# Deconstructing Universality: Women and Gender in Early Medieval Kamarupa (600-1200 CE)

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## Abstract

*The Brahmaputra valley known interchangeably as Kamarupa or Pragjyotisha in the early medieval period was eclipsed successively by three different ruling dynasties, marking a transition from its prehistoric phase to state society. The region has received meagre treatment in the historical writings of ancient India, so does the question of women and gender of the region. Although women in the copper plate inscriptions of early medieval Kamarupa do figure in few historical writings, their position and status were discussed in relation to the question of marriage, education and inheritance based on the names of few queens and women that figure in the epigraphs. However, it does not reflect their actual position in the social structure. It is imperative to formulate their contemporary socio-religious structure that conditions gender relation. The paper aims to study the inscriptions, the Kalika Purana,and other textual sources to furnish us with a comprehensive view of women and gender in early medieval Kamarupa and situate them in their contemporary socio-religious context. It additionally argues that women in early medieval Kamarupa were not subjected to ritual subjugation on account of preponderance of non-Brahmanical traditions.*

## Keywords

Kamarupa, Pragjyotishpur, Kalika Purana, Copper plate inscriptions, Gender relations.

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### 1. Introduction

The question of women and gender in early medieval Kamarupa or pre-Ahom Assam has been taken up in a few scholarly discussions but has not been fully explored. In Pre-Ahom Assam, the socio-religious context that accords social roles and mobility to men and women needs to be constructed. This paper attempts to study different categories of women in the inscriptions of Kamarupa. We will discuss three aspects (i) Gender and Images of women in the Kalikapurana (ii) women in the epigraphs (iii) Women in Shakti and Tantric traditions.

There is a need to move away from the discussion on 'status of women' to social processes that shape lives of men, women, and social institution in early Indian history[1] and to find gender relations that determines the nature and the basis of subordination of women. In early India the caste hierarchical society was achieved by subordination of women.[2] The purity of caste depended on stringent control over women's sexuality. Kamarupa is said to have been 'Sanskritized' or 'Brahmanised' in the early medieval period, as it facilitated new ruling dynasties to climb up social ladder and proclaimed themselves as legitimate rulers through appropriation of Brahmanical accouterments - making of divine lineage, adoption of Sanskrit titles, worship of Puranic-Brahmanical deities and so forth.

Then the question arises whether the implantation of Brahmanical ideologies in the Brahmaputra valley was able to engender an ideal Brahmanical society? Whose foundation depended on caste principles or Varnaashramadharma, that in turn depended on subordination of women. What could have been the role of women in the domain of religion where the Shakta-Tantra had its stronghold in Kamarupa? The textual source the Kalika Purana, composed in the span of 800-1300 CE and in the north Bengal-Assam region, affords us images of women in ritual and political space. But there is also a danger in taking it at face value as it is a normative text.

Yet, it is useful in discerning the ideologies that sought to control and subordinate women. The paper offers synthesis of textual and inscriptional data as the epigraphs offer evidence that is deviant from the norm and makes real women visible in history[3]. There are over thirty-two copper plate grants and image inscriptions, ranging in chronological span from the 6th century to the 13th century, few of them refer to the categories of women and their role in a sacred space.

Before we proceed to the discussion, reference to few scholarly works on Pre-Ahom Assam touching up on the theme of women will be in order. One of the earliest works is that of BK Barua's *A Cultural History of Assam (Early Period), Vol. 1*, (Gauhati, 1951)[4], P. C. Choudhury's *History of Civilization of the people of Assam* (1959)[5] and SL Barua's *A Comprehensive History of Assam* (1997)[6], to name a few. Their work is significant as it underscores women's position in relation to marriage, their access to education, their role as wives and queens, and celebrated for their devotion to husband and idealization as goddesses. Despite their tremendous efforts in bringing women question to the fore, there is still scope to study women and gender in association with the changing social milieu in Pre-Ahom Assam.

