

Revisiting Koch-Mughal Relations: A Political History from Alliance to Disintegration

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Abstract The Koches are one of the earliest settlers primarily from the ancient Kamrupa-Kamata Kingdom. They are basically adulteration of Kacharis, Lalungs, Mikirs and Garos and one of the major groups of Mongoloid stock and mostly inhabited in Lower Assam and North Bengal. In Puranas and Tantras, Koches are recorded as "Kuvacha" whose original paradise was North Bengal and Goalpara. Biswa Singh laid to the foundation of Koch dynasty in the first half of the 16th century. His reign is marked as the beginning point of relation with the Muhammadans. During his reign the Muhammadans invaded his neighbouring Ahom Kingdom more than one time. Although the route opted by the Muhammadans to invade Kamrupa was far from his capital but, it inflicted his mind that his territory might be captured by the Muhammadans after that of the Ahoms. With the view to save his kingdom, he assisted the Ahoms against the Muhammadans in 1532 and drove away the Muhammadans as far as Karatoya River. After his death, with the perseverance of Naranarayan and Chilarai the Kingdom of the Koches took a static figure. The mutual relation between the Koches and the Mughals is said to be started in 1578, while Koch King sought Mughal help to attack Padshah of Gaur. Unfortunately, the partition of the Koch Kingdom into two parts led to weakening of strength of old Koch Kingdom. On account of mutual suspicions and rivalries, each of them sought foreign help to save their respective territories. Finally, both halves of Koch Kingdom fall prey of Mughal aggression.

Keywords: The Koches, Koch-Mughal alliance, partition of Koch kingdom, disintegration of Koch-Mughal relation.

Introduction

The Koches are one of the earliest settlers from the ancient Kamrupa-Kamata Kingdom. They are one of the largest ethnic groups of present Assam and West Bengal in terms of population. The Koches are adulteration of Kacharis, Lalungs, Mikirs and Garos and one of the major groups of Mongoloid stock and mostly inhabited in Lower Assam and North Bengal. In Puranas and Tantras, Koches are depicted as "Kuvacha" whose original paradise was North Bengal and Goalpara. In relation to physical structure they have similarities with the Bodo and the Garo peoples. Biswa Singh, a man of great courage and ambition, laid to the foundation of Koch dynasty in the first half of the 16th century after subjugating several Bhuiya chiefs. His reign is marked as the beginning point of relation with the Muhammadans. During his reign the Muhammadans invaded his neighbouring Ahom Kingdom more than one time. Although the route opted by the Muhammadans to invade Kamrupa was far from his capital but it inflicted his mind that his territory might be captured by the Muhammadans after that of the Ahoms. With the intention to save his kingdom, he assisted Ahom against the Muhammadans in 1532 and drove away the Muhammadans as far as Karatoya River. After

his death, with the perseverance of Naranarayan and Chilarai the Kingdom of the Koches took a static figure. The mutual relation between the Koches and the Mughals is said to be started in 1578, while Koch King sought Mughal help to attack Padshah of Gaur. H.K. Barpujari states that "the Koch-Mughal alliance is marked as the first political alliance between a Hindu state and Muslim state about 375 years after the Muslim conquest of Bengal". Unfortunately, the partition of the Koch Kingdom into two parts led to weakening of strength of old Koch Kingdom. On account of mutual suspicions and rivalries, each of them sought foreign help to save their respective territories. Finally, both halves of Koch Kingdom fall prey of Mughal aggression. The Mughals not only established suzerainty over Koch-Bihar but also annexed Koch-Hajo.

Objectives

The main objectives of the composition are:

- i. to understand the inauguration of the relations between the Koches and the Muhammadans;
- ii. to analyse Koch-Mughal alliance, partition and disintegration of Koch-Mughal relations.

Material and Method

So far methodology is concern; the Historical Method has been adopted in the procedure of this composition. This article has been accomplished through the secondary source materials collected from the different books.

