

Devi Annapurna: Presiding Deity of Varanasi

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A 'peetha-sthan' is an epicentre of spiritual force. Varanasi, a perennial fountain of spirituality, is a revered 'peetha-sthan'. It is considered the principal residential seat of Shiva-Shakti below the Himalayas. Here the river Ganga moves northwards. Its left bank is semi-circularly curved and the region around the bank is referred to as the kingdom of 'Kashi'. The central point of this semi-circular kingdom is its capital 'Varanasi' – an ancient Puranic city on the confluence of rivers 'Varuna' and 'Asi' where the spiritual macrocosm and microcosm meet. In yogic parlance, Varanasi is a holy centre in the inner world of a sadhaka, the sacred pilgrimage where the soul-in-bondage (Jiva) pursues atma-sadhana-pilgrimage through the practice of Brahma-vidya to reach liberation or Shiva-hood. The yogic-science scripture Shiva-samhita pronounces,

*"Ida hi Pingala khyata Varanasiti hochyate,
Varanasi tayor madhye Vishwanathotra
bhasitah;"*

Among the naadis (or 'subtle nerve rivers' within the body) the Ida referred to as 'Varuna' and Pingala as 'Asi', are of wide fame. Between these lies the realm of 'Varanasi', where Lord Shiva (the liberated soul) resides in resplendent glory.

Shakti, the mother of the universe, is worshipped in equal measure. The Adyastotra of Brahma-Yamal states – 'Varanasyam Annapurna' –indicating that Devi Annapurna 'resides' in Varanasi as its

established deity. On the other hand, the Tantra-Chudamani mentions that Devi Vishalakshi is the presiding deity of Varanasi peetha. These two Goddess deities



manifest two inner truths, Devi Vishalakshi from the creative principles and Devi Annapurna from a yogic standpoint. In the aftermath of Daksha Yagna, when Lord Shiva began his 'tandava' dance with the lifeless Devi Sati on his shoulders, Lord Vishnu, through his Sudarshan Chakra cut her body into several pieces. These pieces fell on earth and each such place is considered a 'Sati-peetha'.

The distribution of Devi Sati's relics symbolizes physical ingrainings of the Mahavidyas (or creative principles) in earthly creation, to prevent it from destruction. It is said that Devi Sati's earrings and portion of face with third eye fell on the soil of Varanasi. Vishalakshi refers to the 'great eye-force' of the divine. Thus from the creative standpoint, Devi Vishalakshi is a form of Durga-Mahashakti, the fundamental protective force of creation represented through the 'Ten Mahavidyas'. The 'eye of the inner consciousness' or the kutastha-chaitanya is entered into through the trikuti (triangular cavern) of the agna chakra and it is here that 'Vishwarupdarshan' ('view of the universe') is experienced wherein the entire universe consisting of the physical, astral (or subtle) and causal is perceptually visualized. So Devi Vishalakshi is the Kutastha-chaitanya-shakti, the inner-eye-force.

Again from a Yogic point of view she is looked upon as Devi Annapurna, one who nourishes the satta (being) with its 'amrita' nectar during its journey towards divine self-realization and fulfillment. She is the one who provides all-encompassing bliss and is glorified as nityanandakari, yoganandakari and sarvanandakari. In his renowned Annapurna stotram, Adi Shankaracharya says –

"Annapurne sadapurne Sankara

Pranavallabhe

Gyana vairagya siddhyartham bhiksham

dehi ca Parvati"

Devi Annapurna is ever full of 'amrita' – the divine nectar, elixir of all that is immortal and blissful. She is fullness personified and thus Shiva's precious 'life-beloved'. Shiva – the epitome of wisdom, renunciation and accomplishment approaches her for sacred-nourishment, requesting bhiksha of paramanna or blessed food.

Devi Annapurna is Lord Shiva's Bhairavi-Shakti, one who sustains and harmonizes the sadhaka-mind's outward-to-inward progression in its quest for self-realization. She powers the truth seeker with 'divine food', providing sustenance as the satta (being) transcends various stages of consciousness. She nurtures not only the individual seeker's sheath of the physical self (annamaya kosha), but also provides nourishment for the overall well-being of all life in the universe, whose every bit (of consciousness) is a pilgrim in the journey towards fulfillment. Her gift of 'amrita' or divine immortalizing nectar is the soul-being's most prized nutrient. The route to her 'eternal-well of amrita' can be found through Yoga, the path of divine union. This is symbolized in the popular image we see of Lord Shiva receiving 'anna' from the Devi Annapurna. Here, Shiva, the greatest of yogis, is depicted as the eligible recipient

and Annapurna, his consort, as the provider. She, representing the source of all joy and fortune, sits on a throne draped in the glory of heavenly royalty. Holding a golden vessel containing sacred food ('anna', symbolized through rice), she serves it to the 'spiritually hungry' Shiva with her right hand using a golden ladle. This is her renowned meditative form that depicts how, through the path of renunciation, a yogi can become capable of receiving the blessed 'amrita-anna' from the supreme divine power.

