Sparxan: ‘Seeing’ Menstruating Goddess Kamakhya through the ‘ritual touch’

PREEENA PRADHAN
Theatre and Performance Studies, School of Arts & Aesthetics, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, India

Abstract: This paper discusses how the conceptualization of menstruating goddess Kamakhya revolves around sparxan, the ritual act of touching the goddess. Here, the conventional mode of worship darxan (seeing/viewing the goddess) is effectively replaced by sparxan in order to ‘see’ and communicate with the goddess. However, to understand the complexity of worshipping Kamakhya, the paper explores two contrasting situations where Kamakhya is worshipped by performing and un-performing sparxan-nitya puja (the daily worship) and Ambubachi festival believed to be her menstrual period when she becomes inaccessible in sight and touch. In doing so, the paper argues that the act of sparxan subverts the traditional mode of worship prioritizing the elemental idea of auspicious touch over auspicious sight. But at the same time it also brings into question the ambivalence of how the same goddess becomes touchable or untouchable and both the modes are accepted ways of ‘seeing’ the goddess albeit in two different events.

Key words: Kamakhya; sparxan; darxan; Ambubachi; menstruation; auspicious touch.

INTRODUCTION

During the time of evening prayer, goddess Kamakhya liked to dance nude within the closed doors of the temple situated in the Nilachal hill. Koch king Naranarayana desired to watch her dance and asked the chief priest Kendu Kalai to devise a plan. The priest advised him to peep through a hole in the wall without the goddess’ knowledge. Unaware of his presence, she performed the nritya all the while menstruating. As soon as her eyes fell on the king, his act of intrusion was revealed to the goddess. In a fit of rage, she tore off the head of the priest and admonished the king and his future generations to not even cast a look at the hill. The prohibition is still observed and the local descendants of the Koch kings are believed to pass by the hill under the cover of umbrellas. (Kakati, 2004:44, Barua, 2015:14, Das, 2008:41)

The above narrative offers an intriguing take on the ferocious and free-spirited nature of Kamakhya, the wrongful gaze and her nude menstrual identity which serve as a point of entry through which this paper attempts to traverse. Situated atop Nilachal hill, the Kamakhya temple in Guwahati, Assam, a State nestled in the North-Eastern part of India, draws devotees from several parts of India.
and neighbouring countries. Etymologically, the term Kamakhya probably shares its origin with the hill tribes (Khasi, Garo) (See Kakati, 2004). The temple dates back to the tenth century and its construction and reconstruction have always been interspersed with myths and narratives. Another distinct feature of Kamakhya is that the goddess does not manifest herself in an image or idol, but in the shape of a block of stone with a crevice believed to be her yoni. The stone is always smeared with vermillion and is kept moist with the help of a natural spring. The ritual performances and nitya puja (daily worship) are offered to the symbolic yoni.

Kamakhya is worshipped by Hindus of different communities of Assam and beyond, but not all Hindus in Assam worship her. For instance, Assamese Hindu community is divided into two sections comprising of bamuniya and sankariya. Bamuniya refers to Assamese Hindus who are primarily worshippers of deities like Kamakhya, Manasa, Kali, Durga along with Hindu male gods and employ a bamun (Brahmin priest) to officiate in any religious event. Sankariya or Ekesaraniya, the followers of ekesaranana dharma (reverence to one god), worship Krishna, a religious philosophy propagated by Neo-Vaishnavite Sankardeva late fifteenth century onwards (See Nath, 1938; Kakati, 2004; Neog, 2008). Sankariyas do not worship any Hindu female deity nor do they participate in any religious events dedicated to such deities.

The origin of Kamakhya is included within the realms of the pan-India Sati narrative as a result of which Kamakhya is considered as one of the saktipithas (seats of power) where dismembered Sati’s yoni had fallen turning the hill blue (Nilachal pahaar). Kamakhya menstruates once a year during Ambubachi when the temple remains closed for three days. Hence, Kamakhya is predominantly worshipped as Mother Goddess, yoni goddess and menstruating goddess.

For a long period, Assam has been regarded as the practicing ground for sakti and tantric practices that have raised curiosity among scholars. For example, Urban (2001:778) refers to Assam as ‘the most vibrant heartland of Tantra, if not the original homeland of Tantra’. In the midst of these ambivalent, inaccessible, yet inviting metaphysical undertakings, what stands out is the Kamakhya temple. A major tantric scripture Kalika Purana (KP), an eleventh to twelfth century work, describes the worship of yoni, the sacrificial blood and her menstruation stressing on a sakti lineage for Kamakhya. Another sixteenth century tantric work Yogini Tantra (YT) places Kamakhya within the institution of motherhood by focusing on the ‘creativity of Eros than its sexual newness’ (Barua, 2015:67).

This paper intends to discuss the ritual construction of Kamakhya through sparxan, the ritual act of touching. The corporeality of the devotee and the deity are taken into consideration, more in the form of spiritual transaction, where not only proximity but also distance between them becomes the pathway to knowledge transmission. While the sakti of the goddess remains unchanged
along with the faith of her devotee, the mode of worship alters according to the time of the year. This paper examinestwo events of worship where sparxan remains the point of reference—nitya puja (daily worship) where one performs sparxan and Ambubachi mela where one un-performs sparxan. The traditional mode of darshan or darxan is less significant here and instead involves a tactile bond which is more efficacious with or without the physical touch. Kamakhya worship reveals an intimate way of worshipping where not eyes but fingers are essential to ‘see’ or behold the goddess.

