

Customs, Myths and Traditions in State Formation: A case study of *Dimasa-Kacharis* in the 17th and 18th century A.D.

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ABSTRACT

Myths, rituals and traditions are part and parcel of society and its existence. They also helped to understand the formative process of socio-political organizations. From the historical perspective, the grafting of myths around the kingship played an important role in the state formation during the ancient and medieval period. Through this paper, an attempt has been made to study and analyze some of the myths and traditions under the influence of Hinduism played a significant role in the state formation of *Dimasa-Kacharis*. The *Dimasa-Kacharis* ruled over the vast territory of Cachar (Assam), both hills and plains. They are known by different names in different regions of Assam. They belonged to the one of the sections of *Bodo* tribes in Assam. They are known as *Bodo* or *Bodosa* in lower Brahmaputra Valley; they are known as *Mech* in Koch Behar of West Bengal; in the North Cachar Hills as *Dimasa* and in the plains of Cachar they are better known as *Barman*. The *Dimasa-Kacharis* rule in Cachar was significant as the process of state formation entered into a new phase, due to the influence of *Brahmanical* Hinduism. The settlements of *Bengali Brahmins* causes for the propagation of Hinduism in the kingdom. Their genealogy was given a divine origin linking their ancestry to Hidimba, the wife of Bhima, the epic hero of *Mahabharata*. By the 18th century A.D, the royal family also performed the *Hiranya-garbha* ceremony in order to attain *Kshatriya* status. Sources (both primary and secondary texts) such as the British reports and records, Gazetteers and the *Buranjis* (Assamese chronicles) are used for the study.

Key Words : Barak valley, *Bengali*, Cachar, *Dimasa-Kacharis*, Myths

INTRODUCTION

In medieval times, Assam covered the region from Sadiya in the east to the river Manah in present Kamrup district in the west on both banks of the Brahmaputra, excluding the surrounding hill tracts. Assam is broadly divided into two valleys – Brahmaputra valley and the Barak or Surma Valley. The southernmost part of Assam, commonly known as Barak Valley, comprises of three districts, namely, Cachar, Hailakandi and Karimganj. For the study we are dealing with only Cachar region.

Geographically the entire Southern Assam region is divided into two distinct divisions - hills and plains. It is the Borail Hill that separates the Barak Valley from the Brahmaputra valley. Various historical records reveal that as the *Dimasa-Kachari* were forced to shift their capital from time to time¹, the geographical boundary of their kingdom also underwent changes several times.

Dimasa-Kacharis:

During the period of 13th century A.D., the *Kacharis* were the earliest inhabitants of the Brahmaputra valley,

1. Due to *Ahom-Kacharis* conflict, the *Kacharis* were forced to shift their base frequently. Earlier their capital was at Dimapur, later shifted to Maibong and finally at Khaspur.

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ruled over a vast area extending to the south bank of Brahmaputra from Kalang to Dikhow or beyond including the Dhansiri valley and the present North Cachar Hills (Allen, 1991, p. 150). By the end of the 13th century, the outlying *Kachari* settlements on the east of Dikhow river withdrew along with the advancement of the *Ahoms*. As a result, the river Dikhow remained the boundary between the two kingdoms for a hundred years. It was in the year 1536 A.D, the *Ahoms* took over Dimapur, the capital of the *Kachari* from the king Detsung after defeating him in a battle. The *Kacharis* retreated further south and established a new capital at Maibong. During this period, they held greater part of the Nowgong district and the North Cachar Hills and gradually shifted their capital towards the plains of Cachar. The *Ahom* king Rudra Singha defeated the *Kachari* king Tamradhvaj in 1706 A.D and had to abandon Maibong. He took refuge at Khaspur in the plains of Cachar. Since the onwards, they settled permanently at the Barak valley.

Generally it is said that Cachar owes its name to the *Kacharis* who ruled over the district before its annexation to British India (Barua, 1962, p.50). But the word Cachar in Sylhet means a stretch of land at the foot of a mountain (Choudhury, 1324, p. 96). According to E.A. Gait, however, "The word *Kachar* is derived from a Sanskrit word 'Kucha' or 'Kachha' which means seashore or a bordering place (Gait, 1967, p.299). The early inhabitants of the valley, the Bodo tribes were inhabiting and ruling the border areas of Aryavarta in Aryan inhabited India, situating on the bank of the sea extending through the Ganga-Brahmaputra confluence, they were called 'Kachari' (Guha, 1971, p.47). While C.A. Soppit in his 'Kachari Tribes in N.C Hills' (Soppit, 1855, p.55), stated that Damasazao (Dimasa) or Kacharis on leaving Maibong and settling in Cachar, were called by the neighbouring Sylhet Bengalis 'Kacharis' and the term was accepted by other outsiders.

