

History of Kamata-Koch Behar as reflected in the Persian Sources

Dr. Anil Kumar Sarkar

Professor of History, University of Kalyani, Nadia, W.B.

Abstract: *History is almost silent regarding the time and manner in which the Mahamedans first came to Kamarupa. MinhajuddinSiraj in his book entitled Tabaqat-i-Nasiri had mentioned the three tribes like Mech, Tharu and Koch. Minhaj explained Muhammad BhaktiarKhalji wanted to conquer Tibet through Kamarupa and on the way he met friend a leader of the Mech tribe who embraced Islam and took the name of Ali Mech. This account of the expedition of Muhammad Bhaktiar to Tibet first written in a Persian language by Minhaj in his Tabaqat-i-Nasiri. After Muhammad Bhaktiar, HisamuddinIwaj, Malik Yazbeg and Alauddin Hussain Shah were invaded Kamata kingdom.*

Key-words: Manner, Mech, Koch, Tharu, Islam

The history of Kamata or Kamarupa before the rule of the Khen dynasty is based not on historical evidences but on the ancient scriptures. The territory known as Pragyotisha is mentioned in the *Ramayana, Mahabharata, Vishnupurana, Harivamsa, Yoginitantra, Kalikapurana* etc. E. A. Gait said in his book entitled *A History of Assam*, "The only Kamata dynasty of which we have any connected account in that of the Khyan or khen Kings, whose last representative Nilamvara was overthrown by Hussain Shah in 1498 A.D."¹ The Koches are one of the aboriginal tribes of North-East India.² The Koches assumed political power in the western Brahmaputra valley in the early 16th century and for the time exercised their sovereignty over almost the major part of the North- East. They made a significant contribution towards the progress of civilization and culture of the Brahmaputra valley in particular and of North-East India in general. After Nilamvara, BiswaSingha (Koch Chief) organized the strength of his tribes. It was he who laid the foundation of his kingdom in about 1515A.D. on the ruins of this kingdom of Kamata and he took the title of 'Kamateswar' (Lord of Kamata) and declared himself as King and this dynasty was continued to till 1949. Here I have written my paper on the basis of contemporary Persian sources to explore the history of this region. Persian sources are such as *Tabaqat-i-Nasiri, Riyas-us Salatin, Akbar Nama, Ain-i-Akbari, Baharistan-i- Ghaibi, Padishanama, Fathiya-i-Ibrya, Alamgirnama* etc. The history of Kamata Koch Behar is an unexplored and uninvestigated field of study. These sources will help me to research the history of Kamata Koch Behar in a new angle.

History is almost silent regarding the time and manner in which the Mahamedans first came to Kamarupa. MinhajuddinSiraj in his book entitled *Tabaqat-i-Nasiri* had mentioned the three tribes like *Mech, Tharu and Koch*.³ Minhaj explained Muhammad BhaktiarKhalji wanted to conquer Tibet through Kamarupa and on the way he met friend a leader of the Mech tribe who embraced Islam and took the name of *Ali Mech*.⁴ This account of the expedition of Muhammad Bhaktiar to Tibet first written in a Persian language by Minhaj in his *Tabaqat-i-Nasiri*. After Muhammad Bhaktiar, HisamuddinIwaj, Malik Yazbeg and Alauddin Hussain Shah were invaded Kamata kingdom.

Minhajuddin also writes that the shifting was the usual method of Ahu cultivation and it was this variety of paddy whose use was most common. The Kacharis knew some techniques of irrigation. They used to make dams across the hill streams and then lead the stored-up water to the fields through a network of dug-out channels. Both the Koches and the Bodo Kacharis were adept to hoe culture and to the use of Ahu rice.⁵ The Koches had trade relations with Bengal, Assam (Ahom kingdom of the upper Brahmaputra valley), Bhutan, Tibet and China and later with Mughal India. The Koches had an

important trade centre Karampatan or Kararpatan in the north of the Koch kingdom, Tabaqat-i-Nasiri observes as follows and every day, at daybreak, in the cattle market of that city, about one thousand five hundred horses are sold; and all the tangahan horses which reach the Lakhanawati country they bring from that place. The route by which they come is the Mahamha-i-(or Mahanmha-i) Darah (pass), and this road in that country is well known; for example, from the territory of Kamarup to that of Tirhut are thirty-five mountain passes, by which they bring the tangahan horses into the territory of Lakhanawati.⁶

