

State Formation, Legitimization and Cultural Change A Study of Koch Kingdom

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Abstract

Historical and anthropological studies on origin and growth of kingdoms in pre-colonial northeast India identify a few common features in the process of legitimization of political power. The means adopted for legitimization of the kingdom include construction of the idea of divine kingship, undertaking public works and building of religious institutions, use of Indo-Aryan (non-tribal) culture including language and literature and synthesis of 'adopted' and 'primordial culture'. All these aspects of legitimacy of 'state power' have been analyzed in this paper in the context of formation Koch kingdom in pre-colonial Lower Assam and Sub-Himalayan Bengal.

Keywords: Koch kingdom, legitimization, Neo-Vaishnavism, Hinduization of tribal culture, cultural synthesis.

Introduction

In the discourse on origin and growth of state, legitimacy refers to 'a situation in which the rulers and the ruled shared the conviction that rule of the government is right.'¹ Legitimacy means a justified existence of concentrated political power wielded by a portion of a community.² A new state generally justifies its new institutions; hierarchy and power by introducing new cultural ideas and maintaining traditional 'belief-system'.³ Anthropologists and historians have identified⁴ a few steps in the process of legitimization of power of the kingdom emerging from tribal phase. First step was the construction of a fabricated genealogical link of the ruling (tribe) family.⁵ Redistribution of concentrated surplus through the construction of public works and building of religious institution was another step. Third step was 'adoption of Indo-Aryan (non-tribal) culture' including language and literature. This adoption and cultivation of new

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culture went alongside the maintenance of the primordiality, resulting in synthesis of ‘adopted’ and ‘primordial culture’. ‘Synthesis of culture’ that resulted from kingdom formation process eventually resulted into the evolution of ‘new cultural phenomena’ in northeast India.⁶ All these aspects involved in legitimization of ‘state power’ would be analyzed in the present paper in the context of formation of Koch Kingdom in pre-colonial India.

The geographical area of the present study is the ‘Tista-Brahmaputra basin’ i.e. Sub-Himalayan Bengal and Lower Assam. The Koch and the Mech tribes of this region had initiated political formation in the late fifteenth century. Haria Mondal, a Mech clan leader of Chikina Hill of Khuntaghat (present Kokrajhar district of Assam), together with the Koches had founded a small chiefdom in the first decade of the sixteenth century. This chiefdom was transformed into a territorial kingdom under the leadership of Viswasimha (c1510-1540). King Naranarayan (1540-1587), together with Chilarai (his brother-cum-Koch military general), extended the territorial boundary of the kingdom further. He adopted several steps to legitimize the Koch rule. Different developments such as warfare, peasantization of the tribes, transformation of mode of production, monetization of economy, trade relations with the neighbouring kingdoms, cultural changes and certain other causative factors facilitated the growth of Koch kingdom. But internal contradictions (leading to the division of the kingdom) between Raghudev Narayan (1581-1603) and Lakshmi Narayan (1587-1627) in the 1580’s allowed the Ahoms from Upper Assam and the Mughals from Bengal to intervene in internal politics of the Koches. Aggressive attacks of the Ahoms and the Mughals toward the nucleus zone of the Koch kingdom i.e, Cooch Behar and Koch-Hajo (Eastern part of the Koch kingdom or Lower Assam) reduced the economic and territorial prosperity of this kingdom. Further the intervention of Bhutan in Cooch Behar in the eighteenth century had compelled the weak Koch ruler to seek the assistance of the East India Company in 1772 against the Bhutanese. A treaty was concluded in 1773 between Cooch Behar and the Company by which British supremacy was established in Cooch Behar. Cooch Behar maintained its relations with British India as a native state till 1947. It merged with independent India in 1949 as a ‘C’ category State. And eventually Cooch Behar has been transformed into a district of West Bengal.

Given this history of the Koch kingdom, the paper discusses the various measures adopted by the Koch rulers, while in power, to legitimize their rule over multi-ethnic and plural cultural region of the Tista-Brahmaputra basin.

Legitimacy of Kingship and Kshatriyaization

Construction of a fabricated divine kingship was an essential prerequisite of pre-colonial Indian kingdoms and empires.⁷ In case of the Koch kingdom, it materialized with the creation of an ‘imaginary divine kingship’. Prior to the formation of their kingdom, traditional structure of tribal society of the Koches and Meches was based on clan villages maintained through lineage and kinship. With the territorial extension and growth of complexity in the Koch chiefdom, the chief and his allies came forward to assume the responsibility of management of the emerging kingdom. Thus the tribal chief Visu was declared as ‘King Viswasimha’ (c1515-1540 AD) by the Brahmins who performed the rituals of coronation.⁸

It was a common phenomenon in tribal polities of northeast India that the brahmins projected and popularized the ruling tribe as ruling caste or as *kshatriya* to legitimize their rule.⁹ Viswasimha brought brahmins from different places of Eastern India and settled them in the kingdom with land and honour¹⁰ and adopted culture of the Hinduism to legitimize his kingship. The brahmins conferred him a kingship of an extraordinary origin. *Yogini Tantra*, a sixteenth century Sanskrit text, describes the birth of Viswasimha from the union between Shiva (most popular deity of Hindu pantheon) and Hira, a Koch wife of Haria Mech.¹¹ The *buranjis* (chronicles) and *vamsavalis* (genealogies) have also fairly mentioned the following myth to prove the miraculous birth of the Koch king:

“One day Haria Mondal, chief of twelve villages of Chikina hill of Khuntaghat, after working hard in the *jhum* (shifting cultivation) field; was waiting for food and drink to be brought by Hira, his wife. On her way, Hira was deceived by the duplicity of Lord Mahadeva, and had an intercourse with him. She was embarrassed while Haria Mech blamed Hira for not bringing the food for him. Haria was puzzled but got the solution in dream where Mahadeva told him that ‘I enjoyed your wife and as a result a great child will be born who will be famous as Viswasimha” (sic).¹²

Genealogies, chronicles and official history, composed in the Koch kingdom, had continued the fabricated link between Viswasimha and Shiva. The link was constructed in such a way that the popular myth of northern India was used to justify divine link.

“The sons of Sahasrarjuna, a king of Haihay dynasty of Moon race, being afraid of Parsuram, ‘the destroyer of the *kshatriyas*'; left their country and took shelter at Chikina hill of Lower Assam, particularly among the Mech people. They gradually assimilated with the tribal-culture. But one Mech chief's (Haria Mondal) wife named Hira, had intercourse with Lord Shiva for which a child was born who became famous as Viswasimha”.(sic)¹³

Like other polities of northeast India, this super-structured construction of divine link of the founder king of the Koch kingdom was a ‘by-product of state-patronage to the brahmins'.¹⁴ It justified the ability of leadership of Viswasimha as king. So Viswasimha's kingship did not face any challenge from the ruled. But legitimization of warfare and centralization of powers by King Naranarayan was done by invoking the blessings of the gods in the chronicles and genealogies of the Koch kings as follows:

‘Being jealous to Naranarayan, Chilarai (general of the Koch militia), decided to overthrow the king. But surprisingly, he found that Naranarayan was being protected by goddess Bhagawati. Chilarai was repented for this offence and explained the whole matter to Naranarayan. The king was surprised. He got the solution in dream when Bhagawati appeared before him and advised him to propagate her worship in the region with a special form'.¹⁵

Through propagation of such myths, the authority of Koch rulers received natural acceptance from the ruled by the end of the sixteenth century. Coronation of the king in Hindu style was another means of legitimization of kingship. At the time of coronation, Viswasimha and his successors were compared with the popular deities like *Brahma*, *Vishnu*, *Mahesh*, *Indra*, *Aditi*, *Vayu*, *Varuna*, *Kuvera* and *Ganesh*.¹⁶ The brahmins had also upgraded the status of the Koch kings and Naranarayan was mentioned in some inscriptions of the Koch kings at par with the epic heroes of ancient India like-- Arjuna, Dadhichi, Karna and Kandarpa.¹⁷ Composition of inscribed verses of extra-ordinary origin in Sanskrit and performance of coronation ceremony of the Koch kings by the brahmins

helped in reimagining of tribal chiefship to a kingship. So this transformation had delinked the king from the tribal control. On the contrary, the king established his control over the tribe. Adoption of Hindu titles such as *Simha* had elevated the social status of the Koch chief to that of a Kshatriya king, i.e. legitimate ruler.

Distribution of Concentrated Surplus and Diffusion of New Culture

Second step in legitimization process of pre-colonial kingdoms of eastern and northeastern India was the distribution of concentrated surplus¹⁸ through the construction of universal beneficial construction projects and diffusion of new cultural ideologies.¹⁹ For the first one, the Koch kings had adopted a policy of constructing roads and public tanks for the benefit of the people of the Tista-Brahmaputra region. A road extended from the Western Duars to Narayanpur (also called *Gohain Kamal Ali*) was constructed by Naranarayan.²⁰ The Koches had also maintained the public road of the region constructed by the pre-Koch rulers, i.e the Khenas.²¹ These roads along with the easy movement of the militia facilitated commercial transport contributed to the growth of trade and commerce. The kings concentrated on construction of tanks for public utility. Chilarai Dighi (Tufanganj), Baneswar Tank (Baneswar), Sagar Dighi, Rajmata Dighi, Bairagi Dighi, etc, are some of the finest examples of public tanks constructed by the Koch rulers which are still in existence in Cooch Behar. Construction of these roads and tanks are considered to be a sort of distribution of the surplus accumulated by the Koch kings to popularize their rule among the people.

The Koch kings, however, also paid more attention to the diffusion of Indo-Aryan (non-tribal) culture, which they adopted voluntarily. They found the neo-Vaishnavism and Brahmanical Hinduism as the dominant religious forms having deep influence on the ordinary people of the region. Democratic values and simplicity advocated by Sankardeva (1449-1568) had profound influence on the heterogeneous people of the Tista-Brahmaputra basin. So all communities including the Koch, Kalita, Kayasthya, Chandal, Garo, Ahom, Bhutia, Miri, Muslim and even the brahmins had embraced Sankardeva's Vaishnavism. Madhavadeva and Damodar Deva, the disciples of Sankardeva also touched the hearts of the heterogeneous communities through their religious teachings and transformed the neo-*Vaishnavism* into a popular cult of the region.²²

Satra and *namaghar* of the neo-Vaishnavism appeared as two powerful institutions with capacity for social control. So Naranarayan and Chilarai encouraged the foundation of *satras* in Sub-Himalayan Bengal and Lower Assam to popularize Koch rule among the follower of Vaishnavism. They not only established close relations with Sankardeva but also became great patron of the neo-Vaishnavism. Lakshmi Narayan (1587-1637), Raghudeva Narayan (1581-1618), Parikshit Narayan (1603-1618), Bir Narayan (1627-32) and Prana Narayan (1632-1665A.D.) also continued the state's support to the building of the *satras* in the kingdom. The *Charita Puthis* have mentioned the existence of large number of *satras* in the Koch kingdom (although most of them are now extinct), which brought the bulk of the people under the direct control of the Vaishnavism.

