

ANTHROPOLOGICAL AND ETHNOGRAPHIC VIGNETTE: CHINTPURNI TEMPLE, HIMACHAL PRADESH

Heena

Research Scholar, Department of History, Panjab University Chandigarh

ABSTRACT

This research paper is based on the ethnographical and anthropological fieldwork conducted in Village Chapproh, Himachal Pradesh, India. It is part of a larger, continuing research interest in changing aspects of Hinduism. The research included information on Chintpurni temple i.e. Chinnamastika Dham which is situated at village Chapproh in Una district, Himachal Pradesh. By selecting a single institution in a larger urban center it has been possible to remark the reciprocation of several leading variables prompting religious change. The repercussion of urbanism, new secular patrons, and emerging popular styles of Hinduism on a religious institution can be profound.

Keywords: *Hinduism, Saktism, Tantarism, Saktapitha, DasaMahavidyas, Chintpurni, Chinnamasta.*

INTRODUCTION

Religion has played a very important role in the lives of individuals and communities from the moment they realize their existence. Religion is a complex and multifaceted concept more than a mere system of rites and symbols. There are Monotheistic, Polytheistic, Pantheistic, Atheistic religious systems in the world. India is a place of many religions and several deities have been adored here from the time immemorial in the form of gods and goddesses. These divinities were never of constant mass appeal all the time and went on changing from time to time. Hinduism is regarded as the world's most complex religion. It is composed of tightly-knit myths, rites and customs which evolved from prehistoric times. In Hinduism, there are three devotional sects which are Saivism, Vaisnavism and Saktism. The gods most frequently worshipped in Hinduism are *Siva* and several manifestations of *Viṣṇu*. Numerous sects have developed around these male deities, stressing different styles of devotion. An interesting feature of this ancient religion is the worship of mother goddesses. Terracotta figurines of goddesses dated as early as 3,000 B.C. have been found in the Harappan Civilization. Equal importance is given to the great goddess who takes many forms, both benign and malevolent.¹

Saktism is the worship of *sakti* or goddess archetype – the primary factor for the creation and the reenactment of the universe.² Sir John Woodroffe expresses that “there is no word of wider content in any language than this Sanskrit term with meaning for power for *sakti* in the highest casual science, it is the universe which issues from her womb”. The term *sakti* epitomizes the divine feminine in general and particularly stands for the emerging power of the same divine feminine. In the prolonged history of the Indian religious traditions, the extremely varied and complicated nature of the female energy admits of no simple definition or neither any simple explanation. She is the singular and transcendent divine power but manifests herself in innumerable forms. She has one as well as multiplying herself in various different forms. These female deities continue to play a prominent role in the popular religions of India.

In the orthodox *brahmanical* traditions, she is often depicted as a devoted and auspicious consort of male deities. In the *Tantric* religion, by contrast, we often encounter ferocious goddesses who are pleased with offerings of bodily and sexual excretion.³ Saktism in its developed form became identical with *Tantrism*. *Tantric* philosophy generally regarded the basis of *Sakta* religion. The word *Tantra* is derived its root from the word ‘Tan’ means to draw out, or to draw out, or to spread.⁴ *Tantrism* was a practical means to stimulate the generative powers in nature and as such it was closely related to the Mother Goddess. According to S.B. Dasgupta “It seems to be the religious undercurrent”.⁵

Goddess worship is almost always part of a larger, more intricate pattern of religious symbolism and *Saktipitha* which are related to the supreme mother goddess are considered sacred spots. There are fifty one *Saktipitha* by various accounts, out of which four are referred as Maha in Hindu Texts. Out of 51 *Saktipitha* in India, Himachal is privileged to have *Saktipitha* which are associated with Satī. While Hinduism manifests certain common characteristics throughout the subcontinent, there are important regional variations. While many of the goddess shrines are small and inconspicuous, many others developed into major pilgrimage centers attracting a number of devotees each year. These centers are mapped out in the sacred literature and integrated into the Great Tradition through the legends that are associated with Satī.

