Title: 'Mother Goddess Kamakhya in dialogue with the local, the regional, the national and the beyond'

Author

Dr.Sunu Kalita

Research Scholar of Philosophy,

Humanities and Social Science department,

Indian Institute of Technology, Guwahati.

Abstract:

It can very well be said that any kind of geographical, political, social, religious, anthropological, landscape and philosophical or iconography or culture centric description of the North-Eastern part of India is not possible without some reference being made to the magical beauty of the Mother Goddess Kamakhya. It is the most dominating name in the early history of Assam and till now it remains so. The shrine of the Goddess Kamakhya is situated at the present town of Guwahati which is nearer to the Khasi and Garo tribes areas, which are mostly aboriginal matriarchal tribes. She was taken as tribal and local goddess before her Hinduisation phase has taken place in North-East of India. Infract changes incorporated in her overall status is phenomenal in nature with its impact on the social and religious beliefs and practices among the local people. Initially she remained a regional deity rather than the Great Shakti Goddess. The whole natural environment, landscape and food habits of tribes were interlinked with Her as a folk deity of the region, Kamarupa. Infect it is from some of her innumerable names such as, Kamoi, Kamoit, Kamet, Kamru etc. that the Khasis, Garos and Bodos related their own stories along with the stories of the Goddess's origination on Kamakhya. Mother Goddess as folk goddess did not have much restrictions during those time. She is the goddess who menstruates and worshipped as Yoni goddess, who has reflected as female centric and as Mother Nature who created the universe out of her cosmic womb. Pujas and rituals were also characterised by various ethnic communities in such a way that they offer Her foods and sacrifices; which were a part of their daily dietary routine. The Kalika Purana and the Yogini Tantra records the ritualistic details which also made ways to re-christening

Her as the Great Goddess. This later leads to the division of castes among the local tribes into higher and lower. The present paper seeks to explain the origination of Kamakhya as a local deity and the later Brahmanical phase of transforming her as Shakti, the Great Goddess.

***Keywords**: North-East, Kamahya, Tribal, Local, Folk, Rituals, Puja, Nature, Yoni Goddess, Sakti.*

Objectives:

1. The objective of this paper is to trace the origin and evolution of the goddess Kamakhya, famous for her temple situated atop the Nilachal Hill in the city of Guwahati, Assam, India.

2. The paper tries to ascribe to the postulate that the worship of mother goddess Kamakhya has evolved from the custom of nature worship by local and regional groups.

3. The paper shows that with gradual Sanskritisation, the cult of the mother goddess got integrated in the Shakta tradition. And attempt has been made to touch the original worshippers of the goddess and the development of the icon from a tribal deity to one of the Shakta goddesses.

Methodology:

The research methodology followed is secondary, sources, legends, chronicles and recent news updates. The paper expectations to reach certain conclusions and understandings regarding the changes of values and the perspective of differential of Mother goddess Kamakhya to Shakti the great Goddess.

Introduction

The water of the spring assumed reddish tinged only during the rainy season when the flow increased naturally and in other parts of the year the colour is natural. At the point at which the water oozed out from the rock at its foot, there was a natural fissure conical in shape about nine inches in length and fifteen inches in width and reddish pink in colour-looking very much like genital organ of woman. This further belief that Mother Earth menstruated at the pick time of

cultivation. The place was therefore called Ka-Mei-Kha (mother water course). And later on Hindus named this place as Kamakhya the Supreme Mother.

