CHAPTER – 2

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY AREA

2.1 Geographical background of the Nilachal hills

Geographical location and geographical factors of a place greatly influences the living style, food habits, house patterns, clothing, culture and psychology of people as well as the density and distribution of population of the study area. Geographical factors also influence the thoughts of man which also includes the religious sentiments and even festivals celebrated by the people. For example, the tropical countries being mostly dependent on agriculture, the festivals are also related to the agricultural practices. The study, being a geographical analysis of the Nilachal Hills along with the sentiments and beliefs of people that attracts them to the region, the study of geographical factors is very much essential.

2.1.1 Location

The Nilachal Hills is located in the northern part of the Guwahati city of the Kamrup (Metro) district of Assam. It is located in the southern bank of the mighty river Brahmaputra. The Nilachal Hills is located 3 Kms west of the official centre of the city. The Latitudinal and longitudinal extent of the Nilachal Hills ranges between 26°09' N to 91°42' E (Fig 2.1). The revenue village of Kamakhya covers an area of 35316.34 acres (Majumdar 1998). The number of estates in the village is 326 with 576 plots. Total settled land covers an area of 13246.80 acres. The size of the plots is less than 13.38 acres in most cases, although a few plots with more than 40.13 acres are also seen. It is found that the larger the size the higher is the number of owners, which indicates strong co-ownership. The plots atop the Kamakhya Hills are dense within a very small area, while plots in level land, specifically near the A.T.Road. However, land sale to non-Assamese has occurred prior to the 1960’s and all recent land sales have taken place involving plots located in the hill slopes facing the A.T.Road. Average size is measured at 5.35 acres. Government land covers an area of 22070.01 acres, which is also subjected to massive encroachment by all social groups. However, from my own field survey, it has been found that the area covered by the Nilachal Hills is 3.297 sq.kms.
Fig. 2.1: Location map of the Study area (Nilachal Hills)
2.1.2 Climate

The study area i.e. the Nilachal Hills is characterized by a typical monsoon climate due to the predominance of the south-west monsoon which renders it hot and wet with a moderate temperature. However due to various local factors like orography, periodic disturbances, density of vegetation, local winds etc., its climate does not behave as a typical monsoon climate in the strict sense. The rainfall is also seasonal. The Nilachal Hills falls under the influence of the south-west Asiatic Monsoon regime. In Koppen’s climatic classification, the region will belong to the type Cwa or Humid Subtropical hot summer climate that is mild with dry winters, hot humid summers and moderate seasonality with occasional and un-avoidable variations. The average annual temperature is 24°C. The summer temperature ranges between 28°C to 38°C and the winter temperature ranges between 10°C to 24°C (in normal conditions). The average annual rainfall is 1698mm. Highest rainfall is received in June (when Ambubachi is celebrated) with an average of 315mm and the driest month is December with an average of 6mm of rain. Due to its height, the Hill sometimes experiences orographic rainfall during the summer season. Based on the distribution of rainfall, the year can be climatologically classified into four seasons:

1. Pre-monsoon season: - This season extends over the months of March, April and May. Meteorologically cyclonic disturbances especially thunderstorms dominate this season. These thunderstorms belong to the Norwester family. These thunderstorms are known as Kalbaisakhi in West Bengal and Bordoisila in Assam. These storms occur due to the undercutting of moist bay air by wedges of cold air extending from the valley of Assam. They grow out of cumulonimbus clouds generally give rise to intense precipitation in discontinuous and short spells in the form of showers differing from the continuous rain in the monsoon season. Sometimes low to moderately intense dust storms are also produced in this season. Sometimes hail along with storms is also experienced.

2. Monsoon season: - This season is predominantly under the influence of the south-west monsoon current during the months of June, July, August and
September, resulting in torrential rainfall over the hills. Rainfall of this season is also associated with cyclonic storms and depressions that originate mainly over the Bay of Bengal during the monsoon period. As soon as a depression is formed in the Bay of Bengal, the pressure begins to fall over a wide region of several hundred kilometres. In response of this pressure gradient wind picks up a cyclonic circulation due to Coriolis force which in the Northern Hemisphere is anti-clockwise. As the depression moves from the head of the Bay of Bengal towards the coast a belt of heavy rainfall extends to the southern and south-eastern parts of Bengal and Assam and after reaching Guwahati, due to orographic effect, it rains heavily in the Nilachal Hills. Rainfall in this season occurs in spells having a wide intensity from drizzle to heavy precipitation over a period ranging from a few hours to several days.

3. Retreating monsoon: - This season extends over the months of October and November. This season is under the influence of the north-east monsoon winds. With this season, winter slowly starts in the region. This season experiences scanty and occasional rainfall, pleasant and comfortable weather in October, November. A cold wave is experienced, generally from the last week of December to the last part of January.

4. Winter Season: - The winter season extends over the months of December, January and February. During this period there is scarcely any rainfall. Temperature ranges from 6°C to 24°C and usually maximum cold is felt in the late December and early January. Dense fog is a usual feature in the morning and the sun does not come out in full till 10am on some days.

