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The Veiled Reality: The Role of Occult Practices in Understanding Reality

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Abstract: This article investigates the often overlooked and stigmatized subject of the occult in India, revealing its deep roots in culture and daily practices despite prevalent superstitions and misconceptions. It examines the practical and dynamic nature of magic, emphasizing its synthesis of diverse systems in both Eastern and Western traditions. The discussion extends to metaphysical knowledge, contrasting static orthodox views with the experimental approaches of the Magi. The paper explores historical contexts, from Vedic rituals to Renaissance magic, and contemporary developments, including chaos magic. It highlights the integration of occult practices within religious frameworks and their roles in shaping perceptions of reality. By comparing different occult methodologies, the article challenges the notion of a singular truth, advocating a pluralistic understanding of reality that counters religious fundamentalism and promotes intellectual diversity.

Keywords: Occult, Magic, Culture, Truth, Esoteric.

The subject of the occult is one of the most overlooked and stigmatized topics in India. Discussions on this subject are often dismissed or viewed as a taboo, as laden with superstitions. This leads to the misinterpretation and misinformation of these systems. Despite this, the practice of magic is deeply ingrained in Indian culture and lifestyle, albeit often concealed within rituals and daily practices. The general ignorance of the masses has contributed to a growing interest in this mysterious world, often exploited by con artists claiming to be 'occultists'. However, a thorough exploration of the occult reveals that it encompasses a vast array of knowledge systems, extending beyond mere spellcasting to include forms of arcane wisdom that delve into the nature of reality.

The system of magic is inherently practical, as one of its primary aims is to effect change. Therefore, the *Magus*¹ seek to understand the nature of the cosmos and their relationship with it. This understanding is not static nor linear but involves parallel schools of thought that determine the type of magic practised. Contemporary magic in both the East and the West often synthesizes spells and crafts from these diverse systems, driven by enthusiasts of the occult. This synthesis has led to new understandings of magic and the development of novel methodologies, reflecting the dynamic and evolving nature of magical practices.

While orthodox views often treat the metaphysical knowledge as dogmatic and thus static, the Magus, treat knowledge of the world as more dynamic and therefore give space for experiments. The nature of reality has been a topic of debate among philosophers and theologians. While philosophers engage in intellectual discourses on these topics, religious perspectives often regard alternative views as blasphemous, allowing little scope for dynamic interpretations. The rigidity of a single, absolute doctrine can lead to fanaticism. For example, a staunch Advaita Vedantin might insist that truth is ultimately established only through their interpretation of textual authority², leaving little room for further exploration within the philosophical system. While a theological school like Vaisnava would argue that the reality can be none other than Visnu³, similarly, a devout religious fundamentalist might view their doctrine as the only true path, considering all other views and even other gods and goddesses as subordinate to their deity. This inflexibility stifles the potential for broader understanding and hinders the evolution of thought within both philosophical and religious contexts. Thus, when discussing the absolute view of reality, it is beneficial to explore some of the prominent occult methodologies. These methodologies provide insight into how practitioners interact with and perceive the cosmos, offering an alternative and equally valid perspective of the nature of reality and the pursuit of knowledge.

The understanding of prehistoric magic remains largely speculative; however, archaeological evidence from ancient periods suggest that magic was primarily manifested through ritual worship of natural forces and deities. The earliest Indian literature, the Vedic systems are no exception to this. The very goal is to have betterment of the worldly life and attain heaven after death. Thus, they often contain invocations to elemental forces, to bring rain and harvest, destroy enemies, and so on. These deities and forces, during the Vedic period, were more abstract compared to the more anthropomorphic deities of the later Puranic texts. Comparable traditions are found in the Epic of Gilgamesh (c.2100-1200BCE) and Sumerian literature, where gods govern various domains. The epic refers to the use of medicinal herbs⁴ for rejuvenation and depicts gods and goddesses as powerful entities capable of causing significant destruction, a theme that persisted beyond the Babylonian culture. Similarly, we find magic in other systems, such as Egyptian magic, Greek magic, and so on, where deities are associated with specific aspects of existence. The Greek Magical Papyri (100BCE to 400 CE), which is one of the oldest available literatures on how to perform magic, describes the creation of *daemon*-s, intermediaries between the Supreme form of divine and individuals⁵. This belief develops in the medieval era, with the renaissance magic.

