

Deciphering the *Ambubashi Mela*: Understanding Rites and Rituals of Tantric Menstruation in *Kāmākhya* Tradition

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Abstract: In this paper, the ritual of *Ambubashi mela* is studied in details- the nature of the *mela*, its ritual significance and its impact on the social hierarchy. This paper also explores the role of the *mela* in bringing the *Kāmākhya* tradition into the larger context of the Puranic fold. The analyses are based on a study of the *Kālikā Purāṇa* and the *Yoni Tantra*. The study is also accentuated by the extensive field work undertaken over a period of three months in the region of Assam.

Keywords: *Tantra, Ambubashi mela, Kāmākhya, Menstruation, Social Hierarchy*

Rituals can be performed in two ways. Firstly, in a rather discreet manner, accompanied by mental chanting of hymns in closed confinements and secondly, it can be performed with great pomp and show of devotion and *Bhakti* to the deity in a communal manner. The *Śākta Pīṭha* *Kāmākhya* is the abode of both kinds of ritualistic observation. From the secretive performance of the *Vāmācāra* or left-handed Tantra to the *Dakṣinācāra* mode of rituals and worship, the temple has it all within its fold. Amongst the various other rituals that are performed in the *Kāmākhya* temple, the most important and famous is the *Ambubashi Mela*.

‘*Ambu*’ in Sanskrit means water. From the Sanskrit term ‘*Ambuvācī*’ emerges the Assamese term ‘*Ambubashi*’ which means ‘issuing forth of water’. Literally, it refers to the swelling of water of the earth from the onset of monsoon. Celebrated close to the summer solstice, on the 7th day on the month of *Ashadha* (*Ahara* in Assamese), which typically falls on the 21st-22nd of June; *Ambubashi Mela* is a celebration of the Mother Earth, as she gets fertile through the

process of menstruation.¹ The object of veneration here becomes the menstruation blood and the menstruating goddess, which carves a unique spot amongst the other *Śākta pīṭha*, further consolidates itself in the singularity of the ritualistic processes undertaken during the period of *Ambubashi Mela*.

The Menstruating Goddess

The ritual of *Ambubashi* is very different from all the rituals that are performed in the temple premises. During this period, the goddess *Kāmākhya* is withdrawn from the public viewing for four days. It is kept particularly for four days because according to the traditional believe the menstruation period in relation to a Devi is four and that of a human is five days. According to *Vāyupurāṇa* and *BrahmāṇḍaPurāṇa*, in olden times, women used to menstruate only once in their lifetime. It is only in the *Kali* age that the present system of the monthly course has been introduced.² In the traditional Indian cultural construct, the idea of menstruation holds its own specificity. From celebrating the occurrence of this biological process for the first time in a girl to offering of menstrual blood within the tantric can be seen. Therefore, it becomes very crucial to understand the social context of this biological process.

Menstruation can be regarded as the realization and awakening of the *Śakti* within the female body. Janet Chawla in her article *The Mythic Origins of the Menstrual Taboo in the Rg Veda* states (A)esthetic renderings of a young woman kicking an *Ashokā* tree imply that it is her *śakti* which cause the tree to bloom.³ According to N.N.Bhattacharyya, different areas of India have had notions of the menstruating goddess. In Punjab, it was believed that Mother Earth (*'Dharti Ma'*) 'slept' for a week each month. In some parts of the Deccan after the *Navaratra*, goddess temples were closed from the tenth to the full moon day while she rests and refreshes herself. In the Malabar region, Mother Earth was believed to rest during the hot weather until she

¹Kakoty Bani Kanta, *The Mother Goddess Kamakhya*, Publication Board Guwahati: Guwahati, 1989, p 34.

² Bhattacharyya, NN, *Ancient Indian Rituals and Their Social Construct*, Manohar: Delhi, 1996, p 164

³ Chawla Janet, "The Mythic Origins of the Menstrual Taboo in the Rig Veda", *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 29, Issue No. 43, 22 Oct, 1994.

got the first shower of rain.⁴ But the enigma of worshipping the menstrual flow is to be found only in the *Kāmākhyā* temple of the Nilachala Hills. What is important here is to understand that puberty is not restricted to a female alone, but is also observed by male, within the ritual construct in India.

