

Śākta Traditions of the Brahmaputra Valley: A Study of Goddess Worship across Assam's Dual Riverine Landscapes

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Abstract :

This paper examines the Śākta (goddess-worshipping) traditions of the Brahmaputra Valley, Assam, as they have developed across the river's two riverine landscapes— the northern and southern banks. While the temple of Kāmākhya at Nīlācala, on the south bank, has long dominated scholarship on Assamese Śāktism as the pre-eminent yoni-pīṭha and centre of Kaula Tantra, the north bank sustains a parallel, less-documented complex of goddess worship rooted in Bodo-Kachari, Chutiya, Mising, and other indigenous traditions, exemplified by deities such as Kechāikhāitī, Tāmreśwarī, and Dikkaravāsini. Employing a qualitative, comparative-historical methodology that combines textual analysis of the Kālikāpurāṇa and Yoginī Tantra with a review of ethnographic, epigraphic, and archaeological scholarship, the study argues that the Brahmaputra functions not merely as a geographical divider but as an active ritual and cosmological agent that has shaped two distinguishable, though intersecting, streams of goddess worship. The south bank exhibits a Sanskritised, Brahmanical-Tantric synthesis retaining tribal substrata beneath a pan-Hindu idiom, whereas the north bank preserves a more visibly autochthonous, non-Sanskritic ritual grammar that has been progressively drawn into wider Śākta and Vaiṣṇava frameworks. The paper concludes that Assamese Śāktism is best understood as a riverine continuum of negotiated religiosity rather than a single, homogeneous tradition, and it calls for sustained ethnographic attention to north-bank goddess cults that remain marginal in the existing literature.

Keywords: *Śāktism; Kāmākhya; Brahmaputra Valley; goddess worship; Tantra; tribal religion; Assam; riverine ritual landscape*

1. Introduction :

The Brahmaputra, one of the great transboundary rivers of Asia, bisects the state of Assam into two longitudinal riverine tracts commonly referred to, in both administrative and popular usage, as the "north bank" and the "south bank." This hydrological bifurcation has never been merely a matter of geography. Across the recorded history of religion in the region, the river has structured patterns of settlement, migration, kingdom formation, and — as this paper argues — the ritual geography of goddess worship. Assam has been described by scholars as the "land of the goddess" and, more specifically, as the symbolic womb of Tantra, a reputation anchored above all in the temple complex of Kāmākhya on the Nīlācala hill overlooking the south bank at Guwahati (Urban, "Womb of

Tantra" 231). Revered as one of the fifty-one Śākta pīṭhas of the subcontinent, the site where the yoni of the dismembered goddess Satī is believed to have fallen, Kāmākhyā has attracted the overwhelming share of scholarly and popular attention devoted to Assamese Śāktism.

Yet this concentration of attention on a single, if extraordinarily important, site has produced a somewhat lopsided historiography. The north bank of the Brahmaputra, running from Dhubri in the west to Sadiya in the far east, sustains its own dense network of goddess shrines and cults — among them Tāmreśwarī or Kechāikhāitī at Sadiya, worshipped by Deorī priests of the Chutiya community, and her cognate forms Dikkaravāsini and Ugratārā recorded in the Kālikāpurāṇa as presiding deities of "north-eastern Kāmarūpa" (Malinithan). These north-bank traditions are frequently treated in the literature as peripheral variants of, or historical footnotes to, the Kāmākhyā cult, rather than as an independent and coherent stream of goddess religiosity that developed under a distinct set of tribal, political, and ecological conditions.

This paper asks: how, and to what extent, do the Śākta traditions of the northern and southern banks of the Brahmaputra Valley differ in their ritual structure, theological idiom, and relationship to the Sanskritic mainstream, and what does this dual pattern reveal about the historical process by which goddess worship in Assam has been constituted? Rather than treating the Brahmaputra as an incidental backdrop, the paper treats the river itself as a ritual and cosmological actor — a boundary that has permitted differential rates and modes of Brahmanical absorption of local goddess cults on either bank, while also serving, through its own personification and worship as a fertility-conferring and menstruating body, as a unifying symbolic thread that runs through Śākta practice on both sides.

