

CHAPTER I

PEOPLE

The total area of the present district of Koch Bihar (also spelt as Cooch Behar) according to the survey of India is 3,386 sq.kms. (as on 1st July, 1971). In the Census of 1971, the population of the district is shown as 14,14,183.¹ Prior to the Census of 1872, there was no sincere attempt at the enumeration of the inhabitants of Koch Bihar.²

During the days of Visvasinha, the founder of the Kāmata-Koch dynasty, there was an attempt to ascertain the total population in the Kāmata-Koch kingdom. Results of the aforesaid census showed that the number of able-bodied men capable of bearing arms were 52,25,000 which, however, seems to be an exaggeration.³ Naranārāyana, the son and successor of Visvasinha is said to have introduced the poā-pāik enumeration (a rule counting four men as one poā-pāik) and on calculation, the total number was estimated at 17 lacs.⁴ The number of population as enumerated during the period of Modanārāyana, another subsequent ruler, ~~the number,~~ however, showed a sharp decrease to ten lacs.⁵

As regards ethnic identity of the people, Tabaqāt-i-Nāsiri informs us that there were three non-Indian Mongoloid tribes such as Koch, Meoh and Tharu in Northern

Bengal.⁶ Afterwards, Shihāb-ud-din Talish who accompanied Mirgumla, the Subadar of Bengal in the conquest of Koch Bihar in 1661 A.D., observed that the inhabitants since ancient times, were the Koch and Mech tribes.^{6(a)}

The two tribes Koch and Mech are said to have belonged to the same stock.⁷ Their manners and customs were identical. Moreover, we learn that the Koches and the Meches freely intermarried from early times.⁸ Hājo, the Koch chief married his daughter to the Mech Hariyā Mondala and from this marriage, 'with the fabulous assistance of Siva', was born Viśu or Viśvasimha.⁹

The Koches are frequently referred to as Kuvācha (those do not speak a pure dialect) in the Purānas and Tantras.¹⁰

S.K.Chatterjee has rightly been observed that 'the present-day Bengali word is Kōc, or rather Kōmc, and this can well be from a Middle Indo-Aryan source-form *Kawōmca written* Kamōca, which could be properly Sanskritised as Kambōja. ... A later Sanskritisation of the non-nasalised form of the name Kōca, occurs in the Yoginī Tantra as Kuvaca'.¹¹

It is not unlikely that during the reign of the palas of Bengal, the Koches after their Hinduization organised a strong force and dethroned the Pāla ruler from Gauḍa and established their rule at least temporarily in Northern Bengal by the middle of the 10th century A.D.¹² The Dinajpur Pillar

inscription states the erection of a Siva temple by Kuñjareghatāvarṣa, king of Gauḍa who belonged to the race of the Kambōjas (Kambojānvaya-Gauḍapati).¹³

Grierson thinks that "the original Koches were the same as the Bodoḥ, 'Koch', 'Mesh', and 'Bara' or 'Bodo', all connoted the same tribe, or, at most, different septa of the same tribe".^{13(a)} The Koch tribe is said to have belonged to the Western Bodoḥ of the Indo-Mongoloids.¹⁴ However, this issue has created difference of opinions among the modern scholars. Hinen Tsang, who came to Kāmarūpa remarked that 'the men were of small stature, with a dark yellow complexion'.¹⁵

Ralph Fitch who visited the Koch Kingdom in the sixteenth century further says, "The people have ears which be marvellous great, of a span long, which they draw out by devices when they be young".¹⁶

While according to Hodgson,¹⁷ the Koch belong to Bodo and Dhimal Group with a similar observation by Buchanan,¹⁸ Risley would like us to believe that the Koch are sprung from a large Dravidian stock with an admixture of Mongoloid blood.¹⁹ Dalton²⁰ also assigns these people to the Dravidian origin and thus, in the main, agrees with Risley, as noticed earlier.

According to Waddel, 'they (the Koch) do not, as stated by Col. Dalton, Mr. Risley and other, belong to the dark Dravidian aborigines of India, but are distinctly Mongoloid, though somewhat heterogeneous'.²¹

Gait also observes that 'in Jalpaiguri, Koch Bihar and Goalpara, the persons now known as Rajbansi are either pure Koches who, though dark, have a distinctly Mongoloid physiognomy, or else a mixed breed, in which the Mongoloid element usually preponderates'.²²

In spite of the above conflicting theories, it may be pointed out with little doubt that the Koch are a mixed race and that the 'true Koches were a Mongoloid race very closely allied to the Meches and the Garos'.²³

These Indo-Mongoloid people were first said to have settled over the entire Brahmaputra valley and then spread over the Northern Bengal (i.e. Koch Bihar, Rangpur and Dinajpur Districts).²⁴

It may be said that these Indo-Mongoloids or the Tibeto-Burmans penetrated into the above regions not long before the beginning of the Christian era.²⁵

Now, as to their Aryanisation we may first refer to its influence on Bengal from which it infiltrated into the North-eastern India. In Bengal, the Aryanisation had started during the Maurya period and it was stated to have completed in 7th century A.D. at the time of the Gupta rule in India.