Thus, summing up we can describe the region to have a very humid climate, most of the rainfall received in summer season whereas the winter remains dry. As a whole, the climate of the study area can be described to have characteristics of cold and foggy winter, a moderately hot spring season and a temperate but humid summer (Kalita and Sarma, 1985).
2.1.3 Geomorphology

The Nilachal Hills complex comprises of three joint hills, as mentioned earlier, locally known as the Brahma Pahar, the Vishnu Pahar and the Shiva Pahar. These are residual hills of highly weathered pre-Cambrian basement. The region has moderately thick soil cover. It is an ancient hillock and considered as an extended part of the Shillong Plateau. The region is comprised of highly metamorphosed quartzite, biotite, schists, biolite, gneiss, augen gneiss and granite. The highest point of the Nilachal Hills complex is about 250mts high and its average height varies between 100 to 200mts. Its average slope is 40°. Due to the eroded characteristics of the hills, the rainy season encounters occasional landslides in the region. (Fig. 2.2:)

![Contour Map of Nilachal Hill](image)

Fig. 2.2; Contour map of the study area
Source: Map constructed with the data from primary survey along with Toposheet no. 78N/12 of SOI
2.1.4 Drainage

Being a low altitude hill, the study area, Nilachal Hills consists of numerous little springs which are mainly rain fed and nearly dries up in the winter and dry season. Mainly there is a perennial spring of water located at its top-shoulder region. It is known locally as the Akasa Ganga. Moreover mention may be made about three seasonal (i.e. semi perennial springs) on the shoulder region. These small streams drain mainly to the mighty Brahmaputra flowing towards the north of the Nilachal Hills. There are extensive lakes and marshes on the south-western part of the hill. Those lakes are called ‘‘Kundas’’. There are numerous kundas on the three hillocks of the Nilachal Hills, the most important and famous being the Saubhagya Kunda inside the compound of the main Kamakhya temple. The other popular Kundas as mentioned earlier are Wrin Mochan Kunda, Amrit Kunda, Durga Kunda, Gaya Kunda and Kaso Pukhuri (regularly used names).

2.1.5 Natural Vegetation

As the region experiences intensive and abundant rainfall it is covered with tropical vegetative cover of great biodiversity. The region has lush green landscape and several protected forests under the supervision of the temple complex and the various ashrams and dharamshalas. Some main flora found in the Nilachal Hills can be mentioned as follows- Apamarga (Achyranthes porphyristachya), Atapihal (Annona squamosa), Satiani (Alstonia scholaris), Bel (Aegle marmelos), Kathal (Artocarpus heterophyllus), Matikathal (Annanas Comosus), Tamul (Areca Catechu), Neem (Azadirachta indica), Tarua kadam (Acacia Farnesiana), Kadam (Anceithephalus Cadamba), Malati (Aganosma Caryophyaata), Leteku (Baccaurea Ramiflora), Nahar (Bauhinia Purpurea), Palas (Bulea Monosperma), Simalu (Bombax Cieba), Jara Tenga (Citrus Medica), Akan (Callotropis Procera), Aparajita (Clitoria Ternatea), Karabi (Cascabela Thevetia), Parijat (Canna Chinensis), Katza Tenga (Carissa Congesta), Rabab Tenga (Citrus Grandis), kusum (Carthamus Tinctoris), Ou Tenga (Dillenia Indica), Krishnasura (Delonix Regia), Dhatura (Datura Stramonium ), Amloki (Emblica Officinatis), Siju (Euphorbia Ligularia), Jagga Dimaru (Ficus Racemosa), Ahat (Ficus Religiosa), Bat (Ficus Benghalensis), Joba (Hibiscus rosa-sinensis), Sarai Phool (Holmskioldia Sanguinea), Gutimali (Jasminium Laurifolium), Juti ( Jasminium
Sambac), Bhoomi Sampa (Kaempferia Rotunda), Sonaru (Mussaenda Glabra), Dron (Leucus Plukenetti), Jaiphal (Myristica Fragrans), Champa (Michelia Doltsopa), Aam (Magnifera Indica), Nahar (Mesua Ferrea), Bakul (Mimusops Elengi), Rakta Karabi (Nerium Indicum), Sewali (Nyctanthes Abortristis), Gulanchi (Plumeria Acutifolia), Kanak Champa (Pterospermum Acerifolium), Dalim (Punica Granatum), Ashok (Saraca Asoca), Jam (Syzygium Cumini), Chandan (Santalum Album), Teteli (Tamarindus Indica), Silikha (Terminalia Chebula), Pasatia (Vitex Negundo), Bagari (Zizyphus Mauritiana) etc. (Sharma, 1996; Kalita, 1984).

2.1.6 Land use/ Land cover

The land use and land cover pattern of the Nilachal Hills shows a very unique character. Human interference is seen mostly in the central part of the hillock (in and around the Kamakhya temple complex) and in the southern, eastern and western foothills, whereas the northern slopes of the hill is undisturbed by human interference. The area is covered by dense vegetation and contrastingly by high density of human settlement. (Table 2.1)

Table 2.1 : Land use/ Land cover of Nilachal Hills

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LU/ LC Type</th>
<th>Area in sq. metre</th>
<th>% of area</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dense vegetation</td>
<td>940499.16</td>
<td>28.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grass</td>
<td>97029.73</td>
<td>2.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High density settlement</td>
<td>967495.52</td>
<td>29.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low density settlement</td>
<td>437381.71</td>
<td>13.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open space</td>
<td>4696.28</td>
<td>0.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trees and shrubs</td>
<td>836929.77</td>
<td>25.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Water bodies</td>
<td>13150.95</td>
<td>0.40</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Digital Globe's Quick Bird Satellite image through Google earth and primary survey.

The northern slopes and a patch in the southern slopes of the hill is occupied by dense vegetation whereas the eastern and southern slopes of the hill is covered by trees and shrubs. The western slope of the hill has a patch of grassland. The water bodies (in
the form of sacred ponds) are scattered over the central and western part of the hill. (Fig. 2.3). On the other hand, 0.14% of the area has been utilised for construction of a parking space which accommodates the private vehicles of the localites and also the vehicles of the tourists and cabs.

