

The 'Trinity of Goddesses': A Study of the Process of 'Appropriation' of the Three Aniconic *Sakti* Cult in Koch-Kamta Region Through Historical Lenses

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Introduction-

The Indian sub-continent offers interesting diversities in its various aspects and religion is one of them. A multitude of gods and goddesses and their worship have a significant role to play in this diverse strands of religion, particularly of the Hindu tradition (Bhattacharya, 2002, p. 45). Since time immemorial when people settled in an agriculture based society, the cult of the Mother Earth conceived as a female deity (Bhattacharya, 1971, p. 3). Many early female icons made of clay, stone or bones in their visual appearances suggest that the worship of motherhood as the source of life and the reason of flourishing existed in our continuing civilization

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and carried forward the symbolic significance of it. In later times the agricultural society in their time has seen the mother in literal form along with the concept of mother earth merging together to make it grand in every possible meaning (Bhattacharya, 1996, p. 4).

Those Hindus who worship the supreme deity as a female principle are called *Saktas*. Sakta cult is one of the best known amongst the *Smārta Pancopānasā*³ cult. The term *Sakti* is derived from the root “*Sak*” which refers to the capacity to do or to have power (Chatterji, 1968, p. 1). The great Goddesses is known in India as *Devi*, has many guises. She is *Maa*, the gentle and approachable mother; Mother of the Universe, she assumes cosmic proportions, destroying evil and addressing herself to the creation and dissolution of the worlds.

Though the Buddhist text ‘*Niddesa*’ (2nd-3rd Century B.C.E) remained silent regarding the worship of *Sakti* or female principle but here we find a clear mention of other four cults of the *Smārta Panchāposanā* cult (Banerjea, 1960, p. 217). Although with this information the antiquity of the *Sakti* worship is inadmissible. Many scholars have suggested that the cult of the mother goddess existed in some form or other among the early Indus valley people. Pottery images of the goddess have been found in course of the excavations in the sites, and Ernest Mackay is of opinion that they ‘were kept almost in every house in the ancient Indian cities, probably in

³Those persons who are belonging to the orders of the Brahmanas and guided by the injunctions laid down in the Smritis like Manu and Yagnavalkya, are called Smartas. They worship five cult deities (Pancaposana) namely- Sakta, Saiva, Saurya, Vaisnava and Ganapatya. J. N. Banerjea. *The Development of Hindu Iconography*, Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi, 1941. Pp. 6.

a recess or on a bracket on the wall'. The early Indus Valley settlers appear also to have worshipped her in her aniconic form (Banerjea, 1941, p. 489).

But until the Gupta Period, the cults of the female divinities were not much popular with the people of the upper strata of the society who were the patrons of sculptural art. The picture was no different in Eastern India. Texts like *Devīpurāna*, datable to the 7th/8th century mention the prevalence of Devi worship in Varendri⁴, Radha⁵, Kamarupa⁶, Kamakshya, and Bhottadesa. The Goddess were in fact regarded as the consorts of their respective gods and embodiments of the 'strength or potency' of the inactive and transcendent gods. In course of time the ancient cult of the Universal mother metamorphosed into the full-fledged *Sakti* cult of the medieval period incorporating myriad Devi concepts (Bhattacharya, 2002, p. 55).

There seems to be no doubt that the concept of the cult of *Sakti* was an amalgam of Aryan, non-Aryan, and folk elements, all connected with the practice of worshipping the female energy. But it is really in the Puranic literature particularly in the '*Devīmāhatmya*' chapter of the '*Markandeya Purāna*' that the cult of *Sakti* truly

⁴The Varendri region came into prominence as the heart of Pundravardhana from 10th century onwards. It comprised a number of districts of undivided Bengal namely Bogra, Dinajpur, Pabna, Malda, Rongpur and Rajshahi district. Niharranjan Roy, *Bangaleer Itihas: Aadi Parba*, Kolkata: Dey's Publishing, 1949. Pp. 116.

⁵Earliest reference of the Radha region occurred in the Jain text '*Acharanga Sutra*'. According to this text Radha divided into two parts, i.e. *Bajra bhumi* and *Suksha bhumi*. Another Jain text '*Prajnapana*' mention Kotivarsha as the capital of Radha. Niharranjan Roy, *Bangaleer Itihas: Aadi Parba*, Kolkata: Dey's Publishing, 1949. Pp. 116-117.

