

Sixty-Four Yoginis

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YOGINIS ARE HOLY WOMEN with yogic powers or female attendants of Shiva or Durga. Commonly it is believed that eight yoginis exist, namely Mangala, Pingala, Dhanya, Bhramari, Bhadrīka, Ulka, Siddhi, and Sankata. They are also perceived as divinities constituted by eight groups of letters of the alphabets.

The philosophy of the concept of yogini is based on the concept of Sapta Matrikas, seven Mother goddesses. These seven goddesses symbolise the motherly aspect and have a logical, esoteric, and conceptual sequence. Sometimes the Sapta Matrikas are portrayed in a deeper philosophical conceptual meaning with the eight divinities involved in the creation of universe and its various integral life forms in a serial logical order.

- Brahmi or Brahmani represents the

unmanifested sound, logos, and she creates the universe.

- Vaishnavi gives the universe a definite shape.
- Maheshvari gives individuality to all created beings.
- Kaumari bestows the force of aspirations.
- Varahi is the power of assimilation and enjoyment.
- Aindri or Indrani is the immense power that destroys whatever opposes the cosmic law.
- Chamunda is the power of spiritual awakening.

Sixty-four yoginis symbolise the multiplication of these values. The symbology involves references to sixteen *kalas* or phases that are constituted by the mind, five gross elements, and ten sense organs. The moon has sixteen phases out of which fifteen are visible and one is invisible. There is a group of sixteen eternal goddesses.

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Goddess Gauri doing Penance Standing on a Monitor Lizard

There are sixteen siddhis or attainments or supernatural powers.

Yoginis are representations of powers that are sheltered everywhere in Nature. They are hidden in forest outside and also in mental states—‘*manasa vana*’ of a human being.

A special reference in this article is to the sixty-four yogini temple at Hirapur, Odisha, India, that show us its tantric roots. The circular walls, lack of roof, that is, hypaethral style of a building, arrangement of each yogini image in the niche of the wall to replicate the seat of self, that is, as a symbol of origin of the Self. The circle of sixty-four yoginis symbolises the continuation of life. It is a never-ending circle—a spiritual symbol named ‘*mandala*’. It is also called ‘*yogini chakra*’ as an auspicious ritual circle.

Usually the yogini temples were situated in remote places for tantric rituals. Metaphorically they may suggest that the difficulty in finding out the remotely built temples indicate that the sadhaka, a spiritual aspirant, has to accept difficulties and obstacles in aiming for tantric sadhana. This desertion in and around the location sometimes gave rise to superstitions and wrong concepts regarding tantric sadhana.

Goddess Parvati as the Major Deity in Yogic Sadhana

In Indian mythology Gauri, one of the forms of Parvati, the consort of Lord Shiva, is said to have performed a penance while standing on a monitor lizard. She is described as ‘*godbasana bhavet gauri*’.¹ It can be translated as, ‘Parvati is known as Gauri, when she performs penance standing on a monitor lizard, *godha*’. In Sanskrit, monitor lizard is called *godha*. Here the root verb is ‘*gudha*’, which means to wrap up, to envelope, or to conceal.

In the sculptures at Rani Ki Vav, Patan, Gujarat—a unique and intricately carved step well from the Solanki dynasty of the eleventh

century, originally constructed as a memorial to king Bhimdev I by Queen Udayamati—**fifteen forms of Parvati are depicted**. Among these sculptures there is one image of Parvati in penance standing on a beautifully carved monitor lizard. This form of Parvati or Gauri, who has engaged herself in a penance is known as *panchagni-tapasya* meaning penance in five types of fires. She is depicted as standing in the middle of four fire altars and looking up at the burning sun.

In the sculptures found in South India, monitor lizard is sometimes shown to be the carrier vehicle of goddess Parvati.²

A sculpture of a tiger-faced Matrika, one of the minor goddesses, found at Kaushambi, Allahabad, shows a monitor lizard on her left lap (252).

The Uma-Maheshvara images sometimes show the monitor lizard as the mount of Parvati (306).

