CHAPTER IV

BHURAN TIRTHA: A cult-spot on the hill top
I

Hhuban Pahar (hill) demarcates the plains of Cachar from the hilly tract of Manipur. From Matinagar, a garden-bazar some 15 miles from Silchar town, one is to climb up a stiff hill tract of seven miles to reach the peak of the hill which stands more than 3000 feet above sea-level. There is a table land just below the peak and two big stone slabs by their projection make a natural contilever roof over a portion of this land. Two stone images, one of Bhubaneswar Shiva, the presiding deity of the hill, and another of his consort, Bhubaneswari, are installed below the roof. At present, adjacent to this natural roof, a modest shrine has been built, to accommodate broken and mutilated statues of some other deities. These statues are gathered from different parts of the hill and still now in some remote places; some statues can be seen lying under the open sky in a decomposed shape. It is said that even some fifty years ago at least a hundred images lay scattered all over the hill, but natural odds and human vandalism took away most of them.

Bhubaneswar Shiva commands great respect from the Hindu population of Cachar. On the auspicious occasion of Shivaratri, thousands of people climb the hill to pay their homage to the god. It is not an easy task to climb
seven miles of stiff hilly track, but not to speak of the able-bodied men and women, one can count hundreds of old people of both sexes amongst the pilgrims, who take this challenging task gracefully. A natural spring at the top has been converted into a pond, water of which is held sacred. The pilgrims take bath in the pond and worship the god after that. It is customary for a pilgrim to spend a night at the site and to take at least one nocturnal meal there. So the pilgrims carry cooking utensils with them and build thatched sheds as night-shelters. The hill top and its surroundings look like a temporary camp.

About a mile away from the hill-top, there is a tunnel and a mysterious cave that attract a large number of pilgrims. The District Census Handbook furnishes a detailed account of the cave. The tunnel is "about 10 ft. long and 18" x 9" in dimension dug under the rocky hill. This is known as yonidwara or vaginal passage. One person can crawl through this passage on his breast with difficulty. After crossing this 10 ft. long narrow passage, there is a rectangular yard about 80 ft. long and 30 ft. wide and about 20 ft. high a wide tunnel absolutely dark. This is known as mel-mandop, i.e. assembly hall. From this hall runs a downgrade path easily passable, for a distance of about 400 ft. and it leads to the second assembly hall.

almost of the same size as that of the first. From the
second hall another downgrade path from a distance of
about 400 ft. leads to the third assembly hall. There
are two stone images carved on the right wall of the
hall but these cannot be identified due to darkness and
also due to the moss having grown on them."

"From the third hall, there is a very narrow passage
similarly downgrade for a distance of about 100 ft. In the
centre of the passage, there is a block of stone with
teeth-like nodules protruding on all sides. One can pass
through this passage with great difficulty and risk to
his body. From this hall, there is an upgrade narrow path
with faces of big boulders protruding on all sides. After
a distance of about 400 ft., there is a triangular stone
in the centre of the passage leaving a very narrow slit-
like passage on two ends. Only a dare-devil can attempt
to pass through these slits. Generally nobody dares to
penetrate further. It is said that after travelling
through this dangerous passage for a distance of about
half a mile, one can reach a wide rectangular plain yard
where there is a linga image of Shiva. It is also believed
that there is an underground tunnel leading up to Kamakshya
hill near Gauhati." The tunnel passage and the assembly
halls, according to the District Census Handbook, "are
the handiworks of ancient architects of great skill and
imagination. The rock of Bhuban hill is hard sandstone
and quartzite boulders. Natural tunnels due to geological faults is possible in lime-stone hills, but not in sand-stone or granite hills to such a great extent."

