

From Tribes to the Temples: The Evolution of Kamakhya

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Abstract: This paper proposes to investigate the Shakta tradition of North East India, focussing on the temple of Kamakhya in Assam. Shakta and Tantra practices have been widely prevalent in the state of Assam from medieval period onwards, up to the present. It is probable that the origin of this tradition goes as far as the pre-Vedic period. The icon of goddess Kamakhya is a case in point, as through her, one can trace the continuation and development of the tribal “Mother-Goddess” cult into a mainstream Hindu icon. The objective of this paper is to trace the origin and evolution of the Shakta goddess Kamakhya, who is most famous for her temple situated atop the Nilachal Hill in the city of Guwahati, Assam, India. The paper tries to postulate a hypothesis that the worship of mother goddesses evolved from the custom of nature worship which was prevalent in pre-Aryanised Assam. With gradual Hinduisation, the cult of the mother goddess got assimilated in the Shakta tradition. In this connection, an attempt has been made to trace the original worshippers of this goddess and the development of the icon from a tribal deity to one of the most revered Shakta goddesses. In continuation, the paper also discusses the present tradition of worship and ritual in the temple complex of Kamakhya, and the cultural placement of other icons (such as the “Dasa Mahavidyas”) in the complex vis-à-vis the primary image. The research methodology followed is referencing of secondary sources and site visits for analysis of artefacts such as temple reliefs, paintings and sculpture. The paper hopes to reach certain conclusions and understandings regarding the chronological and cultural development of the icon of goddess Kamakhya.