

A Theological Phenomenology of Shakti in Shakta Praxis

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The task of defining *Shakti* requires a departure from the reductionist tendencies of early Indology, which often categorized the Goddess merely as a ‘consort’ or a ‘fertility archetype’. Within *Shakta Upasana* (worship of Shaktism), *Shakti* is not an attribute of the Divine; She is the ontological definition of Divinity itself. She is the kinetic absolute, the dynamic aspect of the ultimate reality (*Brahman*) that renders the transcendent accessible, cognizable, and realizable. Shakti is the mechanism of *Vimarśa* (divine self-reflection); the mirror in which the infinite Consciousness (*Shiva/Prakāśa*) recognizes its own existence. Without Shakti, the Absolute is *Shava* (a corpse): inert, powerless, and effectively non-existent.

The Metaphysics of Autonomy: Shakti as Svatantra

The Critique of Static Monism

To understand the Shakta definition of Shakti, one must first confront the theological backdrop against which it evolved and reaches us: the Advaita Vedanta of Adi Shankara. In Shankara’s non-dualism, *Brahman* is pure consciousness (*Cit*), but it is static and actionless (*Nishkriya*). The world is explained through *Maya*, a power of illusion that superimposes name and form upon the changeless Brahman. For the Shakta theologian, this creates an ontological fracture: if the world is illusion, and God is real, then the world is practically severed from God. Here we must pause and note that within Shakta worship and actual living within the Shakta mode, practitioners qua devotees know and not merely believe, that these practices predate this Yuga and while many of the canonical texts might have been written in medieval India, their roots predate even the Vedas.

It is safe to say that according to the vibrant Shakta tradition(s) of Assam, Bengal, Odisha, Jharkhand and Nepal, and in reality, the main mode of worship within Sanatana Dharma is the Shakta mode of worship. Even within Vaishnavism, the liturgical praxes based on Pancaratra texts, is definitely Shakta.

Shakta theology, specifically the *Shaktadavaitavada* and the Pratyabhijñā schools of Kashmir, rejects this fracture. They assert that *Maya* is not an illusion that veils Brahman, but the *Creative Power* of Brahman itself. As Ramachandra Dikshitar famously summarized, "Brahman is static Shakti and Shakti is dynamic Brahman". The relationship is not one of substance and shadow, but of fire and heat, or the sun and its rays. You cannot have fire without heat; thus, you cannot have Shiva without Shakti. It is good to remember that *Shaktadavaitavada* is a felicitous conjunction of monism with Samkhya. But that is another matter to be discussed elsewhere.

This redefinition shifts the locus of reality. If the world is the projection of Shakti, and Shakti is real, then the world itself is Real (*Sat*). This ‘world-affirming’ theology is the cornerstone of Shakta praxis. The *Upasaka* does not seek to escape the world (as in ascetic Vedantism) but to realize the world as the "Play" (*Lila*) of the Goddess. The universe is the *Pariṇāma* (real transformation) of the Divine Will, not a *Vivarta* (illusory appearance).

1.2 Prakāśa and Vimarśa: The Optics of Consciousness

The most sophisticated definition of Shakti comes from the *Trika* school of Abhinavagupta, which heavily influences both Srikula and Kalikula Shaktism. Here, the Absolute is defined as *Prakāśa-Vimarśa-Maya*.

- **Prakāśa (The Light):** This is the illuminating aspect of consciousness, the pure Subject. It corresponds to Shiva. It is the "I" that witnesses.

- **Vimarśa (The Reflector):** This is Shakti. It is the capacity of the Light to examine itself. It is the *Reflexive Awareness* that allows the "I" to know "I am."

Bhaskararaya Makhin, the 18th-century polymath and doyen of Srividya theology, explicates this in his commentary *Setubandha*. He argues that a diamond shines (*Prakāśa*), but it does not *know* it shines. A mirror reflects, but it knows it reflects. Shakti is the "knowingness" of the Light. Without *Vimarśa*, Shiva would be pure light shining in a void, unaware of his own potency.

