Chapter III

Śaktism

I

Śakti, the spouse of Śiva, is worshipped under various names, viz., Devī, Mahāmāyā, Durgā, Kāli, Jagaddhātri, etc. One special manifestation of Śakti in Assam is Kāmākhyā whose worship dates back to very early times. For centuries the temple of Kāmākhyā at Nīlācala hill has been the fountain head of the Śakti cult and the cradle of Tantrism in the eastern part of India.

Some scholars are of the opinion that the birth place of Śaktism is the North-Eastern India, particularly Assam and Bengal.¹ The archaeological and literary records show that Śaktism occupies a prominent place in the religious history of Assam.² According to the Kalika-purāṇa, Narakāsura, king of Kāmarūpa, introduced Devī-worship in the land.³ The account of the traditional king Naraka does not profess to be exhaustive and goes back to that period of history which is engulfed in legends. The names of Kāmeśvara, Mahāgaurī and Pārvatī are mentioned in the grants of Vanamāla Varmādeva of ninth century and Indrapāla of eleventh century. Specific references to the worship

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² H.C.P.A., pp.418-422.
³ Kāmākhyāpūjayanrato nilakūte mahāgirau (ch.38.153)
of Sakti in Kamarupa occur in the Devi-purāṇa, Kālikā-purāṇa and Yoginī-tantra. A verse in the Kālikā-purāṇa states that Devī (i.e. Sakti) rare in other places, is a household deity in Kāmarūpa. The repetition of the verse in the Yoginī-tantra (II, 6.151) shows that even in the sixteenth century Saktism had a firm hold in Kāmarūpa. This may be supported by the fact that at the instance of the Koch king Naranārayaṇa (16th Century), Sukladhvaja, the king's brother, made an elaborate arrangement to worship Devī (Durgā) for three days. Sukladhvaja's grand-son Pariksitañārayaṇa also worshipped Durgā on the Nilācala hill.

Taking the clue from the Kālikā-purāṇa, Kakati has divided the manifestations of Devī into four forms: (1) the mother goddess Kamakhya, (2) the spouse goddess Pārvatī, (3) the virgin goddess Tripūrā and (4) the dreaded goddess Tāmresvārī (Ekajata). Among these four forms Kamakhya is worshipped as the primordial deity and the main shrine situated on the Nilācala hill, is named after her. The goddess Kamakhya is also known as a virgin (kumārī) goddess, namely, Tripūrā. The kumārī-pūjā is still held in the Kamakhya temple. In the form of Ekajata (with one lock of matted hair), Ugratārā or Tikṣṇakāntā, the goddess Tāmresvārī was

4. anyatra virālā devī kāmarūpe grhe grhe (ch.58.42).
5. Darrang Rāj Vaśāvalī, vv.577-79.
6. Ibid., V.750.
7. The Mother Goddess Kamakhya, ch. IV.
8. K.P., 63.50.
worshipped in a copper temple situated at the Saumāra-piṭha of Eastern Assam with the special offerings of wine, human sacrifice, etc.  

Besides these four, there are ten other forms of Śakti commonly known as daśa-mahāvidyā. These are: Kālī, Tārā or Ugratārā, Śodāsī, Bhuvanesvarī, Bhairavī, Chinnamastā, Dhūmavatī, Vagalāmukhi, Mātāṅgī and Kamalā. But the concept of Daśa-mahāvidyā does not appear either in the Kālikā-purāṇa or the Yoginī-tantra. It is, therefore, a later development, at least, in Kāmarūpa. Eliot aptly remarks that Śakti is "a goddess of many names and forms." The goddess in these ten forms are regularly worshipped in different temples built in the Nīlācala hill. Neog points out that in all these temples the object of worship is not an image but "a flat, slightly fissured stone, with water coming from below as in the case of the principal shrine of Kāmākhya". But there is an exception in the central hall of the Kāmākhya temple where a bronze image called Calantāmūrti, Hara-Gaurī-mūrti, or Bhogamūrti, is worshipped regularly.

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10. We find mention of daśamahāvidyā in the Cāmunda-tantra thus:
   kālī tārā mahāvidyā śodaśī bhuvanesvarī bhairavī chinnamastā ca vidyā dhūmavati tathā vagalā śiddhavidyā ca mātāṅgī kamalātmikā etā daśa mahāvidyāḥ śiddhavidyāḥ prakīrtitāḥ.
   (Quoted in the Kāmākhya-tīrtha, p.56)
11. Hinduism and Buddhism, I, intro., p.36.
The image is called Calantā (one that moves) possibly because it is carried out by the votaries in a procession on some special occasions. But there is no mention of this image in the Kalikā-purāṇa and in the Yoginī-tantra. It might have been installed at a later time.

The Kalikā-purāṇa states that the goddess can be worshipped according to the daksinācāra (i.e., right-hand) or the vāmacāra (left-hand) method. Secondly, some tantric rituals were also practised in worshipping the goddess. The list of sacrificial articles enumerated in the Kalikā-purāṇa (ch.69) includes an impressive array of items, such as different kinds of cloth, ornaments, perfumes and varieties of flower. One chapter (70) of the Kalikā-purāṇa is devoted to the description of the five kinds of naivedyas (offerings) which consist of paramānṇa (rice cooked in milk with sugar), cakes, lāḍḍu (sweet balls), milk of cow, buffalo, goat and deer, sugar, honey, molasses, wine and different kinds of fruits, pulses, spices and vegetables.

Apart from these we also find a long list of objects of sacrifice to Candikā and Bhairavi, which includes birds, tortoises, alligators, fish, nine species of deer, buffaloes, iguanas, bulls,

14. The right-hand rituals are those which are "public and decent", while the left-hand rituals are nothing but the "admittedly immural orgies" performed secretly. (Hinduism and Buddhism, II, p.283).

