

# Maa Bhavani in Spiritual Consciousness and Contemplation.

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## Abstract

According to the Devi Bhagavata, Shakti exists as the soul in all living beings, and when a creature is devoid of Shakti, it becomes as inert as a corpse (shabavat). According to this Purana, the Supreme Being (Parama Purusha) is divided into two parts—one part is Sat-Chit-Ananda (Truth-Consciousness-Bliss) and the second part is Parashakti (Supreme Energy) or Mayashakti (Cosmic Illusion). Yet, fundamentally, the two parts are identical.

## 1. Introduction

The idol of Mother Bhavani is crafted in an exquisite style, an impeccable expression born from the inner vision of a devout sculptor. This manifestation of the Mother is distinct from other goddesses. The maternal idol is two-armed (di-bhujā) and in a semi-reclining posture on Her left side. The beautiful and elegant gestures (mudras) of Her fingers give the entire idol a unique grace and expression.

The Goddess's right hand extends toward Her waist. Flowing from Her navel, a lotus stalk extends exactly up to Her waist through Her thumb and forefinger, and upon this blooming lotus rests a Shiva Lingam. Her right leg is extended in a graceful, playful stance behind Her slightly raised left leg. Both feet are painted with red alta (lac dye) and heavily adorned with ornaments. Through the creation of this exquisite maternal idol, the sculptor sought to convey that Adyashakti (the Primordial Energy), the Mother of the Universe, has given birth to Shiva.

The guidelines for sculpting deities in Bengal are derived from the tantras and meditative visualizations (dhyanas) of various gods and goddesses patronized by Brahmanical Hinduism. Following those instructions, the idol was given form by manifesting the physical lineaments of the shape that first appeared in the devotee's meditation. Fundamentally, the realization of this devout artisan's meditation and contemplative power is embodied in the unique majesty, form, and beauty of these deities. To correctly interpret these idols, one requires spiritual consciousness and the insight of a devout mind.

In Bengal and Eastern India, the child placed in front of this maternal idol has been interpreted as the newborn child of Mahamaya. The idol discovered in Gauda, North Bengal, is carefully preserved in the Indian Museum. In its description, it is referred to as "Mother with Child". This exquisite artwork, carved from black stone, is an impeccable expression of the devout artisan's mind. In this idol as well, the primary female figure is semi-reclining on Her left side.

The places of discovery for these idols are within the Rajshahi district of Bangladesh, with only two idols being collected from Bogra. It is worth mentioning here that the period between 995 and 1237 AD—which corresponds to the Pala reign in Bengal—is considered the definitive era of Eastern Indian architecture. It was during this time that the sculpture of Bengal reached its ultimate pinnacle of excellence. A sculpture identical to this one was found in Kosham Saheb village under the Khetlal police station in the Bogra district of Bangladesh. It was named "Gauri with Infant Shiva (Newborn)". The history detailed in the inscription associated with this sculpture reveals that it was crafted during the reign of Vighrahapala (III), specifically between 1054 and 1071 AD.

Bhattacharya was the first person to characterize this type of goddess sculpture as 'Gauri and Infant Shiva,' drawing upon the marital narratives of Shiva and Parvati.

Based on an analysis of the data, the discussed idol of Mother Bhavani belongs to the eleventh century, contemporaneous with the Pala emperors Mahipala I (988–1038 AD) and Vighrahapala III. An exquisite similarity in subject matter and emotion is observed between this idol and sculptures belonging to the 'Mother and Child' or 'Uma and the Newborn' categories.

Aristotle called art the vessel of truth; that is, through an artwork, we arrive at certain eternal yet distinct values of life that bring us closer to the truth.

According to Abanindranath Tagore, the creator of art continuously crafts one piece after another out of necessity, just to capture this elusive form of universal nature within a tangible vessel. This is the artist's divine play (leela). Where man is free from bondage, art is God—it is the Supreme Brahman. Art is the playful manifestation of man's conscious spiritual energy (chinmayi shakti). The joy an artist experiences through a sudden glimpse of the Ultimate Beauty progressively intensifies their thirst for giving form to it.



