Kamakhya Temples' Complex

The Historical and Religio-social Perspective

Compiled by

Rajib Sarma

Founder & Director, Foundation for History and Heritage Studies

Prologue: A description of the Site

The land of Kamarupa, characterized by its beautiful landscape of hills and wetlands, the mighty river Brahmaputra, rich natural resources and the lush vegetation has played an important role in the history and evolution of a unique religious tradition and culture that flourished here. In this Kamarupa, on the Nilachala hills, peetha of the great Goddess Kamakhya is located, surrounded by the Mahavidyas, other Goddesses, Pancha Shivas, Ganeshas, Vishnu, other deities and numerous sacred sites, scattered all over the hill. This makes the Nilachala hills a sacred complex of several temples. Goddess Kamakhya in the form of one of the Dasa Mahavidyas is worshipped as Tripura Sundari or Sodasi. Goddess Kamakhya is also called bhagavati, who possesses bhaga or the yoni, the creative force and worshiped in the form of a rock (the peetha) inside a dark cave (the garbhagriha), perpetually wet from a stream of water. Again, the natural sacred ponds (Kunda) that are found on the Nilachala hills also represent a manifestation of the sacredness of bhagavati. The abundant natural water sources flowing in the Nilachala hills is the vital current that bhagavati embodies and generates. It is indicative of the life that She disseminates in its various aspects and the fluidity expresses the most essential element of nature, i.e. life-force or the creative force.

The peethas of the other Mahavidyas (except Goddess Tara), Pancha Shiva and other Goddesses are identically similar in nature to that of the peetha of Goddess Kamakhya. In fact, inside a dark cave or the garbhagriha (sanctum sanctorum) of the Kamakhya temple, peethas of three Mahavidyas of the Dasa Mahavidyas are located, i.e. the third Mahavidya Tripura Sundari or Sodasi known as Goddess Kamakhya, the ninth Mahavidya Matangi (Goddess Saraswati) and the tenth Mahavidya Kamala (Goddess Laxmi).

The place that popularly known Kamakhya, actually is a hill system comprising of three segments (i.e. Brahma, Shiva and Varaha hill) referred to in the scriptures as Nilachala, is also referred variously as Kamagirii, Mahagiri, Kamakhya Yonimandala and Kamakuta. This is thus the installation of a delicately conceptualized and intrinsically interconnected network of peethas, shrines, sacred ponds, other sacred sites, etc. keeping Kamakhya temple as the focal

point. Hence, use of the phrase Kamakhya Temples' Complex of Nilachala hills instead of just Kamakhya is more appropriate for a better understanding of the site.

The Sloka 50-59 of Chapter 11 of Yogini Tantra: Purvakhanda (a 16th Century AD text) elaborates the Kamakhya Yonimandala (also mentioned in the scriptures as Nilachala, Kamagirii, Mahagiri) as follows:

(The Lord said) O' Devi, now I will tell you about Kamakhya Yonimandala; now listen to its glory briefly. In that place (i.e. Kamakhya Yonimandala) with crore Yogini saviour of the world Kali always resides. Mahakali always resides there (i.e. in Kamakhya Yonimandala) with Chinnamasta, Bhairavi, Dhumavati, Bhuvaneshwari, Matangi, Kamala, Bhagnaklina, Bhagadhara, Bhagandari, Durga, Jayadurga, Mahisamardini who has sapta satwa bibheda (seven wonderful qualities) and all other upavidyas and Brahma, Vishnu, Mahadeva.

O' Maheshwari! The peetha of Devi Ugratara is also present there (i.e. in Kamakhya Yonimandala). This peetha is of two kinds: one is secret and the other is open for all. The secret peetha is very precious for the Sadhakas (initiated adept); only the Sadhaka having Divya and Vira bhava (state of mind) who are expert and proficient in both the Kula (Sri Kula and Kali Kula) can perform sadhana in this peetha.

In the Agni (one of the ten directions in the Indian system) direction of the Manobhava Guha (the beautiful sanctum sanctorum) the head of the Devi is shining high on a peak; this peetha is known as Mahogra. In this peetha Siddhakali, the destroyer of Ghoradaitya (a demon) and Brahmarupa (like the form of Brahma) Bhuvaneshwari resides. One who performs Japa on this peetha he becomes like Lord Shiva.

The Goddess and HER worship: In search of the origin

The word Kamakhya and the origin of HER worship has always remained open to different etymological hypotheses. The word Kamakhya clearly emphasizes its relationship with the Sanskrit term Kama which means 'desire', related to female in a broad sense and specifically to the great Goddess. Most likely the origin of the word is not Sanskrit and is derived from Austro-Asiatic linguistic ethnic groups Khasis and Jaintiyas (Synteng) of present Meghalaya (which was once part of Assam) and/or Tibeto-Mongoloid linguistic ethnic group Bodo-Kacharis of Assam. As per available information, the religious and socio-political structure of the Khasi-Jaintiya state was very unique. The Khasis were the religious sect who used to look after the religious affairs of the sacred sites and the Jaintiyas were the ruling class. Therefore the king in the Khasi-Jaintiya state was always selected from the Jaintiyas. Apart from this, the Khasis also served as peasants and warriors for the state.

