

# **Gendered Ritual: A Sociological Inquiry Into The Construction Of Womanhood In TheKamrup-Assam As A Cultural Region**

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### **Abstract:**

The paper is an attempt to critical analysis how women life in Assamese kamrup Hindu Society is marked by gendered rituals and in doing so, it intends to understand how rituals particularly life cycle rituals- puberty signifies the construction of womanhood from a Sociological point of view. The study is concentrated at the Kamrup district of Assam as it is the Centre of Shakta Sect in Assam that itself determine the women life experience from being worshipping mother goddess Kamakhya to observing her annual menstruation in the month of June to maintaining Puberty ritual of the Assamese Hindu girl and monthly menstrual norms in Assamese Hindu Society. Furthermore, Women Life in Assamese Hindu Society both in Shakta tradition and Vaishnava tradition is characterised by two form of initiations and therefore to examine how women life is determined by life cycle rituals particularly puberty rites enhances the paper with deeper understanding how the contradictory scenario exist in Hindu practices and Hindu Cosmology where in practices women are being entitled as impure and secluded ( anti-Structure) during her menstruation and has to go through purifying rituals(rites of incorporation) to incorporate her into the society (normal, structure) (Turner,1969).

**Key words:**Ritual, Menstruation, Taboo, Purity, Pollution, gender, Tuloni Biya(menstrual rite),

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### **I. Introduction:**

Rituals are in some way or other is characterised by the notion of gender. As long as people live gendered lives, their experience of the world, and thus of ritual, will be gender dependent, whether or not the rituals they perform explicitly relate to gender. Religious rituals often make gender distinctions in their actions, and many rituals can only be performed by men or by women. Studying ritual is an appealing way to understand how this cultural conscription of gender emerges during rituals and after, as many rituals play an important role in establishing, reaffirming, and problematizing gender and provide an outlet for social being to internalise the meaning of gender differences in society such as in many religious rituals gendered existence are marked for say, the Kinaaldá ritual where the girl becomes the Changing Woman (a fertility goddess) through songs, dress, and action. Many religious rituals serve to reaffirm adults' gendered existence. Whether or not these rituals indicate equality or oppression, they do affirm differences between men and women. These differences do not necessarily relate to physical characteristics, as some puberty ceremonies do, but often re-establish the characteristics that the religious tradition considers properly masculine or feminine. To be socially accepted a man must often behave in masculine ways and a woman in feminine ways, and this is learned through ritual(Brosius&Husken,2010).

Moving into the study, gendered ritual such as Puberty or menstrual rite is that social customs which mark the changing societal and cultural status of women in society and its ritual play an immensely important part of an individual's life as well as in the society. Like in Assamese society, puberty rituals clearly mark the women live. Therefore the study focused on the menstrual rite to understand or highlight how it constructs women as a person in Hindu Assamese Society. there is also variation among the different regions, ethnic, caste Hindu groups , however the paper deals with Kamrup district of Assam to highlight the culture of the Women living there as Kamakhya the centre of Shakta Sect of Assam ( which is branch of Hindu Society to Worship Goddess) is located in Nilachal Hill of Kamrup, which highly influence the kamrupi society of Assam. Thus it highlight the difference between Hindus Cosmological Understanding and Practicality.

**Statement of the Problem:**

Assamese Hindu Society is unique in itself with its own cultural practices. Every society is bound by rituals in some way or other. The ritual find expression through the practice of rites of passage that mark individual's living, societal role, position, status bringing together cultural and physical processes of human living. Interplay of biological and cultural fact is at the core of all rituals and life cycle rituals is of the same kind. Life cycle rituals-birth, puberty, marriage, death plays an immensely important role in an individual's life as well as in the society. However, India being a vast country with diverse culture, there exist diversity in Hindu ritual of Rites of Passage with differ cultural value. The division of north-south, east-west, is also visible in their culture with diversity and so in the Hindu customs and rites. Assamese Hindu Society has its own norms, customs and rites and their own significance and theories. Study of these Rituals of Assamese Hindu Society can highlight the similarity and differences in Hindu Society in India and their specificity. Assamese Hindu Society has many different practices from the other Hindu Society for say the menstruation rite, the traditional prayer hall ( Namghar), Sacred Space( Satras) , goddesses worshiping and so on which are unique to Assamese Society. In other words, Assamese Hindu Society is mix of both Brahmanical Hindu and Tribal Hindu practices that exercise both indigenous customs along with Hindu customs; for example: Bathou Puja of Bodo community; Saktas worshipping of Assamese people.