The Chintpurni is a sacred Hindu pilgrimage site located in the Una district of Himachal Pradesh (Punjab District Gazetteer, Part- A: 1980p.67). Chintpurni Temple lies within the Trigarth region. The oldest division of this area is found in Alexander Cunningham’s book, where the states have been divided into three groups; Kashmir, Dusarna and Trigarth region (Hutchison J. & Vogel, Ph., History of Punjab Hill States, I: 1993, p.41). The research is conducted in an urban goddess temple in the present state of Himachal Pradesh. This region has remained somewhat isolated from the mainstream of modern Indian life, but for centuries devout people have visited goddess shrines. It

would be presumptuous to attempt a full study of this complex phenomenon in this research paper. Nor is there sufficient historical or ethnographic data to develop a comprehensive picture of the goddess worship. The study presented here brings together some very basic information on the topic, with particular interest in how the goddess cult becomes manifested at Chintpurni Temple. Goddess worship seems particularly suited to the needs of newly urbanized individuals.

RESEARCH GAPS IN THE EXISTING LITERATURE

Chintpurni Temple is located at the confluence of several socio-religious streams in contemporary Hinduism. It does not represent the full range of factors emerging today as prime movers that impact on religion in India. Other temples in the distinct parts of the subcontinent would certainly reflect a large variety of other social, cultural, economic, and religious variables. Nevertheless, it is felt that this study has certain unusual characteristics to offer for religious change. Chintpurni Temple is not a large pilgrimage center or ancient sacred complex. Yet, there are thousands of middle ranges, relatively recent shrines like Chintpurni Temple in the country. None of them has been studied ethnographically in any detail.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

Present study extends this new view of the role of religion in the modernizing process by illustrating how an urban goddess temple can act as a initiate for change. From this point of view Hindu religious institutions are neither doomed to extinction, nor necessarily resistant to change. They vary generally in their adaptive capacities. Chintpurni Temple has managed to create a new synthesis to cope with change. The present study is concerned with changing patterns of symbolism, visualization associated with a growing popularity of Chintpurni Temple in Himachal Pradesh.

SCOPE AND RELEVANCE OF THE STUDY

The Chintpurni temple as a popular religious spot has highlighted its importance. With the rising spirit of inquiry, it is important to take upon research work on Chintpurni Temple to answer the questions of common people as well as academicians. It fills the knowledge gaps that have arisen. So many questions regarding *mahavidya* temple as *chintpurni* temple known by the name *Chinnamastika Dham* either remain unanswered or are answered irresolutely at best, so it became incumbent to conduct research work to try and find the answers to these questions. The focus of the paper would be to the temple in its entirety, to peel off the layers that obscure the origin of

mahavidya chinnamasta in the temple, to look at its assimilation with Goddess Chintpurni which is the presiding deity in the temple and composite similarities in its art, to understand its unique temple architecture.

THE METHODOLOGY OF RESEARCH WORK

The research work remains qualitative in nature and based on a descriptive and analytical approach. For the completion of the proposed research study endeavor made to collect the information from identified individuals related to the temple of Chintpurni. The fieldwork of the concerned location and interactions with the people also add to the study. Oral evidence related to the proposed study are recorded and arranged respectively. Attempts were made to present the facts in a rational, symmetrical and critical manner so that the work becomes as objective as possible.

MYTHOLOGIES AND PRESENT DAY BELIEFS

The mythology of Dakṣa Yajña and Satī's self-immolation is the mythology linked with this Śāktapīṭha. Dakṣa Prajāpati was the father-in-law of Lord Śiva. However, Dakṣa never respected him. Dakṣa decided to conduct a holy Yajña at his palace in which he invited all the gods except Lord Śiva. The intention was to insult Lord Śiva by not inviting him. Satī decided to attend without an invitation. She tried to convince Lord Śiva to come along with her but he refused to go. As soon as she reached the Yajña, Dakṣa started insulting her and Śiva among all. Satī could not bear the ruthless words of her father, so Satī with her power, burned herself in front of all. The incident enraged Śiva and he plucked his hair by which Vīrbhadra and Bhadrakālī appeared before him. He ordered them to destroy the Yajña and kill Dakṣa for his arrogance. Śiva was completely mad and wandered around the earth in grief, dancing furiously with the dead body of his beloved wife on his shoulders. Lord Viṣṇu utilized his *Sudarshan chakra* on the body cutting it into pieces. Various pieces of Satī's body were said to have fallen on earth and they have become Śāktapīṭha. These are sacred spots that have been linked with the mother goddess.

