

The Divine Feminine in Assamese Myths: A Symbolic Interpretation

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Abstract: *Assamese mythology, rich in oral and written traditions, offers a complex portrayal of the divine feminine through a variety of symbolic representations. This paper explores how the feminine divine is expressed in Assamese myths through goddesses, heroines, and supernatural female figures. Using symbolic interpretation, it delves into themes of fertility, protection, transformation, and cosmic balance. The paper aims to understand the deeper cultural, religious, and philosophical meanings encoded in the portrayal of female divinity and the ways in which these figures reflect Assamese society's perception of femininity, power, and sacredness.*

Keywords: Assamese mythology

I. INTRODUCTION

Mythology has long served as a repository of a community's collective consciousness, shaping and reflecting its values, ideals, fears, and aspirations. In India, where the mythological tradition is vast and regionally diverse, the representation of the divine feminine occupies a particularly central role. Assamese mythology, both in its classical and folk variants, offers rich portrayals of feminine divinity through figures such as the goddess Kamakhya, various local deities, mythic heroines, and female spirits. These feminine forms are not simply religious icons but are emblematic of deeper symbolic meanings—embodying themes of creation, destruction, transformation, fertility, protection, and cosmic balance. The present study explores the symbolic significance of these divine feminine figures in Assamese mythology and what they reveal about the cultural and spiritual worldview of the region.

The state of Assam, situated in the northeastern part of India, is a land of syncretic traditions. Its mythological narratives are shaped by the fusion of Vedic, Tantric, tribal, and folk influences. The result is a unique tapestry of beliefs that gives the feminine divine a multitude of forms—goddess, mother, lover, protector, and even destroyer. Perhaps the most significant and emblematic symbol of the divine feminine in Assam is the goddess Kamakhya, worshipped at the Kamakhya Temple in Nilachal Hills, Guwahati. This ancient shrine is a center of Shakta Tantra, and Kamakhya herself is worshipped not in anthropomorphic form, but through the yoni (female genital) symbol—representing fertility, cosmic energy, and the creative principle of the universe (Urban, 2001). Kamakhya is not only revered in Assam but across the Indian subcontinent, and her cult symbolizes the region's deep-seated connection with the sacred feminine.

The symbolic significance of Kamakhya extends beyond religious ritual; it permeates the cultural imagination of Assam. As Monisha Sharma (2012) observes in her socio-cultural study of the goddess, Kamakhya represents “the power of womanhood in its rawest, most primal form, integrating both the benevolent and the fearsome.” She is a goddess of both life and death, love and rage, blood and transcendence. Her annual Ambubachi Mela, which celebrates her menstruation, is a rare cultural instance in which the female biological process is not stigmatized but sanctified. In symbolic terms, Kamakhya represents not only female fertility but also the cyclical and regenerative force of nature itself—a theme recurrent in various mythic and folkloric traditions across Assam.

Assamese myths also abound with other feminine divine figures—many of whom are rooted in local tribal cosmologies and folk beliefs. Goddesses such as Tara, Bhairavi, and Dhumavati, who are part of the Dasamahavidya pantheon, are also worshipped in Assam, particularly within esoteric Tantric practices (Barua, 2014). These deities challenge the mainstream Hindu ideals of femininity by portraying aspects such as rage, non-motherhood, and widowhood as potent sources of divine power. In symbolic interpretation, these figures subvert patriarchal binaries of pure/impure and

auspicious/inauspicious, suggesting that all aspects of femininity—however transgressive—are divine. This inclusive and transgressive representation of the feminine is a key feature of Assamese Tantric mythology, where the goddess is not merely a consort to the male deity but a powerful force in her own right.

In folk narratives and oral traditions, the divine feminine is also manifested through characters who undergo transformation and transcendence. One notable example is the tale of Tejimola, a young girl murdered by her stepmother and reborn multiple times in different natural forms such as a flower, a bird, and a fruit-bearing tree. Though Tejimola is not a goddess in the conventional sense, her story embodies the symbolic themes of suffering, rebirth, and resilience often associated with divine femininity. As Birendranath Dutta (2000) explains, folk heroines like Tejimola function as “quasi-sacred figures whose suffering and transformation symbolize the enduring spiritual essence of womanhood.” Her narrative reinforces the idea that feminine energy is regenerative and immortal, aligning with the broader Shakta belief system that permeates Assamese religious thought.

