



Priests and practices: understanding the socio-religious scenario of Kamakhya temple

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Abstract

Every religion in its own tradition builds houses of worship. In Hinduism, temples are the major places of worship and have great role in the religious and socio-cultural life of the people of that place. In Assam, Kamakhya temple is the largest ancient temple and it has been playing an important role in the socio-religious life of the people of this region. The priests of the temple are working for generations and with change in , the nature of their work, their life styles and their involvement in the temple activates have undergone remarkable changes. The present paper tries to highlight the socio-cultural scenario of Kamakhya temple along with the activities and assignments of the priests residing in the Nilachal Hill. The paper is based on both primary and secondary data. The primary data has been collected with the help of well-designed questionnaire- cum schedule. The data so collected has been analysed for clean exposition.

Keywords: temple, religious, priests, worshipping.

1. Introduction

The word temple or 'mandir' (in Sanskrit) is used to mention a place of worship or prayer where people get mental peace and seek prosperity, comfort and fortune in life. Temples are regarded as the most sacred among all the artifacts, hence occupy a special place in the life of every Hindu. The temple in India originated as a place of worship or a cult centre. Temples were systematically built up as an institute and it has been the centre for all human activities such as social, economic and cultural. In ancient period, temples were regarded as the centres of power by the kings and other ruling authorities. Temples of early days were witnesses of the change of religious and socio-cultural history of that period. The capital city of Assam, Guwahati is an ancient town and carries a rich heritage of both the political and

religious traditions. Kamakhya devalaya, the largest temple of Guwahati is a famous shrine of Goddess worship. The kings of different dynasties patronized Kamakhya temple. The temple received huge grant of land, men and other properties mainly from the Ahom kings. The religious festivals were celebrated with great pomp and ceremonies and this tradition is been followed in the present days as well. Different categories of people were assigned to serve the temple and the descendants of their families are still serving the temple. But with the passage of time, the religious performances and the activities of the priests and other functionaries have changed. In the present paper an attempt has been made to highlight the socio-cultural scenario of Kamakhya temple along with the practices of the priests engaged in the temple activities.

2. Objectives

The objectives of the present paper are

- i) to understand socio-cultural scenario of Kamakhya temple,
- ii) to describe the religious activities performed in the temple, and
- iii) to investigate the practices of the priests in temple activities.

3. Database and methodology

The present study is based on both the primary and secondary data. The sources of secondary data are books, journals and different published and unpublished documents, etc. On the other hand, questionnaire survey and interviews with the priests and other persons related with the temple as well as the personal observations in the study area are the sources of primary data. There are about 270 priests working actively in the temple and out of them, information from 91 priests have been gathered.

The data so collected has been analysed by using appropriate quantitative techniques for clear exposition.

4. Kamakhya temple: A brief history

Kamakhya Devalaya, the famous '*shakti*' shrine of India is located on the Nilachala Hill which is in the north-west part of Guwahati city. In ancient times Kamakhya temple was accessible from four sides of the hill and each path had different name. The path in the north was known as the '*Swargadwar*', south was known as the '*Singhadwar*', east was known as the '*Byaghradwar*' and west was known as the '*Hanumantadwar*'. The earlier pilgrims coming by the boat used the paths of north and west sides but due to natural reasons these paths can no longer be used. Now Kamakhya temple is accessible either by the road in the south or the stairs in the east.

The main temple of Kamakhya is surrounded by thirteen other minor and subsidiary temples and those are collectively known as '*Nanan Devalaya*' and among them ten are also famous as '*Dasamahabidya*'. In the temples of '*Dasamahabidya*', goddess is worshipped in ten forms, namely, '*Kali*', '*Tara*', '*Sodasi*', '*Bhubaneswari*', '*Bhairavi*', '*Chinnamasta*', '*Dhumavati*', '*Bagala*', '*Matangi*' and '*Kamala*'. The shrines of '*Matangi*' and I are situated along with the main peeth i. e. the '*yonipeeth*' and the remaining other forms of the goddess are worshipped in separate temples in the surrounding area of the main temple. All these temples including the main shrine of

Kamakhya are surrounded by the houses of the priests and other inhabitants and the business establishments related to the temple activities in all the sides.

