

The Mughal-Koch Relation: A Shift from Defensive Alliances to Subordinate Agreements

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Abstract: *The Mughal-Koch relation is a significant political narrative that unfolds in the history of the Indian subcontinent. The shifting alliances and power dynamics between the Koch Behar kingdom and the Mughal Empire during the late 16th and early 17th centuries led to a transformative political landscape in northeastern India. Initially, the Mughal Empire and Koch Behar alliance provided mutual benefits, with Koch Behar gaining fortified security, defense against external threats, and military support during conflicts. The economic and cultural exchanges between the two powers flourished, leading to economic growth and enrichment of the region's cultural landscape. However, as the alliance evolved, Koch Behar transitioned from a defensive posture to a subordinate relationship with the Mughal Empire, resulting in significant changes in the region's power dynamics. The dynamics of the Koch-Mughal relationship illustrate the complexity of political alliances during this period and their long-term impact on the region's history.*

Keywords: Mughal, Koch Behar, Raja Nara Narayan, Man Sigha, Defensive Alliance, Koch Hajo, Parikshit Narayan, Isa Khan, Subordinate Alliance.

Introduction

In Northeastern India, Koch Behar, situated adjacent to Assam, holds historical significance dating back to ancient times. Referred to as 'Pragjyotish' or 'Kamrup' in various scriptures such as the Ramayana, Mahabharata, and Harshacharita, the region has been integral to Indian history and mythology.¹ At different periods, Kamrup existed as a feudatory under rulers like the Palas and Ahoms. During the reign of Akbar, Koches established direct relations with the Mughals. The late 16th century bore witness to a rich tapestry of alliances, rivalries, and strategic maneuverings, particularly in the northeastern reaches of the subcontinent. Amidst this complex political landscape, one pivotal alliance emerged that would profoundly shape the course of events in the region—the Mughal-Koch subordinate alliance. At its genesis, this alliance was a defensive pact born out of mutual security concerns and the need for diplomatic stability. It marked a significant departure from the norm, representing the first political contest between a Hindu state, led by Nara Narayan of the Koch Kingdom, and a Muslim empire, under the reign of Emperor Akbar of the Mughal Empire, occurring about 375 years after the Muslim conquest of Bengal. A convergence of interests drove the strategic

¹ Khan Choudhury Amanatullah Ahmed. Koch Bihar Itihas. State Press, Cooch Behar, 1942, p. 15.

collaboration between these two formidable entities—both sought to protect their territories from external threats while promoting mutual benefits and regional stability. This initial defensive pact laid the groundwork for a deeper partnership that would transcend mere security concerns, evolving into a subordinate relationship that left an indelible mark on the history of northeastern India. The Mughal-Koch alliance served as a beacon of stability in an otherwise tumultuous region throughout its evolution from a defensive alliance to a subordinate relationship. It safeguarded both powers' territories and facilitated cultural exchange and economic cooperation, fostering a sense of mutual interdependence that endured for generations. As we delve into the origins, evolution, and legacy of the Mughal-Koch subordinate alliance, we uncover not only the intricacies of statecraft and governance but also the enduring impact of diplomatic collaboration in shaping the destiny of nations. This alliance, forged in the crucible of political necessity, stands as a testament to the power of strategic partnerships in navigating the complexities of medieval India's geopolitical landscape.

