

CHAPTER- IV

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF CULTS IN THE SOCIO-RELIGIOUS LIFE OF KAMARUPA THROUGH THE AGES

Origin and antiquity of Kamarupa and Kamakhya

‘The non-Aryan origin of the name Pragjyotisha and its association with astronomy is well known to us. The words Kamarupa and Kamakhya also suggest an Austric or Alpine origin. The term Kamakhya is probably derived from an Austric formation, such as Kamoi (demon) in old Khamer; Kamoit (devil) in Cham; Kamet (corpse) in Khasi; Komui (grave) or Komuoch (corpse) in Santali. It may be a substitution of the word like Komuoch, meaning grave or the dead.¹ Kamrupa is derived from the formations like Kamru, or Kamrut, the name of a lesser divinity in Santali, and the land is thus associated with magic or necromancy.² Both Kamrupa and Kamakhya are closely associated in literature. B.K. Kakati thinks that the word Kamarupa symbolizes a new cult, and in exhalation of it the land was re-christened. The very name Kamrupa-Kamakhya suggests, in his opinion, that the cult is to be derived from some Austric divinity.³ The traditional origin of the name of the name of Kamarupa, as given in the Gopatha Brahmana, Which relates the story of Kamadeva’s revival after being burnt up by Siva, may be explained in the light of prevalence of the cult of magic and sorcery, associated with the Austric-Alpine culture of Assam.⁴ The traditional name Kamakhya also, associated with the genital organ of Sati, according to the Kalika Purana and other works, can be explained on the basis of a pre-Aryan cult of the phallus, receiving new orientation with the introduction of Aryan culture. The legends in the puranas and the Tantras may as well recall internment of the relics
of the Buddha. The story is applicable to both Kamarupa and Kamakhya. Symbolically Kamakhya stands for the geographical unit of Assam, which is *trikonakara* and Kamarupa for spiritual entity. The latter name was so reputed that a comparatively late work, *Hara-Gaurisambada* describes the long period of the Ahom rulers under what is styled *Kamarupadhikara*. Historically and traditionally both the names are indistinguishable, Kamarupa standing for *Purusa-Siva* and Kamakhya for *Prakriti-Devi*.

While Kamakhya finds mention only in literature, Kamarupa is also mentioned in epigraphs. That the latter is a sanskritization of some earlier formation is proved by other sources. The usual name is found as *Kamru* or *Kamrud* in the Buddhist caryas, the *Hara-Gauri-Sambada*, and the Muslim sources like the *Tabaqat-i-Nasiri* and *Riyaz-us-Samvada*, Yuan- Chwang mentions it as *Kamolup’o* and in *Tang-Shu*, the name is given as *Kamopo* and Komelu. Levi connects it with a formation like Tamalipi. The references shows the Austric origin of the name Kamarupa.

**The Sakti Cult Kamakhya**

We have come across the references to four places where Goddess Kamakhya is worshipped. The Kamakhya temple at Kshetri in Kamrupa is said to have been built by an unknown ruler of the Dimarua principality, and the date of its construction cannot be ascertained. The second is situated in Silghat in Pubtharia mauza in Nagaon district and one Kendukalai Barthakur is credited for the foundation of the temple in 1745 A.D. under the patronage of the Ahom king Pramattasimha. One more place for Kamakhya is known to be located in Lakhimpur village in Kalaigaon Mauza near Mangaldoi. The ruins lying there indicate the existence of an ancient temple.
According to some investigators Goddess Kamakhya was not totally absent in other parts of India also for they have referred to the temples of Kamakhya in a place called Ahicchatra, said to be the capital city of a king named Sumada and another temple for the Goddess in Kanchipura. It is however not known if there is any relation in between the temple of Kamakhya on Nilachala and that of Kamakshi of South India. The Cult as well as the temple of Kamakhya of our concern stands on the Nilachala hill in Guwahati. The area surrounding the temple has now been included in the area of the Guwahati municipal authority with 200 families who are closely connected with some form of activity of the temple. An all weather good motor able road leads to the temple. Buses of the Assam State Transport Corporation ply between the Deputy Commissioner’s office and the temple at every half-an-hour during day time. Taxis and auto-rickshaws are also readily available at the foot of the hill. The main temple of Kamakhya is surrounded by 13 other minor and subsidiary temples and is collectively known as Nanan Devalya (other different temples). The priests of these temples however, do not enjoy the right of worshipping Kamakhya. Besides the daily and regular worship, special pujas are organized on the occasions of the Ambubachi in the month of Asadha (July-August), when the mother earth (goddess Kamakhya) becomes impure. It last for three days and during the period the temple doors are closed and no pilgrim is allowed inside the temple. Pilgrim from all over India, Nepal and Bhutan come to visit the shrine on the forth-day when the temple is opened again.