The significance of the puberty rites (in relation to a male) is expressed in the primitive thought by the idea that at initiation the individual dies and is born again. Kartsen writes, when a child is born, the life thus brought into being is not a new life; it is simply one of the forefathers that appear in the new born. A dichotomy is seen in the approach of the conception of puberty rituals among a male and a female. According to the *Agni Purāṇa*, *Śiva Purāṇa*, *Kūrma Purāṇa*, *Varāha Purāṇa* and *Vāmana Purāṇa* a menstruating woman is a taboo, unclean and impure.⁵ While, the culture of celebrating puberty rites of the male is seen to be positive and is observed amongst high castes as well as tribal affinities, the menstrual rites of a girl has a varying enthusiasm on the part of the observer. The ritual of the *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa* refers to the right of being reborn, within which the person is asked to stay in-door, not see the sun and bathed and anointed with clarified butter. Many features of the said rituals are also seen in the *Upanayana* ceremonies which are the sophisticated tribal rites of initiation.⁶ A somewhat similar kind of pattern is followed in the menstrual rites observed in Assam. The girl is bathed with *Tulsi* or holy Basil leaves. She is kept secluded in a 'preferably' dark room to be slept on hay as bed. She is not allowed to see any male or the sun. In the traditional belief, the girl gets sexually active for the first time she gets her periods, therefore, is not allowed to see any male for five days. Further similarity can be traced in the context of the initiation of a tribal boy which is observed in secret, performed at a distance from the settlement and often preceded by a probationary period of seclusion.⁷ These kinds of similarities give forth the argument that this belief might have a tribal affinity. It is interesting to note here that in the primitive belief, the menstruation was thought to

⁴ Bhattacharya N.N, *The Indian Mother Goddess*, Manohar Publications, New Delhi, 1977, p 8

⁵ ----- *Ancient Indian Rituals and Their Social Construct*, Manohar: Delhi, 1996, p 162.

⁶ Bhattacharya N.N, *The Indian Mother Goddess*, Manohar Publications: New Delhi, 1977, p 143.

⁷ Ibid

be the effect of sexual intercourse and the latter was therefore, accounted necessary for the establishment of the physiological function.⁸

However, amidst the similarity in the observance of these rituals, it has to be bore in mind that there is a stark difference between the approach at which the male and the female puberty is seen. The tone underlying the rites of a male is that of denouncement of the status of being a vehicle for the forefather and reborn in their new individual identity. While that of a female is of reinstating the status of being an instrument of reproduction which would further navigate the forefathers through generations. It is within such a context that tantric rituals like *Ambubashi* are very important which worships this very ‘impure’ substance. In relation to Goddess *Kāmākhyā*, the ritualistic sense is similaralbeit, with a stark difference in its tone and understanding of the conception of menstruation itself. Within the Tantric fold, this impurity along with the *yonī* is venerated and held to be the Supreme in the Mother Goddess tradition. This kind of theological stand point brings one to a discussion on the importance of the worship of the menstruating *yonī* within the larger context of the tradition.

II

Vermillion, Blood and the ‘Kha-Puspa’: Worship of the Menstruating Yonī

The performance of the *Yonī pūjā* covers a large and a very important dimension of the *Vāmācāra* Tantric fold. The *Pañcmakara* aspect within this kind of mode of worship also requires the observance of the *Yonī pūjā* before ‘indulging’ in the *Maithuna* rite. The reference to *Yonī* has always been a characteristic of Tantric tradition, be in overtly direct mention of it in the mantras of the *Kālikā Purāṇa* or in the deliberately manipulated secrecy of *sāṃdhyābhāṣā*.

The offering of the menstrual blood to the goddess and her consort in Tantra is regarded as ‘*Kha-puspa*’- flower of the sky, with which the Supreme Goddess is to be worshipped.⁹ Before the

⁸ Ibid, p 159.

adept or the *sādhaka* engages in coitus with his *bhairavī* or *yoginī*, he needs to worship the live *yonī* by smearing it with vermillion, sandal wood paste, incense and flowers. Though flower has its own importance in the performance of any ritual, in the observance of *Yonī pūjā*, it has a distinct and important place. To begin with, a *Yonī pūjā* is specifically performed by using the Aparajita flower. According to the *Yoni Tantra*, the Aparajita flower can have specific function as it has the form of a *yonī*. And it is because of this characteristic form of the flower, it gets substituted with *Śākti* herself at times. The *Bṛhadyonitantra* terms this flower as ‘*yonīsvārūpa*’.¹⁰ An interesting point at this juncture is to understand the fact that, this ritual not only upholds the very essence of Tantric theology; which is the union of the *Prakṛti* with *Puruṣa*, it is also an important pointer towards castes and feminist theories.

