

**KOCH
RAJBANSHI
and
KAMTAPURI**

The truth unveiled

Nalini Ranjan Ray

KOCH RAJBANSHI AND KAMTAPURI- THE TRUTH UNVEILED

Nalini Ranjan Ray



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PREFACE

Often it appeared as if I was scaling the Mount Everest while writing a project like this one. Then, it was only the training that I had received during my days in the armed forces, made me to get going with the task that started in almost a decade ago finally got accomplished and as a result it took a shape of a book. The military dictum – ‘When going gets tough, the tough gets going’ was often remembered to draw some extra energy when ever I felt like giving up and found no morale boosting support from any corner. Writing on Rajbanshi community or Kamtapuri movement is a dicey composition and people normally avoid it, as subject is politically volatile in nature. I feel honoured to say that keeping in view of the best traditions of my past services in the armed forces as a soldier and my present banking organisation where I am serving, the motive behind writing this book is solely for a social cause and is in no way meaning anything or associating myself in any act, which or that may be prejudicial to the interest of the sovereignty and integrity of India, the security of the state, friendly relations with foreign state, public order, decency or morality, or which involves contempt of the court, defamation or incitement to an offence. The subject matter of this book is sensitive indeed in the sense that certain debatable issues related to socio-economic and political scenario concerning state machineries of West Bengal, Bihar and Assam have been discussed; but in no way, I intend to hurt the feelings of any person or instigate any person against the any state or the nation.

This book is all about an ethnic Indian community, as old as Indian civilisation, which having a glorious past but now is shrouded with an obscure history. Most of these simple, less privileged, socio-economically poor Rajbanshis living for ages in whole of present North Bengal (barring its hilly areas), Northeastern districts of Bihar, eastern Nepal, Assam and their adjoining areas, most of whom are unaware of their past, do not realise harsh realities of caste based politics rampant in the country, do not anticipate the community’s uncertain future. These unfortunate people, also called Deshi and Koch

Rajbanshi face the most critical period of their existence today. Fallouts of historical aberrations, changes in geographical boundaries, political, socio-economic, cultural and linguistic conflicts have, over the centuries, affected them critically and their very existence is threatened today. Pains of hunger and poverty, inability to meet the basic needs of life, repentance of loosing lands and homes, hopelessness multiply their miseries and emotional feelings not only saddened me but also, enabled me to gain enough strength and courage to take up this project.

This community of India appears to be on the verge of extinction not numerically but from social point of view; a peculiar in nature ever came across in any known history of mankind for the reasons attributable to socio-economic and political aberrations. Their history remained in obscurity because they did not write it themselves but allowed others to do so, who could mould it in their favour. These people are in majority in rural North Bengal and third major caste Hindu community in West Bengal and majority in two districts of neighbouring Bihar and almost half of the districts in Assam and few other areas but they do not have their a say in any sphere socially or politically. They identify themselves as *Kshatriyas* in North Bengal and its adjoining areas but got them denigrated socially by accepting lower social status constitutionally. Their learned and well established lot or the elite group of people are in quandary and to keep away from vortex of identity crisis they always found easier way out, just to get absorbed in the mainstream populace of their respective state wherein they reside to hide their distorted identity. However, a sizable group of the community raises their voice for grant of separate statehood to greater 'Koch Behar' to the bitter dislike of many. At times the situation appears to be explosive and dangerous for the nation. Hope the readers from all walks of life including academicians, administrators and political leaders will be immensely benefited by this book and all they will act in a manner that will surely help these unfortunate people, enable them to make progress, prosper and save these people from extinction.

Although, an earnest endeavour has been made to give, as much as possible the authenticated or near true facts in this book but I know for sure that there exists enough scope for further improvement. So, I shall look forward for critical analysis, suggestions and valuable guidance from the readers so that together we may educate ourselves more and get to know more about this community. Hope readers will enjoy reading it.

Place: Guwahati
Date: October 2007

Ex-Capt. Nalini Ranjan Ray

CHAPTER – I
HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE OF KOCH, RAJBANSHI
AND KAMTAPURI

The Beginning

Pristine glories, chivalry of Chilaray and sunshine,
Bygone are those olden days of celebration and joys;
Time came, heavens fell and destiny played its role,
Winds full of uncanny fury blew them up and down,
Light was long gone; in darkness they lost their way.

Rare are those who dared to walk down their memory lane,
Forgotten heroes, obscurity overwhelmed; where are they?
Tears of sorrow get dry after a prolonged cry in Her eyes,
Saddened, silently weeping motherland, beloved Kamta 'Ayi'
With inflicted wounds her children in pains gasping for air.

Did you ever listen to those blissful songs from deep within?
Came from land of rivers, trees, small hills and paddy fields,
Dwindling yet melodious, calling her children to rise again;
It is little about the Koches or Rajbanshis, before we begin
Telling their true story to the nation India, mother divine.

(Aye – Mother in Rajbanshi Kamtapuri language)

Among the reminiscences of Koch Empire that still stand tall and remind us of the past Kamta-Koch-Rajbanshi grandeur are Cooch Behar palace and temples constructed by Kamta-Koch kings; And then, to name a few well known living Koch Rajbanshi royal descendants are legendary figures like ageless Gayatri Devi(*since expired*), a princess of Cooch Behar royal house, who was married to erstwhile king of Jaipur to become 'Rajmata' of Jaipur; 'Rani' Gina Narayan, an English lady married to late king of Cooch Behar and many others like that of Bijni kingdom (later shifted to Abhayapuri(Bongaigaon district in Assam) and royals of Darrang and Beltola(Assam), Dinajpur and Jalpaiguri(North Bengal) and other kingdoms. Most of them are now settled in London, Kolkata and few in Guwahati. Non-fulfillment of their socio-economic, political aspirations and down sliding state of affairs of erstwhile subjects of their princely states make these royal descendants feel unhappy. Even if they always wish for happiness and prosperity of the Rajbanshis, long lost paramount power of princely states and political turnaround force them to maintain cool over today's pressing issues, which we are going to discuss in later chapters and find pragmatic solutions.

With these words let us first explore the history of a large ethnic community of India about whom neither we found much authenticated information nor ever seriously tried to know.

(a) Need to Know History of Koch-Rajbongshis or Rajbanshis and Kamta-Kamrup

More than a century ago, Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay (1838-1894) who can aptly be called the Father of Bengali style of prose writing realised that history of Bengal hitherto written by the English historians did not depict the real picture of the country, they wrote as it suited the British interest. And the writer, strongly signaled a warning by saying that what Bengal needed was a history, otherwise there was no hope as it appeared in his Bengali articles '*Bange Brahmanadhikar*', *Bhadra*, 1280, *Bagabda* (Bengali chronology), '*Bangalir Bahubal*', *Shraban*, 1281, *Bangabda* and '*Banglar Itihas Sammandhey Koyekty Kotha, Agrahayan* 1287, *Bangabda*', in Bengali journal '*Bangadarshan*'. The litterateur advised everyone to write history and he himself pioneered in this field by writing few novels based on historical stories. For Bengalis proper, the Pioneer's advice was well followed and its fruits since enjoyed by the fellow Bengalis but for a brother community of theirs, who have not followed it and remained in obscurity, the advice still holds good even today.

In the present crises-ridden and caste based Indian society there is a great necessity to revisit the historical facts and redefine identities of numerous aborigines or indigenous people and their intermixing with other cultures so as to reach a reasonably near true history of India.

The ethnically one, one of the most tolerant aboriginal people of strategically located areas in whole of North Bengal barring its hilly terrains; in a sizable portion of Assam; western part of Meghalaya; Purnia, Kishanganj districts and eastern part of Katihar district of Bihar; Jhapa and Biratnagar districts of Nepal; Rangpur, East Dinajpur districts and some parts of north west Mymensingh, northern Rajshahi and Bogra districts of Bangladesh and lower parts of Bhutan where these indigenous people ordinarily reside from time immemorial are known as Rajbanshi Kshatriya Bengali in North Bengal, simply Rajbanshi in Bihar and Nepal and as Koch Rajbongshi in Assam, Meghalaya and their adjoining areas. What they all need today is to explore their past history to prove their true identity.

In history books available today, not much has been mentioned related to Kamta-Koch-Rajbanshi domains. In Assam, to some extent, mention of Pragjyotishpur, Barman dynasty, Kamrup kingdom and Koch king Nara Narayan was made in their history books. Although, history of Kamta-Koch kingdom was an integral part of history in Assam and was taught in schools and colleges till few years back; now, it is being slowly done away with. This aspect needs introspection.

