

## Kāśī as a Śākta Pīṭha with Special Reference to Kālī-Upāsana

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**Abstract:** Kāśī, also known as Varanasi or Benaras, holds a great significance in Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism. It's revered as one of the oldest inhabited cities in the world and considered a sacred pilgrimage center especially for Lord Śiva. However, Kāśī is also significant as a Śākta Pīṭha which is the main theme of this paper. Several temples and traditions emphasize the worship of the goddess, particularly in her fierce forms such as Kālī. This paper have been focused on the Śākta Pīṭha Kāśī exclusively Kālī-Upāsana on the basis of some temples and literary evidences. The city's association with Śakti is interwoven with its identity as a seat of spiritual powers and transformation.

**Keywords:** Śakti, Kāśī, Śākta Pīṭha, Varanasi, Kālī-Upāsana, Literature, Temples etc.

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## Introduction

Worship of Mother-Goddesses is a prominent feature of ancient civilizations. Indian subcontinent has also a rich tradition of worshiping nature as mother from the earliest period. So, it is quite natural that Kāśī<sup>1</sup> cannot be deprived of this practice. The city has embraced both Brahmanical and Shramanic traditions and has become a sacred center for Hinduism, Buddhism as well as Jainism. The Purāṇas establish Kāśī as a Tīrtha (pilgrimage center) for the followers of Vaiṣṇava, Śaiva, Śākta, Gāṇapatya and Saura sects.

## Literary Evidences

Varanasi is an important center of Śaivism, but temples dedicated to Śakti are quite large in numbers. The Kāśī Khaṇḍa of the Skanda Purāṇa delineates 68 Śakti temples of Kāśī, of which 16 temples are more eminent than others (Sukul 1977: 83). Kṛtyakalpataru of Lakṣmīdhara gives a list of 24 Śākta Pīṭhas of Varanasi which is mentioned in the Liṅga Purāṇa. 16 temples of this list are similar to the temples that is mentioned in the Kāśī Khaṇḍa. Therefore, we have 72 Śakti temples that is described in both Purāṇas (Sukul 1977: 83). Apart from this, there are other temples dedicated to Nava-Durgā, Nava-Śaktis, Nava-Chaṇḍīs, Nava-Gaurīs, Aṣṭa-Mātrkāś and Chausaṭha Yoginīs of which many temples are either annihilated or shifted to other places.

The Kṛtyakalpataru has given a description of Nava-Chaṇḍīs of Kāśī, who are the guardian deities of the 9 directions in which, Durgā protects the city from south, Uttareśvari from south-west, Angāreśī from west, Bhadrakālīkā from north-west, Bhīṣmachāṇḍī from north, Mahāmuṇḍā from north-east, Śāṅkarī from east, Adhaḥkeśī from south-east and Chitraghaṇṭā Devī from the center (Aiyangar 1942: 126-127). But the Kāśī Khaṇḍa of the Skanda Purāṇa apprised Śikhīchaṇḍī as a guardian of the northwest direction (Skanda Purāṇa, Kāśī Khaṇḍa, 70/70-71). The Kāśī Khaṇḍa's 12<sup>th</sup> Chapter mentions the names of the Nava-Śaktis of Kāśī, which are Śatanetrā, Sahastrasyā, Ayutabhūja, Aśvārūḥa, Gajāsya, Tvaritā, Śavavāhinī, Viśvā and Saubhāgyagaurī (Skanda Purāṇa, Kāśī Khaṇḍa, 12/92-96). In the same manner, we find a list of Nava-Durgās in the Kāśī Khaṇḍa, but there is no clear mention of their name and the temples related to them. The ritual of the annual Yātrā of Nava-Durgā continues in the city in the month of Āśvina (September-October) during Śāradya Navarātrī. In popular tradition, Śailaputrī, Brahmachārīnī, Chandraghaṇṭā, Kuṣmāṇḍa, Skandmātā, Kātyāyanī, Kālārātrī, Mahāgaurī and Siddhidātrī are accepted as Nava-Durgā (Śrī Śrī Chaṇḍī, Devī Kavacha 3-5). Kāśī Khaṇḍa suggests Durga Yātrā on Ashtami and Chaturdashi tithi of the lunar month (Skanda Purāṇa, Kāśī Khaṇḍa, 72/92-96). Liṅga Purāṇa mentions about dancing image of Durgā in Varanasi, which is irretrievable today (Aiyangar 1942: 85).

