

Chapter VI

Koch Coinage in relation to that of the Neighboring States

Koch kingdom was established in late-medieval period so without the analysis of other contemporary coinage it is very hard to draw a comprehensive picture of Koch coinage. Because on the one hand Koch coinage was influenced by the other contemporary coinages of that time similarly it also influenced other regional currencies to a great extent. So from a comparative analysis of the Koch coinage with that of the other coinages especially the coinages of medieval North East India, we can get a thorough idea of both Koch and other contemporary coinages. The present chapter will first analyze the different contemporary coinages of medieval North East Indian states and then try to make a comparative study drawing the similarities among them.

Before entering into the inter-relation between the Koch coinages with the other North East Indian dynastic coinage it is important to know from when and how a regularized currency system came into existence in North East India. The territory including in North East India was known as Pragjyotish Kamarupa ¹ in the early centuries of this millennium. This part of India was never totally occupied by the mainstream ruling dynasties of India before the advent of Muslims. So on account of the geographical situation, North East India has been out of the central focus of Indian history and the developments in central areas have only occasionally touched the course of events in this part and this area had only marginal influence on the total history of India. The territory known as North East India is linguistically and to a great extent culturally a fairly homogenous unit. Through intersected by rivers its major regions were linked with ancient, medieval times by political as well as cultural and commercial ties. Hence the territory concerned can be

considered as a unit for study. Before the advent of the Ahoms in thirteenth century the territory was ruled by various small dynasties like *Naraka*, *Varmana*, *Salastambha* and *Bhouma-Naraka* dynasties. ² These dynasties were small and till now no numismatic specimen is yet found belongs to these dynasties. Though the *Mahasthangarh* inscription ³ seems to suggest that the ancient kingdom of Pragjyotish-Kamarupa was a part of the Maurya Empire but one cannot ignore the significant fact that we have not discovered in Assam any punched marked coin, which was the regular silver and copper currency of the Mauryas, although such coins have been found in considerable numbers in Bengal. Surprisingly it is the fact that we have not found in Assam any of the abundant issues of the Gupta even though we know that the province of *Pundravardhana* or North Bengal formed a part of the Gupta empire from the fourth to sixth century A.D., and the ancient Assam or the Pragjyotish-Kamrupa country was separated from the Pundravardhana territory in the west only by the river Karatoya. ⁴ In the same context we have to remember that Pushyavarman of Assam and his successors appeared to have had political relation with the Gupta emperor. In the first half of the seventh century A.D., the great king Bhaskaravarman had considerable political dominance over the region but still we have not discovered even a single coin of Bhaskaravarmana to our satisfaction. However, evidence of use of cowries as currency can be noticed in the Tezpur rock inscription of Harjaravarman dated Gupta era 510 (829-30 A.D) wherein the imposition of a fine of 100 *vuttikas* has been mentioned for violating royal order with regard to playing of the fishing boats on the river Brahmaputra. ⁵ In this backdrop, it is very recently assumed that metallic coinage was introduced in Assam only in the seventeenth century. But a series of hoards noticed in various parts of Darrang, Sonitpur, Kamarupa and Nagaon districts have conclusively proved that copper coinage was introduced in Pragjyotisha-Kamarupa kingdom in the 9th century. ⁶

This large predominantly tribal area saw the rise of some tribal kingship in different parts in the medieval period. Tipra in Tripura, Ahom in Assam, Koch in Cooch Bihar, Kachari, Jaintia in Meghalaya and Jayantipur and Manipuri in Manipur were the major power and authority during 13th

to 18th centuries. Some of these village kingdoms in course of time became fairly powerful and came to control extensive land areas. All these powers are known to have issued their coins. Oldest and longest series of coins were struck by the Tipras, better known as Manikyas of Tripura, who struck their initial coins from 1464, the Koch in 1555 and the Ahoms in 1648. Likewise coins of the Kacharies, Jaintias and the Manipuries were also struck in c.1559, 1563 and 1709 respectively or somewhat earlier in each case. Thereafter the coins of all these ruling tribal families were struck fairly regularly in most cases.

Prior to the Muslim invasion in the early thirteen century coinage on North East India or more specifically the coinage of the Hindu rulers which formed the majority of the numismatic issues of medieval and late medieval North East India was conspicuous by its absence. Perhaps the reason for the lack of any state sponsored coinage during the centuries around the millennium can be found in the structure of the society. Most of the people were self-sufficient in the necessities of the life and urban communities were non-existent and limited marked trading was facilitated by the use of the cowries. ⁷ Society was probably based on the largely self-sufficient village with villagers strictly divided into occupational based castes and taxes were paid through labor or in kind. Without money the villagers were to a large extent deprived of physical mobility and with the caste system were also deprived of social mobility. The ruler might discourage the use of coins by the people because of the financial independence and hence physical mobility that such coins could give to sectors of the community such as traders.

But in thirteenth century the situation changed in Bengal when Mohammad Bakhtiyar (1198) invaded and occupied political power. As a Muslim he could only hope to gain lasting control over the country by breaking the power of the Brahmin priests and gaining the support of at least some of Hindu population. The Muslim invaders might have decided that by encouraging trade and allowing the Hindu trading and banking community to enrich, they would gain their support and ensure that they would be able to exercise stable political control over the newly conquered territory. The

introduction of a silver and gold coinage might have been part of the strategy through which Bengal was successfully ruled by the Muslims. The Muslims introduced a coinage of fine silver as it was a usual practice in the Muslim society. The sultans of Bengal were the first who introduced the metallic currency in eastern India and also brought a drastic change in the transaction process.

