



## Religious Beliefs and Rituals in Kachari Kingdom

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### ABSTRACT

The origin of the Kachari race is obscure. They came into prominence in different parts of the North-Eastern region. At the beginning, they expressed their religious emotions by worshipping various forms of propitiation of the nature. They believed in the existence of supreme fore. Their old religious beliefs and rituals gradually changed when the Kacharies settled down at Khaspur. The process of Aryanisation began when the Kacharies came at Maibong and it attained a matured form at Khaspur. It was due to influence of the Brahmins upon Kachari kings that embraced Hinduism formally. They then observed Hindu customs and rites but their traditional customs and practices were not totally abandoned. Different Hindu Gods and Goddesses were worshipped along with their harvesting tribal deities. Again, the Kachari kings were primarily the followers of the Saktism. Yet the Vaisnava faith was not unpopular to them. Thus the Kachari kings in Cachar brought this land within the mainstream of Indian religious life.

### KEYWORDS

Kachari, rituals, hiranyagarbha.

### Introduction:

The Kacharies were one of the earliest inhabitants of North-East India. They lived far-away from the mainstream of Hindu-religious life. They expressed their religious feelings through various forms of propitiation of the nature. The Kacharies believed in the existence of the supreme force of nature behind all creations in the universe. They worshipped the nature to gain physical strength, mental peace and agricultural prosperity. No priest was required to guide them. So, there is good reason to form impression that such worship had no fixed ritual and it was done in the form of prayers. Naturally no priesthood emerged in the society. Domestic ceremonies were usually conducted by the family head, but all major religious ceremonies of the society were guided either by a king's minister or a public dignitary (Fisher, 1840). There is good reason to think that the Kacharies of Dimapur might have been influenced by the Buddhist concept of mass-prayers, because scholars have recently revealed that there existed Buddhist settlements in Nagaland before they rose at Dimapur (Bhuyan, 1929 May-June). Animal sacrifices were made by the Kacharies on all religious occasions (Fisher, 1840). The nature-worship and sacrificial ceremony both continued simultaneously. But the Kacharies of Dimapur and the Kacharies of Maibong, according to S.K. Chatterjee might have come under the Hindu influence (Chatterjee, 1974). But Edward Gait pointed out that the Kacharies were free from all Hindu influence while at Dimapur and the Hindu influence in the Kachari court was tangibly noticed only when the Kacharies came to Maibong and built a new capital there after the sack of Dimapur city by the Ahoms (Gait, 1984). Besides the village names of Maibong such as Kamarpara, Kamarpara and Brahmanpara also point out that they were much inclined towards the culture of the masses based on Hinduism (Guha, 1971). High regard of the Kachari Royal house for the Hindu gods and goddesses was noticed in the life of the first Kachari kings of Maibong Nirbhoyanarayan (1336 A.D.) whose coin demonstrate his regard for Hera-Gauri who in the tantric literature is identified with Siva and Sakti.

### Religious beliefs and Ritual:

The Royal dreams appear to have played a significant role in shopping the religious life of the Kachari kings. In most cases gods and goddesses appeared to them in dream and instructed the reigning kings to install them in temples and offer them Pujas. It is difficult to ascertain how far the dream episode is factual but the oral traditions referred to the dream backgrounds which help us to understand the religious mind

of the Kachari kings belonging to the period under review.

Thus when the Kacharies came to Maibong their first king Nirbhoyanarayan (1536-59) was instructed by Ranachandi through a dream that he should take a dip in the nearby river water on the following day to find her floating on the surface of the water (Choudhury, 1317 B.S.). Accordingly, he went to the river next morning and saw a dreadful snake swimming in the river. The king thought that the dream goddess might have assumed that form only to test him. He stretched out his arm to catch that snake, but he did not have sufficient courage to do so. At last when he gathered courage he could catch only the tail of the snake. Instantly the snake was transformed into a sword. The king carried that sword to his capital at Maibong. The goddess reappeared in dream in the following night and informed the king further that so long as he would be able to keep that sword with him the prosperity of the kingdom would never decline. The sword came to be worshipped thereafter as the symbol of Ranachandi and protector of the Royal house (Choudhury, 1317 B.S.).