Table 1
Important *Satras* of the Koch kingdom sponsored by the State.

Patron	Name and Location	Founder(s)
Naranarayan / Chilarai	Madhupur Satra (Madhupur)	Sankardeva
”	Ramrai Kuthi or Satrasal (Dhubri and Tufanganj boundary)	Ram Ray
”	Kakatkuta and Vela Satras (Cooch Behar, now extinct)	Sankardeva and Madhavadeva
”	Fulbari Satra (Tufanganj, Cooch Behar)	Madhavadeva
”	Bhitrua Satra (Baikunthapur)	Damodar Deva
”	Barpeta Satra (Barpeta)	Sankardeva
”	Raghunath Pravu Satra (Dhubri)	Not known
Lakshmi Narayan	Baikunthapur Satra (Baikunthapur)	Damodar Deva
”	Nakarkhana (Buxirhat)	Not known
”	Jhingaparni (Tufanganj)	Not known
Raghudeva Narayan	Shyamrai Satra (Golokganj, Dhubri)	Not known

The *namghars* emerged as the center of regular meetings in villages and *satras* as center of huge gathering. They promoted a kind of

social cohesiveness among the Vaishnavas with a common identity and ideology. So the building of the institutions of the neo-Vaishnavism at the cost of the kingdom had enhanced ‘state control’ over the ‘vaishnavite subjects’. By placing them as the patrons of Vaishnavism, the Koch kings got legitimacy among the Vaishnavas. As symbolic projection of this patronage, on Vaishnava style the Koch kings had assumed their title, *Narayan*, and their coins came to be known as *Narayani Tanka*.

The Koches did not confine themselves to the construction of *satras* and *namagharas* only. It has been already mentioned that they had adopted Hinduism as a new and fruitful ideology for legitimacy. So the Koches spent huge amount for construction and maintenance of temples of the Hindu pantheon. Naranarayan and Chilarai had constructed the present temple of Kamakhya at Guwahati.²³ They appointed the brahmins as priest of the temple with *brahmattar* (rent-free land granted to the brahmins) land and granted huge amount of *devottar* (land donated to the temple) land and took the burden of expenditure of daily worship of the deity of the Kamakhya temple.²⁴ The kings had equal reverence to the Shaivism. They built Chhoto Mahadeva temple at Nakkati Gachh (Tufanganj), Bara Mahadeva temple at Baro Kodali (Tufanganj) and Baneswar Shiva temple in Cooch Behar and arranged their regular expenditure.

Raghudeva Narayan (1587-1604) had rebuilt the famous Hayagriva Madhav temple at Manikut and endowed it with *devottar* and *brahmattar* land. Lakshmi Narayan had also continued the policy of the temple building. He even initiated the construction of the temple of Lularkeswar at Benaras, which was completed later by his successors.²⁵ King Prana Narayan (1632-1665 A.D.) also paid adequate attention to the building of new temples at the state’s expenditure. He constructed the temple of Kamateswari at Gosanimary and Jalpeswar Shiva temple at Jalpes and granted *devottar* land for their maintenance.²⁶ King Rup Narayan (1693-1714A.D.) and Dhairendra Narayan (1765-70) continued this trend.

Table 2 Notable Temples Built by the Koch Kings			
Patron(s)	Temple	Deity	Grant(s)
Naranarayan/ Chilarai	Kamakhya (Guwahati)	Kamakhya	140 <i>paiks</i> , villages, Rs. 25000 and huge <i>devottar</i> land
"	Bhairav Nath (Goalpara)	Shiva	Not known
Naranarayan	Baneswar (Baneswar, Cooch Behar)	Shiva	Arranged for daily worship and granted <i>devottar</i> land
Chilarai	Bara Mahadeva and Chhoto Mahadeva (Tufanganj)	Shiva	Arranged for daily worship and granted <i>devottar</i> land
Raghudeva Narayan	Hayagriva Madhava (Hajo)	Vishnu	<i>Brahmattar and devottar</i> land
Lakshmi Narayan	Lolark Kunda (Benaras)	Shiva	Not known
Bir Narayan	Chaturbhuja (Cooch Behar)	Chaturbhuja	Daily worship maintain by the kingdom
Prana Narayan	Jalpesh (Maynaguri)	Shiva	Daily worship and land endowment
"	Kamateswari (Gossanimari)	Gossani	"
"	Shiddeshwari	Gossani	"
"	Harihar	Shiva	Not known
Moda Narayan	Jalpesh	Shiva	The king granted 23 <i>jotes</i> of land as <i>brahmattar</i>
Rup Narayan	Madan Mohun (Cooch Behar)	Vishnu	Daily worship

