CHAPTER I

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The Mother Goddess Cult is a deep-rooted religious and historical phenomenon that evolved through the ages transgressing all geographical boundaries of the world. Various religious practices pivot around ritualistic worship of deities, prominent among all being Mother Goddess apparently for her representation of the unexplainable natural and universal phenomenon of fertility and reproduction. Historical evidence suggests that Mother Goddess worship was prevalent in different forms in the Indian Peninsula. It is no surprise that literary evidence corroborated by archaeological findings suggest that Mother Goddess was also widely worshipped in Bengal and Assam in the early period of history. The present research attempts to make a comparative study of this cult in the two geographically adjacent areas by the historical comparative method.

Procreation, be it human or agriculture, has always been the essence of survival, and in the absence of a plausible scientific understanding had carried a mystic aura of being a phenomenon controlled by the higher beings that often took the form of god or goddess in the human psyche. The worship of Mother Goddess, universally portrayed as Mother Earth and a fertility deity, flows from the submission to the unknown and unexplained phenomenon of reproduction throughout human civilization around the globe, and India has been no exception. Evidence of the worship of Mother Goddess can be found since infancy of human civilization and can be used as a marker in the socio-economic development and changes of the human race.
It is not an easy task to trace exactly at which stage of human history the cult of Mother Goddess originated. Lewis Henry Morgan in his work *Ancient Society* states that "savagery preceded barbarism in all the tribes of mankind, as barbarism is known to have preceded civilization. The history of human race is one in source, one in experience and one in progress"¹. Archaeology and anthropological study support the view that in the earliest period of his life, man lived as a food gatherer, a stage identified by Sikha Sarkar² as *savagery*. Tools of Paleolithic people indicate the stage of hunting. Stage of food production at the subsistence level, a stage of *barbarism*, synchronizes with the Neolithic age, and so also the stage of surplus food production with the Chalcolithic age.

It may be reasonably assumed that at the stage of subsistence-level production, when man's technology of agriculture was primitive, the spirit of fertility, or rather Mother Goddess, was first invoked. The study of the pre and proto-history of eastern India would reveal that the people witnessed the stages of general evolution of mankind. It was, therefore, natural for them to develop the cult of Mother Goddess at the stage when agriculture emerged as the main food gathering method. The study has shown how the natural and mystical powers of Mother Goddess formed the basis of their belief-system which slowly coalesced into a religious cult. Its subsequent association with fertility became intrinsically connected to the beginning of agriculture, thereby slowly evolving into a complex religio-socio-economic-politico construct when the political landscape of the areas underwent dramatic change during thirteenth century A.D.*

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* Although some academics in the fields of theology, education and history have adopted the CE (Common /Current/Christian Era) and BCE (Before Common Era) notation in research articles and theses, the traditional notation of B.C. (Before Christ) A.D.(Anno Domini) will be used for the present work.
In fact, anything related to religion cannot be studied in a vacuum without reference to society, people, their beliefs and practices. The connection between religion and power, the link between ruler and the priest, the intricacies of the effect of religion on political process and thereby on economics, culture and civilization, create a complex whole. Thus a study of the Mother Goddess Cult would be incomplete without an understanding of such linkages.

James George Frazer in his work *Golden Bough* defines religion as conciliation of powers superior to man, which are believed to direct or control the course of nature and of human life\(^3\). It is a belief in powers higher than man and an attempt to propitiate or please them and is an integral part of society. Religion is primarily concerned with people and society and thus, plays an all-embracing role in human life and thought. Religion reflects values, norms and cultural picture of a society. According to Ninian Smart, "to understand human history and human life it is necessary to understand religion"\(^4\). One cannot have a comprehensive study of religion without considering its historical and social context because the relation between society and religion is fundamental to the nature of religion.

W. H. Capps holds the view that "... societies are characterized by the values they embody, the individual and collective motivation they encouraged, the inceptives they inspire and sanction, and the ideals by which beliefs, attitude and behaviour are established and secured. Accordingly, religion can hardly be identified or defined except in terms of human social relations"\(^5\). Thus, religion evolves from a society, either by confirming or as reactions to the prevailing social norms.

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Religion and political power demonstrate intricate relationship throughout history. Focusing our attention to the relationship between the ruler and the ruled with religion as the backdrop, we find that among the earliest civilizations that exhibit the phenomenon of divine kings are early Mesopotamia and ancient Egypt. History is agog with numerous instances to show how royal dynasties were accorded a divine status. There are also instances by which individual kings were attributed divine qualities. The titles that the rulers adopted or were conferred upon had in many cases the purpose of suggesting the qualities of the gods. Divinity is one of the means to seek legitimization for the ruler by making use of certain symbols of a religious system that had already gained acceptance.

Ancient kings were commonly priests also. The union of royal title with priestly duties is common in ancient Italy and Greece. In Rome there was a priest called the Sacrificial King or the King of the Sacred Rites and his wife bore the title of Queen of the Sacred Rites. The Emperor of China offered public sacrifices, the details of which were regulated by the ritual books. The king of Madagascar was a high priest of the realm. Kings were revered and treated like god. Kings are often expected to give rain and sunshine in due season, to make the crops grow, and so on. Thus, it can hardly be debated now that religion is a major player in the politics of every society and therefore religion in general is also often moulded as a political construct.