Trade relations with other neighboring kingdoms like Bengal, Cachar, Sylhet, Jayantiya and Manipur were also maintained. It should be mentioned here that Naranarayan permitted the kings of Jayantiya and Sylhet to mint coins so that trade relations with those countries as well as with Bengal would further prosper. Ralph Fitch refers to the extensive trade on cotton and cotton fibers in Bengal, some of which definitely came from Koch Behar.⁷ The Mughals were interested in agar wood, sandal wood, silk and textiles and carried on trade in these commodities with the kingdoms of Koch Behar and Assam.

Riyas-us Salati was written by Munshi Ghulam Hussain Salim, this is a Persian text and was written in 1787-1788 A.D. (English translated by Abdus Salam). It narrated the political relations of the Mughal Viceroy of Bengal with the Koches and the Ahoms. It is mentioned that Sultan Alauddin Hussain Shah, after regulating his own kingdom, began to aspire to foreign conquests. He, in consequence, assembled a numerous army and invested the kingdom of Assam, situated to the north-east of Bengal. Having overrun that country, and acquired much plunder, he turned his arms against the Rajas of Kamata Koch Behar and the countries lying at the foot of the northern mountains, distinguished by the general name of Turryana (Princes of Kamata Koch Behar); and, on taking possession of many of their forts, established garrisons therein; after which, having appointed his son to be governor of the conquered districts, he returned to his capital.⁸ In the middle of the sixteenth century, Munshi Ghulam Hussain Salim mentioned that when Nara Narayan was deeply engaged in conquests and battles with the Ahoms and other North Eastern tribes of Assam. Kalapahar who was singular for his skill in river fighting, much have launched an invasion through the Brahmaputra unrested and destroyed the temples at Kamakhya and Hajo.⁹ After victorious in North, East and South, Nara Narayan determined to invade the kingdom of Gaur in the west, in order to avenge the misdeeds of Kalapahar who invaded Assam in 1553 A.D. and destroyed the Kamakhya Temple. Persian chronicle Riyas-us Salatin discussed that Nara Narayan invaded Gaur in 1567.¹⁰ The Koch army invaded under the leadership of Chilarai (brother of Nara Narayan) was defeated by the Padshah of Gaur. Munshi Ghulam Hussain Salim also described the peoples of Koch Behar country. There was two type of race Makh (Mech) and Koch and the Raja of Koch kingdom made Gold coins in his own name (Narayani Coins).¹¹

Akbarnama and Ain-i- Akbari was written by ShaikAbulFazlAllami in Persian language. This Persian text has been translated into English by H. Beveridge in 1877. We learn from Akbarnama of AbulFazl that Nara Narayan had friendly relations with Emperor Akbar. According to Akbarnama, Nara Narayan lived the life of an ascetic and did not marry till late in life.¹² According to Ain-i-Akbari, "Nara Narayan renewed his demonstration of obedience to the imperial throne and sent 54 elephants and other valuable presentations to Akbar.¹³ It seems that emperor Akbar had been highly pleased with such ambassadorial communications, for in the said work Naranarayan's qualities have been highly praised and there is no indication of treating Narayan as a vassal of the Mughal emperor. According to Akbarnama, the western boundary of Naranarayan's kingdom touched the Mughal dominion at Tirhut.¹⁴ As such it extended beyond the river Karatoya which then used to flow through the districts of Rangpur and Bogra. The same source further informs us that the Kingdom of Koch

Behar extended in the south as far as Ghoraghat.¹⁵ According to the Akbarnama, the Koch kingdom directly to the north, touched lower Tibet.¹⁶ Ain-i-Akbari had mentioned Koch Behar kingdom was famous especially for horses and elephants. Ain-i-Akbari has given information about the relations of the Koch kings with the Afghan Sultans of Bengal, hospitalities between Lakshmi Narayan and Parikshitnarayan and the manners and customs of the people of Kamarupa Kamata and Akbarnama contains reference to the relations of the Koch kings with emperor Akbar. Besides, it narrates the history of Man Singha's participation in the conflicts between Lakshmi Narayan and Raghudev. The Akbarnama states that Naranarayan, "possessed much enlightenment and was adorned with excellent qualities."¹⁷

