



AMBUVĀCHĪ AND OTHER RITUALS RELATED TO FERTILITY IN INDIA

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ABSTRACT: Menstruation is a unique natural phenomenon seen among the female human beings. It is very much a topic of science related to birth. However, it has always been subjected to taboos and myths that form many aspects of socio-cultural lives. In one hand, menstruation has been revered as a divine phenomenon. On the other hand, female beings are lowly held because of menstruation in many parts of the world. In India, we find both the practices deeply rooted in many traditional and religious beliefs. *Ambuvāchī*, a spiritual practice prevalent in the Indian state of Assam, manifests these two contradictory ideas. It secludes the menstruating goddess like any common woman during the first three days of her menstruation. On the contrary, on the day of *nibrīti*, *angavastra* or the piece of cloth which is supposed to be wet with menstrual blood is distributed as *Prasad* among the devotees. Apart from *Ambuvāchī*, other festivals like *Keddasa* festival, Raja Parba, Rituals at Chengannur Mahadev Temple etc. also are centered on the concept of menstruation. In this article it is being tried to evaluate the practices of *Ambuvāchī* and other festivals and find the socio-cultural basis of such festivities.)

Key words: *Ambuvāchī*, *Keddasa*, Raja Parba, menstruation, genitalia, yoni, *Kāmākhyā*

INTRODUCTION: The monthly cycle of procreativity or menstruation among female human beings is linked to nature in one or the other way in many of the historic civilizations. In Mesopotamia, it is believed that the great goddess Ninhursag had infused her 'blood of life' to the 'clay of humans.'¹ It is believed that the name of Adam also came from the word 'adamah' meaning 'bloody clay' which the scholars translate as 'red earth' though.² It shows that the story of Adam in Bible has been lifted from older female oriented creativity related myths. Ancient Greek mythologies narrate procreative blood as 'supernatural red wine' which was given to the gods by Mother Hera.³ The Norse god, Thor is believed to take rebirth after bathing in a river filled with the procreative blood.⁴ Egyptian mythologies

believe that the real strength behind the Pharaohs is the period-blood of *Isis* which even made them immortal.⁵ As per one mythology of ancient Roman Empire, Plutarch declared that man was made of earth and the moon provided the 'blood of life' required.⁶ In many ancient mythologies of east as well as west, it is believed that blood carries the spirit of sovereign authority as because it is the medium of transmission of life of clan or tribe.⁷ Ancient Chinese sages also believed that the periodic-blood or the 'essence of Mother Earth' give lives to all things.⁸

In the Indian context, there are lots of evidences in the *Tantric* tradition which show how menstruation is regarded as pure and holy and how it is being the central element in some rituals especially those which are related to worship of female genitalia. In fact, menstrual blood is considered as pure and sacred and it plays a very crucial role in some *tantric* rituals. *Kaulanjnananirnaya* (Patala- 8) written by MatsendryaNath, *MatrikabhedāTantra* etc. books have also cited menstruation as pure and sacred.⁹

Methodology of the Study –The research article has been prepared on both primary and secondary sources of data. Primary source includes interview of learned persons and secondary sources such as books, articles and unpublished PhD thesis. Here the researcher is using descriptive and analytical method to carry out the research.

Origin and meaning of Ambuvāchī: *Ambuvāchī* is a pre-eminent festival of spirituality celebrated at *Kāmākhyā* temple situated atop *Nilāchal* Hill in Guwahati, the capital city of Assam that celebrates the divine power of menstruation. During this festival, lakhs of devotees of Mother Goddess *Kāmākhyā* gather at *Kāmākhyādhām*. As per mythological beliefs centered on the *Ambuvāchī* festival, mother earth menstruates on the 7th day of the month *Āhār* (*Āhār* is the third month of Assamese lunar year). The number '7' is pronounced in Assamese as 'Sāt' (symbol: 9). As such, the menstruation period of earth is also known as 'Sāt' or 'Sāth' in some places of Assam. In some other places it is called as 'Amoti' or 'Ameti' apart from the popular name "*Ambuvāchī*."

The comparison in between mother earth and a woman has been one of the main elements of almost every culture in the world.¹⁰ It is scientifically proven that a woman becomes biologically eligible to bear child after attaining puberty and during each subsequent monthly menstruation cycle. As it is necessary for a woman to bleed for life, so is for the Mother Earth when she is ready to bear crops. The celebration of *Ambuvāchī* festival makes the statement that the entire earth is now ready for growing crops for the year.