In the religious history of the world, Mother Goddess played an important role. It is difficult to state and prove as to where the worship of the Mother Goddess originated and flourished first, but it is noticed that the cult was not only prevalent but gained conspicuous popularity in all the ancient

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7 Frazer, op.cit., p. 9.
civilizations of the world. Speaking on the origin of mother worship and the migration of the practice to Asia, Edwin Oliver James stated:

An adequate supply of offspring and food being a necessary condition of human existence, the promotion and conservation of life have been a fundamental urge from Paleolithic times to the present day which has found magico-religious expression in a very deeply laid and highly developed cultus. Exactly when and where it arose is still very obscure, but it was from western Asia, the South Russian Plain and the Valley of Don the female figurines, commonly called Venuses, in bone, ivory, stone and bas-relief, often with the natural organ grossly exaggerated, were introduced into Eastern and Central Europe at the beginning of the Upper Paleolithic by an Asiatic migration in what is now known as Gravettian culture. ...With the transition from food gathering to food production the female principle continued to predominate the cultus that had grown up around the mysterious process of birth and generation.

However, James pointed out with reference to regions like Western Asia, Crete and Aegean that though woman is the preserver of the human race, essentially being the life producer and respected as such, phallic emblems became increasingly prominent from Neolithic time onwards.

The remarkable feature of the whole group of Paleolithic Venus figures is the extreme stylization that suggests the underlying motive: veneration of the birth-giving power of femaleness. These are probably the earliest representations in sculpture of the human ideas that were prevalent in the society of hunters and food-gatherers. Paleolithic excavations have yielded no male human figures. In cave paintings of the same period, the stylized Venus motif dominates the composition. Male figures are quite common, but they are realistically painted, usually at the back or the periphery of the composition which is a pointer to the centrality of the female principle in votive and ritual activity. The images of so-called Venus showing pregnancy, nudity, fondling of children and other feminine aspects are of universal occurrence. They certainly indicate that the divinity was

10 Ibid.
considered to be the form of a mother, creating and nourishing the world. The whole ancient world is conversant with this idea of a protecting feminine deity. In India also the earliest evidences from Chalcolithic cultures indicate the presence of the Mother Goddess and they continue down to this day throughout the different phases of history.

In the religious history of India, where religion and culture have been inseparable, the cult of Shakti had been at the forefront of mother worship. Before Puranic Brahmanism reached eastern India, it was already under the pervasive influence of Tantra, where goddesses occupied the most important role. Tantra had firm footing in Bengal and Assam. Wilson in his translation of Visnu Purana writes, “Assam or at least the north-east of Bengal, seems to have been in a great degree the source from which the Tantric and Sakta corruption of the Vedas and Puranas proceeded”.

Literature and archaeology provide evidence that Assam and Bengal were strongholds of mother cult, which largely shaped the culture of both the areas. Literary sources like Kalika Purana and Yogini Tantra point to the antiquity of Devi worship in Kamarupa or ancient Assam. Devi Purana (a work, composed in the seventh or the beginning of the eight century A.D.) states that Devi was worshipped in her different forms in Kamarupa and Radha, Varendra (Janapadas of ancient Bengal), etc. Kalika Purana states that Naraka founded a kingdom in early Assam and that he established himself as a custodian of the yoni goddess Kamakhya. Banikanta Kakati in his work Mother Goddess Kamakhya states that Naraka

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12 Visnu Purana, p. LXII.
13 'devikshetram Kamarupam vidyateanyana tatsamam anyatra birala devi kamarupe grihe grihe' (Kalika Purana, 58/41)

'Kamarupam devikshetram kutrapa tat samam na cha
Anyatra birala devi Kamarupe grihe grihe' (Yogini Tantra 2/1/5),
Meaning of both the stotras are same that Kamrupa is the best place for the worship of Sakti and there is no land equal to it. The goddess is rare elsewhere (in other parts of the country) but in Kamarupa she is present in every household.

14 Devi Purana, 39/14.
may be the introducer of the Sakta cult in Assam and that he established himself in power somewhere between second to fifth century A.D.\textsuperscript{16}

The earliest inscribed Devi image of Bengal, belonging to seventh century A.D., found from Samatata region (Deulbari, Tippera), proves that by that time the concept of Devi was popular in Bengal. Though both Assam and Bengal are part of the greater Indian traditional heritage, they possess distinctive socio-religious features. However, in both the regions Mother Goddess cult began as a magico-religious construct, became rooted in an agricultural economy, and subsequently enfolded political elements and evolved into a religio-socio-economic and political construct, with royal patronage at a later period.

Between eighth to thirteenth century A.D. a large number of \textit{Upa-Puranas} were written in Bengal focusing on the goddess cult. The \textit{Kalika Purana}, one of the \textit{Sakta Upa-Puranas} written in ancient Assam, bestowed prime focus on goddess Kamakhya. In both of these regions, the \textit{Puranas} adopted the goddess probably because of her extensive presence among the local people and thus constructed a regional cult that later became one of the major symbols of the cultural traditions of Assam and Bengal.

The worship of Mother Goddess, a prominent feature of agrarian settlement had its origin in female-dominated societies. Rama Prasad Chanda holds the view that it is generally in a matriarchal society that the \textit{Sakta} concept of \textit{Devi} as \textit{Adya Sakti} (primordial energy) and \textit{Jagadamba} (mother of the universe) arising was prevalent\textsuperscript{17}. Deviprasad Chattopadhyaya\textsuperscript{18} has treated this issue strictly from an economic point of view. He holds that initial stage of agricultural economy created the matriarchal conditions for

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{18} Chattopadhyaya, D., (ed.) \textit{Lokayata}, Indian Council of Philosophical Research, New Delhi, p132.
the social supremacy of the female. Thus, the principle of social superiority of the women seems to have developed particularly among agricultural tribes dependent on the economic role of women as the first agriculturists. The argument is reinforced by the observation that the social supremacy of women is not found among those living by herding large animals or by hunting\(^\text{19}\). This clearly shows that the cult was a socio-economic construct. We have hardly any evidence to show that there was a period when the people of ancient Bengal or Assam adopted domestication of animals as their primary occupation for living. Rather, fertile soil of Bengal and Assam seems to have been considered more suitable for agricultural production than for large-scale domestication of animals.

