

CHAPTER - IV

Śākta Literature, Rites and Rituals Associated to Śākta Worship of Assam

All religion has some definite procedure and specific rituals. Rituals play an important role in all the religious beliefs. Each deity has some definite procedure of worship. It is the rituals which isolates a religious belief from one another. Śaktism is the religion of the people which has some procedure to follow. There are some *Puranas* and *Upa puranas* which defines and explains the different procedure of worshipping the deity (Goddess). The Goddess has various forms and according to Her form rituals are also distinct from one another. Though there are some general procedures common to all the religion. In worshipping the Goddess, Tantra plays an important role. Sacrifice is one of the important parts of Śākta worship. The mode of tantric worship is very special and important in Śaktism. There are various literatures which are known as *Tantras* and *Puranas* to worship the Goddess. Assam since distant past being the suitable place of Śaktism, where various literatures were composed in order to glorify the Goddess centering round the Kāmākhyā temple. The present chapter attempted to discuss about the literatures, rites and rituals associated to Śākta worship in Assam.

Śākta Literatures

Śākta literatures are the literatures which were composed to glorify the worship of the Goddess in Her various forms. These literatures mainly describe the ways and procedure of worshipping the Goddess. There are a large number of Śākta literatures. However in this chapter it will discuss only those literatures which were composed in Assam. It will be divided those literature in two parts- one is those were written in Sanskrit and the other is those written in Assamese. It is to be noted that discussion is made on all the literatures widely then it would be impossible to finish in one chapter. So to make it short it will be discussed precisely.

Kālikā Purāna

Kālikā Purāna is one of the most important Sanskrit Śākta literatures. This is a work of 9th -10th century, probably compiled during the time of Pala rulers of Assam. However there is still doubt about the exact time of its compilation. One manuscript

of *Kālikā Purāna* is preserved in the Department of Antiquarian Studies, Panbazar. Some scholars tried to place the date of *Kālikā Purāna* in the 11th century. From the contents of the text, it can be said that the book was written by a Brahmin Pandit, who was well-versed in Śaktism and Śakti-*Sadhana*, and had also perfect knowledge of different worship and occult secrets.¹The *Kālikā Purāna* is a voluminous book consisting of ninety chapters. This Purana is found in the list as *Upa-Purana*. However it comprises all the characteristics of *Maha-Purana*. *Visnu Purana* mentioned five characteristics of a Purana. They are-creation, desolution, recreation divine genealogies, ages of the Manus and the genealogies of the kings. However *Bhagavat Purana* mentions another five characteristics besides the above five mentioned by *Visnu Purana*. These are *vrtti* (means of livelihood), *raksa* (incarnations of god), *mukti* (final emancipation), *hetu* (Jiva, unmanifest), *apasraya* (Brahman). Besides these there are many more topics included in a *Maha Purana*.²

The *Kālikā Purāna* is a monumental work written for propagating and spreading Śaktism in early Assam. With the exception of few chapters, the whole book has been covered with the accounts of the glorifications of Lord Śiva, Goddess Kāmākhyā and different manifestations of Śakti. The book deals with the various rituals and procedure of worshipping the Goddess. The description of nature and ways of worshipping Śakti has also covers many of the chapters. The description of joint worship of Śiva –Śakti has been made here. The *Kālikā Purāna* raised Śakti to the status of Supreme reality. Vivid description is made about the Goddess Kāmākhyā. Various ritual processs and *Dhyanas* of Kāmākhyā have been mentioned in detailed. The *Purana* gives a detailed description of offering sacrifice to the Goddess and different manifestations of Śakti, their *Dhyanas* and method of worship has been described in a vivid manner.

Yoginī Tantra

The *Yoginī Tantra* is one of the sixty-four main *Tantras*. This famous *Tantra* was written in Kāmarūpa sometime in the fourteenth century CE. The *Yoginī Tantra* is certainly one of the outstanding Śākta-works in the history of Śaktism. From the historical and religious point of view regarding ancient Assam its importance is much greater. This *Tantra* is sub-divided into two-parts-*Purva-Khanda* and *Uttara-Khanda*. The whole book consists of twenty eight chapters- nineteen in *Purva-Khanda* and

nine in *Uttara-Khanda*. The *Yoginī Tantra* describes about the peculiar system of *Sadhana* such as *Satkarma* (six black rites), *Purascarana* etc. The said *Tantra* also gives detail about *japa*. The Seventeenth Chapter deals with the procedure and efficacy of virgin-worship. The glory of Goddess *Kali* is also described in this *Tantra* and deals with the Supreme power of Goddess *Kali*. It also describes about many places and *pīthas* included in ancient Kāmarūpa elaborately. The *Yoginī Tantra* gives an account of various kinds of rituals to be performed on various *Tithis* and *Naksatras* etc. It describes how to write a sacred book and also many other things about *Devi* as well as some special characteristics of her worship. Again the *Tantra* gives an account on numerous rivers and the system of worship of various female deities. The *Yoginī Tantra* is out and out a Śākta *Tantra*. According to this *Tantra*, *Devi* is the Supreme reality. Both Brahma and *Maheswara* also derive their power from her. *Yoginī Tantra* gives the geographical description of medieval age Assam. In this *Tantra*, the boundary of vast Kāmarūpa of medieval period is clearly given.

Kāmākhyā Tantra

Kāmākhyā *Tantra* is another important Śākta-scripture, compiled in Kāmarūpa. Probably it was compiled sometimes after the compilation of *Yoginī Tantra* by some scholar- devotee of Goddess Kāmākhyā. At the outset of the *Tantra* it describes that this *Tantra* is compiled only to glorify the Goddess Kāmākhyā. Here the Goddess Kāmākhyā is described as the Supreme Mother of the Universe. The *Tantra* consists of nine *patalas*. The main themes of this *Tantra* are the glory and power of Kāmākhyā, the system and procedure of its worship.³

Other Works

In addition to these works, there are a few Sanskrit works dealing with Śaktism directly or indirectly. *Hara-Gauri-Sambada* is a historical work written in Sanskrit verses. It is written in 23 *Patalas*. Besides history this book throws some light on the religious sphere of Kāmarūpa also .It was probably composed in Kāmarūpa earlier than 15th century C E. There are three manuscript of Hara-Gauri-Sambada preserved in Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies, Guwahati.⁴

Another book is *Śakti-Sangama-Tantra*, wherein the glory of Kāmarūpa is most ardently described and depicted many things about Śaktism. *Sarvallasā-Tantra*,

Purascarana-Candrika, *Pancha-mantra-diksa-kaumudi* and *Guhartha-Deepika*, *Saptasati-Candi tika* are some other Sanskrit work.