The Indo-Mongoloids of the North-eastern India were brought under Hindu fold and their absorption was said to have begun immediately after central and North Bengal became

Aryanised,²⁶ Hinen Tsang who visited Kāmarūpa in the 7th century A.D. observed that the people were mostly initiated to Hinduism.²⁷

AS a result, the Koches who became Hinduised appeared to have abandoned their original Tibeto-Burman speech and had adopted the northern dialect of Bengali in North Bengal and Assamese was popularised in Assam.²⁸ The non-Aryan Indo-Mongoloid people might have played an important part when the people of this region were embracing Aryan culture at large. They possibly transmitted the culture they received from the Hindus and acted as 'the intermediaries in the transmission by land routes of the Brahmanical and Buddhistic cultures of India to Burma and beyond, during the greater part of the 1st millenium A.D., and probably in the early pre-Christian centuries as well'.²⁹

In course of Aryanisation, the place names were also normally being translated into Sanskrit or Sanskritised.³⁰

The Mongoloid Koches, soon after their Hinduisation particularly during the reign period of the two Koch kings Visvasimha and Naranārāyaṇa, were proud to call themselves as Rājavanśis and to claim to be called Kṣatriyas.³¹ It is interesting to note that the Rājavanśī people do not like to accept the Koches within their ethnic form. They like to treat them as a separate caste not belonging to Kṣatriya identity.

And since pre and post-independence period, the Rājavanśīs are spearheading this movement through their organisation called Kṣatriya samity.

But the above claim of the Rājavanśīs does not appear to be tenable on the following grounds :

First, both the Rājavanśīs and the Koches are physiognomically indivisible and they inherit in them the Mongoloid blood profusely. Secondly, these tribes freely intermarried each other since early days. Thirdly, both of them carry on the same religion and culture and are regulated by the same general norms of life. Fourthly, likewise the Rājavanśīs the Koch people also called themselves Kṣatriyas. Both of them tend to refer to the story of Parusūrāma and associate themselves with the same tradition in order to establish their Kṣatriya identity.³²

Similarly, Yoginī Tantra narrates a story which speaks of the Kṣatriya origin of Viśvasiṃha, the founder of the Koch dynasty. It describes that Lord Śiva was infatuated by the beauty of a Koch woman named Hīrā, the wife of Hariyā Maṇḍala. Śive is said to have had intercourse with Hīrā and gave birth to Viśu, who later took the name Viśvasiṃha.³³

The above story undoubtedly ascribed Viśvasiṃha's birth to Divine origin. Here, it may be mentioned that unlike many other rulers of India, Viśvasiṃha also required to be brought under Kṣatriya fold prior to his consecration, as Kṣatriya identity of a ruler was considered to be the important

criterion to become a king in those days. We know that during Viśvasiṅha's time Brāhmaṇas were settled in the Kāmatā-Koch kingdom and that they introduced the Śāstric injunctions in the country.

Since the Kṣatriya identity of Viśvasiṅha was established, the people within his kingdom would start in all likelihood following their king. Thus, S.K.Chatterjee has rightly been suggested that 'with the full Hinduization of the Koches, and rise in power of their chiefs, Kṣatriya origin was, as was, natural, found out or suggested for them'.³⁴

The people of the Kāmatā-Koch Bihar Kingdom found an impetus to trace their identity with the royal dynasty and called themselves Rājavanśis.³⁵

It would thus appear that it was the same stock with which both the Rājavanśis and the Koches were related. And the Koches or the Rājavanśis were one and the same race.

Notes and References

- 1 Durgadas Majumdar, West Bengal District Gazetteers, Koch Bihar, Calcutta, 1977, p.2.
- 2 Ibid., p.45.
- 3 Cf. Bāyāna je lakṣa sainna pañcis hāzār | V.198
N.C.Sharma (ed.), Darrang Rājā Vamsāvalī, Gauhati
1973, p.40.
Gait (A History of Assam, Calcutta, 3rd ed, 1963,
Reprint, 1967, p.50), also contends that this number
is clearly an exaggeration.
- 4 N.N. Paul (ed.) Mahārāja Vamsāvalī (in Bengali),
Cooch Behar, 1993 Bengali San, p.4.
Also see S.C.Ghosal, A History of Cooch Behar,
Cooch Behar, 1942, p.157.
- 5 Durgādāsa, Rājavamsāvalī, 1270 B.S., p.77;
Ghosal, op.cit., p.213.
The decrease in number of population as compared to
what we get at the time of Naranārāyaṇa was perhaps due to
cession of the eastern part of Naranārāyaṇa's Kingdom at
the time of Lakṣmīnārāyaṇa, son of Naranārāyaṇa, and Raghudeva,
the nephew of the king who ^{had} entrusted upon Raghudeva the
governorship of Koch Hāje, the tract lying to the east of
the river saṅkosa.
- 6 Minhāj-i-Sirāj, Tabaqāt-i-Nasiri, Eng.tr. by Major Raverty,
Vol.I, London, 1881, Reprint, New Delhi, 1970, p.560.

