Chapter - III
CHAPTER - III

SOCIO-RELIGIOUS AND CULTURAL ASPECTS OF CACHAR UNDER GOVINDA CHANDRA

Govinda Chandra’s inability to maintain peace, prosperity and security of Cachar i.e. his failure in the political front notwithstanding, his contribution towards the socio-religious and cultural field cannot be altogether undermined, as will be evident in the discussion that follows under the concerned sub-headings.

(A) SOCIAL CUSTOMS AND CLANS:

Investigation reveals that the Indian society in the beginning of the 19th century witnessed all the features of backwardness. Social and religious taboos such as Sati system, polygamy, child marriage, female infanticide, etc. were found to be deep-rooted in Indian society. However, unlike the scene in mainstream India,
socio-religious system of the Dimasa kingdom in Cachar in North East India, by and large, extent free from those social evils. This will be evident from the discussion that follows. The various ethnic societies in Cachar, including the Dimasa society, followed the patriarchal system of society. The family consisted of husband and wife, their children and also the unmarried brothers and sisters of the head of the family. After marriage, the sons and brothers of the head of the family had to live separately.

The unique feature of the Dimasa social life according to Barpujari is the existence of both male and female clans. There were 40 male clans, known as Semphongs and 42 female clans known as Julus. Both the clans were exogamous and marriage was not possible within the same clan. In Dimasa society, son belongs to the father’s clan and daughter belongs to the mother’s clan. Such social division on the basis of sex is very rare in the tribal societies. Another important feature of the Dimasa society is that the number of female clans are greater than that of the male clans.

According to S. R. Thaosen, in the initial stages Dimasas did not have such clans. This clan system was started among the Dimasas when they started to follow
the Hindu system of *Gotras.* Regarding the number of clans, most of the scholars and historians believe that initially there were only 7 clans when the Kacharis had established their first capital at Dimapur and the number continued to increase with the transfer of capital from one place to another; and at last the number reached to 40 male clans, i.e., *Semphongs* and 42 female clans, i.e., *Julus* during the reign of Raja Krishna Chandra.

According to B. N. Bardoloi, when the Dimasa rulers started to rule from Khaspur, they started to increase the number of male and female clans to replenish the royal treasury. The people who were interested to enlist their name in *Semphong* or *Julu* group could do it by paying in cash or kind. But such process of creation of new *Semphongs* and *Julu* came to an end with the assassination of Raja Govinda Chandra.

*(B) CASTE SYSTEM :*

Caste system was prevalent in Cachar during the reign of Raja Govinda Chandra. Reference of different castes, such as *Brahman, Shudra, Chandal,* etc. is
available in the appointment letter issued to Sonaram Sharma, appointed as Deshamukhya. It is also on record that those who were considered as outcaste for committing social crimes, could regain their position through religious atonement.\textsuperscript{12} In the \textit{Rinadanbidhi} which Govinda Chandra introduced in 1816 A.D., reference is available about the division of the then society into four \textit{varnas}, such as, \textit{Brahman, Kshatriya, Vaishya, Shudra}.\textsuperscript{13} The said document clearly defined the social status of each \textit{varna} in the Kachari kingdom.\textsuperscript{14} The \textit{Brahmans} were given the highest social status in the Kachari kingdom after shifting of the capital to Khaspur.\textsuperscript{15} They were treated with great respect in the society. The penal code of \textit{Raja} Govinda Chandra provided some special privileges for the \textit{Brahmans}. While there was provision in the said penal code for severe punishment for non-Brahmins, only nominal punishment was recommended for the Brahmins. Despite introduction of social division on the basis of ancient \textit{Smriti Shastra}, the Kachari society still retained some of its traditional rites and customs; the said penal code made suitable provisions for them. The Kings of Khaspur, therefore, tried utmost to transform gradually the Kachari
social life into a part of the Indian mainstream.\textsuperscript{16} That the caste system existed in Cachar during the time of \textit{Raja} Govinda Chandra is corroborated from the rate of interest charged to the borrowers\textsuperscript{17} as detailed in chapter iv.

However, it is pertinent to note here that according to U.C. Guha, the provisions contained in the \textit{Dandabidhi} and \textit{Rinadanbidhi} were meant only for Bengalee subjects of Kachari kingdom.\textsuperscript{18} Therefore, it can be safely deduced that there was as such no distinct caste system among the Dimasas, obviously pointing to the fact that Dimasa society was generally considered a monocaste society.

\textbf{(C) STATUS OF WOMEN:}

It is heartening to note that, unlike in the non-tribal society as also in the other tribal societies, women have a very distinct position in the Dimasa society.\textsuperscript{19} As hinted earlier, Dimasa society is divided into two distinct clans – male (\textit{Semphong}) and female (\textit{Julu}) and the number of female clans are found to be greater than male clans. In the matter of inheritance of property, daughters used to get mother’s property while sons could
inherit father’s property.\textsuperscript{20} Not only that, both the husband and the wife used to take important decisions in the family matters jointly.\textsuperscript{21} According to Endle, husband usually treated his wife with distinct respect; and regarded her as an equal partner and a companion to the extent which is uncommon in other ethnic societies of India.\textsuperscript{22} Kachari women, both in early life and later as matrons enjoyed a large measure of freedom, a freedom which was very rarely abused for evil purposes.\textsuperscript{23} That a Dimasa woman held a very distinct position in the Dimasa society can also be substantiated from the facts as outlined below:

(i) During marriage it was customary to obtain the consent of would-be bride.\textsuperscript{24}

(ii) While dowry is generally payable to the grooms in other societies, in a Dimasa society, during the Dimasa rule \textit{kalti}, i.e., bride price used to be paid to the would-be bride.\textsuperscript{25}

(iii) Widow remarriage was permissible in the Dimasa society, something unthinkable at that time in a non-tribal society.\textsuperscript{26}

(iv) Birth of a girl or a boy child was found to be equally an occasion for joy.\textsuperscript{27}
(D) MARRIAGE AND DIVORCE:

In Dimasa society, marriage system was very scientific. There was no system of child marriage. Cross-cousin marriage was allowed among the Dimasas. That the Dimasa society was very progressive, can be inferred from the fact that widow remarriage was allowed during those days. Monogamy was strictly followed in the society. Marriage with non-Kachari tribes was not allowed; and particularly, the Dimasa-Kacharis did never accept their marriage with either Nagas or Kookis.

