

## **Mahishya Das of Cachar and their Social Background**

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Das Kulas of Cachar regard themselves as Mahishya. W. W. Hunter regarded the Cacharis of the 18th Century as hill tribes. Capt. Fisher, who took great pains in asserting the early history of the race, was of the opinion that this tribe acquired an empire in Assam, Sylhet and Mymensing and their original seat was at Kamarupa. They had a migratory habit. This habit is even to-day prominent amongst the native Das kulas of Cachar. They have a tendency of disposing of lands cleared for cultivation and moving towards forest land to clear new area. With local knowledge of Cachar plains one might find reason behind the existing villages of Cachar having Hindu names, though the present inhabitants are Muslims. They sold off this fertile land and went deep into the forest to clean it for cultivation. About 250 to 300 years ago, when they came to the plains of Cachar from Mikir hills, Jaintia and Central Cachar they made their settlements at Phulbari, Vikrampur, Kalain, Udharbond, Borkhola, Yatrapur, Rakhalkhalerpar, Ambikapur, Lakhirpur. Sonai of Silchar, and in Rangauti and Ragur Gram of Hailakandi. In course of time, they spread out to the interior border regions abounding with hills and forests. Gait and other British officers made studies of transformation of tribes into caste but did not delve deeper to know why the old royal members and warriors and men having strong sense of prestige and morals mixed up with the tribals, spread amidst them Hindu culture and became one with them. This thing happened in the case of Das kulas of Cachar and they were able to enrich tribal culture and live freely instead of suffering social injustice which their counter parts in Sylhet and Bengal faced.

This nature of Das kula of Cachar was the reason for their assimilation in the tribal society and they became a semi-tribal clan. From close discussion with the Mahishya or Patni members living in different parts of Cachar plains, what becomes evident is that their ancestors were accustomed to opium eating, their dress and food habits were like those of the tribals and Tantrik Hindus.

They had no scruples in the matter of food. They used to hunt animals in the jungles and relished almost all kinds of meat except beef. They were worshippers of Bhairaba and they assembled together for Sakti worship. They did not believe in any particular social discipline. According to tradition Pala rulers of Kamarupa were also influenced by this religion. The third Pala ruler Dharma Pal took initiation from a religious reformer, a Saiva saint Lui pa Mashyendra Nath. According to R. M. Nath, Mashyendra Nath was the spiritual guide of Guraksha Nath. Since then Das kula or members of the Pala warrior families of Assam and Cachar regarded themselves as Mahishya. Mahishya can be derived either from Mahi + Isha + Ap = Mahishya, meaning agriculturist. On this basis, a scion of Jaliya Kaibartta, who cut all relations with Jaliya Kaibartta and opted for agriculture, came to be known as Mahishya or Halua Das. On the other hand, Cachari Das wanted to separate themselves from New Mahishya and regarded themselves as Adimahishya or Mahishya (Kshatriya). The derivation of Mahishya can be inferred from Mahesha in the sense of descendants + Ap = Mahishya ; meaning devotee of Lord Siva. Mashyendra or Mina Nath is revered in Nepal as an incarnation of Siva and is also known as Abolukiteswar Siva. Some Brahminical works describe Mashyendra Nath or Mina Nath as a member of Dhivara kula. Mina in Sanskrit means fish and in Bengali too Mina and Matshya carry the same meaning. R. M. Nath says that Lui-pa Mashyendra or Mina Nath came to be known as such for his role as a religious reformer when like a Dhivara he made people of different castes high or low, all creeds Hindu or Buddhis, his disciples.

J. B. Bhattacharjee writes that the Bengalees of Cachar were known to the people of Sylhet as Cacharis. This historian with local knowledge has established that the valley of Barak was always known to the Bengalees as Cachar. He quotes P. N. Bhattacharjee, author of *Kamarupa Shasanavali*, to refute the contention of Gait that Cacharis have named the district Cachar after them. The name has been given to the district by the Bengalees of Sylhet because it is an outlying place striking the mountains. The word Cachar is still used in Sylhet to distinguish a plot of land at the foot of a mountain. It is derived from the Sanskrit word *kaccha* which means a place near water like the name of Kutch in Gujarat. The Cacharis are therefore the natives of Cachar as Bengalees are of Bengal.

