

Numismatic Evidence on the Chronology and Succession of the Rulers of the Kingdom of Kamta-Koch Behar

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All historical interpretation is ultimately based on evidence derived from the sources of history, conventionally derived into two categories – literary and archaeological. From a historical point of view, literary sources include all texts and on the other hand archeological sources include all tangible material remains like inscription, coins and inscribed and un-inscribed images. Among these archaeological sources, coins have a unique place in the reconstruction of the old events.¹ It is right to state that coins have enormous power for initiating “an unending dialogue between the past and the present”. A viable definition of history which underlies three usages of words- thought, record or events, can conspicuously be read from the bearings on the two sides of a coin. A.H.M. Jones pointed out the value of numismatic evidence with the following words – “Numismatic is a science in its own right. Coins deserve study both from the technical and artistic point of view and must be classified typographically and chronologically”.²

A coin technically speaking is a piece of metal of prescribed weight, embellished with designs or legends and produced under the direction of a public or private authority for its use as a medium of exchange.³ Every coin has two sides obverse and reverse. Obverse is also called head. It is the main side of a coin carrying the portrait head of the ruler or a symbol and name of the country. Reverse is the back side of a coin and is called tail. It depicts the denomination or issue price of the coin with year and mint mark underneath.⁴ Besides this technical side the study of coins gives an insight into many aspects of the culture of a region. At first glance, coins may appear to carry little historical information but they provide ample light to several important historical processes. Their very existence and in particular the denominations and number of pieces issued, shed light on the economic and social aspect of a country. The issuing authority sheds light on the political history. The quality of production indicates technological developments. The metal content indicates minting activity, if the metal was mined locally or imported and also the trading link as well. The choice of design and inscription often shows the religious preference of the issuing authority and the quality of execution sheds light on religious iconography and artistic development.⁵ In fact, coins are datable contemporary documents of a rather special nature and as such, they can be of great value to the historians.

The genesis of metallic currency in India was followed by regular issue of coinage in different regions of the country. The use of coins in India can be traced from an early time⁶ The Indian people used to place equal emphasis on *Dharma- Artha- Kama* principal in life. Scholars believe that paradigm of true coins in the modern sense are not available in

any literary work of the pre Buddhistic period. It is also categorically observed that no regular currency or coinage appears to have been introduced even in the age of the *Upanisads* and *Sutras*, as no coins definitely belonging to this period have been unearthed and no specific and undoubted reference to coins occurs in the literature of the period. But without any prejudice or reservation it can be opined that a regular system of coinage or currency was probably in vogue during the time of the great grammarian Panini⁷ (c. sixth-fifth century B.C) who mentions (in *Ashtadhyayi*) coins like – *Pana*, *Karshapana* and *Pada*. This leads us to presume that coins and currency system in India was well known to people, although the other system of exchange was also in practice side by side.⁸ In this paper an attempt will be made to throw some light on the coins issued by the Kamta-Kochbehar Kings.

The state of Koch Behar was situated between 25° 57'40" and 26°32'20" north latitude and 88° 47' 40" and 89°51'35" east longitude. The territory of modern Koch Behar originally formed a part of the ancient kingdom of Pragjotish and Kamrupa⁹ and had no separate existence of its own as a distinct principality prior to the abolition of the ancient Kamarupa Kingdom. The name 'Koch Behar' is a compound of two words Koch and Bihar. The word 'Koch'¹⁰ is a corrupted form of 'Kuch' and it means a race of people and 'Behar' means the abode or land of the Koches. The origin of the Koch Behar State can be traced back as early as to the sixteenth century and it was a small kingdom situated just south of the Himalayas controlling the main route up to the Brahmaputra River from Bengal and Bihar to Assam. The state was founded about 1510 A.D.¹¹ in the vacuum created after the collapse of the Hindu kingdom of Kamrupa and Kamta. There is a great deal of obscurity leading to some academic controversy about the way it was established and more so about the ancestry of its original founder. In spite of a very modest beginning as a small principality in the early years of the sixteenth century, the Koch Behar state was unique for its long existence and can boast of its remote antiquity, sustained continuity and survival down the centuries.

The original inhabitants of Koch Behar and its royal family belonged to a branch of Mongoloid race and believed to have originally come from Tibet. However the history of Koch Behar is mainly based on literary sources. The literatures like *charita*, *vamsavalies*, *Assam Burunjis*, foreign travelers account, *puranas*, diplomatic letters etc. are the main literary sources and they have left an account of chronological history of Koch Behar. But only literature can not be taken as the authentic source material for reconstructing the Koch history:

A few inscriptions of the Koch kings so far known have not been properly utilized and are not therefore, of much help to us in reconstructing the history of Koch Behar. In this respect coins of Koch Behar are of immense historical importance particularly as these coins are among the earliest historical documents that survive from the region and almost invariably dated as they are; for they duly bear the names and epithets of the issuing kings. The evidence of coins not only corroborates genuine facts as given by the literary sources but also supplements information not supplied by the literary sources.

