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Colony to Kingdom: A study of Koch state formation in Cachar

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Abstract:

The historical process by which a polity transforms into a state with specific duties and exclusive use of physical force is known as state creation. Conquest, compulsion, and social evolution are among the theories. The origin of the state as a global institution are explained by the idea of association. The authority of monarchs established state borders, which evolved over time. The Koch kingdom of Viswa Singha reached its peak under Malladeva, with support from his brother Sukladhvaj (Chilarai). Malladeva acquired the name Naranarayan and his reign was known for favoring Brahmins, high castes, saints, and scholars, and played an imperial expansionist role. His brother and Deoyan, Chilarai, led triumphant campaigns against northeastern states and founded a small Koch principality in the Barak Valley. In 1562, Chilarai attacked the Tripura kingdom, leading to a battle that resulted in a victory for Chilarai. Naranarayan placed the deceased king's brother on the vacant throne and fixed an annual tribute of 9,000 gold coins. He also stationed soldiers and constructed a fort near Brahmapur, later named Kochpur and now called Khaspur. Later Kamalnarayan (Gohai Kamal) was sent to Cachar as the Crown Agent or Governor to look after the affairs of Cachar. With the passage of time, Kamalnarayan assumed an independent status and laid the foundation of the independent Koch state in Cachar.

Keywords: Koch, Naranarayan, Chilarai, Cachar, Khaspur.

Formation of State: State formation is the historical process by which a polity develops into a state with its own distinct tasks and a monopoly on physical coercion of its subjects under particular conditions. There are numerous theories proposed regarding the genesis of the state, including social evolution, coercion, and conquest. The theory of association sheds light on the genesis of the state as a universal institution. And these factors adequately show how biologically favored areas such as the Nile valley in Egypt, Hwang Ho in China, Mohenjodaro and Harappa in the Indus valley, and Euphrates and Tigris valley in Babylon gave birth to not only the early civilizations but also the organized governments. The State boundaries were determined by rulers' power, and they changed over time throughout human history. Great Empires, great kings, and mighty conquerors have existed in the past in various parts of the world, and their exploits have contributed significantly to human

legend. Though some of them inspire people all over the world, it is difficult and fruitless to recognize and define such historical stages as a live reality in present life.¹

Tribal state and polity formations in Pre-Colonial India indicate that common characteristics were present in all situations, albeit some of these elements may have been more important in individual cases. The tribal formations underwent transformation with the emergence of private property, when tribal societies were stratified into classes in terms of differentiated land-holding and the extent of political dominance, which strengthened the position of the traditional chiefs at clan/tribe level. The sphere of political dominance of a chief was extended either by subduing neighbouring tribes/clans/communities or by direct territorial conquest. The authority was further strengthened by leading the people in war path either for offensive or defensive purposes, and it continued to be unquestioned, at least at the formative stage, in cases where the state came into existence through military adventurism. The ruling chiefs succeeded in developing a centralised administration with an elaborate defense structure and the means to appropriate surplus through a hierarchical state order. The introduction of more advanced agricultural technology to ensure increased production, as well as production control on the part of the ruler, could be an essential precondition for a centralised state authority. Families with traditions of administrative proficiency, as well as artisans and peasants, were encouraged to immigrate and reside in the territory.²

Between the 13th and 16th centuries, a great number of tribal political structures emerged and developed. By the 15th century, the Chutiya, Tai-Ahom, Koch, Dimasa (Kachari), Tripuri, Meithei (Manipuri), Khasi (Khyriem), and Pnar (Jaintia) tribes had all formed primitive state structures. In each case, the process required transforming part of the pre-existing tribal organization's organs and replacing the remainder with new organs that permitted the seizure of public authority by an emerging privileged class. At this point, the Court typically adopted a written language (usually not the tribe's own). The Chutiyas were the most developed tribe in the 15th century. Their kingdom had been captured and assimilated by the Tai-Ahoms by 1523. The remaining tribes, however, continued to elaborate and sophisticate their different state structures until their surrender by the British in the early 19th century.³

Origin of the term 'Koch': The one derivation of the word "Koch" is that Ksatriyas took shelter in the lap (koch) of Bhagabati, being frightened by Parasurama; another that the root is derived from the shrunken condition (sankoch) of the Ksatriyas. In the Viswa-kosa 'sankoch' is considered synonymous with 'koch'; alternatively the word Koch has been adapted from the 'kos' portion of the name of the river "Sankos". It is also claimed that the root is from "kubacha" (signifying those who do not speak a pure dialect) and mentioned in the Jatikaumudi and Yoginitantra. In the Yoginitantra, the land is "Kos", and in Pliny's Indica "Cosyri" are inhabitants of the land below the Himalayas. The "Koch" race is referred to in the Brahmavaivarta Purana (Brahma Khanda, Adhyaya 10) and in the Melbidhi of Debivara Misra (15th century).⁴

