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A Historical Analysis on the Evolution of Dimapur: The City of River

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ABSTRACT

This article traces the history of Dimapur, now the commercial gateway of Nagaland, from the earliest evidence of Kachari settlement on the Dhansiri, It argues that the town is best understood as a layered place: a Dimasa Kachari brick capital that fell to the Ahoms between 1526 and 1536, a frontier valley shared by Naga and Kachari families, a British railhead, an Allied supply base in 1944, and a modern district shaped by the Tribal Belt of 1979, the district of 1997 and the Inner Line Permit of 2019. Few towns in northeast India hold as many layers of history as Dimapur. Today it is the commercial gateway to Nagaland, where the railway, the airport and the national highway converge, and where traders from nearly every part of India work alongside the state's Naga communities. Beneath the markets and the traffic, however, lie the brick-built capital of a medieval kingdom, a frontier trading post where hill peoples and plains rulers bargained over salt and land, a colonial railhead, and a wartime supply base whose survival in the spring of 1944 helped decide the course of the Burma campaign. To understand Dimapur is therefore to read several histories at once. The question that gives this chapter its urgency is a contemporary one. Public leaders and commentators in Nagaland have at times asserted that Dimapur does not belong to the Nagas. Such statements overlook how civilisations rise, move on and are replaced, and the truth can be reached only through a

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systematic reading of the origins, migrations and political changes that shaped the place.

Introduction

Dimapur was a Dimasa Kachari capital for a long period before 1536. After the Kachari royal house withdrew, the Dhansiri valley passed through a long interval in which no single state governed it, and the Naga communities of the surrounding hills and foothills became the dominant presence in the area. The British then made the town a railhead and an administrative frontier, and the state of Nagaland, created in 1963, built its modern legal framework around it, from the Tribal Belt of 1979 to the district of 1997 and the extension of the Inner Line Permit in 2019. These facts do not compete with one another. Each belongs to a different layer, and a responsible account must hold them together. The history of Dimapur has to be pieced together from unequal sources. The earliest written references come not from the Kacharis themselves but from their neighbours and rivals. The Ahom chronicles, known as *Buranjis*, describe the town as a brick city and call its rulers *khun timisa*, a form that scholars read as a corruption of Dimasa ("Dimapur," 2026). Chinese records of the early Ming period and Burmese inscriptions of the fifteenth century also mention a polity that appears to be the Dimasa kingdom, although the identification rests on interpretation. The Dimasa left no chronicle of their own until the eighteenth century, so early coins and inscriptions are among the few direct witnesses; one silver coin dated 1520 is usually linked to the king Khorapha ("Dimasa Kingdom," 2026). Colonial officers form a second body of evidence. Between 1839 and 1873 a succession of British officials visited the ruins and described them: Grange in 1839, Bigge in 1841, Captain John Butler in 1844 and the topographer Godwin-Austen in 1873 (Bathari & Bathari, 2018). Archaeology supplies a third. Systematic digging at Dimapur began only in 1979 and 1980, and the first radiocarbon dates from the site were published in full as late as 2024 (Nienu, 2024). The colonial accounts are valuable, but they were written by outsiders, often with military or administrative convenience in mind, and they should be read accordingly. Oral tradition is a further source, and the earlier chronology on which this chapter builds draws heavily on it, noting that Kachari rule is known mainly through oral narrative rather than written record (Awomi, n.d.).

The word *Kachari* is a broad label that colonial ethnographers applied to several related Bodo-speaking groups, whereas *Dimasa* names the community that actually ruled from Dimapur and later from Maibang and Khaspur (Bathari & Bathari, 2018). Some modern historians prefer *Dimasa* for the ruling polity precisely because *Kachari* is so general ("Dimasa Kingdom," 2026). This chapter uses *Dimasa Kachari* for

the community and the kingdom, and *Kachari* in the compound names of monuments, such as the Kachari Ruins or the Kachari Rajbari, which are now fixed in public usage.

The Origin of the River and the Name of Dimapur

Dimapur lies on the alluvial plain of the Dhansiri, a tributary of the Brahmaputra. Its fertile banks and navigable stretches drew settled rice-growing communities to the valley long before the modern road and railway arrived. The river is said to have been known originally as *Dong-siri*, a name glossed as a ravine of peaceful habitation ("Dimapur," 2026). It rises in the Barail range and runs for some 355 kilometres before joining the Brahmaputra.

