

Chapter II

The Koches: Locations of their State Formation and the Tribalism.

The geographical location where the Koch kingdom emerged is the Tista-Brahmaputra valley which is bordered by the natural boundaries. Two rivers, the *Tista* and the *Karatoya*, formed the western boundary while the *Baranadi* and the *Brahmaputra* rivers determine the eastern boundary. Bhutan Duars is the northern limit and the confluence of the *Brahmaputra* and the *Karatoya* in Rangpur is the southern boundary of the valley. In our present political map it is comprising of Jalpaiguri, Cooch Behar and southern part of Darjeeling districts of West Bengal, part of Dinajpur and Rangpur districts of Bangladesh, and Kokrajhar, Bongaigaon, Dhubri, Goalpara, Barpeta, Bijni, Darrang and Kamrup districts of Assam¹. Geological variations, full with rivers, hills, hillocks, foothills, fertile plain tract, forest and mountain passes are the determinate factors of the socio-cultural format and mode of production of the region. Geography of multiplicity together with multiple ethnicities had significant role in form and formation of political power.

2.1.River System.

The river system is the heart of civilization of the Tista-Brahmaputra valley. Most prominent river in the western part of the kingdom is the *Tista*. It has its sources in the Chumbi Lake of Tibet, which comes down to Darjeeling district and enters Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar and eventually falls in the *Brahmaputra* in Rangpur. Socio-cultural format and economy of the western part of the Koch kingdom were closely linked with the *Tista*.

The *Karatoya* used to determine the western boundary of the ancient Kamarupa.² It was the natural frontier of the Mughal power and the Koch Kingdom.³ The Sanskrit literatures, composed in the region, categorically highlighted the link of this river with the cultural format of Kamarupa and Kamata.

The *Sankosh* is a prominent river in the region. It enters to Jalpaiguri district from Bhutan and flows down to Cooch Behar and finally lost its course to the *Brahmaputra* in Dhubri district. It played a significant role in determining the political boundary of

the states emerged in the region. Still the *Sankosh* is the political border between Assam and West Bengal.

The *Torsha* river originates in Tibet and flows through Bhutan, Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar and eventually falls to the *Brahmaputra*. Important political centers including the capital of the Koch kingdom and cultural centers had been flourished in the bank of the *Torsha*.

The *Dharala* currently is a very narrow stream, flows in the southern part of Cooch Behar district as a tributary to the *Torsha*. Once it was a navigable river and was the natural protector of the capital of the Kamata Kingdom established by the Khenas. Kamatapur, the capital city of the Khenas and early Koch rulers was developed in its bank.

The *Raidak*, the *Kaljani*, the *Jaldhaka*, the *Mujnai*, the *Gadadhar* and other small rivers flow from Bhutan to south as the tributary to the *Torsha*, the *Sankosh* and the *Brahmaputra* are closely connected with the societal format of the western part of the Koch kingdom.

The *Brahmaputra* system was the heart of sociopolitical and economic life of the region. The *Brahmaputra* receives a good number of important tributaries from the northern bank such as the *Subarnasiri*, the *Bharali*, the *Baranadi*, the *Pagladia*, the *Gadadhar*, the *Champamati*, the *Saralbhanga*, the *Manas*, the *Sankosh*, etc. His notable tributaries from the south bank are the *Buri Dihing*, the *Dishang*, the *Dikhau*, the *Jhanji*, the *Dhansiri*, etc. Important centers of political power, religious cultural and trade and commerce mostly developed along the bank of the *Brahmaputra* system. King Raghudev Narayan (1581-1603) and Parikshit Narayan (1603-1613) concentrated the political power of the Koch-Hajo (Eastern Koch Kingdom) in Ghilah Jhar at the bank of the *Gadadhar*. The *Baranadi* was the eastern boundary of the Koch kingdom during the reign of Visvasimha(c 1510-1540).

