

An Historical Outline of the Princely State Cooch Behar

Situated in the north-eastern part of West Bengal, and surrounded by Bhutan, Assam, Bangladesh and Jalpaiguri district of West Bengal, the Cooch Behar district of West Bengal has its own identity itself. Until the year 1949 Cooch Behar was an Indian Princely State ruled by the Maharaja of Cooch Behar who had been a feudatory prince under the British Government. Maharaja Jagaddipendra Narayan of Cooch Behar ceded his territory to the Dominion Government of India in 1949 and on the first day of January, 1950, Cooch Behar was transferred and merged with the province of West Bengal.¹ Since then Cooch Behar is being administered as a district of West Bengal.

The documented history of this region provides us the fact that this tract once formed part of the ancient and independent Rajya (state) named Pragjyotishpur which was formed composing of geography of present day Assam and a part of early Bengal. Different Regional tribal groups such as Danaba, Kirat, and Asur ruled either whole or part of this region.² With the passage of time Pragjyotishpur became known as Kamrupa. At a later stage Ahom, Khen, Koch and such other tribal groups dominated the region at different points of time. These tribal groups used to fight with each other to keep their political hold and had come to a relationship under dominant-dominated continuum.³ They had to experience with different kind of socio-political interactions and had to come across different stages of inter-relations such as conquest, super-imposition, assimilation and amalgamation.

It is known from the sources that Kamrupa was under the domination of the Pala kings for several years. But whether these Palas were the same as the Pala kings of Bengal is controversial.⁴ The founder of the line seems to have been Dharmapala, whose city was in Dimla in Rangpur.⁵ He governed a large country, extending as far as Tezpur in modern Assam. His brother was Manikchandra on whose death Dharmapala overthrew his son, Gopichandra. But a battle ensued between Dharmapala and Gopichandra's army in which the former disappeared never to come

back again.⁶ Gopichandra and Bhabachandra were the next rulers respectably. Bhabachandra is said to have been overthrown by the first ruler of the Khen dynasty.⁷

It is not known how the rule of the Pala kings of Kamrupa came to an end. It is probable that the last of the Pala kings having died without an heir, the part of Kamrupa, west of Brahmaputra remained in a state of anarchy for some time, and was overrun by several tribes of Koch, Mech, Garo, Kachari and Hoar.⁸ This period of disturbance and disintegration of power was most favourable for the rise of the Khen tribe.⁹ They acquired the power and Nilwadhwaaja became the king. He built his capital at Kamatapur on the west bank of Dharala about 14 miles southwest of modern Cooch Behar. He was succeeded by his son Chakradhwaja who was also succeeded by his son, Nilambara who was the third and the last king of this line. But he was a most successful ruler as he included the greater part of Goalpara, and Kamrupa, the whole of Rangpur and Cooch Behar and portions of Jalpaiguri and Dinajpur under his dominions. He tried his best to improve communication system by making roads and established temples in different parts of his kingdom.¹⁰

King Nilambar met with a tragic end at the hands of Sultan Hussain Shah, the Afghan ruler of Gaur in 1498. The Khen dynasty came to an end after the great defeat of Nilambara.¹¹ Later the Assamese expelled the Mussalmans and a sort of anarchy prevailed in the country. The kingdom of Kamrupa was then broken up into numerous principalities under local rulers called *Bhuiyas* and was frequently being attacked by tribal chieftains from the north-east region of India.¹² In the meantime the Koch chiefs gradually raised into power.¹³ The political metamorphosis of conquest, superimposition, and assimilation ultimately led to the formation of Koch kingdom or the Cooch Behar State in the 16th century. The Ahoms occupied the eastern zone of Kamrup and the Koches became masters of the western zone of Kamrup and ultimately centred round Cooch Behar and Baikunthapur.¹⁴ The Koch tribe under their leader general Hajo defeated the Khens and ruled the Western portion of Kamrup from 1510 and the successors of the Koch rajas ruled this tiny State till its merger with India in 1949.¹⁵

The name Cooch Behar is of comparatively recent origin. The territory of modern Cooch Behar originally formed part of the ancient kingdom of Kamrupa and had no separate existence of its own as distinct principality prior to the division of the country into two parts between king Naranarayan and his brother Shukladhwaja, in the

middle of the 16th century.¹⁶ The name Cooch Bihar appears to have been first used in relation to this country in *Shah Jahan Nama* about the middle of the 17th century.¹⁷

In his *Statistical Account of Koch Behar*, W.W.Hunter attempted to derive the name from the Sanskrit "*Vihara*" meaning recreation, especially applied to a Buddhist monastery.¹⁸ Considering the fact that the name Cooch Behar is of recent origin, connection with any Buddhist monastery seems unlikely. In the absence of any concrete evidence of the existence of a Buddhist monastery, the main word Behar must be etymologically derived as a place or abode or sport. Cooch Behar thus is an abode of the Koch tribe.¹⁹ It came to be called Cooch Behar after the Koch kings had come to the power in the beginning of the 16th century, long after all Buddhist influence had died out in Bengal.²⁰ The name Cooch Behar is a compound of two words: Cooch and Behar. The term 'Cooch' is a corrupted form of Cooch or Koch, being the name of a race of people, inhabiting a large tract of country to the north-east of Bengal, and Behar or more properly *Vihara* denotes abode or sport. 'Cooch Behar' means the abode or the land of the Koches.²¹ The Cooch Behar Royal Gazetteer of 1896 first used the name Cooch Behar instead of Koch Bihar.²²