The name of the town has attracted more debate than almost any other element of its history. The most widely accepted explanation derives it from Dimasa words: *di* for water, *ma* for big, and *pur* for settlement or city ("Dimapur," 2026). The *Dimapur District Human Development Report* of 2013, as reported in a newspaper overview of the state's districts, gives a similar account, stating that *Dima* means Great River and *pur* means city ("Nagaland: Know Your Districts," 2017). A common misunderstanding holds that the town was named after a king called Dima. In fact *Dima* refers to the big river, the Dhansiri, and not to a ruler, so that Dimapur simply means the city beside the big river. This is consistent with the scholarly view, though many historians also read the name as the city of the Dimasa people, since the community's own name is built from the same elements. Other communities have their own names for the place.

In the Ahom chronicles the town appears as *Che-din-chi-pen*, which has been glossed as brick town ("Dimapur," 2026). A Naga writer records that the Rengma call it *Hatenyu*, while Sumi tradition speaks of the flat land around the Mizi river as *Khoda*, a word meaning flat in the Sumi language (Jimomi, 2022). A government industrial profile of the district adds that Dimapur is a later appellation (Ministry of Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises, 2015), a reminder that the name in use today is only one of several attached to the place. The plurality of names is itself a historical fact: it shows that Kacharis, Ahoms, Rengmas, Sumis and others each knew the place and described it in their own terms.

The Kachari and the Dimasa: Origins and Terminology

Scholars differ on the origin of the name *Dimasa*, but in its literal sense it is often taken to mean the children or descendants of the great river, the Brahmaputra. The same source records the Dimasa belief in a tutelary deity named Madai and in the divine bird Arikhidima, from whose egg the first gods are said to have come, and it traces the forty male and female clans of the Dimasa, the Sengphong and the Julu, to this tradition ("Dimasa Kingdom," 2026). These are important elements of Dimasa self-understanding, and they are best

recorded as belief rather than as events that can be dated. A common classification divides the wider Kachari family into a northern and a southern group. The northern group includes the Bodo, Rabha, Tolata, Mech, Dhimal, Koch and others, while the southern group includes the Joyar, Lalung, Garo, Haijong and Tippera. The classification reflects an older ethnographic habit of grouping related peoples. What matters for Dimapur is that the ruling community was one part of a larger Bodo-Kachari world, and that not every group labelled Kachari ruled the kingdom of the Dhansiri valley.

On the question of where the Kacharis came from, no certainty exists. Oral sources point to a cosmic or unknown place of origin, while some historians have suggested a movement from the region of the Yangtze and Yellow rivers in western China, through the Chindwin and Irrawaddy valleys and into Assam. Another line of thought looks to eastern Assam. Linguistic work has shown close links between the Dimasa language and the Moran language, and the shrine of the tutelary goddess Kechai-khati near Sadiya suggests that the Dimasa were present in the east before the Ahoms arrived ("Dimasa Kingdom," 2026). The Ahom chronicles themselves describe an early meeting between the first Ahom king, Sukaphaa, and a Kachari group in the Tirap region who had settled near the Dikhou river, which supports this eastern picture.

One part of the tradition deserves particular care. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries the Dimasa rulers, with the help of Brahmin advisers, constructed a legend linking them to Hidimba and the Pandava prince Bhima. The story says that Bhima married Hidimbi and that their son Ghatotkacha ruled the Kachari kingdom. Historians note that this Hindu origin story was a political construction of a later age; the scholar Uttam Bathari describes it as an invented tradition while acknowledging that people in the community sincerely believe it (Bathari & Bathari, 2018). The Hidimba title was thus used for the Dimasa kings by outsiders and then absorbed into their own claims.