Baharistan-i-Ghaybi by Mirza Nathan Allauddin Ispahani (English tr. By M.I. Borah in 2 Vols) narrated the political condition of Koch Behar during the period 1608 to 1624 A.D. The ruler of Kamata Koch Behar acknowledged obedience to the Mughal Emperor.¹⁸ During this time the ruler of Kamarupa was Pariksit.¹⁹ Lakshmi Narayan, the ruler of Kamata Koch Behar was intended to capture over Kamarupa. So, the Subedar of Bengal was an old enemy of Pariksit because he was not acknowledged obedience to the Mughal Emperor. On the other hand, Lakshmi Narayan instigated him (Subedar) to attack Pariksit by a policy of cunning incitement. Eslam Khan (Subedar) however was not deceived as to Lakshmi Narayan's purpose. He agreed to dethrone Pariksit and give Kamarupa to Lakshmi Narayan.²⁰

In 1612 A.D., Eslam Khan (Subedar of Bengal) sent forces against Pariksit and Maharaja Lakshmi Narayan joined the Mughal forces.²¹ The Mughal forces and Lakshmi Narayan jointly attacked Dhubri. The backbone of Pariksit's resistance was broken by the conquest of Dhubri. The Baharistan-i-Ghaybi briefly narrated the situation of battle field in both sides and ultimately the result was that the Mughal army defeated Pariksit and Kamarupa was captured by the Mughal forces. The Mughal Emperor delegated the Governor of Kamarupa to Lakshmi Narayan.²² In 1614 A.D. Kasem Khan, the brother of Eslam Khan arrived at Dacca as the new Subedar. Dewan Mokhles and Mokarram complained against Kaesem Khan because Kaesem Khan did not solve the problem properly. During the time of Kaesem Khan, Pariksit and Lakshmi Narayan imprisoned by Subedar. Later, Ibrahim Khan was appointed Subedar and Emperor had expressed a desire to release them but up to that time, it had not been implemented. Before going to Bengal, Subedar Ibrahim Khan sponsored their release. So, Baharistan-i-Ghaybi narrated all these incidents.

All Persian sources make references to the prevalence of magic and sorcery in this region. The Baharistan-i-Ghaybi gives an interesting description of practice prevalent in the Khuntaghat region of the Koch kingdom, "This place (Khuntaghat) is notorious for magic and sorcery. Thus if a man takes by force a fowl from a ryot and the ryot comes to the judge for redress and if that person is refused justice then the complainant by means of his magic and sorcery could make the accused produce the voice of a fowl from inside his stomach and thus prove the falsity of the protestations of the accused. If a bailiff of the judge stays at a village in connection with the work of the Dihidar or the Pattadar (the tenure holder or the revenue farmer) and if in a state of drunkenness he demanded fish with violence in the evening or at midnight when no fresh fish was, available, and persisted in his demand by torturing the ryots, then they would bring some leaves of mango tree or (another tree whose name reads like lahsura and breathe on these leaves some words of magic and sorcery. These leaves would forthwith turn into a kind of small fish. When these fish(es) were cooked by him in a state of drunkenness, they turn into blood. As soon as they were eaten by the bailiff, he died."²³

Padishahnama was written by Abdul Hamid Lahori (English tr. By H. Blochmann, JASB, 1872), narrated the conquest of Kamarupa (Koch Hajo) etc. Padishahnama has given detail, Bengal in the

north is bounded by two kingdoms, one of which is called Koch hajo and the other Koch Behar. Koch Behar lies far away from the Brahmaputra; Koch Hajo lies on the banks of that river. In the beginning of Jahangir's reign, Koch Hajo was ruled over by Parichhat and Koch Behar by Lakshmi Narayan. According to Padishanama, Meer Joomla took possession of the capital of Koch Behar, he appointed Syed Mohammed Saduc to be chief judge; with directions to destroy all the idolatrous temples, and to erect mosques in their stead. He however, issued orders to his troops not to plunder or injure any of the inhabitants, but to seize upon all the property of the Raja, wherever it could be found. To evince his zeal for religion, the general himself, with a battle axe broke the celebrated image of Narain (the principal object of worship of the Hindoos of that province) and after wards, ascending to the roof of the temple proclaimed the Mohammedan call to prayers.²⁴ With this exception on the article of religion, Meer Joomla would not permit his troops to be guilty of any injustice to his new subjects and instituted a court for the express punishment of plunderers or other offender.