Regarding the origin of the *Dimasa-Kacharis*, there are various opinions forwarded by the historians and cultural anthropologists. According to Dalton (Dalton, 1872, p. 241), the Kacharis, one of the constituents of the Bodo nation, "are the one of the most numerous and widely spread of the tribes on the Eastern Frontier". B.C. Allen (Allen, 1905, p.19) observes that the Kacharis are one of the sections of great Bodo race of Assam. Today, they are known by different names in different areas. They are known as Bodo or Bodosa in lower Brahmaputra Valley. These people are spread over in

some other regions like, Nepal, Goalpara of Assam and Koch Behar of West Bengal where they are known as Mech, in the North Cachar Hills as Dimasa and in the plains of Cachar they are better known as Barman (Bordoloi, 1983, pp.1-3).

Suniti Kr. Chatterjee stated that when the *Ahoms* came to Assam, they were opposed by two powerful groups - one, belonging to the *Chutiyas* in the extreme east near Sadiya, and the other, to the *Kacharis* of the Dhansiri Valley (Chatterjee, 1974, p.102).

The *Kacharis* living in different parts of Assam are known by various names. In this regard S. K. Barpujari stated, "A great portion of the so called Kachari population now settling down mostly in the district of North Cachar Hills call themselves 'Dimasa', while they are known to their neighbours as 'Hill Kacharis'. They constitute an important ethnic group in Assam. Besides North Cachar Hills, they are found also in its adjoining areas in Nagaon and Cachar. The Barmans of Cachar are also Dimasas. The origin of Dimasa is shrouded in mystery due to the non-availability of historical records" (Barpujari, 1997, p.14).

Another interpretation is forwarded by S. Thaosen who in the book 'Asamar Janajati' states that the Bodos of the present Cachar (both N.C. Hills and Cachar) came to be known as 'Dimasa' after they came to settle on the bank of river Dhansiri which is called 'Dima' by them (Thaosen, 1962, pp.44-47). This was probably done in order to distinguish themselves from the northern *Bodos* who remained in the Brahmaputra valley and continued to call themselves 'Bodofisa, i.e., children of the river. It seems that those who resided at the Brahmaputra valley, called themselves *Bodo*, while in the Barak valley or Cachar as *Dimasa*.

For the early accounts of the *Kachari* kingdom's origin, the *Kachari Buranji* states two different branches, first one deals with *Kacharis* of Sadiya and secondly, the *Kacharis* of *Heramba*. It is mentioned that the *Kachari* kingdom of Sadiya was bounded by Sadiya on the east, the river Dikhou on the west, the south bank of the Dihing on the north and Kenduguri on the Dilih on the south. In the second account, the lineage of *Kacharis* were linked to *Ghatotkoch*, son of *Bhima*, one of the *Pandavas* married *Heramba*. *Heramba's* son *Ghatotkoch* became the king. The successor of *Ghatotkoch* ruled as *Kachari* rajas. Therefore they were called *Herembeswar*, the word was derived from *Hirimba*. Earlier, the *Kacharirajas* were known as

“*Pha*”, while the title was substituted by *Rajas* (Bhuyan, 2010, p. 3)

Regarding their kingdom, S. Endle writes-
 “... the earliest historical notices of the eastern branch of the race show that under the name of *Chutiyas* they had established a powerful kingdom in the eastern corner of the province, the seat of Government being at or near the modern *Sadiya*. How long this kingdom existed it is now impossible to say; but what is known with some degree of certainty is, that they were engaged in a prolonged struggle with the *Ahoms*, a section of the great *Shan (Tai)* race, who crossed the *Patkoi Hills* from the south and east about A.D. 1228, and at once subdued the *Morans*, *Borahis*, and other *Kachari* tribes living near the northern slope of these hills. With the *Chutiyas* the strife would seem to have been a long and bitter one, lasting for some 150 or 200 years. But in the end the victory remained with the *Ahoms*, who drove their opponents to take refuge in or around *Dimapur* on the *Dhansiri* at the foot of the *Naga Hills*. There for a time the fugitives were in comparative security and they appear to have attained to a certain measure of material civilization, a state of things to which some interesting remains of buildings (never as yet properly explored) seem to bear direct and lasting witness. Eventually, however, their ancient foes followed them up to their new capital, and about the middle of the sixteenth century the *Ahoms* succeeded in capturing and sacking *Dimapur* itself. The *Kachari Raja* thereupon removed their court to *Maibong*. Finally, however, under pressure of an attack by the *Jaintia Raja* the *Kachari* sovereign withdrew from *Maibong* to *Khaspur* in *Cachar*, 1750 A.D. (Endle, 1975, p. 6)

Elements of myths and traditions in state formation:

Myths and traditions help to understand the formative stage of the society. Most acceptable statement defines myth as “folklore genre consisting of narratives that play a fundamental role in society, such as foundational tales”. There are various definitions put forward by scholars and folklorists to define myth. Bascom defines that myth are often endorsed by rulers and priest and are closely

linked to religion or spirituality (Bascom, 1965). In fact it stated that how many societies group their myths, legend and history together, considering myths to be true accounts of their remote past (ibid).

