

Ambuvachi Festival: - A Socio-Cultural Study

A Dissertation Submitted

To

Sikkim University



In Partial Fulfilment of the Requirement for the

Degree of Master of Philosophy

By

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DECLARATION

I, **Perismita Basumatary**, hereby declare that the research work embodied in the dissertation titled "**Ambuvachi Festival: - A Socio-Cultural Study**" submitted to **Sikkim University** for the award of **Master of Philosophy**, is my original work and it has not been submitted to this or any other University for any degree.

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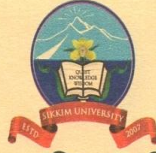
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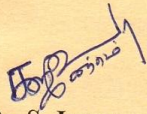
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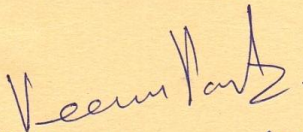
CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the dissertation titled "**Ambuvachi Festival: - A Socio-Cultural Study**" submitted to the **Sikkim University** for partial fulfilment of the requirement of the degree of **Master of Philosophy** in the Department of History, embodied the result of bonafide research work carried out by **Ms. Perismita Basumatary** under my guidance and supervision. No part of the thesis has been submitted for any Degree, Diploma, Association and fellowship.

All the assistance and help received during the course of the investigation have been duly acknowledged by her.

We recommend that the dissertation be placed before the examiner for evaluation.


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***Dedicated to Maa, Baba and
Loved one***

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CONTENTS

CHAPTERS	Page No.
ACKNOWLEDGMENT	
CHAPTER-I	
Introduction.....	1-24
CHAPTER-II	
Historical Background of the Kamakhya Temple.....	25-48
CHAPTER –III	
<i>Ambuvachi</i> Festival as a Historical Study.....	49-65
CHAPTER-IV	
<i>Ambuvachi</i> Festival and its impact on the Society	66-77
CHAPTER-V	
Conclusion	78-82
Appendix	83-85
Bibliography	86-90

CHAPTER-I

INTRODUCTION

Institutions are the humanly devised constraints that structure political, economic and social interaction. They consist of both informal constraints i.e. sanctions, taboos, customs, traditions and codes of conduct and formal rules i.e. constitutions, laws, property rights.¹ Institution divides the social and cultural organizations of the society. The main aspects of institution can be considered as the nature of the community and its boundaries. This institution reflects the doing of the people, the rules which are followed even in various situations. Institutions arose from the intellectual power of men. Thus, the religious institutions are the one considered as a social maker of any society. Religious institutions are visible and organized manifestations of practices and beliefs in culture and historical context.

Assam as one of the eastern most state of India has enormous numbers of religious institutions and owns temples with Saiva, Sakta and Vaisnava worship. Some of the Scholars had also opined that the actual birth place of Shaktism is the North-eastern India, particularly Assam and Bengal.² The specific references to the worship of Shakti in Kamarupa occur in the *Devi-purana*, *Kalikapurana* and *Yoginitantra*. As stated in the verse of *Kalikapurana* Devi i.e., Shakti is a household deity in Kamarupa.³ Also in the *Yoginitantra* it is mentioned that even in the sixteenth century Shaktism had a firm hold in Kamarupa. In Kamarupa along with the seats of Shakti or *yoni* (female energy) the *Linga* (male energy) is associated.⁴

In general, Shaktism is the cult of worshipping a female goddess as the supreme deity. The followers of Shaktism believe that the chief God is Supreme Mother and

is of remote antiquity in India.⁵ Thus, Shaktism implies the worship of the active female principle, in various iconographic Durga, Kali, Uma, Tara, Candi, Camunda, Vindhyaivasini etc.⁶ These forms of Goddesses are associated with the power and the Goddess has been conceived as the Shakti of Siva, the prominent deity. Shakti means the power, energy, strength, ability. It is a feminine term which denotes the Mother Goddess. The divine feminine has given many names conveying different aspects of her nature, Devi (Goddess), Shakti (Power/Energy), Parasakti (Supreme Power), Adyasakti (First or Primordial Power) or Mulprakrit (Primordial Matter).⁷

Marshall on the discovery of female statuettes at Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa has remarked that “no country has worshipped the Divine Mother from time immemorial as deep-rooted and ubiquitous as in India. Her shrines are found in every town and hamlet throughout the length and the breadth of the Land.”⁸ Marshall also pointed out that “the central figure is mother or Nature Goddess who out of her own being creates her partner God just as the Indian Mother Goddess creates Siva and then in union with him becomes the mother of all things. Like the Mahadevi of the Saktas she is beneficial and malignant, averter of evils but herself a dread power; ruler of passions and appetites, and mistress of magic and sorceries; and her ritual is characterised by sexual promiscuity and sacrifices of especially sanguinary character.”⁹ Monier Williams has pointed that, the history of Shaktism is linked closely with that of Saivism. As Siva has One thousand and Eight (1008) names or epithets, so his wife also possesses a feminine duplicate nearly every one of his designation some of her ferocious character and also of kind and benevolent.¹⁰

There exist many centres for the worship of Shakti in the history of Assam. Among that Kamarupa is recognised as the principle centre of Shakti worship with its chief temple Kamakhya where Shaktism is followed from ancient time onwards. However, it started to receive a liberal patronage in the medieval period from the rulers of Ahom, Kachari and Koch. The present temple structure was constructed in 1565 by the rulers of Koch dynasty.¹¹ The Koch and his follower the Mech were the primitive Saktas.¹² Epigraphs, archaeological remains supports prevalence of Shaktism in ancient Assam and for the medieval period evidences for the prevalence can be found in the rock inscription, copper plate grants, scriptures and historical works like Buranji, Darrang Rajvamsavali etc. Thus in the present days the prevalence of Shaktism is evident in a number of beliefs and practices current in Assamese. Some of the Inscriptions like Dubi Copper Plates and Nidhanpur Copper Plates of Bhaskarvarman there can be found the comparison of Queens with Goddess Durga, Lakshmi and Parvati.¹³ Then Tezpur Copper Plates and Parbatiya Copper Plates of Vanamalavarmandeva contain references of Goddess Mahagauri of Kamakutagiri.¹⁴

In general, Kamakhya temple is considered as one of the important holy shrines in India is situated in the Kamarupa (modern Guwahati) city of Assam. The name of the hill where Kamakhya temple is located is called Nilachala Hill. Nilachala is a combined two words Nila means blue and Acala means hill.¹⁵ It is well known that the hill originally represented Siva himself. When the genital organ of Sati fell on this hill, the hill turned into dark blue.¹⁶ The temple is famous for both as the centre of Goddess worship and a centre of tantric practices. It is being said that there are associated temples with Kamakhya they are named as Dasamahavidya, Dhirgeswar temple and Ugratara temple. Kamakhya temple is considered different

from other temples. It has no image of Goddess and the Mother Goddess Kamakhya is worshipped in the form of a *yoni* (reproductive organ) like stone, which symbolises the genital organ of the female and even it is the place of pilgrimage. This temple enshrines the symbol of Kamakhya Devi and it is considered as the Shakti *tritha*, one of the fifty one *Pithas*.¹⁷ Apart from the Kamakhya temple there are many other Shakti temples located the Assam. Here is some of it:

- Bageshwari Devalaya temple is situated on the south-west foothill of the Bageshwari hill located on the Bongaigao district. The temple is considered as a Shakti *Pitha*. It is believed that Sati's sword fell in this hill which has now turned to Devalaya. The sword in a Singhasana (lion-throne) is considered to be the Devi Bhageswari herself or the Goddess of tiger. Here *pujas* related to Devi like Ambuvachi, Durga puja are performed.¹⁸
- Kachakhanti pith- It is a Shakti temple located on the North of Silchar in Kumigram. The Kachakhanti is also called Kesaikhati Devi of the Brahmaputra valley. It is said that the Dimasa Kacharis of Cachar were the ones who established this temple as they were the worshippers of Shakti.
- Bhairab Kunda- This place was considered as one of the supreme Shakti *Pitha* established by Koch king Naranarayana in the mid 16th century situated in Udalguri district.¹⁹ For Hindus Bhairab Kunda is the place of pilgrimage and take their holy bath in the Kundas (water-pool). The Bhairab kunda is associated with the Trishul Devi Mandir at the Nalkhaora village.
- Math-Mandir is a Devi temple also known as the Kamakhya Thaan. The deity here is a stone slab inset with a Visvapadma of exquisite workmanship,

worshipped as Kamakhya. This shrine lies on the eastern bank of the large Lakhimpur tank, about seven kilometre away from Burhinagar road junction.

- Harhi Devalaya, a Shakti temple located at Dhemaji district.
- Shakti Shrine Alokjharir Thaan and Mahamaya Thaan of Dubri district.
- Salkosa Kali Thaan.
- Tukreswari Devalaya, Krishnai- Tukreswari is situated beside the Guwahati-Goalpara road. The Tukreswari is a steep and isolated hill, about 50m in elevation from its surroundings. At its foot-hill and beside the above road is located a temple complex consisting of modern buildings which enshrines the sleepers of the Debi. The top of the hill is a rock formation, flat and spacious, which contains the Devi *Pitha*.²⁰
- Kakagosain Thaan is a Shakti temple enshrines the Ayudhas (weapons) of the Devi. This temple is located within the Bokakhat town and lies to the south of the National Highway which has passed through this town.
- Burhigosani Devalaya, here the temple enshrines image of Mahisamardini Durga situated in the Jorhat district.
- Dirgeswari Devalaya- The Dirgeswari is a Shakti *Pitha* and the main deity here is a rock formation watered by an underground stream and is located inside a rocky sanctum-sanctorum, a wall of which also contain two rock-cult fingers. The name Dirgeswari means the Isvari or the Devi of the Dirgha or lengthy hill, located on the North Guwahati.
- Dudhkunwari situated in Rangamati of Kamarupa district. The shrine has developed round a rock with outgrowths resembling a pair of female breasts. It is believed that the breasts of goddess Sati were believed to have fallen here though it is not recognised universally.

- Ugratara Temple is a Shakti temple situated in Kamarupa district. The navel of Sati is being worshipped in this temple.
- Deopani Durga Mandir of Karbi-Anglong district is also famous as a Shakti temple.
- Neel Devalaya a Shakti temple situated in Lakhimpur district. The temple contains only the feet portions of a stone image with the monolithic pedestal and this image is worshipped as the legs of the Devi.
- Balilecha Kali Mandir is located in Nalbari district.
- Bhairavi Temple- The temple is located in the city Tezpur, one of the Shakti *Pitha*. The temple contains the stone symbol representing the pair of feet of Sati.
- Another Shakti temple is Kalyani Devalaya situated in the town Barangbari of city Tezpur.

There are many mythological stories and legends on Kamakhya temple. According to legend, ‘Sati’, wife of Lord Shiva, killed herself into the sacrificial fire. The reason was that Sati’s father Daksa organised a sacrificial programme, where all Gods and Goddess were present. But his son-in-law, Shiva and his daughter Sati were not invited as because Daksa did not like Shiva due to his appearance. In spite of that Sati went to her father’s house. As Daksa saw Sati, he became angry and made derogatory references to Shiva and insulted in front of all the denizens of *Tribhuvana*. Sati could not bear the treatment she received from her father and killed herself. Shiva came to know about the incident and went to his father-in-law’s house and being furious destroyed the sacrificial place. Then Shiva started to do *Tandav Nirtya* (the celestial dance of the infuriated Shiva which possessed the capacity of destroying the universe) carrying the dead body of Sati. It alarmed that the entire universe would be destroyed and the creator asked Vishnu to intervene

with his *sudarshan* chakra to cut off Sati's body into pieces i.e. of fifty one parts. That fell all over modern India as well as Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Nepal, Tibet, Bhutan and Pakistan, which turned to Shakti *Pith* (religious centres).

1.1. Total *Pithas* inscribed from different Tantras and Puranans

According to the mythology, Shakti *Pithas* are originated with the death of Goddess Sati. As known from *puranas* the places where the body parts of Goddess Sati had fallen became the Sakti *Pithas*. The description of *Pithas* can be traced in the manuscripts and *puranas*. The *Kalikapurana* gives an account of seven *Pithas*. According to this section the *Pithas* are:

- *Devikutas* i.e. Devikotta, modern Bangarh in the Dinajpur district of Bengal where Sati's two feet fell on the ground and the Devi is *Mahābhāgā*.
- *Uddyāna* where the two thighs fell and the Devi is *Kātyāyanī*.
- *Kāmagiri* in Kamrupa where the pudendum mulibere fell and the Devi is Kamakhya.
- A locality on the eastern border of Kamarupa where the navel fell and the Devi is *Dikkaravāsini*.
- *Jālandhara* where the two breasts fell and the Devi is *Candi*.
- *Pūrṇagiri* where the neck and shoulders fell and the Devi is *Pūrṇeśvarī*.
- A locality on the borders of Kamarupa where the head fell and the Devi is *Lalita*. Now *Lalita* is associated with the hill-streams *Sandhyā*, *Lalita* and *kanta* not far from Guwahati.²¹

The manuscripts entitled *Pīṭhanirṇaya* or *Mahāpīṭhanirūpaṇa* describes the fifty-one *Pithas*. *Rudrayāmala* a tantra work composed earlier than 1052 A.D mentions ten holy places as the principal *Pithas*. Another work entitled *Kularṇava Tantra*

mentions eighteen *Pithas*. In the *Jñānārṇava Tantra* eight important *Pithas* has been noted.²²

D.C Sircar mentioned the names of hundred *Pithas*. These are as follows: 1 *Viśālākṣī-Vārāṇasī*, 2 *Līṅgadhāriṇī-Naimiṣa*, 3 *Lalitā-prayāga*, 4 *Kāmākṣī*, *Kāmukā* or *Kāmukī-Gandhamādāna*, 5 *Kumudā-Mānasa*, 6 *Viśvakāyā* or *Viśvakāma-Ambara*, 7 *Gomati-Gomata*, 8 *Kāmaeāriṇī-Mandara*, 9 *Madotkaṭā*, 10 *Jayantī-Hastināpura*, 11 *Gaurī-Kānyakubja*, 12 *Rambhā*-the Malaya or Amala mountain, 13 *Kīrtimatī-Ekāmra*, 14 *Viśvā* or *Vilvā-Viśveśvara*, 15 *Pūruhūtā-Puṣkara*, 16 *Mārgadāyini-Kedāra*, 17 *Nandā* or *Mandā*- the Himalayas, 18 *Bhadrakarṇikā* or *Bhadrakālikā-Gokarṇa*, 19 *Bhavānī-Sthāṇviśvara* or *Sthāneśvara*, 20 *Vilvapatrikā-Vilvaka* or *Vilvala*, 21 *Mādhavī-Śrīśaila*, 22 *Bhadrā* or *Bhadreśvari-Bhadra*, *Bhadreśvara* or *Madreśvara*, 23 *Jayā-Varāhaśaila*, 24 *Kamalā-Kamalālaya*, 25 *Rudrāṇī* or *Kalyāṇī-Rudrakoṭi*, 26 *Kālī-Kālañjara*, 27 *Kapilā-Mahāliṅga*, 28 *Mukuṭeśvarī* or *Maṅgaleśvari-Koṭa*, *Markoṭa* or *Karkoṭa*, 29 *Mahādevī-Śālagrāma*, 30 *Jalapriyā-Śivaliṅga*, 31 *Kumārī-Māyāpurī*, 32 *Lalitā-Santāna*, 33 *Utpalā* or *Utpalākṣī-Sahasrākṣa*, 34 *Mahotpalā-Sahasrākṣa* or *Hiraṇyākṣa*, 35 *Maṅgalā*-the Ganga or *Gayā*, 36 *Vimalā-Puruṣottama*, 37 *Amoghākṣī-Vipāśā*, 38 *Pāṭalā-Puṇḍravardhana* or *Puṇyavardhana*, 39 *Nārāyaṇī-Supārśva*, 40 *Bhadrasundari* or *Rudrasundari-Trikūṭa*, 41 *Vipulā-Vipula*, 42 *Kalyāṇī-Mānasācala* or *Malayācala*, 43 *Koṭsavī-Koṭitīrtha*, 44 *Sugandhā-Mādhavavana* or *Madhavivana*, 45 *Trisandhyā-Godāśrama*, *Godāvarī* or *Kubjāmraka*, 46 *Ratipriyā* or *Haripriyā-Gaṅgādvāra*, 47 *Śivānandā*, *Śubhānandā*, *Sunandā* or *Śabhānandā-Śivakunda*, *Śivankuñja* or *Śivacanda*, 48 *Nandinī*-the bank of the *Devikā*, 49 *Rukmiṇī-Dvāravatī*, 50 *Rādhā-Vṛndāvana*, 51 *Devakī-Mathurā*, 52 *Parameśvarī-Pātāla*, 53 *Sitā-Citrakūta*, 54 *Vindhyavāsini*-the

