Metaphor, Rasa, and Dhvani: Suggested Meaning in Tantric Esotericism

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Abstract
Indian aesthetics provides a framework for reading Tantric traditions. Tantras describe the public and private domains of ritual in language that grounds esoteric experience while referring to commonsense entities. Their language is highly metaphorical, and uses conceptual blend, indication, and indirect suggestion. The experience transformed through meditation and ritual practice in this depiction parallels aesthetic bliss, and the theme of this description is the recognition of the true nature of the self, considered as concealed in mundane experience. The central argument of this paper is that the application of the aesthetic theories of rasa and dhvani to a reading of Tantra allows a deeper insight into Tantric rituals, their mystical writings, and esoteric practices. By studying two select cases of the description of esoteric bliss and consciousness, this essay contextualizes two aspects of aesthetics, rasa and dhvani, as tools for deciphering esoteric Tantric literature.

Keywords
Tantra, metaphor, blend, rasa, dhvani, ānanda, cit, Abhinavagupta

Introduction
This essay examines two aspects of classical Indian literature: esoteric Tantric materials and classical Indian aesthetics. Tantras have developed their own ontology and epistemology in the presentation of private and public rituals. The ritual dimension of Tantra is wide. It not only embraces the subject matter of Hinduism, but also includes Buddhist or Jaïn traditions. Through yogic practices and through dance, possession, and other forms of rituals, Tantra plays a direct role in common religious experience. The diversity of Tantric visualization, architecture, and its philosophy defies commonsense interpretation.

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Classical Indian aesthetics emerge from the interpretation of dance and drama performed primarily in ritual settings. In addition to analysis of the metaphoric and literal dimensions of language, this aesthetic model relies on an understanding of psychological moods that are identified as *rasa*. Select Indian philosophers advanced this theory by propounding the doctrine of *dhvani*, by which the highest aesthetic bliss is experienced through suggestion.

The central argument of this paper is that the application of these aesthetic theories allows a deeper insight into Tantric rituals, their mystical writings, and esoteric private and public practices. The scope of this essay, therefore, is the cognitive and psychological aspects of ritual behavior, with the objective of interpreting religious experience through the lens of aesthetics. In order to ground the argument, this paper explores the scope of religious experience theorized in Tantras, specifically in the Trika doctrine of Kashmir, and the cognitive models found in classical Indian philosophy of aesthetics and utilizes the latter as a tool to interpret the first.

**The Problem of Interpretation**

Esoteric texts are notoriously cryptic. Unlike those describing phenomenal reality, these texts take for granted a subject matter rather unknown to the ordinary senses. If the scope of esoteric texts is nothing other than common-sense experience, it does not deserve a separate treatment. On the other hand, if it is suggested that these texts are describing something beyond the realm of mundane experience, this thesis has to confront multiple challenges, one being, is there really something to be described out of the range of ordinary experience? Even when metaphoric expression of something uncommon is considered possible, the description of mystical experience will be something similar to describing ‘sweet’ love to someone who is aware of only sweet mangos.

The issue can be framed in the following question: Does language reproduce, remind, or grant recognition of something already known, or can language break the barrier of that which is already experienced and touch something new? If language were to not grant new knowledge, the very application of language to describe esoteric experience would bear no fruit, and the above question is moot. The Tantric Trika doctrine, the philosophy under discussion, negotiates the ground by adopting the doctrine of recognition (*pratyabhijñā*) where ‘reality’ is something already known. It is immediately cognized as the ground of cognition, hidden due to ignorance and revealed in self-reflective meditation by recognizing the essential nature of awareness. The problem,