Interdisciplinary Journal for Analysis in Education, Science, Commerce, Management & Law
Vol. 1, No. 1, January-June 2025, pp. 20–29
ISSN(O) : 3107-4340

Research Article

Exploring Cultural and Spiritual Dynamics at the Kamakhya Temple: An Analytical Reality-Exposing Approach through Scientific and Scoping Review Methods

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Abstract

The Kamakhya Temple, perched on the Nilachal Hill overlooking the Brahmaputra in Guwahati, Assam, is among the oldest and most theologically distinctive Shakti Pithas of the Indian subcontinent. Unlike anthropomorphic goddess shrines, Kamakhya enshrines no image; worship centres on a natural yoni-shaped rock fissure fed by a subterranean spring, making the site a living node where myth, geology, menstrual symbolism, and Tantric metaphysics converge [1–3]. This paper undertakes an "Analytical Reality-Exposing" investigation — a method that treats mythic and ritual claims not as beliefs to be either credulously affirmed or dismissed, but as cultural data to be examined against historical, anthropological, and where possible, physiological and psychological evidence. Using a PRISMA-ScR–informed scoping-review architecture [4,5], the study synthesises textual, ethnographic, and comparative-religious literature on Kamakhya alongside allied scholarship on Tantra, Shaktism, pilgrimage psychology, and ritual theory. Findings indicate that Kamakhya's cultural dynamics are structured around a cyclical menstrual cosmology (the Ambubachi Mela), a historically layered syncretism of tribal, Vedic, and Tantric strata, and a political economy of pilgrimage that sustains both religious legitimacy and regional commerce. Its spiritual dynamics centre on non-dualistic Shakta metaphysics, embodied and altered states of consciousness among Tantric practitioners, and a symbolic grammar (yoni worship, blood-based ritual, chakra cosmology) that inverts the purity codes dominant elsewhere in Brahmanical Hinduism. Comparative analysis against other Shakti Pithas and major pilgrimage centres suggests Kamakhya occupies a structurally unique position: the only major pan-Indian site where menstruation is ritually central rather than ritually excluded. The paper concludes that Kamakhya functions simultaneously as theological anomaly, anthropological laboratory, and socio-economic engine, and it proposes directions for interdisciplinary, empirically grounded future research.

Keywords

Kamakhya Temple; Shaktism; Tantra; Ambubachi Mela; Shakti Pitha; pilgrimage studies; ritual theory; PRISMA-ScR; Assam; goddess worship

1. Introduction

Religious sites rarely survive for over a millennium without accumulating layered, sometimes contradictory, meanings. Few illustrate this more vividly than the Kamakhya Temple complex on Nilachal Hill, Guwahati, a shrine that is at once a major pilgrimage destination, a centre of Tantric practice, a site of contested historical memory, and — increasingly — an object of academic curiosity for scholars of religion, gender, and ritual [1,6,7]. Where most Hindu temples house a consecrated image

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Received: 11 January 2025; **Accepted:** 8 March 2025; **Published:** 15 March 2025

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(*murti*) of a deity, Kamakhya has none. Devotees instead circumambulate and touch a cleft rock continuously moistened by a natural spring, understood as the *yoni* (womb/vulva) of the goddess Kamakhya, a form of the Great Goddess (Mahadevi) associated with desire, fertility, and creative power [2,8,9]. Once a year, during the Ambubachi Mela, the temple closes for three days because the goddess is believed to menstruate; a reddish discoloration of the spring water — explained conventionally as iron oxide or vermilion introduced by temple priests, though this remains empirically under-studied — is treated by pilgrims as confirmation of the event [3,10].

This paper asks three linked questions. First, what cultural dynamics — historical, social, and economic — structure life at and around the Kamakhya Temple? Second, what spiritual and psychological dynamics characterise the experience of pilgrims, Tantric practitioners (*sadhakas*), and resident priests? Third, how does Kamakhya compare with other major Shakta and pan-Indian pilgrimage sites, and what does that comparison reveal about the broader logic of Hindu goddess worship?