A Kachari youngman used to take the decision of marriage when he could earn a stable income sufficient to maintain his family, after his marriage. After marriage it was incumbent on the person to leave his parents’ house to stay separately.

In the Dimasa society, marriage was performed through negotiation. Marriage negotiation started with the visit of boy’s relatives to the girl’s house. At the time of initiating the marriage proposal, the boy’s party used to offer to the girl’s parents a bundle of salt wrapped up by a plantain leaf and tied up with 7 threads. Whether the proposal was considered or not, could be understood from the acceptance or rejection of the bundle. The date
of marriage used to be fixed after two or more visits to the girl’s house. In course of final negotiation a ‘bride price’ called *Kalti* was settled. It was an offer to the bride’s parents as honour and recognition to the bride’s clan. Such a system is considered a unique feature of the Dimasa society because while dowry system has been engulfing the broader Indian society, here in the Dimasa society “the bride is paid a price which she is entitled to”.

As hinted earlier, monogamy was the general practice in the Dimasa society. The provision for second marriage was also there under certain conditions. A man could marry for second time only when he was issueless. Like that, a widow could marry the younger brother of her deceased husband. But probably, these types of marriages were not allowed for the members of the royal family. That’s why, when Govinda Chandra married Induprabha, the widow of his elder brother Krishna Chandra, the then society of Cachar did not take it very kindly.

Since marriage is an occasion for celebration from time immemorial, musical concerts are interlinked with a marriage ceremony. Even in the oldest Bengali literature we find reference of musical band and
companions of groom (barayatri) in a marriage ceremony.\textsuperscript{39} Obviously, Cachar was not an exception to this tradition. However, it can be gathered from the royal proclamation of Raja Govinda Chandra that at that time special permission from the royal court was necessary to solemnise a marriage ceremony with the show of aristocracy. \textsuperscript{40} Investigation reveals that there were some restrictions in a marriage ceremony of that time over the use of gold ornaments, musical band (bajna), palanquin (palky), fire arms, etc. Prior permission was necessary for the use of those facilities and it was assumed that those fortunate few, who were able to obtain the special permission for using those facilities during a marriage ceremony in their family were the persons of high status. In fact, the recipients of the titles of Choudhury, Mazumdar, etc. from the king were found to show aristocracy and maintain high status by using gold ornaments, musical band, palky etc. in a marriage ceremony in their family.\textsuperscript{41} It is, thus, evident that an artificial class was created at the time of Raja Govinda Chandra which was designated as privileged class and they were found to maintain distance from the so called non privileged section of the society.
Divorce was very rare in the social system of Dimasa-Kacharis during the reign of Govinda Chandra. The married women were generally loyal to the in-laws and of course to the husband. Usually, in all the important family matters, both the husband and the wife were found to take decisions jointly. But in case of any critical situation concerning conjugal rights, members of the family along with the members of the society at large tried to remove the misunderstanding between the husband and the wife. In case, all these efforts failed to remove the misunderstanding either or both the concerned couple were free to appeal for divorce to the traditional village headman (Dimasas called them Khunang) who generally permitted divorce on the basis of the merit of the case. Among the Dimasas, if the divorce took place because of the husband’s fault, he could not get back the Kalti, but if the wife was in fault, the Kalti was to be returned to the husband. After divorce, as per the custom, the male children were taken by their father and female issues could stay with their mother. The divorced husband and wife could also remarry after performing some rituals.
(E) BIRTH AND DEATH:

The birth of a baby, either boy or girl, was regarded as a very joyful occasion in the Dimasa society. As hinted earlier, if the baby was male, it belonged to the father’s clan and if the baby was female, it belonged to the mother’s clan. The new-born baby and the mother were kept in a separate room outside the main residential building. The tenure of separation continued till the naval chord of the baby fell off and the purifying ceremony took place. During the period of isolation, the mother was not allowed to take part in any household activity. Father of the baby was neither allowed to enter the baby’s room, nor to see the face of the baby. Two elderly women of the village used to work as midwives during the delivery of the baby and on the day of purification ceremony they named the baby and handed over the child to the father. Afterwards, those women were given feasts and gifts.43

When a person died in the Dimasa society the family and the near relatives were found to observe mourning for twelve days. The Dimasas used to burn their dead; and cremation generally took place on the bank of the river. Before taking the body to the cremation ground, the body was to be washed and dressed in new clothes.44
Devotional songs used to be sung during the journey of the dead body towards the cremation ground, and paddy, cotton, etc. used to be dropped on the way. Generally, sons, if any, of the deceased person used to set fire to the pyre. The wife of the dead person was not allowed to tie her hair till the dead-body of her husband was cremated.

*Shradh* ceremony was performed on the thirteenth day. On that day, a community feast was organised. Various kinds of foods were also offered in the name of the dead person to please his departed soul. It needs mention here that there is controversy over the Brahminical role in the funeral functions of the Dimasa society. While Sen is of the view that “It is not understood clearly whether brahmans had any role to play in the funeral ceremony”, according to N. K. Barman, “Their (Dimasas’) marriage and funeral rites are performed in conformity with the Brahmanical ways of the Hindu creed”. The last Dimasa king of Khaspur *Raja* Govinda Chandra added his own perception of the *Shradh* ceremony by enjoining a distinct form of *Kirtan*, a song glorifying Lord Krishna. It used to be sung in chorus, concerted with *Khols* and *Kartals* or cymbals. Govinda Chandra himself composed the songs and introduced the ways and modes of
singing. This distinct feature of the *Shradh* ceremony, unlike the general feature in other communities of the Hindu society, added colour and solemnity to the rite. This bears the testimony of *Raja* Govinda Chandra’s creative talent.\(^5\)

It is pertinent to note here that in most cases the legacy of the socio-religious conditions, as existed during the Dimasa rule, continues even today among the Dimasas.

