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Purity and Impurity in Nondualistic Śaiva Tantrism

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Abstract

Indian civilisation has been strongly characterised by the work of containment erected by the Brahmanical elite over the almost two thousand years of its grandiose attempt at culturally and socially dominating the Indian world as a whole. Lacking any direct power, the Brahmans have replaced it by successfully imposing, as an alternative, an opposition between purity and impurity that has marked every aspect of Indian culture: purity of spirit, purity of philosophy, purity of rites, purity of language, purity of social and religious conduct, etc. Nondualistic Śaiva Tantrism's response starts by questioning the legitimacy and very basis of the division between pure and impure, destined to crumble progressively beneath the thrust of deliberate "non-dual" behaviour (*advaitācāra*). Purity or impurity are not properties of things. They are qualifications pertaining to the knower depending on whether he perceives the object as united with consciousness or not. "Impure is what has fallen away from consciousness: therefore everything is pure if it has achieved identity with consciousness." Moreover, if Śiva "is" the universe, there may be no impurity. In the Tantric texts special emphasis is laid on the necessity to overcome *śaṅkā* ("hesitation, inhibition"), viewed as the ultimate purpose of the Brahmanical rules concerning purity/impurity, acting as a subtle and effective *instrumentum regni*.

Key words: India, purity, impurity, nondualistic Śaivism, Somānanda, Abhinavagupta, Tantrism, Brahmanism
Słowa kluczowe: Indie, nieczystość, śiwaizm niedualistyczny, Somānanda, Abhinavagupta, tantryzm, braminizm

Does impurity have any place in a nondualistic scenario?

The pure-impure dichotomy presupposes a dualistic scenario, or at least a non-nondualistic one.[1] In fact, the rejection of this dichotomy by the most extreme Tantric Śaiva

[1] Some of the materials presented in the first part of this paper are drawn from R. Torella, *Śaiva Nondualism* [in:] *Indian Epistemology and Metaphysics*, J. Tuske (ed.) (forthcoming), where they are treated in greater detail.

schools is to be seen as closely connected with their explicitly nondualistic attitude. As a worldview based on reason and revelation (*yukti* and *āgama*), Śaiva nondualism is expected to have its roots in Śaiva scriptures. Indeed, one of the most popular divisions of the Śaiva scriptures (cf. *Tantrāloka* [TĀ] I.18) presents three sets of texts, characterised by dualism, dualism-cum-nondualism and nondualism, promulgated by Śiva, Rudra and Bhairava, respectively, numbering ten, eighteen and sixty-four.[2] Any scrutiny of what is extant from the sixty-four Bhairavatantras risks disappointing the seeker for unequivocal nondualist lines. As A. Sanderson[3] and J. Törzsök[4] have shown, even the very occurrence of terms like *advaita*, *advaya*, etc. hardly refers to a straightforward affirmation of ontological and epistemological nondualism, but rather concerns ritual practice. A practice is termed *advaita* "nondualistic" (*advaitācāra*) when it programmatically rejects the mainstream brahmanical opposition between what is in itself pure (normal, socially acceptable, clear, etc.) and what is impure (abnormal, despised by the generality of Hindu society, obscure, etc.). The impure is also often felt as being more effective, quickly transformative, although directly or potentially dangerous. We can envisage several pairs of opposite terms, which can roughly be reduced to two: ritual in a pure environment (pure ingredients, pure behaviours, defence of self-identity) versus ritual in an impure environment (impure ingredients, such as blood, alcohol, male and female sexual fluids, urine, faeces, illicit practices, like group copulation, possession); and ritual versus knowledge. This is not to be taken in a too schematic way: within the same school, different kinds of attitude can be detected (for one, see the temptation of knowledge found in a Saiddhāntic text such as the *Mataṅgapārameśvara*) or the unwillingness to get rid of ritual in a champion of the primacy of knowledge over ritual, like Abhinavagupta.

The main question might also be formulated in the following terms: does *advaitācāra* "nondualistic practice" necessarily presuppose a noetic nondualist framework? This seems particularly true for the Kaula tradition within nondualistic Tantras. In such a case, why are statements expressing ontological and epistemological nondualism so rare even in the Kaula texts, or at least in the early ones?[5] On the

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[2] See J. Hanneder, *Abhinavagupta's Philosophy of Revelation: An Edition and Annotated Translation of Mālinīvijayavārttika I (I.1–399)*, "Groningen Oriental Studies" 1998, no. 14, pp. 26–32, 237–268.

[3] A. Sanderson, *The Doctrine of the Mālinīvijayottaratantra*" [in:] *Ritual and Speculation in Early Tantrism: Studies in Honor of André Padoux*, T. Goudriaan (ed.), Albany 1992, pp. 281–312.

[4] J. Törzsök, *Nondualism in Early Śākta Tantras: Transgressive Rites and Their Ontological Justification in a Historical Perspective*", "Journal of Indian Philosophy" 2014, no. 42, pp. 195–223.

