

SAKTI CULT IN ANCIENT ASSAM



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Abstract: Sakti cult was most dominant and popular among the people of ancient Assam. It plays an important role from that time till today. It plays an important place in the literatures also. There are various forms of the cult worshipped by the people in the ancient period is evidenced by the inscriptions also.

Keywords: Sakti, Cult, Inscriptions, Literatures, Sculptures.

INTRODUCTION

The most striking characteristic of ancient Assam (Pragjyotisa-Kamarupa) was the Sakti cult which was the dominant and influential cult of Assam in the early period. It has been worshipped in different forms in different places in different times. Various literary evidence, inscriptions and sculptures of ancient Assam are regarded as the most reliable sources which supply us authentic information about the prevalence of Sakti cult and its various forms. The present paper aims to study about the prevalence of Sakti cult in Assam in the ancient times based on literatures, inscriptions and sculptures of Assam.

ORIGIN AND DEVELOPMENT OF SAKTI CULT:

Sakti, cult is a deep-rooted religious and historical phenomenon which evolved throughout the ages in the whole world. The Sakti cult had been worshipped as the mother Goddess, conceived as power both creative and destructive has been an object of worship in India from early times.¹ The cult of fertility or the worship of the phallus, *linga* and *yonis*, personified later on as Siva and the Mother Goddess or *Devi*, which formed the basis of Saktism and Tantrikism, is found not only in the prehistoric finds, such as Neoliths and Megaliths which are so extensive in Assam but also from the Indus valley remains. During the Indus Valley civilization, the worship of the female principle appears to have been in vogue among the Harappans as has been proved by the terracotta images of the Goddess and the ring stones. The Sakti as a cosmic energy, personified as a female, is one of the oldest faiths in India, and some of the names of the Goddess like *Durga*, *Kali*, and *Uma* occur in the Vedic literature. But it is almost certain that Saktism had a non-Vedic origin and Uma or Kali was probably a female mountain ghost, which was later on identified with the wife of Rudra, or brought into line with the Brahmanic thoughts. The Epics and the *Puranas* are mainly responsible for the consecration of this female entity in Hindu pantheon and unfolding her diverse aspects supported by various myths and legends.² Historical evidence suggests that Mother Goddess worship was prevalent in different forms in the Indian Peninsula. It is no surprise that literary evidence corroborated by archaeological findings suggests that Sakti Cult was widely worshipped in the eastern part of the country especially in Assam and Bengal in the early period of history.³ Sakti worship developed and flourished all over Kamarupa after the coming of the Aryans or during the royal dynasties on the aboriginal tribal cult. Traces of Sakti cult was found in the villages among agricultural society in different form-personal, family and in the *kulas* with the aboriginal tribal methods. The deities in course of time, were worshipped in the society in common form, but confined in a particular race such Kiratadevi, Mikirani etc by the matriarchal society.

From the foregoing discussion it is clear that independent local tribal Goddesses were transformed into Brahmanical deities and *Puranas* played an important part in this process of reconstruction. Assam and Bengal were aryanised at a later date compared to the rest of India due to geographical locations. Before the Puranic Brahmanism reached eastern India, tantricism had a stronghold in both these regions where Goddess occupied the most important role. Saktism in its developed form became identical with Tantricism as Tantric ideas are generally regarded as the basis of Sakti religion. It has appeared from the epigraphic record that Puranic Goddesses made their advent in Assam by the seventh century A.D. Both literary and epigraphic records prove that both Vaisnavite (Lakshmi, Saraswati) and Saivite (Bhavani, Gauri, Sarvani) Goddesses were popular in ancient Assam.

The concept of Saktism is an all Indian phenomenon and it was expanding since time immemorial. It is not possible to trace its place of origin and the date, as well as its precise date of prevalence in Assam. The development in practice has little variation. So it will be helpful if we can point out the time since when Saktism has been a living faith here and the probable time relating to the phases of its development. In order to find out the prevalence of Saktism or the worship of the Sakti cult in ancient Assam we shall have to look into the inscriptions, literatures, various sculptures or images of the deity.

