Menstruating and Maternalized Bodies: The Performance of 'Ideal' in Assam's Ambubachi *Mela* and the *Tuloni Biya*

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This is to certify that the thesis titled **Menstruating and Maternalized Bodies: The Performance of 'Ideal' in Assam's Ambubachi *Mela* and the *Tuloni Biya*** submitted by Ms. **Prerna Pradhan** in partial fulfillment to the requirements for award of degree of **Ph.D.** of Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, has not been previously submitted in part or in full for any other degree of this university or any other university/institution.

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Acknowledgements

This research is an outcome of my profound fascination towards the socio-ritual construction of gender. While an unplanned visit to Kathmandu in Nepal pushed me to the world of Kumari (living goddess) worship that resulted in my MPhil dissertation, I found myself in a never-ending thirst to explore more of goddess cults in South Asia. This eventually led me to conduct a research closer home in Assam. Kamakhya worship has been a familiar aspect of religious life in Assam, but often the easily accessible spaces are the least explored one. Studying Kamakhya opened doors to the conceptualization of menstruating and maternalized bodies that has become my academic and personal endeavour all these years. It has been an honour as well as a challenge to bring forth the discussion on subjects that are often pushed to the fray or not questioned in conventional societies that has already mapped the boundaries of social acceptance. Being the first person and a woman in my entire family to write a PhD thesis itself comes with a lot of responsibility and expectations. Over the years, my research has helped me evolve as a person, to question and critique, more importantly put myself in that awkward fence of inside/outside radar. This could not have been possible had I not left the comfort of my home and community at a very young age for higher studies. In this regard, my alma mater Jawaharlal Nehru University has had a bigger influence in the way I put my point across. It is not the university, but the conversations I engaged with here taught me to raise questions is the first healthy step in academics. I would like to acknowledge here I owe this thesis to several people I came across that materialized this into writing. I would like to thank each and every one, no matter how remotely they have assisted me in my research as each and every voice matters. But there are some without whose support I would not have been able to conclude this research work.

There were times when I was not sure if this thesis would even see the light of the day as the past three years have been testing and difficult for me and my family. We have had our share of darkest of the times and research took a backseat as I was at the verge of a nervous breakdown. I spent a good number of months back home because of my mother's illness, a strong woman who has fought her way back after spending several months in ICU. Honestly, I would be lying if I said I didn't think of dropping out of my PhD because of all the stress my family was going through. But even then, this research also became my sole reason that helped

me fight back negative thoughts. This motivated me and drove me get back to my research as soon as she showed little signs of recovery. Hence, more than a case study my research became my therapy.

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…For Aama, Aapa and to my dearest little brother Trifon who left us too soon. I believe you are in a better place…

Introduction

Menstruating and Maternalized Bodies: The Performance of 'Ideal' in Assam's Ambubachi *Mela* and the *Tuloni Biya*

> *Daksa, the progenitor of people performed a great sacrifice ritual to which he invited one and all living beings, except his daughter Sati and his discarded son-in-law, Shiva. Unable to bear the insult, Sati arrived at her father's house and insinuated herself at the sacrificial fire. Enraged Shiva carried her dead body and started dancing uncontrollably shaking the entire universe. Eventually, Vishnu decided to stop Shiva's dance of destruction by dismembering Sati's body into fifty-one pieces with his discus. As a result, each piece fell in different places giving birth to Sakti pithas (seat of power). After Sati's Yoni had fallen on the hill, the hill turned blue and hence was named Nilachal (the blue hill). The Yoni no sooner had it fallen on the hill turned into stone, and Shiva himself finding no corpse on his shoulder, sat down manifested in the phallic stone.* (Shastri, 2005:284; Patel, 1994:79; Urban, 2001:787-788).

The narrative of Kamakhya temple's *yoni* may actually direct towards Sati narrative, but in Assam Kamakhya is worshipped instead of Sati--in different other forms. Kamakhya is predominantly deified in several forms of Mother Goddess, *yoni*[1] goddess and menstruating goddess. This thesis attempts to explore the corporeality of menstruating and maternal bodies constructed through ritual, performance and social performativity. It intends to study conceptualization of these bodies from the interiors of Kamakhya temple to the interiors of domestic spheres; the performance of rituals that begin with menstruation and ends with motherhood in the 'gendered everyday' of Kamakhya and Assamese Hindu women in Assam. Thinking through menstruating bodies not only in terms of physicality, but also as a site of performance, the study intends to emphasize on the idealized motherhood as a contested space.

Assamese Hindu community comprises of *bamuniya* and *sankariya* sects. *Bamuniya* refers to the Assamese Hindu who are worshippers of deities like Kamakhya, Manasa, Kali, Durga and employ a *bamun* (Brahmin priest) to officiate in any religious event. *Sankariya* or *Ekesaraniya* are the followers of *ekesaran naamdharma* (reverence to one God) in order to worship Krishna (See

[1] *Yoni* can be translated as vulva, vagina, generative organ.

Nath, 1938; Kakati, 2004; Neog, 2008), a religio-philosophy propagated by Neo-Vaishnavite *Mahapurush*[2] Sankardeva[3] late fifteenth century onward. It has been inferred that Vaishnavism must have existed even before Sankardeva as early as the twelfth century Pala dynasty under the patronage of Dharmapala (see Nath, 1938), but it is only Sankardeva who shaped and brought Neo-Vaishnavism in the religious map of Assam. The prayers are offered to the holy scripture of Sankardeva's Bhagavata derived from Bhagavata Purana at *sattra* (monastic institutions) and *naam ghar* or *kirtan ghar* (prayer house). It is to be noted here that Assamese Hindu community, irrespective of their sect affiliations often offer prayer at *naam ghar*, but it is only the *bamuniyas* who worship multiple female deities.

What began as a study to explore the menstruating body of Kamakhya, I could not resist the temptation to go beyond the temple site and view the socio-cultural construction of menstruating bodies in their social reality. Moreover, the identity of Kamakhya as a mother figure in the ritualized space gave way to include the concept of maternalized bodies in the social sphere. I attempt to put forward the cases of two mothers who menstruate as well: the conceptual mother and the social mother. This work focuses on two events-Ambubachi *mela* held at Kamakhya temple and a post-menarche symbolic marriage ritual ceremony called *tuloni biya* or *shanti biya* observed by the Assamese Hindu community of Assam across castes.

Situated atop Nilachal hill, the Kamakhya temple in the city of Guwahati, Assam, a state nestled in the North-Eastern India, draws devotees from several parts of India and the neighbouring countries. It is always bustled with visitors in any time of the year, while the annual festival Ambubachi *mela* sees the largest gathering. Etymologically, the term Kamakhya probably shares its origin among the hill tribes (Khasi, Garo) (See Kakati, 2004). The temple is dated back to the tenth century and its construction and reconstruction has always been interspersed with myths and narratives.[4] Another distinct feature of Kamakhya is that the goddess does not manifest in an image or idol, but in the shape of a block of stone believed to be her *yoni*. The stone is always smeared with vermillion and is kept moist with the help of a natural spring. The ritual performances and

[2] The respect and popularity of Sankardeva gave him honorific title of *Mahapurush* (great person) in Assam.
[3] It is believed that Sankardeva was born in a non-Brahmin caste of Kayastha Bhuyan family of Sakta worshippers.
[4] It was destructed several times probably due to Muslim invasion or natural disaster and rebuilt by various kings across the centuries. The present temple is claimed to be rebuilt by Naranarayana, the king of Koch Bihar in the year 1665 (Kakati, 2004:37).

nitya puja (daily worship) are offered to the symbolic *yoni* through the *sparxan*[5] ritual (touching the *yoni* stone) instead of the conventional *darshan* or *darxan* (viewing the goddess).

Two icons (fig. 5 and 6) at Kamakhya temple that contributed greatly to the conceptual articulation of this thesis are as follows: The first icon is that of a woman profoundly positioned just outside the temple door with exposed breast and vagina smeared with vermillion in a squatting position often likened to goddess Kamakhya (very similar to Lajja Gauri[6], but with a face) suggesting menstruating, rather than giving birth. The other icon is that of a mother figure sitting in a relaxed cross-legged position, suckling her baby from her visible breast, located on the both sides of one of the exit gates. These two images encapsulate the immediate identity of Kamakhya and other women in their gendered everydayness, thereby lending the fundamental ground work for this research.

The research examines if the menstrual space is produced for women's 'protection and rest' or in order to map the 'pure' from the 'contaminated' bodies. During Ambubachi *mela*, Kamakhya's menstruating body becomes a performative space to execute and represent *sakti* (cosmic power). It intends to question if menstruation performs the means to display Kamakhya's power or attempts to manufacture a static and idealized identity of motherhood for the social sphere to emulate. It proposes to bring forth the concept of 'desexualized gaze' and interrogate if it is a political performative to dilute the concept of womanhood and reconstruct Kamakhya and women as essentially asexual maternal bodies. This brings into discussion how the symbolic performances be it metaphorical-motherhood or symbolic-marriage reflects the transitory spaces that further materializes into performed selves and embodiment of social ideas. The flow of blood be it the menstrual blood flowing out of the goddess or the sacrificed animals' blood offered to the goddess display a cycle of *sakti* between the goddess and the world. The research interrogates this 'display' and examine where is the *sakti* manifested-in the *pitha*, in the menstruating and the maternalized

[5]In Assamese language terms like *sparxan* is pronounced like 'kh' instead of 's' as in *sparsan*. However, the forced stress of 'kh' is replaced by soft-sounding 'x' as in *Xattriya* dance. The same goes for other italicised terms that has 'x' in it like *darxan*, *baxumati* and so on.

[6] The figure of Lajja Gauri is always shown as squatting in a birthing position exposing her breasts and vagina but the image does not reveal a face as her head is often replaced by a lotus icon (also known as *Kamalamukhi*, the lotus-faced). The sculpture at Kamakhya displays the face clearly and hence it is still debatable if the sculpture is another variant of Lajja Gauri or a different identity altogether. All the images provided in the thesis are taken by the author, unless not mentioned.

bodies of goddess/women, in the split female and animal bodies, in the officiating priests, in the male gods, in the constructed fierceness of Kamakhya or elsewhere?

The annual festival Ambubachi *mela* takes place in the month of Asad (June-July), while the temple remains closed for three days, the festival is celebrated in the periphery of the temple. During these three days the *yoni* stone is covered with *angabastra* or *raktabastra* (red-coloured cloth or blood cloth), not accessible to anyone. It is only in the fourth day the temple is reopened and the visitors throng to seek Kamakhya's blessing by touching the stone. The festival culminates after the *angabastra* is cut into small pieces and distributed amongst the devotees as *prasad* (Goddess' blessing).

For a long period, Assam has been regarded as the practicing ground for *sakta* and *tantric* practices that have successfully raised curiosity among scholars. Hugh B. Urban refers to Assam as 'the most vibrant heartland of Tantra, if not the original homeland of Tantra' (2001: 778). In the midst of these ambivalent, inaccessible, but yet inviting metaphysical undertaking, what stands out is the Kamakhya temple. Major tantric scripture like Kalika Purana (KP), an eleventh to twelfth century[7] work describes the worship of *yoni*, the sacrificial blood and her menstruation stressing on a *sakta* lineage for Kamakhya. Another sixteenth century tantric work Yogini Tantra (YT) places Kamakhya within the institution of motherhood by focusing on the 'creativity of Eros than its sexual newness' (Baruah, 2015:67).

Scholars like Banikanta Kakati, Hugh B. Urban, Kali Prasad Goswami have extensively argued how the identity of Kamakhya has transformed with time.[8] However, Kakati's work *Mother Goddess Kamakhya* vaguely mentions Kamakhya as menstruating goddess and neither is there a passing reference to Ambubachi *mela*. Even though the existing studies have discussed the annual

[7] The date is debatable as many scholars argue it is an eight-century product, while others assert that it is a fourteenth century. While few have suggested that there might be two volumes at different time periods. (Urban, 2001:791)

[8]It has been argued time and again that Kamakhya has been brought within the folds of Hinduized identity with the aim of royal patronage and territorial unification. However, one cannot deny that the negotiation with indigenous fertility cults has left some residual traces behind in the shape of identity remnants which is evidently visible in her identity construction. For instance, matriarchal tribes like Khasi and Garo have a strong presence of women in the social space and fertility deities had a bigger role to play. It is crucial to investigate if there is any presence of fertility cults in these tribes in the contemporary period and explore the dynamics between women and the deities within the tribes who have been converted to Christianity to a large extent. Likewise, it is also significant to study the status of the universal deity outside the tribes and her residual remnants after being assimilated within the temple walls.

festival, however the focus is on the celebration, the animal sacrifice and the participation of large number of devotees and so on. They do not offer a closer look at Kamakhya, her menstruated body, the female bodies and the performance of these bodies in several social and ritual spaces. Menstruation thus is still explored in an 'anecdotal fashion'[9] and not as a central theme in these spaces. As a result, the *angabastra* still covers the *yoni* and the domestic spaces are still unexplored.

On a panoramic view Mother Goddess cults and *yoni* worships are spread across the Indian subcontinent, however my work will attempt to study the performative meaning of the symbolic menstruation of Kamakhya and the actual menstruation of women in Assam. Using the term autoethnography, Mitoo Das (2008, 2014) has widely written on observance of menstruation in Assamese Hindu households, during *Tuloni Biya* and on monthly basis, and the constant purity/impurity debate that surrounds around it. Referring to Kamakhya, Das argues that the construction of the mother goddess functions as an example set for the women to follow. Her work discusses self and community, but yet does not trace the private body located within the domestic space that my work intends to do. While she does speak about her own menarche and menstrual experience, but the presence of those silent codified bodies and gendered selves within these domestic spaces still need a deeper intervention and discussion.

Kamakhya temple itself bears witness to the fact that its corporeal construction is created in a way to give an idea of a female body with the symbolic experience of birthing. For instance, visitors or devotees have to enter the sanctum sanctorum *garba griha* (womb-chamber) followed by steps that take them to the *yoni* symbol which gives an overall experience of taking birth through her while taking a tour of her maternal body. Use of props like the *yoni*, the red cloth, the temple door, veiling of *yoni*, animal sacrifice and pilgrims' worship create her aura and presence turning the periphery of the temple as the central performative site. Even though it seems as if the goddess constructs the socio-cultural ecology through her powerful presence, it comes out clearly how the devotees control the sacred space and role playing. This suggests how the maternal identity of Kamakhya is also a social construct. What is worth-noting is that despite being a menstruation

[9] Although Denise L. Lawrence (1982: 85) discusses this in reference to 'women's views' towards menstruation are often not taken into consideration, whereas in the given case the study of menstruation is overlooked in general and remain in the periphery of discussion, academic or otherwise.

festival Ambubachi does not invite female priestess or practitioners to initiate the worship rituals in a largely masculinized Kamakhya temple space. In a space like this, it is ironical that the *yoni puja* (worship of female genital) takes place presided over by *mul pujari*s. However, Ambubachi is also observed as *xaat* by *bamuniya* Assamese where the community goes through the menstrual spell and women practice restrictions so as to provide rest to the menstruating *Baxumati* or *Prithvi* (Mother Earth).

The *tuloni biya* or *shanti biya* on the other hand, is observed to celebrate the post-menarche ritual as the attainment of womanhood where the initiate is symbolically married to sun or plantain tree[10] (symbolic-husband). Women of all age-groups and girls participate in celebrating the *tuloni* ritual of the girl. *Tuloni* implies elevated to a higher status, *shanti* denotes the relief of the parents to know that their daughter is capable of getting married and become mother and *biya* means marriage (Das, 2014:49). As soon as the girl menstruates, which is referred as *suwa*[11], she is confined to a room or a makeshift room for a period of seven days and during this period she is not allowed to show her face, see, meet, touch or even speak to any male. She becomes untouchable as the menstrual blood is believed to desacralize her body. On the seventh day, the priest predicts her conjugal life by calculating the date and time of her menarche and the girl is purified in a bathing ritual in the presence of her symbolic husband and dressed up like a new bride. It is then followed by *biya naam* (marriage songs) or *ai naam* (devotional songs) performed by women and a feast.[12]

The rituals of *tuloni* indicate how a girl, right after her menarche is expected to become woman and a potential mother due to the attribute of fecundity attached to her body. What follows is a series of embodied selves performed by the initiate one after the other throughout the observance of the coming-of-age event. Her fertility is celebrated to let the community know of her new and cleansed status. With that also comes her responsibility towards her family and

[10] It can be debated that many societies do not consider any difference between the animal, human and plant world and it is absolutely fine to get married to a plantain, but the way I see it is not the symbolic husband but the idea of marriage as an endorsement of heteronormativity and married status of the woman itself. This needs further exploration to comprehend the production of social meaning and performed selves in daily lives in social and ritual spaces.

[11] There is no parallel word in English to describe this term. The closest term can be impure or polluted.

[12] This feast is not really a part of the original rituals and is an add-on. This trend has caught on many households and has become an indicator of social status (Das, 2014:51).

community as a woman, always under communal surveillance and diligent self-performance. *Tuloni biya* is a site where gender relations are created and choreographed for the rest of her adult life. The endorsement of heterosexual marriage and reproduction within the boundary of marriage separates the good mother from the bad, while the idea of single Goddess and single mother addresses the absence of male representation. As a result, even a woman-driven event like *tuloni biya* prioritizes rituals making the male symbolism ritually indispensable.

This thesis, therefore, refers to these Ambubachi and *tuloni biya* in order to highlight the significance of menstruation and motherhood in the social sphere. While speaking about the women's active participation, this research further provokes the woman-goddess equation. It argues that instead of imaging women in the image of Kamakhya there is a deliberate attempt to humanize Kamakhya. The humanization and the construction of the goddess spreads not only across the 'women-centric virtues' but also the gender-defining process of menstruation.

Menstruating body/ies have a great potential to throw open discussions on the performative constructions of female bodies in the thealogical[13] and cultural discourse. The thesis focuses on how the performance and embodiment of these manufactured bodies are crucial to the existence of these identities. How do the performative rituals (like that of menstruation rituals) and the ritualized images (*yoni* as procreative symbol only) contribute to the 'ideal' identity formation of women? In the previous works on the events mentioned the question of sexuality is completely silenced and replaced by the overbearing idea of fertility and idealized motherhood. My intervention will offer a critique to those 'ideal' constructions. In order to comprehend the gendered everydayness, the chapters emphasize on the menstruating and maternalized body of the sacred (Kamakhya) vis-à-vis the menstruating and maternalized body of the social as performing factors. This work emphasizes on the social production of goddess figure and questions if the imposition of 'pleasureless mother' (Spivak, 2001:132) operates as a role model to attain a sublime womanhood?

[13] Theaology as a discourse solely focusing on goddess worship and the idea of divine female principles puts forward the crucial question of woman in religious studies which is largely a male domain. The attempt to see beyond the god and bring in the feminist perspective encourages the study of goddess through the thealogical lens. Refer to the works of Valerie Saiving (1960, 1976), Mary Daly (1985), Paul Reid-Bowen (2007, 2011).

In relation to the above symbolic-marriage like *tuloni biya*, speaking about motherhood, I prefer to call it a metaphorical-motherhood because menstruation indicates the potential to become a mother, but not exactly the mother. Is then Ambubachi *mela* a yearly failure of Kamakhya to actually perform the role of a mother despite having the capacity to become one? As the symbolic blood oozes out of her symbolic *yoni* and beyond her symbolic physical boundaries, does she herself become a symbolic mother without going through the pain of birthing and birth blood? Thinking about the 'women only' menstrual spaces, if they in any way symbolize the reversal of masculine dominance or further ghettoize women to a more pronounced subjugation? Does the production of a desexualized gaze in a ritual space hinder the mobility, sexuality and impose social femininity of women in the social space as well? How does one describe the dynamics between Kamakhya and women and what is the significance and meaning of mother goddesses in India and amongst Indian women: a limiting or liberating force?

The study of menstruation in the temple and domestic space is significant because it demonstrates certain contradicting meanings that has manufactured the social thinking about the female bodies. For instance, while menstrual cloth is considered polluted, the *angabastra* is distributed among the devotees as *prasad*. In what way is menstrual blood represented in tantric practices and if at all there is an alternate way of looking at it when Kamakhya menstruates? Menstruation is believed to be a private occurrence and needs to be disclosed with women only however, the public *Tuloni biya* displays a contradiction and raises a pertinent question as to why there is a necessity to publicly announce it and thereafter celebrate it too? The several layered contradictions provide an interesting space to base my work as it has a potential to not only question the existence of these beliefs and their fulfillment, but to explore how these contradictions still exist in the first place. This work attempts to explore the unrestricted display of *yoni*, *Tuloni biya* and exoteric rituals of goddess worship vis-à-vis the restricted observance of purity to counter ritual pollution and seclusion during menstruation.

Janet Lee (2009) argues that bodies should be studied in relation to the space that they belong to and not in terms of individual body per se. Lee writes, "While bodies are biophysical entities, the meanings attached to bodies are directly related to the historical and sociocultural spaces they occupy" (p.625). Discussing North East India in general and Assam in particular Debarshi Prasad Nath (2016) speaks about the idea of North East to the rest of India may be that

of a whole region, however it has definitely never been a unified socio-cultural space (p.12). The politics of marginalization is also different here and so is the gender dynamics.

It has to be noted that various scholars have suggested the existence of matriarchy as pre-patriarchal society (See Briffault 1931; Bhattacharyya 1971; Dudley 1978; Sarma 2015). The emergence of patriarchal society overpowered the matrifocal, matrilineal social functioning indicating a decline of mother-right and status. One important reason unanimously stated was the introduction of pastoral culture replacing the agricultural set up of the society. Robert Briffault (1931) has done an extensive study on motherhood especially the matriarchal societies of ancient times before it was uprooted from most of the societies and some traces of it still exist in several social groups. He argues that the matriarchal theory is theory of social origins (p.179). The matriarchal society needs to be understood in its individuality and not in borrowed knowledge and language of patriarchy. It should not be defined as the social order in which women ruled instead of man (Briffault 1971:100). It was definitely a social as well as performative alternative where the women performed roles albeit different from what they came to be projected in the patriarchal order. Referring to an alternative to the patriarchal theory of social origins, Briffault suggests the non-patriarchal form of society which came to be called as the matriarchal society (Ibid.). However, matriarchy has been misunderstood due to the fact that the same lens that viewed patriarchy is used to view matriarchy through a simplified altering of sex. Matriarchy, therefore is not only misunderstood and over-simplified, but misleading and misconceptually presented. As a result, mother-dominated society is what matriarchy has been reduced to, when as a matter of fact, matriarchy performed otherwise.

Briffault further argues that it is not just matriarchy that is wrongly placed in relation to women-centric society. Other terms like ‘matrilinear society’, ‘mother-right’ have may also be objected as these terms are often referred interchangeably. The objection is due to the fact that these terms tend to define the society as one form of domination over the other which, according to Briffault, is not true in the case of ‘equalitarian’ primitive societies as the ‘concept of authority is simply not understood’ (1931:180). In case of Indian context, he provides the example of North-East Indian ‘matriarchal or matrilineal’ tribes like Khasi, Garo living majorly in the state of Meghalaya and some parts of Assam. It is not only Briffault but several other scholars have unanimously spoken about the ‘matriarchal relics’ (Bhattacharyya, 1971:72) in the North-East

India when it comes to women-dominated societies. In fact, academic understanding of these tribes brings out an empowered image where women are the authority, where the ownership rights and clan name is passed to and through women.

However, it is crucial to question this view since Briffault might be pointing at how matriarchal societies originate and how they sustain that position. But at the same time, he might have fallen for the same trap when he provides a detailed study of Khasi tribe and the mechanism of family functions, he does not closely view the woman in question, supposedly the family head. Patricia Mukhim (2015), while acknowledging and admiring the hard work done by several Western scholars like Abendorth-Goettner or Peggy Sanday, suggests that Eurocentric imagination may have defined the Khasi society in a more glorified way than it actually is. The reason Mukhim provides for this form of misrepresentation of the 'matriarchal' societies is the conflation of matriliny/matrilineality with matriarchy and the inadequate research methods of collecting data. It is true the Khasi society still practices matriliny, but that should not in any way imply that Khasi women therefore are empowered than their counterparts from other tribe or region. Referring to Khasi women, Mukhim writes, "have internalized our matrilineality and who enjoy no special powers other than that our children carry the mother's clan name." It is basically the nominal power that they own and coming back to the ownership rights she argues that several women are landless and since the men have started migrating to bigger towns and cities in search of work there is no mother's authority as has been speculated (also see Raman, 2009). Mukhim concludes thus,

> There is the question of "voice", which is often muted…It is important to redefine Khasi matriliny for what it really is. And the reality of matriliny in Meghalaya is that women are increasingly being pushed to the fringes, with many of them taking on household roles of childbirth, caring for the elderly and doing chores, all of which is unpaid work. (2015)

The autonomy of man is still the same as in any patriarchal societies, the only difference being that it is practiced in so called 'matrilineal space'. For instance, 'a Khasi man can abandon his wife and not look back' and he is not answerable to anyone. The mother takes the responsibility of looking after the children and there is no stringent law against wife-abandonment or co-parenting. As a result, it is the woman who suffers with the halo of mother-right around her matrilineal head.

Likewise, Nath further sheds light on the 'projected' image of North East India to be an egalitarian and empowering space for women and how these feeds on the stereotyped notion of ethnic women as being more 'liberated' than others (p.15). Nath writes,

> In the process of 'integration' and 'assimilation' with institutionalized religions, many ethnic communities have developed a deep-seated fear and suspicion of woman. 'Traditional' patriarchal prejudices which existed in spite of the matrilineal systems in some societies combine with an internalized sense of male authority to strengthen gender stereotypes. (Ibid.)

This 'deep-seated fear and suspicion' emerges from several constructed social and ritual beliefs and menstrual stigma may be considered one of them. The 'projected' image fails to balance the gender dynamics and, in some ways, the female body is subjected to a relatively lower place as far as the ritual cleanliness of the society and community is concerned.

My hypothesis is that fear begets role performance in terms of social and cultural restriction and its observances. It is the instilled, internalized and ineradicable fear that influences certain role-playing and performances. It is not just limited to women only, even men's role performance is an outcome of the instilled menstrual fear-for instance the fear of impending danger of being around menstruating woman or the 'fear of menstrual blood (Douglas, 1966:148)'. The sense of 'disgust' felt by women turns into 'fear of the unknown' for men; what is unknown is to be feared or kept at a distance. As disgust transforms into fear, the whole bodily and social dynamics change making menstruation that ignominious 'red rupture' influencing subsequent event and actions.

I intend to put forward a multidisciplinary methodology in order to study the dynamics between religion and culture through the performance of menstruating and maternalized bodies in Assam. Amidst several discussions and debate on 'the death of god'[14], it is of paramount

[14] Michel Foucault has referred to the 'death of god' as a cause of the emergence of sexuality. He argues that religion often plays the role of introducing new techniques or mechanisms of power to ascertain its hold on the social and cultural domain, for instance the emergence of social images or ideas like that of reproduction within marriage (Foucault, 1999). Foucault's understanding of religio-social production of images absents women in his discourse, his deliberate gender-blind position or his androcentric work and the focus on male-paradigm. The patriarchal discussion on production and reproduction cannot be made on the basis of male paradigm only because that would also mean another mechanism of gender power that he himself is trying to critique. In the same way, Mary Daly (1985), has also extensively talked about the death of God or absent God and rejection of God as a 'being' and suggests to look God as a 'verb' and not as a noun (p.33). For instance, the term 'goddessing' also bears the fact that it is the performative that 'do' indulges in in order to transform social performances into normative performances through politically maneuvered power dynamics.

importance to study the re-birth of the goddess, a menstruating goddess. It is also essential to study how patriarchy operates in Assam, specifically at the Kamakhya temple and in the Hindu Assamese community to see what role religion plays to endorse it. And if so, has there been any attempt to tame Kamakhya's sexuality or that of women and how? Or, has there been any attempt to resist, subvert or transgress the patriarchal structure in these two ritually socialized and socially ritualized spaces? In Kamakhya temple, there has never been a priestess and the female members of the *samaj* still do not exercise any voting rights in the election process[15] of *Doloi* and *Bor doloi*. There was an appeal to the Supreme Court filed by several citizens to grant the voting rights to women as well, but it was turned down stating that the aforesaid change was not possible since the tradition was already 'well established' (Kashyap, 2015). Can then menstruation be considered one of the reasons for not electing women as priestess or to any other administrative post and refrain them from taking part in the crucial temple matters? Can it be safely postulated that the concept of production and reproduction is dichotomized where production is largely considered a male domain, whereas reproduction that of female?

It has to be noted here that in Assamese Hindu households the menstruating body and the image of profanity and social/ritual pollution it carries within is a normalized and accepted notion. Hence, discussion around social pollution is pertinent that will serve as an entry point to the inner complexes of Kamakhya and the rest of the women. The concept of menstrual stigma is deliberated with focus on Mary Douglas' argument of pollution and Goffman's discredited and discreditable bodies as a result of social stigmatization. A debate is also essential to highlight the challenges often faced in the domain of Indian Feminism when the Mother Goddess cults are looked through Western Feminist lens. Several Indian feminists and Indologists like Maithreyi Krishnaraj, Sukumari Bhattacharji, Kamala Ganesh, Sudhir Kakar, Somnath Bhattacharya among others have raised questions to the Western understanding of Theology and Feminism in reference to Indian

[15] Over several centuries, the administration of Kamakhya temple is in the hands of the Bordeuri *samaj* who not only run the temple, but also provide priests for Kamakhya and the nine other temples situated in the Nilachal hill. The *samaj* comprises of five main families of priests where the priests of Kamakhya temple are called Bordeuri, the priests of the other nine temples are called Deuri and the chief priest of Kamakhya is called Doloi. The tradition went on till 1998 followed by a legal battle between the *samaj* and Kamakhya Debuttal Board formed by local priest and representatives to decide the administrative responsibility of the temple. In July 2012, the Supreme Court of India restored the temple rights to the Bordeuri *samaj*. Every five years the priests are elected by the male members of the *samaj* and no other sections are involved in the voting.

context.[16] Rather than applying feminism, this work will question the need of a feminist gaze or the lack of it that has not been adequately addressed. Hence, in order to understand the complex cultural phenomenon, it is relevant to initiate a dialogic discourse which may assist in seeking some unanswered and silenced queries.

Meenakshi Thapan (2009) argues that the body has a physical location as much as it is a social construct. Addressing the argument, the construction of these categorized spaces that drives the gendered bodies to reaffirm certain conventions as the normal and the natural. As the body is a socio-historical writing often infused with the politics of it, it further questions how the 'every month' of women is different from other 'every month'? And, how does this 'gendered everyday' performance of 'self' and 'other' construct the self-surveilled and self-perpetuated bodies? Also, can we then consider the private spaces to be more public when it comes to display female submission to social regimes and their observance across generations, by making bodies a visible present of the past?

In performative utterance, J. L. Austin argues how the sentence like 'I do, I name, I bet' not only define an action, but actually 'do' it through performance (1962: 6). I intend to revisit this argument and provide a gendered linguistic perspective to it that Austin might not have addressed. For instance, Sati is not just a character of the narrative, it stands for a virtuosity that Sati denotes and demands a Sati-like role-performance from Kamakhya and the rest of the female bodies. Terms like *suwa*, *tuloni*, *shanti* alter their literal meaning to a socially-constructed one when uttered from the perspective of menstruation. For instance, the term *suwa* which can be translated as polluted, does not have any male parallel in Assamese language and is clearly understood as menstruation when associated with female bodies while its literal meaning is to see/to touch. There is a communal attempt of cultural, spatial and linguistic silence of menstruation with the usage of gendered-performative disguised terms referred here as the 'flowing codes'. Likewise, a gradual effort is also seen on cleansing Ambubachi from menstrual traces where the festival is pacing towards a more touristic event completed with veiling Kamakhya's menstruation with spiritual tourism. At the same time, it also addresses how the contemporary feminist discussion on

[16] The portrayal of South Asian religions by Western scholars like Wendy Doniger, Jeferrey Kripal, David Gordon, Sarah Caldwell and so on have been questioned by Indian scholars and Indologists like Sudhir Kakar, S.N. Balagangadhara, Yuvraj Krishnan, Somnath Bhattacharyya and so on. The Western scholarship have been charged with alleged misinterpretation, invasion of sacred and overt exoticization of Hindu deities.

menstruation is still inadequate to comprehend the concept of menstruation in a more localized and particularized context of the present research invoking the existence of theoretical silence therefore.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (2001) has discussed the absence of goddess by referring to *pitha*s turning into Shiva's abode as she states, "There is no Devi here" (Spivak, 2001:132). Rather than searching for the absent goddess, I intend to link this statement with the goddess' relationship with women. In an attempt to revisit Spivak's statement, I intend to substitute Spivak's question of 'absent' Devi with that of women's absent voices in the social sphere. How do women view the goddess or is their image of the goddess mirrored in Kamakhya? Also, are they mirrored-selves who have contributed equally in the imprisonment of each other's identities? What does mirroring entail in terms of mirroring the bodies, society, self and the goddess? Does the 'absent devi' in any way refer to the silencing of women in the social arena and that of goddess in the ritual spaces? Does then the rituals perform the role of identity marker in relation to the body and brings exclusivity just like the exclusive function of reproduction? Is then a woman's body stigmatized and socially reduced to bodily fluids only be it the menstrual blood or the breast milk? Does the act of seclusion work in several levels to form a separate and exclusive identity like that of a sacred body, sacred marriage or sacred motherhood? Is menstrual seclusion a secluded event? Or, is it deeply connected with the constructed ecology of social system and the subsequent power-dynamics?

My method has involved field work in the city of Guwahati, Assam with focus on Kamakhya temple, interviews with the temple authorities, women in the community from several age groups and eminent scholars whose work are in the similar fields. The documentation consists of Ambubachi mela, *tuloni biya* in and around my hometown Rangapara.

Chapter I, *Menstruating Bodies and the 'Flowing Codes'* discusses how a menstruating body is perceived and the question of its status in the social stage. Focusing on the corporeal performativity of menstruating bodies, it enquires how the fluidity of menstruation shapes, reimages or transforms their identities. I intend to look at how the menstruating body externalizes or is constructed to externalize pollution in order to become a social/ritual pollutant. The exploration of 'flowing codes' highlights the culture of silence and existence of menstrual codes.

Chapter II, *Maternalized Bodies* explores the ideal motherhood in terms of women, Goddess and landscapes with specific reference to Assam. It explores if the autonomous agent like Mother Goddess has elevated the 'ideal and conceptual' mother only and not the 'social mothers' who worship her. It will consider and look into the othering of motherhood and its stereotypification with reference to Kamakhya and women. This chapter brings in the contemporary discussion on motherhood in order to revisit the debates to comprehend if it does any justice to the Assamese Hindu society and how the motherhood debate situates itself within the ritual and social space of Assam.

Chapter III, *Ambubachi mela and its 'Divine Menstruation'* discusses at length the Ambubachi *mela* at Kamakhya temple when the goddess' body ritually bleeds in the imagination of the social. It highlights the several performative motives that this festival exhibits inside and outside the temple. It highlights the gradual transformation from pilgrimage of menstrual landscape to destination of spiritual tourism. This chapter emphasizes on the centrality of the peripheral rituals that goes on for those three days and the observance of ritualistic practice that the devotees, pilgrims and visitors undergo during the festival within and beyond the temple space.

Chapter IV, *Embodied Selves in Tuloni Biya* elaborates on the rituals that are practiced by women and on the initiated, all the more discussing the various ritual meanings that are produced in order to create a passage from menstruation to motherhood through the route of marriage. It focuses on the girl's embodied selves and role-playing as a part of this staged rites of passage event to become a woman. It examines if the 'process of becoming' reproduces patriarchy and re-institutionalize it through the socially-structured embodiments.

The research has put together two construed milestones in a woman's life–menstruation and motherhood, socially structured, culturally imposed and corporeally executed by women. Be it Ambubachi, or *tuloni* rituals, be it the custom of menstrual seclusion and glorified maternal image, or be it the societal taboo associated with unmarried women, single goddesses or unhusbanded mothers, no female body can escape the communal surveillance, neither Goddess nor women. As female bodies oscillate between these manufactured as well as hailed identities, while perpetually performing them ideally, a question emerges if one is gazing at the static and

stagnant gender-defining roles within the limited spectrum of menstruation, wifehood and motherhood.

Chapter I

Menstruating Bodies and the 'Flowing Codes'

Introduction

> *During the time of evening prayer, goddess Kamakhya liked to dance nude within the closed doors of the temple situated in the Nilachal hill. Koch king Naranarayana desired to watch her dance and asked the chief priest Kendu Kalai to devise a plan. The priest advised him to peep through a hole in the wall without the goddess' knowledge. Unaware of his presence she performed the nritya*[17] *all the while menstruating. As soon as her eyes fell on the king, his act of intrusion was revealed to the goddess. In a fit of rage, she tore off the head of the priest and admonished the king and his future generations to not even cast a look at the hill. The prohibition is still observed and the local descendants of the Koch kings are believed to pass by the hill under the cover of umbrellas.* (Kakati, 2004:44; Barua, 2015:14; Das, 2008:41)

Our regular visit to the chemist or a store is a monthly ritual and so is the quick wrapping of sanitary packet by the store keeper. With a 'feigning ignorance' as well as 'I understand you' look in his face, he swiftly performs the ritual of 'concealing' the sanitary packet with a newspaper or a brown bag and tries to clear the evidence before someone catches us purchasing it. It is like a codified act that they perform and this is how and where the concept of stigma is reproduced and attached to women's bodies. Where then, menstrual stigma unveils itself -in the blood, in the body, in the blood outside the body or in the Keatsian notion of 'beholder's eyes'? It is crucial to search the source of menstrual stigma in its social reality which has been attached to the bleeding female bodies far too long.

To a large extent, the above two accounts try to encapsulate the idea of menstruating body in reference to a private sacred space as well as in public everyday social transaction. In Assamese language disguised terms or codes like *suwa*, *nuwara* or *axubidha* is used to refer a menstruant where *suwa* may not have a parallel word in English in terms of menstruation, but the closest term can be impure or polluted, *nuwara* implies the inability of the menstruant to perform domestic

[17] *Nritya* implies dance without any specification of what kind, type or style.

chores like cooking, washing clothes, doing dishes, offering worship to the deities and so on and *axubidha* may simply be translated as 'female trouble'. It is to be noted here how the linguistic erasure of the menstrual act takes place as the codes only imply the restricted acts or consequence of menstruation and not the menstruation itself. The social views the menstruating body from a distance, that requires constant isolation and sanitizing, a point that this chapter primarily aims to discuss.

The pollutant/pure bodily state poses a crucial question whether a body is tamed to perform and internalize these pollutant states according to the collective knowledge of the social structure. Referring to bodily pollution, I intend to look at how the menstruating body externalizes or is manufactured to symbolize pollution thereby transforming into stigmatized bodies. Does then the power of ritual and its purification process absents/ distances/ separates the profane from the sacred? Vis-à-vis the stigma attached to the menstruating body, this chapter also engages in the potent presence that the menstrual body possesses through its transgressive yet powerful status in tantric ritualistic practices.

The 'flowing codes' as I call it, performs in several levels, be it in its fluid nature of blood or the physical concealment or be it the linguistic erasure of menstruation and menstrual denial. Through several menstrual narratives of women and research done by several scholars on several communities or communitas (borrowed from Victor Turner), this chapter explores the flowing codes giving out a larger picture of menstruation.

Thinking through Mary Douglas' (1966) view of dirt as 'essentially disorder, offending the order of society' (p. 2), how can menstruating bodies be conceptualized to be the living embodiment of pollution? Taking Douglas' further argument that dirt as an idea violates 'a structure of ideal' (1999: 109), how these bodies manifest everything that is beyond the ideal arrangement of the social? Douglas posits that in order to strike an orderly balance and cleanse the body from pollution like blood that traverses the boundary of the body, purification rituals are instrumental for creating positive effect (p. 108). However, why is the menstrual body considered a dirt that needs constant ritual cleansing and separation in the first place though? As much as I analyse the menstruating body as an absolute presence in its actuality, I cannot but perceive it as an elemental idea to deconstruct the 'tidied-up' social milieu. Douglas, therefore can provide the

initial passage to foreground the concept of pollution to discuss further how the social not only scaffolds menstruation in a concealed paper of ritual sanitation and anonymity, but also how the menstruating body equally acquiesce to that demand in the name of upholding order.

Drawing concept from Erving Goffman's (1963) stigma and the production of discredited and discreditable bodies, what happens when the social stigma that Goffman generally attaches to the body actually transgresses the physical boundaries of the body and flows out of it? If we observe closely Goffman's theory of stigmatized bodies as discredited bodies it seems completely based on the construction of bodies and the social construction of what is beyond the 'normative' restricting his understanding of stigma to the display of body. However, as a mode of departure from Goffman, my objective would be to revolve discussion around menstrual stigma which does not find any mention in his work and the transgressive nature of menstruation that normatively and naturally 'leaks' beyond the bodily boundaries. This chapter further discusses the individual, collective and cultural silence of menstruation and posit whether these often disregarded 'thinking bodies' (See Adrienne Rich, 1986) is in dire need of being heard and flow out to be 'visible'.

The seemingly discredited status of the menstruating body offers a new way of looking at the transformation and transition of the same body due to the mere presence of menstrual blood. Here, the menstrual blood and its seepage performs the role of catalyst in forming a 'new' re-manufactured figure which displaces the non-leaking, non-bleeding, sanitized, unpolluted and pure body in a cyclical phenomenon. Menstruation is a cyclical performance–neither repetitive, nor reproduced but re-performed and always in progress. Hence, the Sanskrit term for menstruation *rtu* reiterates this meaning of circularity within and beyond the female body in the form of seasonal change and menstrual cycle.

I begin with asking a simple question that would surely snowball into complexities of social and cultural production of menstrual stigma. What role does menstrual seclusion and stigma play in the way women perceive and conceive their bleeding bodies body in the social arena and how do they perform or (un)perform menstrual stigma? What does 'menstrual etiquettes' (Laws, 1990) or dirt-avoidance that demand certain pollution behaviour from the menstruants and non-menstruants reveal about the community? What does it take for the body to internalize and literate itself to perform ideally to become 'normative' by secluding oneself to an assigned space? How

does the stigma-ridden body transform from a 'normal' body to a 'bleeding' body, and a 'discredited' body thereafter? The constant reiteration of body defiling, menstrual shaming or the production of menstruant-phobia directs us to view how the flowing codes in the social sphere has successfully isolated the menstruating bodies: spatially, physically as well as linguistically.

Stigmatized Bodies

The Kamakhya narrative in the beginning of this chapter is an amalgam of several variations of the same myth written by scholars. They have a similar story line, but one fascinating variation or digression is found in Mitoo Das' narrative which is that of the *nritya* being done while Kamakhya was menstruating and in a nude state. I have not come across this version and was inquisitive to know the source. On being asked, Das mentioned that she found this particular narrative from her family priest and from another *panda* (priest at Kamakhya temple) (2019). This idea of Kamakhya's menstruating body while performing the dance changes the whole dynamics of menstrual stigma in a religious or sacred space. I find this particular variation of Das intriguing in the sense that the poignant image of the dancing goddess in her menstrual state has a great potential to perceive the performing menstruating body in a different light. Having said that, it also leads one to think the required secrecy of the nude, menstruating body to perform within the closed doors that hints at the need of a private stage, all the more suggesting that 'stigma is not stigma' until it remains concealed or 'under the wraps'.

The concealed and cyclical nature of menstruation is a never-ending phenomenon very much sustained in the social arena. Noting on the menstrual cycle, Thomas Buckley and Alma Gottlieb (1988) state,

> Menstrual blood does not issue randomly or accidently, as does the blood of wounds, but from a single source and to some extent regularly and predictably if, unlike other products of elimination, uncontrollably. (p. 26)

This statement clearly demarcates menstrual blood and its significance or insignificance and its alien-ness to other kinds of bodily bleeding. This also suggests that the stigmatized status of menstrual blood may be due to its circularity and the ability to be spotted or exposed most

commonly in female or non-female bodies[18] and hence easily targeted and prone to shame and stigma. As a result, these bodies transform into stigmatized and cursed site which requires periodic sanitizing, concealment and seclusion. In order to encounter the shame and stigma of menstruation, several women go to the extent of not acknowledging its existence and an extreme level of menstrual denial.

In an attempt to trace the source of menstrual blood and its subsequent stigmatization in Hindu *Vedic* texts, Frederick M. Smith (1991) refers to Taittiriyasamhita in which Indra, the Vedic god committed *brahmahatya* (brahmicide) by killing Visvarupa, the son of Tvastr (p. 23). Following the murder, one third of Indra's guilt transferred to women to take the form of menstrual periods referred to as *malavadvasa* (stained garments) that was later symbolized as the mark of sin, danger, impurity or 'Indra's curse' (pp. 5, 23). Smith mentions that due to this 'stained' curse, the text concludes by announcing the restrictions to be observed by stating, "one should not converse with [a woman] with stained garments, nor should one sit with her or eat her food when she has emitted the colour of *brahmahatya*" (p. 23).

Referring to Elizabeth Kissling, Chris Bobel (2010) states,

> the social construction of menstruation as a woman's curse is explicitly implicated in the evolution of woman as Other. Menstruation does not make woman the Other; it is because she is Other that menstruation is the curse (p. 28).

In Assamese Hindu society, like several other societies menstrual 'othering' or restrictions are observed especially in terms of access to religious, ritual and supposedly clean or sacred spaces due to impure or polluted curse the menstruant is believed to embody. The menstrual flaw is not just the concealed blood, but the blood that performs the 'leaky' role of coming out in the open and makes itself visible. Hence, the 'shameful stain' produces a sacrilegious subaltern 'othered' identity and maps the open, seeping and uncontrollable menstrual body from the pure and sanctified male body. Vagina as a bodily orifice or a gateway is often associated with pollution of birth, menstruation and so on (See Hüsken, 2013), while male body's presence is legitimized in sacred spaces due to its 'closed', controlled and non-leaky nature. Here again, one observes that

[18] Many female bodies do not menstruate and many non-female like pre-transmen and intersexual do menstruate (See Bobel, 2010:11-12).

the narratives are directed with an almost single purpose of cursing and stigmatizing the female body due to the presence of menstrual blood as a distinguishable and a separating factor that is categorically absent in male bodies.

Gayatri C Spivak (2001) observes that the formation of Devi or the great goddess is an outcome of the 'male authorship' of the Puranas (Hindu religious texts) and that in the Puranic texts female empowers and males act (p. 132). In the divine space, the image of the goddess is empowered so much so that western feminism has derived inspiration and is really quick to view it in the form of women empowerment. The reflection of powerful and fierce goddesses of these divine spaces are seldom transported to the social space occupied by women of several strata. The divine space is largely male-dominated and masculine in the sense that they are often controlled and choreographed by men. Even during Ambubachi *mela* (fair or festival) when Kamakhya is considered to go through her annual menstruation, the presence of female practitioners is not rare, but the power or right to conduct worship is conferred on *mul pujari* (male priests) belonging to Brahmin caste of Bordeuri family. The participation of women is limited to visiting the temple complex and offer worship to the main shrine and other deities. The space is masculine in the sense that the active participants starting with the priests, other *sevait*s[19], the shopkeepers and even the sacrificial animals are male except for a sporadic negligent number of female security guards and a few sanitation workers. In fact, there are more sculptures and icons of female deities than female workers, the deities smeared with vermillion, flowers and a few coins. Can we then look at menstruation one of the several factors for not electing women as priestess or to any other administrative post and refrain them from taking part in the crucial temple matters?

What makes menstruation a concealable and isolating occurrence that eventually stigmatizes the bleeding body? In Assam among the Assamese Hindu households, it is a common practice called *saki jaluwa* or *saki diya* which means to light the earthen lamps and perform worship before the household deities either in a small makeshift altar inside the home or temple inside the compound. It is performed twice a day; however, the evening worship is mandatory to ward off unfortunate evil presence. Growing up in an Assamese locality with Assamese Hindu female playmates, our games were often disrupted by their fathers or brothers who would often

[19] *Sevaits* refers to the group of people engaged in other temple services who do not belong to Brahmin caste.

summon them to perform *saki diya* every once in a while, when their mothers would be in a *nuwara state*, meaning she was unable to perform the task. We were aware of terms like *suwa*, *nuwara*, *axubidha* right from our childhood. However, since for me the restrictions were not observed in my family, I was not really aware of the menstrual bleeding and knew these terms only as something which restricted women's movements within the house. Nor did I ever ask my friends if they had any idea of what it actually meant. Now when I ponder upon it, I have a feeling neither did they know. It was a custom children grew up listening to and saw them materialized before them and most of it was unquestionable. Hence, the menstrual state was signified through the restrictions and no explanation was provided about the actual process as it was shameful or a taboo to discuss. The terms or the restricted customs were introduced first, to be internalized by the new menstruants and the actual 'menstrual talk' never took place within the household. It was either the elder sisters, school mates, community friends who passed on the knowledge and that too never in an explicit manner.

The *laaz* (shyness) to speak about the actual process of menstruation limited the conversations to residual bloody performance without making the blood visible. The female bodies are thereby well-instructed and trained about *niyam palon kora* (obeying the rule), which failing to do so might attract untoward incidents to them or the entire family. The inculcated fear is engraved so deep that the body internalizes these rules due to the dangers it possessed.[20] The stigmatized bodies are separated from anything that can be termed sacred and pure. In fact, the idea of sacred gets altered and goes beyond the religious spaces where the menstruating body is restricted from. There is a range of categorized spaces related to cooking, praying or eating that the menstruant is not allowed in. For instance, everyday item like pickle is kept away from a menstruant due to a local belief that it will turn bad with the menstrual touch. Similarly, daily objects and spaces are demarcated in order to maintain the stigma attached to the body. The space allotted to the menstruant shrinks considerably and her movement within and outside the house is controlled to avoid dangerous 'consequences'.