## 2. The Setting

Historians earlier mapped a large span of areas covering Bengal, Bihar, Tibet and Northeast India for historical Kamarupa. However, a careful observation of the find-spots of the inscriptions of the three different ruling families of Kamarupa reveals that the epicenter of the region 'Kamarupa or Pragjyotisha' situates around the Brahmaputra valley. This supposition can be vouched by the Kalika Purana and the Xuan Zang's record 'Si-Yu-Ki'. The river Brahmaputra originates in Tibet flowing east and then it takes sharp-pin bend flows southward to enter Arunachal Pradesh as the Siang and to Assam as the Brahmaputra from eastern or upper Assam to southwest Assam; and flows as Jamuna and Padma in Bangladesh drain in the Bay of Bengal. The valley also known as 'Assam Valley' is an extension of the great eastern plains.[7] The Valley is bounded hills on all its side - Eastern Himalayas, Patkai Hills and Karbi Plateau in the east; and Khasi-Garo Hills and Hillocks in Guwahati in the west. The riparine plains on both the bank of the Brahmaputra support settlement due its fertility.[8] The riverine plain supports agriculture and is suitable for growing rice, jute, pulses and other vegetables.

The valley saw rise of three powers successively, namely the Varmans (?-700CE), the family of Salastambhas (700 -900CE) and the Palas of the Brahmapala branch (900-1200), claiming themselves as lord of Pragjyotisha *(pragjyotishadhipati)* or ruler of Kamarupa. The period is of historical significance in the region owing to evolution from pre-state society to state-kingdom phase. The rise of state-like polity can be attributed to the agrarian development and its effects on society. The inscriptional records of three different ruling dynasties bear testimony to increase in agrarian production. One of the copper grants of a ruler of the Salastambha family records a land able to yield 4000 unit of paddy in the ninth century[9] and, on the other hand, in the twelfth century inscriptions of Dharmapala speak of donated land capable of yielded 6000[10]-10,000[11] units of paddy. The rise of ruling families from erstwhile tribal society is one of such ramifications of agrarian development. The tribal and local affiliation of these dynasties can be gauged from their tracing of lineage to mythical demon Narakasasura. Their non-vedic origin can also be traced from one inscription[12] of Salastambha ruler explaining why their lineage was equated with 'mlechcha'. In an attempt to aggrandise and legitimise their power, the three ruling dynasties claimed mythical Narakasura of Brahmanical lore as their founding ancestor without mentioning the former ruling dynasties, and by adopting sanskritic grandiloquent title 'Maharajadhiraja'. In fact, these dynasties may have been three unrelated ruling families that ascended due to agrarian changes. It is not surprising that the Brahmanas may have played an important role in legitimising their rule by formers' donation of land to the latter as recorded in copper plates grant. It will not be out place to mention what Jae-Eun-Shin writes on this matter "*… the genealogy of Naraka had continued almost five hundred years in the early medieval Kamarupa. However this does not mean unilineal development of dynasties or definite connection among ruling families. In fact, each dynasty had denied validity of previous dynasty for claiming their own legitimacy and the character and identity of their progenitor, Naraka, were continuously formulated the socio-political changes.*"[13]

As discussed earlier, Kamarupa also saw rise in rent free settlement or land to Brahmana by reigning monarchs and this in turn was bound to bring sea changes in socio-religious realm in the region. The socio-religious changes in this period was spell out by scholars in the form of peasantisation of tribes and their absorption into caste society and Sanskritisation /Brahmanisation of local cults -