Goddess Kamakhya has been the most dominating deity of the region since early times. Kamakhya has long been the most important shrine of the Sakta. Hindus and the land of Kamakhya attain fame in Hindu traditions as a land of magic and witchcraft. The name of Kamakhya finds mention for the first time in the Kalika Purana which also gives the story of its origin. Other work viz.the Yogini Tantra, the
Rudra Yamala, the Tantra-Chudamani, the Devi-Bhagavanta, the Manhandle Tantra, and the Kamakhya Tantra etc. simply recount the same story in one form or other. According to the Kalika Purana, being unable to bear the insult heaped upon her husband Siva by her father Dakhya, the familiar king in Indian mythology, Sati breathed her last. Overcome with the grief at the death of his consort, Siva wandered about the world carrying the dead body of Sati on his shoulder. Frightened at this all the Gods and Goddesses requested Visnu to put stop the penance of Siva. Visnu then followed Siva and the body of Sati was lapped off into pieces with his discus. As a result different parts of her body fell on fifty one different places on earth which became sacred. The genital part of Sati fell on Kamagiri and site was henceforth known as Kamakhya, or the goddess of sexual desire.

In another place, the same work says that the mountain represent the body of Siva himself and when Sati’s organ of generation fell on it, the hill turned blue for which it is called Nilachala (Hill of blue colour). The goddess who resides in Nilachala is called Kamakhya because she came here secretly to satisfy her Kama (amour) with Siva.

The Yogini Tantra on the other hand puts stress on the creative symbolism of Kamakhya in his conversation with wife Parvati, Siva tells that Kamakhya is the same as Kali and is regarded as the eternal form of Barhma, the god of creation. About the origin of the temple building, we have two legends. One says that Kama, the Indian cupid was sent by gods to put an end to Siva’s mourning after the death of Sati and to awake in him again the passion of creation. Siva became furious at this and Kama was burnt to ashes by the angry glance of Siva. Rati, the wife of Kama having no other way began to cry other gods suggested her preserve the ashes and to pray Siva. On being pacified, Siva brought back Kama to life without his original grace and charm.
Siva, however, agreed to restore Kama to his former self on condition that a temple on the genital part of Sati was to be erected by Kama. This was done and Kama got back his own *rupa* (original form). It is therefore, said that the temple of Kamakhya was built by gods with the help of Visvakarma, the carpenter and architect of Indian mythology. The other legend relates the construction of the temple with Naraka, the legendary king of ancient Assam. According to this legend, Naraka was made the king of Pragjyotisa and placed in charge of goddess Kamakhya. He was further advised by Visnu, his father, not to worship any other god except Kamakhya. Naraka made his capital at Pragjyotispura and settled a number of Brahmins at Kamakhya for the worship of the Devi. One day when goddess Kamakhya appeared before him, Naraka was captivated by her charm and made overtures of love to her. To fulfill the condition as laid down by the goddess to marry him, Naraka almost completed the construction of a temple, a pond and a road from the foot of the hill to the top within a single night. It is therefore said that the temple of Kamakhya was built by Naraka. However nothing is definitely known about the time of its first building and its builder. On architectural evidences, the original temple is assigned to 7th-8th century A.D.

It is from the rise of the Koch dynasty in the sixteenth century that the history of Kamakhya temple is known. A woman belonging to the Mach community showed the shrine to Venusimha, identified with Koch king Visvasimha, who after sacrificing a pig and a cock resolved to build a temple of gold at the site. Though scholars like R.M. Nath in his article entitled ‘*Kalapahar and the Kamakhya temple*’ demurs at the tradition; a large section of devotees still believe that the iconoclast Kalapahar who led an invasion of Kamrupa was responsible for the destruction of the temple. B.N. Sastri on the other hand opines that the Kamakhya temple faced its ruin on
account of natural calamities like earthquake. Whatever might be the truth, the original temple collapsed and Naranarayana alias Malladev, who succeeded Visvasimha built the temple of brick and mortar on the old temple. He placed one Mahatram Basihya, in charge of the construction but was accused of misappropriation of money for which he was punished. Thereafter, Meghamukdumak, one of the generals of Naranarayana, completed the work within six months. Two stone inscriptions now seen at the entrance chamber of the main shrine declare that king Malladeva and his brother Sukladhaja had built the temple in Saka 1487 (A.D. 1565). K.L. Barua suggests that the credit of rebuilding the temple should go Sukladhaja. The two stone figures now seen in the temple are said to be the representations of Naranarayana and Cilarai. (Malladeva and Sukladhaja).

Rites, Rituals, Festivals

The Kalika Purana contains information about the rites and rituals of Kamakhya. This is a work written in 10th century. But the worship of Goddess Kamakhya was started in the ancient past. Therefore it is very difficult to say how the goddess was worshipped before the Kalika Purana was composed. However, the rites and rituals of the deity might have prevailed for a long time. Up till now the method of worship is followed according to the Kalika Purana. In the Kamakhya complex a number of rituals- both calendrical and occasional are performed. Among these the most important rituals are as follows:

Ambuvachi (popularly known as Amti or Ameti)

It is observed in the month of Asadha (within the first fortnight of the month of June) and is considered to be the menstrual ceremony of the Earth goddess (goddess
Kamakhya). On this occasion doors of the sanctum of the temples are closed to all including the priests for three days at a stretch and then reopened on the 4th day. During these days cultivation, digging, ploughing, felling trees, building houses etc. are prohibited. On the day proceeding the actual time of the beginning of the Ambuvachi as per the almanac, the yoni Mandalay of Kamakhya pitha is covered with a cloth called angavastra for four days. The day next to the completion of the period of Ambuvachi is called suddhi and on this day Kamakhya or the yoni Mandalay is given a ritualistic bath. A ceremonial puja is also performed. This ceremony has its special Important since the main object of worship is said to be the genital organ (yoni) of the Devi and pilgrims from different parts of India assemble in the temple campus awaiting entry to the temple on reopening day.

