Chapter 7

KOCH-BEHAR STATE AND THE CRISIS
Bordering the Bengal State to the north was another Indo-Mongoloid State called Koch-Behar. It stretched from Karatoya river to the Brahmaputra and Sankosh rivers. East of Koch-Behar lay Kamrup, the Ahom State but it was under the Mughal occupation for most part of the 17th century. The Koch-Behar State belonged to the Pani Kuch people who had for long lived along the fringes of Indo-Aryan civilisation and they dwelt in forest, cultivated by hoe, drank

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rice bear, were matrilineal and materilocal, and spoke a language distinct from Bengali. From at least 16th century onwards the Brahmanical culture had been making inroad into their society following which a process of sanskritization had started. Sanskritization effected both the social structure as well as the polity.

In the early decade of the 16th century, there appeared a dynasty of Koch kings descending from Haria Mandal a village headman, whose son Bishu had put together a powerful confederation of Koch tribes. Having established supremacy from river Kartoya to the Barnadi, Bishu adopted the title of Raja and proclaimed himself as king of the region.

On his death around 1555 AD his son Naranarayan succeeded to the throne and he like his father patronised the sanskritic culture. As a result of the sanskritization the rise of the Koch kingdom was accompanied by simultaneous adoption of fictitious genealogy. Thus, the humble headman Haria Mandal and twelve Koch families were declared to have been offspring of twelve fugitive Kshatriya princes who had settled in the hills of Kamrup and intermarried with women belonging to the Mech tribe. This was necessary for an upwardly

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3 Richard M Eaton, ibid.
4 Ibid., p. 187-188.
mobile tribal dynasty, thereby, a link was established with the uppermost echelons of the Hindu social hierarchy. A kind of divinity was then injected into the ruling dynasty by declaring the Bishu’s mother had been miraculously impregnated by Lord Shiva – this legends thus, establish Bishu as the son of the major Hindu God and grandson of a kshatriya warrior. Naturally, therefore, Bishu patronised north Indian Brahmin priests who were evidently responsible for furnishing the king with his illustrious genealogy. It was a familiar process; tribes aspiring to access economic power and political domination employed puranic myths to link themselves with ritually clean Gods and caste of Brahmanical culture. This has been traditional root of upward mobility for indigenous tribe of Indian leaving on the fringes of Brahmanical society and vehicle for their integration into the caste society through out the early period of Indian history.

From the 16th century onward the Koch religious system also absorbed considerable brahmanical contents – formerly the native priest called kalitas, who had officiated at ritual sacrifices to various Gods and Goddess. They employed no images in worshipping their pantheon of deities. The major deity worshiped was supreme God

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Rishi, who married to an Goddess named Jogo but by the 16th century on the influence of sanskritization these two deities were transformed into Siva and Parvati. This identification of local divinities with Hindu divinities validated by sanskritized reasons and myths and supported by Brahmanical priesthood proved crucial in the adoption of a Brahmanical world view and social system for Koch State. At the same time the Koch priest whose status had initially been threatened by the Brahmins imported by Bishu re-established themselves by adopting Brahmanical ritual function and under their direction entire society gradually became sanskritized.

The Koch society consisted of number of clan based tribes loosely organised around a king to whom local land holders owed allegiance and to whom their subordinate clansmen paid tribute. The tribute was paid not only in cash or kind but also in form of labour service apparently modelled after the paik system of the Ahoms. The peasants known as paiks belonged to units of four cultivators and obliged to render labour services to the king in rotation. A peasant would render his service to the king for a period of one year while other three member of his unit looked after the land so that every

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7 Ibid.
8 Richard M Eaton, op. cit., p. 188-189.
peasant served the king one year in four. Unlike that of Bengal proper the Koch economy was not monetized. In fact it was never lastingly integrated in the Bengal sultanate, although Muslim commanders invaded Koch-Behar in 1206 AD, 1238 AD, 1227 AD, 1321-22 AD, 1332-33 AD, 1457 AD, 1493-94 AD and 1567-68 AD. The longest period of sultanate domination followed Allal Din Hussain Shah's 1494 invasion and conquest of Koch-Behar and Kamrup. The coins minted by Hussain Shah's government continued to mention (Kamru) until 1518 and from evidence in the Ahom Chronicle that the sultan remained in control over this frontier region until 1533 when they were decisively defeated by the Ahom kings and forced to withdraw from Koch-Behar and Kamrup.