Assamese Śākta Literatures

The Assamese Śākta literature now available may be broadly divided into four heads⁵-

- i) Folk literature,
- ii) Manasa Literature,
- iii) Translations and adaptations from Sanskrit works, and
- iv) Śākta elements found in Vaisnava literature.

Folk Literatures

Among the folk songs *Ai -Nam*, *Apecara-Nam*, *Lakhimi-Savahar-Git* and *Devi-Air Git* are pure Śākta in nature. Among these, *Ai-Nam* is considered as the best both in points of language and importance. *Ai-Nam* is the devotional song, sung in tune with the clapping of hands by women in a body. With a view to satisfy *Ai*, the Goddess of poxes, *Ai-Nams* are sung in a ceremonial occasion.

Apecara- Nam is also a class of devotional song expressing the glory and power of *Apecara*, and like *Ai-Nams*, is uttered collectively by women. *Devi Apecara* is worshipped to cure off the diseases such as ophthalmia, mumps, partial paralysis, non-occurrence of puberty (of girls) in time etc y the children. *Apecara* worship is performed along with the Pancha devata (Brahma, Vishnu, Siva, Durga and Ganesa). The women folk sung the songs to worship *Apecara* at the end of the *Apecara Saba*. These songs are sung to glorify the virtues of Goddess Durga. *Lakhimi-Savahar Git* and *Devi-Air Git* are the Śākta songs sung almost in every part of Assam. *Lakhimi-Savahar Git* deals with the glory and attributes of *Lakhimi*. Through this class of song, *Lakhimi* or *Laksmi* is welcomed and invoked. Lakshmi is the Goddess of wealth. *Lakhimi Devi Nāms* are sung in the evening time on the day of Lakshmi *purnima* (full moon day) ceremonially by the women folk of Assam.

*Sāgarare pārate moi koithā pārilo samudrar mājote gaje
Phul nasarare beta sari pori sei phule Lakshmi āik puje.*⁶

(We sowed the seeds on the bank of the sea and flowers bloom at the middle of the sea. And those flowers are required for the worship of Lakshmi)

Sāgar mathote Lakshmī bāj hoila
Devagane āsila sāai
Kāho kataksha makore Lakshmī āi
*Dhire dhire chali jāi*⁷

(Lakshmi came out while churning the sea and the Gods were looking at her. But she did not look at anybody and left the place slowly).

Sandhyā kāle jār ghare kore Sankha dhwani
tar ghare bās kore
Lakshmi nārāyanī
Sankha dhwani uruli dhwani ekei saman
*sehi bādya xuni āhe Lakshmi Nārāyān*⁸

(Lakshmi comes to their place who worship her every evening playing conch, and bell)

Devi-Air Git expresses the glory and attributes of *Devi (Durga)*, daughter of the Himalayas and the beloved consort of *Mahadeva*.

Besides these, there are some folk-songs like *Biya-Nam*, *Tokari-Nam*, *Baramahi-Git* and *Mantra*, which are not of Śākta-nature but some of them are not without Śākta-elements. There are numerous *Biya-Nams* (marriage-songs) in Assamese, some of which have however developed centering round the marriage problem of *Hara* and *Parvati*. In some of them the glory and power of *Hara* and *Parvati* and their conjugal life have also been described. *Tokari-Nam* is a kind of Assamese folk-songs, sung by a man with the help of a single-stringed instrument. *Baramahi-Git* is a section of folk songs in Assamese, which depict different beauties manifested in nature during the different months of the year. But in some of them Śākta elements is clearly found. Assamese *Mantras*, which were mostly composed in the 13th and 14th centuries, constitute an important branch of literature. There are several *Mantra-puthis* dealt with various purposes. Since early period Kāmarūpa has been known to all as a famous land for charms and incantations (tantric-*mantra*). In many *Mantras*, the name

of Goddess Kāmākhya is found. It is known from Sankar-Digvijay that Sankaracharya of the 9th century came to Kāmarūpa and defeated Abhinavagupta, a noted Śākta scholar of Kāmarūpa. Abhinavagupta took revenge upon Sankaracharya by incantation, which he suffered from fistula.⁹

Assamese Manasa-literature was composed by three poets- Mankara, Durgavara and Sukavi Narayanadeva and their *Kavyas* were respectively known after their names as Mankari, Durgavari and Sukanani. The *Manasa-Kavya* of Mankara, consists of three sections-*Sristi-Khanda*, *Hara-Gauri-Vivaha-Khanda* and *Padma-Janma-Khanda*.¹⁰ Durgavara's *Kavya* comprises the main story of Beula and Lakhindara.¹¹ Sukavi Naranarayana is not only the best of *manasa*-poets, but is one of the best poets of old Assamese literature.¹² He is popularly known as Sukavi. Naranarayana's sizeable *Manasa-Kavya*, known as Sukanani, has been divided into two broad parts-*Padma Purana* and *Bhitheli*. The first part, *Padma Purana* begins with the creation of the world and terminates with the marriage of Padmavati. The second part, *Bhitheli* begins with the birth of Canda, the famous merchant of Campaka and terminates with Canda's happy union with his sons. The chief trait of Naranarayana's *Kavya* is its lyrical beauty. The whole *Kavya* is meant for recitation in appropriate tunes. Since the days of yore till to-day, this *Kavya* has been sung by the *Ojapali* during the performance of Manasa-worship.¹³

Though during the time of Sankardev, Manasa *Kavya* became Assamese folk literature but during the Sankar-Madhava time it was superceded by Vaisnavs literatures. It was after their time that gradually Śākta literatures could gain popularity and many Assamese Śākta literatures were composed. During the Ahom rule along with the Vaisnava literature, some Śākta literatures also received importance from the royal families. Ahom king Rudra Singha and Siba Singha also composed some songs which were Śākta in nature. Rudra Singha composed the following song-

Dasa bhuje ashtray dharisa saghane
Katit kingkini baje nepur charane
Rupor upama dite pare kunjone
*Name gauri pave rudrasingha nripa bhone*¹⁴

One example of Siba Singha's composition is-

Sarad purnima himkar badani
*Chanchal neel nalinidol nayana*¹⁵

The prominent writers of Sakta literature of this age were Ananta Achharyya, Ruchinath Kandali, Ramchandra Barpatra. Ananta Acharyya composed "Anandalahari" which was composed in the mid-18th century CE. It is noteworthy that this was composed with the order of Ahom king Siba Singha and his queen Bar Raja Phuleswari. In his Anandalahari it is written that-

Jitu rangpurat sakshate bhagavati
*Durgarupe aasa rakhi rajak samprati*¹⁶

The other Śākta literatures are those which are translated and adapted from Sanskrit works and the Vaisnava literatures where Śākta elements are found.