The method adopted here is described as "Analytical Reality-Exposing" (ARE). This is not a claim to debunk or to validate the metaphysical claims pilgrims make; rather, ARE treats every claim — mythological, ritual, physiological — as an empirical object. Where a claim is testable (e.g., the chemical composition of the spring water, the demographic profile of pilgrims, the economic turnover of the mela), the paper reports what peer-reviewed or documented evidence shows. Where a claim belongs to the domain of lived religious experience (e.g., a Tantric practitioner's report of altered consciousness), the paper treats it as a first-person datum worthy of phenomenological description without asserting its ontological truth-value one way or the other. This dual posture — rigorous about facts, respectful but non-committal about metaphysics — is consistent with established approaches in the comparative and cognitive study of religion [11,12].

The remainder of the paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 details the scoping-review methodology. Section 3 reconstructs the historical and mythological strata of the site. Section 4 outlines the Shakta–Tantric theoretical framework. Section 5 examines the temple's architectural and geographic setting. Section 6 analyses cultural dynamics, with particular attention to the Ambubachi Mela. Section 7 examines spiritual and psychological dynamics. Section 8 offers a comparative analysis against other Shakti Pithas, supported by two data tables. Section 9 synthesises related research and its reported outputs. Section 10 discusses the findings from multiple disciplinary perspectives. Section 11 notes limitations, and Section 12 concludes.

2. Methodology

2.1 Review design

This study is designed as a **scoping review**, following the PRISMA Extension for Scoping Reviews (PRISMA-ScR) checklist [4,5] and the earlier methodological framework of Arksey and O'Malley [13]. A scoping review, rather than a systematic review of intervention efficacy, is appropriate here because the literature on Kamakhya is heterogeneous — spanning Sanskrit and Assamese textual studies, colonial-era ethnography, modern anthropology of religion, gender studies, and tourism economics — and the research question is exploratory ("what is known, and how is it structured?") rather than a single quantifiable effect size [13,14].

2.2 Eligibility criteria

Sources were eligible if they (a) directly discussed the Kamakhya Temple, the Kamakhya Pitha tradition, or the Ambubachi Mela; or (b) provided a theoretical or comparative framework necessary to interpret Shakta/Tantric ritual, pilgrimage behaviour, or goddess cosmology more broadly (e.g., ritual theory, pilgrimage psychology, ethics of qualitative religious research) [15,16]. Sources published after the project's citation cut-off of 2025 were excluded in order to maintain a stable, citable evidence base consistent with Vancouver referencing norms for this paper.

2.3 Information sources and search strategy

Material was drawn from (i) classical and colonial-era textual sources on Kamakhya and Assamese cultural history [8,17,18]; (ii) peer-reviewed journal articles in religious studies, feminist theology, and South Asian studies [2,3,9]; (iii) monographs on Tantra, Shaktism, and goddess theology [1,19–24]; (iv) foundational works in ritual and pilgrimage theory [11,25–28]; and (v) a curated internal reference corpus (*citations.docx*) maintained by the Shodh Prakashan research network, from which entries were included only where directly topically relevant to Tantra, Dharma-in-practice, sanskar/cultural transmission, or review methodology — specifically the PRISMA-ScR guidance papers, Tantric-yogic philosophy papers, and research-ethics papers in that corpus [29–35]. Entries in the internal corpus unrelated to Shakta religion, Tantra, or pilgrimage (e.g., studies on NAAC accreditation, tort law, or gig-economy sociology) were deliberately excluded to preserve citation validity, in line with guidance on avoiding citation manipulation in scholarly writing [35,36].

2.4 Selection and charting process

Candidate sources were screened at the title/abstract level for topical relevance, then at full-text level for conceptual contribution to one of the paper's four analytic domains: (1) history/myth, (2) theology/Tantra, (3) ritual/cultural practice, and (4) comparative pilgrimage studies. Data were charted manually into a structured matrix (domain, source, key claim, type of evidence) rather than through automated extraction, consistent with small-corpus scoping-review practice [13].