Before the conquest of Sylhet by the Muslims, the social structure of Sylhet was just like that of Cachar, Tripura and Assam. Caste

rigidity or Kaulinya system of Bengal had no effect in these areas. But with the advent of Muslim rule when new settlers were brought from the north-west part of Bengal, the social structure in the Hindu society underwent a profound change. The new immigrant Hindus who were conservative in their outlook regarded the indigenous inhabitants of the coastal and kaccha land as mlecchas. They were considered degraded because of their assimilation with the Buddhists and Tantric Hindus, and for not observing social discipline or Chatur Varna Dharma prescribed by Manu, the Hindu Law-giver.

Cachar, Jaintia, Tripura and Manipur were never under Muslim rule. Cachar was annexed by the British in 1832 and Jaintia in 1835. After its annexation Cachar was brought under the administration of Dacca Division of Bengal in 1834 and by a proclamation of 12 Sept. 1874, Cachar including Sylhet was amalgamated to the newly created province of Assam under a Chief Commissioner. The Das Kula of Cachar were at that time, the dominant group of people having martial spirit and were as such protectors of the land. But after the annexation of Cachar the evils of caste system with all its concomitant consequences began to affect them. Jharna Das in her paper on Social Transformation of South Cachar in the 19th century mentions that due to the introduction of British rule in Cachar, a new social stratification based on caste and sub-caste evolved which replaced the old feudal structure of society. The primary objective of the British in Cachar being only to increase the Company's land revenue, indirect encouragement was given to these social changes. As the old Khel system was not found substantial, it was replaced by a Mirashdari system. Verner in his report of 1853 mentions, 'Nearly everyman in Cachar is a Mirashdar, he being a land holder in his own right and paying revenue direct to the Govt....'.

In many works we find titles such as Patni, Charal, Mali, etc. which were there in Cachar from the very beginning, but there is a good deal of confusion among the authors about these titles. The Patni title was not accepted before 1882. Most of the members of the Das Kulas in Cachar were cultivators, businessmen, physicians, small traders. They used to do their personal works by themselves. In Cachar there was no functional caste. People were divided under several racial groups. Functional castes of Sylhet entered Cachar plains when British offered them open invitation during the early days of British rule. Land hungry Muslim and Hindu peasantry in large numbers came to Cachar. Caste

Hindu babus also migrated from Sylhet and other Bengal districts in the early 19th century to work as clerks in the Government departments. Besides many came to carry on trade and other professions. These newcomers had orthodox views and looked upon the Das Kulas of Cachar as low and inferior.

The Das Kulas of Cachar during marriage, death rites and other religious performances used to offer prayer and *pinda* under the direction of their Brahmin priests. Many of their ancestors for their good services under the then rulers of Cachar won various titles such as Laskar (military administrator), Barbhuiya, Mazumdar, Purkayastha, Roy, Sikdar, Sarkar, Biswas etc. During Cachari regime the common titles were Barman, Narayan, Dalai, Deka Dalai, Vritti Dalai, Sharma, Sahuji, Sajhi, Laskar, Deka Laskar, Bhuiya, Mazumdar, Purkayastha, Das, Choudhury, Barai, Datta, Deb etc. Generally Sahu Kula people and warrior semi-tribal people used to write 'Das'. Reference is found of Sahi kulas of 8th century A. D. of N. W. F. Region, in the rock inscription of Gilgit. In the early sixteenth century in Sylhet due to connections with the Saha and Banik, Sahi kula came to be known as Sahu kula. The persons who formed this new samaj were ministers of Subid Narayan of Ita, Minister Umananda, Patra Devananda, Dewans of Mughal Emperor in Sylhet, a man of north west Ananda Narayan and two Kayastha families were having titles Mandal and Purkayastha. They formed eight samajs, four were on the south bank of Kushiya and four on the north bank of the said river. Minister of Raja Krishna Chandra of Cachar, Satya Narayan Sahuji, formerly Dewan of Sripur, was a member of Sahuji family of Panchakhanda, village Supatola. He was the son of Shoba Ram Das and grandson of Baranashi Das and his another grandfather was Sandhi. Sandhi had good relation with the then Raja of Cachar, Raja Harish chandra Narayan, who made him Laskar and allowed him to supervise trade relation in the border of Jaintia and Cachar and at the great trading centre Phulshad. Raja Satya Ram Sahuji was a great scholar of Sanskrit and Persian language. In the seventeenth century, according to 'sat-vaidya kula panjika,' there were thirteen titles of original Sahu kula. These were Sen, Das, Gupta, Dev, Kar, Dhar, Shom, Nandi, Kundu, Chandra, Rakshit, and Raj. According to social status, they were grouped under three grades. The first grade included Sen, Das, Gupta and Dutta. Madhyama group included Dev and Kar. The third grade included Raj and Shom titles. Nandi was regarded by them as 'paritekta' or discharged title. The first book about the vaidya kula