[5] I might quote not more than two texts showing straightforward nondualistic statements, the *Ucchuṣmatantra* and the *Kālikākrama*. "How is it possible, O Dear One," says a stanza of the former (quoted by Kṣemarāja in *Śivasūtravimarśinī*, p. 8 and *Svacchandoddyota*, vol. II, p. 55, ad VII.249), "that these can be the object of knowledge without being [at the same time] the subject of knowledge? The object of knowledge and subject of knowledge constitute a single reality. That is why there is no impurity" (my understanding of this verse considerably differs from P. Bisschop, A. Griffith, *The Practice Involving the Ucchuṣmas (Atharvavedapariśiṣṭa 36)*, "Studien zur Indologie und Iranistik," 2007, no. 24, p. 4). Several verses from the lost *Kālikākrama* are quoted by Kṣemarāja again in the *Śivasūtravimarśinī*, e.g. p. 118: "Knowledge shines in various forms, externally and internally. Without knowledge there is no existence of the object, therefore the world is made of knowledge. Without knowledge things cannot become the object of cognition. From this it ensues that knowledge constitutes the essential nature of the object." The *Kālikākrama*, being quoted for the first time by Kṣemarāja, is likely to be a post-Abhinava

other hand, we can admit that an anti-dualist attack, seen as an attack on the Brahmanical or semi-Brahmanical establishment, dominated by the sharp demarcation between pure and impure, is much more effective if it concerns praxis rather than mere knowledge. The need for philosophical awareness comes only later, i.e. when nondualistic Śaivism engages in a śāstric, i.e. cultural, discourse with adversaries (within and without the Tantric context). This happens in concomitance with its emergence from the dimension of restricted circles, and the attempt at establishing itself in the stratum of social normality, by internalising, or in any case circumscribing specific differences. We can hypothesise that the first step after negating the pure-impure opposition in ritual and behavioural contexts is to elaborate on the basic equality of all by stressing the presence of Śiva in the universe. For this purpose, stating that the all is pervaded by Śiva may prove insufficient as this is also upheld in Saiddhāntic circles. There is no impurity, since Śiva "is" the universe. This is precisely what will constitute the core of Somānanda's teaching (early 10th c.).

In explaining the sameness of all by the universal Śiva nature, Abhinavagupta (TĀ IV.274) refers to a passage on *samatā* from a comparatively early Trika scripture, the *Trikaśāsana*, quoted in full by Jayaratha in the *Viveka* thereon:

> There is sameness of all beings and, by all means, of all conditions. There is sameness of all philosophies and, by all means, of all substances. All the stages of life are the same, and also all the lineages, all the goddesses, and by all means, all the classes (*varṇa*).

The *locus classicus* for Somānanda's concept of universal *samatā* because of everything having the same Śiva-nature is *Śivadṛṣṭi* [ŚD] I.48, to be read in the light of Utpaladeva's comments in the *Vṛtti* thereon (p. 34):

> ŚD: Thus, it is firmly established that the Śiva-nature is the same for all entities. A differentiation in them in terms of higher, lower, etc. may be maintained only by those who are ready to think anything true.
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> *Vṛtti*: This is the meaning: Starting from Paramaśiva down to all objects, such as a jar, etc., the Śiva-nature is the same, in the sense that it is neither more nor less, and it is definitely present in everything with no exception (*niyatā*), since the nature of full consciousness is never exceeded. Due to such experience of unity with the Śiva-nature, everything possesses a marvellous and indefinable (*kāpi*) state. Thus, since everything has intimate unity with the Śiva-nature, we can speak of things as differentiated into higher, lower, etc., of their having a pure or impure nature, etc., only on account of our non-awareness of such intimate unity. This may take place in people just owing to mere belief, that is, without sound reasons. In things there is no purity or impurity whatsoever.

The purity-impurity issue often emerges in Abhinavagupta's works. In TĀ XV.163cd–164ab, he is confronted with a dubious statement found in the very core text of the TĀ, the *Mālinīvijayottara-tantra* [MVU]:

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scripture. The date of the *Ucchuṣmatantra* is unsettled (on this problematic title see S. Hatley, *The Brahmayāmalatantra and Early Śaiva Cult of the Yoginīs*. A dissertation in Religious Studies presented to the Faculties of the University of Pennsylvania in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, 2007 (unpublished), pp. 275–281; A. Sanderson, *The Śaiva Age* [in:] *Genesis and Development of Tantrism*, S. Einoo (ed.), Tokyo 2009, p. 194.

> One should not think that there may be anything that is not purified by it [the *arghapātra*]. By it, everything is purified and what is impure becomes pure.

After quoting this passage, Abhinavagupta points out (XV.164cd–165ab) that "Impurity is to be considered as such only from the point of view of limited souls and their teachings, for everything resides in its own state either after a previous (impure) state or after a pure state." Later on in this chapter (417cd–418ab), Abhinavagupta takes up the issue again: "The Lord in the MVU has not prescribed the purification of the two sacrificial ladles in order to suggest that the essence of purification is none other than full perception of true reality."

But the MVU also has passages in which the opposition purity/impurity is negated, like the well-known XVIII.74: "Here there is neither purity nor impurity, nor deliberation about what may be eaten or not, neither duality nor nonduality, and not even adoration of the *liṅga*, and so on." The passage is commented on at length by Abhinavagupta in TĀ IV.212ff. "Even if we consider things as existing externally," he continues (244cd–245ab), "purity and impurity are not comparable to [existing objects, like] the colour blue. Purity and impurity are qualifications pertaining to the knower depending on whether he perceives the object as united with consciousness or not."