METHOD OF THE STUDY
This paper is a tiny section of my ongoing doctoral research that began from the year 2015 onward to explore the menstruating and maternalised bodies in Assam with reference to Kamakhya, Ambubachi and a menarche ritual called Tulonibiya observed by the Assamese Hindu community. Born and brought up in Assam, I have always been familiar with rituals revolving around female deities and community rituals. However, academic exposure provided the much-needed depth in my own perspective; sometimes the easily accessible space becomes the least-explored one. Although I was aware of Kamakhya worship and the annual celebration of Ambubachi from a very young age, the documentation for academic purpose was a revelation in terms of studying the female bodies in social, religious as well as psychological parameters. Till then, I saw but never observed or thought it necessary to observe taking all these parameters into account. This research work could make progress for it has been able to recognise the difference between everyday and gendered everyday, the one which is encountered or staged in the social arena.

Exploring rituals through the lens of gender performance as an approach evidently reveals the significance of sparxan double fold because it is not just a ‘gesture’ but represents a completely different standpoint of how one distinguishes Kamakhya from any other deities, how one views the menstruating body in asocial stage and comprehends the social construction, engendering and humanisation of Kamakhya alongside.

I have been documenting Ambubachi festival for several years now and have been able to point out how this event has altered with time catering to changing demography, tourist aspirations and steps taken by successive governments. Kamakhya temple is one of the very few religious destinations in North-East India that is known to the rest of the country as one of the powerful sites of Mother Goddess worship. My innumerable visits to this temple during Ambubachi and otherwise have aided me in perceiving this masculine space where the guardian deity is a female with the unmistakably female organ yoni. My linguistic accessibility and conversations with temple authorities, Kamakhya worshippers, Kamakhya enthusiasts, as well as scholars have greatly assisted in formulating my thought process and translate it into my research work.
Scholars like Banikanta Kakati, Hugh B. Urban, Kali Prasad Goswami have extensively argued how the identity of Kamakhya has transformed with time. However, Kakati's work (2004) vaguely mentions Kamakhya as menstruating goddess but there is not even a passing reference to Ambubachi. Even though the existing studies have discussed the annual festival, their focus is on the celebration, the animal sacrifice and the participation of large number of devotees and so on. They do not offer a closer look at Kamakhya, her menstrual body, or even begin to explain the monumental sparxan or the absence of it.

For this paper, I have taken Diana L. Eck's (1998) concept of darsan to situate my argument on how sparxan counters that very idea and brings out a philosophy of touch and bodily association. At the same time, it argues that even the non-performance of sparxan leads to worshipping Kamakhya with the same intensity that darxan may never be able to materialise. As a point of departure from Eck's study, this paper analyses the sense of touch over the sense of sight and the auspicious touch over auspicious sight as the preferred ritual form of worship.

SPARXAN NOT DARXAN

The Bordoloi (the chief priest) of Kamakhya temple Mohit Chandra Sarma stressed on the fact that the mode of worshipping Kamakhya and other deities in the Nilachal hill is purely tantric though the pancamakara ritual is limited to some events only. On being asked what is so different about worshipping Kamakhya than any other goddesses, he gave his explanation in terms of Yaat darxan nohoi, sparxan hoi (here it is not seeing/viewing, but touching the goddess). The performance of worship is incomplete without that touch between the goddess and the worshipper that facilitates the transmission of knowledge or the act of knowing the tantric goddess. Likewise, referring to Mahanirvanatantra, (XIII, 289-291), Stella Kramrisch (1946:305) notes that the act of Nyasa (ritually touching different parts of the body) performed on the living body and the image of wood and stone is felt alive with the breath of the cosmos.

Sarma further explained and remarked that the space where one is required to touch is called manobhava guha where Maa (mother goddess Kamakhya) is raktaranjita birajmaan devi (goddess manifested in the blood-colored stone) in the yoni pitha. The water spring keeps the stone moist and one needs to touch the wet stone. Sarma quoted from Kamakhya Tirtha as follows: Manobhava guha madhhe rakta paasanrupini, tatsyas, sparsham maatre punar janma niti (In the form of blood flow the goddess manifests and touching it conveys rebirth or higher birth) (also See Goswami, 1996:96).

As a justification, Mahendra Nath Bhattacharyya (2000: 1) quotes from the Kamakhya Tirtha (KT):

Kamakhya Bordedevi Neel Parvatvasini,
Twang Devi Japatanga Matryonimudra Namosthate
(Kamakhya resides in the yoni shrine located in the blue hill).