Vimarśa is further defined as *Svatantrya*, that is, Absolute Freedom. Unlike the physical laws that bind matter, or the karmic laws that bind souls, the Absolute Will of Shakti is unbound. She is free to project the universe, sustain it, and withdraw it, solely out of the overflow of Her own bliss (*Ananda*). This concept of *Svatantrya* is crucial for the theologian because it establishes Shakti as the *Agent (Kartri)* of the Godhead.

Spanda: The Ontology of Vibration

If *Vimarśa* is the reflective quality of Shakti, *Spanda* is her kinematic quality. The *Spanda Karikas* and Abhinavagupta's *Tantrāloka* define Shakti as a "subtle vibration" that throbs at the heart of reality. This is not physical motion, which requires space, but a "movement within the motionless," a dynamic potency.

- **The Theological Mechanism:** How does the immaterial become material? Through the slowing down of vibration. The highest Shakti (*Para Vak*) vibrates at an infinite frequency, appearing as stillness. As She descends through the 36 Tattvas (categories of existence), Her vibration "densifies," becoming the mental realm, the energy realm, and finally the gross material realm.

- **Implication for Praxis:** The Shakta Upasaka believes that since their own body and mind are made of this same vibrating Shakti, they can, through specific rituals (Mantra/Mudra/Yantra and Yoga), "tune" their personal vibration back to the frequency of the Divine. Liberation is not going "somewhere else"; it is modulating one's frequency to resonate with the *Spanda* of Shiva-Shakti. Here Shiva-Shakti does not indicate gendered beings but

Lived Shakta Theology

Recent scholarship, including unpublished doctoral dissertations, has begun to uncover the "lived theology" that often escapes the Sanskrit canons. For instance, the work of scholars like Somadeva Vasudeva highlights terms like *Samavesa* (immersion/possession). In high philosophical texts, *Samavesa* is metaphorical "absorption" in non-duality. However, in the lived practice of the *Kula* lineages, it often implies a literal, controlled possession where the *Upasaka* invites the Shakti to displace their egoic agency. This "Theology of Possession" challenges the sanitized, rationalized versions of Shaktism often presented in 20th-century neo-Vedantic interpretations.

Similarly, dissertations on the *Saktipithas* (seats of power) reveal a "Theology of Geography." The earth itself is not just a stage for human action but the dismembered body of the Goddess (Sati). To walk on the earth is to traverse the divine corpus. This geo-theology informs the *Upasaka's* environmental ethics and ritual orientation; prayer is directed not to the sky, but often to the earth, the womb of the cosmos. In actual practice; to 'Chita Mata'.

Śrīkula and Kālīkula

While both Śrīkula and Kālīkula agree on the supremacy of Shakti, they disagree on Her nature and the method of realization.

The Śrīkula (Family of the Auspicious), centered on the Goddess *Lalitā Tripurasundarī*, dominates South Indian Shankara Mutts and the *Srividya* tradition.

- **Theological Focus:** *Sri* implies order, beauty, and prosperity. Here, Shakti is the "Queen" (*Rajarajeshwari*) who governs the universe through precise laws. The theology is heavily influenced by the *Samaya* (internal worship) school, which emphasizes meditative internalization over external ritual. This is not to say that external rituals are unnecessary; it is only to point out that for the adept; external rituals are redundant.
- **Cosmology of the Sri Yantra:** The central icon, the Sri Yantra, is a map of cosmic emanation. The central point (*Bindu*) is the union of Shiva and Shakti. The expanding triangles represent the devolution of the One into the Many. The theology here is one of *continuity*; the individual soul (*Jiva*) is a miniature replica of the cosmos.
- **Soteriology:** The goal is *recognition* of the innate order. The practitioner realizes that their body is the Sri Yantra. The worship is often "benign" (*Saumya*), focusing on the beautiful and maternal aspects of the Goddess.
- **Key Textual Authority:** The *Lalita Sahasranama* is the central scripture. Bhaskararaya's commentary on it is considered the gold standard of Shakta exegesis. He interprets the names of the Goddess as philosophical propositions. For example, the name *Mithya-Jagad-Adhithana* (The support of the illusory world) is interpreted not to mean the world is false, but that the *perception* of difference is false, while the *substratum* (Shakti) is real.

