CHAPTER-I

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I. A rapid Survey of the land and people of the kingdoms of Kāmarūpa and Kamatā:

Present day Assam was known as Prāgjyotisa, Kāmarūpa, Kamatā or Kāmarūpa-Kamatā in different period of history, before the Āhoms became the paramount power in the Brahmaputra valley in the 17th century A.D.¹ Regarding the origin of the name Prāgjyotisa some astronomical explanations have been found in a section of the literary compositions viz. the Kālikā Purāṇa and in the Yogini Tantra etc.²

On the other hand a section of scholars think that as soon as Naraka, a Hinduised prince from Mithilā (presently Odisha) made a political adventure and killed its ruler Ghataka belonging to the Mongoloid origin, and thus established a new line of kings, the name of the land changed to Kāmarūpa from Prāgjyotisa.³ B. Kakati is of the opinion that the word Kāmarūpa has been derived from an Austic formation like Kamaru or Kamarut, the name of a lesser divinity in Santali, which justifies the association of the land with magic and necronomy. He also thinks that the word symbolises a new cult, namely the worship of the mother goddess Kāmākhyā and in exaltation of it, the word Kāmākhyā too has been derived from an Austic formation such as Kāmoi (demon) etc.⁴ An earlier works, viz Gopatha Brāhmaṇa narrates

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¹ The Āhom entered into Assam in A.D. 1228 and established kingdom at Charaideo in present day Śivasagar district under the leadership of Sukapha in 1253 A.D. The kingdom reached its zenith during the reign of Rudra Simha. Hence scholars generally calculate the period of Āhom rule for six hundred years when it ceased to its existence in 1826 A.D. But the western part of Assam i.e. the present day district of Kamrup, Nalbari, Barpeta, Goalpara, Dhubri and Bongaigaon were came under the Āhom permanently only after the battle of Itakhuli in A.D. 1682. For details one may consult E. A. Gait, “A History of Assam” (henceforth HAG).

² The Kālikā Purāṇa suggest a mythological derivation of the formation Prāgjyotisa (39/126) “formerly Brahma staying here created the star, so the city is called Prāgjyotisapura.” From this Gait points out - “Prag means former or eastern, and Jyotisa, a star, astrology, shining. Prāgjyotisapura may therefore be taken to mean the city of eastern astrology. The name is interesting in connection with the reputation which the country has always held as a land of magic and incantation, and with the view that it was in Assam that the Tantric form of Hinduism organized.” (HAG, P.15) K. L. Barua observes the etymology in a different connotation - “ It is significant that to the immediate east of the town of Gauhati there is a temple, on the crest of a hill known as Chitralcha, and this temple is dedicated to the Navagrahas or the nine planets. It is probable that this temple is the origin of the name Prāgjyotisapura. (Early History of Kāmarūpa, P.9)


the story of Kāmādeva’s revival in this land, after his destruction by the fiery glance of Lord Śiva. During the medieval period Kāmarūpa became a centre of Tāntrik worship and came to be considered a most sacred place centering round the temple of Kāmākhyā. All this can be explained in the light of the cult of magic and sorcery prevalent in the land, which has a bearing on the pre-Aryan cult of the Phallus. However it received new orientation with the introduction of Aryan culture.

From the early 5th century A.D. we have come across sufficient evidences both literary and epigraphic with full of informations relating to the socio-economic, religious and political history of Kāmarūpa till the last part of 11th century A.D., which will be dealt with in detail in the following pages. From 12th century A.D. the Kāmarūpa kingdom became disintegrated on account of a number of causes, both internal and external. Centrifugal powers raised their heads claiming independence to each other. Taking advantage of the situation, a Brahman minister of the Gauda king Kūmārapāla invaded the eastern part of the Kāmarūpa and by defeating its rulers Tīngyadeva established his authority, while the western part was remained under the centrifugal powers who called themselves as Bhuyans - meaning the lord of lands.