It was not an easy task to ascertain the circumstances under which today's North Bengal and its neighboring areas lost their pristine glory, which, otherwise was once a central hub for acculturation among various races in northeastern part of India. Their language that was once believed to be the lingua franca of the entire Koch Empire is dying today due to non-recognition. It still holds good for the Rajbanshi people to take Bankim's suggestion seriously and get onto the job of writing history lest Koch or Rajbanshis will perish. What needed is an endeavor to search, collect and put together all the available legendary stories, archaeological findings, historical facts already brought out by quite a few historians, works

of research scholars and eminent personalities in this field and present them to the readers so that they can have a clear idea on the past of the people belonging to this community.

There is a need to co-relate contemporary histories of adjacent regions entire Northeast, South Bengal, Bihar, Nepal, Sikkim, Bhutan and Bangladesh to find an unbiased history of entire Koch-Rajbanshi or Kamta region. Also, it has to be kept in mind that writing history for self-interest or in a manner prejudicial to others is harmful to the society as a whole. History should be written in holistic and impartial manner; otherwise as one of our most illustrious and learned President of India, Dr. S. Radhakrishnan repented in saying that we might have learnt nothing from history. In his book “The Present Crisis of Faith” he wrote: -

“...History is a creative process, a meaningful pattern. It is brought about by the spirit in man. While external conditions determine our progress to large extent, they are not completely coercive.... If we are careful we can learn a great deal from history. Our past history demonstrates that we failed whenever our centre weakened, when internal dissensions became prominent, when famine and disease were allowed to spread, when administration became unclean and corrupt. These indicate the great need for warding off the forces that are subversive of stable order.... This is not the time for faint-heartedness. We must avoid the deadly sin of cynicism, of despair. However rugged the obstacles that confront us may seem, we must face them with honesty and seriousness and push on. That is the warning of history.”- (p.162-164).

These are the basic tenets of history that Rajbanshis need most because aberrations in their history have already ruined them; and as such, their history needs to be placed in right perspective. This is must for survival for this great ethnic community of India and perpetual peace in the region.

(b) Their Origin and Physiognomy

The people of this community generally have the features mixed up with all four human streams or cultures i.e. Austral-Asiatic or ‘Adivasi’, Dravidian, Mongoloid and Aryan, where Mongoloid features like short height, fair complexion and having flat nose are predominant. Some of them can be seen as tall, fair and having sharp nose like people of north or midland Indians, who trace their origin in Aryan culture; Some of them can be seen as fair as Aryan people and at the same time some are as dark complexion as Adivasis or Dravidians. This was the region we can term as the eastern gateway of India or a meeting place where all four human streams got amalgamated, which gave birth to new 'sanskritised' culture of the northeastern part of India. While the civilization progressed towards modernity, Rajbanshis lagged behind mainstream cultures of Bengal and Assam due to their geographical division, political aberrations and social degradation.

H.H. Risley in his work, ‘*The Tribes and Castes of Bengal*’, volume-I, page 491 wrote that Rajbanshis belonged to Dravidian origin. Similar views were expressed by W.W. Hunter in his work, ‘*Statistical Account of Bengal (Volume –X, page 402)*’. Their views do have relevance as regards Rajbanshis of South Bengal, southern parts of North Bengal and Bihar, as their features are predominantly Dravidian.

According to Sir Gaits, these people were mixed of both the Mongoloid but Mongoloid features were pre-dominant. Whatever the facts were, this particular community

formed a major group of ancient Indian population and they were the people who bore the brunt of ingress of foreign cultures over the ages. Their area of domain always acted a buffer zone between several human streams namely the Austral-Asiatic, Dravidian, Mongoloid and lately the Aryan culture. When the aryanised people made headway into eastern part of India, they were resisted by the people of *Pundra* (Eastern Bihar, Southern part of North Bengal and western part of Bangladesh), *Banga* (southern part of Bangladesh and South Bengal) and *Kamrup* (North Bengal and western part of Assam) all in a strong axis and delayed main Aryan thrust for centuries. Finally, these aboriginal people gave in to powerful Aryan cultured people accepted the foreign culture. Subsequently, Aryan cultures overran the axis to reach Brahmaputra valley in one direction and another to *Surma* valley (Barak valley or Cachar district in Assam and Sylhet in Bangladesh).

Present day Assamese of 'Kalita' surnamed community are supposed to be the descendants of early Aryan settlers in Kamrup, who became co-habitants of the aboriginal Kuvach or Koches (forefathers of Rajbanshis), China (Tribes of Arunachal Pradesh) or Kirats (forefathers of Gorkhas), who got mixed up with Aryan cultured people. Thus, it is in line with the belief that the earliest settlers in North Bengal of the Mongoloid stock were the Kirat and Chinas, who were none but after mixing up with Aryan culture became the forefathers of the present day Rajbanshis or Koch Rajbanshis. The age-old social bond between Koch Rajbanshis and Kalitas continues even today and marital relationship is a common socially accepted practice.

The Kacharis, another Mongoloid human stream, earlier inhabitants of difficult terrains of North East did not come into contact with Aryan culture for ages. Kacharis were the forefathers of numerous present day tribes of the hilly terrains in North East including the larger community of Bodos.

Ancestors of the Rajbanshi community, who were the settlers in semi-hilly terrains and plains of in North Bengal, Assam and their adjoining areas, who embraced Aryan culture, later took to Hinduism. Here, Hinduism denoted the way of civilised life, following of Vedic procedures of rituals and adoption of 'Sanskritised' Maithili Apabhramsa languages, which Aryan culture brought along with its advent into this part of ancient India.

(c) Different Theories on Origin

Difference in opinions regarding the origin of Koch or Rajbanshis existed for long and still exists to the much detriment on the community as a whole. As scholars are not sure about their real origin, these poor people neither can firmly establish their identity of their own nor do mainstream communities of their homeland - Bengali, Bihari, Nepali or Assamese feel that they are same. Having said so, now let us consider few of the theories on their origin:

- i) Going by the popular legendary stories as mentioned in epics and scriptures, Kuvach and Kirats-Chinas lived in the frontier states of greater India in ancient period. They belonged to the great human streams that entered northeastern India from Thailand-Vietnam belt. Frontrunners of these human streams, the Kuvachas most of who settled in the riverine axis of Brahmaputra valley in the east to the riverine highlands of Pundra (North Bengal and its adjacent areas) were none but the forefathers of Koch-Rajbanshi or Rajbanshi or Deshi people of today. After the advent of Dravidian, followed by Aryan culture, Kirats and Chinas shifted their

homes in upper hilly terrains, who later came to be known as Gorkhas, Kacharis or Bodos, Tribes of Arunachal Pradesh and other Tribes of North East India.

ii) Second theory is that in pre-Vedic period the prominent groups of people that ruled this part of the country were the people of Pundravardhan, who were regarded as Kshatriyas by the invading Aryanised people. Those people were guarding the northeastern frontier of the country and resisted the Aryanised people for centuries. Pundra Kshatriyas were the mixed up people of both races of Mongoloid origin, who invaded this region much earlier as well as later of Dravidian stock, who after invading mainland India penetrated into eastern India up to the axis - Pundravardhan and western frontier of Kamrup between 3000 BC and 2000 BC.

iii) Third theory goes that Koch or Rajbanshis belonged to Bodo tribe as their physiognomy has similarity, but their language proves otherwise.

iv) Fourth theory is that these people were of Dravidian stock as people living in aforesaid *Pundra* region resemble as people of Dravidian look do. Alternatively, Mongoloid people migrated from east and in turn got intermixed with aboriginal Austral-Asiatic and Dravidian people.

vi) The Rajbanshi Kshatriya Samiti leaders, who tried to establish Koches and Rajbanshis as two separate entities, created this fifth theory, arguing that these separate entities do not have any close affinity but their theory has done much harm to these people. This theory has divided the great community and may not hold good. Naturally question arises - what differences are there between the Koch Rajbanshis of Kachakhana or Gauripur in Dhubri district and Rajbanshis of their neighbourhood places like Baxir Hat in Cooch Behar district of North Bengal? Is that imaginary line of Bengal-Assam border between them is enough to differentiate them as two separate communities and create a gap between millions of same people?

Let us read what renowned scholar Ram Sharan Sharma had to say in the 'Summing Up' part in his treatise 'Advent of The Aryans in India' published by Manohar Publishers & Distributors, 2/6 Ansari Road, Daryaganj, New Delhi -110 002,

"...the Aryan culture appear in the archaeology of south Central Asia in 1900-1500 BC, though the earliest inscriptional specimens of its language are found in Western Asia in c.2300 BC.... The Indo-Aryan language was spread by the horse-using people who came from south Central Asia. It gradually replaced the Dravidian language which was spoken earlier in a major part of the subcontinent. This explains the presence of the Dravidian substratum in the Indo-Aryan languages, though words of Munda stock are not entirely absent in them."

