



ANCIENT ASIA

Vol. 17, 2026, pp. 103-115

© ARF India

URL: <https://ancient-asia-journal.com>

<https://doi.org/10.47509/AA.2026.v17i.07>

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Chāmuṇḍā at Kamakhya: Tantric Symbolism and the Representation of Human Anatomy in Early Medieval Assam

Jayanta Roy

Research Scholar, Department of Anthropology, North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong. E-mail: rjayanta833@gmail.com

Abstract: The representation of human anatomy in Indian sculpture provides important information into the relationship between art, religion, and knowledge systems. While Early Historic sculptural traditions introduced detailed depictions of the human body, Early Medieval Brahmanical and Tantric depictions further developed these conventions through symbolic representations of divine figures. Among such deities, Chāmuṇḍā has a distinctive position due to her emaciated form and prominent skeletal features. This paper documents and analyses two sculptures of Chāmuṇḍā from the Kamakhya temple complex, Assam, one of the most important centres of Shakta-Tantric worship in India. The study examines their iconographic features, tantric associations, and representations of the human body, with importance on skeletal anatomy. Through visual and comparative analysis, the sculptures are examined in relation to other Chāmuṇḍā images from different regions of India to identify regional similarities and variations in artistic expression. The study traces the development of anatomical representation from Early Historic sculptures to the Chāmuṇḍā iconography of the Early Medieval period. It states that the Kamakhya sculptures reflect a sophisticated interaction between religious symbolism, Tantric ideology, artistic understanding, and anatomical observation. These images not only demonstrate the sculptors' technical skill but also reveal how the human body was engaged as a powerful visual medium for expressing concepts of death, transformation, and divine power within the Shakta-Tantric tradition.

Keywords: Kamakhya, Sculpture, Tantrism, Human Anatomy, Śakti Pitha

Received: 28 May 2026

Revised: 27 June 2026

Accepted: 10 July 2026

Published : 28 July 2026

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Jayanta Roy (2026). Chāmuṇḍā at Kamakhya: Tantric Symbolism and the Representation of Human Anatomy in Early Medieval Assam. *Ancient Asia*, 17: 1, pp. 103-115. <https://doi.org/10.47509/AA.2026.v17i01.07>

Introduction

Chāmuṇḍā is recognized as a manifestation of Durga or Kali and is counted among the eighty-one tantric goddesses, bearing various names such as Chamundeshwari, Chamundi, Chandi, Sachhi Mata, Kausiki, and Chachika. Her association with the slaying of the demon brothers Chanda and Munda gives her the name *Chāmuṇḍā*. Various literary sources, including the Vedas, Epics, *Puranas*, *Devi Mahatmaya*, *Devi Bhagvata*, and *Markandeya Purana*, provide evidence of the Śakti cult and the presence of *Chāmuṇḍā*. *Chāmuṇḍā* is often portrayed either as an individual deity or as part of the *Sapta Mātṛkās* panel. Within the *Sapta Mātṛkā* panel, *Chāmuṇḍā* holds a significant position, being placed as the seventh goddess in many texts (Rao 1914; Rose 1926; Banerjea 1956; Joshi 1979; Mukhopadhyay 1984; Panikkar 1997; Unkule et al. 2017; Banerjee 2023).

Assam boasts a rich Śaktism heritage, with Kamakhya Temple standing as one of the venerable 51 Śakti Pithas. This temple holds the distinction of being an ancient portal to unveil India's sacred mysteries. As detailed in the Sati Purana, Kamakhya Temple is a sacred place of worship dedicated to the Hindu Tantric goddess (Sarma 1960; Bhardwaj 1973; Mishra 2004; Singh 2010; Barua 2015). Historical records, including inscriptions, attribute the construction of the current Kamakhya Temple to the Koch ruler Naranarayana (Malladev) and his brother Chilarai (Sukladhvaj). The Kamakhya Temple is located in the state of Assam, which was historically known as Prāgjyotisha-Kāmārūpa. The term 'Prāgjyotisha' can be traced back to the Hindu Epic Mahabharata, but it was through epigraphic sources that Assam came to be referred to as the Prāgjyotisha-Kāmārūpa kingdom. The earliest inscription to use the name "Kāmārūpa" for this region can be found in the Allahabad Pillar inscription of Samudragupta (Kakati 1989; Gait 1926; Sharma 1999; Deka 2013).