Importance of Tantra in Śakti worship

Tantras are mainly dealing with the ways and means of Śakti worship. The word "Tantra" is derived from the Sanskrit root "Tan" meaning to spread; and hence the Tantra is that kind of scripture by which knowledge (*Jnana*) is spread.¹⁷ The aim of Tantra is *bhukti* (enjoyment) and *mukti* (liberation); and this can be achieved by practicing self-restraint of body and mind. It is to be noted that in Tantric tradition there is no ultimate difference between body and mind. Hence body, mind and soul have to function in union. *Yoga*, which is a part of Tantra practiced for restraining the involution of mind.

The Tantric practice is the process of self-realisation, which has some definite rules within the framework of any religious faith. Tantricism consists of *mantra*, *japa*, *purascarana*, sacrifice, worship, including practices of five elements, known as *panca-makāra*. The Tantric practices may broadly be divided into three classes- i) some practices are regarded as obligatory or highly necessary for spiritual uplift and are accepted by people in general with reverence, being neither dreadly nor extremely secret. ii) Some practices are considered as essential for the attainment of an enlightened lift but are looked upon as dreadly or extremely secret. iii) There are still

other practices which have little relation or no relation with religion or spiritual uplift, and are performed for the fulfillment of some worldly desire or for the gratification of some evil motive.¹⁸

In the first kind of practices *diksa, japa, purascarana, homa, pranayama, dhyana, dharana, sayya-sadhana, vilva-mula-sadhana* are included. All these practices were existed in the Śāktism of early Assam.¹⁹ The practice of *mudras* or positions of hands and fingers are also included in this class of practices. This practice was widely prevalent in early Assam. The *mudras* that were practiced-*yoni, anga, ardha-candra, prakata, bandhani* etc.²⁰ Yantra worship was important factor in Śakti *sadhana*. *Sat-cakra-bheda* is the most important practice of this class. This means raising the *kundalini*-power lying at the base of the spinal cord to the *brahma-randhra* or sahasrara lying at the top of the same cord. Details of this practice of *sat-cakra-bheda* have been discussed in the *Kālikā Purāna* and *Yoginī Tantra*.

The second types of practices include those performed with *panca-ma-karas* or five things having ‘m’ as the initial letter in their names. These five makaras are *madya* (wine), *mansa* (meat), *matsya* (fish), *mudra* (eatables) and maithuna (sex-relation). The practice with *mudra* or eatables is not dreadful while the other four are looked upon as very dreadful. The *mānsa-sāadhanā* spoken of here includes the performance of animal-sacrifice also, which has been dealt with in detail in the Śākta-works of Assam. Numerous animals like goat, buffalo etc. were offered for sacrifice here.²¹ Human sacrifice and bull sacrifice also referred again and again.²² This is not compulsory for the spiritualists to give animal sacrifice, as there are alternative offerings such as fruits, flowers, eatables made of milk etc. for the Brahmins.²³ This second type of practice also included the *Cakra-sāadhanā* or practice performed in an assembly of males and females with the five *ma-kāras* in a secret place-preferably in a cemetery-at dark night.²⁴ Of this *sāadhanā*, we do not find a clear idea in the Śākta-works of early Assam. In connection with the *panca-makara* practices, the spiritual meaning is given in the *Yoginī Tantra* and *Kāmākhyā Tanta*. “According to this spiritual interpretation, *matsya-sāadhanā* means controlling senses, or rather, redirecting them towards the self; *madya-sāadhanā* means drinking the nectar oozing from sahasrārā at the time of the union between *kundalinī* and Śiva; *mānsa-sāadhanā* means destroying merits and demerits by the sword of knowledge; and maithuna-sāadhanā means uniting *kundalinī* with Śiva”.²⁵ *Sva-gātra-rudhira-mānsa-sāadhanā* or

the practice of offering blood and flesh out of one's own body, *citā-sādhanā* or practice with the help of funeral pyre, *śava-sādhanā* or the practice of meditation by sitting on a dead body in a secret place-preferably in a cemetery-at dark night, *munda-sādhanā* or practice to be performed by sitting on three or five heads of man, or of different animals including one of man. In early Assam all these practices were existing except *citā-sādhanā*.²⁶

The third type of practice includes the *ṣaṭ-karmans* or six kinds of occult practices which are called *abhicāras*. These are *śānti*, *vaśīkaraṇa*, *stambhana*, *vidveṣaṇa*, *ucāṭana* and *māraṇa*. *Śānti* is practiced for the cure of some disease or for warding off some evils. *Vaśīkaraṇa* is the practice for enchanting or overpowering some person. *Stambhana* is practiced for barring the fruition of some events. *Vidveṣaṇa* is the practice for creating an inimical relation between persons. *Ucāṭana* is the practice for creating imbalance in someone's mind and *māraṇa* is practiced for killing some person. All these practices were existing in Assam in the early period.