According to the scholar, Dravidian culture came from central Asia and came in contact with western frontier of Indian subcontinent between 3000 and 2500 BC. It spread over midland India during the period 2000 to 1500 BC. If we go by this assumption, Dravidian culture flowed through midland India in two distinct directions; One towards down

south covering all States in South India, reaching Sri Lanka and another flowed through Bihar, Orissa reaching frontier States of Pundravardhan or western frontier of Kamrup or Pragyotishpur kingdom around 1500 BC. Most of the people of these areas bear the features of Dravidian stock. The flow of the Dravidian culture could not have spread towards Northeast beyond river Karatoya in present day North Bengal and Bangladesh. This is how we find the prominence of Dravidian touch over Mongoloid features among Rajbanshis in Purnia and Kishanganj districts of Bihar, Maldah, North and South Dinajpur districts in North Bengal and Rangpur district of Bangladesh.

Influence of Aryan culture in North East India including Koch-Rajbongshi or Rajbanshi community can be termed as work-in-progress. Theories discussed above appear to be inadequate to a definite conclusion as to what was the real origin of this community. As written by Professor Romila Thapar, Emeritus Professor of History at Jawaharlal Lal Nehru University, Delhi in her Essay titled, 'The Historiography of the Concept of Aryan' published in a book, 'India: Historical Beginnings and the Concept of the Aryan': -

"...In the past the theory has been used by many as an agency of empowerment and entitlement to include some and exclude others. This in itself cannot be curtailed since resort to history – particularly ancient history – has been part of the agenda of various nationalisms and imperialism a continues to be so in some cases. Nevertheless, historians, archaeologists, specialists in linguistics and in other disciplines that bear on the subject, need to be constantly in a scholarly dialogue so as to assess the validity of the theories being suggested. Such verifications are also sign posts for the interested general readers."

It is certain that Koch-Rajbongshi or Rajbanshis were pure Mongloid, who came into contact with the Aryan culture much later. This particular group of people played a pivotal role in the great social assimilation in the ancient northeastern India for a longer historical period right from inflow of Dravidian culture to advent of Aryan culture. During the process of acculturation, Prakrit, Magadhi or Maithili and Burmo-Tibetan languages got intermixed that resulted into a new generation of mixed languages led by Magadhi Apabhramsa, which had much influence of Sanskrit and became lingua-franca of the whole region. While Burmo-Tibetan languages remained intact in the difficult and hilly areas of North East India, Magadhi Apabhramsa gave birth to number of languages, which can be termed as Indo-Aryan languages because all these languages do bear testimony of similar scripts and vocabulary. In Anga and Kalinga (present day Orissa), the language became famous as Oriya. In Banga and Samatata (present day South Bengal and mainland Bangladesh), this language came to be known as Bangla or Bengali, which began to develop enormously from seventeenth century onwards after the advent of Europeans in and around Kolkata in South Bengal. In Pundra, Barendra and Kamrup (present day North Bengal, North Eastern Bihar, Assam and Northern districts of Bangladesh), the language came to be known as Kamota-Kamrupi, later as Rajbanshi or Kamtapuri or Deshi. In modern Assam the language also developed, albeit in lesser pace than its counterpart Bengali in Bengal province, and got its name changed to modern Akhomiya or Assamese.

(d) Ancient Demographic Extent of Kamta-Kamrup

The geographically contiguous areas of Barendra-Pundra-Kamta-Kamrup comprising of whole of present day North Bengal, northern districts of Bihar, Jhapa-Biratnagar region of eastern Nepal, Rajshahi division of Bangladesh, Western Assam, lower parts of Bhutan and some parts of Meghalaya were parts of Kamrup. Let us go through in succeeding paragraphs what epics and old scriptures narrated on this part of northeastern India.

As per Mahabharat and Ramayan: The kingdom known as Pragjyotishpur stretched southwards as far as the sea of Bay of Bengal, the coast was believed to be much higher up towards the north as most the areas of present day Bangladesh were under the sea at that historical period. Towards west, the boundary of the kingdom was extended up to river Kosi touching Videha ((Mithila in Bihar)). In both the epics, this north-eastern part of India was described as Pragjyotishpur which literally meant that the city had formerly been a city of 'Jyotisha' i.e. astronomical and astrological learning otherwise, we can take it's meaning as first stage of Aryanisation of the Brahmaputra valley and settlements on the banks of the river Karatoya (washing down present day North Bengal-Bangladesh). As discussed in earlier chapter, this region was inhabited by non-Aryans whom Aryanised people gave negative names such as 'Asur' or 'Danab'. Aryan prince Narak of Videha defeated and killed the last Asur king Ghatakasur and founded a new kingdom named Pragjyotishpur extending from the Kartoya River to the extreme outskirt of the Brahmaputra valley and established his capital called Pragjyotishpur (present day Guwahati city in Kamrup district of Assam). He assumed the title of Asur, keeping the tradition of earlier kings of the kingdom. He brought many Brahmins from *Videha* and settled them at Kamakhya on the Nilachal hills. A hill(Naraksur) near Guwahati was named after him, which indicate that he was a famous king. Legend goes that in his height of power, he became so powerful and terror that Lord Krishna (Hindu God) had to kill him to restore Aryan rule. *Sabha*, *Asvamedha*, *Udyoga Drona*, *Bhisma* and *Karna* ' Parvas' (chapters) of the Mahabharat do have mention of Pragjyotishpur kingdom and Bhagadatta, son of king Naraka along with the Kirats, Chinas and other people, which tell us that during the period of the epic, a flourishing kingdom existed in this region. In 'Sabha' parva, it is mentioned that Arjuna attacked Mlechha (who said to have spoken an inferior language) king Bhagdatta's kingdom, which was defended by the Kirats and Chinas. Bhagdatta was compelled to pay tribute to Arjun. During the famous Kurukshetra war, Bhagdatta became an ally of Duryodhan and participated in the war with his powerful army. In '*Bana Parba*' he was mentioned as king of Kshatriya 'Varna'. He was believed to have owed allegiance to Jarasandha, the mighty emperor of Magadh, who reined terror in whole of Aryavarta (midland India). Bhagdatta was killed in the thick of a battle during the war. Vajradatta succeeded him in the throne of Pragjyotish and acknowledged overlord ship of Pandav king Yudhishtir.

In Ramayan, Pragjyotish is mentioned in *Adikanda*, which relates to laying a foundation of the city in Baraha Mountain by Amurta Raja. In *Kiskindhyakanda*, it is mentioned that the Narak's city of Pragjyotish was established on the gold-crested Baraha Mountain, which was 64 yojanas in length and situated near depthless *Varunalaya* (water reservoir). From this epic, we get to know that the capital of Pragjyotish kingdom was

situated on the bank of mighty Brahmaputra River and the kingdom was rich with wealth. Although, facts given in the epics are legendary, still, undoubtedly one can be sure of methodology as to how this 'Mlechha' kingdom of non-Aryans i.e. mongoloid stock came in contact with the ancient Aryan religion of the Ganga valley.

As per *Kalika Puran* and *Yogini Tantra* (Tenth-Eleventh Century Texts): The holiest place of worship for the seekers of 'Shakti' (Tantrik power), temple of 'Maa Kamakhya' (at Guwahati) was supposed to be in the centre of the kingdom, Kamrup. The kingdom extended upto Dikhu near modern town of Sibsagar town on the east in Assam and river Karatoya in the west (now in Dinajpur district of Bangladesh). In the north, the kingdom touched mountain of Kunjagiri (Bhutan) and in the south up to the confluence of Brahmaputra. The areas of Brahmaputra valley, Rangpur and Mymensingh districts of Bangladesh, Jalapaiguri and Cooch Behar districts formed parts of the kingdom. As per *Yogini Tantra*, *Kuvach* people resided in this region. Their descendants, the Koches of greater Goalpara district of Assam numbering around thirty thousand speaking a language similar to Bodo are still maintaining their original look and habits in whom Rajbanshis or the Koch Rajbanshis of Assam trace their origin.

As per Bishnu Purana: As per the 'Vishnu Purana', Kamrup kingdom consisted of whole of North Bengal, Assam and Bhutan.

As per Greek Geographer Ptolemy: Ptolemy wrote geographical accounts about India in the middle of the second century A.D. but gave a hazy picture on northeast India. The names of hills, rivers, places and people of the region he named in Greek could not be satisfactorily tallied. The term '*Kirrhadia*' has been identified with the ancient kingdom inhabited by the Kiratas as mentioned in Mahabharat. Ptolemy mentioned that in '*Kirrhadia*' best of '*Malabathrum*' i.e. trees of 'Tezpata', fragrance laden condiment leaves were largely cultivated in the area and formed an important item of Indo-Roman trade since the early years of Christian era.

