

Ambubachi Mela in Assam's Kamakhya Temple: A Critical Analysis

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ABSTRACT

With globalization, religion is mixing up with capitalism and consumerism. Old religious observances are finding new modern uses. Ambubachi, celebration of goddess menstruation in Assam's Kamakhya temple has also undergone significant changes overtime. An analysis of the festival reveals its dichotomous nature. On the one hand, it celebrates menstruation and on the other hand, retains the tradition of menstrual seclusion even for Goddess Kamakhya. The strict rules and taboos that used to be a part of this festival have now become flexible. The temple premise during the period of Ambubachi has also turned more into a commercial site. Thus, although devotees continue to throng Kamakhya temple during Ambubachi mela, yet study reveals that the festival has certain attributes that deserve sincere academic scrutiny.

Keywords: Ambubachi, Menstruation, Goddess, Religion.

KAMAKHYA TEMPLE: A HISTORICAL ANALYSIS

The Kamakhya temple is the famous pilgrimage spot for the Hindus and Tantric worshipper located on the Nilachala hill in the Guwahati city of the Eastern Indian state of Assam. The uniqueness of the temple is that there is no idol of the deity in the Garbhagriha of the temple. She is worshipped in the form of a yoni-like stone over which a natural springs flows.

The history of Kamakhya temple is shrouded by many myths and legends. The one that suits our analysis of Ambubachi is mentioned in the Kalika Purana, one of the oldest Sakta sacred texts. According to this legend, 'Sati', the wife of lord Shiva took her life at a Yagna ceremony that has been organised by her father Daksha because she could not bear the insult hurled at her husband by her father. On hearing the news of his wife's death, Shiva, the destroyer of all that was evil flow into a rage. Torn between misery and blind fury, Shiva picked up the corpse of his beloved wife, Sati and performed a dance of destruction called the 'Tandava'.

The intensity of the destroyer's fury was so overwhelming that it took several God to pacify his anger. In the midst of this struggle, Sati's corpse accidentally got cut into 51 parts by the disc in the hands of Lord Vishnu and her female 'genitalia' or 'Yoni' fell on the spot where Kamakhya temple stands today (Mishra, 2004:145)

AMBUBACHI MELA: A BRIEF DESCRIPTION

Ambubachi Mela, the major festival of Guwahati's Kamakhya temple is celebrated during

Ahaar month in Assamese calendar. It is known as the menses period for Goddess Kamakhya. What is worshipped at Kamakhya during Ambubachi Mela is not an image of the Goddess but rather a process: a formal process of menstruation. It is believed that during monsoon rain the creative and nurturing power of the 'menses' of mother Earth becomes accessible to devotees at this site during Ambubachi. During this period, there is an entire cessation of all ploughing, sowing and other agricultural activities. Fragments of cloth stained with the blood-mark of the Goddess are distributed to the devotees and pilgrims preserve these in their houses as protective amulets. Ambubachi mela is so-called because a fair or mela takes place in the temple premise during these four days.

Ambubachi has great significance and attracts thousands of Sadhus, Sanyasis and Tantrics. In keeping with traditional women's menstrual rituals, the Kamakhya temple is closed to worshipper during the mela. There is variety of rituals performed during the three day Ambubachi Mela. Many similar localized festivals to that of Ambubachi is being celebrated in different parts of India. One such festival is celebrated in Orissa named Raja Parba. Etymologically Raja means "menses" and parba means "festival". Thus, Raja Parba is a festival of menstruation of the Goddess (Maharana, 2011).

Many of the traditions associated with Ambubachi are also linked to the temple of Chengannur, Bhagavati, south of Kottayam in Kerala. As in Kamakhya here also the temple is

linked with the tradition of the dispersed body of Sati. According to the tradition at Chennganur, Bhagavati is Sati reborn as Parvati (Eck, 2012:296). As in Ambubachi mela in Kamakhya temple here also the temple is closed for three days during the menses of the goddess. Here also the goddess “menses is celebrated as an important agricultural ritual, *urruca*, in which all work are stopped for 3 days so that she could rest before the beginning of the next agricultural year” (Marie, 2011).

AMBUBACHI MELA: HIDDEN SCENARIO

Among the founding fathers of sociology Karl Marx’s occupies a unique place in terms of his opinion regarding religion because Marx’s views divert completely from what other scholars have to say about religion. Unlike other scholars, Marx’s stands in support of the abolition of religion. Marx’s called religion as pure illusion. Marx expresses that, “belief in God or Gods is an unhappy byproduct of the class struggle, something that should not only be dismissed, but discuss with scorn” (Pals, 1996:139). Marx while criticizing religion has argued that, “Man makes religion, religion does not make man. Religious distress is at the same time the expression of real distress and the protest against real distress. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, just as it is the spirit of a spiritless situation. It is the opium of the people” (Marx and Engel, 1955:41).