How and when, then, did Dimapur become a capital? Tradition names a king called Mahamanipha, said to have ruled between 1330 and 1370, as the founder of the city ("Dimasa Kingdom," 2026). Dimasa historians have long assumed an earlier date and have suggested that the capital was established around the tenth century. Archaeology now complicates the picture. Nienu's trial excavations at the Rajbari citadel in 1979 and 1980, the first archaeological projects ever conducted in Nagaland, yielded two charcoal samples from mid-level deposits, whose calibrated radiocarbon dates were AD 270 to 660 and AD 570 to 940. On this evidence Nienu (2024) argues that Kachari occupation at Dimapur predates the arrival of the Ahoms in 1228 by several centuries, and by nearly a thousand years at the earliest date. The result is striking, but it should be handled with measured language. The dates come from only two samples taken during a salvage operation at a site already damaged by construction, and the author himself calls for further excavation to

confirm them. Nienu estimates the citadel at roughly 550 to 650 metres in length, with fortifications on all sides except the river bank, and reports that railway workers digging near Dimapur and Rangapahar in 1896 and 1897 found further traces of buildings, tanks, canals and causeways, which suggests that the city extended well beyond the ruins that survive today (Nienu, 2024). It is fair to say that the evidence points to a considerably older settlement than the traditional dates suggest, without yet proving that Dimapur was a royal capital from the third century. The safest statement is that the site was occupied long before the Ahoms came and that its role as the capital of the Dimasa kingdom was fully developed by the later medieval period.

The physical remains confirm the Ahom description of a brick town. The ruins include a brick wall of nearly two miles and two large tanks about three hundred yards square, evidence of a city of considerable size (Bareh, 1970). A brick gateway, whose curved battlement and pointed arch struck nineteenth-century observers as similar to Bengali architecture, still stands. The best-known features are the carved sandstone pillars, many of them topped with hemispherical heads and decorated with foliage and with figures of animals and birds but no human forms. Dimapur was not an isolated hill town: Chinese records of the Ming dynasty suggest political contact with the Dimasa kingdom between 1406 and 1439, and a Burmese inscription of 1400 and another of 1442 are thought to refer to a polity called Timmasala that has been identified with the Dimasa Kacharis (“Dimapur,” 2026; “Dimasa Kingdom,” 2026).

Godwin-Austen, who visited in 1873, regarded the carved pillars as the most distinguished feature of the site and noted that nothing similar existed elsewhere in the Naga Hills. The *Nagaland District Gazetteers*, edited by H. Bareh in 1970, named the surviving tanks as Padum Pukhuri, Jor Pukhuri and Bamon Pukhuri and attributed them to the old Kachari kings (Bareh, 1970). These identifications are debated, but together they hint that the Dhansiri valley formed part of long-distance routes linking Assam, Burma and southwest China. A coin of 1520 bearing a Sanskritised royal name reveals similar outside influence, since scholars believe the Kacharis took the idea of coinage from Bengal and Tripura. The capital, in short, was a meeting point of cultures well before the colonial period.

The kings were assisted by a council of ministers and by an assembly of clan representatives called the *Mel*, with some forty clans, or *Sengphong*, each sending a delegate. The British officer J. H. Crace recorded in the 1931 census report that seven Dimasa clans ruled at Dimapur before the capital moved to Maibang: the Bodo, Thaosen, Hasnu, Langthasa, Jigdong, Haflongbar and Sengyung (Bathari & Bathari, 2018). The absence of clear temples and images has led some historians to question how deeply Brahmanical culture had penetrated the Dimasa court at this stage. The ruins are protected by the Archaeological Survey of India,

which lists them as the remains of a fort at Dimapur ("Kachari Rajbari Ruins," n.d.). The picture is that of a kingdom with real institutions, not of a loose gathering of tribes.

The Arrival of the Ahoms and Their Relations with the Nagas

The Ahoms, a Tai people, entered the Brahmaputra valley in the early thirteenth century. The historical records indicate that their leader Sukaphaa left his homeland around 1215 with a following of nobles, infantry and cavalry, wandered the hills for about thirteen years and reached the Patkai range in about 1228. The year 1228 is generally accepted as the date of his arrival, and his capital at Charaideo was founded in about 1252. The Ahoms crossed the Patkai pass through country inhabited by Naga communities, and the *Buranjis* record harsh punishment of Naga villages. This agrees with the broader picture in which the Ahom chronicles are full of accounts of reprisals and raids as well as of the acceptance of Ahom authority by Naga groups along the frontier (Misra, n.d.). Over the long term the Ahom rulers learned that the Nagas were a formidable people who could not simply be subdued by force, and the chronicles show a gradual change of policy toward accommodation. Naga village heads were invited to court and given gifts, and some are said to have been given office. The Ahoms granted revenue-free land and fishing rights to Naga communities living near the plains, built boundary works such as the Naga Bund of 1633, and set aside market areas called *Naga Khats* in the plains, which were managed by officials known as *Kotokis*. The reign of Pratap Singha, in the early seventeenth century, is associated with the formal establishment of the Khats, and a road known as the *Naga Ali* was built near the Namdang bridge to ease contact (Longchar, n.d.; Tzudir, n.d.). Such arrangements were meant to keep the peace and to channel hill produce, particularly cloth and cotton, toward the plains.