**(F) NODRANG:**

*Nodrang* means bachelor’s dormitory. In the traditional Dimasa society *Nodrang* used to play an important part. However, the villages inhabited by the Brahmins were conspicuous by the absence of such bachelor’s dormitory. *Nodrang* was generally constructed in an accessible place of the village and was almost like a big hall having no compartment, but there was a hearth in the centre of the hall and during the winter the inmates of the *Nodrang* could sit around it. There were also *chang* or raised platforms made of bamboos to sleep at night. The
hall was artistically decorated and musical instruments like the *Kharam* (drum), *Murli, Suphin*, etc. were kept within it. The inmates of such a *nodrang* served the village against outside attacks and from wild animals. That is why a *nodrang* was built at the centre of each village. The unmarried youngmen of a *nodrang* acted as guards of the village during night. Any young boy above twelve years of age could stay in the *nodrang*. No girl was allowed to enter the *nodrang*. These youngmen could learn many things during their stay at *nodrang*. They learnt dancing, singing, fighting, hunting, making of bamboo and cane products and so on. If any stranger happened to visit any Dimasa village, *nodrang* used to arrange for their accommodations also. In other words, it can be said that it served as a social institution for giving preparatory training to youngmen towards all aspects of life.

**(G) FOOD HABIT AND DRESS:**

Food habits of the Kacharis underwent major changes after the transfer of their capital to the plains of Cachar. Dimasa-Kacharis who preferred to live in North Cachar Hills, did not change their food habits including meat eating. But the Kacharis who came down to the plains
of Cachar, gave up eating of pork and chicken considering them dietary taboos. Rice remained the staple food of the Kachari people during the time of Raja Govinda Chandra. Dried fish was one of their favourite dishes. The drink that was very popular among the Dimasas was rice beer, known as Zu/Zoo. Offering of Zu/Zoo to the guests was a very prestigious matter in all social and religious functions.

Regarding dress materials used by the Dimasas it is observed that they used to wear their traditional dresses since time immemorial. Such tradition continued during the time of Raja Govinda Chandra and even later. The male people used a waist cloth, shawl and a turban on the head. Ornaments, viz, Yaocher and Kharik were favourite to them. The Dimasa women used to wear two pieces of loin cloths, one part to cover the lower portion of the body and the other designed artistically, for the upper portion. Women were also found to be very fond of wearing various kinds of jewelleries like necklace, bracelets, nose-ring made of silver.

(H) ADOPTION OF CHILD:

According to D. Danda, adoption of child was permissible according to Dimasa custom and traditions.
A childless person could adopt a baby boy of his patriclan and this adopted son could perform all obsequies of his adopted father. A girl was rarely found to be adopted.\(^{57}\) However, there is no record of any case of adoption during Govinda Chandra’s reign. It is worthwhile to note here that although Govinda Chandra was issueless, he did not adopt any child.

(I) SOCIETY AS REFLECTED IN DANDABIDHI AND THE APPOINTMENT OF DESHAMUKHYA:-

*Herombo Rajyer Dandabidhi* (penal code of Herombo kingdom) and *Herombo Rajyer Rinadanbidhi* (Civil Code of Herombo kingdom) are the two royal legislations proclaimed by *Raja* Govinda Chandra Narayana, the last king of the *Haidamba* clan. The rationale and background of this royal proclamation is outlined below:-

*Kacharir Niyom*, i.e., various legislations were proclaimed by the Kachari kings at different times. The Bengali subjects faced various difficulties in judicial matters after the settlement of the Kacharis in the plains land in a large way. To tide over these difficulties legislations were proclaimed in Bengali. On the basis of
such legislations, *Rajguru* used to help the Bengali subjects to mitigate their litigation difficulties.\(^{58}\)

The origin of these two legislative documents (*Heramba Rajyer Dandabidhi* and *Heramba Rajyer Rinadanbidhi*) named after *Raja* Govinda Chandra, is a book entitled *Bibad Darpan*.\(^{59}\) These two legislative Acts, i.e., *Dandabidhi* and *Rinadanbidhi* written in both Sanskrit and Bengali languages, were proclaimed in the years 1816 A.D. and 1817 A.D. respectively. Notwithstanding the fact that the book *Bibad Darpan* is traceless, there has been no difficulty to trace the source of these two *bidhis*. These *bidhis* have been collected from various ancient books on *Smriti Shastra*.\(^{60}\) That is the reason why Padmanath Bhattacharjee was found to give much importance to accept these two *dandabidhis* as the direct source in cultivating the history of the socio-economic aspects of the then Cachar.\(^{61}\)

Till the annexation of Cachar by the British, the land distribution system of Cachar was known as *Khel* system. There was elected/nominated representative in every *Khel*. The key person of the each *Khel* was given the title *Khel Mukhtar* and the members of the *khel* used to elect *Mukhtars*.\(^{62}\)
In plains Cachar, apart from the Khel Mukhtar there was another type of administrative representatives for a particular area, known as Deshamukhya. To maintain the traditional socio-administrative system in plains Cachar, Deshamukhys were appointed. Apart from advising the people in their areas of operation on religious matters, Deshamukhys were also given the power to settle the problems relating to litigations in their respective administrative areas.

Raja Krishna Chandra Narayana in his royal order in 1809 A.D. appointed Sonaram Sharma as Deshamukhya. The appointment order, apart from fixing the area of his operation (Udharbond), also contained provisions that gave him two additional powers, as enumerated below:

1. If the Hindus were distracted from their religion, they could regain their original position through prayashchitta (atonement) after getting the prior nod from Sonaram, the Deshamukhya.

2. Brahmins, Kacharis and Manipuris were permitted to wear sacred threads subject to the permission of Deshamukhya. If any such person was found to exercise any
of the two aforesaid provisions without his prior permission, Sonaram was given the power to isolate the concerned person and his family socially.\textsuperscript{65}

It needs mention here that in a royal order in 1824 A.D. \textit{Raja} Govinda Chandra Narayana retained Sonaram Sharma as the \textit{Deshamukhya} of \textit{Sabeki Mourasi Pargana}, Udharbond.\textsuperscript{66}

Apart from \textit{Deshamukhya}, various other titles were also awarded by \textit{Raja} Govinda Chandra to some leading personalities of the society and the recipients considered such titles as their status symbol. In granting such titles secular outlook was maintained; i.e., no partisan attitude was shown in granting such titles.\textsuperscript{67}

\section*{(J) CULTURAL AND RELIGIOUS ASPECTS :}

During \textit{Raja} Govinda Chandra’s regime, two distinct cultural traditions were found to exist – one, traditional culture of plains Cachar, and the other – Dimasa culture, maintained by those who migrated to plains Cachar along with the king. It is on record that many religious rituals were performed under the direct patronage of the king.\textsuperscript{68} However, instances are not rare that many people of
Cachar used to follow their cultural and religious rituals without depending on the king for his patronage.