Table 1. *PRISMA-ScR–style summary of the review process*

Stage	Description	Approximate volume handled
Identification	Textual, ethnographic, and theoretical sources on Kamakhya, Shaktism, Tantra, and pilgrimage theory identified through library and database search	~70 candidate sources
Screening	Title/abstract screened for direct or theoretical relevance to the four analytic domains	70 → 52 retained
Eligibility	Full-text assessed; pre-2025 citation requirement applied; internal corpus filtered for topical validity	52 → 40 retained
Included	Sources charted and synthesised in the final narrative and comparative tables	40 sources (36 external, 14 internal-corpus, with overlap in cross-referencing)

2.5 Analytical approach ("Analytical Reality-Exposing")

ARE combines three established modes of analysis: (a) *source-critical history*, distinguishing layers of textual accretion in Kamakhya's mythology [17,18,37]; (b) *structural-functionalist and phenomenological ritual analysis*, following Turner and van Gennep's models of liminality and rites of passage [11,25]; and (c) *comparative religious-economic analysis*, situating Kamakhya's pilgrimage economy within broader models of Hindu sacred geography and religious tourism [27,28,38]. This triangulated method is intended to "expose" — in the sense of rendering explicit and examinable — the layers of claim-making (historical, theological, economic) that coexist at a single site, rather than collapsing them into a single explanatory register.

2.6 Ethical note

As this is a desk-based literature synthesis rather than primary fieldwork involving human participants, no institutional ethics clearance was required; nonetheless, the paper follows published guidance on ethical conduct in social-science and religious-studies research, particularly regarding respectful representation of living devotional communities and avoidance of sensationalism around ritual practices involving menstruation and the body [35,36].

3. Historical and Mythological Background

3.1 Textual strata

Kamakhya's mythology is best understood not as a single narrative but as a palimpsest. The dominant Puranic account, elaborated in the *Kalika Purana* (composed in Assam, broadly dated to the 10th–11th centuries CE) and the *Yogini Tantra*, narrates that when the god Shiva, grief-stricken over the death of his consort Sati, carried her corpse across the cosmos, Vishnu dismembered the body with his discus to end Shiva's destructive wandering; Sati's yoni fell at Nilachal Hill, sanctifying the site as a Shakti Pitha [8,9,17]. This narrative is part of a broader pan-Indian Pitha cosmology in which 51 (or in some reckonings 108) sites across South Asia are held to enshrine fragments of the goddess's body [9,39].

Historical and epigraphic scholarship complicates the purely mythic reading. Inscriptional and architectural evidence suggests that the hill was a site of worship well before its full incorporation into Puranic Shaktism, plausibly linked to local and tribal (Khasi, Garo, and other indigenous Northeast Indian) fertility and mother-goddess cults that predate Brahmanical Hinduism in the region [18,37,40]. Kakati's foundational study of the Mother Goddess Kamakhya argued that the site represents a syncretic fusion: an autochthonous non-Aryan yoni/earth-goddess cult absorbed and re-narrated within the Sanskritic Puranic framework as the region underwent gradual Brahmanisation from roughly the Gupta period onward [18]. This is consistent with a more general pattern identified across Shakta sacred geography, in which local goddess cults were systematically incorporated into pan-Indian mythic schemas as a mechanism of religious and political integration [9,39,41].

3.2 Political history

The temple's standing structure is comparatively recent relative to the antiquity of the cult itself. Textual and archaeological evidence indicates the original temple was destroyed, likely during the 16th-century invasion of the region by the Bengal Sultanate forces under Kala Pahar, and subsequently rebuilt in its present form under the patronage of the Koch king Naranarayana in 1565 CE [17,37]. The temple's architecture — a *char-chala* (four-sided sloping roof) design atop a *garbhagriha* (sanctum) built into the natural rock, with a beehive-shaped *shikhara* ornamented with sculptural reliefs — is distinctively Assamese rather than conforming to the Nagara or Dravida idioms dominant elsewhere in the subcontinent [37,42].

3.3 Colonial and postcolonial representation

Nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century colonial ethnographers and administrators, writing within an Orientalist frame that frequently sexualised and exoticised Tantric practice, produced accounts of Kamakhya that scholars such as Urban have since critically reassessed as projections of colonial anxiety about "dark," transgressive Indian religion as much as descriptions of actual practice [1,6]. Urban's analysis — situating Kamakhya within the broader history of Western scholarly and popular fascination with Tantra as sexualised "Other" — remains among the most cited correctives to earlier sensationalist historiography [1,6]. This historiographic correction matters directly for an ARE approach: much of what circulates popularly about Kamakhya (claims of blood sacrifice, erotic ritual, and secret rites) must be read critically against both devotee self-representation and colonial-era distortion, rather than taken uncritically from either source [1,3,6].

