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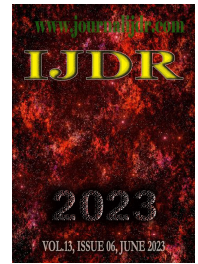
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SHAKTISM IN HINDU RELIGION: CONCEPTS AND CHRONOLOGY

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ABSTRACT

Shaktism is a cult of Hinduism that focuses on worship of the Goddess (feminine God). Goddess is worshiped in many forms, such as, the violent *Durga*, the fearsome *Kali*, the nurturing *Parvati*, or the gentle *Lakshmi*, among others. The article deals with the early origins of *Shaktism*, its philosophical development, and present-day forms. Different denominations of *Shaktism*, like folk *Shaktism*, *tantric Shaktism* and devotional *Shaktism* are also covered. Besides, the ten basic forms of Goddess (*Dasamahavidya*), namely *Kali*, *Tara*, *Shodashi*, *Bhuvaneshvari*, *Chinnamasta*, *Bhairavi*, *Dhumavati*, *Bagala*, *Matangi* and *Kamala* are discussed with spiritual and philosophical meanings. The article further describes the location of prominent *Shakti-piths* (seats of Goddess) like 4 *Adipithas*, 51 *Satipithas* and 108 *Shaktipithas*. Other stuffs like Goddess of contemporary times, major festivals, modern-day popularity of *shaktism*, etc. are incorporated to make the article more comprehensive.

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INTRODUCTION

Shaktism is a denomination of Hinduism that focuses on the worship of Goddess (Feminine God) as the supreme deity or ultimate reality. In other word, it is the cult of Goddess worship. The Goddess worship is often called *Shakti* or *Devi*, which means "Divine Mother". The *Shakti* symbolises force, strength, potency, etc. *Shakti* denotes the female deity and depicts the female principle taking part in creation. In *Shaktism*, the Goddess is worshiped in many forms, such as, the violent *Durga*, the fearsome *Kali*, the nurturing *Parvati* (the consort of Shiva), or the gentle *Lakshmi* (the consort of Vishnu), among others. She brings salvation for the devotee and the motivating force of all actions. The followers of *Shaktism* are called as *Shaktas*. *Shaktism* also resembles *Shaivism* and recognised as *Shiva* and *Shakti*.

Early Origin of Shaktism: The earliest Goddess statue excavated in India is from modern-day Prayagraj. It corresponds to the upper Palaeolithic age (20,000 - 23,000 BC). The belongings to that period are some colourful stones with natural triangles. These have connections to the *yantras* used by *Tantrics* and the triangles manifest fertility.¹ Discovered near Mirzapur in Uttar Pradesh, these stones are still worshiped as *Devi* by tribal people of the area. Thousands of small female statues dated as early as c. 5500 BCE has been recovered at Mehrgarh (in Balochistan, Pakistan), one of the

important Neolithic sites in world archaeology, and a precursor to the great Indus Valley Civilization.²The Goddess worship was even prevalent in Indus valley civilization where female statues were found in almost every household.³ Most statues are naked and have elaborate hairstyle.⁴ Some statues have ornaments or horns on the head and a few is in poses that expose the genitals (*yoni*) were also found.⁵ The objects and images found suggest that the goddess cults of the Indus valley civilization were associated with fertility.⁶ A seal was discovered with a male figure standing over a female figure with a sickle. This indicates an association between the female and crops, and perhaps implies a sacrifice ritual where the blood of the victim was offered to the Goddess for better crop production.⁷

Philosophical Development of Shaktism: When we analyse the philosophical development, *Shaktism* was originated in Vedic Age; evolved during the formative period of the Hindu epics; and reached the zenith during Gupta Age (300-700 CE). It continued and flourished thereafter. The Vedic age (1500 - 600 BC) was basically a male dominated society in which female divinity used to have subordinate place, generally as consort to the God. Nonetheless, *Aditi*, the Great Goddess of the Indus Valley and Dravidian religions still appeared large in the *Vedas*. *Aditi* (means "without limits") is mentioned many times in the *Rigveda*, and is perhaps the earliest name used to personify the infinite. Further, the Vedic descriptions of *Aditi* are echoed in the idol of *Lajja Gauri* (lotus-headed goddess in the birthing posture), which was worshiped across India.⁸

