

## CACHAR UNDER THE KOCHES

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### **Abstract**

The Koch rule in Cachar was the product of military adventurism. The Koch state experienced a series of segmentation. The Koch king Naranarayana extended his territorial expansion with the help of his able brother chilarai. But later on they failed to check their growth. They also failed to sustain their own structure. The Koch principality in Cachar emerged as a military colony in a conquered tract. But it soon lost its military character. They patronized the Brahmins and temples. The society was organized on hierarchical hereditary basis. Soon later, the Dimasas emerged stronger and gradually extended their boundary to the Koch territories in Cachar. In such a situation, the Koch Raja in Cachar was bound to look upon his Dimasa counterpart as a protecting power. The fact that the last Raja had no male successor and the two principalities merged in to one through a matrimonial alliance. It recognized the status of the Dimasa Raja as the ruler of Cachar (Khaspur).

**Keywords:** Koches, Koch rulers, Cachar, Dimasas, Tripura state

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## Introduction

The Koches emerged as the ruling race of the Cooch Behar state which was founded by Viswa Singha in the beginning of the 16<sup>th</sup> century by integrating a large number of chieftaincies in modern North Bengal and West Assam region, extending from Karotowa in the west to Barnadi in the east. The reign of Naranarayana (1540-1584) known for patronage to Brahmins, high castes, saints and scholars saw the state in the Zenith of its prestige. His brother Sukladhwaja (popularly known as Chilarai) led successful campaigns against the Ahom, Dimasa, Jayantia and other north-eastern states. It was during this campaign that Chilarai laid the foundation of a petty Koch principality in the Barak Valley region.

Sir Edward Gait in his studies on Cachar and Koches, viz, *A History of Assam, Report on the Progress of Historical Research in Assam, Koch Kings of Kamarupa*, makes no mention of a Koch principality in Cachar. Rajmohan Nath's *The Background of Assamese Culture* is also silent about it. The *Darang Raj Vamsavali*, which is the main source of our information about the north-eastern campaign of Chilarai. According to it, Chilarai, the brother and general of Naranaraya invaded Tripura and defeated its ruler. N.R. Roychoudhury, a historian of Tripura, assumes that, "This incident might have taken place after the death of Vijoy Manikya when Tripura was ruled by weak rulers" (N.R. Roychoudhury, 1977). The historians of Cachar (U.C. Guha, 1910, "a") and Cooch Behar (K.S.A. Ahmed, 1926) confidently narrate the story of Chilarai's war with the Raja of Tripura on the basis of local records and traditions. Although the *Vamsavali* mentions the invasion of Tripura and the peace made by the brother of the Raja agreeing to pay tribute, it does not say anything about the place where the battle took place. The local traditions suggest that the place where the battle took place came to be known as Longai which was the boundary between the Koch and the Tripuri territories (U.C. Guha, 1910, "b"). Longai is now the name of a place in Karimganj district in the Barak Valley of Assam and there is also a river of the same name. There are other sources to suggest that the whole of Cachar Valley in the 16<sup>th</sup> century formed part of the Tripura state (J.B. Bhattacharjee, 1977). In case the information about the demarcation of Longai as the Koch-Tripuri boundary is to be accepted, it is to be presumed that the Cachar Valley from the foot of Barail or North Cachar Hills to Longai came under the possession of the Koches (J.B. Bhattacharjee, 1991 "a") and the Raja of Tripura lost his control over the Barak Valley tract.

### The Koch principality

The Koch general Chilarai had left the newly conquered territory in Cachar Valley under a governor (kamalnarayana). Kamalnarayan's responsibility became limited to the administration of the Koch colony. He snapped all connections with the central authority and declared himself as an independent ruler of Koch principality in Cachar tract. Kamalnarayan was experienced as an administrator. He is more known for his works of art and public utility. He was highly religious and peace loving and always avoided the path of war (U.C. Guha, 1910, "c"). He had established a settlement of the Brahmins on the bank of the river Tikal and extended royal patronage to them. He also established two *kali* shrines in Cachar, viz. Kachakanti in Udharbond and *Shyama* in Thaligram which have survived the stress and strain of time and circumstances. But he failed to resist the onslaught of the neighbouring hill tribes and encroachments into his territory as a result of which the state was reduced in size (J.B. Bhattacharjee, 1991 "b").

