

= Shashthi =

Shashthi or Shashti (Sanskrit : षष्ठ्यम् , षष्ठ्या , literally " sixth ") is a Hindu folk goddess , venerated as the benefactor and protector of children (especially , as the giver of male child) . She is also the deity of vegetation and reproduction and is believed to bestow children and assist during childbirth . She is often pictured as a motherly figure , riding a cat and nursing one or more infants . She is symbolically represented in a variety of forms , including an earthenware pitcher , a banyan tree or part of it or a red stone beneath such a tree ; outdoor spaces termed shashthitala are also consecrated for her worship . The worship of Shashthi is proscribed to occur on the sixth day of each lunar month of the Hindu calendar as well as on the sixth day after a child 's birth . Barren women desiring to conceive and mothers seeking to ensure the protection of their children will worship Shashthi and request her blessings and aid . She is especially venerated in eastern India .

Most scholars believe that Shashthi 's roots can be traced to Hindu folk traditions . References to this goddess appear in Hindu scriptures as early as 8th and 9th century BCE , in which she is associated with children as well as the Hindu war @-@ god Skanda . Early references consider her a foster @-@ mother of Skanda , but in later texts she is identified with Skanda 's consort , Devasena . In some early texts where Shashthi appears as an attendant of Skanda , she is said to cause diseases in the mother and child , and thus needed to be propitiated on the sixth day after childbirth . However , over time , this malignant goddess became seen as the benevolent saviour and bestower of children .

= = Iconography = =

Shashthi is portrayed as a motherly figure , often nursing or carrying as many as eight infants in her arms . Her complexion is usually depicted as yellow or golden . A Dhyana @-@ mantra ? a hymn describing the iconography of a deity , upon which a devotee of Shashthi should meditate ? describes her as a fair young woman with a pleasant appearance , bedecked in divine garments and jewellery with an auspicious twig laying in her lap . A cat (मर्जरा) is the vahana (mount) upon which she rides . Older depictions of Shashthi may show her as cat @-@ faced , while another reference describes her as bird @-@ faced .

In Kushan era representations between the first and third centuries CE , she is depicted as two @-@ armed and six @-@ headed like Skanda . A significant number of Kushan and Yaudheya coins , sculptures and inscriptions produced from 500 BCE to 1200 CE picture the six @-@ headed Shashthi , often on the reverse of the coin , with the six @-@ headed Skanda on the obverse . Shashthi is also pictured in a Kushan @-@ era Vrishni triad from the Mathura region , surrounded by Skanda and Vishakha . In Yaudheya images , she is shown to have two arms and six heads that are arranged in two tiers of three heads each , while in Kushan images , the central head is surrounded by five female heads , sometimes attached to female torsos . Terracotta Gupta era (320 ? 550 CE) figures from Ahichchhatra show the goddess with three heads on the front and three on the back .

The folk worship representation of Shashthi is a red @-@ coloured stone about the size of a human head , typically placed beneath a banyan tree such as those usually found on the outskirts of villages . The banyan may be decorated with flowers or strewn with rice and other offerings . Shashthi is also commonly represented by planting a banyan tree or a small branch in the soil of a family 's home garden . Other common representations of the goddess include a Shaligrama stone , an earthen water pitcher , or a Purna Ghata ? a water vase with an arrangement of coconut and mango leaves ? generally set beneath a banyan tree .

= = Evolution and textual references = =

The general consensus among scholars of Hinduism traces the origins of Shashthi , like Skanda , back to ancient folk traditions . Over the course of the early centuries BCE , the Vedic fertility goddess of the new moon , Sinivali @-@ Kuhu , and Shri @-@ Lakshmi , the Vedic antecedent of

Lakshmi , were gradually fused with the folk @-@ deity Shashthi . This merger created a " new " Shashthi that was associated in various ways with Skanda (also known as Kartikeya or Murugan) . From her origins as a folk goddess , Shashthi was gradually assimilated into the Brahmanical Hindu pantheon , and ultimately , came to be known in Hinduism as the Primordial Being and Great Mother of all . The fifth century text Vayu Purana includes Shashthi in a list of 49 goddesses , while a Puranic text calls her " the worthiest of worship among mother goddesses . " However , the long @-@ standing universality of her worship has led scholar David Gordon White to challenge the classification of Shashthi as a folk goddess , observing that Shashthi has been worshipped on the sixth day after childbirth by " all Hindus : rural as well as urban people , since the Kushan era . "