State formation of the Koch kingdom: The process of state formation was steady and fast until a point when governing houses commanded unified commitment as a tool for expanding their control and sustaining the political framework, but once the youth faded, internal dissension invariably crept in, causing a substitution of the older governing house by another or a territorial split. The Koch state underwent a succession of divisions, primarily at the request of the ruling family.⁵ Kochh-Mandai, Rajbangsi, Paliya, Desi, a large Dravidian tribe of North-Eastern and Eastern Bengal, among whom there are grounds for suspecting some admixture of Mongolian blood. The Koch kingdom of Viswa Singha reached the peak of its reign under Naranarayan when the support offered by his brother Chilarai witnessed the state's territorial growth and conquest of a host of structured monarchies and principalities. However, decay eventually set in. The repressed states reasserted themselves, and the Koch authorities failed to control their rise.⁶

After the death of Nilambar, the last prominent ruler of Kamata, around the end of the fifteenth century, a king of *Matsyanyaya* ruled Kamarupa. Several small Bhuyan chiefs governed the country. This situation could not last for very long. Eventually, a leader emerged, raising his head over all the other petty chiefs and slowly enslaving them all. This was Bisu, who had a very modest beginning. His father, Haria Mandal, was the mandal, or headman, of a village that included twelve other Koch households. He took the name Viswa Singha and later transferred his capital to Koch Bihar, where he created a beautiful city.⁷ The heir-apparent, Malladeva, and his brother Sukladhvaj were pursuing studies in Banaras when Viswa Singha died. The third brother, Nara Singha, appeared to have seized the crown during their absence. Malladeva and Sukladhvaj left Banaras as soon as they learned of this information. Either they fought Nara Singha and defeated him, or Nara Singha escaped to Bhutan and was never heard of again. It is stated that he ruled over a portion of Bhutan, however this was not the reality.⁸

Malladeva acquired the name Naranarayan after coming to the throne. The reign of Naranarayan (1540-1584), known for favouring Brahmins, high castes, saints, and scholars, saw the realm achieve its zenith of magnificence while also playing an imperial expansionist role. His brother and *Deoyan*, Sukladhvaj (also known as Chilarai), led triumphant campaigns against the Ahom, Dimasa, Jayantia, and other northeastern states. During his campaign, Chilarai founded a small Koch principality in the Barak Valley through conquest. Initially established as a royal colony under Cooch Behar, Koch kingdom in the Barak Valley later gained independence as the Khaspur state.

In 1562, on the orders of Koch king Naranarayan, (Chilarai) attacked Tripura kingdom. At this time, the plains of Cachar belonged to the Tripura kingdom and at a place called 'Longai', a terrible battle took place between Chilarai and Tripuri King, in this battle Chilarai lost one-third of his army and commander Bhimbal was also killed. On the other hand Tripuri King himself lost his life in the battle along with 18000 soldiers. At the end of the war Chilarai had won a victory. Naranarayan ordered to place the deceased king's brother on the vacant throne, and fixed an annual tribute of 9,000 gold coins, a first tribute having been paid of 10,000 silver 100 gold coins and 30 war-horses. Naranarayan having

conquered Tippera, is said to have stationed a group of soldiers, constructing a fort near Brahmapur, which was later named Kochpur and is now called Khaspur.⁹ In a meeting held by the Rajbonsi community of the Deoyans of Cachar, they themselves acknowledged the fact that they came into the District with the great warrior Sukladhvaj (Chilarai) the conqueror of East Bengal and Assam, who also conquered Cachar and started ruling there.¹⁰

The administration of the tract was first looked after by the chief of the garrison. A year or two after this, Kamalnayan or Gohai Kamal, whose name is associated with 350 miles long road (called Gohai Kamal Ali) from Cooch Behar to North Lakhimpur and till then the Governor of Dibru in the east of Brahmaputra and Sonkosh, was sent to Cachar as the Crown Agent or Governor (called variously as Deoyan or Upa-raj). He had brought with him a number of people to look after various branches of the administration. Presumably, the Cachar Valley had then the status of a colony of the Cooch Behar state. A few years later, when the Koches faced reverses during Chilarai's campaign in Bengal and the central authority slackened, the subdued states in the north-east reasserted themselves. The Koch Deoyan in Cachar since then was no longer required to perform his initial diplomatic functions. Kamalnayan himself assumed an independent status and laid the foundation of the independent Koch state in Cachar. The Deoyans in Cachar still remember him as their first King.¹¹

