CHAPTER III

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The wave of Tantra that swept over Assam and Bengal during early medieval was very strong. This chapter focuses on the development of the cult of Mother Goddess reflected in the Tantras. Tantric elements associated with the goddess, which were given mature shape in medieval Bengal and Assam can be traced even in the epics and the Puranas. The process of the growth of the cult of Mother Goddess as depicted in the Tantras has associated with her personalities of a large number of goddesses who may be classified as Mahavidyas, Matrikas Yoginis etc. This chapter will focus on the status of Tantric goddess in both these regions in the light of literature and archaeology.

Tantricism is generally referred to the religious beliefs and practices which are intricately connected with Saktism. Tantricism greatly developed in early medieval period in Assam and Bengal and impacted practically every major religion. The scriptures that present these practices are generally known as Tantras. The word *Tantra* is derived from the Sanskrit word ‘*tan*’ meaning ‘to draw out’, or ‘to spread’¹. According to Carl Clemen, *Tantra* means literary production dealing with religion, philosophy and natural sciences and is of a later date than the Vedic literature². Though the germ of Saktism can be traced to the Vedas, in reality Saktism has developed only in the Tantras and the Puranas³. Haraprasad Sastri stated that ‘the word Tantra is

very loosely used. Ordinarily people understand by it any system other than the Vedas...The union of male and female energy is the evidence of Tantra\textsuperscript{4}. Some scholars opine that Tantra ought to be restricted to the text connected with Sakti worship which emphasizes \textit{prakriti} or the female principle, the main aspect of Tantricism.

As regards the antiquity of the Tantras, Chintaharan Chakravarty points out that many rites and practices similar to those described in the Tantras were quite familiar to the primitive people of most countries\textsuperscript{5}. Some scholars are of the opinion that the Aryans borrowed the primitive rites from the Dravidians or other non-Aryan people and through a gradual process of assimilation systematized them for their own purpose, with the addition of many later practices\textsuperscript{6}. The worship of the phallus, Linga and Yoni, personified later on as Siva and Devi respectively formed the basis of Saktism and Tantricism\textsuperscript{7} and according to a group of scholars it is found in the pre-historic finds including those from the Indus. However there is a difference between the scholars regarding the true identification of the ring-stones (identified as \textit{yoni}) and the cylindrical stones (identified as \textit{lingas}). It is interesting to note that these stone pieces have been discovered throughout the extant of the Indus Valley from different sites in the Panjab, Sind and Baluchistan. John Marshall identifies them as \textit{linga} and \textit{yoni}\textsuperscript{8}. On this basis some scholars hold the view that Tantricism had its root in pre-historic religion where the Mother Goddess figurines, scenes on seals and ritual objects, notably large stone \textit{lingas} and \textit{yonis} give glimpses of Tantric survivals of magic fertility rites that formed the basis of primitive Tantricism\textsuperscript{9}.

\textsuperscript{5} \textit{Indian Historical Quarterly}, vol. VI, p. 117.
\textsuperscript{6} Ibid
\textsuperscript{7} Choudhury, P.C., \textit{Assam Bengal Relations}, Spectrum Publications, Guwahati:Delhi, 1988, p. 300.
\textsuperscript{9} Choudhuri, S, op. cit., p. 115.
The early Vedic tribes whose material culture and social institutions have been revealed in the Rgveda appeared to have disliked the conception of the female principle owing to their patriarchal bias, but they had also to incorporate some female deity into their pantheon\textsuperscript{10}. Goddess like Uma, Ambika, Kali, Durga etc. were popular Tantric goddesses who made their way into the Vedic texts. In the later Vedic literature the sex rites were also associated with agriculture, the rites that are closely associated with Tantricism. This was mainly due to the extension of agricultural economy. Numerous rituals, mainly sexual in character, were designed to secure the fertility of the field, found their way into the Vedic texts and became integral part of Tantricism. \textit{Periplus of the Erythrean Sea} mentions goddess Kanyakumari who was generally worshipped as a virgin mother. The worship is known as Kumari-Puja to which the Tantras attach special importance\textsuperscript{11}. That the new emerging religious cult of Mother Goddess was incorporating elements of fertility with the growth of agriculture in the new economy at this stage is clearly evident from Narendra Nath Bhattacharyya's statement:

The cause of the increasing popularity of the Female Principle from the beginning of the Christian era was evidently connected with the changing social pattern arising out of the new economic conditions resulting from changes in the mode of production, expansion of internal and external trade, centralized state authorities, and the growth of urbanism. The caste system had by this time become a regular social institution. The Agriculturist and other professionals apart from the priestly, warrior and trading classes did form the majority of population, and it was the religion of this majority, the Mother Goddess of the agriculturists, that found its way into the higher level of the society under diverse historical condition. The mass strength behind the female principle placed goddesses by the side of the gods of all religions, but by doing so the entire emotion centering round the Female Principle could not be channelized. So a need was felt for a new religion in which even the great gods like Siva or Visnu would remain subordinate to the Goddess\textsuperscript{12}.

\textsuperscript{10} Bhattacharyya, N.N., \textit{Indian Mother Goddess}, Manohar Publishers, Delhi, 1999, p. 222
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid, p. 223.
Bhattacharyya has emphasized clearly the transformation of the cult taking place as a result of social changes brought about by the growth of a new economy, where agriculture was dominant. As such the cult became the religion of the agriculturists who formed the majority of the population and metamorphosed into a socio-economic construct.

