

Ritualizing Women Body: An Analysis of Tantric Sacred Geography with special reference to Kamakhya in Assam

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Abstract: This paper attempts to examine the domain of tantric sacred geography with the exploration of the religious institute of Kamakhya temple situated in Assam. Kamakhya temple stands out not only as an eminent tantric centre but also as one of the chief Shakti Pithas. Ritualization of women body in tantric tradition is not an unknown phenomenon. However, this paper will limit itself with the aspect of sacred geography and menstruation in the tantric tradition. Sacred geography in tantric tradition is not bound to locations, but it could be viewed as the parts of Sati's body which developed into various sacred Shakti Pithas. The most vital of these pithas is situated in Kamakhya. Kamakhya is adorned in the form of Sati's yoni, which is perceived as the centre of creation. Another aspect in adoration of Sati's yoni at Kamakhya is menstruation of the goddess. Kamakhya is one of the few Indic religious institutions where menstruation is celebrated in the form of an annual festival known as Ambubachi Mela. Ritualization of women body could be perceived with a renewed understanding by exploring Kamakhya and examining domains like sacred geography and menstruation in tantric tradition in particular and Indian religious setting in general.

Keywords: Women Body, Tantric tradition, Sacred Geography, Menstruation, Kamakhya, Assam.

1. INTRODUCTION

Assam situated in the northeastern part of India is often upheld as a land of a unique culture with the presence of practices like human sacrifice, witchcraft and black magic. Gait thinks that "The temple of Kamakhya at Guwahati is one of the most sacred shrines of the Shakti Hindus and the whole country is framed in Hindu traditions as a land of magic and witchcraft."¹ It is often depicted as a mystic land affiliated with dark, evil or dangerous perspective. The Kamakhya temple situated in Guwahati is also one of the chief attraction of Assam. The temple is unique in more than one perspective. It has been a part of the religious setting in Assam since antiquity. However, its development as a proper structure took place during the medieval period. The tantric tradition was also a part of the religious setting in Assam since antiquity which links to the Kamakhya temple as scholars regard it as the centre of origin of Tantric tradition in India. Kamakhya temple as an eminently religious institution has received royal patronage by kings and kingdoms like Naraka, Koch Kingdom and the Ahom Kingdom. However, with the rise of the Vaishnavite movement by Shankardeva in Kamarupa during the medieval period, tantric tradition and eminence of Kamakhya have receded to the background.

This paper will attempt to explore various themes in the tantric tradition like sacred geography and menstruation with a special focus on Kamakhya. And place it in the broader realm of ritualization of women body in Indian religious setting. It will also attempt to bring forward the contrast of these themes in Puranic tradition.

¹ Edward Gait, *A History of Assam*, (Thacker, Spink & Co. Calcutta, 1906.) P ii

2. A BRIEF OUTLINE OF THE KAMAKHYA TEMPLE

Kamakhya temple is situated in the Nilachal hill, near Guwahati often referred to as the Blue Mountain. The chief attraction of the temple is the yonipitha. "In the temple, there is no image of the Goddess. Instead of the image, there is a Yonipitha. The Yonipitha is a squire size and red and is always wet with water oozing out from a spring below. The length of the pitha is one arm and twelve fingers and also attached with a Siva- Linga. In the interior cave, there are Matangi and Kamala Mahavidyas."² Adoration in the Kamakhya during the ancient period was carried out by the *Kiratas*, who were a non- Aryan tribe and homage were paid through non- Aryan rituals. As a controversial term, 'Aryan', the term Sanskritic and non- Sanskritic would also do justice. Assam during the period was known as Pragjyotishpur. "Before the advent of Naraka, the aboriginal *Kiratas* of Pragjyoisa were the followers of Saiva cult. But at the same time, the Shakti worship was prevalent among a considerable section of them. The mother Goddess or Devi Kamakhya manifested in the form of Yoni symbol and representing Shakti or procreative force of the female was an object of veneration for those *Kiratas*, who were the devotees of the creed."³ Kamakhya was not a full-fledged construction initially; rather, it was only a site which was contemplated reverent by them. However, with the coming of Aryans, the land got aryanised, and rituals also began to transform. This can be said to have begun with the coming of Naraka. He is said to have introduced Shakti worship in the land and also rechristening of the name of the land from Pragjyotishpur to Kamarupa.⁴

