



Representation of Folk Tantra: An enquiry into the *Rati Khowa* Sect in Assam

Nilam Kakati

PhD, Department of History University of Hyderabad; e-mail <kakatinilam@gmail.com>

KEYWORDS

Tantra, Folk Tantra, Rati Khowa sect, Vaishnavism, Assam, Kamakhya

ABSTRACT

In recent times, the category of folk Tantra has evolved in the study of the Tantric tradition. The category as initiated by June McDaniel in her work is applied for the case study of the Bengal region in India. The new category marks a sharp distinction from the classical Tantra. The study attempts to explore the category further and expand it into the area of Assam in India. The Rati Khowa sect grew after the schism in the popular Vaishnavite movement in Assam. The sect is of esoteric nature which displays the amalgamation of Vaishnavite and Tantric elements. It could be seen in a few districts of Assam. The rituals practised by the sect comes under the left- hand path of Tantra and thus are not approved by the societal norms. Rituals are open only to the participants practised in secret and excluding the outsiders completely. The study will attempt to view the Rati Khowa sect as a folk tantric category. In the process, it will also examine that the category of folk Tantra in Assam is dissimilar to the category of folk Tantra in Bengal as viewed by June McDaniel.

Introduction

The Indic religious setting comprises distinct traditions quite peculiar in their understanding and way of life. ‘Tantra’ also holds a minor spot in the setting. Tantra as a tradition has grown stronger since 7th C.C.E. “From roughly the seventh to the thirteenth century, the thought, ritual practice, and institutional presence of tantric traditions played a major role in the life of South Asians....Tantra first arose as an esoteric tradition for initiated elites seeking liberation (*mokṣa*) or extraordinary powers (*siddhi*), but it later became deeply involved with royal power and with India’s public temple cult (and the political and agrarian expansion linked to it), making tantric ritual, institutions, and ideals of sacred power—epitomized in the figure of the tantric *yogī/guru*—a fundamental part of mainstream Indian social, religious, and political life.” (Burchett, 2019, 49-50). However, its earliest appearance could be seen in texts like the *Rig Veda* and the *Atharva Veda*.

Its origin, meaning and definition were always a matter of debate among various scholars as they could not be pointed out specifically. The vital facets regarding Tantra being uncertain, it was frequently synonymized with terms like evil, dark and obscure both by Western and Indian scholars during the early part of the 19th century. Scholars primarily viewed Tantra through the lens of sexual rituals and blood sacrifice. These rituals were included under the left- hand path of Tantra, and this myopic view

of Tantra aided in displaying it as a misunderstood aspect of India religious setting influenced by the prejudiced understanding.¹

State of the art understanding of Tantra has led to the coining of terms like Neo- Tantra, Folk Tantra etc. This study will explore the category of Folk Tantra in relation to the *Rati Khowa*² sect in Assam. June McDaniel have used the term folk Tantra in her work “Offering Flowers, Feeding Skulls: Popular Goddess Worship in West Bengal” (2004). She is of the opinion that Tantra can be divided into two types: folk and classical. She has defined the term placing it within the geographical area of the Bengal region. However, this study will put it in the Assam region, which is situated next to Bengal.

Objectives

This study has a two-fold objective: first is to make an enquiry into the esoteric *Rati Khowa* sect in Assam by viewing it through the category of folk Tantra and its implication in recent times and the second is to examine the category of folk Tantra itself and observe its significance if any in filling the gap for the reading of Tantra.

Methodology

The study will be based on the reading of field works conducted previously by scholars, oral sources on the *Rati Khowa* sect in Assam, and also on primary sources including key Tantric texts like Kalika Purana (10th C/13th C) and Yogini Tantra (16th C) composed within the geographical area of Assam.

Discussion

McDaniel has established the category of folk Tantra which marks a sharp distinction from the classical Tantra. She is of the opinion that

In folk or popular Tantra, the emphasis is upon ritual practice, direct experience, and pragmatic results. The goddess gives supernatural abilities (siddhi) and power (shakti), and she appears to the practitioner in the forest or burning ground... Folk Tantra is largely an oral tradition, in which the term “Tantra” refers primarily to a practice or sadhana. There is little emphasis on reading texts, and many folk tantrikas are illiterate. When texts are used, the ritual instructions are not interpreted in a symbolic manner; they tend to be taken literally, and the rituals are physically acted out. However, due to the lack of texts and tradition, much of popular Tantra seems to be based on a sort of trial-and-error approach.” (2004, 10).