The relationship became close in moments of danger. When the Koch commander Chilarai attacked the Ahom capital in 1563, many Ahoms are said to have found shelter in the Naga hills, particularly among the Ao, Phom and Konyak communities. During the Mughal invasion led by Mir Jumla in 1661 and 1662 the Ao, Lotha and Konyak supported the Ahoms, and the future king Gadadhar Singha sought refuge in Naga territory between 1679 and 1681. Another source states that Gadadhar Singha, known in Assamese tradition as Gadapani, ascended the throne in 1681 (Longchar, n.d.). His time as a refugee in the Naga hills led to matrimonial alliances between the Ahoms and the Nagas, and families of mixed descent, the result of marriages between Ahom princes and Naga women, can still be found in the border areas. The relationship was uneven, and the Ahoms did not establish lasting rule in the Naga Hills; but it was also far from simple hostility. A leading Naga scholar has urged that the Assam–Nagaland border issue be studied against this longer record of cordial relations and marital alliance, rather than treated only as a product of colonial lines.

Popular accounts hold that the Ahoms invaded Dimapur in the sixteenth century, sacked it in 1526 and drove the Kacharis out by 1529, and that the royal house moved to Maibong around 1536. The published scholarship offers a slightly different sequence, which resolves the apparent overlap. The first recorded clash between the two states took place in 1490, when the Ahoms sued for peace by offering a princess to the Kachari king. After absorbing the Chutia kingdom in 1523 and 1524, the Ahom king Suhungmung decided to recover the ground lost to the Kacharis, and in 1526 his forces advanced against them; the Kachari king Khorapha was killed in the fighting and was succeeded by his brother Khunkhara ("Dimasa Kingdom," 2026; "Suhungmung," 2026). The two sides agreed for a time to treat the Dhansiri river as a boundary, but the peace did not last. In 1531 the Ahoms took the offensive, Khunkhara was forced to flee with his son, and an Ahom force reached Dimapur. A Kachari prince named Detsung was installed on the throne as an Ahom client. When Detsung later tried to throw off Ahom authority, Suhungmung advanced again, captured and killed him, and occupied Dimapur in 1536. The Dimasa rulers then abandoned the city. The standard timeline of Assam's history likewise gives 1536 as the year of the destruction of Dimapur ("Timeline of History of Assam," 2026). The 1526 date repeated in many popular accounts therefore marks the opening of the campaign against the Kacharis and the death of Khorapha, while 1536 marks the abandonment of the capital by the Dimasa ruler.

A point of considerable importance for the modern debate is what the Ahoms did after 1536. Dimapur remained within the Ahom kingdom until the Treaty of Yandabo in 1826. According to Edward Gait (1906), however, the Ahoms occupied the Kachari capital twice but never attempted to occupy the Dhansiri valley, which soon relapsed into jungle; permanent Ahom administration was concentrated farther north, in the lower Dhansiri or Marangi frontier. The fall of Dimapur thus represented the military defeat and abandonment of a capital, not the incorporation of the city into an Ahom administrative system.

After the loss of Dimapur there was an interval of some twenty-two years in which no king is recorded. In 1558 or 1559 a son of Detsung, Madanakumara, took the throne as Nirbhaya Narayana and established a new capital at Maibong, in the North Cachar hills. The Dimasa kings remained there for about two centuries. The Koch commander Chilarai made the kingdom tributary after 1564, and the kingdom later expanded under Satrudaman, who struck coins in his own name; but by the reign of Birdarpan Narayan, in the middle of the seventeenth century, the Dimasa had withdrawn completely from the Dhansiri valley, which reverted to jungle and formed a buffer with the Ahom state (Gait, 1906).

The Maibong kingdom was ended in stages. When King Tamradhwaj declared independence, the Ahom king Rudra Singha sent his generals against Maibong in December 1706, and its fort was demolished.