This point had been anticipated by Jayaratha in his *Vīveka* on TĀ IV.221cd–222ab:

> In fact, we do not deny the practical use in everyday life of the notion of purity and impurity, but we point out that purity and impurity are not properties of the object, for it is the knower who ascertains "this is pure, this is impure." Were purity and impurity properties of the object, something impure could never become pure, and viceversa, because what is blue could not ever become non-blue.

This echoes Utpaladeva's ŚD*Vṛtti*, quoted above (*na tu vastūnāṃ śuddhir aśuddhir vā kācit* – "In things there is no purity or impurity whatsoever"). Abhinavagupta's position can be summarised by his own words (IV.240cd–241ab): "Impure is what has fallen away from consciousness: therefore everything stays pure if it has achieved identity with consciousness."

Among the most quoted statements on the matter found in Trika scriptures, one stands out: *Vijñānabhairava* 121 *kiṃcijjñair yā smṛtāśuddhiḥ sā śuddhiḥ śaṃbhudarśane | na śucir hy aśucis* [...]. The meaning of this verse, whose readings fluctuate greatly both in manuscripts and in quotations (the text as given above is that which I consider the correct one), which I find most likely is: "What men of limited knowledge traditionally[6] consider as impurity, this in the Śaiva worldview is taken as purity. For purity cannot become impurity [...]."[7]

Highly interesting is the position of another important Trika Kaula tantra, the *Vīrāvalī*, now lost. The passage is quoted in TĀ IV.242:

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[6] The commentator Śivopādhyāya glosses: *dharmaśāstrajñaiḥ* "by the experts in Dharmaśāstra."

[7] See the passage from Jayaratha's *Vīveka* just quoted; cf. also TĀ XV.164cd. See also the *Bhairavamaṅgala*: "Just as a piece of charcoal will not abandon its nature [and become pure or white] if one rubs it or pours [water on it in hundreds of buckets, so is the case with all embodied souls" (transl. J. Törzsök, *op.cit.*, p. 212); the same simile is used in the *Kulasāra* (cf. J. Törzsök, *op.cit.*, p. 216).

> The life principle (*jīva*) is what sets in motion all entities; nothing exists that is destitute of such life principle. Whatever is destitute of life you should consider as "impure."

Needless to say, for Abhinavagupta the life principle (*jīva*) is the supreme light of consciousness. He concludes (243ab): "Therefore what is not exceedingly distant from consciousness brings about purity." This may be compared to an analogous statement (in fact, many more could be quoted) already found in an early nondualistic text, the *Spanda-kārikā* by Bhaṭṭa Kallaṭa (or, for some, by Vasugupta), particularly referring to the domain of language: "There is no state in words, meanings and mental constructs that is not Śiva." "No state," says Kṣemarāja in *Spandanirṇaya* (p. 48), is meant to include the initial, medial and final part of all these realities.

The coincidence of Śiva and the world might be taken in an "illusionistic" sense, as in some Advaita Vedānta or Vijñānavāda approaches. While having the nature of Śiva in a sense "enhances" the reality of the world, in another it risks de-realising it, i.e. flattening its multifarious aspects and finally making it fade altogether. Realising the ultimate Śiva nature might lead to the very disappearance of the universe as such. Since its very beginnings, nondualistic Śaivism has tackled this crucial issue. According to Somānanda, it cannot be said that the universe is "imagined" as Śiva, or vice-versa, because the one is directly the other. Just as gold is not "imagined" as such, either in the simple jewel of solid gold nor in the earring in which the craftsmanship is so refined as to set aside, as it were, its nature of pure gold, so Śiva is "formed, arranged" as universe – in the sense that he has become such and such, i.e. freely presents himself in this form. An original and very subtle treatment of the issue can be found in ŚD III.82cd-83, which is worth quoting in full along with Utpaladeva's explanation. The passage hinges on the distinction between *kḷpti* and *kalpanā*: Śiva is not just conceived of (*kalpita*) as having the form of the world, and vice-versa, but he is indeed (auto-)formed (*kḷpta*) as having the form of the world.

> ŚD – It is not mental construction that operates as regards this [universe] consisting of the Earth principle, etc., since the [Śiva principle] is formed precisely in this manner. If something is conceived of as different from what it is, then we can speak of mental construction. But is that [Earth, etc.] conceived of differently from what it is? If [mental construction] concerns something real,[8] then mental construction is just a word [without content].
>
> *Vṛtti* – We cannot say that, with respect to the multitude of entities that are perceived as having the form of earth, etc., the fact of having Śiva as their own form is a mental construction. For in actual fact it is the very Śiva principle that is formed having earth, etc., as its own form. If something that does not possess a certain form is ascertained as possessing that form, as in the case of fantasy, then this would be a [case of] mental construction, i.e. this would be something constructed mentally. But, since everything is directly Śiva himself, the earth, etc., are in actual fact nothing but Śiva, [so] will the earth, etc., be "mentally constructed" as being Śiva? The meaning [of the rhetorical question] is: they are not! If we speak of mental construction with regard to [the cognition of] the earth, etc. which are really so [i.e. of the nature of Śiva], then "mental construction" in the present case is just a verbal expression.

[8] I.e. if it presents something just as it really is.

