

THE SACRED SHRINE KĀMĀKHYĀ



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Abstract

Kāmākhyā had been the most sacred shrine of Assam from the earliest times till today. Kāmākhyā temple is situated on the Nilachal Hill a few miles from the city of Guwahati. Kāmākhyā temple has a great influence among the people of the entire country because of its assimilation of various religious cults such as Saktism, Saivism, Vaisnavism, Buddhism, Tantricism. Being the most sacred shrine, it attracted the people of the whole country from different corners.

Key Words: *Pitha, Kāmākhyā, Cults*

Introduction:

The *Saktipitha* Kāmākhyā, famous for Sakti worship in India, is a meeting ground of various religious cults. The shrine of the Goddess Kāmākhyā is situated about three miles from present town of Guwahati and about fifty miles from the range of hills. The Kāmākhyā *pitha* is situated on the Nilachala Hill. The shrine is a place of culmination of Saktism, Tantricism, Saivism, Tantric Buddhism and Vaisnavism and so on. The Saktism found in the temple has got assimilated with Tantricism. The mode of worshipping Goddess Kāmākhyā is according to Tantric rites. Besides this all the religious cults like Saivism, Vaisnavism, Buddhism are mixed

with each other in the Kāmākhyā temple. All are associated with each other. Being a sacred shrine, culminating the major religious cults of India, it is very significant to study the religious practices in Kāmākhyā. This study aims to highlight the assimilation of various religious cults in the Kāmākhyā *pitha*

Assimilation of different religious cults in the Kāmākhyā Pitha:
Saktism:

Assam in the earliest period is recognized as a suitable place for Sakti worship centering round the Kāmākhyā temple. There are many legends and stories related to the origin of Kāmākhyā temple and the worship of the Goddess Kāmākhyā. Several literary works like the *Kalika Purana*, the *Yogini Tantra* give different accounts of the Aryan origin of Kāmākhyā. However Banikanta Kakati and Nirmal Prabha Bordoloi mentioned Kāmākhyā as a non-Aryan Goddess. The Kāmākhyā temple is associated with different religious cults like Tantricism, Saktism, Saivism, Buddhism and Vaisnavism etc. As a Tantric *pitha*, it is related with religious practices like animal scarifices, Kumari Puja, *Yantra* worship and several other Tantrik rites and rituals. Several religious rituals and festivals like Ambubachi, Devadhani, Durga Puja, Vasanti Puja, Kumari Puja, Punsavan ceremony etc. are observed in the temple. Ambubachi is the most popular among these festivals.

There are various mythological and historical evidences written in literary works like the *Kalika Purana*, *Yogini Tantra*, and Assam Buranji of Gunabhiram Barua about the origin of Kāmākhyā. It is mentionable here that instead of an image or iconic representation of the goddess in the temple, prayer is offered to a *yonimandala* made of stone. The *yoipitha* and *yonimandala* of Kāmākhyā temple are different from each other. The *yonipitha* is a vast tract of land in which the *yonimandala* is situated. The *yonipitha* has a length of 'five cros'. Inside of the *yonipitha* there is the Hill called Nila situated within the *yonipitha*. They are the Brahmasaila, the Nilasaila, the Maniparvat and the Bhasmachala Hills. The *yonimandala* is a squire sized red stone. It remains always wet with water that flows from a spring below. The length of the *Mandala* is one arm and twelve fingers. It is also attracted with a Siva *Linga*.

According to the *Kalika Purana* and *Yogini Tantra* Kamrupa remained the most suitable place for Sakti worship from the ancient period for the practice of magic and witchcraft which were mainly practiced in the Kāmākhyā. Though there are various literary evidences about the origin of Kāmākhyā, it is difficult to determine definite and specific date and period of the origin of Kāmākhyā. The *Kalika Purana* says that the genital organ of Sati fell on a hillock named Kubjikapitha in Kamrupa before the advent of Naraka. As the genital organ of Sati fell on the hill, the hill turned blue. Hence the hill came to be known as the Nilachala. As soon as the genital organ of Sati fell on Nilachala Hill, it turned into a slab of stone which came to be considered as the Goddess Kāmākhyā.