To begin with, the object desired to perform the rite is preferably a virgin. A dichotomy is seen in this context, which gives a sense that women are robbed of their control over their own body. But the presence of text like the *Yoni Tantra* denounces such kind of claims. The *Yoni Tantra* enumerates nine kinds of women whose *yonīs* are suitable for performing the *Yonī pūjā*. The list includes:

- An actress (*Nāṭi*)
- A woman of *Kapālikā* order (*Kapālitta*)
- A prostitute (*Veśyā*)
- A washerwoman (*Rajakī*)
- The daughter of a barber (*Nāpītāṅganā*)
- A *Brāhmaṇa* woman (*Brāhmaṇī*)
- The daughter of a cowherd (*Gopālakanyakā*)
- The daughter of a *Sudra* (*Sudrakanyakā*)
- The daughter of a garland maker (*Mālākarasyakanyā*).

⁹ Bhattacharya N.N, *The Indian Mother Goddess*, Manohar Publications, New Delhi, 1977, p165.

¹⁰ Schoterman, J.A, *The Yoni Tantra: Critically edited with an Introduction*, Manohar: Delhi, 1980, p14.

Together they are regarded as *Nava Kanyā*, thus, connoting that they should be unmarried but not virgins.¹¹ From the list it is clear that castes did not hold much ground than the fact of the woman being unmarried and conspicuous. According to the *Yoni Tantra*, women of anycaste may be enumerated as long as she is experienced and wanton.¹² While, in text like the *Yoginī Tantra*, it is a clear exclusion of a *Brāhmaṇī* as a part of *Śākti* which upholds the tribal inclination of the text. There is a vehement denouncement of constricting the women to the shackles of 'Brahmanical' parameters of virginity and chastity. The expectation that a girl must remain celibate, irrespective of her age, protecting her virginity till her marriage is arranged is not seen in this theological thought. From placing a *Brāhmaṇa*'s daughter below a prostitute and juxtaposing a *Sudra* woman with that of a *Brāhmaṇa* and a *Gopālakanyakā*, *Yonī pūjā* projects a so called 'emancipated feminist theory' within the religious construct. Yet, even this kind of a gender liberalist ritual does not escape the pangs of prejudices. The *Yoni Tantra* forbids the worship of a *yonī* which has produced children (*Mātriyonī*). Although a *sādhaka* is allowed to worship such a *yonī*, he is not allowed to have *Maithuna*.¹³ In this sense, the ritual somewhat snatches away the reproductive rights of the woman who partakes in it. This kind of an argument also throws light on the fact as to why some of the goddesses in the *Daśa Māhāvidyā* pantheon are iconographically represented in a particular way. For instance, iconographic representation of goddess *Tārā* is that of one standing on a supine male figure often discernible as *Śiva* but sometimes, said to be an anonymous corpse. She is black, dark blue or blackish blue in color, naked or wearing minimal clothing, sometimes only tiger skin with garland of severed arms. Her tongue lolls out oozing blood and is pot bellied and heavy breasted.¹⁴ It is this physiological depiction which differentiates *Tārā* from *Kālī*. In this context, it can be seen that, though *Tārā* may appear to be visibly pregnant, she has not given birth to any child, making her the *Śākti*. However, the benign side of the same goddess shows motherhood or motherly sentiments. The most important image of such depiction is found at the *Tārāpīṭha*, where *Śiva* is suckling milk

¹¹ Schoterman, J.A., *The Yoni Tantra: Critically edited with an introduction*, Manohar: Delhi, 1980, p18.

¹² Ibid, p19.

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ Kinsley, David, *Tantric Visions of the Divine Feminine: The Ten Mahavidyas*, Motilal Banarssidas: Delhi, 1998, p 100.

from the bosom of the goddess herself. These kinds of characteristics make her a very important deity of the *Vāmācāra* tradition. The *yonī pūjā* is a discreet ritual even for the Dikshit adept. The Kāmākhyā temple houses both non-initiated and tantric initiated adept and only the tantric adept are entitled to perform such a ritual. During my field work, when I asked about this ritual, I was met with “we are not allowed to...” or “I do not know about its...” and “I can tell only this much...”. Even though I had the opportunity to sit through the *Pañcāmakara* ritual, I was asked to leave after the purification rite on the wine element. Therefore, under such a circumstance, the real nature of the ritual undertaken in the temple and its specificities is a little difficult to comprehend. But considering that *Kāmākhyā* is referred as the *Mahāyonī* by *Kālīka Purāṇa*, *Yoni Tantra* and *Yoginī Tantra* alike, it is performed with the prescribed paraphernalia, though in secrecy.

