

A Visit to Kamakhya Temple And the Mahavidya Shrines



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A VISIT TO KAMAKHYA TEMPLE AND THE MAHAVIDYA SHRINES

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Preface

I was inspired to write this travelogue because of the dearth of information about Kamakhya written for the general traveler. Very few of the Tantric practitioners I know are aware of the importance of the temple. The local stories tell us that this is where Matsyendranath received his initiation, and this is the center from which Tantric practice spread, north to Nepal, south to Odisha. The temple here is two thousand years old. Ritual has been conducted at Kamakhya almost continuously for the past five hundred years. Goddess worshippers will find here the heart of the Mother Religion; Pagans will find a living temple complex of the type whose ruins we tour in Egypt and Greece.

I found the Assamese people to be friendly and welcoming. Alex and I shopped the Fancy Bazaar as the only white people on the street, and we were treated just like every other shopper. The U.S. State Department marks Assam as a high-risk destination and prohibits government employees from travelling there. On the other hand we stayed in a five-star hotel among business people conducting brisk trade in a tea-growing state, and millions of people visit the temple every year, flowing in and out of the city peacefully. Much depends on the exact situation at the time of travel. The political environment in Assam is a fluidly changing situation; I'm grateful we weren't caught in the demonstrations a few months after we visited. I managed the travel risk by staying in corporate level hotels and hiring local guides who can look out for you if the situation changes while you're there.

In writing this account I am inspired by Laura Amazzone, whose description of her visit to Kamakhya in *Goddess Durga and Sacred Female Power* was heart-felt and informative. I am deeply grateful for her knowledge, wisdom and courage. Thank you to Ted Gill, partner in so many ways, for his ongoing support of both me and Alex. My deepest thanks and love to my travel companion and life partner Alex Williams. When I asked him what he wanted to do most in the world, he said to visit Kamakhya. So we did.

A Knowledgeable Guide

“They will need a car and driver at their disposal.” Our guide spoke crisply into his mobile phone. It was our last day in West Bengal and he was reaching out to his colleague in Guwahati to organize the next phase of our pilgrimage. “Also a guide for Kamakhya Temple.” Glancing at the book in my hands, he added, “He should be your most knowledgeable guide. They are well informed.”

Three days later we were speeding toward Kamakhya Temple. I was syncing up as quickly as possible with our new guide. The temple is about seventeen kilometers from the city center, half an hour drive, so we didn’t have a lot of time. “We want to start with the main shrine today,” I said. “Also, can you show us how to get to the Mahavidya shrines?”

“Yes, which ones?”

“All of them. I’m not sure about the days.” I showed him the book, Parimal Kumar Datta’s *Kamakhyatantra and the Mysterious History of Kamakhya*. “This gives the days of the week for the shrines but it doesn’t give them all.”

His eyes lit up. “Today is Tuesday. After the main shrine we can visit Bagala,” he said. “Wednesday is Chinnamasta.” At Kamakhya the Mahavidyas are associated with astrological bodies. In astrology, both western and Jyotisha, these are also associated with the days of the week. “Chinnamasta is Rahu. At the Navagraha Temple Rahu and Ketu are on Saturday, but here they are on other days of the week.” Navagraha means “nine planets”. The Assamese spelling and pronunciation swaps in the “b” for the “v” used elsewhere.

I picked up the thread. “Thursday is Jupiter, Dhumavati.”

“No, Tara is Jupiter,” he corrected me. “Dhumabati is Ketu, also Thursday.” I wondered immediately if Datta had reversed these as a deliberate blind, as Tantric practitioners often do. In any event both Dhumavati and Tara share Thursday as their active days.

“Friday, Bhubaneswari. Saturday, Kali. Sunday, Bhairabi,” he said.

“We’re flying out Sunday,” I said. “What planet is Bhairavi?”

“No planet. She is the langal so she doesn’t have a day of the week. You can visit her Wednesday with Chinnamasta.” He smiled. “It’s good you have enough time to see them all.”

I asked him how long he had lived in Assam. “I am Guwahati born and bred,” he said

proudly. “My grandfather worked for the temple.” He explained that he loves the temple and visits the Mahavidya shrines as often as he can. Our contact in Kolkata had done us a huge favor. Our contact in Assam was turning out to be a knowledgeable guide.

Tuesday

Stepping onto the Hill

“Look,” said, pointing ahead. “The blue mountains.” I took in a breath. The Nilachal Hills emerge from the Guwahati cityscape in distinctive mounds covered with dark green forest. As the car wound up Kamakhya Mandir Road we passed a sign announcing “The Cradle of Tantra”. I felt a little leap of excitement. In West Bengal the Tantric practitioners we spent time with hid their practice. They certainly didn’t put out signs. We truly were in the heart of Tantric country.

Our driver pulled off to the side to let us all out, competing with taxis and buses for a temporary parking space. “He will park and come back for us,” our guide said. As I stepped out of the car my eyes lit on a “welcome to Kamakhya Temple” sign.



Kamakhya Mandir entrance

Our guide led us up an ascending stairway lined with shops selling puja items and souvenirs. As we walked he gestured to the shrines we were passing. “Kali. Tara. Chinnamasta.” He stopped at a vendor and pointed to a set of shelves at the back of the shop. “You can leave your shoes there.”

“Should we buy something?” I asked him, kicking off my shoes.

“You can, but it isn’t necessary.” He nodded to the vendor and led us on.



Kamakhya stairway

The tiled walkway was clean and neither hot nor cold in October. Our guide had minimized our barefoot walking distance by picking the last vendor before the security gate. I later learned that security levels vary with the festival calendar and the terrorist threat level. Each gate into the temple has a metal detector. When the threat level goes up this may be augmented

by male and female search lines, we encountered those later in Varanasi. Security forces monitor the main gate and patrol the grounds at night and guards also monitor a CCTV system. While we visited the threat level was very low and I barely noticed the guards near the entrance.



Entrance gate to Kamakhya Temple grounds

As we passed beneath the arch of the gate our guide touched the doorstep and then touched his forehead. I'd learned to do this at other temples and followed his lead.

We'd arrived at 7 am before the temple opened. The tile had been washed clean for the morning visitors. It was pretty slick, and as I walked I slipped, causing a gasp from our guide and other visitors. I managed to catch myself to everyone's relief. After that I moved more slowly and kept my footing.

Our guide pointed out the lavatories as we passed, right behind the information desk. I popped in to use them and learned there are separate sections for men and women, no gender neutral or family sections. The stalls are squat toilets with ceramic feet indicating where to stand. Yay for yoga class! There are wash fountains for both hands and feet. I used my little bottle of hand sanitizer.



Information desk and toilets

Our guide parked us in a line while he went off to get tickets. The line self-organized with couples trading off keeping their place and sitting on a nearby ledge. The sign on the building announced “Waiting Hall for Devotees”. We were waiting to get into the waiting hall! At 7 a.m. it was already full. The ticket office was in the same building. The cost of the “premium” ticket was 501 rupees or a few dollars. This enabled us to skip ahead of the free line. I’d read quite a few web sites describing this process, some of which said that the tickets had been discontinued, so I was guiltily relieved that the system was still in place.

We could tell the temple had opened when lines in other parts of the temple started to move. It was 7:30 a.m. At 8 a.m. we were led up the stairs into the waiting hall, so we’d waited outside for an hour. Our guide walked along with us imparting urgent last-minute instructions. “When you enter there will be water,” he said. “There are three waters, one just inside, and two in the cave. The virtue is in the water.” He stopped to talk to the guard at the door while we went inside.



Waiting hall

My pre-trip research warned that it would take hours to get into the temple and I was fully prepared to spend the whole time standing. I found to my delight that the hall was filled with rows of plastic chairs and we spent most of the wait sitting. We ended up in the first line of chairs facing a white wall. The hall filled with the buzz of bored people, mostly in family clumps, Mothers and fathers and older relatives and kids, talking and playing videos on their mobile phones.

“I’m going to practice,” I told Alex.

He smiled and nodded. “So am I.”

I closed my eyes and dropped into another world.

In the Womb of the Mother

The first thing everyone learns about Kamakhya is that the temple is the yoni of the goddess. A spring constantly flows in a cleft in the floor of a cave. Every July the spring turns red for three days, the menstruation of the goddess. The water from the spring flows down the hill to the Brahmaputra River.

Kamakhya Temple is a Shakti pith, a place of goddess power. We had visited other Shakti piths in West Bengal. At two smaller Kali temples in the country I could feel the presence of Devi in the inner sanctum. At Kalighat the energy of the temple surrounded me as soon as I set foot on the grounds and my eyes filled with tears.

Nothing prepared me for the level of power I felt at Kamakhya.

As soon as I closed my eyes I was caught in a tide of power, tugged deep below the surface of the temple's massive energy field. I felt dizzy and my heartbeat accelerated. I thought, I'm still in the waiting hall! How much stronger will it be inside the cave? I need to prepare myself to encounter the Mother.

I grounded myself in place, imagined myself in my inner open-air temple, and brought up the visualization of the Devi and her attendants as I usually did. Only this time they weren't visualizations and I wasn't imagining that I was in a temple. I was *in* a temple. I could see the dirt floor, the rock walls, the sky. The goddess herself stood before me, smiling, enveloping me with her energy. I chanted her mantra.

When I finished 108 chants I ended the visualization and opened my eyes. I was shocked to see a white wall in front of me. The sounds of the waiting hall flooded back in. I looked at Alex who was coming out of his practice. "Are you praying to her?" I asked.

"I am," he said serenely. He was the reason we were there. When I asked him what he wanted to do most in the world he said he wanted to go to India, and specifically to Kamakhya, to the most sacred site of the Mother, to meet the goddess he had been praying to all his life. His happiness was a physical force and I felt blessed to share the experience with him.

I closed my eyes again. This time when I entered my internal space it was filled with a golden light. The light centered in my heart and spread to my entire self. I heard a chant echoing through the universe: "Ma! Ma!" reverberating as if it was chanted by millions of voices for thousands of years.

When I opened my eyes again our guide was standing in front of me. I startled. "Is there something wrong?"

"I am checking on you," he said apologetically. "Even in the premium line there is a wait. You must be patient."

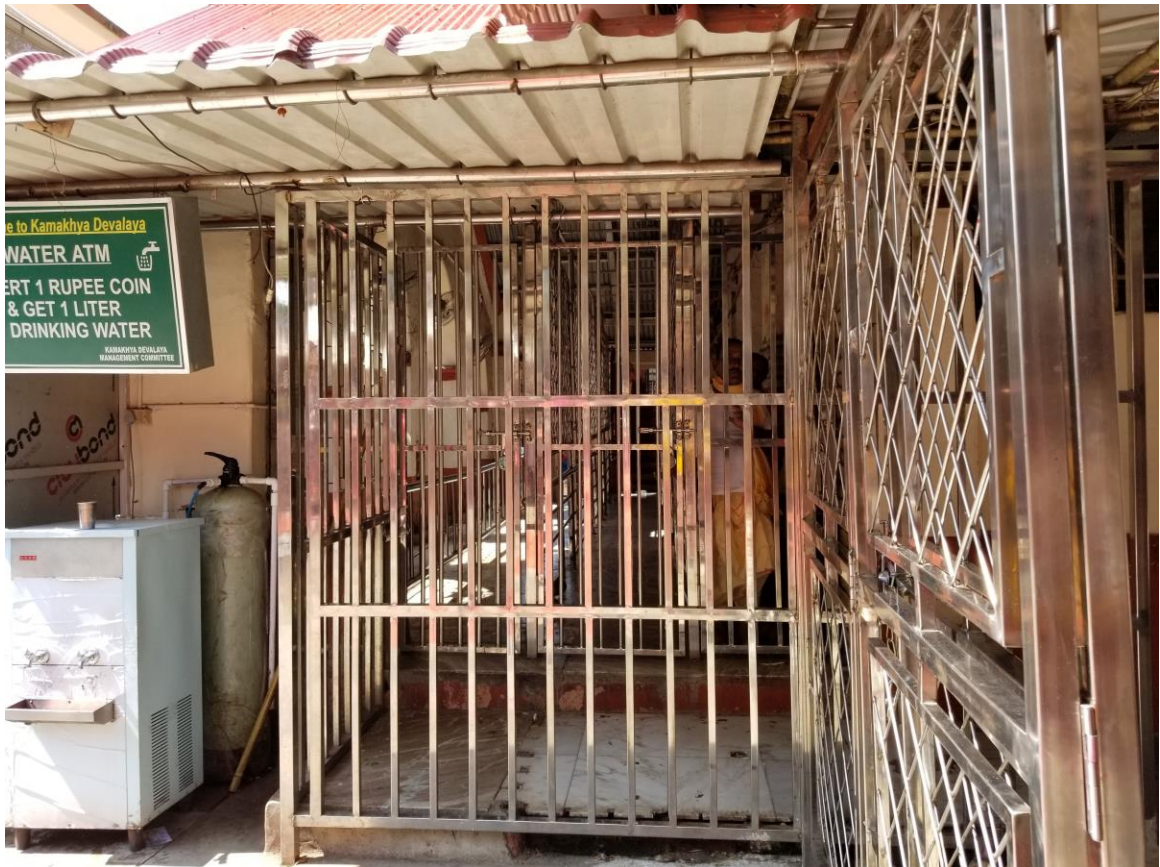
I smiled at him. "It is a great blessing to be able to do practice here," I said.

