

Contribution of Koch Kings and Development of Saivism in Kamata- Kochbehar in Historical Perspective

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Abstract:

The Kamata-Kochbehar occupies a significant place in the religious and cultural history of North-East India. As a part of ancient Kamarupa, this area witnessed the prevalence of Saivism since early times. With the establishment of the Koch Kingdom by Maharaja Biswa Singha in the early 16th century, Saivism received systematic royal patronage and became a key instrument for political legitimacy and social integration. This paper deals with the contribution of Koch kings in the propagation and development of Saivism in Kamata-Kochbehar from a historical perspective. It traces how rulers from Biswa Singha to Sivendranarayan promoted Saivism through temple construction, land grants, appointment of Brahmins, and the synthesis of Brahmanical and tribal rituals. Prominent Saiva centers such as Jalpesvara, Banesvara, Siddhanath, Hiranayagarbha, and others flourished under royal support. The study also highlights how the Koch rulers legitimized their authority by claiming descent from Lord Siva, thereby facilitating the process of Aryanization and Hinduization while maintaining religious tolerance toward tribal beliefs. Despite the rise of Neo-Vaishnavism in the region, Saivism continued to dominate the socio-cultural life of Kamata-Kochbehar due to its alignment with the agrarian ethos of the people. The paper concludes that Saivism under Koch patronage was not merely a sectarian faith but formed the bedrock of regional identity, heritage, and cultural continuity in present North Bengal.

Keywords: Koch Dynasty, Kamata-Kochbehar, Saivism, Lord Siva, Royal Patronage, Temple Architecture, Religious Syncretism, Biswa Singha, North-East India, Koch-Rajbanshi Heritage

Introduction :

The Kamata- Kochbehar has the glorious past of the North-East India. This region was previously included in ancient kingdom of Kamarupa. The Koch rulers were predecessors of Kamarupa. There were four Peeths in Kamarupa such as '*Kampeeth*', '*Ratnapeeth*', '*Suvornopeeth*' and '*Saumarpeeth*' (Haque, 2021, p. 9). This ancient kingdom expanded from the Western part of Brahmaputra Valley up to Karatoya. Kamata gained its name from Kamarupa in between 13th century to 15th century A.D. The Gauda's ruler Allauddin Hussain Shah defeated the Khen dynasty (Sen, 1989, p. 18), then a new era started under the Koch rulers of Kamata- Kochbehar. In 1510 A.D, Maharaja Chandan established the Kamata- Koch Kingdom (Das, 1985, p. 25). After the foundation of Koch Kingdom , Maharaja Biswa Singha had established a liberal, social, economic and Hindu culture in North-East India. Soon after, a section of

Brahmins elevated him to the rank of Kshatriya of the *Varnashrama* community and called him, meaning lord of the world, and even identified him as a descendant of Siva, the Hindu Trinity. Finally, the process of Aryanization and Hinduization began in the Brahmaputra valley from the beginning of the early Christian era. Therefore, at the time of establishment of the Koch Kingdom in the lower Brahmaputra Valley, that is, at the beginning of the 16th century CE, most of the people throughout almost the entire Brahmaputra Valley were primarily either purely Hindu or influenced by Hinduism. In fact, Kamata-Kochbehar under Biswa Singha was one of the most powerful Hindu Kingdoms in North-East India. Nevertheless, their tribal beliefs also coexisted alongside Hinduism (Adhikary, 2018, p. 26). In this present paper an attempt is to throw light on the great royal patrons of Saivism in Kamata-Kochbehar along with their contributions towards propagation and spread of Saivism.

Historical Background of Saivism in Pre-Koch Kamarupa:

The Saiva cult of this region emerged from the earliest times. It was very popular amongst the aboriginals and Aryanized people in Brahmaputra Valley. They believed their religious and cultural beliefs. The popularity of Saivism has been observed since the era of the '*Mahabharata*'. The religious text such as the '*Kalika Purana*' indicates that worship of Siva was more widespread than that of Devi worship, and notes that, prior to Naraka's introduction of Devi worship at Kamakhya, Siva was regarded as the guardian deity of land (Adhikary, 2018, p. 27). It is said that during the reign of Naraka, Siva concealed in his own city and the Kiratas worshipped him (Choudhury, 1959, p. 445). Siva is also revered as the god of fertility and is closely associated with agriculture (Kakati, 1961, p. 34). Thus, the Saivism became the dominant religion among the population of Brahmaputra Valley.