SAKTI CULT IN THE INSCRIPTIONS OF ASSAM:

As already mentioned that Assam was the suitable place for Sakti worship, the different inscriptions of ancient Assam brings into light the prevalence of the cult. Inference may be made of those inscriptions where varieties of names of the Goddess are mentioned. Among them in the Doobi and Nidhanpur Copper plate of Bhaskaravarman contains various names of Sakti. In the Doobi plate Nayana Devi is compared to *Durga* (and Parvati) which throws light on the respect and devotion to the Goddess and her popularity. And the queens were also compared to Sakti in power, beauty and fame. The Nidhanpur plate refers (1.87) to a donee named Kaliswami which signify the popularity of the cult of Kali to a certain extent. In the same plate (V.20) refers to Syama and the queen assumed the name Syamadevi. Syama is also

a form of Goddess *Durga or Kali*, the great Goddess of the *Devimahatmya*.⁴

In the Tezpur plate (II.10-11) of Vanamaladeva, reverential reference is made of the presence of *Kamaswara* and Goddess *Mahagauri* on the top of a hill called *Kamakutagiri*. Centering to *Kalika Purana* (64, 48, 18-42), it may be presumed that *Kameswara* means God Siva and *Mahagauri* is Goddess Kamakhya and *Kamakutagiri* is the *Nilachala hill* or the *Nila parvata*. The Parvatiya plate also refers Candika Devi, one of the important Puranic Goddess. In the same plate reference is made to a tank named *candika* from which it may be assumed that the people of this area cherished special devotion to this Goddess of the Markandeya purana. In the Deopani Vishnu Image, Vishnu paid homage to Hara (Siva) and said that Goddess (Devi) is adorable and identical with Visnu. In the Bargaon Copper Plate, mention is made to Kauladevi (Goddess of the family) belonged to the king of the *Bhauma* family. The Sualkuchi grant of Ratnapala states the existence of Tantric rites during the ruling period of Ratnapala and he himself was a well versed in Tantric lore. In the Gauhati grant (V.1) of Indrapala, reference is made to a quarrel between *Gauri* and *Sambhu*. The same grant mentioned that queen Durlabha of Purandapala is compared to Goddess Siva belonging to Sambhu (Siva). In the Gawakuchi Copper Plate (L.49-60) reference is made to a plot of land chartered in the name of Goddess Mahagauri and Lord Kameswara. In the same epigraph (V II 71-2) king Indrapala is named *Haragirijakaranapankajarajoranjitottamanga* e.i. one whose head is coloured with dust of the lotus feet of Hara and Girija.⁵ These evidences decisively show that king Indrapala was a follower of the sakti cult; and temples in the name of Goddesses under his patronage were built and he assiduously followed the cult by studying the Tantras.

The Gachtal Copper Plate of Gopalavarmadeva refers to the daughter of mountain Himalaya (Parvati). In the Khanamukh Grant of Dharmapala the *mangala* verse is addressed to the Goddess in the *Ardhayuvatiswara* form. In the eleventh verse of the same plate queen Ratna is compared to Goddess Girija belonging to Sambhu. The same plate (v.9) also refers Goddess Saraswati. In the Subhankara Pataka Grant of Dharmapala (V.19) the mother of the done is compared to Goddess parvati, the spouse of Siva, the killer of Andhaka (parvativa daityandhakadvisah). The Hayunthal Copper Plate of Harzaravarman mentions that Harjaravarman was born to Jivadevi, who is identified as Mother Earth.⁶

The above discussion indicates that there are various manifestation of the Goddess which was popular in ancient Assam. Lord Siva is directly associated with Sakti in the physical manifestation of Gauri as seen in the Tezpur Copper Plate Inscription of Vanamala and Guwakuchi Grant of Indrapala. The Bargaon grant also shows a new motif where Siva and Gauri were playing Dice. Later on Siva and Parvati acquired a unity and both were coalesced into one. The Khonamukh and Subhankarapataka Grant of Dharmapala invoke Ardhayuvatisvara.