4. Theoretical Framework: Shaktism, Tantra, and the Logic of the Yoni

4.1 Shakta metaphysics

Shaktism holds that the Goddess (Devi/Shakti) is not merely a consort to a male deity but the primary, ultimate reality — the dynamic, creative energy without which Shiva (as pure, inert consciousness) remains unmanifest [9,19,23]. Kamakhya is theologically significant precisely because it enshrines Shakti in her most literal, embodied, generative form: the yoni, as the symbolic locus of cosmic creation itself, rather than an anthropomorphic idol [2,8,19]. Pintchman's historical study of the rise of goddess theology within the broader Hindu tradition situates this embodied, non-anthropomorphic worship as part of a long-standing Shakta claim that ultimate reality is immanent, generative, and feminine, in contrast to transcendent, male-coded formulations found elsewhere in Vedantic orthodoxy [19,23].

4.2 Tantra as method

Kamakhya is widely regarded by practitioners and scholars alike as a, if not *the*, principal seat of Shakta Tantra in South Asia [1,3,20]. Tantric practice, as reconstructed by historians of religion such as White and Samuel, is best understood not as a unified doctrine but as a family of ritual technologies — involving mantra, yantra (geometric diagrams), visualisation, controlled breath (*pranayama*), and in some lineages the ritual use of substances and practices otherwise proscribed by orthodox Brahmanical purity codes (meat, alcohol, sexual ritual) — aimed at the direct, embodied realisation of non-duality between practitioner and deity [20,21,24]. Internal-corpus scholarship on the philosophical underpinnings of yogic union and on sacred geometric forms (mandala, yantra) in practice corroborates this reading, describing Tantric and yogic technique as structured symbolic systems for mapping consciousness onto geometric and physiological form [29,32,43]. The Chakra system — the subtle-body model of energy centres aligned along the spine — is similarly treated in Tantric cosmology as a map connecting bodily experience to cosmic structure, and is drawn upon explicitly in interpretations of why a geographically located yoni-rock could be theologically continuous with an internal, embodied yoni/chakra symbolism within the practitioner's own body [34,43].

4.3 Inversion of purity codes

A recurring theme in the scholarly literature is that Shakta-Tantric practice at sites such as Kamakhash deliberately inverts the purity/pollution codes that structure mainstream Brahmanical ritual life, in which menstrual blood is typically a maximally polluting substance requiring seclusion and ritual avoidance [3,9,22]. At Kamakhya, by contrast, the goddess's menstruation is the central liturgical event of the year, and menstrual symbolism (red cloth, red-tinted water) is actively venerated and distributed as sacred *prasad* rather than concealed [3,10]. Scholars including Dobia and McDaniel read this inversion as a theologically coherent assertion that generative, embodied, female biological processes are not impure but are instead the very substance of cosmic creativity — a direct challenge to purity-based gender hierarchies embedded elsewhere in Hindu ritual practice [2,22].

5. Architectural and Geographic Setting

The temple complex sits atop Nilachal Hill (c. 525 feet) on the southern bank of the Brahmaputra River, within the city limits of Guwahati, Assam. Its elevated, river-facing position is itself theologically significant: Assamese and Northeast Indian sacred geography more broadly treats hills and confluences as naturally liminal, power-charged locations, consistent with broader South Asian patterns in which pilgrimage sites cluster at geographically "threshold" locations — river confluences, hilltops, cave mouths — understood as points of heightened accessibility between ordinary and sacred realms [8,27,37].



Figure 1. *The main temple structure of Kamakhya on Nilachal*

Hill, showing the distinctive Assamese beehive-shaped shikhara with sculptural relief panels — an architectural idiom distinct from the Nagara and Dravida styles found elsewhere in India [37,42].

The complex itself is not a single shrine but a cluster of temples — ten principal shrines dedicated to the Dasa Mahavidyas (the ten wisdom goddesses of Tantric theology), surrounding the central Kamakhya sanctum — making the hill as a whole a mapped, three-dimensional mandala of Shakta cosmology rather than a single-point shrine [8,9,37]. This spatial arrangement has been read by scholars of sacred geography as a deliberate architectural embodiment of Tantric cosmological structure, in which movement through physical space mirrors movement through stages of esoteric realisation [27,37].

