

# Female goddess worship cult in Tribal Society of Assam: A Sociological Study

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## Abstract:-

Tribal societies have been by and large characterized as egalitarian societies, especially about the hierarchical character of caste society. Like other societies in India, tribal societies of Assam are quite peculiar from the position of women in terms of religion and social status and this paper mainly deals with the position of women in the tribal societies of Assam from a religious point of view.

## Introduction:-

The study of women and religion examine mainly women in the context of different religious faiths. This includes considering female gender roles in religious history as well as how women participate in religion. In ancient texts of India always considered women as goddesses. So many kings also built many temples to worship female deities. Besides India in different parts of the world since ancient times we have found different concepts of female deity cult.

After a long decade in ancient India, tribal gods and goddesses get a permanent place in their society. In ancient Assam Shakti temples like Kamakhya, Kechaikhati, Burhi Gossani are proof of this. To realise the extreme deity as the form of the mother goddess is the main motive of the Shakti cult. Since ancient times with different kingdoms in Kamrup like Barman, Pal, Chutia, Ahom, Jayantia, Kachari, Koch & other tribal societies mother goddesses get much popularity.

Therefore, by this paper, we attempt to create a brief discussion on the worship of women's power through various rituals prevalent in the tribal community in line with the Goddess worship cult of Assam.

## Review of Literature:-

We have seen so many scholars, writers, columnists, critics and historians collect different historical sources, books, research

papers, articles regarding the topic of female goddess worship cult and different rituals followed by the tribal people in Assam; viz:- Devi book by Dr Nirmalprabha Bordoloi, Dr Maheshwar Neog's book "Pabitra Asom", Dr Banikanta Kakoti's The Mother goddess of Kamakhya, Yogini Tantra, Kalika Puran etc. Most of the sources of this paper are mainly collected from those books.

## Objectives of the Paper:-

- The main purpose of this paper is to collect genuine sources about the origin of the female goddess worship cult in Assam.
- Secondly, to know about the structure of tribal societies and their different rituals related to goddess worship tradition.
- Thirdly, to measure the women's position and status in tribal society through a religious perspective.

## Methodology:-

The present research paper has been prepared with the help of a secondary source of data. Data have been collected from various books, articles, journals, newspapers and websites.

## Discussion:-

From ancient times, Assamese women were able to achieve a respectable position in social life.

Especially in the tribal society of Assam the women were recognised as Devi(goddess) and is worshipped in the form of nature or mother. The tribal compared women with the source of nature and recognised them as the source of fertility. In the tribal social life, various divisions such as Sonowal, kachoris, Bodos, dimasas, Karbis, tiwas along with other various tribal groups were worshipping with their own rules and rituals. In this regard from the beginning itself, various tribal groups had their adorable goddesses and worship them by keeping forward a certain moto and they believed that she will lessen their pain and fulfil their needs.

From the ancient ages, the tribal population of Assam were dependent upon agriculture. Agriculture was the main occupation for their livelihood. But sometimes the drastic climatic condition stands as a hindrance to the agricultural fields and grains. In such a situation, there arises a lack of food production. So to get rid of such a situation the tribal population prays to their soul deity to seek blessings. In this belief, they worshipped different goddesses related to agriculture.

Moreover, at that particular point in time, there had been so many diseases for different reasons but they considered all to occur due to some kind of evil spirits and therefore, they also performed deity worship to cure various diseases and also get rid of evil spirits. Most of the tribal societies are female-dominated because they are mainly nature worshippers and nature is always considered as the form of female or mother and therefore, women are playing a vital role in social status amidst the tribal societies of Assam

In this paper, we are going to discuss some important deities of Assam to delineate the powerful position of women and their different social statuses in tribal societies.

### **Goddess Kamakhya:-**

- Kamakhya is one of the most famous Shaktipeeth among the 52 Shaktipeeths of India located in the neelachal hills in the Western part of Guwahati. Though there's not any concrete historical evidence kamakhya was worshipped by the tribes of Neelachal hills before Narakasura. The Austric group of people believe kamakhya is a goddess of the crematorium. Kalikapurana, kubjikantra and Yoginitantra

mentions the prevailing practice of the mother goddess in the Kamrupa region. Legend has it that Sati fought with her husband to be part of the grand yajna that her father was offering to appease the gods—of which both were purposefully not invited. Paying no heed to her husband's advice, Sati headed to the yajna nevertheless, only to be insulted by her father. The last straw was when he spoke ill of Shiva as well. Unable to bear the insult, Sati leapt into the very sacrificial fire of the yajna. Shiva carried his wife's burnt corpse and went on a rampage with his 'Tandav' or the dance of destruction. Vishnu sent his chakra and cut the body, to calm the aggrieved deity. The place where her womb and vagina fell is what constitutes the Kamakhya temple.

- From the historical point of view, the temple can be presumed to have come into prominence during the reign of king Naraka who is said to be the earliest paramount king of Brahmaputra valley. The temple was destroyed after some time and reconstructed by Koach king Biswasingha. According to Ahom buranji, the Kamakhya temple was rebuilt by Koach king Naranarayana and his brother Silarai after it was destroyed by Kalapahar in 1553. Darang rajbanshawali gives an account of the 100 human sacrifices, 3lakh yajna performed by Maharaja Naranarayana which is substituted by a copper plate inscription.

The Khasi tribal community of Assam worship this place as "ka-mei-kha" and the body called her "Kham-may-kha". "Kamai" means mother in the Khasi group of people. The origin of the kamakhya temple is believed to be pre-Aryan and tribal in traits and rituals by many.