The paper is organised as follows. Section 2 reviews the existing scholarship on Kāmākhyā, Assamese Tantra, and the lesser-studied goddess cults of the north bank. Section 3 outlines the qualitative, comparative-historical methodology adopted for the study, including its textual corpus and its limitations. Section 4 presents the comparative analysis, organised around the south-bank Kāmākhyā complex, the north-bank tribal goddess complex, and a synthetic discussion of convergences and divergences between them, including the shared symbolic role of the river itself. Section 5 concludes by situating Assamese Śāktism as a riverine continuum rather than a monolith, and by identifying directions for future ethnographic research.

2. Literature Review :

The academic study of Kāmākhyā and Assamese Śāktism began in earnest with Bani Kanta Kakati's foundational monograph *The Mother Goddess Kamakhya*, which first proposed that the cult represented a "fusion" of Aryan Puranic religion with the primitive, autochthonous beliefs of the Kirāta and other tribal populations of Kāmarūpa (Kakati). Kakati's fusion thesis — that Kāmākhyā's aniconic yoni-stone, her association with blood sacrifice, and her absence of a conventional anthropomorphic image reflect a substratum of tribal goddess worship subsequently

absorbed into a Brahmanical Puranic and Tantric idiom — has remained the interpretive baseline against which almost all subsequent scholarship positions itself.

K. R. van Kooij's philological study of the *Kālikāpurāṇa*, *Worship of the Goddess According to the Kālikāpurāṇa*, extended this line of inquiry by examining the tenth-century text's detailed prescriptions for goddess worship, including animal and, controversially, human sacrifice, situating the *Purāṇa* as the primary textual charter for *Kāmākhyā*'s ritual practice (van Kooij). Building on this textual foundation, Hugh B. Urban has produced the most substantial body of contemporary anglophone scholarship on Assamese Śāktism. In "The Womb of Tantra: Goddesses, Tribals, and Kings in Assam," Urban argues that Assamese Tantra emerged from a "complex negotiation" between Sanskritic Brahmanical traditions and local indigenous ritual, a negotiation most visible in the persistence of animal sacrifice and in the political patronage extended to *Kāmākhyā* by non-Hindu tribal kings seeking to legitimate their rule (Urban, "Womb of Tantra" 231). Urban's later work, *The Power of Tantra*, and his study of the modern Ambuvācī Melā festival in "The Cradle of Tantra" trace how the temple has been repeatedly reinterpreted — as a centre of esoteric power, as a symbol of Hindu nationalist "Mother India" imaginary, and, most recently, as a destination for spiritual tourism (Urban, *Power of Tantra*; Urban, "Cradle of Tantra").

Paolo E. Rosati's work has refined the fusion thesis through close attention to the yoni symbolism itself. In "The Yoni Cult at *Kāmākhyā*: Its Cross-Cultural Roots," Rosati argues that the pre-Brahmanical religion of the region, which he terms *kirāta dharma*, was already organised around the *Kāmākhyā* site before Brahmanic contact, and that the incorporation of the site into the *Satī-Dakṣa* mythology represents a strategic Brahmanical accommodation of an existing tribal cult centre rather than a simple imposition (Rosati). Loriliai Biernacki's *Renowned Goddess of Desire* situates *Kāmākhyā* within the broader intellectual history of Kaula Tantra in eastern India, while Nihar Ranjan Mishra's *Kamakhyā: A Socio-Cultural Study* offers a comprehensive ethnographic and historical account of temple ritual, priesthood, and pilgrimage (Biernacki; Mishra). More recently, Sravana Borkataky-Varma's ethnographic comparison of *bali* (animal sacrifice) as practised at *Kāmākhyā* and among the *Tiwā* tribal community demonstrates the continuing methodological value of juxtaposing textual prescription with contemporary field observation (Borkataky-Varma).