Not only Vaisnavism and Saivism, but faiths like Buddhism and Jainism also have taken recourse to Tantric practices. The Jain texts refer to Tantric practices current among certain contemporary sects. Tantricism in the form of Mother Goddess cult, magical rites like sat-Karmas, efficacy of mantras etc., are also met with the practices of Jainism. In case of early Buddhism several texts refer to Tantric influence; Lalitavistara represented Buddha as practicing asphanaka-yoga himself. The Majhima Nikaya refers to sexual intercourse of a class of Sramanas and Brahmanas with female ascetic to attain salvation. All of these activities are Tantric in character. The beliefs and rituals of tribal people who were outside the pale of Vedic culture found expression in Buddhism and Jainism. Tantricism also has drawn much from the anti-Vedic system in which primitive and esoteric elements have found their way.

Unlike the Vedic and Puranic religious practices people belonging to all castes are entitled to practice the Tantric rituals. The women and young girls from lower castes are preferred in Tantric sadhana. The aim of Tantra is bhukti (enjoyment) and mukti (liberation) and this can be achieved by self restrain of body and mind. The Tantric practice is the process of self realization and has been followed within the framework of any religious faith. Tantricism consist of mantra, japa, purascarana, sacrifice worship, including practices of five elements, known as pancamakaras. Pancamakara consists of madya (wine), mamsa (meat), matsya (fish),

13 Choudhury, S., op.cit., p. 117.
14 Ibid, p. 118.
15 Shastri. op. cit. p. 2.
Mudra (cereals) and maithuna (sexual intercourse) 16. These are also known as Vamacara17 (left handed worship). According to Saktisangamatantra among the Mahavidya goddess Kali, Tara, Bhairavi, Cinnamasta, and Bagala are favourite to the followers of Vamacara, while Kamala, Bhuvaneswari and Dhumavati may be appeased by Daksinacara18. According to frazer and Briffault sexual rites related to fertility magic are common to all forms of primitive religion19.

The development of the Tantric concept is found in the worship of Visnu Siva and Sakti, and of the deities of their families (Kula). The drawing of mandala for worship and yantra are some of the features. Though Tantric ideas and practices are very old, specialized Tantric works came to existence from the fourth century A.D. Farquhar has suggested the Tantras seems to have taken a definite shape only after the seventh century A.D20.

However, regarding the origin of the Tanricism it is said that Assam and Bengal were the birth places of Tantricism in India from where it spread to the rest of India. Smith points out that Kamarupa (ancient Assam):

...Is a gate through which successive hoards of immigrants from the great hive of the Mongolian race in Western China have poured into the plains of India and many of the resident tribes are still almost pure Mongolians. The religion of such tribes is of more than of local concern, because it supplies the clue to the strange Tantric development of both Buddhism and Hinduism which are so characteristic of mediaeval and modern Bengal21.

This view is corroborated by the evidence of Tantra which point to the importation of Tara worship from China to India. Tantricism has been

16 Ibid
17 The followers of Vamacara are expected to worship the goddess in the traditional way during the day time and at night in the special tantric way with the help of pancamakara(five M's)
18 Tarakhand, 1/84-90
21 Quoted by P.K.Maity, Historical Studies of the Cult of Goddess Manasa, Punthi Pustak, reprint, Kolkata, 2001, p. 68
intimately connected with Kamarupa-Kamakhya, the *Mahapithas* of Tantras and Puranas. *Hevajra Tantra*, which is a Buddhist Tantra (composed around 690 A.D.) mentions four noted centers of Tantricism: Kamarupa, Purnagiri, Uddiyana and Jalandhara. Pratap Chandra Choudhury observes that another center was definitely Bengal with which region Kamarupa and Magadha (Bihar) – Utkala (Orissa) had close contacts. It is believed that Tantricism travelled from Assam and Bengal to Dravidian India. Wilson holds that 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 religions of the Vedas and Puranas proceeded. Assam was one of the great centres of Tantricism which is proved by Tantras themselves. Probably ancient Assam with her non-Aryan elements contributed greatly to the origin and growth of the system. Choudhury states that:

The Austrics and the Tibeto-Burmans, as shown by the phallic megalithic remains, really laid the foundation of the system, the final form of which was given by the assimilation of both Hindu and Buddhistic ideas. In short the origin and later growth of some of the important elements of Tantrikism are to be attributed to the non-Aryans in ancient Assam, one of the fertile fields in eastern India for the development of hose ideas.

However, it has been argued by some scholars that Tantricism migrated from China whereas others believed that the Hindus borrowed it from the Mahayana Buddhism. While the Hindus developed the Siva-Sakti concept, in Buddhism Prajna and Upaya (Sunyata and Karuna) dominated. Great uncertainty still prevails regarding the priority of the Hindu and Buddhist Tantras and their antiquity. A group of scholars including Sastri assert the priority of the Buddhist Tantras and state that it was by way of Buddhism that Tantric practice gained a foothold in Hinduism. However, scholars including Ernest A Payne are of opinion that it was on the basis of Saiva Tantra that the Buddhist Tantras emerged, by borrowing not only the

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22 *Kalika Purana*, 51/64.
23 Choudhury, P.C. op.cit., p. 300.
24 *Visnu Purana*, LXII
language but also the rites and practices of the Saivas. In this respect Sashi Bhusan Dasgupta rightly observed that 'Tantricism is neither Buddhist nor Hindu origin. It seems to be a religious undercurrent originally independent of any abstruse metaphysical speculation, flowing from the obscure point of time in the religious history of India'.