Similarly, Ananta Sarma\textsuperscript{11} mentioned how the \textit{yoni pitha} of the Devi is \textit{tezeregarha} (created with blood) and how her identity remains \textit{tezabaan} (brimmed with blood) or \textit{tezaal} (bloody) and alive. The striking sculpture of a menstruating woman in a squatting position very similar to Lajja Gauri, adjacent to one of the temple doors, with her exposed breast and vagina is always covered in red, signifying blood, always alive with the redness of life. Moreover, the reference to blood in order to describe Kamakhya is so strong that her identification comes to naught without it. Beginning with her physical description to the space of Kamakhya temple which is smeared with redcolour to her annual menstruation during \textit{Ambubachi}, she is clothed in blood which eventually becomes her greatest marker in identity formation. Gioia Lussana (2015:78) is of the view that the morning bath performed on the goddess’ body (the \textit{yoni} stone) awakens the sleeping goddess and those who touch her. In the midst of it, the \textit{sparxan} brings the element of efficacy from which emanates the realization of touching a goddess where the proximity is almost none.

Kamakhya is fondly referred to as \textit{Maa} and the pilgrimage to Kamakhya temple concludes in the goddess’ \textit{yoni}. The temple situated in Nilachal hill is always bustled with visitors in any time of the year for the \textit{sparxan}, while the annual festival \textit{Ambubachi} sees the largest gathering. \textit{Maa} never falls short of visitors and her children never fail to live up to her expectation. It is a glimpse of quotidian performance where she is prepared by the \textit{sevait} (her servicemen) to play the perfect host to her visitors as she ‘waits’ (ibid:77) for their arrival. The temple opens every day at 8 AM for the public and remains open till 5 PM with an hour’s break in between 1 and 2 PM for the \textit{maa’r bhoga} (Mother’s meal). One is required to enter the temple complex on bare foot. The present structure of the temple is built in such a way that beginning from a distance one has to walk towards the main temple complex passing through the grilled corridor that ends right where the main inner door of the temple exists. One needs to wait to touch the waiting mother.

It is not that mandatory to go through this waiting process if one wants to just worship the goddess from a distance without touching her. One can perform \textit{parikrama} (circumambulate) the temple and offer the \textit{puja thali} (offering plate) consisting of incense sticks, sweets, flowers like lotus and hibiscus, fruits that is easily available in nearby shops. However, majority of devotees prefer to experience the longer process in order to perform the \textit{sparxan} even if that lasts for not more than two seconds. The \textit{saubhagya kund} (auspicious pond) which is located in between the grilled corridor and the outer side of the temple is the place for another ritual that is crucial to Kamakhya worship after \textit{sparxan}. It becomes a site to perform purification of sacrificial animals and birds before being taken to the \textit{balighar} (sacrificial house). The families offering the sacrifices are anointed under the close scrutiny of the priests,
while the members of the families try their best to repeat the chants and ritual acts. One may often get distracted by the screams of the bleating sacrificial goats before being drawn back to the chants of devotees in the queue. The length of the intestine-like corridor gives out an uncanny resemblance of being inside the belly of the goddess with every step approaching the yoni—personified mother.

As I drew nearer, the corridor perceptibly turned smaller with every step and then there came a point when the pressure of people got tightened around me so much so that their sweat and smell became mine. The transportation that resulted in oneness with the goddess consequently took the meaning of being one with the fellow-devotees. As the space shrunk further, people raised their puja thalis up in the air to create room and the hibiscus flowers once adorning the plate turned pale and fluttered desperately under the ceiling fans to meet the mother. Devotees were then split into gendered queues separated by an iron grill between them as the ‘moment’ came closer. As soon as I entered the temple complex, and then the garba-griha (womb-complex), I was engulfed in a dark and smoky compartment, totally cut off from the chants, screams and mundane talk while the incense prepared me for the final descent to the yoni. A few slippery steep steps down landed me to the yoni stone submerged under a flower bed immersed in water. As I bent and knelt down, the priest sitting there instructed me to touch the wet stone while he mechanically pasted the vermillion water on my forehead like a trace of blood. This brings to my mind what Lussana (2015:79) mentions about the performativity of the said rite that devotees undergo in that brief moment revealed by a gesture while doing it. Lussana points out that everything happens on the living body of the Goddess and by touching her body the devotee touches both his own body and the very root of sacred (ibid.). The sparshan was performed on my body and the body of the goddess synchronously. Our bodies met momentarily and the visit bore fruit. It happened so swiftly, that within the blink of an eye I was soon replaced by another person standing behind me. As I exited the chamber door, the noise, the familiar smell and the sight welcomed me back from the time warp that I was with the Maa for a brief moment. As the sunlight gently rubbed against my body, it felt like as if I had emerged out of Kamakhya’s vagina; reborn from her maternalised body, after reaching down inside her and still carrying the trace of blood on my face.

Diana L. Eck (1998: 8), in her book on darsan has noted the power and importance of “seeing” in the Hindu religious tradition. Referring to darsan as the central act of Hindu worship, Eck narrates it, “to stand in the presence of the deity and to behold the image with one’s eyes, to see and be seen by the deity”. The auspicious sight becomes the fundamental basis of worship where visual perception of sacredness is considered the conventional mode of worship. Eck further points out that the importance of eyes can be understood from the fact that in the later Hindu tradition while creating divine images the eyes
were the final part of the anthropomorphic image to be carved or set \(\text{(ibid:7)}\). Hindus, according to Eck, ‘read’ images as visual theologies or scriptures \(\text{(ibid:41)}\). Here, it is to be noted that the literal meaning of \textit{darsan} simplifies the exchange between the devotee and the deity which is supposed to awaken the five senses and awareness of being in the presence of the divine. While doing so, the sense of sight finds fulfillment, while the sense of touch remains absent or in a slumber.

