CHAPTER III

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE BODO-KACHARIS

Origin and Local Spread of the Tribe

The Bodo-Kacharis are the earliest known indigenous inhabitant group of people in Assam. It is a predominant tribe. It forms the largest group of tribals in Assam. The racial classifications as made by the anthropologists allot the tribal people to four main groups, namely, Proto-Austroloid, Mongoloid, Negrito and Nordic. In the Vedas, Austroloid and Mongoloid are known as "Nishada" and "Kirata" respectively. The Mongoloid division is again sub-divided into different branches, of which the Bodo-Kachari is one.

The Great Bodo race includes different tribes of Assam such as Bara or Kachari, Rabha, Mech, Dhimal, Koch, Solanimiya, Mahaliya, Phulgariya, Saraniya, Dimasa, Hojai, Lalung, Garo and Hajong. In these, Moran and Chutiya of Upper Assam are also included.
The Bodo-Kacharis, as a branch of the Great Bodo race, have a high concentration of population in the entire Brahmaputra Valley. The Census Report of 1971 reveals that the total population of the Bodo-Kachari tribe is 6,10,459, out of which 3,08,768 are male and 3,01,691 are female.\(^1\) In the Brahmaputra Valley, the Kacharis call themselves Bodo or Bodo-fisā (sons of the Bodo). In the North Cachar Hills, they call themselves Dimāsā or Dimā-fisā (sons of the great river), in Tripura, they are known as Tipperah, and as Gāro in Garo Hills, etc. We find them in scattered communities more or less Hinduised, and some are converted into Christianity, all over the valley of Assam. They are widely distributed in Cachar, Darrang, Kamrup, Goalpara, Nowgong and Lakhimpur Districts. They extend from Tripura in the south-east to Morang and the country of the Kichaks in the north-west direction.\(^2\)

Rev. Sidney Endle has divided the Great Bodo race as follows:

"These may perhaps be conveniently divided into a (1) Northern and (2) Southern group, the Brahmaputra being taken roughly as the dividing line, thus:-


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Approximate Numbers</th>
<th>Chief habitat</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I. NORTHERN GROUP:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Bārā (Kachari)</td>
<td>2,72,500</td>
<td>Western Darrang, Kachari Duars, and in North Kamrup.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Rābhā (Totala)</td>
<td>31,370</td>
<td>Goalpara.</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Koch</td>
<td>10,300</td>
<td>On Northern Frontier from Jalpaiguri to North-west Darrang.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Solanimiyas</td>
<td>15-18 families only.</td>
<td>Only in Mongald doi Sub-division.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Mahaliyas (Phulgariyas) Saraniyas</td>
<td></td>
<td>Western Darrang. All slightly Hinduised Kacharis.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. SOUTHERN GROUP:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Di-mā-sā &quot;big water folk&quot;</td>
<td>15,931</td>
<td>North Cachar Hills.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Hojais</td>
<td>2,750</td>
<td>North Cachar Hills and Nowgong.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Lalungs</td>
<td>40,160</td>
<td>South-west Nowgong &amp; adjoining districts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Garos</td>
<td>1,50,000</td>
<td>On Garo Hills and at foot of same.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Hill Tippera (Tripura people)</td>
<td>1,05,850</td>
<td>Hill Tippera &amp;c.</td>
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(Source: Endle, Rev. S., "The Kacharis", 1975)
To these may be added one or two smaller communities, e.g., the Morāns and Chutiyās in Upper Assam, whose language, not altogether extinct as yet though apparently dying out rapidly, would seem to prove them to be closely akin to the Kachari (Bada) race."  

N.N. Vasu opines, "It is believed by the modern western ethnologists that the Koch, the Mech, the Kacharis, the Rabha and the Dhimal are all one and the same people having sprung from one common stock. Of course, we regard the Koch, the Mech, the Kacharis and Dhimal as quite different people. Again some asserts the Garos and Kacharis as identical in blood. But they are not same in character."  