On the basis of several literary evidences a critical investigation about the origin of Kāmākhyā can be done. Banikanta Kakati mentions that the word 'Kāmākhyā' has its origin in the Austric Khasi word Kesh, meaning pine trees. After cutting down the pine trees on an around the Nilachala Hills, some hermits started worshipping Kama, a 'cremation-ground-dwelling goddess.' Eventually this Goddess came to be known as Kāmākhyā.¹

Nirmal Prabha Bordoloi mentions that at the beginning Kāmākhyā *pitha* was the place of mother worship of the non-Aryan people. The concept of mother worship remains important among the Austric Khasi people. Moreover, the Mongoloid Bodo people worshipped the Sakti. Therefore, Kāmākhyā might, be a place for mother worship of the Bodo and Khasi people in the ancient period.

In North-East India the tribal people worship bamboo in some of their festivals instead of an image. The Kāmākhyā temple also lacks an image. Here also a symbol of *yonī* is worshiped. The *yonī* represents the creative force of the mother Goddess. The worship of *yonī* existed as *linga* worship existed among the non-Aryan people in the ancient period. During the age of the prevalence of Tantricism, this worship of *yonī* was assimilated with the religions beliefs of the Aryan group of people. Being influenced by the Aryan culture, the *yonipitha* or the worship of the female genital organ got associated with the worship of Sakti or *Devi* and Kāmākhyā became centre for the worship of *yonī*.²

Saktism is also associated with the worship of *yonī* in the Kāmākhyā temple. In the temple, prayers are offered to a *yonipitha* of stone in lieu of an image or iconic representation of the Goddess. Though there is an image of Goddess Kāmākhyā belonging to much later period main worship is still offered to the *yonipitha* in the monobhavagruha (the cave in which the *yonī* of the goddess exists). The sex organ of a female represents creation. Therefore, *yonī* worship means the desire for fertility. Thus, the desire for fertility in the form of *yonī* worship got associated in the Kāmākhyā temple.

The Kāmākhyā *pitha* came to be recognized as the most important *Saktipitha* not only among the *Saktipithas* of Assam but also among the five main Sakti centres in India viz, Katyayani at Uddiyana, Kāmākhyā at Kamrup, Purneswari and Chandi at Jalandhara and Dikkaravasini at the eastern part of Kamrupa.

Saktism is associated with the sacrifices of various animals, human beings etc. Sacrifice of pigeons, ducks, goats and buffaloes are still prevalent in the Kāmākhyā temple. Without the sacrifice the worship of Kāmākhyā is not supposed to be completed. In earlier period, human sacrifices also prevailed in the Kāmākhyā temple. During the reconstruction of the temple by Chilarai in 1565, the Koch king Naranarayana had offered 140 paiks as sacrifice to the Goddess.³ Saktism has three types of worship viz, *jap*, *hom* and *tarpan*.⁴ *Jap* is the system of worship in which mantras are uttered by the priest to worship the goddess. *Hom* is system of worship in which items like *ghee*, *belpat* (wood-apple leaves), *til* (sesame) and *Chaul* (rice) are sacrificed in the sacred fire. *Tarpan*, the worship of the goddess with sixteen upacara is also an important part of Sakti worship in the temple. The sixteen upacaras are- *asana* (seat), *swagata* (calling), *padya* (protection for foot), *arghya* (an utensil made of copper to pour milk or water to the goddess), *asamaniya* (to wash hand and mouth), *madhuparka* (mixture of honey, curd, milk, molasses and sugar), *punarasamaniya* (again to wash hand and mouth), *snana* (bath), *bastra* (cloth), *Abharana* (ornaments), *Gandha* (perfume), *puspa* (flower), *dhup* (incense sticks) *deep* (eathen lamp) and *naibedya* (eatable items like gram and fruits offered to the Goddess).

The religious festivals observed in the Kāmākhyā temple are related with the worship of Sakti. The festivals associated with the Sakti worship are Durga puja, Manasa Puja, Kali Puja, Lakshmi Puja and Saraswati Puja and so on.

Durga Puja which is observed in the autumn season is a popular festival of temple. It is observed in the month of *Ahin* (mid September to mid October) of Assamese calendar and worship is offered according to the Tantric mode. No image of goddess Durga is used in the temple. Sacrifices of animals like goats, pigeons and buffaloes are offered to the Goddess during that period.

Another important festival observed in the Kāmākhya temple is the Manasa Puja or Devadhani festival. It is observed on the last day of *Shaon* and first day of *Bhada* (mid August) of Assamese calendar. The folk Goddess Manasa is considered as the goddess of snakes. During this festival different musical instruments are played along with the recitation of the Beula-Lakhindar ballad. Sacrifices of animals are offered to the Goddess during this festival.