Ambuvāchī is a Sanskrit word which means flow of water.¹¹ 'Ambu' means water and 'vāchī' means to talk or to speak.¹² So, the word literally means the issuing forth of water which refers to the abundance of water during the onset of monsoon. *Ambuvāchī* festival is held in the month of June (the seventh day of the month *Ahār* according to the Hindu lunar calendar) every year.¹³ It is to be noted here that generally the month of *Ahār* is regarded to be the onset of monsoon in the Indian subcontinent which brings spells of rain, the primary source of water for cultivation in most of the parts of India. As such, during this auspicious month, most of the farmers start their agricultural activities.

It is quite fascinating to note that the natural stream of water, flowing up through the *yoni mandala* of the *garbhagriha* of the main shrine in the *Kāmākhyā* temple turns red during *Ambuvāchī*.¹⁴ The stream of water is reddened with some mineral deposits that are flushed out by the rains during monsoon season.¹⁵ The reddening of the stream symbolizes the

menstrual blood of the Goddess and symbolically denotes the period of annual menstruation of the Goddess.¹⁶

The concept of fertility of the earth becomes a manifestation in the *Kāmākhyā* temple in the form of a *yonimandala*, i.e. the shape of female genitalia. Though there is no concrete record, it is assumed that worship of *yonimandala* or female genitalia for want of fertility was a pre-Hindu concept. Later it was associated with *ShivaSakti* episode of *Pauranic* fame. The shrine was given a new identity as the genitalia of Sati. No doubt, the fertility related traditional belief of aboriginal Mongoloid and Austric people of Assam was later given an Aryan touch to make it more acceptable to the pan Indian culture. Thus, *Ambuvāchī* is the result of assimilation of local traditions, Hinduism (*Saktism*, *Shaivism* and *Vaishnavism*), *Tranticism* etc.

It is nowhere clearly mentioned about the exact period or time of starting of *Ambuvāchī* at *Kāmākhyā* temple. However, from various sources of oral history, books etc. it is understood that the tradition of *Ambuvāchī* is very old. *DeviBhagavat*, a book of 11th or 12th century mentions about *Ambuvāchī*. It is mentioned in this ancient text that Lord Vishnu declared the mother earth as the supreme goddess after his sexual intercourse in the boar incarnation with earth. He then also declared that during the following occasions, goddess earth would be worshipped:¹⁷

- a) During the starting of planting season,
- b) During the beginning of construction of new house and
- c) At the end of the *Ambuvāchī*

This very text has linked the concept of menstruation of the earth with *Kāmākhyāpith*. *DeviBhagavat* also states the temple of *Kāmākhyā* as the temple of the greatest goddess on earth. In this particular text it is mentioned that the goddess come to this place during menstruation as the genitalia is present here. There is no such sacred place on the earth.¹⁸

According to a legend mentioned in the *KalikaPurana*, which is popularly known as *DakshaYajna* episode, the genitalia of Sati fell on the Nilachala Hill. Later, it became one of the 51 *shaktipithas* in India. It is to be noted here that, the object enshrined in the cave of the *Kāmākhyā* temple is a stone which resembles to the vulva or the female genitalia.

According to another *tantric* legend, Lord Vishnu during his boar incarnation rescued the goddess earth from the *Sindhu* (the sea) where she was hidden by Hiranakshya, a demon. During that period mother goddess earth was menstruating. After rescue, lord Vishnu in boar incarnation had sexual intercourse with mother goddess earth and as a result of this intercourse, Naraka was born. It is believed that all the deities were trying to stop the birth of Naraka as his birth was likely to be ominous for all. But they could not cause any harm to Naraka due to intervention of Lord Vishnu. The *tantrics* believe that Naraka was powerful but was oppressive due to his unusual birth.¹⁹

A few oral tales told traditionally are also linked to Mother Goddess *Kāmākhyā*, her temple and the *Ambuvāchī* festival. In one of such tales, the story of a cultivator is narrated. The cultivator was an ardent follower of the mother goddess *Kāmākhyā*. He observed the annual menstrual festival of the goddess, i.e. the *Ambuvāchī* festival with great zeal. However, once the cultivator was misled by a heterodox and he stopped observing the *Ambuvāchī* festival. The ill-fated cultivator did not have a good cropping season that year due to drought and lots of other causes. He realized his mistake and started praying the goddess.

