Śri Yantra

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Introduction

Śri Yantra (also written Shri Yantra) is a sacred diagram of Tantric Hindhuism. Its symbolism is explained in Zimmer[15]. It consists in three concentric parts:

- An inner figure of interpenetrating triangles. This figure, symmetric in its vertical central axis, contains both upward-pointing triangles (*vahni*), symbolizing the male element ("Purusha", the Person), and downward-pointing triangles (*śakti*), symbolizing the female aspect ("Prakriti", i.e. energy) of divinity. There are 4 male triangles, and 5 female ones. Their inter-penetration symbolizes the complementarity of the opposite principles in creating the illusion of duality through ignorance, whereas the general symmetry and balance of the whole figure symbolizes the more profound reality of Unity of God through its various unfoldings.

- Two concentric circles, wearing a regular lotus (*padma*) design. The inner pattern has a period of 8, the outer one a period of 16. These patterns symbolize the sanctity of the inner diagram, used in Yoga meditation as a linear yantra[15].

- A triple Greek-like key-pattern, the *bhūpura*, or *śiśirita* (shivered) frame. It symbolizes the ground-plan of a temple with 4 square openings, in the 4 directions of space. This sanctuary is the seat (*pīṭha*) of one's chosen deity (*iṣṭa-devatā*), representing one's Higher Self.

This Śri Yantra diagram is one of the most sacred symbols of Tantric Hindhuism, and it is traditionally used in Yoga meditation exercises. The original edition of Zimmer[14] had erroneous descriptions of Śri Yantra, according to the later english translation[15]. Unfortunately, that one too is marred with errors in diagrams, and unclear references to inside-out construction instructions for the drawing of the triangular central pattern. The present paper presents a more systematic approach to the formal definition of Śri Yantra.

1 In search of Śri Yantra

1.1 Drawing experiments

Our first approach was completely experimental: the author tried to draw Śri Yantra in free hand, and failed. A more systematic attempt with a computer drawing system failed too. The only reliable model available then was the frontispiece figure in [15], all the other diagrams in the book being obviously erroneous, or at least significantly different from the frontispiece figure. Instructions for drawing the diagram lead to various inexact drawings, such as the False Śri Yantra shown in Figure 1.

Using the Macintosh package FreeHand, and measuring precisely Zimmer's frontispiece diagram, a correct Śri Yantra was then produced, shown below as Figure 2, and measured to serve as initial approximate configuration.

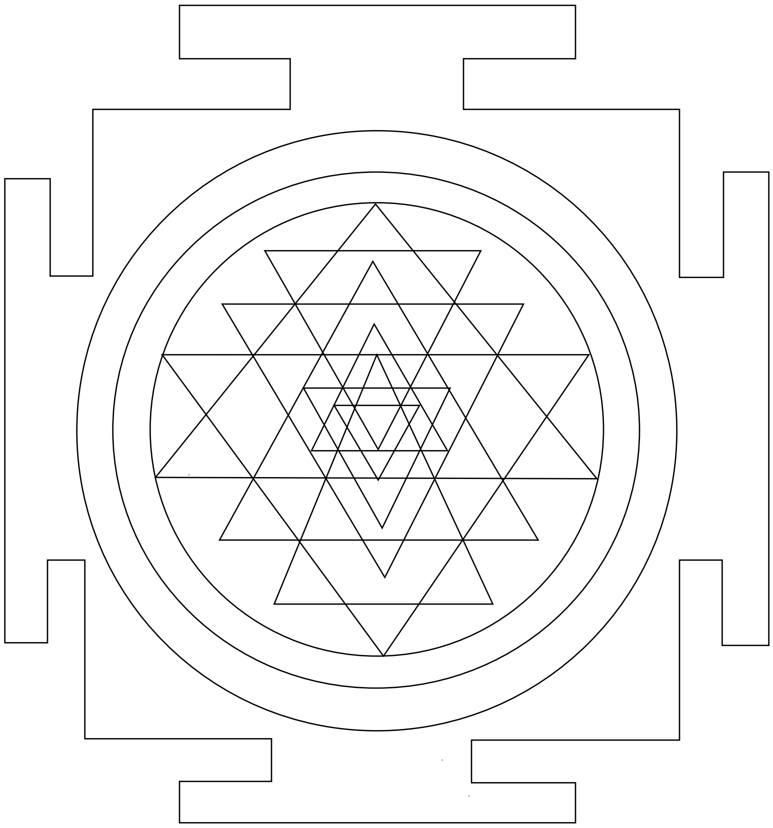

Figure 1: False Śri Yantra

1.2 A more rigorous mathematical analysis

The difficulty of the above experiments had left undecided whether Śri Yantra was indeed uniquely defined in the real plane, under-specified, or even impossible. Using the notation XA for the horizontal coordinate of point A in Fig. 1, and YA for its vertical coordinate, and writing $A\&B \rightarrow c$ for "points A and B determine the line c joining them" and $a \times b \rightarrow C$ for "lines a and b determine their intersection C", we compute a system of real coordinates constraints as follows. α is the inner circle of the diagram.