The worship of Vishnu started in Koch kingdom in the late seventeenth century. In the early 18th century in Cooch Behar several temples of Madan Mohun (Vishnu) were constructed in the capital and

different parganas of the kingdom. Worship of Vishnu gradually was further popularized in Cooch Behar with the introduction of *Rash Mela* (a fair celebrated invoking Sri Krishna's divine love with beloved Radha and other *Gopinies*).²⁷

Grant of lands to the temples, priests and servants of the temples was thus a common phenomenon in Koch kingdom. Lucrative grants had allured the brahmins to settle in the region. Land endowment was so high that it became 19% of total land revenue production of 1872.²⁸ Apart from Brahmins coming from outside, 'the *Kamrupi* Brahmins'²⁹ were also employed in the services of the Hindu deities and temples. However, percentage of *brahmattar* land was much higher than that of *devottar*. The statistics of 1872 (as given in the table 4) of Cooch Behar State shows that out of 66194 *bighas* of total rent-free land, 40022 *bighas* were *brahmattar* land (60.46%). It was largest in capital Cooch Behar and its vicinity. The *devottar* land, however, was only 4823 *bighas* that was 7.28% of the total charitable land. The *devottar* land granted to the Kamakhya temple, Hayagriva Madhava temple and Jalpesh temple were roughly 23685 *bighas*, 54300 *bighas* and 44 *jotes* respectively. In the capital and its vicinity *devottar* land was much less and *brahmattar* land was much higher (15.63% of the total charitable land). This was due to the large settlement of the *Panchagram Brahmins* who were endowed with five villages.³⁰

Table 3
Distribution of Charitable Land (1870)
(in *bighas*)

Pargana	Devottar	Brahmattar	<i>Pet Bhata</i>	Pirpal	Lakheraj	Total
Mekhliganj	154	4220	10321	--	721	15416
Mathabhanga	1458	2248	3293	--	262	7261
Lal Bazar	30	14741	30	--	246	15047
Dinhata	842	6241	193	---	531	7807
Cooch Behar	2247	10347	2289	84	879	15846
Tufanganj	92	2247	2500	--	--	4817
Total	4823	40022	18628	84	2639	66194

Source: Harendra Narayan Choudhury: *The Cooch Behar State and its Land Revenue Settlement* (Cooch Behar, The Cooch Behar State Press, 1903)

Note: 1*bigha* = 0.33 acre or 1 acre = 3 *bighas*.

The Koch rulers, however, followed the policy of non-interference in *brahmattar* and *devottar* land. The priests of Kamakhya and Kamateswari temples imposed certain restrictions to the royal power by creating a few fictitious myths that disqualified the ruling family to visit these temples. Myths and anecdotes retained in the chronicles, genealogies and oral traditions describe that:

Kendu Kalai, the brahmin, was appointed as the priest for daily worship of Kamakhya. Kamakhya used to dance being satisfied to the musical services and submission of the priest. The king aspired to watch it. But the deity became so angry that she cursed that if Naranarayan and his family visit this temple, the dynasty of the Koch kings and the Brahmin priest would be destroyed'.³¹

Naranarayan, Chilarai and their successors including the Koch kings of Darrang, Beltala and Cooch Behar royal family strictly followed these restrictions. Similar myth was also created in connection with the Kamateswari temple of Gosanimari built by Prana Narayan.³² But the temples of Shiva³³ (which were numerous in the kingdom) were always open to the rulers. However, construction and maintenance of temples, appointment of the brahmin priests for service of the deities contributed to rapid development of Hindu religious culture among the tribal people of the region. This trend also stimulated the process of de-tribalization.

Adoption and Diffusion of Non-tribal Language and Literatures

Adoption and diffusion of new ideology for political legitimacy of the Koch kingdom was not confined to the religious cult. The Koches adopted Indo-Aryan languages like Sanskrit and Bengali in their courts.³⁴ Hinduism in general and Vaishnavism as patronized by the state in particular, were significantly linked with the Sanskrit language and literatures. Kings like Naranarayan and Chilarai were well-versed in Sanskrit, including Vedas, Sanskrit grammar, *puranas* and *smritis*. King Naranarayan himself compiled a dictionary of Sanskrit language titled *Malladevi Avidhan*. Knowledge of Sanskrit language and literature was considered a prerequisite for entering into the services of the Koch court in the mid-sixteenth century A.D.³⁵

This phenomenon was reflected in popularization of Sanskrit grammar in the kingdom. Purushottam Vidyavagis (at the instance of

king Naranarayan) had composed a work on Sanskrit grammar called *Prayoga Ratnamala*. It was modified Jay Krishna Bhattacharyya during the kingship of Prananarayan.³⁶ This grammar had wide circulation in the Tista-Brahmaputra basin till the 19th Century.

However, there is no way that Sanskrit could become an official language or *lingua franca*. So Naranarayan adopted Bengali in his court as ‘official language’. It was continued by his successor and Bengali got modified form during the reign of Prana Narayan. His diplomatic letters sent to the Ahom king give some sense of the official language of the Koch kingdom.³⁷ Subsequently, Bengali became the common language for diplomatic and official exchanges between Cooch Behar and Bhutan.³⁸ The increasing use of non-tribal vernacular by the Koches in their offices, courts and external affairs, led the tribal people to get acquainted with the Bengali language. The process of *linguistic-sanskritization* was thus accelerated by the ‘state- patronage’ to non-tribal standard languages.