The inhabitants of Koch Behar become reconciled to their invader and many of them, who had fled from the city returned to their habitations. At length, BishenNarain, the son of the Raja, who was on bad terms with his father came in at the instance of Meer Joomla, he was converted to the Muhammedan faith and on the promise of being raised immediately to the Raja undertook to seize his father.²⁵ To effect this impious undertaking, a considerable force under the command of Isfundiar Beg was sent with BishenNarain who entered the woods and having pursued the Raja for some time compelled him to take refuge in a hill fort of Bhutan, the only entrance to which was by a bridge composed of iron chains and which was easily taken to piece on the approach of an enemy. Although disappointed in seizing the Raja, they captured his principal Minister with all his family and wealth, they also found in the wood, 250 guns, great and small, and much other property; all of which was forwarded to Dacca.²⁶

Meer Joomla, having settled the revenues of Koch Behar at ten lacs of Narain rupees and made his arrangements, left fourteen hundred horses (cavalry) and two thousand musketeers under the command of Isfundiar Beg, to support the new government and proceed to the conquest of Assam.

Abdul Hamid Lahori narrates the other than political matters, "The inhabitants shave the head and clip off beard and whiskers. They eat every land and water animal. They are very black and loathsome in appearance. The chiefs travel on elephants or country ponies; but the army consist only of foot soldiers. The fleet is large and well fitted out. The soldiers use bows and arrows and matchlocks, but do not come up in courage to the Muhammedan soldiers, though they are very brave in naval engagements. On the match they quickly and dexterously fortify their encampments with mud walls and bamboo palisades, and surround the whole with a ditch."²⁷

Fathiya-i-Ibrya was written by Ibn Muhammad Wali Ahmed Shihabuddin Talish. He gives very interesting account of Koch Behar kingdom under the king Prana Narayan (1632-1665 A.D.). It is stated that this ruler is an a noble, mighty king, powerful and fond of companion of women. He never took his lip from the edge of the bowl nor his hand from the flagon; he was continually surrounded by singing women and was so addicted to the pleasures of the harem that he did not look after his kingdom. His palace is regal, has a ghushulkhana, a darshan, private rooms, accommodation for the harem, for servant's baths and fountains and a garden. In the town there are flowerbeds in the streets and trees to both sides of them. The arrows are generally poisoned; their mere touch is fatal. Some of the inhabitants are enchanters, they read formulas upon water and give it to the wounded to drink who then recover. The men and women are rarely good-looking.²⁸

There was wide belief in magic and incantation. The Fathiya-i- Ibriya describes how one KhahataSannyasi had performed certain magic rites over an effigy of Chilarai whereupon the latter fell a helpless victim to slow death.²⁹ShihabuddinTalish gives the description of the Jogighopa, “It is a large and high fort on the Brahmaputra. Near it the enemy had dug many holes for the horses to fall into and pointed pieces of bamboo (panjis) had been stuck in the holes. Behind the holes, for about half a shot’s distance, on even ground, they had made a ditch, and behind this ditch, near the fort, another one three yards deep. The latter was also full of pointed bamboos. This is how the Ahoms fortify all their positions. They make their forts of mud. The Brahmaputra is south of the fort, and on the east is the Monas.”³⁰ Masir-i-Alamgiri by Muhammad Mustaid Khan also gives an account of the conquest of Koch Behar by Khan-i-Khanan in 1661 A.D.³¹

There is no doubt that the kingdom of Kamata Koch Behar was prosperous land and it is historically very important. Its rulers were also powerful. But the history of this land has not yet been properly investigated and explored. The rise of the Koches had a great significance in the political history of medieval north eastern India. The Koch rule under my study which saw the rise, climax and disintegration of the Koch power, was marked by important changes in the political, socio-economic and cultural life of this part of the country. Thus it is high time now that the researchers in the field should take up special pains to utilize all kinds of sources available at present and produce a comprehensive history of Kamata Koch Behar.

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