The first Kachari king of Khaspur, Harishchandra (1755-1780), said to have dreamt a dream while he was searching for his missing favorite elephant (Choudhury S., 1986). A household Kachari goddess by name Nimata, as per Endle's version, appeared to Harishchandra in a dream (Endle, 1975 (Reprint)). She said to have assured him that he would get back his favourite missing elephant if he constructed a shrine for her and worshipped here regularly (Choudhury S., 1986). We do not know whether the king found his elephant or not but it is clear that king Harishchandra installed Nimata on a hill at Damcherra (Choudhury S., 1986). Siama was another goddess which the Kachari kings worshipped after they came from Maibong to Khaspur (On the basis of author's investigation). No dream background is mentioned anywhere. It is identified with the tribal form of Hindu goddess Kali (Chottapadhyaya(ed), 1933, October-March). The elderly people of the Kachari kingdom believed that the Kachari kings used to consult his trusted men at the time of crisis and seek the blessings of Siama (on the basis of field investigation). The Kacharies conceived her as a tribal goddess. Later on they introduced Hindu rituals to worship her.

Again, the first devi which the Kacharies worshipped in the idol form was Kachakanti. Raja Krishnakanta dreamt a dream (in 1806) that he should construct a temple for worshipping one of the terrifying forms of a devi (Bhattacharyya, 1987).

The Royal priest Sonaram Sarma after hearing the dream installed the image of Kachakanti in a temple constructed in the deep forest in the neighbourhood of present Udarbond. Sonaram also introduced connected rituals to worship the devi.

However, formal conversion of the Kachari kings to Hinduism was made at Khaspur in the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. To obliterate their non-Hindu tribal background, the Bengali Brahmin priests suggested Raja Krishnachandra (1780-1813) to arrange a religious ceremony. Accordingly, he did a Mahadana ceremony known as Hiranyagarbha. In this ceremony, the priests secretly put Raja Krishnachandra and his brother Govindachandra inside the body of a cow made of gold. When they descended from the cow in public, it was imagined that as if they were born of a sacred cow which the Hindu regard as mother (Gomata) and the assembled priests and Brahmanas instantly acknowledge them as Hindu after they pronounced some mantras (Guha, 1971). This was how formal conversion of the Kachari kings to Hinduism was made at Khaspur with the celebration of Hiranyagarbha Mahadana ceremony.

The most popular temple of Lord Siva in the Kachari kingdom was the temple of Bhubhaneswar. It was situated some miles away from the present Silchar town. Lord Siva has been identified here as Bhubhaneswar and his consort Durga as Bhubaneswari. Again, Raja Krishnachandra got a temple erected by his minister Jai Singh at Sonaimukh for the purpose of worshipping the deities. Krishnachandra's patronage helped to develop that place into an important centre of Saivism (Guha, 1971).

The Kachari royal house was equally respectful to Vaisnavism. Infact, Kachari king's inclination to Vaisnava saints was first noticed when a royal messenger was sent to invite Sankardeva, the founder of neo-Vaisnavism in Assam, to visit the Kachari kingdom (Saha, 1374 B.S.). But it is not known whether he visited the Kachari kingdom or not but it is a crystal clear that the Kachari Royal family was a follower of Vaisnavism too.

### Conclusion:

However, it is clear from the above narratives that the Kacharies were God-fearing people. More they came closer to the mainstream of the Indian religious life; they abandoned their age-old tribal habits, customs and rituals and replaced them with the Hindu practices. Yet in doing so, they retained some of their age-old customs and rituals during the period under review. By patronizing Saktism, Saivism and Vaisnavism, the Kachari kings brought this land within the mainstream of Indian religious life. It lost most of its tribal characters, rituals, ceremonies and emerged successfully as a Hindu kingdom in the contemporary Hindu religious yard-stick. Their old religious practices and rituals gradually changed. Absence of priesthood in the early period, they were then following a religion similar to the one followed by the early Indo-Aryans. The process of Aryanisation began during this period. The life style was brought too close to the Hindu life-style. They ungrudgingly accepted many Hindu customs and usages as their own, yet they did not give up some of their past mores and values which they inherited from their ancestors. But after the strong influence of Hindu Brahmins, the Kachari kings included in them all good qualities of a Hindu king.

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