

Chapter — III

THE COOCH BEHAR STATE IN THE NORTH EASTERN PERSPECTIVE

The northeastern region has remained a unique geographical unit distinctively distinguished from the rest part of Indian State. The history, culture, society, economy and politics of the region have a kind of its own with a non-Aryan and non-Dravidian roots¹. History of the autochthonous people of the northeast suggests clearly that the people of the region do have a definite Austro-Mongoloid tribal origin. Indeed, the panoramic morphology of the north eastern tribes presents a kind of museum accommodating such a kind of unique civilisation operating in diversified socio-cultural milieu in the north east gave birth to a variety of little nationalities fundamentally different from the so called dominant nationality or tradition of Indian state structure. Thus, ever since India's independence the process of integration has been baffled by the ethnic autonomy considerations². A brief background study is not out of place here.

To adumbrate, the Cooch Behar State qualified to be a northeastern variety, experienced with the process of state formation synonymous to other small states of the North eastern

plains. There had been the co-existence and interaction of tribal organisations, chiefdoms, archaic state and larger state system of the precolonial period. Admittedly, the principality of Cooch Behar designated as secondary premodern principality overlain by Colonial rule. Importantly, a very special dimension of such a principality is the domination and emergence of a typical ethnic tribal group sanskritised, Hinduised in the greater process of assimilation and integration. Thus the Cooch Behar principality can not be comparable in a true sense with the definable external models like Rajput-Kshatriya, Taishen or Tibetan. The Cooch Behar State operated in a situation co-related to an ecological base or hill plain contrasts. However, Cooch Behar State is nearer to Ahom- Tai model rather than the Kshatriya Rajput or Tibetan Bhutia models of stimulus diffusion³. Cooch Behar State represents more or less the ~~synonymous experiences~~ of Ahom political system capable of presenting co-relation between the degree of surplus generated through appropriate technological innovations in agriculture and the level of functional differentiation, stratification and centralisation of a polity.

The concentration and expansion of political power depended on the power of the king to extract surplus and exploit the technological productive power of the subjects, the kings were expected to partially redistribute the wealth through the organisation hierarchically situated on a dominance - dependent

continuum. In the hierarchy higher levels of politics were evolved by conglomeration of lineage or clan based units of one or more ethnic groups and by conquest of segmentary tribes by larger principalities or states. In the levels of the polity co-ordination of lineage or clan segments at the level of kingship or chieftancy and also among the lower strata are significant structural blocks. Prof. Surajit Sinha has rightfully presented two models of stimulus diffusion out of which one is essentially the northeastern variety of social and political formations. According to him 'While the social and political formations in north eastern India have been developed on tribe-caste peasant contrast and co-related ecology of hill plains contrast, the principalities or states of the Indian heart land operating in a situation of tribe-caste/peasant continuum correlated to an ecological base of hill-plateau-plains continuity'.

The period from 13th to 16th Centuries saw the emergence and development of a large number of tribal political formations in northeast India. The Chutiya, the Coch, the Dimasa, the Tripuri, the Nuithi, the Khasi – all these tribes crystallised into rudimentary state formations by the end of 15th century. The most developed of them all, the Coches went on elaborating and sophisticating its formations. With these processes were associated also the progressive adoption of wet rice cultivation, the introduction of plough, the subjugation of neighbouring people, the employment of

scribes, a greater or lesser degree of Hinduisation of the ruling families and petty commodity production to a limited extent. Such an experience of civilized polity formation from its immediate root of tribal formation has been unique for the northeastern principalities which can not be comparable with the principalities of northern and eastern India as well as of southern India. Owing to the primary reason that the process of state formation started too late in north east in comparison with Indian main lands.

The Cooch Behar State had thus been 'a product of society at a certain stage of development' in the wake of 'the admission that this society has become entangled in an insoluble contradiction with in itself'⁵. Later it continued to undergo further sophistication, and it increasingly admitted non-Coches not only into the position of spiritual guides and preceptors, but also into the middle strata of the bureaucratic hierarchy. Such a fusion was not absolutely unique but had been taken place under such compulsions of circumstances as demographic influx, increased division of labour, demonstration effects of neighboring States, Hinduisation and above all, the need for allies to moderate the conflicting relations and established social equations for that purpose between the Rulers and the Ruled.

