

Nature of Śakti in *Pancastavī* and *Saundarya Laharī*: Mystical Elements in Devotional Framework

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This paper takes a look at two pre-medieval Sanskrit devotional texts to see they delineate cosmic power as Śakti, the highest principle considered to be beyond all philosophical conceptualization. Acarya Shankara's *Saundarya Laharī* and Dharmacharya's *Pancastavī* both are esoteric hymnal compositions on the Divine feminine that bear significant resemblance. On the surface, the texts offer poetically powerful images of the goddess in the form of divine mother but at a deeper level the texts serve as scriptures for Śrīvidyā philosophy and practice. Some of the significant aspects of Śrīvidyā that both the texts highlights are:

- Significance of guru and esoteric māntric syllables (*bījākṣaras*) which must be obtained only from guru within the *guru-paramparā*. (*Pancastavī*.¹)
- References to Puranic history are in abundance. Entire range of the forms of Goddess from the Puranic sources as well as from folklore are invoked in the texts. For instance, images of *Sarasvatī*, *Lakṣmī*, *Durgā*, *Pārvatī*, *Ambā*, *Śīvā*, and *Śabrī* are described in detail in *Pancastavī*.
- Depictions of Goddess as *Kundalinī Śakti*, *Tripurasundarī*, *Mātrikā*, and *Mālinī* in *Pancastavī*.
- Goddess in her fourfold aspect of Speech- *Parāvāk*; *Pashyantī*, *Madhyamā*, and *Vaikhari*. Subsequently as the source of all names and forms arising from the *svaras* (vowels) and *vyanjana-s* (consonants beginning from *ka* and ending in *kṣa - kādikṣānta*) *akṣaras* and *varṇas* reminding us of *Parātrimśika* and Trika influence on Dharmacharya's *Pancastavī*.
- In *Pancastavī*, at the end of each section, poet underlines the *phalaśruti* i.e. the fruit of worship, which is an essential part of any devotional text. Keeping in line with that the author repeatedly

mentions grace of the goddess that devotee experience. It is interesting to note that in both the poems supreme grace of goddess on the devotee is rise of creativity in the form of spontaneous flow of poetry from him².

Current scholarship ascribes these texts to two different lineages (*paramparās*) – one flourishing in the South and the other flourishing north in Kashmir.

The resemblance in the texts, on one hand leaves us with questions related to historicity but on the other hand, it indicates the assimilative and merging nature of our traditions and the free flow of cultures in the subcontinent at all times.

Many scholars contest the authorship and dating of both the texts, yet majority of them believe that *Saundarya Laharī* is Aadi Shankara's (788-820 AD)³ composition, and Śrī *Pancastavī* is that of Dharmacharya (end of 9th or beginning of 10th CE).

On historicity of the texts

One can conjecture that Dharmacharya could have preceded Adi Shankara on the basis that Dharmacharya fondly alludes to Udayana (2.7) and Vatsaraja (1.12) at two places in his poem. King Udayana was the hero of the Sri Harsha's famous play *Ratnāvalī* and King Harsha was a seventh century sovereign of Kannauj. It is interesting that Lakshmidhara, the 14th century commentator of the *Saundarya Laharī* refers to *Panchastavī* in his commentary and ascribes it to Kālidāsa, which proves the antiquity of the *Panchastavī* regardless of its authorship.

Further, Dharmacharya's *Pancastavī* is quoted by Acarya Mammata (11th century) in his *Kāvyaaprakāśa* and also by King Bhoja (11th century) in his *Sarasvatī Kanṭhābharaṇa*, hence it is considered to be a text that definitely existed before 10th century. Besides, there are references to Śavarī Pūjā (1.17, 3.1,4.15, 5.3), which is popular in Maharashtra,

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Karnataka and Kerala. This suggests that Dharmacharya may have belonged to South India. External evidences like the fact that king Bhoja and aesthetician Mammata quote this poem in their works, indicate that the text must have been popular in the Southern and Central parts of India as well. *Pancastavī* may have lost its popularity among South Indian people in recent times but it remains a popular text of Devi worship in Kashmiri Hindu households till today. Shri B.N. Pandit in his essay on “*Pancastavī* in Kashmir” speaks about the presence of this text in the valley since antiquity: “*Pancastavī* is highly popular with the pundits of Kashmir who sing it regularly at the time of their daily worship at their homes and especially at the religious places of the Mother Goddess.”⁴

Kashmiri Śaivācārya Sri Harbhata Sashtri (1894-1951) has written an elaborate commentary in Sanskrit on the *Pancastavī* from Trika perspective. Trika Śaiva saint-scholar Swami Lakshman Joo Maharaja has also translated the poem into Hindi with brief descriptions of the Trika principles as they occur in the verses. Thus, he also reads the text in the Kashmir Śaiva framework⁵.