He smiled back. “Just pray to Ma,” he touched his chest, “here in your heart.”

I touched my heart. “That’s exactly what I am doing!”

When he left I took the opportunity to snap a picture of my ticket.

At 10:20 a.m. the guards opened the door on the other side of the hall. They shepherded us all down another flight of stairs and across the walkway. We all filed into a hallway. We could see through the glass walls that there were two other hallways in this new waiting room.



Empty hallway on left, occupied hallway on right

Each hallway had a long metal bench. We organized ourselves into two lines, one sitting on the bench and one standing. In the hallway next to us I could see two pigeons marked with red huddled together beneath the bench. The man sitting above them heard them chittering. He gently picked them up and walked to the open end of the hall to set them free.

This was where the premium line joined up with the free line. Our hallway had filled up with people from the waiting hall, the other two hallways took in people from the free line. The farthest hallway opened and let out the occupants, then the one next to us. When the farthest one opened again some of the people in my line became agitated and waved at the guards: it was our turn! I didn't mind, I thought the people in the free line had paid with their much longer wait.

Finally our hallway opened and we shuffled into the temple proper. I saw a basin of water in the corner where a few people had stopped. I remembered what our guide had said about the water just inside the door and tried to join them, but the priest shepherding our line stopped me and kept me in place.

Photography is not permitted in the inner temple. The line snaked through a stone room called the chalanta (or calanta). I looked for the small statues of Kamakhya and her consort Kameswara that I knew should be there. I spotted a platform which I thought must be the location of the statues. All I could see was a mound of flowers which completely covered whatever was beneath. A priest sat near the platform chanting; I didn't see anyone interact with him.

Above this platform hung a small picture of Kamakhya. I did my best to commit it to memory. She stood on Shiva who lay on a lion. She had five sets of arms: green, gold, red, blue, white. Later we bought a similar picture of Kamakhya that had a sixth set of flesh-colored arms in front of her, so I expect that I didn't notice those arms in the temple image. The image we bought also depicts her with six heads matching the colors of the arms.

The main chamber is called the garbagriha, meaning "womb house". The calanta was separated from the inner cave by stone pillars. I knew from my reading that this is some of the most ancient stone work in the temple. I touched the pillar as I passed, feeling that I was touching one of the most ancient temples on the planet. We wound down a set of stone stairs. I was very grateful for the handrail! Accounts of the temple warned that the steps could be slippery with flowers, but they were bare and clean.

Since no photographs are permitted in the temple I hadn't seen an actual image of the cave and the yoni cleft. There are other images online from other temples, but none of Kamakhya. I had thought when I visited I would be able to see it live. However all I could see was red saris stretched over the area, and mounds of red flowers covering the yoni. A priest sat

beside the spring. I knelt, he dabbed kumkum on my forehead and poured water into my hands. Since I had been trained not to drink any local water I poured it on my head. I gave rupees as offering.

I turned to make my way back up the stairs, but to my surprise the priest on the stairs pointed back into the temple. A man next to me said kindly, “It would be a shame to wait all this time and not take both of the waters.” I remembered that our guide had said something about more than one water. So I turned back and registered a second priest sitting on the far side of the chamber. I knelt, he poured water into my hands, and also put kumkum on my forehead. I poured the water on my head.

Back up the stairs the line funneled through another chamber. This turned into a kind of gauntlet with priests standing next to shrines. They explained what the shrines were and asked for donations to give blessings. In my stunned bliss I didn’t remember any of the names they gave me.

Then we were out the gate, blinking in the sunshine. It was 11:15. We’d spent about twenty minutes in the garbagriha, and about four hours waiting.

The Temple Grounds

Our guide picked us up immediately. “How are you?” he said. “Do you want to sit for a minute?” We must have looked as dazed as we felt. “Let’s walk around,” I said. I need to move to process.

Photography is permitted around the temple grounds. Our guide took a photo of us standing outside the main tower, the shikhara, in the Assamese beehive shape.

A ring of carved stone pillars surrounded the shikhara, elaborately decorated with bas-relief sculptures of Devis, Devas and yoginis. People walked up to the walls and touched them, even putting their heads against the walls. When I touched my forehead to one of the walls it felt as if I was falling down into the darkness of the cave, into the beating heart of Ma. I thought, you really only need to go into the cave once, after that you can feel it just standing on the grounds.



Alex and me



Carved temple walls

As we walked around the temple our guide pointed out the corridor filled with people standing in the free line. He said they had started lining up at 4 a.m. and waited for seven to eight hours.



Free line

Our guide showed us a bas-relief which he said replicated the little statues of Kamakhya and Kameswara in the calanta. I've seen photos of these sculptures coated with kumkum. Now they're behind bars and glass and it's hard to get a good picture of them.



Kameswara and Kamakhya

We peered into one of the gates leading out of the temple. Our guide said if people don't have enough time to wait to get into the main temple he will take them here so they can have some touch of the place.

Then he walked us into the sacrificial area. I saw a priest working on a bucket of sacrificed pigeons. Our guide told us that visitors can buy a pigeon or goat and either release them or "go for the sacrifice". That explained the lost pigeons in the glass hall. After that I noticed a lot of pigeons and goats wandering around the temple grounds dabbed with red. The sacrificial hall had a yoke that could take a buffalo.



Temple exit



Buffalo yoke behind priest

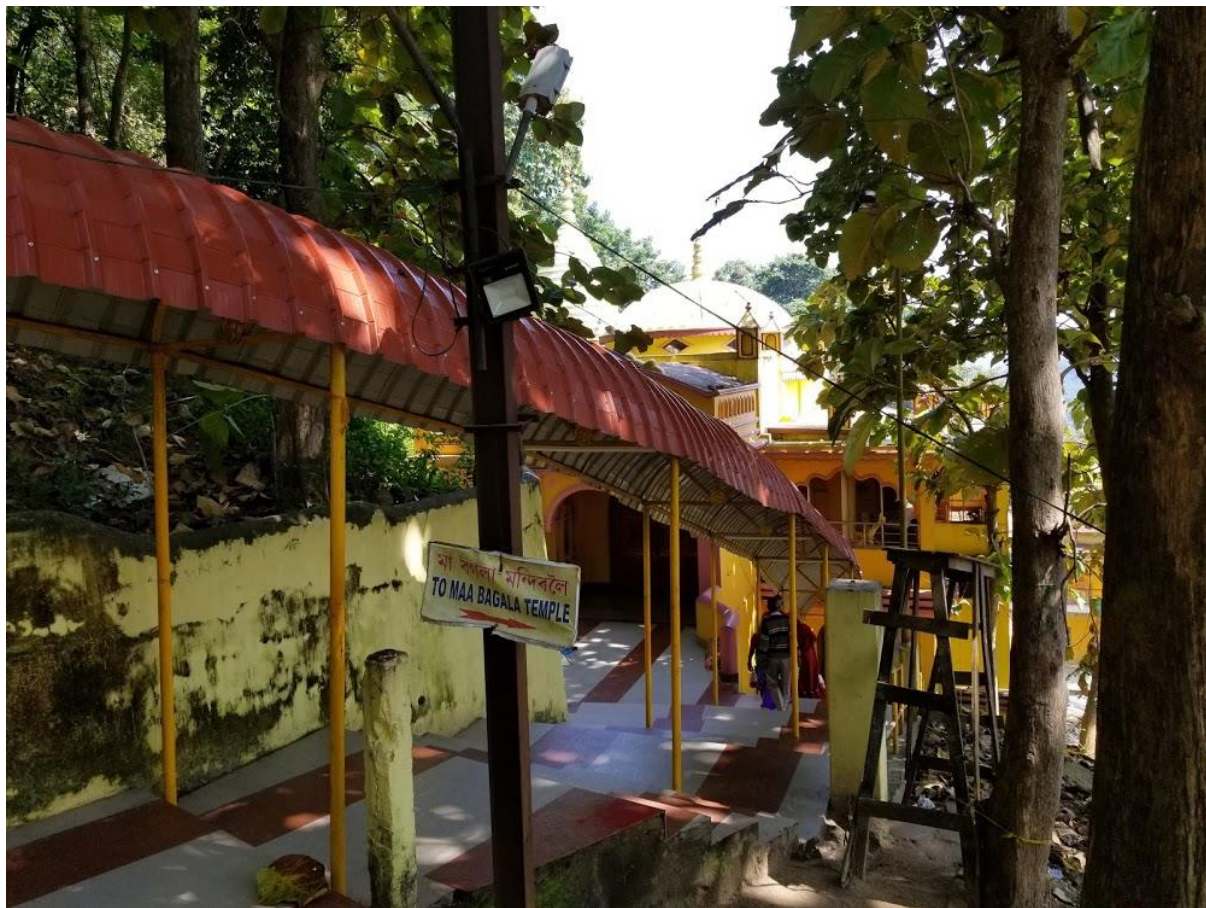
Our guide was matter-of-fact as he walked us in and out of the sacrificial hall. It helped me to stay non-reactive as I processed the new experience. I decided that I felt pretty much the same way that I feel on chicken slaughter day at a local farm - a little squeamish, but accepting the necessity. On the farm the slaughter is humane, and after all, before I committed to being

vegetarian I would eat the chicken. At Kamakhya the slaughter is also humane, and the priests get shares of all the meat in rotation. But if I walked my friends through the place I'd prepare them for encountering blood on the ground.

With the new cleanliness initiative at the temple cleaning up the ground litter I'm not sure what the goats live on. I saw one sneak up on a basket of flowers an unwary visitor had left unattended and steal a mouthful. I dubbed him "the goat that lived."

Maa Bagala Temple

The drive up the hill from Kamakhya Temple to the Bagala shrine to didn't take long. The road was lined with vendors offering bright yellow cloths for sale. After our driver dropped us off, our guide bought a collection of puja supplies, then led us down the walkway. It split into two sections, one longer and gentler, one shorter and steeper. We took the long one down and the short one back.



Maa Bagala Temple stairs

Our first stop was a red-smearing image of Ganesh cut into the rock. Our guide said it was customary to begin by honoring Ganesh. This felt normal to us as we start every puja with a Ganesh chant. Our guide said his mantra silently, and Alex and I said ours silently too.

Our next stop was a large courtyard. This was the designated fire area, with shelves for lamps and two braziers for homa rituals. Our guide stepped us through how to make an offering. He had bought three lamp kits, plastic baskets filled with a clay diya lamp, a wick, a triangular bag of vegetable oil, a tiny pack of matches, and a box with exactly three sticks of incense. He set the clay lamps on a shelf and laid the wick to hang partly outside the lamp for lighting. He lit an incense stick and used this to poke a hole in the plastic oil bag so he could pour the oil into the diya. Then we lit the lamp wicks and waved the incense sticks in the air three times.