The goddess became satisfied at his prayer and advised him to continue observing *Ambuvāchī* festival with earlier dedication. Accordingly, the cultivator did the next year and he could have good harvesting with the grace of the ever after.²⁰

As per oral histories available, the festival of *Ambuvāchī* was known to *Sadhus* and *Sannyasis* from Nepal and other countries and places of the Himalayan foot hills from very ancient times. *Devikuta* alias *Kāmākhyā* was one of the major pursuit of their frequent pilgrimage. There is a probability that the festival of *Ambuvāchī* came to limelight only after the renovation of the temple by Koch king *Naranarayana* in 1565 AD. It is perhaps the renovation of the temple that inspired the *Sakti* worshippers and *Tantrics* from Nepal and eastern India to gather during the opening of the newly renovated *Kāmākhyā* temple. This is echoed in the references of *Darrang Rajyamshavali*. It is possible that the concept of menstruation of mother earth came from a tradition common to the indigenous people of this region. Eventually it became a major event after due recognition from *Tantric* and *Sakta* worshippers.²¹ Influence of *Tantricism* on the Kamakhya temple is a fact supported by some images carved on the temple walls. In an image on one of the walls of the compound of the temple, a woman is openly exposing her genital organ (probably a menstruating image). No doubt, this type of image is carved on the temple wall due to influence of *Tantricism*.²²

Rites and rituals observed at Kāmākhyā temple during *Ambuvāchī*. Kāmākhyā is a *yonipitha*. So, no idol is worshipped in Kāmākhyā temple. As per theory of *Maithuna*, *karabi* or yellow oleander flowers (scientific name – *Thevetiaperuviana*), which represents the *linga* or the phallic are placed above *aparajita* or Asian pigeon-wings or blue pea flowers (scientific name- *Clitoriaternatea*) representing the female genitalia after applying *chandantilak* or sandalwood paste over the later.²³

Hundreds of thousands of devotees across the globe throng the *Ambuvāchī* festival every year and spend their time in religious discourse, meditation etc. *Ambuvāchī* celebrates the flow of Goddess' blood for life.²⁴ It is believed that the Goddess remain impure for the three days of menstruation like any other common woman. The doors of the temple remained closed during the initial three days of the festival and regular religious functions of the temple are suspended. This is very much similar to the traditional seclusion of a woman during her periods.

A piece of red cloth, known as *Angavastra* is used to cover up the *yonimandala* during *Ambuvāchī* for the initial three days. The final day of *Ambuvāchī* is called as the day of *Suddhi* and the shrine or the *yonimandala* is given a ritualistic bath on that day. Ceremonial *puja* is also performed in the temple. This is regarded as the holiest day to visit the temple. So, a large number of devotees throng the doorstep of the temple for *darshan* of the goddess Kāmākhyā.²⁵

During the *nibritti* on the fourth day of the *Ambuvāchī* festival, water is brought from the nearby pond, the *saubhgyakunda*, to wash the shrine. Water is brought only by the *snanpaneris* or the traditional office bearer of the temple who is responsible for washing the shrine. In earlier days a special class of goldsmiths used to cleanse the golden jewelries and other utensils of the temple. However, a local man has mentioned that this particular class of *sewaits* or volunteer is not available now. *Gayan-bayan* performs during *Ambuvāchī* just as

they do during *Durgapuja*. But, they do not sing and perform during celebration of *Manashapuja*.²⁶

Angavastra or the cloth which is supposed to be wet with the menstrual blood of the goddess Kāmākhyā is the unique *prasad* of *Ambuvāchī*. This is very famous among the devotees. In the 12th century text of *KubjikaTantra*, it is mentioned about the divine power of *Angavastra*.²⁷ In the 7th Patala of *KubjikaTantra* it is mentioned as follows:

*KāmākhyāVastramadayaJapaPujangSamacharet/
PurnakaamLabhyedebiSatyangSatyang Na Mahay//*²⁸

(**meaning:** one can accomplish anything if he wears a piece of *angavastra* on his body. Also, wishes of a devotee come true if he worship the *angavastra* placing at sacred place).