The Śiva nature embraces everything (ŚD VI.127ab *tato jñeyā śivatā sarvagocarā*). Somānanda further specifies that the world's having the nature of Śiva involves all objects, like a jar, having the same powers as Śiva (*icchā*, *jñāna*, *kriyā*) and possessing sentiency (*sacittvam*). Being is, actually, being united with the manifestation of consciousness (cf. ŚD IV.29b *cidvyaktiyogitā*; IV.7ab *sarvabhāveṣu cidvyakteḥ sthitaiva paramārthatā*). Thus everything is pervasive, incorporeal and endowed with will, like consciousness (V.1). If things can be efficient, it is because they "want" one particular action that is peculiar to them (V.16, 37). And if they want it, they must also know it, in other words be conscious – first and foremost, of themselves. All things are in all conditions knowing their own self (V.105ab *sarve bhāvāḥ svam ātmānaṃ jānantaḥ sarvataḥ sthitāḥ*). This dignifies all levels of reality, including the surface level, made of human transactions and related verbal behaviour, in a word *vyavahāra*.[9]

The pure-impure dichotomy in the Brahmanical order

As we have seen, the main argument against the pure-impure dichotomy is universal equality based on the fact that everything has the same Śiva nature.[10] The argument is indeed well chosen, since behind any division into pure and impure lies a primordial attempt at classifying the universe. Classification is never a neutral act,[11] deriving from a mere wish for knowledge, but a symbolic act in which a cultural or hegemonic project manifests itself. A basic classification is between what belongs to "our" world, the *hortus conclusus* in which we can feel relatively safe, and the rest, the immense extraneous world that encircles and potentially menaces our little world on all sides.[12] Broadly speaking, the difficult task that all societies have to confront is to defend their own little world from the assaults of the immense universe, but without negating it: life itself needs the contribution of, or dialogue with, the obscure world of power just outside the boundaries.[13] This is the universally human scenario within

[9] This may remind us of a passage from Heraclitus, cited by Porphyrius (Quaest. Hom. ad II.4, 4): "To God all things are fair and good and right, while men hold some things wrong and some right" (τῶι μὲν θεῶι καλά πάντα καὶ ἀγαθὰ καὶ δὶκαια, ἄνθρωποι δὲ ἃ μὲν ἄδικα ὑπειλήφασιν ἃ δὲ δίκαια).

[10] To the aforementioned passages we may add, e.g., some verses from the *Kulasāra*: "For this whole world has been produced from a single seed/cause, oh my beloved. Therefore, the concept of [various] genera is due to error. [...] Everything human comes from a single matrix/source, oh goddess lauded by heroes. Differentiation is mere delusion here, it has been devised for the sake of maintaining the world." (transl. J. Törzsök, *op.cit.*, p. 215).

[11] Cf. B.K. Smith, *Classifying the Universe: The Ancient Indian Varṇa System and the Origins of Caste*, Oxford 1994, p. 333.

[12] "But what is danger elsewhere is impurity here [scil. 'in Indian world']" (L. Dumont, D. Pocock, *Pure and Impure*, "Contributions to Indian Sociology" 1959, no. 3, p. 30).

[13] In the words of the anthropologist M. Douglas: "Granted that disorder spoils pattern, it also provides the material of pattern. Order implies restriction; from all possible materials, a limited selection has been made and from all possible relations a limited set has been used. So disorder by implication is unlimited, no pattern has been realised in it, but its potential for patterning is indefinite. This is why, though we seek to create order, we do not simply condemn disorder. We recognise that it is destructive to existing patterns; also that it has potentiality. It symbolises both danger and power. Ritual recognises the potency of disorder" (*Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Tabou*, London

which Indian civilisation proceeds on its own path. What first strikes us is that the rules of play are not dictated by Indian society as a whole, but by a numerically small elite which takes on its shoulders most of the cultural and religious responsibilities of Indian society, and the related privileges. It is in fact the Brahmans who dictate the bulk of socio-religious texts prescribing the rules of conduct both in rituals and from which everyday life comes. Of these, rules concerning purity and impurity play a central role. Such rules are imposed on the whole of Indian society, including the Brahmans themselves, whose life is made particularly complicated by their being more exposed than others to pollution due to their more noble and "delicate" nature.[14] However, they remain the source of the rules (in the sense that they are the only recognised mediators between Indian society and the scriptures on which the rules are based), and are also purifiers par excellence. The rules concern practically all aspects of human life, with special emphasis on the most crucial ones, such as nutrition and procreation, and borderline moments, like birth and death; the body and, in general, all kinds of bodily substances play a highly significant role. Even by closely observing the terms used[15] it becomes quite clear that purity is not deemed to be a definite state with specific features, but rather the result of a successful process of getting rid of certain impurities. In other words, purity is a temporary state[16] always about to collapse due to the overwhelming pressure of the unending impurities that surround it. In a sense, in ordinary life a state of permanent purity is not even prescribed as an ideal achievement. One might consequently be tempted to consider purity as a neutral state, or even a non-state, a state of never-definitively-attainable "normality" with no positive content. A. Malinar, referring to *Yogasūtra* II.40, notes that the elaborate practices of purification prescribed for ascetics "[o]nly increase the awareness of some fundamental impurity implied in physical existence, which in turn increases the desire for liberation"[17]. This attitude is conspicuously shared by two non-Brahmanical ascetic traditions, Jainism and Theravāda Buddhism, which negate the very possibility of purity in this world.[18] A very interesting model for assessing

1984 [1966], p. 95). And again: "Those vulnerable margins and those attacking forces which threaten to destroy good order represent the powers inhering in the cosmos. Ritual which can harness these for good is harnessing power indeed" (*ibidem*, p. 162).