Another very important political development of fourteenth and fifteenth century was that side by side of the Muslim intervention in eastern India the Brahmins of the Gangetic valley and also of Bengal were feeling threatened and some of them started migrating eastward. A process of Hindu state formation commenced in the eastern India when one or more Brahmins or Brahmin group convinced a local tribal leader to embrace Hinduism and to establish their new kingdom. Thus in this way some new state namely Tripura, Cooch Behar, Assam, Kachar, Jayantipur came into existence. All this medieval and late medieval Hindu states of North East India had their own system of coinage and they derived their inspiration from the silver coinage of the Sultans of Bengal.⁸ Now in the following we will make an overview of the contemporary coinage other than Koch coinage. A basic summary of the relevant coinage is set out below.

Coinage of Tripura:

The state of Tripura an erstwhile princely state of North East India currently occupying about four thousand square miles in the hills to the east of Brahmaputra plain, was one of a strong regional power in the history of entire North East India.⁹ The state of Tripura was important because instead of repeated Muslim invasions it succeeded in remaining its political identity against the Muslim invasions. The Manikya kings of Tripura issued coins in their names and as a royal issue the coins of Tripura were the emblems of royalty and also a symbolic majesty of the Tripura kings. The metals, the motifs, the portraits as well as other accompanying details of the coins depict the details of faiths and customs adopted by the kingdom of Tripura. The Tripura coins are no way less important than

epigraphy, literary sources or other source of information regarding the history of Tripura as we come across different types of coins which have produced much effective records in Tripura history.

The kingdom of Tripura provides us the most remarkable and longest series of coins of North East India and covers a period of five hundred years.¹⁰ During the Mughal period the state was relatively isolated but before, during and after this period it produced un-arguably one of the rarest and most attractive of all Indian coinage. The state was visited little by Europeans during British occupation of India and as a result relatively few examples of the coins reached the west and therefore its coinage remained virtually unknown and unpublished until after independence. We find in the sources that during the first half of the fifteenth century, Maha Manikya and his son Dharma Manikya ruled the country and these two kings were probably the first to assume the title *Manikya* a title that was taken by all subsequent rulers of the state. According to *Rajmala* after the death of Dharma Manikya, Ratna Manikya took the charge of the state after defeating his other brothers with the help of the Muslim Sultan of Bengal, Ruknuddin Barbak Saha.¹¹ Ratna Manikya while in Gour, the then capital of Bengal, noticed the use of silver coin in the trade and transaction. So when Ratna Manikya assumed power he struck silver coins in his own name, probably bringing Muslim metal workers from Bengal to work in his mint. In this way coins were introduced in the state of Tripura and the subsequent rulers of Tripura followed the tradition of minting coins until the first half of the 20th century. The last Tripura king, who issued ceremonial coins was Viravikramakishor Manikya in 1951.

12

The coinage of Tripura are entirely Hindu in their design and inspiration and one of the reason behind their issue may have been as political demonstration of independence but the types are so numerous and varied that there must have been other motives for their issue. Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of the coins is the quality of the striking and the artistry of the designs which is far superior to the carelessly made products of the mint of Bengal. The latter presumably reflect the mass production techniques employed at the mints in Bengal, whereas in Tripura with little need for coins

in quantity, much greater care could be taken with the striking. The weight standard adopted by Ratna Manikya was identical to that used by the Muslim Sultans, so the two series of coins were presumably intended to circulate alongside each other, although it is significant that coins of Tripura are very rarely found outside the Historic territory of Tripura.

The coins were certainly circulated as currency but to different extent at different times. During the sixteenth century they were struck in reasonably by large numbers and probably had a significant monetary function for payment of mercenary soldiers, as well as being used as a store of wealth and for use in religious ceremonies and for payment to Brahmins. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries they had a modest role for the payment of taxes and for use in the kingdom.¹³ They have been found in hoards beyond the boundaries of the state, primarily in the plains of present Bangladesh but their monetary use was largely confined within the borders of Tripura. After 1760 the coins were struck exclusively for ceremonial purpose but the privilege of striking coins were carefully preserved and exercised even though the coins themselves could hardly be used as currency.

Coinage of Ahom Kingdom:

In medieval period the kingdom of Assam had its own glorious series of coinage. As a royal issue the coins of Assam were the emblems of royalty and also a symbolic majesty of the Ahom kings. The metals, the motifs, the portraits as well as other accompanying details on the coins depict the details of faiths and customs adopted by the kingdom of Assam. The *Ahom* rulers issued fine series of coins. The shape, size and calligraphy are such that the coins attracted attention easily.¹⁴ At the time of introduction of the *Ahom* coinage the basic medium of exchange was formed by the cowries. It should be noted that the *Ahoms* were a tribal people and the cowries as a media of exchange was acceptable to a tribal as well as non-tribal milieu. Although the *Ahom* started ruling in Assam as early as 1228 AD,¹⁵ but the first Ahom coin so far known is only with date is 1648. No doubt there are references in literary texts to the use of coins by a few early *Ahom* kings like, Siu-Ka-

Pha (Sukapha, 1228-68), Siu-Dang-Pha (Sudanpha, 1397-1407), Sui-Han Pha (Suhenpha 1488-93), Siu-Hum-Mong (Suhunmung, 1497-1539). But these references to coins are not substantiated by the discoveries of actual pieces struck by these rulers. So such claims may be considered as wrong or we shall have to wait for discoveries of such coins in future.