This famous '*shaktipeeth*' is associated with different legends. In Kalika Puran, it is said that Sati breathed her last at the insult faced by her husband Shiva in the '*yagnya*' arranged by her father Daksha. At this, Shiva in deep grief wandered about the world carrying her dead body on his shoulders. All the gods and goddesses scared about the incident requested Vishnu to put a stop to the penance of Shiva. With his Sudarshan Chakra Vishnu cut the body of Sati into 51 pieces and the places where the pieces of the body fall became sacred. The genital part of sati fell in the Nilachala hill and the site become famous as the Kamakhya peeth. The same work in another place, says that the mountain represent the body of Shiva himself and when Sati's organ fell on it, the hill turned blue and known as Nilachala (the hill of blue color).

There are various legends regarding the temple building. According to one legend, the Indian cupid Kama was sent by the gods to break Shiva's mourning after the death of his wife Sati. But Shiva became furious at Kama's efforts and burnt him into ashes. Later kama regained his body at the prayer of his wife Rati by Shiva on the condition of building a temple on the genital part of Sati. Kama with the help of Biswakarma the carpenter and architect of Indian mythology constructed the temple of Kamakhya. Another legend says, the role of Naraka, the legendary king of ancient Assam in constructing the temple. According to this, Naraka became the king of Pragjyotishpura and was a devotee of Kamakhya. But, one day when the goddess appeared before him, he was attracted by the beauty of the goddess and wanted to marry her. At this, the goddess laid some conditions before him and to fulfill the conditions, Naraka constructed a temple, a pond and a road from the foothill to the top within one night. But nothing is clearly known about the first building of the temple and its builder.

It is only since the rise of Koch dynasty in the sixteenth century the history of the Kamakhya temple known. During the reign of the king Viswasingha, a temple of gold was constructed at that site. The original temple was destroyed either by the natural calamities or by the attacks of invaders. The stone inscriptions seen at the main shrine says that the temple was build in '*Saka*' 1487 (A. D. 1565) by the king Malladeva

(Naranarayan) and his Brother Sukladhaja (Chilarai).

5. Religious activities

In Kamakhya temple, the main door is opened in the morning and at first the temple is cleaned. The red cloth covering the shrine is changed every day by the priests after the '*snana*' (bath) of the shrine. After getting the materials ready for worshipping from the '*bharalghar*' (store room) of the temple, main priest start the processes of worshipping. A goat is sacrificed (*balidan*) and the blood of that goat is kept in two bowls in front of the goddess and the priest offers it to the goddess by uttering '*mantras*' (sacred lines). On the other hand, in the separated head of the sacrificed goat a '*pradeep*' (lamp) of ghee and camphor is lighted and offered to the goddess. After completing the dily puja, the doors of the temple are opened for the pilgrims. Again in 1 pm the doors of the temple are closed for offering the '*bhog*'. The '*bhog*' is non vegetarian and cooked in the '*bhog ghar*' (kitchen) of the temple. After the completion of the '*bhog*' offering the door of the temple is again opened and remains opened for pilgrims till the sunset. In the evening *aarati* is performed before the goddess. At this time different types of sweet dishes are offered as the '*prasad*'. Only the priest can enter inside the temple at this time of '*sandhya aarati*'. The temple remains closed during the night.

