CHAPTER II

KAPILASRAM: a cult-spot and its background (I)
On the left bank of the Barak river, about a furlong to the east of the Dadarpurghat railway station, there is an old shrine dedicated to lord Shiva. The place is called Siddheswar or Kapil-Asran and regarded as one of the most holy sites of the region. The location of the site is important as it stands only some three miles away from the plains district of Sylhet (now in Bangladesh) on the one hand and some fifteen miles from the Jaintia Hills district of Meghalaya on the other. The site also marks the starting point of the hilly ranges of the North Cachar Hills. The temple which was built about two hundred years ago has been improved and renovated recently. Also there is a shrine of goddess Jurga, the consort of Shiva, standing on a hillock to the south of the railway line. But not much importance is attached to the latter and it has practically been abandoned. Previously there was a gap of about half a mile between the shrine and the river course, but due to heavy erosion since 1936, the river now flows just below the Shiva temple which is built upon a rock.

There is a huge Shiva-linga of black stone and a crude image of a bearded male engraved on a stone slab. Both are installed in the inner compartment of the temple. Also there are some statuettes of stone and bronze arranged haphazardly in the outer campus. Some of them, including two miniature images of the Buddha, have some antique value.
and deserve the attention of iconographers. According to tradition the main linga is of philosopher's stone, but since it does not have any magic power at present, some believe that the original linga has been lost and is replaced by a spurious one.

Shiva is being regarded as the presiding deity of this tirtha and he is known here as Siddheswar. It is believed that he bestows success or siddhi on his votaries and so both the deity and the place earns the epithet Siddheswar (lord of success). It is said that Kapila, the sage and the illustrious author of Sankhya Philosophy worshipped the deity here and thereby succeeded in his pursuit of knowledge. The place is known as Kapil-Asram after the name of this renowned sage.

Also there is another tradition related to one Purabaja, perhaps a tribal chief having effective control over the region in the remote past. This king was very much fond of fish. A huge quantity of fish was required to prepare his daily meals. In the lean season, the requisite quantity of fish was not available. He found out an ingenious method to overcome this difficulty. There was a stone-slab on the bank of the river Barak with a supernatural or magical quality. A touch or contact with this slab could bring back life to any dead being. Purabaja

used to utilise this magic stone to his advantage. He kept a huge stock of dry fish procured in the season and with the help of this magic stone brought them back to life whenever necessary. That way, the king ensured a steady supply of fresh fish throughout the year. There is a belief that from that magic stone, the linga was carved out at a later date.

II

Shiva here is worshipped daily. The expenditure of the temple is met from the contributions made by the passers-by who travel through the Silchar Karinganj road that runs very close to the temple. Almost all vehicles make a brief halt to enable the inmates to pay their homage to the holy site. Also there is a steady flow of votaries, who go there to offer special puja on fulfilment of a desire or such other reasons. The affairs of the temple are looked after by some mohantas belonging to the Giri sect of the Shankarite monks, whose headquarters is in Uttar Pradesh. Though no record is available, it is said that the management was taken over by these monks about three hundred years ago. The gentry of Grgauri, a nearby village inhabited by caste Hindus, also takes a keen interest in the affairs of the tirtha.
The principal festival associated with this tirtha is Varuni, which falls on the thirteenth day of the dark half of Chaitra. It is a bathing ceremony and each year on this particular day not less than ten thousand pilgrims congregate there to take bath in the holy water of Varuni. They come from all over the district and also from the bordering Bangladesh district of Sylhet. Also there is a big fair continues for fifteen days and are attended by thousands of people. It appears that the bathing of the Varuni day is a pretty old custom of this state. On enquiry, the elderly people of the neighbouring villages asserted that this ceremonial bathing has been practised here from the time immemorial. Other indirect evidences, which shall be discussed later, also support this contention.

Even a casual observer would not miss some curious features associated with this tirtha. First, though a Shiva tirtha, the principal festival of the holy site does not have any direct relation with the worship of Shiva, nor does it take place on a date associated with his worship like Shivaratri or Shiva Chaturdasi. Secondly, the participants of the bathing ceremony do not think it necessary to offer an oblation to the nearby temples after the ritual bath. Thirdly, the votaries of Siddheswar Shiva consist mainly of caste Hindus; a lower caste Hindu seldom visits the temple. But with regard to the Varuni ceremony, the situation is reverse. It is the caste Hindus who flock the
ceremony whereas the lower caste population round at least thirty miles radius of Siddheswar simply go crazy to attend the bathing irrespective of their age or sex. Those who attend the ceremony feel themselves flattered, those who cannot, suffer from a sense of frustration. They know very little of the cae apsila and still less of his sukhyay philosophy and cannot justify their mad rush to the bathing spot. But still the craze is there that betrays something like an age-old attachment deeply rooted in their flesh and blood.