It is not known why and under what circumstances the rulers took the initiative of starting a new coinage. As records are available there might not be any strong economic reason behind such decision. The silver coins were not used as money to meet the daily necessities of the people, at least at this starting stage of coinage.¹⁶ The external trade was also very limited. The Ahom rulers adopted a policy of isolation and they did not like outsiders to enter into their territory even for trade and commerce. It may be the continuous Turkish invasion which forced them to be isolationist. But these Muslim invasions resulted infiltration of coins of sultans of Bengal in the area. Coins of Koch Kingdom and Bengal sultanate probably influenced the Ahom rulers to issue their own coinage as a declaration of sovereignty after becoming the major power in North East India.¹⁷

Among the Ahom coins discovered so far the earliest series belong to a king having the title *Svarga Narayandeva*. The octagonal silver coins of the series bears legends in Assamese (or Assamese Bengali) characters on the obverse and reverse side. The legend engraved on one side is 'Sri Sri SvargaNarayan Devasya Saka 1570'. The inscription on the other side can be deciphered as 'Sri Sri Hari Hara Charana Parayanasya'.¹⁸ The same dates occur on the obverse of another series of octagonal silver pieces which bears on the reverse the Chinese inscription. 'Tsang Pao' meaning 'Tibet Valuable' (i.e. a valuable medium of exchange for traders from Tibet). Such pieces could have been issued to facilitate trade with Chinese knowing persons coming from Tibet.¹⁹

The second phase of Ahom coinage commenced with Rudra-Simha (1696-1714) who introduced the practice of striking coins annually beside in the first years of region. The custom was followed by his successors. The vast majority of these coins are octagonal in shape and is bordered by dots flanked by two lines. These coins also carry Sanskrit legends in Assamese Bengali characters on

both sides and a date in the *Saka* era on one side. After starting a full-fledged system of coinage by the Ahom in 1648, the later rulers also followed the practice of minting coins until the territory was occupied by the British.²⁰ Though the style of the coins were changed during the reign of successive rulers but the basic style of the Ahom coinage remained same. Of the two precious metals used for minting Ahom coins, gold was available locally. Gold dust was actually produced from gold bearing stone pieces carried down by the Brahmaputra. Silver was perhaps imported from outside through commercial transactions. Among the possible sources of supply were the silver mines of Yunnan (China) which was connected with the area of Assam by a land route.²¹

The coins of the Ahom kingdom were beautifully struck mainly on carefully produced octagonal flans with dies of the same size as the flan. Their weight standard was carefully controlled and the silver content appears to have been of the highest quality. The fact that relatively few pairs of dies were used at most periods indicates that production have been high although survival rate seems to be quite high, perhaps because the coins were retained as religious amulets or buried as treasure. The small denominations produced during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries would seem to indicate that the coins were intended to be used in circulation but such use seems to have been limited and small denominations are often in very fine condition.²²

Coinage of Jayantipur:

With the commencement of the 16th century the Jayantiyas who belonged to *Mon-Khmer* stock came to the plain tract situated in the south of their original abode Jayantiyapur Hills and made their capital at the place which was called Jayantipur.²³ Jayantia was one of the major kingdoms in the medieval North East India which struck coins in the sixteenth century as part of its state formation process.²⁴ The history of the kingdom is somewhat obscure and sources are mainly confined to traditions collected at the end of the last century. We find mentions in various Ahom or Koch

chronicles, a very few inscriptions and other contemporary documents about the Jayantias and for this the coins are the major source of information about the Jayantias.

The earliest coin of Jayantiya king is remarkably anonymous undated coin, but may have been struck by Bar Gohain. It has the legend '*Sri Sri Rupesa Banadasthana Jantapuramka Saupradhuna*' which may be translated as 'coin of the most beautiful chief ruler of the forest land and the Jayantia people'.²⁵ The other side has a more conventional *Sivaite* invocation to *Hara* and *Gouri*. The next ruler to have struck coins was Vijaya Manik who was the only ruler to strike a full *tanka* coin with his name. It bears a date 1497 Saka (AD 1575) and has an unusual invocation to *Bhubanesvar*. Though the Jayantias minted coins in 1580, yet they could not throw out the yoke of the Koch suzerainty. They not only honored the imposition of not putting their names on the coins but they also reflected their dependency by striking their names on the coins but they also reflected their dependency by striking their money alike with those of the Koch.

No Jayantiya coin is found in between 1580 and 1669. Hence it is not unlike that during this period the Jayantiya kings ruled as the vassals in all respect. However about ninety years after 1669, Pratap Simha captured the Jayantiya throne and re-started the Jayantiya coins by minting on the earlier pattern. At the time the Jayantias were not the feudatories of the Koch. The subsequent kings except the last continued minting of money. They all issued the anonymous coins on which the dates range from *Saka* 1591= 1669 to 1712= 1790. But three Jayantiya rulers besides using the earlier model of anonymous coins also attempted to coin their money in their own names.²⁶

In the later course of Jayantia history Jayantiya coins became much debased and it is recorded by the British that the right to strike coins was auctioned off to the highest bidder, a practice was not followed in any other state. The debased nature and light weight of many of the coins would have meant that it was not worth anyone's while exporting them, so they are only occasionally found in hoards outside Jayantipur territory. E.A.Gait notes that in 1835 coins were hardly used in the local economy so they probably played a ceremonial and revenue raising role and may have also been used

by the high officials as a way of strong wealth rather than being used as currency for everyday transactions.