Although it may be difficult to trace the origin of the Bodo-Kacharis, there are numerous references on them made by writers in different books. In the absence of an authentic account, the origin of the Bodo-Kacharis has been mostly a matter of inference and guesswork.

It is believed that the original home of the Bodo-Kacharis was in Tibet and China. The Tibeto-Burman speakers are Mongoloids. Their original home

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was in the north-west region of China near the Huang-ho and the valley of Yang-tse-kiang rivers. Through these rivers, the Mongoloids moved from China in different groups since 2000 B.C., and scattered in different places. The group of Mongoloids of Tibet took the name of Bod and a branch of it entered into Assam through the Brahmaputra river and known as Bodo or Boro. It is also believed that the Mongoloids left Siberia and Mongolia since 2000 B.C. The Mongoloids of Tibet started coming towards North-eastern India and Assam through the waterways of the Brahmaputra and its tributaries for trade in Endi and Muga in Assam. At that time they introduced themselves as Ti-Bod or Bod from which the term Bodo (Boro) originated. Various tribes of Mongoloid stock inhabited in the sub-Himalayan ranges on the North-eastern Frontiers of Assam. Some of them are known as Abors and Mishimis.

The Bodo-Kacharis belong to a distinct racial group of people having their habitation in the North-Eastern India. They belong to the Indo-Mongoloid (Kirata) group which includes the Bodos and their allied tribes. According to S.K. Chatterjee, "The Bodos at one time had formed a solid block of a Mongoloid people throughout the whole of North Bihar,
North Bengal, East Bengal and Brahmaputra Valley with extension in the Cachar Hills, the Garo-Hills and in the Tripura Hills. Local Austic and Dravidian elements were in possibility absorbed by the Bodos."

About their first home in Assam, the Kacharis themselves believed that they lived originally in a land called Kamruli (Kamrup) by which flowed a river in a great valley; then they were driven out and got to a place called Kundilo (Kundil or Sadiya).

"The origin of the Kachari race is still very largely a matter of conjecture and inference in the absence of anything entitled to be regarded as authentic history. In feature and general appearance they approximate very closely to the Mongolian type; and this would seem to point to Tibet and China as the original home of the race. It is possible that there were at least two great immigrations from the north and north-east into the rich valley of the Brahmaputra, i.e., one entering North-East Bengal and Western Assam through the valley of the Tista, Dharia, Sankosh, etc., and founding there what was formerly

the powerful kingdom of Kamrupa; and the other making its way through the Subansiri, Dibong and Dihong valleys into Eastern Assam, where a branch of the widespread Kachari race, known as Chutiyas, undoubtedly held sway for a lengthened period. The Capital quarters of this last mentioned people (the Chutiyas) was at or hear the modern Sadiya, not far from which certain ruins of much interest, including a copper-roofed temple (Tamar ghar) are still to be seen."  

"They have square set faces, projecting cheek-bones, with almond-shaped eyes, and scanty beard and moustache, the last mentioned being often wanting altogether."  

From their physical features and general appearance, it can be said that the Bodo-Kacharis are of Mongolian origin, and this point suggests about their original home somewhere in Tibet or China.

"According to B.C. Allen, the Kacharis are a section of the Indo-Chinese race, whose original habitat was somewhere between the upper waters of the Yang-tse-kiang and the Hoang-ho and who gradually spread in successive waves of immigration over the greater part of what is now the province of Assam, entering by way of Burma."  