Yogini Kshemankari is also depicted in a sculpture from the ninth century as standing on a monitor lizard at the sixty-four yogini temple, Hirapur, Odisha.³

The reason for choosing a reptile like the monitor lizard as a mount for penance is open to interpretation. **I feel that it may be due to the solitary nature of this secretive reptile, which is shy and avoids humans. It has a keen eyesight and is said to detect human movement from about 250 meters away.** Monitor lizards dwell in various kinds of habitats from open areas to forests. They shelter in burrows or tree hollows. This behaviour also tallies with its apt Sanskrit name *godha*, which refers to the habit of concealing oneself. Since the goddess was engaged in a penance, she preferred a completely solitary undisturbed atmosphere. Hence, according to my interpretation, one can say that the Indian tradition has wisely chosen the monitor lizard as her mount and has not only offered a respectful place to this reptile but has also encouraged its protection and conservation.

Sixty-Four Yoginis:

Important Temples in India

- Khajuraho, Madhya Pradesh; ninth century.
- Chandel Dynasty. All shrine cells and statues of goddesses are ruined. Only Brahmani, Maheshvari, and Hingalaja or Mahishasuramardini are remaining.

- **Morena**, Mitavali, Madhya Pradesh; eleventh century. Belongs to the Kachhapaghata dynasty; built by King Devapala, vassal of the Chandelas.

- Badoh, Gadarmal Matru Mandir, Madhya Pradesh; ninth century.

- Dudhahi, Uttar Pradesh; eleventh century Brahma temple.

- Ranipur-Jharial, Titalagadh, Odisha; ninth or tenth century. Built during the reign of Somavanshi Keshari kings.

- Hirapur, Odisha; ninth century. Built by Queen Hiradevi of Brahma dynasty.

Major Sanskrit Textual Sources of Yoginis

- Puranas: Agni Purana, chapter 52; Markandeya Purana, Kalika Purana, Bhagavata Purana, Matsya Purana, Garuda Purana, Skanda Purana, and Devi Bhagavata Purana.

- *Maya Dipika*, a rare text.

- *Pratishtha Lakshana Sara Samuchchaya*.

- *Chaturvarga Chintamani* of Hemadri; thirteenth century.

- *Matottara Tantra*; thirteenth century.

The Yogini Cult

- Yogini: She is believed to be the origin of the centres of energy in the human body.

- Machhindranatha's Yogini: Also called *kaula marga*, **this cult respects women and gives them a right to receive spiritual knowledge.**

- Shiva-Shakti synthesis: This philosophy is known as *kaula jnan*.

- Puranic mythology: The Puranic mythology

speaks about the origin of yoginis. Different names of yoginis are found as per the seven different lists and references to their mounts.

- The number of yoginis were believed to be 42, 64, or 81.
- Varahamihira's *Brihat-sambhita*: This work says that the yogini temples should be built on 81 or 64 squares.
- *Adi-Shakti* is connected to 64 forms of art.
- **Sixty-four: This number has a unique significance in tantra; tan, to spread philosophy.**

Characteristic Features of the Names of Yoginis

- Synthesis of tribal beliefs and Vedic as well as Puranic concepts.
- **Each Matrika has her own set of yogini attendants. Matrikas are personified forms of powers of gods.** They are usually depicted in a group of seven or eight and they are subsidiary deities.
- Some yoginis are indicative of fearsome aspects. They are believed to have magical powers and they have an important place in tantric traditions.
- **The worship of Devi Kamakhya has the invocation of sixty-four yoginis in the worship.**
- Some yoginis are zoomorphic deities.
- In the concept of yogini, we see the presence of totemism. Totemism is the identification of a tribe with a particular bird or animal. Most totems have their own story where the totem animal or bird has saved the ancestor of that tribe.

Some Rare and Unusual Zoomorphic Forms of Yoginis

- Yogini Uma: Parrot-faced yogini with boar-faced child on her lap and her carrier vehicle is boar.
- Yogini Vainayaki: Elephant-headed yogini with a big mouse as her mount.