According to one hypothesis, *Ka-mei-kha*, the mysterious name, is the great goddess venerated by the Khasis. In Khasi language, *Ka* is the generic name for women, *mei* is the specific power of motherhood and *kha* suffix denote the dynamic quality of the maternal principle. As per my understanding, the hypothesis related to the Khasis can be re-analyzed in this way- *Ka* could mean 'mother goddess', *mei* could mean 'blood' and *kha* could mean 'the power of protection', based on the fact that, blood is always related to their worship and rituals of the Mother Goddess.

Furthermore, the Yogini Tantra (a 16th Century AD text) also confirms the Mon-Khmer origin of the name of Kamakhya, associating it with an ancient goddess of spirits, venerated in the cremation ground.

Most likely, the region of Guwahati where the temples' complex of Kamakhya is located, was also originally inhabited by the Khasis and Jaintias and the name of the great Goddess meant the generative power of nature that constantly changes in the different life forms and is identified with the female fertility and its 'fluid nature'.

Another hypothesis indicates that, for the Bodo-Kachari (the Kiratas), Kamakhya is *Kham-Maikha*, meaning 'Old Mother' and *Ka-mei-fria* (female deity). In ancient Kamarupa the feminine principle was the Supreme Being, often referred to by the epithet *kiratini*, supporting the association of the prehistoric ethnic group Kiratas (Bodo-Kachari) with the worship of the Goddess with wine, meat and animal sacrifice.

In fact, in the ancient Kamarupa the native component played a decisive role in the evolution of the entire religious phenomenon in general. The Kalika-Puraṇa (9th Century AD) and Yogini Tantra (16th Century AD) describe the ancient Kamarupa as the land inhabited by indigenous ethnic group Kirata (Bodo-Kachari), following the Kirata-Dharma, a local religiosity, characterized by unorthodox style of worship of the Goddess.

Gradually Kamarupa started getting populated by various communities from time to time bringing in new social-political and religious orders. In order to avoid conflict and interference of the powerful migrants in their social system, the Khasi-Jaintiyas of the region started migrating to the nearby hills to maintain and continue their religious affiliations and practices, as also their social order. To resume their socio-religious structure the Khasi-Jaintiya state initiated vigorous religious development programmes to convert the state into a replica of Kamarupa. In this quest, a similar site like *Ka-mei-kha*, the holiest site of the Khasi-Jaintiya, *Griva Kamakhya* (shoulder of the goddess) was established, where a natural spring flowed down a narrow-rigged rock-face. Followed by the *Griva Kamakhya*, temples of *Bama Jangha*

Peetha (left thigh of the goddess), *Jayanteshwari*, *Jayanti Kali*, etc. was established in the Khasi-Jaintiya state.

Thus we can arrive at a conclusion that, non-Aryan ethnic groups like Khasi, Jaintiya, Bodo-Kachari were closely connected or involved with the worship and rituals of Kamakhya and some of the important elements and techniques used by these non-Aryan ethnic groups during worship and rituals of the Goddess have still remained as an inseparable part of the worship and rituals of the Aryanized Kamakhya Temples' Complex. These elements are primarily-

- Offering blood of animals and fish after sacrifice to the Goddess is an inherent part of the worship and rituals of these non-Aryan ethnic groups.
- Worship of natural elements like stone with flowing water, sacred ponds; sacred objects made out of clay; symbolic use of specific flowers or plants (or plant parts) during the worship; ritualistic festivals related to fertility; use of alcohol, meat, fish and some other items forbidden in the Aryanized or Vedic form of worship and rituals; etc.

Therefore, we can construct a hypothesis open for further research and discussion that, the primitive worship of the goddess Kamakhya was performed according to the system or custom followed by the ethnic groups and hence Kamakhya was not an Aryanzed or Vedic Goddess.