A divine parentage is ascribed to the Koch kings. The tradition is that the God Siva fell in love with Hira, the daughter of a Koch chief named Hajo and the result of their intimacy gave birth of two sons named Bisu or Biswa Singh and Sishu or Sisya Singh.²³ Hira and her sister Jira both were also got married with a Mech people named Hariya Mandal. Jira was also blessed with two sons-Chandan and Madan.²⁴ Accounts differ as to who became the first king of the Koch line in Cooch Behar. According to the contemporary account it is known that Chandan, son of Jira founded the kingdom in 1510 and his cousin brother, Biswa Singh, succeeded him.²⁵ But according to Khan Chaudhury Amanatulla Ahmed, the author of the *History of Cooch Behar* (in Bengali) the first king of Cooch Behar was Biswa Singha. But the contemporary source also varies regarding the date of accession of Biswa Singha. Harendra Nayan Chaudhury gives the date of accession of Biswa Singha as A.D. 1522 which appears more probable. E.A.Gait in his *History of Assam* depicts A.D 1515-1540 as the duration of Biswa Singha's reign. The most of the contemporary sources agreed with the fact that Chandan founded the Koch kingdom in 1510 and Biswa Singha succeeded him in the year 1522 A.D.

1.1. Cooch Behar State under the Independent Koch Rulers

Biswa Singh proved himself to be a mighty conqueror and brought under his rule the whole tract from the Karatoya on the west to the Baranadi on the east. Under his strong hand the government began to be systematically administered.²⁶ His brother Sisvu Singha became his chief minister. At the coronation of the king Biswa Singha, Sisva Singha held the Royal umbrella over his head and assumed the title of *Raikat*, which means the head of the family and the hereditary chief minister.²⁷ Biswa Sinha appointed twelve ministers from the 12 chief families of the Meches.²⁸ He also introduced a regular state organization. He also marched to the subjugation of Gaur. He succeeded in reducing the country round Gaur, but failed to conquer the capital. But he snatched away the Western portion of modern Jalpaiguri District from the king of Gaur.²⁹ Though he was a mighty warrior and successful conqueror he was very much religious at the same time. After a reign of 31 years he meditated upon relinquishing the world. He spent his last days of life to close meditation and prayer.³⁰

After the death of Raja Biswa Singha his eldest son Nara Singha sacrificed the throne in favour of his younger brother Naranarayan ascended the throne in the year 1555A.D.³¹ Coins were struck in his name both in gold and silver and came to be called after new king Narayani coins. Soon after his accession to the throne the Mahamedans of Gaur attacked the Koch kingdom. But the large army of the king defeated the governor of Gaur and the country as far as the Ganges was conquered.³² Naranarayan led his victorious army into Assam and not only conquered that country but also reduced the neighbouring countries of Kachar, Manipur, Jaintia, Tipperah, Dimuria and Sylhet into submission. The kings were made feudatories who paid the conqueror a yearly tribute. Thus in his time Cooch Behar was an extensive kingdom comprising almost the whole of Northern Bengal, Bhutan and Assam as well as the modern state of Kachar, Jaintia, Manipur and Tipperah and extended up to the coast of the Bay of Bengal.³³

During his tenure the country was divided into two portions and he had given the portion of the kingdom east of the Sankos River to his brother Sukladhvaja or Chila Rai who thenceforth became the ruler of Assam or Eastern Kamrup.³⁴ Thus Maharaja Naranarayan was the last of the Koch kings who ruled over the vast territories comprised by the old kingdom of Kamrupa. His descendants held the sway over the western part of Kamrup for the next two centuries.³⁵

This event of partition of the kingdom led to the downfall of the Koch kings. Nar Narayan died in 1584 and his son, Lakshmi Narayan, who succeeded him, having quarrelled with the descendant of Chila Rai, appealed for the aid of the Mughals and declared himself a vassal of the emperor of Delhi.³⁶ Laxmi Narayan reigned for 35 years and died in 1621 A.D. His successors were not strong enough to keep the country under their strongholds. The Ahoms gradually absorbed the eastern kingdom, while the western part was captured of its outlying possessions by the Mughals on the south and west and by the Bhutias on the north, until at last only the modern state of Cooch Behar remained in the precarious possession of Biswa Singh's descendants. He was succeeded by his son Biranarayan.³⁷