Shelves for lamps



Brazier for fire offerings

A priest came along behind us scraping the spent lamps, oil bags, matchbooks and incense packets into a trash can, part of the new cleanliness initiative.

Next we joined the line to enter the inner sanctum of the shrine. Bells hung over the walkway. Our guide reached up to ring one. Alex asked him when it was appropriate to ring them. “Whenever you feel it,” he answered. Alex rang a bell.

The hallway skirted a rock wall carved with other images of Ganesh, all splashed with orange paint. I counted five and later read that there are eight images on the grounds. The line filed up to a tiled basin up against the rock wall. When my turn came I knelt by the basin and dipped my hand in as the others had done, and was surprised to find water. The priest dabbed my forehead and I dropped money in his tray.

As we were leaving I explained to our guide that I felt awkward taking water because others were drinking it, but we are warned as westerners to drink only bottled water. He showed us how to dab the water right underneath the lower lip.

Back in the courtyard we saw a homa ritual in progress. A priest threw red chilies on the fire. Our guide explained that Bagala loves fiery things. People offer red cloths to other Devis but yellow cloths to Bagala. She protects against misfortune and in particular against enemies who make magic against you. People wear pink coral rings for her aid in balancing out an afflicted ketu. The shrine was so active because Bagala is associated with Mars and Tuesday is Mars day. The priests haul water up the hill to fill the basin on that day and staff the shrine for visitors.

The sense of power in the shrine was nearly as strong as Kamakhya Temple but different in quality. Kamakhya is Ma, the Mother, the source, fierce and loving. Bagala felt fierce too but in a more focused way. Our guide and the people visiting the shrine came to her for specific reasons, teasing out one strand of the fabric of Devi to grasp a narrower and more concentrated energy.

The Place

My first day on the hill left me with a lot of questions. I'd been to other Shakti piths and other temples of all sizes. Whether they were tiny shrines tucked into a street corner or huge monuments with extensive grounds, each of them was basically a building containing statues with human-shaped bodies and faces. Even when they were surrounded by smaller shrines the grounds were geographically limited.

The descriptions of Kamakhya as a Shakti pith surrounded by smaller shrines had seriously misled me. Sure, there's a temple and there are shrines, and there are numerous images of Devas and Devis with bodies and eyes, but in the inner sanctuaries the focus of devotion turned out to be rocks and springs. The entire hillside is alive with power. The pilgrimage destination isn't Kamakhya Temple, it's *Nilachal*.

With a good internet connection at the hotel I hit my online research sources each night. I stumbled on Shodhganga, a treasure chest of doctoral theses mostly in English. Generations of Guwahati grad students have swarmed Nilachal documenting land use, architecture, social structure and ritual.

I felt an urgent need to understand the physical landscape. How high is the hill? Where do the springs come from? How big is the forest and how is it managed?

From Juthika Mahanta and Namita Devi I learned that Guwahati sits on the Shillong plain surrounded by hills. They have so many caves that the town takes its name from the Assamese word for cave, “guha”. That’s one of the features of Kamakhya as a sacred site, the dark chamber of the inner sanctum anciently called the Manobhava cave.

The Nilachal Hills are “inselbergs”, meaning they rise up out of the plain like icebergs in an ocean. There are actually three hills in the Nilachal group, called locally the Shiva Pahar, Brahma Pahar and Vishnu Pahar. At their tallest they rise to 1000 feet. Kamakhya Temple sits on the Shiva Pahar at about 500 feet, the Bhubaneswari Temple sits higher up the road on the Brahma Pahar.

That’s the rock. As for water, Guwahati is in a monsoon area. It gets wet and stays wet. Seasonal rains fill the ponds and springs, rivulets flow down the hills into the adjacent Brahmaputra River. There are also a few perennial springs. That’s one of the features of the Kamakhya garbagriha too, a spring that wells up through the floor of the cave.

Guwahati is not only the city of caves, it might also be called the city of forests. The government of Assam manages nearly twenty reserved forested areas. Outside the reserves all other forested land is unclassed and unprotected. The Nilachal territory covers more than three square kilometers and falls into the unclassed category, although Kamakhya Temple and other organizations in the hills supervise some portions of the forest.



Southern view of forest landscape from vantage above Bhairabi Mandir

Dense evergreen forest covers the northern part of the hills, while the forest opens out to the south and west and turns into scrub. It is a diverse ecosystem, home to numerous plant and animal species. Paths up and down the hill cut through dense jungle.

Over the past twenty years the human occupied area has doubled, eating away nearly half the wild forest. There are numerous impacts. In particular, the change from closed forest to scrub land attracts leopards from the surrounding wildlife refuges. They are drawn by food sources, particularly backyard chickens, and the goats released by the temple. So the goat that lived isn't out of the woods yet.

The landscape frames the sacred site. How long have people been drawn to the spring in the cave? We know that humans have lived in the area for a very long time. There are Paleolithic sites that might be as old as 125,000 years. A number of tribal people still live in Assam and neighboring Meghalaya. These are woman-centered people, described as both matrilineal and matriarchal (which attracts intensely hostile reporting from male-centered culture). They worship very strong Mother goddesses with offerings that include animal sacrifice.

The sacred cave, the sacred spring, the sacred tree, these are the first places humans touched power, the first images of divine care. The spring gives us nourishing water, the tree breathes with us, the cave envelopes us in the fertile darkness of the Mother's womb. It is no wonder that I felt the chant "Ma" reverberating in the land around me; it is a prayer humans have been chanting for tens of thousands of years.

Wednesday

We guided ourselves on our second day in Kamakhya. Our driver let us off at the drop-off point with instructions to call him when we were ready to go somewhere else. We connected to each other through WhatsApp before he drove off to park.

First stop, find a vendor to take our shoes. We picked one close to the main temple gate. Alex and I each bought a garland of red flowers from him. I was pleased we were able to manage the transaction on our own.

Chinnamasta Temple

Then we wandered around trying to find the Chinnamasta shrine. On the south side of Kamakhya Temple outside the main wall we found a line of goat vendors. We asked them for the Chinnamasta shrine and they pointed us back toward the main walkway. It occurred to me to check Google Maps. Alex had Google Fi and got no coverage, I had a Verizon phone and got excellent coverage. We were delighted to find that maps gave us walking directions from Kamakhya Temple to Chinnamasta Temple. We finally spotted the sign for the shrine half-hidden by foliage.



Chinnamasta Temple sign

The temple was separated from the walkway by metal railing. Outside the building a small goat-sized sacrifice yoke was smeared with kumkum and adorned with red flowers.



Sacrifice yoke

The building itself sat below the level of the sidewalk. We walked down a few stairs to enter.



Chinnamasta Temple entrance

The chamber inside was lit only by the sunlight coming from the doorway. A plaque leaned against the far wall, possibly copper; whatever design it had was obscured by a coating of kumkum powder. People had left garland offerings there. The entrance to the garbagriha was just next to it. I peered inside.

Here is how Parimal Kumar Datta describes the shrine: “The Chinnamasta pitha is in the small Kunda. Devotees have to reach this pitha by going down through steps. It is about 15 feet below the ground level.”

Here is what I actually saw: a rock wall sloped from the entrance down to the floor of the garbagriha. A series of steps had been hacked into the wall, unevenly spaced, so narrow that they could more properly be called a stone ladder rather than a stone stairway. There was a handrail, thank goodness, but it turns out that fifteen feet is quite a drop.

At that time I was in my early 60s, heavysset, and had arthritic knees. I looked down into the garbagriha and had a clear image of missing my footing and falling. I heard Her say “you don’t have to come down here.” I laid my garland at the plaque, sat against a wall, and started a quiet meditation.

While I was sitting Alex came up to me and said “I’m going to go down.” I took a deep breath and said, “Whatever.” To translate: Alex was 70 and walked with a cane. I was fearful that he would fall going down into the garbagriha and I wouldn’t be going with him to assist him so I worried about the risk. On the other hand I didn’t want to prevent him from doing something he felt called to do. I commended him to his fate, inshallah.

“She wants me to come down,” he said.

I had a strong faith that if She wanted him She would get him down and back safely. He disappeared down the steps. As I continued to meditate other people entered the shrine, looked down the steps, and then stepped back. I got up and went to the entrance and saw Alex slowly pulling himself up with the handrail. I wanted to reach down and help him! I sent him a strong burst of energy to help bring him up. Our guides had been helping us up and down stairs, but this was one of those places where you really have to physically get yourself there and back on your own.

Alex reported that he found an elderly priest sitting next to a spring. Alex gave the priest his flower garland and the priest gave him water from the spring and dabbed kumkum on his forehead. Later he confessed that the descent was one of the most frightening things he had physically done. She kept telling him She would bring him back safely, and She did.

Although I didn't go down into the garbagriha I felt strongly connected to an energy there, distinct from the general energy of Kamakhya. Our language to describe these perceptions is not well developed and relies on metaphor. To me the energy felt blue, cool, and secret.

Since I was having such good luck with Google Maps I decided to try to find the Bhairabi Temple. I followed the instructions and ended up on a walkway looking down a stairway which Google Maps called "Ma Dhumavati Road". The map indicated a short distance from where I stood, but that distance was some ways down the hill. There was no sign so I wasn't sure this was the right place. I caught the eye of a man who was hanging out in the area, pointed down the stairs and said "Bhairabi?" He shook his head and said "No."

Alex wanted to spend some time in meditation near the Kamakhya garbagriha. He went off to find a spot. I found a perch near a Krishna shrine. When a family approached the shrine I moved away respectfully. Two older women motioned to me to stay. They touched their heads to the shrine and I did too. Then I was family! They held my hands, patted my cheeks, touched their hearts, and had their grandson take their picture with me.

When they left I was able to enter into sadhana. I grounded, chanted to Ganesh, and then centered in my heart and chanted "Ma". The power in the temple vibrated my bones. I immediately became dizzy and felt myself lifting up through my head. I remembered that a Tantric acquaintance in West Bengal had said "protect your head". I wrapped my scarf around my head and immediately felt more in my body.

When Alex reconnected I told him I needed to go down from the hill to stop being so dizzy. I called our driver to come pick us up. It was early enough that we could fit in another stop. We decided to take our guide's advice and visit the Navagraha Temple. It's not far from Kamakhya Temple but sits on a different hill, the Chatrakar hill.

One of the best things about this hilltop was the view down to the Brahmaputra River. The name means "son of Brahma" and is the only river in India considered to be male.



View from Navagraha Temple

The temple complex included a main temple building and an open-air courtyard where homa rituals can be conducted – one was in progress when we stepped up. The main temple building had the distinctive Assamese beehive tower or shikhara.



Navagraha Temple

The sign outside the door asked visitors to keep oil lamps and incense out of the main temple and provided a shelf for oil lamps. We didn't see a vendor to purchase these from so we didn't make an offering here.

The temple had an anteroom before the inner sanctum. In the garbagriha there were nine huge stone yonilingas in a circle with ghee lamps the size of birdbaths. Niches in the wall held nine black images of the navagrahas. From our guide and other sources I gathered that devotees could come here to have priests do ritual to one or more of the navagraha to balance out issues in their horoscopes. I stood outside the room and peered in. A couple of men stepped inside. They were quickly shooed away by priests who came and closed the temple doors. Then the shrine shut down for the afternoon altogether.

There is a navagraha shrine in a Hindu temple near my house. A priest there instructed me to circle the navagraha images counterclockwise. Other visitors to report being able to make the circle there at the Navagraha Temple. I might have been able to do it if we'd gotten there earlier in the day.

The Temple

Cave, spring, forest form the sacred ground of the pilgrimage site. Who put the temple over Manobhava cave? Well, that's a story. Juthika Mahanta starts her version with a sigh: "The origin of the Kamakhya temple and the Nilachal hills has been a mystery to everybody." It all started so long ago that it's hard to see the beginning of the tale. One thing is for certain: where the land is a source of power, the temple is a statement of empire, a target for destruction and rebuilding.

