



The Kalika Purana and Reconstructing the Religious History of Early Assam

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Abstract:

The Kalika Purana occupies a unique position in the sacred and secular literature of the Hindus. It is regarded as the most important source material to reconstruct the history of Early Assam. This text serves as the key to the proper understanding of the various aspects of Hinduism, i.e. Saktism-its beliefs, modes of worship, mythology, festivals, feasts, and fasts etc. Moreover, the work helps to know about the sacred shrines and places of pilgrimage, its philosophy and ethics and theology. But in using it, a modern historian should be able to disentangle legendary, fictitious or mythological material from the purely historical and cultural data. The present study is an attempt to develop a clear and critical understanding of the religious history of Early Assam as reflected in the Kalika Purana and also to explore the geographical description as refer in the Kalika Purana as well as the authenticity of the text as a source to reconstruct the history of early Assam.

Keywords: Kalika Purana, Early Assam, Religion, History.

1. Introduction:

The two branches of Sanskrit Literature in the religious tradition in India *Vedas(sruti)* and *Smriti*, are considered to be the source and authority of the age-old religion. The Puranas are next only to the Vedas in their authority to dharma¹as they are come under *Smriti*. The word *Purana* means old. According to tradition, the Puranas were composed by Vyasa, but it is clear that in the form in which they have come down to us, they were not the work of one person or of one age. There are 18 *Mahapuranas* (Great Puranas), and many more *Upapuranas*(Secondary Puranas).² Actually the Puranas are the elaborate commentaries on the Vedic tenets. They are encyclopedic in contents and exhaustive in treatment of subjects. They are both the documents of the socio-religious order of the contemporary society, and the philosophy of life to the people of their time and

future generations. The *puranas* used to exercise tremendous influence on Indian minds through the ages all over the country, and even abroad, thus they used to serve as a unifying force. The *Puranas* are always popular with the masses of this subcontinent because they disseminate knowledge to the people of all strata of the society through popular myths and legends, which directly appeal to the human heart.³

The *Kalika Purana*, a religious-ritualistic Sanskrit text is said to be composed between the 10th to 11th century serve the purpose for the composition of ancient and early medieval history of the region. There is much controversy regarding the date, author and place of the composition of *Kalika Purana*. However, the book is a voluminous one and contains 93 chapters. But in most of the manuscripts it contains only 90 chapters. In either case the contents are the same. In fact, the 90 chapters' addition has been made into a 93 by splitting a few chapters. This text is basically a book on the system of worshipping the mother goddess *Kamakhya*. It begins with the quarry of the sages to Markendeya about the union of Hara and Kali. It describes how sati sacrifices her body when Dakshya King refused to invite Hara to the *Yagya*. Then it goes on to narrate the glory of *Kamakhya*. It describes in details the story of the Naraka from birth to death and his association with *Kamakhya*. It also describes the legend behind the development of the names of *Pragjyotisha* and *Kamarupa* and its extent. The *Kalika Purana* contains lengthy narrations of all the sacred places of *Kamarupa* and also describes the river of the land and their sources of origin. The book is valuable for a study of the religious, political and cultural history of Early Assam.

2. Review of Related Literature:

B.K. Barua in his *A cultural History of Assam (Early period)* makes references *Kalika Purana* in several occasions while mentioning various aspects of early Assam such as administration, society, culture, religion and economy. Another Scholar of ancient Assam History P.C. Choudhury in his book *The History of Civilization of the People of Assam to the Twelfth Century A.D.* refers the verses of *Kalika Purana* along with other literary and archaeological sources. J.B. Bhattacharya in his work on state formation deals with the legend of *Bhauma-Naraka* described in the *Kalika Purana* in understanding the process of state formation and political legitimization of Early Assam. *The Comprehensive History of Assam (Volume I)* edited by H.K.

Barpujari on early history of Assam which is contributed by renowned historians used the *Kalika Purana* while discussing various aspects of early Assam. However, the present study is an attempt to review the religious history of early Assam as reflected in *Kalika Purana* in different historical interpretation.

2. Objectives of the study:

The present study is an attempt to develop a clear and critical understanding of the religious history of Early Assam as reflected in the *Kalika Purana*. It will further explore the geographical description as refer in the *Kalika Purana* and also the authenticity of the text as a source to reconstruct the history of early Assam.