Now if we substantiate Marx’s view with that of Ambubachi Mela, we will find that not all but many devotees who come to Ambubachi Mela comes with a specific problem. They believe that in Ambubachi Mela they will get solution to their problems. They believed to get a sigh of ‘relief’. One can see the existence of superstitious beliefs among the people who visit the Kamakhya temple during Ambubachi Mela. The Kamakhya Temple is often considered as a ‘paranormal world’ where most Sadhus and Sanyasis are capable of doing miracles, what most people would like to dismiss such claims as rubbish. Mystics who gather at the temple claim that they can perform wonders make childless couples conceive, find a distress loner a spouse or even cast an evil spell on others. Thus, a large number of people make a mad rush in the temple during Ambubachi Mela to get blessings from the Tantrics and Sanyasis. People believe that with their blessings, their life will take a turn from hell to heaven. Buffalo sacrifices are often done in Kamakhya Temple during the festival to please the goddess. In order to bring to the fore the superstitious beliefs of the people, I would like

to quote a statement of a devotee who visited the Kamakhya Temple during Ambubachi Mela.

Meenakshi Paul, a house wife from Orissa while her visit to Kamakhya Temple explained that, “I have come to offer my respect to Bhola Baba who blessed me to conceive and bear a child”. She came to know about this from her relatives in 2005 during Ambubachi Mela. “It was a miracle of sorts. Baba made me to drink some whisky poured into a monkey skull after chanting some hymns and said that I would surely be able to conceive. And by 2006 September, a baby girl was born”, she said (Hussain, 2007).

Karl Marx also argues that religion is an expression of material realities and economic injustices. When the temple re-opens on the 4th day there could be seen huge rush among the devotees who waited for 3 days to have a look at Goddess Kamakhya and to get the piece of cloth stained with the blood marks of the Goddess. The devotees have to make long que. But to utter disappointment, it could be seen that the politicians and financially well to do people with their money power, without standing in long que gets the chance to offer their prayers to Goddess. Thus, during Ambubachi Mela, religion just remains a ploy of the dominant section of the society.

Ambubachi can be criticised also on the ground of its dichotomous nature Ambubachi exhibits a dichotomous character. This dichotomy is reflected between the orthodox rules of purity and transgressive Tantric orientation. As an orthodox rule the temple remains closed for four days because goddess Kamakhya attains her menstruation and menstruation is believed to be something polluted and seclusion is a part of this polluted phase. This act affirms the orthodox standards of purity in that it isolates the menstruating female. However in this festival “menstrual blood” (symbolically) is received as Prasad is the violation of orthodox rules of purity. The irony further lies in the fact that celebration of menstruation is only at the theoretical level. However, the truth is menstruation is looked down as a taboo.

Along with superstition, commercialisation of religion can also be seen at the site of Ambubachi Mela. Religion is an adherence to God and a common truth based agenda based developed across ages to keep society together. Religious based employments are at rise today. Same could be seen also at the site of Ambubachi Mela. The mela attracts thousands of people. Brisk business in all sorts of

petty things is done. Children go about blowing cheap pipes. Bengalis constitute the largest number of visitors. Heaps of garlands made of various flowers are on the sale. They are needed when the doors of the temple are thrown open after three days. Young kumaris will approach devotees of the devi with 'thalis' for a few coins, one cannot refuse them because kumari puja is an important rite in Kamakhya. The Tantric Sanyasis who come from across India attracts media and foreigners gathered at Ambubachi mela. And the Tantric Babas performing numerous unique rituals and exercise are photographed and published in magazines and newspaper around the world.

The Pandas' or Priests' also earn a good deal during the Ambubachi mela. They charged a huge amount of money from the devotees for performing the puja rituals.

Keeping pace with superstition and commercialisation, corruption is also at its height, corruption could be seen among the wealthier section of the society. When the temple re-opens on the fourth day. There could be seen huge rush among the devotees who waited for three days to have a look at Goddess Kamakhya and to get the piece of cloth stained with the blood marks of the Goddess. The devotees have to make long queue. But to utter disappointment, it could be seen that the politicians and financially well to do people with their money power, without standing in long queue gets the chance to offer their prayers to Goddess. Thus, during Ambubachi Mela, religion just remains a ploy of the dominant section of the society. Thus, we can finally say that commercialisation and corruption is at the peak during Ambubachi mela.

Conclusion

Ambubachi Mela has undergone significant changes overtime. The strict rules

earlier followed during Ambuvachi have now become flexible. In urban areas people no more adhere to the restrictions followed during Ambubachi. Another point to be noted is that although the number of devotees has undoubtedly increased every year. Yet in the recent years, the quality of pilgrims has deteriorated as many appear to come to the temple attracted merely by the free fooding and lodging offered by the voluntary organizations, rather than the Ambubachi Mela per se.

Detailed study of Ambubachi also shed light on the fact that menstruation is always considered an impure process where women and Goddess alike goes through a period of seclusion during menstruation which further leads to the devaluation of women.

To conclude it can be argued that although changes has occurred overtime, yet Ambubachi continued to be one of the major festival celebrated in Assam's Kamakhya temple till date

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