Kāśī is an important place for Nava-Gaurī, who is worshipped during Vāsantika Navarātrī<sup>2</sup>. These are Mukhanirmālīkā-Gaurī, Jyeṣṭhā-Gaurī, Saubhāgya-Gaurī, Shringār-Gaurī, Viśālākṣī-Gaurī, Lalitā-Gaurī, Bhavānī-Gaurī, Maṅgala-Gaurī and Mahā-Lakṣmī (Skanda Purāṇa, Kāśī Khaṇḍa, 100/125-126). The Liṅga Purāṇa refers the name of AhaniKālīkā Devī instead of Mukhanirmālīkā-Gaurī (Aiyangar 1942: 126-127). Bhavānī-Gaurī is known as Tatkutumbinī (consort) of Viśveśvara Śiva, considered as the primal goddess of Kāśī (Skanda Purāṇa, Kāśī Khaṇḍa, 61/130). Far ahead, Annapūrnā takes the place of Bhavānī-Gaurī; in a hymn that occurs in Kāśī Khaṇḍa where Bhavānī-Gaurī and Annapūrnā are believed to be the same (Skanda Purāṇa, Kāśī Khaṇḍa, 20/102). Goddess Viśālākṣī belongs to Nava-Gaurī, also included in 51 Śakti Pīṭhas which is mentioned in Tantrachūḍāmaṇi, where she is known as Śakti of Kāśī and Kāla-Bhairava is associated Bhairava of Viśālākṣī. It is believed that Satī's earring is felled here.

Apart from the above, Kāśī Khaṇḍa and Liṅga Purāṇa give a brief description of MātṛkāPīṭhas of Kāśī. The Sanskrit word 'Mātarah' denotes the Aṣṭamātṛkās in Purāṇas (Sukul 1977: 94). The AṣṭamātṛkāPīṭhas of Kāśī is dedicated to the goddess Brāhmī, Māheśvarī, Vaiṣṇavī, Indrāṇī, Varāhī, Kaumārī, Chāmuṇḍā, and Charchikā. Kāśī Khaṇḍa states that after taking a deep in the Mātṛkā Tīrtha, one who visit and pray to the Matrikas will find all the desired things they wish for (Skanda Purāṇa, Kāśī Khaṇḍa, 87/45-46).

Pañchamudrā Pīṭha is believed to be the pivotal seat of the Goddess Vikatā (Skanda Purāṇa, Kāśī Khaṇḍa, 87/40-41). According to the Padma Purāṇa, Devi Vikatā is also known as Devī Saṅkatā (Sukul 1977: 96).

The Chausaṭha Yoginīs are also adored in Kāśī, Navarātri of the lunar month Āśvina and Kṛṣṇa Chaturdaśī of Chaitra month (March-April) is believed to be meritorious for the worship of them (Skanda Purāṇa, Kāśī Khaṇḍa, 45/48-52).

The other important seats of Śakti in Kāśī are Amṛteśvarī, Kubjā, Vidhi Devī, Dvāreśvarī, Śivadūtī, Chitragrīvā, Harasiddhi, Siddhalakṣmī, Hayakanthī, Tālaṅgheśvarī, Yamadrṣṭā, Charmamuṇḍā, Mahāruṇḍā, Svapneśvarī, Bhīṣaṇā Bhairavī, Śuṣkodarī, Bhāgīrathī, Maṇikarṇī, Vārāṇasī Devī, Kāśī Devī, Nigaḍabhanjanī, Chhāgavakreśvarī and Aghoreśvarī (Sukul 1977: 97-99).

## Discussion

The places which are related to Śaktism and rituals got a sudden hike in the medieval period. In its present form Śaktism is essentially a medieval religion (Bhattacharya 1974: 1). It was the time when Śakta-Tantra was flourishing in the Eastern India and Kāśī couldn't be deprived of this. There are 64 Tāntric texts related to the cult of Śakti (Winternitz 1927: 592). These texts are discourse between Śiva and Śakti. Those Tantras where Śakti asks questions as a disciple and Śiva in the position of a Guru answers that are known as Āgama and where Śakti is Guru and Śiva is a disciple is known as Nigama (Winternitz 1927: 592).

