of the Advaita Shaiva philosophy in Kashmir. He has therefore named it as the Trika school of Shaivism.

Abhinavagupta has mentioned three triads, *trika*, in his magnum opus *Tantraloka* as constituting the subject matter of the Trika school of Shaivism. These are: Shiva, Shakti, and their union; Shiva, Shakti, and Nara; and Para Shakti,

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Apara Shakti, and Parapara Shakti. He has projected the idea of their essential identity by naming the Advaita Shaiva school of spiritual philosophy as Trika.

When we carefully study the early formative life of Abhinavagupta, we find that the syncretic outlook developed in his mental make-up due to his studying different subjects with different teachers of his time, whom he has mentioned by name. For instance, his father Narasimhagupta alias Chukhulaka was his first teacher from whom he learnt Sanskrit grammar, Sanskrit literature, and logic or Nyaya (37.58). He studied Nyaya, Mimamsa, Yogachara Buddhism, Arhata philosophy, Pancharatra Vaishnavism, and so on, under different teachers. He stayed in different *mathikas* or *gurukulas*, schools that were meant for initiating students into the study of different schools of philosophical thought with a view to generate a balanced philosophical approach in them. He has mentioned Bhutiraja and his son Helaraja of Nathamathika (37.60), Vamananatha for studying dualistic Shaivism, Lakshmanagupta of Trayambaka Mathika for studying *Kulaprakriya*, which is the same as *Yogini-Kaulamata* founded by Siddha Matsyendranatha. Matsyendranatha is said to have founded the Yogini Kaula school of Kamakhya, where he performed his sadhana and obtained perfection. He was venerated as a siddha in Tibet where he is known as Luipa. He was venerated in Nepal as an incarnation of Bodhisattva. He was also the guru of Gorakshanatha.

Abhinavagupta has mentioned that he moved from one guru to another like a black bee to collect scented honey from different flowers and blend them to produce a masterpiece, namely, a spiritual philosophy that is rich and sublime in the form of the Advaita Shaiva philosophy of Kashmir (13.335).

He also borrowed spiritual thoughts from the

Chumma tradition that was then popular with the common masses in Kashmir, and assimilated them in the spiritual philosophy named by him as Trika. It may be mentioned here that no literature was available to him then, which is evident from his quoting verses in the local dialect without naming the source and incorporating them at the end of some chapters of his work, *Tantrasara*. In this manner, Abhinavagupta made the Advaita Shaiva philosophy, the most perfect and powerful school of spiritual philosophy in Kashmir, eclipsing the popularity of other schools like Shaiva Siddhanta, Yogachara Buddhism, and Pancharatra Vaishnavism in Kashmir.

Abhinavagupta's syncretic outlook is also reflected in his description of the Advaita Shaiva cosmology. According to him, *Samvid* or the supreme Real conceived in a non-corporeal form as abstract metaphysical principle or Parama Shiva or Parameshvara conceived in a corporeal form resolves to manifest himself as the universe out of his free will. He does so by exercising his divine power, technically called the *svatantrya shakti*, the power of divine freedom. His power then functions in three different forms, technically called Para Shakti or Mahamaya, Parapara Shakti or Maya Shakti, and Apara Shakti or Prakriti Shakti on the three stadia in world creation. As a result of this, the universe is manifested in three different forms, technically called *shuddha adhva*, *shuddhashuddha adhva* or *mayadhva*, and *ashuddha adhva* or Prakriti. In his work, *Paramarthasara*, Abhinavagupta conceptualised these *adhvas* as constituting spheres which he named as *andas*.³ These are named by him as *shaktyanda*, in which the divine power functions in its pure form as *chitshakti* or *mahamaya*; *mayanda*, in which the divine power is held to be functioning as *sukshma achit shakti* or *maya*; and *prakritiyanda*, in which *achit shakti* functions in its gross form or Prakriti. Abhinavagupta adds

