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## From *Chhinnamasta* to *Chintpurni*: Reframing and Transformation of a Fierce Goddess in North Indian Shakta Tradition

Shriya Kalia<sup>1</sup>, Maninder Kaur<sup>2</sup>, Anil Kishore Sinha<sup>3</sup>, Ramesh Sahni<sup>4</sup>

**Abstract:** *Chhinnamasta*, one of the ten *Mahavidyas*, is popularly known as the self-decapitated Tantric goddess. She symbolises the recurrent interplay between life and death and the transcendence of the ego. This paper examines the shifting paradigm of *Chhinnamasta* worship within South Asia. The study is based on first-hand ethnographic data from the *Chintpurni* temple, located in the south-western Himalayas of Himachal Pradesh. The secondary data for this research is complemented by the other two main shrines of *Chhinnamasta*, i.e., the *Rajarappa* temple (Jharkhand) and the *Kamakhya* temple (Assam). This scholarship investigates the regional transformation of a fierce Tantric goddess into a benevolent, serene, and maternalistic form at the *Chintpurni* temple. The comparative analysis of nomenclature, iconography, ritual practices, and mythological narratives explores this transformation. It examines the rethinking and redefinition of *Chhinnamasta* at the *Chintpurni* temple as a compassionate and maternal goddess. It also highlights a psychological dimension of this transformation, shifting from terrifying imagery to a deity who promises to alleviate all the anxieties of her devotees. Therefore, this study argues that this transformation illustrates a broader cultural phenomenon of domestication and *Durgafication* within the South Asian goddess worship system, where the esoteric and tantric aspects of the goddess are reinterpreted as a more accessible, acceptable, and compassionate form so as to realign with regional sensibilities.

**Keywords:** Tantric tradition, *Chhinnamastika*, *Chhinnamasta*, *Chintpurni* temple, Regional devotion.

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### Introduction:

The goddess worship system in South Asia embodies a paradox of divinity, where the fierce and the benevolent, the transgressive and the nurturing, coexist in the sacred landscape. *Chhinnamastika/Chhinnamasta*, one of the *Dasa Mahavidyas* (the ten great and powerful wisdom goddesses), lies

particularly in this paradoxical position. *Chhinnamasta* is depicted as a nude and self-decapitated goddess (who has severed her head) with three blood streams flowing from her neck and pouring into her mouth and into her attendants' mouths, *Jaya* and *Vijaya*, to nourish them (Benard, 1990; Kinsley, 1988). Under the tantric

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cosmology, her decapitation does not just reflect violence but rather represents a radical theological vision in the form of self-sacrifice, self-liberation, annihilation of ego, and spiritual transcendence and awakening. Benard (1990) describes *Chhinnamastika*'s decapitation as an unceasing cycle of creation and destruction. Nevertheless, the worship of Chhinnamasta is not uniform across India, as her worship swings from being esoteric and fearful to benevolent and nurturing.

*Chhinnamastika* worship is rooted mainly at the Rajarappa temple (Jharkhand) and in the temple complex of the Kamakhya Devi (Assam). These temple complexes preserve the Tantric ethos of *Chhinnamastika* with a significant emphasis on the esoteric rituals and blood sacrifice (Urban, 2012). Chhinnamasta's cult at the Rajarappa temple is associated with fertility, blood sacrifice, and liminality, symbolising the generative power of destruction (Singh and Kinsley, 2010). In contrast, the Kamakhya temple has been widely institutionalised and continues to uphold the Tantric principles associated with the goddess (Pintchman, 2015). At both these sites, she functions as the transgressive goddess who refuses to conform to the conventional and normal Hindu Shakta framework of worship.

The Chintpurni temple, nestled in the northwest Himalayas of Himachal Pradesh, is one of the fascinating sites where this transformation of *Chhinnamastika* is clearly visible. The goddess here is worshipped as *Chintpurni Devi*, which literally means the one who removes all worries. She shares a significant theological, iconographic, and etymological resonance with *Chhinnamastika*. However, the sacred performances, rites, and tone of worship at

this temple are markedly distinctive from the other two sites mentioned above. At the Chintpurni temple, *Chhinnamasta* has been consolidated within the mainstream *Bhakti* framework, which is characterised by gentleness and purity.

