

The Notion of Virginity in South Asia and its Impact on Religious Practices and Oral Literature¹

Emilie Arrago-Boruah

Kumārī pūjāphalaṃvaktuṃ nārhāmi
sundari/
jihvākoṭīśahasrais tu vākyakoṭīśatair api //

“O Beautiful, even with ten thousand
million tongues and one thousand
million sentences,
I could not define the result of a ritual
dedicated to a virgin girl”.

Yoginī tantra, I.17.29

Virginity is still an important notion of contemporary Hindu marriage. Early marriages at village level evidence this fact. The ritual dedicated to pre-pubescent girls, namely *kumārī pūjā*, also corroborates this. During this ritual, the girl is called *kumārī*, which according to the Monier-Williams Dictionary means “a virgin girl between ten to twelve years old” or “a virgin girl up to the age of sixteen or before menstruation has commenced”. According to this tradition, a girl may represent a living image of the goddess provided she is not yet polluted by menstrual blood. However chaste she is, the pre-pubescent girl worshipped during this ritual represents womanhood.

Observations mainly come from a place of pilgrimage, considered to be one of the Hindu goddess’s favourite seats (*pīṭha*), located in the capital of Assam, Guwahati. It may be noted that there are fifty-one such sites in India. According to mythology, the places where pieces of Satī’s dead body fell are said to have become one of these sites. In Hinduism, these scattered places appertain to the development of the Śakti cult, which is part of the Tantric tradition, where adoration of the goddess is the focus and magical and possession practices are fully distinct. However, the temple in Assam holds a prominent position because the vagina of the goddess is said to have fallen there. The Sanskrit term by which this local goddess is known highlights this view as she is “the one whose name is

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love”, namely Kāmākhya. A stone moistened with water and situated two metres underground represents her icon. But pilgrims can also worship the goddess through a living person. It is in this context that a pre-pubescent girl – between the ages of six and ten years old – is used during a ritual when, for the pilgrims, she becomes an incarnation of Kāmākhya.

The ritual generally begins in the largest section of the temple called *nāṭmandira*. In Sanskrit, *mandira* is “the residence” or even “the temple” while *nāṭa* designates “the act of dancing”. In fact, many accounts regarding this temple have given evidence to the prevalence of female dancers or sacred prostitutes (*devadāsī*) in early times. The pilgrim can meet a little girl here. She sits, hunched up, on a piece of cloth. She remains silent while a priest covers her body with flowers and recites magical spells. As the incarnation is real, the pilgrim loses all restraint, forgets the border between the visible and the invisible world, feeds the little girl and touches her feet with great devotion. Satisfied with what he has done, the little girl looks at him imperiously, touches his head and pronounces these words: “*kuśal hāok, mangol hāok*”, which in Assamese roughly means “be happy and be fortunate”. When the ritual is over, the girl collects a few rupees from her devotee and becomes an ordinary girl again. In contrast the veneration of the pre-pubescent girls in Nepal as an incarnation of the goddess lasts until their puberty. However we shall demonstrate that the same values are ritually performed in both countries. To fully understand this ritual, an apparent paradox has to be explained: on the one hand, a pre-pubescent girl participates as a symbol of purity, while on the other hand, she also represents a sexual person. Women worship, for example, a pre-pubescent girl to seek a cure for infertility. This paper deals with this particular aspect with the aim of showing that the notion of virginity refers to a period very close to puberty, which implies fertility. To do this, we shall combine the results of a study of a few extracts from Sanskrit literature and of fieldwork on a ritual of puberty still practised today among the Assamese community.

Bodies and Sexuality

The medical texts use the same terms, *ṛtu* or *ārtava*, to speak about menstruation or ovulation. Indeed, according to Susruta the time of ovulation coincides with the beginning of menstruation and lasts for twelve days. Once ovulation is over, *dr̥ṣṭārtava* occurs, that is the time where ovulation is regarded as having “appeared” (*dr̥ṣṭa*). Moreover, it is explicitly said that the behaviour of a woman during her menstruation determines the nature of her future child. For example, if she has a tendency to take naps during the day, she will give birth to a sleepy child;

if she undergoes oily massages, the child will be born a leper, if she cuts her nails it will suffer from fragile nails, etc.² To ignore the difference between menstruation and ovulation and to describe the menstrual blood as a sexual fluid which transmits biological heredity means that here menstrual blood represents the same generative function as sperm.