As per Chinese Traveler Hiuen Tsang: The Chinese traveler Yuan Chwang, also known as Hiuen Tsang, who visited Kamrup in the 7th century AD supported the view that Kamrup kingdom comprised of Brahmaputra valley in Assam, Bhutan, Rangpur (in Bangladesh), Cooch Bihar, north-east of Mymensingh (in Bangladesh) and possibly the Garo hills. The earliest inhabitants of Kamrup were the Kirats, Chinas and other tribes of Mongoloid stock. When waves of Aryans migrated to this region, earlier inhabitants got aryanised. One group of aryanised people who possesses a tract of hilly countryside in the Morung area laying west to Sikkim, now in the eastern part of Nepal are the descendants of the Kirats. Rai and Limbus of eastern Nepal belong to the ancient Kirat tribe.

Abul Fazl's Account as recorded in 'Buchanan Manuscripts': About 'Abul Fazl's account of the Koches' it goes,

"...When *Abul Fazil* composed the *Ayeen Akbery*, the subdivision of the kingdom of *Viswo Singho* was not known at Delhi, although in all probability it had recently taken place. From prudential motives it had perhaps been carefully concealed, and the two branches of the family lived in an amity that was absolutely necessary for their safety. *Abul Fazil* says that "north from Bengal is the province of Coach(Koch), the

Chief of which commands 1,000 horse and 100,000 foot(the usual oriental exaggeration). Kamrup, which is also called *Kamtah* (*Komota*, the old capital) makes a part of his dominion...”

Dr. Francis Buchanan-Hamilton's own Accounts: After annexation of Koch Behar Kingdom by East India Company in 1773, a need was felt by them to know the area and its people for their administrative as well as commercial purposes to carry out an extensive survey of the Eastern India. To do the job, the Company and the Governor General-in-Council engaged the services of Mr. Hamilton (Francis Buchanan born in 1762, later in 1815 changed the name as Hamilton), who conducted the survey from 1808 to 1814 of eastern India including Assam, which at that time lay outside the domain of the Company. Let us reproduce relevant portions what he had saw and wrote about Kamtapur in his famous manuscripts, which were outcome of his laborious survey of the area and its adjacent territories known as “Buchanan Manuscripts” preserved in India Office Library, London: -

“ Boundaries of Kamrup. - ...Almost the whole of it is included in the ancient Hindu territory of *Kamrup*, which extends East from the Korotoya where it joined the kingdom of Motsyo, to Dikorbasini, a river of Assam which enters the Brahmaputra a little to the East of the eastern kamakhya which is said to be fourteen days' journey by water above Jorhat, the present capital of that kingdom....The southern boundary of Kamrup is where the Lakhya river separates from the Brahmaputra and there it is bounded by the country called Bonggo. Kamrup, according to this description, includes a portion of Moymonsing(North part of Dacca R.) and of Srihotto(Selhet R.) together with Monipur, Jaintia, Kachhar, and Assam. 183.

“ Kamatapur. - The *Raja* (Niladhvaj) having settled his government built a city called Komotapur(in Cooch Behar district), and he and his successors took the title of *Komoteswor* or Lords of Komota, while the title of *Komoteswori* of lady of Komota, was bestowed on the family deity, a female spirit as usual, delighting in blood. 198.”

According to Hamilton *Rotnopith* was the country called *Vihar*. However, he was not clear about its boundary. According to ‘Kamrupar Buranji’ it was the western *pith* among four of them that formed greater Kamrup kingdom during ancient period. From the analogy given in the name itself and old scriptures, it could be deduced that the general area was believed to be the name of Kamtapur that is present day North Bengal, Lower Assam and Northeastern Bihar.

As per Sir Edward Gait: As per Sir Edward Gait, North Bengal of today formed a major part of ancient Kamrup kingdom. During 'Mahabharat' period, the kingdom was believed to have extended southwards as far as the Bay of Bengal, the coast of which at that time was much higher up in the North, as most of the deltaic regions of Bangladesh and southern districts of West Bengal were either under the sea or wetlands. The kingdom extended up to the bank of river Kosi to the west in Nepal and Videha (Mithila in Bihar). Geographically, this region of the eastern India acted as buffer zone between two distinct cultures during pre-Christian and early Christian era i.e. Indo-European and Euro-Chinese. In other words, this zone played a role of a cultural bridge between the south and south-east Asia. The area had a great reservoir of the ancient people named 'Kirat', who belonged to Mongoloid stock. It formed a busy trade route between China and India in about second century B.C. Trade was

carried out by both by river and land routes. India and China was connected through hills of Sikkim, the Chumbi valley and Tibet in one of the route and other routes were through the hills of Assam and Burma (now Myanmar). In the Indo-China trade route, the river ports namely, Pragjyotishpur (Guwahati), Haruppeswara (Tezpur) and Davaka (Nagaon in Assam) in Kopili valley played a major role. Chinese wares and horses were imported by Kamrup kingdom through these routes. Ambari excavation showed typical Chinese calendar ware. The potteries found at Guwahati proved that ancient Pragjyotishpur was a trade centre enroute Indo-China regular trade.

As per the ‘Periphus of the Erythraean Sea’: The ‘Periphus of the Erythraean Sea’, a Greek account on the navigation in the Arabian sea and trade written in the first century A.D., provides us the information about trade carried out by the Kirat linking up with China via Tibet. It also shows that Mongoloid group of people in India were well known with the Chinese culture. As per the records left by a Chinese Political Officer, Chang K’ien (second century B.C.), we come to know about large volume of trade, which used to be carried out between North Bengal and south-west China for centuries. From China, silk goods and bamboo flutes were used to be imported by India and then further exported to Egypt and the Roman world. Through trade relations, there was cultural exchange also. Folklores of India traveled to China through this area, which happened as early as during 4th century B.C.

As per S.L. Barua(A Comprehensive History of Assam): According to the historian, *“It appears, therefore, that the kingdom of Pragjyotisha-Kamarupa covered the major portions of Eastern India. Varying fortunes brought by conflicts with the neighbouring powers in the west sometimes pushed back boundary across the river Karatoya (in North Bengal-Bangladesh) and sometimes extended it beyond that river”*. According to K.L. Barua, *“... in any case it is clear that Pragjyotisha or ancient Kamarupa was a much larger kingdom than most of the other kingdoms mentioned in the Mahabharata and most of the sixteen Mahajanapadas existing during the time of Gautama Buddha”*. According to the historian, present day North Bengal was a part of ancient Pragjyotisha-Kamarupa kingdom.

As per Kamarupa Anusnadhana Samiti (Assam Research Society): In their article titled *‘Historical Geography of Assam in the Early and Medieval Period: A Perspective’* written by N.N. Bhattacharyya and M. Taher published by the society in 1992 in their journal commemorating Platinum Jubilee, both the scholars with vast knowledge on the subject gave a vivid picture of the extent of ancient kingdom of Kamrup, which included present day North Bengal and its adjacent areas. To quote few excerpts from the paragraphs ‘Introduction’ and ‘Extent of Kamarupa’ of the said article: -

“...Modern Assam was the principal part of Pragjyotish which can be identified with the easternmost part of India comprising present Assam, Meghalaya, foothills of Arunachal, parts of western and southern Bhutan, a part of Bangladesh, a portion of Northern West Bengal and a part of Eastern Bihar. From the decryption in the ancient Brahmanical literature it appears that Pragjyotish was a flourishing kingdom during the epic and classical periods. Subsequently it was known as Kamarupa, the name in which the area was referred to in the Allahabad Pillar Inscription of Samudragupta (who ruled during c. A.D. 321 to 380 A.D). It is very much significant that the celebrated temple of the Mother Goddess, Kamakhya is closely associated with