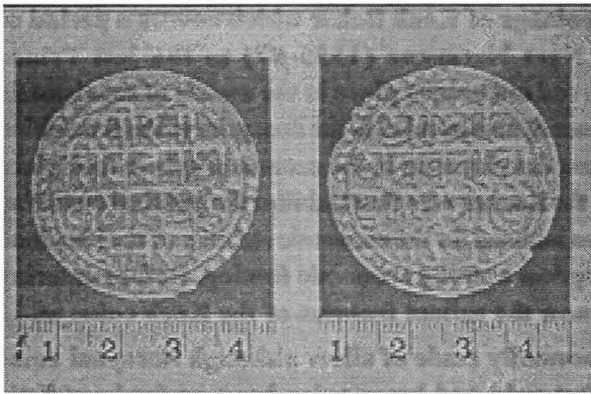
The most extensive series of coinage of Koch Behar which covers a period of about five centuries starting from Nara Narayana (1555-87) to the last Prince Jagaddipendra Narayana (1936-49) curved out unique place in the annals of numismatic heritage of India. Though some other minor dynasties ruled in the area prior to the acquisition of power by the Koches, yet no significant development in the economic sphere took place because of the political instability. It was the Koches who first stabilize the political condition by suppressing other tribal groups and also initiated for the economic stability of the kingdom. They took concrete steps to give the kingdom a strong economic footing. Before entering into the core issue it is important to know the salient features of the Koch coinage.

The coins of Koch Behar are normally made of silver although Narayani coins were struck in gold and brass also. But gold and brass coins have so far been little noticed.¹² The coins are usually of full, half and quarter denominations.

The dates of Koch Behar coins are always given in the Rajasaka era. The Rajasaka era is normally regarded as commencing in 1510 A.D., so that the dates can be converted to A.D by the addition of 1509 years.

The characteristic feature of the Koch Behar coins was that the epithet and the name of the king are inscribed on the obverse side and the phrase "*Sri Sri Shivacharana Kamalamadhu Karasya*" inscribed on the reverse. This particular phrase is engraved in most of the coins of the Koch dynasty. The coins of Koch Kingdom were not only known as '*Narayanimudra*' after the title Narayana assumed by the rulers but also known as '*Sivatanka*'¹³ as the association of Siva with the people of the Kingdom was very deep rooted.

There is no historical evidence as to when coins were first used in old *Kamatapura* or Koch kingdom. The oldest surviving coins of *Kamatapura* were of Samsuddin Ilias Sah which was recovered with other coins from *Kamatapura* (Gosanimari) in 1863 by the discovery of a big hoard of 13500 pieces of silver coins.¹⁴ After Nilambara the last king of *Khen* dynasty of *Kamatapura*, Visvasimha of the Koch clan became the ruler of *Kamatapura*. Visvasimha during his first few years was busy in consolidating his position to the north of the Brahmaputra. After the departure of the Muhammadans the whole country was ruled by a number of petty independent chiefs. Visvasimha seized this opportunity and in course of time made himself the master of the country west of Bara Nadi.¹⁵ Visvasimha assumed the title of *Kamateswara* and declared himself an independent king after his formal coronation in c.1496 A.D. It was the usual practice among the Indian rulers to issue coins in their own name, the moment they felt themselves independent and powerful enough to do that. But unfortunately no coins have so far been discovered. This may lead us to believe that unstable political condition of the time might have prevented Visvasimha from issuing any coins in his name. But *Rudrasimha Burunji* refers to a meeting between the Ahom King *Suhunmun* and *Visvasimha* in *Saka* 1419 (i.e. A.D.1497) in which *Visvasimha* presented a purse of 500 coin struck in his own name and five horses. From the above statement it is clear that *Visvasimha* issued coins in his own name and we believe with Khan Chowdhury Amanatulla Ahamed that his coins may be discovered when the old city of *Kamarupa* will be excavated.¹⁶



An unusual coin of Nara Narayan

Visvasimha's successor Nara Narayan ascended the throne in 1555. Although there may be speculations on whether *Visvasimha* issued coins or not but surely it was the credit of his son Nara Narayan whose coins are discovered plenty in number from Koch Behar and adjoining Assam.¹⁷ During Nara Narayan's reign the Koch Empire expanded almost upto Burma in the east and in the west upto Bihar and several neighboring

rulers were forced to acknowledge the suzerainty of Koch Behar. The military campaigns enabled Nara Narayan to accumulate a large quantity of silver as booty and tribute by which Nara Narayan could strike coins. His full rupees are very plentiful but only a few specimens of half and quarter rupees are known. All the coins are of same basic design, with an invocation to Siva on the obverse and the name of king and the date 1477 (1555 A.D.) on the reverse. It is probably that this date merely represents the accession year. These coins were struck on several occasions and perhaps even in the several mints throughout the reign.