15. Eliot defines Tantrism as "a system of magical or sacramental ritual, which professes to attain the highest aims or religion by such methods as spells, diagram, gestures, and other physical exercises". (Hinduism and Buddhism, II, p.274)
he-goats, ichneumons, boars, rhinoceros, antelopes, sarabhas (fabulous beasts with eight feet), lions, panthers, men and blood drawn from votary's own body (67.3-4). The text (67.72-73) enjoins offering/sacrifice daily in a cremation ground. The goddess Bhairavī was to be offered a garland of human heads in a cremation ground, called Heruka (67.75). That human sacrifices were offered in the temple of Bhairavī below the shrine of Kāmākhyā, is evident from other sources. History tells us that a son of Satrājīt, the commander of the Muslim army, was sacrificed to the goddess Kāmākhyā in about 1615.

The Kālikā-purāṇa (chs.51-61) contains a detailed account of meditation, mantra, process of worship, offerings of sacrificial beings and the method of making diagrams connected with the worship of the deity, and the mode of worship of the goddess through the medium of a virgin. Sabarotsava, which is basically an erotic form of worship, finds place in the Kālikā-purāṇa (61.17-22). A list of different rituals connected with the worship of the goddess, is enumerated in the Yāgini-tantra also. But we find no reference to the human sacrifice and the sabarotsava in this work. Neog observes that much of the 'left hand' exercises (described in the Kālikā-

16. Eliot : II, p.288; Gait : p.59. I was told by Pramathanath Sarma, the head of the Kāmākhyā temple and others that from the time when the practice of human sacrifice in the temple of Bhairavī fell into disuse, an image of man being made of flour, was sacrificed till recent times. But this method is no longer practised.

purāṇa) was toned down in the time of composition of the Yogini-tantra. However, this tantra refers to some 'left hand' rituals like ṣāvā-sādhana (special worship in a dead body taken for a bed, I, 5.2-15) and munda-sādhana (skull-worship, I, 5.51-75) which were performed in a state of nakedness. The tantra (I, 5.55-63) prescribes worship of Bhūtanātha, Śmaśānādhipati, Kālabhairava, Cāndikā and other deities on an altar raised on the human heads. It further describes different processes of worship as divine, heroic and bestial. In the bestial process the five elements, better known as pāñča-makāra, such as, maḍva (wine), māṃsa (meat), matsya (fish), mudrā (parched grain) and maithuna (sexual union) are included (I, 6.14). Similarly the other process like vaśikarana (the art of enchantment), svapnāvati (enchanting the object to dream), mṛtaśanājivani (restoring the life of the dead), etc., are included (I, 7.). Such form of worship of the goddess, which is marked by sensuality or human sacrifice, characterised the tantric cult of the past. The tantric rituals played an important role in the worship of Śakti till the time of composition of the Yogini-tantra in Assam. But it appears from the present process of worship that many of the old rituals were dropped out though Śaktism has not lost its popularity in the land. The existing Śakti temples and thāns show that Śaktism still occupies an important place in the district of Kamrup.

18. S.H.T., p.82.
19. The Pavitra Asam refers to some temples, thāns and tirthas of Śakti situated in different places of Kamrup (pp.197-221). The total number is 17 to which we may add six temples of dasamahavidyā built on the Nilacala hill.
Worship of the goddess Kamakhya

Besides the texts, already quoted, a concrete picture of the processes of worshipping Kamakhya can be obtained by visiting the shrine. Every year a large number of devotees from different parts of the country visit the ancient shrine. The priest of the temple worships the deity thrice a day - in the fore-noon, at noon and in the evening. The watch-man called āthparīvā, washes the pitha and changes the attirement every day in the morning. Along with other offerings, such as flowers, perfume, light, incense and naivedya, a goat offered by the temple-authority, is daily sacrificed and a little amount of blood, a piece of flesh and the head of the goat, are placed at the altar. After this the icons of Hara and Gaurī, enshrined in the Calanta temple (which can be identified with the antarāla or jagamohan of Hindu shrines elsewhere) are worshipped. At noon cooked victuals consisting of black grams (in lieu of meat), flesh and vegetables are offered to the deity. In the evening ārati is performed. It may be mentioned that during the time of the worship and the offering of the victuals to the deity, the votaries are not allowed to enter the temple. But for the rest of the day the temple remains open for all votaries who are first required to ceremonially wash their face and feet in the pond known as Saubhāgyakunda.

It is stated in the Yogini-tantra (1,11.20) that the benefit accruing from the visit to Kamakhya is equivalent to that of the aśvamedha (horse-sacrifice).
near the temple. The devotees usually offer garlands, lamps of ghee, bhog, etc., to the deity. It appears that the process of worship of the deity described in the Kalika-purāṇa and the Yogini-tantra have undergone many changes with the passage of time. Some of the sacrificial objects like a tortoise, deer, and other animals, human being and his blood mentioned in the Kalika-purāṇa (ch.67) and the Yogini-tantra (II,7.154-160), are not allowed to be offered to the deity to day. Buffaloes are sacrificed only on the occasion of the Durgā-pūjā, or when some votary makes a special offer of it. Goats and pigeons offered by votaries are either sacrificed or set free in the name of the deity, in accordance with the wishes of the votaries. The reason that led to the discontinuance of some of the old practices including offering of human head and blood might be the spread of the bhakti cult in the land from the fifteenth century.

One more Kamākhya temple is located at Ksetri in the district. It is believed that the Dimariā king built this temple after the construction of the Kamākhya temple at Nilācala hill. The presiding deity is worshipped daily in this temple.

