



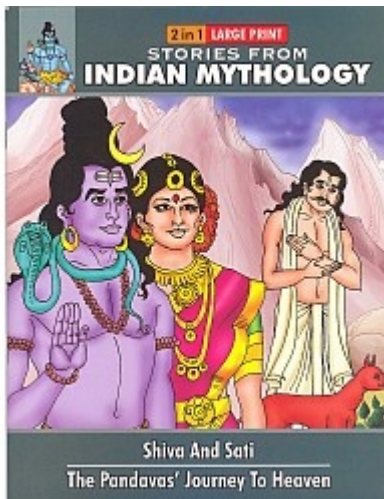
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Terracotta Art - From the Earth to the Soul

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Indian mythology abounds with several stories of Gods and Goddesses and their avatars or manifestations; each for a particular purpose; in order to teach devotees a lesson in story form. While most of the Devi/Devata stories seem merely entertaining and regale us with various anecdotes, there are those who are fierce, passionate and self-determined beyond imagination. One such story is that of Devi Sati. This month, we bring you the tale of Goddess Sati and how she came to be.



Shiva and Sati - Stories from Indian Mythology

Sati, also known as Dakshayani, is a Hindu Goddess of longevity and marital felicity. An aspect of Parvati or Goddess Adi Shakti, Dakshayani is the first consort of Lord Shiva. Sati is known to be extremely fiery, with a frightening temper. However, she is also loving and extremely benevolent by nature.

According to Hindu legend, both Sati and Parvati are aspects of the Devi, who helped Shiva come away from his ascetic isolation and involve himself in Samsara (the material world). Sati is famous (and sometimes, rather infamous) for the fact that she immolated herself in the sacrificial fire, when she saw that her husband was being humiliated. So intense was her love, loyalty and passion for her husband, that she could not tolerate to live on when he was being belittled by her own father.

Even today, the controversial practice of Sati is followed in several parts of rural India – herein, a Hindu widow jumps into her husband's funeral pyre, as a final act of commitment and loyalty towards her husband. This she does, in order to uphold her own honor and that of her husband and his family as well.

The Story of Goddess Sati

Queen Prasuti and her husband, King Daksha, had a desire to beget a daughter. They approached Daksha's father, Lord Brahma, for advice and he asked them to meditate on Goddess Adi Parashakti. The couple immediately donned ochre robes and left the palace, in order to appease the all-powerful Devi. Traveling deep into the forest, they located a suitable spot and started meditating on the deity. They braved harsh weather conditions and quietly sat in meditation, not minding even the wild animals in the forest.

After testing them for a long time, Devi Adi Parashakti appeared before them, in an effulgent form, with a thousand hands, holding infinite weapons. She was draped in a blood red sari and was bedecked in ornaments carved intricately, studded with gems; wearing a gold armor, a crown. The Devi was pleased with the couple's devotion and granted them any boon they desired from her.

Daksha told the Goddess about their long-time desire and asked her for a daughter. The Devi granted them the boon, saying that she herself would be born to them. But additionally, she warned them that if she were ever to be insulted in any way, she would immediately take her original form, disown everyone and leave their lives forever. Daksha and Prasuti agreed to the Devi's conditions and, happy to have been granted their boon, returned to the palace.

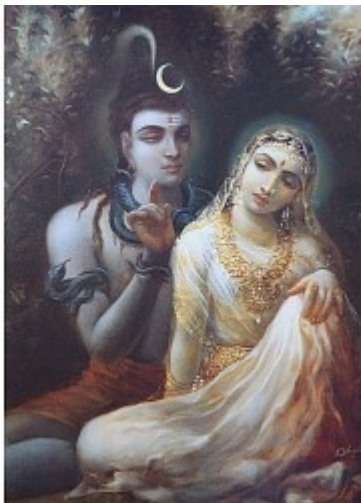
As per the boon, Adi Parashakti took human birth and was born to Daksha and Prasuti. This is why she is known as Dakshayani - Daksha's daughter. Brahma had so designed that Sati should grow up and marry Lord Shiva. It was also Adi Parashakti's own will to bring Shiva out of his penance. Even as a child, Sati adored Shiva and would love to hear stories and legends associated with him. Sage Narada would often come to the palace and regale her with stories of Shiva. As time went by, Sati's devotion for Shiva grew by leaps and bounds and she had decided that she would marry only him. She received several proposals from rich and valiant princes, but she had eyes only for the Lord of Kailash, the God of Gods, Mahadeva.