Thus there were two Kāmarūpas: The western Kāmarūpa was ruled by a line of kings till the middle of the 13th century A.D. and the eastern Kāmarūpa was ruled by a number of Bhuyans, who witnessed and experienced two events leading to a culmination of the causes of Assam History at this time. The first one was a series of invasion from the west by the Turko-Afgan ruler of Bengal and the second was the establishment of a kingdom in the

5. Gopatha Brāhmaṇa, an earlier works narrates the story of Kāmādeva’s (god of love) revival in this land. According to the legend, Kāmādeva the god of love was sent by the other gods to put an end to Śiva’s mourning after the death of his consort and to awaken him again the passion of creation. Kāmādeva was bent to ashes by the angry glance of the great God, but later recovered his original form (Rupa) hence the name Kāmarūpa becomes. Vide, P.C. Choudhury, The History of Civilization of the People of Assam to the Twelfth Century A.D.P.35.
East by the Āhoms who entered to Assam from the south eastern provinces of China. The two events borne two different characteristics. While the Turko-Afgans were mere invaders with the goal to exploit its wealths and resources along with territorial aggrandisement, the Āhoms who were agriculturist left no stone unturned to settle themselves permanently in the Brahmaputra valley and thus to bring all the tribes and communities under a single umbrella with a common identity. Under this circumstances the king of the western part of Kāmarūpa, Sandhyā defeated Malik Yujbeg Tughril Khān, in second half of the 13th century A.D. and from the defensive point of view he shifted his capital from present day north Guwahatī to further west to Kamatāpūr. Since then the Kāmarūpa kings came to be known as Kamatā king and the kingdom as Kamatāpūr or Kāmarūpa. Kamatā which included the present day western part of Assam and a considerable part of North Bengal. With fluctuating fortunes this Kāmarūpa-Kamatā was ruled by nine kings. However in 1365 A.D. king Indranarayana of Kamatā could not resist the constant invasions of the Muslim powers from Bengal. As a result the Bhuyans of the area as well as their subjects suffered to their worst. The people therefore were seeking for a change of the royal authority and hence the way for rise of the Bhuyans was cleared. They were united under the leadership of one Arimatta who by killing Indranarayana captured the throne of Kamatā, and shifted his capital to Betna, a village in present day Kamrup district. His kingdom was continued under three of his successors and the last one Mrigānka breathed his last leaving no heir for which Niladhvaja, one of the powerful Bhuyan managed to capture the throne of Kāmarūpa-Kamatā in A.D. 1440. He rebuilt the earlier city of Kamatāpūr to which the capital was retransferred from Betna. His son and successor Chakradhvaj not only resisted an invasion of Sultan Ruknuddin Barbak (1459-74 A.D.) of Bengal, but also caused to built the celebrated temple - Kamatesvari at

his capital city. Chakradhvaj was succeeded by his son Nilambar who extended his kingdom from Karatoa to Bomadi and said to have included a part of North Bengal.

Thus right from Sandhya the founder of Kāmarūpa-Kamata the kingdom was in existence up to A.D. 1498, when its last ruler Nilambar was subjugated by Allauddin Hūsain Shāh, the Nawab of Bengal. (A.D. 1493 - 1519). Allauddin then appointed his son Denial as the administrator of the newly conquered territory of Kāmarūpa-Kamata with Haju as its Head Quarter. On his return to Gauda Hūsain Shāh even minted coins where in he claimed to be “conqueror of Kāmarūpa-Kamata”14 and to celebrate his victory he caused to build a Madrasah in Malda of todays west Bengal. Moreover a systematic settlement of muslims began at Hājo where in later on the Poa-Macca was established.15 Thus by the overthrown of the Nilambar at the hands of Allauddin Hūsain Shāh, the rule of the Kāmarūpa-Kamata kings came to an end.16

II. Events leading to the rise of the Koch power in the western Brahmaputra valley:

The muslim rule established by Alauddin Hūsain Shāh was short lived. The Pro-Islam activities of Hūsain Shāh and his son Denial, made the Bhuyans, who by this time under the influence of Hinduism were detribalised to a great extent, decided to unite against Denial. At their united effort Denial and his associates were annihilated to the last person.

This incident of united effort made by the Bhuyans helped them to understand their own strength on the one hand and the drawbacks and weakness of the invaders of Bengal on the other. This was best understood by one of the Bhuyan named Bisu who by subjugating his neighbouring other Bhuyans established a new kingdom and earned a new identity as a

Koch king. Bisu, later came to be known as Bishwa Singha and his kingdom as Koch kingdom.