Laksmi Puja is also observed in the Kāmākhya temple on the next bright fortnight of *Bijayadasami* (the last day) of Durga Puja. In this festival sacrifices are offered to Goddess Kamala, one of the *Dasamahavidyas*. Goddess Kamala is considered as the Laksmi in the Kāmākhya temple. Kali Puja is observed in the Kali temple (one of the *Dasamahavidya* temples) in the Kāmākhya temple complex on the next black fortnight of Laksmi Puja. The worship of Goddess Kali is performed by giving animal sacrifices.

The Sarawati Puja which is also a worship of Sakti is performed on the fifth day of bright fortnight of Assamese *Magh* (mid January to mid February) month. The Saraswati Puja is performed in the Matangi *pitha* (one of the *Dasamahavidyas*) of the Kāmākhya temple in which animal sacrifices are offered to the Goddess.

Kāmākhya temple is also associated with the worship of folk Goddess Sitala in the Sitala temple on the southern side of the Kāmākhya temple. Moreover, an image of Goddess Sitala also exists in the Kāmākhya temple premises. In Assam, Goddess Sitala is considered as 'nature Goddess' who can cure small-pox, one of the common diseases of Assam.

Saivism:

Saivism is another important religious cult associated with the Kāmākhya temple. In Kāmākhya temple, the Mahadeva cult is connected with the cult of Sakti. The cult of fertility or the worship of the phallus or *linga* which was later personified as Lord Siva is also found in the Indus valley remains and Vedic literature. Saivism is one of the oldest religious faiths of Assam. During the period of Naraka Siva dwelt secretly. He was then worshipped by the indigenous Kirata people.⁵ Bana the king of Sonitpura followed Saivism. Siva worship was first introduced in early Assam by king of Jalpaiguri (North Bengal) known as Jalpeswara and also had founded a Siva temple by his name.

The Chinese traveler Yuan Tsang had given some information about the prevalence of Saivism in Assam. Yuan Tsang who visited Kamrupa during the period of the Varman king Bhaskar Varman (594-650 A.D.) mentions in his book *Si-Yu-Ki* that there were hundreds of *Deva* temples in Kamrupa. Perhaps those *Deva* temples mentioned by Yuan Tsang were dedicated to Lord Siva, because he used the word *Deva* in place of the word *Devi*. Probably during that period the tradition of mother worship continued in a low profile.

The worship of Siva prevailed in Assam from a remote period and it was the popular form of religion amongst both the aboriginals and the Aryanized people. The popularity of Saivism in ancient Assam is also proved by the copperplates and land grants of the kings appeared in the

Kamrupa Sasanavali. The kings of ancient Assam had expressed their allegiance to Saivism through those copperplates and land grants.

In the Kāmākhyā temple the joint worship of Siva and Sakti is prevalent. Tantra also popularizes the worship of Siva and Sakti. According to Tantras, Siva without Sakti is not capable of moving. The joint worship of Siva and Sakti is purely of a Tantric origin. The mother Goddess Kāmākhyā is united with Siva or Mahakala or Kamesa and pairs with Him as Kameswara-Kameswari.

The union of Siva and Sakti is proved by the *Dasamahavidya* temples existing in the Kāmākhyā temple. *Dasamahavidyas* represent ten different forms of Sakti. There are ten *Mahavidya* temples in the Kāmākhyā complex. Except Dhumavati, who is represented as widow, the nine *Mahavidyas* are worshipped with their *Bhairavas*. The *Bhairavas* of the *Mahavidyas* are- Goddess Kali (worshipped with Mahakala), Tara (with Aksaubha), Sodasi (with Kameswara), Bhubaneswari (with Tryamvaka Siva), Bhairabi (with Dakshinamurti), Chinnamasta (with Kavandha), Bagala (with Ekavaktra Siva), Matangi (with Matanga Siva) and Kamala (with Sri Visnu).

There are five *pithas* of Panchanana Siva within the Kāmākhyā temple which proves the existence of Siva cult in the Kāmākhyā temple. Besides this there are some other Siva temples in the Kāmākhyā *pitha*.

Some local festivals observed in the Kāmākhyā temple are also related with Saivism. One such local festival prevalent in the Kāmākhyā temple in the *Puhan Bia* or *Punsavan* ceremony. This ceremony is one of the ten Hindu *Samskaras*. It is performed to produce male child. It is observed at the seventh or eight month of the first conception of any remembrance of the Hara-Gauri's (Siva-Parvati's) marriage ceremony. This festival is held on the second or third *tithi* of dark fortnight of the *Pusya* constellation of the *Puh* or the *Magh* month (mid December to mid February).