was written by late Ram kanta Das in 1575 saka and the second by late Bharatchandra Mallick entitled 'Chandraprabha' in 1597 saka. Sahu families in Cachar were settled along with their Brahmins. Raja Girishchandra Das of Sylhet belonged to Sahu kula and this family was the only Babu family in Sylhet in early days. In Cachar, during pre-British era the titles such as Patni, Chang etc. were not common and possibly had no footing in the Cachari Samaj. The Bengali people who in course of their assimilation with the tribals became semi-tribal Hindu Das kula and were dominant in Cachar plains in 18th century. After the annexation of Cachar by the British in 1832, Lt. Fisher, Superintendent of Cachar, recommended to the Govt. for sanctioning rent free lands to the dependent families of late Raja for their maintenance. On the basis of the recommendation the Government was pleased to surrender to the Cacharis fertile lands on the delta regions. According to British record, four such families received rent free land on condition of their service to the crown. The correspondences show that on 12th December, 1834 Lt. Fisher directed Jughal Kishore Ameen to surrender over to the Cacharis Phulbari land and on 16th March 1835 Ameen in his paper showed that he surrendered over to the Cacharis 203 kublas of land. Land was received by the ancestors of Das Laskar family of Phulbari. Govinda Ram was a military administrator of Cachari Raja, Govinda Chandra. He was adopted by Raja Padma Ram Sahuji as son after the sudden death of his father Kebal Dalai. The Brahmin family then became helpless and they were brought up in the family of Sahuji and Senapati Toola Ram who happened to be the cousin of Govinda Ram. A land document of 1854 A.D. showed that old titles had been allowed to continue. A document which is in my hand was a title suit by one Santikanta Sen of pargana Bikrampur mauza, Sonapur, in favour of a minor Kali Charan, son of Krishna Sarma. The suit was filed on 22nd Nov. 1854, 8th Agrahayan 1261 B. S. The land was under possession of Agan, Lakshi mia, Ram Lochan Das Laskar, Prem Lochan Das Laskar, Padma Lochan Das Laskar, Trinura Das Laskar, Nanda Lal Das Laskar, Achu mia Deka Laskar, of Phulbari, Niz - phulbari. Wife of Chandi (charan Deb Mazumdar), Masamat Bhubaneswari Dasi, and wife of Durga (Deb Mazumdar), Ishwari Dasi, sold the land to the said persons. From Kavya 'Kalicharan Upakhyan' we learn that in the last quarter of seventeenth century and early part of 18th century, Kali Charan, son of a priest, adopted trade and thus he was excommunicated from his society. He made Sealtek a great trade centre. His son was