Background of Alliance

At the end of the reign of Maharaja Biswa Singha, the conflict between Koch Behar and Ahom was evident. The Koch Kingdom, under Nara Narayan, faced significant security challenges from neighboring kingdoms, such as the Ahom Kingdom to the southeast, which had a strained relationship with Koch Bihar. The Ahom Kingdom, under the reign of Sokhampha Khora Raja, was known for its hostility towards Koch Bihar and its attempts to incite discontent and harbor political criminals in its territory.² Bakhtiyar Khalji first invaded Koch Bihar in 1206 with medieval tunes. Subsequently, Muslim raids on the Kamrup kingdom were carried out at different times, plundering and ravaging. After this, the balance of the Koch Behar kingdom continued to deteriorate, and the expansion of these Muslim Afghans towards Koch Behar from the south also took place. In 1553 AD, a Pathan soldier named Kalapahar invaded Koch Behar kingdom and destroyed the famous Kamakhya temple. As a result, Nara Narayan attacked the Gaur Pathans. But this attack led by Chilarai failed and he was defeated and captured.³ In such a situation, Maharaja Nara Narayana needed a strong alliance. He felt the need to ally with the Mughal Emperor Akbar. Based on this, the Koch kingdom wanted to establish a strong independent state in northeast India.

On the other hand, the Mughal Empire, led by Emperor Akbar, was engaged in a protracted conflict with the Pathans of Bengal and sought to expand its dominion in the region. The conquest of Bengal was a strategic priority for the Mughals, and they needed allies in the northeast to counter the resistance they faced from various

² Khan Choudhury Amanatullah Ahmed. Koch Biharer Itihas. State Press, Cooch Behar, 1942, pp. 102-110.

³ Ibid., p. 113.

regional powers in Bengal.⁴ An alliance with Koch Behar provided a strategic advantage and a buffer against the Ahom Kingdom and potential support against Bengal.

Overall, the defensive alliance between the Koch Kingdom under Nara Narayan and the Mughal Empire under Emperor Akbar was driven by a combination of security concerns and diplomatic considerations. The convergence of these factors led to a strategic collaboration that protected their respective territories and promoted mutual benefits and regional stability in northeastern India.

Defensive Alliance (1576-1596)

The Koch chronicle records the alliance between Emperor Akbar of the Mughal Empire and King Nara Narayan of the Koch Behar kingdom against the Afghan insurgents in Bengal.⁵ It is recorded that Akbar initiated the alliance by addressing a letter to Nara Narayan, proposing a division of Bengal between them after its subjugation.⁶ Nara Narayan accepted the proposal and prepared for a simultaneous offensive from the east. The combined forces of the Mughals and the Koches invaded Bengal, defeating the Afghan insurgents and dividing the region between them. However, the events described in the Akbarnama present a different perspective on the alliance between Emperor Akbar and King Nara Narayan. According to this account, it was Nara Narayan who initiated friendly overtures by writing a letter to Akbar, demonstrating his willingness to align with the Mughals.⁷

However, the alliance between the Mughals and the Koch kings, particularly Nara Narayan, possibly began in 1574 or before. This is suggested by the fact that Nara Narayan refused asylum to Afghan and Mankali rebels from Ghoraghat in 1574, possibly indicating a desire to establish friendly relations with the Mughals. He also sent an emissary to Akbar bearing gifts to further enhance the cordial nature of his friendly gesture.⁸ The alliance was formalized with a simultaneous attack on Daud Karrani, an Afghan ruler in Bengal, which was possibly carried out in 1576, with both Mughal and Koch forces. This suggests that the alliance between the Mughals and the Koch kings began around 1574 and was formalized in 1576.⁹

⁴ Bhattacharyya, Sudhindra Nath. *A History of Mughal North-East Frontier Policy: Being a Study of the Political Relation of the Mughal Empire with Koch Bihar, Kamrup and Assam*. Calcutta, 1994, p.93-96

⁵ Sharma, N.C., editor. *Darrang Raj Vamsavali*. Pathsala, Bani Prakash, 1973, pp. 565-568.

⁶ Ibid., p. 568.

⁷ Ibid., pp. 582-584.

⁸ Bhattacharyya, Sudhindra Nath. *A History of Mughal North-East Frontier Policy: Being a Study of the Political Relation of the Mughal Empire with Koch Bihar, Kamrup and Assam*. Calcutta, 1994, pp. 96-97.

⁹ Nath, Dambarudhar. *History of the Koch Kingdom, c. 1515-1615*. Mittal Publications, 1989, p. 73.