Moreover, the symbolic presence of the divine feminine in Assamese myths also extends to nature spirits and local deities like the Baak, Joka, and Bordoisila. While not always benevolent, these female spirits are deeply tied to natural elements—rivers, storms, forests—and often serve as guardians or punishers of moral transgressions. Their volatile behavior is not to be interpreted as mere superstition, but rather as a reflection of the symbolic power attributed to women and nature in Assamese cultural narratives. The connection between woman and nature, or Prakriti, is a longstanding motif in Indian mythology, and in Assamese context, it is particularly prominent in how female spirits are invoked to ensure agricultural fertility, household prosperity, and village protection (Neog, 1984).

The symbolic interpretation of the divine feminine in Assamese mythology thus invites us to look beyond literal readings of religious texts and into the cultural psyche that produces and sustains these narratives. Through myth, the Assamese community has created a complex vocabulary of symbols that celebrate, revere, and occasionally fear the feminine principle. Whether through the sacred yoni of Kamakhya, the vengeful ghost of a wronged woman, or the resilient girl reborn from death, these stories highlight the multi-dimensionality of feminine power. They also reflect the region’s socio-religious values, including its openness to Tantric esotericism, its reverence for nature, and its recognition of female agency.

Furthermore, analyzing the divine feminine through a symbolic lens also provides insights into the gender dynamics at play within Assamese society. While patriarchal structures are undoubtedly present, the prominence and complexity of female deities in myth suggest a parallel spiritual narrative in which women—or the feminine principle—occupy central, even supreme, positions. This duality between social reality and mythic ideal offers fertile ground for feminist reinterpretations, allowing scholars to explore how women’s sacredness in myth can be mobilized for empowerment in the contemporary world.

The symbolic representation of the divine feminine in Assamese myths is a testament to the rich and layered cultural heritage of the region. From the sacred sexuality of Kamakhya to the transformative resilience of folk heroines, these myths present femininity as a cosmic force—at once nurturing, destructive, mysterious, and sacred. By employing a symbolic interpretative framework, this study aims to illuminate the cultural, spiritual, and philosophical dimensions of feminine divinity in Assamese mythology, offering a deeper understanding of how these symbols shape and reflect the Assamese worldview.

The Kamakhya Goddess:

The most prominent symbol of the divine feminine in Assam is Goddess Kamakhya, revered at the Kamakhya Temple in Guwahati. She is an embodiment of Shakti (cosmic female energy), and her worship involves elements of fertility, sexuality, and spiritual power. Symbolically, Kamakhya represents both creation and destruction—the womb of all life and the force that liberates it. Her mythological presence is deeply tied to the land, nature, and the feminine body, making her a central icon in understanding the Assamese view of feminine divinity.

Symbolism of Fertility and Creation:

In many Assamese folk myths, female deities and spirits are linked to fertility and natural abundance. Goddesses such as Lakshmi, associated with rice cultivation, are worshipped not just for wealth but for the prosperity of agrarian life.

Symbolically, these myths associate women with the life-giving and nurturing forces of nature. The fields, rivers, and forests are often feminized, reflecting an eco-feminist worldview that sees the divine feminine as intrinsic to environmental and agricultural cycles.

Women as Protectors and Punishers:

Many female figures in Assamese mythology carry dual aspects—benevolent and wrathful. For instance, deities such as Durga are invoked to protect from evil, but also wield weapons of cosmic judgment. Female spirits in folklore like the Baak or Joka may act as both guardians and threats depending on the moral context. This duality symbolizes the complex social roles of women—protectors of family and culture but also feared when they defy norms.

Transformation and Transcendence:

Symbolic transformation is a recurring motif in female-centric myths. Characters like Tejimola, although part of folktale rather than pure mythology, are often treated in a mythic light. Tejimola's death and rebirth through nature symbolize resilience, transformation, and transcendence. The motif of metamorphosis reflects the spiritual capacity of the feminine to overcome suffering and achieve higher states of being.

The Divine Feminine and Cosmic Balance:

Assamese myths often present female deities as essential for cosmic harmony. The balance between male and female energies is depicted through divine couples or dual deities. This reflects Tantric influences prevalent in Assamese spiritual traditions, where the union of Shiva and Shakti is symbolic of ultimate unity and enlightenment. The feminine divine thus serves not only as a cultural or religious figure but as a metaphysical principle.

II. CONCLUSION

The divine feminine in Assamese myths is a powerful symbol of complexity—embodying nature, fertility, transformation, and cosmic power. Through symbolic interpretation, we understand that these depictions are not passive archetypes but active cultural forces that shape Assamese spiritual and social identity. The myths act as mirrors to societal perceptions of gender, while also offering a vision of feminine energy that is sacred, dynamic, and central to the order of the universe.

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