III

Mela, Vrata and Tapasya

During the four days festival, the goddess is regarded to be at rest and offered light worship which includes lighting of a ghee lamp and incense sticks. It has to be mentioned here that this worship is done outside the sanctum sanctorum of the temple. The doors to the temple are closed in accordance with the ritualistic calculation of the exact time at which the goddess is going to begin her menstrual flow. This is called the ritual of *Pabritti*, which is marked by the covering of the yoni with a red clothe. This is called *Athparia*. Likewise, the time when the doors would be once again open for *darśana* is called *Nibritti*. In regards to the observation of *Nibritti*, certain kind of nuances can be seen within the same sacred network of the region. In the *Kāmākhyā* temple, the purifying bath or *Mahāsnāni* is performed at the hour of its *Nibritti*. The Goddess is bathed using the *pañchagāvyā*- concoction prepared by mixing five products of cow- dung, urine, milk, ghee and curd. This ritual is carried out in the shrines of the *Daśa Māhāvidyā* as well. In the *Ugratārā* temple, situated in the heart of the Guwahati city, the *Nibritti* will be done the next day, if it occurs the previous night. Corresponding to the interaction with the head priest of

the *Ugratārā* temple, Jiten Sharma, I came to know that the temple gates would not be opened after the evening *ārti*. The offering of worship to goddess would continue to be paid outside the temple in a separate room, meant for that specific purpose.

This kind of demarked space replicates the sacredness that is brought outside the shrine, where, the deity resides for a certain period of time. The *Brhatsamhitā* distinguishes between the *Pradistha* and *Adhivasa* of the deity in a temple. The first is the fixed or the permanent adobe, while, the latter is the temporary placement of the deity.¹⁵ The presences of such ritualistic differences bring in a heirarchization of the deity within a certain network of sacred space. The politics of the myths and the flow of the pilgrims concentrated on one particular site than the other, within such a religious cult network, determine the course of these rituals. Ritual itself was seen as a trajectory from the physical to the symbolic and thereby, projected a movement from the manifested plane to the un-manifested one. In this regard, the spatial organization of the temple, the iconographic distribution and the hierarchical conceptualization of the deity, in addition to the performance of the rituals, together constitute the ritual plane in symbolic terms.¹⁶

Along with the offering of light worship, the deity is given a *sāttvic* diet- yoga diet or sentient diet. This kind of diet includes cereal grains, legumes, vegetables, fruits and nuts. It has to be mentioned here that, during these days any kind of non vegetarian food or offering of sacrifice is not undertaken. It is only during the *Nibritti* hours that sacrifice is performed in the temple premises of *Kāmākhyā* as informed by Rajani Sharma, a priest who traces back his lineage to the priests of Kannauj. What is important in this ritual is the change of the offering, from sacrificed non-vegetarian which is inherently tamasmic to a totally *sāttvic* offering. In this sense, it can be said that, the *Ambubashi* is a communal observance of *vrata* for the human and the divine alike. *Vrata* is a vowed observance, a religious act of devotion and austerity performed for the fulfillment of specific desire. In the *Māhābhārata*, a *Vrata* is a religious undertaking or a vow in which one has to observe certain restrictions about food or general behavior. In the *Purāṇa*, the

¹⁵ Mahalakshmi, R. *The Making of the Goddess: Korravai- Durga in Tamil in Tamil Tradition*, Penguin Books: Delhi, 2011, p 205.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, p209.

restrictive aspect is emphasized. Here it is called *tapas* because it causes hardship as the performer has to restrain his sense organs while observing the *vrata*.¹⁷ Transcending the confines of a shrine, this *vrata* found its way among the mass, specially the widows, who consumes only fruits for these three days. While the married mass refrain from any kind of sexual activities. The *vrata* per say consist of a set of regular activities and the verbal or mental declaration of intent-when it is mentioned at all- is designated as the *samkalpa* which is what makes a series of actions or abstention in to *vrata*.¹⁸ However, one may consider *Ambubashi* as a communal *vrata*, yet caution has to be undertaken while analyzing it in that sphere of understanding. This is because the characteristics of the *vrata* are different from what has been laid down as the prescribed rules. According to Raghunandan, for example, a *vrata* is a complex ritual which involves several items such as *snān*, morning prayers, *samkalpa*(vow), *homa*, worship of the deity in whose honor the *vrata* is taken, *upavāsa*-feeding of the *Brāhmaṇas*, maiden and/or married women, *dakṣinā*(paying of the honorarium to the *Brāhmaṇas*) and observance of certain rules of conduct during the period of the *vrata*.¹⁹ In this tradition, the *vrata* is more inward, without the paraphernalia of the given Purāṇic nitty-gritty, a honorius offered to the *Devī* inwardly by male and female alike. Yet, these 'regalia' is not unknown in the tradition. Within the larger *Ambubashi* framework comes the *Satha Vrata*. The *Satha Vrata* is observed on the first three days of *Ashara* and the last 4 days of *Jeth*. It is basically celebrated in the lower Assam region including places like Suwalkuchi and Hajo. This *vrata* or fasting is very similar to the *Savitri vrata* which is observed in honor of the welfare of the husbands or in the aspiration of a Śiva like husband. For seven days, the women would fast and finally break the fast with an offering of *pūjā* to *Kāmākhya* along with Śiva. Here the male *Brāhmaṇa* plays a crucial role and the ritual is complete only with the payment of *dakṣinā*. Considering these fact, this *vrata* can be said to be an apparatus of appropriating the positions of *Brāhmaṇa* in the tradition. What is striking about this ritual is the fact that a tradition which heralds womanhood, would give way for a ritual