However, in contrast to *Saundaryā Laharī*, the *Pancastavī* is a very distinct text because it assimilates elements from disparate traditions and upholds the essential oneness of the Śākta streams of worship. In a wide range of verses, the text invokes Supreme principle as divine mother who is the source of all names and forms in this universe. Following verse is an example of how Dharmacharya beautifully declines to delimit the form of divine mother within the discourse of prevailing philosophical expositions:

*Kulaṁ kecitprāhurvaparakulamanye tava budhāḥ
Pare tatsambhedāṁ samabhidadhate Kaulamapare
Caturṅāmapyeṣāmupari kimapi prāhurapare
Mahāmāye ! tattoaṁ tava kathamamī niścinumahe. //5.10//*

[O Mahāmāyā Bhagavati! Many wise ones name your *svaroopa* as *Kula*; others (Tantric traditions) call you *Akula* (Śiva); some (Trika followers) describe you as *Kulākula* or comprised of Śiva-Śakti-Sāmarasya; some (*Pratyabhijñā* philosophers) describe you with the epithet of *Kaula*; others describe you as *Anākhyā*. O mother! You only tell us how do we define your form?]

Esoteric elements within the devotional framework

These poems fall into the category of *stotra* (hymn) literature which is one of the eight aspects of Devi worship in the *Antaryāga - patal, padhati, kavacha, stotra, sahasranāma* and so on. Both the hymns celebrate ecstatic love for the divine that dissolves all diversity and paints every form into one - that of Śakti. From aesthetic perspective, both poems invoke sentiment of supreme love in the heart of a *sahrudaya* through the beauty of diction, metaphor, symbolism, meter and the subject matter.

Acarya Shankar’s *Saundaryā Laharī* is associated with the *samaya mata*.⁶ Although Dharmacharya’s *Pancastavī* been placed in the Trika context, it refers to both the traditions of Śrīvidyā i.e. the *Samaya mata* as well as *Kaula mata*, but doesn’t show specific affiliation to anyone view. Both the texts uphold non-duality in their own way. For instance, the poet of the *Pancastavī* says, “*paramārthatopi tvam Bhagavatī ekā sati... naratakīva bahuvidhā saṅdraśyase*” (4.18). The *Saundaryā Laharī* reflects the same idea:

*Manastvaṁ vyoma tvaṁ marudasi marutsārathirasi
toamāpastvaṁ bhūmistvaṁ pariṇatāyāṁ nahi param
toameva svātmānaṁ pariṇamayitūṁ viśvavapuṣā
cidānandākāraṁ Haramahiṣi bhāvena bibhṛṣe (verse 35.)*

[O consort of Śiva! Thou art mind; thou art ether; thou art air; thou art fire; thou art water and earth too. When thou hast transformed thyself into the form of the universe in this way, there is nothing beyond what is not included in Thee. This form of consciousness and bliss that Thou assumest rules in the form of Śiva’s consort.]

These hymns use everything that is of value in the creation as a metaphor for the goddess and integrate tantric as well as mythological, metaphysical as well as mystical in order to reveal Devi’s immanence as well as her transcendence in the universe.

The significance of these texts lies in that although the poet-exponents adopt the style and format of a devotional text and sing praises of the Goddess in extremely sublime poetic discourse, they intertwine the metaphysical aspects of the Divine feminine that has its source in the mainstream Hindu religious structure and the peripheral Tantric traditions at the same time. In order to reveal the transcendental aspect of Śakti the poets specifically take recourse to tantric metaphysics. They integrate all three aspects of the Tantric symbolism- *yantra*, *mantra* and *mandala*. The *Lalitāsahasranāma* refers to these as the *mūrtisvarūpa* (the auspicious three dimensional anthropomorphic form, the mandala); the *māntricasvarūpa* or mystic sound syllables; and the *yāntricasvarūpa* i.e. the geometric design as abode of Śakti. We shall look at the individual texts to see how they hold the key to sacred mystical practices that are revealed only within the guru-disciple lineage

Mantroddhāra, extraction of the seed syllables (*bījas-mantra*)

The first section of *Pancastavī* is called as *Laghustavī*. In its 21 *stotras*, it reveals the *manthroddhāra* process through intense metaphors that conceal potent Śakti *bījas*. Author sings glory of Śakti inherent in the three *bīja* mantras and weaves the *bīja*-s into a beautiful descriptions about various forms of divine as goddess mother. The depiction

of the mantras is never done in a direct statement but with symbols and metaphors from Pauranic literature so that only a guru or a realized *siddha* can extract the mantras from a given verse.

