

Growth of Trade and Commerce in Koch kingdom: A Numismatic Study

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Abstract: *The study of coinage and economy of any area has its own appeal. As they were not much affected by external influences so they often proceed along their own line and thus had significance for people trying to determine the general patterns of economic life. Koch kingdom an erstwhile princely state had its own series of coinage and it was extensively used in day to day transaction in the kingdom and adjoining areas. The introduction of a regularized currency revolutionarily transformed the mode of transaction and ushered a new era in the growth of trade and commerce in the kingdom. In this write up we will discuss the role of Koch currency in the expansion of trade and commerce in the kingdom and thus try to comprehend the economic atmosphere in the Koch kingdom.*

Keywords: *Koch, Coinage, Trade and commerce, Economy, Kingdom.*

The Koch Kingdom¹ situated in the sub Himalayan Bengal was an important politico-cultural identity in the history of medieval North-East India. Being a contemporary state of the Mughal Empire the Kingdom succeeded to preserve its sovereign status until the last half of the eighteenth century. As the state emerged from a stateless situation to huge kingdom, so it went through several phases of economic transformation. Among these, the introduction of standardized currency² system of its own ushered a new epoch not only in the Kingdom itself but also in the economic sphere of the entire North-East India, as the state in its full phase conquered almost the whole of North-East India.

It is markedly clear from archeological as well as literary sources that Koch kingdom issued coins in view of political and economic purposes. Though the early impetus of minting coins came from political prerogatives but economic reasons were as strong as the earlier cause. Probably it was due to the economic cause that compelled the kingdom 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, the Kingdom regulated the transaction system,

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which helped a lot in the direction of economic development. With the advent of a proper medium of exchange, trade and commerce flourished and the self-sufficient rural economy of the state started to transform into a surplus economy. Trading activity in the Koch kingdom can be supplemented by the discoveries of several hoards of Koch coins from various remote areas of North-East India.³ In the present write-up, an attempt will be made to show the role of the Koch currency in trade and transaction in the Koch kingdom as well as to highlight on how the economic basis of the state developed depending on its established currency system, which gradually revolutionized the entire economic scenario of the region. But before going into the core issue of trade and commerce we must have a clear understanding of the economic base of the kingdom.

Contemporary local sources⁴ and accounts left by the foreigners⁵ reveal that the region during the 16th -17th centuries, witnessed a period of transition from tribal agricultural patterns to a more advanced feudal productive systems resulting in the growth of agricultural output in the kingdom. Agriculture was the main source of surplus generation. Introduction of advanced agricultural techniques and technologies for cultivation by the Koch kings had contributed to the surplus generation.⁶ Instead of agro products the kingdom was always rich in forest and animal products. Besides these, crafts and Industries reached in a considerable advance stage due to the continuous encouragement by the early rulers.⁷ The *Darang Raj Vamsavali* and other contemporary sources for example, mentioned some professional communities and products which clearly proved the existence of an organized crafts and industries in the region. With the state formation, peaceful political condition and admixture of the tribal and non-tribal techniques during the reign of Nara Narayana and his successors crafts and industry had made considerable progress. Manufacturing goods in the Koch kingdom had been extensively and qualitatively produced.⁸ All this not only encouraged the native merchant class to pursue commercial works but also attracted foreigners to carry on trade with this region. These developments in agriculture, craft, industry and marketable surplus productions gave impetus to the development of trade and commerce not only within the kingdom but also in the whole of North-East India. To this may be added all encouragements accorded by the rulers, whose aim was to establish both political and as well as economic hegemony over the neighboring territories. However it is not clear from the available sources that whether the state was directly involved in trade and commerce or not, but from the available literary sources indicates that the state directly controlled the trade and commerce to some extent through different administrative levels. For example Visva Singha had appointed his son Megha Narayan as a supervisor of the weaving industries and to collect taxes from the weavers and washer men and king Nara Narayan also had continued this office.⁹ Besides this, the introduction of the regularized currency may also be treated as the state's initiative towards the consolidation of trade and commerce. Probably Nara Narayan introduced his currency to boost trade and commerce in his newly established empire. From contemporary and near contemporary

literary sources we can know that the Koch kingdom had effective trade relations with neighboring territories like with Bengal, Assam, Tripura, Kachar, Jayantipur, Bhutan, Tibet and with the Mughals.¹⁰ Trade links with these neighbors and internal trade were the matter of great care for the Koch kingdom.

