

## The Semiosphere of Arthur Avalon's *Mahanirvana Tantra*: the First English Translation of a *Tantric* Text

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### **Abstract:**

Arthur Avalon's English translation of *Mahanirvana Tantra* in 1913 was the first *tantric* text to be translated into a European language. This article traces the cultural dynamics which made this text a representative of the late colonial *zeitgeist* necessitating its translation. *Tantra* moved from being an object of derision in the early nineteenth century to the centre of the cultural semiosphere in the second half of the century reaching its height in the post Partition of Bengal period due to its close association with militant nationalism. This shift was congruent with a concerted project to present *tantra* on a monistic line commensurate with Vedantic thinking, and not a champion of sectarian belief and elaborates rites. The article studies these shifts to finally revisit the curious *innenwelt* of *Mahanirvana Tantra* and its unique position within the *tantric* corpus, placing the entire study within a semiotic grid proposed by Juri Lotman.

**Keywords:** *Mahanirvana Tantra*, Arthur Avalon, Semiosphere, Translation of *Tantra*

Such art (of cultural translation) does not merely recall the past as social cause or aesthetic precedent; it renews the past, refiguring it as a contingent 'in-between' space, that innovates and interrupts the performance of the present.  
(Bhabha 7)

That which is known by intuition may also be known from external signs; For them who know Him from these external signs, for them *sadhana* is enjoined.

(*Mahanirvana Tantra* 3:10)

In *Universe of the Mind*, Tartu semiotician Yuri Lotman develops Vladimir Vernadsky's idea of the biosphere to formulate his delineation the human cultural space in terms of a

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‘semiosphere’, a prerequisite aggregate of cultural signs that is necessary for any semiotic function. He states:

The semiosphere is the result and the condition for the development of culture; we justify our term by analogy, with the biosphere, as Vernadsky defined it, namely the totality and the organic whole of living matter and also the condition for the continuation of life. (Lotman 125)

Thus, the semiotic moment is both performed within a semiosphere while simultaneously contributing to its formation. The smallest functioning mechanism within a semiosphere is not a single sign ( or as a sign text), but the whole semiotic space whose internal organization is created and sustained by the multiple sign processes occurring at the different levels of multi-faceted and multileveled system of communication.

Speaking about the internal organization of the semiosphere, Lotman clarifies that ‘the set of languages in an active cultural field is constantly changing, and the axiological value and hierarchical position of the elements in it are subject to even greater changes’. (Lotman 124) This ensures the semiosphere to function as a highly dynamic spatial metaphor, which is defined both by a flux that operates within its boundary. Noth explains how Lotman conceives of the spatial metaphor of the semiosphere as a necessarily self-reflexive system. (Noth 249) Lotman states, ‘the extension of the metastructural self-description from the centre of the culture over all its semiotic space, makes it possible for an historian to look at an entire synchronic section of the semiosphere as something unified, though in fact it only gives an illusion of unification’. (Lotman 131) The illusion is best challenged when the space is confronted through a set of historical conditions by the ‘beyond’. The boundary, both in Lotman and Bhabha becomes the richest performative space, as that which defines a particular semiosphere by jeopardizing the stasis of its organization by bringing in the semiosphere that resides outside itself.

Thus, the individual sign within the semiosphere always has a possibility of movement. And this movement, if not observed or observable within the centre is often validated by its connection with the semiosphere which lies beyond its own boundary. This spatial communication is necessarily carried out semiotically. According to Kalevi Kull, one

of the foremost commentators on the works of Juri Lotman, the communication between the semiosphere and the sign is carried out through two, not disparate but hierarchically structured, channels – translation and dialogism. Lotman himself thinks that the dialogic situation creates the common language that underlies the translation of messages.

The most volatile and busy section of the semiosphere, which has been noted for its significant deployment of the spatial metaphor, is the boundary. The boundary creates binaries, notably an ‘inside’ and an ‘outside’. These two spaces are mutually untranslatable unless semiotically. The semiosphere is thus a close and bounded system, and it is at the boundary of two or more such systems that translated operates. However, although the necessity of the boundary is brought in a theoretical necessity, it is better understood not a bound system but a space of overlap. Its dynamicity attests the constantly shifting positions of signs within the semiosphere. It is perhaps clear at this point that the boundary itself is not impervious to this movement. The flux negotiates the boundary as well. Moreover, since Lotman is emphatic in his claim that the boundary of the semiosphere is the most vital part of it, and translation is the ur-text of that boundary, so it is clearly understood that negotiation of the inner semiospheric movement and the resultant repositioning of the boundary affects the communication between the ‘outside’ semiosphere as well. This is, with all its complexity, still only the first level of modeling.