The physical sciences help us here. Rajib Sarma is a hereditary Brahman priest at the temple. Sarma tells us that Gauhati University used radio carbon isotope dating to fix the oldest level of the temple at 2200 years old. We can presume that the highest rank of priests have the education and local knowledge to identify the oldest parts of the temple for testing. So it seems that the physical temple at Kamakhya is more than two thousand years old.

The next level of the temple dates to 500 CE. Something happened then – some catastrophe seems to have damaged the temple. A persistent legend attributes the destruction to the Turkish Muslim invader Kalpahar. Sarma and other scholars have come to doubt this story and believe an earthquake is a more likely cause. At any rate there are physical indications that the temple was rebuilt then. There's also an inscription in the Umachal Rock Cave at Nilachal dating to 500 C.E that records the construction of a temple by Maharajadhiraja Surendavarman. Sarma believes this refers to the reconstruction of Kamakhya temple.

The next story comes from a written text. The Kalika Purana was composed in Assam in the ninth or tenth century. It is a collection of myths, a history, and a ritual instruction manual all in one. Mousimi Deka recounts the Kalika Purana's stories of the Danavas and Asuras. Brahma created the stars in the city of Pragjyotisha, ruled by the non-Aryan king Mahiranga Danava. When the Danava dynasty failed the king Naraka took over, and the name of the country changed to Kamarupa, the place where love takes form. Biswanarayan Shastri points out that land grant inscriptions from the seventh to twelfth centuries frequently cite the Naraka story. Deka and Shastri see in the story of Mahiranga and Naraka a record of the conflict between indigenous non-Aryan and settler Aryan peoples.

In the centuries after the Kalika Purana was written, Kamakhya was periodically looted by incursions from neighboring Bengal and Bihar. The temple may also have been damaged by

additional earthquakes. We do know that the temple was rebuilt by King Biswasingha of the Koch Behar kingdom early in the 1500s, and again in the mid-1500s by his son Naranarayan. The striking features of the temple today - five beehive domes and fantastically sculpted walls - date to this reconstruction, using materials from the older temples.

The Koch kings imported Brahmin priests to establish a ritual calendar. Historian Edward Gait reports that the temple was rededicated with a massive human sacrifice of some one hundred and forty men. Prabalika Sarma notes that when the Ahom kings took Kamarupa from the Koch they further established categories of priests and temple workers, and granted large tracts of land for temple upkeep. The state of Assam takes its name from the Ahom dynasty.

In the Koch and Ahom eras, the temple rituals were dedicated to the welfare of the kingdom and the ruling kings. Prabalika Sarma tells us that the Burmese invasion broke the connection between the kings and priests and interrupted rituals in the temples. When the British arrived in the mid-1800s, Sarma says, the Assamese people welcomed the change from Burmese rule.

The British government set a policy of non-interference with the temple, which became self-managing at that point. More earthquakes in 1897 and 1950 damaged the temple, which was repaired with steel reinforcements and Portland cement. The state of Assam now provides for the upkeep of the temple, and the rituals are directed for the benefit of all the people of Assam.

Damaged by earthquake and ransacked, the temple has been periodically renewed. Touching the temple walls links the devotee to 2200 years of physical history on the site and the devotion of the people who have loved the land and the goddess.

Thursday

When we parted on Tuesday our guide had indicated he might be available on other days of the week. Our adventures on our own had proven that we could handle ourselves, which was gratifying, but also demonstrated that it was easier with a guide. So we asked him to guide us on Thursday. It's Jupiter day, which codes blue in western astrology and jyotisha. Our guide showed up in blue pants, Alex had a blue tunic, I wore a blue dress, and we all smiled at each other, sharing the common secret.

Traffic was tougher for some reason and our driver had to find an alternate route to Nilachal. Our guide had him drop us off farther up the hill and showed us another alley to the main staircase that cut off some of the climb. As he watched us navigate the staircase he nodded approvingly. "Already you are more confident," he said. He picked out the vendor-of-the-day and bought three puja kits while Alex and I stowed our shoes.

Alex wanted to meditate near the Kamakhya garbagriha so we spent a few minutes there. The familiar dizziness hit as I touched my head to the wall. I told our guide I thought you only need to visit the Kamakhya garbagriha once, after that you can feel it through the walls, and he agreed.

Tara Temple

Our first stop was the Tara temple. The archway was beautifully painted and still decorated from Navratri a week earlier. We struggled up the steep uneven steps into the courtyard. The sacrifice yoke here was covered with flowers, no blood. Entering the temple proper, our guide set up our oil lamps. While we lit them our guide saw a priest he knew and went back out to chat with him. I looked around for somewhere to put my incense sticks. I saw our guide had stuck his in the sand next to the sacrifice yoke so I put mine there too.

There was no priest in the garbagriha. As we entered a man was taking advantage of this to conduct a private puja. He did his work neatly and quietly, making rapid-fire mudras with his offerings, then sweeping up as he left. He touched the well and then touched his head. When he was gone I knelt to put my hand in the well and found to my surprise that it was dry, smeared only with kumkum. I touched this to my head. It was so quiet I thought about praying a mala, but a woman came in and I didn't want to hog the small crowded space.



Flower garlands on the Tara Temple arch

Dhumabati Temple

Our next stop was the Dhumabati temple. The route led along the outer wall. On the way we passed the stair that Google Maps had led me to on Wednesday. I asked our guide if the stair led to the Bhairabi Temple. “Yes, but don’t use it,” he said. He led us past the goat vendors to the stair leading to Dhumabati. “Use this one,” he said, indicating that it would lead me to the Bhairabi temple.

When Alex stepped into the Dhumabati courtyard red-faced and panting, the priest took one look at him and turned on a fan. That made lighting our lamps more difficult. Our guide indicated we should sit on the ground. I started to sit in the corner near the sacrificial yoke and then realized there was blood on the ground, so I scooted away and found a doorway lintel to sit on.

I have been advised not to pray directly to Dhumavati. This Mahavidya made herself a widow by eating her husband Shiva! She is the one who takes everything.



Overhead view of Dhumabati temple roof

As I sat on praying in front of my lamp I wondered how to address her. Our guide identified her as Ketu. I addressed her as the Dhumavati who is Ketu - I offered her respect in that form only.

Inside the temple four men sat cross-legged in front of cloth squares, all performing a grain puja. One of them was a white man I'd seen meditating on the grounds. In the garbagriha two white goat heads perched on the edge of the well. They looked peaceful. I thought to them, have a good next life, little goats! I wondered if they had been sacrificed for the men doing puja.

The priest in the garbagriha engaged in a puja with us. Our guide told us to repeat the mantra the priest gave us; we did not remember it. The priest indicated to us that we were to throw flowers. I was proud our flowers landed well. Afterwards our guide told me to touch the water in the well. It was so clear I didn't see it until I felt it.

Our guide led us back up the stairs. Then he stopped and delivered a spiritual suggestion. He said praying for only good things isn't a balanced approach. Maybe you ask for something positive but what you actually need is something negative. It is better to ask Ma to give whatever is needed – she would know. I told him that this was an excellent suggestion. Later Alex and I traded notes and found that was pretty much what we were doing in all the small shrines: show up, pray, and release expectations. Put ourselves in Her presence for whatever She chose for us.

Ugra Tara Temple

My internet researches had turned up the interesting fact that there was another Tara temple in Guwahati. This is known locally as a Shakti pith, although I didn't find it on a country-wide list. Our guide was happy to add it to our itinerary on a Thursday. When we arrived I was very glad we'd asked him to guide us; the signs were in Hindi and the puja vendors did not speak English. They also didn't watch shoes, people just left them on the sidewalk at the temple gate.



Gate into the Ugra Tara temple

This temple was more like the others we'd visited, a building in a courtyard surrounded by a wall. Compared to the shrines on Nilachal it had a lot of space. Tourist web sites inform us that the Ahom king Siva Singh built the temple in 1725 CE.

When I stepped through the courtyard I was punched in the heart by a presence. My eye was drawn to an image of Tara above the doorway arch of the garbagriha. Hindu imagery of Tara resembles that of Kali, with blue skin and skull ornaments. This was more in the Buddhist style, white with delicate features. I stopped and said "Oh!" Our guide smiled and said "Ma!"

Our guide had acquired puja kits from one of the two vendors outside and helped us set up the lamps. He set one of the incense boxes on the floor and instructed us to put the lamps on them in a row.

Then we went into the garbagriha. Here there was only a well filled with water, no murti, no stone. A metal framework held a red cloth over part of the basin. At our guide's instruction I touched the water and touched my lip.

The temple was so spacious and peaceful that I felt I could do a practice here. Alex and our guide were happy to wait. I have a White Tara empowerment from the Gaden Shartse monks so I have her mantra. It's generally written "om Tara tuttara ture mama anja punya jnana pushtim kuru svaha", although we received it slightly differently. I sat on the floor and did a mala of that mantra. I strongly felt connection with White Tara in the temple. Internet tourist web sites repeat the idea that there is a Buddhist connection in this temple. I would love to see a more detailed history of this temple.

As we left the courtyard our guide checked our lamps and found them all burning brightly. He was pleased and considered this to be a good omen. Alex and I did too.

Umananda Island

Back in the car our guide suggested this was a good day to see Peacock Island. We were happy to have the chance to do it with a guide.

The British named the island for its shape. Local folk know it as the place where Parvati became happy, Umananda. We had considered trying to visit Peacock Island on our own and we could probably have managed it, but it was a lot easier with our guide. He could explain that we were waiting on the mud bank while workers replaced a bamboo walkway because the river had changed height. Then he got tickets and we all sat in the plastic chairs in the welcome shade of the dock's roof.

The boat waited until enough tickets had been sold before loading. There weren't many seats and we didn't try to compete for them, we stood on the deck hanging onto railings. Even though the boat moved very slowly it only took five minutes or so to reach the island. We were excited to finally be out on the river and eagerly took photos during the whole ride.

Once on the island the boat's passengers flowed up a long flight of stairs. There were actually two routes, our guide led us up the route that was less steep but had more stairs.



Gateway to Peacock Island

Our first stop was a new Ganesh shrine built in 2017. It had a large and rather cute rat statue out front that had its own tray to collect donations. A priest did puja there, but I didn't interact with him, I quietly said my own chant and moved up the hill.

A line had formed in front of the Shiva temple. Someone went to get the priests to tell them that the boat had come in. The delay gave me a chance to memorize the decorations on the tiles around the door: Saraswati, Lakshmi, Krishna on a boat with gopis, baby Krishna on the snake. It seemed to me there was a lot of Krishna imagery for a Shiva temple, but then, there is a Krishna temple tucked within the walls of the main Kamakhya temple too.

Once the door opened and people flooded in the priests worked rapidly to process

everyone. A priest tried to turn me aside but our guide insisted I was with him. In the garbagriha we knelt and threw flowers at the murti while a priest chanted a mantra we dutifully repeated. The priest dabbed us with kumkum. Our guide helped me to my feet. Alex was out of my reach but others kindly assisted him to stand.



Alex descending the stairs at the Shiva Temple

As we left the temple people starting asking us for photos. This happened a lot; we were the only white people we saw except for one man at Kamakhya and a few westerners at the hotel. Our guide waved them off and started rushing us at this point. I didn't realize it at the time but the ferry was offloading and our guide wanted to catch that one back. He helped Alex navigate the many stairs while I went out ahead. I stood next to the rail anxiously, intending to call out if the boat started to leave before they made it on, but it turned out our guide had asked people to tell the ferry to wait for us. Once Alex and our guide made it we waited for the last two couples, so we were not the last people on the boat.

It was a long day. I recorded everything I could remember every night, but by the time we got to the hotel I had already lost detail about the Tara Temple visit.

The Goddess

The Nilachal hills shelter the yoni of Ma. The stone walls and towers enclose the cave with its yoni and spring in Kamakhya Temple. But who is Kamakhya? How did she emerge from Ma?

Tribal Goddess

Rajib Sarma is a hereditary Brahmin priest at Kamakhya. He starts his description of Kamakhya with the Khasi and Garo tribes in the surrounding hills. Both, he says, are matriarchal, and see the goddess of the cave as the natural creator. Many scholars have referenced the tribes as the original worshippers of Ma since Gait wrote his history a hundred years ago. Today academics question this idea (we note in passing the patriarchal hostility to woman-centered culture), but at least one priest at Kamakhya firmly insists on the tribal history.