Assam (ancient Kamarupa) is the place known as the first and the principal centre of Shakti worship. It is said that here women are respected as a manifestation of Goddess Kamakhya. Women were considered as the backbone of the social life. Virgin worship of Sakta sect incorporating Tantric custom is one of the prevailing practice in Kamakhya and another pilgrim of Assam. It is argued by people that virgin worship is observed regardless of any caste differences. Within such special position, there is the celebration of women adulthood through 'Puberty Ritual' known as 'Tuloni Biya' but with times such celebration deteriorates the position of women as taboo and restriction imposed on it. Thus it is very relevant to note how from puberty ritual the construction of women' fortune in Assamese society and how with the ritual their construction womanhood begins and finally goes through the marriage ritual to motherhood. Beginning with the menstruation, the life of women in Hindu society, as well as other society, undergoes many changes both socially and biologically and through marriage, these change steps ahead socially that celebrate the attainment of adulthood in any society. In Hindu society, such change of social role is marked by certain rituals which are also the true in case of Assamese Hindu society but unlike the other Hindu society, Assamese society practice some unique feature of its own. One such practice is the existing two kind of marriage that characterized the women living in Assamese society. Therefore, the study of such rituals that construct the Assamese Hindu society would be relevant to understand their uniqueness and specialty as well as differences from the other Hindu society.

**Objectives of the Study:**

Based on the statement of the problem, the objective of the study is-To understand the role of menstruation rite (Puberty Ritual) in constructing womanhood in Assamese Hindu Society and how it determines women position in society and highlight the process of womanhood practice through rituals from the sociological point of view.

**Methodology and Theoretical Framework:**

These objective of the paper has been approached from an ethnographic method which is more concerned with the meaning attribution and social construction of the actors. This is line with the aim of the research to explore both the meaning *and* practice of transitional rites in the complex society. The Universe of the Study include women of different age set to have a comparative analysis of the phenomena and better understanding of the truth. Women are the core focus to incorporate their experience of the reality. However, interviewed also include a few male member to have insight of theirexecution of the idea of purity and pollution. Moreover, different age group was taken into account to understand or examine how opinion differ with the age gap and analysis how they reflect upon the notion of gender. The study adopted thick ethnographic tools like interview, participant observation, conversation analysis drawing from the founder of ethnographic method Malinowski to Harold Garfinkel to Clifford Geertz. The study is located within the field of Sociology of Rituals & Religion, and Society and Gender. The study tried to understand the interrelation between religion and gender and in doing so aims to focus on the specific rituals from a gender perspective, trying to understand what role religious rituals plays in shaping gender relation in society and how rituals are performed on the basis of Gender to internalize the notion of gender. Here the initiation ritual is completely a woman phenomenon where there is found complete absent of men in the ritual exercised. While it also true that in Hindu Society, there are some rituals related to the male member only, thus it is very oblivious that there is this gender perspective of rituals in society we live. Therefore, for the proper understanding of the practice, it is worthwhile to study the problem from these two perspectives. The functional Perspective is benefitted to investigate what function rituals hold in the individual's life and as well as in society. Borrowing from Durkheim theory of Religion and Rituals, study

emphasis on the how rituals are performed for the functioning of the society and to sustain stability and order in the society. Concepts like marriage, menstruation, menstrual taboo, rituals, gender, womanhood, etc., are employed in the study.

#### Key Findings and Discussion:

##### Sociology of Ritual Studies and Gender:

There has been a different interpretation of culture and ritual and its importance, for say: the symbolic scholars' argued that the ritual to be crucial in the dynamics of culture. For anthropologist who studies religion and ritual, Ritual is more than a mere analytical instrument Ritual has been a major tool in clarifying the societal world and the impact of religious ideas in the discussion of the relationship between myth and practices or rites or rituals interpret behaviours developed out of religion that has something to do with the notion of sacred which is evident in the work of phenomenologist of religion today (Bell, 1992). Robertson Smith inquiries into the other shades of ritual as a human experience that is more connected with societal aspects of it, which was further put forwarded by Emile Durkheim in his work "The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life", where he stated that any religion comprises of 'Rites' and 'Belief'; where 'Rites' are outlined in terms of their object, while beliefs are the "the special nature of the object" (Durkheim, 1912). He holds that beliefs have analytical importance while the ritual is more crucial in maintaining social integration and solidarity in regards to the dynamic of culture (Durkheim, 1912).