We choose YQ, XF, YP, XA and YJ as parameters, and we get:

$$YQ \times \alpha \rightarrow Q$$
$$Q\&O \rightarrow e$$
$$YF = YQ$$
$$YJ \times \alpha \rightarrow J$$
$$J\&T \rightarrow h$$
$$XA \times e \rightarrow A$$
$$YJ \times e \rightarrow H$$
$$YQ \times h \rightarrow I$$
$$XU = 0, YU = YQ$$
$$U\&A \rightarrow f$$

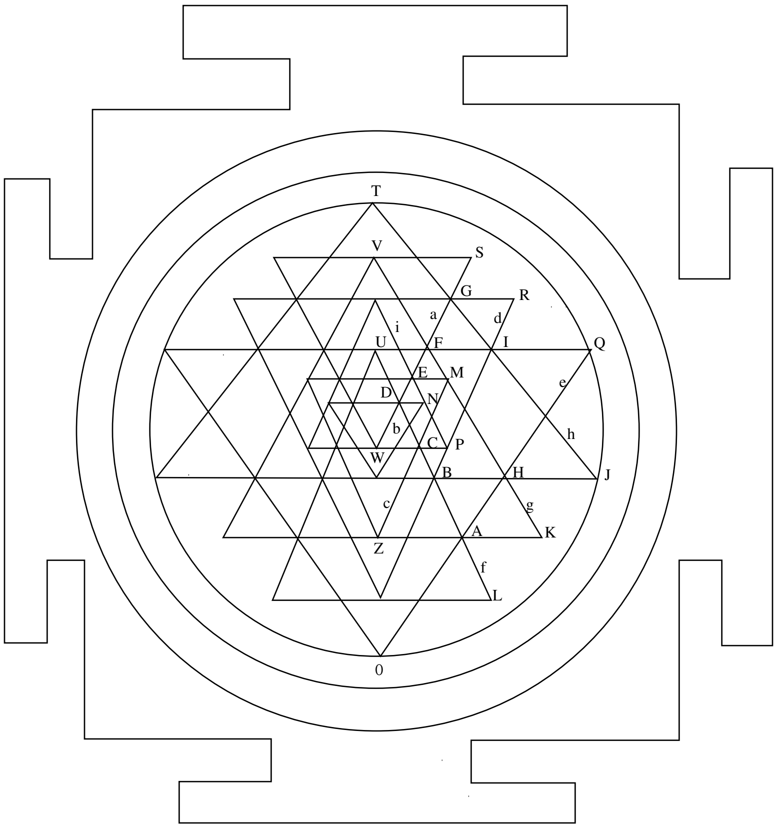

Figure 2: Approximate Śri Yantra

$$YP \times f \to C$$
$$F\&H \to g$$
$$0T \times g \to V$$
$$XW = 0, YW = YP$$
$$F\&W \to a$$
$$a \times f \to D$$
$$a \times h \to G$$
$$YJ \times f \to B$$
$$XZ = 0, YZ = YA$$
$$C\&Z \to c$$
$$c \times g \to M$$
$$I\&B \to d$$
$$d \times 0 \to YL$$
$$f \times YL \to L$$
$$d \times YP \to P$$
$$a \times YM \to E$$
$$P\&E \to i$$
$$a \times YV \to S$$
$$g \times YA \to K$$

$$i \times YD \rightarrow N$$
$$d \times YG \rightarrow R$$

The parameters are correct if point $(0, YG)$ is on line i, which gives one extra constraint. We thus obtain a problem with 4 degrees of freedom, which admits of several solutions. However, we have to take into account the further constraints that the various points of the diagrams should be inside the circumbscribing circle α ; we thus have a very shallow range for the 4 real parameters, leading to solutions which are esthetically rather close to Figure 2. A standard Newton approximation solving of the constraint on G from various initial solutions leads to the following particular solution, where the diameter of circle α is taken as unit length:

Definition *Classical Śri Yantra* is defined as:

- YF=0.668
- XF=0.126
- YP=0.463
- XA=0.187
- YJ=0.398
- YL=0.165
- YA=0.265
- YG=0.769
- YV=0.887
- YM=0.603
- YD=0.551

This investigation solved our main query:

Theorem Śri Yantra is an under-determined Euclidean plane geometry problem with 4 real parameters, admitting an infinity of solutions around the Classical Śri Yantra.