Donnalee Dox (2012: 43) argues how body becomes the site where the internal experience of spirituality and the materiality of performance practices reciprocate to each other. Dox notes when the body performs ritual, it also becomes the site in which people experience sensations and logic of spirituality. Dox further adds, “Meaning making can happen from the body as well as being written on the body” \(\text{(ibid:59)}\). In the midst of this, Kamakhya’s body reciprocates with the devotees’ bodies where the \textit{sparxan} performs the dual action of giving and extracting meaning and knowledge out of the bodies merged together. Without \textit{sparxan} the worship remains an unfinished act.

\section*{UN-PERFORMING \textit{SPARXAN}}

\textit{Ambubachi mela}\textsuperscript{12} takes place in the month of Asad or Ahaar (the second day according to Hindu Lunar calendar, generally late June). Like it happens in several annual celebrations in temples across the country, \textit{Ambubachi} also witnesses a huge gathering much higher than the large number of visitors throughout the year. In the year 2019, the estimated gathering for the three-day celebration was close to twenty five lac from within Assam and other states, like neighbouring West Bengal, Jharkhand, Odisha, Uttar Pradesh and from Southern states as well. Pilgrims from neighboring countries, like Nepal and Bangladesh also frequent the temple to perform worship to the menstruating deity.

However, unlike annual festivals in other temples across India, or annual festivals held at Kamakhya temple like Manasa Puja, Durga Puja, Pohan Puja and so on, \textit{Ambubachi} officially commences with the closing of the \textit{garba griha} at the \textit{vimana} section of the temple. The unique practice of Kamakhya temple centers round the \textit{manobhava guha} where the \textit{yoni} is located. On this occasion it remains closed and the \textit{yoni} is veiled due to which the usual worship through \textit{sparxan} is prohibited.

During \textit{Ambubachi}, Kamakhya temple is transformed into a sacred menstrual landscape. A well-known tale related to \textit{Ambubachi} that I grew up listening to is that the water of Brahmaputra river turns red when Kamakhya menstruates. The genesis of this tale is unknown just like the historical account of the festival itself, but explanations of the ‘menstruation’ have gained currency. During the peak monsoon, Kamakhya undergoes her annual menstruation and it is locally believed that her blood flows out of the temple to finally merge with the mighty river Brahmaputra. The ‘veiling’ itself is the reason why so many pilgrims and tourists alike pay visit during \textit{Ambubachi}. 
During these three days while the yoni stone is covered with red-coloured angabastra or raktabstra (menstrual cloth) inaccessible to anyone, the peripheral space of the temple is transformed into the central performative site. It is only on the fourth day that the temple is purified and reopened for the visitors who throng to seek Kamakhya’s blessings by touching the yoni stone. The festival culminates after the angabastra is cut into small pieces and distributed amongst the devotees as prasad (goddess’ blessing).

The closed door symbolises Kamakhya’s menstruating body as unapproachable and not ready for performing sparxan. The ceremony begins when the athporia and duari\textsuperscript{13} covers the yoni pitha with the angabastra supplied by the Temple Trust Board (Mishra, 2004:52). They are allowed to stay at the adjacent calanta section just outside the closed door to make sure that the three lamps are lit throughout the whole period of Ambubachi. It also means the usual maa’r bhoga is not offered to the goddess and other deities at the temple complex as they are also believed to be under the spell of the menstrual suwa.\textsuperscript{14} Instead, the uncooked food meant for the goddess is offered to the gayana for his ‘nightlong service of singing songs in praise of the deity’ (ibid.). As Kamakhya menstruates, everyone is virtually and ritually smeared with the blood of the goddess in the form of a communal suwa at the site already charged with social and ritual fervor.

Ambubachi does not fail to express the elemental idea of impurity as a powerful tool of disruption and non-performance—a hiatus to everydayness. It characterises a break, a sort of pause per se in order to establish another periodical event that is seamlessly exhibited through the annual divine menstruation. Moreover, Ambubachi reveals the power that a bleeding body possesses to bring everything to a halt, in order to resume another cycle. I view this festival as a ritual vacuum which houses two different energies; one is that of the still and veiled yoni where no ritual movement takes place for three days and which remains untouched, unseen yet everybody feels the presence of the powerful absent and the other is the absolute spontaneous constant ritual presence and mobilization of bodies that navigate outside the closed door to worship the still and silent goddess. These two energies combine together to reach a ritualised crescendo that materialises itself in the form of energy passed on to the devotees. The whole process symbolises how the divine menstruation of the goddess behind the closed door is transformed into a public spectacle of blessing.

