

Kamrup - The Koch Kings and Assam

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During the pre-Ahom period - the history of present Assam was the history of Kamrup or Pragjyotisha. From the references found in the Epics of India, inscriptions and various writings, it can be said for sure that in the times of antiquity, both Kamrupa or Pragjyotisha were used as synonyms for each other. This Kamrupa in the Eastern part of India, in the past, never came under the domination of any king of India so as to be included in the main stream of Indian History except once during the time of the British-rule in the name as Assam. As told by K. L. Barua in the preface of his "Early History of Kamrup,—"Pragjyotish or Kamrupa, from the earliest times till the death of the Koch King Narayanaraj towards the end of the sixteenth century" was the one powerful Kingdom of Kamrup. In the times of the Epics, Naraka and Bhagadatta were the Kings of Kamrup with extreme power and extensive territory. As found in the Bhagawata, Lord Krishna was said to have spent quite a long time before entering into the Capital of Pragjyotishpura for killing Naraka. Lord Krishna is believed to have stayed in 'Aswakanta' before killing Naraka. Lord Krishna installed Narak's son - Bhagadatta as the king of Kamrupa whose valiant participation in the War of Kurukshetra was elaborately described in the Mahabharata. His huge regiment of soldiers numbering one 'Aksauhini' comprised Kiratas, Mlechhas and Chinas. The inclusion of Kirata and China soldiers in his army gives us the scope of conjecture that during Bhagadatta's time Kamrupa had, probably, comprised parts of present Nepal as well as Tibet or China. In "The History of Ancient and Medieval Nepal" by D. B. Shrestha and C. B. Singh(1976) Nepal was found to be called as "Land of Kirantis" - and so was Kamrupa at the time with the Kiratas as her populace. As referred in the Mahabharata, Bhagadatta's one of the regimental camps is believed to have been situated on the banks of the Lohitya—that is the confluence of the Brahmaputra and Ganga - where his subjects were said to be Mlechhas.

After the period of Epics, little obscurity seemed to have prevailed over Kamrupa for a short time, probably due to the lack of any glamorous powerful King. But again she rose to the power to the last degree with the glory of Kumar Bhaskar Barman's reign—that was the middle of the 7th Century A.D. As told by K. L. Barua in his 'Early History of Kamrup' the genealogy of the Kings of Kamrupa from the 4th Century A.D. to the 12th Century A.D.

was the longest, ever known in Indian History, line unbroken for nine centuries at a stretch. During this period, Kamrupa established her matrimonial alliances with Nepal and Kashmir by giving princesses : Rajyamati and Amritaprabha respectively. After the period of Barman dynasty being over, Kamrupa appears to have sporadic break over her sovereign power due to her fragmentations into small principalities ruled by various tribes and mostly by the petty rulers of the Bhuyans. But again she became powerful and glorious during the rule of the Koch Kings.

Apart from the facts found in the 'Darrang Rajvamswali', it is prevalent till today among the descendants of the Raj families of the Kochs that Koch King's origin of the ancestry belonged to the times of the Epics where episode of Haihaya King Sahasrarjuna was mentioned. Sahasrarjuna's twelve sons fled their Kingdom to this side of eastern land to save themselves from the fury of Parasurama, whose twentyone campaigns against the Kshatriyas caused them to flee pell-mell into all directions of the world. In order to save their lives, these twelve sons of Haihaya Raj concealed their identity by being assimilated with the local tribes through marriages. But inspite of their blending, they retained their 'Kuleen Kshatriya' traits through performances of all kinds of rites and rituals of the Sanatanic religion of the time.

The present Chikanjar in the district of Goalpara is believed to be Chikna where this clan of western Kshatriya immigrants established their habitat in the east as a chieftain-oriented tribe. One such chieftain called Hariya Mondal (Mondal meaning chieftain) became extremely ambitious to expand his inherited small principality into a kingdom. His father, as found in the 'Koch-beharer Patra Bibaran - Mukhabandha' - by Maharaja Jitendra Narayan Bhup Bahadur, (October, 1929) was called 'Kula Shrestha Damdambu'. Hariya Mondal, besides subduing several surrounding Bhuyans, inclined to expand his territory towards east. For this purpose he married two daughters called Hira and Jira of Koch Hajo. This matrimonial alliance imparted him the opportunity to have a grip over the side of east of his own principality.

After Hariya Mondal's death, his son called Bisu through Hira succeeded him assuming the name as Raja Biswa Singha. Bisu was said to have been born on the day of Bihu - that is Bisu and so was his nick name Bisu. This incident of name as Bisu signifies the importance of Bihu during those days among the people of present Western Assam as well as present North Bengal.

Raja Biswa Singha became bent on the fulfilment of his father's aspirations to have a very big kingdom - and hence he began subduing the Bhuyans all around him except one called Charu Bhuyan with whom he got defeated. This defeat led him to the hiding for a short time in the hills of Nilachala. But there also he did not spend time idly - instead discovered the ruined temple of Kamakhya with the image of stone deity i.e. 'Bigraba' which remained lying neglected and unworshipped for centuries. He did it according to the directions prescribed in the Puranic scriptures. As the legend goes Kamakhya remained in that state of devastation for centuries

due to spell of curse cast upon by sage Basistha. Bisu reinstalled the Goddess by bringing qualified Brahmins from Kanauj, Mithila and Banaras. (Ref. : 'The Koch Kings of Kamrupa' by E. Gait.) With renewed strength of power, Bisu defeated Charu Bhuyan. Thereupon he assumed the title as 'Maharaj Dhiraj Kamrup - Kamateswar Biswa Singha' in 1515 A.D. and shifted his capital to Koch Bihar which he established with all the ultra-modern facilities and amenities of the time compared to the rest of India. Like any other Kshatriya king of the time, Biswa Singha married eighteen wives from different parts of India including those from Nepal and Kashmir. It is said Maharaj Biswa Singha allocated rank and file among his eighteen sons by holding one lottery with the view to keeping the integrity of his acquired kingdom intact. According to the decision of the lottery - to be future king and crown prince fell in Malladeva and Sukladhwaja respectively. After reigning for twenty-five years he died in the year 1540.A.D. Malladeva and Sukladhwaja - assuming the names as "Maharaj Dhiraj Kamrup Kamateswara Naranarayan" and as "Yubaraj Sangram Singha" ascended the throne as king and crown prince respectively. Apart from being crown prince Sangram Singha became the general and prime minister of the king and the kingdom. Sangram Singha later came to be popularly known as Chilarai due to his untiring valour in the warfares, successive victories and specially for his uncommon dexterity in riding horses in the way like that of flying kites (i.e. "Chila" in Assamese).

From the behaviour of the Koch Kings, they can be regarded as immensely cultured kings with all the refinements. After the decisions given by the lottery Maharaj Biswa Singha sent his successors - both Malladev and Sukladhwaj to the care of Swami Brahmananda of Banares for their royal education both in Sanskrit literature as well as war artilleries and strategies. This kind of tendencies among the Koch Kings signify the refined streaks of "Kuleen Kshatriya" nature of the time.

After their coronation, both Naranarayan and Sangram Singha (alias Chilarai) resumed their father's half-done campaign of building a vast Kamrup-Kamata Kingdom. With that purpose, for the convenience of war strategy for invading "Ahom Rajya" called 'Asom' as found in the 'Darrang Raj Vamsawali' a road was constructed stretching from Koch Bihar to Parasuram Kunda. After the completion of the construction of the road, an army camp called Narayanpur, was set-up by Sangram Singha. At present times the road is transmuted into North Trunk Road - but still the sporadic parts of it are known as 'Gohain Kamala Ali' who was another brother of Naranarayan and Chilarai. "Asom Rajya" was then a small principality confining itself only to 'Saumarapitha' of ancient Kamrup - that is the eastermost part of present Assam. The retreating Chutias, from 'Saumarpitha', to the west of the 'Ahom' kingdom resisted the latter's further advancement towards west. Chutias surrendered later to Chilarai after the defeat of the 'Ahoma Swargadeu' at the hands of Chilarai.

Though there is no fixed demarcation of time as to when the name - "Asom" came to be known so widely - still it can be said for sure that till the time of Chilarai's conquest of Ahom Kingdom in the year 1546 A.D. - "Asom" was a small principality. Chilarai's contemporary Swargadeu was 'Suklengmung'. His reign was from 1539 A.D. to 1552 A.D. (Ref : Assom Buranji - by Padmanath Gohain Baruah). According to the Ahom genealogy of Swargadeu, Suklengmung, who was defeated by Chilarai was the 15th (fifteenth) in the line from the first Ahom king Sukapha who entered into Saumarpitha in the year 1228 A.D. by crossing Patkai range of hills on the easternmost part of the ancient Kamrupa. If counted from Sukapha to Suklengmung the period ranges for more than 300 years and within that period Assam was not so extensive as it became later with the decline of the Koch Kings. The sword and the valour of Chilarai had unified Kamrup from Sadiya on the extreme east to Gauda - now in West Bengal - on the extreme west comprising his conquered territories of Kachar (then Heramba Rajya), Sylhet (then Srihatta), Mymensingha - both are in Bangladesh now - then again Jayantia Rajya and Tripura (then Tippera), Koch king sent messenger to the king of Manipur who also extended the friendship with obeisance to Koch Kings with tributes and gifts. (Ref : Early History of Kamrupa" and "Darrang Raj Vamsawali") All these conquered Rajyas meaning kingdoms by Chilarai were converted into the tributary states of Kamrup-Kamata then ruled by his brother Naranarayan.

So far as Ahom King was concerned, besides tributes he had to send few of the Ahom Princes as hostages to Kochbihar to the courts of Naranarayan. Among these hostages, Sundarkowar was said to have been very much impressed by the pomp and pageantry of the Durga Puja of Koch Bihar. It is said that Naranarayan provided him with the best experts of the idolmakers of Durga images on the release of the hostages. As said, Sundarkowar promised to spread Durga Puja with idols in Asom Rajya with the kind permission of the then Swargadeu. As said, the Durga Puja with idols began in Assam since that time - that is from the time of Maharaj Naranarayan of Kamrup-Kamata (Ref : Darrang Raj Vansawali).

During the time of Mahabir Chilarai's stay at his regimental camp of soldiers at Narayanpur, another very great event took place and that was the meeting between Mahapurush Shankardev and Mahabir Chilarai for the first time. Knowing the fact that the Koch Kings were both educated and patronisers of the Sanskrit learnings, Shankardev agreed to meet Chilarai in his army camp on the latter's invitation. This meeting, eventually, led them to such a close friendship that while offering welcome to the king's court at Kochbihar, Chilarai had to marry Shankardev's niece Kamalapriya as signal of assurance. Maharaj Naranarayan had not only received him with honour but also had regarded him as the most valuable gem of his Court. Both king's and crown prince's patronisation had facilitated Shankardev to make great contributions not only in the field of literature and art but also in the refor-

mation of the society through establishments of many Satras over Kamrup-Kamata. His voluminous contributions to the literature at the later period, came to be regarded as enriching Assamese literature with the decline of the Koch kings of Kamrup. Thus, founding of Satras by Shankardev all over Kamrup helped Asom, at the later period, remain unified socially as well as culturally with the rise of the Ahoms to the powerful sovereignty.

It was during Maharaj Naranarayan's reign that the Kamakhya temple, as we see it today, was built by the king at the wish expressed by Chilarai (Darrang Rajvamswali). Inscriptions of dedication to the temple of Kamakhya contains both the names of Maharaj Naranarayan and Mahabir Chilarai. The mention of the name of Chilarai with that of the monarch asserts the fact as to how strong was Chilarai's hold over the king. After Chilarai's death the eastern part of Kamrup had been given to his son Raghudev Narayan by Naranarayan. King kept the western side of Kamrup - Kamata for himself and for his son Lakshminarayan keeping the river Sankosh as the common boundary. Raghudev Narayan established a new capital of his own called Barnagar somewhere on the banks of Barnadi. In order to keep his eastern boundary intact he gave his daughter Mangala Devi to Ahom Swargadeu Pratap Singha in marriage. After Naranarayan's death his son Lakshmi Narayan posed a menace to Raghudev Narayan on the western boundary of his kingdom in association with the Moghuls. It is said that the temple of Hayagriba Madhava on the Mani hill was built by Raghudev Narayan during his reign on Kamrup. (Ref : History of Assam & The Koch Kings of Kamrup - by E. Gait). The inscription over there bears his name as the builder of the temple. Besides this, the most of the scholars of the court of Koch Bihar moved to the court of Raghudev Narayan after the death of Maharaj Naranarayan due to Lakshmi Narayan's joining hands of friendship with the Mughals. These scholar's contributions in the field of literature are also said to have enriched Assamese literature at the later period with the decline of the Koch kings of kamrup.

After Raghudev Narayan's death, his son Parikshit Narayandev ascended the throne of Kamrup with his many brothers all around. Frequent attacks by the Mughals on the western side of his kingdom compelled him to move his capital to present North Gauhati in the new name as Vijaya Nagar. The Silsako - which means stone bridge of the present North Gauhati is said to have been built by him. Parikshit Narayan had to keep himself busy most of his times fighting with the Mughals. In 1614 A. D. his fierce fighting with the Mughals near Dhubri met with defeat which caused him to be the captive at the hands of the Mughals. He was carried away to the Mughal court in Delhi where he had to surrender himself, but before he reached his home back he breathed his last on the banks of Ganga. Parikshit's brothers- Balit Narayan and Hara Narayan Dev defied the Mughals refuting their brother's surrender at Delhi. Eventually, they too failed with Mughals and asked the Ahom Swargadeu Pratap Singha for help. In such state of affairs Swargden reduced both Balit Narayan and Hara

Narayan in the new names as - Dharma Narayan and Gaja or Gandharba Narayan into the status of his subordinate Rajas of Darrang and Beltola respectively. Again on the western side, the Mughals installed Parikshit's son Bijit Narayan on the seat of Bijni as their subordinate Raja. The Raja of Koch Bihar called Lakshmi Narayan had willingly joined hands with the Mughals and thereby already was a subordinate Raja of the Mughals. Thus, the time altered the destiny of Kamrup to become an extensive Assam under the sovereignty of the Ahom Swargadeus. The Koch Kings disappeared from the history of Kamrup for ever and in its place, history of Assam emerged.

Notes & References

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