Maharaja Biranarayan's tenure was marked by further loss of power and lands. During the reign of Biranarayan, Bhutan broke her allegiance and stopped the payment of tribute and the *Raikat* ceased to be a tributary and did not hold the umbrella over the king's head at the time of coronation.³⁸ He removed his capital to Atharakotha, near modern Cooch Behar. He established schools in different parts of his country and did much to promote knowledge and learning. His 5 years reign had hardly any significance and he died in 1626 after appointing his son Pranarayan as his successor.³⁹

The 40 years rule of Prannarayan was marked by humiliation and defeats. During his reign, in 1638, Islam Khan the governor of Chittagong invaded the territories of Cooch Behar. But it was not confirmed whether he penetrated in to the State or not. Mirjumla, the Governor of Bengal also entered into the country in the year 1661 and took possession of the capital.⁴⁰ Pranarayan had to take refuge in the forest. Mir Jumla appointed a governor, ordered the destruction of all Hindu temples, and gave instructions to erect mosques in their place. No other damage was done to the town, and plundering was not allowed. Mirjumla had settled the revenues of Cooch Behar at 10 lakhs of Narayani rupees and left an army to look after the administration of the State before he marched to Assam. During the absence of Mirjumla, Pranarayan gathered momentum and with the help of the people of Cooch Behar returned to his capital and suppressed the Mughals. Thus the attempt of Mirjumla to conquer the State had gone in vain.⁴¹

The King Prannarayan re-established himself in his capital. He was a learned and accomplished man and a great Sanskrit scholar. He was also an expert in singing and dancing, and wrote a treatise on those subjects. He left many works on various subjects, but these have unfortunately been destroyed by fire. He also encouraged religion, and built the temples of Jalpeswar, Baneswar, and Kamateswari, he also repaired the temple of the goddess Gosanimari, the famous presiding goddess of old Kamatapur. The Maharaja made a liberal endowment for the maintenance of the shrine. After a reign of 39 years Prannarayan died in 1665.⁴²

On the death of Maharaja Prannarayan the internal rivalry started for the acquisition of the power of the State. Internal affairs also fell into deplorable confusion. In accordance with the course of the Hindu political system three families, all scions of the royal stock, the *Nazir Deo*, the *Diwan Deo*, and the *Raikat* of Baikuntpur each claimed a hereditary position, which was inconsistent with unity of administration, and did not hesitate to call in the foreign foe to support their pretensions. The Maharaja Madannarayan, after a disturbed reign of 15 years, was died practically heart-broken, and without issue.⁴³

The *Raikats* now placed Basudevvarayan, the third and only surviving son of Maharaja Prannarayan, on the throne. Two years after another attempt was made on the part of the sons of Mahinarayan, the *Nazir*, with the assistance of the Bhutias, to attack the capital. A battle ensued, in which the king's troops were routed. The king fled to the palace and was beheaded. Maharaja Prannarayan's great-grandson, an infant of the name of Mahendranarayan, was now made king by the *Raikats* in 1682.⁴⁴ After some years both the *Raikats* died and the young king was left practically helpless. After a reign of 11 years the king died in 1693 at the age of 16. After his death Rupnarayan, *Nazir's* nephew, became the Maharaja of Cooch Behar.⁴⁵

During his time the Mughals renewed their attack on Cooch Behar territory and their suzerainty over the *Chaklas* of Boda, Patgram and Purvabhag was accepted. Maharaja Rupnarayan removed his capital to Guria Hati on the eastern bank of the Torsa. He was noted for his profound religious knowledge. After a reign of 21 years he died and succeeded by his son Upendranarayan.⁴⁶

Systematic expansion of Bhutanese power in the plains began when Cooch Behar State lost its rich territories of Boda, Patagram and Purbabhag to the Mughals

in 1711. Maharaja Upendranarayan was not powerful enough to oppose them. Nar Singha, the king's brother is said to have taken refuge in Bhutan due to his expulsion from Cooch Behar and in the middle of the 18th century the Bhutanese became the real king maker.⁴⁷ After the death of Maharaja Upendra Narayan, the Chief Minister of the State carried on the government for some time. The Bhutanese became so powerful during this period that they had started keeping resident at the capital with a force of Bhutan's soldiers. The Bhutanese resident practically ruled the State.⁴⁸ Gradually they started interfering in the court intrigues. Upendranarayan was succeeded by his son Devendranarayan who was assassinated in 1765.