3. Methodology of the study:

The *Kalika Purana* is a voluminous text comprising more than 90 chapters. To study all aspects, require a long period for the detailed study of the text. Hence a micro level study has been undertaken and only religion has selected as the subject of the study. For the study both the primary and secondary sources have been utilized. So far as the primary sources are concerned it is not possible to explore the original manuscripts of *Kalika Purana*. Hence the edited and translated volume of *Kalika Purana* by Prof. B.N. Shastri and *Kalika Purana* (translated in Assamese by D.B. Bhattacharya) has been taken as primary source. The secondary sources have been collected through different books, journals etc. Historical method has been followed for the study and attempt has been made in the study to compare the records and information of *Kalika Purana* with other contemporary epigraphic and literary works to make the study more interesting.

4. Analysis and Discussion:

The name Pragjyotisha and Kamarupa find no mention in any of the early Vedic texts. The region was first mentioned in the Epics. In the Epics and Puranas, this part of India is said to have been originally inhabited by *Mlecchas* and *Kiratas*, who were driven by Naraka to the hills and the marshy region near the sea.⁴The *Kalika Purana* mentioned this fact as follows, “ *Vidravitah kiratatse sagarntam samasritah; sarvan kiratan purvasyam sagarante nyavesayat*” .⁵The critical study of religious aspects as reflected in the *Kalika Purana* help us to make a proper understanding of the religious history of Early Assam in Pre-Ahom period.

4.1. Whether Mahapurana or Upapurana

Though the Kalika Purana contains all features to being a *Maha-Purana*, it is not included in the list of the *Maha Puranas*. Though technically an *Upa-Purana* or *Kali-Purana*, it was composed to popularize the cult of shakti, particularly the worship of the Mother Goddess *Kamakhya*. The Kalika Purana listed in the list of 18 *Upa-Puranas* like a few other *Upa-Purans* enjoy respectability and is given a place of pride and honor which only Maha-Puranas are able to claim. The last forty-five chapters, out of a ninety, are devoted to the Goddess Kamakhya as worshipped in the Nilacala hills and other holy places of the Kamarupa region.⁶

4.2. Authorship of Kalika Purana:

Controversy arises among historians regarding the authorship of this Purana. It is inferred that the author was a *Vaishnava*, on the ground that the Purana started and ended with the name of Vishnu. Scholars, like R.C.Hazra are of the opinion that the Kali-Purana is a different work and not the same as the Kalika Purana. However, this opinion is not accepted by many scholars. Another scholar V. Raghavan remarks that there were three versions of the text Kalika Purana.⁷ The Manuscripts of the Kalika Purana are widely circulated and scattered all over India. They are preserved in public libraries and private collections.⁸

4.3. Date of composition:

There is much controversy about the date and place of the composition of Kalika Puarana. Farquhar believed that it was composed in the 14th century A.D. Another scholar Raghavan placed it in between the end of the 7th and beginning of the 8th century as the upper limit. R.C.Hazra takes it to be a work the 10th or the first half of the 11th century A.D. T.N. Sarmah opines on the ground that goddess Kamakhya and her shrine is not mentioned in single inscriptions of Kamarupa kings, therefore it can be assumed that this sacred literature was composed much later than these inscriptions. According to K.L.Barua it was written under the patronage of king Dharmapala. Biswanarayan Sastry mentions that the Kalika Purana was composed at Kamarupa. The Kalika Purana describes all the temples and holy places of ancient Kamarupa. But interesting aspect is that there is no mention of some important temple as that of *Hetukasulin* which had been rebuilt by Vanamala as recorded in the Tezpur and the *Parbatiya Plates*. This proves that the Kalika Purana was composed before the

rule of Vanamala.⁹It shows that the text belonged earlier than the middle of the 9th century AD. However, it is generally accepted that the Kalika Purana was composed in Kamarupa around the 9th-10th century A.D.

4.4. Place of Composition:

The vivid and graphic description of geography and topography of Kamarupa, the elaborate ritual procedure for worshipping of Goddess Kamakhya, the description of local customs, name of local fruits, flowers, roots, foods and drinks, ornaments and garments, the Naraka legend and the dynasty founded by him in Kamarupa, the reference of *Lauhitya* and Brahmaputra, praising of the kingdom of Kamarupa thousand times as holier unmistakably, proved that the text was composed in ancient Kamarupa.