The kumārī pūjā

One special ritual frequently held in the temple of Kamakhyā is the kumārī-pūjā or the worship of a virgin who assumes the role of the Devi. The kumārī-pūjā can be performed on any day throughout the year. It is, however, noticed that this
is mostly performed by many votaries on the closing day of ambuvāci, the supposed menstrual period of the Mother Earth. Along with the Durgā-pūjā festival the kumārī-pūjā is also performed. This shows that the kumārī-pūjā has a distinct place of honour in the Śākta school till today. The present practice is that a minor daughter of a Pānda (pilgrim's guide) is idolised as the virgin goddess on that occasion and worshipped by an individual or a couple. Before the worship the virgin is neatly dressed and is seated on a low stool or a piece of cloth placed in front of offerings consisting of husked rice, pulse, fruits, sweets, scented oil, comb, mirror, vermilion, clothes, ornaments, flowers, garlands and bilva leaves. When these articles are arranged, the votary puts on his head a garland and sits near the offerings. He besmears the feet of the virgin with lac dye. As the priest utters mystic syllables in praise of the virgin goddess, the votary offers flowers, bilva-leaves, a little amount of rice and water at the feet of the girl with a copper spoon (argha). In the name of the goddess he further offers to the virgin a looking-glass, a comb, scented oil and clothes, and adorns her with a garland. He also waves an earthen lamp and incense-stand in front of the virgin. While the worship goes on, the musical instruments like dhols (drums), cymbals, etc., are

21. The priest who conducts the kumārī-pūjā usually supplies the articles and the votary or votaries pay a nominal price for the same. The priest, however, uses the same set of articles as far as practicable.
played outside the temple. At the end of the worship the votary feeds the virgin with sweets and pays daksīṇā to her. The votary bows down at the feet of the virgin who in turn blesses him by touching the head with her right hand and uttering the words 'May you be happy' (kusāl haṅk, maṅgal haṅk). Finally the votary pays daksīṇā to the priest.

It is difficult to trace out when the worship of a virgin (kumārī) as an embodiment of Śakti was introduced. It may be noted here that though the word kumārī usually means a minor girl or a virgin, chaste and unspotted, it connotes in this context an unmarried maiden who is free from anybody's control. In the Kālikā-purāṇa (ch.63) goddess Kāmākhya (who is also known as Sodasi) is called virgin goddess Tripurā. This goddess is adored in three forms: Tripurabala, Tripura-sundari and Tripura-bhairavi. Before her worship, a triangular diagram should be drawn (63.52). The goddess is to be worshipped with sixteen varieties of offerings (63.184) and three kinds of sacrifice (63.193). The goddess may be worshipped according to the right-hand or left-hand method. The Yognī-tantra (II, 7.76) asserts that the goddess Tripurā is the presiding deity of Kāmākhya. She assumed the form of a virgin (kumārī) and killed a demon called Kolāsura. The virgin goddess is the manifestation of Śakti who pervades the

23. Y.T., I, ch.17.
whole universe with her lustre (I, 17.21; I, 19.71). The goddess was worshipped by gods and other goddesses and thus the worship of the goddess in her virgin form spread far and wide in the land (I, 17.28). The tantra prescribes that a virgin should be worshipped as the physical manifestation of Śakti. To propitiate one virgin is to propitiate all the goddesses. If a devotee luckily finds an unmarried daughter of a prostitute, he should worship her with the offerings of gold, silver, etc. (I, 17.34).

The Yogini-tantra (I,6.7-12) gives an account of the process of meditating upon the virgin form of the goddess. The devotee is to contemplate an image of a naked girl of sixteen shining like a rising sun. He is to concentrate his mind on different parts of her body and then think of his own body as being fully assimilated to her image.

It may be pointed out that there is a class of Śaktas called Kaulika, which consists of two sections: ancient (pūrva) and modern (uttara). The former worships a picture of the female genitals while the latter worships the genitals of a living woman with wine, flesh, honey, fish and such other things. The Yogini-tantra also asserts that wine, flesh, fish, woman, etc., are most essential for the worship of the goddess in a Kaula-way (I,6.17,43). From this it may be assumed that the virgin worship owes its origin to the worship of Śakti in a Kaula way.

24. ekā hi pūjitā bālā sarvāḥ hi pūjanaḥ bhavet (I,17.33).
The Yogini-tantra mentions some places like Kāñci (possibly modern Kāñcipuram of South India) and Kampilla, a city of Uttar Pradesh where the worship of the virgin took place in olden days. Kakati shows that the cult of virgin worship is derived from the cult of Tripurā and the Tripurā cult appears to him to have originated in South India. Thus it seems that the kumārī-pūjā is prevalent not only in Kamrup but also in other parts of India.

From the present method of virgin worship it appears that most of the old rites (prescribed in the Kalika-purāṇa and the Yogini-tantra) have almost died down. A virgin not of sixteen years but of minor age is worshipped as the symbol of the goddess at present. This may be due to the social stigma attached to the sensual aspect of the worship. Secondly, wine is not offered, nor animal sacrifice is performed today. The number of sixteen varieties of articles also seems to have lessened and most of the articles are used only as tokens. However, the votaries believe in the assertion of the priest that one may get his desires fulfilled by worshipping the virgin goddess. In other words, they believe that they will be blessed with sons, wealth, land and other desired objects. The Kalika-purāṇa (63,202) states that by worshipping the goddess one can ascend the abode of the goddess (Devi-loka) after getting all his worldly desires fulfilled.

The worship of the goddess Durga

One manifestation of Šakti is the ten-armed Durga. As in other parts of India the Durga-pūjā is celebrated in Assam during September-October. Though Durga-pūjā is primarily a festival of the Saktas, people of other sects also take equal share in its accompanying merriment. Next to Bihu, Durga-pūjā is the most celebrated festival in Assam.

The iconographic representations of Durga, viz., the images of Mahiṣamardini-durga of Hāṭimūrā temple (Nowgong) of the 9th-10th century, the Mahiṣamardini from the Bhoi-Parvat (Nowgong) ascribed to the 9th century A.D., the rock-cut image of Durga found in Pāṇḍu,27 etc., point to at least ninth to tenth centuries of Durgā worship in Assam. The Kalīka-purāṇa28 gives a detailed account of the Durgā worship. On the occasion of the establishment of the Devīdol of Sibsagar, one Kṛṣṇarāma Nyāyavāgīśa Bhaṭṭācārya introduced the worship of Durgā and under orders of the king Śivasimha wrote Durgāreṣamāṇi maṇjarī.

The rites and rituals of the worship of Durgā have been prescribed in different puranas, viz., Brahmāndikeśvara-purāṇa, Devī-purāṇa and Kalīka-purāṇa.29 Though there are some minor

28. (a) Panchanan Tarkaratna, ed.: Kālikā-purāṇa (Baṅgavāsī Kāryālay); (b) Nṛśimhachandra Vidyabhusan, ed.: Kālikā-purāṇokta-Durgā-pūjā Paddhati; P.D., vide "Kālikā-purāṇokta Durgapūjā".
differences in respect of the rituals prescribed in these purāṇas, by and large the pūjā is almost the same. People, however, perform Durgā-pūjā by following any one of these purānas according to their tradition.

