CHAPTER NINE

ESOTERIC LANGUAGE

Pervasive among ancient sages was the insistence that mathematical language holds a secret meaning known only by initiates. Concerning ancient Babylonian texts, R. C. Thompson calls their style obscure and notes that “writers took pains to make their forecasts unintelligible to the uninitiated” (1900: xxix). Describing the language of the Sūryasiddhānta, E. Burgess calls it elliptical to a degree that would make meaning unclear without commentary. This hinting style, he says, “is typical of Hindu scientific literature” (1859: 143). Henderson states that the language of Chinese divination, Greek oracles, and the like are all intentionally obscure (1999: 80).

Though readily perceived by some, the idea that mathematical language inherently holds a secret meaning known only to initiates is widely disputed by modern scholars. O. Neugebauer even rejects the perception that mathematical texts have an inherently opaque style. “The language of Greek and Babylonian mathematics,” he says, “is clear” (1951: 137-138). This notion is seconded by Lloyd and Sivin who understand esotericism as a cultural phenomenon.¹

As a cultural phenomenon, esotericism was manifested in numerous traditions across Eurasia. Examples include early Christian Gnosticism, medieval secret societies such as the Teutonic Knights and Templars, and the medieval Kabbala teachings in Judaism. However, when it comes to written mathematical language, the development of specific forms of arcanum belongs especially to Indian astronomy and particularly the tantric tradition (Neugebauer 1951: 137-138; Stone 1981: 23).

Tantras are written in a specific kind of ‘intentional language’ (S. sandhābhāṣā; Tib. dgongs pa’i skad), that is, a form of enigmatic speech that holds a secret meaning (Newman 1987: 38-40; Bharati 1961: 261-262; Davis 1995: 41-42). According to E. Conze, the concept that words have both an obvious and hidden meaning came largely as a yogācārin concept on sandhābhāṣā around AD 300 (1975: 25-26). J. Newman, who has worked

¹ Concerning the Pythagorean tradition which is often remembered for its esoteric practices, their careful study of the sources reveals that “stories about the secretiveness of the Pythagorean group may go back to the 4th century BC but receive much attention in later sources such as Porphyry and Iamblichus” (2002: 105).
extensively on the Kālacakratantra and related texts, notes that a given passage can have both an exoteric and esoteric meaning and cites six alternatives for tantric speech: intentional/unintentional; literal/non-literal; and provisional/definitive (Newman 1987: 38-40).

This sandhābhāṣā form, however, is only one of numerous other kinds of esoteric language found in tantric texts. A. Bharati, who in his article “Intentional Language in the Tantras” discusses the different ways in which the sandhābhāṣā tradition has been interpreted by scholars and poses the question of its ultimate purpose, notes as well that though sandhābhāṣā is a language of light and darkness whereby some passages are understandable others not, it always appears to describe something. This is distinct from the appearance and objective of various mantric forms such as dhāranīs, magic spells mostly consisting of Sanskrit syllables or words and/or unintelligible phonetic units used in ritual, which do not designate anything in nature and set out in their purpose to bring about change (1961: 261-262).

Neither the opaque style typical of the Kālacakratantra nor the unintelligible language typical of dhāranīs is found in the Manual, however, which refers to dhāranīs (M. tarnī) but does not offer any. Compared to the ornate, convoluted sentence structure of the introduction, a style typical of Buddhist exposition, the language of the main text, where the content is divination, is exceedingly straightforward and, with the exception of genre specific terms, concepts, and formulae, rather easy to understand. This is not to say, however, that the language of the Manual holds no secret meaning. Contrary to those who understand esotericism merely in terms of cultural and historical circumstances or as an unverifiable, mystical insight into nature, the foundation of esoteric language lies in something purely scientific and empirical: the inconstant nature of a point, whereby every one thing contains two opposing things at the same time, such that when one is perceived the other is hidden. This instability, as we have seen, is clear from mathematics’ first point, where order is derived from chaos through the fixing of a point against the void by which space and time may be apportioned. As that point holds divergent phenomena, tropical and sidereal, it exists for but a moment. Herein lies the problem of space and time, the flux between instant and duration. Due to these divergent phenomena, genesis, the eternal, instantaneous, metaphysical and universal reality, is hidden by a transient, durative, physical, and conventional reality. Though it rejects esoteric knowledge in favor of a rhetoric based on a priori faith in a durative abiding order, Second Isaiah likely remembers this foundation of esoteric language in the forging of order from chaos in following passage, “I [the Lord] did not speak in secret, in a land of darkness; I did not say to the offspring of Jacob, ‘Seek me in chaos’” (Isaiah 45.19).