In the path of yogic evolution, as a yogi-sadhaka proceeds from the anahata towards the agna, riding on the force of a deep renunciation-consciousness that generates directly from the power of the soul (atma-shakti), the divine power that enables this climb to the agna chakra and helps attain stability in its realm by nourishing the physical, mental and vital sheaths of the being who remains in a state of ultimate tyaga (renunciation) seeking only the divine in its quest for realizing the ultimate truth, is Devi Annapurna. From within the sahasrara in the cranium, divine ambrosia (chandri-sudha) drips down and descends into the agna chakra. Through the sadhana of Khechari mudra, by enabling the tongue to enter into the cave in the head, the sadhaka can sip the nectar of this chandri-sudha. Again through the practice of pranayama and firm establishment in kumbhaka, when the kulakundalini Shakti rises and settles in the agna chakra, this ambrosia falls into the tongue as rays of divine light-nectar and through the lalana chakra is transmitted into the fifty-nine principal aerial channels, nourishing and stabilizing the primary pranic forces that sustain life-consciousness, thereby preserving the physical embodiment, both inner and outer. This is the yogic significance of Mata Annapurna's 'paramanna-daan' or gift of blessed food to Lord Shiva.

As one transcends from Jiva-hood to Shiva-hood, knowledge dawns and the mysteries of creation begin to unfold. As the supreme laws are revealed it becomes apparent that 'anna' is verily Brahman. The Taittiriya Upanishad pronounces 'Annam Brahmeti Vyajanat', indicating 'anna' to be the physical manifestation of Brahman. Sage Bhrigu, son of Varuna, through his tapasya realized that food is manifested-Brahman, with three eternal capabilities, namely of creation, sustenance and disappearance, embedded in its innate property. He pronounced his realization as follows: On consumption of 'anna' (staple food), shukra (semen) is produced and through its entry into the womb, the human embodiment of a Jiva comes into being. Thus 'anna' has powers that enable birth. Similarly 'anna' nourishes the body in a person's lifetime and thus has powers of sustenance. Again on death, the soul in bondage takes birth again in the womb of a mother through the seed of a father. Encapsulated in food Brahman enters into its new parent's physical sheath (annamaya kosha). The newly entered soul-being becoming permeated in this annamaya kosha received from its parents now relieves itself of its older sheath to take a new embodiment, thereby exhibiting its 'laya' or disappearance property. This way, after being enlightened by the physical or annamaya properties, sage Bhrigu began to grasp the intricate secrets of the vital (pranamaya), mental (manomaya) and psychic or intuitive-wisdom (vigyanamaya) embodiments of a Jiva, realizing each of them to be Brahman. Finally he realized the innate properties of the body of bliss (anandamaya kosha) and equated that to Brahman. A Jiva is born out of bliss, in the quest of bliss he lives and at the end, in bliss he shall culminate. In this evolutionary progress of a being, it is impossible to

separate 'anna' from Brahman. Food is life (prana) and life (prana) is Brahman.

Devi Annapurna, being the mother-force of Anna-Brahman, is both the Mother of Jiva and Shiva. Saint Sri Ramprasad therefore sang from the depths of his realization – Thou art Maa Annapurna, called 'Shyama'(Kali) in the cremation grounds, 'Roma' in Vaikuntha and 'Uma' in Kailash – meaning that Devi Annapurna is a special form of the creative-sustaining-annihilating supreme power, one who is divine power-consort of The Lord of the Universe, who himself resides as avimukta (never-forsaken) Shiva-linga in the holy land of Kashi, both in the physical world as well as in the embodied soul. She, as Anna-Brahma-swarupini is the liberator of the Jiva and the provider for all that Shiva needs.