⁶The extent of the region Kamarupa which earlier known as Pragjyotishpura varied from time to time. According to *Jogini Tantra*, Kamarupa is said to extend from the Karatoya river on the west to the Dikhu on the east, and from the mountain of Kanjagiri on the north, to the confluence of the Brahmaputra and Lakshya rivers on the south; that is to say, it included roughly, the Brahmaputra valley, Bhutan, Rangpur, Coochbehar, the north-east of Mymensingh and, possibly, the Garo Hills. Edward Gait, *A History of Assam*, Guwahati: EBH Publishers, 2008. Pp. 10-11.

emerges, revealing different iconographic representations often satisfactorily confirmed by extant archaeological specimens (Chakrabarti, 2001, p. 172).

An introduction to the region of Koch-Kamta-

The area that had taken into consideration for the present study is Koch-Kamta region. The province was differently called in different historical periods. The territory was named as Pragjyotisha in the most ancient times and Kamarupa in medieval times. In the Ramayana and Mahabharata the region is referred to as Pragjyotisha. In epigraphic records the name Kamarupa was first mentioned in the Allahabad inscriptions of Samudragupta in 5th century A.D. (Kakati, 1989, p. 1). The territory of modern Cooch Behar and Jalpaiguri originally formed part of the ancient kingdom of Kamrupa. It came to be recognized as a distinct principality prior to the division of that country between king Naranarayana and his brother Shukladhvaja, commonly known as Chila Ray, in the middle of the 16th century (Chaudhuri, 1903, p. 212). The term *Kamarupa* is first made use of in some of the Puranas and Tantras, which are admittedly of a later date than the great epics (Chaudhuri, 1903, p. 212).

The ancient Kamarupa was divided into four sacred *Piths* namely *Kama-Pith*, *Ratna-Pith*, *Suvarna-Pith* and *Saumara-Pith* (Chaudhuri, 1903, p. 216). The historicity of the Khen and Koch dynasty is evident from this region and on other hand the region under consideration has an interesting mythological history as well. *Mahiranga Danava* is regarded as the earliest recorded mythological king of the region of Kamarupa. He was succeeded by three kings of his line and the dynasty came to an end with the third, who was named *Ratnasura*. After them, Pragjyotishpura seems

to have been occupied by a race of Kiratas. It is said that their chief Ghataka was defeated and slain by Naraka⁷, and became the king of the country (Chaudhuri, 1903, p. 219).

The worship of female principle rather the influence of Mother Goddess dated back in this region many and many years ago. Even an explicit impression regarding the worship of the female principle can be traced in the naming of the region. This place came to be widely known as Kamakhya from the legend of a part of the body of Sati having fallen here. Kamarupa is another name of Bhagabati. It is said that another name of Devi Kamakhya is Kamada according to the 62nd chapter of *Kalika Purana*, and the region was named after her. Another speculation regarding the name of Koch or Kochbihar is that Ksatriyas took shelter in the lap (koch) of *Bhagabati*, being frightened by *Parasurama* so that the region is named as Koch-Bihar (Ghosal, 2005, p. 4). *Kalika Purana* states that Kamarupa was a seat of goddess worship even when it was inhabitat by the Kiratas (Chaudhuri, 1903, p. 220). Even in present day Coochbehar we see a number of female deities are being worshipped with great devotion. Amongst them Devi Kamteswari, Devi Ghurneswari and Devi Siddheswari are regarded as the best celebrated forms of *Sakti*. Interesting to note that these three goddesses are worshipped in their aniconic or symbolic forms. Any anthropomorphic figure yet not imagined for these goddesses.

⁷In the Kalikapurana, an early medieval text that compiled in northeast India in the 9th-11th century gives a fascinating legend regarding the mytho-historical king Naraka who was responsible for the Aryanization in Kamarupa region and started the worshipping of goddess Kamakhya. It is said that Naraka was born to the varaha incarnation of Vishnu and Prithvi. Prithvi conceived him when she was impure (she had her period of menstruation) considered by Hindu-Brahmanic orthodoxy. Paolo Eugenio Rosati. *The Goddess Kamakhya: Religio-Political Implications in the Absorption Process*. Pp. 5-6.

We first discuss the origin of these three goddesses in a general manner and eventually will proceed on how the aboriginal notion get incorporated in the mainstream Brahmanical religion and uplifted its hierarchy in the later part of this present work.