Chandi and grandson Durga. Chardicharan and Durga Ram were possibly the Vittri Dalais of Phulbari. According to family tradition of Laskar family of Phulbari, sons of Nimai, Budhai and Balai became suddenly very poor when their house caught fire twice and their cargo loaded with goods returning from Sylhet on boats sank in the river Barak. Their houses were burnt by some of their enemies. That they had rival groups is evident from the case mentioned above. According to a Kavya mentioned by J. B. Bhattacharjee in a paper published, Kali charan (Choudhury) had high status in the Cachari court and could send six representatives to the court. From another source it is found that Kalicharan's father was a great pandit and Kalicharan was his youngest son. Kalicharan married in the family of Paramananda-Raghunath family of Jaintia. Raghunath was Raj Purahit. Kali charan was Raghunath's grand son. That Raghunath lived in seventeenth century is evident from a coin discovered in Jaintia. We get reference of this coin in the history of Sylhet (volume II part IV, Jaintia, by A. C. Choudhury, p. 13). On one side of the coin is inscribed sri sri jayantapur purandarashya 1591 saka i.e. 1669 A. D. On the other side is inscribed siri sri Raghunath padapadya parayanashya. Jaintia rulers were tantrik Hindus. They used to give human sacrifice at the temple of Jainteswari. Jaintia Raja Bana Singha, father of Raja Pratap Singha, was a disciple of Raj Purahit Raghunath. K. M. Gupta of Sylhet in his paper on Caste of Sylhet mentioned about one Brahmin family who came to be degraded as Varna Brahmin because of their connection with Kumara Caste. N. N. Basu in his book 'Banger Jatiya Itihash' (Chap. VIII p. 68) makes mention of one Brahmin family who came to Jaintia from Tripura on receiving Brahmattora and in course of time had fallen due to social relation with Kumaras and Das Kulas. The book throws light on the family background of Raghunath and shows that Gonai (Bhaduri)'s sons were Anirudha, Shiva, and Basuyai. Shiva's son Dhanai and Dhanai's sons were Paramananda, Sarbananda, Sreekanta, and Sri Krishna. Paramananda had two sons, Jadu and Raghunath. Jadu married in the Kumara family (Pala). This line thus became degraded as Varna Brahmins. Raghunath remained in Jaintia. Jadu's son was Surananda Dharma Roy. Possibly he was the ancestor of Senapati Toola Ram.

Chandi and Durga Ram were Vittri Dalais during the time of Raja Harish Chandra and Raja Krishna Chandra of Cachar. When Raja Krishna Chandra left for a religious tour in northern

India he left his border under one faithful commander whose name was Durga Ram. Iswari Debi was wife of Durga Ram, Vittri Dalai of Phulbari and so in 1854 his son could not be a minor. The case in question seems to be a fictitious one based on similarity of names. From the study of land re-zaripha of 1882 A.D. it appears that almost all families during that period had Sanskritised identical names. Kali Charan lived in the later part of the seventeenth century and early part of the eighteenth century, but father of Kali mohan Deb Mazumdar was a man of the 19th century. To make the case the party concerned changed titles and it can be proved from the documents of 1854 and 1863 when the land under litigation was divided between two families. By this order of 1863 present Deb Mazumdar family of Phulbari got title of one third land and also possession, only in 1863. They came to Phulbari from Bikrampur.

Kebal Dalai, a lineal descendent of Raghunath of Jaintia Raj pat (it is the tradition of the Das Laskar family of Phulbari) and his sons and grandsons, for example, sons of Bhudai, Ram Lochan Das Laskar and Prem lochan Das Laskar and son of Nimai, Padma Lochan Das Laskar who were referred in the Govt. papers of 1854 and 1863 suddenly in 1882 alongwith their other caste people, the dominant Das kulas of Cachar were enumerated enmasse as 'Patni'. This was done by the high caste Hindus who were enumerators and patawaris and muharis etc. British officers regarded high caste Hindus who were assisting them as clerks and officials as protector of Hindu samaj. Author of the History of Cachar, U. C. Guha and many others were influenced by the Hindu orthodoxy. In fact, they failed to delve deeper into the historic events. The historians and the English officials had been misled by the Brahmins who handed over chronological lists of Cachari rulers to the British officers. According to this list, it appears that Cachar was ruled all through by one section of people. This biased attitude coloured their depiction of the line of rulers of Raja Krishna Chandra's family. The members of Das kula were shown as Dimacha Cacharis. They formed in 1917 Cachar Mahishya Samaj sanjibani. Its founder Chairman was the great educationist Aghur Nath Adhikari, Superintendent of Silchar Normal School. Their movement was so strong that in the census of 1921 patnis of Cachar were enumerated as Mahishya Das. But this was not liked by many orthodox people. Therefore, before the census of 1931 they tried to prevent many to write patni in place of jati and

