

Introduction

Śākta *pīthas* are the sacred places of worshipping the Goddess as main deity. Śākta *pīthas* are the seat or abode of the Goddess in Her different manifestations at different places. In this regard mention may be made or question may arise that what is a *pītha* and what is the difference between a *pītha* and a temple? The general answer to this question is that meaning of both *pītha* and temple are the same. But if one describe according to the sacred literatures and the mythological references, there lies the difference between the two. Here *pītha* means the seat of the Goddess which evolved due to the falling of Sati's body part. There is a legend related to the origin of the Śākta *pīthas* in *Kālikā Purāna*, *Yoginī Tantra*, in the Epic *Mahābhārata* and in many religious literatures.

Assam has been considered as the suitable place of worshipping the Goddess Śakti in various forms since time immemorial. Nobody can ascertain the exact date of the prevalence of Śakti worship in Assam. But some scholars ascertain that Śakti worship started in Assam from the pre-historic time. However many scholars are of the opinion that Naraka was the first Śākta worshipper in Assam who was the staunch follower of the then residing deity Kāmākhya. However it is also noteworthy that the geographical features of Assam was very convenient for Śakti worship.

The most striking characteristic of ancient Assam (Prāgijyotisha-Kāmarūpa) was the Śakti cult which was the dominant and influential cult of Assam in the early period. It has been worshipped in different forms at different places in different times. Various literary evidence, inscriptions and sculptures of Assam are regarded as the most reliable sources which supply authentic information about the prevalence of Śakti cult and its various forms even down to the Ahom rule upto 18th century CE. Various architectural remains scattered throughout the state evidenced the existence of various temples since ancient period. Even many of the medieval Śākta temples still exist today though some of them are not in its earlier form. At least upto 18th century Ahom kings were the staunch follower of Śaktism in Assam. And there are many Śākta temples of this time. The land of Kāmarūpa as said both in the *Kālikā Purāna* and *Yoginī Tantra*, appears to be the foremost as an appropriate place for *Sakti-Sadhana* and achieving success therein. Both the scriptures clearly say that there is no place like Kāmarūpa, which is more suitable for *Devi's* residence. *Devi*, who is rarely found

in other places, is residing in every household of Kāmarūpa. In *Hara-Gauri Samvad*, Kāmarūpa has occupied the most prominent place as a sacred *pītha* where all desires of the *sadhaka* are fulfilled. The second Patal of *Hara-Gauri-Samvad* expresses the supremacy and sacredness of Kāmarūpa as a *Sadhana-pītha*.

From the mythological evidence it is known that Narakasur, the legendary hero and king of Prāgjyotisa who spread his supremacy over the eastern part of India was the first Śākta king and initiator of Śākta cult in Kāmarūpa. However *Kālikā Purāna* mentions that Śaktism prevailed in Assam even before Naraka. *Kālikā Purāna* says that the genital organ of Sati fell on the Nilachala hill when her dead body was carried hither and thither in frantic sorrow by Lord Siva and it fell before many times earlier than Naraka. Again when Naraka occupied Prāgjyotispur at that time Kāmākhyā was the supreme goddess of that land. So, it seems that Śaktism was prevalent in Kāmarūpa before Naraka.

Through epigraphical records in the form of the Doobi Plates and Nidhanpur, Tezpur and Parbatiya Plates we find traces of the prevalence of Śaktism in ancient Assam. Moreover iconographic representations of the *Devi Śakti* have been found in archaeological ruins discovered in different parts of Assam under different names. However in the medieval period also Ahom kings patronized Śaktism and many Śākta temples were constructed. Koch king Viswa Singha reconstructed the Kāmākhyā temple. Besides this the Kacharis, Jayantias, Chutiyas etc. also contributed a lot in the spread of Śaktism through the ages.

The spread of Śākta cult in various manifestations necessitated the establishment of the abodes or temples for their enshrinement and propitiation. The concept of *pītha* or the seat of the abode of the dwelling place of the Goddess is of hoary antiquity. Such *pīthas* or the abodes of the Goddess are also known as *Devasthanas*. The origin of *pītha* is generally ascribed to the *Mahabharata* period when the Daksa *Yajna* story was coined, although there were many holy places in the whole of Assam of early period. Many such sacred places were turned later on to Śākta *pītha*.