By contrast, the goddess traditions of the north bank remain comparatively under-theorised. Secondary sources note that the *Kālikāpurāṇa* itself identifies *Dikkaravāsini* as the principal deity of north-eastern *Kāmarūpa*, and that this figure is closely associated with, or identical to, *Kechāikhāitī* (also rendered *Kecāikhāiti* or *Kechai-Khati*), the primordial tribal goddess of the *Chutiya* kingdom, worshipped in her main shrine at *Sadiya* by *Deorī* priests according to distinct tribal ritual conventions rather than orthodox Brahmanical procedure (Malinithan). Scholars including P. C. Sarma and Premalata Devi, cited in secondary compilations, have documented the temple architecture and religious philosophy associated with these north-bank sites, including the ruined *Malinithan*

temple on the river's northern floodplain, but this material has not yet been synthesised into a sustained comparative account set against the south-bank Kāmākhyā complex (Malinithan). Maheswar Neog's *Early History of the Vaiṣṇava Faith and Movement in Assam*, while primarily concerned with the Ekasaraṇa Vaiṣṇavism of Śaṅkaradeva, is nonetheless indispensable for understanding how the sixteenth-century Bhakti reform movement — which drew significant early support from north-bank satras — interacted with, and in places supplanted or absorbed, pre-existing Śākta and tribal goddess worship (Neog).

This uneven distribution of scholarly attention constitutes the specific gap this paper addresses: existing literature offers rich, theoretically sophisticated accounts of the south-bank Kāmākhyā complex, but comparatively little systematic, comparative treatment of how goddess worship on the north bank differs from, parallels, or has historically interacted with its south-bank counterpart across the shared riverine landscape of the Brahmaputra Valley.

3. Methodology :

3.1 Research Design :

This study adopts a qualitative, comparative-historical research design situated within the discipline of religious studies, drawing methodologically on the history of religions, textual philology, and interpretive ethnography. The design is exploratory and interpretive rather than hypothesis-testing, consistent with standard practice in humanities-based UGC-CARE listed journal publications in religious and cultural studies. The unit of comparison is the ritual-theological complex associated with goddess worship on each bank of the Brahmaputra, treated as two related but distinguishable case clusters.

3.2 Data Sources and Corpus :

The study relies exclusively on secondary and tertiary source material, in keeping with a desk-based literature-synthesis design. Three categories of source were consulted. First, classical Sanskrit textual sources in their scholarly editions and translations, principally the Kālikāpurāṇa (via van Kooij's study) and references to the Yoginī Tantra, were used to establish the normative Brahmanical-Tantric charter for goddess worship in the region. Second, peer-reviewed secondary scholarship — including monographs and journal articles by Kakati, Urban, Rosati, Biernacki, Mishra, Neog, and Borkataky-Varma — was reviewed to reconstruct the historical and ethnographic record for both riverbanks. Third, supplementary archival, encyclopaedic, and journalistic sources were consulted to corroborate details of specific north-bank sites (such as Malinithan and the Sadiya Tāmreśwarī shrine) and of contemporary folk ritual practice (such as riverine Gaṅgā-pūjā among fishing communities on the Brahmaputra's banks), triangulated wherever possible against the peer-reviewed literature.

3.3 Analytical Framework :

The analysis proceeds through comparative textual and thematic coding, structured around four analytical categories derived inductively from the literature: (a) the origin narrative and mythological charter of each goddess cult; (b) the identity and institutional position of the officiating priesthood; (c) the ritual grammar of worship, particularly the presence, form, and symbolic function of blood sacrifice and aniconic (non-image-based) worship; and (d) the historical trajectory of Sanskritisation or Brahmanical incorporation, following the analytic vocabulary established by Kakati and refined by Urban and Rosati. These four categories are applied symmetrically to south-bank (Kāmākhyā-centred) and north-bank (Tāmreśwarī/Kechāikhāitī-centred) material to generate a structured comparison.

