

[My Family's Goddess Pilgrimage](#)

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My Family's Goddess Pilgrimage Grandma, mom, aunts, uncles and cousins visit five Durga temples

By Runjhun Noopur, India

Devotees of goddess durga believe that no one gets the opportunity to visit any of Her 51 Shakti Peethas (divine power centers) unless She Herself sends the call. As luck would have it, I was blessed with an invitation from the Goddess and an opportunity to visit not one, but five of Her temples. Three are Shakti Peethas and all are located in the land of the divine, Himachal Pradesh. Joining me were nine members of my extended family: my mother, grandmother, two aunts, one uncle and my four young cousins, including seven-year-old triplets--Varun, Rimjhim and Aryan.

We had planned our five-day pilgrimage--or yatra, as we preferred calling it--for the month of May. We hoped to escape the sweltering heat of India's plains, even as we satiated our spiritual longing; but as soon as we got down at the Chandigarh station, our guide explained that much of the trip was at lower altitudes and there would not be a significant difference in temperature from the plains. Fortunately, the weather, though hot, was bearable.

A practical advantage we had over first-time visitors was already being well acquainted with a local guide. A trip with such a guide is far more convenient and economical than a pre-planned and prepaid travel package. Also, even though looking for a guide may seem like a practical hassle, it is a convenient way of avoiding the fraudulent dealings by travel agents, who are extremely prevalent in the tourist hot spots in Himachal Pradesh and surrounding areas.

Naina Devi

From Chandigarh station, we set out by cab on an unexpectedly long journey through Himachal's winding, mountainous roads. Our first destination was Naina Devi, located in the district of Bilaspur, approximately 115 kilometres from Chandigarh. The lush green beauty of the Himalayan foothills welcomed us, and the delight of a clean, pollution-free environment was refreshing.

Naina Devi temple is on top a somber-looking mountain. Most of the hundreds of devotees choose to walk two kilometers up a steep pathway or take the ropeway. Since we were accompanied by very young kids and also by aged members of the family, we chose to reach the shrine by cab, which took just 15 minutes. The path to the Goddess was flanked by shops selling offerings, flowers and souvenirs peculiar to the region--altars to capitalism we'd see at every temple.

We reached the shrine in the evening, with the intent of attending the evening arati worship. It had already begun as we entered. The temple echoed with the sound of the bells, conches and chants. As we stood at the far end of the long queue to the main shrine, nothing could really be seen. Yet the sound of worship drowned the chaos, and an immense stillness settled all around. It was an unsurpassed encounter.

After several minutes of experiencing this beautiful inner silence, our senses suddenly became aware of the hustle and bustle around. The sound of bells faded away as the arati came to an end. A long wait to finally enter the main shrine followed, made less tedious by the delightful chanting of "Jai Mata Di" ("Victory to the Divine Mother"), by the enthusiastic devotees.

The Deity of Naina Devi inside the shrine is not a Deity in the conventional sense of a human-like form. She is said to reside here and, for that matter, in all the peethas as an abstract pindi--a featureless red stone covered with vermilion. The story of the Shakti Peethas (see sidebar page 35) says that Sati's eyes fell in this place, hence the name Naina Devi, "Eye Goddess." Accordingly, the pindi stone representing the Goddess has prominent and beautiful eyes. Many devotees offer a pair of minuscule silver eyes in the belief that they and their family will be protected from eye ailments.

Chintpurni Devi

Our next destination, Chintpurni Devi, is located in the district of Una, 100 kms from Naina Devi. We arrived there at about 11 in the morning and found a two-kilometer queue leading to the temple. The shopkeepers informed us that today, Sunday, was the most crowded. We waited stoically for our turn, even as the kids refused to show an ounce of patience. Punjabi devotees handing out toffees and chips in massive quantities provided a welcome relief.