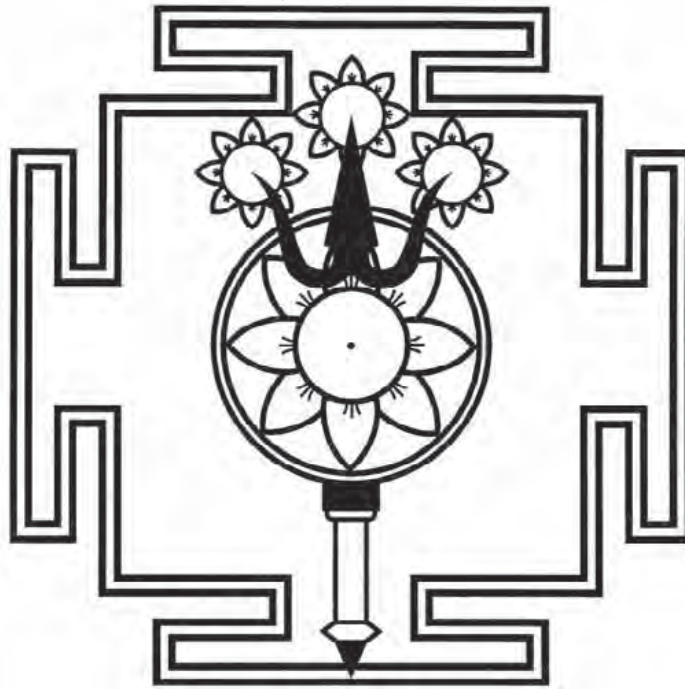
one more *anda*, a sphere, which he calls *prithvy-anda*. He has classified thirty-six *tattvas* or levels of manifested universe admitted in the Advaita Shaiva school of Kashmir under four *andas*: *sadashiva tattva*; *ishvara tattva* and the *shuddhavidya tattva* constituting the *shaktyanda*; *mayashakti* and five *kanchukas* namely, *kala*, *vidya*, *raga*, *kala*, and *niyati*, constituting *mayanda*; Purusha, Prakriti, *buddhi*, *ahamkara*, and *manas*, five powers of sense perception called *jnanendriyas*, five powers of action called *karmendriyas*, and five primary subtle elements called *tanmatras* constituting the *prakrityanda*; five gross material elements called *mahabhutas* that are the product of five *tanmatras* constituting *prithvy-anda*. The total number of *tattvas* constituting the manifest world is thirty-four. The remaining two *tattvas* out of a

total number of thirty-six *tattvas*, *Shiva-tattva* and *Shakti-tattva* are held to be eternally existent as such, as these stay above the world creation. Parama Shiva, the supreme Being exists on the top as the transcendent Reality and the Absolute. He is also immanent or creative at the same time. His creative nature is represented by *Shiva-tattva*, which symbolises the initial creative movement. The universe manifested by the supreme Being, Parama Shiva out of his free will, not only consists of thirty-six *tattvas* or levels

of creation mentioned earlier, but also of infinite number of limited beings—*pramata*, experiencers, and their objects of *prameya*, experience, which exist on each of the levels of the manifested universe described above. Actually, it is the supreme Being, Parama Shiva, who manifests himself both as so many *tattvas* or levels of creation and also as an infinite number of experiencers and their objects of experience by assuming self-contraction out of his free will (6).

The experiencers thus manifested by Parama

Shiva can be classified under two heads—pure experiencers existing on three levels within *shakty-anda* or *shuddhavadha* are technically called *mantramaheshvara*, *mantreshvara*, and mantra existing on the pure levels of *sadashiva-tattva*, *ishvara-tattva*, and *shuddhavidya-tattva* respectively. These



Trident Yantra of Parama Shiva

pure experiencers are equipped with pure bodies made up of *bindu* or divine power in a concentrated form, technically called *baindavadeha*. *Baindavadeha* of pure experiencers serves as a vehicle for enjoyment only by them. Pure experiencers have no independent will of their own, hence they exist like gods immersed in their true consciousness nature tasting bliss.