A more recent text, a domestic handbook written in the nineteenth century to oppose British values, also describes this link. Dhirendranath Pal, a prolific Bengali writer in the 1880s, projected menstruation as a sign of sexuality. Here, the first menstruation is generated by sexual intercourse, which gives the impression that both the sperm and the menstrual blood are defined as sexual fluids:

What is menstruation? It is a sign of maturity in women. For only when each and every part of the body has completely matured, do the astonishing laws of the Creator allow this miraculous event to occur. For the womenfolk of our country the proper age of menstruation should be 13 or 14. But child marriage — I won't say it's exactly the fault of child marriage — but it is the fault of an uneducated husband when a woman begins her periods too early. If he does anything to stimulate his wife's senses before her periods have started, her menstruation will begin before it should.³

Besides worshipping the goddess during a ritual dedicated to a pre-pubescent girl, the devotee confirms his belief about the generative power of the menstrual blood. The pre-pubescent girl, who is characterised as “the root of all forms of existence”⁴ (*sarvajāṭisamudbhavām*) expresses in fact the essence of motherhood even before the generative fluid becomes manifest. Like the seed of a tree is the most essential element for germination, a pre-pubescent girl is seen as the most fundamental living being for the hereditary process. This ritual has been developed among worshippers of the goddess as this cult gives more importance to women categories. Our fieldwork revealed that this idea is expressed during *Ambuvācī mela*, the festival that celebrates the menstruation of Kāmākhyā in the month of June. In literature, rain is usually generated by the sperm of the gods, which is the origin of the earth's fertility.⁵ But here the beginning of the monsoon is associated with the goddess's menstruation which is tantamount to life, just as rain is needed for the crops. However, this festival reveals a tension between impurity and fertility. On the one hand, the temple is closed for four days because the goddess is considered to be impure. On the other hand, the small pieces of her red sari, believed

² *Suśruta-Saṃhitā, Śārīrasthāna*, II, 24.

³ *Strīr sahit kathopakathan*, [*Conversation with the wife*], Calcutta, 1883. Reprint in Walsh (2005).

⁴ *Yoginī tantra*, I, 17,30.

⁵ See, for example, in the *Kālikā purāṇa*, 11, 28-30.

to be impregnated by her menstrual blood, are collected by pilgrims at the reopening of the temple and seen as the most effective amulet.

Another example of the ambiguity of menstrual blood is that the girl's body is purified during her first menstruation and her new status is formally announced to all the villagers, during what is called *tolōni biyā*. The term *biyā* means marriage and derives from the Sanskrit *vi-VAH*, "to marry". However, the definition of *tolōni* is less clear, but it most probably comes from the Assamese verb *tolā* meaning "to bring up, to nurture". Thus the term *tolōnīyā* is also used to speak about "an adopted child". *Tolōni biyā*, then, signifies a formal ceremony to promote and designate the new identity of the girl. In villages, this function starts on the fourth day of menstruation where the girl is given a ceremonial bath — the same Assamese word, namely *nowā*, is used for the ceremonial prenuptial bath given to the bridegroom and the bride. Three days later, after another ceremonial bath in the morning, the girl must look at a fruit-laden tree. She is also required to gaze at the sun, which in Vedic mythology is the god responsible for coordination between acts and sacrifices, namely *ṛtu*. In Sanskrit, *ṛtu* designates menstruation as well as the season. When this first stage is over, the girl is married to a banana plant (*kōl gōs*) under the guidance of a priest. In the afternoon, she is made to dress like a bride with the red mark of vermillion (*sendūr*) of married Hindu woman on her forehead. When I observed this ceremony in Koliabor, in the district of Nagaon, more than a hundred women were invited to see the new bride (Fig. 1).



Fig.1: Puberty's rite of Chumki Bora, a girl from Koliabor; September 2007 (photo: E. Arrago)

A dinner was offered while the girl distributed sweets and rice cakes to three children she had seated on her lap. According to the women, this practice guarantees the fertility of the newly pubescent girl. The precise nature of the girl at that moment is then suggested in the song performed by the elder ladies⁶:

kōrōdoi ⁷ sakōl	A slice of carambola
rebābōr ⁸ bākoli	the skin of a pomelo
rebāb ṭhāle bhōri lāge he	the branch of the tree is full of pomelos
rebābōr tōlōte bōrōmel pātise	the assembly is gathered below the tree
ai rām āideu olāle bhāge he	ai rām the young girl appears separately;
belikoi ābeli hōle chandrāwalī	the afternoon has come late Chandrāwalī
belī ki ābeli hōl,	the afternoon has come late
bhokōt chandrāwalī gā mōrōhile	Chandrāwalī's body faded because of hunger
māk bā kehōloi gōl ?	where has her mother gone?

