

State, Power and Ethics of Governance: A Kamata-Koch Experience

Dr. Bijoy Kumar Sarkar

The Kamata-Koch kingdom was included originally in the ancient kingdom of Kamarupa extending from the eastern part of the Brahmaputra valley up to Karatoya. It was from the thirteenth to the fifteenth century A.D. that the whole tract seems to have formed a kingdom and the name had been changed from Kamarupa to Kamata. In the *Baharistan-i-Ghayabi*¹, the country is mentioned as Kamata. The name Koch Behar is, however, comparatively of recent origin.

The history of the Kamata-Koch territory may be obtained since the fall of the Khen dynasty (1185-1498) in the hands of Hussain Shah, ruler of Gauda. With the decline of the Khen dynasty, a Koch chieftain Visva Simha succeeded in establishing the Kamata-Koch kingdom in 1515 extending from the river Karatoya in the west to the Badnadi in the east with his capital at Kamatapura. Visva Simha's son and successor Maharaja Naranarayana (1533/34-1587) is said to have made away a part of his kingdom extending from the Sankosa in the west to the Badanadi in the east in 1581 to his nephew Raghudeva. The successors of the main line of the Koch dynasty after Naranarayana continued to rule the western part of the old kingdom, i.e. the Kamata-Koch kingdom with the river Sankosa as its eastern boundary till 12th September, 1949 when its administration was transferred to the Government of India. On 1st January, 1950 it became a district of West Bengal.

As per the time-honoured *Varna* system, an Indian king was supposed to belong to the *Kshatriya* caste. Descending from the non-Aryan Tibeto-Burma group, the founder King Visva Simha was left with no such scope to ensure social approval of his kingship. Hence the Kamata-Koch state's attempt to legitimize its power might have been made in an alternative way: the theory of divine origin of kingship. It is repeatedly claimed in different texts such as *Vamsavali*, *Bhagavatasara*, *Kamarupa Buranji*, *Rajopakhyana*,² etc. that Visva Simha was a son begotten of Mahadeva or Mahadeva himself was born as Visu. To strengthen the claim of his divine descent, Visva Simha who is believed to have been a worshipper of Devi³ since his childhood, not only performed the worship of Siva by himself, but also got initiated into the Saiva tenets by a Brahman named Kalichandra Bhattacharya.⁴ It is also said that he became king on a divine throne, an umbrella and a scepter of divine origin being used at the investiture. He imported a large number of Brahmins from Kanauj, Benaras and other places⁵ ostensibly with a view to engaging them in legitimizing and strengthening his power base.

The worship of Siva performed all by him⁶ as well his initiation to Saiva faith is also quite significant. No other king of the Kamata-Koch dynasty is ever heard to officiate in the worship of any deity. It points to Visva Simha's belief in traditional mode of worship prevalent among the Koch people since time memorial, who were yet to be fully sanskritised and also points to his respect for the ceremonial ethics of the people over he was ruling. Needless to say that his formal initiation to Saivism indicated his desire like others to join the main-stream of religious views held by the Hindus. This may be seen as an attempt to strike a balance in religious attitude between ceremonial beliefs of two classes of his subjects – the Hindus and the semi-Hinduised or aboriginal tribes. The sense of balance is unquestionably essential for a judicious ruler to stiffen his moral hold over the people, to do away with possibility of any popular discontentment over the ceremonial issue and to prove the ruler's adherence to governmental ethics. The same motive becomes manifest in case of Naranarayana too. On the eve of his expedition against the Ahom King, Naranarayana worshipped the god Siva in accordance with the Hindu Sastras prevalent at that time.⁷ However, while proceeding to attack the Ahom kingdom, he dreamt a dream in which Mahadeva is said to have dictated that the king should organize a dance in honour of him according to the traditional Kachari rites which he had failed to perform after he accepted Hinduism.⁸ Naranarayana accordingly organized a Kachari dance performance offering ducks, pigeons, fowls, pigs, buffaloes and liquor to Mahadeva on the bank of the Sankosh River.⁹ After the ceremony, he ordained that ceremonies to be performed in temples and religious places to the north of Gohain Kamal road henceforth be conducted by Kachari priests and those to the south of the said road be conducted by Brahmin priests.¹⁰ This is again a glaring example of the Kamata-Koch state's adherence to governmental ethics of honouring the religious sentiment of the people under rule with a view to keeping the popular approval of the royal power in place.