The narrative for folk Tantra as put forward by McDaniel could be viewed in Assam since the medieval period. Institutions like the Kamakhya temple near Guwahati and the *Kesai Khati* temple in Sadiya could be pointed as few instances. Tantric rituals and practices were carried out in the Kamakhya temple following the left-hand path, which included ceremonies like sacrifice and use of meat and wine. In the case of the *Kesai Khati* temple, it could be viewed in the ceremony of the human sacrifice carried out within the premises of the temple. However, this study will not deal with these institutions,

1 Some portions have been taken from the unpublished PhD thesis titled “Tantric Religious Milieu of the Kamakhya Temple: Analysis of Practices and Patronage Patterns (14th – 16th Centuries A.D.)” by Nilam Kakati, Department of History, University of Hyderabad, India, 2019.

2 Rati is night in Assamese and khowa is eating. Thus, it implies a ritual which is conducted during the night which included eating.

but with an esoteric sect which was an amalgamation of Vaishnavite and tantric traditions.

The Vaishnavite movement (16th C) in medieval Assam was the most important phenomena in the religious setting.

There were two phases in the growth of Vaishnavism in Assam. In the early phase (from the epic age to the twelfth century A.D.) it was more or less a queer mixture of the Puranic and Tantric faiths, and in the later (fifteenth- sixteenth centuries) it was principally based on the doctrine of Bhakti or monotheism as propounded by Shankardeva... The Bhagavata tradition in Vaishnavism which virtually emerged in the early centuries of the Christian era with an emphasis on devotion or Bhakti of the worshipper for an individual deity and gained ground in the post- Gupta period attained greater popularity in Medieval Assam, Bengal and Orissa. (Singh, 2009, 103).

In the 16th C, proselytization by a Vaisnavite apostle Shankardeva, took place through the medium of 'namasamkirtana' which involved collective chanting and direct homage to the deity. The followers of Shankardeva paid little attention to caste, were willing to accept a Sudra as their head priest and were allowed to eat the flesh of domesticated animals. The beginning of 'namasamkirtana' is to be found in the 8th C Sankara Narayana image inscription. The Deopani Vishnu image inscription dated in the 9th C mentions that the twice-born classes, along with the Sudras and women, can worship Vishnu. This inscription also contains a reference to bhaktas which implies that the cult of Bhakti was gaining ground as early as the 9th C. (Lahiri, 1991, 128).

One of the primary aspects of Shankardeva's Vaisnava movement was his intimidating attitude towards the Tantric Shakta tradition, which had been prevalent in Assam since long and it included animal and human sacrifices and *panchamakara* in its ritual practices. He had a shallow opinion of it and regarded it as a debased form of adoration where women were employed as items for sexual enjoyment in the name of the Tantric cult. (Borkakoti, 2008, 2). He made a great effort to discontinue these practices and preached against them. However, in spite of Shankardev's attempt to discontinue them, these practices could be viewed to have crept into the Vaisnava movement at its later phase taking the shape of the *Rati-Khowa* sect.

The sect grew after a schism in the institution of the Satra long after the demise of Shankardeva. The Satra, as an institution established under the Vaishnavite movement, became a vital centre for the propagation of the religious ideas. It also acted as space which developed art, culture under the banner of the movement.

Vaishnava establishments of Assam are generally called satras and not maths. This name seems to have been taken from the Bhagavata- Purana where it occurs in numerous places... The word Satra was possibly applied in Assam Vaishnavism to mean an assembly of devotees (where things about Vishnu and Krsna, who was for them no other than the Brahman or Paramatman were discussed) in an analogy of brahma satra. (Neog, 1965, 310-11)

The institution of the Satra, along with the Vaishnava movement, gained popularity and was established as an eminent institution in association with the movement. In a way, this institution represented the Vaishnava movement. However, like every other religious tradition, it had to pass through the irregular path of schism too. The Satra had to face schism after the demise of its initiator Shankardeva and his favourite disciple Madhavdeva.

The term Samhati was employed in the sense of groups of Assam Vaishnavism of the schism of the order. We find the use of the word only in the post- Sankrite Vaisnava literature... In early

biographies, this division was never termed as Samhati, and we find the word Sampradaya or simply Samprada instead of Samhati. (Goswami, 1988, 34).