The wider variation of the various solutions is on YL, and this obviously affects the esthetic rendering of the diagram, and consequently its magic powers. It became clear at this point that a synthetic study of the above solutions was essential in getting a more precise approximation to the traditional diagram.

1.3 Graphic synthesis of solutions

The graphic description language Postscript[3] was chosen for the graphic synthesis of the solutions. The mathematical analysis of the previous section pertains only to the triangular area. The circular, as well as rectangular patterns, were obtained by measurements from the original model from the frontispiece figure in [15]. The lotus patterns were also obtained by a trial-and-error fiddling with the Postscript Bézier cubic curves primitives. The relevant Postcript code is available from the author.

We show below two examples of figures which are particular solutions of the Śri Yantra equations. In the left figure point V is very high, whereas in the right one point N is very close to line c. The tension between these two pitfalls is the essential difficulty in drawing the right diagram.

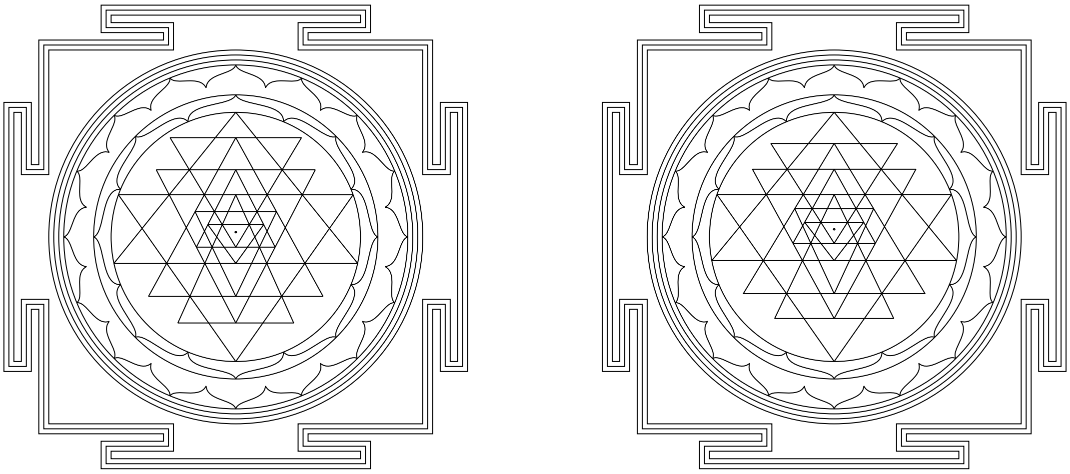

Figure 3: Two exact Śri Yantras

1.4 Esthetic feedback

An esthetic analysis was made of the resulting figures, leading to more experiments aiming at reaching an optimum feeling of harmony from the contemplation of the diagram. The author must confess his ignorance of Śri Yantra authorities who could obviously help in the search for the most powerful pattern. The main worry was the seemingly mandatory inflexion in the slope variation of the upward diagonal lines e, d, c, b, a, and symetrically (but to a lesser extent) of the downward diagonal lines f, i, g, and h. This essentially experimental study converged to the definition given above of Classical Śri Yantra, and the corresponding rendition is given below in Figure 4.

1.5 Bibliographic analysis

The initial hope of the above mathematical analysis of the yantra was to formally describe a parametric situation admitting multiple solutions which could be optimized according to an esthetic criterion. However, even though the first part of the conclusion was reached, see the Theorem above, the shallow range of solutions made it absolutely impossible to optimize the diagram to the extent, for instance, that the various triangle slopes vary in a monotonous manner.

Doubts became thus to enter the mind of the author as to the precise definition of Śri Yantra. Even in a serious study such as [15] contained inconsistencies. It defines descriptions of it, culminating in Figure 10, which are clearly different from its colour final rendition presented in the frontispiece. The frontispiece figure conforms to the mathematical analysis given above, and thus we may ascertain that it is an early precise graphical rendition of Classical Śri Yantra. But its