The experiencers existing on a different level of world manifestation existing within the sphere of Prakriti called *prakrityanda* are technically

known as *sakalas*, literally meaning equipped with kala or gross physical body. Abhinavagupta has described in his work *Paramarthasara*, the constitution of psycho-physical body framework of *sakalas*. According to him the body structure, individual, of *sakalas* is made up of the gross physical body and the subtle body technically called *puryashtaka*. The gross physical body is made up of five gross physical elements called the *mahabhutas*, while *puryashtaka* is comprised of five subtle elements, intellect, the sense of ego, and mind. Abhinavagupta conceives the physical body of an embodied individual as a temple in which Shiva resides as the Self (7). Embodied human beings participating actively in world transactions are not aware of his presence in the innermost core of their being on account of their vision directed towards the world existing outside them. Spiritual practitioners have to pursue the path of spiritual disciplines to discover the presence of Shiva in the sanctum sanctorum of their physical body and recognise him there. This involves the changing of the direction of their vision from the world existing outside oneself to within by performing the appropriate kind of spiritual practices called introversion, developing an inner vision. When they would succeed, they would realise the supreme goal, namely the recognition of their real self or Shiva. This is technically called *pratyabhijna*, recognition. Incidentally, it may be mentioned here that the same idea also occurs in a mantra in the *Katha Upanishad*: 'The self-existent Lord destroyed the outgoing senses. Therefore, one sees the outer things and not the inner Self. A rare discriminating man, desiring immortality, turns his eyes away and then sees the indwelling Self.'⁴

Abhinavagupta holds perfect knowledge to be the cause of the attainment of liberation. The perfect knowledge, according to him, is the revelation of Shiva nature in the spiritual aspirants

that is characterised by his fullness nature in respect of both knowledge and action. Exercising his power of divine freedom that 'vibrates' without break coalesced with him, Shiva appears as limited in knowledge and action out of his free will to manifest himself as the multiplicity of the world. Again, it is he, the supreme Lord, who removes all veils in the form of defilements in the form of the idea of smallness and the like, hiding his true nature by exercising the same power of divine freedom. As a result, he shines, as it were, in his pristine form as Shiva, the supreme Lord. This is described as moksha.

In his *Paramarthasara*, Abhinavagupta states that there is no separate region for liberated persons to proceed towards.⁵ Moksha is attained by them by piercing the knots of ignorance by developing in them the power of divine freedom. Abhinavagupta says in his *Tantraloka* that moksha should not be considered as the attainment of knowledge but it is the cause of knowledge.⁶ It is the manifestation of one's real nature as Atman or Shiva.

All schools of Indian philosophical thought are unanimous in regarding ignorance as the root cause of embodied beings passing through repeated cycles of birth and death, but these schools describe the nature of ignorance differently. Without going into a discussion of the nature of ignorance as conceived by these schools, let us confine ourselves to the examination of the nature of ignorance postulated by the Trika school of Shaivism. According to the teachers of this school, ignorance is the product of the self-contraction assumed by the supreme Lord exercising his divine freedom out of his free will in order to manifest himself as the multiplicity of the world. This results in the creation of *anavamala*, the impurity of limitedness, which is regarded as the basic defilement, *mulamala*, innate in all individual beings in the world. Its origin

lies in the power of divine freedom operated by the supreme lord in order to manifest himself as the multiplicity of the world.

Anavamala operates in the individual limited beings in two ways: causing loss of consciousness or awareness of their true nature in them, technically called *bodha* or *jnana*; causing the loss of freedom of action in them, technically called *kriya*.⁷

The loss of consciousness or awareness of their true nature as well as the loss of freedom of action in them following their self-contraction or envelopment by *anavamala* is technically called *paurusha-ajnana*, ignorance in respect of their true consciousness nature.