Translator's Reminiscences:

As this translation was being carried out, several thoughts flashed, several feelings surged. Memories went back to the early days when we moved into the Akhanda Mahapeeth Ashram amidst the then lush green rural surroundings of Jagannathpur village in Shibrampur. Sree Sree Maa quietly remarked, "There is poverty all around, material poverty of people – no proper clothes, winter wear for a large section of the people especially women, elderly and children. The area lacks adequate drinking water, education and healthcare. This region needs to be developed. There is an even greater poverty – that of the spirit – in the hearts and minds of people, spread across the state and its neighbourhoods. People need true spiritual nourishment to bring about change that only divine power can provide. For this we should seek, request and bring Mata Annapurna here. She is the power of Durga-Shakti that provides all-round succour. She is the true benefactor of the poor seeker. She is also the provider of the realized and liberated yogi who lives on

nothing else but divinity.” Soon Sree Sree Maa took initiatives at all levels – from activities of charity (distribution of new clothes and blankets, support for education and medical care, food distribution for children) and welfare (providing drinking water, street-lighting, road improvement) to spiritual upliftment (through imparting sadhana, spirituo-cultural activities, yoga classes, patanjali yoga classes, discourses) and gave direct darshan at regular intervals. Quietly she made plans for setting up the Annapurna Temple in the Bhakta-Niwas area. With great interest, we observed and followed her meticulous instructions – building construction, development of the deity – idol to be enthroned – its design and manufacturing, development of the altar-asana, etc., at the physical level followed up even more carefully planned and executed (primarily by herself) multi-year spiritual sadhana of the ten mahavidyas, imparting consciousness to the thousand and eight shiva lingas which were encased within the base of the altar after due worship. She called me and said, “Partha – we have to go to Varanasi where Mata Annapurna resides to take a spark from her living light, bring it here to complete the installation in the correct manner.” So we went to Varanasi and from there she brought back the ‘Annapurna consciousness’ which was then ingrained into the idol-ensemble during the Avishekha or anointing ceremony two and a half years ago. Those of us who were part of this whole activity observed how the inner work was done in quiet seclusion. During the visit to Varanasi she said, “Mata Shankari Mai Jew, the great woman yogi who is linked to all great saints from Trailanga Swami, Sri Ramakrishna Paramhansa, Sri Sri Shyamacharan Lahiri Mahashay and is also mentioned by Swami Yogananda Paramhansa, came to me at night in her enlightened body and reminded

me how in my earlier birth I would come to the Annapurna temple in Varanasi and pour Ganga-water on the Shiva Lingas. She is very happy with our plans and has requested me to visit her sadhana place.” We located her old sadhana place but due to paucity of time we were able to visit the sacred room only in our next visit.

Mata Annapurna was finally installed in Akhanda Mahapeeth in November of 2011. During the installation ceremony, when the time came for the ‘bhiksha to Lord Shiva’, Sree Sree Maa remarked to our guru-brother priest Yagnanarayan-da, “Yagnanarayan – are you sure you can provide the required ‘anna bhiksha’ to Lord Shiva?” Yagna-da put his hands down and remained seated in quiet surrender. Several seconds passed in complete silence in the hall. Sree Sree Maa sat with her eyes closed. Suddenly she opened her eyes, got up and took the ‘anna bhiksha’ in the earmarked spoon, offered it to the Lord, came back to her seat and again closed her eyes. After some more time she opened her eyes and told Yagna-da, “Now proceed.” The offering had been made. Soon the Puja was soon completed.

From then onwards Mata Annapurna resides in Akhanda Mahapeeth in her resplendent glory. Every once in a while, at the dead of the night, Sree Sree Maa visits the sanctum sanctorum to personally give the Devi and the Lord a bath and change the clothing. Their clothes are ideated and manufactured primarily by the ‘designer-tailor’ duo of Sree Sree Maa and Swami Prabodhananda. We, who have been with Sree Sree Maa for several years now, can imaginatively but reasonably accurately gauge the purpose of this ‘sringar’. The real ‘wish-fulfilling mother Annapurna’ has created yet another image of herself through unified cosmic principles that is camouflaged through what appear to be ordinary rituals.

At the end of this translation, well past midnight, I came and sat down in Sree Sree Maa's room contemplating deeply with my eyes closed on the divine principles of the inner eye-force of Mata Vishalakshi and the spiritually nourishing power of Mata Annapurna, both forms of Adya-Shakti Maa Durga. Sree Sree Maa was engrossed reading a book. My mind went into silence – the entire kutastha was occupied by her

presence like never before and the 'annapurna-amrita experience' surged for a moment. I looked at her and smiled to myself. The 'magic' of the translation effort was complete. Howsoever hard she tries to hide her true forms and behave like the ordinary, divinity leaks.

–Translated into English by
Sri Partha Pratim Chakrabarti,
Her Blessed Child