CHAPTER: IX

LIFE AT A GLANCE

The Kachari kings first established their capital at Dimapur in the thirteenth century A.D. Forced by the circumstances they came to Maibong where they set up their second capital in the sixteenth century and therefrom they shifted their capital to Khaspur in the plains of Cachar in the middle of the eighteenth century. Their kingdom survived till the treacherous murder of Govinda Chandra, their last king in 1830 and then the East India Company took over the charge of Khaspur by a proclamation and annexed it to their dominion in 1832.

Khaspur is situated on the bank of the river Madoora, a contributory rivulet of the Cachar district's Principal river, the Barak. The early political background of Cachar is very obscure. It was more or less included within the boundary of Sylhet up to the 13th century A.D. In the thirteenth century, Tripura rule was enforced in Cachar and subsequently in the sixteenth century A.D. (1562) it came under the rule of the Koches following the invasion of Koch general Chilarai. Khaspur since then was governed by his Agent called Dehan (Dewan) up to the middle of the eighteenth century A.D. The Kachari royal house of Maibong established matrimonial alliance with the Koch Dehans of Khaspur and this enabled the Kachari king of Maibong to get his capital shifted to the plains of Cachar in the middle of the eighteenth century.
The Kacharis were one of the aboriginal tribes of the Brahmaputra Valley of present Assam and they belonged to the Bodo stock of people. From the anthropological point of view, they seem to be of Mongolian origin. These Mongolian people might have come either from Tibet or China in the first millennium B.C.

Their past tradition indicate that they established their political hold over the greater part of the Brahmaputra Valley even before the arrival of the Ahoms in Assam. The names of the important rivers and of the places in the Brahmaputra Valley beginning with the prefix 'D' (which means river or water in Kachari language) such as Dimapur, Diphu, Dhansiri etc., indicate their hold on the banks of those rivers. Tradition further indicate that the Kacharis once ruled over Kamrup. It is probable that after being driven out from Kamrup (it is not known by whom), a powerful group among them established their hold in Dimapur, where they established their first historical capital, while other groups of Kacharis being cut off from the main group got themselves settled on the hills and might have entered into matrimonial relationship with the other aboriginal tribes and as a result of this fusion, tribes like the Garos, the Koches etc. were born.

While the Kacharis had their capital at Dimapur, they first came in confrontation with the Ahoms in the Thirteenth century and by the sixteenth century the latter
sacked their capital and this forced the Kacharis to come over to Maibong and establish their new capital on the bank of the river Mahur. The Ahoms since then acted as their overlord. But the Ahom influence in Maibong did not last long owing to their defeat in the hands of Koch General Chilarai in 1562. The Koch General simultaneously also captured the Kachari Capital Maibong and brought the reigning monarch under his heels. So long the Koch influence remained dominant, the Ahoms failed to reestablish their hold over Maibong. But after the death of Chilarai, Ahoms began to try to regain their overlordship over the Kacharis. Ahom policy of territorial expansion, the frequent disturbances committed by the Jaintias inside the Kachari kingdom, the growing influence of Hinduism in the royal family ultimately compelled the Kachari rulers to shift their capital to Khaspur in plain Cachar in the middle of the eighteenth century.

Before the shifting of their capital to Khaspur the Kacharis had indirect control over the plain areas of Cachar. It was regarded as their sphere of influence. The Kachari prince Lakshmichandra who married the daughter of Koch king of Khaspur in 1745 created a good background for the subsequent transfer of capital. It was Harischandra, the uncle of Lakshmichandra who had shifted the capital in the year 1755 and this is confirmed from the land grant which recently has come to light.

The new capital city at Khaspur was built by Harischandra. The temples of Ranachandi, Vishnu and Kali
indicate that the capital was built like a Hindu capital. All the constructions are brick-built and surface is plastered with surki.

The political history of the kings of Khaspur was not a happy one, particularly during the reigning periods of Krishnachandra and Govindachandra. During the early period of Krishnachandra, one Aga Md. Reja invaded his kingdom for which he sought the assistance of the East India Company which indicate that his position was weak from the military point of view. On the other hand, the Moamaria rebellion in the Ahom kingdom also effected his kingdom. Rebel leaders took shelter in his territory. The Ahom king demanded the extradition of the refugees who took shelter here, but the Kachari king remained non-committal. Meanwhile, Manipuri princes on being driven out from Manipur, also took shelter in Cachar. Krishnachandra's repeated appeals to the company for assistance proved his incompetence. His successor Govindachandra was also confronted with similar situations. The revolt of his own general Tularam Senapati and his son Kachadin, the occupation of Cachar by the Manipuri princes compelled Govindachandra to take refuge in Sylhet under the company's rule. The advance of the Burmese army to Cachar alarmed the British authorities in Calcutta and at last they concluded in 1824 the treaty of Badarpur with Govindachandra. According to the terms of the treaty, Govindachandra was restored to the throne of Cachar. But he reigned from a temporary capital at Haritikar which was closer to Sylhet.
His reign in Cachar came to an end in 1630 when he was murdered by an unknown assassin said to have engaged by the Manipuri prince Gambhir Singh. The absence of legal heir in the royal family compelled the East India Company in 1832 to annex the Kingdom. Yet during their short reign, they exhibited a life-style of their own.