The Koch-Behar State had also never evolved any institution of land revenue extraction long prevalent in the western deltaic Bengal. Its peasantry was also not organised into endogamous and hierarchically arranged castes like Bengal. In fact, it was only in the 16th century that the Koch society had moved from hoe to plough and the sedentary life associated with the practice of wet rice cultivation.

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10 Buchanon-Hamilton MSS, op. cit., p. 137.
Therefore, the Mughal army that sought Koch-Behar was to confront a society which was very different from the deltaic Bengal.12

In 1613 the Bengal Governor Islam Khan sent a army of 5000 musketeers a 1000 cavalry men, 400 war boats equipped with large cannon and 300 state elephants with a cash amount of Rs. 7 lakhs for contingency expenses. This was first important expedition which recently defeated chieftains of Bhati who, now, participated in fighting on the side of new master. Reaching Dhubri, an important Koch fortress on the western bank of the Brahmaputra, the Mughal forces settled in three months seize against a hostile population. The Mughal forces eventually prevailed in pursuing the Koch to their capital Gilah and driving the Koch Raja Parikshit Narayan out of the country altogether. Having entered the capital which they triumphantly renamed as Jahangirabad. The imperialist had annexed Koch-Behar to the Mughal Bengal and chased the former king into Kamrup.13 There the fugitive Raja at last submitted to Mughal authority. By July, 1613 both Koch-Behar and Kamrup had been fully annexed and brought under Mughal fiscal administration.

12 Buchanon-Hamilton papers, op. cit.
The land was divided into 20 revenue circle and taxes were levelled on the peasantry and the imperial agents called karori were sent out to collect the imposed land revenue. Some revenue circles were given to revenue farmers called mustajir with whom the government contracted for stipulated demand of revenue to be remitted to Dacca.¹⁴

Soon the Mughal sent a new revenue official to Jahangirabad Mir Safi, who introduced further changes in the revenue assessment and demanded that the local militia, or the paiks, be paid salary out of the general land tax. In this way a corvee militia intended for the service of the local king was transformed into a salaried army under the authority of distantly placed governor. Moreover, the army was supported by additional revenue burden placed on a peasantry unfamiliar with the payment of cash taxes or a monetized economy.¹⁵ To make matter worse the Mughal revenue farmers further squeezed the peasantry for their own profit by raising legal and illegal taxes within their circles.

The entire Koch economy was fundamentally shaken and with no king to articulate their resentment caused by these changes a series of violent peasant rebellion erupted through out Koch-Behar and

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 270-275.
¹⁵ Ibid. p. 288-290.
Kamrup. In 1614 peasants rebelled and overpowered the Mughal garrison at Rangamati and besieged the regional headquarters at Gilah. The Mughal forces responded by evacuating Gilah and by recovering Rangamati and established garrison in eastern Kamrup between the Manas and Barnadi rivers. Around August - September 1615 they launched a full scale invasion of Assam where upon the insurgents in eastern Kamrup seized the Mughal garrison at Dhamdham. Subsequently the Koch rebels met under the leadership of peasant named Sanatan, who declared independence. Sanatan communicated four demands to the Mughal forces; that the revenue collectors sent to Kamrup be punished for committing oppression, that all Mughal taxes be remitted for as full year, that the imperial army to withdraw from Kamrup; and that the allowance of the paiks should be given to them directly and not made any addition to the revenue payment due to the government. In the response the Mughal expressed the willingness to appease the rebels by dismissing Mir Safi - the oppressive revenue collector. But they were not willing to rescind the new system of taxation that they had introduced nor they were willing to restore the former status of the paiks. At this impasse

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Sanatan proclaimed himself to be the *Raja* of the area.\textsuperscript{17} The Mughal commanders deployed all of their superior might to launch the counter insurgency measures. They mowed down Sanatan’s fortified stockades, killed thousands of rebels and compelled Sanatan ultimately to flee for his life.\textsuperscript{18}

The next intervention in north eastern states particularly Koch-Behar came during the turbulence of the Mughal State in the second half of the 17\textsuperscript{th} century. In 1657, the aged Mughal emperor Shajahan fell sick in Delhi which marked the beginning of scramble for succession amongst his four sons. Prince Shuja – second son being the viceroy of Bengal set out with troops to contest the throne as a result the frontier Mughal garrisons at Ghoraghat was considerably weakened.\textsuperscript{19} Taking advantage of weak state of the Mughal frontier the Koch king Prannarayan made a series of raids into the Gharaghat region, kidnapped a number of Mughal subjects, stopped payments of *tribute* and set himself as an independent ruler.\textsuperscript{20} He desired that assistance of Durlabh Narayan the zamindar of Budhnagar and a vassal of Mughal to overthrow the Mughals from Kamrup. On his

\textsuperscript{17} Mirza Nathan, *op. cit.*, vol. I, p. 370-381.