The resemblance between the words Kamakhya and Kamarupa has been brought forward by Kakati about Kalika Purana. "It has been said in the Kalika Purana that immediately after Naraka of Mithila became king and was placed in charge of the goddess Kamakhya, the name of the land was changed from Pragjyotisa to Kamarupa. The term *Kamarupa/Kamakhya* symbolized a new cult, and its exaltation of it, the land itself was re-christened."⁵ Goswami, on the other hand, attempts to link tantric tradition to the etymology of the terms. He writes "the word Kamakhya is a mystic term. Perhaps Kamarupa refers to Shiva as because he appeared in the 'Kama Rupa' (Sringara Rupa) to satisfy the sexual desire of Sati. This union of Shiva and Sati is a tantric phenomenon. And it seems that they are purely tantric names."⁶

Royal patronage of Kamakhya was initiated under Naraka. However, the debate about the mythical origin of Naraka would be avoided in the study. "It was Naraka who after having after conquering Pragjyotisha and its original inhabitants, the *Kiratas* brought to prominence the aboriginal cult—the cult of mother goddess worshipped in the Yoni symbol as opposed to the cult of Shiva worshipped in the phallic symbol. No wonder the Kamakhya was an embodiment of the fusion of both Aryan and non- Aryan beliefs and practices."⁷ "This mother cult of Kamakhya must have belonged to certain matriarchal tribes like the Khasis and the Garos. To win over their allegiance and support and to facilitate the propagation Aryan ideas and customs, royal patronage was extended to this local cult of Kamakhya."⁸

During the medieval period, Kamakhya received royal patronage from not one but two Kingdoms, Koch and Ahom. The Koch Kingdom was the initiator of the royal patronage. Koch was quite unprejudiced in their religious outlook as they gave patronage not only to Kamakhya, which practised Shakta worship but also to Vaishnava movement. "The Koch kings, though they also patronized Vaishnavas and Saivites, were primarily Saktas, worshipers of the goddess, and particularly, worshipers of the goddess at Kamakhya."⁹ "The Koch king, Naranarayan, and his brother Sukladev/Chilaraya rebuilt the temple at Kamakhya in 1565 after the Muslim general Kalapahar sacked it."¹⁰ Kamakhya also received royal patronage from the Ahom Kingdom. Though it was initiated during the 17th C and it continued till it was the annexation of the British in 1826. Ahom followed their own beliefs, however with times they adapted to the Hinduised way of the land which also included Shakti worship. This adoption and inclusion of the Ahom led them to the

² Kali Prasad Goswami, *Kamakhya Temple: Past and Present* (APH Pub. Corp New Delhi, 1998)p 5.

³ G. P. Singh *Researches Into the History and Civilization of the Kirātas* (Gyan Publishing House, New Delhi, 2008) p 279.

⁴ S.L. Baruah, *A Comprehensive history of Assam* (Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd, New Delhi 2005) p 81

⁵ Bani Kanta Kakati, *The Mother Goddess Kamakhya*, (Lawyer's Book Stall Guwahati, 1989) p 6.

⁶ Kali Prasad Goswami, *Kamakhya Temple: Past and Present* (APH Pub. Corp New Delhi, 1998)p 27.

⁷ G. P. Singh *Researches Into the History and Civilization of the Kirātas* (Gyan Publishing House, New Delhi, 2008) p 280.

⁸ Subodh Kapoor *Short Introduction to Sakta Philosophy* (Cosmo Publications, New Delhi, 2008) p 48.