Hence, the present study revolves around the central argument that the Chintpurni Devi and the Chhinnamastika are fundamentally the same entities in the Shakta-Tantric pantheon but differ due to regional localisation processes. It precisely explores the transformation of *Chhinnamasta*, the same divine energy, which has been recontextualised from the tantric to the Bhakti framework. It primarily argues that the Chintpurni temple is not dedicated to a distinct goddess but rather to *Chhinnamastika*, with a regional rearticulation, and follows a broader pattern in the evolution of Hindu goddess worship (Erndl, 1993; Urban, 2003; Pintchman, 2001).

In the earliest textual references, *Chhinnamastika* appears in the *Sakta Tantras* and *Mahavidya* tradition, both as a destroyer and nurturer, representing both the terror-stricken and benevolent nature (Kinsley, 1998; Pokharel and Banu, 2024). She challenges the dualities of purity and impurity and life and death, which situates her as the Tantric equivalent to mainstream domesticated goddesses like Lakshmi or Durga. Benard (1990) calls out *Chhinnamasta*'s self-decapitation as a symbolic act of generosity, where she sacrifices her head to feed her attendants, indicating her role as a patron through self-immolation. In South Asian religious studies, the transformation of the fierce goddesses into the benevolent ones has been a recurrent pattern. Erndl's *Victory of the*

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*Mother* (1993) and Pintchman's *Seeking Mahadevi* (2003) both argue that the North Indian *Shakta* goddesses have undergone the phenomenon of domestication, which makes them accessible and acceptable, while retaining their original essence. Benard (1990) termed Chhinnamasta as 'the awful goddess' in her foundational work *Chhinnamasta: The Awful Buddhist and Hindu Tantric Goddess*. She documented Chhinnamasta's origin in both Hinduism and the Vajrayana tradition of Buddhism. Dasgupta (2004) asserts that localised devotional frameworks absorb goddesses like Chhinnamastika through a process of feminisation of power. Scholars like Urban (2003) and McDaniel (2004) have worked on such transitions and noted that these transformations are not linear but complex reconceptualisations, where the basic essence of the goddess remains the same, even if her mode of manifestation changes. Such a pattern is vividly visible at the sacred sites of Chintpurni Temple, Rajarappa, and Kamakhya, where the goddess is the same, but her mode of manifestation is different.

**Significance of the Study:** This study is significant, as it offers one of the first systematic examinations of the transformation and reinterpretation of *Chhinnamastika* into the regional devotional framework of Chintpurni. By grounding the research in the first-hand data from the Chintpurni temple and juxtaposing it with the other two shrines, the research highlights the composite processes by which the local religious bodies soften, domesticate, and emotionally reframe such a transgressive goddess. Additionally, no major study has systematically compared these sites within a religious framework, and not a single one has covered the sacred site of the Chintpurni

temple. The study contributes to the broader argument of the domestication and regionalisation of the fierce goddesses. Hence, this study fills the gap by examining how the same goddess is reimagined, reframed, embodied, visualised, and approached in the Bhakti-Tantra spectrum.

**Aim and Objectives of the Study:** The primary aim of this research is to investigate the ritual, cultural, and theological transformation of the goddess Chhinnamastika at the Chintpurni temple and the psychological impact of this transformation on the devotees, with the following objectives:

1. To trace the etymological evolution from Chhinnamastika to Chintpurni.
2. Analyse the iconographic transformations from the violent and self-decapitated imagery of Chhinnamastika (observed at Rajarappa and Kamakhya) to the maternal form that is worshipped at the Chintpurni temple.
3. The study also aims to conduct a comparative analysis of the ritual practices across these three sites, highlighting the shift from esoteric sacrifices to more moral and devotional forms of *Bhakti*.

By addressing these objectives, the study would enhance the comprehension of how the Shakta tradition reconciles the Tantra and Bhakti.

### **Methodology:**

The current study employs a qualitative and interpretive framework, integrating ethnographic fieldwork with comparative iconographic and textual analysis, to investigate this transformation. A hermeneutic-phenomenological approach is

employed, which views the worship of the goddess as a living practice, with rituals, myths, and iconography carrying significant meanings. Following Geertz's (1973) concept of a "thick description", rituals and cultural narratives are considered living texts that are contextually encoded. Bell's (1991) assertion that rituals are not merely representations but a form of practice offers an interpretive framework.

Chintpurni temple is the primary fieldwork site for this study. Fieldwork was conducted from 2023 to 2025, focusing on the daily rituals, the festivals, and the interactions between and with the pilgrims, sacred specialists, and temple administrators. Participant observation and semi-structured in-depth interview schedules were used as the method of data collection. The data was documented through field notes, audio recordings, and photographs to ensure a comprehensive record of ritual practices. The ethical guidelines were properly adhered to, and written consent was obtained from all the participants. The comparative secondary research on the Rajarappa and Kamakhya temples supplemented the findings from the fieldwork. The data was analysed using a combination of thematic and interpretive strategies.