Despite being a territory of the present state of West Bengal, the geography, history and society of Cooch Behar can not be properly understood by any standard unless Cooch Behar is viewed

from the north-eastern perspective. While the district of Cooch Behar is a present a part of West Bengal. Cooch Behar was historically linked and culturally connected with the western plains of northeast. In fact the ingredients of natural and social environment of the northeast have shaped the ecology, the lives and society of the people of Cooch Behar. Indeed, Cooch Behar is both historically and culturally linked with the principal northeastern state of Assam⁶. Such a linkage of Cooch Behar with the northeast can well be substantiated by the homogeneities in the symbols of identity. Such an identity provided for the nucleation of cultural zone in which a community concept seemed to have played a considerable role. Such a nucleation of cultural zone has come out of linguistic distinctiveness and that position of Cooch Behar gave support to justify the analysis of viewing the problems and issues of merger of the Cooch Behar State with the Indian Union.

The British had a definite strategic interest in intervening into the north east frontier⁷. In fact Assam was fully annexed by the ~~British~~ British. As a part of extended territory of Assam to the West, the Cooch Behar State had been brought under the control of British authorities⁸. However, as a sequel of British administrative policy true tribal society, the state of Cooch Behar was left free to be administered by indigenous kings or tribal chieftains.

Post independent India's northeastern policy was chaotic⁹ characterised by misinformation about the territory. While the

inexperience of the national political leadership to understand the problems of north east has provided a room for understanding the society, economy and polity as well as history of the north east in an over simplified manner, the northeast including Cooch Behar, **Sikkim and Darjeeling still remains ambiguous**¹⁰. The main **Stream State building force in this region was almost absent and the nation building forces could not have its sway in the northeast**¹¹. Thus the so-called Indian nationalism as a concept had been 'constructed' and had never been 'given' issue. The process of state formation in the northeast has been fundamentally different from the process of **state formation as experienced by the Indian northern heart land**. This is simply because of the civilisational differences between northern India and the northeast India. The religion-ridden society of northern India witnessed a kind of nexus between the religious power elite and the secular power elite. The Brahmanic dominant tradition did have a definite role in the process of state formation in **north India**. The northeastern India, on the other experienced **variegated trends and events in the process of state formation**. The Ahom - Tai model, the Cultural intrinsic model. The Jayantia models are some of the references which help understanding the variegated nature of the process of state formation. In fact the development of the civil society of the northeast has been based

upon two important conceptions like Dharmaraja and Devaraja. A blend of these two concepts provides room to understand the basis of the relationship between the ruler and the ruled. The simplicities of the tribal society and the tribal perceptions on egalitarianism ■ scarcely found in northern India provided a kind of definite historiography to understand the process of state formation. The northeastern state formation process has been culturally different and ethnically distinctive.

Whatever social tensions threatened the political ignanimity in the region have originated partially from the British policy of northeast. The open competitive electoral politics was first introduced by the Britishers in the northeast historical frame. Such a historical study would unravel the issues and events basically concerned with the integration of a population not only to a nationalist frame decaptivised from the feudal economy, but also to a political system of soft democratic nature in which the entire northeast including Cooch Behar was never a serious partner during prolonged phase of colonial rule. In fact the anti colonial political project engineered and mastered by India's nationalist elites could not touch upon the heart of the people of Cooch Behar due to the reason that anti colonial political moves of any kind were banned by the administration of the princely State Cooch Behar¹².

Thus a brief historical note of the north east is an urgency to have a real understanding of the perceptions of the people of Cooch Behar and the ruler on the issue of integration of the state of Cooch Behar with the Indian Union. A brief survey of historical antiquity of the Cooch Behar State may be in order.