To see the *mantroddhāra* or the extraction process of the mantras, one can look at following verses from *Laghustava*.

“The one who holds the luster of ‘Indra-dhanuṣa’ (rainbow) in her forehead; who carries the cool white rays of moon on her head (symbolic of the whole universe); who holds the warm rays of the light of the sun in her heart- that same goddess Tripura who fulfills these three dimensions of existence, may she burn our sins at once with the three *padas* (as in the poetic meter) of *Aimkāra* from ‘*Aindrasya Śarāsanasya*’; *Kleemkāra* from ‘*Śaukleem*’ (white light of the moon), *Sauḥkāra* from ‘*Aiṣaṣauḥ*’ (That same (goddess)).

ऐयन्द्रस्यैव शरासनस्य दधती मध्ये ललाटं प्रभां
शौक्लीं कान्तिमनुष्णगोरिव शिरस्यातन्वति सर्वतः
एषाषौ त्रिपुरा हृदि द्युतिरिवोष्णान्शोः सदाहः स्थिता
छइन्द्यान्नः सहसा पदैस्त्रिभिरघं ज्योतिर्मयी वाङ्गमयी
[Verse 1.1]

The three *bijas* are revealed in the first verse and then the power of each syllable is separately explained in the rest of the section. Each syllable of the three-syllabled mantra is supposed to be powerful in *krama* (sequence), in *akrama* (without sequence) and also in the non-*krama* (in any sequence) modes and the grace of *Vāṇi*, goddess *Vāk*, the source of poetry and creativity descends on the worshipper. Poet affirms that even if someone utters the syllables unknowingly or inappropriately, the mantras quickly bear fruit and bestow *siddhis*, the mystical powers on the *sādhaka*. (verse 1.6).

Similarly, *hreemkāra bija* is revealed in the 18th verse of the 1st section in which all imaginable forms of Supreme Tripura Śakti are invoked, “you are *Māyā*, *Kundalinī*, *Kriyāmadhumatī*, *Kālī*, *Kalā* (*niṛtī*, *pratiṣṭhā*, *vidyā*, *Śāntā*, *Śāntātīta*), *ṇādi-fānta Mālinī*, *Mātaṅgī* (amongst the ten *vidyās-Tārā*, *Dhūmāvati*, *Baglāmukhī*, *Chhinnamastā*), *Vijayā* (bestowing victory over *Tanmātrās*), *Jayā* (liberating from the *karma* and fruit of *karma*), *Bhagavatī* (endowed with six *aishvaryas*), *Śivā* (auspicious one), *Śāmbhavī* (identical with *Śiva*), *Śakti*, *Śankaravallabhā* (beloved of *Śankara*), *Trinayanā* (the three-eyed one), *Vāgvādinī*, *Bhairavī*, *Hreemkāri*, *Tripurā* (*Tripurāsundarī*), *Parāparamayī* (bestower of *bhoga*, the enjoyment as well as *moksha*, the liberation), *Mātā* and *Kumārī*.” (1.18)

Bijākṣhara-s ‘a-kṣa-hreem’ and ‘na-fa-hreem’

Another verse reveals *bijākṣhara-s a-kṣa-hreem* and *na-fa-*

hreem by depicting that all sounds and letters - in the form of pure syllables; joined with other letters in groups of two or three; mixed-letters or mixed with vowels; just consonants from *ka* to *kṣa* – represent thousands of names of mother *Tripurāsundarī* who is *Bhairava*’s consort. This mystical verse is worth quoting:

Āīpallavitai parasparayutairdivritri kramādyakṣaraiḥ
Kādyaiḥ kṣāntagataiḥ svarādibhiratho kṣāntaiśca taiḥ sasvaraiḥ
Nāmāni Tripure ! bhavanti khalu yanyatyanta guhyāni te
Tebhyo Bhairavapatni ! viśatisahasrebhyaḥ parebhyo namaḥ!!
[Laghustava. 1.19]

[O great Goddess Tripurā (the one who fulfills the three worlds)! O consort of *Bhairava*! Your highly mystical names (in the form of (*bijākṣhara-s*)) are of the form of leaves of vowels ā-ī. In a sequence of two or three, they are mixed syllables. They begin with *ka* and end with *kṣa*; they are joined with vowels; or they begin with vowel and end with *kṣa* i.e. they are ‘*a-kṣa-hreem*’ and ‘*na-fa-hreem*’. We bow down to those twenty thousand excellent names of yours!]