II

But the effective maintenance of trade and commercial relation both inter and intra-regional compass need a well-organized system of currency. Because small regional level trading activity may be carried on by barter system but to carry out inter-regional large scale commerce, the presence of currency was an essential requirement. There is no historical evidence as to when coins were first used in the Koch kingdom for effective undertaking of economic activity. Currency in the Koch kingdom before the advent of the *Narayani Mudra* was consisted of *Cowaris*. Likewise other parts of Bengal *Cowaris* were regularly used in small and internal transactions only.¹¹ A special kind of fruit called Almond was also accepted as money.

The Kochking Nara Narayan first understood the necessity of eradication of the complexities of barter mode of transaction. Though some numismatist says that Visva Singha, the founder of the kingdom had his metallic currency but no specimen of Visva Singha's coins have been yet discovered.¹² Being initiated by Nara Narayan, *Narayani Mudra* continued up to the second half of the eighteenth century without any interruption but later under the pressure of English East India Company it gradually withdrawn. It was Nara Narayan who first stabilized the political condition by suppressing the other tribal groups of the region and then began the process of economic consolidation to establish his kingdom upon a strong economy base. The introduction of the state sponsored currency for effective continuance of trade and commerce is an integral part of this consolidation process.

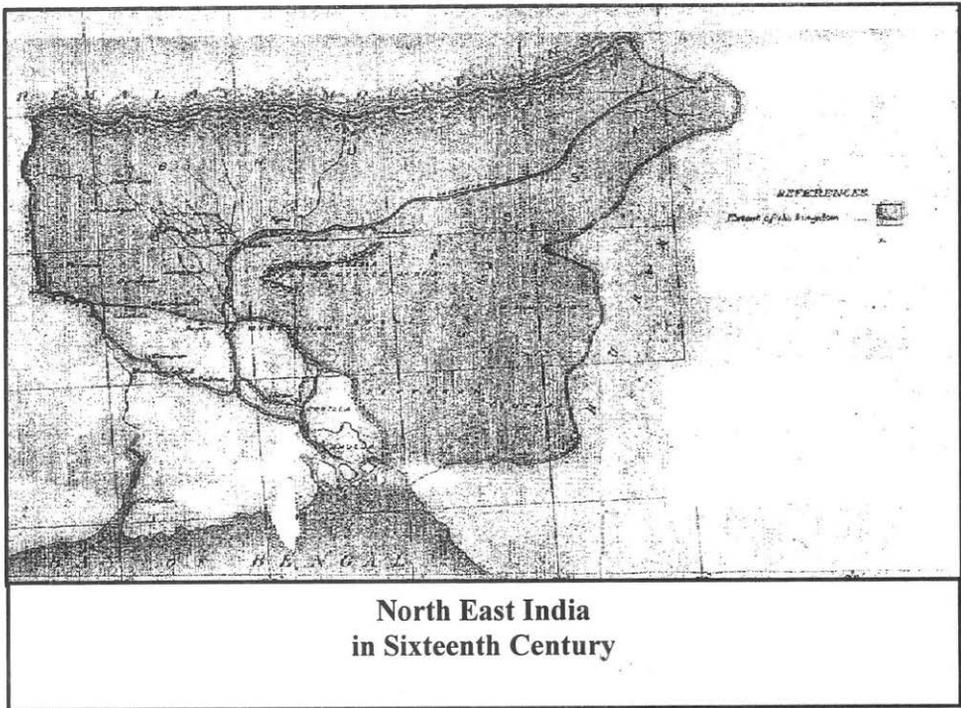
After introduced by Nara Narayan the *Narayani* currency became an acceptable standard medium of exchange both in inter-regional and intra-regional trade of Northern part of Bengal, lower Assam, Bhutan and other adjoining territories.¹³ It led to the growth of trade and commerce in favor of the Koch state. Contemporary literature particularly the biographies of Sankardeva and his disciple Madhadeva contain the references of circulation of the coins among the masses of the region. The *Guru Charita* of Ramcharan Thakur frequently mentions the *taka*, *adhtaka*, *shiki* as the prevailing coins for ordinary and big transactions.¹⁴ *Narayani* currency had greatly monetized the whole economic structure of the region. Besides this the period also witnessed introduction of coins in almost all the tribal states of the North-East India.¹⁵ The Ahom, the Kacharis and the Jayantiya kings issued coins and these currencies brought about the process of modernization in commercial activities. Thus beginning from the 16th century down to the

middle of the 18th century the North Eastern markets became conceived of gold, silver and copper coins.

The study of the role of currency in trade and commerce can be divided into two phases. As the currency was in circulation un-interruptedly up to 1773 so the influence of Narayani coins over the transaction system was more high comparing the period after 1773 when the British influence in the state was increased gradually and the role of imperial currency became dominant because of the repeated interruption of minting Narayani currency by the part of the Koch rulers.