⁹ Loriliai Biernacki *Renowned Goddess of Desire: Women, Sex, and Speech in Tantra* (Oxford University Press, New York, 2007) p 182.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, p 182.

patronage of the Kamakhya. "Hinduisation struck strong roots in eastern Assam mainly after the Ahom royalty embraced Hinduism and offered its patronage from the 15th Century, especially as a result of the expansion of the Ahom territory westward which subsumed many Hindu speaking subjects including the Hinduised autochthons."¹¹

The structural complex of Kamakhya has been constructed and reconstructed several times. However, its vitality as a scared space has been established since antiquity, and it continues till date. It had passed various phases of adoration from the *Kiratas* and received royal patronage from Naraka, Koch and the Ahom Kingdom, but it did not even once lose its identity as an eminent sacred space of Shakti worship.

3. SACRED GEOGRAPHY IN TANTRIC TRADITION AND THE SETTING OF KAMAKHYA

Sacred geography could be defined as space which is considered sacred irrespective of any boundary. It could be not specific but varied spaces like Mountains, hills, rivers, lakes, caves, forests, rocks, stones etc. "With the passage of time, sacred places became invested with the accumulations of mythical and historical meanings in complex layers of cultural memory. When joined by paths, processional ways, or great routes of pilgrimage, sacred places form networks that may embrace local village, tribal lands or large nations. It is an assemblage and calendrical festive elaboration of these networks that come to form the sacred geographies."¹²

Scared geography as a part of religious setting could be viewed in both Puranic and tantric traditions. However Puranic sacred geography marks a pronounced discrepancy from Tantric tradition. The fundamental discrepancy between Puranic and tantric sacred geography could be viewed as the vitality it places on the deity. Puranic sacred geography was more inclined towards Gods like Vishnu and Shiva, whereas tantric sacred geography was inclined towards the goddess. Moreover, the terminology used to denote sacred geography also adds to the discrepancy. Tirtha is termed as Puranic sacred geography whereas Shakti Peetha as termed as tantric sacred geography. "In Puranic literature, the term 'Tirtha' was used in an eclectic denotation, contrary to the Vedic tradition which propounded it only in the connotation of the river – ford. Puranas mention sacred geography concomitant to Vaishnavite and Saivite traditions. Puranas illustrates supplementary sacred places in the northeastern part of India and on West Coast in contrast to the Sothern part of India."¹³

Bharadwaj has categorized four primary Puranic sacred geographies. "They are Daiva Tirthas, Asura Tirthas, Arsa Tirthas and Manusa Tirthas. Daiva Tirthas resulted directly from benevolent divine acts of the three major deities of Hinduism, namely Brahma, Vishnu and Siva; all were male deities. Asura Tirtha was associated with demons or Asuras. This association did not mean that demons or Asuras created them, but their sanctity derived from acts of the three major Gods, who destroyed the demons, thus restoring moral order. Arsa Tirtha has been consecrated by the human actions of saints and sages through their austerities, penances and sacrifices. Manusa Tirthas are those that have been sanctified theoretically by the rulers of solar and lunar dynasties. These are the tirthas where the rulers established a temple and duly consecrated it."¹⁴

Appropriation of mythology could be viewed as a shared factor in both Puranic and tantric sacred geography. Myths are associated with sacred geography, which aids in the process of Sanskritization and its adoption in the large tradition. "Often, in its mahatmya, a local tirtha will subscribe to the larger all-India tradition by linking its sanctity to the great events of the Epics and Puranas. This might be seen as the geographical equivalent of Sanskritization. The forest sojourn of the Pandavas or the adventures of Rama, Sita, and Laksmana are especially suited to this kind of local subscription, as is the myth of the dismemberment of Sati. In this way, countless local tirthas claim their part in a larger tradition."¹⁵

A popular and well-known myth is associated with the creation and origin of tantric sacred geography. The myth could be noticed to have appeared in various Puranic and Tantric with diverse narratives. However, during the early medieval period, the most popular version of Daksha- Sati Yajna came into prominence. Kalika Purana is considered one of the

¹¹ Chandan Kumar Sharma Genealogy Contested: Oral Discourse and Bodo Identity Construction in M. D. Muthukumaraswamy (Ed.) *Folklore as Discourse* (National Folklore Support Center, Chennai, 2006) p 80.