The bright fortnight within which the Durgā-pūjā is performed, is called Devi-pakṣa. The first nine nights of this fortnight is known as navarātra. During these days a special kind of worship to Devi takes place in the temple of Kamakhya. Particularly the kumāri-pūjā is performed daily during this period. In some places (e.g. Bilvēśvara temple) a pitcher is consecrated (ghata sthāpana) on the first day of Devi-pakṣa and a goat is sacrificed in honour of the goddess Durgā.

It is believed that during the daksināvana, i.e., the period of the year from July to December, all the gods and goddesses remain asleep. Hence, the awakening of the deity is of prime importance in any worship during this period. So, in the evening of the sixth day of Devi-pakṣa the goddess Durgā is supposed to have been awakened (bodhana) by chanting mystic verses (mantras) under a bilva tree. Then a consecrated pitcher called Devi-ghata, is placed on the altar, and the adhivāsa ceremony (i.e. introductory and purificatory rites) is performed. A cluster of images with Durgā at the centre, Śiva at the top, Lakṣmī and Gāṇeśa to the right, Sarasvatī and Kārtika to the left and a lion and the demon Mahiṣāsura under the feet of Durgā, is placed at the altar. It may be noted that the images are
not required when the worship takes place in ancient temples like Kamakhya Bilvesvara and Ugratara.

In the seventh day morning of the Devi-paksa a small bilva branch consisting of two bilva fruits, is cut down by chanting the mantra "chindhi chindhi phat phat svāhā". A small banana plant and the leaves of seven other varieties of plant are covered with a sari to resemble a veiled Hindu bride. This called navapatrika, is regarded as the representation of the goddess and is placed near the image of Ganesa. Then the worship of Durga and other gods and goddesses is performed with gadasnopacāra. The worship for the saptami-day is closed with the sacrifice of an animal.

The worship of the deity on the aṣṭami and the navami days is performed with great eclat. So, these two days are called maha (great) aṣṭami and maha navami. The meeting point between the mahāaṣṭami and the mahānavami day is called sandhi (juncture) when a special kind of worship called sandhi-puja, is performed. On the navami day a large number of goats, pigeons, ducks and sometimes buffaloes offered by votaries, is usually sacrificed. According to the Kalika-purāṇa (60.6) some kumarīs (virgins) should be fed in connection with the worship of Durga. The Devi-purāṇa refers to the worship of a virgin on the mahāaṣṭami day at the time of sandhi-puja. The Skanda-purāṇa provides that the performer should feed the maidens from the first

tithi of Navaratra on a rising scale, viz., one maiden on the first tithi, two maidens on the second and so on up to nine on the ninth.\(^31\) But the worship of the virgin is performed in some places of Kamrup on the \textit{daśami} day called \textit{vijayā-daśami}, when no sacrifice is offered. Only the deity is worshipped with \textit{pañcopacara}. The worship being over the \textit{Devi-gaṭa} and the image of Durgā along with those of Lakṣmi, Sarasvatī, etc., are immersed. The \textit{Kalika-purāṇa} prescribes that a devotee should write the name of Durga on a palm leaf (\textit{tāla patra}) that day.\(^32\) This practice is now observed mostly by the school-going students by using a piece of paper instead of the palm leaf.\(^33\) It is believed that such an act would bring knowledge to the students.

Though the \textit{Kalika-purāṇa} prescribes tortoise, alligators (67.3.5) and human beings (67.101.148) besides different kinds of animals and birds as sacrificial items, now-a-days, however, buffaloes, pigeons, ducks, goats, etc., are only offered. Just before immolation the sacrificial objects and the weapons are washed and worshipped. As soon as an animal is sacrificed a portion of flesh from the upper part of its body, a little amount of blood and the head are placed before the \textit{Devi-gaṭa} and a blazing wick is kept on the head of the animal.

\(^{31}\) H.D., Vol.V, Pt.I, p.170.\(^{32}\) P.D., p.816.\(^{33}\) The students usually write down the names of Durgā and Sarasvatī each for 108 times thus: 'śrīśri-durgādevyai namāḥ' and 'śrīśri-sarasvatai namāḥ'. Moreover, some of the students write down an Assamese verse in praise of Sarasvatī. (Infra, Sarasvatī, ch.V.)
There are three methods of worship of Durgā, viz., sātvika, rājasika and tāmasika. In the sātvika form of worship meditation, offering of homa and oblation of vegetarian articles are essential. According to the rājasika method meditation and homa are not necessary but animal sacrifice and non-vegetarian offerings are mostly required. In the tāmasika method wine and meat are the main offerings to the goddess and there is no necessity of meditation, homa or mantra. The Kirātas are said to have followed this process.

There is some resemblance between the methods as prescribed in the purāṇas and those of the present day Durgā-worship in Kamrup. The sātvika and the rājasika methods appear to have been assimilated in the present method of worship. However, the grandeur in respect of offering articles continues to decline. The human sacrifice is forbidden. Goats, buffaloes, pigeons, ducks, fish, sugarcane, the ash gourd (komorā) and a variety of arum, called mān-kacu, are sacrificed only in temples. Elsewhere, Durgā-pūjā is performed in the sātvika way. The Kālīka-purāṇa (67.119) prescribes wine as an important offering to the goddess. In early times musical performances were held in connection with

34. śāradī caṇḍikāpūjā trividāh parigiyate sātvikā rājasī caiva tāmasī ceti tāḥ śrṇu. (As quoted in the Durgotsava Viveka, p.3, from the Skanda-purāṇa).