On examining the later developments in the practice of magic, Solomon's *Goetia* and his *Key*-s (compiled in mid seventeenth century, from older texts) provide a notable example of the hierarchical categorization of entities. In this framework, humans occupy a middle ground between higher and lower beings. The invocations within these texts involve the sacred name of God, which serves as a seal, followed by a series of angels or higher beings used to bind and compel lower beings to fulfil human commands. *The Sworn Book of Honorius*⁶ (Thirteenth Century approximately),

one of the oldest medieval examples, illustrates how monotheistic religions incorporate magic by viewing reality through a hierarchical chain of beings. Neo-Platonic magic (third century) similarly involves practices that locate entities according to their positions within a cosmic hierarchy, adhering to the concept of the "Great Chain of Being."⁷ In India, dualist schools exemplify similar views, positing that a particular form of the Absolute, such as Mahāviṣṇu in Vaikunṭha, is supreme, with all other deities serving this Supreme Being⁸ The nature of the individual in relation to the cosmos, as well as morality, is thus determined by the will of the Supreme Being.

When we get further into Monotheism and its form of Magic, one of the common ideas we find is magic through dedication and devotion. There are two major categories of such magic, one where the Absolute is with form, and the other where it is formless. The Absolute with form can very well be understood through the *Great chain of beings*. Alternately it can be also the sole Being which becomes or creates many beings. However, when we enter the idea of a formless being, it is where one enters the domain of pantheism.

The sixteenth century witnessed a significant focus on magic involving divine communication through angels. Texts such as *Arbatel de Magia Veterum* (1575) and John Dee's (1527-1608 C.E.) *Enochian Key-s*⁹ explore elaborate ceremonial magic rituals designed to contact angels and demons. *The Key of Solomon*¹⁰ (Fourteenth or Fifteenth Century), also attributed to this era, is a part of this tradition. Consequently, a wave of fear and persecution ensued. Any magic that did not conform to the Christian doctrine was condemned and considered blasphemous. As a result, much occult knowledge became encoded within Christian doctrines. Entities once worshipped as deities were often recast as saints. This cultural enmeshing is evident in later traditions, such as New Orleans Hoodoo, where figures like Papa Legba, a Loa^{11} , became equated with St. Peter¹². Both represent the entity of the crossroads and serve as messengers between worlds.

A similar phenomenon may have occurred in India, as suggested by texts such as the Bhūta Dāmara Tantra. This text mentions *Krodha Bhairava*, a deity capable of subjugating even the gods¹³, and is structured as a dialogue between the Goddess Parvati and Śiva. This mirrors the structure and culture of ceremonial magical texts like the *Grimoire of Pope Honorius*¹⁴ (Seventeenth Century or Eighteenth Century text, supposedly found in 1629), which involves invoking of the names of higher beings to compel lower entities to perform the magician's bidding. In the *Bhūta Dāmara tantra*, the invocation of powerful deities for magical purposes parallels the Western tradition where higher beings are invoked to control the lower ones. This indicates a shared structure in occult practices across different cultures, where a hierarchy of supernatural beings is manipulated through ritualistic and ceremonial means. The encoding of occult knowledge within religious texts and practices reflects a broader trend of integrating and masking esoteric traditions within dominant religious frameworks to avoid persecution and maintain continuity.

Even now, magic in India is primarily ritualistic in nature, relying heavily on elaborate ceremonies. A classic example of this is the corpus of Vedic rituals, where precise performance is believed to produce '*apūrva*,' leading to new outcomes. This ritualistic approach extends to orthodox Tāntric systems, where performing *satkarmas* according to specific codes can yield results. A crucial aspect of both Vedic and Tantric traditions is the knowledge of planetary positions and interactions, which dictate the appropriate spells. This emphasis on astrology is not unique to India; in the West, astrology is also considered essential for higher magic and depend on the seven primary planets. While understanding mundane astrology and lunar mansions, alternately *nakşatras* in Indian Astrology, help to determine the optimal timing for magical practices. The nature of the planets further defines the type of magic to be cast, with each planet's influence linked to specific deities or at times even the Mahāvidyas in modern Indian traditions. For example, seekers of knowledge might approach Jupiter, presided over by Mahāvidya Tārā, to invoke Jupiter's effects. This correspondence system mirrors Western practices, where planets are associated with angels or entities. Invoking of Archangel Tzadkiel, or the deities- Amun, Fortuna, Zeus are for the same purpose,- to gain health. Additionally, each planet is related to specific colours, plants, or alchemical elements, creating an elaborate system of magic found in both Eastern and Western traditions, say for example, Jupiter is associated with Tin, in the West.