Fig. 2.3: Land use and land cover map of the study area

2.2 Historical background of the study area

The origin of the Kamakhya temple and the Nilachal hills has been a mystery to everybody. Almost every aspect of the region is associated with a myth or a legend, be it the name of the hill, the construction of the temples, the rituals and worship of the temples of the region festivals celebrated in the region, the architecture of the temples, the road to the main temple, the Nilachal Kamakhya or the inhabitants of the region. Because of the religious sentiments or may be due to the gravity and standard of the sources where those myths and legends are found to be written, people since the earliest times and ages, have been believing them to be true.

Different sources like the Kalika Purana, Yogini Tantra and various other legends and historical records, gives different stories to the various aspects of the
2.2.1 The mythologies and legends

As stated above, there are a number of myths and legends about various aspects of the region, i.e. the Nilachal Hills. The hill, which is called Nilachal now, is said to represent Lord Shiva himself. It is said that when Sati’s genital organ fell on the hill, it turned blue. The Goddess herself is called “Kamakhya” because she came there secretly to satisfy her armour (Kama) with Lord Shiva, her husband. Thus, the hill became both a graveyard and a secret love tryst of the Goddess. This name is associated with legend which is happily preserved to us in the Kalika Purana in the Chapter on Daksa Yajna. Moreover the word ‘Kama’ in Sanskrit signifies blue. Along with the fill of the genital organ of Sati the hillock turned into blue. So, she may be a blue-eyed Goddess on a blue mountain. Or, the natural beauty of Assam is very charming. It is covered with green trees and creepers. It is a province with green forests, hills and valleys. The deity worshipped here is accordingly beautiful, blue of green Goddess “Kamakhya”. Another view is that the word “Kamakhya” may refer to one deity who can change her appearance at her own will. According to Dr. Pranavjyoti Deka in his Inaugural Lecture “Nilachala-Kamakhya in Historical Perspective (26th October, 2009), the name “Nilachala” is borrowed from “Nilachala of Jagannath Puri” of Orissa, abode of Balabhadra, Subhadra and Jagannath, a supposed form of Krishna.

According to the Kalika Purana, the king Daksa, the father of Sati, once performed a great sacrificial ceremony with splendour and solemnity, where to, he sent invitation to all relatives and Gods and Goddesses, sages, except his daughter and Shiva (son-in-law), as he disliked them. This contempt was due to the fact that he did not like his daughter Sati, married Shiva. Sati was informed by Narada about this sacrifice in which she wanted to be present and she asked her husband’s permission which he refused. At this refusal, she grew furious and with her great influence she made her husband bound to consent to her prayer and in great joy she arrived at her father’s place. But Daksa, the great king, was annoyed at her arrival and at the face of Sati he reproached her husband with much contempt again and again. Sati did not expect such humiliation from her father. She was very much mortified to see her husband being
dishonoured before so many Gods and Goddesses and guest who were present at the ceremony. So out of her anger and mortification she decided to sacrifice her mortal being, given be her father, i.e. her body. Thus, she took her seat on the ground, closed her eyes and reduced her body to ashes by the fire produced internally by the abstract meditation on Shiva.

Shiva grew terrible at this unexpected fate of Sati; so he came down with his two attendants Nandi and Bhringi to wreck vengeance upon Daksa. He was beheaded by the followers of Shiva, however the great beweilding of the queen, i.e. Daksa’s wife, moved his heart and at last he restored the life of Daksa by replacing the head with that of goat. But the grief of his dear counsel Sati, made Shiva frantic and in a state of lunacy he took the dead body of Sati upon his shoulders and wondered aimlessly all over the universe. At this frantic and destructive state of Shiva, Brahma and other gods become worried, so they approached Vishnu for his advice and help regarding how to save the universe from destruction. Vishnu then, with his unfailing weapon “Chakra” followed Shiva in his wanderings kept himself invisible from the sight of Shiva, cut the body of Sati from his shoulders, part by part to keep it free from decomposition and sati’s body fell upon earth in 51 different pieces. Each of the places became the great religious centres. The genital part of Sati fell on top of the Nilachal hill in Kamrup, and the place was thenceforth held sacred to Kamakhya.

The Yogini Tantra gives a different story regarding its origin. According to it- when Brahma created the world, he grew proud and forgot the good counsel of Durga. Goddess Durga realised this and with a view to chastise Brahma for his pride, she created a fierce demon called Keshi. The demon rushed after Brahma to kill Him. Brahma in great panic approached Vishnu for protection. The demon began to torment the whole universe in his rage. Brahma cast aside his arrogance and with the company of Vishnu offered prayer to Goddess Kali to rescue the world from the utmost destruction going to be caused by the tyranny of Keshi. The Goddess was then satisfied with the hymn of Brahma and Vishnu and burnt the demon to ashes. Then she asked Brahma that the place where he worshipped her for the destruction of Keshi, there will be evolution of a genital sphere which originated from her blood. Then she advised him
to go and worship that place. That place was none other than Kamarupa and the temple is that of Kamakhya.

However the most famous and accepted legend is that after the destruction of the temple by Moslem invasion, the temple was rebuilt by the able general of the Koch King Naranarayan, Chilarai, in 1565 A.D. thereafter, King Naranarayan engaged priest Kendukolai to look after the temple. It says that Rajib Lochan Roy, a Brahmin landlord married the daughter of Badshah Soleman of Bihar. After his marriage, he went to Puri to live as a Hindu and accordingly, he expressed his desire to remain as a Brahmin there. But owing to his marriage with a Muslim girl, he was regarded as a heretic and so he was ex-communicated from the society. At this he was so much disgusted that he converted himself to Muslim religion. He took the name Kalapahar and determined to wreck vengeance upon the Hindu religion for punishing him. So, he organized an army in order to make an invasion to destroy all the religious institutions, temples and sacred places of the Hindus. At that time, when Koch king Naranarayan was engaged in wars with the Ahoms, Kalapahar entered his kingdom and ravaged the temple of Kamakhya and the temple of Hajo in 1553 A.D.