The Koch community in Cachar was separated into eighteen groups or clans by Kamalnayan (Gohai Kamal) to carry out distinct tasks. Up until recently, the surviving generations of some of these groups continued to carry out these tasks as their inherited professions. There are occasions when the customs suggest that these groups came from eighteen Koch or Deoyan families. Barpatra, Dekapatra, Senapati, Uzir, Rajkazi, Shyamabhandari, Kavibhuyan, Doloi, Deuri, Purkait, Singadar, Chanadar, Bagdar, Kumarlaskar, Bherualaskar, Dhulialaskar, Sunaptra, and Bharipatra are the names of these people. The roles of Shyama Bhandari (in charge of the estate allotted to Shyama temple), Senapati (general), Uzir (civil or judicial officer), Rajkazi (judge), Barpatra (prime minister), Dekapatra (junior minister), etc. became hereditary to the particular families. Professionals and craftspeople comprised the remaining groupings. The Kavibhuyans, for instance, were musicians, goldsmiths from Sunaptra, traders of gold and silver, Doloi (spiritual advisor), Deuri (temple attendant), Purkait (writer), Singadar (flute man), Dhulialaskar (drummer), and so on. With only a small number of people of the race, Kamalnayan had to oversee the state's governance. Therefore, it was essential to give each person or family a distinct role. The King settled Brahmins and other upper castes, who enhanced the state's renown and occasionally served as advisors to the King on social and political issues.¹²

Several holy places in Cachar, such as the Kancha-Kanti at Udharband and the Kali temple at Thaligram, were constructed by Kamalnayan and have withstood the test of time and weather. Additionally, he designated a few Koches as Devagrihi or Sabayat and several

Brahmins as priests.¹³ His main duty was to guarantee neighboring kings who recognized Cooch Behar's suzerainty would continue to submit to him.¹⁴

Following Kamalnarayan, Cachar was ruled by two rulers. The third ruler was a tyrannical ruler. Finally, the nobility of the area plotted against him, and the King was killed. The people elected Uditā, the general, as King, and his heirs governed Cachar for seven generations. Bhim Singha, the seventh king, had no son and just one daughter, Kanchani. She was married to Laksmichandra, a member of the reigning Dimasa royal family in North Cachar. Bhim Singha appointed Laksmichandra as Governor of a section of the kingdom, the headquarters of which became known as Lakhipur. But after Bhim Singha passed away, the territory of Cachar went to Laksmichandra, which eventually united with the Dimasa domain in the North Cachar Hills.¹⁵

Decline of Koch rule in Cachar: Following Gohai Kamal, further two Koch rulers reigned over Khaspur. The last ruler was both majestic and merciless. Those who tried to occupy other people's land without straightening the field aisle (boundary) got killed on the crooked aisle. As a result, the great chiefs despised him intensely. The kingdom's chiefs intended to kill the King.¹⁶ The final King of Koch state in Cachar, Bhim Singh, did not have a son, but he did have an exceptionally beautiful daughter named Kanchani. Prince Laksmichandra, King Kirti Chandra's youngest son, was invited from North Cachar to the grand festivities, with the hope that the wishes of the people would not be neglected. Kanchani's beauty attracted Lakshmi Chandra, who married her and ruled the country from Khaspur.

The Koch experienced a series of segmentations mainly at the behest of the members of the ruling family. The infant state of Viswa Singha reached the prime of its youth under Naranarayan when the support extended by his brother Chilarai saw the state's territorial growth and subjugation of a host of organised monarchies and principalities. Before long, however, decline set in. The subdued states reasserted themselves and the Koch rulers failed to check their growth. They also failed to sustain their own structure. The state was partitioned into eastern and western wings between sons of Naranarayan and Chilarai.¹⁷ Nothing much is known about the social and political structure of the kingdom. The territory was first placed under army or military rule. Thereafter, a governor was appointed. This governor then declared independence and proclaimed himself as the King. A Senapati or chief of the army was under the King. The successors of Kamalnarayan ruled in hereditary line for two generations. Uditā, the Senapati, came to power through a revolt (and possibly with external help) and his successors also ruled for seven generations in hereditary line. The succession was in all probability according to the law of primogeniture. When the last King had no male successor and his only daughter was married to Laksmichandra, it was the son-in-law and not the daughter who was named as successor, and in the process, the state merged with Heramba state to the ruling family of which the prince belonged.¹⁸

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