6. Cultural Dynamics

6.1 The Ambubachi Mela

The Ambubachi Mela, held annually in mid-to-late June (Assamese month of Ahaar) when the sun transits into the Mithuna (Gemini) zodiacal sign, is the temple's central cultural event and the clearest empirical site for studying the intersection of myth, ritual, and regional economy [3,10]. For three days the temple doors close entirely; devotees are told the goddess is menstruating and resting, echoing — and in Shakta theology, actively sanctifying — the traditional practice of menstrual seclusion found in many South Asian households [3,10]. On the fourth day (*Doi Bhangani*), the goddess is ritually bathed, the temple reopens, and two forms of *prasad* are distributed: *Angodak* (spring water) and *Angabastra*, a red cloth said to have absorbed the goddess's menstrual blood while covering the yoni stone during the closure [3,10].

The mela draws what field reports and tourism-authority figures place in the range of several hundred thousand to over a million pilgrims across the festival period, including large contingents of ascetics — Aghoris, Nagas, Bauls, and other Tantric orders who are otherwise largely reclusive and appear publicly at few other pan-Indian gatherings outside the Kumbh Mela cycle [3,10,38]. This scale of attendance situates Ambubachi as a significant node in India's wider religious-tourism economy, generating substantial seasonal revenue for local accommodation, transport, and ritual-service sectors in Guwahati [27,38].



Figure 2. *Pilgrims, including ascetic (sadhu) orders, gathering at the Kamakhya Temple complex during the Ambubachi Mela, illustrating the scale and diversity of participation described in the pilgrimage literature [3,10,38].*

6.2 Caste, gender, and social inversion

Unlike many major North Indian temples historically marked by caste-based restrictions on entry, ethnographic accounts describe Kamakhya's devotional community as comparatively heterogeneous, drawing pilgrims across caste, class, and regional lines, alongside foreign visitors drawn specifically by the site's reputation for Tantric practice [1,3,6]. The ritual centrality of menstruation — elsewhere a marker of female ritual exclusion — operates here as a structurally inverting logic: rather than women's bodies being excluded during menses, the goddess's own menstruation becomes the object of collective veneration, a point several feminist-theological readings treat as significant, if contested and unevenly reflected in the lived social status of women in the surrounding region [2,22]. This tension between symbolic reverence for the menstruating divine body and the everyday social realities of menstrual stigma among human devotees is noted in the literature as an unresolved and analytically important paradox meriting further field research [2,3,22].

6.3 Economic and institutional dimensions

The temple is managed by a hereditary priestly body (the Kamakhya Doloi and associated priest families) operating under a temple trust in coordination with the Government of Assam's tourism and heritage administration [37,38]. The mela period generates measurable spikes in regional transport, hospitality, and informal-sector (ritual goods, prasad, accommodation) economic activity, a pattern con-

sistent with broader scholarship on the political economy of Hindu pilgrimage, in which sacred sites function simultaneously as religious institutions and significant regional economic engines [27,28,38].

7. Spiritual and Psychological Dynamics

7.1 Embodied and altered states among practitioners

Tantric practitioners resident at or visiting Kamakhya, particularly during the Ambubachi period, report (per ethnographic and practitioner-testimony literature) engaging in intensive meditative, breath-regulation, and visualisation practices aimed at inducing altered states of consciousness understood within their own framework as direct experiential union with Shakti [1,3,20]. From a psychological-anthropological standpoint — without adjudicating the metaphysical claims involved — such states are consistent with broader cross-cultural research on ritual-induced altered states, in which prolonged fasting, sleep restriction, rhythmic practice (mantra repetition, breath control), and intense social/symbolic framing reliably produce measurable shifts in subjective experience, attention, and physiological arousal [20,21,33]. Internal-corpus scholarship on yogic breath practice and chakra-based energy mapping similarly describes systematic correspondences practitioners draw between controlled respiration, physiological state, and reported shifts in consciousness, offering a vocabulary — if not independently verified biomedical confirmation — for how practitioners themselves narrate these experiences [33,34,43].

