

Book Review-4

Dr. Sailen Debnath (ed), *A Comprehensive History of the Koch Kingdom*, Aayu Publications, New Delhi, 2023, p. 377, Rs. 3000

The present edited book, a compilation of twenty research papers of different academicians and scholars, including the introduction, contains 21 chapters. Undoubtedly, it's a pioneering work in the history and historiography of Eastern and North-Eastern India, as there is the overall rarity of writings and published works on the total history of the Koch Kingdom, which in the sixteenth century assumed the size of an empire in the east and north-east of India except the small Ahom kingdom. The present book, for that reason, may best be considered to have filled a big hiatus in historical research and writings.

In medieval times, after the destruction of the Kamata Kingdom by the invasion of Sultan Hussain Shah of Gaur in 1498 CE, the Koch Kingdom was established in the geographical area of the Assam-Bengal border down the Himalayan Mountains of Bhutan. Not long after its creation by King Viswa Singha, the new kingdom in due course of time took the form of an empire under King Nararayan, which subsequently got bifurcated into two parts; and the western part of it gradually got reduced into the size of a kingdom owing to the pressure of internal conflicts and neighbouring aggressive powers including the Mughals. The 435-year-long glorious history of the Koch Kingdom (1515-1949) has so far remained neglected by the mainstream historians of India and Bengal. The social, economic, cultural and political history of the kingdom has been critically analyzed in the present book by different researchers. Foreign relations of the Koch Kingdom most significantly with Bhutan, the Ahoms, the Mughals and finally with the mighty British Empire have categorically been analyzed in this book. The merger of the Koch Kingdom with independent India in 1949 ushered in a new scene of controversy and tension containing the seeds of a separate identity movement in post-independent India. The area where the Koch Kingdom was in full progress, at present has become a strategic hot point of Indo-China and Indo-Bangladesh bilateral relations; and in this backdrop, the history of the Koch Kingdom or Cooch Behar deserves special attention.

Besides a vibrant and thoughtful introduction, this book has been a scholarly arrangement and concatenation of the contributed twenty papers in a thematic sequence and chronological order by the editor. The editor has categorically stated that the contributors to this book have well been abreast

of the modern concepts of historical research and most of them have so far been illustrious in the academic field; therefore, as an editor, he has rather played the role of a compiler without editing the papers as per editorial norms; but he has tried his best to fill up the thematic gaps and blanks by inserting his writings in the forms of chapters, and that so much to have been so required for the continuity of the main theme of the book. Following the introduction, in the second chapter, '*Foundation of the Koch Kingdom under the Early Koch Kings*' the editor, Sailen Debnath, has brought out a fact-oriented discourse of the foundation of the Koch Kingdom and its first capital, Hingulavas, by Viswa Singha, the founder of the Kingdom, which helps the reader to easily enter into the main theme of the book. The saga of the foundation of the Koch kingdom was the result of dauntless struggle and continuous warfare against the Islamic occupation of the erstwhile Kamata Kingdom; and in doing so, Viswa Singha had to face friendship as well as enmity of the Bhuyans; but his victory one after another in all battlefields not stop until he could defeat and kill Turbak Khan, the last commander of the Muslim occupation army.

Emerging historian Professor Rup Kumar Barman has outlined the importance of river basins in the historical evolution of the Koch kingdom in Eastern India. His vivid narrative of the Raidak-Sankosh Basin in the 3rd chapter entitled '*The Raidak-Sankosh Basin and Formation of the Koch Kingdom*' has brought to light the saga of human life – social, economic and cultural – along the courses of the rivers throughout the ages. Through the stream of his lucid description, the readers can easily roam into a complex interplay and lasting impact of historical geography on the Koch kingdom. The strategic importance of this river basin nurtured the ground for the building of the first capital of the kingdom and the extension of the kingdom into an empire-like shape, with ups and downs of political and diplomatic relations with the neighbours. By dint of extensive field research, Dr. Barman has presented a hitherto unexplored field of socio-cultural history through the lens of the "*Satras*" (the pilgrimage centres) of the followers of Kamrupi Vaishnavism propagated by **Srimanta Sankardeva**, the great medieval saint of eastern India. Here in this chapter, the readers will be highly privileged by getting information on the creation of "*Chhit Mahal*" (enclaves & exclaves) which later turned into a complex problem between Bangladesh and India. The military cantonment located between the two rivers at Fulbari in the Tufanganj subdivision also is a matter of attraction. If Dr. Barman could have included in his study the other important rivers like the Torsha, Kaljani and Jaldhaka or Mansai, the chapter could have been richer and more attractive.

