CHAPTER V

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The discussion in the foregoing chapters reveals that the cult of Mother Goddess, both in Assam and Bengal, is a historical phenomenon that underwent transformation *vis-a-vis* changes in the economy and society, as also the politics of the time. Besides dissecting the practice of the cult in the regions, the study also unearthed the roots of the concept and identified similarities as well as differences related to the cult up to the beginning of the fourteenth century. This chapter summarizes the major findings of the present research.

The study began with an introductory discussion on the concept of the Mother Goddess cult, which evolved through various phases of history. This discussion addressed the historical process that worked behind the origin and development of the cult of Mother Goddess in Assam and Bengal within the socio-economic and political framework. With this objective one of the central premises developed was that Mother Goddess had not been a static phenomenon; rather her position had been changing according to the need of the society and polity.

Chapter II, entitled Puranic Reconstruction of Mother Goddess, explored how the Puranas played a vital role in the process of transforming a more or less independent tribal goddess into a Brahmanical deity often depicted as a spouse of a major god. Further efforts were made to trace the status of Mother Goddess in Assam and Bengal of the early period in the light of literature and inscriptions. Puranic religious beliefs spread under the
Gupta hegemony. It was around fifth century A.D. that Bengal was annexed to the Gupta Empire. It is evident from epigraphic source like Allahabad Pillar Inscription that Kamarupa was also under the influence of the Guptas and became included in the cultural life of Northern India. Most of the Mahapuranas were composed during the Gupta rule and were richly equipped with the references of Mother Goddess. According to Kunal Chakravarty¹, before Puranic Brahmanism reached eastern India, Tantra had established a firm footing in Bengal and Assam. The Goddess occupies a dominant position in Tantra. The authors of the Puranas, which were written in eastern India, chose to inculcate the goddess probably because of her enveloping presence amongst the local people. Consequently a regional goddess cult emerged. The Puranas are mainly responsible for the consecration of the independent and powerful female entity to the larger Hindu Pantheon and unfolding her diverse aspects supported by various myths and legends that legitimized patriarchy.

Compared to other parts of India, the process of aryanization was late in Assam and Bengal mainly due to their geographical location. The process of aryanization entailed that tribal goddess lost her independence and hold secondary position in the patriarchal structure of Brahmanism. With examples from Assam and Bengal it was discussed how a local deity was 'raised' to the rank of one of the approved Brahmanical goddess. Local tribal goddess like Mangalacandi of Bengal and Kamakhya of Assam were later depicted as manifestation of Puranic goddesses like Durga, Kali etc. Durga has been first recognised in Mahabharata as an independent powerful goddess and Markandeya Purana glorified her myth. Banikanta Kakati holds the view that once her existence was recognised and worship formulated, all local and independent deities began to be identified with her in her local manifestations². It is interesting to note that the process of such transformation were almost similar though the characteristics of the

goddess of Assam and Bengal were different. In the process, most of the independent local goddesses were represented as the consort of male gods and thereby indicating a subordinate position.

A distinctive regional character of the goddess in the Puranas could be discerned in terms of form and name. As such, Kamakhya of Kamarupa and Mangalacandi of Bengal were manifestation of the Brahmanical supreme goddess, which clearly reflected the socio-political environment of the regions concerned.

Puranic literature is richly endowed with references of Sakti worship. As if to prove this point, Devimahatmya section of Markandeya Purana tells us of various mythological exploits of the goddess and thus covers almost all facets of Sakti. Such tradition discussed in the Devimahatmya and other Puranas and Upa-Puranas can be traced in the religious history of ancient Assam and Bengal in the form of Siva and Visnu’s consort, warrior goddess, earth goddess, bloodthirsty goddess etc.