A second level overrides it, for this recourse to the biosemiotic model of Marko von Uexkull is necessary. The relationship between the Tartu school of semiotics and the biosemiotic model of Uexkull and Seebok has only begun to be explored by thinkers like Kalevi Kull and Peter Torrop. Although this is not the space for a comparative analysis of the two model, I would use it to methodically justify my approach is interpreting and understanding literary translation. Largely, the approach I would take is to consider the text as an organism, a sign-text within a semiosphere analogous to the way a biotext operates within a biosphere. Aligned to that is the *innenwelt* of the text, which typologically reflects the *umwelt* of its existence. which reflects the *umwelt* of its existence. The role of translation in this relationship, I may stress, has been explored. Thus, the rich semiotic network that we get operate on three levels of semiosis –

- i. Between two semiospheres which are bound, closed and untranslatable unless semiotically carried out.
- ii. Between the centre and the periphery of a single semiosphere
- iii. The *innenwelt* of the text, which semiotically reflects the *umwelt* of its production.

All translated text follows exists in the above *bauplan*, but for the present the particular text I choose to show how this *bauplan* functions by putting the semiotic relationships at play is Arthur Avalon's translation of the *Mahanirvana Tantra*, which was published for the first time in 1913. One reason of choosing a *tantric* text is because *tantra* invests heavily in understanding the semiotic translation between an organism's *innenwelt* and the *umwelt* as its Universe as typologically reflecting each other; and like semiotics in Biology, has itself been on the boundary of the academic semiosphere.

The general structure that will be followed in this article can be simplified in the following schema:

1. The conversations between the European and Indian thinkers on matters religious and scriptural in the early 19th century, in which the Orientalists create the centre largely through ambitious translation projects, and *tantra* inhabits the edge
2. The movement of *tantra* from the periphery to the centre vis-à-vis socio-political as well as legal reforms, and its changing status in relation to the changing modality through which the nationalist movement unfolded towards the end of the 19th century; and thus initiating a new perception from the 'beyond' through translation.
3. The inner world of the *tantric* text itself, and its relationship with other *tantric* texts.

One of the interesting features that emerge from this schema is that while the first two have every appearance of being a diachronic analysis, they are mostly of a synchronic nature, while the last despite appearing diachronic operates within the synchronic world of *tantric* scriptural dissemination and practice. The categories are not mutually exclusive, and there are clear regions of overlap, but at the same time it is also worth

remembering that each of the levels are distinct semiospheres within which communication is being possible only because the semiotic moment of the translated text is making it possible.

### On the margin of the Semiospheres

‘The bridge of thoughts and sighs that spans the whole history of the Aryan world, had its first arch in the Veda, its last in Kant’s Critique (Muller xxvii)

It is interesting how often the metaphor of the bridge recurs while describing the early cultural encounters between the Europeans and the Indians from the 18th century onwards. This bridge, like any bridge, allowed crossing over. Yet, the bridge also serves as a meeting point - a point which is sometimes inclined towards one bank and sometimes towards another, yet in a spatial metaphor of the cultural space, whose liminal locus is inevitable. Following Muller’s rhetoric above, it can be surmised that if the Vedas formed the arch, then translation was the bridge. The earliest religious conversations between the Indian and the Europeans in the colonial times revolved around the Vedas, which closely followed on the heels of the *Bhagwat Geeta*, the first translated Indian text in a European language. What Muller stated in the preface to his translation of Kant’s work was representative of the German zeitgeist, which among its enthusiasts counted Arthur Schopenhauer. At the root of this optimism were immense translation projects led by Orientalists like William Jones, Colebrook and Max Muller himself. Later on, the missionaries who arrived in India with the express purpose of translating and disseminating the Bible and developed the material bulwark necessary to carry out that work, also ended up translating scriptures, learning Sanskrit and Indian languages, and lending resources to facilitate translations of ancient Sanskrit texts. The names of Henry Martyn and William Carey can be remembered in this context. By the turn middle of the 19th century, the West was well familiar with the major texts, ideas, philosophical premises and literary content of the sacred books of the East.

Well, almost all. There was a significant omission – the *Tantric* texts. Tejaswani Niranjana would later identify as the inherently asymmetric nature of translation activity. (Niranjana 2) Texts were being selected and translated that would suit the Orientalists’

expectations and would not offend the Europeans' taste. While Vedanta and Vaishnava could be accommodated easily, *tantra* presented a problem. Most Christian observers in India in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, whether scholars, missionaries, or European travelers, found the goddess worship they encountered off-putting. This was true whether they were commenting on idolatry, on the Kali of the famed temple in Calcutta, Kalighat, on blood sacrifices within temple precincts or on the supposedly licentious practices of goddess-worshipping *Tantric* votaries. (McDermott 50)