[20] The fear or the outcome of breaking the menstrual restrictions is not just limited to Assam, but it is equally observed in several pockets of India as well as Nepal. Moreover, Shruti Chopra and Krishnan Sharma (2011) mention that in semi-rural Haryana a menstruant is not allowed to touch flowering or fruit plants, visit or touch images of gods, temples and religious scriptures and she would commit sin if those taboos were broken (p. 99).

The menstrual bleeding of women in Assamese Hindu community is viewed as a microcosm of the larger cosmic phenomenon of Ambubachi summarized through the phrase like *prithivi/ baxumati ritumati hoi* (the Earth menstruates) (Sharma, 2017:99). Here the process of menstruation symbolizes the transaction between nature and culture, while solidifying the gender stereotypes. The bleeding Earth places the private 'female-centric' occurrence out in the open in the form of a cosmological union between the Sky and the Earth. The intervening element in the above description is the visceral display of menstruation and menstrual blood in the imagination of the social commonly termed as stain. The menstrual fluid flows out and exhibits itself not only in the female body but the 'femaled' Earth's and Kamakhya's body as well. I argue the staining fluid which may be socially condemned as solecism displays its transgressive nature in the morphology of performance that only menstruating bodies are capable of performing.

The idea of stain, especially blood stain and that too menstrual blood stain bothers women of all age groups whether still menstruating or otherwise. As the stain becomes a visible emblem to alienate the body (Lee, 1994:348), it produces shame. Alternatively, can the bothersome stain be viewed as transgressive? What all is concealed when a menstruating body and the stain remains hidden from the communal gaze? Why does it cause embarrassment to not only the body that displays it, but also someone who sees the display on another body? At the same time, what is the significance of menstrual blood when it comes to understanding tantric ritual where Kamakhya is one of the most revered tantric goddesses? In the light of all these questions, I view menstrual blood as the transgressive fluid because it exhibits transgression in several ways be it physical transgression where it traverses the marked bodily threshold, or metaphorical transgression where the fluid supposedly transgresses into the impure body, or the performative transgression when the stain causes a ritual transformation. In fact, because of its transgressive nature and a tendency to cross the socially accepted threshold makes it more prone to stigmatization.

This boundary defying transgression exists in its display of menstrual blood and the visibility of stain lends another dimension to understand the normativity of a social order. The stain does not just stand for menstruation which takes place within the unseen part of the body, it also signifies the restraints that a menstruating body is subjected to in order to conceal it and hence non-existent. Goffman argues that the situation of the discredited is with 'tension to manage' whereas the situation of the discreditable is 'information to manage' (1963: 125). Several of my

respondents confided in order to resist menstrual stigma and avoid restrictions they have often begun to 'manage information' by not revealing about their menstrual status. With the increasing usage of sanitary pads, it has become more much easier to 'conceal' their menstrual blood to even avoid seclusion rituals.

The rituals of separation are performed to avert dangerous effect as Douglas explains (1999: 108), but the consequence of domestication and seclusion is borne by the menstruating body alone. It becomes the stigmatized site where violation of the social order is committed and the only way to achieve purity is to conceal and isolate the body to the margins till it is clean enough to merge with the community. The body therefore is impure yet dangerous; its power is due to its ability to contaminate anything and anyone making it necessary to follow the dirt-avoidance behaviour. The menstruating body carries the stigma that the community has attached to it wherever it goes because more than a physical presence of menstrual blood in the body it clings as an idea that the community helps breed in people's psyche.

In a friendly chat with an acquaintance who comes from an Assamese Brahmin family and teaches gender studies, she shared an anecdote about a trip to Vaishno Devi[21] along with her husband. On her way to the temple, she began menstruating and was perplexed about the situation. Her husband, on the other hand, asked her to carry on and enter the temple but she could not make up her mind till she reached the main entrance. As she was about to take her final steps something stopped her and she stepped back although she did want to go ahead and expand her own boundaries. To this day she has failed to fathom what made her retract her steps that day. Seemingly, those retracted steps were outcome of many years of 'menstrual instructions' on the female body and psyche, many years of embodying the social, many years of stigmatization and self-perpetuation and many more years of 'unlearning' that still needs to happen.

The rituals do not self-perform, nor do they self-mean anything. It is only when the rituals are perceived in relation to its execution in the hands of the ritual-performers in a ritualized space that rituals are lend meanings. It may not always be about power play; it may also be about the readiness and consent of those who actually participate in the continuation of menstrual restrictions

[21] Vaishno Devi is a Hindu goddess and the temple is known by the same name. It is located in Katra at the Trikuta Mountains in Jammu and Kashmir. It is a popular pilgrimage destination and every year millions of devotees pay their visit.

just because they want to and not because they were instructed to or may be because they have internalized the social stigmas. For instance, most of the women in rural Assam where the menstrual restrictions are strictly followed are not working women in the sense they do not venture out of their homes to work. Hence, the domestic space is the assigned space and their works mostly comprise of field works and household chores from early morning till everyone else goes to sleep (also see Deka's analysis of women's labour comprising of agricultural and domestic during colonial times, 2013:162-3). Therefore, the working hours can vary according to the need of the rest of the family members and the labour that they put in the running of the household are often seen as if that is their 'job'. Now in a scenario like this menstruation may look like a breath of fresh air or a possibility of subversion for these women who could take a break once a month. Of course, that would come with certain conditions, but their impure state could also provide them with some much-needed rest. I am tempted to look at menstrual observance as a form of negotiation adopted by Assamese women with the social.

Even in Assamese society in general and Assamese Hindu society in particular feeling negatively about menstruation or menstrual stains is supposedly good as it maps the clean and unclean body and does not bring the menstrual discussion out there in open. It is deemed private and hence not to be 'displayed and disgraced'. I call this tendency negative optimism, an awareness which is spread in such a way that the negative feeling is supposed to be felt in order to remain optimistic. Stain is therefore bound to bring shame and symbolizes the inability of the person concerned to control the blood flow and hence flawed. On the other hand, the ability to feel ashamed thereby maintaining the invisibility is considered flawless. Hence, the menstruating body internalizes the negative feeling in order to feel positive, abled and 'performing ideally' in the social understanding of feminine perfection. Chris Bobel (2010) questions the common response of hatred of women towards menstruation (p. 7). This response is visibly spread across culture where Bobel's menstrual hate enquiry often turns into 'menstrual shame' or 'curse' (See Liamputtong, 2010; also see Secunda, 2014; Spellberg, 1996)[22] in other cultures. The negative

[22] The curse narrative on female bodies and the subsequent inferior position to men has travelled in several religious narratives be it Christianity where Eve is often viewed as the reason for Adam and Eve's fall from the heaven as a consequence of a curse meted out to them in Genesis Chapter 3 of The Bible. Similarly, in classical Zoroastrianism or Quranic references the gaze or presence of menstruating women resonates with the idea of cursed bodies. Thus, the 'difference' symbolically represents, materializes and legitimizes the 'curse', the inferiority and subsequent stigmatization on Eve and the rest of the female bodies. In classical Zoroastrianism, it is cursed to even cast eye on menstruating women as Shai Secunda (2014) shares a local belief where "menstruation and menstruating women are

connotation towards menstruation is seemed or structured to look positive for the betterment of women in several societies.

Employing menstruation as a mode of enquiry, Chris Knight (1991) studies the origins of culture that shaped the concept of menstruation. Knight asserts, "Women conclude that it was they- but not men- who would have to suppress and deny their own biology as the condition of feeling liberated" (p. 36). The tendency to colour menstruation in a subservient shade endorses the menstrual blood as a violent transgressor of social fabric. Its presence is denied and appearance suppressed while it exists as an absent category in the living experience of women. Thus, menstruation and discussion around it vehemently dismantles the 'cherished classification' (Douglas, 1966:37) of the community that requires corrective measures to veil it.

Lastly, if we closely observe the Assamese folk narratives, 'the uneven world generated by forces of patriarchy is ironically sustained, fostered, reinforced and transmitted by women' (Neelakshi Goswami, 2016:136). Goswami further notes that there is a common usage of phrases by Assamese women asking their men folk to 'not be petty like women', 'not to squabble like women', or it does not 'behave well to spread canards like women' and so on (Ibid.). On the other

deemed ritually impure and the gaze of menstruating women is thought to be especially harmful (p. 84)". Likewise, Quranic reference to Eve is often nameless or called *zawj* (Arabic word for spouse or mate of Adam) or Hawwah which is a clear borrowing from the pre-Islamic materials (Spellberg, 1996:306, 311). D.A. Spellberg (1996) argues that Eve or Hawwah's 'divine condemnation' (p. 314) and function as the first woman "explain the essential aspects of character that allegedly makes all female different from the normative male in biology and behavior" (p. 305). The bodily composition of Adam is referred to as that of clay and water, whereas Eve as flesh and blood which could also imply menstrual blood. Hence, Eve's body signified the impure status as Spellberg argues that the blood equates the female infant as ritually impure in Islamic practice on a monthly basis, thereby linking her to the physiological punishments meted out to Eve in post-Quranic sources (p. 313). On the other hand, while studying the construction of menstrual meaning in the social context of Hmong women, a Laos hill tribe migrated to Australia, Pranee Liamputtong (2010) states that the existence of menstrual taboo is limited to embarrassment and does not count the menstrual blood as polluted but a necessary process for procreation (p. 154). The term used for menstruation among Hmong is *ua poj niam* which literally means 'being a woman' (p. 159). It certainly prioritizes reproduction in the construction of womanhood something that men do not possess. However, menstruating women are restricted from performing certain tasks like crossing rivers, washing clothes or their bodies in rivers and dams, throwing the used water into rivers and so on. Doing so would offend nature spirits and might end up in miscarriage and infertility (p. 167). Although menstruation is not looked down as a polluting agent, but it is frowned upon if any 'sign of menstruation' is displayed (p. 164). Here what is striking is how the concept of menstrual pollution is conveyed not in terms of outright repulsion, but an array of subtle restrictive tasks, fear of infertility and imposition of embarrassment of menstrual stain. What Liamputtong does not mention is that the social construction of menstruation does not necessarily have to be evidently visible in the social milieu. Even the invisible or unseen prejudices can have similar effect on the menstruants as these prejudices decide the threshold of menstrual embarrassment and does not take time to turn the stain into shame if transgressed. I argue this due to the reason that according to Liamputtong all Hmong women feel much relieved once they reach menopause as it makes them become 'clean like men' (p. 165).

hand, like Assamese Hindu, in several communities, menopause may bring relief as it may signify to become 'clean like men' (See Liamputtong, 2010). This tendency to become 'clean like men' draws from the social belief that women are not and the reason for their uncleanliness emerges from menstruation. This categorically stigmatizes the menstrual body according to the hygienic markers which is evidently absent in the female body. It definitely arises from the persistent gender stereotyping and inclination to validate the manly principles that women do not possess; to become 'clean like men' thereby embodies an exclusively male privilege.

Ideal Bodies

Moving from the stigmatized bodies where the impurity of menstruation marks the body, the menstrual body becomes a source and medium of knowledge in tantric practices and an ideal ritual body at that. The Vedic or non-Tantric view of menstruation and menstrual blood in terms of intercourse of any kind be it sexual, social, worldly or spiritual is denied and prohibited.[23] Likewise, in Assamese Hindu households the prohibition of sexual intercourse during menstruation is one of the most important menstrual restriction followed religiously. Women are not even allowed to share the same bed with their husbands for the entire period. In the light of the given prohibitions, it appears that the intercourse of any kind moves away from the menstruating body as it withdraws itself inside the menstrual cocoon, whereas the tantric body, in contrast, draws in several forms of intercourse during menstruation. There is a co-existence of closed and open body in these two alternate spaces as they wax/wane in their menstruation and veil/unveil their menstrual blood.

The discussion on Tantra and Saktism[24] reverses the Vedic understanding of pollution and presents contradictory philosophy in its performance of 'ideal'. Biswanarayan Shastri (1982) explains that the vast number of tantric literatures are known by the generic term called *āgama*, where *ā* means it has come from the mouth of Śiva and heard by Pārvatī-the dialogue between the divine couple (p. xi). He further states that term tantra is derived from the root *tan*-to extend,

[23] Several Hindu texts like Yajurveda Taittiriya (Verse 2.5.1), Angirasa Smriti (Verse 37), Manu Smriti (4.40), Susruta Samhita (Sharirasthana 2.31) and *Kashyapa Samhita* (Sharirasthana 5.5) (Sridhar, 2019:64) command against it. The offspring (son) born of intercourse with (a woman) with stained garments is accursed (Ibid. 9).

[24] Tantrism and Saktism may be understood as two intersecting but not coinciding circles, the former referring to a specifically characterized, integral convergence of doctrine and practice, the latter to worship of the central power (sakti) of the universe as female deity (Coburn, 1991:125).

continue, multiply, spread, prepare, succession, unfolding, continuous process etc. (p. xii). Shastri writes, "The grammarians would give the derivative meaning of the word as- *tanyate vistāryate jnānam anena iti tantram* i.e., what extends knowledge (Ibid.)." Here, tantra is fluid in its character and can manifest 'in any form just like a woman' (See Dube, 1988:18) and at the same time it may be viewed as flowing against the established normal. Hugh Urban (2008) mentions the inverted quality of tantra and tantric rituals thus:

> In India generally, sexual fluids are considered dangerous and polluting…ambivalent substances that overflow the boundaries of the physical body. In the Tantric rite, however, the sexual fluids become the ultimate source of power. (p. 523)

Likewise, Douglas notes that the orifices of the body are vulnerable points from where marginal stuff referred to as pollution emerge traversing the boundary of the body (p. 122). There is a sense of power that these transgressing fluids display as its impure and polluting nature itself is its organic identity. While Douglas prescribes purification to avoid this dangerous contaminating presence to restore the ideal order otherwise, Urban states the very characteristic of pollution marks the polluted body an ideal vehicle to augment the efficacy of tantric beliefs. The tantric understanding, therefore upturns the norm of an 'ideal' society and endorses enacting the often disregarded and discouraged actions of the social milieu. The 'ideal' performance of the tantric body is revealed through this contradiction, a knowledge which travels in an inverted, anti-established manner. Taking this idea forward, it is crucial to discuss how tantra perceives the body with the socially constructed 'socially-sanctioned' female attributes. It is equally significant to learn what it entails to bring into discussion not only the body but the menstrual body vis-à-vis tantra.

The notion of 'extended knowledge' as mentioned above is pertinent in the sense that it hints at the prospect of going beyond what is 'normal and natural' and creating a knowledge system as a form of departure. Shastri states that the knowledge of tantra should not be disclosed to the *paśu* (common one) and *pāmara* (the wicked one) (1982: xi). Quoting the Yogini Tantra, he writes,

> It should be carefully kept secret from the unworthy persons, like a woman who keeps her vagina concealed from the view of the males, except her husband. *Gopaniya twaya bhadre yoni: paranare yatha*- YT 1.8.6 (Ibid.)

It may imply two things- the vagina or *yoni* is equated with knowledge and hence special than other body parts and secondly, the knowledge of tantra requires an extraordinary quality to obtain it. Tantra, therefore, in that sense is extremely exclusivist and the knowledge may not pass on to everyone. Taking texts like Chāndogyopanisad and Brhadāraranyakopanisad, Shastri refers how the sexual intercourse in Tantric ritual is equated with the performance of a sacrifice and the woman's body with that of the sacrificial rite:

> The woman is the fire, her womb the fuel, the invitation of a man the smoke, the door is the flame, the entering the chamber of pleasure is spark. In this fire the gods form the offering. From this offering springs forth the child-*Chāndogyopanisad*, 5, 8, 1-2 (1982: xxii)
>
> Her lap is a sacrificial altar, her hair the sacrificial grass, her skin the *stoma* press (grinding stone for pressing *soma*). The lips of the vulva are the fire in the middle of vulva."-*Brhadāraranyakopanisad* 6 4 3 (p. xxiii)

What we see here, according to tantric philosophy, is that the bodyscape is used as metaphor, and especially the female body provides an array of ideas to accelerate knowledge. The 'sexual intercourse' may be correctly redefined as 'intercourse' alone and the sexual attribute may invoke less of physical intermingling of bodies and more of mental notations. The term 'intercourse' sounds more inclusive as it may not just mean sexual but socio-cultural in a broader sense. Krishnan Ramaswamy *et al* (2007) have pointed out how tantra in the Western imagination like Doniger's glossary has evolved in the form of sex alone with their over-simplified Sanskrit terms and 'reductionist definitions' (p. 71). For instance, the term maithuna may go beyond the sexual meaning in order to contain the intercourse with the world as well (p. 72). On a similar vein, Urban (2003) mentions that the West tries to simplify the complex meaning of tantra and its meaning has been altered (p. 306). At this juncture, it becomes essential to situate the tantric body and its relation to the menstrual bleeding.

In order to trace the anatomical meanings of female body, it is crucial that one includes the glorification of *yoni* and its worship in tantric ritual site and what purpose it serves to represent women in social spaces. Gioia Lussana (2015) explores the Sakta Tantrism of Kamakhya through various tantric texts in order to understand what role the menstrual blood plays in tantric intercourse. Lussana writes,

> The KjN (Kaulajnananirnaya), the root text of this tradition, explicitly states that female blood contains fluid gnosis, whereas the Kaulavalinirnaya (KAN) affirms that the menstrual flow is samvid, knowledge. According to these ancient traditions, written texts (kulagama) are considered male, while the original knowledge is female and 'oral' in a concrete sense, transmitted through the Yogini's lower mouth (yoginivakrta) or vulva. Kaula Tantrism was originally handed on 'from mouth to mouth' (vaktradvaktram): the woman was the possessor of knowledge and transmitted it to the male adept through her vulva. Kulagama is the concrete transmission of knowledge by means of the male adept's absorbing female fluids (rajapani), whether vaginal secretions or menstrual blood. These liquids were deemed to be knowledge in a fluid state. Every woman was the natural bearer of this knowledge, whereas the man needed to assume it directly, drinking the fluid emission (dravyam) or absorbing it by Yoga techniques (vajroli-mudra). During the sexual intercourse, the Goddess's fluid is strengthened by mixing with the male seed: this is explicitly named clan fluid (kulatmika) by the Kamakhya –tantra. (p. 81)

What emerges here prominently is the tantric handling of menstruation and its perceived efficacious nature in terms of the completion of ritual. Urban quotes Yoni Tantra and Kamakhya Tantra and discusses the inverted sexual position between male and female partner (2010: 117; Khanna, 2000:111) along with the significance given to the female partner who should be *rajasvalābhagam* (ideally menstruating). The menstruating body is transformed into the interior landscape of Kamakhya pitha and other major pithas (2010: 107,110). Urban writes, "the final aim is the production of the female sexual fluids (*yonitattva*) (p. 110). The circulation of blood especially menstrual blood lubricates the functioning of not only the 'gnosis' or spiritual knowledge about one's own bodily presence, but that of one's partner and the connection one builds with the rest of the world through that. Menstruation as an ideal element is aimed to magnify the 'performance of power' in the ritual stage–power of knowledge, menstrual fluids and that of merging the fluids in the form of 'ideal intercourse'. In the above studies, the performative menstrual blood is not disgusted upon nor is it considered inauspicious. It rather inverts the constructed meaning of menstrual blood in the social arena and transforms itself into a crucial role-playing element. Menstrual fluid claims central position and sheds its peripheral marginal character as Douglas presents it to be, in order to perform the 'ideal' elemental role to produce spectacle of knowledge or gnosis transmission.

The *Bor doloi* (Chief Priest) of Kamakhya temple Mohit Chandra Sarma (2019) stressed on the fact that the mode of worshipping Kamakhya and other deities in the Nilachal hill is purely

Tantric although the *pancamakara*[25] ritual is limited to some events only. On being asked what is so different about worshipping Kamakhya than any other goddesses, he put his point across thus: *Yaat darxan nohoi, sparxan hoi* (here it is not seeing/viewing, but touching the goddess) (Interview). The performance of worship is incomplete without that touch between the goddess and the worshipper that facilitates the transmission of knowledge or the act of knowing the tantric goddess. He further explained and remarked that the space where one is required to touch is called *manobhava guha*[26] where *Maa* (Mother Goddess Kamakhya) is *raktaranjita birajmaan devi* (manifested in the blood-coloured stone) in the *yoni pitha*. The water flowing through a water spring keeps the stone moist and one needs to touch the wet stone. Sarma quoted thus: *Manobhava guha madhhe raktapaasan rupini, tatsyas, saprsham maatre punar janma niti.* (In the form of blood flow, the goddess manifests and touching it conveys rebirth or higher birth).

Mahendra Nath Bhattacharyya (2000) quotes from the Kamakhya Tirtha (KT) and writes thus:

Kamakhya Bordedevi Neel Parvatvasini,

Twang Devi Japatanga Matryonimudra Namosthate

(Kamakhya resides in the *yoni* shrine located in the blue hill).

Similarly, Ananta Sarma (2019) mentions how the *yoni pitha* of the Devi is *tezere garha* (created with blood) and how her identity remains *tezabaan* (brimmed with blood) or *tezaal* (manifested in blood) and alive. The striking sculpture of a menstruating woman in a squatting position very similar to Lajja Gauri right adjacent to one of the temple doors, with her exposed breast and vagina is always covered in red signifying blood. Lusanna is of the view that the morning bath performed on the goddess' body (the *yoni* stone) awakens the sleeping goddess and those who touch her (2015: 78). Moreover, the usage of blood in order to describe Kamakhya is so strong that her identification is nothing without it. Beginning with her physical description to the space of Kamakhya temple which is smeared with redness to her annual menstruation Ambubachi she is clothed in blood which eventually becomes her greatest marker in her identity formation. In the

[25] *Pancamakaras* is a specialized Tantric ritual which includes the following ingredients and is often considered as one of the most powerful and effective ritualized worship. It consists of five (Panca) ingredients beginning with *ma-mudra* (parched grain), *matsya* (fish), *mamsa* (meat), *madya* (wine), *maithuna* (intercourse). (See Mishra, 2004:3)
[26] Kamdev, the Hindu god of love and desire is believed to be created in the *guha*.

midst of it, *sparxan* brings the element of efficacy from which emanates the realization of touching a goddess where the proximity is almost none.

Donnalee Dox (2012) argues that body becomes the site where the internal experience of spirituality and the materiality of performance practices reciprocate to each other (p. 43). Dox notes when the body performs ritual, it also embodies the sensations and logic of spirituality experienced by people (p. 46). Dox further writes, "Meaning making can happen from the body as well as being written on the body" (p. 59). Meaning, therefore is produced by and on the body. In the midst of this, Kamakhya's body reciprocates with the devotees' bodies where the *sparxan* performs the dual action of giving and extracting meaning and knowledge out of the body. Without *sparxan* the performance of worship is unfinished, just like the menstrual blood without which the climax of tantric performance is never reached. Hence, the ritualized tantric body exists to perform and performs to exist in the touch and presence of female body and menstrual blood.

Sparxan clearly replaces the conventional mode of worship of *darsan* that is commonly used in other temples. In her book on *darsan* Diana L. Eck (1998) has noted the power and importance of "seeing" in the Hindu religious tradition. Referring to *darsan* as the central act of Hindu worship, Eck narrates it, "to stand in the presence of the deity and to behold the image with one's eyes, to see and to be seen by the deity" (p. 8). The auspicious sight becomes the fundamental basis of worship established through the visual perception of sacredness. Eck further points out that the importance of eyes can be understood from the fact that in the later Hindu tradition while creating divine images the eyes were the final part of the anthropomorphic image to be carved or set (p. 7). Hindus, according to Eck, 'read' images as visual theologies or scriptures (p. 41). Here, it is to be noted that the literal meaning of *darsan* simplifies the exchange between the devotee and the deity which is supposed to awaken the five senses and awareness of being in the presence of the divine. While doing so, the sense of sight finds fulfilment, while the sense of touch remains absent or in a slumber.

As pointed out by Eck, it is crucial to have a pair of eyes to establish communication between deity and the worshipper. The significance of a pair of eyes is evident when we look at Vedic deities, be it in anthropomorphic forms or iconic images. However, if one is to look for those eyes in non-Vedic cult, one might be disappointed to find out that the presence and

representation of deities are an-iconic in nature. The sacred manifestation is discovered and worshipped in any form of nature like a block of stone or a crevice in a stone (like in the case of Kamakhya), a roadside tree, mounds of earth and so on. The urgency to 'see and be seen' is not much as of a ritual obligation as it is to touch and make oneself present in body and spirit. The act of *sparxan* therefore challenges the Vedic imagination of gods and goddesses with their 'large and conspicuous eyes' (Eck, 1998:7) and manufactures a new way of viewing the sacred with or without eyes.

Kamakhya is worshipped as one of the mainstream deities in the pantheon of Hindu gods and goddesses or, at least, has been brought under the umbrella of principal deities through Sati's myth. The popularity of Kamakhya and its aura of sacred geography dominate over other locations where the rest of the body parts fell. In fact, Chenannur Bhagavati in Kerala also claimed to be the site where the *yoni* fell (Eck, 2012:300) but Kamakhya's *yoni* worship overshadows and limits the former to a regional knowledge system only. As a result, Sati's myth may have enhanced Kamakhya's fame in the Hindu pilgrimage orbit, but the tantric goddess is still not fully accommodated within the realm of Vedic cultus. The autochthonous Kamakhya is stubbornly manifested in its an-iconic stone-self, challenging the Vedic idea of worshipping, perceiving and encountering the sacred; dismantling the grammar of 'gaze' one touch at a time.

Madhu Khanna (2000) cites the difference of views between the orthodox Hinduism and the Saktas with regard to menstrual blood. Stating the sakta view, Khanna questions how can be menstruation impure when it emanates from woman's body (p. 118). Thinking through the intricacies of the ritual, one finds a persistent focus on the *yoni* and the menstrual blood where the *yoni* assumes the identity of Kamakhya and the menstrual blood becomes synonymous to the woman's body. Similarly, Kartikeya C. Patel (1994), argues in Shakta-Hindu woman's own nature (*strsvabhava*) and woman's religion (*stridharma*) are defined in terms of menstruation and therefore the notion of female, feminine and woman cannot be separated from each other (p. 72). Having said that, there is a danger that it may therefore generate by drawing an amalgamated image of the diversity of an identity to a singular bodily part or function. The reverence offered thus is evidently due to the presence of *yoni* and menstrual blood on the bodies and not otherwise. There is a fear that the bodies are means to an end which get reduced and dismembered to one body part or one stream of blood dismantling and diluting the whole process of identity formation. Urban

insists that texts like *Yoni Tantra* and *Kamakhya Tantra* stress that women are esteemed not just because they have *yoni*s but because they are *yonis* and their ability to produce "flower of the *yoni*" (*yoni puspa*) or menstrual blood (2010: 133). I thereby argue that the refusal to identify these bodies over and above their sex exploits and exposes them to submit to an authoritative command and enact the choreographed role-playing without question. Over and above the super-imposition of naturalized 'exaggerated form of heteronormativity' (Urban, 2010:135), it evidently situates the menstruating body as a site and a medium for the male practitioners to attain higher knowledge. All the more, rather than seemingly empowered and an indispensable component in tantric phenomenon, I view the menstruating body as non-marginal and transgressive because it transforms into a powerful tool to expose the otherwise cloaked sexual objectification in the garb of ritual efficacy, glorification of female sexual organ and the menstrual blood.

Seclusion, but not a secluded event

Sophie Laws (1990) argues that the one purpose of 'menstrual etiquette' is to not make men aware of the existence of menstruation and it also springs from the essence of the phenomenon the disgust that menstrual blood or the whole concept of menstruation indicates (pp. 14, 29). Laws explains,

> What we have is a menstrual etiquette, part of a larger etiquette of behavior between the sexes. Women are discredited by any behavior which draws attention to menstruation. Thus, the etiquette expresses and reinforces status distinctions. (p. 211)

Likewise, menstrual seclusion can be unmistakably considered a part of a larger socio-cultural and religious etiquette in the context of India in general, and the Assamese Hindu community in particular.[27] Menstrual seclusion supposedly provides protection and rest to the menstruant as the body in question is believed to be the most vulnerable to unwelcome energies. The menstruant is separated from the rest of the family and undergoes temporary seclusion and restrictions in terms of diet, separate bed, utensils, clothes and anything that she is allowed to touch during that period.

[27] Menstrual seclusion is commonly practiced in Western Nepal as well where menstruating women are forced to stay in tiny menstrual huts called *chaupadi* despite a ban by the Supreme Court of Nepal (See Rothchild and Piya, 2020). The outcome of menstrual seclusion is often deaths due to suffocation from fire smoke during harsh winters. This has resulted in huge outcries globally, but the menstrual restriction still continues despite of many women welfare organization trying to bring reform and educate the people in remote villages.

It is followed for three days after which the restrictions are relaxed in some families and for some it can be extended till the seventh day.

Of course, the intensity of restrictions may vary in urban, semi urban and rural spaces, but menstrual seclusion mostly includes a set of prohibited actions one should not engage in that is of religious, sexual and sensual nature. She should not enter temple or any religious and spiritual space that is considered sacred or holy. She should not have sexual intercourse and should not comb her hair, anoint her body, apply collyrium to her eyes, sleep on the ground, not touch the fire, not eat meat, not touch anyone and so on (Chawla, 1994:2819; Khanna, 2000:118; Sridhar, 2019:19). Menstrual seclusion is observed and temporary untouchability is maintained by both the menstruant and others.

In an attempt to legitimate and justify menstrual seclusion in Hindu tradition and the above-mentioned restrictions, Nithin Sridhar (2019) argues that menstruation is a period of austerity, self-purifying process and rest (p. 17) and an exclusive women's 'privilege'. (p. 49). Sridhar further mentions Indra's Brahmahatya episode and states that as menstruation constitutes Brahmahatya, it imparts 'Ashaucha' or impurity on menstruating women. As a result, menstruation assists in washing away that guilt in the form of a self-purifying process bringing austerity and rest to the menstruating women (p. 11). Not to forget how it brings to mind Douglas' argument of social neatness if one is to consider the guilt a menstruating body may want to cleanse from for causing disorder. Sridhar concludes that the reason and justification of menstrual observances is due to the 'heightened Rajasic condition' that may have an adverse effect on people if the restrictions are not followed religiously (p. 67). Evidently, Sridhar's work glorifies menstruation, but fails to acknowledge the major issue of women's 'lived and living' experience especially in semi-urban and rural India; discussion on fear directed towards the menstruating bodies is totally absent and negated to a large extent.

Similarly, Buckley justifies the communal belief towards menstrual seclusion and mentions that a menstruating woman should isolate herself because this is the time she is at the height of her powers and her energy should be towards spirituality (1988: 190). Hence, the menstruating women should not be disturbed and left alone. Keeping the women, Earth and the Goddess on a same plain, and speaking on a similar tone Patel explains that the disturbance of

female body of women-earth-the Goddess during menstruation may result in discontinuity and annihilation and destruction (1994: 81, also see Douglas, 1999:108).

On the other hand, referring to Sjoo and Mor's analysis of the Indra episode, Janet Chawla (1994) states that the murder "initiates the creation, not of cosmos but of patriarchy" (p. 2121). Chawla further questions "what/whom is really being killed?" (p. 2819). Likewise, Khanna reiterates that the guilt is passed on to womankind to remain in eternal bondage because of the guilt (2000: 118). The above-mentioned 'eternal bondage' reminds of Sridhar's explanation of how Rajas guna increases a person's 'bondage with the worldly cycle' and in both the scenarios the menstruating bodies play a crucial role; one that contains the male god's guilt turning itself into a guilt-ridden body. It becomes the vehicle where the 'sin of murder' flows in and the bloody price of that very 'sin' flows out. The bodies not only accommodate somebody else's crime, but also personify death in the form of menstrual blood. The bondage, therefore, binds and stains women with manifested impurity where these bleeding bodies are monthly reminder of how men can even get away with a cold-blooded murder as long as women's bodies exist to embody the sin.

Arupa Patangia Kalita (2016) views menstruating body as a powerful presence in a patriarchal society and hence a source of hatred (p. 44). Kalita explains the fear directed towards menstruating female body as it is a common belief amongst the Assamese community about the ill-effects of menstruating body's touch that is believed to turn wine into vinegar, destroy crops and seedlings and so on. Nihar Ranjan Mishra (2004) argues that menstrual bleeding is not just about purity-pollution's concern with hygiene and physical cleanliness, but it has a lot to do with the magico-religious connotation (p. 37). It has power to affect any person, anything or any act which makes it 'collective', 'hereditary' or 'collectively hereditary' (Ibid.). On the other hand, observing the hierarchy and untouchability in the Hindu caste system, Frédérique Apffel Marglin (1985) presents a different view with regard to women's body and the purity-pollution discourse. Marglin contends the hierarchy rests upon the observance of rules of purity and pollution which also applies in the inferiority of women vis-à-vis men (p. 44). The impurity, other than creating an 'othered' image of itself simultaneously displays an undeniable powerful presence. Meanwhile, the 'power' that Kalita highlights can also be perceived as the powerful presence that Kamakhya symbolizes while menstruating. The reproductive power and the power to bleed for days without dying is convincing enough to make female bodies superior to male bodies. However, the seclusion

that Assamese Hindu women go through is reflected in the goddess as well since the Kamakhya temple remains closed for three days during her annual menstruation Ambubachi. It goes without saying it is dealt through menstrual fear and untouchability which conveniently reverses the social reality and brings in gender stereotypes in the form of 'leaking and lacking' body.

Trishna Borah (2019), a young new mother and a school teacher by profession mentioned how menstrual separation may vary in different places and several levels. For instance, at her natal village at Jamuguri, the seclusion and its associated restrictions are observed for seven days, while at her in-laws' at Nalbari it is relaxed from the fourth day onward. During the menstrual period, one needs to wash off anything that the menstruant comes in touch with like chair one sits on or utensils one touches. One can eat *rooti* (wheat bread), but not rice, vegetarian food among other things and so there are dietary restrictions as well. She seemed relaxed for the time being since her menstruation had paused temporarily due to her recent child-birth which meant she did not have to go through the monthly seclusion. On being asked if there are any relaxation for mothers who resume menstruation after child-birth, she sighed and said there is no *rehaai* (relaxation or relief) no matter what. She was quick to even mention that the restriction on menstruation is just one of the several restrictions like not cutting nails in the afternoon or the birth day one is born, not discussing menstruation in public, washing oneself every time a woman uses the lavatory and so on.

However, changes are bound to happen as Douglas observes if one can realise how much a language changes in a lifetime, without the speakers recognizing their own contribution, one can realise how rituals and beliefs change (1999: 170). She notes, "They are extremely plastic" (Ibid.). Similarly, Borah was also right to point out that the restrictions are somewhat relaxed for girls who have school exams or for those working women who have to go out to work. She recalled that she was on her second day of menstruation when she was asked to join her job. She did not hesitate even once to keep aside all the restrictions and leave for work. However, one needs to understand that once they return to their homes the restrictions are imposed again as corroborated by a group of *Gupini*[28] (2019).

[28] *Gupini* refers to a group of elderly women who sing *Naam*, religious hymn praising gods like Visnu, Krishna. They practice Vaisnavism propounded by Sankardeva. *Gupini* may also imply Krishna's group of milkmaids called *Gopi*s.

Menstrual seclusion observance is clearly space-oriented and the private space of the house demands the menstruants to follow the seclusion without fail. Moreover, the flexibility is not just limited to exams and job as Borah mentions that she finds it funny at times to see how rituals are convenience-driven. She explains,

> If I stain my *paator mekhela*[29] I do not have to wash as it might destroy the silk. However, in case of a regular cotton *mekhela* the restriction needs to be followed and washed off immediately. Likewise, it is okay to just sprinkle some water in order to purify a used blanket during menstruation but in case of a thinner blanket one needs to wash it after the third day. There is no *suwa* in fire and water for those who use the same tap in their washroom or same gas stove to cook food and for some there is. It is a convenient-driven custom. Our mother and grandmothers have no answers to these queries. Neither are we allowed to ask. I personally do not belief these restrictions are unquestionable. (2019)

The menstruating bodies carry their 'seclusion' with them wherever they move even though it may fade out as the distance between them and home increases, but it does not disappear completely (also see Cicurel and Sharaby, 2007[30]). The seclusion re-exists once the menstruants set their foot homewards as it grows stronger and reappears once they are within the home space. By secluding the menstruating bodies, menstrual observance displays the strong association it shares with the fear and the anatomy of constructed beliefs that is grounded on menstrual pollution and stigma. Moreover, the sacred space which generates several layers of meanings therefore is more or less fixed, while the meanings attached to 'contaminated' bodies is non-fixed and fluid, thereby causing the menstrual blood to signify or alter these meanings.

[29] Traditional Assamese women's wear made of pure silk and hence expensive.

[30] Inbal Cicurel and Rachel Sharaby (2007) conducted a study on the preservation attempt of menstrual observance amongst the Jewish Ethiopian community also known in Ethiopia as Beta Israel (p. 72). Calling it a 'case of activism', Cicurel and Sharaby talk about how the women preserved custom of *margam gojos* (menstruation huts) even after they had migrated to Israel during 1985 and 1991 after Israeli State recognized the community as Jewish as the customs provided them with health, rest, purification and female bonding (pp. 69, 74). While living in immigration centers, the women began using one of the caravans as a substitute for *margam* to seclude themselves during menstruation to purify themselves, while the younger working women did away with the tradition (p. 76). The study reveals with the change of space, the *margam* changed its meaning and turned itself into an impure space instead of a purifying space. As they traveled further from the actual space where they observed it, it became more of a convenience than a custom. Here again, I argue that the menstrual observances are space-oriented and the sacredness of a space determines the effective performance of the menstruating bodies.

The domestic spaces reveal that women themselves have actively supported and reinforced menstrual seclusion. In several instances it has been observed in my interviews that women especially middle-aged and old-aged have actively participated and strongly advised the younger women to continue. They ensure that the menstrual seclusion and other restrictions are followed religiously without question. Menstrual spaces are extremely non-masculine as male presence is not even required to ensure that the restrictions are followed. Here, men somewhat seem to disappear from the scene and women act. It would not be wrong to say that these spaces are women-dominated where restrictions are sustained to invisibilize menstrual blood and encourage seclusion.

Das, while studying about menstruation in a village called Simlitola located in Assam discovered that women actively participate in the menstrual restrictions. She notes despite knowing that a mere touching of menstruating women will not cause any disease, the men of the village remain mute spectators and do not initiate any change to free these women from their monthly 'agony' (2008: 38). However, she also adds that men alone cannot be completely blamed as the women themselves believe in the goodness of these taboos (Ibid.). According to Das, women consider it as a virtuous act in hiding their menstruation or rather silhouetting menstrual meaning from men (p. 40). On being asked why is it so important to follow these rules the most common response that I seemed to find was that it is for women's own good. Of course, patriarchy screams out loud from this response, but women have claimed the menstrual space and the baton has been passed from men to women. The hierarchy is maintained amongst women where the elders direct the younger ones to preserve, observe and stage these beliefs.

Women amongst the Assamese Hindu community actively participate in the menstrual restriction and this act may have come out of viewing one's own body as defiled and in constant need of purification. Menstruation, therefore is considered that component that can cause ritual anomaly and the fear of repercussions also drive women to perform menstrual restriction without fail. It is essential here to consider several studies where women are seen as the principal performers on whose shoulder rests the cleansing and conditioning of the social fabric. The role of women is not just restricted to separate oneself to retain the sacredness of the social spaces, but also to initiate a cyclical reminder to all the menstruating bodies to perform their roles when the 'time' comes. There is a phrase in Assamese called *xomoi hoise* (it is time) which is commonly

used to euphemize the doorstep arrival of menstruation. The expression almost hints at the commencement of a period of embodied pollution, separation and cleansing. This 'period' facilitates a performative time and space which requires menstruating bodies to play the role as a 'corrective measure' within a specific duration and this cyclical performance is performed on a loop. The culmination of the performing purity period sets another upcoming cycle in motion and the aforesaid embodiment is curated, revealed and retained under the observing eyes of fellow women.

Buckley and Gottlieb have asserted that concluding menstrual seclusion as a sign of male suppression may not be always correct and this kind of outlook may have 'inflected from the pride of missionaries and other colonialists' (1988: 12). Further, they explain that women themselves may have been responsible for originating the customs in many societies (p. 13). This opinion sets the ball in motion to understand what does it mean to retain the menstrual restriction or is it another way of diminishing the presence of men in order to claim autonomy? The women-only space may also be viewed as an alternate space to reinforce control over fellow women in the pretext of customs. Or, it may allow women to practice autonomy in at least one remaining space not invaded by men. Or, it may be viewed as a 'sanctuary and not a shameful banishment'[31] that women are granted in order to endorse female bonding outside the 'naturally' assigned domestic life. The 'possibilities' as Buckley and Gotllieb call it may abound and differ from society to society, but it is nonetheless a suggestive exercise in order to bring into discussion how women not only display avoidance behavior (also see Lawrence, 1988)[32] but they self-participate and ensure other women's participation as well.

Sally Price (1994) provides an alternate perspective with her study on the Saramaka village of Dangogo, Suriname in 1966 where she was allowed to stay with her husband Richard Price on one condition that she would follow the menstrual seclusion in the menstrual hut along with the

[31] Bobel's interpretation of Buckley and Gottlieb's argument (Bobel, 2010:74).

[32] Denise L. Lawrence (1988), explores a small town called Vila Branca in southern Portugal to examine the avoidance behavior during menstruation at the time of annual pig-killing. According to Lawrence, women are the 'principal actors' who maintain menstrual taboo as a form of social control during the event and may not often just relate to pollution concepts (p. 117). Lawrence furthers states that the taboo maintenance appears to be motivated by a strong undercurrent of fear: Not of men towards women but women's fear of each other (p. 130). Here the fear is not grounded on disgust or danger that men may have as discussed earlier, but the fear may be due to the repercussions of failure to conduct the rituals correctly.

other women which she did (p. 128). Hence, the menstrual restriction is performed by both the menstruating and non-menstruating bodies, eventually resting on the maintenance of this detachment in several levels. Through her own experience, Price provides a window to the social conditioning of the Saramakas where the menstruating women are not only untouchable, but they had to remain out of sight and were prohibited to speak to (Ibid.). Price informs that the term used for menstrual seclusion is *de a badka* meaning 'to be in mourning', which according to her expresses the lived-experience of these women (p. 129). Price, therefore, questions the theoretical interpretation and representation of Western scholars who analyse the menstrual seclusion or periodic banishment as a 'feminist escape from the burdens of daily life' (1984: 2) owing to their own understanding of feminism and female empowerment. Moreover, Price questions whether some feminist writings have 'redecorated the menstrual hut' (p. 132) as 'matriliny has been misread as matriarchy' while 'Independence has been misread as a Western-style women's liberation' (p. 1).

In Assamese Hindu community, the menstrual spaces are mapped out and the menstruating bodies are marked as a constant effort to control this space by women not only within the threshold, but also outside of it. The exercise of power and control over bodies, space and sexuality (See Chanana, 2001:38) may be because of certain distinction and virtuosity women are recognized with due to the continuation of these menstrual observances. The sexual connotation is unmissable in the present context and the prohibition is practiced in order to map a 'safe space' from unacceptable moral and social codes, to discipline the 'uncontrollable and undisciplined' (Patterson, 2014:97) bleeding bodies. Borah explained while men are not required to take shower every time they defecate, women are supposed to (2019), which according to her surely does not mean they are cleaner than women and do not have to keep cleaning themselves. Then turning towards me, she asked sharply, "We learn to seclude ourselves right from our childhood. This is how *pitrisatta* (patriarchy) operates, right?" Her statement brings to mind what Leela Dube (1988) notes, "The culturally prevalent attitude of considering themselves defiled has been internalized through the socialization right from the childhood days" (p. 37).

In a separate interview with the *Gupini*s (who had already attained menopause) rued the fact that some women do not follow the restrictions religiously. They explained the restrictions and the need for it:

> It is *chalithoka porompora* (a living tradition) since time immemorial. One should live in a saintly manner without any *uttejana* and *chanchalta* (excitement, implicitly sexual) to protect her from any kind of external harm whatever that may be. (2019)

The justification is similar to the 'heightened Rasa guna' explanation that causes the menstruating body to produce imbalance and disrupt the social eco system. Dube's questions on the production of women as gendered subjects (1988: 11) becomes crucial here. Terms like *uttejana* and *chanchal* are gendered, viewed in singularity and featured as a female performing attribute. On the other hand, the non-menstruating male body is convincingly characterized as a passive recipient who performs the minimum role in the actualization of the moral disruption in the performance of an 'inappropriate act'.

Due to the socio-cultural handling of menstruation, participated by women (proactive or otherwise), the menstrual bleeding body therefore is viewed as a rupturing agent who singlehandedly fragments the social order. As a matter of fact, while Douglas talks about pollution behaviour for controlling dirt, I view it as a mechanism to control and conceal stigma-ridden bodies. While Douglas sees ritual cleansing to idealize order, I see it as a site of demonstrative hierarchy. According to Douglas, the dirt-avoidance results in tidying up the social disorder, I view the arrangement as a sign of crystallizing gendered role performance. Menstruation is thus a seclusion event, but not a secluded event. It should be viewed as a relational concept and the social conditioning plays a larger role to turn menstruation into seclusion, without totally secluding it from society. It is not possible to seclude the menstrual body from the social body because the former remains in total submission to the latter.

Linguistic Silence and the 'Flowing Codes'

> Rivers rising once a month are a woman's monthly flow. A flower blooming after twelve years signifies a young girl starting to menstruate. To drink the honey from the flower or to go swimming in the river is to ingest a woman's flow in order to be nourished. (Hanssen, 2002:365)

The above poetic camouflage of 'ambiguous' (See Hanssen, 2000:366; Kissling, 1996:383) menstruation is drawn from Kristin Hanssen's (2002) profound reading of Vaishnava Baul singers in Bengal. No doubt the metaphorical and metaphysical symbolism is grounded and seamlessly merges the menstrual body with the bountiful nature. But what rather caught my attention was the

manner in which the entire bodily process of menstruation is poeticized, but yet concealed. Michel Foucault (1978) asserts how repression operates as a sentence to disappear and an injunction to silence, an affirmation of non-existence with nothing to say about such things, nothing to see, and nothing to know (p. 4). In a similar manner, the individual, collective and cultural silence on menstruation exhibits a systematic and a cautious urge to invisiblize the menstrual bleeding from the social stage; menstruation exists, but in codes. During my field work except for a very few instances (provoked by me), the term 'bleeding' was rarely mentioned and even if it did, it was habitually uttered by my respondents under their breath making it almost inaudible. In order to refer to menstrual bleeding the rather disguised Assamese terms are used which I call the 'flowing codes'. These disguised terms are *suwa* (polluted), *nuwara* (inability to do), *axubidha* (trouble or female trouble in this case), *mahekiya* (monthlies), *gaa beya* (unwell or sick body), and so on. These are conveniently used so as to avoid any kind of 'embarrassing' encounters.

There is a constant effort to silence and erase menstruation because of the stigma the menstrual body carries within. In an effort to counter this, Shauna M. MacDonalds (2007) advocates for making menstruation visible in order to resist the menstrual stigma and erasures that occur at several levels (p. 351). The 'leaky performances' or the fluid nature of blood becomes performative displaying kinesis that eventually aids in 'breaking the established social norms and understanding' (pp. 350-1). However, that may still be achievable in advanced societies, but the ground reality of traditional communities is that it successfully cloaks menstruation in codes. Das states, "*Ritushrow* is the Assamese term for menstruation, however no one uses it" (2008: 38). Referring to these codes as 'euphemisms and safe words', Das observes the usage is due to the socialization of women where they are taught to view menstruation as degrading and shameful (Ibid.). Even though there is a gradual trend of using terms like menses and period by the younger generation, Das suggests that the use of English term does not always mean social change since the women share this term amongst themselves and it may also mean extreme embarrassment that the use of the mother language brings to a private physical process (p. 39).

Surprisingly, many of my male respondents preferred to use the actual term for menstruation like *ritumati*, *ritushrow* or 'menstruation' more than the commonly used codes. However, the conversations were inclined towards Ambubachi *mela*. They did mention *suwa*, *nuwara* a few times though. As for women, they categorically view menstruation as a restriction-

inducing event, they prefer to use disguised terms displaying a complete denial of menstruation as a biological process. I reiterate that the flowing codes perform the role of constructing the 'menstrual acts' in order to establish the consequence of menstruation and customize the role to be subsequently demonstrated by the menstruating body.

One of my respondents in her late 40s narrated her first bleeding experience in her native village. While she spoke about it like she would on any other topic, but there came a point when she had to mention *tez* (normally it means blood, but menstrual blood in this case) she quickly lowered her tone and almost whispered it into my ear. She recalled while she was out in the field grazing the goats, she went to urinate. To her utter shock, she saw some clots of blood in her urine for the very first time. She recalled,

> I trembled and came back home but did not disclose it to anyone fearing that they might not believe me and then I would have to show the blood in order to convince them. I felt guilty and shy at the same time even though I was aware that it happens to every girl. (2019)

She finally confided to her elder sister by saying '*gaa bhaal loga nai*' (I am feeling unwell). But in this context the meaning changes and is a code for menstruation. Her sister responded saying '*Tur biya hol neki?*' (Have you got married?), but in this context it specifically codifies as 'Are you menstruating?' (*biya* refers to *Tuloni biya*, a post-menarche marriage ceremony). She continued thus, "I was filled with shame and denied that I was married and ran away from her in order to avoid any more queries from her" (Ibid.). The exchange of codes flows in between the sisters just like it does in the larger social fabric and the conception of menstruation begins and exists in codes flowing from one prescribed act to another. Her menstrual denial thus began with a guilt and shame-driven concealment and it is not an exception but rule that has been enacted by a larger section of women in every household.