So from the Daksha *Yajna* story and with the spread of Śaktism, many Śākta *pīthas* emerged in all parts of India including Assam and their number varying from text to text. When Śaktism made its headway it was but natural to raise the number of *pīthas* and *upapīthas* in Assam. Harinath Sarma Doloi mentions as stated in the *Kālikā*

Purāna and the *Yoginī Tantra* that Goddess, a rarity in other countries, is a household deity in every family in Kāmarūpa. Due to this, in days gone by, numerous Śākta temples were established in different parts of the county. Most of the temple then established are still resplendently existing in Assam.

Śaktis being different names and forms seem to have worshipped by different sects. According to the Tantras, the great Goddess has innumerable forms, some of which are distributed in different *amnyas* or regions. The varieties of names and forms of Śakti have been brought under the most famous division of ten Mahavidyas (Dasamahavidyas), each having a distinct literature of its own. The ten Mahavidyas are Kali, Tara, Sodasi, Bhuvaneshwari, Bhairavi, Cinnamasta, Dhumavati, Bagala, Matangi and Kamala. Besides Kāmākhya, the Śakti had been worshipped in Assam in many of her manifestations. The widely known among them are Dasabhuja Durga, Sodasabhuja Durga, Ugratara, Ugracanda, Jayanti, Kausiki, Kamesvari, Sivaduti, Tripura, Annapurna, Dirgheshvari, Dipteshvari, Byaghesvari, Daksina Kali, Bhadra Kali, Smasan Kali, Tara, Candi, Mangal Candi, Jagaddhatri, Bhairavi, Manasa and Sitala. Śaktism is also associated with the worship of *yonī* in the Kāmākhya temple. In this *pītha* prayer is offered to a *yonipītha* of stone or iconic representations of the Goddess. The desire for fertility in the form of *yonī* worship got associated in the Kāmākhya temple.

Worship of these deities is done according to *Kālikā Purāna* and *Yoginī Tantra*. Because in these texts there are various rites and rituals of *Devi* worship. These two texts were composed in Kāmarūpa only to glorify Śaktism in Assam. These are the Śākta Tantric text. Besides these two many other Śākta literatures were composed in Assam to glorify the Goddess. *Kāmākhya Tantra*, *Hara-gauri-samvada* and many other works were compiled in Sanskrit. Literatures to worship Manasa were composed in Assamese. Even there were many folk songs where the glory of the Goddess is traced out.

Śaktism is associated with the sacrifices of various animals, human beings etc. To offer sacrifice is an important element of Śakti-worship. There is a provision of offering sacrifice both in *Vamcara* and *Pancamakara* systems of worship. These are Tantric worship. In Assam sacrificial offerings including continued as an element of Śakti-worship since early times. Even there was a tradition to offer human being in

sacrifice which had been stopped by the Ahom king. In this regard Tamreswari temple is the most remarkable shrine in the north eastern region on account of the annual human sacrifice once carried out in its precincts. There are various festivals celebrated in Assam which are associated with Śakti cult. In early times we found observation of these festivals under royal patronage. In some of the Śākta pīthas also such festivals were celebrated. These festivals were celebrated in the families also. In the Kāmākhyā pītha like Durga Puja, Ambuvasi, Basant Panchami and many other festivals were celebrated. In the Ugratara and Dirgheswari temple Durga Puja is celebrated with great honour. So in this way in different Śākta pīthas of Assam various forms of the goddess were worshipped and different festivals are celebrated. There are also many legends and stories related to the origin of different Śākta pīthas of Assam.

The erection of temple in Assam goes back to an early century; at any rate, the existence of numerous shrines dedicated to Siva, Surya, Visnu, Devi, and other deities is fully attested to both by inscriptions and the contemporary literature. There is a common conception regarding the building of the temples or pīthas and that was religion or to pay homage to the power who can protect from all disasters. The architectural activities in Assam especially highly influenced by the Indo-Aryan (North Indian). The temples of Assam has some similarities with the temple of Orissa and the Nagara type temple of North India. The temples in Assam are mostly sikhara or Rekha deul type in elevation. By examining the sikhara of the temples, it reveals that they are of various shapes as rekha deul, hut shaped barrel-vaulted, bulbous, round, and pyramidal and polygonal, ratha type.

A temple developed under the political and royal influence which make it popular with the time and region. The medieval period of Assam which began from 13th century CE was mainly ruled by the Ahoms, Koches, Kacharis, Chutiyas, Jayntias etc. The political history of Assam is very confusing due to disturbances from the external powers and other neighbouring territories. However regarding source of the temple architecture there are the inscriptions attached to the temples and some of the temples built during this time still existed which provide us an idea about it. It was under these rulers that many Śākta temples were built. The Ahoms, Koch, Kacharis, Chutiyas, Jayantiyas were liberal to the Śākta cult. Some of them were staunch worshipper of the cult. Siba Singha was very much influenced by the Śākta cult and

he alongwith his wives, Phuleswari, Ambika became the follower of Śākta cult. It was during his reign that Śaktism reached its zenith and many Śākta temples were erected under his patronage.