absorbing and appropriating local cults into Puranic Hinduism and thus Brahmanical control over the local cults were maintained. However, a closer study of the socio-religious process in the region reveals a complex process and does not necessarily fit into the paradigm formulated by scholars. Through the settlement of Brahmanas in the revenue free settlement one may expect spread of Brahmanical social order *'Varnaashramadharma'*. The copper grant inscriptions and the Kalikapurana do refer to the term and give us impression of the establishment of the ideal Brahmanical society. The ideal Brahmanical society entails spread hierarchical Varna-Jati society and division of life of twice born male into four stages. The mention of four varnas also figures in the offerings to goddess. A passage from the Kalikapurana refers to offerings to be made to goddess Chandika in accordance to their varna: Cow Milk to be offered by Brahmana, melted butter by Kshatriya, Honey by Vaishya and Flower Juice by Shudra.[14] Likewise, in the copper plate inscriptions grants to Brahmanas loosely refer to reigning rulers as upholder of duties of all varnas[15] or in the kingdom all people of all varna lived contend[16]. For instance, in the eleventh century inscription of Indrapala he is said to have brought proper division of four varnas and the four ashramas.[17] This has been format while referring to *varnaashramadharma* in the inscriptions, right from the seventh century to the eleventh century. One cannot but notice conspicuous absence of categorical reference to the name of the four varnas, except for the Brahmanas. Also, the varna-based offerings to Goddess do not necessarily mean presence of four varnas as the text represents normative. Furthermore, the spread of few jatis too were not in accordance to laid normative texts.18 Besides, lands were and own cultivated by tribes[19] and other occupational groups.[20] This was far cry from the ideal Brahmanical society laid in the shastras. Therefore, the social change in early medieval Kamarupa due to land grants to Brahmana was not a matter of inauguration of Brahmanical society based on *varnasharamadharma* but it expressed laxity, perhaps due to strong presence of earlier tribal traditions and its interaction rather than its complete disappearance.

This brings us to the discussion of religious realm of the society. As in other parts of India, Kamarupa in the early medieval period saw spread of Pan-India Puranic traditions i.e. worship of three great gods and One goddess and Bhakti mode of worship. The local cults that existed even prior to the advent of the Puranic tradition are not

traceable due to its absence in written document. However, one may look into ethnographic data and tribal faiths to trace their continuities from the past. The present day monolithic and megalithic structures fit into this example. These age old antiquities are still revered as ancestor cult. To understand the interaction between the local cults and the puranic tradition, as said earlier, 'sanskritisation' formed the theoretical framework to study the religious process of this period. This was reflected in the work of Nihar Ranjan Mishra[21] and B.K. Kakati[22]. This implies that local cults were simply absorbed into Puranic cults by identifying the local deities with that of the Puranic-Shiva, Vishnu, Brahma and Devi. Kakati argues the local goddess Kamakhya which belonged to matrilineal tribes of the Garos and the Khasis and was brought into alignment with Goddess Durga, Kali etc.[23] Although this seems unproblematic in understanding the religious process of the region, we seem to turn blind on the reverse process wherein local cults too make considerable influences in the making of Puranic Religious tradition of the region or what may be called 'localisation'. The process of localisation is evident even in the Kalikapurana. The offerings to the goddesses prescribed are invariably local practice. The goddesses and other deities in the purana are propitiated with blood sacrifices of birds, tortoise, Rhinos, buffaloes and so on. It prescribes even human sacrifice and usage of liquors. The use of such articles has nothing to do with Brahmanical practices but speak volumes about inroads of tribal local practices into Puranic tradition. As matter of fact, the Purana does not prescribe blood sacrifice or use of liquor to the Brahmana class, perhaps, owing to its origin in non-Brahmanical practices. Hugh. B. Urban observes the form of sacrifice laid down in the Kalikapurana has no sort of similarity with the Vedic sacrifices and goes on to argue that the Satpatha Brahmana recommends only pure, domestic and non-wild, animals such as horses, cows, sheep and goat, while the purana advocates sacrifices of wild and non-domestic animals.[24] Likewise, Patricia Dold has observed in the present day practice of worship in the precinct of Kamakhya temple is a combination of elements of 'mainstream orthodox Hinduism with local and transgressive Hinduism' in the form of worshippers waiting to perform Puja and receive Prasad and the animal sacrifice, on the other.[25]

Thus, the socio-religious process in the region reveals a negotiation of both Brahmanism (or the mainstream Hinduism) and local tribal practices that has shaped society and religion even to

present day rather than simply importation of Brahmanical social and religious order in the region. Given this backdrop, the formulation on gender relation is shaped by the new social ethos.

