CHAPTER VI

RAMACHANDI AND NIMATA: TRANSFORMATION OF
DIMASA KACHARI DEITIES
The immigrant Hindu Bengalees, during more than two hundred years of their settlement in Cachar plains, adopted very little from the Kacharlis culturally, though the latter formed the ruling class at the beginning of their settlement. This is not surprising since the Bengalees possessed a more advanced material culture and it was the Dimasas who came under their cultural influence. But cultural transaction has its own mode of operation and is rarely, if ever, a one-way traffic. The Kacharlis received much from the immigrants but they too did give something in return. At least two deities who could be readily given Hindu appearance, entered the Hindu pantheon and occupied two of its many vacant niches. The memory of their real origin soon receded and they became familiar members of the divine household. Ranachandli and Nimata are these two deities.

Khaspur which had been the last capital of the Kacharlis Kings is eleven miles from Silchar. It is now in ruin, broken bricks scattered on the deserted site. There still survives a temple known as the temple of Ranachandli. This old shrine had been abandoned long ago and the altar has long been vacant. But at Bijoypur (seven miles from Silchar), a small village by the river Jatinga, there is a shrine in which Ranachandli receives daily homage till this day. The priest is a Bengalee Brahmin. On the altar
in the shrine, there is an iron sword wrapped in a purple cloth. This sword is never shown to anyone. Only the priest has this privilege. This sword is worshipped as Ranachandi. It is said by the local people that the sword as the symbol of 'Devi' had originally been installed in the temple of Khaspur from where, in the troubled days of Burmese invasions, she was secretly carried to Bijoypur. The historicity of this account is subject to reservation but the sword of the Bijoypur shrine commands the homage of the Bengalees and the Dimasa Kacharis alike. Two years back a Bengalee gentleman employed in a tea-garden in the proximity of Khaspur had a dream in which the Devi appeared to him and commanded him to worship her on a given day in the deserted temple at Khaspur. The abandoned shrine in the old capital was cleaned and from Bijoypur, the sacred sword was reverentially taken to Khaspur and installed on the abandoned altar there with great pomp. At the end of the Puja, the sword was again taken back to Bijoypur.

(b)

The Dimasa Kacharis have a myth which explains how the goddess became the sword. When their ancestors lived in Dimapur, which was long before their migration to Cachar, a Kachari king had a dream in which Ranachandi

1. A.Choudhury, Srihatter Itibrita, App. p. 100
commanded him to take bath in the Dhansiri river on the following day. She told him that he would see goddess floating on the stream. If he could set aside fear and seize her he would be invincible. The King obeyed. He went to the river and found a dreadful snake which came crawling towards him. Instinctive fear stopped the King from seizing it but on a second thought he could manage only to touch its tail. Instantly the snake was transformed into a sword while a divine voice admonished him for his wavering which had proved his lack of confidence on the divine instruction. He was commanded then by the voice to take the sword to the palace and worship it as the symbol of Ranachandi, who would then be pleased, and bestow on him good fortune. Since then the sword came to be regarded as Ranachandi who became the guardian deity of the royal house.

A similar myth with a slight variation is current in Cochbehar District of West Bengal regarding the Gosani goddess of Gosanibari village in Dinhata Subdivision. Kanteswar was the founder of an obscure dynasty perhaps of Koch origin, of Kamatapur. The King one night saw the Chandi goddess (Gosani) in a dream. She urged upon him to take bath next day in a pond of the palace. There, she said, she would appear before him, in three forms in

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2. Asutosh Bhattacharyya, Bangla Mangal Kavyer Itihas, p. 563-64
succession, first as a makara (a mythical aquatic animal), then as a crocodile and lastly as a snake. If the King would seize any one of the first two forms it would bring him good luck, but if he touched the snake his good luck would be accompanied by a loss, because, then he would be devoid of offspring. The King went to the pond but in spite of the divine assurance he let go the first two forms in fear and only at the last moment gathered enough courage to grasp the tail of the snake. Instantly the snake was gone and there was Chandi herself in its place and she cursed the King that his reign would be short-lived since he had displayed a lack of confidence in her words.