The Kālīkula: The Theology of Dissolution and Time

The *Kālīkula* (Family of Kali), dominant in Bengal, Assam, and the Himalayan foothills, offers a theology of *Time (Kala)* and *Transformation*.

- **Theological Focus:** *Kali* is the feminine form of *Kala* (Time). If Srikula focuses on the "maintenance" of the cosmos, Kalikula focuses on its inevitable "dissolution." Shakti is worshipped here as the "Devourer"; She who births the worlds only to eat them.
- **The "Dark" Absolute:** Unlike the Western "Problem of Evil," Kalikula theology embraces the destructive aspects of nature (death, disease, decay) as manifestations of the Goddess. To deny death is to deny the Mother. The *Upasaka* is encouraged to confront terror to transcend fear. This leads to the "Heroic" (*Vira*) modes of worship, often involving cremation grounds (*Shmashana*) and marginal substances (*Panchamakara*), aimed at shattering social conditioning.

Unpublished research by scholars like Nika Kuchuk and Suchitra Samanta highlights the "affective" dimension of Kali worship. In Bengal, despite her terrifying iconography, Kali is approached with intense, almost child-like intimacy. This "Bhakti-Tantra" synthesis (pioneered by poets like Ramprasad Sen) softens the metaphysical terror of Shakta Tantras into a theology of maternal love. Ramprasad's poetry often scolds the Goddess for her wildness, establishing a relational theology that is unique to the Shakta tradition.

The Syncretic Bridge

While distinct, these streams converge in the concept of *Adi Parashakti* (The Primordial Supreme Power). Texts like the *Mahanirvana Tantra* attempt to harmonize them, stating that *Tara* (a form of Maa Kali) and *Shodashi* (Lalita) are merely different vibrations of the same

Spanda. The *Upasaka* may start in one Kula but often finds that the advanced stages of realization (non-duality) are identical: the realization that "I am She" (*Sa 'ham*).

Hermeneutics of the Divine

The definition of Shakti is not static; it is constantly refined by the *Acharyas* (Teachers).

Bhaskararaya Makhin

Bhaskararaya (1690–1785) is a pivotal figure who systematized Shakta theology to defend it against orthodox Smarta critiques.

- **Defense of Vamachara:** In his commentary *Setubandha*, Bhaskararaya tackles the controversial "Left-Hand" practices. He argues for *Adhikara Bheda* (competency-based qualification). He posits that the Vedas prescribe rules for the *Pashu* (common man), but the Tantras provide the "Direct Path" for the *Vira* (hero). He legitimizes the use of wine and meat in ritual not as hedonism, but as a eucharistic integration of the "forbidden" into the divine non-duality.
- **The Nature of Mantra:** In the *Varivasya Rahasya*, Bhaskararaya argues that the *Mantra* is the "Causal Body" of the Deity. He attacks the Mimamsa view that mantras are mere tools for ritual efficacy. Instead, he argues for *Shabda-Brahman*; the Mantra *is* the Deity. To recite the fifteen-syllable *Panchadashi* mantra is to *be* Lalita Tripurasundarī in sonic form. This ontology of sound is central to the Shakta definition of divinity. Mantra-siddhi is primary in all branches of Tantra.

Sri Abhinavagupta

Although a Shaiva, Abhinavagupta's *Tantrāloka* provides the metaphysical engine for Shakta

theology.

- **Rasa as Theology:** Abhinavagupta bridges aesthetics and theology. He argues that the bliss (*Ananda*) experienced in art or sensory enjoyment is a "spark" of the Divine Bliss of Shakti. This validates the Shakta path of *Bhoga* (enjoyment) as a legitimate yoga. The *Upasaka* is trained to catch the "after-vibration" of sensory pleasure and trace it back to its source in the Self.
- **The Three Goddesses:** He classifies Shakti into *Para* (Transcendent), *Parapara* (Intermediate/Cognitive), and *Apara* (Immanent/Physical). This tripartite division allows the theologian to explain how the One becomes the Many without losing unity.