Sources differ on what became of Tamradhwaj: some say he took refuge at Khaspur, while another account has him fleeing to the Jaintia kingdom, where he was imprisoned ("Dimasa Kingdom," 2026). The Dimasa court did eventually shift to Khaspur in the plains of Cachar, a move that occurred in the middle of the eighteenth century; sources differ on whether the year was 1745, 1750 or 1755, and the Koch state at Khaspur merged with the Dimasa kingdom in 1745. The three brothers, Gopichandranarayan, Harichandra and Laxmichandra, ruled in succession, and in 1790 a formal act proclaimed the royal family Hindus of the Kshatriya caste.

The Dimasa kingdom was occupied by the Burmese in the early nineteenth century, and the last king, Govinda Chandra, was restored by the British after the Treaty of Yandabo in 1826. He could not control the hill chief Senapati Tularam, and he died in 1830. Accounts of the annexation differ. One source says that Tularam was pensioned off in 1832, that his region became North Cachar and that Govinda Chandra's domain was annexed in 1833; another places the annexation of the hills in 1834; and the Dimasa Youth Forum argues that the area remained under Dimasa rule until Tularam's death and the British annexation of 1854 (Bathari & Bathari, 2018; "Dimasa Kingdom," 2026). The matter is unsettled, but all sources agree that by the mid-nineteenth century the Dimasa kingdom had ceased to exist as an independent state.

The Long Interval in the Dhansiri Valley

This raises the question of what happened at Dimapur between the withdrawal of the Kacharis and the arrival of the British. Gait's (1906) remark that the valley relapsed into jungle points to a landscape of forest and abandoned brickwork, with a few villages of the Kachari subjects who had been left behind. At the same time, the Nagas of the surrounding hills used the edge of the plain for farming, hunting and, increasingly, for raids and trade. Naga traditions suggest that Sumi families moved down the Mizi river valley and found the flat country that they called *Khoda* (flat), and that a herder named Nechu, a Sema, set up a guard house beside a stream near the later Nechuguard gate. As more Semas arrived and cleared the jungle, the place became known as *Sema khuti* to the Assamese and *Semagutting* to the Kacharis, the origin of the colonial name Samaguting (Jimomi, 2022). Colonial records, for their part, note raids by Angami warriors on Dimasa villages in the North Cachar hills for salt and for human labour, and they record that a salt depot was opened at Dimapur in the early 1840s and a market at Samaguting to pacify the raiders (Jimomi, 2022).

Burma, Britain, the Naga Hills and the Treaty of Yandabo

The nineteenth century brought a new power into the picture. The Burmese Konbaung monarchy extended its reach westward, occupying Manipur and Assam and threatening Cachar and Jaintia, two territories that Britain had taken under its protection. The Burmese commander Maha Bandula planned to annex Arakan, Manipur, Assam, Cachar, Jaintia and eastern Bengal. In response Britain declared war on 5 March 1824, opening the First Anglo-Burmese War, which lasted until 24 February 1826, when the Treaty of Yandabo was signed. Under the treaty Burma gave up Assam, Arakan and the Tenasserim coast, renounced all claims to Cachar, Jaintia and Manipur, and agreed to pay an indemnity of one million pounds sterling; the Arakan ceded under it is the coastal province of present-day Rakhine in Myanmar ("First Anglo-Burmese War, 1823–26," 2001; "Treaty of Yandabo," 2026).

British contact with the Nagas began in 1832, and British authority over Naga territory expanded gradually and lasted until 1947 ("Naga Hills District, British India," 2026). After a series of expeditions, many of them directed against the Angami, the government created the Naga Hills District in 1866 and placed its headquarters at Samaguting, the present Chümoukedima, only a short distance from Dimapur ("Naga Hills District, British India," 2026). The boundary was notified in 1867, and Lieutenant Gregory became the first Deputy Commissioner (Rengma, n.d.). The headquarters moved to the healthier site of Kohima on 14 November 1878 ("Naga Hills District, British India," 2026). A contemporary report explains that Samaguting was notoriously unhealthy and that Kohima's central and commanding position would allow the Political Officer to enforce government demands throughout the Angami country (Cambridge University Library, n.d.).