Since the root cause of *paurusha-ajnana* in the individual beings is self-contraction assumed by the supreme Lord in the beginning of his self-manifestation as the world, it is eternal in the sense that it is coterminous with the cosmic dissolution. It is innate in all limited beings covering his true self. It cannot be eradicated by them despite their making all the efforts in the form of spiritual practices but it gets destroyed immediately following the influx of the divine grace in them, technically called *shaktipata* from the supreme Lord through his representative guru at the time of their initiation, *diksha*.

The *bauddha-ajnana*, as its very nomenclature indicates, has its seat in the *buddhi* or



intellect of embodied beings. It is of the nature of both indeterminate and determinate knowledge. Its presence in the intellect of all embodied beings prevents them from knowing the real nature of their Self as well as simultaneously produces the experience of Self in what actually is not-Self in them represented by their physical body and so on. The experience of Self in not-Self is technically called *vikalpa* or *kalpana*, thought-construct, which is symbolised by the ego-experience. It is produced when the real Self becomes associated with the gross physical body at the time of its appearance on the mundane plane as an embodied being. It ceases to exist with the Self's dissociation from the gross physical body at the time of the death of the embodied being. Sri Ramakrishna called this ego-experience in embodied beings, the 'unripe ego'.⁸

The Advaita Shaiva texts of Kashmir admit *paurusha-jnana* and *bauddha-jnana* as counter to *paurusha-ajnana* and *bauddha-ajnana* described above. The nature of *paurusha-jnana* is described by Abhinavagupta in his *Tantrasara* as the experience of the Self in the real Self.⁹ It is eternal as it exists in every sentient embodied individual right from the time of his manifestation simultaneously with the Self—manifestation by the supreme Lord, Parama Shiva as the multiplicity of the world. Though it is eternal in nature, it is *not experienced* by the embodied individual beings on account of the 'screen' created by the ego-experience, which hides the experience of Self in real Self in them. The ego-experience is a product of the *bauddha-ajnana* existing in the intellect of all embodied beings since their appearance on the mundane plane in the beginning of world creation. But when the individual spiritual aspirant is infused with the divine grace of the guru at the time of initiation, the 'screen' veiling the true Self in oneself, that is,

bauddha-ajnana, is annihilated in the disciple for some period of time. As a result, the *paurusha-jnana* arises in the disciple and the disciple becomes aware of one's real Self. It illumines the intellect, producing the experience, 'I am Shiva, I am Shiva' in the disciple.

The disciple then experiences the entire universe consisting of different objects of the world existing in the clear mirror of one's consciousness nature, everything that exists in one's consciousness nature to emanate from one, like varied objects experienced in dream appearing in a concrete form in the waking state, as it were. It is the supreme Self experienced as pure 'I', who takes the form of the universe like gross physical body composed of hands, feet, and so on. It is the pure 'I', who alone is manifest in all illumination. 'The universe shines forth in myself alone just as a pot, and the like, (appear) in a spotless mirror. All springs up from myself just like the variegated variety of dreams (arises) from sleep. I myself have the form of the universe as if it were a body that by nature consists of hands, feet, and the like. I myself shine forth in all as the (Shakti or Power) whose essential nature is brightness with reference to (all) the positive entities.'¹⁰



References

1. Kshemaraja, *Shiva Sutra Vimarshini*, Introduction.
2. See Abhinavagupta, *Tantraloka*, 1.7–21.
3. See Abhinavagupta, *Paramarthasara*, 4.
4. *Katha Upanishad*, 2.1.1.
5. See *Paramarthasara*, 60.
6. See *Tantraloka*, 1.156.
7. See Utpaladeva, *Ishvara Pratyabhijna Karika*, 3.2–4.
8. M., *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, trans. Swami Nikhilananda (Chennai: Ramakrishna Math, 2002), 860.
9. See Abhinavagupta, *Tantrasara*, Introduction.
10. *Paramarthasara*, 48–9.