SAKTI CULT IN THE LITERATURES OF ASSAM

Of the literatures, the *Kalika Purana*, a work of late ninth century, tells us something about the Sakti cult. The different female divinities such as *Uma, Ambika, Durga, Parvati, Haimavati, Kali, Mahakali, Bhadrakali, Karali* etc. came to be associated with the wife of Siva and the relationship between the Saiva and the Sakta cults grew up. The Sakta Cult rose into prominence in the early centuries of the Christian era.

The *Devi Purana*, a work composed about the end of the seventh or the beginning of the 8th century A.D. states that the Devi was worshipped in her different forms in different places, for instance in Kamarupa, Kamakhya, Bhattadesa, etc. (Chap 39.v.14 and chap 42, v.9). Wilson, in the preface to his translation of *Vishnu Purana*, remarks that Assam, or at least the north-east of Bengal (Kamarupa), seems to have been the source from which the Tantric and Sakta corruption of the religion of the *Vedas* and the Puranas proceeded. "Saktism", says Eliot, "in the sense of a definite sect with scriptures of its own, if not confined to the north-east corner, at least has its head-quarters there".⁷ Traditionally the Sakta cult is considered to have its centre in Kamarupa with its chief temple at Kamakhya. But strangely enough, in the inscriptions there is no trace of Sakti worship, except the veiled references in the inscriptions of Vanamala and Indrapala to the temples of Kamesvara Mahagauri, and Maha-gauri Kamesvara.

The name of Goddess Kamakhya, does not appear in the early literature and the word according to B.K. Kakati, is non-sanskritic in origin, an Austric word meaning ghost or dead body. Kamakhya formerly a Goddess of ghosts and spirit, was worshipped in a smasana or cremation ground. Throughout the medieval period, even down to the 18th century, the leading religion of Assam, however seems to be Saktism.⁸ Kamakhya is the most holy and famous shrine of the sect and with its worship was associated the various rites, mantras, mudras and sacrifices.

Kalika Purana and *Yoginitantra* are two of the early Sakta treatises of Assam, which are regarded as authorities in Saktism even outside Assam. In these works, Sakti or Divine Mother is described as the non-dual Power of the Supreme God or Siva. These works mainly deal with the exploits and worship of the

Divine Mother in her various forms. The study of the *Kalikapurana* and the *Yoginitantra* discloses that Sakti cult in its various phases was a predominant religion in Assam during the ancient and medieval periods. The *Yoginitantra* gives more details of some of the practices relating to Tantricism

Another important work on Sakti cult in Assam is the *Kamakhyatantra*, though of a later date. The *Mahabhagavata-purana*, (as the *Devibhagavata* is called) is an *Upapurana* which also advocates Saktism; it is believed to be composed in ancient Assam or in that part of eastern modern North Bengal which was included in ancient Kamarupa during the 10th or 11th century A.D. Another tantric work on Saktism which may be mentioned here is the *Sakti-Sangama-Tantra*. In this tantra, the greatness of Kamarupa (*Kamarupa-Mahatmya*) has been depicted in a vivid way. From this it can be presumed that this work has most probably been written in Assam or in ancient Kamarupa.

SAKTI CULT IN THE SCULPTURES OF ASSAM

Assam was the centre of Sakti worship from time immemorial which had been evidenced by the images discovered throughout the state. It is natural to accept that in the early period

Assam was one of the important centres for Sakti worship. Variety of *Devi* images associated with different Sakti cults has been discovered and some are preserved in the state museum.

As regards the *Devi* images found so far in the state, Deopani image of Durga is the earliest. The Goddess has four hands; the two lower arms are in the *varada-mudra*. Of the two upper ones, the right hand holds a trident and the left one a mirror. On each side of the Goddess stands a small worshipping female, holding the hands with the palms joined together in front of the breast, the usual attitude of supplication.