Coinage of Kachar:

The Kacharis known to be the earliest indigenous inhabitants of Assam belonged to the Mongolian stock.²⁷ They came here either from Tibet or China.²⁸ These people first inhabited the hills and slopes in the north of Brahmaputra and then they expanded to its south. The Kacharis after their occupation of the region which was south of the Brahmaputra made their capital at Dimapur. But in 1536 it was sacked by the Ahoms and hence they established a new capital at Maibong in the North Kachar Hills which also met with the same fate in 1706 at the hands of the Ahoms and then they founded their capital at Khaspur in the plains of Kachar.²⁹ The history of Kachar is obscure as they have no historical chronicle of their own although they appear as side players in the chronicles of Cooch Behar, the Ahom and Tripura. So these coins are an extremely important historical source for this kingdom.³⁰

The earliest numismatic record of the Kachar kingdom is a coin in the name of Vira Vijaya Narayan dated 1502 or 1520 but although this is the first silver rupee to be struck by any of the Hindu rulers of the Brahmaputra Valley nothing else is known about this king but these coins do indicate that the state of Kachar must have been relatively advanced at this early stage as it struck coins even before Koch kingdom.³¹ The next king to strike coins was Megha Narayan in 1488 *Saka* (1566). These dates are not available from other sources and hence the coins provided very important information to historians on the chronology. For example it seems clear that the invasion of the Kachar by Cooch Behar troops in 1562 under Chilarai fell during the reign of Nirbhaya Narayan. According to the Koch chronicle on this occasion the Kachar king agreed to pay tribute to the Koch King 70,000 silver coins, 1000 gold coins and seventy elephants.³²

Since the Kacharis were made their feudatory of the Koch and they agreed to pay annual tribute mostly in the form of the coins to the latter, the Kacharies minted them and for that they partly adopted the coin pattern of the Koch. Vasanta Choudhury and Pariman Ray two well-known numismatists, observe; 'It is remarkable that the legend and calligraphy as well on the coins issued by the king of Kachar and the Koch kings are very similar'. However the noteworthy characteristics to be pointed out is that the initial Kachri coins like some of those of the Koch kings Nara Narayan, have bi-scriptural legends in proto Nagari on the obverse and Assamese on the reverse. The Kacharies also modeled their currency on the coins of Sultans of Bengal.³³

All the Kachari coins are round in shape except those of Lakshmi Chandra Narayan which are in octagonal form. The latter is evidently adopted from the Ahom coinage. Vasanta Choudhury and Parimal Ray rightly observe 'this break in the traditional shape of the Kachari coins possibly signifies the supremacy of the Ahom king upon Lakshmi Chandra Narayan'.³⁴ They were abnormally broad and thin in fabric except those of Lakshmi Chandra Narayan and his son Govinda Chandra who were the latest kings of the dynasty. The Kacharies like Jayantias inscribed their legends on their coins in Sanskrit language and for that they used the old Assamese script although some scholars consider it Bengali.³⁵ They have an expression of religious faith on the obverse and name of the king and the date on the reverse. Botham writing on the coins of the Assam dynasties observe that the inscriptions are adaptations of those on Muhammadan coins since in addition to the name and title of the king; they include a profession of his devotion to his favorite deity. The form of the Sanskrit inscriptions appear to have been derived from the coins of the Hindu kings of Bengal. Danujmardandeva and Mahendradeva who flourished in the early fifteenth century³⁶ But the Kacharies adopted the legend patterns for their coins from those of the Koch, which are inscribed on both sides on the coin.

The coins generally have very poor calligraphy and are rarely found in private collections although a few hoards have been found in Kachar. There are so many die varieties found in these hoards and it is clear that the coins were struck in significant number and were most probably

intended to circulate as currency although the fact that they do not seem to be found outside Kachar territory could imply that they did in practice facilitate external trade. After an abortive start in 1520 the coinage of Kachar commenced in 1559 and thus was the very earliest of the coinage of the North East. From then, until soon after 1616, a continuous coinage of silver was struck. Initially mainly rupees were struck but after 1583, most of the coins were of the quarter rupee denomination. The calligraphy was of poor quality showing that the Kacharies did not have access to such skilled metal workers as the other North Eastern states. The coins may have circulated to a limited extent internally but those struck after 1580's have never been found outside Kachari territory. After 1620's only a handful of coins are known and these were probably ceremonial issues, struck to demonstrate independence from the Ahoms.

Coinage of Manipur:

Manipur is a small hill state to the south east of Assam bordering Burma. The early history of Manipur is set out in local chronicles which contain long genealogical lists but little in the way of firm historical information. Manipur also finds occasional mention in the chronicles of neighboring states but reliable information is hard to find. They have record that contains a list of chiefs which purport to carry back their history to the thirtieth year of the Christian era. The list enumerates forty-seven kings upto 1714 but many of these earlier chiefs are probably entirely legendary.