The Koch chronicle and the Akbarnama both refer to this relationship continuing beyond 1576. As mentioned elsewhere, the latter work documents that Nara Narayan dispatched a formal embassy and 54 elephants as costly gifts to Akbar's court in 1578.¹⁰ Emperor Akbar appears to have been quite happy with these ambassadorial contacts because Nara Narayan's talents are highly lauded in the work as mentioned earlier, and there is no sign that Nara Narayan is being treated as the Mughal emperor's vassal.

Koch Behar gained some special advantages as a result of this alliance. Firstly, it provided Koch Behar with fortified security and defense, safeguarding its borders against potential external threats. Secondly, this alliance ensured the integrity of Koch Behar's territory, discouraging neighboring states from encroaching upon its lands. Politically, Koch Behar gained influence in regional affairs, while culturally; it experienced enrichment through interaction with the Mughal administration. Furthermore, access to Mughal administrative expertise improved governance in Koch Behar, and potential military training enhanced its defense strategies. The Mughal Empire also reaped substantial benefits from its alliance with Koch Behar. Geographically, Koch Behar served as a strategic buffer state, protecting the Mughals from neighboring threats. Militarily, the alliance strengthened the Mughal military presence in the northeastern region of India. Intelligence gathered from Koch Behar aided the Mughals in making informed decisions, countering the influence of rival powers like the Ahom kingdom. Diplomatically, the alliance bolstered the Mughals' regional authority, while access to resources from Koch Behar furthered their economic and military capabilities.

Subordinate Alliance (1596-1608)

The emergence of a new Mughal policy of subordinate alliance to Koch Behar was significantly influenced by several key factors, foremost among them being the character and achievements of Lakshmi Narayan, the son and successor of Nara Narayan, who ascended to power in 1587 A.D. It appears that Lakshmi Narayan inherited very few of the brilliant kingly qualities of his father. Unlike his father, he lacked energy, vigor, wisdom, tact, and far-sighted vision. His character and diplomatic skills were also found lacking. Furthermore, he wasn't fortunate like his father in having a gifted brother who could fight battles and win laurels on his behalf. While possessing personal bravery and ability, Lakshmi Narayan was hesitant to utilize them unless faced with a pressing necessity. He seemed incapable of sustained endeavor and often chose the path of least resistance. A strain of feminine weakness, indolence, and sloth seemed to permeate his entire being. Additionally, he had a strong fondness for the society of women. Overall, it appears that Lakshmi Narayan's shortcomings and lack of leadership qualities contrasted starkly with those of his father, Nara Narayan. These deficiencies likely contributed

¹⁰ Beveridge, Annette Susannah, translator. Akbar-nama, Vol. III. The Asiatic Society, Kolkata, 1907 p. 349.

to the challenges faced by Koch Behar during his reign and may have influenced the decision to seek support from external powers like the Mughals¹¹.

Such a man as Lakshmi Narayan was deemed entirely unfit to lead the Koch state during the tumultuous times that followed the passing of the mighty figure of Nara Narayan. In response to this leadership vacuum, Raghudev, who had previously refrained from declaring formal independence, now asserted his autonomy. He forged alliances with figures such as the Afghan chief, Isa Khan, and demonstrated his newfound strength by minting coins in his name, following the traditional custom of the parent state. This bold move by Raghudev, symbolizing the assumption of independent royal dignity, proved too much for Lakshmi Narayan to tolerate silently. Lacking the power to compel Raghudev's submission, Lakshmi Narayan resorted to deceit. He sought to exploit the naturally turbulent spirit of Raghu's son, Parikshit Narayan, inciting him to rebellion. However, Parikshit Narayan's revolt was swiftly and ruthlessly crushed.¹² During these internal conflicts, the strained relations between the Koch Behar and Kamrup kings persisted. The Kamrup king harbored long-standing ambitions to reclaim the fertile tract of Bahirband, previously conquered during Nara Narayan's reign but later relinquished due to a territorial compromise.¹³ With Lakshmi Narayan perceived as weak, the Kamrup king saw an opportunity to seize Bahirband from his cousin.

