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Re-examining the cult of the feminine: An analysis of tantric practices at Kamakhya and Tarapith

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Abstract

Tantricism is inextricably inter-linked with the cult of the feminine. Tantric rituals exalt the female deity and celebrate the power (Shakti) of the female form of divinity. In India, alongside the Vedic system of worship, Tantricism has co-existed for centuries. There are references to the Tantric tradition in the epics; similar references have also been found in the Indus Valley civilization. There are many shakti peeths in India but only a few are associated with Tantricism. This article aims to explore the Tantric rituals at the temples of Kamakhya in Assam and Tarapith in West Bengal, in order to establish the significance of the Tantric tradition even in the 21st century.

Keywords: tantricism, tantra, ritual, goddess, Shakti, Devi, cult, practices

Introduction

In India, since the ancient time, two distinct and parallel forms of worship have existed—Vedic and Non-Vedic. Kallukabhata, the first scholar who presented an exhaustive interpretation of the Manusmriti, made a clear distinction between two branches of Indian thought. He divided Indian wisdom into Vedic and Tantric ^[1]. The former was based on a male-centric social order, while the latter was based on the principles of matriarchy and consequently the notions of fertility.

N.N. Bhattacharya has identified seven *acharas* or means of spiritual attainment—Veda, Vaishnava, Shaiva, Dakshina, Vama, Siddhanta, and Kaula. These can be encapsulated into two main *acharas*—*vamchara* and *dakshinachara* ^[2]. The former is known as the left-handed path while the latter is known as the right-handed path. Most scholars unanimously believe that the two paths are totally divergent, and that the ritual practices associated with them are markedly different in nature. Tantricism follows the left-handed path and adheres to the principles of *vamchara*.

According to some scholars, the origin of the Tantric cult in India can be traced back to the Indus Valley Civilization in which the worship of goddesses assumed a prominent place. Scholars have argued that evidence of Tantric rites are found even in the epics, the Mahabharata and Ramayana.

With the ascent of patriarchy, the Tantric form of worship gradually lost its relevance and gradually with the dominance of Brahmins in the established caste system, the followers of Tantricism were reduced to a miniscule minority. However, the practice of worshipping female deities in various iconographic forms such as Durga, Kali, Uma, Kamakhya, Tara, Chandi, Chamunda, Sakambari, etc have continued ^[3]. There are numerous temples dedicated to these female deities. There are a total of fifty-one *shakti peeths* across the length and breadth of India, and some of them have become popular due to the miraculous virtues attached to the devi ensconced in the sanctum sanctorum of these shrines. Many of these shrines are associated with occult practices and tantric rituals.

The Kamakhya temple in Assam and the temple of Maa Tara at Tarapith are two of the finest examples of the female fertility cult which have over centuries attracted devotees from all across the county. It is, therefore, important to analyze the ritual practices associated with these temples. It is also critical to re-evaluate the significance of the female goddess cult within the dominant discourse.

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Methodology

Kamakhya: The tantric conundrum

Kamrupa, the ancient name of Assam, has since centuries been associated with the *Shakta* cult. Shaktism is the worship of the female goddess who is considered to be the ultimate source of *shakti* or strength. According to R.C. Hazara, “With the spread of Shaktism, Kamrupa attained importance as a seat of the *Shakta* cult and greatly influenced the religious life and people of Eastern India [4].” In fact, the *Shakta* cult of Kamrupa had such a great influence on the socio-religious fabric of the region that many texts such the *Kalika Purana*, *Mahabhagvata Purana* and *Brihadharma Purana*, among other religious texts, have associated goddess Kali as the principle deity of the Kamrupa region [5].