II

The remains of Bhuban Pahar present an intriguing picture as to the cultural back-ground of the cult-spot. The statues and images with regard to their pattern, skill and craftsmanship do not manifest any uniform style or standard. For example, the image which is known as Bhubaneswari, is a massive figure with earlobes pierced and extended up to the shoulder. It is a crude work lacking even in polishing and finishing and as such can at best be regarded as a marginally improved specimen of primitive art. Its features do not bear any similarity with those of the known divinities, rather they have a marked affinity with those of a Kuki woman. Some other broken statues also bear such crude features. On the other hand, the supposed image of Bhubaneswara, which though not conforming to any accepted concept of Shiva, displays better artistic skill and refinement. The stone image is about 3' x 9' high, a slim figure standing up with the left hand extending up to the left knee joint and the right palm resting on the chest. Its hair-style is quite ornamental and the expression of eyes and face betrays the competence of the sculptor. Another broken statue,
supposed to be of Vishnu, bears similar traits. An image of Gadura and another of Hanuman also may be classified in the same category.

It is apparent that these remains represent different cultural phases. The cult-spot presumably retained its prominence for a considerable span of time; otherwise a gradually developing culture could not have flourished around it. It may be assumed that one or more groups of people had been dwelling in the hill for a prolonged period to maintain the continuity of the cult-spot. The developed specimens of Bhuban-remains bear the cultural imprint of a much later period, whereas the crude ones remind one of primitive antiquity. In between these two extreme limits, obviously there were some intermediary stages. It is not possible to demarcate all these phases with any amount of definiteness. Only some broad-based suggestions can be made as to the socio-cultural evolution of the cult-spot.

According to D.D. Kosambi, cult-spots on the hill-tops are generally of 'late highland origin.' Primitive agricultural people were low-landers and so highland pastoralists occupied hill-tops which is of little use to the low-landers. Primitive pastoralists were nomadic people and Bhuban Pahar was perhaps one of their seasonal

camps. The compulsory provision that a pilgrim should pass a night in Bhuban Pahar might be a relic of this seasonal camping. Normally nomadism and cattle-rearing were associated with a patriarchal society and such a people usually had a male guardian deity. Shiva of Bhuban Pahar might have his origin to such a male deity worshipped originally by the nomadic pastoralists who first settled on this hill-top.

These early settlers may be identified with the Kiratas or Indo-Mongoloids, who, according to Banikanta Kakati, had to flee from Kamarupa under the pressure of the Aryanised invaders in the second century A.D. and ultimately moved towards the eastern sea. Kakati holds that these Kiratas were the early Shaivites of eastern India who worshipped Shiva in an unorthodox fashion with flesh, wine and women. Now, Bhuban hill stands in the neighbourhood of Manipur and Mizoram and the existence of an ancient land route leading to the eastern coastline of Burma and Hill Chittagong via Cachar, Manipur and Mizoram cannot be ruled out. It was likely that a group of these exiled Kiratas took shelter in Bhuban hill and laid the foundation of a shaivite cult-spot there. The image of the Kuki woman with Indo-Mongoloid features and other

3. B.K. Kakati, Mother Goddess Kamakhya, p. 14
4. B.K. Kakati, Ibid., pp. 10-16
5. N.R.Roy, Bengali Itihas, p. 119
crude images might be the handiwork of these Kiratas. The tradition that asserts that the tunnel of Bhuban hill has an underground link with Kamakshya hill near Guwahati may be regarded as a popularised version of the material cultural connection which the early settlers of Bhuban Pahar had with Kamarupa.

III

The second phase of Bhuban sculpture was perhaps associated with the Tripuris or Tipras, an Indo-Mongoloid people who subsequently built up a kingdom in Hill Tippera (present Tripura state). The Tripura royal family retains a tradition which says,

"Kapila nadir tir chhari dia
Ekadasa bhai mili mantrana kariya
Sainya sena sans Raja sthanare gela
Barabakrar ujanere khalangma rahila." 

[Raja taking advice of his eleven brothers left the bank of the Kapila river (of Nowgong district of Brahmaputra Valley) along with his army and following the upstream of Barabakra (Barak river of Cachar) ultimately settled on the on the bank of the Khabangma (river).]

This tradition asserts that the Tripuris like their other Kirata brethren, had to leave the Brahmaputra valley.