- Yogini Shashakanana: Rabbit-faced yogini. She is shown with small rabbits peeping out from each end of her seat.
- Yogini Sarpasya: Snake-faced yogini sitting on an elephant. A large hood of a snake is shown behind her face.
- Yogini Hayanana: Horse-faced yogini resting upon a hyena-like animal. With a fish in her hand she supports a horse-faced child on her knee.
- Yogini Ajanana: Goat-faced yogini resting on a goat.
- Yogini Gomukhi: Cow-faced yogini having a cow as her carrier vehicle.
- Yogini Vrishanana: Buffalo-faced yogini seated on a crane.
- Yogini Rikshanana or Yogini Bhalluka: Bear-faced yogini mounted on a bear.
- Yogini Gajanana: Elephant-faced yogini.
- Yogini Mrigashira: Deer-faced yogini.
- Yogini Simhamukhi: Lion-faced yogini with lion as her carrier vehicle.

Unique Features of Yogini Temple, Hirapur, Odisha

- Built by Queen Hiradevi of Brahma dynasty in ninth century; no information of this dynasty is available. Probably it was the transitional period of Bhaumakar kings who ceased their reign around 900 CE and Somavanshi rulers took it over in 1000 CE.
- Use of sandstone and black chlorite stone.
- Circular, hypaethral, tantric rituals for worshipping *bhumandal* consisting of five *mahabhutas*—fire, water, earth, sky, and ether.
- **Yogini sculptures represent the victory of feminine power** and they express various emotions.
- Sixty-four yogini cults in tantra developed through transformation of concepts and is shrouded in mystery. They were the powers created to assist goddess Durga in killing the demon Raktavirya.

All yogini images are beautiful and have unique attires, hairstyles, and ornaments.

Sixty-Four Yogini Images at Hirapur Temple with Mounts Depicting Flora and Fauna

- Yoginis and animals: Fourteen mammals; six birds; four aquatic vertebrates like fish, tortoise, frog, and crocodile; and one marine aquatic invertebrate, mollusc; two terrestrial reptiles, snake and lizard; one arachnid, scorpion; and one decapod crustacean, crab.

- Eight zoomorphic forms.
- Yoginis and flora: Mainly lotus, some creeper.
- Yoginis and human beings or corpse.
- Yoginis and various other things, nine in number.

Yoginis and Their Mounts: Symbology

1. Sri Maya or Bahurupa or Chandika: **Stands on a corpse lying straight.** *Shava* sadhana is a difficult ritual and it signifies detachment from the physical world and uniting with the absolute.

2. Sri Tara: Stands on a corpse; the reason is same as given for Yogini Maya.

3. Sri Narmada: Stands on an elephant. *Narma* means joy and *da* is one who gives; *narmada* is the one who gives joy. Elephant symbolises wisdom. It suggests that the tendency of taking should consist of wisdom.

4. Sri Yamuna: Stands on a tortoise. The word *yamuna* means 'prayuvati gachchhati iti va; the river which flows by mixing the water of other rivers in her own flow'. And, 'prayuvitam gachchhati iti va; the river which flows peacefully'.⁴ Probably this is why River Yamuna was also known for its turtles, it was depicted as her vehicle whose speed is slow and peaceful. *Kurma* was related to the stories of creation in the Vedic

literature. In the *Shatapatha Brahmana* text, the Prajapati Brahma was said to have taken the form of a tortoise. He did the 'karma' of creating the world and that is why that particular incarnation came to be known as *kurma*. In the same text, the *kurma* is also called *kashyapa*. The Sanskrit root verb *kash* means to go and to move. Later in the Puranic period, a tortoise was connected to Lord Vishnu.

5. Sri Shanti or Kanti or Lakshmi or Manada: Stands on a full blown lotus. The yogini named after qualities like peace, lustre, wealth, and honour is mounted on a lotus. A lotus represents our journey towards spirituality. From the seed stage, we need to bloom by discovering our path from the dirty waters of worldly life.