The beginning of the schism in the order could be observed after the demise of Sankardeva, which led to the question of the succession after him. It further intensified with time and resulted in the schism of the order into four divisions, which were “i) the followers of Damodara- Brahma Samhati, ii) the followers of Mathuradasa Padma Ata and others- Nika Samhati, iii) the followers of the grandsons of Sankara and their successors- Purusa Samhati and iv) Gopal Ata’s followers- Kala Samhati.” (Neog, 1965, 154). The schism in the order led to the weakening of the primary pillar of the movement. However, it also initiated the process of the establishment of Satras in various parts of Assam, but with different doctrines under the banner of each Samhati. This schism could also be viewed as one of the factors of the downfall of the Ahom Kingdom. As Mayamara-Satra affiliated to *Kala Samhati* led a revolt against Ahoms, which destabilized the roots of the Ahom Kingdom.

With the subsequent schism in the Vaishnava movement certain ambiguous religious practices crept into it. These practices were of esoteric nature, and represented a section or group of marginal observers who do not appear much in the historical narratives. The *Rati-Khowa* tradition represents one of such esoteric sects which developed within the Vaishnava movement in Assam. It originated in the affiliation to Kala Samhati which displayed a liberal attitude. “The Gosains propagating the esoteric cults of Rati-Seva or Rati-Khowa belong to a religious sect called *Kal-Samhati* or *Kal-Ghati*. The founder of *Kal-Samhati* was Gopal Ata.” (Gogoi, 1976, 46). Gopal Ata had twelve chief disciples, and the foremost among them was Bar Yadumani. “Of the chief preachers’ Bar Yadumani’s favourite disciple was Ramai or Ramdev. It is said that Ramdev was the first Gosain to propagate the cult of the night- worshipping in Upper Assam through his agents.” (Gogoi, 1976, 46). “For the liberal view in religious matters, some sort of esoteric observances probably entered into the sect in later times.” (Goswami, 1988, 40). “The Kala Samhati, originating from Gopaladeva of Bhavanipur has some such qualities in it as would commend themselves as democratic in character.” (Neog, 1965, 155). However, ambiguous religious practices could also be viewed in the other Samhitas.

Barua makes an attempt to associate the *Rati-Khowa* sect to Buddhist Tantrism that was prevalent in Pre- Ahom Assam. He writes “It might be that Buddhism visited Assam in its declining phases. It can be established from the isolated images of Buddha discovered and the existence of sects as *Rati Khowa Sampradai* that can be connected with the declining phases of Buddhism, that once this religion of the ‘Enlightened one’ prevailed in this country.” (Barua, 1956, 57). “The *Rati Khowa* or *Purnadhariya* sect of Assam, which continued till recent times, had its origin undoubtedly in this system which was evidently a mixture of Tantric-Buddhism and Tribal Customs.” (Dutta, 1990, 84). Gogoi, on the other hand, holds a different opinion regarding the affiliation of the *Rati Khowa* sect. He affiliates it to the Tantric Saivite tradition.

The present-day Tai Ahom have racial unity but are socially and religiously disintegrated by sectarian Hinduism. About half of the community are Tantric Saivites who may be called Night-worshippers. The members of the sect are known as Purnadhari devotees or Bhaktas who hold on to the perfect one. They are also called Barkhelia Bhaktas, meaning worshippers belonging to the Great sect. But ordinarily, people refer to them as Rati Khowa Bhaktas or night worshippers from the fact that they perform their ceremony of worshipping only at night in strict secrecy. (1976, 42-3).

Different opinions and arguments could be viewed regarding the source of the *Rati-Khowa* sect by various scholars. However, it could not be overlooked that it was affiliated with the Samhatis of the Vaishnava movement and was a part of the Bhakti cult which had distinct features of Tantric elements in it.

The *Rati-Khowa* sect represents secret and esoteric practices which are carried out in the night in secluded spaces. It is not performed for public view; only participants of the ritual were allowed to attend it. Thus sources for these are not available in abundance. The participants also were not outspoken regarding the rituals, which are transmitted orally from generations. Songs and Padas were available in association with the rituals which gave a symbolic impression of it.

Cinia bhakati dhara mur bandhava

Cinia bhakati dhara

Hare parvati rahasya bhakati

*Ihak sar kari dhara*³

The nature of the practices of the secret and esoteric rituals vary from place and modes. They could be categorized under various types:

Gopidhara, Gopi- khela, Bara- Sewa, Bati- bhagiya or Bati- pariya, Carikaraniya, Digambariya, Dangariya- Sewa, Kewaliya, Katani, Karanipatiya, Lakhimpuriya, Madhupuriya, Mayamariya, Purnabhagiya, Phuibariya, Sudhabhagiya Salitalagowa and Sibasagariya practices fall under the generic form of Rati-Khowa. (Dutta, 1990, 89).

