CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Cachar at present a south-eastern district of Assam, is situated between longitudes 92°14' E to 93°16' E and latitudes 24°8' N to 25°8' N covering an area of 5102 square kilometers. It is bounded on the north by the North Cachar Hill District of Assam, Jayantia Hill District of Meghalaya; on the east by the Manipur state; on the south by the State of Mizoram and on the west by Tripura and Sylhet District (Bangladesh). The North Cachar Hill District in the north was a subdivision of the Cachar District till 1953. Karimganj now a district of Assam was a subdivision in Cachar District from 1947 till 1983. Before the annexation of Cachar by the British in 1830, the North Cachar Hill District, Hojai-Dabaka areas of Nowgong District of Assam and Jiri Frontier area of Manipur were known as Heramba kingdom.¹

The area mentioned above was named as Kachar by the people of Sylhet from very early times. According to Sir Edward Gait author of the A History of Assam, the district of Cachar either might have got its name from the Sanskrit word "Khachar" meaning a "bordering region", or after the name of the principal tribe Kacharis inhabiting the area.² But Padmanath Vidyavinod in his Critical Study of Mr. Gait's History of Assam observed

"...........the name has been given to the district by the Bengalees of Sylhet, because it is derived from Sanskrit 'Kachchha' which means 'a plain near mountain', or a place near water." Another scholar Shri Achyut Charan Choudhury has tried to prove both historically and ethnologically that the Dimasa were also called Kacharís from the time, the valley of Cachar formed a part of their kingdom. J.B. Bhattacharjee contends that ever since Khaspur became the capital of the Heramba, the Kingdom was called by the people of Sylhet as Cachar and the ruling Dimasa tribe as "Kacharís". Even the Bengalees living in Cachar were known as Kacharís. Many historians agree that Barak valley was always known to the Bengalees as Cachar and the ruling race as Kacharís. In British records the ruling race appeared as Kacharís even before its annexation by the British East India Company.

Physical background

Cachar consisted of two broad divisions—Cachar plains and North Cachar Hills. Cachar plains was known as South Cachar.

It consisted of Silchar and Hailakandi Sub-divisions.


4. According to Pandit Raj Mohan Nath in two 'Sanads' written in two pieces of coarse brown paper found in the possession of one Bhogeswar Lalung of Nahorgon near Doboka in the Nowgong District a seal of the King of "Zilla Kachehar" dated 1734 Saka (1812 A.D.) were to be seen. Though the Sanads bear no name of the King Shri Nath believed that the seal was engraved in 1812 and the Sanads were issued in 1814 by Tularam. — See also Bhattacharjee, J.B.; n 1, pp. 14-15.
Cachar or more properly the valley of Barak was an "extension of Gangetic Bengal" from geographical, historical and ethnic points of view. It is a plain region or a valley formed by the river Barak which is also known as Surma beyond Karimganj; the valley is occasionally dotted with the hills which are commonly known as tilas. The plains section or the extensive valley of Cachar lies to the south of the Barail range. It has an average elevation of about 75 metres and is intersected by two transverse hills, the Rengti pahar and Tilain, which enclose a low marshy tract known as Chatla Haor in the eastern part of the valley.

The Barak with its tributaries Sonai, Dhaleswari and Katakhali runs throughout from east to west. The total length of the Barak course within Cachar is about 209.17 kilometers, it flows within 137.16 metres to 182.88 metres wide and navigable for native boats of large tonnage capacity. The Barak and its tributaries dry up during winter but with the rains they swell up and overflow their banks. Heavy floods and inundations are, therefore, frequent occurrences in Cachar which bring untold sufferings to the people and their crops and cattle. The presence of this extensive water surface

5. Ibid., p. 2.
bordered by forests cause excessive precipitation. Extreme humidity and heaviest rainfall are two characteristics of the climate of Cachar. The fertility of soil has been a point of attraction to the people from neighbouring regions from early times. Notwithstanding, Cachar on the eve of British annexation had a scanty population which might have been due to misrule, Manipuri and Burmese invasions.

**Historical background**

It has already been stated that the picturesque valley of the Barak is a natural continuation of the vast Bengal plains and was included in the various kingdoms that had emerged during the prehistoric and early historical periods like Gauda, Vanga and Samatata. Due to the absence of archaeological source, the history of ancient Cachar had to be reconstituted on the basis of literary evidence of the Puranas which may be accepted as source of history. During the rule of the Guptas, Cachar Valley, Sylhet and Chittagong area was known as Pratyanta Desha. Kamakhya Tantra, a Sanskrit literary work, points out that Cachar was integrated in the Sapta-Khanda Kamrupa. The Varaha-Purana and Vayu-Purana

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11. Ibid., p. 1.
referred to Barak as Barbakra or commonly known as Punyotova or holy river. The Yogini-Tantra and Kalika-Purana mention about the Bhubaneswar temple. For some references in the Mahabharata, the Kacharis claim their descent from Ghototkach, son of Bhima.

However, systematic history of Cachar can be traced from seventh century A.D. From seventh to tenth centuries the region might have been included in the Harikela kingdom which comprised Sylhet and the adjacent territories. In the thirteenth century the Barak valley was ruled by the Tripuris, a section of the Bodos. In the beginning of the sixteenth century, we find an independent Tripura state established in Cachar.