In the last section of the hymn, a powerful *bija* mantra is concealed. The *īṅkāra bija* is hidden in the word-phrase *Bhagavatīm*. In the word *Bhagavatīm*, a joining (*sandhi*) between address word (*sambodhana*) ‘*Bhagavati*’ and seed syllable ‘*īṅkāra*’ is effectively done to hide the mantra. The verse in the last section of *Pancastavī* named as *Sakalajanānistavaḥ* reveals this:

Puraḥ paścādantarbahiraparimeyam parimitam
param sthulam sukṣmam sakulamakulam guhyamaguham
davīyo nedīyaḥ sadasaditi viśvam Bhagavatīm ... [5.31]

Swami Lakshman Joo underlines that by doing the *japa* of this *īṅkāra* syllable of *Mahā Tripurāsundarī*, a *sādhaka* obtains ‘*Vishvākaraṣaṇātmikā śakti*’ i.e. power to attract everything desirable in the world. However, he emphasizes that the method of *japa* (*japa-vidhi*) must be learnt only from the *guru*.

Mantroddhāra in Saundarya Laharī

Acarya Shankara conceals the *pancadaśākṣarī mantras* of two distinct systems of *Devī vidyā* i.e. *hādi* and *kādi* in the 32nd and the 33rd verse of *Saundarya Laharī*:

Śivaḥ Śakti kāmāḥ kṣitiratha raviḥ śitakiraṇa
smaro haṁsaḥ shakrastadanu ca parāmāraharayaḥ
amī ḥṛllekhābhīstisrabhiravasāneṣu ghaṭitā
bhajante varṇāste tava jananī namāvayavatām//32//

“O Mother! The syllables *ka*, *ī*, *ai*, *la* indicated by *Śiva*, *Śakti*, *Kāma* and *Earth*; *Ha*, *sa*, *ka*, *ha*, *la* denoted by *sun* (*Ravi*), *moon* (*śitakiraṇa*), *Kāmadeva* (*Smara*), *Hamsa* and *śakra* (*Indra*), and then *sa*, *ka*, *la* denoted by *Parā* (*Śakti*), *Māra* (*Kāmadeva*), *Hari* (*Viṣṇu*), form the mantra of Thy name when joined with the syllable *ḥṛīṅkāra* (*ḥṛllekhā*) at the end of each of the three groups.” (Trans. Swami Satyasangananda Saraswati. 2008:215)

The Pancadaśākṣarī Mantra: ka ī ai la hṛīm ha sa ka ha la hṛīm sa ka la hṛīm

S. No.	Syllable Mantra	Deity	Element	State of consciousness	Devi's three-fold form
1.	ka	Śivaḥ	Agni/ Fire	Jāgrat	Vāgbhava- kūta
2.	ī	Śakti			(from neck to the top of the head)
3.	ai	kāmaḥ			
4.	la	kṣitiḥ			
5.	hṛīm				
6.	ha	ravi	Sun	Svapna	Kāmaka-lā- kūta
7.	sa	śitakiraṇa			(from neck down to the waist)
8.	ka	smara			
9.	ha	hansa			
10.	la	śakraḥ			
11.	hṛīm				
12.	sa	parā	Moon	Suṣupti	Śakti-kūta
13.	ka	māra			(from waist down)
14.	la	hari			
15.	hṛīm				

Smaraṁ yonim lakṣmīm tritayamidamādye tava mano nidhāyāike nitye niravadhimahābhogarasikāḥ japanti tvam cintāmaṇiguṇanibaddhākṣavalayāḥ śivagnau juvantaḥ surabhigṛtadhārāhutiśataih/33//

“O Eternal one! Some connoisseurs of the highest enjoyment do japa of thee adorned with the rosary of cintāmaṇiintāmaṇi gems, adding the syllables of Kāmarāja (klīmkāra), Bhuvaneśvarī (hṛīmkāra) and Sri (śṛīmkāra) at the beginning of thy mantra. (Thus do they) worship thee with the oblations of countless streams of ghee from Surabhi (the celestial cow) in the purified fire of Śiva (i.e. Śakti established in the trikona in the Anahata chakra)”. [Trans. Swami Satyasangananda Saraswati:2008:33]

This verse reveals bīja mantras of the *pancadaśākṣarī* as practiced in *kādi vidyā*. In the *kādi vidyā*, the basic syllables remain the same but three syllables *klīmkāra hṛīmkāra*, and *śṛīmkāra* are added to the main mantra. *Smaraṁ* (syllable of *Kāmarāja* as *klīm*); *Yonim* (syllable of *Bhuvaneshvarī* as *hṛīm*), *Lakṣmīm* (syllable of *Lakṣmī* as *śṛīm*) are carefully revealed in the verse.