While constructing a myth around a figure or a person, it was always associated with Gods, Demigods or epic heroes. Many religions have their own mythological heroes or stories. They played an important role in state and society formation. Similarly in *Hindu* mythology, the two great epic- *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* are used as a narrative in formulating a myth.

In regard to this study, myths were constructed by the religious priests, i.e. the *Brahmins* to legitimize the position of king to the throne. The lineage or genealogy was derived from their dead ancestors and a divine kingship theory was framed. Since the *Gupta* period, there was a migration of *Brahmins* to the various parts of the country. Many of the local chieftain started inviting them from the Indo-Gangetic valley. These *Brahmins* were settled down with various land grants as a source of their livelihood. Myths were created to legitimize the monarchical rule over its subjects by providing an ideological base.

Various land grants under different categories such as *brahmattara*, *devottara* and *dharmattara* were donated by the king to the *Brahmins*. The *Brahmins* in return helped the ruling dynasty by grafting *Hindu* myths over the kingship. The *Brahmanical* myths gave the rulers divine descent which produced an image of inviolability to the kingship a process that strengthened its base to integrate not only the cognate clans and the bordering tribes but also the culturally and technologically advanced *Hindu* population (Bhattacharjee, 1987, p.180).

The *Dimasa-Kachari* had strengthened their economic base by the 15th and 16th century A.D. After consolidating and establishing their base, the process of state formation entered into a crucial phase mostly due to the growth of *Brahmanical Hinduism*. The transformation from its indigenous tribal like formations to a monarchical state was reached mainly through syncretic adoption of the symbols of *Hinduism* by bringing the tribes within the broad *Hindu* based *Aryan* civilization generalized through the eastern plains of India (ibid). For such purpose *Brahmins* played a significant role by legitimatizing the position of the ruling class.

Myth of Divine Origin:

In this section, an attempt is being made to validate

some of the myths and traditions that played an important role in the state formation of the *Dimasa-Kachari*. The process of state formation began later in the 17th and 18th centuries, when the *Dimasa-Kachari* rulers came under the influence of *Bengali Brahmins of the Barak valley*. Before Cachar's annexation by the British in 1832 A.D, the *Dimasa-Kacharis* ruled over the vast territory of Cachar, both hills and plains. The *Dimasa-Kacharis* rule in Maibong was significant as the process of state formation entered into a new phase. The settlement of *Bengali Brahmins* settlements began in the *Dimasa-Kachari* state when its capital was still at Maibong. The influence of *Bengali Brahmins* who settled down in the plains of Cachar helped in the propagation of Hinduism in the *Dimasa-Kachari* kingdom. The neighbouring states of Tripura, Manipur, *Ahoms* and Jaintia came under the Hindu influence by the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The *Dimasa* royal house was definitely influenced by these states in their process of cultural assimilation which introduced new ideals of kingship at Maibong. As far as the proximity of advanced Hindu states, their influence provided to the *Dimasa* state such necessary attributes of the state as an ideology, a system of power organization, a language for decrees and forms of official communication (Maretina, 1978, pp.341- 345).

In Maibong, the *Dimasa-Kacharis* came under the direct influence of the Brahminical Hinduism. According to tradition, during the course of his wanderings for a place of settlement, Nirbhaynarayana under whose leadership *Dimasas* migrated to Maibong in the 16th century, came under the influence of a *Brahmin* who predicted a good fortune. When Nirbhaynarayana was proclaimed as the *Dimasa Raja* he accepted the *Brahmin* as his *Dharmadi Guru* (Bhattacharjee 1987:180). From this time onwards the *Brahmins* became the spiritual guides and obtained the title of *Rajpandit*. The *Brahmins* exerted a strong influence upon the king. The *Dharmadi Guru* was always a *Bengali Brahmana* and acted not only as the chief advisor to the Raja but was also the interpreter of *Hindu* law in the state (Bhattacharjee, 1972, pp. 189-195).

The *Dimasa-Kacharis* rule at Maibong increased the presence of the *Bengali Brahmins* in the state and

had a profound influence upon the royal family who came under the influence of Hinduism. Various land settlement were made to the *Brahmins* which helped in the propagation of the Hindu Brahmanical faith in the *Dimasa-Kacharis* state.