Vindhyas, 55 *Ekavīrā*-the *Sahyādri* (Western Ghats), 56 *Candrikā-Hariścandra* or *Harmacandra*, 57 *Ramaṇā-Rāmatīrtha*, 58 *Mṛgāvatī*-the *Yamunā*, 59 *Mahālakṣmī-Karavīra*, 60 *Umā* or *Rūpā-Vināyaka*, 61 *Arogā* or *Ārogyā-Vaidyanātha*, 62 *Maheśvari-Mahākāla*, 63 *Abhayā*-the *Uṣṇatīrthas*, or *Puṣpatīrtha*, 64 *Amṛtā*, *Nitambā* or *Mṛgī*- the Vindhyan cave, 65 *Māṇḍavī* or *Māṇḍukī-Māṇḍavya* or *Māṇḍava*, 66 *Svāhā- Māheśvarapura* or *Māheśvarīpura*, 67 *Pracaṇḍā-Chāgalāṇḍa*, *Chagalaṇḍa*, *Chāgaliṅga* or *Vegala*, 68 *Caṇḍikā-Amarakaṇṭaka*, *Makarandaka* or *Marakaṇṭaka*, 69 *Varārohā -Someśvara*, 70 *Puṣkarāvati-Prabhāsa*, 71 *Devamātā-Sarasvatī*, 72 *Mātā*, *Pārā* or *Pāvā*-the shore of the sea or the bank of the *Pārā*, 73 *Mahābhāgā* or *Mahāpadmā-Mahālaya*, 74 *Piṅgaleśvarī*-the *Payoṣṇī*, 75 *Siṃhikā - Kṛitaśauca*, 76 *Yaśaskarī*, *San̄karī* or *Atiśan̄karī-Kārttikeya*, 77 *Lolā Utpalāvartaka*, 78 *Subhadrā-Śoṇasaṅgama* or *Sindhusaṅgama*, 79 *Mātā Lakṣmī* or *Umā Lakṣmī-Siddhapura*, *Siddhavana* or *Siddhavata*, 80 *Aṅganā*, *Anaṅgā* or *Taraṅgā-Bharatāśrama*, 81 *Viśvamukhī-Jālandhara*, 82 *Tārā*-the *Kiṣkindhya* hill, 83 *Puṣṭi- Devadāruvana*, 84 *Medhā-Kāsmīra*, 85 *Bhīmā*-the Himalayas, 86 *Puṣṭi* or *Tuṣṭi-Vastreśvara* or *Viśveśvara*, 87 *Śuddhi* or *Śuddhā-Kapālamocana*, 88 *Mātā-Kāyāvarohaṇa*, 89 *Dhvani* or *Dharā-Sāṅkhoddhāra*, 90 *Dhrti-Piṅḍāraka*, 91 *Kālā* or *Kalā*- the *Candrabhāgā*, 92 *Śivakāriṇī*, *Śivadhāriṇī*, *Siddhidāyini* or *Saktidhāriṇī-Acchoda*, 93 *Amṛtā*-the *Beṇā*, 94 *Urvaśī-Badarī*, 95 *Oṣadhi* or *Auṣadhi-Uttarakuru*, 96 *Kuśodakā-Kuśadvipa*, 97 *Manmathā-Hemakūṭa*, 98 *Satyavādinī - Mukūṭa* or *Kumuda*, 99 *Vandanīyā* or *Vandinīkā-Aśvattha*, 100 *Nidhi*-in the home of *Vaiśravaṇa*, 101 *Gāyatrī* in grammar, 102 *Pārvatī* in the company of *Śiva*, 103 *Indrāṇī* in the world of gods, 104 *Sarasvatī* in the mouths of *Brahman*, 105 *Prabhā* (light) in the solar orb, 106 *Vaiṣṇavī* among the Divine Mothers, 107 *Arundhatī* among chaste women, 108

Tillottamā among beautiful girls, 109 *Brahmakalā* in the heart of men, and 110 Shakti (strength) in the living beings.²³ These are the names of the *Pithas* among which some of the places are imaginary.

According to the description of *Kamakhyatantram*, Mahapitha (great place of pilgrimage) are Nepāla, Pauganda, Vardhamāna, Pursathira, Carasthira, Kāsmīra, Kānyakubja, Dārukeśa and Ekāmra.²⁴ Other Mahapithas are Kolagiri, Elāpura, Kāleśvara, Jayantikā, Prayāga, Saṣṭhīśa, Māyāpura, Kuleśvarī (Janeśvarī), Malaya Mountain, Vāmana Mountain, Hiraṇyapūraka, Mahālakṣmīpura and Uḍḍiyāna Kāśīpura.²⁵ The superior *pithas* are Tristorā, Kāmakota, Kailāsa Mountain, Bhṛgu Mountain, Kedāra, Aumkāreśvara, Jālandhara, Mālava, Kulābja, Devamātrkā, Gokaṇa, Māruteśvara, Aṣṭahāsa, Vīraja, Rājagrha, Ujjayinī, Kṣīrikā, Hastināpūrakam and Uḍḍīśa.²⁶

1.1.2. Tantricism

Tantricism is related to Shaktism as the procedure of worshipping Shakti cult is based on sacrifice and the magical rites. Both Shaktism and Tantricism indicate the feminine aspect of the divine.²⁷ During the earlier period the practice of tantric cult had a strong hold in Kamarupa but at present it has lost its power over the region. The worshipping process of Goddess is mentioned in the tantras. The ritual consists of muttering of mantras (mystic syllables), drawing of Yantras (mystic drawings) and the application of five *makaras*, i.e. *matsya* or fish, *māmsa* or flesh, *madīrā* or wine, *mūdrā* or mystic symbols shown with the fingers and *maithuna* or sex. Other important elements are *vīja*, *nyāsa*, *bhūtaśuddhi*, *kuṇḍalī-yoga*, *kriyā*, *caryā*, *māyā*, *yogā* etc (Avalon, Shakti and Sakta).²⁸ There are some other works

such as *Kulā cāra-tantra*, *Yoni-tails* of the tantra which give details of the process.²⁹

The word 'tantra' is derived from 'tan' meaning to spread 'tra' meaning to save. Thus taken together the word 'tantra' means something which spreads and saves simultaneously.³⁰ *Yoginitantra* is one of the important works on tantric literature. It is the dialogue between Siva and Parvati divided into two parts *Pūrvardha* (first part) and *Uttarārdha* (second part). The first part gives the description of the glory of guru (preceptor) and is followed by the vivid description of Kali, the method of initiation, worship, meditation, practice of rituals, mythology etc the second part focuses mainly on the sacred places and the places of pilgrimage in ancient medieval Assam known as . Also the performance of *sraddha* is enumerated, the creation, the destruction of the world and the worship of gods are described.³¹

1.1.3. Derivation of name Pragjyotisha or Kamarupa

Even with the name Kamarupa or Pragjyotisha or present Assam, there are many mixed stories. The name Pragjyotisha was mainly used in the ancient period. In *Markendaya Purana* Pragjyotisha is mentioned as one of the famous kingdom also known as Mleccha kingdom ruled over by king Bhagadatta and for which is called as Danava or Asura kingdom.³² According to the *Kalikapurana*, Pragjyotishpura was a land where the creator God, Brahma sat and first created the stars so the city was called Pragjyotishpura a city equal to the city of Indra.³³ In *Kalikapurana* both the name Kamarupa and Pragjyotisha is used to denote the city. Again in another verse of the chapter *Kalikapurana*, the name is used explaining as the region on the east of the river Karatoya extending up to the seat of the Goddess Dikkaravasini thirty *yojanas* in breadth and one hundred *yojanas* in length,

triangular in shape, black in colour, interspersed with innumerable hills and hundreds of rivers.³⁴ It is also said that region Kamarupa (present Kamrup) is derived from the name of Kama. Once he was burnt by the fiery glance of the eyes of Sambhu for his misdeeds but later on regained his shape with the grace of Sambhu himself, for which the region got its name.³⁵ The city is also known as the secret place where Shiva and Parvati always reside.³⁶ Also, it is said that might be the name of the kingdom has been equated to Kamru and Pau, a hill.³⁷

About the place Kamarupa, in *Yoginitantra* it is mentioned that in course of their dialogue i.e., Parvati and Shiva. Parvati desired to know the chosen place where one can attain *siddhi* (achievement) and *mukti* (salvation) by the performance of japa etc. In reply to this Siva says that japa become effective when it is performed in Varanasi, but the results turnout only if performed in Kamrupa.³⁸ In the second part of *Yoginitantra* description of the sacred places of Kamrupa are given. About the emerging of four *Pithas* it has noted that *Uddiyāna* emerged in Satya age, *Pūrṇasāila* in Treta age, *Jālamndhara* in Dvapara age and Kamarupa or Kamakhya in Kali age.³⁹

Regarding the derivation of name Pragjyotisha or Kamarupa there are varied and numerous references. While referring to the rulers the epigraphs of the early period preferred the name Pragjyotisha and Pragjyotishadhipati.⁴⁰ Even in the Bhagalpur grant of Narayanpala the name Pragjyotisha is engraved while Kamarupa is mentioned in the Allahabad Pillar Prasasti of Samudragupta.⁴¹ Thus from this it can be traced that the name of the city was changed from Pragjyotisha to Kamarupa.

Edward Gait writes the meaning of Pragjyotisha, “Prag means former or eastern, and Jyotisha, a star, astrology, shining i.e. the city of eastern, Astrology”.⁴² K.L Barua relating with the point of Edward Gait opined that the temple Chitrachala located to the east of Gauhati town is dedicated to the Navagrahas or the nine planets might be the origin of the name Pragjyotisha.⁴³

1.1.4. Boundaries of Kamarupa

Kamarupa is surrounded by rivers and mountains. According to *Kalikapurana*, Kamarupa is surrounded by the river Karatoya in the west and the *Lalita-kanta* in the east.⁴⁴ Whereas in *Yoginitantra* “Kamarupa extends from the mountain *Kāñcana* to the Brahmaputra and from the river Karatoya to Dikkaravasini”.⁴⁵ And on the south there is river Brahmaputra, along with Bhutan, Rangpur, Cooch Bihar, the north-east of Mymensingh and possibly the Garo Hills.⁴⁶

Another Sanskrit work *Haragaurīsamvāda* divides Kamarupa into four *Pithas* with marked river boundaries namely 1) Ratanpitha between the Karotoya and the *Svarṇakoṣa* 2) Kamapitha between the *Svarṇakoṣa* and the Kapili 3) *Svarṇapitha* between the Puspika and Bhairavi 4) *Saumārapitha* between the Bhairavi and the Dikarng.⁴⁷

1.1.5. Assam

The present name Assam also has a tremendous point on its derivation. According to some of the writers, it is derived from the word ‘Asama’ meaning distinguished from the Samatata or the level plains of Bengal. B.K. Kakati suggests that the word Asama (peerless) might be the Sanskritised form of Acham. In Tai, ‘cham’ means to be defeated. With the prefix a, Assam would mean undefeated and conquerors.

If this is its origin, then the names are once applied to the people was subsequently applied to the country as well.⁴⁸ The history tells that in the early period the land belonged to the Danavas or Asuras. As the earliest inhabitants of Assam are known as the Kiratas, Cinas and Asuras⁴⁹, the Mother Goddess was also believed to be the tribal God. Even in the *Kalikapurana*, Kiratas were described as shaven heads and yellow skins. Some of the scholars had opined that people belonging to different races Negrito, Austro-Asiatic group, Tibeto-Burman, Thai or Shan and also the Aryans of the neighbouring lands came and settled in different parts of Assam at different times.⁵⁰ Mahiranga Danava was the earliest mentioned king of Kamarupa. He was succeeded by Hatakasura, Sambasura, Ratnasura and Ghatakasura.⁵¹ According to an account in the *Kalikapurana*, Naraka son of Vishnu in his boar incarnation and Bhumi (Mother Earth) came and conquered Kamarupa from the Kiratas. He made Pragjyotishpura his capital. Naraka was succeeded by his son Bhagadatta who took part in the Mahabharata war. Bhagadatta was succeeded by Bajradatta.⁵² From the evidences it is know that dynasties initiated by Varman, Salastamba (650 C.E - 990 C.E) and Pala (990 C.E – 1138 C.E) respectively ruled Kamrupa from the 4th to the 12th century.⁵³ Later on Koch took over the Kamrupa followed by the Ahom. After that in 1826 the British marked the boundaries of present district of Kamarupa.

There can be found four footpaths to reach the Kamakhya temple which is said to be built by the Naraka. Among these paths only the north, east and western sides seems to be popular among the pilgrims. Of the four paths the eastern path which is known as *Mekhelā-ujuwā* was the most popular among the devotees. It is also called Baghduar.⁵⁴ Pilgrims had belief that whoever took this route for *darshan* were blessed with success and prosperity and the path is full of rocks. The

Northern path which was from Pandunath was believed to provide salvation. This path is known as Svargadvara. The people who take the route of western side called Hanumanduar are blessed with gaining a kingdom Rajyalabha. Lastly, the southern called Singhaduar is said to bring bad luck, even death.⁵⁵

Earlier these paths were used by the pilgrims but after the construction of pitched road pilgrims stopped using these routes. Only the northern and Eastern paths are used. Only during the *Ambuvachi* festival the prescribed pilgrims take the route of Northern side.⁵⁶ Also, some of the pilgrims coming from western side had to cross the river which was before the construction of Saraighat Bridge. There are a total eleven Ghats on the bank of Brahmaputra starting from Kalipur the eastern lower level of Nilachala Hill to Pandunath, the western lower level of Nilachala Hill.⁵⁷ Thus pilgrims crossed the river to reach these Ghats and took the footpath which leads to the temple. Later on in the year 1956 the road was constructed of three kilometres on the southern side of the Nilachala Hill till the Kamakhya temple. In the present day these well constructed roads are mostly used and the Ghats and the western path are seldom used.⁵⁸

Mother Goddess Kamakhya is worshipped in many different forms which gave rise to different types of *pujas*, festivals and ceremonies. There are numerous rites and rituals performed daily and some are annually. Thus *Ambuvachi* is one of the festivals which is conducted annually and regarded as the most important one which reflects the establishment of the temple. *Ambuvachi* is the celebration of the potency of Mother Earth that is represented and personified as Devi. It has a common belief that mother earth undergoes a menstruation once in a year and her menstruation period is observed by her devotees as a sacred period. During this period tantric practitioners make appearance and that use to remain seclusion

throughout the year. Also the devotees' visits the temple for *darshan*. A huge *Ambuvachi mela* (fair) is also held in Kamakhya during these days that draws lakhs of devotees not only from nearby areas but also across India and neighbouring countries as it is one of the biggest and significant.