Bisu had a very humble origin. His father Hāriā Mandal, was only the mandal or headman of a village consisting of twelve other Koch families. The leading men of these families were- Pānbar, Phedela, Phedphedo, Barihamā, Kāthiā, Guabar, Meghā, Baisāgū, Jogi, Gūrikatā, Jugbar and Dākhārū. According to Gait the progenitor of the Koch kings was a Mech or a Koch it is not certain. It will be dealt with in detail in a separate heading, i.e. "The Racial affinities of the Koches".

Hāriā Mandal who belongs to the Koch community was the resident and headman of the village Chikanāgrām in the Khūntāghāt Paraganā in the Goalgārī district. Hāriā married Hirā and Jirā, the two daughter of one Hāzo, by whom he had two son, namely Bisu and Sisū. Bisu was the son of Hirā and sisū was the son of Jirā. They were born some years before the conquest of Kamatā by the Muhammadāns under Allauddin Hūsain Shāh. However Hūsain Shāh did not retain a permanent hold on the country and the people, left to themselves, split into numerous petty principalities, each under its own chief. Bisu was a man of unusual enterprise and courage, and he soon forced his way to the front. He defeated the chiefs, or Bhuyans, of Udālguri and Luki, but was repulsed by Charu Bhuyans. However, afterwards he renewed his attack, at a time when the Bhuyan’s soldiers had dispersed for a festival and killed him and the few followers that remained with him. Following up this success, he subdued the chiefs of Phulgiri, Bijni and other places and gradually extended his rule as far as Karatoya in the west and the Bar nadi in the east. He rose up to the power about 1515 A.D.

It is said that Bisu took twelve years to subjugate the neighbouring Bhuyans, after which he declared himself king in 1527 A.D. His kingdom was called Koch Behār and its capital was Kamatāpūr. As of their predecessors had in other parts of India the Brāhmānas

19. HAG : P48
20. Ibid.
21. Ibid.
of Koch Behār also lost no time to create a legend of the origin of the Koches. It says that Bisu’s forefathers originally belonged to Kshatriyas who had thrown away their sacred threads when fleeing before the wrath of Parasūram, the son of the Brahman ascetic Jamadagni and that Bisu was the son of god Śiva, who assuming the form of Hāriā Mandal had intercourse with his wife Hirā, she being an incarnation of Śiva’s wife Pārvati. Bisu then assumed the name of Biswa Singhā and his brother Sisū took the name Śiva Singhā, both of whom were most honourably accepted to the Hindu fold. Not the royal family, many members of that tribe also gave up their tribal designation and were elevated to the Hindu caste.22

Biswa Singha moved his capital from Chikanāgrām to Koch Behār where he built a fine city. He made his brother sisū or Śiva Singhā, Jūvaraj and appointed twelve ministers of state from the twelve chief families of the Meches. Now he became a great patron of Hinduism. He himself worshipped Śiva and Durgā and patronised the worship of Viṣṇu and gave gifts to the priests and astrologers. He revived the worship of Kāmākhyā, rebuilt her temple on the Nilāchal hill near Gauhati. He brought numerous Brāhmānas from Kanauj, Benāras and other centres of the learning.23 Biswa Singha took a census of his subjects and estimated his military strength at 52,25,000 fighting men which obviously, is a much exaggerated figure. He had also innumerable elephants, horses, asses, buffaloes and camels.24

Biswa Singha came into contact with the Āhoms, but the accounts differ as to what happened. His contemporary Āhom king was Suhungmung alias Dehingia Rājā (A.D. 1497-1539) who extended the western boundary of his kingdom to the river Suvansiri or beyond in the north bank of the Brahmaputra and to the north of Kalang river in the south bank. On the other hand, Biswa Singha’s jurisdiction seemed to extend up to the river Marā Dhansiri in the Darrang district on the north bank and to some parts of the Nowgaon district in the south banks.25 The territorial expansion of the Koches towards the east and that of the Āhom towards the west was sure to lead a direct confrontation of the two powers sooner or later.