During the early rulers the extent of trading activity was reached its zenith as king Nara Narayan conquered a considerable part of the North-East India. Sukladwaja, the commander in chief and also brother of Nara Narayan compelled the other North East Indian kings like Ahom, Tripura, Kachar, Jayantipur, Manipur to subjugate before Nara Narayan.¹⁶ These kingdoms had their own currency system and after defeat in the hand of the Koch, they forced to stop minting their own coins and asked to mint coins in the name of Nara Narayan. This event tremendously enhanced the importance of Narayani currency in local trading activity in those state. Because as the local currencies were forced to stop, the local markets faced a scarcity of coins and so in place of indigenous currency, Narayani currency played an important role in day to day transaction. Besides as these kingdoms were compelled to pay taxes in Narayani currency so they encouraged the local traders to trade in Narayani currency and extract tax in Narayani rupees from them to pay tribute to Koch ruler.

During the reign of Nara Narayan the power and prestige of the kingdom was in a high stature so the subjugated kings did not raised voices for their sovereignty but after Nara Narayan due to the succession debate with the Raghu Deva state was divided into two regions that is the western Koch kingdom and Eastern Koch kingdom popularly known as Koch Hazo.¹⁷ During this period almost all the subjugated states emerged as sovereign power and again started to mint their own coins and gradually Narayani currency lost its hold from the markets of North East India and Narayani currency confined only in the territories of the Koch kingdom, west of the river Sankosh.



Area of Circulation of Narayani Currency in Late Sixteenth Century

Due to the paucity of reliable source of information it is very difficult to know the total amount of money circulation in the markets of Koch kingdom but the tribute structure can be treated here as substantive source of information. As the Koches after Nara Narayan were subjugated by the Mughals, so from the amount of tribute payable to the Mughal exchequer we can get a rough idea about the total volume money in the kingdom. In the later phase of the Koch rule the Mughol interventions in the state had increased the demand of revenue in cash also got pace. So the process of money collection from the peasants was regularized. From the occasional references contained in the contemporary literatures an idea can be made about the amount of collected revenue. Annual tribute paid by Lakshmi Narayan to the Mughals was Rs. 1,00,000 or 80,000 Narayani Tanka.¹⁸ The *Darrang Raj Vamsavali* claims that king Raghudeva Narayana had a hard cash of Rs. Three cores in his treasury. King Parikshit Narayana offered a peshkash of Rs. 80,000 to the Mughals.¹⁹ Similarly Prana Narayana paid Rs. 55,000 to the Mughol governor of Bengal in 1665 as an indemnity.²⁰ The *Fathiya-i-Ibriya* also refers that the kingdom of Prana Narayana had the capacity of yielding Rs. 8, 00,000 as land revenue per year.²¹ Even *Fathiya-i-Ibriya's* writer estimated the revenue according to the Mughal system of $\frac{1}{3}^{\text{rd}}$ of the total production it was not less than Rs. 6,00,000 in the Koch system. This huge amount of land revenue and tribute indirectly points out the amount of money circulation in the Koch kingdom. As the amount was extracted from the

common people so it is not heard to assume that they acquired cash only by sealing their agro-products and menial products in the markets of the Koch territories and which ultimately to some extent gave impetus to the trade and commerce in the Kingdom.

From literary references we can establish that Narayani currency was hugely popular and it was a greater acceptability in trade and transactions. A number of monetary transactions in Narayani coins have been mentioned in autobiographies, biographies, chronicles and literature such as *Baharistan-i-Ghaybi*, *Guru CharitaKatha* and *Darrang Raj Vamsavali* etc. covering the mostly earlier periods of Koch rule. Substantial number of documents, archive materials and the books written by foreigners clearly indicate that Narayani coins were highly sought after for trade, transaction and payment of revenues. Such information obviously rejects the existing belief that Narayani coins were only used as ceremonial gift items, donations to the temples and royal administrative class.