6. Sri Vriddhi or Kriya or Varuni: Stands on waves on the pedestal. Varuni is the female counterpart of the deity Varuna, who is the personification of the sky and he is also associated with clouds, rivers, ocean, and water.



Yogini Varahi

So, naturally his female energy is shown to be mounted on waves.

7. Sri Gauri or Kshemankari: Stands on an alligator. Makara is believed to be the symbol of lust and attachment in Indian culture. We move towards higher goals by controlling passions. So yogini Gauri, a fair-one, or Kshemankari, one who is auspicious, rides on an alligator.

8. Sri Aindri or Indrani: Stands on an elephant. Aindri or Indrani is the female energy of the deity Indra. Elephant is associated with water and rains and Indra is the ruler of rains. So his female counterpart is also depicted as mounted on an elephant.

9. Sri Varahi: Boar-faced, she stands on a buffalo. Varahi is described as the yoga-nidra of Vishnu and she holds the earth on her tusks. She represents the maternal aspect and is connected to earth. That is why her vahana, vehicle or mount is a buffalo.

10. Sri Ranavira or Padmavati: Stands on a snake. A folk goddess, Manasa is popularly worshipped in Bengal. In Hindu mythology, she is the mother of the king of snakes. She is also known by the name 'Padmavati'. Probably this is why Ranavira, one who is a warrior in battles, and Padmavati are associated with snakes.

11. Sri Ushtrarudha or Vanaramukhi: A monkey-faced yogini stands on a camel. Probably this has connection to the Momai Ma or Ushtravahini Devi, who is popular in Gujarati culture. The reason for the depiction of monkey-faced yogini is not clear.

12. Sri Vaishnavi: Garuda is her mount. Since Vaishnavi is the spiritual energy of God Vishnu, she is mounted on an eagle. In Hindu mythology, Garuda is a powerful bird, symbol of the Self inseparable from his master Vishnu.

13. Sri Kalaratri or Panchavara: Stands on a boar. This yogini is the energy of Vishnu's Varaha avatar, the boar incarnation. So she is mounted on a boar.

14. Sri Vadyarupa: Stands on a drum. The name of this yogini refers to the vadya, musical instrument.

15. Sri Charchika: Stands on a male figure. The Sanskrit root verb charcha means to repeat a word. Charchika is our power of japa. And this power of repetition of any divine word should conquer physical attractions.

16. Sri Marjari or Vetali: Stands on a fish. Fish has a unique symbolic meaning in the panchamakaras, the five aids in tantra, where twin fishes suggest a reference to the Ida and Pingala nadis, which are controlled by pranayama. Probably, it has some connection to goddess Shashthi, who rides a cat.

17. Sri Chinnamastaka: Stands on a severed human head. Chinnamasta is one of the goddesses of the esoteric tradition of tantra. She symbolises sexual self-control and represents the two aspects of the life-giver and life-taker. She also symbolises self-sacrifice, which is shown by her severed head and that is the reason she is mounted on a severed human head.

18. Sri Vrishabhanana or Vindhyavasini: Stands on a flat roof or cave with a hole. 'Vindhyavasini' literally means one who resides in the Vindhya Mountain. She is also called as a bull-faced yogini. She is connected to God Shiva.

19. Sri Jalakamini: Stands on a frog. 'Jalakamini' means one who loves waters and that is why she is shown as standing on a frog. In Maharashtra, a group of seven deities is known as sati asara, whose small temples are usually established near rivers or water sources. Manduka, the word for a frog, has a spiritual meaning that is reflected also in the name of Mandukya Upanishad.

20. Sri Ghatavara: Stands on a lion, lifting an elephant over her head. The meaning of the word 'ghatavara' is not clear. Since this yogini is also a mystical power of goddess Parvati, she stands on a lion.

21. Sri Vikarali or Kakarali: Stands on a dog.

22. Sri Sarasvati: Stands on a serpent. A snake is a symbol of fertility, yogic powers, as well as of immortality and transformation. Sarasvati is the goddess of knowledge. As a human being gets knowledge, one is transformed into a wise and mature human being.