Other Goddess forms in the Vedic period include the *Usas* (Sun-God's daughters governing dawn) and *Prithvi* (mother earth). More significant appearances of beloved Goddesses are *Vac* (today's *Sarasvati*) and *Sri* (today's *Lakshmi*). The word *Upanishad* is of Sanskrit origin (*upa* means 'by' and *ni-śad* means 'sit down') which means 'sitting down near.' It refers to the student receiving spiritual knowledge by sitting down near the teacher. *Upanishads* are generally called as *Vedanta*, the last chapters or parts of the Veda. There are more than 200 known *Upanishads*.⁹ The first dozen or so are the oldest and important and known as *Mukhya Upanishads*. Of the remainder, 95 *Upanishads* are the part of *Muktika Upanishads*. There are 8 *Shakta Upanishads* in the *Muktika* which are related to the *Shaktism*. In the Epic period (c. 400 BC to 400 CE) two most tales, the *Mahabharat* and the *Ramayana* came into existence. The *Mahabharata* is full of references to *Shakta* worship as *Durga*, *Sri*, and *Ambika*. The *Ramayana*, describes *Sita* (wife of Lord *Ram*) as one of the most popular Goddesses. The Tamil epic, *Silappatikaram* (c. 100 CE) was a literary masterpiece which showed how the Goddess cult was popular even in South India. *Puranas* (the religious and cultural compilations during Gupta Empire c. 300 - 600 CE), provide the foundation for the popularity Hinduism along with *Shaktism*. An important Puranic text is the *Devi Mahatmya* of *Markandeya Purana* (composed during c. 400-500 CE). It describes the older myths and legends on the Goddess. During this phase, the *Shakti* cult emphasized itself as a distinct philosophical entity, example *Mahishasura Mardini* (Goddess slays *Mahishasura*, the Buffalo Demon).¹⁰

Types of shaktism: *Shaktism* can be divided into three denominations depending on the origin and use; i.e., tribal/folk, *tantric/yogic* and devotional/*Bhakti* strands. The tribal/folk strand involves in possession, healing, and animism; the *tantric/yogic* strand encompasses meditation and visualization; and the devotional or *Bhakti* strand relates love for a specific Goddess. In combined form, they like a rope of strands interwoven together.

Tribal/Folk Shaktism: The Tribal/Folk *Shaktism* is perhaps the oldest form of *Shaktism* in India. It involves the worship of both tribal and local Goddesses. The tribal Goddesses are generally worshipped as *budi* (the old woman). The local Goddesses are generally rocks or other natural objects who have revealed themselves to villagers. The folk *Shaktism* is practised to heal the diseases, accord fertility to all living beings and to get rid of spirits of the ancestors. In West Bengal, the Goddesses are generally worshipped in several forms. The Goddess may be the tribals' dark and powerful *Kali*, the hunters' *Chandi*; the snake goddess *Manasa*; the smallpox goddess *Shitala*, etc. She is also worshipped as *Gramadevatas* and *Yoginis*.

writings of 6th century CE, the elements of *tantric* are found and by 9th century CE texts called *tantras* are found in writings. The Goddesses are generally depicted in certain forms of meditation and ritual worship. It involves the practice of different tantric mantras and body postures. *Kundalini yoga* is often an element in this. The meaning of *Kundalini* is a spiritual energy or life force located at the base of the spine and is perceived as a coiled-up snake. The practice of *Kundalini yoga* is believed to stimulate the sleeping *Kundalini Shakti* through the six chakras, and penetrate the seventh and the last chakra or the crown. *Kundalini Yoga* has a tri-fold tactic, i.e. *Bhakti yoga* (devotional power), *Shakti yoga* (physical strength), and *Raja yoga* (mental control). In West Bengal context, there are two major subtypes of *Tantric* strand, i.e., folk *tantra*, and classical *tantra*. In folk *tantra*, the importance is upon ritual practice, direct experience, and practical results. It is believed that the goddess accords supernatural abilities (*siddhi*) and power (*shakti*) to the practitioners. The folk *Tantrika* goes to the burning ground for worship and to envision the Goddess. It is largely an oral tradition and denotes to a practice. Many folk *tantrik* as are illiterate. Therefore, little emphasis is given on reading texts. On the contrary, in classical *tantra*, the Goddess is the symbol of liberation (*moksha*), and consciousness (*brahman*). It is believed that the Goddess grants omniscience (*brahmajnana*) to the classical *tantrika*.

Devotional or Bhakti Shaktism: Devotional or *Bhakti Shaktism* is the third form of *Shaktism*. In this method, the Goddess is worshipped as loving mother. It is the combination of *Shakta bhakti* and Vedanta philosophy, and is against the caste and social status. Thus, it may be called "non-sectarian *Shaktism*." This interpretation became popular among Indian *Shaktas* with the acceptance of modern-day monks like *Ramakrishna* and *Vivekananda*.

Ways of studying Shaktism: Academically *Shaktism* has been studied in various ways. Five major approaches in the studies of *Shaktism* are (i) historical surveys, (ii) situations and locales, (iii) studies of specific Goddesses, (iv) analysis and translation of *Shakta* texts, and (v) studies of *Shakta tantra* and literature. The first method is based on broad historical surveys. It tends to look *Shaktism* as a tradition with the archaeological findings in Indus valley Civilization as *Vedic* Goddesses. The second method is based on specific situations and locales. It involves the methodology of social science, history, and sociology of religion. This method highlights the studies of persons, places, and events. The third method involves the studies of specific Goddesses as well as analysis of their myths and iconography. The fourth method is based on translations and analyses of *Shakta* texts with emphasis on sacred text. Finally, the fifth method views *tantra* as a subtype of *Shaktism* with *tantric* belief and practice.