Amrtananda and the *Yogini Hridaya*

In his *Dipika* commentary on the *Yogini Hridaya*, Amrtananda provides a detailed cosmogony of the *Sri Yantra*. He defines Shakti as the "pulsation" that expands the central Bindu into the tripartite geometry of the Yantra. His key contribution is the concept that the *Yantra* is not a representation of the cosmos, but the *blueprint* from which the cosmos is generated. The *Upasaka*, by meditating on the Yantra, reverses the blueprint, dissolving the cosmos back into the Bindu. In reality, this is easier said than done and takes decades of practice to achieve.

The Phenomenology of Praxis: Embodied Theology

For the Shakta *Upasaka*, theology is not "faith seeking understanding" but "practice seeking realization." The definition of Shakti is found in the phenomenology of ritual.

Nyāsa: The Divinization of the Body

Nyāsa (literally "to place") is arguably the most distinctively Shakta practice. It involves placing one's hands on specific body parts and chanting *Bijaksharas* (seed syllables) to "install" the deity into the physical form.

- **Theological Mechanism:** The *Upasaka* operates on the premise that the human body is a microcosm (*Pinda*). However, it is clogged by *Papa* (impurities/sin) and *Ahamkara* (ego). *Nyāsa* ritually dismantles the human body and reconstructs it as a "Mantra-Body" (*Mantra-Deha*).
- **The Ritual Process:**
 1. **Kara Nyāsa:** Divinizing the hands/fingers.
 2. **Anga Nyāsa:** Divinizing the heart, head, and eyes.
 3. **Matrika Nyāsa:** Placing the 50 letters of the alphabet on the chakras.
- **Phenomenological Outcome:** The practitioner ceases to be "Human" and becomes a "Devata." As the texts say, "Only a God can worship a God" (*Devo Bhutva Devam Yajet*). This is *Embodied Cognition* in a ritual context. The body becomes the yantra.

Mantra: The Sonic Absolute

Shaktism defines Shakti as *Vak* (Speech). The best introduction to 'Vak' remains *Vac: The Concept of the Word in Selected Hindu Tantras* by Andre Padoux. Yet none of these books reveal the entire truth which is only passed down from a Guru to a disciple. Unlike what is found online, initiation into this 'marga' is done by a Guru to one disciple only. A Tantric Guru does not have more than one Tantric disciple.

- **The Four Levels of Speech:**

1. **Para:** Silent, undifferentiated intention (The Will of Shakti).
2. **Pashyanti:** The visualizable thought (The Vision of Shakti).
3. **Madhyama:** The mental word (The Intellect of Shakti).
4. **Vaikhari:** The spoken word (The Action of Shakti).

Practice: The *Upasaka* chants outwardly (*Vaikhari*) to push the consciousness inward to *Para*.

The repetition (*Japa*) creates a standing wave in the consciousness, overwriting the "noise" of worldly thoughts (*Vrittis*).

Antaryaga: The Internal Sacrifice

Advanced Shaktism moves from external idols to *Antaryaga* (Internal Worship).

- **The Ritual:** The *Upasaka* visualizes the spinal column as the sacrificial pillar. The *Kundalini* fire is kindled at the base. The senses and emotions are offered as oblations (*Ahuti*) into this fire. In actual practice, a gourd is ritually sacrificed to represent the sundering of the senses and internal renunciation.
- **Theology:** This is the ultimate non-dual practice. It asserts that *Shakti* is the eater, the food, and the act of eating. The distinction between "sacred" and "profane" dissolves. All life becomes a *Yajna*. Part V: Soteriology: Kundalini and the "Short Path"

The goal of Shakta praxis is *Moksha*, but defined differently from Vedanta. It is *Bhukti-Mukti*—liberation *within* enjoyment.

Kundalini: The coiled Potential

Kundalini is the static form of Shakti residing in the *Muladhara* chakra of every human. She is the "individualized" Absolute.

- **The Ascent:** Through *Shaktipāta* (descent of grace from the Guru) or intense *Sadhana*, this energy uncoils and ascends the *Sushumna* (central channel).
- **The Chakras as Cosmological Planes:** As She pierces each *Chakra*, the practitioner absorbs the corresponding element (Earth, Water, Fire, Air, Ether, Mind) into the Spirit. This is a "dissolution" of the universe within the body.
- **The Union:** In the *Sahasrara* (Crown), She unites with Shiva. The result is the flow of *Amrita* (nectar), which regenerates the body and confers *Jivanmukti* (liberated living).