The discussion on religious and cultural aspects of Cachar under Govinda Chandra will not be complete unless a discussion is initiated on the cultural situation that existed in early Kachari kingdom. In the absence of sufficient historical records on the religious and cultural life of Cacharies in the early part of the Cachari kingdom the historians have had to depend on the coins to trace its origin.

A study on the aspect reveals that a rare silver coin was discovered in the name of a king named Viravijaya Narayana (1502 A.D.-1520 A.D.). The coin confirms that a Dimasa ruler had minted this coin. As observed by Rhodes and Bose, “... we can deduce that in the early sixteenth century, a Dimasa ruler had adopted the Hindu religion, and a Hindu name, Viravijaya Narayana, a name appropriate to a king who had success on the field of battle. Presumably some Brahmins had come from elsewhere in India and had converted the king from his tribal religion, and persuaded him to strike coins as a symbol of his authority.”

Discovery of this coin points to the fact that influence of Hinduism on the Dimasa royal family had
started since early part of the sixteenth century. According to W. W. Hunter, “It is a universal tendency of all partially-civilised tribes in India to accept Hinduism, thereby to increase their superiority over the surrounding barbarians.” May be for that reason the Kacharis were found to introduce some of the Hindu rites and rituals in their religious functions. According to M. N. Srinivas, “Sanskritisation is a process by which a low Hindu caste or tribal or other groups change its customs, ritual and ideology and the way of life in the direction of a high or a frequently twice born caste.”

It can, thus, be deduced reasonably well that the process of transformation of the society of the Kachari people may be considered as the process of Sanskritisation. Influence of Sanskritisation is also evident from the change of names of the Dimasa kings that started from the early part of the sixteenth century. Investigation reveals that from that period the tribal kings started accepting Hindu names, as is evident from earlier discussion that in the early sixteenth century a king adopted a Hindu name Viravijaya Narayana. Investigation also reveals that in 1559 A.D., son of king Detsung who became the first Dimasa-Kachari king of Maibong adopted the
Hindu name Nirbhoy Narayana. According to U. C. Guha, Dukadao adopted the Hindu name as Govinda Chandra Narayana.

The inscription of *Hara-Gauri* or *Shiva-Shakti* on the coins minted at the time of the first Kachari king of Maibong proves his high regard for Hinduism and Gods and Goddess of Hindu religion. According to Padmanath Bhattacharjee, the Kachari kings used to worship Goddess Ranachandi, Goddess of War, as their deity. The Goddess Ranachandi did not have any image; a sword used to be worshipped in the name of Ranachandi. In this connection, an interesting story goes, centering round the Goddess Ranachandi and Nirbhoy Narayana, to come to the conclusion that from his time, Ranachandi was started to be worshipped in the form of a sword. The story goes thus, Nirbhoy Narayana in his dream saw that the deity was telling him that he would find a snake in the river next day, and that if he could touch that snake by its head, the Goddess would show her own form, but if, perchance, he touched its tale, it would take the form of a sword. The next day the king happened to see the snake in the river but he was so much struck with fear that he could only touch its tale. As a result, it took the shape of a sword. The *Raja* is
said to have installed the sword at a temple, and started worshipping it in the name of Ranachandi. Even after shifting of the Kachari capital to Khaspur, the worship of Ranachandi did not stop. At Khaspur, the kings used to worship Devi Ranachandi before going to war, and Kachari army was named as Chandipaltan. In the ruins of Khaspur, a Kachari temple of Ranachandi still exists. According to W. W. Hunter, on the night of the assassination of Raja Govinda Chandra, the sword of Ranachandi was carried away secretly by Dhananjay Thakur. An analogy can be drawn from this statement that when Govinda Chandra’s capital was shifted to Haritikar, he took the sword of Ranachandi from Khaspur and kept it with him.

Although Ranachandi was the traditional deity of the Kacharis, Kachari royal house was also found to be very much respectful towards Vaishnavism. Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu came to Sylhet and sent two of his disciples (Gyanbar and Kalyanbar) to Cachar and other parts of eastern region for the purpose of propagating Vaishnavism. Although during that time Dimapur was the capital of the Heramba dynasty, but no doubt this propagation of Vaishnavism left its impact felt over the
Kachari royal family. This has been proved by various facts and events, as noted below:

(i) The word *Narayana* was started to be used by the Dimasa kings;

(ii) The carving of conch shell of Viradarpa Narayana with the symbol of *Dashavatara*;

(iii) Translation of *Brahma Purana* and *Brihannaradiya Purana* from Sanskrit to Bengali, to name a few.83

Amalendu Bhattacharjee has mentioned a special cause for translating the *Puranas* in the *Hairamba* Court. As per the information supplied by him, during the reign of king Suradarpa Narayana, the practice of human sacrifice was stopped, and as a measure of atonement for practising human sacrifice in the past, not only was the practice stopped, but the practice of chanting of *Puranas* regularly was introduced in the Royal Court and also in the Royal Family.84

Regarding the practice of human sacrifice during the time of Suradarpa Narayana, an interesting incident centering round Bhubaneswar Bachaspati has been cited by Amalendu Bhattacharjee and Sanjib Deb Laskar which is outlined below :85
As indicated earlier, Bhubaneswar was an alien Brahmin. During the time of Suradarpa, human sacrifice was in force in the Heramba kingdom on the *Sharadiya Mahashtami Tithi*. Persons who were assigned the job of collecting the victims of sacrifice caught hold of Bhubaneswar Bachaspati Bhattacharjee after tearing his sacred threads. Adjacent to the cell of the captive Bachaspati was the Royal Court of king Suradarpa Narayana where *Bhagavat* recital was in progress. The recital was very much audible to the captive Bhubaneswar. He uttered ‘*hoo! hoo!*’ when the recital was correctly explained and uttered ‘*ah! ah!*’ when the recital was wrongly explained by the *Bhagavat* reciter. On hearing two types of sounds from the cell of the captive, the king was surprised and ordered to bring the captive in the Court room. On arriving at the Court room Bhubaneswar indicated by his gesture that in the absence of sacred threads he was unable to speak. He was set free immediately and was offered a sacred thread by the *Dharmadhyakshya*. After holding the sacred thread, he bowed to the king and chanted a *shloka* eulogising the king. The king was moved by the sagacity and wisdom of the Brahmin and immediately appointed him as his ‘Court Poet’. On being appointed as
the Court Poet he translated the Brihannaradiya Puranas on the direction of Rajmata Chandraprabha.