There are two schools of thought regarding the origin of Tantricism. One group including scholars like Prabodh Chandra Bagchi argues in favour of the Vedic origin of the Tantricism as some features of the Tantricism are clearly found in the Vedas. However it is to be noted that in Buddhist and Jaina canonical works there are several references to mystic rites, which are akin to Tantric rites. There is also a contradictory theory that was suggested by scholars like Nagendra Nath Vasu that the Tantric cult had a foreign origin as is evident from the verses in the Kubjika Tantra (5th century A.D.) and Mahachinachara Tantra. Probably Tantric goddess Tara was imported from China as we have a reference to the peculiar practice of using the twig of a tree in her worship, a custom unknown to the Indians. From Tara Tantra it is clear that the cult of Cina Tara came from the Mahachina. Levy finds in Cina Tara an echo of secret societies in China. Mahacinatara is identified with Ekajata whose cult is said to have been taken by Nagarjuna from Tibet. Kanak Lal Baruah has tried to established that Nagarjuna has close association with Kamarupa and may have actually hailed from there. In Rudrayamala and other Hindu Tantras including Yogini Tantra the worship of Tara is said to have been brought by Vasistha from China and meditated on Goddess Tara on Nilachala hill of Kamarupa. Thus, Kamarupa was associated with early part of Buddhist Tantricism.

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27 Maity, op.cit, p. 65.
28 Maity, op.cit., p 67
Bengal was one of the important centres of Tantric Buddhism. Under the royal patronage of the Palas and other minor rulers such as Kantideve and Chandra Kings, Buddhism in Bengal gained prominence. However, there was much difference between the pre-Pala Buddhism as noticed by the Chinese pilgrims and reflected in epigraphic and archaeological records and Buddhism during the Pala-Sena period. Pure Hinayana and Mahayana form were decaying and a new phase of religion in which the original ethical principles were superimposed in such a way by an esoteric yogic system that it could hardly be called Buddhism any longer. It seems that the apostles of Mahayanism made their religion such that it might attract and suit the masses. This revolutionary change in Buddhism was one of the stages in the development of Tantric Buddhism. During the period between eighth and eleventh centuries Tantric Mahayana Buddhism underwent various changes. Several yanas developed such as: Mantrayana, Vajrayana, Kalacakrayana and Sahajayana. All these yanas lay stress on Hatha-yoga. It is generally agreed that most of these later forms of Buddhism developed in the Pala Empire. Most of the Buddhist images of Bengal may be assigned to the period between the ninth and eleventh centuries. The Buddhist Pala rulers started their rule from the last part of the eight century A.D.

Devi Purana states that Devi was worshipped in Kamarupa, Kamakhya, Bhottadesa and other places. According to some writers the deity was formerly a goddess of spirits worshipped in a cremation ground. The Yogini Tantra confirms this in stating that Kamakhya is the Kali-smasana. Kamarupa is the noted centre of Tantricism and the temple of Kamakhya has the reputation of the worship of Devi with Tanric rites and sacrifices details of which are given in the kalika Purana and the Yogini Tantra.

31 Farquhar, op.cit., p. 209.
32 Maity, op.cit. p. 54.
Both Epigraphy and literature testify to the widespread prevalence of Tantricism in Assam and Bengal. The reference of magic practices in inscriptions of ancient Assam shows that the Tantric rites had already appeared in the field of Brahmanical religion and reached predominance during seventh century A.D. The text of the Tezpur Copper Plate Inscription begins with the sign Anji which is a Tantric symbol representing Kundalini. Tantricism laid principal emphasis on joint worship of Siva and Sakti. This inscription also refers to the temple of Kameswara(Siva) and Mahagauri(Sakti)33. The Guwahati Grant of Indrapala (960-90 A.D.) of Pala dynasty of Assam refers to Tantra as a subject and King Indrapala was well versed in the subject34.

So far as Bengal is concerned Sian Stone Inscription of Nayapala(1027-43 A.D.) furnishes some information regarding Tantric goddesses. It refers to the construction of temples dedicated to the Tantric goddesses like Carca(Carcika), Pingalarya, Sixty-four Yoganis, Nine-Candikas. Carca is most probably a shortened form of Carcika. Goddess carcika is mentioned in the Bangarh Prasasti of Murtisiva of the reign of same king Nayapala(1027-43 A.D.). Description of the terrible form of the goddess in this inscription leaves no doubt about her Tantric character. The Sian Stone Inscription stated that the king caused the erection of a stone pinnacle on the stone temple originally established by Pratihara King Mahendrapala (ninth/tenth Century A.D.). It appears that the temple had been constructed at least one hundred years before the date of the Sian Stone inscription. Goddess Pingalarya most probably was a local Tantric deity. The Sian Stone Inscription records the installation of images of sixty-four yoginis by the king in his own city. The worship of yoginis is considered as a part of the Tantric rituals.

Some of the Puranic texts composed in eastern India including Assam and Bengal contain symptoms of growing Tantricism. Thus *Devi Purana*, a text composed in Bengal approximately of seventh or eight century A.D. mentions various Tantric rites. According to Rajendra Chandra Hazra, the parts of *Devi Purana* containing the Tantic *Mantras* and *Vidyas* have a much earlier beginning and most of them have a long tradition behind them. The Devi of the *Devi Purana* undoubtedly contains almost all elements of *Vamacari* Tantricism. It is mentioned in the beginning of chapter-ix of Devi Purana – 'om namo bhagvati camunde smasana-vasini khatvanga kapalahastemahapretasamarudhe ...'. This leaves no doubt that by seventh century A.D. Camunda, as a Tantric female deity occupied a prominent position in eastern India including Bengal.