There are various *pujas* and rituals performed in the Kamakhya temple complex. The lists are as follows:

- Nitya Puja: It is the daily ritual conducted in the Kamakhya temple i.e., morning, afternoon and evening. All the activities were managed by the Sevatis.
- Kumari Puja, Durga Puja, Manasa Puja, Vasanti Puja, Pohan Bia, Durgadeul, Madandeul and Kali puja: This *pujas* performed every year in their specified month.
- The two major fairs and festivals celebrated in Kamakhya temple is *Ambuvachi mela* and Deodhani nirtya.
- There are other rituals which are observed by the people. Bohag Bihu, Aksaya Tritiya observed in the month of April-May i.e., *Vaisakha*. Savitri Vrata, Phalahari Kali puja, Campak Caturdasi observed in the month of May-June i.e., *Jyestha*. Satha Vrata observed in the month of June-July i.e., *Asadha*. Manasa Puja, Subhacani Puja, Apesvara Puja and Sitala Puja observed in the month of July-August i.e., *Sravana*. Janmastami, Lalita Saptami, Suryya Puja observed in the month of August-September i.e., *Bhadrapada*. Durga Puja, Laksmi Puja observed in the month of September-October i.e., *Asvina*. Tulasi Puja, Dipavali, Bhaipota, Jagaddhatri Puja, Uttan Ekadasi, is observed in the month of October-November i.e., *Kartikka*. Carai-Vrata observed in the month of November-December i.e., *Agrahayana*. Pohan Bia, Uruka observed in the month of December-January i.e.,

Pausa. Magha Sankranti, Deul Puja, Sarasvati Puja, Magha Purnima is observed in the month of January-February i.e., *Magha*. Sivaratri, Phakua observed in the month of February-March i.e., *Palguna*. Asokastami, Rajarajesvari Puja, Candra Arghya, Manantara Vrata, Kamy Puja is observed in the month of March-April i.e., *Caitra*.

1.2. Statement of the Problem

There are various types of festivals celebrated at Kamakhya temple throughout the year. *Ambuvachi* is considered as the prominent one among them. The festival is different from others as it is gender specific and rituals differ from others. However, there is lack of detailed information on *Ambuvachi*, which tends to be the subject matter. There is an obscurity about the role played by women and how they are treated during the festival. In addition, the practices and rituals are managed by the priests of the temple who were mostly male. Hence, the festival is about the celebration of the Goddess menstruation, the practices and rituals might be conducted by the female priest. Thus, the work tries to look and analyse how rites and rituals during this festival were done and how did it influence on the people. It is an attempt to look deep in the particular festival and its impact on the people.

1.3. Literature review

A large number of works can be found on the temple of Kamakhya. Some of the detailed account of works has been done by K.L. Barua, S.L. Baruah, N.N. Acharyya and Edward Gait.

H.K. Barpujari in his work “The Comprehensive History of Assam, Volume I” gave a concrete details about the ancient Assam from pre-historic times to the twelfth century C.E. Along with that, the author had present art, religion, social and economic condition of the period. There is a detailed account of the religion which was followed during the period. Banikanta Kakati’s “The Mother Goddess Kamakhya” traced the origin and rise of the concept of Goddess Kamakhya, and the uniqueness of the temple. According to the work, there is no image but yoni has been sculptured and detailed various interpretation of the origin of yoni-Goddess given in *Kalikapurana* and different features found in *Yoginitantra*. Then the Kamkahya temple was destroyed in the early sixteenth century and the present structure was rebuilt in 1565. It also showed how Kamarupa became the main centre of Shakti worship. However, there is no detailed information given about any of the festivals which are being celebrated at the Kamakhya temple.

In “Kamakhya: A Socio-Cultural Study” of Nihar Ranjan Mishra was a detailed study of the Kamakhya temple along with origin of Shaktism in Assam and the, process of sanskritization. It further detailed about the different royal dynasties of various ethnic communities who had worshipped Mother Goddess Kamakhya in her different names and forms in the past. The author had covered the rituals, festivals that are observed in the Kamakhya temple and also the undergone changes of rites related to the socio-cultural condition of temple priest. Then among the traditions, rituals, festivals followed in Assam, the author gave specific attention to *Ambuvachi*. Hence, about the *Ambuvachi* festival there can be found thorough explanation on the *mela*(fair) which is held for four days. During this time people refrain from going to the temple and doing any auspicious. Since the temple celebrates several festivals as well as rituals, the resident includes the

Brahmins and the communities. Therefore, the author while explaining the socio-cultural life of the people in the Kamakhya temple had tried to trace the family system and their livelihood.

Priyam Goswami in her work “Kamakhya: The Mother Goddess” has given full illustration about the Nilachala Hill where the sacred Shakti *Pitha* has been worshipped from the ancient times and the ten manifestations of Devi ‘*Dasamahaidya*’. There are several stories relating to the origin of these manifested forms of Devi. Also there is description the sculptures and architectural style which represents different period and dynasties. While explaining about the festival and fairs, the author had mentioned that apart from religious and ritualistic significance, these festivals have contributed to the rich cultural fabric of the region. Though, there is explanation on some festivals like Deodhani dance festival, Kumari puja, Manasa puja, but regarding *Ambuvachi* the author has given the same information alike the others like conducting of *mela*, *angavastra*.

Vivekananda Kendra institute of culture’s publication, “Heritage of Kamakhya on the Nilachala Hill” is based on field investigation conducted under the guidance of Dr. Pradip Sarma the project director. This book traces abundant of information on the history of Kamakhya starting from the Nilachala hill, incarnations of Devi, the various rites and rituals, the different fairs and the festivals and the architecture. Thus, specifying about the *Ambuvachi* festival, here the author had tried to describe about the origin, legends and about the actual Sadhus who has been conducting this festival from the beginning.

Parimal Kumar Datta’s work “Kamakhya tantra and the mysterious history of Kamakhya” gives an exclusive study on the history of Kamakhya. Here the author

had thoroughly explained about the derivation and meaning of Kamakhya, origin and along with that the mythological history of the *Pitha* of Kamkahya then the story of Mother Kamakhya with Narakasura, Vasistha, Naranarayana and Chilarai. Regarding the festival a specified story was mentioned which is not mentioned by some other authors, tantra says that ‘God Varaha, the boar incarnation of Lord Vishnu, rescued Vasumati or Earth from the water of Sindhu (i.e. sea), Where she was hidden by Hiranyaksa. At that time Vasumati was in her menstruous period and physical relation between Vasumati and Varaha resulted in the birth of Naraka, the ancient King of Assam. It is stated that the *devatas* raised various types of obstacles to stop the birth of Naraka, as this birth was likely to bring misfortune to all, but they failed to do so because of the intervention of Vishnu. The tantrikas believe that Naraka, the son of Varaha, became very powerful but was oppressive because of his unusual birth. Apart, Atpariyas is also mentioned who clean the *Garbhagriha* when *Ambuvachi* is over and help to bring the piled cloth from the *Yoni mandala*.

“The History of Civilization of the people of Assam to the 12th century A.D”, was considered as one of the important research papers of P.C. Choudhury. It contains different aspects like cultural, social, political and religious life of medieval Assam. It discussed the association of Shaktism and Tantrism with Kamraupa, as an important centre of Devi worship. However, the author did not give any description about the rituals of the Kamakhya temple and its other features. In most of the above mentioned book there is the same description given about the *Ambuvachi* festival.

1.4. Objectives

1. To focus the historical background of the Kamakhya temple.
2. To analyse the rites and rituals of the *Ambuvachi* festival.
3. To explore the impact of *Ambuvachi* festival on society.

1.5. Methodology

This study uses the methodologies of gender studies and religious history. The work used both the primary as well as the secondary sources. The primary sources are included on the *Puranas* and the accounts. Whereas the history, origin and other materials is collected from secondary sources based on the reviews and references, published sources, books and journals.

From the Foundation for History and Heritage Studies a research organization, reference library and archives (A Charitable Trust Registered Under the Indian Trusts act, 1882) vivid information has been known consulting Rajib Sarma, a priest.

1.6. Chapterization

The first chapter **Introduction** consists' methodology, objectives, chapterization, and statement of the problem and review of chapters.

The second chapter, "**Historical Background of the Kamakhya Temple,**" gives the detailed account of the historical background and extensive mythological stories of the temple.

The third chapter, "***Ambuvachi* Festival as a Historical Study,**" deals with the rites and rituals that are followed during the *Ambubachi* festival. It will also focus

on the role and responsibility attested with the priest of the temple in conducting the pujas during the festival.

The fourth chapter, “**Ambuvachi Festival and its Impact on Society,**” examines the influence of this festival on common masses. This chapter tends to analyse how this festival is perceived by the people.

The fifth chapter, **Conclusion,** will analyse the chapters and summarize them.

Endnotes

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CHAPTER-II

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE KAMAKHYA TEMPLE

Introduction

Temple as the place of Gods and Goddesses holds abundant of information's within it. There are multiples such as religion one of the basic reasons for the establishment of the temple, then its historicity which explains about the location, the legends and myths associated with it and also as social institution deals with customs, traditions and many other practices. In the same way, the historical background of Kamakhya temple can be explained. The *Kalikapurana*, *Yoginitantra*, *Kamakhyatantra* and other *Puranas* give the detailed account of the temple and the worship of deity.

2.1. Myths of the Kamakhya Temple

The abode of Mother Goddess Kamakhya is Nilachala Hill, Guwahati situated on the bank of river Brahmaputra. In the *Kalikapurana*, Nilachala has been mentioned as *Nīlākuta*, *Nīlāparvata*, *Nīlgīrī*, *Kāmagiri* and *Kāmaparvata*.¹ The whole of Nilachala Mountain represents the body of Lord Shiva and is famous for the *Pitha* (shrine) of Devi Kamakhya. It is said that different parts of the body of Sati fell all on the earth and thus these places are revered as Shakti *Pithas*. According to *Kamakhyatantra* the goddess is worshipped in five different forms Kamakhya, *Tripurasundari*, *Kāmeśvarī*, *Śaradā* and *Mahāmāyā*.² Also inside the main temple of Kamakhya three goddesses are worshipped Tripurasundari, Matangi and Kamala.

There are different points of view over the derivation of the name Kamakhya. Scholars opined that the name Kamakhya was varied from community to community. The scholar, Banikanta Kakati remarked, that the word Kamakhya has probably

derived from the Austric formation such as *kamoi* (demon) in khmer, *kamoit* (devil) in cham, *kamet* (corpse) in khasi and *komui* (grave) or *komouch* (corpse) in Santali.³ The goddess Kamakhya is also praised by many communities Ahom, Tipras, Rabhas and Jaintias. From earlier times different communities had signified the goddess Kamakhya with their own traditional name. Thus, according to the tradition of Bodo-Kachari's Kamakhya is referred as *Kham Maikha* and for the Garos, Nuting, Muring she is referred as the energy behind creation.⁴ P.C. Choudhury mentioned that the *yoni*-goddess migrated to Assam with the arrival of the Austrics or the matriarchal tribes like the Khasis and the Garos and the Naraka were considered to be responsible for the foundation of Devi worship in Kamarupa.⁵ In the *Kalikapurana* it has been mentioned that Kiratas were also the worshippers of Mother Goddess Kamakhya and the original inhabitants of Kamarupa.⁶ Even in the *Yoginitantra*, it has been described that the worshipping of *yoni pitha* is of Kirata origin.⁷ As the Kamarupa in the present day has become the residence of diverse tribes, the word Kirata needs an explanation. The term Kirata indicates tribes living in the mountainous country, mainly the Himalayas and the North-eastern areas of India.⁸

2.1.1. Dasamahavidya, the ten incarnations of Devi

There are ten forms of Devi; Kali, Tara, Sodasi, Bhuvaneshwari, Bhairavi, Chinnamasta, Dhumavati, Bagalamukhi, Matangi and Kamalamika.⁹ Devi is both *vidyā* and *avidyā* and is called *Mahāvidyā*¹⁰ i.e. *mahā* means great and *vidyā* means knowledge. As mentioned in *Kalikapurana*, there are ten different *Pithas* in the Nilachala hill where incarnated forms of Sati are worshipped and together are called *Dasamahāvidyā* i.e. *dasa* (ten), *mahāvidyā* (great divinities).¹¹ These ten forms of great goddess are venerated in the different temples and each of Devi's manifested forms holds essential stories of their formation and for the welfare of the universe.

2.1.2. Kali

The first *rūpa* or form of Sati was Kali that represents *Ichāśhakti* or the power of supreme desire.¹² Kali is referred as the goddess of death and the ruthless killer. Usually the image of Kali is depicted as a woman who is mounted on the dead body with terrible ferocious bangs, naked and dark in complexion, with her lolling tongue wearing a garland of fifty two skulls and a skirt made of dismembered arms. It is said that Kali and her consort Shiva dwell in the cremation grounds that symbolize body as temporary like ego. The goddess has four hands in two of her hand she holds a sword and severed head depicting her immense strength and the other two for giving boon to her devotees, providing *moksha*. *Chitśaktisvarūpiṇī Khadga*¹³ is the only weapon Kali carries. According to *vidhis* and tantras, it should be worshipped as an annual event of new moon in the night of autumn¹⁴. Kali is worshipped mainly on Saturdays the day of planet *Sani* (Saturn).¹⁵ In general, Kali has two personalities' *dakṣiṇa kali* and *bhadra kali*.¹⁶

2.1.3. Tara

The second of the *mahāvidyā* is Tara, the deity of the planet *Ketu*. She is described in a fierce way with dark blue complexion and dressed in tiger skin, wears a garland of human heads and adorned with *pañchamudrā*¹⁷ and has three eyes with four hands in two of it the goddess carries sacrificial swords *khadga* and *kartri* and lotus in the other two. The goddess Tara has the ability to endure stress, to create, sustain and protect. Also the tantric book depicts Tara as Ugra Tara, Nīla Saraswati and Ekajata.¹⁸

2.1.4. Sodasi

Sodasi is the third of *mahāvidyās*, which is regarded as the deity of planet *Budh* (mercury) that worshipped on Wednesday. *Sodasha* means sixteen therefore the goddess is represented as sixteen year old girl with the belief to embody sixteen types of desire. She is also known as Tripurasundari meaning beauty of three cities whereas *pura* stands for city, place or field of action and *trip* denotes the threefold field.¹⁹ This goddess has third eye on her forehead, four-armed holding five arrows or flowers classified as the five senses, a noose classified as attachment, then a goad classified as repulsion and a sugarcane bow classified as the mind. Also the goddess jeweled richly sits on a lotus laid on a golden throne, upheld by Brahma, Vishnu, Rudra and Indra.

