CHAPTER III

KAPIL-ASRAM: A cultspot and its background (II)
KAPIL-ASRAM: a cultspot and its background

There is another holy site in eastern India which bears the name Kapil-Asram or Kapil tirtha. It is a small island situated in the mouth of the Ganges where the river meets the Bay of Bengal and as such the place is also known as Gangasagar or Sagardwip. The holiness of Gangasagar is widely recognised all over the country and the site may be regarded as one of the most important tirthas of eastern India. On the auspicious day of Makar Sankranti (15th or 16th January), lakhs of people, predominantly from western and southern Bengal, flock to the site to take ritual bath on the occasion. Since it has been suggested that Kapil-Asram of Siddheswar owes its name to the aboriginal river deity Kupli, it may as well be examined whether the more famous Kapil-Asram of Gangasagar betray any association, however remote, with same deity.

Gangasagar is believed to be the ancient abode of sage Kapila. The Ramayana story\(^1\) is well-known that the great sage burnt to ashes sixty thousand sons of Sagara. The tragedy, it is supposed, took place in the vicinity of this place. Bhagirath, a resourceful descendent of Sagara, persuaded Ganga to descend to the cursed spot to liberate the souls of the unfortunate princes. Shiva

\(^1\) Ramayana Vol. (Translate in English by M.L. Sen) p. 74-76.
helped Bhagiratha by holding the descending torrent on his head as no other god was able to bear the onrush. So Ganga travelled a long course from Kailash to the coast line of southern Bengal for the salvation of Sagara's sons and rendered holy the abode of Kapila and the water around it where the salvation took place.

Ritual bathing at Gangasagar has been prescribed in the Vanaparvan of the Mahabharata. According to D.C. Sircar, Gangasagara attained the fame 'as a very great tirtha' even before the Gupta age. He asserts that in the remote past it was the greatest of all tirthas of eastern India. So with regard to antiquity and fame Kapil-Ashram of Gangasagar is far too great to be compared with its humble namesake of Siddheswar; and apparently it would appear futile to seek for any traces of resemblance between the two cult-spots.

But a close observation would bring forth some striking points to ponder about. Both at Gangasagar and at Siddheswar people assemble for taking ritualistic bath which reveals cult-spots' association with river deities. At the former, the river-deity Ganga is directly worshipped

and the river deity Kupli was the original object of worship at the latter cult-spot.

Sage Kapila, it appears, had an obvious as well as curious association with these river deities.

Kupli is a deity of the Austroic speaking Khasis. The term Ganga, according to S.K. Chatterjee, is a word of Austroic origin. 3

There is a river as well as a village in the mouth of the Ganges called Kulpi, which bears close phonetic affinities with Kupli. There are at least two other rivers within the cult-zone of Gangasagar whose first syllables bear affinity with Kupli. These two rivers are Kopai and Kapatakshya, of which the latter according to Nihar Ranjan Roy, 4 is distinctly a word of Austroic origin. In Khasi, the word Kapait means a source or a place where a river starts. Again, people of Jessore believe that the sage Kapila lived on the bank of Kapatakshya.

The cult of river goddess at Gangasagar like that of Kupli in the Khasi hills, is inseparably associated with human sacrifice. The antiquity of this tradition goes back to the days of the Mahabharata. One can recall the myth that Ganga, as the wife of Santanu, sacrificed her seven sons which is suggestive of human sacrifice. This awful custom of human sacrifice continued vigorously till

the nineteenth century. Lord Bentink had to take stern legal measures to put a stop to this custom.

The orthodox section of the Khasis still confess their sins before crossing the Kupli river where Khasis 'priests of Pyrmgap clan cleanses their sins by spiritual efforts.' It is believed that ritual bathing at Gangesagar also washes away all sins.

II

These stray facts combined together suggest an identical background of both the cult-spots. The early inhabitants of eastern India are believed to be the Austric people. At present these people are spread over sporadically in some isolated pockets from the delta of Mekong river in Indo-China to the sylvan ranges of central India. It is significant that the name of the river Mekong itself meaning the Mother River is an obvious remnant of an early river cult. In the far west, another river, Damodar is also a name of Austric origin. The Santals, also an Austric people hold the river with great veneration which according to Hunter, 'altogether disproportionate to its size.' He asserts that 'a faint remembrance of the

7. S.K. Chatterjee, Indo Aryan and Hindi, p. 76
far-off time when they dwelt beside great rivers, still
exerts its influence'. On the basis of these two examp-
les, along with already mentioned Austric Association of
Ganga and Kupli cults, it can be presumed that the early
Austric dwellers of eastern India promoted one or more
cults of river deities in the region.

S.K. Chatterjee suggests that the Khasis might have
adopted Austric culture after their migration to India
through contact with local Austric dwellers in the pre-
historic times. Hemlet Bareh holds that they are one
of the earliest Austric immigrants who entered India from
Indo-China. Without going into the details of the contro-
versy it can be safely assumed that the Khasis represent
to a considerable extent the early Austric culture of
eastern India. In the circumstances Kupli may be regarded
as the river goddess of the early Austric people in general
and her cult might have been prevalent all over eastern
India in the pre-historic days. In the plains the process
of Hinduisation perhaps effectively erased the marks of
the original cult whereas the Khasis in their isolation

10. Ibid.
11. S.K. Chatterjee, Kirata-Jana-Kriti, p. 30
12. H. Bareh, Ibid., p. 352
retained its original name and modes of worship almost unaffected.