Sir J.C. Scott reports a similar myth from Indo-China.³ “The hero of the tale is King Le-Loi, who was the founder of the later Le dynasty, and the time is laid about 1418, when the Chinese were still in occupation of the country after the overthrow of the Taran dynasty. At this time there was a young man in Hanoi who held some appointment in the palace, but had been turned out into the world when the Chinese took possession of Tongking. He became a fisherman to gain a livelihood ... and one day when he had thrown his cast-net into the little lake, he drew up, not a fish but a large sword with a broad

strong blade which flashed out rays of lighting when he took it in his hand. At the same moment, Le-Loi, having a sudden preception of divine command that was laid upon him, carefully concealed the sword and secretly sought to get supporters for a popular rising against the Chinese. When he had gained a sufficiently strong following, he declared open hostilities, himself leading the war of independence which lasted ten years from 1418 to 1428 and which is the most creditable incident in the national history. The struggle ended with the expulsion of the Chinese and Le-Loi was then crowned King in Hanoi, preparing himself for this by making an offering to the spirit of the lake where he had been a humble fisherman. He went there in procession, girt with his magic sword and escorted by an enormous crowd going before and behind, but he had scarcely reached the border of the mere when there was a noise like a clap of thunder, whereupon the entire assemblage saw Le-Loi's sword leap from the scabbard and transformed into a jade coloured dragon which immediately plunged into the water and disappeared."

The Ranachandi myth of the Kacharis and the Gosani myth of the Koches have a common motif, which is the transformation of a snake into a goddess, while the Indo-Chinese myth has a common motif with that of the Kacharis, i.e., the transformation of a reptile into a sword. And the reptile, as an incarnation of the divinity, plays a vital role in all three tales.
The Kacharis and the Koches are considered to be two branches of the same Bodo people - a dominant section of the Indo-Mongoloids whose original home is believed to have been between the upper reaches of the Yang-tse-Kiang and Hoang-ho rivers in China, from where in the distant past hordes of them migrated to Assam and North Bengal and as far as the west of Tripura. The Indo-Chinese on the other hand, though predominantly of the Mon-Khmer origin, had absorbed much Mongoloid blood. Perhaps the snake was venerated by the Mongoloid people in their original home even before their large-scale migration towards the south and south-east began. Sir J. C. Scott tells us that "the Japanese worshipped the water snake and they have a tradition that the creator appeared to man in the form of a serpent." In most of the Indo-Chinese countries, he tells us again, "the plain snake is usually changed into the more ornate dragon very probably through the influence of China and Japan."

So, the dragon of the Indo-Chinese myth and the snake of the Koch and Kachari myths are identical. Of the two motifs already mentioned, the transformation of a serpent into a sword seems to have an earlier origin.

4. S.K. Chatterjee, Kirata-Jana-kirti, p. 27
5. (a) S.K. Chatterjee, Ibid, p. 13
   (b) P. Neimier, Totemism in India, p. 125
6. J.C. Scott, Mythology of All Races, Vol. XII, p. 301
The serpent-sword motif must have originated in their original home before the Mongoloid people started on their migration. And that is a plausible explanation of how the essence of the same myth has been retained by two peoples at present dwelling in two far-off regions.

It is generally accepted that the Bodo-branch of the Indo-Mongoloid first settled in the foothills of the Himalayas, in North Bengal and the Brahmaputra valley. Perhaps here was added a new motif to their ancestral snake-myth, i.e. the transformation of the snake into a mother-goddess. It must have occurred before the horde was again subdivided and a fresh migration towards the east and the south began. So the Koches and the Kacharis came to possess a similar myth with slight variations. The infiltration of a mother-cult to their ancestral religion might have been the result of an alien influence and this influence may be attributed to the neighbouring Khasis, who had developed an elaborate mother-cult by that time. Subsequently, when the Brahmanical Hinduism infiltrated amongst these people, this composite snake-sword-mother deity of tribal origin was ultimately absorbed within the fold of Hinduism as a manifestation of goddess Chandi.

7. S.K. Chatterjee, Kirata-Jana-Kirti, p. 27
8. B.Kakati, Mother Goddess Kamakhya, p. 16
"Fuller Hinduisation of the Kachari ruling class appears to have begun from the 16th century." So when the Kacharis built their capital at Hhaspur in Cachar sometime in the middle of the eighteenth century, their Hinduisation was nearly complete. Eventually, the Bengalee Hindus of Cachar, when they came in contact with the Kacharis, found the sword-deity of the latter as a manifestation of goddess Chandi with a myth explaining it. Chandi had been one of the most venerated divinities of the Bengalee Hindus and as such, Ranachandi, the presiding deity of the tribal royal house, was readily accepted by them without any reservation. A deity of Kachari origin that way assumed the position of an object of popular worship to the Bengalee Hindus of Cachar.