Sculptures play an important role in the architectural activities. Temples in Assam were also decorated with various sculptural designs with the scenes from epic and contemporary scenes, various natural scenes, erotic scenes, sculptures of various Gods and Goddesses and so on. Various animal curvings are also seen which adorn the walls and ceilings of the temples. Various *Devī* sculptures have been found throughout the state which belonged to early period. Image of the Goddesses such as Mahisamardini Durga, Kali, Lakhmi, Manasa etc have been found at various places of Assam.

Thus, it appears that Śaktism and Śākta *pīthas* played a dominant role in Assam since early times upto 18th century. Though there is a prospect of extensive study on Śaktism in Assam and about Śākta literature, it is pertinent to mention here that no comprehensive and systematic attempt has yet been made by any scholar to study and highlight the Śākta *pīthas* in Assam. Therefore it is important to discuss the Śākta significance of Assam along with its Śākta *pīthas*. Hence it is important to survey the sites and monuments in full coverage of the present state of Assam to refer to published materials and to collect the legends and traditions connected with such *pīthas*. The study will be helpful for the history of religion, culture, art and architecture of Assam. The present study will discuss the Śākta *pīthas* in Assam systematically.

Objectives

This study aims –

1. To explore the origin and development of Śaktism in Assam.
2. To bring into light the different manifestations of Śākta cult in Assam.
3. To survey the different Śākta *pīthas* distributed throughout Assam.

4. To study the Śākta literature, rites and rituals associated with Śakti worship in Assam.
5. To study the art and architecture of Śākta temples of Assam.

Methodology

The study is based on records of primary and secondary sources, field study and interviews. To collect primary sources exploration is done in different Śākta *pīthas*. The study is also based on secondary sources like relevant books and journals which have been found in different libraries like-Assam University Central Library, K.K. Handique Library of Gauhati University, ICHR Library, NCB Library, Kāmarūpa Research Centre Library, the Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies, the State Museum and the Circle office of the Archaeological Survey of India in Guwahati, district libraries at different district head quarters and libraries of different colleges.

Proper scientific research methodology mainly the empirical and analytical methods are employed for collecting data and for a proper analysis of them. The proposed study will compare and contrast elements that will be found in all data. The proposed study will follow the convention of acknowledging sources and of appending those in a bibliography.

Research Questions

- How did the Śākta cult evolved in Assam?
- What were the contributions of the Royal dynasties in the development of the Śākta cult in Assam?
- What was the nature of Śākta Worship among the people of Assam from the earliest time?
- How did the Śākta temple architecture evolved in Assam?
- What were the rites and rituals in Śākta worship?

Organization of Chapters

The proposed work is divided into one introduction and six chapters

Chapter I: Historical Geography, Land and People of Assam

This chapter will deal with the historical geography, land and people of Assam. In ancient time Assam was known as Prāḡjyotisa- Kāmarūpa. Boundaries of Kāmarūpa underwent change in different ages. According to Gunabhiram Barua Kāmarūpa was divided into four *pīthas*-Kamapītha, Subarnapītha, or Svarnapītha and Saumarapītha. Saumarapītha is identified with the present upper Assam. The country known as Prāḡjyotisa, in the ancient times and Kāmarūpa in medieval times, has been stated in the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. The *Kālikā Purāna* says that Kāmarūpa is to the east of the Karatoya river. *Yoginī Tantra* states that the country lying to the east of Karatoya as far as Dikkaravasini is called Kāmarūpa. It is triangular in shape. Modern Assam is a part of the former kingdom Prāḡjyotisa or Kāmarūpa. It is physically divided into two main parts, the highlands of the frontier tracts of the north and east, and the plains below. The inhabitants of Kāmarūpa were the Kiratas according to *Kālikā Purāna*.

Chapter II: Political, Socio-Economic and Religious Condition of Assam upto 18th Century

This chapter will discuss the political, socio-economic and religious condition of Assam upto 18th century. The actual political history of ancient Assam began with the Varman dynasty which was followed by the Salastambha and the Pala dynasty. The extensive Kāmarūpa kingdom got disintegrated with the fall of the Pala dynasty in the twelfth century CE. As a result a number of independent or semi-independent kingdoms of feudatory rulers had emerged. Taking advantage of this chaotic situation in 1228 C E a group of Tai-Shan (the Ahoms) people entered into the South Eastern part of Brahmaputra valley and established their kingdom at Charaideo in 1253 CE. This chapter will also discuss the social structure in Assam and also the complex economic distribution of the people of Assam down the ages. This chapter will also highlight the religious scenario of Assam through the ages.