The network of rivers of the Tista-Brahmaputra valley had a significant role in the formation of states in the region since the beginning of historical period. As the natural frontier, the river system had pertinent role in the defence of the territory. Floods as a regular occurrence in the rivers had protected the region from the aggression of Bengal. Inspite of initial success of Bakhtiyar Khalji in his campaign in North Bengal and Lower Assam in the early 13th century, the rivers system had stopped

the implementation of his ambitious design in that region.⁴ Similarly, the invasion of Mir Jumla, Mughal general, against the Koch kingdom in 1661-1662 A.D. was a sheer failure for heavy rainfall and flood in the rivers of the region.⁵ Cultural format including animism of the tribes was largely dominated by the rivers. The *Kalika Purana*, compiled in the region has highlighted the river system of Kamarupa and important religious sites at the river bank which are continued to be exist in present time.⁶

2.2.The Surface

Fertile plain tract of Sub-Himalayan Bengal and the Brahmaputra valley was the land of peasantization of tribes with surplus generating capacity and significantly linked with the economic viability of the states emerged in the region. Foothills, hills and hillocks of Western Assam and mountain passes (*duar*) to Bhutan of Sub-Himalayan Bengal are also closely associated with the cultural format and mode of production of the people of the region. The mountains passes to Bhutan were main trade routes to Bhutan from Bengal and Assam.⁷ These had political role too. While Mir Jumla, a Mughal general, invaded Koch Kingdom in 1661 A.D., King Prana Narayan (1632-65 A.D.) got shelter at Buxa Duar,⁸ one of the entrance door to Bhutan.

Plenty of jungle and forests⁹ with wild animals of large varieties and forest products are closely linked with the tribal animism, hunting, cattle rearing and their way of life. The availability of wild elephants in the jungles of Assam and Duars had led to the growth of elephant catching as a profession. So elephantry was an essential part of the Koch and Ahom militia.

2.3. Societal Format.

Spatial distribution of multilingual tribal and non-tribal population in the region prior to the Koch states formation is not well documented. Vernacular and Sanskrit literatures, composed locally; the Sanskrit scriptures, Persian literatures and certain inscriptions and 'land grants', however, have left some impressions about the societal format. Chinese traveler Yuan Chawng (Hiuen Tsiang) who visited the region in the 7th century A.D. had illustrated that the people of the region –

"were of honest ways, small of stature and black-looking, their speech different a little from that of mid India, they were of violent disposition and were

persevering students; they worshiped the Devas, and did not believe in Buddhism..”¹⁰

The *Tabakat-i-Nasiri*, of Minhaj-ud-din Siraj, a 13th century Persian work, has reflected the distribution of tribal people of the region. It categorically mentions the settlement of three tribal communities between the country of Bengal (Lakhanavati) and Tibet viz. Koch, Mech and Tharu.¹¹ They had their own languages. The *Yogini Tantra* has also described them as *Kuvachaka*¹² or evil speakers. The *Kalika Puran* is, however, more precise in the identification of the people of the region. The tribal people were described either as *Kiratas* or as *Mlechchhas*. The tribal culture and their non-Aryan physical stature have been categorically illustrated in these Sanskrit literatures.¹³ So the literary constructions of the people of the region undoubtedly indicate to the tribals of present nomenclature such as- Koch, Mech, Tharu, Garo, Kachari, Bhutia, Chutia, Rabha, etc. The Koch, Mech and Rabha communities are specially concentrated in Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar districts of West Bengal, Goalpara, Kokrajhar, Bongaigaon and Barpeta districts of Assam and Garo Hill district of Meghalaya.

Beside the tribal culture, non-tribal cultural elements had been entered in the cultural format of the Tista-Brahmaputra valley before the emergence of the Koches. The Brahmins got settlement in the region due to the land-grants issued by the tribal kings. The Brahmin colony in the region is traceable in the 11th century A.D..¹⁴ Kamarupa was a stronghold of the Brahmins and a center of *tantric-culture*. Brahmins were also appointed in the state administration by the Khena kings of the region of the 15th century.

Among the non-tribals, *Kayasthas* (a dominant mixed Hindu caste) were most prominent (other than the Brahmins). The *Guru Charita* of Ramcharan Thakur, a 16th century biography of Sankardeva, has illustrated that the Kayasthas were migrated to Kamarupa in the 13th and 14th centuries from Kanouj and Gauda.¹⁵ They gradually emerged as landed aristocrats for their knowledge of advanced agricultural techniques and technologies. They were specially called the *Bhuiyans*. Forefathers of Sankardeva, the propagator of neo-Vaishnavism in Assam and North Bengal were Bhuiyans. The Kayastha Bhuiyans were distributed in the Lower Brahmaputra valley particularly at Kamarupa, Darrang, Barpeta and Goalpara;¹⁶ and had great role in the contemporary

politics of the 15th century. In the administration, the Koch kings specially treated the Kayasthas.