Gait (1926) mentioned the term 'Prāgjyotisha' or 'Prāgjyotishpura', carries the meaning of *Prag* means 'former' or 'eastern' and *Jyotisha* 'a star', astrology, shining. Prāgjyotishpur may, therefore, be taken to mean the 'City of Eastern Astrology'. The Prāgjyotisha-Kāmārūpa kingdom thrived in the Brahmaputra valley from the 3rd to the 13th centuries CE, under the rule of three major dynasties, Varmana, Salasthamba and Pāla (Kakati 1989; Gait 1926; Sharma 1999; Barua 2015).

The Kamakhya temple and the region of Kāmārūpa are commonly recognized as the epicenter of mystical practices for acquiring supernatural abilities, as well as the domain associated with the practice of dark magic and witchcraft, respectively (Eliade 1958, 1959; Foulston and Stuart 2009; Goswami 1998; Singh 2009; Barua 2015).

In the *Kalika Purana*, a text dating back to the 9th century, there is a mythical narrative about *Kāmārūpa*'s origin. The tale unfolds as follows: While the Great God *Mahādeva*, also known as Shiva, was engrossed in penance, the other gods grew apprehensive that his asceticism would grant him universal power. In response, they dispatched *Kāmadeva*, the God of Love, to make Shiva fall in love once more and thereby disrupt his meditation. *Kāmadeva* accomplished his mission, but Shiva's fury was so intense that he reduced *Kāmadeva* to ashes with a fiery glance from his third eye. *Kāmadeva* was eventually revived and returned to his original form (*rupa*) in Assam, and the land where this transformation occurred came to be known as *Kāmrup* or *Kāmārūpa*. The *Kalika Purana*, dating to the 9th century CE in ancient Assam, offers a mythical account of the origin of the *Devipitha Kāmākhyā*. It narrates how *Mahāmāya*, reborn as Sati, became Shiva's wife through devotion but met a tragic end due to her father Daksha's arrogance. After transforming into *Shyāma* or *Kālī* in a fit of rage, she ultimately sacrificed herself at her father's *yajña*. In grief, Shiva carried her body, dancing in destruction, leaving her body parts at 51 sites across the Indian Subcontinent, with the *Devipithas* (seats of the Devi) or *Śaktipithas* (seats of power) being established in her honor (Kakati 1989; Kinsley 1998; Urban 2001; White 2003; Singh 2000, 2010; Singh and Singh 2010; Barua 2015).

The depiction of Chāmuṇḍā in a dancing posture represents one of the most powerful and energetic expressions of her fierce nature surrounded by Hindu iconography. Unlike her more common standing or seated postures, the dancing posture highlights her role as a manifestation of destructive and transformative energy (*ugra śakti*). In several sculptural traditions of central and eastern India, Chāmuṇḍā is depicted dancing on a corpse (*śava*) or surrounded by skeletal attendants, symbolizing her control over death, decay, and the cremation ground (Kinsley 1988). Her emaciated body, sunken belly, projecting ribs, and garland of skulls further underline her association with mortality and tantric practices (Rao 1914). In these representations, she is often shown holding attributes such as a skull-cup (*kapala*), trident (*trishula*), detached head, and *damaru*, while performing a vigorous dance that signifies both the demolition of evil forces and the cosmic process of dissolution (Dehejia, 1986). The dancing posture may also be connected to descriptions in the *Devī Māhātmya*, where the fierce goddesses and Mātṛkās celebrate victory over demons through ecstatic and terrifying movements (*Devī Māhātmya*: 465-522). Thus, the dancing form of Chāmuṇḍā should not be viewed only as an image of destruction; rather, it embodies the transformative power of Śakti, where death becomes crucial stages in the regeneration and maintenance of cosmic order (Kinsley 1988; Dehejia 1986).

The Kamakhya Temple is unique in India as it honors the goddess of desire in her menstruating form during the *Ambubachi Mela*. This festival takes place in June, following the Hindu lunar calendar. During the *Ambubachi Mela*, the temple remains closed for three days, symbolizing the goddess's annual menstrual cycle. In one of the rituals, a red cloth is draped over the yoni shaped sacred stone. This festival coincides with the onset of the rainy season in the region.