Devi Kamteswari-

The temple of Devi Kamteswari is regarded as one of the most celebrated *Sakti Pitha* of Northern part of Bengal. The temple presently situated in Gosanimari village. According to *Yogini Tantra* and *Kalika Purana* ancient Kamarupa was sub-divided into four sacred *Piths* and the western *Soumar Pith* accordingly came to be known as Kamta. The Khen kings founded the kingdom of Kamta in the first half of the 15th century and it is said that Niladhvaja, the first king of this line erected a temple for the worship of the family deity who was called Kamteswari or the Guardian goddess of Kamtapur (Das, 1985, p. 114).

We often notice a tendency among the Hindu kings that they often ruled in the name of a deity. Perhaps the kingdom of Kamteswari too followed the same tradition and have been named after Kamata or Kamtapura. Hossein Shah, the then Musalman king of Bengal sacked the temple of Kamteswari in 1493 A.D. and conquered the kingdom. Sometime after this turmoil condition Maharaja Visvasinha (1522-1554 A.D.), the Koch king retook *Kamakhya Pith* and, established Gosani Devi, the tutelary *Devi* of the Koch kings. The present temple of Kamteswari was constructed by Maharaja Pranaranayan (1625-1665 A.D.) in 1665 A.D. The

hearsay contains the installation of only a *Kavacha*(amulet) as a symbol of the Devi Bhagabati in the sanctum of the temple (Ghosal, 2005, p. 45-46).



Kamteswari Temple at Gosanimari (Photograph taken by the Authors themselves)

Dr. Buchanon Hamilton visited the place in 1808 or 1809 A.D. and he recorded the evidence regarding the *kavacha*. The myth and antiquity of the kavacha attached with the story of the ancient king Bhagadatta who outclassed in the battle of Kurukshetra. He hold that kavacha on his arm as a blessings of Devi Chandi. It is said that Devi in the form of an aniconic *kavacha* was thrown into the tank Kajalikura. A fisherman, named Bhuna threw his net in that tank and was unable to draw it up. On that very night Maharaja Pranarayan was advised in a dream to restore Kamteswari and arrange for the proper worship of the deity. Under

orders of the king, a Brahmin went to the banks of the tank and lifting out Kamtevari in the form of a kavacha, placed it on an elephant. At the spot where the elephant stopped of its own accord Kamteswari was taken down and a temple subsequently constructed (Ghosal, 2005, p. 46-47).

*Gosanimangal Kavya*⁸ describes, at Goddess's wish in 1587 Sakaera (1587+78= 1665 A.D.) the temple was established at Gosanimari. In this text Devi Gosani is eulogized as Devi Chandi. A *slokain* Sanskrit language, Bengali script was inscribed at the top of the western doorway.

“ওঁ নমো গণেশায়

সম্মত্যাধ্বিষদেক জিত্বর ভুজদন্ডপ্রতাপায়স্য

ত্রীড়াকন্দুক বেগবর্ধিত দিশঃ শ্রীপ্রাণভূমিপতেঃ

শাকাব্দে নগনাগমার্গণ হিমজ্যোতির্ম্মিতে নির্ম্মিতঃ

শ্রীভাজা কবিমন্ডলেন ভজতা ভবোঁ ভবানী মঠঃ॥

১৫৮৭”.(Das,1985,p.115)

Maharaja Prananyan appointed a Maithili Brahmin, Ratinath Jha to offer regular services to the Devi and also granted ‘*Debottor*’ and ‘*Brahmottor*’ land to the Brahmin family. They being honoured with the title ‘*Bara Dehuri*’ since that time (Pal, 1978, p. 15). The Bara Deuri of the temple says regarding the Kavacha, “The image of Bhagabati is inscribed on the silver casket within which the Kavacha is kept. No

⁸The text was written by Radha Krishna Das Bairagi in 1825 A.D. during the reign of Raja Harendra Narayan (1783-1836 A.D.).

one is allowed to see what is inside the casket. Even the priest worshipping it does not see this (Ghosal, 2005, p. 45).