At Khaspur, the Kachari Kings set up a new type of administrative system - one for the Kacharis and another for the non-Kachari subjects. The Kachari kings had two courts - Mel and UL. The first one consisted of forty Semphongs, who could decide all matters relating to the Kacharis. The other house called the UL consisted of Mukhters or heads of the Khels decided non-Kachari affairs. In the matters concerning all subjects, a joint session of both the houses was convened.

The whole kingdom was divided into a number of divisions which were subdivided into taluks and taluks were again subdivided into Maujas. In the judicial level, the king was the highest judicial authority and he was assisted by four princes. Their code was based upon Hindu Sastras while the Muhammedan Laws was based on the laws of the Quran. No regular police department existed in the kingdom. Some persons known as Barkandaz were appointed for three months in a year to prevent crime. They did not receive salary but enjoyed certain rent free land for their services. In the rural areas law and order was maintained with the help
of the paiks, known as Dakwahs. Their army mainly consisted of Infantry.

With the shifting of the Kachari capital from Dimapur to Khaspur, the old tribal beliefs and traditions gradually began to change and gradual Hinduisation of their social outlook was noticed. They were free from all Hindu influence while at Dimapur but at Maibong Hindu influence was marked by the use of the names of their kings such as Nirbhoynarayan, Meghanarayan, Yasonarayan etc. It was at Maibong, female clan called Julu also came into being. The main purpose behind the introduction of the female clan was to preserve their racial purity by preventing assimilation with other tribal people through marriage. One peculiarity of the Kachari social system was the simultaneous existence of agnate and cognate semphongs and Julus.

Their laws of inheritance were somewhat different from those of other tribes. It can be divided into three heads—paternal property (real estate, weapons, and hard cash), maternal property, (jewellery, cloths, family looms, etc.) and common property, (cooking utensils, dishes, made of brass etc.).

Two types of marriages were prevalent among the Kacharis: (i) Marriage by elopement and (ii) negotiated marriage. Among them marriage by elopement was very popular. The Kacharis both male and female used their traditional ornaments and dresses. In the village life of the Kacharis Nodrangs or bachelors' club house played a very important role. But impact of Brahmanical religion on their society
brought about major changes in their life-style. The age-old doctrine of the Hindu social divisions influenced the Kachari society in the plains of Cachar.

The age-old religious beliefs and customs of the Kacharis gradually began to transform when the Kacharis settled at Khaspur. Absence of priesthood in the early period and plant worship indicate that they were following a religion similar to the one followed by the early Indo-aryans at least in this respect. The process of aryanisation began when the Kacharis were at Maibong and it took a matured form at Khaspur. It was due to the influence of the brahmans upon Kachari king that Krishnachandra, his brother Govindachandra and Kachari nobility embraced Hinduism formally. They then observed Hindu customs and rites but, their traditional customs and rites were not totally abandoned. Different Hindu Gods and Goddesses were worshipped along with their harvesting tribal deities. The tribal Gods were worshipped by the Bantijai families who took a meaningful role in the religious life of the Kacharis.

Like the Ahom rulers of the Brahmaputra valley, the Kachari kings were followers of Saktism. But vaisnava faith also did not fade away. This is evident from the existence of Vishnu temple inside Khaspur palace complex. Perhaps after the marriage with Induprabha, the Manipuri princess, Krishnachandra became inclined towards vaisnavism. Govindachandra himself composed vaisnava songs like "Rasalilamrita" and devotional songs of Lord Krishna. Their inclination towards saivism was also noticed through their
patronage extended to Bhubaneswar Siva and construction of a Siva temple inside the palace complex.