¹² Mircea Eliade (ed), *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, (Macmillan Publishing Company, New York, 1985) Vol. V, p 509.

¹³ Surinder Mohan Bharadwaj *Hindu places of Pilgrimage in India: A study in Cultural Geography* (Munsihram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi, 1999) p 74.

¹⁴ Ibid, p 97-98.

¹⁵ Diana L. Eck *India's "Tirthas": "Crossings" in Sacred Geography* (History of Religions, Vol. 20, No. 4 May, 1981, pp. 323-344) p 336.

most authentic texts composed on Kamakhya during 11th/13th C. The text narrates an elaborate version of the myth and the origin of the Shakti Pithas. The paper will avoid the debate of the date for the composition of the text as brought forward by R. C. Hazra.¹⁶

“Matsya Purana gives an account of the worship of Mother Goddess in India during the medieval period. This Purana gives an account of the origin of the Shakti Pithas, enumerates hundred and eight names of the Goddess, the places sacred to her and also their merits thereof. Interestingly Kamakhya, located in Kamarupa, the most renowned Shakti Pitha, do not find any mention.”¹⁷ The number of Shakti Pithas are not accurate as it varies with varies texts. “In most texts, the Sati Shakti Pithas are counted as 52, while Devi Bhagwatam foretells the Sati Shakti Pithas to be 108 in number.”¹⁸

“Sati was the daughter of King Daksha, and she married Lord Siva much against the wishes of her father. Daksha was the devotee of Lord Vishnu and was against Lord Siva and his followers. When king Daksha neglected to invite his daughter and her husband Shiva to his grand celebration, i.e. a yagna organized by him, Sati decided they should attend anyway, uninvited. Upon arrival, she discovered her father was upset they had come, because he did not especially, like his son-in-law, Shiva. Deeply insulted, Sati killed herself by jumping in the fire of the yagna. Shiva went mad; he cut king Daksha’s head and replaced it with the head of a male goat, and when he saw his wife dead, he picked up the dead body of his wife Sati and began famous tandav wandering the world with her body upon his shoulders. Finally, Vishnu came upon Shiva and cut Sati’s body into fifty-one pieces and tossed the parts from heaven down to the earth below. Thus, wherever her body parts fell became the Shakti Pithas.”¹⁹

“In the myth that tells of the genesis of Kamakhya, the god Siva, in his grief over the death of his wife Sati, wanders all over the continent of India, carrying his wife’s dead body on his shoulders while the god Vishnu sneaks behind him chopping off the limbs of Sati’s corpse one by one, to remove the visible emblem of Siva’s grief. As the limbs fall to earth, the sex organ of the goddess Sati lands in Kamakhya. Where it falls, the earth turns blue and becomes known as the Blue Hill.”²⁰

Various scholars have attempted to shed light on the validity of the myth in association with the creation of tantric sacred geography and the Shakti Pithas. Sircar thinks that “the mythological interpretation of the genesis of the Pithas, however, has little bearing on the origin and development of the Pitha conception.”²¹ Eck is of the view in respect of the myth that “the grand finale is the exaltation and glorification of Satī, who is clearly the Great Goddess, Mahādevī”²² André Padoux says “Sacred geography is important in Tantra, both because of the number and specificity of Tantric tirthas and because geography can be interiorized by the adept”²³