Again there is a myth about the Mother Goddess as the dancing Goddess. It says that after the historical vandalism caused by Kalapahar, as a result of which the original temple was raised to the ground, Koch King Naranarayana rebuilt the temple and raised it to the ground on the ruins of the original temple and had engaged priest Kendukolai to look after the Temple. He used to bathe the Goddess, change her and perform puja. As legend has it, it is the Goddess herself who used to dance sometime in the late evening on being pleased and satisfied by the services of Priest Kendukolai. On the condition that none else than the priest himself should know that and witness and see the event, the Goddess permitted the priest to be present when She danced. King Naranarayana somehow came to know about the dancing of the Goddess Sudoshi, a tender aged girl, clad in red. He told the priest that he would also like to have a glimpse of the dancing Mother and had accordingly directed the priest to arrange even. On being refused to violate the condition of Goddess Kamakhya, the King threatened Kendukolai with capital punishment and on the fear of being put to death, Kendukolai suggested that though he would not be able to fulfil the wishes of the King in full, the king could
peep the Dancing Goddess through a hole from the northern end of the Natya Mandir. As destiny would have it, Kendukolai’s suggestion enabled the King to peep dance of the Goddess. The Omniscient Goddess came to learn of the fact and infuriated, she medicated both the king and priest. The priest was turned into a stone which is now seen to be engrafted on the wall by the encircling Sri Yantra Pitha. And in so far as the king and his family members are concerned, they were bestowed with the curse that if ever they come to Kamakhya they would similarly be turned into stones. Much water has flown through the Brahmaputra since then, but till now no family member from the Koch Dynasty to King Naranarayan come here for darashan despite being strict Shakti Worshippers as of their tradition.

Another myth prevails relating to the Dasamahavidya. The Nilachal hill is home to numerous other temples apart from the main Kamakhya temple. Of those the ten main deities and the temples occupied by them are known as the Dasmahavidyas.

The myth regarding the origin of the Dasamahavidyas says that when Shiva and Sati were not invited to Daksha’s sacrificial ceremony, inspire of that Sati wanted to be present in it and for this she asked for her husband’s permission but could not attain inspire of much effort. After that Sati became angry and remained silent for some time and after that she started looking at her husband with furious eyes and sparkles of fire were emitting from her third eye. Seeing the tremendous anger in her eyes, Lord Shiva was shocked. Out of enragement, the Goddess started taking the form of the dark-complexioned four-armed Goddess. Shiva became impatient observing all these and out of anxiety and helplessness he started fleeing from that place. When Sati saw the fleeing Shiva, she realized what’s going on and she tried to calm down Shiva saying “don’t be afraid” and called back her husband. But Shiva didn’t stop. At this the Goddess took ten different forms and tried to block the way of Shiva from ten directions. Whichever directions he looked, Shiva saw a different furious form of the Goddess. Shiva was very much afraid of that unexpected condition and being fed up; ultimately he gave Sati the permission to go to her father’s sacrificial ceremony.
2.2.2 Myth and Reality

The Kamakhya temple is a Shakti Peetha and an important pilgrimage destination for general Hindus and Tantric worshippers. It is the main temple within the Nilachal in a complex of individual temples dedicated to different form of the Mother Goddess as the Dasamahavidya, including Bhubaneswari, Bagalamukhi, Chinnamasta, Tripura Sundari and Tara. It is not only a religious centre but also a centre of natural life. The Kamakhya temple is unique when compared with the Devi temples in other parts of India, for it enshrines no image of the Goddess. Tucked away within a corner of a cave, in the temple there is a sculptured image of Yoni of the Goddess which is the object of reverence. The stone is kept moist by the oozing of a natural spring. Devotees touch it and seek the divine blessings.

The current structure of the Kamakhya temple has a bee-hive like Shikara with delightful sculptured panels and images of Ganesha and other Hindu Gods and the Goddesses on the outside walls. The images of 64 Yoginis and 18 Bhairabas that are found even today are said to be the architectural and sculptural mastery of the original temple created by Vishwakarma. The temple consists of three major chambers. The western chamber is large and rectangular and is not used by general pilgrims for worship. The middle chamber in a square, with a small idol of the Goddess is said to be a later addition. The walls of this chamber contain sculpted images of Naranarayana, related inscriptions and other Gods.

The five domes visible on the present temple are the products of hybrid Indo-Islamic culture. The elevated dome on Indian-Hindu with steps and ridges, were constructed to distinguish from Islamic “smooth-surface domes”. There is one large and one medium dome and three small cupolas. The largest dome is on the top of the “Garbhagriha”, the Manobhaba Guha. The major domes of the temple, the cupolas and the pyramidal roof were constructed during the rule of King Naranarayana and completed in the year 1565 A.D. It was a repair-reconstruction job and the materials used are burnt bricks and lime, organic cement mortars. The shape of the roof, the dome etc. which existed before the temple was constructed by Naranarayana is not known. Repair of the temples with stone chips, Portland cement and steel reinforcement were done after 1897 earthquake and also in the recent times (Deka, 2004).
The original statues present in the temples show distinct artistic styles. There are different groups of statues; one group having finely chiselled long visage, with sharp nose and big eyes, legs extremely long with short bodies and hands; the second group having noticeably short legs, long bodies and hands. The second group of statues has been brought and fixed on the temple wall during the Ahom period restoration. On the gate of the path leading to the Kamakhya temple there are two stone statues, one is that of Balarama killing Mustika, the professional wrestler in a wrestling match in the place of Kansa. The second statue can be of the king Balavarmana I, namesake of Lord Balaram. At present on the Nilachal Hills there are only three ancient stone statues which can be definitely identified to be that of Krishna, Vasudeva, whereas there are more than 15 statues of Musala (cudgel) carrying Balaram (Deka, 2004).