In textual references , Shashthi is often depicted as closely connected to Skanda . An early textual reference dating to 8th ? 9th century BCE relates Shashthi to the six Krittikas who nurtured and nursed Skanda . Sometimes regarded as an aspect of the goddess Durga (identified with Parvati ? the mother of Skanda) , she is also called Skandamata (" Skanda 's mother ") . The 3rd to 5th century text Yajnavalkya Smriti describes Shashthi as the foster @-@ mother and protector of Skanda . However , later texts identified her as Devasena , the consort of Skanda , including the epic Mahabharata wherein Shashthi (as Devasena) -the daughter of Prajapati- is betrothed by the god @-@ king Indra to Skanda . She is also identified with goddesses Shri , Lakshmi , Sinivali , and Kuhu in this text . The scripture Padma Purana also describes Shashthi as the wife of Skanda . In the 7th century text Kadambari , the images of Skanda and Shashthi are also said to have painted together on the wall of a palace lying @-@ in chamber of the queen .

Scriptures and folk traditions also connect Shashthi and Skanda in numerous indirect ways . The Mahabharata , finalised around the 4th century CE , describes a relationship between the infant Skanda and the Matrikas (" Mothers ") , a group of female deities who embody the perils that afflict children until the age of sixteen . The Encyclopaedia of Hinduism identifies this textual account as a source of the modern @-@ day practice of mothers worshipping Shashthi until their child reaches the age of sixteen . In the Mahabharata , Shashthi is described as an attendant of Skanda who behaves malevolently by causing disease . Skanda is furthermore said to have 18 malevolent spirit @-@ followers collectively known as the skanda graha , one of whom ? Revati ? is given the epithet " Shashthi . " This association of Revati with Shashthi is reiterated in the 5th century text Kashyapa Samhita , wherein Shashthi is also identified as the sixth form of Skanda and a sister of the five Skanda deities . Like Skanda , Shashthi is occasionally depicted with six heads , in which form she is also known by the epithet Shanmukhi (" six @-@ headed ") .

Shashthi is historically associated with a variety of other deities . The second century BCE composition Manava Grhya Sutra identifies Shashthi with Lakshmi , the goddess of wealth and beauty . It also describes the Shashthi @-@ kalpa rite was performed on the sixth lunar day of every fortnight invoking Shashthi to provide sons , cattle , treasures , corn , and the fulfilment of wishes . The scripture Padma Purana , composed between the 8th and 11th centuries , describes Shashthi as the daughter of Indra . Texts written over the last 500 years , such as the Brahma Vaivarta Purana and the Devi Bhagavata Purana describe Shashthi as the daughter of the creator @-@ god Brahma . In addition , she is associated with Mula @-@ Prakriti , the universal female energy said to be composed of six aspects : one of these , typically the sixth aspect , is said to be Shashthi .

Over time , the characterisation of Shashthi underwent a gradual evolution . Aforementioned folk traditions originating between the 10th and 5th centuries BCE associated the goddess with both positive and negative elements of fertility , birth , motherhood and childhood . However , between the 4th century BCE and the 5th century CE , a shift occurred in which Shashthi was increasingly depicted as a malevolent deity associated with the sufferings of mothers and children . The fifth century text Kashyapa Samhita calls Shashthi by the epithet Jataharini (" one who steals the born ") and provides a list of the malevolent activities in which Shashthi is believed to engage , including her practice of stealing fetuses from the womb and devouring children on the sixth day following birth . For this reason , the text recommends that she be propitiated through worship in her honour on this day in the lying @-@ in room and on the sixth day of every fortnight thereafter .

Eventually , Shashthi came to represent all goddesses and forces responsible for causing diseases in children and their mothers , who needed to be propitiated on the sixth day after childbirth to

prevent these illnesses . Consequently , Shashthi came to personify the sixth day of a child 's life . The sixth day of the lunar fortnight is itself called Shashti , a name derived from the name of the goddess . The Yajnavalkya Smriti , composed during Gupta rule between the 3rd and 5th centuries CE , describes the rites of Shashthi Puja in which Shashthi is worshipped on the sixth day after childbirth to ensure the protection of the newborn baby . According to one explanation for the worship of Shashthi on this day , folk belief associates this critical time in an infant 's life with great susceptibility to diseases related to childbirth , such as puerperal fever and tetanus , and that worship of Shashthi is performed to help ward off these diseases .