Among the non-tribal communities, Hindus of lower social status were the majorities. Professional castes like--Dom, Hira (potter) and Nadial or Kaivarta (fishers and boatmen) were autochthonous communities. Few other professional castes such as-Teli, (oil men), Sonari (goldsmith), Kumar (blacksmith), Kahar (palanquin bearer), Dhoba (washer men), Tanti (weavers),¹⁷ etc; were settled in the Tista-Brahmaputra valley prior to the emergence of the Koches as a political identity.

Daivagna or Ganaka (astrologers) had a special place in the state polity. The founder Koch king, Visvasimha (1515-1540 A.D.) had appointed Sribar as the Daivagna for the king.¹⁸ With astrology as occupation, the Daivagnas were predictor of future of the people.

Table2.1: Population distribution in the Brahmaputra valley 1881¹⁹.

Bodo-Kachari tribes influenced by Hindus.	Kachari	265418
	Mech	57885
	Lalung	46077
	Hajong	3689
	Garo (plains)	23275
Bodo-Kachri tribes in the proc of conversion.	Rabha	56285
	Madhai	13149
	Mahalia	6198
	Sarania	4718
	Totila	2539
Castes formed of conversed Bodo-Kacharis	Borahi	(extinct)
	Chutia	59163
	Rajbanshi/Koch	366739
Miri tribe		25636
Hindu castes	Kalita	241589
	Ahom (Tai-Ahom)	179283
	Kaivarta	105 317
	Dom (Nadial)	96779
	Kantai&Jugi	81931
	Brahmin	68784
	Ganak (Daivgna)	17390
Muslim		208431

The *charita puthis* (biographies of the Vaishnava saints of Assam) and genealogies of the Koch and the Ahom kings also mentioned certain other occupational communities such as Manjhi (boatmen), Baroi (betel leaf farmer), Kalita (indigenous

agricultural caste), Mukhi (image maker), Khanikar (mask and image maker), Sutar (carpenter), Not (dancer), Mali (gardener) and Keot (fishermen and oil maker).

So ethnically diverse population was distributed in the Tista-Brahmaputra valley. The ecology and geographical features had determined their culture and occupations. The tribals with their clan villages and production system were basically distributed in the hills, hillocks and foothills of the region. Contrarily, non- tribal communities were scattered specially in the plains with advanced tools and technologies of production. In spite of entry of the Brahmanism and Hindu culture, Hindu social stratification was less penetrated in the Tista-Brahmaputra valley.

2.4.Historical Locations.

Origin and growth of civilization in the Tista-Brahmaputra valley in prehistoric stage had its (historical) reference as political identity since the epic period. This region, before the emergence of the Koch Kingdom had been mentioned in different names—viz., Pragjyotisha with its capital at Pragjyotishapur, Kamarupa and Kamata. The territorial boundaries of these kingdoms were always not identical. The mythological heroes like- Naraka and Bhagadatta have been described in the epics and the *puranas* as the *Kirata* (tribal) chiefs of Pragjyotisha. The *Kalika Purana* has described the 'Narakasur episode' and located the boundary of Pragjyotisha from the *Karatoya* in the west to the *Dikkar Basini* (*Dikkrai*) river in the east.²⁰

Since the early centuries of the Christian era, Brahmaputra valley began to be described as Kamarupa. The *Allahabad Prasasti* of Samudra Gupta (c. 325-76 A.D.) mentioned that 'Kamarupa' was a frontier kingdom.²¹ However, the *Raghuvamsa* of Kalidasa, produced in the Gupta empire (5th century A.D.) had mentioned two names of the region viz. Pragjyotisha and Kamarupa.²² Kamarupa became the general political identity since the 4th century A.D. particularly with the rise of 'Varmanas' as ruling dynasty. Kamarupa under Vaskarvarman was emerged as a significant political power in the first half of the 7th century A.D. During his reign, Yuan Chawng had visited Kamarupa. In his account, Kamarupa has been described as *Kia-Mo-Leo-Po*, situated in the eastern side of the Pundravardhana after a great river (the *Karatoya*).²³ The natural boundary of Kamarupa was, however, defined in the *Yogini Tartra* that Kanchangiri was the northern boundary, the *Karatoya* was situated on the west, the *Dikkar Basini* formed the eastern boundary while the confluence of the *Brahmaputra* and the *Lakshya*

rivers stood as the southern boundary of Kamarupa.²⁴ This region was also known as **Kamata** during the Muslim period. Kamata was the western part of Kamarupa where the Khenas had established a kingdom in the 15th century.