William Ward, who was generally tolerant of differences, was repulsed by the scenes in Kalighat. He writes in 1811:

The bleating of the animals, the number slain, and the ferocity of the people employed, actually made me unwell, and I returned about midnight filled with horror and indignation. (Ward 190)

One of the reasons of this absolute impossibility of communication was the lack of anything common that could be found in the Christian doctrine and the *tantric* doctrine. Vaisnava bhakti had lots in common with Christian faith. Vedanta and monism had clear parallels, as did the Trinity and Samkhya philosophy. But mother worship rites had little in common. No semiosis was possible amidst these spheres. Hans Kung said, the Sakta and the Tantrik systems were 'extraordinarily alien to Christians, more alien than anything we have met thus far in Buddhism and Hinduism'. (Kung 414)

Its position, even within Bengalis, was precarious through the early half of the nineteenth century. The Bengali converts and the reformers were clearly against *Tantra*. Krishna Mohan Banerjea and Lal Behari De, both early converts despised the Sakta tradition and the practice of *Tantra* in no uncertain terms. In *Hotum Pyachar Naksha* as well in Banerjea's maiden literary endeavor, the play *Persecuted*, the opposition of the young Bengalis to kali worship is clear and pitched. Saktism was singled out among the Hindu worship and belief system for criticism, and in Bengal that was closely related to veneration of Kali. Thus within the religious discursive field throughout the early half of the nineteenth century, *tantra* was marginalized and despised. There were two axes along which the

marginalization was perpetuated: the rise of the Brahmo Samaj and the spread of Western education which apparently based itself on Protestant principles of reason and utility.

Rammohun Roy's attitude to *tantra* was ambivalent. By and large, with the exception of the Mahanirvan *tantra* and *Kularnavatantra*, he despised it. This was largely because he despised idolatry and *tantra* is a very storehouse of it. This was integrally linked with the Christian missionary thought on one side, and the deep influence that his scholarship in the Semitic languages and Islamic education left in him. Both traditions were intolerant of idolatry. Thus, largely due to the attack of the missionaries on one hand, and reformed Hindus on the other, *tantra* from the beginning of the nineteenth century seem to be relegated to the discursive margin. It was deemed irrelevant at best and a repulsive later day corruption of the grand Vedic system at its worst. Most importantly, it was not in-keeping with the grand and noble 'Orient' that Europe was willing to accept India as. It was not a part of translation projects, of inter-religious discourse, or of religious practice of the urban dwelling. English educated reformed Hindus and Brahmos and the academic apathy towards it became pervasive and may even have become a lasting legacy.

Yet, the fact that it was present in the semiosphere of Bengali thought is clear if we move from the symbolic to the indexical sign within the semiosphere. There were a proliferation of kali temples that were being built around Bengal around this time. Although it lacked a voice, it did not lack a view. The temples contributed to a metaphor for all to recognize and yet none would speak about it. But what was marginalized in the semiosphere in the early half of the nineteenth century gradually made its way to the centre in the second half. The indexical would take a symbolic turn, the metaphor would change into a metonym. In a semiosphere, signs mean sign structure, and the discursive signs around religion were re-orienting the spatial *bauplan* with the growing political signs which were changing, with the trigger offered by the Revolt of 1857. From there to the Partition of Bengal in 1905 and the Rowlatt Act of 1908 we witness a period of steady growth in nationalism that was antagonistic and unaccommodating. It was also the time that *tantra* made its way to the centre as an ideological tool deployed to give rise both to a more militant form of nationalism politically and a refashioned Orientalism culturally.

### **Tantra Old and New**

*Tantra* means different things to different people. From the philosophic deliberations of the Kashmiri Shaiva *Tantra* to New Age sexual techniques, the very mention of *tantra* evokes varied reactions and associations. The *tantra* that we are going to deal with in this article is the corpus of texts and associated spiritual practice that prevailed in Bengal from at least the 6th century CE, more specifically the Shakta *Tantras*. Religious practice in Bengal was on *Tantric* lines from the very beginning. The earliest Bengali texts, the *Charyapadas*, are esoteric deliberations about the practices and philosophy of sahaajiya *tantric* Buddhists. *Tantra* is overwhelmingly present in Bengali's religious rites and practices, even if they go unrecognized at times. Methods as diverse as the Vaishnava and the Vedantic in Bengal have also been colored in *Tantric* hue, and Bengal's greatest festival, the Durga Puja, is essentially a shakta *tantric* rite.