2.1.5. Bhuvanesvari

The fourth *mahāvidyā*, Bhuvanesvari stands for the concept of space. Her planet is Shukra (Venus) and the special *puja* is offered on Fridays. Bhuvanesvari means the queen or ruler of the universe²⁰ and is depicted as having four hands, two holds the noose and goad, even wears a crescent on her forehead and her vehicle is tiger. She is *jnana shakti*, the knowledge-force of the supreme²¹ who plays the role of creator and protector. Other names of the goddess Bhuvanesvari are *Nava Durga*, *Aditi* and *Prakriti*.²²

2.1.6. Bhairavi

Bhairavi is identified with the functions of creation, maintenance and destruction. She is the only deity who is not dedicated to any of the planet but is known as the guardian deity of *bhur*, *buvah* and *swah*. The Bhairavi Pitha of Kamakhya is called as Tripura Bhairavi. She is worshipped in thirteen different forms.²³ Tripura Bhairavi is depicted

as a four handed figure, who seat on lotus holding a *triśūla* or trident in her left hand, wears silken red cloth, for sacrifice tortoise, duck, pigeon, catfish are offered and is worshipped on Sundays.

2.1.7. Chinnamasta

Chinnamasta is a goddess who had beheaded herself and holds with her own hand. She is associated with the deity Rahu. The Goddess is portrayed as naked or dressed scantily standing on a couple Rati and Manmatha holding her own severed head with her two attendants' *Dākini* and *Bārini*.²⁴ She represents the spiritual energy and concept of self-sacrifice.

2.1.8. Dhumavati

According to the scriptures, Dhumavati is the first and foremost creation claimed as *jyeṣṭhā* the eldest. Dhumavati is worshipped as the deity of *Brhasparti* (Jupiter) and special prayers offered on Thursdays. The Goddess is often depicted as an old widow with pale complexion, sagging breasts, big nose and a toothless mouth who rides a chariot drawn by crow. She is described as a giver, granter of all the desires and a rescuer from the troubles. As for her rough behavior she was also called as *Vivarnā*, *Chanchalā* and *Ruṣṭā*.²⁵

2.1.9. Bagalamukhi

The Goddess was said to paralyze all her enemies' with speech *vāk stambhanakari*²⁶ but gives her devotee the power to overcome hostile force and negative thoughts. She was the presiding deity of planet *mangal* (Mars) and worshipped on Tuesday. Bagalamukhi is depicted with the yellow color. Her complexion, garment and garments are all yellow. She wears a crescent moon on her head and seats on a golden

throne in the midst of an ocean full of yellow Lotus. She holds a mace in her right hand and with the left she pulls the tongue of the demon. The worshipper of Bagalamukhi is asked to be clad in yellow and perform the *japa* of the mantra with the beads made out of turmeric. The materials used in her *puja* are all of yellow like chili, turmeric, puffed rice, white mustard, black salt any kind of yellow fruit and flowers. Goat, buffalo, catfish, duck, pigeon, pumpkin, sugarcane, coconut etc are sacrificed on her *puja*. The worshipper of Bagalamukhi performs the *japa* of mantra with the help of beads made out of turmeric. Often she is referred as Pitambara-devi and Bakamukhi, who makes the opponent duck-faced.

2.1.10. Matangi

Matangi occupies the ninth position in the *dasamahāvidyā* and the presiding planet is Sun. The Goddess is considered to be the tantric form of Saraswati, the goddess of music and learning. Same as Saraswati she governs speech, music, knowledge, art which is indicated by the parrot in her hand and thus praised as *keera karā*. Matangi represents worldly power since all human affairs need maintenance, therefore is called *Rājmatangī* or the Matangi of kings and lords.²⁷ The Goddess has various complexions like *śyāmalā*, the dark one, greenish dark, *marakata śyāma* and bluish dark. Like other *mahāvidyās* she is also depicted as having three eyes with smiling face, her clothes and ornaments are red in color, her garland is made of *kadamba* flower. She is termed as sixteen year old, has a slim waist holding a skull and on the other hand *Khetaka* (shield).

2.1.11. Kamala

The last and the tenth *mahāvidyā* is Kamala or Kamalamika. The *puja* for this goddess starts on *pratipāda* or the first day of *chaitra* month and comes to an end in

the *puṇnima* or full moon day²⁸, thus her presiding planet is Chandra (moon). This *puja* is also called *Trikālīn puja* and red *Karabī* flower is considered as the essential one and is performed on Mondays. Also during the time of Deodhani, Kamala *puja* is conducted. The name Kamala means “lotus” and has been identified with goddess Lakshmi and considered as the goddess of divine beauty, prosperity and generosity. She is depicted as beautiful goddess with golden skin stands on a lotus flower holding aloft two lotus flowers, dressed in white silk and is constantly bathed by four elephants. Both Matangi and Kamala have *Pitha* known as *manobhava guha*.²⁹

These are the ten incarnation of Sati. It can be seen that there are no figures of any deity worshipped in the temple of Nilachala hill but the image of the deities were invoked as described in the *vidhis* and tantras. In the *Kalikapuranam*, there is a brief description of Mother Goddess Kamakhya. She is said to be yellow in color. Her ears are decorated with golden ornaments. She has three eyes and makes the gesture of assurance and conferring boons, sits on a red lotus. She is called *Siddhā Kāmeśvari*. Men and kings bow down their heads before her and grants desires and fulfill the wishes. She looked as radiant as the rising sun. She grants excessive wealth and has a smiling face. Her quick movement is equaled to the movement of wind. She is gentle as the crescent and sits with the *yonimudrā* on the *Kāmāgiri*.³⁰

The *Dhyāna*, the divine contemplation of Kamakhya given in *Kamakhyatantra*³¹ describes Kamakhya Devi as *Bhavānī* was the consort of Lord Siva dressed in beautiful garments with a woven silk-cloth in her loin, wears ornaments, has three eyes, has a smiling face, also can conquer the beauty of the blue clouds by her grace. She is worshipped by Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva and skilled in the application of the arrow of *Kama* (Cupid). She is a woman (*Kāminī*) who grants sexual desire, *Yonirūpā*

(form of Vagina) and destroyed all the sins of the kaliyuga. She sat on the jeweled throne which is placed under the *Kalpavṛkṣa*.³²

In the *Kalikapurana*, the goddess Kamakhya is described as of saffron-yellow color, stands on the white ghosts, wears a rosary, holds a siddha-sutra in her two hand and the postures of her other two hands are in boon granting and safety providing.³³

2.2. Mythological story described in *Kalikapurana*

The first and the foremost story of Kamakhya temple is how it got established, story of Sati and Shiva. The common story has been known from *Kalikapurana*³⁴ that once Daksa who was a great sage and father of Sati gave a sacrifice (*Yajna*) called *Sarvajana*, for the welfare of all the living beings. There Daksa had invited the whole creatures who abode in the universe from Gods to human beings and animals. The list further included the mountains and the trees. However, Daksa decided not to invite Shiva and Sati. According to him, Shiva is a *Kapali* (wearer of human-skull) and hence not eligible for the *yajna* and Sati was his wife. Sati angered to know about the sacrifice visited the *yajna*. However, Daksa insulted Shiva in front of her and being not able to bear her husband's insult, Sati gave up her life and her eyes turning red in anger by adopting a posture of *yoga*. She closed all the nine doors in her body and made a distinguished sound *sphota*.³⁵ With that sound of *sphota* her spirit went out from her body by breaking the tenth door.³⁶

Meanwhile, Shiva performs his *pratah sandhya* (morning oblation and prayer) in the beautiful lake of Manasa. He was returning to his hermitage where he heard pitiable wailing by Vijaya, daughter of Sati's sister. Hurriedly went to the sacrificial ground where he found his beloved wife Sati dead. Shiva heard the detailed incident from Vijaya he became furious and lost his sense. Then carrying the dead body of Sati on

his shoulder began to wander around the universe. Brahma, Vishnu and other Gods observed the condition of Shiva and decided to detach the body of Sati. Vishnu pieces the body of Sati with the *Sudarśana* (discus) of Vishnu.³⁷ The body part felled all over the earth and which were turned into Shakti *Pitha* (temples). The pair of feet fell at *Devikūta*, the pair of thighs fell at *Uddiyāna* and the female pudenda fell on the mountain named *Kāmagiri* in Kamarupa and the naval fell there on the ground, the pair of breasts was adorned with the golden chain and fell at *Jālandhara*, the arms along with the neck fell on the mountain, named *Pūrnagiri* her head fell beyond the region of Kamarupa.³⁸ Hence, the place where the genital organ of Sati felled became one of the prominent temple of Kamarupa i.e. Kamakhya Temple. Since, the goddess came secretly to satisfy her amour Kama with Shiva in the Nilachala hill. Therefore, she is called as Kamakhya.

2.3. Kamakhya Devi and Naraka

There is another legend related to Kamakhya Devi and its prominent figure was Naraka, who was depicted as *dvārapāla* or gate keeper of Kamakhya Devi.³⁹ Naraka was the son of Varaha (the boar incarnation of Vishnu) and the goddess Prthvi who was turned into demon. Coincidentally, Naraka was born out of the sexual intercourse by Varaha and Prthvi, who was then impure on account of her monthly course.⁴⁰ He was considered to be born as demon. After the birth of Naraka, he was sent to king Janaka (mighty king of Videha) to get all the lessons that were required to become a ruler of the particular kingdom. During the period Prthvi mother of Naraka disguised as a nurse with name Katyayani⁴¹ at the residence of Janaka and never left his side, till he reached the age of sixteen. As there was a promise kept between the king Janaka and the goddess Prthvi, when Naraka was about to complete his sixteen years She brought him to the bank of river Ganga and told him who were his real father and

mother. Vishnu the actual father of Naraka arrived there and brought them to Pragjyotispura situated in the midst of Kamarupa, where Kamakhya is the presiding deity.⁴² But the kingdom was inhabited by the Kirata people, with the leadership of king Ghataka. The Kiratas were described as foolish with cruel character and had shaven heads.⁴³ Naraka with the help of Lord Shiva killed the Kirata king and his generals and the soldiers. Some of the kiratas fled away and others surrendered to Naraka. Then Naraka went to his father to pay his obeisance after killing Ghataka. For which Vishnu gave the kingdom Pragjyotispura his son Naraka to reign for years attaining wealth, gems, elephants, horses and chariots. It is known that Naraka ruled for around twenty five thousand years.⁴⁴ Vishnu told him (Naraka) to worship only the great Mother Goddess Kamakhya, to respect the Brahmins, sages, kings and Gods and also gave him the management of Kamakhya *Pitha*.

The age of *tretā* (*Tretā yuga*) been passed to the end of the age of *dvāpara* (*Dvāpara-yuga*) there ruled a great demon king by the name Bana over the Kingdom of Sonitapura.⁴⁵ Naraka had developed a close friendship with Bana who was the son of Bali. During this period Naraka began to stop worshipping goddess Kamakhya, honoring the Brahmins and stopped performing sacrifices and offering gifts. Therefore, due to this negligence Naraka was killed. According to the *Kalikapurana*, the legend portrays that one day *Vasiṣṭha*, son of Brahma, the superior most of the sages had come to the city of Pragjyotish to visit Kamakhya Devi. But he was not allowed to enter for which the sage became angry and cursed Naraka that within a short time he will be killed by his own father Vishnu in a human form. And along with that Goddess Kamakhya, the mother of the world would disappear with all her attendants from the kingdom of Naraka i.e. Pragjyotish. After all this Naraka as for

the misdeed was killed by his own creator Vishnu and a new ruler Bhagadatta was installed on the throne.

2.4. Mythological story described in *Yoginitantra*

The legend related to the Kamakhya in *Yoginitantra* mentioned that the original deity of the Kamakhya temple is Kali as she is being surrounded by several *yoginis*.⁴⁶ The episode described in the Tantra goes this way Brahma after creating the beautiful universe became arrogant of his creativity and power. Hence to teach Brahma lesson the Goddess Kali created a demon named *Kesi* out of Brahma's pride and arrogance but the demon as soon as he was born rushed towards Brahma to swallow. The demon *Kesi* had also established his own city named *Kesipur*, from where he started to rule the whole universe and started creating havoc. Consequently, Brahma used to hear a menacing voice in the air, 'Kill Brahma'.⁴⁷ Realizing his foolish behavior as no one could kill the demon, so Vishnu and Brahma went to Kali and prayed to get rid of *Kesi*. She then killed *Kesi* and burnt him to ashes. After that Kali ordered Brahma to worship the genital sphere (*yoni* circle) which was originated from her own blood for the maintenance of the universe. The *yoni* circle was placed in Kamarupa along with that there are nine other such spheres.⁴⁸ This is how the Kamakhya temple got established according to *Yoginitantra*.

In the *Yogintantantra*, there is a similar story of Naraka as portrayed in *Kalikapurana*. Naraka son of Vishnu and the mother Earth was made the king of Pragjyotispura (Kamarupa) by his father Vishnu at the behest of Prthvi. There Naraka defeated the last kirata king for which Vishnu told him about the *yonimandala* (circle of vagina) and advised him to worship her.⁴⁹ The coming of *Vasistha*, the son of Brahma who

was propitiating Tara came to Nilachala hill to visit Kamakhya temple is also mentioned.

2.5. Naraka's marriage proposal to Goddess Kamakhya

Another story of Naraka which is still heard in the localities of Assam goes like this. One day suddenly Naraka proposed Mother Kamakhya to marry. To teach a lesson she agreed to the proposal with condition that Naraka must build a path from the foot of the Nilachala Hill to the top where the Kamakhya Temple exists and a tank near this temple within a single night.⁵⁰ Naraka accepted the challenge and started the construction with a great speed. Seeing that he might complete within the given time Devi decided to block the progress and sent a cock to crow to declare the dawn even though it was too early. When the cock started crowing, an angry Naraka chased and slaughter the cock. Lastly, Naraka could not complete the challenge. At present the place where the cock was killed is known as *Kukurākatā*⁵¹ (i.e. *kukurā*, a cock and *katā*, to kill) and the path that was constructed is called *Mekhelā ujuwā bāt*.⁵² This path is considered as the most popular and devotees of the Mother Goddess Kamakhya who walked by this route are believed to be blessed with prosperity.

2.6. The Historicity of Kamakhya Temple

Before the Koches and the Ahoms, Assam was ruled by Varman dynasty belongs to the family of Bhagadatta⁵³, descendant of Naraka then Salastamba and Pala dynasty. Though during the reign of these dynasties there is no clear information mentioned about the Shaktism or Mother Goddess Kamakhya. The Palas of Kamarupa were said to worship Kameswara Maha-Gauri Devi and the Salastambas had constructed the second Kamakhya temple on the Kamakuta hill near Silaghat.⁵⁴ Therefore only in the

period of Koch and the Ahom details about the Shaktism and the Kamakhya temple can be found.

From the *Kalikapurana*, it is known that a town Puri was built at Nilachal hill.⁵⁵ But at present, there cannot be seen any trace of the ancient town in this area instead modern structures of different types are built now along with the Kamkhya temple. Even the actual structure of the temple in the ancient period is not known only the recent structure which was renovated by the Koch rulers is there and in present outer surface of the temple is rebuilt.