The Chandi-cult of the Hindus, while absorbing the primitive snake-deity of the Indo-Mongoloids, perhaps borrowed an interesting feature from them. We have already quoted the opinion of Scott that a dragon is nothing but an ornate form of the snake. The Bodos might have carried along with them the concept of dragon. Now, in the Gosani myth of the Koches we find references to a

Makara (an aquatic mythical reptile) and of a crocodile as manifestations of the goddess. The myth, as has been handed down to us, is the Brahmanical version of the original one. Could it be so that the Makara or the crocodile of the Gosani myth was simply the Indianised form of the dragon of the original myth? If we agree to that, we can proceed farther to suggest that the manifestation of Chandi as "Godhika" (Iguana-large lizard), a common motif found in all Chandimangalas, may be as well an Indian substitution for a dragon and that might be a contribution of the Indo-Mongoloid to the development of the Chandi-cult of the Hindus.

II. Nimata

(a)

Nimata is another goddess of Kachari origin. Her name does not signify anything in Bengali, Assamese or Sanskrit. The word might have its root in 'Ni-madai', the Kachari term for a god or supernatural being.

10. Asutosh Bhattacharyya, Bangla Mangal Kavyer Itihag, p. 560-64

11. Chandimangala is a traditional poetic narration depicting the greatness of Chandi (identified with the mother-goddess Durga. Recital of these songs was very popular in medieval Bengal. The theme of Chandimangala attracted hundreds of Bengali poets to compose long narrative poems. The godhika myth of Chandimangala runs thus: Kalaketu, the hero of the narrative, was a vyadha or hunter by profession. Once while he was returning from jungle empty handed, he found a godhika with a golden body. Kalaketu captured the game and when about to kill it, the godhika took the shape of Chandi, the goddess.

The goddess Nimata is worshipped in a shrine at Borkhola, a large village seven miles from Silchar. The village is one of the earliest Bengalee settlements of the district. The shrine is not of any ornate design; its rather poor appearance is hardly equal to the universal homage the presiding deity receives. She is worshipped everyday by a priest. This priest is a Bengalee Brahmin who claims descent from the Brahmin whom Harishchandra, the Kachari King, appointed as the first permanent minister of the goddess Nimata about two hundred years ago. The annual ceremonial puja of Nimata begins with the first day of Jagadhatri puja and continues for three days.

A legend relates how one day, Harishchandra lost his favourite elephant in the jungles of the North Cachar Hills. The King tried all means but failed to trace the lost animal. The tired King sadly went to bed and had a vision. Nimata descended on him and assured him that she would restore the elephant if he made arrangements for her daily worship. The King woke up and as he kept pondering on the divine message a Brahman came and told him that the goddess Nimata had ordered him in a dream to be her priest. The coincidence dispelled all doubts. The King ordered that all arrangements be made to carry out the divine will. He appointed the Brahman—presumably the ancestor of the present priest — the permanent
minister of the deity. This pleased the goddess, who restored the elephant to the king.

A parallel legend is available from North Bengal. Raman Dhar had founded a zamindar family at Hilly in the district of Dinajpur. Once, his elephant sank in a bog and all efforts to recover it failed. In a dream the zamindar saw Chamunda. She seemed to usher in two stone slabs near the bog. He woke up from his reverie, and found two pieces of timber. His artisans carved out of them an head of Chamunda which was placed in a temple and worshipped. The Devi, pleased with such obedience, made it easy for the chieftain to recover the elephant from the bog.

Dr. Suniti Kumar Chatterjee opines that "the Bodos appear first to have setted over the entire Brahmaputra Valley, and extended west into North-Bengal (in Koch Behar, Rongpur and Dinajpur)." He also suggests that from this northern settlement, gradually they moved to Cachar and further west to Tripura. So, the myth of a lost elephant and chieftain could have originated amongst the Bodos of North Bengal. The Kacharis, in all probability, carried it along with them and subsequently changed it slightly to suit the new environment. The Hi Hili myth suggests that the Bengalees of North Bengal borrowed it

13. S.K. Chatterjee, Kirata-Janaka-Kirti, p. 27
from their Bodo neighbours perhaps at an early date. That the Chamunda of Hilli does not have a full image, but is represented only by a 'head', is significant because 'the use of heads only in lieu of full images' is seldom found in Hindu rituals. But in Tripura, 'the national pantheon of the Tipras (a branch of the Bodos) consists of a group of 14 gods who are worshipped by the cantais in a series of metal heads.' So the head worship of Hilli might as well be an adoption from the Bodos.