Amongst all Shakti pithas in India, Kamakhya is the most admired one. The Mother Goddess Kamakhya temple is located in the locality of Guwahati, on a hill called Nilachal, the regional capital of Assam – the foremost north-eastern state of India. Kamakhya's mythological context underlines its respectable place in religious and cultural history of North East of India. It can be said that any kind of geographical, political, social, religious, anthropological and philosophical or culture-centric description of the North-Eastern part of India cannot be completed, without the reference being made to the magical beauty of Mother Goddess Kamakhya. Some evidence from the iconographic representation, the yoni pithas of Mother Goddess constitute a significance part of findings and scriptures also testify to that Kamakhya of Kamrupa is a residing place of the goddess, along with that the evident form of the Goddess contains several symbolic meanings which assert her creative image from the local and tribal people from ancient time. The holy shrine of Kamakhya is widely known as the centre of mystical land to get magical powers and the land of thrilling and witchcraft. But along ongoing thinking and time, which has slowly changed the image of Kamakhya in accordance with the changing demand. This leads number of visitors and researchers from the all-around of the world and pilgrims that carries the growth of the global sacred shrine and other believing structures in the temple much complex.

Kamkakhya as local goddess affiliation

As Kamakhya sacred complex is located and evolved over a quite long period of time, has been named differently in the past. There are extensive evidences to justify how Assam continues to be a structure to a crowd of ethnic communities. Among many of the local communities, there exists several examples to illustrate women-domination, matriarchy and supremacy of women which provide the explanations the existence of Kamakhya's cult. It is also all the rage belief that women of this province acquire the knowledge of black magic and witchcraft too.

The concept of Kamakhya is said to have been derived from a tribal mother goddess cult. According to B.K. Kakati, "This mother cult of Kamakhya must have belonged to certain matriarchal tribes like the Khasis and the Garos". And expanded that the area where the temple is situated was earlier inhabited by members of these tribes.

Khasis-According to popular Khasi belief, the Kamakhya temple was founded by the Khasis in the ancient past when the area was under their control. In their legendary interpretations, it is stated that the Sanskrit name Kamakhya is a corruption of the Khasi word Ka-mei-kha, which means the "paternal grandmother". Ka-Mei-kha who is the mythical grandmother from paternal side is accorded an important position in the bone burial ceremonies of the Khasis.

Garos-According to the Garo tradition, the word Kamakhya has been derived from the Garo word Ka-Ma-Kha, which means 'victory to my mother.' The Garo tradition states that the Kamakhya temple was built by a Garo architect in honour of the mother-goddess.

Bodos-Kamakhya was identified by the Bodos with their chief goddess, Kharia Brui. The prominence of female deities in no way corresponded to the actual position of women. They worship goddess Kharia Buri or Ai Kamakhya along with Lord Bathow for all-round development. Khanya-Bimakha, which is another name of the goddess Kharai Buri.

Rabhas-They worship different forms of Mother Goddess like Khokci, Ranthak, Kaca–Khaiti and Manasa. As Khocki or Baikho the goddess is the deity of agriculture and harvest. Rantak is the deity of every household and worship her in the form of two earthen vessels full of rice and put her in one corner of their kitchen along with their traditional weapons. Kaca-Khaiti as the dispeller of evil spirits and during her puja which was held near a river is the absence of animal sacrifice.

Festivals and Rituals:

The tantric cult of Kamakhya is closely associated with specific rituals that are performed at the temple. The main form of offerings are flowers, incense and sweets, however, animal sacrifice is also carried out on some occasions. Mass animal sacrifices are also carried out at some times of the years. A very special kind of sindoor, made from the local rock, is available here. This is considered to be a blessing from the goddess Kamakhya not only has spiritual significance alone. It has socio-cultural functions and festivities, rituals, celebrations. It is accepted by people as the core of culture. Some are performed on special festival days like Durga Puja, PohanBia, Durgadeul, Vasanti Puja, Madandeul, and Ambuvaci, in a calendar year in the Kamakhya temple. Festivals and celebrations are inseparable from the socio-cultural life of all ethnic communities around the place. On the occasion of autumnal worship of the Goddess Durga, a four-day festival takes place in Kamakhya. Pilgrims from different parts of India visit the temple. Apart from the usual sacrifices offered to the Goddess, goats and buffalos

are also sacrificed on the occasion. The unique festival for which Kamakhya is known is Ambubasimela, which is held in the second week of the solar month of Asadha (second half of June) usually from 6th to 10th. Asadha is regarded as the menstruation period of the Goddess and the temple remains closed for the pilgrims during this period. At the end of the period, the door of the temple is opened to the pilgrims. This is regarded as the most auspicious moment to pay obeisance to the Goddess. Thousands of pilgrims from all over India visit the temple and wait impatiently for the auspicious moment and gatecrash for darshana of the Goddess.