Sivaratri, another religious ceremony performed to worship Siva in the Kāmākhyā temple on the *Krishna Chaturdasi tithi*, i.e., on the fourteenth day of the dark fortnight of the month of *Fagun* (mid February to mid March), also proves the prevalence of Saivism. In this occasion non-vegetable *bhoga*, made of fish and meat of castrated goat is offered to Kāmākhyā in the five Siva *pithas* (*Panchanana*). In this festival a castrated goat is decapitated in the temple.⁶

Tantricism:

Tantricism is also associated with the worship of Goddess Kāmākhyā. The shrine is regarded as the perfect place for the practice of the Tantric cult. Tantricism has also a non-Aryan origin and all the elements like the use of magic and charms, the use of wine, the evoling rites the beliefs in the efficacy mantras and sex worship are found in other primitive cultures around the world.

One element of the religious heritage of ancient Assam is 'Fetishism', a belief in magic which is associated with objects like stones and trees etc. constituting the foundation of Tantricism in Assam with its centre at the Kāmākhyā temple. Tantric worship centres round the union of Siva and Sakti. In the Kāmākhyā temple unified prayer is offered to Siva and Sakti in the forms of Kameswara and Kameswari respectively.

As a centre of Tantricism, the *Panchamakara* i.e. the 'fifth M' method is practiced in the Kāmākhyā temple. These Panchamakara include *Madya* (alcohol), *Mangsa* (meat), *Matsya* (fish), *Mudra* (signs of seats) and *Maithuna* (sexual intercourse). *Yantra* worship is also an integral parts of Tantrik worship which existed in the Kāmākhyā temple. In the temple worship is mainly performed on the *Srichakra* (*Yantra*) which is considered as principle among the other 960 *Yantras*. This *Srichakras* (*Yantras*) are actually symbols which the Sadhaka tries to establish God or Goddesses in that symbol.

Several festivals are observed in the Kāmākhyā temple at various times. Many of them are related with Tantricism. The Ambubachi festival observed in the Kāmākhyā temple from the seventh day to the eleventh day of *Ahar* (within the first fortnight of the month of June) is an example of such festivals. It is believed that this is the period of menstruation of Goddess Kāmākhyā. During this period the temple is closed for the devotees and Visitors. The temple is re-opened on the fourth day. After the period of menstruation, the productive power of a woman becomes active. Ambubachi is a festival which signifies the power of fertility. Thus, the concept of fertility is related with mother Goddess Kāmākhyā. This is a Tantric belief.⁷

In the Kāmākhyā *pitha*, the worship of the *Dasamahavidyas* is also prevalent. These temples are the Kali temple, the Tara temple, the Bhubeneswari temple, the Bhairavi temple, the Bagalamukhi temple, the Dhumavati temple, the Sinnamasta. All the *Mahavidyas* except Bagalamukhi, are worshipped with red flowers. The use of wine is the speciality of the worship of the *Dasamahavidyas* along with Dhyana and Bija-mantra.

Buddhism:

The Kāmākhyā temple is also associated with the Buddhist faith especially with the Buddhism or Tantrik Buddhism. The architectural remains of the Natachala Hills indicate the Buddhist influence on the temple. Some Buddhist tradition state that Buddhism entered Kamrupa around the third century B.C. Kalhana's Rajtarangini also mentions about the prevalent of Buddhism in Kamrupa of the Pre-Bhaskarvarman era. The Bagalamukhi is one of the famous Goddess among the *Dasamahavidyas* and in Kāmākhyā temple also there is a temple of Goddess Bagala. Bagala is the best example of the assimilation of the Buddhist and the Hindu Tantras. In the Buddhist Tantras, there is a Goddess named Bagala or Bogla Dakini. Various Buddhist relies are found on the Nilachala Hills in which testify the Buddhist influence on the Kāmākhyā temple. All the sculptures are in various shapes. They are on the verge of decay. They depict episodes of Gautam Buddha's life. Two images of Buddha and Buddhisattava are found on the Nilachala Hills. Moreover, a rock cut image of Buddha under the Bodhi tree was discovered by the side of the old path of the Kāmākhyā temple. Some other Buddhist sculptures like Gautama in archery contest, Gautama on horseback etc. are also found on the Nilachala Hills⁸. Moreover, a broken image of Padmapani Buddha in the form of *Dhyana* and an image of a mother with a child, probably representing the Buddhist goddess Hariti are found in the temple. Some broken images of elephants and oxen's are also found in the Kāmākhyā temple. All these sculpture belong to the seventh or the eight centuries and they signify the existence of the Buddhist cult in the Kāmākhyā temple.