As we trace back across history, we encounter societies intimately connected with nature, in direct contrast to the urbane localities and metropolises. Consequently, ancient magical traditions often emerged within the ecosystems they inhabited, with plants serving as a direct source of magic. This worldwide tradition of herbal magic is evident in both Eastern and Western cultures. Plants are viewed as living beings spanning the three worlds: their roots reaching into the underworld, their central structure grounded on Earth, and their branches ascending towards the cosmos. Imbued with spirits and planetary associations, plants possess unique properties. This connection with plant-based magic became particularly prominent during the era of the slave trade in America, as enslaved individuals brought their folk practices with them. Similarly, in India, tribal practices categorized under *Vanaspati Tantra*¹⁵. encompass the knowledge of utilizing plants. These herbs are employed not only in casting spells of beneficial or malefic nature but also in invoking deities and inducing semi-altered states. Classic examples include the invocation of Hekate within a reed in the West or worshipping *Svetarka Ganapati* in India.

The elements—Earth, Water, Fire, and Air—are considered the fundamental building blocks of reality and magic. These elements are associated with various planets, gods, emotions, and other correspondences. Alchemical magic builds upon this foundation by incorporating basic metals such as Mercury, Gold, and Silver. The unifying theme across these systems is the exploration of the dualism between matter and spirit and the interactions between the two. Additionally, the fifth element, Ether, is often regarded as the Life Force that unites and permeates all other elements¹⁶.

The dualistic concept of spirit and matter, along with pluralistic cosmic doctrines, underpins various systems of occult practices. These systems share the central belief that spirits possess innate powers beyond their physical manifestations, often structured into hierarchies and categories. This pluralistic worldview emphasizes the existence of a metaphysical self, distinct from the physical realm. Practices associated with this doctrine include ancestor worship, necromancy, shamanism, demonolgy, angelology, and the belief in a chain of being. Despite their differences, all these variations stress the presence of conscious entities that transcend mere physical matter. This overarching belief in a metaphysical dimension is central to the understanding and practice of these diverse occult traditions.

The later development of magical thought involves transcending the concept of plurality and striving towards oneness. This shift may have been influenced by Upanisadic doctrines, which evolved alongside the ideas of philosophers such as Hegel, Schopenhauer, and Éliphas Lévi, who were well-versed in Indian texts of their time. The emerging idea was to seek a transcendental Being, understood as the sole Reality manifesting in diverse forms. This pursuit led to the philosophy of non-dualism, where the goal is to realize the inherent unity underlying all existence. In this context, magic became the art of aligning oneself with this state of oneness, thereby transforming modern magical practices. It serves as a key to understanding deities and systems that transcend individual belief systems, offering a broader perspective to the nature of reality and spiritual experience. This non-dualistic approach emphasizes that all distinctions are relative to the Absolute's self-manifestation, and true wisdom lies in recognizing the singular essence that pervades everything. A clear method of this is found in Trika¹⁷, where attainment of the Bhairava Nature¹⁸ makes one capable of cursing or giving boons¹⁹. In the early twentieth century, we do find the same doctrine in Thelma of Crowley²⁰. The divinity from this period becomes the essential nature of us, rather than something separate as in the West. Thus, even in Doreen Valentine's words what we seek is within us²¹.

