

**HISTORY
OF THE
KOCH
KINGDOM
1515-1615**

D Nath

This book is the first of its kind to study both political and socio-cultural aspects of a tribe that formed, along with numerous others, a state in the north-eastern region of India. The Koches belonging to the stock of the present day Meches, Garos, Rabhas, Lalungs, Hojais, Hajongs and other Bodo groups of the greater Mongoloid race established a kingdom in the western Brahmaputra valley in the early 16th century. Very soon the state extended over almost the entire north-east India at the cost of the other neighbouring tribes and for a time it was found that this was the greatest kingdom that any tribe had ever formed in the region.

Such political glory was, however, short-lived. Internal strife and external aggression made the state dwindle into insignificance. But its importance lies in other aspects as well. The Brahmins left no stone unturned to Hinduise the royal family immediately after they had acquired political power. It so happened that the near relatives of the king not only became stern followers of Brahmanical Hinduism, but also tried their best to patronise both Brahmanic and Vaishnavite cultures and institutions in the court. Sanskrit learning became an ideal of the neo-Hinduised royal family. The Brahmins and the royal officers receiving grants or assignments of land, the members of the royal household and other feudal landlords e.g. the 'Bhuyans' formed the culturally and economically advanced class. The vast masses of people remained at the bottom of the society. This is how the socio-political elite of the state acquired the identity of a separate class and the whole tribe became a caste-tribe continuum.

Besides dealing with the problem of the original habitat and racial affinity of the tribe, the rise and fall of the Koch political power is also discussed in this volume. The way of administration, the nature of the society and economy and the patronage of religion and literature by the kings are also dealt with in proper perspective.

Dr. D. Nath (b. 1954) had brilliant academic career. He stood first class first in M. A. (History) from Dibrugarh University in 1976 and obtained the University Gold Medal. He taught for some time as Lecturer in J. D. S. G. College, Bokakhat and Darrang College, Tezpur till 1979. Currently he is Lecturer in the Department of History, Dibrugarh University. He was awarded Ph.D. in 1983.

Dr. Nath is a member of the All India History Congress, the North-East India History Association and the North East India Council for Social Sciences Research. Besides a number of research papers published in different journals, he has to his credit a large number of research and popular articles in Assamese. A book **Assam Buranji** (History of Assam) is one of his latest literary achievements.

HISTORY OF THE KOCH KINGDOM

KOCH KINGDOM

& THE KING

THE KING

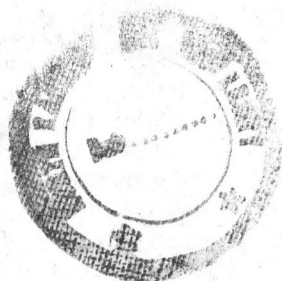
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HISTORY OF THE KOCH KINGDOM

(c. 1515—1615)

D. NATH



MITTAL PUBLICATIONS
DELHI-110035 (INDIA)

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NAT;4

MANU Library
acc. No. 171007
acc. by *Najah*
Date *27/10/89*
Class by *31/10/89*
checked by
described by

First Edition, 1989

© D. Nath, 1989

ISBN 81-7099-109-9

Published by
K. M. Mittal
Mittal Publications,
4528/12, Jai Mata Market, Trinagar,
Delhi-110035 (INDIA)
Phone: 7217151

Printed by
Ankur Composer at Sunil Printers,
New Delhi-110028.

Preface

Not many attempts have been made to unveil the past civilizations of the Indo-Mongoloids of north-eastern India who have since time immemorial been inhabiting this isolated geographical region. Contributing materially and otherwise to the formation of the basic cultural pattern of the region, these peoples gave an independent shape to its regional identity through the ages. At the same time, they maintained a strong unity with the rest of the country in the sphere of culture-contact and with generations of new-comers to their land. This cultural contact has played significant role in shaping the social history of the region.

A section of such Indo-Mongoloids who played a major role in the formation of the region's past civilization, were the Koches. 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. Under their great king Naranarayan, the Koches extended their sway over almost the entire north-east. This glory was, however, short-lived. Greatly weakened by the partition of their kingdom and jealousy and conflict between the ruling houses of the divided kingdoms of Koch Behar and Kamrup (Koch Hajo), the Koches gradually dwindled into insignificance in the political arena. But the actual contribution of the Koch rule lies in the patronage it extended to the cultural development of this part of the country as well as to the Neo-Vaishnavite movement, which revolutionised the entire face of the Assamese society.

Substantially based on Ph.D. dissertation submitted to the Dibrugarh University in 1983, the present publication is the result of my persistent investigation into the socio-political life of the lower Brahmaputra valley during the 16th-17th centuries. Although I have tried my best to examine critically all available materials, still the work may not be claimed to be complete in

all respects. There is enough room for new interpretations while amplifying the utilised materials. However, I hope, it might inspire sincere scholars to investigate the undiscovered history of a class of men who have been left unnoticed through the ages.

I acknowledge my indebtedness to all the authors whose works I utilised in preparing this volume. I take this opportunity to offer my thanks to the authorities and officials of the different institutions for their help and cooperation in various ways in collecting materials. I acknowledge my gratefulness to Prof. (Mrs.) S.L. Baruah of History Department, Dibrugarh University, Assam, who kindly supervised my work despite her heavy academic workload. I must also acknowledge with thanks the valuable suggestions and advice which the late Professor Dr. D.C. Sircar, who was also one of my thesis-examiners, gave me particularly during the preparation of the first chapter. It is under his instructions that this chapter has been revised for this edition. Besides, I offer my sincere regards to Prof. K. P. Baruah of DHSK College, Dibrugarh, and Dr. H. Goswami of Economics Department, Dibrugarh University for their valuable help and suggestions. Thanks are also due to Mr. K. Gogoi and Mr. G. Borah of Dibrugarh University for typing out the work. I am indebted to my friend M. M. Mazumdar, my brother G. Nath and my wife J. Gogoi (Nath) who helped me in working out the present volume.

I also offer my gratefulness to Mr. K. M. Mittal of Mittal Publications, Delhi, for publishing this work.

D. NATH

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Abbreviations

- AAAW : *An Account of Assam* by J. P. Wade.
AB : *Ahom Buranji*.
ABGB : *Assam Buranji* by G. R. Barua.
ABHB : *Asam Buranji* by Harakanta Barua Sadar Amin.
ABS : *Asam Buranji Sar* by Kasinath Tamuli Phukan.
ABSMJC : *Asam Burani or Sri Sri Svarganarayandev Maharajar Janma Charitra*.
ADB : *Annals of Delhi Badshahate* by S. K. Bhuyan.
AEALK : *Aspects of Early Assamese Literature* (ed.), B.K. Kakati.
BGC : *Bardowa Guru Carit*.
CSLSC : *The Cooch Bihar State and Its Land Revenue Settlement* by H. N. Choudhury.
DAB : *Deodhai Asam Buranji*.
DHAS : Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies.
DRV : *Darrang Raj Vamsavali*.
EI : *Epigraphia Indica*.
GCR : *Guru Carit* by Ramcharan Thakur.
GCS : *Guru Carit* (ed.) K. Saikia.
HAG : *A History of Assam* by E.A. Gait.
HBM, I : *History of Bengal*, Vol. I (ed.), R.C. Majumdar.
HBS, II : *History of Bengal*, Vol. II (ed.) Sir J. N. Sarkar.
HCGh : *A History of Cooch Behar* (tr.) S. C. Ghoshal.
JARS : *Journal of Assam Research Society*.
JASB : *Journal of Asiatic Society of Bengal*.
KAS : Kamrup Anusandhan Samiti.
KB : *Kamrupar Buranji*
KBIKh : *Koch Beharer Itihas* by A. Khan Chaudhury.
KGC : *Katha Guru Carit*.
KJKC : *Kirata Jana Kriti* by S.K. Chatterji.
KJPK : *Koch Behar Jelar Pura Kriti*.

- KP : *Kalika Purana*.
KRB : *Ms. Koch Rajar Buranji*.
MNEFPB : *A History of Mughal North-East Frontier Policy*
by S. N. Bhattacharya.
MSB : *Mahapurusha Sankaradeva* by Bhushan Dvija.
PAB : *Purani Asam Buranji*.
PBPS : *Prachin Bangala Patra Sankalan* by S. N. Sen.
PKSID : *Prachin Kamrupiya Kayastha Samajar Itivritta* by
H. N. Datta Baruah.
PSN : *Prachya Sasanawali* (ed.) M. Neog.
Riyaz : *Riyaz-us-Salatin*.
SAB : *Satsari Asam Buranji*.
SHTN : *Sankaradeva and His Times* by M. Neog.
SMCD : *Mahapurusha Sri Sankaradeva Aru Sri Madhava-
deva* by Daityari Thakur.
YT : *Yogini Tantra*.

Glossary

- Acharya*—a preceptor; a spiritual guide; an instructor, especially one who teaches the *Vedas*.
- Admaha*—a unit of currency equal to 1/8 of a rupee.
- Ahu tali*—land where *Ahu* or rabi crop is sown.
- Akhai*—parched rice.
- Amatya*—a minister.
- Ankiya-nat*—one-act devotional plays written by Vaishnava saints, particularly Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva.
- Ata*—a senior and respectable devotee residing in a *Satra*.
- Atai*—a celibate devotee residing in a *Satra*.
- Bachari*—Assamese war-boat.
- Bandi or Beti*—a maid servant under bondage.
- Bao tali*—land where *Bao* crop is sown.
- Bargit*—devotional songs in classical tunes particularly composed by Sankaradeva and Madhavadeva.
- Bargohain*—one of the three 'Great Gohains' or ministers of the Ahom government. He governed the tract from the south of the Dikhow to Kaliabar.
- Batchara*—a gate-house, a two-roofed small house in front of the *Namghar* and the *Kirtanghar* serving as a gateway.
- Bayan*—leader or member of an instrumental musical party.
- Bhakat*—a devotee.
- Bhatima*—a devotional song employed in the Vaishnava dramas.
- Bhawana*—a dramatic show based on religious themes.
- Bihu*—Assamese national festival.
- Bish*—unit of land measurement equal to 13 standard *bighas*.
- Brahmottar*—revenue free land granted to a Brahmin.
- Buragohain*—one of the three 'Great Gohains' or ministers of the Ahom administration, considered, by tradition, as the senior most. He governed the tract from the north of the Dikhow river to Sadiya.

- Buranji*—Assamese chronicle; *Buranji* is a Tai-Ahom word meaning a 'store-house of knowledge' which teaches the ignorant.
- Carit-Puthi*—a biography of a Vaishnava saint.
- Chadar* or *Cheleng*—a single cloth wrapped round the body or over the shoulders.
- Chakla*—an administrative unit consisting of several villages.
- Charyyas/Charyyapadas*—Buddhist lyrical works by the *Siddhas*, where earliest specimens of Assamese are found.
- Chatra*—royal umbrella.
- Chali-nach*—a type of *Sariya* dance resembling the spreading out of the tail of a peacock.
- Chatradhari-Raja*—a prince who used to hold the royal umbrella over the king's head at the time of coronation ceremony.
- Choki*—an out-post.
- Danda*—royal sceptre; symbol of administration.
- Dasavatanritya*—dance showing the ten incarnations of God Vishnu.
- Daphala-kunda*—a kind of wooden frame used to punish a criminal; stock for confining criminals; a red trap.
- Deodhai*—an Ahom or a Kachari priest.
- Devdasi-nritya/Nati-nach*—dev=god, dasi=slave, nritya=dance; a dance performed by temple girls before the deity.
- Dev-Dharma Rajas*—a term applied to the diarchy of Bhutan; *Dev-Raja* in charge of the general administration, *Dharma-Raja* that of religious.
- Devottar*—revenue free lands granted for the purpose of erection and maintenance of temples.
- Dharmottar*—revenue free land granted for religious purposes.
- Dola*—the Assamese litre; sedan or palanquin.
- Duars*—mountain passes.
- Ekasarana*—eka=one, sarana=initiation; the supreme surrender to one God.
- Ga-dhan*—bride-price.
- Gamocha*—an Assamese towel.
- Garamali*—a police constable of the Koch kingdom.
- Gathiyar*—a kind of fragranted root for anointing the hair, also used as medicine.
- Gayar*—the leader or member of a Vaishnava singing party.

Ghat—a landing place on the bank of a river.

Ghuri—a kind of lower garment.

Gomasta—an administrative officer under the Koches.

Gram-Sabha—village assembly.

Gosain—a spiritual guide; the head of a *Satra*. Initially only the Brahmin *Satradhikaras* were called *Gosains*, but subsequently all *Satradhikaras*, Brahmins or non-Brahmins, were called so.

Got-Karai—fried coarse rice.

Guru—preceptor.

Gurucarita—a biography of a Vaishnava saint.

Halisa or *Halsa*—a unit of land measurement equal to 1/4th of a *Pura*

Hat—a market place.

Hati—row of huts in a *Satra* where the devotees live.

Hengul—vermillion, cinnabar.

Jaigir—lands given by the Koch kings to the state officers as remunerations.

Jakai—a kind of bamboo appliance for catching fish.

Jaklar—tax levied on fisheries.

Jama—a kind of loose trousers.

Japi—a kind of circular sun-shade; a wicker-work.

Kaithali/Kayasthika—a kind of Assamese script used in western Assam in medieval times; book-keeping and accountancy.

Kar—tax.

Kandali—expert in debates specially in scriptural topics.

Karapat—gate way to a *Satra*, built in style of small houses.

Kamdhenu—a fabulous cow, said to have given anything asked for, belonging to sage Vashishtha.

Koshas—(see *bacharis*).

Kataki—an ambassador.

Khanikar—an artisan.

Kharani—a kind of alkali prepared from the ash of plantain plant, specially from the rhizoms.

Kherai-Puja—worship of the primordial male deity *Bathua-brai* and primordial female deity *Kamkhi* by the Bodo-Kacharis.

Kirtana—a devotional work by Sankaradeva; an act of chanting prayers.

Kowri—conch shell, used as medium of exchange, 1280 *kowris* being equal to one rupee.

Krishna-nach—a kind of dance depicting the deeds of Lord Krishna.

Kuthi/Kuchi—a small area consisting of two or three villages.

Maghuwa tali—Land for the cultivation of rabi crops.

Maha—unit of currency, 1/4 of a rupee.

Maha-purushiya—another name for Sankaradeva's sect.

Manikut—a room attached to a Vaishnava prayer house where the sacred scripture or the idol of the deity is installed.

Mantra—incantations.

Mechaghar—a house with bent roofs.

Medhi—a functionary appointed by the *Satradhikara* to look after the religious affairs of a village.

Muga—a kind of Assamese silk made of cocoon (*Antheroea Assamaea*).

Muri—husked rice inflated or blown by parching.

Mohar—a gold coin weighing a *tola* (10 grams); a seal.

Namghar—Vaishnava prayer hall.

Nama-Kirtana—community singing of devotional hymns to God.

Nara-Kapor—a special kind of fine cotton cloth.

Narayani—Koch coins.

Oja-Pali—a choral performance with dance and music where Puranic tales are recited.

Pag|Paguri—head-dress of a noble.

Paik—an adult male having had to render specific services to the state.

Pandit—a scholar; a teacher; one proficient in a field.

Pat—the silk of the mulberry fed silk worm.

Payasa—rice boiled with milk and sugar.

Phat-kar—a duty levied on traders.

Phandi—a person trained in catching elephants.

Pirpal—a revenue free land granted for the maintenance of a Muslim *Pir* or a mosque.

Piyada—a constable of the Koch kingdom.

Pon—a unit consisting of 80 numbers.

Pujari—a priest; a worshipper.

Prasad—sacred offerings.

Pura—a unit of land measurement, equal to 4 *Bighas*.

Raga—one of the six primary modes of music.

Raga-lakshanas—characteristics of the *ragas*.

- Raga-malitas*—a continuous descriptive poem relating to a *raga*.
- Rajkhowa*—an administrative officer of the Ahoms.
- Rajpat*—royal seat of throne.
- Raj-sabha*—royal court.
- Rishi*—a sage.
- Rupit tali*—lands for cultivating transplanted rice.
- Sabah*—a congregation of people for religious or semi-religious purposes.
- Sanci-pat*—a sheet prepared from the sanc-tree (*Aquilaria agallocha*) used for writing the manuscripts.
- Saksal*—a kind of instrument used to punish a criminal; wooden peg.
- Saranh*—an iron instrument used in punishing a criminal.
- Samkranti*—the passage of the sun to a new sign or position; the last day of a Hindu month.
- Sastra*—religious scriptures.
- Satra*—a monastery of the Vaishnava sect.
- Sairadhikara*—head of a *Satra*.
- Siddha*—one who attains superhuman power through acts of devotion.
- Sika*—pure, genuine.
- Silakuti*—an artisan who works on stone.
- Simhasana*—an ornamented seat supported on sculptured lions on which an idol is placed or a king sits; a throne.
- Sudra*—a non-Brahmin Hindu.
- Sutradharinriya*—the dance of the inaugurator called *Sutradhara* or *Sutradhari* of a Vaishnava drama.
- Svargadeo*—the title of the Ahom kings. *Svarga*=heaven, *deo*=god, an Assamese equivalent to the Tai-Ahom word *Chao-Pha* (meaning the god coming from heaven).
- Taka*—rupee.
- Tanga*—a kind of horse from Bhutan.
- Than*—a sacred place; a place of worship at the cremation ground of religious man.
- Thapana*—alter, a place set up for worship, a sacred scripture place by the Vaishnavas as an object of worship.
- Tola*—a school for Sanskrit learning kept by a Brahmin scholar.
- Tola*—a measurement of weight equal to 11.66 gm.

Ujir—judicial officer of the Koches.

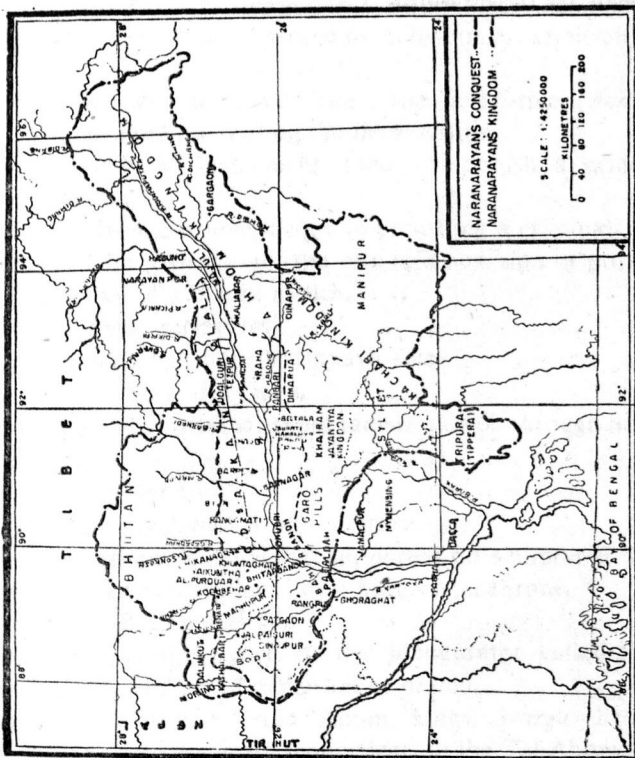
Vasma—race; family.

Vamsavali—a geneological table; a history of a royal or a noble family or a *Satra*.

Vidhi—rule of law based mainly on Hindu religious texts.

Yajna—a sacrifice; a ceremony in which oblations are offered.

Yuga—an age of the world.



CHAPTER I

The Koches: Their Racial Affinities and Original Homeland

The Koches are one of the aboriginal tribes of North-East India.¹ They assumed political power in the western Brahmaputra valley in the early 16th century, and for a time exercised their sovereignty over almost the major part of the North-East. They made a significant contribution towards the progress of civilization and culture of the Brahmaputra valley in particular, and of North-East India in general. Following the invasion of the Kamata kingdom which comprised the western Brahmaputra valley by Ala-ud-din Hussain Shah, the Sultan of Bengal (A.D. 1439-1510) in A.D. 1498, Bisw—later known as Biswa Singha, an adventurous Koch chief, organised the strength of his tribe. It was he who laid the foundation of his kingdom in about A.D. 1515 on the ruins of this kingdom of Kamata. His son and successor Naranarayan (A.D. 1540-1587) was not only the greatest of the Koch kings, but was also one of the illustrious rulers of North-East India of his time. His long reign of nearly half a century forms a landmark in the history of the Brahmaputra valley. With the help of his able brother Chilarai, who was also his general, he brought most of the neighbouring states under the Koch hegemony and by greatly patronising various cultural pursuits as well as the New-Vaishnavite movement, helped in the opening of a new chapter in the history of this part of the country. But the political hegemony which the Koches held over the region was short-

lived and the kingdom suffered a division in A.D. 1581 following the death of Chilarai in A.D. 1576. The western division was known as Koch Behar and the eastern division as Kamrup or Koch-Hajo. Despite this division and the political events of the subsequent period, Koch Behar continued its existence till its annexation to independent India, while, on the other hand, Koch-Hajo which preferred to play an inimical role against the great Mughals joining its hands with the Afghans, was annexed to Mughal India in A.D. 1612. However, it was occupied later by the Ahoms after the battle of Saraighat in A.D. 1669, and it continued to remain in their possession till the annexation of their kingdom by the British in A.D. 1826.

Racial Origin of the Koches

The origin of the Koches is still a subject of controversy. Although there is a general agreement to the fact that the Koches include the Meches, Kacharies, Bodos, Rajvamsis, Garos etc. there is still a difference of opinion about their racial origin. According to Risley, the Koches, unquestionably "non-Aryan and non-Hindu", were "a large Dravidian tribe of north-eastern and eastern Bengal among whom there are grounds for suspecting some admixture of Mongolian blood".² Oldham also describes them as "the most conspicuously Dravidian race in Bengal".³ Dalton has stated that the Koches were all very dark and displayed "the thick protuberant lips and maxillaries of the Negro", and therefore, he considered them as belonging to the Dravidian stock.⁴ To support his claim, he forwards the opinion of a medical officer, a resident of Koch Behar who describes the Koches of that country as having "face flat . . . eyes black and oblique; hair black and straight, in some curling; nose flat and short; cheek bones prominent; beard and whisker rather deficient; . . . colour of skin in most instances black. . . ."⁵

According to another group of scholars the Koches are definitely of Mongolian stock. For example, to Hodgson, the Koches belong to the "distinctly marked type of the Mongolian family".⁶ He is supported by Waddel who also says that they do not belong to the Dravidian stock, "but are distinctly Mongoloid".⁷ Buchanon and the *Dacca Blue Book* class them with the Bodos and the Dhimals.⁸ So did Endle, who had classed

the Rabhas, the Meches, Dhimals, Koches, Dimacas, Hojais, Lalungs, Garos, Hajongs and such other tribes within the fold of the great Bodo race.⁹ According to Gait, there is no doubt that the Koches of Assam belong to the Mongolian rather than to the Dravidian stock.¹⁰ Scholars like S.K. Chatterji and D.C. Sircar hold the same view.¹¹ Anthropologists of North-East India like B.M. Das also support the Mongolian origin of the Koches.¹²

While such divergence of views is there, certain contemporary sources supply us with important information regarding the ethnic identity of the Koches. Thus Minhas-ud-din Siraj, the author of the *Tabakat-i-Nasiri*, which contains an account of the first two expeditions of Muhammad-bin-Bakhtiyar Khalji to the kingdom of Kamrupa (ancient Assam) in the first part of the 13th century, noted that during that time this region (meaning present north and north-east Bengal and Western Assam which at that time formed a part of the kingdom of Kamrupa), were peopled by the Kunch (Koch), Mej/Meg (Mech) and the Tiharu (Tharu) tribes having Turk countenance.¹³ S.K. Chatterji in this connection rightly observes that their Mongoloid features and speech made a distinct impression upon the Turks who were also members of the same race.¹⁴ Again, Ralph Fitch who visited Koch Behar in A.D. 1585, notes: "the people have ears which be marvellous great of a span long which they draw out in length by devices when they be young".¹⁵ Gait further informs us that this practice is still common among the Garos who belong to the Mongolian group.¹⁶

In religious beliefs and rites as well as in social manners and customs similarities between the Koches and other Bodo tribes like the Rabhas were noticed by scholars like Buchanon, Martin and Risley.¹⁷ Buchanon even found that the language spoken of by the Koches resembled that of the Garos.¹⁸

Contemporary literary sources also contain references to the Koches and their Mongoloid characteristics. Thus the Padma Purana referring to the Koches as Kuvacakas states that they had no choice of food and spoke a barbaric tongue and betrayed no sophistication in their manner.¹⁹ The Yogini Tantra, which was composed in Assam itself in about the 16th century, refers to the Koches as Kuvacas and states that they were born of a Mech woman.²⁰ The Dharma Purana, compiled in Assam

in the 17th century under the patronage of the Ahom king Siva Singha (1714-1744 A.D.) also states that the Koches did violence to all kinds of creatures and used to take even beef.²¹

Thus there are strong grounds to conclude that the Koches are of Mongoloid origin having their homeland in the Himalayan region, most probably in Tibet wherefrom they poured into India following probably the courses of the Teesta and the Dharla. They settled first in north Bengal and then spread gradually towards the east as well as towards the south and west, where they mixed themselves up with the Dravidians. S.K. Chatterji, on geographical basis, has divided the Bodos of north-east India into two main branches: the eastern and the western, the latter, according to him, being an extension of the former.²² It is possible that coming from the north, the great Bodo race had divided themselves into two parts: one branch gradually advanced towards south and west, and the other advanced eastward through the valley of the Brahmaputra. According to S.K. Chatterji, the western branch included the Koches of Koch Behar, Kamata and Hajo; and the eastern branch, the Kacharies and the Chutiyas.²³ But Risley who ascribes them Dravidian origin states that they had probably "occupied the valley of the Ganges at the time of the Aryan advance into Bengal. Driven forward by the incursion into the swamps and forests of North and North-Eastern Bengal, the tribe was here and there brought into contact with the Mongoloid races of the Lower Himalayas and of the Assam border, and its type may have been affected to a varying degree by intermixture with these people",²⁴ which, however, is not tenable in the context of our foregoing discussions.

From the above analysis it appears that the Koches are of Mongoloid origin having close affinities with other bodo tribes like the Meches, Rabhas, Dhimals, Hajongs and Garos. But in course of time and in some limited areas, they inter-married with the Dravidians and gave birth to a mixed Mongolo-Dravidian race but having preponderant Mongoloid characters. In the middle of the 19th century Hodgson observed that their number could not be less than 8 lacs, possibly "even a million or a million and a quarter". In Assam proper, they numbered 377,808 according to the 1891 Census.²⁵

Designation of the Koches

The Koches are designated both as *Rajvamsis* and as *Bhanga Kshatriyas*. Gait observed that in "North Bengal and Goalpara" the term 'Koch' had been "falling into disrepute; and it has to a great extent, been abandoned in favour of the appellation Rajvansi".²⁷ He also points out that the designation 'Rajvamsi' originally referred to an entirely distinct community of Dravidian affinities.²⁸ According to him, the Koches, after their Hinduisation, appropriated the name of this Hinduised Dravidian community, who were most numerous in their neighbourhood.²⁹ That the Koches had adopted for them the designation Rajvamsi after their conversion to Hinduism,³⁰ and that too long after their leader Biswa Singha had established a strong political power to reckon with, can be largely supported. The adoption of the designation was, however, so complete that in the Census of 1881, not a single person was returned as Koch in Koch Behar, the cradle of the community itself.³¹ But it is interesting to note that neither in the Persian records, nor in the foreign accounts, nor in any of the dynastic epigraph of the time, the Koches are mentioned as Rajvamsis. Even the Darrang Raj Vamsavali, which is a genealogical account of the Koch royal family, and which was written in the last quarter of the 18th century, does not refer to this term. Instead, all these sources call them as Koches and/or Meches.³² It is, therefore, possible that the term Rajvamsi as applied to the Koches is of recent origin and therefore, the contention that this term was applied to them immediately after their Hinduisation in the time of their state-formation, as held by Gait, S.N. Bhattacharyya, and others is not well-founded. On the other hand, it is possible that when the Koches became conscious of their past ancestral glory at a later period, they began to call themselves as Rajvamsis—meaning "descendants of the royal kindred". This new appellation also made them feel somewhat superior to the rest of their kinsmen.

The Koches were, however, ascribed a fictitious Kshatriya origin as early as the days of Biswa Singha.³³ Soon after Biswa Singha had established himself as a sovereign ruler, the Brahmanas "sought him out. They discovered that his tribesmen were Kshatriyas who had thrown away their sacred threads

when fleeing before the wrath of Parasuram . . . while Biswu himself was declared to be the son not of the humble Hariya Mandal, but of the God Siva . . .”³⁴ Probably thenceforth the members of the ruling family introduced themselves as Kshatriyas. It, however, took long time to pass the concept of the Kshatriya origin from the ruling class to the common people. It is interesting to note that while in the Census of 1881, as Rajvamsis in Koch Behar, in the Census of 1891 the term Bhanga-Kshatriya first came to be applied to these people, and as pointed out by C.C. Sanyal, there was a great fall in the number of Rajvamsis in Jalpaiguri in that year.³⁵ It may, therefore, be safely concluded that the term Rajvamsi was only recently applied to the Koches. But their Kshatriya origin, as already stated, was evolved as early as the days of Biswa Singha, although it was only towards the close of the 19th century, that the Koches, in general, claimed as Kshatriyas or more properly Bhanga Kshatriyas, and by 1921 it was seen that almost all of them became recorded as Kshatriyas.³⁶ In the final report on the survey and settlement operation in Dinajpur in 1934 to 1940, it has been observed, “formerly they (Rajvamsis, Rajvamsi Kshatriyas that are found in large numbers in Rangpur, Jalpaiguri and Koch Behar), were known as Paliyas. Officially in the census they were listed as Rajvamsi Kshatriyas. There has always been some difficulty in distinguishing them from Koches”, but actually there is no distinction between the Koch, Rajvamsi and Paliyas, who “are really the three names of the same thing”.³⁷ Hinduisation as it had been in case of other sub-tribes of the Koches like those of Dhimals, Hajongs, Garos etc. are still in the process. It is interesting to note that the Garos after using the plough used to introduce themselves as Hajongs and the Hajongs after giving up the practice of taking certain “unclean animals and birds” came to be known as Koches. As observed by Risley:

The adhesion (of the Koches) to Hinduism is comparatively recent (which) is shown by their own customs as regards burial, food and marriage, as well as by the existence of Dhimal, who might be defined as a non-Hinduised Koch or Rajvamsi among them and beside them.³⁸

Even in the present-day North Bengal, the term Rajvamsi does not stand for a 'Caste-Hindu', but for a Hinduised tribe and "they are quite content at the same time, for the sake of political advantages, to be classed as a 'Scheduled Caste' among the lowly in Hindu society whose past disabilities are now sought to be atoned for by giving them some special privileges".³⁹ In Assam proper, however, the term 'Koch' implies the name of a caste (rather a Hinduised tribe) "into which all converts to Hinduism from different tribes, Kachari, Garo, Hajong, Lalung, Mikir etc. are admitted on conversion".⁴⁰

Origin of the term 'Koch'

A few words regarding the origin of the term 'Koch' is felt necessary here. It has already been stated that in the *Yogini Tantra* the Koches are termed as *Kuvaca*, and in the *Padma Purana* as *Kuvacaka* who are said to have taken dirty food, and spoken a barbarian tongue.⁴¹ It is possible that because of their difference particularly in food habits and speeches the Aryan scholars used to call them as such, or sometimes as *Mleccha*. K.L. Baruah opines that *Mleccha* might be a Sanskritised form of the term *Mech*.⁴² This view is also supported by Gait and S.K. Chatterji.⁴³ That the Koches and the Meches are the members of the same family, is clear from the point that while Biswa Singha's father has been represented as the chief of the twelve Mech families, his mother has been described as the daughter of a Koch chieftain.⁴⁴

According to S. K. Chatterji, "the word *Koc* (or rather *Kome*), comes from a Middle-Indo-Aryan source from *Kawomca* written *Kamoca* which can be properly Sanskritised as *Kamboja*".⁴⁵ He further states that the Kambojas of Bengal are apparently the ancestors of the Koch people of North-Bengal.⁴⁶ This view is also supported by scholars like D. C. Sircar.⁴⁷ Thus it is reasonable to hold that the appellation Koch is a corrupt form of the Sanskrit *Kamboja* to which we have a number of references as a group of people or as a country where these people dwelt.

Original Home of the Koches

According to Buchanon Hamilton the primitive Koches who

were called *Pani-Koch* lived amidst the woods, frequently changing their abode in order to cultivate land enriched by a fallow. He appears to hold that the Koches had their original home somewhere in the northern part of Bengal towards Dalimkot.⁴⁸ This view is supported by Hodgson.⁴⁹ But this theory is not wholly correct. On the other hand, a number of scholars like H.C. Raychaudhury⁵⁰ and R.C. Majumdar⁵¹ believe that the Koches came to Bengal from north-west India (NWFP) and hold them to be identical with the Kambojas, an ancient tribe of that region. N.N. Vasu also states that the Kambojas came originally from near the Gurjara country.⁵² But recognising the fact that a Kamboja race was there in the N.W.F. Province, we are rather not in a position to hold that the Kambojas belong to that race. The Tibetan work *Pag-Sam-Zon-Zang* refers to a country called *Kan-po-tsa* in the upper and eastern Lushai Hill tracts lying in between Burma and Bengal.⁵³ Accordingly, H.C. Ray has pointed out that, "there was a Gandhara and possibly also a Kamboja as well on the north-eastern frontier of India, near the regions now known as Yunnan and Szechwan, and it is not unlikely that these conquerors of Northern Bengal (meaning the Koches) may have come from that direction".⁵⁴ R.P. Chanda has taken Tibet to mean *Kambojadesa* and according to him the 'Kamboja' people have come to Bengal from Tibet.⁵⁵ This is also supported by R.C. Majumdar according to whom Kamboja was an Indian name for Tibet.⁵⁶ It is interesting to note that the Nepalese traditions apply the term *Kambojadesa* to Tibet.⁵⁷

A traditional story still prevalent among the Garos and Rabhas of Assam, also replete with references to Tibet or the eastern sub-Himalayan region as their ancestral home.⁵⁸

Again, from what has been written in the *Brihat-Samhita*, it may be presumed that Pragjotisha (ancient Assam), Lauhitya (the Brahmaputra) and *Cina* or Kamboja are contiguous regions.⁵⁹ It is to be noted that in India during both early and late mediaeval periods *Cina* meant Tibet and *Mahacina* indicated China. Some epigraphic sources testify to the fact that horses were imported to Bengal, and as such to Pragjyotishakamarupa from the Kamboja country.⁶⁰ The *Tabakat-i-Nasiri* points out that horses in large numbers imported to Assam and Bengal from Tibet.⁶¹ The *Riyaz-us-Salatin* also refers to Bhutan

and the neighbouring mountainous regions as suppliers of such horse.⁶² It is to be noted that there was a ruling race in Tibet called *Khampa* or *Kampa* or *Kamba*,⁶³ and that the Tibetan monasteries (Ucangue Country) were called as *Campas* or *Compas* etc. We may, therefore, conclude that the term 'Koch' (Sanskrit *Kamboja*, *Kuvaca* or *Kuvacaka*) had its origin in Tibet and that these groups of Indo-Mongoloid people were from that country.

Now comes the question of the date of the coming of the Kambojas or Koches to Bengal and Assam. Gait in the *Census Report of 1891* observes: "the first mention of the Koch of which I am aware is in 1198 A.D. when Bakhtiyar Khalji conquered Bengal and invaded Tibet".⁶⁴ As we have already mentioned, the historian of this invasion, Minhaj-ud-din Siraj, refers to the Koch, Mech and Tharu tribes of North Bengal of his time; and he has also recorded that one Ali Mech, a Mech chieftain, guided Bakhtiyar's army through Kamarupa.⁶⁵ Epigraphic sources also help us to ascertain the tentative date of the rise of the Kambojas to political power in this part of the country. The two C.P. inscriptions found in Irda⁶⁶ and Kalanda⁶⁷ villages of Orissa of the Kamboja king Nayapala who was the son of king Rajyapala and queen Bhagyadevi and younger brother of Narayanapala, by which the king donated lands in the Dandahuktimandala within the Vardhamanabhukti, are assigned on palaeographical grounds to the latter half of the 10th century A.D.⁶⁸ Another inscription⁶⁹ of king Kunjara-ghatavarsa,⁷⁰ the 'Kamboja lord of Gauda' (*Kambojanvayaja Gaudapati*), found in Bangarh (Dinajpur District, Bangladesh), is also palaeographically assigned to the same century.⁷¹ According to Prof. D.C. Sircar, these rulers belong to the same family (of the Kambojas),⁷² and occupied not only North Bengal (Gauda), but also the South-Western portion of the province including Vardhamanabhukti.

Besides the period indicated by the above inscriptions, there are other evidence to show that the Kamboja family rose to power in Bengal even as early as the Pratihara occupation of North Bengal under Mahendrapala (c. 885-908 A.D.) known from his own inscriptions.⁷³ This is proved by the Pachimbhag plate⁷⁴ of the fifth year (c. 930 A.D.) of king Sricandra (c. 925-

975 A.D.), according to which the army of Trailokyacandra (c. 905-925), father of Sricandra, occupied Devaparvata (at the southern end of the Mainamati hill near Comilla in present Bangladesh), the capital of Samatata had been attacked by the Kambojas just a little earlier. We have shown that the Kambojas were Tibetans; and it is to be noted that in the chronicles of Ladakh,⁷⁵ we find that the Tibetan king Khri-srong-Ide-btsan (755-97 A.D.) claims to have extended his political suzerainty over India, his son Mu-tig-btsan (804-15 A.D.) to have defeated Dharmapala, and the king Ral-pa-can (c. 817-836 A.D.) to have conquered India as far as the *Ganga-sagara* in the south. Prof. Sircar has suggested that these Tibetans were allies of Gurjara-Pratihara king Vatsaraja (c. 770-800 A.D.) and the latter's son Nagabhata II (800-33 A.D.) who dethroned Dharmapala's subordinate ally Cakrayudha from Kanauj and transferred his capital there.⁷⁶ He further points out that "If Pala kingdom was invaded jointly by the Gurjara-Pratiharas and the Tibetans, the Kambojas, may have began to settle in North Bengal about this time, and it was the same area which witnessed the rise of the Hinduised Kamboja, *Gaudapati* Kunjaraghatavarsa, shortly after the death of Mahipala I in the first quarter of the 10th Century A.D."⁷⁷ The Bhaturiya pillar inscription⁷⁸ witnesses that king Rajyapala's (of the Pala dynasty) command was obeyed among other powers, by the *Cinas* as well. Here the use of the term 'Cina', which as we have stated earlier, denotes Tibet, implies that it was during his rule that the Kamboja rulers became his subordinate. It is therefore conclusive that the Kamboja rule in North Bengal was shortlived. But the Irda, Bangarh and Kalanda C.P. inscriptions which refer to king Nayapala's gift of lands in Dandabhuktimandala within the Vardhamanabhukti, indicate that the Kamboja rulers extended power also to the south-western part of Bengal together with a part of the Balasore district of Orissa. According to Prof. D.C. Sircar, this had probably taken place during the reign of king Kunjaraghatavarsa who was a contemporary of the Pala king Rajyapala (c. 917-52 A.D.). The decline of the Bhaumakaras of Jaipur (Guhesvarapataka) had facilitated to the Kamboja occupation of the region. The two Baud plates⁷⁹ of queen

Prithvimahadevi of the Bhaumakaras which are dated in the year of 158 of the Bhaumakara era record grants of land in the Dandabhuktimandala region. This implies that the Kamboja occupation had taken place after this, *i.e.*, after 988 A.D.

The early Kamboja rulers were either Buddhist or Hindu by religion. Rajyapala, a *paramasangata*, was a Buddhist. But his son Narayanapala was a Vaishnava (*Vasudevapada-abja-pujanirata-manasa*). Nayapala and king Kunjaraghatavarsa both were Saiva, who built Siva temple in the capital city at Priyangu. This proves that Hinduisation to a limited extent, at least of the royal house alone, began as early as the 10th century A.D. The similarity of the names of the kings and queens of the Kamboja family (*e.g.*, Rajyapala, Narayanapala, Bhagyadevi etc.) with those of the Pala rulers of Bengal, as such, appears to prove that it was an imitation while on the way through the process of acculturation. It also indicates the subordinate position of those Kamboja rulers to the imperial Palas of Bengal in spite of their assumption of the high sounding titles of *Maharajadhiraja Paramesvara Paramabhataraka*.

From the above, it may be safely presumed that the Kambojas were but Koches who migrated to India from Tibet, settled first in the north and north-eastern Bengal and then extended towards western part of Assam. Gradually they occupied large areas as far as south and West Bengal where they came into contact with diverse racial elements including the Dravidians. For a brief period they even held political power in those regions and some of their rulers ruled with assumption of sovereign titles like *Paramesvara Paramabhataraka Maharajadhiraja*. But their power gradually dwindled. The invasion of the Colas under their great king Rajendracola brought about the collapse of the Kamboja rule in the south. In the north, the Pala king Rajyapala, as proved by the Bhaturiya pillar inscription, extirpated their rule from North Bengal before the middle of the 10th Century A.D. The political power now became extinguished, and the masses remained tribal until the beginning of the 16th century when they had a political and cultural renaissance under the leadership of one Biswa Singha in the Brahmaputra Valley.

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Sarva-bhakshya-rata mudha mleccha go-brahma ghatakah,
Kuvackah pare mleccha ete kutu-yonayah,
Tesam paisaciki bhasa, lokacaro ra vidyate.
cf. N. N. Vasu, *Social History of Kamarupa*, Calcutta, 1922, p. 71.
(These Mlecchas or barbarians are accustomed to eat everything; they are idiotic, and they kill cows and Brahmanas; these other Mleccha Kuvacakas have their birth place in the hills. Their language is of pisaca (demoniac) character, and they have no (good) social usage; KJKC, p. 113).
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Dakshinata Kachari Kuvaca buli yaka,
Go mamsa bhunji punu pranira himsaka.
(In the south reside the Kacharis and Kuvacas. They take beef and do violence to all kinds of creatures.)
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Epilogue

The Koches, also known as Kambojas in earlier epigraphic records and as *Kuvacas* or *Kuvacakas* in later medieval literary works, were a Mongoloid tribe. They inhabited Tibet and its adjoining regions before their coming down into the plains of Assam and north Bengal. By about 10th century A.D. or even earlier, the tribe still known as *Kambojas* became powerful enough to establish its hegemony in Bengal taking advantage of the declining strength of the Palas. For about half a century, the Kambojas ruled in Bengal, but their power soon declined and the Palas recovered their lost position.

In the beginning of the 16th century A.D. Bisu, the chief of eastern branch of the tribe, established himself over the Khuntaghat region in the western Brahmaputra valley. Gradually Bisu had extended his sway from the Karatoya in the west to the Barnadi in the east and declared himself king in about A.D. 1515. His kingdom was called Koch Behar meaning 'the residing place of the Koches'. He had his capital at Kantanagar or Kamatapur, which too later came to be known as Koch Behar.

The astute Brahmins who so long designated the Koches as *Mlecchas*, now came forward to accept them to the Hindu fold. They christened Bisu as Biswa Singha and ascribed him a Kshatriya origin. Biswa Singha well consolidated his conquest and laid the foundation of a strong kingdom which soon attracted the attention of the great Mughals. The secret of Biswa Singha's success was not merely the existing political confusion in the region but also his ability to organise the entire strength of his own tribe as well as of those inhabiting the region. The Bhuyans who had been playing an important

role in the political life of the period, failed to offer a united resistance against this tribal chief and had at last accepted his overlordship. They were, however, allowed to enjoy their autonomy.

The rise of the Koches had a great significance in the political history of medieval north eastern India. The Ahoms, a Tibeto-Burman tribe who had established themselves in the extreme south eastern part of the Brahmaputra valley in the early part of the 13th century, had in the meantime made themselves the master of the whole eastern Brahmaputra valley and were covetously looking towards the west—their only way of expansion. On the western border of the Koch kingdom the Afghans were ruling, who had even conquered the erstwhile kingdom of Kamata in A.D. 1498 under Ala-ud-din Hussain Shah and introduced their rule there, although for a short period. This success of Ala-ud-din inspired his successors to repeat their attacks in the Brahmaputra valley. The founder Koch king was therefore, to proceed with great tact and caution. "A born leader of men" Biswa Singha had "combined in himself great military talents with unrivalled genius for administrative organisation".¹ His reign lasting for a period of about a quarter of a century was marked by splendid success so that at his death he could leave a kingdom strong enough not only to stem the tide of foreign aggression but also to undertake aggressive military conquests.

During the reign of Biswa Singha's illustrious son and successor Naranarayan (1540-1587) who may be considered as the greatest king of medieval north-east India, the Koches rose to the climax of their political glory and cultural achievements. Naranarayan was fortunate enough to possess in his brother Chilarai a most efficient general, along with whom, he pursued a career of aggressive conquests and brought all the states of north-eastern India under Koch hegemony. Indeed it was Naranarayan, who after Bhaskaravarman of ancient Kamarupa, made an attempt to establish an empire in north-eastern India. The rising power of the Koches attracted the attention of the Sultan of Bengal who led an expedition to the Koch kingdom in A.D. 1568, which ended with the defeat and imprisonment of the Koch general. Although after sometime the latter managed his release, waning brilliance of the Koch

political glory could not be restored. In fact, they had long reached the saturating point of their military aggrandisement.

The news of Chilarai's defeat had already encouraged the subjugated states to shake off the Koch vassalage and assert independence. Things took such a turn with the conquest of Bengal by the Mughals under the great emperor Akbar that Naranarayan thought it wise to court the friendship of the former as well as of the Ahoms. The Mughal emperor too was in need of an ally to subdue the rebellious Afghans in Bengal. He, therefore, warmly responded to the Koch king's offer of friendship. But the Mughals could not remain content with the conquest of Bengal. They were looking for a trade route to south-east Asia through Bengal, Koch Behar and Assam, for realisation of which the conquest of the other two kingdoms was most essential. However, so long Naranarayan lived, there was no attempt made in that direction by the Mughals. Contemporary Persian sources, on the other hand, inform us that Naranarayan had allied with the Mughals in fighting the Afghans in Bengal.

The death of Naranarayan was followed by the disintegration of the Koch kingdom. Already in 1581 the kingdom had been partitioned between Naranarayan and Raghudev, son of Chilarai; the western part consisting of Koch Behar proper being retained by the former and the eastern part, called Kamrup or Koch Hajo being given over to the latter. It was, of course, not the partition as such, but jealousy and conflict between the two brother kingdoms, which as narrated, led to the loss of independence of the western division and annexation of the eastern one first to the Mughal empire (1612) and later to the Ahom kingdom (1669). Their conquest of Kamrup brought the Mughals into the direct clash with the Ahoms. The desire of the Mughals to conquer Assam and the strong determination of the Assamese to resist their advance to their kingdom with success to the latter in the long run forms a very interesting chapter of medieval Indian history, but outside the scope of our work.

The hundred years of Koch rule under study which saw the rise, climax and disintegration of the Koch power, was marked by important changes in the political, socio-economic and cultural life of this part of the country. In the political field,

the first two Koch rulers succeeded in bringing about a political integration at least in those areas which were under their direct administration. It had its impact in the autonomous territories also. The large militia with which Naranarayan and Chilarai carried on their extensive conquests were drawn not only from the areas under their direct administration but also from those under the autonomous rule of the Bhuyans, the tribal chiefs or the feudatory rulers. These soldiers in course of their fairly long period of military expeditions, obviously came into contact with the people of other parts of the region. This mobility and mutual contact, although for purely military purposes, had undoubtedly influenced the social relations of the heterogeneous tribes and communities of the region and thereby helped the process of political and cultural integrity. Besides, there had always been a threat of invasion from the western neighbour—the rulers of Bengal—which had intensified the need of political integration.

The Koch kings encouraged arts and crafts, agriculture and industries, constructed roads, rest houses, channels and bridges, built a number of *Satras*, minted coins and did such other welfare works. Ram Saraswati in his *Mahabharata* states that excluding the religious men, beggars, monks, and children etc. nine lacs of people daily engaged themselves in different works in the capital at Koch Behar.² This had a direct effect in the growth of trade and handicrafts which consequently led to the prosperity of the kingdom. Its growing trade and commerce attracted even European merchants like Ralf Fitch to its capital. Besides, the Koch rulers had built up an elaborate administrative machinery and also a ruling class consisting of the members of both the upper caste Hindus and the Hinduised tribes. The aristocracy, however, kept itself distinguished from the commoners.

In the social life, the period saw significant changes brought about mainly by the Neo-Vaishnavite movement which received direct patronage of the Koch rulers. Sankaradeva himself in the *Bhagavata Purana* states that the new creed built a society where “the Kiratas, the Kacharies, the Khasis, the Garos, the Miris, the Yavanas, the Kankas, the Goalas, and others”³ had become the members of one Vaishnava fraternity. In fact it was this movement which, as stated earlier, had

unified the diverse tribes and communities under a common Vaishnava fold and gave them a common *lingua-franca* in the form of Assamese, a common cultural pattern and thereby a common cultural identity. This socio-cultural integration was a supplement to the political integration and strengthened the bonds of unity among the people. The advocacy of the path of devotion as the way of salvation for all castes including the *Chandalas* or untouchables and the ideal of "universal social brotherhood" of the new religion greatly helped the creation of a harmonious atmosphere and bridged the distinction between the Brahmins and *Sudras*. Human and animal sacrifice or the esoteric rites associated with the worship of gods and goddesses suffered a setback but could not be rooted out. Although priesthood which was so long a monopoly of the Brahmins, now came to be practised by the *Sudras* as well, the Brahmins continued to claim a privileged position for themselves including their traditional right to preach and educate. On balance the position of woman deteriorated. She lost most of her rights and freedom enjoyed in a tribal society and came to be looked upon with disgrace if not with contempt.

Despite this, the Koch rule under study witnessed remarkable developments almost in every field of culture. There was an outburst of creative activity particularly in the fields of literature, music and dance which made the Koch rule highly significant in the history of north-eastern India. All the Koch rulers, beginning from Biswa Singha down to his descendants in Koch Behar, Kamrup and Darrang were patrons of arts and letters. Both Naranarayan and Chilarai had great respect for Vedic culture and Sanskrit learning. Naranarayan was particularly interested in the *Smriti Sastras* and appointed Sanskrit scholars like Purushottam Vidyavagish to compile or compose works on *Smriti*. There were also many other works, both religious and secular, written in that language under his direct patronage. Meanwhile was launched the Neo-Vaishnavite movement. Sankaradeva, like other Indian *Bhakti* preachers, propagated his teachings in the vernacular and composed his works mainly on that language. This led to the growth of a new branch of Assamese literature called Vaishnava literature. Naranarayan, who had sheltered Sankaradeva, worked hand in hand with the Vaishnava saint in getting not

only the Sanskrit religious texts translated into Assamese but other works as well. His noble objective is clear from his own words uttered before the scholars whom he had summoned for this purpose: "These translations will first be read by women and *Sudras* and after sometime by the Brahmins as well. It is only by this means that the scriptures can be protected from loss in this *Kali Yuga*."⁴ How he had assisted the scholars with all the necessities including money and the services of servants and slaves, has been described in an earlier chapter of this work. The translation of the original Sanskrit texts made their contents open to all people high or low. To quote Madhava-deva, "The river of the nectar of love which had shone forth formerly in the Vaikuntha had flooded the entire world, Sankaradeva having broken open the banks."⁵ Ananta Kandali, a contemporary of Sankaradeva, who had also adopted vernacular in preference to Sanskrit, said that the purpose of doing so was to make the women, *Sudras* and others learn the significance and rejoice by listening to the books.⁶

In the field of fine arts, the period witnessed remarkable developments. In fact, the growth and development of the Assamese drama dates back to this period. The performance of the *Rama-Vijaya* drama in the Koch capital under active patronage of Chilarai in the theatre hall he built for the purpose, is a significant development in the history of Assamese drama. The establishment of the *Satra* institution under Koch royal patronage gave a new impetus to all branches of fine arts and brought about a complete regeneration in the field. That master artist Sankaradeva so skilfully mingled Indian musical and dance traditions with the indigenous ones that an independent school which can rightly be called Kamrupi or Assamese school of music and dance, grew up. Indeed the Vaishnava *Bargits* and other prayer songs which are still very popular, formed a distinct branch of classical Indian music. A talented musician himself, Chilarai not only encouraged new compositions but himself wrote the commentary to the Assamese version of the *Gita Govinda* by Jayadeva. In a like way the *Sastriya* dance, greatly esteemed by artists all over the world in present days, has also owed its origin to Sankaradeva and the patronage of the Koch kings. There is even ground to believe that the world famous Manipuri dance which is reco-

gnised as one of the four schools of Indian classical dance, was but a 'by-product' of Assam's *Satriya* school of Dance.⁷

In the field of painting, the age of the Koches inaugurated a new era. Besides manuscript painting, the artists of the period used to paint walls and pillars of the *Namghars* and *Manikuts* of the *Satras*. The legacy thus started inspired the production of the vast mass of painting works in latter periods, most noted of them being the *Hasti-Vidyarnava* the *Darrang Raj Vamsavali* and the *Dharma Purana*. Painters were recruited from among the local people and provisions for training them in the vocation, was made specially in the *Satras*. In the field of painting also local materials were used and besides religious matters, social life formed another subject of painting. This was probably the reason why art of painting became much popular in the period under study. As pointed out by R. Das Gupta, "the art was never forgotten even when the *Ekasarana Nama Dharma* lost its sway at the Koch Court," and some families in the villages near Koch Behar still have in their possession numerous painted manuscripts most of which are a couple of centuries old.⁸

In the field of architecture and sculpture, the period however does not deserve much praise. Even though a number of architectural works still remain, these were mainly done on the ancient remains. The reason for this has been discussed in the preceding chapter. It may also be added that there was fear of destruction of temples by iconoclastic hands and therefore the rulers did not like to spend on costly architectural works and the artisans diverted their talents and times to other branches of fine arts. Even then a new style of architecture grew up in the *Satra* buildings and the artisans of our period produced finely decorated buildings, having a style of its own, with wood, bamboo, cane and ivory.

The period under study was one of transition, when a large number of tribes through Neo-Vaishnavism had been entering the fold of Hinduism and hence became acquainted with advance culture. There was also wide extension of the plough which led to the increase of agricultural production and promotion of agricultural pursuits. But the society being feudal, exploitation of the peasants and artisans by the ruling class was but natural. Surplus production meant an increase in the

rate of payment to the master, for fear of which the peasant usually cultivated only what was required to maintain his living.

It may also be noted that the *Satra* institutions in course of time, had built up a class of rich land-lords in the form of the *Satradhikaras*, who by virtue of their being spiritual heads, claimed also temporal power for themselves. This relation between the *Satra* and the state with significant results affecting the life of the people in a subsequent period of Assam history, still awaits an objective study. During the period under study, of course, neither Sankaradeva nor Naranarayan and Chilarai could anticipate that the *Satra* would one day become a state within a state and hence the most potential threat to the existence of monarchy. On the other hand, as already stated, the Koch kings took personal interest in the organisation of the *Satras*, and the harmonious relation between the Koch kings and the Vaishnava reformers lead to the production of a cultural legacy which still pervades in the vitals of the Assamese society.

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