35. Durgotsava Viveka, p.3.

the worship of Durgā. The Kalikā-purāṇa (60.33) mentions one special festival, namely śabarotsava which was celebrated in connection with the immersion of the image of Durgā on the vijayā-daśamī day. The festival was performed by the virgins, prostitutes and dancers. While participating in the festival they played on musical instruments, like conch and drum, kept some flags fluttering in the air, threw mud and parched-paddy on one another and uttered some lewd words (61.19-21). But this festival has now become completely obsolete. It may, however, be mentioned that even today some people of Kamakhya rejoice in taking ghōṭā and hemp, and performing a dance on the daśamī day. In a way it is reminiscent of the śabara festival. Now-a-days a group of singers and dancers, called niśpāli, invariably presents its performance in the pūjā pandal during the period of the festival.

It may be noted that some of the articles prescribed in the Durgā-pūjā-bidhis are scarce and beyond the reach of common people of our times. As for example, water collected from rain, dew, hot spring, river Gaṅgā, sea, etc., is required for mahāsnāna, a kind of special bath to be given to the goddess. Again pieces of earth collected from different sources like the tusk of an elephant, horns of a bull, the door-way of a prostitute and the bottom of an ocean, etc., are necessary for the purification of

the Devī-ghata and the Devī-pitha. From this it appears that it is not possible for all except the well-to-do people to celebrate the Durgā-pūjā in the prescribed manner. The Kālikā-purāṇa (60.1) prescribes that kings would celebrate the Durga-puja festival with sacrifices in the autumnal season. History tells us that some of the kings belonging to different royal dynasties, viz., the Ahom king Rudrasimha, Śivasimha and his queen Phulesvarī, Koch king Naranarāyaṇa, etc., celebrated Durgā-pūjā with much eclat. It is stated in the Asam Buranī that without prior permission from the Ahom king no one except the royal priest could perform the Durgā-pūjā or offer sacrifice to the goddess Durgā. It may, therefore, be assumed that in olden days the celebration of Durgā-pūjā was confined mainly to the royal families, but along with the eclipse of the monarchical rule, the Durgā-pūjā is being performed by the common people. And thus passing into the hands of less affluent people Durgā-worship was gradually divested of the gaudy and rich offerings of the earlier days. The over-simplification of Durgā-worship by dispensing with many items of worship might have stemmed from the general laxity for elaborate rituals of the past. It may be mentioned here that buffalo sacrifice to the goddess was not

38. Pāckaḍi Bandyopādhyāya Raacauvalī, pp.175-177.
41. Kochbiharer Itihās, p.129.
42. Written by Haliram Dhekiyal Phukan and ed. by Jatindramohan Bhattacharya, p.58.
freely allowed by the Ahom king as the animal was considered very essential for cultivation.43

Durgā-pūjā, as mentioned above, has now become one of the most popular festivals in Kamrup district. It has now emerged into a community worship taking in its fold not only the important towns of the district, (with singular exception of Barpeta) but also many populous villages inhabited by the Hindus. In almost every town numerous pandals are tastefully decorated and the clay images of the goddess Durgā surrounded by a cluster of other gods and goddesses, are prominently installed under a temporary shed raised at the outer side of the pandal. The pūjā pandals remain crowded by people of all ages and sects from morning till late evening and are stirred up by beating of drums and the blowing of conch-shells, full throated chorus of the ośāpāli, and the romping and frolicking children attired in their best for this purpose. This invariably presents a spectacle of a gay congregation and mass merriment. The women devotees, offer naivedya to the goddess and accept nirmāli from the priest with great reverence. Although the images conform to the basic concept envisaged in the text, they vary to a great extent in size as well as presentation, depending upon the expertise or excellence of the artisans. While the actual worship goes on in the manner prescribed in the texts, the sweet-meat dealers, stationery shop-keepers, pān-shops and many other petty traders who open their stalls near and around the pūjā-

43. Ibid., p.58.
pandal make brisk business. In many places the function continues till small hours of the following morning, and the people are entertained with musical and theatrical performances.

The grand spectacle reaches its high-water-mark on the vijaya-daśami day. In the afternoon the images mounted on lorries, are taken out in colourful processions. Towards the evening the images are brought to the river side and carried on country boats. Thereafter immersion of images takes place in the midstream.

Some religious observances connected with the worship of Durgā

There are a few religious ceremonies performed during the period of Durgā-pūjā. Many house-holders worship Durga on the mahāstami day in their residences. The women-folk also perform a number of simple ceremonies on this occasion. These are: pacalā throwing, āilā-pūjā, Devīr nām and śāl-pūjā. A brief description of the last four observances is given below:

The pacalā throwing ceremony:

Pacalā means a young shoot of the plantain tree of which a curry of delicate savour is prepared by most of the Assamese women. The curry also is known as pacalā. This plantain shoot i.e., pacalā is specially connected with a festival held on the mahānāvantī day of Durgā-pūjā in the Siva temple of Piṅgaleśvara in the Kamalpur circle of Kamrup. The mahānāvantī day is
observed with great gusto and fervor in this temple. People collect in large number at the precincts of the temple from the very morning of the day. The usual rites and sacrifices are performed before noon. Immediately after that a tug of war is started between two parties. In this tug of war a bamboo is used instead of a rope. The bamboo is properly washed and placed in the gate-house of the temple area. The parties start pulling the bamboo from both the ends. The winners of the game take the lead in throwing the pieces of the plantain shoots. This is the climax of the festivities associated with the pacalā festival.

The sacrifices in the festival are offered on a pedestal made of big plantain shoots. As the animals are being sacrificed pieces of the plantain shoots start shooting sideways. All these pieces, soaked in the blood of the animal sacrificed, are collected together and chipped into smaller pieces. These pieces are now thrown across the pandal by the jubilant devotees. The winners of the tug of war start the process and all other people, old and young, take part in the function. This continues for some time. The whole festival is known as pacalā throwing festival.

The tug of war episode bears resemblance to the mock-fight of the dola festival described in the chapter IV.
Ailā-pūjā:

Ailā-pūjā is also known as ōula-pūjā or Devī-pūjā. This ceremony is performed by the unmarried grown-up girls in a community basis on the navami-tithi of Devī-pakṣa. On this occasion a large number of bamboo-torches are lighted and the goddess Durgā is worshipped by the girls. The purpose of the worship is to secure blessings of the goddess towards the votaries becoming expert weavers and obtaining good husbands.