Emile Durkheim (1912), was the first to recognize the importance of ritual in religion. In his definition of religion, he clearly stated that religion is all about beliefs and practices (rituals). According to him, Rituals or rites are particular modes of action which are different from other human practices like moral practices. Durkheim in his book 'Elementary Forms of Religious Life' mentioned that there are two main types of rituals. The first group includes the sacrificial, imitative, commemorative and the peculiar rites that form the 'positive cult'. The second group consists of taboo and ascetic rites, constituting the 'negative cult'. Apart from the positive rituals that contribute to the smooth functioning of the society, the negative rituals also exercise a positive functioning of the religious and moral value in the society.

Furthermore, Gender has been an important aspect of any society and so among academician especially got more focussed in the 19s with the emergence of the first wave of feminism. Both Simone de Beauvoir and Butler Performative Gender theory hold quite a similar stand where for Simone, it is "Situation" that makes women as women and for Butler 'Gender' is "Performative Acts". Simone remarked that "one is not born, but, rather, becomes a woman," taking from the perspective of phenomenology (Beauvoir, 1949). Judith Butler (1988), borrowing from Beauvoir stated that gender is rather an identity that is formed with time and situation depicted through some mannered and repeated actions or behaviour and not a secured identity or medium which determines the actions processed, therefore gender can be said to be regulated through the bodily movements, execution of acts, behaviour that ultimately resulted in the imaginative self (Butler, 1988). According to Butler, Gender is performative indicates that gender is a reality only in its performance. Therefore, Butler (1988), stated that "Gender is performative acts obliged by social sanction and taboo and informed by historical conventions" and therefore for her body turned to gender through "sedimented acts" that objectified with time. (Butler, 1988). Another sociologist Candace West and Don H. Zimmerman (1987), in the article "Doing Gender" described gender as an accomplishment result out of day to day social activity that classifies and signify the notion of famines and masculine instituted through the medium of social interaction. The focus turned towards the function of gender in everyday life and its interaction with men and women, with the West and Zimmerman's work. Such a shift opens the space for new doubts and discussion about the multidimensionality of Gender. Furthermore, the notion of Gender also plays a key role in the sociology of religion and ritual studies.

In the article "Gender Ritualisation: The Customization Of 'Doing' Gender" Jennifer A. Johnson (2008) deals with the concept of Gender Ritualization which he said to be borrowed from Collins (2004) and Bell (1992), and defined gender ritualization "as the strategic mobilization of gender whereby men and women elevate the symbolic meaning of select gender practices to accomplish ritualistic goal" (Johnson, 2008). He commented that "Gender ritualization is the process through which individuals, standing inside their own social location and gendered self, select from those activities that constitute the 'doing' of gender, mark those selected practices as exceptional and tactically 'use' them to achieve the basic objectives of a ritual - symbolically communicate emotional messages of gender, engage in the crafting of their gender identity and influence their emotional experiences of gender" (Johnson, 2008). Thus for him individual use gender which he termed as "customization of doing gender". He argued that those activities that appear to be meaningful can be customized by rituals, and accordingly makes strategic to achieve the need. "Both male and female-typed tasks are forms of 'doing' gender, yet one form has more symbolic power than the other. Gender ritualization simply asks, out of all the ways men and women can 'do' gender, which ones are most 'useful' inside the immediate situations in which people live" (Johnson, 2008). Therefore, Johnson argued that gender ritualization is the social interaction between two or more people, as ritual theory provide a framework for the study of ritual, gender ritualization

tells us how individual mobilize gender practices in an interactive process by sending and receiving the symbolic message and also associate in forming gender identity.

#### Notion of Gender in Hindu Society:

In regard to Indian patrilineal Hindu Girl, Leela Dube (1988), in the article “On the Construction of Gender Hindu Girls in Patri-lineal India” was concerned on “the way Hindu girls are being socialised through rites and rituals, languages in the household and also by its relations” (Dube, 1988). She argued that the culturally produced gender differences are explained as biological difference as natural law, she cited the example of the concept of procreation among the Patri-lineal India, where the man is the provider of the seed or the essence and women is equated with the field that nourishes the seed and therefore, it is said that the child born share the father’s blood.