Ramos has brought forward a fresh approach of the Sati myth with the understanding of the later centuries. “However a close examination of Kamakhya’s socio-religious context during the Pala and Koch periods, in particular, reveals a coherence and interaction between sculptures, articulating the significance of the aniconic yoni shedding light on later 19th and 20th C understandings of the site in the context of the nationalist reinterpretation of the Sati myth. This coherence is tied to the harnessing of Tantric power through fertility (as recourse for sonless couples) and apotropaic symbolism (i.e. magico-protective imagery to ward off malignant forces). Both are united in their activation of the temple’s potency, and the combination of maternal and martial goddess properties would have appealed to a revolutionary audience.”²⁴ Anway

¹⁶ R. C. Hazra, *The Kalika Purana*, (Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, Vol. 22, No. 1/2 (1941), pp. 1-23)

¹⁷ Surinder Mohan Bharadwaj *Hindu places of Pilgrimage in India: A study in Cultural Geography* (Munsihram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi, 1999) p 68.

¹⁸ Pratha Sharma, *The Forgotten Shivalings of Sati Shaktipeeths* (Zobra Books Pvt. Ltd., Gurgaon, 2018) p 2.

¹⁹ Karen Tate, *Sacred places of goddess: 108 Destinations* (Consortium of collective consciousness, 2006), p 175

²⁰ Loriliai Biernacki, *Renowned Goddess of Desire: Women, Sex, and Speech in Tantra* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2007) p 14.

²¹ Dineschandra Sircar, *The Śākta Pīṭhas* (Motilal Banarasidas Publishers Private Limited, Delhi, 1948) p 7

²² Diana L Eck, *India: A Sacred Geography* (Harmony Books, New York, 2012) p 257.

²³ André Padoux, *The Hindu Tantric World: An Overview* (University Of Chicago Press, London, 2016) p 136.

²⁴ Imma Ramos, *Pilgrimage and Politics in Colonial Bengal: The Myth of the Goddess Sati* (Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, New York, 2017) p 48.

Mukhopadhyay²⁵, in her recent work, has approached the study of the goddess in various Puranic and Tantric texts through the perspective of identifying it as a corpse. The sati myth is a part of her study, who is also represented as a corpse.

The sati myth could be visited and revisited several times and with various perspectives. However, it could not be denied that it represents as a whole an altered understanding of sacred geography in a tantric tradition which marks specific distinction from Puranic sacred geography. Any location does not define space of sacredness in the tantric tradition, rather it the body of Sati that defines sacredness. The space of sacredness is quite distinct from a Puranic tradition where it is defined by specific locations. Thus in tantric sacred geography, the body parts of Sati are ritualized, and it functions as a sacred source which is further strengthened by the addition of religious structures, rites and practices.

4. ANNUAL MENSTRUATION OF KAMAKHYA

Ritualizing of women body in Tantric tradition could also be perceived by exploring the theme of menstruation of Kamakhya along with its sacred geography. Ambubachi Mela is the annual menstruation festival which is celebrated in Kamakhya in June. Origin of the festival is obscure. However, Urban has attempted to put up a theory based on its earliest narration. "The historical origins of Ambuvaci are by no means clear. Probably the earliest reference comes from the Devi Bhagavata Purana (eleventh to twelfth centuries), where it is described as the aftereffect of the intense love-play between Vishnu and the goddess Earth. Assuming his boar (Varaha) incarnation, Vishnu made love to Earth for an entire year of the gods (360 human years). At the end of their dalliance, he worshipped Earth as the supreme goddess and declared that she would be honoured on several key occasions: at the beginning of the planting season, at the laying of the foundation of a new home, and the end of the Ambuvaci ceremony."²⁶