8. Ibid., p. 1  
It is said that before 2000 B.C., the Mongoloids were moving in Siberia and Mongolia. In course of time, they were divided into three groups. One group moved towards Europe and settled in Turkey and Italy. The second group settled in Mexico of North America after crossing Baring Strait in Siberia and a branch of it went to Japan. The third group of Mongoloid proceeded towards south and lived in Tibet plateau and in Hwang-Ho of the south-west valley of China. From Hwang-Ho, a branch of this group came to Burma and they were known as Thai. The Mongoloids of Tibet came down to the foothills of Himalayas in a successive wave and settled there. They are known as Nepali, Limbu, Gurung, Newar, Chunar, Dhamang and Serpa, etc. As mentioned above, a section of the Mongoloids of Tibet entered into the North-east India through the waterways of the Brahmaputra and its tributaries for the purpose of trade in Endi and Muga, and settled in the riverine of the Brahmaputra, constituting a major tribe known as the Bodo-Kachari.

Nagendra Nath Vasu wrote about the origin of the Kacharis in his book, "The Social History of Kamrup": "Among the Hill Tribes with which the Vedic Aryans came in contact in Eastern and the Himalayan region, the Kiratas are the most prominent."
The Yajur-Veda and the Atharva-Veda contained the first reference to them, for former speaking of them as 'living in caves' and in the latter occurring the following: 'The little girl of the Kirātas, she the little one, with golden shovels, upon the ridges of the mountains, that which conquers disease'. Then in the Ramayana, we have 'The Kiratas are of conical heads, the golden complexion and are fair looking'. Those living in islands, however, are fierce, and are tigers in human form. The Mahabharata also is not silent about them. Among the soldiers of Bhagadutta, one section of the Kiratas is said to be adorned with gold ornaments and of the other, it is said that they were natives of the marshy sand banks. They spread over the whole western frontier of India, i.e., Assam, Chittagong and the hilltracts of Tipperah as well as the shallows of the adjacent Lohita sea and the marshy lands about or the small islands in the river Lauhitya. That is to say, they lived both on land and water. Till the age of Atharva Veda or even of the Ramayana they were ignorant of the use of iron and used gold very largely. Needless to say that during that age gold was available in abundance in their territories."
Kirata had at one time occupied the whole of Assam, but subsequently losing hold over the country, before the powerful Naraka, they withdrew themselves to the coast of the Eastern sea. The Utkacha, the dwellers of the hills, being also dispossessed of all, left the borders of Assam and blended themselves with the Kiratas. The descendants of this mixed people are known at the present time as the Kacharis. Ghataka was the name by which the ancient ruling family of the Kirata was known; after their intermingling with the Utkachas, the title was perhaps changed into Ghatotkachas. At the time of the Rajasuya Sacrifice of the Mahabharata, when Bhima, the second Pandava brother, came on the mission of universal conquest to the east, he defeated the Kiratas and Utkachas and placed his son on their throne under the guardianship of his mother Hidimba. He is Ghatotkacha I, the king of the Kiratas and Utkachas. It has been said before that formerly the Koch dynasty belonged to the system of mother-kin and that the Pani Kochas even now adhere to the system of a matriarchal society. Their kinsmen, the Utkachas, showed their affinity with the Pani Kochas by calling the dynasty founded by Ghatotkacha as Haidima or the time of Hidimba and giving the same name to the country which they inhabited. This prince became so much distinguished for valour that ...
Bhagadutta, the king of Pragjyotisha, bestowed the hands of his adopted daughter on him, this being the first instance of the inter-marriage between the Kachari and Mech tribes."

According to Sir Edward Gait, "The Kachari king at that time was styled 'Lord of Hidimba.' After this time, the name Hidimba or Hiramba frequently occurs in inscriptions and other records, but there is no evidence of its use by the Kacharis at any earlier period. It has been suggested that it had long been the name of the Kachari kingdom, and that Dimapur is in reality a corruption of Hidimbapur, but it seems more likely that Hidimba was an old name of Cachar, which the Brahmons afterwards connected with the Kachari dynasty, just as in the Brahmaputra valley they connected successive dynasties of aboriginal potentates with the mythical Narak."