The Kamrupa region attained a significant position in the *Shakta* worship tradition over a period of time, and the existence of the temple of Kamakhya played an important role in elevating the status of the region as a major *devi* worshipping zone. The goddess Kamakhya, therefore, played a very vital role in the religious history of Assam from very early times. Devotees visit this temple to seek the blessings of the goddess for fertility, health and well-being. The Kamakhya temple is considered to be one of the main *shaktipeeths* of India. It holds an eminent position among the Tantric Goddess temples in India. It is associated with *shakti* and tantric worship. The temple is dedicated to mother-goddess Kamakhya, another form of Parvati. The temple is located on top of the Nilachala hill in the city of Guwahati in Assam. In Kamakhya, the mother goddess is worshipped in the phallic form or in the form of a yoni. This symbolizes the reproductive female organ. Ajit Mookerjee states that:

A famous temple at Kamakhya near Guwahati in Assam is dedicated to yoni worship. It contains no image of the goddess but in the depths of the shrine there is a yoni-shaped cleft in the rock, adored as the yoni of shakti. A natural spring within the cave keeps the cleft moist [6].

The most popular legend associated with the site states that the genital organ of goddess Sati fell here when Lord Shiva was moving with the corpse of Sati. Two texts vividly describe the worship of the Devi at Kamakhya—*Kalika Purana* and *Yogini Tantra* [7, 8]. The tradition of *panchmakara* which is the representative mode of worship according to the *vamchara* tradition, is the prime mode of worship at Kamakhya. The *panchmakara* includes the five M's: *matysa* (fish), *maas* (flesh), *madira* (alcohol), *mudra* (parched grain), and *maithun* (sex).

The concept of Kamakhya is said to have been derived from a tribal mother goddess cult. According to B.K. Kakati, “This mother cult of Kamakhya must have belonged to certain matriarchal tribes like the Khasis and the Garos [9].” Kakati has also elaborated that the area where the temple is situated was earlier inhabited by members of these tribes. According to popular Khasi belief, the Kamakhya temple was founded by the Khasis in the ancient past when the area was under their control. In their legendary renditions, it is stated that the Sanskrit name Kamakhya is a corruption of the Khasi word *Ka-mei-kha*, which means the “paternal grandmother [10].” According to the Garo tradition, the word Kamakhya has been derived from the Garo word *Ka-Ma-Kha*, which means ‘victory to my mother.’ The Garo

tradition states that the Kamakhya temple was built by a Garo architect in honour of the mother-goddess.

The temple has been rebuilt many times. The first Koch emperor, Biswa Singha rebuilt the temple over the ruins of an earlier temple. Literary evidence suggests that the rulers of Kamrupa had great faith in Tantricism. As a result, the Kamakhya temple evolved as a centre of Tantricism and ritual sacrifices. The Koch king Naranarayan and his brother Sukladhwaj declared the Kamakhya cult as the state religion. Through extensive land grants and elaborate state-sponsored rituals, the Kamakhya temple emerged as the most important temple in the state. Over a period of time, Kamakhya also came to be associated with mysticism, witchcraft and sorcery [11]. It became a renowned centre of tantric sacrifices and sorcery during the 10th-12th centuries, the period corresponding with the Pala kings of Assam. Some of the Muslim chroniclers wrote about the temple and described the manner in which the temple had become popular as a centre of magic and sorcery. In the writings of the Muslim chroniclers, there are also references to a myth of disappearance of those who enter the temple [12].

The tantric cult of Kamakhya is closely associated with specific rituals that are performed at the temple. The main form of offerings are flowers, incense and sweets, however, animal sacrifice is also carried out on some occasions. Mass animal sacrifices are also carried out at some times of the years. A very special kind of *sindoor*, made from the local rock, is available here. This is considered to be a blessing from the goddess.

The annual festival organized at the temple complex is called Ambubachi Mela. The *mela* is held during the monsoon season each year, around the middle of June. There is a significant legend associated with this festival. It is believed that during this season, the goddess Kamakhya goes through her annual cycle of menstruation. This festival is also known as Ameti. During this four-day long *mela*, many tantric *babas*, who remain in seclusion for most of the year, make their appearance in an around the temple complex. The temple is kept closed for first three days of the *mela*, on the fourth day, rituals are performed inside the temple and then the temple door is opened [13]. It is believed that these rituals are performed to restore the purity of the *devi* after she undergoes her cycle of menstruation. According to Ajit Mookerjee, “During Ambubachi, after the first burst of monsoon, a great ceremony takes place, for the water runs red with iron-oxide, and the ritual drink is symbolic of the *devi*, her menstrual blood [14].”