Devi Ghurneswari-

In the district of Coochbehar 'Nakkatigach' is situated nearby the Coochbehar-Assam National Highway. From there about 2 mile North-East in the village named Chamta which is situated under Tufanganj Mahakuma, here Devi Ghurneswari is crown with worship. Inside the temple there is a triangular shaped black stone which is worshipped as Devi Ghurneswari. The stone piece is smeared with vermilion. Beside the stone there is a small trident. Daily services offered to Devi Ghurneswari as in the form of Kali and the trident is worshipped as Bhairav. Inside the temple a big and heavy sacrificial axe which people presumes to be of Lord Biswakarma as oral tradition followed. Regarding the establishment of the temple there is a popular conventional myth. It is said that there was an age old Banyan tree nearby the temple. That stone was kept under the tree since ages. Cattles from nearby villages would come there and shed milk over it. This account fascinates Maharaja Harendranarayan (1783-1836 A.D.) and he started worshipping the stone as Devi Ghurneswari. He also built a temple for the goddess. It can be speculated that in earlier times these areas were frequently devastated with heavy rainfall and storm. The term Tufanganj or Ghurneswari may indicate this phenomenon. Although the present temple might have been built by Maharaja Nriprndranarayana. The temple is concretized and roof made of tin. On special occasions people come in a large number to worship the deity. Animal sacrificial ritual is also present. Lakshmikanta Debsharma, a Kamrupi Brahmin acts as an

officiating priest of the temple. The temple came under the Coochbehar Debotro Trust Board (Mukhopadhyay, 1974, p. 47).



Aniconic icon of Devi Ghurneswari (Photograph taken by the Authors themselves)

Devi Siddheswari-

Another remarkable *Sakti-Pitha* of Coochbehar is 'Siddheswari'. 13km north from the city of Coochbehar, there is the very popular temple of Baneswar. From there up to 3km on the direction of south-east, an octagonal dome shaped temple can be found. This is the temple of Devi Siddheswari. Beside the temple there is an old star fruit tree which has a paved surrounding and there we can find that three stones are kept. This place is being glorified as *Kamakhya Pitha* hence called "*Dwitiya Kamakhya Pitha*". It is said that if someone praises Devi Siddeswari with the Panchakkhar mantra of Kamakhya Tantra shall get liberation from the cycle of rebirth.

Kamakshya tantramebasya pujane tantrameeritam

Ebong krittwa naro dheero: punorjonou na jayate //

[Free Translation- if someone praises Devi Siddeswari with the Panchakkhar mantra of Kamakhya Tantra shall get liberation from the cycle of rebirth.]



Aniconic icon of Devi Siddheswari(Photograph taken by the Authors themselves)

The *Nilacala*(blue hill) in Assam, the sacred abode of the goddess *Kamakhya*, has been one of the most significant Sakta-Tantric centres from the early medieval

period and attracts millions of devotees from the neighbouring states even today (Shin, 2010, p. 3). Nilacala is also well known as the *yoni pitha* (seat of the vulva) a religious centre where Devi *Kamakhya* is worshipped in her non-anthropomorphic form of a yoni stone. The yoni is covered by the water of a natural underground stream, which prevents the sacred stone from being seen directly. As a consequence, it is necessary to touch it to experience the *darsana* (seeing) (Rosati, 2020, p. 28).

An analytical observation regarding the origin of the Devi Kamteswari, Devi Ghurneswari and Devi Siddheswari indicates the aboriginal elements associated with these three deities. We find no mention of these deities in any canonical Hindu texts. Kamteswari, Ghurneswari and Siddheswari are being worshipped in their aniconic forms. Basically a kavacha is being identified with Kamteswari and in course of time Devi Kamteswari considered as a form of Brahmanical deity *Chandi*. A number of myths and hearsay centred round to this deity in different period of time. Similarly a triangular shaped black stone regarded as the Ghurneswari and a star fruit tree is with Siddheswari. The incorporation of aboriginal cults into the mainstream Brahmanical religion is evident from an archaic past. These three autochthonous goddesses gradually strengthen their appearance into the broad spectrum of *Sakti* and considered as the manifestation of Bhagabati or Kali or Kamakhya. Shrines of aboriginal deities mostly contain aniconic symbols or elementary symbols like stone and trees. This way of appropriation and transformation certainly not of a sudden occurrence. It is kind of a one way process to be practice since ages.