On the day of observance the girls abstain from taking food. They collect articles like fruits, rice, pulses for naive-dva and weaving tools like spinning wheel (vātar) and cotton-gin (neethani). They make a square size altar in a courtyard or in a namghar. The altar is bedecked with a diagram (mandala), varieties of flowers and coloured papers. Four young banana plants are erected on the four corners of the altar. Jasmine flowers and cotton threads spun by the girls, are hung over the banana-plants. A palanquin-shaped seat, called māju, is made of plantain barks. It is beautifully decorated and placed on the altar.

44. (a) The word āilā may be a corrupt form of āriyā (torch) derived from Skt. andikā (meaning a fire-pit). As noted above, a large number of bamboo-torches are lighted on the occasion of the Devī-pūjā.

(b) Another meaning of the term āilā is scattering and thereby exhausting something. So, the term āilā-pūjā may indicate the closing function of the Devī-worship, as it is almost closed on the navami-tithi.

(c) The term ōula may be derived from ākula (mad), Śiva and Pārvatī being sometime referred to as Pagalā and Pagalī.
Thereafter an image of Durgā is kept in the maṭju. Earthen lamps, incense and resins are also burnt at the altar.

The ceremony starts in the evening and continues till morning. No Brāhmin priest is required to conduct the function. The girls sit in front of the altar and offer their reverential prayer to the goddess by singing devotional songs in her praise. Simultaneously they start spinning and weaving. A piece of cloth is woven during the night which is offered to the goddess in the morning. At the end of the function the image is immersed.45

Devīr nām:

Devīr nām, like śilā-pūjā, is performed during the pūjā festival. The high light of this function is the variety of the devotional songs sung by the women-folk of a locality in praise of the goddess. It is believed that the goddess Durgā is easily propitiated by the performance of this ritual. Consequently, she protects people from all sorts of diseases like cholera, small-pox, etc., and blesses the devotees. The function is held in the evening of aṣṭamī, navamī, or daśamī day of the Devi-pakṣa. In this function oblations consisting of rice, pulses and varieties of fruits are offered in honour of the goddess. The prayer-services continue for about an hour. The songs relate to the popular concepts regarding/activities of the goddess.46 Durga is here represented as the spouse of the Lord Śiva. Once in a year,

as the story goes, she comes down from the Kailāsa mountain to receive the homage of her devotees and shower blessings on them. She takes sacrificial animals and like an Assamese woman she relishes in chewing areca-nut, betel-vine, lime and tobacco. After receiving prayers when she returns to Kailāsa, she is rebuked by her husband and is not allowed to enter her home. She is made to spend the night beneath arum plants. The village girls wrap threads round the arum plants on the daśamī day, because they believe that by doing so one can obtain a boon from the goddess to become a good weaver.

Śal-pūjā:

Śal-pūjā or the hand-loom festival is held on the viṭavā-daśamī day in some villages of Nalbari sub-division in the district. On this occasion girls and women raise four small mounds of earth around the four posts of their own loom. Each mound is decorated with vermilion and varieties of flowers including a flower of devi-tokan plant which is considered most essential. In the centre of the four posts a naivedya is offered to the goddess Durgā. The performers pay their reverences to the goddess.

The purpose of observing the festival is to secure blessings from the goddess Durgā to become a good weaver.
From the above description of the local festivals it seems that Assamese women and girls attach much importance to the art of weaving and that it is as sacred and important to their life as the said religious performances.

The Vāsanti-pūjā

Another form of the worship of Durga is called Vāsanti-pūjā as it is held in the Vasanta-ṛtu (spring season) particularly in the month of Caitra (March-April) or sometime in Vaiśākha (April-May). The goddess is worshipped on the bright saptami, aṣṭami, navami and daśamī tithis of the month. According to the Markandeya-purāṇa (chs.78-90) Suratha, a Kṣatriya king and one Samāhi Vaiśya first worshipped a clay image of Durga in the spring time. Rāvana, king of Lāṅka, also used to worship Durgā in the spring time, but later on Rama celebrated the Durgā-pūjā in the autumnal season to kill Rāvana. In course of time the pūjā festival of Autumn became much more popular than that of spring. However, the rites and rituals of the worship of the goddess in both the seasons are almost the same. Only the bodhana (awakening) function is not performed in the Vāsanti-pūjā, as all the gods and goddesses are believed to have remained wide awake in that season.

Durga is also known as Annapūrṇā, meaning a goddess whose store of food is full. She is ever bounteous to mankind. This concept of Durgā finds prominent expression in the celebration of Vāsantī-pūjā held on the astāmī day.

The pomp and grandeur that usually mark the Durgā-pūjā are conspicuously absent in the Vāsantī-pūjā. The number of places of celebrating Vāsantī-pūjā is also very few.

The worship of the goddess Kālī

The goddess Kālī or Šyāmā is regarded as one of the manifestations of Śakti. The Kālikā-purāṇa (41.45-48) narrates that Satī, the daughter of the king Dakṣa, was born after self-immolation as the daughter of Himalaya and his spouse Menakā. She was called by the names Šyāmā, Kālī and Pārvatī by her mother, father and friends respectively. According to the Yogini-tantra (I, ch.8) Śakti assumed the dreadful form of a woman, called Kālī, in order to kill a demon called Ghora. Another form of Śakti is Bhadrakālī who slew the demon Mahiṣāsura. In that form she kept her left toe on the chest of Mahādeva, and thus Śiva in the form of a corpse became the pedestal of the goddess Kālī (I, 9.69-70). Kālī also killed the demon Keśī who threatened Brahmā and Viṣṇu (I, 15.23). Besides these, she has other forms under different names of Kālī, viz., Dakṣiṇākālī, Śmaśāna-kālī, Raṭanti-kālī, Phalahārini-kālī, Rakṣā-kālī,
and the like. They are separately worshipped by different vo­
taries on different occasions. These different manifestations
of Kāli appear to have shown the manifold and miraculous activi­
ties and popularity of the Śakti cult like that of Viṣṇu in
the Hindu pantheon. In one verse of the Yogini-tantra, Kāli is
said to be Brahmarūpā (the spirit of the Universe), Sanātanī
(the spirit of eternity), Mahāvidyā (epitome of learning) and
Paramesāvari (the Supreme Goddess). Kāli is also identified as
Kāmākhyā, the bestower of all desired objects (sarvasiddhi vino­
dīnī). The image of Kāli is regarded as the prototype of the
goddess and worshipped with due rituals.