It is not clearly known since when Ambuvachi has been observed at Kamakhya. As per oral history, this festival was known to the sadus and sanyasis from Nepal and the Himalayan foothills from vary ancient times that used to frequent Devikuta alias Kamakhya in their pursuit of pilgrimage. Probably, the festival came to limelight since the time of renovation of the temple by Koch king Naranarayan in AD1565, which inspired the sakti worshippers from far and wide and particularly the tantriks from Nepal and Eastern India, to assemble in the temple. This has been inferred from the Darrang Rajvamsavali, it is possible that the concept of the mother’s period of menstruation had come down from some tradition, which was in existence among the autochthons (indigenous people) of this region; particularly the different communities and it became a major festival when the tantrists and sakta worshippers recognized it. In fact this tradition is seen even in Orissa which is celebrated as Rajotsava. Though Amuvachi is observed with varied names with similar concept in many parts of India, apparently it is to Kamakhya temple that thousands of devotees congregate from
every nook and corner of inside & outside our country. One of the traditional beliefs from ancient time associated with Ambuvachi is the custom of spreading of the Angavastra or raktavastra, which is used to cover the symbol of Devi during the Ambuvachi period. Angavastra is regarded as greatly beneficial and auspicious and the devotees crave for acquiring a piece of this cloth. The garments that adorn her during these days are made into small strips and distributed among the Bhakatas succeeding the purifying rituals on the fourth day. These pieces of cloth are tied on the arms or wrists or necks as talisman to achieve success. According to a legend, Koch king Naranarayana and his brother Chilarai laid a piece of white cloth on the main pitha of Devi to locate and verify this age old spot before undertaking rebuilding work. It is said that this piece of white cloth became red automatically indicating the presence of Mother Goddess.

The worship of Durga is held in autumn season. Durga is not different from Kamakhya. Durga puja is worshipped in Devipitha and people from different parts of the country come here to attend the festivals. The worship is done according to the instructions of the Kalika Purana, Devi Purana and Vrannandikesvara Purana. In the Kamakhya temple Durga puja is celebrated as one of the major festivals. It is believed that the tradition of observing Durga puja in Kamakhya area is as old as the pitha itself. In this temple, the puja begins on the Krisna Navami (9th day of waxing of the moon) of the month of Asvina (mid of September-October) indicating that it covers a period of 15 days from krisna Navami to Sukla Navami of Asvina. The duration of this puja being one paksa (derived from Sanskrit paks that is fortnight), it is locally called pakhuvapuja. Late Paran Chandra Sarma, one of the Chief Priests and who is also a panda of the Kamakhya temple, informs that the puja which start from krisna Navami of the Asvina and is called pakhuva puja does not quite signify Durga
puja but a part of *pakhuva puja*. However, the masses take it as Durga puja itself. The first day of *Durga puja* is called *sasthi* or *Adhivasa*, which indicates the 6th day of the new moon of the month of *Asvina*, and the *puja* ends in *sukla Navami*. The immersion ceremony, which is locally called as *Visarjana* or *Bhasana*, is performed in the next day of *Sukla Navami* called *Dashama Navami*. The most remarkable aspect of *Durga puja* in the Kamakhya temple is its process of performance, which is unique in character when compared to the *Durga puja* performed elsewhere. There is no image or shrine in the *Durga puja* of Kamakhya temple and instead of this the *puja* is performed in the main *pitha*, which consists of a natural fissure, conical in shape and about nine inches (225mm) in length and fifteen inches (375mm) in width. Under the *Ahom* rule as recorded in British report, only the royal house observed the *puja* or in the temple the *puja* was performed only on the permission obtained from the king.

**Kumaripuja (The Devi in her human form)**

It is not known since when this *puja* came to existence. It is believed that it grew into an indispensable ceremony when Kochs renovated the Kamakhya temple in AD 1565 and started *pujas* of all the *Devis* related to the *Sakta* worship.

Virgin worship (*Kumari puja*) is as old as that of Kamakhya worship. Worship of goddess Kamakhya as virgin is similar to that of mother concept. Perhaps, it was assumed that the goddess, although omnipresent, surely exists in the virgins. Reverence to male or female children as god or goddess is an age old customs of India. The worship of infant *krisna* (*Bala- Gopala*) is a very popular custom.

