

A Brief History of Cooch Behar

In the last two thousand years, the vast alluvial plains beneath the Sub-Himalayan Mountain range stretching from the River Tista (Trisrota) to Brahmaputra (Lauhitya) were documented in ancient literary sources and inscriptions as Pragjyotis, Lauhitya, Kamarupa and Kamata.¹ From the sixteenth century onward the Tantric texts, Mughal, Portuguese, Dutch and British accounts, travelogues and topographic maps marked the western portion of the Kamarupa as Couch Country, Cocho Bihar, Comotay, Kamata Bihar, Kosbia, Cos Bhaar, Koch-bihar.² To end the all pre-existing confusion regarding the name of the place, the spelling Cooch Behar was permanently fixed by His Highness Maharaja Nripendra Narayan Bhup Bahadur of Cooch Behar through the gazette notification published in Cooch Behar Gazetteer, 1896.³

The origin of the human settlements in Pragjyotis and its surrounding regions was vividly portrayed in Indian mythology. According to *Mahabharata*, Narakasura established a colony in Kamarupa by expelling the people of Kirat race. Bhagadatta, the elder son of King Narakasura participated in the great battle of Kurukshetra from the side of the Kauravas and was killed by Arjuna.⁴ The *Koch Kings of Kamarupa* states that around nineteen rulers of Narakas dynasty ruled over Kamarupa. Most famous among them, Kumar Bhaskaravarma was a contemporary of Harshavardhana of Pushyabhuti dynasty of Kannuj.⁵

Around the fourth and fifth centuries, Sangaladeva became the most powerful sovereign ruler of these regions. He established capital at Laksanabati (Gour) after repulsing the Hunas from Bengal and Malava. Kalahana's *Rajatarangini* mentions that in the eighth century, the kingdom of Pragjyotis and *Stri-Rajya* was attacked by King Muktapida Lalitaditya of Kashmir.⁶ Between the eighth to eleventh centuries, the kingdom of Koch was transformed into a fief of the Pala kings of Kamarupa.⁷ In 1205 AD, Ikhtiyar al-Din Muhammad Bakhtiyar Khalji, the Turko-Afghan military general of Muhammad of Ghor, marched towards Tibet through these regions. The *Sankara Charita* and *Asamer Sanksipta Burunji* mention that from 1293 onward, there was a sustained war between the King of Ahom and the rulers of Kamata.

In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, Kamatapur (Gosanimari; Location: 26.032°N - 89.484°E) in the bank of river Dharla emerged as a powerful kingdom under the rulers of Khen dynasty. A massive fortress was constructed by the Kamata rulers to protect manpower and wealth. There was no other fortification in eastern India which could compare with Kamatapur in terms of size and technicalities of construction.⁸ Now the ruins of the burnt bricks fortress

¹ Ahmed, Khan Chowdhury Amanatulla, *Cooch Beharer Itihas*, Vol.I, Cooch Behar State Press, Cooch Behar, 1935, p. 1

² Ibid, pp. 2- 13

³ Cooch Behar Gazetteer, 1896, p.28. His Highness Maharaja Nripendra Narayan Bhup Bahadur of Cooch Behar preferred to adopt the more anglicized spelling Cooch instated of Koch which was the native pronunciation.

⁴ For more information see *Mahabharata*, Asvamedhaparva Adhyayas 75, 76.

⁵ Ahmed, 1935, op.cit, p.15

⁶ Kalhana, *Rajatarangini*, Taranga-4, Verses-272-274

⁷ Ghosal, Sarat Chandra, *History of Cooch Behar*, State Press Cooch Behar, 1942, p.26

⁸ Ibid, p. 38

at Gosanimari Rajpat, (Dinhata Block I, Cooch Behar) protected by the Archaeological Survey of India, Government of India. According to Rakhaldas Bandyopadhyay, the Kamata kingdom stood as a buffer between eastern Kamrupa and the Bengal Sultanate. In 1808, the ruin of Rajpat was examined by Dr. Francis Buchanan Hamilton who prepared a detailed map of the old fortress. The Kamata state reached its zenith during Kamateswar Niladhvaja and Chakradhvaja. A few sources state that the temple of Kamateswari was built by Chakradhvaja, as he was advised in dreams to recover the indestructible *Chandika Kavacha* (amulet) of King Bhagadatta who was killed in the great battle of Kurukshetra and installed it in Gosanimari the capital of Kamatapur. The entire region was destroyed by Ala-ud-din Husain Shah of Hussain Shahi dynasty in 1498. Shah Ismail Ghazi, the military general of Husain Shah defeated and executed King Nilambar, the last ruler of Khen dynasty. In a queue, Ala-ud-din Husain Shah and his military generals devastated the Kamateswari temple of Kamatapur, Kamakhya Temple at Nilachal Hills, Jagannath Temple of Puri.