There are two types of worship of Kāli, viz., nitya
and kāmya. The nitya type of worship is performed annually by
the people in a community basis in the new moon night of the
month of Kartika. The kāmya type of worship is performed in an
individual household on some suitable day of the year. By per­
forming the first type of worship one can obtain happiness in
this world and salvation after one's death.49 The second type
of worship is performed at night falling on Tuesday, Saturday,
new moon day, eighth, ninth or fourteenth lunar day of a month.
It is stated in the texts that in order to be protected from
pestilence and famine one should worship Kāli with devotion.
Kāli is called the goddess of protection (Rakṣā-kāli) as she is
believed to protect all beings.

49. tatra sampūjyayeddevīm bhogamokṣapradāyinīṁ.
(As quoted from Devyācana in the Viśvakoṣa, Vol.XX,p.606.)
The methods of worship of Kālī in all her manifestations are almost the same, though there are minute differences in respect of dhvāna (meditation) and pranāma (salutation) mantras. As for example, we can compare the dhvānamantra of Raksākālī with that of Niśakālī as follows:

caturbhuja krṣṇavarnā munḍamālā-bibhūsītā
khaḍgañca dākṣīne pāṇau bibhṛatindivaradyam.

and,

om śavopari samāsinām munḍamālā bibhūsītam
dhāyedaṣṭabhujaīryukā karapadme bīrājitaṃ.

The general rule is that Kālī is worshipped along with some other gods and goddesses including Pañcadēvā, Navagraha, Daśadikpāla, Bhairava, Vaṭuka, Mahākāla and the like. The sword with which the animal is sacrificed is also worshipped. As prescribed in the Kālī-pūja-vidhi articles exceeding one hundred in number are required to worship the goddess. But it is not easy for common people to collect some articles, like nava-ratna (nine kinds of precious jewels) i.e., pearl (muktā), ruby (mānikya) cat's eye (vaidūrya maṇi), gomeda, lotus-hued gem (padmarāga), etc., which are very costly and scarce. So, in lieu of these costly articles some token price is offered to the goddess. It is to be noted that as in Durgā-pūja some specific diagrams (yantra or maṇḍala) are drawn on the altar where the holy pitcher is placed, and in some places worship of Kālī is

50. P.D., pp.1009-1010; Śrīrī-kālīpūja paddhati, compiled by Harishchandra Vidyaratna Bhattacharya, Calcutta, 1370(BS).
performed without sacrificing a bird or an animal.

The Yogini-tantra (I, 5.61-73) gives an account of the worship of the goddess in the cremation ground. It (I, 11.8-10) considers a cremation ground to be the most suitable place for worship of the goddess. But this practice became obsolete in later times.

The worship of Raṭanti Kālī is performed in Kāmākhyā temple on the fourteenth day of the dark half of Māgha. Likewise, another form of Kālī, called Phalāhāriṇī, is also worshipped in Kāmākhyā temple in the new moon night of Jyaiśṭha. It is to be noted that varieties of fruits and flowers form the special offerings to the goddess. Daksīṇa-kālī, another form of the goddess, is usually worshipped in the house-holds. The goddess is conceived as fair and six-armed, standing over the chest of Mahādeva.

On the occasion of the worship of different forms of Kālī, pāṭalī and other dramatic performances draw the attention of the people to the place of worship.

Jagaddhātrī

Like Durgā or Kālī, Jagaddhātrī is also regarded as a manifestation of Śakti. She is worshipped on the ninth day of the bright half of Kārtika (October-November). Her mount(vahana) like that of Durgā, is a lion. The difference between Durgā and
Jagaddhātrī lies only in their forms: Durgā is a ten-armed (daśabhujā) goddess, whereas Jagaddhātrī is four-armed (catur-bhujā). The goddess is named Jagaddhātrī because she is regarded as the foster-mother (dhātrī) of the world (jagat).

The method of the worship of Jagaddhātrī bears resemblance to that of goddess Durgā. However, there is a difference. Durgā is worshipped for three days i.e., from the saptami to the navami days of the Devi-pakṣa, whereas Jagaddhātrī is worshipped for three times 51 on the same day, i.e., the navami tithi. The festival connected with Durga-worship ends on the vilava-dasami day, while that with Jagaddhātrī usually closes on the navami day and sometimes on the dasami day.

We have reference to the worship of Jagaddhātrī in different texts like Kātyāvani-tantra, Kuviika-tantra, Uttara-Kamākhya-tantra, Bhavisya-purāṇa and Smṛti-saṃgraha, composed perhaps at different places of India at different times. This shows the popularity and the wide prevalence of the worship of the goddess in different parts of India.

The Kātyāvani-tantra (paṭala or ch.77) narrates a story of the origin of the goddess Jagaddhātrī as follows:

Once all the gods became proud of their own prowess of which, they believed, there was no parallel. Knowing this the goddess Durga wanted to curb their power and appeared before them as a wonderful lustre. The gods could not look at the bright object. They sent Pavana, the wind-god and Agni, the fire-god, to face the lustre. The

51. P.D., p.320.
goddess remaining within the luminosity told Pavana to remove a piece of straw, but Pavana tried in vain. The goddess then told Agni to burn the straw, but he also could not succeed. Then all the gods were frightened and began to pray the lustre as the goddess of the universe. The goddess was satisfied with their prayer and sitting on a lion appeared before them as Jagaddhatri.52

There is a similar story about the birth of Haimavatī in the Kenopanisad.53 The goddess was possibly assimilated with Durgā afterwards.

According to the Kātyāvanī-tantra (ch.18) the goddess is to be worshipped on the ninth day of the bright half of Kārtika. The goddess helps to cure the disease of children and increases one's influence and power. If the navami day falls either on Tuesday or Saturday, the worship of the goddess helps one to attain caturvarga, i.e., the four principal objects of human pursuit, viz., dharma (virtue), artha (wealth), kāma (sensual enjoyment) and mokṣa (salvation).