It is believed that at Kamakhya, the goddess appears in the form of virgin. So, some of the pilgrims worship the living virgins as goddess in this temple. Worship of living man or woman as god or goddess with the offerings, generally offered to them, is
purely of Tantric origin. Like Virgin worship, *tantra* recommends preceptor (Guru) worship. It is stated that Virgin worship is nothing but *Sakti* worship. The *Yogni Tantra* has introduced the following story about the origin of virgin worship. We relate the myth below.

‘Once a ferocious demon was gave birth by Visnu’ s bosom. He tortured the gods. The gods being helpless prayed ‘Mahakali’. *Mahakali* approached the demon in disguise of a virgin and begged food from him. The demon gave her sweets but her hunger remained unsatisfied. She devoured horses, elephants, and chariots and at last devoured the demon. At the death of the demon the gods being overjoyed began to worship her. Since then the virgin worship began. According to another story from the same *Tantra*, that a king of *Caitra* dynasty attained salvation by propitiating a virgin named *Kanci* and the place where *Kanci* was worshipped was named as *Kancipuram*.

The prevalent custom of Virgin worship is that it is performed along with *Durga*, *Kali* and other *Mahavidyas*. The salutation mantra of a virgin worship is same as that ‘Vidya’ s salutation mantra. Sometimes it is also seen that virgin is fed and clad, saluted without any mantra. The tantric believe that the virgin is the goddess incarnate.

The *Pranatosini Tantra* says that virgins are of sixteen types, depending upon their ages. Again in ancient time, a man named *Kampilla*, worshipped a virgin. The place where he worshipped the virgin is known as *Kampilla Nagar*. Since then the virgin is there is in the form of a stone.
There is a ‘Dhyana’ for Kumari Puja in Kamakhya  there is also \textit{avahana} and salutation mantra. In Kumari Puja there is no caste bar. Virgins from the low castes are preferable. Their only caste is virginity.

As regards virgin worship, N.N. Basu comments: ‘Thus the maiden was an unavoidable item of Sakti worship at Kamakhya, and quite a large number of these unmarried girls were required to devote themselves to the service of the goddess.’

To quote S.C. Banerjee: ‘Krishnananda says that \textit{homa} does not produce the full fruit without Kumari Puja’. It may be that the procedure of worshipping virgins in the Durga and Kali Puja is just after the performance of \textit{Homa}. Kumari is an integral part of Purasascarana.

\textbf{Deodhani also called Devadhani or Mare or Manasa puja}

The Manasa puja, a puja, dedicated to Manasa, the goddess presiding over Serpents, is celebrated in any one of the following months-Jaistha, Asadhara, Sravana and Bhadra in some of the temples of Kamrupa according to convenience. It has assumed the form of popular festival in Kamrupa, and also in Darrang. In all the Devi temples including that of Kamakhya, it is observed on the confluential day of Sravana and Bhadra and continues for the next two days. On the first day of the puja, a ghat (an earthen pot of particular shape) full of water is placed in the name of Manasa. The last day coinciding with the second day of Bhadra the ghat is thrown away into water, and the puja comes to an end. The particular class of servitors called ojhapali exhibit their dance in all these days by reciting passages from the Padmapurana (also called Manasa purana). In some temples, another class of people consisting of both male and female called Deodha (Deodhoni) offer dance on this occasion separately. In the non- Vaisnavite temples, animal and birds are sacrificed on these days.
Deodhani is one of the most important occasions of significance associated with the Kamakhya temple. Because of congregation of a large number of devotees, this occasion takes the form of a mela or fair. Incidentally, it coincides with the Manasa puja at Kamakhya. The deodhani is a shamanistic type of dance. There are different opinions regarding the spiritual aspect of the deodhani. According to some people deodhani means spiritual power of god and goddess, which is manifested through the performers of the deodhani nrtya. According to another belief, it means voice or expression of a goddess through a man who serves as a medium of divinity to manifest their will before a human being.

The dancers of deodhani are called as deodha, which means the man who possesses the power of a deo or god or goddess. Deodhas are also locally called ghora and joki. Ghora means the vehicle of god or goddess, and joki means the parson who is possessed by a particular god or goddess with the result that he demonstrates paranormal feats, which enable him to predict the fate of a man.

History is silent regarding the date from when deodhani in Kamakhya was started or how it came to be performed during Manasa puja. According to Dr. Nabin Chandra Sarma, Retd. Prof. Dept of Folklore, Gauhati University; both Manasa puja and deodhani started in Kamakhya temple from the time of Koch king Biswa Singha. He opines that in ancient times the traditional dance devadasi was popular with the temples in this area. There is a village named Natipara (nati means dancer and para, a locality) in Kamakhya area and according to him it might have been a colony of devadasis from which deodhani dance originated in a local form. But there apparently has no distinct influence or impact of devadashi dance on the present form of deodhani. Now deodhani is performed only by non-Brahmin male dancer in Kamakhya temple while the devadashi was traditionally performed by females.
Phakua and Dolyatra of Krishna

Durga Deul is remarkable festival uncommon in other parts of the country. It is performed during spring season particularly on second, third, fourth, fifth and sixth tithi of the full moon day in the month of Caitra (March and April). Like Radha-Krisna in the Daulyatra, Kamesvara and Kamesvari are kept in the swing in their respective temples. On the evening of the sixth day Devi Kamesvari is taken out in a procession people observed the ceremony by throwing colour at each other. For all these days special worships are held.