Table 1. Comparison on core aspects of three Strands of Shaktism

Core Aspects	Tribal/Folk	Tantric/Yogic	Bhakti
Path	appeasement	meditation	devotion
Goddess image	old woman, protector	consort, warrior	child, mother, country
Goddess's locale	nature (forest, tree, etc.)	burning ground, forest	statue, heaven, human heart
Goddess's gifts	life, fertility	knowledge, power	Love, salvation,
Ritual specialist	<i>ojha, gunin</i>	<i>sadhu, guru</i>	<i>bhakti guru, pujari</i>
Rituals	healing, <i>bratas</i> , asceticism	<i>tantric</i> worship, <i>kundalini yoga</i>	<i>puja, kirtan</i>
Practitioner roles	servant, healer	hero, sage, ascetic	child, parent, servant
Practitioner emotion	submission, fear, gratitude	detachment, courage	dependence, love, passion
Religious experience	possession, dream command	liberation, vision	<i>darshan</i> , selfless love,
Supernatural figures	ancestors, ghosts	<i>yakshinis, yoginis</i>	servants of the Goddess
Community	family and village	guru and disciple, chakra	temple, <i>ashram</i>
Dharma	occasionally	sometimes	generally

The folk tradition is primarily an oral tradition, handed down from village elders or priests to the followers. Likewise, the traditions of goddess worship are passed down to next generation. Few elements of *Brahmanical Hinduism* (such as Sanskrit mantras or brahmin priests) are also found in *Shaktism*. In few cases, the tribal shaman-healers (*ojhas*) and *Shakta tantrikas* perform meditation and worship in burning ground.

Tantric/Yogic Shaktism: *Tantric/Yogic Shaktism* is the second form of *Shaktism*. The origin of *Tantric Shaktism* is not clear. In the

Tantra: *Tantra* (literal meaning in Sanskrit is loom-weave-system) denotes the traditions of *Hinduism* (also found in Buddhism - Vajrayana tradition and Jainism). It entails interweaving of traditions and teachings and makes it available in form of structure and practice. *Tantra* word appears in *Rigveda* with the meaning of warp (weaving). Starting in the early centuries of CE, the *Tantras* surrounding Vishnu, Shiva or Shakti emerged. *Tantra* is an overarching term which may include *Tantric* items. These include *bijas* (mantras), *mandala* (geometric symbols and patterns), *mudra* (gestures), *nyasa* (icons and sounds), *dhyana* (meditation), *puja* (worship), and *diksha*

(initiation).¹¹ The major differences between the *Tantric* and non-*Tantric* tradition (orthodox Buddhism) is the assumptions of austere life. According to Non-*Tantric* traditions, the worldly life of a householder is driven by desire and greed which are the obstruction for *moksha* (spiritual liberation). It teaches renunciation of householder life to become a monk. On the other hand, the *Tantric* traditions argue for attainment of both the enlightenment and worldly enjoyment together. For enlightenment, there is no need for rejection of materialistic world.¹² *Tantras* are central scriptures (ritual manuals) in *Shaktism*. The *Tantras* formulated two main paths; left-hand path (*Vamachara*) and right-hand path (*Dakshinachara*) to reach the same goal. *Vamachara* is mostly associated with the *pancha-makara* or the "5Ms", which are recognized as *pancha-tattva* (five elements). These are: *Madya* (wine), *Mamsa* (meat), *Matsya* (fish), *Mudra* (gesture), and *Maithuna* (sexual intercourse). Practitioners of *vamachara* rituals make symbolic use of these literal things, which are not endorsed in orthodox Hindu practice. In contrast, *Dakshinachara* traditions place restrictions on the use of these and caution against non-sanctioned use.

Therefore, *Dakshinachara* is accepted in orthodox Hindu practice and it insists upon the purity in action and conduct. It draws attention to *mantra*, *yoga* and *dhyana*.

Dasamahavidya: The word *Dasa-Maha-Vidya* is derived from Sanskrit words *Dasa* means ten, *maha* means great, and *vidya* means wisdom. Hence, the literal meaning of *Dasa-Maha-Vidya* is ten wisdom Goddesses. These goddesses are sometimes also interpreted as *Dasavatara* of Vishnu.¹³ Each form of *Dasamahavidya* has her own name, story, quality, and mantras. These names are *Kali*, *Tara*, *Shodashi*, *Bhuvaneshvari*, *Bhairavi*, *Chinnamasta*, *Dhumavati*, *Bagala*, *Matangi* and *Kamala*. The *Dasa Mahavidya* as are a very distinctive group of deities that differ from the usual depictions of Hindu Goddesses and the *Shakta* theology. Though depicted as fearsome, the *Mahavidyas* have deep spiritual and philosophical meaning. They are always shown independent, without the support of a male deity as consort. Though some of them are shown with Lord *Shiva* as their consort, he is given a subsidiary position. Some believe that the *Mahavidyas* represent different phases or facets of a woman's life.



Fig.1: Kali

Kali

The Goddess *Kali* is absolute black in colour, with long untied hair dancing in the wind and her tongue red with blood. She is always naked, wearing a skirt of severed heads, a garland of detached heads and earrings of bones. She has four hands-on one hand the head of a skull, and the other a curved sword with blood dripping on it. She has *mudras* (spiritual gestures) on her other two hands, one for giving freedom from fear and the other for blessings.