So, it is a possibility that Gangasagar, alias Kapil-Asram, being an important centre of river worship was originally associated with the cult of Kupli goddess. It is noteworthy that D.C. Sircar also ascribed a non-Aryan origin of this tirtha.  

His view is quite in conformity with the contention that the pre-Aryan Austri cult of river goddess was prevalent there. If it is assumed that Kapila is the Sanskritised form of Kupli, then on the basis of the myth of Bhagiratha it can be suggested that Kupli was the presiding deity of Gangasagar when the sons of Sagara, i.e., Aryan adventurers, tried to conquer this strategic island. According to D.C. Sircar, it was perhaps the seat of an indigenous kingdom. The myth tells us of the tragic fate of the adventurers who were completely crushed probably by the adherents of Kupli. Initially Ganga might be an allied or subordinate deity to Kupli, both having common Austri origin, and the former deity came into prominence only through the efforts of Bhagiratha who perhaps also took a political retaliation of the defeat of his predecessors. The aryani- sation and upgradation of the Ganga cult was attained

14. Ibid., pp. 177-83
probably at the cost of Kupli deity. But the deity had too deep a root to be erased completely, which is manifested by the Ramayana story that had to accommodate Kupli in the garb of Kapila and the cult-spot still bears the name Kapil-Asram as a remnant of this original association.15

This explains as to why the river-cults of Siddheswar and Gangasagar, situated far away from one another, retain an obvious association with Kapila and both the tirthas bear the same name Kapil-Asram. The cult of Kupli, though confined at present within the narrow boundary of the Khasi and the Jaintia hills, had far wider a diffusion in the days of pre-history, and disguised in a sanskritised garb, the common name of these two cult-spots retain traces of their common origin. The legend that Kapila's abode was situated on the bank of Kapotakshya is yet another testimony which suggests the prevalence of Kupli cult around a wider region.

III

In spite of the identification of Kapila with aboriginal Kupli deity it cannot be ignored that in Indian philosophical tradition Kapila is believed to be the founder of the Samkhya School of thought and in Hindu Puranas he is often described not only as a great sage but also as a

15. 'Kapildhara' is also a name of the Ganges (M. Williams, Sanskrit-English Dictionary, p. 251)
divinity. Conversion of a primitive female deity into a male divinity is quite plausible under the subsequent pressure of a male dominated society and Kosambi furnishes us with some such south Indian parallels. But Kapila's inseparable association with the origin of the Samkhya philosophy demands, in the light of the suggestion that Kapila is simply a Sanskritised transformation of the goddess Kupli, an answer to the question as to in what way a blood-thirsty aboriginal deity could have been associated, even remotely, with a sophisticated philosophy. Since the scope of the present study does not allow us to go into the details of the origin of the Samkhya philosophy, only some salient features may be mentioned to suggest that the pre-historic adherents of the Kupli goddess might not be altogether unlinked with the origin of the Samkhya.

Hara Prasad Shastri ascribes a non-Aryan origin to the Samkhya. According to him, it was the early inhabitants of eastern India, 'Vanga-Vagadhachera' who promoted this philosophy. Nihar Ranjan Roy identifies these 'Vanga-Vagadha-Chera's as the pre-historic Austric dwellers of eastern India. These people, as already suggested, were presumably Kupli-worshippers and Shastri's contention is

is relevant in the context. In Ramayana sage Kapila is mentioned as the lord of the nether world that reminds us of the primitive concept of the 'deity of the deep' which again bears an obvious association with river deities.

D.P. Chatterjee, in his quest for the materialistic background of Indian philosophical traditions, makes an interesting observation on the origin of Samkhya philosophy. According to him, the concept of an active dominant female principle and its indifferent male counterpart, could have originated only in a society where women enjoyed an actual predominant position. In other words, only a matriarchal society could provide the material background necessary for the germination of the ideas on the foundation of which the Samkhya flourished. To illustrate his viewpoint, Chatterjee actually mentions the still prevalent matriarchal system of the Khasis and quotes from G. Thomson, "The Khasis have a saying, 'From the woman sprang the clan'. That does not leave much scope for the man. As a husband he is a stranger to his wife's people, who refers to him curtly as a begetter". The Samkhya cosmology, Chatterjee opines, is simply a metaphysical manifestation of this attitude that was actually prevalent amongst the matriarchal people.

19. D.P. Chattapadhyaya, Lokavata Darshan, pp. 496-505
This observation can be supplemented by adding the fact that the Khasis still adhere to the cult of Kupli, a female deity symbolising the fertilising river, and there are reasons to suppose that Kapila, the supposed founder of the Samkhya, owes his name to this river-goddess. Historicity of Kapila, as an individual being, has been doubted by scholars including Sankaracharyya. Can it be suggested that Kapila, as an individual, was conceived at a later date and in reality, the name symbolises and represents the deity of the people who furnished the material basis of the Samkhya?

21. D.P. Chatterjee, Ibid., p. 514