As we know, each verse in the *Saundaryā Laharī* is a mantra, the seed syllables of which have been culled out by the gurus⁷. Lakshmidhara's commentary offers an elaborate table with bīja mantra and yantra for

each verse and Swami Satyasangananda has made an important addition to this table by providing a *mandala* i.e. *mūrtisvarūpa* for each verse.

Mūrtisvarūpa: Depiction of mandala-s of the divine mother in Pancastavī

As mentioned above, Dharmacarya's *Pancastavī*, is a condensed poetic flow on the Supreme goddess's immanent and transcendent aspects. Poet sings from a highly realized spiritual state and displays a wide knowledge of esoteric aspects of Śakta-*vidyā*. Dharmacarya's hymn dwells on the form of mother as *Viśvavyāpinī*, the one who pervades each and every particle in the universe. In that sense, the poet speaks of her form in terms of metaphors derived from mythology. The poet invokes and describes all the popular names and forms of goddess that are worshipped in Indian households and are central in Indian mythology. He often just invokes a name and the entire form is spontaneously rises in the mind. As soon as the name is given the image associated with it pops up in the consciousness of the devotee (listener/reader). There are many stanzas in the poem, which give rise to a form that offers complete image of goddess used for meditation, the *dhyānamūrti*.

For instance, goddess *Sarasvatī* (1.7. *Vāme pustaka dhāriṇīm...*; 1.8, *Ye tvām pandur pundarikapatalaspashtabhirā mprabhām...*); goddess *Kālī* (1.11 *Aarbhatyashashikhandama nditajatajutām nrimundasrijam...*)

Dharmacarya also uses colour symbolism of three *guna*-s (white for *sattva*, red for *rajas* and black for *tamas*) to delineate three goddesses *Sarasvatī*, *Lakṣmī*, , *Kālī*/*Durgā* in *sphatika* (white), *sindurī ābhā* (red tint), and *shyāmā* (dark bluish) colours respectively. For example, invocation of *Rudrāṇī* in colour red creates a very vivid image:

Rudrāṇī! Vidrummayīm pratimāmiva tvām ye cintyantyaruṇakantimananyarūpām tānetya pakṣmaladrśaḥ prasabham bhajante kanthāvasaktamṛdubhāhulatāstaruṇya//2.17//

[O Rudrāṇī! The devotees who meditate on your excellent image red like the 'vidruma' gem – young women of delicate limbs and beautiful eyes go and embrace them unabashedly.]

Similarly, goddess *Sarasvatī* is invoked in *Ambastava*, the fourth section:

Yā sphātikṣagunapustakakundikādhyām vykhyāsamudyatakarām śaradinduśubhrām padmāsanām ca hṛdaye bhavatīmupāsate mātā! Sa viśvakavitārkakacavravartī //4.14//

[O Mother! (Thou carries in your four hands) string of sphatika beads, book, kamandala, and your hand lifted for imparting

knowledge; seated on the lotus you in your supreme white colour shine like the October moon. The one who thus meditates on your image in his heart centre becomes the king of poets and scholars.] (trans. mine).

Mandalas of the divine mother in *Saundarya Laharī*

Acarya Shankara's immersion in the waves of beauty (lit. *Saundarya Laharī*) and bliss of spiritual experience gives rise in him the supreme vision of divine mother in her *sākāra svarūpa* (form with attributes).

Besides delineating beautiful vision of mother's form that comes down to us through Pauranic narratives of Śiva and Pārvatī, Acarya Shankara weaves tantric aspects where he depicts the ascent and descent of *Kunḍalinī* from *mulādhāra* through *chakras* to *sahasrāra* and back. Then he conceals the *bīja* mantras of Śakta-vidyā as well as the description of the Śrīyantra within the verses.

Acarya Shankara's hymn has two parts. In the first part up till verse 41, he alludes to the esoteric aspects of mother as divine feminine, as *Kunḍalinī* and as *Tripurasundarī*. Here, he shows mystical dimensions mainly by delineating Śakti's presence in the *kulapatha*, the central passage in the spine piercing each *chakra* as *Kunḍalinī śakti*. He also gives detailed description of Śrīcakra as abode of the divine mother in the 11th verse in this section.

In the second part from verse 42 onwards, he depicts anthropomorphic form of the divine mother as *Pārvatī*, Lord Śiva's consort. The string of verses from 44th (*Vahantī Sindūram prabalakabarī bharatimira...*) to the 89th (*Nakhairnākastrīṇām karakamala samkocaśāsibhih...*) sequentially describe sublime grace bestowing beauty of Supreme mother literally from head to toe. These stanzas joined together to form the divine body of the Goddess.