Another text *Kalika Purana* written in ancient Assam in ninth or tenth century A.D. prescribes the Tantric mode of worship to appease Kamakhya or Kameswari of Kamarupa. It is said that Vasistha who was practicing penances to Siva was forced to go out by the goddess Ugratara. Vasistha cursed Ugratara with these words –'You being a women (vama) are expelling me, you will henceforth be worshipped only according to Vama rites, your hosts (Ganas) roving about like 'mlechchas' will henceforth be degraded to the rank of 'mlechchas'. According to Banikanta Kakati the figure of Vasistha is made to stand at the cross-roads of political and social changes in Assamese legends. Vasistha's curses led to changes in religious and social customs and the result was the initiation of *Vamacara* (left hand) rites in ancient Kamarupa. Here we find that Kakati is pointing to the political dimension of the socio-economic and religious construct of the Mother Goddess cult.

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36 *Kalika Purana*, Ch-85.
The erotic sensual elements that are an important part of Tantric religion are recognized in the above mentioned Puranas. In the *Devi Purana* there is a stotra where Devi is said to be the better half of Siva. She is worshipped along with Siva. An emphasis is laid on the union of Siva and Sakti as the basis of creation and preservation of the universe. *Kalika Purana* also gives an account of Siva's marriage with Devi and mentions that Kali is very dear to Siva and she is half of Siva's body. The union of Siva and Sakti has its philosophical foundation in the Samkhya system and also reflected in the esoteric Tantric Yoga practices connected with awakening of Kundalini, the Primeval Energy dormant in the microcosm (human body). Representation of the union of Siva and Sakti in the art of Assam and Bengal is very common. A large number of images of Uma-Maheswara, Arhanariswara etc can be noticed in the art of these regions which prove the popularity of the Tantricism.

Both in Assam and Bengal Tantras were composed not earlier than twelfth / thirteenth century A.D. However the study of both *Devi Purana* and *Kalika Purana* indicate that much prior to the composition of the Tantras in these regions, Tantric practices were in vogue in connection with the worship of the goddess.

The Saktis bearing different names and forms seem to have worshipped by different sects. But the variety of names and forms of Sakti has been brought under the most famous division of ten Mahavidyas (Dasamahavidyas), each having a distinct literature of its own. The concept of Dasamahavidyas is of Tantric origin. According to Yogini Tantra those are mantras, which are applied to the worship of gods, and those applied to the goddesses are known as vidyas. Mahavidya means great goddess. The popular myth behind the origin of the Dasamahavidyas is that when Sati came to know that her father Daksa is going to perform a sacrifice where he

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38 *Kalika Purana*, Ch. 47.
invites all but Siva and Sati, she wanted to go there without an invitation. Siva forbade her and at this Sati became ferocious and angry. At the sight of her anger, Siva became perplexed and wanted to flee hither and thither. Then Sati expressed herself in ten images in ten directions. Siva was perplexed and accorded permission to go to Daksa’s place.

The ten Mahavidyas are Kali, Tara, Sodasi, Bhubaneswari, Bhairavi, Cinnamasta, Dhumawati, Bagala, Matangi and Kamala. According to David Kinsley the Mahavidyas emerged about a millennium ago. However, some individual goddesses like Kali have significant early and independent footing. The ten forms, while lacking any obvious internal coherence, are overlapping embodiments of the great goddess (Mahadevi) representing many of her paradoxical aspects—benign and horrific, creative and destructive. The terrible aspect predominates. The Dasamahavidyas defied conventional Hindu norms regarding the ideal woman as a controlled and obedient wife.

The Siva-Sakti union is best explained by Dasamahavidya concept. Except Dhumavati who is represented as widow the other nine Mahavidyas are to be worshipped along with their Bhairavas. Most popular among these ten incarnations of the Goddess was no doubt, Kali. The Mahanirvana Tantra ascribes her as the progenitor including animate and inanimate object. Tantrasara quotes the dhyana (meditation form) of the goddess Kali from the Siddheswari Tantra. It seems to be much more dreadful than the Puranic description:

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savarudham mahabhimam ghoradramstam varapradam
hasyayuktam tmetranca kapalakartrakakaram
muktakesim lolajihvam vipantim rudhiram muhuh
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39 Brihaddharma Purana, Madhyama Khanda, VI Chapter, pp-13-14
41 Ibid.
Here the goddess is found standing on a corpse (sava) and drinking blood with her lolling tongue. Bhadrakali, another form of the goddess, is much more fierce in appearance and attributes as portrayed in the Tantrasara and Saradatilaka Tantra. One of the dhyanas is such:

ksutksama Kotaraksi masimalinamukhi muktakessi rudanti
maham trpta vadanti jagadakhilam grasamekam karomi

Bhadrakali is here found as hungry, hollow eyed, dark-sad faced, knotted hair, crying, not satisfied till she could gabble the whole world. The forms of Kali mentioned in the Tantric works of Bengal are as follows: Daksinalalika, Siddhakali, Guhyakali, Bhadrakali, Smasanakali, Raksakali, Mahakali etc. In Bengal Dakshina Kali form is very popular. One interesting iconographic feature of Kali is standing on the chest of Mahadeva. This characteristic probably is a later addition evidently to show the supremacy of Prakriti over the inactive Purusa or the predominance of the female principle as cause of creation, sustenance and destruction. Literature like Kalika Purana and Yogini Tantra prove that Kali is very popular in eastern India including Assam. Archaeology also supports this fact.

