

**A STUDY OF KAMAKHYA TEMPLE IN ITS MULTIPLE
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ABSTRACT

Kamakhya temple had established itself from a prominent part of socio-cultural life and historical narratives in Assam. Its prominence has not mitigated even in recent times. It has invariably sustained its discrete place in the history of Assam, whose impression could be noticed in distinct facets of order like social, cultural, political and economic. Kamakhya temple holds a place of utmost importance in the religious setting of Assam. Its importance can hardly be substituted with any other religious institution as a symbol that was patronized by the Koch dynasty. Kamakhya temple has been the central focal point of multiple literary compositions from Assam. Prominent literary compositions amidst the rest are Kalika Purana (10th/13th C), Yogini Tantra (16th C), Kamaratna Tantra (15th C) and Yoni Tantra (16th C). These texts portray diverse facets of the temple, which unfolds virtually every narrative regarding the temple. Kamakhya temple has been viewed in the texts through the lens of Tantra and had tried to establish a profound coalition with Tantric tradition.

KEYWORDS: Kamakhya Temple, socio-cultural life, religious**INTRODUCTION**

The temple located on the top of Nilachal hill or Blue Mountain in Guwahati has been celebrated as a center of Shakti worship and pilgrimage site since ancient times, the position is still retained in present times. It is counted as one of the imperative tantric centers and Shakti Peethas. 'In the temple, there is no image of the Goddess. Instead of the image, there is a Yonipitha. The Yonipitha is a squire size and red and is always wet with water oozing out from a spring below. The length of the pitha is one arm and twelve fingers and also attached with a Siva-Linga. In the interior cave, there are Matangi and Kamala Mahavidyas.' The Yonipitha is of central importance in the Kamakhya temple.

Kiratas were one of the non- Aryan tribe residing in Assam during ancient times

when it was known as Pragjyotishpur. Homage was paid in the Kamakhya temple via non-Aryan rituals. As a controversial term, 'Aryan', the term Sanskritic and non-Sanskritic would also do justice. The temple was not a full-fledged structure originally; rather it was only a site which was contemplated reverent by them. However, with the coming of Aryans, the land got aryanised, and rituals also began to transform. This can be said to have begun with the coming of Naraka. He is said to have introduced Shakti worship in the land and also rechristening of the title of the land from Pragjyotishpur to Kamarupa. The process of Sanskritic and folk interaction is reflected in stages.

The name of the temple through the ages

'Kamakhya' cannot be established as the primordial name of the temple. It was



embraced following the land got Sanskritized. Prior to the period, Kiratas, (a group of 'Austic people') 'Khasi tribe' initiated reverence in the temple complex. 'The name Kamakhya consists of three Austric words Ka Mai Kha. Ka means a sign of feminine gender, Mai means mother and Kha means to give birth, i.e. Kamakhya means the place where the mother gives birth or the sign of mother's yoni through which she has given birth.' Veneration of yoni and integrating it with mother goddess worship has been initiated since long back. It was deemed to be an abode of the goddess who was looked upon as a mother who gave birth and therefore is a fertility symbol.

Tiwari has provided further dialogue concerning it with the tribal association. He says "the Bodos (Garos, Kacharis, Hill-Tipperahas and Chutiyas) are said to have installed the phallic emblem of their worship the Austric Kameikha. This emblem was given the name of Umei-Ludai- Fia (Mei- mother, Ludia- male genital organ and Fia- Pha- God) by the Austrics. The name Umaluda transformed and consequently became Umanuda which is now known as Umananda (representing Shiva Lingam and traditionally believed to be the consort of Kamakhya)... The Bodos called the Austric Kameikha (representing the genital organ of mother Earth) Kamei-Fria (Fiar- Female God). The evidence suggests the amalgam of Saiva Shakti principles in the religious belief of the ancient Kiratas. The holy shrine of Kameikha was particularly associated with two 'Austic' tribes, the Khasis and Syntengs (Jaintias)."

Kamakhya and Kamarupa are repeatedly combined in a literary context. Kakati has sited the reference from Kalika Purana. It

is mentioned in the Kalika Purana that the title of the land was renamed from Pragjyotisa to Kamarupa right after Naraka of Mithila established himself as the king and the charge of the goddess Kamakhya was placed under him. The term Kamarupa/ Kamakhya denoted a new cult and adoration of the temple and thus on the process the land itself was rechristened. One can trace the names of the rendered meanings accordingly with cultural stages. Goswami tries to traces the etymology of the name of Kamakhya and Kamarupa to tantric tradition; he thinks that "the word Kamakhya is a mystic term. Perhaps Kamarupa refers to Shiva as because he appeared in the 'Kama Rupa' (Sringara Rupa) to satisfy the sexual desire of Sati. This union of Shiva and Sati is a tantric phenomenon. And it seems that they are purely tantric names." This is the dominant theme of Kamakhya.

