

**Iconographic Analysis of Goddess Chinnamasta: Unveiling Divine Power of Mahavidhya in Hindu Mythology**

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**Abstract**

The paper discusses the iconographic analyses and symbolic interpretation of Goddess Chinnamasta, whose headless body is the crux of supreme power and revelation of one of the ten forms of Mahavidya Hindu mythology. Through the iconographical analysis of the Chinnamasta, the paper analyses the ideas of a body without an organ in connection with the supreme power of the female Goddess as Shakti in Hindu mythology. Using symbolic interpretation grounded in Hindu tantric theory and gender insights as the study methodology. It studies the process of reaching the super soul from tantric perspectives. The paper employs the concepts of the Tantra by Kinsley and Flood, and Butler's gender identity, as analytical tools to examine the claim. Ultimately, the study deduces that the iconography of the Goddess reflects two distinct yet interconnected aspects of the body: the head and body. The head symbolizes symbolic power, whereas the body represents physical power. Together, they work as a whole for two distinct roles: creator and destroyer. The separate forms signify distinct entities, encompassing their function and the notion of transcending the self to unite with the supreme soul through the self-denial of personal value in pursuit of ultimate power. Therefore, this extends Chinnamasta's iconography as the body devoid of organs, relating to the entirety of the body in the context of supreme power.

**Keywords** : head, iconography, mythology, symbol, supreme power, tantra

**Introduction**

The Goddess Chinnamasta is the headless female deity of the Hindu religion, symbolizing the generation and circulation of tantric power. The goddess is the source of power for the devotees and one of the ten Mahavidyas. As Kinsley (1997) interprets, "Mahavidyas are different forms of overreaching transcendent female reality" (p.18). Devotees seek power through tantric practices to generate mystic power. Despite her headless body, the Goddess remains alive, representing the profound power of tantra. Her iconography portrays a headless goddess holding her severed head in her right hand. Blood poured from her neck, nourishing two attendant goddesses and her own severed head. The body without a head depicts the centrality of the image. The vivid imagery centers around the headless body of the main figure, which stands atop male and female figures. Beside her side are the other two female deities drinking blood from

her three jests streaming from her neck. The Goddesses are depicted nude, adorned with skull garlands, and wearing snakes around their necks. Both goddesses hold a demon's head in their hand, indicating their quest for the blood of the devils.

Hindu spiritual tradition, female goddesses are endowed with the power to equalize their position with males. Women are not subordinate to men during that age. Instead, they are nature, nurturers, and the very essence of Mother Earth for all human beings. They were elevated to the status of deities, symbolizing the energy and magic power. Kinsley (1997) elaborates on the symbolic significance of Goddesses, stating, "Mahavidayas are related to Shiva, fierceness, magic power, independence (pp36-37). During this period, society did not expect women to be obedient wives, daughters, and mothers. Rather their images displayed fierce power, courage, and independence. Giving powerful positions and displaying fierce pictures shows a sense of togetherness. This tradition bestows power to the Goddess, bestowing them with unparalleled power.

The sense of power and regeneration are the etymological interpretation of the goddess. 'Chinna' refers to severed and 'Masta' denotes to head. Together, the term describes a goddess without a head. The image of a headless goddess presents a gruesome scene, depicting acts of violence. However, the tantric concept of the East goes beyond this idea, embarking on the sense of identical identity of goddesses. The picture of the Chinnamasta reveals the notion and similar posture of the Kali, another form of goddess, a symbol of power. The powerful deity, fond of blood. Kinsley(1997) describes the way blood enters after self-sacrifice, "Three jests of blood gush from her neck. One stream enters the mouth of her severed head, the other two jests enter the mouths of two female companions" (p.11). The red color of the blood designates power. In his statement, the words unbounded hair, and nakedness are similar to the physical state of the Chinnamasta and Kali. On the contrary, being associated with blood signifies that both goddesses are fond of power and energy. So, in that sense, both goddess's iconography can be interpreted interchangeably. Blood signifies the longing for power and cyclic regeneration of energy.