The worship of Jagaddhātrī is performed either individually or in a community basis. An image of the goddess and that of a lion as her mount are made for the purpose. In the worship of the goddess animal sacrifice is also admissible. Though prescribed in the pūjā-bidhi, the co-worship of the kumārī (virgin) and Jagaddhātrī is rarely practised at present. Even the worship

53. tasminnevakase striyamajagama umām haimavatīm vaḫusobhahāmanām.
(As quoted in the Bāṅgalīr Pūjā-dārvāṇa, p.69 from the Kenopanisad.)
of this goddess is also not widely prevalent in the district of Kamrup. It is even less popular than Kāli-pūjā. However, to the mind of the devotees the goddess occupies the same place of honour as Durgā or Kāli.

Maṅgalacanḍī

Maṅgalacanḍī, the goddess of welfare and happiness, is regarded as one of the manifestations of Śakti.

The Brahmavaivarta-purāṇa gives an account of the goddess Maṅgalacanḍī. The purāṇa defines the name Maṅgalacanḍī thus: caṇḍī means skilful and maṅgala means welfare. As the goddess is an expert in doing good to her devotees, she is called Maṅgalacanḍī. Further, she is said to have been worshipped by the planet, Maṅgala and also by a monarch of the world, called Maṅgala. Hence she is so called. The goddess Durgā manifested herself in the shape of Maṅgalacanḍī in order to help Śiva for killing the demon, Tripura. She was first worshipped by Śiva with oblations of water, and then with the offerings of flowers, sandal-paste, cloth, ornaments, cakes, honey, and with presents of goat, lamb and buffaloes, followed by the meditation of her qualities according to the prescribed mantras. Finally the goddess was worshipped by the women on Tuesday (Maṅgala) and thus her worship spread in the three worlds.

54. Prakṛti-khaṇḍa, ch.44. 55. Ibid., 44.1-19.
56. Ibid., 44.36-40.
One special temple dedicated to this deity is the Chatrakāra temple situated at Gauhati. A brass image of the goddess Maṅgalacaṇḍī is daily worshipped with the offerings of cooked victuals. Fish, pigeon, duck and goat are also sacrificed occasionally. Elaborate arrangements are made to worship the goddess on the special day when the last day of a month happens to be Tuesday. The Brahmayajātā-purāṇa (prakṛti-khaṇḍa, ch.44.32) also states that her worship is appropriate on Tuesday.

The annual festival held in honour of the deity in the temple is called Maṅgalacaṇḍī-vaiṇa. The vaiṇa festival is celebrated on the last Tuesday of Vaiśākha. On this occasion, the worship of the goddess is performed with the offering of homa rites. It is commonly believed that a woman is blessed with a son or sound health, if she observes a vow in the name of Maṅgalacaṇḍī. So female votaries in large number often offer their prayers in the temple.

Ugratārā

Ugratārā is generally identified with the Buddhist goddess Tikṣṇakāntā or Ekajaṭā. She was later on inducted into the Hindu tantras and is identified with the goddess Durgā of Kālī. The Yogini-tantra (I, 2.8) holds Tārā as another name of Kālī and

57. The Mother Goddess Kāmākhya, p.64.
Kamakhya. The Kalika-purana (ch.18.43) states that the navel of Sati fell to the east of the Kama hill, i.e., the Nilacala hill. It is believed that the well inside the temple of Ugratara at Gauhati represents the navel of Sati. Through these accounts the goddess Ugratara is identified as one of the manifestations of Sakti.

Ugratara was worshipped according to the left-hand method (vamacara). The Kalika-purana (ch.55) gives a long list of sacrificial objects, viz., animals, birds and votary's own blood to the goddess. But now-a-days only fish, goats, pigeons and ducks are sacrificed. People suffering from eye diseases worship the deity with a belief that the goddess has powers to cure their disease.

IV

The invocation of Sakti involves the tantric, ritualistic and devotional aspects. At present the horrible practices of the tantric cult have lost their former hold in Kamrup. The ritualistic aspect is predominant in the temples. The devotional aspect which consists of observance of some of the simple ceremonies like wrapping of threads around arum plants, is predominant in the rural areas of Kamrup. In the folk songs as well as in some old Assamese narratives goddess Durga appears in various

58. Rama Sarasvati: Bhima-carita.
forms including that of a housewife who keeps herself busy with kitchen and other household duties, a venerated lady whose subservience to her husband is expected in such measure that she is scolded by her husband for being late in her return to Kailāsa, and a goddess who shines in all her lustre and might in the form of Durgā. She is the central figure in an Assamese narrative Kalikā-purāṇa, or Haragaurīr Bibaha where her marriage with Hara has been described in a manner that fits with the description of a typical Assamese Hindu marriage ceremony. Many female minor deities worshipped in the villages are considered to be the prototype of Durgā in the folk-songs. One more salient feature of the worship of Śakti in Kamrup is that in the nīṭhaśṭhāna the object of worship is not an image but a consecrated pitcher personified as the goddess to which offerings are made. The clay image (mṛṇmaya-mūrti) of Durgā appears to be of rather recent origin.

We have noted elsewhere some of the names of the goddess Śakti which are found in the old texts. Besides these, we find a few more names which can be termed as local. To each of these names is dedicated a shrine or a holy place where the worship of the goddess is performed regularly. The folk songs

59. Devīr nām.
60. Durgār nām.
61. Infra, ch.V.
62. We may refer to the deities like Lāheswarī, Dharmeswarī, Nijeswarī, Bāgheswarī, Nāheswarī, and the like, as mentioned in Pavitra Asam, pp.202-207.
like Devīrām, Āilāpūjār gīt, and Durgāpūjār nām, etc., composed in praise of the different manifestations of Śakti and which have enriched the Assamese folk-literature, are still popular amongst the women-folk. The existing fasts and festivals observed in connection with the worship of the Śākta deities and also the folk songs composed centering around them, show that Śaktism has a firm hold in the district of Kamrup even today.