Khaspur attracted the attention of the fortune-seekers of the neighbouring Bengal districts who came and settled in the kingdom. Brahmans were brought by the king who got them settled in the kingdom. Some were appointed as Rajpandits and Royal Priests in the kingdom. They were granted Brahmattor lands. As the number of new-settlers in the kingdom was greater than that of Kachari people, the king introduced two types of revenue administration - one dealing with the Kachari subjects alone constituted by the long gradation of royal officials. The migrants on the other hand, were granted a set of special tax-laws which protected them from the high-handedness of the Kachari royal tax-collectors and court officials dealing with the Kachari subjects alone.

Under the Kachari kings, the management of the royal revenue department was placed under Bar-bhandari who was assisted by other subordinate officers. On the other hand, in order to bring waste land under tillage, the lands were allotted to groups of people, mostly migrants called Raj which were subdivided into khels and which became the real units of the Kachari revenue system. Each individual in the khel was jointly and individually responsible for the payment of the total revenue assessed on the khel and similarly each khel in turn was responsible for the payment to the Raj. The khel elected its representative known as Mukhter, while the elected representative of the Raj were called Choudhury, Mazumdar, Laskar, Barbhuyan and Chotabhuayan according to
their territorial jurisdiction.

The main source of income of the kings of Khaspur was the revenue derived from lands. During the early period of their rule at Khaspur, source of income was sound which is evident from the construction of their capital complex. Gradually due to political disturbances such as Manipuri disturbances, Moamaria rebellion, their economic condition began to deteriorate. In the time of Krishnachandra, the revenue from the different sources was one lac in kind and cash. In the time of Govindachandra, total revenue collection was about twenty thousand rupees. Desperate attempts were made by the last two Rajas of Cachar, Krishnachandra and Govindachandra to improve their financial position by resorting to various economic drives. Small scale industries such as brass and bellmetal industry, manufacture of Endi and Muga cloth developed in the kingdom which was organised by the common men.

Medium of exchange was cowries. Existence of king's coins were few. Penal code or Dandabidhi gives us the information about commercial transactions and medium of exchange and their law of punishment. Trade and commerce carried on mainly through the river route, and Kachari kings always exhibited keen interest in normalising trade relations with the neighbouring countries in the greater interest of their kingdom. Had there been no internal and external disturbances, the Kachari kingdom would have survived for a longer period. But the end of the Kachari kingdom was tragic.
It was fated to meet its end like other Hindu kingdoms of India.

During their reign, we notice great cultural advancement in the Hindu line. In the early stage, they were truants of civilization. But they had among them the same tendency to accept Aryan custom and at the same time, retain some of their important age-old traditions and to relish a complacent feeling of their superiority over other tribes. They kept themselves aloof from other tribal communities for the purpose of preserving their racial purity and this helped them to accept brahmanical faith more easily than other tribal communities in the neighbourhood. Their palace complex at Khaspur reflected their faith on Hindu religion. Khaspur was quite different from their two previous capitals where their aboriginal character was more prominent. Under Krishnachandra rapid cultural advancement was noticed. By performing Hiranyakarbhā Mahadana ceremony, the king, the members of the royal family and the Kachari nobility came to be regarded as Hiranyakarbhā Prasuta. The contemporary Hindu king of Manipur gave them equal social and religious status and established matrimonial relationship with them. The kings inculcated in them all the good qualities of a Hindu king. Yet, their age-old customs, beliefs and traditions continued to influence the life of the Kacharis at the lower stratum and their tribal ceremonies were conducted by Kachari Banti jai families. But in the upper stratum, old beliefs and customs remained dormant.
The cultural transformation of the Kacharis was noticed when upper stratum reacted sharply against Govindachandra's marriage with the widow of his elder brother. The cultural refinement of the Kacharis is better illustrated in their tolerant characters in the matter of religion. Non-interference and tolerance were the two cardinal principles of the Kachari royal life. Though they were the followers of saktism, they equally patronised vaisnavism and saivism and also honoured the rules of the Holy Quran.

They patronised the Bengali language and literature. The last two kings composed devotional songs in the Bengali language. Though they had their own language, they encouraged production of Bengali literature. A congenial atmosphere was created in the kingdom for the production of Bengali literature and good number of works were produced under royal patronage. Translation of the Brahmapurana in Bengali is an example. Chandramohan was their national poet. Regard for the Brahmans, acceptance of Hinduism, encouragement to Bengali literature, use of Bengali Era and Saka Era and occasional use of Sanskrit and finally their liberal outlook in the Hindu line converted one-time tribal Kachari kingdom into a full-fledged Hindu kingdom. It was due to this that the Kachari kings established beyond any reasonable doubt their Hindu identity and thereby they came much closer to the mainstream of the Indian life. Here lies the significance of the cultural life of the Kachari kingdom of Khaspur.