4.5. Kalika Purana on Geography of Early Assam:

Kalika Purana is a valuable text for reconstructing the historical geography of early Assam. Because it helps to demarcate the boundary of early Assam or Kamarupa. The region, i.e., *Kamarupa* extended from the river *Karatoya* on the west, to the seat of the goddess *Dikkarvasini* in the east. *Yogamaya*, the source of the Universe herself resides here assuming the form of Kamkhya; *Lauhitya*, the prince of the rivers, son of Brahma (Brahmaputra) flows through this region; *Sambhu* and other gods are also resided here, let you prosper in this land of yours with your wife and sons. It describes about the hills, the climate and geography. The text mentions that the extent of Kamarupa was 100 Yojanas in length and 60 yojanas in breath. However, the geographical distribution of the inscriptions of early Assam enables us to get an idea of the territorial expansion of the state. While some land-grant inscriptions of early Assam were discovered in Assam itself, some others were recovered and discovered in places outside Assam.¹⁰ For example, the Kamauli Copper Plates of Vaidyadeva had been discovered near the confluence of the Varuna and Ganga rivers in Kamauli in Varanasi region of the present district of Uttar Pradesh. But it does not mean that Varanasi was under the jurisdiction of Kamarupi King. But in case of the discovery of Nidhanpur Copperplates in the present Bangladesh has sufficient evidence to support that the region in the 7th century A.D. was a part of the early kingdom of Kamarupa. The find spots of the inscriptions of early Assam are sufficient to believe that the eastern boundary of Kamarupa was not far beyond than that of the present Golaghat District of Assam. It is evident by the fact

that not a single inscription belonging to the ancient Assam was discovered in the eastern district of Upper Assam. So, in this regard the geographical description as given by Kalika Purana is contradictory.

4.6. Kalika Purana on the name ‘ Pragjyotishpura’ and ‘Kamarupa’

The Kalika Purana suggests a mythological derivation of the formation Pragjyotisha. It is said that formerly Brahma staying here created the star, so the city is called Prag-jyotishpura. But in Sorensen’ s Index to proper names in the Mahabharata, no association of the name with astrology or astronomy is suggested. The etymology is left unexplained like those of other proper names.¹¹The later historians like Sir Edward Gait and K.L.Barua had followed the etymological lead given by the Kalika Purana. Gait mentions that Pragjyotishpura means the city of Eastern Astrology ¹² and Barua on the ground that *Navagraha* temple is to the immediate east of the town Guwahati and it is probable that this temple is the origin of the name Pragjyotishpura.¹³

Kalika Purana says that the *kiratas* with shaven heads, yellow skin were the earliest inhabitants of Assam. They were strong, ferocious, and ignorant and addicted to meat and drink. It refers how the name Pragjyotisha came into being. The Kalika purana makes Naraka the founder of the worship of Kamakhya whose temple is situated beyond the Brahmaputra and as the Kamakhya hill was within Naraka’ s Pragjyotish. It has been said in the same text that immediately after Naraka of Mithila became king and was placed in charge of the goddess from pragjyotisha to Kamarupa.

4.7. Kalika Purana on Polity of Kamarupa:

The text also enlightens about the administration of Kamarupa in its section of Rajaneti. It chiefly refers to the duties of Kings and ministers. It states seven organs of the state, the seven organs were- *Swamin*(king), *Amatya*(minister), *territory*(janapada), *Durga*(fort), *Kosa*(treasury), *Danda*(army) and *Mitra*(ally). The Kalika purana lays importance on these elements and called the Rajyangam. It speaks about abhisekha or coronation ceremony. The king was the head of all powers. It speaks about *Varnasramadharm*. The Kalika Purana which was composed in Assam itself in about the 10th century A.D. is valuable for a study of the political history of ancient Assam. The Kalika Purana advises the king to take all measures for his own safety. It also suggests him the duty of protecting his family and his people. But it is to be remembered that

the genealogies of the dynasties given in them are in most cases defective from standpoint of chronology and often these facts are mixed with fiction. However, the historical significance of this text cannot be ignored.