According to Marshall, like the Mother Goddess of Western Asia, the pre-Aryan cult of Indian Mother Goddess originated in a matriarchal state of society\(^\text{20}\). Chanda holds the view that Saktism arose in India under the same social conditions as those under which Astarte or Ashtarte was conceived in Syria, Cyble in Asia Minor and Isis in Egypt - that is, in a society where mother right or mother kin was prevalent. His hypothesis is further supported by the researches of Ehrenfels, who prepared a long list of the matriarchal tribes and castes of India\(^\text{21}\). According to the map prepared by Ehrenfels, the chief matriarchal zones were Assam, probably referring to what is now Meghalaya, parts of Andhra Pradesh, Madras, Mysore and Kerala. The Austro-Asiatic speaking Khasis of North East India comprising its different branches (Synteng, Lynngam and others) and the Tibeto-Burman speaking Garos comprising twelve branches are the most worth-mentioning representatives of Indian society having recognition of Mother Right. It is natural that in the religion of these social groups special importance is attached to the cult of Mother Goddess. Among the Khasis, gods are predominated by goddesses and

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priests by priestess. The religion of the Garos also shows markedly matriarchal traces and like the Khasis Mother Goddess is conceived as their tribal ancestress. However, it may be pointed out here that what Ehrenfels identified as 'matriarchal' societies of the Khasis, Jayantias, Garos and also the nairs of Kerela, were in actual, 'matrilineal', as proved by recent research.

Narendra Nath Bhattacharyya noted that the state of the society and religion of the Khasis presents some interesting parallels to the social and religious condition of Western Asia and Egypt in early days. Another remnant of Mother-Right is found among the Dimasa tribes of North Cachar District of Assam. This tribe upholds Hindu religion, and male and female members of this tribe have their distinct gotras (line of descent) in their society. Despite their belonging to the male-dominated Hindu society, the girl child usually inherits the lineage of her mother and male child follows his father's clan. The Dimasas are very strict in maintaining this customary rule. This custom may be considered a partial presentation of the relic of matrilineal society.

'Sister-marriage' is one of the features of matriarchal society. The survival of the custom of marrying the daughter of maternal uncle in some part of South India reflects a matriarchal social orientation. This custom has also been referred to the Ceylonese Mahavamsa. According to this text, Sihavahu, king of Vanga and Radha, married his sister Sihasivali. The Buddhist stories of sister-marriage indicate the existence of Mother Kin in Eastern India.

It is interesting to note that, in the Tantras, women are given the right of initiating persons as preceptor in the matter of religious and spiritual

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22 Bhattacharya, N.N., Saktism and Mother Right in Sircar, D.C.(ed.), The Sakti Cult and Tara, University of Calcutta, p. 65.
24 Bhattacharya, N.N., Saktism and Mother Right, op.cit, p. 67.
activities. In the field of religion, this high position of women is mainly due to their traditional association with agricultural magic of religion. All this can be explained in terms of the Mother-Right. William Halse Rivers defined Mother-Right as a highly complex condition in which a good number of social processes were involved, e.g., descent, kinship, inheritance, succession, authority, etc. He states that different parts of the world had Mother-Right in pure form as the basis of their social organization\textsuperscript{25}.

Following his theory, these symptoms of matriarchy can hardly be traced in any society in the history of Bengal. But Damodar Dharmananda Kosambi thinks that the first stage of Indian civilization is to be marked as ‘Classless Matriarchal Society’ which is characterised by the emergence of primitive matriarchal cults and fertility rites\textsuperscript{26}. He states that food-gathering tribal society and food producing tribal society belonged to the first stage. This leads us to believe that there might have been female domination in Bengal in early times because the food gathering followed by food producing tribal society had its existence in pre-historic Bengal. Thus, \textbf{the probability of female domination in Bengal cannot be ruled out.}

Mother Goddess occupies an important place in the religious history of early Assam, Kamakhya being referred as the reigning deity by \textit{Kalika Purana}. Kamarupa or ancient Assam was better known as a land of magic with its association with the famous Tantric shrine of Kamakhya (Kamrup-Kamakhya)\textsuperscript{27}. According to Banikanta Kakati, it was under the banner of Mother Goddess Kamakhya that the first empire of early Assam was built\textsuperscript{28}. Both literature and archaeology testify to the prevalence of the Sakti cult in Assam from early times. \textit{Devi Purana}, composed during the end of the seventh or beginning of the eighth century A.D. states that the Devi was worshipped in different forms in Ancient Assam and Bengal. On the other

\textsuperscript{25} \textit{Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics}, 1951, vol III, p. 851ff
\textsuperscript{27} Kakati, op.cit., p. 1.
\textsuperscript{28} Ibid, 25.
hand, Eliot regards Saktism, as a definite sect with scriptures of its own, if not entirely confined to the north east corner, had at least its head quarters there\textsuperscript{29}. Most of the scholars consider the Sakta cult to have its centre in Kamarupa with its chief temple at Kamakhya.