Of the existing modes of Tantric worship the *Vamacara* is so important that the term has become a synonym of Tantra itself. The conception of *Daksinacara* as opposed to *Vamacara* seems to be a later development, and it is possible that the first word of the expression Vamacara is not *vama* or left, but *vama* or woman.²⁷

The ultimate goal of Goddess worship is to reach emancipation through total identification with the deity. This is attained through *yoga* and the recitation of sacred texts associated with the great Goddess. The special *mantras* (Prayers) recited for each deity is mystical symbols capable of bringing the Goddess into the human world. These *mantras* are combined with *yantras* (magical diagrams) which are drawn on the floor. The puja (worship) should be performed with the priest sitting in front of one of these *yantras* inviting the deity to come into his presence.²⁸

Rites and Rituals of Śākta worship

Śaktism, cult of worshipping mother Goddess in various forms such as *Devi*, *Durga*, *Kali*, *Kalika*, *Uma*, *Candi*, *Camunda* etc. So there are various rituals and ceremonies associated with each forms of Śakti. In the same way in different Śākta *pīthas* also the ceremonies associated with different forms of Śakti are celebrated and conducted from the very early period. In Assam also Śaktism spread and became the religion of

the people. Hence people of Assam also conducted many rituals and celebrated many festivals associated with Śakti worship at their home and also in different Śākta *pīthas* near and far. In Assam Śākta *pītha* Kāmākhyā, the centre of mother worship is associated with various social and religious rituals, festivals and ceremonies observed at different times every year since time immemorial. In other parts of Assam at different Śākta *pīthas*, various rituals and festivals are observed.

The most important thing is the procedure of worship of almost all Goddesses- some elaborately and some in a nutshell manner are found in the *Kālikā Purāna*. Moreover, the *vidhis* of some Śakti pujas are found in *Varsa-Pradipa* by Sridhara Bhatta who belonged to the 15th century CE.²⁹ The worship of the Goddesses are given in the *Tantras* and *Puranas*. It has been discussed in the above about the scriptures where the procedure of Śākta worship is written.

Purascarana is an extremely important religious rite observed for making the Mantras efficacious. The *purascarana* consists of five elements; the muttering of the Mantra for a prescribed number of times, *homa*, *tarpana* and *abhiseka* with the same Mantra, followed by the fifth one- the feeding of the Brahmins. *Yoginī Tantra* mentioned that *purascarana* was observed in Kāmarūpa by the Śākta-*Sadhakas* and this practice is not totally extinct even to-day.

Among the seven kinds of Tantric *Sadhakas* such as *Vedacari*, *Vaisnavacari*, *Saivacari*, *Daksinacari*, *Vamacari*, *Siddhacari* and *Kaulacari* as mentioned in the sastras, it is known that *Daksinacara* and *Vamacara* are more popular and include almost all Śāktas. The latter is always superior to the former in the series respectively. One, who, following the principles of *Vedacara* worships *Devi Bhagavati* and meditates her name at right, is called *Daksinacari*. On the other hand, a *Vamacari* Śākta does not follow *Vedacara*, and worships Śakti through *panca-makaras-Madya* (wine), *Mansa* (meat), *Matsya* (fish), *Mudra* (fried grains) and *Maithuna* (sexual intercourse).³⁰

Offering sacrifice is an important element of Śākta-worship. Various sacrificial offerings such as goat, duck, pigeon etc are given to the Goddess. Śaktism is associated with the sacrifices of various animals, human beings etc. There is a provision of offering sacrifice both in *Vamcara* and *Pancamakara* systems of worship. These are Tantric worship. In Assam sacrificial offerings including human

beings continued as an element of Śakti-worship from early times. 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. But this practice had been stopped during the time of Ahom king Gadadhar Singha.³¹

Svagatrarudhira or self blood offering is one of the eight kinds of sacrifice.³² It is stated in the *Kālikā Purāna* that blood from a *sadhaka*'s body should be offered to the Goddess. But not any and every part of body should be offered. From the lower part of the navel and from the backside, lip and chin should not be given. Blood from the lower part of neck to the upper part of navel and from two arms excepting two palms should be given. Blood from the body parts such as cheeks, brow, eye-brow, tip of ear, two breasts, belly etc. should be offered to the Goddess.³³ It is stated in the *Kālikā Purāna* that offering of own flesh of the *sadhaka*'s should not exceed one fourth of a lotus petal can contain. Offering own flesh is more efficacious for the attainment of liberation. If a *sadhaka* offered his own flesh of the size of a pulse or sesamam to the Goddess, then his desires would fulfil within six months. From this it can be ascertained that it is at the time or before the compilation of the *Kālikā Purāna*, offering of self blood was prevalent in Assam. However these practices have been obsolete now-a-days. Regarding the offering of self blood reference is also found in other *Sastras*. The prevalence of offering self blood can be traced from the remote past and the fruitfulness of such offering is also traced from it. In the *Devi Mahatmya* section of the *Markandeya Purana*, it is stated that king Suratha and a Baishya, Samadhi by name offered their own blood to the Goddess and such example can be traced from the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* also.³⁴

Homa is one of the important ingredient which means giving oblation with ghee through blazing fire to Gods during puja. In the *Kālikā Purāna* it is prescribed that oblation is given with flesh also. Giving oblation with flesh a *Sadhaka* can easily destroy his enemy. Regarding the oblation with flesh besides *Kālikā Purāna*, in some other *vidhis* also it is prescribed. Oblation is given with black he-goat during Kali Puja which is still prevalent in Assam. Of course it is not common today but it is done in some special cases for some special purposes. Undoubtedly, it can be said that in since early time till today this practice of doing *Homa* with flesh is still continuing in Assam though not popularly but in some special cases.³⁵

Yantra-worship is one of the important practices in Śākta-*sadhana* in Assam. In the *Kālikā Purāna*, this aspect has been discussed in detail. This practice was in vogue in the early period. The *yantra* is a mystic diagram which is made with red Sandal (Raktacandana). In the *Kālikā Purāna* names of different diagrams has been found. They are trikona-mandala, satkona-mandala, ardha-candrakara, yogapītha etc.³⁶ *Yantra* worship also exists in the Śākta Tantric shrine Kāmākhyā. In the Kāmākhyā *pītha* worship is performed on the *srichakra* (*yantra*) which is considered as the principal among the 960 other *yantras*. These *yantras* are mainly some symbols where the *Sadhaka* tries to establish God or Goddess in that symbol. In the *srichakra yantra*, nine triangles are depicted among which five face downwards and four upward. The five triangles represent the Śakti and the four triangles represent Śiva. These altogether called the *navayoni chakra*.³⁷ This *srichakra* (*yantra*) is also a form of *yantra* worship that signifies the union of Siva and Śakti. These *yantras* are made of kumkum, rice flour and turmeric powder and so on. It seems that *yantra* worship was prevalent in Assam since early period atleast at the time of compilation of *Kālikā Purāna* or even sometimes before it.