It is only at this particular cult-spot that Shiva has been treated with indifference by the lower caste people, otherwise the deity is quite popular among them and is worshipped with usual devotion in the villages. This singular indifference to Siddheswar Shiva seems to be curious and deserves further investigation. At the same time the apathetic attitudes of the upper castes towards the popular Varahi festival is another significant fact. The situation betrays some remote clash of cults and the cult-spot of Siddheswar, it appears somehow accommodated two divergent if not rival cults but could not accommodate them properly. The background of this cultural interplay may best be understood if an attempt is made to ascertain which of the two cults is earlier and who were the people originally attached to this cult-spot.
The cultural history of the country bears enough testimony to the fact that it is amongst the people of the lower strata that the continuity of the earlier cults generally survives. It is a strong point to regard the Varuni cult as the earlier cult of Siddheswar. Moreover, bathing ceremonies are perhaps survivals of the primitive cult of the water or river deities. Scholars like Przybysz and Kosambi attribute a non-Aryan origin to such cults. Again, the dithayatra or the pilgrimage to holy places is almost inevitably associated with ritual bathing and .c. Siracar suggests that the pilgrimage itself 'is a non-Aryan institution later adopted by the Aryans'. The term Varuni is conceived to be the female energy of Varuna, but whereas the latter is an important Vedic deity, his female energy or associate is nowhere mentioned in the Vedic texts. 40, she may be regarded as a later infiltration in the Brahmanical pantheon and her introduction was necessary perhaps to accommodate different indigenous cults of river goddesses under a single Brahmanical banner. The Varuni cult of Siddheswar may as well be regarded as a pre-Aryan cult of some river goddess, incorporated later in a modified form.

2. According to Kosambi, immersion and water sacrifices are ramifications of the cult of river-goddesses. (v.s. Kosambi, Myth and Reality, p. 61).

3. (a) J. Przybysz, The Great Goddess in India and Iran, Indian Historical Quarterly, 1934, pp. 405-30. (b) J. Kosambi, Ibid., p. 68

within the Hindu fold.

It is significant that the Chhasis, an ethnic group of people who dwell in the neighbouring Chhasi and Jaintia hills from time immemorial have retained an elaborate cult of river deities. Amlet Harch, an eminent Chhasi scholar, furnishes us with an account of these tribal practices.

"In the month of June, the cult of the Kupli water goddess is held. Sacrifices of animals are still performed to propitiate the Kupli deity at Shangphung, Junaga, Longklieh etc. Other deities in Jaintia are numerous and at Hartiang, Patisona, the water deity is identified with the Kupli. Other festivals carried out on the banks of the Uniceren and Gyndu streams are indirectly meant for the Kupli. All these water spirits appear to have fallen under the hegemony of the male or female (her son) of the male shrine .... The Kupli goddess among water spirits is accounted to be the most important both in antiquity and celebration."

It appears that the Chhasi worship numerous water deities and the Kupli goddess is regarded as the supreme of these deities. The river opili which originates from the Jaintia hills and flows through the plains of western district, owes its name to this goddess. Many travellers of the nineteenth century testify that the river was held with superstitious fear by the Chhasi who would not

5. B. Harch, The History and Culture of the Chhasi People, pp. 355-361
cross it after dusk, Bareh tells us that "whenever the river was to be crossed in those days, the travellers confessed their sins and the priest of the Pyrnehop clan cleansed their sins by spiritual efforts. The orthodox section of the communities still observes such customs on crossing the river." The Hinduised Khali kings of Jaintia were staunch devotees of the Kupli deity and they made it a compulsion for the Brahmin keeper of the temple house at Nartiang to attend the ceremonial worship of Kupli river and it is told that twenty four generations of Brahmin keepers have been there.7

Another feature of the Kupli worship was human sacrifice. "Traditions are still current that the Kupli goddess and her son, i.e., Iale were propitiated with human sacrifice annually. The sacrifices were conducted on the river bank (Kupli) and this place of execution was the Kypong side where blocks of stone serving as an execution platform are still to be seen".8 Gurdon informs us that "in olden days human victims were sacrificed to the Kupli goddess on the flat table stone (naw Kynthi) at a place called Jew Ksin, close to the Kopili river."9 He further suggests that the famous Jainteswari Kali of Jaintiapur, who also was propitiated with human sacrifice, might be a

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conversion of the Kali goddess. T. Rynai mentions another spot associated with such sacrifice: "On the upper reaches of the river is the waterfall called the Ila, formed by the sudden drop of the Kopili which is a rare combination of majesty and awful beauty by the side of which, they say, human beings were once sacrificed to the goddess Ila."  

