CHAPTER: VIII

CULTURAL LIFE

To assess the cultural life of any people it is to be borne in mind that human culture is always a synthetic whole, and hence the cultural life of the Kacharis includes all facets of social, religious, economic, literary and artistic activities during the period under review. It may be recalled here that their culture began when they first lived in the solitude of forests and jungle-clad hills of Assam. As a class they then constituted small pool of humanity without any living connection with the main currents of Indian life and culture. They were then only the truants of civilization. They experienced in that stage unending series of terrors of the fellow tribes, animals and unknown powers. It was for this reason that they lived in the punji or small bustee. Each such punji was referred to in the official record as village and each Kachari village had a nodrang, a club house of the young men, the task of which was to protect the inmates of the punji from all kinds of terrors. Fear, therefore, formed the main stuff of their early life. They were then unacquainted with the more civilised way of living. But their physical strength and ethnic unity enabled them to curve out an empire for them to fight against all odds of life. Their aboriginal background is clear from the very name of the city of (Di)mapur as

1. Jitendra Kumar, Asamer Adim Jati, article in Bengali, Probash, monthly, Oct.-March, 1940 (1348 B.S.), Pp. 188-96.
explained earlier. Elements of aboriginal culture is noticed in their plant worship which was almost a common feature in the cultural life of most of the aboriginal people of India such as Mals, Savara, Mundas, Banjara, Oraon, Bhils and Santals etc. Yet the general tendency among the powerful aboriginals was to accept Aryan custom and simultaneously to retain tribal practise and thereby to relish a complacent feeling of their superiority over other fellow tribes. The Garos for example who accepted the Hindu way of life much earlier looked down upon the Kacharis in the contemporary tribal social yard-stick. But it did not become easy for the Kacharis to accept the Hindu way of life as easily as the Garos did, and this was found to be true in the case of all aboriginals. Perhaps the forces of orthodoxy among the Kacharis were strong enough to retract the Hindu way of life in the name of the purity of their race and this is evident in the introduction of the independent female clans in Maibong among the Kacharis. Introduction of the female clans was intended to prevent marriage with the Nagas and Kookis who lived in the proximity of their territory. As the latter two classes had striking

differences with the Kacharis for their aggressive temperament. Kookis and Nagas were less sober in their social life whereas the Kacharis were more peace-loving and socially a more refined class. Kookis and Nagas were almost war-like races. Naturally, the Kacharis lived in isolation without establishing any social contact with the Nagas and Kookis who lived in different parts of Cachar, Manipur, Lushai hills and hills of Tripura. This separate entity helped them in accepting brahmanical life-style more easily than the Nagas and the Kookis. Subsequently under the British while Nagas and Kookis accepted the Christian faith in a large scale, only a microscopic minority among the Kacharis accepted that faith?

Their reign in Maibong, therefore, formed the formative period of Kachari renaissance, which attained maturity in the plains of Cachar where they had transferred their capital. The first Kachari king Khaspur Harischandra did not embrace the tenets of Hinduism formally yet there was no doubt that he had profound respect for the brahmans and their faith. He had a great aversion to material life and had a fascination for the life of an ascetic. He was a devout Hindu from all considerations though he formally and officially did not accept the religion. The style of construction of Khaspur palace complex which he built,

temples of Hindu Gods and Goddesses which he constructed, Joradighi which he excavated in front of Singhadwar, clearly indicate that Harischandra got designed and built the capital befitting a Hindu king. The Khaspur palace complex is quite different from there in their previous two capitals. There are nowhere V-shaped stone pillars or memorial stone from 13 to 16 feet in height and 14 to 23 feet in circumference as we do find in Dimapur reflecting the tribal character. Nor do we find any instance in Khaspur where buildings were constructed with timber and bamboo and with mud-plastered walls which was noticed in Maibong indicating aboriginal entity. Therefore, the tribal background is very clear in the construction of palaces in Dimapur and Maibong. This was not so in Khaspur. The photographs which we have inserted in chapter III clearly indicate Hindu get-up of the Khaspur palace complex. The hut-shaped design of the temple of Khaspur reflected the temple of Bisalakshi of Bengal. These temples are clear indication of Harischandra's homage to the Hindu Gods and Goddesses. Thus the constructions in Khaspur indicate that Harischandra came much closer to the life of the Indian mainstream. Any casual traveller can easily identify Khaspur as a Hindu capital. One can measure easily to what extent they advanced themselves in the cultural field if the background of Dimapur and Maibong is known to him.