Chapter III: Origin and Development of Śaktism in Assam

This chapter will focus the origin and development of Śaktism in Assam. Śaktism in Assam is centering round the Kāmākhyā temple. According to *Kālikā Purāna* the dead body of Sati fell on different parts of the country by Daksha *Yajna* story. *Yoni* part of Sati fell on the Nilachala hill and from that time Goddess Kāmākhyā resides in that hill and Naraka constructed a temple in the Nilachala hill called Kāmākhyā temple. Naraka was the first Śākta king of ancient Assam. During the medieval period Ahom kings patronized Śaktism in Assam. The Koches, Kacharis, Jayantiyas, Chutiyas etc also contributed a lot to the spread of Śaktism in Assam.

With the spread of Śaktism different form of Goddess had been worshipped in Assam from the earliest time to the 18th century. The widely known among them are Dasabhuja Durga, Sodasa Bhuja Durga, Ugratara, Ugachanda, Jayanti, Kausiki, Kameswari, Sivaduti, Tripura, Annapurna, Dirgheswari, Dipteswari, Byaghreswari, Daksina Kali, Bhadra Kali, Smasan Kali, Tara, Candi, Mangal Candi, Jagaddhatri, Bhairabi, Manasa and Sitala.

This chapter will also discuss about different Śākta *pīthas* distributed all over Assam in the ancient and medieval period. There are many Śākta temples spread over the state. The origin of these temples is related to many legends and stories. Those legends and stories will also be discussed in this chapter. This chapter will deal with both the major and minor Śākta temples of Assam.

Chapter IV: Śākta Literature, Rites and Rituals Associated to Śākta Worship of Assam

This chapter will discuss about the Śākta literatures of Assam. *Kālikā Purāna* and *Yoginī Tantra* are the main Śākta literatures which were composed only to glorify Śaktism in Assam. These two are Sanskrit text. However there are some Assamese Śākta literatures which will be discussed in this chapter. There are various rituals and festivals celebrated in Assam from the ancient period. There are several religious rites and rituals associated with Sakti worship. In Kāmākhyā some important religious festivals are observed. They are Ambuvasi, Devadhani, Durga Puja, Vasant Puja, Kumari Puja etc. Besides Kāmākhyā temple, in Dirgheswari and Ugratara temple also

Durga Puja is celebrated with great honour. This chapter will discuss about those rites and rituals which are related to Śakti worship in Assam.

Chapter V: Art and Architecture of Śākta Temples in Assam

This chapter will deal with the art and architecture of the Śākta temples in Assam. Epigraphs and literary works speak of the construction of numerous temples dedicated to the Goddess of different forms by the Kāmarūpa kings but not a single of these early edifices are found now. The temple building activities of Assam can be said as an offshoot of the same architectural type that was once popular in north India. They are basically the *Nagara* type with regional elements infused into them. Mostly they are *sikhara* or *rekha deul* type in their elevation. A temple in Assam seems to have only one chamber e.i., the *garbhagriha* or it may have the combination of a few separate structures joined together axially, diagonally or in cardinal directions. The *garbhagriha* may contain an *antarala*, a *mandapa*, a *mukha-mandapa* or *ardha mandapa* or any one or all of them. The old Temple of Kāmākhya said to have been destroyed by the iconoclastic hands of one named Kalapahar was built by Chilarai in 1487 *Saka* (1565 A.D.). The general architectural plan of this temple conforms to Sri Chakra type and has the *Nat-Mandir* or *Mandapa*, the *Gopuram* and the *Garbh-Griha*. The *Shikhara* is a combination of the *Nagara* and *Vessara* type. Ugratara is of the same design as Kāmākhya.

Chapter VI: Conclusion

This chapter will be a concluding chapter. As a result of a final endeavour this chapter will critically deal with the findings of the previous chapters. A “Bibliography” will follow the conclusion. An “Appendix” containing the chronology of the kings of Assam will follow the “Bibliography”.

With this at the background it is attempted to discuss the Śākta significance of Assam along with its Śākta *pīthas*. It is proposed that such a study will be immense importance to the students of History, culture, art and specially religion.