Nihar Ranjan Mishra details the beliefs of many of the local tribes. He points out that the Khasis call their grandmother goddess Ka Mei Kha. On the jaimaa.org web page Kulasundari Devi talks about the history of the goddess. She notes that in other places in India the goddess is called “Kamaksha” or “Kamakhya”, but the local people in Guwahati still pronounce her name “Ka Mei Ka”. After I read this one night in the hotel room I listened closely to our guide and realized that was how he pronounced the name.

The Kalika Purana describes five versions of Kamakhya. Chapter 62 describes the first version, the cave with the spring. Biswanarayan Shastri translates:

Mount Nila is triangular in shape, low in the middle, which is Sadashiva himself. There on the middle of this stone lies a beautiful mandala, associated with thirty saktis; within that mandala is the cave of Manobhava, which has been created by Manobhava (Kama) himself.

On this stone the female organ is in the form of a stone, attractive and lovely, which is twelve anguli [fingerbreadths] wide and twenty one anguli long, gradually sloping in a very fine proportionate way going down to the Bhasma mountain; it is as reddish as vermilion and saffron; there in that pudendum the amorous goddess always amuses in her fivefold form, who is the source of the creation, eternal, repose of the universe, and bestower of all desires.

Here is the hill, the Shiva Pahar, with the cave, created by the god of love, and the yoni on the floor of the cave, in a sacred text composed a thousand years ago.

Sanskrit Goddess

How did Ka Mei Kha become Kamakhya? Kulasundari Devi notes that the Aryan people moving into Assam/Kamarupa/Pragjyotisha brought Hinduism with them and imported the worship of Shiva. The arrival of the East India Company brought a new wave of patriarchal culture. The woman-centered Khasis and Garos were pushed to re-focus their leadership and inheritance on men. To some extent the tribes have resisted this push and women continue to be important in these regions. As one example, many of the Guwahati graduate students whose theses I have studied are women, and at least one is coached by a women professor.

Mishra believes the names Pragjyotisha and Brahmaputra have pre-Aryan roots. The shifting of these names reflect a general movement to bring the tribal peoples into the Hindu fold. As he sees it, the Kalika Purana documents this effort. The Koch and Ahom tribal peoples are re-imagined in the Hindu caste system, coming in as kshatriyas, one level below the highest Brahman class. New stories frame the goddess of Nilachal as a Hindu goddess and Sanskritize her name. Now she is Kamakhya and she has a history.

The story of the Kalika Purana establishes the Shakti piths and maps the sacred landscape of India as the scattered body of the goddess. In this story the great goddess Mahamaya takes incarnation as Sati, the daughter of Daksha. Sati married Shiva over the objections of her father Daksha who deeply disapproved of the ash-covered ascetic. One day Daksha held a great fire ritual and did not invite Sati and Shiva. Sati became very angry at the insult to her husband. She showed up at the ritual and demanded that Shiva be invited. When Daksha refused, Sati leapt into the fire and immolated herself.

Shiva was overcome with grief. He picked up Sati's body and carried it everywhere in mourning. Meanwhile his divine duties were being neglected. Finally Vishnu followed him around and threw his discus to cut Sati's body into pieces. Wherever the pieces fell there is a place of power, a Shakti pith. Kamakhya is the place where Sati's yoni fell.

Wherever Sati's body landed, Shiva's phallus touched the ground. At Kamakhya the phallus enters the yoni, and Shiva and Sati are finally united permanently. Mishra makes the interesting observation that the story makes Kamakhya both a place for amorous union and a graveyard.

This story is told in a number of puranas. The story continues: Shiva retreated into ascetic contemplation and withdrew from the world. Mahamaya again took incarnation as Parvati, the daughter of Himalaya. She engaged in severe meditation with the intention to marry Shiva. However Shiva declined to break his ascetic lifestyle. The gods dispatched the god of love Kama to break his meditation. Kamadeva found Shiva in meditation on Umananda Island with Parvati

nearby. The god of love cast springtime over the island. When Shiva stirred to see what was happening, Kama loosed an arrow of love. Unfortunately Shiva caught the movement. Angrily Shiva opened his third eye and blasted Kamadeva to ashes. Nonetheless the arrow hit its mark and Shiva fell in love with Parvati.

On Umananda Island Shiva anointed Parvati with ashes and gave her instruction, a blessing which brought her happiness. Kamadeva's wife Rati pleaded with Shiva to restore Kamadeva to life. Shiva relented and permitted Kamadeva to be reborn. In Assam the temple of Madan Kamdev, now an archaeological site which displays erotic sculptures, is held locally to be the place of Kamadeva's rebirth. The statue of a man and woman in amorous union found there is held to be Rati and Kamadeva.

The Kalika Purana casts the ancient kingdom of Pragjyotisha as Kamarupa, the place where the body of Kamadeva took form. I learned this story first as a pan-Indian story about Shiva, Parvati and Kamadeva. It was only when I visited Assam that I realized that one of the sources of the story is a medieval Tantra and roots in the specific landscape of the land of love.

The Kalika Purana lists only a few Shakti piths. Other puranas fill out the full complement of 50, 51 and 52, depending on the source. A few stand out as Adi Shakti or very important Shakti sites. As the site of the yoni and the ongoing union of Shiva and Devi, Kamakhya Temple is usually at the top.

The Sanskritization of a tribal goddess explains why the description of Kamakhya Temple as a Shakti pith did not do the reality of the place justice. Mishra and others point out that bringing Kamakhya into the Shakti pith system connected the temple in Assam with other temples all over India. It gave the temple a context and brought pilgrims from around the country, the region and the world.

The Form of Kamakhya

The cave on the hill is not the only form of Kamakhya listed in the Kalika Purana. Biswanarayan Shastri's English version summarizes parts of the purana and translates excerpts focused on the descriptions of deities. Chapter 62 describes another form of Kamakhya called Kamesvari. This form of Kamakhya has six faces, each of which has a name and a color:

Mahesvari	white
Kamesvari	red
Tripura	yellow
Sarada	green
Kamesvari	black
Candika	variegated

Kamesvari appears twice in this list. Possibly oral instruction would give a different name for one of these. Each of these faces has three eyes, so she has eighteen eyes in total. She has twelve arms holding twelve tools. She stands on a red lotus coming from the navel of Siva, who appears here as a white ghost wearing a tiger skin and lying on the back of a lion.

This six-headed image matches the image I saw in the calanta in Kamakhya Temple. Since photographs are forbidden and I can only rely on memory, I am not certain whether there are differences between the description in the Kalika Purana and the image in the temple.

Buddhist Goddess

Kamakhya also has a Buddhist connection. Mishra points out that the ninth century Hevajra Tantra, a Buddhist text, lists Kamakhya as one of four main sacred centers of the goddess.

The scholar-practitioner Mark Dyczkowski has made a lifetime study of the secret Newar goddess Kubjika of Nepal, culminating in a multi-volume translation of the Kubjika Tantra. Dyczkowski explores her relationship to the Shiva linga. She is the goddess who emerges from the linga, and the goddess who contains the linga within herself.

Dyczkowski gives a translation of the Kalika Purana which discusses the journey of Bhairava and Vetala. Shiva told them:

...go to the inner sacred seat (antahpitha) of Kamarupa called Nilacala. This is the secret abode of (the goddess) Kamakhya called the sacred seat of Kubjika; there the heavenly Ganges (flows) (akasanganga). (Bathe there and) sprinkle (yourselves) with its waters, O sons: worship there Mahamaya who is the universe. Pleased, the goddess will quickly bestow (her) boons on you. (p.250)

The goddess answers their prayers by bursting out of a lingam and appearing in a beneficent aspect. She does not appear as a lover, but as a Mother, and feeds them with streams of milk from her breasts, after which they became immortal.

The iconography of Kubjika matches the iconography of the six-headed Kamakhya. How did the goddess Kamakhya end up in Nepal?

Dyczkowski says that the Kubjika Tantras rely on the works of Matsyendranath, the founder of the Kaula Tantric lineage. Kulasundari Devi reports the legend that Matsyendranath was born in Assam and initiated into Tantra by yoginis at Kamakhya; he then Sanskritized the

goddess and her teachings and spread them to Nepal.

Kamakhya's transference to Nepal as the goddess Kubjika lifts her into another dimension. As Ka Mei Kha she is the goddess of the cave. As Kamakhya she is a goddess of Tantric practice with an anthropomorphic visualization or dhyana. To become Kubjika, the goddess of the Newar people of Nepal, she transcends country and religion. She becomes universal.

Friday

Every trip has a day like Friday, where nothing goes right.

Bhubaneswari Temple

I was excited to visit the Bhubaneswari shrine. My tutelary goddesses are aligned with Venus. I thought this would be the day that I would understand the Mahavidya and connect with her strongly.

This was a day that our guide was not available so we guided ourselves. Our driver knew where he was going and took us straight to the parking lot. The shrine sits higher than the others we had visited. It's on an entirely different hill than the main Kamakhya Temple, on the Brahma Pahar. The walkway up to the temple was flat with no stairs, a real treat.



Walkway to Bhubeswari Temple and vendors

I bought incense, oil lamps and garlands of flowers from the puja supply vendors. The trouble started when we stepped onto the temple grounds. As soon as we crossed the threshold Alex and I started fighting. This was a surprise and a departure. We had been travelling for

nearly three weeks at that point and had been working together as a team. We did a lot of planning and trip preparation, including how to resolve travel irritations, and it had worked out really well. It felt as if we were travelling in a bubble of grace and happiness.

In the shrine of the goddess of love and domestic bliss our team fell apart. Each of us couldn't figure out what the other was doing, resulting in mis-steps in the ritual process. The familiar procedure of lighting lamps and incense was suddenly difficult. The steps into the garbagriha were crowded with eager devotees. The priests hurried us through the offerings and muttered the mantra at us without pausing for us to repeat.

The temple itself was under renovation, with bamboo scaffolding everywhere and piles of dirt in the walks. Alex found what he was looking for, a yogini statue next to an ancient tree. The statue is actually two yoginis back to back, but it was hard to get a photo that captured this.



Photo c 2019 Alex Williams

Tree and yogini statue



**Small image of
Bhubaneswari**

While he took this photo I wandered down to the vendors and purchased a small image of Bhubaneswari in small glass frames. I took this home in my suitcase, and when I unpacked I found that despite wrapping it well, the glass had shattered, although the paper image was intact.

We had our driver take us down to the main temple walkway. We decided to split up and see if getting some space helped to re-establish our accord. I found a vendor and dropped off my shoes, which later turned out to be a mistake.

With much of the day in front of me I decided to visit the Bhairabi temple. I took the route our guide had recommended, passing the Dhumabati shrine. The stairs were lengthy and steep, but also clean and paved. Down below I saw two men carry a buffalo carcass on a pole. Clearly it had been sacrificed and was on its way to some location to be processed for the priests' families.



Stairway past Dhumabati Temple to Bhairabi Temple



Durga Temple through Bhairabi gate

I walked through the gate of the temple courtyard. There were two buildings, both with locked doors, and a pond. A bored looking priest loitered in front of one of the buildings. From the lion decorations on the I gathered that one of them was a Durga temple.

Families came down to the pond to admire the large turtles that live there. I leaned against the fence to take pictures and wait for the temple to open. It turned out that I was standing on the buffalo carcass trail. Another pair of men walked briskly by just a few feet from me. The carcass was still twitching. My journal notes “big balls!”



That was, frankly, a little intense. Before another one of those could come by I approached the priest and asked him when the temple would open. “It is open,” he said, and led me to a side entrance. It turns out that this is where you need to take off your shoes, and I could have worn them all the way down and back.

Inside the temple was dark and silent; the puja days are Sunday so there was no water in the well, although it did have a metal framework covered with a red cloth. There was no priest on duty either, but the guard priest from outside did follow me in so I didn’t feel that I could sit and meditate. I made a quick pranam. Without any other offering I left money. My smallest bill was a 500 rupee note. As soon as it hit the offering tray it evaporated into the priest’s pocket.