Finally, our turn came, and we entered the shrine amidst much hustle and bustle. The huge crowd refused to remain orderly, despite the efforts of police deployed for that purpose. Nobody was allowed to stay in the shrine for more than two seconds as the hordes of people pushed their way inside. It was only with some luck and skill that we were able to have a proper, though fleeting, glimpse of the Deity. The Goddess here, too, resides as a pindi. This shrine has an extremely powerful vibration. The priests said it is a seat of tantra, a mystical and magical form of worship.

A large "wish-fulfilling" banyan tree in the temple courtyard is festooned with thousands of red threads. Devotees make a wish and tie a thread on the tree as a symbol of their wish and faith.

After our tumultuous ordeal to meet with the Goddess, we spent some quiet time near the temple enjoying the delicious suji ka halwa, a semolina sweet, served as prasadam by the temple priests.

Jwala Devi

Our next stop was Jwala Devi, just 30 kilometers away. The Goddess here manifests in the form of fire or jwala, emanating from a wall. Sati's tongue is said to have fallen here. Dedicated to the nine Goddesses Jwalamukhi, those of "flaming mouth," the temple has nine permanent flames named after the Goddesses--Mahakali, Unpurna, Chandi, Hinglaj, Bindhya Basni, Mahalakshmi, Saraswati, Ambika and Anji Devi. All these flames, or jyotis, have been burning incessantly since time immemorial. This miracle reminds us of the triviality of human knowledge and existence before the infinite and unfathomable powers of nature. According to our guide, several excavations for the source of fuel were unsuccessful.

The main attractions of the temple are the arati sessions--at early morning, sunrise, afternoon, evening and bedtime. A beautiful room has been designed for the Goddess in the spacious temple premises where She sleeps every night after the evening arati. The bed in this room is piled high with rich dresses decorated with precious ornaments.

After visiting the shrine, we went to the langar, a free feeding place providing generous quantities of dal and rice. In addition to the devotees, thousands of poor and hungry people are fed here daily.

Vajreshwari Devi

Our next destination was Vajreshwari Devi, after whom the district of Kangra has been named, about 20 km from Jwala Devi. The original shrine was destroyed by several invaders, beginning with Muhammad of Ghazni in the 11th century ce, but it has since been restored to its original glory. This temple was uncrowded and well organized, without the hustle and bustle that haunted us in the previous shrines, and we had a long and lingering meeting with the Goddess.

In the market here are shops that sell brass wares unique to Himachal Pradesh. We saw beautifully designed incense stick stands, faces of Gods and Goddesses, showpieces and statues. We spent a small fortune on these items before proceeding on!

Chamunda Devi

Our final destination was Chamunda Devi, a shrine equally important for Lord Siva. According to our guide, this site was originally only for Lord Siva and called Nandikeshwar Dham. The Chamunda Devi shrine was located 16 kilometers away, on top of the Dhauladhar Hills. This is the place where Goddess Kali is said to have defeated the demons Chand and Mund--hence the shrine's name, Chamunda. The Deity or pindi of the Goddess is said to have come down the mountain in a flood and ever since has been housed in the current shrine along with Nandikeshwar Mahadev. It is one of the most powerful and fierce incarnations of the Goddess.

The system of queues was well managed, as in the Kangra Devi shrine. Every devotee had an opportunity to have a proper view of the Deity. The pindi of the

Goddess is not as abstract as in the previous shrines. The tradition is that this Deity is so powerful that no one can gaze at it directly. Hence, it is kept completely draped in a red cloth.

A novel aspect of the shrine is the Deity of Lord Nandikeshwar or the Sivalingam which is located below a huge boulder. This Sivalingam was found existing here naturally. A tiny temple was built around it without disturbing the actual setting. Only one person at a time can go inside. Despite the claustrophobic space, the temple is full of positive vibrations. Ardent devotees of Siva claim that a distinct sense of presence of the Almighty can be felt inside that sanctum.