In chapters four and five, Dr. Jaydip Roy meticulously presented the expansion of the Koch kingdom into an empire during the reign of the second Koch king Naranarayan; such enlargement of the kingdom was possible on account of the relentless military and diplomatic efforts of his brother Sukladhwaj, better known as Chilarai. The military tactics of Chilarai and the archaeological details of the military installation namely '**Chilarai's Kot**' have

been well narrated; but the Military General's so-called discomfiture against the army of Gaur has not been well reasoned in the perspective of required analysis, though it calls for more and in-depth research. In chapter six, Prof. Pradip Adhikary tried to present a precise description of the Koch kings from the beginning i.e. from the period of Vishwa Singha to the end of the rule of the last king, Jagaddipendra Narayan, which is to help the reader to get a linear idea about the rulers and their political activities in brief. But the reference portion of this chapter is not satisfactory, where only the secondary materials are mentioned, and the pages of the referred books are not mentioned. Chapter seven is written by two young researchers including first Anup Ranjan Dey, and they have depicted a true picture of the Koch-Ahom bi-lateral relations from 1496 to 1765. This chapter is rich with the delineation of political and diplomatic matters about socio-cultural and economic factors.

In chapter eight, Prof. Kartik Chandra Sutradhar, a renowned scholar on the history of North Bengal, has outlined the Koch-Mughal bilateral relations. Before getting into the main theme, he portrayed a beautiful depiction of the emergence of the Koch kingdom and its relationship with the Muslim rulers of Gaur. The study reveals how the Mughal-Pathan contest and the revenue survey of Todormal initiated the ground of Mughal penetration into the Koch kingdom. It has been meticulously delineated how the practical division of the Koch kingdom after King Naranarayan in 1587, provided an opportunity for the Mughals to invade the eastern Koch kingdom, Koch-Hajo, and how there grew close relations between the rulers of the eastern Koch kingdom and the Ahom rulers, which ultimately gave birth to Mughal-Ahom conflict. Due to the family conflict, the Koch king Lakshmi Narayan was compelled to sign a treaty with the Mughals compromising the sovereignty of the kingdom in 1596. The Koch-Mughal relations henceforth continued through ups and downs till the period of the Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb and his ambitious general Mir Jumla, who invaded Koch Bihar and captured a large territory, though the occupation did not sustain for long and the Mughal army withdrew. In this connection, the author has further narrated the genesis of the Chhit Mahal problems. The overall analysis is satisfactory, but the long-lasting socio-cultural impact of Mughal dominance has not been taken into consideration.

In chapter nine, Sailen Debnath, the editor himself skillfully depicted an interesting picture of Koch-Bhutan-British tri-lateral relations from 1772 to 1947. The aggressive posture of Bhutan and the growing conflict with the Koch Kingdom created an opportunity for the East India Company's Government under Warren Hastings in making the Koch Kingdom a subsidiary of the burgeoning British Empire in India, and that had happened long before the introduction of Subsidiary Alliance by Lord Wellesley. The economic and strategic importance of Bhutan vis-à-vis the contiguous location of and trade route to Tibet allured the British to make relations with Bhutan for a long duration. The author has given a deeper and more elaborate description of the reasons and consequences of the Anglo-Bhutan Wars most

often involving too the interests of the Koch Kingdom. Apart from the Anglo-Koch Treaty, he analyzed the provisions and the results of all the Anglo-Bhutan treaties in 1773, 1865 and 1910.