2.6.1. Kamakhya Temple and the Koch Kings

The Koches were referred as *Kuvacha* according to the *Puranas* and the tantras.⁵⁶ At around 16th Century C.E. the Koches established their kingdom. They are called 'Rajbansis' i.e., the descendant of Royal Race in the region Cooch Behar and Western Assam.⁵⁷ Haria Mandal was the progenitor of the Koch Royal family who married the two daughters Hira and Jira of Hajo's King.⁵⁸ He had two sons from both of his wife. Biswa Singha's mother was Hira and Siba Singha's mother was Jira. Later on, Biswa Singha ascended the throne after his father's death.

2.6.1.1. Biswa Singha

The Koch ruled Assam from 1515 to 1635 CE⁵⁹ and Biswa Singha was the first Koch king. Biswa Singha followed and spread the Sakta cult further. It was considered as the significant historical mark in the reconstruction of the Kamakhya temple. According to Sir Edward Gait, Biswa Singha worshipped Shiva and Durga and gave gifts to the disciples of Vishnu and to the priests and astrologers. He revived the worship of Kamakhya and rebuilt her temple on the Nilachala hill of Guwahati and

brought Brahmins from Kanauj, Benaras and other centre of learning.⁶⁰ Therefore, it can be assumed that Biswa Singha was the first ruler who had constructed the temple of Mother Goddess Kamakhya.

There was a story, how Biswa Singha encountered Mother Goddess Kamakhya. Once, the King Biswa Singha was engaged in a war with the Ahom. The heavy rain and strong winds cut off the soldiers of Biswa Singha and his brother Siva Singha. They could not find their soldiers and lost their way to the Nilachala Hill. Suddenly, they noticed a light, heading towards found a banyan tree. There an old lady was worshipping a heap of soil without an image or idol. When the puja got over, they asked for water to drink, she told them to drink from the fountain. Biswa Singha asked about the heap of soil and came to know that it was the mound of *Pitha*. She mentioned that the mound itself was the form of the mighty Goddess and she always fulfills the desire of her devotees. Hearing these two brothers bowed down their heads and prayed to help them to find their soldiers. They promised to construct a temple of gold on the *Pitha*, if their prayer fulfilled. They found their army after and they realized the grace of Goddess.

Biswa Singha was interested to check the existence of the Goddess. He dropped three pieces of reed and a diamond ring in the pond created by the fountain from where they drank water and stated that he will believe in the divine power of Goddess, if he could find these things in the river Ganga at the holy city of Varanasi. After that the two brothers came back to their Kingdom and years passed away. Biswa Singha forgot about the incident and his promise. Once he visited Varanasi to take a ritualistic bath, there he found the diamond ring which reminded him of his commitment to build the temple of gold for Goddess at Nilachala Hill. Biswa Singha consulted his scholars and

pandits about the incident. After studying the different tantra and ancient books the scholars and pandits informed the king that the Nilachala Hill where he had spent a night and met the old lady is the greatest and the most powerful Shakti *Pitha* of Mother Durga (Mother Kamkahya).⁶¹ The King decided to construct the temple and excavate the site thoroughly. They found the main *Pitha* of the *yonimandala*. In the beginning, they built a shrine with brick instead of gold but it kept on breaking repeatedly. The king could not understand the cause of that. He reminded about the promise that construction of a golden temple of the Mother Goddess. However he realized his ability to build the temple with gold. Mother Goddess Kamakhya was pleased with the honesty of Biswa Singha and advised him to put a *rati* (very small amount) of gold in each bricks and to begin the construct of temple. As the king followed the direction of Mother Goddess, the construction got completed within a short period. For the management of the temple, Biswa Singha appointed around seventy two priest from Soalkuchi of Assam.

2.6.1.2. Naranarayana

Malladeva, son of Biswa Singha ascended the throne after the death of his father in 1540 CE.⁶² He later assumed a name Naranarayana and appointed his brother Sukladvaja as commander-in-chief. He was a great warrior and nick named as *Chilarai* or *Kite-king*.⁶³ Naranarayana engaged in many battles with Ahoms, Kachari's conquered the Jantia kingdom, Tippera and Sylhet. After the battle Naranarayana and Chilarai came back to Kamrupa and heard about the attack of Kalapahar who was the general of Sulaiman Karbani, Nawab of Gaur, Bihar and Orissa. He not only attacked Kamarupa but also destroyed the temple Kamakhya. Therefore, both the brothers decided to retaliate against Kalapahar and the Nawab of Gaur but were defeated and Chilarai was taken captive.

It was said that Koches lost the battle against the Nawab of Gaur because of their own mistake. They did not re-build the temple before the war. Chilarai was kept in the prison where Mother Goddess Kamakhya appeared in his dream and said that his defeat was due to the fact that he has not renovated the temple before waging the war against Nawab. Chilarai apologized for his mistake, upon which the Mother Goddess gave him another chance to correct. She asked Chilarai to follow her instructions. Nawab's mother who will be bitten by a poisonous snake should be cured by him and she will help him.⁶⁴ Chilarai's dream actually happened. However, all the physicians of Nawab and the snake-charmers failed to cure. As instructed by Goddess Kamakhya Chilarai sent the message to the Nawab that he could cure his mother because he had possessed the mantra of curing snake-bitten people. Then, taking the name of Mother Goddess, Chilarai took out the poison of the snake from the body of Nawabs mother and cured her. Out of the gratitude the Nawab released Chilarai and the two brothers planned to re-build the temple.

For the task of rebuilding the temple, Mahatram Vaisya⁶⁵ was appointed but the money was squandered away for this reason he was discharged for embezzlement. Naranarayana gave the responsibility to his general Meghakumudan in 1555 CE. At first attempt, Meghakumudan failed to construct the temple. As like Goddess appeared in other rulers dream she also appeared in Meghakumudan's dream and advised him to construct with the brick fried in clarified butter. Following the advice without any obstacles the temple was completed within six months. It is engraved in an inscription of Naranarayana in the *mandapa* (hall) of Kamakhya temple, that the reconstruction was done in saka 1487 i.e. 1565 CE.⁶⁶ From the record of Darrang Rajvamsavali, it is found that Naranarayana and his brother, Chilarai, came to inaugurate the temple and offered three lakh units of *homa* (fire rituals including

sacrificial performance) and granted seven *kudi pāik*, (*kudi* stands for score and *pāik* for servitors) by issuing a copper plate charter for the management of the temple.⁶⁷

The inauguration program of the temple was also done where King Naranarayana, his wife Banumati, Chilarai and his wife Chandraprabha along with their attendants participated in the ritual which was arranged in a big way for the occasion. Where both the brothers took a vow (*vrata*) and remained without food for seven days and got the inaugural function celebrated by offering three lakh of *homa* and one lakh animal sacrifices and made full provision for regular worship in the future. Along with the animal sacrifice the king had also offered heads of hundred and forty men to the Goddess.⁶⁸ In this connection, the king provided seven scores of servitors for the temple and issued copper-plate charter to that effect.⁶⁹

In spite of their dedication and contribution towards the Mother Goddess, the kingdom had been cursed. Here comes the incident, A Brahmin priest named *Kendukalai* used to worship goddess Kamakhya with rare devotion and sincerely performs *sandhyarati* which means waving of light before an image in the evening. The priest was skilled in music, dance and also chants hymns. Mother Goddess Kamakhya was highly pleased with the music and desired that she would perform her *līlā* (a play and dance) with *Kendukalāi*. She began to appear daily before him in that particular hour but warned him not to disclose in front of others. As, about the appearance and dance could not be kept secret for many days. Thus it so happened that the Koch king Naranarayana heard and desired to see the sight of divine dance of goddess with his own naked eyes. He came to the temple and requested *Kendukalai* to allow him at least a glimpse of the dancing goddess from outside. *Kendukalai* refused at first and said that with the grace of king he could maintain his family by priesthood. But will not be able to accede to his request. It is not good to plan a trick on Mother

Kamakhya. *Kendukalai* suggested the king to chant her name with much devotion then she might appear before you.⁷⁰ But *Kendukalai* was pressured by the king and lastly he had to surrender. The king was advised to take a position. He further advised the king to peep into the temple from the north-eastern side through a hole. The King was waiting for the moment when Mother Kamakhya would appear and dance. *Kendukalai* started the *sandhyarati* with the recitation of hymns and began to dance, after few minutes goddess appeared and began to dance. The King peeped into the temple and saw the wonderful sight of Goddess Kamakhya dancing. However, she came to know about the presence of Naranarayana and stopped. Goddess became angry with both of them and was enraged at the betrayal of *Kendukalai* she slapped him and made his head fly up and drop down near the village of his birth place Kalaigaon. Goddess Kamakhya also cursed Naranarayana, forbade him and his family members along with his descendants to enter or visit the temple or even to look at the temple from any place. She said, “If you or your descendants or members of your royal family ever visit or look at the temple, you or your descendants or members of your family will surely die.” Then she vanished in the air. From that day onwards the heirs of Naranarayana have not visited the temple.

2.6.2. Kamkahya Temple and the Ahom Kings

Another great dynasty of medieval Assam was Ahom who had ruled for around six hundred years. The Ahoms were described as the descendants of the “Lord of Heaven” whom the Hindus call as ‘Indra’ and the Deodhais as ‘Lengdon’.⁷¹ Also the first leader of Ahom, Sukapha was from the origin of *shans* who laid the foundation of the Ahom kingdom in Assam. In the beginning of the seventeenth century, the Kamakhya became more popular and known wider due to Ahom King Pratap Singha

(1603-1641 CE).⁷² Durga puja was introduced in Assam. After him, Rudra Singha ruled from 1696 AD to 1714 CE.⁷³ He was a staunch follower of Sakta to embrace Shaktism he became an orthodox Hindu. Even he summoned a Sakta Brahmin priest, Krishnaram Bhattacharya⁷⁴ from Bengal to settle in Nilachala hill and take care of temple. But when the priest reached the king declined to become his disciple and sent him back. It is interpreted that due to the curse of the priest a severe earthquake occurred. However, the king died before the fulfillment of his desire. Before his death, he had already advised his son and successor Siva Singha to settle the saint in the Nilachala Hill and gave him responsibility of management of the Kamakhya temple.⁷⁵

In the reign of Siva Singha (1714-1744), the Land grant inscription of Kamakhya Pandunath dated at 1637 saka or 1715 CE⁷⁶ mentioned that a total of 400 *purās* of land covering two *paraganas* were given to the priests of Kamakhya *Pitha* for its maintenance. Along with Siva Singha his consort Phuleswari known as Pramatheswari became a staunch follower of the Shakti cult and was more under the influence of Krishnananda Bhattacharya. Even she tried to make Shaktism as a state religion. It is widely known that Phuleswari to execute her plan she invited Vaishnava followers in a Shakti shrine and smeared their foreheads with the blood of sacrificed animal and made them accept *nirmali* of the Devi which caused the Moamaria rebellion.

Pramatta Singha (1744-1751 CE)⁷⁷ brother and the successor of Siva Singha, continued the royal patronage to the Kamakhya temple as mentioned in the stone inscription of the Amratakesvara (Siva) temple at the north Nilachala hill, dated 1744 CE.⁷⁸ Rajeswar Singha (1751-1769 CE)⁷⁹, the fourth son of Rudra Singha ascended

the throne after the death of Pramatta Singha. Like his predecessor, Rajeswara Singha had given some land grants to the Kamakhya Temple. It is mentioned in a copper plate inscription dated 1759 CE that the Ahom king Rajeswara Singha donated some lands to Brahmans and servitors at *pubpar parganas*.⁸⁰ Apart from that during his reign, Officer Tarun Duwara Barphukan constructed the temple which is mentioned in stone inscription of the Kedar Temple at Nilachala dated 1751 CE.⁸¹ According to the text of other stone inscription Nat-mandir attached to the Kamakhya shrine, with the patronage of Rajeswara Singha his officer constructed the Utsava-mandir attached to the Kamakhya temple dated 1759 CE.⁸² According to the copper plate inscription of Gaurinath Singha 1782 CE, the king desired to offer one lakh sacrifice to the Kamakhya temple.⁸³ Later on, from the *buranji* (chronicles) it is found that Badanchandra Barphukan, the Governor of Lower Assam had not managed the temple properly and misused the items and articles of worship.

Conclusion

Thus, it can be concluded that the Kamakhya temple as one of the greatest centre of Shakti worship gives the detailed information about the mythological stories related with it. But, regarding the actual date for the establishment and building of the temple there is no evidence to be found of the ancient period. Then later on, as per the accounts in the medieval period the temple was re-build by some of the rulers of Assam. Also, it can be said that Saktism along with the renovation of temple began to flourish all over the Assam from the medieval period. Also only during the period of the Koches the Kamakhya temple was well recognized, passing to the Ahoms and at present it has become one of the famous temple in whole region.

Endnotes

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CHAPTER-III

AMBUVACHI FESTIVAL AS A HISTORICAL STUDY

Festivals are termed as an important social event. It is a set of celebration associated with religion and observed in variety of ways in which some are related to different communities, areas, cities and country. Some of the festivals could be for different purposes like arts, food and drinks, even harvest and seasonal. Along with the involvement of family, friends and relatives, it is also a public celebration which provides entertainment, thanks giving. Also all the community celebrates together without any enmity. As there are numerous types of festivals some are celebrated with luxuriousness and gaiety while others are celebrated in a simple manner. Each of it has their form, tradition and features. Many are there which are not only observed at temple but also at home and public places. Festival also has political, social and economic aspects. They are even organized for the promotion of the region as to attract tourist. Thus, this demonstrates the growing cultural significance.

Moreover, India can be labeled as the hub of festival and it became a part of cultural life. It is well known that the Hindu socio-religious life is very rich with festivals and even there is a common saying that there are thirteen festivals in twelve months.¹ However the date of the festivals does not remain same and it changes every year. Hence, the festivals are used to strengthen the relation among the people and understand the human culture and help to socialize more broadly.

There are numerous definitions on festival that are formulated by different writers, institutions and dictionaries. Whereas, in the oxford advanced learners dictionary festival is defined as a day or period of the year when people stop working to

celebrate a special event, often a religious one. Also, a series of performances such as music, plays, films/movies etc and others are usually organized in the same place and once in a year, a series of public events connected with activity or idea.²

According to the Merriam-Webster collegiate dictionary festival is a time of celebration marked by special observances, an often-periodic celebration or program of events or entertainment having a specified focus.³

According to the Collins COBUILD advanced learner's English dictionary, a festival is an organized series of events such as musical concerts or drama productions.⁴

Waldemar Cundy defined it specifically a festival is an organized socio-spatial phenomenon that is taking place at a designated time outside the everyday routine-increasing the overall volume of a social capital and celebrating selected elements of tangible and intangible culture.⁵

Emile Durkheim considered festivals as an effervescence the intensity of which cements the solidarity of a group or a people, a representation of the invisible relationships between man and the laws of nature, a veritable institution whereby the bonds between the members of a society are maintained, regenerated and reproduced.⁶

3.1. Ambuvachi Festival

In India, every year dozens of festivals are celebrated. *Ambuvachi* is one of it observed in the Kamakhya temple that was located at the Nilachala Hill of North-East Assam. In immemorial time, Mother Goddess Kamakhya is being worshipped to indicate the divine energy in the temple. According to the *Kalikapurana*, it was

known that the genital organ of Sati was the shrine and it became one of the Shakti *pitha* (centre) that is there at Kamakhya temple. The main *Pitha yoni mandala* is a stone consisted of a natural fissure, reddish in color like vermilion or saffron and conical in shape which is twelve *angulas* in width and twenty *angulas* in length, lying along the *Bhasma-saila* (the hill of ashes of Kama).⁷ The great festival, *Ambuvachi* has become the recognition of Kamakhya temple. At present, it has become the most popular festival all over the country and every year people visit the temple. Despite the huge popularity and value, the exact detail about the origin of the festival is not known.