At one time the Bodo-Kacharis were the ruling tribe in Assam. The Bodo kingdom extended along the south bank of the Brahmaputra from the Dikhau to the Kalong in the 13th Century. The Kacharis retreated further south when their old capital at Dimapur was sacked by the Ahoms in 1536 A.D., and they established

a new capital at Maibong in the North Cachar Hills. These people are known as Dimasa which means "sons of the great river". The ruins of Dimapur which are in existence till now exhibit the degree of perfection which the Kacharis attained.

It is believed that the people living in the District of Cachar are called Kacharis. It may not be out of place to mention that the Kacharis are scattered all over the Brahmaputra Valley in addition to the District of Cachar.

Dr. S.K. Bhuyan, a noted historian of Assam, is of the opinion that a strain of Kachari blood may be traced in classes which are regarded as pure Aryan. According to him, "The kingdom of Cachar, of which Tamradhwaj Narayan was the ruler in the reign of Swargadeo Rudra Singha and Gobinda Chandra at the time of British occupation, is only one of the numerous states brought to existence by the political genius of the Kachari people. But because the name Cachar was attached to the specific kingdom of that name, after which the district is called at the present time, the superficial observer is led to suppose that the habitat of the Kacharis is Cachar and that it is only in Cachar that the Kacharis experimented the arduous task of state-building; whereas in fact the Kacharis are
scattered all over the Brahmaputra Valley in addition to the so-called district of Cachar and even beyond their limits." 13

But, Sir Edward Gait points out, "If Kachar was an early home of the Mech or the headquarters of a powerful Mech dynasty, the members of the tribe in Assam may well have been called Khacharis or Kacharis; the word Khachar is derived from a Sanskrit word meaning a 'broadening region'. The district of Cachar may have got its name directly from this word, or it may have been so called after its principal tribe. In any case it is certain that the Kacharis did not get their name from Cachar. They are known by that name in many parts far remote from Cachar, and were so called long before a section of the tribe took possession of that district.

The Kacharis are believed to be very closely allied to the Koches, and also, so far at least as language is concerned, to the Chutiyas, Lalungs and Morans of the Brahmaputra Valley, and to the Garos and Tipperas of the southern hills. Having regard to their wide distribution, and to the extent of country over which Boro languages of a very uniform

type are still current, it seems not improbable that at one time the major part of Assam and North-East Bengal formed a great Bodo kingdom, and that some, at least, of the Mlechha kings mentioned in the old copper-plate inscriptions belonged to the Kachari or some closely allied tribe." 14

"Apart from the southward movement of the Miris and Chutias, most of the tribal migrations have been from the south towards the north. This was the direction of the Ahom invasion in the thirteenth century, the traditions of the Nagas all represent them as coming from the south, and the northward movement of the Kuki tribes was only stopped by the intervention of the British Government. The Kacharis were born and increased greatly in numbers and thence they travelled till they reached Nilachal, the hill near Gauhati on which the temple of Kamakhya stands. From Nilachal, they migrated to Halali and finally settled in Dimapur." 15

N.N. Acharyya confirms the points I have made out. He points out that the Kachari of Bodo race is


a very widely distributed one and exercised their sovereignty throughout Assam in different ages with different names and in different places. They are undoubtedly found well outside the limits of the modern Assam, i.e., in the districts of North-east Bengal, Jalpaiguri, Cooch Behar, Rangpur, Mymensingh and also in Hill Tipperah, where the language of the people gives decisive evidence that they are of the Bodo stock. 16

C.A. Soppitt says that the Kachari race originally inhabited the hills and slopes to the north of the Brahmaputra and then gradually extended through central Assam to the Mymensingh district, the headquarters of the Raja being established at Gauhati. 17