The linguistic erasure of menstruation from everyday dialogues throws light on how a society communicates the internalization of individual and collective shame echoeing through the menstrual body. It also determines that the linguistic erasure replaces the process of menstruation with certain disciplined actions. Discussing the failure of language to represent menstruation adequately, Bobel discusses Suzette Haden Elgin's invention of women's language in 1984 that captured women's diverse experiences of embodiment: to menstruate, to be pregnant, to

menopause (2010: 29). Elgin included words like "husháana" to menstruate painfully; "desháana" to menstruate early; "ásháana" to menstruate joyfully and so on (Ibid.). While Elgin attempts to linguistically redefine the lived-experience as a process, the flowing codes re-embellish the experiential process through a 'stylized repetition of acts' (Butler, 1990:191) to turn into 'sedimented acts' (Butler, 1988:523). Terms like *suwa*, *nuwara*, *axubidha* and so on are uttered less to refer to the menstrual bleeding, but more to enforce the menstrual body to perform the sedimented gendered acts.

A significant linguistic distancing is observed as well while referring to menstruation. For instance, in order to describe a bodily process like feeling hungry (*bhuk*), thirsty (*piya*), cold (*thaanda*), hot (*gorom*) and so on it is accompanied by term *laagise* to mean something that has happened within the body. Whereas to describe sickness/fever (*jor*), menstruation (*suwa*/*nuwara*) and so on it is usually accompanied by *hoise* to mean to have happened to the body. It clearly creates a distance between what is within and outside the acceptable bodily boundaries. Similarly, Lee suggests that in instances when menstruation is referred as 'it', that also gives an illusion of a fragmentation between the self and body as women tend to look at menarche or menstruation for that matter to appear from the outside, invading the self and not a part of them (p. 349). In case of Assamese language, usage of terms like *hoise* instead of *laagise*, there is a conscious linguistic alienation of menstrual bleeding from other everyday bodily processes. Equating menstruation with sickness or linguistically constructing the menstrual body as being sick or diseased lends a sense of estrangement maintained through acts like menstrual seclusion.

In performative utterance, J. L. Austin (1962) argues how the sentence like 'I do, I name, I bet' not only define an action, but actually 'do' it through performance (p. 6). I argue that the flowing code provides a gendered linguistic perspective to it that Austin might not have addressed. For instance, Sati is not just a character of the narrative, it stands for a virtuosity that Sati denotes. Spivak (2001) opines, ""Sati" is a word in the language meaning, presumably, a paragon of the specifically womanly virtues (p. 138)". In the same way, the reference to "Sati" demands a Sati-like role-performance from Kamakhya and the rest of the female bodies. Terms like *suwa*, *nuwara*, *axubidha* connote a deeply embedded social meaning that demands a specifically performed stereotyped role from female bodies. With the utterance of these terms, there arises a strong tendency to transform the physiological, social and mental status of female bodies and demand

ideal performances of their transformed state. For instance, the term *suwa* which can be translated as polluted, does not have any male parallel in Assamese language. It denotes the transitory state of a woman who is polluted due to the menstrual blood present in her body and hence untouchable. These terms 'do' the selves of Kamakhya and women alike demanding role-playing whenever uttered. The term *suwa* can also be translated as "to see/ to touch" which is ironical in the present context because the sight of a menstruating woman or menstrual stain is considered ominous as well as untouchable. The meaning is completely reversed when it is used in order to refer to a woman specifically when on her periods. The disciplined body thus enacts and transforms the linguistic meaning to socially-performed gendered meaning when pronounced while controlling their bodies from being 'menstrually visible'. The failure to acknowledge and feigning ignorance negates the existence of menstruation not only in its physicality, but also in its spatial and linguistic reality.

Conclusion

Chris Bobel and Elizabeth A. Kissling (2011) argue that discussion on menstruation has proliferated through the study of women's bodies from 'object to subject' status in the contemporary women's discourse (p. 123). Bobel mentions how third wave feminism of the West in the 1990s tried to address the deficiencies of the second-wave by promoting a more inclusive movement spread across gender, race, ethnicity, class and sexuality (2010: 4). The formation of several menstrual activist groups like red brigades, radical feminists and feminist spiritualists have initiated the 'menstrual talks' or being 'period positive' (See Patterson, 2014) in order to detach the shame associated with menstruation.[33] While Bobel observes that menstrual activism endorses menstruation as a healthy bodily process and may prove effective in constructing 'body literacy', an essential tool to understand one's own body (2010: 8), any attempt to display or make menstruation visible is often met with a strong sense of denial.

However, the crucial point of feministic intervention in menstruation matters also poses a central problem of brushing the entire menstrual issue with feministic strokes. When menstrual

[33] However, these groups have their own way of viewing menstruation. For instance, the feminist-spiritualists celebrate menstruation as it essentializes and defines womanhood and presumably stabilizes gender, whereas radical feminists find this "I bleed therefore I am woman" discourse problematic and thus challenge this sort of essentialization because not all women menstruate, and not only women menstruate (Patterson,2014:11-12).

activists like third wave feminists in first world countries are fighting individually and collectively to treat menstruation as normal and detach the stigma associated with it, women like in the context of my research are still fighting their own battle to first individuate themselves from the collective. Their idea of stigma and stigma management is completely separated from how third wave feminists comprehend the concept of stigma. While the third wavers problematize the medicalization of menstruation (See Lahiri-Dutt 2014; Sitar, 2017) and menstrual consumerism in concealing the menstrual blood, the women here are not even aware of the medicalization since they are occupied with concealing themselves and their 'sick and diseased' bodies. While the third wavers are fighting to display 'menstrual shame' out in the public, the women here still continue to feel 'menstrual guilt' in the privacy of their homes.

Third wave feminism or menstrual activism for that matter is still inadequate to address the issues of women in the localized interiors of rural lives where the idea of individuality is still a far-fetched phenomenon where women are often viewed in clusters.[34] The sense of 'cluster' often disciplines the menstrual bodies when they associate themselves as mirrored selves of other women. They religiously imitate the role-playing and their idea of individuality often dies an early death. It is therefore imperative that they detach themselves from the herd and emerge as body literates to question the menstrual objectification they go through which might also prove to be the most effective way to stop self-objectifying[35] their bleeding bodies with menstrual guilt and shame. As a matter of fact, in order to read the conception and consequence of menstruation, feminist discourse may still need to localize and particularize itself with the way woman's body in general and the menstruating body is socially perceived in its specificity and socialized meaning. Till then, I still have reservations to simplify the menstrual matters of Assamese Hindu women into a blanketed feminist observation, where menstruation first needs to break out from the 'euphemisms' to an acknowledged existence, way before 'becoming visible'.

In an attempt to move the often-peripheral menstruating body to the center of discussion, this chapter has elaborated on the various facets of menstruation and how it is revealed in the

[34] It reminds me of Krishna Kumar's (1992) intriguing anecdote of his boyhood when he would roam around the streets of a small town in the Indian state of Madhya Pradesh with the other boys of his neighbourhood. Having seen the girls in groups using the street simply as a means to get straight home from school erased his ability to view them as individuals and not 'clusters' (p. 83).
[35] For self-objectification of menstruation, See Roberts and Waters, 2004:11.

community space. Locating the menstrual body in the interiors of domesticity and Kamakhya temple boundaries, it shares a glimpse of what it entails to 'bleed like a woman' and ideally perform the menstrual observances. The crucial points that this chapter has showcased begins with the concept of menstrual stigma and how the bodies perform a socially-prescribed role through the act of concealment–spatial and linguistic. Hence, concealing menstruation by veiling the body, mapping menstrual spaces and codifying it in utterance is an attempt to institutionalize menstrual stigma and produce stigmatized bodies and subsequent role-playing.

On a different note, the chapter views the menstrual blood as transgressive which often traverses the toe-lined socio-cultural boundaries and flows out while unapologetically staining the social fabric. It rather questions if the menstrual blood has any other meaning than the dominant perception of being impure and polluted. To provide an alternate perception of menstruation in the social understanding, the chapter tries to gaze at the tantric body and addresses the purity/impurity discourse through the performance of 'ideal intercourse'.

The chapter thereafter observes that menstruation is a seclusion event, spatially absenting the body, although not a secluded one. It discusses the role of women in retaining the menstrual observances and if women themselves play a bigger role in preserving menstrual practices than has been presumed. It throws light on their active participation where men have disappeared and women have taken the central stage to ensure the menstrual bodies perform the role diligently without fail. Besides, menstruation memories get displayed as remnant of fear, shame, embarrassment and guilt. Consequently, in the gendered everyday of menstruating bodies, the linguistically alienating 'flowing codes' seamlessly flow in daily conversations, effectively mirroring the fluidity of menstruation and successfully keeping the 'actual talk' on menstruation at bay; secluded one may say.

Chapter II

Maternalized Bodies

Introduction

> *Naraka, the ruler of Pragjyotishpura*[36] *worshipped Kamakhya as Mother Goddess and seeing his unshakable faith, she appeared before the king. She was a sight to behold and her radiant beauty aroused a sexual desire in him. Naraka did something unthinkable by proposing the goddess to be his wife. She consented to his proposal provided he built the four stairways that would lead to her temple situated atop the Nilachal hill in one night. Naraka accepted the condition and put his best men forward for the job. The men labored so hard that the construction was almost complete filling Naraka with pride and lust. Taken aback as the job was about to accomplish, Kamakhya used her illusionary power to cause a rooster (kukura) to crow signalling the break of dawn. The rooster perched himself in the incomplete staircase and crowed with all his might. Realizing the Goddess' trick, Naraka slaughtered the rooster after which the place came to be known as 'kukura kata'. Some say the staircase is still there if one wants to climb it.* (Goswami, 1996:34-35; Bhattacharyya, 2000:22; Urban, 2010:81)

The above narrative exhibits the consequence of Kamakhya's sexual identity and prescribes the 'maternal image' for her in a dominant manner. The idealization of motherhood begins with Kamakhya's portrayal of being a mother. Naraka's masculinity is challenged by Kamakhya's maternity and her modesty. Her maternal image is eventually reinstated by a rooster or a cock, a symbol of majestic masculinity, male virility and protection. This chapter attempts to provide a fertile ground to explore the 'what' and 'how' of motherhood in the larger context while focusing on the ritual and social space of Assamese Hindu society in particular. The 'what' clearly implies searching the meaning of motherhood in the social milieu at the backdrop of conventional identity formation. The 'how' intends to 'conceive' the paradigm within which motherhood is structured and portrayed, while mothering roles are produced to be ideally performed in order to separate the maternalized from the unmaternal bodies.

[36] Pragjyotishpura is the ancient name of present Guwahati city, the capital of present Assam, previously named Pragjyotish.

In India, the debate of feminism examines motherhood to exhibit the dynamics between mothers of two kinds-human and divine, which is also the foundation of this chapter. Jasodha Bagchi, Maitreyi Krishnaraj, Kamala Ganesh, Sukumari Bhattacharji among others have provided several studies on various shades of maternal projection of Indian women. Anu Aneja and Subhangi Vaidya (2016) bring out the paradoxical position of women in India through a 'familiar hackneyed defense' that says 'but in our country we honour our women as devis' (Ibid. 27).

In an attempt to discuss the prevailing notion of ideal motherhood and the performance of maternalized roles, this chapter focuses on corporeality of maternal images seamlessly attached to female bodies to discuss two kinds of husbanded mothers–social and conceptual. The evolution of motherhood highlights the various maternal ideation that constructs the glorified image of social mother as well as conceptual mother like Mother Goddess or maternalized landscapes. It will explore the birth ritual observance of potential and actual mothers among the Assamese Hindu women. It will look at the creation of maternal images centered on womb, lactating breasts, *yoni*, birthing iconographies to highlight the superimposition of social/ non-sexual over the sexual being and examine if the production of desexualized gaze reinforces the identity of female bodies to maternal performances alone. It will observe the manifestation of maternity through the idea of 'visitations' performed by the community in rituals conferred to Mother Goddesses like Kamakhya and Sitala. This chapter will further discuss the social construction of motherhood as synonymous to certain maternal virtues and limits her characterization of matriarchal and militant mother that she eventually withdraws from to role-play her maternal homecoming.

It becomes pertinent to comprehend how the idea of motherhood and therefore mothering has disseminated into the social sphere in order to create an aura around the conceptual mother. The term motherhood and its deeply engraved meaning floats in the social and ritual space dominantly, almost engendering the female bodies into performing ideal mother through the social, religious and national discourse. In order to engulf or envelope the conceptual mother in the localized cultural landscape, what does motherhood 'do' to initiate 'maternal' performances? How does religion invade the socio-ritual space with the inclusion of presumably empowered territorial Mother Goddess cult in varying regions? Motherhood is believed to be the purest form of love, but is the idea of a mother premised in the same view? All these enquiries may provide some cues to how the society has arrived to 'conceive' and spacify the mother in a particular absolute manner.

Does motherhood empower or power over female bodies, goddess and human alike? How does the image of ideal mother Kamakhya mirrored in the social arena and has the autonomous agent like Mother Goddess elevated the 'ideal and conceptual' mother only and not the 'social mothers' who worship her? In view of a distinct separation between husbanded and 'immoral' unhusbanded mothers, what does motherhood within a sacred heterosexual marriage reveal about the moral compass of a community? Furthermore, why is maternalization of female bodies deemed necessary and what does it reveal about women's bodyscape in relation to the glorification of certain body parts? This chapter attempts to argue that the concept of motherhood may have been idealized to such an extreme point that mothers may not be valorized as much as motherhood is. The socio-ritual gaze fantasizes the unattainable image of 'mothering ideally', whereby the maternal image demands a breeding space for daughters to maternalize their bodies right from their own birth.

Matrescence: A Mother is born

A mother is born when she gives birth to a child enduring the glorified labor pain. What is considered the quintessential role a woman transforms herself into or what fulfills a woman? A response that is almost reverberated in the fulfilled womanhood is the status of motherhood that is conferred to a woman. As Nancy Chodorow (1978) has reinstated time and again that 'women mother' (p. 3), the role of mothering is 'naturally' reproduced to woman and in the process 'women's mothering has been taken for granted' (Ibid.). She states,

> When biological mothers do not parent, other women, rather than men, virtually always take their place. Women's mothering is one of the few universal and enduring elements of the sexual division of labor. (Ibid.)

Aneja and Vaidya have stressed upon the fact that the "motherhood pact calls for a certain kind of 'mother performance', a cultural compulsion" (2016: 138). Within the boundary of patriarchal autonomy, the female body is gazed upon to deliver specific societal expectations which is motherhood-personified. The idealization of motherhood has customized the female body to submit itself in the image of unattainable mother that is always at a distant and yet static. I call it a crisis of performance that is never resolved. Clarissa W. Atkinson (1985) argues good motherhood is almost as difficult to define as it is to achieve (p. 139). Fulfillment of being a mother hence is a continuing endeavor that is present and yet not attained. When women try to emulate

the ideal mother where would one think the source is located? Is there anything like an ideal father or the socio-cultural responsibility is entirely in the hands of mothers? An intervening argument provided by Chodorow might have a clue to this query in her analogy of terms used for parenting. She argues that mothering a child can always be associated with women and in certain cases it may also mean when a man mothers the child if he is the primary nurturing figure (1978: 11). However, a woman can never be seen as 'fathering' a child even if in rare high societies a woman takes a wife as she can be called the 'social father' of the child, but not fathering the child (Ibid.). This argument directs one to think that matrescence is engendered, while the exclusive function of fathering rests on male bodies. In the context of patrifocal society, the need to idealize fatherhood is not often mentioned since the male body plays a crucial role in the initiation of motherhood by providing the much-needed seed for reproduction. Literally and figuratively, the male body becomes the reference point through which motherhood is born in the first place. Patrifocal understanding of reproduction is unequivocally based on the ownership of female body since the identity-formation of female body as a mother is drawn and defined through/from male representation. The process of matrescence, therefore is men-derived as women mother only because men eventuate motherhood; without men, women cannot mother. At this juncture, it provides the last straw in the endorsement of men's crucial role to materialize motherhood and the art of mothering.

As women tend to evolve within the specified walls of 'community normative', motherhood is often viewed as the *summum bonum* of their living experience. Speaking about experience, motherhood has been constructed as one and the only real experience of being a woman instead of one of the many experiences. Adrienne Rich (1986) has categorically argued how the experience of motherhood has been institutionalized to an extreme point that the cycle of womanhood is deemed complete only when one becomes a mother. In a similar line, Jasodha Bagchi (2017) asserts how motherhood as a concept has been naturalized of the highly gendered terms in use (p. 34). Viewing the term 'engendering' Bagchi argues that the word itself implies a synonym for reproduction, both in being impregnated and impregnating (Ibid.). Bagchi writes, "Motherhood…is the site that is more prone to manipulations of representation" (Ibid). The question of representation triggers several discursive approaches which endorse motherhood, no doubt, and appears to empower it as well, but at the same time there is always a possibility of that representation penetrating into the social thinking as a norm.

Mary O'Brien (1983) argues that feminist theory begins within the process of reproduction where the ideology of male supremacy finds its roots and its rationales (p. 8). The question of motherhood in feminist discourse has faced challenges as pointed out by Adrienne Rich, Sara Ruddick, Nancy Chodorow, Andrea O'Reilly among others. The biggest challenge being the definition of motherhood that limits women's roles to 'singular identity' that this chapter has also addressed. Sara Ruddick (1989) challenges the social imagination of motherhood being an absolute identity attached to women for so long. Ruddick writes:

> When mothering is construed as work rather than as an identity or a fixed biological or legal relationship, people can be seen to mother with a different expense of time at various periods in their lives and in various and often changing sexual and social circumstances. When mothering is considered as a gender-free work, birth giving and mothering appear as two distinct and quite different activities. (p.xi-xii)

Ruddick further points that maternal performance is often disciplined by the 'gaze of others' and that anyone like teachers, grandparents, mates, friends, employers or even an anonymous passerby could judge her good or bad mothering skills (1989: 111). Ruddick adds, "Correcting their child loudly for small infractions, so that the observers know she is really trying" (Ibid.). Hence 'fear of the gaze', Ruddick argues is not but 'inauthenticity', a repudiation of one's own perceptions and values (p. 112).

Matricentic feminists and scholars of feminist mothering have time and again argued that motherhood cannot and must not define women. O'Reilly writes, "Mothers needs a feminism that puts motherhood at its centre. Motherhood, is the unfinished business of feminism" (2016: 2). O'Reilly contends that matricentric feminism understands motherhood to be socially and historically constructed and positions mothering more as a practice than an identity challenging the conventional belief that maternity is natural to women (p. 4). Hence, mother should be viewed more 'as a verb' (O'Reilly's reference to Mielle Chandler in p. 28) than as a noun, something one does and not assigned to one gender. I look at it as a feministic intervention to undo the gendering of motherhood in the social stage.

On the other hand, matricentric feminism also laid bare the failures of feminism in upholding the maternal discourse. O'Reilly mentions how a seemingly anti-motherhood perspective emerged in early feminism because many women who were mothers felt that feminism

itself was not sympathetic to their experiences (2005: 4). It paved way to appeal for self-defining and self-evaluating to free oneself from the traditional male-defined limited maternal roles. There has been a resilient attempt to draw a clear line between motherhood and mothering that places feminist mothering as a negation of patriarchal motherhood as argued by O'Reilly and others thus:

> Because women's reproductive capacity historically had been used to define and confine them, motherhood was rightly seen as the paramount source of oppression. The term "motherhood" refers to the patriarchal institution of motherhood that is male-defined and controlled and is deeply oppressive to women, while the word "mothering" refers to women's experiences of mothering that is female-defined and centered and potentially empowering to women. The reality of patriarchal motherhood thus must be distinguished from the possibility of potentiality of gynocentric or feminist mothering. (2004: 2)

Helene Stork (1991) notes that family traditions concerning child care are mainly transmitted to women of all age groups across generations with the help of mothering rituals or everyday practice (p. 98). The experience of matrescence and mothering the art of motherhood is constantly enacted by girls from a very early age. For instance, in almost every community in India the elder daughter no matter what her age may be is often expected to look after the younger siblings even though she may not be the eldest child. The exercise of enacting the mother's role is 'naturally' imbibed by the daughter in household spaces. In fact, I remember many of the new mothers in my locality would ask me and my girlfriends to babysit their babies if no older daughter or other women were around. Although we were not very old enough to babysit, they would often ask us to do the job and not any boys who would be much older than us. We would happily do so as it seemed job-appropriate, if not age-appropriate. However, on a close observation, we learn to familiarize ourselves not only with the 'maternal' performance from a very early age, but also the private space of new mothers and babies together. We may venture out from the inner space of our homes for sure, but while doing so we would enter another private space that would initiate the mothering performance not only for the new mothers, but for other female bodies irrespective of age. Thus, the preparation and execution of 'maternal' performance begins at home, the mother always being the point of reference.

My recollection of childhood is interspersed with several collective instances where the girls would play domestic game commonly known as *ghar ghar khela* (*ghar* being home in Assamese

and *khela* means play or game). It would usually begin with cleaning a small space in the courtyard where the boys would build a makeshift house with our mothers' old *mekhela* or *saree* hung with sticks and ropes. We would painstakingly sweep the floor and arrange the tiny chairs, tables and our *khela baason* (playing kitchen utensil). Some of us would also adorn ourselves with our mothers' clothes in order to make the act more real and believable. The boys' role would be limited to bringing the fake vegetables and other groceries for us to cook. We could play-act the whole day trying our best to imitate our mothers and cook several delicacies with the sand, stone, flowers and leaves that the boys would bring in. We would nurse our doll babies, suckle them from our almost non-existent breasts while at the same time cooking food. The massive influence of the game was such that we would even go to the extent of celebrating birthdays of our doll babies and send out invites to other neighbourhood kids to come and eat our inedible food and cemented cakes decorated with flowers audaciously plucked out from the neighbours' gardens. In a spontaneous manner, the whole idea of our game was to enact the roles, especially our mothers' roles as closely as possible. The domestic game was none other than a disguised game of imitation that we partook from a very early age giving in to the gendered norms, unintentionally though. However, one thing to note is the deliberate use of the term *khela* that particularly distinguished the game from reality. That element of 'playfulness' is still intact while imitating the real is closely maintained. An essential factor that emerges from this role-playing is the observant nature of children whose only reference point is the mother and the role is played out with such finesse may be due to her domestic presence in the spaces easily accessible to children. Secondly, the supposedly 'innocent' enactment of domestic life displays the sexual division of labor where the representation of motherhood begins in a 'playful' manner before turning itself into a full-fledged internalization. As children grow and fit themselves into the socially-assigned role of motherhood in the social sphere, the *khela* transforms its meaning from 'absolute playfulness' to 'playing the natural role ideally'

Similarly, in the religious sphere which serves as a fertile ground for promoting social performances, the 'mother' in Kamakhya serves as an image that has been attached to her as a 'natural' and spontaneous attribute. Kamakhya is always addressed as *Maa* (mother) by her devotees either in her temple or in daily conversation outside of it. Her identity seems incomplete without the maternal prefix. It is not an unusual case and almost all the goddesses are addressed

with the prefix. The reduction of the mother goddess to a mother is believed to have empowered her since it is said there is nothing above or beyond the mother or mother goddess in this case.

Why I stress on the prefix is due to a very specific reason that I have encountered in several instances during my field trips. One of the instances unfolded itself in an unexpected incident when I visited a grieving family of siblings who had lost their mother, a person I was very attached to right from my childhood. As it is a Hindu funeral custom to cremate the body and while the women stayed at home with the female members of the bereaved family, the men would take the body to the crematorium. Likewise, I stayed back and as I was sitting in one of the corners, I overheard a conversation where one woman spoke while others listened. She casually announced that she was planning to visit mother and the women around her nodded together. She began talking about some horrible dreams she was having lately and that she had not paid her visit as promised. She eventually spoke about an incident where a young boy was possessed and the visit to the mother freed him of the possession. By then more women started to include their possession stories and how the visit should be made if promised. I was intrigued to know more about what they were talking and who this mother was because by then I was at least sure it was not her biological mother she was referring to all this while and that the rest of the women had understood it from the very beginning of the conversation itself. Then she said she had to make some preparation for the visit as she had to catch the early morning train, the only one available from our town that goes towards Guwahati city. Other women suggested since its very close from Kamakhya Railway station, she shouldn't have any problem reaching the temple. That was when I realized that it was Goddess Kamakhya she was referring to as mother and the promised visit made every sense to me.

This small brush up with the power of prefix and not any prefix but *Maa* forced me to contemplate about how the term *Maa* has linguistically attributed Kamakhya and it does not even require another set of prefixes or mental footnotes to explain who is being referred here. This spontaneous act of calling Kamakhya *Maa* and then not explaining that it was not the biological mother, but the mother goddess is indicative of the fact that her role as the conceptual mother is why she is glorified. She is the epitome of selflessness and protection for her children, a mother who does not keep anything for herself and who does not distinguish between her children. She remains benevolent and fulfills the desires of her children consistently since she is the goddess of desire, but lately whose own desire has been transmitted to her children. The paradigmatic shift in

the conceptualization of Kamakhya defines motherhood in a precise manner which then becomes as the only prescribed way of mother image. The maternal love with which she is believed to shower her worshippers demands allegiance from the potential and actual mothers. The characterization of ideal mother is evidently drawn from the mother goddesses, who though definitely at a distance from the human mothers but not too far to not imbibe her image through their own bodies. That way the difference between the conceptual mother and actual mother is always retained, but at the same time readily accessible to mirror the mothering from a distance. What is striking in this discussion is the fact that the identity of mother survives on the basic idea of mirroring. As kids we mirrored our mothers, who in turn mirrored the ideal image of mother goddesses and who in turn did the same with the constructed idea of mothering and motherhood. It seems like a never-ending cycle of role-playing that is staged in order to customize and validate the engendered presentation of matrescence.

Landscapes Maternalized

While Western feminism addressed the conflict between patriarchal motherhood and feminist mothering, between women and mothers, the Indian strand of mother-centric feminism theorizes motherhood at the backdrop of equation shared between human and divine mothers between the social and the conceptual mother. The idealization of motherhood and the subsequent identity-formation reaches its zenith when not only human mother and Mother Goddesses, but even the nation is configured in the image of mother. During the freedom movement of India, the glorification of motherland like Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyaya's *Vande Mataram* (See Jain, 2006; Bagchi, 2010) was used as the 'political battle cry' in Bengal and other parts of the country. As the nation seemed to be in acute danger and in need of 'protection', she transformed from an abstract nation to an absolute mother. Bagchi corroborates thus, "The ancient redeeming image of the *Bharatmata* as the presiding deity Shakti is taken up in a big way in the nationalist phase of Bengal" (2010: 175-176). Revered as another form of Mother Goddess, her children grew in number not limited to one religious affiliation. Mother India or *Bharat Mata*[37], is not just a geographical dimension, but the spiritual and sanctified presence spread across the length and

[37] See Gupta, 2001 for twentieth century Bharat Mata temple in Banaras; also see Eck, 2012 for her study on map-goddess Bharat Mata temple in Banaras and Haridwar.

breadth of the country. The magnified and exalted maternal image gives an impression of Mother India to be a 'sacred land filled with site that possess sacred power' (Pintchman, 1994:200).

How the mother's acute pain and struggle caused the nationalistic awakening in her children who then fought for her freedom has been framed and reframed in popular culture like Bankim Chandra's Anandamath (See Bagchi, 2010) as well as Mehboob Khan's 1957 film Mother India. Khan's film is often considered a cinematic response to the 'notorious' 1927 booklet by Katherine Mayo by the same name for her racist take on India (See Aneja and Vaidya, 2016; Narayan, 1997). Tanika Sarkar (1987) studies the nationalist iconography with focus on women and argues that the concept of Motherland or Deshmata gradually emerges as the most recent and the most sacred deity in the Hindu pantheon (p. 2012). Sarkar writes, "The process of deification, then, is essentially a process of self-estrangement, of fetishisation. The country was sacralised and feminized" (Ibid.). The identification of Mother India with Mother Goddess and its subsequent genuflection constructs an idolized image of the maternal which is then reproduced in the human mother, the real mother, who, in all actuality go through birthing and nurturance. The 'naturalization of gendered reproduction' (2016: 139) as Aneja and Vaidya suggest, and the idealization of mother, mothering and motherhood is evidently constructed by Swami Vivekananda (1951) to upheld the 'distinctiveness of Indian culture' as mentioned by Bagchi (2010: 172). Vivekananda asserts,

> Now, the ideal woman in India is the mother, the mother first and mother last. The word mother calls up to the mind of the hindu, motherland, and god is called mother. In the west, the woman is wife. The idea of womanhood is concentrated there as the wife. To the ordinary man in India, the whole force of womanhood is concentrated in motherhood. (p. 57)

The 'concentration' in motherhood may be otherwise read as the reduction of woman's identity formation in singularity, almost bordering in self-abnegation of other aspects of her personality. While idealizing motherhood the woman is contained in the mother just like Vivekananda argues that the Western woman is limited to the wifely role. The only difference in both the case is the question of idealized maternity. The female body here is maternalized and embellished with the regalia of constructed motherly virtues of sacredness, purity and selfless austerity; altruism equates the social image of motherhood. Motherhood, thus, becomes the threshold without crossing which the cycle of womanhood and therefore the role of being a woman remains an unfinished

performance. A childless married woman stands at the threshold trying everything possible to cross it to attain 'real' womanhood. Her female body with all other physical 'female' attribute serves no purpose whatsoever if she cannot suckle from her breast, or if her blood does not nurture the baby in her womb, or if her body does not bear the labor pain, or if the umbilical cord is never cut off or if her vagina does not crown and bleed to give birth. Till then she is just a half-woman otherwise, easily prone to social rejection and humiliation.

The notion of motherhood has been broadened in order to accommodate the most recent upsurge in cow vigilantes in several parts of the country which provides a better view of how the 'mother' is re-presented to restage a certain majoritarian ideology. The image of cow has been essentialized into the idealized mother who feeds her human children with her milk and stands as a symbol of maternal bounty whose breast milk never dries up. N. N. Bhattacharyya (1971) argues the idealization of cow as mother could be traced to pastoral societies and higher pastorals like the Vedic Aryans, where cattle are generally valued for milk and wealth, not for meat, hence the significance was more economical than religious (p. 53). What is crucial here is that the purported devotion towards *gau mata* (Mother Cow) serves a purpose of segregating a certain community by maternalizing the holy cow and demonizing the eaters as someone who do not even spare their mothers turning them into 'cannibals of maternal love'. The mothering of *gau mata* surely helps to bring into discussion how a religiously idealized image of mother can be disseminated into the social system to mark consumers and ostracize them.

Prefixing the female identity with the maternal image or 'maternal prefixation' as I prefer to call it has been idolized if we view the several ways Assam's history has shaped up with its maternalization. It brings to mind Laxminath Bezbaruah's several instances of popular phrases that we grew up with.[38] Bezbaruah is also credited with the composition of Assam's state song *O' mur aapunor desh* (O' my own country, country here refers to Assam) which we grew up singing in every important occasion to evoke our love and patriotism for Assam. Another famous line that withstood the test of time was:

[38] Fondly known as the '*Rasaraj*' (king of humor or satire), Laxminath Bezbaruah is fondly remembered for his compilation of a collection of short tales *Burhi Aair Xadhu* (Grandmother's Tales) among several other literary works, symbolizing the era of Romanticism in Assamese literature remembered as the *Junaki Jug*.

Bajok doba, Bajok xonkho,

bajok mridang khol,

Axom akou unnati pothot

Joi Aai Axom bol…

(Let the *doba* sound, let the conch blow

Also, the *mridang* and the khol,

Assam is on the rise again,

Say Hail to Mother Assam)

Bezbaruah's *Joi Aai Axom* (Hail Mother Assam) went on to become a political tool during the six years long Assam Agitation 1979-85 spearheaded by the All Assam Students' Union (AASU) against the 'outsiders', the illegal immigrants, primarily Muslims from Bangladesh. The agitation embarked on as a students' movement comprising of young minds who feared that their motherland would fall in the hands of the 'infiltrators'. Here, in the absence of husband the onus was on the children (preferably sons) to protect the motherland. *Joi Aai Axom* reverberated during the protests as thousands of protestors took to streets to protect the ailing mother who was to emerge from the clutches of undeserving non-children. Ironically, Bezbaruah's treatment of the phrase was re-contexualized and re-presented to trigger the patriotic fervor in order to drive out those who did not 'belong' to Mother Assam. What was once a patriotic song symbolizing the jubilant mood, the bountiful nature of the land along with love and pride of the Assamese people towards the motherland altered its meaning as it was transformed into a war cry to save the distressed land from the cruel hands of the '*bidexi*' (foreigner). The movement turned violent in February-March 1983 when close to 2000 Bengali Muslims were massacred in one single night by Lalung tribesmen in central Assam at places like Nellie and Chaulkhowa Chapori, considered as one of the deadliest riots in Assam's history (See Bhaumik 2009). Subir Bhaumik (2009) states,

> The ferocity of the violence split the groups leading the Assam Agitation along religious lines and a number of Assamese Muslim leaders broke away from the AASU and the All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AAGSP) immediately after the 1983 riots, alleging that the agitating groups had been 'infiltrated by the RSS'. (p. 53)

Bezbaruah's song for the mother went through phases of transformation as it was clothed in that one slogan which awakened the nationalistic fervor in every Assamese. The term *aai* is relatively lesser in usage than the commonly used *maa*, yet Bezbaruah decides to use it denotes a visualization of Mother Assam with a locally–rooted mother rather than a common maternal presence accessible to everyone; equating the biological mother to the geographical mother. *Aai* seems much closer than *maa* as it lends a sentiment of belonging, communality closely rooted to one's exclusive identity. However, the phrase that promised the bountiful *aai* was later reorganized and reconstructed into a full-fledged slogan to display the denigrating state of the same *aai* through the following lines:

Mare Axom, Jiye Kun

Jiye Axom, Mare Kun,

Jai Aai Axom

Jadi na huwa Axomiya

Axom aeri gusi juwa

(If Assam dies, who lives

If Assam lives, nobody dies,

Long live Mother Assam

If you are not an Assamese,

Leave Assam)

The underlying tone prepares the ground for the annihilation of certain groups who seemed un-Assamese or not Assamese enough in the pretext of protecting Mother Assam. Noting that the sloganeering surrounding around *Joi Aai Axom* set the tenor of the agitation, Bhaumik writes, "Assamese youth groups coerced linguistic and religious minorities during the agitation and violent attacks on them were reported from all across Assam" (2009: 118). It is pertinent to see how the trajectory is structured from the romanticized Mother Assam to a denigrated and dilapidated mother. While the phrase is often used by several Assamese who take pride in echoing it at every possible juncture, its brush with such violent past cannot be overlooked or glossed over with Assam's maternalization. Nor, can one feign ignorance over the fact that motherhood has

become an empowered, albeit static quotidian concept, institutionalized and molded at various times in history to endorse and cause efficacious maternalized performance, religiously mirrored by the social.

'Maternal Homecoming'

The idealized transfiguration of motherhood may be studied with the help of two crucial phases– militant and the maternal. Becoming a mother cannot be restricted to the physical birthing of an offspring. It entails an urgency, the requirement of a mother in the continuation of social performance. In what way does motherhood or the concept of mother facilitates the interactivity of the socio-cultural lifeline? The contextual affirmation comes from the presence of maternal culture that have gone through various transformation iconographically as well as socially. The above–mentioned phases are equally important because they provide the window to how the society has changed its stand gradually towards the mother image and how each image has produced a 'new' mother and a 'new' assigned space. The transformative images convey how the woman went on to become the mother, while the female body manufactured the corporeal evidence to justify motherhood as a woman's domain, a private performing role.

The mothering function that matriarchy provisioned focused on the creative and productive ability that women and mothers demonstrated in the social stage. Rosemary J. Dudley (1978) notes that agriculture was the invention of women since they were familiar with seed growth during gathering forays (p. 112). Dudley opines that agricultural communities were most likely concerned with the twin processes of production and reproduction and it was through mimesis (imitation), fertility of the land was attributed to fertility of woman (Ibid.). Likewise, Bhattacharyya (1967) also stresses on women's contribution to the origin of agricultural society, which was their province (p. 69). Interestingly, Nabin Chandra Sarma (2015) offers a cue to the link of women and motherhood to an agriculture-based society like in Assam. Sarma writes,

> Women performed the agricultural task in the matriarchal society and the responsibility of women had surpassed men and their role was not just limited to procreation. In fact, the man was required only in assisting pregnancy. (p. 4)

The existence of matriarchal societies was the norm as it was the patriarchally constituted societies that was an exception (Briffault 1931:180). However, with the change of phases in the

economy and the domestic sphere, the structure was reversed and patriarchal society established itself as the new norm. As agricultural societies flourished so did the women's right and status as the bearer of offspring and food-gatherer, while the 'organic authority' (Rich, 1986:59-60) became an enviable source for man to revolt and overthrow it with the emergence of pastoral economy.

The continuous transition of agricultural society into a pastoral had a direct effect on the autonomy of women. The intervention scuttled the rights of women and presented with the need for more children (preferably and desirably male) in order to increase the food production to sustain. Gradually the woman, who was glorified for her 'magical power' of reproduction (as Briffault had suggested) was limited to that role to fulfill the demand of more hands to help since strong and courageous men were needed to protect the women, hunt and rear the cattle. As a result, the woman turned to a constant mother recoiling to the private domestic life, while the man controlled the public and the private space. A similar tendency was seen in the religious sphere as well with the intervention of pastoral upsurge. As Bhattacharyya asserts that the establishment of husbandry and domestication along with the cattle-drawn plough, the economic importance of the males increased further, while the male god became the co-equal of the female goddess, eventually ending up as the predominant partner (1971: 6).

As the positions of men and women swapped places, there began the labefaction of women, the overthrow of '*matria potestas*' (Ibid. 71), although Mother Goddesses still hold their grounds in other forms. Dudley asserts thus,

> Every village has its Sapta Matrikas (Seven Mothers) and the majority of Gramadevata (village deities) are female. Thus, due to strong patriarchal and pastoral pressures, the Goddess changed, but did not die. (1978: 112)

The decline of agricultural society and the rise of pastoral society lessened the influence and dexterity of women in the work sphere, often relegating them to birthing and breeding roles. At the same time, the pastoral economy endorsed the male dominance where the father figure who assisted in procreation became the 'man of the house' and the hierarchal head. Mother, therefore becomes the peripheral to the centre, while the father the epicenter of everything. As Dudley rightly concludes, "As the Great Goddess was stripped off Her sovereignty, so, too, was the power of woman as Living Goddess, as living ancestor, wrested from her" (1978: 116).

The matriarchal phase thus constructed the woman/mother/Mother Goddess further into a different form where the 'collective' strength and aura of matriarchs were channelized to a militant nature only to be maternalized later into an unreturnable abyss. In order to understand the two phases of militant and maternal, one has to engage with the identity-formation of quintessential Hindu Goddesses. The deification of women, on the other hand, lies on their ability to display traces of fierce goddesses through their feminized and fetishized bodies while at the same time always eager to go back to being maternal as and when required. While it is socially-convenient to return to maternal roles from a militant one, but the former one is the ultimate and desired role the latter being the need of the hour. In the *longue duree* of maternalized roles and performatics, female bodies oscillate in between the militant and maternal tied to the interest and convenience of patriarchal bondages. The study of Kamakhya here becomes remarkable not only because she is uniquely manifested in the *yoni*, but also because of her mythical central association with women-centric tribes of North-East India and Hindu deities like Sati, Parvati, Durga, Shiva, cluster of ten goddesses *Dus Mahavidya* as well as the Assamese Hindu women in the periphery.[39] Kamakhya symbolizes the internalization of a militant and the maternal protectress through her '*yoni*fied' body. She personifies the mother who demands sacrificial blood from her children and feeds on it in order to remain alive. She produces multiple forms of Mother Goddesses like *Dus Mahavidya* to protect her children and nurture them at the same time. She performs the dual role

[39] Apart from worshipping *dus mahavidya*s, there is a tradition of worshipping the cluster of seven and sometimes eight mothers (*sapta matrika* and *asta matrika*) or even sixteen is a popular way of worshipping the major fierce goddess like Durga, Kali and the *Matrika*s who are always worshipped as a collective. In the mythology of the Great Goddess *Devi Mahatmya*, the *matrika*s performed a crucial role to assist Goddess Durga (also Devi or Mahadevi in some cases) in the war against the demons. Goddess Durga is created by the male gods who lend their special powers and weapon to fight Mahisasura, the demon who cannot be killed by any man alive. The narration of *Devi Mahatmya* exhibits the Goddesses Durga, Kali and the fierce mothers who put up a great show of their collective and individual strengths lending a choreological reading treat. It may be one of the strongest descriptions of female deities who take the central stage in a nail-biting war scenario of all time (See Kinsley, 1988; Das, 1985; Coburn, 1991). Durga is described as 'quaffing wine, laughing and glaring with reddened eyes under its influence' (Kinsley, 1988:100). The momentum in which the battle unfolds is directly proportional to the speed and agility with which Goddess Durga charges towards the demon riding her lion with the female army by her side. The female control of the space evidently turns the male gods into spectators at the periphery of the battle field. On the other hand, the spectatorship also entailed a direct 'dissociation of the male god with the demon' as pointed out by Veena Das (1985: 31). As the narrative advanced, the female deities of the said battle became more and more engaged and associated with the demon so much so that Goddess Durga not only came to be known as Mahisamardini (Killer of Mahisa, the buffalo demon) but her iconography became visibly incomplete without the demon's presence. Mahisasura visually uplifted and validated her militant image and the demon's presence became essential as a token of evidence to glorify Durga's fierce identity. She was doomed to remain grateful to the male gods and the demon in order to perform that image and escape the female and feminine stereotypes.

with the same dexterity and finesse, while accommodating the non-Vedic, Vedic and Hinduized deities within a single fold.

The origin of *Dus Mahavidya* (ten Mahavidya) is akin to Vishnu's *Dus Avatar*, 'a Sakta version of Vaishnava idea' (Kinsley, 1988:161), the only difference being here, is the ten forms of goddess. The iconographic representation of *mahavidya*s is depicted in several temples throughout India (Ibid.). There are two *mahavidya* narratives that prominently emerges displaying Kamakhya's relation with the Hindu pantheon. First is the Sati narrative, which not only merges the identity of Sati and Kamakhya with the fall of *yoni*, but it also establishes a relationship between the ten *mahavidya*s and Sati/Kamakhya. The narrative goes like this:

> Sati is already infuriated for not being invited to attend the sacrificial ritual hosted by her father Daksha. Despite the insult, she decides to go when her husband Shiva tries to stop her. Unable to change his mind, she reveals her ferocious side and manifests in a dreadful form. She does not stop at this and as her anger increases, she multiplies herself into ten fearsome forms, frightening Shiva who finally yields to her wrath and lets her go. (See Kinsley 1988; Sarma 2015)

In the later part of the narrative, Sati assimilates with Kamakhya when her burnt body splits into several parts causing the *yoni* to create Kamakhya's *sakti pitha*. The ten forms are as follows–Kali, Tara, Chinnamasta, Bhuvaneshvari, Bagalamukhi, Dhumavati, Kamala, Matangi, Sodasi (Tripurasundari) and Bhairavi. The second narrative transports the *mahavidya*s from the Sati's pre-death to post-death. This narrative was personally narrated to me by Mohit Chandra Sharma, the Doloi (Chief Priest) of Kamakhya. Sharma explained thus,

> When Maa's *anga* (body parts) fell, the Nilachal hill sank inwards due to the weight of the *yoni*, causing *sphuringa* (vibration) in several places. These supernatural tremors gave rise to the *mahavidya*s that we now know. (2019)

The narrative brings Kamakhya closer to the *mahavidya*s not only mythically, but also through the production of sacred geography by corporeally restaging the myth. Presently, instead of statues or iconographies like in other regions of India, the narrative is further materialized through the presence of ten smaller temples surrounding Kamakhya temple, each dedicated to the *mahavidya*s. Three out of ten goddesses the *trividyas* Sodasi, Kamala and Matangi reside inside the Kamakhya complex, also known as *mul mandir* (main temple), while the other seven live in close proximity

to the *mul mandir* and to each other. They stand guard at the threshold alongside the main goddess Kamakhya assisting her, just like the *matrika*s accompanied Goddess Durga to the battlefield.

The appearance of *dus mahavidya*s like Kali, Chinnamasta[40] is paralleled to the *matrika*s as fierce tantric mother goddesses who must be appeased with sacrificial blood. David Kinsley (1988) notes that the mythological context implies that the *mahavidya*s are meant to be terrifying deities, who may be described as beautiful, but they are equally formidable and fearsome (p. 163). For instance, Goddess Kali displays a terrifying image with her black face, dishevelled open hair, and slender red tongue dripping with her victims' blood, adorned with garlands of skulls around her neck in cremation grounds. Ontologically, Kinsley explores this striking characteristic of Kali thus:

> Kali puts the order of *dharma* in perspective…that certain aspects of reality are untameable, unpurifiable, unpredictable and always threatening to society's feeble attempts to order what is essentially disorderly; life itself. (1982:52)

The appearance and the significance of *dus mahavidya*s is noteworthy, no doubt, but Goddess Kamakhya remains the centre of attraction to the large number of visitors and the temple itself displays a few exclusive traits in its functioning. Sharma informed that the Deuri priests of *dus mahavidya* temples do not belong to the Bordeuri family tree (unlike in Kamakhya temple) and they are assigned by the Kamakhya Temple Committee. Therefore, they cannot officiate any form of worship in the *mul mandir*, although Bordeuri priests can officiate in the *mahavidya* temples if invited to do so. Apart from that, there is a stark and visible difference in the number of visitors to the *mul mandir* and the *mahavidya* temples. The latter number is almost negligible as Goddess Kamakhya pulls the crowd with her unflinching power and attraction. On being asked

[40] However, what deserves more attention is the imaging of Goddess Chinnamasta who is never mentioned as much as Kali although her appearance is more theatrical and the meaning it construes through it. In most Hindu renditions three jets of blood spurt from the cut stump of her neck. One jet streams into the goddess's own mouth, while the other two flow into the mouths of the two flanking yoginis. The goddess usually holds her own head on a platter, as if about to make an offering of it. Beneath the goddess the god Kama, personifying sexual desire, and his wife, Rati are engaged in sexual intercourse, she usually on top. They are stretched out on a lotus, and the backdrop is often a cremation ground. Chinnamasta is probably the most dramatic, stunning representation in the Hindu pantheon of the truth that life, sex, and death are part of an interdependent, unified system. (Kinsley,1988: 173)

about the huge difference in visitors, Sharma mentioned that since each deities rule specific planets except for Bhairava and consequently, specific days are assigned for each deity according to their planet. For instance, Tuesday for Bagalamukhi, Friday for Bhuvaneshvari, Thursday for Tara or Dhumavati and so on. He added that in fact, even Kamakhya did not have large visitors in the past, but ever since the transport facilities improved the inflow of visitors have increased considerably. Now that since *Maa* Kamakhya is the reference point, the centre of everything, she naturally receives more attention and worshippers. On a personal note, I have never seen Kamakhya temple with a relatively lesser visitor. The queue for *sparxan* is always endless and it usually takes the entire day if one wants to enter the inner sanctorum, where the *yoni* is placed. On the other hand, *mahavidya* temples can be visited any time of the day as they remain desolate, dark and damp, with some flickering *diya*s, carefully placed on the severed head of sacrificed goats.

Manisha Sethi (2002) talks about the rise of women's militancy in the Hindu Right and how the identity of women is cast according to the need of the hour. Sethi argues,

> Gender identity does not exist as primordially or eternally fixated but is invented, created, resisted and subverted at the fulcrum of multiple identities…The entire oeuvre of practices both discursive and material the imagery of Bharat mata, the fiery as well as the fecund mother goddesses, valiant historical figures and subservient mythical wives all allow women to become avenging angels in moments of crisis and when these moments ebb away, they can return to the mode of nurturing mothers and obedient wives. (p. 1551)

Likewise, despite the ferocity of these mother goddesses, there is a saturation point, a climactic scene, following which the 'Militant Goddess' (Ganesh, 2010:94) is calmed down to don her actual role of the maternal. Vivienne Kondos (2015) argues that the fierce image of Hindu goddesses is positive not despite its ferocity, but because of it (p. 224). In fact, the ferocity of the goddess equally accentuates the contradicting maternal image of the fierce goddess as the desired objective of femininity, the eventual maternal homecoming. Most of the fierce goddess myths elevate the martial status of the goddess to the highest position possible and then pull her back to her 'real' mothering performance. She cannot remain fixed to the terrifying image as it is revealed only in the time of crisis, when a situation demands out of her. Therefore, it is not her 'natural' self, but an identity that germinates only at times of 'need'. As Kinsley notes, "She (Durga) is created because the situation calls for a woman, a superior warrior, a peculiar power possessed by the

goddess with which the demon may be deluded" (1988: 97). The example of Durga is pertinent because it is her identity which produces other identities through her. For instance, Durga is often equated with Parvati and Kali within the fold of Hindu pantheon of goddesses, while Kamakhya is merged with Kali, Durga and Sati who is again conflated with Parvati. What is expressed through this conflation is an attempt to feminize Durga or the other goddesses into the 'mother umbrella', whose flight to battles and other 'unwomanly' spaces like cremation grounds, mountain cliffs and caves are nothing but a temporary need of the hour.