One can see that Acarya Shankara is adapts *nyāsa-paddhati* from ritual worship where each part of the worshipper's (*upāsaka's*) body is divinized. Acarya Shankara, however, appears to reverse the *nyāsa* process here. In *nyāsa* (literally 'to deposit'), the human body is divinized, however, we see that here that Acarya is actually humanizing the divine body. Besides, this is also an indication that Acarya got so deeply immersed in meditative state or *samādhi* that he had direct vision of the Devi. He uses most sublime metaphors to give us a glimpse of divine mother's anthropomorphic form.

Mother as *Kunḍalinī Śakti* in *Pancastavī* and *Saundarya Laharī*

Many verses in *Pancastavī* and *Saundarya Laharī* are dedicated to the *Kunḍalinī svarūpa* of the goddess and

the rise of *kunḍalinī* in the *suṣumna*, the central psychic channel in the spine. For instance in *Pancastavī*, the verse:

*Taditkotijyotirdyutidalita śadagranthiigahanam
praviś tam svādhāram punarapi sudhāorishti vapuṣā
kimapy- aṣṭātrīṇṣat-kiraṇa sakalee bhootamnisham
bhaje dhāma śyāmam kucabharanatam barbarakacam// 5.8//*

[Thirty-eight rays (*aṣṭātrīṇṣat -kīraṇa*) are sixteen of the moon, 12 of the sun and ten of *agni*.]

Compare this with following two verses from the *Saundarya Laharī* that reveal the ascent as well as the descent of *Kunḍalinī śakti*:

*Mahīm mulādhāre kamapi maṇipoore hutavaham
Sthitam svādhīsthāne hridi marutam ākāśamupari
Mano'pi bhrumadhye sakalamapi bhitvaa kulapatham
Sahasrāre padme saha rahasi patyā viharase //9//*

[As earth and also water in the *mooladhara*, (Thou art) established in swadhithana, as fire in manipura, as air in the heart (anahata), and above as ether and also mind in bhrumadhya, between the eye-brows (ajna), also the entire path of kundalini, piercing which Thou sporteth with Thy consort in the solitude of sahasrara Padma, the thousand petalled lotus.]⁸

*Sudhādhārasāreś-carāṇayugalāntarvīgalitaih
prapancham sinchantī punarapi rasāmnāyamahasah
avāpya svām bhumim bhujaganibhamadhyuṣṭavalayam
svamātmānam kritva svapiṣi kulakunde kuhariṇi// 10//*

[With streams of nectar gushing from Thy feet, irrigating the five elements again from the region of illumination (sahasrara), Thou returnest to thy home via the six chakras. Converting Thyself into the individual self, or jivatman, Thou sleepest in the deep pit of Thy own home, like a serpent of three and a half coils.]⁹

Yantricasvarūpa in *Saundarya Laharī*

A lot has been written about the *Srividya Yantra* in *Saundarya Laharī*.

Famous 11th verse of *Saundarya Laharī* is the pithiest description of the Śrī-yantra as a representation of microcosm as well as macrocosm i.e. *pindānda* and *brahmānda*. As *pindānda*, it is the representation of experience of Śakti as *kunḍalinī* in individual experient's body. As *brahmānda*, it is a representation of cosmic body of Śakti as source and holder of the universe. Many scholars including Shri Lakshmidhara, famous commentator of the *Saundarya Laharī* have elaborated upon that. For every verse, a *yantra* (geometric-design), a *bīja-mantra* (seed-syllable), a *mandala* (anthropomorphic image for meditation also known as *dhyanamurti*) along with the process of worship (*upāsana-anuṣṭhāna*) and fruit of the worship (*phalaśruti*) are given for the desired

siddhi. Swami Satyasangananda Saraswati has gives an in-depth explanation of the same in her book, which is one of the best English translations of the text. We shall not go into these details but we would summarize here the main features of the Śriyantra as described in verse 11 (of the *Saundaryā Laharī* by Acarya Shankara.

*Caturbhi śrīkanthaiḥ śivayuvatibhiḥ pañcabhirapi
prabhinnābhiḥ sambhornavabhirapi mūlaprakṛtibhiḥ
trayaścātvarīṅśadvasadalakalāśratrivalaya
trirekhābhiḥ sardham tava caraṇakoṇaḥ pariṇatā.//11//*

[The four triangles that enclose the supreme energy and also the five Śakti triangles form the nine basic triangles of the root manifestations (of Śakti) of [mūlaprakṛti, the prime Śakti]. Then there are the eight-petal and sixteen petal lotuses, three surrounding circles and three lines. Distinct from Śiva, these angles which house Thee become Thy mansion of forty-three triangles.] [Trans. Swami Satyasangananda Saraswati: 2008:141].

