Initiating the Monarch: the adaptation of a Śaiva practice for the propagation of Esoteric Buddhism in India, Inner Asia and the Far East

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ABSTRACT[1]

Our evidence for the history of the religions of India in premodern times is overwhelmingly in the form of texts that tell their audiences what they should do and think but reveal little of what was actually done and thought. They convey even less that would enable us to understand the demography of these religions and the social, political, and economic history of their institutions. Where historians of other literate civilizations can draw on archives, official and private histories, diaries, biographies and the like we are limited almost entirely beyond our prescriptive texts to the evidence provided by the epigraphical and archaeological record; and that is both lacunose and parsimonious.

The textual scholar may feel that this poverty of non-prescriptive data does not seriously distort the understanding that he can form from the rich body of texts at his disposal. Indeed he may even feel justified in remaining in ignorance of this evidence, believing that he is true to the spirit of the texts themselves in considering that what he lacks or overlooks are mundane, ephemeral, and peripheral details that were of no importance to his authors.

However, if his task is to understand their intentions, he should accept that this resides not merely in what they state but also in relations between

[1]This lecture and its abstract are based on Alexis Sanderson, *Religion and the State: Initiating the Monarch in Śaivism and the Buddhist Way of Mantras*. Part 2 of *Rituals in South Asia: Text and Context* edited by J. Gengnagel, U. Hüsken, and S. Raman, Heidelberg Ethno-Indological Series I-II. Harrassowitz (forthcoming).

what they state and what they know their audience knows about itself and its context in the wider world. Now this unstated information may be doctrinally neutral and it may be lacking simply because there was no need to state what was obvious to those to whom the text was addressed. But there is important information of another kind, information known to the audience that authors keep unstated or understated or avoid thinking through because it does not fit comfortably into the picture of the religion that they wish to present. Such tensions are only to be expected. Religions, if they are successful in the world, can find that they have accepted compromises that their theologians may be unable or disinclined to understand and justify. This was certainly so among the Śaivas.

I have discussed elsewhere the case of the Śrāddha rituals that the Śaivas came to perform for their deceased initiates in conformity with brahmanical norms, even though the central promise of their religion was that the ceremony of initiation destroyed the bonds of the soul so that the initiate would attain liberation at death, and therefore be in no need of such offerings.[2] Here I shall present evidence of another important respect in which they were prepared to consolidate their position in the world at the expense of doctrinal consistency, namely by tying themselves to the monarch and the monarch to them.

I find four major aspects of the interaction of Śaiva Gurus with royalty evidenced in inscriptions and/or reflected in the Śaiva literature. These are:

1. the creation, empowerment and supervision of royal temples;
2. the performance of fire rites (*agnikāryam, homaḥ*) for Siddhis, the accomplishment of supernatural results of protection, attraction, expulsion, weather control, destruction and the like for the benefit of royal patrons wishing to secure the prosperity of their realm and the confounding of their enemies;
3. the development of an apparatus of rituals enabling Śaiva Gurus to take over the traditional role of the brahmanical royal chaplain (*rājapurohitaḥ*);[3] and
4. the practice of giving Śaiva Maṇḍala initiation (*dīkṣā*, *śivadīkṣā*, *śivamaṇḍaladīkṣā*) to the king as a key element in the ceremonies that legiti-

[2] Alexis Sanderson, 'Meaning in Tantric Ritual', in A.-M. Blondeau and K.Schipper (eds), E*ssais sur le Rituel III: Colloque du Centenaire de la Section des Sciences religieuses de l'École Pratique des Hautes Études*, Bibliothèque de l'École des Hautes Études, Sciences Religieuses, Louvain-Paris: Peeters, 1995, pp. 34–36.

[3] The third of these aspects of interaction is the subject of Alexis Sanderson, 'Religion and the State: Śaiva Officiants in the Territory of the Brahmanical Royal Chaplain with an Appendix on the Provenance and Date of the *Netratantra*', *Indo-Iranian Journal*, 2004 iii (forthcoming).

mated his office and added to his regal lustre.

This last practice was crucial to the fortunes of the religion, but it was one that received so little attention in the prescriptive and commentatorial literature, compromising as it did the purely spiritual purpose of initiation, that it has been overlooked in the study of that literature. Here the evidence of inscriptions and other historical records proves indispensable to the development of a more rounded picture of the religion and prompts us, moreover, to return to the Śaiva literature to discover that there are after all clear traces of the practice within it, albeit mostly in works that as yet are available only in their primary evidence, that of surviving manuscripts. Notable among these unpublished sources are (1) the *Kalādīkṣāpaddhati* of the Kashmirian Śaiva Gurus, composed by Manodaguru in A.D. 1335/6 but variously expanded during subsequent centuries to produce distinct versions, and (2) the *Naimittikakarmānusandhāna* of Brahmaśambhu of Mālava, composed in A.D. 938, the oldest of the surviving Paddhatis, that is to say, of the post-scriptural guides for officiants that set out the procedures and Mantras for the performance of the Śaiva cermonies. The second of these works is particularly revealing, since it treats the initiation and consecration of the monarch, the chief queen (*agramahiṣī*) and the crown prince (*yuvarājaḥ*) at length, devoting a separate section to the topic, unlike the later Paddhatis of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, beginning with the unpublished *Siddhāntasārapaddhati* of Mahārājādhirāja Bhojadeva of Dhārā (r. A.D. 1018 to 1060) and the published *Kriyākāṇḍakramāvalī* of Somaśambhu (the *Somaśambhupaddhati*), composed in A.D. 1095/6. For those works and their successors make no direct reference to the practice.