The epigraphic records suggest that Puranic beliefs began to spread in Bengal and Assam since fourth and fifth century A.D. respectively which is proved by Susuniya Rock Inscription (Bengal) and Umachal Rock Inscription (Assam). Although the earlier epigraphic records of both the regions hardly make mention of the female divinities, a number of epigraphic records from the seventh century to the thirteenth century A.D. supply information that Sakti cult in different forms and various names gained popularity in both the regions. Inscriptions prove that both Vaisnavite and Saivite goddesses were popular in ancient Assam and Bengal. However, Saivite goddesses earned more popularity in Assam. So far as war-goddess is concerned, Upa-Puranas written in Bengal gave much stress on the war-goddess. In Kalika Purana, the chief goddess Kamakhya was portrayed as a fertility goddess, who is represented in her yoni symbol.
Some land grants contain valuable information regarding the village or local deities of these regions. For example, the Khalimpur Copper Plate Inscription of Dharmapala refers to a temple of goddess Kadambari on the northern border of a village of Pundravardhana bhukti. The Parbatiya Plate of Vanamalavarman of Assam refers to goddess Candika residing near a tank on the southeastern boundary of the village Haqposa on the northern bank of Brahmaputra. Generally, a Gramadevata (village deity) was a goddess (and not a god) and was worshipped as a village presiding deity. It is probable that they were independent village deities bearing a local appellation and worshipped generally by the non-Aryan people. That the goddesses earned wide popularity is suggested by the fact that her shrine or her tank is used as reference for a boundary of a village.

Besides Brahmanical Goddess, Bengal epigraphs mention several Buddhist goddesses. However, this is absent in case of Assam. The epigraphic records of Bengal region seem to suggest that Brahmanical goddess Candi or Candika and Buddhist Prajnaparamita were simultaneously worshipped in the territory. This may be because of the fact that Buddhism got the royal patronage in Bengal; whereas most of the rulers in Assam were Saivites. Tantric goddesses like Carcika, Pingalarya etc are mentioned in the Bengal epigraph; in contrast epigraphs of Assam mention only Brahmanical Puranic goddess. **Syncretism was found in concept of Ardhanarishwara, Ardhayuvatiswara etc. in epigraphs of both the regions.** Khanamukh Copper Plate Inscription of Dharmapalavarman(1030-65 A.D.) of Kamarupa and Naihati Copper plate inscription of Vallalasena(1170 A.D.) of Bengal mention Ardhanarishwara. This is suggestive of an ideological compromise as well as synthesis in art among different rival sects.

Chapter III, entitled The Tantric Goddess, investigates the Tantric elements associated with the Goddess that can be traced even in the epics
and the Puranas. A comparative study of Tantricism and Tantric goddesses in Assam and Bengal showed that the concept of Tantricism in Ancient Assam was neither exclusive to nor different from that of Bengal, but the development of the practice of Trantricism in both the regions have little variations. Though it is common knowledge that both Assam and Bengal were strong centres of Tantricism, it has not been possible to trace the place of origin of Tantricism or form its timeline. It has generally been accepted that Tantricism originated in the eastern part of India, which includes Assam and Bengal\(^3\). Bengal became a very important centre of Buddhist Tantricism under the royal patronage of Palas and Chandras. Though the name Kamarupa is associated with the introduction of Tara cult, this cult became much more popular in Bengal later. It is interesting that before the composition of the Tantras in both the regions, Tantric practices were in vogue in connection with the worship of goddess.

The study in Chapter IV titled Mother Goddess in Iconography makes an analysis of mother goddess as represented in sculptures of ancient Assam and Bengal and corroborated with the representation of the goddesses found in the Puranic and Tantric texts to a great extent. By the twelfth century A.D., the Mother Goddess cult received a universal recognition in all religious sects of the two states. However, it is conspicuous that no Jain image of the goddess is found in Assam so far, probably because Jainism did not find roots in Assam. R.C. Majumdar holds the view that classical art style shows a fundamental unity running throughout India till the seventh century A.D. Regional tendencies both in political and cultural life grew and found expression in eighth century A.D\(^4\). In Bengal, under the Pala rule new local idioms of expression evolved, developing its own characteristic which is generally known as Eastern Indian School of Medieval Sculpture. The Pala ruler occasionally exercised suzerainty over Assam and Pala School of Bengal also influenced art of Assam.