23. Sri Virupa: The pedestal she stands on has lines of waves. The yogini is probably related to the essence of waters.

24. Sri Kaveri: Stands on seven *ratna-kalashas*, gem pots, on a full-blown lotus. *Kalasha*, water pot, and a lotus are symbols of prosperity.

25. Sri Bhalluka: Boar-faced, stands on a *padma-lata*, lotus, on her pedestal. A lotus is a symbol of prosperity.

26. Sri Narasimhi or Simhamukhi: Lion-faced, stands on a pedestal with five flowers and leaves. This yogini is shown with flowers and leaves to show her close association with nature.

27. Sri Viraja: Stands on a lotus bud with leaves. A lotus is a symbol of prosperity.

28. Sri Vikatanana: Protruding lips and curling matted hair, the pedestal with mount is broken.

29. Sri Mahalakshmi: Stands on an open lotus in full bloom. A lotus is a symbol of prosperity.

30. Sri Kaumari: Stands on a peacock. The Kumara Kartikeya is depicted as having a peacock as his vehicle. So his power named as Kaumari is shown as having the same mount.

31. Sri Mahamaya: She is worshipped as the presiding deity of the temple and she is mounted on a full blown lotus. A lotus is a symbol of prosperity.

32. Sri Usha or Rati: Stands on a pedestal with an archer with a bow in his hands, Kandarpa or Cupid. Rati is the female counterpart of the god of love and so, she is shown accompanying Kandarpa.

33. Sri Karkari: Stands on a crab. Karkari is described as a kind of a lute and also a water pot. Perhaps her connection to water associates her with a crab.

34. Sri Sarpasya or Chittala: Snake-faced, the mount is broken.

35. Sri Yasha: The mount is a pedestal with four legs.

36. Sri Aghora or Vaivasvati: Stands on a horned goat-like animal or tapir. A tapir is a large herbivorous mammal and it is similar in shape to a pig. It is found in South as well as Central America and Southeast Asia. This is an unusual animal to be found in a sculpture.

37. Sri Bhadrakali or Rudrakali: Stands on a crow. A crow is usually a symbol of death, magic, and mysteries. Perhaps this is why it is related to the yogini Rudrakali.

38. Sri Matangi or Shitala or Vainayaki or Ganesani or Gajanana: Stands on a donkey.

Yogini Vrishanana





Yogini Kamayani

Goddess Shitala is described as *rasabbastha shitala*, one who rides on a donkey, in the Sanskrit texts on Hindu iconography. Shitala is a folk deity and she is also believed to be a form of goddess Parvati. She rides on a donkey because it has sattva guna, is humble natured in the sense that it is never attached to the things that are kept on its back. It just carries them to the destination unselfishly according to the wish of his owner.

39. Sri Vindhyavalini: Stands on a rat.

Vindhyavalini yogini inhabits the Vindhya mountain range. The mountain gives shelter to innumerable species of flora and fauna. Rodents are also among these species. So this yogini has given place to a rat. A rat is also a symbol of hard work and perseverance because it makes its way and create holes through the hard surfaces of mountains.

40. Sri Abhaya or Vira Kumari: Stands on a scorpion. The definite reason for her mount is not known. But in southern Karnataka, Chelamma is a scorpion goddess.

41. Sri Maheshvari: Stands on a bull. Maheshvari is a spiritual power of Maheshvara, Shiva. So, she is shown as standing on a bull which is the carrier vehicle of Lord Shiva.

42. Sri Kamakshi or Ambika: Stands on a mongoose. A mongoose is a symbol of attributes like protection and defence and it is also the animal symbol of Uttara Ashadha Nakshatra.

43. Sri Kamayani: Stands on a cock. A cock is the symbol of love and progeny. So it is probably correlated to Kamayani.

44. Sri Ghatavari: Stands on a lion. The reason for the mount is not clear.

45. Sri Stuti: Stands on a *haldi-kathua* or a pot for turmeric paste. The reason for the mount is not very clear but in Hinduism, turmeric is an auspicious element in religious rituals; it symbolises strength due to the medicinal properties in it.