In the early 19th century, although despised and unrecognized by the most recognizable section of Bengali intellectuals, *tantra* was building a bridge of a different kind through the theosophists. Madam Blavatsky's highly controversial book that began the movement was inspired by *tantra*. The way theosophists came to be associated with the Home Rule movement showed a sign that *tantra* could be maneuvered to serve a nationalist end. Julian Strube has investigated how much of the early collaborators to the Theosophists were Bengali intellectuals who started writing books on *tantra* from the 1850s. After the Revolt of 1857, the same thought process came to be detached from the Theosophists and directly applied within the nationalist discourse that was beginning in Bengal. Urban observes how 'throughout the late nineteenth century, *Tantra* was increasingly identified with the most dangerous subversive movements, such as the criminal Thuggee and political extremists of the nationalist movement'. (Urban 74) Tantrism acquired a new political dimension as British fears about civil unrest and mutiny were excited and linked to the supposed degeneracy of the natives. *Tantra*, as is clear, was developing as a dialectic category not unlike Fanon's development of categories leading to violence, where '*tantra*, (which) could be employed by colonial authors as proof of Indian backwardness, barbarism, and savagery, could also be turned around and redeployed as the symbol of India in violent revolt against her colonial masters'. (Urban 74) A metaphoric application was in *Tantra*'s

typology of secrecy. *Tantric* texts re-iterate often of its being a secret knowledge, a gnosis that is to be received and practiced in secrecy, often applauded as a virtue. This sign was metaphorically extended to validate the actions of the secret societies that developed across Bengal in the early part of the twentieth century. For Aurobindo Ghosh, who was at the helm of the *Anushilan Samity*, and whose brother Barindra was a *karta* or master of the more radical *yugantar* group associated with it, nationalist operation and religion could not be separated. He clearly stated:

Nationalism is not a mere political program; Nationalism is a religion that has come from God. Nationalism is a creed which you shall have to live...If you are to be a Nationalist...you must do it in the religious spirit...It is not by any mere political programme...that this country can be saved...What is the one thing needful?...the idea that there is a Power at work to help India, that we are doing what God bids us. (Aurobindo 6)

Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay's *Anandamath* turned into a metonymic cul-de-sac for nationalism and *tantra*, providing the movement with its most endearing set of signs. Kali, the deity of *tantra* was refashioned and allegorized as the 'Mother India', to whom the British were to be offered as sacrificial white goats. The rhetoric of sacrifice to the mother was paramount in their writings. What is the most interesting part of this movement is the way in which this movement of *tantra* from the margin to the centre of the semiosphere created a refashioning of *tantra* related books as well, which meant writings on *tantra* as well as actual *tantric* texts, with a reform observable in the closed *innenwelt* of *tantra* as well. The Bengali intellectual groups who opposed this were being decried as effeminate and misguided through 'Western' modes of knowledge and succumbing to accommodating themselves towards an Orientalist image of India and Indians, which was demeaning. The rhetoric of masculinity was at the centre of this refashioning, with its chief fetish in the feminization of the country as the hapless and hungry mother who is in need of protection and succor.

But this movement also came with a vigorous refashioning of its *innenwelt*, adapting its different parts in response to the changing semiotic ecology and influencing it in turn. *Tantra* includes two kinds of texts – the original *tantric* books and commentaries on them. Digests on *tantra* are as old as *tantric* books themselves. Within the *Sakta* tradition of *tantra* in Bengal, *Shaktananda Tarangini*, along with *Brihat tantra sara* are two such texts which

are not a single *tantra* but derive from a wide gamut to guide the seeker or the *sadhaka* through the *kaulatantric marga* of *sadhana*. Many books on *tantra* begin to appear from the later half of the eighteenth to the early part of the twentieth century, and we see that their ideological emphasis has decidedly shifted from the early *tantric* texts. We will look at two of them to understand this shift of emphasis. One is *Tantrik Guru* by Nigamananda Paramhansa which was published from Dhaka in 1911, and quickly ran into many editions. The second is an article called ‘Banglar *tantra*’ by Panchkari Bandyopadhyay published in 1906. These are only two of many such publications that started to make their way among Bengali readers.

The introduction of *Tantrik Guru* clearly lay down the premise for publication:

*Tantra* is a miraculous creation of the ancient Aryans. It is divided into two parts – the parts of *pravritti* and of *nivritti*. *Pravritti* includes remission of diseases, astrological interventions, hypnotism, magic and the six karmas (of *maran*, *stambhan*, *mohan*, *uchatan*, *bashikaran* and *akarshan*), as well as the communion with supernatural beings. It is not advisable to follow this *marga*; particularly modern people with their unrestrained minds must avoid it. My subject for this book is the *sadhana* of the *nivritti marga*, which the seeker can follow for self realization. (Nigamananda 6)

He goes on to explicate in the first chapter:

*Tantra* is not an exclusive *sastra*, it is a transformation of the Vedas, it contains in particular the essence of *Samkhya* philosophy and the *Upanisadas*. It reveals a convenient way towards liberation. (Nigamananda 7)

