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# KAMAKHYA

The Mother Goddess

# **KAMAKHYA**

## The Mother Goddess

Dr. Priyam Goswami



*Orchid*

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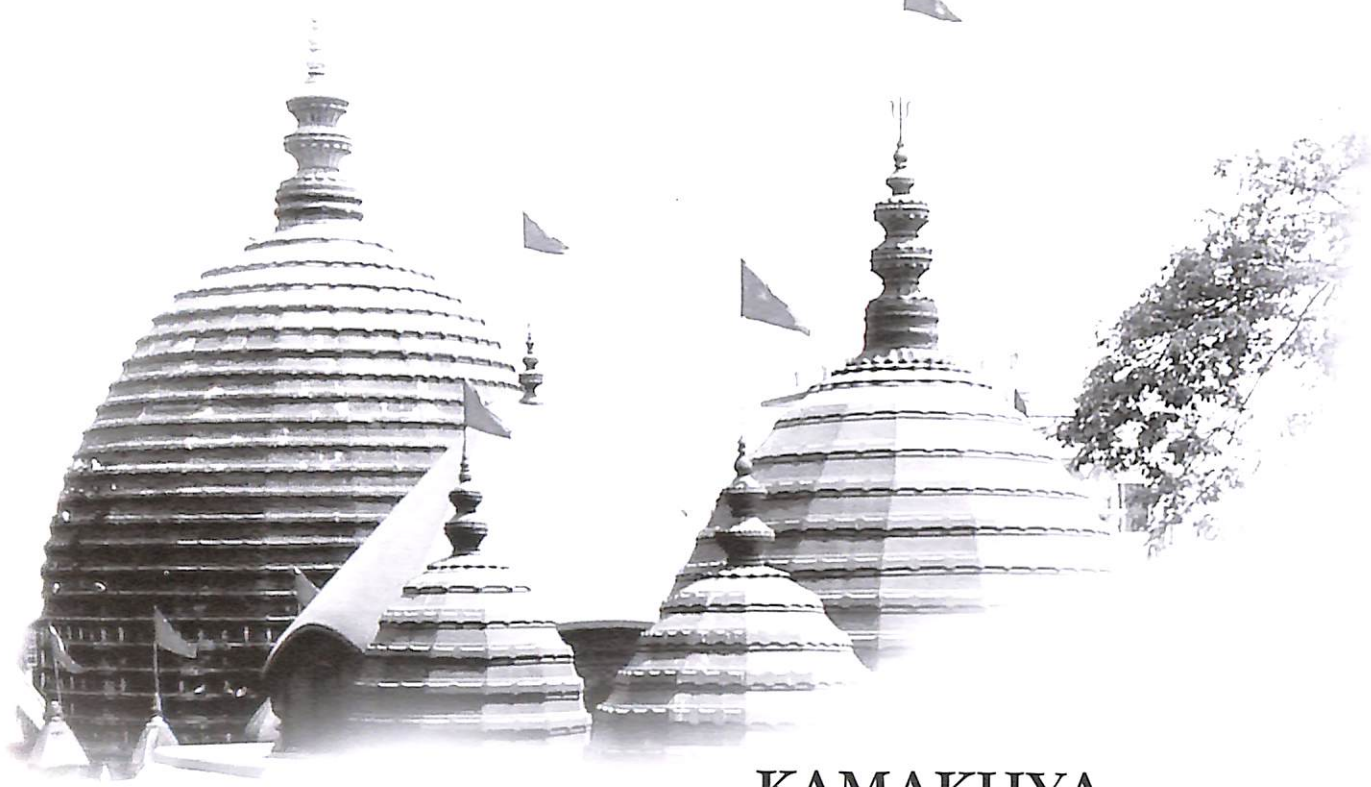
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## KAMAKHYA

Standing like a sentinel at the gateway of North East India, is the temple of the deeply revered Mother Goddess Kamakhya. Located at Guwahati atop the *nilachala* (*nila*, meaning blue and *achala*, meaning hill), this sacred *shakti peetha* has been worshipped since prehistoric times and continues to inspire awe and devotion throughout the country and beyond, even today. The Kamakhya temple is structured like a beehive *shikhara* with sculptured panels and images of Hindu deities. Consisting of three major chambers, the middle chamber leads to an underground cave containing a natural spring symbolising the *yoni* (genital organ).

**Except the temple dedicated to Tara, they contain no images. The other objects of worship are stones each moistened by a natural spring.**

**KAMAKHYA**  
The Mother Goddess



Gatehouse of the eastern path

Gatehouse of the western path





*mekhelajua baat*

An important seat of tantric practices, the hillock is also the abode of the *Dasamahavidya* or different manifestations of Shakti. These different forms of the Mother Goddess, namely, Kali, Tara, Sodasi, Bhubaneswari, Bhairavi, Chinnamasta, Matangi, Kamala, Bagalamukhi and Dhumavati are venerated in the different temples dedicated to her. Significantly, except for the temple dedicated to Tara, they contain no images. The object of worship consists of a stone each moistened by a natural spring. Nilachala is also the abode of Shiva, for it is believed that the power of Shakti is incomplete without her consort. Every year lakhs of people pay homage to the Devi, making Kamakhya one of the most visited places of pilgrimage in India.