¹⁷ Chakrabarti, Kunal, *Religious Processes: The Puranas and making of a Regional Tradition*, Delhi: Oxford University Publication, 2001, pp 235-236.

¹⁸ Lubin, Timothy, "Vrata: Divine and Human in Early Veda", *Journal of the American oriental Society*, 121, 4, 2001.

¹⁹ Chakrabarti, Kunal, *Religious Processes: The Puranas and making of a Regional Tradition*, Delhi: Oxford University Publication, 2001, p 236.

steeped deep in patriarchy. The answer lies in the origin of *vrata* which has a tribal origin. According to Nihararanjan Ray, the religion of the Ṛg Vedic Aryans centered on sacrifice and those who lived beyond the pale of Aryanism, such as the people of the Eastern region perform the indigenous *vrata* and possibly came to be known as *vratyās*.²⁰ Here Ray basically points to the hunting-gathering society. Can the indigenous *vrata* emerged out of a scarcity of the availability of certain game in particular seasons leading to some kind of observance of fasting is a question which needs to be probed. Some scholars suggest that non Brahmanical Gods and Goddess were introduced in the Brahmanical household by young non Brahmanical brides presumably through their *vrata* oriented mode of worship of their deity²¹. If the *Satha Vrata* is analyzed carefully it can be seen that it does uphold the position of women. The manifestation of *Śākti* in the female devotee through the observance of *tapasya* leads to the protection of the male counterpart. The Puranic tradition got assimilated within this tribal ritual and got seasoned within a male-*Brāhmaṇa* centric fold. This is very evident in the *Kālikā Purāṇa* where Sāvitrī is mentioned in the context of *mātrikas* along with *Gāyātrī*, *Bāhulā*, *Saraswatī* and *Draupadā*, who discussed about the chastity of women and well being of the people. It gave Sāvitrī the important status of a tutor to Ārundhati wife of sage Vāsistha, regarding the chastity of women. Worth mentioning in this context is the argument given forth by Kunal Chakrabarti that, the brahmanical adaptation of the indigenous *vrata* was meant to earn the trust of the local people, to create a platform for the dissemination of the *Purāṇas* and to provide steady income to the Brahmins, and the *Satha Vrata* within the *Ambubashi* tradition seems to be a glaring living example. This kind of an argument projects the ritual as a mobilizing instrument. An analysis of its nature also throws light on the aspect of it being a cult of fertility.

IV

The Fertile Goddess, Impure man and Pure Woman

²⁰ Chakrabarti, Kunal, *Religious Processes: The Puranas and making of a Regional Tradition*, Oxford University Publication: Delhi, 2001, p 238.

²¹ Ibid

The concept of menstruation is undoubtedly connected to the fertility cult within the Mother Goddess Tradition. This gets enhanced by the fact that ploughing of the field or plucking of flowers during *Ameti Suwa*, as being popularly referred in the region, is forbidden and considered inauspicious. The connection that Shulman makes is of the goddess's inherent affinity to earth as a symbol of fertility. Just as the fertility of the earth can be trapped only through the violence of cultivation the goddess power, where acknowledged, is activated and captured through violent imagery.²² This kind of an argument explains why ploughing is not undertaken at this time. Primarily, the *linga* was the symbol of the act of cultivation, while the *yonī* represented the Earth. The fact that ploughing was prohibited, also points to the fact that sexual union during menstruation is unnatural and impure. Leveling one to the local understanding shows a dichotomy. The information given forth by Rajani Sharma proved instrumental in this regard. He establishes a connection between the sun and the occurrence of the *mela*. He informs that it is because of the sun's rays falling vertically on earth which makes her fertile. He compares the 'phenomena' with the maturing of a human body and Earth. Just as human body needs rest and enhances change during the period of maturity, so as Earth undergoes a similar process. Human body needs adjustment to change like difference in voice, appearance of acne etc. representing the outer factors of maturity. Likewise, Mother Earth goes through the same process, where contamination of stored water by the birth of harmful microbes is the external representation of such change. Hence, Sharma says that water stored during the *ameti suwa* period needs to be first purified with *bel* leaves and sugar. This can also be related to the union of Earth and heaven which makes the earth fertile and ready for germination. The sun is looked at more than a material force, as a giver and sustainer of life in accordance with the human body, which is regarded as the temple in Tantric philosophy.