Modern Assam and a part of Bengal forming the old Kamrup were formerly ruled by many tribes¹³. The Danavas, the Kiratas, the Ashuras, the Burmans, the Chutiyas and the palas have overrun either the whole or a part of Kamrup from time to time. The later comes the Ahoms, the Khens and Coches, although brought amongst themselves were practically mixed up through matrimonial and other alliances. The Ahoms occupied the Eastern Zone. The Coches became masters of the Western Zone of Kamrup and ultimately centered round Cooch Behar and Baikunthapur¹⁴.

Information has been scarce and sketchy to indicate the rise of Cooch Behar State as one of the tiny North Eastern polities since the eve of sixteenth century. References of Mlechha king (undignified) in the legends and historical records also point to the existence of some kind of political organisation among the aboriginal people¹⁵. A few local chiefs assumed the royal suffix Pala to their name when this part of north east India was brought under the control of Pala king Gauda. One such feudal Chief was Dharma Pala, relics of whose fortified place had been visited by Francis Buchanan Hamilton. Legends of Mainamati and Gopichandra were

associated with Dharmapala. Mention should be made of another locality chief, king Prithu whose place of residence Prithurajas Gada, had also been described by Buchanan Hamilton. The Assamese historical sources mentioned the existence of local chiefs as Bhuinya Raja from tenth century onwards in the part of Kamrup now with in the Goalpara and Kamrup districts of Assam¹⁶.

Information relating to northeast history have been sketchy and spreaded over a span of a millenium and found in legendary and quasi-historical process. These have been the pointers to the historical fact that this part of the Indian realm of ancient kingdoms of Kamta Cooch Behar Kamrup were controlled by the local tribal chiefs drawn principally from land owing peasantry. The rise of such politics suggested a socio-economic base of stratified village societies and production and appropriation of surplus depended on the mode of production and quantum of surplus were the degree of stratification of peasant society and level of political organisation.

The geographical area within which the earliest political developments took place can easily be demarcated from the evidences of historical remains place names and areas where legends originated. A sketch of land from the north western corner of the macro region to the tip of lateritic clay of Barind in the south comprising Western part of the piedmont plain of the northern Bengal contained all these remains and antiquities. This tract lies between the broad plains of the Karatoya-Trisrota-Jaldhaka river system.

All these early polities accepted the suzerainty either of the Varman kings of Kamrupa or the central rulers of Gauda. Their allegiance was nominal than real and they exercised control and wielded power like independent rulers in their localities. No sovereign ruler emerged in this area so long these two centrally powerful States held overlordship over them. With the decline of the powerful Pala and Sena rulers of Bengal, a void was created for the time being till it was filled in by the rising Muslim power in Bengal¹⁷.

External influence of the State of Gauda Paundravardhan helped in an indirect manner, the political development of the region under study. Locality chiefs acquired political power by virtue of their relations with the imperial power of these neighbouring states. Each of such chiefdoms or localised political units expanded continuously through colonisation of adjacent territories by the Hinduised peasantry and by bringing the non Hinduised autochthons of the newly annexed territories within the dominant socio cultural fold. One of such polities evolved a supra local political organisation and form among the Chiefs would emerge as eminent one who would be recognised by the rest as the supra local political authority. In such a loosely structured political system characterised by absence of strong military power and bureaucratic organisation against the complementary power of the chiefs, the supra local authority maintained this patrimonial powers by means of ritual sovereignty. The ritual means by which the

supra local authority maintained his sovereign power consisted of deputyship of the sanskritised form of the most influential autochthonous deity, introduction of Brahmanical canons and rituals and establishment of temple institution. By these means popular cults of the autochthonous was elevated to exclusive state cult monopolised by the supra local power.