After the death of Nara Narayana his son Laxmi Narayan (1555-81) ascended the throne and also coined money. The coins of Laxmi Narayana were identical in style to the late coins of his father. Apart from his half rupee coin, quarter and half rupees are also found. All these coins have the same accession year that is 1509.

After Laxmi Narayana the most important names of the Kings, who struck coins are Raghu Deva (1581-1603), Parikshit Narayan (1603-1613), Bira Narayan (1627-1633), Prana Narayan (1633-1665), Mada Narayan (1663-1681), Vasudeva Narayan (1681-1683), Mahendra Naryana (1683-1695), Rupa Narayana (1695-1715), Rajendra Narayana (1770-72), Dharendra Narayan (1772-75), Dhairyendra Narayana (1775-83) and Harendra Narayana (1783-1839).¹⁸

This continuation of striking coins was hampered due to the invasion of Bhutan in the late 18th century. The King of Koch Behar took help of the English East India Company to resist the Bhutanese attack and made an agreement with the British (1773)¹⁹ By this agreement Koch kingdom became a tributary state and it lost the authority of minting coins. Finally the Koch mint was permanently closed by a British order of 27th December, 1845. But in spite of that coins were struck ceremonially upto the reign of Jagaddipendra Narayan (1936) and the rulers retained the right to strike one hundred one gold and one thousand one silver coins on the occasion of their coronation and the transaction of Narayani currency was in vogue upto the first half of the 19th century.

Notes and References

1. Carr, E.H., *What is History?* Cambridge, 1961, p.11.
2. Jones, A.H.M., *Numismatic and History: Essays in Roman Coinage*, Oxford, 1956, p.13.
3. Jash, Pranabananda., *Coins and Culture of Early North India*, Delhi, 2008, p.5.
4. Singh, Upinder, *A History of Ancient and Early Medieval India*, Delhi, 2009, p. 51.
5. Rhodes, N.G., *The Coinage of North East India*, (unpublished manuscript) Hythe, Kent, (U.K), 1994, p.1.
6. According to Cunningham (*Coins of Ancient India*, London, 1891, p. 43) the date of the earliest coinage goes back to 1000 B.C, but J. Allan (*British Museum Catalogue of the Coins of Ancient India*, London, 1936, pp. xvi, xvii, xix) is not inclined to place them earlier than the Maurya period, the single-type silver coins alone being given an earlier date.
7. Agarwala, V.S., *India as Known to Panini*, Lucknow, 1953, pp. 37ff and 48ff.
8. It is generally believed that the method of exchange of the primitive man was usually confined to barter. Besides this Cowrie shells also served as currency for smaller transactions.
9. Chaudhury, H.N., *The Cooch Behar State and its Land Revenue Settlements*, Koch Behar, 1903, p.209.
10. The scholars are not unanimous about the etymological source of the term 'Koch'. S.K. Chatterji a distinguished philologist, argues that the term Koch has been originally derived from the Indo-Aryan source *Kawamca*, written as *Kamoca*, which was sanskritized as *Kamboja*. (Sunity kumar Chatterji, (1998) *Contributions to the History and Culture of India*, reprint ed, The Asiatic Society, p.111, Calcutta). The term *kamboja* has been further elevated to *kubachaka* through *Komc-Koch-Kubacha* continuum. Whatever may be the actual source and differentiability in nomenclature we will use the term Koch to indicate the race.
11. Rhodes, N.G & S.K. Bose, *The Coinage of Cooch Behar*, Dhubri, 1999, p. 1.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 60.
13. It was a very ancient practice in India to connect the symbol or name of *Siva* or the joint names of *Hara* and *Gouri* with coins. In early times such coins were called '*Sivanka*' tanka. The coins of Koch Kingdom are known as '*Sivatanka*' because Koch coins were dedicated to the cult of Lord *Siva*. In the coins the rulers generally describe themselves as the "devotees of Lord Siva" as we find the phrase "*Sri Sri Shivacharana Kamalamadhu Karasya*" inscribed on the reverse side of the Koch coin. The most probable cause for this devotion is that the Koches always tried to project themselves

as descended from Lord *Siva*. (See, Ghoshal.S.C., *A History of Cooch Behar* (1942), Koch Behar, p. 304.)

14. Khan Choudhuri, A.A., *Koch Beharer Itihas*, (Bengali), Koch Behar, 1936, p. 293.
15. Barua G.R., *Assam Burunji*, (reprint), Gauhati, 1972, p.55.
16. Bhattacharya, P.K., 'The Coins of Visvasimha and Suhunmun' *JNSI*, Vol. XXXII, Pt I, 1970, pp 42-5, Singh J.P., 'Did Visvasimha Issue Coins?' *Bulletin of the Assam State Museum*, No. IV, 1982, pp. 48-54.
17. Khan Choudhuri, A.A., *op.cit.*, pp. 295-297.
18. Rhodes N.G & S.K. Bose, *op.cit.* pp. 4-16.
19. Khan Choudhuri, A.A., *op.cit.*, pp. 373-37.