CHAPTER XIV

CONCLUSION
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Hinduism, in its present form, is no doubt a composite religion. It travelled a long way through a zigzag course of abhorrence and adjustment, confrontation and conciliation to ultimately assume the present shape. In different phases of history in different regions Hinduism encountered and in most cases consequently absorbed, divergent indigenous peoples who again in their turn infused or at least tried to infuse into it their own traits and notions. This process and counter process of absorption and infusion operated throughout the country and this phenomenon is primarily responsible for manifold local variations to which Hinduism is often subjected to. Rites and customs, notions and beliefs of the Hindus of the country differ at varying degrees and at different levels from region to region and even amongst the different communities of the same region and these divergences deprive Hinduism of even a broad based uniformity which other religions normally possess.

In the circumstances, it is no wonder that the Hindu cult-practices of Cachar, particularly of its rural areas, have been subjected to some local variations. This study deals mostly with the practices where the
influence of such local phenomenon is really significant. Attempts have been made to trace out, through field investigations as far as possible, the factors responsible for such variations, and in some cases attempts have been made to reconstruct in detail the background which necessitated the transformation or absorption of a number of cult-practices. Since divergent elements interacted in manifold ways at different stages and levels to influence the orientation of local cult-practices, it would be futile to look for a single pattern behind the process of its formation. Hence in the preceding chapters efforts are made, as far as practicable, to deal with each particular cult practice independently in the light of the facts available in that particular context and it has been found that the cultural growth in this part of the country does follow some patterns, however broad-based or general their nature might be, revealing in the process the presence of some essentially common traits to form the basis of a broad-based pattern.

Brahmanical Hinduism was obviously a developed religion backed by a sophisticated philosophy and sponsored by powerful champions when it first encountered the primitive way of life of the local aboriginals. Generally it is believed that it was a simple vini vidi vici affair — the local primitive religion gave way to
the advanced invading religion without much resistance. But the facts manifest a different story. It was a long-drawn battle fought vigorously through centuries in which none came out with an outright victory. The aboriginal local religion did give way to its comparatively advanced counterpart, but the latter, too, in its turn, could not help accommodating some elements of the former. The process through which this compromise has been accomplished may be classified in four broad divisions.

First, some deities having a primitive origin have been absorbed in the Brahmanical pantheon after effecting necessary changes here and there. So the cult of Kupli, the Khasi river goddess, has been incorporated in the Varuni cult of all India prevalence. The boat worship, along with its presiding deity Manasa, was given scriptural sanction by writing a treatise in Sanskrit on the model of another famous treatise (i.e. Durgabhakti-taran-gini). The Mongoloid snake-goddess, who had originally been the goddess of creation and subsequently became a war-goddess, was given the Sanskrit name Ramachandi and thereby her ultimate identification with the Pauranic Chandi became a routine affair.
Secondly, some primitive rites and notions were found not suitable for absorption through the above mentioned process of transformation, but their popularity amongst the indigenous people made their accommodation imperative. So they were incorporated as a component part of some recognised Brahmanical rites, and in most cases their distinctive features were retained. The Peki khela or the muddy game with a coconut shell could not have formed the part of a much honoured Brahmanical festival like Durgapuja unless there was a favourable social environment which sponsored conciliation and compromise. In the same manner the primitive notion of bamboo-worship could retain its existence by infiltrating into the ritual part of a Hindu marriage ceremony. The myth of Usha and the ritual of miniature garden associated with Kartik worship also betray the same pattern.

Thirdly, in some cases the process of transformation of a tribal or aboriginal deity into a Brahmanical one has been started but the metamorphosis has not yet been accomplished. The goddess Nimata is the typical example of such a deity in transition. This Dimasa deity, symbolised originally by two stone-slabs, is now in the process of assuming the anthropomorphic form of Jagadhatri, though it may take some time to complete the process. Tremendous effort is
there to identify Rupasi, the tribal deity of fertility symbolised in a tree, with Durga in her sylvan form, and it is doubtful how long she would be able to retain her separate identity. Kalathakur or the primitive sun-cum-rain god of the villagers has retained his independent existence so long, but efforts are half way through to subordinate this cult under the banner of the more dominating Krishna cult.

Fourthly, there are some rites which have been left untouched by Brahmanical Hinduism. The latter did not even try to incorporate them through any of the processes mentioned above. The majority of the agricultural and female rites fall within this category. So also the case with the cult of Badsha. In spite of the absence of any Brahmanical sanction, these rites have unquestionable popularity amongst the masses. It is a wonder that all-absorbing Hinduism did not try to grab these cults till this day, but it is likely that if this popularity continues, Brahmanical Hinduism would try to absorb them in near future. Budding symptoms are already there to suggest such a probability.

The way in which Brahmanical Hinduism responded to the challenge thrown by the indigenous cults of the region also deserve mention. Despite the fact that the Brahmanical
Hinduism lost much of its liberalism since the days of the Guptas, in this region its champions showed admirable prudence, if not genuine catholicity. In initial encounters these might have been some conflicts and confrontations, and the earliest promoters of Hinduism might have regarded the aboriginal cult-practices with contempt and disdain. But gradually, with passage of time, their attitude softened and they displayed an ingenious ability to incorporate indigenous beliefs and practices within the fold of Hinduism. This tactic paid a good dividend and the Hinduisation of the region since then became an easier task. The process thus initiated by these early promoters is being followed till this day by their descendents and so in the sphere of religion the process of absorption and adoption is still a living phenomenon in the region.