- 6(a) Fathiyya in J.A.S.B., Vol.41, 1872, p.66.
- 7 N.N.Vasu, The Social History of Kamarupa, Vol.I,
New Delhi, First Reprint, 1983, p.130.
- 8 Gait, op.cit., p.48.
- 9 W.Robinson, A Descriptive Account of Assam, First
published 1841, Reprinted 1975, Delhi, p.262.
- 10 Gait, op.cit., p.47.
The Koch race is referred to in the Brahma Vaivarta
Purāna (Brahmakhaṇḍa, Adhāya, 10) quoted by Ghosal in
History of Cooch Behar, p.5.
There has also been mention of Kuvāsa in Jātikaundī
and Yoginī Tantra, See Loc.cit.
- 11 S.K.Chatterjee, Kirāta-Jana-Kṛti, Calcutta, 1951,
Revised ed. 1974, p.113.
- 12 D.C.Sircar, Pala-Sena yuger vaissāṅga Carit (Bengali),
Calcutta, 1982, p.75.
Also the Introduction by D.C.Sircar in the
Gaṇḍarājamālā, Reprinted, Calcutta, 1975, p.10.
R.P.Chandra also suggests the *identification*
of the Koches with the Kambojas. See Gaṇḍarājamālā, pp.41-46,
1975
- 13 According to some Kuṅjaraghataṅvara stands for Śaka
880 (=866 A.D.), see R.P.Chanda, ...
... op.cit., pp.41-46.

This view has not been accepted by all. Sircar and other perhaps rightly suggest it as the name of the Kamboja king. See the Introduction by D.C.Sircar in the Gaudarājamaḷa, loc.cit.

- 13(a) G.A.Grierson, Linguistic Survey of India, Vol.III, Part II, First ed. 1903, Reprint, Delhi, 1967, p.95. He has referred to the traditional origin of the Koch Kings from a Mech father and Koch mother.

- 14 S.K.Chatterjee, op.cit., p.112.

The Indo-Mongoloid tribes were classed into Tibeto-Burman and Siamese-Chinese branches of the single Sino-Tibetan speech family. See Chatterjee, Ibid., pp.40-41.

He also informs us that these tribes 'seem not to have moved much further to the east of their primitive home round about the sources of the Yang-tse-kiang at the time of Aryan penetration into India (1500 B.C.) when the Tibeto-Chinese race, came to the Indian side of the Himalayas, to Nepal and North Bihar, Bengal and Assam, they possibly mingled with the Kot and Dravidian peoples already established there'.....
 'The other branch of the Tibeto-Chinese peoples, the Tai or Shan', according to Chatterjee, 'carried on its incursions in North-eastern India in successive wars, of which we know in detail one only, the Ahom invasion of Assam in the 13th century'.

See Chatterjee, Origin and Development of Bengali Language,

First published by George Allen and Unwin Ltd, London, 1970,
Calcutta, 1926, Vol. I, p. 29.

Chatterjee has referred to the Kirāta people somewhere else. These Kirātas are mentioned in the Yajur and Atharva Veda and also in the Mahābhārata. The Kirāta people were the Mongoloids. To the Aryan speakers, the Mongoloid people who were their compatriots were designated as Kiratas. 'They may for convenience be described in English as Indo-Mongoloids; and this is a term which defines at once their Indian connection and their place within the cultural milieu in which they found themselves, as well as their original racial affinity'.

See, The place of Assam in the History and civilisation of India, Gauhati University, ^{Reprint,} 1970, p. 16 and the Kirāta-Jana-Kṛti, p. 38.

- 15 S.K. Chatterjee, The Place of Assam in the History and Civilization of India, p. 22.
- 16 J. Horton Ryley, Ralph Fitch - England's pioneer to India and Burma, London, 1899, p. 111.
- 17 J.A.S.B., Vol. XVIII, Part II 1949, pp. 704-706.
- 18 Martin, Eastern India, Vol. III, 1838, p. 538.
- 19 H.H. Risley, The Tribes and Castes of Bengal, (1891), Vol. 1, p. 491.
- 20 Col. Dalton, Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal, 1872, pp. 89-92.

- 21 L.A.Waddel, The Tribes of the Brahmaputra Valley -
a contribution on their physical Types and affinities,
First published 1901, Reprinted, Delhi, 1978, p.48.
- 22 Gait, op.cit., pp.47-48.
- 23 Ibid., p.47, Grierson, op.cit., p.95.
- 24 S.K.Chatterjee, Kirata-Jana-Krti, p.46.
- 25 S.K.Chatterjee, O.D.B.L., Vol.I, p.69.
- 26 Loc.cit., V.R.Dikastar (The Aryanisation of India(Assam),
I.H.Q., XXI, pp.29ff), however, states that 'the
Aryanisation of Eastern India has begun in the age of
Rigveda with the credit for this achievement going to
Mathava of Videha country and to his celebrated Purohita
Gotama. Between the composition of Rigveda Samhita and
of the Satapatha Brahmana there was a slow infiltration
of the Aryan ideas and ideals beyond the river Sadanira.
By the time of the Aitareya Brahmana, the movement towards
the east gained further impetus'.
- 27 S.Beal, Records of the Western World, II, London,
1906, pp.194ff.
- 28 G.A.Grierson, op.cit., p.95; S.K.Chatterjee, Kirata-Jana-
Krti, p.112.
Grierson again observes that 'the name 'Koch', in
fact, everywhere connotes a Hinduized Bodo who has
abandoned his ancestral religion for Hinduism and the

ancestral Bedo Language for Bengal or Assamese',
See op. cit., p. 95.

29 S.K.Chatterjee, op. cit., p. 55.

30 Chatterjee, The place of Assam in the History and
Civilisation of India, p. 17.

He refers to a few places like Brahmanutra and Luhitva,
the names of Great rivers of Assam, and Prāgjyotiṣa and
Kāmarūpa, names of the province and states that these are
in all likelihood approximations to Sanskrit of Pre-Aryan
names.

31 S.K.Chatterjee, Kirāta-Jana-Kṛti, p. 112.

We come across the term Rājavanī as referred to
in the Kānatesvara Kulakārikā of Śrutidhara (Composed in
16th Century A.D.) Khan Choudhuri Amanatulla Ahmed,
Kuch Biharar Itihāsa (Bengali), p. 39

Also see, H.N.Dutta Barua (ed.), Guru Garita,
Nalbari, Assam, 1955, p. 747.

32 These Rājavanī and Koch people claimed themselves to be
the descendants of the Kṣatriyas. But they had to escape,
as they said, themselves from the wrath of Parasurāma of
Vṛgu dynasty who led a crusade against the Haihaya Kṣatriyas
between the years C 2550-2350 B.C. and, to take shelter
in the lap (Koch) of Bhagavati in the Koch Land.

See C.Sanyal, The Rajbansis of North Bengal,
Calcutta, 1965, p. 17.

However, Scholars like H. Boileau (quoted by C. Sanyal, op. cit., p. 11) and Risley (op. cit., p. 491) do not accept the Ksatriya ancestry of the Rājavanśis as there is no historical evidence.

- 33 Yogini Tantra, Chap. XIII, Slokas, 2-19.
 34 S.K. Chatterjee, op. cit., p. 112.
 35 Gunabhirama Barua, Āgam Burañi, Gauhati, Reprint, 1972, p. 40.

L.A. Waddel (op. cit., p. 48), says that 'the term Koch therefore not being a favoured one in Bengal, it is usual to find them dropping that title whenever there is a resident raja of their own kindred as at Koch Bihar (Kuch Behar), Darrang, Bijni, Mechpara, Sidi, Beltola, Jalpaiguri and Lakhi. At such places they call themselves by the higher sounding Indian title 'Rajabansi' or 'Royal race'.

However, it is said that the Rājavanśis were mostly cultivators. In the lower delta the Rājavanśis were said to be a subdivision of Tiyars (H. Beverly, Census Report of Bengal (1872) Vol. I, p. 130). Hunter also opines that the name Rājavanśi was adopted by the cultivators and they were 'Semi-Hinduised Aborigines' (Statistical Account of Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar, Vol. X (1976), pp. 347-48, Ibid., jal-p. 253, Ibid., Cooch Behar, p. 341) Gait says that 'the term is also a title of Tiyars, Kaibarttas, Namasudras and other fishing castes, also of Barua Mugs of Chittagong and

of Bagdis, Mals etc. (Census Report of Bengal, 1901) Appendix I, p. XXXVIII. Risley, while commenting on the term Rājavanśis observes that this title 'serves much the same purpose for the lower stratum of Hindu population of North Bengal as the title does for the land holding class of dubious origin all over India'. See op.cit., p. 491.

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