Besides the daily worshipping, lots of annual festivals are observed in Kamakhya temple. Among all these festivals '*ambubachi*' is the biggest and attracts lakhs of pilgrims to the temple from far and wide. This festival lasts for four days and commences generally in the last week of June month. This festival is considered to be the menstrual ceremony of the Earth goddess. On this occasion the doors of the main temples are closed to all including the priests for three days at a stretch and then reopened on the fourth day. In the case of Kamakhya temple, this ceremony has its special importance since the main object of worship here is said to be the genital organ of the goddess. Another important festival of Kamakhya temple is '*manasa puja*' or '*debaddhani*'. In Kamakhya temple Manasa Puja is observed as Debaddhani festival and starts on the last day of '*Shravana*' and continues up to the second day of '*Bhadra*'. In the second day of this festival the dance of the '*deodhas*' commences. The dance of the '*deodhas*' consists of very rigorous movements interspersed with shrill shrieks. They hold swords, batons and animal offerings on their hands

and shoulders. Other important festivals of Kamakhya temple are '*durga puja*', '*kali puja*', '*doul yatra or holi*', '*basanti puja*' '*puja of gramya devata*', '*pohan biya or har-gauri bibah*', '*lakshmi puja*', '*shiva ratri*', etc. The celebrations of all these annual festivals in different months and tithes attract pilgrims from different parts of the country and the foreigners also.

6. Religious practices and the priests

Kamakhya temple has its importance as one of the large and ancient shrines of India as well as the great centre of '*sakti*' worship. It is estimated that Kamakhya temple possessed a total of 2820.67 hectares of land at different places of greater Kamrup region (Adhikary, 2001). In Kamakhya temple worship of goddess in different forms are prevalent from the ancient time. Kamakhya temple received royal patronages from different dynasties in the form of constructing the temple building, assigning different categories of people, endowing land and other properties, etc. The Ahom kings brought brahman families to regulate the temple's daily activities and assigned different responsibilities of daily performance of '*puja*' in the temple to the brahmans of different clans. These brahmans received a fairly large amount of land and other properties from the kings for their service to the temple. These families were completely involved with the temple's affairs and their life and livelihood also grew centering the temple. The descendants of these families are known as the '*bardeuri*'. The present priests of the temple are the members of these families and only they have the right to act as the priests of the temple and do the daily worshipping. No other priests can perform '*puja*' in the temples of the Kamakhya group. As already mentioned, about 270 people are engaged in this profession in Kamakhya temple and 91 of them have been interviewed for the present study. An attempt is made in the following paragraphs to investigate some of the important aspects related with the activities of the priests of the temple.

Age structure: The priests, presently working in the temple are all Assamese speakers and there is no age limit for them to enter into the priestly work, but the only requirement is that he should be a full fledged Brahman who wear '*yangyapobit*' (sacred thread) through proper rituals. On the other hand, a Brahman can perform priestly works till his health permits. The surveyed data speaks to the fact that 32.96 per cent of the priests of the temple belong to

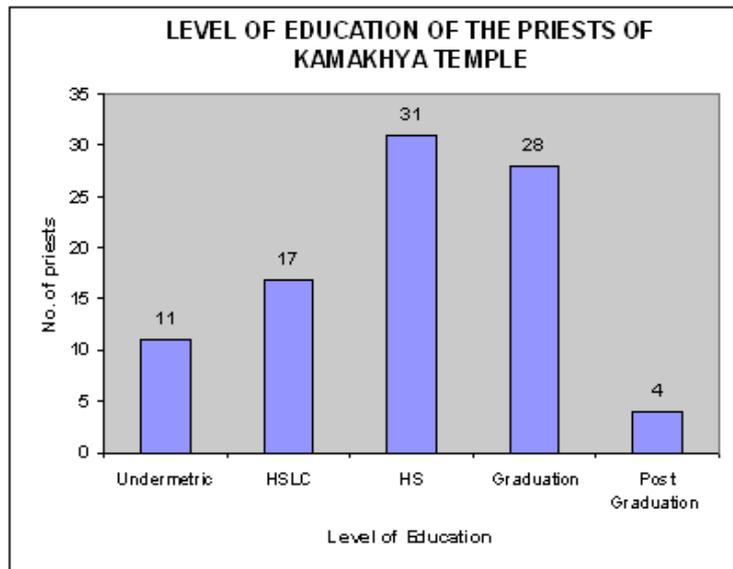


Fig.1 :

the age group of 40-50 years followed by 27.47 percent in the age group 30-40 years. The percentage share of priests in the age group below 20 years and above 60 years is found to be 5.49 and 4.39 respectively (Fig. 1).

