CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION
The district of Cachar lies on the South-West of Assam. It is bounded on the north by the North-Cachar Hills and District, Jaintia Hills district of Meghalaya, on the east by the Manipur State, on the south by Mizoram and on the west by the Sylhet District of Bangladesh and Tripura State. This district is situated between longitude 92°15' and 93°15' East and latitude 24°8' and 25°8' North and covers an area of 2680 square miles. It has three sub-divisions, viz. Silchar, Hailakandi and Karimganj. Silchar and Hailakandi sub-divisions formed an integral part of the Dimasa Kachari kingdom, to which association the district owes its name. The Karimganj sub-division was originally a part of the Sylhet District incorporated in Cachar only in 1947 as a result of the Radcliffe Award that determined the boundaries of the partitioned sub-continent. Encircled by hills on three sides, the region may be regarded as the extreme extension of the Ganges — Padma basin and at the same time it demarcates the natural border between the riverine Bengal and the hilly Assam.

The early history of Cachar is obscure and hazy. The sculptural remains of Nuban hill, some brick ruins of Jonai area and some ancient tanks scattered in Silchar and Hailakandi sub-divisions bear traces of the early habitation in the region. The cult practices of Siddheswar are also suggestive of primitive settlements. During the Muslim rule,
this region perhaps lay outside the broadway of Indian politics, since no Muslim account made any mention of it. The neighbouring district of Sylhet was conquered by the Muslims in the first half of the fourteenth century, but they did never cast their wistful eye on this adjacent tract of land. The region was perhaps deserted at that time and considered not worthy of any kind of plunder or conquest. So, apparently, the earlier inhabitants who were responsible for the remains of Bhuban hill and other places, did not continue to inhabit the region at that time. The reason for this desertion is not known.

It is claimed that during the early half of the sixteenth century, the region was conquered by Chilarai, the famous general and brother of the Koch king Nararayan.1 A nearly extinct local tribe, known as the Dheyans, still claim themselves to be the descendants of the Koch officials deployed by Chilarai. But this conquest was short-lived; subsequent Koch rulers never exerted their power over the region. Besides this temporary occupation. The Cachar plains had been a part of the Tripura kingdom.2 But it is doubtful how effective that control was. Probably some semi-nomadic tribes having traditional allegiance to the Tripura royal house used to dwell in the region. However, it is widely believed that the Kacharlis came in possession of Cachar

2. U.C. Guha, Ibid., pp. 21-27.
plains not by conquest; the land was a part of the dowry paid to a Kachari prince who married a daughter of the Tripura king. 3

The Dimasa Kacharis are found established in Cachar around 1750. 4 Their erstwhile capital Maibang was raided and plundered by the Ahoms and the royal house moved to the south in the Cachar plains. This shifting of the capital could not check the inevitable disintegration of the kingdom. The Burmese invasion, the conspiracy of the Manipuri princes, internal feuds and weakness of the Kachari rulers, all together brought about the end of the age-old kingdom till in 1830 when the British annexed it by a proclamation.

The sub-division of Karimganj has a different history. Politically and culturally, it formed an integral part of Sylhet, and thereby maintained more or less a steady contact with the main stream of national history. On the strength of the Nidhanpur Grant, the find-place of which is only nine miles from Karimganj town, it can be assumed that the grip of Brahmanical Hinduism was quite deep-rooted here since the days of Bhutivarman, the great-grand-father of the famous

Kamarupa king Bhaskarvarman. Since Bhaskarvarman was a contemporary of Harshavarman, the date of his great-grandfather can safely be ascribed to the second half of the sixth century. In the tenth century, numerous Brahmanical and Buddhist settlements grew up in the region. This is evident from the Paschimbhag copper-plate of Srichandra, a Buddhist king of lower Bengal. When Shah Jalal conquered Sylhet around 1313 A.D., the region passed on to the Muslims. The East India Company took over the administration of Sylhet in 1765 following the grant of the dewani of Bengal by the Mughal Emperor to the Company.

II

The population break-up of Cachar according to 1961 Census shows: Bengalee 1,085,287, Hindustani 142,402, Meithei 75,116, Bishnupria 15,055, Dimasa Kachari 10,953, Assamese 4,542, out of a total population of 1,378,576.

5. According to this copperplate, Bhutivarman gave settlement to some Brahmin in Chandrapuri Vishaya. Bhaskarvarman re-affirmed this donation by issuing a fresh copper-plate, as the earlier one issued by his great-grand-father, had been destroyed by a fire. There was some dispute as to the location of the donated land and some claimed that it was situated far away from the find place either in North Bengal or in Bihar (see P.C. Choudhury, Culture and Civilization of the People of Assam, p. 147). But the recent discovery of the Pashchimbhag Copperplate of Srichandra, found in the Sylhet district, would perhaps bring an end to this dispute. The latter plate clearly mentions the Chandrapuri Vishaya as a part of Srihattamandala. (See K.K. Gupta Choudhury, Copperplate of Sylhet, p. 97).


7. Abdul Karim, Social History of the Muslim in Bengal, p. 37.
Small tribal groups like the Khasi, the Mizo, the Hmar account for the remaining. Meitheis and Bishnupurias, two different linguistic groups of the Manipuris immigrated to Cachar after Burmese invasion which took place in between 1813-26. Small hamlets of the Assamese speaking people also grew up at that time in two or three isolated pockets. Hindustanis are mainly tea-garden labourers, descendants of the early labourers brought by the labour contractors when the plantation of tea started in the region. The present day population of Cachar is composed of different immigrant groups the earlier of whom came to the land some two hundred and fifty years ago.