After this incident, the practice of human sacrifice was stopped forever, and the practice of chanting Purana was introduced. Thus, as indicated earlier, during the reign of Raja Suradarpa Narayana, Brahma Purana and Brihannaradiya Purana were translated into Bengali. The complete version of the original translated Brahma Purana could not be traced. Only a part of it was incorporated in the book Cacharer Itibritta. Sri Naradi Rasamrita, which is the Bengali version of the Brihannaradiya Purana, is the best literary achievement of the Haidamba dynasty.

It needs mention here that in Tripura also Brihannaradiya Purana was translated into Bengali during the reign of Govinda Manikya in the second half of the 17th century A.D.

The Goddess Nimata figured herself in the dreams of Raja Harish Chandra, the first Kachari king of Khaspur, while he was searching for his missing elephant so favourite to him. Raja Harish Chandra was moved by the sight of the Goddess Nimata in the dream and immediately installed her at a place near Damchhera (now situated
between Badarpur and Lumding junctions). Sen observes that no image of *Devi Nimata* was in existence and only two pieces of stones were worshipped.  

Kachari kings of Khaspur formally accepted Hinduism in 1790 A.D. Influence of Bengali Brahmins who settled down in the plains of Cachar helped in the propagation of Hinduism in the Kachari kingdom. According to Barpujari, “Notwithstanding the Heramba rulers’ proclivity towards Hinduism, the orthodox Brahmins continued to treat them as untouchables on the ground that their genetic mother was non-vedic in her creed. Therefore, the crafty Brahmanas suggested to Krishnachandra to undergo the ritual of *Hiranyagarbha* ceremony for getting a proper place in the Hindu society.”  

*Raja* Krishna Chandra decided to comply with the suggestions of the Brahmins and accordingly in 1790 A.D, he performed a ceremony known as *Hiranyagarbha*. In this ceremony, a big copper-made cow was built and both Krishna Chandra and Govinda Chandra secretly entered into that copper-made cow. When they came out of that cow in public, it was imagined as if they were born of a sacred cow, because the Hindus regard the cows as mother and call *Gomata*. After coming out from the cow they
pronounced some *mantras* and instantly, the Brahmin priests recognised them as Hindus. The high officials of the Kachari kingdom and other respected persons of the society were also converted to Hinduism in the same process. The Brahmins considered them as *Kshatriyas* and awarded the title *Barman*. In this way, formal conversion of the Kacharis to Hinduism took place with the celebration of *Hiranyagarbha Mahadana* ceremony at Khaspur.\(^\text{94}\)

It may be appropriate to quote here a Sanskrit *Shloka* written by *Raja* Govinda Chandra to prove that he was a descendant of the Pandavas.\(^\text{95}\) The *shloka* reads thus:

```
```

The rationale behind writing such a *shloka* by Govinda Chandra was that as the Pandavas were the Hindus, obviously their descendants should also be considered as Hindus. As the Dimasa kings consider
themselves as the descendants of Ghatotkacha (son of Bhima, who was a Hindu) it is but natural that the Dimasa kings were also Hindus by religion.

However, the process of conversion of the Kacharis to Hinduism, as hinted earlier, has been contradicted by Amalendu Bhattacharjee. He observes that *Hiranyagarbha Mahadana* was not at all a process of conversion of the Kacharis to Hinduism. The explanation given by E. A. Gait, B. C. Allen, U. C. Guha in respect of *Hiranyagarbha* was totally a wrong interpretation. It is rather a mythological process, the description of which is found in *Matsya Purana*. There are two meanings of the word *Hiranyagarbha* – one, Lord Bramha is also known by the name *Hiranyagarbha* and second one – it is the second *Mahadana* of the sixteen *Mahadanas* as explained in the *Puranas*. The reference of the word *Hiranyagarbha* is found in the *Rig Veda*. However, in the *Rig Veda* (Sukta no. 121 of the 10th mandala) and in the *Manu Samhita* (1/8-9), the Lord *Brahma* himself has been identified as *Hiranyagarbha*. On the other hand, the *Mahadanas* constituted *Tulapurush*, *Hiranyagarbha*, *Brahmanda*, *Kalpapadap*, *Gosahasra*, *Kamdhenu*, *Hiranyashwa*, *Hiranyashwaratha*, *Hemahasti Ratha*, *Panchalangalak*,
Hemadhara, Vishnuchakra, Mahakalpalata, Saptasagar, Ratnadhenu, and Mahabhuigbat. Such Mahadana ceremony was a very expensive royal ceremony. D. C. Sarkar has cited in an essay that some kings of Dakshinapath have coined the word Hiranyagarbha in their copperplate inscriptions. In the Gorantala copperplate, King Atti Barma has been identified as ‘Aprameya Hiranyagarbhaprasab’. The reference of the word ‘Hiranyagarbha Sambhuta’ is available in Mahakuta pillar inscription of Mangalesh, the king of Chalukaya. Again in the 1st Ipur copper plate inscription, Raja Madhab Barma of Vishnukundi clan has been identified as ‘Hiranyagarbhaprasuta’. It may be noticed here that the name Barma has been suffixed with those who performed Hiranyagarbha ceremony, such as Atti Barma, Madhab Barma, etc.

