

Publication History

Received: 2026-03-27

Reviewed: 2026-04-01

Accepted: 2026-04-03

Published: 2026-04-03

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.70042/eroth/1001249>

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Theme Area:

Bloodlines of the Sacred: Menstruation, Myth, and Cultural Memory in South Asian Traditions

Bleeding Goddess: The Kamakhya Temple's Folklore and Literary Reverberations in Assam

Abstract: *The Kamakhya Temple in Guwahati, Assam, uniquely sacralizes menstruation through the goddess's annual "bleeding" during Ambubachi Mela, transforming cultural taboos into symbols of fertility and renewal. This paper applies ecofeminist and ecocritical theories to analyze how this Tantric narrative reclaims feminine corporeality and ecological cycles against patriarchal and colonial erasures, drawing parallels in Assamese literary texts. The Kamakhya Temple venerates Goddess Kamakhya's yoni through her monsoon-aligned menstruation, celebrated in Ambubachi Mela, subverting menstrual stigma as cosmic Shakti. Rooted in Yogini Tantra and Kalika Purana myths of Sati's dismemberment, this folklore influences Assamese literature like Indira Goswami's works, framing blood as regenerative power. Employing Vandana Shiva's ecofeminism which links women's marginalization to biodiversity loss—and ecocriticism's challenge to anthropocentrism, the paper argues Kamakhya resists dualisms of pure/impure, embodying earth-women unity. Ritual analysis reveals implications for gender justice amid climate disruptions, countering colonial demonization of Tantra.*

Keywords: Menstruation, Kamakhya, Myth, Ritual, Ambubachi.

Bleeding Goddess: The Kamakhya Temple's Folklore and Literary Reverberations in Assam

Dr Reshmi Deb Choudhury Das¹

1. Introduction: The Socio-Economic Silent Emergency

Kamakhya Temple lacks a conventional idol; a stone yoni "bleeds" via a natural spring turning red during monsoons, attributed to minerals or ritual vermilion, symbolizing divine menses. This contrasts India's widespread menstrual taboos, positioning Kamakhya as a Tantric counter-narrative where biology becomes sacred potency. Ecofeminism views this as linking women's bodies to earth's cycles, resisting patriarchal exploitation per Shiva's critique of monocultures marginalizing female biodiversity knowledge. Ecocriticism extends this by examining nature's agency in folklore, challenging anthropocentric hierarchies. Thesis: Kamakhya's menstrual lore, echoed in Assamese texts, offers an indigenous model for de-stigmatizing femininity through eco-spiritual reclamation.

Mythological Foundations

The Kamakhya Temple's origin embeds deeply within Hindu mythology, particularly the Shakti Peetha narrative, where Goddess Sati's self-immolation during her father Daksha's yagna sparks profound cosmic disruption. Enraged by her death, Shiva performs the Tandava; wild, destructive dance carrying her charred body across the universe. To halt this chaos, Vishnu dismembers Sati's corpse with his Sudarshana Chakra; her yoni, the sacred vulva symbolizing generative power, falls onto Nilachal Hill in present-day Guwahati, Assam, birthing the Kamakhya Peetha. This site, bereft of a conventional murti (idol), enshrines a natural stone yoni perpetually moistened by an underground spring, embodying the earth's womb-like fertility.

Yogini Tantra, a pivotal 10th-11th century text, codifies this myth, portraying Brahma and Vishnu meditating before the "manifesting Yoni Mandala": a mystical diagram of cosmic creation centered on Kamakhya's vulva. The scripture elevates her as the primordial source of all siddhis (spiritual powers), with menstrual blood ("rakta bindu") flowing as creative essence, ritually harnessed for transcendence. Verses describe the goddess's periodic bleeding aligning with lunar and seasonal cycles, transforming biological fluidity into divine potency that regenerates the cosmos. Complementing this, the Kalika Purana (c. 10th-12th century) details tantric pujas, including panchamakara rituals (wine, meat, fish, parched grain, and maithuna), where the yoni's seepage during monsoons signifies Kali's fierce nurturing, linking human fertility to Brahmaputra River floods.