The maternal homecoming remains exemplified through the character transformation of Durga and several other goddesses assimilated with her. Kamakhya is believed to have imported from indigenous non-Vedic Austric mother-centric society (See Kakati, 2004; Kinsley, 1988; Urban, 2010; Sarma, 2015). There is a striking resemblance between Durga and Kamakhya in terms of their non-Vedic origin, their choice of abode in inaccessible mountains and caves, their association with Shiva and their relationship with sacrificial blood (See Kinsley, 1988; Bhattacharyya, 1971; Pintchman, 1994; Sinha, 1967). Kinsley writes, "In the concluding scene of the *Devi Mahatmya* her devotees are instructed to propitiate her with offerings of their own flesh and blood (13.8)" (1988: 100). Kinsley further informs, that a goddess named Kesai Khati (eater of raw flesh) was worshipped in Assam, and sometimes human sacrifices were made to her as an act of devotion (p. 145). Kesai Khati is often identified as Kamakhya's earlier indigenous form (See Kakati, 2004; Sarma, 2015). Kinsley writes, "The Kalika Purana says that the Devi is satisfied when her devotees offer flesh from near the hearts (71.74 ff)" (Ibid.). It is not surprising that Durga Puja is one of the largest celebrations at the Kamakhya temple for four days with much pomp and vigor. Although there does not seem a direct relation between these two deities, but a closer observation reveals a pattern which is employed to construct the maternal Kamakhya not only through her *yoni*fication, but also through the maternalization of Durga. The annual arrival of goddess Durga at Kamakhya's courtyard resonates the narrative of *Devi Mahatmya*, where Durga returns to her maternal feminine role once the battle concluded and the male gods rejoiced.

The non-normative nature of Durga and Kamakhya situated them outside the cultured social order and their transfiguration to maternal-self seemed necessary to exercise control and authority over them and several other ferocious *matrika*s. This 'maternal homecoming' occurred with their celebrated withdrawal to the maternal world, a normative and regimented space. It

required the goddesses to eschew what constituted the non-normative gender roles. Sarma states that the marriage alliance between Shiva and Parvati resulted in the assimilation process where Parvati and Kamakhya were eventually merged into one in texts like Kalika Purana and Yogini Tantra (2015: 53). Similarly, Bhattacharyya mentions the assimilation and merging of two independent streams of terrible goddesses like Kali, Chandi and benign goddesses like Parvati-Uma into Durga (1971: 62). As a result, the presence of benign and maternal element in Durga and Kamakhya, always referred to as *Maa* often reassured that the maternal would hegemonize the non-maternal and militant, only to be unleashed to the patriarchy's rescue. Sukumari Bhattacharji (2010) argues that the construction of hymnology of goddess served the ulterior purpose of glorifying motherhood (p. 59). Likewise, at the backdrop of Bengali Nationalism, Sarkar juxtaposes Durga with a 'curious mismatch' between how she looks and what she does (1987: 2012). The warrior goddess is depicted as smiling, matronly beauty, a married woman visiting her natal home with her children- the archetypical mother and daughter, the impression of a domesticated gentle femininity, the presiding deity of Bengali kitchens and sickbed (Ibid.). The 'maternal props' clothed the 'mother and maternal attribute' over the woman's body especially over mother goddess like Kamakhya who appeared to contain the maternal and the martial, where the former more or less disempowered the latter, as mother's love appeared to surpass any kind of love there ever was.

In a conversation on the many roles of women, and the several oppressive measures they encounter in their daily lives, Ananta Kumar Sarma remarked,

> Women contain various forms of goddesses like Saraswati, Lakshmi, Parvati. However, they are generally perceived weak by *jaghanya purush* (disgusting men) who oppress them. Due to this, women are bound to reveal their *ugra rup* (terrifying form) like that of Kali whenever the situation demands of them. Once they calm down, they go back to being Saraswati, Laksmi and Parvati again. (2019)

The motive of *ugra* is to transgress the boundaries of social femininity that defines her. She can display her terrifying form even in her own everyday domestic space, fighting the gendered battle whenever needed, but she withdraws back to the domestic cocoon once the climactic moment fades away into oblivion. As Sarkar observes that there is 'no final and absolute transgression' as they are bound to revert back to the gendered role of motherhood 'laying down the glorious garbs and

return to dish-washing' (1987: 2012). The maternal homecoming, therefore, is inevitable and so is the continuous mothering role.

Husbanded Mother/ Goddesses

The maternal homecoming not only constructed the female body into mothering stereotypes, but opened more room for scripting the wifely role. Motherhood came to be legitimated within the boundary of marriage between man and woman. Motherhood is clearly possible even without the ritualized marriage, but it is deemed sacred and socially acceptable to embrace motherhood staying within the conjugal dynamics. The 'sanctified justification' to reproduce offspring appears to have conferred upon marriage. Gradually, marital sex came to be associated mainly with procreation than as a sexual act; a social act in the making. It appears that the maternal homecoming was not enough to maintain the patriarchal dynamics of power distribution. There should be a firm, but socially demanding law that would constantly retain the equation between man and woman drifting towards patriarchal hierarchy. At this juncture, it becomes pertinent to study the process and mechanism of this 'drifting'. The idea of spousification germinates from this fact that husbanded mothers became the ideal kind of motherhood, with the husband's influence always in a higher pedestal.

As mentioned earlier, at the Nilachal hill Kali's Mahavidya temple is situated close to Kamakhya temple. Every day hoard of visitors goes past the temple in almost sheer ignorance in a hurry to visit *Maa* Kamakhya. The temple stands on the side of the steps with a few stray visitors while the Kamakhya main entrance is always filled with devotees desperate to offer worship. The reason behind bringing Kali (or Mahakali) into the discussion is not her immediate terrifying picture that flashes in the mind as soon as her name is uttered, but it is due to her sober and calm image as Mahakala Shiva's wife. There is a popular tale where Shiva tries to calm down Kali who is on a rampage killing people, drinking their blood all the while dancing fiercely. He finally lies down on her way trying to make her stop and thinking no wife would ever step on her husband. As Kali entranced by the killing spree frantically steps on her husband, she realizes the mistake and like any docile wife would do, her face changes expression performatively biting her tongue

in *laaz* (shyness).[41] However, in other different views, Kali is also seen as subverting the societal hierarchy. For instance, Frédérique Apffel Marglin (1982) studies the iconography, myth and ritual connotation of Kali sitting/standing above Shiva and categorizes it as an example of inverse sexual union where Kali plays the active role in the usual male-hierarchal sexual order (p. 302).

The pictorial description of this episode is popular in several households, shops, calendars and so on where it gives out an impression that the intensity of Kali's energy dramatically descends right in the middle of a killing field. Another corollary to this myth is that the *laaz* was due to the fact that as her husband lied down below her, she realized her husband caught her in a very compromising situation, she stops right there biting her tongue. These local interpretations of Kali transform her from a fierce goddess to a shy wife, a successful prototype of Vedic spousification that was eventually re-modelled on the social sphere. The intervention of the husband Shiva is popularly viewed as the required set of action to control an unstoppable wife, the potential mother to his children. The intervention, is in fact, applauded since Shiva saves the universe from Kali's wrath by falling at her feet. It does not symbolize Shiva's surrender, but a well-strategized display of power dynamics between married couples who go by the rule book of conjugal bliss irrespective of how the wife acts. She has to eventually give in to the role of a benign mother waiting for her to be performed without transgressing the threshold of marital hierarchy. This means the male-centred society is built upon the foundation of complex understanding of female's subordination and identity-transformation: from militant to maternal is not enough, married maternal is necessary. From Kali to Kamakhya we find several instances that focuses on how the husbanded mother constructed the foundation of ideal motherhood, social projection and production of mothering roles.

Another narrative well-known in several Assamese Hindu household is the creation myth related to Prithvi, the Mother Earth (who is also equated with Kamakhya due to their menstruating ability) and Dyaus, the Sky God. The sexual union of Prithvi and Dyaus is looked upon as a sign

[41] Kali's tongue plays a significant role to define her or manufacture a definitive image, almost equal to her striking appearance or sometimes even more than that. The lolling tongue gives out more cues than her black (sometimes blue) appearance with her disheveled hair and intoxicated glaring eyes. The tongue hence becomes the centre of her facial expression and the main subject of interpretations. Devdutt Pattanaik (2014) describes the sudden transformation of Kali through the tongue symbolism. He writes, "Kali's tongue transformed from being a weapon, to the symbol of wisdom to the symbol of shame. Kali's tongue is a symbol that mocks the limitations as well as the assumptions of the human gaze" (Ibid. 45, 61). It exhibits a labyrinthine blueprint of women's existence who cannot escape any of the customized role-playing without becoming a hindrance.

to establish that the heterosexual union of deities is that this hierogamy is an absolutely sacred performance and reproduction from the holy union is the social duty. Prithvi-Dyaus, considered to be the universal parent whose union through the symbolic rain on the body of the earth fertilizes the world and everything living on it (See James, 1959; Bhattacharyya, 1971; Kinsley, 1988; Sarma, 2015; Sarma, 2017). Metaphorically, we as human being live off our Mother Earth, but not without the seed of rain from the father sky. It is at this juncture it is crucial to see how this archetype of universal parenthood passes on to another social determinant of conjugal relationship in between deities to become even better prototype. The evolution of Kamakhya and Shiva as a symbol of cosmic balance Sakti-Shiva is derived from a deep-rooted Hindu understanding of male-female unity established through marriage.

Tracy Pintchman (1994) suggests that the appearance of the term sakti in Vedic literature did not carry the same theological, cosmological and metaphysical significance and was viewed more in literal terms meaning ability, power, capacity or help service (p. 79). Hence, the meaning of divine power of sakti was constructed in the same line of thought when it came to be associated with Shiva stressing on the heterosexual tone, decorated with the holy matrimonial alliance to sanctify sexual union. The divine power of sakti was exalted to do great service to the patrifocal preference of the social order. Thus, the divine coupling of Sakti-Shiva is drawn into the folds of a populace belief system through de-Sanskritization instead of outright Sanskritization (Padma, 2001) or 'complex negotiation between the Brahmanic traditions and indigenous kings' (Urban, 2011:245) which cannot view the icon of Sakti-Shiva in singularity. In fact, Thomas Coburn (1982) points out that the conceptual evolution of this phenomenon through text like *Devī-māhātmya* where he states that the polarity of Siva and Sakti came to be well-known in later Sakta and tantric circles whereas the *Devī-māhātmya* showed no preference for Siva while discussing Devī as *śakti* (p. 161), let alone the notion of hierogamy. The plurality of the icon brings into discussion how the concept of marriage has seamlessly established itself in the social fabric to be sacralized through the union of gods and goddesses. Brenda Dobia writes,

> Without (the passionate engagement of) Śiva and Śakti, creation would be nothing but a figment… Śiva manifests as the great *linga*, Śakti's essential form is the *yoni*. By their interaction, the entire world comes into being; this is called the activity of *Kāmā*. (2013: 239)

Consequently, the spousification of Kamakhya begins with her mythical linking with Sati, the wife of Shiva. Kamakhya 'naturally' becomes Shiva's wife in the hierogamous representation of *yoni*-phallic. E. O. James (1959) opines that the worship of Mother Goddesses received Brahmanical sanction by interpreting them as manifestations of Sakti personified in the consort of Shiva, combining in one shape, life and death (p. 102). While Prithvi-Dyaus image is still vague with a wide room for several interpretation towards their union, Sakti-Shiva is more intentional with a clarified motivated strategy towards the conceptualization of reproduction through the marriage union. It is to be noted that the common way of addressing this union is male-female order implying the higher position of the male, while I have deliberately reversed the order to focus on how the female is used as a means to the end. Even fiery collective goddesses like the *sapta matrika*s are turned into consorts of male deities (Aneja and Vaidya, 2016:7), solidifying social institution of marriage and linking themselves to male gods, the true source of their power. The institution of marriage confines the female body into a mere vessel to carry the life-giving male seed who is independent enough to take birth on its own. The female body, merely providing a passage to this process, finally rests on the image of *yoni*, symbolizing a mother but a married one, eternally tied to a husband, deity or human.

Kamakhya with visible tantric traits to begin with, is steadily maternalized and the contextuality of her *yoni* is altered from a site where desires are born to an anatomical tool for birthing motherhood. Archana Barua (2015) argues that tantric text like Yogini Tantra have re-handled the myth to make Kamakhya temple more of a Shakti-shrine than a Yoni shrine (p. 57). Barua writes, "The Yogini Tantra modified the eroticized form of the goddess with a focus on creativity of Eros than its sexual newness" (p. 67). The identity of a Sakti shrine conveniently accommodated Shiva, which in turn, produced the Sakti-Shiva icon as an inseparable and one entity rather than two separate beings almost bordered on the glorified husband-wife dynamics. Sharma notes that the power of Sakti (*prakriti* female) and Shiva (*purush* male) is collectively staged and remarks that '*Sakti prakriti aaru shaktiman purush*' (*Prakriti* is power, while *purush* is powerful) (2015: 17-18). It is the Sakti that enables Shiva to be powerful. Power and powerful cannot be separated and distinguished and hence without Sakti, Shiva is likened to a corpse. In order to explain the relationship of Sakti and Shiva, Sharma borrows a colloquial phrase which is often used to refer to a dependent relationship, more often a marital one: *Andha Khanjawat-Purush andha, prakriti khora* (Blind *Purush* and crippled *prakriti*). The alteration in Sakti from a powerful

being to a dependent wifely-identity focuses on how the presence of Sakti in the social arena is transformative because it not only causes Sakti to transform the meaning of its presence, but also enables Shiva to claim centre-stage. Shiva is static and husbands several other deities like Parvati, Sati, Kali, Kamakhya and so on whereas Sakti keeps submitting to demanding roles and role-playing.

Pintchman argues that the incorporation of non-Vedic autochthonous goddesses into the folds of epic and Puranic tradition along with their identification with established Vedic pantheon is successfully carried out without threatening the authority of the earlier Vedic tradition (1994: 119). The peripheral role of goddesses denotes their representation as partial manifestations of a single deity (as is the case here) (Ibid.) and as consorts of male gods. Meeta Deka (2013) argues that the change in depiction of goddess as consorts reflected the change in gender relations in the society (p. 37). It is found that several goddesses derive their names and identities from their god-husbands as a result of their dependency on their husbands, for instance, Indrani (Indra's wife), Bhawani (Bhav or Shiva's wife), Varunani (Varun's wife) (See Sarma, 2015:13; Kinsley, 1988:17) as well as Mahakali (Mahakal or Shiva's wife).

Similarly, the divine dismemberment of Sati fails to provide any individuality to these goddesses, instead tightening the collective noose around their necks as fragments of Sati's body. It is through the very origin of narratives like that of Kamakhya or Devi (of Devī-māhātmya, See Coburn, 1991), the individuality of female deities is denied and lost as they come to be known collectively, while Shiva stoically retains his individuality, totally impervious to change. While the female deities struggle to conserve their territory, Shiva holds on to a universal appeal. Maheswar Neog (2008) mentions that Shaivism had spread early into Kamrup and concretely established itself as the places sacred to Shiva outnumbered that of Devi or Vishnu (p. 1). Shiva emerged as a popular deity not only among the aboriginal worshippers, but also among the Aryan population which explains Shiva's inclusion in the Vedic pantheon. To find Shiva one needs to seek through Sakti, Shiva being the ultimate goal. The active Sakti kineticizes the passive Shiva staying at the background, while Shiva steals the limelight. Through the aniconic representation of inserted phallus in the *yoni*, temples become masculinised as goddesses becomes consorts (Krishnaraj, 2010:17-18). While the *yoni* rests Shiva's ithyphallic *linga*, the world sees the *linga* first, while the *yoni* lingers there soaking itself in invisibility, like an absent presence.

Alternately, on the other hand, the full-fledged presence of *yoni* and its iconographical autonomy mentioned in Yogini Tantra that describes Sati's *yoni* standing on its own, point otherwise:

> *Tabanyetxang hitarthai sthaptang yoni mandalam*
> *Prithivyang bharatebarxe Kamrupang mahaphalam*
> (In the Nilachal hill of Kamrup is established the *yoni* of Kamakhya illuminated with the blood of the goddess.) (YT, 1.15.52, Sarma, 2015:51)

However, the autonomy is short-lived as the undeniable presence of Shiva come to be associated with Sati/Kamakhya through narratives and materialized with Sati's dismemberment:

> *kāmgirau nyapatat yonimaṇḍalam*
>
> *tatra tatra mahāhadevaḥ svayaṁ liṅgasvarūpa dhṛk*
>
> *tasthau mohasamāyuktaḥ satīsnehavaśānugah-*
>
> (In Kamarupa fell the private part of Kāmagiri. Lord Siva out of his undying love for Satī remained in the form of a phallus wherever these pieces fell) (KP, 18/41-47, Mishra, 2004:27)

Finding Sati's *yoni* established at Kamarupa, Shiva plunges himself unto her, creating the conjoined image (Kinsley, 1988:3). Lerner observes the consequence of linking of the goddesses to the gods resulting in her dethroning and her re-imaging as supreme god's wife (p. 154). She writes,

> The demotion of Mother Goddess figure and the ascendance and later dominance of her male consort/son. Wherever such changes occur, the power of creation and of fertility is transferred from the Goddess to the God. (1986: 145)

Hence, when Kamakhya as a *yoni* shrine tries to break away from Shiva's shadow and attempts to establish individuality and autonomy, its conversion to *sakti* shrine reconnects it to Shiva with its visibly glorified *linga* symbol, leading the *yoni* shrine into an irremediable ramification.

In several studies on the role of marital relationship as a pathway to reproduction, it is found that reproduction is the only permissible reason for sexual intercourse and a justification of sexual contact (Lafleur, 2002:57), whereas the sexual union is often viewed as the duty, the offspring being the reward of that duty. Michel Foucault (1978) opines that the idea of sexuality

was carefully confined when it moved into the home in order to turn it into the serious function of reproduction (p. 3). Similarly, Henrike Donner (2008) studying motherhood in middle-class Bengali families in Kolkata, asserts how the marriage frames sexualities as legitimate and acceptable sexual relations directed towards reproduction within marriage (p. 131). Donner notes, "Once married, the new wife and daughter-in-law goes through an extended liminal phase of resocialization in her in-laws' house, a phase which only ends when she gives birth" (Ibid.). On the other hand, the confinement of reproduction through the institutionalization of marriage is further legitimated with the inclusion of consort deities into the fold. As a result, even an ascetic like Shiva cannot escape the glorious entrapment of marital domestication and reproduction. When Shiva finds Sati personified in the *yoni*, he is brought down to Earth, a symbolic surrender to the earthly domestic life. Kinsley argues that the domestication of Shiva is Sati's triumph (1988: 40). As a result, the matrimonial precursor to reproduction is equally binding on supreme deity like Shiva and Sati/ Kamakhya/ Parvati like any other conjugal couple, consequently localizing the Hindu duty of marital confinement.

The imposition of heterosexual marriage with a sole purpose of legitimate reproduction lends a significance to the idea of marital relationship. The non-abiding rebellious nature of unbound Shiva countered the mundane, 'cultured' world of deities. Marriage, thus, became the only way to tame him and draw a boundary to mirror him with other male gods with consorts. Thus began the domestication of Shiva within the boundary of marriage and the maternalization of goddess like Kamakhya associated with him. Shiva's marriage to the goddesses (referred to interchangeably) is idolized and idealized as the only path to set the universe in motion. On the other hand, the attempt to humanize Shiva and his marriage is an attempt to enculture fecundity within marital boundaries. What we see here is not only an attempt to Hinduize the non-Vedic popular Shiva, but also to envelope him in the Vedic understanding of marriage and reproduction to disseminate the Vedic philosophy of holy marriage and sacred sex into the socio-cultural and religious way of thinking.

Unhusbanded goddesses project an absolute delinking from the male deities and motherhood is the only way they are brought within the folds of regimented subordinate role. Referring to unhusbanded goddesses, Ganesh observes that the truly 'single' goddesses display iconography that excludes the male presence (2010: 81). Ganesh writes, "This is the goddess who

neither confronts nor is subservient; she exists in herself, by herself" (Ibid.). The nature of 'power' changes with the marital status of goddesses:

> As a properly married spouse she is the embodiment of grace and benevolence; as the independent goddess, she threatens to destroy the very basis of the social order. (Ibid: 83)

Similarly, Sarma opines that the difference between the single unbound goddess like Mahadevi and other spoused goddesses depends on other factors like morality, manufactured boundaries, social structure, marriage freedom and sexuality (2015: 1). According to Sarma, single goddess like Mahadevi's blessing is sought in affairs which is not under the capacity of the male to perform (Ibid. 4). Referring to scholars like Lawrence Babb, Wadley and William Sax, Pintchman also attempts to show how the social justification of married status of goddesses and subsequently women is provided through the danger that female bodies possess and controlling through marriage and motherhood is the only way to pacify the uncontrollable energy. The myth of submissive, docile wives turning into nurturing mothers is the most natural way of manufacturing womanhood. The desired woman, therefore, is a maternally-equipped symbolic order whose identity is derived from her capacity to give birth and raise offspring, but with motherly care. The unmothering mother (or 'bad mother', also see Ditrich, 2005) who is deprived of being naturally real mothers, just like single goddesses may not exhibit the essence of femininity and nurturance. Hence, unmothered goddess and women both are othered as disabled mothers whose disability lies in the absence of husbands and children.

Bhattacharji observes as marriage became obligatory, the women be it goddess or humans were relegated to the socially significant role of the procreatrix, most importantly the mother of sons (2010: 58). On the other hand, Rich notes that the devaluation, rejection and reduction of Mother Goddess' status proved detrimental to human woman as patriarchal man impregnated "his" wife who performed the service to deliver "his" child (1986: 120). The divine and the human mother both thus become the symbol of selfless virtue who always gives silently and asks nothing in return; her glorified nature of being silent is viewed as her maternal strength, an exclusive gendered existence constructed to boost patrilocal establishment. The liminal phase between marriage and birth of an offspring therefore becomes the crucial site to manufacture her acceptance in the community; a successful pregnancy is what it takes for the woman to assume her own self,

the mother self for what she has been constantly trained all her life. Aneja and Vaidya rightly remark 'barrenness' becomes the worst albatross around the married woman's neck (2016: 141).

The heterosexual marital relationship, thereby, became the most fruitful social and acceptable sexual form of intercourse in every term, keeping in mind the significance attached more to reproduction than to fecundity. The dependency of patriarchy, as Rich argues, on motherhood and heterosexuality turned them into axioms, "nature" itself, not open to question (1986: 43). There is an undeniable resemblance to Rich's statement with respect to the union of Sakti-Shiva, where Shiva, the passive receptacle of active Sakti's power remains dependent on the latter in iconographical, metaphorical and theological terms and yet remains visible. But what eventually emerges is quite the reverse, the sakti, the Earth, the Goddess and finally the woman become the passive receptacle of the active male authority. Patriarchy, once again, promotes reproductive heterosexuality and maternalizes female bodies within marriage while trying to spousify the unhusbanded mother goddesses who preceded wife-hood, while at the same time vilifying the unhusbanded human mothers as the source of all that is profane.

Performing 'Visitations'

It is almost a reflex response that one calls out the mother (one's own mother or Mother Goddess) at times of some untoward incident. It has become almost a part of linguistic usage (at least in Assamese language) where the mother has become a synonym for cry-out help. While thinking about this deliberate manifestation of 'mother' in linguistic utterance, I tend to observe the bodily manifestation of mothers through the medium of 'visitation'. As a result, I intend to discuss how the divine mothers Kamakhya and Sitala manifests themselves in stone and the body of her children respectively. While the former is called *Maa*, the latter is referred to as *Ai* (also mother in Assamese) or *Āisakal* (the mothers, according to popular belief there are seven or nine of them each one symbolizing a skin ailment) (Datta, 1994:53) and often seen as another form of Kamakhya by many. *Ai*, or Sitala, the goddess of small pox is also worshipped as one of the terrifying forms of Durga and Kali. The children of these divine mothers encounter their appearance primarily in two ways- one when they visit Kamakhya temple to touch the *yoni*-stone where the mother resides or when *Ai* pays a visit by appearing as primarily as small pox (but it can be other skin ailment as well) on her children's bodies locally known as *Ai uluwa* (mother's

appearance). It is to be noted here that even though small pox is believed to be scientifically eradicated, but the reverence to the goddess of ailments and her ritual essence still remains in Assam and and neighbouring West Bengal (See Dimock, 1982). These two instances of visits expose one to the deeper interaction with the divine goddess corporeally on one hand, and spiritually on the other. The visitation or appearance shares a complex bond with how a mother is conceived as a social existence and how it is executed by human mothers through the actual birthing process. I also intend to discuss the birth rituals in the light of these above two divine visitations. The conceptual or divine and social mothers become one and many as ritual-driven meanings shape their bodies, their presence and their identities. One is often presented with the glimpse of becoming and being a mother in bits and pieces-through rituals, through symbols like *yoni*, bodily diseases and the mother's blood that binds all kinds of mothers together.

My childhood reminiscence is often filled with a common sight of *neem* leaves (azadirachta indica) being tied on both sides of the doors in several households. Known for its bitter taste, neem is often traditionally used to cure skin diseases, deworming and healing purposes. Other than its proven healing quality, neem is ritually significant when a person is afflicted with skin disease. *Ai uluwa* is either seen as the anger of the goddess or her blessing. The afflicted person, therefore is separated and kept in a room with neem leaves tied on the door and on the edge of the bed, is given neem bath, along with cold food (mainly liquid and uncooked) due to *Ai*'s preference for such food in order to accelerate the healing process. Additionally, and more importantly, the *Ai naams*, devotional songs sung by women, are therefore performed to appease the mother who reveals herself on the bodies of her children. The maternal image is constructed on the anger as well as the *sitalta* (coolness) of the nurturing mother who cannot see her child in pain and relieves them of it. The neem leaves, a preventive measure, points out to the fact that the visit is rather unwelcome, but since the guest has already arrived, everything is done to make the visit as short-lived as possible. Consequently, what we see here is the aim of the above ritual staging of neem leaves and *Ai naam* is to get rid of the angered mother and bring her actual and natural motherly 'mother'-self back.

Babagrahi Misra (1969) explains that small-pox, an 'epidemic of uncertain nature' is believed to have caused either due to villagers' neglect of proper worship or the desire of the angered deity to have victims (p. 134). Another legend has it that on the day of *paus sankranti* no

food is cooked or the hearth is light as Sitala pays visit to every house and lies inside the hearth (Ghatak, 2013:128). Lighting the hearth by mistake could invite curse from the goddess resulting in the outbreak of small pox in the family. The popular characterization of Sitala, is therefore mostly obtained from an angry, cursing and self-invited goddess who is hard to please and only human mothers can perform the task as one mother would understand the other.

In her primitive and aniconic form Sitala was goddess of small-pox only, but gradually was transformed to a children's deity since they are the worst affected by the diseases, which according to Misra might be a later development due to the high infant mortality rate (1969: 134). It is also crucial to note here that it is not the case anymore as more and more children are vaccinated these days. However, Dimick (1982) argues that Sitala is 'embedded and latent' within the human society (p. 186) as part of the ritual ecosystem. Referring to a eighteenth century text *Sitala-mangal* by Dvija Nityananda, Dimick points out that Sitala's random visitations to her children is nothing but the manifestation of her *lila* that eventually frees them from affliction and disease. In the *Sitala-mangal*, Dimick writes,

> the structures are there, and the society is revitalized, though threat and response are enclosed entirely within the system. The goddess is not really an adversary; rather, an unpredictable acquaintance. She is not a threat to, but a part of, the culture. (p. 202)

Likewise, the glimpses of Sitala is often discovered in the ritual appeasement of the deity through devotional songs. As the skin rash grows to the point of visibility that is when the mother reveals herself in the form of pustules that are considered 'appearance of flowers' (Datta, 1994:53) or the flowers 'decorating the body' (Misra, 1969:13) or popularly believed to be blessing left by the mother. In order to propitiate *Ai*, devotional songs called *Ai naam* is performed by women, with a periodic intervention of claps. The songs are mostly sung without any musical accompaniment and comprises of glorification of *Ai*, reminding her of the self-less mother that she is. One of the popular and commonly performed *naam* are as follows:

> *Ai mur Ujāāye Aahile, Ai mor Āāire sāātebhoni, Ai Mur Boxonte Bāā Bōlōy*
>
> (My mother has come with her seven sisters, I can feel the breeze of autumn) (Das, 2016:41941)

This also explains how the autumnal breeze plays an important role to spread the airborne disease especially amongst children who often mix up in public places like school and playgrounds. In fact, the duration from spring to autumn can be contained here as spring season or boxonto *rtu* is often used to mean the skin disease itself. The human mothers perform the role of mediators and the *naam* can be viewed like a form of negotiation with the divine mother more than a pure devotional motivation.

Datta *et al* (1994) further explain the *naam* thus:

> They are coming, Āi's seven sisters, across the seven mountains/ All bow their heads–the grass, the creepers, the trees, for Āi is coming/ The golden butterfly, round does it circle on its two silver wings/ The Āis have come to visit the place, we beg our lives of them/ Unconsciously did we trespass into Āi's garden, unaware did we pick the buds/ Forgive our crimes thus once, O Bhavani, we prostrate ourselves at your feet./ The Āis have come to poor houses-nothing do we have to offer/ We shall rub their feet with our tresses and lie down to make fords our bodies. (p. 53)

The above *naam*, and likewise, several songs of submission may assist to understand the specific participation of women as they may be more 'naturally' capable of playing the role of submissive as well as diplomatic hosts. The human mothers thus counter the 'fear complex' (Misra, 1969:140) by balancing between being hospitable and trying out everything to send or get rid of the satisfied guest sooner. The men or the fathers are therefore not included or voluntarily do not involve themselves in these kinds of 'mothers' affairs.

The irony here is the name Sitala 'meaning the calm one' given to the apparently angered mother in order to refer to her even though her anger is the most visible attribute of her character. Moreover, consuming the bitter neem leaves was nightmarish when our mothers would often force-feed us from time to time to prevent several diseases, hence offering guest that may seem inhospitable. In the view of this, the neem leaves offered to the afflicted person or the goddess (in this case) served a different purpose and hospitability may not be one of them. Misra writes thus, "The popular belief about the use of nim leaves is its bitterness. If Sitala mata is given something bitter, she will leave the body soon" (p. 138). On the other hand, the association of diseases with female deity also raises a crucial question of how the fierceness of goddess is profiled through substantial impurities like sores, pustules and sugar-coated or beautified as 'flowers', again a

signifier of undisputable femininity. The sick person is kept indoors, separated from the public life just like women in general are expected to. *Ai uluwa* or Mother's appearance, as an ailment is acutely domesticated as it is visibly and socially replicated with the way women, especially human mothers remain indoors most of their time, cool and calm like the goddess immersed in floral femininity and doing what they do best, nurturing and protecting their children. From social mother to the divine, the personality strokes remain the same, the children being the epicenter of their maternalized love or terror, whatever one may call.

The second kind of visit discussed here is when one undertakes to worship Mother Goddess Kamakhya at Kamakhya temple, fondly referred to as *Maa*. 'Performing the visitation' is an experience in itself, other than the symbolic meaning one finds if one looks for it. I will state my own experience in understanding the visit that concludes in the goddess' *yoni*. *Maa* never falls short of visitors and her children never fail her expectations. It is a glimpse of everyday performance where she is prepared by the *sevait*s (her servicemen) to play the perfect host to her visitors as she 'waits' (Lussana, 2015:77) for their arrival. As mentioned above, there is never any dearth of visitors, hence the 'visitation' lasts for the entire day as one spends most of the time standing in the queue waiting for their turn. The temple opens every day at 8 AM for the public and remains open till 5 PM with an hour break in between from 1-2 PM for the *maa'r bhoga* (mother's meal). One is required to enter the temple on a bare foot as no slippers are allowed inside the temple complex. The structure of the temple is built in such a way that devotees begin at a distance and snake their way to the main temple complex through grilled corridor that ends right where the main inner door of the temple begins. One needs to wait to 'ritually touch' the waiting mother.

It is not that mandatory to go through this waiting process if one wants to just worship the goddess from a distance without touching the *yoni* stone. One can perform *parikrama* (circumambulate) of the temple and offer the *puja thali*s (offering plate) consisting of incense sticks, sweets, flowers like lotus and hibiscus and fruits. But many visitors prefer to experience the longer process in order to perform the *sparxan* even if that lasts for a few seconds. I noticed several visitors wearing a red head band with words *Jai Mata Di* (Hail to the mother) and *Jai Kamakhya Maa* written on them. Here, the former phrase is popularly referred to Goddess Durga, but since all the goddesses are the believed to be the same that is no longer an issue here. As the visitors

prepare themselves thus for the long wait, the grilled corridor is filled with the chants of *Jai Mata Di* as soon as the queue moves a few more steps ahead. One is often diverted by the activities in the *Saubhagya Kund* (auspicious pond) situated on the right-hand side of the temple. The pond is located in between the grilled corridor and the outer side of the temple so it becomes a site to perform purification of sacrificial animals and birds before they are taken to the *bali ghar* (sacrificial house). The families offering the sacrifices are anointed under the close scrutiny of the priests as they try their best to repeat the chants and ritual acts. Often one may get distracted by the screams of the bleating sacrificial goats before being drawn back to re-energized chorus of *Jai Mata Di* as the queue progresses again. The length of the intestine-like corridor gives out an uncanny resemblance of being inside the belly of the goddess with every step approaching the *yoni*-personified mother.

As I drew nearer, the corridor markedly turned smaller with every step and then there came a point when I could just remember being tightened in a noose of people whose sweat and smell became mine. The transportation that resulted in oneness with the goddess consequently also meant being one with fellow-visitors. As the room reduced, people raised their *puja thali*s up in the air to create some space and the hibiscus flowers once adorning the plate turned pale and fluttered desperately under the ceiling fans to meet the mother. People were then split into gendered queues separated by an iron grill between them as the 'moment' came closer. It was hard to distinguish whether I was more motivated to meet the mother or she was. The queue did not end inside the temple as I walked with my temporary community. As soon as I entered the temple complex, and then the *garba griha* (womb-complex), I was engulfed in a dark and smoky compartment, totally cut off from the slogans, screams and mundane talks, the incense prepared me for the final descent to the *yoni*. A few slippery steep steps down landed me to the *yoni* stone submerged under a flower bed immersed in water. As I bent and knelt down the priest sitting there instructed me to touch the wet stone while he mechanically pasted the vermillion water on my forehead like a trace of blood. This brings to mind what Gioia Lussana (2015) mentions about the performativity of the said rite that devotees undergo in that brief moment revealed by a gesture which is by doing it (p. 79). Lussana points out that everything happens on the living body of the Goddess and by touching her body the devotee touches both his own body and the very root of sacred (Ibid.). The mantra recited at the time of touching known as 'sparsa mantra' is taken from Kamakhya Tirtha- *manobhava guhamadhye raktapasana rupini/ tasyah sparsamatrena*

punarjanma na vidyate (KT, 67) (Goswami, 1996:96). The *sparxan* was performed on my body and as well as the body of the goddess. The bodies met momentarily and the visit was completed. It happened so swiftly, that in the blink of an eye I was soon replaced by another person standing behind me. I ascended the steps again and was motioned by another person to take a different route to exit. As I exited the *garba griha*, the noise, the smell and the sight welcomed me again from the time warp that I was exposed to for those brief moment with the *Maa.* As the sunlight gently rubbed against my body, it felt like I emerged out of Kamakhya's vagina; reborn from her maternalized body, taking a tour of her maternal body, carrying the trace of vermillion-blood still on my face.

The third 'visitation' in this section is demonstrated with the pre-natal feeding ritual practice of the Assamese Hindu community, where certain roles are primarily performed by female members. However, not every community prioritize women to perform active role in the pre/post-natal ceremonies. Ute Hüsken (2013) argues that 'humans are ritually constructed' and it is only through *samskara*s (life-cycle rituals) that one becomes human in Hindu philosophy (p. 21). Hüsken also notes that these rituals throw light on the gendered division where man take active participation in rituals as compared to women. The textual sources of ritual in Hindu scriptures written in Sanskrit and its enactment in the ritual sphere gives more significance to men's role in the completion of samskaras. Hüsken discusses pre-natal ritual called *simanta* observed in the eighth month of pregnancy in the South Indian states of Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu. In this ritual the husband of the pregnant woman parts her hair with a porcupine quill and feeds her a mixture of barley, milk and butter (p. 22). It is performed in order to ensure safety of the unborn child where the mother is viewed and represented as an independent agent but an 'appropriate vessel' to hold the child (p. 23). The pre-natal *samskara*s is observed, Hüsken writes, "to make all the future children of the pregnant woman 'perfect' and 'fitting' and to have a purifying effect on the mother" (Ibid.). Hüsken further observes that although the pre-natal ritual revolves around pregnancy, both the textual prescriptions and execution of the ritual prioritizes the male members that is the husband of the pregnant woman, priests and other men in the family as the main actors (Ibid.). Citing the advanced state of pregnancy, the woman's absence from the ritual space is justified and are brought out of their private rooms for those ritual acts only where her bodily presence is absolutely necessary like when the hair is parted and when she is to be fed the ritual food by the husband. Referring to the passive role of women, Hüsken argues,

> The marginal role of the pregnant woman in the texts is perfectly mirrored by her marginal role during the performance of the rituals prescribe by the Sanskrit texts (Ibid.).

Hüsken explains that the search for an 'authentic Hindu tradition' as a counter-model to colonial influence led to the neo-Hindu movements in the nineteenth century which resulted in a redefined 'tradition as religion in everyday life' and a pronounced division between the private and the public where men, for obvious reasons, dominated the public while women engaged with domesticity of private sphere (p. 26). However, Hüsken is also quick to point out that in spite of the hierarchies between the public and the private and despite the domination of canonized rituals, women have been successful to a certain extent to perform non-textual rituals like *valai kappu* and *pu cututal* within the intimate sphere, passed on orally across generations. Hüsken writes, "The fact that female ritual knowledge is embodied knowledge, which handed down orally and learnt mimetically, also accounts for its invisibility in public (Ibid.)." Paradoxically, the fact that through the intervention of ritual invention women claim some agency to actively perform in women-centric rituals reveals the uneven gendered power dynamics.

In contrast to the above passive role of women, the pre-natal ritual in Assam provides ample space to women to actively participate and navigate the ritual. The mother-to-be participates in two feeding rituals when she reaches the fifth and ninth month of her pregnancy and purification rituals post the birth of the child. As soon as the pregnancy steps into the fifth month, a small family event is organized where the women of the pregnant woman's natal family pay a visit. The visitation consists of a feeding ritual, which though not very grand, but is considered obligatory and unavoidable in any circumstance. The would-be parents are seated and the woman is bathed, clothed in new clothes and offered *pancha amrit* (five kinds of nectar-like or sweet food) consisting of *ghee* (clarified butter), *mou* (honey), *gur* (jaggery), *gaakhir* (cow milk) and *doi* (curd), mixed well with *maalbhog kol* (a specific kind of big-sized banana with large seed) in a copper bowl. The husband is paid respect with a *gamosha* (a hand-woven scarf) placed around his neck, but his presence is not mandatory since the woman becomes the center of attention. As pointed out by Pramila Devi (2019), the soon-to-be mother is pampered since she is the one giving birth while the husband's job of facilitating the pregnancy is already accomplished. Devi was quick to respond with the reason behind the feeding ritual and why the pregnant wife is given more importance. According to her,

> It is believed that the foetus starts to develop its cognitive ability from the fifth month onwards. The mouth-watering and sweet *pancha amrit* is presented to the mother in order to lure the unborn baby and paint a beautiful image of the world that the child will arrive at. The feeding and clothing ritual is observed to raise the hope of the unborn baby that such pleasantries await its arrival. (2019)

A *saki* is lit at the *goshain ghar* (prayer room of the house) and the elderly women are invited to bless the pregnant woman for a safe delivery and a healthy baby. It is largely mothers' affair as they actively participate in the ritual. Although married woman who have not yet attained motherhood remain present, but it is the elders and mothers especially the woman's mother and her female relatives who pay her visit and actively participate so that all the rituals are performed flawlessly. Married women take active participation while widows or widowed mothers or childless/barren women tend to distance themselves voluntarily. Although there are no such restrictions, but widows especially young ones prefer to stay away due to the societal tendency that often stigmatize widowhood and barrenness. They are never asked not to attend the rituals, but they often excuse themselves from the rituals in order to evade the blame if anything tragic happens later. Once the *pancha amrit* is offered the woman has to finish the entire bowl for herself and the unborn child and nothing is reserved for the husband. Devi's face was lit up when she mentioned that she was not sure about her unborn baby but she did like it thoroughly and enjoyed the entire bowl as it was very delicious. She further mentioned that the feeding ritual is performed for every pregnancy and is not restricted to a woman's first pregnancy only. She noted, "Every unborn child deserves to relish the taste of good food and material happiness" (Ibid.).

On the ninth month of pregnancy another round of feeding ritual is observed, slightly bigger than the previous one as more community members pay visit to bless the pregnant woman. This ritual is called *nau maahiya jol paan khuwa* (*jol paan* can be referred to as food and water) and it is not just feeding the pregnant woman, but the community as well. There is a variation of terms used for this particular ritual even though the rituals remain all the more the same as Devi explained that in Kamrup (district) side, they call it *jeura bhanga* (breaking the fence), while in our side (Sonitpur district) we call it *gupini jol paan khuwa* (feeding the *gupini*s). *Jeura bhanga* is basically performed to pray for safe and smooth delivery of the baby, unblocking all the *jeura* (obstacles) on its way. The *gupini*s of the in laws' locality are invited by the natal family to the in laws' house along with other guests. Everything needs to be procured from the natal house and

food items like rice, duck curry and other vegetarian dishes have to be prepared by the natal family. The *gupini*s along with other guests are fed properly and requested by the natal family to bless the would-be mother and the unborn child for a safe delivery and good health. The *gupini*s bless her through the performance of *naam* sung with the accompaniment of claps while other guests bless her with gifts for her and her unborn child.

There is a gender-revealing or gender-predicting ritual that the women engage in where the two covered copper bowls unbeknownst to the woman is placed before her. One bowl consists of *taamul* (betel or areca nut) and the other bowl consists of *paanor khila* (a bunch of betel leaves). The woman is then asked to uncover one of the bowls, *taamul* would mean a boy whereas *paan* would mean a girl. It is to be noted here that in Assam *paan-taamul* is always offered to guests or is supposed to be consumed together as an ideal combination. It is unmissable to see how the gender identity reveals itself according to the gender construct even before the child is born; *taamul* implying the hard masculine nut, while the slender smooth vine *paan* leaves symbolizes the intended femininity. Several women voiced out a similar distrust with the ritual as many times the prediction turn out to be incorrect and it is more of a merriment that the women of the locality indulge themselves in order to extend the day's activities. At the same time, one cannot help but notice how in a playful, albeit an imposing manner, the rituals reinstate the ideal performance of gender norms existing in the society.

The birth of the child brings forward another set of rules and rituals that the new mother and the child is exposed to due to the element of impurity they are believed to possess due to the child-birth. The mother-child duo is not allowed to come out of the house till the fifth day and they are made to sleep in a makeshift floor bed separated from the husband/father. On the fifth day, purification ritual called *xuddhi* is observed where the mother is bathed and clothed in clean clothes, while the child's head is shaved off and given a cleansing bath to slowly erase the effect of their *suwa* bodies. The person who touches the baby has to take bath afterwards as he also becomes contaminated, therefore untouchable. On this day, all the objects that the mother must have come in contact with are brought out and washed and whoever does it needs to take the purification bath. The mother-child duo is given clean beds and after their bath they are allowed to come out of the house till the courtyard. Devi recollected the time her daughter (now a teenager)

was born although she had claimed to have chosen the *taamul* bowl, had a hard time convincing herself to change the rituals she was familiar with. She informed thus,

> My in-laws' side do not follow the fifth day ritual (head shaving ritual). Hence, I was worried that my natal family and relatives would not touch my daughter due to the *suwa*. I was in a big dilemma and that is when my maid suggested that she would get a small blade to shave a small portion without the knowledge of my husband and in laws'. That ways I was mentally satisfied, and at the same time did not end up upsetting my in - laws'. (2019)

Even though women remain the main actors until the birth of the child unlike Hüsken's case study, but Hüsken's hierarchies of 'private and the public sphere' is not completely erased in the Assamese Hindu community as well. Till the eleventh day no one is allowed to hold the baby and the mother cannot touch anyone in the house although she can converse with them. On the eleventh day, the Brahmin priest visits the family to supervise the *xuddhikaran* (purification) bath of the mother-child followed by the purification of the entire house by sprinkling water with mango leaves or some other purifying water mixture. Once the *xuddhikaran* is complete, that night a *xuddhi sabha* (purificatory gathering) is arranged where the *bhakat*s (male members of the *naam ghar*) are invited to perform *kirtan* (practice of devotional singing) in order to bless the new born child. It is noted here that all this while the women and the *gupini*s took an active role during the pregnancy rituals, however with the birth of the child, the male member of the community take the lead active role to welcome the child into the community as the private rituals transform into public enactment of community expansion. Also, it is crucial to note the change in time of the gathering which was earlier daytime permissible for women to venture out to attend the rituals, but the night time has been unquestionably reserved for men and other male members. Following the *kirtan*, the newborn is welcomed into the community as a rightful member and is presented with the first portion of the *prasad*[42] for consumption. From that day onwards, a portion of the *prasad* in any event of the community is reserved for the child no matter if the child is too small to walk or eat or seated on the mother's lap. It is, in fact, considered a grave mistake if the infant is not offered a separate portion since the baby had taken membership right on the eleventh day.

[42] Here *prasad* usually consists of soaked gram, lentils mixed with coconut, ginger and salt, along with fruits like apple, orange, sugarcane, banana and so on.

From the eleventh day onwards, the mother can touch people and objects, but till one month she is not allowed to touch the well or source of water in the house, enter the kitchen, visit the cow shed or offer prayers in the *naam ghar* or prayer room in the house. The same menstrual restrictions are imposed till the completion of one month. Once one month is completed, she is given another ritual bath after which she is allowed to touch and participate in the daily household chores and welcomed back from the temporary seclusion. In some part of Assam there is no such difference in the number of days the *suwa* is observed. However, in some the duration of seclusion differs according to the gender of the newborn. Mandakini Baruah (2016) explains the profanity (*sucita*) and purity (*asucita*) of a female body in Assamese Hindu Society in relation to child birth and the subsequent separate rituals depending on the sex of the baby (p. 169). Baruah notes that the practice of quarantining the mother and the child after child birth is followed strictly and the temporary period can extend up to twenty days for boy child and thirty days for girl child implying that the latter is more profane than the former (p. 171). This concept of purity/profanity dichotomy is marked right at the time of child birth and subsequently attached to the female body especially during menarche and the following menstrual experiences. The observance of strict rituals during child birth or menstruation emerges from the female body viewed as the threatening body.

Drawing from the three visitations discussed above, it brings to mind how we conceive the reproduction of maternal semantics and identities that is so corporeal and at the same time gender-defined/defining. A couple of markers that binds the three mothers together that assists in the formulation of that 'reproduction' and their ideal performance. Firstly, the bodily representation of what 'being and becoming' of a mother in the Assamese Hindu community signifies. The corporeality of these maternalized bodies is defined in terms of their ability to reproduce through their bodies or on other bodies– be it offspring, the worshipper's rebirth or through the afflicted bodies. The reproductive quality qualifies them to the status of mother, be it a loving benevolent or a terrifying one because every mother is capable of birthing multiple mothers within them and yet symbolize unified human and divine motherhood. As pointed out by Stanley N. Kurtz (1992) his formulation of the 'Ek-Hi phase' describes the Hindu understanding that all mothers and mother goddesses derive from the same source and therefore one and the same. Referring to the term, Kurtz notes,

> In the Hindu case, however the movement is not away from the mother and toward individuation and trust. Rather, the movement is away from the natural mother and toward a larger and fundamentally benevolent group of mothers in which all the mothers are, ultimately, "just one". (pp. 92-93)

Kurtz further argues there can never be good and bad mothers as it becomes problematic to analyse according to such a 'simple duality'. This resonates with how several of my informants mentioned the unity of several kind of mothers within one body, awaking the required one at the required time.

But at the same time Kurtz formulates his arguments around the idea of 'Hindu understanding' which seems limiting and broad at the same time, in the sense that in several cases like the child rearing culture in India or even the Ek-Hi phase, for instance, it is much larger than the Hindu thinking that all deities are same and this 'unified deities' thinking is spread across religion in India. There might be a particular way in which a child growing up in a Hindu household might learn to imbibe the religious doctrines, but as far as the child rearing and going beyond one's faith just because all gods are the same is concerned, it cannot be restricted to a Hindu community alone. That way Kurtz's understanding may seem a blanketed opinion on the Indian cultural evolution as categorically Hindu, a stand that could be avoided. It is almost like Uma Narayan's (1997) critique of Mary Daly's portrayal of 'Indian women' as victims of Sati custom and dowry burning. Narayan opines,

> Given Daly's framing, Indian women seem to go up in flames-on the funeral pyres of their husbands and in the "kitchen accidents" that are the characteristic mode of dowry-murder-without historical pause. The effacement of *cultural change* within historical time collaborates with the effacement of *cultural variations* across communities and regions to suggest a "Third-World culture" that is "frozen" with respect to both Space and Time. (pp. 48, 50)

Consequently, Kurtz's study attempts to keep Hindu/ Indian paradigm as one and the same painting everything with one singular stroke.