The painter Nandalal Bose stated that art is a 'special creation'; it is not an imitation of nature. Art is the artist's meditation or contemplation. When a viewer is overwhelmed by a distinct consciousness while viewing the artist's creation—or in the moments following it—only then dThe most noticeable characteristic of the Shakta ideology is that the Mother Goddess is conceived here under various names and in diverse forms. According to the cosmogony of the Shakta Puranas, the Primordial Energy (Adyashakti) Herself—as the symbolic embodiment of creation, preservation, and destruction—created Brahma, Vishnu, and Maheshvara (Shiva). The root of this Primordial Energy or Shakta philosophy is embedded within the life practices of ancient human civilizations. In the primary stages of social evolution, the maternal role was paramount, and the life-giving Mother Goddess was the central focus of religious life. The equation of this feminine power with the Earth and human fertility laid the foundation for the concepts of Prakriti (Nature) found in Samkhya philosophy and Tantra, from which the later philosophy of Shaktism developed. Throughout the world, it is a common custom among primitive agricultural tribal societies to view the reproductive power of the Earth as identical to the child-bearing capacity of women. It was based on the belief that the influence of one can be transmitted to the other through contact or imitation that primitive Tantric rituals and cosmologies were formed.

In the introduction to his book *Bharater Shakti Sadhana O Shakta Sahitya* (The Cult of Shakti and Shakta Literature of India), Shri Shashibhusan Dasgupta states: "The practice of Mother Worship can be seen in various forms across different regions and eras worldwide, but nowhere else do we see the development of a philosophy of Shakti (Shaktivada) or a spiritual practice (Shaktisadhana) comparable to that of India. Because Shaktivada is so distinctively indicative of Indian thought and exerts such an overarching influence on our lives, it commands our special attention."

According to the *Devi Bhagavata*, Shakti exists as the soul in all living beings, and when a creature is devoid of Shakti, it becomes as inert as a corpse (shabavat). According to this Purana, the Supreme Being (Parama Purusha) is divided into two parts—one part is Sat-Chit-Ananda (Truth-Consciousness-Bliss) and the second part is Parashakti (Supreme Energy) or Mayashakti (Cosmic Illusion). Yet, fundamentally, the two parts are identical.

The tradition of embracing the Goddess as Adyashakti (the Primordial Energy) was first expressed and propagated in Puranic literature. The Markandeya Purana, *Devi Bhagavata*, *Brahmavaivarta Purana*, *Kalika Purana*, and even the *Vishnu Purana* and *Bhagavata Purana* document the essence of Shakti worship. Influenced by Vedanta and Samkhya philosophy, the philosophy of Shakti (Shaktatattva) was integrated into the Tantras and Puranas. The glory of the Goddess Shakti is firmly established in Tantric scriptures. The Tantras are innumerable. The very objective of Tantra is to discuss the philosophy of Shakti and the methods of Her worship across various classifications. The tradition of Mother Worship that existed among non-Aryan, primitive tribes eventually influenced the Vedas, Upanishads, philosophies, and Puranas. A well-consolidated synthesis of this entire evolution occurred within Tantra.



Shakta Padavali (devotional poetry dedicated to Shakti) is, in reality, the musical expression of this very philosophy of Shakti. The Shakta poets were spiritual practitioners (sadhakas) first and poets second. They poured their realized spiritual truths and personal realizations into songs of poetic and emotional resonance. They manifested complex and profound Shakta philosophies using everyday, colloquial, and domestic language, drawing upon metaphors, similes, and imagery taken directly from ordinary human life. A beautiful harmony of divine majesty (aishwarya) and sweet intimacy (madhurya) took place in Shakta Padavali. Portrayals of family life and the struggles of oppressed humanity are vividly etched within these verses. A magnificent blend of spiritual philosophy and the essence of human life was achieved here. A vast diversity of vignettes, characters, hopes, aspirations, and imaginative thoughts found spontaneous form in the sweet melodies of Shakta Padavali.

When distressed humans become exhausted and bewildered, they seek refuge in a power that grants boons and dispels fear—a power that will protect them from adversities, rescue them from oppression, and lead them from fear into a realm of absolute fearlessness. The ultimate sanctuary for this can only be the feet

of the Mother of the Universe, who destroys the fear of time and death (Kalabhayaharini Jagatjanani). Worshiping that profoundly reassuring, compassionate Mother of the Universe is precisely what is known as Shakta Sadhana. And the songs composed by these devout poets as an integral part of that spiritual practice are known as Shakta Padavali. The endeavor to make the divine intimate, or the tendency to anthropomorphize and project human traits onto the deity, is a distinct feature of Indian spiritual practice. An analysis of Shakta religion and Shakta philosophy reveals three distinct forms of the Goddess. Firstly, it is observed that the Goddess is the beloved of Shiva (Shivapriya)—where Supreme Lord Shiva is the Ultimate Truth (Paramatattva), and the Goddess is accepted as the inherent power (Shakti) of that Supreme Truth, Mahadeva. Secondly, there is an equal prominence given to both Shiva and the Goddess (or Shakti)—a philosophy that finds its primary dominance within the Tantras. And in the third view, the Goddess is 'Independent' (Svatantra)—She Herself is the Ultimate Truth. Here, the Goddess is the peerless Supreme Energy (Mahashakti) pervading the three worlds, and everything in existence is born from that Supreme Energy.