IV

It is evident from these accounts that Kali may be considered as quite an important city of the bhasi till this day and what the deity was more dominant in the past is manifested by the fact that a number of sites retain traditions of human sacrifice associated with her worship. That we venture to suggest is that the cult-spot of Sambeswar was also originally connected with bhasi-worship and the bathing ceremony during the Yamuna is a modified survival of her cult. This contention would apparently sound abrupt, but it can be shown that the traditions attached to the cult-spot still bear traces of this original identity in spite of the fact that these traditions have undergone considerable changes subsequently.

There is the local legend that tells us the story of the fish-loving tribal chief Pura Raja and the magical stone slab on the bank of the river. Pura Raja is obviously

10. Sarkaraki (compiled by), Writings of India, p.49
a Khasi chieftain who derives his name perhaps from the Khasi word 'puriya' meaning dry fish. It is significant that till recently, the worship of the river goddess was accompanied by ceremonial large scale fishing in some parts of the Khasi Hills. The legend of Pura Raja perhaps retains the memory of such fishing festivals and the subsequent preservation of the catches.

The mention of the stone slab, that supposed to have magical power to regenerate life, might be regarded as a remnant of another aspect of the worship of Puri. It has been shown that at different sites it was the custom to propitiate the goddess with human sacrifice. Jordon and barer maintain that at each of these sites, the sacrifice was executed on a particular table-stone or block of stones year after year and it was likely that these traditional sacrificial stones were attributed with some magical qualities by the tribal folk.

At Sudder, there might have been a similar stone where such sacrifice was in vogue in the past. To the primitive mind, life and death were essentially interlinked and it was quite within the scope of primitive logic to bestow such life-regenerating power on the stone which was associated traditionally with ritual sacrifices. It was equally likely that the Shiva-linga of Sudder might have been carved out from this stone to attract the adherents of the

11. ...barer, Ibid., p. 360.
Original deity towards the installed cult of Shiva and perhaps the tradition that suggests that the lin'a of Siddheswar is made of a magic stone is a survival of that association.

The name Kapila Asram is also suggestive. It has already been mentioned that some Kapila is not much known in the locality and his supposed association with the holy site is less known to and never mentioned by the votaries who participate in the Taruni bathing. To seek justification for such naming, it can be suggested that the word 'kapila' bears a close phonetic resemblance to the word 'kupli'. It fits quite in the pattern of the Brahmanical manoeuvre to twist an aboriginal name, particularly of a deity, to facilitate its entry into Sanskritised nomenclature. So, Kupli could easily be converted to Kapila (Kupli > Kapili, the Assamese name of the river in Nowgong > Kapila, its muscular form) and a myth might subsequently be innovated to justify that conversion. Hence, the name Kapila-Asram is also a pointer to the fact that the cult-spot of Siddheswar was perhaps originally associated with the Kupli-worship.

Along with traditions, fragmentary evidences of history also suggest that the Khasis, both in the remote and recent past, were in a position to leave distinct cultural
imprints on the population of the Surma Valley. Discovery of some pre-historic stone implements of Khasi variety in the North Cacnar Hills suggests that the Khasis inhabited the region not far away from Siddheswar in the days of antiquity. According to J.K. Chatterjee, they were spread over the plain lands of Sylhet, before they finally confined themselves to the Khasi and Jaintia hills so they were one of the earliest dwellers of the region which now constitutes the cult-zone of Varuni.

There are traditions to suggest that the Khasis retained their political domination over the areas in the vicinity of Siddheswar till the Muslim invasion. It is said that Shah Jalal, after his conquest of Sylhet, sent one of his generals to bring this area under his effective control. The general, on his arrival, found the people of the locality extremely panic-stricken as they were being tortured by a deo or demon who used to pay a regular nocturnal visit. He also found the people suffering from wart of drinking water as the water of the Barak river was thenuddy, impure and unfit for human consumption. The general failed to cope with the situation and it is believed that at last Shah Jalal himself had to come. The saint not only suppressed the demon, but also rendered the water of the Barak clean and sweet with his magic power.

