

Sakta-Tantric Icons and Erotic Images from Assam

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Abstract: Assam is located on north-eastern part of India with rich cultural past. It came under the cultural influence of mainland India from time immemorial and ever since the mainland culture has made its inroads to Assam. These cultural traits include both tangible and intangible. Over the time the people living in Assam has adopted many beliefs and customs, art and architecture and sculptural art of mainland which include some of the extreme beliefs namely Shakta-Tantra. The present article aims to study and examine the Sakta-Tantra icons and erotic images of Assam protected and preserved by Directorate of Archaeology (DoA) and Assam State Museum (ASM).

1 INTRODUCTION

The Shakta or Shaktism is a goddess centric cult and one of the major Hindu sects considering metaphorically a women and Shakti (Mahadevi) is regarded as supreme godhead. It consists of numerous goddesses and their different forms all considered aspects of same supreme goddess (Klostermaier, 2010: 233-45). Shakta is different sub-tradition from worship of Durga, Parvati and Kali. The major information of the sect derived from *shruti* and *smriti* texts and religious texts like Devi Mahatmya, Devi-Bhagavatam, Puranas specially Kalika Puran in context of Assam and Devi Upanishad (Jones & Ryan, 2014: 399). The Sakta traditions involve both devotional and tantric strands. The Shakti traditions have maintained strong tantric leanings and preserved ritual and contemplative practices originating in Hindu tantric circles (June, 2004: 6-13). It is closely related to Saiva tradition and the textual basis of many Shakta traditions are rooted in the goddess oriented *Vidyapitha* and *Kaula* traditions. However though aligned Shakta tradition were not tied to Saiva tradition but enjoys individuality of its own. The worship of goddess was widespread throughout the south Asia. There was tremendous growth in Devi worship during tenth-eleventh century indicated by Puranic literatures (Pintchman, 2014). Tantra is a sub-tradition of Shaktism referring to practices, techniques, ritual grammar, icons involving *mantra*,

yantra, *nyasa*, *mudra* and other elements of traditional Kundalini yoga practiced typically in the guidance of a qualified guru after due initiation (*diksha*) and oral instruction of various texts. There is a discourse among Shakta theologians whether tantric practices are orthodox or heterodox. The origins of Shakta tantrism are uncertain, ambiguous and possibly olden, individualistic and independent of Vedic traditions. The interplay among the Vedic and tantric tradition can be traced to sixth century CE (Brooks, 1990). According to Geoffrey Samuel (2008) surge of tantric traditions and practices can be ascribed to late medieval times and were meant to confront and cope with Islamic invasion and political instability around fourteenth century. The popular Shakta tantras are Saradatilaka tantra (eleventh cent.), Kali Tantra (fifteenth cent.) Yogini Tantra (seventeenth cent.), Sarvlassa Tantra, Saktananda Taragini, Shyama Rahasya (sixteenth cent.), Tantrasara, Agama Tattvavilasa (seventeenth cent.). The Sanskrit tantric texts from Orissa in Oriya script belonging to ninth-tenth century are Kaula Chudamani and Varahi tantric. The Sakta tantric tendency greatly influenced other religious cults. In Orissa it conceived Jagannath as Shiva and Vimala as Mahadevi such parallels are also found among many caste and tribes of India including Assam. In Assam Shiva was tribalised in the form of *Shiju* in Bodos, *Langa Deo* among Rabhas etc.

2 EROTIC ART

Erotic art is art with a sexual content, which may be more or less overt. The philosophy and intrinsic meaning of these structures are varied but when studied in context the sculpture appears along with divinities and daily scenes inferring that the sexual act being only one of the many acts of life. The exact philosophy of erotic art is not known; possibly it differs with the socio-cultural orientation of communities in different time and space. Sexuality is a part of human experience since our inception as specie. There have been times and cultures when explicit reference and depiction were more accepted by societal norms and sometimes not. Sculptures with genitals are rampant across cultures with many using exaggerated figures of these genitals as representation of gods of fertility. In India it sometimes depicts *sanyama* or abstinence. In Indian philosophy restraining and non-indulgence always held high. Misandry scholarship suggest phallic symbolises reasserting male dominance, power and political authority whilst the Indian philosophy it always mean an unending desire and something to be restrained for greater goal i.e. *moksha* (Rao, 2018).