Goddess Chinnamasta is one of the ten Goddesses in Hindu tantric tradition. The icon of her image is a body without a head. The body is the primary requirement to control the head and the head symbolizes reason, rationality, and ego. The detachment between head and body is the detachment of the ego from the body. This icon has been analyzed rating it ferocious, terrific, and bloody. Why do critics deviate from the crux of the supreme power attainment process of the Goddess centralizing only with the closed-minded visual pictorial details? What are the symbolic significances of a Goddess without a head? This study responds to these questions, analyzes the pictorial details and interprets the iconographic image of a goddess indicating symbolic significance to indicate an ego-free personality to dive into the spiritual realm.

#### **Review of Literature**

Goddess Chinnamasta is the subject of analysis and interpretation due to its rare icon and mythologically accepted power. Goddesses massacre the devils when male gods failed to defy them. The failure of male Gods and the success of female Goddesses

inscribes the unlimited power of Goddesses. Critics have analyzed Chinnamasta from diverse lenses relating it to our visible layers of the image. Houben & Van kooj. (1999) “An eighteen-century miniature painting of the gruesome goddess Chinnamasta is undeniably violent and bizarre image”. (p.249) The word “undeniably” violent refers to the iconography that is questing for blood which is not normal to observe and “bizarre” indicates very strange and unusual sense of state when anyone crosses across it. This is the misinterpretation of the Goddess because he does not have to understand the power of tantra to devoid the head from the body. The value of the visual aspect results in the subjective interpretation of the icon.

Contradiction as resembles the characteristic of the goddess because the power center during the crisis due to devils in the Hindu mythology were Goddesses. Neumanies (2002) evaluates the ten Goddesses as against tradition, “The Mahavidyas are ten goddesses embody traits antinomian to the general code of proper womanly behavior in Hinduism” (p.45). However, the point is that the male Gods' failure and their appeal to Goddesses led them involved in activities to defy Rakshesha (Devils). However, people in the West felt it against tradition, since the mythical context in the Hindu myth was different from that of the West. Chakrabarti (2021) states the functions of religious agencies during the period of colonialism in India, “The literary-cultural construction of a religious hybridizes, operating between and cross-fertilizing Indo-European cultural conjunction, is examined through the study of individual in-between religious agency” (p.35). This in-between analysis separated the crux of the Hindu myth and merged Eastern images with the Western perspectives. In the same way, Chand, Chand & Biswas (2023) assert that “Shaktism is a cult of Hinduism that focuses on the worship of the Goddess (Feminine Goddess). Goddess is worshiped in many forms such as the violent Durga, the fearsome Kali, the nurturing Parvati.” The Goddesses are the centers of power as they symbolize creation, as well as destruction. According to Woodroffe (2009), “The tantra accepts the doctrine of rebirth” (p.21). Regeneration for the continuation of life forms and destruction of evil forces. Hindu mythology has assigned two-fold responsibility to Goddesses.

Critics evaluate the image as a violent, bizarre, terror-generating icon, and against the code of Hindu tradition. However, they value what it appears rather than what it signifies in Hindu mythological tradition. Their analysis speaks of visual art but fails to go beyond the mythical institution of Hinduism. Gods' failure to destroy evils led Goddesses as the power center. When the Goddesses were successful in killing them, they became the center of power. Therefore, Hindu myth prioritizes the tantric power of females. The icon of Goddess designates the world beyond physical sense perception, having tantric power generation and circulation of the females for the destruction of the tribulations. To destroy these forces, they need power beyond the common forces. Ultimately, they generated strength through tantric procedures. This procedure supported attaining supremacy. This led to a devoid headless body, a body of self-sacrifice, power, and uncommon strength for physical doings and supreme acquaintance. Tantric power is the superhuman power that could exercise divine power to control over unsolicited forces of the society.

### **Theoretical Framework for the Study**

Goddess Chinnamasta is one of the Ten powerful Goddesses for creation and regeneration. The objective of the study is to analyze the icon of Chinnamasta and interprets the symbolic significance of a body without a head from iconographic and Hindu tantric perspectives to relate the icon of the Goddesses with the implied process of digging into the super conscious phase. Tantra studies real human experiences along with spiritual experiences. According to Woodruff (2009) “Tantra Sastra is broadly divided into three parts namely Sadhana, Siddi, and philosophy” (p.15). This is the reason why Woodroffe (2009) further states, “Tantra is only a system of Sakti Sadhana” (p. 22). It uses tantric philosophy as an analytical tool for the iconographic study of Chinnamasta.