Van Butinien defines Hinduism as a way of life which has a conglomeration of various doctrines and cults. Within these conglomerations of cults, different traditions interact with each other synthesizing and amalgamating, making one tradition similar to another and at the same time

²²Mahalakshmi R, *The making of a Goddess: Korravai-Durga in Tamil Tradition*, Penguin Books India: Delh, 2011, p 26

making another completely different. On such an interacting plane, an analogy can be drawn between the ritual processes of the *Ambubashi Mela* with that of the *Anavasara* period in the *Jagannātha* cult. During this period, the images of the Trinity of *Jagannātha*, *Balabhadra* and *Subhadra*, are being publicly bathed after which the deities are withdrawn to isolation for the next 15 days. Under the care of the non brahmanical priests called the *Daitapitā*, secret rites are performed and all damages caused by the bathing is removed, adjusted and freshly colored. The daily ritual and worship are reduced to minimum. The reading of sacred texts, performance of songs and music and offering of flowers or scent is avoided. The remaining rudimentary worship is being diverted to the *Narasiṃhā* image in front of the temple where *Narasiṃhāmantra* is observed.²³ The worshipping of *Narasiṃhā* image upholds the Tantric origin of the cult of *Jagannātha*. In the *Kāmākhyā* tradition, during the *Ambubashi* period, the *pūjā* is specially offered in front of a *ChalanMā* made of *astadhatu*, as informed by Jagat Dada, a *panda* (priest) in the *Kāmākhyā* premises for 30 yrs. What makes the *Ambubashi Mela* different is the unique *prasāda* that is being distributed at the end of the four days. With the *nibritti* period and the ritualistic cleansing of the goddess, the pilgrims are offered the *prasāda* of a red cloth called the *raktabastra* or *anga Bastra*. This is the cloth given to the deity in consideration of her menstrual flow inside the *yonī kuṇḍ* of the *garbhagrha*. This *raktabastra* is regarded as a powerful and important talisman in the *Śākta* tradition. Another *prasāda* is the *angabhū* which is the water from the *yonī kuṇḍ*. This water is believed to be the menstrual flow.

The kind of *prasāda* that are distributed among the pilgrim and in the broader perspective, the very essence of the *Ambubashi Mela*, brings forth the question of substantiating the conceptions of purity and impurity. The cultural construct has been imbibed with the idea of women being impure and weak because of certain physiological and psychological differences of which, the occurrence of mens or menstrual flow is most important. A look at different cults would clear our picture about how deeply these stigmas have been ingrained in our minds, more specifically within the religious scenario. The crucial ritual act of carrying the anklet of the deity in the cult

²³ Eschmann Anncharlott, Kulke Hermann and Tripathy Gaya Charan, *The Cult of Jaganath and the Regional Traditions of Orissa*, Manohar: New Delhi, 1978, p120.

of *Pattini* is done on the head of the chief priest who is always a male. A woman plays a subsidiary role in the ritual much as a dancer or an attendant of the goddess. In the cult of *Pattini* as Gananatha Obeseykere has pointed out, the fact that *Pattini* herself is a woman who has been regarded as the goddess par excellence, the exemplar of chastity, virginity and purity. She is the goddess which, unlike a human female, is above the impurities of menstrual flow,²⁴ immediately throwing light on the contrast between two cults within the same goddess tradition. The *kapural*,²⁵ although a member of a village society, is expected to adopt a lifestyle, different from the ordinary Sinhala Buddhist villager. *Kuli* (polluting substance) is viewed very seriously in the society and it refers to the polluting attendant on birth, puberty, menstruation and death. One prohibition is strictly observed that polluted persons cannot interact with the Devas. Thus, a man who has eaten meat may visit a *Deva* shrine but not a man whose wife is menstruating. While here we see that the impurity is directly transferred from a husband to a wife, in the *Kāmākhya* tradition, abode of a menstruating *yonī kuṇḍ*, is regarded as the purest place, unanimously by all the pilgrims. This kind of duality in the conceptualization of purity can also be seen in the aspect of trances mediumship. In the low countries of Sri Lanka as well as in the main *Pattani* shrine in the area around Kandy, possession and trance is not a cult requirement. In the Sinhala low country, it is difficult to extend the theory of trance to the higher gods given the Buddhist belief that gods are pure beings and they could not reside in the impure human body.²⁶ Therefore, it is seen that, irrespective of the fact that the body is either that of a male or a female, it can be regarded as impure when it comes in relation to divinity. The *Pattini* cult demonstrates the labeling of the female body as impure because of her menstrual flow, the same time one can also see that the male body is also seen as impure in some regions. Thus it is seen, though the cult of *Pattini* is steeped in a patriarchal ritualism, yet there are some amount of gendered equality on the basis of the purity and impurity of the male and the female body. Noteworthy, is the fact that the impurity vested on a male body is ritual centric while that of a female body is month centric. On the contrary, the *Kāmākhya* tradition is a harbinger of trance and mediumship. Especially