Official designation of the Kamakhya temple

Kamakhya temple is often regarded as the seat of Tantric practices. Origin of Tantrism is often referred in the context of Kamakhya and Kamarupa. Scholars like H. H. Wilson, P. C. Choudhuri, Gait, and D. C. Sircar strongly believe that Kamarupa had an inherent relation to Tantra. Mircea Eliade points out that "Assam (= Kamarupa) was the tantric country par excellence."

It would not be incorrect to term Kamakhya as a theological college of Tantra on account of its Tantric affiliations. In the Kamakhya temple complex, explicit rituals and practices affiliated to Tantric tradition are performed. Kamakhya is not only just a temple complex but an institution, which stands as a primary center for Tantric



heritage. The tantric tradition is inherently associated with Kamakhya since ancient past and interestingly still continuous to the present. Blood sacrifice was performed in the temple complex, which continues to date. Kalika Purana the authentic text is dedicated to the rituals and practices in Kamakhya. It mentions a detailed list of animals and birds that can be sacrificed according to Tantric tradition.

LOCATING KAMAKHYA WITHIN THE AMBIT OF TEMPLE STUDIES- PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS

Kamakhya temple is renowned as a Shakti Pitha, which encompasses itself in the domain of Tantric sacred geography. Kamakhya has to be located in the broader context of temple studies from the perception of sacred space in relation to a female deity. The temple as a structure has to be examined from the view of the goddess temple structure. Contribution of myth has to be taken into account for the creation of such sacred space. The myth of Sati's body has to be referred persistently while exploring the domain of Tantric sacred geography.

Kinsley gives his understanding of the myth; he says "Although the myth speaks of the dismemberment of Sati's corpse, the emphasis at the Pithas is not on the worship of Sati's relics but on the worship of the living goddess, who are all understood as manifestations of the living Mahadevi. The point is not so much that India is the reliquary of Devi's corpse as it is that India is the Devi's living body. The myth provides a vantage point from which many local and regional goddess cults throughout India may be understood as part of a larger, unified vision in which each act of devotion to a local goddess becomes an act of reverence to the divinity

of India as a whole." Therefore is a living tradition.

Preston tries to link Shakti Pithas with the Great Tradition. He is of the opinion that "While most goddess shrines are small and inconspicuous, many others have developed into famous pilgrimage centers attracting thousands of devotees each year. These larger temples are mapped out in the sacred literature and integrated into the Hindu Great tradition through the legend of Sati. The major goddess temples of India are linked to the Great tradition of Hinduism through identification with a Shakti Pitha. Diverse elements of the little tradition are woven into the mainstream of Hinduism through identification with the Shakti Pitha and the Great Goddess."

Kinsley and Preston have provided a different viewpoint. Both the viewpoints are too meaningful to be discarded. Regarding Kamakhya, Kinsley is of the view that "The famous center of goddess worship, in short, reveres and enshrines a sacred place that is affirmed to be the creative orifice of a goddess, whose larger body is the earth itself or at least the local mountain and region".

Sati's corpse is identified as a symbol not of the dead but the living. Kamakhya temple fits into the scenario accurately as she is represented to be the yoni- goddess. She is identified as a symbol of creation, the one who gives life. She is the one who is carrying forward the process of life. Thus Sati's corpse becoming the symbol of living is apt in the context of Kamakhya. She here becomes the symbol of 'corporeal corpse'.

Identifying Shakti Pitha with the Great tradition enhances its position. Shakti Pitha had to be placed in the broader context of sacred geography to be included in the area



of Great Tradition. Both Kinsley and Preston have emphasized the 'Universalization' of local and regional goddess cults into the broader context of divinity. Kamakhya can also be included in the category of 'Universalization'. The reference of which can be noticed in Kalika Purana. Naraka myth mentioned in Kalika Purana can be accepted as the initiation of 'Universalization' of Kamakhya.

Eck has defined the bearing of the name Pitha instead of Tirtha in association with the sacred geography of Goddess. She writes "Many of these sites associated with goddess are called Pithas, 'seats.' Why the term Pitha is used for those sites in preference to the more traditional and common term tirtha is not entirely clear. Pitha is preferred, perhaps because it tends to emphasize the rootedness of the goddess, associated with these places. ... It may be, too that the term Pitha is appropriate to those aspects of Devi theology which emphasize her association with the earth itself and her motherly nature, which casts her in the role of an ever-present, nurturing presence. Perhaps the point of the term is to emphasize that the Devi is to be understood as firmly located in this world, both in the sense of being identified with it and in the sense of being oriented towards such worldly concerns of her devotees as fertility, well-being and as long life." Pitha and Tirtha thus form two separate sacred geographies, which marks sharp differences.