Educational qualifications: When the

educational qualifications of the priests of Kamakhya temple are assessed it is observed that 31 priests have completed their graduations and only 4 are post graduates. On the other hand, there are 11 undermetric, 17 HSLC passed and 31 HS passed priests out of 91 priests interviewed (Fig. 2).

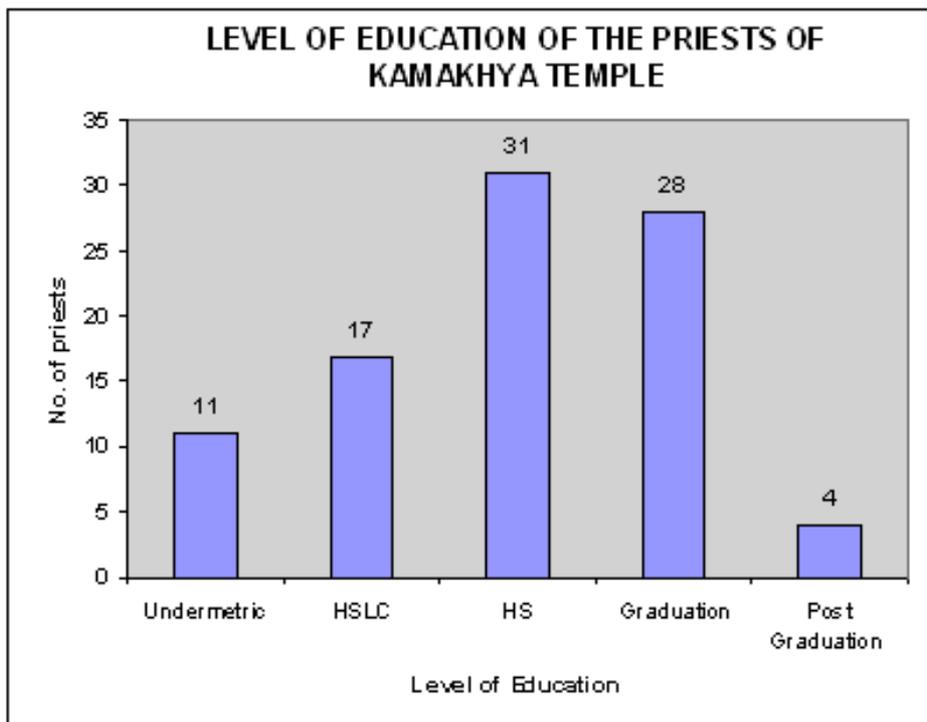


Fig.2 :

Period of Engagement: It has been noticed that the entry of people in the priestly work is a continuing process and the time period served as the priests are found to be ranging from more than 30 years to less than 5 years. Table 1 show that 24.17 per cent of priests

have been working in the temple for 20-25 years followed by 20.88 per cent for 15-20 years and 14.28 per cent for 10-15 years. The percentage shares of priests working for more 30 years and less than 5 years in the temple are 13.18 and 8.88 per cent respectively.

Table 1 : Period of Engagement of the Priests in Kamakhya Temple

Duration	p. c.
Less than 5 Years	8.88
5-10 years	10.98
10-15 years	14.28
15-20 years	20.88
20-25 years	24.17
25-30 years	13.18
More than 30 years	7.77
Total	100.00

Reason of engagement: The priests of temple are the successors of the ‘bardeuri’ families. But now these people have shifted to other professions apart from the priesthood. Among the priests interviewed, 50 stated that in order to carry on with the tradition of their forefathers they have volunteered to work as priests. 15 priests have said that they choose this profession because of economic reasons and the remaining 26 priests opined that it was both for

tradition and economic reasons they have chosen to become priests (Fig. 3).