This study deals with the iconographic analysis of the image of Chinnamasta having a body without a head and the symbolic significance of the image from Hindu tantric perspectives. It probes beyond the physical details and relates the power of the Goddess for delving into the spiritual phase through self-sacrifice. The theoretical modality is tantric iconographic analysis and symbolic interpretations.

Primarily this study uses the image of Goddess Chinnamasta as the main point and includes her details and other icons. In addition to that, it focuses of her main icon for descriptive analysis and tantric significance for the interpretation. The body without the head is the crux of the analysis and interpretations. For analysis and interpretation, it uses the theoretical underpinnings of Kinsley (1997), Neumanies (2002), Judith Butler (2004), Flood (2006), and Woodruffe (2009)

### **Analysis and Interpretation**

The picture of Chinnamasta encapsulates the dual nature of Devi as both giver and taker of life, embodying the destruction of devilish tendencies from Hindu tantric perspectives. Moreover, the picture denotes the power and strength of the feminine body emphasizing its role as the center and origin of life from gender viewpoints. The portrait of the female body and ornaments shows female centrality. Holding weapons represents of transferring the power of male to female, underscoring the representation of female body without a head equipped with blood, a skull, and weapons. Hindu tantric myths equalize Goddesses in terms of creation and regeneration as well as the destruction of the devils, affirming the divinity and power of the feminine body.

### **Iconographic Analysis and Interpretation of Goddess Chinnamasta.**

The body is the representation of the cosmos accompanying different external and internal organs. Each of the organs has its shape, size, function, and performance. From head to feet, each of the body's organs performs its task as per the demands of the environment. The thought that occurred in the head was planned and delivered accordingly by the organs of the body. In that sense, the body recapitulates the entire universe within it. It recapitulates the internal and external energy needed to live, sustain, function, and perform. Flood (2023) has used the word “sky of consciousness” (p.4) to refer to the double consciousness that is exposed with the head and without the head in the body. The word double presents the dual nature of the body and mind,

which performs at the Centre and spreads its consciousness to the cosmos to accumulate internal and external energy.

The bodily duality performance of Chinnamasta represents both the performance of gender and sex roles in her case. The body has been categorized into biological sex as man and woman and socially constructed as male and female to perform certain social and cultural tasks. The same biological body overlaps with socio-cultural functions and performs dual roles and responsibilities. As a result, men and women have their roles and responsibilities to attend to. So, sex is the base of the body, while gender performance is determined by biological features yet constructed socially. Butler (2004) mentions that “it is a practice of improvisation within a scene of constraint. Moreover, one does not “do” one’s gender alone. One is always “doing” with or for another, even if the other is only imaginary” (p.11). Gender is the performative act where one performs for themselves and for others. They performed such acts not alone but rather ‘for’ or ‘with’ another person. A similar line of thought has been depicted in the case of Chinnamasta, where she has performed her act for other deities through divine power. Additionally, cutting the head and serving the blood as food is a performative act by a woman rather resembles the act of daring and courage that was the responsibility assigned to Goddesses when Gods failed to defy the evil spirit of the world.

The face is transparent and the exposure section of the body while the body is covered. When the face is covered or the face is not in its position, then that body is incomplete in common sense. So, a body without a head is similar to a body without an organ. In this case, the word ‘organ’ refers to the head as the central part of the body. To be in such a position, the body has to go under a lot of pressure and make the most extreme decisions that one can take. The body experiences such extraordinary journeys, pain, and astonishing situations to achieve divine power. To attain this power, the body has to move through several procedures. The body disconnected from the head is the sacrifice of the ego through tantric power. However, Guattari (1947) being without an organ is the long process by which the organ of the body has gone. He asserts that “the hypochondriac body: the organs are destroyed, the damage has already been done, nothing happens anymore”.(p.143) It seems that the body's organs are destroyed and damaged, so nothing more can be done with that body. No further pain, no further function, and no further moment of suffering can be witnessed.