From 1515 to 1949, overall twenty-one kings of Koch dynasty ruled Cooch Behar and many times faced the Mughals and Bhutanese invaders. Biswa Singha (1515–1540) was regarded as the supremely powerful first sovereign ruler of the Koch dynasty. He adopted the title Kamateswar and established control over vast tracks from the foothill of the Himalayas upto the Gouda. He reconstructed the Kamakhya Temple in Nilachal Hills and established capital at Chikna. Maharaja Naranarayan and Laxminarayan faced numerous attacks from outsiders. Maharaja Naranarayan was the first ruler of Cooch Behar who introduced population census in his kingdom.⁹ In 1596, Maharaja of Amer Mansingh I, the military general of Akbar marched towards Cooch Behar. Koch ruler Laxminarayan accepted the suzerainty of the Mughals. Again in 1661, following the order of Aurangzeb, his military general Mir Mohammad Sayyid Ardistani or Mir Jumla II attacked Cooch Behar and subjugated the capital without any battle. Maharaja Pranarayan fled to the foothills for a secure shelter. Soon the name of Cooch Behar was changed to Alamgirnagar. Cooch Behar was the only state in entire India where the Mughals issued their coins in a regional language. Later on, Maharaja Pranarayan agreed to give valuable yearly tribute to the Mughal Emperor and resume control over the capital.

After the death of Aurangzeb (1707), the Bhutanese incursions rapidly increased in the neighbouring areas of Falakata, Buxa and Western Dooars. It led to the frontier dispute between Cooch Behar and Bhutan. In the 1700s, political problems intensified along with the abduction of Maharaja Dharjendranarayan of Cooch Behar by the king of Bhutan and the commencement of the Sanyasi-Fakir uprising in the Northern Part of Bengal. Warren Hastings (1732 -1818) the first governor-general of Bengal intervened in these matters and deputed Company's troops to Cooch Behar. Maharaja Dharjendranarayan of Cooch Behar was released from Bhutan and Anglo-Koch Treaty was signed in 1773. The British East India Company grabbed 1,99,120 narayani taka from Cooch Behar state as the charge of the war.¹⁰ Aftermath of the treaty, the process of Anglicization was started in Cooch Behar, especially in the sphere of administration, judiciary, revenue and education of Royal descendants.

⁹ Ibid, p. 157

¹⁰ Ahmed, 1935, op.cit, p.214

The modern cityscape of Cooch Behar Town (26.3452° N, 89.4482° E) gradually developed since the reign of Maharaja Harendranarayan to His Highness Maharaja Nripendra Narayan Bhup Bahadur during the nineteenth century. As British colonialism directly stimulated the growth of Calcutta as a cosmopolitan city, it also influenced the rulers of Cooch Behar to gain the reputation of the most advanced native states in South Asia. Soon the magnificent royal palace, educational institutions, state offices, court, libraries, clubs, theatrical stages, playgrounds, and railway station were constructed which replicated the Neo-classical and Indo-Saracenic architecture prevalent in the British capital in India. Maharaja Nripendra Narayan and Maharani Sunity Devi had a worldwide reputation. Sunity Devi became the first Indian Queen to travel abroad and the first woman recipient of the CIE award of the British Empire. She attended the Diamond Jubilee celebrations of Queen Victoria in 1898 and the Delhi Durbar of 1911 with her husband. Cooch Behar was the only native state in India where three royal ladies wrote their autobiographies in Bengali and English.

During the rule of the Regency Council in Cooch Behar State, Manishi Panchnan Barma strongly protested against the steps taken by the council and raised his voice for the rights of the Rajbansi people. He fought for the identity of the *Rajbangshi Kshatriyas*, social justice for the oppressed women and eradication of all kinds of exploitation in society. The last Koch ruler, Sir Jagaddipendra Narayan Bhup Bahadur (1915-1970), ceded full ruling powers to the Government of India on 12 September 1949 and the state was merged with West Bengal on 1 January 1950.