Like other words, *Ambuvachi* also has a meaning that consists of *ambu* means water and *vachi* means to speak or to talk.⁸ Initially, a feminine suffix referred to the Devi's yearly turn of menstruation period.⁹ *Ambuvachi* actually is an Assamese word which means that "the issuing forth of water", referring to the swelling of the Earth's water during the onset of the monsoons at that time of the year.¹⁰ According to the tradition Devi Kamakhya being a mother figure goes through menstruation towards the end of *Mṛgāsīrā* star and continues till the end of *Ārdrā* star around the early part of the month of *Āṣāḍhā*. The devotees had surmise that whoever touches the yoni will be cursed. There is a reference in the *Yoginītantra* that it is a yearly recurrence of such a period of impurity during which no one should go into the Devi's temple. It is said that the touching of Devi during these days will invite a curse and shorten his life.¹¹

Usually temples are recognised with the images or idols residing. However, the Kamakhya temple does not consist of any image inside the temple. It makes the temple different from other temples. The sanctum sanctorum of the temple is constructed on rock with silt that is painted with red. Consequently, when the

festival takes place during the rainy season water gets mixed with vermilion, trickles out through it and the devotees believe it to be the menstruated blood of the Goddess.¹² If the literal meaning of the word is paired with the significance of the festival, it can be concluded that this particular time is celebrated because it is believed that the natural stream of water flowing through the *yoni mandala* of the *garbhagriha* of the main temple ‘speaks’ by turning red with an increased supply of iron in it, thereby denoting the menstruation period of Goddess.¹³ It can be seen that the festival did not happen suddenly or just has to. The concept is closely linked with the natural elements mainly the agriculture and the weather cycle of the area i.e., Kamarupa.

3.2. Origin of the Festival

There is no clarity on the exact period of origin of the *Ambuvachi* festival is celebrated in the Kamakhya temple. However, with the help of oral tradition, it has been traced that *Ambuvachi* festival was known to the *sadhus* and *sanyasis* from Nepal and the Himalayan foothills. From the ancient times, they used to frequently visit *Devikuta* alias Kamakhya in their pursuit of pilgrimage.¹⁴ Probably, it can be considered that the festival came to limelight since the time of renovation of the Kamakhya temple by Koch King Naranarayana as stated in the buranji and the accounts. The renovation of the temple inspired the Shakti worshippers from far and wide. Particularly, the tantrics from Nepal and Eastern India used to assemble in the temple.¹⁵ *Sadhus* and tantrism believed that this festival is for only to them and as it is pivotal one and not for the common people. For this reason, *Ambuvachi* is also called *Ameti* or Tantric fertility festival. They assert that visiting the Kamakhya Temple during this period is prosperous as believed that the divine energy of Mother Earth becomes more powerful.

According to Hindu mythology, the earth is the symbol of female power, and the life giver. Therefore, the earth has been regarded as a deity of worship with names such as of Mādhavī, Jagaddhātri, Dharā, Bhumidevī, Dharitrī, Vasumatī, Vasundharā¹⁶ from ancient times itself. From the story of *Kalikapurana* specified that the Mother Earth had gone through the menstruation and God Vishnu assumed the form of a boar known as *yajnavaraha* to rescue the earth from the water Sindhu.¹⁷ During the time Prthvi and Varaha resulted in the birth of Naraka, the ancient King of Assam. However, the *devatas* raised various types of obstacles to stop the birth of Naraka. They had learned that Varaha discharged his semen into the womb of Prthvi when she was impure because of her menstruation.¹⁸ Due to Prthvi's impurity, Brahma and other gods reckoned as the birth was likely to bring misfortune to all. They delayed Naraka's birth with their divine power. The time passed Prthvi could not give birth even after the completion of the period. She was suffering to extreme with unbearable pain and was not being able to carry on the child. For the reason, earth was facing destruction, she went to Madhava seeking for help where being touched by Vishnu Prthvi delivered the child. It can be understood through this mythological story that Naraka turned to be a demon due to his unusual birth. Since the ancient time, menstruation period was seen with the prospection of impurity which is still found in the present society. Some of the community in the Indian society considers that the woman during her menstruating days is polluted. She is even forbidden to touch anything in the house and is not allowed to enter the kitchen. The rules and regulations for this practice also vary from one community to community. Among the Assamese society, who are residing at the Kamarupa, where the Kamakhya temple is situated also follows the same practices. With the same comparison, the *Ambuvachi* days are also taken as

defilement of the Mother Goddess Kamakhya for which the temple remains closed for three days.

3.3. Rituals

Rituals are a kind of religious service or ceremony involving a series of practices performed in fixed order.¹⁹ Festivals have their own ritual procedures which are needed to be followed and people carry out in a fixed pattern.

The month of *Āṣāda* third month of lunar calendar i.e. June to July witnesses heavy rainfall every year and in this same month *Ambuvachi* festival also starts on the seventh day.²⁰ Whereas, the festival usually starts from the longest day in the year i.e., 21st or 22nd June to 26th June throughout this period Mother Goddess goes on her menstrual cycle. As it is believed that the Goddess takes rest following the tradition temple remains closed for three consecutive days and the daily rituals are also restrained till the main gate reopens. Then on the fourth day, the temple gates opens for the *darshan* of the Goddess Kamakhya. The festival starts with the covering of *yoni mandala* (vagina circle) of Mother Goddess Kamakhya with red silk cloth of about three hundred meters which is kept for three days and this cloth is called *Angavastra*.²¹ Hereafter, the cloth becomes wet with the menses of Mother Goddess which is believed sacred. Usually *Angavastra* means the shawl as in Assam it means Gamosa or Chador and in Bengal it is called Uthoria but here in the Kamakhya temple *Angavastra* gives the different meaning. The completion day of *Ambuvachi* is called as *suddhi* and *garbhagriha* the innermost chamber of the deity where the deity resides is cleaned²² and arrangement is done for the *darshan*. *Ātpariyas* the non-Brahmana of the Kamakhya temple also known as *paiks*²³ and were the keepers of security and supervisors of cleanliness inside the temple.²⁴ It is

their responsibility to clean the *garbhagriha* and also help the priest during the religious rites in the *Pitha*. They even give the ritualistic bath to *yoni mandala* first with *pancagavya* (almanac) and then with plain water. After that the deity is dressed in new saris and the nominal *puja* is performed.²⁵ After the ritual *Angavastra* or *rakta vastra* is taken to the temple office or *Bharal* (store room). The cloth is cut into small strips and then it is distributed to the temple priest. The Priest and the people who were connected to the Kamakhya temple were the ones who can take part in the contribution to buy the cloth. Also the priest never sells this *Angavastra* instead it is given as blessings to the common people. With a belief that it will bring success strips of these red cloths are tied on the arms or wrists or necks and is never worn below the navel. According to the legend, Koch king Naranarayana and his brother Chilarai laid a piece of white cloth on the main *pitha* of Devi to locate and verify this spot before undertaking the rebuilding of the temple. This piece of white cloth became red automatically indicating the pressure of Mother Goddess Kamakhya.²⁶ It is considered that those who got the *Angavastra* are lucky as it is the most precious thing. For which people visits from every corner of the region with a belief that they will get this *prasad*. Also, *prasad* (offerings) in the form of *Angodak* (water from the spring flowing over the *Yoni Mudra*) is distributed.²⁷

Tradition is a belief, custom or way of doing that existed for a long time in a particular society or among the group of people.²⁸ *Ambuvachi* festival also has some special type of traditions that are followed both at temple and home. Such as works like the agriculture, cultivation, digging, ploughing, cutting trees, building houses all these are restricted.

The identification of woman and Mother Earth are same i.e., menstruation as a natural phenomenon that fertilize woman to conceive and reproduce are also thought to be same for Mother Earth. Therefore, *Ambuvachi* festival signifies the nurturing power of Mother Earth producing with the dominance of monsoon rain. In the passage of *Mārkaṇḍeya purāna* it is mentioned that the Goddess herself had said to “support the whole world with the life sustaining vegetables which shall grow out of my own body during a period of heavy rain. I shall gain fame on earth then as *Śākambharī*”. Thus, this makes it clear that the Mother Earth produces life sustaining crops for the whole world.²⁹

There are some other rituals like restrain from the food which is cooked in the fire are mainly followed by widows, *sadhus*, Brahmins and even the married woman, man and any other devotees can follow the same practice. They even observe restrictions such as avoiding oiling and combing their hair, not using foot wears.³⁰ Specifically for widows it is considered to be the matter of great virtue to visit Kamakhya on the occasion of *Ambuvachi*. During this period of impurity the devotees observe *vrata*³¹ for three days and relay on flattened rice, curd and fruits. Some devotees do not even keep their fruits and other eatables on the ground and they subsist on uncooked food instead. The person who had lost his parent or parents also observes the *vrata* usually in the first year after the death.³² But the ceremony which is mainly practiced by the woman in this period is called *Sāthā vrata*. It is observed for seven days from the last four days of the *Jyestha* (May-June) to the third day of the month of *Asada* (June-July). All the *vratas* are actually the household practices, so as this. The *vratī* who are the performer especially girls and the ladies perform the rituals for continuously seven days. They collect some mud from the mouse holes and spread on the plate. Then flowers, fruits like *leteku*

(*baccaurea ramiflora*), lemon, pomegranate, *dheki* (fern), betel nut and then the equipments used for cultivation are kept on the plate to offer to the Goddess. And the deities associated with this *vrata* are Kamakhya, Upani Gauri, Goddess Lakshmi, Mankamini and Phool Kotari. Every day the process of decorating the plate continues by changing the ingredients. On the seventh day, the *vrata* ends with offering the Goddess some flowers, the plate is placed near the shrine of the house and seeds are sown such as pulse, mustard, barley, lintel and paddy. Lastly *visarjana* is done i.e. immersion of the objects of worship in the *Saubhagya Kunda*.³³ Along with all this restriction, ritualistic practices and auspicious programmes, functions like *annaprāsana*, *cūḍākarāṇa*, and marriage³⁴ are also strictly avoided.

Some of the authors had noted that despite of suspension of all other *pujas* only *nitya puja* is observed at temple and even at home. In the *Kāmeśvarī* temple *nitya puja* is worshipped, where the daily sacrifice of he-goat is needed to be continued.³⁵ However these days in the afternoon the usual *bhoga* (food cooked only for the deity) is avoided, instead flattened rice, curd, mango, jackfruit and other seasonal fruits are offered to the goddess on banana leaves. Again, in the afternoon a special plate of *prasad* is offered to the Goddess.³⁶ Among all the devotees, the priests and family members who reside by the Kamakhya were the real bhaktas (devotees) as they are ones who follows all the restrictions and taboos. A custom called *bhūmidāha* is quite similar with the festival *Ambuvachi*. The term *bhūmidāha* means the burning of the earth. It is considered that the earth is burnt with the extreme heat of the sun.³⁷ In addition, *Ambuvachi* festival is also based on the concept of earth. The rituals of both the tradition were related such as ploughing and sowing are forbidden and *vrata* is performed.

3.4. Pilgrims, Fair and its management

The popularity of this festival has spread to wider range, as there can be seen increase in number of devotees every year. Pilgrims are not only coming from India but also from some foreign country. Although, the temple remains closed for three days, the atmosphere remains vibrant with *Kirtan* (songs) and other activities. The Nilachala hill turns into a colourful canvas of mixed designs with lakhs of people gathering during this time. A *mela* (fair) held in the temple premises where commercial activities take place. There are hundreds of ascetics gather at Nilachala. For most of the *sadhu's* who posses' the mystic powers, this is an occasion to exhibit. Among these *sadhus* and *sanyasis* males were more in numbers than females. This fair also witnesses large assembly of saints and monks of different sects and cults in the complex. However, the representation of female monks is far less than their male counterparts. There cannot be seen any female priest or *pandas* in the temple in conducting any of the *pujas* or helping the people who are there for *darshan*. There is hardly any female priest in the temple and all the works are conducted by the male priest and the *pandas*.

Pilgrims consider Kamakhya temple as the *mātr̥khetra*, which signifying the spiritual inspiration of *siddhi*, *riddhi* and *kr̥yā-karma*.³⁸ Generally, this occasion is a platform for religious discussions and interaction. At the time of stay, the pilgrims spend their time on meditation, engage themselves in singing songs, praising to the Goddess, starts philosophical talks and even share their miraculous incidents. Some of the pilgrims spend their time with monks in seeking their advice and suggestions about their personal problems. They believe that the temple of Kamakhya grows tremendously powerful by accumulating the divine power of all the Shakti *Pithas*.³⁹ On the day of re-opening of the temple pilgrims from

nearby areas and from different parts of the country come to this sacred complex to get *darhsan* of the Goddess. For these four days some of the Pilgrims stays in the tents arranged by the temple authority and other voluntary organizations. Now a day many ashrams and lodges were built near the temple boundary so that the devotees who have come from far places would not face any problem.

To conduct this huge festival is not possible without the proper management. In which the State Government directly takes part along with the temple management committee. The works were distributed to the concerned departments such as Health Department for first-aid and ambulance, for the security and safeguards Home Department, Guwahati Municipal Corporation GMC is also involved for the cleaning, sanitary facilities, drinking water facilities along with Public Work Department for keeping the entire Hill safe. They even arrange temporary shelters, for the pilgrims. All the management of the occasions are arranged by Government of Assam represented by Deputy Commissioner and the Tourism Department. Many other organizations also come forward to supply free food both cooked and uncooked to the thousands of pilgrims gathered in the festival. From the main road to the temple complex it takes of around one hour journey by foot. Where during the festival days no vehicles were allowed inside for maintenance and on the way to the temple many facilities were provided from drinking to resting place. The facilities at the top of the hill during this period have greatly increased the popularity of this *Ambuvachi* festival. Many of the pilgrims not only come to visit the temple but even come to sell their goods which are mainly of *puja* articles and handicrafts with religious motifs. Through this economic perspective can be seen. The whole process of the festival organization has not changed from

the time when the festival was celebrated but facilities and maintenance has improved.