However, tantra asserts that this segmentation is the result of Shakti (supreme power). Cutting the head of Goddess Chinnamasta is the act of the hypochondriac body, indicating that the head is no longer on the body. It seems physically destroyed but this is the separation of the physical body with the celestial power. It shows the acts of extremists that express the extreme level of situation where the corporeal body acts rarely. This kind of rear act is the act of power, confidence, and liberation of the self from the physical phenomenon world to attain the superpower that is possible only through liberating the body with the physical connections which are only possible through the self-sacrifice of the head to attain utmost power. Conversely, the body can remain without certain organs, too. In the language of Guattari, (1947) such a type of

body is called the paranoid body. He remarks, "The organs are continually under attack by outside forces, but are also restored by outside energies" (p.143). Organs react owing to the implication of the external forces, but at the same time, they produce contractions due to external and internal forces and restore energy. In the case of Goddess Chinnamsata, an external cause, she chops her head and feeds her blood to her disciple. After the task is completed, the inside energy supports her to restore her energy and even produces a new sort of energy among the disciples. Biologically such type of body should not survive but in her case, it survives and revives in a new form. The stage of revival is restoring the energy in the form of nature and nurture.

The body comprises both positive and rational pluses, from the point that the head symbolizes ego. To release from ego, people need to self-sacrifice. The body is the agent of contradiction. Where the body consists of logic, control, clamor, order, and ordinary features to run life, as it also has disorder, intoxication, disease, madness, and chaos. According to Greek mythology, such combinations are related to the Apollonian and Dionysian cults, where Apollo is related to music, art, rationality, and logic, and Dionysian is related to the wine of God, irritability, madness, and chaos. The example of Apollo and Dionysian is the human body, which has both features that are projected based on the circumstances. Nietzsche (1999) claims that "Dionysiac and its role in human life, i.e., the view that destructive, primitively anarchic forces are part of us, and the pleasure we take in them is real and not to be denied". (p.30) It emphasizes that Dionysia's attributes shape life in the form of destruction that transforms into lawlessness with the emergence of new laws and rules. When the old phase is broken and a new rupture is shown, then no one can escape from that pleasure. The word 'pleasure' shows any sort of pleasure that can be taken and created by breaking the linear pattern. Chinnamasta, being a female cutting her head, is breaking the linear patterns where linearity is steps of breaking and resisting fundamentalist systems. On the other hand, drinking her blood brings a sense of pleasure and madness that relates to the Dionysian notion. So, the fearful scenario, chaotic moment, and madness of an extreme level reveal that Chinnamsata detaches herself from the physical calls of the visible world.

The major three distinct organs define the female body. These organs are the breast for milk, the womb for conception, and the vagina for birth. Therefore, the body of the female is for creation rather than destruction. But while they are in the phase of reproduction, the body of the women dislocates from themselves, destroys its original form for another life, and transforms into new shapes and sizes physically as well as equips with new roles and responsibilities and functions as an animus figure for the child. So, the combination of anima and animus in one body reflects Dionysus's transvestism. The terms refer to dressing in female attire in the male body. Flood (2006) illustrates that "Dionysus's transvestism, then, symbolizes his radical identification with mothers. I connected this to his association with water, milk, blood, sap, honey, and wine". (p.29) The Dionysian shows the mixture of calm and rupture, such as blood as from growth and nourishment, and blood as destruction and regression. The

Chinnamasta also combines with Parvati as milk and Chinnmasta as blood. The bloody section can only be possible when the Dionysian notion gets embedded in the body.

The head is the focus and the presence in the physical world. The body without a head is the body without a presence in this society. The word existence refers to a fixed point, and the head is the center and fixed point to reveal one's identity and personality for the common beings. The head is the center of a matter of recognition, at which point everyone gets trapped in it. There is no other alternative to living without the head. However, in Hindu mythical tradition, the head is the point of ego that deviates from the process of getting enlightened. For Kinsley (1997) The ten Goddesses indicate "awakening, arising, and ascents" 942) through worship and meditation. Consequently, the spiritual ascending reaches to the culmination. Self-cultured self-sacrifice is an important process for transcendental knowledge and power.