The temple town is about 180 metres above the surrounding plains. Despite the uneven topography, most of the temples are adjacent to one another. A few, like the Bhubaneshwari and the Bagalamukhi temples, however, are a little further away. Prior to the construction of the metalled road in 1958, the temples were accessed through four footpaths from four directions. The most popular was the *mekelaujuma baat*,

the rocky path leading to the temple from the east, which was believed to endow the devotees with good health, wealth and prosperity. The path from the Pandunath

**The eastern path to the temple was believed to endow the devotees with good health, wealth and prosperity. The path from the north was regarded as a route to attain salvation. The western route was for blessings of the Devi for material wealth. The southern route was not considered auspicious.**

temple in the north was regarded as *swargadwara*, i.e. a route to attain salvation. Those who traversed the western route did so with the object of attaining the blessings of the Devi for gaining material wealth. The southern route was not considered auspicious.

Shaktism, the doctrine of power, is a denomination of Hinduism that focuses on the worship of Shakti or Devi— the Hindu Divine Mother— as the absolute, ultimate Godhead. Along with Saivism and Vaisnavism,





King Daksha

it is one of the primary schools of devotional Hinduism. Shaktism regards Devi as Supreme, with all other forms of divinity, female or male, as merely her diverse manifestations. As such, Shiva, the masculine aspect of divinity, is considered solely transcendent and his worship is usually relegated to an auxiliary role.

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further by calling Shiva poor and wild. Unable to bear such humiliation in front of the guests, Sati immediately jumped into the sacrificial fire and killed herself. Hearing this, an enraged Shiva came to Daksha's palace, destroyed the sacrificial altar and killed Daksha. Then, with the dead body of his wife on his shoulder, he started dancing the *tandav* (the dance of destruction) and travelled the entire universe. Seeing that the universe was on the brink

### Kamakhya temple according to the Kalika Purana...

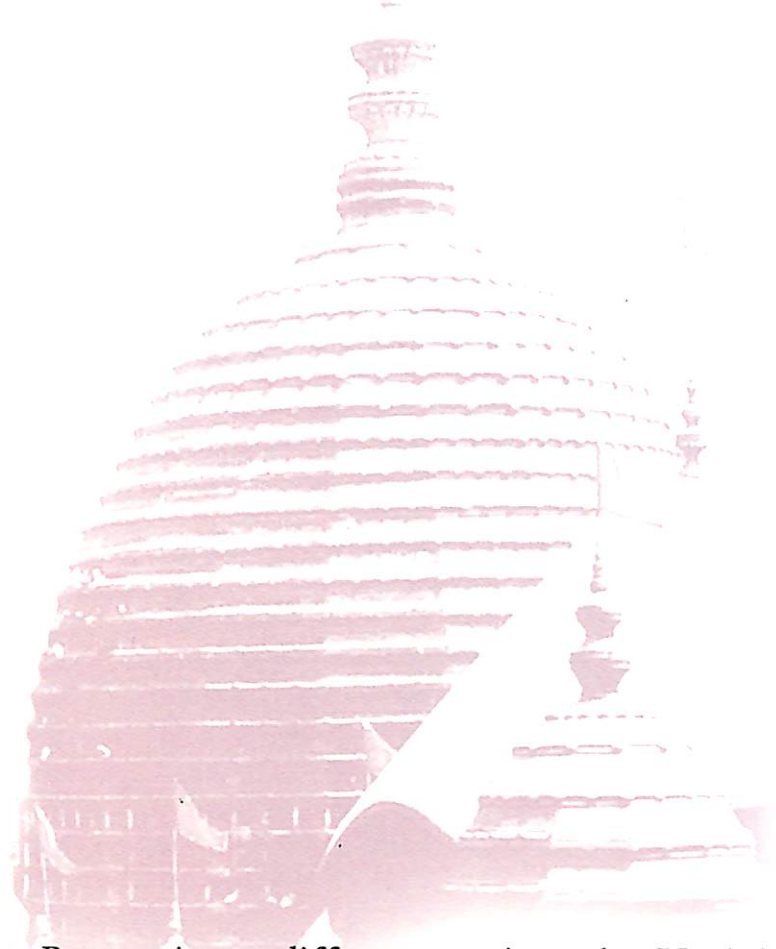
of destruction, all the other gods and goddesses approached to Lord Vishnu for help. Vishnu came to their rescue and with the help of his *chakra* (discus) chopped off Sati's body into 51 pieces which fell at various places. Each of these 51 places is venerated as a *shakti peetha*, i.e. a centre of power. The *yonis* (genital organ) of Sati is said to have fallen on a hillock in Guwahati. The hill is believed to have represented the body of Shiva himself, and when part of Sati fell on it, the hill turned blue. It is on this hill, Nilachala, that the Kamakhya temple now stands.

Kamakhya, another form





Shiva and Parvati



Recounting a different version, the Yogini Tantra, (16<sup>th</sup> century) lays stress on the creative symbolism of the *yoni*. It states that when Devi asked Shiva who Kamakhya was, Shiva replied that she was none other than Kali, the eternal

### According to the Yogini Tantra...

in the form of Brahma. Elaborating this, Shiva went on to relate that after having created the universe, Brahma became arrogant and arrogated to himself the supreme forces of creation. Kali noticed this change in Brahma's attitude and in order to punish him for his conceit, created a demon, named Kesi, out of her own form to destroy

Brahma. Despite Vishnu's help, Brahma was no match for Kesi and was compelled to flee. When realization eventually dawned on Brahma, he cast aside his vanity and begged Kali to save him. Being satisfied with his penitence, Kali revealed that she herself had created the demon in order to punish Brahma. She burnt the demon into ashes, but added that if Brahma wanted deliverance from his sin of arrogance he would have to create a hillock from the ashes of the demon and cover it with grass suitable for grazing. The intensity of his sin would diminish in proportion to the grass consumed by cattle. She also pointed out to the spot where the demon had been destroyed and where a *yoni* circle (*yoni mandala*) had arisen out of her own creative energy. She instructed Brahma that this should be



Sadashiva






Varaha



regarded as the source and origin of all, and that in future, nothing was to be created by him without first paying obeisance to the yoni circle which she had created for the good of all. Brahma consented. By sprinkling water from his jug, he created a hillock which he named Govardhana Parvata, also referred to as Nilakuta Parvata or Nilachala.