Working hours: Out of the 91 priests surveyed it has been observed that 40 priests work for more than 10 hours in the temple, 35 priests work for 8-10 hours and only 16 priests work for 4-8 hours in a day. This shows that the average working hour of the priests is quite high and during different pujas when the flow of pilgrims is very high they have no time to rest (Fig. 4).

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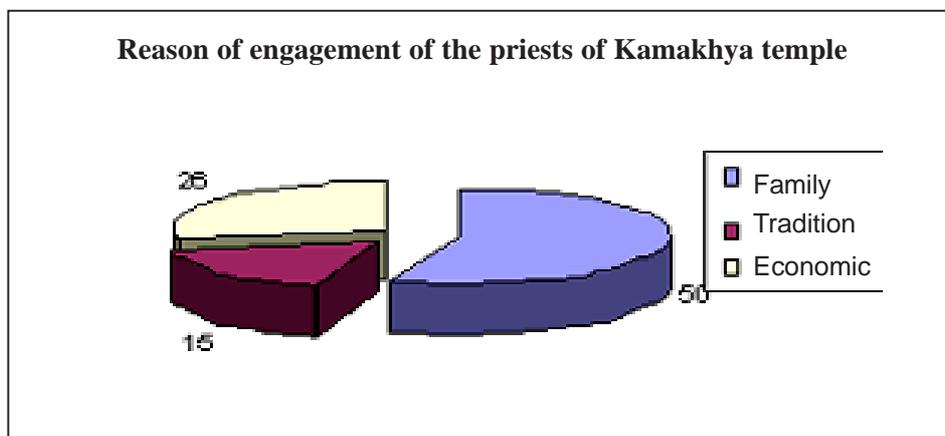


Fig. 3 :

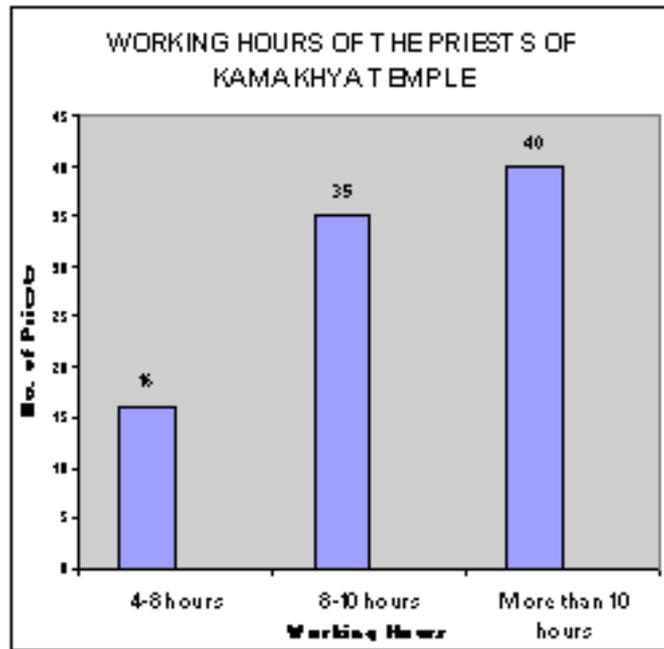


Fig. 4 :

Engagement in temple activity: It has been observed from the field that 70.32 per cent of the priests depend solely on the activities performed in the temple to earn their living. On the other hand, 10.99 per cent are primarily engaged in business and services and the works in the temple are subsidiary occupation. 18.68 per cent of the priests have stated that, they work in the temple as and when required, but are also engaged in other economic activities for a descent standard of living.