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Another significant aspect of mystical doctrines can be found in systems like Kabbalah and Indian Tantric schools, where language is considered the building block of reality. In these traditions, words are held sacred, and their meanings are seen as having profound significances. Through the manipulation of language, one can influence reality itself. For Kabbalah, this sacred language is Hebrew, while for Tantra, it is the mātrkā²², the mystical letters of the Sanskrit alphabet. In both these traditions, language is viewed as permeating higher worlds and acting as a bridge between the physical and the divine. These worlds are interconnected, and language becomes a key to understanding and conceiving the divine. In Tantra, the divine is often envisioned as the womb of the Goddess, who herself is the transcendental principle of speech or $V\bar{a}c$ manifesting through various stages. Similarly, in Kabbalah, the cosmic Shekinah represents the divine presence that is both beyond and expressed through language²³. These mystical doctrines emphasize the power of sacred language to access and interact with higher spiritual realities.

In the West, religious orthodoxy, particularly of a Biblical nature, was often perceived as an oppressive force with little regard for human rights and freedom. This perception spurred significant movements of rebellion against the system. Just as Satan was depicted as the adversary of God, Satanism also countered religious fanaticism. Contrary to popular belief, this movement did not involve the Satanic practices propagated by Christian narratives, such as animal sacrifice, evil acts, or dark sorcery. Instead, it championed freedom, human rights, and equality²⁴.

The first major form of modern religious Satanism was the Church of Satan, founded in San Francisco by Anton LaVey in 1966. LaVey articulated his ideas through various publications, most notably *The Satanic Bible* (1969). LaVeyan's Satanism is formally atheistic, presenting Satan not as a real entity but as a symbol of humanity's intrinsic animal nature. However, it did incorporate certain supernatural beliefs, specifically in the efficacy of magic, with adherents performing rituals for magical purposes. LaVey's philosophy was influenced by right-wing libertarian principles and emphasized that Satanists should see themselves as an elite distinct from the "herd" of ordinary humanity. They firmly rejected the notions of a glorious heaven or a torturous hell for sinners, but prioritized knowledge and personal advancement. Consequently, the system primarily opposed dictated morality, regressive religious practices, and essentialism. The concept of Satan thus became a tool to challenge the theism of God-centric cultures and to promote a doctrine, centred on individualism. In this context, magic was reinterpreted as the power of the mind.

Chaos magic emerged as a significant departure from traditional, rigidly structured magical practices, influenced by the post-modern wave of the 1970s. Pioneered by Austin Osman Spare, chaos magic challenged the established doctrines of magic that were believed to be fixed and governed by strict rules. Spare's doctrine emphasized the freedom of the subconscious mind, proposing that all magical systems primarily rely on an altered state of consciousness known as "gnosis". Gnosis involves suspending one's conscious filters to achieve a state where magical operations can flow unimpeded into the unconscious. Chaos magic texts describe three main types of gnosis: inhibitory gnosis, achieved through deep meditation and trance states facilitated by techniques such as slow breathing, muscle relaxation, and sensory deprivation; ecstatic gnosis, reached through intense arousal and activities like sexual excitation, dance, and the use of hallucinogenic drugs; and indifferent vacuity, where spells are cast with minimal conscious thought. A central practice in chaos magic is the paradigm shift²⁵, which involves adopting and adapting different belief systems as tools to achieve specific magical effects. This approach reflects the influence of postmodernism, rejecting fixed models of reality and embracing the idea that "nothing is true, everything is permitted"²⁶. By viewing beliefs as malleable constructs rather than absolute truths, chaos magicians manipulate symbolic and linguistic constructs to achieve their desired outcomes, emphasizing the instrumental use of belief and the necessity of entering an altered state of consciousness to perform effective magic. This ushered in a new era of modern magical world view. With no fixed doctrines governing the world, individuals are free to choose the paradigms that best suit their works, thus questioning the notion of the 'Self' as an absolute entity. Consequently, our understanding of the Self and its relationship with the cosmos is not dictated by any pre-established system but is instead defined by personal choice and interpretation - Divinity, Non-dual, Chain of Beings, etc.

Therefore, we find that various doctrines of magic present contrasting perspectives on reality, yet each demonstrate efficacy in practice. While some may view these doctrines as progressing from one to another, it is perhaps more accurate to understand them as parallel systems. The challenge lies in reconciling these divergent views, as each system defines reality pragmatically based on its approach to magic. This diversity inevitably raises doubts about the existence of a singular correct doctrine, a definitive understanding of the self, or an ultimate truth. What emerges from these contrasting systems is the recognition that the concept of partial truth or approaches to truth themselves pose significant challenges. Consequently, it becomes apparent that there is no single or highest doctrine, but rather a variety of systems presented based on their effectiveness rather than their factual accuracy. Everything, including the notions of Self and Cosmos, are understood as constructs, rather than absolute truths.