Rituals included sexual union, wine, meat, and fish which display a similar depiction of the *panchmakara* of left-hand path of Tantra.

They worship with offerings of meat and homemade liquor (saj) prepared from rice, the meat being of fowls or pork... Beginning with the Sadhu all the chief devotees in the assembly drink from the same cup the liquor it contains. Women devotees offer the drink and meat to every male Bhakat... In a covered enclosure called dhol- ghar (secret chamber) a Bhakat who aspires to be a Karani is examined by a naked woman. All other men and women having access to this dhol ghar including doorkeepers have to be naked. (Gogoi, 1976, 43). *“Usual Rati- khowa forms of ritual are 1. Salita- logua, 2. Dangaria Seva and 3. Bar Seva in which the select group of devotees strip their persons of all apparel before they proceed to perform their worship with devotional songs and dance.* (Gogoi, 1976, 49).

The rituals are conducted under a guru who has complete knowledge of the practices. He is addressed as Sadhu or Purna- Swami, i.e. someone who has gained complete knowledge. “As interpreted by some followers of the *Rati-Khowa* cult, the sadhu must be a ‘*jitendriya*’ (controller of five organs) man, who can subdue all passions of life... The first stage of the function is termed as ‘*Tel-karani*.’” (Dutta, 1990, 105-6). The first stage is considered to be the most vital; it examines the controlling power of the sexual urge. The monk who could successfully overcome this urge was promoted to the higher-order and was capable of presiding the rituals.

A female nun other than the sadhu’s wife was designated to take her place beside the *sadhu*. Genital organs of both the *sadhu* and nun were the chief elements of adoration during the rituals. “One very curious aspect is that the genetic organ of the Sadhu is considered as a manifestation of Narayana.” (Dutta, 1990, 108). The *sadhu* and nun are adorned, represented as a manifestation of Krishna and Radha. Homemade liquor or saj is vital for the accomplishment of the rituals and are consumed by the Sadhu and all the devotees who attend the ceremony. Sexual unions are included in the ceremony of sects like the *Gopi-khela* and *Bara-Sewa*. However, the ceremony of *Tel-karani* was shared by all sects. The sect is still a part of the religious setting in contemporary Assam.

3 Yugut Vicar (devotional songs). It says Know the bhakti. This secret worship Rati- seva with meat and drink offering is of Hara and Parvati.

[The] Rati- Khowa is in vogue today among a large section of the Ahom people of Sibsagar and Lakhimpur districts and also among the Miris and Kacharis. Satras propagating this cult were established mostly in the sub-divisions of Sibsagar in Upper Assam, but Satradhikars are non- Ahom, mostly high caste Hindu Sudra Gasains." (Gogoi, 1976, 47).

The Vaishnava faith as propagated by Shankardeva was of composite nature, which discarded practices like drinking alcohol and were against the blood sacrifice. But the dominant religious setting prior to its establishment was composed of the said elements. The *Rati-khowa* sect evolved blending some elements of both the faiths. The sect established a space where Tantric tradition could be continued but with the veil of the Vaishnava faith. The *Rati-howa* sect could be viewed as the tool which was adopted to domesticate Tantra within the ambit of the Vaishnava movement. Tantra representing an enduring part in the religious setting and was not easy to ignore. It had to be assimilated in the popular religious setting, i.e. the Vaishnava movement. Thus the said sect incorporated tantric rituals and practices. However, it could not discard the esoteric nature of it. As the esoteric nature of Tantra is what defines Tantra.

The *Rati-Khowa* sect of Assam aptly fits the category of folk Tantra as defined by McDaniel. The sect could be identified more by its practices than the literary or written traditions. Moreover, not many written records were available for the sect, and tradition is handed down orally from generation to generation. The sect consisted of a closed group of members and elaborate details regarding the rituals were not made available to outsiders. Additionally, the rituals comprising the use of wine and sexual rituals places it in the category of popular Tantra.

In the case of Assam, the category of folk Tantra stands out as a prominent factor. It initiated with the institution of Kamakhya since antiquity. Kamakhya is frequently claimed as a central Shakti Pitha. It is the space where the *Yoni* of Devi Sati fell. The myth related to the origin of the Shakti Pithas is too well known to repeat it again. Kamakhya is regarded as the yoni goddess symbolizing the life-giving power.