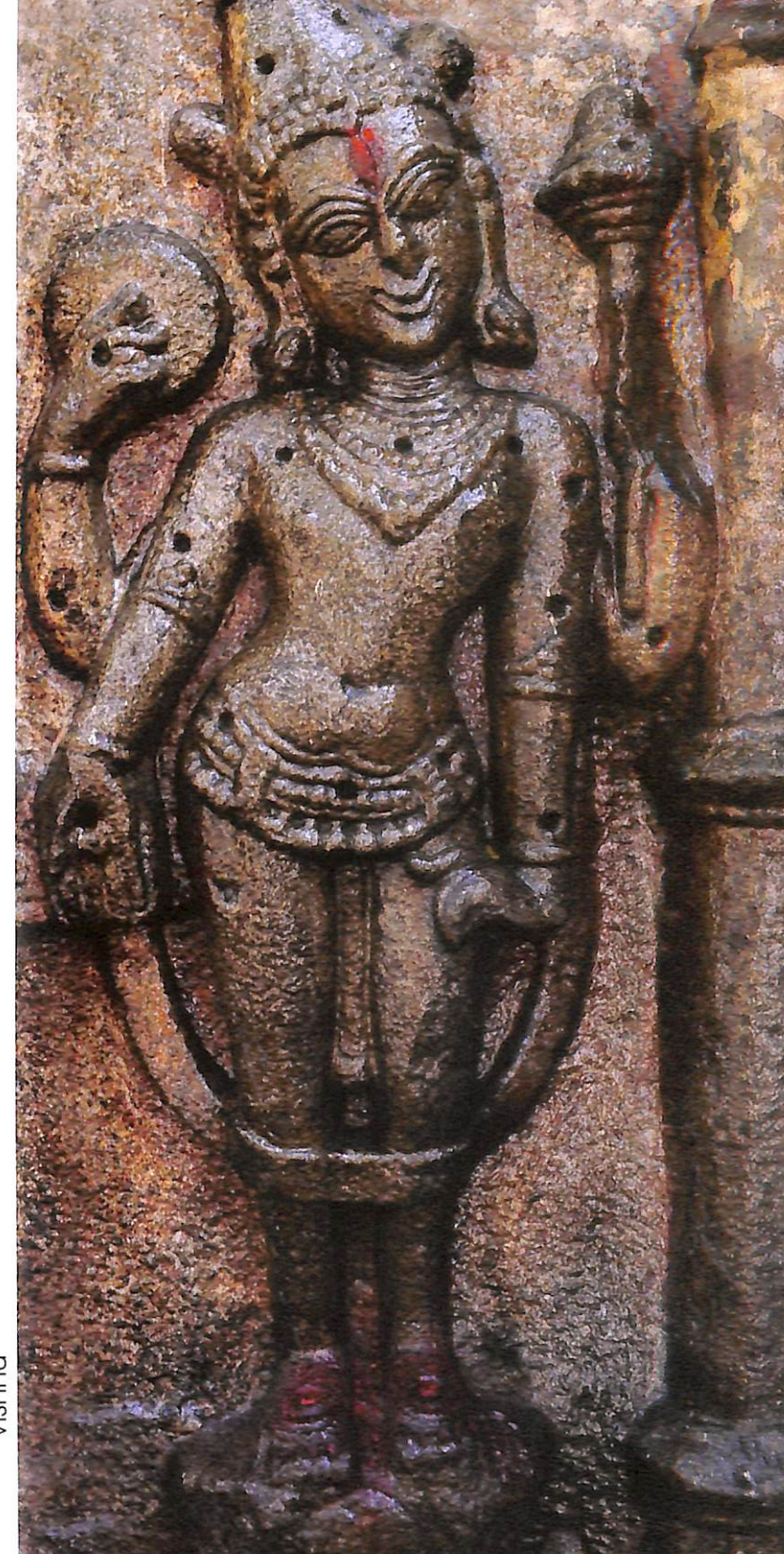
### Another legend relating Naraka...

Another legend relating to the Kamakhya temple is associated with Naraka, the powerful king of Pragjyotisha. Naraka is said to have been born of the earth (*bhumi*) by Vishnu in his Varaha (pig incarnation) and brought up by Janaka, the ruler of Videha. Naraka defeated Ghatakasur,