## 3. The Formulation on Gender Relation : Women and Gender in Early Medieval Kamarupa

### 3·1 Gender and Images of Women in the Kalikapurana

Before we delve into the discussion few words may be said on the Kalikapurana. This Purana comes under the category of Upapurana, composed in the chronological span between 800-1200 CE in geographical space around north Bengal and Assam.[26] The Purana does not fit into any sectarian affiliation but it does contain rituals and myths related to the Goddess Kamakhya more than that of Vishnu's and Shiva's. This regional Purana like that of Bengal's was composed to draw indigenous local tradition into the Puranic Brahmanical tradition.[27] However, it is to be underlined that the Puranic tradition does not undermine the preeminence of Brahmana's position and the infallibility of the Vedas.[28] In other words the interaction between the Brahmanical and the non-Brahmanical tradition is to be achieved without undermining the social status of Brahmanas and the local rituals (Vratas) were fitted along the Brahmanical one. Thus, the rituals prescribed in the Kalikapurana too, whether dedicated to gods or goddess, were to achieve four male goals - Purushartha (Dharma, Artha, Kama and Moksha). For instance, even the inclusion of blood sacrifice of animals in a non-Brahmanical way, as stated earlier, was to grant fourfold aim (Purushartha) to the adepts.[29] It should not be surprising to find inclusion of women in the vratas of the older Puranas. The inclusion was aimed to draw women's patronage as their patronage to other sects have reduced the incomes to Brahmanical tradition and shaken their social position.[30] Consequently, the inclusion of women has begun as early as the early Christian centuries. And it is no wonder that the Kalikapurana too calls for the inclusion of women. In Pavitra ritual dedicated to the Goddess Durga, it is stated "wife devoted to husband, a widow of good character must spin a thread; women of loose character must not spin"[31]. Likewise, married women are also allowed to wear 'Yantra' (diagram on silk) dedicated to goddess and it grants them sons and grandsons with long live. A closer look into the reward/ merit of rituals performed by women or men, beside Dharma, Artha, Kama, Moksh, was sons and grandsons. This can be construed as inclusion of

women and rituals directed to male goals and androcentric! Nowhere in the text we come across a passage stating women or a girl child as merit of rituals performed. In the political realm, the Purana enjoins the king to have unwavering control over his queens/wives and preventing them from becoming independent and guard their wives from accessing public sphere.[32] Here we sense a paradigmatic Brahmanical fear or anxiety over losing control over women. As stated earlier, women in Brahmanical social order are conceived as a gateway to caste purity and thus it calls for a mechanism to control sexuality.[33] In other words the ideal Brahmanical social order is maintained by controlling her sexuality or movement. Thus, in Brahmanical traditions there is greater emphasis on her sexuality, chastity and her character; they are projected extremely licentious with unbridled lust implying that if these were controlled or regulated, the ideal social structure is achieved. The idealisation of chasity or wifely virtue in myths underlies ideological control over women's sexuality. The myth story of Sandhya in the Kalikapurana is an embodiment of the celebration of women's chastity. Her desire to be a chaste lady propelled her to perform harsh austerities; to which Vishnu responded and she asked him to make her renowned as '*chaste women in three worlds*'[34]. On Vishnu's instruction she had self immolated herself in the sacrificial fire of sage Medhatithi and was reincarnated as Arundhati in the next birth. Medhatithi takes her to Savitri and Bahula to foster good conduct in her and the latter praises her as *"This chaste lady shall purify your dynasty and enhances its status ........"*[35]. Here the discourse on good conduct of women emphasised mainly on female chastity. However, the text does not seem to speculate or lay greater emphasis on man's sexuality. An episode from the Kalikapurana exemplifies man's sexuality relatively unfettered as compared to that of females. The Sage Kapota sexually desired Taravati, wife of the king Chandrasekhara, despite knowing she was married.[36] He could easily atone for the sin of having sexual intercourse with other's wife through his power of austerity. The text like the Kalikapurana is prescriptive in nature and does not reflect reality but it does exemplify Brahmanical ideological control over women and women internalising it.

Notwithstanding the patriarchal overtones in the myth stories of the Kalikapurana and the male centric goals in rituals, we do have instances of celebration of women in Kamarupa as goddess. In the discourse between Bhairava and Vetala and Shiva in the purana,

Shiva expounds how gods and goddess in Kamarupapitha are propitiated and performing that whereby they attain Siddhi( spiritual merit). In the discourse, Shiva advises twice born males to offer salutation to women in red clothes or charming ladies whenever he sees them as it pleases goddess Bhairavi.[37] It further states that a devotee of goddess Tripura must perceive himself as Bhairava and his to be wife as Bhairavi while marrying her.[38] This ambivalent attitude towards women in the Purana is perhaps due to balancing of Brahmanical socio ethos with the local or non-Brahmanical ones that is relatively gender egalitarian society.