[14] See the case of the Havic Brahmans studied in E.B. Harper, *Ritual Pollution as an Integrator of Caste and Religion*, "Journal of Asian Studies: Aspects of Religion in South Asia" 1964, no. 23, p. 174. This indirectly shows that impurity is not an absolute matter: a behaviour or a substance can be impure if it concerns a brahman, or pure if it concerns the member of an inferior class. Then impurity can be transmitted, while purity cannot. "Or, phrased another way, although all beings are impure unless ritually purified, and only some beings (e.g. Brahmins and devarus) have within their nature the ability to achieve the higher degrees of ritual purity. An Untouchable cannot become a Brahmin, but a Brahmin can become an Untouchable. Within a caste purity is a state to be attained, achieved, worked for." (E.B. Harper, *ibidem*, p. 194).

[15] Thoroughly analysed in P. Olivelle, *Caste and Purity: A Study in the Language of Dharma Literature*, "Contributions to Indian Sociology" 1998, no. 32 (2).

[16] Cf. A. Malinar, *Purity and Impurity* [in:] *Brill's Encyclopedia of Hinduism*, K.A. Jacobsen (ed.), vol. 2, Leiden 2010, p. 438.

[17] *Ibidem*, p. 445.

[18] Cf. P.S. Jaini, *The Pure and Auspicious in the Jaina Tradition* [in:] *Purity and Auspiciousness in Indian Society*, J.B. Carman, F.A. Marglin (eds.), Leiden 1985, pp. 84–93; S.J. Tambiah, *Purity and*

the respective domains of purity and impurity has been proposed by M.N. Srinivas, who, in his research on the Coorgs of south India, identifies not two but three levels (ritual impurity, normal ritual status, and ritual purity)[19]:

> Normal ritual status is the status which a person enjoys most of the time. From this point of view, both *maḍi* and *polé*, both ritual purity and impurity are deviations from the normal. [...] There is no term in Koḍagi normal ritual status. [...] If a person in a condition of normal ritual status touches another in a pure condition, the latter loses his purity and is reduced to normal ritual status. That is, normal status is a mild form of impurity.[20]

Srinivas's position is aptly reformulated by L. Dumont and D. Pocock:

> What is referred to here, in opposition to both purity and impurity, is the state or condition of a person having nothing to do with ritual, acting outside the religious field, and engaged in ordinary or profane pursuits. Most individual spend the greater part of their life in this condition. It might be called ordinary, or average, or neutral, or profane, but certainly neither normal, nor ritually normal. [...] [a]nd which appears as impurity in relation to purity, and as purity in relation to impurity.[21]

> In India. at first sight, it seems that the major opposition lies within the sacred, between pure and impure, holy and unclean, while the profane is scarcely recognised at all; although we tried to track it down, we found only a sort of shadowy region halfway between the extremes of purity and impurity, a kind of neutral condition not expressed as such in the language.[22]

Thus, we can say that there are, so to speak, two purities. Both of them are threatened by impurity, but while the lower level of purity is recovered whenever impurity is removed, something else is needed for the level of higher (ritual) purity to be attained. This hyper-purity, which, however, is only within reach of Brahmans,[23] is the outcome of additional perfecting procedures (*saṃskāra*) presupposing an already-possessed level of non-impurity. This scenario may also help us find the right place for a concept often conceived of as, at least partly, overlapping that of purity: auspiciousness (*śubha*, *maṅgala*). Auspiciousness/inauspiciousness concerns the intermediate level, or, in other words, the level of ordinary non-impurity.[24]

Dominated by purity, life would come to a standstill, since it is essentially made of typically impure components, like the production of any kind of polluting substance, copulation, birth, death, and so on.[25] Very significantly, while for Brahmans life is impurity itself, in the Tantric *Vīrāvalī* passage quoted above life is assumed

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Auspiciousness at the Edge of the Hindu Context – in Theravāda Buddhist Societies [in:] *Purity and Auspiciousness*, pp. 94–108.

[19] See also E.B. Harper, *op.cit.*, pp. 152–155.

[20] M.N. Srinivas, *Religion and Society among the Coorgs of South India*, Oxford 1952, pp. 106–107.

[21] L. Dumont, D. Pocock, *op.cit.*, pp. 16–17.

[22] *Ibidem*, p. 29.

[23] Cf. E.B. Harper, *op.cit.*, p. 194.

[24] As shown for example by the not rare cases of association of auspicious and impure, as found in the event of birth and in the figure of the *devadāsī* (cf. T.N. Madan, *Non-renunciation: Themes and Interpretations of Hindu Culture*, Delhi 1987, pp. 66–67.