Dimapur's place in all this was largely strategic. The Dimasa Youth Forum argues that Dimapur was added to the Naga Hills District for strategic military interest only after the district was formed (Bathari & Bathari, 2018). In the following decades the district grew: the Ao region was annexed in 1889, most Sumi territory in 1904 and the Konyak region in 1910, and in 1912 the district became part of Assam Province. The Government of India Act of 1919 declared the district a backward tract ("Naga Hills District, British India," 2026).

It was in these decades that the Kachari ruins entered the written record. Grange, sent with the first military expedition against the Angami, described the Kachari villages and a ruined circular fort in 1839; Lieutenant Bigge gave the first description of the monoliths in 1841; and Captain John Butler, guided by Kacharis, visited the monolith site on 28 November 1844 and ordered a sketch to be drawn, which is preserved in the Survey of India collection at the National Archives of India ("Naga Hills District, British India," 2026).

Godwin-Austen followed in 1873. Nienu (2024) observes that the ruins had remained unattended for centuries and that British officers recognised the strategic value of Dimapur from the onset of the occupation of Naga country in 1832.

The Railway, the Frontier Town and the First World War

The decisive change in Dimapur's modern history was the railway. The metre-gauge line laid by the Assam Bengal Railway from Chittagong to Lumding was extended to Tinsukia in 1903, and Dimapur station opened in that year ("Dimapur Railway Station," 2026). The station became the railhead of a narrow-gauge track under the Assam Bengal Railway, and in colonial days the stop was known as Dimapur-Manipur Road, because passengers and goods for Manipur were taken on from there by road ("Dimapur Railway Station," 2026). A tour diary kept by J. H. Hutton, the Deputy Commissioner, for 18 March 1921 records that he met the District Engineer of the Assam Bengal Railway and reached a provisional agreement on encroachments and railway boundaries at Dimapur (Hutton, 1921).

A popular claim concerns the legal status of the land itself. Some accounts hold that in 1918 the Assam provincial government leased Dimapur to the Naga Hills District for thirty years for the construction of railway lines, and that in 1963 it was leased again to the new state of Nagaland for ninety-nine years. The same sources note that the claim is controversial and that neither state government has commented on it. Political figures from Assam have occasionally revived the demand for the return of Dimapur ("Dimapur," 2026). However, the claim lacks authenticity and remains hearsay until the governments of Assam and Nagaland place valid evidence before the public.

Contact between the Nagas and the British

After the Treaty of Yandabo was signed in 1826, Assam, Arakan and Tenasserim (in present-day Myanmar) and the Jaintia hills (in present-day Meghalaya) passed to the British East India Company. The treaty and the acquisition of new territory in the east also prompted the British to expand into Naga territory in search of better road connectivity between Assam and Manipur. By then the kingdom at Dimapur no longer existed. The Kacharis who had lived there had moved to their new capital at Maibong in the mid-sixteenth century and had established a new kingdom in the Cachar region. A few remained behind, but in later years their reluctance to pay revenue led them to abandon the area and join their new kingdom. The vast tracts of Assam, Arakan, Tenasserim and Jaintia came under British control ("Treaty of Yandabo," 2026). The British came into contact with the Nagas in 1832, and the Naga territories they reached came under direct British administration, which continued until 1947 ("Naga Hills District, British India," 2026).

In 1908 the British government issued a proposal encouraging migration and settlement, and migration into these sparsely inhabited areas began. When the First World War broke out in 1914, the British recruited Nagas into the Labour Corps as non-combatant forces. After the war they were impressed by the support given by the Naga tribes, especially the contribution of about 1,000 men and the bravery of the Sema, and in 1919 they issued a second migration permit and granted *pattas* to migrate and found villages in these areas. The pattas were issued to the Nagas in general, but because of disease, wild animals and other difficulties the other Naga tribes declined to migrate. The Sema, as they were then called in colonial records, took up the challenge, and many Sumi villages were established in the western areas under Herbert Charles Barnes, John Henry Hutton and Charles Ridley Pawsey (Awomi, n.d.).