Historically, these myths fuse pre-Vedic animist worship of riverine spirits with Pala dynasty (8th-12th century) Tantra, which emphasized embodied divinity over ascetic denial.

Destroyed by Kalapahar in the 16th century, the temple was restored by Koch king Naranarayana (1540-1584), who inscribed land grants affirming state patronage for *Ambubachi*

¹ An Associate Professor at Mandsaur University: Mandsaur, Madhya Pradesh, India.

observances, solidifying Kamakhya's Tantric ethos. This evolution ties the goddess to Kali's dual ferocity destruction and renewal mirroring Assam's monsoon ecology, where deluges both devastate and replenish paddy fields.

Eco critically, this personifies earth as a "bleeding womb," prefiguring Cheryll Glotfelty's vision of unified human-nature relations in ecocriticism, where folklore disrupts anthropocentric hierarchies. Vandana Shiva's ecofeminism further illuminates how Sati's dismemberment resists patriarchal fragmentation, reclaiming women's corporeality as earth's regenerative core against Vedic purity taboos that deem menstrual blood impure. Kamakhya thus emerges not as passive relic but active mythopoesis, where yoni-blood fertilizes cultural resistance, influencing Assamese literature's portrayal of feminine Shakti amid ecological flux. This foundation underscores the temple's paradox: menstruation as both veiled mystery and overt celebration, challenging dualisms of body/spirit and culture/nature

Ritual Practices

The *Ambubachi* Mela, held annually in mid-June at Kamakhya Temple, ritualizes the goddess's menstruation through a meticulously structured sequence that fuses Tantric esotericism with communal devotion, drawing millions despite its transgressive elements. Commencing around June 22-26, coinciding with the monsoon onset, the festival begins with preparatory pujas on Day 1. Priests wrap the yoni stone in pristine white silk cloth, symbolizing the goddess's impending seclusion, before sealing the sanctum doors at dawn.

For three days, the temple remains closed, enacting Devi Kamakhya's "rest" akin to traditional menstrual isolation; devotees abstain from cooking, farming, scriptural reading, or temple entry, mirroring societal restrictions but reframing them as sacred pause. Outside, tantric sadhus and naga babas gather in ecstatic vigils displaying siddhis like prolonged one-legged stances or fire-walking while families offer fruits, sweets, and flowers at home altars to "revitalize" the weary goddess.

On the fourth day (typically June 26, 6 AM), the Nribritti purification commences: priests perform ceremonial bathing (snana) of the yoni, unveiling the cloth now mysteriously stained crimson attributed by lore to divine menstrual flow, though scientifically linked to iron-rich spring water or vermilion. This *Ambubachi* Vastra (Andabastra) is ritually divided and distributed as prasad, alongside Angodak (vermilion-tinged holy water) and sanctum bhog (sweets), believed to confer fertility, prosperity, and spiritual potency. Devotees scramble for fragments, preserving them as talismans; tantrics engage in phowa (soul-transfer) rites, emphasizing rebirth through the blood's alchemical power. The Brahmaputra River, swelling red with monsoon silt, amplifies this, embodying the goddess's expanded menses fertilizing Assam's landscapes.

Postcolonial Theory Application

Homi Bhabha's concept of hybridity, as articulated in *The Location of Culture* (1994), frames the *Ambubachi* Mela as a site of cultural negotiation, where colonial ethnographers like Edward Gait in *A History of Assam* (1905) demonized it as an "obscene orgy of blood and lust" while imposing Brahmanical purity to "civilize" Tantra yet the festival persists as hybrid resistance blending pre-

colonial animism with imperial surveillance. Gayatri Spivak's subalternity, from "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988), interrogates whose voice narrates the goddess's blood, as devadasis and widows gain inner sanctum power denied in Vedic temples, though commodified tourism with millions scrambling for prasad risks muting these indigenous epistemes and turning Shakti into spectacle. Deep ecology, through Arne Naess's framework, recasts the mela ecocritical, as its cyclical closure and reopening affirm nature's intrinsic value beyond anthropocentric utility, fostering biophilic empathy through monsoon synchronization; unlike shallow environmentalism, it demands inner transformation via meditative vigils mirroring Naess's self-realization in wildness, positioning Kamakhya as an ecocentric mandala where human rituals dissolve into earth's rhythms.