On the basis of literary and numismatic evidences, we find that two Rajas ruled in succession to Kamalnarayan. The third one was an oppressive ruler. As a result, he incurred the displeasure of the influential people who conspired against him and put him to death (J.B. Bhattacharjee, 1991 "c"). Uditā, the Commander-in-Chief of the state, then became the Raja (J.B. Bhattacharjee, 1991 "d"). The *Gopichandrer Panchali* tells us that after Uditā his son Bijoy became the king and he was a powerful ruler. The last king of the line was Bhim Singha who had no son. His only daughter Kanchani was married to prince Laksmichandra of the Dimasa Raj family. As a result, the two states merged together and the Dimasa capital was shifted from Maibong to Khaspur (U.C. Guha, 1910, "d"). It is also presumed that the rulers of Khaspur since the time of Uditā had feudatory status under Heramba and Lakshmichandra might have no reason or means to contest the arrangement that quietly followed (J.B. Bhattacharjee, 1991 "e").

### Social and political structure

Practically, there is no real information about the social and political system of the Koch principality in Cachar. What is known is that the territory was first placed under army or military rule. Thereafter, a governor was appointed. This governor then declared independence and proclaimed himself as the Raja. The successors of Kamalnarayana ruled in hereditary line for two generations. Uditā, the *Senapati* came to power through a revolt and his successors also ruled for seven generations in hereditary line. When the last Raja had no male successor and his

only daughter was married to Lakshmichandra, it was the son-in-law and not the daughter, who became his successor and thus the state merged with Dimasa state to the ruling family of which the prince Lakshmichandra belonged to (J.B. Bhattacharjee, 1991 “f”).

In Cachar, the Koch rulers had very few people of their race to support them in functioning of the state. Kamalnarayana had divided the entire Koch Community in Cachar in eighteen groups to perform different functions of the state. The Brahmins and other high castes settled by the king added to the prestige of the state and on occasions, they could advise the king on social and political matters (J.B. Bhattacharjee, 1991 “g”).

Originally the Koches were Hinduised people before a colony of them had been planted in Cachar by Chilarai. Although of Tibeto-Burman tribal origin, their long stay in this region had caused a considerable socio-cultural change. The first batches of settlers in Cachar were soldiers and later on came civilians with Kamalnarayana. On getting settled to Cachar region permanently they found inter marriage and other social, as well as racial intercourses as inevitable. All these brought them nearer to the local people who were either pure Bengalis or others greatly Bengalized (S.S.Tunga, “a”). Social relations resulted in a good deal of cultural and linguistic assimilation. Originally *Saktas*, they became staunch vaishnavites of the *Gavdiya-Chaitanya* School. They gave up meat, egg, onion and garlic, and among the non-vegetable food items retained only fish. Like the Bengali Brahmins, they took to sacred thread as symbol of their *Kshatriya* status (S. S. Tunga, “b”). This presumably strengthened their position as the ruling race in the state.

### Conclusion

The Koch rule in Cachar was the product of military adventurism. The Koch state experiences a series of segmentation at the behest of the members of the ruling family. The infant state of Viswa Singha reached its youth under Naranarayana with the active support of his brother Chilarai. However, decline set in. The subdued state reasserted themselves and the Koch rulers failed to check their growth. They also failed to sustain their own structure.

The Koch principality in Cachar was unique and different from any other tribal state in the region. A civil character was given to this military colony. Cooch Behar ultimately lost interest in maintaining this petty province when its real purpose was lost and the colony since then had to depend on its own resources. But this conquered tract did not emerge from an

indigenous tribal base. The Brahmins and the Brahmanical Hinduism had also nothing to do in the process of polity formation as the Koches were already Hindus and the principality began as a military colony in a conquered tract.

The society was organized on hierarchical hereditary basis but before the Koch Rajas could consolidate their position, the Dimasas gradually extended their boundary and ultimately Cachar (Khaspur) became a feudatory status in relation to Maibong. The fact that the last Raja had no male successor, and the two principalities merged into one through a matrimonial alliance, formalized the Dimasa Raja as the ruler of Khaspur.

### References

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