The area on the river near the shrine has been beautifully developed as a theme park and picnic spot. Devotees can also take a dip in a pool made for that purpose. There are beautiful statues of Lord Siva, Lord Hanuman and Goddess Parvati. After offering prayers at both temples, the kids with us had a great time boating and playing around in the water.

The Return

As our cab once again followed the mountainous paths, drifting away from the Devbhoomi, the land of the Gods, a sense of satiation drowned our senses. It was a fulfilling journey, a memorable rendezvous with the Divine. It was more than an excursion, it was a spiritual outlet for our accumulated physical and mental stress. The raksha sutras (protecting threads) tied on our wrists at each of the five shrines carried the blessings of the Goddess.

In the wake of the August, 2008, stampede at Naina Devi which killed 162 people and injured 400, devotees have become apprehensive about visiting these shrines. While the hazards of the crowd and the occasional unruly bunch of devotees cannot be ruled out, most of these shrines do have suitable arrangements for maintaining order and security. Incidents like the recent stampede are rare and can be avoided if the devotees themselves behave in a more responsible and aware manner and cooperate with the authorities in taking security measures. P!pi

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The Origins of Shakti's 51 Power Centers

Asked about the origin of the 51 Peethas, most Hindus would relate the story of Daksha's yajna, or grand sacrifice, to which he invited all the Gods except Lord Siva. According to the story, Sati, Siva's wife and daughter of Daksha, appears uninvited at the sacrifice to confront her father and demand an explanation for the insult to her husband. Humiliated by his arrogant response, she jumps into the sacrificial fire and dies. Siva, learning of the tragedy, destroys the sacrifice, cuts off Daksha's head, picks up the body of Sati and dances distraught across India. Lord Vishnu, fearing the consequences of Siva's grief, cuts Sati's body into pieces with His discus. As each falls to the ground, it creates one of the 51 sacred Peethas, each associated with a specific body part, from Sri Lanka to the Himalayas.

Seeking further explanation of this story, Hinduism Today queried Dr. S. P. Sabharathnam, one of India's foremost scriptural experts. He replied that according to the basic Shakti scriptures, such as Tantraraja Tantra, Yogini Hrudayam and Nitya Shodasikharnava, there are indeed 51 Shakti Peethas, one for each of the 51 letters of the Sanskrit alphabet. But he disputes their association with Daksha's sacrifice and the decimation of Sati's body.

Instead, he says the peethas are related to Shakta or Tantric worship rituals, specifically, the practice of nyasa. According to the website, www.shivashakti.com, "The word nyasa means 'placing' and refers to a large component of Tantric worship in which the practitioner touches various parts of his body while at the same time pronouncing a mantra and visualizing a devata (divine being) or a bija (root) mantra. Nyasa is intended to 'divinize' the body of the worshipper."

Dr. Sabharathnam goes to explain, "At the beginning of the Sri Chakra or Sri Vidya worship, six nyasas are to be performed, of which peetha nyasa is the sixth. During this nyasa, the priest touches 51 parts of his body--head, face, right eye, left eye, and so on--while reciting a bija mantra and naming the location of one Shakti Peetha--Kamarupa, Varanasi, Nepala, etc.

According to Dr. Sabharathnam, the scriptures listing the peetha nyasa predate any association with the story of Daksha's sacrifice. He said, "In order to link the peethas with the Puranas, the later Puranic writers--that is, after the 16th

century--added the story of Sati's dismemberment. The Skanda Mahapurana deals at length with Daksha's yajna but makes no mention of Siva carrying off Sati's body, nor do any of the authentic Shakta Tantras. The story is a fabrication."

"These later writers," he goes on, "took the existing peetha nyasa, in which each Peetha is identified with a part of the worshiper's body, and incorporated it into the story of Daksha's sacrifice. In the process, they created at least seven different lists of the Peethas, including one of 108. These later writings do not tally with the correct list provided in Yogini Hrudayam and other authentic Tantric texts. Such fabricated lists have been proliferating endlessly from the 17th century."