Coins stand for the symbol of independence or sovereignty and issue of coins illuminates the exercise of the political power of the issuing ruler in his kingdom.¹¹ Hence, minting of coinage was a customary practice at the time of accession both in ancient and medieval India. Dynastic coinage came to be an instrument of legitimization of authority vis-a-vis symbolism of power in North-east India in medieval period too and the Kamata-Koch kingdom was no exception to this. King Naranarayana introduced the Koch coins popularly known as Narayani coins¹² presumably with a motive of legitimizing his power. As a reflection of political supremacy, there prevailed a tendency among the rulers to impose their own currency over others after a military victory. This tendency comes to surface when we see that Maharaja Naranarayan (1540-1587), during the conquest of Assam, is prohibiting the ruler of Jayantia from striking coins in his own name.¹³ As such, Jayantia coins were inscribed - '*Jayantapura-purandara*' (ruler of Jayantapur) without the name of a particular ruler. Their description is: *Sree Sree Jayantapura Purandarasya* sake 1592 (on the obverse); *Sree Sree Sivacharanka malamadhuka rasya* (on the reverse).¹⁴ An exemplary display of ethical standard comes to

our notice when see that the Jayantia chiefs respected the Kamata-Koch Maharajas even when the Cooch Behar power and influence waned.

The Koch Kingdom was a contemporary of the Mughal Empire, which is found to have issued coins dedicated to *Allah*. Silver coin of Akbar is known with inscriptions of the Islamic declaration of faith. The declaration reads: "There is no god but God, and Muhammad is the messenger of Allah."¹⁵ The phenomenon highlights the religion of the ruler (i.e. Islamic religion). On the other hand, the currency of the Kamata-Koch kings prior to Rajrajendranarayan (1911-13) was devoted to god Siva¹⁶ from whom the Koch dynasty claimed its descent. Interestingly, compared to the Mughal Empire, the Kamata-Koch Kingdom was very, very small with much less power-base. Still, numismatic dedication to the guardian-deity unquestionably manifests the desire of the Kamata-Koch kings to assert their own sovereign power and to stick to their ethics of governance. Again, the continuity of the same practice for almost four centuries from Naranarayana to Nripendranarayana¹⁷ in spite of an intense, individual inclination of a few important Koch rulers to some other religious faiths like Neo-Vaishnavism, Saktatism, the *New Dispensation* (Nabobidhan), etc also points to continued reverence to the guardian deity and the deity most popular among the people.

In 1772, the whole of Coochbehar with the exception of Rahimgunj was conquered by the Bhutiyas who built forts in various parts of the country. In this emergency, the Nazir Deo Khagendranarayan applied to the Government of India for help and this finally led to the conclusion of a Treaty between the English East India Company and Coochbehar on the 5th of April, 1773. Under the treaty, the State of Cooch Behar acknowledged subjection to the will of the English East India Company, agreed to make over the Company one-half of the annual revenues of the state for ever, obtained the Company's protection and allowed the state to be annexed to the province of Bengal.¹⁸ When the terms of the treaty were settled, the Maharaja proposed that the right to strike his own coins should remain unimpaired. Though the Company was in favour of the Rajah voluntarily and cheerfully relinquishing the privilege of coining, it would not insist on it if the king was reluctant to do so. However, the treaty did not specify the abolition of the minting right. The very next year the Company promulgated the order of not accepting the new Narayani coins.¹⁹ In 1789 A.D., while the authorities of the Company admitted the right of the king to strike coins in unequivocal terms, they expressed their desire to curtail it. When the Company managed the affairs of the State as guardian of the minor Maharaja Harendranarayan, they almost stopped the Narayani issue. Afterwards, after receiving powers of administration, the Maharaja sought to affirm his right of minting. A Resolution of Government dated the 26th August 1802 A.D. admitted the right.²⁰ But the Cooch Behar State was not allowed to exercise the right on the ground of serious inconvenience. In 1821 A.D. while the Maharaja again raised the question, he now was asked to give up the claim in apprehension of *opening the door to abuses not easily controlled, besides being on other accounts objectionable*.²¹ On the 3rd February 1828, the Government was again addressed in the matter, but they now urged the ruler to