The Chintpurni Temple is recognized by the people of village Chapproh as their presiding deity. In recent years she has come to play a prominent role in the religious life of the people. The threads of religious change are traced at several levels within the institution. Since Chintpurni Temple plays a focal point in the religious life of people of Chapproh, it is instructive to extend the analysis beyond the inner workings of the institution to reveal how goddess worship fits into the ritual network in that area. Though the goddess temple is also known by the name of *Chinnamastakā Dham*.

Chinnamastakā is known as the severed-headed one as well as the fore-headed one. *Chinnamastakā* is also known as sixth *mahavidyas*. In the 10th Century, *Sakta Mahabhagvata Purana* we find the earliest account of the *Dasa Mahavidyas*.

The Sanskrit word *mahavidya* is a combination of the adjective *maha* meaning great or supreme and the noun *vidya* which is from the verbal root *vid* meaning to know, to learn, to ascertain, to experience. By combining *maha* with *vidya*, one can translate the word *mahavidya* as supreme knowledge.⁶ The group of *mahavidyas*, consisting of multiple feminine divinities, exemplifies the complexity of goddess cults. Their names and numbers varied considerably according to traditions and texts. However, the concept of *mahavidyas* gradually emerged, systematized and crystallized in due course of the time, and they came to be known as *Dasamahavidyas*. The order of the *Dasamahavidyas* is *Kali*, *Tara*, *Tripurasundari*, *Bhuvaneshwari*, *Chinnamasta*, *Bhairavi*, *Dhumavati*, *Bagalamukhi*, *Matangi*, and *Kamala*.⁷

Another legend associated with this Śāktapīṭha is once while having a bath in the Mandākinī River; Goddess Pārvaṭī got excited and turned black. Meanwhile, her attendants (two yoginīs) named Ḍākinī and Varniṇī get hungry and ask the goddess to satisfy their hunger. Goddess looked around but could not find anything to eat. After that, she decapitate her head, her head fell on the palm of her left hand and the blood flowed in the three directions; one in Ḍākinī's mouth, the other in Varniṇī's mouth and the third in the goddess's mouth itself. From this act Pārvaṭī came to be known as Chinnamastā. Chinnamastā is sometimes shown standing upon Kama and Rati, who are copulating on the lotus flower or cremation pyre.⁸

Another legend that has been travelled across the time which is linked with this *saktapitha* is when Goddess *Chandi* killed the demons after a relentless fight; two of her emanations were still hungry and wanted more blood. To quench their thirst, the goddess is said to have severed her own head and is depicted holding her own head feeding the yoginis with the blood eruption from the arteries. There is no way to isolate the sacred world of temples and priests from the community.⁹ The Chintpurni shrine was established about fifteen generations ago in Village Chapproh by a *Saraswat* Brahmin. The origin of this Śāktapīṭha is associated with the discovery by Pandit Mai Das.¹⁰ The concern of religious self-sacrifice in Indian imagery is complex, reflecting the overlays of tradition and the intermingling of the 'Little Tradition' with the 'Great Tradition'. The portrayal of self-offering may reflect images from the epics but also folk-tales, local hero cults, tribal beliefs, or Tantric practices.¹¹ The sacred place came to be known by the name of Chintpurni over a period of time after the famed deity of the Temple. His descendants reportedly perform *Pujas* and ceremonies at the temple. They are till today considered the official priests of the temple.¹²

Countless examples of self-sacrificing women appear in Indian mythology and imagery. *Sita* is perhaps the most popular. She was the ideal of modest, self-abnegating female behaviour in the Ramayana. *Sita* represents the *anima*, the strength of the female behaviour that is alluring and supporting to the male, but is never accepted as trustworthy and always perceived as fickle. She was the long-suffering wife who although of stainless moral character is yet not quite believed when she protects that her chastity was never besmirched while in Lanka.¹³ *Chinnamasta* is the reverse of the *Sita* model. She is self-sacrificing, but completely in control to handle the sacrifice. The portrait of *Chinnamasta* represents a logical continuity of development in sacrifice imagery, from the individual mortal to the universal deity. Goddesses and mythical figures provide models, both ideal and imperfect, for the development as well as rejection of social behaviour.¹⁴