²⁴ Obeseykere Gananatha, *The Cult of Pattani*, Chicago University Press: USA, 1984, p118.

²⁵ Kapural is the term for male priest in the Sinhala Cult of Pattini.

²⁶ Obeseykere Gananatha, *The Cult of Pattani*, Chicago University Press: USA, 1984, p213.

during the *Ambubashi Mela* there is a showcasing of the *sādhakas* powers that throng to this *mela* from all over and the highlight always pinning on the trances and the mediumships.

The worship or the offering of the menstrual blood is not unknown in the Tantric tradition, specifically within the *Aghori* sects. It is this entity which is regarded to have embodied the creative energy of the Goddess. Neither is the veneration of the *yonī* a new concept. In Tantra, special importance is attached to the rituals centering round the female genital organs. As Douglas Renfrew has pointed out that *Kula* and *Kaulism* refer to the primary stream of tantricism characterized by certain principles, values and norms of religious practices. This includes the elements of rituals most frequently disputed inside and outside Tantric circles. The *pañcamakara*, the worship of the female organ is the so called *Kāmakala* meditation and the inclusion of persons from all castes and other sexes can be seen as active in such ritual participation.²⁷ Yet, the celebration of the *Ambubashi Mela* is a relatively new occurrence. To begin with *Kālikā Purāṇa* does not mention *Ambubashi Mela* at all. It is only in the *Yoginī Tantra* (2.6-156) that one comes across the mention of a yearly occurrence of such a period of impurity. The exact reason and the time frame of the origin of the *mela* are vague. The Mother Goddess tradition comes within the fold of the *Bhakti* essence of the Puranic cults. Within this essence, the deity is subjected to personal veneration and undivided devotion from the devotee. In this case, than it can be said, this kind of personal veneration deconstructs the deities image from being an unapproachable divinity to a higher being among the humans to which the devotee has ultimate access to. The acceptance of the menstrual flow makes the goddess as humanly as possible. Largely deconstructing D.D Kousambi's feudal take on devotion²⁸ where god is the master and devotee the servant, *Kāmākhya* tradition envisioned the goddess more as a mother, a wife or a lover. This paved way for a tradition, based on the recession of the utmost loyalty to the object of veneration with a change in dynamics of the relation defined between a deity and its

²⁷ Brooks Renfrew Douglas, *Auspicious Wisdom: The text and Tradition of the Sri Vidya Sakta Tantricism in South India*, State University of New York Press: USA, p 118.

²⁸ The essence of fully developed feudalism is a chain of personal loyalty; not loyalty in the abstract but loyalty with a secure foundation in the means and relations of production. To hold this type of society and its state together, the best religion is one which emphasises the role of *bhakti*, personal faith, even though the object of devotion may have clearly visible flaws. (Chakrabarty Kunal, "D.D Kousami On Religion", *Economic and Political Weekly*, 2008, July.)

devotee, filtering a caste-based society within its fold. It emerges as an instrument to balance the Varna system and get the women in to the tradition. As the argument forth by Lannoy, these norms served as tools in the stabilization of the social or served as the social order or serves as a kind of thermostat which mechanically regulates social inter relationship.²⁹ This explains the incorporation of the *vrata* as well within the tradition. The *vrata* and *tīrtha* are only two Brahmanical religious practices where, the right to participation is extended to all, irrespective of caste and gender.³⁰

In the same line of thought, the *Ambubashi Mela* can be said to be a consequence of the politics of marking of sacred geography of the *Kāmākhyā* tradition. The politics of construction of the sacred goes through processes of associations and assimilations and is substantiated by the celebration of the likes like *Ambubashi Mela*, which gives it a very important position among the *Śākta Pīṭha* itself, as it celebrates the menstruation flow of the *Devī* and giving it a even larger dimension of sacredness, by associating this menstruation cycle with that of the earth. This created a certain kind of cultural space as well, within which, separation of secular and religious space was seen.

