CHAPTER VII

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In the foregoing pages, an attempt has been made to trace out how the Koch rulers utilised different sects of religion for the expansion and consolidation of their rule on the newly conquered independent and semi-independent feudal and tribal states of the Brahmaputra Valley. Besides, a general survey of the land, people and their religious beliefs and practices at the time of the establishment of the Koch Kingdom early in the 16th century A.D. in the lower Brahmaputra Valley has been discussed in this study.

Our study reveals that at the time of their establishment, most of the people in almost entire Brahmaputra Valley were by and large either pure Hindu or Hinduised, as well as tribal beliefs were also continued to exist side by side. Especially from Kāmarūpa to the further west of the valley, the Hindu beliefs and social system predominated since long. The process of the Aryanisation and Hinduisation was led by the Brahmanas and Bhuyans, who spread the Hindu beliefs and practices in the nook and corner of the valley. The aboriginal non-Aryan people called Kirātas or Asūras and Mlechas inhabited the valley since remote past. They had their own culture and religious beliefs. However, the Vedic culture infiltrated into the masses at least in the first century A.D., if not earlier which resulted the slow-conversion of the non-Aryan tribes into Hinduism. On the other hand with the contact with non-Aryans, the Vedic religion also underwent changes mainly in two ways—first in the creation, chiefly illustrated by the Epic and Purānic literature of a galaxy of defied personages; secondly in the adoption of deities, religious myths, and also cults derived from the races beyond the Brahmanic pale. Some of these gods and goddesses developed into special cults sectarian lines.

In the beginning of the 16th century Bisu, the chief of a section of the Indo-Mongoloid race, the Koches, rose into the power. He gradually extended his sway from the Karatoya in the west to the Barnadi in the east and declared himself king in about A.D. 1515. His Kingdom was latter called Koch Behār with its capital at Kamatāpur. At the rise of the Bisu the astute

1. S.N. Sarmā. P.190.
Brahmanas who so long designated Koches as Mlechas, came forward to accept them to the Hindu fold. The Brahmanas christened Bisu as Biswa Singha and ascribed him a Kshatriya Origin. Biswa Singha soon well consolidated his conquest and laid a strong Kingdom, as well as proved his ability to organise the entire strength of his own tribe and others inhabiting the region. The Bhuyans played an important role in the political life in the western Brahmaputra Valley till date, failed to offer a united effort against this tribal chief and had at last accepted the overlordship of Biswa Singha. His reign lasting for a period of about 25 years was marked by splendid success so that at his death he left a kingdom strong enough not only to stem the foreign aggression but also to undertake aggressive military conquests.

The rise of the Koch power in the western Brahmaputra Valley latter became the dominant power in the Valley and even for a short while was able to conquer the entire north-east region of the present day India. During the reign of the Biswa Singha’s illustrious son and successor Naranarayan (1540-1587) who is to be considered as the greatest king of medieval north-east India, the Koch power rose to the climax of their political glory and cultural achievements. In association with his able brother general Chilarai, Naranarayan pursued a career of aggressive conquest and brought all the states including the powerful Ahoms also of the north-eastern India under Koch hegemony. The rising power of the Koches invited the attention of the Sultan of Bengal who led an expedition to the Koch Kingdom in A.D. 1568, which resulted the defeat of the Koches and imprisonment of Chilarai. However, after some time Chilarai managed to release himself honourably from the imprisonment of the Sultan of Bengal.

The defeat and imprisonment of Chilarai at the hands of the Sultan of Bengal encouraged the subjugated states to shake off the Koch vassalage and asserted independence. The situation took such a turn with the conquest of Bengal by the Mughal emperor Åkbar that Naranarayan thought it wise to court the friendship with Åkbar in the west as well as of the Ahoms in the east of his Kingdom. On the other hand Mughal emperor Åkbar too was in need of an ally to subdue the rebellious Afgans in Bengal. He therefore, warmly responded to the Naranarayan’s offer of friendship. So long Naranarayan lived, the bond of friendship with the Mughal was remain intact.

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The powerful Koch kingdom had been partitioned during the lifetime of Naranarayan with his nephew Raghudev, the son of Chilarai in 1581. The western part consisting of Koch Behar proper being retained by the former and the eastern part, called Kamarupa or Koch Hajo being given to Raghudev. However the death of Naranarayan was followed by the disintegration between the two. It was of course jealousy and conflict between the two brother kingdom, brought about the loss of independence of western division i.e. Koch Behar and the annexation of the eastern division i.e. Koch Hajo, first to the Mughal Empire in 1612 and the later to Ahom kingdom in 1669.

It is seen that during the reign of Naranarayan the newly established small Koch kingdom reached its climex and became the unchallenged power of the region. In this regard D.Nath, comments on the consolidation and extent of Koch kingdom during the reign of Naranarayan—"It will therefore,have to be admitted that the conquests of Naranarayan were based on more military feats than on territorial extention followed by fruitful consolidation. So long the military strength of the Koches stood as democle's award over the feudatories, they shook off the vassalage and stopped paying tributes".2 Ofcourse Naranarayan didnot annex most of the conquered territories to his kingdom, but allowed the defeated rulers to enjoy their autonomy by paying tributes. His conquest comprised the whole of Northern Bengal, Bhutān, Assam, as well as the modern states of Kacher, Jayantia, Manipur and Triperah and extended upto the cost of the Bay of Bengal3 However the territory as directly administered by him was much smaller than that.

The study of the history of the Koches, which show the rise,climax, and disintegration of the Koch power was marked by allround important changes in this part of the country. Biswa Singha and Naranarayan succeeded in bringing about a political integration among the conquered areas at least which were under their direct control. The large militia maintained by Naranarayan and Chilarai, with which they carried on their extensive conquests were

drawn not only from the areas under their direct control but also from those under the autonomous rule of the Bhuyans, the tribal chiefs or feudatory rulers. These soldiers in course of their long period of expeditions, obviously came into contact with the people of other parts of the region. Hence it influenced the mobilisation of mutual contact among the heterogeneous tribes and communities of the region and thereby helped the process of political and cultural integrity of the valley.

In the social life, the period showed the significant changes brought about mainly by the neo-Vaisnavite movement in almost the entire Brahmaputra valley. The early Koch rulers in their personal and family life were devout worshipper of Śiva. It is justified from the study of the coins they issued. The coins bear the name of Śiva. But at the same time their endeavour to patronise various cultural pursuits as well as the neo-Vaisnavite movement held in the opening of a new chapter in the history of this part of the country. Although the rulers were Saiva, yet they lavishly patronised the Sāktas and Vainavas. The sixteenth century religious beliefs and practices in the area under study reveals that the Brahmanical Hinduism was the dominant force of the society and religion, yet the tribal beliefs and practices were parallelly existent in the society. However, the process of detribalisation underwent with the contact of Vedic religion led by the Brahmans. The first steps of the Hinduisation of the non Aryan tribal people was through converting them into the Aryan methods of Saivism. The rulers of erstwhile Kāmarūpa Kamatā were devout worshippers and patronisers of Saivism. As well as they also worshipped their premordial female deity in the form of Sakti viz, Devi, Durgā, Kāli, Tārā etc, in the various manifestations of Devi Sakti. As the work of Hinduism in the midst of non Aryan inhabitants was continuing since the early period where the Brahmana priest played a great role, brought about a significant and noteworthy developments in the sphere of religion. These were (i) consolidation and expansion of purānic Hinduism, (ii) conversion of the number of ruling families into Hinduism by the way of divinisation of the respective dynasties, (iii) building of new temples and shrines and rebuilding of old ones, (iv) introduction of neo-Vaisnavism, which happened to have a higher degree of appeal to the masses and led to a short renaissance in all sphere of arts and culture, (v) spirit of religious toleration and peaceful

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coexistence barring minor exceptions.\textsuperscript{4} Besides, the main working agents in this process of Hinduisation were—(i) The Brahmana priests, (ii) The Royal patronage and (iii) The Vaisnavite movement.

As regards to their religious policy it is seen that from the very beginning of their establishment as the political power the Koch kings followed almost a liberal and time honoured policy to appease and satisfy all the subjects people of their kingdom. The rulers never tried to interfere or to force their subjects to follow the king’s religion or the beliefs as compulsory. It is evident from the sources that the founder king Biswa Singha though himself a devout worshipper of Śiva and Sakti he even patronised the Vaisnavas and offered gifts and present to the Vaisnava priest and astrologers also.\textsuperscript{5} King Naranarayan being educated with the Hindu scriptures in Benāras he was quite aware of the Rājādharma and the influence of the Brahmanical Hinduism. Besides he knew the philosophy of the divinity and religious sentiment of the people and how much it was useful in maintaining the administration of the kingdom. Hence he never interfared the heterogeneous sects and beliefs followed by his subjects people. He just tried to utilise in his favour the religious sentiments of the subjects if and when necessary.

Our study reveals how king Naranarayan utilised the religious sentiments of the soldiers of his large army when he carried out his military expeditions for expansion of his kingdom under the command of his brother Chilarai. His large army was consisted of all the tribes and castes irrespective of Hindu and non Hindu peoples. Hence to satisfy all of them he had to followed a shrewed policy. One of his march against the Āhoms he received the supports from the Bhuyans, Daflas, and all the Mech-Kachāri people of the region. At a place called Temāṭumāni in the present Mongoldoi sub-division he got the support of twelve groups of the tribal people. To appease all the tribal people Naranarayan build a temple of goddess Durgā and a hill fort at a place called Chandikā Behār. He installed an image of the goddess in the temple and appointed a Kachāri as its priest instead of traditional Brahmana priest.\textsuperscript{6} He

\textsuperscript{4} CHAHB. Vol III. P.211. \textsuperscript{5} DRV. Vv, 131; HAG. P. 49; ABGB, P. 41. \textsuperscript{6} DRV. Vv, 331-334; KBI. Pp. 107.
instructed all the tribal people viz, Meches, Kachāris, Koches living to the north of the Gosāin Kamal Āli to follow their tribal customs. But the territory between Gosāin Kamal Āli and the Brahmaputra, Brahmanic rites were to be continued. Such type of religious policy of Naranarayan showed the shrewedness of an able administrator, which were definitely guided by diplomatic motives to gain allround support and loyalty from the people of the region.

It is evident from the fact that although the Saivism and Saktism were the predominant faith of the people of the valley till the reign of Naranarayan, led by Brahmana priestly class, yet the reign of Naranarayan witnessed the renaissance in the socio-religious life of the valley. The neo-Vaisnavism led by Sankaradeva created a new feelings not only among the common people but also in the ruling chiefs of the region. Till the time from Biswa Singha, the ruling family were lavishly patronised the Brahmanic Hinduism and for the spread of it they brought most of the learned Brahmanas from Navadeep, Kanauj, and Benāras etc, and honourably settled them in the valley. Biswa Singha even sent his two sons Malladeva (Naranarayan), and Sukladvaj (Chalarai) to Benāras the earstwhile famous seat of Hindu learnings of India to get them educated in Hindu Scriptures. However the period in all over India shows the rise of Bhakti movements started by Rāmanuja, Kabir, Chaitainya and others. Same was happened in the Brahmaputra Valley in the name of neo-Vaisnavite movement led by Sankaradeva. It was supposed to be a part of all India Bhakti movement. By the new ideology of his movement Sankaradeva not only tried to simplify elaborate ritualism of the contemporary Brahmanical Hinduism, but also tried to abolish Brahmanical priesthood that was then much exploiting the people at large. Under the prevailing conditions in Assam at the time when ignorance and superstitions were widely rampant, there was no doubt the need for rationalising men’s religious attitude. There was also the need for uniting the heterogeneous tribes and their faiths and beliefs through the bond of common faith and to create conditions for their harmonious living. Sankaradeva then initiated a faith conforming to the main principles of Bhakti, which could revolutionised the entire face of the life of the people and led to the formation of a broader civil society. It united the diverse tribal population of the region and


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gave a culture to be identified later as a Assamese society. But this new philosophy created a confusion among the Brahmana priestly class. First in the Ahom kingdom the priestly class got alarmed in the fear of minimising their importance in the society. They took up the challenge and offered Sankaradeva open hostility and lodged complains against him to the Ahom king. As the result of which Sankaradeva and his followers had to leave the ancestral home and took shelter at Koch kingdom. But same thing was happened to him in Koch kingdom also. There he had also face the challenge of same situation from the Brahmana priestly class. The growing popularity of the new faith immediately alarmed the Brahmana priestly class and invited hostilities from them in the Koch kingdom. They could not tolerate Sankaradeva’s teaching and popularity, abused the king’s ear with exaggerated accounts of Sankaradeva’s practices. They tried to instigate Naranarayan against Sankaradeva. The objections of the Sākta Brahmanas lodged against Sankaradeva may be Surmised in the following points— (i) that Sankaradeva being a sudra was giving sarana (initiation) to Brahmanas which is not permitted by Hindu sāstras in general and that the Sarana Kaumudi of Pitāmbara Sidhāntavāgisa; (ii) that after getting initiation the followers of Sankaradeva denied the age old Varna dharma leading to a socio-economic chaos; (iii) that Sankaradeva instigated only to chanting Harināma and hence denied the srāḍha-karma, puja, leading to the starvation of the priest; (iv) that if Sankaradeva allowed to continue in his way the number of Eksarana might have rise to such a large number who might be capable to challenge even the royal orders relating to maintainance of the society and economy. As Naranarayana himself was a devoted votary of Devi Kāmākhya, and incensed by such disturbing reports from the priestly class he became very angry and at once ordered his men to arrest the Vaisnava saint. However the king’s brother Chalarai who was already initiated to Sankaradeva and married his nice Kamalpriya favoured Sankaradeva and offered shelter in his Palace. This act of Chalarai created a matter of dissatisfaction with Naranarayan. However at the presence of Sankaradeva at the kings court did not taken a time to change the ill attitude of the king. By his depth of knowledge in Bhāgavata Purāṇa and his learned personality make the king totally spellbound.

9. CHAB. P. 447.
King Naranarayana himself was a learned scholar from Benaras, hence he was highly pleased with the explanations of Sankardeva and instantaneously over powered by the Sankara's radiating personality, offered him the royal honour and accepted him as a friend. Besides Naranarayana immediately granted Sankardeva a secured place for propagation of his neo-Vaisnava faith in his kingdom. Sources witnessed that for the smooth running of the Sankardeva's neo-Vaisnava religion in Koch kingdom, Naranarayan granted a land at Bheladungā to establish a satra which later on came to be known as Madhupur satra. It is said that the king came to have so much regard to Sankardeva that he even wanted to be initiated into Vaisnavism himself, but it was not materialised.

Naranarayan offered the same footage to the Vaisnavas with the Brahmanic Hinduism in his court not only for their ideology, but for to appease and maintaining the Rājādharma among all the section of his subjects motivating towards neo-Vaisnava cults. Educated in Benaras the famous seat of Hindu learnings Naranarayan was quite aquainted with the theories of Rājādharma. He therefore seriously kept a vigil on the philosophy as well as of the intricacies of the neo-Vaisnavism of Sankardeva. Sankardeva's religion was based upon the principle of "Eka deva eka seva, eka bine nahi keva" meaning one should offer homage to one God only i.e. God Visnu, which became most popular among the mass people, where there was no cast distinction i.e. Brahmana-Chandala alike. According to the Hindu philosophy the king is the representative of God on earth and hence the people should obey the king's order as a command from the almighty. And as the Sankardeva's neo-Vaisnavite philosophy was the devotion to one god only where the devoties were Brahmana-Chandālas alike, hence Naranarayan might have the desire to be a disciple of Sankardeva for attracting the mass population and his high officials towards this creed, so that following the same principle his subjects might remain submissive to the king himself. It would help the king to a great extent to maintain and keep the people and state together. Moreover for establishment of a satra, the neo-Vaisnavite preacher was always in need of fertile land to grow more crops and of natural resources of livelihood. Thus the villagers surrounding a satra became economically

11. KGC. P. 252.
self sufficient. It would helped the king also in collection of more tax and revenues. In all probabilities king Naranarayan was shrewed enough to exploit these aspects by extending lavish patronisation to Sankaradeva and his followers. With the liberal grants and patronisation from the royal house, a number of Vaisnavite satras were established in the Koch kingdom. However Naranarayan didnot leave up his traditional religious customs viz, Śiva and Sakti worship according to the Brahmanic rites. He used to perform the Durgā puja and Śivaratri annually in his capital.