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{19} Sudhindra Nath Bhattacharyya, *op. cit.*, p. 298-299.

\textsuperscript{20} Shihabuddin Talish, *Fathiyah-i-Ibriyeh*, translated by H Blochman in ‘Koch Behar, Koch Hajo, and Assam in the 16\textsuperscript{th} and 17\textsuperscript{th} centuries. According to the Akbarnamah, the Padshahnamalis and the Fathiyah-i-Ibriyeh’, *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, 41, no. 1, 1872, p. 49-101.
refusal he ousted Durlab Narayan and annexed his zamindari to state.\textsuperscript{21} At this development the Mughal commandant at Guwahati Mir Lutfullah demanded the return of his fellow vassal’s domain and on his refusal scuffle followed in which Prem Narayan defeated the Mughals and captured Hajo.\textsuperscript{22}

The Ahom king did not want to allow the substitution of the Mughals by the Koch. He, therefore, marched his army towards Guwahati. The twin attack made the Mughal withdraw from Kamrup which brought the Koch and Ahoms into confrontation. But the dream of Pran Narayan to replace the Mughals in Kamrup remained unfulfilled and it went back to the Ahoms.\textsuperscript{23}

The struggle for succession among the sons of Shahjahan ended with Aurangzeb’s ascending the throne. Immediately on his coronation Aurangzeb appointed Khan-i-Khanan Mir Jumla as governor of Bengal in 1660 and immediately sent him to Jahangirnagar “to punish the lawless zamindars of the province”.\textsuperscript{24}

The new Bengal viceroy was determined to stamp out sedition and disloyalty with an iron hand and accordingly made fast preparation for an expedition against Koch-Behar and Assam.

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., pp. 115-16.
\textsuperscript{23} Sudhindra Nath Bhattacharyya, op. cit., 300-301.
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid., pp. 302-03.
The Koch-Behar expedition marked the most crucial phase of politics in the Koch-Mughal relationship. It was indeed the turning point in the history of Koch-Behar when after a period of independence for nearly three quarters of a century and faithful vassalage for half century its very existence was threatened.\textsuperscript{25}

On hearing the news of Mughal’s Koch campaign, the Raja Prem Narayan made an attempt to stay off the Mughal attack by sending an envoy to Sujan Singh and Mirza Beg appealing for pardon for disloyalty. Mir Jumla rejected the appeal and imprisoned the envoy and ordered Raja Sujan Singh and Mirza Beg to march against Koch-Behar.\textsuperscript{26} In view of rain Sujan Singh delayed the attack which made Mir Jumla very angry who took the field himself. On 1\textsuperscript{st} November 1661 Mir Jumla started from Jahangirnagar and on 13 December, 1661, he reached the foothills and by 19\textsuperscript{th} December occupied the capital of Koch without much difficulty. But the subjugation was not complete as the general populace offered stubborn resistance. Mir Jumla overcame this opposition by the politics of humanitarianism. The customary plunder and ravage of the conquered territory strictly forbidden. The property and honour of subject was assured protection and from excess of soldiers. The

\textsuperscript{25} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{26} Fathiya-i-Ibriyah, op. cit., pp. 8-18. Also see, Alamgirnamah, op. cit., pp. 683-93.
king's son Bishan Narayan submitted and was honoured with a khilat.\textsuperscript{27} The Koch king took asylum in the jungle of Bhutan. Mir Jumla did not want to open another front with the Dharmaraja of Bhutan and decided to proceed towards Assam. But before his march to Assam he made elaborate arrangement of administration in Koch-Behar. Henceforth, Koch-Behar was to form the part and parcel of Mughal India. Isfandar Khan appointed as faujdar of the region until the arrival of permanent incumbent. Askar Khan and Qazi Samnai appointed as diwan and two others were appointed as amins.\textsuperscript{28} The name of the capital changed from Jahangirnagar to Alamgirnagar. The fortification of the gateways of the Yakdwar was levelled with ground and an open space of 100 yards wide made by cutting jungle from both side.\textsuperscript{29} After the departure of Mir Jumla, the Mughal officials introduced further innovation in the land assessment of the country, which was vehemently opposed by the peasants who broke out in rebellion. The imperial garrison at capital was too weak to counter the violent uprisings, there were no hope of re-inforcement from Mir Jumla who along with his army reduced to sad plight in Assam due to the advent of monsoon. The fortified post were isolated due to rain and flood and all communication between the fleet and