Koch kingdom emerged in the ruins of the Kamata kingdom and the territorial boundary was almost identical with Kamata. The kingdom of Visvasimha (founder ruler of the Koch kingdom) was extended from the *Baranadi* in the east to the *Karatoya* in the west and from Bhutan Duars to Ghoraghat (Rangpur) in the south.²⁵ Under the leadership of King Nara Narayan, the kingdom got its highest territorial expansion comprising the Tista and Lower Brahmaputra valley and began to be known as '**Koch**' or '**Behar**'. However, the kingdom was divided into two parts in 1581 due to the internal conflicts between King Nara Narayan and Raghudeva Narayan, nephew of the king. After the partition of the kingdom, eastern part has been counted as **Koch-Hajo** and the main branch came to be known as **Koch Bihar** or **Cooch Behar**. In the last days of independent status of the Koch kingdom, it was extended from Bhutan frontier in the north to Rangpur in the south and from the *Tista* in the west to the *Sankosh* in the east.²⁶ Inspite of geographical and territorial variations and differentiability in nomenclature of the region, present work fixes this geographical location as Tista-Brahmaputra valley which was the play ground of the political formation of the Koches and prefers to use the term '**Koch kingdom**'.

2.5. The Koches: Origin, Original Homeland and Identity

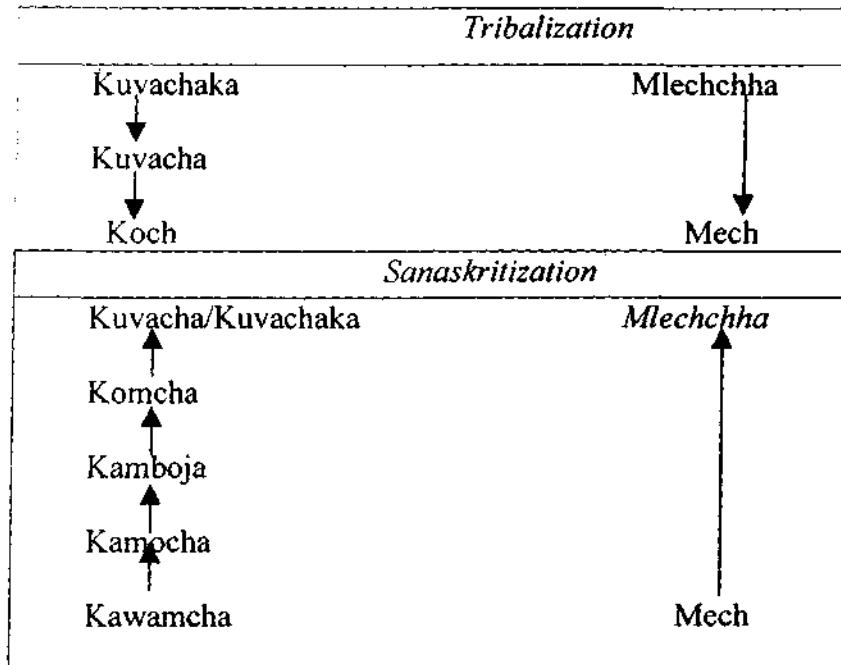
The tribes historically traced living in the Koch kingdom were the Koches and Meches who in our present constitutional stratification have been classified either as 'Scheduled Tribes'(ST) or as 'Scheduled Castes'(SC). But their origins and original homeland are still the matters of controversies to the scholars. The Sanskrit texts have described the Koches in sanskritized (purified) name such as *Kuvacha*²⁷ and *Kubachaka*²⁸ (evil speaker) aligned with non-Aryan (evil) tongue and food habits. On the contrary, the Sanskrit term *Mlechcha* has been derived from the name of the tribe **Mech**.²⁹ However, the *Tabakat-i-Nasiri*, a 13th century Persian work has mentioned these tribes as '**Mech**' and '**Koch**'³⁰ without any metaphoric expressions.