The notion of gender has been a relevant topic of research inquiry in the study of Hindu Society which emerged in the 20<sup>th</sup> century with the feminist study marking the social sciences. In regard to the studying of gender in Hindu society, Vasudha Narayanan argued that Hindu Sources gives and multiple interpretations of gender approach that includes essentialist, Constructivist and transcendent. According to her, gender in Hindu Society if at philosophical level goes beyond all dichotomies that include gender for the soul and for a deity, but at the human level, the worshiper distinguishes between gender roles but on the other hand, its boundary is fluid enough (Gold, 2008). Thus this plural dimension of Gender leads to focus on the studying Gender in Hinduism in two areas i.e., Cosmology and Society. Therefore in Hindu society, we witness women in two parts, briefly in the cosmology the female divine power in the form of Sakti(energy), Creation or Nature ( Prakriti) and Illusion ( Maya); Secondly the women role in everyday religious rituals or practices and Hindu society and in the public sphere where women as female saints, incarnation are being worshiped (Gold, 2008).

Thus Hindu Ritual is the one that field where a researcher can explore gender relation and also highlight the entire functioning of the Hindu Society. As Hindu Society is very much determined by its ritual and religion provides the framework to study the entire society in detail. Literatures allow to argue that though menstruation is a biological event, it is subjected to diverse symbolical meaning in diverse culture. Such interpretation of menstruation can also be witnessed in the field where on the one hand there is a narrative of celebration and on the other hand the taboos associated with it. For example, Mitoo Das (2008), highlight the taboos related to menstruation in Assam and the concept of pollution associated with it. But when you go down to the field it is really dilemmatic to arrive at such conclusion because, on the one hand, the people relate menstruation rite with Ambuvachi Mela which is the auspicious festival of worshipping of Goddess Kamakhya where she is welcomed back with huge celebration after her annual menstruation. Further, old narration argued it ‘as a way of providing rest to the woman’ because women are always entrusted with household and harvesting activities in Assamese Society, therefore to keep them away from heavy physical work during the menstruation, such norms of seclusion are maintained, according to the elderly people from the field. Thus completing negating, it, might mislead us and so requires extensive and comprehensive research on it.

#### Gender Ritual in Kamrup (Kamakhya) as a Cultural Region:

In Assam, the construction of girl as women start with a ritual called “Tuloni Biya” performed to commemorate the attainment of womanhood status to a girl. The celebration of first menstruation through a symbolic ritual that is almost equivalent to the marriage in Assam is known as ‘Tuloni Biya’. Puberty Ritual or locally termed as “Tuloni Biya” is observed by every Hindu Assamese people irrespective of caste, ethnicity and each group has its own understanding that underlines its importance of observance and origins. In Assam, women are subjected to two kinds of marriage, one: Tuloni Biya(a marriage that celebrates during first menstruation, where the girl is married to banana tree) and second: Bor Biya( the marriage that takes place with groom). The ‘Tuloni Biya’ marriage is exercised as an attainment of adulthood and as a ritual for cleaning the pollution associated with it so that her future conjugal relation is fortunate. It is said that this system of puberty ritual (marriage) earlier came into being in Assamese society as a symbolic invitation to the Ahom king and princes for a marriage proposal indicating that their daughter is eligible for marriage which with times associated with taboos and restriction. Apart from Assam, such ritual can be evident in south part of India and Nepal etc. This puberty ritual is celebrated as a part of purity/ pollution in whole of Assam but every less study can be evident, so on that note, it is very important to discuss, critically analysis such event or phenomena of Assamese society where the question of gender is very much related to the notion of purity and pollution(Das,2018).