Vaisnavism:

The cult of Vishnu is also associated with the Kāmākhya shrine. According to the *Kalika Purana*, Mother Earth gave birth to Naraka. Naraka was fathered by the Boar incarnation of Visnu. After coming to Pragjyotispura, Naraka started to worship goddess Kāmākhya on the advice of Visnu. This signifies the influence of Vishnu cult over the Kāmākhya Shrine.

In the Kāmākhya temple there is a temple of Vishnu, known as Kamleswar in which both Visnu and Siva jointly exist and the sonnet form is known as Kambalakhya. There are several stone structures and statues related with the Visnu cult in the Kāmākhya temple. These testify the prevalence of Vishnu cult in Kāmākhya temple.

There are several stone structures related with the Visnu cult in the Kāmākhya temple. In the Nilachala Hills, there is a stone statue of Visnu Vasudeva and three statues of Visnu Krishna. Moreover, there are several stone statues of Visnu Balarama, the elder brother of Krishna, carrying a plough in his hand. In the first gate of the main walking path to the Kāmākhya temple, a statue of young Balaram is affixed. Balaram is seen as killing Mustika, the wrestler of king Kansa. A rock cut flute playing statue of Krishna Vasudeva is also found in the Kāmākhya temple. Moreover, near the main temple of Goddess Kāmākhya, a Krishna temple exists. Regular worship is held in the Krishna temple.

Some festivals observed in the Kāmākhya temple are also related with the cult of Visnu. The Douljatra or Holi, the festival of colour and joy is observed in the temple on the full moon day of the Assamese month *Fagun* (mid February to mid March). The Douljatra is a festival related with Lord Krishna. The festival is observed in the Kāmākhya temple with pomp and grandeur.

Another important festival related with the Visnu cult or Krishna cult is the Janmastami (the birthday of Krishna). Janmastami is celebrated in the Kāmākhya temple on the Krishnastami *tithi* (day) of the month of *Bhada* (i.e. on the eight day of the black fortnight between mid-August to mid September). In this festival, *hom* is offered in the Kamaleswar temple. Moreover, animal sacrifices are also conducted in the main *pitha* of the Kāmākhya temple on this occasion. All these festivals signify the existence of the Visnu cult in the shrine.

Worship of Ganesa

The worship of Ganesa is an important part of the religious aspect of the Kāmākhya temple. In the temple, a traditional ritual exists in which the devotee can enter the main Kāmākhya *pitha* after taking permission from the image of Ganesa which is situated near the tank Saubhangakuda. Stone images of Ganesa are found on the Nilachala Hills in large numbers. The numbers of Ganesa idols discovered on the Nilachala Hills are above fifty. It is mentionable here that most of the Ganesa statues on the Nilachala Hills have two full teeth where the Ganesa images of rest of India are generally single toothed.⁹

Conclusion:

The Kāmākhya *pitha* is assimilated with several religious cults like Saktism, Tantricism, Saivism, Buddhism and Vaisnavism etc. However, it is popular mainly as the centre of Sakta Tantricism. On the Nilachala Hills, several families inhabit. They are mainly Brahmanas, Kayasthas, Napits, Dhobas and so on. All these people are associated with the Kāmākhya temple by several professions. The Brahmanas are the Pandas who conduct the worship of Goddess Kāmākhya. All these people lived at the Nilachala Hills are followers of Sakta

Tantricism. Besides Saktism, they believe in other cults like Saivism and Vaisnavism. As all these religious cults are amalgamated with the worship of the Kāmākhyā a shrine, the people have naturally, become the followers of all these cults. Therefore, there is no distinct sectarian division among the inhabitants of the Nilachala Hills who belong to Sakta, Tantric, Saivite and Vaisnavite sects at the same time.

The Goddess, Kāmākhyā had a great influence in the minds of the people of Assam from the earliest time till today. The temple of Goddess Kāmākhyā not only attracts people of Assam but also from all over India and abroad. The Goddess Kāmākhyā became an important Sakti cult in Assam centering round the Kāmākhyā temple. The Kāmākhyā *pitha* has great significance in the socio-economic and religious point of view.

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