Kamrup and Pragjyotish. The Mother Goddess, Kamakhya stands as the presiding deity to this ancient kingdom. Kalidasa in his famous work '*Raghuvamsa*' also refers to this kingdom and mentioned that Raghu came to Pragjyotish after crossing the river Lauhitya. According to the *Yoginitantra* the city of Pragjyotish or Pragjyotisapura was situated on the bank of the Lauhitya(Brahmaputra). According to the Kalika Purana the pre-urban nucleus of this city was the astronomical observatory located on the crest of the Citracala hillock (Navagraha Hill). It is presumed that the science of astronomy was first started from this station. There is still a temple dedicated to the Navagrahas or the planets in this station. There is still a temple dedicated to the Navagrahas or the nine planets in the same place. According to this Puranic tradition Pragjyotishpur is known as the city of Eastern Astrology. Narakasura and his illustrious son Bhagadatta of the *Mahabharat* fame, ruled in Pragjyotish with their capital at Pragjyotishpur or modern Guwahati. It is mentioned in the *Kalika-Purana* that that Narakasura came from Janaka's palace in Videha. This shows that by the time when Naraka's dynasty came to power, the country came to be known as Kamarupa and the capital Pragjyotisapura.' Extent of Kamrup: The ancient Kamrup held a distinct and independent political existence. But its political frontiers were expanded or receded in different periods under different rulers.... The area lying between the Karatoya (historical river flowing from North Bengal washing down North Western Bangladesh to river Padma, the other name Ganga as known in Bangladesh) and the Svarnakosa or Sankosh river (Jalpaiguri & Cooch Behar districts in North Bengal) was known as Ratnapitha. This included the eastern part of North Bengal, the western-part, most of undivided Goalpara district along with certain parts of Bhutan and Sikkim. The Kamapitha extended from the river Sankosh eastward to Puspika or present Barnadi in the north bank of the Brahmaputra and Kapili(river) in the south bank. It included the old Goalpara district, old Kamrup district and the western part of Nagaon district. Similarly Svarnapitha extended from the Barnadi in the west to the Bhairavi or Jia Bharali in the east. In the south bank this province covered the northern part of Nagaon district and some parts of the Karbi Anglong district, the discovery of the ruins of temples, carved blocks of stones, rock-cut images from the areas like Dakmoka, Sinhasana, Daboka etc. proves the antiquity of the area. Saumarapitha extended in the north bank from Bharali to Dikharvasini in the east and in the south bank from the Karbi Anglong Plateau in the west to river Lohit in the east. D.C. Sirkar mentions that Saumarapitha in the south bank must have included three Upper Assam districts of Jorhat, Sibsagar and Dibrugarh."

Above given account of these two Assamese scholars on the extent of ancient Kamrup provides a clear picture of North Bengal as to how it originated from Pragjyotishpur, which was also known as Kamrup and branched out its western part to Kamtapur that ultimately became Cooch Behar before it got fragmented into parts. Out of those fragmented parts, a major part went to West Bengal, two districts became parts of Bihar, another portion became a part of erstwhile East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) and another part went to undivided Assam.

(e) Mythological Belief and Scriptures

As given in page 1, Chapter I of “*Kamrupar Buranji or An account of ancient Kamarupa; and a History of the Mughal Conflicts with Assam and Cooch Behar, up to A.D. 1682. with Appendices. Compiled from old Assamese Manuscript Chronicles*” edited by Suryya Kumar Bhuiyan, M.A., B.L. (Cal), PhD (London), D.Lit (London), Vice-Chancellor, Gauhati University published by the Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies: Assam 1958, Kamarupa or Kamrup during mythological era covered the area as follows:

Kampristha – From Second-Munishila to River Manas and up to River Sankosh.

Ratnapristha – Bar Sankosh to Morang border (Nepal).

Bhadrapristha – Kalang River to Kailash river of Karaibari.

Saumarpristha – Dikhorbahini to second-Munishila.

First king of all above four 'pristhas' was son of Lord Brahma – Mairang Danab, whose successive kings in the father-son lineage were Hatakasur, Sambabasar and Rakeswar. After the kingdom was taken over by king Narakasur hailing from another clan, his successive kings in the father-son lineage were Bhagadatta, Dharmapal, Karmapal, Prithvipal and Subahu.

The whole of mythological Kamrup kingdom was believed to have had a brilliant pre-Aryan history. Aryans believed to have reached Bihar via Punjab around 8th century B.C. Their expansion in North Bihar is mentioned in the ‘Satapatha Brahmana’ during that century. North Bengal was one of the last parts of India to be aryanised. Before the advent of Aryans, Pundravardhan and Kamrup or Pragjyotishpur kingdoms flourished in the north eastern India. Perhaps, Aryans arrived in this part of India much later as it is evident from their earliest literary works such as the Rig Veda in which no mention of this area was made.

In “Buchanan Manuscripts”, we can find some early references to the Kamrup-Kamata areas, which say: -

“...Yogini-Tantra. – In the part of the *Yogini-Tantra*, which I have procured, and which is considered as the highest authority concerning every thing relating to Kamrup, the Pundit of the mission says that there is no mention of *Bhogodotto*, but that the god *Siv* prophesies, that the infidel *Norak*, and at the commencement of the era of *Saka*, that is, about the end of the first century of our era, there would be *Sudra* kings of *Kamrup*. The first raja mentioned is *Divyeswor* in whose time the worship of *Kameswari* or *Kamakhya* the knowledge of which had hitherto been confined to the learned, would be published even to the vulgar, and this would happen at the very beginning of the era of *Saka*, or in the year of our era 76. This Raja is said to have been of the tribe called in the Sanskrit language *Dhibor*, which is usually applied to the *Kaibortos* of Bengal; but it may be doubted whether the prince belonged to that tribe, which is not one of *Kamrup*. The worship of *Linga* according to the prophecy would begin in the 19th year of *Saka*. Some indefinite time after that period, a Brahman born of the *Korotoya* river, and named *Nagosangkor* would be the king, and extend the doctrine. After him, but at what interval is not mentioned, would be a Raja, named *Jolpeswor* who would still further encourage that worship, and who would build the

celebrated temple of *Jolpis*. Very considerable ruins are at no great distance from that place, as will be hereafter described, but they are ascribed to *Prithu Raja*, who may however have been a person of the same family. 189.

As per *Aitareya Brahmana*, Pundras lived in this region and as per *Aitareya Aranyaka*; Vangas lived in the region located towards the east, which mostly falls in present day Bangladesh. Those people were non-Aryans and uncivilized as they were projected in these texts that were written during 7th –8th century B.C. As the region was outside the pale of Aryan culture, the Vedic texts spoke very poorly of the people of North Bengal. Aryan culture that flourished in Ganga-Jamuna doab in around 4th century B.C., probably did not penetrate into North Bengal till such period, as it is evident from the text of *Bandhyana Dharmasutra* (4th century B.C.), according to which any person (Aryan) proceeding to Pundra and Vanga had to undergo penance after he returned. Thus, the whole northern part of present day Bengal including some part of Nepal, north Bihar, northern part of Bangladesh, Assam and further up the north eastern India were unaffected by Aryan culture for several centuries. It was only during 6th century B.C. when the Aryans were believed to have reached south Bengal. Finally, they made headway towards north Bengal during 4th century B.C. We get to know this from *Gopatha Brahmana* that recorded the information regarding early contact of the non-Aryans and Aryan elements in Brahmaputra valley (Kamrup). From this text, we also get to know about a tradition of the origin of the name of Kamrup, the area that now mostly covers Assam and some part of North Bengal. Vedic culture was believed to have been accepted in this region during the period from 320 B.C. to Gupta era.

Going by the old scriptures, there existed pre-Aryanised kingdoms in north eastern part of the country. While referring to the '*Satapatha Brahmana*', where find that a civilization had already existed there extending from the bank of the river 'Karatoya' in the west of Brahmaputra valley in the east named 'Pragjyotishpur'. The river Karatoya was then referred as 'Sadanira' in that text, that formed the border of Pragjyotishpur up to which the Aryans advanced. Also, it would be pertinent to ask whether Pragjyotishpur and Kamrup were the one or two different kingdoms of different periods. Hemachandra (1088-1072 A.D.) in his writing '*Abhidhanachintamani*' considered both these names to be of the same kingdom. According to '*Yoginitantra*', kingdom of Kamrup comprised the whole of the Brahmaputra valley (Lauhitya) together with Rangpur (Bangladesh) and Koch Bihar. In the Mahabharat, Pragjyotish was referred as a '*Mlechha*' and an *Asura* kingdom ruled by Bhagadatta which was bordered by the tribes of the 'Kirats' and 'Chinas'. As already said these people belonged to Mongoloid stock. The Kamoli grant of Vaidyadeva made a reference of the 'Mandala' of Kamrup and 'Visaya' of Pragjyotisha, which suggested that Pragjyotish was the larger empire including Kamrup as a division. Thus it must have comprised of not only Kamrup division but also a major portion of present day North Bengal, a part of north Bihar, lower part of Bhutan and northern part of Bangladesh. According to this grant, the empire was ruled by Indrapala who was also styled as *Maharajadhiraja* (Emperor). As per the grant and also the grant of Indrapala of Pragjyotishpur and Nagaon copper plate, during his reign, collection of taxes and award of punishments were rare. According to *Kalika Purana*, city of Pragjyotish was looked upon as Indra's mansion by the king of Videha (north Bihar). As per the Bargaon grant of Ratnapala, the city was impregnable and rendered beautiful by the river Lauhitya (Brahmaputra).

(f) Early and Obscure History

Advent of Aryan Culture: According to Dr. B.P. Mazumdar of Patna University (*an article named 'A Survey of the Sources of History of Ancient Bihar'* published in the book named 'Sources of the History of India, Vo.II, edited by S.P. Sen, 1988) expansion of Aryan culture in north Bihar as recorded in *Satapatha Brahmana* was assigned generally to eighth century B.C. However, no text including Vedic one gives a systematic history of the dynasties in Bihar that can be connected to the history of Kamrup-Koch Kamta area. Stray references to Anga Virochana as an anointed king and to the life of Dirghatamas, an Agnirasa Rishi, are mentioned in the *Aitareya Brahmana*. These references prove that Anga had been aryanised at a period later than the date of composition of the 'Atharvaveda', where (AV.V.22.14) the poet prays that fever might visit the Gandharis, Mujavants, Angas and Magadhas.

Nevertheless, as the region was outside the pale of Aryan culture, the Vedic texts spoke very poorly of the people of North Bengal. Aryan culture that flourished in Ganga-Jamuna doab in around 4th century B.C., probably did not penetrate North Bengal till then as it is evident from the text of *Bandhyana Dharmasutra* (4th century B.C.), according to which any person (Aryan) proceeding to Pundra and Vanga had to undergo penance after he returned. So, the whole northern part of present day Bengal including the falling in some part of Nepal, north Bihar, northern part of Bangladesh, Assam and beyond to the east were unaffected by Aryan culture for several centuries.

Pundravardhan was a civilisation that existed in the northeastern India, which could be roughly calculated between 1500 B.C. and 320 A.D. The frontier forces consisting of Pundra Kshatriyas together with Kiratas and Chinas of neighbouring frontier lands of Pragjyotishpur formed a wall to resist the advancing Aryanised people advancing from midland India and forced them to halt for several centuries till 320 A.D. when finally they made headway in to the heartland of this area in a route that was not directly but taking a detour via Videha-Samatata (Bihar-South Bengal).

As some historians believed that the Aryans were forced to halt their further ingress into eastern India at the border of Pundra-Barendra area, where Pundra Kshatriyas or the Kuvach (Koch-Rajbanshi) gave them a stiff resistance. As it was believed that the torch of Aryan culture got extinguished on the western side of the river Koshi (in Bihar-Nepal axis). Then, Aryanised people had to take a detour via Samatata (south Bengal), Vanga to reach Brahmaputra valley and Surma valley (Shreehatta or Sylhet in Bangladesh).

(g) Known but Obscure History till Rise of Koch Empire

Mauryan Period: As already discussed, North Bengal was unaffected by Aryan or Vedic culture for a long historical period. Once it began to penetrate into this area and further east, a cultural fusion took place in this region. In the process of Aryanisation, Jainism and Buddhism, the protestant offshoots of the Vedic religion, played a vital role in the cultural fusion among the Aryans and non-Aryans of the region. Existence of Buddhism and Jainism along with Vedic culture co-existed in this region during early period. Sri Surya remains near Goalpara town in Assam amply proves this belief. Votive stupa whose upper portion is tapping indicates that Buddhism existed in the region during the period between first century

B.C. and first century A.D. or early Christian era. The Brahmanical religion, which was accepted by almost all Kamrup kings, also had an influence on the Sri Surya temple or Surya cult that can be said as a confluence of Buddhism, Hinduism and Jainism. The co-existence of all three religions at the same site of Sri Surya Pahar proves tolerance and religious harmony among the followers of different faiths in Kamrup region. In fact, the Brahmanical religion, the oriental form of Vedic culture did not take a firm root in north Bengal before the advent of the Gupta rulers. In the process of acculturation, both Buddhism and Jainism had played a prominent role in northeastern India. The *Divyavadana*, a well known Buddhist text written during the period between third and fourth century A.D., also depicts an interesting episode concerning Buddhism and Jainism at 'Pundravardhan' (present day areas of Dinajpur districts of West Bengal and portion of Bangladesh). As per the text, 'Nigranthas' or Jainas, a group of fanatical people of Pundravardhana had painted a picture showing Lord Buddha falling at the feet of Jaina, on hearing this, Ashoka, the great king of Kalinga killed 18,000 Ajivikas (followers of Jainism) of Pundravardhan on a single day. Though, the episode is purely a legend in nature, one get to know that during that time Ashok, both Buddhism and Jainism were prevalent in North Bengal. Also, Pundravardhan must have formed a part of Mauryan Empire, as it is evident from Mahasthan stone plaque inscription. In the inscription, reference has been made regarding famine that occurred in the region of Pundravardhan during Mauryan period for which Mauryan king took great interest in removing miseries of the people. However, no such evidence has been found mentioning Kamrup or Pragjyotishpur, which indicates that this region was outside the pale of Mauryan Empire.

Gupta Period: As per the Allahabad pillar inscription of Samudragupta (380 A.D.), Pragjyotish was one of the frontier state (Pratyanta), outside the limits of Gupta Empire of which capital was Pragjyotishpur, identified with modern Guwahati in Assam. In the writings of the Chinese travelers, there was no indication of inclusion of Pragjyotish within the territory of Gupta Empire. In the Kamouli grant of Vadyadev, the village was said to have situated in *Kamarupamandala* and Pragjyotishabhukti, and, their king used to pay taxes to emperor Samudragupta. Allahabad inscription was said to be the first epigraphic reference to Kamrup. Here with Samatata, Davaka and Nepal, Kamarup was a frontier state like other frontier states of Punjab, Himalayan region, Malwa and central provinces which were believed to have paid taxes, obeyed his orders and came to pay obeisance to Samudragupta. Monarchs of those states were friendly and subordinate to the Gupta Empire. During the period of Gupta king Mahendragupta, son of Damodargupta, a strong monarchy was established in Kamarup by Susthita Varman, who was said to be a descendant of legendary king Bhagdatta. He came into conflict with Mahasengupta and was defeated.

As recorded in the Mahasthan (Bogra in Bangladesh) inscription, we get to know the famine conditions prevailing in Pundravardhan during the reign of Mauryan kings, who took keen interest in alleviating the distress of their people. The Mauryan rulers took up relief measures such as distribution of food grains and giving loans to their people.

Varman Dynasty: A good collection of ancient stone cut idols of various Gods and Goddesses and other structures, obtained through excavations carried under the auspices of Archeological Survey of India and aesthetically showcased at State Museum of Assam at Ambari, Guwahati and their guide display board kept at its entrance say that 4th Century A.D. onwards, the Kamrup kingdom was ruled by Pushyavarman and his descendants. This

dynasty effectively ruled whole of Kamrup during post-cultural assimilation phase of ancient India (between 4th to 7th Century A.D.), which roughly coincided with the Gupta period. Kumar Bhaskarvarman was the last king of the dynasty.

Varman dynasty is known to have begun 355 A.D. the first king of the dynasty was Pushyavarman. He ruled Kamrup from 355 A.D. to 380 A.D. as recorded in the Allahabad pillar of Samudragupta. He was also referred to as one of the Pratyanta (frontier king) of Kamrup and Daboka (modern Nagaon district of Assam) during 4th Century A.D. The copper plate grants found at Nidhanpur, a village in the district of Sylhet in Bangladesh and Dubi near Pathsala Township in Nalbari district in Assam provide epigraphic records and genology of the Varman dynasty (380– 650). Due to lack of proper historiography, we do not find detailed events in proper sequence. But, it is evident from the various written work and epigraphic records that from the Gupta age to the twelfth century A.D., the whole region covering present day North Bengal, Assam and their adjoining areas of northern Bangladesh, foothills of Bhutan, Morang region(eastern Nepal) and northern districts of Bihar state was known as Pragjyotishpur and later as Kamrup. The rulers down the centuries can broadly be said like this: -

Surendravarman, who decorated himself with the title as 'Maharajadhiraj Sri Surendravarman Kritya Bhagavati Balabhadrasvamina Indanigriham' and, who was also identified as Mahendrarvarman, ruled Kamrup from 450 A.D. to 485 A.D.

Sixth 'Bhauma Naraka' ruler of Varman dynasty, Bhutivarman ruled from 510 A.D. to 555 A.D. he was a powerful military campaigner. As per Nidhanpur inscriptions on copper plates Bhutivarman performed *Aswamedha Yagna* (Horse sacrifice) to commemorate his conquest of Pundravardhan, the region west of historic river Kartoya that now lie in North Bengal and Bangladesh. This region formed the part of the Kamrup Empire when the Gupta period was on decline. The stone inscription written in Brahmi script on a big boulder located on the bank of Baraganga, about 30 kilometers northeast of Daboka Bazar in Nagaon District in Assam recorded that Bhutivarman who carried out horse sacrifice appointed Avaguna, who constructed an 'Ashram' (Learning Centre) at the place of the inscription. Most probably inscription incised in 3 ¾ lines in a rock was made in 553-554 A.D. This reference was made in an article '*Epigraphia Indica*' in the journal Indian Historical Quarterly. This inscription also suggests that Daboka kingdom of this region as mentioned in Allahabad pillar inscription of Gupta king Samudragupta was merged with Kamrup kingdom either during the reign of Bhutivarman or his predecessors.

Bhutivarman is believed to have established an '*Agrahara*', called Mayursalmala and settled a large number of Brahmans by issuing a charter. The place is believed to be located in 'Chandrapuri-Visaya', west of river Tista in North Bengal. Since, Bhauma-Naraka rulers of Varman dynasty claimed to be Brahmans, it would not be out of place to believe that the Brahmins settled in the west of river Tista in North Bengal were the 'Gosain', who by virtue of their higher social status, which they considered to be at par with the Brahmins are only empowered priests to perform religious rituals during social functions among the Rajbanshis. The 'Adhikari' Rajbanshis, who were categorised one rung below the 'Gosain' class but higher than the Kshatriyas are also authorised priests to perform religious rituals for the family deities among the Rajbanshis. Due to close vicinity of Bhutan, Bhutivarmans close affinity with the history of Bhutan does have a larger bearing.

Yuan Chwang, usually written as Hieuen Tsang, the Chinese pilgrim visited Kamrupa in about 637 A.D. or during the period from 5th August to 30th September 642 A.D. as per A.

Cunningham, Ancient Geography of India, London, 1871, page 478, Appendix-A, on invitation of the king Kumar Bhaskarvarman. He described the kingdom as *Ka-mo-lu-po* in his travelogue *Si-yu-ki* that is regarded as a very important and authentic record of ancient history of Kamrup. According to him, the territory is estimated at 10,000 Li or 1,667 miles in circumference, which perhaps comprised of Brahmaputra valley together with Kusa Vihara and Bhutan. The Nalanda seals of Bhaskarvarman provide evidence of some political influence of Pragjyotishpur Empire in Bihar. Kalidas, the greatest poet of India of the 5th century A.D. mentioned the names of both Pragjyotish and Kamrup in his famous drama 'Raghuvamsha'. Ban Bhatta's Harishcharita contains many useful references to both political and cultural situation prevailing in Kamrup during the reign of Bhaskarvarman, who ruled Kamrup during 7th century. During his reign, the country covered much area. He had friendship with Harshavardhan of Thaneswar when the later attacked Sasanka, king of Gaur. Their combined armed forces defeated Sasanka. Bhaskarvarman established his 'Skandhavara', the war capital at Karnasuvarna (South Bengal). In the 8th century, Bhaskarvarman conquered Gaur, Odra, Kalinga and Kosala. His daughter Rajyamati was married to a Nepal king.

Vakpati's '*Gouravaho*' written during 8th century A.D. and the '*Manjusrimulakalpa*', a Buddhist work of the same period contained useful references to the historical facts of Kamrup. Rajasekhara, in his written work 'Kavyamimamsa' of 9th century A.D. mentioned Kamrup as a mountain and Pragjyotish as a country. Vishakhadatta made reference to Avantivarman, who was a Kamrup king in his work '*Mudraraksasa*'. In some royal epigraphs, the kingdom was also known as Saumara or Soumara Kamarupa. Varahamitra, who wrote the '*Brihamsamhita*' in 5th century A.D. referred to Pragjyotish and the river Lauhitya along with Magadha, China and Khamboja.

KL Barua, in the work '*Early History of Kamarupa*', wrote about Kamarupa: –

“...The country was low and moist, and crops were regular. The climate was genial and the people were honest. The people were hard working, good learners, of small stature and dark looking. The Chinese pilgrim, Hieuen Tsang, did not see any Asokan monument in the area. The people did not believe in Buddhism. But, some believe that a kind of reformed Buddhism was prevalent in Kamarupa for few centuries.”

If we go by Barua's writings, it can be inferred that Kamrup adopted Brahmanical religion during the reign of Bhaskarvarman. Many Brahmins were believed to have migrated to Kamrup from rest of India. The grant of the Ganga king Anantavarman (922 A.D.) depicts that the king granted lands to Vishnusomacharya, who was a Brahmin. The grant of Paramara King Vakpati (981 A.D.) depicts that the king granted lands to Vamanaswami of Kamrup.

A part of greater North Bengal, presently Bogra district of Bangladesh, provides some evidence of the prevalence of writing in the time of Ashok. An inscription depicts several settlements maintaining a storehouse filled with coins and food grains for the upkeep of Buddhist monks. It shows the local peasants were in a position to spare some of their food grains for religious purpose and paying taxes. The people knew Prakrit language and they professed Buddhism. The area covering from the river Ganga to river Brahmaputra, most of which is now a part of Bangladesh was well settled and people were fairly Sanskrit educated during 5th and 6th century A.D. The Gupta Governors seem to have become independent

rulers after 550 A.D. and occupied a part of southern Kamrup kingdom, which is now, lay in North Bengal and Bangladesh. Local vassal princes called 'Samanta Maharajas' had created their own administrative apparatus and raised their own army consisting of infantry, horses, elephants and boats to fight their adversaries. They collected taxes from local peasants. By 600 A.D., the region south of Kamrup was consolidated by a powerful king Sasanka, who was the adversary of Harsavardhan. The kingdom came to be known as Gauda or Gaur. Copper plate inscriptions found in ancient Pundravardhanabhukti give us useful information about this kingdom of North Bengal most of which now fall in Bangladesh except some adjoining areas of Maldah and Dinajpur districts. Bilateral relation between Gaur and Kamrup seemed to have been cordial, based on mutual interest on trade and constant fear of aggression by powerful kingdoms of midland India.

Legendary Chandra Dynasty: It is believed that one Chandra dynasty ruling North Eastern India covering the areas consisting of Samatata & Bhangala (South Bengal & southern part of Bangladesh), Kamta-Kamrup (North Bengal & Assam) and Tiruhuti (North Bihar). This dynasty might have usurped power after the decline of Varman dynasty during the period around seventh and eighth century. Perhaps, after the glorious chapter of Varman dynasty or during intermittent periods, fourth Chandra king Srichandra of Tippera (Comilla)-Tripura-Sylhet invaded Pragjyotishpur kingdom. His son Kalyan Chandra defeated the indigenous Mlechchhas, who lived on the banks of river Lauhitya (Brahmaputra). The present day Rajbanshi community or the Koch-Rajbongshis must be having certain bearing on this dynasty, where research scholars should get onto their job.

Noted Happenings and Famous Rulers of Kamta-Kamrup during the obscure period from Varman dynasty and till Establishment of First Kamta Kingdom: Right from earlier Vedic period to twelfth century A.D., which covers ancient period, the region broadly covering the Brahmaputra valley, extended upto Haruppeswara (Tezpur in Assam) in the east, lower heights of the Himalayan ranges in the north, Kirat or Morang region of eastern Nepal, northern part of Bihar, upper districts of Bangladesh and most districts of North Bengal were known as Pragjyotishpur and in later period as Kamrup. Typical Gupta sculpture and architecture such as stone pillars found at Haruppeswara region (at Dah Parbatia in Darrang district) speak the grandeur of this ancient kingdom. In fact, rulers of the kingdom down the line of different dynasties preferred to call them king of Pragjyotish or Kamrup. The name of Kamrup kingdom found its mention in the writings of many Indian writers. Vakpati's '*Gaudavaho*', a work of 8th century A.D. and the '*Majusrimulakalpa*', which is a contemporary Buddhist work, made a reference to Kamrup. After the eventful rule of Varman dynasty different lineage of rulers both from Pragjyotishpur origin and rulers from neighbouring countries either conquered or ruled this vast kingdom. During the period from ninth to till upsurge of Kamta-Kamrup kingdom, prominent rulers were King Ramachandra of Jitari, who belonged to Dravidian origin and ruled the kingdom till 767 A.D., Harjjaravarman (815-835 A.D.), Vanamalavarman (835-865 A.D.), Balavarman-III (885-910 A.D.), Ratnapala of Kamrup (1010-1040 A.D.), Indrapala (1040-1065 A.D.), Devapal (as per Lama Taranath's '*Chos-'byun*', Devapal of famous Pal dynasty conquered Barendra (southern Kamta) and ruled for 48 years. His son Dharmapal (1095-1120 A.D.), who ruled for 64 years and subjugated entire areas of Gaur, Kamta-Kamrup and Tirhut, Jayapal (1120-1130 A.D.) and followed by Sen rulers of Vanga beginning with Vijaysen

(1095 – 1158), who named southern region of Kamta as Barendra. During ninth century A.D. the Jalpesh temple dedicated to Lord Shiv in Jalpaiguri district of North Bengal was constructed by a Kamrup king, who was known also known as Jalpeshwar.