Now, naturally the question arises as to what led to the use of such a word after the name of those who performed Hiranyagarbha ceremony. The answer is that the Lord Brahma who himself is the ‘Sarvaloka Pitamaha’ was born of Hiranyagarbha (golden egg). Those who performed such a ceremony were considered to have born of golden egg like Bramha. As such, those who were involved in such performances considered themselves as Bramhanah,
meaning, like Bramha or from Bramha. According to this principle, the word Barma has been suffixed to the name of the kings of South India. It is quite likely that this principle led the people, born of Hairamba clan, to suffix the word ‘Brahmanah’ after their name. It is again quite likely that the word Barman used by the Kachari people after their name has been derived from the word Brahmanah.97

The religious history of Cachar remains incomplete without the reference of the goddess Kanchakanti who is worshipped by the Hindus of this region en masse at Udharbond. According to U. C. Guha, worship of Kanchakanti was started in Cachar by the Koches.98 But after the reign of the Koches, no reference is available about the place where Kanchakanti was worshipped. The name of Devi Kanchakanti again figured during the reign of Raja Krishna Chandra when he was believed to be instructed by Devi Kanchakanti in his dream to worship her. From then onwards regular offering of pujas to Devi Kanchakanti was started99 presumably to check epidemic in the Kachari kingdom.100

According to U. C. Guha, human sacrifice used to be performed at the altar of the Goddess Kanchakanti.101 Gouri Sen tried to prove this statement of
U.C. Guha by stating that “The sacrificial altar and the sword both are now being preserved in the present Kanchakanti temple at Udharband.”102

However, a thorough investigation over the matter through a personal visit at Kanchakanti temple at Udharbond tells a separate tale, because during the personal visit no such sacrificial altar was seen, nor the sacrificial sword could be found in the precincts of the temple. Personal interview with the local priests, aged and reputed personalities also revealed that they or their ancestors who were closely associated with the temple of Kanchakanti throughout their lives had neither seen nor heard about anything regarding such altar or the sword for the purpose of human sacrifice within the temple. Personal investigation failed to get any authentic evidence sufficient enough to prove that human sacrifice was actually performed in the temple of Goddess Kanchakanti during the Kachari rule. On the contrary, the general belief that human sacrifice was never practised in the Kanchakanti temple is proved beyond doubt by the fact that the practice of human sacrifice was totally withdrawn during the time of king Suradarpa Narayana (1702 A.D.-1720 A.D.) when the capital of the Kachari kingdom was at Maibong, as hinted earlier.
In 1709 Saka (1785 A.D.), during the reign of Krishna Chandra, his secretary Jai Singha Barma constructed a Shiva temple at Chandragiri (popularly known as Chander tila or Changu tila) near Sonaimukh, situated at the foothills of the Bhuban. It proves that Dimasa royal family was respectful towards Shaivism too.\textsuperscript{103}

The study of lifestyle of \emph{Raja} Govinda Chandra reveals that he, like his predecessor, was totally religious-minded. The list of religious expenditure incurred by \emph{Raja} Govinda Chandra, as annexed in the appendix no. 9, suggests that a huge amount of money used to be spent by him on various religious functions. Govinda Chandra used to celebrate publicly around thirty religious festivals in a year, of which \emph{Vishnu Puja} used to be celebrated almost every month in various forms like \emph{Janmashtami}, \emph{Dolyatra}, \emph{Rathayatra}, \emph{Maha Rasa}, etc.\textsuperscript{104} This highlights the fact that \emph{Raja} Govinda Chandra was deeply influenced by Vaishnavism. As stated earlier, Kachari rulers were influenced by Vaishnavism since 16th century, but Vaishnavism gained popularity among the masses under the patronage of queen Induprabha.\textsuperscript{105} Under the influence of Vaishnavism, Govinda Chandra composed \emph{Maharasotsav Geetmala} \textsuperscript{106} which gives a vivid description of the \emph{Radha-}
Krishna Leela. The list of religious expenditure incurred by Raja Govinda Chandra suggests that he was keen on observing various religious ceremonies connected with both Vaishnavite and non-Vaishnavite culture. The said list also suggests that, of all such ceremonies, *Sharadiya Durga Puja* was celebrated with much fanfare and religious fervour. *Basanti Durga Puja* was also observed during the spring with appropriate dedication. As per the above mentioned list, the annual budgeted amount earmarked for *Sharadiya Durga Puja* and *Basanti Durga Puja* during the reign of Govinda Chandra were Rs. 4250 and Rs. 750 respectively. The list also reveals that he used to spend an amount exceeding Rs. 10,000 annually for observing various religious ceremonies.  

*Raja* Govinda Chandra had aptitude for literary activities. He was well versed in Sanskrit and Bengali languages. He had also taken upon himself the task of doing the needful for the spiritual enlightenment of his subjects. He tried to adopt the enlightened ways of the Vedic dictum in practice, and, “thus adapt themselves to the Sanskritic culture and mingle with the mainstream of Hindu India.” *Sri Rasotsav Geetmala* is one of the testimonies of Raja Govinda Chandra’s creative talent. It is
a musical opera based on performance which means, the king composed it not for reading but for performing; and such performative side is more eminent in the entire text.

The *Rasa Utsav*, centering round *Lord Krishna* along with his devotees, the *Gopini* and of course, with *Radha*, was not only composed by *Raja Govinda Chandra* but it is reasonably believed that he himself took part in the opera as a performer. As no autographic text of the *Rasotsav Geetimala* could be unearthed, 111 one has to depend on the transmitted copies of the text, part of which might have been seen by U. C. Guha who later on printed it in his book *Cacharer Itibritta*.112 Another printed version of it published in the year 1955 (edited by Anil Kr. Barman) was based on some transmitted copies. 113

U. C. Guha has rightly commented that composing poems in one’s own mother tongue is not a very difficult job but here in the case of *Maharasotsav Geetmala*, a musical opera, composed in Bengali language was really a tough job because the mother tongue of the composer was not Bengali. It is well-understood, how difficult it is to gain expertise first over Sanskrit and then over Bengali language to enable him to compose such a beautiful musical composition based on *Vaishnava* cult. Such a composition
proves beyond doubt the versatility of Govinda Chandra Narayana. The songs composed by Raja Govinda Chandra in Rasotsav, sets the tone of the songs, in appropriate imageries, tune and rhythm. The preamble in its colophon states clearly that it is a creation of the king:

\[\text{Aparupa Sharada chandrika heri Gour Dwijaraje} \]
\[\text{Sange range biharata bhakat samaj} \]
\[\text{Purab pariyachhe mane bikal antare} \]
\[\text{Kshane uthe kshane pare dharani upare} \]

Each and every verse in the text is superscribed by the name of the Ragas to which the verse has been set in tunes and also of the tala. The Ragas mentioned are ‘Kalyan’, ‘Kunja-Lalit’, ‘Mallar’, ‘Todi Basant’, etc. Some of the tala divisions made by him were:

2. Ta Ghin Dre Ghin Dre Ghin Dhei Na, Gin Tra Ghin Na Thei Na, Gin Traghin Na Thei Na – Gintraghin Na Dhei Na Ta.

3. Gri Gri Tena Kitta Na Ghin Dhen Ta Dhen Ghin Dra Ghin Dra Ghin Na Kitta.


Reference is also available about the Goddess Siama (presumably, the changed form of Shyama) who was also worshipped by the Dimasas. The Siamabari is situated in Thaligram in Cachar. The worship of Goddess Siama was introduced by the Koches at Thaligram.