Mahisamardini, the *ugra* form of *Durga*, is the most important and earliest, according to literary texts. Mahisamardini occupied an important place in the Hindu pantheon. She either appears alone or in company in temples. This form of Goddess Durga is most popular in India particularly in Assam and Bengal. The images of *Mahisamardini*, rock-cut as well as carved on stone slabs are found in Assam. An image of *Mahisamardini*, carved on a stone slab (90x50 cm) comes from Sirajuli, a village in the vicinity of Dhekiajuli and is now preserved in a private house of Dhekiajuli town. Here the Goddess has ten arms, stands in tribhanga posture, with the right leg placed on the back of her vehicle, the lion, while the left leg is on the back of beheaded Mahisa. This image, which is in a perfect state of preservation, displays excellent proportions in execution and is a pleasing work of art. Stylistically, this image may be placed in 10th century A.D.⁹ The second image of Mahisamardini is noticed at Hajo. The small image is carved on a block of basalt. Stylistically, this image is assigned to pre-Ahom period, e.i. 11th/12th centuries A.D.¹⁰ A beautiful image *Mahisamardini* is seen at Ulubari, Guwahati, by the side of G.S. Road. Here also the deity has ten hands and stands in the usual way, placing the right foot on the vahana and the left one on the Mahisa. Stylistically this may be assigned to 11th century A.D.¹¹ Another image is seen at Siddheswari temple, Sualkuchi. This image is represented same as the former one.

A four handed stone image of the deity is to be seen in the *nata-mandapa* of the Kamakhya temple and another small image of the Goddess is noticed along with the image of *Uma-Mahesvara* and a *sivalinga* on the way to Kamakhya. Two badly mutilated stone figure of the deity are also seen in the Assam State Museum. In all these four cases, the right foot of the deity is placed on the back of *vahana*, the lion, while the left foot is on the Mahisa; and the right leg of the *asura* is pounced upon by the *vahana* of the deity.

Besides these at various places Sakti images are found throughout the state which belonged to early period. Various icons of Sakti have been unearthed at Ambari area of Guwahati. Various forms of Sakti have been found in many places of the state. A large number of images depicting different aspects of the Sakti-Goddess were unearthed at Ambari. These are: one image of sixteen handed *Candanayika*; Sixty eight small images of *Mahisamardini Durga*; one image of Ganga; One image of Yamuna; One image of Manasa with a snakehood; Sixty two big and small size *yonipithas*. *Yonipitha* is the symbol of creation and in the *Kamakhya pitha* there is no images of the Goddess, yoni is worshipped there.¹²

Kamarupa was an important centre of *Devi* worship both in her symbolic and iconographic representations under various names and along with her companion Siva, is proved by literature and archaeology. The extensive ruins of temples dedicated to *Devi* and different aspects of Sakti along with Siva and their icons have been noticed from a number of places in Assam. This confirms our belief that the faith had an important stronghold in the land from early times.¹³ The existing materials, both records and remains, therefore, point to the widespread prevalence of the faith,¹⁴ even after the vaisnava reformation a great bulk of the population remained Saktas, and the temple of Kamakhya is still one of the great centres of Hindu pilgrimage for all sects from all parts of India, and hundreds of animals and birds are sacrificed at the alter of the *Devi* in the name of religion.¹⁵ With the incorporation of later Buddhist ideas into the system, *Kamarupa* remained a noted centre of the Tantric-Buddhist faith.

CONCLUSION

From the above discussion, it is clear that Sakti worship was very much prevalent in Assam since early times. The description in the inscriptions, literatures and the huge quantities of sculptures of Sakti found throughout the state evidenced the popularity of the Goddess and Her worship in different forms. This leads us to conclude that Assam was an important seat of Sakti worship in the ancient times.

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