Tara, the most well-known and famous Buddhist Tantric goddess has found her place in Hindu Tantricism. She has become very famous goddess and equated with Kali. According to Saktisangama Tantra Kali, Tara, Tripura, Sundari and Cinnamasta are one and the same. Tara has two aspects placid and terrible. In her placid form she is green coloured (syama varna), three-eyed, two-armed, holding lotus, smiling, ornamented with pearls and surrounded by various other Saktis. However, Sadhanamala describes

Dhyana of her terrible form. Here she is described that there is a corpse under her feet and she bears the image of Aksobhya on her head. In *Tantrasara* her terrible aspect is thus described:

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\text{Pratyalidha padanghri savahrd ghorattahasa para} \\
\text{khadgendivara kartkhaparabhuja humkara vijodbhava} \\
\text{kharva visala pingala jatujotranagairyuta} \\
\text{jdyamnyasya kapalake trijagatam hantyugratara svayam}^{45}
\]

It may be inferred that both Brahmanical and Buddhist sects borrowed the concept of Tara from a common source from which the goddess like Kali, Bhadrakali, Camunda were derived and incorporated into Brahmanical pantheon. The common source may be the ferocious concept of spirit that is upheld by the aboriginal tribes.

Among the various forms of Goddess Tara, Ekajata is the most important one. Ekajata is so-called because of her matted lock. Nilasaraswati is the third form of Tara. There are also other forms of Tara collectively known as *Asta Tarini*, mainly found in Buddhism. They are known as Tara, Ugra, Vajra, Mahogra, Kali, Saraswati, Kameswari and Bhadrakali.

The second Mahavidya Tara earned great popularity in Bengal and Assam from very early period. Her name is associated with the famous *Sakta-Pitha* in Bengal known as Tarapitha (Birbhum District). Assam is also connected with Tara cult from a very early period. It is already stated that *Siddha* Nagarjuna introduces the Tara cult that was imported from Tibet to Assam. The name of sage Vasistha is also connected with goddess Tara. According to *Rudra Yamala* and *Yogini Tantra* Vasistha meditated on goddess Tara on the Kamakhya hill. The *Tara Tantra* specifying the formula on which Vasistha meditated says that it related to goddess Tara^{46}. It is also worth

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45 *Tantrasara*, p. 526.  
46 *Kakati*, B, op. cit, p. 31.  
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mentioning that in Guwahati city there is a temple of Ugratara. While the present temple is of Ahom period, the site shows evidence of a much earlier temple.

The third Mahavidya Sodasi is also known as Srividya as well as Kamakhya. She was worshipped by Brahma, Visnu and Siva and came to be known as Tripura\(^47\). Because of her beauty she is also known as Tripurasundari. Her Bhairava is Kameswara. She is also known as Lalita. The Tantrasara quotes the Dhyana of Sodasi from Yoginihrdaya which states her as a youthful and beautiful damsel. Here she is a benign goddess. She is installed on a red lotus. Her garment is also red. She has four hands and three eyes. Bhuvaraneswari, the fourth Mahavidya is recognized as one of the protectress of the world. She is three-eyed and her face is depicted with a smile. She is lustrous like the rising sun and has the moon on her crest. She holds a goad and noose, in two hands and shows *varada* and *Abhaya mudra* in the other two\(^48\). The fifth Mahavidya Bhairavi is another goddess who protects her worshippers from all types of distress. She has a garland round her neck and her breasts are covered with blood. Her three eyes resemble red lotuses. This three-eyed goddess possesses a crescent on her forehead. She holds a rosary and manuscript in two hands and shows *varada* and *abhaya mudra* with other two.

Another famous goddess of Mahavidya category is Cinnamasta who is the fiercest form among all Mahavidyas. The process of her worship is fully Tantric. She is drinking the blood springing out from the cutting of her own throat. She is associated with two attendants called Dakini and Varnini on her right and left. They also drink blood springing out of the throat of the goddess. She is thus described:

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\(^{47}\) Ibid, p. 337.

\(^{48}\) *Saradatiilaka Yantra*, IX, 14.
Different Tantric text like *Saktisangama Tantra*, *Pranatosini Tantra* etc. dealt with goddess Cinnamasta. Goddess Cinnamasta is very much similar to that of Vajrayogini, a Buddhist Goddess.

Dhumavati, another goddess of Mahavidya category is invoked for the destruction of enemies. The most interesting feature of her is that she is a widow and old-aged whereas other goddesses of the Mahavidya category are young and look like a maiden of sixteen years. She rides on a chariot on which a crow sits. Her attributes are also different from others. With one hand she grants boon and on the other she holds a winnowing fan. She is always hungry and thirsty, terrorizing and quarrelsome also. She is a pale complexioned, dirty-clothed goddess and represented as a goddess of misfortune and misery.