The political history of Kamarupa spent nearly two hundred years in darkness after the Naraka dynasty. However, the system of succession originated during the time of the Varman dynasty. One of the prominent king of Varman dynasty was Bhaskaravarman, a follower of Saivism. There are two copper inscriptions of king Bhaskaravarman such as *Dubi Plate* and *Nidhanpur grant*. These two inscriptions commence with an invocation to lord Siva (Sarma, 1981, p. 62). Banbhatta mentions in his *Harsha Charita* that Bhaskaravarman was a devotee of Siva. He further describes that from his early life, he had unwaveringly determined that he would not bow down to anyone except the lotus feet of Siva (Cowel & Thomas, 1897, p. 217). In the 7th century A.D, the Chinese traveller, Hiuen Tsang came Kamarupa and also mentions that hundreds of Deva Temples are presence there. However, it seems that many of which were possibly devoted to Siva (Watters, 1905, p. 186).

After the decline of Varman dynasty, the Salastambha family rose to power and established their rule. King Vanamala was undoubtedly a prominent follower of Saiva faith within this family. Harjavarman, king Vanamala's father, who also sacrificed his life to worship of Siva. Vanamala, the most influential king of Kamarupa, maintained strong control over neighboring kings using both warlike and peaceful strategies. He was a formidable emperor who expanded his reign by war (Choudhury, 1987, p. 219). It is true that Vanamala's exclusive devotion and loyalty to Saivism is evidenced from his personal inscription. The inscriptions provide certain informations of adoration of Saivism. However, the most important inscription of Vanamala have been found from *Tezpur Copper plate*, where it begins with a hymn to Lord Siva (Sarma, 1981, p. 62). He likewise devoted time and resources to the reconstruction and embellishment of a magnificent Siva temple known as *Hetukasulin* in Tezpur (Debnath, 2015, p. 25). Vanamalavarmadeva's intense veneration toward lord Siva is further corroborated by the Nowgong Copper Plate issued by his grandson Balavarma. According to this inscription, Vanamala placed the weight of the kingdom on his

son's shoulder and dedicated himself to the spirit of Lord Siva (Mahesvara) through fasting (Neog, 1984, p. 3). But, the Saiva religion was fully improved and divided into sub- cults at that time. The Lord Siva is known as different names such as Parameswara (Nidhanpur Grant, n.d, V. 4), Maheswara (Grant of Balavarman, n.d, V.4), Iswara (Grant of Vanamala , n.d, Vv. 1-2), Mahavaraha (Gauhati Grant of Indrapala, n.d, V. 2) and Adideva (Suvankarapataka Grant, n.d, V. 1). These names show that lord Siva is superior to all other Gods. He is also addressed as Sambhu (Gauhati Grant of Indrapala, n.d, V.2), Sankara (Bargaon Grant, n.d, Vv. 1-2), and Prajadhinatha (Gauhati Grant of Indrapala, n.d, V. 2). Another character of lord Siva is Rudra, which indicates destructive or violent appearance. However, the different names of lord Siva help to understand the popular ideas about the deity.

The aforementioned epigraphs further attest to the existence of temples consecrated to Lord Siva. Ratnapala was an illustrious monarch of the Pala dynasty and a devout follower of lord Siva. He designated the ancient city of Pragjyotisha with the name of Durjaya. The grandeur of this city is captured in verse within the Bargaon and Sualkuci grants (Choudhury, 1987, p. 230). The inscriptions of Ratnapala depict Lord Siva as the grantor of all, identifying his authentic form with that of the supreme divine being. As an adherent of Saivism, Ratnapala believed in the principle of charitable giving. In his Sualkuci grant, it is mentioned that king Ratnapala dedicated land to a Brahmin named Basudeva, son of Bhattavaladeva, who was a follower of Bhardwaj gotra and the *Kanva- Samhita* of *Vajsaneyi Samhita*. According to the Bargaon grant, he officiated a land grant to Gangadatta, a brahman belonging to the Parasara gotra. Within his inscriptional record, the Brahman donees are formally acknowledged with appropriate veneration (Chudhury, 1987, p. 325). It is clear that Ratnapala was one of successful king of the Pala dynasty , who worked in accurate way. He also adorned the whole world with snow- white temples of Siva and enriched the abodes of Brahmans with manifold wealth. He covered the sacred grounds with sacrificial altars and the heavens with the smoke of holy offerings; he clouded the seas with the dust of his marching legions and marked every land with his pillars of victory (Sharma, 1978, p. 186). Thus , the Saiva religion became popular in the minds of people in Kamarupa.