\textit{Kalika Purana} narrates a story that the genital organ of Sati fell at Nilachala hillock when her dead body was carried by her husband Siva. It also states that Naraka had driven the aboriginal Kirata inhabitants from Kamarupa and settled Aryan immigrants in their place, and mentions that goddess Kamakhya existed in Kamarupa even during the time of Kiratas. \textit{Yogini Tantra} states that the religion of Yogini Pitha (Kamakhya) is of Kirata origin (\textit{siddhesi yogini pithe Dharmah Kairatajahmatah})\textsuperscript{30}. Banikanta Kakati, however, opines that Kamakhya seems to be a relatively new name of the Goddess as she does not appear in the early literature. It is also intriguing that Hiuen Tsang, who chronicled his travel in Assam (Kamrupa) during seventh century, did not mention the name of Kamakhya. According to scholar like Kakati the word Kamakhya is non-Sanskrit in origin. He has equated the word with some similar Austric formation which means ‘ghost or dead body’ and suggested that Kamakhya was formerly a ‘goddess of ghost and spirit’ worshipped in a \textit{smasana} or cremation ground\textsuperscript{31}.

Analyzing the origin and development of worshipping Mother Goddess Kamakhya, Kakati held the opinion that \textbf{Goddess Kamakhya was possibly a fusion of the Aryan and non-Aryan beliefs}. It is quite probable that the reigning deity of original Kiratas was Siva and Saivism in its crude form came to be associated with wine and flesh. The aryanized conqueror held this religion in disdain and placed it under a ban\textsuperscript{32}. For easy recognition by aboriginal people they brought to prominence another local cult-the cult of Mother Goddess worshipped in \textit{yoni} symbol as opposed to

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Ibid
\item Singh, G.P. \textit{Historical Researches into some aspects of the Culture and Civilization of North East India}, Gyan Publishing House, Delhi, 2009, p.60.
\item Kakati, op.cit. p.36.
\item Ibid, p.16.
\end{enumerate}
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the cult of Siva worshipped in the phallic symbol. The Mother Goddess Kamakhya must have belonged to the matrilineal tribes of eastern India like Khasis and Garos, the former belonging to the Austro-Asiatic stock and the latter to the Mongolian stock\textsuperscript{33}. Pratap Chandra Choudhury also thinks that, “it is possible that the yoni goddess migrated to Assam with the migration of the Austrics or the matriarchal [sic] tribes like the Khasis and the Garos and that Naraka became responsible for the foundation of Devi worship in Kamarupa.”\textsuperscript{34}

With the popularity of the cult of Mother Goddess, custom like human sacrifice became common in ancient and mediaeval Assam. In Jayanteswari and Kechaikaita temples, people frequently volunteered as victims but when voluntary victims become scarce, the Jayantias adopted the practice of kidnapping strangers which in a later period brought the Jayantias in clash with the British. Eventually, the British banned human sacrifice in 1835.

Saktism in its developed form became identical with Tantricism as Tantric ideas are generally regarded as the basis of Sakta religion. However, Tantric Buddhist goddesses also shaped the religious history of ancient Assam. Tantric Buddhist goddess Tara and Ugratara are said to have been introduced from China or Tibet by Nagarjuna\textsuperscript{35}. Tamreswari temple at Sadiya was a noted centre of Devi worship. She is also known as Ugratara. We have evidence that Vajrayana school of Buddhism with its chief Goddess Tara became popular in early Assam. Buddhist text \textit{Sadhanaamala} mentions Kamarupa as a \textit{pitha} where Tara is worshipped. It appears that Tara or Ugratara having Buddhist origin later on assimilated into Tantric cult\textsuperscript{36}. Tara was regarded as one of the ten Mahavidyas of the sakta cult

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and was represented in sculptures of ancient Assam. Yogini Tantra states that Tara is the same as Kali. According to Kalika Purana, Tara and Camunda are one. It gives an idea how independent local goddess were affiliated to various manifestation of goddess Durga and Kali.

The early period of Assam was marked by the religious toleration of the ruling class. For example, Bhaskar Varman, claims his descent from a Vaisnava family but he was a devotee of Siva and patronized Buddhism as well. His successors also adopted this catholicity. The non-Aryan tribes of Assam from very early period adopted Hinduism and were followers of sectarianism that resulted in the assimilation of the Aryan and non-Aryan people and thus contributed to the building up of a composite socio-religious fabric of ancient Assam.

In Bengal, literary and archaeological evidence indicate that mother cult became popular from the seventh and eight centuries A.D. On the other hand, it has been suggested by scholars in the field that it was only from the Gupta period that Bengal came fully under the influence of the Aryan civilization. Thus, mother cult existed in Bengal before the advent of the Aryans. That Devi was worshipped in various places of ancient Bengal is proved by the images of Devi in her various aspects including Durga-Kali found from different places of Bengal. Other archaeological evidence including the icons and literary evidence bear eloquent testimony to the prevalence of Devi cult in ancient Bengal.

One of the popular aspects of Saktism in Bengal is worshipping of Gramadevata who is a guardian deity or 'protecting mother' of a particular locality. The etymology of the word – *gram* meaning village and *devata* 37 Payne, E.A., The Saktas, YMCA Publishing House, Calcutta, 1933, p. 84.
meaning god – also suggest this. These Gramadevatas have occupied special space in the psyche of the village folk presumably from a very early period, and they are commonly worshipped in many places on the outbreak of a calamity or epidemic and on the occasions of marriage, child birth and so on\(^{38}\). The Bengalis may be broadly divided into two classes - the first comprising primitive people such as Savaras, Pulindas, Chandalas, Kols, Hadis etc. and the second containing the higher class people\(^{39}\). The first class had very little to do with the deities of Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism generally worshipped by upper classes and paid their respect to the Gramadevatas. Nihar Ranjan Ray suggests that in the early period, the Gramadevatas of the pre-Aryan people were never worshipped by upper classes and nor by the Brahmanas\(^{40}\). He further adds that the Mangalakavyas and other evidence indicate that many of the deities of non-Aryan origin such as Manasa, Ban-Durga, Sitala, Sasthi, different types of Candi and Janguli were later absorbed into the Brahmanical and Buddhist pantheon.