Sivaratri

The Sivaratri is performed on the 14th day of the waning forth night also known as Sivacaturdasi in the month of Phalguna or Caitra according to astronomical calculation. On this day, all the deities in the temples are worshipped with special offerings, but in Siva and Devi temples animals are also sacrificed. On this day, a special worship in addition to the normal worship of Siva is also performed according to the procedures laid down in the Sivapurana.

Dasamahavidyas

The concept of Dasamahavidyas is of tantric origin. But before going to discuss the ritual of Mahavidyas, let us know what Mahavidya is. According to the Yogini Tantra and science of mantra is divided into two categories i) Mantra ii) Vidya. Those are mantras which are applied to the worship of gods and those applied to goddess are known as Vidyas. When we apply the adjective ‘Maha’ to it we mean great goddess or chief goddess.
The popular myth behind the origin of *Dsamshavidyas* is that when Sati came to know that her father Daksa is going to perform a sacrifice to which Daksa has invited all but Siva and Sati she wanted to go there without having any invitation. She begged permission from Siva to go to the sacrifice. Siva forbade her and explained the consequences of attending the sacrifice, without being invited. At this Sati became ferocious and angry. At the sight of her anger, Siva became perplexed and wanted to flee hither and thither. Sati obstructed him by shouting ‘do not be afraid.’ Siva was not pacified. In the mean time Sati expressed herself in ten images in ten directions. Siva was perplexed and accorded permission to go to Daksa’s place.  

The modern interpretation is different. Some scholars wanted to say that these ten images of the mother goddess are different forms of Devi Kalika. The followers of Kalikula, worship the ten *Mahavidyas*. They are Kali, Tara, Tsodasi, Bhuvanesvari, Bhairvavi, Vagala, Cinnamasta, Dhumavati, Matangi, and Kamala. These *Mahavidyas* are worshipped along with their Bhairavas i.e. Siva with different names.

The *Siva-Sakti* Union is the best explained by *Dasmahavidyas* concept, because Siva without Sakti is passive or dead. To quote Dr. Radhakrishnan, ‘Siva is this system is of the nature of omnipresent (akhilanugata), pure consciousness (prakash), impersonal and inactive. It is being devoid of any relativity. The active personal being Sakti includes all individual souls.’ The worship of *Dasmahavidyas* is prevalent among the *Tantrics* and specially the Saktas.

The worship of *Dasamahavidyas* and their respective piths are perhaps the creation of a later age. Considering the different tastes of different persons, the Hindu religion has recognized the worship of various gods and goddesses. Similarly, the worship of various *Mahavidyas* is propagated to suit the need of different devotees. The existence of the *Dsamahavidyas pithas* on the Nilachala hillock proves that it was out and out a
centre of Tantric worship for a long time. The following table shows the form of Dasamahavidys-

**TABLE-V: DASAMAHAVIDYA AT THE NILACHAL HILL**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sl. No.</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Additional Name, if any</th>
<th>Hands with Ayudhas</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Kali</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Two hands, Khanda in one hand only</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Tara</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Two hands, both hand carry Khanda</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Sodasi</td>
<td>Tripura Sundari</td>
<td>Four handed holding pasa, ankusa, arrow and bow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Bhairabi</td>
<td>Tripura Bhairavi</td>
<td>Four handed in padmasana, trisula in left hand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Bhubanesvari</td>
<td>Rajarajesvari, Annapurna &amp; Navadurga</td>
<td>Four handed, two carries pasa and ankusa her vehicle is tiger</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Chinnamasta</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Dhumavati</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Bagala</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Two handed in general, four handed on special occasions; mace in right hand &amp; pulling the tongue of a demon with left hand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Matangi</td>
<td>Sarasvati</td>
<td>Four handed figure on padma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Laksmi</td>
<td>Laksmi</td>
<td>Four handed, on padma, pasa in hands ankusa, Dhanusbana(bow &amp; arrow)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Kali puja**

The Kali puja of Kamakhya starts with her worship in the Kamakhya pitha. It is always a fact with Kamakhya that, in spite of the existence of different temples of the Devi with their respective methods of worship, Kamakhya Devi is considered as the supreme as such, in any event in any of the temples here, the same is started with a ritual in the Kamakhya pitha. On the day of kali puja mentioned while the difference in the mode of worship inside the Kamakhya pitha as Kali is not known. Buffalo and Goats are sacrificed during this worship. This sacrifice was found to be exclusive for Kamakhya Devi who, in fact, is assumed as Kali in Tantra, who constitutes one of the ten aspects of *Mahavidya* (great incarnations of the divine female power). However, this daytime ritual in the Kamakhya pitha had appeared to be confined to the priests only and did not attract any devotee other than the normal visitors to the temple.