Over the past 1500 years , the characterisation of Shashthi gradually shifted toward that of a benevolent and protective figure . In Banabhatta 's 7th century work Harshacharita , Shashthi is called Jatamatr (" mother of the born one ") , while the Kadambari by the same author calls her Bahuputrika , meaning " having many children " . Shashthi 's evolution mirrors that of the demoness Jara of the Mahabharata and a similar Buddhist goddess , Hariti : all of them are characterised in early texts as malevolent goddesses , but over the course of time these deities transform from devourers of children into their saviours and protectors .

= = Legends = =

A chapter entitled Shashthidevyupakhyanam , appended to the texts Brahma Vaivarta Purana and Devi Bhagavata Purana , narrates the tale of Shashthi . King Priyavrata ? the son of Svayambhuva Manu (the progenitor of mankind) ? and his wife Malini performed the putrakamesti yajna (a fire @-@ sacrifice ritual to gain a son) in an effort to conceive , but after twelve years of pregnancy , a still @-@ born son was delivered to Malini . Priyavrata set off to the cremation grounds with the corpse of his son . On his way , he saw a celestial woman dressed in white silk and jewels , riding in a heavenly chariot . She declared to Priyavrata that she was Devasena , the daughter of Brahma and wife of Skanda . She further said that she was Shashthi , foremost of the Matrikas (" Mothers ") of Skanda , and had the power to grant children to devotees . She held the child in her hand and resurrected the infant , then began to leave for her heavenly abode , taking the child with her . Priyavrata stopped the goddess , praising her and pleading that she return his son to him . The goddess agreed on the condition that Priyavrata would initiate and propagate her worship in all three worlds : heaven , earth and the netherworld . She returned the child to the king , naming him Suvrata and declaring that he should become famous as a great , virtuous , and learned ruler . Priyavrata decreed that Shashthi should be worshipped on the sixth day of every month , as well as the sixth and twenty @-@ first days after childbirth , and on all occasions auspicious to a child . She would be worshipped in the form of a Shaligrama stone , a Purna Ghata under a banyan tree , or an image of her on a wall .

A Bengali folk @-@ tale about Shashthi tells of the youngest of seven daughters @-@ in @-@ law in a prosperous household who was a glutton that used to secretly steal food and then blame a black cat , which was thrashed as punishment . The black cat happened to be the vahana (mount) of Shashthi and complained about the mistreatment to the goddess , who pledged to avenge it . When the youngest daughter @-@ in @-@ law gave birth to a son , the cat stole the child in the night and gave it to the goddess , and did the same for her next six sons . The neighbours accused the young mother of carelessness and began to believe she might be a witch who ate her own children . Finally , when a daughter was born , the young mother decided to remain awake the whole night to resolve the mystery . She managed to catch the cat in the act of robbery and wounded it with her bracelet , but the cat escaped with the child , leaving a trail of blood . The mother followed this trail to the abode of Shashthi . There she saw her sons playing around Shashthi as the goddess held the mother 's infant daughter in her arms . Shashthi explained the reason for the mother 's ordeal and told her to ask pardon of the cat . The mother asked the cat 's pardon , which was granted , and then she promised the goddess that she would offer worship in a ritual dedicated to her , which would come to be known as the Jamai @-@ Shasthi Vrata . The mother returned home with her children and spread the worship of the goddess , who blessed her family with children , wealth and happiness .

A different version of this tale narrates that when the youngest daughter @-@ in @-@ law was pregnant , she secretly ate the food @-@ offerings ritually dedicated to Shashthi and then blamed the theft on the black cat . Angered by the dishonour of its mistress and the unjust accusation of theft , the cat pledged to teach the young mother a lesson . In this version of the tale , the cat not only stole her six children , but also ate them . But when the seventh child was born , the mother caught the cat fleeing with her child and followed it but tripped in middle of the chase and fainted . The cat took the infant to Shashthi 's abode , where she told the goddess the whole tale of her insult . The benign goddess , however , was annoyed with the cat and rushed to the aid of the mother . The goddess explained the reason of her suffering , and after the mother had begged the cat for forgiveness and had sworn to worship Shashthi on anointed days , all seven of her children were returned to her .

Shashthi 's Bengali legends appear in the Mangal @-@ Kavya texts , especially in the Shashthi @-@ mangal section of this work . The Mangal @-@ Kavya and Bengali folk tales describe Shashthi as closely related to Manasa , the serpent goddess . Shashthi furthermore appears as an ally of Manasa in a famous Bengali folk @-@ tale describing Shashthi 's activities during the Nag Panchami festival of Manasa .