2.5.1. Origins of the Koches.

There is no unanimity among the scholars about the etymological source of the term '**koch**'. Suniti Kumar Chatterji argues that the term **koch** has been originally

derived from the Indo-Aryan source *kawamca*, written as *kamōca*, which was sanskritized as *kamboja*.³¹ The *kamboja* has been further, elevated to *kubachaka* through *Kome–Koch–Kubacha* continuum. Whatever the etymological sources of the terms Koch and Mech tribes, it is true that these were *sanskritized* as *Kuvacha* or *Kubachaka* and *Mlechcha* as described in the Sanskrit literatures. Contrarily, the term *Kamboja* or *Kuvacha* or *Kubachaka* and *Mlechcha* were tribalised as *Koch* and *Mech*, as illustrated in the non-Sanskrit (Persian) literatures and prevalent locally as the names of the tribal communities (as illustrated in the figure 2.1). Inspite of differentiality in nomenclature, the present work prefers to use the term **Koch** and **Mech** as the nomenclatures of the tribes associated with the foundation of the Koch kingdom.

Figure 2.1: Sanskritization and tribalization of the terms- Koch and Mech.



2.5.2. Original Homeland of the Koches.

Like the origin of the term Koch, their original homeland and routes of migration to North Bengal and Northeast India are also debatable. Several scholars have come forward to identify the original homeland of the tribes with the arguments of probability based on certain identical nomenclatures. R.C. Majumdar and N.N. Vasu³² have argued Kombaja Desha or the country of the Kombaja of the northwestern part of the Indian subcontinent³³ as the original homeland of the Koches on the ground of

identical etymology. H.C. Ray on the other hand, has indicated another possibility that the Koches came from the northeastern part of the subcontinent particularly from the region between Yunan and Swechwan lies in present Miyanmar. His argument is based on the possibility of existence of a Kamboja and a Gandhara country in the northeastern region of the subcontinent.³⁴

There is another group of arguments in favour of Tibet as the original homeland of the Koches and Meches. R.P. Chanda has placed the Kombaja Desha in Tibet.³⁵ D.C. Sircar, in describing the Kamboja rulers of Northern Bengal of 9th and 10th centuries A.D. mentioned in the *Dinajpur Pillar Inscription* and *Idra Copper Plate*³⁶, had stressed on the point that the Kombajas came from Tibet and they came to be known as Koch in the later priod.³⁷

The possibility of Tibet as the ancestral homeland of the Koches is very high. But R.P. Chanda and D.C. Sircar merely indicated it as the country of Kamboja. The term 'Koch' if confirmed as the tribalized form of *Kamboja* then Tibet was that land. But if *Kamboja* is *sanskritized* form of the Koch then it is contradictory to the pervious one. However, far-distanced northwestern Indian subcontinent has very little possibility as the original homeland of the Koches. But northeastern Indian subcontinent is possible as the tribes like- Ahom entered into the Upper Brahmaputra valley in the 13th century and emerged as a political power. But H.C. Ray's argument is purely hypothetical. Tibet, however, has the largest possibility and is corroborated by the folk tradition of the other Bodo tribes of North Bengal and Northeastern India. The Meches of Sub-Himalayan Bengal (*Duars*) believe that their ancestors were the inhabitants at the bank of the *Mechi* river of Eastern Nepal.³⁸ The legend of origin of the Limbu tribe of Nepal and North Bengal considers the Bodo tribes of North Bengal and Northeast India as their cognate.³⁹ Practically the Koch, Mech and Rabha tribes had their close proximity and the legends prevailed among them are corroborating the Tibetan valley as their ancestral homeland. The route of migration from Tibet was through Eastern Nepal to Northern Bengal and then to Assam and Meghalaya. Whatever the date of their migration, the Koches and Mech settlement are exist in the Tista-Brahmaputra valley prior to the 12th century as it has been confirmed in the *Tabakat-i-Nasiri*.

2.5.3.Racial Identity: Colonial and Post-colonial Constructions.

The administrative requirement of the British government⁴⁰ had begun the process of collection of ethnographic data about the Indian tribes and castes since the early 19th century which resulted into the stratification of the Indian population on the basis of tribe, caste, race, religion, etc. The Koch, Mech and the Rabhas, being the tribal people of North Bengal and Northeast India got considerable attention from the colonial anthropologists and ethnographers.