**Sevaits of Kamakhya temple**

The Kamakhya temple is regarded as one of the most vibrant *Saktipithas* of India. An important aspect of this shrine is the tradition of the Sevaits (*a sevaitor* and a tenant of the *devottar* land) (The kings and the landlords of ancient Assam donated lands to temples as an act of patronage. Thus, lands of three categories were donated, such as, the *brahmottara* which was given to the Brahmins for keeping religious rites vibrant, the *dharmottara* to the religious leaders to keep the flag of religion high and the *devottara* in the name of a deity of a temple to manage all affairs of a temple, such as, daily rituals, for general maintenance etc.) Who are indispensable in the management of the temple? From history, the origin of the sevaits of Kamakhya is little known, but *sevaits* groups like *pujari* (priest), *balikata* (people engaged in sacrifice) etc claim their origin from Kanyakubja or Kanauj in North-India. Several groups of *sevaits* are
known to be traditionally in existence. From pujari to paneri (water supplier to the pith), all of them offer their services concertedly to the upkeep and the daily management of the temple. From investigation it was known that initially there were only five officials appointed by the raja (king) for management of the pith. But in course of time the designations of these officials either changed or they changed their professions to mingle with the general population.

In Assam it is noticed that, except Hayagriva Madhava temple of Hajo, it is the Kamakhya temple where varied groups of sevaits are traditionally employed in the management of the temple. (During the rule of the late-medieval Ahom kings, the system of offering paiks or temple-servitors was introduced. They mainly raised crops on the temple land and offered their service as required by the temple management). Though these sevaits groups originally had specific services to be offered traditionally to the temple, many changes have taken place by now in their mode of service. Incidentally, these sevaits are still seen to have important role in the management of the different daily and seasonal works of the temple. It is a matter of satisfaction that even today they maintain these age old traditions which have made Kamakhya temple one of the best-managed temples of our country. Some details of the servitors are given below:

**Pujari**

Pujaris from the priest class of the Kamakhya temple. Originally five pujaris were entrusted by the raja (king) to share the daily rituals of the pith in shift basis throughout the year. Besides nitya (daily) puja in the morning, they also offer their services during the arti (chanting hymns accompanied by music and dance) in the evening and on the other special occasions of the pitha.
There is a system of *Pali* among the priest. According to this system, a *Pali* or a particular priest offers his service for a particular duration and then vacates in favour of another from the group. In this system there is also provision that in the absence of a *Pali*, another of the same priest group can offer the service. For some special occasion like *Durga puja*, *Manasa puja* etc. there is another *Pali* system. According to this system, every *Pali* is given the chance to offer his service in rotation. For his service to the temple, the *pujari* gets a portion of the amount of money and the naivedya offered to the temple by devotee as the daksina. It was known that *daksina* and *naivedya* are shared among the *pujari*, *duwari*, and *athporia* in 60-40 percent ratio. On the other hand, the offerings received in cash or kind collected as *pranami* goes to the accounts of the temple trust.

In Kamakhya pitha a person has to pass a long process to become a priest. One should have to select his Guru who will teach him the methods and the curriculum of the puja or the religious performances of the *pitha*. After this, the oldest member of the *Sevait* group has to recognize him as proficient enough to take the responsibility. In Kamakhya temple there is a tradition of reciting the hymns for the Devi without reading the main bidhi during religious performance.

**Athparia** (originally round-the-clock watcher but now cleaner of Devi *pitha*):

The word *Athporia* derived from the word *asta prahara*, (asta means eight and prahara covers three hours) meaning the eight divisions of a day covering 24 hours. In the *pitha* the *Athporia sevait* are engaged in full day service to keep the premises tidy by cleaning and washing of the *pitha* etc. He also offers his service as the helper of the *pujari* during religious rites in the *pitha*. According to the daily routine, an *Athporia* has to come to the temple early in the morning and should bring flowers for
puja. After this he performs japa (meditation) and recites mantra, which is followed by other works like cleaning and washing of the pitha and the chalanta. Then the athporia replaces the sari that was spread over the pitha on the previous day with a new one. This type of work is also done in the same way on the Matangi and the Kamala pitha. After this the pujari performs religious rites and the athporia’s service is limited basically to the temple. He is the guard of the temple.

To become an athporia, a person has to follow and practise some strict rule and regulation. At first he has to take sarana/diksa (initiation) under a priest of the pitha, who trains him in japa, tapa and bijamantra of the pitha, after acquiring which the person is recognized as an athporia. In return for his service to the pitha he gets bhog and thali from the temple. The kinds and coins offered by the devotees to the temple as dakshina are shared between the priest and the other sevait groups. According to this tradition, the priest receives half of the share and the remaining half is again divided among other sevait groups equally that are engaged inside the temple. It is also a rule that the beheaded body part of the daily sacrifice is also shared between the sevait groups.