The eminent professor of History, Dr. Ratna Roy Sanyal's careful study of the Koch-British Relations has been placed in chapter ten. Prof. Sanyal started his study by depicting the historical quest for analyzing the nature and impact of indirect rule of the Koch kingdom by the British in India as they subsequently introduced the same types of rule elsewhere in the sub-continent. The execution of the famous "One charge theory" and its later consequences must attract the attention of the readers. This study reveals that even being a small princely state in comparison with other states in India, Koch Bihar enjoyed the special status of being one of the first category of states among the 560 Native states in India; and for that reason, there developed a unique and reciprocal cordiality between the Royal family of England and that of Koch Bihar. Because of that, a modernization drive in Koch Bihar became successful. What is wanted in the chapter is the lack of exploration into the lasting socio-cultural impact of the Koch-British relations in the long run. In the context of the crowned prince Narendra Narayan's journey to Krishnanagar, the year is mistakenly printed as 1953 instead of 1853 which is deceptive.

An egressing scholar of history, Dr. Debajit Dutta has contributed two chapters, of which one is on trade and commerce with the elaborate use of *Narayani Mudra*, the currency of the Koch kingdom; and the other is on the system of slavery in the Kingdom. These papers have been comprised in chapters 11 and 12 respectively. How the agrarian economy changed from tribal to feudal or semi-feudal mode of production and how surplus production created the ground of trade and commerce have been un-earthed by meticulous studies of various primary sources. The importance of the Koch Currency i.e. Narayani Mudra has been described by the instance of the acceptance and widespread use of that currency in Bhutan and other kingdoms in the larger part of North-East India. In chapter 12, the existence of slavery in various strata, levels and gradations till the days of its abolition gradually after 1835 have been narrated in detail. These two chapters dealing with the economic and social history of the Koch Kingdom have undoubtedly augmented the importance of the book.

Chapter 13 of this volume is contributed by Sailen Debnath, the editor himself; and here the evolution of the religious beliefs and faiths of the Koch royal family along with the general masses have been sequentially delineated. The journeys from animism to Saivism along with subsequent devotion to Shaktism, Vaishnavism and Brahmoism have well been reflected in the study. The spread of Islam as well has been well articulated. The religious faiths of two aboriginal tribes, the Bodos (also known as Meches) and the Ravas, have been studied in the context of phonology and philosophy which, no doubt, will draw the attention of the researchers in the domain of the history of religions and theology. In the next chapter, the famous historian of North-East

India Prof. Dambarudhar Nath's rigorous study of the sources about the background and spread of the Kamrupi Bhakti Movement and the emergence of Sankaradeva has been a valuable addition. The essentiality of the chapter lies in the fact that, because of the antagonism of the Ahom kings, Sankardeva and his disciples Madhav Dev and Damodar Dev took shelter in the Koch Kingdom; and here under the patronage of Naranarayan and Chilarai, they were able to practice and spread their concept and philosophy of Vaishnavism. But the author's referencing style is not similar to those of other contributors, which is a kind of aberration.

Chapter 15 by Prof. Madhab Chandra Adhikary is a narrative about the society and culture of the Koch Kingdom. Begun with an elaborate background study, this chapter categorically reflects the society and culture of the Rajbanshis together with the Kshatriya Movement that causally had its first onset in Koch Bihar. The author has dealt with the cultures of other peoples as well including the Brahmins and the Muslims; and in these diversities, he has touched upon the Kamrupi Vaishnava movement also. This chapter will meet the interest of the readers and researchers interested in the socio-cultural history of Koch Bihar.

Chapters 16 and 17 are again contributed by Sailen Debnath, the editor; and in the first one here he has, in an argumentative but lucid style, presented a brilliant picture of the British cultural imperialism in the Koch kingdom along with the narrative of its background and nature in British imperial policy and its overall impact. The British attitude, urgency and interest in the arranged marriage between Suniti Devi, daughter of the Brahmo leader Keshab Chandra Sen, and King Nripendra Narayan of Koch Bihar were guided by their imperial policies in 19th century India. British interest in reforms in Koch Bihar was determined by their means of using the colonial reforms and the socio-cultural movements organized by the elite Indians as safety valves for the Empire, and all such things have been presented in a nutshell by the author of the chapter. In the next chapter, the history of the royal family-sponsored cultural awakening and modernization and its far-flung impact in the field of administration, education, society and culture have been studied in detail. These two chapters will fulfil the queries and aspirations of the researchers and readers interested to know about the emergence of Koch Bihar as a modern state.