1. Rise of temple studies in India

Divinity and temple have a long connotation. The Hindu temple, representing as a place of adoration, is located deep within the complex history of the evolutionary process of the Hindu

faith. The vast history if traced back from the initiation of the human civilization it could be viewed that the Hindu temple had changed its appearance with each phase of transformative shifts within Hinduism itself. If the Hindu history is surveyed from the earliest pre- Vedic, Vedic period to the contemporary times it could be viewed that notions associated with the Hindu temple range through a series of categories like the primordial spirituality of the natural landscape to abstract insignnia and symbolism, from modest shelters for deities to colossal scriptural monuments. To construct a place for the worship of Hindu spaces is equally complex. It includes spontaneous creations of shrines and artefacts to highly organized acts of temple and city- building.

Temple as shelters for deities came to prominence from the Gupta period. Fuller has elaborated on the topic. He is of the view that "Temples of basically the same design as those which exist today first began to be built in the Gupta period (fourth-seventh centuries A.D.) or even a few centuries earlier, and although many aspects of Hinduism and Indian society are continuous over one-and-half millennia, many others not."

Temple studies underwent a new and improved phase with the establishment of the Archaeological Survey of India in 1861. Alexander Cunningham was appointed its first Director-General. Archaeological Survey and it was undertaken to the preservation of historical monuments and temples. This initiation paced the path of temple studies in India. However, the contribution of Asiatic Society towards temple study is also noteworthy. Prior to the establishment of the Archaeological Survey of India,



Asiatic Society took to the task of temple studies.

2. Framing of the temple as a purely religious institution

Temples in India holds the status of institutions, which becomes a space of divine association. It not only appeals to the spiritual parameters but also personal contentedness. The space considered to be sacred spreads an atmosphere of divinity. It turns into an institution, which serves as the meeting point for various pilgrims. The emotion of contentedness is often accompanied by this sacred space.

Preston views temples as a laboratory; he writes “A temple is a major place of devotion in Indian society, it is a perfect laboratory for the analysis of the rich symbolism which is elaborated in its ritual process. For here religious symbols become a model of reality in a way that makes the world comprehensible to people. Here symbolic codes are represented, affirmed and disseminated to the community. ... The temple is both organically part of Indian social structure and separates from it- an intersection between two worlds, sacred and secular, which are never totally distinct from one another.”

Preston's views temple as two diverse domains, sacred and secular but interwoven, which cannot be separated. It becomes challenging to make distinctions between the two domains. The challenge can be faced when the temple is regarded as an institution of symbolic interpretation. Nataranjan is of the opinion that. Sacred spaces obtain their purity form the devout individuals who had lived or are still living there. The godly vibrations sent out by the sanctified patronages endures as an everlasting divine inheritance to humanity.

The sacred spaces deliver motivation to seekers for growth in the spiritual quests. The fact describes why temples are reinstated by the spiritual everywhere and at all times... Temples were present during the Vedic period, and all the splendid temple seen at present were originated in the latter period. During the earlier period, all the attractive and inspiring spaced were used for the adoration of the creator. The channel between man and the deity was established by the sacrificial fire. Temple worship was established in the course of time through the mode of worship. Cave temples cut and curved in suitable hills gave place to structural temples embodying the same principles.

3. The early ideas of temples according to Indian art and iconography

Temple structures in India provided an occasion as the stage of art and architecture. The time frame which can be marked as the initiation of the temple, beginning to stand out as a prominent structural factor, can be said to be from sixth-seventh centuries. This was amalgamated with the features of art, architecture and iconography.

Chandra has referred James Fergusson, in his work who talks of Indian art and architecture regarding religion. Fergusson, in reference to India is of the view that “it was an architecture that illustrated ethnography, fixed the ever-varying forms of religion and reconstructed history. Even language and literary sources are a poor substitute; for architecture “is more distinct, it never shifts its locality, and it does not change with time,” and permits us to know exactly the religion, the art and the civilization of the people who built its monuments.”



Though Chandra considers Fergusson's work to be in the rudimentary stage its significance as basic or foundational knowledge in the sphere of study of temple art and architecture can hardly be overlooked. Chandra has agreed to this despite him being critiquing Fergusson.