stop the use of Narayani coins. The Government issued orders in 1836 A.D., prohibiting the practice.²² In letter No. 2969 dated the 27th December 1845, the Agent was ordered by the Government to close the mint in Cooch Behar.²³ During the minority of Maharaja Nripendranarayan, the charge of administration was vested in the Government (1864 A.D.). Taking advantage of the situation, they ordered in 1865 A.D. that the use of Narayani coins should cease also in the State of Cooch Behar. Finally, from the year 1866, the Government coins became legal tender in the State of Coach Behar.²⁴ Even after the formal closure of the Cooch Behar mint, the right was, however, retained by the rulers to strike 101 gold coins and 1001 silver coins on the occasion of their installation. Shivendra Narayan (1839-47), Narendra Narayan (1847-63) and Nripendra Narayan (1863-1911) availed themselves of this privilege with locally made coins, used purely as ceremonial gifts. The tradition was continued by Raja Rajendra (1911-13) and Jitendra Narayan (1913-22), although their coins were struck by the Calcutta goldsmith Grish, as were those struck by Jagaddipendra, on his accession in 1922. These ceremonial issues had a purely symbolic and commemorative function in demonstrating that the Maharaja still retained the right to strike his own coins, in spite of the fact that he was not allowed to circulate them as currency.

In spite of their claim for descent from the god Siva and thereby belonging to the Siva family as noted in *Rajopakyana* as well as the numismatic dedication to this very deity,²⁵ Saivism was never accorded the status of the state or royal religion, though instances could be found of construction or repair of many Siva temples along with making provision for his worship. On the other hand, religious faiths such as the Sakta or the Vaisnava or the Brahma religion were bestowed with the same privilege by different Koch rulers in their respective reigning period because of their personal inclination. How to account for this apparent contradiction? The answer lies again in the Kamata-Koch kings' concern for popular sentiment and thereby governmental ethics. The most predominating element in the population of the Kamata-Koch Kingdom was the Rajbanshis, who formed about 60% of the entire and 87% of the Hindu population in the State.²⁶ Roughly speaking, the community had only one main occupation which is agriculture²⁷ and their most important deity was Siva²⁸ who is related to agriculture and fertility.²⁹ Naturally, whoever might have been the personal god or goddess of different Kamata-Koch rulers, they had but to patronize the worship of the deity in some way or other keeping in view the deep-rooted faith of the people in this very god. This, no doubt, speaks of their concern for observance of ethics of governance. However, we also find the Kamata-Koch Kings deviating from their traditional ethics of dedicating the coins to Siva. In the reign of Maharaja Rajrajendranarayan, the practice of inscribing coins with the coat-of-arms including the rampant lion, the elephant and the Sanskrit motto "*Yato dharmastato jayah*" in modern Bengali character, was first introduced in place of the name of Siva.³⁰ The coins of the next two Maharajas were struck in the same style. This deviation could be accounted for by the fact that Maharaja Raj Rajendra Narayan and his successors who switched over from Hinduism to Brahma Religion, did not find any

reason in inscribing on the coins the name of the god they did not believe in. But these is a clear case of breaking away from the governmental ethics on personal grounds as the people of the Kamata-Koch Kingdom remained absolutely untouched by the Brahma religion and were still associated with the worship of Siva as before.

An instance of deviation from the governmental ethics again comes to notice during the reign of Maharaja Nripendranarayana who embraced the Brahma religion and declared it as the state religion.³¹ The conservative Hindus were not favourably disposed to the spread of the Brahma faith in Cooch Behar but they did not have the courage to protest against the state religion. On the contrary, the Brahma followers enjoyed the royal patronage and other special privileges. For example, Lalit Kumar Chattopadhyay who was not a Brahma joined the Victoria College on August 07, 1893.³² The high officials of the Coochbehar State under the secure shelter of the king publicly condemned the Hindu religion, custom and manners. Lalit Kumar protested against both these things and thereby landed himself into royal displeasure. To save his self-respect Mr. Chattopadhyay had to relinquish his post on August, 1894.³³