Referring to myths and legends as a source of history

Myths and legends are repositories where important historical information and references are hidden. Hence, the myths and legends can be sensibly used as a tool for unearthing and reconstructing historical truth. In this context, the Kamakhya Temples' Complex is also not an exception. Numerous myths and legends related to the site, which are still popular, can be found in different scriptures. Apart from the myths and legends a sizable number of oral legends, folk-lore, narratives, etc. are also related to the Kamakhya Temples' Complex. Here are some important myths and legends of the scriptures and oral legends, folk-lore, narratives, etc. associated to Kamakhya Temples' Complex which are related to this discussion-

<u>The legend of Kamadeva and construction of the Kamakhya temple</u>

Gripped by intense grief of the self-immolation of his consort Sati in the sacrificial fire of her father Daksha, Lord Shiva alienated himself from all activities and went into the state of meditative mourning. Due to this, the creative process of the universe came to a halt and caused great alarm and concern for all the Gods. The Gods then devised a plan to ameliorate this situation and sent Kamadeva (the Indian Cupid), to awaken Lord Shiva again from the state of his meditative mourning so that he can again engage himself in the passion of creation. At this disturbance caused by Kamadeva during the state of his meditative mourning, Lord

Shiva became furious and burnt Kamadeva into ashes by the angry glance of his third eye. Shocked by the consequence Rati, the wife of Kamadeva, prayed to Lord Siva to bring back Kamadeva to life. Satisfied with the prayer of Rati, Lord Shiva brought Kamadeva back to life with all his original grace and beauty. However, Lord Shiva put one condition for restoring Kamadeva to his former self. If Kamadeva and Rati erect a temple on the Nilachala where the Yoni of Sati fell, only then he would restore Kamadeva's life. Rati readily agreed to do so. After Kamadeva got his life back, according to the promise made by Rati, Kamadeva erected the temple with the help of the celestial architect Visvakarma on the Yoni of Sati on the Nilachala hills.

Thus, from this mythological legend we get the information that, the original temple of Kamakhya surrounding the Yoni was built by Kamdeva with the help of Biswakarma, which has become a symbol of great veneration and is regarded as a source of divine power and influence. As per the scriptures the Kamakhya temple built by Kamadeva was covered in stone sculpted images of the sixty four Yoginis and eighteen Bhairavas.

Though, there is no historical evidence or basis of this mythological legend on the origin of the structure of Kamakhya temple, we can assume that the temple is of great antiquity. While, interestingly, as a symbolic evidence of the event, a statue of Biswakarma is still present in front of the northern gate of the Kamakhya temple. Furthermore, a temple dedicated to Biswakarma where regular worship is performed is also present at the southern part of the foothills of Nilachala hills (near the stone pathway).

The legend of Priest Kendukalai and Koch King Naranarayana

According to this legend, Goddess Kamakhya transformed herself daily into a beautiful woman and danced in tune to the music of the chief priest Kendukalai, within the closed doors inside the garbhagriha of the temple during the Aarati (evening prayer). The Koch king Naranayana who used to patronise the temples somehow came to know about this occurrence and with a desire to witness the dancing Goddess, requested the chief priest Kendukalai to make the necessary arrangements. The priest being aware of the consequences of this endeavour initially rejected the request of the king. But eventually, due to immense pressure from the king and in fear of getting ousted as a priest, he finally accepted the request. Priest Kendukalai made a hole in the wall of the garbhagriha of the temple and instructed the king to peep through the hole from outside during the occurrence of the event. On that day, as the king was about to peep through the hole, the Goddess immediately came to know about the mischievous plan of the priest and the king. Enraged by this treacherous act of the priest and the king, the Goddess beheaded priest Kendukalai and also debarred the king from visiting the Kamakhya

Temples' Complex forever. The Goddess even warned the king that, along with him all his relatives and future descendants must not visit the Kamakhya Temples' Complex and if they did so she cursed that the dynasty would vanish without a trace from the earth. To this day, descendants of the Koch royal family pass by the hill under the cover of umbrellas.

This legend provides information about the involvement of the Koch king Naranayana with the Kamakhya Temples' Complex and thus justify the fact that the king rebuilt the Kamakhya temple during his reign in 16th Century AD.

A legend of Naraka

Naraka holds a prominent place in the pre-historic period of Pragjyotishpura (later known as Kamarupa and then Assam). Naraka appears in Ramayana as the lord of Pragjyotispura, and a friend of king Ravana. In the Mahabharata, he is depicted as a Danava, the son of Danu. The Kaurava prince Duryodhana married Bhanumati, the daughter of Naraka's son Bhagadatta and he was an ally of the Kauravas in the Kurukshetra War.

Naraka was born out of the union of Bhumi (Mother Earth) and Varaha (Boar incarnation of Lord Vishnu) and the child was left on the sacrificial ground of King Janaka of Mithila. King Janaka raised the child along with the royal princes till he was sixteen years old. During the period Mother Earth transformed herself as a caretaker named Katyayini and looked after Naraka's upbringing. By this time with sheer hard work Naraka excelled the royal princes in the arts of war and in his proficiency of the sacred scriptures. This frightened king Janaka as he apprehended that the talented Naraka might one day usurp the kingdom from his sons. Katyayini could sense that, due to this misapprehension king Janaka could harm Naraka and hence made a plan to take Naraka away to security. Katyayini convinced Naraka to accompany her to a pilgrimage to the Ganga and travelled to the banks of the Ganga. On the way to the Ganga, Katyayini told the actual story of his birth to Naraka. With the effort of Katyayini, Naraka met his real father Krishna (another incarnation of Lord Vishnu), the king of Dwaraka. Krishna joined them and taking the water route they reached Pragjyotisha. With the help of Krishna, Naraka killed the Kirata king Ghataka of Pragjyotisha. Krishna crowned Naraka as the king of Pragjyotisha and also assigned the responsibility of looking after the worship and maintenance of Goddess Kamakhya and Nilachala to him. Krishna also advised Naraka to rule the country with a good heart and not to worship any other God or Goddess other than Kamakhya.