Chapter 18 is the outcome of a path-finding research by Prof. Anil Kumar Sarkar, a prolific writer of eminence. Here, Dr. Sarkar has made an exhaustive study on the health and medicine of the Koch Kingdom with the extensive use of primary sources. At the inception, he presented an elaborate review of the literature on the studies and research of the history of health and medicine in India. Gradually the readers will get well into the core field of knowledge about *Kabiraji* and *Ayurvedic* medical practices and medicines as had been extant for centuries in the Koch Kingdom. How colonial penetration laid the foundation of the European alias modern system of medicine in this peripheral region has been described in a nutshell. Consequently, from the contemporary

records, the author with relentless effort has extracted statistical data and presented in several tables about the treatments of major diseases, hospitals, birth and death rate, average hospitalization, vaccinations and epidemics. Finally, based on these statistical data, Prof. Sarkar has analyzed the important facets of medical history till the reign of the last king of the kingdom. This work is not only thought-provoking but also a model study worth emulating by future researchers.

Chapter 19 on the literary activities in the Koch Kingdom is the précised and partial result of a basic research work accomplished by Dr. Sulekha Pandit; and here we get the information of how, apart from other writers like Harekrishna Das Bairagi, Ghashyam Dalai, Jaynath Munshi, Jadav Chandra Chakraborty and so on, the Koch Royal family members including the kings, the queens and the princesses devoted themselves to the creations of high profile literature in Bengali and English, though in the earlier times the court poets in the Koch Kingdom since the times of Viswa Singha, Naranarayan and Chilarai contributed a lot to literary translations from the Sanskrit epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, though king Naranarayan's letter to the Ahom king is universally recognized as the first standardized prose in Bengali. Dr. Pandit has beautifully delineated the development of original Bengali literature in the Koch Kingdom since the beginning of the nineteenth century, when even in Kolkata, the seat of Bengal Renaissance, poetry in Bengali failed to get the centre-stage of memorable creativity except the big contributions made in the development of prose by Rammohan, Vidyasagar and Bankim Chandra. Royal ladies like Bhanumati, Kamalapriya, Brindesari, Suniti, Sabitri, Nirupama and Gayatri Devi either patronized the litterateurs or produced literature reflecting the contemporary socio-economic and religious life of the people. Going through this chapter, the readers will know truly that all branches of Bengali literature bloomed in the Koch kingdom. Chapter 20, a joint research paper by two young scholars, Dr. Ruman Sutradhar and Debasish Dey, reveals a glowing picture of the temple architecture, emblematic of the Indo-Persian or Indo-Islamic style, of the Koch Kingdom. The attachment of many relevant pictures has enriched the chapter to be more attractive, but they have not consulted the Bulletins of the Archaeological Survey of India related to this region. Nevertheless, the reference part of the chapter, however, is satisfactory.

Finally, in the concluding phase, the editor logically has made justice by comprising the article on the merger of Koch Bihar with free India in 1949 by the late Parbananda Das, a prolific writer and educationist. The editor has made an update to the chapter by adding a rejoinder authored by himself. Parbananda Das has collocated and concatenated many source materials to authenticate the sequences of facts and arguments he has dealt with in narrating the course of events and controversies that created social upheavals and political tensions exemplified by the ouster for the life of some dignified people from Koch Bihar. Here lie the roots of post-independence ethno-social and political movements in Koch Bihar. The editor's rejoinder is interesting as

in this part we get the role played by different groups in producing arguments in favour of merging Koch Bihar with West Bengal, with Assam, with East-Pakistan, or to make it a union territory have been categorically analyzed.

Though the sum-total significance and congruous stupendousness of the work can by means be ignored, the limitations of any edited book like the diversities of themes written in various tunings and approaches by different authors nurturing dissimilar attitudes, orientations and targets are present in the book; and as such, this lack of identical tuning in writings makes the book a composition of separate islands often stealing away the taste and interest of worth reading. Presently, however, the genesis of ethnocultural identity movements along with the demand for a separate state of Koch Bihar and China's covetous eyes on the Chicken's Neck comprising the nearby Siliguri Corridor and the Dooars have increased the necessity of the studies in the history of the Koch Kingdom and the intricacies of its annexation to free India. Dr. Sailen Debnath by his planning and editing of the book has done a commendable job; because there is no book comprising exhaustive studies in all the important facets of the history of the Koch Kingdom. It is beyond doubt that this book will be welcomed by historians, researchers, scholars, students and general readers.

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