As the temple is visited by the pilgrims from different parts of the country and abroad, the priests of the temple can speak different languages besides their mother tongue Assamese to serve the pilgrims.

Most of the priests can converse well in Bengali, Hindi, Odiya, Nepali and English. It has observed that some them can also speak a few of south Indian language which they said have learnt from their clients. It is interesting to note that 90 per cent of the priests can speak at least three of the above stated languages and Bengali and Hindi are spoken by almost all the priests.

Dress pattern: All the priests when they are in work wear traditional dress- red coloured dhuti and red chadar or kurta or shirts. In early days, the priests wore only dhuti- kurta and naamavali for the whole life. But now-a-days, most of the priests wear this traditional dress only at the time of worshipping in

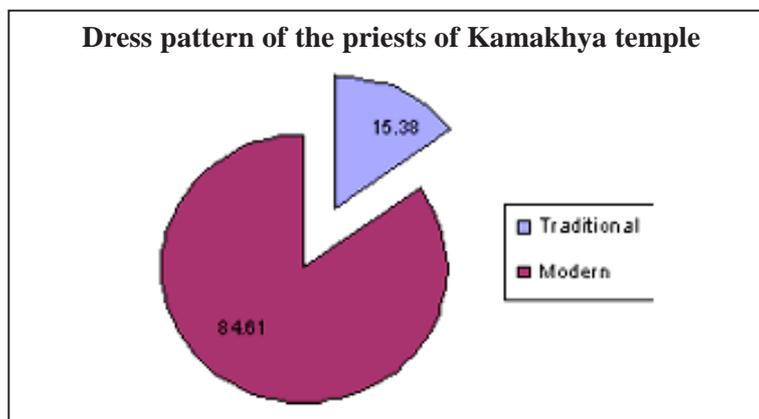


Fig. 5 :

the temple. Outside the temple they wear modern dresses. It is observed that only the elderly priests wear traditional dress even outside the temple. Fig. 5 show that only 15.38 per cent of the priests maintains the traditional dress habits and remaining 84.62 per cent priests wear modern dresses.

House type and amenities: The houses of the priests of Kamakhya temple are well constructed. The house types can be categorized as Assam type pacca houses and RCC houses. 37.36 per cent priests have Assam type pacca houses and 62.64 per cent priests have RCC houses. However, the settlement pattern surrounding the temple is very dense and the vertical expansions of the buildings are observed.

During the field study, it is noticed that most of the houses are equipped with almost all the modern facilities. 78.02 per cent priests have two wheelers and 25.27 per cent have four wheelers. 90.11 per cent of the priests have refrigerators and 63.74 per cent have washing machines. The percentage shares of the priests having inverters and computers in their homes are 51.56 and 43.95 respectively. On the other hand, 94.50 per cent priests use mobile phones and all the priests have TVs in their homes. This shows that their standard of living is quite good.

7. Role of women in the temple activities

The women of the priest families do not have

any direct role in the temple's activities. They are not allowed to perform the daily puja in the temple. But, they have an important role as the host of the clients or pilgrims. The women of the houses take care of the pilgrims coming from distant places and arrange the necessary materials for the intending puja of the pilgrims.

8. Conclusion

Kamakhya temple is the largest and one of the most visited temples of Assam. The temple received patronages from different royal dynasties in the form of land and other properties. The daily worshipping in the temple which was initiated was by the Ahom kings still continues along with the annual festivals which are observed in the temple. The pilgrims from different parts of the country and abroad visit the temple regularly and offer prayers. The priests, besides participating in the daily worshipping of the temple serve the pilgrims who visit the temple. The priests of different age groups and qualifications are engaged in the temple activities, which help them to earn a living for themselves and their family. Remarkable changes have been observed among them in all spheres right from their dress pattern to their participation in the temple activities. However, they are found to have a descent lifestyle and enjoy all the modern day amenities.

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