Linguistic sanskritization in the Koch kingdom was further stimulated because of encouragement given by the state to translations of religious literature into Bengali and Kamrupi. With the support of the kings, who sought popularization of Indo-Aryan culture, several *puranas* were translated into the regional vernaculars.³⁹ The translations enabled the newly *hinduized* people who were not acquainted earlier with the Hindu scriptures to have access to knowledge of *puranas*. Many scholars in the court of the Koch kings attempted at translation of Indian epics (particularly the *Mahabharata*) Pitambar Siddhantavagis, at the suggestion of Prince Samarsimha (Chilarai), translated the *Nala-Damayanti* episode of the *Mahabharata*. Ananta Kandali, another scholar of the Koch court, composed *Savitri Upakhyan* and the *Rajasuya* section of the *Mahabharata*. Ram Swaraswati, Kabindra Parameswar and Kamsari of the court of Naranarayan produced several chapters of the *Mahabharata*. At the instance of King Lakshmi Narayan, Vipra Prasad translated the *Virata Parva*, *Bana Parva* and *Karna Parva* into the vernacular. Similarly, Kavishekhar translated the *Kirata Parva* at the instance of Bir Narayan. Translation of epics became more prominent during the reign of Prana Narayan (1632-1665). His courtier Srinath Brahmin translated several episodes of the *Mahabharata*. At the same time Sankardeva, Ananta Kandali and Kalap Chandra Dvija composed a few verses of the *Ramayana* in the vernacular, particularly in *kirtana* style.⁴⁰ Translation

of different epics into the vernaculars done with state sponsorship helped popularize the epics among the non-ruling section including the tribals and newly *hinduized* people.

Besides the *Mahabharata*, composition of literary vernacular pieces on *Bhagavata* had also drawn state-sponsorship. Sankardeva wrote extensively on the Vaishnavism in Kamrupi during the reign of Naranarayan. Sankardeva began his writings with the *Harish Chandra Upakhyan* and *Rukmini Upakhyan*. His *Nimi Narashiddhi Samvad* is a doctrinal commentary based on Book XI of the *Bhagavata*. His *Bhakti Pradip* and *Anadi Patan* are based on *Garuda Purana* and *Bamana Purana* respectively. Sankardeva popularized his teachings among his followers also by composing *ankiyanat* and *kirtana*.⁴¹

Like Sankardeva, his disciples Madhavadeva and Ananta Kandali also produced several works with state support. Madhavadeva started his writings with the *Janma Rahashya*, a small poem on the creation and destruction of the world based on the *puranic* theory. His *Bhakti Ratnabali* was the translation of Sanskrit work of Bishnupuri Sanyashi. The narrative poem *Nama Ghosha* contains his philosophical teachings. Madhavadeva continued the compositions of the *Baragit* (devotional songs) and *ankiyanats*. His *Nama Malika* (translation) and *Adikanda Ramayan* have been produced at Cooch Behar.⁴² In the production of the Vaishnava literature, Ananta Kandali had significant contribution. His poetical works - *Mahiravan Badha*, *Harihar-Yuddha*, *Vrittasur Badha*, *Bharat-Savitri*, *Kumar Harana Kavya* and *Khatasura Badha* were produced in the court of Naranarayan.

Vaishnava literatures, produced under the patronage of the Koch kings, were not confined among the literates and the state-officials. Propagation of messages of the Vaishnavism through the *kirtana* (chanting, listening), *baragit* and *ankiyanat sravana* contributed to the diffusion of this new culture among the masses. These state-sponsored literatures had several outcomes. Firstly, the ruling section of the Koches was accepted as Kshatriyas at least in the court literatures produced under their patronage. They were also propagated as the saviors of the brahmins, cows, Vaishnavas and intellectual class. Hence they are legitimate rulers.

Secondly, the tribals, newly *hinduized* tribals and the non-tribal laymen got a taste of Hindu classical literatures that influenced the

language and culture of the tribals. With the growth of Vaishnavism and consequent ‘detribalization of tribals’ Koch language became extinct from North Bengal. The linguistic change is thus a by-product of diffusion of the non-tribal culture by a kingdom that sought legitimation of its kingdom formation.

Primordial Culture: Modification, Synthesis and Continuity

It was a common feature of all tribal polities of northeastern and eastern India⁴³ that in spite of adoption of Indo-Aryan language and religion, they maintained the primordial culture. In case of the Koch kingdom, the tribals other than the ruling elite, especially those who live distant hilly areas, maintained primordiality, where state-sponsored religious ideologies and literatures had less influence. The rulers could not antagonize the tribals as they needed the tribal support in warfare. Hence, when the worship of Lord Shiva solely with the Vedic rituals was opposed by the tribals, King Naranarayan had to allow traditional ways of worship with animal sacrifice, offering of country beer (*chakat*) and colourful tribal music and dances. The Kacharis, Meches, Koches and other tribes of northern side of the *Gohain Kamal Ali* (from Cooch Behar to Narayanpur) were allowed to maintain their own cultural form with their own priests and rituals while the tribals of the southern side adopted Indo-Aryan culture.⁴⁴