### **Goddess Chinnamasta: A Symbol of Divine Power**

The Goddess Chinnamasta is a form of mythical and tantric icon in the Hindu religion to indicate divinity in goddesses. In Hindu mythology, Chinnamsata is regarded as a manifestation of Devi, or Goddess Durga. According to the Mahavidhya Purana, there are ten forms of the goddess Durga. Among them one is a Chinnamasta. Benard (1990) illustrates that, "In the Hindu tradition, Chinnamasta is associated with the popular goddess Durgā, as one of her ten manifestations known as the Dasa Mahāvidyās." (p.15). The ten forms of Mahavidyas are for the destruction of the demonic quality and the creation of ego free society. Manifestation here indicates multiple power forms of them. 'Mahavidya' comprises two words: Maha is great, and Vidya is knowledge. So, Mahavidyas is the supreme knowledge that one acquires through a tantric knowledge acquisition process. Based on Hindu mythology, supreme knowledge supports releasing oneself from the bond of cyclic existence and acquiring what lies beyond. Thus, Chinnamsata is an example of breaking through the bond of cyclic existence by cutting her head. Cutting the central part of the body conveys the message that one should get rid of egotistical, greedy, and manipulative aspects in society. Cutting head is cutting the centrality of all the negative characteristics that a person can have. Therefore, cutting signifies curtailing the self-centered and highly egoistic feelings. To acquire the supreme, releasing oneself from the physical bondage of Sadhana is the primary requirement. The Goddesses got tantric power out of Sadhana.

Goddess Chinnamasta is a symbol of creation, regeneration, and supremacy through self-cultured discipline. The iconography denotes the form of life, death, and sex. Cibele (2021) explains that the "Chinnamastā represents the interconnection between life, death, and sex. Life feeds on death and is nurtured by it, while sex is how life can be perpetuated". (p.8). The conception, death, and continuation of life are the main points for the deity. The image of the goddess resembles life while three jest blood sprouts out of her neck to the other deities, death of the self and sex as part of female sexuality as well as control over the lust by standing on the intimating body. Symbolically, it represents the cycle of the human life.

The head symbolizes the whole body of human, and human biological identity as well as the embodiment of human identity. When the head is disconnected from the body, then the existence of the being is supposed to be on the question mark. Without a head leads to a contradiction in terms of identity. Not only that face reveals the truth and reality of the human. Goffman (1967) mentions that “Face is an image of self-delineated in terms of approved social attributes, albeit an image that others may share.”(p.1). Though the body without a head does not make a social attribute, it deserves significance for the tantric power attribute. In common sense, face is a self-portrait and self-explanatory feature of the body that cannot be hidden and through that humans or any creature gets approval for the social attributes. In the case of Chinnamasta, the body without face and head discloses that the biological body with worldly attribution, independent and grounded on her own does not need anyone’s support to defy evils.

The image of the goddess releases characteristics of a mother figure, a symbol of protection, guidance, and savior for the beings of the world. The origin of the Chinnamsata reveals that far away from worldly life, the two disciples of Parvati Dakini and Varini go to the forest for meditation and knowledge gain. As the meditation continues, a dire situation occurs, and they strike with great hunger. To fulfill their hunger, goddess Parvati cut off her head and metamorphosed into Chinnamasta. The slit-throat blood was drunk by the Dakini and Varini to reduce their hunger. Kingsley (1998) mentions that “Chinnamasta has cut off her head with her sword. Her left hand supports her head on her platter, and her right-hand holds the sword which she cut it off” (p.11). It depicts the divine power of the goddess, who has cut off her head to feed her children. Moreover, Kingsley adds that “three jets of blood gush from her neck: one stream enters the mouth of the severed head; the other two jets enter the mouths of two female champions” (p.11). This is the line in the mythical stories that explains to fill the hunger of her devotees she cut off her head and fed them her blood. She sacrifices her head to fill the empty stomach of her children and manage the moment of crisis. Crisis management is more relevant contextually. Nevertheless, the way of crisis management by Chinnamasta indicates spiritual power.