### 3·2 Women in the Epigraphs

Unlike the Kalikapurana, the women in the rock and copperplate inscriptions are real women rather than imagined. One Deopani image inscription informs us that women were included in the Vishnu worship, which corresponds to the Puranic tradition that allows women participation in rituals or offerings. Besides this general statement on women, the inscriptions also furnish us with different categories of women which we shall discuss.

The epigraphs are replete with the names of queens and wives of Brahmana donees; and these are two categories of women that make visible presence were praised for their feminine beauty, devout role as mother and wife and are also likened with goddesses. In the seventh century Doobi inscription of Bhaskaravarman, his remote ancestor Mahendravarman is likened with Indra and the latter's wife with Saci, consort of Indra. Her feminine beauty is praised and analogised with the good conduct of the king and her devotion to him is underlined as thus: "She stood as a foremost limit of the beauty,(or so far as the mirror of intelligence of the king is concerned, she shone therein as an epitome of the foremost limit of good conduct of the king) and on her own part she was so devoted to the king that she shone like a constant luster in a moon in the form of that king"[39.] The same format has been used for the queens of different ruling families down till the 12th century extolling their beauty and wifely duty towards their respective kings. Their devotion to their husband was analogised with that of Goddesses towards their consort. In the mid-ninth century, Mangalashree, queen of Hajarvarman of Salastambha family, is compared with Lakshmi and is said to have displayed her beauty and qualities.[40] His another queen Shrimattara is also likened to Lakshmi.[41] Likewise, in the eleventh century

inscription the marital relationship between Durlabha and the king Pundrapala was conceived parallel to Saci to Indra, Shivaa to Shambhu, Lakshmi to Hari and Rohini to Nishkara. At times king and his consort, especially chief queen, are said to be inseparable. In the twelfth century inscription *"King Nihshanka's chief queen was similar to his own life. The name Ahiadevi remained attached to her. She was a female Swan to the lake Manasa in the form of the mind (Manasa) of Nihshankasimha......."*[42.] The epigraphs also underlines the virtues and qualities of the queens. The twelfth century inscription of ruler Vaidyadeva praises his mother Pratapadevi as *'place of virtue, prosperity and reputation'*[43]. The celebration of chastity also finds mention in the inscription. One queen of Harshapala of the Brahmapala's family is known to be *'the foremost amongst chaste wives'*. As said earlier idealisation of Chastity especially for women underlies an ideological device in the Brahmanical society to control their sexuality. From these we can surmise the epigraphs only exalt the queens as goddess and their devotion to kings, their qualities, duties, character(chastity) illustrated as worth praising. However, these do not speak much about their active role in political sphere, if there is any. We do have a few inscriptional records that document the kings paying salutation to *Rajas, Rajnis* and *Ranakas* inhabiting in and around the donated land. The mention of *'Rajni'* would imply that these wives of vassals did have some official position.

The next category of women that dominate the epigraphs are the wives of the Brahmana donees. The wives of Brahmana donees in the epigraphs, likewise using the same literary device, were extolled for feminine beauty, wifely duty and chastity and compared with goddesses. For instance, wife of the Brahmana donnee's son Gabisthara, celebrated as *"pure like the soma-creeper, devoted to the husband like the wife of Vasishtha, mother of a great progeny like Sachi, the beloved of Indra......"*[44]. The virtues and qualities that include chastity figure here as well in the inscription of the Dharmapala (12th century) wherein the donee Brahmana Bharata's wife is described as *"Like Rohini, the consort of the cool-rayed (moon) and like Parvati the dear wife of the enemy of Andhaka (i.e. Shiva), he had a wife named Pauka who possessed of merits and chastity and a good character"*[45]. Some historian holds that the upper class women of Kamarupa had access to education on the basis of the Kamauli inscription of Vaidyadeva that mentions that the prasasti was composed by Brahmana Monoratha with the aid of his wife.[46]