Menstruation in tantric tradition holds a vital spot. It is deemed an essential element in the tradition. The terminology used for menstruation blood in the tradition is *Khapushpa*. Bhattacharyya is of the view that "The deeply ingrained dread of impurity and unholiness and the terror attached to the taboo on menstruating women are not to be found in the primitive and original form of the concept. There are instances especially those of the bleeding goddess in which menstrual blood had developed a sanctifying and purifying influence as a manifestation of the life-giving power inherent in the female sex. This explains why in the Tantras menstrual blood has been regarded as so sacred that it is prescribed as an offering to the great God Shiva and his consort Devi."²⁷ He further argues that "In the Tantras, menstrual blood is regarded so sacred that it is prescribed as an offering to the great goddess. The menstrual blood of a virgin is the best thing by which the goddess can be pleased. If it is not available, the blood of a married woman or that of a widow will do."²⁸ Urban argues that "Tantra, on the whole, seeks to unleash the tremendous power that is associated with impure substances such as menstrual blood, transforming what is normally a source of pollution into a source of divine energy."²⁹

On the contrary to tantric tradition, menstruation was viewed as the source of pollution, taboo and impurity in the Vedic literature and law books. A menstruation woman was bound to an isolation space. "When a woman has her menses, she should abandon all her works. She will have to remain in a secluded place with shame so that she may not be seen suddenly by anyone, wearing only one piece of cloth and giving up bathing and use of ornaments. She will have to remain as a destitute without the exchange of any word with others and any movement of eyes, hands and legs, only eating once at night in an earthen pot. She will have to lie on the ground without being excited, and having three nights in this way she will be pure on the fourth day after the rise of the sun when she will bathe and wash her clothes."³⁰ "The patriarchal synthesis effected by the Vedic poets involved the construction of a symbolic structure- which glorified women in their

²⁵ Anway Mukhopadhyay, *The Goddess in Hindu-Tantric Traditions: Devi as Corpse* (Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, New York, 2018)

²⁶ Hugh B Urban, *The Power of Tantra: Religion, Sexuality and the Politics of South Asian Studies*, (I.B.Tauris & Co Ltd. London, 2009), p 53- 54.

²⁷ N.N. Bhattacharyya, *History of the Tantric Religion: An Historical, Ritualistic and Philosophical Study*, (Manohar, New Delhi, 2005), p 136

²⁸ N. N. Bhattacharyya, *Indian Puberty Rites*, (Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd. New Delhi, 1980), p 9.

²⁹ Hugh B Urban, *The Power of Tantra: Religion, Sexuality and the Politics of South Asian Studies*, (I.B.Tauris & Co Ltd. London, 2009), p 56.

³⁰ *Vyasa Smriti* II. 37-40.

role of mothers and simultaneously excluded or mystified and demonised the female biological fluid of blood.”³¹ “The Brahmanical law books hold that menstruating women must be dreaded and regarded as impure.”³²

“The image of women projected in the Puranas is far from ennobling. Women are branded as senseless and vile creatures, generally treated as property and condemned to a life of servitude. The Puranas also attach certain taboos. Mantras or the Vedas should not be recited before menstruating women. Men are the only legitimate religious specialists.”³³ “Hindu religious writings are varied and can be classified as “early” and “later” texts. The later text of the Manusmriti presents the clearest view of menstruation in both particular and general context. Firstly it is said that menstruating women are not permitted to witness Brahmins consuming food. The reason for such a prohibition is plausible because when menstrual blood is shed accidentally into the women’s clothing the Brahmins will simply lose appetite for eating, but clearly there is more involved here that relates to the maintenances of caste boundaries separated by taboos and purity.... Secondly and relatedly, menstruation is regarded as unclean within the Hindu tradition and thus purification is necessary for the menstruating women after the last day of her period. Usually, purification is carried out by a bathing ritual which is believed to deal with the ‘impurity’ of menstruation.”³⁴