The erotic figures consist of human characters, god and goddesses, copulation and bestiality scenes. The erotic images are modelled in stone and clay, such images were found on the walls of temples, also some solitary images. The early *yaksa*, *yaksi*, *maithunas*, *nayika* images also reminds of the category. However they are largely categorised as artistic. The various aspects and philosophy regarding the representation of erotics in plastic art are discussed elaborately by Desai. According to her it represents sacred union of women with god, exposing of nudity and worship of generative organs, magical power of obscene language and gesture, magical power of depicted sex, role of women in magico-sexual rites etc. sometimes depiction in temples is reminder of devadasi system. The depictions include coital couples and orgies reported from various parts of the country mainly central and eastern India. The various poses of sexual congress include frontal congress, oral congress of fellatio type, congress from rear (*vyanata*), head down pose, sitting pose, standing pose and sleeping congress, masturbating figures, amorous couples, homosexuals, bestiality, copulating animals (Desai, 1975). Terracotta images on the theme are not reported from Assam so far. Penetration of erotic tantric goddess in the temporal representation can be ascribed to Buddhist Tantric traditions. The cult of Shakti has direct bearing on the depiction of *mithunas* of religious art. The esoteric cult of *Sri* has been

mentioned in Buddhist literature. The Buddhist structures mark the commencement of erotic art in India and it culminated around twelfth-thirteenth centuries. However Buddhist erotic art are not reported from Kamarupa. Erotic depictions are permitted in religious art because it was considered auspicious (*mangala*) because of its association with procreativity (Desai, 1975). During the early medieval period erotic art was incorporated into mainstream representation however they are not assigned prime or centre spaces, but depicted towards the margins of a structure of representations. From seventh-eighth century the epicentre of erotic arts shifted to eastern India towards Orissa and Assam. It seems Orissan images had direct implication on the erotic art of Assam. Erotic representations are reported from many temples from Orissa including Jagannath and Sun temple of Konark which includes *maithuna* poses, oral congress, standing frontal congress etc. Oral congress is shown in two varieties fellatio and Kakila. Erotic arts are also reported from other Orissan sites of Bhubaneswar and Konark mostly on the outer walls of temple. The representation includes *mithunas*, human and of *nagas*, *mithuna* couples in various poses, erotic groups. *Sanghata* of one man and two women and one woman and two men. Bestiality, *Salabhanjika*, *alaskanyas* and nudity exposing females. The coital poses found representation has preponderance of standing poses, *purusayita* or *viparitarata* (woman acting as man), oral poses, nudity(exposing females), sexo-yogic poses, ascetics in erotic scenes, royal and aristocratic person in erotic arts, hunting parties in association with erotic scenes, sexual figures flanking deities, erotic representation inside the temples. The main representations in Kamarupa belonging to the subjects are ten Mahavidyas, various forms of goddess Parvati including *Lajja Gauri*, *Uma-Maheshwar* and erotic representations of various forms and kinds.

3 MATRIKAS AND YOGINIS

Matrikas (divine mothers) are group of seven (*saptamatrika*) or eight (*astamatrika*) mother goddesses depicted together. Scholars identify *saptamatrikas* to be personification of seven stars and became popular by 7th century a standard feature of Devi temples since ninth century (Wangu, 2003: 187). *Saptamatrikas* are popular in South India while *astamatrikas* are popular in eastern India and Nepal (Van Den Hoek, 1993). *Matrikas* assumed prominent position Sakta-tantric belief. The early references of

matrikas are associated with conception, birth, diseases and protection of children. They were also associated with various perils, propitiated in order to avoid sickness and mortality in children (Wangu, 2003: 58-59). They were also considered inauspicious sometimes (Kinsley, 1988). According to Kinsley matrikas may be local village goddesses, who are being assimilated in the league of divinities. Saptamatrikas are ascribed to Dravidian origin (Bhattacharya, 1974). There are many temples across India dedicated to matrikas or have depiction of matrikas. Matrikas are included among yoginis a group of sixty four or eighty one goddesses. The nature and character of yoginis are not clear and are described variously.



Figure 1: Matrikas on the outer wall of Garbha of Kamakhya temple

In tantric Hindu tradition they are important deities whereas other traditions consider them to be cruel minor deities (Dehejia, 1986: 5). Every matrikas are considered to be yogini associated with seven other yoginis. The prominent yoginis are identified as matrikas (Bhattacharya, 1974: 128). Yogini is an adept female practitioner of tantra and yoga. Worship of yoginis is considered heterodoxical, Dehejia is of view that its emergence lies in the worship of village goddess, the *grama devata*. In tantra these divinities were grouped into sixty four and considered powerful (Dehejia, 1986: 1-10). However in common parlance female *sanyasins* are identified as yogini.



