

Introduction

Studies on pre-colonial Indian states although considerably enriched the theoretical framework of sociopolitical development of the Indian civilization, Northeast Indian tribal state formations and the process of transition from tribalism to state are still virgin area of historical inquiry. Rise of few tribal chiefdoms in the 13th century Northeast India and their transition to state-system by the 16th century thus deserve a careful and critical historical investigation to understand the process of historical development in the region. Certain tribes such as--Koch, Ahom, Meitei, Jayantia, Kachari, Tripura and Chutia had established their states in the 16th century by materializing some identical long-term dynamics of sociopolitical transformation. Here, an intensive study has been undertaken about a small but viable state emerged in the early 16th century under the leadership of the Koch tribe in the Tista-Brahmaputra valley i.e. North Bengal and Lower Assam. The beginning and development of the Koch kingdom in various stages have some identical points with the history of some other states of India or elsewhere but fact remains that there are certain peculiar and exceptional issues which provoke academic investigation in order to conceptualize the process of state formation of the region as a whole. The relevance of this study, in fact lies in such a background.

A careful and critical study of the historical sources on the Koch kingdom shows that prior to their emergence as ruling power, Koch and Mech tribes had their tribal societal format, controlled by a pastoral and non-plough (*jhuming*) agrarian economy in the hills and foothills of present Western Assam and Sub-Himalayan Bengal. They had their long political experience as 'ruled' under the states flourished in the Tista-Brahmaputra valley. But decline of the Kamata state by the end of the 15th century had transformed the Tista-Brahmaputra valley into a sphere of incessant inter-tribal feuds and conflicts among the decentralized political units. In such a political background, the village-confederacy of the Koch and Mech tribes began to transform to chiefdom under the leadership of Haria Mech (*Mandal*)¹. The chiefdom eventually transformed to a kingdom due to the successful leadership of Visu (son of Haria Mandal) in the

aggressive warfare and territorial formation .The transitional process reached to its climax in the mid-16th century when Nara Narayan (1540-87 A.D.) had successfully materialized other pre-requisites of state formations. Although the kingdom was divided in 1581 for internal conflict but it survived as an independent state till 1772 A.D. with continuous modification of state-structure. Since the 1773 A.D. to the independence of India (1947 AD) it enjoyed the 'Native State' status and finally merged with independent India in 1949.²

There were few causative factors that stimulated the emergence of the Koch state, its economic viability, formation of its structure, centralization of power and its legitimating aspect. 'Warfare' was the primary causative of territorial formation and the transformation of the tribal chiefdom to a state. Plundering of booty through aggressive warfare had encouraged the tribes for further warfare and formation of militia. Their aggressive warfare, however, was replaced by defensive warfare since the early 17th century.

Regularization of the income of the state was another aspect of their state formation that had been materialized by the Koches by two steps. First step was the collection of land revenue from the peasantized agricultural economy of the plains of the Tista-Brahmaputra valley by recruiting revenue collecting agencies and officials. Second step was the peasantization of the tribals for further surplus generation to be appropriated by the state. The non-plough tribal agricultural operations particularly 'shifting agriculture' (*jhum*) began to be replaced by the plough and wet rice cultivation and the tribals were brought closer to the non-tribal subjects in the domain of political relations.

Question of managerial functions of the state led to the development of elaborate bureaucracy in the state with new offices. Power centrality was the basic trend in such offices. The kingship became hereditary with a divine connection. The post of military generals, civil administrators including certain other subsidiary offices were entrusted to the fellow tribal village chiefs and kin of the ruler. Their post gradually become hereditary and the ruling power were basically concentrated to the founder tribes.

Concentration of political power into a small segment of the tribes both in internal (vertical) and external (horizontal) domains had been legitimized by its ultimate adoption of exogenous (non-tribal) cultural ideologies. Being *hinduized* (like

contemporary other Northeast Indian states) the Koch kings assumed high-sounding Hindu titles and attempted to diffuse the new ideologies which eventually enforced the detribalization of the tribals. At the same time, redistribution of concentrated surplus through the building of universally beneficial institutions had fulfilled the internal legitimization aspect of the tribal state. Military expeditions, organized defence and matrimonial relations had materialized external legitimacy of the kingdom.