We will see from this collation of epigraphical and prescriptive textual evidence

1. that from the early seventh century onwards in India and from the tenth century onwards among the Khmers of mainland Southeast Asia royal Śaiva initiation was a well-established convention in those kingdoms, the majority, in which Śaivism was the principal recipient of royal patronage,

2. that royal initiation was conflated by the Śaiva officiants with the brahmanical royal consecration ceremony (*rājyābhiṣekaḥ*), so moving from the private into the civic domain; and

3. that in references to it outside the technical literature it was cut adrift from its theologically defined function to be openly promoted as a means of sanctifying royal authority and enhancing royal power.

In this form it was indeed a powerful means of propagating the religion. It was rewarded through the *dakṣiṇā* paid to the officiant who performed the ceremony with a lavishness that enabled the Śaiva monastic network to spread out into new regions and raised the leading pontiffs to an authority that reached far beyond the confines a single kingdom.

The Śaiva practice of royal Maṇḍala initiation (*śivamaṇḍaladīkṣā*) was among the elements of Śaivism that Indian Mahāyāna Buddhists chose to adopt when they adapted Śaiva ritual models to their own Buddhist purposes in constructing their Way of Mantras (Mantranaya, Mantrayāna, Vajrayāna). Evidence of Buddhist royal initiation following the Mantranaya is present for India, though it is slight. But we have abundant evidence of its practice as a means of propagating the Buddhist faith in Tang China and, following that example, in Japan from the ninth century onwards. It is also a conspicuous element in the history of the propagation of Tibetan Buddhism in Inner Asia among the Mongols, and in China during the Yuan, Ming and Qing dynasties.

Now this evidence of Buddhist royal Maṇḍala initiation belongs to two separate transmissions out of India. The first occurred in the eighth century, exporting the form of the Mantranaya that survives to this day in the Japanese Shingon-shu and the *taimitsu* of the Tendai-shu. The second, that began in the tenth century, brought to Tibet and thence to Inner Asia and China, a later form of the Mantranaya, in which the traditions seen in the earlier Esoteric Buddhism of China and Japan have been overshadowed by the systems of ritual, meditation and observance whose scriptural authorities are the texts known as the Yoginītantras or Yoganiruttaratantras, later works that are strongly influenced by the traditions of the non-Saiddhāntika Śaiva worshippers of Bhairava and the Goddess. The fact that royal initiation appears as a central element in both these transmissions is strong evidence of its prevalence in the land that is their common source. It also shows that it prevailed there throughout the last phase of Indian Buddhism, from the eighth century onwards.

However the Indian Buddhists' adoption and adaptation of Śaiva royal initiation, and indeed of the many other elements of Śaiva ritualism that flowed into the Mantranaya, should not be seen as an invasion of Buddhism from the outside. This was a creative and transformative process. The Buddhists' purpose in developing their own Way of Mantras was not merely to add a repertoire of religious rituals that matched those offered by the Śaivas. They sought to surpass their rivals in the eyes of their patrons by developing a system of ceremonies that was familiar to the culture

of the courts and offered the same mundane benefits of protection and empowerment of the state and the monarch, but was both more spectacular and more accessible to potential converts and patrons.

It was more spectacular because it introduced initiation Maṇḍalas on a larger scale than those of the Śaivas. It was more accessible because it allowed many more people to be brought before these Maṇḍalas simultaneously and did not restrict access to those already engaged in Buddhist practice. Chinese, Japanese and Mongolian evidence shows that this far greater openness to candidates is found in both the main branches of the transmission of the Way of Mantras, which indicates that this too, like the practice of royal initiation itself, derives from Indian usage.

There are already indications of this openness in the *Mahāvairocanābhisaṃbodhi*, composed probably during the first second quarter of the seventh century. But it is most developed and explicit in the *Sarvatathāgatatattvasaṃgraha*, a text that developed during the period from the last quarter of the seventh century into the eighth, and was to have a lasting impact on the Mantranaya in all its forms.

In this respect the Way of Mantras shows a radical departure from Śaiva practice. That allowed that Śiva could liberate all kinds of persons through Maṇḍala initiation, but it never envisaged opening up the soteriological process on such a scale. We see here a striking example of the methodological versatility (*upāyakauśalam*) that Mahāyāna Buddhism made its hallmark. Adopting the non-Buddhist practice of Maṇḍala initiation in general and its royal form in particular it adapted it to its own purpose, turning it into a spectacular instrument for the propagation of allegiance to the faith among those élites in India and beyond who might otherwise have seen little reason to deviate from their established religious traditions.

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