The modern history of the state begins from the time when Pamheiba, a Naga Chief ascended the throne of Manipur in 1714.³⁷ Subsequently he became a convert to Hinduism taking the name Garib Newaz and reigned approximately for 35 to 40 years. He was an outstanding ruler from all accounts. During his reign Brahmanical Vishnavism was accepted as the religion of the court. Moreover, the Manipuris adopted the Bengali script, abandoning their old and complicated alphabets. The first coins of Manipur were probably square bell metal pieces struck during the reign of Gharib Niwaz, in 1724. These were followed by square and round bell-metal coins with the *Sri Ram* or with

single letters such as *Ja*, *Wa*, *Sri* and *La*, weighting about 3.5-4 gm on average, but fluctuating considerably about this mean. Some coins apparently have the letter in archaic Manipuri script.³⁸ Silver and gold coins were known locally as *Lupa Tanga* and *Sana Tanga* respectively, were struck from 1756-1831. They were generally square in shape, and are extremely rare nowadays. Apart from full rupees and *mohurs*, struck to a weight standard in excess of 11gm, a few half and quarter denominations coins are known. The earliest square rupees weight over 12gm, making them the heaviest silver coins of the region. Later rupees are struck to a weight standard similar to the Moghul and the Ahom rupees, but differ from the Ahom coins in being square in shape and with the legend in Nagari script, rather than Bengali. Most of these silver and gold coins were probably struck more for ceremonial purposes than for use as currency, although the square rupees of Chaurajit Simha may have circulated to a limited extent. It is interesting to see that the coins are dated to the year, or even the day of issue, rather than showing merely the accession year.³⁹

At a glance it would be difficult to access the merit of technical efficiency of the coinage of Manipur. The bell-metal seal produced in local Manipur mint were quite crude both in shape and finish. In the same way we find most of the entire square shaped gold and silver issues from the time of Garib Newaz were known so far having the same fate as of the crude struck seals. But all those remarkable ornamental designated round gold coins except one type of both gold and silver struck by Marajit Simha does not have only high technical merit but also reveal the great aesthetic sense of its issuers. The noticeable features of the said round mohurs are strikingly akin to the coins of the kings of Kachar. Manipur history records that political intercourse between the kingdoms of Kachar and Manipur was quite close and frequent. It may be assumed that the minting technology was borrowed from time to time from Kachar specially for the striking of gold round ceremonial issues in question. It may also be presumed that not much attention was paid to the striking of square coins both in gold and silver including seals as because they were minted for commercial use.⁴⁰

Coinage of Bhutan:

In ancient times the country of Bhutan was ruled by independent small chieftains but no historical account of that period is available. About the beginning of the sixteenth century a disciple named Noanamgi of the Tibetan Lama brought the whole of the Bhutan country under his absolute control.⁴¹ Likewise the political history of Bhutan the monetary history of Bhutan also shrouded in deep mystery. No records are available which show exactly when coins were first struck in Bhutan. But it is certain that coins struck in Bhutan were close copies of the Narayani rupees of Koch kingdom and only very minor modifications of the design distinguish the early Bhutanese productions from the Koch coins.

During the late medieval period Bhutan had commercial links through her various '*duars*' with the Ahom and Koch kingdoms and subsequently with the company ruled areas of Bengal. It is very likely that Koch coins might have reached Bhutan in the course of trade as early as the sixteenth century when there was a flourishing trade between Bengal and Tibet that passed through Koch kingdom and Bhutan.⁴² The earliest coins found in Bhutan date from the reign of Lakshmi Narayan (1587-1627). The earliest Bhutanese reference discovered that mention coins date back to the time of the Shabdung Ngawang Namgyal. In about 1619 the Shabdung went to Chaochha to preach and receive presents from the king of Koch kingdom including silver and gold coins. Also the people of Chapchha apparently offered 'lots of silver coins' to the Shabdung on this occasion.⁴³ On his return from Chapchha the Shabdung apparently started the construction of a new monastery called Cheri Dorjidhen. In this monastery he placed a double storied silver *stupa* containing the ashes of his father, which has been made with the silver coins brought of Chapchha.

In another account this time referring to the period about 1640-43 there is lengthy description of gifts received by Shabdung including several thousand '*matang coins*' called as *brgya-bul* (hundred offerings) from the district between Rtse-rag dum-bu and from the district of Dar-dkar as far as the place was called Bye-ma in India.⁴⁴ The use of the term Ma-tang is interesting and may well be

explained by looking at the coins themselves and in particular the full coin or half coin of Prana Narayan who ruled between 1633 and 1665. These as do the earlier rupees of Lakshmi Narayan have prominent letter *Ma* coin at the top right of the obverse legend. This letter although written in Bengali would have been easily recognized by the Bhutanese so that probably caused the coins to be referred to as '*Ma-tang*' or '*Ma tam*' as it is unlikely that they could have read any part of the legend. In 1680 Tenzen Rabgye was enthroned as the 4th *Druk Desi* and apparently received present of 1000 gold and 1000 silver coins from the king of Ladakh ⁴⁵ and 700 gold coins and 1000 silver coins from the Koch king. The presents were distributed to the general public including one silver coin to each family. ⁴⁶ In 1707 on the enthronement of the 8th *Druk Desi* a gift of the silver coin was distributed to each of the monks and to the general public of Bhutan ⁴⁷ and the 13th *Desi Sherab Wangchuck* (1744-63) distributed gifts of one silver coin (*ma-tam*) to each citizen eight times during his reign. This made him very popular in the country. ⁴⁸ Furthermore in 1747 on the occasion of the coronation of the Shabdung II, Jigsmed Graga-pa (1725-61) gifts were described in detail and valued in *Ma-tam*. For instance gifts presented to the Gyalse Rinpoche Mi-pham brug-sgra rnam rgyal included images, coins, horses, clothing, brocades etc. the total value of which was listed at 2290 *Ma-tam*. This passage is particularly interesting in that it indicates that the *Ma-tam* was actually used as medium of exchange and as a common unit of value at this time. The kingdom of Bhutan issued coins upto the middle of the nineteenth century independently after that its authority of minting coins was seized by the British authorities.