To quote the details of Śriyantra from Swami Satyasangananda Saraswati:

“The five triangles facing upwards, known as Śiva yuvati, represent the parāprakṛiti or mahākunḍalinī that is forever gazing upwards, poised for ascent. As parāprakṛiti, she is yuvati, the virgin goddess, who, interlaced with the four downward triangles known as śrīkantha, becomes entrapped in the sensorial world, which is her own creation. The word kantha (in the word śrīkanthaiḥ) alludes to a sense of getting caught up in something, which is the exact condition of kunḍalinī. Leaving aside the first triangle at the centre, which is the abode of Shakti, this intersection of the nine primary triangles creates a total of forty-three triangles...

At the centre of the Śricakra is the bindu, or nucleus, which is the seat of Śakti, who remains separate (asanga), from range of triangles that are created by the intersections of nine triangles. They forty-three triangles are surrounded by eight lotus petals, symbolic of aparāprakṛiti, and then sixteen lotus petals, symbolic of fifteen days of the waxing moon, culminating in the ṣoḍaśī, or pūrṇimā. Outermost bhūpura, or square, which represents the earth element that contains all this.” [Saraswati:2008:142-43].

As a hymn on Śri vidyā, Dharmacharya’s *Panchastavī* does not refer to the Śricakra or Śriyantra directly but it reveals the path of *kunḍalinī* through the *chakras* in vivid detail and Śriyantra also offers a linear representation of the ascent and descent of *kunḍalinī* itself. Some verses in *Panchastavī* appear to be a replica of the verses in *Saundaryā Laharī*:

*Mūlāvālakuharadudītā Bhavāni !
Nirbhidyā ṣatsarsijāni tadillateva
Bhūyopi tatra viśasi dhruvamandalendu-
niḥṣyandamānaparmāmṛtatatoyarūpā//4.8//*

[O Bhavani ! From the rounded circle of mulādhāra, you rise

like a ray of lightening piercing the lotuses of six chakras and then you enter into the same mulādhāra again. In this manner, you irrigate the entire body with the blissful nectar sieving from the thousand petal lotus in the Brahmarandhra.] (Trans. mine)

Acarya Shankara explains the same idea in two verses, 9 and 10 (also quoted above)in his *Saundaryā Laharī*:

*Mahim mūlādhāre kamapi maṇipūre hutavaharī
sthitam svādhīsthāne hr̥di marutamākāśamupari
mano’pi bhrumadhye sakalamapi bhitoā kulapatham
sahasrāre padme saha rahasi patyā viharase //9//*

*Sudhādhārāsāraiscaraṇayuglāntarvīgalitaiḥ
prañcam siñcanti punarapi rasāmnāyamahasah
avāpya svām bhūmim bhjaganibhamadhyuṣṭavalam
svātmānam kṛtvā svapiṣi kulakunde kuharīni //10//*

[“As earth and also water in the mulādhāra, (Thou art) established in the svādhīsthāna, as fire in manipura, as air in the heart (anāhata), and above as ether and also mind in bhrumadhya, between the eyebrows (ājñā), also the entire path of kunḍalinī, piercing with Thou sporteth with Thy consort in the solitude of sahasrāra padma, the thousand-petal lotus.

With streams of nectar gushing from Thy feet, irrigating the five elements again from the region of illumination (sahasrāra), Thou returnest to Thy home via the six chakras. Converting Thyself into the individual self or jīvātmā, Thou sleepest in the deep pit of Thy own home, like a serpent of three and half coils.”]. [Trans. Swami Satyasangananda Saraswati].

Thus, we observe that *Panchastavī* and *Saundaryā Laharī* are two very significant hymns that are closely related not only in terms of subject matter but also the mystical elements that they conceal or reveal with respect to Śrividya tradition of worship and spiritual practice.

Notes

1. Significance of the guru as the medium and provider of the *vidyā* and grace is underlined again and again by Dharmacharya. In *Laghustava*, he says that this hymn, this *stuti* and the entire process of *mantodharaṇa* with the three *bijas* - *aimkāra kleemkāra sauḥkāra* related to great goddess Tripura’s comes down from *guru-śiṣya* lineage- the *guru-paramparā*:

*Iyam Bharatyā Tripurā iti stuti
Adyaṣṭe yatra eka-dvi-tripada krameṇa (sphutaṁ) kathitaḥ
toatpāda samkhyākṣaraiḥ
mantra uddhāra vidhivoiṣeṣa sahitaḥ satsampradaya anvitaḥ
[1.20].*

In the third section called *Ghatastava*, the poet invokes the guru, “*Avasthā Shāmbhavi me’stu prasanno’stu guru sadā*” (3.21).