**Balidhara**

The service of the balidhara sevait group is to control the animal before sacrifice including holding the Bali (the animal offered for sacrifice) in position during sacrifice. The members of this sevait group are arranged mainly from other sevait group like duwari, athporia etc. of the temple. Most probably the balidhara group was not introduced in the earlier times but was organized later on when situation demanded it.
In the distant past these sevait groups were created mainly to offer the specified service in relation to the activities of the pitha and even today most of these entrusted services are carried out by maintaining the age old tradition.

These sevait groups get some portion of daily income of the temple. It was specially known that the daily donation (Dana) to the main temple is shared among the priest and Duwari and Athporia in 60/40 percent. On the other hand, the cash offered by the devotees against their sacrifice (Bali) is also shared between Balikata and Balidhara. The remaining sevait groups get bhog against their services. Among these sevait group the Pali system has prevailed, according to which the sevait shift their services on rotational basis. The number of people assigned to the temples during the Ahom administration was quite large. According to an estimate it was more than 15,000 in 1769.  

Thus it now appears, that besides the temple building, each temple within the limit of our study enjoyed a huge property both movable and immovable appropriated to various deities and to Brahmins or other religious men.  

**Balikata**

Balikata service to the pitha is to execute the Bali (sacrifice) offered to the pitha. In the pitha a nitya or daily sacrifice is a must from the temple management in which a he-goat is offered to the Devi. By offering the service to the pitha, the balikata gets a thali (share) of naivedya and bhoga. There are two kinds of thali, namely, barthali and chalanta thali. The thali offered to main pitha is known as barthali and another two thalis for chalanta (the metallic image of the Devi which is taken out on special occasions) as chalanta thali. The balikata gets the barthali and also one thali of
chalanta. Moreover, he also earns money by executing sacrifices offered by the devotees.

In Kamakhya, the original balikata families are titled as sikdar. It is known that this sevait group is also engaged in revenue collection and payment of Kamakhya pitha in past years, for which the title Sikdar was given to them from the pitha. To be a balikata of the pitha, a sevait of the sikdar family has to take diksha from Guru at first and then by offering a puja to the pitha he can gain the qualification of balikata (executor). In Kamakhya temple buffalo, pigeon, duck, goat, catfish, sugarcane, gourd, banana etc are sacrificed. The weapon used in buffalo sacrifice is 5kg in weight. In the midnight of Astami of Durga puja a human motif made of wheat is sacrificed traditionally in the pitha. A member of the Sikdar family can offer his balikata service to any pitha of dasamahavidya of the area. The Pali or shift-duty system is also in existence among this group.

**Dadharua**

Originally, this group of people was engaged in sharpening the knives of the pitha. But today they have lost this distinction.

**Duwari**

Duwari is the gatekeeper of the Kamakhya temple. Their main duty to the Kamakhya temple is to open the doors of the temple in the morning and then to close the same in the evening. Moreover, the duwaris are also seen to have played the role of helper during puja. In the morning a duwari has to provide various types of help to the priest. During the time of offering of bhoga (cooked item) and in the arti (prayer in the evening) also the duwari offers his help to the pujari. This sevait group also serves as
the night watchman of the temple and resides in the temple at night. During enquiry it was known that now only eight families from *duwari* groups are engaged in their service and among them Pali system is prevalent. In return for their service to the *pitha*, this *sevait* group gets *bhoga* and *naivedya*. Moreover, the group also enjoys a share of the *Dana* and *daksina*, which are offered to the temple.

**Hetania**

*Hetanias* help the *khowar* (a *sevait* group) in the preparation of *bhoga* in the temple. They help by cleaning and preparing the items needed for *bhoga* and are also responsible for cleaning the kitchen of the temple. Moreover they carry the *dolas* (palanquin) in the procession organized during the festivals like *phakua* or *holi*, *Durga puja* etc. Now four families are engaged in this service and among them *Pali* system is maintained. In exchange for the service, the *hetania* gets a plate of *bhog* every day. Different types of item like fish, meat, vegetable, duck, eggs, pulses, and arum etc. are offered as *bhoga*.

**Gayan**

*Gayans* are the players of the musical instruments associated with the temples of Kamakhya. The literary meaning of this word is a singer but at Kamakhya it means a musician. They play instruments like *khol* (a type of traditional drum), *doba* (kettle drum), cymbal etc. in the Kamakhya temple. Originally this *sevait* group used Barman as their family surname, but now they have adopted the ‘*Gayan*’ title to indicate their relation with the service to the *pitha*. This *sevait* group offers their particular service during the evening prayer (*arti*) daily. Moreover, except in *Manasa puja*, the *gayans* have to offer their service in other festivals such as *Durga puja*, *Basanti puja* etc.
Now four families of these *sevait* groups have been offering their service to the *pitha* under the *Pali* system. For which for their service to the *pitha*, the *thali* (the dish of *naivedya*) and the *bhoga* offered to the *Saraswati pitha* in the temple is granted to the particular *gayan*.