In 1872, Mr. E.T. Dalton had described the Koches as Dravidian for their physical characteristics.⁴¹ E.T. Dalton had been endorsed by Mr. Beverley in the 'first colonial census report' (1872).⁴² In 1891 H.H. Risley constructed the Koch tribe as the Dravidian and stressed on the possibility of admixture with the Mongoloids.⁴³

Colonial ethnographic view in favour of Mongoloid origin of the Koches is more prominent than the Dravidian racial identity. In his Monograph, *Essay the First on the Koch Bodo and Dimal Tribes*, B.H. Hodgson convicted that the Koches belonged to the Mongoloid family.⁴⁴ Hodgson was followed by Dr. Latham who stressed on the Mongoloid origin of the Koches.⁴⁵ Similarly L.A. Waddell has categorically expressed that

'they (Koches) do not, as stated by Colonel Dalton, Mr. Risley and others, belong to the dark Dravidian aborigines of India but are distinctly Mongoloid though somewhat heterogeneous.'⁴⁶

Similarly S. Endle corroborated the Mongoloid origin of the Koches. He even classified the Koches, Meches, Rabhas, Dhimals, Hajongs, Lalungs, Garos and such other tribes of Northeastern India within the same category.⁴⁷ These ethnographic constructions and observations in favour of Mongoloid physiognomy have been accepted by the administrative historian like Sir E.A. Gait who specifically expressed that – 'there seems to no doubt that the true Koches were a Mongoloid race, very closely allied to the Meches and Garos.'⁴⁸

Postcolonial anthropological studies on the tribes of Northeast India have recognized the Koches as Mongoloid. B.M. Das has classified them within the 'greater Bodo family' consisted with other tribes like the Garos, Kacharis and Rabhas.⁴⁹ Historians like D.C.Sircar and Suniti Kumar Chatterji have recognized the Koches as Mongoloids.⁵⁰ However, possibility of admixture with the Dravidian blood is not

ignorable. Black colour of the Dravidian race had been noticed among the people of the Tista-Brahmaputra valley by Yuan Chwang in the early 7th century.⁵¹ So it would be more tenable to conclude that the Koches originated from Mongoloid stock having close affinities and cultural similarities with the Meches, Garos, Rabhas, Dhimals and Hajongs and other tribes of 'Bodo family' and had mixture with the Dravidian race but Mongoloid features of physiognomy remained prominent.

2.5.4. Social Identity

While racial identity of the Koches is not beyond the scope of debate, their social identity is more controversial. They are now assimilated with the designation of Rajbanshi, a *hinduised* caste. They are often called *Koch- Rajbanshi* in West Bengal and Assam.⁵² But literary sources of the Koch-history particularly the *buranjis* (chronicles), *vamsavalis* (genealogies) and Persian works have categorically identified them as Koch. Koch genealogies such as *Darrang Raj Vamsavali* of Suryakhari Daivagna, *Raja Vamsavali* of Ripunjay Das, chronicles like *Rajopakhyan* of Munshi Jaynath Ghosh, *Kamrupar Buranji* and *Deodhai Assam Buranji* have attached a fictitious *kshatriya* origin with the Koches and categorically mention that the Koch ruling family was originated from the adulterous union between Hira (mother of Visvasimha) and Lord Shiva⁵³, a prominent male deity of the Hindu pantheon. Hence, the ruling family has also been described as *Shivabanshi* but not as *Rajbanshi*. Rather, the *Guru Charita* of Ramcharan Thakur, a 16th century biography of Sankardeva, has described that the *Rajbanshis*⁵⁴ were distinctive than the Koches.

With the beginning of colonial ethnography and decennial censuses, social identity of the Koches, however, became almost inseparable from that of the Rajbanshis. Buchanan Hamilton who visited Rangpur and other parts of North Bengal in the early 19th century (1807-14 A.D.) had observed that 'the Koches were designated as Rajbanshi although Rajbanshis are not Koch'.⁵⁵ It Means that the term 'Rajbanshi' is a greater designation where Mongolian tribes entered after abandoning their tribal custom and accepting Hindu traditions and rituals. Hamilton was endorsed by B.H. Hodgson (1847) who expressed that the Koches, Meches and the Kacharis originated from the great Mongolian race and Koches or Rajbanshis are merely the most *hinduized* form of the common stock.⁵⁶ To them, Koches after *hinduisiation* were

rajbanshized. So it is not unlikely that the Koches were began to be designated as *Rajbanshi* since the early 19th century.