### Discussion:

The transformation of *Chhinnamastika* into *Chintpurni Devi* demonstrates an enthralling religious reframing of a goddess in the *Shakta* tradition. The following section is an attempt to delineate the transformation along the four comparative axes: nomenclature, iconography, ritual practices, and narratives.

- **Nomenclature:** The nomenclature involves an intense spiritual and semiotic

value and is marked by the shift in the goddess's name from *Chhinnamastika* to *Chintpurni*. The term "*Chhinnamastika*" sets the background for the act of self-decapitation, reflecting self-sacrifice and transcendence of the ego. Etymologically, the emphasis on 'chinna' (severed) and 'masta/mastika' (head) places the goddess in the paradoxical nature and realm of creation and destruction. Kinsley (1997) calls it the 'paradox of nourishment through self-destruction'. On the other hand, the epithet 'Chintpurni' is derived from two words: 'chinta' (worry) and 'purni' (to alleviate), which together mean 'the one who alleviates everyone's worries'. This reconfiguration reflects the power of the goddess in one's psychological and emotional care. During the fieldwork, sacred specialists and the pilgrims repeatedly referred to the goddess as '*chinta-harni*' or '*chinta haran wali maa*', which literally means 'the one who absorbs all your worries and worldly anxieties'. Such narratives and testimonies reveal that nomenclature conciliates theology. It also highlights that the goddess functions not only religiously but also psychologically, offering the devotees a safer and peaceful space. Additionally, the designation "Shri Chhinnamastika Dham" persists in official and ritual contexts. Signboards at the primary entrances and the state tourism boards display the inscription, "Mata Shri Chhinnamastika Dham Chintpurni".



**Picture: The entrance gate for Chintpurni Temple.**

The existence of dual naming suggests that the temple preserves the formal and ancient tantric memory of Chhinnamastika, serving as a marker of legitimacy and reflecting religious depth through semiotics. The adoption of the name Chintpurni has symbolically pacified the fierceness of the *Chhinnamastika*. McDaniel (2004) observed that Hindu *bhakti* traditions often reinterpret tantric deities by giving them more benevolent epithets, which makes the renaming or relabelling of the Chhinnamastika into Chintpurni not a unique case. This also exemplifies the ‘semantic domestication’ of the undomesticated and fierce feminine energy (Pintchman, 2015)

**- Iconography:** *Chhinnamasta* is one of the most radical goddesses. At the Rajarappa temple, she is worshipped in her fierce avatar, the stone image, which is approximately 30 cm tall. In Tantric and *Mahavidya* iconographic tradition, she is depicted standing naked on the copulating couple, *Kama* and *Rati*. She holds her head in one hand and a scimitar in the other, with three bloodstreams flowing from her body: two feeding her attendants and one going to her mouth (Benard, 1990; Pokharel and

Banu, 2024; Singh and Kinsley, 2010). At the Kamakhya temple (Assam), the womb of the goddess is primarily worshipped, and at the sub-shrine of *Chhinnamastika*, she is worshipped with similar imagery (Singh, 2011).



**Picture: The iconography of *Chhinnamastika* being worshipped at the Rajarappa temple, Jharkhand (Retrieved from: <https://www.facebook.com/RajrappaMandirRajrappa/photos>)**

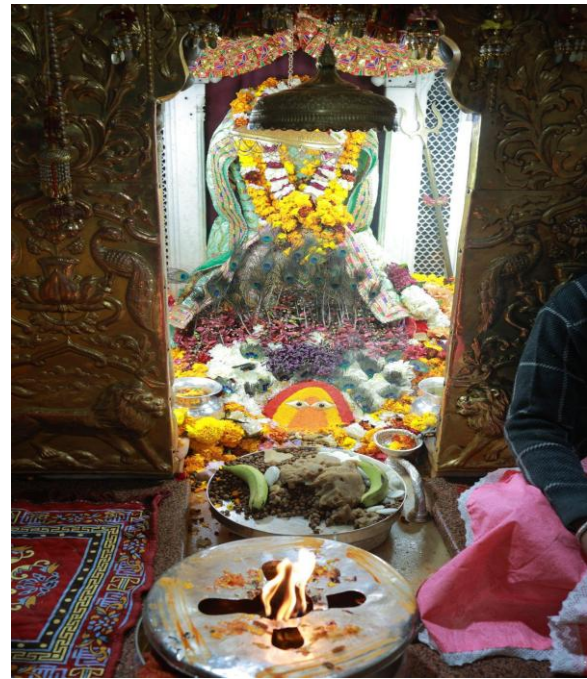


*Shriya Kalia*<sup>1</sup>, *Maninder Kaur*<sup>2</sup>, *Anil Kishore Sinha*<sup>3</sup>, *Ramesh Sahni*<sup>4</sup>