Without denying the inseparable weaving of religion and culture within the heritage and traditions of any human society, it can at least be said that even at the source of a great, overflowing river, there lies the collective murmur and independent rhythm of hundreds and thousands of subtle streams.

The famous Tara Maa temple is located in Tarapith within the Birbhum district. It is said that Sage Vashistha was the first to witness this form of Mother Tara, after which he initiated the worship of Sati in the form of Tara.

At present, Mother Tara is seen adorned in Her royal attire (Rajvesh). The metal face placed over the Mother's stone-carved idol represents Her presiding in this royal splendor. In this captivating royal attire, Her disheveled hair resembles dark rainclouds. She wears a royal crown on Her head and a long silver necklace around Her neck, which features a garland of human skulls (nrundamala). The Mother's elongated tongue protrudes outward. None of Her hands or feet are visible from the outside. It is a serene and peaceful idol. The three eyes (trinayan) on Her face are a delightful sight to behold. Seated upon a high altar in Her royal garb, She appears as a royal queen or Rajarajeshwari (the Supreme Empress). Benevolent, peaceful, beautiful, ever-smiling, and auspicious, Mother Tara feels like one's own mother who gave them birth. King Ramkrishna Roy of Natore witnessed this form through meditative visualization (dhyana). This envisioned form from his meditation was later commissioned and built by King Udmanta Singh of Nasipur.

According to legend, it is said that during the churning of the ocean (Samudra Manthan), when Shiva's throat began to burn from consuming the emerging poison, Tara Devi pacified Mahadeva's burning agony by nursing him with Her own breast milk.

The Vashistha-worshiped Tara idol carved into the sacred Brahma-shila (divine stone) within the Tara temple is two-armed (di-bhuja), adorned with a sacred thread made of a serpent (sarpa-yajnopavita), and holds Shiva in Her left lap in the form of a son.



Two categories of narratives regarding the Goddess Adyashakti Mahamaya are prevalent in the Puranas. In one category of stories, the Goddess is born from the divine radiance of the gods (Deva-tejah-sambhuta)—a luminous embodiment of energy and the slayer of demons. In this aspect, she shares a lineage with the Vedic divine Sarasvati. In the other category of stories, the Goddess is the daughter of Daksha (Dakshatanaya), and in her next birth, Uma-Parvati, the daughter of the Himalayas (Himalayanandini). In both births, She is the power of Shiva (Shivashakti) and the consort of Shiva (Shiva-jaya). Uma-Parvati is the mother of Ganesha (Gajanan) and Kartikeya; She is not the destroyer of demons. On the other hand, the Supreme Power Chandi, who is born from the combined radiance of the gods, is Vishnumaya—the yogic sleep (Yoganidra) of Vishnu—not the consort of Shiva or the daughter of the Himalayas. She is the embodiment of the power of all the gods—and is therefore truly the Supreme Energy (Mahashakti). Over time, these two forms of the Goddess gradually merged into one. Durga, Parvati, and Chandi blended together to transform into a single divine entity—the same Supreme Energy, the power of Shiva, Shivani. Within the stream of evolution and progressive development of the concept of the Goddess, the origins of the Parvati-Uma lineage can be traced back.

On the auspicious occasion of Mahanavami (the ninth day of Durga Puja), the maternal idol of Mother Bhavani is escorted to the adjacent 'Bungalow' amidst the collective arati (lamp-waving ritual) and hymns of the gathered devotees. There, the Mother's worship is solemnized through homa (fire rituals), yajna (sacrificial bonfires), and balidan (ritual sacrifice); the special worship on this day assumes a Tamasik form (according to Tantric tenets) of adoration. Throughout the rest of the year, the Mother is worshiped



daily in Her Satvik (pure and gentle) form—but why is this extraordinary ritual organized specifically on the day of Navami?

When evaluated from a scriptural standpoint, a syncretic philosophy—which integrates the traditions of Vaishnava, Shakta, and Vedic practices—becomes unified in the adoration of the Mother Goddess. In the quest for a specific historical and social backdrop, this rare form of Mother worship breaks free from the confines of rigid scriptural doctrines and unfolds before us through the prism of a broader socio-religious evolution.