During this period the *Subas* of Bengal lost their authority and the *Dewani* of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa was conferred on the East India Company by Shah Alam, Mughal Emperor of Delhi. The revenue of the Cooch Behar *Chaklas* was henceforth paid to the Company.⁴⁹

After the assassination of Maharaja Devendranarayan, the boy king, *Nazir* Rudranarayan attempted to place his brother's son on the throne, but this was objected by the Dewan Deo Ramnarayan. After a while Ramnarayan's third brother, Dhairjendranarayan, was elected as king. Shortly after, in 1769, the *Nazir* died, and his brother's son, Khagendranarayan, was appointed to the *Nazirship*. But the leading man of the State was the *Dewan*. His power was enormous, being supported by the Bhutanese representatives. The officers around the king, being jealous of the *Dewan's* power, conspired against him, and he was treacherously murdered. The king's younger brother was then made *Dewan*.⁵⁰

The Dev Raja of Bhutan was furious at the murder of the Dewan Deo, and caused the king and the new Dewan to be carried off as prisoners to a hill fort, the Dewan however was escaped. The Bhutias in 1770 placed the king's brother Rajendranarayan on the throne. His nominal reign lasted for two years and he died in 1772. On hearing the king's death Nazir Deo Khagendranarayan hastened to the capital and elected Dharendranarayan, the son of captive king, and he was installed king⁵¹. The Deo Raja of Bhutan objected to this and sent an army against Cooch Behar. The Nazir Deo, however removed the young Maharaja and his mother and the royal family to Balarampur, and prepared to oppose the Bhutias. A battle ensued, in which the Nazir Deo was defeated and driven out of the country. The Bhutias occupied the whole of the country, with the exception of Rahimgunge, and built forts

in various parts. Even the palace of the town was occupied by a large section of the Bhutia soldiers.⁵²

In this emergency, the king's party headed by Nazir Deo appealed to the East India Company for help which was promised on certain conditions. It was under these circumstances that the attention of the East India Company was first attracted to Cooch Behar and its affairs.⁵³

This led to the conclusion of the treaty, on the 5th April 1773, between East India Company and Cooch Behar State. This treaty was signed, sealed, and concluded by the Honourable the President and Council at Fort William, on the one part, and by Dharendra Narayan, son of Dhairyendra Narayan, Raja of Cooch Behar, on the other part. Maharaja Dhairyendra Narayan was freed by British force. The following conditions are mutually agreed on:⁵⁴

1st.- That the said Raja will immediately pay into the hands of the Collector of Rangpur Rs. 50,000 to defray the expenses of the force sent to assist him.

2nd. That if more than Rs. 50,000 are expended the Raja make it good to the Honourable the English East India Company, but in case any part of it remains unexpended that it be delivered back.

3rd. That the Raja will acknowledge subjection to the will of the English East India Company upon his country being cleared of his enemies, and will allow the Cooch Behar country to be annexed to the Province of Bengal.

4th. That the Raja further agrees to make over to the English East India Company the one half of the annual revenues of Cooch Behar for ever.

5th. That the other moiety shall remain to the Raja and his heirs for ever, provided he is firm in his allegiance to the Honourable United East India Company

6th. That in order to ascertain the value of the Cooch Behar country, the Raja will deliver a 'hustabud' (revenue statement) of his district into the hands of such person as the Honourable the President and Council of Calcutta shall think proper to depute for that purpose, upon which valuation the annual Malguzari (assessment) which the Raja is to pay, shall be established.

7th That the amount of Malguzari settled by such person as the Honourable East India Company shall depute shall be perpetual.

8th-That the Honourable East India Company shall always assist the Raja with a force when he has occasion for it, for the defence of the country, the Raja bearing the expense.

9th-That this treaty shall remain in force for the space of two years, or till such time as advices may be received from the Court of Directors empowering the President and Council to ratify the same for ever.

As a result of signing of this treaty the Bhutanese aim of political predominance in Cooch Behar State had been successfully checked. Maharaja Dhairyendra Narayan and his brother, the Dewan Deo, were freed from the hands of the Bhutanese. The Bhutias were not only driven beyond the frontier, but followed

into their own territory, and three of their forts were captured.⁵⁵ At the same time this treaty opened the doors of the State for the colonial penetration.

From the above discussion a question may be raised why did East India Company interfere into the affairs of a small north-eastern State like Cooch Behar? The answer to this question can be given from different angles. Firstly, it was guided by political interest of the British. It is evident from the subsequent report of Walter Hamilton (1820) that, "the peace and security of the adjacent British territories were more to be considered than any pecuniary advantage to be derived from the new acquisition, as prior to this period the Rangpur District had been much exposed to incursions from Bhutan".⁵⁶ The protection of the northern flank of the company's expanding empire in Bengal was their main concern.⁵⁷ Secondly, they had their economic motive too. The Company's commerce in the Himalayan region was so long carried on through Nepal, but during this time the political atmosphere of Nepal badly hampered the commercial interests of the British East India Company.⁵⁸ The Company as a result was eager to open trade route to Tibet through Bhutan, Assam and Cooch Behar and Warren Hastings's policy in this regard was to bypass the Gurkhas of Nepal.⁵⁹ But the relation between the East India Company and Bhutan was not even established and cordial. Naturally, the annexation of Cooch Behar by Bhutan would prevent their commercial interest in this region. To obtain free access for trade routes it was essentially important on the part of the East India Company to clear the trade routes and the war with Bhutan was necessary.⁶⁰ Thirdly, the strategic position of Cooch Behar was very much important for the British. Placed as it was geographically, Cooch Behar was constantly involved in the expansionist schemes and political intrigues of Bhutan, Sikkim and Assam, which in their turn were involved with Nepal and Tibet. So it was important for the British to have a foot-hold in this troubled and strategically important area.⁶¹ Moreover, the Company was very much irritated by the activities of the Sannyasis in the neighbouring areas of Cooch Behar State. The problem to tackle the Sannyasis became the concern of the British authority.⁶²