Even to this day, the Koches, Meches and Rabhas follow their tribal style in their religious lives. The Rabhas and Koches have their traditional male deity called *Rishi* (Mahakal) and female deity known as *Jog*. The rituals of the chief deities are being performed by tribal priests, also known as *Deoshi/Deodhai/Huzi*. The Meches are also the followers of the *Bathouism*, i.e. worship of *Bathou* (*Shiva*). Two daughters of the chief male deity (*Rhishi / Bathou*) are also worshipped by them. The Rabhas called them *Rountak* and *Basek* while to the Meches they are ‘Alai Khungri’ and ‘Bilai Khungri’. *Rountak* is the synthesized form of goddess *Kali* and goddess *Lakshmi* of the Hindus. The Meches have a similar female deity called *Mouthansri* or *Lakshmi*.⁴⁵ Tribal culture has its continued existence in the Tista-Brahmaputra basin with primordial form.

However, primordiality and state sponsorship to Indo-Aryan culture led to cultural synthesis. Synthesis of religious culture can be noticed in

the worship of chief male and female deity i.e, *Shiva* and *Shakti* (*Durga/Chandi/Gauri*) of the Tista-Brahmaputra region. Tribal female deity, *Bhandani* (or *Vanadevi*) has been transformed into a localized incarnation of *Durga*. *Devi*, a special synthesized form of both the *Durga* of the Hindu pantheon and chief female deity of the tribals, is still being worshiped in Cooch Behar. Worship of *Devi* is generally performed by a ‘Kamrupi Brahmin’. The image of *Devi* and sacrificial animals like -- tortoise and boar show strong tribal influence.

Another deity of synthesis is *Shiva* who is popular both among the tribals and non-tribals. It is observed that in Bara Mahadeva temple at Baro Kodali, Chhoto Mahadeva temple at Nakkatigahh, Mahakal temple of Mahakalguri village and many other *Shiva* temples of the region, in addition to Vedic rituals sacrifice of animals and offering of fish of local varieties take place. Moreover, in places where tribal traditions are strong, tribal male deities like *Masan*, *Jachha*, *Bura Thakur*, *Dhum Baba*, etc., are worshiped as *Shiva*.

We have also noticed religious synthesis in certain folk festivals and worship of folk deities. The *Satyapida* and the *Paglapida* are the synthesized form of the Hindu and the Islamic faiths. *Garam Puja* is another interesting popular religious ritual where the Koch-Rajbanshis worship deities of the Hindu pantheon, Islamic faith and tribal spirits.⁴⁶

Changes in the form of the tribal deities and their synthesis with the deities of the Hindu pantheon (non-tribal) do not suggest that the process of *sanskritization* has succeeded in assimilating them. Even after *hinduization* the tribals neither abandoned their animism completely nor assimilated themselves in caste-culture.

Conclusion

Like other tribal polities of eastern and northeastern India, the Koch kingdom adopted certain familiar strategies to legitimize its rule. Distribution of accumulated surplus for building of religious institutions and taking up construction works of public utility had positive outcomes for both for the kingdom and the subjects. Contradictory policies of adoption of Indo-Aryan ideologies and conservation of primordial culture legitimized the Koch rule both among the tribals and other people of the region. At the same time, the state policies have initiated detribalization process which

eventually brought the *hinduized/sanskritized* tribe close to Hindu caste hierarchy. Simultaneously, adoption of standard vernacular in royal courts and external relations and translations of the religious literatures into vernaculars had stimulated the process of linguistic *sanskritization* leading to abandonment of tribal dialects for non-tribal languages. Thus the acts of 'legitimation' led to emergence of social stratification which facilitated the process of kingdom formation.

Notes and References

1. H.J.M, Claessen: The Internal Dynamics of Early State, *Current Anthropology*, vol. 25 (1984), pp. 365-379.
2. Morton H Fried: *The Evolution of Political Society: An Essay in Political Anthropology* (New York, Random House, 1967), p. 26.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 342.
4. Studies on formation of tribal polities in pre-colonial Indian context are not many. Some worth mentioning works which discussed state legitimization process in pre-colonial context include, James Heitzman: "State Formation in South India 850-1280", *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 24(1987), pp. 35-61; B.D.Chattopadhyaya: *Political Process and the Structure of Polity in Early Medieval India: Problem of Perspective*, Presidential Address, Ancient India Section, Indian History Congress, 44th Session, (Burdwan, 1983); Surajit Sinha: "State Formation and Rajput Myth in Tribal Central India", *Man in India*, 42 (1962); Surajit Sinha (ed): *Tribal Polities and State System in Pre-colonial Eastern and Northeastern India*, (Calcutta, K.P. Bagchi & Co, 1987); Hermann Kulke: "Early State Formation and Royal Legitimation in Tribal areas of Eastern India", in Moser R. Rupert and M.K. Gautam, (eds): *Aspects of Tribal life in South Asia, Strategy and Survival*, (Bern, 1978); Hermann Kulke (ed): *The State in India 1000- 1700*, (Delhi, OUP 1995); Amalendu Guha: From Tribalism to Feudalism 600 – 1750, *Indian Historical Review*, vol.1 (1974), pp.65-76; Amalendu Guha: *Medieval and Early Colonial Assam, Society Polity Economy*, (Calcutta, K.P. Bagchi & Co, 1991); S.A. Maritina: *The Kachari State: The Character of Early State Like Formation in the Hill Districts of Northeastern India*, in H.J.M, Claessen and P, Skalnic (eds): *The Early State*, (The Hague, Mounton Publishers, 1978); K.S, Singh: *Tribal Society in India*, (New Delhi, Manohar, 1985); Romesh, Buragohain: Presidential Address, *Proceedings of North East India History Association*, XXIth Session, Manipur University, (Imphal, 2002); Milton S. Sangma (ed): *Essays on North East India*, (New Delhi, Indus Publishing House, 1994).