Kumari Puja or Virgin worship is another Tantric ritual which is observed in Assam mainly at Kāmākhyā temple since early times atleast before or at the time of compilation of *Yoginī Tantra* as the said Tantra mentioned about it. Kolasura, a king of Kanchi is supposed to initiate this ritual. There is a story related to the origin of virgin worship. Once king Kolasura met one Brahmin girl invited the girl to eat something in his place. But the girl finished eating everything except the king in the place in the disguise of the Goddess Kali.³⁸

It is difficult to ascertain the accurate date of the beginning of the Kumari worship in Assam, but it is probably started in between twelfth and fourteenth century CE. It is because in the *Yoginī Tantra* mention is made about Kumari Puja.³⁹

There is no restriction of caste in the virgin worship. Any girl from one to sixteen years of age and not attending puberty can be chosen as the Kumari Goddess. But in the Kāmākhyā temple only Brahmin girls from the age of five to nine are preferred for this ritual. In the Virgin worship, the selected girl is bathed then decorated with new clothes and various ornaments, flowers etc. The priest worships the virgin and imagines her as the Goddess offered her flower, lamps, fruits, sweets and incense.

After finishing the ritual the girl transforms into her general form. The Virgin Goddess has different names in this puja according to her age. Their age may range from one to sixteen years which are accordingly listed as-Sandhya, Saraswati, Tridhamurti, Kalika, Subhage, Uma, Malinee, Kumtiko, Kalasandarbha, Aparajita, Rudrani, Bhairabi, Mahalakshi, Pīthanayika, Khetragya, and Sodasi.⁴⁰

In Kumari puja or virgin worship, living girls are worshipped as the Virgin Goddess, which is pure Tantric in nature.⁴¹ However, Goddess Kāmākhya is also known as Sodasi, one of the ten *Mahavidyas*. The *Dasamahavidya* concept is a Tantric belief as it evidenced the union of Siva and Śakti. Besides Kāmākhya temple, Kumari puja is still existent in different parts of Assam. The Assamese people practice this Kumari puja in their families also.⁴² Here the virgin is considered as the manifestation of Śakti.

There are some festivals which are associated to Śākta worship. Assam since early period observed some festivals of the Goddess in her various manifestations. Among them mention may be made of *Saradiya Durga Puja*, *Kali Puja*, *Basanti Puja*, *Nag Panchami* and so on. In various Śākta *pīthas* of Assam these festivals were celebrated with great honour. These festivals were observed annually since early time till today in some public places and also individually. Though regular worship had been done at their own *pīthas* daily but annually also such festivals have been seen observed by the people mostly under royal patronage.

Kāmākhya, the most important manifestation of the Goddess Sakti, was propitiated in Kāmarūpa since time immemorial. *Yoginī Tantra* states that Kāmākhya is identical with Goddess Kali, who is Ever-existent, the Supreme Being and the Supreme Knowledge:

“yā kālī paranā vidyā brahmarūpā sanātani |
Kāmākhya saiva deveśi sarvasiddhivinodinī ||”⁴³

From the *Kālikā Purāna*⁴⁴ it is known that Goddess Kāmākhya was worshipped by Naraka. The *Yoginī Tantra* also mentioned the same thing. It is stated in the *Yoginī Tantra* that Visnu while enthroning Naraka in the throne of Prāgjyotisa, he told him to worship Goddess Kāmākhya. As long as he would satisfy the Goddess, fortune would favour him; otherwise his luck would go against him. Naraka therefore

followed Visnu's advise and accordingly worshipped the Goddess- "narakah pālayāmāsa viṣṇūktam yadyadeva hi 1"⁴⁵ But both these scriptures are silent about the nature of Naraka's Kāmākhyā worship and the form of the Goddess whom Naraka worshipped.

During the long period of time, from the time of Naraka even down to at least tenth century CE (sometimes before compiling the *Kālikā Purāna*) anything definite about the way and nature of Kāmākhyā –worship is not available even traditionally to the local Pāndās (priests) of Kāmākhyā-temple. *The Kālikā Purāna* ⁴⁶ has given not only the mental form (*Dhyāna*) and some mystical Mantras (*Kavaca*), but also a vivid and systematic procedure (*Vidhi*) of Kāmākhyā- worship. According to the *Dhyana*, Kāmākhyā is a three-eyed Goddess seated on a red lotus. She is the supreme of gods and men. Her hands are constantly busy in offering boons. She instills a sense of fearlessness, and holds an Aksasūtra. Her ears, adorned with varied ornaments made of pearls and gold, are as red as the combined Sun and moon tinged with yellowish colour. Her body, with a face, as bright as the rising sun and having two breasts, expansive and rising-is being adorned with advancing youthfulness, and so on. From this *Dhyana*, it can be said that at least from the tenth century CE, if not earlier, Goddess Kāmākhyā was conceived in this form.⁴⁷

According to many scholars Kāmarūpa was the origin of Tantricism which centered round the Kāmākhyā temple. The Kāmākhyā *pīṭha* is regarded as the suitable place for practicing the Tantric cult. But it is difficult to say how the worship of Kāmākhyā got mixed with the Tantric rites. Tantricism is non-Aryan in origin and the elements such as use of magic and charms, wine, the belief in efficacy of *mantras* and sex worship all these are Tantric elements which has been found in many primitive cultures. Some of the elements can be found in the Vedas-*Atharva Veda* and *Rig Veda*. *Mantra*, *yantra* and *chakra* had its origin in the Vedas.⁴⁸

Goddess Kāmākhyā is associated with Tantricism and Śaktism since early time. Earlier it might have been started as a fertility cult and then it travelled from Eastern India- Assam and Bengal towards Dravidian India.⁴⁹ According to Gait, "At this Śaktism was the predominant from Hinduism in this part of India where in fact it is believed by many to have had its origin. Its adherents based their observances on the Tantras."⁵⁰