[25] Cf. P. Olivelle, *op.cit.*, p. 214.

as the ultimate criterion for demarcating purity from impurity ("The life principle is what sets in motion all entities; nothing exists that is destitute of such life principle. Whatever is destitute of life you should consider as 'impure'."). For the Brahmans, absolute purity is reserved for the state of liberation, or for ritual. Moreover, the purity required for performing rituals turns out to be an embarrassing burden once the ritual is over: the adept is expected to be liberated from his excessive purity before returning to everyday life.[26]

A very telling, albeit comparatively less studied, example of how the purity-impurity issue works is to be found in the domain of language. Pure language, i.e. correct Sanskrit, is strictly required when it becomes one of the ingredients of the sacrifice. But using correct Sanskrit, as the Brahmanical elite (the *śiṣṭa*s) does spontaneously, is not enough. By referring to the scheme outlined before, this would be included in the "lower or ordinary purity" level. Just as occurs in the case of the sacraments (*saṃskāra*) progressively transforming the still amorphous infant into a fully-fledged member of Hindu society, the higher purity of language consists of its being used in the light of the awareness of the grammatical operations (*saṃskāra*) bringing forth its inner processes, as explained by grammatical science. If the Asuras were defeated by the Devas because they used impure, or linguistically incorrect, words (*yarvāṇas tarvāṇaḥ* instead of *yad vā naḥ tad vā naḥ* "whatever might happen to us, let that happen to us"), and the same words were used by ancient ṛṣis without incurring blame or personal ruin, it is because, as Patañjali explains,[27] the latter used them in everyday life, while the Asuras did so within a sacrificial act.

Awareness of the predominance of impurity in social life, however, does not cause Brahmans to condemn it. Interestingly, the impure act is not interrupted by the corresponding purification act: the latter is prescribed only after the completion of the impure act.[28] Moreover, the system does not lack flexibility: for example, as A. Malinar remarks[29], the period of impurity (*āśauca*) following a death can be shortened or even abolished if the specific role played by the person in social life requires his full participation in it; or again, articles exposed for sale in a market, though touched by a variety of potential buyers, are always pure.[30] A significant feature of the pure-impure demarcation system is its early association with the *varṇa* and *jāti* system. The Brahmans placed themselves in the top position, in a close, if sometimes also problematic, association with the Kṣatriyas.[31] To the four *varṇa*s is also assigned a decreasing level of purity, connected with a decreasing dignity and rank. The higher castes can, at least partly, dodge impurity by delegating it to the lower ones.[32]

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[26] Cf. A. Malinar, *op.cit.*, p. 438.

[27] *Vyākaraṇa-mahābhāṣya* (ed. Kielhorn), vol. 1, p. 11.

[28] Cf. P. Olivelle, *op.cit.*, p. 212.

[29] *Ibidem*, p. 441.

[30] See *Mānavadharmaśāstra* V.129 and other Dharmaśāstra texts (cf. P.V. Kane, *History of Dharmaśāstra*, vol. 4, Pune 1976, 2 ed., p. 312).

[31] Cf. B.K. Smith, *op.cit.*, pp. 29–31, 36–42.

[32] Cf. E.B. Halper, *op.cit.*, pp. 151, 194–195; L. Dumont, D. Pocock, *op.cit.*, pp. 18–19.

The role of śaṅkā "hesitation-perplexity-inhibition"

As impurity is hiding everywhere, in the social world, one always has to be on guard against infraction.

> The purpose of rules of impurity is not to ensure permanent purity but to make people anxious about becoming impure and when they become impure, as they must, to make them anxious about recovering their lost purity.[33]

> Socialising involves paying attention, involves anxiety – *śaṅkā*. Rules of purity are meant to cause anxiety, for anxiety creates heightened attention to the boundaries that the rules are meant to uphold.[34]

The first (and, as far as I know, also the only) scholar to draw attention to this motif, which seems to me crucial to understanding the background and meaning of the purity/impurity system in the Indian context, is T.N. Madan. In his well-known book *Non-renunciation: Themes and Interpretations of Hindu Culture,* deriving from fieldwork among the Brahmans of Kashmir, he writes:

> The daily life of the Kashmiri Brahmans is beset by *śaṅkā* or perplexity: uncertainties as to whether to do something or not, how to do it, when to do it, and so on.[35]

This induced anxiety spread throughout Indian society turns out to be an instrument for hegemony in the hands of the Brahmanical class. The fact of being the guardians (and also the organisers and creators) of the demarcation between pure and impure, and also the main purifiers, puts them in a privileged position, and this is the peculiar feature of the Indian way of enacting what is in fact a generally human attitude. The Brahmans claim that they do not act arbitrarily in establishing what is pure and what is impure, but make use of criteria based on concrete qualities of things, which they alone are able to see, with the support of the scripture, and point out to the others. That is why one of the principal targets of nondualist Tantricists' critique is, as we have seen before, the very existence of purity as an intrinsic, if unseen, quality of things. The Brahman also reserves for himself the power to transform ordinary, or profane, things into *medhya* "fit for ritual use" – one of the main words for "pure" – by adding to them unseen perfecting qualities (*saṃskāra*).

The insistence on negating the value of the pure-impure dichotomy shows that Tantric authors were acutely aware that this was not just a credence among others, but one of the pivots of the Brahmanical hegemonic system.[36] In a sense, their attack is

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[33] P. Olivelle, *op.cit.*, p. 214.

[34] *Ibidem*.

[35] Cf. E.B. Harper, *op.cit.*, p. 63, slightly modifying id., *Concerning the Categories Śubha and Śuddha in Hindu Culture: An Exploratory Essay* [in:] *Purity and Auspiciousness*, p. 19.