So emergence of the Koch state 'from the autonomous tribal villages' in the early 16th century and its maintenance of sovereign status till 1772 A.D. went through two broad stages of sociopolitical developments viz. - 'from clan village to chiefdom' and 'from chiefdom to kingdom'. The dynamics of sociopolitical changes were guided by the 'economic controlling of culture'. Power centrality led to the growth of state-structure that was legitimized by the 'adopted culture'. In spite of theoretical nearness with the origins of early states, tangential similarities with the Northeast Indian tribal states and structural resemblance with traditional concept of ancient and pre-colonial Indian states; emergence of the Koch kingdom was the result of historical development. Territorial segmentation of the kingdom and the presence of feudal characters, however, did not transform it into a segmentary state nor to a feudal state system. It is the basic objective of present study to locate the process of emergence of the kingdom with basic requirements of a state. Moreover, cultural change in the Tista-Brahmaputra valley and its correlation with the state formation process of the Koches are still virgin area of historical inquiry. All these aspects suggest a background of the present work.

For the purpose of this work, archeological evidences including inscriptions, temples, archeological remains and explorations in North Bengal and Northeast India; coins of the Koch kings (*Narayani Tanka*) and literary sources have been utilized. The literatures produced under the patronage of the Koch and Ahom kings such as *charitas*,³ *vamsavalis* (genealogies)⁴, *buranjis* (chronicles), translations of the classical literatures and scholarly works of contemporary social reformers have been carefully consulted as primary sources. There are few Persian works containing ample information about the Kamata-Koch and Ahom state. Scholarly English translations of these works⁵ have been utilized with great care. Foreign traveler's accounts⁶ and early colonial reports and survey on Cooch Behar, Assam and Bhutan⁷ have left some

impression about the socioeconomic format of the Tista-Brahmaputra valley which are complementary sources of information. Diplomatic letters exchanged among the Northeast Indian states, between the East India Company and Cooch Behar State and Bhutan and the East India Company⁸ have fattened the amount of literary sources. Additional data about the tribalism, tribal culture including mode of production of the tribals of the present study have been collected through the field works carried out in tribal villages of North Bengal, Assam and Meghalaya. Myths of origin of the kingship of the Kamata-Koches and building of temples have also been collected through the fieldwork.

On the basis of source materials mentioned above and the approach of the research work stated there in, the whole work has been presented within the following chapters. The introduction of the dissertation is intends to present an overview of the whole work under consideration. Formation of early and secondary states in theoretical perspective has been analysed in the chapter I. Basic features of state formation in ancient and medieval India and in the Northeast India also have been highlighted in this chapter.

Careful studies and examination of the sources of history of the Koches, Meches and other tribes of the region have raised several questions. Whether the Koch and Mech tribes had a tribal economy or way of life prior to their emergence as a state? This question along with the societal format, geographical location of the present study and identity of the Koches has been discussed in the chapter II.

The early history and origin and growth of the state system in the Tista-Brahmaputra valley prior to the rise of the Koch power are the main theme of the chapter III. Rise and fall of the Kamata kingdom under the Khenas in the 15th century A.D., post-Khena situation in the Tista-Brahmaputra valley and beginning of political formation of the Koches have also been constructed in the chapter III.

Transitions of the Koch chiefdom to a kingdom, territorial formation and consolidation of the state have been analyzed in the chapter IV. Division of the kingdom, internal conflicts, loss of conquered territories to the neighbouring aggressive powers, continuity of the core area as an independent state till 1772 A.D. and role of warfare also have been highlighted in this chapter.

Economic viability of the Koch state and its correlations with the surplus generation and its concentration, technological acculturation of the tribes, process of peasantization and role of *Narayani Tanka* are major queries made in the chapter V.

Institutionalization of leadership, centralization of political power and development of administrative structure have been analyzed in the chapter VI. This chapter also highlighted the process of bureaucratization and evolutions of the administrative machinery of the Koch state.

Correlation between the political legitimacy and process of cultural change is the basic theme conceptualized in the chapter VII. Role of the state in detribalization of the tribal society, adoption and diffusion of exogenous culture and their symbiotic relations with the state formation process have been analyzed in this chapter. Marriage relations of the Koch kings (ruling section) have been analyzed with a new view of external legitimacy of sociopolitical power.

Last chapter is the observation on the process of Koch state formation in the form of conclusion derived from the analysis of the previous chapters.

Notes and References

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4. *Darrang Raj Vamsavali*, *Rajopakhyān*, Ratikantā Dvija: *Kharga Narayanar Vamsavali*, Ms.; Ripunjay Das: *Raja Vamsavali*, Ms. (N.B.S.L, Ms. no.4); and so on.
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