The conclusion drawn is that there is no definitive conclusion. All the doctrines, so discussed, including the concept of the 'self,' are constructs designed to facilitate the functionality of their respective systems. Truth, in this context, is relative and context-dependent, devoid of absolute meaning beyond the confines of the system. Therefore, seeking a transcendent meaning is futile, as the essence of truth lies within the framework of the tradition itself. The pursuit of truth within any tradition serves the tradition's purpose, while the occult tradition itself serves as a veil concealing the ultimate reality. This ineffable aspect of esoteric doctrines is something experienced by these cultures, but it defies adequate expression through language or words.

The relevance of this conclusion lies in its challenge to religious fundamentalism, which often hinges on the belief that there is a singular, absolute truth. This perspective is not unique to religious doctrines but extends to metaphysical philosophies as well. To establish the supremacy of one truth, there is often an attempt to either demolish other viewpoints or elevate one doctrine above others.

However, the approach of my research problematizes the existence of a singular truth. This questioning can render the entire endeavour of establishing a single supreme truth futile. It disrupts conventional intellectual frameworks and poses a threat to established esoteric doctrines. In this context, the exploration of various occult methodologies offers an alternative approach to understanding reality. By recognizing multiple perspectives and the experiential nature of knowledge, these methodologies challenge the dogmatic insistence on a singular truth. This makes the study of occult practices not only relevant but also essential in broadening our comprehension of reality and countering the limitations imposed by fundamentalist views.

Notes

- 1. *Magus* indicates sorcerers, and Occultists, it is being used as an umbrella term. In Persian they are the "wise men".
- 2. See Saņkarabhāsyā on Brahmasutra 1.3 Śāstrayonitvat.
- 3. In Viṣṇu Sahasranāma the first two names come as Viśvam Viṣṇum indicating they are same. While the vedic reference comes as, viśvai nārāyaṇam devam akṣaram paramam padam / viśvataḥ paramānnityam viśvam nārāyaṇam harim/- Nārayaṇa suktam, Taitteriya āraṇyaka, Kṛṣṇa Yajur Veda. Which among several other references are taken to establish supremacy of Viṣṇu.
- 4. "Utanapishtim spoke to Gilgamesh, saying: "Gilgamesh, you came here exhausted and worn out. What can I give you so you can return to your land? I will disclose to you a thing that is hidden, Gilgamesh, a... I will tell you. There is a plant... like a boxthorn, whose thorns will prick your hand like a rose.

If your hands reach that plant you will become a young man again." Tablet 11, Epic of Gilgamesh.