As to the paucity of reliable information on the economic scenario and the role of currency on it, it is very hard to draw any accurate picture of the role of currency in trade and commerce in markets of the Koch kingdom, but it can be easily imagined that *Narayani* currency was an acceptable mode of transaction during the independent rulers of the Koch kingdom. Because starting from Nara Narayan come down to Dharyendra Narayan all the kings introduced coins not only in the time of their accession but also several times in their reign with different dies. It is considered that only Nara Narayan used one hundred and fifty different kindsdies to mint coins.²² The coin hoards of different rulers has been discovered not only within the actual territories of the kingdom but also from distant places of North-East India where Koch rule was established during the reign of Nara Narayan. Mere hoarding for wealth was not possible in those days because hording needs availability of coins in good numbers but in those days due to the metallic scarcity, coins were minted in limited numbers and with demand or necessity. So most probably coins were reached in the far flung parts of the kingdom in due course of trade and commerce. The denomination of Koch coins is important here because small denominations were introduced largely by the Koch rulerswhere as big denominations were issued in small numbers. The small denominations can be treated as a demand of the market. Because small denomination were used to exchange day to day transactions in the local markets of the kingdom.

Though the role of Narayani currency was vital in the years of the Kingdom's independent existence but the whole scenario was changed after 1773, the year marked by the treaty of Anglo-Koch treaty by which the kingdom became a subsidiary state and the administrative power to some extend fall in the hand of the authorities of the English East India Company.²³ Though the treaty had not banned the free minting of Narayani currency but from the later developments we can know that the British authorities was in no mood of its free circulation and different times they imposed

certain restriction over the minting of Narayani coins. Though the Koch rulers had taken initiatives but their efforts were not enough to revive the glory of the Narayani currency and due to the pressure of the imperial powers the currency lost its hold from the markets of the state and lastly the circulation stopped officially from 1866.²⁴

This withdrawal was not only important from a political perspective but it had crude effects on the trade and commerce of the state. Due to the uncertain minting of Narayani coins a kind of confusion occurred in the kingdom and it directly hampered the trading activities of the state. Both inter-state and intra-regional trade were troubled greatly due to this confusion. Due to non-availability of coins in good numbers the local markets in the far-flung areas of the state suffered heavy setbacks and people also suffered a lot. The problem at the local level was understood by Cornel Jenkins who was the Commander in Chief in the North East Frontier Province, asked the Company authorities to do something for the people who were the worst sufferers. In 1849 Capt. Jenkins said to the Company authorities in his report "the people of Koch Behar still suffer much inconvenience from the prohibition to coin Nararinee rupees, and the non-currency of the Government coin".²⁵ Not only the internal trade but also external trade of the state got heavy loss. For example the Bhutanese authorities in the years after the Anglo-Koch treaty denied accepting the new Narayani coins minted by Dhairyendra Narayan due to its degraded metallic quality. Besides this as the state had great commercial relations with the neighboring territories so after the withdrawal of the Narayani currency they almost stopped the trading relation with the Koch state in view of monetary unclarity. With this, the British trading interest also hampered the Koch trading interests heavily as it was keen to implant its own imperial currency in the territories of the Koch state to get grip over local as well as external trade.

So from the above study we can come to this conclusion that Narayani coins are very significant in visualizing the economic environment of the Koch Kingdom especially to understand the growth of trade and commerce of the kingdom. By assaying the role of these coins conclusions can be drawn about the prevailing economic condition of the kingdom. When coins came to replace the barter mode of transactions then trade and commerce flourished in the region and the self-sufficient rural economy started to transform into a surplus economy and which ultimately increased the standards of living of common people and also helped a lot to develop the communication network. By taking inspiration from the Koch rulers the other princely kingdoms of North East India started minting their own currencies and which popularized the acceptability of coins as a good mode of transaction, which ultimately paved the way of trade and commerce in greater scale. Another area of economic activity to which coins provide an insight is trading patterns. As there are no silver mines in North East India so the silver must have reached the states in the course of trade, probably from Bhutan or China, either directly or via Bengal. Koch coins provide an interesting case study as the silver coinage was very

plentiful at several periods. After 1562, it is recorded in the local chronicles that the kingdom acquired a lot of silver as tribute from various states conquered by Nara Narayan during his military expeditions. Much of this booty was struck into coins by Nara Narayan. Later kings however did not acquire silver through conquest, and it is likely that these coins were struck from the profits earned from transit trade among different regions with the Koch kingdom. The size of the coinage provides a crude measure of volumes of this trade. In particular, no coins were struck in Koch kingdom between 1683 and 1695, which probably indicates that the trade was disrupted during this decade. So finally from the above study we can clearly prove that Narayani currency played an important role in the trade and commercial progression of the Koch kingdom. The growth of trade and commerce laid the economic foundation of the kingdom and upon which the able Koch rulers established the political as well as economic superstructure of their kingdom which lasted more than two hundred years independently and it was due to the trading interest simultaneously attached the attention of the British authorities to come here and take part in it and which gradually paved the way of its steady dissemination towards subordinancy.

Notes & References

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