The eight Mahavidya Vagala wears yellow cloth and seated on a throne. She holds noose, club, tip of the tongue of the demon and thunderbolt with her four hands. The *Tantrasara* describes her thus:

*Caturbhujam trinayanam kamalasanasamsthitam*  
*Mudgaram daksine pasam vame jihvance vajrakam*

Matangi the ninth Mahavidya is represented as sitting on a throne of gems. The *Tantrasara* describes her as of dark complexion, three-eyed, with a crescent on her forehead, holding sword, khetaka, noose and goad in her

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four hands. The tenth Mahavidya Kamala is represented as bright complexioned beautiful goddess, adorned with jewels and wearing a red silk saree. The goddess is represented with Four elephants, coronating her by holding four pitchers containing nectar with their trunks.

According to Devid Kinsley the Dasamahavidyas lack strong association with the theme of fertility and nurturance\textsuperscript{50}. None of the ten is portrayed as a mother. Dasamahavidyas can be treated as symbol of liberation from the confines of a world strictly governed by rules of caste, of purity and pollution\textsuperscript{51}. Dasamahavidyas are worshipped in ancient Assam. There are temples of Dasamahavidyas on the Nilacala hillock in Guwahati where regular worship has been performed since time immemorial. It is said that the worship of Dasamahavidya is equally ancient as that of Kamakhya\textsuperscript{52}. The existence of the Dasamahavidya temples in Nilacala hillock proves that it was a great centre of Tantric worship for a long time. Mahavidyas are quite well known in Bengal. It is evident from their account given in Bharatacandra’s \textit{Annadamangala Kavya} in Bengal (eighteenth century A.D.).

In the Puranas we may trace the beginning of the Tantric elements. The Matrikas who are associated with the Devi in the Puranas are given more importance in the Tantras. In the \textit{Markandeya Purana} it has been said that the Matrikas aided Goddess Ambika along with Camunda in causing death to the most powerful ally of the demon king Sumba, named Raktabija. Similar was the case with Andhakasura who fought against Siva. Generally

\textsuperscript{50} Brown, Mackenzie. C., op cit, p. 145.
\textsuperscript{51} Ibid.
the matrikas are seven in numbers. However, there are occasional variations in the list of Matrikas with regard to their number. Sapta-Matrikas (seven mothers) represented the saktis of important familiar gods. They are Brahmani, Maheswari, Kaumari, Vaisnavi, Varahi, Indrani and Camunda. However, Aindri, Yami and the other also added in different texts. From the Sadhanas in the Buddhist literature, it appears that the Tantric Buddhist literature has also incorporated the Sapta Matrikas in their religious fold. The characteristics of the Matrikas are that they are fierce in nature in the most part, and they are formidable in the battle, terrifying their enemies. This concept of the cult as war-goddess is borne out of the political turmoil of the time. This is an identifiable political construct of the Mother Goddess. In the worship of the divine mothers, as it was intimately associated with the Tantric form of Sakti worship, primarily fear played the prominent part.

Matrika worship is prevalent from a very early period in both Assam and Bengal. Three of the Matrikas are known to have been represented in the art of Assam. An image in the Assam State Museum is seen to represent Varahi that has the face of a boar. The other Matrikas are Camunda and Yami. In Bengal images of Sapta Matrika carved on a stone slab found in the collection of Rajshahi Museum. A stone slab representing five mothers is preserved in Malda Museum. Sometimes matrikas were separately represented. One four-armed unique image of Varahi is found from a village in the district of Hooghly, now preserved in Asutosh Museum, University of Calcutta. She holds a fish which is unique characteristic in Varahi image. Jitendra Nath Banerjea holds the view that this figure indicates some Tantric trait (fish is one of the five ma’s that is panca-makara). Sculptural representation proves that Brahmani, Indrani, Camunda and Barahi are

53 Sadhanmala, II, p. 130.
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known to the people of ancient Bengal. Camunda is the most popular goddess in both regions.

In Tantricism the Great Goddess appears with Yoginis as her followers. From the *Kulamava Tantra* (Chapter X, 138-143) it is learnt that the followers of the goddess were emanations from the goddess herself and assumed different forms. In the Sanskrit literature, the Yoginis have been represented as the attendants of various manifestations of Durga engaged in fighting with demon Sumbha and Nisumbha and the principal Yoginis are identified with the Matrikas. The number of Yoginis varies from eight to sixty-four. *Kalika Purana* (Chapter- 60, 61, 63, 65) gives a description of Yoginis. Goddess Durga has eight associates known as Saktis, called Ugracanda, Pracanda, Candogra, Candanayika, Canda, Candavati, Camuna and Candika. Goddess Kausiki, Uma, Bhadrakali have eight, eight and twelve Yoginis respectively. Orissa is one of the most important place for Yogini cult. The Orissan village Hariharpur contains a temple of sixty-four Yoginis. Another temple of sixty four Yoginis in Orissa is situated at Ranipur Jharial in the Balangir District54. Yogini cult is well known in Bengal as is evident from Krisnanandas Tantrsara. Here the worship of Asta – Yogini is mentioned. In Kamrupa also Yogini cult was popular. *Kalika Purana* mentions Bhuvaneswari and Dirgheswaris as Yoginis. Dirgheswari has her shrine in Rangmahal in northern Guwahati.