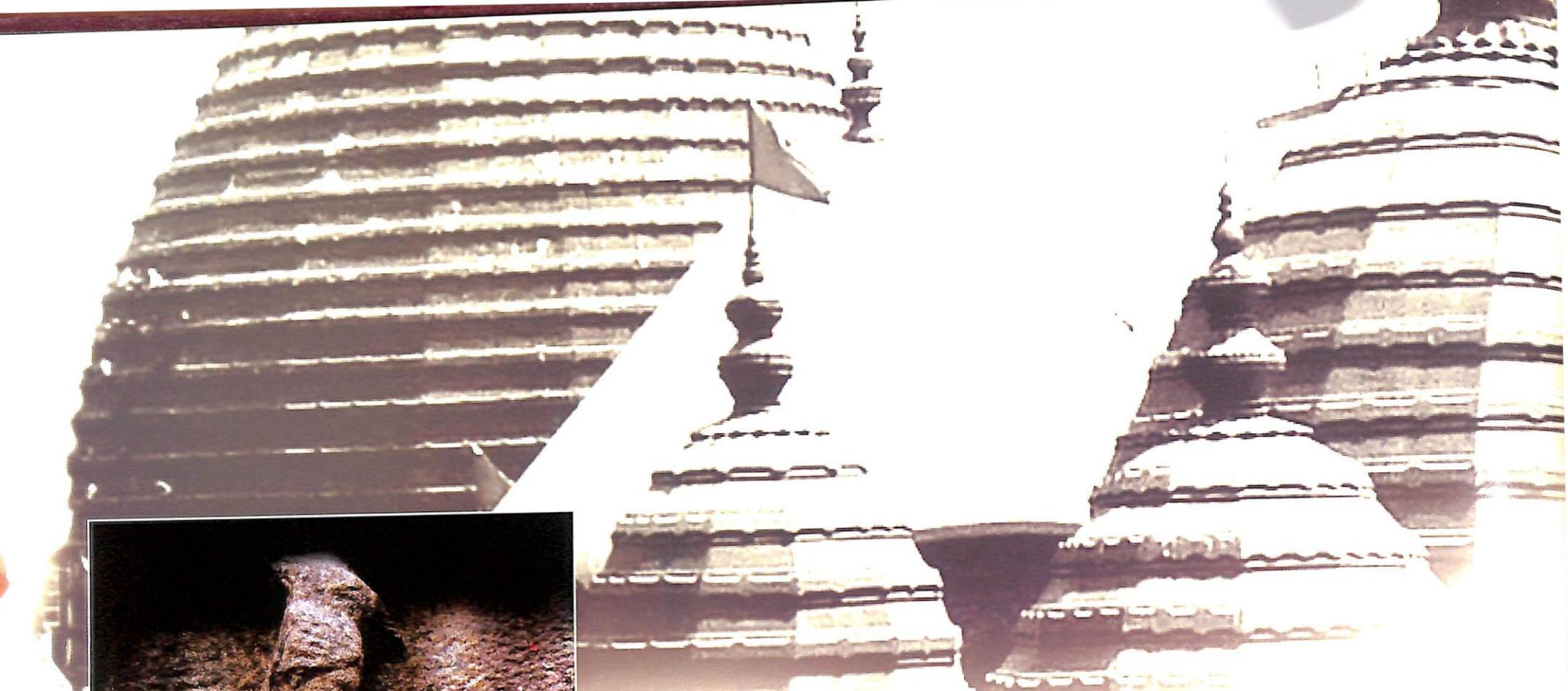


the reigning king of Kamrupa, extended his territory and made Pragjyotishpur his capital. Under the influence of Vishnu, Naraka started worshipping Kamakhya and was so enamoured by her that he proposed to marry her. The goddess was startled at his audacity but agreed to marry him on condition that Naraka constructed a temple, a tank and a road from the foot of the hill leading to the temple, all in one night. Naraka accepted the challenge and almost completed the task, but seeing this the goddess caused a cock to crow and declared that since dawn had broken Naraka had lost the challenge. An angry Naraka chased the cock and slaughtered it. The place where the cock was supposed to have been killed is still known as *Kukurakata*, (*kukura* meaning cock, and *kata* meaning to cut) while the road up the hill is referred to as *mekhelaujuwa baat*, meaning, a steep road.

The Kalika Purana states that soon afterwards, Naraka befriended Banasura, the king of neighbouring Sonitpur, and under his influence gave up worshipping Kamakhya. He is even said to have



Vishnu



prevented the sage Vashistha from worshipping the goddess. Having thus alienated both Vishnu and Kamakhya, Naraka eventually fell victim to Vishnu, in his incarnation as Krishna, and was succeeded by Bhagadatta, the eldest of his four sons.

According to another popular legend, Kendukalai, a Brahmin priest in the Kamakhya temple during the reign of the Koch king Naranarayana, was an ardent devotee of the goddess. Every evening

**Yet another popular legend relating Kendukalai...**

while offering his prayers within closed doors he would go into a trance and start dancing in ecstasy. Touched by his devotion, the Goddess started participating with him in the dancing, but warned him



Warrior



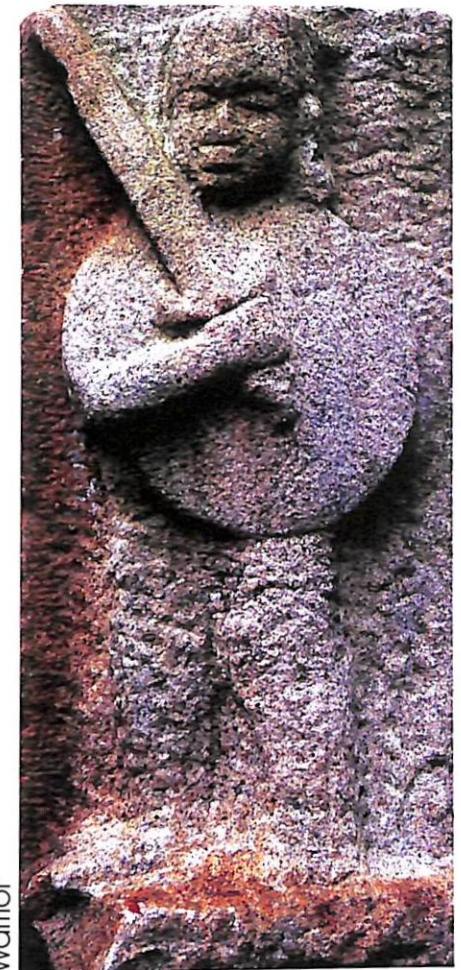
not to tell anyone about it. Naranarayan somehow got wind of this and requested Kendulalai to give him an opportunity of having a glimpse of the dancing Devi. Kendukalai could hardly refuse the monarch and so asked him to peep through a hole in the wall. As Naranarayan did so, his eyes caught the eyes of the infuriated goddess who tore off the head of the priest. She further cursed the king saying that if either he or any of his descendants even cast a look towards the hill, they would all

### Reference to Kamakhya in the Mahabharata...

be destroyed. Interestingly, till this day, many of the descendants of the king cover themselves with umbrellas while passing by the hill.