II

From the above mentioned survey of various dynastic coins it is evidently clear to us that in late medieval period, North East India witnessed the rise of numerous kingdoms and all these states were well known for their own series of coinage. As these coinages were belonged to a same geographical region so they shared lots of things in common and must have some close inter-relationship to each

other. As we have already mentioned that the region of North East India was less influenced by the mainstream ruling dynasties so in terms political, economic, cultural and other spheres these regional states shared lots of common practices. In the field of medium of exchange these states were to some extent same in their intention of introducing its own coinage. In the following we will discuss the basic similarities of these above mentioned dynastic coins as a whole and by which we can understand the closeness of these currencies with that of the currencies of the Koch kingdom. In terms of comparative analysis we have to divide our discussion into some sub categories. It will help us to understand different resemblances of these currencies with each other.

In terms of political prerogative behind the introduction of coinage all these state were similar because the first boost for striking coins came from political compulsions. We have already discussed elsewhere that a Hindu state formation process was started in thirteenth and fourteenth centuries in medieval North East India in view of the growing Islamic political hold. In the said period the Muslim power gradually increased and threatened by this Muslim predominance the local tribal or semi tribal communities with the help of migrating Brahmin community embraced kingship in their respective territories and succeeded in establishing kingdom in their territories of control. But after establishing kingdom, they needed for a device which can prove their political authority in a firm footing and in this respect coins came to them as a media of demonstrating their political authority. As the minting of coins in the name of the king in time of accession was treated as a sacred event in India from time immemorial so this practice was grabbed by the newly established kingdoms and all the kings of these kingdoms issued coins in the time of their accession. This particular incident of issuing coins in time of accession was common among the coin issuing kingdoms of medieval North East India. The Koch kings were also not devoid of this practice and in terms of this the Koch kingdom following the same custom with that of the other states of North East India.

Probably the practice of engraving the name and the accession year in the coins were borrowed from the Islamic coins of contemporary India. In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries the

Muslim domination in Eastern India was growing rapidly and as all these states emerged to restrict the growing Muslim political hold over eastern India, so it is probable that they consciously copied the Muslim style of minting coins. In Islamic coins the pictorial representation was prohibited so they engraved the name and accession year of the ruler in one side. These types of coins were familiar in eastern India so while minting their own coins, all the kingdom of North East India took this style of engraving the name and accession year from the contemporary Islamic coins. So in this respect the medieval kingdoms of North East India shares common similarities.

The dynastic coins of North East India can be used as a media of reconstructing the political history of the each state. Coins bearing the name and year provide us systematic information regarding the chronology and succession of the rulers of a particular dynasty, and in North East Indian perspective this short of information is very useful as because of the lack of adiquite volume of literary evidences. All these kingdom maintained a practice of engraving the name of the ruler along with the accession year in their coins so by the minute study of the coins in each case a detailed chronological history of a particular kingdom can be achieved. In the case of Koch coinage for example, starting from Nara Narayan down to Jgaddipendra Narayan all the kings inscribed their names in their coins, from this we can have a chronological history of the Koch rulers. Similarly the other states also practiced this custom of minting the name of the king and accession year while minting their coins. By the comparative analysis of Koch coins and with that of the other kingdoms one can know the name of different rulers at a same time by using their coins. So in terms of reconstruction of chronological history of these kingdoms the coins are a good source of information and in this respect the kingdoms of medieval North East India shares common similarities.

In respect of economic compulsion behind the introduction of coinage all the North East Indian kingdom share a similar motive. Before the establishment of a well-organized currency system by these kingdoms, the region was carring on its transaction activity in barter system. The most probable cause of this nonexistence of currency may be traced in the patterns of the society. The tribal

societies of North East India were homogenous and the economy was self-sufficient due to political as well as communicational backdrop. But with the state formation process the economy also got pace when limited market trading was unable to meet the kingdoms internal as well as external necessities. In this situation most of the kingdoms understood the necessity of eradication of the complexities of barter mode of transaction and issued currencies in their respective territories and thus making their economy stronger. Besides this economic compulsion the growing use of coins in day to day transaction compelled all these state to mint currency of their own.

In the case of introducing coins though the early impetus came from political prerogatives but economic reasons were as strong as the earlier cause. Probably it was due to the economic cause that compelled these kingdoms to mint coins to consolidate the economy first and then claim obedience from the common masses. In this respect the role of currency is crucial because monetary consolidation of the region gave pace to the state formation process. Similarly, with the introduction of state-sponsored coinage, these Kingdoms regulated the transaction system, which helped a lot in the direction of their economic development. With the advent of a proper medium of exchange, trade and commerce flourished and the self-sufficient rural economy of these states started to transform into a surplus economy. The regional currencies of medieval North East India are very significant in visualizing the entire economic environment of the region especially to understand the growth of trade and commerce. Trading activity in the North East India can be supplemented by the discoveries of several hoards of different dynastic coins from various remote areas of North East India. By comparing the role of these coins conclusions can be drawn about the prevailing economic condition of the region.