It must be admitted that Kachari kingdom already turned into a full-fledged Hindu kingdom like that of the Hindu kingdoms of Manipur and Tripura. And this happened even before the formal conversion of royal house to Sanatan Dharma.¹⁰

Rapid cultural advancement towards Indian mainstream was noticed during the reign of Krishnachandra who succeeded Harischandra. To obliterate the non-Aryan background of the Kacharis, the brahmans in Kaasipur suggested celebration of the Haranyagarbha ceremony to bring formally the royal house under Hindu brahmanical religion. Krishnachandra did this Mahadana known as Hiranyagarbha ceremony¹¹ in a specially arranged religious conclave. Following the contemporary practice he accepted Hinduism and the brahmans in his kingdom also acknowledged him as a Hindu. This elevated the Kachari royal family, as mentioned earlier, to positions of members of the Hindu society. As a performer of Hiranyagarbha Mahadana ceremony, Krishnachandra ranked himself as one of the Indian Hindu kings and got recognition of Hiranyagarbha prasuta. They inculcated in them all the practices usually performed by Hindu kings. One of such practices was undertaking pilgrimage to the Hindu Holy cities of North India. Krishnachandra did it and

¹¹. Ibid, P. 112.
incurred a lot of expenditure for the purpose. He was also accepted as a Hindu king by the contemporary kings. His marriage to Induprabha, the princess of the kingdom of Manipur illustrate it very clearly. It was unthinkable that a Manipuri princess would marry a Kachari king if the royal family was not recognised as a Hindu family. The royal house of Manipur gave the Kacharis equal social status. Moreover Krishnachandra personally inculcated in him the qualities of an illustrious Hindu king. Not only was he religious minded like his father and a bit indifferent to material life, he acquired great proficiency in Bengali language and literature which will be discussed in the appropriate place.

Recital of Bhagavata Puranam in Maibong court and perhaps Khaspur palace as a routine work indicates the cultural refinement of the royal house. The nobility began to behave like Hindus in all social matters. No longer the royal family laid emphasis on their old aboriginal customs and traditions.

The cultural refinement of the Kachari social mind can be exhibited from the instance of Govindachandra's marriage with his brother's widow Induprabha. It was unthinkable in brahmanical society though such instances were not rare in the tribal life. Sharp social reaction against this illegitimate marriage reflected the cultural maturity of

12 Ibid, P. 117.
the higher class of the Kachari society in the Hindu line. Their social likes and dislikes became more prominent in the plains of Cachar. Govindachandra's social ex-communication indicate deep influence of brahmanical faith in the Kachari social life. Yet this is an instance of Govindachandra's personal lapse for which he paid his own penalty. Yet the process of cultural advancement in the Kingdom did not stop under Govindachandra. Under him the Barmans fully emerged as a dominant Kshatriya clan though we do not find any example where Kachari kings of Khaspur have ever been mentioned as Krishnachandra Barman and Govindachandra Barman like the Hindu kings of Tripura. But the Kacharis by and large in Khaspur used this surname without fail. They abided by all social customs and observed religious rites like the Hindus of the Bengal districts. Acceptance of the Barmans as Hindus in Khaspur during the period under review was recognised by common social consent.

One point needs to be highlighted here. There was the apparent and surface rigidity of Indian caste system. Yet the caste Hindus offered no resistance to the Kacharis who desired to come into the fold of Hinduism. Here lies the flexible character of Hinduism. Sir Herbert Risley rightly observes that in this process of transformation they lost their tribal name and became Rajputs or Kshatriyas and gained for them a different pe-digree invented by the brahman priests. They lost aboriginal and semi-aboriginal traits
and also gained gotra of a particular class and intermarried with the members of that caste. "This practice", observes the Modern Review, "is being commonly adopted in the outlying parts of Bengal and Assam".16

The cultural refinement of the Kachari kings of Khaspur is better illustrated in their tolerant characters specially in the matter of religion. Their religious temper was one of non-interference and tolerance. Though they adopted Hinduism formally yet they practised Hindu way of life much earlier. They did not bear two names like the Ahom kings, nor did they adopt tribal names like Hachengsa, their first king, and adopted Aryan names even before their formal conversion.17 Their tolerant and sympathetic attitude have been illustrated in their patronage to saivism and vaisnavism though they were Saktist. Yet their aboriginal beliefs and customs continued to influence the life of the Kacharis in the remote areas from the capital. They did worship Hindu Gods, but they did so in their own way, Pigs, buffaloes, he-goats, pigeons, ducks and cocks were used as offerings along with rice-liquor (zoo) to the Hindu Goddess18 This was done in most of the tribal societies in India. The lower stratum in the Kachari