Like the *Ahoms*², the *Dimasa-Kacharis* genealogy was also given a divine concept linking their ancestry to Hidimba, the wife of Bhima, the epic hero of *Mahabharata*. Ghatotkocha, the son of Bhima and Hidimba was considered as their first ruler (*Bhuyan* 2010). The *Kachari buranji* states two different branches of *Kacharis*, first one deals with *Kacharis* of Sadiya and secondly, the *Kacharis* of *Heramba*. It is mentioned that the lineages of *Kacharis* of *Herambha* were linked to *Ghatotkoch*. The successors of *Ghatkoch* ruled as *Kachari rajas*. Therefore they were called *Herembeswar*, the word was derived from *Hirimba* (ibid). Since then their state came to be known as *Herambha-rajya*. According to Gait, many of the names mentioned in the genealogy are purely imaginary and in some cases king, who had reigned in fairly recent times, are no mentioned at all, and some names repeated at a considerable interval of time just to fill up the time gap in genealogy. The list is clearly a compound of oral traditions and deliberate inventions and has no historical value (Gait, 1967, p.307).

The *Brahmins* by grafting mythical origin created a divinity around the *Dimasa-Kachari* monarchy. With the help of myths and legends of the *Mahabharata* heroes, they associated the *Dimasa-Kacharis* with a pure descent of Hindu dynasty. It instilled among the ruling family and aristocracy with intense pride in their Hindu origin and hence they turned to be the champions of the new faith. Since then, they came to be called as the *Heramba-rajya* as known from their coins, inscriptions and records. Even their tutelary deity, *Kechaikhati* was transformed into *Ranachandi* (Goddess of War) and various hymns and verses were made by the *Brahmins* for worship.

Although the Hindu influence began during the Maibong period but the formal conversion took place at Khaspur. Till that time, they were treated untouchables by the orthodox *Brahmins*, on grounds that, their genetic

2. The ideological base to the *Ahom* state formation was given by the *Brahmins* through the origin of kingship based on genealogy. In most of the *Buranji* (chronicles), the origin of the *Ahoms* had a parallel theory, where one deals with *Tai* tradition and another one with Hindu tradition (linking Sukapha's lineage to the *Aryan God, Indra*, the *Hindu* counterpart of the *Shan* god *Lengdon*).

mother³ was non-Vedic in her creed (Barman, 2007, p.134). Later in accordance with the rules prescribed by the scriptures, the royal family performed conversion ceremony. In 1790 A.D, Krishna Chandra Narayan, his brother Govinda Chandra and the members of the royal aristocracy performed the *Hiranya-garbha* ceremony.⁴ It was the formal conversion into Hinduism. During the conversion ceremony, the king Krishna Chandra Narayana and his brother Govinda Chandra Narayan entered the body of a copper effigy of a cow and on emergence from it, proclaimed to be Hindus of the Kshatriya caste (Hunter, 1879, p. 401). It resulted in the creation of two social groups in among them. The ‘Barmans of Cachar’ were of the reformed culture, and the Dimachhas of North Cachar, were clinging to their own primeval ways (Barman, 2007, p. 135). The Barmans of Cachar plains adopted and absorbed themselves into the Hindu fold.

Conclusion:

Such traditions played a significant role in the formation of the hinduised *Dimasa-Kacharis* society. Due to the continuous conflict with the neighbouring kingdoms, the *Dimasa-Kachari* hardly got enough time to fully evolve as a state. But it was in Maibong and later at Khaspur, they formally legitimize their position with the help of *Brahmins*, which created an aura of divinity. The myth of linking genealogy to the epic heroes cannot be regarded historical. But as a part of tradition and customs, it is widely accepted among the *Dimasa-Kachari*. It did impacted significantly in their process of state formation. It was in that period *i.e.* between 17th-18th centuries A.D., all their contemporary kingdoms followed the same theory of divine kingship. The myths that were created were the need of time during that time. It was prerogative among the ruling dynasty during the medieval period.

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3. Hidimbha, the mother of Ghatotkocha was of tribal origin or did not belonged to the upper caste or *jati*, which was totally opposed to the dictum of Vedas.
4. *Hiranyagarbha* literal translation means “golden womb”. It is a ritual of rebirth for social acceptance. This rite was mostly performed by the rulers from the marginal social classes, who needed the social acceptance of his paramount authority equal to the other rulers from the elite social classes, mostly in ancient India. For details see Jayanta Bhattacharya, *The Rite of the Golden Womb Ritual Rebirth for Social Acceptance*, Mumbai, 2017

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