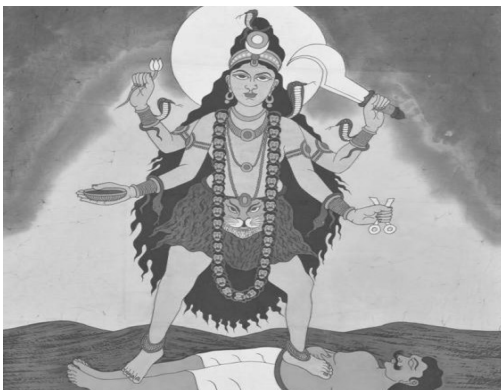


Fig.2: Tara

Tara

The Goddess *Tara* symbolizes the Eternal World. Unlike *Kali* who is black, *Tara* is light blue colour representing limitless sky. She is pictured naked up to the waist and then clad in tiger skin. In four hands she carries a sword, a pair of scissors, a human skull and a lotus. The weapons represent the destruction of the ego while the lotus assures the absolute protection. Her big belly represents her hunger for selflessness.



Fig.3: Shodashi

Shodashi

Shodashi represents Goddess *Parvati*. Once *Parvati* was sitting in meditation on *Sumeru Mountain*. To create separation between *Shiva* and *Parvati*, *Narad* went to *Parvati* and said that *Shiva* was entering into a relationship with another woman. When *Parvati* heard, She lost Her temper and assumed the form of the most beautiful woman of sixteen years (*Shodashi*) and appeared before Lord *Shiva*. This form is also known as *Tripurasundari*



Fig. 4. Bhuvaneshwari

Bhuvaneshwari

Bhuvaneshwari represents the Ruler of the Universe (*Bhuvana* means universe, *Ishwari* means Ruler). While *Kali* represents time, *Bhubaneswari* represents space. Lord *Brahma* had the desire to create the Universe and did meditation. *Parameswari*, being pleased with his meditation came as *Bhu devi* or *Bhuvaneshwari*. She bears three eyes and is radiant like the rising sun.



Fig. 5. Chinnamasta

Chinnamasta

Chinnamasta means beheaded. In this *avatar*, Goddess holds her own severed head and the head drinks the blood coming out of her throat. At her feet, is a couple in the heart of passion, symbolizing life, and death. Once *Parvati* went with friends *Dakini* and *Varnini* for bath. Her friends were hungry and asked for some food. She cut Her own head and immediately blood erupted in three directions and She and her two friends drank the blood.

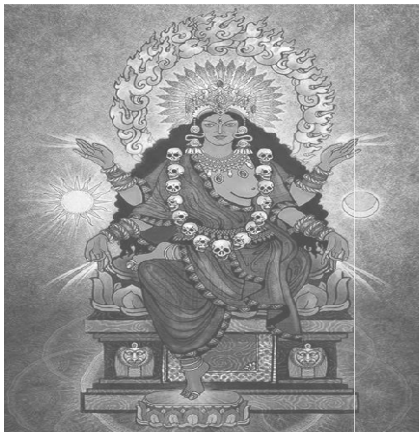


Fig. 6. Bhairavi

Bhairavi

Bhairavi is the consort of *Bhairava* (a fierce manifestation of Shiva). In *Bhairavi* form, the Goddess killed *Chanda* and *Munda*. Hence, called as *Chamundeswari*. She is described as harbinger of death in scripture and also a mother defending her children from evil. Her body is the colour of the rising sun. She wears beautiful necklace around neck. In four hands She holds a string of prayer beads, book, rose, and displays the *mudras* of blessing.



Fig.7: Dhumavati

Dhumavati

Dhumavati (Smoke Goddess) is an exceptional representation of Goddess as a widow. She is believed to manifest herself at the time of *pralaya* (cosmic destruction). She is considered as 'Spirit of Smoke'. She is represented as the antithesis of *Lakshmi*, who stands for all good things and auspicious. When worshipped *Dhumavati* (*Alakshmi*), she is prayed to go away from home. Further, She demonstrates rejection and eliminates all frustration and confrontation. She is free from disgrace.



Fig.8: Bagala

Bagala

Goddess in form of *Bagala* annihilates enemies. She stops all motion at the appropriate time and silences all evil beings. This is a violent avatar and is shown pulling out the tongues of demons. Once an *asura* named *Ruru*, the son of *Durgam*, performed penance to win the favour of *Brahma*. As *Ruru* became powerful, apprehension developed amongst the Gods. So, they did *aradhana* and the Divine Mother appeared as *Bagala*.



Fig. 9. Matangi

Matangi

Matangi is considered as the Goddess of music and learning (*Raja-Matangi*). She is also described as the leftover, symbolizing the Divine Self that is left over after all things perish (*Uchchhishta-Matangi*). She is emerald green in colour. *Uchchhishta-Matangi* bears noose, sword, goad, and club in four her hands. *Raja-Matangi* is seen with the *yeena* and is often depicted with a parrot. Her worship is done to obtain supernatural powers, especially to gain control over enemies.



Fig.10. Kamala

Kamala

Kamala means lotus and *Kamala* is known as lotus Goddess. She is the Consort of Lord *Visṇu* and the only *Dasamahavidya* that is not directly related to *Shiva*. *Kamala* like *Lakshmi*, is a goddess of fortune, riches, fertility, fame, and material well being. She manifests the perfection of compassion in all Nature. *Kamala* is of most beautiful form with black hair, bright eyes, and kind expression on her face. She is described with radiant white *saree* denoting peace and bliss and is seated on a fully bloomed lotus.