Women’ menstruation, as polluted require purity ritual (like death rituals) that observed to clean the pollution. Assamese society has its own ideas about ‘Pure’ and ‘Polluted’ which are implicated in their religious and social life. Thus Puberty rituals become the landmark of women for entering into a new social position. This puberty ritual is absolutely carried without a male counterpart and they are just welcome as a guest at the end of the event. So it is quite interesting to note how the entire practice is being carried and what role does it have on

women's life. There is a religious factor to the taboos of menstruation. The kitchen is conceptualized as Goddess Place and certainly, the prayer house. So, since a woman is 'Suwa or Polluted' during menstruation, she is best kept away from these places which specify purity. The menstrual taboos of the Assamese women are also

associated with 'Ambubachi or Xaat' which falls during the month of June'22 every year and is the time when Goddess Kamakhya menstruates. The taboos and the restrictions are much more rigid during this time for women who menstruate. In fact, the seclusion is like the first menstrual separation ritual. Though we can witness a kind of taboo associated with menstruation in Assam but we also evident celebration as attainment of adulthood which even synonymous with celebration the great goddess Devi Kamakhya Maa'sRitu( mense), followed by system of Tuloni Biya where the same ritual carried as that of in Kamakhya 's Mense in every year for cleaning and making her eligible to be worshipped again after four days of seclusion(Das,2018).

#### Menstrual Rite Of Assamese Kamrup Hindu Society: A Case

Menstruation is one of the core factors in girl's socialisation as she is introduced to her bodily process as it is considered to be the development of female body biologically and thus after menstruation, a girl attained her maturity or in other words womanhood. When a girl gets her first Menstruation, then her life is considered to be changed, thus menstruation can be taken as life-changing in a woman life. Most of the Anthropological research into menstruation rituals in India and across countries focused on the notion of purity and pollution. The rituals associated with it are meaningful and symbolic and define the rest of the girl life. In Assam ritual related to first menstruation like other culture vary according to caste, religion, ethnicity and the local negative term for mentioning menses is 'Nuwara' ( Cannot do which means cannot touch), 'Suwa' ( leftover), however, 'Mahekia' means monthly.

Whether it is Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs or Christians maintain menstrual norms regarding pollution. However, Assamese Hindu society seems to be stricter about it but there is a dual nature attached, as it also celebrates womanhood with an equal arrangement to marriage. Among Assamese Hindus, when a girl gets her first menstruation performed a ritual called 'Tuloni Biya'. No doubt in Assam like many places in India child marriage prevailed even though it was not that hard and fast and for that reason it is said that people use to celebrate 'Aag Biya' (Before marriage) ritual in childhood and 'Pass Biya' (after marriage) at first menstruation as an announcement of daughter ability to get married and thus to informed the groom's family so that her marriage would take place. However, the concept of 'Aag Biya' in Assamese Society has declined and even can be argued to be extinct, instead of the concept of 'Tuloni Biya' emerged which also mean 'Khoru Biya' indicating Minor Marriage as a symbolic marriage to attained maturity, as in Brahmanical Lawbook indicate marriage is the only initiation for women. This Tuloni Biya celebrated at the first menstruation of a girl mark by Seclusion of them in a room for six days, though a female member of the family, society visit her and offer fruits, she is avoiding to see the sun, a male member in another word the outer world for six days. She is devoid of the religious activities and that also applies to the rest of her life which she needs to follow during menstruation. She either keeps in a separate room or in given separate bed or in villages made to sleep in the ground till the third day which starts with the first menstruation keeping in a separate room, away from male member and outer life. During this period female member used to teach her about the restriction and norms she should be followed in her next monthly cycle and some said they also try to teach her about good manner being a girl she should follow like daily prayer, respecting adult, helping mother in household activities, in fact, that she is no longer a child and so she should become responsible and act accordingly. However, it is been observed that none talks about sexual life or her reproduction process which taken to begin with menstruation in women body (field Observation).

The ritual of the 'Tuloni Biya' begins with the first day of menstruation and time and day of first menstruation play an immense role in Assamese Hindu woman life. As soon as the mother get to know about it, she will note the exact time and day followed by visiting a priest to ask about the restriction on food and other matter that girl should follow depending on day and time. There are specific concepts of Kanya( Girl) related with day and time like Brahmachari, Podammi, and Urgo etc according to which restrictions are maintained. For example, depending on what type of Girl she is, her restriction on food is maintained, general norm is that the girl avoids rice that for three days and after three days it depends on her first menstruating time and day that either she will be allowed to eat or to continue fast. After three days till six days the girl is given food only boiled one before sunset at around 4:30 one time a day in the general case and if required she should be only on fruits till six days. On the fifth day, the first bath of the girl took place with black grain, turmeric, and oil putting the small banana tree on four sides. And finally, bath takes place in seventh with the same stuff and then like a bride is given red vermillion and used the banana tree as a symbolic groom. So the girl is married to the banana tree. She is dressed in bridal clothes and gold jewellery with same that a bride wear and a reception take place where the guest was welcomed, served food and only then the girl is again incorporated into societal life and males are allowed to see her. Though it is said that the reception depends on the capability of the girl parents but yet it becomes a matter of difficult for poor section of people because it is a community celebration where