As our present discussion conveys, the social and conceptual mother is popularly viewed as an amalgam of multiple personalities/ bodies within the female identity. It strikes me to think of how Kamakhya is perceived as a bodily part and not as a full-bodied entity as an *anga* (part) of Sati, but with a unique identity of her own. Kamakhya serves as a site to demonstrate two

functions: Sati's fragmented yet unified body and secondly, the specific *anga* that re-produces and re-presents her maternalized body. The complex 'creative motif' is displayed through Kamakhya in three manners–one who is born out of Sati, her second birth occurs through her *yoni* covered in a flower bed decorating her body/ *yoni* and the third birth is the one when the visit is designed to turn into a symbolic birthing experience for the visitors.

The 'one and unified' mother identity is later found in terms of *Ai* as she goes on to represent the disease-inflicting mother and reproduces herself on human bodies and literally leaves her mark (scars) as a reminder of her maternal presence. The transformation is corporeal again as the afflicted person goes through pain and suffering, while the sores and rashes flower, finally ripen like the fruit of the soil with a gradual increase in pain and discomfort, to be finally reduced and healed only to be left with the *Ai*'s scarred-blessing. The angry mother subsides within herself and wakes up her benevolent side as she contains multitude. The child becomes one with the *Ai* and conjoined for life in the form of scars decorating the human body.

On a completely opposite manner the human mother, on the other hand is merged with her child right from the time it takes birth in her body. As the foetus grows inside her and she transforms with each passing day, her body swells with the presence of her unborn child. Every ritual brings her closer to her becoming a fully-fledged mother, categorically turning her from a potential to an actual mother, from her menstruation to her child's birth. As she bears the labour pain and the bleeding experience of her child's birth, her pain and suffering increases only to be reduced and healed with the child's birth. The child leaves her body, but not before it leaves her 'flower-like scars or stretch marks' for life reminding her the motherhood she embraced the moment she conceived and the mother she became. The question of gender-defined roles is undeniably present be it in the gender-symbolic food like *taamul* or *paan*, or be it the floral femininity on the maternalized bodies, or be it the reinstated outcome of the three visits is the transformation of a woman into a reproducing mother. The visitation points out to the mobility and the interactivity between bodies. Visiting the *Maa* provides the experience of taking birth through her *yoni*, while *Ai* delves into the body of her children completing the circle of visit. The divine or conceptual mothers' visitations are momentary, while the social or human mother visits to stay back with her children.

Desexualized Mother

The image of a woman and the image of a mother is separated and preserved that way. It is a normalized and naturalized process of raising a girl and boy child in separate ways in a same family under the same roof. As pointed out by Rich, the association of conception is processed differently for women and men, where the former learns to know herself as daughter and as a potential mother, while the latter, due to his said detachment first experiences himself as son and much later as father (1986: 118). Motherhood remains in a dormant state, the exalted idea of being a mother is encouraged and the mother figure and maternal images are internalized with the growth of the girl child. As a result, matrescence begins with maternal training and framing from an early age when girls are first introduced to learn the basic domestic chores eventually graduating into full-fledged motherhood with the beginning of their maternal adulthood.

There is an intangible relationship between women and several forms of desire as the motherhood is turned into an exclusive otherhood. The desire does not necessarily emerge from a sexual standpoint. It actually denotes the socially-structured desire to give birth, to 'embrace motherhood' so to speak and the desire to prove her worth and fulfil womanhood by becoming a mother. The question of 'desire' therefore becomes quintessential to comprehend what it entails to be desirous and what are the different versions of desire that shape the social identity of a woman, goddess and eventually the mother.

Kali Prasad Goswami (1996) suggests the idea of tantra goes against the teachings of Bhagavadgita in terms of attaining earthly happiness. Tantra categorically aims at the principle of 'caturbarga sādhana' which consists of 'Dharma (religion), Artha (wealth), Kama (eros) and Moksha (salvation)' (p. 10). Goswami writes, "Kamakhya worship starts with fulfillment of desires, she is prayed to grant desires…to satisfy the earthly desires. And it is generally believed she is satisfied by propitiation" (Ibid. 11). Goswami further explains that it is due to this very nature of granting desires, both worldly and otherwise, which contradicts the Vedantic or Buddhist religion, who, on the other hand, attempt to minimize human wants (Ibid. 41). Kamakhya is also believed to change her appearance according to her own desire- virgin at the dawn, Bhairavi at noon and Parvati during evening (Ibid. 44). Quoting Kalika Purana (60/55), Goswami writes,

> In her amorous mood the goddess holds a yellow garland in her hand and stands on a white corpse. When her amour is gone, she takes up the sword and stands on a red lotus placed on a bare white corpse. In her mood of benevolence (Kamada) she mounts upon a lion so she assumes one form or another according to her whims (Kamārūpinī). (Ibid. 46)

Kamakhya's desire to become many and multiple role-playing poses a direct threat to the singular identity formation of women in the social spaces. Simultaneously, it also highlights how Kamakhya's identity is also being gradually transformed to imitate the aforesaid singular identity by referring to her as *Maa* and focusing on her 'benevolent' motherly feature. Kamakhya's desire does not translate into women's desire as they continue to learn to either become mothers or embrace motherhood as an everyday practice.

Similarly, Hugh Urban (2010) opines how tantra differs from most of the South Asian religious traditions who view *kama* as the primary obstacle in the religious life. According to Urban, tantra considers the path that 'seeks to transform and redirect desire towards the aims of both this worldly power and spiritual liberation (p. 19)'. Quoting Madeleine Biardeau, Urban writes,

> Rather than placing desire and liberation in opposition to each other…the desire is the hallmark of each and every individual's initiation into the path of salvation. It is therefore no longer one's acts, ritual or otherwise, that are valorized as such; rather it is desire itself which is actually positively re-evaluated. (Ibid.)

Thus, desire is not just reduced to sexual liberation, but a means to spiritual liberation; desire takes different meanings like Kamakhya's ever-changing forms. Urban, similarly like Goswami, explains the tantric philosophy about how the idea of *kama* (as a smaller goal) is a means to achieve the primary aims of life namely *artha* and *dharma* (Ibid. 20). Urban asserts, "Not primarily a means to pleasure alone, kāma is rather a means to awaken and channel the tremendous energy that lies within the body and the cosmos" (Ibid.). What we see here is how desire becomes the fulcrum to mobilize the tantric understanding of liberation that is intensely tied to earthly human needs. Thus, worshipping Kamakhya brings the worshipper closer to taste desire and the power to own one.

The analogy of desire in case of Kamakhya may not be as sorted as Goswami presents it to be. There is a sense of complex meaning expressed through Kamakhya and her desire-fulfilling ability. She not only grants mundane desires and is an epitome of desire-personified, she equally

liberates her devotees from earthly desires. Barua stresses on this contradiction centred in Kamakhya aspect as a "blend of pravritti (desire and passion) and navritti (desirelessness/ dispassion) in one, and finally she remains a combination of all these aspects in these various aspects" (2015: 66). This is where another form of desire comes in, which Dobia (2007) refers to as 'desireless desire' (p. 72) that enables the male devotee to view his female counterpart as *Maa*, the Mother Goddess to whom he offers his worship. Dobia points out that the ultimate aim is to enable a total identification with Kamakhya and to achieve this desire becomes the offering (Ibid.). Here, desire implies motherhood as the *summum bonum* imposed on the Goddess by the devotee which further explains how motherhood is designed to contain human mothers within its domain. Dobia (2013) states how the male devotees' behaviours are highly ritualized and viewed as a sign of respect. Dobia quotes one of the pandits thus:

> 'We are born out of the mother, we also marry the mother, when the wife feeds us, she is also like the mother, and she's like a counsellor who give advice. A wife is looked upon as a mother, only at night she's a wife.' (p. 242)

Dobia further adds that according to the pandit even the daughters are viewed in the same manner as all females are seen as aspects of mother. She notes that doing this have the potential to over-determine and restrict women's roles (Ibid.). Essentializing goddess and women to limited maternal roles may not be a form of respect, but disqualifying women's potential to achieve sexual and sensual roles. Calling Kamakhya as *Maa* is not just limited to her, it actually expands the imposed role to women in general, who do not possess the liberty to don multiple roles like Kamakhya does. However, the role-playing can be fulfilled only when the goddess is made desireless as a woman, but desirous only as a desire-fulfilling mother. Likewise, the sexual side of women is veiled, while her maternal quality is displayed, reinforced and celebrated; all are born of women, but only women are born as desexualized mothers.

Sucharita Sarkar (2020) argues that the Hindu framework for childbearing and childrearing do not encourage non-normative, independent or resistant maternal thinking (p. 116). It is exclusively through scriptural strategies like 'sacralization of breastmilk' (p. 109) in texts like Skanda X (Book X) of the Bhagavata Purana centered around Krishna myths served one purpose: to reinforce the metaphor of maternity as selfless nurture, and to insist that motherhood is an essential quality of all females (p. 111). I argue that the womb-centric human and divine bodies

are therefore ritualized and desexualized as a result of 'censoring sexuality'. Bodily attributes like hips, breasts, navel and vagina are attached with sexual meanings as they grow and become visible to public gaze. However, these female erotic zones are emphasized and turned into unique sacred sites that help in the larger process of reproduction, giving the body a fitting crown of a mother. The bodily fluids like breast milk, sexual fluids (necessary for the conceiving purpose only) and amniotic fluids are therefore reduced to maternal fluids. The idea behind 'censoring sexuality' implies the undeniable presence of sexuality. The erasure is therefore an attempt to contain sexuality within the domain of motherhood and turn it into something very asexual and banal.

Female sexuality, exists, no doubt, but it does not share the same space with motherhood. Motherhood and female sexuality are socially viewed as mutually exclusive phenomenon, where female sexuality might seem unmotherly and therefore threatening. Ditrich argues that the reflection of the male experience of woman is split into a pure, benevolent, nurturing "good mother" and a threatening, malevolent, seductive "bad mother" (2005: 85). However, O'Reilly argues that it is only by becoming "bad" mothers that is 'outlaws from the institution of motherhood' through agency, authority, autonomy and authenticity one becomes better mothers (2004: 172).

O'Reilly and Marie Porter (2005) contend that matricentric feminism's attempt to redefine motherhood is to dismantle the oppressive mandates which is to be good woman, one must be a mother and to be a good mother one must not be a woman-that is have a self outside of motherhood (p. 11). That a woman can explore her sexuality and motherhood at the same time is still not readily accepted in Assamese Hindu society like several other conservative communities in India and elsewhere. Sexually active woman is often not viewed as a socially-accepted role due to which 'sexual jokes' are coded and covered only to be revealed in same-sex interactions. Which means the maternal image controls the social system by emphasizing how a mother is supposed to perform ideally, meaning the maternal role cannot be flawed be it in raising the children, keeping the home together, suppressing her own sexuality and using her fecund body to further the family tree. Each and every step is under scrutiny as her link to the family is established and validated only through her reproducing ability. Hence, sexual union does not develop into sexuality at least for the woman, discovering and defining sexuality is still considered a male domain, outside the maternal boundaries.

Beginning with a common image I try to explain the relationship shared between mother and the child is the way a mother carries her child. Like in several parts of India, in the Assamese Hindu households as well, it is a common sight in domestic spaces where the mother effortlessly holds her child astride her hip while working with the dominant hand. Although a common sight, the image definitely converts itself to construct two visual meanings-i) the child is an extension of the mother, clinging to her blurring the boundaries between two bodies, ii) rearing the child is a form of domestic gendered labour the mother engages in as a part of her other household duties and responsibilities. I find this image crucial to comprehend the dynamics shared by the two because it not only highlights the said relationship, but also the position of the father. The father does not hold the child astride his hip, but with both the hands very much implying that it is more of a relaxing activity after the conclusion of his real work or labour outside the house. He does not require a free hand to perform the domestic works unlike the mother of the child. In fact, the closeness of the child with the mother may also make the mother available to the father. Kurtz mentions this closeness thus, "The child sleeps with the mother, and the breast is kept accessible. No baby is allowed to cry for long since the breast is offered on demand" (1992: 32). The large amount of time the child spends attached to the mother physically determines the bodily and mental affinity with her depending on the gender of the child. A boy child will grow up into someone who would want to detach from everything the mother represents or does, while the girl child would imitate the mother in an attempt to eventually become the mother. Of course, the ones not following the gendered order questioning its existence in the first place turn out to be exception in a still conventional society.

Consequently, the 'cry for the breast' (Ibid. 33) as Kurtz calls it, begins and ends the attachment between the mother and the child. As the child grows, the demand for breast decreases, while the child gets attached to the father. Kurtz further explains the growing distance between the mother and child's fascination with the mature, transformed sexuality beyond the family's maternal group (Ibid.). The father, then, becomes the rites of passage to carry the child into the world where the need and desire for the mother's breast is non-existent. The breast thereby becomes symbolic of food for the child, a source of constant nourishment, bravery and valour which has given birth to iconic Hindi cinema dialogues like *Maa ka doodh piya hai toh saamne*

aa, *doodh ka karz*[43] and so on very reminiscent of the 'attached bodies' that the mother-son dyad once represented. I argue that the concept of breast-feeding has been turned into a masculinized act because these dialogues are always exchanged between men, where the mother's milk is referred to challenge the masculinity and virility and if the person is 'not manly enough' to accept the challenge. I see a deliberate silencing of women, absenting them from the site which requires courage and manly strength that women can never possess as is the popular belief. Secondly, it also denotes that only the sons are capable of paying the debt of mother's milk by always protecting her, displaying a clearly economical barter quality. Lactating breast is holy, but public breast-feeding is not, sacred images are meant to be idolized, but only in private. Moreover, the breast is conveniently turned into an object of veneration, completely stripped off its sexual character, hidden away from plain sight often revealing itself in men's heated arguments and provocation, constantly in need of sons' protection.

Incidentally, other erogenous zones in a female body like navel and *yoni* have also been reimaged as maternal attributes, desexualized and adorned with motherly values and significance of creation. Hence, even the union between gods and goddesses was deemed necessary only for the sole purpose of creation of the cosmos, a 'form of sacrifice' (Urban 2010:114) for greater goods, while the element of sexual intimacy was given lesser significance. It is at this juncture Kamakhya appears to symbolize not only the sexual intimacy between couple, but also the creational motive. Popular belief in Assam is that Nilachal hill served as the secret love abode for Shiva and Sati where they would engage in lovemaking without the intention of creation. Kurtz mentions that the phallus illuminates the paradoxically ascetic-erotic character of Shiva mythology and his sexuality (1992: 149). It is to be noted here that the portrayal of Shiva may also have a lot to do with his image as a god popular amongst the indigenous non-Aryan culture; desexualization process may have a slowing effect on Shiva as opposed to other Hindu deities.

On the basis of Kalika Purana and the Yogini Tantra, Banikanta Kakati highlights the symbolic meaning of Kamakhya's *yoni* as a symbol of sex and as well as creation, views embodied by two different sets of people in different periods of time (p. 36). Kakati argues that Kalika Purana constructed a new image of Kamakhya and her association with Shiva was established. Kamakhya

[43]Dialogues like 'Come forward if you have suckled mother's milk', 'Indebted to mother's milk' are a few instances that is often evoked to prove one's masculinity disguised as bravery in different situations.

becomes this amorous wife of Shiva, 'living in inseparable companionship with her husband for secret love' (Ibid.41). He writes, "The new motif is sex or kāma (eros) and from that point of view every detail has been re-conceived and represented" (Ibid.).

On the other hand, another narrative suggests that Kama, the Hindu god of love and desire seemed to have regain his *rup* (form) here at the Nilachal hill after he was burnt down to ashes by Shiva's fiery anger. Shiva's anger is as intense as his sexual prowess which is evidently portrayed through phallic worship spread across India. Both the narratives connect Kama, Shiva, Sati and Kamrup together flourishing with a strong undercurrent of desire, lovemaking and organic sexual significance. But what happened to Kamakhya when the female sexuality attached to her was consciously muted to reconfigure her maternal identity? Barua highlights the several image and layers of meaning unveiling what Kamakhya stands for her children and writes thus,

> The goddess of the Yoni-Pitha remained the Mother-goddess for her average devotee, though she remained the passionate goddess representing the eroticized love for a chosen few and the dreadful and wrathful goddess as Shakti or power for some others. The goddess at the shrine finally emerged as the living embodiment of eroticized desire (kāma) who fulfills all desires of her devotees. (2015: 62-63)

The multiple symbolism of Kamakhya requires her to make herself accessible to her children (just like breast-feeding) when demanded. However, in the recent time the *yoni* symbolism is viewed more as the gateway to creation while the sexual element is restricted to esoteric tantric rituals or other symbolic rituals only. The emphasis on *yoni*'s ability to give birth, shape and senses to a new born is celebrated while the 'sexual union' required for procreation is not adequately addressed. Dominantly transposed as *Maa*, Kamakhya gives birth through her newly attained status of desexualized *yoni*, the origin of all creation and creativity.

The constant attempt to desexualize a woman's identity into a singular maternal image is an outcome of fear. The fear arises from the 'danger' possessed by the notion of female sexuality. To explain this concept of fear, Samjukta G. Gupta (2000) elaborates thus:

> Divine sexuality of the Goddess is equated with the divine power…Her nature is motherly and wifely. She performs cosmic functions on the authority of God, seen as her husband, and she procreates as the cosmic mother, but her sexuality has the dangerous quality of seduction and even deception. (pp. 94-95)

There is a felt dichotomy between female image versus maternal image where the former is threatening to the social ecosystem, while the latter is threatened by external forces. The division is drawn in the portrayal of goddesses as well, like asexual non-threatening goddess like Saraswati, sexually amorous Sati/Parvati and the fierce, yet motherly Durga. Saraswati denotes the asexual mother goddess of language and learning, "embodying creation but not participating in the 'profane' corollary, procreation" (Aneja and Vaidya, 2016:22). Aneja and Vaidya stresses on the fact that the fertile nature of Saraswati is abstracted to a different perspective on the maternal as creativity, as aesthetic impulse (Ibid.). In the midst of this abject form of categorization, I wonder how Kamakhya is transfigured with her identity at stake and threatened. From divine creation to human reproduction, the male principle signifies creation as one of the many aspects of identities, whereas for female principle it becomes the one and only aspect, an unchanging and absolute conceptualization of Mother Goddess, which is socially reflected in women's identity formation as an indelible marker.

In contrast to the glorification of Mother Goddess, Kakati puts out an interesting point across when he discusses the 'break with the mother' with the advent of Neo Vaishnavism of Sankardeva in Assam fifteenth century onwards (2004: 71). The elimination of goddesses from the worship spaces and a complete break from the Mother Goddess figure gave rise to *Sankariya* philosophy of *ekesaraniya* (obeisance to one male God) in order 'to purify Hinduism from within' (Neog, 2008:155). It can be viewed as an antidote to worship of gods and goddesses with blood sacrifices and sexually-charged *sakti* worship in Assam. Any tie to any form of Mother Goddess worship was severed and *sakti* remained unacknowledged. In an attempt to desexualize the religious space and the ritual efficacy of the relationship between the devotee and the deity, the *shringar rasa* like that of Radha-Krishna came to be replaced by the *dasya rasa* of servitude to one divinity which was no way represented by a female entity. Thus, Mother Goddess like Kamakhya was erased from the mnemonic culture of the Assamese Hindu community who decided to follow Sankardeva's spiritual undertakings.

Fear of woman or construction of fear towards the female body validates female control or control of female sexuality in the similar manner as masculine culture controls the feminine nature. It leads to ghettoization of the maternal through a calculated separation from the sexual world. All

the female energy, sexual or otherwise, is transferred to the male control[44] as she remains 'potentially dangerous and destructive' (Aneja and Vaidya, 2016:120). Sexuality is thus non-existent in the discourse of motherhood, existing only outside home and beyond maternal roles (Ibid. 145).

Moving from the desexualized world to the sexual is a clear disruption, threatening the social order, demonstrating the 'risking/abandoning the carefully constructed persona imposed by the patriarchal accord' (Ibid. 137). A mother may clearly have wants, desire and a right to choose, however her social position and image portrays her as the one whose want and desire never crosses the family threshold. Sexual freedom becomes a dangerous territory compromising the 'ideal' nature of selfless mother which can easily put them in the socially inappropriate category of 'bad and selfish' mother. The desexualized gaze, is therefore produced to preserve the hallowed maternal image, remaining forever under surveillance. The existence of desexualized gaze is a patriarchal invention and it does not necessarily mean it is practiced, but it remains in vogue to control female sexuality. Female body has been evidently gazed upon as a sexual being, but when it comes to these bodies asserting their sexuality, the desexualized maternal identity is successfully superimposed. Aneja and Vaidya explain where this deification of women germinates from by stating:

> Women are violated not in spite of being worshipped; they are violated because the idealization of a desexualized maternal validates the desecration of the irreverent, sexual female body as a pariah, in a cultural context which promotes the splitting up of the maternal object into a divine spirit and a profane body. (Ibid. xvii)

The distinction between maternal and unmaternal bodies hints at the 'ambiguity' that Pintchman tries to highlight when it comes to 'threatening the patterns of order' (1994: 205). The ambiguity is such that a goddess is invoked as 'mother' if she upholds the order of the world (Ibid.). This does not have to do with her married or unmarried status, or whether she is constructive or destructive or if she is benevolent or malevolent (Ibid.). The only thing that matters is even in her destruction she should be the tool for keeping order. The goddess in the spiritual world and the woman in the temporal world become the mechanism to 'conserve order' by turning themselves

[44] Woman is believed to derive her identity from her husband (See Aneja and Vaidya, 2016; Pintchman, 1994).

into that symbol of order. Female sexuality, therefore, is negotiated in order to venerate the male control and exhibit its virile victory over it.

Stephen Ellingson and M. Christian Green (2002) argue that the embodiment of human experience of the world is expressed as sensual and sexual beings and sexuality plays the central role in the construction of religious meaning (p. 7). According to their study on sexuality and several religious cultures in the world, they opine that in an attempt to tame sexuality, many religious traditions establish and enforce the nature, purpose and boundaries of human sexuality, especially women's sexuality (Ibid.). Consequently, women's bodies are represented as those holy sites which needs to be guarded from constant threat, active female sexuality being considered one of the threats. The popular belief of women as a sacred vessel is centred at a position which is in ceaseless danger of being defiled and therefore surveilled 'for their own good'. The vessel, furthermore represents the obligatory maternal duty of reproduction, dispossessed of sexuality with not even a trace of it. The icon of menstruating goddess at Kamakhya temple can illuminate the idea of vessel forward. It can generate a similar expression that Ganesh discusses about the icon of Lajja Gauri (the shy Gauri) or Kamalamukhi (the lotus head). Ganesh argues that the headless icon is body incarnate and the personified *yoni* expresses an elemental idea (2010: 77). The artistic device was to remove the face which actually gave her an identity in order to portray the female principle of creation literally (Ibid.). Likewise, the icon at Kamakhya spectacalize the semi-nude body that highlights the breast, softly protruded stomach, navel and the *yoni* smeared with vermillion. It not only denotes the menstrual bleeding the body goes through, but at the same time it also signifies menstruation which is nothing but a biological and symbolic precursor to motherhood. Ganesh's 'elemental idea' can be expanded and postulated here not only on the basis of iconic representation, but also as a mechanism to institutionalize the divine symbol into the social sphere for the women to emulate. Furthermore, it is remarkable to see how the icon remains veiled with a transparent red cloth many a times, ideating the repressed sexuality, the barrier between the social and sexual world and the desexualized body.

Conclusion

An Indian newspaper daily *The Hindu* reported from the drought-affected Beed district of Maharashtra about the womb-less women workers who went through hysterectomies to avoid

taking breaks from their work, a 'norm' followed by almost every woman as young as 25 years of age (Jadhav, 2019). They work in the fields during the cane-cutting season and a day off from the work due to menstrual problem would mean a massive cut in their daily wages. According to the women workers, the contractors who employ them offer the surgery fee and deduct the fee from their wages. This piece reveals another side of maternal bodies, because the bigger problem lies in prolonged pregnancy which would mean no livelihood for the entire year. These women, therefore, remove the uterus and become womb–less to sustain the family's earning, another example of how women are expected to make that huge sacrifice for the betterment of the family. It is striking that a report like this provides a completely different perspective to how we perceive the concept of ideal motherhood. In instance like this, it occurs that the maternalized bodies perform not only the expected roles of self-effacement, sacrifice and suffering, it also solidifies the dichotomy of women's labour (productive) versus women's labour (reproductive). In both the cases, women exhibit the spectacle of motherhood in either side of the spectrum.

The linguistic representation of child bearing is gendered and sexist as there is no equal term for men who also play a crucial role in procreation. The child bearing and rearing rests entirely on the shoulder of the mother as defined by social terms like fatherhood and motherhood. Rich argues 'fatherhood' remains tangential and elusive where fathering a child limits his duty to assisting in the reproduction, while to 'mother' a child implies a continuing presence (Ibid. 12). In Assamese language a barren woman is called *baaji* implying the barrenness of Mother Earth, infertile land where nothing grows, an inauspicious term reserved for women who are not able to bear child. They are supposed to take the entire blame on themselves for not being able to conceive. Their identity is reduced to their unmaternal bodies, unfulfilled women whose presence is not preferred in social and religious events. Of course, there is an Assamese term for men like *napunshak* meaning impotent or sterile which suggests 'not manly enough' and has more to do with an inability to perform sexual function. It however, does not, in any manner carry the inauspicious connation that is socially attached to *baaji*. This linguistic inadequacy portrays a grim picture of how social and conceptual mothers are maternalized, they may be treated different, but they are placed under the same desexualized gaze.

Interrogating motherhood discussed how it has been shaped, staged and molded women's position in the society. It provides glimpse to several factors that goes into manufacturing the

conceptualization of not only Mother Goddess Kamakhya but that of 'ideal' motherhood as well and how in the process a woman is strategically reduced to a singular identity. The discussion on matrescence delineates the trajectory of how the maternalization of women, landscapes, sacred sites and goddesses like Kamakhya and Sitala underlines the significance attached to female bodies the ability to perform and stage motherhood ideally. No matter how militant tendency a female body displays, the maternal homecoming surely transports her back to the naturalized and idealized notion of womanhood, a husbanded and fulfilled one at that.

I argue becoming a mother is not problematic, but the social ideation of motherhood and mothering is. A woman should have the liberty to expand her horizon, experience and explore several sides to her identity equally like her male counterpart. Binding her to a singular self and training her entire life to learn the art of motherhood would mean suppressing her sexual and social expression. The 'female possibility' and 'female potentiality' (Rich, 1986) is eroded so as to hinder the growth of women and their social lives. Hence, veneration of Kamakhya, does not in any way mirrors women's lived-experience of gendered everydayness, but when it comes to crystallization of their identities as 'essentially mothers', they still seem to share the same umbilical cord of their social existence.

Chapter III

Ambubachi *mela* and its 'Divine Menstruation'

Introduction

Ambubachi *mela* takes place in the month of Asad or Ahaar (the second day according to Hindu Lunar calendar, generally late June). Like it happens in several annual celebrations in temples across India, Ambubachi also witnesses a huge gathering much higher than the large numbers of visitors throughout the year. In the year 2019, the estimated gathering for the three-day celebration was close to twenty-five lacs that comprised of devotees from within Assam and other states like neighbouring West Bengal, Jharkhand, Odisha, Uttar Pradesh and from Southern states as well. Pilgrims from neighbouring countries like Nepal and Bangladesh also frequent the temple to perform worship to the menstruating deity with utmost veneration and wishes.

However, unlike annual festivals in temples across India, or other annual festivals held at Kamakhya temple like Manasa Puja, Durga Puja, Pohan Puja and so on, Ambubachi officially commences with the closing of the *garba griha* at the *Vimana* section of the temple. The *manobhava guha* where the *yoni* is located remains closed and the *yoni* is veiled due to which the usual worship through *sparxan* is prohibited. Right during the peak monsoon, Kamakhya undergoes her annual menstruation and it is locally believed that her blood flows out of the temple to finally merge with the mighty river Brahmaputra. The 'veiling' itself is the reason why so many pilgrims and tourists alike pay visit during Ambubachi. During these three days while the *yoni* stone is covered with red-coloured *angabastra* or *raktabastra* (menstrual cloth) and is not accessible to anyone, the peripheral space of the temple is transformed into central performative site. It is only in the fourth day that the temple is purified and reopened for the visitors who throng to seek Kamakhya's blessing by touching the *yoni* stone. The festival culminates after the *angabastra* is cut into small pieces and distributed amongst the devotees as *prasad* (goddess' blessing).

This chapter analyses the menstruating body of Goddess Kamakhya. Ambubachi *mela* witnesses devotees from far and wide performing the pilgrimage to Kamakhya temple to

participate in the divine bleeding at the peak of monsoon when Baxumati or Mother Earth is also believed to menstruate and become fertile for the rest of the year. Needless to say this grand celebration is in stark contrast to the low-key affair when women menstruate every month.

This chapter begins with the pilgrimage to the festival space viewed as the menstrual landscape during Ambubachi, slowly traversing towards the menstrual body of Kamakhya that becomes the focal point of the festival, the quintessential pilgrim's destination. While doing so, the menstruating body is examined further that is metaphorically and physically isolated from the pilgrim's touch. This chapter will further observe how Ambubachi is observed in the Assamese Hindu households beyond the temple space known as *xaat*. As mentioned earlier, the Assamese Hindu society comprising of *bamuniya* and *sankariya* followers share several cultural values to a large extent and observe some set of common rituals with slight variations, however there are some prominent differences that is maintained and Ambubachi is one of them. This is also one crucial event which profoundly marks the two distinct sects despite sharing several religio-cultural practices. Menstrual restrictions within the domestic spaces are strictly observed by the entire Assamese Hindu community, whereas Ambubachi or *xaat* rituals are performed by *bamuniya* only. *Xaat* displays a 'fundamental ritual difference' between the *bamuniya* and *sankariya* section of Assamese Hindu community. Ambubachi may have evolved as an agricultural festival, but due to its association with Kamakhya, a tantric goddess, it is solely within the domain of *bamuniya* Devi worshippers.

Several enquiries that shape this chapter are as follows: Why does the annual pilgrimage to the menstrual landscape despite the closed doors become so crucial in the context of Ambubachi? What does the secluded and untouchable Kamakhya tell us about the social imagining towards menstruating bodies that is prevalent in the Assamese Hindu community? Can one look at Kamakhya's ritual menstrual blood as stigma-ridden or does it represent entirely different signification in the goddess' *sakti* that her otherwise non-menstruating body is believed to emit? Does Kamakhya's menstruation transgress the ritual purity and establishes itself as an alternate embodied state that is completely distanced from her 'ideal' identity? As the community prepares for the period of menstrual spell, it becomes crucial to discuss what are the restrictions, who observes it and how? What is the significance of performative elements like the colour-coded striking 'redness' of Ambubachi that spectaclizes the festival space with deep-rooted menstrual

meanings? How does the distribution of sacred menstrual remnants or *angabastra* alter the concept of impure menstrual bodies or is it a privileged status accorded to goddess alone? How much has Kamakhya gained prominence and whether the *xaat* observance a direct influence of agricultural society and the significance of Mother Earth? Keeping in mind the gradual transformation of Ambubachi into a major 'spiritual touristic' event, is Ambubachi *mela* still an amalgam of Ambubachi and *mela* or has it been just reduced to a staged *mela* only, invisiblizing the divine menstruation from the tourist gaze?

Pilgrimage to the menstrual holyscape

An Ambubachi myth is often cited from texts like Kalika Purana (KP) and Yogini Tantra (YT), the two tantric texts often credited with the narrative of Kamakhya as the menstruating goddess. The Ambubachi narrative goes like this:

> Varaharupi (the boar avatar of Vishnu) plunged into the ocean to rescue the menstruating Prithvi or Baxumati (the Earth) from the clutches of Hiranya. After he rescues her, they engross themselves in a sexual union following which a son is born. Prithvi places the new born Naraka on a sacrificial ground with his head resting on a human skull (*nara*). Janaka, the king of Videha discovers the child and decides to raise him under the guidance of a nurse Katyayani. When Naraka grows up to a fine young man and excels the royal princes, he becomes a threat to the kingdom. Katyayani takes him to a pilgrimage on the pretext of meeting his putative father Vishnu, who then asks Naraka to surrender himself to Mother Goddess Kamakhya and declares Naraka the ruler of Pragjyotishpura, the modern-day Assam. Meanwhile, Naraka befriends a staunch Shaivite King Bana of Sonitpura and under his influence becomes indifferent to Kamakhya, eventually dying at the hands of his own father Vishnu (See Kakati, 2004; Goswami, 1996; Bhattacharyya, 2000; Urban, 2010; Sarma, 2017; Ramos, 2017).

The narrative of 'mythical', 'demon' king Naraka[45] can be viewed as an amalgam of several accounts, securely blended into the many waves of Hinduism. The present day Ambubachi celebration presumably takes the route of Prithvi's menstruation, Naraka's pilgrimage and finally culminating with the performance of Kamakhya's worship; equating Prithivi and Kamakhya as one menstrual body.

[45] Naraka is also cited as the first king who drove the Shiva-worshipping tribal dwellers called Kiratas, and Mlecchas who have been mentioned in Mahabharata.

The term ‘Ambu’ means water and ‘bachi’ implies ‘to expand’ (Sarma, 2017:99), ‘bachi’ may also mean a feminine suffix referring to the Devi’s turn of menstruation period (Mishra, 2004:51). A sense of fluidity and suggestively menstrual one is attached to the meaning of the festival in a synchronized natural phenomenon of the monsoon. Although the pilgrimage to the temple begins even before the festival period, the festival is kick started with Kamakhya’s menstruation symbolically displayed by the closing of the door which houses the *yoni*. The structure of the temple is such that it is divided into four interconnected-parts- *Vimana*, *Calanta*, *Pancharatna* and *Natamandira* each part supposedly built/rebuilt at different times (See Singh, 2011). The *Vimana* is where the *yoni* is erected and it remains closed during the period of Ambubachi. The rest of the sections are partially accessible for the visitors to offer their worship which eventually becomes the pilgrims’ destination.

The prominence of Kamakhya as one of the major pilgrimage sites is more like an addendum to several other Indian sacred sites preceding it. Surinder M Bhardwaj (1973) discusses the specific motives of ‘pilgrim flows’ behind performing pilgrimages–a commitment or vow for the solution of an afflicted problem and secondly, earning religious merit (p. 6). According to Bhardwaj, even though a place named Kamakhya is mentioned in the pilgrimage route between Vadava to Kurukshetra, but that is by no means the present day Kamakhya temple, besides the said temple is associated with Rudra and not a female deity. Moreover, referring to Matsya Purana, one of the oldest texts in Hinduism (possibly as late as third century BCE), Bhardwaj opines that the birth of Kamakhya as a *sakti pitha* finds no mention in the text.

Likewise, closer home, Banikanta Kakati also notes that early land grants never made any mention of Kamakhya or Devi. It was only in the grant of Vanamāla Deva (ninth century) and second grant of Indrapāla of eleventh century, a casual reference is made to Kāmeśvara-Mahāgaurī (2004: 11). It was only in the local text Kalika Purana (KP) (eleventh-twelfth century) and Kubjika Tantra (KbT) (similar period) and much later Yogini Tantra (YT) (sixteenth-seventeenth century) that Kamakhya was well established as *sakti pitha* containing the much-revered *yoni*. Kakati further mentions that Devi Bhagavata Purana (DBP) had initially left out Kamakhya as one of the places Sati’s body parts had fallen to and it was only in a supplementary list that Kamakhya was enlisted along with Guhya-Kali of Nepala and Nila-Saraswati of China (pp. 42-43). DBP later associated the Earth’s menstruation with that of Kamakhya in the form of Ambubachi and later

texts like KbT included Kamakhya's *angabastra* as the harbinger of blessing and fulfillment of desires (See Urban, 2019). The above discussions hint at Kamakhya temple's gradual evolution from an esoteric shrine to a central pilgrimage site.

Victor Turner (1973) stresses on the liminality of pilgrimage when a pilgrim spatially changes the structure of the communitas as the pilgrim leaves the 'localized, relatively stable, structured systems of social relations' (p. 192). Turner considers this obligatory 'movement' not only a break from the social life one leads, but which also comes with a sense of 'freedom, choice, volition, structurelessness' (p. 200) as a 'form of institutionalized or symbolic antistructure or metastructure' (p. 204). Turner conceptualizes pilgrimage as a 'liminal phenomenon' which requires one to physically move from one space to another. On the other hand, Agehananda Bharati (1967) clearly maintains a break away from the Turner's conventional or several other Western ideas of pilgrimage. Likewise, discussing the royal pilgrimage of Goddess Nandadevi in the Garhwal region of India, William S. Sax (1991), points out the need to leave behind Western understanding of pilgrimage like that of Turner, as he argues that the idea of 'the sacred' has its own history and is not universal (p. l4). Pilgrimage, might not just mean to move from place to another, it may also have mediational undertaking in contrast to the physical movement. Modelling pilgrimage in a tantric context, Bharati highlights the limit of conventional Western meaning of pilgrimage and writes,

> Indian terms for pilgrimage are often to be understood metaphorically, as when a yogi (a contemplative adept) 'performs' a 'pilgrimage' (yātrā) to the seven 'shrines' (tīrtha) by specific type of meditation, during which he stays put, physically. (p. 85)

Taking the above two understandings of pilgrimage it becomes significant to ideate what makes the pilgrimage to Ambubachi an exceptional phenomenology and what meaning does it convey to be 'physically present' in order to perform worship to Kamakhya.

It is believed that the pilgrimage remains incomplete without the performance of *parikrama* or *pradakshina* (circumambulation) of the temple. Consequently, pilgrimage and *parikrama* together is performed in order to complete the worship ritual of Ambubachi. During Ambubachi the government buses ply throughout the city for the convenience of the visitors. They are dropped at the gate located at the foothill of the Nilachal hill unlike other days when the buses are allowed

to go till the top. It is therefore required for the visitors to climb the hill on their own as smaller vehicles from this point are only reserved for aged, pregnant women and women with infants. Many aged devotees refuse to take the vehicles and prefer to walk the stretch chanting the name of Mother Kamakhya with their immediate communitas.

In several of my Kamakhya temple visits during Ambubachi, I have learned to closely observe the street that snakes its way to the temple swarming with pilgrims, besides offering a bird view of the Brahmaputra River and the city of Guwahati. As one begins to climb the stretch of over three kilometres of uphill route, one is always encountered with several paraphernalia leading to the temple. The entire road to the temple remains filled with sellers selling hand-made wares, stuffed toys, clay items, cosmetics, jewelleries, and posters from Bollywood movie posters of shirtless Salman Khan to tiger skin-clad god Shiva, and to the amorous union of Shiva-Parvati. Clearly, it is no longer a solitary hill as there has been increase in construction works and several lodge, hotels, restaurants are in the vicinity. As I walked endlessly looking at the displayed items every now and then, I kept searching for something that could relate me to the festival, to Ambubachi *mela* and finally to Kamakhya. Unfortunately, and equally ironic that I found none.[46]

A few days before the Ambubachi 2018, as I arrived at Guwahati airport and took a cab till the Kamakhya Railway station, I started a conversation with the cab driver and asked him to share his opinion about the Ambubachi *mela* that was about to begin soon. He animatedly spoke about the thousands of visitors that this festival pulls annually and how the stretch of road from the main road till the temple seems like an easy trek during this time. He maintained that this feeling of ease was due to this sense of community going together in an otherwise stiff climb for people who are not used to it. I visited Guwahati again during the Ambubachi *mela* the same year. There were free bus services available outside the station which would ferry visitors from the station till the Kamakhya main gate from where people would walk uphill for another half an hour to reach the main temple complex. I was told that the bus would take me to '*mandir*' gate as '*mandir*' was synonymous to Kamakhya temple alone during the time of the festival, very much like *Maa* being equated to Kamakhya. As I walked towards the temple after the bus ride, I became a part of a large

[46] The presence of Kamakhya or any ritual object related to the goddess either closely or remotely is not easily found or one can say has been dissolved in the celebration of the very goddess. Like, even the posters of the festival do not prominently mention Kamakhya or her menstruation which is successfully masqueraded as 'blessing' only.

crowd who were walking alongside. I was reminded of the driver's 'divine experience' when the walk seemed easy in spite of being an uphill one amidst scorching sun and sweat.

As I became a part of the huge gathering, I observed that the students from 'scouts and guides' controlled the crowd with a stern display of discipline, there was a sense of power at their discretion which was passed on to them for those days. There was a conscious attempt to regiment the crowd and lead them to Kamakhya in a restrained manner. I felt myself pushed in this regimented space as I walked almost like a motorized entity. While I stood in the queue for the *parikrama* I overheard a conversation happening just behind me. There was a young guy telling his friend how he had become smarter with every Kamakhya visit. As a naïve guy from a small town, he would place coin on every offering box or shrines designated for worship. Nowadays, he restrains himself from doing that and instead spends money on puja accessories and heads to the inner sanctorum to offer his worship. While I was almost eavesdropping, my attention went towards a female *guru maa* (a female ascetic) who casually bent towards one of those stones and picked a handful of cash and sneaked away happily with a nonchalant air in her walk. I was almost speechless for a moment and missed out on the previous conversation that was taking place behind me. Another fellow standing right before me spoke to one of the scouts to know why there was not much crowd on the first door situated on the other side of the temple. While the scout preferred to ditch the question and kept on minding the queue, another person promptly replied in a whispering tone that was reserved for people 'ready to pay'. He even suggested that rather than paying it was better to keep standing in the queue as it is the *bhakti* (devotion) of the pilgrim that matters in the end while the other fellow nodded in agreement.

During the 2019 Ambubachi, I encountered several old pilgrims collapsing on the streets due to the unexceptional heat at an unusually monsoon period (global warming I say). One thing to be noticed here is they meditate and at the same time they 'physically move' towards the waiting mother. This reminds me Nalinibala Devi's account of difficult to access Kamakhya temple during the colonial period when pilgrims especially old women would pray for strength to climb the hill thus:

Ma, Ma Jagot jononi, shakti daini, shakti diya Ma

> Mother, Mother, the source of all knowledge and power, give me strength, mother. (Deka, 2013:77)

At this point, the two concepts of pilgrimage discussed above merge that lends an altered meaning of how without meditation to the deity even a physical movement or presence may remain unfinished and wanting. The spatial and metaphorical dualism prepares the pilgrim's body to express the devotion by invoking the deity within themselves, even before reaching the assigned space to perform the worship. The preparation to worship the bleeding goddess facilitates the pilgrim to participate in the phenomenon of 'communal menstruation' that will eventually lead to a fruitful year ahead.

Bharati (1965) points out performing pilgrimage in the Indian context germinates from a tantric understanding of devotion, acted out through corollaries like *pradakshina*, a 'canonical' (p. 85) tantric act of circulating one's focus of devotion. However, Bharati notes that the 'painful prostrations, self-humiliations, and disciplines bordering on the masochistic' are not necessarily tantric though (Ibid.). Bharati categorizes the pilgrimage destinations in three sections what he calls the topography of Indian sanctuary according to all India importance, local relevance and sectarian corpus of sacerdotal literature (1967: 100). Kamakhya falls in the third group since it is one of the very few sites where the method of worship is still tantric in nature which was later corroborated by Mohit Chandra Sarma, the *Bor doloi* of Kamakhya temple (chief priest) in a personal interview. Moreover, Bharati is also quick to mention that the tantric quality of pilgrimage and *pradakshina* is not necessarily known to the laity who visits the shrines or even the priests sometimes.

The focus of devotion or the centre of pilgrimage at Kamakhya is the *sakti* or *yoni pitha* of Kamakhya and during Ambubachi the menstrual *yoni pitha* becomes the performative site constructing the auspicious meaning of pilgrimage and *parikrama* performed by the pilgrims. At this juncture, it is also crucial to note that the evolution of Kamakhya's *yoni pitha* highlights the mythical and historical route taken to establish itself as a popular pilgrim's destination. A popular perception voiced out by several pilgrims visiting Ambubachi is well summarized by a pilgrim named Sachinta Sarma whom I met at the temple courtyard. He has been performing pilgrimage to Kamakhya temple for many years and identified himself as a true Devi worshipper. He never misses to make this special pilgrimage during Ambubachi and performs *parikrama* without fail as

it has the power of wish-fulfillment. Pointing towards many visitors performing *parikrama*, he informed me thus, "They are performing *jap* (meditation) while doing *parikrama*. They come with their wishes". Shaking his head sideways, he added, "No matter what temple one visits, until and unless one does not worship at Kamrup Kamakhya, *eku xiddhi nohoi* (everything remains unfulfilled)" (2019). The concept of pilgrimage here is much more concentrated and filtered where Kamakhya seems to emerge as the most powerful *sakti* seat, a menstrual holyscape in the topography of mother deities, the one who menstruates and has the capacity to mother children. The power of creation is thus transferred from Mother Earth to Kamakhya in the social imagery. It also points out to the fact that Kamakhya, as a result of popular belief may be present in every household as mentioned in one of the chapters earlier, but one needs to embark upon a spiritual journey in order to actually worship her. Circumambulating the temple is equivalent to taking a tour of the universe as the menstruating *yoni* becomes the epicenter of the universe with its power enveloped under a red cloth sequestered in the dark cave.

The evolution of Kamakhya's menstruating *yoni* arranged a narrative of holyscape around it as it became a centre of attraction for large numbers of pilgrims who performed *parikrama* around the veiled *yoni* during the most auspicious 'period' of the year. The divine menstruation became the sole reason for the heavy flow of pilgrims paralleled with the heavy flow of monsoon and that of Kamakhya's menstrual flow making all the more sense of Ambubachi's literal meaning. The enormous presence of nature effortlessly defines not only the virtuosity of Kamakhya's presence, but her menstruation within closed doors.

Unperforming *sparxan*

The closed door symbolizes Kamakhya's menstruating body as unapproachable for performing *sparxan*. The ceremony begins when the *athporia* and *duari*[47] covers the *yoni pitha* with the *angabastra* supplied by the Temple Trust Board (Mishra, 2004:52). They are allowed to stay at the adjacent *Calanta* section just outside the closed door to make sure that the three lamps are lit throughout the whole period of Ambubachi. As a symbol of hiatus, Ambubachi also means the usual *Maa'r bhoga* (cooked food for the Mother Goddess) is not offered to the goddess. Instead,

[47] *Athporia* is the first person to enter the *garba griha* for *nitya puja* every morning in order to clean the site for the priest to perform the first worship. *Duari* is the door keeper.

the uncooked food meant for the goddess is offered to the *gayana* for his 'nightlong service of singing songs in praise of the deity' (Ibid.). The hiatus is equally observed for other deties at the temple complex as they are also believed to be under the spell of the menstrual *suwa*. As Kamakhya menstruates along with the Mother Earth, everyone is virtually and ritually smeared with the blood of the goddess, in the form of a communal *suwa* at a socio-ritually charged site.

Diana Eck's (1998) study of *darsan* as the conventional mode of worship may be viewed as an extension of art historian Stella Kramrisch's work on temple pilgrimage and ritual worship. Likewise, Jan Gonda (1969) discusses the power of the eye and the possibilities of its gaze and the contact that appears from the combination of looking and touching (p. 4, 19). Both Kramrisch and Gonda points out that 'seeing is a kind of touching' in the Indian context. Kramrisch explains that a pilgrimage to a temple is undertaken for the purpose of looking at it (*darsana*) with the sight of knowledge or methods of cognizing truth (p. 8). However, Kamakhya worship reveals a complete subversion of the above dominant form of ritual. In fact, the pilgrimage to Kamakhya temple, especially during Ambubachi renders another meaning to the *sparxan* ritual as well. Usually, through touching the *yoni* one connects and sees the goddess, whereas during Ambubachi even without touching and seeing the pilgrim connects with the goddess even more. What is poignant in the inclusion of *angabastra* within the realm of Kamakhya worship is how this tiny piece of cloth transforms the dialectics of *darxan-sparxan* phenomenon.

The Naraka episode exposits the menstrual flow of Prithvi and eventually Kamakhya, but at the same time it also expresses the elemental idea of impurity as a powerful tool of disruption and non-performance–a hiatus to everydayness. Ambubachi characterizes a break, a sort of pause per se in order to establish another periodical event that is seamlessly exhibited through the annual divine menstruation. Consequently, Ambubachi does not fail to display the power that a bleeding body possesses to bring everything to a halt, in order to resume another cycle. I view Ambubachi as a ritual vacuum which houses two different energies– One that of the still and veiled *yoni* where no ritual movement takes place for three days and remains untouched, yet powerful absent presence. The other is the absolute, spontanoeus ritual presence and mobilization of bodies that navigate outside the closed door to worship the still and silent goddess. These two energies combine together to reach a ritualized crescendo that materializes itself in the energy passed on to the devotees. I intend to discuss the first kind of energy which lends meaning to the existence of

the second kind. The private menstruating impure energy of the goddess behind the closed door is transformed into a public spectacle of divine blessing.