3.4 Limitations :

As a literature-based comparative study, this paper does not present original field data, interviews, or archival transcription; its evidentiary base is accordingly mediated by the interpretive choices of the secondary scholars whose work it synthesises. The north-bank material, being less extensively documented in peer-reviewed anglophone scholarship than the Kāmākhyā complex, is correspondingly thinner, and conclusions regarding it should be read as provisional pending further primary ethnographic and epigraphic research. The study is further limited to Hindu and tribal goddess traditions accessible through published English-language and translated sources, and does not extend to Assamese-language vernacular scholarship not available to the present authors in translation.

4. Data Analysis and Discussion :

4.1 The South-Bank Complex: Kāmākhyā and the Brahmanical-Tantric Synthesis

The temple of Kāmākhyā, situated on the Nīlācala hill on the southern bank of the Brahmaputra at Guwahati, constitutes the paradigmatic case of Assamese Śākta religiosity. Structurally, the temple lacks a conventional anthropomorphic mūrti; the goddess is instead worshipped in the form of a yoni-shaped natural rock fissure within an underground sanctum, kept permanently moist by a natural spring (kamakhya.org). This aniconic mode of worship is widely read by scholars as evidence of the site's pre-Brahmanical origin, subsequently absorbed into the Sanskritic Purāṇic framework through the Satī-Dakṣa myth, in which the goddess's yoni is said to have fallen at Kāmagiri after Śiva's grief-stricken wandering with her corpse (Rosati). Kakati's fusion thesis identifies this process precisely: the transformation of a tribal yoni-stone into the "yoni of Satī" served, he argues, the practical political purpose of enabling Brahmanical actors to secure legitimacy and support from local, non-Hindu populations for whom the site already held sacred significance (Rosati).

The ritual grammar of the south-bank complex is characterised by several distinctive features. Animal sacrifice (bali) — most prominently of goats and buffaloes — remains a central and highly visible element of temple practice, a feature Urban identifies as marking Kāmākhyā as unusual among major Śākta pīṭhas, most of which

have moderated or eliminated blood sacrifice under the pressure of reformist and "civilising" currents within modern Hinduism (Urban, "Womb of Tantra" 234). The annual Ambuvācī Melā, during which the temple is closed for three days on the belief that the goddess undergoes menstruation — marked, in popular understanding, by a reddening of the Brahmaputra's waters near the temple — represents perhaps the most striking instance of the river being ritually incorporated into the goddess's own body and fertility cycle ("Gods and Goddesses of Assam"). The festival, also known as Ameti and understood locally as a tantric fertility observance, draws practitioners of Kaula Tantra whose seasonal public visibility is itself structured around this ritual calendar ("Gods and Goddesses of Assam").

Institutionally, the priesthood at Kāmākhyā today is dominated by Brahmin pāṇḍās operating within an orthodox Hindu ritual idiom, even as the temple complex retains a network of shrines to the ten Mahāvidyās and continues to accommodate both "mainstream orthodox" darśana-and-prasāda worship and the more transgressive practices associated with Kaula and left-handed (vāmācāra) Tantra side by side (Urban, "Womb of Tantra" 244). Urban terms this co-presence a process of "tribalisation" of Brahmanical practice rather than a simple, one-directional "Sanskritisation" of tribal religion — the temple has not erased its tribal ritual substratum so much as institutionalised a durable coexistence of both idioms under a single sacred roof (Rosati).

4.2 The North-Bank Complex: Tribal Goddesses and the Chutiya-Bodo Substratum :

The north bank of the Brahmaputra, historically the heartland of the Chutiya kingdom in its eastern reaches and of Bodo-Kachari polities further west, sustains a goddess-worship tradition whose institutional and theological centre of gravity lies markedly closer to tribal ritual practice than the south-bank Kāmākhyā complex. The principal deity of this tradition is variously named Tāmreśwarī ("the copper goddess," after the copper-plated temple structure associated with her worship), Kechāikhāitī, or Kēcāikhāitī, worshipped at her primary shrine near Sadiya in the far northeastern corner of the valley (Malinithan). The Kālikāpurāṇa itself names Dikkaravāsīnī as the presiding deity of northeastern Kāmarūpa, and later scholarship, following Kakati, treats Dikkaravāsīnī, Kechāikhāitī, Tāmreśwarī, and Ugratārā as regionally and historically overlapping names for what is fundamentally a single tribal goddess figure absorbed at varying depths into the Puranic Śākta vocabulary (Malinithan).

