The Mother Goddess Kamakhya

Late Dr. Biswanarayan Shastri

Kamakhya temple at Guwahati is one of the important centres of pilgrimage for the Hindus. Pilgrims from all over the country, and even from neighbouring Nepal, visit the temple on auspicious days, especially during Navaratra and on other auspicious occasions related with the worship of Goddess. This temple is also considered by the followers of the Shakti cult as one of the most important seats of the cult. ISHANI had approached late Biswanarayan Shastri, an eminent Sanskrit scholar of Assam, to write about the temple, which he kindly did. It could not be published during his lifetime due to resource crunch faced by ISHANI. We have, however, preserved it carefully and are glad to publish it in this issue of ISHANI. We also offer our humble tribute to his memory on this occasion.

Editor

“O Goddess Kamakhya, thou art the source of the world and mother of the world, thou doth reside on the blue mountain and bestow boons on the devotees, I pay my obeisance to thee”. Thus praying, devotees in hundreds and thousands enter into the sanctum sanctorum of the shrine of the Mother Goddess Kamakhya.

The shrine of the Goddess Kamakhya is situated on the top of the hill called Nilachala on the southern bank of the mighty river Brahmaputra, at a distance of 6 km from the heart of the city of Guwahati. The Goddess in the sanctum sanctorum of the shrine is in laconic form and not an anthropomorphic one. In other words, there is no icon of the Goddess and thus it is unique in its own standing. Perhaps except the temple of Sambaleswari at Sambalpur in Orissa, there is no temple in India without an image of the presiding deity.

Inside the temple there is a cave and in the cave there stands a block of stone resembling yoni (pudendum) and the block of stone has always been kept moist from the oozing of a natural spring within the cave. The cave is called Manobhava Guha (the cave of Cupid) because, according to mythology, this was created by or belonged to Kama.

The Kalika Purana, a work composed in ninth century A.D. in ancient Assam, for glorifying Kamakhya gives a description of Manobhava Guha. It says:

“Inside the cave there exists a very lovely pudendum on the stone which is 12 angulas (9cm) in width and 20 angulas (16 cm) in length gradually narrowing and sloping... It is reddish in colour like vermilion and saffron. On that female organ the amorous Goddess Kamakhya... The primordial force resides in five different forms.”

All ritual performances and offerings are made in this laconic symbol of Yoni. The Kalika Purana also gives an etymological explanatory meaning. It says that the Goddess comes to the hill to fulfil her amorous urge with Lord Shiva and hence the Goddess is called ( Kama + Akhya) Kamakhya. Though it is difficult to say how the concept of Peetha came into being, the development of the concept could be traced to the Puranas and Tantras and prior to this in the Mahabharata (Vana Parva) we find mention of three kundas associated with the Goddess Shakti as Yoni (pudendum) and Stana (the breast).

The three kundas or yonikundas are the seat of Bhima in Pancanada and Udyaparvata and Stanakunda in the Gaurishikhara in the east. It may be presumed that the association of the Mother Goddess Gauri with the Kundas was developed in the Puranas in the Peethas.

The well-known mythology of the destruction of the sacrifice of Daksa by the order of Shiva is told to sanctify the place. Though the mythology varies from Purana to Purana, the kernel of the story is the same.
Once upon a time Daksa, the progenitor of people had performed a great sacrifice to which he invited one and all living beings except his discarded son-in-law, Shiva, and for that matter his daughter Sati, too. Sati had taken denying entry to Shiva as an insult to her husband, Lord Shiva. She gave up her life. Shiva was not at the hermitage at that time but learnt of the sad incident and saw the dead body of Sati. Shiva, taking the corpse of Sati on his shoulder, in his inconsolable grief, started moving hither and thither. Sensing the danger from the wild wandering, Lord Vishnu, at the request of the Gods, cut the corpse on the shoulder of Shiva into pieces with his discus. The limbs from the corpse of Sati had fallen at different places and at last the vital organ of Sati had fallen on a mountain in the region of Kamrupa. After the vital organ of Sati had fallen on the hill, it turned blue and hence the mountain is called Nilachala or Nila Sāila. The yoni, no sooner had it fallen on the hill, turned into stone, and Shiva himself finding no corpse on his shoulder, sat down and became a stone.

Thus, it explains the origin of yonimandala located inside the temple on the Nilachala near Guwahati. The Kalika Purana says that the naval portion of Sati fell on the plains (tatraiva) near Nilachala, i.e. present Ugratara in the heart of Guwahati. The Kalika Purana also states that the region that Shiva with the corpse of Sati on his shoulder visited, became worthy of performing religious rites. No doubt, this is a Puranic way of sanctifying land in those days.

**THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE PEETHAS:**
In course of time when worship of the Goddess became widespread, the three kundas mentioned above became Peethas. The sanctity of the number three is perhaps at the root of the concept of the three kundas, and later on when the kundas were turned into Peethas, the number went on increasing and became four. The Kalika Purana mentions these four Peethas and at the same time mentions seven Peethas (Ch.18). Rudrayamala mentions 10 Peethas, Kularnava describes eight Peethas and some other tantras mention 50 or 51 Peethas and finally the number has gone up to 108.

It is to be noted that in all these counts, Kamarupa Peetha with its presiding deity Kamakhya occupies the important position. That is from the concept of kunda, Kamarupa is always mentioned. Perhaps the origin of Goddess worship had its origin in Kamarupa, Assam.

**THE SAKTA PEETHAS OR THE SEATS OF THE GODDESS:**
In the Puranic and tantric traditions, four prominent Sakta Peethas are well known. These are Odra or Oddiana or Uddiana, Jalasaila or Jalandhara, Purna Peetha or Purnagiri and Kamrupa. The Kalika Purana gives names of the places where the severed limbs of Sati had fallen, and though the list begins with Devikuta, it lays emphasis on Kamrupa. Hevajra and some other tantras also speak about four Peethas. It may be mentioned that Kamakhya Peetha is one of the principal Shakta Peethas of the country. This unmistakably proves that since the earliest period of the Tantric cult, Kamrupa has been an important centre of the cult with the Goddess Kamakhya as the presiding deity. The people living in this part of the country accepted the ancient concept of yonitirtha and this Peetha had been given great importance and is treated with sanctity.

Modern scholars are of the opinion that “the formation of Kama in Kamakhya is of extra Aryan origin” and hold that the Goddess Kamakhya originally was a deity worshipped by the matriarchal tribes and later on identified with the Goddess Mahamaya.

**THE NARAKA MYTH:**
The Mahabharata and some Puranas narrate the Naraka story. The story is briefly like this. In ancient times, when Vishnu in his incarnation as a wild boar raised the Earth from the vast water of deluge, she conceived as she came into bodily contact with the wild boar. The Earth gave birth to a son, who came to be known as Naraka or Narakasura. The Kalika Purana tells this mythology in detail and states that though the Mother Earth conceived in the age of Satya, she gave birth to the son in the age of Kali because the gods by a conspiracy caused delayed delivery. It further narrates that the Mother Earth gave birth to the son at midnight on a spot just outside the sacrificial ground of the king Janaka of Mithila and abandoned the newborn child. King Janaka
picked up the newborn child and named him Naraka, presumably after his family epithet – Janaka (Jana + Ka, Nara + ka). Both Janaka and Naraka convey the same meaning. In the seraglio of Janaka, his Mother Earth disguising herself as a nurse brought up Naraka. In course of time, Kalyani, the nurse, disclosed her real identity to her son. One midnight, Bhoomi fled the seraglio with Naraka and reached the Ganges where Vishnu, father of Naraka, joined the two. The trio made an adventurous journey to the land of Pragjyotisha (ancient Assam) by the river route. Naraka, at the behest of Vishnu, fought against Ghataka, the Kirata king of Pragjyotisha and killed him in a fierce battle. Naraka was appointed the king of the land by Vishnu who instructed him to remain steadfast in his devotion to the Goddess Kamakhya and also warned him that the moment he (Naraka) would behave otherwise, his death would be imminent. No sooner Naraka became the king of the land of Pragjyotisha, (a geographical nomenclature), it came to be known by the new name Kamrupa, (the name of a Sakta Peetha) and associated with the tantric cult. Naraka became the propagator of the Shaktta cult, the protector and devotee of the Yoni Goddess. He assumed the role of the gatekeeper to the temple.

Once upon a time, the legendary sage Vasistha had come to Kamakhya on a pilgrimage and when he proceeded to pay his obeisance to the Goddess Kamakhya, he was not allowed entry into the sanctum sanctorum of the temple where the Goddess resided in the form of yoni. The enraged sage Vasistha cursed Naraka to meet with death shortly and also the Goddess to disappear forthwith.

Naraka, by this time under the influence of the demon king Bana, a devotee of Shiva, lost his faith in Kamakhya and Lord Krishna killed him. The Goddess disappeared. This is the long story made short that is told in the Kalika Purana.