16. The Modern Review, Nov. 1926, Pp 544-45, see, comments entitled, "our rigid caste system".


18. From the findings of field investigation.
society never responded to royal progressivism as easily as the upper classes did. Thus apparently there continued in Kachari society, two cultural flows though the most dominant was brahmanism. Unfortunately the Kachari kingdom did not get sufficient time for gradual assimilation due to company's annexation in 1832, yet their kings' progressive attitude helped to develop brahmanical faith in their kingdom unobstructed. Perhaps because of this twin flow, the primitive Kachari culture passed from one generation to another and old values of the Kachari society get transmitted to the new generation. It was because of this reason total cultural synthesis did not become possible. Despite formal conversion to Hinduism the tribal character remained dormant in the upper stratum. As an evidence we may cite here the worship of mother Goddess. Mother Goddess in the Kachari kingdom outnumbered the masculine deities. Perhaps this difference is to be associated with the patriarchal character of the brahmanical society and matriarchal character of aboriginal society. The Kachari native goddesses were now identified with Sakti or the great mother when the Kacharis came under brahmanical faith. Male Gods gradually came under prominence only when they came under Aryan influence. Worshipping of masculine God was only then patronised. Patronage extended to Saivism and renovation to Bhubaneswar Siva Temple in the Chandragiri tilla in 1906 by Krishnachandra's minister Jai Singh are examples. Such open patronage to masculine Gods was not found earlier.

Yet the most prominent in the kingdom was the mother Goddesses and they were identified with either Durga, Chandi, Kali or Mahakali. They conceived Kali as Kachakanti—a great mother, loving, adored and a dread power delighting in death and destruction and even in human sacrifice. Their Durga was not a Durga of puranic legend. She was a Durga with their aboriginal concepts. Thus we find how they blended Aryan culture with their aboriginal culture in their own way. It was the flexibility of Hinduism, in some respects despite its rigidity in the matter of religious rites. Their worship was also given approval by the priestly class of the Kachari kingdom. In fact, their Hinduism was a liberal form of Hinduism. The Kachari kings were too much liberal in religious matters. Their Muhammedan subjects were allowed to practise their own faith without any opposition. They were also tried in the Kachari Court of law on the basis of the law of the Quran. There was no forcible imposition, nor was there any instance of harrassment meted out to anyone on religious ground.

Their tolerant attitude to get themselves merged with the mainstream of Indian life is reflected in the matter of enacting fiscal laws and laws for administration of legal justice.

21. Please see Dandabidhi and Rinadanbidhi in the appendix No. 7 and 8 respectively.
Gobindachandra's attempt to get a book of penal code written on the model of "Bibad Darpan" which was the book of penal laws in force in the Kushala kingdom in North India illustrate how the Kachari royal house strove hard to bring the Kachari Judicial administration at per with other Hindu Kingdom of northern India. Introduction of Hindu monetary system, which has been discussed in the previous chapter indicate abandonment of the earlier tribal system of monetary transaction of the olden days. Their criminal and civil laws and their credit system were drafted on the basis of Arthasastra and Manusmriti and contemporary Hindu social traditions. All the provisions of the act were drafted not only in Sanskrit but also in the Bengali language. Following the contemporary Hindu practice, promulgations were made for using Saka era. Except the solemn promise that the king would honour old traditions and customs of the Kacharis all provisions in the laws reflected the age-old Indian tradition. It deserves a mention here that their laws gave a special status to the brahmans. What a striking contrast with their previous system of administration and financial administration! Their cultural refinement is noticed in each provision which assured legal justice to the aggrieved.22

The Kachari kings of Khaspur were generous patrons of literary activities. Their liberal attitude towards the Bengali language and literature was reflected in granting

22. Ibid.
state assistance to the Kachari poets, for the production of Bengali literature. Here we find similarity with the Ahom monarch who encouraged production of literature in the Assamese language rather than in their own language. The Kacharis like the Ahoms had their own language, called Dimasa. It was their spoken language. Their tradition and folk songs were passed from generation to generation orally. They did not develop the written form of Dimasa language. Naturally Kacharis had no literature in their own language. On the contrary, proximity of the Bengal districts influenced them to accept Bengali as the medium of literary expression. It is indeed creditable to the Kachari kings that they themselves acquired proficiency in the Bengali language and contributed to the growth of the Bengali language and literature in a humble way in Khaspur. Krishnachandra who reigned from 1780 proved himself a good composer of devotional songs. His songs were in the form of a prayer to the mother goddess Ranachandi in which he prayed to rescue him from the troubles which he and his state underwent following the capture of his kingdom by Aga Md. Reja in 1799. Perhaps they have little literary merit. But there is no doubt that his devotional songs have great historic value.

He could have composed them in his own mother-tongue but he

24. Guha, U.C., n.5, P. 113. (for Bengali style, see appendix No. 9 Serial No. 1)
did not do so. The use of Bengali by him clearly indicate his love for the language. Usefulness of such a language must have influenced Krishnachandra to compose his poem in that language. His successor Govindachandra who reigned from 1813 composed "Rasalilamrita" in Bengali. It was a lyric dance drama eulogizing various aspects of life of Lord Krishna. His another work in Bengali was "Govindakirtan". It was a collection of devotional songs written by him in homage to govinda who is also called Krishna. The above two works of Govindachandra prove beyond reasonable doubt, his inclination towards Vaisnavism.