[36] It is worth noting that in order to attack Brahmanical ideology Tantricists have one more arrow in their quiver, a sharp one. While the Brahmanical system places revealed scripture very far away from men and appoints itself as its indispensable interpreter and mediator, the two champions of the Śaiva Advaita, Utpaladeva and Abhinavagupta, place revelation in the very heart of the human creature, as being ultimately rooted in universal consciousness, Śiva. This active divine presence is what may also be called

mainly a symbolic one, the deliberate consummation of the most impure and forbidden substances taking place only in a ritual context. After all, though, it is precisely on the sacrificial scene that the Brahmanical obsession for purity reaches its climax, and the sacrifice is the higher duplicate of the human world. In the end, even the Tantricists do not favour the mere cancellation of the distinction between pure and impure in everyday life (I refer to Jayaratha's passage quoted above: "In fact, we do not deny the practical use in everyday life of the notion of purity and impurity"), but rather questioned its acting as a main component of the Brahmanical hegemonic project.

Within the general attack on the Brahmanical purity system, a special place is assigned to warnings against *śaṅkā*, thus indirectly confirming its central, if not immediately evident, role. In the Kaula Tantras and nondualistic exegetical literature, *śaṅkā*, "hesitation, perplexity, inhibition," is at the centre of a constellation of closely related terms: *vikalpa* – "(paralysing) choice among alternatives," *vicikitsā* –"prolonged elucubration," *saṃkoca* – "contraction," *kampa* – "tremor," *bhaya* – "fear," *glāni* – "depression."[37] In the Krama system of meditation one of the twelve (or thirteen) Kālīs is Yamakālī. In her depiction by Abhinagupta, most of the aforementioned terms are present:

> Afterwards, [Consciousness, Kālī) once the taste of destruction has reached its completion, with regard to one part spontaneously creates and then destroys hesitation, consisting of restraint, producing obstacles.[38]

Jayaratha's comments are indeed worth considering:

> Afterwards – i.e. immediately after the arising of the Kālī named "Destroyer of the Duration," when the taste – i.e. the state of knowing subject – of destruction whose nature has been described in the above terms, is completed, i.e. has reached its climax, Consciousness, having assumed the role of limited subject, spontaneously – i.e. by force of its own freedom, with regard to one part – i.e. to its outward tension, restrains – i.e. establishes two cogent options "this may be done this may not be done." This is the meaning of *yama*, that is, *vikalpa* "(paralysing) choice among alternatives" which is the essence of *śaṅkā*, "hesitation." For its part, *śaṅkā* is nothing else than *vicikitsā* "prolongued elucubration" made of inert stupefaction, concerning what has to be done, for, due to the infinite number of the śāstras, one sees the discrimination between what may be done and what may not be done now in the opposite sense.[39]

āgama, and has the form of the innate language principle which imbues all cognitions and actions. It is the divine Voice (*vāc*) of the Lord that speaks in living beings. The immensely distant and undecipherable *āgama* of the Brahmans, the Veda, gives way to the internal and variegated *āgama* of the Śaivas. The two themes are also closely related, the pure-impure distinction having precisely revealed scriptures as its ultimate ground. See R. Torella "Inherited cognitions: *prasiddhi*, *āgama*, *pratibhā*, *śabdana* (Bhartṛhari, Utpaladeva, Abhinavagupta, Kumārila and Dharmakīrti in dialogue)". In: *Scriptural Authority, Reason and Action, Proceedings of a Panel at the XIV World Sanskrit Conference, Kyoto, September 1st–5th 2009*, V. Eltschinger, H. Krasser (eds.), Wien 2013, pp. 455–480.

[37] The meaning of *glāni* is made clearer by Jayaratha's gloss *taduttho 'nutsaha* "lack of enthusiasm deriving from it".

[38] TĀ IV.151.

[39] TĀ-*Vivṛti*, vol. 3, p. 164.

"For, according to this teaching, if one is exempt from tremor," says Abhinavagupta in TĀ XII.17b-18a, "one can apply oneself to any activity, whether ordinary or extraordinary; if instead one is trembling, one's tremor should be attenuated forcibly."[40] But how to overcome such an attitude, so hard to eradicate? Since hesitation is the direct outcome of seeing a mixed nature in things, Abhinavagupta goes on, if we believe in the common consciential nature of the different entities, the grounds for hesitation vanish. We should not even hesitate about hesitation openly: in this way, hesitation will dissolve gently by itself. Not only does our human understanding lead us to such determination, but also the scriptures. In this connection, Abhinavagupta quotes four Tantras, all belonging broadly speaking to the Kula, *Sarvācāra*, *Vīrāvalī*, *Niśācāra*, *Krama[sadbhāva]*, etc.[41] The relevant passages from these texts, now lost (apart from the *Kramasadbhāva* and the *Niśācāra*, both extant in Nepalese mss.), are quoted by Jayaratha. Particularly interesting is the passage from the *Sarvācāra* (alias *Sarvavīra*):

> Due to nescience the fool hesitates; from this, creation and dissolution ensue. [...] What may or may not be drunk is just the water principle, what may or may not be eaten is just the earth [principle], the good or bad form is just the fire [principle], what may or may be not touched is just the air [principle], any hole is just the ether [principle].

Here the *Sarvācāra* deals with the six main objects of hesitation: mantra, the four *tattva*s (see the above quotation), and *ātman*. The doctrine of the sixfold *śaṅkā* is also found, with minor variations, in the *Niśācāra* (alias *Niśāṭana*).