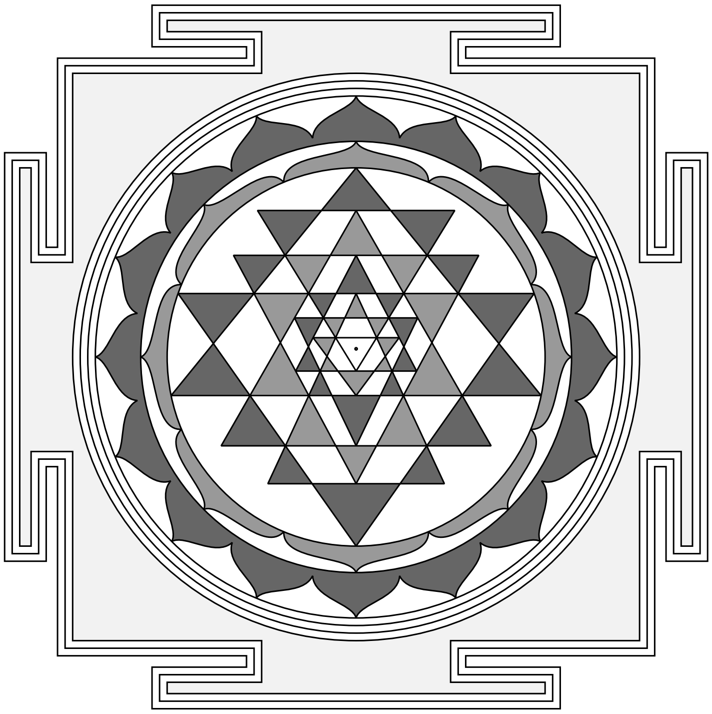

Figure 4: Classical Śri Yantra

awkward sloping of the innermost shakti triangle makes it less harmonious in some sense than the smoother design in Figure 10 of this work, similar to the False Śri Yantra shown above.

The inside-out instructions, attributed to Bhāskararāya's *Nityāśodaśikārnava*, are clearly misleading, since there is no hope, except by extraordinary luck, to get points J and Q on the circle α determined by its diameter $0T$. Actually, this text can be only considered as the description of Śri Yantra, and by no means precise instructions for its geometrical construction.

The author then tried to decide which of the two designs was the traditional one. It was not a priori obvious whether the more exact, or the more harmonious drawing, were optimal from the meditation point of view. The frontispiece to [15] is credited to [9], but was added by the translators, and is absent from the original edition [14]. The first lead was to follow Zimmer himself, who consigned later his observations on Myths and Symbols in Indian Art and Civilization in a volume edited after his death by Joseph Campbell[16]. In there, Fig 36 (also reproduced on the front cover) is a version of the False Śri Yantra. The credits attribute this figure to Sir Woodroffe, alias Arthur Avalon. Indeed, this figure may be found on the cover of [1], dated 1914.

The next available reference was the work of A. Daniélou[4]. The relevant diagram is represented in the French edition on page 537, and we shall call it the Dual Classical Śri Yantra with small gates. The small gates matter in incidental, we mention it just for completeness. What is more important is first, that it is the mathematically precise yantra (hence the word classical), and second that is is upside down. The diagram is called Shrî Cakra in this work, i.e. Fortune Wheel, while alluding to its other name of Shrî Yantra, translated as Diagram of Beauty or Harmony. It is said that the Shrî Cakra represents the Universal Goddess. At this point it seemed that the Classical Śri Yantra was indeed the correct rendition, but the vertical orientation was in doubt, especially with respect to the remarks on incorrect orientation in footnote q p. 161 of [15].

One of the most confusing sources is Rao, who discusses the diagram, under the name Śrīchakra, in the chapter Devi of the first volume of his extensive study of Hindu iconography[10]. In this work, are presented successively a hand-drawn Dual Classical Śri Yantra as Plate XCVII, and the photograph of a genuine Classical Śri Yantra metallic plate engraving from Śrīṅgeri Maṭha as Plate XCVIII.

Evidence for the right orientation was found in Renou[12], article 1166, which says that the most efficient yantra, *çrîyantra*, is composed of 5 downward and 4 upward triangles. The accompanying figure 28, p. 581, is however a False Śri Yantra, apparently identical to Avalon's original one. The text refers to Zimmer as its main source.

Further evidence for the right orientation was found in a book on Tantra Art [6], where a correct Classical Śri Yantra in the form of a Rajasthan painting from the late 18th century is reproduced as Plate 7. It is mentioned that, according to the Tantrasara, this yantra should not be drawn during night time. Plate 51 of the same source shows a copper plate rendition from South India, dated 17th-18th century. It is stated that the ultimate object of meditation on this yantra is to realize the unity of the meditator's individual soul with the Goddess. The text of this work gives mysterious instructions for drawing the diagram: "Taking the positive pentagon (and its negative ally, the pentacle) and drawing diagonals from (a) centre to angles, and (b) from centre to sides, two series of ten lines, having two lengths only, appear. This design is called Sri Yantra." It goes on in describing still more mysterious relationships between the proportions of the diagram and the musical scales (*ragas* and *raginis*) of Indian music.

