It is found that although some works have been done on the Koches, the present topic “Religious Policy of the Koch Rulers of Assam (1515-1728 A.D.)” remained neglected till date.

A section of the Indo-Mongoloid Group, the Koches, are one of the aboriginal tribes of present day Assam (also of the North-East India). They played a major role in the formation of the region’s past civilization. Their rise as a political power on the ruins of the Kamata kingdom in the early part of the 16th century is an important chapter in the history of North-East India. A petty chieftain of this race named Bisu, taking advantage of the invasion of Kamata, a remnant of the old Kamarupa kingdom in A.D. 1498 by Alaudin-Hussain Shah of Bengal, established his authority over a number of Bhuyans in Western Brahmaputra valley and thus founded a kingdom in 1515 A.D. Immediately after this, he was elevated by a section of Brahmanas to the position of a Kshatriya of the Varnasrama order and called him as Biswa Singha, meaning the lord of the world and even traced his descent from Siva of the Hindu Trinity. Eventually, the process of Aryanisation and the process of Hinduisation began in the valley since the beginning of the early Christian era. Hence, at the time of establishment of the Koch kingdom i.e. early in the 16th century A.D. in the lower Brahmaputra valley, most of the people in almost entire Brahmaputra valley were by and large either pure Hindu or Hinduised. Of course their tribal belief was also continued to exist side by side. Especially from Kamarupa to further west of the valley, the Hindu beliefs and social system predominated since long time past. The Bhuyans and the Brahmanas living there spread it in the nook and corner of the valley. Brahmaputra valley was inhabited since remote past by the non-Aryan people called Kiratas or Asuras and Mlechas, who had their own culture and religious beliefs. But the Vedic culture gradually infiltrated into the valley at least in the first century A.D. if not earlier, resulting the slow conversion of the non-Aryan tribes to Hinduism.
To give proper education, the newly baptised Biswa Singha sent his two sons Malladeva and Sukladhvaj to Benaras, the earstwhile famous seat of Hindu learnings. After an undisturbed rule for 25 years, Biswa Singha breathed his last in A.D. 1540, and Malladeva, by assuming the name of Naranarayan, meaning lord of the people, ascended the throne. On the other hand, Sukladhvaj was appointed in the office of the general of the Koch army. The Abhiseka (ascending ceremony) of Naranarayan was celebrated according to the rites and rituals of the Hindu scriptures. During his reign for about half a century (1540-87), significant development took place in the field of civilization and culture of the Brahmaputra valley in particular and North-East India in general.

The early Koch kings in their personal and family life were devout worshipper of Siva which is justified from the study of the coins they issued. The coins bear the name of Siva. But at the same time, their endeavour to patronize various cultural pursuits as well as the neo-Vaishnavite movement heralded a new chapter in the history of this part of the country. Naranarayan, very diplomatically, dealt with an impending religious rebellion of a section of his army during the preparation of a war against the Ahoms in A.D. 1562. To pacify the enraged army, he passed a decree that the people inhabited in western part of his kingdom may worship their own deities according to their own ways and even by their own priest, while the eastern part was allowed to follow the rites and rituals of the Hindus. Naranarayan shows his shrewdness while patronizing Sankardeva, the great neo-Vaishnavite preacher of the day in his court and simultaneously renovating the most celebrated seat of the Saktas, the Kamakhya temple at Guwahati in A.D. 1556. The neo-Vaishnavite movement gained wonderful popularity among the masses within a short time.

Besides the three major sects of Hinduism, viz. Saiva, Sakta and Vaishnava, some other religions were also prevalent among certain sections of the population of the Koch kingdom. Tantricism and Nathism may be mentioned here in this context.

Thus, it appears that the subjects of the Koch kingdom were the followers of a number of faiths and were not unified in respect of their religious behaviour and practices. The rulers were Saiva, but lavishly patronized the Saktas and Vaishnavas. All the points made above may lead us to think that the Koch rulers like their counterparts in
the rest of medieval India lost no opportunity to utilize religious beliefs and practices in achieving their political goals and hence, followed a very delicate religious policy.

The necessary data and information had been collected by consulting both the primary and secondary sources. The primary sources consists of relevant Persian records and military accounts, inscriptions found in and around the geographical limits of the Koch kingdom, the coins issued by the Koch rulers, art and architectural remains and the literature flourished under their patronage. Moreover, attempts have been made to exploit the myths and legends still current in the minds of the Koch people of the area under study with a scientific treatment.

The works of the scholars involved in similar study have been consulted as secondary sources. Field study have also been done whenever required to clarify and verify the facts and information thus gathered. Thus, both historical method and analytical approach have been followed to complete our study.