There is also reference to Kamakhya in the Mahabharata. To the west of Nilachala at the waterfront, there is a place called Pandunath which has been named after the five Pandavas who, it is stated, took a ceremonial bath there before proceeding to offer prayers before the Goddess Kamakhya for the recovery of their lost kingdom. The shrine of the Pancha Pandavas consists of five rock cut images of Ganesha.

All the above legends, however, reflect different periods of time. The beginning of Aryanism in Assam is associated with Naraka who is said to have established himself as the custodian of the Mother Goddess and in whose honour he even changed the name of his kingdom from Pragjyotishpura to Kamarupa. According



Warrior



Ganeshha

to oral traditions, as well as the Vishnu Purana and Kalika Purana, Naraka initiated the worship of the Goddess Kamakhya who dwelt on the Nilachala in Assam and settled large numbers of Brahmins in the Brahmaputra valley.

### **Naraka initiated the worship of the Goddess Kamakhya.**

Scholars like Banikanta Kakati, however, find a continuum over time and space in the worship of the Mother Goddess. Analysing the fusion of Aryan and non-Aryan elements, he is of the opinion that the Khasis

### **Another opinion associates the Khasis and Garos with the shrine during its formative period.**

and Garos, both matrilineal groups who lived in the vicinity of the Nilachala, were associated with the shrine during its formative period. In support of his argument he refers to the Khasi tradition of regarding *u lum ka meikha*, as the ancient abode of many Khasi, Garo and

Bodo communities. He believes that the concept of the Mother Goddess initially emerged amongst these people who believed in ancestor worship and in the protective powers of an ancestral Mother. In order to win over their allegiance and support and to facilitate the propagation of Aryan beliefs and custom amongst these

### **A continuum over time and space in the worship of the Mother Goddess is also opined.**

newly conquered non-Aryan people, Naraka extended royal patronage to the local cult of the Mother Goddess. Pauranic literature too refers to the goddess on the Nilachala as a primordial goddess, associated with the fertility cult. With the gradual inroads of Vedic brahmanical religion, local goddesses like Kamakhya were assimilated into the brahmanical fold and a Pauranic origin was assigned to them.

Among the successors of Naraka, however, no reference to any royal patronage to the Kamakhya temple has been recorded, so its history is obscure till the rise of the Koch



Gajavyala at Baghduar



Sikhara

kingdom in the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

Biswa Singha (1515-40), the first Koch king, was an exceptionally enterprising and courageous man with keen military and administrative abilities. He set up a strong

**Biswa Singha rebuilt the temple on Nilachala and is said to have revived the worship of Kamakhya.**

independent kingdom in Assam forcing the Muslims to withdraw from Kamrup. He next sought to remove all vestiges of Muslim rule in the region by repairing the damaged temples. He is said to have revived the worship of Kamakhya. He rebuilt the temple on Nilachala and settled many Brahmin families from Kanauj, Benaras and other centres of learning, on the hill. The credit of re-instating Kamakhya as a predominant deity, however, is attributed to his son and successor, Naranarayan Singha, an ardent devotee of the Mother Goddess. Naranarayan was a person of mild disposition, religious in nature and interested in intellectual pursuits. It appears that on questions of politics and administration, he was totally



Lioness at Baghduar

dependent on his shrewd and skilful younger brother, Sukladhwaj, popularly known as Chilarai.

Within a few years of his accession, Naranarayan set up a strong kingdom. Encouraged by repeated and brilliant victories all around, Naranarayan and Chilarai, decided to invade Gaur (Bare Bangala), but the Koch army was defeated. The jubilant Muhammadan army ascended the Brahmaputra as far as Tezpur,

**Naranarayan rebuilt the Kamakhya temple over the existing basement in 1565.**

but was suddenly compelled to return hurriedly to quell an uprising in Orissa. The Koch kingdom was saved, but the invaders left behind a trail of plunder, ruining and desecrating numerous images and temples, including the ones at Kamakhya



Rishi



Tantric Figures

and Hajo, on their way back. Local traditions point to the iconoclast Kalapahar, the general of Suleiman Kararani of Bengal, as being responsible for the vandalism that occurred.

Two inscriptions on the walls of the *antarala* (vestibule) of the Kamakhya temple record that Naranarayan had the temple rebuilt over the existing basement in 1565. The construction is said to have taken six months. Eminent scholar, Maheswar Neog, states that the responsibility of rebuilding the temple was initially given to an official named Mahatram Baishya, but that the charge was subsequently handed over to Meghamukdum who completed the work by using bricks. Both Naranarayan and Chilarai took part in the dedicatory ceremony where offerings of one lakh sacrifices were made. Along with extensive land grants and fisheries, the king dedicated to the temple the families of 140 *pair* along with musical instruments and utensils of gold, silver, copper and bell-metal. King Naranarayan also had statues of himself and his brother, Chilarai, to be engraved inside the temple. The two rock cut figures on the wall of the *chalanta* or *jagamohan* of the Kamakhya temple are believed to depict Naranarayan and Chilarai.