Finally, most doubts were dispelled by reading Pott's scholarly work on Yoga and Tantra[8]. It is remarked there that Zimmer's figures were incorrect, but it is asserted rather strangely that the drawing instructions are correct! A correct diagram is presented decorated with letters of the Devanāgarī alphabet, as Fig. 7. We note that this diagram is pretty close to the left diagram in our Figure 4 above, with point S almost on circle α. We also remark that the bindu is there drawn as a small circle, following Rao. We note that Pott refers to a good illustration of Śri Yantra in Kundangar[5].

Another book on the art of Tantra, by P. Rawson[11], presents first a copper plate, as Fig. 49, and then a Rajasthan drawing, c. 1800, decorated with *mantras* (magic formulas), as Fig. 50. Although called Śri Yantra, this drawing is rather remote from the classical one, since it possesses only 3 *vahni* triangles, and 4 *śakti* ones. But Fig. 65 shows a magnificent Classical Śri Yantra drawn as a gouache painting on a cloth, from Nepal, c. 1700. Described as "a diagram of the continuous process of Creative Generation", this beautiful painting is illustrated with images of gods in various geometric positions. Its color rendition is significantly different from the frontispiece from [15]. In particular, the triangular sub-patterns are all red, and not alternating red and blue. The text presents a metaphysical interpretation of the diagram, based on the Kāmakalāvilāsa. This text, whose complete translation is given in the appendix, is obscure, to say the least.

Further information is provided in The Tantric Way[7]. Besides previously referenced representations, we note a curious 3-dimensional bronze rendition. This must correspond to what Rao calls the Mēru form of the Śri Yantra[10].

We finally mention that numerous books on symbols mention Śri Yantra, but they usually show incorrect representations of it, either reproducing the False Śri Yantra from [16] (e.g. Campbell), or it's upside-down dual (e.g. Jung). We leave it to the psychoanalysis enthousiasts to decide whether a Freudian slip significance should be attached to these erroneous symbolic descriptions.

2 Semantics of Śri Yantra

We shall now describe an analysis of the diagram, useful for understanding its ritual significance.

2.1 A sacred symbol of Devi

We first follow Rao[10]:

"The worship of *yantras* is common throughout India ; perhaps the most important of these *yantras* is the *Śrīchakra*. It generally consists of forty-three triangles interestingly arranged in a plane and may also be produced in three other different forms called Mēru, Kailāsa and Bhū. The Mēru is the same as the plane *Śrīchakra* in plan ; but the various triangles, surrounding the innermost one, are piled one over another in different planes so that the whole becomes shaped into the form of a pyramid. The topmost layer of the Mēru contains a circle called the *bindu*. If associated with the eight *mātṛikā* deities the Mēru becomes the Kailāsa ; and with the *Vāsinī* deities it becomes the Bhū. The *Śruti* or Vēdic revelation itself supports the worship of *yantras (vide, Taitt. Āran.)*. The drawing of the famous *yantra* known as the *Śrīchakra* is given herein ... This and other *yantras* are generally engraved on some metallic plate, preferably one of gold ; silver and copper also are often enough employed. The *Śrīchakra* engraved on metallic plates is an object of worship. In South Indian temples of the medieval and later periods, there are shrines called by the name of *Śakti-pīṭhālayas*, in which there is a *pīṭhā* or smaller altar very much resembling the common *bali-pīṭha* whereon the oblations of formal worship are usually offered in temples. It is said that these *bali-pīṭhas* associated with the *Śakti-pīṭhālayas* contain inside them the plate on which the *Śrīchakra* is engraved. Regular *pūjā* is offered to the *Śakti-pīṭha* at least twice a day. In as much as this is thus an object of worship, it has been treated in this work as an icon.

The other *yantras* are engraved upon thin silver, gold, silver or copper plates, which are rolled into a cylinder and then put into a golden or other metallic case so that they may be worn on the body of the person with a view to avoid diseases, possession by devils, and other such evils, which, it is supposed, they have the power to ward off. Occasional worship is also offered to this case containing the magical *yantra*, and the wearer's faith in its efficacy may well effect cures in many cases."

2.2 Analysing the three basic symbols

The inner triangular area of Śri Yantra is constituted of concentric areas, formed from three basic symbols: the triangle, the arrow, and the Christmas tree, depicted respectively in Figure 5, Figure 6 and Figure 7.