The impurity translates its power over purity and hence creates a terrifying sensation. The power of impure emerges from its very ability to transform anything into impure effortlessly as ‘something that is veiled or asleep can be seen as dirty or impure’ (Lussana, 2015:77), while to become pure or to be awakened needs concerted effort. The inauspicious and impure phenomenon in the non-tantric world is the most auspicious in the tantric world as the power of impurity transcends the boundaries of purity. The impure yet powerful
manifestation of Ambubachi reveals itself in several manner—the non-tantric belief that impurity like menstrual blood needs to be isolated and the tantric philosophy that menstrual blood is powerful and the source of everything that is auspicious because it is impure. These two parallel schools of thought undeniably acknowledge a sole common belief that the menstrual blood is a powerful tool, empowered in itself to contaminate purity and hence threatening. The element of being impure, powerful and auspicious at the same time is translated into a knowledge and thereby instills faith which allows the devotees to seek goddess’ blessing, but from a distance through un-performing sparxan. Even the unawakened goddess is powerful during her menstruation. The very act of invoking the deity with sparxan is prohibited so that the goddess’ sakti is contained and allowed to cool down for the devotees to receive it.

With the closure of main manobhava guha, it is impossible to miss how several activities taking place in the temple courtyard comes alive. As the increasing hordes of tired visitors walking up the Nilachal hill enter the premises with folded hands and unfulfilled wishes, the air in the courtyard gradually enters into your consciousness as it attempts to contain so many forms of representation within its fold other than people’s presence. The aura of Kamakhya despite the closed door permeates into the courtyard. In one corner of the open air where photography of any kind is prohibited, goats are sacrificed. As the number of sacrificial goats keep on increasing, a couple of temple members decapitate the goats in an automated manner swinging their blades as fast as they can. While, in the other corner, people are occupied with ringing numerous metal hanging bells quite oblivious of sacrifices and flow of sacrificial blood on the other side. Several parts of the temple roof, window carvings and stone sculptures are filled with dead pigeons. During my visit I could sense death in the air as it was being celebrated in several forms, be it Kamakhya’s menstrual blood or sacrificed birds and animals. There was colour of vermillion in the air as well as an uninterrupted sound of cymbals and drums successfully dissipating the death cry of the bleating goats and then there was constant announcement of missing people in the air, something like an anti-climax.

Kramrisch(1946:8) explains that a pilgrimage to a temple is undertaken for the purpose of looking at it (darsana) with the sight of knowledge or methods of cognising truth. Furthermore, in order to explain how seeing is a kind of touching in the Indian context (ibid:9), Eck refers to Kramrisch (1946) and Jan Gonda (1969). However, Kamakhya worship reveals a complete subversion of the above dominant form of ritual. In fact, the pilgrimage to Kamakhya temple, especially during Ambubachi renders another meaning to the sparxan ritual as well. Usually, through touching the yoni one connects and sees the goddess, whereas during Ambubachi even without touching and seeing the pilgrim connects with the goddess even more.
The phenomenon of touching the deity is crucial as it leads to an inner satisfaction that the prayers have been heard. The inability to touch the yoni or the void left by un-performing sparxan inside transforms in a higher level of sparxan of the icons on the temple courtyard, walls and so on; it is an act which is doubly sensorial and spiritually satisfying for the worshippers. The unusual increase in the physical act of ‘touching divinity’ outside almost creates an impression that every devotee is trying to fill the lacunae left by the yoni’s untouch. I look at this touching divinity as a pure act of ritual endeavour to see Kamakhya through fingers. It is visibly desperate effort to search for the goddess’ traces through touch, the only true accepted mode of worshipping her.

Kamakhya’s bleeding is seen as a buffering period after which the Mother Goddess equated with the Mother Earth is believed to abundantly bless her children for the entire year. All who participate in Ambubachi at Kamakhya temple are not necessarily tantric worshippers. Many devotees pay visit due to their allegiance to Prithvi or Baxumati (Mother Earth) and there is a greater chance that they may follow the non-tantric form of worship sans animal sacrifice. Their explanation of closed door may be linked to their own cultural understanding of menstrual seclusion amongst the Assamese Hindu. In fact, bamuniya Hindus observe the ritual of xaat or Baxumati’r rajasthala (Earth’s menstruation) during Ambubachi, especially in the villages where agricultural fields remain untouchable and activities like digging, ploughing, sowing, plucking and so on are stopped in totality.

Consequently, Ambubachi provides the space, the temple and a veiled icon to direct their worship towards the invisible, inaccessible and untouchable goddess. As a result, menstrual celebration at Kamakhya elevates the faith process by substantiating the impure danger of menstruation on one hand and when merged with the power of the auspicious purity on the other. Ambubachi successfully creates the ‘need for isolation’ of Kamkhya, while simultaneously producing a site for tantric and non-tantric forms of worship by including Prithvi’s menstruation.

The celebration of Ambubachi is not just the glorification of menstruation and creation, but is also significant for reversal of some sort. Kamakhya’s ability to menstruate sends her to rest, while the visitors are awakened from their mundane slumber. Secondly, the inability to touch the yoni results in the touching of each and every remnant of her body that is associated with the deity, no matter how remotely it is. The temporary separation from the sparxan is another reason to rejuvenate and recycle one’s life to participate in the re-awakening of the deity with a renewed vigour.