According to the Anglo-Cooch Behar Treaty of 1773, it is also noteworthy that the half of the revenue to be paid to the English Government is clearly marked out as a tribute and not as a tax. The collector of Rangpur collected this tribute agreed to be paid to the British Government by this treaty.⁶³ Unto 1780 the tribute was

realized by committing the total collections of the state to *Tehsildars* appointed by the British Govt, and from the total collections the *Tehsildars* deducted the half share of the British Government and paid over the other half to the State. Thus collection was made twice from each *Jotedar*, once by the East India Company's *Tehsildars* for half the amount and second time by the revenue collections of the Maharaja for the remaining half.⁶⁴

1.2. Cooch Behar State under the Feudatory Chiefs

Cooch Behar became a feudatory State to the East India Company by the virtue of the treaty of 1773 and Maharaja Dharendranarayan was the first ruler who acknowledged his loyalty to the Company.⁶⁵ But after his untimely death again his father Dhairyendranarayan became the second feudatory chief. But he could not live for a long time. Harendranarayan, the second son of Dhairyendranarayan was 3 years and 9 months old when his father was died. After his death the State was internally divided into two parties-one headed by Maharani and other was headed by *Nazir Deo*, Khagendranarayan. By the support of the Company's officials the *Nazir Deo* became very much influential in the State and had sent the supporters of the Maharani into prison. He also kept the Maharani and infant Harendranarayan into confinement and declared himself the king. But at last with the help of the Collector of Rangpur Maharani recovered her power and seized all lands belonged to the *Nazir Deo* and had driven out him from the State.⁶⁶

Taking account of this disturbed situation Lord Cornwallis appointed a Commission under the supervision of Messrs Lawrence Mercer and John Lewis Chauvet to report on the real motive of both the parties and on various matters connected with the administration of the State. The Commissioners recommended "full sovereignty in favour of the Raja, granting small concessions to the *Nazir Deo* and the *Dewan Deo* and the appointment of a Commissioner or Resident."⁶⁷ With the appointment of the Commissioners the interference of the Company in the matters of the State expanded. Commissioner Douglas introduced reforms in administrative system of the State. He also introduced the *Izaradari* System for the collection of the revenue of the State and abolished the duties on *ganjes* and hats.⁶⁸

Maharaja Harendranarayan did not like this type of interference of the Company. In the year 1801 when he ascended to the throne the Commissioner was withdrawn and he took the charge of the administration in his hands fully.⁶⁹ But afterwards several attempts were made again and again by the British Government to re-establish the post of Resident Commissioner at Cooch Behar, but the Raja objected. From 1805 to 1813 the Collectors of Rangpur were ex-officio Residents of Cooch Behar and carried on their duties connected with the State at Rangpur. But this arrangement led to the intrigue and trouble. At last the Government determined on exercising a thorough and efficient supervision of the State. The post of Resident Commissioner was renewed in 1813. But during his long reign of 56 years he always tried to resist the introduction of the East India Company's regulations in the Cooch Behar State.⁷⁰

A "Governor-General's Agent" was appointed on the North-Eastern Frontier in 1822, and the representation of Cooch Behar was henceforth vested in that officer. He only supervised important affairs and did not interfere in social or petty matters connected with the State. In 1834 Captain Jenkins was appointed as the Agent to the Governor-General in Cooch Behar State.⁷¹ The reign of Maharaja Harendranarayan marked a period of transition from the old to the new system of the government and formed a critical epoch in the history of the State. During this period the policy of the Government was finally decided upon, and it was through the tact, patient and ability of the Maharaja that the State did not sink into an ordinary Zamindari. But during his time the Bhutias constantly made raids into Cooch Behar territory. A boundary was laid down by order of the Government in 1851.⁷²

On his death his eldest son, Sibendranarayan became the Maharaja of the State in 1839 and ruled till 1847. Improvement and modifications in administration was viewed during his reign. The extravagances of the late Maharaja had left the State in a very embarrassed condition, but the new Maharaja, by great care and attention, in the course of a few years brought the finances of the State into order. His attention was chiefly devoted to the internal administration of the State, and several boundary disputes were settled. His administrative farsightedness was more superior to those of any of his predecessors.⁷³