Bengal has always been the fertile land for the origination of deities particularly of female ones as the socio-economic structure was favorable. During the Pala-Sena period innumerable local female deities emerged in Bengal as during the rule of the Palas, Bengal and Bihar became the stronghold of Mahayana Buddhism. Some minor royal dynasties, ruling in Bengal during the Pala period, were also followers of Buddhism. Reference may be made in particular to Kantideva and Chandra kings. Tibetan sources tell us that Tantric Buddhism flourished in Bengal under the Chandras and king Gopichandra is associated with the tradition of a

\(^{40}\) NR Ray, as cited in P.K. Maity, op.cit., p. 74
particular form of mysticism\footnote{Majumdar, op. cit., p. 418}. Mahayana Buddhism became an international force during this period.

One important characteristic of this period was the assimilation of the deities of different religious system. It is likely that local beliefs began to be mixed up with Mahayana Buddhism of Bengal during the Pala period and out of that mixture many local gods and goddesses arose. The Buddhist borrowed Hindu deity like Saraswati and on the other hand Hindus borrowed Buddhist deities such as Camunda, Tara etc\footnote{Maity, op. cit., p. 75}. Scholars suggest that the Buddhist goddesses Janguli, Mahacinatara and Vajrayogini were prototype of those known in the Hindu pantheon as Manasa, Tara and Cinnamasta respectively. Archaeologists have discovered remnants of numerous Buddhist Tantric goddesses from various parts of Bengal. Among the female divinities discovered, the different forms of Tara, e.g. Khadirvani Tara, Bhrukuti Tara, Vajra Tara, Marici, Purnasabari, Hariti, Chunda and Pajnaparamita deserve special mention. Taras in their various forms are more numerous than the male divinities and thus it appears that the worship of the female principle was more widespread and popular.

Ramesh Chandra Mazumder states that the royal patronage of a religion is not a bad index of its general influence and popularity\footnote{Majumdar, op. cit., p. 426}. It has already been mentioned that in Bengal the Palas, the Chandras and the Khadgas were followers of Buddhism. They patronized the Tara cult which was very popular during that period. On the other hand, early Sena rulers like Vijayaseana, Ballalasena etc. were Saivas, whereas the later Sena kings, the Varmanas and the Deva family were Vaisnavas. But in spite of the existence of different religious sects side by side there was no sectarian jealousy which is proved by references in contemporary epigraphs. Prabhavati, the queen of Buddhist ruler Devakhadga, set up a Brahmanical
image of Candi, which was a very popular goddess in ancient Bengal. Thus the catholic attitude can be seen among the rulers in ancient Bengal.

History tells us that all over the world, religious activities draw people to temples making them places of popular gathering and consequently a centre for generation of public opinion capable of influencing the public sphere. **The importance of temple as a seat to mobilize people's support** was realized by the rulers early on and was often used as a means of strengthening the royal authorities about priest King. The relationship between power and religion or the priest king has already been mentioned. The influence of a temple or its presiding deity was limited within a geographical area and any attempt to impose a faith or a deity from outside, for reasons ranging from political to cultural, often met with resistance. Scholars believe that in Assam too, local deities - mostly non-Aryan - were often either assimilated or made identifiable with their counterparts of Vedic and Puranic literatures to win over the people⁴⁴.

None of the pre-Ahom period (before thirteenth century A.D.) temples in Assam now exist. Information on the history of these temples and their administration can be collated from the discovered copper plate charters and inscription of the Kamarupa kings. Some of these contain description of a number of temples to which endowments were made. As some of the inscriptions were found to make clear references to the worship of Siva and Sakti by the kings of Kamarupa (at least since seventh century); it appears that Saiva and Sakta and even a few Vaisnavite rites were performed with great pomp and ceremony.

Medieval Hindu kings maintained a close relation with the temples by extending royal patronage to them within their respective territories and by following a systematic policy of settlement of Brahmanas as well as of other

people from different professional castes in the vicinity of the temples45. This was done with a view to securing the support and loyalty to the tribal or partly Hindu surroundings. It has also been noticed that the Hinduized chief like Visvasingha of the Koch dynasty or Hindu kings like the Varmana or Pala kings accepted the dominant deities in their respective territories as family and guardian deities as it had been found to be an essential precondition for the consolidation of political power as well as their legitimization in the respective areas46.

The kings had followed the *Dana Dharma* (law of gift) which was an important characteristic of Kingship47. The kings of Kamarupa, according to the inscriptions, made extensive gifts to temples and Brahmans for securing the spiritual merit (*punya*) arising from the act of *dana*, It was clear that though *dana* was involuntary in theory; it was obligatory in practice48. It is recorded in a copper plate grant that almost all the kings of Varmana dynasty, up to the seventh century A.D., performed number of sacrifices and made extensive *dana* to Brahmans which was the basic element of the definition of the kingship. However, it appears that there occurred a change in the concept during the rule of the Pala kings (ninth to twelfth century A.D.) when giving of gifts become one of the elements constituting the sovereignty. This shift coincides with the beginning of temple-building activities associated with Puranic deities such as Kameswara and Mahagauri (very identical with Kamakhya). The temple of Mahagauri and Kameswara received large endowments of land and men. It appears that such endowments were enjoyed by the temples for centuries till they were abandoned due to political as well as natural causes in the earlier part of the thirteenth century A.D. We may also note that Hindu sacred treaties

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46 Ibid.
47 Nath, Vijay, *Dana: Gift System in Ancient India*, Munshiram Manoharlal Pulications, Delhi, pp. 25-51
recorded that the commands of a king who makes gifts of earth can never be disobeyed.