SACRED ’MENSTRUAL REMNANTS’

On the fourth day of Ambubachi, the vimana section of the temple is re-opened as the Kamakhya’s menstruation is believed to be concluded. The athpora
removes the *angabastra* and unveils the *yoni pitha*. He prepares the *pitha* for the priest to perform *xuddhikaran* (purification ceremony) by performing *devir snan* (bathing the goddess) with a purifying water called *pancgavya* and then with plain water (Mishra, 2004:52). The *pitha* is dressed up in a new red *saree* (traditional garment worn by women by draping around the body) and offered fresh flowers, followed by a general worship. As the *pitha* is ready for the *nitya puja*, the *athporia* leaves the *garbha griha* and the priest takes over to perform the *nitya puja* in tantric method by invoking the deity from her hiatus. Once the *nitya puja* concludes, the *angabastra* is taken to the main office of the temple and the door is re-opened for the devotees to touch the *yoni* and seek blessings. The menstrual cloth of Kamakhya is then distributed amongst the devotees as *mul axirbaad* (main blessing) in the form of *nirmali or nirmālya* (Bhattacharyya, 2000:99; Urban, 2019:7) or *prasad*, a sacred menstrual remnant of the deity’s body.

According to Kali Prasad Goswami (1996: 35-36), during the monsoon season when *Ambubachi* is celebrated, the flow of the water spring where the *yoni pitha* is located increases and assumes a reddish tingle or the ‘red hematite present in the soil mixes with water of the natural spring’ (Barua, 2015:59). Sivanath Barman also mentions about this phenomenon while explaining the blood-like redness of Kamakhya’s menstruation. In one of his personal handouts he gave to me, Barman writes, “the water level (in the *pitha*) gets higher due to monsoon and the water gets mixed up with the *xendur* and *kumkum* (vermillion) that wets the red cloth and makes the redness more profound” (Barman, 2019:3).

Once the door reopens the *angabastra* is lifted and brought to the office first. Earlier it used to be distributed by the *pujaris* to their respective *jajmans* (clients) or other devotees. Kamakhya Bordoloi Sarma informed the distribution of *angabastra* remains solely under the authority of Bordolois. Due to several logistic and crowd management issues, the Temple Trust have come up with a system according to which the *pandas* and the *pujaris* are required to list down their names and the amount of cloth (not exceeding three metres) right before *Ambubachi* begins. Once the cloth pieces are given to them, they cut these into smaller pieces and distribute them as *prasad* to their *jajmans*. According to Sarma, the *Bor Doloi* (Chief priest) of Kamakhya, the holiness of the *raktabastra* may be explained through the following passage:

\[
\text{Kamakhya bastra madaya, japa puja samasaritpunya}
\text{ka} \text{manga vidhi visatta nasam se}
\]

It can be roughly summarised as Kamakhya’s cloth is so holy, no matter where one is, a piece of the *angabastra* will keep the devotee close to Mother Kamakhya and fulfill his or her desire.

Similarly, *Kubjika Tantra* (KbT, Eleventh-Twelfth century) also details the sacredness of the red cloth thus:
Meditating on Kamakhya’s menstrual cloth will lead to liberation and fulfillment of desires if kept close. (Devi, 2007:84; Urban, 2019:7)

Urban further states that the red cloth represents the nirmalya of the goddess’ flow, a sacred remains of an offering (2019:7). Hence, the piece of angabastra is often worn by the devotees as amulets tied around their right arm (for male devotee) and left arm (for female) or hung around their necks tied to a thread (Devi, 2007:84). The beneficial quality of the cloth is highlighted along with the closeness it brings to the deity. The constant touch of the angabastra to the body assures the devotee of matri’r rakxa (mother’s protection) as Bor Doloi Sarma explained it to me; it’s an assurance of one being in touch with the Mother. Likewise, Agehananda Bharati (1967: 93) explains the association of pavitr-kr (an idiom meaning ‘to make pure’) with prasad, by the act of touching or eating of food by a god or a sadhu in Smrti-literature. In case of Ambubachi, it is a spiritual food in a physical form ‘made pure’ by the menstrual touch of Kamakhya. It is after all an event of ‘ritual remembering and replenishment of her power’ (2007: 71), as Brenda Dobia puts it. The spiritual dynamic that angabastra attempts to establish is the belief that one may complete the pilgrimage and go away from the temple, but the deity still stays with the devotee as two bodies get merged into one. The touch that begins with the yoni’s sparxan ends with the yoni’s sacred remnant attached to the body of the devotee.

Angabastra or raktabastra which literally translates itself into blood-cloth in Sanskrit language is believed to be auspicious for Kamakhya and several other tantric deities. In Karel R. Van Kooij’s (1972) translation of Kalika Purana, the significance of red colour is accentuated and is made an object of reverence. Kooij writes,

As soon as one has seen women in red colour, a lion, a corpse, a red lotus...one should bow to the Mahâmâyâ. Red is a favourite in the rites of for worshipping the goddess. Women who have painted themselves red or wear red clothes reflect the figure of the Goddess. Lion, corpse and red lotus appear as Mahâmâyâ’s seats. (ibid:91)