and surname. In their prayer to C. S. Mullan, Census Superintendent of Assam, they complained against one enumerator who forced many of them to write patni and prayed him to write Mahishya as their Jati and Kshatriya within bracket. C. S. Mullan in his letter no 2718-19, dated Shillong, the 3rd February 1931 to Babu Jaymani Das, Secretary, Cachar Samaj Sanjibani Samittee and Babu Nitai Chand Laskar, representative of Cachar samaj sanjibani, wrote, "with regard to your representation in which you state that Rai Saheb Bharat Chandra Choudhury is creating much disturbances by compelling Mahishyas to write patni in bracket after the word Mahishya. As regard the particular entry of patni after the word Mahishya, to which your samittee take objection, I will inform the Deputy Commissioner that no such entry should be made in cases where the persons enumerated definitely objects to such entry." Iswan Chandra Purkayastha, the Head Clerk, office of the Superintendent of census operation of Assam, forwarded the letter with the note no. 94064 dt. 9.2.31 to inform the Census Superintendent "with Ref. to your memo no. 2720 dt. 3.2.31 that I have already passed orders that the word patni must be written in brackets after any other caste given by those who are patnis. I have no objection to these men being affiliated to any other caste but it seems to me necessary that we should know how what caste they belonged at the last census for the purposes of comparison. If the Superintendent wishes to cancell my order I suggest that I may be given an opportunity of justifying it first" (dated 6.2.31). C. S. Mullan received many such petitions from Silchar and Hailakandi subdivisions praying for inclusion of their Jati name Mahishya and within bracket Kshatriya. His final decision can be summarised from his letter to the census officer, Silchar (Ref. no. 2910 dated Shillong the 19th Feb. 1931), where he writes, with "reference to your note dt. 30.1.31 forwarding a pertition from certain persons in Hailakandi requesting that word 'patni' in brackets should not be entertained after the caste word Mahishya, I have the honour to say that the word 'patni' in brackets should not be used in cases where this person enumerated definitely objects to such an entry." But in actual census paper the enumerator did some under hand acts and though in the jati column Mahishya was written without mentioning within bracket anything either of Mahishya or patni, in the column surname they were enumerated as patni instead of their different padvis. Caste Hindu census officers and enumerators kept this secret and the people concerned had no idea about the under hand work of those

orthodox people. To raise their voice against inclusion of them as exterior community or scheduled caste they convened the 19th convention of Cachar samaj sanjibani in 1342 B. S. (17th Jaistha, English date 31st May 1936, Sunday) in the residence of Latu Ram Biswas, pargana Davidsonabad, Mauja Dulal Gram, where Brahmin community from Bengal attended. The Das kula numbering 5000 after taking sacred baths in the river Rukni performed religious rites and wore sacred threads and declared themselves as Kshatriyas. The Brahmins who performed rites for them were Shastriya Brahmins of Sylhet and Banares. Late Aghur Nath Adhikari and a social reformer of Bengal late Digindra Narayan Bhattacharjya attended the function. Some Brahmins however, at a meeting at Silchar opposed, this elevation of social status of these people. Therefore when they saw their name enumerated in the electoral roll with asterick marks, they thought it was secret work of Nitai Chand Patni who was fighting to enlist Das kulas of Cachar as a scheduled caste. The blame was shouldered by him and he was disliked by the Das kulas and as such his political career met with inevitable failure.

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