5. B.D. Chattopadhyaya: *Political Process and the Structure of Polity*, op.cit.
6. Rup Kumar Barman: "Formation of States in Ancient and Medieval India with Special References to Northeast India: A Theoretical Overview, *The Quarterly Review of Historical Studies*," vol. XLVIII, nos. 3&4 (2008-09), p.117.
7. The kings of non-Kshatriya origin, for legitimizing their kingship had always tried to create a link with the rulers mentioned in Hindu mythologies. For details see, Steward Gordon: *Marathas, Maruadars and State Formation in Eighteenth Century India*, (Delhi, OUP, 1998); J.C., Heesterman: "Power and Authority in Indian Tradition", in R.J. Moore (ed): *Tradition and Politics in South Asia*, (New Delhi, 1979); J.F. Richards: *Kingship and Authority in South Asia*, (Delhi, OUP, 1998), Surajit Sinha (ed): *Tribal Polities and State System in Pre-colonial Eastern and Northeastern India*, op.cit.
8. Nabin Chandra Sharma (ed): *Kabi Baladev Suryakhari Daivagna Birachita Darrang Raj Vamsavali*, (Pathsala, Bani Prakash, 1973), pp.20-26; Biswanath Das (ed): *Munshi Joynath Ghosher Rajopakhyan*, (Calcutta, Mala Publications, 1989), pp. 1-5; Ripunjay Das: "Raja Vamsavali", unpublished Manuscript (Cooch Behar, North Bengal State Libraray), p. 6.
9. K.S. Singh: *Tribal Society in India*, op.cit., p. 43.
10. Khan Chowdhuri Amanatulla Ahmed: *Cooch Beharer Itihas, Vol. I* (Cooch Behar, Cooch Behar State Press, 1936), p. 95.
11. Swami Sarbeswarananda Swaraswati (ed): *Yoginitantra*, (Calcutta, Nababharat Publishers, 1978), Chapter 13, vs, 2-22.
12. S.K. Bhuyan (ed): *Deodhai Assam Buranjij*, 4th edition, (Guwahati, Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies, 2001), p. 127; Idem (ed): *Kamrupar Buranji*, 3rd edition,, (Guwahati, Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies, 1987), p. 10.
13. S.K. Bhuyan (ed): op.cit., pp. 10-11.
14. Like Viswasimha, Naranarayan and Chilarai had showed their interests in the Brahmins and their culture. They invited the Brahmins from centers of Sanskrit learning like-Mithila and Gauda. Subsequent Koch rulers - Raghudeva Narayan (1581-1603), Lakshmi Narayan (1587-1627), Bir Narayan (1627-32) and Prana Narayan (1632-65) continued the policy of adoption of caste-culture by patronizing the Brahmins. In the early 18th century when Satananda Goswami, a Brahmin from Murshidabad, was chosen as the *Raj Guru* (spiritual guide of the King).
15. Biswanath Das (ed): op.cit., p. 24.

16. Nabin Chandra Sharma (ed): *Kabi Baladev Suryakhari Daivagna Birachita Darrang Raj Vamsavali vs. 131-143*, op.cit., pp. 25-30.
17. The Kamakhya temple inscription was originally inscribed in Sanskrit language. Free translation of this inscription runs like this: Glory to the king Malla Deva, who by virtue of his mercy, is kind to the people, who in archery is like Arjun, and in charity like Dadhichi and Karna; he is like an ocean of all goodness, and he is well-versed in many *sastras*; his character is excellent in beauty, he is as bright as Kandarpa, he is a worshiper of Kamakhya. His younger brother Sukladeva built this temple of bright stones on the Nila hillock in 1487 *Saka* for the worship of the goddess Durga. His beloved brother Sukladhvaja again, with universal fame, the crown of the greatest heroes, who, like the fabulous Kalpataru; constructed this beautiful temple with heaps of the stones on the Nila hill in the 1487 *Saka*.
18. Surajit Sinha (ed): *Tribal Polities and State System in Pre-colonial Eastern and Northeastern India*, op.cit., p. xv
19. Hermann Kulke: “The Early and Imperial Kingdom: A Processual Model of Integrative State Formation in Early Medieval India”; in Hermann Kulke (ed): *The State in India 1000- 1700*, op.cit., pp. 233-262.
20. Gohain Kamal, brother of the King and Officer-in-charge of the Department of ‘construction and maintenance of the roads’ of the Koch kingdom was instructed by King Naranarayan (1540-87) to construct a road called Gohain Kamal Ali extended from the Cooch Behar, capital of the Koches, to Narayanpur of Lower Assam. It was constructed in around in 1563 A.D. for easy movement of militia.
21. The Khena rulers of the fifteenth century had established the Kamata kingdom in the Tista-Brahmaputra valley. It declined in 1498-99 due to the invasion of Sultan Hussain Shah. Besides building the strongly fortified capital, the Kamata rulers constructed several roads to keep the kingdom under control. The road from Kamatapur to Bhutan and from Kamatapur to Rangpur and Bogra were their contributions.
22. The *Charita Puthis* or the biographies of the Vaishnava saints of the region including Sankardeva, Madhavendra and Damodardeva have vividly described the religious teachings of Sankardeva and popularity of the neo-Vaishnavism.
23. *Kamakhya Temple Inscription.*
24. The Kamakhya temple was built in 23685 *bighas* of rent-free land. Khan Chowdhury Amanatulla Ahmed: *Cooch Beharer Itihas* (Cooch Behar, The Cooch Behar State Press, 1936), p. 127.