4.8. Kalika Purana on religion: Saivism

From the religious point of view, the Kalika Purana is basically a religious text of *Tantrik Saktas*, but the importance and tolerance paid to other religious sects is equally significant. The devotees of *Kali* also worshipped other gods and goddesses which is evident in the Kalika Purana. This text is mainly concerned with the glorification of the *Sakta* Tantric cult at the temple of Kamakhya in Kamarupa though adequate importance is given to Siva and Vishnu as well.¹⁴ The reference of *Brahma*, *Visnu*, *Siva* and worship of others in the text in multiple time is sufficient to prove it. Moreover, the text begins with an obeisance paid to Visnu followed by *Mahamaya* (Sakti) and in the third verse the author salutes *Purusottama*(Siva), the supreme lord of the world.¹⁵ The supremacy of *Brahma*, *Vishnu* and *Siva* is also seen the verse of Kalika Purana. Here it is mentioned thus “ sometimes the body of *Vishnu* has merged in the body of *Brahma*, the same way the body of *Brahma* has emerged in that of *Vishnu*, so also the body of *Vishnu* in that of *Sambhu*, in turn the body of *Sambhu* has merged in that of *Visnhu*, the same body of *Brahma* has completely merged in the body of *Sambhu-Hara* observed that this process (of merging one in another’ s body) constantly had been going on, he also realized the identity of the three.”¹⁶ The text also highlights that in Kamarupa *Brahma*, *Vishnu*, *Siva*, Moon and the sun all reside together.¹⁷ (Oh my son! Myself, *Brahma* and *Mahadeva* all reside here so also the Sun and the Moon). Another interesting aspect of worship of other gods and goddesses are also seen in the text. It is mentioned that the king along with the priest should worship *Ganesha*, *Kesava*, *Indra*, *Brahma*, *Samkara* with *Uma*, all *ganadevatas*, and all sixteen *matris* (Mothers).¹⁸ The Kalika Purana in recounting the sacred places of ancient Kamarupa mentions fifteen places sacred to Siva against five sacred to the Devi and five sacred to Vishnu. An analysis of the names of the sacred places of Assam as given in the Kalika Purana clearly shows that the number of sacred places connected with Siva Worship is larger than that of places associated with Vishnu and Devi worship.¹⁹ The Kalika Purana relates that before the coming of Naraka, who probably

introduced the cult of the Mother Goddess into Kamarupa, Siva was regarded as the guardian deity of the province.²⁰ The Kalika Purana tells the story of a certain Naraka (different from the Naraka of the epics) of Mithila leading a colonizing expedition into ancient Prag-jyotisha kingdom. Referring to its previous history the Purana says that the kingdom was formerly preserved by *Sambhu* for his own domain: *Sa ca desah svarajyarthepurvam guptasc Sambhuna*. The aboriginal inhabitants were Kiratas with shaven heads and addicted to drink and flesh. Naraka was accompanied in his expedition by a Vaisnavie religious guide (described as Vishnu his putative father). Naraka settled twice-born people within his kingdom and he was enjoined by his Vaisnavite guide not to worship any other deity except Kamakhya, a yoni goddess. It would appear that the aboriginal *Kiratas* were under the protection of Siva, because it has been said that they were expelled to eastern sea with the consent of Sambhu. Naraka confesses in one place that *Siva* remains hidden within this city. The existence of Saivism in Kamarupa as explained by Kalika Purana can be acceptable in the fact that the contemporary inscriptional evidences also supported the prevalence of Saivism in early Assam. *The grant of Vanamala* states that Bhagadatta worshipped Siva with great humility and penances²¹ and his successors also devoted to the same deity. In the initial verse of the *Nidhanpur Grant*, *Bhaskaravarman* invokes Siva, who has the crescent on his crown, who is the holder of the Pinaka and who is besmeared with ashes. *The Kamauli grant* also supported the existence of Siva worship in Kamarupa. Moreover, the contemporary literary source like *Harshacharita* also mentions that Bhaskaravarman from his childhood firmly resolved never to do homage to any being except the lotus feet of Siva.²²

4.9. Kalika Purana on Saktism:

The Kalika Purana is very important from the point of view of his history of Saktism. It records so many stories to show the prevalence of the Sakti-cult. First time we find here the story about the origin or creation of the Sakti Pithas. It is the only work in whole of the puranic range which gives in detail the description as well as the prescription of Pasu Bali to the goddess. It also suggests the performance of Mudras, especially the Yoni-Mudra, very dear to the goddess. In short, the Purana represents the ritualistic side of the Sakti-cult which was very popular in those days. According to Kalika Purana, the genital organ of Sati falls here when her dead body was carried hither and thither in frantic sorrow by her husband Siva. The mountain

represented the body of Siva himself and when Sati's genital organ fell on it, the mountain turned blue. The goddess herself is called Kamakhya, because she came there secretly to satisfy her amour (Kama) with Siva.²³The Devi Purana also supported that the Devi was worshipped in different forms in Kamakhya and Kamarupa. As one of the most important Purana, it is regarded as an authority by the Nibandha-karas, especially with regards of Sakti-worship. It is very important from the point of view, that it deals in details with the rivers, mountains, flora and fauna as well as with cultural and religious history of ancient Assam, called Kamarupa. It records the progress made in the state under the rulership of the king Naraka, who has migrated from Mithila; as well as it also depicts the chaos prevailing in the state under the *Mlechha-rule*. This Purana also attempts to regularize and codify the religious duties what the smrities and left. It prescribes the worship of Sakti in her manifold forms as Girija, Devi, Bhadrakali, Kali, Mahamaya and others. It also gives in detail the *Bali* ceremony and draws a list of the animals to be covered. The Kalika Purana imported a new goddess named Dikkarvasini who was worshipped in the eastern region of Assam. Her mode of worship in general, conforms to that of the goddess Kamakhya, although her most delectable offerings are consisted of strong spirituous liquor, human sacrifice, Modaka, flesh, curry, cocoa-nuts and sugar-cane.