The Koch principality in Cachar that existed from sixteenth to the eighteenth century A.D. is an example of Medieval Polity Formation by Hinduised tribal groups. The Koches were a Hinduised branch of the Bodo family of the Tibeto-Burman race of North-East India. They emerged as the ruling

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12. Ibid., p. 5.
13. Ibid., p. 8.
14. Mazumdar, R.C., n 9, pp. 79-81, also Bhattacharjee, J.B., n 5, p. 4.
race of the Koch Behar state which was founded by Biswa Singha in the beginning of the sixteenth century. However, Sukladwaj, more popularly known as Chilarai, led successful campaigns against the Ahom, Dimasa, Jayantia and other north-eastern states. It was during his campaign that Chilarai laid the foundation of a petty Koch principality in the Barak Valley by conquest. 18

Although no trustworthy records exist concerning the period of Kachari supremacy, it is known that the Kachari Rajas first ruled in the hilly region, now occupied by the Nagas to the north of Barail range. Their capital was first at Dimapur, where ruins of brick buildings are still in existence amidst dense jungle. 19 Subsequently due to the aggressions of the Ahoms they were compelled to remove southward to Maibong, in a valley between two spurs of the Barail range in the North Cachar Hills. But their capital at Maibong was exposed to the aggressions of the Koches under Chilarai in the middle of the sixteenth century. He was the brother and general of the powerful Koch monarch Nararayana. The Koch general left a colony of people in the Cachar district who were known as Dehans. 20 Till the beginning of the seventeenth century very little is known of the Kachari history but during this period they extended

18. Ibid.
20. Ibid., p. 251.
their rule up to the plains of Cachar. Khaspur near Silchar became the seat of the Kachari capital. Ever since Khaspur became the capital of Heramba, the kingdom was called by the people of Sylhet as 'Cachar' and the ruling Dimasa tribe as Kacharis. In the 17th century the Heramba kingdom attained pristine glory.

The Kachari kings had their conflicts with the Jayantias and the Ahoms. The Raja of Cachar had to cede a portion of his territory up to the river Jamuna to the Ahoms which once formed a part of the Heramba Government. From the latter part of the eighteenth century till the beginning of the nineteenth century, the Ahom kingdom itself was in trouble due to internal troubles and external dangers arising out of Mrauk-U revolts and Burmese invasions.

The subsequent history of Cachar till its annexation by the British in 1832 is a continuous record of strife and misrule emanating from internal as well as external forces. Raja Krishna Chandra ascended the throne in 1773 and due to his indifference to the state affairs, the kingdom was subjected to a series of internal and external aggressions. There was a heavy drain in the state resources and military organisation was also on the point of collapse. The Raja sought help of the British East India Company and cultivated friendly

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relations with it which had exposed Cachar to the colonial speculation of the British. Due to the successive aggressions of a fanatic named Aga Mohammad Reza and a displaced army personnel named Kalyan Singh, the Raja in quest of personal security left the kingdom temporarily.22

Krishna Chandra after a long reign died in 1813 leaving no heir to the throne. He was therefore succeeded by his younger brother Gobinda Chandra who had "begun his career in the face of a host of problems, both external and internal."23 Before long he allowed himself "to be entangled in the web of intrigue that had encircled the throne of Manipur". In the beginning of the nineteenth century, there followed a scramble for succession between three Manipuri brothers Marjit, Chaurjit and Gambhir. During and immediately before the Anglo-Burmese War (1824-26) Cachar became the arena of a struggle between the three aforesaid Manipuri princes who had been driven out from Manipur by the Burmese.24

The Manipuri invaders had dislodged Gobinda Chandra; Marjit took possession of the Hailakandi valley and Gambhir Singh the rest of Cachar. To add to the misfortunes of Gobinda Chandra one of his Kachari Officers Kohi Dan (Kohi Das) by name set up a principality of his own.25 The former got him

23. Ibid., p. 25.
24. Ibid. — p. 7
captured and put to death, whereupon his son Tularam in the wake of the Burmese invasion joined the invaders to avenge his father's murder. Tularam's success against the Raja deprived the latter of his northern hills.

Meanwhile, the Burmese advanced from Manipur towards Cachar and Assam and the British declared war against the Burmese. By the Treaty of Badarpur (1824) signed with Gobinda Chandra, Cachar became a protected tributary state and after the conclusion of the Anglo-Burmese War Govinda Chandra was reinstated in his throne in 1826. In 1829 Mr. David Scott, Agent to the Governor-General, North-East Frontier, induced Gobinda Chandra to concede to Tularam the hilly portion of his territory. The Raja, however, was not destined to rule for long and he was assassinated in April, 1830.

Due to the absence of any legal heir to the vacant throne, the British East India Company which had its covetous eyes on Cachar annexed it by means of a proclamation in August 1832 to its dominion, restoring the Pargana of Dharampur to Lower Assam and dividing the remaining portion into North and South Cachar. Tularam was allowed to retain possession of the hilly areas that had been assigned to him by the late Raja. Thus Cachar ultimately succumbed to the imperialistic designs of the British Company.

26. Ibid., p. 304.
27. Ibid., p. 305.
28. Ibid.
The Supreme Government after Cachar's annexation appointed in 1833 Lieutenant T. Fisher as Superintendent of Cachar with headquarters at Dudpatil. He was to exercise the powers of a Magistrate, Collector and a Civil Judge under the supervision of the Agent to the Governor-General. Over and above these, he was to exercise political authority over the hill tribes on the Cachar frontier on behalf of the Government of India.²⁹ The Superintendent was first under the Commissioner of Assam, but afterwards placed under the supervision of the Commissioner of Dacca.

²⁹ Bengal Political Consultations, 30 May 1833, No. 100, Bhattacharjee, J.B., n 1, p. 72.

* Thomas Fisher (1772-1836) was the son of T. Fisher started his career as a clerk of the East India Company in 1786. He was appointed Superintendent of Survey, Sylhet which position he held till 1830 when he was made "in-charge of Cachar affairs". (See Buckland, C.E.; Dictionary of Indian Biography, 1937, p. 146).