In this fascinating introduction, Nigamananda Paramhansa further explicates how there are ancient *tantras* as well as new *tantras*, and states that the new *tantras* have induced rites which are sure to appear repulsive to an educated mind and does not take one to the path of liberation - the ultimate goal of all *tantras*. Even in some of the old *tantras*, he states, there have been rites that even after being mediated through the holy mouths of Siva and Parvati, have failed to import any purity or sacredness. The indication is an acknowledgment of human agency in the composition of the *tantric* texts, and thus also of individual and temporal influences that may have colored it. This is a radical claim on the authority of scriptures, which draws much of its authority from testimony. He warns the reader to steer

clear of the practice of such rites. He states that where *tantra* goes against the karma kanda of the Vedas, it clearly states it as a warning sign to the sadhaka. A seeker must clearly discern the *sattvik* element of the *tantras* from the *tamasik* and *rajasik* elements that were interpolated at a later state. He rather pitches *tantra* right within the philosophical premise of Samkhya, and states that the numerous deities that are enumerated in *tantra* are symbolic representations of truth as revealed in Samkhya, including Kali. The authorities that he quotes for validity of the *tantras* range from the Vedas to the Bhagwat Geeta to Vedantic scholars like Shankaracharya – which are interestingly texts outside the kaula *tantric* tradition. Among the Puranas, he quotes the *Vayu puranas*, the *Brahmavaivartapurana*, but not *Kalika Purana* or *Devipurana*, which were traditionally associated with *sakta tantric* tradition. Among the *tantras*, he quotes *Shyama rahasya*, *Rudrayamala* and *Viswasabatantra*. However, none of the notable *tantras* popular in the Tara and Kali kula are mentioned. It is evident, that Nigamananda is keen to establish the entire *tantric* tradition on Vedantic lines. The book has a chapter on *Brahmavada*, and the only *tantric* text he uses for this is *Mahanirvana Tantra*.

The second text that we consider as a part of our investigation in this part is by Panchkari Bandyopadhyay. In an article named *Banglar tantra* published in *Prabahini* in 1929, Panchkari equates *tantra* with Bengali nationalism in the very introduction through a deft identification strategy. He states that the Partition of Bengal and the Swadeshi movement inspired Bengalis to turn from their imitative ways of the earlier century towards their own culture. Although this trend was often ridiculed by various names, it brought them closer to their roots. He then says:

Is there not a true Bengali in your land? Look close, you have women's rights, marriage of young women, widow marriage, joint feast of allcastes, worship of the formless divinity. But those there are closely associated with Benagali clothes, food and customs. If you want to revive that which are truly Bengali, all the things mentioned above, try to understand Bengali Vaishnavism, sahajiya and *tantra*. Closely studying these sects, texts and customs you will realize that everyone from Sureshchandra to Keshab Chandra has repackaged what was already here in a foreign garb and sold it back to us. (Bandyopadhyay 108)

And this identification goes on throughout this article. Regarding literature, for example, he would conclude that :

The more you read *tantra*, the more you realize that *tantra* is the original creed of Bengal. (Bandopadhyay 109)

In another article by the same author, named ‘idol worship in *Tantra*’, he tries to establish the monism that we have noted above, when he states:

The thought element in Upanishads and *Devisukta*, which states that I am all, it is from me that all there is – is the base on which the structure of *tantra* has been constructed. Christian theism is a protest to that thought, which finally suppresses that. A theism which states that there is a being who is stronger, older, more willing, more gracious and generous and in all respects greater than me – that is God. (Bandopadhyay 269)

Both texts reveal that there is something new and interesting that is going on in this refashioning of the *tantra* within the Bengali cultural sphere. Julien Strube points out how this new reformed *tantric* texts were geared with a three pronged agenda. It wrote directly against the missionaries, the Vedantic bias of the Brahmo Samaj and also addressed itself to the Theosophists, to whom it said that there is a more grounded counterpart of the concocted ‘esoteric’ school of Madam Blavatsky. And two contrary turn are simultaneously deployed. First, there is a movement towards an universalism by stating that initiates all are same. Sadhakas are not defined by religious and national boundaries, whereby *tantra* can be a basis of universalism. There is a wide Catholicism in the spirit of this exposition. On the other hand, there is a strong nationalist spirit which states that whatever we take as Western knowledge like egalitarianism, scientism and rational thinking of the deepest kind have already been explored in the *tantric* texts. So, if Indians look at their own tradition without looking outside then they will find an answer for the questions that they are asking. Thus, *tantric* texts were also laying the foundation for a nationalist cause.