I decided to walk up the hill along the other route, the one Google Maps had indicated, that I had been warned not to try. The stairs looked clean and even from the temple courtyard. I figured that I would be able to tell people what the route was like. I got a good view of the Bhairabi Temple from the stairway.

Midway up the hill I discovered why I had been warned against the route. The stairs look good from below and



Bhairabi Temple

above, but in the middle section hidden from view the walkway turned into a runoff channel. The stairs had deteriorated. They were covered with trash. The water that ran down the channel smelled like sewage.



I thought about turning back but I had already come some distance. Instead I talked myself through it, walking barefoot through the squishy bits trying not to breathe.

At the top of the hill I marched into the Kamakhya Temple rest rooms. They have troughs where you can wash your feet which was a real blessing. I sat on a bench outside the rest room to catch my breath. Families came and went, mothers and grandmothers with their children. One small boy walked up to me and stared at my white face. When his Mother noticed she told him to leave me alone, but told her it was okay. I was the stranger there.

When Alex and I met up again I asked to make the hotel our next stop. I wanted to wash my feet, change my leggings, and spray Lysol inside my shoes. Then I thought we could go to the state museum since it was still early in the afternoon. When our driver heard that plan he insisted on going to the museum first. When I checked out the map I realized why, it was not far from the temple, and traffic was building up.

The museum was closed for a special event. With that we returned to the hotel and called it a day.

At dinner we talked about the unnerving experience at the Bhubaneswari shrine. Alex said as soon as he stepped off the temple grounds he stopped being irritated. Both of us were

puzzled about what had triggered our discord. Then I remembered what our guide had said, that Ma will give you what you need for balance. If we had been arguing for our entire trip Bhubaneswari might have given us a moment of grace. Since we were getting along so well She gave us a moment of dispute so we could appreciate our harmony!

The Cradle of Tantra

Priests

When Anjali Pathak showed up at Kamakhya to interview a priest, Jitendra Sarma solemnly assured her Tantra was no longer practiced on the hill. “I learn to my surprise that the legendary tantrics of Kamakhya have all but disappeared,” she said. “Since very few had disciples, their knowledge of tantra vidya died along with them. Jitendra is not a tantric or a Sanskrit scholar. He dropped out of college to follow in his father’s footsteps as a pujari.”

In contrast Ranjib Sarma’s web profile tells us he is “Purnabhisheka Sadhaka (full adept) in the Kulacara Tantra Marga (Tantric tradition) of the Kamakhya Temples’ Complex” and goes on to list the many scholarly research projects he has undertaken. Maybe Jitendra didn’t get the same educational opportunities that Ranjib did. Or maybe Jitendra decided to downplay the Tantric stuff for a random reporter writing for a travel web site.

The priests seem to talk more openly with serious researchers. Parimal Kumar Datta, Nihar Ranjan Mishra and Prabalika Sarma all report on the Tantric rituals conducted by the priests. The overlap in their reporting serves as a verification that the priests are at least saying the same things to different researchers.

The Koch kings imported five Brahmin families to serve at the temple in the 1500s. The same families still live at Nilachal five hundred years later. Mahanta and Sarma both report on the hierarchy of the priests. The hereditary Brahmin priests occupy the highest rank. The non-Brahmin priests fill out the rank of temple workers. Their duties including guarding the temple gates, maintaining temple stores, keeping the temple accounts, making and repairing and cleaning temple gear, bringing water to the main temple and shrines, cooking food, and sacrificing animals. Mahanta noted that when she wrote her thesis, six families provided the balikata priests who perform the sacrifices.

We may recall that the tribal people were brought into the caste system in the class below Brahmin, kshatriya. I wonder how many of the temple worker families have some tribal heritage, if their ritual understandings differ from that of the Brahmins, and if there is some resentment.

This is a fair question in light of the socialist revolution. During British rule, and after Independence in 1947, the Brahmin hierarchy managed the temple. In 1998 a socialist group took temporary control of the temple with a coalition of Brahman and non-Brahmin sevaitis. In the second chapter of her thesis Prabalika Sarma describes the events from the point of view of the Brahmin priests: “They attempted to implement a socialistic pattern of management of Kamakhya temple by sharing the control of Bardeori Samaj and the Dolois and giving charge to

people who were neither by custom nor by tradition capable of taking such a charge. They even promised to give the voting rights to the females”. With all due respect to Sarma, I’m rooting for the socialists!

The revolution didn’t last. There were accusations of misuse of funds. The government stepped in and tried a power-sharing scheme that also failed. Ultimately the five hereditary Brahman families regained control of the temple. They have since allowed non-hereditary priests to hold some additional offices, but re-established the procedure that only men can vote and be priests.

Ritual

I found the third chapter of Sarma’s thesis to be riveting. “The Calendric Activities Of The Kamakhya Temple Religious Rites, Rituals, Ceremonies, Vratas & Festivals” documents the rituals of the temple. Some stories leapt out in particular.

Secret practitioners. Sarma tells us that there are practitioners doing private and severe meditations who only come out at particular times of year. I’ve watched videos of Kamakhya at festival times swarming with sadhaks and wondered where they come from. They do come from all over the country, but it turns out that some of them live at Nilachal all year long.

Severe practices. Human sacrifice was performed at the temple until fairly recently. The practice dropped off both because of the outcry and the decline of people volunteering themselves to be sacrificed. People also remember their grandfathers engaging in practices like meditating while sitting on a corpse, worshipping a skull while naked, and erecting altars on human skulls. These practices have reportedly also declined in the modern era.

Animal sacrifice. The balikata priests are kept busy. The main garbagriha gets one goat sacrifice every morning, and the smaller temples and shrines have sacrifices on their open days. Some, like the Kali temple, have larger yokes that can even handle buffalo. These sacrifices are offered by priests at the temples for the common good, but devotees can also offer a pigeon or a goat for their own requests any day of the week, although Sarma notes a buffalo sacrifice requires a two-day notice. On Navratri the priests make so many sacrifices for the main temple they don’t even start in on the buffalo until midnight.

Deodhani dances. In August, during the festival of the snake goddess Maa Manasa, a special class of laity enact what Sarma calls shamanistic dances. They identify themselves to the priests and get training. During the three-day festival they drum and dance all night, possessed by the spirits of the Devis and Devas of the various Nilachal temples. As they dance people make offerings of goats, ducks and pigeons, asking to have their future read. The Deodhas sometimes

bite the heads off the pigeons and drink their blood. At the end of the third night they immerse themselves in the water of the Saubhagya Kund to cool down and end the trance possession. Once chosen they engage in this ritual role for life.

Cakra puja. During the Rajrajeshvari festival the priests engage in the cakra rituals described in the Kalika Purana and Yogini Tantra. They make the pancamakara or five offerings, one of which is sexual intercourse. The festival goes on for fifteen days, and Sarma lists ten Devis who are offered the puja. The ritual can take place at the Kameswara temple along the main road, or in the Bhairabi temple tucked down by the Durga Kund, Sarma says, “according to convenience.”

Daily and Seasonal Puja

Sarma tells us that the elaborate rituals conducted by priests a few generations ago have been somewhat curtailed by the increasing popularity of the temple, as the requirement to open the main temple for darshan has cut into the time available to do lengthy pujas. However slightly shorter forms of puja pujas are faithfully conducted three times a day.

Datta, Mishra and Sarma all agree on the main points of the ritual routine. In the morning the garbagriha is cleaned out and fresh red cloths are stretched out over the yoni. The yoni is sprinkled with water from the nearby Saubhagya Kund and offered a goat head. After that the temple opens for visitors. The garbagriha closes for lunch, at which time the yoni is offered a vegetarian meal. In the afternoon devotees are once again allowed into the enclosure. The garbagriha closes about seven pm for the night when an evening aarti (flame ritual) is offered. Devi is not alone however, at least one priest stays in the garbagriha at all times. This goes on all day every day except for the three days per year that the Devi is menstruating, when no visitors are allowed and she is left alone.

Sarma gives the most complete list of seasonal rituals. There are so many, she notes, that her list is not exhaustive. Once when she went to Nilachal she found the priests celebrating a Chaitra Navratri that no one had previously mentioned.

Viewing the yoni

Prabalika Sarma documents as much detail as she could coax the priests to provide about the morning puja. First, one or two priests called Athporias remove the red saris over the yoni cleft and replace it with new saris. They do this in complete silence. While they do so they cover their eyes with white cloth and avert their eyes so as not to look at the yoni. Once they have performed their duties the Barapujari goes into the enclosure to offer the goat’s head and other offerings.

This leaves me with a question. I was somewhat surprised when I visited that my view of the yoni was obscured by cloth and flowers. I thought that the priests must be the only people who see the yoni. Prabalika Sarma tells us that the priests who replace the cloth go out of their way not to view it. By the time the Barapujari conducts the daily offerings the yoni is by concealed beneath the cloth. Does he see it? If not, when was the last time someone saw it?

I notice that some people who visit the temple describe the yoni, while others report seeing only flowers, as I did. I wonder if the people describing the yoni are actually relying on the description in the Kalika Purana.

Texts

Prabalika Sarma tells us, “At Kamakhya the Vamacara Tantra Marg of Puja is followed.” Vamacara means left-hand path. As she documents, the left-hand path includes offerings to deity of meat and sexual intercourse. This path can scandalize people not accustomed to thinking of sexuality as a sacred offering. There was a good reason for Jitendra Sarma to downplay the ongoing performance of Tantric ritual to an outside reporter.

Vamacara Tantra is documented in a few texts which were almost certainly composed in Assam. The Kalika Purana specifies some of the rituals, including human sacrifice and the offering of goat heads. I have not found an English translation of the whole text, only the excerpts by Biswanarayan Shastri.

The Kamakhya priests also draw on the Yogini Tantra. This text was written somewhat later than the Kalika Purana, in the 16th or 17th century. Mike Magee summarizes the Tantra on his web site. Biswanarayan Shastri’s Sanskrit edition also summarizes the text in an English introduction. The Yogini Tantra identifies Kamakhya as the most sacred site. This Tantra also describes the rituals of pancamakara, the offering of grain, fish, meat, wine and sexual intercourse. The text includes meditation on a seat of five skulls, pancamunda, in which at least one of the skulls should be human. The text notes that no sadhaka can meditate without a Sakti, that is, a female partner. Versions of this meditation include Kumari Puja, worshipping a virgin girl, and yoni puja, worshipping a living female yoni.

Many sources report that the priests draw on the Kalika Purana and the Yogini Tantra for their rituals. Mishra adds the interesting note that the priests perform the kavaca (armor of energy) ritual from the Bhairavi Tantra. Presumably he is referring to the Vijnana-Bhairava Tantra. Unlike the Kalika Purana and Yogini Tantra, the Vijnana-Bhairava Tantra has been translated into English by numerous scholars, possibly because it is a much shorter text! Personally I refer to the version translated by the woman practitioner Swami Satyasangananda

Saraswati. This is a Kashmiri Saivite compendium of meditation techniques.

There is one additional text associated with Kamakhya that I haven't seen any other scholar mention. Parimal Kumar Datta translated the Kamakhya Tantra in 2017. This work begins "The description of the own form or identity of Sri Kamakhya Devi who is in the form of vagina. Aum salutations to SriKalika. SriKamakhya is victorious." Like the Kalika Purana and the Yogini Tantra, the Kamakhya Tantra outlines the practice of Tantra. The text instructs the male practitioner to find a guru, acquire a female partner, and engage in ritual, including sexual intercourse while his partner is menstruating. The text gives mantras to recite along with visualizations of the goddess, and specifies the powers that these rituals impart.

Women at Kamakhya

The legendary founder of Kaula Tantra, Matsyendranath, was said to have received an initiation from a yogini at Kamakhya. We know that a socialist attempt to give women voting power at Kamakhya failed and that only men are priests. We also know that the Tantras are almost always written for the male practitioner. Are there women who practice Tantra at Kamakhya, and do they practice on their own behalf?