If we go back in 4th/5th -10th century in broad Indian perspective we shall notice a number of archaeological and literary evidences which convey the process of ever expanding Hindu religion. B.D Chattopadhyaya in his work “‘*Reappearance’ of the Goddess or the Brahmanical Mode of Cult appropriation: Some Early Epigraphic Evidence Bearing on Goddess Cults*” has come up with a number of epigraphical evidences which show the process of transformation of the goddess from ‘her primeval background and her becoming as much part of the Hindu written record as the religion of God’ (Chattopadhyaya, 2003, p. 174). The first copper plate record he cited was originated in the reign of king Bhulunda (369-70 A.D.) from Bagh. It is clear by the name Bhulunda that it represents a tribal (non-Sanskritic) form of personal name to be replaced by such Sanskritized name of his successors as Svamidasa, Rudradasa, Bhattaraka, and Nagabhata; they all ruled in succession as members of the same family of rulers from Balkha. The author further interpret the plate as follows, “the installed at a place called Navatataka, Mother Goddesses. The record further stipulates that the villages Dubhedika and Dharmanaka, entrusted with a Brahmana called *Mulasarman*, and a plot of land in a locality called Arjunapamtika, entrusted with someone with the designation *bhutabhojaka*, were granted by king Bhulunda for the performance of *bali*, *caru* and *satra* rites of the mothers and to provide for perfume, incense and garlands” (Chattopadhyaya, 2003, p. 176). The record further stipulates: ‘From now onwards our agents (*ayuktaka*) and temple servants (*deva-karminah*) who are engaged in performing the duties of *bali*, *caru* and *satra* rites and providing *gandha* etc. and all our partisans, kinsmen, police-magistrates, messengers, soldiers and royal heralds should endorse this grant.’ Here the author shows the process how the Mothers collectively became the Great

Mothers as much in the same way the king was Maharaja(Chattopadhaya, 2003, p. 176). The author has cited another inscriptional evidence which is dated AD 517. The record mention a king named Hastin and found at a place called Navagrama, it records the grant of village Navagrama to several Brahmanas, the village is mentioned as having been located in *Pulindarajarastra*. This obviously is an extremely important example of a monarchical political formation emerging in the tribal region of the Pulindas. The next record to be cited is Khoh copper plate inscription of Maharaja Samksobha of the Parivrajaka Maharaja family of rulers dated AD 528-529. The record was found in the former Nagod state of Bundelkhand. The king erected a temple to the Goddess Pistapuri located in the territorial area called Maninagapetha. The gift was made to ensure such services as *bali, caru, satra*. By the 6th century Devi Pistapuri became a quite prominent deity (Chattopadhaya, 2003, p. 177-178).The major mechanism through which myriad local cults and mythopoeic oral tradition get incorporated into Hinduism and in turn lend Hinduism its regional and local character termed by the author as Brahmanical mode of cult appropriation". The main fact what he highlighted as the mediator between 'such cults and emerging monarchies through the mediation of the Brahmanas' (Chattopadhaya, 2003, p. 182).

In case of Koch-Kamta region we can see that Kanta nath who belongs to the Khen tribe ascended the throne of Kamta region and took the Brahmanical name Niladhvaja and erected a temple for the Devi Kamteswari, tutelary deity of the Khens. He brought many Brahmanas from Mithila and did much to re-establish the worship of the Vedic Gods. With the growth of the dynasty the status of the

Goddess uplifted to a higher strata. In course of time Kamteswari became the most celebrated *Sakti* of this region. Eventually Niladhvaja, formerly a tribal chief became the Kamteswar, the king of Kamta. During the reign of Koches, Maharaja Pranaranayan reconstruct the temple in 1665, appointed Ratinath Jha, a Maithili Brahman for performing the daily services to the Devi and also granted '*Debottor*' and '*Brahmottor*' land to the Brahmin family. They being honoured with the title '*Bara Dehuri*' since that time. A kind of batch was also given to Ratinath Jha and he had to wear it before entering the Royal Court (Pal, 1978, p. 15-16). Maharaja Harendranarayan of the Koch kingdom established the temple of Ghurneswari and a kind of myth centred round the triangular shaped stone gave it a prestigious status. Similarly Devi Siddheswari eulogized as sacred as Kamakhya.

A close observation of the study primarily pointed out three basic factors responsible behind the process of appropriation i.e., **i.** Royal patronage through land grants and conferring prestigious designation, **ii.** Daily performance of puja, **iii.** Recognition by all castes and more than local importance.

Irrespective of time and space the process is quite same regarding the incorporation of local and regional goddesses into the mainstream Brahmanical region. In the area of our concentration i.e. Coochbehar and Jalpaiguri though we did not find a number of archaeological remains and obviously incomparable with dynasties of early Indian history. The earliest known archaeological remain is Jatilesvara temple of Jalpaiguri. But we can mark that to some considerable extent the process of "appropriation" can be applied to our concerned area. Here Devi Kamteswari, Siddheswari and Ghurneswari, the three aniconic female cults absorbed into the

mainstream Brahmanical religion and developed as the manifestation of *Sakti* in due course of time.

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