For many in the West, this was the beginning of a new understanding of *Tantra*. It was closely connected with the rise of interest in esoteric knowledge in the West itself from the beginning of the twentieth century, where the theosophists may have contributed. The

mystically constructed Irish nationalism could be a prototype to study the relationship between *tantra* and Indian nationalism too. All these meant that a section of the Western intelligentsia has prepared to engage with *tantra* in a more involved manner. The *Tantric Order of America* was established and in 1905 has brought out its journal. In the fifth edition of that journal, they provided of an entire compendium of quotations that reveal two to three things:

- i. There are clear links between Western esoteric knowledge and practice, and the Indian *tantra*.
- ii. *Tantra* is certified by the Veda as is valid as a *Smarta* tradition
- iii. The Western engagement in *tantra* is widespread, and noted philosophers, thinkers and literary figures display an active interest in it.

In this rich cultural atmosphere, emerges the mysterious figure of Arthur Avalon, and a translation of the *Mahanirvana Tantra*, the first *tantra* to be translated into English and one that the West came to know in its entirety, through a translation with a magnificent introduction in 1913.

### **Arthur Avalon and the translation of the *Mahanirvana Tantra***

We have, till now, engaged in an overview of the *umwelt* within which the text came to be translated. In this section we will *innenwelt* of *tantra*. This has a diachrony that is somewhat, though not exclusively, independent of its *umwelt*. This difference can be understood typologically, since *tantra* is so much devoted towards the *innenwelt* of the practitioner, through which *umwelt* is then described. It prioritizes an inside out structure. It is with this world, the inside world of the *tantra*, that we will deal with in this section.

Hiroki Watanabe has extensively worked on the textual history of *Mahanirvana Tantra*, and he concludes that the text is full of ambiguities. (Watanabe 1060) First, the second part of the text, though mentioned in almost all editions of the translation and commentaries and referred to in the first part of the text, is never actually found. Arthur Avalon, in his translation of the text in 1913, which is the first English translation of the text (a second prose translation appeared as late as in 1970) mentions that he has seen a copy of

the second half with a Nepali pundit but he was reluctant to part with it. This is, however, just the beginning of the problem. We will arrive at them as we go along, but it is important that we come to know who Arthur Avalon was. Arthur Avalon was long believed to be the pseudonym of Sir John Woodrow, judge at the Calcutta High Court who worked with local pundits and experts to bring out the edition. In a thesis in 1998, Kathleen Taylor proved categorically how it is a pseudonym shared by two writers Sir John Woodrow and Atal Bihari Ghosh. Her thesis has in fact unraveled within the translation the two separate voices of Woodrow and Das which was made possible because Woodrow himself has many publications exclusively to his name. (Taylor 14)

Secondly, within the corpus of the *tantric* tradition, *Mahanirvana Tantra* holds a unique place. Not much is heard about the text before the 18th century, although we have already seen that both Nigamananda in 1906 and Panchkari Bandopadhyay 1908 consider it to be an ancient and authoritative *tantra* text. Panchkari Bandopadhyay goes so far as to attest that the Brahmo dharma is nothing but a structure derived out of a small portion of the *Mahanirvana tantram* devoted to the worship of the brahman. He was sharing a common sentiment. The text was used profusely by Raja Rammohun Roy in his polemic against Brahminical orthodoxy to justify the tradition of worship of the *Brahman*. He often resorted to the ‘ancient authority of the Mahanirvan’. This was also the text to which he took recourse in his support of widow remarriage. Due to its lack of mention in old records, there has been a widespread idea that this *tantric* text is a fabrication of Raja Rammohun Roy himself, who not only provided the text but also created a myth of a second part which could not be published. However, that may not be true, and the authorship is often ascribed to Hariharananda Bharati, who was Rammohun’s guru in Varanasai and from whom it is commonly believed that he received some sort of a *tantric* initiation. Along with the text, there is a debate regarding the author of its commentary as well. All translations take into account the commentary of Jaganmohan Tarkalankar, but who is he? Is there a single Jaganmohan Tarkalankar, or are there two as Arthur Avalon states? So the water becomes only too murky. In this section we will try to look at the various controversies related to the text and then come to its translation project.

Much of the complications arise from the fact that the *tantra* is radically different from all other *tantras* in its general construction, theology, its commitment to jurisprudence and intensive borrowing from shastric texts, upholding of the caste system in everyday life and finally in its comparative study of shakti worship in other parts of the world like Babylon and Egypt. Hugh Urban felt that 'the text is really something of a double edged sword that accomplishes a two-fold task. Not only does it attempt to reinterpret certain aspects of Indian culture according to the model of the *tantras*, but it also attempts to relegitimize the *Tantric* tradition in light of a reformed modernized Hinduism. (Urban 70)