Dimapur in the Second World War

The Second World War made Dimapur one of the most important places in the eastern theatre. In March 1944 the Japanese Fifteenth Army launched Operation U-Go with the aim of destroying the British IV Corps at Imphal; a second part of the plan sent the Japanese 31st Division to take Kohima and cut the road from Dimapur to Imphal (Kohima Museum, n.d.). The general in command, Mutaguchi, wished to push on from Kohima to Dimapur itself, the vital railhead and logistical base in the Brahmaputra valley. The Battle of Kohima was fought between 4 April and 22 June 1944 (Kohima Museum, n.d.). The defenders, cut off from Dimapur, depended on air supply. The 161st Indian Infantry Brigade had been flown to Dimapur in late March, and on 14 April the newly arrived British 2nd Division and the 161st Brigade opened the Dimapur–Kohima road and lifted the siege of Kohima. More than seven thousand Japanese were lost in the fighting around the town ("Kohima," n.d.). Dimapur itself was never taken. Its airfield supplied forces in Burma, and a new all-weather road from Dimapur to Imphal was built in 1942 and 1943, becoming the most critical of the Allied roads in the campaign ("Kohima," n.d.). The war left a lasting mark on the town's identity. It confirmed Dimapur as the logistical heart of Nagaland, as the commemorations and museums at Kohima remind visitors, and it ensured that rail and road links were built to a standard that later development would depend on.

From Statehood to the District of Dimapur

After 1947 the Naga question dominated the political life of the hills. In 1957 the Naga Hills District of Assam and the Tuensang Frontier Division were joined in the Naga Hills Tuensang Area, and Nagaland was inaugurated as the sixteenth state of India on 1 December 1963 by President S. Radhakrishnan at Kohima, with Shilu Ao as the first Chief Minister (Department of Tourism, Government of Nagaland, n.d.; Lal Bahadur Shastri National Academy of Administration, n.d.). The Dimapur area came into the new state with

the rest of the old district. One measure that has had a lasting effect on land in Dimapur was the constitution of the town as a Tribal Belt. According to Land Revenue Department notification number LR/2-118/76, Dimapur was constituted a tribal belt on 21 November 1979 ("Nagaland Govt Extends ILP Regime to Dimapur," 2019). That date later became the cut-off for the Inner Line Permit exercise of 2019.

For several decades Dimapur remained a sub-division of Kohima District. It became the eighth district of Nagaland through a notification of the Home Department of the Government of Nagaland on 2 December 1997, formed by carving out the circles of Niuland, Nihokhu, Dimapur Sadar, Chümoukedima, Dhansiripar and Medziphema from Kohima ("Know Your District: Dimapur," 2017). The district was inaugurated in April 1998 ("Dimapur District," 2026). Subsequent changes reduced the district: on 18 December 2021 the new districts of Chümoukedima and Niuland were carved out of it, and Nagaland now has seventeen districts, the latest being Meluri, declared on 2 November 2024 (Department of Tourism, Government of Nagaland, n.d.; "Dimapur District," 2026). Dimapur's modern history also includes tragedy. On 2 October 2004, two powerful bombs went off, one at the railway station and one at the Hong Kong Market, killing thirty people and injuring more than a hundred ("Dimapur District," 2026). The incident is a reminder that the town's openness, which is the basis of its prosperity, also exposes it to risk; the Inner Line Permit is intended to play an important part in checking such risks and the loopholes that have led to an influx of illegal immigrants into the state.

Whose Dimapur? Heritage, Belonging and Historical Argument

The history set out above supports two claims that are sometimes presented as opposites. The first is that Dimapur was the capital of the Dimasa Kachari kingdom and that the Rajbari ruins are the surviving monument of that kingdom. In an article of 22 July 2018, the Dimasa Youth Forum stressed that this fact should be recognised, and that the aim of recalling it was not to press any geopolitical claim but to highlight the history of a kingdom that existed in medieval Dimapur. The forum added that the Dimasa king left the kingdom in the sixteenth century after defeat by the Ahoms, leaving some subjects behind, whose descendants are the present Kacharis, and that they are part of the state by destiny (Bathari & Bathari, 2018).

The second claim is that the fact that Dimapur was once a Kachari capital does not translate into present ownership by any other community. The Dimasa Kacharis are part and parcel of Naga society today; the Nagas have preserved the tangible heritage of the Kacharis and recognised them as an indigenous tribe of Nagaland, and statements to the effect that Dimapur does not belong to the Nagas imply that it belongs to non-Nagas. Delhi was once the capital of the Sultanate or the Mughals, but it would be unreasonable for

their descendants to claim that Delhi belongs to them. Human civilisation is a story of migration and occupation, and the hill tribes of the northeast are themselves migratory in origin. A historical understanding of the chronology therefore plays a vital role in resolving conflicting interests objectively, so that the past is understood properly rather than through sentimental remarks.