12. H. Bareh, Ibla., p. 16
13. J.K. Chatterjee, Kirat Jana Kriti, p. 3
There is another tradition that asserts that Pura Raja, whom we have already mentioned, was the ruling king of Bacarpur and the surrounding regions in the last part of the fourteenth century. It is believed that he was a tribal chief with Hindu affinities and was finally ousted by a Muslim adventurer named Muhammad Torani. The local people hold that this adventurer improved the conditions of his conquered region and encouraged new settlements.\(^1\)

These traditions, in all probability, preserve some fragments of historical truth. The legend associated with Shah Jalal may be interpreted as the popular version of the saint's remarkable success in dealing with the local tribal folk whose regular nocturnal raids perhaps created a panicky situation in the settlements of the new non-tribal immigrants. As late as the nineteenth century, Pemberton mentions similar raids by the Khasis in the plains of Sylhet, and he testifies that "night was almost invariably chosen for these murderous assaults".\(^2\) It was likely that the bank of the Barak river was also inhabited by these people and because of this the settlers could not dare to fetch water from the river and Shah Jalal might have removed that fear by his stern action. This could justify the legend which asserts that Shah Jalal rendered the water of the Barak drinkable. And the association of Pura Raja

with a number of local legends suggest his undeniable historicity. So, it can be assumed that even in the fourteenth century when Shah Jalal conquered Sylhet, Gainbar and its vicinities were under tribal domination. In all probability, they were the residue of the earlier Khasi dwellers of the region, and Pura Raja was their last ortho-mentioning chief.

Again, in the sixteenth century the Khasis re-asserted their authority over some portions of the lost land. The Khasi kings of Jaintia occupied permanently a vast tract of plain lands in northern Sylhet which later formed the thanas of Goainghat and Kanaighat. Often they exerted political authority over almost half of the northern subdivision of Karimganj and hills and plains of northern Cachar. Often they exerted political authority over almost half of the northern subdivision of Karimganj and hills and plains of northern Cachar. The royal house and their Khasi subjects, known as Gujtings, subsequently fell under the influence of Hinduism, but retained almost all of their earlier customs and rites side by side. Finally, the kingdom was annexed by the British in 1835 and the southern plains of the kingdom thenceforth formed a part of the district of Sylhet.

17. K. Ghoshbiry, Ibid., Sec. IV, Chap. I, p. 11
18. K. Ghoshbiry, Ibid., Chap. II, p. 16
19. A. Barih, Ibid., p. 66
VI

Regular hinduisation of the Surma Valley started presumably in the sixth century. The pioneers of the new faith, the immigrant caste Hindus, obviously had to encounter the opposition of the local aboriginals, of which the Khasis perhaps formed a dominant component. According to S.K. Chatterjee, other Austric people preceded the Khasis in the region, and the latter adopted and absorbed Austric cultural traits from their predecessors, which traits they have retained scrupulously. The adherents of Hinduism, backed by the sophisticated state-craft of different Brahmanical dynasties of eastern India, succeeded in pushing away the aboriginals to the neighbouring hilly regions. But before this process of expulsion was accomplished finally, it is possible that many of the aboriginals had already been absorbed within the fold of Hinduism.

That the Khasis were absorbed within the fold of Hinduism is also evident from the tradition that ascribes a Khasi origin to Gour Govinda, the last Hindu king of Sylhet. According to another tradition, this Hinduised king was the son of a water deity, which reminds one of

20. On the basis of Midhanpur grant, it can be said that there were some Brahmin settlement in the valley as early as the sixth century A.D. (K.K. Gupta Choudhury, The Copper Plates of Sylhet pp. 87-100)
23. A.Choudhury, Ibid., Sec. II, Chap. I, p. 3
the Jhansi goddess of water, Kupil. In Sylhet, there is a separate class of brahmans, called 'Garua' who formed a down-graded community having no social communication with high caste brahmans. It is believed that their ancestors were the priests of Gour Govinda. There is another community, called Pator. They claim themselves to be the descendants of the same king, though now listed as a scheduled caste. Like the Khasis, they trade in lime and betel leaves. The Baruis are a numerically dominant caste listed officially as backward and it is said that the term Barai itself is a word of Austro-Asiatic origin meaning both betel leaves and arecanut. Like the Khasis, they are also traditional traders and planters of betel leaves. Under the sustained pressure of Brahmanical Hinduism, many of the lower castes might have lost their original traits, but it is significant that the social, economic or even political transactions with the Khasis were never completely abandoned by the people of the Jurua Valley at any period of history.