- **Rituals observed in various parts of Assam during *Ambuvāchī*:** During the *Ambuvāchī*, various other rituals like *Amoti*, *Sāth* are observed throughout the state. These rituals have been changed tremendously with the passage of time and have taken new refined shapes. These various traditional rites and rituals have undergone the test of Hinduism, Tantricism, Vaishnavism etc. at different periods.²⁹

Since it is believed that the mother goddess earth menstruates during *Ambuvāchī*, activities like plowing up, tilling and other agricultural activities, cropping, performing *puja* and other religious activities, touching of certain clothes etc. are not undertaken. It is to be mentioned here that traditionally *nangal* (plough in Assamese) or *langula* or *langal* is used for plowing. It is said that the word *nangal* (plough in Assamese) or *langula* or *langal* comes from the word *lingam* or phallus. It can be inferred that the activity of plowing is compared with sexual intercourse. Since it is believed that the earth menstruates during *Ambuvāchī*, so farmers refrain themselves from plowing.³⁰

The widows fast and only take fruits and milk as diet during the three days of *Ambuvāchī*. Though there may be relaxation in observing these rites by widows in other parts of the state, it is followed very strictly in Kāmākhyā temple. The widows gathered at Kāmākhyā for *Ambuvāchī* breaks their fasts (*brata*) by offering their obeisance to the goddess on the fourth day of *Ambuvāchī*.³¹ In some parts of the state widowers also observe *brata*.³²

During *Ambuvāchī*, married and unmarried women observe a particular *brata* which is known as *Sāthābrata* or *Sāthābarat* at Kāmākhyā temple. Such *brata* is observed at Bamundi of Nalbari, Hajo, Sualkuchi etc. places in the state apart from Kāmākhyā temple.³³

In almost all the rituals observed in other parts of the state, purification is done on the fourth day. However, such rituals which coincide with *Ambuvāchī* have got different names in different parts of the state. In Kamrupa, it is known as *Āmotior Āmeti*. In most of the places of Upper Assam, it is known as *Sāt* or *Sāth*. The largest tribe of the state, the Bodos also observes certain rituals during *Ambuvāchī*. In some villages in West Bengal *Ambuvāchī*s observed in small scale.³⁴

Menstruation in other religious beliefs: Menstruation is a unique natural phenomenon seen among the female human beings. However, it has always been subjected to taboos and myths that form many aspects of socio-cultural lives.³⁵ The taboo around menstruation is rooted to the ancient Hindu mythological text of *Rigveda*. There is an episode in *Rigveda* on *Vritra*, the demon who withheld water from people and was known as the demon of droughts. Indra,

the king of Gods killed the water demon by releasing thunderbolt to the chest of the demon. Thereby he released water to the people and ensured future prosperity. However, God Indra was consumed by guilty as the demon *Vritra* was a Brahmin. So, Indra went to the womankind and asked them to take the guilt upon themselves and go through a regular cycle of repentance in the form menstruation. Thus it is depicted that menstruation is form of eternal punishment women are forced to accept.³⁶ Apart from this, menstruation is seen as a form of punishment in other Hindu religious texts like *Manusmriti*, *VasishthaDharmashastra* etc. It is not true that the menstruation taboos are there in Hindu religion only. It can be seen in other religions like Islam, Judaism, Jainism, some orthodox Churches (Catholic) of Christianity etc. In most of the places on earth restrictions are imposed on a woman during her menstruation.³⁷

Like *Ambuvāchī* in Kāmākhyā temple, there are other festivals too in other places in India celebrated on this concept. Some of the festivals and rituals are discussed below:

- **The Keddasa festival:** The Keddasa festival is celebrated in the South Kannada district Karnataka. It demonstrates the association of menstruation with the concept rest and sacred celebration.³⁸ The three days long festival is celebrated by the Tulu speaking population of the district.³⁹ This festival is being celebrated from ancient times in the honor of the annual initiation of the agricultural season. As per belief of Tulu peoples, mother earth undergoes menstruation for three days every year, after which she is ready to give birth to fruits and crops. Generally the *Keddasa* festival is celebrated on the last three days of the Tulu month *Puyintel*, that roughly falls in calendar month January or February. People of the community do not undertake activities like digging, cutting trees, trenching etc. during the three days.⁴⁰ The Tulu people worship the mother earth and distribute a mixture of nine grains known as *Navadhanya* among the relatives. At the end of the *Keddasa*, they begin agricultural activities by sprinkling oil and turmeric on the ground first.⁴¹