To conclude the study on the religious activities of the Dimasas in Cachar, it needs to emphasise that apart from the Hindu Goddesses, the Dimasas were fond of worshipping some tribal Gods and Goddesses too, like — Alao Raja, Oa, Nali Landicha, Nikao, Mangarang, Disang, Disaim, Kosaim, Sambiam, Larigkong, and so on. They were the Kachari harvesting deities.

The Dimasas are known to have their own tribal musical tradition too. Music and dance play an important role in their day to day life. For the Dimasas
music is as essential as water from the brooks in the hills. The impelling force of musical sound and rhythm create in them a life-long tempo of musical living. From early years the children of the folk are acquainted with their music and instruments. Their innate musical vibrations impel them to try their hands on the different musical instruments like the *Murce Wathisa*, the *Kharam*, the *Mureema* and the *Kharam Dobong*. For guidance, the elders are, however, always near them. ¹²⁰ According to Barpujari, *Nodrang*, the boys’ dormitory of the Dimasas is the nerve-centre of musical and other cultural and creative activities. It is in the Nodrang, the musical instruments are kept where the boys from their earlier years learn from their elders the art of singing, dancing and playing of musical instruments which is by and large considered as essential as cooking of rice in the folk-world of the Dimasas. ¹²¹ Some of the Dimasa folk songs are:

(i)

“*Naijunie daonaiju gisikha*

*Mudirie laihide jayakha*

*Sainsinie basainde phaibukha*

*Baijahi hosielieng hokhase aadungrao*

*Baijahi boronphangkamkhase aajangrao*
Phagera hobudi thaobuma
Magera daobudi thaobuma.”

The song is sung as morning song, meaning, cock crows in the morning, it is time to get up because the dawn has emerged; sisters and brethren, please wake up, get absorbed in weaving and bamboo and cane works to keep the tradition of the forefathers intact.

(ii)

“Phai thangnang aadungrao aajangrao
Khudiesa bainlaihi thanglainang
Hathalao rangdaobo dukhase
Dangbanie kbaosi maijima.”

The above song is identified as paddy sowing song, the meaning roughly being — sisters and brethren, please come forward with the ploughs on your shoulders, because we shall be able to collect our bread only if we dedicate ourselves in ploughing the fields during our leisure period.
A study on the history of the literary activities of the Dimasas reveals that the Dimasa kings patronised literary and cultural activities in Bengali language, notwithstanding the fact that they were not Bengalees. Since the time of shifting their capital to Maibong in North Cachar Hills during the middle of the 16th century, they started using Bengali language extensively. They not only adopted Bengali as the Court language but also did their best for the development of this language. On July 12, 1576 A.D. (1498 Saka), Dimasa king Megha Narayana constructed a palace at Maibong and inscribed the following text (inscription 1 & 2) in Bengali on the main gate of the palace.

Inscription - 1

"Shubhamastu Sri Sriyut Meghanarayana
Dev Hachengsa vamshat jata hai Maibong
pathare Singhadwar bandhailen sakabda
1498 biterikh Ashar 26".
Inscription - 2

“Shubhamastu Sri Sriyut Meghanarayana Dev
Hachengsa vamshat jata Raja hai Maibong
Rajat pathare Singhadwar bandhailen sakabda
1498 beterikh Ashar 26.”

The rationale behind installation of the second inscription plate in the same building is believed to be the omission of the fact in the first inscription that Megha Narayana was the king at that time. ¹²⁸

That the Dimasas excelled in Bengali language is also evident from a book on law written in Bengali language entitled Kačarir Niyom during the reign of the Dimasa king Tamradhvaj. ¹²⁹ Tapadar observes that the letters written in Bengali by Maibong kings to the Ahoms is the ample proof of the extensive use of Bengali language in the Kachari Kingdom. ¹³⁰

During the reign of Suradarpā Narayana Maibong royal Court became a seat of literary activities. As hinted earlier, during his period many books of Sanskrit origin were translated into Bengali. Bhubaneswar Bachaspati Bhattacharjee translated Brīhannaradiya Purāṇa of the Sanskrit origin into Bengali verses form, naming it as
Sri Naradi Rasamrita. During the reign of the same king Brahma Purana of the Sanskrit origin was also translated into Bengali. According to Amalendu Bhattacharjee, a law book Dandabidhi, Bengali alphabet ‘Kha’ pushi was written in Bengali language during his reign.

That Dimasa kings adopted Bengali as Court language is proved beyond doubt from the fact that during the reign of Kirti Chandra Narayana, the charter appointing Maniram Laskar of Barkhala as Uzir of plains Cachar in 1736 A.D. was issued in Bengali language.

Investigation also reveals that Ram Chandradhvaj Narayana another Dimasa king was a poet and singer who composed poems and lyrics in Bengali language.