From the above considerations, a dual aspect of *śaṅkā* comes forth. One is general hesitation in the face of a series of alternatives, or the anxiety concerning the choice of the right action (or substance) in a world beset by all sorts of impurities. The other, more specific, is the hesitation of the Tantric adept in front of the socially blameworthy behaviours and highly impure substances he is expected to make use of in the ritual practice.

After giving a very creative explanation of the term *caturdaśa* – found in *Parātriṃśikā* 9c (making it refer to alcoholic beverages due to their having "four states," such as sweetness, etc.), Abhinavagupta once again states that all forbidden substances constitute a privileged means of liberation. But in order to use them the adept has to get rid of hesitation – that hesitation that all socio-religious systems purposely construct and propagate.

> *tad etāni dravyāṇi yathālābhaṃ bhedamalavilāpakāni | tathāhi dṛśyate evāyaṃ kramaḥ – yad iyaṃ saṃkocātmikā śaṅkaiva samullasantī rūḍhā phalaparyantā saṃsārajīrṇataroḥ prathamāṅkurasūtiḥ | sā cāprabuddhān prati sthitir bhaved iti prabuddhaiḥ kalpitā [bālān*

[40] "Being exempt from tremor", says Jayaratha's *Viveka* on this, means "being exempt from (paralysing) choice among alternatives". Tremor consists of "hesitation, etc."

[41] According to Jayaratha (*Viveka* thereon), by "etc.", Abhinavagupta is referring to the lost *Gamaśāstra*. Complying with the principle expressed in the *Kiraṇatantra* (vidyāpāda, IX.14ab), according to which knowledge can be derived from three sources (spontaneously, i.e. by using intellectual tools, from the scriptures, or from the guru), after dealing with the first two sources Abhinavagupta proceeds to the third, referring to Utpaladeva's *Śivastotrāvalī* II.28 ("I pay homage to the path expounded by the Great Lord, which destroys all excitation [...]").

prati ca] kalpyamānāpi ca teṣāṃ rūḍhā vaicitryeṇaiva phalati | ata eva [vaicitryakalpanād eva] sā bahuvidhadharmādiśabdanirdeśyā pratiśāstraṃ pratideśaṃ cānyānyarūpā.[42]

These substances, once made available, dissolve the stain of duality. The process we meet with in our everyday experience is as follows: It is precisely hesitation, made of contraction, which – progressively emerging, then taking root and finally bringing fruit – constitutes the first sprout of the old tree of saṃsāra. This ["hesitation"] has been fabricated by the enlightened to provide the unenlightened with a basis for ordinary life, and, despite its being a mere construction, it takes root in them and produces multiform fruits. Precisely for this [multiformity], it [hesitation] may be designed by a plurality of words, such as *dharma*, etc., and assumes different forms according to the various śāstras and various places.

Here Abhinavagupta gives a final touch to the portrait of *śaṅkā*. *Śaṅkā* is functional to direct everyday life experience, and in principle the enlightened ones who conceived of it are not to be blamed as they did it for the sake of common men. The problems start when *śaṅkā* ends up permeating all levels of human individuality, and from being an attitude to protect human individuality from the dangerous world of the unknown and power turns out to be an instrument to control and block its full achievement.[43]

Conclusion

In radically criticising the Brahmanical demarcation between purity and impurity, the nondualistic Śaiva schools are not motivated by the impossible, and also quite dangerous, dream of overthrowing the wall that protects the human world from that dominated by the powerful forces of the non-human. This obscure world of frightening power is evoked and confronted with only at the ritual level. The message they send to the ideal recipient of the Tantric teaching – that is, the pillar of Indian society, the householder – is to widen the range of experience giving more room to the passional, emotional and bodily dimensions of mankind. Thus, the tantric adept is repeatedly urged to overcome *śaṅkā* "hesitation," that same hesitation that the Brahmanical order strives to disseminate in all strata of Indian society as a prime component of its hegemonic project.

As Utpaladeva says in his mystical hymns:

Dwelling in the midst of the sea of the supreme ambrosia, with my mind immersed solely in the worship of You, may I attend to all the common occupations of men, savouring the ineffable in everything.

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[42] The passage has a few dubious points. In the tentative text I propose, I have partly accepted the emendations made by R. Gnoli, p. 266, and A. Sanderson, A *Commentary on the Opening Verses of the Tantrasāra of Abhinavagupta* [in:] S. Das, E. Fürlinger (eds.) *Sāmarasya. Studies in Indian Arts, Philosophy, and Interreligious Dialogue in Honour of Bettina Bäumer*, Delhi 2005, p. 111, n. 43, and added some of my own (particularly, I take [*bālān prati ca*] and [*vaicitryakalpanād eva*] as scribal glosses).

[43] *Mutatis mutandis*, the same may be said of the emotional-passional-cognitive structure which envelops the individual soul, the so-called *kañcuka*s "cuirasses." See R. Torella, *The kañcukas in the Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava Tantric Tradition: A Few Considerations between Theology and Grammar* [in:] *Studies in Hinduism*: *Miscellanea to the Phenomenon of Tantras*, G. Oberhammer (ed.), Wien 1998, pp. 55–86.

May my desire for the objects of the senses be intense, O Blessed One, like that of all other men, but may I see them as though they were my own body, with the thought of differentiation gone.[44]

The householder of Kashmir, whose desire for an intimate experience of the absolute and fullness of live withdrew before the abysses of transgression and loss of identity, was not to remain indifferent to such an insinuating message.

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