To honor Chāmuṇḍā, worshippers traditionally presented meat and wine as part of their *naivedya* offerings, with the aim of satisfying the goddess's thirst. This reverence often involved performing animal sacrifices, typically involving buffalo or goats. According to the *Devi Mahatmaya*, there was a historical practice of human sacrifices known as '*Narabali*', where unmarried males were offered before transitioning to animal sacrifices. Eventually, this practice evolved into a more humane form, which involved the symbolic cutting of a pumpkin (Rose 1926; Banerjea 1956; Joshi 1979; Mukhopadhyay 1984; Urban 2001; Unkule et al. 2017).

Although previous studies have examined Chāmuṇḍā particularly from religious, iconographic, and tantric perspectives (Rao 1914; Mukhopadhyay 1984; Panikkar 1997; Unkule et al. 2017; Banerjee 2023), limited attention has been given to the representation of the skeletal body within the regional sculptural tradition of Assam, particularly in relation to the sacred and tantric landscape of Kamakhya. Previous study has also discussed skeletal and ascetic bodies in Indian art, especially within Buddhist traditions such as Gandharan representations of the fasting Buddha (Huntington 1985; Zysk 1986). However, the present study differs by investigating how the body of Chāmuṇḍā was visually conceptualized within a tantric framework where skeletal metaphors functioned not only as anatomical observation but as a symbolic expression of death, asceticism, power, fear, and supremacy.

The two sculptures from Kamakhya are particularly significant because they show distinct skeletal detailing with the religious environment of one of South Asia's most important tantric centers. Through iconographic, comparative, and visual analysis, the paper argues that the emaciated body of Chāmuṇḍā represents a deliberate symbolic and religious creation associated with cremation-ground images, Yoginī traditions, and cryptic Shakta practices of the early medieval period.

Chāmuṇḍā has an important position in Brahmanical, Shakta, and Tantric traditions and appears in several literary and iconographic sources including the *Devi Mahatmya*, *Kalika Purana*, *Agni Purana*,

Matsya Purana, Vishnudharmottara Purana, and various tantric texts. In the Devī Māhātmya: 465-522, Chāmuṇḍā emerges from the fierce anger of the goddess Durga and slays the demons Chanda and Munda, from which her name is derived. Later textual traditions increasingly associate her with cremation grounds, death symbolism, yogic power, and cryptic rituals.

By the early medieval period, Chāmuṇḍā became closely integrated with the Yoginī cult and the Sapta Mātrkā tradition. Sculptural depictions from Odisha, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Gujarat, and other parts of India commonly portray her as emaciated, skeletal, and terrifying, adorned with skull garlands, serpents, severed heads, and bone ornaments. In several Tantric traditions, the terrifying form of the goddess symbolized both destructive power and spiritual supremacy. Her association with cremation grounds and ascetic imagery further reinforced her connection with Tantric ritual practices and Yoginī worship during the early medieval period (Mukhopadhyay 1984; Panikkar 1997; Kinsley 1998; Unkule et al. 2017; Banerjee 2023).

Although many textual traditions prescribe common iconographic features such as the kapala, trishula, khatvanga, narmunda, skeletal body, and hollow belly, regional sculptural traditions developed significant stylistic variations. The Kamakhya sculptures therefore provide an important opportunity to examine how Tantric imagery and skeletal representation were adapted within the regional artistic tradition of Assam.

Methodology

The study is based on field documentation and iconographic analysis of two Chāmuṇḍā sculptures presently preserved within the Kamakhya temple complex, Nilachal Hill, Assam (N26°09'59.08" E91°42'21.54"). These sculptures were visually examined and photographed by the author during field visits. Additional comparative studies were undertaken using museum collections, published reports, archival images, and previous academic studies on Chāmuṇḍā iconography across India.

The analysis includes iconographic study, comparative visual analysis, and interpretive understanding of the body within Tantric visual culture. Particularly the representation of skeletal elements such as ribs, clavicles, sternum, and facial bones. The identification of anatomical features is based on observation of sculptural representation rather than modern anatomical precision.

Textual references from the Devi Mahatmya, Kalika Purana, Puranic iconographic traditions, and secondary research on Tantric and Yoginī cults have been incorporated to contextualize the symbolic dimensions of Chāmuṇḍā images.