Table: 2.2: Koch and Rajbanshi population in West Bengal ⁵⁷.

Community	1951	1961	1971	1981	1991
Koch	931	3522	17257	9714	14844
Rajbanshi	742733	1201717	1353919	2258758	2839481

Table: 2.3. Koch and Rajbanshi population in North Bengal ⁵⁸.

District	1971		1981		1991	
	Koch	Rajbanshi	Koch	Rajbanshi	Koch	Rajbanshi
Darjeeling	551	31505	192	62770	94	96745
Jalpaiguri	9572	329191	356	514274	538	656073
Cooch Behar	919	481304	1438	714221	2497	865622
West Dinajpur	1527	134976	3267	369015	5005	489642
Maldah	3561	50693	3793	83462	5139	114697
North Bengal	16130	1027669	9046	1743642	13212	2222779

In spite of *kshatriyazation* of the Koches, particularly of the ruling section; Rajbanshi was not a preferred title. But the colonial censuses in the beginning had given a similar caste status to the Rajbanshis and Koches i.e. *Bhanga Kshatriya* or *Bratya Kshatriya*.⁵⁹ But it was challenged by the educated and landed elite of the Rajbanshi community. The Rajbanshi élites, fortified with modern education by codifying the common beliefs prevailed among the Rajbanshis, have argued that they are the descendants of Raja Vardhana who being persecuted by Maha Padma Nanda, fled to North Bengal.⁶⁰ Thus their social status is not identical with the Koches who had their ancestry with tribal folk. The Rajbanshi intellectuals of Rangpur had founded their caste organizations to differentiate the Rajbanshis from the Koches. The educated section of this community began to publish several works containing, scriptural evidences that the Rajbanshis are *kshatriyas*⁶¹ (Poundra). The Rajbanshi Kshatriya Samity, founded in 1910 A.D. at Rangpur, had the basic objectives to establish distinct social identity of Rajbanshis, delinked from the Koches.⁶² The census of 1911 recorded the Rajbanshi as the Kshatriya. But in the census of 1921, the Koches were also recorded as *kshatriya*. However, *kshatriyization* of the Rajbanshis since 1913 A.D. had rapidly increased the figure of the Rajbanshi population while the figure of the Koches

was declined. The figures of the Rajbanshis in 1921 was 1727111 which increased to 1806390 in 1931 while the figure of the Koches was decreased from 131273 in 1921 to 81299 in 1931.⁶³ It was due to the classification of the Koches as Rajbanshi. In postcolonial West Bengal the Koches have very little concentration. In North Bengal, the playground of the Koch power, now a days Rajbanshi is the most prominent caste in population figure but the Koches are very few. In Assam, the scenario is not different. The Koches of West Bengal and Western Assam i.e., Tista Brahmaputra valley more or less assimilated with the Rajbanshi or Koch-Rajbanshi social identity is now a monotonous one. But in Meghalaya, particularly in Garo Hills, the Koches have their *non-rajbanshized* identity with tribal culture.⁶⁴

2.6. The Tribalism.

It is very difficult to define the tribe within a rigid framework. Multiplicity of characteristics derive from the empirical studies of the tribal societies in different ecological and geographical set up have entangled the definitional problem. However, these studies indicate certain general feature of the tribes and tribal society.

To the social scientists a 'social group usually comprising a number of *sibs*, *bands*, villages or other sub groups, which is normally characterized by the possession of a definite territory, a distinct dialect, a homogeneous and distinctive culture and either a unified political organization or at least some sense of common solidarity as against outsiders'.⁶⁵ Its economic typology is of subsistence character with simple technology, 'bartered mode of trades' and 'self-sufficiency'.⁶⁶ Andre Betielle has, however, reservation about the application of the general concept of tribe in Indian context where the tribals are inseparably linked with the non-tribals.⁶⁷ Inspite of contradiction and multiplicity in definition, the International Labour Organization (ILO) in its 169th Convention, *Article 1*, has defined a tribe with the following words:

'Tribal peoples in independent countries are those whose social, cultural and economic conditions distinguish them from other sections of the national community and whose status is regulated wholly or partially by their own customs or traditions or by special laws or regulation.'⁶⁸

Foregoing discussion reveals certain basic characteristics of tribal society. So Robert Redfield had noted distinctiveness, smallness, homogeneity and self-sufficiency as primary futures⁶⁹ of the tribal society. With Redfield, certain other features can be

included to identify the tribal society such as common territory, common dialect or language, existences of common culture and distinct socio-political institutions.