Another area in respect of comparative analysis of these regional currencies is the source of metal for coining money. As there is no silver mines in North East India so the silver must have reached in these states in the course of trade. These dynastic coins provide an interesting case study as the silver coinage was very plentiful at several periods in these states. Side by side of trading activity

silver was acquired in the way of warfare. For example it is recorded in the local chronicles of the Koch kingdom that the kingdom acquired a lot of silver as tribute from various states conquered by Nara Narayan during his military expeditions. Much of this treasure was struck into coins by Nara Narayan. Similarly all the other states acquired silver from taking tributes from their subordinate states.

In terms of cultural comparison among these coins lots of resemblances can be found. The coins of Medieval North East India provide valuable information regarding beliefs and practices of the kings and the people of these kingdoms and by the comparative analysis of the religious epithets inscribed on coins one can understand the cultural sensibilities of the region in general. The religious inscriptions on the coins, together with the name of the king reinforced the religious identity of the monarch and of the state. Presence of name or some time pictures of the Gods and Goddesses on the coins help us to determine the evolution of different religious sects in North East India. The comparative study of varied types of coins belonging to different kingdoms exhibit an embodiment of North East Indian culture in the miniature form. By the in-depth comparative study of the coin symbols from the historical perspective we can get a comprehensive idea of the gradual evolution of religious sects. For example the term '*Sri Sri Siva Charana Kamala Madhukarasya*' is engraved in most of the coins of Koch dynasty. The phrase inscribed on the reverse side of the coins show the deep relationship between the Koch kings with Siva and also it establishes the fact that the association of Siva with the people of the kingdom was very deep-rooted. Likewise the Koch kingdom, Siva was a very popular deity in Medieval North East India which can be supplemented by the coins of Ahom and Tripura kingdom where *Sivait* affiliation can be proved from their religious epithets inscribed on the coins of those two states.

If we compare the various dynastic coins of medieval North East India we donot find any pictorial representation of the deity except in some coins of Tripura where an image showing the traditional attributes of the tribal mother goddess *Nowi*, takes the role of *Garuda* as the *vahana* of

Vishnu and Narayan is depicted as a human-faced dragon, which may have been recognized by the tribal as a deity. So it can be proved that the worship of Vishnu was popular in Tripura and as the dynastic title of the Koch kings was Narayan so it can be assumed that there was a deep interrelationship of Vishnu worship in both Koch and Tripura kingdom.

The absence of pictorial representation either of the ruler or the deity in the coins of these states offers a serious review in respect of comparative understanding of these coins. It is very surprising to us that why the then rulers devoid of practice of inscribing their pictures. The answer can be found in the greater perspective of issuing these coins. These regional currencies had introduced in respect of the gradual penetration of Islamic currencies in North East India and they were inspired by the Islamic coins a lot. In Islamic coins there were no pictorial representation either of the issuer or of the deity due to the non-idol worship philosophy of Islam. So instead of pictorial representation the Islamic rulers inscribed their name and accession year in their coinages. So all the states of North East took this style of minting coins to maintain close similarities with that of the Islamic coinage.

In terms of artistic vigor and sensibilities all the currencies of Medieval North East India share strong resemblances. From a comparative analysis we can find that in the field of decorative design all the regional currencies have drastic similarities. The varied symbols present on the coins of medieval North East India depict a vivid reflection of religious as well as cultural impression of its people as well. These dynastic coins are beautifully stuck which may be termed as masterpieces of contemporary numismatic art. Looking at art on different coins we find a large number of symbols occupying a preeminent position. Though the art motifs on the coins are essentially primitive in nature but some of their creations can be classed as art object. Both religion and practical necessity compelled the issuer of these coins to assign certain decorative ornamentation. As in these states *Shivism* and *Vaisnavism* had a very strong hold so *Sivait* and *Vaishnavite* epithets took a prominent place in the coins of different dynasties. Besides this religious perspective of artistic execution of North East Indian coins some other reasons were also behind it, which compelled the rulers of

different dynasties to choose certain kind of decorative ornamentations. Among these, the other contemporary coins and their religious affiliation was a determining factor behind the execution of numismatic art. The Muslim currency both from Bengal and Delhi was in vogue in the territories of North East India before the establishment of these states and the use of such coins probably influenced the artistic execution of the regional coinage. So when these kingdoms planned to introduce their own currency, they were stylistically very much influenced by the Muslim currencies and copied their style. They issued coins in the prevailing imperial Muslim types. The weight standard and fabric of their coins were initially derived from Sultani *Tanka*. But it was not only the Muslim coins that influenced the artistic designs of the coins of these kingdoms but also the glorious series of ancient Hindu coinages of different dynasties may have profound impact behind their artistic execution on coins. Because all these kingdoms practiced Hinduism in faith so they may have come into touch of ancient Hindu coinages and the artistic excellence of ancient Indian coins shaped their artistic mind. The coins of these kingdoms were basically die-struck and round in shape and made of silver generally but occasionally they were made of gold and contain legend in both sides. Though all the coin issuing state of North East India issued coins round in shape but the Ahoms issued coins in octagonal shape. This octagonal shape gave the Ahom coins a unique place in the entire series of North East coins.