Naraka was a good ruler and he strictly adhered to the injunctions of his father and worshipped the goddess Kamakhya very devotedly. Goddess Kamakhya was satisfied with the dedication of Naraka and one day, She appeared before him. Seeing her unparalleled beauty and charm, Naraka got totally captivated and proposed to marry her. Instead of getting enraged, the

goddess gave her consent to Naraka, with a condition. If Naraka constructed a temple, a tank and a masonry road (stone pathway) from the foot of the hill on the western side near the banks of the river Brahmaputra to the top of the hill within a single night before the dawn, only then would she marry him. Since the desire to marry the beautiful goddess grew so strong in him, Naraka accepted the proposition and started the mighty task immediately. As he almost completed the construction, the goddess made a cock crow, declaring the daybreak. The break of dawn signalled the end of the time which was given to Naraka to complete the task. The Goddess therefore refused to marry Naraka.

Historical evidence of existence of Naraka is a subject of debate because of the fact that, information related to him appears only as legends in the scriptures like Harivamsa, Kalika Purana, Yogini Tantra, Mahabharata, Ramayana, etc., while some scholars suggest that, the reign of king Naraka could be from 2200-2169 BC. On the other hand, as mentioned in the legend, the masonry road or stone pathway (said to be built by Naraka) from the foot of the hill on the western side near the banks of the river Brahmaputra to the top of the hill still exist. Therefore, by doing an analysis with reference to the legend, suggestion on the dates of the reign of Naraka and existence of the masonry road or stone pathway we can assume that, the temple of Kamakhya seems to have existed on the Nilachala hills before 2200 BC.

The legend of Naraka and sage Vashistha

Naraka became very powerful with the blessings of the Goddess Kamakhya. Puffed by the power that he attained through his sincere and dedicated worship of Goddess Kamakhya, Naraka became egoistic and arrogant. Gradually, he came under the influence of his friend King Bana of Sonitpur (present Tezpur) who was a dedicated Saivite. In his company Naraka developed Asura (demonic) qualities and transformed into an arrogant, unkind, intolerant and ill-mannered human being. In the mean time, the great sage Vasistha visited Nilachala to worship Goddess Kamakhya, but the arrogant Naraka denied entry into the temple to the sage. An enraged sage Vasistha cursed Naraka and declared that from then on Goddess Kamakhya would be worshipped according in the Vamachara (left-handed Tantrk practice) tradition and she would disappear from his kingdom and without her protection he would be diminished. Sage Vashistha even vowed to remain in Kamarupa till Naraka is destroyed and established an Ashram at Sandhyachala.

Though it is difficult to establish the legend in context of historical facts, the ashram established by Sage Vashistha in Sandhyachala still exists as “Vashistha Ashrama” in the Beltola area of Guwahati.

An analysis of the documented historical materials

The history of Kamakhya Temples' Complex is obscure and inter-mixed with inadequate historical records, oral history, mythological texts, legends, folk-lore, etc. till the advent of the Koch Kingdom. The mysticism surrounding the worship of the goddess Kamakhya has also lent a mysterious aura to the whole region and various social norms have sprung up which are quite distinct in comparison to the rest of the country.

The countless pieces of sculpted stone that are lying scattered all over the Nilachal hills bear mute testimony to the beauty of the original stone temple of Kamakhya. As per the scriptures the main temple was covered in stone sculpted images of the sixtyfour Yoginis and eighteen Bhairavas. Maybe, owing to disputes, the ravages of time and natural calamities only the base of the original temple of Kamakhya survived till it was rebuilt in 16th Century AD. However, various rulers and kings in later periods have added to the remnants of the original temple and the present structure is a medley of architectural styles hailing from different periods and dynasties. Down the ages, various rulers took up the worship of Kamakhya and these rulers must have built or re-built or renovated the existing temple structures, ponds, stone pathways, etc. on the Nilachala hills. These rulers might have also invited or brought various families of scholars and priests from various parts of the country to perform the rites and rituals associated with the worship of the deities. Thus, the royal patronage of Shakti worship became dominant over the other forms of worship in Kamarupa and its surrounding areas.