Racial Origin

The Koches are one of the earliest settlers from the ancient Kamrupa-Kamata Kingdom. They are one of the largest Tibeto-Burman Linguistic and racial group, and have been living in some places of present Assam and West Bengal as indigenous people since the time of immemorial (*Rajkhowa, 2011:33*). Prominent Historian Gait observes that the word 'Koch' is a term of some ambiguity. In Assam it has become the name of a Hindu caste, into which are received the converts to Hinduism from the ranks of the Kacharis, Lalungs, Mikirs and other tribes (*Gait, 2001:47*). The Koches are the branch of the Tibeto-Burman people or of a greater family called Indo-Mongoloid; therefore, they are akin to the Kacharies, Tipperas, Garos, Rabhas etc. (*Barman, 2008:45*). Basically, the people belonging to this community possess all the characteristics of four human streams such as Austrich, Dravidian, Mongoloid and Aryan; whereas majority of scholars views that the Koches are belonging to Dravidian origin (*Roy, 2007:07*). Gait further views that the 'true Koches were a Mongoloid race, very closely allied to Meches and Garos; and find in Jalpaiguri, Koch Bihar and Goalpara'. Colonel Dalton considered them to be Dravidian and Risley, while admitting an intermixture with Mongoloid stock, states that Dravidian features is predominate (*Gait; 2001:47-48*). Although they have associated with all cultures such as Austrich, Dravidian, Mongoloid and Aryan; but finally they might have accepted the Aryan culture and converted to Hinduism (*Choudhary, 2011:9*).

Historical Background

The east patriarch of Koch Kings was Haria Mandal, a resident of the village Sikangram of Goalpara. He was the chief of twelve leading families of Maches or Koches of that area. He married two sisters Hira and Jira, and had two sons namely Bisu and Sisu. After the death of Haria Mandal, his elder son Bisu took over the reign as a new chief. He organized the strength of his tribes and defeated several Bhuiya chiefs (*Baruah, 2007:203-204*). Then he became the chief of Phulguri, Bijni and other places like Karnapur, Jhargaon, Kusumpur etc. Gradually, he extended his rule up to the Karatoya River in the west and Barnadi in the east. He rose to power in 1515. It is said that he took almost 12 years to subjugate the neighbouring Bhuiyas, after which he declared himself as king in 1527 and named himself as Biswa Singh (*Baruah; Baruah, 2007:299*).

Beginning of the relation with the Muhammadans

In 1498, Hussain Shah invaded Kamata Kingdom, overthrown the ruler Nilambar and appointed Daniyal as the governor of Bengal (*Nath, 1989:34*). Biswa Singh, was the man of the exceptional courage and military ability, rose to power about 1515, after defeating a number of Bhuiya chiefs (*Barpujari, 2007:70*) and might have fought against the Muhammadans with the help of Bhuiya chiefs to overthrow Daniyal (*Nath, 1989:34*). There were several reasons for Ahom-Mughal dispute in the east. During his reign, the relation between the Ahoms and the Muhammadans deteriorated significantly. The Muhammadan Commander Nashrat Shah undertook a series of invasion against the Ahoms. After Nashrat Shah's invasion several constant attacks hold by Muhammadan commander generals such as Turbak, Husain Khan (*Barpujari, 2007:133,135*), Bar Ujir, Bit Manik and Lupt (*Nath, 1989:34*).

The Muhammadans invaders might have crossed over whole territories in course their invasions to Ahom Kingdom. Thus, they might have at first came into conflict with the Koches and then advanced towards Ahom Kingdom. In an engagement with Muhammadans Biswa Singh was defeated, became fugitive and sought shelter to his tribesmen in hilly regions (*Nath, 1989:35*). The Kingdom of Muhammadans and the Ahoms were laid west and east respectively to the kingdom of Biswa Singh. There was possible threat of further Muhammadans invasion from Bengal. The Ahom Chronicles states that in 1537, Biswa Singh paid a friendly visit to the Ahom King Suhungmung, exchanged presents with him and announced the vassalage of Ahom King. During his reign there were several hostilities between the Ahoms. In 1532 the Muhammadans invaded and advanced up the Brahmaputra as far as Koliabar (*Gait, 2001:50*). Finally, the Muhammadans were repulsed by the combine pressure of the Ahoms from the east and the Koches from the west and forced to withdraw from Kamrupa and pursued as far as Karatoya. He organized a vast army with the help of local tribes and gradually established authority over his new Kingdom, bounded by Barnadi on the east and the Karatoya on the west (*Barpujari, 2007:71*).