Meanwhile, under the leadership of Sukapha, Ahom migrants from Upper Burma had crossed the Patkai range and had established a kingdom in Upper Assam in the early



Linga with *sikhara*

thirteenth century. By the end of the seventeenth century, they were the unchallenged masters of the entire Brahmaputra Valley with many tributary chiefs and

### **The Ahom kings adopted Hinduism.**

princes owing allegiance to them. But in order to attain this position they had to wage many wars against the Morans, Barahis, Chutiyas, Kacharis, Koches and even the Mughals. The Ahom monarchs were essentially liberal in

their social outlook and were by and large tolerant of other religions. It was in fact a conscious effort on their part, because they realised that only through assimilation could they retain effective control over the diverse people whom they had conquered. Records show that royal patronage was extended to all sects.

Gradually, the Ahom kings adopted Hinduism, and although they did not give up worshipping their ancestral gods altogether, Ahom gods came to be identified with their brahmanical counterparts. The numerous land



Siddheswara Temple



grants made to religious and charitable institutions by the Ahom monarchs were exempted from revenue and classified under three categories: *brahmottar* lands for the maintenance of the brahmanas, *debottar* lands for the maintenance of temples and *dharmottar* lands for religious and charitable purposes.

Shakta influence in the Ahom court emerged as a strong influence during the reign of Gadadhar Singha (1681-1696). This was further strengthened during the reign of his son and successor Rudra Singha (1696-1714) who invited Krishnaram Bhattacharya, a noted Shakta Mahanta of Malipota near Santipur in Nadia district, Bengal, to take charge of the Kamakhya temple on Nilachala. The story goes that the king changed his mind after the arrival of the preacher who being thus humiliated, left in anger. The occurrence of a series of earthquakes in Assam thereafter and the subsequent illness of the king were interpreted by the king's advisors as the result of the ill treatment meted out to the holy man. Hence, on his death bed, Rudra Singha asked his sons to accept Krishnaram Bhattacharya as their guru.

The reign of Siva Singha (1714-44), son and successor of Rudra Singha, witnessed the predominance of Shaktism. As per the wishes of the late monarch, Krishnaram Bhattacharya was once again invited to Assam and bestowed with the responsibility of the management of the Kamakhya temple. He was given the title of Parbatiya Gosain. Apart from assigning him land for his personal use, Siva Singha issued several land grants covering large areas for the maintenance of the Kamakhya temple. Stone inscriptions at the Kameswara Shiva temple (dated

### **Phuleswari, patronised shaktism with the extreme zeal**

1718), the Siddheswara temple (dated 1718) and the Kamaleswara temple (dated 1728) also testify to the royal patronage extended to other temples on the hill as well. Siva Singha was greatly influenced by the brahmana priests and astrologers. So, when in 1722 it was predicted that his rule would shortly come to an end, he was so alarmed that he not only made lavish grants for the support of temples and priests in the hope of



conciliating the gods, but also appointed his chief queen, Phuleswari, as the *bar raja* and surrendered to her the Ahom insignia of royalty in the hope of averting the predicted crisis. Phuleswari, assumed the name Pramatheswari Devi and patronised shaktism with the extreme zeal of a new convert. Determined to establish shaktism as the state religion, she launched a drive against the Vaishnavites, especially the influential Moamaria *mabantas*. This resulted in dire consequences.

Despite resistance from several quarters, shaktism remained predominant during the reigns of Pramatta Singha (1744-51), Rajeswar Singh (1751- 1769), Lakshmi Singha (1769-80) and Gaurinath Singha (1780-94). According to a stone inscription dated 1759, inside the

*natmandir* of the Kamakhya temple, it was under the patronage of Rajeswara Singha that his officer, Tarun Duwara Barphukan, constructed the *natmandir*. The

**The British first made *dolois* powerful, later abolished their office.**

second half of the eighteenth century thus saw munificent royal patronage to shaktism in the form of land grants, lavish endowments, settlement of brahmanas on Nilachala and observance of innumerable prayer sacrifices and rituals in the temple. These inevitably resulted in the emergence of a gradation of officers like the *doloi*, who was the representative of the *bardeoris* (priests) of the temple and the *sevacaloo*, who