From the assessment of inscriptional records above, by and large, it is clear that the women of upper-class strata were referred only to highlight their good character which includes chastity and devotion to their husband; and in doing so their relation to their spouse were compared with the relationship of goddesses with their respective consort. These goddesses that were compared with queens and the wives of the Brahmana donee do not seem to be independent goddesses, but the goddesses paired with their consort which underlines their conjugal relation. For want of evidence, we do not have any evidence on non-upper-class women at our disposal, save for a stray reference to Veshayas (courtesans) as endowed with Shiva temple.[47] Investigation on women of non-elite and non-Brahmanical class is not complete without delving into sacred space, the worship of divine feminine and where they have supposedly had active participation.

### 3·3 Women in the Shakti and the Tantric Traditions

It need not be reiterated that Kamarupa is revered as one of the Shakti pithas and Tantric sites to this date. The Kalikapurana and other puranas[48] enumerate the Nilachala mountain as a place where Sati's vulva fell and where Goddess Kamakhya, manifestation of Great Goddess, Mahamaya resides. Likewise, the nineth century text, the Hevajra Tantra[49] lists Kamarupa as one of the places of congregation.[50] The Shakti cult in Puranic tradition emerged due to incorporation of non-Brahmanical goddesses into the Brahmanical belief system. The process crystalised in the sixth century and culminated to the Devi Mahatmtya section of the Markandeya Purana. The **Devi Mahamatya** is perhaps the earliest text that describes *'the supreme reality as female priniciple'*[51] . This section of the Markandeya Purana embodies the Shakta theology in which the Supreme Goddess, however, is made of Shakti or brilliance of males. One historian points out that the Shakti concept of the remote past, from the Rigveda, was conferred to the non-Brahmanical goddess whilst the latter's incorporation into Sanskritic tradition.[52] It is through the Shakta cult the various non-sanskritic or non-Brahmanical goddess were acculturated into the Puranic tradition in Bengal.[53] As observed earlier, the local goddess Kamakhya, which has its origin in Austro-Asiatic Khasi and Kachari tribes, was identified with the Great Goddess and the Sati myth woven around it completed the process of assimilation into Puranic Hinduism. Both the Shakti

and the tantric cults are complementary to each other. In fact, in both the belief systems, beside other similarities, goddesses held the supreme position. N.N. Bhattacharya writes "*Although Tantrism has special position in Buddhism, Vaishnavism and Shaivism, it is in the Sakta religion that the Tantric ideas and practices have found favourable ground for their meaningful survival and development*"[54]. Indeed, we find a substratum of Tantric influences in the Kalikapura. The text mentions of goddesses of Tantric in origin such as Tara, Ugra-Tara, Tripura and so forth. In one episode, Ugra Tara at the behest of Shiva evicted sages from Kamarupa and it had affected sage Vashishta, who hurled curse on her and the region.[55] This myth may be construed as a tension between Tantric practitioners and people of Brahmanical faith. Besides, the Purana also entails Tantric Vamachara (Left hand) method while propiating goddesses Tripura Bhairavi, Smasana Bhairavi, Ugratara, Chandi, Kamakhya, Kameshvari and others.[56]

It is in these spaces caste (varna/jati) stratification that underpins patriarchal values becomes ineffective. Goddesses in these Tantric traditions are independent, without association with their consort, and has own power. The women in these traditions must have played greater role and assumed importance in such religious space acting as gurus and priestess initiating followers.[57] These traditions do not observe caste distinction and use and celebrate imageries and symbols of female organs as source of fertility and regeneration.[58] Identification of women with such goddesses and imageries related to female body must have been embroidered mirror of relatively egalitarian society. Notwithstanding anti-caste stance in Tantric practices, the presence of Shakta cult did not necessarily mean women had ennobling position. There could be a society where goddess cult may be prominent and at the same time the social structure could exercise enormous control over women. Gerda Lerner has observed that in Mesopotamia despite social dominance over women, Goddess Ishtar was held at the high position and had their own power like their male counterpart.[59] She speaks of this as remnants of ancient past where goddess cult reflected a society where women held had a special place. It is conjectured that in the pre-historic stage women's sexuality was venerated as source of life giving, fertility and the survival of a tribe and the community depended on the motherly nourishment of the infants.[60] The awe and reverence to reproductive capacity of females culminated into Mother goddess cult and devotion to and production of art related to female sexual organ.[61]In