7. U.C. Guha, Cacharer Itibrittta, pp. 20-27
Perhaps their migration followed the migration of the Shaivite Kiratas mentioned earlier. Now Khalangma is the tribal name for the upstream of the Barak river which runs close to Bhuban hill. Also some ancient brick buildings and tanks of Silchar Subdivision are traditionally associated with Tripura Kings.\(^8\) The Tripuris of Tripura still retain a vague memory of their early settlement in Cachar on the bank of the Rukmi river which is also not much away from Bhuban hill. All these facts suggest that the Tripuris, before finally settling in modern Tripura, perhaps had a long sojourn in the vicinity of Bhuban hill. That the Tripuris had a zeal for undertaking largescale sculptural projects is manifested in the remains of Unokoti hill of Tripura, where hundreds of images, lying under the open sky, are visible still today.

The third and final phase of Bhuban sculpture is probably associated with Buddhism since some images including that of Bhubaneswar betray association with Buddhist deities. Kosambi furnishes us with a number of examples where a number of caves, originally inhabited by primitive cave dwellers, were ultimately developed and converted into cave monasteries.\(^9\) The mysterious cave of Bhuban hill might have undergone a similar transformation. It was perhaps

originally a natural cave, converted and developed into a series of halls by skilled artisans to meet the demands of the later period. It may be mentioned here that the Buddhism spread in Burma and other adjacent areas from eastern India. According to Nihar Ranjan Roy at least one of the ancient land routes from eastern India to Burma did pass through Cachar and Manipur. And again, according to Kosambi, it was along the early trade routes that the cave monasteries grew up. Long travels, frequently undertaken by the traders and missionaries, demanded intermediate halting stations and to meet this demand, natural caves were enlarged and renovated during the Buddhist period and were converted into cave monasteries. Bhurban cave, in all probability, grew into such a monastery and it was not unlikely that tradesmen, adventurers and the missionaries, who pioneered the cause of Buddhism in Burma, contributed considerably to the development of Bhurban cult-spot into a Buddhist centre. Buddhist remains of the hill were perhaps the product of this period.

IV

It should be noted that the sculptor and the artisans, the priests and the missionaries, through whose

10. W.R. Roy, Bangalir Itihās, p. 119
11. D.D. Kosambi, Ibid., p. 100
efforts the cult-spot retained its continuity, had to depend for their provisions or supplies from the foothill since the hilltop did not provide any facility for agricultural production. This leads to the inevitable supposition that the foothill came to be populated by prosperous communities which could afford economic support to inhabitants of the hilltop for a considerable span of time. Throughout this period, barring the primitive stage, obviously there was some kind of political administration otherwise a prosperous settled life could not continue. As already mentioned, the Tripuris might have ruled the region for some time. Also, there might have been some other people, who had their political sway over the region before and after the Tripuris. For paucity of definite evidence, identification of these people is not possible at present.

When the Muslim rulers established their authority over the whole of the country, Cachar did never form a part of their domain. It was then an abandoned and depopulated territory infested and frequently raided by savage tribes from the south and the south-east. This rendered tranquil agricultural settlement impossible. Inevitably, the cult-spot of Bhuban hill lost its significance and it was only the determined adventurists, hard-boiled mendicants and semi-Hinduised tribes of the neighbourhood who dared to visit the place. The cult-spot would have faded away
completely from the memory of the people but for these people. It was only in 1787 that the cult-spot entered into the mainstream of history again when Jai Singh, a Kachari minister, installed two stone-inscriptions at Sonai, paying his homage to the Shiva of Bhuban hill.12 After the lapse of some two hundred years, at present, the cult-spot, where thousands of people pay their homage to Bhubaneswar Shiva every year, has no doubt been restored to its previous glory to a considerable extent.

12. It is said that once the minister decided to build a temple for Bhubaneswar Shiva and accordingly proceeded towards the hill in the company of a large number of people. But on reaching the foothill he was restrained by a dream which forbade him to climb the hill. The dejected official built a temple of Shiva at Changutila in the foothills of the sacred mountain where he inscribed two stone-slabs to pay his homage to the presiding deity of the holy tirtha.