Various scholars have attempted to understand the significance of the Ambubachi Mela and its validity. Ramos is of the view that “The festival is closely connected with the agricultural cycle. During this time of the year, the water is said to run red with iron- oxide, trickling over the yoni in the inner sanctum, so it appears as if the goddess is menstruating. During the festival, a reddened cloth wrapped around the yoni is sought after by pilgrims and prized for its talismanic protective properties.”³⁵ Urban views it as “If the goddess gives power and fertility to the world through the blood of her annual menstrual flow, her priests and devotees also return blood to Kamakhya in the form of sacrifice. The primary public form of worship at Kamakhya is now—and probably always has been—animal sacrifice, which to this day is offered several times a day throughout the year, and hundreds of times on holy days.... In sum, the public ritual cycle forms a kind of circuit or cyclical flow of power between Mother Kamakhya and her devotees, embodied in the fluid form of blood. The goddess menstruates annually, giving life to the earth and blessings to her devotees through her blood; and blood is returned to her through the offering of animal victims, forming a capillary network of power that flows between the deity, the earth, the priests and her devotees.”³⁶

Lussana, in her recent study, views it as “. . . fluid essence is one of the most archaic and universal features of the sacred, closely linked to Mother Earth, whose very nature is arid and dry because through her monthly menstruation she loses her generative power and so needs to reintegrate it constantly by absorbing liquids.”³⁷ Rosati is of the view that “Hence, the rulers of Kamarupa, tracing back their origins to Naraka, justified their samkarajati status, which linked the royal power to both Brahmanic and tribal traditions. To maintain political stability, the Assamese king continued the tradition of blood offerings to the Goddess—a ritual performance that was often associated with tribal traditions. Yet the ruler also performed the most secret sexual practices, such as the rajapana, a sexual rite on which was based the Yogini Kaula’s concept of gnosis transmission. In this way, through the act of drinking the reddish water flowing inside the womb chamber of the goddess Kamakhya, the king, such as every sadhaka, obtained supernatural powers. Thus, the northeastern kingship, through public blood sacrifices and consuming female sexual discharges, was closely connected to the Assamese ‘Sakta- tantra. The role of the Goddess’s menstrual blood as a source of power was derived from the worship of the yoginis, which linked the kingship to both the explicit sexual symbolism and the hidden death imaginary. Both the

³¹ Janet Chawla, *Mythic Origins of Menstrual Taboo in Rig Veda*, (Economic and Political Weekly, 1994, Vol. 29, No. 43, pp. 2817-2827). P 2862.

³² N. N. Bhattacharyya, *Indian Puberty Rites*, (Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd. New Delhi, 1980), p 13

³³ Rosario Rocha & Kuruvills Pandikattu (Ed.) *Visions and Dreams: New Horizons for an Indian Church: Essays in Honor of Professor Kurien Kunnumpuram*, (Jnana Deepa Vidyapeeth, Pune, 2002), p 238.

³⁴ Stephen J. Hunt & Andrew K. T. Yip (Ed.) *The Ashgate Research Companion to Contemporary Religion and Sexuality*, (Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, London, 2016), p 214

³⁵ Imma Ramos, *Pilgrimage and Politics in Colonial Bengal: The Myth of the Goddess Sati*, (Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, New York, 2017), p 52.

³⁶ Hugh B Urban, *Matrix of Power: Tantra, Kingship, and Sacrifice in the Worship of Mother Goddess Kamakhya*, (South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies, Publisher: Rotledge, 27 July, 2015), p 514- 520.

³⁷ Gioia Lussana, 2015. Fluid Mother Goddess: Water and Blood as Flowing Sacred Essence of Maha Devi in the ‘Sakta Tantrism of Kamakhya. (The Human Person and Nature in Classical and Modern India. Rivista degli Studi Orientali 88: 73–83). P 76.

symbolisms were unified into the yoni-stone of Kamakhya, which was the primordial source of cosmogenesis—from her yoni, everything was created, and everything will be absorbed into her yoni.”³⁸