After his death his adopted son Narendranarayan became the Maharaja. From the time of Narendranarayan the colonial interference in every sphere of state affairs

started. When he became the Raja he was only 5 or 6 years old. He was placed under the tutorship of Mr. Moore.⁷⁴ Though the *Dewan* and his party was against the English education of the Maharaja but the Government had taken the step to give the western education to Narendra Narayan to fulfil the dying wish of the late raja of Cooch Behar in regard to the education of his son. He was sent to Krishnagar to finish his College education.⁷⁵ During his reign the trouble with Bhutan flared up again and there was a series of disputes. This problem was handled by the British Government but failed to bring any permanent solution. Disputes with Rangpur also had taken place during his time. The disputes arose as the *rayots* of Cooch Behar and Rangpur were trespassing on each other's land. To solve the problem a topographical survey of the State was made under Mr. Pemberton, Revenue Surveyor in 1859. His map was the first regular map of the country. At last the problem was patched up⁷⁶

He was a benevolent king. He introduced some reforms in the administration. He had taken initiatives to bring English Education in the State by establishing Jenkins School in Cooch Behar town. During his time the initiatives for expansion of communication was taken by the Government. The most important thing is that the management of the territory of Cooch Behar was placed under the jurisdiction of Government of Bengal from his period.⁷⁷

Narendra Narayan died a pre-mature death at the age of 22 in the year 1863 after a short reign of 4 years only. His legitimate son Nripendra Narayan succeeded him.⁷⁸ He was a minor at that time and East India Company appointed Colonel Haughton to be the Commissioner of Cooch Behar State. Haughton was vested by the Government with the full authority of the ruler of the State. But soon he was put in charge of the Second Bhutan war, a Deputy Commissioner was appointed to assist him in the matter of administration of Cooch Behar.⁷⁹ The Maharaja received a wholly European training and education, and has at various times visited England. In 1878 he married the eldest daughter of the great religious reformer Keshab Chandra Sen, and in 1883 he assumed charge of the administration of the State.⁸⁰ But he did not bring any change in the administrative structure of the State. A Council of State was established in 1883 with the king and three other members. The Maharaja is entitled to a salute of 13 guns. Maharaja Nripendra Narayan never tried to deny the British control from the State although in 1891 he lightly modified this administrative structure.⁸¹

During his rule all branches of administration were reorganised and public welfare activities were increased. Several salutary reforms were introduced. A complete survey and settlement of land was made, and the various departments of the State were put upon the firm and substantial basis. Nripendra Narayan was a great builder who had given a modern shape of the town of Cooch Behar and built beautiful private and public buildings.⁸²

Maharaja Nripendranarayan died in 1911 in England and was succeeded by his eldest son Rajendranarayan who died a pre-mature death in 1913. During his two years reign there was no change in the political affairs of the State.⁸³ He was succeeded by his younger brother, Jitendranarayan who died in 1921. He tried to modernize the State including the development of transport, education, sanitary service, and had done many welfare works for the subjects.⁸⁴ After his death, Maharani Indira Devi became Regent of the State during the minority of the then present ruler-Jagaddipendra Narayan. So the Regency Council guided by the queen mother Indira Devi managed the political affairs of the State.⁸⁵ He was the last Maharaja of Cooch Behar. On September 12, 1949; he signed the Instrument of Accession. The State was transferred into Indian Government on 28th August 1949. But he remained silent about the future of the State after the end of the British control.⁸⁶

The Koch Kings (Appendix-1) ruled Cooch Behar kingdom for nearly 450 years. Over a span of 400 years or so, the political status of the present Cooch Behar has kept on changing. From a Koch kingdom it became a princely State, then to a revenue paying State to the British, and finally it became a district of West Bengal after the merger of the State in India in 1949. The Koch or Rajbansis are the major ethnic group which over a long period of time has been living with other immigrant social groups in the State of Cooch Behar. But as the Koch or Rajbansis were the dominant group in the State naturally the socio-economic life of the Rajbansi community denoted the socio-economic life of the State.

1.3. The People of the State of Cooch Behar

The population of Cooch Behar is of a mixed origin. The Rajbansis or Koches undoubtedly predominated over all the other tribes. The root of the Koch tribes lied in the influence of Astromongoloid tribal groups.⁸⁷ Some Historians and Anthropologists

have expressed the view of Dravidian-Mongoloid admixture and have stressed the Mongoloid element. However the Pre-history and mythology of this region indicate the existence of Aryans in this region who used to live only river side of Karatoya. In fact we don't have any definite information about the Koch tribe before 16th century. The initial identification of Koch tribe could have been made as a part of extended Boro tribe.⁸⁸ According to the view of famous Anthropologist Dr. Charu Chandra Sanyal, "Koches are Non-Aryan in origin. Some of them adopted Hinduism and became the Rajbansis. These Rajbansis later on claimed to be Kshatriyas"⁸⁹ But a section of the local Rajbansi intelligentsia denied the argument and they claimed that the Rajbansis do have certainly *Kshatriya* origin of northern heartland of India. They had taken the resort of the old Hindu scriptures and mythologies to substantiate their view.⁹⁰ Thus the ethnic origin of the Rajbansis has been some what uncertain amidst opposing arguments. The continuous process of assimilation and integration of Hindu religion gave rise to a new social group called Rajbansi which was formed as a major breaking away group of the Koch Tribe. Besides Koch or Rajbansis, there have been some tribal groups which are still in existence such as Mech, Rava, Kachari and others.⁹¹ They are all grouped under the Hindus. So the people are generally composed of two elements: Hindus and Muslims. There are some well-to-do Muslim families, some of whom have been honoured by the State with titles and distinctions, and seats in the Durbar.⁹² The Brahmans are mostly of the *Vaidic* class, and are the descendants of those who were from time to time brought into the country by the Khen kings of Kamatapur and by the Rajas of the Koch dynasty, from Oudh, Tirhoot and Assam.⁹³ Attracted to remain in the country by the grant of the *Brahmattar* lands and stipends, they have settled in and near the metropolis, and not differing much from the Brahmans of lower Bengal in their religious and social customs. Besides this *Brahmanas* there were small number of *Khatriyas*, *Baidyas* and *Kayasthas*.⁹⁴