this stage societies were assumed to be female centric, matrilineal (reckoning lineage from mother's line) and matrilocal (groom leaves his residence lives at his spouse's residence). The gradual transition to plough agriculture which demanded more labour than that of prehistoric gathering or occasional hunting had rendered unsuitable for women, and eventually domination of men paved the way for subordination of women and establishment of patrilocal marriages and patrilineal kinship system.[62]

The popularity of the Goddess Kamakhya in the region, besides its absorption into Shakta cult of Puranic Hinduism, we believe, can be attributed to its wide social base and substantial influence of tribal-prehistoric society where goddesses or divine female had supreme importance. Women in these societies were relatively free from clutches of patriarchy, if not equal to men. Same could be said for Tantrism in the region. Parallelism between Tantric traditions and the tribal societies can be observed in the similarity of rituals to deities involve alcohol, meat, liquor etc., in fact Bhattarchya argues Tantrism has its roots in tribal practices.[63] The surviving elements of such societies can be observed in social practices of Austro-Asiatic and Kachari tribes. Inasmuch as the existence of these tribes or their proto ancestor in the early medieval Kamarupa is concerned, their presence can be buttressed by Austro-Asiatic and Kachari words in the epigraph.[64] As a matter of fact, the epigraphs also speak of land owned by *Brihadrava*, identified with the Rabha tribe of Kachari ethnicity. The Khasi, the Garo and the Jaintia tribes still practice matrilineal kinship and matrilocal marriage, although decision making rests on the brothers of woman head of the family. The Dimasa Kacharies too trace their decent from female line (Jahdi/Jilik) along with patrilineal kinship system.[65] These are surviving practices from the remote past wherein females were given equal importance as men and reckoning lineage from her too seem significant. Priestesses and mother goddess as a creator play vital role in these societies in a more marked degree. In the Khasi society priest Lyngdoh is a deputy or helper of the main priestess *Ka So Blei and Ka So Kla*.[66] In the worship of ancestor, Ka Iawbei , the primeval clan ancestress is honoured in form of erecting monoliths and offering food in these stone structures.[67] Likewise, the myth origin of the Dimasa Kacharies speaks of their primordial mother as Goddess eagle *'Arikhidima'* who is said to have laid eggs from which clan male deities were born.[68]

Returning to Kamakhya goddess cult, the site at Nilachala hill in Guwahati contains a temple built in the medieval Koch-Ahom Period in which natural spring is worshipped as Yoni in the sanctum underground. The association of menstruation with the goddess Kamakhya can be traced in the Kalikapurana which states an adept on beholding a menstruating woman he must worship Kamakhya.[69] An adoration to Kamakhya's pudenda and sipping of goddess vaginal fluid by Brahma and Vishnu point towards sacralising menstrual fluids.[70] The same Purana, however, speaks of impurity of menstruation.[71] At present Ambuvachi Mela festival in the month June and July marks veneration of menstruation goddess in the temple complex. It commences with the observation of a period of impurity for certain days and closing the temple, halting all the activities. Thereafter the temple reopens for Puja and celebration; devotees from neighbouring Nepal, Bengal, and other places throng to the temple to worship the goddess and to obtain water symbolising her menstrual blood as *Prasad*[72]. The association of impurity with menstruation is of recent origin[73], unlike in ancient times. Impurity linked with menstrual blood or childbirth is an attempt to affirm superiority of male biological aspect over females. The veneration of menstrual blood and at the same time considered impure in the purana, and likewise the celebration of the same in the Mela and impurity observed for certain days exhibit intrusion of Brahmanical patriarchal ideology into older ones that entails non-Brahmanical, local and Tantric[74] oriented practices. However, in great measure, women in the non-Brahmanical, local-tribal and Tantric realms exercised their agency and mobility, if not in political domain.