Politically the cult of Kamakhya became significant under the Koch and Ahom kings. The Koch king Naranarayana and his brother Cilarai reorganized the endowments of Kamakhya temple. They undertook to rebuild the Kamakhya temple and after inaugurating the temple offered three lakhs of different sacrifices including those of mahisa (buffalo), chagala (goat), hamsa (duck), matsya (fish), paravat (pigeon), harina (deer) and kacchapa(tortoise) before opening it for the public. They also donated lavishly to meet the expenses of priesthood, daily worship and occasional festivals. Cult of Kamakhya, thus, once again became important in the religious history of medieval Assam. In later period, Ahom kings followed the old custom and Gaurinath Singha is said to have offered sacrifices numbering three lakhs in the temple. It is interesting to note that at the request of Ahom king Rudrasingha, Krisnaram Nyayavagisa came to Assam from Nadia, Bengal and was appointed Parvatiya Gosain, i.e., the sole in charge of the goddess Kamakhya temple on the Nilachala hill. In this context, an observation made by Jean-Baptiste Chevalier who was the first European ambassador from the French East India Company to visit Assam is worth mentioning. In his recently published travel diary Chevalier refers that the temple of Kamakhya was probably the richest temple in the whole world because it owned a huge quantity of gold generously donated by the Ahom Kings throughout the centuries. Thus, cult of Kamakhya played an important role for the legitimization and consolidation of the power of the kings.

The history of Assam’s neighboring state Bengal and Orissa closely parallels these developments in Assam in many respects. The most
important similarity among them is the fact that Brahmanism arrived late in all these regions. In Orissa it was the temple of Jagannath at Puri that came to symbolize the regional consciousness of entire people. Anantavarman Codaganga, who built the Vaisnava Jagannath temple, around the middle of the twelfth century, was personally a Saiva all his life. Hermann Kulke has shown that this was a political decision\textsuperscript{52}. By the eleventh century Vaisnavism had began to exercise considerable influence on Orissa. Anantavarman was keenly aware of this religious trend and he decided to erect a Vaisnava Temple in order to base his power on a rising movement. Thus, from its inception, the religious complex at Puri was conceived as a legitimating agency for the rulers of Orissa.

Bengal did not have any such temple of major regional significance having underlying political consideration possibly because Bengal never developed the culture of temple-building as a part of pre-meditated state policy\textsuperscript{53}. However, Richard Eaton\textsuperscript{54} has contradicted this by arguing in his monograph on medieval Bengal that like several other ruling dynasties of early medieval India, such as the Pratiharas and the Rastrakutas, the Sena rulers of Bengal also established centralized state cults, physically expressed in massive and elaborately carved temples. In support of the argument we find references to a number of temples in the Bengal epigraphs from the Gupta period onwards. In fact, excavations have unearthed the ruins of several temples in Bengal, a few of which were fairly large and impressive, pointing to the fact that there was no dearth of temples in early medieval Bengal. Kunal Chakrabarty holds the view that the temples of early Bengal were local centers of worship which eventually

\textsuperscript{52} Kulke, H, The Cult of Jagannath and the regional tradition of Orissa. Delhi, 1978, P. 139
decayed due to lack of patronage or were destroyed by Muslim invaders. Though Bengal was one of the important centres of Goddess worship it lacked of political support and therefore, Brahmanism in Bengal failed to support the construction of a 'goddess temple' of comparable scale around which the dominance of religion over polity could begin.

As regards the area of study, this research is confined to the geographical boundary of ancient Assam and Bengal up to thirteenth century A.D. The study focuses on the cult of Mother Goddess in Assam and a comparison is made with Bengal, because of its geographical proximity and cultural affinity.

The objectives of the present research are primarily, to reveal the historical process working behind the origin and development of the cult of Mother Goddess in Assam and Bengal within the socio-economic and political framework, and second, to make a systematic and comparative analysis about the growth and practice of the cult of Mother Goddess in Assam and Bengal. Third, the work proposes to focus on the Puranic and Tantric reconstruction of Mother Goddess and lastly, attempt a comparative iconographic analysis of Mother Goddess of both regions.

The study of the cult of Mother Goddess has been enriched by various scholars from diverse disciplines. In the context of present study, a survey of existing literature leads us to the works done by the following scholars such as T. A. Gopinatha Rao (1914), Sir John Woodroffe (1917), James George Frazer (1922), Nagendra Nath Vasu (1922), B. T. Bhattacharyya (1924), Nalini Kanta Bhattasali (1929), Sir John Hubert Marshall (1931), Sashibhushan Dasgupta (1946), Bani Kanta Kakati (1948), Suniti Kr. Chatterji (1951), Edwin Oliver James (1957), Jitendra Nath Banerjea (1966), N. N. Bhattacharya (1970), S. K. Saraswati (1977), Harinath

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55 Chakrabarty, K., op. cit, p. 243.
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First comprehensive work on Hindu Iconography was done by T.A. Gopinatha Rao. In his work *Elements of Hindu Iconography* the author has dealt with the iconographic features of several gods and goddesses. The book gives a detailed account of the origin, descriptions, symbols, mythological background, meaning and moral aims of Hindu images. The author has described the goddess after the *Devimahatmya* section of the *Markandeya Purana*. *Sakti and Sakta* by renowned orientalist Woodroffe is another indispensable volume on Tantra, Tantric beliefs and practices.