The analogy between bodies and fruits – the girl's body is sweet like the flesh of a carambola, her skin is firm like the skin of a pomelo and the round shape of her breasts is like that of the pomelos in the tree – these metaphors link up the song with the term which designates menstruation. When describing menstruation the context refers to a temporal picture: “the afternoon has come late”, like the crop dependent on seasons. Moreover when *ṛtu* is used to designate ovulation, in medical texts for example, it becomes closer to its Vedic definition which suggests a “coordinative activity” (Silburn 1955: 36), that is, a process combining action and time. There is another significant metaphor in this song. The girl's name, Chandrāwalī, evokes a milkmaid who offered milk to Kṛṣṇa. A new moment has come: since the girl has reached puberty, she can now give milk like a mother. The fact that her body “faded” reveals at the same time the diet she has to follow during purification at her first menstruation.

This symbolic marriage is common among all the Assamese even today, whereas it does not exist among the Bengali community. Some

⁶ We prefer to transliterate the first Assamese vowel as <ō> when it is pronounced [ɔ], although the IAST transliteration scheme would require a simple <a>.

⁷ *kōrōdoi*: Carambola, or star fruit (*Averrhoa carambola* L.). Exotic fruit looking like a star with five or six sides.

⁸ *rebāb*: Pomelo (*Citrus decumana*), a kind of large grapefruit.

orthodox rituals may have been strongly promulgated in Assam in order to establish the necessity to purify the newly pubescent girl's body. It is in fact what may be observed by comparing the history of this tradition and its ritualistic parallels today. The goddess's cult, which has prevailed in Assam at least since the tenth century was, significantly, based on eroticism. The *Kālikā purāṇa*, which is the oldest text dealing with Kāmākhya, is explicit: *yadyonimaṇḍale snātvā sakṛt pītvā ca mānavah / nehotpattimavāpnoti param nirvanamāpnuyāt //*,⁹ "A person who takes his bath in the vagina of the goddess and sips from it once is never again born in the mortal world and achieves supreme liberation". The depiction of the goddess as a fluid is also referred to in the *Yoginī tantra*. Here, she is located in the cave of the god of love, encircled by a thousand lingas, the phallic form of Siva and depicted as *raktapānīyarūpinī*,¹⁰ which is to say that she assumes the shape of a pool of blood.

The only reference to such practices nowadays is found among the adepts of the Assamese sect called *rāti khowā*, which means "night eater". Most of these adepts are located in Upper Assam, mostly confined to the non-Brahmin community and a few tribes who have been converted to Hinduism. Although the rituals take different forms, in each case, the sexual organ of the head of the group, known as *sādhu*, is venerated. Besides, the female adepts on the first day of their menstruation enjoy a rather important status during the rituals. In Majuli, a fluvial island near Lakhimpur, Torun Payeng, a respected man of sixty eight years old and member of the Mising tribe, is considered as a *sādhu* in the Eknong Borgoya village. I first met him at a village meeting in Goramur and then at his place where he performed a dance with his wife, Nimeswari Payeng. At one time, both of them were ready to undress. This ceremony is performed to ward off any kind of misfortunes in the village. This ritual, which is practised in Majuli by a few adepts, is performed naked for the whole night and is known as *Bara sewā*. Though it has been developed in reference to the cult of Kṛṣṇa, the erotic songs, the erotic dances and the personification of the main adept in the image of Digambara, a form of Śiva, evidence the influence of the goddess's cult.

In Kāmākhya, the ritual dedicated to young girls seems to be what remains of any evidence of an erotic cult, except that today the girls performing this ritual are younger. Damodara Misra, a writer from the fifteenth century seems to be at the origin of this transition. He created an analogy between the goddess's menstruation and rain by imposing a calendar of prohibition which is still performed during *Ambuvācī mela*, "the four days of impurity of the earth". He retained the main image of

⁹ *Kālikā purāṇa*: 72.89

¹⁰ *Yoginī tantra*: I, 11.37.