Recognizing the precariousness of his position, Lakshmi Narayan turned to the Mughal court for support. He acknowledged the formal supremacy of Emperor Akbar, seeking armed assistance against the formidable alliance between the Neo-Koch forces and Isa Khan's Afghans.¹⁴ Despite the potential cost to his independence, Lakshmi Narayan prioritized strengthening ties with the Mughals to confront the challenges posed by his adversaries. The Koch king, Lakshmi Narayan, took a significant step towards formal submission to the imperial authority by approaching Raja Man Singh, the governor of Bengal. Lakshmi Narayan offered his sister in marriage to appease Raja Man Singh and arranged a personal meeting with him. This meeting occurred on December 22, 1596, at Anandapur, likely a Koch frontier town near Ghoraghat.¹⁵ The details of what occurred during the interview remain somewhat unclear. However, it seems that Lakshmi Narayan formally offered his submission to the Mughal authority.

¹¹ Bhattacharyya, Sudhindra Nath. *A History of Mughal North-East Frontier Policy: Being a Study of the Political Relation of the Mughal Empire with Koch Bihar, Kamrup and Assam*. Calcutta, 1994, p. 108

¹² Khan Choudhury Amanatullah Ahmed. *Koch Biharer Itiha*. 1942, p. 137.

¹³ Ibd, p. 121.

¹⁴ Bhattacharyya, Sudhindra Nath. *A History of Mughal North-East Frontier Policy: Being a Study of the Political Relation of the Mughal Empire with Koch Bihar, Kamrup and Assam*. Calcutta, 1994, p. 110.

¹⁵ Beveridge, Annette Susannah, translator. *Akbar-nama*, vol. III. The Asiatic Society, Kolkata, 1907, p. 1067.

Although the events of 1596 did not yield immediate tangible results, they marked a significant turning point in the history of Mughal northeast frontier policy.

This event signified the conclusion of the initial phase of Mughal engagement with the region. It began a new phase characterized by the subordinate alliance with Koch Behar. This shift foreshadowed a policy of imperialism that would soon follow. While Nara Narayan, the previous Koch king, had maintained a cautious distance from direct contact with the Mughal Emperor and had sought to preserve friendly relations through envoys, his successor, Lakshmi Narayan, was compelled by circumstances to engage directly with Mughal authorities. This act of seeking a personal interview with Raja Man Singh and voluntarily acknowledging Imperial suzerainty represented a significant departure from the previous approach. It highlighted the challenges the weakened Koch state faced under Lakshmi Narayan's rule.

Fate Khan, Puranandar Laskar, Nitai Chandra, Nazir Tagore and Galadhar Barua advised Raghudev to attack Lakshmi Narayan. Acting on their advice, Lakshmi Narayan invaded and occupied the kingdom outside. Following his successful capture of Bahirband, the Kamrup king continued his aggression by attacking the Koch king himself. Pressing him so hard that Lakshmi Narayan was forced to seek refuge within a fort, the Kamrup king laid siege to it. Lakshmi Narayan appealed to Raja Man Singh for assistance in his desperate situation. Recognising the threat posed by the Neo-Koch-Afghan alliance, Raja Man Singh acted swiftly to suppress it. He dispatched a chosen force under two Afghan officers to engage the Kamrup king in open combat. In the ensuing fierce battle, the Kamrup king fought alone and suffered a significant defeat in May 1597.¹⁶ As a consequence, Raghudev was compelled to evacuate Bahirband.