Kālī is the presiding deity of Kālī-Kula of the Śakti cult, where she is portrayed as the creator, preserver and destroyer of the creations. She gulps Mahākāla himself hence, she is known as Ādya-Kālī (Winternitz 1927: 592). Due to the impression of Tantra, Kāśī itself starts to grow as a center of Kālī worship. Mahānirvāṇa Tantra proclaims Kālī as 'Kāśīśvarī' (the queen of Kāśī) and the beloved one of Viśvanātha (Mahānirvāṇa Tantraṃ 7/28-29). According to the Yoginī Tantra, Kāśī is as luminous as the face of Kālī, the seer feels excessive bliss after watching over the city, so that it is called Ānanda Kānana (Yoginī Tantra 15/30-31). The Devī Bhāgavata also states Kāśī as Gaurī-Mukha (face of Gaurī) (Śrīmaddevībhāgavata 7/30).

The earliest references to Kālī worship at Varanasi can be traced in the Purāṇas. The Liṅga Purāṇa gives the details of Goprekṣa-Sthāna which is the seat of Devī Kālikā (Aiyangar 1942: 125-126). According to the same text, Bhadrakālī is believed to be the guardian deity of the north-west (Aiyangar 1942: 126-127).

With the escalation of Tantra, many temples dedicated to Kālī were built in Kāśī. Pratāpāditya, the king of Jessore<sup>3</sup> built a temple dedicated to goddess Bhadrakālī in Varanasi, which is mentioned in a Bangla record named '*Pratāpādityer Jivana Charita*' (Biography of Pratāpāditya) of Satyacharan Shastri (Ghosh 1999: 148). There are also attempts to connect this temple to Ādi Śankarāchārya. It is believed that Ādi Śankarāchārya re-established the Brahmin Dharma after defeating the Śunyavādī Buddhists in a debate, after which Tamoguṇa emerged in his mind. As a result, Ādi Śankara started ignoring Śakti, considering its ignorance. One day, while returning from bathing in the Gaṅgā, Ādi Śankarāchārya felled unconscious at Chausatthī Ghāta of Varanasi, then an old woman passing by gave him some refreshments. After regaining consciousness, he performed the Sādhana of goddess Bhadrakālī at the same place and attained Siddhi benefits. Later, a metal image of Bhadrakālī (Figure 1) was established at the same place by the king Pratāpāditya (Ghosh 1999: 148). This is the reason why the Sumeru Maṭha situated nearby, which is believed to have been established by Ādi Śankarāchārya, has the image of the goddess Dakṣiṇa-Kālī, Tārā and Ṣoḍaśī-Devī (Figure 2), but not the image of the goddess Bhadrakālī (Ghosh 1999: 148).

In the same sequence, the name of Rānī Bhavānī of Natore<sup>4</sup>, who made a unique contribution to the development of Kāśī, is a noteworthy event. In 1770 CE, Rānī Bhavānī established the second Mahāvidyā Tārā in her Jaya Bhavānī Palace located in Bengali Tola, Varanasi (Ghosh 1999: 185). Along with Goddess Tārā, the image of the goddess Dakṣiṇa-Kālī is also established in this courtyard (Figure 3 & 4). Here, the way of worship is Tantricism. In this palace, there is a Kṛṣṇa temple established by Rānī Bhavānī's daughter Tārā Devī and a metal image of Mahiṣāsura-mardinī Durgā with family established by Rānī Bhavānī herself where the Śārādīya Durgā festival is organized every year. Devī Viśālākṣī and Gopāla temple are also located in this courtyard. Later, in 1789, near this place, the Shavashiva Kālī temple was established by Śrī Chandraśekhara Śarmā, the priest and head





Figure 1: The metal image of Bhadrakālī, Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh, India