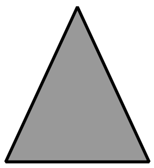

Figure 5: *Vahni* triangle

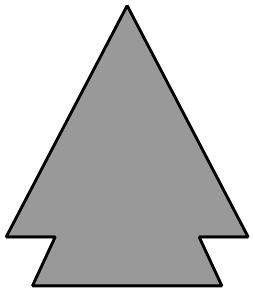

Figure 6: Arrow

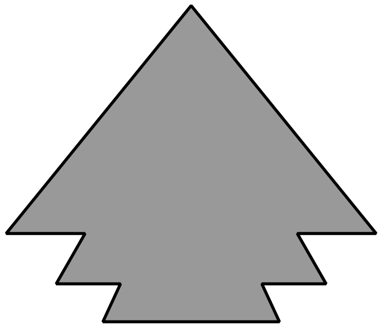

Figure 7: Christmas tree

These three basic figures, together with their upside-down symmetric duals, form by successive intersections the concentric areas into which the triangular pattern decomposes itself. Such an area is called a *chakra* or wheel. The first step of initiation in Śri Yantra consists in identifyng these areas, instead of the confusing jumble of triangles. For instance, Figure 14 below is formed from a triangle and a reversed arrow. The Figures 12 and 13 are formed with two upside-down arrows, and Figure 11 is formed from two upside-down Christmas trees.

Let us now examine these concentric rings in an outside-in approach, corresponding to the standard use of Śri Yantra in meditation practice.

2.3 An outside-in walk

An elaborate description of the constituents of the diagram, basically consistent with the terminology from Zimmer[15], is given in The Tantric Way[7]. It goes as follows.

"The Śri Yantra is called 'Nava Chakra' since it is composed of nine circuits, counting from the outer plane to the bindu. Through contemplation on the Śri Yantra, the adept can rediscover his primordial sources. The nine circuits symbolically indicate the successive phases in the process of becoming. They rank from the earthly plane and rise slowly step by step to the final point, the state of supreme joy. By entering into the élan vital of the yantra, the adept reintegrates with it. The nine circuits within Śri Yantra move from the gross and tangible to the sublime and subtle realms.

The outermost periphery consists of a square, with four gates, coloured white, red and yellow. This is the Bhūpura, the ground-plan, of the Śri Yantra.

Inside the square are three concentric circles, girdles (mekhalā). The space between the square and three girdles is the Trailokya-mohana, or the Enchantress of the Triple World, chakra; at this stage the adept is infatuated by aspirations and desires.

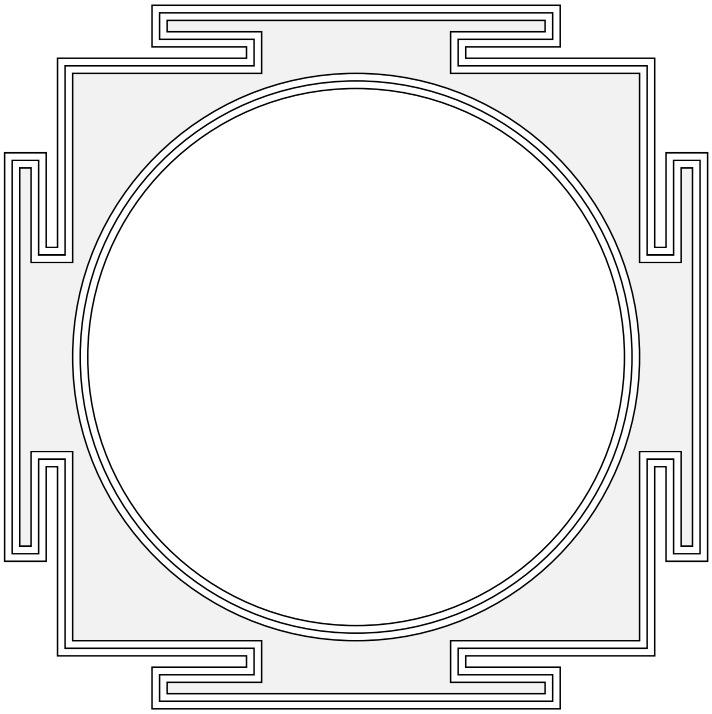

Figure 8: *Trailokya-mohana chakra*

Next are two concentric rings of sixteen and eight lotus petals, respectively. They are called Sarvāśāparipuraka chakra and Sarva-śaṅkshobhaṇa chakra, indicating fulfilment of desire.

The fourth chakra, Sarva-saubhāgyadāyaka, or Giver of Auspiciousness, projects the realm of possibilities in spiritual ascent. it consists of the fourteen triangles forming the outer rim of the complex interlocking of triangles.

The next two chakras are each constructed of ten triangles. Called Sarvartha-sādhaka and Sarvarakshākāra, Accomplisher of All purpose and Giver of Protection, they indicate a stage when inner realization begins to dawn.

The seventh chakra, consisting of eight triangles, is called Sarva-rogahara, Remover of All Desires and Ills, and represents the stage when the adept is free from earthly bonds and is at the threshold of the inner circle of realization.

An inverted triangle is the eighth chakra, Giver of All Accomplishments, of Sarva-siddhīprada; it denotes a stage before the consummation of realization. All the triangular chakras are coloured red, to represent radiant energy or the dynamic and fiery element of the cosmos.