Location and significance of Chāmuṇḍā goddess in Kamakhya

On the Nilachal hill within the Kamakhya Temple (Assam) campus, there exist two distinct images of Chāmuṇḍā. These sculptures are intricately carved on their front sides, suggesting their original intent to be affixed to a temple wall or a flat surface. Currently, these two images are positioned on either side of the entrance, at a certain distance from the Shri Kedareshwar Shivalaya temple within the Kamakhya complex (N26°09'59.08" E91°42'21.54"). The Chāmuṇḍā deity depicted in these sculptures is portrayed in the *Pretasana* pose, usually dynamic and commanding, reflecting her powerful nature (**Figure 1** and **Figure 2**). In terms of stylistic attributes, both sculptures exhibit similar features. The goddess is adorned with specific symbols and attributes, including a *Kapala* (the frontal part of a human skull), a *khanjor* (a knife), a *Trishula* (a trident), and a *Narmunda* (a human head) (**Table 1**). It's worth noting that the knee portion of the right leg in both sculptures is entirely broken, and the lower left hand of **Figure 1** has suffered damage as well.



Figure 1: Seated Chāmuṇḍā sculpture at Kamakhya temple, Guwahati, Assam.

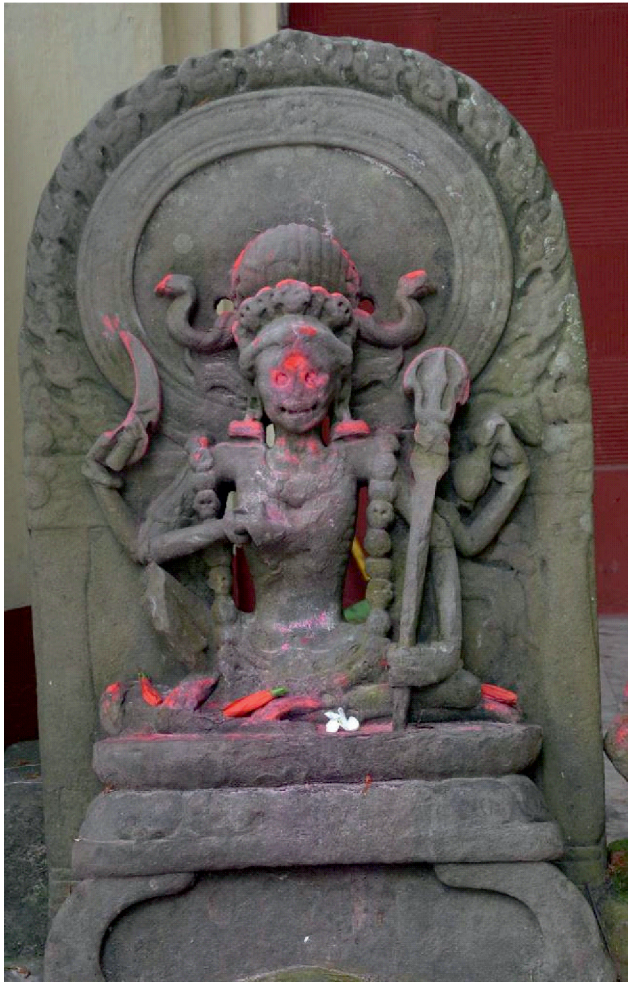


Figure 2: Chāmuṇḍā Sculpture Displaying all attributes at Kamakhya temple, Guwahati, Assam.

Iconography of Chāmuṇḍā

Table 1: Iconographical features of the sculpture of Chāmuṇḍā

Sl. No	Name of the Goddess	Posture	No. of Hands	Upper right hand	Upper left hand	Lower right hand	Lower left hand
Fig.1	Chāmuṇḍā	Pretasana	4	Khanjor	Narmunda	Kapala (skull cup)	Broken
Fig.2	Chāmuṇḍā	Pretasana	4	Khanjor	Narmunda	Kapala (skull cup)	Trishula

This deity is renowned for her fierce temperament and is described as the consort of Bhairava, who is similarly characterized by his formidable nature. She is also revered as a goddess associated with concepts of death and time (Kinsley 1975). The multifaceted nature of this deity has led to the development of her fearful aspect, characterized by various elements. The fierce goddess is depicted through the exposure of her skeletal body, her terrifying countenance with intense facial expressions reflecting determination and strength, hollow eyes, a wide-open mouth with long canine teeth, and elongated nails. The place or vehicle (*vahana*) where the deity is positioned is known as *preta*, often interpreted as a male deceased figure. There is a scholarly divergence of views on this matter, with some asserting that *preta* is not a deceased boy but rather Lord Shiva himself, who lies beneath her as

a means to pacify her anger after vanquishing a demon (Rose 1926; Mukhopadhyay 1984; Misra 1989; Panikkar 1997; Soundarajan 2003; Unkule et al. 2017; Banerjee 2023).