Apart from the festival the Kamakhya temple usually receives thousands of devotees everyday as there is not only one temple around the boundaries of the temple many are there. To maintain and look after all the works is not an easy task and it is the duty of the *Sevatis* to arrange and manage the requirements for the daily rituals and the ceremony which are held in the temple. As it is known fact that temple works are done only by the *Sevatis*, *Pandas* and the people who were connected to the temple. The working hours increases during the festival days and have to work harder. Even for daily *darshan* long queue starts from morning 5 o'clock. At present, due to the increase in number of pilgrims to thousands for better maintenance the queue and coupon system has been introduced. The VIP pass has been introduced for those who do not want to wait in the queue for *darshan* and offers *puja* quickly and through easy process. But to get this VIP pass they have to pay. Other pilgrims are also there who does not have to pay and waits for their turn for *darshan* staying in the long queue. The process of *darshan* does not change even during the *Ambuvachi* festival or any other festival, it remains same. *Sevatis* are the Brahmans and the non-Brahmans who look after the temple complex⁴⁰ and *Pandas*, who help and guide the devotees in the process of *darshan*. This *sevatis* were brought by the rulers in the earlier period to look after the management of the temple and lands were granted to them to settle and to fulfil their needs. This *sevatis* later on turned into the Brahmans. In the Nidhanpur copper plates it has been mentioned that the land has been awarded to the Brahmans by the Bhaskarvarman and even no tax was levied.⁴¹ The sacred ceremony of horse-sacrifice which shows the power, wealth and status of the king was followed by the

ruler Bhutivarman taken from the imperial Guptas⁴² probably for which Brahmans were brought to perform the sacrificial practice and to improve the learning and cultural programmes. During the Pala dynasty most of the rulers had donated land to Brahmans who had come from different regions outside the Assam as engraved in the copper plates. In the Bargaon copper plate grant it has been mentioned that Ratnapala donated a plot of land having the capacity to yield two thousand units of paddy to the Brahmin named Viradatta in the north bank of Brahmaputra. The Swalkuchi copper plate of Ratnapala gives the detail of land donated where three thousand units of paddy can be cultivated to a Brahmin Kamadevabhata, also the Guwahati copper plate grant of Indrapala gives the evidence that the king had granted four thousand units of paddy field to a Brahmin Deshapala in Hapyoma Visaya of the north bank of Brahmaputra, the Guwakuchi copper plate grant of Indrapala mentions land of two thousand units for yielding was being donated to Brahmin Devadeva, Gopalavarman the son and successor of the king Indrapala has also granted a land of Eight thousand units to a Brahmin described in the Gachtal copper plate. Also Dharmapala had given a land of six thousand units mentioned in Khanamukh copper plate and ten thousand units of land for yielding is mentioned in Puspabhadra copper plate. Apart from all this also in the Parbatiya copper plates of Vanamalavarmadeva and the Nowgong copper plate grant of Balavarman III, there has been mentioned about the land granted to the Brahmans.⁴³ Therefore, from this source it can be traced that from the early period the Brahmans had already settled in the region Kamarupa (Assam). Also, later on some of the Ahom kings Rajeswar Singha, Siva Singha and their officers had also granted land to a priest of Kamakhya. In the copper plate inscription of *brahmottar* grant in the Bangsar-Pargana, it has been stated that Siva Singha's officer Auija Duwara

Barphukan donated thirty *bighas* of paddy land to a priest of Kamakhya named Vidyavagisa Chakraborty in 1717 C.E and the copper plate inscription of Nankar in the Nambar-bhag paragana provides the detail that during the reign of Rajeswar Singha a land of eighty *bighas* were donated in 1763 C.E.⁴⁴ Also from the account it has been known that on the invitation of Ahom king Rudra Singha, Bengali Brahmin came to Assam.⁴⁵ With the passages of time, this Brahmins became the permanent residents of the region and their population began to increase. Thus, in the present the whole area of the Kamakhya temple is dominated by the Brahmins and they had also started to build buildings which are set up as the lodges, shops and ashrams. Through this apart from the temple work they have their extra source to fulfil their needs.

3.5. Conclusion

Even, though the exact period is not known when the *Ambuvachi* festival is started celebrated. The festival has become the greatest one linked with the agricultural cycle in which the whole region survives. It is a period of transition when the Mother Earth gets prepared to bear crops. Thus to give an understanding to the common people, it has been placed religiously. But apart from the outer surface which is seen during the festival is the only information we can know, other than that things are secret. Going into the depth of the *Ambuvachi* festival the temple is closed for three days. At that time whatever have happened in the temple are never disclosed to the common people. It just remains as a secret within the office of Kamakhya temple and the priest along with the people who are connected to the temple. Then about the rituals it can be seen that the though the devotees also observe but temple priests and their family were the ones who follow all the taboos and restriction functional in the Kamakhya temple. Since, the concept is about the

natural phenomena and the fertility cult is worshipped women is automatically connected with the *Ambuvachi* festival.

Endnotes

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CHAPTER-IV

***AMBUVACHI* FESTIVAL AND ITS IMPACT ON SOCIETY**

Religion plays the role of both positive and negative effect in society, which sometimes divides, bring peace and even controversies. Still with the common rites and rituals binds the people of various communities together which brings harmony in the society. Religious ideologies reflect and evolve according to the needs of society as its material condition, mode of production and relations of production changes.¹ From earlier times, woman's were seen excluded from many services starting from religious service, in political complex noting them as weak, problem creator and impure on account of her menstruation. Thus, this chapter explains the worship of menstrual period of the Mother Goddess and examines the influence of *Ambuvachi* festival and analyze how this festival is perceived by the people of Kamarupa. *Ambuvachi* festival gives a different impact on the society relating to the menstruation. It can be said that this festival as the fertility ritual present the actual scenario of the Kamakhya temple. In the many parts of India there are temples with the similar concept of menstruating Goddess. In Kerala the same rite of purification is made of the goddess bhagavati.² In Punjab Mother Earth sleeps every month for a week³ probably during her periodic days as well in Malabar region, the Goddess during the hot weather takes rests until the first rain.⁴ Then as well in the Deccan, after the *navaratra*, the temple of Devi is closed from the tenth to the full moon day.⁵

Ambuvachi festival is the interpretation of the energy of Goddess similar with the woman with the reference of worshipping the *yonipith*, genital organ of Sati. Moreover, the Goddess Kamakhya is known as the primordial force that puts the

entire world in the motion.⁶ There is a belief among the devotees that if a person touches the yoni stone he acquires immortality as immortal resides in the abode of Brahma through which liberation (moksa) can be obtained.⁷ As mentioned in the *Kalikapurana*, even if the piece of iron comes into the contact with the *Yoni*-stone it turns into gold because of the powerful energy of Mother Goddess.⁸ Here in the temple along with *yonis* and Lord Shiva is also worshipped in the form of *linga*. This forms the joint worship i.e., the united energy of Siva and Shakti (Saiva-Shakti) under the name of *Ashta-matikas*, representing principles of fertility and generations.⁹

The festival is celebrated in the month of June-July that is the monsoon season of harvesting. During these days Mother Goddess goes through her menstrual period and devotees this menstrual blood of the Goddess is believed to be sacred and can cure any illness.¹⁰ Red as the symbol of fertility represents the menstrual blood and the vermilion stands for menstrual blood which is used to smear on the stone implying the productive energy.¹¹ As in the temples vermilion is put on the stone, sculpture and images of the Goddesses and even after conducting the *puja* as a ritual the priests smeared on the forehead of the devotees. Another custom followed by the Hindus is that women have to put the vermilion on their forehead as a symbol of married but the widows cannot use it. The forehead painted red shows a sign that she is forbidden to all men except her husband and will bear him children.¹²

As mentioned in Manu Samhita man is referred as a seed and the earth as the field.¹³ Also earth is termed as the eternal womb.¹⁴ Thus, as the women can bear child in the same way Mother Earth has also the function of life producing, agriculture. Therefore, for common masses it is the divine energy, power called

Shakti of Mother earth as well as the women. Mother Goddess being termed as the fertility goddess considered her to be the protector of children. It can be projected that same as women Mother Goddess also has womb i.e. Earth, where crops are yielded for survival for human being. Actually, it is an ancient concept of conceiving by Mother Earth.¹⁵ So, in this connection as the Indian agricultural myths begin with the Mother Goddess of Harappa culture. As mentioned by Marshall in the unearthed seal at Harappa there is nude female figure, head downwards and legs stretched out upwards, with a plant issuing out of her womb.¹⁶ The concept of Mother Goddess as primordial force is also there in other countries present with different names and forms, such as Isis in ancient Egypt, Ishtar in Mesopotamia, and Greek and Roman goddess as Gaea, Athena, Demeter, Artemis, Aphrodite and many more.¹⁷ These Goddesses are the evidence of being independent that stood by her and have the strength and power to destroy any problem. Accordingly the fertility of the fields seemed to belong to the special competence of women who were regarded the first cultivators of the soil and power of child bearing in primitive thought as a sympathetic effect on the vegetative forces of the earth.¹⁸ In this point, N N Bhattacharya argued that ‘As the Universal beliefs, Women cause the fruits to multiply because they know how to produce children. Whatever is planted by a pregnant woman will grow and increase as the fetus in her womb.’¹⁹ This implies that Woman has the power to control over things. And the fruit here might be considered as children who will grow with the nature and purpose as she had desired whether with the faults or advantages. Particularly the concept of Mother Goddess fighting with the demons can be compared with the natural calamities like flood, drought and the landlords and money lenders who in the present world handle the matter of lands in and even

oppress the unprivileged peoples in order to protect her worshippers and their agricultural yields. In the *Kumari Tantra* it's been mentioned that the 'The whole world is embodied in the woman, one should be a woman one's self. Women are Gods. Women are vitality'.²⁰

4.1. Tantricism related to Shakti worship

The religion attested to the worship of Mother Goddess is Shaktism. Shaktism also had similar roots, it can be noted from the earlier civilization that the aboriginal tribes used to worship cults who were mainly female deities. Later, these cults were brought under the Hindu fold and were given a name Shaktidevi, as the woman was believed to possess creative energy.²¹ Shaktism actually is the medieval religion with certain primitive female deities. It is a worship of Goddess in different forms and names. Basically Mother Goddess Kamakhya is one but assumes various shapes at her will and is known by numerous names according to her manifestations in different *Pithas*.²² The male gods, Shiva, Brahma and Vishnu are the subordinates of the Mother Goddess. They remained as the mounts of the great powers of Mother Goddess and also she is the consort of Shiva and yet being the consort she is also his creator.²³ These can be compared with the father, brother and husband of women as like the male Gods they remain as the supporter and protector. Mother Goddess is the source of all powers to all the beings. But remains the subject although was created by the combined powers of Gods. She was created to perform the deeds that the Gods could not achieve for themselves she soon established her own significant might and power.

The worship of Mother Goddess is mostly related to Tantricism, where sacrifice is the main offerings. According to the Tantric ritual the menstrual blood is called

khapuspa (flower from the sky) and the necessary part of the ritual is yantra actually drawn as Lotus whereas the lotus signifies the female procreative organ.²⁴

4.2. Changes in the offerings

With the passage of time changes took place even in the field of religion. The methods remained and rituals changed. Particularly, the process of worshipping Mother Goddess Kamakhya had also changed mainly the offerings to the deity. In the *Kalikapurana* and *Yoginitantra*, the methods of worshipping the Mother Goddess Kamakhya were thoroughly described, but some of it are not followed or allowed in the present days.

The Goddess Kamakhya being a mother protects from the enemies, removes misfortunes, brings welfare, grants wish of her devotees. To achieve all these benefits hundreds of rituals and offerings are required to satisfy the goddess. For the common people it is difficult to perform alone without the knowledge of procedure therefore priests are assigned to guide them. In the earlier days kings of Kamarupa and from nearby regions before going to the battle ground visits the temple of Kamakhya for their victory. As the goddess can be pleased by the sacrificed blood, the rulers according to the practice used to offer wild animals like buffaloes, he-goats and sometimes human sacrifice.²⁵ Through this they affirmed that Mother Goddess would protect the dynasty from the enemies. Thereafter as it happens they come back to the temple to offer their gratitude to Goddess Kamakhya. But, in the present days some of the offerings mainly the human sacrifices are not allowed.

Moreover, for the sacrifice birds, tortoise, alligators, fish, big lizards, bulls, he-goats wild boars are presented for the attainment of liberation and prosperous

life.²⁶ However, apart from birds and he-goats some of the other animals are not allowed for the sacrifice in today's generation, for the reason that those animals are difficult to gather. For the replacement of those unavailable things other items like the pumpkin, sugarcane, spirituous and fermented liquor are used considering equal to the sacrifice of animal and can be used to satisfy the goddess.²⁷ Generally, to worship Mother Goddess Kamakhya numerous procedures has been mentioned in the *Kalikapurana* one of them is that a person can rescue his thousand generations of dynasty from accumulated sins, can enjoy long life happiness and also can obtain sovereignty if he can climb the mountain *Nilakuta* and worship the *yonimandala* for three times.²⁸ As per the concept of religion killing any living beings is a sin but according to the *Kalikapurana* the animals are said to be created for offering sacrifice for which even if an animal is killed for sacrifice it is not considered a sin.²⁹ On top of it only the male animals, birds are offered for sacrifice and the female animals, birds are exempted, might be because it is presented to Goddess. The sacrificial work is always conducted only in the temple for which *Balikata*'s were given the responsibility. *Balikata* is a termed used for a person whose duty is to sacrifice the objects offered to goddess. They execute the daily sacrifice or *nitya bali* in the temple. Moreover, this is their source of income.

Some other offerings, women are mostly pleased with cloths, perfumes and flowers as well Mother Goddess does. To praise her seat made of various flowers or wood or cloth or of *Kusa* grass is presented.³⁰ After offering seat one becomes fortunate and attains the liberation. Whereas devotees consider cloth as the remover of shame and wipes away the sin.³¹ Then the perfumes obtained from the trees and flowers delights the goddess. Also the *yoni mandala* is bathed with the water, milk, honey and saffron. To satisfy Goddess Kamakhya it might be easy task or might

not be for the reason that all the ingredients and objects are not easily available. In this case, alternative is there if the flowers are not available leaves can be used for worshipping. Even, leaves are not available then grass or water or rice. At last, if none of these ingredients are found, a devotee can offer his devotion.³² But as the time passed away the methods and process of conducting rituals became simple for many reasons. Like to manage the procedure and the common people could also worship with needed items.

For all these arrangements of daily *puja* and even during the *Ambuvachi* starting from the flowers, cloths, fruits and other ingredients, *athparia's* the *sevatis* were given the responsibility. They were the in charge of cleaning and washing of the *Pithas*. The word *athparia* is derived from the word *asta prahara*, *asta* means eight and one *prahara* covers three hours meaning the eight divisions of a day covering twenty four hours.³³

From earlier times onwards women's were used to accomplish some of the programmes to keep good terms, to fulfil some of the needs and to maintain wealth. In addition, matrimonial alliance for the support and welfare and sometimes the power is handed over to the queen but the main tasks were played by the man behind her. One of the examples can be taken as:

Siva Singha the Ahom ruler, his consort Phuleswari was said to be responsible for the downfall of reign. During his reign a Sakta priest Krishnananda Bhattacharya was invited from West Bengal to take care of Kamakhya temple and was made the head of the temple. But Krishnananda wanted to replace Shaktism instead of Neo-Vaishnavism in the region. However, in 1722 C.E³⁴ the astrologers predicted that the king had fallen under the evil influence of stars and soon his reign will end.

Thus, to save his kingdom Siva Singha following the advice of priest decided to hand over the power to his consort Phuleswari and made her the chief queen with the title Bar Raja and the king himself became the chief advisor of queen. After that priest gave her name Pramatheswari considering as a symbol of Goddess Durga.³⁵ Phuleswari became a disciple of Krishnananda Bhattacharya. As a staunch follower of Shaktism, she began to follow whatever the priest suggested. Now the queen was completely under the influence of the priest Krishnananda. Being the chief queen she wanted the whole region to follow Shaktism and started to impose changing the rituals. But some of the subjects in the region were against the imposing of religion on the society. Queen heard that the Vaishnava followers were against the religion even insulted the rites and rituals of Saktism, so she thought to teach them a lesson.³⁶ So, she invited those including Moamaria Mahantas who were also the Vaishanava followers in the occasion of Durga puja. The disciples knowing the fact that they will be insulted without dishonouring the queen's invitation went there. The queen taking the chance after the sacrificial ceremony of animals in the name of ritual smeared the foreheads of the Vaishnavites and also of Moamaria Mahantas with the blood of the sacrificed animals. Thus the incident hurt the sentiments of Vaishnavites and the Moamarias. Therefore, this led to the rebellion between the Ahoms and the Moamarias.