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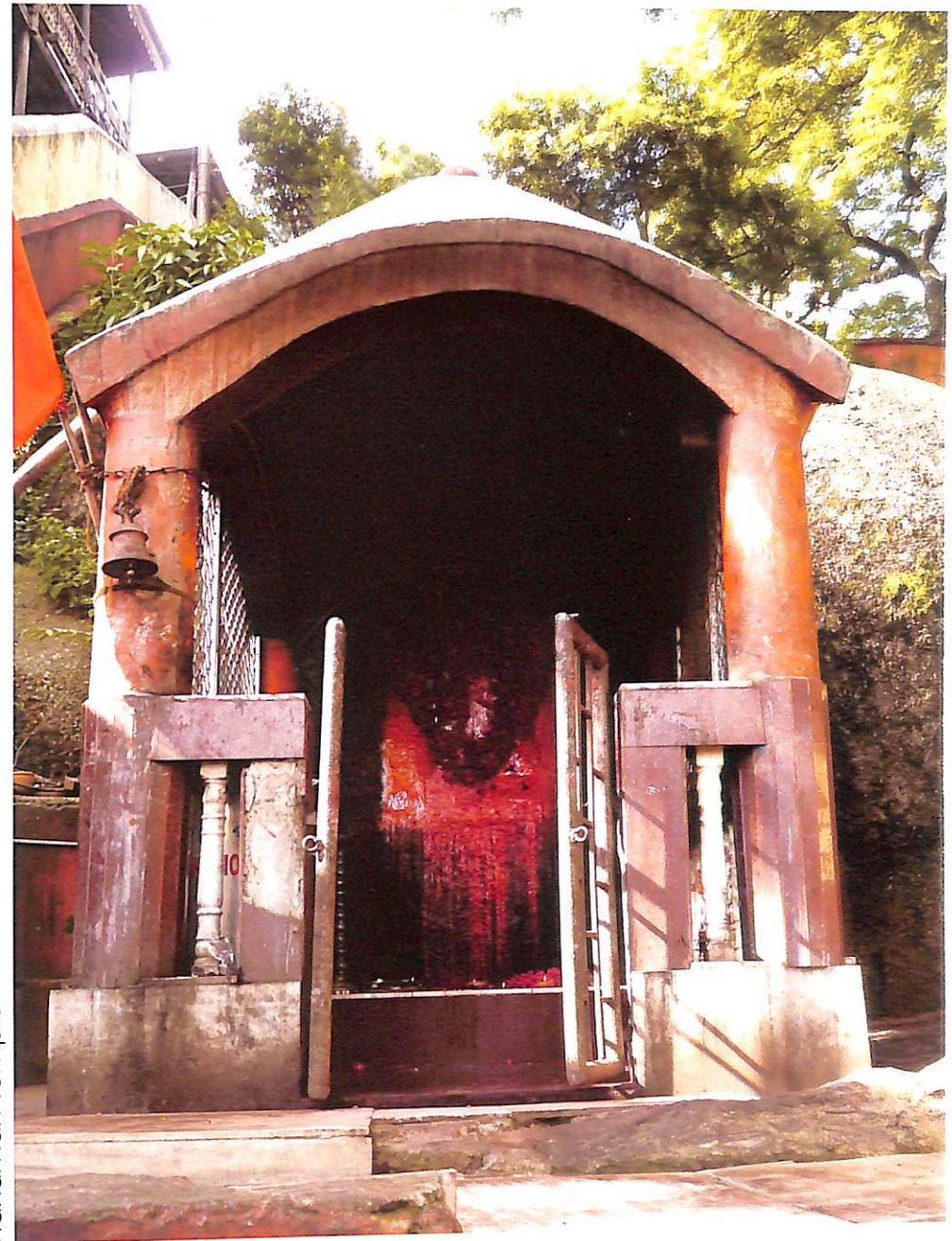
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acted as the intermediary between doloi and the Barphukan. In this set up, the Barphukan wielded immense authority. The period also witnessed the emergence of a new shakta literature. On the model of the Vaishnava *bargeets*, the Shakta poets wrote a large number of hymns, most of them glorifying goddesses like Kali, Durga and Sitala. Under the patronage of Siva Singha, Ananta charya composed *Ananda Labiri* while the *bandi* was translated into Assamese by both Ruchinath and Madhusudan Misra.

After Gaurinath Singha, royal patronage to the Kamakhya temple appears to have waned. The period coincided with the decline of the Ahom kingdom. Weak and unscrupulous rulers occupied the throne and each succession became a scramble for power. The situation deteriorated further when even the Ahom court itself was divided following the premature death of Gaurinath Singha. Both Kamaleswar Singha (1795-1811) and Chandrakanta Singha (1818) were mere puppets in the hands of Purnananda Buragohain, the prime minister, who virtually became the *de facto* ruler in Upper Assam. Badanchandra Barphukan, the king's viceroy in Lower Assam, was bitterly opposed to this and



Hanuman Temple



Pandunath Temple

the rivalry between the two eventually paved the way for the Burmese invasions of Assam.

In such a political scenario, it is not surprising that religion took the back seat. In fact Badanchandra Barphukan was even accused

### After Burmese invasion worship at the temple virtually ceased.

of mismanagement of the Kamakhya temple and misuse of the articles of worship therein. During the troubled times that followed the Burmese invasions of Assam (1821-26), the Kamakhya temple was abandoned by the *sevacaloo, dolois*, priests and servitors, as a result of which the daily prayers and rituals virtually ceased to be performed. When Mofatt Mills, a judge of the Sadar Diwani Adalat visited Assam in 1853, Maniram Dewan, presented to him a petition wherein, along with other issues, he deplored the discontinuance of worship at the temple. The great earthquake of 1897 also took its toll and the domes of almost all the temples were destroyed. The dome of the main temple, interestingly, survived.

British occupation of Assam brought about





Varaha and Narasimha



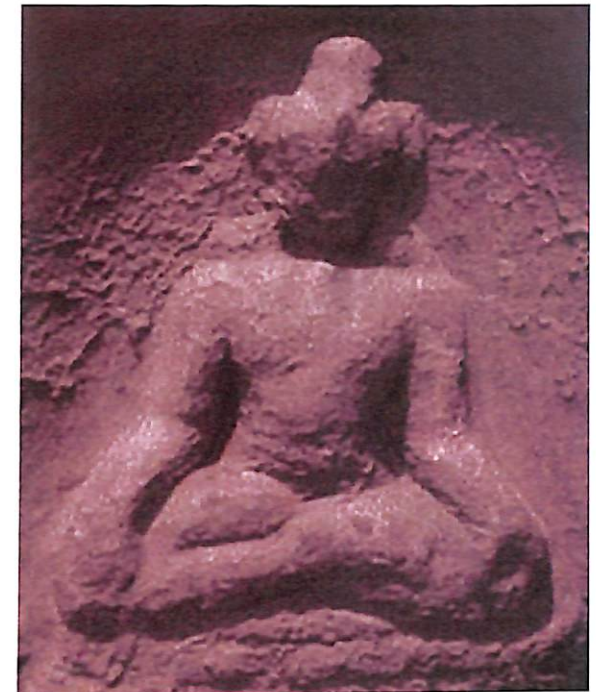
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dramatic changes in all spheres. One of the first measures of the new government was the monetization of the economy and collection of taxes. In order to widen the tax base, the government imposed a tax on the vast areas of lands which till then had been exempted from all taxation. Thus all *brabmottar*, *debottar* and *dbarmottar* lands came under this tax network.