Crucially, the priesthood at the Sadiya shrine has historically been drawn not from Brahmin lineages but from the Deorī community, specifically its Borgoyā sect, who serve as hereditary tribal priests conducting worship "according to her old tribal customs" rather than through Sanskrit Vedic or Puranic liturgy (Malinithan). This represents a structurally significant divergence from the south bank: whereas Kāmākhyā's tribal ritual substratum survives beneath, and in institutional partnership with, an established Brahmanical priesthood, the north-bank Tāmreśwarī-Kechāikhāitī cult has retained tribal ritual authority as its primary and, for much of its recorded history, sole institutional form. Associated architectural remains, such as the Malinithan temple ruins on the

river's northern floodplain (in present-day Arunachal Pradesh, historically within the same cultural zone as north-bank Assam) and the Bura-Buri and Tāmreśwarī temples of Sadiya, indicate that sacrificial worship was conducted at these sites and that royal patronage — extended by Chutiyā kings between the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, who simultaneously began granting land to Brahmins — provided the mechanism through which limited Brahmanisation proceeded on the north bank ("Spiritual"; Malinithan).

The historical trajectory of the north-bank tradition also diverges from that of the south bank in its subsequent religious history. Whereas Kāmākhyā's Tantric and Śākta identity intensified through royal Ahom-era patronage from the sixteenth century onward, the north bank became, in the same period, the principal theatre of Śaṅkaradeva's Ekasaraṇa Vaiṣṇava reform movement, whose satra institutions — exemplified by centres such as Khatarā Satra in Darrang district — actively promoted monotheistic Vaiṣṇava devotion among the same Bodo, Rabha, Mising, and other indigenous communities who continued, in many cases, to maintain parallel or underlying goddess worship ("Part 1"). The north bank of the Brahmaputra thus emerges as a zone of layered and, at points, competing religious absorption — tribal goddess cults contending, at different historical moments, with both an eastward-radiating Śākta-Tantric influence from Kāmākhyā and a westward-radiating Vaiṣṇava reform movement centred on the Satra institution.

4.3 Convergences and Divergences across the Dual Banks :

The comparative analysis surfaces both structural convergences and equally significant divergences between the two riverbank traditions. At the level of convergence, both complexes are unambiguously rooted in a pre-Brahmanical, tribal ritual substratum, both retain some form of animal sacrifice as a central ritual act, and both have been drawn, to differing degrees, into the wider Puranic-Tantric textual framework of the Kālikāpurāṇa, which explicitly names deities from both banks — Kāmākhyā for the south, Dikkaravāsini for the north — as regionally presiding forms of the goddess. This shared textual accommodation suggests that the Kālikāpurāṇa's compilers, likely operating from within or in close proximity to the Kāmarūpa court, were consciously engaged in a valley-wide project of incorporating diverse local goddess cults into a single Puranic cosmology, rather than privileging the south-bank site alone.

The divergences, however, are equally instructive. The south-bank Kāmākhyā complex underwent a far deeper and more institutionally entrenched process of Brahmanisation, resulting in a resident Brahmin priesthood, a codified pilgrimage calendar, and eventual integration into pan-Indian Śākta pīṭha networks and, in the twentieth century, into Hindu nationalist and touristic imaginaries of a unified national sacred geography (Urban, "Cradle of Tantra"). The north-bank Tāmreśwarī-Kechāikhāitī complex, by contrast, retained tribal Deorī priestly authority as its institutional core and remained comparatively marginal to pan-Indian Śākta networks, its visibility instead mediated primarily through localised Chutiyā and Bodo-Kachari communal identity. This suggests that the intensity of Brahmanisation was not simply a function of textual inclusion in the Kālikāpurāṇa — both banks

achieved that inclusion — but of subsequent, contingent factors: the differential political fortunes of the Kāmarūpa and later Ahom courts relative to the Chutiya kingdom, the proximity of Kāmākhyā to the valley's principal urban and administrative centre at Guwahati, and the north bank's subsequent absorption into the rival gravitational field of Śaṅkaradeva's Vaiṣṇava movement.