As we take a closer look at its *innenwelt*, we find that the text unfolds like most *tantras*, as a conversation between Siva and Parvati regarding the dismal situation of the world where mortals are haunted by sorrow, and the way to free from it. Siva customarily replies, and this is also usual, that *tantra* is the only way in the modern iron age or 'kali yuga' to liberate oneself. The ancient Vedic rituals are both impossible to carry out and fruitless in terms of efficacy in modern age. And therefore, with the noble intention of freeing mankind, he is revealing the secret doctrine of the *Mahanirvana Tantra*, which he has held a close secret till then out of love and compassion to his beloved Parvati, so that men who know it can be liberated. There nothing much here that is different from other *tantras*. It is a formulaic beginning. The differences start to appear from the third chapter, which establishes the formless Brahman as the supreme deity of whom the gods and goddesses are only manifestations. This strain continues throughout the *tantra*. It is not sectarian in the sense that it is not devoted to a particular deity but towards a formless eternal divinity, the Brahman – which agreed well both with the British and the reformed Hindus alike. This is unique when it comes to *tantric* texts, which are usually sectarian in the sense that they are generally ascribed to various kulas depending on the deity, the *Srikula*, *Nathkula*, *Kalikula* and *Tarakula* being the major streams. In *Mahanirvatantra* Kali, or adyakali as the shakti deity, appears only in the seventh chapter and here too the bhakti representation is prioritized over the fearsome aspect as found in some of the other sectarian *tantras*. Its description of 'adyakali', its chief deity is remarkably different from other *tantras*. The famous *ka-kar-kuta stotra* that appears in the seventh chapter of this *tantra* abounds in devotion, and the pleasant and beautiful aspect of the devi is prioritized over her fearsome and destructice aspect.

The rituals here are highly sanitized, to a degree that at least one Brahmin pundit referred to it as a ‘woman’s *tantra*’. (Urban 72) The dreaded five Ms of *tantric* rites, which has been the greatest point of disgust and disagreement among the reformed Bengali Hindus have been only summarily dealt with here. The fifth M, the maithuna is only hinted at in one line through an euphemism. Moreover, it is also said that the rite is best carried out only with one’s legal spouse. This was a great departure from earlier *tantras*.

The most interesting matter in the *tantra* is the long time it invests in matters which are distinctly un-*tantric*, matters related to marriage, caste system, social duties and laws of inheritance. There are direct references to the *dayabhaga* and the *manusmriti*, and there are some noted differences in matters of inheritance with these earlier texts. The laws of *Mahanirvana Tantra* have a striking resemblance with the reformed inheritance laws that the British administration introduced in 1775, but changed again in 1782. It has lead many, like Derrett to conclude that it was written somewhere between 1775 and 1782. Derrett convincingly argues that if not the whole, then at least part of it was written in commensuration with the ‘changes made in the British legal system between 1773 and 1782’. (Derrett 141) Manuscripts of this *tantra* were few and far between, and not present with any of the traditional sampradayas, but Rammohun Roy’s personal library had two copies and the Brahmo Samaj library had one. The first printed copy was by the Adi Brahmo Samaj Press.

Regarding the significance of this *tantra* Panchkari Bandopadhyay states, ‘our land of Bengal used to be ruled by Tantrik works such as Saradatilaka...Pranatosini, *Tantrasara* etc. then the *Mahanirvana Tantra* did not have so great influence. Considering the form into which, as a result of English education, the mind ...of the Bengali has been shaped the *Mahanirvana* is a proper *Tantra* for the time. The *Mahanirvanatantra* alone is fit for the country at the present time’. And it was this *tantra* that Avalon selected as the best representative of the zeit geist. Internally, it was well adopted to suit the spirit, externally it was perfectly representative of the spirit of neo nationalism being refashioned in *tantric* lines. The growing importance of this text is clear from Avalon’s own words in his preface to his 1913 translation, which also sheds important light to the translation history of this text:

It was first published by the Adi-Brahma-Samaja in 1798 Shakabda (A.D. 1876), and was printed in Bengali characters, with the notes of the Kulavadhuta Shrimad

Hariharananda Bharati under the editorship of Anandachandra Vidyavagisha. The preface to this edition stated that three MSS. were consulted; one belonging to the library of the Samaja; the second supplied by Durgadasa Chandhuri, and the third taken from the library of Raja Ram Mohun Roy. This text appears to be the basis of subsequent publications. It was again printed in 1888 by Shri Krishna Gopala Bhakta, since when there have been several editions with Bengali translations, including that of Shri Prasanna Kumara Shastri. The late Pandit Jivananda Vidyasagara published an edition in Devanagari character, with the notes of Hariharananda; and the Venkateshvara Press at Bombay have issued another in similar character with a Hindi translation. (Avalon 7)

The Mahanirvana *Tantra* thus inhabited a liminal space between two semiospheres that were trying to engage in dialogism. To the East it took on a revisionist signification on the basis of which political activism can be generated, to the West it was commensurate with Avalon's corrective to the Western way of looking at the Hindu *tantras*. And finally in 1913, it got translated and published by the name of Arthur Avalon.