**Picture: The iconography of *Chhinnamastika* being worshipped at the Kamakhya temple, Assam.**

Whereas, in a striking contrast, at the *Chintpurni* temple, the goddess is worshipped in the form of an aniconic *pindi* (a natural, rounded stone, without any anthropomorphic features), adorned in red clothes, flower garlands, and a crown over the *pindi*. The goddess's face is imagined in the form of this *pindi*, and the rest of her body is covered with the red cloth behind this *pindi*, which no one is allowed to see, not even the sacred specialists, as told by a senior sacred specialist.



**Picture: *Chhinnamastika* in the form of *pindi* at the Chintpurni temple.**



**Picture: The iconography of the *Chhinnamastika* at the Chintpurni temple.**

On the inner walls of the sanctum-santorum (*garbhagriha*) and the main door frame of the Chintpurni temple, one can discover the engraved iconography of the self-decapitated goddess, in which the goddess is partially naked, wearing a garland of skulls, holding her severed head in her left hand,

while holding a scimitar in her right hand. In the iconography, three bloodstreams are simultaneously oozing out of the *Chhinnamastika's* neck, two flowing into the mouths of her two attendants, whom the sacred specialists identify as *Jaya* and *Vijaya*, with no copulating couple in the iconography.

The presence of this iconography is striking for several reasons. It primarily affirms that despite the temple being widely recognised as *the Chintpurni Devi* temple, which is dedicated to a compassionate and motherly figure, it consciously preserves the esoteric memory of the *Chhinnamastika's* original Tantric persona. Secondly, it also represents the 'iconographic domestication' (Erndl, 1993), in which the transgressive nature of the iconography is softened by adding and removing some of the changes and embedding it into the temple architecture. The goddess's fierce iconography is literally engraved in the Chintpurni temple but is not the dominant image of worship, which makes it a symbolic trace. Thirdly, the absence of the copulating couple (*Kama* and *Rati*) beneath the goddess's feet in the iconography at the Chintpurni temple symbolises a decisive theological reorientation. It indicates that a conscious effort has been made to replace the explicit sexual symbolism of *Chhinnamasta's* power with a more socially accessible, acceptable, and morally neutral expression of the divine. Conclusively, the Rajarappa temple preserves the tantric image of the *Chhinnamastika* and continues to be one of the most revered sites of her worship in India. At the Kamakhya temple, *Chhinnamasta* does not function as an independent deity but as one of the manifestations of Kali (Singh, 2011; Urban,

2003). At the Chintpurni temple, the goddess's fierceness is remembered and contained through engravings, though not fully eliminated or accepted. The iconographic analysis of all three sites reveals that the transformation from *Chhinnamastika* to Chintpurni at the Chintpurni temple represents a continuum of adaptation and represents a living archive of this transformation (Kinsley, 1998).

- **Ritual Practices:** Where iconography discloses the visual transformation of the goddess, the ritual practices and the sacred performances reveal the emotional and ethical shifts in her living tradition. The transformation and the reframing of the fierce goddess *Chhinnamasta* can most vividly be traced through the changing worship practices. This is the transition in the ritual practice from being esoteric, sacrificial, and secretive to devotional, public, and under *the bhakti* framework.

The rituals and sacred performances at the Rajarappa and Kamakhya temples retain a strong Tantric influence. The Rajarappa temple is situated on the confluence of the rivers Bhairavi and Damodar and is an active site of alcohol offering and animal sacrifice, mostly during the *Navratras* (Erndl, 1993; Mahalakshami, 2014). At the Rajarappa and the Kamakhya temples, the goats, pigeons, and other blood offerings are made to appease the goddess (Benard, 1990). Practices like these are deeply rooted in the concept of *bali* (offering), which functions as an energy exchange to maintain the cosmic appetite of the goddess.