Naranarayana, the famous king of Koch dynasty became king in 1534. Naranarayana and his younger brother as well as his general, Chilarai, began the construction of the temple in 1555 and completed in 1565. Naranarayana also brought qualified Brahmins from Bengal for the smooth performance of the Deity’s worship. The basement of the existing temple, which is made of hewn stone dates back to the time of Koch king Naranarayana, but the superstructure, is of more recent data. The Kamakhya temple as a whole is in excellent repair. During Ahom rule several kings contributed for its development. Shiva Singha (1714-1744) the Ahom king accepted Hinduism. He was initiated by Krishna Ram Bhattacharya, a famous Mahant of Shakti sect who lived in Malipota, near Santipur in Nadia district of West Bengal. Shiva Singha set up his preceptor at Nilachal Hills and granted plenty of moveable and immoveable property. Likewise, his successor like Rajeswar Singha in 1759 and Gaurinath Singha in 1789, Pramatta Singha etc. constructed temples of various Gods and Goddesses within the temple complex. The other buildings on the hill are comparatively modern and most of them were re-erected by the Maharaja of Darbhanga, after the earthquake of 1897.

The present Kamakhya temple structure shows evidences of damages due to earthquake. The lower and the middle part of the present Kamakhya temple show little evidence of landslide. The most ancient part of the present Kamakhya temple is a stone construction around the cave with the water fountain. The water fountain shows natural
stone blocks at the bottom but the sides are protected with huge, finely-sized granite blocks which are fitted in jigsaw puzzle-style without any cement on dowel joints. Carbon dating of the soil layer below this construction shows an age of 2200 years. The next soil layer above it indicates an age of 1500 years which means construction work must have started in any time between 200 B.C. to 500 A.D. As the second stage of construction took place before 500 A.D. on the older stone platform, the bottom part must have been constructed about 2000 years back. These stones are unadorned, bereft of any curving. The upper part of the stone temple which was constructed by about 500 A.D., the roof collapsed after 13th century and reconstructed with brick and mortar in 1560-65 A.D. (Deka, 2004). On the main walking path to the Kamakhya temple, the first gate on the foothill was reconstructed during the Koch on Ahom rule in 18th century but the foundation is ancient and made of sized stones (Deka, 2004).

The tradition of performance and recitation of dance and music all throughout the year in the Nilachal Hills during the erstwhile monarchical regime had been a rule rather than an exception, as we find today. Sargadeo Rajeswar Singha and others patronized such a tradition and considerable grants were offered by them especially for such occasions. Nevertheless owing to political upheavelment and the Burmese invasion this tradition was lost in antiquity. Dance and music is an inseparable and integral part of the rituals connected to the worshipping of Goddess Kamakhya. Till the signing of the Yandaboo in 1826, all sort of encouragements, assistance and patronages from the erstwhile rulers were continuously forthcoming till the year 1842, when the British Government adopted the policy of non-interference with religious institutions.

Being the foremost amongst the 51 Shaktipeethas, the Deity of Sri Sri Kamakhya is one of the most venerated Goddess. Vast tract of land were settled in Her favour throughout the ages by various rulers in different parts of the state for the maintenance of the Shrine. The quantum of such lands had been about 45,000 bighas, out of which an approximate area of 35,000 bighas were agricultural lands including fisheries in various districts of the state. The rest comprised of the Nilachal hills (i.e. the three hills of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva), the non cadastral areas of Durga Sarobar, Maligaon, Garandu Kumarpara, Gotanagar and other areas in Guwahati Circle. The Paiks and Raiyats used to pay crop rent as well as service as against their holdings.
Thus, the management of the Temple used to operate on the income derived from these landed properties till about the year 1967 when the first notification of acquisition of the lands of Kamakhya under The Assam State acquisition of Lands Belonging to Religious or Charitable Institutions of Public nature Act, 1959, was published. Under this law the lands of the Kamakhya Temple were to be acquired by the Deputy Commissioner. However, under the same law it is also mandatory that the Deputy Commissioner will demarcate an area comprising of the Temples' Complex and the lands appertaining thereto, the residential quarters of the Shebaits, Priests, Servants and Workers connected to the shrine along with the flower gardens, orchards, etc. which were to be retained by the endowment, revenue free in perpetuity.

The first confirmable and reliable historical record about the Nilachal hill, till date, is the rock inscription seen on the rock boulder of the Umachal Hill, the steeply dipping eastern flank of the Bhubaneswari massive of the Nilachal Hill. According to this Umachal inscription, there was a Vishnu temple constructed near the site of the inscription. At present there is no clue of any such temple, but there is a cave-like hollow with a water stream covered by the stone boulders rolled down from the top.