The four ancient pithas of shaktism: In ancient Buddhist, Hindu and Tantric texts, there is a description of four holiest ancient seats (*Adi pithas*) of Goddess (*devi*) worship. The four places are: *Oddiyana*, *Purnagiri*, *Jalandhara* and *Kamarupa*.¹⁴ The tradition of 4 *pithas* at different geographical locations is the oldest one. Many places are assumed for the location of *Oddiyana*.¹⁵ The common locations of them are: (i) the Swat valley in Pakistan, (ii) a region in Bengal and Odisha. The theories suggesting *Oddiyana*'s location either in Odisha or Bengal are weak in the light of accounts of the Tibetan pilgrims.

On the other hand, strong evidences exist in favour of the *Oddiyana* located in the Swat valley (present-day Swat district in Malakand Division of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province in Pakistan). The location of *Purnagiri* is perhaps in Almora district in Uttarakhand (India-Nepal border). In government documents name the same mountain as "*Puniagiri*". Probably, '*Puniagiri*' in local tongue is *Purnagiri*. Nevertheless, no concrete evidence has yet been found in favour of this. As far as *Jalandharapitha* is concerned, there are many probable locations. The information in the texts is not sufficient to confirm the

exact location of above *pitha*. The *Kalika Purana* describes *Jalashaila* as the residence of *Chandi*. According to Cunningham, it refers to a popular name for the Sutlej-Beas doab. In *Puranas*, *Trigarta* is another name for this region. It is also possible that *Jalandhara* was a country rather than a mountain or city. Reference to *Kamakhya/Kamgiri/Kamarupa pitha* is found in many religious texts. There is no debate on the location of this *pitha*. It is located on *Kamagiri/Nilanchala* hill, on the bank of the river Brahmaputra, in Guwahati City in Assam. The Goddess *Kamakhya* might have been known as mountain Goddess in earlier times. Later on, the Goddess might have installed in a cave of the *Nilachala/Kamagiri* mountain. In this cave there is a stone symbolising the *yonis* (vagina) of *Sati*. Another view on *Adi pithas* is that the Goddess manifested herself in the *Satyayuga* at *Oddiyana*, in the *Tretayuga* at *Purnashaila*, in the *Dvaparyuga* at *Jalandhara*, and in the *Kaliyuga* at *Kamarupa* or *Kamakhya*.

The 51 *satipithas*: The custom of 51 *Satipithas* has come into existence in early medieval period.¹⁶ This tradition is linked to a mythology that clearly affirms the unity among all places sacred to the goddess.

The mythology says that in *Satyayuga*, *Daksha Prajapati* organised a *yajna*. He was not happy with *Shiva's* behaviour and attitude. To humiliate his daughter, he invited all Gods and Goddesses except his son-in-law (*Shiva*) and his daughter (*Sati*) to the occasion. When *Sati* knew about her father's function, she asked *Shiva's* permission to visit. Initially *Shiva* did not agree to the proposal as they are not been invited. But, on repeated insistence *Sati*, finally Lord *Shiva* agreed and allowed her to attend. Unfortunately, *Daksha* did not welcome his daughter *Sati* and started criticising *Shiva* in front of all guests. *Sati* could not tolerate her husband's criticism by father. She finally jumped into the sacrificial fire pit (*Yajnakunda*). Knowing this, *Shiva* became furious and stormed the venue of the sacrifice, killed *Daksha*, and started destroying everything. Anguished by *Sati's* death, *Shiva* roamed in the cosmos with *Sati's* corpse on his shoulder. As a result, the order and stability of the cosmos was disturbed. Perceiving the threat, all Gods was called upon *Vishnu* to tackle the situation. *Vishnu* entered in to *Sati's* body by *yoga* and cut the corpse into several pieces with His *chakra*. Realising that *Sati's* body is no more, *Shiva* stopped grieving and regained his divine composure. The places where different organs/parts of *Sati's* body and ornaments fell became sacred places of the Goddess and were called *Satipithas* (shrines).

