

**“THE CRADLE OF TANTRA:”
Transformations of a Hindu Festival,
from Nationalist Symbol to Tourist Destination**

CSR No More than a Page

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This No More than a Page is a summary of one chapter of a book that I am now finishing based on research conducted in India from roughly 2000 to 2022. Entitled *The Path of Desire: Living Tantra in Northeast India*, the book focuses on the lived, popular, and vernacular forms of Hindu Tantra in the state of Assam. Historically, Tantra is one of the most important forms of Asian religions, which spread throughout both Hindu and Buddhist traditions from roughly the sixth century CE onward. But it is also one of the most widely misunderstood and misrepresented. While most European Orientalist scholars and Christian missionaries of the nineteenth century dismissed Tantra as “black art of the crudest and filthiest kind,” modern American popular audiences have celebrated Tantra as a form of “spiritual sex” and a “cult of ecstasy” (as we see in books such as *The Complete Idiot’s Guide to Tantric Sex*). My project looks instead at Tantra as it is practiced today in Assam, which is often identified as one of the oldest centers and perhaps original heartland of Tantra. Known in early sources as Kāmarūpa (the “place” or “form” [*rūpa*] of “desire” [*kāma*]), Assam is the seat of the mother goddess Kāmākhya (the goddess of desire), whose temple is believed to be the locus of the goddess’ *yoni* (womb). The most important festival at the temple is Ambuvācī Melā, which celebrates the goddess’ annual menstruation and coincides with the coming of the monsoon in early summer.

In my project, I am not only interested in understanding this fascinating tradition and its historical development; more importantly, I am also grappling with the changing nature of this tradition in the twenty-first century, in the face of Hindu nationalism, globalization, tourism, and a rapidly developing Indian economy, all of which have radically transformed many traditional religious sites. For my understanding of “lived” and “vernacular religion,” I follow the lead of scholars such as Robert Orsi and Leonard Primiano. However, I am especially interested in the ways in which living traditions respond to the rapidly changing landscape of modern India – particularly in the wake of nationalism, globalization, and tourism -- through a variety of local expressions, such as ritual, dance, and festival.

The fifth chapter of my manuscript focuses on some of the most striking transformations at this site, which have taken place around the goddess’ annual menstruation festival, Ambuvācī Melā. For the last five or six years, the festival has been aggressively promoted by conservative Hindu politicians, including India’s Prime Minister (Narendra Modi), Assam’s Chief Minister (Himanta Sarma), and state and national departments of tourism. Modi and others are explicitly trying to use goddess temples and pilgrimage sites as new symbols of Hindu nationalism and as a means of accelerating India’s economic growth, particularly in the northeast states. When I visited the festival in 2017, for example, I noted huge billboards featuring Prime Minister Modi himself, welcoming visitors to come “Come, seek the blessings of Maa Kamakhya” in the “Cradle of Tantra.” This promotion by the conservative BJP government is profoundly ironic, however. This is, after all, a Tantric festival based on the goddess’ menstruation, which involves practices that are typically condemned by conservative Hindus such as Modi. As such, various efforts have been made to “clean up” or “sanitize” the temple, such as covering images that have sexual content and banning rituals that might be offensive to tourists. Perhaps most controversial is the practice of animal sacrifice, which is essential to the goddess’ worship in Assam, where large numbers of goats, buffaloes, pigeons, fish, and sheep are sacrificed each year. In Assam and throughout India, however, conservative religious and political groups have attempted to ban the practice, which they see as barbaric, primitive, and fundamentally “un-Hindu.”

I want to argue that this attempt to transform Ambuvācī Melā into a nationalist symbol and tourist destination reveals some deep tensions and perhaps violent contradictions within the agenda of Hindu nationalism itself. While Modi and other conservative politicians hope to impose a singular, unified, and sanitized vision of “Hindutva” onto modern India, Ambuvācī Melā remains a stubborn reminder of the messy, heterogeneous, often transgressive, and sometimes bloody reality of the “nation and its fragments.”