The defeat suffered by Raghudev served as a wake-up call for his Afghan ally, Isa Khan. Realizing the growing power and influence of the Mughals following Raghudev's defeat, Isa Khan sought to rectify his earlier mistake of not aiding Raghudev. He prepared an army to come to the aid of the Kamrup king, posing a potential threat to the Mughal-backed Koch regime. However, Raja Man Singh, recognising the danger posed by Isa Khan's intervention, devised a clever strategy to keep him occupied and closer to home. He organized a combined assault on Isa Khan's stronghold of Katrabau by land and water. Lakshmi Narayan cooperated with the Imperial forces in this endeavor. A stubborn naval battle ensued near Katrabau in September 1597, where Isa Khan, aided by Masum Kabuli, put up a heroic defense and emerged victorious. In the battle, the Imperial admiral Durjan Singh, son of Raja Man Singh, was killed along with a significant number of

¹⁶ Bhattacharyya, Sudhindra Nath. *A History of Mughal North-East Frontier Policy: Being a Study of the Political Relation of the Mughal Empire with Koch Bihar, Kamrup and Assam*. Calcutta, 1994, p.110-111

soldiers, including Koch Paiks, who were taken prisoner.¹⁷ Although Lakshmi Narayan was party to the ignominy of defeat, Isa Khan demonstrated foresight and prudence by extending generous compassion towards him. Isa Khan's release of all Koch prisoners helped ease tensions between the two parties.

The death of Isa Khan in 1599 brought relief to Lakshmi Narayan, as it removed the most powerful supporter of his cousin, Raghudev. This created the possibility of a respite from Raghudev's hostility.¹⁸ Furthermore, the emergence of conflicts between Raghudev and his heir-apparent, Parikshit Narayan, diverted attention away from Koch Behar, resulting in a temporary halt in the Koch internecine feud. But after the death of King Raghudev of Koch Hajo, the succession conflict between Lakshmi Narayan and his successor, Parikshit Narayan, resumed. At this time, Parikshit Narayan married his daughter Mangaldai to King Partab Singh of Ahom and friendly relations were established between the two kingdoms.¹⁹ After gaining the state, Parikshit Narayan Lakshmi Narayan's state attacked the state's external affairs department. Lakshmi Narayan was completely defeated in this battle and fled for his life. But 12 of his employees were captured by the enemy. At this time, Lakshmi Narayan was feeling helpless due to the frequent changes in subhadra in Bengal. Despite a subservient alliance with the Mughals, Koch Bihardid did not receive any help when Lakshmi Narayan attacked Bahiraband, which led to Lakshmi Narayan's defeat. Seeking revenge, Lakshmi Narayan first attempted to ally with the Ahom king but failed, turning instead to the Mughals. In June 1609, Alau-d din Islam Khan, the new Bengal viceroy, demanded Lakshmi Narayan's acceptance of Imperial vassalage²⁰. Caught between internal strife and the fear of external invasion, Lakshmi Narayan reluctantly agreed. Lakshmi Narayan sealed the acknowledgement of vassalage with the payment of tribute. This event of 1609 AD profoundly influenced the Mughals' North-West Frontier policy. As a result of this incident, the state of Koch Behar lost its independence, and subsequently, a part of the state was under the direct control of the Mughals.

The Mughal relations with the Koch kingdom undoubtedly left a significant imprint on the social and economic fabric of medieval Koch Behar. The Mughals adopted their system of land measurement and survey, as well as cash land revenue collection, which was then common in Northern India, and they completely rebuilt the region's revenue administration system. The Kamrup kings were found to have been greatly influenced by the Mughal system of classifying land into three

¹⁷ Beveridge, Annette Susannah, translator. *Akbar-nama*, vol. III. The Asiatic Society, Kolkata, 1907, pp. 1093-94.

¹⁸ Nath, Dambarudhar. *History of the Koch Kingdom, c. 1515-1615*. Mittal Publications, 1989, p. 204.

¹⁹ Gait, Edward Albert. *A History of Assam*. Thacker, Spink, 1926, p. 64.