\(^3\) Kalika Purana, 51/64
Vishnu Purana, LXII
In popular Indian perception of divinity, the dominant image is of a male god accompanied by his consort who is his Sakti. However, **war-goddess Mahishamardini is portrayed independently and her iconography is very popular in both Assam and Bengal.** Sarvani image of Deulbari proves that war goddess was popular in Bengal from the seventh century A.D. Most of the Mahishamardini image of Assam belonged to ninth to eleventh century A.D. In both the regions ten-handed Mahishamardini, known as Katyayani, is popular. Sakta Upa-Puranas written in Bengal also gave prominence to the war-goddess. The wide distribution of the Mahisamardini images makes it obvious that the war goddess, in various guises, attained popularity since an early period. This popularity is probably the reason why in medieval Bengal she was recognised as the national deity. Images of Mahisamardini Durga far outnumber those of the other orders in Assam and this may be attributed to the great influence of Pala art style of Bengal.

**Goddesses represented as consort of Siva and Visnu were also popular themes of art in both the regions.** Devi in her placid and terrific form is represented in the art of Assam as well as Bengal. Generally there is a tendency to depict the ‘consort’ goddess in placid form and the ‘independent’ goddess in a dreadful form. A group of goddesses, called Matrikas, were popular in both the regions. Though they were called Matrikas they were seldom depicted with children. Actually they were brought into existence to wage war. They were terrific in nature. Laksmi and Saraswati were represented independently as well as consort of Visnu in the art of both the regions. Worship of the snake goddess Manasa was prevalent from very early period in Assam and Bengal which is proved by a wide distribution of their images. **Goddess Sasthi earned popularity in Bengal but not in Assam.** Icons of Kalyana Sundar and Laksmi Narayana were popular in Bengal as those concepts were taken from south India by
the Sena rulers who were originally from Karnataka. However, those were not popular in Assam.

One distinctive feature of the iconography of Bengal is the existence of numerous Buddhist goddesses, which have been found in lesser number in Assam. Tara, chief goddess of the Mahayana Buddhism, earned immense popularity under the patronage of the Pala rulers of Bengal. The representation of different forms of Tara and other Buddhist goddesses prove the fact. In spite of the fact that the rulers in ancient Assam were mostly Saiva, they showed catholicity towards Buddhism. Different forms of Tara and goddess like Cunda were depicted in the art of Assam. Though Buddhist goddess played an important role in the religious history of both the region, it seems that Bengal was much fertile land for the proliferation of Buddhist goddesses.

Jainism was popular in Bengal in early time but lost its foothold after the seventh century A.D. During the visit of Hiuen Tsang there were a good number of Nigranthas in Pundravardhanas. In some districts of West Bengal Jain images of the goddess were found. Image of goddess Ambika is found from Barkola, Purulia. Images of Yaksini and Mahavidya were also reported from Bengal. However, it is conspicuous by its absence in Assam.

An analysis of the iconographic types of Brahmanical Buddhist and Jain goddesses indicates a trend towards mutual exchange, assimilation and synthesis. It is probable that the basic idea behind the creation of the form of Buddhist Tara and Jain Ambika is the same as that of the Hindu goddess Durga. Tara is the supreme deity of female divinities of Mahayana form of Buddhism. There are several goddesses that are manifestations of Durga and Tara in Hinduism and Buddhism respectively. Both of them played the role of consort. Among the Jain goddesses, Ambika the female consort of Neminatha, holds the prime position. Ambika
may also be considered as the Jain counterpart of Puranic Durga. The Jain goddesses hardly introduced an iconographic standard that might be distinguished from the Brahmanical and Buddhist norms. However, it is clear that there was a constant process of give and take between the Brahmanical and Buddhist art and *iconography*. Thus, one of the central hypotheses of the present study that Hindu, Buddhist and Jain goddess are one and same is proved.