The goddess Chāmuṇḍā is typically portrayed in alignment with the commonly observed iconographic features described in various ancient texts. Most frequently, she is depicted with four hands. However, when she is represented with three eyes and four hands, she is referred to as *Yogeshwari* (Misra 1989; Rao 1914). The goddess's hands cradles a skull-shaped bowl filled with blood, while another hand grasps a *Khanjor*. Her third hand wields a *Trishula* or *Khatvanga*, and the fourth hand holds a *Narmunda*. She adorns herself with a *Mundamala*, a garland made of skulls, and her hair is fashioned into a *Jatamukuta* with locks that stand upright (*urdhvakesha*), resembling fiery flames (*jvalakesha*) entwined with a serpent and adorned with skulls (Rao 1914).

The deity is often portrayed alongside symbols such as a skeleton, jackals, corpses, snakes, eagles, and scorpions. Regional variations may include attributes like the *Trishula*, *Khatvanga*, *Vajra*, *Khanjor*, *Kapala*, *Damaru*, and *Narmunda*. The goddess is adorned with ornaments made of bones, serpents, skulls, and other symbols associated with disease and death. Additionally, the deity is typically depicted wearing a *Yajnapovita*, a sacred thread made of skulls (Rao 1914; Rose 1926; Banerjee 1956; Joshi 1979; Panikkar 1997; Unkule et al. 2017; Banerjee 2023).

The overall depiction of Chāmuṇḍā symbolizes her role as a powerful and formidable goddess associated with protection and destruction of evil forces.

Skeletal Representation of the Sculpture Chāmuṇḍā

During the Early Medieval period, Indian stone sculptural art marked a significant development with the introduction of the first representations of human anatomy. This period featured images of Buddha with emaciated bodies, a distinctive departure from the usual depictions. In the Buddhist iconographic tradition, these emaciated representations of Buddha are unique, and they predominantly appeared within specific regions and during a limited timeframe. This style of depicting Buddha was notably prevalent within the Gandhara School of Art (Huntington 1985; Zysk 1986; Rose 1926). Within the Brahmanical iconographical tradition, certain divine figures are consistently depicted or described with skeletal attributes (Rao 1914; Rose 1926; Smith 1997; Bhattacharya 2008; Wujastyk 2009; Unkule et al. 2017; Banerjee 2023).

On the basis of stylistic features, the two Chāmuṇḍā sculptures from Kamakhya may be assigned to the Late Pāla period of Assam (c. 10th to 12th century CE), the period characterized by the flourishing of Shakta and Tantric sculptural traditions in the Brahmaputra valley (Choudhury 2006). The expression of facial features, ornamentation, body proportion, and iconographic composition shows similarities with other early medieval sculptural traditions of eastern India.

These images intricate details of human anatomy, showcasing features such as bones and muscles carved on a stone panel or *silapatta*. Notable elements include the clear depiction of the humerus (upper arm), the observable femur (thigh bone), prominent clavicles, discernible ribs, well-defined zygomatic bones (cheek bones), proportional supra-orbital ridges (eye orbits), weathered or broken nasions (nasal bones), visible phalanges, and the presence of the sternum (**Figure 3**).

Comparison

Chāmuṇḍā sculptures found in India typically depict the fierce form of the goddess Chāmuṇḍā, a prominent deity in Hinduism, particularly within the Shakta tradition. Chāmuṇḍā is often portrayed as a fearsome goddess, wielding various weapons and surrounded by symbols of power and destruction. Here's a comparison of Chāmuṇḍā Devi sculptures from different regions of India:

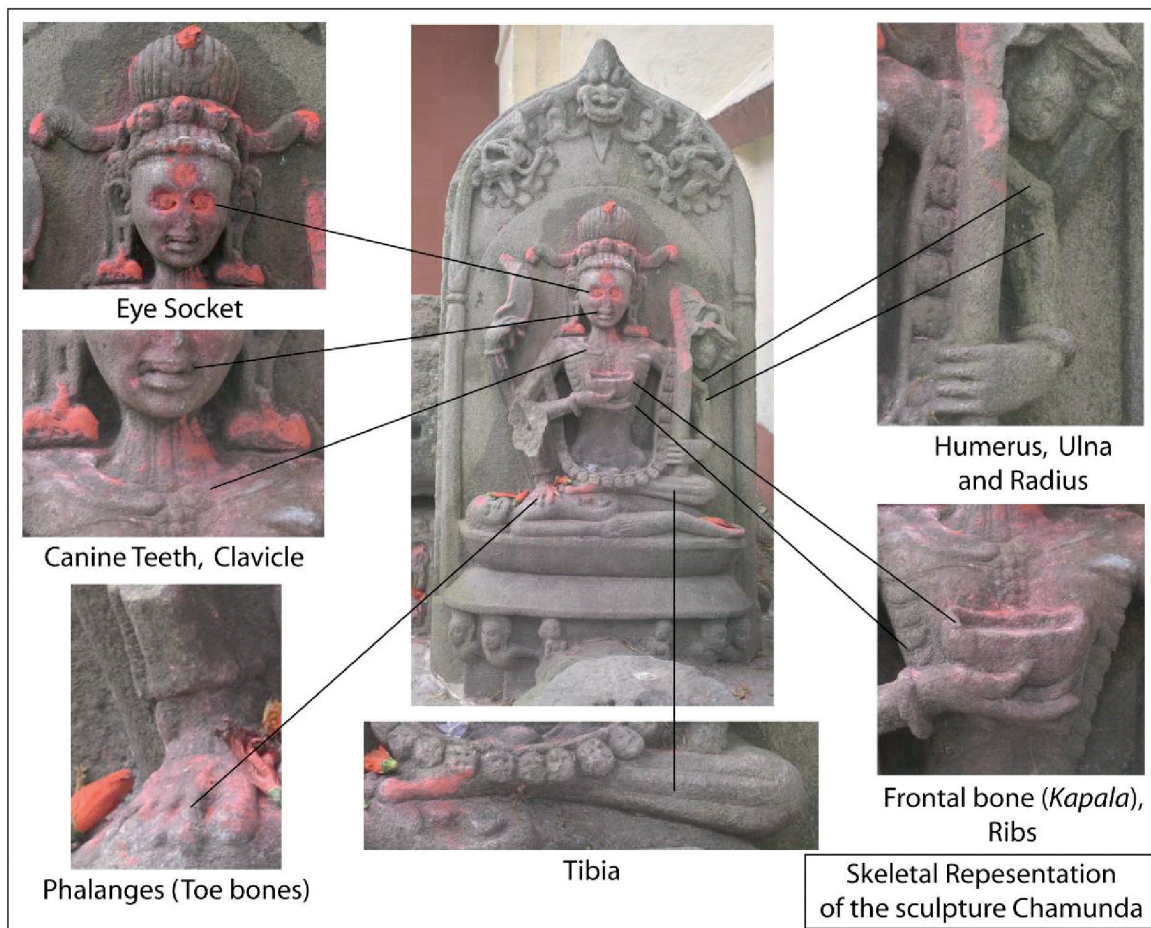


Figure 3: Skeletal Representation of the sculpture Chāmuṇḍā.

Comparative Interpretation of Regional Variations

The Chāmuṇḍā sculptures across India share certain common iconographic attributes; important regional variations can be identified in posture, physical action, ornamentation, and symbolic importance. Sculptures from Odisha and Central India commonly depict Chāmuṇḍā in dancing or dynamic postures associated with Yoginī and Tantric traditions, often highlighting cremation-ground representation and skeletal contact. In contrast, several North and Northeastern Indian examples, including those from Assam, place greater importance on emaciated anatomy, rigid facial intensity, and static iconic depiction.

The worship of Śakti, or the divine feminine, is one of the most widespread and significant traditions within Hinduism. Scholars have long debated the origins of Śaktism and the symbolic role of the goddess, who is often portrayed as the female counterpart of the Hindu trinity. However, comparatively little attention has been given to forms of feminine divinity that exist beyond the conventional image of the nurturing “mother goddess.” Among these are the Yoginīs, a group of powerful female deities popularly known as the Chausath Yoginīs (Sixty-Four Yoginīs). Sculptures of these deities are found in a number of temples, primarily in Central India, many of which are situated in remote and relatively inaccessible locations. The Yoginī cult is generally believed to have emerged during the early medieval period and flourished mainly in Central India. Most of the surviving Yoginī temples, notable for their distinctive architectural forms, date between the 10th and 13th centuries CE (Dehejia 1986; Rajoriya and Rajouria 2025).