²⁰ Nathan, Mirza. "Baharistan-i Ghaybi." *A History of the Mughal Wars in Assam, Cooch Behar, Bengal, Bihar and Orissa during the Reigns of Jahangir and Shah Jahan*, 1936. P. 144.

categories: good, middle, and bad. They also adopted a system of land survey in which they divided the land into four categories: Ksetra (arable land), Khila (wasteland), Vastu (building sites), and Kristabhumi (inferior land).²¹ As a result, Kamrup was divided into 26 Parganas, each of which was given to an officer known as a "Choudhury." These officers received assistance in collecting revenue from several other officers, including "Thakurias," "Talukdars," "Patgiri," and "Gaon Kakati," whose job it was to determine the amount that each of these officers was required to pay as revenue.²² Ibrahim Kakori also stated that a land survey was done in Kamrup during the Jahangir era. The Mughals instituted a system of categorizing the lands in Kamrup based on the type of produce they produced to increase revenue. As a result, properties were divided into three groups: "Kheraj," or taxed land, which included regular cultivating tenure; "Nisf Kheraj," or half-assessed tenure; and "La Kheraj," or revenue-free tenure.²³ Additional divisions of the Kheraj territories were made into "Polaj," "Parauti," "Chachar," and "Banjar." In addition, the Mughals established a class of officials charged with overseeing revenue collection and land appraisal. In addition to agriculture, medieval Koch Behar also produced metalwork. Sarthebari, located near Kamrup, was a significant hub for bell metal fabrication. According to Chronicles, the Mariyas of Kamrup produced brass goods for the Hayagriva Madhava Temple there. Muslims made up a significant portion of the population and rose significantly as a result of the Mughal Empire's geographical expansion. The communication affected the Kochs' political life since it exposed them to the Mughal political and administrative structures. Furthermore, the enrichment of the social and cultural life of the area was observed as a result of the encounter, with noteworthy changes observed in the areas of attire, nutrition, literature, art, architecture, music, painting, and many other areas. The influence was also felt in the area's economy; the Mughals made significant contributions to trade, industry, craft, coinage, and other areas.²⁴ However, as a result of this interaction, the Mughals or Muslims suffered because their culture was also greatly enhanced.

In conclusion, the Mughal Koch subordinate alliance was deeply influenced by the division of the Koch kingdom, the conflict between Lakshmi Narayan and Raghudev, and Raghudev's alliance with Isa Khan of East Bengal. These events reshaped the political landscape of Northeastern India and had significant implications for Mughal policies and interactions with regional powers. The

²¹ Singh, Baljit. *Relation of Koch and Mughals on Political Realm: From Akbar to Aurangzeb.* *International Journal of History*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2022, p. 15.

²² Bhuyan, Suryya Kumar. Kamrupar Buranji. Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies, Assam, 1958, p. 3

²³ Barua, S.L. *Comprehensive History of Assam.* Guwahati, Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 1988, p. 411.

²⁴ Singh, Baljit. *Relation of Koch and Mughals on Political Realm: From Akbar to Aurangzeb.* *International Journal of History*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2022, p. 15.

division of the Koch kingdom weakened the authority of the Koch rulers and provided the Mughals with an opportunity to extend their influence in the region. The conflict between Lakshmi Narayan and Raghudev furthered the Mughal agenda of establishing control over the Northeast, leading to Mughal intervention in Koch affairs and the formation of a subordinate alliance with Lakshmi Narayan. Raghudev's alliance with Isa Khan posed a challenge to Mughal authority in the region, prompting the Mughals to further consolidate their alliance with Lakshmi Narayan and intervene more actively in Koch affairs to counter the threat posed by Raghudev and his allies. Overall, the Mughal Koch subordinate alliance was a strategic move aimed at extending Mughal influence, maintaining stability, and countering external threats in the Northeastern region. It solidified Mughal control over the Koch kingdom and reshaped the political dynamics of the time, leaving a lasting impact on the history of the region.

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