Figure 2: Sumeru Maṭha, Varanasi

of the king Kṛṣṇachandra of Nadīyā<sup>5</sup> (Ghosh 1999: 17-19). The Purāṇas mention goddess Śavārūḍhā or Śavavāhinī among the nine protecting powers of Kāśī (Skanda Purāṇa, Kāśī Khaṇḍa, 12/89-91). The place of this Śavavāhinī goddess is considered to be to the north of Saubhāgya Gaurī. Most probably Chandraśekhara Śarmā chose this place and established the temple for the goddess Śavaśiva Kālī. The image of the goddess Kālī has been carved on a Śivaliṅga. Śiva in the form of a corpse is established as the Vāhana of the goddess. Mahākāla is shown lying down above him, with whom goddess Dakṣiṇa Kālī is engaged in Viparīta Rati. The upper hand of the right hand of the goddess is in Abhaya Mudrā and the lower hand is in Varada Mudrā. The goddess is holding a sword in the upper hand of the left side and a human head in the lower hand. She is wearing a garland of human heads (Muṇḍamālā or Kapālamālā) on her neck and a human hand around her waist (Figure 5). The image of Mahākāla Bhairava is also installed next to the Devī image. Nadīyā's King Krishnachandra had donated an umbrella to the goddess (Ghosh 1999:16). The method of worship here is tantrism. There is an inscription in Bengali script on the pedestal of the image. It is read as bellow:

দশ মৈত্র শকে শ্রীল চন্দ্রশেখর শর্মণ ।

প্রতিষ্ঠিতা মোক্ষদাত্রী শ্রীমদ দক্ষিণ কালিকা । ।

Bengali:

*Romanization: Daśa Maitra Śake Śrīla Chandraśekhara Sharmmaṇa |  
Pratiṣṭhita Mokṣadātrī Śrīmad Dakṣiṇa Kālīka ||*

Here, Maitra means seventeen. Since, the number is written in Vāmagati, it has been read as 1710 Śaka Saṃvat (Ghosh 1999: 14-15). That is, in 1710 Śaka Saṃvat (corresponding to 1808 CE), the image of Mokṣadātrī Dakṣiṇa Kālī was installed by Chandraśekhara Śarmā.

Later, in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, King Narendra Nārāyaṇa Singh of Cooch Behar<sup>6</sup> established Anandamayī and Karuṇāmayī Kālī Temple in the Sonarpura area of Kāśī. Among these, Anandamayī Kālī Temple was built according to the dream order received by the king. Where this temple is installed today, earlier there also goddess Kālī was installed in the form of a stone under a Peepal tree. In this way, this temple is considered to be the oldest Dakṣiṇa Kālī temple of Kāśī. It was at this place that King Narendra Nārāyaṇa Singh installed the image of the goddess on a Pañchamuṇḍī-Āsana (five-headed/skull seat). This Āsana is used only in Śākta Tantra Sādhana. Here, Dakṣiṇa Kālī is standing on Śiva who is in the form of a corpse. The upper hand of the right hand is in Abhaya Mudrā and the lower hand is in Varada Mudrā. The upper hand of the left-hand holds a sword and the lower hand is adorned with a human skull (Figure 6). The goddess is surrounded by Yoginī, Dakinī, Barbarinī, and two jackals.

The image of Karuṇāmayī Kālī is installed to the south of this temple. She has been installed in the form of Bhavatāriṇī Kālī of Dakṣiṇeśvara. The image of Dakinī and Yoginī along with the goddess and the image of Śiva holding a Vīṇa is installed to the right of the goddess's figure. There is no Śikhara on these two temples, which indicates that they are private temples. Gopāla temple and three Śiva temples are also installed in the same courtyard. The goddess is worshipped with sattvic bhāva according to Dakṣiṇāchāra Tantra. Although on special occasions, there is a ritual of offering fish as bhoga and fish sacrifices to the goddess. It would be necessary to describe the Kālī Maṭha in the sequence of Kālī temples of Kāśī. According to the belief, this Matha was established by Ādi Śankarāchārya. Although