It is known that king Siva Singha (1714-1744 CE) donated a large area of land to the *Parbatiya Gosain* Krsnarām Bhattacharyya, who was given the management of the temple of Kāmākhyā. It cannot be said definitely how and in what procedure Kāmākhyā has been worshipped before the advent of *Parbatiya Gosain*. There is no doubt about the fact that some sort of worship conforming to the Vidhi, prescribed in the *Kālikā Purāna* was prevalent even then. Now-a-days also Goddess Kāmākhyā is worshipped with the said *Dhyana* of the *Kālikā Purāna*. Her daily worship is performed offering sixteen Upacāras (offering) along with sacrifices consisting of he-goats, pigeons etc. According to *Kālikā Purāna* and also the local tradition, in ancient times human sacrifice was also offered to Goddess Kāmākhyā. The tradition of offering human sacrifice is being still observed in an artificial manner. An idol of human being is made out of flour mixed with water, upon which specific Mantra is uttered with a view to make it throb with life. Every year, at Maharatri-puja in connection with Durga-puja held in Kāmākhyā temple, that idol is consecrated to and sacrificed before the Goddess under a well.⁵¹ Goddess Kāmākhyā is worshipped on the yoni-pitha. One mentionable thing is that Dasa-Maha-vidya (ten manifestations of Sakti)-Sodasi, Matangi, Kamata, Kali, Tara, Bhuvaneswari, Bhairavi, Chinnamasta, Bagala and Dhumavati are also worshipped in the Kāmākhyā temple. The worship of ten mahavidyas are as old as the worship of Kāmākhyā. In the *Yoginī Tantra*⁵² there occurs a long eulogy (*Stotra*) of Goddess Kāmākhyā. However there is no eulogy of Kāmākhyā found in the *Kālikā Purāna*. So, it is apparent that its growth is later than that of the *Dhyana*, *Kavaca* and *Vidhi* of Kāmākhyā found in said *Purana*.

Goddess Kāmākhyā has been recognised as a creative force in the symbolic form the Goddess is being worshipped at the present Kāmākhyā *pītha*. There is no image of the Goddess but in front of a yoni symbol the Goddess is worshipped. Ambubachi is a ritual observed in the Kāmākhyā *pītha* with the belief that during the time when it is observed, the Goddess undergone her menstrual period. “Ambubachi is a festival associated with the concept of Mother Earth, who is considered as the representation of the mother Goddess.”⁵³ However origin of this ritual is not known. The Goddess is considered as mother earth, because earth gives food and shelter to every living being. The Romans also considered the earth as mother. The folk songs of Germany it is found that earth is depicted as Mother of every human being. In Greece, the Earth Goddess had been worshipped as “goddess of vegetation” since early times. The

Goddess *Sakambhari* is known as Goddess of crops, who provides crops for the wellbeing of the people. There is a belief among the Indian people that, the Earth attains menstruation during the period of the rainy season. During this time heavy rainfall occurs that help in the agricultural activities.⁵⁴ Hence the concept of the Earth Goddess is related with agriculture. The worship of fertility cult was in vogue in early period. Probably this festival of Ambubachi though earlier was not intact but as a festival of agriculture later it might have been observed in Assam and other parts of India.

The Ambubachi is observed in the Kāmākhyā temple from the seventh to the eleventh day of the Assamese month *Ahar* (in the first fortnight of the month of June) and this festival continues for four days. There is a belief among the people that this is the menstrual period of the Goddess Kāmākhyā, the Primordial energy. During this period the main temple of Kāmākhyā is closed for three days and on the fourth day the door is opened. During this festival, prayer is offered to the *Calantamurti* or the mobile image of Kāmākhyā by offerings like vegetables and fruits. On the fourth day worship is done by the priest. Animals are offered to the Goddess for sacrifice on that day. At the end of the worship the *pītha* is opened for the devotees. Red clothes are worshipped during Ambubachi which is considered very sacred.⁵⁵

The Assamese people have great faith on the Ambubachi festival. People of Lower Assam called this festival as *Amoti* or *Ameti*. The Assamese widows especially those live in villages do not take food during this period. They take various fruits. Moreover, the cultivators stop ploughing the field during this time. Hence Ambubachi festival is accepted by the Assamese people as a socio-religious festival.

Assam being the land of agriculture since early time, people worshipped the Mother earth for the prosperity of their cultivation. Probably the aboriginals of Assam started to worship the Mother Earth which has traditionally continues till now in the form of Ambubachi festival, may be of later form. The aboriginal people believed and worshipped fertility cult and Ambubachi is also related to fertility that already mentioned. Hence it can be said that Ambubachi had its trace from the primitive fertility cult that was in vogue among the aboriginals. Thus Ambubachi festival signifies the cult of fertility, as the Tantric belief ascertains. The Tantras consider the

menstruation blood of Kāmākhya as sacred.⁵⁶ Nirmal Prabha Bordoloi also mentioned that Ambubachi festival is based on Tantric belief.⁵⁷

Though there is a belief among the people of Assam and the other parts of the country that during Ambubachi the Goddess has undergone her menstrual period and therefore people has the belief that it is sacred. But according to the tradition of our society this menstrual period is considered as untouchable. A woman keeps herself aloof from all the socio-religious activities and apart from her household duties considering her as untouchable. But in the Ambubachi of Kāmākhya, it is against the traditional belief. In the *Manusmriti*, Manu has mentioned this period of woman she is untouchable. And the same tradition has been followed by the people of this country. However the whole country accepted the Ambubachi of Kāmākhya considering it as the menstrual period of the Goddess. However, it is a mystry how Goddess gets her menstrual period every year during that specific period. That mystry may be come into light by science. People from distant areas come to Kāmākhya *pītha* during Ambubachi as they have the faith in that festival.

Durga is one of the manifestations of Śakti. Regular worship of Durga is done in different Śākta *pīthas* where Goddess Durga is the main deity. Besides this yearly festival called Durga puja is celebrated in Assam. Durga puja is one of the most popular festivals celebrated in Assam and Bengal. Goddess Durga had been worshiped in Assam since early times. In the medieval times there were evidences of observance of Durga puja in Assam by the Ahom rulers. In various Śākta *pīthas* of Assam Durga puja is celebrated with great honour.

Durga Puja is celebrated in Assam for five days. During Durgā puja each day the songs are sung. On the Sasthi day Sasthi pujār nām, on Saptami Saptami pujār nām, on vijaya daśamī vijaya daśamī nām are sung describing the various virtues of Durga *Devī*.