V

Ambubashias aMela

A *mela* or a fair is described as a gathering of people to display or trade produce or other goods, to parade or display animals and often to enjoy associated carnival or funfair entertainment. The *Ambubashi* ritual being termed as *mela* does bring with it a kind of socio economic and political dynamics contributing to the successive unfolding of the ritual. It becomes a fertile ground for the political harbingers and the financial wielders to make their hold strong. Lodging, food and dispensary facilities are provided to the people by the *Kāmākhyā* organizing committee like the

²⁹ Mishra, Nihar Ranjan *Kamakhyā: A Socio-Cultural Study*, D. K. Printworld Pvt Ltd: Delhi, p 40

³⁰ Chakrabarti, Kunal, *Religious Processes: The Puranas and making of a Regional Tradition*, Oxford University Publication: Delhi, 2001, pp 251

Kamakhya Debutter Board and Kamakhya Ambubachi Mahotsava Parichalana Samiti. The government also comes forward to provide security and health arrangement for the pilgrims. Though there is a filtration of caste and class within the cult, yet, the stark class distinction in providing these arrangements does not go unnoticed. What is acknowledgeable is the work of various neighborhoods organizations striving to make the stay of the pilgrims as comfortable as possible. The lined up make-shift stalls selling all sorts of assortment, item both “religious” and ‘secular’ is composed of population traveling from as far as Kedarnath to Maharashtra to the locals. Amongst the cacophony of the ochre, orange and black robes of sanyasis, the *AmbubashiMela* hides yet another world- the world of black magic. During my field work in the *AmbubashiMela*, I stumbled across stalls selling what is called ‘*māyā-jāāl sāmāgri*’. There were assortments of dried bones specifically of cat and bear. The interesting fact was that no photograph was allowed and any questions asked were evaded. Stallers cried out their trade cry for this *sāmāgri* though. This highlights the fact that *Ambubashi Mela* also gives a germinating forum for the meeting of tantrikas engaging in Black magic, which is at times, wrongly seen synonymous with Tantra itself.

The practice of Black Magic, when located on the canvas of a larger human evolution, is an economic outcome, as well as a pointer to a tribal affinity. Within the stratum of sanyasis, one find segregated substratum. Pagol Baba Paramhansa, a *sādhaka* from Kasi Dhām, when asked about the practice of black magic in the premises of the temple, more specifically in the *Bagalāmukhi* temple, answered that it was meant for people who would undertake *sādhakaas* as a means for motive generation than for the love and *Bhakti* towards Ma. These motives largely generates out of an economic depravity, therefore creating a rift between what can be termed as *asli sadhu*³¹ and *nakli sadhu*³². Elite practitioners, in this case the *asli sadhu*, by virtue of their

³¹ Popularly an asli sadhu is the one whose motive is utter devotion to the goddess, aiming at a fulfilment of inner well being.

³² Popularly nakli saddhu is the one whose motive for saddhana is the fulfilment of external and materialistic desires or demands, specifically by the use of black magic. These motives basically include vaśikarni, stambhan, mṛityu..etc.

higher tantric empowerment, textual lineage and formal instruction are able to transact with the Supreme transcendent- yet immanent deity of the Tantric universe at the centre to control all of the beings of the *maṇḍala*-divine, semi divine and demonic- for the protection of the king, his court and the state as a whole. While, the deities with a non elite practitioner would interact will be some low level lord of spirits. They will not be absent from the *maṇḍala*, rather they will be relegated to the periphery of the *yantra* as a fierce protector deity guarding the *yantra* of the king and superior deity's utopian realm from incursions by malevolent spirits from the outside that is the enemies.³³ In this context, the perspective of D.D Kausambi that, religion played a vital role in maintaining a class-based social structure was implicated in this process in a fundamental way.

VI

The *Ambubashi Mela* houses a very important and unique ritual of worshipping the menstruating goddess. An in-depth analysis of this *mela* shows the dynamics and the stimuli that lead to the evolution of a tradition. The functioning of the *mela* shows stains of duality and a constant effort at bridging these discrepancies. From politics of sacred geography and socio-economic, Marxian politics to an environment of devotion filled with hymns and *bhajans* and staging a forum for the meeting of initiated *sādhak* with their *gurus*, the *Ambubashi Mela* is the most important ritualistic festival of not only the *Kāmākhyā* tradition, but in entirety the *Śākta* tantric tradition.

³³White, David Gordon, *Tantra in Practice*, motilal Banarssidas Publication: Delhi, 2001, p30.