The Koch tribe under the general Hajo defeated the Khens and ruled the Western portion of Kamrup from 1510 - 1587 A.D. According to some authors Koches had been in Assam since 1205 A.D. It is said that they belonged to great Bodo tribe who came to north eastern Assam through Pathoi range along the Noa-Dihang river. The Kingdom of hajo included western half of Assam, eastern half of Morung (Nepal Terai) and the lands bounded on the east by Dhanewari river, on the west by Konki river, on the north by Dalimkotta hills (formerly in Bhutan now in the district of Darjeeling West Bengal) and on the south upto Ghoraghat (now in Bangladesh). This altogether formed the boundary of Hajo's Kingdom at that time.¹⁸

Thus, genealogically all these tribal groups have had definitely a Austro-Mongoloid origin, which had never been, at least for few centuries experienced with Aryan or mixed Aryan-Dravidian interactions. Ultimately, however, there had been interaction between these civilizations and a kind of cultural diffusion was taken place.

In his search to identify the existence of politics in the north-east since time immemorial, E. Gait sincerely put, "The only Kamta dynasty of which we have any connected account is that of Khyan or Khen kings, whose last representative Nilamvara was overthrown by Hussain Shah in 1498" ¹⁹.

The history of Kamata or Kamrupa before the rule of the Khen dynasty is based not on historical evidences but on the ancient scriptures. The territory known as Pragjyotisha is mentioned in the Ramayana, Mahabharata, Vishnupurana, Harivamsa, Yoginitantra, ~~Kalkipurana~~ etc. The earliest name associated with this territory in Naraka, the son of Vishnu on Mother Earth, who was ordained the king of Prajyotisha by Lord Vishnu in his Krishna incarnation and his son Bhagadatta was made the King, who fought on the side of the Kauravas in the Kurukshetra war. The subsequent rulers of Kamarupa have claimed descent from Bhagadatta. According to tradition, he discovered the skeleton of the arm of Bhagadatta which was carried by a kite from the Kurukshetra battle field and lay buried under a simul tree. Chakradhvaja ensharined the amulet to the arm in the temple of Kamatesvari.

After Bhagadatta comes the name of Bhaskravarman in the middle of seventh as the king of Kamarupa and the name of Dharmapala, the last of the Pala line of kings of Kamarupsa, 12th century A.D. died without an heir and there was anarchy for some time during which the country was overrun by the Koch, Mech,

Garo and Bhot tribes. Niladhvaja somehow acquired power and proclaimed himself king with Kamatapur as his capital, Niladhvaja was succeeded by his son Chakradhvaja, was succeeded by Nilamvara who was the last of this line of kings. In the war with Hussain Shah of Gouda, Nilamvara was taken as prisoner and Kamatapur was captured in A.D.1498. But the Muslim army could not keep Kamatapur Kingdom for long, within seven years, the son of Hussain Shah who was in charge lost the whole territory.

After the expulsion of the Muslim army, the Kamata Kingdom was engulfed in anarchy and split up into petty principalities under small chiefs. This state of affairs continued for a few years and then the Koches under Biswasingha made themselves masters of the country.²⁰

The era of the present Cooch Behar State starts from Chandan in the year 1510 AD, when he was proclaimed king at Chikna. Chandan ruled for thirteen years and after his death his cousin brother Bishu named afterwards Biswasingha became king of Cooch Behar. Biswasingha was a man of unusual enterprise and courage. He defeated the neighbouring chiefs and extended his kingdom from the Brahmaputra in the east to Ghoraghat in the west and firmly established his kingdom making Cooch Behar his capital²¹. In fact, Biswasingha was the first Cooch ruler who embraced Hinduism and Hinduism had a strong hold in Cooch

Behar from the early period. The narrative discourse of the history of Cooch Behar presents the facts that Biswasingha was succeeded by his son Naranarayan, who extended his kingdom in the eastern direction and defeated among others, the chiefs of Dimapur, Jaintia, Khairam, Chachar and Tippera and also the Ahom Raja²². The triumph of Naranarayan was put to a halt when Isha Khan, the Muhammadan Chief of Bhuiya of Sonar Gaon who took prisoner Naranarayan's brother Shukladhwaj, defeated him. The rule of Biswasingha dynasty in Cooch Behar ended on the 12th September 1949 AD under the Cooch Behar Merger Agreement between the Governor General of India and His Highness the Maharaja of Cooch Behar. Thus Cooch Behar was brought to the so-called Indian mainstream, which must arouse cynicism, scorn and even fury. Despite the presence of such a psychological state, the State of Cooch Behar had ultimately been merged with India and became a district of the State of West Bengal. This was possible because of political administrative linkages were established since 1773 and the continuous intervention of the dominant cultural tradition and a kind of assimilation. As a result of assimilation, the process of sanskritisation did play a vital role. The dominant Aryan bent of national thinking could accommodate the Dravidian reality and tried to inject the Indian ethos in the minds of the people who