The last chakra, the Bindu, is known as Sarva-ānandamaya, Full of Bliss. It is the *sanctum sanctorum*, abounding in joy, in which the adept participates in union. The point is light itself, beyond all colours, and is therefore represented as colourless."

At the end of this spiritual search, one feels like the pilgrim who has completed his ascent of the Borobudur three-dimensional mandala, and finaly contemplates the final crowning stupa,

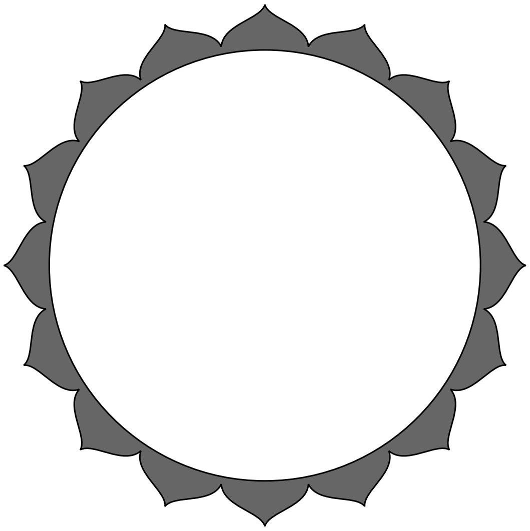

Figure 9: *Sarvāśāparipuraka chakra*

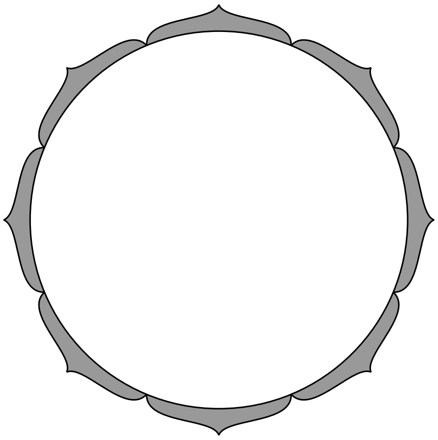

Figure 10: *Sarva-śaṅkshobhaṇa chakra*

symbolizing Emptyness.

We note that the colour descriptions differ from the frontispiece figure in [15], where the chakras alternate blue and red, the outer one being yellow. Also we note that the bindu in both works is described as a mere dot, whereas Rao[10] describes it as a small circle.

2.4 Yantra as an instrument of worship

Here we shall follow Zimmer[16]:

"In Hindu devotional tradition, "yantra" is the general term for instruments of worship, namely, idols, pictures, or geometrical diagrams. A yantra may serve as (1) a representation of some personification or aspect of the divine, (2) a model for the worship of a divinity immediately within the heart, after the paraphernalia of outward devotion (idol, perfumes, offerings, audibly uttered formulæ) have been discarded by the advanced initiate, (3) a kind of chart or schedule for the

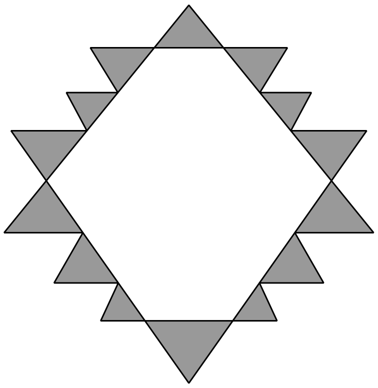

Figure 11: *Sarva-saubhāgyadāyaka chakra*

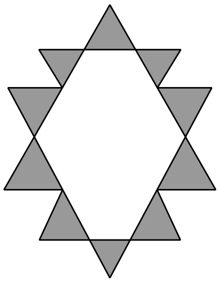

Figure 12: *Sarvartha-sādhaka chakra*

gradual evolution of a vision, while identifying the Self with its slowly varying contents, that is to say, with the divinity in all its phases of transformation. In this case the yantra contains dynamic elements.

We may say, then, that a yantra is an instrument designed to curb the psychic forces by concentrating them on a pattern, and in such a way that this pattern becomes reproduced by the worshiper's visualising power. It is a machine to stimulate inner visualizations, meditations, and experiences. The given pattern may suggest a static vision of the divinity to be worshiped, the superhuman presence to be realized, or it may develop a series of visualizations growing and unfolding from each other as the links or steps of a process."