= = Worship = =

Among Hindus , Shashthi is widely regarded the benefactor and protector of children and tutelary deity of every household . She is also worshipped as a bestower of children to the childless , and regarded as the foremost goddess for blessing children . One of the earliest scriptural sources to describe a ritual in her honour is the second century BCE composition Manava Grhya Sutra , appended to the Yajurveda (written between the 14th and 10th centuries BCE) , which describes a ritual called Shashthi @-@ kalpa . In the Shashthi @-@ kalpa rite , which was described as performed on the sixth lunar day of every fortnight , Shashthi was invoked to provide sons , cattle , treasures , corn , and the fulfilment of wishes . Today , Shashthi continues to be worshipped on the sixth day of each of the twelve lunar months of the Hindu calendar , as well as on the sixth day after childbirth in the lying @-@ in chamber where the birth has taken place . Shashthi is worshipped in a different form in each of these lunar months as the deities Chandan , Aranya , Kardama , Lunthana , Chapeti , Durga , Nadi , Mulaka , Anna , Sitala , Gorupini or Ashoka .

In North India , Shashthi is worshipped at childbirth and puberty , and during marriage rites . When the pregnant woman is isolated during childbirth in the lying @-@ in chamber , a cow @-@ dung figure of the goddess is traditionally kept in the room . The birth of a living child is considered the blessing of Shashthi , while the birth of a stillborn infant or the early death of a child are considered manifestations of her wrath . Before childbirth , Shashthi is worshipped to protect the welfare of the expecting mother . She is also invoked after childbirth on the sixth day of each month until the child reaches puberty , especially when the child is sick .

In Bengal and South India , Shashthi is worshipped on the sixth day after childbirth and on Aranya @-@ Shashthi (also called Jamai @-@ Shashthi) , the sixth day of the bright fortnight of the Hindu month of Jyeshtha . Her worship can be performed in the house , where she is symbolised as an earthenware pitcher ; she may also be worshipped outdoors in a natural , open space consecrated to her , termed a shashthitala . In honour of Shashthi , women tie a stone in a small rag to the branch of a tree in the shashthitala : a mother does this to ask for long life for her child , while a barren woman does so to entreat the goddess to aid her in conceiving . The vrata (ritual) performed on the day of Jamai @-@ Shashthi is also prescribed to be performed by pregnant women at least once on any Monday , Tuesday , Friday or Saturday in the month of Jyeshtha . Dough images of Shashthi and her black cat are prepared and worshipped , along with a water pitcher with a banyan tree branch near it . Betel nuts and leaves , fruits , sweets and kheer are offered to her in units of six . In North India , Shashthi is worshipped in the form of the banyan tree , which is sacred to her .

In Bengal , on the night of the sixth day after childbirth , a number of items may be placed in the lying @-@ in chamber in deference to Shashthi , such as an earthen pitcher of water covered with a

napkin , offerings of husked rice , cooked rice , bananas and sweets , bangles , and pieces of gold and silver . A pen and paper are also kept in the room , because it is believed that Shashthi (or , according to some traditions , Chitragupta or Brahma) comes into the home after everyone is asleep and writes the child 's fortune on the paper with invisible ink . In Bihar , the sixth day ceremony is called Chathi or Chati (" sixth ") and Shashthi is known by the epithet Chati Mata (" Mother Chati ") . A lump of cow dung dressed in red cloth or paper and covered with vermilion , symbolising the goddess , is kept in the lying @-@ in room . Here , the new @-@ born baby is oiled and dressed in new clothes and rings and then named ; a feast follows this ceremony . Childless people may perform a vrata (ritual) in worship of Shashthi , called either Chati Mata or Shashthi Vrata , in an effort to conceive .

In Orissa , the goddess is worshipped in the lying @-@ in room on the sixth day after childbirth , on the 21st day after childbirth and on every subsequent birthday of the child until he or she reaches the age of sixteen . Shashthi is also prescribed to be worshipped the sixth day of each of the two lunar fortnights occurring each month ; as part of the vrata rites , the worship occurring on the bright fortnight of the month of Bhadrapada is the most important of these and holds the same status in Orissa as the Aranva @-@ Shashthi ritual in Bengal . By these rites , it is believed a childless woman may gain offspring , while a mother may secure the longevity and welfare of her child by the grace of the goddess .

In North India , women worship Shashthi on Ashoka Shashthi , the sixth lunar day of the month of Chaitra . In this region , women will drink water from six flower @-@ buds of the Ashoka tree to secure the well @-@ being of their children . Women observe Khas Shashthi in the month of Pausha by fasting to ensure the longevity of their children .