4.10. Kalika Purana on Vaishnavism:

Vishnu-worship does not seem to occupy any prominence in the accounts of the Kalika Purana. Except in the case of Vasudeva Vishnu very little is added to the bare mention of the Pithas. Only five manifestations are taken notice of with names of the places where they were worshipped. These are Vishnu as *Haya-Griva* killed *Jvarasura* in a place called Manikuta; Vishnu as Fish incarnation worshipped in the *Matsyadhvaja* Mountain east of Manikuta and Madhava in the form of a *Bhairava* named *Pandunatha* in Raksakuta. Vishnu is also worshipped as Boar Incarnations in the Citravaha Mountain east of Pandu and Vasudeva-Vishnu in the Dikkaravasini region. Of these the most important are the Pithas of Hayagriva and Vasudeva. *Haya-Griva* is a living temple even now attracting hundreds of pilgrims. But it has received scant notice in the Kalika Purana.²⁴ B.K.Barua on the basis of the epigraphic evidences advocated the worship of *Avatara* or incarnation as a notable feature of Vaishnavism in ancient Assam. The extent of epigraphic evidence shows that the *Avatara* theory was current in Assam.²⁵The inscriptions of Vanamala, Balavarman, Ratnapala, Indrapala and

Dharmapala mention the Boar Incarnation in which Vishnu lifted up the earth from the depths of the lower region. *The Kamauli Grant* begins with an invocation of Hari in the form of Varaha. The Kalika Purana notices that Vishnu as the Boar-incarnation was worshipped in the Citravaha mountain east of Pandu.

5. Conclusion:

The Kalika Purana occupies a unique position in the sacred and secular literature of the Hindus. It is regarded as the most important source material to reconstruct the history of Early Assam. This text serves as the key to the proper understanding of the various aspects of Hinduism, i.e. Saktism-its beliefs, modes of worship, mythology, festivals, feasts, and fasts etc. Moreover, the work helps to know about the sacred shrines and places of pilgrimage, its philosophy and ethics and theology. But in using it, a modern historian should be able to disentangle legendary, fictitious or mythological material from the purely historical and cultural data. However, the Kalika Purana has accounts of mountains, rivers, and places, which are useful for the study of historical geography. It also reflects the emergence of religious cults based on devotion, especially towards the Mother Goddess and the goddess Sakti. It is observed that in Kalika Purana an attempt has been made to follow toleration to other sects such as Saivism and Vaishnavism. This devotion was expressed through the worship of images of deities in temples, pilgrimage, and interactions. This text had a very important function in the belief of Saktism as vehicles of Sakti worship and also for social and religious values. It is mainly concerned with the glorification of the Sakta Tantric cult at the temple of Kamakhya in Kamarupa though adequate importance is given to Siva and Vishnu as well. The author of Kalika Purana chose the medium of verse for writings. Although this writing seems to be inclined towards ornate style, he has mingled the historical truth in it. In the historical writing, the text emphasizes on the transience of the worldly life and physical materials. The study of Kalika Purana, discloses that the Sakta cult in its various phases was a predominant religion in Assam during the early medieval period. The value of Kalika Purana for a historical study, the view is generally held that sound conclusions are possible when only critical editions of the texts are made available. No definite period of composition can be fixed for this text, because, through centuries it has been in debate regarding its composition. The role and value of Kalika Purana as sectarian religious texts and historical text has been controversial because it praises many gods and goddesses and sectarianism is far

less clear cut than assumed. However, the study of ancient history of Assam is incomplete without a proper knowledge of the Kalika Purana and further studies along with other archeological as well as epigraphic evidences will bring sufficient light on the various unknown facts of early Assam. As a matter of fact, it is virtually impossible to understand not only culture and life of early medieval Assam without this text. The Kalika Purana contains not only valuable historical material but also information on various topics for the reconstruction of early history of Assam. Therefore, a cautious approach should be followed while using Kalika Purana to reconstruct Early History of Assam with other contemporary sources in composition of history of early and early Medieval history of Assam.

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