Inspite of the presence of historical myths and legends, according to Dr. Pranavjyoti Deka, the cult of Kamakhya was introduced to the Nilachal Hills between late 11th to middle 12th century and probably came to Nilachal with Baidya Deva. He is of the view that there was a group of people master in chiselling and polishing stones, but did not know to join them by using cement or dowel joints, they used gravity. This group of people constructed a temple i.e. the Kamakhya temple at the top of a natural water spring. The flow of the stream was enhanced by constructing a series of tanks.

Dr. Deka further goes on analyzing the reality regarding the myths of the origin of Kamakhya temple. He says- “About 50 years back (1948) one eminent scholar of Assam boldly declared that, ritual worship of female organ on the Nilachal hills was adopted from the neighbouring, matriarchal, Austric, tribal groups, the Garos and Khasis who live only 50 miles away from the temple of Kamakhya. For half a century, a galaxy of scholars swallowed this whopper without protest knowing well that the Garos and the Khasis never had any religious rituals related to worship to female sex organ. Kamakhya temple and the cult are still very much there in Nepal and in North Bengal,
hundreds of miles away from the Garos and Khasi. Secondly, Kamakhya –Kameswari cult is an offshoot of Hindu-Bouddha Tantric cult. Tribals and tribalism have and had nothing to do with the cult of Kamakhya. The present temple of Kamakhya on the Nilachal Hills is accepted by the archaeologists as constructed in the 5th century at the earliest and the 8th century at the latest, but there is no reference to be found about the Goddess Kamakhya, Kamakhyi or Kameswari in any literature before the 11th century who could have been the ruling deity or deities residing in the present temple of Kamakhya for the first 600 years.”

It was a rule in the early days that lands were granted to the religious institutions and their caretakers by the kings and rulers for their upkeepment. The Kamakhya shrine was no different. Around 6000 hectares of lands were dedicated by the erstwhile rulers of the state in favour of the Deity of Sri Sri Kamakhya for the maintenance of the temple. The produce of these lands either in cash or kind were utilized for the maintenance and upkeep of the endowment as a whole and for the daily expenses of bhog-puja performed not only in the main temple of Kamakhya, but also in all the other temples of the Dasamahavidyas which comprise the temple’s complex of Sri Sri Kamakhya. These granted lands were called Debuttar. But exact records pertaining to the actual extent of the Debuttar areas are not available. The general area around the Nilachal had been a hotbed of war activities due to the tactical and strategic advantage afforded by the peculiar geographical features. The progressively frequent foreign incursions from the 12th century A.D. onwards led to the erection of many fortified embankments in the vicinity of the Nilachal Hills at Garigaon, Sadilapur, Khanajan, Pandu etc. the remnants giving the evidence of the stated facts. It is also said that the iconoclast, Kalapahar, destroyed almost all temples and the Hajo temple. However, it is also equally probable that the inclement weather, flash floods, the gradual change of the courses of rivers as well as the effects of geoclastic forces coupled with human avarice and neglect have resulted in the destruction of many old temples.

After signing the Treaty of Yandaboo in 1826, British undertook the proper survey of the areas. They also undertook the systematic demarcation of the lands held by the different Devalayas. In this context it is probable that the Shebaits stated that the lands granted in their names too were part of the temple lands and were revenue free.
But the British who were out to derive the maximum revenue over the lands of this region, denied such claims and though they adopted the policy of non-interference in religious matters as early as 1842 after having abolished the part of the Sevacholuwa, in 1870 all religious grants were bifurcated into the revenue free or Lakhiraj Estates dedicated to Deities and the half revenue held by individual priests and other servants of the temples or Satras.

Such a state of affairs continued till 1947 but soon after the scenario changed and the state, in pursuance with an enactment entitled “The Assam State Acquisition of Lands Belonging to Religious and Charitable Institutions of Public Nature Act, 1959”, purportedly acquired the lands dedicated to the Deity Kamakhya. The law provided that the institution would be entitled to retain specific areas as its revenue free lands so as to accommodate the resident Shebaits and perhaps devotees of the Goddesses as well as to incorporate future requirements. The enactment also contemplated that as against such acquisition, compensation in the form of an annuity would be computed in the manner statutorily prescribed and paid annually to the Head of the Institution. However, as per the affected people, the Government has not taken any initiative to demarcate the retainable areas nor compute the compensation payable over the lands acquired.

There are several temples scattered all over the Nilachal Hills and according to an estimate by the Archaeological Survey of India, there probably existed more than a hundred in the past. Presently there are 42 distinct temples in the Nilachal Hills. They may be categorised as follows -


Shiva temples: - It is said that the Mother Goddess in her various forms is often accompanied by her consort, Shiva. Thus, along with the temples dedicated to the deity, the Nilachal Hills also comprises 5 numbers of Shiva temple namely, (1) Kameswar temple, (2) Siddheswar temple, (3) Kotirlinga temple, (4) Amra Tokeswar temple and (5) Aghor temple.

According to Kali Prasad Goswami, the worship of Dasamahavidyas and their respective Pithas are perhaps the creation of a later age. Considering the different tastes of different persons, the Hindu religion has recognized the worship of various Gods and Goddesses. Similarly, the worship of various Mahavidyas is propagated to suit the needs of different devotees. Secondly, the existence of the Dasamahavidyas pithas on the Nilachal Hills proves that it was out and out a centre of Tantric worship for a long time. Lord Ganesha, in his four different forms as Nandi, Bhringi, Mahakal and Ganapati guards the four gates of the temple complex (the Nilachal Hills).