The impurity translates its power over purity and hence terrifying. The power of impure emerges from its very ability to transform anything into impure effortlessly as 'something that is veiled or asleep can be seen as dirty or impure' (Lussana, 2015:77), while to become pure or to be awakened needs effort. The inauspicious and impure phenomenon in the non-tantric world is the most auspicious in the tantric world as the power of impurity transcends the boundaries of purity. The impure yet powerful manifestation of Ambubachi reveals itself in several manner–the non-tantric belief that impurity like menstrual blood needs to be isolated and the tantric philosophy that menstrual blood is powerful and the source of everything that is auspicious because it is impure. These two parallel schools of thought undeniably acknowledge a sole common belief that the menstrual blood is a powerful tool, empowered in itself to contaminate purity and hence threatening. The element of being impure, powerful and auspicious at the same time is translated into a knowledge and thereby faith which allows the devotees to seek goddess' blessing, but from a distance through unperforming *sparxan*. Even the unawakened goddess is powerful during her menstruation. The very act of invoking the deity with *sparxan* is prohibited so that the goddess' *sakti* is contained and allowed to cool down for the devotees to receive it.

The phenomenon of touching the deity is crucial as it leads to an inner satisfaction that the prayers have been heard. The void left by absence of *sparxan* inside is replaced by an unusual increase in the phsyical act of 'touching divinity' outside, an act which is doubly sensorial and spiritually satisfying for the worshippers. Hence, unperforming *sparxan* inside the temple leads one to fill that vacuum in the temple courtyard in every manner possible (Fig. 11). I look at this touching divinity as a pure act of ritual attempt to see Kamakhya through fingers. During Ambubachi 2018, a commotion in one section of the temple courtyard drew my attention. After climbing a few steps to get a better view I came across this group of people who were trying to touch a patch of mud mixed with some herbs, rice and flower placed right on the top of the door. As I asked people around, nobody seemed to know as they were all trying very hard to follow each other. Everyone tried to touch the patch especially those whose hands were struggling to touch it came up with all sorts of strategies which even included climbing on other people. There was sudden mad rush to touch it and it left me wondering how an act of mirroring constructs the rituals

finally inventing a new tradition with all mirrored acts and practices. Moreover, not to mention the undeniably visible desperate ritual attempt to search for the goddess' traces through touch, the only true accepted mode of worshipping her.

Another icon that visitors perform *sparxan* without fail is the sculpture of a semi-nude woman's figure exposing her breasts in a squatting position about to give birth in a Lajja Gauri-like posture. This icon is kept covered with a red cloth for the rest of the year in contrast to the *yoni* stone which remains open for the rest of the year. It implicates a strong resonance of maternal/ menstrual bodies where the fertility-inspired goddess like Lajja Gauri and menstruating goddess like Kamakhya cannot be accommodated and staged in the same space be it the physical, mental or spiritual. One has to be concealed for the other to remain in the display; one's absence /concealment produces space for the other's presence and manifestation. It is not exactly a contestation of sorts per se, but an arrangement to contain the goddesses and retain their powerful status in the socio-ritual arena.

The celebration of Ambubachi is not just a glorification of menstruation and creation, but also an association of a polluting act of sexual intercourse with a menstruating woman, giving an unusual take on the very concept of holyscape. Two aspects which strongly emerges from this celebration is how menstruation usually considered a violation of sacredness is reversed as Kamakhya's ability to menstruate sends her to rest, while the visitors are awakened from their mundane slumber. Secondly, the inability to touch the *yoni* results in the touching of each and every remnant of her body that is associated with the deity no matter how remotely it is. Visitors try to touch and bow to each and every icon displayed on the exterior wall of the temple with a prayer that one of these icons may invoke the goddess placed in isolation and their desires be fulfilled. The inability to touch the *yoni* transforms in a higher level of *sparxan* of the icons on the temple courtyard, almost looks like every devotee is trying to fill the lacunae left by the *yoni*'s untouch. The temporary separation from the *sparxan* gives another reason to rejuvenate and recycle one's life to participate in the awakening of the deity with a renewed vigour.

However, sexual intercourse with a menstruating woman is not without consequence as is firmly established by Naraka's death who had to die at the hands of his own father. It serves as a reminder that it is after all a polluting act challenging the sacredness of procreation. Ambubachi,

as an idea, carefully treads on the edge of balancing the belief systems in such a manner that the 'freedom' of celebration is allowed, but within the confined walls of cultural taboos. As mentioned earlier in Chapter I, menstruating women are secluded and any kind of physical communication is forbidden. Hence, sexual intercourse during menstruation is undoubtedly a sinful polluted act. Hugh Urban (2010) refers to classical Indian law books like Gautama Dharma Sutra and Vasistha Dharma Sutra which condemns the highly polluting act which requires arduous penance to purify (p. 116). Hence, the negative outcomes like the death of cursed king Naraka was bound to happen (Ibid.). Or, P. E. Rosati (2017) points out that the *asura* traits of Naraka was believed to exist only because of the contact of menstrual blood during the sexual union, despite the divine powers of Prithvi and Visnu (p. 4).

On the other hand, interestingly, Sarma, the *Bor doloi* of Kamakhya temple not only stated the fundamental difference between women and Kamakhya, but also between Prithvi and Kamakhya's menstruation and stressed on the purity of Kamakhya's menstruation. He asserted,

> Although Prithvi or Baxumati and Kamakhya menstruate almost around the same time, but there is a difference in terms of Ambubachi's *pabriti* and *nibriti* (commencement and culmination). According to our *panjika* (calendar) we consider eight waking hours as one day which means twenty four hours in total that is equal to three days, but Ambubachi (Prithvi's menstruation) may last for four days. In case of Kamakhya, the *angabastra* or *raktabastra* signifies holy and pure and a blessing. This duration is considered as the holiest of the holy period since there is a belief that all the deites and the *sayasi*s (holy men) arrive here. There is no impurity as such. (2019)

It certainly distances itself from the 'polluting act' of Prithvi's sexual intercourse, even though tantric rituals do consider menstruation as the ideal moment. Moreover, the above explanation further dismisses the 'theory of impurity' and the reason provided for closed door is to not disturb her during her menstrual period and let her regather power in order to bless her children after the door reopens. Kamakhya's bleeding is seen as a buffering period after which the Mother Goddess and the Mother Earth will abundantly bless her children for the entire year. All who participate in Ambubachi at Kamakhya temple are not necessarily tantric worshippers. Many devotees pay visit due to their allegiance to Pritihvi or Baxumati and there is a greater chance that they may follow the non-tantric form of worship sans animal sacrifice. Their explanation of closed door may be linked to their own cultural understanding of menstrual seclusion. Consequently, Ambubachi

provides the space, the temple and a veiled icon to direct their worship towards. As a result, the celebration of Ambubachi at Kamakhya elevates the faith process by substantiating the impure danger of menstruation on one hand, merged with the power of the auspicious purity on the other. Ambubachi successfully creates the 'need for isolation' of Kamkhya, while simultaneously producing a site for tantric and non-tantric form of worship by including Prithvi's menstruation.

Aura, Ambience and Feminized Kamakhya

Walter Benjamin (2008) states aura is 'a strange tissue of space and time: the unique apparition of a distance, however near it may be' (p. 23). Likewise, the aura of Kamakhya is magnified due to one's inaccessibility to the *yoni*. As the door to the *manobhava griha* remains closed, the aura of the menstruating goddess is accessed through the presence of objects and events happening outside of it. Hence, it is impossible to miss several activities taking place in the temple courtyard turning it into a central performative site for the festival period. The air in the courtyard gets to you as it attempts to contain so many aspects into its fold other than people's presence. In one corner of the open air where photography of any kind is prohibited, goats are sacrificed where a couple of temple members decapitate the goats in an indifferent and automated manner swinging their blades as fast as they can since the number of sacrificial goats keep increasing as the day passes. While, in the other corner, people are occupied with ringing numerous metal hanging bells quite oblivious of sacrifices and flow of sacrificial blood on the other side. Several parts of the temple roof, window carvings and stone sculptures are filled with dead pigeons. I am not certain how they died whether they were offered as sacrifice or died due to any other reason. There was death in the air as it was being celebrated in several forms be it Kamakhya's menstrual blood, or sacrificed goats and pigeons. There was colour of vermillion in the air, there was an uninterrupted sound of cymbals, drums being played by numerous musicians in the air, where the cry of mercy from the bleating goats fainted away gradually displaying the aura of the deity and then there was constant announcements of missing people in the air.

Furthermore, the presence of monsoon rain undeniably magnifies the experience of Ambubachi for those who are at the right place at the right time. During one of my Ambubachi visits, a bright sunny day suddenly turned cloudy before appearing dark and shortly afterward I was engulfed in a heavy torrential rain. As I ran for shelter in one of the temple sheds, I encountered

a theatrical effect on the people as they lifted up their hands and cheered visibly thankful as the rain poured down heavily and the musicians who seemed fatigued a short while ago resumed their music with a renewed vigor and enthusiasm. The forceful overflowing of rain water washed away the blood from the *bali ghar* while it was still warm enhancing the aura and presence of the goddess with the arrival of rain. As I sat there waiting for the rain to stop several thoughts flowed in and the constant music barred me from thinking anymore. I decided to walk back to the Kamakhya Railway station as the last train was leaving in an hour. On my way back, I came across priests walking briskly with goat meat in transparent plastics gathered from the sacrificial site. Well, it occurred to me that the blood might be for the mother, but her children definitely had a dinner to prepare.

The aura of the festival reflects the aura of Kamakhya and her presence in the temple space. It is enmeshed with several spaces occupied with performing moving bodies at one and the same time and it is easily possible to miss something or the other. Beginning with the white-smeared skull holding *aghori baba*s[48] or the entranced *Guru Ma*s who occasionally pose for photographers, or a *baba* deeply engrossed in his smart phone while another devotee trying to click a selfie with him, middle-aged women breaking into an impromptu dance to the drum beats that envelops the temple premises, group of chanting sadhus busy in a ritual act with the neon light rays shooting out of the temple premises, or tantriks transforming from one unthinkable posture to another, semi-clad to nude chillum-smoking *aghori*s sharing philosophy of tantra with each other sipping water from mineral water bottles distributed by some NGO, women singing *naam* accompanied with soft clapping and some musical instruments in a space assigned for them, tourist trying to capture the perfect shot of *aghori*s with the biggest dread-locked hair, the abundant knick-knack shops selling everything from magic beads, bangles to chillum pots, and increasing hordes of tired visitors walking up the Nilachal hill enter the premises with folded hands and unfulfilled wishes.

As part of her research, Irawati Karve (1962) describes a first-hand experience of a several days long pilgrimage devoted to Saint Dnyaneshwar from Alandi in the Poona district to Pandharpur in the Sholapur district of Indian state of Maharashtra. She advanced towards the pilgrims' destination by assimilating with the large number of people divided across castes in order

[48] *Aghori baba* is a male ascetic while *Guru Ma* is a female ascetic who have given up families to practice Shaivism and are often linked to post-mortem rituals.

to “visit” the “god” (p. 13). A pilgrimage or a ritual festival, no doubt, sets the aura, context and vocabulary to perceive the deity as well as solidify the relationship between the deity and the devotee or pilgrim. Similar to Kamakhya being referred to as *Maa* and temple as the only *mandir* during Ambubachi, Karve notes how one gets used to the vocabulary during the course of the pilgrimage like *Dev* for Saint Dnyaneshwar or *mauli* for mother. Besides carrying the image of the deity, the pilgrimage was a planned route stopping at designated places to rest and prepare food for the pilgrims and most importantly the *Dev*.

As Karve oscillates between two camps of pilgrims consisting of Brahmins and the Marathas, she observes the division of labour in both the camps seemed completely different as the women in the former did all the chores and ate only once the men finished their meal, while the Maratha camp had work assigned for everyone and they usually ate together. Besides that, Karve highlights the ‘extreme humanizing of God, of imagining him to have qualities and a form identical with man’ (p. 17). The visiting hours were closed for some time to allow the deity to have food with a screen around the image in order to ‘prevent the evil eye of the onlookers affecting Him’ (Ibid.). The aura of the festival revolves around the humanness of the deity seamlessly merging with the pilgrims as he eats, sleeps and takes rest when tired.

Reza Aslan (2017) argues that in every religious tradition there exists a compulsion to humanize the divine in our own image (p. 2-3). Aslan provides an example of Henri Breuil’s twentieth century discovery of a cave painting that Breuil named ‘The Sorcerer’ in Les Trois-Fréres, Montesquieu Avantes, France, (dating in between c. 18,000 to 16,000 B.C.E). Aslan describes the painting as not a mere human-animal hybrid, but a collage of species merged to create a single, active, animated being (p. 20-21). The prime location of the painting in a chamber, high above other paintings clearly seemed like the ‘humanoid figure’ was meant for worship which opened the window to conceptualization of God through a humanized image. Referring to Breuil’s discovery Aslan writes,

> And so, after some consideration, he changed his mind about what he had discovered, concluding that his strange hypnagogic creature staring back at him from on high was not in fact a shaman. It was, as he wrote in his notebook, the earliest image ever found of God (p. 21).

Aslan opines that it is a human tendency to make the concept of God relatable by projecting human attributes, emotions and personalities along with our strength and weaknesses as well as reimaging the God in our own bodies, by making God us (p. 3); to fashion God in our image and not the other way around (p. 5). Aslan writes,

> To get to know the gods better, we will construct entire spiritual systems based on the only thing we can truly know: ourselves. The gods need food, because we need food; and so we will offer them sacrifices. The gods need shelter, because we need shelter; and so we will build them temples…They need mythic histories to ground them in our reality, formalized rituals so they can be experienced in our world…servants and attendants who can fulfill their wishes… (p. 52).

The observations of Karve and Aslan with regards to the attempt of humanizing gods may become instrumental to understand Ambubachi when *Maa* Kamakhya who is not only worshipped in the form of female genital, but that the *yoni* performs the role of bleeding like a woman would. The imaging here therefore is condensed as the female attribute is not just humanized as is the case with male gods, but it is further feminized as I would argue to image the goddess not just as a woman, but to make her bleed like a woman. The feminization, hence, is validated when the monsoon rain is equated with her menstruation, both feeding the lands with yearlong fruitfulness. As a matter of fact, there seems a strong tendency to crystallize the goddess as not just a woman who bleeds, but her bleeding is considered as that crucial moment of performance without which her identity remains unfulfilled and without her 'aura'. Her hallowed presence is desired, deified and acknowledged by humans only when revealed in the materiality of her bleeding *yoni* and the menstrually-soaked *angabastra*, without drifting from her expected feminized identity and choreographed role-playing.

Sacred 'menstrual remnants'

Erica Fisher-Lichte (2008) argues that the essence of performance remains in the present and its materiality may remind of the performance that occurred in the past, but may get lost once its over (p. 75). Hence, the material objects used in the performance like decorations, props, costumes become the traces of the performance. Of course, performance may be accessed digitally or through documents but the specific materiality of the performance disappears as no two performance will ever be the same again. Fisher-Lichte writes:

> The performance brings forth its materiality exclusively in the present and immediately destroys it again the moment it is created, setting in motion a continuous cycle of generating materiality. (p. 77)

Keeping the presentness of materiality in mind, material object like *angabastra* in the case of ritual performance of Ambubachi implies not only the annual menstruation of Kamakhya, but also the sacred menstrual remnants it leaves behind. On the fourth day of Ambubachi, the *Vimana* section of the temple is re-opened as Kamakhya's menstruation is believed to be concluded. The *athporia* removes the *angabastra* and unveils the *yoni pitha*. He prepares the *pitha* for the priest to perform *xuddhikaran* (purification ceremony) by performing *devir snan* (bathing the goddess) with a purifying water called *pancgavya*[49] and then with plain water (Mishra, 2004:52). The *pitha* is dressed up in a new red *saree* and offered fresh flowers followed by a general worship. As the *pitha* is ready for the *nitya puja*, the *athporia* leaves the *garbha griha* while the priest takes over to perform the *nitya puja* in tantric method by invoking the deity from her hiatus. Once the *nitya puja* concludes, the *angabastra* is taken to the main office of the temple and the door is re-opened for the devotees to touch the *yoni* and seek blessing. The menstrual cloth of Kamakhya is then distributed amongst the devotees as *mul axirbaad* (main blessing) in the form of *nirmali* or *nirmālya* (Bhattacharyya, 2000:99; Urban, 2019:7) or *prasad*, a sacred menstrual remnant of the deity's body.

A well-known tale related to Ambubachi that I grew up listening to is that the water of Brahmaputra river turns red as Kamakhya menstruates. The genesis of this tale is unknown just like the historical account of the festival itself, but explanations of the 'menstruation' abound. According to Kali Prasad Goswami (1996), during the rainy season when Ambubachi is celebrated, the flow of the water spring where the *yoni pitha* is located increases and assumes a reddish tingle (pp. 35-36) or the 'red hematite present in the soil mixes with water of the natural spring' (Baruah, 2015:59). Shivnath Barman (2019) also mentions about this phenomenon by explaining the blood-like redness of Kamakhya's menstruation in one of his personal handout he gave to me. He writes, "the water level (in the *pitha*) gets higher due to monsoon and the water gets mixed up with the *xendur* and *kumkum* (vermillion) that wets the red cloth and makes the redness more profound".

[49] *Pancagavya* refers to a mixture of five sacred elements obtained from a cow: milk, ghee, curd, cow dung and urine.

Even though KbT and DBP does mention about the menstruation of the presiding deity, but the celebration of Ambubachi at Kamakhya temple seems like a process of ritual evolution. For instance, the highly cited work like Kakati's Mother Goddess Kamakhya does not mention the festival, not even in a passing reference which raises curiousity when we look at the grand celebration that Ambubachi displays at the present time. Kakati refers to the deity's monthly menstruation twice (2004: 43) in the book, but Ambubachi celebration is nowhere cited. The popularity of Ambubachi in Assam probably began with Bengali pilgrims arriving at the temple as the concept of Ambubachi seems to have been strongly acquired from Bengal. Reference to Ambubachi at Bengal is found in several accounts that validates its observance from a long time (See Bhattacharyya, 1971; Dudley, 1978; Bagchi, 2010). It is only in later works in Assam that Ambubachi at Kamakhya is detailed or mentioned which may be due to the accessibility of Kamakhya in terms of transportation and it being more of a exclusive ritual which has become more inclusive in the recent years. The flow of tales around the mysterious red-water may have also played a crucial role in popularising the festival while the closing, re-opening of the temple and the temporary isolation of the diety was able to intensify interest amongst the potential devotees.

The distribution of *angabastra* plays a bigger role to immerse oneself in the materiality of the festival where the performance of divine menstruation leaves behind a remnant that the devotees could take back with them as *ansa* (part) of the goddess. Sati's remnant is glorified in Kamakhya's *yoni*, whereas Kamakhya's remnant lies in the *prasad* as the holy bloodprint for spiritual consumption. *Prasad* generally consists of sweets or fruits that can be consumed by devotees, but the unique nature of Ambubachi is that it strikes the right chord as spiritual consumption is prioritized. The durability of a piece of cloth is much more higher than that of an edible and easily decomposable food item. The presence of the goddess is felt as the *angabastra* can be tied to a body part of the devotee like a protective shield. The food item can be consumed and give a sense of 'being with the goddess' for a short while, but the constant touch of *angabastra* changes the meaning and utility of *prasad*.

In view of the sacerdotal hierarchy, Kamakhya *Bor doloi* Sarma informed the distribution of *angabastra* remains solely under the authority of *Bor Dolois*. After the door reopens the *angabastra* is lifted and brought to the office first. Earlier it used to be distributed by the *pujaris*

to their respective *jajman*s (clients) or other devotees. Due to several logistical and crowd management issues, the Temple Trust have come up with a system where the *panda*s and the *pujari*s are required to list down their names and the amount of cloth (not exceeding three metres) right before Ambubachi begins. Once the cloth pieces are given to them, they cut it into smaller pieces and distribute them as *prasad* to their *jajman*s. According to Sarma, the holiness of the *raktabastra* may be explained through the following passage:

> *Kamakhya bastra madaya, japa puja samasarit punya kamanga vidhi visatta nasam se* (2019)
>
> It can be roughly summarized as Kamakhya's cloth is so holy that no matter where one is, a piece of the *angabastra* will keep the devotees close to Mother Kamakhya and fulfill their desires.

Similarly, KbT also details the sacredness of the red cloth thus:

> *Kamakhya bastra madyai japa-pujanga samasaret/ Purnakarm labhe devi satyang satyang na sankhai*
>
> Meditating on Kamakhya's menstrual cloth will lead to liberation and fulfillment of desires if kept close (Devi, 2007:84; Urban, 2019:7).

Urban further states that the red cloth represents the nirmalya of the goddess' flow, sacred remains of an offering (2019: 7). Hence, the piece of *angabastra* is often worn by the devotees as amulet tied around their right arm (for male devotee) and left arm (for female) or hung around their necks tied to a thread (Devi, 2007:84). The beneficial quality of the cloth is highlighted along with the closeness it brings the devotee to the deity. The constant touch of the *angabastra* to the body assures the devotee of *matri rakxa* (mother's protection) as Sarma pointed it out to me; Mother's touch remains with you. Likewise, Bharati, explains the association of *pavitr-kr* (an idiom meaning 'to make pure') with *prasad*, by the act of touching or eating of food by a god or a sadhu in smrti-literature (1967: 93). In case of Ambubachi, it is a spiritual food in a physical form 'made pure' by the menstrual touch of Kamakhya. It is after all an event of 'ritual remembering and replenishment of her power' (2007: 71) as Brenda Dobia puts it. The spiritual dynamic that *angabastra* attempts to establish is the belief that one may complete the pilgrimage and go away from the temple, but the deity still stays with the devotee as two bodies merged in one. The touch

that begins with the *yoni*'s *sparxan* ends with the *yoni*'s menstrual remnant attached to the body of the devotee.

Discussion on a*ngabastra* or *raktabastra* which literally translates itself into blood-cloth in Sanskrit language is believed to be auspicious for Kamakhya and several other tantric deities. In Karel R. Van Kooij's (1972) translation of Kalika Purana, the significance of red colour is accentuated and is made an object of reverence. Kooij writes,

> As soon as one has seen women in red colour, a lion, a corpse, a red lotus…one should bow to the Mahāmāyā. Red is a favourite in the rites for worshipping the goddess. Women who have painted themselves red or wear red clothes reflect the figure of the Goddess. Lion, corpse and red lotus appear as Mahāmāyā's seats. (p. 91)

The red colour is derived from the symbolism of blood which is very much poignant throughout the festival be it the menstrual cloth, the blood oozing out of the *bali ghar* (sacrificial room) where animal sacrifice is constantly performed without fail or red-coloured outfits preferred by devotees. As sacrificial animals 'absorb' the sins and inauspiciousness (See Sax, 1991:99) in the case of goddess Nandadevi in Uttarakhand transforming into purity, so does the *angabastra* of Kamakhya 'absorbs' the menstrual impurity of the body and transforms it into purest of the pure blessing.

It is believed that the blood flowing from the animal sacrifice enhances the *sakti* of Kamakhya to bleed more in order to redden and purify the menstrual cloth. Animal sacrifice is a mandatory ritual on a daily basis at Kamakhya temple as no law has been able to ban the animal slaughter (See Urban, 2019). During Ambubachi it is increased to several folds as for many the *puja* seems to be lacking without spilling sacrificial blood in the glorification of Kamakhya.[50] In fact, there has been several gory accounts of human sacrifices at the temple premises (See Gait, 1906) which have been strongly refuted (See Barua, 1938) who stressed that the above conclusion was due to translation errors as it was not Kamakhya, but Chutia dynasty's tutelary goddess Tamresvari who relished on human sacrifices as recent as nineteenth century (See Kakati, 2004; Neog, 2008). However, a sacrifice of human effigies made out of flour or rice powder may still be performed in utter secrecy (Saikia, 2019).

[50] Although animal sacrifice is the norm of worshipping Kamakhya, but many offer vegetables and fruits like gourd, pumpkin, sugarcane instead of animals.

The discussion on human sacrifice resurfaced again a few days before Ambubachi 2019, when a headless woman's body along with a few *puja* items was discovered in the steps leading to Kamakhya temple. In a response to the alleged human sacrifice, Rajib Sarma, a member of Kamakhya Bordeuri *samaj* strongly denied any form of human sacrifice in the temple premises and insisted that it has never been a part of Ambubachi ritual practices (Ibid.). He strongly condemned the incident saying it was an act of criminal and the crime scene was doctored to pass the murder off as a sacrifice. Another reason might be that female of birds, animals and human are not eligible for a sacrifice in a tantric mode of worship (Neog, 2008:141). In the light of this, animal sacrifice or the accounts of alleged human sacrifice practice in the temple keeps revisiting especially at a period when the sacrificial blood reddens the temple giving back *sakti* to the deity, who transmutes the blood-print of a *sakti* into her *angabastra*.

While the spiritual and ritual transaction takes place between the devotee and deity, another '*pavitr-kr prasad*' moment that I witnessed during my several trips to Ambubachi is a notable presence of transgender community in the temple premises specifically during the festival. Seated cross-legged on the first row of the open-air steps of the temple courtyard, Priyanka (Fig. 12), a visibly tall woman with a husky, but low voice happily obliged to take selfies with the devotees. She was decked in red from top to toe with a bright *sindoor* (vermillion) on her forehead, a red *saree*, completed with red-stoned jewellery and red *alta* (decorative paste) on her hands and feet. All the devotees came towards her after performing *parikrama*, bowed to her, placed ten-rupee note on her hand and took a selfie before leaving. As I watched her from a distance, I overheard several conversations around me describing how radiant she looked (which she did) and how a transgender's blessing is an added bonus to the deity's blessing. She did accept the offerings the devotees presented her with, but one thing which caught my attention was she did not just bless them by touching their head. Every time she received an offering, she pulled out a coin from her purse, gently placed it in between her lips, bit it for a second and touched the already moist coin with the tip of her tongue before giving it back to the devotees.

In my view, a transaction was completed; she made the coin pure leaving the remnant of her 'self' in the coin. She informed me that she travels to Guwahati for Ambubachi every year from Mumbai as she finds the temple premises during the festival an 'inclusive' space where she is revered and she likes to give it back to the people (2019). The temple premise has been

'inclusive' in the sense that everyone irrespective of caste, creed, religion and gender can visit the temple all the year round as informed by the Temple Trust, which has been the case in several other temple sites (See Bharati, 1967:91), barring temple like Sabarimala where women of certain age group are still not allowed. However, when Priyanka mentioned that she did not feel discriminated, I was quickly reminded of how people especially men run away from transgenders especially in trains, buses, railway stations, and otherwise public spaces when they come asking for alms. Their biggest fear and closeted embarrassment are that the transgender would lift up their *saree* and display their genital organs in the presence of other people. Not to mention the reversal déjà vu I perceived when I place that image parallel to Kamakhya's otherwise displayed *yoni* veiled during Ambubachi. Nevertheless, the space at Kamakhya was still public, but the transgender all of a sudden found a new respect and reverence from the same men who would avoid them otherwise. The site validated a divine identity to Priyanka and many others from her community for the brief period of Ambubachi, while her reverted coin turned into *prasad*; maybe someday it will return to her as she meets these devotees asking for alms in other non-divine spaces.

Although Peggy Phelan (1993) holds a similar view as Fisher-Lichte in terms of 'performance in the present', but differs as long as documentation of performance is concerned. Unlike Fisher-Lichte, Phelan asserts that performance cannot be documented and if performance participates in the circulation of representations of representations it no longer remains a performance (p. 146). Phelan points out the significance of 'difference' as two performances may look similar, but they can never be the same. Phelan states, "Performance in a strictly ontological sense is nonreproductive (p. 148). When viewed through this lens, it becomes relevant to explain the necessity of re-performance of Kamakhya's menstruation every year to exhibit a completely renewed and a different performance of sacred menstruation. As a wet stone crevice lifts up the spiritual fervor of the devotees immersed in divinity, the nature's performance of *rtu* (seasonal and menstrual cycle) is revealed on the divine bodies of Prithvi and Kamakhya. Once the private performance behind the closed door gets over and the menstrual blood slowly disappears from the divine bodies, what is left behind is the sanguine 'remnant' of the performance until the divine menstruation re-emerges the following year.

Menstrual spell of *Xaat*

Ambubachi is not just observed at the Kamakhya temple alone; its reverberations are often felt in the midst of *bamuniya* Assamese community. The duration of Ambubachi is believed to be the spell of *xaat* when the Mother Earth who is locally known as Baxumati, Dharitri or Prithvi menstruates and the duration becomes *suwa*. As a result, this period also known as *xaator suwa* symbolizes 'communal menstruation' giving rise to several restrictions which are to be religiously observed. However, the women folk of the community participate actively in the *xaat* ritual, while the men support it. *Xaat* represents a 'disruption of everydayness', a discontinuity to celebrate the continuation of life and fertility of agricultural community. Having said that, *xaat* also displays a 'fundamental ritual difference' between the *bamuniya* and *sankariya* section of Assamese Hindu community.

S. L. Baruah (1979-80) mentions as early as Ahom period (roughly from thirteenth to mid-nineteenth century), the main occupation amongst Assamese population (except for Brahmins) has remained agriculture. Baruah points out that there was a sense of dignity and respect attached to agricultural pursuits as a noble occupation and several Ahom kings earned their living through it before becoming kings (p. 50). Baruah writes, "A newly enthroned Ahom monarch had to perform ceremony of sacrificial ploughing at the time of his coronation" (Ibid.). Apart from crop farming, Baruah suggests that flower plantation was another aspect close to Assamese people as evidenced from Kalika Purana which clearly states a long list of flowers dear to the goddesses Kamakhya and Tripura among other objects (p. 59).

Ironically, the birth and rule of Naraka (historical or mythic) is significant since it is Vishnu his putative father who advised him to never leave the worship of Kamakhya and it is the Vishnu/Krishna worshippers in fifteenth century onwards who forbade the worship of any other deities especially the goddesses in the Neo Vaishnavite movement in Assam. Moreover, one of Sankardeva's Brahmin biographer had announced his coming as the fulfillment of Kalika Purana prophecy which mentioned the future advent of Vishnu in person [See Kakati's (2004: 78) reference to Rāmānanda Dvija]. Consequently, there is an absolute absence of female deities and Vedic rituals in *sankariya* faith system and as Ambubachi symbolizes the glorification of deities like Prithvi and Kamakhya, it does not find a place in any sort of ritual observance. As a result, despite Prithvi's annual menstruation being associated with agricultural society, no rituals are observed by the *sankariya*s during the period of Ambubachi even though menstrual restriction is

a part and parcel of Assamese Hindu everyday practice. Ambubachi is therefore, non-existent for one section, while for the other the spell of *xaat* is one of the most 'vigilant' period in the household as everyone is cautious to not disturb the menstruating Baxumati.

Ambubachi or *Baxumatir rajasthala* (Earth's menstruation) may hold a different meaning for those people who are closely associated with agricultural livelihood. Their own existence is owed to the bounty and fruitfulness of Earth. They pull their lives together heavily dependent on the fertility of soil for the entire year. Ambubachi, therefore, comes as an opportunity to be thankful to the Earth for what they have received as her blessing. Baxumati is prioritized in the agricultural society and Kamakhya is viewed as one of her forms, whereas the significance is reversed at Kamakhya temple. During Ambubachi there is a set of restrictions strictly followed and practiced by the *bamuniya*s. Baxumati's menstruating body is given ample amount of rest and during this period all sorts of digging, ploughing, and agricultural acts are stopped in totality. The restriction is not just limited to agricultural fields, but is extended to the households as the community prepares itself for the spell of *xaat*.

Due to its menstrual connotation, the duration of *xaat* has a sense of impurity attached to it and hence many restrictions often mirror the menstrual restrictions. The entire house is cleaned prior to *xaat* along with clothes, utensils, other objects that are generally used or kept in the open. There is a total separation from nature as no trees are cut, nor any fruits, flowers or even leaves are plucked. In fact, in several households cooking is prohibited since the earthen hearths are not lighted and only fruits or sprouts (lentils like gram and moong) are consumed. Women do not perform *saki diya* as offering prayer to any deity is incomplete without the earthen lamps. Women, especially widows observe *vrata* (religious fasting) and some even do not lay their feet on the ground and consume only fruits placed on a plate above the ground and water from an earthen vase filled before the commencement of *xaat* (Devi, 2007:83).

The menstrual spell of *xaat* reveals the amount of preparedness with which the devotees of Baxumati await her menstrual arrival, as well as one's thoughtfulness to minutest details that could cause disturbance to the deity. A sense of cautiousness prevails throughout the three days of the spell when they try everything to avoid drawing Baxumati's anger towards them. A few days before *suwa* begins, the women folk clean the house along with each and every household object that may or may not have come into physical contact. Pramila Devi (2019), whom I met a few days before *xaat* described the 'in advance preparation' that her natal village was going through: every

house had dug out a mound of mud at the backyard in order to store mud so that they could keep their houses clean with a fresh wipe of mud and cow dung mixture every day during *xaat* without having to dig the earth. On the other hand, clothes like wearables, bed spreads, pillow cases, curtains, table spreads and all kinds of usable are washed and locked either in a box or wardrobes. In villages due to non-availability of large boxes they tie the clothes in bed spreads and hang the bundle of clothes either from the ceiling or put them away in roof stores. The main objective of *xaat* is separation from nature by being in nature. Devi even mentioned since people cannot live without consuming *tamul-paan*, it is allowed during *xaat* as it is uncooked, but the catch is that they cannot pluck *tamul* or *paan* during *xaat* so they store them beforehand so that their daily, small pleasures of *tamul-paan* is not hindered in any manner. In fact, when cows are taken to graze in the fields, it is required to erect the *gorur khuti*[51] to tie them. A *tamulor dhokua* (areca nut tree's bark) is strategically placed in between the *khuti* and the earth in order to avoid any form of direct touch with the soil indicating no hurt is caused to *Baxumati*.

Moreover, the community *naam ghar* remains closed as no prayers are offered and there is a local saying *xaat logaar pora xaat bhongaar loke saki nidiye* (No *saki* is lit from the beginning till the end of *xaat*). However, *naam ghar* in *sankariya* locality remains open, where prayers are offered and *naam*s (devotional song) are sung as a form of daily praise. Devi's in-laws are *sankariya* and hence when she found out the *naam ghar* remained open during *xaat* she literally trembled and seeing her response, they categorically reminded her: *Tumaar bamuniyar logot amaar nimile nohoi* (Our rituals are not similar to your *bamuniya* ways) (2019). The 'ritual difference' revealed during *xaat* resurfaces in several other religious events propitiating goddesses like Durga puja, Manasa puja, Kali puja and so on since only *bamuniya*s observe them. However, *xaat* is distinguished and emerges solely because unlike other events it personifies as a 'disruption of daily performances', a hiatus of sorts through the closing of *naam ghar* which generally functions as a common element of worship for the two sects.

It is to be noted here that *xaat* is primarily women's ritual prerogative or structured in such a manner that women are the active participants within the domestic spaces, while men abhor from doing 'outside the house' tasks. Beginning with the meaning of *xaat* to its implication on the agricultural societies, the ritual demands women to play the primary role (rightly noted by Barman

[51] *Goru* means cow and *khuti* would simply means a pole made out of hard substance like bamboo, wood or iron in order to erect it firmly to the ground.

as well) as the observant of the divine menstrual period. Even amongst women, it is the widows who perform ritual roles of observing *vrata*s, consume uncooked food and water. While widows living in villages may have lenient *vrata* rules, however, widows living close to Kamakhya temple observe stricter rules. Before the *xaat* period begins, they collect water in an earthen vessel and drink from it until the spell is broken. Apart from that, they consume only uncooked food served on plates that is not placed on the ground (Devi, 2007:83). They meditate on the divine menstruation the whole time and visit the Kamakhya temple to offer their prayers once the spell is over.

Many women (married and widow) who visit the temple in large groups from nearby and far-flung villages and small towns during Ambubachi observe *vrata*, and could be seen distributing fruits like apple, mango[52] and cucumber amongst themselves. Their purpose is to offer prayers at the temple as the community undergoes impure spell and the best way to do that is to not let any adulterated elements inside their bodies in order to nurture organic thoughts alone. Observance of *vrata* is not limited to Assamese women only, even women from Bengali Hindu community perform the *vrata* rituals for Ambubachi specifically as they do not observe *xaat*. They depend on water, Glucon D, fruit juice and look visibly relieved and happy on the last day of Ambubachi as the period gets almost complete without any bad omen; their *vrata* is bound to bring good fortunes and abundant blessing for the entire year. *Xaat* or Ambubachi displays a woman-oriented event where the biological and the spiritual womanhood is deified, personified and executed by women.

Referring to works of Frédérique Apffel-Marglin and Purna Chandra Misra, Karthikeya C. Patel (1994) discusses Raja Parba in the Indian state of Orissa, a menstruation festival of Goddess locally known as Harchandi, Prithibi, Thakurani, Basudha, Draupadi (pp. 77-78). Patel opines that menstruation is a 'focal point' around which the conception of the Goddess and relationship are formed both for men and women (p. 79). Patel writes, "If the female body of women-earth-the Goddess is disturbed during her menstruation, what follows is discontinuity and possible annihilation" (p. 81). Similar to the observance of *xaat*, the earth is not disturbed and no agriculture-related tasks are performed as it is believed that doing so will hurt and cause her unhappiness; separation will ensure blessing from the goddess.

[52] Ambubachi is also known as Aamati due to the heavy consumption of *Aam* (mango) by fasting women (mentioned by Barman, 2019), complete with a feminine suffix *mati*.

A great care is taken during Ambubachi or *xaat* and Raja Parba clearly implying the consequence is a fertile earth for the several communities who depend entirely on agriculture. The post-menstruation period is the most fertile time for women and that logic reflects in the bodyscape of divine female entities like Kamakhya and Prithvi. The strategic timing of the festivals right at the peak of monsoon indicating the 'fertiling' process which will boost agriculture, a major occupation of many communities. Bhattacharyya (1971: 16) and Dudley (197: 114) opine post Ambubachi, the Mother Earth prepares herself for her 'fertilising work', Ambubachi being a pause before the fertile period begins. Likewise, the greenery and agricultural landscape of Assam and erstwhile neighbouring West Bengal is undeniable and so is the deification of fertile goddesses.

Xaat represents a ritualistic endeavor and a divine desire where each and every step is taken with caution, lest one hurts the Mother Earth. It germinates out of fear and respect for the deity, but at the same time it produces an awareness about one's own body and outside it. In the midst of a constant and continual existence, Ambubachi offers a much-needed respite to focus on one's ability to restrain and meditate on self and the other through the ritual of 'community cleansing'. Moreover, the association to the fertile nature of Earth and women therefore makes sense as there is a continuing attempt to maternalize the female body, the deities and human alike. While at the same time observances like *xaat* equally succeeds to not only ritualize the divine menstruation, but time and again isolate menstruating bodies in order to justify menstrual restriction through women, for women and by women.

Divine Menstruation and the Tourist Gaze

Parallel to the 'pilgrim flow' during Ambubachi, what has emerged strongly is the upsurge in the 'tourist flow' as the annual divine menstruation is gradually turning into a well-defined and well-arranged event. Well-defined, because along with the endorsement of spiritual tourism, there has been a conscious attempt to 'define the acceptable' boundary of the often messy and impurity-driven menstrual celebration. In short, Ambubachi has begun to flourish as a major tourist festival and the present government has not shied away to declare the main objective of festival is to ensure a great revenue-seeking spiritual touristic opportunity to attract tourists from all over the world. The theatricality of Ambubachi has taken a tremendous turn keeping in mind the 'spiritual' experience exhibited to the tourist, while at the same time not having to compromise with their

comfort. While trying to turn Ambubachi into a 'palatable spirituality', what is crucial to see is whether Ambubachi is still able to retain its core identity when several of its identifiable aspects are erased so as not to cause discomfort to the tourist gaze.

It is not a rare sight to see government-funded advertisement of Ambubachi in public spaces successfully 'clothing' the divine menstruation with quotes like 'Be with the Goddess', 'The Festival of Spirituality, Divinity', 'Taking you to the Supreme, 700 steps ahead', 'Divinity meets Mysticism, 460 steps ahead', 'Seek the Goddess and You shall find Her' and so on. Furthermore, the 'Vision and Mission' of Assam Tourism Development Corporation (ATDC) quotes thus: To promote Spiritual Tourism centering on Kamakhya Temple as India's most powerful Shakti-Peeth highlighting Ambubachi Mela (2017: 3). The idea of 'spiritual tourism' with respect to Ambubachi or Kamakhya for that matter did not find a sudden popularity with the present State and Central government in power. For instance, the facilities during the festival have been carried out even before the present government came to power, but the discernible manner in which the newly-appointed Chief Minister of Assam (2016-2021) Sarbananda Sonowal from the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) did put Kamakhya in the tourist map cannot be missed. Besides, there is a deliberate attempt to remain visible in public spaces like Kamakhya and make sure the visitors know that the government is behind all these development and facilities provided at the *mela*. The government's aspiration to be visible is palpable through its pet project of 'Swachh Bharat Abhiyan' (Clean India Mission) along with the welcome note at the temple gate. Ironically, the hoarding stood under a pile of trash that must have accumulated in the last three days.

The Sonowal-led Assam government after 2016 accelerated the momentum with the introduction of spiritual tourism, where Ambubachi became one of the most highlighted events in the 'Awesome Assam' tourism advertisement. A major shift is seen when it comes to government's push to 'beautify' the State's holyscapes in terms of endorsing and commercializing a sacred site. Therefore, in order to do that, certain appropriation is bound to happen especially in case of Kamakhya due to its organic tantric status. At the same time, it is also crucial to bring those changes slowly so as not to hurt the religious sentiments of the devotees. A balance as well as tropes are required to accommodate two groups of visitors (tourist and pilgrim) in the Ambubachi space due to which the tantric elements of the event is limited to the knowledge system of pilgrims only.

The irony of contemporary Ambubachi is the fact that the Assam Government prepares for the three-day mega event of *Maa*'s 'divine menstruation' without mentioning it. For instance, several hoardings display Shiva's images (Fig. 10) welcoming the visitors to 'Ambubachi Mahayug' as the 'gateway to heaven', while Kamakhya's menstruation is never mentioned anywhere. The powerful existence of menstruation remains clothed in the *angabastra* of grand tourism 'experience'. It becomes a silhouetted category in order to remind menstruation is not something to be discussed or advertised in large fonts in this case. To seek blessing of Kamakhya during Ambubachi is designed as one of the main 'itineraries' apart from several other 'things-to-do' like a cruise in Brahmaputra River, tour in tea gardens and clicking pictures of unbothered one-horned Rhinos in Kaziranga National Park and so on. The spirituality with which the pilgrims embark upon their pilgrimage at Ambubachi may not exist in the 'once in a lifetime' experience of the tourist. For a pilgrim, the pilgrimage to Ambubachi is an extension of everydayness, while for a tourist it may be just another 'bucket-list' that needs to be checked out. Subsequently, the preparation for Ambubachi may construct alternate reality, meaning and spiritual stimulus for the Government, the pilgrim and the tourist.

In May 2016, when Sonowal became the fourteenth Chief Minister of Assam it was a big milestone for the BJP-led central government as fifteen years long Congress rule in Assam led by the then Chief Minister Tarun Gogoi came to an expected end. As a result, the push for promoting the popular sacred sites as tourist destination in the world map resulted in the 'sanitization' process (as Urban, 2019 argues) strategically turning them into cleaned-up spaces of spiritual upliftment. Right after coming to power, in June 2016 the Assam government expressed a desire to prepare early in order to celebrate Ambubachi in the grandest manner possible. In the newly formed cabinet, Sonowal flagged off one hundred buses to ferry pilgrims, while the Minister of Health and Family Welfare, Finance, Education Himanta Biswa Sarma assured that the government would leave no stone unturned for the next Ambubachi celebration (Nath, 2016) in 2017. In 2016, the purpose of Ambubachi was still limited to pilgrims and their welfare throughout the duration of the festival. However, in the next year a complete shift was noticed as the Assam Government worked vigorously in order to build a tourist-inspiring image of Ambubachi to generate an ambitious record of visitors. In the past three years, the arrangement of Ambubachi is not just limited to the welfare of pilgrims within Assam, but the *mela* has undoubtedly become a huge crowd-puller due to the contribution of Assam Tourism in making Ambubachi a 'trending' event.

In 2017, the first full-fledged and well-prepared Ambubachi under the leadership of BJP government, Assam Tourism elevated the arrangement wholly centred on the festival. ATDC targeted the core areas like tourism and hospitality sector to emphasize on the tourist demand and gaze. It attempted to frame an identity of Ambubachi according to the demands of image shaped by tourist's experience and expectations. ATDC chairman Jayanta Malla Barua mentioned, "With the present government identifying tourism as a major focus area, the ATDC has for the first time organised high-cost accommodation for tourists" (Kashyap, 2017). This included packaged tours of the *mela* to attract high-end visitors, nine air-conditioned star-category tents and luxury cruise called Mahabahu and other separate cruises on the Brahmaputra River along with nine camps in and around Nilachal hill, with capacity of eighty thousand pilgrims (Ibid.; Chatterji, 2017). In order to reach out to potential tourist, Barua further added that all the required information would be shared through a 'fierce campaign' (The Sentinel, 2019) in social media, print media, TV, radio jingles, multiplexes, shrines like Vaishno Devi, Tirupati along with standing boards and digital screen advertisements in major airports of India as well as through special requests of popular TV personalities to visit Assam in monsoon (Ibid.; Chakravarty, 2018; India.com, 2017).

In a 2018 interview, Barua mentioned about the arrangement to spread awareness through bike rallies across the State and beyond, along with live telecast of Ambubachi Mela through eight channels apart from plans to build better roads, new ropeway from the thirty-five crore sanctioned by Oil India Limited (OIL) among other things (Chakravarty, 2018). The tourism budget for 2019 Ambubachi, according to Barua, was estimated for one crore thirty-six lakh and it was expected that the number of visitors would be over twenty-five lakhs, a whopping 20% increase than the previous year (The Sentinel, 2019; The Assam Tribune, 2019). In a bid to cater to several types of spectators, popular Bollywood singer Kailash Kher was invited to perform at the inauguration ceremony well attended by Sonowal, Union Minister of State for Tourism and Culture Prahlad Singh Patel and other political dignitaries displaying the tourism agenda as core to the popularization of Ambubachi as major tourist destination. Sonowal took this opportunity to welcome tourists and devotees from different parts of the country as well as the world (The Sentinel, 2019; Nath, 2019).

A major change of tradition that occurred in 2017 was the removal of *naga sadhu*s' procession which bestowed a unique identity to Ambubachi like that of Kumbh Mela in the Indian

State of Uttar Pradesh. *Naga sadhu*s is a group of Shaivite ascetics who abandon the mundane life and social attachments in order to lead a solitary life meditating on Shiva. They are easily recognized due to their choice of being naked as a symbol of detachment from the worldly pleasures, smearing their bodies with ashes, smoking marijuana, and opium in a bid to honor and identify with Shiva. At the time of Ambubachi, it was a common sight to see intoxicated as well as sober *naga sadhu*s revealing their bodies as a divine gesture. Every year before the decision was taken to scrap the procession, *naga sadhu*s would take out a procession within the temple complex outside the closed temple doors.

According to the Kamakhya *Bor doloi* Sarma, the matter was discussed and decided in a meeting with government representatives to allow *pradakshina*, but remove the tradition of *naga* procession (Kashyap, 2017). Barua further added that an 'exclusive' and 'separate zone' was arranged for the *naga sadhu*s in Abhayananda ashram in the western part of the temple to carry out their ritual practices (Ibid; Dutta, 2017). The reason provided was that the display of nudity and consumption of intoxicants seemed to have caused discomfort to other visitors as majority of them frequented the temple sober and fully-clothed. Pabindra Prasad Sarma, the Doloi of the temple was quoted saying, "This type of spiritualism will not be allowed at the main venue of the fair from this year. We have decided not to allow them to move around in the main venue" (Dutta, 2017). In a response to the decision taken on behalf of the *naga sadhu*s who were not consulted at all, Mahanta Shri Govinda Giri expressed displeasure and retorted back saying, "They (government) don't do anything for us and now we have to face restrictions here. *Naga sadhu*s are part of Kamakhya since ancient times. No one can stop us from doing what we do" (Ibid.). As it turned out, to the surprise of onlookers, the *naga* procession did happen in the temple complex, but for the first time all the *naga sadhu*s were in clothes (Mazumdar, 2017). They were forced to shed off their ascetic identity to become lay pilgrims in order to avoid being isolated from the majority. The attempt to curb cannabis problem, just like animal sacrifice may lead to hurting religious sentiments (Kashyap, 2015), but to quarantine *naga sadhu*s was an easier way out.

Pilgrimage is all about meditating on a deity, while absorbing all the hardships and completing the journey despite that. Comfort is antithesis to pilgrimage as the pilgrim leaves the comfort of home to brace the unknown and seek the goddess. The above-mentioned 'preparation' for Ambubachi categorically targets the tourism sector because most of the 'five stars'

arrangements as well as awareness campaign are made for a comfortable holistic trip and not a pilgrimage. According to a tantric initiate Rajiv Sarma and Vandana Sarma who are active with the temple preservation, the main essence of Ambubachi has been lost amidst tourist hordes, blatant consumerism and crass festival displays only to be replaced by tourist spectacle (Urban, 2019:15).