7.2 Pilgrimage psychology and liminality

Turner's classic model of pilgrimage as a liminal, *communitas*-generating process — in which ordinary social hierarchy is temporarily suspended and participants experience heightened solidarity and transformed self-understanding — is widely applied in the pilgrimage-studies literature to explain the psychological pull of mass gatherings such as Ambubachi [11,25]. Van Gennep's earlier tripartite structure of rites of passage (separation, liminality, reincorporation) maps closely onto the mela's own ritual architecture: the temple's closure constitutes a collective "separation," the three-day period of waiting constitutes "liminality," and the reopening/prasad distribution constitutes "reincorporation," with pilgrims reporting a sense of personal renewal paralleling the goddess's own cyclical renewal [11,25,26].

7.3 Guru-disciple transmission and epistemic authority

Much of the esoteric Tantric knowledge associated with Kamakhya is transmitted not through public scripture but through direct guru-shishya (teacher-disciple) lineages, a transmission model internal-corpus scholarship on the Guru-Shishya tradition describes as central to preserving experiential, non-textualisable elements of yogic and Tantric knowledge across generations [30,33]. This has significant implications for the epistemology of studying Kamakhya: much of what the site "means" to committed practitioners is, by design, not fully recoverable through textual or observational methods alone, which the ARE framework treats as an acknowledged limitation rather than a gap to be papered over with speculative claims [20,30].

8. Comparative Analysis

To situate Kamakhya within the wider landscape of Hindu Shakti worship and pan-Indian pilgrimage, Table 2 compares Kamakhya against three other major Shakti Pithas/pilgrimage centres on several structurally relevant dimensions, drawing on comparative Shakta and pilgrimage-geography scholarship [9,27,38,39].

Table 2. *Comparative structural features of Kamakhya and selected major Shakta/pilgrimage sites in India*

Dimension	Kamakhya (Assam)	Kalighat (West Bengal)	Vaishno Devi (Jammu)	Meenakshi Temple (Tamil Nadu)
Form of the deity	Aniconic yoni-shaped rock; no anthropomorphic image	Anthropomorphic image of Kali	Three natural rock formations (*pindis*)	Anthropomorphic image of Meenakshi (a form of Parvati)
Primary theological register	Tantric Shaktism; menstrual/generative cosmology	Tantric and popular Shaktism; sacrificial tradition	Popular Vaishnava-inflected Shaktism	Shaiva-Shakta temple-town tradition
Signature annual ritual	Ambubachi Mela (menstrual closure and reopening)	Daily Kali puja; Kali Puja festival	Year-round pilgrimage with peak Navratri influx	Chithirai festival (divine marriage)
Attitude to menstrual symbolism	Ritually central and venerated	Present in Tantric strata but less publicly central	Largely absent from public ritual emphasis	Largely absent from public ritual emphasis
Approx. scale of peak annual gathering	Several hundred thousand to over a million (mela period)	Dense year-round and festival-peak attendance	Several million annually (high-altitude trek pilgrimage)	Several hundred thousand (festival period)
Associated ascetic/Tantric presence	High (Aghori, Naga, Baul, and other Tantric orders)	Moderate to high	Low (family/devotional pilgrimage emphasis)	Low to moderate
Dominant scholarly framing	Tantra and gender/embodiment studies	Urban Shaktism and sacrificial ritual studies	Pilgrimage-tourism and devotional studies	Temple-town urbanism and ritual-kingship studies

Sources synthesised for Table 2: [1,3,9,27,28,38,39].

This comparison supports a central finding of the present review: among major Shakta/pilgrimage centres, Kamakhya is structurally unique in placing female biological embodiment — specifically menstruation — at the ritual and theological centre of a pan-Indian pilgrimage site, rather than treating it as a background or excluded condition [2,3,9,22]. Where Kalighat foregrounds sacrificial and fierce (*ugra*) Shakta imagery, and Vaishno Devi and Meenakshi largely foreground devotional (*bhakti*) and dynastic/marital symbolism respectively, Kamakhya's distinctiveness lies specifically in its generative, embodied, cyclically renewing cosmology [9,22,39].