The Hill also comprises few sacred ponds (Kundas) which are associated with various pujas and rituals. These ponds are Saubhagya Kunda, Durga Kunda, Bhairavi Kunda, Amritdhara Kunda, Rnamocana Kunda and Gaya Kunda. The Nilachal Hills has a number of Ashrams and Dharamshalas which are meant for saint and holyman. They are Dasnami Akhara, Abhayananada Dharamshala, Kalipur Ashram, Nigamananda Ashram, Satsanga Ashram, Tapovan Ashram and Bijay Krishna Sadhan Ashram. (Mishra, 2004). The Nilachal Hills also comprises the Umachal Ashram. The Umachal Ashram also consists of a Yogic hospital which acts as a rehabilitation centre. It earlier also consisted of a Yogic college which is now dormant due to lack of human resources and students.

The Nilachal Hills is a combination of three joint hillocks. The hillock where the Bhubaneswari temple is located is called the Brahma Hill (Pahar) (690ft above mean
sea level), the hillock where the Kamakhya temple is located is known as the Shiva Hill (Pahar) and the hillock to the west is known as the Barah Hill (Pahar) or Vishnu Hill (Pahar). This hillock is 450 ft above the mean sea level (Talukdar, 2003).

2.3 Demographic Composition and their Characteristics in Nilachal Hills

The demographic background of a region refers to the overall study of the composition of the population residing in the region, the history of peopling, their quality, cultural and social background etc.. The formal demography limits its object of study to the measurement of population processes. While the broader field of social demography or population studies also analyses the relationships between economic, social, cultural and biological processes influencing a population. However, here, to achieve the ultimate goal of knowing about the scope of tourism industry, we must know a little more that formal demography of the region which will, in due course of study, disclose, to some extent, the broader field of social demography.

In my research, the study of demographic background is of much more importance because the developments and prospects of further developments of tourism industry depends upon the quality of the local community. Keeping in view the demographic conditions, the survey can be performed. In the Nilachal Hills the whole of the region under study comprises of a mixture of people belonging to various castes, class, linguistic groups etc. creating a unique demographic base. The pattern of settlement is also seen to be of unique type. The growing popularity of the temples has resulted in the gradual attraction of people to the region. This has not only changed the complete scenario of the land use pattern of the region but also brought about a lot of changes in the social and economic aspects of the area.

2.3.1 Evolution of settlement and peopling

The population of Nilachal Hills are not original inhabitants. They are said to have migrated 600 years before the present time. During the early 16th century, a significant development that took place when Kamakhya temple, which was in the state of natural decay was rediscovered atop the Nilachal Hills and rebuilt. It was during this time that the Brahmin priests from North India were brought for performing religious rites in the temple (Gait, 1981). It is said that when the Kamakhya temple was
reconstructed (after being destroyed by the Muslim invader Kalapahar) by Koch king Naranarayana, he brought a priest from Sualkuchi, known as Kendukona to take care of the temple and to carry on rites and rituals of the temple. Further, the Ahom King Rudra Singha (1696-1714), a Shakti worshipper, summoned Krishnaram Bhattacharya, a famous Mahant of the Shakti sect who lived in Malipota, near Santipur in Nadia district of West Bengal to the Kamakhya temple. After that, Rudra Singha's son, Ahom King Siva Singha (1714-1744) the donated Krishnaram Bhattacharya and his descendents, lands in the Nilachal Hills and also entrusted them the responsibility of looking after the temple. The present residents of the Nilachal Hills are therefore the descendants of him and the land are called the Debottar land. Those people are called the Parbatiya Gosains or Nati or Na Gosains.

However, according to the study of Goswami (1998), the priests (Pandas) of Kamakhya temple claimed that they were originally brought by a Kamrupa King, named Dharampala from Uttar Pradesh and they were allotted settlement in different parts of the state. Their descendents are known as Basottariya Brahman who lived in Sualkuchi near Guwahati.

2.3.2 Population growth and its trend

As per historic sources, the original inhabitants of the region constituted only 5 families of priest class who were brought from Northern India to perform rites and rituals of the mother Goddess Kamakhya temple, and were allotted land within the region to settle down. However, for performing the other works of the temple complex, gradually, people of lower social class were also brought to assist the priest class from time to time. According to local sources there were about 190 Brahmin families and the total population was 1000 in 1958 and the number of non-Brahmin families was 250 and the total population was 2500. The first recorded authentic population data of the region could be found in the form of Census of India 1971. As per Census 1971, the total population of the Nilachal Hill was 6371 which consisted of 3598 males and 2799 females. Thereafter, there was no Census in Assam in 1981. The next authentic population data is found in Census of India 1991, according to which the total population of the region is 10933 of which 5945 are males and 4988 females which consists 2050 households. According to 2001 Census India, the total population of
Nilachal Hills increased to 19166 of which 10092 are males and 9074 females with a total of 4020 number of households. This figure increased up to 4647 number of total households according to 2011 census of India data which includes total population of 20366 consisting 10368 males and 9998 number of females. Following the authentic data received from Census of India, the growth of population in the region is remarkable between 1971 to 2001 (almost 3 times) however between 2001 and 2011 is very less. This may be due to the awareness of population control in the region, or less number of new settlement in the region. It may be regarded as a good sign in the trend of population growth.