Lord Shiva

Sati Wins over Shiva

In order to win over the ascetic Shiva, Sati left the comforts of the palace and bade goodbye to her parents. Walking into the forest, she decided to give up herself to severe austerities and the constant worship of Lord Shiva. Going deeper into meditation, she started by renouncing food and water. At one point of time, she would eat just one leaf per day. Then she gave up even that. Her mother visited her in the forest and tried to coax her to eat, but she refused to touch a morsel. This abstinence gave her the name Uma. She also decided to do away with her clothing. She braved the harsh cold and lashing rains in this condition, continuing to meditate only on her Lord. This earned her the name Aparna.



Shiva and Sati

Her penance finally bore fruit. Realizing the extent of her devotion to him, Shiva decided to manifest in front of her. Acceding to her wishes, he agreed to take her as his bride. Sati was happy beyond belief and then returned to her palace, awaiting the day when Shiva would come and take her away with him.

Sati's arrogant father Daksha, though, was far less than pleased by this turn of events. He was a staunch Vaishnavite (devotee of Vishnu) and could not bear the fact the fact that his favorite daughter was to wed someone lowly (in his opinion) such as Shiva. In any case, Sati was firm on her decision to marry Shiva. She became his wife and then left for Kailash to be with her husband. Daksha, in the meantime, could not reconcile to the fact that Shiva was his son-in-law. Hence, he decided to excommunicate his daughter from the rest of the family.

Daksha Insults Sati and Shiva

Soon after the wedding, Daksha organized a grand yagna (sacrificial ritual) at his palace, where he invited all Kings, princes, Gods and Goddesses to attend. He, however, decided not to invite Sati or Shiva. He was still unhappy about his daughter getting married to who he thought was his arch enemy and so, he planned to insult them both.

On learning about the yagna, Sati begged Shiva to go with her. Shiva refused to give in to her wishes. An upset Sati was determined to attend the grand event and, defying Shiva's wishes, left alone to her father's kingdom. Shiva had warned her against going there, knowing she would be insulted and humiliated. However, when Sati would not listen to what he had to say, he sent his own troops to escort her there.

On seeing her arrive at the yagna, Daksha was furious and started shouting and yelling at her, hurling insults at her and Shiva. He made it very clear that neither she nor her husband were ever welcome there. Sati tried to speak with her father and placate him, relating what a wonderful husband Shiva was and how happy their marriage was. However, Daksha turned a deaf ear to all this and just kept shouting at her and humiliating her and Shiva in front of one and all present there.

Finally, Sati could take it no more. She had warned Daksha and Prasuti in the past, before she was born to them, that she would desert them if she was insulted in any way. Accordingly, she flew into a rage and took the form of Goddess Adi Parashakti. Her family and the kings, saints, sages, Gods and Goddesses present there were frightened by her terrible form. She introduced herself to Daksha, saying that she was the Eternal Power and stated that she would be giving up her mortal life by jumping into the sacrificial fire. She further cursed Daksha that he would be destroyed by her husband, Shiva. Thus saying, she entered the sacred fire and ended her own human life.

Shiva Destroys All

Learning about all that happened at Daksha's palace; also deeply saddened by Sati's death; an enraged and grief-stricken Shiva entered the location of the yagna and rendered the terrible Tandava, the Dance of Destruction. His dance activated the negative cosmic energy to the extent of destroying everything around.



Nataraja in Tandava Pose

Later, he pulled out a couple of locks of his hair and threw them on the ground. From one lock arose Veerabhadra, Shiva's destructive incarnation. He was dark and frightful, having eight hands, each holding a weapon. From the second lock of hair arose Bhadrakali, a dark and extremely violent incarnation of the Supreme Goddess. She had a terrible form with eighteen hands, each holding weapons such as the trident, discus, spear, mace, dagger, sword, vajra, conch, bow and arrow and so on.

Veerabhadra and Bhadrakali were a couple, working in tandem to destroy everything in sight. They were collectively known as Manbhadra. They were assisted by eight other Goddesses, namely, Chamundai, Ishaani, Mundamardini, Bhadra, Kali, Katyayani, Vaishnavi and Twarita. The angry Shiva ordered them to start the process of destruction.

This is how each of the terrible Goddesses appeared:

1. Kali manifested with four hands, holding a trident, sword, severed demon head and a drinking vessel.
2. Katyayani, who was riding a lion, had four hands, holding a trident, sword, lotus and the other hand indicating a gesture of destruction.
3. Chamundai had sixteen hands, holding a trident, sword, discus, conch, scimitar, mace, skull mace, snake, drum, battle-axe, shield, bow, arrow, spear, vajra (thunderbolt), drinking vessel, thunderbolt, and severed demon head.
4. Bhadra had eight hands, holding a sword, hook, trident, discus, conch, battle-axe, drinking vessel and vajra.
5. Vaishnavi had six hands, holding a sword, lotus, bow and arrow, discus, conch and mace.
6. Mundamardini had two hands, holding a sword and drinking vessel.
7. Ishaani had eight hands, holding a trident, spear, mace, sword, bow and arrow, scimitar and battle-axe.
8. Twarita had eight hands, each holding weapons such as the trident, mace, sword, discus, conch, arrow and shield. This terrible Goddess also rode a lion.

Daksha was decapitated by Veerabhadra and Bhadrakali. The other eight Goddesses felled all of Daksha and Bhrigu's armies, Gods, saints and all the others present there. This horrific destruction continued all night, after which Shiva finally relented and restored all that was destroyed and brought back to life all those he had slain. He even brought Daksha back to life and restored his kingdom. Shiva then substituted Daksha's decapitated head with that of a goat. Daksha was humbled by both Shiva's show of strength as well as his grace. He completely changed and became an ardent devotee of Lord Shiva.



Shiva with Sati's Corpse on His Shoulders

In the meantime, a totally grief-stricken Shiva, carried Sati's charred body on his shoulder and roamed all around the world with it. According to one legend, Vishnu dismembered Sati's body, cutting it into 51 pieces, with his Sudarshan Chakra (discus). He named each one of them Shakti Peethas. As Vishnu continued cutting them, they fell onto the earth, scattering across different parts of India. Each of these body parts was a manifestation of the Supreme Deity, Adi Parashakti.

Shiva, who later regained his equanimity, incarnated as Lord Bhairava, in order to complete the huge task of protecting and preserving each one of these Peethas.

Several of these holy Shakti Peethas have now become major places of pilgrimage, pulling in scores of devotees all the year through. These centers are considered particularly sacred by the Shaktas (sects who consider Goddess Sakthi as the Supreme Godhead). Some other minor Shakti Peethas too, such as Bindudham, have become famous, as they are supposed to have emerged in the places where the Devi's blood drops fell onto the earth.

After this task was completed successfully, Sati was reborn as Parvati, the daughter of Himavan, King of the Mountains, and his wife Menavati. In this incarnation, Parvati's father, unlike Daksha, was already an ardent devotee of Shiva. Right from childhood, Parvati grew to adore and love Shiva and was always devoted to his worship. In due course of time, she married Shiva again; then giving birth to the elephant-headed Lord Ganesha and the spear-wielding Lord Kartikeya.

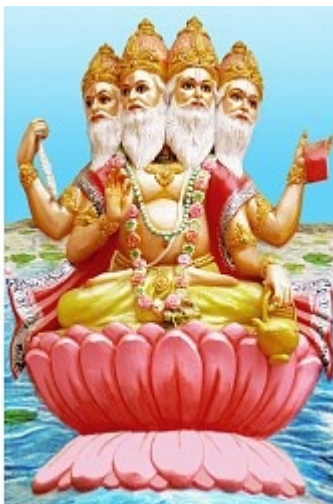


Shiva, Parvati,
Ganesha and Kartikeya

The Shakti Peethas in Detail

As mentioned above, the Shakti Peethas are places of worship dedicated to Goddess Shakti or Sati, the Sacred Feminine in Hindu philosophy. She is also the main deity for those in the Shakta sect. These sacred Peethas are strewn all over the Indian subcontinent.

The Legend of the Shakti Peethas



Lord Brahma

Legend has it that Lord Brahma conducted a yagna to please Shakti and Shiva. Shakti emerged, as a separate entity from Shiva, in order to help Brahma create the Universe. Once that was done, Brahma decided to give back Shakti to Shiva. He therefore asked his son Daksha to perform yagnas to obtain Shakti, with a view to finally getting her reunited with Shiva. In accordance with his father's wishes, Daksha performed those yagnas and was graced by Shakti, who was born to him as Sati.

Unfortunately, Brahma had been cursed by Shiva, because the former had lied to him. According to the curse, his fifth head would be cut off in front of Shiva. Due to this, Daksha ended up hating Shiva and so, he refused to let Sati marry him. Sati, however, was determined that she would marry only Shiva and had her will. This further incensed Daksha, who insulted both Sati

and Shiva at his yagna, thereby resulting in the ensuing destruction and the resultant installation of the Shakti Peethas, as mentioned above.

In each of these sacred places, Shakti is accompanied by her consort, Lord Bhairava, an incarnation of Lord Shiva. Shakti, a manifestation of the Supreme Adi Parashakti, is sometimes considered to be the Mother of the Trimurti (the Divine Trinity).

The story of Sati holds immense significance in Hindu mythology, literature, art and culture. It led to the existence of the Shakti Peethas and the strong emergence of the Shakta cult. Sati is also a precursor to the emergence of Parvati as a grihastashrami (householder) and the mother of Ganesha and Kartikeya.

Four Adi Shakti Peethas

Some of the major religious treatises such as the Shiva Purana, Devi Bhagavata, Kalika Purana and Astashakti talk of four major Shakti Peethas. These centers include Bimala (Pada Khanda - inside the Puri Jagannath temple, Odisha), Tara Tarini (Sthana Khanda - near Berhampur, Odisha), Kamakhya Temple (Yoni Khanda - near Guwahati, Assam), Dakhina Kalika (Mukha Khanda - at Kolkata, West Bengal).

The 51 Shakti Peethas

Apart from these major centers, there are 51 Shakti Peethas recognized by all religious texts. These 51 Shakti Peethas link to the 51 alphabets in the Sanskrit language. Temple locations, however, vary from text to text. Some treatises state that the body parts were sprinkled all over India, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bangladesh, Tibet, Bhutan and Pakistan.

The list of 51 Shakti Peethas are as follows:

1. Amarnath	Jammu and Kashmir	Throat
2. Attahas	West Bengal	Lips
3. Bahula	West Bengal	Left Arm
4. Bakreshwar	West Bengal	Between the Eyebrows
5. Bhairavparvat	Madhya Pradesh	Elbow
6. Bhabanipur	Bangladesh	Left Anklet
7. Chinnamastika	Himachal Pradesh	Feet
8. Gandaki	Nepal	Temple
9. Bhadrakali	Maharashtra	Chin
10. Hinglaj or Hingula	Pakistan	Brahmarandhra
11. Jayanti	Meghalaya	Left Thigh
12. Jessoreswari	Bangladesh	Palms and Soles
13. Jwalaji	Himachal Pradesh	Tongue
14. Kalipeeth	West Bengal	Right Toes
15. Kalmadhav	Madhya Pradesh	Left Buttock
16. Kamgiri	Assam	Genitals
17. Kankalitala	West Bengal	Bones
18. Kanyashram	Tamil Nadu	Back
19. Karnat	Himachal Pradesh	Both Ears
20. Kireet	West Bengal	Crown
21. Anandamayee	West Bengal	Right Shoulder
22. Bhramari	West Bengal	Left Leg
23. Manas	Tibet	Right Hand
24. Manibandh	Rajasthan	Wrists
25. Mithila	Nepal	Left Shoulder
26. Nainativu	Sri Lanka	Silambu or Anklets
27. Near Pashupatinath	Nepal	Both Knees
28. Chandranath Hill	Bangladesh	Right Arm
29. Panchsagar	Uttarakhand	Lower Teeth