The text goes on elaborating on the processes of enfolding and unfolding visions arising from meditation on linear yantras. Much more information on linear yantras in general, and Śri Yantra in particular, are given in Zimmer's learned treatise on the relationship between Art and Yoga in the Sacred Images of India[15], where a full chapter is devoted to linear yantras. This work also explains that yantras must be consecrated by a breath-giving ceremony (*prāṇapratiṣṭhā*), where the deity, seen in one's own self by meditation, is installed as a vivifying element into the material image. Following the Gandharva Tantra[13], after Zimmer[15]:

"Next, after performing Prāṇāyāma [the preparatory breathing exercises], the Sādhaka [devotee] should take handfuls of flowers. The Devī should never be invoked without handfuls of flowers. The Sādhaka who controlled his Prāṇa will meditate on the Parameśvarī [that is, the Highest Ruler] as above described, in his heart, and seeing by Her grace that image, the substance of which is consciousness in his heart, let him think of the identity between the image manifested within and the image without. Next, the energy [*tejas*] of consciousness within should be taken without by

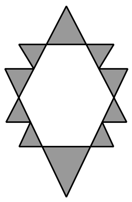

Figure 13: *Sarvarakshākāra chakra*

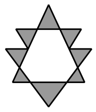

Figure 14: *Sarva-rogahara chakra*

means of the Vāyu-Bīja [the mantra "*yam*"] with the breath along the nostrils, and infused into the handful of flowers. Thus, issuing with the breath, the Devatā enters into the flowers [he is holding to his nostrils]. The Sādhaka should then establish the Devatā in the image or Yantra by touching it with those flowers."

2.5 Mantras

The photographic illustration given as Plate XCVIII in Rao[10] shows a Śri Yantra bearing devanāgarī letters. This is analysed in Pott[8], which we cite here:

"Within the outline of the *bhūpara*, the square with projections, is a three-fold circle inside which is a sixteen-petalled lotus which in its turn envelopes an eight-petalled lotus. Within this latter lotus there is a figure consisting of nine juxtaposed triangles - the figure is indeed called by the name *navayonicakra* - which together make up the total of 43 small triangles of which Rao speaks. In these small triangles, just as on the petals of the 16-petalled lotus and with the exception of the nine innermost triangles, are the characters of the nāgarī alphabet, while on the petals of the eight-petalled lotus there are groups of characters, each letter provided with a bindu, groups which are hard to discern in the reproduction in Rao."

Pott gives at this point, as Fig. 7, a graphic rendition of the Śri Yantra with nāgarī letters. This hand-drawn figure is an exact Śri Yantra, rather close to the one represented above as the left picture in Figure 3. Actually, point S almost touches circle α. It is not a faithful rendition of Plate XCVIII from Rao[10], which is much closer to the Classical Śri Yantra, contains further multi-syllabic mantras in the eight-petalled lotus, and finally shows all the inscriptions oriented circle-wise in the figure, as opposed to horizontally as in Pott[8]. This last author continues thus:

"The figure can be more closely analysed through the placing of these letters. It appears, namely, that on the sixteen petals of the outermost lotus there are the sixteen different vowels of the alphabet, beginning with *a* at the bottom and then going round to the left, thus in the opposite direction to the course of the sun. The remaining letters are disposed in the same order in the small triangles which are divided into circular groups. In the outermost "ring" of fourteen triangles (...) we find the letters from *ka* to *dha*, in the following group of ten the letters *na* to *bha*, and in the group of eight, which is located inside, the remaining letters of the alphabet, *viz*, *ma* to *kṣa*.

If we follow in through the letters of the alphabet, in their correct order, then we describe an

Figure 15: *Sarva-siddhīprada chakra*

Figure 16: *Bindu : Sarva-ānandamaya chakra*

imaginary line which runs in a spiral fashion from the outer edge of the figure to the centre, the *bindu*, in a direction contrary to that of the sun."

2.6 Secrets of Śri Yantra

It is clear that our investigation has left many questions unanswered. The precise mantras, mudras, and divinities associated with Śri Yantra are nowhere fully explained in the published secondary literature, and this esoteric tradition is still largely hermetic to the scholar. Although it is hinted in several sources that this symbol is very old, the author does not know of any published representation anterior to the seventeenth century, leaving quite open its date of creation. But the really puzzling enigma is: How could such a difficult geometric construction be invented at all?

We cannot resist quoting again The Tantric Way[7] in its very intriguing interpretation of the difficulty in mastering the correct diagram: "Śri Yantra, in its formal content, is a visual masterpiece of abstraction, and must have been created through revelation rather than by human ingenuity and craft".

Conclusion

This study offers a more precise definition of Śri Yantra than was previously available in the published litterature. Only the Tantric Authorities will be able to assess maningfully if the definition achieved is the genuine one, or at least close enough to its best known realizations. It leaves open the mathematically precise formulation of the optimization needed to achieve for maximal magical power. We offer this study as evidence of the non-triviality of bridging the cultural gap between Humanities and Science on the one hand, and Eastern-Western knowledge, or sensibility, on the other.

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