2.3.3 Population Density

The density of population is very uneven in the Nilachal Hills. As seen in the land use/land cover map and the composite map showing super imposed features of land use/land cover, contours and thematic map showing temples of the region it has been seen that the highest density of population is seen near the Kamakhya temple complex and in the foothills of the western, northern and eastern side of the Nilachal Hills. In other words, the highest density of population is found at the height between 50 mts - 75 mts from the mean sea level and between 100 mts to 150 mts from the mean sea level (Fig.2.4). However, here height of the region is not the sole criteria for the uneven distribution of population. The main criteria is nearness to the Kamakhya temple at the higher elevation and nearness to the main road, A.T. Road, Guwahati at the lower elevation. Somewhat lower density of population is seen in the Western slopes of the Nilachal Hills whereas the northern part can be said to be totally uninhabited, being covered by dense jungles and at the transitional zone between the Nilachal Hills and the bank of the river Brahmaputra in the North. However, arithmetically, the population density in 1971 is 931 persons per sq.km, 3313 persons per sq. km. in 1991, 5808 persons per sq. km in 2001 and 6172 persons per sq. km. according to 2011 census. However from my personal field survey, it can be said that population density ranges between 7000-8000 persons per sq.km. in and around the Kamakhya temple and the foothills whereas it ranges between 100-200 persons per sq.km. in the middle portion of the hill and further it ranges between 10-20 persons per sq. km. in the Northern slopes of the Nilachal Hills.
Fig. 2.4: Superimposed map of LU/LC, contours and temples of Nilachal Hills
2.3.3 Literacy Rate

The literacy rate of the region has always been much higher than the national average as per census data available. According to 1971 census data, the literacy rate of the Nilachal Hills was 62.54% as against the national average of 34.45%. According to 1991 Census of India, the literacy rate of the region was 73.11% as against the national average of 52.21%. In 2001, the literacy rate was 76.37% as against the national average of 64.84% and in 2011 census, it was 82.33% as against the national average of 74.04%. The above statistics reveals that the people of the region gives much emphasis on learning which is quite expected too, as the original settlers belonged to the priest class.

2.3.5 Sex Ratio

Unlike literacy rate, the sex ratio of the region is not satisfactory and is far below the national average. According to 1971 census, the sex ratio of Nilachal Hills was 777 females per 1000 males as against the national average of 930 females. In 1991, it was 839 as against 927 of national average. In 2001, it was 899 as against 933 of national average and in 2011 it is 892 in comparison to 940 of national average. However, the sex ratio available in the Census data may not reveal the negative aspects of population analysis. There may be various genuine reason of lower sex ratio. It may be such that most of the priests are hired from outside the state who either have their families in their home town or they may prefer to retain celibacy or another reason may be such that the workers of lower grade who are engaged in the maintenance of temples have their family staying outside the region. Due to such practical reasons, the sex ratio may be revealing an unsatisfactory trend of growth.

2.3.6 Social Stratification

Social stratification refers to visual or external difference marked along vertical or horizontal axis among the people of a society. These differences are marked in occupations, commercial relations, settlements, style, food, dress etc of the people. From the field survey, through personal interview with the local people it has been observed that the population of the region may be divided into two Varnas, namely the Brahmanas and non- Brahmanas. The Brahmanas includes the Bordeori and the Nanan
Bordeoris. The Bordeoris are believed to be the five original families of the region. These five families are the Burhas, the Dekas, the Hotas, the Brahmas and the Bidhipathaks. The Nanan Bordeori families are those who are attached to the Kamakhya temple. They are the Chandipathak, the Supakars and the Saleis.

The Non- Brahmin people of the region may be categorized on the basis of their designation in the temple complex. They are-

1. Athparia - The designation Athparia refers to an incumbent whose duty is to attend to the goddess throughout the eight prahars of the day. He is jointly responsible with the Duari for the safety and security of the deities in the temple. He may deny entry to anybody in the temple.

2. Balikata - His traditional duty is to sacrifice the animals and birds before the Goddess. At present there are six families in the region who performs this profession.

3. Duari - He stands on the entrance of the temple to keep an eye on the pilgrims. He also takes care of cleaning the calanta section of the temple and pours oil into five permanently burning lamps at different places within the temple complex. He also rings the bell during puja.

4. Bharalkaith - He keeps accounts of the income and expenditure of the temple. At present there are four families of this profession.

5. Bharali - He maintains the store of the temple. He is responsible for the safe keeping of the ornaments and utensils of the Devalaya.

6. Sonari - He is supposed to make new ornaments and repairs old ornaments of the goddess. He washes the ornaments and utensils on the day of reopening of temple after Ambubachi. At present there is one family of this profession in the region.

7. Tamuli - This person is traditionally associated with the arrangement of different articles of the Naivadya thal (used in the worship of the Goddess). There are two families of this profession in the region as per information provided by the local people.

8. Khataniar - He assists in the preparation of bhoga in the temple's kitchen. After the bhoga is served to the deities he washes the utensils and deposits them to the Bharali. There are four families of this profession in the region.
9. Kharikata - He provides firewood to the temple's kitchen.

10. Gayan and Bayan - Their traditional duty is to sing songs and hymns and play musical instruments in front of the deity. At present there are five families of this profession in the region. During Ambubachi, the gayans and bayans are responsible in carrying out the musical activities throughout the period.

11. Bhoga Paneri - He is supposed to bring water for preparation of bhoga for the goddess from the stream inside the Kameswar temple.

12. Snan Paneri - He fetches water from the Soubhagya Kunda to bathe the goddess.

13. Guwala - This person or family is responsible to provide milk and milk products to the temple's kitchen.

14. Caulkara - The duty of this profession is to clean the rice and lintels used in the Bhoga of the goddess. There are two families of this profession in the region now.

15. Chandratap Cilaikara - This profession stitches the Candratap (the cloth used over Devi's pithsthan) during various pujas.

16. Dhulia - It refers to a professionals who beat drums or dhols during the daily worship and annual festivals of the goddess.

17. Jagamukti - The traditional duty of this profession is to clean the Pancaratna and Natamandir sections of the temple and the Balighara. There are two families of this profession in the region.

References:


