

Mughal-Koch Political Relations (1578 A.D.-1609 A.D.)

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The paper is an attempt to make in-depth study of Mughal-Koch political relations from 1578 A.D. to 1609 A.D on the basis of original sources of the contemporary period. It seeks to explore different alliances between the Mughals and the Koches and also examine the nature of the Mughal conquest in Koch Behar during the period under review. It is necessary to mention in this connection that the Assam, the Koch and the Persian chronicles are at variance regarding the showdown between the Mughal rulers of Bengal and the kings of Koch Behar. The native chronicles are always prone to eulogise their rulers and minimize their enemies.

It is said that the history of Mughal north-eastern frontier policy is a history of Mughals' relations with the frontier kingdoms of Koch Behar, Kamrup and Assam.¹ In this connection it is relevant to mention that the Mughal general Khan Jahan defeated Daud Khan Karrani, the Afghan ruler of Bengal at the battle of Rajmahal and finally conquered the land of Bengal in 1576.² With the fall of the Karrani dynasty (1564 A.D.-1576 A.D.) in Bengal the Mughals stepped into the shoes of the Afghan power and thus came into contact with the Hindu kingdoms beyond the north-eastern border of Bengal.³ That is why it was natural for various reasons that the Mughals would proceed further to round off their conquest in the east after the conquest of Bengal.

Koch Behar's western and southern boundaries were contiguous to the northern and eastern frontiers of Mughal Bengal.⁴ So it was very natural that the Mughal would come into contact with the Hindu kingdom of Koch Behar. The Mughal policy and attitude towards Koch Behar were never fixed. They were changing and the policy took new shape from time to time.

Background of Mughal-Koch Understanding

The Mughals and the Koches were destined to come into contact for common interest in the first phase of their relationship. Naranarayan

inherited an anti-Ahom legacy from his father, Visva Simha. His victory over the Ahoms in 1562 A.D. proved to be transient.⁵ The subsequent invasion of Koch Behar by Kala Pahar, the general of Sulaiman Karrani, 'Padshah of Gaur' (1565 A.D.-1572 A.D.) up to the Brahmaputra as far as Tezpur in 1568 A.D. and the imprisonment of the Koch general Chilarai, made Naranarayan weak and dispirited. He set all Ahom hostages of 1562 A.D. free with the hope of securing alliance with the ruler of Assam. But this attempt fell flat on Sukhampha of Assam (1552 A.D.-1603 A.D.), because of the later's success in freeing himself from the Koch guardianship, his definite aggressive designs on Koch Behar, and constant desire to stir up Koch malcontents.⁶ So the king sought to make friendship with the Mughals. On the other hand, the Mughals, too, badly needed a Koch alliance for their own interest.⁷ Though the Afghan leader Daud Karrani was defeated in the battle of Rajmahal in 1578 A.D. by the Mughals, yet at home the Mughals, newly established *de jure* authority in Bengal continued to be resisted by the Afghan and the Hindu irredentism. The 'Baro Bhuyans' or twelve landlords of Bengal cherished ambitious designs of self-aggrandizement. Besides such chieftains, there were rebels like Mahmud Khan Khaskhail, Ibrahim Narail and others, who were incited by Isa Khan to create trouble for the Mughals.⁹ Thus the Koches and the Mughals understood the ground reality and came forward to cultivate friendship for their mutual interest.¹⁰

Mughal-Koch defensive Alliance (1578 A.D.)

Bisva Simha, the founder of the Koch royal house pursued a pacific policy towards the Muslim kingdom of Bengal with a view to secure his western frontier against the hostile Ahom power on his eastern frontier. This policy was fruitful for Bisva Simha. Naranarayan, the son of Bisva Simha followed a pacific policy like his father towards the Mughals. Accordingly, he refused asylum to the defeated Afghan rebels after the fall of Daud Karrani. These Afghans being hotly chased by the imperialists crossed the river Karatoya and took refuge in the Koch kingdom. This was the first step on the part of the Koch king Naranarayan in courting friendship of the Mughal emperor Akbar. With a view to please Akbar Naranarayan sent an embassy the imperial court with rich presents four years later.¹¹ The Mughal emperor was highly pleased and reciprocated the friendly gesture of Koch king. A friendly alliance on the basis of the equal terms was concluded between the two powers.¹²

The Koch king was not required to acknowledge the over lordship of the Mughal emperor. There was no mention of tribute, territorial concession or any other symbol of political tutelage.¹³ In fact, the political expediency made the two kings to come to an understanding. In order to prevent the Bengal rebels from taking asylum in the neighbouring state Koch Behar, Akbar welcomed the friendly gesture of the Koch king.¹⁴ On the other hand, the Koch king, in his desire to have a powerful ally against the menace of the Ahoms, whose king was always on the lookout for creating troubles for the Koch king, by harbouring political offenders in his kingdom, looked at the Mughals as a strong weapon of defence against the Ahom state. Both sides were thus anxious to solve their respective political troubles with mutual assistance and hence the ground was prepared for such defensive alliance in 1578 A.D.¹⁵ J.N.Sarkar remarks on this alliance, "Its significance lies in the fact that it was the first pacific alliance between a Hindu state and a Muslim state about 375 years after the Muslim conquest of Bengal."¹⁶ However, this alliance appears to have helped the Mughals to consolidate their empire in Bengal and to conquer the north-eastern frontier in course of time and gave safety and security to the Koch state for a couple of years. After the conclusion of the alliance, Naranarayan sent a few war-boats to help the Mughals against Masum Khan Kabuli.¹⁷

Partition of the Koch State (1581 A.D.) and Foreign Intervention (1597 A.D.-1613 A.D.)

About this time, there came a partition of the Koch state and that brought about a change in the Mughal frontier policy. Raghudev, the nephew of Naranarayan carved out a principality of his own from the parent Koch kingdom and this new state came to be known as Kamrup. He fixed his capital at Baranagar. Now he resorted to all sorts of subversive activities against his uncle Naranarayan. This partition henceforth gave rise to conflict between the two states of Koch Behar and Kamrup.¹⁸ It weakened both halves of the old kingdom, Koch Behar and the New Kamrup. On account of ill-will and rivalries, each sought foreign intervention, the Mughals on the side of Koch Behar and the Ahom on the side of Kamrup. This rivalry between Koch Behar and Kamrup brought about a change in the Mughal policy which assumed more and more an aggressive by nature. Finally both became the prey of Mughal aggression.

Koch-Mughal Subordinate Alliance (1596 A.D.-1608 A.D.)

So long Naranarayan was alive, the Mughals respected the treaty of alliance on the terms of perfect equality. Naranarayan died in 1587. His son and successor Lakshminarayan was weak in diplomacy and incapable as a ruler. His weakness soon roused his rival Raghudev into action. The latter declared his independence, came to an understanding with the Ahom king and Isa Khan of Sonargaon and made attempts to conquer Bahirband in the possession of Lakshminarayan. Realising his inaptitude against this formidable combination, Lakshminarayan sought the Mughal help even at the cost of his independent status. Accordingly the Koch king waited on the Mughal viceroy of Bengal, Man Singh in 1596 A.D., acknowledged Mughal suzerainty and gave his sister in marriage to Man Singh.¹⁹ The Mughal Viceroy was satisfied with a verbal submission of the Koch King, and did not insist on payment of tribute and allowed him to go back with honour.

In the meantime Raghudev attacked Bahirband. Now Lakshminarayan appealed to Man Singh for help which the latter complied with. Raghudev was compelled to withdraw from Bahirband in May, 1597. Isa Khan, however came forward to the assistance of Raghudev. A Mughal army was detached against Sonargaon and a fierce battle ensued in September, 1597.²⁰ It ended in the total defeat of the imperialists and a large number of imperial soldiers fell prisoners into Isa Khan's hands. But Isa Khan thought for peace. He released the imperial prisoners, abandoned his attack upon Lakshminarayan and offered submission to the Mughal emperor.²¹

Aggressive Imperialism: Koch Behar under Mughal Vassalage (1609 A.D.)

With the coming of Islam Khan as viceroy of Bengal in 1608, the defensive frontier policy of the Mughal was transformed into an aggressive policy. Islam Khan was determined to extend the territorial limits of the Mughal empire in the north-east by thoroughly annexing the Hindu principalities of that region. Koch Behar, being nearest to Bengal, naturally fell a victim to this aggressive policy first of all in the region. The formal acknowledgement of the suzerainty of the Mughal emperor by the Koch king was not deemed enough by Islam Khan. He went a step further and deprived Lakshminarayan of personal freedom, kept him confined at Dacca and posted imperial officers at Koch Behar. This happened under very unusual circumstances.²² Raghudev's son Parikshit

who ascended the throne of Kamrup was more ambitious and violent than his father. Parikshit made an attack upon Bahirband, following his father's hostile policy. Failing to withstand the aggression of Parikshit, Lakshminarayan accompanied by Raghunath of Shushang, a Mughal Vassal, waited on Islam Khan and accepted the Mughal vassalage by paying a tribute.²³ This incident was the signal of aggressive imperialism of the Mughals and henceforth systematic and persistent efforts were a foot at territorial expansion in the north-east frontier. The year 1609 A.D. marked the end of Koch Behar's independence.²⁴

Conclusion

From the above discussion we can conclude that in the beginning of Akbar's reign a defensive alliance was formed between the Mughal empire and the Koch kingdom on the basis of perfect equality. But towards the end of Akbar's reign the defensive alliance was transformed into a subordinate alliance and the Koch king Lakshminarayan almost accepted the Mughal vassalage without any payment of tribute. During the reign of Jahangir, the subordinate alliance was again transformed into an aggressive alliance by nature and Koch Behar was turned ultimately into a tribute vassal state of the Mughals in 1609 A.D.

The incident of 1609 A.D. was really of great significance in the history of the Mughal north-east frontier policy in general and Koch Behar in particular. It sounded the death-knell of Koch Behar's independence. The result of the alliances was more fruitful to the Mughals than to the Koches. It not only gave an advantage to the Mughals to hold their sway over Behgal but later after the death of Naranarayan enabled them to intrude into Koch politics and finally led the Mughals to make Koch Behar a vassal state.

Notes and References

1. A.C.Ray, *History of Bengal*, Calcutta, 1968, p145
2. Abdul Karim, *Banglar Itihas*, Sultani Amal, Dacca, 1977, p.384
3. *Op. cit.* p143
4. The boundary of Koch Behar is discussed in various sources. The Persian chronicles of the contemporary period highlights the boundary of Koch kingdom. But they differ in their opinion. See for instance Abul Fazal, *Akbarnama*, Vol. III translated by M. Beveridge, Delhi, 1973, p. 1067.

5. D.Nath, *History of the Koch Kingdom 1515-1615*, Delhi, 1989, pp 55-57.
6. J.N. Sarkar, "Koch Behar, Kamrup and the Mughal (1576-1613)", in H.K. Barpujari (ed), *The Comprehensive History of Assam*, Vol. Two, second edition, 2003, Guwahati, p. 93.
7. *Ibid.*
8. *Ibid.*
9. M.S.N. Rahman, *Hindu-Muslim Relations in Mughal Benagal*, Calcutta, 2001, p 27.
10. Abdul Fazl, *Akbarnamah*, Vol.III, tr.Col. H.S.Jarret, revised by Sir J.N.Sarkar, 1949, Bib. Indica Series, pp 327-28, 327-28
11. *Ibid.* p. 349.
12. S.N. Bhattacharya, *A History of Mughal North-east frontier Policy*, (Reprint) Guwahati, 1998, p. 96.
13. *Ibid.*
14. *Ibid.*
15. *Ibid.*
16. J.N.Sarkar, *op. cit.* p. 94.
17. *Akbarnamah*, III, p. 621.
18. J.N.Sarkar, *op. cit.* pp 94-99 and A.C Ray discussed the problem in his work *op. cit* 147.
19. *Akbarnamah*, III, p. 621.
20. *Ibid.*
21. *Ibid.* 1094.
22. The incident is described in *Akbarnamah* clearly. Battacharya, Sarkar and Ray also left some light on it.
23. *Ibid.*
24. There is no difference of opinion among the historians that Koch Behar lost her independence in 1609 A.D.