From the discussion above, it is clear that all the kings of Kamarupa were followers of Siva. Most of royal land grants include invocation to Siva, addressed by one of his various names. As evidenced by the 1185 A.D Vallabhadeva copper plates (Barpujari, 1960, p. 316), Saivism continued to exercise a pervasive influence into the twelfth century. These inscriptions document a strong tradition of asceticism, claiming that the ruler himself was a divine gift bestowed upon his parents by Lord Shiva in recognition of their disciplined penance.

Royal Patronage and Development of Saivism under Koch Dynasty:

Kamata-Kochbehar is one of the major centers of religious tolerance. Various religious reformers visited this region and propagated their religious and moral teachings. Guru Gorakhnath, the founder of the *Nathpanthi* religious group, was the most remarkable among them. According to oral traditions and regional folk music, this great soul was born during the twelfth century in the vicinity of the renowned *Jalpesh Dham*. While the exact period of their arrival is contested, Sona Ray and Rupa Ray are recognized as two additional Sanatan reformers who spread their teachings in this region prior to the arrival of Islam. During the 16th and 17th centuries, Guru Nanak (founder of Sikhism) and Guru Tegh Bahadur (reformer) travelled to Kamarupa for religious propagation. Furthermore, the 16th century saw the arrival of Chaitanyadeva, the founder of Gaudiya Vaishnavism, and Shankardeva, the founder of the Assamese Vaishnavite tradition. Accompanied by his associates Damodardeva and Madhavdeva, they visited this

region to disseminate their spiritual and philosophical ideals. In addition to various sects of Hinduism, this region was an important center of Islam during the 13th century. The Islamic preachers arrived here and propagated their religious ideals. Among them were Torsa Pir, Pagla Pir, Ismail Gazi, Satya Pir, and others (Ghoshal, 1936, Pp. 65- 73). Thus, the ideals of various reformers played a significant role in the development of Saivism.

In this study the Koch kingdom indicates that a pluralistic religious landscape existed among the general population. Hinduism was largely localized within the royal household and select sectors of the capital. Due to a policy of non-interference by the court, non-Hindu tribes were free to worship their own deities. Maharaja Biswa Singha strategically supported both Brahmanical and tribal rituals to maintain political stability; he eventually adopted Hinduism personally and was formally initiated into the Kshatriya caste by Brahmin priests (Adhikary, 2018, p. 29). As a result, Biswa Singha laid a new foundation for Hinduism in the kingdom of Koch.

The Koch royal power emerged under the leadership of Biswa Singha after the decline of the Kamata Kingdom in the late 15th century. It marked the beginning of the royal patronage of Saivism in the Kamata-Kochbehar region. During the reign of Biswa Singha the Saivism was not restricted to personal worship but became the principal instrument for constructing royal ideology and political legitimacy. There are legendary folktales circulating regarding the fact that Biswa Singha was a follower of Saivism. The *Darrang Rajvamsabali* (Goswami, 1973, Pp. 50-73) says that king Biswa Singha was a son of Lord Siva, who took the form of Hariya Mondal and cohabited with his wife Hira, is an incarnation of Siva's wife Parvati. The text *Shankarcharit* of Ramcharit Thakur states that Biswa Singha was a child of lord Siva, graced by the deity's own blessings (Ahmed, 1936, p. 83). The literary account of Mankar, a court poet in under Biswa Singha, attests to the practice of Siva worship in Kamata- Kochbehar during this period (Adhikary, 2018, p. 29). The Koch account further states that Biswa Singha, a devotee of lord Siva, was initiated into the Saiva religion by the Brahmin Kalicharan Bhattacharya. He fetched a large number of Brahmins from Kanauaz, Mithila, Gaud and provided them land to reside the kingdom of Kamata-Kochbehar. He established numerous temples throughout the Kingdom and appointed priests. He appointed Vallabhacharya , the son of the Kanauz Brahmin named Vasudeva Acharya as the priest of goddess Kamakhya in the Kamata- Koch Kingdom (Ghoshal, 1936, p. 11). He was an illustrious protector of Hinduism and also adored Lord Siva and Durga (Gait, 1906, p. 47).