There is also a popular story current about Naraka among the people. The story is built on the well-known motif, deceptive conditions.

Once Naraka was captivated by the charm of the Goddess Kamakhya and offered the proposal to marry her. The Goddess seemingly agreed on the proposal made by the king provided he could do three things – that Naraka, during the course of one night, should construct a temple for her, dig a tank by the side of the temple and also construct a road from the plains to the temple door in the hilltop.

Naraka gladly accepted the three conditions and set to work at nightfall and he was about to complete the three tasks he was obliged to do. The Goddess was alarmed and made a cock to crow to herald daybreak. Naraka had taken the signal as that of daybreak and stopped work. Thus, Naraka was frustrated in his love adventure. In uncontrollable anger, Naraka chased the cock and cut it into two pieces. The place where this incident took place is called Kukura Kata Pahar (the hill where the cock was killed) by people.

The essence of this tale is that previously there was no temple of the Goddess Kamakhya Who resided in the form of yoni and there was no road for pilgrims to climb up apparently before the mythical Naraka became king. It is likely that the temple, the tank and the road were constructed in historical time by some reigning king with the name Naraka.

The temple of Kamakhya from the architectural evidence cannot be placed earlier than the eighth century. This temple was destroyed in the mid-sixteenth century. The traditional account ascribes the destruction to Kalapahar, a renegade general of Suliman Karrani, the Afghan Nawab of Bengal. However, history is silent about the destruction of the temple. The Yoginitantra, a work composed in Assam in late sixteenth century tells that the temple of Kamakhya was destroyed due to natural calamities. King Naranarayana of the Koch dynasty rebuilt the broken temple in 1565 A.D.

The two types of architectural design can be seen in the body of the temple. The lower portion, about six feet or so, bears resemblance to the structural foundation and plan described in Silpasstra with fine workmanship and the upper portion is constructed after the local style.
Another popular story is also current about the Koch king in the society. It tells that the Goddess Kamakhya used to dance naked at the time of evening prayer. On hearing this, the king expressed his desire to see the dancing Goddess and asked the priest to make a device. The priest advised the king to peep through a hole, which he had made in the wall. When the king peeped through, he caught the eyes of the Goddess. The irate Goddess tore off the head of the priest, Kendu Kali. The king and his descendants were forbidden as a dire penalty to cast a look at the hill. It is said that the descendants of the Koch dynasty while passing by do not look at the hill even till today.

Around the main temple there are images of Dasamahavidyas, namely Kali, Tara, Sodasi, Bhuveswari, Matangi, Chinnamasta, Kamala, Dhumavati. These manifestations of the Goddess are being worshipped in the traditional method.

**FESTIVALS:**
On the occasion of autumnal worship of the Goddess Durga, a four-day festival takes place in Kamakhya. Pilgrims from different parts of India visit the temple. Apart from the usual sacrifices offered to the Goddess, goats and buffalos are also sacrificed on the occasion.

The unique festival for which Kamakhya is known is Ambubasi mela, which is held in the second week of the solar month of Asadha (second half of June) usually from 6th to 10th. Asadha is regarded as the menstruation period of the Goddess and the temple remains closed for the pilgrims during this period. At the end of the period, the door of the temple is opened to the pilgrims. This is regarded as the most auspicious moment to pay obeisance to the Goddess. Thousands of pilgrims from all over India visit the temple and wait impatiently for the auspicious moment and gatecrash for darshana of the Goddess.

It may be mentioned in this context that the Goddess Bhagavati in the Chengannur Mahadeva temple in South Kerala is also believed to have menstruation once a year.

**PHILOSOPHY:**
Linga and Yoni, the symbols of creation in males and females respectively, used to be regarded as divine by human beings since the earliest period of civilization and hence, the creative forces of the Universe have been conceived as male, female or the union of the two. Thus, yoni has been regarded as the symbol of creation and worshipped with the utmost regard. The creative female force has been conceived as the visible symbol of the invisible female and, hence, has been identified with the Goddess.

The mythology in different Puranas is the follow-up action. If one looks to the development of the Vedic story, the Sacrifice had fled the place fearing Shiva in the form of a boar, and according to a story in the Puranas, Virbhadra destroyed the Sacrifice at the command of Shiva.

The historians may trace the origin of Vedic and non-Vedic tradition here.

*Late Biswanarayan Shastri was an eminent educationist and Sanskrit scholar. He originally hailed from North Lakhimpur district of Assam but had settled in Guwahati. He was also a Member of Parliament and Deputy Chairman of Assam State Planning Commission.*