In the new set up, the Barphukan was irrelevant, and although the old system of temple management was by and large retained, the European magistrates preferred to delegate their powers to the panchayats or the managing committees of the temples. In 1834, the government decided to settle all temple lands and fisheries, known as *bhogdani* properties in the names of the *dolois* in return for a fixed amount of revenue. This inevitably resulted in a changed situation wherein the *dolois* became very powerful and influential. The

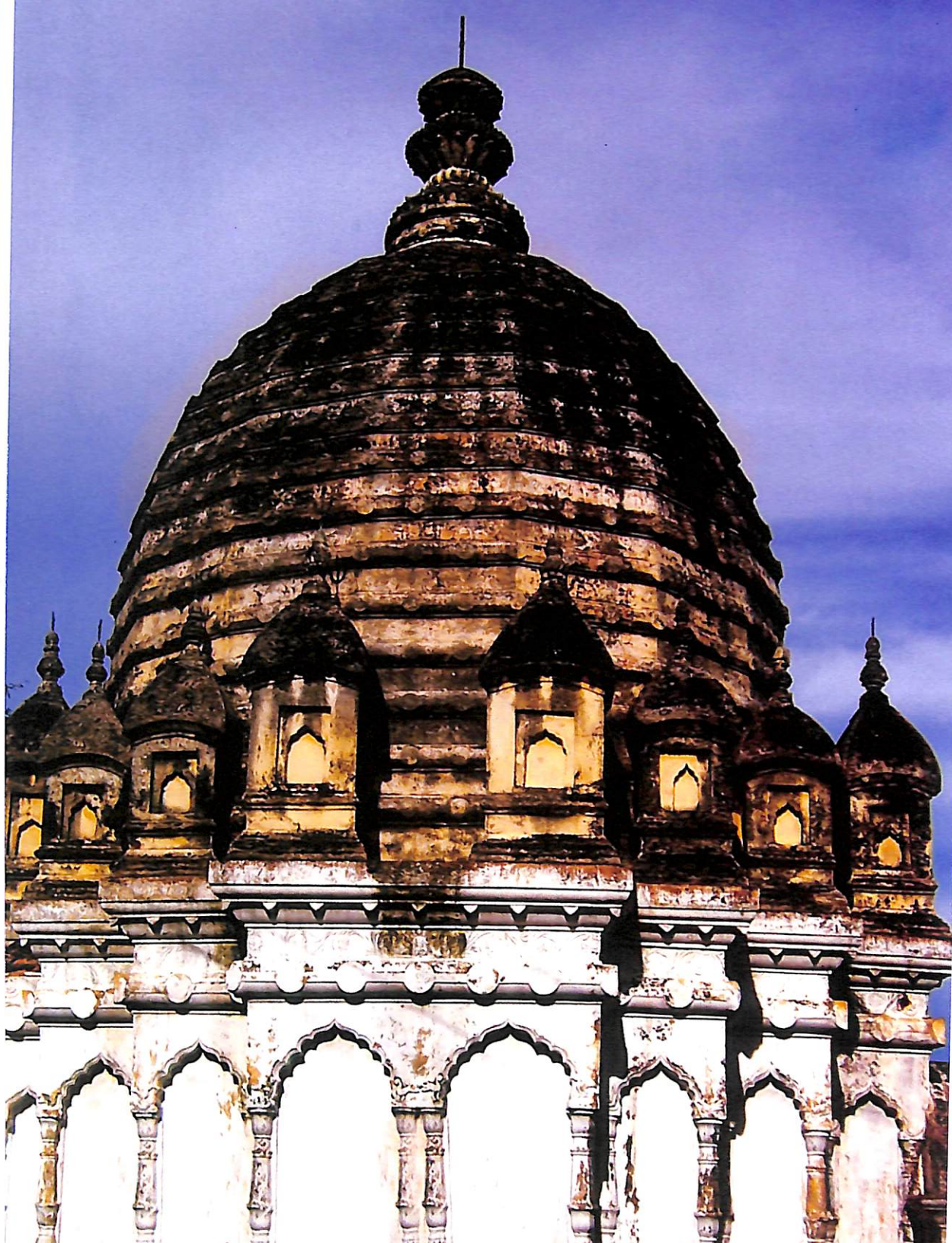
arbitrary manner in which they often behaved, resulted in a large number of litigations leading to innumerable problems. Eventually, in 1961 the office of the *doloi* was abolished and all lands belonging to temples and charitable institutions were taken over by the state with a fixed amount being sanctioned for the maintenance of the institution.

Today, the Kamakhya temple is one of the most visited places of pilgrimage in India. The current structure has a beehive-like *shikhara* with delightful sculptured panels and images of Ganesha and other Hindu gods and goddesses on the outside. Believed to be the granter of all desires, the Devi is worshipped by lakhs of devotees, cutting across class, caste, age and region, who throng the temple every year.



Buddha





Kali Temple