## 4. Conclusion

To sum up, in this paper we have tried to explore the question of women and gender in early medieval Kamarupa. And we do find the patriarchal anxiety over female sexuality seeking to control it in the form of myths and the celebration of chastity in the Kalika Purana; and the purana speaks of confining and controlling queens, and,yet, at the same time enjoining the dwija class to bow or salute women as they embody goddess. But we do not know to what extend it was practice due to its prescriptive nature. In visualising the historical women in the epigraphs, the queens, and the wives of Brahmanas occur prominently. Beside few instances of women's access to

literary field, their description underscores the conjugal relation with their spouse equating it with relationship between goddesses and their consort. These women are known for their virtuous qualities, chastity and wifely countenance. The women of non-elite and non-Brahmanical class, save for one line reference to Vesya (courtesans), do not feature in the inscriptions. Their investigation must be accompanied by exploration of popular cults, the Shakti and the Tantric. This paper argues that the Jati-Varna based society which cages women, and their movement and sexuality never found its way in the full blown form in early medieval Kamarupa on account of predominance of local, tribal, non-Brahmanical and Tantric influences reshaping the Sanskritic-Brahmanical culture. In the work of Nirode Boruah, based on locational analysis of donated lands in the epigraph and finds of sculptures of Puranic Hinduism, he has prepared a tentative sketch of areas where 'Sanskritization and Detribalization'[75] was active. He goes on to argue that not entire the Brahmaputra valley came under Brahmanical culture, considerable region remained out of it and maintained its own cultural traits.[76] If not gender equal society, women outside the pale of Brahmanical culture were not allocated to socially and ritually low position.

## Footnotes and References

1. Uma Chakravarty, *Everyday Lives, Everday Histories: Beyond the King and Brahmanas of 'Ancient' India*, New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2012, 138-153. also See Vijaya Laxmi Singh, *Women and Gender in Ancient India*, New Delhi: Aryan Book International, 2015.

2. Here the term refers to the socio-historical process of assimilating local cults into greater pan-Indian Sanskritic and Brahamanical tradition.

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9.  M.M. Sharma, *Inscriptions of Ancient Assam*, Guwahati: Department of Publication, Gauhati University, 1978, 147.

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13. Jae Eun Shin, "Changing Dynasties, Enduring Genealogy: A Critical Study on the Political Legitimation in Early medieval Kâmarûpa", *Journal of Ancient Indian History*, XXVII, 2011, 183.

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16. The 9th century inscription of Vanamalavarmadeva in M.M. Sharma, *Inscriptions of Ancient Assam*, Guwahati: Department of Publication, Gauhati University, 128.

17. M.M. Sharma, *Inscriptions of Ancient Assam*, Guwahati: Department of Publication, Gauhati University, 1978, 187.

18. Kaivrata Jati despite their low position in social jati-varna scheme held considerable land in Kamarupa see M.M. Sharma, *Inscriptions of Ancient Assam*, Guwahati: Department of Publication, Gauhati University, 1978, 82-88.

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20. *Ibid.*, 251-54.

21. Nihar Ranjan Mishra, *Kamakhya-A Socio-Cultural Study*, New Delhi: DK Print World, 2004.

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23. *Ibid.*, 15-16.

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40. *Ibid*, 92-93.

41. *Ibid.*, 186.

42. *Ibid.*, 186.

43. *Ibid.*, 283.

44. *Ibid.*,135-136.

45. *Ibid.*, 247.

46. SL Barua, *A Comprehensive History of Assam*, New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 1985 , 154.

47. M.M. Sharma, *Inscriptions of Ancient Assam*, Guwahati: Department of Publication, Gauhati University, 1978, 95-113.

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49. The text refers to the Kamarupa pitha and other sites where Sati's parts were fallen as places of meeting. See D.L. Snellgrove, *The Hevajra Tantra: A critical Study*, London: Oxford University Press, 1959, 70.

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55. B.N. Shastri, trans., *The* Kâlîkâpurâ*na: Text, Introduction and Translation in English Verse with Index*, Third edition, Delhi: Nag Prakashan 2018, 631-634.

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