It appears reasonable to assume that the bulk of the lower caste population of the Jurua Valley were in fact the Hinduised descendants of the Khasis and other Austro-Asiatic people who were the early dwellers of the region. That would account for the large scale participation of these people in the Naruni bathing festival. Their deep-rooted devotion to the water-deity Kupli and traditional attachment

24. N.P. Roy, Bangalir Itihas, p. 59
for the cult-spot associated with her worship, could not be washed away by the wave of the new faith. There is the parallel example of a later date amongst the Khasi syntengs. The Jaintia kings and their Khasi-syntengs subjects fell under the influence of Brahmanical Hinduism in the sixteenth century. All Hindu festivals were performed in the kingdom with great pomp and splendour under royal patronage, but at the same time they did not abandon any of their tribal rites which also included the worship of Kupli accompanied by human sacrifice. The Hinduised Khasi-syntengs of the Jaintia district still follow a hybrid religion, an admixture of the Hindu and the Khasi rites.

VII

It has been stated that the regions around Siddheswar were under direct domination of the Khasis till the end of the fourteenth century and a major portion of the cult-zone of Jaruni had been under the Jaintia kings from the sixteenth to nineteenth century. It may be presumed that the process of Hinduisation advanced at a slower pace in the region, and the local lower caste people originating from the converted aboriginals had enjoyed comparative freedom to continue their earlier practice here. At this early stage, the cult-spot of Siddheswar perhaps retained all tribal features of Kupli worship.

The Muslim conquest helped in establishing a regular administration which encouraged new settlement in the region. The caste Hindus started settling there at a still later date. According to tradition, caste Hindu villages like Arigouri, Amalsid, Ichhamati and others grew between the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries. With the advent of the Upper class Hindus, who were the champions of Brahmanical Hinduism, and in a sense its non-official missionaries, the process of Hinduisation attained its completion in the region. In the early phase of their migration, the upper caste people perhaps disdained the cult of Varuni for its awful practices and aboriginal associations. The attitude survives the passage of some centuries since their descendants still maintain an avathy towards the Varuni bathing ceremony.

But subsequently, the caste Hindus could not altogether ignore the cult-spot held to sacred by the indigenous people around them. They took recourse to modify the cult along with the cult-spot to conform it with the established pattern of Brahmanical mode of worship. The indigenous people were perhaps persuaded to abandon the tribal features of the river-cult and the river-deity herself had to assume the Brahmanical name Varuni. But the original name, Kupli, was probably still popular enough amongst her indigenous adherents, so the name was tacitly accommodated by naming the cult-spot as Kapil-Asram, thereby sanskritising the term Kupli. Gradually, under the overwhelming
influence of the Brahmanical Hinduism, goddess Kupli faded away from the people's memory and Brahmanical deity Varuni came to the lime-light. The name Kapil-Asram survived, but the real significance of the name has been lost completely.

It is apparent that in spite of these transformations, the cult of the river-goddess was not whole-heartedly accepted by the belligerent section of the caste Hindus. They perhaps wanted to graft on the cult-spot a more recognised Brahmanical deity with a view to diverting the focus from the disdained river-deity of the indigenous people. So Shiva was installed by them as the presiding deity of the place. If may be mentioned that though Shiva himself is of non-Aryan original but even before the Mulsim conquest the deity had been sufficiently upgraded to symbolise Brahmanical Hinduism as evident from the legend of the Manasamangal, and for some curious reason, he was thought best suited to combat any aboriginal cult. However, with the installation of Shiva, the place was renamed Siddheswar, and a suitable myth associating the sage Kapila was concocted to justify and rationalise both the naming, earlier and later, i.e., Kapila-Asram and Siddheswar.

To ensure perpetual preservation of strict Brahmanical norms around the cult-spot, the conservative Sram-Karite monks were brought in by these caste Hindus. Even at present, whenever a vacancy occurs in the post of the Mohanta of the Shiva temple, the gentry of Srigouri
village takes a keen interest to fill the vacancy by importing a suitable monk of the same sect. Hence, Shiva of Siddheswar has been representing the high browism of local upper castes from the very beginning. The lower caste people in their turn, might have reciprocated the attitude by maintaining a cool indifference towards the deity installed by them. Moreover, the installation of the deity here has been associated with an attempt to displace the original cult held so dearly by the lower castes, which might have helped making this indifference stiffer. It is not wonder in the circumstances that Shiva of Siddheswar would be alienated completely from the common rural masses.