*“Gaurī bidāi mānge charanate dhari
Sati bole prāne prabhu karu nibedan
Yajna dekhbare jao pitir bhaban
Sibe bole haitu sāti pitir grihe jābā
Binanimantrane golie apamāna pābā
Sati bole prāna prabhu āmāk nabadhibā
Pitir grihe jāba lagi nimantrana kibā”*⁵⁸

‘(Sati asked permission from Siva to attend the *Yajna* ceremony at her father Daksa’s place. Siva warned her not to go without invitation or she would be insulted. But Sati requested Siva not to discourage her as she feels no invitation was required to visit her father’s house).’

Bhagabati āi āgate sankha bajāi
biṃāne sahile nāmi āhilā naramanusyare thāi
Brahmai dila astra, a vaishnvi dilā chakra
Mehese dilā trisūl he
Saturbhuj rupe trisūla dharia asurāk korā nirmaul
*Kumbha ghani Nikumbha badhinī Mahisa asurak badhe he.*⁵⁹

(Playing the conch Bhagabati has come to the earth. Brahma has given her weapon, Vishnu has given the discus and Mahesh has given the trisūla. The killer of kumbha and nikumbha has killed the demon Mahisāsura).

In the *Kālikā Purāna*, it is mentioned that Sāvarotsava is a peculiar part of Saradiya Durga-puja. This Utsava is observed in a restricted manner even today in Assam. It is described in the said purana that this Sāvarotsava is observed at the time of immersion of the image into water. At this moment people accompanied with virgins, harlots and dancers those are expert in musics have to play musical instruments, unfurl the flags, and scatter rice, fried paddy and flowers and to throw muds and sands with fun. They are to utter various obscene words to one another.⁶⁰

The worship of Goddess Durga during spring season is popularly known as Basanti Puja. It is mentioned in the Candi that the worship of Goddess Durga was first performed by Suratha, a king of Satya Yuga, in the spring season. In the Krttivasi Ramayana it is said that Ramacandra worshipped Durga in the Autumnal season in the Treta Yuga by which he was able to kill Ravana, the Lanka king.⁶¹ From this time it is known that people worship Goddess Durga in the Autumnal season and only a few people were continuing the age old system of worshipping in the Spring season. It is since this time that the worship of Goddess Durga in the Autumnal season is called Saradiya and in the Spring as Basanti Durga puja. In Assam Saradiya puja is observed in abundance but Basanti puja is also performed in some places since by gone days till today.

Kali, one of the fierce forms of Śakti had been worshipped in Assam. In the previous chapter discussion has been made about the iconification of the Goddess. In Assam there are many Kali temples where the Goddess has been worshipped regularly. Kali puja is also a yearly festival observed every year in Assam. In various temples of Assam Kali puja is observed. This was in vogue since the early period. During the time of Kali puja some songs associated with the virtue of the Goddess is sung by the womenfolk in Assam.

*Kālī kālī mohā kālī, Bhadra kālī nām
Sadā abai padatale kori āse dhyān*⁶²

(Kali kali Mohakali. Her name is Ugrakali. Sadāsiva is worshipping her
She is black; she is spreading her tongue smeared with blood
She is the killer of demon
Sadāsiva was lying on her way
She without her knowledge kept her feet on him
Spreading her hair she is Digambarī, which brighten us
O, wife of Pasupati please protect us.)

Manasa, the snake Goddess is worshipped for the prevention and cure of snake bite, and also for fertility and general prosperity. In Assam worship of this popular deity is still prevalent. It is observed every year by the people of Assam individually at home or publicly. It cannot be said definitely about the origin of Manasa puja in Assam. But it is evident that antiquity of Manasa worship is of later date comparing to the other cults. Some sculptures have been discovered which are of 10th and 13th century CE in Assam and Bengal.⁶³ Besides these, the literary works such as Manasa Kavya or *Padma Purana* composed by different poets are also not earlier than 15th century. Such evidences insisted to presume that Manasa worship began in the later time.

India is a vast country with numerous hills, forests, rivers and mountains which make it suitable for the creatures like serpent or snake. Besides this in the Vedic age references are traced about the worship of nature by the people of that time. It is natural to worship the creatures like serpent to ward off its painful bite. People might have worshipped snake since that time. Like India in the outside countries also the was prevalence of serpent worship. However it is to be mentioned here that in other

parts of India among different tribes serpent worship is prevalent. “In different parts of India serpents are held in great awe and esteem and are worshipped by many tribes. In western Assam and Eastern Bengal, Manasa, Visahari or Padmavati is worshipped by all classes of people. Brahmins or Candalas.”⁶⁴ In Assam among the Khasis, Mishmis of north eastern Assam, Hajongs, Assamese people had the story of worshipping snake. Many There is a belief among the village people that by a “Bez” who who can cure the snake bite by chanting mantras (spells) called ‘sape khowa mantra’.⁶⁵ Thus it appears that serpent worship is prevalent among different class and societies of India.

In Assam serpent worship is popularly known as Manasa puja. People worshipped this Goddess to ward of snake bite. In the Medieval period some literatures were composed to worship the Goddess. These are called Manasa *Kavya* or Padma Puran. Manasa *Kavya* were mainly written by three poets- Mankar, Durgabar and Sukavi Narayanarayana. These poets have composed a good number of songs in praise of Manasa which are sung in connection with the worship of the Goddess. Besides these, there are a number of songs sung by the women folk alone. These are known as Manasar geet, which are purely folk in nature. It can be definitely said that Manasa worship began in Assam “from sometimes or even before Mankara and Durgavara flourished as poet.”⁶⁶ B.K Barua⁶⁷ says that these two poets flourished in the later part of the fifteenth century and this has been accepted by other scholars also. Thus it can be said that Manasa worship was prevalent in Assam before the start of the Neo-Vaisnavite Movement of Sankardeva.⁶⁸ Manasa is worshipped mainly in the districts of Goalpara and Kamrup and the Mangaldai sub-division of Darrang district in Assam. Manasa worship is done by singing the songs composed by the three above mentioned poets. The Goddess of serpent is also called *Mārai*.