The *tantra* soon gained popularity in the West, largely because of the high connection of Sir John Woodroffe. Among his acquaintances was John Rothschild. He knew about the *tantra*, carried the text with him, and may have played a role in popularizing it in the West. Yeats knew about the text, although the Upanishadas and the Yoga Sutras were closer to his heart. Yeats was not a systematic reader of *tantra*, but he took whatever attracted him. Grevel Lindop mentions how the *Vision 2* has parts woven into it that were taken from the Mahanirvana. Avalon's introduction includes a long description of the meru, which is reflected in Yeats poem by the same name. In India, however, the debate around its authorship and commentary continued.

This popularity, however, did not do away with the controversy that surrounded its commentary. Arthur Avalon states in his introduction that the commentary he follows is of Briddha jaganmohan Tarkalankar. He then goes on to state that the moniker 'Brddha' has been used in the form of disambiguation. In Avalon's own words:

The edition which has been used for the translation is that (now out of print) edited and published at Calcutta by Shri Krishna Gopala Bhakta in Chaitra 1295 Bengali era (April, 1888), with Commentary of Shrimad Hariharananda Bharati, and with additional notes by the learned and lately deceased Pandit Jaganmohana Tarkalankara, called Vriddha in order to distinguish him from another celebrated Pandit of the same name. A new edition of the same work is now, in course of publication, with further notes by the latter's son, Pandit Jnanendranatha Tantraratna. (MT 6)

Jnanendranath Tantraratna, however, has himself debated this contention. He has stated in his introduction to the text:

We have already received in English a translation of Mahanirvana *Tantra*. Its translator goes by the name of Arthur Avalon. It is the translation of the earlier edition of the present edition along with the commentary of late Jaganmohan Tarkalankar. In the said translation, the translator has written in the preface that he has taken as his source the text and commentary of late Vriddha Jaganmohan Tarkalankar...but in reality there existed no other pundit by the name of Jaganmohan Tarkalankar. The same person is the translator and commentator of the present volume'. (*Mahanirvana Tantra* ii)

The reason why John Woodrow wanted to establish Jaganmohan Tarkalankar as two personalities is unclear. It is clear that multiple translations of the Mahanirvana *tantra* already existed in Bengali, and at least one in Hindi, by the time Avalon brought out his translation. It is clearly understandable now how a little heard of *tantric* text rose to ascendance under changing condition of the semiosphere it inhabited. However, what is important is that this *tantra* was now solidly placed in the corpus of *tantric* texts. The *innenwelt* suited the *umwelt*, and the semiosphere was redefined, and redefined in the term of 'positive Orientalism'.

### A Text as a Sign: Positive Orientalism?

Tapati Guha Thakurta divides the evolution of Orientalism into two parts, an old Orientalism and a new Orientalism. (Guha Thakurta 8) Although it largely featured in painting with the changing perception towards Indian art among English connoisseurs among whom E.V.

Havell plays an important part, its effect was felt throughout the cultural sphere of Bengal. Sir John Woodroffe was close to Abanindranath Tagore, A.V. Coomaraswamy and the entire Bengal School painters. It is evident that within the rise of a new nationalism, *tantra* was re-orienting itself. While the early Orientalists largely engaged with the *Vedas* and the *Upanishadas*, the *Bhagwat Geeta* as well the literary works of mostly Kalidasa; the new Orientalism was woven around the *tantric* texts. Thus what was extraneous and marginal in the semiosphere of the early 19th century, now took a turnover and became central in the early 20th century, albeit through re-fashionings that were already discussed. *Mahanirvana Tantra* became more than a text, it became a sign that metonymically brought together as a cultural aggregate of all the movements and sentiments of this time, resulting in its translation and growing acceptance.

Kathleen Taylor calls this positive Orientalism, which was developed to remedy the evils brought about by the first spate of Orientalism in the late 18th and early 19th century. The chief evils that were identified in the earlier movement, and which were bolstered by the introduction of 'Western Education' in the 1830s, were, as Sumit Sarkar points out – denationalizing, alienation of education from religion, and making Indians servants of the Raj and imitators of the West. (Sarkar 154) Sarkar states how The general belief was that the texts for translations were chosen to consolidate this structure of supremacy. The new Positive Orientalism was constructed as a corrective. The return of the *tantra* was an important role to conjure a nationalist spirit and validate the growth of nationalism on the platform of activism. In this changed semiosphere, the translation of texts which were thought hitherto considered irrelevant, came about. *Mahanirvana Tantra* was one of the foremost in this regard.

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