The red colour is derived as a symbol of blood which is very much apparent throughout the festival, be it the menstrual clothsymbolising blood constantly oozing out of the balighar or red-coloured outfits preferred by devotees. As sacrificial animals ‘absorb’ the sins and inauspiciousness (See Sax, 1991:99) in the case of goddess Nandadevi in the Indian state of Uttarakhand transforming these into purity, so does the angabastra of Kamakhya ‘absorb’ the menstrual impurity of the body and transform it into purest of the pure blessing.
Moreover, the blood flowing from the animal sacrifice enhances the sakti of Kamakhya to bleed more in order to redder and purify the menstrual cloth. Animal sacrifice is a mandatory ritual as part of nitya puja at Kamakhya temple as no law has been able to ban the animal slaughter (See Urban, 2019). During Ambubachi it is increased several times as for many the puja seems to be incomplete without spilling sacrificial blood in glorifying Kamakhya. In the light of this animal sacrifice or the accounts of alleged human sacrifice practiced in the temple, people keep on revisiting, especially a when the sacrificial blood reddens the temple giving back sakti to the deity, who transmutes the blood-print of a sakti into her angabastra. As a wet stone crevice lifts up the spiritual fervor of the devotees immersed in divinity, the nature’s performance of ritu (seasonal and menstrual cycle) is revealed through the corporeality of Prithvi and Kamakhya. Once the private performance behind the closed door concludes and the menstrual blood slowly disappears from the divine bodies, what is left behind is the sanguine ‘remnant’ of the performance until the divine menstruation re-emerges the following year.

What is poignant in the inclusion of angabastra within the realm of Kamakhya worship is how this tiny piece of cloth transforms the dialectics of darxan-sparxan phenomenon. While Kamakhya ritual advocates both the forms of sparxan and non-sparxan worship, the ritual climax of Ambubachi is maneuvered through the angabastra that can be seen and touched all the year round carried in the devotees’ bodies, an ansa (part) of the goddess that eventually becomes an ansa of the devotee. Sati’s remnant is glorified in Kamakhya’s yoni, whereas Kamakhya’s remnant gets transformed into prasad as the holy bloodprint. Prasad generally consists of sweets or fruits that can be consumed by devotees, but the unique nature of Ambubachi is that it strikes the right chord as spiritual consumption is prioritised. The powerful presence of the goddess and the materiality of the goddess’ menstrual blood increases thousand fold for those devotees who succeed in carrying the sacred menstrual remnant of the deity tied to their bodies being ‘constantly in touch’ with the goddess, giving them the privilege of performing sparxan even miles away from the yoni.

CONCLUSION

As Eck has pointed out, it is crucial to have a pair of eyes to establish communication between deity and the worshipper. The significance of a pair of eyes is evident when we look at Vedic deities, be it in anthropomorphic forms or iconic images. However, if one is to look for those eyes in non-Vedic cult, one might be disappointed to find out that the presence and representation of deities are an-iconic in nature. The sacred manifestation is discovered and worshipped in any form of nature like a block of stone or a crevice in a stone (like in the case of Kamakhya), a roadside tree, mounds of earth and so on. The urgency to ‘see and be seen’ is notas much of a ritual obligation as it is to touch and make oneself present in body and spirit. The act of sparxan therefore challenges the Vedic imagination of gods and goddesses with their
‘large and conspicuous eyes’ (Eck, 1998:7) and manufactures a new way of viewing the sacred with or without eyes.

Kamakhya is worshipped as one of the mainstream deities in the pantheon of Hindu gods and goddesses or at least, has been brought under the umbrella of principal deities through Sati’s myth. The popularity of Kamakhya and its aura of sacred geography dominate over other locations where the rest of the body parts fell. In fact, Chengannur Bhagavatî in Kerala also claimed to be the site where the yoni fell (Eck, 2012:300) but Kamakhya’s yoni worship overshadows and limits the former to a regional knowledge system only. As a result, Sati’s myth may have enhanced Kamakhya’s fame in the Hindu pilgrimage orbit, but the tantric goddess Kamakhya is still not fully accommodated within the realm of Vedic cultus. The autochthonous Kamakhya is stubbornly manifested in its an-iconic stone-self, challenging the Vedic idea of worshipping, perceiving and encountering the sacred; dismantling the grammar of ‘gaze’ one touch at a time.

END NOTES

1 In Assamese language terms like sparxan is pronounced like ‘kh’ instead of ‘s’ as in sparsan. However, the forced stress of ‘kh’ is replaced by soft-sounding ‘x’ as in Xattriya dance. The same goes for other italicised terms that has ‘x’ in it like darxan, baxumati and so on.

2 Kamakhya temple was destructed several times probably due to Muslim invasion or natural disasters and rebuilt by various kings across the centuries. The present temple is claimed to be rebuilt by Naranarayana, the king of Koch Bihar in the year 1665 (Kakati, 2004:37).

3 Vulva, vagina, generative organ.

4 It has been inferred that Vaishnavism must have existed even before Sankardeva as early as the twelfth century Pala dynasty under the patronage of Dharmapala (See Nath, 1938), but it is only Sankardeva who shaped and brought Neo-Vaishnavism in the religious map of Assam. The prayers are offered to the holy scripture of Sankardeva’s Bhagavata derived from Bhagavata Purana at sattra (monastic institutions) and naamghar or kirtanghar (prayer house). It is to be noted here that Assamese Hindu community, irrespective of their sect affiliations often offer prayer at naamghar, but it is only the bamuniyas who worship multiple female deities.