II

When the synthetic formation of Hinduism is an accepted fact, it naturally follows that it absorbed multifarious elements from the indigenous population throughout the country. But in the majority of cases, such absorption has been accomplished by effecting a complete metamorphosis, because Brahmanical sophistication took particular care to erase all visible traces of these borrowed components which were often primitive or aboriginal in nature.
The ease with Surma Valley, comprising the districts of Sylhet and Cachar, is somewhat different in this respect. First, this region is situated in the easternmost corner of the country far away from the nerve centre of Brahmanical Hinduism, and so the levelling influence of the scripture-dominated religion could not exert its full thrust here. Secondly, the society of rural Cachar is still under a feudal fold with its traditional agricultural economy. The process of transformation and change operates at a slower pace in such a society. These two factors, along with the proximity of the tribal inhabited regions, helped the local population to retain in their cult practices some notions and practices whose importance is not confined only within the sphere of local cult-practices. A number of rites and rituals which have a vast and wider range of diffusion at times embracing the whole country, can be interpreted and explained to a reasonable extent with the help of these notions and practices.

Hence the ritual art in the form of foot-prints of Lakshmi, which is being drawn in connection with Lakshmi-worship all over Bengal and whose objective and purpose is hitherto unknown and unexplained, retains an earlier form in Cachar where similar foot-prints are drawn from
the abode of Lakshmi to paddy-field where she makes a sojourn till the harvest. This practice when examined in the light of the more primitive custom of drawing a track from the field to the granary to enable the corn-spirit to stay there for the season, clearly brings out the original notion that lies beneath this developed form of ritual painting. Similarly, almost all over India, Kartik has been regarded as a misogynous deity. But the Cachar-myth of his abandoned marriage with Usha gives an opportunity to trace the original socio-cultural reason which might have been responsible for Kartik's misogyny. The myth of Savitri and Satyavan, as described in the Mahabharata and other Sanskrit texts, narrates a simple story emphasising Savitri's extra-ordinary love and devotion towards her husband. There is nothing to give us any inkling of the fact that it is the converted version of a folk ritual. But the Cachar rite of Savitri Vrata retains a number of agricultural elements directly linking the myth with the universal cycle of the death and rebirth of vegetation. The Ranachandi myth of Cachar gives indication to ponder about whether the Godhika(iguana) incarnation of the goddess Chandi mentioned in the Bengali Chandimangals is an Indo-Mongoloid phenomenon. Such examples can be multiplied. What we want to stress here is that some cult-practices of Cachar have retained their
earlier or intermediary forms which enable us to form an idea of the primitive contexts and original objectives associated with them, which help us to explain some widely practised cults of the country. A study of folk cults of Cachar thus in some respects is capable of furnishing the missing link to reconstruct the pattern through which a cultural fusion or synthesis has been affected in this sub-continent of which Hinduism is the product.

Secondly, a good many rituals of Cachar are non-religious in the sense that they were performed without reference to any god or a deity. On the occasion of Garbha Sankranti peasant women offer Sadh to the paddy field which is nothing but an imitation of a ceremony which is performed by feeding a child-bearing mother with such food for which she has a desire with the hope of a smooth delivery. For five months peasant women perform a prolonged vrata emphasising austerity which also have nothing to do with a deity. Bhola Samkranti is a pre-harvest ceremony having a potentiality at least for its name to be a Saivite rite, but this too has retained its secular character till now. No deity is invoked on the occasion. The case is the same with the Sidal Katar vrata which is celebrated on the occasion of the first partaking of dry fish. To associate her with an imaginary
deity named Siudhesvari is an utter failure. These facts bring out a significant feature. The majority of the deities are metamorphised or anthropomorphised forms of some natural objects that were worshipped for one or other material reason. But it is evident that such metamorphism or anthropomorphism is not an essential precondition for the continuation of cult-practices; they can survive side by side with the established religion only on the strength of their economic or material efficacy, real or imaginary.

Last but not the least, some cult-practices discussed in this study bear striking resemblances with the customs prevalent in some far off lands. So the last sheaves of corn are called old women in Cachar as well as in entire eastern Europe. Cachar women bite a jijube to kill their foes magically whereas Italian women pierce lemons with similar objective. The Mexicans use a figurine made of rag and dressed in bride's clothes to represent the corn-maiden; the Cachar women do the same thing with regard to Usha, the local corn-maiden. Bhola Samkranti has a close parallel in the widely prevalent European custom of expulsion of civil. It is highly improbable that all these customs owe their resemblances to a common centre of origin. No doubt they grew independently in different
regions but obviously they were not the product of fortuitous coincidences, rather the truth that operates behind these similarities may be traced in Albert Reville's memorable remark: "All this shows once more how the same fundamental logic of the human mind asserts itself across a thousand diversities and reappears under every conceivable form in every climate and every race."¹

¹ Albert Reville, *Native Religion of Mexico and Peru*, p. 508