inviting every one of the villages to become a norm. Moreover, the entire process also required a good amount which is very clear that a girl needs to be on a special diet, clothes and especially jewellery which is an inevitable part of the ritual. Another important fact is the absence of male member throughout the process and welcomes only as a guess at the end day. Apart from the consulting a priest for knowing the thiti (Yug), there is no role of priest, bhakt or another male member. However if according to Girl ‘Yug’ some ritual needs to be especially performed then it is done after the seventh day completion that means after the ‘Tuloni Biya’. Even sometimes if some faults are found in her day and time which can affect her future life preferably marriage life she can be made to rely on one time boiled food for a month or more than that and also ask to offer thing like gold, silver, pigeon etc to remove that bad deeds. So first menstruation in Assamese Hindu Society is a costly affair but it is observed by every household irrespective of class, caste, ethnicity as a cultural practice that special to their socio-cultural context with slight differences in the process of performing the ritual.

#### Change And Continuity:

The field analysis highlights that it is not declining rather changing its nature and continuing to prevail with modern influence. With the help of other work like “Menstruation as Pollution: Taboos in Simlitol, Assam” it can be argued that it is still maintained according to convenience. Therefore, one cannot take the ritual as declining rather it is changing and continuing. Early it is said that after fifth day birth and seventh day ceremony is mandatory, while at present it is observed that because of school and any other family affair, the girl after fifth day bath free to join her daily life work and thus reception can be postponed for some time but not that it is avoided because family with their convenience seen to perform the reception ceremony. The ceremony now can also be a private affair with relative and close friend whereas in earlier times it is mostly community celebration. And the same is visible with the monthly restriction, earlier menstruation girl or women are not allowed to go out, and secluded in one place, avoid touch another person, entering worship place etc but with time they are now allowed to go outside freely and not secluded in one place, though not entering worship place is strictly prevail till date. At present the way of maintaining the pollution notion changes, for example, earlier girl is secluded for mostly fifth day but now she is free to go out and touch stuff in house but at the end day it is seen that mother would clean the house meaning washing the stuff using during the periods and restore the daily life, daily ritual activities, after the women get her bath along with hair wash (Urban experience) but there is also the other way of maintaining that is visible in an urban setting that the girl sleep separately in bed and do not touch the other clothes of the house, avoid worship space, but go out for school or other affair and similarly after taking bath and washing hair and thereby clean everything in fifth day and join daily life but mostly join ritual activity after seventh day. This way of maintaining the pollution can also be found in village setting but with much stricter form like it is found in some household, the women are not allowed to sleep on the bed for the fifth day, not allowed to cook, etc. And only after bath washing hair, she joins her daily work. This cleaning process of herself and the stuff used indicates the process of purifying again and thus qualify to join the societal and spiritual world. So from the above discussion, it is can be said that whether it is First menstruation ritual (Tuloni Biya) or the monthly system of maintaining the notion of ‘purity and pollution’ though changing ,yet continuing according to convenience.

#### Prevalence Of Kamakhya Devi Menstruation Celebration in the Kamrup:

Ambubachi is known as Tantric Festival closely associated with Shakti Cult held every year in the month June’ 22-25 day. Though the Ambubachi Mela is celebrated in the Kamakhya Temple of Guwahati and it is also carried by every household of Assam irrespective of any caste or ethnic differences. These four-five days is maintained as Maa'rRitu or Xaat Loga, (meaning Mother Goddess Menstruation), during which every household keep their worship space close and do not pray and Along with the Kamakhaya temple ‘s closing the main door, all other temple avoid performing prayer these days and thus suspend the ritualistic activities. People eat fruits of variety as it is celebrated as a festival, in every household mostly prefer to use limited clothes and after the completion of these four-five days, people wash their used clothes during the days and after cleaning the worship space they again freshly started their prayer.