One of the major finding of this research is that Cult of Mother Goddess is not a static phenomenon. Mother goddess evolved through the various phases of history. In ancient Assam and Bengal, what began as a socio-religious construct, rooted in an agricultural economy, the mother goddess cult subsequently enfolded political elements and evolved into a religio-socio-economic and politico construct with royal patronage in early mediaeval and mediaeval period. It is more evident in case of Assam which became a ‘cult region’ centring round the goddess Kamakhya.

Another significant finding is that the Puranas played an important part in transforming independent local tribal goddesses of Assam and Bengal into Brahmanical deities. In the process of aryanization the tribal goddess, lost her independent status to become stereotyped in the patriarchal structure of Brahmanism. Though the nature of the goddess of Assam and Bengal are different, yet the process of transformation was almost similar. Most of the independent local goddesses were represented as the consort of male gods and thereby indicating a subordinate position.

Epigraphic records prove that Puranic goddesses made their advent in Assam and Bengal by the seventh century A.D., if not earlier. Both literary and epigraphic records prove that both Vaisnavite and Saivite goddesses were popular in ancient Assam and Bengal. However in Assam, Saivite goddesses earned more popularity.
The images of goddess Laksmi depicted on early terracotta seals belonging to third to fifth century A.D. in Bengal prove that the goddess of corn and good fortune enjoyed far more popularity in early period than the war-goddess. It was after fifth century A.D. that she settled down as the benign consort of Visnu. In the art of Assam also Laksmi is represented as the consort of Visnu. This change in depiction could be closely associated with social changes such as the subordination of women emerging under the Gupta rule. This loss of her independent status and portrayal as a consort is itself an emerging and identifiable social-construct of Mother Goddess.

With the development of Eastern Indian Medieval Sculpture under the Palas, Laksmi lost her importance in art. War-goddess gained popularity from seventh century A.D., coinciding with political turmoil, which is evident from the Deulbari Sarvani image. War goddess became popular in Assam from ninth century.

Another significant major finding is that the Upa-Puranas written in Bengal gave prominence to the war-goddess. Though Mahisamardini aspect of the goddess is mentioned in the Kalika Purana, Kamakhya is not portrayed as a war goddess in Assam. This can be attributed to the prevalence of lesser political struggles in Assam than in Bengal, whose history abounds in conflicts and struggles. However, this explanation falls short with the elaborate depiction of the war-goddess in art in Assam, which could be explained as the influence of Bengal art, rather than by the political milieu of the time.

So far as the form of the goddess is concerned, Bengal has more variations of the goddess than Assam. Apart from the Brahmanical goddess Bengal epigraphs also mention Buddhist goddess, which was absent in case of the epigraphs of Assam. However, Buddhism got the royal patronage in Bengal and not in Assam where most of the rulers were
Saivites. However, the rulers of Assam showed catholicity towards Buddhism. Although Kamarupa is associated with the introduction of the Tantric goddess, the so-called Tara cult, it is in Bengal that the cult assumed much more popularity in a later period under the royal patronage of Palas and Chandras.

Art of Assam was greatly influenced by the Pala art of Bengal. Though local art school like Deopani School emerged in ancient Assam but it was short-lived because of the dominant influence of Eastern Indian School of Medieval Art. However, local traits can be traced in the various art forms.

A tendency is to be marked in cases of some icons which illustrate genuine attempt towards a synthesis between principal rival sects. A very interesting sculpture of this type can be seen in the Indian Museum, Kolkata. Images of Visnu, Durga, Surya and Ganapati carved on the four sides of the square Sivalinga which symbolizes the syncretistic attitude of five major cults namely: Vaisnava, Sakta, Saura, Ganapatya and Saiva. This attempt at synthesis is evident even in the case of Assam but with difference that while a synthesis of five major cults is seen in Bengal, in Assam the synthesis is on a minor scale, as that between Vaisnava and Saiva, between Sakti and Visnu and between Sakti and Siva.

Historically, Assam, Bengal and Orissa had close links with each other from very early period, which is strongly reflected in their political history, art and religious traditions. Mother Goddess played a dominant role in the religious history of Orissa too and its inclusion in an extended study of Mother Goddess in Eastern India in future would make the analysis more comprehensive.