From the above discussion, there emerge a few noticeable things. To consolidate the popular base of the royal power, the Kamata-Koch kings had taken different steps: invention of the divine origin of kingship, import of Brahmanas from different centres of repute, initiation into the Brahmanical faith, demonstration of uniform respect for both Tribal and Brahmanical mode of worship, etc. To assert their sovereignty, they issued coins and compelled the sub-ordinate rulers not to issue coins in their name. To observe the ethics of governance as well as sovereignty, they had dedicated the coins to Siva, the deity of their own religion and done many, many other things as mark of respect to the same Siva, the most popular deity of the people. Self-stripped of required material powers to safeguard their own dignity and sovereignty against the Bhutanese, they gradually surrendered to the sweet will of another stronger foreign power, the English East India Company. This clearly demonstrates that it is not possible for a weaker state to adhere to the ethics of governance due to lack of power. The Lalit Kumar episode also shows that the Koch Kings could not always live up to the long-nourished tradition of tolerance and equality to people of different religious faiths. Still it can, safely, be said that the Kamata-Koch Kings used powers more or less for betterment of the people and held the tradition of ethical standard in governance fairly high.

Notes & References

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3. *Darrang Rajvamsavali*, vv.78-87, 93-103, 114-7, 130, 215f. 225f., 330-3, 347-54; Vasu, N.N., *Social History of Kamarupa*, Vol. II, New Delhi, First Reprint, p. 56.
4. Khan Chowdhury Amanatulla Ahmed, *Koch Beharer Itihas* (Volume 1), ed. by Hiten Nag, N.L. Publishers, Siliguri, First published in 1936, First Reprint 2005, p. 95 – '*Kālichandra nāmē bhattāchārjaka ānilā. Śibara dikṣāka tēhē ānandētē dilā.*' Gandharba Nārāyanera Vansābalī, 52 patra).
5. Khan Chowdhury Amanatulla Ahmed, *op. cit.*, p.105.
6. *Ṣōraśōpacārē puḷā āpani karāya. Brahmamantra japi mūla mantra uccārāya. Daṇḍabatē pari stuti kara nta bistara. Tāhāna stutita tuṣṭa haya- ta śankara-* Darrang Rajvamsavali composed by Suryakhari Daivajna and edited by Nabin Chandra Sharma, pp. 44-45.
7. Daivajna Suryakhari, *Darrang Rajvamsavali*, Edited by Nabin Chandra Sharma, p. 68.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 66.
9. *Ibid.*
10. "*Gōhāmī kamala āli madhyē sīmā kari. Uttarēra phālē āchē yatēka kachārī. Sōhiphālē dēbālaya āchē yata yata. Kōcē mēcē pujibēka mōhara bākyata. Dakṣiṇara phālē pūjā brāhmanē kariba. Ēhi nibandhanē sabē dharma prabartiba.*"- *Ibid.*, p. 152.
11. Christopher, Howgego, *Ancient History from coin*, Routledge, London and Ney York, 1955, p. 39.
12. Ghosal, S.C., *A History of Cooch Behar* (A translation of *Koch Biharer Itihasa*, Vol. I by Khan Choudhury, Amanatullah Ahmed) Cooch Behar, 1942, p. 295.
13. Ghosal, *op. cit.*, pp. 304.
14. *Ibid.* p.305.
15. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Akbar>.
16. Ghosal, *op. cit.*, pp. 295, 297-98, 300.
17. *Ibid.* p. 304.
18. *Ibid.*, pp. 306-07.
19. *Bengal District Records*, Rungpore, Vol. 1, p. 41.
20. Khan Chowdhury Amanatulla Ahmed, *op. cit.*, p. 309.
21. *Cooch Behar Select Records*, Vol. II, p. 41.
22. Letter dated the 13th February, 1837 A.D. to the Agent from the Government. *Cooch Behar Select Records*, Vol. II, p. 73.

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25. Ghosal, *op. cit.*, pp. 295-6, 297-8, 300.
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27. *Ibid.*, p. 154.
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29. Roy Girija Sankar, *Uttar Bange Rajvamshi Kshatriya Jatir Puja-Parban* (in Bengali), N.L. Publishers, Dibrugarh (Assam), 1970, p. 13.
30. Ghosal, *op. cit.*, p. 304.
31. Roy Swapan Kumar, *Prachin Koch Beharer Sampurno Itibritta* (in Bengali), Calcutta, 1413 B.S., p. 246.
32. Brajendra Nath Bandopadhyay, 'Lalit Kumar Chattopadhyay,' *Sahitya Sadhak Charitmala*, Volume 9, Bangiya Sahitya Parishad, Calcutta, p. 11.
33. *Ibid.*