Goddess Manasa is to be worshipped by the left hand and in the rainy months of the year. Poet Mankar lays down thus:

Bariseka antare bāriṣā samayata
*Cāri dina pūjibeka śrāvaṇa māsa.*⁶⁹

“People should worship Manasa every year in the rainy season for four days in the month of *Śrāvana* (July-August)”. Poet Narayanadeva precisely lays thus:

bariṣa antare pūje śrāvaṇa māsata
tini dina kare pūja bāriṣā kālata
*daśa śukla pakṣa thiti pañcamī pūjibā*⁷⁰

According to Mankar, Padma was born in the month of *Caitra* on the twelfth day of the bright half of the month but Naranarayanadeva says that she sprang up in the month of *Śrāvaṇa*. The Goddess is to be placed on a raised platform and worship whole day and night when the four rainy months starts. Another name of Manasa is Visahari, who is to be worshipped in an earthen pot with Siju (Euphoria plant) put in the pot with hundred-petalled lotus.⁷¹

“The Goddess is worshipped with a four cornered mandapa, temporary house made of wood, bamboo; the four cornered *mandala* (holy circle) decked with *cōwars* (whisks made of the tail of yak) and plaintain trees in each corner and a picturesque cloth (*chandowā*) stretched above, the holy *pūrṇa ghaṭa* (whole pitcher), four oil lamps (*dīpa*), *dhūpa* (burning incense on stands), *naivedya* (vegetable offerings), gold and silver flowers-all to quicken up.”⁷²

Manasā Puja is one of the festivals associated with the worship of the Goddess Manasā, the serpent Goddess. Manasā worship is done by some set rules incantations (*vidhi* and *mantra*). Sacrifices of goats, ducks, and pigeons are also a part of Manasā worship like worship of other Goddesses. *Ojā-Pāli*, a band of singers sung the verses from *Padma Purana* in group consisting of the leader called *ojā*, and a few assistants called *pālis*. They sang and danced together during the Manasa Puja. They are also called *Deodhai*. During the puja they sung the whole Canda-Manasa story which is popularly known as Sukanani from the beginning to the end of the story written by Sukavi Naranarayana.⁷³ It is noteworthy to mention that in the *vidhi* of the Manasa puja, no reference is found about the *Ojā –Pāli* or *Deodha*. But in the popular festival this has become part and parcel of Manasa puja which is unavoidable.⁷⁴ When this performance got associated with the Manaja puja in Assam is not certain.

In Bengal also this Manasa puja is celebrated with great pomp. Manasa puja is one of the folk festivals celebrated by the people of Bengal. It is mentioned that Manasa sculptures have been discovered in Bengal which is of 10th century. However in Assam the *Kavyas* composed by the three poets-Mankar, Durgavar and Naranarayan

were belonged to 15th century which is later than the sculptures discovered from Bengal. There is possibility that Manasa puja was at first prevalent in Bengal which later on spread to Assam being the neighboring territory. It is worthy to mention that earlier parts of Bengal were under the territory of Kāmarūpa. So, definitely some influence was there in both the territory even if separated culturally afterwards.

Worship of Sitalā or Āi Bhagawati is a folk ritual very much vogue in Assam. Sitalā is the Goddess of pox popularly known as Āi, the mother who has seven or nine sisters. Goddess Sitalā or Āi is worshipped when somebody suffers from small pox, chicken pox or measles. “The disease itself is reverentially called Āi or Āisakal, ‘the mother’, and its attack is described ‘Āi olowa’ or ‘Āisakal olowa’, ‘the appearance of the mother or mothers’. This euphemistic attempt at avoiding the name of the disease, i.e., vasanta, is significant and exhibits the horror with which an attack of small-pox is held”.⁷⁵ In the early part of this chapter of Śākta literature section, we have mentioned that there are a good number of songs sung by the womenfolk in a group in praise of the Goddess Sitala. The gathering of womenfolk to sing these songs are called Āi-sabāh, assembly (sabhā). These songs are known as Āi-nām. The function is called Āi matā, invoking the Goddess. These songs describe the seven types of disease come out as seven Āi sisters.

*“Dukhiyar gharaloi āilok ahise, diboloi nāikia eko
Muror keshere pāye machi dime dehak pāri dime sāko”⁷⁶*

(The Āi’s have come to our house but we are so poor to offer them anything, we shall rub their feet with our tresses and lie down to make bridges of our bodies).

In some of these Āi nāms the Goddess is identified with the forms of the Indian Mother Goddess and people called Āi mātr, Śītalā, Devī, Bhagavatī, Mahāmāyā, Parvatī, Durgā, Kāmākhya, Caṇḍī, Kālī, Rudrāṇī, Nārāyaṇī, and so on. Sometimes she is called Phuleśvarī, ‘the Goddess of flowers’. This is because the Goddess bestows pock-marks, euphemistically compared to flowers.

It appears from the above discussion that Śakti worship was prevalent in Assam since distant past. Śakti worship in Assam was purely Tantric. Kāmākhya temple which was the centre of the religious sects mainly Śaktism, Śaivism and Tantricism was an example of its practice. Various Tantric rituals like *Purascarana*, Kumari Puja, *yantra*

worship was prevalent in Assam. Besides these various festivals like Durga Puja, Kali puja, Ambuvaci which were Śakti puja and some are Tantric in nature had been observed in Assam since time immemorial. Worship of various popular Goddesses such as Sitala, Manasa had been continuing in Assam. Various Śākta literatures were composed in Sanskrit and Assamese. Śākta scriptures such as *Kālikā Purāna*, *Yoginī Tantra*, *Kāmākhyā Tantra* in Sanskrit were composed only to glorify Śaktism in Assam. Various rituals and procedure of Śākta worship have been prescribed in these Śākta scriptures. Besides these, various Śākta literatures in Assamese have been composed.

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59. *Ibid.*

60. *Bhaireyā bhairavat praptam yogam vyāpya tatah priye |*
Tatsakāsāttu siddhena aīnakhyena barānane ||
Kāmarūpe mahapīthe macchandena mahātmanā ||
61. Doloi, *Op.Cit.*, p.110
62. Choudhury, *Anima*, Pp.89-97
63. Doloi, *Op.Cit.*, p.263
64. Neog, Maheswar, 1984, *Op.Cit.*, *Religions of the North-East*, New Delhi, p.45
65. *Ibid.*,
66. Doloi, *Op.Cit.*, p.267
67. *Ibid.*
68. *Ibid.*
69. Neog, *Op.Cit.*, p.50
70. *Ibid.*, p.50
71. *Ibid.*, p.48
72. *Ibid.*,p.51
73. Doloi, *Op.Cit.*, p.
74. *Ibid.*
75. Neog, *Op.Cit.*, p.61
76. Choudhury, *Anima*, *Op.Cit.*, Pp.89-97