Koch-Mughal Alliance

During the reign of Naranarayana the relation between the Muhammadans and the Koches further deteriorated. Elated with the repeated success in the east, the Koches next turned towards the west, to the kingdom of Gaur, ruled by Suleiman Kararani. Naranarayan's army under Chilarai was defeated and imprisoned (*Gait, 2001:55*). According to Riyaz-us- Salatin and Akbarnama, Suleiman Kararani invaded Koch Kingdom in 1568. Before entering to the capital of Koch Kingdom, he had to return immediately

hearing the tidings of outbreak of revolt in Orissa in 1567-68 against the Padshah of Gaur (*Baruah & Baruah, 2007:305*). Koch Commander Chilarai was taken to Gaur as the prisoner of war. Then he obtained the favour of the Padshah's of Gaur by curing his mother of snake-bite. Padshah even gave his daughter in marriage to Chilarai with a dowry of five regions-Bahirband, Bhitband, Gayabari, Sherpur and Dasakunia (*Baruah,2007:213*). While the local source indicates that Naranarayan was the aggressor, who was defeated in an engagement with the force of Suleima Kararani and his brother Chilarai was taken to prisoner to Gaur. Subsequently, he obtained the favour of Padshah's mother for curing her. Padshah's mother considered Chilarai as her adopted son and took the assurance not to invade Gaur until her death. The Padshah having pleased with him set him free and given his daughter in marriage along with six royal maiden servants as well as five regions Bahirband, Bhitband, Gayabari, Sherpur and Dasakunia as royal gift (*Devbarman,2006:39*).

After humiliation, Narnarayan became very anxious to set up good relation with the Ahom King. Thus he sent back the Ahom hostages, Sundar Gohain and others along with vivid presents and friendly letter to the Ahom monarch to ensure Ahoms loyalty. Then he also sought to make an amicable relation with the Mughals (*Gait,2001:56*). Akbarnama records that Naranarayan noted down a friendly letter to Akbar accepting his submission with valuable presents. On the other hand the Koch chronicles indicates that Akbar wrote a letter to Naranarayan seeking his help and friendship to fight against the Afghans of Bengal. The letter also records to divide Afghan territory between them after subjugation (*Nath,1989:72-73*).

In such way Naranarayan succeed to make an ally with Akbar. Then he invaded Padshah's Kingdom under Chilarai from the east while the imperial army advanced from the west. The Padshah of Gaur, the common enemy, was defeated, occupied his kingdom and was divided between the Koch Monarch and the Emperor Akbar. According to Ain-i-Akbari, in 1578, Naranarayan renewed his expression of obedience to the Imperial throne and 54 elephants and the other valuable presents to Akbar (*Gait,2001:56*). But the local source indicates that the Koch Monarch received 54 elephants from Akbar as a gift and the regions east of Mithila and the east regions of Ganga Valley annexed to the Koch Kingdom (*Devbarman,2006:43*). The mutual alliance was very effective and fruitful for both the sides which established a long time after the Muslim's conquest of Bengal. Barpujari rightly remarked that "*it was the first pacific alliance between a Hindu state and a Muslim state about 375 years after the Muslim conquest of Bengal*".

Diplomatically the alliance was very fruitful for the Mughals than the Koches. Later on

the Mughal not only gained the advantage to spread their influence over Bengal but it enabled them to enter into the politics of Koches. In 1679, rebellion of Mughal captains occurred in Bihar and Bengal on behalf of the orthodox and Mirza Hakim of Kabul in place of emperor Akbar. Naranarayan aided Akbar to minimize the revolt. In 1583, he again sent naval assistant to the Mughals against the rebel Masum Qabuli near Tanda, who was defeated and forced retreat to Bhati through Ghoraghat. This victory is known as '*Third conquest of Bengal*' (*Barapujari,2007:94*).

Partition of Koch Kingdom

There were several causes for the disintegration of Koch Kingdom. These were death of Chilarai, birth of legal Koch heiress, ambitious nature Raghudev, conspiracy of royal officials and Naranarayana's loves for peace. Chilarai died of Vasanta in 1571 and this was a heavy loss for the Koches (*encyclopedia*). The good days of Kohes under Naranarayan did not last long. Naranarayan then left war and became most devoted to religion and works of public welfare. Chilarai left his son named Raghudev under his brother's care. Naranarayan was childless for several years and it was believed that Rughudev will be enthroned after him. But during his old age he had a son named Lakshminarayan. This put ice in Raghu's desire and created suspicion in his mind. Several officials who loved Raghudev might encourage him to have a separate Kingdom for him. Along with some officers and councilors, he proceeded towards east, reached Barnagar on the bank of Manah where he made his capital and declared himself as a sovereign king in 1581. It is already stated that during last days of reign Naranarayan left war and became most devoted to religion and peace loving. Being peace loving Nara Narayan did not adopt offence against his own nephew and decided to divide the Kingdom among them. Accordingly he handed over Raghudev the territories east of Sonkosh and retained the parent Kingdom for himself (*Baruah,2007:214-215*). Even he sent Raghu's wife, followers and slaves to join him (*Nath, 1989:84*). The Persian writers called the eastern part Koch-Hajo and the western part Koch-Bihar, while the Assamese chronicles record the same regions as Kamrupa and Bihar respectively (*Baruah,2007:215*).