2.6.1.The Koches and Meches and their Tribalism

The general features of the tribal society have their applicability to determine the tribalism of the Mongoloids tribes of the present study. Territorially, the Koches and Meches were and still are concentrated in the Tista- Brahmaputra valley. The Sanskrit literatures like- *the Kalika Puran* and *Yogini Tatra* have identified the territory extended from the *Dikrai* in the east to the *Karatoya* in the west and from the Bhutan hills to the confluence of the *Lakhai* and the *Brahmaputra*; as the tribal belt, dominated by non-Aryans tribes like Kiratas, Koches, Meches and others.⁷⁰ The *Tabakat-i-Nasiri* also recorded the same territory as the abode of these tribes⁷¹.

These tribes had their own languages, which are still in (strangulated) existence in the region. Although the *Yogini Tantra* and the *Padma Purana* have described the Koches as *Kuvacha* and *Kubavchaka* (bad speakers) respectively, their language was distinctive than the Aryan language. The *Tabakat-i -Nasiri*, had illustrated a distinct language prevalent among the Koch, Mech and Tharus.⁷² Linguistically they belonged to the Tibeto-Burman group.⁷³ In North Bengal, Koch language is almost disappeared. But the Meches of Jalpaiguri and Darjeeling in West Bengal and Western Assam are progressing with their own tribal language.

These tribes have their own distinctive culture. They did not accept the symbols of the Aryan culture without opposition and challenge. The *Kalika Purana* described that the *Kirata*(tribe) chief Ghataka fought against the Aryan invaders.⁷⁴ Their food habit was completely different from the Aryans. The *Padma Purana* in its single verse has highlighted the culture of the Koches that they had no respect for cows and Brahmins and they are accustomed to eat everything.⁷⁵

The chronicles (*buranji*) and the genealogies (*vamsavalis*) have illustrated the non-Aryan culture of these tribes. These literatures invariably sought to attach a *kshatriya* lineage of the Koch and Mech tribes and illustrated that the founder king Visvasimha's (Visu) father was not Haria Mech but Lord Shiva. His Koch mother was cheated by the duplicity of Lord Mahadeva.⁷⁶ Whatever the exaggerations, these sources prove the birth of Visvasimha for the union between Haria Mech and Hira Koch. But it raises another question, why did the descendants of Haria Mech are called

Koch? It was definitely for the matrilineal tradition of the Koches. But after the formation of state with their *hinduization*, patriliney was established in the ruling family of the Koches .So from Visvasimha, Haria Mandal's successors have been counted as **Koch**.

Like other tribal communities, the Koches and Meches had their mixed subsistence economy comprising collective *jhuming*⁷⁷, collective hunting⁷⁸, cattle rearing and crafts for domestic uses. So in the early life Visvsimha was a *bargorakhiya* (chief cowherd)⁷⁹ and wielder of *aranya dharma*⁸⁰ (life of the forest). Their crafts particularly the *endi culture* (making of *endi* silk and weaving of *endi* cloth) was the expertise of the Meches. Inspite of multiple threats from the advanced technology, the old tradition of *endi culture* is still exists among the Meches of West Bengal and Assam Duars.

2.6.2. Sociopolitical Setting.

Tribal society with the kin and clan villages having a leadership of the chief was the common feature of the Koches and Meches before the 16th century. Although the Mongolian tribes of North Bengal had participated in the invasion of Bakhtiyar Khalji⁸¹ and were guided by the tribal chief, politically they could not cross the tribal bondage. Prominent position of the Koches under their chief in the 13th century also noticeable from Mymensingha.⁸² Appropriation of circumstantial opportunities although established the Koch and Mech chiefs as political figures but they remained in the stage of tribalism. The chief was basically selected from the clan villages. The *Darrang Raj Vamsavali* and the chronicles have given a list of twelve leaders of 'Mech clan villages' of Western Assam who selected Haria Mech as their chief (Mandal) in the late 15th century⁸³. The chiefdom of Haria Mandal was a greater political unit for the Meches. Similarly the Koches were also settled in the region with similar tribal leadership.

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