The two claims answer different questions. The first concerns the origin and heritage of a place; the second concerns present rights and the protection of a community's land. The first is best answered by archaeology and chronicle, the second by administrative history, law and politics. In law, Dimapur's present status flows from the creation of the Naga Hills District in 1866, the formation of Nagaland in 1963, the Tribal Belt of 1979 and the district of 1997. Ancestry matters to this process, but it does not by itself settle it. That is why historians who study the matter tend to emphasise the layered character of the town: the Dimasa created the city; the Ahoms destroyed its political role without ruling its valley; the Naga communities settled and used the surrounding lands over centuries; and the British and the Indian state built the present administrative structure.

There is also an important point about preservation. The Dimasa Kachari have reason to be grateful that the ruins were cared for by the British and the Nagas and not demolished, unlike the Ahoms, who destroyed the city they invaded. The Kachari Rajbari remains the town's best-known historic site, maintained by the Archaeological Survey of India under the listing of the remains of a fort at Dimapur. Local reporting has described restoration work and the laying out of a garden around the monuments, and notes that around fourteen of the standing monoliths show some defect and that many others lie crumbled on the ground ("Kachari Rajbari Ruins," n.d.).

The history of Dimapur cannot be told in a single sentence, because the town has been many things in succession. It was a river-side settlement of great age, the brick capital of the Dimasa Kachari kings, a valley left to the forest after 1536, a frontier shared by Naga and Kachari families, a British railhead, an Allied supply base, a district and, since 2019, an Inner Line town. Each stage left its traces: in the carved pillars of the Rajbari, in the names that different communities gave the place, in the railway of 1903 ("Dimapur Railway Station," 2026), and in the legal notifications of 1979, 1997 and 2019 ("Nagaland Govt Extends ILP Regime to Dimapur," 2019).

Between the thirteenth and nineteenth centuries the Northeast underwent a profound demographic change, as the Tai Ahoms established their kingdom in Assam and British rule took hold in India. The area of present-day Dimapur was undeniably once a Kachari capital, but that is how a civilisation undergoes territorial reorganisation and becomes part of a rich historical tapestry, a heritage and a legacy. Dimapur was

once part of the Kachari kingdom; today it belongs to the Nagas. The Dimasa Kachari, the people of the river Dhansiri, are part and parcel of the Naga community today. They have reason to be thankful to the British and the Nagas that the ruins were not demolished, destroyed or removed but cared for and preserved, unlike the Ahoms, who crushed the kingdom and destroyed the city they invaded. The Nagas have preserved the tangible heritage of the Dimasa Kachari and recognise the Kachari as an indigenous tribe of Nagaland. Without an understanding of the historical past, it is wholly inappropriate for young people or public leaders to say that Dimapur does not belong to the Nagas, as if it must then belong to non-Nagas. History has its role, but today Dimapur, though its name does not come from a Naga language, belongs solely to the Nagas, who have every right to protect the city from an influx of outsiders. Dimapur may once have been a Kachari capital, just as Delhi was once the capital of the Mughals, but it would be absurd for the descendants of the Mughals to claim that Delhi belongs to them. Civilisation is largely a story of migration and occupation, and the hill tribes of the northeast, migratory by nature, trace their origins to different parts of the world; the historical record must therefore not be distorted by sentimentalism and sensationalism. The Dimasa Kachari community must not be swayed by the passions of political waves or carried away by internal or external propaganda of vote-bank politics aimed at dividing the unity and harmony of the Naga community; it should instead play a decisive role in preserving the integrity of the state of Nagaland.

Finally, history should serve coexistence. The Dimasa Youth Forum, the Naga civil society organisations and the scholars who study the Kachari ruins disagree on many things, but they agree that the monument at the heart of the town deserves protection. If the past of Dimapur teaches anything, it is that the town has always been shaped by movement and exchange. A future that honours the Kachari heritage, respects the Naga communities' ownership of land and customs, and treats the many other communities of the town fairly would be faithful to the diverse past that has shaped the Dimapur of today.

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