Re-christening Her as Great Goddess:

The Kalika Purana and Yogini Tantra records the ritualistic details which also made ways to re-christening Her as the Great Goddess. The Kalika Purana Written around the 10th-11th century CE in Sanskrit, the text celebrates the power of the divine feminine in her various manifestations centring round the goddess Kamakhya or Kalika. Among Saktas (worshippers of divine feminine in Hinduism) the Kalika Purana is one of the revered and famous scriptures. Sometimes she is in gentle form providing wealth to her devotees, while in some other episodes she is in terrible form destroying the evil (demon). Thus the Goddess in the Kalika Purana is many-sided figure. She is called by more than fifty names or epithets, while many of these names are simply honorific (for example, Mahamaya, Maheswari, Jaganmayi). In the first part of the Kalika Purana the Goddess is associated with Vishnu. The Goddess Prithvi is depicted in relation with Vishnu in his boar incarnation out of which Naraka; the early ruler of Kamarupa was born. Here Goddess Prithvi is motherly by nature and takes care of son Naraka after birth as a nurse in the form of Katyayani. Later on, as the story goes on, when Naraka becomes rude (asura) after tying up friendship with Bana the Goddess in her form of Kali or Kalika helps Hari in his fight against Naraka. While fighting he observed tall Kalika by the side of Krishna similar to Kalika, with red face and red eyes, wearing sword and sakti and also Kamakhya, the protectors of the world, the enchantress. Thus in the text the Goddess is portrayed as the consort of Vishnu, who can create illusion and enchanting needed for creation of universe and destruction of evil. In this way one facet of the Goddess is Vaisnavite.

Of all the male deities Vishnu is the earliest with whom the Goddess is associated in the Kalika Purana. Out of the male gods in the Kalika Purana Siva is the mostly associated god with the goddess. Throughout the text the Goddess is associated with Siva as his consort. Some names of the Goddess such as Rudrani, Samkari, Sivaduti are due to her association with Siva. The text relates the story of the birth and rebirth of the Goddess only to marry or enchant Siva for

welfare of the world. In the first part of the text, the Goddess is born as Sati, the daughter of Daksa, to enchant Hara (Siva) as she only can do it. She is the power to create illusion (Maya) in the mind of the great ascetic. Thus the motive behind her birth as Sati is to become the spouse of Siva. But as the story goes on she leaves her life as Daksa does not invite Siva to the sacrifice that the former arranged. Afterwards Siva destroys the sacrifice and Sati's dismembered body parts gave rise to many pithastananas (seat). The Kalika Purana enumerates the pithasthanas as seven: Devikuta (where pair of feet lie), Uddiyana (where pair of thigh lie), Kamagiri (where genital organ lies), on the ground of Kamagiri (where the navel lies), Jalandhara (where pair of breast lie) and the place beyond Kamarupa (where the head lies). In every pitha the goddess is known by different names and Siva lives with the goddess. Praising Kamarupa as the most sacred pitha where Hara with Parvati always resides.