Goddess Chinnamasta is the metamorphic version of the goddess Parvati. Parvati represents the obedient wife, and mother as nature, and nurture. That shows the submissive wife, who most of the time relies on Shiva to decide her own life. Parvati is not able to recognize her feminine strengths, power, and energy. But once there is a call, she transforms from an immature form of Parvati to an adult form of Chinnamasta. She decides to eradicate hunger and establish a new sort of knowledge by cutting her head. She is being diverse into the margin, but with the act of welfare, she comes to the main point. The process of metamorphosis leads to the act of invalidating oneself and others. Straus (1996) describes that “Metamorphosis is about invalidation, our self-invalidation and our invalidation to others”. (p.2) The word ‘invalidation’ means an action that is proven wrong. In other words, it is the breakthrough of fallacies, false notions, ideologies, and assumptions that one has held. So, the invalidation leads to the

transformation of the new version, where one can invalidate one's self and others too. Goddess Chinnamsta invalidates her prototype image by cutting her head. Such metamorphosis is the act of invalidating oneself to manifest change and a new dimension as per the demands of the context. It provides the message that when it is valid to show the invalid, then it is important to show the world that invalidation is the transformation that the body and soul. Such processes start from within through the detachment of the self from the physical world that is possible through tantra sadhana.

The Goddess generates female focus, building the limitations and boundaries equalizing the positions of Goddesses. Habib (2005) asserts that “the function of such a center has been both to organize the structure and to limit the free play of terms and concepts within it, in other words, to foreclose such play” (p.666) when the center occurs, there are boundaries and limitations to free play, which can block the vibes of rupture and breakthrough. The relation between body and head is an example of binary opposition, where if the head exists, then the body and feet also exist. But out of supreme power, the head as a symbol of ego is demolished through tantra sadhana. Chinnamasta presents the power of the spirit in the absenteeism of the call of the physical phenomenon requirements.

Blood signifies the willingness to regenerate life as a continuous form bringing life from one to the next form. It does not indicate death and violence but rather the indication of life continuation through the transformation of atman from one form to the next. Sexual liberation and will are the basic forms of pleasure that humans or any living being desire to get. It is the form of Kama that simply means pleasure to restore earthly pleasure and a way to return to the cyclic existence in the world. In that sense, the picture of the Chinnamasata shows the yogin cycle that emphasizes the interpretation of bringing life through blood which is symbolically natural and nurturing to the new life. Bénard (1990) illustrates that “she can bring up the "blood" to this chakra as only an adept yogin can. Thus, Chinnamasta is a great yogin”(p.16). So, the quality of the yogin is to bring life into existence as her image reflects. Hence, this paper focuses on the symbolic significance of Goddess Chinnmasta and explores her iconographic features as a Self about the individual self and self-relating with the cosmos that acquires centrality through divinity.

### **Conclusion**

Goddess Chinnamasta in Hindu mythology represents the superpower personality of a female Goddess with divine power. Her body is the visual representation of a female biological body that has its organs, and those organs function accordingly. On the other hand, the same body holds the socio-cultural norms and values that, based on gender role division, she is assigned to perform. The female biological body reflects the beauty, shape, point of attraction, and focus of the origin of the human species, along with the assigned gender roles that oblige her to perform the task of being a mother, wife, and daughter. She is the obedient wife Parvati of Shiva. Parvati is the mother earth who loves, nurtures, and takes care of her children. Along with this, the body symbolizes tantric Hindu mythology, which endows power to Goddesses when Gods fail to control

evils in the world. She is one among the ten Mahavidyas as the backbone of power to maintain peace and order in the world. Before the metamorphosis of Chinnamsata in her new form. In dire need of her disciple, she transforms into Chinnamasta and shows readiness to defeat the devils of the world. She slit her throat and fed her blood to her companion and her head. Such an act symbolizes the act of nature and nurture, and at the same time, cutting the head is self-sacrifice through sadhana to attain supreme power. It takes very long and self-cultured Sadhana to get control of the senses and achieve supreme. So, in that sense, goddess therefore, Goddess Chinnmasta prevails Shaiva power shifting from physical authority to supreme influence.

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