In this part of the compilation we would try to analyse the myth, legend and historical resources available till the re-building of the Kamakhya Temples' Complex by the Koch dynasty. After the involvement of the Koch dynasty and subsequently of the Ahom, the history of the Kamakhya Temple' Complex has been elaborately documented and sufficient information is available. Hence, to avoid repetition the effort of this compilation will be restricted to an analysis of the materials related to the site till 16th Century AD.

<u>Historical references on Naraka dynasty</u>

It has already been mentioned above that, the existence of Naraka is a subject of debate, but interestingly; reference to him and his sons appear in the Tezpur Copper Plate Grant of Vanamalavarmana (835-860 A.D.). The translation (done by M. M. Sarma in his book, Inscriptions of Assam) with additional notes of the relevant section of the copper plate is as follows:

.....

Welfare to you all. The illustrious Maharajadhiraja Sri Vanamalavarmadeva, who belong to the family of the Lords of Pragjyotisa.

.....

There was a son of Adhivaraha (i.e. Visnu in his Boar incarnation), from Bhu (i.e. the earth), named Naraka, born in time of saving her (i.e. the earth, from the universal deluge), who in time of stealing away the kundalas (i.e. ear rings) of Aditi stole away the valour of Hari (i.e. Indra, Aditi's son) as well. (Line 3)

Krisna killed him (i.e. Naraka); but his heart being touched by the sad wailings of his wife spared his two sons, Bhagadatta and Bajradutta. (Line 4)

Bhagadutta attained the illustrious position of the monarch of Pragjyotisa; and having come there worshipped Shiva with penance and politeness. (Line 5)

Being pleased with him, he (i.e. Shiva) gave him (i.e. Bhagadatta) the lordship also over Uparipattana and gave the lordship over Pragjyotisa to his progeny for the future time. (Line 6)

With reference to the above text of the copper plate, now it is important to mention the suggestion made by Rajmohan Nath in his book "The Background of Assamese Culture (1948)" on the dates of the kings of the Naraka dynasty-

Naraka I	2200-2169 BC
Naraka II to XXIII	2169-1509 BC
Naraka XXIV	1509-1479 BC
Bhagadatta	1479-1449 BC
Bajradatta	1449-1419 BC
Somadatta	1419-1389 BC

From the analysis of the above information together with other information available on Naraka, we may arrive at a cautious conclusion that, king Naraka possibly existed and the Kamakhya temple was shining with pride and glory during 2200 BC on the Nilachala Hills. Subsequently, as already mentioned above, the name of Bhagadattta, the son of Naraka appears as an important character in the epic Mahabharata. But then, this subject requires a more in-depth and careful investigation before establishing the same as a historical fact.

A reference of Kamakhya from the Mahabharata

The earliest traceable reference of Kamakhya temple can be found in various sections of the epic Mahabharata (300 BCE - 300 CE). In one section of the Mahabharata, it is mentioned that, the Pancha-Pandavas after the years of agyatavas (a period of unidentifiable living during the exile), came to Nilachala, took their ceremonial bath in the river Lauhitya (river Brahmaputra) and worshipped Goddess Kamakhya to regain their lost kingdom. There is a sacred site named Pandunath located in the north-west direction of the Nilachala hills on the banks of the river Brahmaputra where the Pancha-Pandavas camped during their visit to Kamakhya Temple. Near Pandunath, a site still exists named Pancha-Pandava, which bears the testimony of the visit of the Pandavas.

Views presented in the published documents

At this juncture it is important to present the reference of different views and opinions expressed in the published documents on the period of existence of the original structure of the Kamakhya temple and other structures such as ponds, stone pathways, etc.

Firstly, according to some published documents, the Kamakhya temple existed on the Nilachala Hills during 4th-5th Century AD. This view appears without sufficient justification, hence to analyse this fact the historical evidence of Umachala Rock Inscription can be taken into consideration. The Umachala Rock Inscription of the Nilachala hills which dates back to 5th Century AD records that, a cave temple was constructed by king Surendraverman. Therefore, the evidence of the inscription can be co-related with the information of the published documents on the existence of Kamakhya temple during 4th-5th Century AD to derive a justified hypothetical conclusion.

Secondly, based on the analysis of the structural remains of the Nilachala Hills and historical materials, some scholars have suggested that the Kamakhya Temple located on Nilachala hills dates back to 7th-8th Century AD and that the foundation of some of the temples of the Mahavidyas and Pancha-Shiva dates back to 10th-11th Century AD (some of which were re-built by the Ahom kings during 17th-19th Century AD).

Reference of scientific research to determine the date of the Kamakhya temple

The department of Geo-sciences, Gauhati University (Reported by B.P. Duara, 2003) conducted a radio carbon isotope age determination exercise on the Kamakhya temple. The result of this scientific exercise revealed that there are two layers below the floor of the Kamakhya temple. The radio carbon isotope test of the layers shows that, the bottom layer is 2200 years old and the second layer is 1500 years old.