*The Golden Bough of Frazer* is a comprehensive thesis on magic, taboos, superstitions, mode of worship, sex practices, rituals and festivals of early men throughout the world and thus describing the evolution of man from savagery to civilization. This excellent book provides many significant references about the evolution of religion in different parts of the globe.

B.T. Bhattacharyya’s *The Indian Buddhist Iconography* includes passages from Sadhanamala and Nispannayogavali relating to the description of the deities of Vajrayana Buddhism. This work deals with the mortal and Dhyani Buddhas, the Bodhisattvas, Manjusri Avalokiteswara, etc. This book also deals with goddess like Kurukulla, Bhrukuti, Mahasitavati, Marici, Cunda, Aparajita, Vajravarahi, Parnasabari etc.

Renowned archaeologist N.K. Bhattasali was a pioneer in the field of Hindu and Buddhist iconography. His efforts in this field resulted in the publication of his monumental work *Iconography of Buddhist and Brahmanical Sculptures in the Dacca Museum*. The flourishing period of Bengal school of art ranged from tenth century till the Turkish conquest in the thirteenth century and many specimen of this school are preserved in the museums of Dacca, Rajshahi and Malda. The Dacca Museum contains various images of Buddhist deities such as: Dhyani Buddhas, various forms
of Boddhisattvas Avalokiteswara, goddess Tara, Prjnaparamita, Marici, Parnasabari, Hariti etc. Brahmanical female deities like Saraswati, Mahamaya, Mahisamardini, Gauri, Parvati, Candi, Sarvani, Ugratara, Camunda, Manasa etc. Iconography of these deities is very important from the viewpoint of religious history. This book is undoubtedly a landmark in the field of Buddhist and Brahmanical iconographical studies.

Marshall’s *Mohenjo-Daro and Indus Civilization* is basically a treasure-house of information. Besides minute archaeological descriptions, the author also explores the growth and expansion of the cult of *divine mother* from Indus as far as the Nile. S. B. Dasgupta’s *Obscure Religious Cult* mainly treated with the Tantric Buddhism which ultimately gave birth to some obscure cult. *Mother Goddess Kamakhya* by B.K. Kakati is a study of the fusion of the Aryan and extra Aryan religious beliefs and practices in Assam in the light of the comparative method of the modern sociological studies. J.N. Benarjea’s *Puranic and Tantric Religion (early phase)* deals with various aspects of *Sakti* cult since the pre-historic period. The development of the concept of *Sakti* as revealed in the Vedas, and in different Puranic and Tantric literature has been traced, identified and documented.

In his *Social History of Kamarupa*, N.N. Vasu refers to the origin of the *Sakta* cult under Pani supremacy and also discusses *Sakti* worship among the Koches. However, he ignores the development of goddess worship under the Varmanas, Salastambhas and Palas.

*Assam Bengal Relations: From earliest times to 12th century A.D.* by P.C. Choudhury discusses socio-political, economic and cultural relations of Assam with that of Bengal from earliest times to 12th century A.D. However, it is seen that *Saktism* constitute only a small part of the whole work. *The Cult of Mother Goddess* written by E. O. James is a very interesting study. Here the author critically examines the myth and ritual associated with the goddess cult, especially in the Ancient Near East, India and the eastern
Mediterranean. He also explores the growth of the goddess cult from its earliest manifestations in early ‘Venus’ sculptures to present times.

N.N. Bhattacharya, a pioneer of Indian religious study, describes in his work *The Indian Mother Goddess*, the Earth and Corn Mothers, protectress of children, city goddess, goddess of the animal world, the goddess of disease, the war goddess, the blood thirsty goddess and the goddess of different tribes. He also dealt with the goddess of Western Asia, Greece, Asia Minor, Mesopotamia and Iran. The author’s unique contribution is his description in comparative light of the Mother Goddess of Christianity, Taoism, Buddhism, Vaisnavism, Saivism and Tantric Saktism. His other works include a number of important papers on the subject published in different journals. *S.K. Saraswati's Tantrayana Art: An Album* describes the Buddhist gods and goddesses depicted in stone and metal found in different parts of the country with the illustration of the images of the Buddha, the Bodhisattvas and their Saktis.

*Iconography of Sculptures* by P.K. Bhattacharyya supplied a lot of information regarding the images discovered in North Bengal. The Hindu goddesses discussed in this book are Ambika, Gauri, Mahisasamardini, Ardhanarishwara, Manasa, Camunda, Vaisnavi, Radha etc. Apart from the Hindu gods and goddesses, Buddhist deities like Avalokiteswara, Gautam Buddha, Aparajita etc. are also discussed. *Hindu Goddesses* of David Kinsley is a seminal work on the subject. The author has made an arduous survey of almost all the major Hindu goddesses and then dealt with each of them as an independent deity. It is a comprehensive work on Mother Goddess from Vedic age to modern times. This book may be regarded as the source book for the growing study of women and religion. Apart from the Vedic, Puranic and Tantric goddesses he also dealt with Sakta pithas and village goddesses. *Sikha Sarkar*, in her work – *Mother Goddess in Pre-
Medieval Bengal – makes an in-depth study of various manifestation of female divinities of eastern India.

Kunal Chakrabarty’s Religious Process: The Puranas and the Making of a Regional Tradition unites the study of social process with Indological scholarship in a genuinely historical analysis. The author discusses how the Purana acted as an instrument for the propagation of Brahmanical ideals of social reconstruction and sectarian interest. It also discussed how local goddess was transformed to a Brahmanical deity.