30. Prabhas	Gujarat	Stomach
31. Prayag	Uttar Pradesh	Finger
32. Kurukshetra	Haryana	Ankle Bone
33. Ramgiri	Uttar Pradesh	Right Breast
34. Sainthia	West Bengal	Necklace
35. Sarvashail	Andhra Pradesh	Cheeks
36. Naina Devi	Uttarakhand	Eyes
37. Shondesh	Madhya Pradesh	Right Buttock
38. Shri Parvat	Andhra Pradesh	Right Anklet
39. Shri Shail	Bangladesh	Neck
40. Shuchi	Tamil Nadu	Upper Teeth
41. Sugandha	Bangladesh	Nose
42. Udaipur	Tripura	Right Leg
43. Ujaani	West Bengal	Right Wrist
44. Varanasi	Uttar Pradesh	Earring
45. Vibhash	West Bengal	Left Ankle
46. Virat	Rajasthan	Left Toes
47. Vrindavan	Uttar Pradesh	Ringlets of hair
48. Jalandhar	Punjab	Left Breast
49. Baidyanath Dham	Jharkhand	Heart
50. Biraja Temple	Odisha	Navel
51. Jugaadya	West Bengal	Big Toe

The 18 Maha Shakti Peethas

While the exact number and locations of Shakti Peethas are yet in dispute, there are some Maha Shakti Peethas that are absolutely certain. These are as follows:

1. Sankari Peetham	Trincomalee	Heart
2. Kanchi Kamakoti Peetham	Kanchipuram	Eyes
3. Pradyumna Peetham	West Bengal	Stomach
4. Krounja Peetham	Mysore	Hair
5. Yogini Peetham	Telangana	Upper Teeth
6. Srisaila Peetham	Srisailam	Part of Neck
7. Shri Peetham	Kolhapur	Left Hand
8. Renuka Peetham	Maharashtra	Part of Back
9. Ujjaini Peetham	Ujjain	Tongue
10. Pushkarini Peetham	Andhra Pradesh	Peeta
11. Oddyana Peetham	Odisha	Right Hand
12. Draksharama Peetham	Andhra Pradesh	Navel
13. Kamarupa Peetham	Guwahati	Genitals
14. Prayaga Peetham	Prayag	Fingers
15. Jwalamukhi Peetham	Himachal Pradesh	Part of Head
16. Gaya Peetham	Gaya	Part of Breast
17. Varanasi Peetham	Varanasi	Throat
18. Saraswati Peetham	Kashmir	Lips

The Shakti Peethas at Kamakhya, Gaya and Ujjain are considered the most important, because they symbolize the most vital aspects of the Supreme Adi Parashakti, namely, Creation (Kamarupa), Preservation (Sarvamangala) and Annihilation (Mahakali).

The Sharada Peetham is now no longer in existence and lies in ruins near the LoC (Line of Control) between India and Pakistan. Instead, the Sringeri Sharada Peetham in Karnataka is doing the work of propagating the worship of the Goddess. This, though, is not one of the Shakti Peethas.

In Hindu Literature and Worship

- According to the Ramcharitmanas, during the Treta Yuga, Shiva and Sati together visited Rishi Agastya. The sage narrated to them the story of Lord Rama, one of the major avatars of Shri Maha Vishnu. Shiva wanted to meet Rama, but Sati, who did not realize his true divinity, wondered why her husband was so keen to meet a mere human being.

Shiva soon got a glimpse of Rama and was overtaken with love and adoration for him. Though Sati did not say anything at the time, she wondered why Shiva was so overwhelmed seeing this handsome prince. However, Shiva, being omniscient, understood what was going on in Sati's mind. He asked her to go ahead and test Rama's divinity.

Rama, in the meantime, realized that Sati was planning to test him and was amused thinking of what was to come next. Sati assumed the form of Sita, Rama's wife, and approached him. Rama, however, merely smiled at her and asked her how Shiva was doing and why she was roaming in the forest alone, without her husband. After that incident, Sati beat a hasty retreat and returned to Shiva. She was sad and repentant that she had doubted both her husband and Rama.

Knowing that Sati was sad, Rama decided he would entertain her and bring her back to her usual cheerful mood. He gave Sati a darshan of himself along with Sita and his brother, Lakshmana. Sati saw them walking in front of her. She turned back hearing a sound and found them at the back as well. Wherever she looked, Sati found Rama, all the deities and the entire creation within him. This opened her eyes and made her realize the divinity that was Rama. Happy again, she returned to Shiva, also adoring Rama for life.