Outside the royal palace, a congenial atmosphere was created for undertaking literary activities during the period under review.

Anantaram Barman completed the translation of Brahmapurana in Bengali 1795 (1201 B.C.) Another poet of remarkable eminence was Chandramohan, a contemporary of king Krishnachandra. In his poems he describes the events of the reign of Suradarpa under whom the task of translating Brahmapurana was first undertaking. Guha describes him as a Kachari national poet. This indicates the importance of Chandramohan Barman in the literary history of the Kachari kingdom. Chandramohan lived a long life and saw the

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25. Ibid, P. 163. (Appendix No. 9. Serial No. 2)
26. Ibid, P. 88. (Appendix No. 9, Serial No. 3).
contemporary events personally.27 Hence we first mentioned in
his work how and why the practice of human sacrifice in the
Kachari kingdom was abolished.

The cultural refinement of the Kachari kings has
been illustrated in granting in extending patronage to the
development of the Bengali language and literature and
thereby established close cultural ties with the main stream
of Indian life. The Kachari kings of Khaspur transformed
the spoken Bengali dialect into written Bengali form in all
royal works. The penal code of Govindachandra was written
in sanskrit with Bengali versions. The Kachari credit
system in the name of Rinadanbidhi was also drafted in
Bengali.28 Local Bengali language was used in their
correspondences with the authorities of the East India
company29 All their deeds granting Brahmattor and Debattor
lands were written in the Bengali language. The deed
granting land to Atmaram Bhattacharjee of Panchakhand for
instance, was written in Bengali. So was the case with
Sonaram Deshmukh of Udarbond who received a land grant from
Govindachandra. It is interesting to note that side by side
with the Bengali text, the Sanskrit text is also noticed such

27. Ibid, P. 124 (Appendix No. 9, Serial No. 4)
28. (Please See Appendix No. 9, Serial No. 5)
29. Bishi, Sri Pramatnath and Dutta, Sri Bijit Kumar
(Ed) Bangla Gaddyer Padanka 2nd Edn., 1372 B.S. P.
559. (Please see Appendix No. 9. Serial No. 6).
FRESCOS IN THE MODEST FORM
as in the case of landgrant issued to Gopinath Siromoni.\textsuperscript{30}

Thus the Kachari kings of Khaspur used simultaneously the Bengali and the Sanskrit languages along with Bengali Era and Saka Era in their official correspondences. Under the circumstances it is not unreasonable to conclude that Bengali was adopted as the medium of official expression in the Kachari court.

Before this narrative is finally closed, it is necessary to throw some light on the artistic activities of the Kachari kings of Khaspur. The frescos in the temples are in the most modest form. They depict trident inside circles connected with creepers which have been exhibited in the annexed photograph. Perhaps they reflected symbol of saktism. There is no human form in those frescos. The simplicity of the designs of the temples and their modest decoration do not reflect any artistic skill. Temples are brick-built, but appears from distance as if they were rock works. There is no evidence of any workmanship. All the buildings are of unified design. Despite this, the serenity of the constructions and their Hindu fashion made the temples impressive. The capital looked like an abode of Hindu goddesses rather than a palace of kings. The only massive structure is Barduari. It is a two-storied building almost like a tower. The front face has a lancet opening for the admission of light into the rooms. The staircase to the building is now almost broken. The technique of

\textsuperscript{30} Guha, U.C., n. 5, P. 175 - 77. (Appendix No.9, Serial No. 7)
construction indicate the architect must have been imported from Bengal. The constructions exhibited similarity with the style of construction of the Ahom palace.

Their coins are of simple type without any craftsmanship. Like their temples, their coins also reflected their devotion to Hindu goddesses. Through their construction of temples and minting of coins they unquestionably established their Hindu identity.

The cultural significance of the Kachari kingdom of Khaspur is that, they being one of the aboriginal races of Assam came to mainstream of Indian life in the 19th century. It took about five hundreds years' preparations. They did not come under Hindu influence all of a sudden. Circumstances forced them to merge with the Hindu society. No doubt their proximity with the Bengal district facilitated their conversion. Yet this peace-loving tribe found required ingredients, in Hinduism for a descent living. As a class they were quite different from others. Their tolerant nature helped them to appreciate the culture of the masses in the main land of India. Their epic background undoubtedly influenced them to accept the Hindu caste system and became members of that society. The narrative above indicate that they tried utmost to give their kingdom a Hindu get-up and share the cultural heritage of India and thereby they established their Hindu identity.