Table 2. Detail description of Satipithas

S.N.	Satipitha's Site	Fallen Body Part	Goddess's Form	Geographical Location
1	Hingalaj	brain	Bhairavi	250km West of Karachi (Pakistan)
2	Amaranath	throat	Mahamaya (ice-form image)	Kashmir
3	Shriparvat	right temple	Shri Sundari	Northern Ladakh
4	Kamakhya	vagina	Kamaksha	Guwahati, Assam
5	Baurbhaga	left thigh	Jayanti	near Shillong, Meghalaya
6	Tripura	right leg	Tripurasundari	near Agartala, Tripura
7	Chattal	right arm	Bhavani	near Chittagong (Bangladesh)
8	Sugandha	nose	Sunanda	near Barisala (Bangladesh)
9	Puri	navel	Vimala	Puri, Odisha
10	Ratnavali	right shoulder	Kumari	Chennai city, Tamil Nadu (T.N.)
11	Kanchi	skeleton	Devagarbha	South of Chennai, T.N.
12	Nallur	anklet	Indrakshi	Near Jafna, Srilanka
13	Kanyakumari	back	Shravani	Kanyakumari, T. N.
14	Suchindram	upper teeth	Narayani	On Kanyakumati-Trivendrum Rd, T.N.
15	Karvira	third eye	Mahishamardini	Kolhapur, Maharashtra
16	Janasthan	chin	Bhramari	near Nasik, Maharashtra
17	Prabhasa	stomach	Chandrabhaga	Ambaji, Gujarat
18	Manivedika	both wrists	Gayatri	near Pushkar, Rajasthan
19	Virata	right toes	Ambika	North of Jaipur, Rajasthan
20	Jalandhara	left breast	Tripuramalini	Jalandhar city, Punjab
21	Jvalamukhi	tongue	Siddhida	SE of Kangara, Himachal
22	Manasa	right palm	Dakshayani	Manasarovara Lake, Tibet
23	Gandaki	right cheek	Gandaki	Muktinatha, Nepal
24	Pashupatinatha	both knees	Mahamaya	Kathmandu city, Nepal
25	Uchchhaitha	left shoulder	Uma	East of Janakapur, Nepal
26	Trisota	left leg	Bhramari (II)	Shalbad, Jalpaigudi, West Bengal (W.B.)
27	Karatoya	left sole	Aparna	Bhavanipur, Bangladesh
28	Yashora	left palm	Yashosheshvari	Jessore town, Bangladesh
29	Kalamadhav	left nipple	Kali (I)	Amarkantak, Chhatisgarh
30	Nalhatti	intestine	Kalika	Nalhatti, W.B.
31	Kalipitha	other toes	Kali (II)	Kalighat, Kolkata, W.B.
32	Batanagar	crown (<i>tiana</i>)	Vimala	24-Parganas (s), W.B.
33	Vibhasha	left ankle	Bhimarupa	Tamluk, W.B.
34	Panchasagara	lower teeth	Varahi	near Karwar, Karnataka
35	Kotitirtha	left temple	Vishveshi	along the Godavari River, Andhra Pradesh (A.P.)
36	Shrishailam	neck	Mahalakshmi	Shrishailam, A.P.
37	Bhairavaparvata	upper lip	Avanti	West of Ujjain, M.P.
38	Ujjaiyini	elbow	Mangalyachandika	Harsiddhi T.,Ujjain, M.P.
39	Vrindavana	hair (head)	Uma Vrindavana	Mathura, U.P.
40	Kurukshetra	right ankle	Savitri	Kurukshetra, Haryana
41	Patna	right thigh	Sarvanandakari	Patneshvari Devi, Patna, Bihar
42	Deoghar	heart	Jai Durga	Deoghar, Jharkhand
43	Nandipur	necklace	Nandini	Near Bolpur town, W.B.
44	Vaktreshvara	mind	Mahishamardini	Near Naihatti, W.B.
45	Bahula	left hand	Bahula	Brahmagram, W.B.
46	Attahasa	lower lip	Phullara	Near Labpur, W.B.
47	Yugadya	big toe	Bhutadhatri	Chhiragram, W.B.
48	Sona	right nipple	Sonakshi	Sasaram town, Bihar
49	Ramagiri	right breast	Shivani	Chitrakut, Banda Dist., U.P.
50	Prayaga	fingers	Lalita	Prayagraj, U.P.
51	Varanasi	Ear ring/eyes	Vishalakshi	Mir Ghat, Varanasi, U.P.

There are total fifty-one (51) numbers of such *pithas*. The location of all of these 51 shrines is noteworthy. A higher number (around 40%) of such shrines is located in the eastern India (including the northeast). Therefore, this region can be known as ‘heart of Goddess cult.’ Varanasi and four other nearby sites, form a minor region of concentration. Rest of the 50% shrines are widely scattered as depicted in the map below. The number 51 is very significant in Goddess worship. It is not only identical to the 51 letters of Sanskrit (and Hindi) alphabets, but also represented mystically in numerous ways in the *yantra*, a typical design associated with Goddess worship. The origin and maintenance, creation and destruction of the universal order is controlled by the divine feminine with 51 points of reference. All *Sati pithas* are closely associated with local culture and many of these shrines are located either the hill tops or the elevated spots. The detail description of 51 *Satipithas* is given in a tabular format below.