**Panery**

*Panerys* are the water suppliers to the Kamakhya temple. There are two types of *panery* in Kamakhya temple—*Snan Panery* (water supplier to clean the main *pitha*) and *Bhog Panery* (Water supplier to prepare the *bhog*). For the above mentioned purpose the *panerys* usually bring the water from the *Saubhagya Kunda*.

**Chandipathak**

This *sevait* group is Brahman by caste. The *Chandipathak* recites the *Chandi* (scripture) during special *pujas* like *Durga puja, Manasa puja* etc.

**Khowar**

*Khowar* is the temple cook who prepares the *bhog* or cooked *prasada*. This *sevait* is always Brahmin by caste.

**Tamuli**

The *Tamuli* group claimed themselves as of *ksatriya* origin. Originally the members of this *sevait* group supplied *tamul-pan* (areca nut and betel leaf) used in *naivedyas* for the *puja* of the *pitha*. But today the *tamuli* group shoulders some extra responsibility by supplying all the raw fruits needed for the *naivedya*. In return for their service, this group also gets a share of the *bhog* from the temple authority.
Sil

Sil is a barber associated with the temple. Though the service of this group is not directly related to the interest of the temple during the Deodhani mela, they have cut and clean the hair etc. of the deodhas for which they are paid by the temple authority. It was known that the sils are liable to offer their services to every pujari family of the pitha.

Sonari

Sonari or honari are the goldsmiths of the temple. The making, repairing and polishing of all the ornaments of the temple are their responsibility. Now the services of these services of this sevait group have almost come to an end.

Bharali

Bharali serves both as accountant and treasurer of the temple. He keeps and maintains details of the expenditure and income of the temple and also serves as the auditor. But today this sevait group is not in their traditional engagement and their services are only sporadic.

Bhandarkayastha

Bhandarkayastha is the in charge of bhandar (warehouse) of the temple. The bhandarkayastha has to keep strict vigil on the articles of the bhandar, which consists of gold, silver, ornaments, metallic objects, valuable materials etc. of the temple. They are non-Brahmins and enjoy a high status in the temple management.
**Kaurkhenia**

The word *kaurkhenia* comes from Assamese words, *kauri* (crow) and *khedua* (to drive away). This group of *sevait* was created to drive away crows that disturbed peace during religious performances of the temple. But today the services of this *sevait* group have become redundant and instead of this the group offers miscellaneous services to the *pitha* during special occasions.

Nowadays the individuals from some other *sevait* groups like *duwari*, *athporia* etc. also offers the above mentioned miscellaneous services during special festivals as required.

**Chaulkadhas**

*Chaulkadhas* are the persons carrying out the duty of measuring and supplying rice etc. for *bhog*. The group now faces extinction.

**Jagamukti**

This group is engaged in cleaning the sacrificial pits and the place around the sacrificial frames. They are still in existence as a distinctive *sevait* group.

**Kharikatia**

*Kharikatias* are the wood suppliers to the temple, but now the service is not in practice.

**Dhubi**

This *sevait* group was exclusively engaged in washing and cleaning the cloth used on the *yoni* of the Kamakhya temple.
Now this group has almost disappeared as a separate group.

**Maji**

*Maji* is in-charge of distribution of Prasad and *bhog*. It was known that their work is limited to special festivals of *pitha*.

**Significance of Kamakhya**

Goddess Kamakhya is the most dominating name in the early history of Assam. It was under her banner that the first empire in early Assam was built. It was over her emergence and recognition as presiding deity of the state the *saivites* and the *vaisnavites* went into salient conflict and Naraka the first builder of the state lost his later religious history also centre round her and other Goddess recognized as her varied manifestation. The picture of Goddess Kamakhya as presented in the *Kalika purana* is a composite figure made up conceptions imported from outside in different epochs in the history of the evolution of the original mother Goddess herself. Naraka’s Kamakhya has been patterned on the earlier conception of the mother Goddess as a primordial deity associated with and patronized by Vishnu. The other figures of Kamakhya as a virgin and as a spouse of Siva belong to later periods. All these conceptions have been rolled into one in the portrait of the Goddess as pictured in the *Kalika purana*. The evolution of the concept of a supreme female power in Indian religion is not new and can be traced to the *Rig-Vedic* times. As such, there is nothing adverse in the worship of a female deity. Even Visnu while installing Naraka on the throne of *Pragjyotish-pura* was said to have exhorted him to worship Kamakhya, a manifestation of supreme power. The cult of Sakti is common to both *Vaisnavism* and *Saivism* and *Siva-Sakti* worship came to be the dominant religion.
under state patronage. When such a religion later on relegated Siva to the background and gave a very dominating position to the female deity, the royal power it seems began to stand aloof from it. 30 Thus the assimilation of different modes of worship is another significance of Kamakhya temple.

**Notes and Reference:**

5. *Ibid*.
7. *Ibid*.
8. Altekar, A.S: *Pre-Aryan and Pre-Dravidian in India*, 1929, pp114, 118.


22. Das, J (ed.): *op.cit* p.83.


27. Das, J (ed.): *Camunda Tantra,* Calcutta, 1387B.S, I/II.