Shaktipāta: The Theology of Grace

Shaktism is distinctively a religion of Grace (*Anugraha*).

- **Mechanism:** The Guru is not only a teacher but a conduit. When the Guru transmits Shakti (*Shaktipāta*), it is not "instruction" but "ignition."
- Research on the *Shaktipat* tradition suggests that in medieval Kashmir, *Shaktipāta* was the *sine qua non* of initiation. Without the felt experience of energy transfer (trembling, heat, bliss), initiation was considered invalid. This emphasizes that Shakta theology is empirical; it requires *perceptible* proof of the Spirit.

Neurotheology: The Science of Visualization

Modern neuroscience is validating the *technology* of Shakta praxis.

- **Findings:** Studies on "Deity Yoga" (common to Shakta and Buddhist Tantra) show that visualizing a complex deity (with arms, weapons, ornaments) dramatically increases *visuospatial working memory* and *cognitive rotation* abilities.¹
- **Implication:** This suggests that the *Yantra* and *Murti* are not just religious symbols but

"cognitive training devices." The *Upasaka* is essentially performing high-level neuro-cognitive exercises that reshape the brain's plasticity, allowing for the "altered states" described in the texts.²

Comparative Theology: Shakti in Global Context

Shakti and the Holy Spirit (Pneuma)

A fertile ground for comparative theology is the relationship between Shakti and the Christian Holy Spirit.

- **Convergences:** Both are the "Power" (*Dynamis*) of God. Both are associated with wind/breath (*Prana/Pneuma*) and fire. Both are the agents of sanctification and the indwelling presence.
- **Divergences:** Orthodox Christian theology distinguishes the Creator from the Creature. The Holy Spirit dwells *in* the soul but the soul does not *become* the Spirit. Shakta theology is *monistic*: The soul *is* Shakti in limitation.
- **The "Kundalini = Holy Spirit" Debate:** Some Charismatic Christians and syncretists argue that the "manifestations" of the Spirit (shaking, heat, glossolalia) are identical to *Kriyas* (spontaneous movements) in Kundalini awakening. However, theologians on both sides caution against a facile equation, noting the vastly different soteriological goals (Union with Brahman vs. Communion with Christ).³

Panentheism and Process Theology

Shaktism is the quintessential example of *Panentheism* (All-in-God).

- **The Model:** The Universe is the Body of Shakti. She is *Visvarupa* (Form of the Universe) but also *Visvottara* (Beyond the Universe).

- **Process Theology:** This aligns with Whiteheadian Process Theology, where God is not a static ruler but a dynamic process of "becoming." Shakti *evolves* through the cosmos. She experiences the world *through* us. This offers a robust theological framework for an "Ecological Shaktism"; to pollute the earth is to poison the body of the Goddess.⁴

Conclusion: The Integral Definition

In a nutshell we can define **Shakti** within Shakta Upasana as follows:

Shakti is the kinetic and self-reflexive ontology of the Absolute. She is the *Svātantrya* (Absolute Freedom) that allows the One Consciousness to project Itself as the Many without diminishing Its unity. Phenomenologically, She is the *Spanda* (vibration) of the practitioner's own awareness, accessible through the technology of *Mantra* and *Nyāsa*. Soteriologically, She is the *Kundalini*, the force of liberation that dissolves the artificial boundary between the World (*Bhukti*) and the Spirit (*Mukti*).

She is, in the final analysis, the dynamic "I" of the Universe.

Select Bibliography followed by notes:

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2. **Vasudeva, Somadeva (2004 - Related Scholarship).** *The Yoga of the Malini-vijayottara-tantra..*

Significance: Reintroduces the concept of "possession" into the theological definition of *Shaktipata*.

3. **Pathak, I. (1981).** *Saktipithas of India: A Study in Cultural Geography*. (Magadh University).

Significance: Establishes the "Geo-Theology" of Shaktism.

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The other citations have been removed for ease of reading.