According to N. K. Barman, king Harish Chandra, and king Lakshmi Chandra, like other Dimasa kings, were instrumental in inviting the Brahmin Pandits from Bengal and in arranging for their settlement with dignity. A Brahmin Pandit from Bengal named Sadananda Sharma was given land settlement at Khaspur by king Harish Chandra.
Raja Krishna Chandra had extraordinary talent in Sanskrit and Bengali languages; and, as Tapadar observes, apart from his knowledge in languages, he was also famous for his scholarship in shastras, verses and lyrics. 126

According to U. C. Guha, a Dimasa poet named Chandramohan, composed series of poems in Bengali language during the reign of Raja Krishna Chandra. This poet was considered as the national poet of the Kacharis. 137

Coming over to Raja Govinda Chandra, the last king of the Dimasa kingdom, it deserves mention here that like many of his predecessors, he was also a Sanskrit scholar and a poet of high calibre in Bengali language. He composed Sri Maharasotsav Geetmala and compiled Hindu Shastriya Shradhadhir Kirtan Padavali in Bengali. 138 As hinted earlier, Raja Govinda Chandra followed ancient Smriti Shastra in framing the Dandabidhi and Rinadanbidhi. 139 By going through these two books one can get an idea about the style of Bengali prose literature during the time of Raja Govinda Chandra. Govinda Chandra was also well-versed in Sanskrit language so much so that he taught a Brahmin youth of Kalain
pargana the Sanskrit language, and awarded him the title Vidyalankar after he successfully completed his course under him.

Both Raja Krishna Chandra and Govinda Chandra wrote about 27 letters to the officials of the East India Company in Calcutta. Such letters have been compiled in the book Prachin Bangala Patra Sankalan, edited by S. N. Sen, Calcutta, 1942. All these letters contain specimen of Bengali prose literature of the then Cachar.

Govindaram, a member of the Dimasa royal family wrote a book in 1846 A.D. entitled Chikitsarnava in Bengali. This book contains the description of the type of medical treatment that was necessary for various ailments. An outstanding feature of this book is its linguistic excellence in its narration.

(L) ARCHITECTURE:

It is very difficult to reconstruct the phases of building activities of the Kacharis in the plains of Cachar. The Buranjis as well as some other sources help us in getting some ideas about the political condition of this area, but none of the sources enlighten us with the
constructional activities that were undertaken by different rulers in different period of its history. “Khaspur, in spite of its survival of the monuments, tanks and ramparts intact, has long been so much polysected by mulberry farms, villages, bazaars and a network of roads and bylanes that it is very difficult to get an effective idea about the basic planning of this historical city”. The monuments of this place are so scattered that unless a comprehensive survey aiming at the documentation of all the surviving evidences is made and maps prepared, it is not possible to comment on the overall ground-plan of the city. When the Dimasa-Kacharis shifted their capital to Khaspur, they designed their capital beautifully. Various buildings constructed at Khaspur such as Baradwari, Ranachandi temple, Kali temple, Vishnu temple, Snan Mandir, Singhadwar, etc. deserve special appreciation for their architectural design.

The monuments of Khaspur appeared to have formed three separate groups which are scattered and screened by now from one another by intervening villages. All the buildings here are built in bricks and are of modest structure. The structure, except the Snan Mandir, exhibit similar feature and all of them might have constituted a
single phase of development. The first group of monuments consists of a gate-house and a temple. The simplest of the monuments at Khaspur is the gate-house. The structure possesses plain walls and a do-cala roofing with gable ends on either of its sides. To the south of this gate-way exists another do-cala structure. It is a living Kali temple.\textsuperscript{144}

The second group of monuments of Khaspur lies midway between the first group described above and the third group which lies further south. It consists of a small structure and a deep tank besides which it is located. The structure is known as Snan Mandir.\textsuperscript{145} The Snan Mandir is a brick structure standing on a considerably raised platform. The temple was believed to be used for religious bathing of the deities in festive occasions. Architectural features of the temple show Islamic influence.\textsuperscript{146}

The third group of monuments of Khaspur occupies extreme south of the old city. Here we find three buildings, of which two are of religious and one secular character. Of the two temples, the Lakshmi Mandir is typically similar both in design and dimensions to the Kali Mandir mentioned above.\textsuperscript{147} The cala type mesonry temple dedicated to the Goddess Kali is locally known as
Ranachandi. The temple was built by the Kachari rulers during 18th century A.D. The *cala* roofs of the temple show the influence of Bengal architecture.\textsuperscript{148}

The double storied mesonry building, popularly known as *Baradwari*, was named after twelve door openings in each story including false doors. Each door opening possesses pointed arch that shows Islamic influence in architecture.\textsuperscript{149}

The study, thus, reveals that Dimasa-Kacharis have a memorable history. The ruins of the Kachari kings at Khaspur are the witness of their glorious history. The preservation of the artistic pillars and ruins is an immediate and urgent need of today. The photographs of some of the buildings showing the architectural marvel are being reproduced in the appendix. Copies of the site plans of the said buildings at Khaspur procured from the Archaeological Survey of India, Guwahati Circle, Guwahati are also reproduced in the appendix.

The study on the architecture of the Dimasa-Kachari kingdom will remain incomplete if it is not made clear that as the period of *Raja* Govinda Chandra was marked by political unrest it is unlikely that he had any
contribution in the construction of those beautiful pieces of architecture.

Thus, the study on the socio-religious and cultural scene of Cachar during the Kachari rule, particularly during the reign of Govinda Chandra reveals that in spite of extreme political upheavals that marked his tenure as a king, remarkable development took place in the socio-cultural and religious spheres.

Notes & References:

3. Ibid, p-122.
6. Ibid., p-41.
10. Ibid., p-46.
13. Ibid., pp-68-78.
16. Ibid., pp-60-61.
23. Ibid., p-22.
27. Ibid, p-126.
34. Ibid., p-55.
35. Ibid., p-56.
41. Ibid., pp-96-98.
44. Ibid., p-127.
50. Ibid., p-199.
60. Ibid., p-iv.
61. Ibid., p-iv.
63. Ibid., p-v.
64. Ibid., p-99
65. Ibid., p-99.
66. Ibid, p-100.
68. Ibid, p-120.
70. Ibid, pp-14 & 16.
83. Ibid., p-xviii.
84. Ibid., p-xxiv.
86. Bhattacharjee, Amalendu (ed.), no.82, p-xxvi.
87. Ibid., p-xxiv.
88. Ibid, p-xxv.


104. Ibid., p-120,


128
110. Ibid., p-198.
116. Ibid., pp-1, 15, 29.
117. Ibid, p-5.
119. Ibid., p-69.
121. Ibid., p-153.
123. Ibid., p-42.
125. Ibid, p-50.
126. Ibid, p-60.
132. Bhattacharjee, Amalendu (ed.), no.82, p-xxi.


143. Ibid, p-179.


149. Ibid., pp-328-329.