the goddess, a sexual fluid, but disguised it with a series of cultivation rites. During the four-day ban, when the temple of Kāmākhyā is closed for four days, it is forbidden to engage in any kind of act connected with cultivation: *na svādhyāyo vaṣatkāro na devapitṛtarpaṇam / halānām bāhanam caiva bījānām bāṇam tathā / yatra dagdhā bhavet pṛthvī yatra vā syādrajasvalā //*,¹¹ “When the earth is consumed by fire or when she has her menstruation, the study of Veda, the recitation of the mantra during the sacrifice, rites offered up to the gods and to the forefathers should not be performed, just as ploughing and the sowing of seed is prohibited.” In this text, the burning of the earth, called *bhūmidāha*, lasts seven days and her menstruation starts three days later and lasts four days.¹² According to my fieldwork, this calendar corresponds exactly to the rituals of today. Durga Devi, a Brahmin woman from Kāmākhyā, performed a seven-day ritual, locally known as *sathā barata*, in order to find a good husband for her daughter. According to the female participants, the burning of the earth represents the burning sensation in the abdomen before menstruation starts. The vernacular “*barata*” is derived from the Sanskrit *vrata*, which means a votive rite, while “*sathā*” may be the Kamrupi pronunciation of *sāt* (seven) as the same ritual is performed in Upper Assam and called *sāt loga*.¹³ This ritual involves collecting some clay and sowing seed on it, and is associated with the beginning of the monsoon in anticipation of a good harvest and implicitly a good conjugal life. Moreover, the four days when the temple is closed corroborate medical texts:

“Performing sexual intercourse on the first day with a menstruating woman is unwholesome for life of the man; moreover, if conception takes place, the fetus dies during delivery (...). If conceived on the fourth day it has fully complete body parts and has a long life”.¹⁴

Indeed, this idea is illustrated in our field data as a thousand widows, which traditionally implies chastity, gathered to celebrate the four days of the earth’s impurity.

Damodara Misra’s message, which has much weight in Assam, may explain why until the nineteenth century the Brahmin community in Assam was still known to practise child marriages. Today, this practice is defunct but puberty rites among the Brahmins evidence this fact: they do not perform *tolōni biyā* like the other castes but *sānti biyā*, “a marriage of purification” which was supposed to occur after the child’s marriage.

¹¹ *Smṛti-Jyoti-Sārasaṅgraha*: I, 14. 94.

¹² *Smṛti-Jyoti-Sārasaṅgraha*: I, 14. 92-93.

¹³ The Kamrupi is a form of the Assamese language spoken in lower Assam.

¹⁴ *Suśruta-Saṃhitā, Śārīrasthāna*: II. 31.

Nowadays, the distinction still exists because Brahmins are the only caste in Assam which does not openly celebrate a daughter's menstruation. In India, the doctrine of *karma* was actually religiously employed to confirm the strong foundation of early marriages. An orthodox text says that a father who did not give away his daughter in marriage on time should drink her menstrual blood every month for instance (Yalman 1963: 49). In practice, it is doubtful whether this view had much effect on the cases of late marriages. The point here is that the ancestors of a girl, who is not married at puberty, are bound to become responsible for the embryo's monthly destruction. It should consequently be admitted that the ritual dedicated to a pubescent girl emphasises a period of transition where the girl is pure, i.e. not yet pubescent, yet sexually attractive because her body has almost reach maturity. The obvious transformation of the girl's body at puberty thus seemed to project her as a sexual person embodying all the qualities of womanhood.

The Child Girl and the Demon

One text that combines the two female identities of a girl close to puberty is the *Yoginī tantra*. In this text the goddess Kālī is summoned by the gods to fight Kolāsura, an invincible demon born of the heart of Viṣṇu. This text may be regarded as the original myth of the ritual dedicated to virgins. It is said that after this episode the gods and the men worshipped a virgin girl in order to achieve any goal:

Once Kālī reached the Kingdom of Kolāsura, she took the form of a virgin and asked the demon: "Could you give me something to eat? I am an orphan and dying of hunger". The demon was touched by her innocence. He brought her to his palace, asked her to sit on a chair decorated with gem stones and offered her an assortment of food. The young virgin ate everything and said: "I am still hungry, please give me something more". The demon provided more food but the girl was never satisfied. Then the demon told her to eat whatever she liked. It was done in a few minutes: she ate everything - elephants of the kingdom, residents, army, and even Kolāsura.¹⁵

There are a number of significant inferences from this myth. First, as in several Hindu myths, women are used to seducing the enemy. But in this case, why does the myth involve a pre-pubescent girl? The belief that girls are sexually dangerous as they approach puberty is implicit. But the main element seems to be the similarity between mythology and ritual. Just as the demon gives food to the girl, the devotee has to feed a pre-

¹⁵ This abstract constitutes the main intrigue of Chapter 17 (Part I) of the *Yoginī tantra*. This text has not been translated in English, but a translation in Assamese has been made by Biswanarayan Sastri.

pubescent girl in order to worship her. There is one reason: food is often used in Indian narratives to refer to sexuality.¹⁶ Sexual appetites are thus expressed through hunger.