Rev. S. Endle says that the Kachari race is the autochthon of Assam and forms a large, perhaps the main constituent element in the permanent population of the province. 18 It has been established beyond any shade of doubt that the Kacharis are widely

spread in Assam and that they are to be found outside also in the North-East of Bengal, in Koch Behar and in the Tippera Hills. "The Kacharis are distinctly separated into the Northern and southern races. There is no intermarriage between the two and the dialects also greatly differ. A story is related about the reason for this cleavage which has to do with the war of the tribe with the Ahoms. It is said that the Ahoms were pursuing the Kacharis and their king Dimasa had to retreat when hard pressed. But the retreat was stopped by a deep river. Thus king Dimasa was in a fix with the enemy on the side and the river on the other. In the night when he slept, he had a dream in which a god appeared and said that the king and his army should enter the river at a spot where they saw a hero standing in the water, but no one should look back. Next morning the king saw a hero as the god had said and led his men to the spot. They found that the river had turned mysteriously shallow there and began to get across. But while some had managed to get across, others were in the middle of the river and yet others still this side of it, a man wandering if his son was following or not, looked back. Immediately, the waters deepened and everyone had to cope with this unexpected turn of events. Some saved themselves by clutching rushes (Khagris) and are consequently known as Khagrabarias. Others caught hold of reeds (Nals)
MAP SHOWING THE AREAS POPULATED BY BODO-KACHARI TRIBE IN THE NORTHERN REGION OF ASSAM (Bodo-Kachari Populated areas shown thus:- Scale: 1 cm = 20 Kms.
and are called Nalbarias. The Dimasas were those who could get across safely.\textsuperscript{19}

It is quite evident that the Kacharis are known under different names in different places throughout Assam. In Goalpara, Kamrup and Darrang Districts, they are known as Bodo or Bodo-Kacharis. Again, in Goalpara and North-Bengal, they are called Mech, and in North Cachar Hills, Dimasa, from the word \textit{Dimā-fisā} or sons of the great river.

For further elaboration of these points, I should like to refer to E.T. Dalton who has given a clear description about the Kacharis and their origin and spread in the following words:

"The Kacharis are one of the most numerous and widely spread of the tribes on the Eastern Frontier. They are seldom found at high elevations, preferring to live amongst low hills on the skirts of the higher ranges or on alluvial flats. Though many of them are completely fused into the mass forming the Hindu-Assamese population living like the Hindus under the shade of ancestral fruit trees..."

and pursuing the same system of permanent cultivation, the majority cling to their nomadic habits, dwelling always amidst new clearings and supporting themselves chiefly by the hoe and hand cultivation of virgin soil. They are in comparison with the average run of the people of the plains, their neighbours, a fine, athletic race, industrious and thriving of light olive complexion and rather strongly marked Mongolian features.

The Kacharis are found in small distinct settlements all over Upper Assam. The majority call themselves 'Soronia', that is, purified Kacharis, to indicate that they have adopted the customs of the Hindus and abstain from forbidden food.

Reasoning from all analogy, the country called Kachar takes its name from this tribe. The proportion of Kacharis in the population of Southern Kachar we are not told, but they are spoken of as the dominant Race. In Northern Kachar they are divided into Hazai and Parbatia, low land and high land Kacharis. The former are said to have been forced north from Lower Kachar by propulsion from the south. They are more Hinduised, civilized, and sophisticated than their brethren of the hills, the educated amongst them emulating, it is said, the Bengali in chicanery and rivalling him in
intrigue. They are physically much the inferior of the Parbatia Kachari, who are described in the same paper as a hardy and courageous race, very industrious, though rather inclined to be quarrelsome and turbulent."\textsuperscript{20}

As pointed out by E.T. Dalton, there are also remarkable linguistic affinities between the Chutiyas and the Bodos or Kacharis. He also mentioned about the Kacharis of the newly annexed Eastern Duars who described themselves as coming from a district which they called Runq-Shar, on the south side of the Upper Assam Valley. \textsuperscript{21}

"Major Fisher in his "Memoir of Sylhet, Kachar &c." says:-'According to records preserved among the family of the last princes of Kachar (which, however, are but traditions reduced to writing) the Kacharis conquered the kingdom of Kamrup, and gave to it a succession of Rajahs from whom the late royal family of Kachar of the line of Ha Tsungtsa derive their descent. The term 'Kachari' is of modern date; the proper name by which that people call themselves, viz., Rangtsa, and the country from which they trace their origin, is situated in the north-east of Assam."\textsuperscript{22}

\textsuperscript{20} Dalton, E.T., Tribal History of Eastern India, 1978, pp. 82-83.