The Saivism gained popularity among some of the later Koch kings. One of them was maharaja Naranarayana, son of Biswa Singha. Maharaja Naranarayana was a great patron of lord Siva. The *Narayani Mudra*, the coins of Naranarayana serves as a testament to his deep reverence for lord Siva. As most of these coins are often called *Siva Tanka* because they typically portray the monarch as “ *Siva Charana kamala madhu karasya*”, symbolising his devotion (Bhattacharya, 2000, Pp. 82-88). As per the Brahmanical and the tribal rites, Maharaja Naranarayana organized Siva worship to please his soldiers on the eve of expedition against Ahoms. The Deodhai priest (tribal priest) was performed all the rites and customs of the worship as well as there was Kachari dancing troupe to beat the drums (madala). Maharaja Naranarayana allowed to worship according to tribal customs on the northern side of Brahmaputra/ Gosain Kamal Ali Road, where Koch, Mech, Kachari peoples performed it but the southern side of the road was left to the Brahmana priests (Darrang Raj Vamsavali, n.d, Vv. 336-337). From this fact it alludes that Siva was the prime goddess of tribal and hinduised people of Kamata kingdom. During this period, Sankardeva, founder of Neo- Vaisnavism, who came this region and propagated his religious dogma. It is

said that Sankardeva's father Kusumbara Bhuyan was a devotee of Lord Siva. Hence, he was named Sankara that a name represents another form of Lord Siva (Guru Charita of Ramananda, n.d, 841-f). The influence of Saiva religion was noticeable during the reign of Maharaja Lakshminarayana. During this period, the Koch kingdom came under severe problems, caught between Bhutanese attack on one flank and Mughal invasions on the other (Das, 2016, p. 41). In spite of all the difficulties, he did not fall back in his religious practices. Then, he went to Agra and on his way back discovered Lolarkakunda in Benares. He established a *Lolarkesvara Siva* again at that place. Maharaja Lakshminarayana reintroduced the worship of '*Jalpesvar Siva*', which was believed to have been closed long ago. But his sudden death hindered the construction of temple (Barma, 1975, p. 137).

Maharaja Pranarayan was a Scholar and righteous. During his reign, Koch Behar was known as '*Dharmarajya*' (Pal, 2023, p. 6). Everyone used to discuss religious matters with each other. Maharaja Pranarayan reconstructed the temples of Siva Sandesvar and Banesvar. Banmali Gosai was the guru of Maharaja Pranarayan. Although there were external and internal problems during his reign, he didn't fail to spread the religion. The Mason came to work from Delhi and commenced the construction of *Jalpesvara Siva* temple, but he was unable to finish this work (Ghoshal, 1936, Pp. 205-206). Subsequently, Maharaja Modanarayan, the son of Maharaja Pranarayan, completed the construction of *Jalpesvara Siva* temple and gave 44 '*Jotes*' at its *Devottora* property. He established the *Sadabrata* at that place. The work of *Sadabrata* was carried out by the income of those Jotes. He also arranged for free food to be provided to the visitors and payment of eleven hundred coins to meet the expenses (Deb, 1896, Pp.23-25).

During the reign of Maharaja Upendranarayan, the royal religion underwent a radical change. But there is a story to know about Maharaja Upendranarayan, which is a very important part. Maharaja Upendranarayan had two queens. His elder, called as Bara Aye Devati was a lady of different character and the younger Aye Devati was the second wife. When the king established relationship with a dancing girl named Lal Bai, the Bara Aye Devati did not allow him to enter the bedroom. The Maharaja lived in a small place at Dhaliabari with his younger queen (Barma, 1975, p. 144). From this fact, it is believed that *Siddhanath Siva* temple have been constructed at Dhaliabari during his reign (Itihas Anusandhan, 1993, p. 89).

Maharaja Harendranarayan played an important role in the development of Saivism. In 1807, he excavated a large tank known as Sagar Dighi and built the *Hiranyagarbha Siva* temple on its western bank. Moreover, he constructed a Siva temple at Dhaliabari. Before the construction of the temple, Maharaja Harendranarayan started his life as a monk. He was often busy with meditation and prayed to Lord Siva (Barma, 1975, p. 144). It is assumed that the Siva temple at Haripur was built in the reign of Maharaja Harendranarayan.

After the death of Maharaja Harendranarayan, his son Maharaja Sivendranarayan carried forward Saivism. He finished the Siva temple at Dhaliabari which was commenced in the reign of Maharaja Harendranarayan. He constructed the *Siddhanath Siva* temple and *Karunamayi Siva* temple at Benares. He granted the '*Devottoro*' property for daily worship. Maharaja Sivendranarayan's court poet was Dvija Vaidyanath, who translated the Siva Purana. This text indicates that the Saiva cult found in Kamata kingdom. However, subsequently some of the Koch kings followed the Brahma religion, but they obeyed all the customs of Saivism. We get information that during the reign of Jagaddipendranarayan Bhup Bahadur, the '*Siva Yojana ceremony*' is held at Khagrabari by Brahmanas in 1948 (Pal, 2023, Pp. 74-76). This genre is now continuing. However, this ceremony is celebrated on Akhsay Tithi in the month of Baisakh.