Sati's Yoni or vulva is located in the inner sanctum or garbhagriha of the Kamakhya temple. It takes the form of a fissure in a large rock, often filled with water from an underground spring, and worshipped as the goddess in her manifestation as Kamakhya. The Kalika Purana, a work composed in Assam to glorify Kamakhya, provides a description of the cave and Yoni.... Originally there was no figurative image of the goddess Kamakhya; however, recently a popular print was installed near the yoni chamber to give pilgrims a complete image of the goddess before encountering the aniconic Yoni. (Ramos, 2017, 45-6).

Kamakhya was initiated as a folk deity by the aboriginal group of people known as Kiratas.

Before the advent of Naraka the aboriginal Kiratas of Pragjyoisa were basically the followers of the Saiva cult. But at the same time, the Shakti worship was prevalent among a considerable section of them. The mother Goddess or Devi Kamakhya manifested in the form of Yoni symbol and representing Shakti or procreative force of the female was an object of veneration for those Kiratas, who were the devotees of the creed. (Singh, 2008, 279).

It was Naraka who, after having after conquering Pragjyotisha and its original inhabitants, the Kiratas brought to prominence in the aboriginal cult—the cult of the mother goddess worshipped in the Yoni symbol as opposed to the cult of Shiva worshipped in the phallic symbol. No wonder the Kamakhya was an embodiment of the fusion of both Aryan and non- Aryan beliefs and practices." (Singh, 2008, 280).

Conclusion

Thus, it could be viewed that the category of folk Tantra has been prominent in Assam since antiquity. The adoration of Devi in the form of Yoni in the institution of Kamakhya provided a more legitimate claim to its tantric background. The folk character in the institution is enhanced when the initial adoration was carried out by an aboriginal group of people.

Therefore to conclude, it can be said that Assam as a region has influenced by the tantric tradition since long, and can also be considered as a prominent instance of folk Tantra, the category established by June McDaniel. The institution of the Kamakhya adorned as the yoni goddess stands out as the initial illustration of folk Tantra. This category was then expanded and integrated into the Vaishnavite movement taking the shape of the *Rati-Khowa* sect. The *Rati-Khowa* sect as an esoteric tradition is more identified by its practices than by any literary feature. This sect comprises a vital aspect in the religious setting of Assam, which symbolizes the domestication of Tantra. However, it could not discarded its esoteric nature, as it is what defines Tantra.

The category of folk Tantra in the case of Assam is a part of its cultural matrix and is inseparable from the same, sharing a common identity. It has continued since antiquity in the instance of the institution of the Kamakhya and it exists in recent times in the instance of the *Rati Khowa* sect.

References

- Barua, Hem. (1956) *'The Red River and The Blue Hill of the State of Assam'* Lawyers Book Stall, Guwahati.
- Borkakoti, Sanjib Kumar. (2008) *'Srimanta Shankar deva as a feminist,'* 14th annual conference of women and children, Harmoti, Assam.
- Burchett, Patton E. (2019) *'A Genealogy of Devotion Tantra, Yoga, and Sufism in North India'* Columbia University Press, Columbia.
- Dutta, Narendra Nath (1990) *'Obscure Religious Practices among Some Vaisnavas Of Assam'* Punthi Pustak, Calcutta.
- Gogoi, Padmeswar. (1976) *'Tai- Ahom Religions and Customs'* Publication Board, Guwahati.
- Goswami, Kesavananda Dev. (1988) *'Post- Sankardeva Vaisnava Faith and Culture of Assam'* Sri Satguru Publications, Delhi.
- Lahiri, Nayanjot. (1991) *'Pre- Ahom Assam: Studies in the inscriptions of Assam Between the 5th and the 13th Centuies A.D.'* Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd. Delhi.
- McDaniel, June. (2004) *'Offering Flowers, Feeding Skulls: Popular Goddess Worship in West Bengal'* Oxford University Press, New York.
- Neog, Maheswar. (1965) *'Early History of the Vaisnava Faith and Movement in Assam: Sankardeva and his Times'* Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi.
- Ramos, Imma. (2017) *'Pilgrimage and Politics in Colonial Bengal: The Myth of the Goddess Sati'*, Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, New York.
- Singh, G.P (2008) *'Researches Into the History and Civilization of the Kirātas'* Gyan Publishing House, New Delhi.
- Singh, Girish Prasad. (2009) *'Historical research into some aspects of the culture and civilization of North East,'* Gyan publishing House, New Delhi.