Some Puranic goddesses have also made their way into the Tantric pantheon. Among these goddesses is Ambika, Katyayani, also known as Mahisamardini, Durga and Parvati are important. It has already been stated that the wave of Tantricism was current in Bengal before the seventh/eighth

54 Bhattacharyya, N.N., op.cit., p. 174.
Century A.D. as derived from Devi Purana where practice of Sakta Tantric worship in the mode of left hand path (Vamamarga) is frequently met with. Literary evidence may be corroborated with archaeological remain in the Paharpur panel depicting a man holding his tuft of hair in the left hand and is about to sever his own head with a sword held in the right. Some scholars are of opinion that the scene is likely to represent a symbol of devotion to the Mother Goddess by voluntary self sacrifice of a Tanric votary\(^{55}\).

Around thirteenth/fourteenth century A.D. the political and social conditions of Bengal influenced the literary activity and religious practices of the people and prepared suitable environment for Tantricism. The age old Hindu religion was revitalized by Chaitanya, the great preacher and reformer. The influence of the Sahajiya cult gripped the imagination of the people.

Worship of Kali in accordance with the prescription of Tantra is widespread in Bengal. The forms of Kali mentioned in the Tantric works of Bengal are as follows: Daksinakali, Siddhakali, Guhyakali, Bhadrakali, Smasanakali, Raksakali or Mahakali. The most popular form in Bengal is Daksina Kalika. She is described as follows: four armed, dark, lolling tongue, a garland of human heads, body smeared with blood dripping from these heads, blood trickling through corners of the mouth, three eyes bright as the rising sun, protruding teeth, naked, standing on the chest of Mahadeva, surrounded by all sides by howling and terrible jackals. Regarding the forms of the deity current in Bengal, and the mode of worship, the following works are authoritative: Mahanirvana Tantra, Kali Tantra, Tantrasara of Krisnananda and Syamarahasya of Purnanada. These works indicate the wide popularity of goddess Kali in Bengal. There is a tradition that Krisnananda, the author

of Tantrsara, conceive the form of Daksinakali for the first time and since then it has been widely current in Bengal. This view is perhaps not correct. This form occurs in pre-Krisnananda works also.

However, the central object of the worship among the people of Bengal is Durga. Markandeya Purana narrates her autumnal worship. Some Tantric texts like the Maya Tantra, the Rudrayamala, Kalivilasa Tantra and the Matsya Sukta deal with the worship of Durga in Tantric mode. There are many aspects of Durga Puja such as: homa, offering sacrifices, recitation of svastimantra etc are from Puranas and nyasa, bijamantra, savarotsava etc. from the Tantras.56. Tantrasara mentions Durga yantra or a diagram in which Durga is to be meditated upon. These texts mention human being or wine among the offerings to the goddess. However, the later Tantras like Pranatosani Tantra clearly forbids these two things for Brahmana worshippers.57

Bengali Smriti-writer Jimutavahana of twelfth century A.D. in his work Kalaviveka refers to the auspicious time (month of Asvina) for Durga worship and a vulgar type of marry making called savarotsava, observed by the people on the dasami tithi.58 Bhatta Bhavadeva (eleventh century A.D.), Prime Minister of Varmana king Hari Varman, composed a work on Durga worship.59 It appears that worship of Durga with Tantric rites was widely prevalent during the Sena - Varmana period. Thus Bengal was a great centre for Tantric practices.

56 Shastri, op., cit., p. 2.
57 Sarkar, op.cit., p. 135.
59 Ibid.
Tantricism has been intimately connected with Kamrup Kamakhya where the chief Goddess Kamakhya is a yoni goddess. Kamakhya temple is unique because it enshrines no image. Only the symbol of yoni or genital organ is worshipped. This yoni worship is certainly a strong reference to old fertility cult associated with agricultural economy. Here we may refer to fertility ritual called ambuvaci which is observed by the women of both Assam and Bengal on and from the seventh day of the third month of Hindu calendar. It is believed that during the four days of the said ritual mother earth menstruates in order to prepare herself for her fertilizing work. In many parts of India, great importance is given to the menstruation of goddess Parvati. Reference should also be made in this connection to the menstruation of the goddess Kamakhya of Assam. The basic ritual of Tantricism is pancamakara which consist of madya (wine), mamsa (meat), mudra (cereals) and maithuna (sexual intercourse). According to James Frazer sexual rites related to fertility magic are common to all forms of primitive religion. Erotic practices, associated with the Mother Goddess cult, are very old concepts.

Goddess Kechaikhiati of Sadiya region of eastern Assam is regarded as a form of Kamakhya and also of Tripureswari of Tripura. She was the same Goddess of Dikkaravasini of Tantras and Puranas. She is known as Tamreswari who has two forms tikshna (fearful) and lalita (lovable). The former was black, pot-bellied and with one lock of matted hair (Ekajata). She was also called Ugratara. Her attendants are Bhaga, Subhaga, Camunda, Karala, Bhisana and Vikala – all are dreadful name which suggest her Tantric character. In general she was worshipped like

60 Frazer, op.cit., p. 11.
86
Kamakhya. Her offerings consisted of strong liquor, human sacrifice, *modaka* etc.

With the popularity of the cult of Mother Goddess, custom like human sacrifice became common in ancient and mediaeval Assam which effected the society. Barua clearly stated that Ranchandi and the Mahamaya of the Kachari Tribe, Tamresari of the Chutias, Jayanteswari of Jayantiyas and the fourteen devatas of Tippearas were worshipped by resorting to human sacrifices

Generally human sacrifice was mainly to please the goddess. The head of the victim was very precious in Tantricism. In the Kalika Puranas Kali is imagined as wearing a garland of human skull. Some tribes of this region offered human sacrifice when they faced common danger like natural calamities, drought etc. They believed that Mother Goddess would save them through human sacrifice. By the tenth century human sacrifices were given canonical sanction by the Hindu tantrist. A chapter titled 'Blood Chapter' (*rudhiradhyaya*) in *Kalika Purana* is devoted to injunctions in regard to the sacrifice of animal and human beings to the Mother Goddess.