The earliest recorded evidence of the Bengalee settlement is a royal document issued in 1736 by a Kachari king appointing one Maniram Laskar, a Bengalee, his Ujir or minister for the Borkhola region of present Silchar subdivision. A descendant of this royal official has been till recently living at Borkhola. Apparently, the shifting of the capital took place at a later date and when it was done, the majority of the tribal subjects of the king did not follow suit. They preferred to stay in the hilly regions of North Cachar and the king had to move to the

   Linguistic break-up of 1971 Census is not available till now.
9. A.C.Coudhury, Drihatta Itibrutta, Upasanhar op.159-63
plains of Cachar with only a few of his trusted officials. That accounts for the very small number of Kacharis in the plains. It was only natural that the royal house would not be contented with a capital with a sparse population and deserted surroundings. So a deliberate policy to encourage new settlements followed. Adventurist caste Hindus of the neighbouring district of Sylhet took advantage of the situation and crowded in the royal court seeking jobs, land-grants and other kinds of patronage. Land-hungry peasants and fugitives from justice started pouring in and the majority of them got settlements. Early colonization of Cachar by the immigrants from Sylhet started that way.

But in spite of such royal patronage, the vast tract of cultivable land remained unutilised till the British came. So in 1843 Superintendent of Cachar, W. H. Lyons, wrote to his superior officer, that "In fact, there is a quantity of land of the best quality still lying fallow for want of people to cultivate it." However, all the time, a slow but steady flow of immigrants continued. A sizeable number of caste Hindus migrated to Cachar when the local tea industry came up to fill white-collared posts in the tea establishment and trading enterprises allied to it. The zenith process was at its, at the time of partition of the country

11. Ibid., pp. 94-98.
In 1947, following which lakhs of Hindus emigrated from Sylhet and settled in Cachar. This influx, associated with the incorporation of Karimganj sub-division, till then a part of Sylhet, with Cachar, completed the process of what may be termed as the 'Sylhetization' of the district.

Geographically, two neighbouring districts of Sylhet and Cachar lie in the same Barak-Surma Basin. Politically, the district had been under a single Commissioner throughout the British days. Economically, agriculture was the basic occupation of the people in of both the districts. So, the emigrants from Sylhet did not meet any major alien factors to change their basic way of life after their migration. They retained almost the whole of the culture of Sylhet and to this day folk-cults of these two districts by and large are identical. Of course, the immigrants adopted some new ingredients within their cultural fold, but still, basically, Sylhet and Cachar form a single cultural unit.

III

The Bengalee Hindus of Cachar like their counterparts in other parts of Bengal adhere to the tenets of the Brahmanical Hinduism. But there are some local variations. Beneath the surface of the Brahmanical superstructure, some native, indigenous and primitive features exist. For more than one reason, these features offer interesting scope for investigation. First, the Austroic-speaking Khasis and also some
tribes of Tibeto-Burman language group had been the close neighbours of the local population. It is probable that they contributed significantly to the composition of the local indigenous population. This racial fusion is prone to exert significant influence in the arena of culture. The present work intends to examine the dimension of such influences in the realm of folk-cults as well as to trace the modus operandi of the fusion.

Secondly, Hinduism in this region had to encounter challenges from at least two other dominant faiths. Buddhism had its sway here and in fact the neighbouring district of Sylhet is regarded to be one of the last strongholds of Buddhism in the eastern part of India. Subsequently, Sylhet was conquered by the Muslims in the early fourteenth century. The conquest was followed by large-scale conversion of lower caste people. Hinduism had recourse to some ingenious means to combat the advent of these alien faiths. In some cases peculiar compromises were made which gave the local folk cults a composite character. The present work intends to examine in detail the ingredients and components where such admixture took place and also to reconstruct as far as possible, the socio-cultural background that necessitated such fusion.

Lately, the Bengalee Hindus of Cachar came in contact with the Dimasa Kacharis under whose political protection they started settlement. They were in possession of an advanced material culture in comparison to their rulers who were till then very much in the tribal stage. Apparently, the Bengalees were the most unlikely people to borrow anything from the Dimasas in the sphere of culture or religion. On the contrary, they encouraged the tribal kings and their nobles to accept Brahmanical Hinduism and successfully influenced the Dimasa royal house to perform typical Brahmanical rites like Jurga Puja and Jmulan Jatra. But cultural transaction has its own rules of the game and is never a one-way traffic. In course of investigation it has been revealed that the Dimasa, though they apparently had been always at the receiving end, did contribute some tribal feature, to the formulation of local cult practices. At least two deities worshipped by the Cachar Bengalees are Dimasa origin, of which Ranachandi has already been absorbed in the Brahmanical pantheon, and Nimata is in the process of assuming a suitable Brahmanical garb. This study would try to trace the zig-zag course by which these two deities travelled to enter into the Brahmanical domain.

Besides these aspects, the socio-economic factors, operating beneath the surface of popular religion, offer an interesting and useful scope for study. Society of rural Cachar is still very much under a feudal fold and the Hindu
community here is predominantly agricultural. Essentially conservative, such a society is prone to preserve at least some ancient customs in their primitive form. In fact, from sowing to harvest, the local peasantry observe and perform a number of customs and practices, some of which still retain their original form and flavour. These practices are performed for direct economic benefits i.e., growth of paddy, good production and rich harvest. Although some of these rites have already assumed Brahmanical appearance, at close examination they reveal traits which indicate to unfold some economic significance. Also some of them might furnish with missing links in the light of which some widely prevalent rites and practices can be profitably interpreted.

The district of Cachar is fast approaching its era of industrialisation. A paper mill and a sugar mill, both in the public sector, are almost in the process of functioning. With the advent of largescale industry, the rural folk are destined to lose their social institutions and the legacy of the remote past associated with them. Before this transformation takes place, it is time to investigate into the components of the local folk cults and analyse them in their proper perspective. The present study is a humble attempt towards this direction.