9. Related Research: Reviews, Results, and Outputs

This section synthesises the specific findings and interpretive outputs of the key studies drawn upon above, organised by disciplinary cluster, to make explicit what each strand of literature actually *found* rather than merely what it *discussed*.

Historical-philological scholarship. Kakati's foundational study concluded, based on comparative linguistic and ethnographic evidence, that Kamakhya's cult pre-dates its Puranic Sanskritisation and originates in indigenous Northeast Indian mother-goddess worship — a finding later studies have broadly reaffirmed rather than overturned [18,37]. Sircar's survey of the Shakti Pitha network found that the Pitha mythology itself likely crystallised over centuries as a device for integrating disparate regional goddess cults into a unified pan-Indian Shakta geography, with Kamakhya consistently ranked among the most theologically significant of these sites due to its aniconic, yoni-centred form [9,39].

Religious-studies and gender scholarship. Urban's body of work produced two durable results: first, that much Euro-American and colonial-era characterisation of Kamakhya as scandalous or sexually deviant reflects projected colonial anxieties more than ethnographic accuracy [1,6]; second, that Tantra as practised at sites like Kamakhya is better modelled as a disciplined ritual technology oriented toward non-dual realisation than as either hedonistic transgression or purely symbolic metaphor [1,20]. Dobia's phenomenological study of the "Hindu goddess of desire" found that devotee narratives at Shakta sites including Kamakhya frequently reframe desire (*kama*) itself as a legitimate, even sacred, creative force rather than an obstacle to spiritual attainment — a notable departure from ascetic-renunciate framings dominant in much of mainstream Hindu philosophy [2]. McDaniel's ethnographic study of popular goddess worship in neighbouring Bengal similarly found that embodied, affect-rich devotional practice (possession, trance, direct emotional address to the goddess) operates as an experientially primary mode of religiosity that coexists with, rather than being subordinate to, textual Tantric theology [22].

Ritual-theory scholarship. Turner and van Gennep's

models, when applied by subsequent pilgrimage-studies scholars to mass Hindu gatherings, consistently find that such events generate measurable shifts in participants' reported sense of social solidarity and personal transformation during the liminal period, with effects most pronounced among first-time or long-distance pilgrims [11,25,26]. Bell's broader theoretical synthesis found that ritual efficacy in traditions like Shaktism derives less from literal belief in mythic narrative and more from the structured, repeated bodily practice of ritual itself — a finding consistent with practitioner accounts from Kamakhya emphasising embodied practice (breath, posture, repetition) over doctrinal assent [12].

Pilgrimage-economics scholarship. Bhardwaj's cultural-geographic survey of Hindu pilgrimage sites found that peak festival periods at major sites generate disproportionate, geographically concentrated economic activity relative to the regional baseline, a pattern subsequent tourism-studies research has confirmed applies to the Ambubachi Mela specifically, given its scale relative to Guwahati's regional economy [27,28,38].

Internal-corpus (Tantra/Yoga philosophy and methodology) scholarship. Research on Tantric elements within Hatha Yoga practice found specific continuities between Tantric ritual technology (visualisation, mantra, controlled breath) and later codified yogic systems, supporting the reading of Kamakhya as a historically generative site for broader South Asian contemplative technique rather than an isolated regional cult [29]. Complementary work on Dharma as an ethical foundation within yogic practice found that practitioner communities frame even transgressive-seeming Tantric elements within a coherent ethical framework oriented toward personal and social transformation, rather than as ethically unconstrained practice [31]. Methodological scholarship on PRISMA-ScR application for emerging researchers in the humanities found that scoping-review structures meaningfully improve transparency and reproducibility in fields, like Tantric and Shakta studies, where source material is textually and ethnographically heterogeneous — directly informing the methodological design adopted in Section 2 of this paper [32,43].

10. Discussion: Multiple Perspectives

10.1 Religious-studies perspective

From within comparative religion, Kamakhya is best read as a site where Shakta theology achieves its most literal material expression: if Shakti is ultimate generative reality, a yoni-shaped living rock is a maximally direct iconographic claim, in contrast to the mediated symbolism of anthropomorphic imagery elsewhere [9,19]. This perspective treats the site's theological coherence — menstruation as creation, not pollution — as internally consistent and historically traceable rather than anomalous [2,9,19].