The style of writing legends by these regional states on their coins is very important aspect in comparative analysis. The legends on most of these coins are written in *Devanagari* language but used proto-Bengali or Assamese script. But the Bengali or the Assamese alphabets are found in crude form and it reflects the evolution of Bengali and Assamese alphabet in miniature form. The artistic quality of coin legends depend upon the die cutters. For example, in the time of Nara Narayan when the size of coins were big, the legend could be prominently seen but in the later phase when size of the coin became lesser the legend was written tightly and some cases it was quite difficult to read the legends properly. In the case of the other states the size of the coins gradually reduced. It may be due

to the lack of silver supply or may be the growing use of coins that compelled the kings to struck smaller denominations which ultimately reduced their artistic quality. Besides this, as the technology of making dies was primitive so all the characters of the legend could not be presented in the coins in any of the issues of these states.

The process of de-monetization of the regional currencies of medieval North East India offers a fresh investigation in terms of comparative analysis of these currencies. The complex currency condition in the early phase of British domination in North East led the English East India Company to its intention of establishing one uniform system of currency throughout its possession in North East India. The company's intention was to have the Bengal *Sicca* rupee replace all the other currencies of North East India. As the primary goal of the monetary policy of the British in North East India was to stabilize the exchange rate, so mere introduction of a standardize currency in company's domain was not enough to meet the British need. For this it was extremely important for the colonial masters to stop the circulation of the regional currencies. Instead of using the Company currency the regional powers of North East India used their own currency in day to day transactions. So a series of attempts had been taken by the Company authority to demonetize these princely currencies.

Initially the British authorities permitted the regional kingdom of North East India to mint their own currency but later they found it would be difficult for them if the regional currencies were in circulation. So first of all they imposed several impositions over the free circulations of the different currencies. The British authorities fixed the number of coins to be struck. For example in the Koch kingdom the British authorities asked a certain number of coins to be struck in every year. Likewise the Koch kingdom, several impositions was placed over the free minting of coins in the other Kingdom's currency. The next attempt towards de-monetization of these currencies was that the British authorities denied accepting tribute in the local currencies. Instead of that they claimed that tribute must be paid on imperial currency only. The third step towards the demonetization of regional currencies of North East India was that the British authorities tried to impose the Farukkabad rupees

in the markets of North East India for the steady implantation of their own currency. The British authorities took these measures towards the demonetization of the regional currencies of North East India. Gradually by the pressure of the British authorities the all regional Kingdoms lost its hold over their right of coining money. If we compare the process of demonetization of each and every case then we can find that the procedure of making the British intention was successful similar in each case.

So from the above study it is evidently clear that that in Mediaeval North East India indigenous coins issued by different dynasties occupied a prominent position in politico-economic and cultural spheres in medieval North East India. It is really a surprising fact to us that how in those primitive days the kings of different dynasties felt the necessity of a state sponsored well-organized currency system for the improvement of their subjects. As all the medieval kingdoms emerged in a specific geographical area so in terms of administration they were highly influenced by each other and this steady competition gave birth to so many effective mechanism which ultimately paved the way for the gross development of the entire region. Introduction of a regularized currency in their respective territories was one of the important path breaking event in their history. Though the currency got its initial impetus from outside but with the passage of time they assumed their special character and made their place permanent in the numismatic heritage of the subcontinent. These currencies not only revolutionised the economic scenario but also opened a platform where the North East Indian heritage could be preserved. As the medieval kingdoms were emerged from a common root so in the field of coinage they had common intention, characteristics and utility. In terms of political, economic, cultural and artistic execution they were so similar to each other so that sometimes numismatist can identify just from a glimpse. Not only that like its origin its weakening process was also to some extent same.

Koch coinage has a special importance here because it was the Koch coinage that inspired the other North East Indian kingdoms to strike their own coins. Because when Nara Narayan began his

empire building process he almost conquered the entire North East India and subjugated all other kingdoms under the imperial umbrella of Koch kingdom and ordered to pay tribute by the subjugated kings. This drive compelled the other kingdoms to strike coins for paying tribute to the Koch royal exchequer. So they were very much influenced by the artistic execution of Koch coinage and other allied factors. Not only that Nara Narayan compelled some of these kingdoms to mint coin in the name of Nara Narayan so the initial coinages of those states were minted in the name of the Koch ruler. As time passes the political hold of Koch kingdom over these kingdoms started to reduce and although the tribute paying compulsion was nonexistent but the people of these kingdoms was accustomed with use of currency in their day to day activity, so the rulers of the concerned kingdom carried on the practice of minting coins uninterruptedly. So in this respect the Koch coinage had deep impact on the other contemporary coinages. Similarly if we examine the decorative execution of the Koch coins so we can find that the other territorial currencies of North East India shaped the decorative design of the Koch coinage a lot. For example the square box design of the Koch coins was borrowed from the Manikya coin that was also a tribute paying state in Nara Narayan's reign. Besides this if we examine the denomination of the Koch coins then we can notice that in the initial years of its existence Koch coins were issued in big denomination but after the reign of Lakshmi Narayan smaller denomination were minted. It was probably an impact of the other dynastic coins of North East India. So finally we can say that the Koch coinage and other territorial coinages of North East India had a reciprocal relationship to each other and both of them were influenced by each other tremendously which ultimately increased the accessibility of coins in the entire region.

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