Other passages of the myth establish how to select the girl. Any girl who has remained pubescent can incarnate the goddess — there is no caste discrimination: *tasmāccha pūjayet bālām sarvajātisamudbhavām / jātibhedo na kratāvyaḥ kumārīpūjane śive //*,¹⁷ “O Siva, we have to worship a small girl as the root of all forms of existence, and hereby during a ritual dedicated to a virgin girl we should not make any caste distinction”. In the first *sloka*, the Sanskrit word *sarvajāti* does not mean “all castes” but “all living beings”. In other words, it suggests that any pubescent girl represents the concept of Existence because, as a female, the ability to give life in the future is already inscribed in her body. The metaphysical basis of this practice must explain why this ritual does not make any discrimination. However, it should be noted that it is mostly girls from low castes who performed this ritual daily, the reason being that they do not all go to school and receive a small remuneration when they perform such rituals. Monu Rajbongshi, a girl of ten and member of the Koch Rajbongshi community, which is at present making attempts to be included in the category of scheduled tribes, performs this ritual with the priest, where her mother works as a cleaner.

However, when the institution of sacred prostitution was in vogue in Kāmākhyā, pre-pubescent girls for the ritual probably came from these families. In the *Kāmrupar burañjī*, an old Assamese chronicle written in the seventeenth century, the institution of female dancers in Kāmākhyā is indirectly confirmed:

Kendukalai, a Brahmin from Kāmākhyā, used to sing for the goddess who would be propitiated and thus dance naked inside the temple. The King hearing this story asked the priest to allow him to witness the dance. The Brahmin let the king see the goddess through a small hole in the wall. The goddess understood the trick, immediately hid her body and threw a curse (*xāp diyā*) on the royal family and this family’s priest.¹⁸

Indeed, in the *Yoginī tantra*, it is recommended that the pre-pubescent girl be from a family of prostitutes: *yadi bhāyavaśād devi veśyākulasamudbhavām / kumārīm labhate kānte sarvasvenāpisādhaḥ / yatnataḥ pūjayet tās tu svarṇaraupyādibhir mudā //*,¹⁹ “O goddess, if with luck a young virgin girl comes from a family of prostitutes (*veśyākula*), O my dear, the worshipper gets the young girl but this joy has to be celebrated

¹⁶ On metaphors about food in Indian narratives, see Raheja (2003: 36).

¹⁷ *Yoginī tantra*: I. 17. 30.

¹⁸ *Kāmrupar burañjī*: I, 3.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* I. 17. 34.

with fervour with gold, silver, etc”. In fact, the ritual dedicated to virgin girls combines the two female identities, both erotic and non-erotic. Mythology and rituals show this principle — the presence of two opposite notions — which seems to be the reason for the magic in this ritual.

By contrast, the royal Kumārī of Kathmandu is selected from a specific caste. But, there, virgin girls are chosen to incarnate a goddess — often the tutelary goddess of the Malla kings — until their puberty, i.e. sometimes for more than ten years. Despite the erotic connotations in this ritual, which has been studied by Allen,²⁰ the selection of pre-pubescent girls is linked to the royal institution. It is then difficult to assert whether this practice was imported to Nepal from Assam. But it should be noted that the *Yoginī tantra* specifies that the content of this text was circulated in Kāmākhyā as well as in Nepal: *bhagavan sarvadharmajnaṃ sarvajñānamaya prabho / sūcitaṃ yoginītantraṃ tanme vada jagadguro // māhātmyaṃ kīrtitaṃ taśya purā śrīśailamandire / vārāṇasīyāṃ kāmākhyāyāṃ nepāle mandarācale //*, “O God, O master, the one knowing all religion, the one who is the teacher of this world. O master of the universe, tell me about the *Yoginī tantra* which is [already] expressed. The greatness of that, told in ancient times in the temple of Saila, in Vārānasi, in Kāmākhyā, in Nepal and in the mountain Mandara”.²¹

Sacrifice and Pollution

Durgā pūjā

More significant is the image of the pre-pubescent girl during the ritual. To begin with there is a shift in the girl’s innocence, as the predominant colour rather brings to mind sexuality than virginity — a red paste (*ālā*) is applied to parts of her body, namely her feet, her hands and her forehead, just like a married woman (Fig. 2). She is often dressed in a red sari. This association with the red colour, though deeply equivalent to the goddess’s cult in India, is strongly reminiscent of bloody sacrifices. Thus the representation of chastity does suggest both sexuality and sacrifice. If this view contradicts the notion of virginity, which emphasises extreme purity, it is not surprising because pre-pubescent girls always represent a goddess who is satisfied at the sight of blood. Common animals, such as goats or pigeons, are sacrificed in the temple of Kāmākhyā. But the relationship between pre-pubescent girls and sacrifices is evident during *Durgā pūjā* which celebrates the goddess’s victory over the demon Mahisa. During this nine-day festival, buffalos are sacrificed daily and special rituals dedicated to pre-pubescent girls are performed by the Kamakhya Debuttar Trust, the committee governing the land and possession of the

²⁰ Allen, 1976.