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., pp. 83-84.

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., pp. 84.
According to S.K. Chatterjee, the Bodo (Baro) tribes are linguistically connected with the Nagas whereas the Nagas have always remained isolated, but the Bodos spread over the whole of the Brahmaputra Valley, North Bengal as well as East Bengal forming a solid block of Indo-Mongoloid (Kirata) people in Eastern India. He asserts that the Bodos or Bodo-Kacharis have retained their traditional identity by maintaining their language which has disposed in several detached pockets in Kachar (Both Hills and Plains) to the North of Brahmaputra and in the Central and Western Districts of Assam as well as in North and East Bengal, where they are found as Rabhas, Mechies, Rajbangshis and Garos as well as Hajongs and Tipperas in Tripura. 23

Now it is clear from the above discussion that the Baro or Kacharis, a branch of the Great Bodo race, are found throughout Assam, and outside also. At one time they became very powerful and ruled Assam.

In the words of Soppitt, "A large number of Kacharis who were transformed into the ruling race in the Assam Valley tendered their submission to the

Koch, during their sway in Western Assam and subsequently to the Ahoms; and though many by combining and forming large communities, retained their language to a great extent in its original form (Bodo); many again lost all or nearly all, trace of their nationality from contact with the ruling races and have probably contributed largely to the Koch caste of Hindus throughout the Valley of the Brahmaputra. After the removal of the Kachari Raj from Dimapur to Maibong we hear of fights between the Kacharis in Nowgong and Darrang and the Ahoms. As regards Darrang, it is known that considerable bodies of Kacharis settled in the district, their descendants being there to this day and it is probable that before resubmitting to the Ahoms, after the departure of the Koch, several engagements took place. They were defeated, however, and shortly after helped the Ahoms against the Mohammedans." 24

It is also admitted that the Kacharis were in a very powerful position from the latter part of the seventh Century A.D. At one time the Bodo-Kacharis were the ruling tribe in Assam, having their kingdom extended along the south bank of the Brahmaputra from the Dikhu to the Kalong in the thirteenth Century until invaded by the Ahoms.

"B.C. Allen says that the Nowgong copper plate belongs to the latter end of the tenth Century A.D. If the Mleccha chief, who overthrew the line of Naraka, was a Kachari king, then it may not be unlikely that when driven from Gauhati by Brahmapala in 1000 A.D., the Kacharis had retreated to the valley of the Dhansiri and established their capital at Dimapur. It is also said that Jongal Balahu, son of the famous Arimatta, whose capital was at Sahari Mauza, about two miles west of Raha, was engaged in constant feuds with the Kacharis, by whom he was finally defeated and killed. The remains of considerable earth works, which are said to have surrounded the capital of Jongal Balahu, are to be seen at the present near Raha, a railway station in the District of Nowgong. Several places such as Raha, Jagi, and Kajalimukh, situated on the Kalong river, are said to derive their names from incidents in the flight when pursued by the Kacharis." 25

'Now, the Bodo-Kacharis constitute a major tribe of Assam. It would be worth-while to mention that in every district of Assam, there are at least two or more villages of Bodo-Kacharis maintaining their traditional way of living. I have visited

many a number of places inhabited by the Bodo-Kachari people in the Districts of Darrang, Kamrup, Goalpara and Lakhimpur with a view to studying the educational level and backwardness among the Bodo-Kacharis which are discussed in the following Chapters.