5 Daksa, the progenitor of people had performed a great sacrifice to which he invited one and all living beings except his daughter Sati and his discarded son-in-law, Shiva. Unable to bear the insult, Sati arrives at her father’s house and insinuates herself at the sacrificial fire. Enraged Shiva carries her dead body and starts dancing frenziedly shaking the entire universe. The sight was so horrible that Vishnu decided to stop Shiva’s dance of destruction by dismembering Sati’s body into fifty-one pieces with his discus. Each ansa (part) fell in different places giving birth to sakti pithas (seat of power). As her yoni fell on the hill, it turned blue and hence was known as Nilachal pahaar (the blue hill). The yoni no sooner had it touched the ground turned into stone, while Shiva finding himself with no corpse on his shoulder, sat down manifested in phallic stone (Shastri, 2005:284; Patel, 1994:79; Urban, 2001:787-788).

6 The date is debatable as many scholars argue it is an eighth century product, while others assert that it is a fourteenth century. While few have suggested that there might be two volumes at different time periods (Urban, 2001:791)
It has been argued time and again that Kamakhya has been brought within the fold of Hinduised identity with the aim of royal patronage and territorial unification. However, one cannot deny that the negotiation with indigenous fertility cults has left some residual traces behind in the shape of identity remnants which are evidently visible in her identity construction. For instance, matriarchal tribes like Khasi and Garo have a strong presence of women in the social space where fertility deities have a bigger role to play. It is crucial to investigate if there is any presence of fertility cults in these tribes in the contemporary period and explore the dynamics between women and the deities within the tribes who have been converted to Christianity to a large extent. Likewise, it is also significant to study the status of the universal deity outside the tribes and her residual remnants after being assimilated within the temple walls.

The *samaj* (community) comprises of five main families of priests where the priests of Kamakhya temple are called Bordeuri, the priests of the other nine temples (of the ten Mahavidya temples) are called Deuri and the chief priest of Kamakhya is called Bordoloi. The tradition went on till 1998 followed by a legal battle between the *samaj* and Kamakhya Debuttal Board formed by local priest and representatives to decide the administrative responsibility of the temple. In July 2012, the Supreme Court restored the temple rights to the Bordeuri *samaj*. The Bordeuri priests can officiate in the other nine Mahavidya temples as well, but Deuri priests cannot officiate in the Kamakhya temple.

*Pancamakaras* is a specialised Tantric ritual which includes the following ingredients and is often considered as one of the most powerful and effective ritualised worship. It consists of five (Panca) ingredients beginning with *ma-mudr* ( parched grain), *matsya* (fish), *mamsa* (meat), *madya* (wine), *maithuna* (intercourse). (See Mishra, 2004:3)

Interview with Ananta Sarma, the author of *Saktirupa Maa Kamakhya* on Kamakhya and *Ambubachi* (2019).

Kamdev, the Hindu god of love and desire is believed to be created in the *guha*.

Interview with the *BorDoloi* (Chief Priest) of Kamakhya temple Mohit C. Sarmaon Kamakhya, *Ambubachi, Dus Mahavidya* (2019).

A popular myth of *Ambubachi* is often cited from texts like *Kalika Purana* (KP) and *Yogini Tantra* (YT), the two tantric texts often credited with the narrative of Kamakhya as the menstruating goddess. The *Ambubachi* narrative goes like this: Varaharupi (the boar avatar of Vishnu) plunged into the ocean to rescue the menstruating *Prithvi* or *Baxumati* (the earth) from the clutches of *Hiranya*. After he rescues her, they engross themselves in a sexual union following which a son is born. *Prithvi* places the new born Narak on a sacrificial ground with his head resting on a human skull (*nara*). Janaka, the king of Videha discovers the child and decides to raise him under the guidance of a nurse Katyayani. When Narak grows up to a fine young man and excels the royal princes, he becomes a threat to the kingdom. Katyayani takes him to a pilgrimage on the pretext of meeting his putative father Vishnu, who then asks Narak to surrender himself to Mother Goddess Kamakhya and declares Narak the ruler of Pragjyotishpura, the modern day Assam. King Narak befriends a staunch Shaivite King Bana of Sonitpura and under his influence becomes indifferent to Kamakhya, eventually dying at the hands of his own father Vishnu (See Shastri, 1982; Kakati, 1989; Goswami, 1996; Bhattacharyya, 2000; Urban, 2010; Sarma, 2017; Ramos, 2017).

*Athporia* is the first person to enter the *garba griha* for *nitya puja* every morning in order to clean the site for the priest to perform the first worship. *Duari* is the door keeper.

There is no parallel word in English to describe the Assamese term *suwa*. The closest term can be impure or polluted. Other disguised terms like *nuwara*, *axubidha* are also used to refer to menstruation.
16 *Pancagavya* refers to a mixture of five sacred elements obtained from a cow: milk, ghee, curd, cow dung and urine.

17 Interview on Mother Goddess cults, Kamakhya, *Ambubachi* with Sivanath Barman, an eminent scholar of the cultural landscape of Assam.

18 Although animal sacrifice is the norm of worshipping Kamakhya, but many offer vegetables and fruits like gourd, pumpkin, sugarcane instead of animals.

REFERENCES


*Address for Correspondence*: Prerna Pradhan, Theatre and Performance Studies, School of Arts & Aesthetics, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi 110067. Email id: prernaefi12@gmail.com. Mobile number:+919971924771

*Manuscript received on: March 03, 2021*

*Manuscript accepted on: April 23, 2021*