The internal demographic formation of Cooch Behar underwent a distinctive transformation due to certain movements arising out of internal social dynamics. The semi-feudal aboriginal state of Cooch Behar from its early social formation formed a social relationship based on community and clan wherein both the ruler and the ruled belonged to the same clan named the Koches. The administrative discourse and the recorded history suggest that Koches are autochthonous tribe having a Austro-Mongoloid decent. That during the last many decades of colonial Cooch Behar, the

socio-cultural mobility movement gave rise to a different kind of identity formation of the indigenous people of Cooch Behar called Rajbansis. The Rajbansi social leaders claiming themselves as *Kshtriyas* were distinctively different from the Koches. However, from the four consecutive Census reports beginning from 1901-1931 revealed that the population profile of the Rajbansis have always been on a higher side and for the Koches, marginally non-existent. It can be stated that in the process of absorption, assimilation and the pressure of social movements most of the Koches of Cooch Behar got themselves registered as Rajbansis, for the convenience of the Study and to imply the indigenous people in the whole course of this study Rajbansis and the Koches are synonymously used without semantic variation.

1.4. The Pre-colonial Social, Economic and Political Structure of the State of Cooch Behar

Agriculture was the main occupation of the Rajbansi community. In matters connected with agriculture they were very traditional in outlook.⁹⁵ New modes of cultivation or the rearing of new crops are regarded with fear as being injurious. A common saying among the natives is “what *bapdada*(father and grandfather, ancestors) have not done I can not do”.⁹⁶ So the system of agriculture of the Cooch Behar State remains unaltered. The indigenous system of shifting cultivation was followed by them.

A Rajbansi land owner (*Jotedar*) does not like to build his house on the land of another *jotedar*. Thus a Rajbansi village consists of comparatively a bigger house of a land landholder and a group of smaller houses of his share-croppers (*adhirs* or *bargadars*). The *adhirs* have practically no land of their own; they work as agricultural labourers receiving half share of the crop they grow. They depend solely on the assistance given by the *jotedar* in the shape of advancing paddy for their food and sometimes money for other expenses.⁹⁷

In the early sixteenth century, the process of state formation of the Koch-Rajbansi tribe had started.⁹⁸ In fact the process of state formation within a tribe could have had started only when it had, to a considerable extent, moved from shifting to permanent cultivation, with or without the use of plough. For a quantum of surplus was necessary to maintain even a rudimentary state apparatus.⁹⁹

Details about the land administrative system under the Koches are, however, lacking. But certain references in their chronicles and also in the records of the British officers throw some light in this matter. From these accounts it appears that lands were usually divided into two kinds –cultivable and uncultivable. Cultivable lands were again divided into two groups-taxable and non-taxable.¹⁰⁰ Assessment varied depending upon fertility of soil, amount of produce or number of ploughs used. There is no record to show that any survey of land was undertaken before the Mughal invasion.¹⁰¹ Although the actual procedure and rate of assessment in the Koch Kingdom is not known it appears that some sort of *Paik*-system, not similar in all respects with that of the Ahoms of upper Brahmaputra valley, existed there.¹⁰² The *Durrang Raj Vamsabali* makes mention of *Paiks* attached to the royal officers of the state. These *Paiks* had to serve the State with manual works, and to go to war as soldiers when necessary. In return they enjoyed some plots of lands free of revenue.

Besides, the *zamindars* like the *Bhuyans* and other high state officials like *Dewan*, *Kajri*, *Choudhury*, collected revenue from the peasants in their own way who were directly under their control, and sent a certain amount of their respective collection to the centre.¹⁰³ After the Koch kingdom had been annexed to the Mughal Empire, the system of collection of revenue was changed. The royal princelets and other *Zamindars* deposited with the imperial treasure a certain amount of their collections from the peasants. The settlement in such cases was made annually and the procedure was to “settle the jama agreeably to that of the preceding year.”¹⁰⁴ Revenue was collected in cash or kind although the first was preferred. The *Katha Guru Charit* appears to inform us that the peasants were to pay 1/4th of their produce as rent to the royal treasury.¹⁰⁵

The king was the actual owner of the soil, but the cultivators' right over their hereditary possessions was never questioned by him. The estates given to the relatives of the king (*petbhata*) were subject to be taken over by the king after the guarantee's death. The *jagir* lands were allowed to be held by the state officers during the period of their service only and were thus transferable.¹⁰⁶

Before the introduction of the *pargana* system following the annexation of Koch Kingdom to the Mughal Empire in 1612 A.D, the Koch Kingdom was broadly divided into certain administrative units called *Chakla* which was a collection of several villages. Each *Chakla* was placed under the control of a *Bhuyan* who was by

and large a governor who collected revenue of his *Chakla* and deposited it to the *Dewan* or the king.¹⁰⁷ In between the *Chaklas* and the villages there were other administrative divisions called *Kuthi* and *Tapa*. It appears that a *Chakla* was equivalent to 1/6th of a Mughal *Sarkar*.¹⁰⁸ The Mughal occupied portion of the kingdom of Koch Behar was formed into a *Sarkar* called Sarkar Cooch Behar or *Kuchwara*. This was divided into six *Chaklas* namely –Boda, Patgram, Purbabhag, Fatepur, Kajirhat and Kakina. It also appears that for administrative convenience, the Koch Kingdom was broadly divided into two parts, each called a *Dewani*.¹⁰⁹

In brief, the Koches adopted an elaborate system of administration. The nature and designations of most of the officers like *Dewan*, *Ujir*, *Nazir*, *Sikdar*, *Piyada* and others indicate the influence of the Turko-Afgans or the Mughals in their administrative set-up which was but a natural one.¹¹⁰ The basic principles of Koch Administration were based on the Hindu religious texts, and with the *Chatra*(umbrella) over his head and the *Danda* in his hands, the Koch King represented a typical Hindu ruler of ancient India. Although tribal preponderance in the administrative set-up of the founder of the kingdom was marked, this was gradually replaced by the non-tribal in the later period.¹¹¹

With the imposition of the Mughal revenue administration on the Koch territories and the increasing role of money in economic life since the close of the sixteenth century, profound changes began to take place in the Koch Kingdom. The Mughal administration demanded revenue in cash from the *paik* allotments in lieu of the traditional militia service. As the Koch rajas retained the Mughal land revenue system, naturally the survey of the land was made.¹¹²

The society was feudal in character. It appears that the Koch Kings would try to imitate the style of living of the Bengal Sultans or the Mughal Governors.¹¹³ The nobility was in second position in the hierarchy who derived its income mainly from the lands cultivated by peasants' proprietors. They monopolised all the high offices in the administration. On the whole differences between the king and the nobility and the commoners were always maintained.¹¹⁴ At the bottom was the peasantry who also formed the militia of the kingdom. Though the peasants generally enjoyed his land right undisturbed, but the land holdings of the peasants were not equal. The *Katha Guru Charit* informs that while some peasants had only one *Bigha* of land and no granary at all, there were others who had as many as twenty six *puras* of lands with

three or four granaries and a number of ploughs. In between the privileged aristocracy at the top and the labouring peasantry at the bottom, there was another class of people who had formed a class of landed gentry.¹¹⁵ The *Bhuyans* or the landlords, the tribal chiefs, the junior officers in administration like the *Thakuriya*, *Saikia* and *Hazari*, the village headman and such other petty officials constituted this class. They collected the land revenue of the villages under their jurisdiction and received a share of it from the government. Though Koch kings established their supremacy over the *Bhuyans* but they were very powerful class.¹¹⁶

However, as the all people of the Koch Kingdom were directly or indirectly associated with the agriculture so it may be said that the agriculture was the mainstay of occupation. The Persian chronicles testify to the fertility and productivity of the soil of the Koch kingdom. The *Alamgirnama* also speaks of the productivity of the Brahmaputra valley.¹¹⁷

Rice formed the staple crop. It had three main varieties: *Ahu*, *Sali*, and *Bao*. Shifting was the usual method of *Ahu* cultivation. *Sali* or wet rice cultivation required transplantation and hence such fields which could retain water or could be artificially irrigated from the adjacent streams.¹¹⁸ But the Koches were adept to hoe-culture and to use of *Ahu* rice. The cultivation of *Sali* was therefore, not extensive in the Koch kingdom. The *Bhuyans*, however, appear to be interested in wet rice cultivation and it was their initiative that the wet rice cultivation and the use of plough became prominent among the tribes including the Koches. It may be also noted that even after the hoe was replaced by the plough, the Koch tribes used shifting type of cultivation as late as the close of the 19th century.¹¹⁹

So if we analyse the indigenous land revenue system of the Koch kingdom before the coming of the Mughals and after that from the above discussion it appears that the Koch revenue system was an admixture of both Ahom and Mughal land revenue system. Like the Ahoms they were habituated with shifting cultivation, paik system, and cultivating *Ahu* rice and later followed like the Ahoms the wet rice (*Sali*) cultivation. On the other hand when they were influenced by the Mughals, they started to collect the land revenue in cash instead of kind.

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