According to another mythological belief, Chintpurni is believed to be the place where the goddess Sati's feet fell, and is thus considered a sacred spot for devotees of *Sakti*. The highly popular Chintpurni Temple of Himachal Pradesh is a major pilgrimage center of worship in Northern India. The term Chintpurni means the divinity who removes anxiety and fulfills all the wishes of the devotees. The Temple is advertised as a *Saktipitha* and is alternatively known as *Chinnamastika Dham*. Although the temple is simply known as the Chintpurni temple, paintings of Chinnamastā and her yoginis mark the entrance door, along with a label that states *Chinnamastikā* temple. The *Chinnamasta* picture is striking primarily because her self-decapitation rivets the devotee's attention. She is not a warrior goddess like goddess *Kali* and she doesn't even receive blood sacrifices; rather, she gives her own blood to nourish the creation. *Chinnamasta*, however, is the only goddess in *Dasamahavidyas* who decapitates herself in order to nourish her devotees.

The temple complex also includes several other shrines and a sacred pond where devotees take a dip before offering prayers to the deity. It is a single storeyed building made of stones with a dome in its centre. Inside the shrine of the goddess a stone pīndi, a personification of the goddess, covered with a red cloth comprises the shrine's central figure. On the other side of the entrance gate, there are idols of *Hanuman* and *Bhairava*. Huge brass bells can be seen hanging when one enters the temple sanctum. The *pujaris* of Chintpurni received two villages Gari and Chambara in Jawan Range worth hundred rupees from the Maharaja in 1836 (Punjab State Archives, Patiala, File no.1134, p.13). Consequently, a process of renewed self identification began, which in the present case is reflected in the building of a shrine.¹⁵ Its annual celebration, a major fair known as '*Mata da Mela*'. It is held thrice a year in the months of *Chet*, *Srawan*, *Asoj*. The temple is currently open to everybody, and there will be no restrictions on age, gender or class. Hair offering continues an important ascetic pilgrimage activity in the temple.

One of the prominent urban beliefs associated with the Chintpurni Śāktapīṭha is devotees tiered crimson threads on the banyan tree while making a wish, and come back untie the red thread (*mauli*) when it fulfilled. It is assumed that if someone ties a red thread, the wish will be granted by Devī. Although *Chinnamasta* is easily recognized by most Hindus and although her image with other *mahavidyas*, is fairly common in goddess temples, she is not popularly worshiped by most Hindu devotees. She is almost always associated with heroic, Tantric religious practice. The only temple dedicated to *Chinnamasta* in Himachal Pradesh has been located in Village Chapproh which came to be known as Chintpurni Temple or *Chinnamastika Dham*. Both Chintpurni and *Chinnamasta* represent the powerful and complex aspects of the divine feminine in Hinduism, embodying strength, transformation and spiritual growth.

CONCLUSION

The ethnography of the goddess shrine is presented to understand how ancient traditional symbols operate in the broader process in change of contemporary India. The goddess identity was constructed to be a vibrant model of growth and transformation, despite strong secularizing forces. Change does not proceed by the innovation of an endless series of new symbols, technologies or models for reality. It must also occur within a familiar idiom to ensure a meaningful thread of continuity with the past.





The goddess temple where the Chinnamastā /Chintpurni are worshipped in Northern India.

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10. There are fascinating legends associated with origin of Chintpurni Śāktapīṭha. Pandit Mai Das was an ardent devotee of Goddess Durgā. He was the youngest of three brothers. He spent all his time in the service of the Goddess. Mai Das faced many difficulties after he separated from his brothers. However, the only thing that kept him going was his faith in Goddess Durgā and believing that goddess removes all difficulties from his life. One day Mai Das thought of visiting his in-laws to seek help, after walking a long distance he sat down to rest under a banyan tree and fell asleep. A radiant girl appeared in his dream and told him, “Mai Das, stay in this place and serve me, I have been dwelling at this very place for many years. In the past, I have been known as Chinnamastakā. From now on, people will also call me Chintpurni as I have removed all your doubts and worries. I will now appear under this tree in the form of a pīṇḍī”. (According to the Popular Literature traveled across the time). Mary Storm, *Head and Heart: Valour and Self- Sacrifice in the Art of India*, Routledge Publishers, New Delhi, 2013, p.4.
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