Disintegration of Koch-Mughal Alliance

The partition greatly weakened the power of the Koches. After the death of Naranarayan Lakshminarayan become the king of Koch Bihar. By 1884, dispute and rivalry overpowered the two royal houses and this helped the foreign powers to intervene to the politics of Koch Kingdoms (*Baruah,2007:215*). Raghudev declared independence in 1588 by striking coins in his own name. Lakshminarayan waged war against Raghu and defeated easily and the latter accepted the vassalage of Lakshminarayan. Then Raghu made

preparations to invade Koch Bihar. Hearing this, the Lakshminarayan took initiative and invaded Ghila but had to retreat after defeat. The growing mutual enmity led the cousins to look around for allies. In order to strengthen Kamrupa and re-occupy the fertile fringe area of Bahirband in South-east Koch Bihar and to counter balance the Koch-Mughal alliance of 1578, Raghu allied with the Afghan Chief Isa Khan, the sworn enemy of the Mughals. To check Raghu's designs and to encounter the Kamrupa-Afghan alliance, Lakshminarayan decided to purchase Mughal help. In an understanding with Man Singh, the Mughal governor of Bengal, he offered his sister Prabhavati to him and acknowledged Mughal suzerainty. This inaugurated a period of Koch-Mughal subordinate alliance (Barpujari, 2007:95-96).

In 1597 Raghu not only attacked his cousin Lakshminarayan and easily occupied Bahirband. The latter was forced to seek Mughal help. In order to contain the Kamrupa-Afghan alliance, Man Singh immediately arranged a joint Mughal-Koch force. Unfortunately, Raghu had to fight alone as his Afghan ally was busy with his own affairs and was defeated and compelled to evacuate Bahirband. The death of Isa Khan put forth great relief to the Mughals. On the other hand Raghudev also became isolate. Thus then Raghu sought for a new alliance. He gave his daughter Mangoldai to Ahom monarch Sukhapha in marriage. The marriage of Kamrupa princess with Sukhapha was a skillful instance of diplomacy of Raghu which would plan an attack against his cousin. The Ahom monarch used Bihar-Kamrupa rivalry for his own advantage and the matrimonial alliance would strengthen Kamrupa as a buffer against Mughal invasion. In 1603, after Raghu's death, Parikshitnarayan ascended to the throne of Kamrupa. Like his father Parikshit also refused to acknowledge the supremacy of Lakshminarayan. In

this regard Barpujari rightly remarked 'if Raghu sowed the wind, his son Parikshit reaped the whirlwind' (Barpujari, 2007:97-98). In a war with the Mughals at Pandu, Parikshinarayan was defeated and surrendered to the Mughals. His kingdom Koch-Hajo then annexed to the territory of Mughals. After annexation of Koch-Hajo his brother Balinarayan along with his followers sought protection to the Ahom king. The Ahom monarch reinstated him at Darrang on assurance of obedience (Nath, 1989:103-104). It is already stated that after the disintegration of Koch Kingdom, Lakshminarayan sought Mughal help against his cousin Raghudev, by offering submission to Akbar. After annexation of Koch-Hajo, the Koch-Mughal alliance became meaningless but still the monarchs of Koch-Bihar remained obedience to the Mughals.

Conclusion

In conclusion it can be said the 16th century was a great era for the Koches. In the first half of 16th century Biswa Singh laid the foundation of Koch Kingdom over Kamata state. The relation between the Koches and the Muhammadans is recorded to have started in his time. Mutual relation between the Koches and the Mughals inaugurated during the tense of Naranarayan. On account of mutual rivalry with the Padshah of Gaur both the power came to close each other and exchanged presents along with friendly letters. The political alliance between these two powers proved to be both defensive and offensive. After the death of Chilarai the Koch Kingdom disintegrated which weakened the both halves of Koch Kingdom. On account of mutual dispute and rivalry both sought the assistance of foreign power with the intension to save their respective territories. Finally, both halves of Koch Kingdom fall prey of Mughal aggression. The Mughals not only established suzerainty over Koch-Bihar but also annexed Koch-Hajo.

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