25. CHAB: P.205.
According to the chronicles of the Koch kings, Biswa Singha undertook an invasion of the Ahom territory, but had to retreat owing to the hardships experienced during the journey and the great difficulty of obtaining supplies. But the Ahom chronicles relate that in the year 1537 A.D. Biswa Singha paid a friendly visit to the Ahom king Suhungmung and exchanged presents with him. Biswa Singha died about 1540 A.D. It is recorded in the Darrang Rāj Vamsāvalī that Bishwa Singha married eighteen wives from different countries like those of Gaur, Kāshmir and Nepāl. The selection of the Kingdom was made in consultation with his ministers. He had altogether eighteen sons born of his eighteen wives. Accordingly they were Nara Singhā, Malladev (Naranarayan), Sukladhvaj (Chilarāi), Gohāin Kamal, Maydon, Rāmchandra Sūra Singha, Mān Singhā, Meeha, Brisaketu, Rāmnārāyan, Ananta, Dip Singha, Hemadhar, Meghanārāyan, Jagat, Rupchand and Sūrya.

Biswa Singha had the skill, intelligence and power which enabled him to lay foundation of a strong kingdom on the ruins of Kāmarūpa-Kamatā. He proved himself to be a successful conqueror and an efficient administrator. He had the qualities of a statesman which is evident from his relation with the Ahoms. It was he who crushed the power of the Bhuyans of western Assam and established a strong centralised monarchy, which was destined to play a far important role during the reign of his illustrious son Naranarayan.

At the time of Biswa Singha’s death his two elder sons, Malladev and Sukladhvaj, were away from the kingdom at Benāras prosecuting their studies there under a learned Brāhmaṇa named Brahmananda. Biswa Singha appointed his eighteen sons to different branches of administration. Koch chronicle Darrang Rāj Vamsāvalī narrates how he distributed the assignments to the sons by playing a stratagem. Accordingly he directed his eldest son Nara Singha to rule over foreign lands and nominated his second and third sons Malladev and Sukladhvaj to succeed him to the throne and to become the Yuvarāja respectively and each of the other sons was put to separate duties so on. But Nara Singha the eldest son,
taking advantage of the absence of Malladeva and Sukladhvaj from the kingdom, usurped the throne at the death of Biswa Singha. On getting this information Malladeva and Sukladhvaj hastened from Benaras and raised an army and defeated Nara Singhā. Nara Singhā being defeated fled to Morāng, the submontane tract west of Koch Behār.\(^{31}\) After expelling Nara Singha, Malladev became king and assumed the name Naranarayan and made his brother Sukladhvaj to be his commander-in-chief. Sukladhvaj was so skilled and swift in military operations that he was nick named Chilarāi or the Kite King.\(^ {32}\)

With the accession of Naranarayan the history of the Koches entered into a brilliant chapter of military glory and cultural achievements. This illustrious ruler with the help of his able brother and Commander-in-chief, Chilarāi, established the Koch sovereignty almost the entire north-east and made it important enough to get recognition in the court of Mughals of Delhi. It is true that not only did they curved out a new kingdom on the ruins of the erstwhile kingdom of Kāmarūpa-Kamatā but also, in course of their eastward expansion, proved their might against the rising power of the Āhoms. After subjugating the neighbouring states one after another, they established their authority over an extensive territory within a short period, posed as challenge to the rulers of Gauda and formed a defensive alliance with the Mughal Empire. The greater significance of Koches were that the Koch Behār was at that time literally swarming with the cultural workers since the begining under the patronage of the royal court. These workers were inspired by the rapidly spreading Neo-Vaishnavite movements and as a result of which the workers ranging over various fields- art, architecture, literature, sculpture, music, religion and so on. All this rising culture made a lasting impact on the Assamese society. During the Naranarayan’s reign of nearly fifty years the Koch power reached its zenith, due to the energy and skill of the brother Chilarāi, rather than to any efforts of his own. Naranarayan was a man of mild in nature and studies disposition and seems to have been more addicted to religious exercises and conversation with learned men than to the conduct of State affairs. In all questions of politics Chilarāi seems to have possessed an overwhelming

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32. *DRV*. V.340; *HAG*. P.51
influence; and he was the moving spirit in every adventure. As soon as Chilarāi died the dint of warlike preparations ceased and peace reigned in the land.33

Racial affinities of the Koches:

The origin of the Koches is still a subject of controversy. In Assam proper, it has become the name of a Hindu caste, into which are received the converts to Hinduism from the ranks of Kachāri, Lālung, Mikir, Gāros and other tribes. In the North Bengal and Goalpārā, on the other hand, the term Koch has been abandoned for the appellation- “Rajvamsi” which denotes a tribe and not a caste, whose ethnic character has been a matter of controversy. The Koches are frequently referred to as Kuvacha in the Purānas and Tantras.34 The historian of Muhammad Bakhtiyar Khilji’s invasion at the end of the twelfth century, “Minhajuddin” in his “Tabaquat-i-Nasirī” says that the features of the “Koch, Mech and Tharu tribes” resembled those of a tribe of Southern Siberia.35 The original Koches were very closely allied to the Meches and Gāros in physical type, language and tribal institutions. B. H. Hodgson in his works classed the Koches with the Bodo and Dhimal.36 H. H. Risley also admitting the Koches an intermixture with Mongoloid stock, held that Dravidian characteristics predominate.37 Delton stated that the Koches were all very dark and displayed the thick protuberant lips and maxillaries of the Negro and therefore he considered them to be Dravidian.38 Oldham also describe them as the most conspicuously Dravidian race in Bengal.

However a group of scholars hold the view that the Koches are definitively of Mongolian Stock. This views, of like Hodgson has already mentioned. He is supported by Waddel as says that the Koches do not belong to the Dravidian Stock, but are definitely Mongoloid.39 The same view is taken by Buchanan and in the Dāccā Blue Book, according to which the Koches are belong to the same class with the Bodos and Dhimals.40 Eudle also classed the Rābhiās, the

33. HAG. P.57
34. Ibid. P46
40. HAG. P46
Meches, Dhimals, Koches, Dimacas, Hojais, Lâlungs, Gâros, Hâjongs and such other tribes within the fold of the great Bodo race.\textsuperscript{41} Scholars like E. A. Gait, S. K. Chatterji, D. E. Sircar and Anthropologists B. M. Das also support that there is no doubt that the Koches of Assam belong to the Mongolian rather than to the Dravidian stock.\textsuperscript{42} Ralf Fitch, who visited Koch Bihâr in 16th century says - “the people have ears which be marvellous great, of a span long, which they draw out by devices when they be young”.\textsuperscript{43} This practice has long been abandoned by the Koches but still continued to exist amongst the Gâros who belong to the Mongolian group.

In religious beliefs and rites as well as in social manners and customs similarities between the Koches and other Bodo tribes like the Râbhâs were noticed by Buchanon, Martin and Rishlay. Buchanon even found that the language spoken by the Koches resembled that of Gâros.\textsuperscript{44}

However, Gait observes that\textsuperscript{45}, the divergence of the views seems to have arisen from the confusion caused by the use of the term “Râjvamsi”, which originally referred to an entirely distinct community of Dravidian affinities but was afterwards adopted by the Koches west of the Manas river, PresUmâibly after their conversion to Hinduism. Like the Koches the other tribal converts, in their neighbourhood also subsequently called themselves Râjvamsis. So long as the Koch kings ruled, there was considerable intermingling of the two races (Dravidian Râjvamsis and the Mongoloid Koches) in the territory under their domination. Thus the Dravidian blood poured into the Mongoloid Koches but there seems to be no doubt that the true Koches were a Mongoloid race very closely allied to the Mechês and Gâros. It is evident from the fact that in Jalpâiguri, Koch Behâr and Goalpâra, the person now known as Râjvamsi are either pure Koches who, though dark, have a distinctly Mongoloid physiognomy, or else a mixed breed, in which the Mongoloid element usually preponderates.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{42} D. Nath. P.3
\item \textsuperscript{43} \textit{HAG} P.47
\item \textsuperscript{44} Quoted from D. Nath. P.3
\item \textsuperscript{45} \textit{HAG} Pp.46ff.; \textit{CHAB}. P.203.
\end{itemize}
In fact the term Rajvamsi, it may be possible that when the Koches became conscious of their past ancestral glory at a later period, they began to call themselves as Rājvamsis—meaning "descendents of the Royal Kindred". This new appellation also made them feel somewhat superior to the rest of their kinsmen.

Thus we can observe that whatever might their racial origin it appears that Koches are more akin to the greater Bodo race and has a close relation with the Bodos, Gāros and Rābhās in terms of their socio-economic and religious behaviour, beliefs and practices.