²¹ *Ibid.*: I. 1. 2-3.

temple. The term “debuttar” comes from the Sanskrit *devattar*, the land “given to the god”. On the first day one virgin is worshipped, on the second day two, until the ninth day when nine girls are worshipped.



Fig.2: Preparation of the ritual with *ālṭā*, October 2003 (photo: E. Arrago)



Fig.3: Brahmin *kumārī* during Durgā pūjā, October 2007 (photo: E. Arrago)

The belief that worshipping the goddess with many virgins is more auspicious occurs in the *Yoginī tantra: ekā hi pūjitā bālā sarvasya pūjanam bhavet /vahūnām pūjane caiva trailokyaśya pūjā bhavet //*, “By worshipping a young virgin, we worship all [the gods], by worshipping several young virgins at the same time, we worship all [the gods] of the three worlds”.²² It should be noted that the daughters of Brahmins perform this ritual. In fact, there are two reasons. First, they do not attend school during this festival and secondly performing this ritual at this time is particularly auspicious for their family as it is for the temple. On this occasion they are very well dressed, in a sari, whereas usually pre-pubescent girls do not have such decorum (Fig. 3).

Similarly, the enthronement of the royal Kumārī in Nepal takes place in autumn during *Dasāī*, the equivalent of *Durgā pūjā*. If the girl can withstand the sight of blood covering all the ground, only then is she selected as the new living goddess (Allen 1976: 306-307). This connection between the pre-pubescent girls and sacrifice appears in the *Kālikā purāṇa*. In the chapter describing the end of *Durgā pūjā* the relationship between virginity and sex becomes evident:

People should be engaged in amorous play with single women, young virgins, courtesans and dancers, amidst the sounds of horns and musical instruments, and with drums and kettle-drums, with flags, wearing a variety of clothes, by strewing parched grains and flowers, by throwing dust and slinging mud, by sporting, cutting jokes, doing auspicious things, by mentioning the name of male and female organs, singing songs audibly(?) about male and female organs, and uttering the words denoting male and female organs, until they have enough of it (60: 19-22). [Then] The act of the dismissal [of the goddess] should be performed with the following mantra; this is to be done in order to obtain prosperity by putting the image of the goddess in the water and after having abandoned her, in order to obtain prosperity (60: 25-26): “What was worshipped by me, O goddess, let this complete for me.

Let you flow in the current of the water, and also remain at home to bring prosperity (60: 28).²³

Here again virginity and sex are intertwined. Yet the focus of this festival is the performance of animal sacrifices. Why did sexuality, then,

²² *Ibid.* I. 17. 33.

²³ Two translations of the *Kālikā purāṇa* are available in English. Van Kooij (1972) translated it partially while Biswanarayan Sastri translated all the text (2001) and edited it in Sanskrit (1972).

become a glorified event — especially with pre-pubescent girls — at the end of *Durgā pūjā*? The answer can be found in the annual calendar. As the rainy season is associated with sexual activities through particular rituals, *Durgā pūjā* celebrates the end of the monsoon with erotic songs. The effigy of the goddess is then plunged into the water. The reason for this analogy is the generative function of rain. The *Kṛṣiparāśara* (verse 10) which deals with agriculture stated that: “all agriculture is rooted in rainfall and life is rooted in rainfall”. If the rainy season appears to be the most appropriate time for cultivators to sow their seed, it is just as if this time was the most suitable for sexual activities or fertility.²⁴ It is therefore suggested that bloody sacrifices coincide with the end of the monsoon; they return a gift to the goddess. In other words, as life and death belong to the same process, the goddess gives life and takes it back by receiving sacrifices. But these views may also constitute an account of the manner in which this festival ends today. Although present-day participants do not refer to erotic songs during the final part, which is performed with joy throughout Assam and Bengal — mostly by males — gigantic idols of *Durgā*, made out of clay, are still submerged in water, i.e. in rivers or ponds. When the goddess returns to the water after showering the world with water, it then confirms the definition of the Hindu goddess as the one whose name is life or love, i.e. food from the rain and birth from sex. It is in this context that pre-pubescent girls who represent the “root of existence” are assimilated with sensuous women, such as prostitutes or dancers.