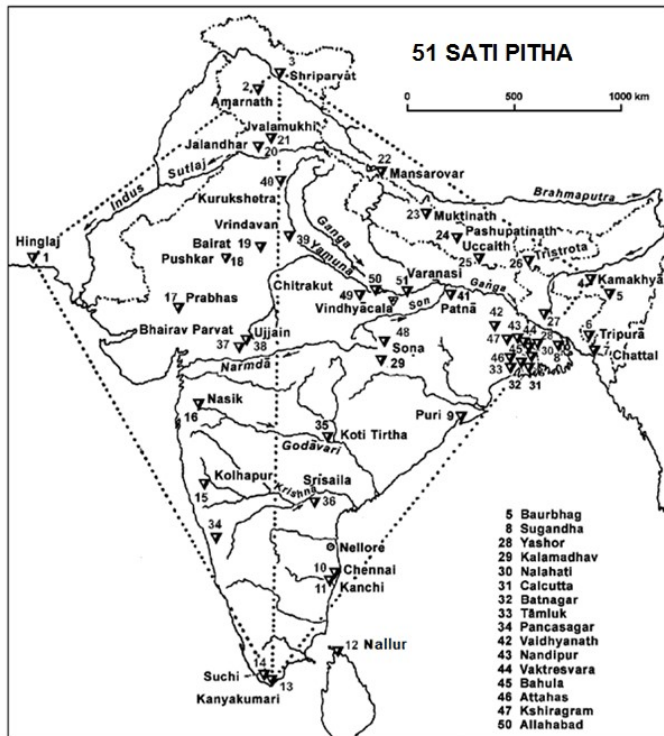


Fig.11: Map showing the location of 51 Satipithas

The 108 shaktipithas: Apart from the 51 *Satipithas*, there is another series of 108 shrines of Goddess (*Shaktipithas*) found in religious texts.¹⁷ As we know, in *Satipithas* series, the shrines were established at the places where corpse’s pieces of *Sati* fell down. But in case of *Shaktipithas* series, the number 108 is an important connotation in Hindu religion. The number 108 is the multiplication product of 12 (zodiacs/months) and 9 (planets). It is also interpreted as the product of 36 varieties of divinities and 3 mythical realms, or 27 lunar mansions and 4 directions. The pattern of distribution of the 108 places of Goddesses is not very different from 51 *Satipithas*. The majority of the places are located with hilly locales; even the places of goddess in plains are found at elevated points than adjoining areas. The concentration of shrines is in the eastern region; while the west and northwest regions possess a few shrines. The geographical locations of 108 *Shaktipithas* are depicted in the map below

Goddess of Contemporary times: *Shaktism* has not lost its relevance in contemporary *Hinduism*. In present-day India, there are thousands of goddesses in different geographical locations. Further, the diverse sects of *Shaktism* offer countless varieties of practices. But there are two broad forms of *Shaktism*, one prominent in South India and the other one in East and North India. *Srikula* (family of *Sri*, i.e., *Lakshmi*), prominent in South India. The *Kalikula* (family of *Kali*) prevails in Eastern and Northern India. Among these numerous manifestations of *Shakti*, there are a few popular Goddesses that are worshiped throughout the Hindu world in modern times. These

Goddesses stand out among others and are described below with iconography. The Goddess groups, such as *Navadurga* (nine Durgas), *Ashta-Lakshmi* (eight Lakshmi) and *Sapta-Matrika* (seven Mothers) are also common in *Shaktism*.

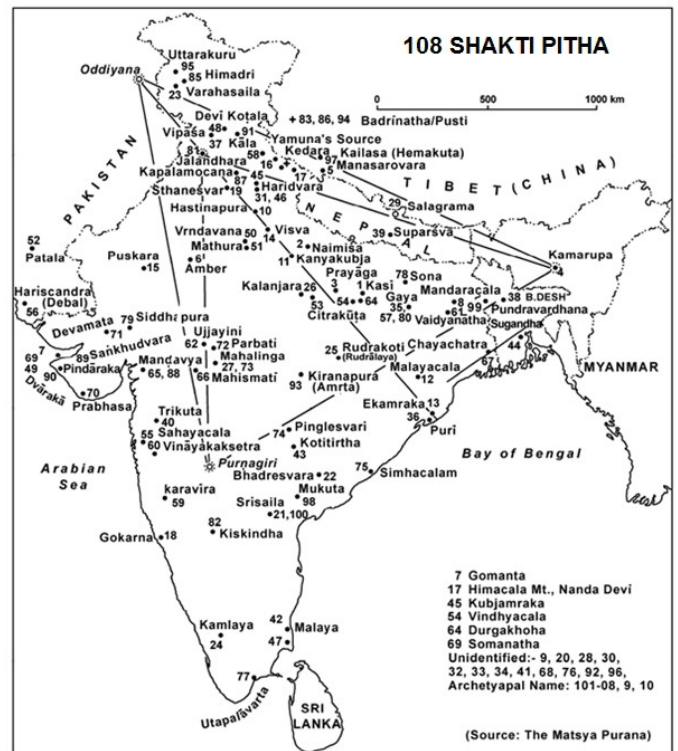


Fig. 12. Map showing the location of 108 Shaktipithas

Table 3. Brief description of popular Goddesses

Name	Brief Description
<i>Durga</i>	As <i>Mahadevi</i> , the apex principle of the universe
<i>Kali</i>	As Goddess of destruction and devourer of time
Lakshmi	As consort of <i>Vishnu</i> , and the Goddess of wealth
<i>Parvati</i>	As consort of <i>Shiva</i> , Goddess of Divine Love
<i>Saraswati</i>	As consort of <i>Brahma</i> , the goddess of knowledge
<i>Sita</i>	As consort of <i>Rama</i>
<i>Radha</i>	As consort of <i>Krishna</i>
<i>Gayatri</i>	As mother of all <i>Mantras</i> .
<i>Ganga</i>	As divine river (the Ganges River)



Fig. 13. Goddess Durga



Fig. 14: Goddess Kali



Fig.18: Goddess Sita



Fig. 15: Goddess Lakshmi



Fig.19. Goddess Radha



Fig. 16. Goddess Parvati



Fig. 20. Goddess Gayatri



Fig. 17. Goddess Saraswati



Fig. 21. Goddess Ganga

Major festivals of goddesses: There are many Hindu festivals dedicated to Goddesses and some of the popular annual festivals are described below.