In sharp contrast, the ritual practices at the Chintpurni temple involve the offering of sacred food (*bhoga*), devotional surrender, and service. Here, at the Chintpurni temple,

*Shriya Kalia*<sup>1</sup>, *Maninder Kaur*<sup>2</sup>, *Anil Kishore Sinha*<sup>3</sup>, *Ramesh Sahni*<sup>4</sup>



the goddess is approached not with fear but with care, emotion, and intimacy. The main offerings are halwa-puri, vermillion, red veil, coconut, and all the substances that symbolise sweetness, purity, and auspiciousness.

While the tantric and the blood-based sacrificial rituals, such as *Bali*, are explicitly found at the *Rajarappa* and *Kamakhya* temples. The logic of sacrifice and *Bali* has not totally disappeared from the Chintpurni temple. Rather, it has undergone the process of symbolic reinterpretation. On the *ashtami* (eighth day) of every *Chaitra Navratras*, a special ritual is performed, known as *narikel bali* (coconut sacrifice). In this ritual, the coconuts are offered to the goddess by the sacred specialist of the Chintpurni temple. This rite is a vegetarianised version of the Tantric paradigm of sacrifice. This subtle transformation symbolises the ritual substitution, as identified by Fuller (2004), in which the violent offerings are converted into non-violent ones, with a change in moral sensibilities but equally potent in the symbolic form. Moreover, at the *Rajarappa* and *Kamakhya*, *Chhinnamasta* is celebrated in the *gupt navratras*, the only one celebrated and observed by the tantric practitioners. However, at the Chintpurni temple, the *navratras* have an open and public celebratory character. This shift, identified by Bell (1992) as 'ritual resignification', sustains the ritual form while transforming its meaning to serve the new social purpose. The exclusion of violence and blood sacrifices at the Chintpurni temple marks a broader trend towards ritual sanitisation (Pintchman, 2015). This transformation and evolution from blood offerings to vegetarianism illustrates what Erndl (1993) and Urban

(2003) identified as the 'domestication of the fierce goddess' or what we call here the 'Durgaification of the goddess'. Yet this domestication, or "durgaification," is not synonymous with dilution; rather, it demonstrates this translation as moralised, internalised, and reinterpreted within the *Bhakti* framework.

- **Myths, narratives, and legends:** The mythic aspect of this transformation is equally important and revealing. In the Puranic and ancient tantric texts, the *Chhinnamasta's* act of self-decapitation symbolises the moment of compassion in which she feeds her attendants by providing them with her own blood (Benard, 1990; Kinsley, 1997). This myth illustrates the autonomy of *Chhinnamastika* as the one who sacrifices and the one who is sacrificed. At the Chintpurni temple, the most popular narrative is about Mai Das laying down the temple foundation. Mai Das, a devotee of the goddess, received a divine vision in which she, in the form of a little girl, ordered him to establish a temple at this location and worship her, promising that she would alleviate all the worries of her devotees. This legend domesticated the myth of *Chhinnamastika* by embedding it into an emotionally accessible story that merges austerity and compassion. This redefinition of *Chhinnamastika* as *Chintpurni* portrays the completion of the goddess's journey from transgressive to relational devotion.

**Conclusion:** The reframing and transformation of the *Chhinnamastika* (the self-decapitated goddess) and one of the *Mahavidyas* into the *Chintpurni Devi* (the benevolent remover of worries) demonstrates the adaptability of the *Shakta*

tradition in the South Asian context. The transformation reflects the change in the translation of religion, where the fierce tantric power is reimagined as gentle devotion. This scholarship is grounded in ethnographic observations of the Chintpurni temple and a comparative analysis of the other two major sites of Chhinnamastika's worship, i.e., the Rajarappa and Kamakhya temples.

The study argues that it is not a historical and theological replacement but rather a cultural, psychological, and regional adaptation and rearticulation. This transformation reflects the continuity of symbols, narratives, and rituals through reinterpretation. The decapitated goddess, who is explicitly revered at sites such as the Rajarappa and Kamakhya temples, is remembered through her transformation at the Chintpurni temple. This reframing reflects a dilution of tantric potency but an adaptation within the ethical, moral, and ritualistic frameworks of the regional sensibilities of the northwestern Himalayan religious landscape. This transition from fierce and fearful tantric goddess to the benevolent mother represents the broader process of domestication and *durgaification*. Ultimately, the Chintpurni temple stands tall as a living testament to the adaptability of the divine feminine. The goddess here does not disappear, but she is reframed into the rhythms of regional devotion. This rearticulation reflects that *Shakti* is both fierce and maternal, Tantric as well as *bhakti*-oriented, and transcendent and immanent. It showcases itself in a continuum rather than a binary.

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