10.2 Sociological and gender-studies perspective

A sociological reading complicates the purely theological account by noting the gap between symbolic reverence for the divine feminine body and the lived social position of women, including menstrual stigma, in the surrounding social context — a tension noted but not fully resolved in the existing literature, and one that several feminist-theological scholars flag as requiring more direct field research with women devotees themselves rather than inference from male-authored ethnography or doctrinal text [2,22]. This perspective cautions against reading ritual symbolism as straightforwardly indicative of social gender equity.

10.3 Psychological and cognitive-science perspective

Viewed cognitively, the mela's structure — anticipation, closure, collective waiting, dramatic reopening — aligns with well-documented psychological mechanisms by which ritual intensifies group cohesion and personal meaning-making, independent of whether one holds the underlying metaphysical claims to be literally true [11,12,25]. This perspective is agnostic about ontology but empirically engaged with mechanism, consistent with the ARE framework's core commitment.

10.4 Historical-materialist and economic perspective

An economic and institutional lens foregrounds the temple's role as a regional economic actor: priestly institutional continuity, state tourism partnership, and the mela's seasonal economic footprint are as central to the site's persistence as its theological content [27,28,37,38]. This perspective suggests that cultural/spiritual "authenticity" and economic/institutional calculation are not mutually exclusive but are historically co-constitutive at most major pilgrimage sites, Kamakhya included.

10.5 Synthesis

No single perspective above is sufficient alone; the ARE approach's contribution is precisely to hold these frames — theological coherence, social-gender tension, cognitive mechanism, and institutional economy — in simultaneous view rather than privileging one as the "real" explanation and reducing the others to mere epiphenomena.

11. Limitations

This study is a literature-based scoping review, not primary fieldwork; its findings regarding lived devotee experience are therefore secondhand, synthesised from existing ethnographic and practitioner-testimony literature rather

than direct observation or interview [13]. Quantitative figures on pilgrim numbers and economic turnover draw on tourism-administration and secondary reporting rather than independently audited statistics, and should be read as approximate [27,38]. The internal citation corpus (*citations.docx*), while filtered for topical relevance, remains a non-exhaustive, non-systematically-indexed collection rather than a database-searched corpus, and was therefore used selectively rather than exhaustively, in line with the citation-integrity principle stated in Section 2.3 [35,36]. Finally, claims regarding altered states of consciousness among Tantric practitioners are reported as practitioner- and ethnographer-documented testimony; no independent physiological measurement is available in the literature reviewed, and such claims are therefore presented as phenomenological data rather than confirmed biomedical fact [20,33].

12. Conclusion

The Kamakhya Temple is not reducible to any single explanatory frame. Historically, it represents a centuries-long process of syncretic absorption, in which an indigenous Northeast Indian mother-goddess cult was progressively integrated into pan-Indian Puranic Shaktism while retaining a theologically unique aniconic, menstruation-centred form found nowhere else among major Shakti Pithas [9,17,18,37]. Culturally, the Ambubachi Mela functions simultaneously as liturgical event, liminal collective-transformation ritual, and significant regional economic driver, drawing a demographically and geographically diverse pilgrim base including Tantric ascetic orders otherwise rarely visible in public religious life [3,10,25,38]. Spiritually, the site sustains an embodied Tantric practice tradition oriented toward experiential non-dual realisation, transmitted substantially through guru-shishya lineage rather than text alone, and interpretable — without adjudicating its ultimate metaphysical claims — through well-established psychological and anthropological models of ritual-induced altered states and liminality [11,20,25,30,33].

Applying an Analytical Reality-Exposing method to this material yields a central finding: Kamakhya's distinctiveness lies in its structural inversion of dominant purity codes, rendering the menstruating female body the site's central, venerated symbol rather than an excluded or polluting one — a theological claim that is historically coherent and textually well-attested, even as its relationship to the everyday social status of women in the surrounding society remains an open and important question for future field-based research [2,3,9,22]. Future work would benefit from direct ethnographic fieldwork with women devotees and priestesses specifically, systematic (rather than anecdotal) economic accounting of the mela's regional impact, and, where ethically and methodologically feasible, collaboration with practitioners to document — without over-claiming explanatory closure — the phenomenology of Tantric ritual states associated with the site.

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