The tourist gaze entails that everything be aestheticized, 'clothed' in acceptability so as not to hurt the eye and experiential sensibilities. Urban argues that the several versions and interpretations of Ambubachi have created deep tensions due to the commercialization of *mela* and government's attempt to 'sanitise' the more controversial Tantric aspects (2019: 5). Despite that, Urban notes that Ambubachi remains a 'stubbornly untidy space that does not fit very neatly within the sanitised ideology of Hindutva' (p. 17). Hence, the bodies or discussion around bodies that may cause a sense of discomfort are veiled or sanitized in order to smooth-sail the holistic experience of the majority or that increases the revenue of the State. I see an ironic correlation here where the concept of menstruating body of the goddess and human produces a strikingly distinct approach with a common element of 'evasion and erasure': constant attempt to sanitize the figurative menstruation of Ambubachi by not mentioning it versus unsanitizing woman's menstruation through disguised terms. As a result, Ambubachi is revamped, packaged and marketed in the grab of 'oxymoronic' spiritual tourism; there is Ambubachi and then there is *mela* catering to two distinct consumers.

Conclusion

Ambubachi signifies a moment of pause amidst the bustled everydayness.[53] It symbolizes an act of stopping daily activities to bring the chaos of life to a standstill, almost a performance of 'void'.

[53] The celebration of Ambubachi festival during the COVID-19 pandemic period has turned into a low-key affair much to the disappointment of its pilgrims. Ambubachi of 2020 and the year after became crucial when not only the interior of Kamakhya temple which is usually devoid of movement during Ambubachi, but also the often charged-up peripheral space of the temple wore a deserted look due to the pandemic. Just before the 2020 Ambubachi the temple's official webpage Maa Kamakhya Devalaya took out a public notice to apprise that Ambubachi 2020 (22nd June to 26th June, 2020) will not take place as no other facilities would be provided to the devotees and visitors. Priests have maintained that it is for the first time that Ambubachi *mela* will be skipped altogether while the rituals will be performed by them as per traditions. The *Bor doloi* of the temple Mohit Sarma noted, "Even during the historic Assam agitation of the 1980s, we had this Mela although the turnout of devotes was very small" (Mazumdar, 2020).

This chapter highlighted several dots, when tied together, lends meaning to Ambubachi. Apart from stating the obvious paraphernalia around the festival, this chapter begins a discussion on how a short period is capable of bringing everything to a standstill. As H.S. Shivaprakash points out that the 'festival is the context of ritual' (2019), this chapter contextualizes the efficacy of the festival on the ritual invention and its performance. The ritual meaning attached to Ambubachi *mela* encapsulates communal belief through the conceptualization of the cosmic and human body, particularly menstruating body. The interrelatedness and ambiguity in terms of menstrual body imposes a humane touch to the godly body to make it more relatable. At the same time, Sati's dismemberment gives birth to corollary festival like Ambubachi associated with the feminized generative organ. Ambubachi is an apt example of how the territorialisation establishes a link between the organ, menstruation and feminized body, in all respect a step further to mirror the social in the religious sphere.

Ambubachi is, in fact, a bridge and a wall; it essentializes the female body, but at the same time separating the deity from the human. It is paradoxical to note how several visitors voiced out that for women and the goddess' bodies, menstruation is a common process and yet it can never be the same thing. Ambubachi, therefore symbolizes the 'awareness of difference' that these two kinds of female bodies share, the impure and pure state of menstrual fluid being the fundamental 'difference'. As the goddess' remnants perform the role to purify and prepare the Earth, it is pertinent to see if Ambubachi continues to remain an inclusive space as it claims to be or is turned from a *sakti pitha* to a sight-seeing spectacle, while the menstrual blood parches out tacitly without leaving a remnant.

Chapter IV

Embodied Selves in *Tuloni Biya*

Introduction

Menarche ceremony is not uncommon in India as several Hindu communities across caste (especially Brahmin) observe it. The coming-of-age event is celebrated with much pomp and splendour in Eastern and Southern India as an important turning point in a girl's life (See Frazer 1913; Ehrenfels 1941; Bhattacharyya, N. N. 1980). In the North-east Indian state of Assam, amongst the patrilineal and patrilocal Assamese Hindu community, the menarche ritual is performed and certain restrictions are observed by the initiate during the seven-day event. This chapter narrows down from the grand celebration of Assam's Ambubachi *mela* (Kamakhya's annual menstruation) spread across communities discussed in the previous chapter to a community-based menarcheal ritual *tuloni biya* amongst the Assamese Hindu women, especially the non-Brahmin castes. As Kamakhya is venerated for her menstrual prowess and fecundity, similarly Assamese Hindu community displays relief and joy when pre-pubescent girls go through the menarcheal passage transforming into 'fertile' women.

Tuloni meaning a higher status, *shanti* denotes the relief of the parents to know that their daughter is capable of becoming a mother and *biya* means marriage (Das, 2014:49). It demonstrates the post-menarche ritual where the menarcheal girl is symbolically married either to a plantain tree (symbolic-husband) or without a husband. It is performed in order to mark the transition of the girl from a child to a woman. *Tuloni biya* is locally referred to as second marriage (in English) by many people even if they are not fluent in English. The reason behind this is the social history of child marriage in Assam like most of India. Earlier, the girl used to get married as a child or a marriage ritual was performed before her menarche which was known as *aag biya* (first marriage), while the *paas biya* (second marriage) would take place post-menarche (present day *tuloni biya*). However, since child marriage is no longer practised in Assam, the *aag biya* does not exist and in its lieu *paas biya* has become the *tuloni biya* or *xoru biya* (small marriage), while the main marriage with a human groom is known as *bor biya* or *daangor biya* (big marriage).

This chapter is an attempt to discuss the rites of passage that a girl embarks upon to transform into a 'woman' while at the same time abide by the societal standard of womanhood. With the initiation of *tuloni biya,* the chapter explores, how the socio-cultural sphere ritually demonstrates the process of 'making woman' in a nuanced and intricate manner. While doing so, it intends to focus on the certain signifiers and performative elements that facilitates the transformation of the girl's status, beginning in the ritual space eventually leading to her role-performing in the socio-cultural arena. It is pertinent to investigate the menarcheal body that bleeds for the first time and how the bleeding is ritually isolated from general bleeding? Secondly, menstrual bleeding defines the rituals that is performed by the initiate for the first time like seclusion, dietary restriction and feminine expectation thereafter. Thirdly, the question of embodiment is crucial as *tuloni biya* exhibits a series of events which can be conceptualized in terms of rebirth and not a mere transformation, in terms of celebrated marital status of the girl along with safe passage to potential motherhood.

Tuloni biya consists of several rituals observed in an order for seven days and in many cases, it can be extended beyond that as well. It includes sequestering the neophyte followed by bathing ritual, *kanai kula* ritual, purification through *naam*, blessings by married women and a community feast[54]. Each and every ritual conducted under the watchful eyes of community women reveals the metaphorical journey a girl traverses throughout her adult life. What happens when a female body turns menarcheal suddenly to become *tuloni* and how does the Assamese Hindu community respond to this sudden change the girl experiences for the first time? What does the series of sequential embodied performance displayed through rituals reflect about the social construction of woman and motherhood in the larger discourse? It is equally significant to note that the ritual is solely performed by women and the presence of men is deemed unnecessary within the ritual space. However, despite *tuloni*'s primary characteristic of being a women's event is the 'absent' male effortlessly invading the space by making itself 'ritually indispensable'? Can one view the ritual celebration of menarche simply as a welcoming event of the girl to an elevated position or does it equally promote performance of 'ideal'? What purpose do the embodied selves in this kind of *biya* serve vis-à-vis the social conception of heterosexual marriage and

[54] This feast is not really a part of the original rituals and is an add-on. This trend has caught on many households and has become an indicator of social status (Das, 2014:51).

institutionalized motherhood? And lastly, does *tuloni biya* as an efficacious display of nature-culture assimilation reveal a successful attempt in the production of a fertile body, albeit controlled by societal gaze or a feminized existence, sexually capable of mothering, but without the sexual imagination of its own?

The Menarcheal body as 'reborn'

It is to be noted even though Assamese Hindu community observe *tuloni biya*, but there are variations in the ritual performance depending on the region, caste and religious affiliation. However, there are certain common grounds that is strictly adhered to for the completion of the event which will be discussed along with a few differences. The first and foremost factor is the menarcheal body because of which the symbolic marriage ritual is conducted. As the girl begins to bleed menstrually, a series of rituals are faithfully observed by the girl and the community for the betterment of both. Hence, the menarcheal body is a prominent signifier which outlines the 'making of woman' process in the community.

A young pubertal girl on the verge of adulthood is called *gaabhoru suwali* (*suwali* refers to girl). What is mentionable is the term *gaabhoru* which can be translated as a phase when the body (*gaa* meaning body) goes through physical transition and certain body parts develop in a visible manner. The maturing body indicates the advent of menarche as the growing breasts and pelvic invites gaze and self-shame in pre-pubertal girls. Menarche, therefore signals the arrival of adulthood as the body experiences not only physical changes, but behavioral too as a result of the former.

When a girl becomes *tuloni*, she informs her mother, sister or any other female members of the family. A strict male restriction is followed as the neophyte is not allowed to see, touch or even speak to any male, either family member or otherwise. It is always advisable to inform a *sadabha* (a married woman) sporting *xendur* (vermillion) on the forehead. Sometimes, a group of *sadabha* is also invited as soon as the girl menstruates and she is given a *saador mekhela* (traditional two-piece outfit worn by women) to wear and sequestered formally in the corner of a room inside the house. At the time of her isolation, the girl remains untouchable until her final purification bath takes place on the seventh day. Female members of the community irrespective of age can come visit her, but they are not allowed to touch her as doing so would transmit her

assumed impurity to the other person. Most of the time it is her *sakhi*(s) (female friend) who spends time with her without any physical contact. The girl may have one or more than one *sakhi* at the time of the seventh-day ritual who would sit by her side as she is decked up like a *koyna* (bride).

In villages, the sequestered space is usually layered with dry banana leaves covered by a white *buwa kaapur* (woven sheet). Three *buwa kaapur* are normally given where one is used to cover the leaves, the second is provided to the girl to cover herself and the third is used to create a *bheti* (makeshift boundary) to curtain the girl within the room. In small-towns and cities this may not be followed as girls might be allowed to sleep on mat or even bed. Pramila Devi in her 40s informs that in earlier times only seven banana leaves were allowed to spread, however these days it can be more than that. She also added only three piece of *buwa kaapur* are still given to the girl in villages, however in towns it may no longer be the case (2019).

Inside the *bheti* a number of items called *bhujoni* are placed from the first till the seventh day which comprises of *tamul-paan*, uncooked rice, *dakshina* (cash), a young banana shoot with two sprouting leaves. The *bhujoni* and the other arrangements are entirely done by women. Devi mentions that the ingredients of *bhujoni* may differ from region to region. For instance, in Morigaon district or area a bunch of five, seven or any odd-numbered *dimoru guti* (fig) is also added to the *bhujoni*. However, in Sonitpur district, it is added on the fourth day after the girl takes the first bath with *maah-halodi* (a paste of lentil and turmeric) for the very first time post her menarche. The embryo-like imagery of fig symbolizes the newly-acquired fertile status of the girl which is added to her identity on the first or the fourth day depending on the region she dwells. In some region other items like a bunch of bananas, *dubori ban* (a kind of grass), mango leaves, metal pot filled with water and a earthen lamp is kept lighted (Das, 2014:50). Das explains these items are believed to create reverence to the almighty and have embedded meanings. The bananas and *dubori ban* symbolizes *bonxo bridhi* referring to reproduction, mango leaves are used to sprinkle water on the girl for her peaceful and serene life ahead, the metal pot represents *dhatri*, her future husband who would hold her world together (Ibid.).

In case of *bamuniya* Assamese, once the girl is settled inside the house, it is of paramount importance that the family sends someone to the *baamun*'s (Brahmin priest) house with the exact time of her menstrual bleeding in order to know the girl's *juug* (cosmic position of her star) or

these days the conversation is usually done over the phone. She is not allowed to eat anything until the *jyotishi* or *baamun* reads her fortune on the basis of her date and time of menarche and prescribes her dietary requirements for the duration of seven days. It is also interesting to note that on her exact time of menarche depends the construction of her personality and the subsequent character profiling. Early morning indicates a serene, peaceful life as they are called *padmini kanya*, in the morning but before noon are believed to be naughty and *chanchal* (mischievous) and is called *siparani kanya*, afternoon would mean *ugra kanya* (short-tempered or fierce), evening through night is called *hostini kanya* symbolizing the worst kind as the tensions are mounted by the end of the day (Ibid, 51). According to these pre-conceived notions, the *baamun* suggests the ways to overcome the flaws, strictly performed by the girl under the watchful eyes of the mother or other women of the household.

She has to follow the *vrata* (fast) diet for seven days or more if there is any *doox* (a cosmological fault in her star) as a result of penance. It is usually offered on a banana leaf or utensil made of stone with a hope to evolve a firm moral character as was informed by several informants. Girls and women are often taunted as 'loose-character' *suwali* if they are seen mixing up freely with opposite sex. The salt-less diet usually consists of uncooked lentil, gram, fruits, sugar, milk and so on for the first four days and fifth day onward some families allow *ek sandhya* (once in a day) cooked food like rice with milk and sugar along with the usual food items. After the *gonona* (calculation), the *baamun* explains what all she can eat, at what time she is supposed to eat and how long she is supposed to follow the *vrata* diet; bigger the *doox*, longer the *vrata*. Menarche in an auspicious time would mean she is allowed more kinds of fruit, while the inauspicious time would mean restrictions in eating *bohu-gootiya phal* (many-seeded fruit). While the fortunate ones do not have to observe *vrata* beyond seven days and they can even partake the normal food of the feast like the ones bleeding during the *kanta juug*, but for the less fortunate ones like the *pratihina juug*, they cannot consume the feast food as the duration of *vrata* can extend upto forty-five days from the seventh day. For the rest, from the eight day onward, they are allowed to consume a mixture of boiled food and *vrata* salt once in a day usually after sunset cooked on an earthen pot supported on three mango woods. The mother of the girl, or any married female relative in the absence of mother serves the food on a lotus leaf in the reverse manner by moving the ladle in the anti-clock manner with the hope of minimizing her flaws.

The period of isolation symbolizes the threshold outside of which begins womanhood and prepares the menarcheal body to transform into a full-fledged woman through the bathing ritual. Janet Lee (1994) stresses on the idea that menarche is a site where girls become women and gender relations are reproduced (p. 360). I, on the other hand, view the menarcheal body which doesn't become woman suddenly, but 'ritually creates' a woman with all the societal expectation attached to it. Chodorow (1978) rightly points out that the major features of the social organization of being gendered members are transmitted and produced by the institution of 'the family' (p. 39). Therefore, the process to 'make' woman begins way before menarche in which the natural bleeding further solidifies and validates the socio-cultural gendred everydayness.

The menarcheal body plays a crucial role not only as the defining moment for the performance of *tuloni* rituals, but it also establishes the body as metaphor of rebirth. The menarcheal body is a body reborn, playing dual role of being reborn and giving birth simultaneously. As the body is initiated to be transported to the adult/sexual world, it is imperative that it goes through the birthing process to be reborn as 'new'. Mircea Eliade (1958) reads into the need for initiation ritual as the tendency to go back to the beginning. As a result, the 'initiary death' often symbolized by darkness, cosmic night, tellurmic womb, the hut is required to prepare the initiate for a higher mode of being (p. xiv) or as if she were 'newly born' (J. G. Frazer, 1913:36). On the other hand, N. N. Bhattacharyya (1980) argues that puberty rites expresses a primitive thought where the initiate dies and is born again since the qualification to be adult is not birth but rebirth through appropriate rites and customs (p. 1). Speaking about female incision ritual of Okiek group in west-central Kenya, Corinne A. Kratz (1994) views initiation as a critical juncture, a process where children enter and adults emerge (p. 95). Likewise, *tuloni* initiation produces that space where adults emerge, but not before they are ritually reborn and new.

The paradox of birth and death of menarcheal bleeding is deeply entwined in the death and rebirth into the adult world. The first seclusion period thus begins the cycle of monthly menstrual seclusions where the body enters into the isolated zone in order to emerge new and clean from all impurities of birth, death and menstruation. The danger of transitional state lies in its characteristic of being undefinable and this danger is controlled by the power of ritual that can 'remake' the initiate (Douglas, 1996:97). The menarcheal body symbolizes a liminal existence waiting at the threshold to adorn itself with a new, cleansed identity and an aim of diligent self-performance.

Every initiation ritually attempts to leave behind old lives replaced with gendered performance of new selves. Similarly, the ritual ingredients of *bhujoni* define the liminality of the girl inscribing several social meaning of birth and birthing through the phallic symbol of banana shoot, the embryo imagery of fig, the room without a sunlight giving a impression of womb through which the initiate emerges for her purification bath in order to appear new and reborn into an ideal woman. There may be several instances of 'newness' in the girl's later life in the form of several status-changing initiations like marriage and motherhood, but nothing can be as close a re-enaction of birthing as menarcheal ritual where the she emerges from the womb of menstrual seclusion in blood.

Performing purification

A usual bath cleanses a body from dirt and sweat and is an individual act and experience, while a ritual public bath erases the impurities of body and mind and transforms the participant into a renewed identity. While the former of bath maintains the demarcation between the private and the public, the latter blurs the line. The first ritual bath post menarche leads the neophyte to traverse into womanhood by removing the wall between her and other women of the society. The menarcheal body remains sequestered and in order to assimilate again with the social, she undergoes the *gaa dhuwa niyam* (bathing ritual) without which her menstrual impurity obstructs her to step into adulthood. The purifying bath is equally crucial for it is that corporeal moment which marks and makes her a complete woman. Menarche may have provided the path to attaining womanhood, but it is only after the *gaa dhuwa*, is she accepted by the society as a fully grown woman completely aware of her social responsibilities and maternal abilities. However, the ritual may differ from region to region even though the goal may be common as to deliver her from the liminal status of perceived impurity and her social standing.

Mary Douglas (1999) argues that the rites of passage are not purificatory but are prophylactic not because they redefine or restore a lost former status or purify from contamination, but they define entrance to a new status emphasizing on the permanence and value of societal classifications (p. 113). Hence, rites of passage should not be just reduced to purification rituals only, but one should view that the purification ritual has a major role in subsequent identity-

formation. In view of that, *tuloni* ritual is never complete without the purificatory bath that the girl undergoes so as to mark the beginning of another phase of her identity.

There are two bathing rituals in the course of seven days that takes place on the fourth and the seventh day. On the fourth day, the girl is taken out with utmost care so as not to show herself to any male members, be it her own family or otherwise. It is usually the mother who brings her out along with other women by sprinkling a mixture of cow dung and water as a purifying measure and in absence of mother, other married female relatives perform the role. A group of pre-pubescent girls (odd numbers like three, five or seven) are invited to bathe the girl following which they will partake rice pudding, the first cooked food for the girl after her menarche. She is made to sit at an assigned space called *bei* decorated with transplanted banana trees, usually close to the water source at the back of the house. She uses the end of her *shador* as a veil or any other piece of cloth to cover her face. It is considered bad omen to catch a glimpse of male or metaphorical male like the sun. A freshly prepared paste of *maah-halodi* (lentil-turmeric) and mustard oil is placed at the bathing site along with other *bhujoni* objects like betel nut and leaves, mango leaves on a pot, a lit lamp and so on.

In the presence of women, the pre-pubescent girls, *bhujoni* and the sun she takes her first bath by rubbing the mustard oil on her hair and the *maah-halodi* paste on her body and pouring the water several times to make sure her body is clean from all the impurities-bodily or otherwise. While the women sing *biya naam* clapping their hands in unison, she is shown the sun after revolving thrice and is given a mirror to see herself. The veil is worn so as to ensure that her face is revealed to the sun alone and no other male. People assisting her or who gets in touch with her also bathe afterwards so as to cleanse themselves from the menstrual touch. She is given a new set of clothes to wear and is taken indoors to where she was kept before the bath. Many families provide boiled food seasoned with *vrata* salt from the fifth day onwards once in a day usually in the evening, while some follow the previous diet till the seventh day or as the priest says so. On the fourth-day bathing ritual, especially in the villages, the stained clothes are soaked in water and buried so as not to come in contact with anyone, while many households in bigger towns prefer to provide sanitary napkins that can be disposed of easily.

The next bathing ritual is bigger as the entire community women outside the immediate family participate in it. It is to be mentioned here that although there is no restrictive rule for not allowing widows in the ritual but many of them prefer to excuse themselves as they are often overburdened with preconceived ill omens. In many cases, the widowed mother of the girl prefers to stay away from the ritual voluntarily, while other married relative lead the ritual. Mothers carry the girl as some families do not want the girl to touch her feet to the ground, while some just lead their daughters to the site with her veil on and is made to sit on the *bei* so that her final purification bath can take place. Usually for the seventh day event, the bathing site is decorated with banana trees, along with other *bhujoni* items. The husband-metaphor is imposed evidently in this case as it is not just the sun but also the banana tree who plays the role of symbolic-husband of the girl. In most of the rituals the girl's *sakhi*(s) stay close to her and in many instances, she also follows the bathing ritual and takes bath along with the girl. They perform similar acts like circumambulation of the banana tree three times and at the end of each round they kiss a banana leaf before looking at the sun thrice. However, one thing that must be strictly followed is they should not kiss the same leaf as that would break their companionship and sisterhood. They are dressed up like *koyna* after the purification bath concludes.

In some localities, the girl's *mami* (maternal uncle's wife) arrives at the girl's house with much fanfare like a groom's side with gifts and new clothes to wear. While in other cases, the girl is given seven sets of *sador-mekhela* and there are seven stools placed in between her and the bathing site. She is made to step on each stool, drenched in water followed by a change of set of *sador-mekhela*. This is repeated until she sets her foot on the seventh stool when she is given her main set that she is supposed to wear for the rest of the day. In all the cases, the girl applies the *maah-halodi* paste along with mustard oil and pours a few mugs of water precisely responding to the women's instructions who stand at a distance closely monitoring her actions. It is not uncommon to hear women animatedly shout phrases that stresses on the importance of fair skin and societal beauty standards to find a good marriage match like *halodi khon mukhot bhaal koi xaan*, *boga hobi* (smear the turmeric paste on your face evenly, you will become fair and attractive), *boga* (fair) being the marker of a good class, caste, upbringing and therefore good fortune. It is at this point a few women begin to sing a few 'instructive' pubertal songs disguised as a reminder to her changing sexual status:

Zika phule xandhiya,

shanti hola aetiya,

baatein puthein lora pale nujukaba aeitya

(Like flowers bloom in the evening, now you have attained *shanti*, please refrain yourself from teasing, provoking boys or by being close to them.)

The pattern of singing is usually initiated by one woman who sings the phrase while the same is repeated by a chorus of other women followed by high-pitched ululation called *uduli*. Some songs even caution the girl with consequences if her newly attained womanhood is not preserved with utmost surveillance:

Aaji pora tumi gabhoru naam lola,

Joubonor prothom khuj diboloi dhorisa,

xabodhane furiba

(From today onward you have become a woman, have made your first step towards womanhood, tread with utmost care and caution.)

The songs performed by women also function as intervening pubertal instruction to the girl eventually bringing socially expected and acceptable behavioural changes. The bathing ritual is not just a passage to womanhood, it is also the formalization of the distinction between sexes and prescribed social etiquette that comes with it.

Both the *sankariya* and *bamuniya* prioritize the bathing ritual and it does not take place without women performing non-religious pubertal songs and *biya naam* (marriage songs), however a fundamental difference remains where strictly spiritual *ai naam* (mother's *naam*) becomes the epicenter in the former. Each village has a community of *khel* which comprises of *naamoti* or *aayoti* or *aai shakal* or *gupini* (women who perform *naam* or the mothers who perform *naam*) who are invited to the girl's house to perform what is aptly called *naamere xuddhikaran* (purified through *naam*) (Fig. 17 & 18). *Sankariya tuloni* is incomplete without *ai naam* as it is believed that *naam* performs the role of purifier instead of water. The water may wash away her menstrual traces, but it is only with the performance of *naam* that the impurity of body and mind is washed away.

The space allotted for *naam* performance is usually at the front yard where certain ritual steps like *aaxon pata*, *dhup baati jaluwa* and *namoti boha* (cleaning, lighting earthen lamps and burning incense) are taken in order to lend a divine status to the performance site. As the *aai shakal*s arrive at the house, they are welcomed, followed by *namoti boha* where they are invited to sit in the *aaxon*. The *naam* consists of several stages of performance–*borgeet*, *boxacharan-chaaricharan diha goxa*, *kirtan*, *xamoroni* and *bhagavatar upadesh path kora*. The ritual performance of *naam* during *tuloni* is indispensable as it carries the signifier of impure menstrual baggage unlike the *bor biya* or *dangor biya* (main marriage) where no such purification is required. Pratima Hazarika maintains that the society is built upon its constitution and according to that everything and everyone is required to perform certain ritual obligation and living tradition like *tuloni biya* (2019).

It is also crucial to point out that *sankariya* Assamese do not recognize the symbolic husband banana tree as mandatory and it is only the presence of the sun which may be vaguely mentioned as the potential husband. The new-found fecundity of the girl is prioritized more than her married status. It is to be mentioned here that the teasing and explicit sexual innuendos of pubertal songs are absolutely absent in the *ai naam* and Hazarika explains why:

> We do not consider *naam* merely as a song. It is more like a spiritual awakening. *Naam* not only purifies the *suwa* body of the girl, but it also replaces *vrata* as *naam* is equivalent to keeping *vrata*. When they go through *puspita* (flowered), one should live with saintly thoughts without nurturing immorality, keeping a distance from worldly diversions like non-vegetarian diet, delicious cooked food, giving complete rest to the body and mind. She should not bleed from any other body part apart from her menstruation and in order to protect her from any external bodily harm she should be kept indoors. (Ibid.)

There are three different kinds of sects in the community–the Vedic followers perform *parashit* (purify) through the Brahmin priest in the evening, while the *samaj* and *sangha*[55] who follow Sankardeva's teachings do it in the first half and purify the girl through *naam*.

Biya naam and pubertal songs may be performed for the sake of making the ritual musical and entail a celebratory colour, but *aai naam* spiritualizes the event and exhibits the girl's

[55] *Samaj* can be translated as society but here it may also refer to a community or a locality and the *sangha* points out to the organization of the *samaj* within which all the social or communal responsibilities are performed.

purification as a divine engagement to contain the sexual nature of womanhood within the walls of sanctity and sociality. What distinguishes the *naam* from the pubertal songs is also the tonal freedom or restriction engaged with respective performances. Pubertal songs are sung with an intention of *dhemali* (casual merriment), where women singers take liberty in adding lyrics according to the occasion as they do not stick with a canonized lyrical pattern. Pubertal songs are usually sung in an impromptu order accompanied with high-pitched to sometimes even shrill *uduli* often symbolizing a certain individual freedom of the singer concerned. On the other hand, *naam* is canonized and performed in a specific manner with a controlled tonal display and characterizes the hymnal quality to be performed within the established lyrical order.

Naam begins with a prayer to the primary *sankariya* deity Vishnu, followed by invoking other male gods like Hari, Ram, Krishna, Narayana. Once the girl is bathed at the back yard, she is brought inside, decked up like a bride in her bridal *sador-mekhela*, complete with make-up, hair do and ornaments, and revealed to the *samaj* in the front yard for her *naamere xuddhikaran* ceremony. Only women are allowed in the space along with the bride and her *sakhi*(s). The leader of the *aai shakal* begins the ceremonial blessing with a hymn purely uttering names of Vishnu, Hari, Krishna, Ram, Narayana each name stretches for long intervals followed by chorus of *jaya jaya Ram* by the rest accompanied by slow and fast claps in a rhythmic pattern. The invocations regulate the claps and vice versa, while the chorus provides the change in pattern. *Naam* may also symbolize the names (also called *naam*) and the purifying power these divine names emanate with each utterance.

It needs to be mentioned here that *tuloni* bath distinguishes itself as a 'gendered cleansing' from a normal everyday bath. The backyard space with water source speaks volume of how it displays an affirmation of sanitizing menarcheal body. The ceremonial purification and front yard space assigned for *naam* elevates its spiritual motive to actively perform the sanitizing role. The house in between the bathing site and *naam* space separates the cleaning from the cleansed, the impure from the pure and from transforming to transformed. The efficacious spectacle of social embodiment is located in ordinary spaces when they are transformed into extraordinary power source due to its ritualized ornamentation for a brief period. In this case, the aforementioned spaces begin with the secluded room, then the bathing space, the room for bridal preparation followed by the *naam aaxon*. The variety of spaces provide a certain status to the girl and as she demurely

traverses from one to next, several meanings of her changed status also travel with her and eventually constructing her *tuli luwa* (elevated her social status). It is only through her exposure to *naam* her newly-found youth can be contained from unwanted 'slippages' that several songs have been warning her against.

Menarche-related ceremonies are performed in many traditional communities in India and neighbouring Nepal. Michael Allen (1982) discusses two pre-pubertal events called *ihi* and *barah tayegu* observed by girls of the Newar community at Kathmandu Valley in Nepal. While *ihi* is a two-day long marriage ritual between the girl and a 'non-mortal spouse' *bel* fruit (wood apple), *barah tayegu* is a pre-menarche ritual that lasts for eleven days when a group of girls are sequestered inside a dark room followed by a feast. In *barah tayegu* ritual similar to *tuloni biya* a great care is taken to make sure that the girls consume foods that are allowed or do not step out of assigned space or look at any male. On the morning of the twelfth day, a barber (lower caste by occupation) and his wife arrives to purify the girls and the house and prepare them for the final ritual. The barber makes a small hole in the door to let the sun rays inside so that no other male can set their eyes on the girls except for the sun-God Surya Narayana (p. 231) (probably a husband metaphor). Referring to Levy, Allen echoes a similar reason for this restriction as there is a communal belief that a sight of the girl is dangerous and brings about misfortune to men if they cast a look at the girl (p. 230). The stated reason of causing harm to men is plenty when we study menstruation rituals in different communities, while at the same time one cannot deny the sexual connotation attached to the female bodies because of which men are made to look like victims of their raw sexual energy.

When I raised the question of male-avoidance to a mixed-aged group of women during their first menstrual cycle, everyone said in an almost-synchronized chorus *napaai* (it is prohibited) (2019). While one added that the prohibitions related to menstruation has been in practice since time immemorial and even though they do not know the specific reason, they do follow the prohibitions without question, the others nodded in agreement. On pressing further, one of the girls exclaimed *lora manuhe saale daari nogoze bule* (it seems men fail to grow their beard if they look at the menstruating girl). Minu Kakoti in her late 50s explained that most of the young girls are not *gohin* (stable and self-controlled) during their first and the subsequent cycles. They go through *chanchalta aru asthiratha*, a sense of restlessness and uncontrolled emotions. They are kept

indoors so that even the sunrays should not fall on her. She gets weak due to the loss of menstrual blood and she gets aroused easily and this may result in some inappropriate actions and gestures. They explained that it is 'for her own good' the restrictions are imposed in order to protect her and to keep her calm she is not allowed to interact with men. It is basically a mode of precaution to disable her *uttejana* (excitement) and prevent any untoward incident.

Ritual obligation of *tuloni* germinates from the deep-seated fear and consequence of non-observance. For instance, Mousumi Mahanta (2016) discusses her case study where one of the patients named Roli in Tezpur Mental Hospital, Assam was going through treatment and her mental condition was believed to have triggered due to her menarche experience in her early teenage years (p.163). During the time of Mahanta's study Roli was in her mid-40s and she had been receiving treatment for more than two decades without any positive result. According to Mahanta, Roli's first menstruation was not observed since she had started bleeding at her relative's place and they did not observe the rituals properly. As a result, it had a deep impact on Roli and she began having seizures which ultimately resulted in losing her mental stability (p. 164). The non-observance of menstrual restrictions is structured in such a way that failing to perform may lead to a sense of guilt that Roli may have experienced in her adolescence. She may have felt 'othered' amongst her peers who, on the other hand, did not fail to participate in the ritual. Her subsequent menstrual periods may have served as a periodic reminder of her 'misdeed' and in the long run grew into a never-healing wound. As she bled, her guilt multiplied; Alas, Roli's guilt was non-transferrable unlike Indra's guilt.

Menarcheal seclusion is perceived as the medium which not only accommodates Indra's curse turned into women's guilt, but also continues to shoulder the responsibility of preventing immoralities by staying indoors and out of reach and out of sight. As my conversation with the group of women was coming to an end one of the ladies invited me to join her only if I wished to know the *beya kotha* (dirty/immoral stuff) since she was *chanchal* and she could enlighten me with bad things only. We all had a hearty laugh at it, but it left me wondering how the dichotomy of *gohin* and *chanchal* is a socio-cultural construct as the former promises morally-sound, controlled and a 'performing ideal' woman, whereas the latter is vilified and is manufactured as an antidote only to be discarded socially.

The absence of men in the purification ritual also points out to the potential ritual dirt attached to the female body. Non-verbal symbols like symbolic husbands, *bhujoni* and cladding the girl with traditional clothes usually worn by women constructs a semiotic engagement which goes on to manufacture the woman out of the girl. The pubertal songs reaffirm and affect the social transformation the girl goes through along with her behavioural responsibilities. The ritual bath provides a few cues to comprehend the community from a better perspective. The use of space, symbolism and songs or utterances perform the role of bringing about ritual efficacy on the initiate with a pedagogic aim of traditionalizing womanhood. The performance of ideal is mirrored in the communicative albeit instructive pubertal songs reiterating and reinstating cultural icons as constant and absolute phenomenon. The gendered everydayness is reproduced through the established cultural materials and symbols of womanhood, wifehood and motherhood.

Enacting symbolic defloration

The menstrual priorities in Western societies depict hygiene and not sexuality as the larger concern since it is viewed as a hygienic crisis rather than a maturational event, with an aim to keep the menstruating body under control (Brumberg, 1997:34-36). In contradiction, traditional communities focus more on the maturing body for a purpose-driven gendered role of motherhood. The concept of hygiene, is, no doubt present but its ritual aspect is signified rather than its scientific explanation. The free-flowing bleeding of the menstruating body is not controlled during *tuloni*, but the sexuality of that body thereafter is. The fertile-hood of the initiate is highlighted, but her sexual being remains unendorsed in the form of communal denial. She is gazed upon as a sexual being solely for the purpose of attaining motherhood and not experimenting sexuality. To initiate the argument, the idea of symbolic defloration through non-verbal symbols becomes pertinent. The enactment of defloration, birthing along with newly attained status of motherhood even places the idea of womanhood as secondary, while maternalization of the initiate becomes the driving force of the *tuloni* ritual.

The structural semiotic of symbolic defloration introduces the initiate to a series of non-verbal as well as verbal ritual phases of maternity. The non-verbal symbols of fertile-hood is invoked through ritual icons drawn from nature-husband metaphors like sun or the suggestively phallic banana tree, embryo-like figs and the presence of blood which is again criterion of birthing.

Post the bathing ritual, the girl is mostly referred to as *koyna* as she dons a new role of being a bride husbanded or unhusbanded depending on the custom of the particular region. While in some households right after the *gaa dhuwa* ritual she is made to gaze at fruit-bearing trees mirroring her own ability to bear fruits. Whereas in some, the *koyna* is led to the courtyard by her *sakhi*(s) within the boundary of her house and is shown fruit-bearing trees. Ecological traces like sapling, mango leaves, and sensorial quality of turmeric-lentil paste take the central position in the ritual enactment of coming of age. The organic-ness of the ingredients expresses the organic and natural role of motherhood and its relevance in the girl's physical and psychological development.

The symbolic defloration does not begin with the bath since the presence of a husband symbol like the banana sapling inside the house during the seclusion period or the banana tree and sun outside denotes the 'symbolic intercourse' throughout the *tuloni* ritual. Another term *puspita* (flowered) used for *tuloni* hints at the menarcheal process to flower or fruition. Menstruation and end of virginity is both symptomized by vaginal bleeding. Frazer raises this question of symbolic intercourse through puberty rituals practiced in India and many other traditional societies around the world. In Hindu marriage and menstrual rituals, Frazer (1913:74-75) Bhattacharyya (1980:34-35) and Mary Frances Billington (1895) explain the ritual significance of *garbhādhāna* as an impregnation rite where several acts are performed in order to ceremonially deflower the girl for instance exposing the girl to sun rays (p. 78). Therefore, it is only with the intervention of metaphorical husbands that the social status of the girl is transformed to being deflowered and let go of her virginal status. The initiation of the girl's 'marriage' to the banana tree, her exposure to the sun rays, being referred to as *koyna*, all these point to the fact that a symbolic intercourse is ritually enacted.

The chronological enactment of non-verbal birthing symbols prepares the initiate to effortlessly traverse into the verbal-world where motherhood is engraved and enacted through songs and role-playing. *Tuloni* songs not only shape the organic characteristic of menarche metaphorically, but also lay out the maternalized the duty of the body as well:

Korodoi sakol, rebābor bākoli,

rebab thāle bhori lāge

Rebābor tolote boromel pātise

Ai rām āideu olāle bhāge he ai rām

Belikoi ābeli hole chandrāwalī

Beliki ābeli hol

Bhokot gā morohile,

Māk bā keholoi gol?

> (A slice of carambola[56], the skin of a pomelo, The branch of the tree is full of pomelos, the assembly is gathered below the tree, Ai rām, the young girl appears separately; The afternoon has come late Chandrāwalī, the afternoon has come late, Chandrāwalī face faded because of hunger, where has her mother gone?) (Arrago-Boruah, 2008:70)

The *tuloni* song serves the purpose of imaging the body with an intention to manufacture a bountiful nature of womanhood just like the nationalistic songs did in terms of producing the image of bounteous *ai*, the mother Assam. At the same time, the undertone of sexualizing the pubertal body cannot be denied in the *tuloni* songs either. Likewise, Emilie Arrago-Boruah argues thus:

> The analogy between bodies and fruits-the girl' body is sweet like the flesh of carambola, her skin is firm like the skin of a pomelo and the round shape of her breast is like that of the pomelos in the tree-these metaphors link up the song with the term which designates menstruation. The girl's name, Chandrāwalī, evokes a milkmaid who offered milk to Krsna. A new moment has come; since the girl has reached puberty, she can now give milk like a mother. (Ibid.)

The sexual metaphors drawn in order to picture the girl and her developing body pushes her further to accept maternal 'emotions' as organic and conventional. The display of this emotion is materialized when *kanai kula* ritual is performed by the girl and other women. It reminds of what Chodorow asserts that women are prepared psychologically for mothering capacities as well as to get gratification from it and this 'reproduction of mothering' occurs through the developmental situation they grow up where women have mothered them (p. 39). *Kanai kula* may be considered as an important ritual after the *gaa dhuwa* as it not only demonstrates motherhood to the girl, but also playfully cheers her up to perform it.

[56] Carambola, also called the star fruit and Pomelo, a kind of large grapefruit is specific to North-East India region.

As discussed earlier, the initiate embodies as ritually 'reborn' from the social into the sexual world where she arrives with her the fecundity. The reborn girl is further ritually-abled to play the role of her mothering skills. When she emerges from her seclusion, she is publicly displayed with two crucial things one being the husband metaphor and the other being the figs, her offspring. In order to stage it the *kanai kula* ritual is performed in the disguise of *jomoni* (merriment) actively participated by women. *Kanai* represents infant Krishna, a popular and loved Hindu god in India and *kula* means Krishna sat on a *kulat* (lap) or it may also mean lineage. *Kanai kula* takes place after the *gaa dhuwa* and she is draped in a new set of *sador mekhela*, she is seated on a stool surrounded by women. The bunch of figs representing *kanai* is placed under the banana tree and the *koyna* and her *sakhi*(s) are asked by the women to place 'maternal' kiss on it as if it is their own baby. The *kanai* is put on the girl's lap like a new mother by the mother of the girl who technically role-plays the grandmother. She holds the symbolic baby and adorably plays with it before placing it on the girl's lap again. This is enacted repeatedly by other women as well as a sort of merriment and maternal training for the girl. The *koyna*'s mother would even perform *sakir xekh diya* by gently rubbing the fictional baby and the bride with a warm cloth heated over the *saki*, a re-enactment of taking care of a new mother and her baby. Many present gifts and cash to the 'new mother' while they hold the baby and place her in the lap. The ritual is performed by either five or seven women relatives of the *koyna* apart from the mother. Women during the *kanai kula* usually break into songs such as:

Abeli belika konai nuliyaba,

silai thape mari nibo,silai thap maribo,

modarat tulibo,

burhimaak bauli hobo

(Do not bring the konai outside in the evening. The bird may snatch it away and will fly away to the modar tree. The grandmother will be overwhelmed with grief) (Dutta)

Another rendition goes like this:

Abeli belika o sonar sikali

Kanai nuliyaba o sonar sikali

Cilae thape mari niba sonar sikali

Korobat Ramacandrar kapal hoise mukali

> (Do not take out the *kanai* outside in the evening otherwise the kite will snatch it. One man gets blessings as you become grown up.) (Baruah, 2016:173)

The ritual is repeated again with an actual infant preferably a male child as many parents feel bad if a female child is involved due to preference of male child in families. In fact, everyone demands a male child to be placed in the *koyna*'s lap for the first time after which female child can be placed, but the first one needs to be a male. She holds the baby and offers *laadoo* (sweet made of rice flour or coconut) but she just performs the ritual of offering and does not feed the child. Instead, she would fling the *laadoo* on the roof of the house right after pretending to offer it to the baby. The sex of the child may be two boys and one girl or three boys, but the number of boys is always preferred to be higher. Earlier seven *laadoos* used to be made since people generally had lots of children, but nowadays only three *laadoos* are made and offered to babies (Devi, 2019).

Kanai kula culminates with married women applying *xendur* (vermilion) on the girl as a sign of her being married; the red colour may also signify menstruation, fertility, non-virgin, as well as her newly attained status of motherhood. Moreover, women folks also indulge in *jomoni* by splashing water on each other, smearing each other's face with *pitha guri* (rice flour), while some even go to the extent of making garlands out of common kitchen objects like *dola*, *chalani*, *xoria* (used to store grain, winnowing basket, cooking pan). Some would even splash water from behind and make fun of them saying she has peed in front of the *raaiz* (community). After the *dhemali* or *jomoni* is over, the girl is brought out in public followed by a communal feast. It is to be noted the feast is more of a choice as it depends on the economic ability of the family. Otherwise, a small refreshment and *prasad* is provided to the women who participate in the *tuloni* rituals. The trend of feast is relatively a new concept catching up rapidly where everyone is invited since several elders of the community did not remember a big feast during their time. As several of them voiced out that earlier unadulterated rituals and ceremonial blessings were prioritized more than the added feast and pubertal songs were sung more than pre-recorded love songs which are generally played out in the *tuloni biya*.

Unlike several Brahmin communities in India, in Assam *tuloni* is not observed by the Assamese Brahmins like other upper and lower castes and the main reason pointed out by Mandakini Baruah (2018) is its direct link to the virginal status of the girl. Menarche denotes that the girl is no longer a virgin and in earlier times it was mandatory for the girls to get married before their menarche especially amongst the Brahmins. Baruah stated that in earlier time *tuloni* meant the girl had come of age and it was considered an abomination for grown-up unmarried girl to remain at their father's house (Ibid.). Likewise, referring to several Dharmasūtras and Smritis (Hindu sacred literature like *Vaśiṣtha*, *Baudhāyana*, *Yājńavalkya*), Bhattacharyya explains this further and writes, "the father incurs the sin of destroying an embryo at each appearance of the menses so long the girl is unmarried" (1980: 37, also see Thomson's analysis of ancient belief of menstrual discharge to be an act of abortion, 1949: 213, also see Allen, 1982). Not celebrating *tuloni*, therefore, was an intended strategy to not attract unwanted attention to the family in the case of absence of suitors to marry the girl. Meanwhile, deliberate use of terms like *koyna* and *puspita* eventually became the 'saving disgrace' markers for upper and lower caste girls to refer to menarche as a married and maternal status (therefore elevated). Even though the custom still holds value despite the stigma of being unmarried during menarche is no longer valid, it surely offers us an image of the past where stigma carried a parental responsibility to either get them married or conceal their menarche from the communal gaze.

The 'indispensable' male in *Tuloni*

Tuloni has always been considered a women's domain as its very origin resonates to a bodily transformation in a female body. It is, in fact, believed to provide an exclusive space claimed by women. It needs to be noted that each and every *tuloni* ritual is prepared and executed by women. In several of my conversations, women have maintained that male presence is not at all required in *tuloni* rituals, but my observation begs to differ. I argue that the male presence has been an indispensable part of *tuloni* ritual where the initiate's series of transformation depends on her established relationship with male symbolisms. As discussed throughout the chapter, it is revealed how the pubescent girl performs several social roles like a reborn, a wife, a non-virgin and a mother and all these cannot be established without the male participation. This section intends to question if the claim of *tuloni* space as women-only holds water in the truest sense of the term or the patriarchal values still pervades below the surface.

The series of embodiment that situates the girl in various role-playing dictates from her relationship to the space she occupies as well as the fluid nature of embodied identities. Suggesting that a body does not have an independent existence and enacts in relation to the world and others (p. 9), Meenakshi Thapan (2009) further explains,

> Embodiment does not impart a fixity to identity as identities are always in the process of becoming, being made and re-made, constructed and re-defined, shaped and transformed. (p. 4)

Thapan's argument of 'independent existence' becomes crucial here if one is to study the paramount importance given to male symbolism in *tuloni* ritual without which the girl's embodied selves remain incomplete. The embodied selves are a direct consequence of male symbols manoeuvred for ritual climax. Male symbols like the sun, banana tree, banana saplings, bunch of figs are several points of reference around which the complete embodiment process of the girl is structured. These symbols facilitate embodiment and aid in the transforming roles of the girl. Her embodied selves are drawn from the meanings attached to these symbols. As she performs multiple roles while traversing through the rite of passage, her transformed status at every threshold be that of a virgin girl, wife, mother is modeled on her relationship to a particular male symbol. Speaking of which the marital relationship displays heteronormativity as the ideal norm of the social.

Bruno Bettelheim (1962) suggests menstruation is often viewed as a 'definite proof' of reaching sexual maturity for girls which boys do not have access to (p. 52). If one is to analyse this argument the sexual maturity or adolescence may be a vague concept for men who may not have a definite event to mark the transition from boyhood to manhood. Furthermore, Peter Rigby (1967) opines in order to make puberty a 'social fact', its physiological fact needs to be recognized socially (p. 434). However, Thapan's argument of achieving adolescence provides an alternate perspective to this very idea of 'definite' moment. Referring to psychologists like Erik Erikson and Carol Gilligan, Thapan further points out that the idea of adolescence itself was a 'masculine construct' based on masculine images and concepts such as self, identity, relationship, sexuality and so on (Thapan, 2009:26). As women are groomed for marriage and motherhood, Thapan explains there may be several instances perceived as experiencing adolescence: puberty, first sexual intercourse or when they bear children (p. 28). There may be no defining moment for girls

as well to ascertain womanhood, but menstruation surely initiates the girl to the series of events which may mark and make her an ideal woman for life.

As Thapan concurs adolescence is a masculine construct, Lee (1994, 2009) strongly argues that the sexuality implies 'compulsory heterosexuality' (2009: 617), where women are taught to live and discipline their bodies as sexual objects for heterosexual male viewing, pleasure and as mothers of men's children (1994: 344). Arnold van Gennep (1975) has analysed that the physiological puberty and social puberty are not the same thing and that they 'rarely converge' (p. 65). He argues that the initiation rites are actually the 'rites of separation from the asexual world' followed by 'rites of incorporation into the world of sexuality' (Ibid. 67). In the light of these arguments, *tuloni biya* raises a crucial question or an assertive indication towards a well-defined heterosexual relationship within the social institution of marriage. The intimate imagery also points out to the opposite characterization of the two prime actors engaged in a fictional love-play. While menarche exposes itself as a 'social fact', so does the promotion of homogenous idea of (hetero)sexuality where a sexual relationship between the opposite sex for the cause of reproduction is sanitized as the sanctified 'holy union'. The undeniable phallic banana tree or the intended masculine imagery of the sun is juxtaposed with the feminine and demure image of a bride. Moreover, the sensual adornment and beautification of the body with turmeric and lentil paste prepares a shy bride for her husband. The prevention of sunlight on the girl's body during the first four days of menarche may refer to the sexual potential of the girl waiting for her symbolic husband to touch her. Her first phase of transformation is achieved only when the sun rays touch her menarcheal body during her first bath and leads her to the next phase where she prepares to go through the liminal period of gestation. The seventh day bathing ritual may or may not have the banana tree, but the idea of intercourse and gestation is already inculcated in the social psyche to validate the figurative reproduction and motherhood.

Motherhood may not be possible without menstruation but what is equally crucial is the male participation which is clearly evident from the male representation in the *tuloni* ritual. It is notable how male symbols are brought into play to essentialize the female body and mark it for the idealized social functions she is expected to perform in fictional as well as everyday gendered life. Thapan asserts that embodiment and its lived experience signifies how a body is 'perceived, constructed, performed, displayed and adorned' (Ibid., 11). The female body in an Assamese

communal space is viewed as a heterosexual body and the layers of embodiment during *tuloni* is a direct response to that. *Tuloni*, in this case without any doubt, becomes the first and foremost initiation to promote the value of heterosexual marriage and motherhood where girls are schooled to adapt to the indispensable presence of men in their lives in achieving that social and later a personal goal.