In different parts, the Goddess is presented as superior to the Hindu Trinity-Vishnu, Brahma and Siva. It narrates the story of confrontation between the Goddess and Vishnu, as the latter shows disrespect to her. Vishnu and Brahma are overpowered by the illusory power of goddess Kamakhya and after worshipping the Goddess, at the behest of Siva, they see the glory of Kamakhya. Thus the story shows the female divinity as superior to the male gods. The gods became highly astonished, their sense turned numb, and they kept on praising again and again, the vagina of Kamakhya. Goddess Prithvi appears in connection with the birth of Naraka. As the story narrates the menstruating goddess Prithvi is impregnated by Vishnu in his boar incarnation and consequently she gives birth to Naraka who became the king of Kamarupa. Here the mention of menstruation and pregnancy as well as delivery by Prithvi, who also incarnates as Katyayani, is significant. It can be site as an indicative of the vegetative power of the Goddess which is celebrated in the text. Naraka was the son of God, because he was born from the semen of Vishnu discharged into the womb of Prithvi at a time when she was impure on account of menstruation. Relates the AmbuvachiMela, when the Goddess's menstrual cycle is celebrated (every year in June-July), in the Kamakhya Temple in shows in Kalika Purana, the earliest text devoted to the worship of Kamakhya. The identification of earth with woman implies that the functions of the earth and those of earth are alike. The same preconditions which fertilize woman are also thought to fertilize Mother Earth. For the same reason in the Sakta literature special importance is attached to the menstrual blood. However, there is no any mention of the Ambuvachi or celebration of the Goddess's menstruation is found in the text of Kalika Purana. The colour red is frequently connected with the Mother Goddess. Red, representing the menstrual blood, is the symbol of fertility supposed to represent the earth or

Mother Goddess. In the Kalika Purana, in the list of the offerings to the Goddess red cloth is praised as the best. Thus the Goddess as the symbol of vegetation and fertility is narrated in the text.

Yogini Tantra is a major Trantic text which widely believed to be written in 16th century AD. Which mainly deals with different esoteric practices and supremacy of the Sakti and focuses on different sacred places of Kamrupa along with socio-cultural life of this period?

The female version of supreme divinity in the Kalika Purana can be understood as the result of cultural assimilation of the Aryan and non-Aryan. The text was composed in the early state of Kamarupa which conforms to major portion of the Brahmaputra valley. This region is the land of habitation for various non-Aryan tribes from a great antiquity. Even if we look at the modern day ritual practices of the north-eastern tribal population the prominence of mother goddess cult and blood sacrifices is noticeable. The primitive tribes were practitioner of agriculture and that is why they were the believer of fertility rites. As a symbol of fertility they worshipped the Earth Mother as female divinity. The Aryan-speaking people when came to the region got assimilated with non-Aryan tribal culture where the concept of Mother Goddess was predominant. The Kalika Purana, which was composed in early Kamarupa by the Sanskrit Aryans, was revelation of this acculturation process.

Conclusion:

Kamakhya was associated with the Hindu deities Shiva and Sati during the historical period when the Assamese religion and customs were blended with Brahmanic tradition, dominated by Pan-Indian gods and texts in Sanskrit. But Nilachal hill and its close vicinity has many other stories to offer, all connected with local history, going back to mythical times. Many mythology and tradition associated with this temple have increased the importance of the region. The Kamakhya Temple symbolizes the “fusion of faith and practices” of Aryan and Non-Aryan elements in Assam. The Goddess Kamakhya is rare everywhere, but in Kamarupa she is present in every household. In this way Kamakhya is presented in the form of the Supreme Goddess to be worshipped in the region of Kamarupa. Thus she is the regional goddess of Kamarupa. The icon of goddess Kamakhya is a case in point, as through her, one can touch the extension and expansion of the tribal “Mother-Goddess” cult into a mainstream Hindu icon. The worship of mother goddesses evolved from the custom of nature worship which was prevalent in pre-Aryanised Assam. With gradual Hinduisation, the cult of the mother goddess got embraced in

the Shakta tradition and so an attempt has been made to trace the original worshippers of this goddess and the development of the icon from a tribal deity to one of the most sacred Shakta goddesses. There is no icon of the Goddess and it is unique in its own standing. Modern scholars are of the opinion that the Goddess Kamakhya originally was a deity worshipped by the matriarchal tribes and later on identified with the Goddess Shakti.

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