There are several *thans* which are open places regarded as holy resort of Mother Goddess in early and mediaeval Assam which prove the influence of the Sakta Tantric cult all over the region and therefore shaped the religious history of the land. Among them Malini *than* is noteworthy. There are several local legend regarding Malini *than* in the lower part of the West Siang district of Arunachal Pradesh. However Malini is the name of one of the sixty-four yoginis. The temple was probably erected during the period of the Pala rulers of ancient Assam. Malini *than* originally fell within the zone of the primitive Mother Goddess Cult which later received Sakta Tantric
orientation. Malini than is described as belonging to the spiritual kingdom of Dikkaravasini. In Tezpur cults of Candi, Mahabhairabi etc. and in North Lakhimpur the cults of Kali, Kechaikhaiti, Nila Gosani etc were prevalent since the pre-Ahom days which influenced the socio-cultural fabric of ancient Assam.

N.N. Bhattacharyya in his work *Indian Mother Goddess* states that: ‘

‘The glorification of Kamakhya as found in the Kalika, Brihaddharma and *Devi bhagawata Purana* as well as in the Kubjika, Yogini and Cudamani Tantras, etc., is suggestive of the fact that the region bounded by the Himalayan extension on the north, the river Dikrang on the east, the confluence of Lakhya and Brahmaputra on the south and Karatoya on the west was from the earliest period a zone of the Tantric cult of Female Principle.

Thus, Tantricism not only made its way to mainstream Saktism, but became inextricably linked to it so much so that it became very difficult to differentiate them. The local goddess became assimilated in Tantricism. The Puranas give a realistic picture of the local goddesses. Later they were identified with the supreme deity of both Saktism and Tantricism. Both Puranas and Tantric texts furnish detailed information regarding the *Pithas*, and their respective deities. There are several Pithas in Assam and Bengal. Among them some are purely recognized as Tantric in character. Kamrupa of Kamakhya is the most important eastern Indian site of the Mother Goddess cult.

In the social sphere the Tantra is silent of any kind of castes and patriarchal prejudices. The patriarchal conception is not found in the Tantras. Sakta Tantric principles offer a set of values quite opposite in character to the

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62 Bhattacharyya, op.cit. p. 304.
63 Ibid.
64 Ibid, p.306
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authoritarian and patriarchal structure upheld by the writer of the smritis.

Bhattacharyya states:

From the tenth century onwards the Sakta Tanric cults gained a qualitatively changed character and became woven into the texture of all religious practices current in India. It was due to the fact that the Sakta Tantric cults offered a sharp criticism and rejection of all external formalities in regard to religious practices and spiritual quests, revived the mystical obscure and esoteric, but protestant and heterodox elements of the existing religious system, and upheld a new philosophy of life which consisted of the recognition of the *guru* as essential for any spiritual exercise and quest, of the human body as the seat and habitat of all religious and spiritual experiences and of the experience of the ultimate reality as one of the inexpressible happiness and absolute non-duality.

Very naturally Tantricism had its solid base among the lower section of the people because the four-fold caste system was not recognized by Tantra. In the Tantras supreme importance is attached to such characters as the Candali, Dombi, Rajaki, Sabari etc. These are all female names representing some of the lowest castes. According to the *Natha* tradition queen Mainamati was initiated by a Hadi, a member of a lower caste. *Sahara* of the *Sahajiya* tradition mentions in his *Dehakosa* that the Brahmanas as caste can-not be recognized to be the highest of men, because their only task is to deceive the people.

The Turko-Afghan invasion brought an important change in the religious outlook of India. To counter inroads of Islam, the Brahmanas required the active assistance of the lower class people. In this process the concept of Sakti as power or energy acquired a new significance and this political thrust recognized Mother Goddess as a war-goddess. Belief in the efficacy of *mantra*, *mandala* and other elements of esoteric practices was firmly established. The concept of ultimate reality as a duality of male and female principle – *Upaya* and *Pranja* in Buddhism, Siva and Sakti in Saktism and
Krisna and Radha in Vaisnavism – became a common basis of philosophical understanding.

From the above discussion we may derive some reasonable inferences in consideration of the fact that both Assam and Bengal were strong centres of Tantricism. Stooped in religion in the early years, the cult assumed new dimensions and was eventually transformed into a socio-economic and politico construct in both the regions. A comparative study of Tantricism and Tantric goddesses in Assam and Bengal shows that the concept of Tantricism has little variation. Before the composition of the Tantras in both the regions, Tantric practices were in vogue in connection with the worship of goddess. A large number of Tantric goddesses including the cult of Dasamahavidya, Matrika, Yogini etc. became popular in ancient Assam and Bengal which was proved by both archaeology and literature. Concept of menstruation of goddess as a symbol of fertility is stronger in Assam than in Bengal. Bengal emerged as an important centre of Buddhist Tantricism under the royal patronage of Palas and Chandras. Hence it is interesting to note that although Kamarupa is associated with the introduction of the Tantric goddess, the so-called Tara cult, it is in Bengal that the cult assumed popularity at a later period.

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