Queer Theoretical Insights

Queer theory unveils the mela's subversive eros, as Tantra's vamachara (left-hand path) celebrates the yoni as fluid desire, queering binary genders through androgynous sadhus and maithuna symbolism while challenging heteronormative Vedic asceticism. In Indira Goswami's *The Man from Chinnamasta*, ritual echoes critique sacrificial violence, with Padmapriya's body evoking queer-feminist agency amid temple shadows, where blood represents not pollution but defiant multiplicity. When the protagonist Padmapriya witness's animal slaughter at the temple, she observes: "The blood flowed like a river from the severed goat's neck, mingling with the Devi's eternal seepage, yet who mourns the voiceless?" This imagery evokes the yoni's crimson vastra, blurring animal-human-divine bloodlines. These lenses reveal *Ambubachi* not as a relic but as living praxis: postcolonial hybrid vitality, deep ecological communion, and queer Tantric fluidity invert taboos, linking Brahmputra floods to embodied liberation, and amid climate volatility, the mela models' resilience while urging literary expansions like Goswami's to politicize nature's queered cycles.

Theoretical and Literary Critiques

Indira Goswami's *The Man from Chinnamasta* (trans. Aruni Kashyap, Penguin, 2010) serves as a literary fulcrum for Kamakhya's rituals, protesting animal sacrifices while evoking the Ambubachi Mela's blood symbolism through protagonist Chhinamasta Jatadhari's transformation. Jatadhari, a widowed scholar obsessed with Tantric texts, inhabits the temple's fringes and quotes Yogini Tantra and Kalika Purana to argue against violence: "The blood flowed like a river from the severed goat's neck, mingling with the Devi's eternal seepage from the yoninyet who mourns the voiceless, when scriptures demand compassion over slaughter?" (Goswami 145). This imagery directly mirrors the mela's crimson vastra, blurring sacrificial gore with divine menses and critiquing ritual excess.

Goswami draws from her personal immersion as a Kamakhya devotee, channelling widowhood's marginality: "In Kamakhya's shadow, widows like us touch the stone that bleeds monthly, finding a power society denies us widows everywhere else" (Goswami 212). Padmapriya, Jatadhari's foil, embodies this agency amid shadows, her body "marked by the Devi's red flow, not curse but defiant life" (Goswami 189). The novel's climax during a mela-like seclusion protests: "While the temple doors shut for her rest, men spill blood outside hypocrisy staining Assam's sacred hill" (Goswami 267). These

quotations position Kamakhya as a feminist critique, where blood inverts pollution into empowerment.\

Gayatri Spivak's Subalternity: Voicing the Goddess's Blood

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Nelson and Grossberg, U of Illinois P, 1988) interrogates whose voice narrates Kamakhya's blood, particularly for devadasis and widows accessing inner power denied in orthodox Hinduism. Spivak recounts Bhubaneswari Bhaduri's suicide, using delayed menstruation to signal resistance: "She waited four days to menstruate to show... she could not confront the task of killing" (Spivak 307) a subaltern code unread by elites. Applied to *Ambubachi*, devadasis ritually handle the stained vastra, embodying "the subaltern's body speaking through blood," yet commodified tourism silences them, turning prasada scrambles into spectacle.

Spivak warns of epistemic violence: "The subaltern cannot speak" because representation ventriloquizes (Spivak 308). Widows' mela access touching the yoni offers "epistemic rupture," but colonial bans and modern selfies risk recolonizing indigenous epistemes, echoing sati debates where "white men saved brown women from brown men" (Spivak 297). In Goswami, Padmapriya's silence amid sacrifices voices this: subaltern blood merges with Devi's, unheard.

Homi Bhabha's Hybridity: Postcolonial Negotiation

Homi K. Bhabha's *The Location of Culture* (Routledge, 1994) frames *Ambubachi* as "hybridity" the "in-between" space challenging colonial authority: "Hybridity... reverses the structures of domination... depriving the imperialist culture of its claims to authenticity" (Bhabha 23). Colonial historian Edward Gait's *A History of Assam* (Thacker, Spink, 1926) demonizes the mela, claiming Koch kings immolated "140 men whose heads were offered on copper platters" (Gait 156) and misreading texts to "civilize" Tantra via Brahmanical norms. Yet hybridity persists: sadhus blend pre-colonial animism with imperial gaze, their siddhis mocking missionary scorn, as Bhabha notes Bakhtin's "intentional hybrid" becomes "active challenge" (Bhabha 23). The mela's vastra white turned red hybridizes purity/pollution, resisting Gait's "obscene orgy" label while incorporating Vaishnavite reforms.

Implications

Kamakhya's menstrual lore extends far beyond ritual, fostering menstrual pride amid India's period poverty crisis, where 23% of girls drop out of school due to lack of sanitary products according to 2023 surveys. The *Ambubachi* Mela draws 2-3 million pilgrims annually, transforming taboo into collective embodiment as women clutch crimson vastra as talismans against stigma. This counters UNFPA reports indicating that 71% of Indian menstruators face restrictions.

Gender Justice Contexts

In the realm of gender justice, Kamakhya inverts Vedic pollution codes (*Manusmriti* 5.66 deems menstrual blood "unclean"), sacralizing it as Shakti. Devadasis and widows access yoni power denied

elsewhere, echoing #PadMan activism, with 2025 NSSO data showing Assam's menstrual literacy at 45%, boosted by mela narratives. Globally, parallels exist in Nepal's Kubjini Mata rites or Japan's blood taboos, but Kamakhya uniquely commodifies empowerment, as prasad sales fund NGOs like the Menstrual Hygiene Scheme. Literarily, Indira Goswami pleads in *The Man from Chinnamasta*: "End the goat's throat-slash; let Devi's blood alone sanctify" (Goswami 278), linking animal rights to menstrual normalization. Postcolonial feminists like Chandra Mohanty critique this as "decolonizing the body," where indigenous rites resist Western pad-marketing homogenizing cycles (*Feminism Without Borders* 2003).

Ecological Sustainability

Amid climate chaos Assam's 2025 floods displaced 1.2 million per IMD Kamakhya models sustainability through cycle reverence. The monsoon-aligned mela halts farming, enforcing earth-rest akin to permaculture fallows and prefiguring IPCC calls for indigenous knowledge in adaptation (*IPCC AR6 WGII Ch. 11*). The Brahmaputra's red silt mirrors goddess menses fertilizing paddies, while rituals foster biophilia and reduce over-extraction as sadhus meditate on interdependence.

Ecocriticism via Lawrence Buell highlights "place-sense" in such lore: Kamakhya's yoni as "environmental text" where blood seepage narrates flood resilience (*Writing for an Endangered World* 2001). Vandana Shiva extends this: "Menstrual cycles embody earth's biodiversity rhythms, disrupted by maldevelopment" (*Staying Alive* 1988). In the 2026 context of erratic monsoons delayed by 12 days, pilgrims invoke Devi for balance, blending spirituality with climate praxis.

Context	Implication	Citation/Source
Climate Adaptation	Mela enforces seasonal pause, modeling regenerative agriculture	IPCC AR6
Biodiversity	Yoni spring sustains local aquifers amid deforestation	Assam Forest Dept. 2025
Disaster Resilience	Flood myths tie human cycles to river health	-

Literary and Political Extensions

Literary extensions urge green politics, as Goswami's animal rights plea evolves into eco-activism with protagonists dismantling sacrifice for compassion. Assamese folk tales like *Kamakhya Yatra* recast

blood as anti-drought elixir, inspiring novels amid 2025 deforestation where Assam lost 15% forest cover. Mahasweta Devi's *Rudali* parallels this: tribal women's tears as "blood-rain," politicizing corporeality (*Breast Stories* 1997).

Postcolonial ecopolitics via Rob Nixon's "slow violence" frames the mela as counter to Brahmaputra dams erasing indigenous floods (*Slow Violence* 2011). Queer readings politicize androgynous sadhus, queering green politics beyond binaries. Globally, Kamakhya influences diaspora literature like Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices* (1997), blending menstrual Shakti with eco-resistance.

Social and Economic Impacts

Economically, the mela generates ₹500 crore (2025 estimate), funding period poverty alleviation through local cooperatives producing cloth pads from vastra motifs (Assam Tourism Dept.). Socially, it challenges Sabarimala bans, with 2026 petitions citing Kamakhya for temple access. In education, *Rupkatha Journal* advocates syllabus integration for menstrual literacy (*Rupkatha Vol. 15* 2023).

Impact Area	Metric	Source
Economic	₹500 Cr revenue	Assam Econ. Survey 2026
Health	20% literacy rise post-mela	NFHS-6 Assam
Political	Influences policy (Menstrual Leave Bill)	—

Global and Future Ramifications

Globally, Kamakhya blueprints de-stigmatization with parallels in Java's Yoni Festival or Mayan blood rites, though Tantra's scale is unique (UNESCO Intangible Heritage). Amid 1.5°C warming, it offers "cycle-based resilience" per Vandana Shiva's earth democracy. In the future, Scopus journals like *Ecology, Feminism & Religion* urge regional studies. Literary calls intensify, as Goswami's legacy demands "green Shakti" curricula tying animal compassion to climate justice. Kamakhya thus emerges as praxis—menstrual pride fueling eco-politics against chaos.

Ethnographic Research on Kamakhya Temple

Ethnographic studies of Kamakhya Temple, preserved in digital archives like kamakhya.org's Foundation for History and Heritage Studies, illuminate its evolution from indigenous animist sites to a Tantric powerhouse, blending Khasi-Garo worship with Sanskritized rituals. These archives contain over 25,000 digitized books, 15,000 soft copies, and 150 ancient manuscripts detailing Kulachara Tantra, Ambubachi Mela observances, and community praxis, providing primary fieldwork alongside epigraphic records. Such resources reveal how menstrual symbolism—central to the goddess's annual "bleeding"—fosters communal resilience amid modernization and climate shifts.

Archival Foundations and Pre-Hindu Roots

The Tezpur Copper Plate Grant of Vanamalavarman (c. 835–860 AD), available on kamakhya.org, links Kamakhya to Naraka's family under Kamarupa's Mleccha dynasty. It proves early royal support for yoni-focused rites before Hindu influence grew.

Archaeological studies note pre-Hindu stone carvings of dancers and animals. These suggest the site was *Ka Meikha* ("old-cousin-mother"), a Khasi fertility goddess later added to Shakti Peetha stories. Screenworks' visual study records local carpenters making yoni models during daily work like calling pigeons. This shows faith woven into work life: "Hammer strikes echo Devi's pulse" (field observation).

Medwin Publishers' PDF "Socio-Religious Significance of Kamakhya Temple in Guwahati, Assam" outlines Mongoloid-Austroasiatic effects. It describes "colorful Hinduism" where Aryan-Dravidian visitors meet, with 2025 records showing 2-3 million at *Ambubachi Mela*. Studies in *All Research Journal* note rising Scopus articles on menstrual rites after 2020, showing worldwide interest.

Fieldwork on Ambubachi Mela Rituals

Scholars in *Antrocom Journal's* digital collection capture the mela's physical feel. On Day 1, prep worship brings sadhus showing powers like one-legged stands and fire rites. Families give sweets and fruits at home shrines during closure, turning menstrual "impurity" into holy rest. At reopening, priests show the red-stained cloth: "Pilgrims press forward, fingers tracing the fabric's warmth, invoking fertility as Brahmaputra swells red nearby" (Kakati, *Antrocom* field note). Devadasis bless the yoni, gaining entry that flips Vedic limits, as noted in kamakhya.org's Tantra texts.

IJARST's research details left-path elements: mixed-gender holy men lead soul-transfer rites after blessing sharing, challenging gender norms through sex symbols. GPS studies from ScienceDirect map Nilachal's "temple areas," connecting the yoni spring to water sources stressed by tree loss.

Digital Archive	Key Ethnographic Insight	Ritual Context
Kamakhya.org Manuscripts	Copper plates on panchamakara; widow rites	Tantric teacher-student ties
Screenworks Field Video	Yoni carvings with animal care	Daily nature-Tantra mix
Antrocom Journal PDF	Cloth touch; sadhu powers	Menstrual body focus
Medwin Publishers	2-3M visitors; ethnic mix	Social-religious blend

Socio-Economic and Ecological Dimensions

Online surveys show economic effects: the mela brings in ₹500 crore (Assam Tourism 2025), supporting groups that make cloth pads with cloth designs to fight period poverty. Paid tourism creates issues "selfies quiet unheard voices," say field notes—but locals keep mother-centered traditions. Climate studies link uneven rains (2025 floods moved 1.2M people) to stronger devotion: "Devi's late flow matches Brahmaputra's anger," say locals.

Kamakhya.org studies challenge colonial bias: Gait's reports (online via Internet Archive) called rites "backward," but archives bring back local voices. From a nature view, rites build life-love yearly breaks help refill water sources amid 15% forest loss.

Theoretical and Contemporary Relevance

Postcolonial study through these archives uses Spivak's subaltern view: devadasis "speak through stained cloth," fighting knowledge harm. Deep ecology sees the mela as self-growth in nature's patterns. In 2026 with unstable climate, these works call for adding menstrual education, as *Rupkatha Journal* suggests. These online studies confirm Kamakhya as a living record: rites keep women-nature ties strong, ending cycle shame for lasting balance.

Conclusion

Kamakhya Temple shows the menstruating goddess through *Ambubachi* Mela and Tantric myths from Sati's yoni on Nilachal Hill to Yogini Tantra's world blood rites. This reclaims women's bodies as life-giving Shakti, challenging male-based Vedic purity rules. This paper's ecofeminist, postcolonial, deep ecology, and queer studies show the story's strength: Vandana Shiva's women-nature links confirm menstrual cycles as earth's rain beat, fighting colonial hate by Gait and priestly hiding. Homi Bhabha's hybridity explains rite survival under ruler eyes, while Spivak's subaltern view gives voice to devadasis' and widows' yoni entry as knowledge break. Arne Naess's deep ecology turns mela breaks into life-loving self-growth, and Goswami's *The Man from Chinnamasta* judges kill rites through mixed blood: "The Devi's seepage mingles with the goat's river yet compassion must prevail" (Goswami 145).

Field archives like kamakhya.org add proof, recording pre-Hindu Khasi roots and modern visitor touch. Red cloth pieces stand for growth amid 2026's uneven floods. Effects spread to gender fairness fighting India's 71% cycle limits with pride (UNFPA 2024), nature strength through cycle respect, and green ideas in Assamese writing calling for animal care.

In the end, Kamakhya sets a model for ending stigma: blood not dirt but change agent against human-first splits, building cycle knowledge and climate fit. As Goswami's widows touch the "bleeding stone," they show body-based fight, sparking Scopus papers for journals like *Rupkatha* on local nature-spirit work. This Tantric puzzle: unclean made holy pushes writing to make women and earth power political against disorder, supporting local knowledge for steady futures.

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