4.4 The River as Ritual Actor :

A recurring finding across the data is that the Brahmaputra itself functions not merely as a passive geographical boundary separating two ritual traditions but as an active participant within Śākta cosmology on both banks. This is most vividly illustrated at Kāmākhyā, where the reddening of the river during the Ambuvācī Melā is popularly interpreted as the physical sign of the goddess's own menstruation, collapsing the distinction between the river's hydrology and the goddess's body ("Gods and Goddesses of Assam"). A structurally comparable, if theologically distinct, phenomenon persists in contemporary folk practice along the river more broadly: fishing communities on the Brahmaputra's banks in Guwahati continue to conduct an annual Gaṅgā-pūjā, worshipping the river itself as the goddess Gaṅgā at the seasonal confluence of the Brahmaputra's waters, explicitly framed by practitioners as a protective rite against the erosion and flood damage the river is capable of inflicting ("Ganga Worshipped"). This contemporary folk devotion — distinct from, yet resonant with, both the Kāmākhyā and Tāmreśwarī complexes — indicates that riverine personification operates as a shared substratum of Assamese religiosity that transcends the north-south institutional divide even as it is elaborated differently within each bank's dominant cult.

Taken together, these findings support a reconceptualisation of Assamese Śāktism away from a Kāmākhyā-centric model, in which the south-bank temple is treated as the tradition's sole meaningful centre with the rest of the valley as its periphery, and toward a riverine-continuum model, in which two related but institutionally distinguishable goddess complexes have developed along either bank of a shared, ritually agentive river, connected by common tribal substrata, overlapping textual charters, and a shared symbolic grammar of the river-as-goddess even as their subsequent institutional histories diverged.

5. Conclusion :

This paper has argued that the Śākta traditions of the Brahmaputra Valley are more accurately understood as a differentiated riverine continuum than as a single tradition radiating outward from the temple of Kāmākhyā. Comparative analysis of the south-bank Kāmākhyā complex and the north-bank Tāmreśwarī-Kechāikhāitī-Dikkaravāsini complex reveals a shared foundation in pre-Brahmanical tribal goddess worship, common inclusion within the Puranic textual charter of the Kālikāpurāṇa, and a shared symbolic idiom in which the Brahmaputra itself is treated as an extension of, or agent within, the goddess's own body and power. At the same time, the two banks diverged sharply in the depth and institutional form of their subsequent Brahmanisation: the south bank developed an entrenched Brahmin priesthood and achieved integration into pan-Indian Śākta

networks, while the north bank retained tribal Deorī priestly authority and was subsequently drawn as much into the orbit of Śaṅkaradeva's Vaiṣṇava reform movement as into wider Śākta circulation.

These findings carry implications beyond the specific case of Assam. They suggest that river systems more broadly warrant treatment as active variables in the comparative study of regional Hindu and tribal religious formation, shaping not only settlement and trade but the differential absorption, survival, and institutionalisation of local goddess cults. For Assam studies specifically, the paper underscores the need for sustained primary ethnographic and epigraphic research on north-bank goddess traditions, which remain significantly under-documented relative to the extensive scholarship available on Kāmākhyā. Future research employing field-based ethnography, vernacular Assamese-language sources, and systematic epigraphic survey of north-bank temple sites would substantially strengthen the comparative account offered here and could further test whether the riverine-continuum model proposed in this paper holds for other braided or bifurcated river systems associated with goddess worship elsewhere in South Asia.

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