The conspicuous presence of male symbols reveals in direct contrast to the absence of local goddesses in *tuloni* ritual as well. For instance, *sankariya naam* performed during *tuloni* invokes male gods like Vishnu, Krishna, Hari, Narayana and *biya naam* refers to Ram as the ideal husband for the bride, while local goddesses are hardly ever mentioned. A *biya naam* performed in *sankariya* and *bamuniya tuloni* goes like this:

> *Maah baati loi suli dhuaai diu,*
>
> *Oi Raam joubonot disaahi bhori hey,*
>
> *Kunuba purushor kopaal hol mukoli*
>
> *Oi Raam konya kaal hol aahi buli he*
>
> (We'll wash your hair with grinded cereals for you have reached your youth now; the fortune of some man has smiled, for you have reached your girlhood now) (Patar, 2019:66)

The celebration of menarche hints at how the physiological change revolves around a 'fortunate man' who will be able to marry her and birth his children.

Having said that, what is also worth-mentioning is the erasure of Shiva from the list of male deities even though Shiva's mass appeal is evidently marked with a larger number of Shiva *linga*s than any of these other male deities spread across localities in Assam. *Sankariya samaj*'s careful omission of Shiva is clearly understood as he is not one of the primary deities revered, but what is interesting is *bamuniya*'s silent distancing approach. Shiva's dynamic, albeit wild sexual nature negates the masculine yet idealized image that is endorsed through the rest of the male deities. Shiva tends to cross that line and at times emerges as a peripheral deity, with his unapologetic passionate lovemaking with his partners that may not go very well with the accepted boundaries of sexualities across the social spectrum. On the other hand, the invocation of Krishna

in *Ai naam* is in the form of servitude towards him and never accompanied with the portrayal of his sexual encounters with Radha.

Furthermore, the construction of alpha male like ideal Ram or any other mainstream male deity in the guise of ceremonial blessing shrinks the possibility of invoking goddess whether local or mainstream. Moreover, it reduces identities to a mere genital, phallic symbol, male offspring, endorsing a stagnant identity of nurturing mothers and wives as well as romanticizing the institution of marriage without fail. As a matter of fact, goddesses like Sitala or Manasa are invoked and propitiated at times of health hazards like small pox or snake bite and clearly *tuloni* is not a disease. *Tuloni* germinates from menstruation whereas menstruating goddess Kamakhya is absolutely absent throughout the ritual. The attachment of diseases and inauspiciousness with goddesses, while the continual invasion of sanitized spaces by the male symbols are legitimized as ritual obligation. The presence of male symbolism in *tuloni* ritual made conspicuous through Brahmin priest in terms of *bamuniya* Assamese, the performance of *naam* invoking male deities in terms of *sankariya* Assamese and the desired presence of plantain tree or sun for symbolic husband and bunch of figs for male offspring. As male initiation across societies is usually choreographed to shape and nurture masculinity, that very idea is structurally imposed on puberty rites like *tuloni* where the masculinity of male symbols is considered inescapable to enhance the femininity and gendered roles for menarcheal girls.

Conclusion

Tuloni biya as a life-altering event in a girl's life has encountered several alteration or modification with the passage of time. The restriction rituals are still followed strictly, while the celebratory factor is a more highlighted event. The public feast and the celebration of the *biya* like a marriage ceremony has proliferated in small towns and villages. According to the elders and the parents, girls these days do not shy away from demanding a big feast and grand celebration, furnished with new expensive clothes, make-up kits and jewelry. It is becoming more of an economic statement than a pubertal event. Girls like the idea of gifts and feast and it may be due to this reward at the end that they go through the seven-day ritual. Moreover, the inculcation of romanticized idea of marriage and maternality from a very young age, followed with the enchantment to dress up like a *koyna* encourage girls to actively engage in the ritual.

Another crucial change is that men are also invited for the refreshment or feast that was not the case before. Several middle-aged and older women remembered during their *tuloni biya* women of the village came, mostly with no gifts, participated in the bathing rituals and they did not make any fuss about the modest *gakhir-aakhoi* (milk and rice cereal) they were offered. However, during their daughter's and grand-daughter's *tuloni biya*, a large number of people were invited as has become the trend now and fed with a meal along with a video recording of the occasion. The space for pubertal songs and *naam* has considerably shrunk along with the arrival of gadgets with a playlist of love songs just one click away. Despite all of these, the fundamental belief of *tuloni* is still intact and the evolution of a girl into an ideal woman and her societal responsibility is still observed through the symbolic enactment of defloration, marriage and motherhood.

The essentiality of social display of coming-of-age ritual like *tuloni biya* highlights how the public announcement is imperative to validate the attainment of 'womanhood'. When she menstruates, her liminal status is in isolation, literally and figuratively. She is in fact, an 'almost woman', but it is only after the introduction of male symbols with the progression of *tuloni* rituals that the community confers her complete womanhood as an elevated social status. She not only 'grows up' and becomes woman, but also performs the roles of wife and mother in succession. Her embodied selves of being reborn, non-virgin, birthing, married and mother are presented in synchronized sequence. Also, to be noted is between each embodiment there comes a 'rupture of cleansing' where the menarcheal body is washed, adorned with a new identity leaving the previous embodied self behind. It is equally significant how the male symbols perform the role of causing the transformation to subsequent embodied entities. It makes one wonder what would entail if the male symbols were to be completely erased from the ritual mnemonic trajectory of *tuloni biya*. It would have been simply reduced to a girl's menstrual bleeding like any other biological occurrence. Not to mention the possibility of innumerable embodied selves, liberating the female bodies from the controlled and limited spectrum of 'marriage and motherhood'.

Conclusion

The blue colour-code in most of the sanitary pad commercials[57] to illustrate menstrual blood and their marketing attempt to turn the blood into 'gel' so as to prevent them from 'leaking' in the public speaks volume about the disgust and shame associated with menstrual blood. The hesitation towards menstrual talks and normalizing the colour of menstrual blood as blue has been more or less accepted in the public discourse as Bourgeois[58] rightly points out that red may mean 'blame' if brought out in the open. In order to explore more of this 'concealment' of brown paper bags and blue-coloured blood, this research began with a few queries on how to view the invisible menstruating body that eventually snowballed into several other aspects of womanhood. In the gendered everyday of women, maternal construction of menstruating body paved way to further comprehend the social conditioning and the crucial role of ritual validation. This work highlights the production of ideal performance in accordance with the communal expectations and effective role-playing. I have attempted to primarily discuss two social images that is attached to women-ideal performance and social meaning of menstruation and the maternalization in the Assamese Hindu community. These two roles are intensively naturalized and normalized to be performed in the social stage. My respondents have almost unequivocally articulated a similar response when asked about menstruation and maternal role in a woman's life. Menstruation is looked as a door step to motherhood and these two roles are identity markers of traditional womanhood. However, menstruation as a process is stigmatized and so is the post-natal stage as these two periods are believed to be polluted and in a constant need of ritual purification.

The research highlights menstruating bodies that has often remained a subject of unmentionable 'female problem'. It addresses the stigma attached to the menstrual body and several ways in which the body is secluded and sanitized to upheld the purity of the social order. It further argues there is a communal attempt to conceal the menstruating body from the social arena reinforcing menstrual shame and menstrual denial. Menstruation is a crucial element that

[57] A new change is observed in terms of depicting menstrual blood in red colour instead of the usual blue in sanitary pad advertisement in India for popular brand like Whisper, however the name of the product itself implies that it is something that needs to be confided in secrecy.

[58] *Red is the colour of blood, Red is the colour of violence, Red is the colour of shame, Red is the colour of blame* (Louise Bourgeois, taken from Ruth Green-Cole, 2020:797).

has the power to transform the bodies into stigmatized or ideal status depending on their location in the social sphere. For communal spaces, menstruating body is looked at as defiling presence and hence isolated from public divine sites like temple, and domestic sacred spaces like prayer rooms and kitchen.

On the other hand, menstruation may also cause efficacy when analysed from the perspective of tantric rituals. In tantric philosophy, glorification of *yoni* as seen in the reverence towards Mother Goddess Kamakhya bears evidence to the fact that *yoni* is equated with not just power, but also path to acquiring knowledge. Hence, menstrual blood remains a potent ritual object for the purpose of translating into fruitful ritual transaction and conclusion. However, having said that the thesis also addresses if the 'ideally menstruating' bodies are looked upon as powerful presence or if there is a masked objectification used as a means to obtain knowledge.

Besides that, study on menstruating bodies suggest that strategies are employed to make menstruation invisible physically, ritually and linguistically as a consequence of complete silencing of these bodies. The use of disguised terms like *suwa* (both in terms of menstruation and post-natal period), *nuwara*, *axubidha* points out to the fact that menstruation exists, but only in flowing codes and these 'unclean' bodies are expected to exhibit itself as social pollutant to be secluded from the communal gaze.

The thesis traverses between menstruating and maternalized bodies to create a larger picture of how rituals are significant catalyst in the production of ideally performing bodies. It has visualized the concept of motherhood in varying lights to argue how the very idea of motherhood subtly aims to create a static universal image through the maternal imposition in several forms. Menstruation, therefore, is socially projected as a rite of passage to maternalization of female bodies. The conceptualization of motherhood has disseminated in the geographical, thealogical and national discourse. The dynamics between social mother and conceptual mother is addressed here with reference to human mothers and Mother Goddesses by bringing in scholarly works on Western matricentric feminism and Indian strand of feminism on enculturation of motherhood. The notion of maternalized bodies is evaluated through the larger context of mothering rituals where motherhood is established as gendered performance to feminize women for the sole purpose of reproduction and domesticity.

The birth of mother or the progress of matrescence begins with the concept of ideal womanhood revolving around maternal images pointed out in the thesis. The traditional identity of women is constructed on the premises of desexualized maternal images of navel, womb, vagina drawn from that of Mother Goddess, Mother Earth and Mother in nationalist imagination. Moreover, maternalized bodies are therefore reduced to bodily fluids like breast milk, menstrual blood and amniotic fluids related to motherhood. As a result, women become anonymous to the maternal figure, the motherly love being a woman's prerogative. While this social construction of mother takes place, the concretization of motherly values and natural motherly instinct remains forever attached to female bodies. The sight of married woman without children encounters the social with utter discomfort as it contradicts the social conventions of 'mother performance'.

The confining power of motherhood is considered patriarchal by matricentric feminists like Nancy Chodorow, Adrienne Rich, Sarah Ruddick, Andrea O'Reilly among others. It certainly displaces the empowering nature of mothering, clearly displaying the theoretical contestations between motherhood and mothering. On the other hand, Indian feminists focus on another aspect of motherhood that is the dichotomy of human mothers and mother goddesses. One crucial point that comes out of these conflicts is the problematic manner the idealized image of mother is often manufactured as a social training for women to play-act the naturally assigned maternal roles. No matter how militant a goddess or a woman is, they are eventually domesticated resulting in their maternal homecoming. The woman-divine equation remains because they are neither the same nor fully different as their idealized identities are co-dependent and so is their social existence right from being husbanded to becoming sacrificial mothers.

In order to encapsulate the menstruating and maternalized bodies within one framework of ritual efficacy, the research examines Ambubachi *mela* and *Xaat*, a corollary of Ambubachi. This ritual festival symbolizes menstruation and fecundity of Mother Goddess Kamakhya and Mother Earth Prithvi in *bamuniya* Assamese households. Ambubachi prevents the worship of Kamakhya and yet does not fail to attract the largest gathering giving a resounding consent to the menstruation seclusion ritual to be repurified in order to merge with social. Nonetheless, it mirrors the stigma attached to menstruation in a cloaked manner by sanctifying the divine bodies in contrast to women's menstrual bodies in general.

The highlight of Ambubachi is the pilgrimage to the menstrual landscape and the inaccessible Kamakhya. The image of Kamakhya worship during Ambubachi is completely reversed as Kamakhya goes through menstrual seclusion and pilgrims are deprived of *sparxan*, that bond of touch, the true mode of worshipping her. Hence, the essence and aura of Kamkhya is instead searched in the materiality of 'redness' of animal sacrifices, red outfits of pilgrims and divine menstruation potently captured in the *angabastra*, the sacred menstrual remnant of the goddess and the festival. The tantric feature of Kamakhya becomes pertinent here as menstruation is not seen from the same Vedic lens and eventually Kamakhya still retains her unconventional tantric persona. As Ambubachi is celebrated at Kamakhya temple and agricultural life comes to a halt during *Xaat* in community spaces, what emerges strongly is the cosmic synchronization of divine bodies, human bodies and the changing seasons with an unmistakeable sense of fertility.

The magnanimity of this festival also means that it has failed to escape the claws of commercialization and commodification. Ambubachi is vigorously promulgated in the public domain as a much-awaited annual spectacular event that would equally pull tourists and pilgrims alike. Meanwhile, the festival is gravitating towards becoming a spiritual-touristic affair under the tutelage of the present BJP-led government where the deity's menstruation is 'concealed' to uphold the 'whiteness' of the social fabric. As a result, the menstrual traces are erased within the garb of sanitized aesthetics and acceptability.

While analysing menstruation and fecundity in divine bodies, the research also takes a perceptive look for that very notion in the community sphere and explores *Tuloni biya*, a menarche ritual observed by pubertal girls. It has emphasized on the embodiment of menstruation and maternity executed through rituals as a maternal training for the young girls to effortlessly perform traditionalized womanhood. The ceremony is observed with a hint of celebration and merry-making, nevertheless what does not escape is the fact that *tuloni* rituals have a strong sense to essentialize gender as identity formation is fixed on two supposed milestones in a woman's life-menstruation and motherhood.

The attainment of menarche as a rite of passage is observed publicly in order to celebrate the transformation of a girl into woman. It is often referred to point out the difference between Assamese Hindu community and other Indian communities in general where this kind of event is

not observed. *Tuloni biya* is usually glorified to assert how the community deems women in high esteem and is comfortable enough to publicly acknowledge her elevated status. However, it is crucial to point out that the celebration is not just the welcoming of the girl into adulthood, but it can also be viewed as a social orientation attempt to define the threshold of womanhood. The ritual objects and symbolism, the ecological parallel drawn between the neophyte and the nature connoting heterosexual marriage union and the established communal belief that a pubertal event begins with the girl entering the menarcheal seclusion and ends with a woman emerging out of it. The elevated status adorning her expects her to perform the role of a woman ideally that the community has scripted for her.

In bigger cities and towns, nuclear families are increasing and the distance between them and the traditional-driven communities have widened. As a result, these families may not closely follow menstrual observances, may even let go of kitchen restrictions, but prohibition of religious activity are not to be questioned. Moreover, young women who leave their native villages for further studies and employment may also excuse themselves from these restrictions, but when they go back to their hometowns, they would either conceal their menstruation in totality or else religiously observe prohibitions.

All the more, it won't be wrong to say that discussion around menstruation is still considered a taboo, but in terms of menarche celebration a change of trend cannot be missed. That doesn't in any way suggest that celebrating menarche has anything to do with visibility of menstruation in the cultural domain. One question that arises is how many families are prepared to continue *tuloni biya* and how many will reconfigure them in order to make the rituals more and more accommodating. With the advent of social media and the event turning virtual, there has been a sudden proliferation of *tuloni* photoshoots in cities just like any wedding photoshoots leading to increase of viewership. The rituals are aestheticized and choreographed to capture the 'perfect candid moments' for the girls to display her 'bridal shyness' in the best possible manner. Apart from the fact that it has emerged as a 'trending' event, the predominant belief of *tuloni biya* is not erased from the communal gaze and memory. Still, *tuloni biya* ritually demonstrates marriage and motherhood for the girl and outlines her role in it. Consequently, menstrual talk is pushed further inward under the façade of grand menarche celebration and reduced to unmentionable cryptic notes.

This thesis is firmly grounded within the framework of ritual, gender and performance discourse and engages the discussion on 'menstruation and maternality' of human and divine bodies . Hence, it has evidently not addressed the subject beyond the ritual site. However, this goes without saying that menstruation particularly has transcended into the art and performance domain and has become instrumental in challenging the menstrual profiling in the public discourse. While in ritual spaces prejudices still exists without much resistance, art spaces are changing in India and beyond to unstigmatize menstruation through the genre of visual culture of menstruation and artistic articulations.[59]

As this research offered a closer look at the meaning and intentionality of several rituals discussed in the thesis, there have been other areas or corners that was not explored. The celebration of Ambubachi *mela* and *Tuloni biya* have evolved more than just ritual-driven events and those can serve as point of interest that could be not taken up here. The primary focus has been the ritual construction and gender performativity of menstruating and maternalized bodies, whereas these events also display the non-ritual side to it that has not been dealt here. This is also significant as the sense of merrymaking and socializing has become an indispensable part of everyday lives. As the conceptualization of gendered everydayness has anchored this research, the 'fun and entertaining' element does not feature prominently here.

Furthermore, another significant aspect that could not be examined here is the purified embodiment of menopausal women who have crossed the threshold of menstrual impurity. Several *naam ghar* in Assam, especially the ones in *xattra* (the monastic institutions) forbid women to enter the prayer house and one possible reason is the social meaning attached to *suwa*. Even in regular *naam ghar*s, it is the menopausal women who are assigned the responsibility of performing rituals and have more accessibility to the holy scripture and interiors. Menopausal status not only confers them with an exclusive sacred identity, but also reward them by allowing them free mobility into divine spaces that are usually reserved for men. Evidently, their position in women-oriented spaces is elevated and their decisions remain valuable and respected. It is their vigilance and considerable autonomy to ensure that the traditions are kept alive and the seemingly menstrual-

[59] Indian artists like Lyla Freechild, Shilpa Gupta, Sarah Naqvi have used art's medium to address larger talks on menstrual stigma. Also see, Judy Chicago's lithograph Red Flag (1971) and art installation titled Menstruation Bathroom (1972); Vartanian, 2013; Rupi kaur, 2015; Daniella T. Manica and Clarice Rios (2020); Jen Lewis, 2020; Ruth Green-Cole, 2020.

stained bodies are mapped from the cleansed ones and the hierarchy of the social order is traditionalized.

In the ever evolving time that we live in, mediatized exposure of ritual events like Ambubachi *mela* and *Tuloni biya* has clearly diminished the distance between ritual interpretation and the external grand celebration. Henceforth, it remains pertinent to comprehend what meaning is given to that 'celebration'. In the case of Ambubachi, due to the increasing number of tourists, its meaning of divine menstruation is slowly being veiled to be displaced by three days of entertainment and social media updates. Undoubtedly, with the advent of digitized culture, festivals and community observances have immensely transformed. Not only that, even the culture of viewing have drastically altered as people are getting familiar with social media and vlogs. A new kind of consumerism and fetishism has prevailed to erase that fear of missing out and engage in every bit of spectacle that festivals display. On the other hand, *Tuloni biya* is steadily transforming into an event of social interaction and festivity, but the maternal training through rituals remains unaffected. Nevertheless, the question still arises if the community denial of gendered bodies in ritual and domestic spaces have been turned into community dilemma of revelation. To what extent this exposure and exhibit is allowed so as not to disrupt the manufactured sanitized identity of the community is something that needs to be analysed further. While doing so, it is also crucial to address if the mediatization has seamlessly effaced the essence of ritual performance and erased the aura of festivals.

In an effort to not just explore the public festivals, but also the privacy of domestic spaces, a distinct comparative study of private and public gendered spaces is emerging through research like this. Space allocated for ritual and gender performance is an absorbing field that needs more academic exposure in order to facilitate a dialogue between accessible and secluded ritually-fulcrumed performance sites. It is a much-needed intervention to explore the spaces rooted in gender-essentializing ritual traditions of ideal-self performance. In this regard, this research is nothing but a miniscule attempt to engage an enquiry into the ritual materialization of menstruation and mothering performances that feminized bodies are indoctrinated to express in the social spectrum of gendered every day practices.

Figures

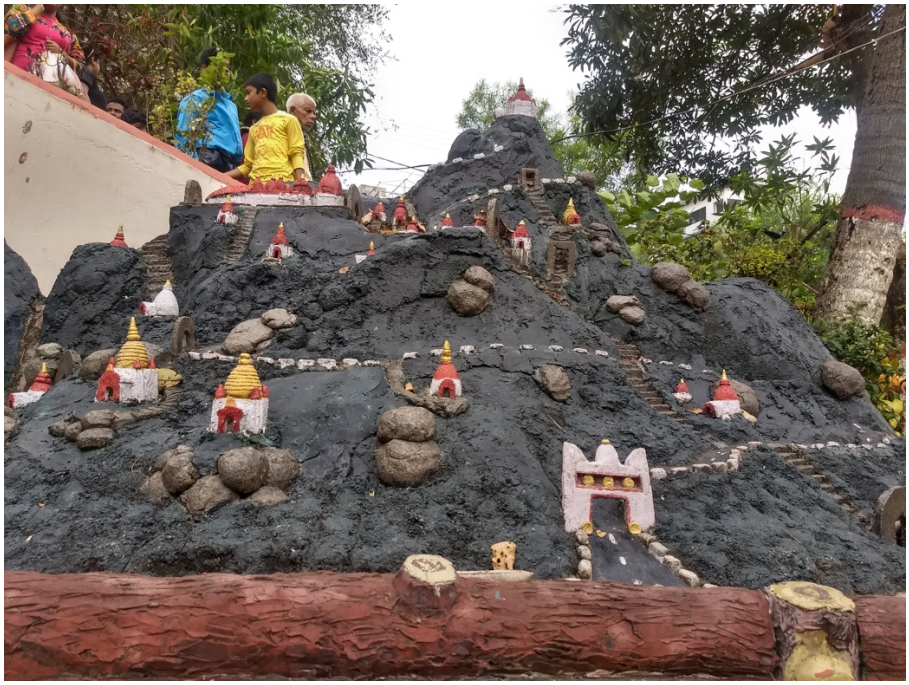

Fig. 1 A miniature exhibit of Nilachal hill with Kamakhya temple at the top along with *Mahavidya* and other minor temples. (Picture taken in 2017)

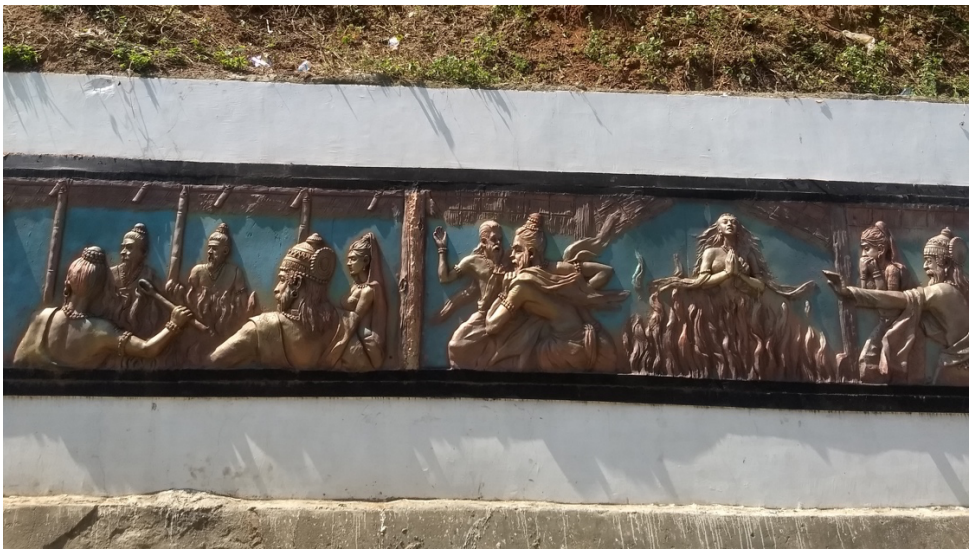

Fig. 2 A road-wall display of Sati episode found on the way to the temple. (Picture taken in 2018)

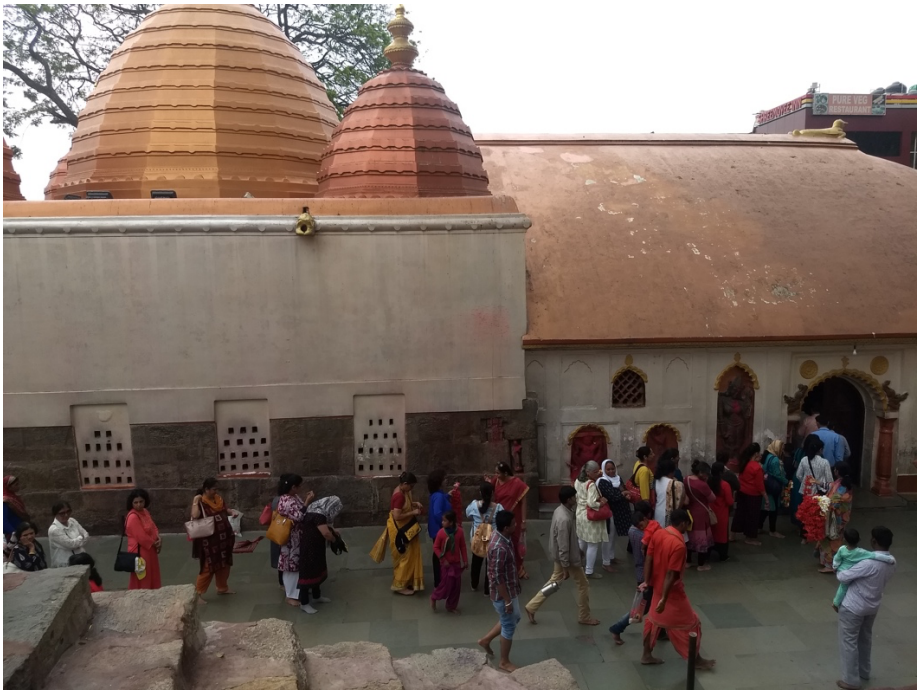

Fig. 3 Kamakhya visitors on a normal day. (Picture taken in 2017)

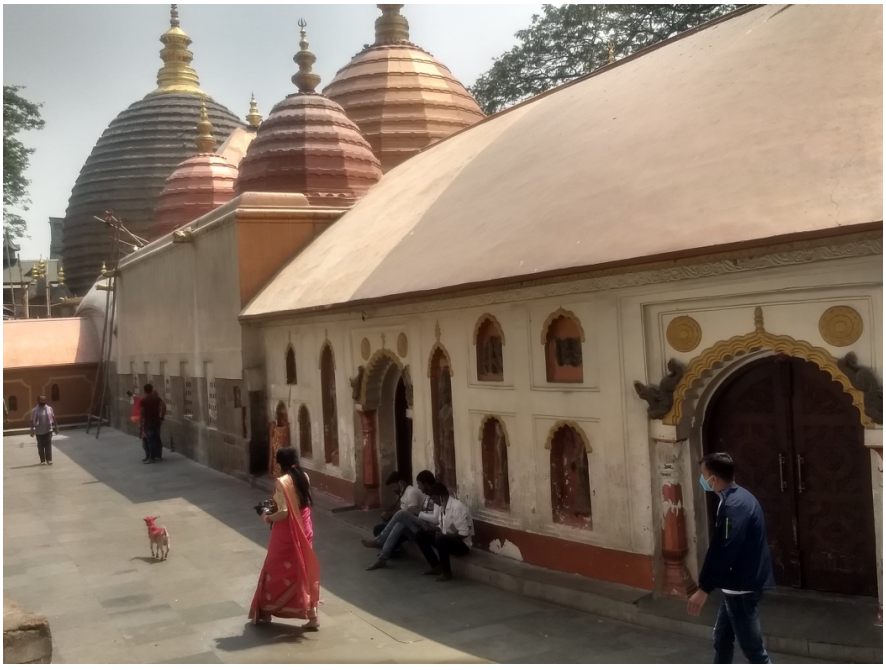

Fig. 4 Kamakhya temple post Covid 19 lockdown. (Picture taken in 2021)

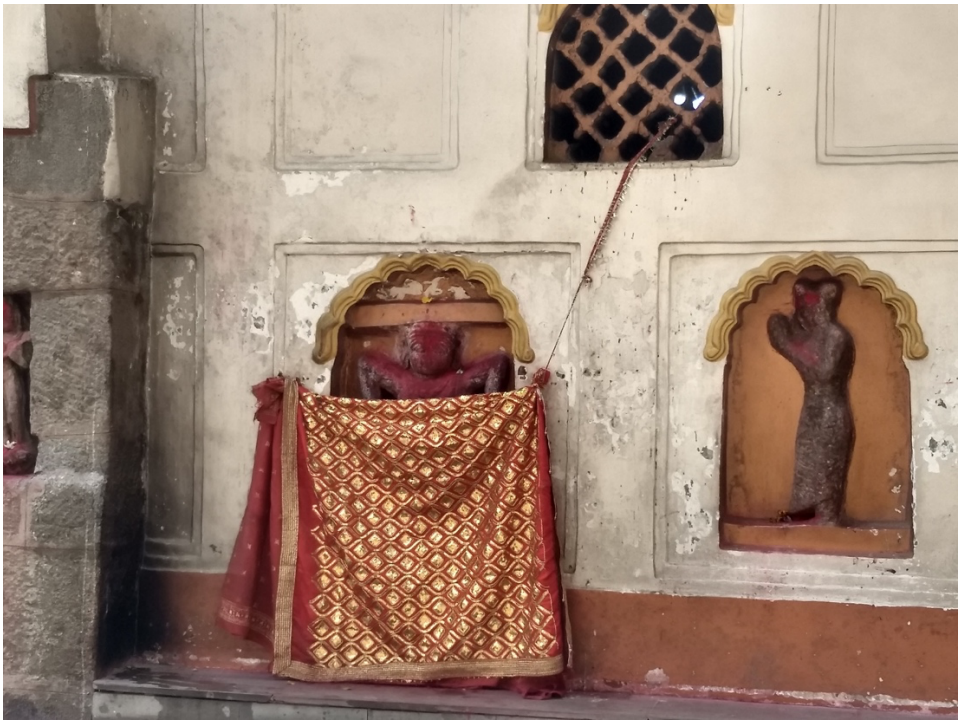

Fig. 5 The icon of menstruating goddess often worshipped as Kamakhya. (Picture taken in 2017)

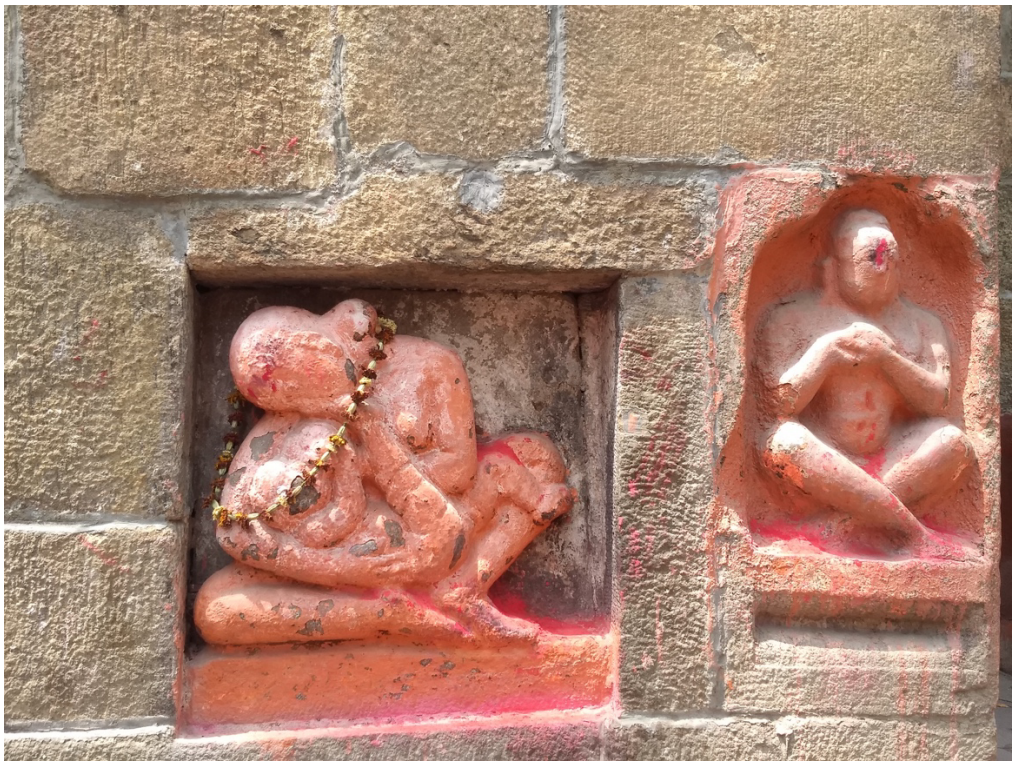

Fig. 6 A figure of mother and child in Kamakhya temple. (Picture taken in 2017)

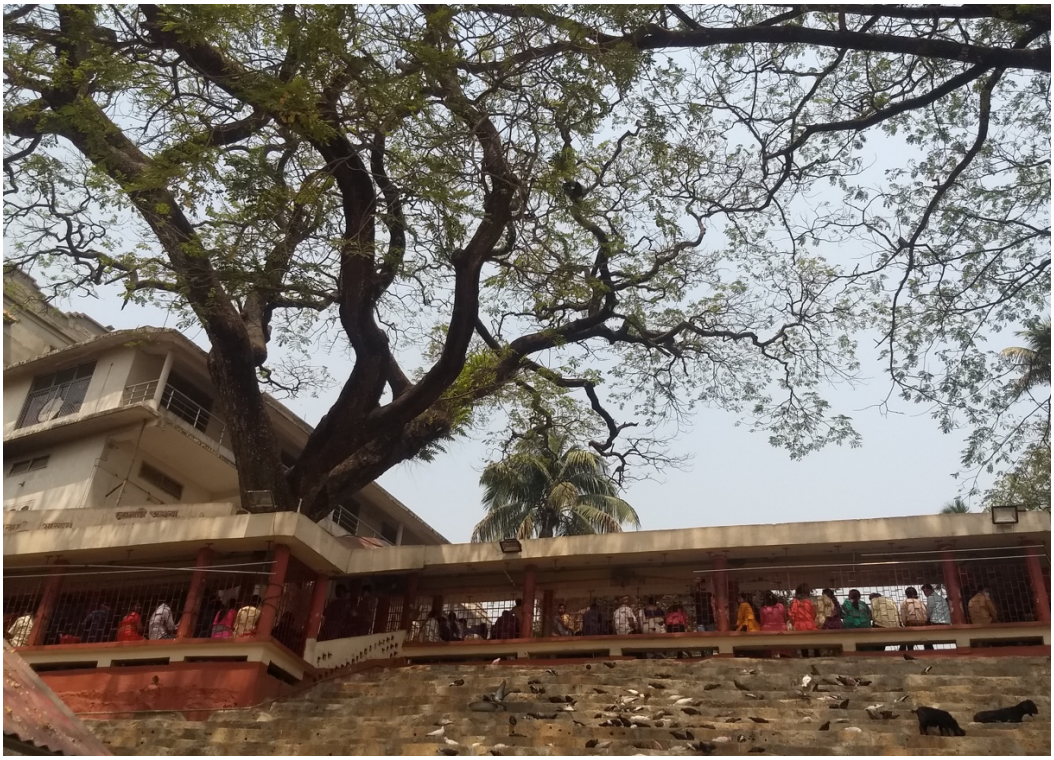

Fig. 7 Devotees waiting in queue to perform *sparxan*. (Picture taken in 2018)

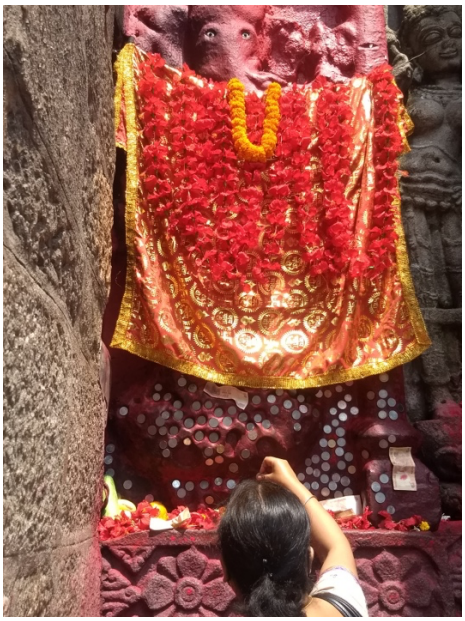

Fig. 8 A female devotee sticking coins at the feet of Hindu deity Ganesh whose icon is accommodated within the Kamakhya temple. (Picture taken in 2018)

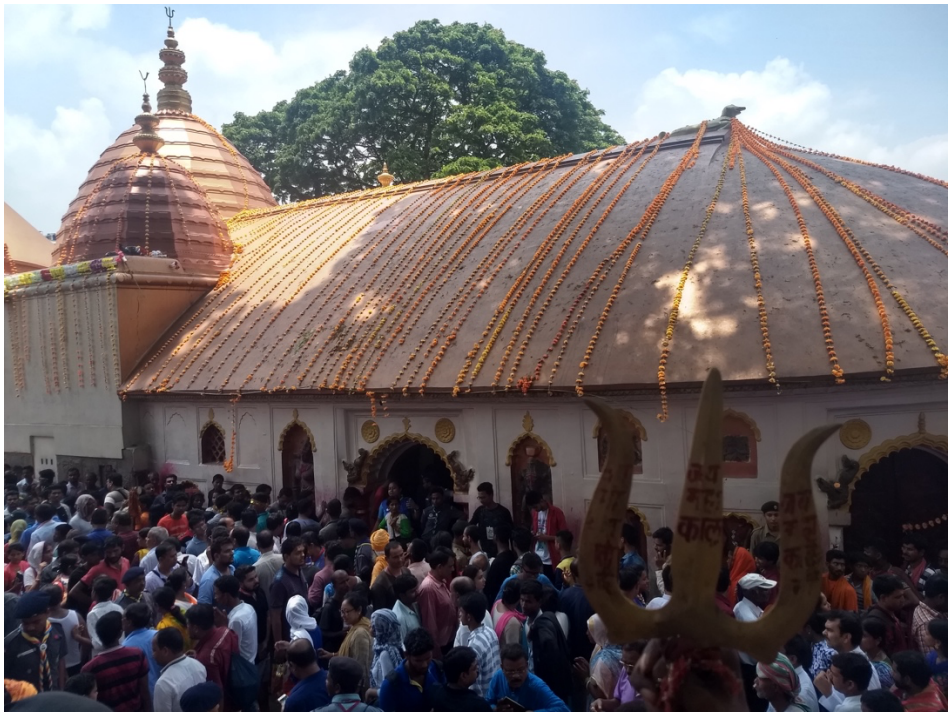

Fig. 9 Gathering at Ambubachi *mela*. (2018)

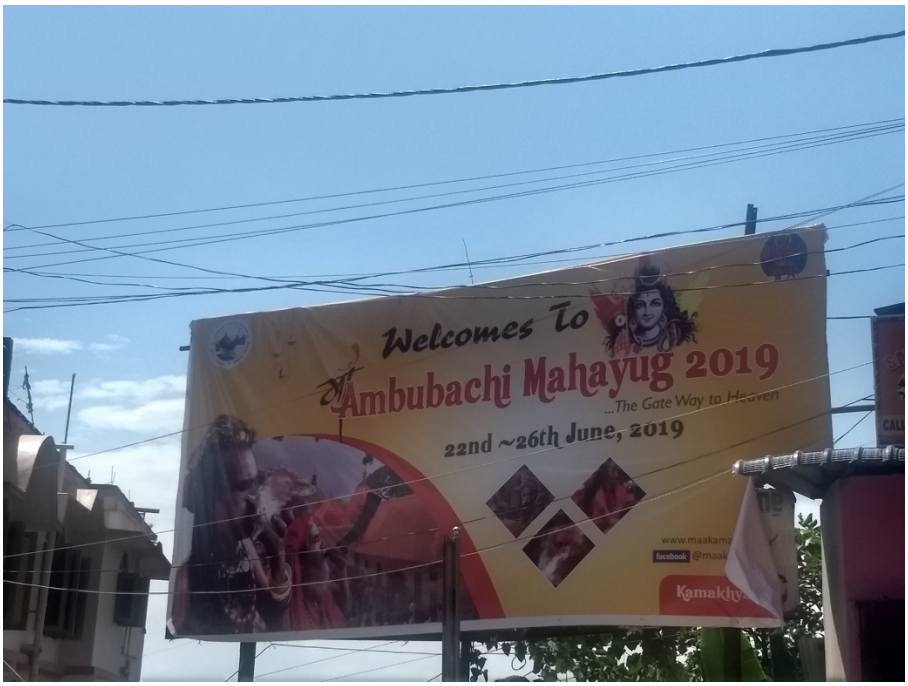

Fig. 10 A poster of Ambubachi with the image of Hindu deity Shiva. (2019)

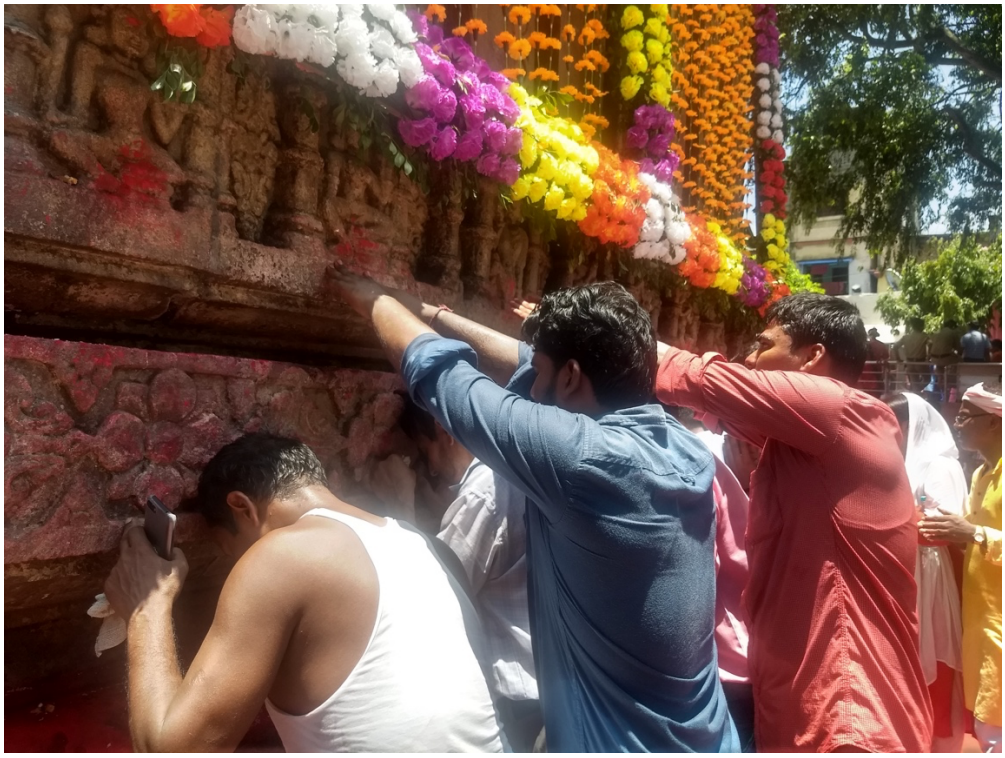

Fig. 11 Devotees worship outside the Kamakhya temple during Ambubachi 2019.

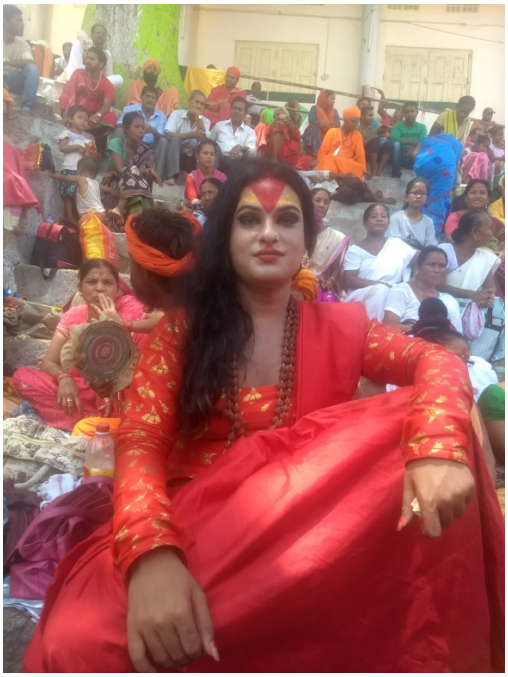

Fig. 12 Presence of transgender community during Ambubachi. (Picture taken in 2019)

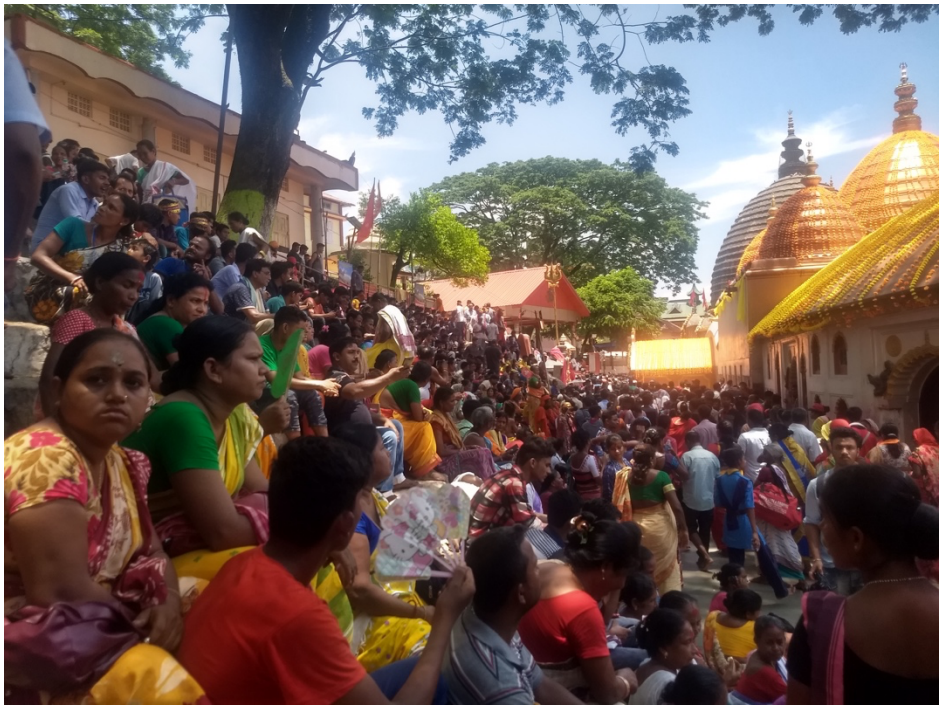

Fig. 13 Women from neighbouring villages, many observing *vrata* during Ambubachi. (Picture taken in 2018)

Fig. 14 A *baba* (moderately covered) standing for alms or selfies whatever comes his way during Ambubachi. (Picture taken in 2019)

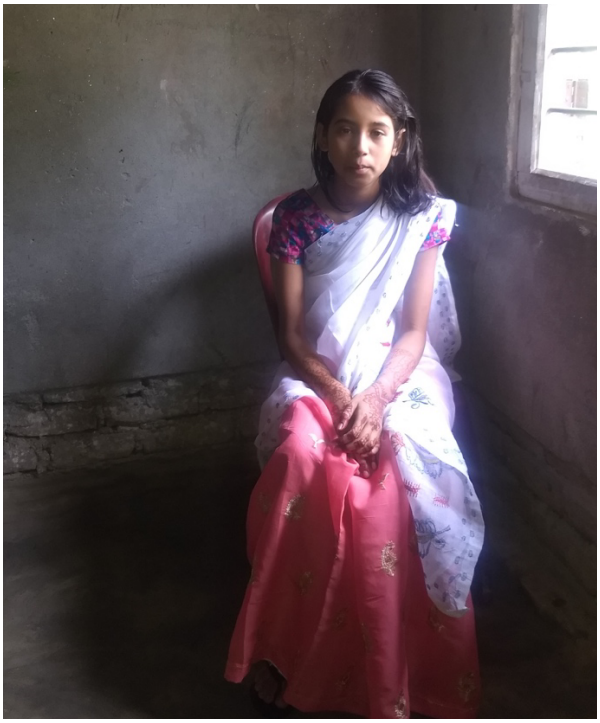

Fig. 15 Pooja Saikia right after her purification bath. (Picture taken in 2019)

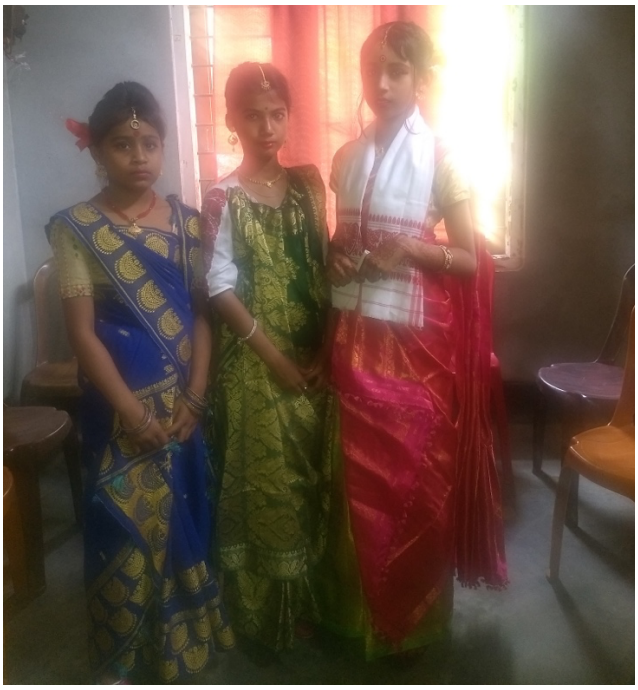

Fig. 16 *Koyna* (in pink *sador mekhela*) along with two of her *sakhi*s. (Picture taken in 2019)

Fig. 17 & 18 *Gupini*s performing *naamere xuddhikaran* (purified through *naam*) in a *tulina biya*. (Picture taken in 2019)

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