Deodhā

Before exploring another ritual in which pre-pubescent girls are also involved, mention should be made of their particular function in the assimilation of some of the ethnic minorities’ practices to Hinduism. Another major festival in *Kāmākhyā* is a trance performance in which male dancers are said to incarnate some gods or goddesses. This dance is known as *deodhā* (in Assamese *deo* means any kind of spirit). Although some Assam tribes have been familiar with this dance for a long time, this practice, incidentally, did not exist in *Kāmākhyā* one century ago. It occurs in various localities in lower Assam and coincides with the worship of the snake-deity in the month of August. Yet one element differs when it is performed in *Kāmākhyā*. This three-day trance accompanies bloody performances where dancers eat raw pigeons’ heads and drink the blood of sacrificed goats. The participation of pre-pubescent girls from *Kāmākhyā* is required at the final stage. First of all, at the end of the public performance, the girls walk around the temple followed by the *deodhā* (Fig. 4). Then, two days later, when the deity is said to have left the

²⁴ See, *Suśruta-Saṃhitā, Śārīrasthāna*: II, 31.

dancers' body, all the *deodhā* perform a ritual dedicated to pre-pubescent girls. The point here is not that girls represent an ambiguous position between chastity and sexuality, but that the purity of a pre-pubescent girl's body, not yet polluted by menstrual blood, acts as purification. As this performance is mostly practiced among the Bodo-Kachari and the Pati-Rabha, the ritual dedicated to pre-pubescent girls is clearly a way of adapting this shamanistic dance to a Hindu point of view.



Fig. 4: A group of kumārī during the deodhā performance at Kāmākhyā, August 2006 (photo: E. Arrago)

Virginity and Marriage

When a girl reaches puberty, her virginity seems to lose its value. Moreover, the representation of pre-pubescent girls in rituals reveals that they are destined to have a sexual life, to get married. Although these examples convey male domination, expressed by the control of a woman's body, it may be suggested that from the perspective of the intrinsic relationship between the virgin girl and sex, women acquire a dominating role once they are married. The view that married women acquire respectability in marriage is expressed in Hindu cosmology, which asserts that the only way for them to attain liberation is to carry out their duty towards their spouse. As Mary McGee reported, "Mokṣa is liberation. This is what is asked for at the time of each votive rite. And that goal is framed in this request: May I die a happily married woman!" (1992: 86). The notion of virginity, as a temporal segment before bodies become mature, cannot

be an end in itself. This is illustrated in rituals since girls cannot incarnate the goddess throughout their lives, but only until their first menstruation. In Nepal, however, a few girls were still regarded as living goddesses after puberty, though this no doubts reflects a problem of rehabilitation. These girls have difficulty in marrying since they incarnate the goddess over a period of several years, which leads to the belief that they can do magic all their life. In Kāmākhyā, another ritual practised exclusively by residents also introduces the temporal values of virginity by stressing the relationship between husbands and wives. It takes place during the whole month of *māgh*, from mid-January to mid-February, and requires girls under ten to participate early in the morning.

Kumārī Śivadoul pūjā

Although this ritual attracted few participants in 2007 as observed by the author, a song suggests why virgin girls from Kāmākhyā do not see their aptitude to incarnate the deity as an end in itself. This song does not focus on the worship dedicated to virgin girls, but only refers to love. It belongs to the oral literature of the residents who call this ritual *Kumārī Śivadoul*. *Doul* in Assamese means “temple”, which is represented here by a small linga, the phallic symbol that girls make with clay. The song transcribed below is in fact longer, but it is just a short example to illustrate how a woman’s duty in affairs of the heart is passed down from one generation to another.

After reaching the sacred tank at five o’clock in the morning, six little girls took a bath, put on saris, placed small linga of clay in front of them, and started to sing while pouring water onto the god’s icon:

nājāni nuhuni dilo pānī	Taking him on trust, we give water to him,
siva devatāk pūjo āmi	we worship the god Siva,
pritivī nōndōn	the earth is green,
pritivī sōndōn	the earth is like the powder of sandal wood,
pritivīt pōri nōkōrō kōndōn	don’t cry while coming to earth
nōkōrō kōndōn, nōkōrō kōndōn	don’t cry, don’t cry
pritivīt rule agōru sōndōn	the eaglewood and the sandal tree are planted,
agōru sōndōn, agōru sōndōn	the world is full of eaglewood and sandal tree,
phule phul, phule phul	everywhere flowers open up
tumi hōbā sōntoso, tumi hōbā sōntoso	you will have everything that you could wish for

nõmõskār, nõmõskār	all hail to you, all hail to you
nite dim moi phulõr bhār	I will give you a bucket of flowers everyday
phulõr bhār moi di jām	I will give you these flowers without doubt
āsis moi loi jām	I will bring you felicity