From this circumstance, queen was portrayed as the evil one and full of greed for power. But, the actual fact was she was only initiating the priest ambition which brought displeasure among the peoples and the matter turned to the war. Because of Phuleswari's this misdeed many works which she had done for the welfare of the region were not recorded instead her husband king Siva Singha was termed as the great king and many of his works were also engraved. This shows the strong

patriarchal tradition in the society denouncing women who tried to profess her thoughts in the regional affairs. Thus, it can be pointed that women's were mostly used as a tool by the men to achieve their target through many oppressing ways.

Every woman in Kamarupa is considered as a living Goddess and receives special worship and respect. The society had also adapted the notations as it is described in the earlier text. Likewise, In the *Kalikapurana*, the story of Prthvi bearing the child of Lord Vishnu during her menstruation days was considered as impurity for which they considered their son would turn into demon. Thus, as followed from the ancient times in today's society the women are also considered impure during her monthly days. Another fact is that, as the menstruation days of the Goddess is celebrated as a great festival in the same way a girl's first menstruation might be celebrated. But probably from the second time of her periodic days she would be excluded from temple worship including the household works like cooking and even restricted from entering the kitchen as per the rules and regulations followed in the society. Thus, it can be related with the concept of Mother Goddess taking up various formations to mold up with the situation that women can also adapt into various character to handle the situations.

The point of equality can be seen in this festival through *vrata*, one of the socio-religious practices followed by the devotees. It is actually observed by the women residing at Kamakhya but the male section does not seem to follow the practice. There are five types of *vratas* followed at the Kamakhya temple, namely *satha vrata*, *katyayani vrata*, *savitri vrata*, *manantara vrata* and *doul vrata*.³⁷ Among these *satha vrata* is practiced during the *Ambuvachi* festival. It is observed by every person of the family from boys, girls, married women except the married men and the widows. This *vrata* is observed from the month Jyestha (May-June)

i.e., from the last four days till the third day of the month Asada (June-July).³⁸ These *vrata* is an agricultural event related with the Mother Earth. Literally, following of the *vrata* were mainly aimed at social control forcing or regulated only to the women. However, it can also be reversed in a positive way as giving chances to the women as a concern for their needs and ambition. As in the *Ambuvachi* festival the process, schedule and methods of the *vrata* is setup by the women.

Even though the temple is of Goddess and the *Ambuvachi* festival is about the potency of female energy. However, it has been seen that the entire priest including *sevaitis* and the *pandas* were male. None of the festival work is done by any female priest. From this it can be notified out that the female members were always put under some restrictions even from the earlier days. As the rules and regulations were mostly set by the male members it had been followed from the earlier days onwards. This festival is termed to be one of the biggest and prosperous one as because it relates the entire social, economic and even political scenario. Likely through the setup of markets the items needed for the worship of Devi is found which aroused the economic perspective.

Endnotes

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³ North Indian Notes and Queries and Punjab Notes and Queries. (*Ibid.*, 8.)

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⁵ Underhill, M.M. "The Hindu religions year". as quoted in *Ibid.*, 8.

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- ⁶ Shastri, B.N. Ed. *The Kalikapurana*. Delhi: Nag Prakashan, 2018:453; 62/3.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, 458-459; 62/73b-75b.
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- ⁹ Vasu, N.N. *The Social History of Kamarupa*, New Delhi: Northern Book Centre, 1986: 74.
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- ¹¹ Bhattacharya, N.N. *Op.cit.*, 9.
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- ¹³ Dutt, M.N. *Manu Samhita*, Calcutta: The Resuscitation of Indian Literature, 1909: 319; 9/33.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 320; 9/37.
- ¹⁵ Lynn Foulston and Stuart Abbot. 1999. *Op.cit.*, 3-4.
- ¹⁶ Marshall, J. *Mohenjodaro and the Indus Civilization*, London: 1936: 52.
- ¹⁷ Bhattacharya, N.N. 1999. *Op.cit.*, 87, 85, 89, 92.
- ¹⁸ Frazer, J.G. “The Golden Bough” and R. Briffault “The Mothers” as quoted in *Ibid.*,5
- ¹⁹ Bhattacharya, N.N. *Ibid.*,5
- ²⁰ William, Moiner. *Brahmanism and Hinduism*: New York, 1891: 181.
- ²¹ Barman, Sivanath. “Religion and Reality: An Inquiry into the Hindu Cults of Assam” In D Nath Ed. *Religious Tradition and Social Practices in Assam*: Guwahati, 2106: 58.
- ²² Shastri, B.N. 2018. *Op.cit.*,42; 55/52
- ²³ *Ibid.*, 422;58/66.
- ²⁴ Barman, Sivanath . 2016. *Op.cit.*,59.
- ²⁵ Shastri, B.N. 2018. *Op.cit.*, 501-502; 67/3-5a, 18.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, 501; 67/5b-6a.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, 503; 67/23.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, 491; 65/59-61a.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, 504; 67/39.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*, 517; 68/2-4a.
- ³¹ *Ibid.*, 524; 69/15.
- ³² *Ibid.*, 529; 69/78-80a.

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³⁸ *Ibid.*, 75

CHAPTER-V

CONCLUSION

The dissertation “*Ambuvachi Festival: -A Socio-Cultural Study*” is focused on the festival celebrated at Kamakhya temple every year in the month of June. There are three objectives framed to understand the *Ambuvachi* festival and its impact on the people of Kamarupa. The first objective is to study the historical background of the Kamakhya temple. The second one is to study the *Ambuvachi* festival and its background and the third is its impact on the society.

Ambuvachi is one of the prominent festivals celebrated in Assam and regarded as the greatest all over India. This festival can be taken as the actual reason for the establishment of the temple. The festival has a strong connection with the women and it is about the menstruation period of Mother Goddess Kamakhya.

Assam where the Kamakhya temple is located has been known by many names from ancient times. In the *Puranas*, Assam is mentioned as Kamarupa then in some other literary works Kamarupa and Pragjyotisha is mentioned as two different regions. Also the present boundary of Assam has also expanded with the passage of time. The environment of Kamarupa can be traced from the races and tribes who were residing in this region. As opined by many scholars tribals use to worship Mother Nature which was later on named as Mother Goddess Kamakhya. Thus, from the *Kalika Purana* it has been known that *Kiratas* were the original inhabitants, as Kamarupa was first ruled by the Kirata King Ghataka later on Naraka son of Lord Vishnu took over the region. Then other dynasties who ruled Kamarupa starts from Varman, Salastamba, Pala, Koch and Ahom.

Religion is connected to all the spheres of a region through politically can be termed as a base of the society and also economically. The religions that existed in Assam were Vaisnavism, Shaktism and Saivism. From the earlier times Saivism was popular in Assam known from numerous sources and literary works. However, tribals from the earlier period used to worship natural elements according to their rites and rituals. In the medieval period, the cult of fertility i.e., *yonis* of Mother Goddess and *linga* of Lord Shiva began to be worshipped through which Shaktism and Tantricism started surfacing. With the story of Sati's genital organ being fallen on the hill of Nilachala hill and Naraka placed as the ruler of the region Pragjyotish (Assam). Assam became the important centre of Shaktism with many temples of goddess where Kamakhya temple one of the greatest centre of Shakti worship was located. Also Shaktism and Tantricism are connected as the worshipping procedure of Mother Goddess Kamakhya is related to tantras.

The two main sources which provide vivid information of the existence of Kamarupa and the worship of Mother Goddess are the *Kalikapurana* and the *Yoginitantra*. The *Kalikapurana* was written in the middle of the ninth century in particularly to explain about the Mother Goddess Kamakhya worshipped in Assam. It has also described about the Shakti cult. In the text the detailed version of the creator of Universe and the actual formation of the Goddess, the procedure to worship, establishment of the region and the characters associated with it were explained. The text presents the divine energy of the Goddess and the role played by the Goddess for the welfare of her children i.e., devotees and the maintenance of the Universe. In the *Yoginitantra*, about the dialogue between the Lord Shiva and the Parvati and about the tantric rituals has been explained. Here Lord Shiva tells the story about the origin of Kamakhya stressing in the symbol of *Yoni*. These

two scriptures gave different interpretations regarding the creation, locations and also provided the mythological arena, how the tribal cult was adopted in Hindu practice associating the legend Naraka and Goddess Kamakhya. Through buranji, only the reign and works of the Kings can be traced along with the religions which were followed.

In addition, the structure also presents different scenario politically, socially and culturally as the sculptures engraved in the temple walls speaks about the history of particular region and dynasty. But regarding the Kamakhya temple there is no information on the actual structure. Only information is that during the Muslim invasion at around sixteenth century, the original Kamakhya temple was destroyed. The present temple is re-built by the Koch king Naranarayana in 1565 C.E. As the ancient Assam was ruled by several kingdoms followed by the Koch and the Ahom, each of these kingdoms had left behind their features, art which can be seen in the sculptures. The Kamakhya temple is not only one it is connected with many other temples located in the whole of Nilachala hill. The unique feature is that there is no image inside the temple instead *yoni pitha* is worshipped. The *pitha* of the deity which are inside the Kamakhya temple are Tripurasundari, Matangi and Kamala. Other than that there are temples of Kali, Tara, Bhairavi, Dhumavati.

Therefore, as there are numerous deities in the temple festivals are celebrated for whole year in which *Ambuvachi* festival is the greatest one and often through the stories narrated in the text and the *puranas* information about the particular festival can be found. So, it can be said that festivals did not happened suddenly or just it has to there is always a concept associated with it. In case of *Ambuvachi* festival there is also a concept strongly linked with the natural elements such as

agriculture, weather cycle along with lifestyle and culture of the particular place. The festival is celebrated during the month of June when the region witnesses the heavy rainfall. The transition which takes place during this period is connected to the earth can be termed as prepared to bear crops. So, this transformation period is taken as the menstruating days of the Mother Goddess Kamakhya when she takes rest for straight three days and for the understanding to the common people it has been placed into the religious pattern. When a woman goes through her menstruation she goes into the total state of rest. But in today's world due to the current work stage a women cannot go in rest even in her periodic days.

Even though it has become famous across the country, the exact period when the festival is started to celebrate is not known. Except the outer layer of the festival which is seen in the Kamakhya temple i.e., increases in the number of visitors in the temple, sadhus, practicing of the rituals and management that is the only information known. Apart from that the other things are secret. In this three days whatever happens inside the temple are never disclosed to the common people. It just remains with the priest of the temple and the people who are connected to the temple. It is a secret which has been maintained here from the earlier time onwards and is still followed as a part of ritual. According to the tantrics the festival is believed mainly for them not for the common people as because common people only understands the outer surface and does not know the real meaning of this period. At present might be for the continuation of the tradition, to keep the belief and to safeguard the practice it has been opened for the common people.

From this dissertation work, it has been found that the devotees who come to attend this festival are mainly the agricultural workers as during these days works

in the paddy field were stopped. So, they get time to visit the temple for a *darshan* with a belief that their crops will grow nicely and give abundant of profits. Even though every day thousands of visitors come to the temple but especially in these festival devotees make sure to go for *darshan* as the day is believed to be the holiest. Due to the dearth of sources the exact period and the connectivity of the festival with other regions were not known. About the impact of the festival on the society it can be said that the maximum number of resides near the Kamakhya temple were the Brahmins. Thus, it is a common fact that the society of that area will automatically follow the rites and rituals which is practiced in the temple. Also not only the followers of Shaktism were the only visitors there were other devotees who comes from the different background. Every year pilgrims and *sadhus* visits from various states like Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Tripura, Rajasthan, West Bengal etc. It is found that a large number of pilgrims come from West Bengal may be because of the fact that region has a strong influence of Shaktism.

Through this festival a multi-organisational work can be seen i.e. the managing process of conducting the *Ambuvachi* festival. Here, along with the State Government and the temple management committee, publics also take part in arrangement and sometimes provides free food to the devotees. While climbing up to the main temple small resting tents were made for the visitors, free drinking water facilities were made and places to keep the shoes were also made. Along with the written records, the observation about the general atmosphere of the temple during the *Ambuvachi* festival gives a lot of information which has not been recorded yet.

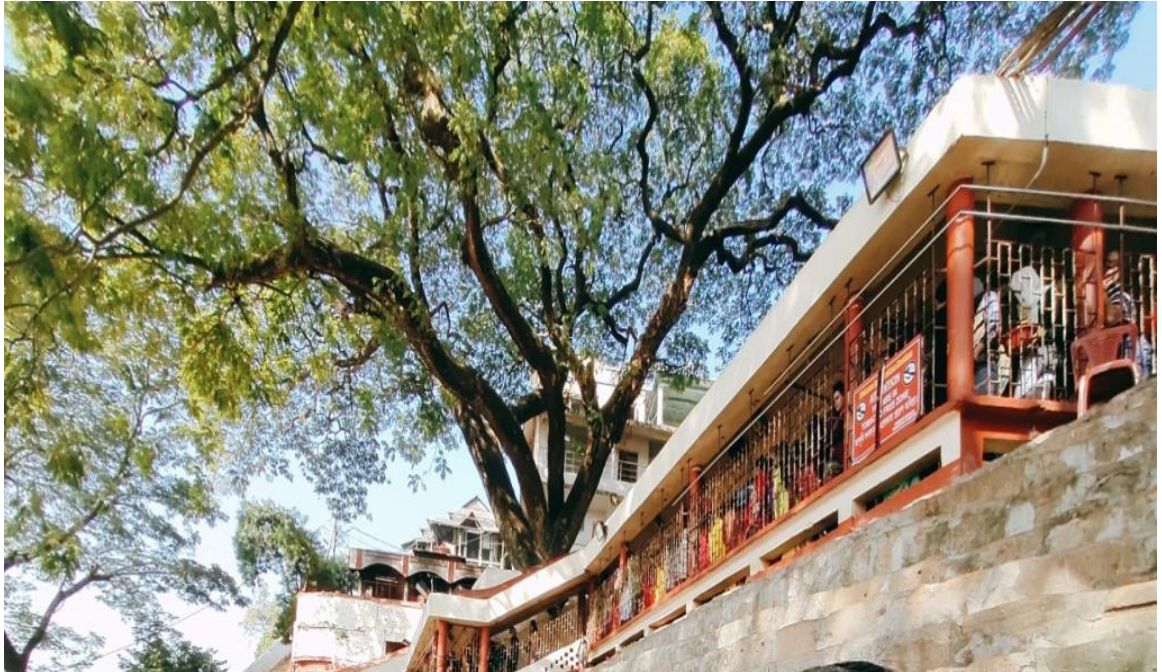
APPENDIX



Appendix 1: Kamkahya Temple



Appendix 2: Front of Kamakhya Temple



Appendix 3: Devotees standing in the queue for *darshan*



Appendix 4: Kamakhya temple during the *Ambuvachi* festival

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