The Mansha Puja is also organized as an annual festival. Another important festival which is celebrated at the temple complex is the Durga Puja during the autumn season.

Tarapith: Abode of the tantric goddess

The Tantric cult of the *devi* is manifested the personage of *devi* Tara at Tarapith, a village near Rampurhat in the Birbhum district of West Bengal. The town derives its name from the centre of worship which has assumed cultic proportions over many centuries. Goddess Tara is a fearsome tantric representation of the *devi*. According to popular legend, Rishi Vashishta had started worshipping the *devi* in the form of Tara. It is believed that the Rishi chose this place for the worship of Sati [15]. Among *peeths*, Tarapith is a *sidh peeth*, which grants enlightenment, wisdom, happiness, and *siddhi* or supernatural powers [16].

The image of Maa Tara at this *peeth* is a “dramatic image” of the otherwise gentler image of the *devi*^[17]. The original idol which is made of stone is camouflaged by a mental covering. Tarapith, replete with its Tantric imagery and occult practices, offered an alternative environment which was different from the urban colonial regime of the neighbouring town of Calcutta. The temple was built in 1818 under the patronage of a rich businessman from Calcutta. However, the temple in its current form was constructed by the King of Natore whose wife is supposed to have been a staunch devotee of Maa Tara.

Like Kamakhya, this *shakti peeth* is also steeped in ritualism of the *vamchara* tradition. The forehead of the deity is smeared with thick vermilion. On entering the temple, the priests smear this vermilion on the forehead of the devotees by chanting ‘Jai Maa Tara.’ The devotees offer coconuts, bananas, sweets, sarees, flowers (usually red in colour), and even bottles of liquor. Another significant ritual is bathing at the pond attached to the temple, and devotees usually take a dip at the pond before entering the temple premises.

Animal sacrifice is a standard norm at this *shakti peeth*. Goats are sacrificed on a regular basis. Many devotees offer goats as a mark of gratitude once their prayers are heard by the *devi*. As is the usual practice at the shrine, the goat is sacrificed and the blood is collected in a vessel. This blood is then offered to the *devi*.

The *maha shamshan* (cremation ground) adjacent to the temple is a place of Tantric ritualism. Many *sadhus* reside in the *shamshan* and perform these rituals. A prominent ritual associated with the temple is the bathing the deity at dawn. Devotees were earlier allowed to be witness to this ritual, however, recently the temple authority decided to abolish the age-old practice of allowing devotees to be part of the ritual^[18]. It is believed that the chandan, sindoor and other items that are offered by the devotees during the ritual bathing is harming the idol.

Tarapith is also associated with the mad mendicant Bhamakhepa whose *ashram* is located in the vicinity of the temple. Bhamakhepa (1837-1911) was a contemporary of saint Ramakrishna Paramhansa. He is said to have been totally immersed in tantric *sadhna*, and is regarded as being one of the foremost carriers of the *vamchara*. His name is indicative of his religious ideology—*Bhama* is a colloquial version of *vama* meaning the practitioner of *tantra* and *Khepa* which means mad in Bengali. According to popular belief, Maa Tara had appeared in a vision to Bhamakhepa while he was meditating in the *shamsham*^[19].

Conclusion

An analysis of the two shrines and their popularity among the common masses lends credence to the fact that the female goddess cult has not only survived over centuries, it is still a thriving element of Hinduism. The dominance of Vedic Hinduism was not successful in diminishing the significance of Tantricism. The temples of Kamakhya and Tarapith are living examples of tantric cults in India, and along with numerous other *shakti peeths*, these centres of worship have provided solace to millions of devotees over a course of many centuries.

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