This scientific experiment provides significant evidence that the Kamakhya temple is more than 2200 years old. Thus, based on the outcome of this scientific exercise it can be accepted that,

a temple stood on this site as early as 200 BC, and an attempt was made to rebuild or renovate the temples' complex around 5th Century AD.

The events and initiatives since 16th to 19th Century AD

As per historical information available from some published documents, Biswasingha (1515–1540 AD), the first king of the Koch dynasty re-built the upper part of the original temple at Kamakhya. But, to support this event, there is no epigraphic evidence available.

After re-building the temple by Koch king Biswasingha, as per a narrative, in 1553 AD, the temple was destroyed by the invading Muslim commander Kalapahar in his crusade against Hindu temples. Kalapahar was originally a Brahmana named Rajiv Lochan Roy. He married a daughter of Badshah Suleiman Kararani of Bihar and therefore was ostracised from the Brahmana fold. After the marriage Rajiv Lochan Roy desperately tried to live as a Brahmana and even went to Puri to undergo purification. The Brahmanas at Puri refused to perform the purificatory rituals for him and due to this he converted to Islam and took the new name Kalapahar. Being humiliated and insulted by the Brahmanas, he made up his mind to avenge the humiliation by destroying Hindu temples. Kalapahar organised an efficient and well equipped army and also invaded Kamarupa and damaged the temple of Kamakhya.

This narrative appears in the work of some scholars with contradictory views and opinion and therefore, the Kalapahar episode still remains open for further discussion and research. Although, in-depth study is required to establish the episode as a historical event, in the heart of the Guwahati city, there is an area on the south-eastern direction of Nilachala hills which is known as Kalapahar.

Alternately, it is quite possible that, the entire North East India being a sensitive seismic zone, a series of massive earthquakes might have dismantled the temple into ruins. This event of earthquake(s) has been graphically recorded in the Yogini Tantra (a 16th Century text) and appears to be the description of an actual earthquake. The earthquake was so intense that it shifted the course of the river Brahmaputra and also caused the temple to tumble down. As per available information, an earthquake occurred in 1897 AD which caused some damage to the structure of the Kamakhya temple and the Koch royal family donated money for repairing the same.

In any case, the upper part of the temple remained dismantled till mid 16th Century AD. King Naranarayana (1540–1587 A.D.) of the Koch dynasty started rebuilding the present temple in 1555 AD and completed it in 1565 AD. King Naranarayana engaged architect Meghamukdam and as per available information, he tried to rebuild the dome twice with the original stone blocks, but failed. Finally, Meghamukdam built the dome in the shape of a beehive with bricks.

Under the rule of the Ahom dynasty during the 17th-19th century AD, the Kamakhya temple and surrounding temples' complex expanded and flourished, with a considerable number of temples re-built, constructed and renovated for the Mahavidyas, various forms of Shiva, Ganesha and other deities during this period.

From the period of Koch king Biswasingha (1515–1540 AD) till the present time ample amount of recorded historical material is available on the Kamakhya Temples' Complex and Kamarupa.

Scriptures and text related to Kamakhya Temples' Complex of Nilachala hills

The most important scriptures or texts related to Kamakhya Temples' Complex of Nilachala hills are as follows:

- Kalikapurana (9th Century A.D.) contains elaborate details on Kamakhya Temples' Complex and Kamarupa.
- Yogini Tantra (16th Century A.D.) contains elaborate details on Kamakhya Temples' Complex and Kamarupa.
- Kamakhya Tantra (16th-17th Century AD) contains elaborate details on Kamakhya Temples' Complex.
- Harivamsa (compiled as a supplement to the Mahabharata probably during 1st-2nd Century BCE) contains myths and legends associated with Naraka.
- Kamarupa Yatra Paddhati (compiled by Holiram Sarma in 1835 AD) contains detailed information on Kamakhya Temples' Complex and different sacred places of Kamarupa.

Apart from above scriptures, reference on Kamakhya and its unique religious tradition can also be found in epics, Puranas, Tantras, Bhagavatas, etc.