Figure 2: 1 Chamunda (Barpathar, ASM) 2 Chamunda (Kamakhya) 3 Narasimhi (Deoparbat, DoA) 4 Bhubaneswari (Kamakhya, ASM) 5&6 Manasa (ASM) 7 Narasimhi (Madan Kamdev, DoA) 8 Tripura Bhairavi (Jogijan, ASM).



Figure 3: 1 Unknown Devi (Kamakhya) 2 Series of yogini (Golaghat) 3 Twin serpent deity (Kamakhya) 4 diety with serpent attendants (Sankhyadevi, DoA) 5 Deity on prone human figure 6 Gajalaksmi (DoA) 7 Erotic image (Deoparbat, DoA) 8 Devi Murti (Kamakhya) 9 & 10 Devi (Madan Kamdev, DoA).



Figure 4: 1 Dakini (Hojai, DoA) 2 Kali (Deoparvat, DoA) 3&6 Yogini (Kamakhya) 4 Yogini (Deoparbat, DoA) 5 Salbhanjika (Madan Kamdev, DoA) 7 Gajalaksmi (ASM) 8 Salbhanjika (Golaghat)

3.1 Lajja Gauri

Reproductive capacity of women celebrated universally among the populace of India. There are temples specially visited by childless couples (Pattnaik, 2000: 9). Lajja Gauri is a lotus-headed Hindu goddess elsewhere associated with affluence, fertility and virility, sometimes euphemistically described as *Lajja* ("modesty"). She is sometimes shown in a childbirth position (*malasana*), but without outward signs of pregnancy. Her fertility aspect is emphasized by symbolic representation of the genitals, Yoni (womb) with legs spread in some cases, the right foot is placed on a platform for full opening. She is invoked for abundant crops (vegetative fertility) and good progeny. Lajja Gauri as the name suggests it is a form of goddess Parvati. The origin of the imagery is unknown. The image is reported from Madhya Pradesh, Elephanta (Maharashtra), Bagalkot (Karnataka), Orissa, Sagameswara temple (Andhra Pradesh). The proto type of Lajja Gauris are reported from chalcolithic Diamabad (on pot), Taxila, Purana Qila, Bhita, Kara, Kausambi, Jhusi, Rajghat, Mathura, Samkisa, Vaisali, Patna (Desai, 1975). Three types of lajja gauri are identified by Desai namely opulent goddess, personified yoni and *panchachuda* (celestial courtesan). No temple dedicated exclusively to Lajja Gauri exists. In tribal representations often outstretched leg posture is noticed. Literary texts like Sankhayana Grihasutra depict her profile as goddess of sexuality and fertility. The Saivite affiliation is suggested from the allusions of bull Nandi and linga

in different Lajja Gauri representations. Sometimes lotus head and stupa also suggest Lakshmi and Vajrayana connotations. From Assam it is reported from Kamakhya temple, Siddheswar temple (Sualkuchi), Madan Kamdev (Baihata Chariali), Jaljali. According to Ramos (2017) at Kamakhya Lajja Gauri attains political status from being goddess of fertility and fortune.

3.2 Kamakhya Temple and Yoni Cult

The temple of Kamakhya is located in Nilachala hill in Guwahati. The temple and its surrounding and practices carried out here are described elaborately in Kalika Puran and Yogini Tantra. Garo and Khasi folktales assert that Kamakhya being their goddess (Bareh, 1967: 37-38). Historically it was first referred in 9th century epigraph of Vanamalavarmadeva. A lot about the temple is studied and written. It remained the seat of Shaktism and tantric practices it will not be exaggerating to say it is the centre of *Shakta-Tantric* traditions. According to Eliade (1971) 'Kamarupa' is the tantric country par excellence and one of the oldest 'seats of power' in south Asia, the ground of the goddess' yoni or sexual organ and the site of her menstruation. Assam is a symbolic 'womb' of tantra and continues to play a key role in lived practice and the popular imagining of tantra in south Asia to this day. The proposition is shared and supported by Eliot (1921) and Sircar (1973) also. Tantric practices and sacrifices carried at the site were elaborately discussed in the Yogini Tantra. The original temple seems build in tenth-eleventh century at the same time when the temples of Madan Kamdev, Singri and others were built. The cross-cultural negotiation of obscure past of Assam was the origin of yoni cult at Kamakhya. The linkage with Sati story seems outcome of such negotiation on apparatus of assimilation of already prevalent cult of yoni and Nilachala Mountain. Yoni puja was a fundamental requisite of *Kaula* ritual system leading to placement of yoni stone inside its Garbhagriha (Deka, 2004).