46. Sri Kali: Stands on a recumbent male figure. Here Shiva, the male figure is the symbol of primal awareness. Kali and Shiva are symbols of Prakriti and Purusha.

47. Sri Uma: Stands on pedestal of lotus flowers. A lotus is a symbol of prosperity.

48. Sri Narayani: Stands on a pedestal with a conical pot with a lid. The reason for the mount is not clear.

49. Sri Samudra: Stands on a pedestal with a conch shell. Conch is a symbol of purity and

brilliance and it is also related to Om, which is the first sacred word. It is very natural that the conch is related to the yogini representing the sea.

50. Sri Brahmani: Has three faces, stands on a book. Brahmani is the spiritual power of God Brahma. Brahma is the symbol of knowledge and creation. That is why Brahmani is also depicted with a book.

51. Sri Jvalamukhi: Stands on a platform with eight legs. The reason for the mount is not clear.

52. Sri Agneyi: Stands on a ram with flames of fire in the background. A ram is connected to Agni, the god of fire. It represents ego. We are expected to offer or sacrifice our ego to fire god. Agneyi is the spiritual power of the god of fire and so she is also shown with a ram.

53. Sri Aditi: Stands on a parrot. Parrot is a symbol of intelligence and grasping capacity. In the Vedic literature, Aditi is described as the mother of gods and she is also associated with mystic power of speech, Vak. Maybe that is why a parrot is depicted with yogini Aditi.

54. Sri Chandrakanti: Stands on a cot with four legs. The reason is not clear.

55. Sri Vayuvega: Stands on a female yak. Yak is a short-legged and long-haired ox-like mammal found the Himalayas. It can run fast only short distances. The meaning of the word 'Vayuvega' is 'one who has a speed like wind'. The reason behind the depiction of a yak with this yogini is not much clear.

56. Sri Chamunda: Stands on a musk deer with a lion over her head. The reason for the mount is not clear.

57. Sri Murati: Stands on a muntjac or barking deer. The reason for the mount is not clear.

58. Sri Ganga: Stands on a *makara*, crocodile: In the Indian tradition, *makara* is believed to be the vehicle of River Ganga. The meaning of the Sanskrit word 'ganga' is one who takes towards

God. *Makara* is believed to be the symbol of lust and attachment in Indian culture. When we have controlled the lust for worldly passions, we are led towards higher goals in life. That is why *makara* is said to be a carrier vehicle of Ganga who has control over it.

59. Sri Dhumavati or Tarini: Stands on a goose with a winnower in her hand. Dhumavati is also one of the ten powers named as *dasha maha vidya*. She is a fierce goddess and she reminds us to develop the power of discrimination and to discard what is unreal. The winnower in her hand suggests separating grain, that is the real, from the chaff, that is, the unreal.

60. Sri Gandhari: Stands on a donkey: The reason for the mount is not clear.

61. Sri Sarva Mangala: The niche is empty.

62. Sri Ajita: Stands on a mouse deer or Chevrotain. Usually a deer is a symbol of desires. Yogini Ajita, one who is never conquered by enemies, stands on a mouse deer to suggest to us to develop the quality of controlling our desires.

63. Sri Surya Putri: Stands on a galloping horse. The Sun-god rides a chariot of seven horses. So yogini Surya Putri, that is, the daughter of the Sun is depicted as standing on a galloping horse.

64. Sri Vayu Vina: Stands on a black buck. The black buck is the vehicle of Vayu, that is, the god of wind. So probably yogini Vayu Vina is depicted with a blackbuck. 

References

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2. See *Bharatiya Murtishastra*, 196.
3. See Dr Suruchi Pande and Dr Satish Pande, *Fauna and Deities: A Perspective on Nature Conservation* (Pune: Ela Foundation and Directorate of Social Forestry, 2016), 279.
4. See *Bharatiya Murtishastra*.