After Naranarayan it is seen that almost all the successors of the Koch kingdom maintained the same religious policy as Naranarayan followed. During the reign of Lakhminarayan both Brahmana and neo-Vaisnavite learned scholars getting same support from the royal house adorned the court and produced most of the valuable religious scriptures. Sankaradeva's great disciple Mādhavadeva and Dāmodaradeva were the royal guest of Lakhminarayan, who spread the teachings of Vaisnava among his subjects. Lakhminarayana even declared Vaisnave form of Hindu religion as his state religion, and stop the animal offerings at the traditional royal adoration to God. But like his father Naranarayan he also didnot leave up the traditional devotion to Saivism and Saktism even though he had taken initiation to Vaisnavism by Dāmodaradeva.

After the death of Lakhminarayan the period of the later kings of Koch Behār, our study seems that they also didnot deviated much from the same religious policy. Bimarayana the successor of Lakhminarayan established the Chaturbhujha Thākura (four armed Visnu) at Bhelādungā village at Koch Behār, as well as he reconstructed the Bāneswara temple12. King Prananarayan was also the follower of the same religious policy like his predecessors, although he was personally a follower of Brahmanic Hinduism. His court was adorned with the learned personalities of both the sects, which produced so many important religious literature during his period. His reign witnessed a scholars forum of five named ‘Pancharatna’ who always engaged in literary activities. The next rulers Modanarayan and Vasudevnarayan, both were

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personally the worshipper of Śiva and Sakti (Durgā) yet they followed a liberal religious policy. But the reign of Mohendranarayan witnessed his absolute inclination towards Vaisnavism. He even devoted his daily life with the recitation of Hari Nāma Prasanga and accepted completely a vegetarian food. However he did not leave to patronise the same footage to the Brahmanic Hinduism. After the death of Mohendranarayan due to some internal crisis one usurper named Rupnarayan ascended the throne in 1704 and ruled up to 1714 A.D. He was personally the follower of Brahmanical Hinduism yet it seems that same attitude were offered to other faiths also.

Besides, in case of the rulers of eastern Koch kingdom i.e. Koch Hājo which was separated during the time of Naranarayan in A.D. 1581, reveals almost the same religious policy followed by the rulers as the socio-political situations of the time permits. It seems that Raghudev followed such a policy which satisfy all the section of the masses. Although the neo-Vaisnavism gained much popularity among the masses yet the influence of the Brahmanical Hinduism was still in full sway in Kāmarūpa.He was personally a follower of Vaisnavism by faith yet he reacted the religion of the masses. He patronised the Brahmanical Hindus, as well as rebuilt the Hayagriva Mādhava temple at Hājo and the Pandunātha temple at Guwahati and granted land and servant for their maintainance.13 But the reign of Parikshit Narayan witnessed the royal patronage towards the Brahmanical Hinduism. He himself was the strict follower of this faith and to a certain extent restricted the activities of Vainavite preachers. Even, due to his anti Vaisnava activities Sankardeva’s greatest disciple Mādhavdeva and Dāmodaradeva had to left his kingdom to Koch Behār.14 But the period of Balinarayan alias Dharmanarayan shows a liberal atmosphere in the field of religion. Although personally he was a devout worshipper of traditional Saiva and Sakti cult and followed the Brahmanical Hinduism yet for his subject people he followed a liberal attitude. As the time demanded, the mass people of the valley from Eastern Assam to the further end of the Koch Behār being influenced by the Sankardeva’s neo-Vaisnavite faith were became vaisnavite largely, because

14. KBI. P.151; Damodordeva Charit (Gurulila), Vv. 525-546.

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all the section of the people of the society were treated as equal where there were no caste
distinction. As a result of which the ruling class must have to support this flow of the time.

The comparative study of the religious policy of the Koch rulers with that of the
Āhom and some of rulers of Bengal also reveals that all the rulers of the medieval period left
their subjects at their liberty in case of their personal religion and usually did not interfered in
to it. We have stated earlier that the king’s religion is generally different in essence from the
religion of the masses. The religion of the ruling class is always governed by some contemporary
socio-political situation backed by the political interest. Hence they followed a religious policy
of non interference and left no stone unturned to use this policy to gain the support and
loyalty of the subjects on one hand and to legitimise the rulers authorities on the other. Likewise,
the Koch rulers also followed the same ,and sharply reacted to the beliefs of the masses and
followed a time honoured religious policy and left no stone unturned to satisfy all the section
of the masses offering a liberal attitude towards their beliefs depending upon the demands of
the time.