Among the Bodo-kachoris and Khasis of Assam, the prominence of females not only in religious but also social and cultural spheres can easily be seen. Worship of the mother goddess or female deity confirms this. Yoginitantra and Kalikapurana mention that the Mongolian or the non-Aryan tribal worship Samkhya's sambhar rupa or the destructive side. Moreover in ancient Kamurupi texts accordingly Yogini Tantra and Kalika Purana highly mentioned that there are two important forms of goddess Kamakhya mainly the destructive form and sexual form was

worshipped by the Mongolian origin and Non-Aryan people of Assam.

### **Kenchaikhaiti Devi:-**

The original Assamese word is Kechaikhaiti (kecha means raw and khai means eat), which refers to a semi-pre-Hindu Goddess, a version of Goddess Kali, who accepts offerings of raw meat, hence the name. Kechaikhanti Devi was worshipped by Kachari kings of medieval Assam in kumigram which is 7 miles away from Silchar. In khaspur the last capital of kachoris and in North Lakhimpur there was still a kesaikhaiti then. According to legend Bhismak, the king of kundil Nagar rescued a flowing idol of Devi with the help of four Chutia men and built the Tamreswari temple. The temple roof was made of copper, that's why it is called Tamreswari. The wall and doors of the temple were well designed with beautiful works. The whole temple was surrounded by brick walls and on the western wall, there was a place for human sacrifice. Tamreswari Devi is worshipped by the priest belong to those four people till today.

The Chutias worship Shakti or mother goddess. The mother goddess was worshipped by a class of priests, popularly known as dew among the Chutias. They believe that the female deity or kechaikhaiti is the source of all the energies which sustain the universe. Scholars assert that the Tai-Khamti female deity Nang Hua Tong is equivalent to Kesaikhaiti, which they absorbed after migrating to the Lohit district of present Arunachal Pradesh from Upper Burma in the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. After Chutias were subjugated by the Ahoms, the Priest were permitted to continue their ghastly rites; but they were given for the purpose, criminals who had been sentenced to capital punishment. The person selected was fed until he was in an insufficiently plump condition to suit the supposed taste of the goddess and he was then decapitated at this Copper Temple. The worship of the goddess even after coming under Hindu influence was performed according to her old tribal customs. Except for women and dogs, every living being can be sacrificed on the copper altar.

Not only in the religious sphere but also the social and cultural sphere women enjoyed equal status. Apart from participating in the battle, the women of the Chutia Kachari tribe participate in every social activity. This liberal outlook was arguably due to the importance of Mother Goddess.

### **Female deity cult in Karbi society:-**

Like other tribal societies in Assam Karbi society also has the que significance of goddess worship tradition. Their society is mainly based on agriculture and therefore, their all kinds of divine beliefs centring around the goddess who related with agriculture; viz:- the goddess of clouds "Haimur." Their village chief was also known as "karma bursa" plays the part of the religious priest and he first invokes the Haimur goddess by singing religious songs. This prominent religious ritual of Karbi society every year observes in Assamese month Bohag and Jeth in their capital place "RongHang-/Bongbong. According to Karbi society's religious beliefs, their main observer god is

"Hemfu"; " Mukrang" is the god of creation and "Rasinjak" is their deity of climate, war and peace.

In comparison to other gods of Karbi society's religious beliefs, the female deity "Rasinjak" receive the higher position.

Like any other tribal society in Karbi society, the female always get the higher position because all kind of religious activities are mainly centred around nature and their society is also mainly matrilineal and therefore, women always received the great privilege.

### **Goddess of Sonwal-Kachari:-**

Like Karbi society, we have also seen the same privilege of the female goddess cult in the tribal society of Sonwal-Kachari and they also depend on agriculture. The main agricultural deity is Lakshmi and for the welfare of agricultural production, they highly worship goddess Lakshmi. They also believe that goddess Lakshmi inhabited in water and for this belief, the women in their society still follow the

tradition by singing the song to invoke the goddess Lakshmi to their home.

Kachari tribe worshipped kenchaikhaiti, Malini and Tammreswari goddesses. According to the historical records the Kachari tribe of Sadiya were also offering human and animals sacrifice on the main altar. They gave special privileges to the goddess of earth and their most popular goddess was "Bhuruli Kabuki."

By observing their all religious rituals we can come to know that the position of women in the society of Sonowal-Kachari not only confined into their religious sphere but also they got equal privilege and respect in the social sector too.

### Conclusion:-

Since the time of ancient period of India women receive a good position in society. We have also seen their remarkable historical contribution to society and also to the nation. In ancient Indian civilization, we worship women in the form of goddesses and the Assamese tribal society is also not separate from this tradition. By this thorough discussion, we can say that in every welfare activity related to religion observed mainly in the tribal societies female deities played an inevitable part in their religious rituals. In different kinds of events and beliefs occurred in tribal societies always female deities get superior positions; which directly indicates the prestigious position of women in their society. The tribal society of Assam is unostentatious but they managed all kinds of necessary items to worship their goddess for the growth of agricultural fertility. Most importantly in their society in comparison to male gods always female gods get the higher position.

At last, we can conclude that female deities' worship cult has a special significance in India and different parts of Assam, mainly within the tribal communities. By practising different religious rituals they believe that the spiritual power of the goddess all kind of evils and ominous things from their lives and will protect them like the mother protect their children. However, in the tribal societies of Assam women get a respectable position because they believe that society's trust and respect are always related to women's prestige.

Women are the creator, women are the root of the world. Women are compared to nature as the main reproductive power and this is why women have been worshipped as goddesses in different places for ages.

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