In *Kamakhyantra* Parimal Kumar Datta includes an image among the plates of a "Bhairavini", a woman with matted locks longer than she is tall. She is clearly engaged in some kind of practice. But what does she do?

Sravana Borkatoky Varma asked that question. Now with the Department of Religious Studies at Rice University, she was born in Assam and speaks Assamese. She spent a number of years doing field work at Kamakhya. She found that it was very difficult to talk to Tantric practitioners. She was able to find a married man to describe his practice, but it was much harder to gain access to women. She says, "While I hung around in the temple at different times of the day, my contacts would point out the consorts, but I was not allowed to approach them. Since I persisted in asking to be introduced, I was subtly told to drop my requests or I would get into a lot of trouble."

Finally she was able to arrange a joint interview with two wives of Tantric adepts. They came from families at Kamakhya where the girls are raised as Tantric spouses. After they take diksha with their husbands their subsequent duties involve rituals which they perform four times a day. Varma reports that they did not have a meaningful choice in the matter, they were required to take the diksha to aid their husbands, and they found this duty largely burdensome.

Varma notes that she does know women Tantric adepts who have raised kundalini, and that their experiences are similar to that of men. She concludes, "the tradition seems to have tied

the awakening of the kundalini to male practitioners. I believe that is merely a bi-product of the socio-cultural narrative that has been driven by men for men's consumption.”

Fortunately we do have the direct words of some of the women of Kamakhya themselves. Tracey Wares presented her doctoral dissertation in the form of a film. In this film women conduct puja themselves. They describe Devi, Ma, as the origin of all things. They honor Shiva as her consort and the union of Shiva and Ka Mei Ka as the source of all life. One of the women explains that Ma is everything, in all women, she herself is Ma, she offers puja to herself. One of the men Wares interviewed her required her to repeat to him “I am Ma.”

Saturday

Kali Temple

“You might want to step over here,” our guide said, as the Balikata priest led the goat to the sacrifice yoke.

The Kali Temple is in some ways the most central temple in the complex. It’s right on the main walkway. The roofed and open-walled outer courtyard lies at right angles to the inner courtyard. I’d sat there for an hour one afternoon watching a monkey cage bananas from the crowd while Alex shopped for Kamakhya souvenirs to hand out to the folks back home. Saturday is Kali day and the temple gets a lot more crowded.



Kali Temple alongside the walkway

While our guide set up our oil lamps I'd seen a goat dragged into the main shrine by the rope around his neck. I knew he was a male goat because only male animals are sacrificed, all females are exempt. (This is why it was such a shock that a woman's headless corpse was found at one of the temples downhill three days before Ambubachi Mela in 2019 - Ma will not accept offerings of any female creature.)

The goat was taken to a priest who perched near the well in the garbagriha. The priest dabbed the goat with red kumkum. Then the Balikata priest dragged the little guy to a nearby water bucket and splashed his head with water. The goat was dragging his heels and protesting all the way. I thought about what a Tantric acquaintance at a Kali temple in West Bengal had told me that his tradition believes: the goat should be taken to the sacrifice yoke and given a choice. If the goat protests he is set free. If he accepts the sacrifice, gives up his goat life, he will be reborn again as a human being. I discovered there isn't time for that kind of nicety at Kamakhya. The devotee has bought a goat, the priest is waiting for the head to continue the puja, and there's a line of people waiting for their moment in the garbagriha.

As the bleating goat's neck was placed down into the sacrifice yoke, I said to Kali, *do you really need this?*

I want you to see what is happening, She answered.

Thwack!

After we lit our candles and incense, our guide led us into the garbagriha. By then the little goat's head had been placed at the well and a candle set on his forehead. It looked so much like a prop on Hollywood B-movie set that I almost laughed. All this was done in accordance with the thousand-year-old Kalika Purana, in a brisk but respectful manner, in a sacred place. It was also the exact image of everything many westerners fear and condemn.

We gave the priest money and touched the well, which was dry. Our guide stepped back against the wall for a moment of private prayer. I realized there was a lull in the busy pulse of the temple day, so I stepped back next to him to spend a moment in the inner sanctum.

Look, She said to me. *I want you to see what is really here.*

I looked up into the round tower. The darkness seemed to be infinite, like the night sky, but without stars. It was the universe, the black womb of the cosmos, and I was floating in it.

I looked down at the well. I realized there was a large black stone in the center of the well. It was covered with red hibiscus flowers which dripped down its sides. With an electric

shock I realized that the stone was breathing. As she had instructed I looked, really looked, to make sure I wasn't imagining it. Was it an optical illusion because the flowers were sliding? No. The stone was expanding and contracting with tremendous pulses of power.

There was no part of me that doubted this. Westerners have skepticism built into our outlook, and there are places it is very useful to have. But when we are confronted with experiences outside our worldview we use our skepticism to hide from our fear of what we can't assimilate: that can't be true, there must be an explanation. That automatic this-isn't-really-happening voice was entirely silence by the experience. I was in the Kali Temple at Kamakhya on the day when special pujas are offered and the stone in the garbagriha was breathing.

When we had all finished our meditations we took one last trip around the Kamakhya Temple grounds. I wanted to check the famous image of the crouching nude goddess with the prominent yoni. It was covered with red cloth all the days we were on site. I asked our guide if it was to hide her, and he said it was a decoration left over from Navratri and meant to honor her. But I was disappointed not to see her.

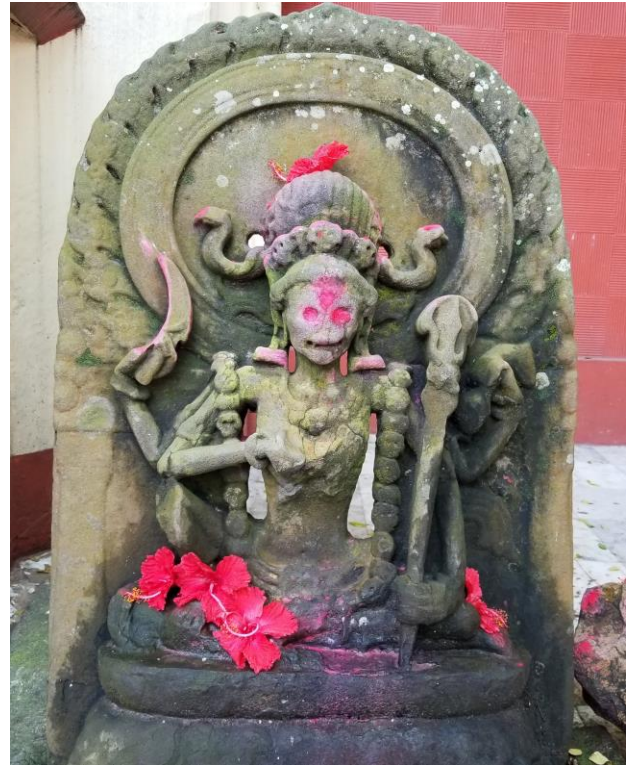


Crouching goddess, hidden yoni

I did get to see a sculpture of Varahi. I'd read there was an image of her on the temple walls. I asked our guide where it was but he didn't know. He asked the priests in the courtyard but they didn't know. Alex found it and happily led me to her.

I located a spot on the walls around the garbagriha where a sculpture of a yogini had been dabbed with red kumkum. I leaned my head against the wall and felt down into the waters of the spring, feeling the golden light in my heart, resonating with the bone-deep devotion of the ages. I was filled with gratitude. As I stood there a man passing by said to me "Jai maa."

I had another photographic mission. I'd been reading Jae-Eun Shin's book on the Mahavidyas and she mentioned there were two sculptures of Chamundi at the Kameswara Temple. I asked our guide to take us and he said it was right at the bottom of the stairway. The temple was closed but the two sculptures were right outside. I was thrilled to have a chance to make the images to share with my kula sisters.



Madan Kamdev

We still had plenty of time in the day. Alex and I had already done our shopping, we had our tea from Assam and beautiful raw silk shawls. I mentioned to our guide that I would like to come back and see Madan Kamdev. He said why don't we go now? It's only an hour away.

As we crossed the Brahmaputra, our guide commented he was so glad we weren't leaving Guwahati without seeing the north side of the river. Our travels in West Bengal had been on rough roads, but here the road was flat and paved, and the green forest and lush fields were a welcome relief from the city.

Our guide had worried about how we would handle the number of stairs from the parking lot to the main site, but the walkway sloped gradually and the stairs themselves were quite low, so Alex and I managed easily. We took our shoes off at the gate. The ancient temple blocks were piled up around a raised dirt platform. The site has one large intact statue, an image of a man and woman conjoined, which was located in the center of the platform. This had been wrapped with red cloth, once again concealing the erotic image. I walked around the blocks taking photos of the famous images of amorous couples that give the site its nickname "Kujaraho of the North".

Then our guide showed up with oil lamps and asked if we were ready to do puja. Where did he get those? It turned out there were puja vendors on site. We stopped first at the Ganesh shrine. Then we climbed up onto the dirt platform where we found a little Brahmin priest tucked down behind the stones! He had a little altar with gold colored status of Shiva and Parvati. We lit more diya lamps, threw flowers at the statues, and got tilaks. We concluded the visit with a stop at the Shiva shrine on the grounds.

This was the first archaeological site I'd visited which was still in use as a temple, and I found that very moving.

The priests were very excited to have white people visiting the site. One Brahmin priest put one of the beautiful Assamese scarves around our necks. Alex got to keep it, which was fine with me. We signed their visitor register.

Our guide indicated the statue and said to us, "Rati and Kamdev." The Brahmin priest stepped in and corrected him: "Shiva and Uma!" Our guide looked chastised, so I smiled at him and said, "It doesn't matter. They are the same," and he smiled back.

That was how we ended our tour of Kamarupa, receiving a puja asking for the blessings of the entwined Devi and Deva, in the place where love was reborn.



There's a priest hidden behind those blocks

The Mahavidyas

Until recently there were few texts written about the Mahavidyas in English. David Kinsley's *Tantric Visions of the Divine Feminine, the Ten Mahavidyas* is an extensive academic survey of the goddesses. It gave me a lot of information but didn't bring me closer to understanding how to relate to them in practice. I knew Laura Amazzone had visited the Mahavidya shrines at Kamakhya. When I found that Parimal Kumar Datta's book *Kamakhyantra* listed the days of the week the shrines held special pujas, I thought that visiting during those days would be a good introduction to the Devis.

The Mahavidya shrines at Nilachal

Before I visited Kamakhya I had thought darshan, receiving the energy from a deity, was about looking into the eyes of a statue. This has been true of Hindu temples I have visited in the U.S. and it was true in West Bengal and Varanasi. I found that the Kamakhya Mahavidya shrines don't have statues, they have rocks and water basins. The visitor comes into the energy field of

the goddess just by stepping onto the grounds.

The main Kamakhya temple had many murtis, deity images, in the other rooms of the temple. There was the statue of the six-headed Kamakhya and the six-headed Kameswara in the calanta room. It was hidden under flowers but replicated outside in a large sculpture, so I knew it was there and what it looked like. There was also the painting of the six-headed Kamakhya hanging in the calanta over the entrance to the garbagriha.

None of the Mahavidya shrines had statues or paintings that I saw. There was a plate in the Chinnamasta temple but it was completely covered with kumkum and I had no idea what it might have shown. The vendors around the Bhubaneshwari shrine offered little paper images of the Devi. The shopkeepers on the main walkway to Kamakhya temple offered identical versions of the Mahavidyas surrounding the six-headed Kamakhya, and all ten are depicted there. Those were the only images of the Mahavidyas I encountered.

As a practitioner I usually have an image of the deity and a mantra to focus on. I can repeat a seed syllable, count 108 short mantras on a mala, or chant some number of repetitions of a longer mantra. When I went to Kamakhya I had no images or mantras for any of the Mahavidyas. I did chant the Buddhist White Tara mantra in the Ugra Tara temple in Guwahati, and later learned that temple has a Buddhist connection.