The rulers of Pragjyotisha, Kamarupa, Koch Behar and Assam who patronized Kamakhya Temples' Complex

The history of Kamakhya Temples' Complex is replete with information regarding royal patronage. There is no doubt that Goddess Kamakhya continued to be the prominent deity since the earliest period of the history of Assam. She was, and still is, the converging point of diverse communities, beliefs and, be it Shakta, Saiva or Vaishnava. The names of the many ruling dynasties and royal patrons can be found in the available historical records like inscriptions, copper plate grants, and also in ancient manuscripts. Some scholars have mentioned in their writings about these kings / dynasties who patronized the shrines of the deities located on the Nilachala hills and the same is mentioned bellow-

- King Naraka: Worshipped Katyayani (Kamakhya in one of the form of Goddess Durga) and Shakti (Chamunda / Chandi)
- Bhauma Kings: Worshipped Katyayani (Kamakhya in one of the form of Goddess Durga)
- Varmana Kings (350-654 AD): Worshipped Katyayani (Kamakhya in one of the form of Goddess Durga) and Shakti (Chamunda / Chandi)
- Shalastambha Dynasty (655-985 AD from King Bala Varma I to King Tyag Singha): Worshipped Mahagauri (a form of Goddess Kamakhya, Mahagauri is also known as Goddess Bhuvaneswari and is one of the Dasa Mahavidyas located on the Nilachala hills), Kameswara and Chinnamasta. (please refer to Note 1 and Note 2 bellow)
- Pala Dynasty (985-1055 AD from King Brahma Pala to King Indra Pala): Worshipped Mahagauri (a form of Goddess Kamakhya, Mahagauri is also known as Goddess Bhuvaneswari and is one of the Dasa Mahavidyas located on the Nilachala hills) and Kameswara. (please refer to Note 1 and Note 2 bellow)
- Pala Dynasty (1055-1125 AD from King Gopala to Joy Pala): Worshipped Mahagauri (a form of Goddess Kamakhya, Mahagauri is also known as Goddess Bhuvaneswari and is one of the Dasa Mahavidyas located on the Nilachala hills), Kameswara, Ugra Tara and Kamakhya. (please refer to Note 1 and Note 2 bellow)
- Pala Dynasty (1125-1250 AD. King Tingya Deva and later Kings): Worshipped Kameswari (a form of Goddess Kamakhya) and Kameswara

(There is no record after 1250 A.D. till 1520 A.D.)

- Koch dynasty (1520-1700 AD): Worshipped Kamakhya, Bhairava and Kalika
- Ahome dynasty (1700-1826 AD): Worshipped Kamakhya, Bhairava, Kalika, Dasamahavidya, Ganesha, various forms of Shiva, Kambaleswara, Manasa, Shitala, Banadurga, Jayadurga and Lalitakanta.

Note 1: In a part of the "city of Haruppesvara" section of the Tezpur Copper Plate Grant of Vanamalavarmana (835-860 AD) it is clearly mentioned as follows- "*The current of this river* (Brahmaputra) *is full with waters which have become purer on account of constantly flowing over the slopes of the mountain Kamakuta at the top of which there is the residence of the illustrious god Kamesvara* (consort of Goddess Kamakhya) *and the goddess Mahagauri*, *whose foot-stool is illuminated by series of rays issuing from the crest-jewels of all the gods and demons (lines 11-13)*".]

Note 2: Reference of Mahagauri can be found in Sloka 122-124 of Chapter 62 of the Kalikapurana. The translation of the slokas are as follows-*"Lord Shiva said; the Yogini Siddharupini, who is goddess Mahagauri is situated on the upper ridge of the Brahma-parvata,*

she is extremely beautiful and called Bhuvaneshwari; she is that spot where Brahma (in the form of a mountain) has joined me, I also stay there by assuming the form of a mountain. The wishing creeper (kalpavali) is present there, called Aparajita, while Kamadhenu is not far away, and on the eastern part the goddess Maheshwari is located."

Some important inscriptions related to Nilachala hills and Kamakhya Temples' Complex

1. Umacal Rock Inscription on Nilacala Hills by Surendravarma (earlier than 518 AD)
2. Tezpur Copper Plates Inscription of Vanamalavarmanadeva (835-860 AD)
3. Rock Inscription of Kamakhya Temple by Koch King Naranarayana (Saka 1487 / 1565 AD)
4. Rock Inscription of Pandunath Temple by Koch King Raghudevnarayana (Saka 1506 / 1584 A.D.)
5. Ab-I-Hayat Arabic Inscription on a rock on the foot hills of Nilachala (17th Century A.D.)
6. Rock Inscription of Kameswara Siva Temple by Ahome King Shivasingha (Saka 1640 / 1718 A.D.)
7. Rock Inscription of Siddheswara Siva Temple by Ahome King Shivasingha (Saka 1640 / 1718 A.D.)
8. Rock Inscription of Kambaleswar Temple by Ahome King Shivasingha and his Queen Phuleswari Devi (Saka 1650 / 1728 A.D.)
9. Rock Inscription of Amra Tokeswar Shiva Temple by Ahome King Pramattasingha (Saka 1666 / 1744 A.D.)
10. Rock Inscription of Durgasarovara on the Foot Hills of Nilacala Hills by Ahom King Pramattasingha (Saka 1666 / 1744 A.D.)
11. Rock Inscription of the Phalgutsava Doula by Ahom King Pramattasingha (Saka 1672 / 1750 A.D.)
12. Rock Inscription of Kedar Temple by Ahom King Rajeswarsingha (Saka 1673 / 1751 A.D.)
13. Stone Inscription of the Nat Mandir attached to Kamakhya Temple by Ahom King Rajeswarsingha (Saka 1681 / 1759 A.D.)