Figure 5: the yoni and Lajja Gauri, Kamakhya temple

3.3 Madan Kamdev Temple at Biahata

The temple complex of Madan Kamdev consists of fourteen plinths known so far. The leading temple of the complex and also the best preserved one is dedicated to Uma Maheswara. The sculptural theme of Madan Kamdev is an amalgamation of devotion, social and erotic. The lower panel is the continuous series of *Kirtimukha* and the upper one bears the depiction of scenes from daily life and erotic art. The number and typology of the various sculptures recovered from the site it is likely that the whole surface (outer face) of Garbha was treated with sculptures like the temples at Khajuraho however some of the sculptures were found and preserved and large number seems to have lost. The sculptures however are not in good shape with faces mutilated and eroded it is hard to identify the icons and attributes. The sculptures can be classified into Religious and devotional, Tantric and erotic, Decorative or architectural.

The sculptures reported from the site include sculptures of tantric and erotic affinities. These images include women sitting in squatting position (*malasana*), mithuna couple in *alingana* posture on kalpavriksha, Couples in various sexual (*maithuna*) postures on the *pabhaga* of the temple. The other images include a skeletal yogi wearing a thin dhoti, women looking mirror (*darpansundari*), humans indulging in bestiality and copulation, women dancing and playing musical instruments predominantly *mridanga* and *veena*, women doing household chores, grinding, bearded devotee doing penance. There is a sculpture which seems that a couple seem teaching a women the process of intercourse and being shy she is covering her eyes with her hands also women touching her genitals and a man touching her genitals. The decorative pieces include Bharwahaks, woman looking at mirror (*darpansundari*), *Kalpavrikshas*, Various *vyalas*, Female figures, *Dvara shakhas*.



Figure 6: erotic image, Madan Kamdev (image 1-16)

3.4 Pingaleswar

Pingaleswar is an archaeological site located in Pingaleswar village in Karara in Kamrup district located on a *debottar* (dedicated to gods) land. The temple is believed to be built by Indrapala in eleventh-twelfth century. Ahom king Siva Singha in 1731 and Gaurinath Singha in 1781 through copper plate made grants of land and essentials needed to the temple (Thakuria, 2018). The temple is presently in complete ruins and some pieces of architectural components are lying at the site suggesting robbery of stone temple components. The limited architectural components recovered includes door jambs and sill, pillar fragments, carved panel with sculpture, figures playing musical instruments, series of elephants,



vyalas on pillar, *bharwahak gandharbha*, dancing figures, lotus design, erotic images, frieze and bracket figures, several *angasikharas*, sculptures and relics dating to around 11th century. The components lying at the site presently is less than one percent even we consider it to be single temple similar in line with Madan Kamdev and Singri. The significant depictions at the site include women in combat posture. Well ornamented erotic figure of women are also recovered from the site. Though not many sculptures are survived and available for assessment the most interesting one being the image of dhyani Buddha flanked by two bodhi trees found at the Pingaleswar temple of tenth century. An erotic image likely copulation with an animal is depicted with Buddha sitting in dhyana mudra depicting his unruffled nature (fig. 7.9). The themes suggest onset of tantric elements in Buddhist and Shakta arts.

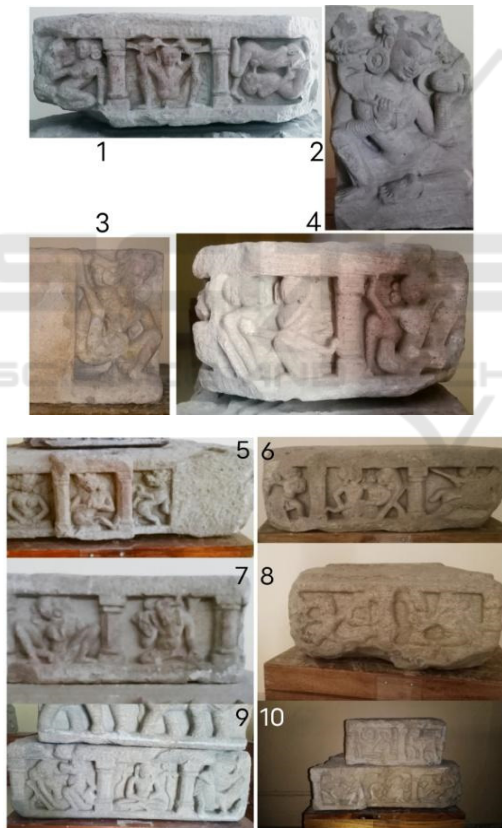


Figure 7: erotic images, Pingaleswar (image 1-10)

3.5 Jaljali

Jaljali is an archaeological site located on the northern side of river Brahmaputra. The site suddenly appeared while digging a tank. It was a temple structure crumbled possibly due to natural reasons.