Rama, Sita and Lakshmana

- Rishi Markandeya composed the Devi Saptashati, containing seven hundred hymns, extolling the virtues of the Goddess presiding the Shakti Peetha in Nashik. They say that the idol there is also leaning a little to the left, in order to listen to the sage's composition. These set of "Durga Stutii" hymns constitute an integral part of Vedic Shakti worship.
- Another legend has it that the third eye of Goddess Sati fell below a tree in a mortuary in the Ishan corner of Vakreshwar. Here, the deity is referred to as Chandi Bhagwai Ugra Tara. This Shakti Peetha is called Tarapith and is located in Birbhum district of West Bengal. The Devi's consort, Bhairava, gives darshan in the form of Chandrachur in this temple.
- Some believe that the 64 Peethas of the Devi actually preserve the mortal remains of some great, unknown, ancient female saint or yogic practitioner. According to these sources, the legend of Kali could have evolved from her story and then merged with the current Hindu Purusha-Prakriti (static-dynamic; male-female) concept of Shiva and Shakti.
- The Kottiyoor Vysakha Mahotsavam is a 27-day yagna festival, which is conducted in the jungle area in North Kerala. This festival commemorates the Daksha Yaga. It is believed that this was the location of the actual yagna of Daksha and that Devi Sati self-immolated on this very spot. The poojas and other rituals conducted here were prescribed by Shri Adi Sankaracharya himself.

Sati's Perception of Life

Why did Sati have to take her own life? Why could she not have walked away when her father insulted her and her husband? Was it all really worth her taking her own life for such a seemingly insignificant reason?

There are several versions and even more interpretations on the story of Devi Sati. Each one of these versions also contains a hidden lesson one could probably learn from. It all depends on how we look at it; from what perspective.

Sati's life was one which involved tremendous self-discipline and performing severe austerities, such as meditation, fasting and adhering to yogic vidhis. However, the difference between her and other yogis/yoginis was that she did not want to renounce anything. Quite on the contrary, she wished to attain her desire - that of marrying Lord Shiva. At the time that Sati was longing for him, Shiva was against material love in any form and actually detested the idea of falling in love. He was an ascetic, who had given up the samsara in its entirety.

Daksha was very much averse to Sati marrying Shiva. He did not like the latter's appearance, behavior and the way in which he carried on with his life. Daksha was only devoted to Vishnu and hated Shiva. He was also highly materially inclined and loved to enjoy the various luxuries that samsara had to offer. He was highly religious and hence, Sati grew up in a religious, orthodox environment. However, she was drawn towards asceticism from a very young age and finally went on to marry an ascetic, who shunned any and all forms of religion. Hence, her entire function in this story was to bring the two opposing forces together.

Daksha and Shiva never saw eye-to-eye on anything. Eventually, however, it was Sati's death; her ultimate self-sacrifice; that ended the conflict between her father and her husband. Her death, which may have seemed like a negative occurrence, was the one that finally restored peace on earth.

Hence, Sati giving up her own life can be viewed as a sort of extension of the yogic inclinations, which she had held on to, all her life. The Shiva Purana mentions that she did not actually burn in the fire, but rather, let the "yogic fire" present in her, consume her. When she was taking her own life, she was well aware how much she would be hurting her beloved husband. However, she also knew that she would come back in another life as Parvati and that she would again unite with Shiva. In this way,

She knew that her death was one with purpose and that each part of her severed body would serve to protect the dharma, and sanctify places as they fell onto the earth. In this way, the earth itself could be seen as the embodiment of Devi Sati. As the Universal Supreme Mother, Devi Sati is responsible for maintaining the process of creation, preservation and destruction. Her life symbolizes the philosophy that what is born must die and death ultimately goes on to create new life. By punishing Daksha for his pride and impudence, she also reinstates dharma back on earth.

Lastly, Sati is responsible for luring Shiva from his ascetic isolation and actively into samsara. However, once she had achieved that goal, she remained an ascetic at heart; in spite of continuing to enjoy marital bliss. In both life and in death, she worked to get the male-female forces of Purusha and Prakriti together, in order to restore balance in the cosmos.

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