The Kamakhya sculptures are unique because they combine skeletal detailing with the sacred geography of an important Tantric center. This suggests that the body itself functioned as an important symbolic medium within the Tantric imagination of the region. The frequent depiction of Chāmuṇḍā in dancing postures in several regions may further symbolize cosmic destruction, cremation-ground ritualism, and uncontrolled divine energy associated with Tantric worship. Such postures should therefore be interpreted not only as artistic variation but as visual expressions of theological and ritual concepts.

Variations in Iconographic, Symbolic, Artistic and in devotional context

North and Northeastern India: Sculptures of Chāmuṇḍā Devi in North and North-eastern India emphasize her fierce warrior nature and her triumph over evil forces. Typically depicted with a dark complexion, Chāmuṇḍā Devi stands atop a corpse or demon, symbolizing her victory over malevolent entities (**Figure 4**, **Figure 6** and **figure 9**). She is adorned with a garland of skulls, representing her role as the destroyer of ignorance and ego, and her multiple arms hold weapons such as a sword, trident, mace, and severed head, highlighting her fierce and protective essence (Lerner and Kossak 1994) (**Figure 7** and **Figure 8**). These sculptures often feature intricate details, particularly in the depiction of her weapons, ornaments, and facial expressions, leaning towards a realistic style that captures her intensity and dynamism. Devotion to Chāmuṇḍā Devi in North India is closely linked to tantric practices and rituals aimed at invoking her protection and blessings (**Figure 5** and **figure 10**).

The comparative sculptures shown in Figures 4-11 represent examples from both the Early Historic and Early Medieval periods. The standing Chāmuṇḍā image preserved in the National Museum, New Delhi (**Figure 4**), is dated as (c. 12th century A.D.), in contrast, the Sapta Mātṛkā panel containing Chāmuṇḍā from the National Museum (**Figure 11**) belongs to the Early Medieval period (c. 10th century CE), when Mātṛkā and Tantric iconography flourished across northern and eastern India. The Kamakhya sculptures, dated stylistically to the Late Pāla phase of Assam (c. 10th -12th century CE), therefore within this developmental sequence and demonstrate the continued evolution of anatomical representation within Shakta-Tantric art.



Figure 4: Chāmuṇḍā Sculpture in Standing Posture at the National Museum, Delhi.

Figure 5: Seated Chāmuṇḍā Sculpture with Prominent Rib Bones at Assam State Museum, Guwahati, Assam.

Figure 6: Standing Chāmuṇḍā Sculpture at the Assam State Museum, Guwahati.



Figure 7: A Chāmuṇḍā sculpture with a fierce expression, adorned with bones and vines, intricately carved, located at the State Museum in Bhubaneswar, Odisha.
Source: Unkule et al. (2017)



Figure 8: Standing Chāmuṇḍā Sculpture at Baghara, Allahabad district, Uttar Pradesh.
Source: Wikimedia Commons; original source/creator and licence information to be verified from the image's Wikimedia Commons page



Figure 9: A Chāmuṇḍā sculpture symbolizing her triumph over malevolent forces, displayed at The Harvard Art Museums, Harvard University.
Source: Harvard Art Museums, Harvard University.



Figure 10: A Chāmuṇḍā sculpture with multiple arms, some of which are broken, housed at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.
Source: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York accession no. 1989.121. Public Domain



Figure 11: A Chāmuṇḍā figure featured in the Sapta Mātṛkā panel at the National Museum, Delhi.



Figure 12: A Chāmuṇḍā figure in a yogic posture, part of the Sapta Mātṛkā panel at the Parsurameswara Temple in Bhubaneswar, Odisha.

Source: Wikimedia Commons; original source/creator and licence information to be verified from the image's Wikimedia Commons page

By and large, while there may be regional variations in the depiction of Chāmuṇḍā Devi sculptures in India, they all convey her essential attributes as a fierce yet compassionate goddess who protects her devotees and destroys evil forces.

Discussion

Chāmuṇḍā sculptures can be encountered in various parts of India, with notable collections displayed in prestigious institutions such as the National Museum in Delhi, the Assam State Museum in Guwahati, the Baroda Museum in Gujarat, and the State Museum of Bhubaneswar in Odisha, among others. These sculptures are often found either as standalone pieces or as part of Sapta Mātṛkā panels.