Figure 3: Jaya Bhavānī Palace, Bengali Tola



Figure 4: Jaya Bhavānī Palace, Bengali Tola

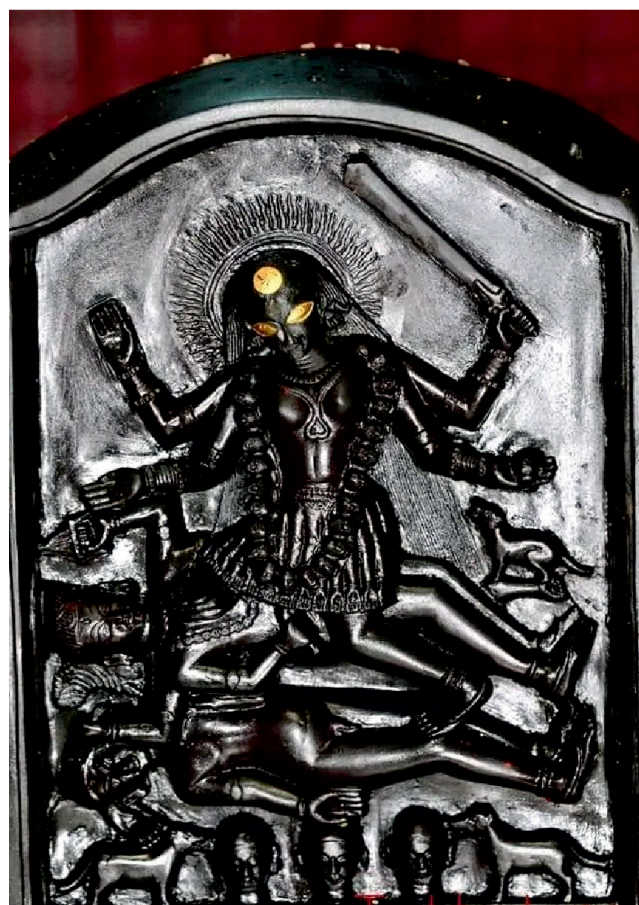


Figure 5: The goddess Śavaśiva Kālī



Figure 6: Dakṣiṇa Kālī, Temple of Cooch Behar State



the worship of Kālī started here later. The image of Dakṣiṇa Kālī is installed inside the temple (Figure 7). This temple is related to the Kaula sect of Vindhyāchala, where the goddess is worshipped with SattvikaĀchāra only. It is believed that the original temple of the goddess is in the cave located below the present temple. Where only a person initiated by the Guru tradition is entitled to enter. However, there is a lack of historical evidence related to this temple. Similarly, the Kālī temple was established in Godaulia area by the mother of Kāśīrāja Prabhunārāyaṇā. In the same compound, the GautameśvaraŚiva temple of KāśīKhaṇḍa is placed. This temple is famous for its construction style and artistic grandeur. The image of DakṣiṇaKālī is installed in the sanctum sanctorum with Śiva Liṅga in the middle (Figure 8).



Figure 7: Dakṣiṇa Kālī, Kālī Maṭha

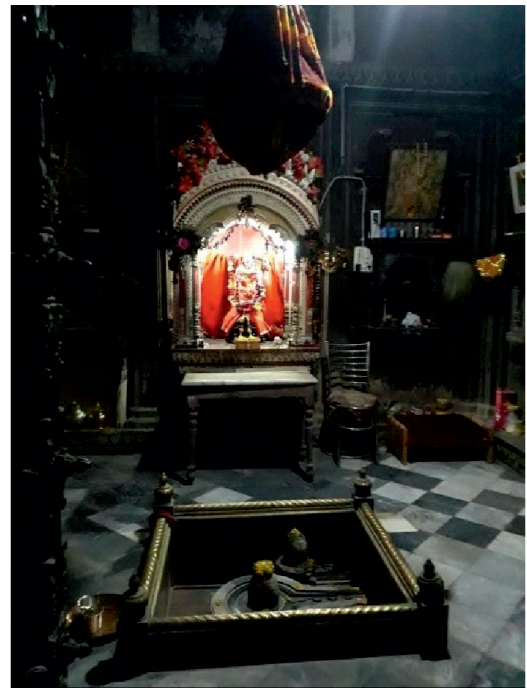


Figure 8: Dakṣiṇa Kālī Kāśīrāja Kālī Temple

## Conclusion

Thus, we have learned that the influence of Tantric worship started increasing in the Śaiva city of Kāśī in the medieval period and the result of this was the popularization of the goddess Kālī, the presiding deity of Tantra. A glimpse of this can be seen in the various Kālī temples established in Kāśī.

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## Notes

1. Kāśī or Kashi is now commonly known as modern Varanasi or Benaras but ancient Kashi's geographical expansion was different. The geography of ancient Kāśī is intertwined with its religious, cultural and historical significance, making it a timeless symbol of India's spiritual heritage.

2. It is also known as Vasanta Navarātri, celebrated during the month of Chaitra (March-April) which is nine-night festival dedicated to the goddess symbolizing a period vibrant energy renewal on Earth.
3. Now it is spelled as Jashore, situated in modern Bangladesh.
4. Natore is also situated in modern Bangladesh.
5. Nadīyā is situated in the state of West Bengal, India.
6. Cooch Behar or Koch Bihar is also located in West Bengal.

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