\textsuperscript{27} Sudhindra Nath Bhattacharyya, op. cit., pp. 305-06.
\textsuperscript{28} Ibid., p. 307.
\textsuperscript{29} Ibid., pp. 307-308.
land army was cut off taking advantage of the situation the Koch-Behar kings came down from the hills of Bhutan and joined his peasants to expel the Mughals. The imperial officials at Kathalbari were killed, all supplies to the garrison were stopped. Unable to negotiate the offensive the Mughal officers withdrew from Koch-Behar. The viceroy Mir Jumla tried to recover Koch-Behar by marching back from Assam. But he died on the way. Thus, even before he could consolidate his conquest of Koch-Behar it slipped away from their hands within five months of its occupation.

On 1664 Shaista Khan became the viceroy of Bengal and at once he announced his design to conquer Koch-Behar. On hearing the news of the impending invasion the ageing king Prem Narayan, reaffirmed his submission and vassalage to the Mughal emperor and disarmed Shaista Khan by offering heavy war indemnity of Rs. 5 lakhs and a half in few instalments. The tribute of the Koch king reached imperial court on 6th December 1665 which marked the reversal of Koch-Behar back to a vassal state after a short spell of independence. However, the death of Prem Narayan in early 1666 marked the beginning of steady disintegration, bloody war of succession, misgovernment, rebellions of state officials and foreign

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30 Fatihya-i-lbriyah, op. cit., p. 80.
32 Ibid.
invasions. These offered the Mughals a good opportunity for extending their sway in southern and eastern portion of Koch-Behar till its eventual dismemberment by the first quarters of the 18th century.

But the internal problems within Bengal stopped the Mughals from making any inroads into Koch-Behar for next twenty years from 1666-1685. In fact, Shaista Khan, was most of the time, occupied with suppression of Arakan pirates quarrells with English East India Company and internal administrative reforms.33

But within these 20 years the state of affairs in Koch-Behar was no better. The new king was Mahendra Narayan whose reign was marked by internal dissension and state officials in collusion with the Mughal officials used to declare independence and an contemporary account of state of affairs states:

Men-in-charge for the parganas in the southern portion of the kingdom revolted against the king's authority and paying some small tribute to Ibrahim Khan the subedar of Dacca and his son Zabardast Khan, attached themselves to the faujdar of Ghoraghat. The Raikat at Baikunthpur and Konwar of Panga, now paid tribute to the subedar.34

The necessity of suppressing the revolts brought the king in confrontation with the Mughals once again. The renewed Koch-

Mughal warfare (1691-93) resulted in the annexation of large part of Koch kingdom to the Mughal Empire and a number of officials had joined the victorious Mughals.

For two years there had been constant fighting Boda and Patgram and many people have been slain the officers in charge of Karjidhat, Kakina, Teppa, Manthanajhori and other parganas became unfaithful to their trust, made themselves owner of the land, consenting to pay a annual tribute to the subedar and obtained sanads.\(^{35}\)

The crisis compounded due to death of Mahendra Narayan in 1693, pursuing their policy of aggression Mughals led a series of expeditions against Koch-Behar which had already devastated by the civil war and weakened by maladministration. Within few years the Mughals occupied the central chaklas of Fatehpur, Karjihat and Kakina. The parganas of Boda, Patgram and Purbabhaga, which could not be taken during Mahendra Narayan's time, were occupied during his successor's period, i.e., in Rup Narayan's reign.\(^{36}\)

*Raja* Rup Narayan undertook his first war to curtail the Mughal but was unsuccessful and signed a treaty with Nawab Zabardast Khan of Dacca to the effect that chakalas of Boda, Patgram and Purbbhaga should be returned to the Maharaja in return of a tribute to the subedar. Since it was considered derogatory to the king, who had

\(^{35}\) *Ibid.*

an umbrella and a *pat-hasti* and who could strike coins to pay tribute directly. It was paid in the name of Shanta Narayan the *nazirr* on behalf of the *maharaja*.37

The settlement was made in 1711, since then Koch-Behar state remain vassal of the Mughal kingdom. Following the entry of the British in Bengal, along with the rest of the province, the diwani was transferred to East India Company in 1773.

In 1773, it entered into a subsidiary alliance with the East India Company and became princely state within the British Empire.

Therefore, since 1711 the developments in Koch-Behar to the large extent was result of the development that took place in Bengal province.

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37 Ibid.