However, Nimata is not represented by a head, instead two stone slabs are venerated as her manifestation in the Borkhola shrine. It is said that these slabs were first installed by King Harishchandra as the symbol of the goddess on a hillock near Damchhera, a small railway station on the Badarpur-Luming line. The altar of the goddess can still be seen on the hillock. Officiating priests of the deity also used to stay on the hillock. It was only at the beginning of the twentieth century, that the hillock became uninhabitable and the goddess, i.e. the two stone slabs, were brought to Borkhola and accommodated in the present shrine.

15. Ibid.
People at Borkhola and its neighbourhood hold Nimata in great esteem and dread. Hardly ever a man dares to climb a hillock or enter a jungle for tree-felling or hunting before he has appeased the goddess in her shrine. Even the Muslims make her offerings before setting out on an assignment. There is the story, for instance, of the misfortune of a wealthy Muslim contractor who had refused to venerate to the goddess. About twentyfive years ago, this contractor was assigned by the government to collect timber from the neighbouring forests. He filled ten barges with timber and anchored in the Jatinga river near Borkhola. That night, all on a sudden, a gale began to rage and the boats were about to sink. The alarmed boatsmen looked at the sky and saw a huge broom being madly fanned by an old woman. Immediately they knew that it was the rage of Nimata to whom their employer had refused to make an offering. In desperation, the boatsmen vowed to the deity that they would compel him to make amends. The promise appeased the goddess. The gale stopped as the strange old woman disappeared with the broom. The next day, after an expensive offering was made to the enraged deity, the boats sailed safely away to their destination. We heard this story in the lips of at least a dozen men of the village who emphasised that all this had happened in their living memory.  

16. It is told that Khan Sahib Gabru Mia Choudhury, a renowned businessman contractor of Silchar was associated with the incident. Since he is dead some ten years back, his version of the story cannot be ascertained.
told and believed speaks of the amount of the regard and awe these people have for Nimata.

It would be apparent from these legends that both Nimata of Cachar and Chamunda of Hilli were sylvan deities of the same origin. They were also attributed with the power of restoring lost objects. Also they had some significant affinities with the character of Chandi depicted by Bengalee poets. The poets of Chandi-mangal describes Chandi as the guardian deity of beasts who sought her protection from the onslaught of Kalaketu. She also occasionally restored lost objects as she did to Phullara who had lost her goats and worshipped her. These affinities might have prompted the local Hindus to accept this tribal deity as a variation of the Devi.

(c)

It has been normal Hindu practice to christen the tribal deity with a Brahminical name while accepting it within its own fold. But Nimata has retained her tribal name with minor modification, perhaps due to the fact that the suffix "Mata" has a Sanskrit look. Allowed to retain her original tribal name, the goddess herself, however, is being subjected to a process of significant transformation in a new direction. It has already been said that the annual puja of Nimata now starts on the day of Jagaddhatri puja and continues for three days. Also in the shrine there is an altar with an impressive image of
Jagaddhatri. The image was installed some fifteen years ago. The two stone slabs, presumably the original manifestation of the Devi, those that were brought from Damchhera, are placed beside the altar. Though the priest asserts that these stone slabs are the real objects of worship, and the image of Jagaddhatri is merely decorative, it appears that the latter has already assumed a position of prominence in the shrine. That the date of the annual puja of Nimata and the date of Jagaddhatri puja have synchronised is also a pointer in this direction. We can assume as well that in course of time people will simply ignore the two insignificant pieces of stone beside the altar and the more prominent image of Jagaddhatri will obviously become the principal object of worship.

The dhyana (Sanskrit text depicting the feature of the deity) of Nimata is the only deterrent in this process of transformation. The priest tells us that in spite of similarities the dhyana of Nimata is in some respects different from the dhyana of Jagaddhatri. For instance, Nimata rides on a tiger whereas Jagaddhatri rides on a lion. But the priest declines to narrate the full text of the dhyana of Nimata as it is a secret. So this only deterrent will not stand in the way of transformation already in progress, because common people have no chance of knowing the differences that exist between the concepts of these two deities. Moreover, a less orthodox priest of near future would not definitely mind
in making suitable changes in the Dhyana itself to meet the demand of the time. Nimata will then lose her separate identity once for all and will be regarded only as another name of Jagaddhatri.

So, at Borkhola, in the shrine of Nimata, a conscious effort has been afoot to delink a deity from the last remnants of her tribal association and it is a matter of real interest to observe how much time it takes to complete this process of total absorption.