- 5. "*A* [daimon comes] as an assistant who will reveal everything to you clearly and will be your [companion and] will eat and sleep with you" PGM I.1-5, Betz, Hans Diete, The Greek Magical Papyri in Trasnlation, University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 1985. Pg 3.
- 6. Supposedly composed by Pope Honorius the Third (1148-1227).
- 7. Great Chain of being is a doctrine that propses a particular deity as the supreme ruler, under whom there are subordinates. This heirarchy of beings are graded in levels with God at the tops to elements and everything in the cosmos. https://www.britannica.com/topic/Great-Chain-of-Being.
- 8. Śrīnivasadāśa, Yātindramatapradipikā, īśvara (9.18).
- 9. John Dee was the prominent occultist during Elizabeth the First's rule. The Enochian Language, which is said to have originated from the angels, was used in form of 'calls' or 'keys'. These were seals and incantations which supposedly aided spiritual communication with the higher beings.
- 10. Loa-s are powerful spirits who are worshipped in Afro-Haitian Voodoo.
- 11. These are texts complied from older sources ascribed to Solomon.
- 12. "In African Diaspora traditions, Saint Peter may be syncretized to the West African spirit Eshu-Elegbara (also known as Elegba, Elegua, or Papa Legba), a crossroads spirit who controls doors, roads, destiny, and opportunities. He is identified with Peter because of the keys Peter holds. Votive images of Saint Peter may sometimes be intended to represent Eshu-Elegbara." Under the entry of St. Peter, Illes, Judika. Encyclopedia of Mystics, Saints & Sages: A Guide to Asking for Protection, Wealth, Happiness, and Everything Else!. United States: HarperCollins, 2011.
- 13. "pañcaraśmim samudhrtya sanghatteti dvidhā padam. Asya bhāşitamātreņa mūrcchitā bhūtadevatāh. Stambhitā vepamānāśca uttisthantyativihvalāh" 2.13. Chattopadhyay, Raikamohana(ed.), Bhūtadāmara tantra, Kolkata: Nababharat Publications, 1897. pg 6.
- 14. Claimed to be written by Pope Honorius the third, and derived from the *Sworn Book* by the same author.
- 15. Vanaspati Tantra is a system where herbs and it's magical properties are studied.
- Rankine, David., D'Este, Sorita. Practical Elemental Magick: Working the Magick of the Four Elements in the Western Mystery Tradition. United Kingdom: Avalonia, 2008. Pg-18
- 17. Trika, is popularly known as Kashmir Saivism, is a tantric school from Kashmir.
- 18. Bhairava is the Self in this system, so Bhairava Nature is basically Self Realisation.
- 19. "vāca karoti karmani śāpānugraha kāraka" Verse 140, Singh, Jaideva. Vijnanabhairava,

Or, Divine Consciousness: A Treasury of 112 Types of Yoga. India: Motilal Banarsidass, 1998. Pg 130.

- 20. "8)A Man whose conscious will is at odds with his True Will is wasting his strength. He cannot hope to influence his environment efficiently.
 9) A Man who is doing his True Will has the inertia of the Universe to assist him.
 14) Man is capable of being, and using, anything which he perceives, for everything which he perceives is in a certain sense a part of his being. He may thus subjugate the whole of the Universe of which he is conscious to his individual Will." Aliester Crowley, Magic in Theory and Practice: Aphorisms, https://sacred-texts.com/oto/aba/defs.htm
- 21. "And thou who thinkest to seek Her, know thy seeking and yearning shall avail thee not unless thou knowest the mystery; that if that which thou seekest thou findest not within thee, then thou wilt never find it without thee. For behold, She has been with thee from the beginning; and She is that which is attained at the end of desire." Doreen Valentine, Charge of the Goddess. https://sacred-texts.com/bos/bos058.htm
- 22. "yadakşaraśaśajyotsnāmaņditam bhuvanannarayam /vande sveśvarīm devīm mahāśrosiddhamātakām // yadakşaraśaśīti . yasyāh samvinmayyāh parāhantāyā madhyasthitānyakşarānyeva vimaśamdayāyām samsāratāpaharatvāt śaśirūpāņi, teşām jyotsnā sphurattā, tayā manditam tanmayībhūtam . rāhakāditrikam bhuvanatrayam . savamśvarom . viśvapoşakaratvāt . mahāśrīsiddhamātrkām . deśakālākārairaniyantaritasvabhāvatvād mahacvem, viśvābhedamayatvāt śrītvas, śivādikītāntasyāharūpatvāt siddhatvam, şaţtriśattatatvollāsahetutvād mātukātvam ."1.4, Dwivedi, Vraja Vallabha, Nityāşodaşikārņava tantra, Yoga-Tantra Granthamāla: Pratham puşpa, Sampurnanand Sanskrit Viśvavidyālaya, Varanasi: 1985, Pg. 14-15.
- 23. See Kabalah Tree of Life. <u>https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/the-divine-feminine-in-kabbalah-an-example-of-jewish-renewal/</u>
- 24. Read more at, https://www.britannica.com/biography/Anton-LaVey Satanic Church: <u>https://thesatanictemple.com/pages/about-us</u>
- 25. Read More at: https://primexaos.com/paradigm-shifting-and-its-role-in-chaos-magick/
- 26. Statement taken from Hassan-i-Sabbah, quited in Principal Discordia. Further details, <u>https://www.stefonmears.com/fintach/ChaosDogma.html</u>

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