Then girls cover the *linga* with flowers from various pots of herbs while singing:

mūlā ²⁵ dim mõi, mūlā hõm mõi	<i>mūlā</i> I will give, <i>mūlā</i> I will be
lāi dim mõi, lāi hõm mõi	<i>lāi</i> I will give, <i>lāi</i> I will be
pāleng dim mõi, pāleng hõm mõi	<i>pāleng</i> I will give, <i>pāleng</i> I will be
sukā dim mõi, sukā hõm mõi	<i>sukā</i> I will give, <i>sukā</i> I will be

In this song, the series of attempts to seduce Śiva, who is invoked onto the earth to meet his wife, turns Nature into Heaven. The first line indicates the faith of girls in matters of marriage. What is translated by “giving him on trust” in Assamese literally means “without knowing and hearing”, *nājāni nuhuni*. Besides, the sandal tree recalls a fresh perfume, just like eaglewood (*Aquilaria agallocha Roxb*), which is a common tree in Assam. But they are also both associated with rituals. Paste which mostly comes from sandal wood is used to make marks on the body and many types of incenses are made out of the oil extracted from eagle wood. That is why the representation of the girl is also expressed here with metaphors: “everywhere flowers open up”, or “I will give you a bucket of flowers everyday”. The second part of the song also refers to flowers. It should be noted, however, that here the flowers in question grow on the stems of some edible green plants, namely *sāk*; this term comes from the Sanskrit *śāka* but the variety of recipes using it seems to be an Assam speciality. In a chapter relating young girls’ first experience of intercourse, the *Kāmasūtra* (3. 2. 6) reads: *kusumasadharmānī hi yoṣitaḥ sukumāropakramāḥ* /, “As women (*yoṣitaḥ*) have the same nature as flowers (*kusuma*), the beginning should be tender” otherwise, as the text adds, “if they are brutalised by men, who have not yet won their trust, they become women who hate sex.”

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<i>mūlā</i>	radish	<i>Raphanus sativa</i>
<i>lāi</i>	pot herbs	<i>Brassica toria</i>
<i>pāleng</i>	pot herbs	<i>Amaranthus viridis</i> Linn.
<i>sukā</i>	spinach	<i>Rumex vesicarius</i> Linn.

Conclusion

The contrasting attitudes towards the notion of virginity in the West and in India come across quite clearly: the one regards virginity as essentially chastity, while the other as essentially a temporal stage before complete maturation of the body, i.e. a biological stage prior to sexual maturation. To ignore this difference may lead to confusion. For example, when the *Kāmasūtra* refers to a girl who marries someone out of love, Alain Danielou translates “she can give herself, renouncing her virginity” (2003: 296) while the original Sanskrit text precisely refers to “a childhood state from where she is liberated”, *bālamāvamoṣaya* (3. 4.46). In the first case, she seems to lose her purity while in the second she seems to undertake a liberating path as she becomes a married woman. Thus if we admit that virginity is a central notion in Indian kinship, it becomes easier to consider the institution of marriage in India. Although the *Arthasāstra* establishes that “the gift of one’s virgin daughter” in marriage makes for the most appropriate wedding, it does not disqualify other forms of marriage. According to what has been shown, this statement rather stresses the notion of virginity which is monitored by the father until the girl’s puberty. In the *Kāmasūtra*, where love marriage is regarded as the best of all, since it stems from mutual love (3.5.30), the girl’s virginity is also fundamental. A girl whose menstruation has started, *rākāṃ jātarajasaṃ* (3.1.11), is disqualified and the text advises to choose a woman “who has not been with another [man] before”, *ananyapūrvāyāṃ* (3.1.1).

There is no doubt that the concern for virginity clearly reflects male domination which contradicts the supremacy of women categories as illustrated in the goddess’s cult. Besides, the ritual dedicated to the pre-pubescent girl is rather a phenomenon which derives from social discrimination. Only uneducated girls perform this ritual daily as a source of income while Brahmin girls, who go to school, only perform it once a year. Moreover, if we compare the ritual dedicated to a *kumārī*, with those related to puberty, we can see that they are quite different. In the first case, menstrual blood is not exclusively associated with a biological fluid. Menstruation is rather a social force which is used as a magical substance. It is in this context that in Sanskrit the virgin girl connotes a girl who is at the threshold of puberty. Consequently, virginity is more appropriately equipped to create a transitional image which fits the category of magic.

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