There are a large number of Saiva centres in Kamata- Kochbehar. According to *Kalika Purana*, there were many holy places connected with Siva in Kamarupa. There were many Siva temples found in the geographical region of Kamata Kochbehar. The most mentionable among them are *Banesvara Siva* temple, *Siddhanath Siva* temple, *Jalpesvara Siva* temple, *Anathnath Siva* temple, *Hiranyagarbha Siva* temple, *Haripura Siva* temple, *Damesvara Siva* temple, *Sandesvara Siva* temple, *Lolarkakunda* and *Lolarkesvara Siva* temple, *Ghurnesvari Siva* temple, *Khamar Sitai Siva* temple, *Goalpatti Siva* temple, *Vitorkuthi Shivprosad Mustafi Siva* temple and *Devatapara Siva* temple. However, it seems that all the temples constructed under the royal patronage of Kamata- Koch Kingdom.

A considerable influence of Saivism is reflected in the folk culture of Kamata-Kochbehar. According to philosophical point of view, Saivism can be divided into two parts. One is the philosophical aspect and the other is socio- cultural aspect. Philosophically Saivism is that the theory where Lord Siva inhabited as the 'guardian deity' of Kamata -Koch kingdom. The people of this area believe that Lord Siva is known as fertility god. Thus the Saivism gained popularity over Sankaradeva's Neo- Vaisnavism in this agricultural based region. Apart from, Socio- culturally there are different names of lord Siva such as *Sannyasi*, *Dhumbaba*, *Jathathakur*, *Budathakur*, *Masan* and *Madan Kamadeva*. It may be mentioned that these names imply as the effigy of Lord Siva. Even Siva is revered as the shield of every village. So Lord Siva is popular deity in Kamata-kochbehar. However, Kamata- Kochbehar is famous for fairs and festivals. Most of the festivals are associated with some particular aspect of faith. There are many festivals connected with the people of this area. The festivals are *Bamboo festival*, *Shravani fair* and *Shiva chaturdashi* (Rajan & Barman, 2024, Pp.74-77). It is true that all the festivals comprehensively affected the community of Kamata -Kochbehar.

Conclusion:

It may be asserted that the role of the Koch dynasty in the evolution of the social, cultural, and religious history of Kamata-Kochbehar was not confined merely to the realm of political governance; rather, it constituted a history of enduring cultural resurgence. The royal patronage extended to Saivism in this region, commencing with Maharaja Biswa Singha and continuing through the reigns of his successors has inscribed a unique chapter in the religious landscape of North-East India.

Historians argue that the Koch dynasty embraced Saivism largely to gain social and political acceptance. By rebranding their indigenous background through a claimed lineage to Siva, they successfully positioned themselves within the mainstream of Hindu hierarchy. Traditional texts like *Rajopakhyān* and *Darrang Rajvamsavali* provide a narrative framework for this divine ancestry. This dual-purpose approach functioned effectively to command devotion from the common people while simultaneously gaining social recognition from the priestly class.

The Koch rulers excelled in harmonizing local tribal rites with orthodox Saiva beliefs, creating a unique cultural fusion. By supporting Tantric traditions at the *Kamateswari* Temple alongside the Brahmanical worship of Siva, they ensured a diverse religious landscape. The survival of Saiva and Sakta faiths in the face of the widespread Vaishnava movement was a testament to the kings deliberate and effective religious diplomacy.

In summary, the Saiva culture that flourished in Kamata-Kochbehar under the patronage of the Koch kings was not merely a mode of worship for a specific sect; rather, it served as the fundamental bedrock of the self-identity and heritage of the people of North Bengal. We can know that both of *Saiva* and *Vaishnava* conflict never arose in this region. This dynasty did not oppose the religion of tribals and other secular

people. The Koch kings themselves never indulged the caste discrimination and accepted the *Yavana* untouchability. Even centuries later, the glorious Saiva legacy of the Koch monarchs remains deeply embedded in the temples of Kochbehar and the traditions of the Koch-Rajbanshi community. Thus, the Saivism continued from the founding of the Koch dynasty till the end.

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