This is part of the representation of Assamese Hindu Menstrual rite where once the girl got her first menses, she is out of the everyday activity till 7<sup>th</sup>day and restarts her normal life after the 7<sup>th</sup>day and during which different norms and customs are carried. Since Ambubachi is taken to be the Mother Goddess (KamakhayaMaa’s menstruation) thus Assamese Society is secluded from praying and even the Goddess menstruation is celebrated just like the girl followed by secluding from prayers, visits, and devotee gather in the outside the main gate enjoy their stay and wait for Maa to return to her normal life. Only in the fourth day after priest cleans the Maa’s main shrine and the water washed out, new water offered the main door get open for the devotee.

From this phenomenon of Assamese Hindu Society, it is very clear why first menstruation is celebrated in a big manner because Mother Goddess is always linked with it and especially in kamrup district at Nilachal hill it is said mythological that after Lord Vishnu cut the Sati body into piece to get Mahadev into his normal life, the main yoni fall in the Nilachal Hill so Kamrupi celebrate the fertility of women and thus achieving

womanhood is celebrated. The core shrine of the temple is yoni that symbolises the reproductive organ of Sati and said during this period the water of the flow through yoni turned red in colour. The menstruation of mother earth can be a witness in Kamakhya temple. According to the Hindu tradition, the earth represents the female power or Sakti that is the life giver and in Ambubachi mother earth is said to be under menstruation for four days. As menstruation symbolised the power of conceiving and reproduction, so during Ambubachi there is the dominance of rain during the season and is considered to be a time of producing a crop by mother earth. Therefore Ambubachi also has an agricultural aspect which is even followed today in some part Assam, for say, seeds are put in an earthen pot filled with water and as the seed germinate, after Ambubachi it is floated in a river. Another belief is the custom of Angavastra which is red in colour, the red colour is considered to be auspicious in Hindu tradition and thus Hem Barua wrote “ Red is the most accepted colour- red flower, red vermillion, red cloth etc which is significance, synchronise with the nature of the ritual. It symbolises passion and erotic excitement and the menstrual flow with which the ritual is associated.”

In Kamrup district Ambubachi is also known as Ameti that start on the seventh day of Asadha, it is a ritual of austerities. The religious significance of the mother goddess has an impact on the socio-cultural life of the Assamese people. Thus during Ambubachi, every household do not observe any ritual activities even the daily prayer and follow some restriction especially the women in menses. They need to observe some fast and are not allowing coming down from the bed which means they should avoid touching the earth. In villages during this time household do not open their granary and no agricultural activities are performed as it is related with mother earth and therefore Hindus believe that during this time mother earth need rest so that once rejuvenate she can bestow her bounty on all. Those who observe austerities like Widows, Brahmacharia especially do not eat cooked food and relies on fruits and milk. And this custom is not only limited to a follower of Sakti cult but indeed the vaisnavites also follow it and do not perform any puja during these days.

From the fact, the Ambubachi the menstruation of mother Goddess Kamakhya Devi is celebrated so the question arises whether menstruation to be considered as pure or impure. There is also a dualistic approach to menstruation. In one hand the menstruating girl is considered as impure while, on the other hand, the ritual performed for her are considered auspicious. With the emergence of Sakta Cult in Assam, the first menstruation of girl is also started observing which is followed by a bathing ceremony and then decorate her with a new dress, jewellery, and flowers and hence it has religious importance in Assamese Culture. For the Hindus particularly among saktas, menstruation has a religious significance. In Hindu Religion, there are large numbers of the goddess known as Saktas and the significance of menstruation is evident from the fact that it is celebrated in a grade way in India places like Assam, Orissa, and Tamil Nadu etc. Menstruation is experienced by every woman but their experience differs. And therefore the question whether menstruation is sacred or profane varies according to culture. From this, it is clear that whether goddess or women, menstruation subjected them to seclusion.