Marglin has attempted to highlight an alternated understanding of impurity in the subject of menstruating women. “Menstrual blood which is highly polluting but at the same time, a source of auspiciousness since a woman who does not menstruate is considered very inauspicious. Women are the harbingers of auspiciousness, a state which unlike purity does not speak of status or moral uprightness but well-being and health or more generally of all that creates, promotes and maintains life.”³⁹ Bhattacharyya also attempts to through light in the subject. “Though the menstrual blood is used only in the Tantric cults of the great goddess, the colour of blood and its smearing on cult objects are essential features of all forms of Hindu religious rituals and mode of worship. It, therefore, appears that there developed a spirit of ambivalence regarding this blood of life. On the one hand, we come across the concept of the menstruating goddess, their supposed blood being regarded as the holiest and efficacious thing and on the other, we also come across a deeply ingrained dread for impurity and unholiness attributed to menstruating women.”⁴⁰

While discussing the subject of Kamakhya, the women question in Assam should also be considered. The attitude of the society towards women was not rigid or controlled. There was the scope of unrestricted movement possible due to the societal norms. “The Assamese society in the ancient days, as it has always been, was predominantly a non- Aryan society. In spite of this early intrusion, Aryan culture as such could not thrive in the land. Its transformation to adjust itself to the taste, temperament and religious beliefs and rites of the local people was perhaps greater in Assam than in other parts of India.... On the whole, women enjoyed greater freedom from male- domination among certain sections of the people who were less under the Aryan influence or were not- Aryans. Besides, the non- Aryan attitude to women also had a positive impact on the Brahmanas who are noted to be more liberal than their counterparts elsewhere.”⁴¹

A menstruating woman is perceived in two alternate Puranic and Tantric tradition. In the former one, she is isolated during the period and is considered to be impure whereas in the latter one menstruation blood is one of the vital elements in the tradition. The most prominent illustration of it could be viewed in the celebration of the annual menstruation of Kamakhya.

Various scholars have approached different understanding to bring forward the meaning of the Ambubachi Mela in Kamakhya. Different horizons could be viewed in its understanding, which further reinforces the idea that in the tantric tradition women body is ritualized. This ritualization of women body is not much prominent in Puranic tradition.

5. CONCLUSION

Tantric tradition holds a unique spot in Indian religious setting. It stands out on many grounds, and ritualization of women body is one among them. The domain of ritualization of women body in the said tradition could be viewed in the two themes of sacred geography and menstruation. Both the themes of sacred geography and menstruation marks a distinct discrepancy from Puranic tradition. In Puranic tradition, sacred geography is bound to locations whereas in tantric tradition it is the body of Sati which forms sacred geography in the form of Shakti Pithas. In Puranic tradition and Vedic literature menstruation blood and menstruating women is viewed as taboo, impure and polluting whereas in tantric tradition it is perceived as one of the chief components in the tradition and is highly valued.

The subject of Kamakhya is highlighted in the study as it is the common factor where both the themes of sacred geography and menstruation could be placed together. Regarded as the chief seat of Shakti Pitha and the annual celebration of menstruation festival in Kamakhya, it highly justifies the image of ritualization of women in the tantric tradition. Various scholars have provided fresh approaches to the theme of sacred geography and menstruation in Kamakhya, which are quite supportive in understanding the institution and its relevance in the tantric tradition. The approaches and understanding could be visited and revisited. However, the fundamental meaning of the themes remains

³⁸ Paolo Eugenio Rosati, *The Cross-Cultural Kingship in Early Medieval Kamarupa: Blood, Desire and Magic* (Religions, Vol. 8, Issue 10, September 2017) p 13.

³⁹ Frederique Apffel Marglin, *Wives of the God- King: The ritual of the Devadasis of Puri* (Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1985), p 19

⁴⁰ N. N. Bhattacharyya, *Indian Puberty Rites*, (Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd. New Delhi, 1980), p 18.

⁴¹ S.L. Baruah, *A Comprehensive History of Assam*, (Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi, 1985), p 153- 154.

identical, which is ritualization of women body. The approach could be further explored to understand the women question in Assam as a whole. As it could be viewed that women movements were not restricted and controlled since antiquity in Assam.

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