The legacy of Fergusson had been carried forward by several other scholars like Alexander Cunningham, James Burgess, Henry Cousens, Alexander Rea, E.B.Havell and others. However, the works of these scholars were not without criticism. Study of Indian temple art and architecture underwent a new and fresh approach with the arrival of Ananda Coomaraswamy (1877- 1947).

SOCIO- ECONOMIC TURN IN THE STUDY OF TEMPLE

Study of the temple can be seen to have extended its sections since the 1960's. It was no longer examined from the perception of divine abode, art, architecture and iconography, but various other aspects were included in the study of temples. Socio-Economic approaches were applied for the study of temples. It was new and a fresh approach and which delivered novel meaning in the area of temple study. Temples were viewed in the broader setting of society and economy. This turn was more applied for the study of South Indian temples.

Raman has very modestly put forward the role which temples played in the socioeconomic life, In the economic sphere, temples functioned as an extensive landowner, negotiator for the relief of the poor, local banking system for lending financial aid to needy, consumer of goods and services and at last the prime host of employers which provided employment to a large number of people as the priest who

conducted the rituals, the manradis (shepherds) to keep an eye on the donated cattle to the temple, cultivators to keep an eye on the lands, garland- makers, washer men, drummers, pipers, the pandal-erectors and a various artisans. The temple also acted as a focus providing the setting for fine- arts, in regard to the social point of view."

A jajmani system, which was the basis of division of labor during the period worked as the foundational stage for the socio-economic turn in temple studies. Scholars like Louis Dumont, J. Heesterman and David Pocock have elaborately examined the division of labor in India and the evolution of the jajmani system. Division of labor created a dichotomy in society.

Dumont is of the view that the religion is a universal mode of expression and it is perfectly coherent when one realizes that the whole orientation is religious, the language of religion is the language of hierarchy, and the hierarchy is essential, as can be viewed, a substance of pure and impure... the division of labor highlights not the more or less gratuitous juxtaposition of religious and non-religious or 'economic responsibilities but both the religious base and the religious manifestation of interdependence. It also deduces interdependence from religion."

Stein has made an extensive study of the economic function of the shrine of Sri Venkatesvara situated at Tirupati. Regarding economic aspect, he is of the view that The said temple is of prime importance as without doubt it could be said to hold a key position in the dominantly agrarian economy of South India prior to the period when British had established their control in the area in the 18th and 19th centuries... the established



development of the temple was closely allied and reliant on the scheme of agricultural development, which was a part of the temple.”

However, the situation in Assam and particularly the Kamakhya temple complex may present a dissimilar picture as has been described by the above-mentioned scholars. In Assam, the caste system was not present in a rigid way, and jajmani system also did not grow roots in a firm manner. The question or rather dichotomy of pure and impure becomes a blur in the context of Kamakhya temple and Tantrism. The division of labor which was prevalent in another part of India, would not fit appropriately in the case of medieval Assam. Thus, when talked about temples, this frame would be inept regarding Kamakhya temple.

CONCLUSION

Kamakhya as an institution has been central to the scared space of Assam's historical narrative since ancient period. It could be viewed as an institution, as space was marked to be scared not attached to any structural establishment. The appropriate structural establishment came up during the Koch kingdom under Nara Narayan in 1565. However, prior to the period also space was present and adorned with the worship of Kamakhya. This space has been inherently associated with Tantric tradition and practices. Attempts have been made by scholars to bracket origin of Tantra with the institution of Kamakhya. The statement is debatable. It remains one of the problems associated with Kamakhya which need further investigation. However, the vitality of Kamakhya and its Tantric affiliation could hardly be overlooked. To get a clear understanding of the religious and socio-cultural setting

in association with the Tantric tradition of Kamakhya and Vaishnavism movement from 14th to 16th C, the thesis have been divided into four themes. Each theme deals with a range of subjects like the pattern of change and continuity form pre-Ahom to Ahom period, origin and heritage of Tantra, the institution of Kamakhya in its multiple contexts and patronage patrons, myth and esoteric practices as part of the institution of Kamakhya. With the inclusion of Ahom in the socio-cultural scenario, religious setting underwent few alternations, which further added elements in the sacred space too. Ahom followed a policy of inclusion, which aided them to hold a resilient spot. However a shift could be noticed with the initiation of Vaishnavism by the renowned saint Shankardeva in 15th C. The movement primarily a religious one, also influenced socio-cultural setting with the introduction of institutions like Satra and Namghar. Gradually it engulfed a wide number of followers with its humble beliefs and practices. In the meantime, Tantric tradition was pushed to the background.

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