K.P. Goswami’s Kamakhya Temple: Past and Present and H.N. Sarmadoloi’s Asamat Sakti Sadhana Aru Sakta Sahitya (in Assamese) mainly deal with the origin and the growth of Saktism in ancient Assam. Another very comprehensive work on the goddess cult is Devi by Nirmal Prabha Bardoloi. It deals with most of the tribal and Brahmanical goddesses, ancient and surviving, of the entire North-East, including their iconographical features. B. N. Mukherjee’s Bengali work Saktir Rup, Bharate O Madhya Asiai describes goddess Mahisamardini’s iconographical feature and her identity in Central Asia.

In addition to these rich literature covering different aspects of Mother Goddess, there are a few other works, though not directly being linked to the present study, proved to be immensely helpful in developing various ideas and bridging different missing links. Some of such works are viz. Edward Burnett Tylor’s Primitive Culture, Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Language Art and Custom Vol. I (1871), Lewis Henry Morgan’s Ancient Society (1877), Suniti Kr. Chatterji’s Kirata-Jana-Kriti (1951), Birinchi Kr. Barua’s A Cultural History of Assam, (1951), Maheswar Neog’s Prachya Sasanavali,

**The rationale for the study is that** despite all the above-mentioned scholarly works published so far, a comparative study of the growth and practice of the cult of Mother Goddess has not been undertaken. No scholar has yet made any attempt for a systematic and comparative study regarding the cult of Mother Goddess in Assam and Bengal. The study aims at bridging such gaps in the history of these regions.

**The study is based on both primary and secondary sources.** The primary sources include early literary works like *Kalika Purana* (written in ancient Assam), *Markandeya Purana, Devi Purana* (written in Bengal), *Ramayan, Mahabharat, Yogini Tantra, Kamakhya Tantra* etc. The archaeological remains and Sculptural representation of both the regions are other primary sources for this study. Another significant primary source is that of epigraphic records which furnish important information regarding the female divinities of both the regions.

Besides primary sources, secondary sources like literature related to History, anthropology, archaeology, folklore, journals, periodicals and other available sources have been methodically consulted. A detailed list of primary and secondary sources is included in the bibliography of the thesis.

**The hypotheses of the present work are:** first, Cult of mother goddess is not a static phenomenon and is an essential marker of social change;
second, the cult is a religio-socio-economic-political construct, and lastly, Mother Goddess in Hindu, Buddhist and Jain religions is one and the same.

As far as methodology is concerned the study is largely based on historical comparative method. Such a comparative method is considered of immense value since in examining the similarities and dissimilarities it can be a source for new synthesis and further questions. This enables an analytical approach as well. In order to derive an in-depth analysis, a multidisciplinary approach is used. Appropriate methodological tools from history, archaeology, anthropology, folklore etc. are selectively used in this study. The critical method is adopted in evaluation of both primary and secondary sources, based on both external and internal criticism. For this study field-survey method was also undertaken.

The thesis is divided into five chapters for a systematic understanding of the Mother Goddess Cult in Assam and Bengal. Chapter I titled Introduction, introduced the concept of mother goddess cult, which evolved through the various phases of history. The mother cult began as a magico-religious belief and gradually evolved into a religio-socio-economic and political construct. This chapter included the objectives of the present study, a survey of literature, the sources used, and also stated the rationale and scope of the study and defined its approach and methodology.

Chapter II entitled Puranic Reconstruction of Mother Goddess has explored how Puranas acted as a catalytic agent in the process of transforming a tribal goddess into a Brahmanical deity and trace the status of Mother Goddess in Assam and Bengal of the early period in the light of literature and inscriptions. So far as Bengal is concerned, epigraphic
records are classified according to their find-spot in different centres. The chronological study of the data helps us to draw an outline of the development with regard to the belief in Mother Goddess in different centres. In Assam most of the inscriptions are found from Brahmaputra valley. In this chapter status of goddess in religion is discussed and also points out the contrast in the ascribed status of women and their real position.

The study of the development of the cult of mother goddess remains incomplete without an indication of her development in the Tantras. In Chapter III, entitled The Tantric Goddess, an investigation has been made into how the Tantric elements associated with the Goddess might be traced back even in the epics and the Puranas and how literature and archeology tells us about the status of Tantric goddess in Assam and Bengal. The wave of Tantra swiping these two regions during early medieval period was very strong. Both Assam and Bengal were aryanised later compared to the rest of the country probably due to their geographical locations. Before aryanisation Tantricism was widely prevalent in these regions and the development of the cult of Mother Goddess is abundantly reflected in the Tantras. Regarding the origin of Tantricism it is said that Assam and Bengal were birthplace of Tantricism in India. Tantricism has been intimately connected with Kamarupa where the chief goddess Kamakhya is a yoni goddess. Epigraphic source is also used to trace the status of Tantric goddess in both these regions.

Chapter IV entitled, Mother Goddess in Iconography, is a comparative iconographic analysis of Mother Goddess of Assam and Bengal, a study of the sculptural representation of both the regions. The study of the icons has
corroborated to a great extent the representation of the goddesses as found in the Puranic and Tantric texts. The icons have been classified according to the creeds to which they belong like Brahmanical, Buddhist and Jain. Sculptural development and the emergence of local art tradition have also been discussed in this chapter. The study also focuses how the socio-political factors directly influence religious and artistic developments.

Chapter V is the Conclusion which summarizes the previous chapters. In this chapter the major findings of the thesis have been summarized and scope for further study is discussed.

Our understanding of the foregoing discussion leads us to the conclusion that the present thesis focuses on the origin and growth of the mother cult in both Assam and Bengal by using historical comparative method. It attempts to situate the cult of mother goddess in the historical context and study the same within the socio-economic and political framework. Archaeological and literary sources are used to arrive at the representation of the Mother Goddess Cult as a religio-socio-economic-political construct.

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