Again in the fourth section called *Ambastava*, poet-devotee Dharmacharya refers to the goddess herself as the guru, “*vayam aamanaam sakshaad apārakarūṇām gurumurtim eva.*

- 4.31." In the end, he mentions that after dissolving the *karama-s* of innumerable births, having found 'Giriśaṁ guruvapuṣaṁ', having received 'Śaivī dikṣā', and having understood your 'krama tanu/sharīra', he would like to spend the rest of his life in worship alone.
2. *Anugrah*(grace) of *Vāgdevī* brings highest rewards in the world where power of speech is the utmost power. Therefore, both *Saundarya Laharī* and *Pancastavī* elevate poetry and poets.
 3. It may be difficult for a lay person to reconcile Adi Shankara's image as a Vedantin and ascetic renunciant saint with the image of a devotee immersed in the supreme bhakti of Mother Goddess *Tripurasundarī* as found in *Saundarya Laharī*. But the Śringeri Matha on the banks of Tunga river in Karnatka founded by Acarya Shankara is actually one of the most celebrated abodes of Śakti. It is known as *Śarada Pītham* where the presiding deity is *Sarasvatī* who represents *Ātmavidyā*.
 4. Ref: <https://ikashmir.net/panchastavi/article2.html>
 5. Essence of the Trika philosophy is non-duality between creator and the creation. One can read the element of non-duality clearly in the *Panchastavī*. For instance:

*Sanīkocaṁ icchasi yadā Girīje ! Tadānīm
vāktarkayoṣ toamasi bhūmrināmarūpa
yadvā vikaśaṁ upayāsi yadā tadānīm
toannāmarūpagaṇaṇāḥ sukārī bhavanti [Ambāstava. 4.22]*

"O Girīje: When you wish to contract your *svarūpa*, then you are beyond the name-form field of language and reasoning; when you move into expansion of your *svarūpa* then it is easier to count/observe your names and forms." (4.22)

Further, he says:

"Because you are the shine in the moon; the light in the sun; consciousness in the Purusha (and in sentient beings); the movement in the air; the sweetness in the water; the heat in the fire. In fact, nothing that is devoid of your being exists. (4.20). In other words, he says "tat kimasti yat toam na bhavasi" (4.26).

Compare this with Kṣemaraja:

*Citiḥ svatantrā viśvasiddhihetuḥ
svēcchayā svabhittau viśvamunmīliyaṭi
citiśaṅkocātmā cetanopi śaṅkucita viśvamayaḥ*

*citireva cetanapadādavaruḍhā cetyasaṅkocinī cittam
(Pratyabhijñāḥdayam. Sūtra 1,2,4,5)*

[Paraphrase. "Citi, of her own absolute free will manifests the universe on the screen of her own self. It is *citi* alone who descending from her state of pure consciousness assumes the forms of objects (names and forms) by contracting herself. And it is also *citi* who becomes *cetya* (the mind)). The individual experient also has the universe as his body but in a contracted way as *citi śakti* (the pure Consciousness) contracts Herself."].

6. Both *Samayācāra* as well the *Kaulācāra* paths worship divine mother as *Mahātripurasundarī*. In *Samayācāra*, the worship is internal. They don't accept external worship or *bahirpūjā*. In the *Kaulācāra* the external worship is important. The main object in the *Samayācāra* is to awaken the *Kuṇḍalinī Śakti* and to lead it through *cakras* in the *Suṣumnā nādi* for union with Śiva in the *sahasrāra cakra*. The followers of *Samayācāra* consider the *bindu* to be inside the 'sahasradala kamala' in the crown of yogi's head where they meditate on the *Sāmarasya* (union) of *Samayā (Bhagavatī)* and *Samaya* (the Śiva).
- Kaula-s worship the goddess *Bhagavati* in the *yonī*, the triangle in the *mulādhāra*. They follow *dakṣiṇa mārga* as well as *vāmamārga* which includes the *pancamakāra* practices.
- 7., Swami Satyananda Saraswati initiated some of his close disciples into *Saundarya Laharī upāsanā*. His foremost disciple Swami Satyasangananda Saraswati has authored an excellent commentary on the text. Her book offers an appendix which gives *yantra*, *mantra* and *mandala* for each verse along with the method of worship i.e. *upāsanā-vidhi* and the *phalaśruti*.
8. Trans. Swami Satyasangananada Saraswati.
9. Trans. Swami Satyasangananada Saraswati.

References

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