## **II. Conclusion:**

From the above discussion, begin with menstrual rite as an initiation to the special case of Assamese Hindu Society celebrating first menstruation, it is clear that first menstruation in any women living in any culture play immense role whether directly or indirectly. So menstruation especially in cases of Assamese culture it is not only physiological affair but rather social and cultural and so the celebration to incorporate her in societal and cultural life. Furthermore, in Assamese culture menstrual rite can be argued as an initiation rite as it is applicable to all women and it purifies to enter into cultural life. No doubt what anthropological research on menstruation shows the notion of pollution is also visible in Assamese society but there is also another side that celebrates womanhood, the creator , the fertility( though not sound about it) from the celebration of Ambubachi Mela can be evident. Ambubachi or the annual menstruation of Mother goddess play an unavoidable role in Assamese Hindu Society in which the entire society suspend from daily ritual activities, agricultural activities and even any activities related to earth in the view that mother earth is menstruating so she needs rest. From the fact, that Ambubachi the menstruation of mother Goddess Kamakhya Devi is celebrated so the question arises whether menstruation to be considered as pure or impure. There is also a dualistic approach to menstruation. In one hand the menstruating girl is considered as impure while, on the other hand, the ritual performed for her are considered auspicious. Thus for Saktas Hindus, menstruation not only biological fact but also religious concept and the same with Assamese Hindu Society as it has two most influential cult of Hinduism, i.e., Vaisnavism and Saktism and most Hindu people follow both simultaneous. Menstruation is experienced by every woman but their experience differs. And therefore the question whether menstruation is sacred or profane varies according to culture. From this, it is evident that whether goddess or women, menstruation subjected them to seclusion. From the field as well as the literatures survey it can be said that Van Genep (1960) rightly stated that puberty rite is marked by rites of separation followed by transitional rites that mark the individual transition from one phase to another phase of life both socially and biologically and then incorporate into the new journey of life, but his equation of menstruation as puberty rite and not initiation is something that confusing in the field as

argued initiation is that applied to all population and in Assamese culture menstruation as initiation rite applied to all section of girl which means a universal feature of Assamese Culture. From the field, it can be said that the notion of purity and pollution is present among all social category whether being Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, and Christians follow the practice of purity and pollution varying in the degree of flexibility. But it is of major concern among the Assamese Hindus naming the ritual as Tuloni Biya. During menstruation, the girl has to go through a number of restrictions. But it is found that these restrictions again vary with the cultural setup. The unavoidable fact is that though the degree of rigidity and flexibility varies yet people maintain the custom accordingly and never opt for eradication even though people especially the youth speaks against it observing its restriction and devaluation imposing on women. Another interesting point is that girls hardly know why they bleed and what this menstruation is all about. They hardly concern about the ritual and process carried rather more inclined towards the ornaments and garments that they get while celebrating and thus keeping aside the part of their isolation. Even it is observed that now as the child turns into ten, eleven they themselves wonder when they will be getting menses in local term Dagor so that they get all the beautiful stuff. And from this, it is clearly known how Young girls are socialised to respect their ‘culture’ where the elder women seem to put forward issue health, hygiene rather cultural concern and thereby finds reasonable arguments for the continuation of rituals and restrictions that it bring upon women. The interesting fact is that though the elderly people justify the custom in name of providing rest to the woman, unfortunately, the local term has negative connotation relating to the term “Menstruation” like Nuwara, Suwa, and Mahekia. Nuwara indicates that ‘cannot do’, while Suwa holds that something i.e left over, and Mahekia means Monthly, since it is monthly process. The ritual has a dualistic nature suggesting contradictory meanings to it. On the one hand, it indicates the celebration of menstruation which gives an image of a more egalitarian society in which women is praise for what she is being. At the same time it again depiction of a closed patriarchal society where women were keeps in seclusion and scarification. Therefore, it is very confusing as to perceive it whether negative rites or positive of Assamese Hindu Society. Moreover, a woman life fully determined by ritual and implicates her future action in life. In short from the day of her first menstruation, the woman starts a new life stepping into adulthood the first menstrual ritual was performed according to one of the informant so that the girls do not have any pitfall in her future i.e. in her married life. And said if the rituals are not performed well or the requirements suggests by the Bakhats is not fulfilled, it is said there is a chance of getting misfortune in a girl’s life. So it can be argued that in Assamese society, the puberty marriage and Marriage has an inter-relation. In fact, Marriage can be taken as an extension because puberty marriage is called khoru /Tuloni and Marriage is known as Bor Biya which processes starts with the girl getting first menstruation. In old days it’s completely related process with very less interval but now with the emergence of the nuclear family, the interval extended as the marriage age gets increases. Globally or locally women are subjected to these rituals varying in the manner of conducting which determine their social role. Whether the puberty ritual is celebrated in very society or not but it is seen very society has some rules relating to first menstruation of girl with varies in its degree. Therefore, the Durkheim theory of Ritual that hold Ritual to hold the solidarity in society where he distinguished between positive rite and negative rite and thereby negative rite as taboo, ascetic also hold a place in functioning a cultural system is very evident in the study.

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