Keddasa generally falls in the calendar month of February. It is celebrated over three days. It is known with different names like *Keddasa*, *Nadu-Keddasa* and *Kade-Keddasa*.⁴² During *KadeKeddasa*, normally elderly woman of the family performs the rites and the rituals. As a part of the rituals she prepares *Sarnadde*, a unique dish of the Tulu and places it before the *Tulasikatte*. The lady wakes up early in the morning and puts cow dung (*ambi*) around the *tulasikatte*. She also lit earthen lamps in front of the *tulasikatte* and places *kumkum* and *shikakai* beside it. The lady pours coconut oil on the ground to symbolize oiling to mother earth before she takes bath.⁴³

- **Rajaparba:** It is observed in the state of Odisha. *Rajaparba* is four day long festival celebrated in the month of June every year. It urges upon the women to acknowledge the mother earth or the *Bhumidevi*. Natively the name of the festival is pronounced as *raw-jaw*. It is to be mentioned that the name *raw-jaw* has come from the word *rajaswala* meaning a menstruating woman. It is believed in Odisha that during the three days of *Rajaparba*, *Bhumidevi*, the wife of Lord Jagannatha undergoes menstruation.⁴⁴ On the fourth day *Bhumidevi* is given a ceremonial bath. Every day of the festival has got its particular name and significance as well. First of the festival is known as *pahilirajo*. The second day is known as *mithunasankranti*. *Mithunasankranti* signifies the starting of the rainy season. Third day of *Rajaparba* is known as *bhudaaha* or *basirajo*. The fourth day is called as *vasumatisnana*.⁴⁵ *Raja* is a typical Odia festival. Significance of the *Raja* is that it is a native

agricultural festival. The name implies that this festival is celebrated to mark the fertility period of the mother earth. It is believed that during this time the earth physically becomes ready to carry seeds for procreation.⁴⁶ In his essay 'Women, Earth and the Goddess', scholar Kartikeya C. Patel states that cyclical changes in a woman corresponds to the cyclical changes in season. He notes that women must take rest during the *RajaParba* festival. As such they are kept away from regular household activities. The four-day celebrations start on the first day of *Ashada*, a month in the Hindu calendar. The celebrations include receiving gifts, eating special foods like *pithas* (a traditional Odia sweet), dancing, singing, playing on swing, decorating all by ornaments and *Alta*. Mostly men spend time in playing cards and they normally hold wrestling matches. On the fourth day women wash their *pidhi/ pidha*, the grinding stone in their kitchen with grass, cow dung, turmeric paste, flowers and *sindoor* (vermillion). The *pidhi / pidha* symbolize the *Bhumi*. So, this ritual is akin to giving the mother earth a ritualistic bath just like a woman do after her menses.⁴⁷ The festival is observed in almost all over the Odisha with minor variations. This is like a family affair in districts like Cuttack, Ganjam etc. But, it is celebrated in mass in the Baliharchandi temple near Puri.⁴⁸

- **ChengannurMahadev Temple:** ChengannurMahadev Temple is located in Kerala. Here, goddess Parvathi is believed to menstruate.⁴⁹ Goddess Parvati and her husband Lord Shiva are the presiding god and goddess in this temple. The head priest of the temple should have to watch out for strains of blood on the clothing of the goddess every morning. During the three days of menstruation the idol of the goddess is taken out of the innermost sanctum just like woman are secluded during the days of menstruation.⁵⁰

As per traditional belief in Punjab, mother earth falls asleep for one week once a year.⁵¹ In South India, most of the temples remain closed from *Dashami* to the next full moon after *Navaratri*.⁵² It is believed that on those days the goddess takes rest. In most of the locations in *Malabar* offshore area this type of traditions are there. In such places it is believed that the goddess takes rest during the last days of hot summer, and this rest ends once the rainy season starts.⁵³ In Bengal, strong *matri* centric traditions and traditions of *tantricism* are there in place. These two traditions venerate the female power and worship earth for more crops. It is noteworthy that *Ambuvāchī* is observed in most of the places of Bengal, but, in a lower scale.⁵⁴

CONCLUSION: It is seen from the above discussion that menstruation has been an enigmatic matter for mankind throughout ages. Human beings across civilizations have tried to connect it with the divine power because of procreative power of the 'red blood.' However, menstruation as a natural phenomenon in common female human beings has been held at a lower place in traditional beliefs in almost all the religions in the world. In India, menstruation as a symbol of fertility has been worshiped in different forms throughout ages. But, some practices contradicts this high wisdom in day to day lives. Even today, menstruation is seen as a sin. There are much to be acted upon for creation of awareness among the mass of India, especially the underprivileged ones, for allaying unequal treatment against women only because 'she bleeds for life.'

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