A religio-social perspective of Kamakhya Temples' Complex

The Kamakhya Temples' Complex is one of the world's most important sites of goddess worship. As a pilgrimage center for Hindus, Buddhists, and practitioners of various streams of Tantrism from time immemorial, a uniquely syncretic religious culture has developed in the Kamakhya Temples' Complex. The rituals and festivals celebrated at the Kamakhya Temples' Complex are distinctive and unique and are the result of hundreds of years of socio-cultural and religious evolution, assimilation and syncretism. The current tradition, with the systems of

homa (oblations), puja (worship), kriya (rituals), bali (sacrifice), and associating of natural elements represents a complex negotiation between orthodox and heterodox systems and the practices are held in balance by the Sevaits (servitors), the ancestral community that resides at and serves the temples of the Kamakhya Temples' Complex.

The Sebaits (servitors or the persons who are closely involved with puja / ritual) are inseparable part of the religious tradition of the temples' complex. There are clear historical evidences available that, the ruling dynasties of Kamarupa who worshiped and patronized Kamakhya Temples' Complex brought selected persons from various parts of India to serve and take part in the elaborate religious duties of the temple(s) of the complex in different capacities. All Sebait groups offer their sincere and dedicated services for the proper observance of the religious tradition round the year since they were brought to Kamakhya Temples' Complex by the erstwhile rulers of Kamarupa.

The system of distribution of duties / services / responsibilities of the Sebaits is called Pali or Pala which rotates within the families of a particular group of Sebait. According to the system, a particular family of a particular group of Sebait offers their services for a particular day or duration and then vacates in favour of another family of the same group of Sebait. This rotation system and has been documented as per the Hindu calendar and the same is being followed since ancient times.

The daily religious and ritualistic schedule of the temples of the Kamakhya Temples' Complex starts in early in the morning and ends in the evening. The system of Puja / Ritual is exclusive to temples of the Kamakhya Temples' Complex. This unique system and tradition of worship and rituals has evolved out of the scholarship and contribution of the Sebaits and the process is still going on. The essence of the religious and ritualistic system and tradition of Kamakhya Temples' Complex is its practical approach and rhythmic style of the Puja / Ritual dominated by the Kulacara Tantra Marga (a tradition within the Vamacara Tantra Marga).

To actually become eligible as a Sebait to participate in the Puja / Ritual / Festivals of any temple located at Nilachala Hills the male member of a family of some Sebait groups has to undergo the process of Diksha (initiation) under the Guru of his family. The Guru-Shishya Parampara (tradition) is an inseparable part of the system and tradition of Kamakhya Temples' Complex. Without Diksha (initiation) Sebaits are allowed to offer religious and ritualistic services and participate in any Puja / Ritual / Festival in temples located on the Nilacala Hills. Though, the initiation is the primary criteria for qualification of a Sebait to actually become a part of the religious and ritualistic system and tradition of Kamakhya Temples' Complex, there are some Sebait groups who do not necessarily have to be initiated to offer their services.

The unique system of worship, rituals and festivals of the Kamakhya Temples' Complex have evolved, developed, and taken shape since very ancient period, which is difficult to determine. Rooted in the rich history of yoginis, siddhas, saints, and kings, the socio-religious system and traditions have been maintained within the familial, ritualistic and initiatory lineages of the Sebaits for many centuries. The process still continues through careful and consistent maintenance, constant research, and practical application of the elements of the tradition, much of which is necessarily kept secret to maintain its sacrality and power. Through their ancestral affiliation and continued service, the Sebaits of Kamakhya Temples' Complex have successfully conserved and protected the integrity and unique character of these traditions with sincerity and dedication. This unique system and its traditions, which foster and value greater equality regarding gender, caste, and religion, have deeply influenced the growth and development of a distinctive local culture at Kamakhya Temples' Complex of Nilachala hills. Although it is an inseparable part of Guwahati, the metropolitan hub of Northeast India, the local culture and society of Kamakhya Temples' Complex remains markedly different and distinct from that of Guwahati.

In conclusion, the socio-religious systems and related traditions of the Kamakhya Temples' Complex are by nature very tolerant and secular. All devotees, irrespective of caste, creed, belief, nationality, ethnicity, gender, or religious affiliation, are allowed to enter the sanctum sanctorum of all the temples of the Kamakhya Temples' Complex of Nilacala hills for darshan and worship. All devotees are encouraged to touch the Peethas of the temples and offer their prayers.

~ 0 ~