Navaratri: The festival is dedicated to nine *Avatars* of Goddess *Durga* and spans nine nights (and ten days). Theoretically, there are four *Navaratri*s in a year representing four seasons, i.e., *Sharada Navaratri* (in post-monsoon, September–October), *Vasanta Navaratri* (in spring, March–April), *Magha Navaratri* (in winter, January–February) and *Ashada Navaratri* (monsoon season, June–July). However, in practice, the *Sharada Navaratri* is celebrated the most followed by *Vasanta Navaratri*.

Durga Puja: In eastern India, the *Sharada Navaratri* is celebrated as *Durga Puja* with some modifications and very popular in West Bengal. This festival celebrates *Durga*'s victory over the demon *Mahishasura*. The earthen idols of Goddess with her family members are worshipped during this time as a guest on earth. At the end of the festival, the idols are lead in a procession to the nearest body of water, so as to send her back to heavenly abode.

Diwali: *Diwali* or *Deepawali* is the Hindu festival of lights (between mid-October and mid-November) and one of the most popular festivals of Hinds. It represents the victory of light over darkness, good over evil, and knowledge over ignorance. This festival is generally associated with *Lakshmi*, Goddess of wealth. Some regional traditions connect it to *Rama* or *Kali*.

Ambubachi: It is an important festival held in the *Kamakhya* Temple, at Guwahati, Assam in June/July and is significant for *Shakta Tantrics*. The festival acknowledges the synergy of the seasonal cycle of monsoon rains in earth with menstruation cycle of female. Both male and female worshippers observe traditional menstrual restriction and seclusion during this time.

Bonalu: Celebrated in Telangana during July/August, where Goddess *Mahakali* (*Bonalu*) is worshipped. It involves the worship of Mother Goddess in regional forms. The festival is also considered as a thanksgiving to the Goddess for fulfilment of vows.

Minakshi Kalyanam: It takes place in April/May and is popular in Madurai regions of Tamil Nadu. The festival celebrates the divine marriage of Goddess *Meenakshi* with Lord *Sundareshwar* (*Shiva*).

Saraswati puja: It is also known as *Vasant Panchami* and falls in late January or February. The festival is dedicated to Goddess *Saraswati* (goddess of knowledge, language, music, and arts) and celebrated in eastern India and Nepal.

Present-day Popularity: A good number of *Shakta-Tantric* works have been composed in 18th to 19th centuries to take Tantric philosophies to the masses. The prominent examples include the *Mahanirvana Tantra* with its liberal outlook towards women. Bhaskararaya (1690–1785), widely considered an authority in *Shaktism*, had outstanding contribution to *Shakta* philosophy. Muthuswami Dikshitar (1775-1835), a legendary Tamil composer of Indian classical music, opened the way to the Divine Mother through devotional music. The passionate *Shakta* lyrics of Ramprasad Sen (1720–1781) of Bengal made *Shakti* cult acceptable to masses with the barrier of caste and creed. More than 80 *Shakta* poets appeared in Bengal after Ramprasad and by the year 1900, the number of *Shakta* lyrics exceeded 4,000.¹⁸ As a result, the *Shaktism* has evolved as a liberal, universal religion that touched nearly every aspect of Indian life. The evolution achieved completeness during the period of great *Shakta* saint Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa (1836–1886). His principal disciple, Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902) viewed India as the living image of the "Divine Mother". This image resonated throughout India's struggle for independence. Another great nationalist, Sri Aurobindo (1872-1950) reinterpreted the doctrine of *Shakti* in a new light. Over time, *Shaktism* infused deeply with mainstream Hinduism and ceased to be a sectarian religion. In present time, *Shakti* pilgrimage sites are drawing ever-growing crowds and recognition. The *Vaishno Devi* shrine in Jammu and Kashmir attracts

record numbers of pilgrims every year. The Indian film industry also played important role by producing scores of devotional films on Goddesses and most famous amongst them is 1975's *Jai Santoshi Maa*. After the film, *Santoshi Maa* quickly became one of the widely worshiped Goddesses in India. Modern female saints like Mata Amritanandamayi, Mother Meera exhibit the matriarchal lineages of mainstream *Hinduism*.

Conclusion

Today *Shaktism* along with *Vaishnavism* and *Shaivism* are the prominent branches of devotional *Hinduism*. This shows the deep respect for the female principle in *Hindu* tradition. This makes a distinct variance among the other great religious systems of the world. The popularity of *Shaktism* has spread beyond India. Non-Indians are experiencing feminine divine through Goddess worship. It should be noted that such, apart from *Hinduism*, such Goddess worship was also a part of Greek and Roman civilizations before the rise of the *Abrahamic* religions. Of late, *Shaktism* has also become a focal point of some Western spiritual seekers trying to create new Goddess-centric faiths.

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