had been under the process of sanskritisation. However, this ethos could not appreciate the Indo-Mongoloid factor in it. Consequently, the northeastern part remained unattended²³. The western part of Brahmaputra and Barak Valley covering the princely State Cooch Behar had undergone a both subjective and objective metamorphosis accommodating and assimilating the so-called Indian ethos super-imposed on them, but the process could not touch upon the Mongolian psyche and cultural tradition distinctively different from the so-called national mainstream, built upon primarily on Aryan and Dravido-Aryan civilisational mix. Even within the region a considerable number of people had not been able to digest the so-called Indian ethos, constituted of a process of accommodation between Aryan bent and Dravidian devoid of Indo-Mongoloid civilisation, remained foreign to them.

Evidently, the mindset and the culture-set of the people of Cooch Behar during the time of India's independence and the integration of the country had been something different both from the culture-set and mindset of the people of India unshackled from the clutches of colonial rule. The reasons are obvious, both historically and administratively Cooch Behar was not an integral part of British Indian mainland. Even during the days of India's national freedom struggle Cooch Behar did have little relationship

with the nationalist mainstream. Neither the Maharaja's administration of Cooch Behar did have interest in India's freedom struggle nor the nationalist leaders had that much of interest to inject nationalist ethos in the minds of the people of Cooch Behar. As a result, barring certain occasional incidents and efforts made by a progressive section of people, Cooch Behar State did not experience with so-called nationalist movement²⁴. Both the Maharajas of Cooch Behar, administrators and local natives viewed the new Indian Government with fear and suspicion. The associates of Cooch Behar Maharaja's administration had a feeling that if the State of Cooch Behar was merged, with the coming of outsiders into their native state they would get slowly alienated both from power and lands. Moreover, a long standing recognition of the tiny State Cooch Behar as a Princely State by the British Government had provided a room for political insulation of the Maharaja's administration with the newly independent India's national state craft. The people of Cooch Behar sans a few educated elites could not be able to identify themselves with the people living in the districts of West Bengal, adjacent to Cooch Behar State. Because, the former did never experience with the liberal democratic political process in Cooch Behar. British policies towards Princely States have played a major role in giving Maharaha's administration a definite separate identity. Because of the prevailing uneven and

under development and less advancement in transport and communication, no greater interaction both social and cultural to remove the distance between the two mindsets was possible. Such a **kind of distinctive historical and culture-set** had provided the ground in ferreting out the paradoxes during the period of bargains to integrate Cooch Behar with India. ✓

A detailed study on the history of the merger of the Cooch Behar State in the forthcoming chapter would unveil the fact that the typical geographical, historical, culturo-political ambience of a tiny State Cooch Behar had shown a kind of apathy of the **Maharaja, the administrators of his court** as well as a section of the native people. In addition to it the common people of Cooch Behar had a degree of possible resistance to the whole issue of merger. The objective reasons behind this apathy may be many, which would be elaborated in the following chapter, but the principal reason may be a kind of compulsion, which has well been argued as a north-eastern compulsion. While viewing the arguments and the counter arguments on the issue of the merger of the Cooch Behar State with the Indian Union, almost all the scholastic writings have either objectively avoided or unknowingly neglected this fundamental perspective of analysing the merger history of Cooch Behar from the northeastern framework. Before putting the history of merger of Cooch Behar State with the Indian Union a detailed analysis may be drawn on the British policy towards Princely States with special reference to Cooch Behar to focus on the **distinctiveness of Cooch Behar as an independent and subjugated Princely territory.**

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