The representation of skeletal elements in Indian sculpture should be understood within a broader chronological framework extending from the Early Historic to the Early Medieval periods. Early Historic sculptural traditions, particularly the Gandharan representations of the Fasting Buddha (c. 1st - 3rd century CE), provide some of the earliest surviving examples of detailed anatomical observation, including the depiction of ribs, clavicles, vertebral structures, and emaciated musculature (Huntington 1985; Zysk 1986). These images demonstrate an artistic concern with bodily realism associated with asceticism and renunciation.

By the Early Medieval period (c. 8th-12th century CE), similar anatomical representations were adapted into Brahmanical and Tantric iconography. Within this context, the goddess Chāmuṇḍā emerged as one of the most important skeletal deities, represented with ribs, sunken stomach, visible bones, and emaciated features symbolizing death, ascetic power, cremation-ground symbolism, and transcendence over worldly existence (Kinsley 1988; Mukhopadhyay 1984; Unkule et al. 2017). The

two Chāmuṇḍā sculptures from Kamakhya, stylistically assignable to the Late Pāla period of Assam (c. 10th-12th century CE), belong to this later phase of artistic development. Rather than representing the earliest evidence of anatomical depiction, they demonstrate the continuation and transformation of anatomical knowledge into a distinctly Tantric visual language. Thus, the Kamakhya sculptures may be interpreted as part of a long evolutionary tradition in Indian art, beginning with Early Historic anatomical representations and concluding in the highly symbolic skeletal imagery of the Early Medieval Shakta-Tantric world.

The author examines how the sculptors, while creating these images complete with anatomical details, would have needed a fundamental knowledge of human anatomy. This knowledge was likely acquired through keen observation of actual human anatomy to achieve perfection in their artistic endeavors.

Conclusion

The study of the Chāmuṇḍā sculptures at Kamakhya Temple, Assam, reveals a deep interconnection between Tantric practices and human anatomy, as reflected through the deity's iconography. Chāmuṇḍā, a powerful and fearsome goddess within the Shakta tradition, is depicted with intense anatomical precision, symbolizing her role as both a protector and destroyer of malevolent forces. The meticulous detailing of skeletal elements in these sculptures highlights both the artistic skill of Indian sculptors and the continuity of anatomical representation from the Early Historic period into the Early Medieval Tantric tradition. The Kamakhya Chāmuṇḍā images reveal how anatomical knowledge was transformed from realistic depictions associated with ascetic descriptions into a powerful symbolic language expressing death, transcendence, and divine power within the Shakta-Tantric worldview.

The presence of Chāmuṇḍā in the Kamakhya Temple underscores the temple's significance as a center of Tantric worship and mysticism, particularly in the context of the broader Śaktism heritage of Assam. This research contributes to our understanding of how religious iconography in ancient India served as a conduit for both spiritual and anatomical knowledge, reflecting a cultural synthesis of art, religion, and science. Through this study, we gain insight into the ways in which the divine and the corporeal were intertwined in the religious practices of early Indian societies, with Chāmuṇḍā standing as a testament to the enduring legacy of Tantric traditions in the region.

Figures 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, and 11 are based on field photographs taken by the author during visits to Kamakhya Temple, Assam State Museum, and the National Museum, Delhi. Other figures reproduced from museum collections, institutional archives, published works, and online sources have been appropriately acknowledged in the figure captions. All visual materials are used only for academic and research purposes.

Acknowledgement

The author extends heartfelt appreciation to Prof. Queenbala Marak, Professor in the Department of Anthropology at North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong, Meghalaya, for her invaluable guidance and information. Gratitude is also expressed to Ms. Jougathi Basumatary, Assistant Professor in the Department of Archaeology at Cotton University, Guwahati, Assam, for her insightful comments and advice. Furthermore, the author wishes to convey sincere thanks to Priyanka Patir, Exploration Officer at the Directorate of Archaeology, Assam, for her valuable input and support.

The author is especially grateful to the authorities of the Kamakhya Temple, Nilachal Hill, Guwahati, Assam, for their dedicated efforts in preserving and maintaining the two significant sculptures of Chāmuṇḍā examined in this study. Their continued commitment to safeguarding this invaluable cultural and religious heritage has made the documentation and scholarly examination of these remarkable sculptures possible.

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