The remains yielded during salvaging include the architectural components and some sculptures on the components of the structure. Various images of Vishnu reported from the site along with limited pottery. A dancing Chamunda also reported from the site.



Figure 8: 1 Erotic panel, 2 Dancing Chamunda, 3 Lady in Malasana

3.6 Siddheswar Temple (Sualkuchi)

Siddheswar Siva temple is located on the northern bank of Brahmaputra near Sualkuchi in Kamrup district built by Ahom king Siva Singha in 1718 (Thakuria, 2018). The temple is located close to the Puranic site of Hajo which is discussed elaborately in Kalika Puran and Yogini tantra. Like other Ahom temples the walls of this temple were adorned with the images of Vishnu, Mahisamardini, Narasimha, few female images etc. The most striking image of the site is the image of Lajja Gauri. The image is depicted sitting on stupa like component in a *malasana* position signifying subordination of Buddhism. There are also other sites where limited depiction often solitarily, specially animals in copulating positions has been reported from Deoparbat (Numaligarh), Mikirati (Dabaka), Rajbari (Hojai). Stone blocks bearing these depictions presently lying at the site therefore it is hard to ascertain whether these images were from the main structure or from the surrounding structures.



Figure 9: Lajja Gauri, Siddeswar, Sualkuchi



Figure 10: Rajbari (Hojai) 2 & 3 Mikirati (Dabaka)

Jagadhatri Dol or the Barpatra Dol is Ahom temple dedicated to goddess Jagadhatri located at Kalugaon, Sibsagar. It is a *pancharatha* temple with *do-sala* type mandapa. The outer wall of the *garbha* of the temple is adorned with images of Shakta divinities including mahavidyas and yoginis. Jagadhatri is an aspect of Parvati. Her worship and rituals are of tantric affiliation. She is seen as remover of ego and worldly desires.

There are some other images also reported from Assam (Figure 13) which cannot be termed erotic but has element of sexuality which includes mainly divinities like Uma-Maheswara in *lingodbhav mudra* (Devaka, ASM), Shiva from Deopani, a man in masturbating position (Madan Kamdev, DoA), two erotic amorous couple on temple component (Guwahati, ASM) and Harihara image *lingodbhav mudra* (Deopani, ASM).



Figure 11: 1 Kamala, 2 Vaisnavi, 3 Shiva, 4 Brahmani, 5 Kaumari, 6 Surya, 7 Matangi, 8 Indrani



Figure 12: Jagadhatri temple (1&2 Kaumari, 3 unknown, 4 Vishnu, 5&7 Mahadevi, 6 Chamunda, 8 Kamala, 9 Indra)



Figure 13.

4 CONCLUSION

The discourse of tantra is wide and varied. The meaning and pantheon of tantra differs region to region. However sexuality and violence had a special place in tantric art and imagery. Being known as cradle of tantra in Assam many prominent Shakta shrines are located. Assam being a land of superstition and tragedy it does not took long for the cult to take its root by making cross-cultural negotiation by means of assimilation and sanskritisation which it later tried to repair. The proliferation and assimilation of numerous local deities into the pantheon seems to be resultant of this negotiation. The finding of sculptures related to Shakta-Tantric tradition is indicative that cult was popular in Kamarupa and people have accepted the tradition though in nature it was esoteric and heterodoxical. Erotic sculptures were known from central and eastern India and are mostly attached with Shiva and Shakti shrines. Emergence of class of goddesses signifying disease, suffering, war, infant mortality, pedicide has significant meaning of social condition of contemporary society. Most of the forms of Shakti have violent and tragic aspects. It seems that many deities emerged and assimilated at the face of some tragedy and subversion of male-female tensions of contemporary society. The rise of divine feminine power and dramatic rise in goddess in medieval India seen as challenge to traditional models of womanhood as passive and docile in their intertwing of violent and erotic power. Tantric sexual rites (Tantra Yoga) also imagined as an internal union based on *kundalini* and *chakras*. Some tantras describe sexual rites for achieving enlightenment. These can be understood both literally and symbolically. Couple assume the role of deities in sexual union symbolically. A practitioner visualises this union within their own body. The erotic imagery not only plays an important role in tantra but also in mainstream Hinduism. According to Hindu belief, the creation of the universe is resultant of divine sexual union and the goals of a fulfilling and righteous life are not only duty (*dharma*), prosperity (*artha*), liberation (*moksha*) but also desire (*kama*).

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