Of all the Mahavidyas I had the best understanding of Chinnamasta. Elizabeth Anne Benard's book *Chinnamasta, the Aweful Buddhist and Hindu Tantric Goddess* introduced her to me as the goddess who is the sacrifice, the sacrificer, and the one who receives the sacrifice. She gives visualizations and the thousand names of the goddess. At Kamakhya, of all the shrines, Chinnamasta's was the one that most closely matched the main shrine, an underground rock with a spring.

While I was in Guwahati I found Jae-Eun Shin's book *Change, Continuity and Complexity, The Mahavidyas in East Indian Sakta Traditions*. Shin tells us that the priests at Kamakhya say the Mahavidya temples were founded at the same time as the main temple. Archaeological evidence can substantiate temples in the sixteenth or seventeenth century, with parts of the structures possibly dating to the eleventh or twelfth centuries. She also tells us that at Kamakhya the Mahavidyas, and the 64 yoginis, are all understood to originate from Kamakhya's yoni. They are all connected to the main temple.

At Nilachal the Mahavidyas map out onto the days of the week through their associated planet and are experienced in that sequence. The order depends on the day you start.

Day	Goddess	Temple	Planet
Monday	Kamala	Main pith	Moon
Tuesday	Bagala	Bagala Temple	Mars
Wednesday	Sodasi	Main pith	Mercury
	Chinnamasta	Chinnamasta Temple	Rahu
Thursday	Tara	Tara Temple	Jupiter
	Dhumavati	Dhumabati Temple	Ketu
Friday	Bhubaneshvari	Bhubaneshwari Temple	Venus
Saturday	Kali	Kali Temple	Saturn
Sunday	Matangi	Main pith	Sun
	Bhairavi	Bhairabi Temple	None

Mahavidyas enshrined in the main pith

In practice there are only seven independent Mahavidya shrines. Parimal Kumar Datta tells us that three of the Mahavidyas, Kamala, Sodasi, and Matangi, are held to be enshrined in the main pith. Special pujas are offered to each of them on their respective days, Monday for Kamala, Wednesday for Sodasi, Sunday for Matangi.

We went to the main pith on Tuesday so did not observe whether devotees could participate in the puja offered to these three Mahavidyas. We were able to participate in the pujas offered by the shrine priests to Bagala, Chinnamasta, Dhumavati, Bhubaneshvari and Kali. There was no priest conducting puja at the Tara shrine on the Thursday we visited, and I visited the Bhairabi shrine on another day than its puja day.

Prabalika Sarma describes the daily ritual the priests conduct in the garbagriha: “Then they spread two saris of thirteen hands of length from the yoni peetha to the peethas of Kamala and Matangi to replace the previous day’s saris with the new ones.” This locates Kamala and Matangi right at the main yoni. It’s not clear to me whether there is any physical representation of these Mahavidyas other than the rock itself.

I am also not clear where Sodasi is said to be located. Our guide said her waters are the first ones encountered when entering the temple. When I entered I saw people dipping their hands into a basin of water; I tried to go there but the guards prevented me from doing so. I don’t know if that is the pith of Sodasi.

Swami Ayyappa Giri of the Yogini Ashram in California describes a pilgrimage to the Mahavidya shrines at Kamakhya. As Datta does, he places three Mahavidyas physically in the main shrine. He gives additional detail about where they are located. In his description, when the devotees step down into the garbagriha and receive the water of Kamakhya, they turn to the right

“where Lakshmi, Sri, and Saraswati reside. Saraswati, too, is in the form of a yoni and Lakshmi is partly represented by a three-dimensional Sri Yantra.” Matangi, he says, is the Tantric Saraswati. “Matangi is placed in the innermost sanctum (*garbhagriha*) of the main temple to the east of the Yoni Mudra Peeth, easily visible as one leaves the sanctum sanctorum.” He also says, “On the way toward the outside of the temple, there are additional opportunities to pay homage in small alcoves dedicated to Matangi and Kamala.” I did not see those during my visit.

He also maps the Mahavidyas onto the yoni. Of Sodashi he says, “Anatomically she resides in the outside upper right quadrant of the yoni lips.” Kamala “is associated with the lower left quadrant of the external portion of the yoni.” Matangi “is associated with the upper left quadrant of the yoni. Re-mapping the quadrant shape to the triangle usually associated with the yoni, this would give:

Matangi	Sodashi
Kamala	

From the description though it is not clear whether the yoni he describes is the rock yoni in the Kamakhya garbhagriha, or any physical yoni, or both.

Mahavidya Practice

I did not have a Mahavidya practice when I went to Kamakhya. At Nilachal I participated in pujas offered to the Mahavidyas. I offered oil lamps, incense, flowers and money. I touched water. I received a tilak. At the Dhumabati and Bhubaneswari temples the priest spoke a mantra at me, and at the Dhumabati shrine I was asked to repeat it, but I have no idea what that mantra was or how it was meant to affect me.

Our guide told us that local people approach the shrines in the same way that they approach the Navagraha temples. They have their Vedic horoscopes cast, then commission pujas from the Mahavidya associated with a specific planet to correct deficiencies. They also approach the Devis for their generally understood powers: Bagala protects against magical attack, Bagala and Dhumavati grant magical power, Bhubaneshvari grants marital harmony and children. People also approach the main Kamakhya temple with wishes for marriage and children.

Since visiting Kamakhya I have found additional references which speak more clearly to practice. In *The Ten Great Cosmic Powers, Das Mahavidyas*, Sri S. Shankaranarayanan presents the Mahavidyas as ten discrete manifestations of the Divine Mother. Each represents a path to Her realization. Kavitha M. Chinnaiyan’s book *Shakti Rising: Embracing Shadow and Light on the Goddess Path to Wholeness* maps the ten Mahavidyas as a spiritual journey, exploring dark and light aspects of each, with accompanying exercises and meditations. Madhu Khanna’s book

Saktapramodah of Deva Nandan Singh has an English introduction with some descriptions of practice, although the sixteen texts with visualizations and mantras are given only in the Sanskrit originals.

I am now on the path of experiencing the Mahavidyas through the Tantric practices of visualization and mantra. I am still exploring how this connects with my experience of the Mahavidya shrines at Nilachal. I look at the images of the Mahavidyas and try to relate them to what I felt at the shrine. Scholars, priests and practitioners talk about the Mahavidyas as if they are the same from one place to another. That may be true on a more universal level, but on the hills the experience is so energetically overwhelming, it's very much tied to the feeling of the place. Whatever else they are, like the Devi Kamakhya in the main temple, the first layer of the power of the Mahavidyas at Nilachal is grounded in water and rock.

Ongoing Practice

We visited Assam the week after Navratri in October 2019. Just a few months later Assam erupted in protests of the Citizenship Amendment Bill. The Indian government responded by stopping plane and train travel to Guwahati, shutting down internet access and imposing a curfew. I worried about our guide and his family. When the internet came back up I waited for a day to make sure his urgent message queue was cleared out, and then sent him a WhatsApp message letting him know I was praying for him. He had quite a story – he'd been guiding three European tourists out of town when the trouble hit, and managed to get them to a regional airport and out of Assam safely, before getting himself back home. He truly is an exceptional guide.

Alex and I made the trip thinking that this might be the only time we visit India. It was physically difficult for me, but I am powerfully drawn to return to Kamakhya. I would like to practice Mahavidya sadhanas in their shrines and connect the mantras and visualizations to the energy of place. I didn't get to any of the Durga temples, and there's an entire Shiva circuit I didn't even register while I was there. I can easily imagine spending a month in Guwahati.

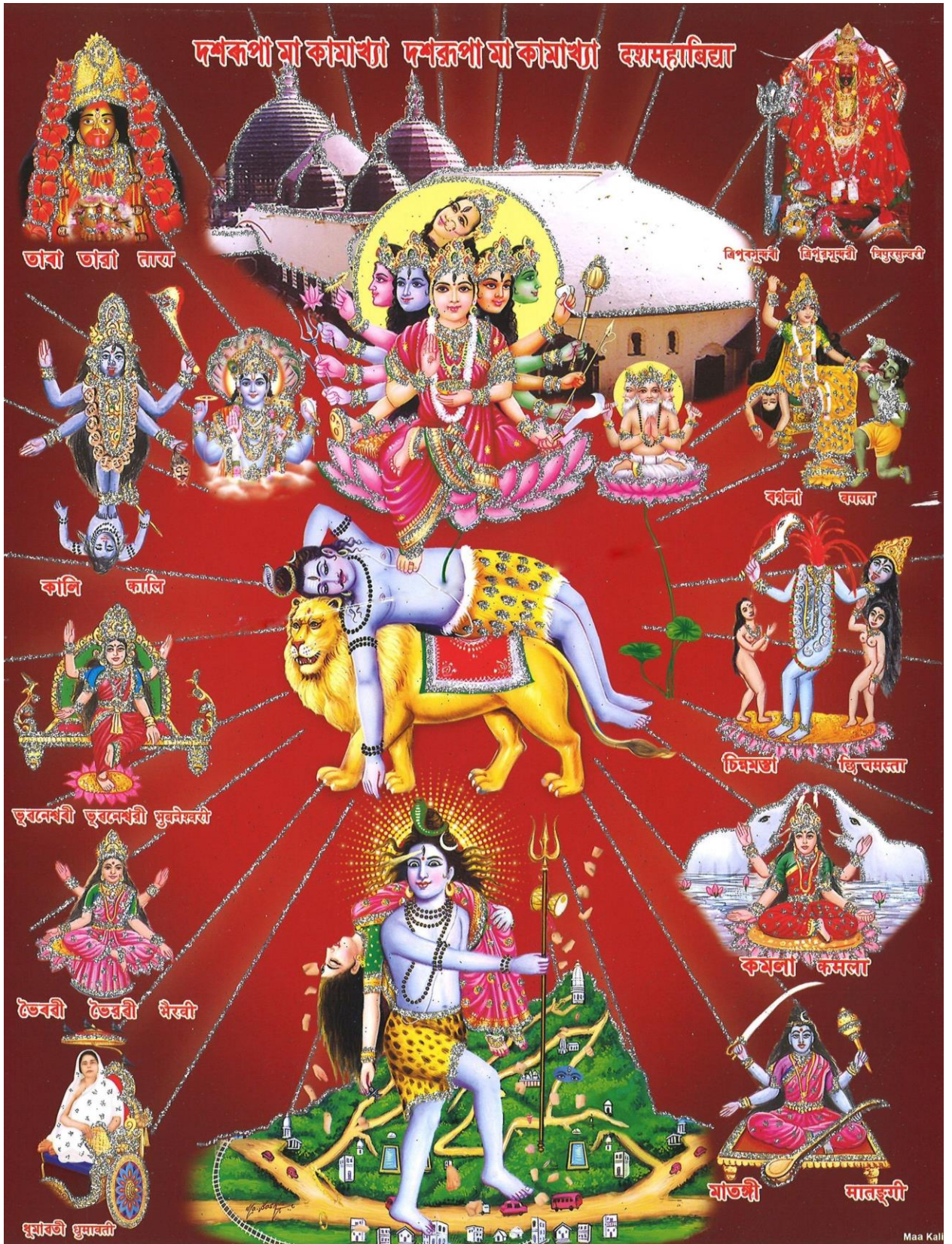
Whether or not I return I have made a permanent connection. Even though I live thousands of miles away I continue to feel the power of the temple. Alex, Ted and I are reading through the Kamakhya Tantra together. Alex and I brought a statue of the six-headed Kamakhya home with us and installed it on our house puja altar.

I do sadhana every night and I often revisit Her. I use the visualization from the Kalika Purana of Siddhakamesvari: a young woman with a saffron complexion, seated on a lotus, standing on the ghost Siva. She has three eyes, offers the protection and boon-giving mudras, and holds a rosary. I keep her golden light in my heart as I experienced it at Nilachal, and chant her

mantra.

As I chant I place myself back in the garbagriha. This time I am alone in the cave, dipping my hand in the spring welling up from the rock. It isn't a visualization or imagining; while I am chanting, I see the rock walls, I hear the echo of thousands of years of chant, I feel the power of the Mother surrounding me and filling me.

Jai Maa Kamakhya!



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