25. Harendra Narayan Choudhury: *The Cooch Behar State and its Land Revenue Settlement*, (Cooch Behar, The Cooch Behar State Press, 1903), p. 545.
26. King Prana Narayan granted 44 *jotes* of land to the Jalpeswar temple. These *jotes* came under the revenue assessment in 1891 by the order of the Revenue Department of the Colonial Government. See, D. Sunder: *Survey and Settlement of the Western Duars in the District of Jalpaiguri, 1889-95*, (Calcutta, Bengal Secretariat Press, 1895), p.123.
27. The date of construction of the Madan Mohun temple of Cooch Behar is controversial. It was constructed either by King Prana Narayan (1632-65) or by King Rup Narayan (1693-1714).
28. Harendra Narayan Choudhury: *The Cooch Behar State and its Land Revenue Settlement*, p. 544.
29. The Brahmins settled in Kamrupa who were invited by rulers of the region came to be known as Kamrupi Brahmins.
30. *Ibid*, p. 545.
31. S.K. Bhuyan (ed): *Kamrupar Buranji*, op.cit., p. 38.
32. Present researcher has collected the oral traditions about the temple from fieldwork carried out at Gosanimari during the period between 2001 and 2004. “The king heard that Ratikanta Jha, a Maithili Brahmin, due to his extraordinary musical performances; could directly talk to the Kamateswari. Accordingly, the king wished to meet the goddess. But Kamateswari appeared in the dream and alarmed that if the priest and the king do so then their dynasties would be destroyed”.
33. Shaivism had its deep-root in the land prior to the rise of the Koch kingdom. Prominent and popular tribal deity called *Bathou* is identical with the Shiva of the Hindu pantheon. Moreover, fictitious genealogy of Viswasimha is connected with Shiva. So accessibility of Shiva as a deity of worship was beyond doubt. Although the Koch coins have been circulated as *Narayani Tanka* due to the influence of the *Vaishnavism* but these are bearing the legend -*Shiva charana kamala madhu karasya* (by the honey bee to the lotus feet of Lord Shiva) in obverse.
34. Rup Kumar Barman: *From Tribalism to State*, (Delhi, Abhijeet Publications, 2007), p. 183.
35. Khan Chowdhuri Amanatulla Ahmed: *Cooch Beharer Itihas*, op.cit., p. 130.
36. *Ibid*, p.154.

37. S.K. Bhuyan (ed): *Kamrupar Buranji*, op.cit., pp. 69-84.
38. S.N. Sen (ed): *Prachin Bangla Patra Sankalan*, (Calcutta, Calcutta University, 1942), p.1.
39. A.K. Chakrabarty: *Literature in Kamata-Koch Bihar Raj Darbar, From Fourteenth to Eighteenth Century*, (Dhubri, 1964), pp. 85-86.
40. Specimens of different chapters of the *Mahabharatas* and the *Ranayana* are available in the North Behar State Library (Cooch Behar).
41. Sankardeva had stressed on *sravana* and *kirtana* form of *bhakti* although other forms such as- *smarana* (remembering the god), *pada sevana* (serving the feet of the god), *archana* (the rite of ceremonial worship of the image of the deity), *vandana* (salutation and submission at the feet of the god), etc; were not discouraged.
42. The manuscript copy of the *Adikanda*, *Sri Krishna Janma Rahasya* and *Bhakti Ratnavali* are available at the North Bengal State Library, Cooch Behar.
43. Surajit Sinha (ed): *Tribal Polities and State System in Pre-colonial Eastern and Northeastern India*, op.cit., p. xxiii.
44. Nabin Chandra Sharma (ed): *Kabi Baladev Suryakhari Daivagna Birachita Darrang Raj Vamsavali*, vs. 325-328,336-337.
45. Rup Kumar Barman: Antebashir Sanaskriti: Parichiti O Antarai (in Bengali), in *Antebahsi, Samaj, Sanaskriti O Unnayan*, (Kolkata, Manuscript India, 2004), pp.181-86.
46. Garam (Gram) Thakur is the savior of the villages. The villagers worship this deity together with Salewari, Mahakal, Sanyashi Thakur, Tista, Paglapida, Kali, Bishahari and Lakshmi.