The conquest of Kamrup by Ramapal's General Mayana is mentioned in Sandhya Karanandin's '*Ramacharita*'. Kalhana's '*Rajatarangini*', which was written during the period 1148-1149 A.D. contains a commentary on Kamrup. It refers to Meghavahan of Kashmir (Jammu & Kashmir), who married Amritaprabha, daughter of Kamarup king. It also refers to campaign of Lalitaditya of Kashmir reaching as far as Kamarup to the east. According to Jyotsna Roy Chowdhury,

"...an inscription found at Deopara (near Rajshahi town, Bangladesh) of Vijayyasna (1095-1158 AD) records the erection by the Sena king of a magnificent temple of the same composite deity (Hari and Hara)..."

Somadeva, in his famous work '*Kathasaritsagara*' made a reference to Udaygiri lay to the east of Pundra, which was the abode of 'Siddhas' (Saints). Probably, Udaygiri was referred to as Nilachal hills near modern Guwahati in Assam and Pundra as Maldah district in North Bengal. Hieuen Tsang, during his pilgrimage noticed twenty Buddhist monasteries and more than three thousand followers of Buddhism in Pundravardhan. He also noticed two thousand Buddhist followers in Samatata (in Bangladesh). He also described about a magnificent monastery in the following lines: -

"In this monastery, which had spacious halls and tall storied chambers were above seven hundred brethren, all Mahayanists; it had also many distinguished monks from eastern India---- near it was a Asoka tope (stupa) -----and not far from it was a temple with an image of Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara, which gave supernatural exhibitions and was consulted by people from far and near."

Situation prevailing in Samatata (South Bengal) during early Christian era: The deltaic part of present Bangladesh and West Bengal formed by the rivers Padma and Hoogli, known as Samatata was made to acknowledge the suzerainty of Samudragupta. The area was fertile, reasonably populated and important enough to attract attention of the Gupta conqueror. Samatata was not ruled by Brahman Princes and consequently, it neither used Sanskrit nor adopted "Varna" system, as was the case of Pundra and Kamrup. However, by the turn of about 525 A.D., this region had a fairly organized state covering Samatata and a part of Vanga, which lay to the northeast of Samatata.

In about the middle of 4th century A.D., a king with a title of Maharaja ruled Pokhara on the river Damodar in present Bankura district of South Bengal. The people of this kingdom knew Sanskrit. Tibetan monk, Lama Taranatha, perhaps, was the first writer to use the word 'Bhangala', which most probably was used to denote in a general way Eastern and Southern Bengal. He, in his work 'Chos-byun' composed in 1608 A.D. separately referred to the territories of Radha, Barendra and Pundravardhan. According to him, eastern India consisted of three regions: Bhangala and Odivisa belonged to the Aparantaka and were called Eastern region. Bhangala, probably referred to the region east of the meeting points of rivers Ganga and Jamuna (Brahmaputra), Odivisa to the west of it that included parts of present day Orissa. A close trade link with northeastern states was prevalent during the period.

The north-eastern kingdoms of Kamrup, Tripura and Hasama were called Girivarta. In the north-eastern hilly region were the provinces of Nangata Phukam on the eastern coast, Balgu, Rakhang, Hamsavati and the remaining parts of the Munjang kingdom. Further off,

were Champa, Kamboja and the rest of Burmese states. All these regions were called Koki. According to him, the Chandra dynasty ruled in Bhangala before the Pal kings. Kings of this dynasty were Vrikshachandra, Vigamachandra, Kamachandra, Simhachandra, Balachandra, Bimalchandra, Govindachandra and Lalitchandra. Among these kings, Bimalchandra brought Kamrup and Tirahuti under his suzerainty. They ruled during the period from 6th to 8th century A.D. However, no epigraphically maintained record is available today to know much about this dynasty. Perhaps, some historical linkage existed between this and legendary Chandra dynasties.

Situation prevailing in Bongodesh (or Bhangala) during early historical period:

According to Lama Taranath's *Chos-'byun* there was widespread anarchy in Bhangala due to absence of any central political authority and election of Gopal to the throne by a voice vote by the people. Gopal, who became the ruler of this kingdom, later conquered Magadh. His rule continued for 45 years and Devpal succeeded him. Devpal conquered Barendra and ruled for 48 years. Raspal succeeded Devpal and ruled for 12 years. His son, Dharmapal, who ruled for 64 years, succeeded him. Dharmapal was a powerful king, who subjugated Kamrup, Tiruhut, Gaur and other neighboring states. His empire extended from eastern India to Delhi in the west and from Jalandhar in the north to the Vindhyas in the south. Although chronological order of Pal kings could not be rightly placed as the copper plate grants of the Pal dynasty depicted differently, still certain useful information can be obtained from his text. Pal dynasty continued to rule till the time of Jaypal, who succeeded Dharampal in 1138. Pal kings patronized Buddhism. On the advent of more powerful Sen Kings, shine of Pals in the society diminished to a greater extent.

The Kamauli grant of Vaidyadev (1138-1145), which consists of three plates, was found in Banaras in 1892 A.D. and was deciphered by A. Venis that was published in 'Epigraphia Indica'. The grant refers to the 'Mandala' of Kamrup and 'Visaya' of Pragjyotish, which suggests that Pragjyotish was the larger administrative division and Kamarup was included in it. In the grant, the village granted is said to be situated in Kamarupa Mandala and Pragjyotishabhukti. The larger division appeared to have included not only Kamrup but included a major part of north Bengal and some part of north Bihar also. It was ruled by Indrapal, who was styled as Maharajadhiraja (1041-1065). As per Nowgong copper plate, the realization of taxes from the tenants and infliction of punishments were rare.

The name 'Bengal' is the English form of Bhangala or Bango or Bangla as pronounced now. This region had a link with early Vedic period of Pragjyotishpur culture. It remained a part of Kamrup kingdom till later part of Gupta rule. When Gupta Governors became independent, southern parts of Kamrup witnessed formation of new independent kingdoms.

Ancestor of First Kamta Kingdom: In 1130, Vaidyadev established his Kingdom in greater Kamrup that lay west of the river Brahmaputra and made his capital at Goshanimari (Cooch Behar district in North Bengal). He ruled the kingdom till 1175.

Pal and Sen Rule in Barendra (North Bengal): In south Bengal, Buddhist Pal rulers were succeeded by Hindu Sen rulers, whose ancestors were believed to have descended from Deccans (Karnataka). A pillar inscription of the Vijaysen, an early Sen Ruler, found at

Paikore (Birbhum district of West Bengal), reveals the existence of the cult of 'Manasa', one of the forms of the great Goddess. They worshipped Sadashiv, one of the incarnations of Lord Shiv. All copper plate grants of early Sen Kings like Vijaysen and Vallalsen carry seals with the effigy of Sadashiv.

Sen Rule in Bengal extended up to Dinjapur in the southern part of Kamta region. The inscription of Deopara (near Rajshahi town, Bangladesh) of Vijaysen (1095 – 1198) records the erection of a magnificent temple of *Prayumneswara*, a composite God combining Hari and Hara in a same body. It is believed that earlier Sen Rulers worshipped Lord Shiv and in later years started worshipping Hari. He was believed to have fled from his capital in fear when Mohammad Iban Bakhtiyar, who earlier headed the army of Kutubuddin Aibak and later became independent ruler of Bongodesh, attacked his kingdom with an army led by cavalry. Lakshansen shifted his capital from Lakshmanbhuti in Nadia to Bikrampur. On conquering Bongodesh Bakhtiyar changed his name to Ikhtiyaruddin and also became famous as Bakhtiyar Khilji as he hailed from Persia (Turkey). With the defeat of Lakshansen, Muslim rule was established in South Bengal and Bihar.

An Analysis of Pal and Sen Rule over Kamta: Main problem arose when Pal and Sen Kings of Bengal subjugated Kamta during medieval period. Pals were believed to have come from midland India while Sens were believed to have their origin in Coorg areas of Karnataka. Probably, this is the reason why there is a distinct differences seen in their physical appearances among Bengalis and Rajbanshis. Bengalis having Sen lineage bear a feature of tall figure, fare and sharp look and mostly having impressive figure. Bengalis having Pal lineage are mostly dark and medium built. Although Pal and Sen Kings adopted the language of erstwhile Kamta-Kamrup and Bango, they could not reconcile with the self-esteemed Kamta-Kamrupi Rajbanshis. There was natural dislike for this north eastern part of India. While Bengal under Pal and Sen Kings flourished, its northeastern parts remained neglected.

Muslim Invasions in Kamrup: *'Bharatar Buranji: A Text Book on History'* in Assamese for students of classes IX & X of secondary schools in Assam written by scholars, Sarbashri - M.L. Kathbarua, Nilmoni Phukan of Arjya Vidyapith College, Guwahati; Hari Prasad Das of North Guwahati College, Deb Kanta Dattabarua, retired Head Master of Bartola High School; revised by Shri M.N. Saikia, MA., BT., LLB, retired Principal of Barhampur S.S.I. Higher Secondary School; published by M/s Barua Agency, Guwahati – 1 (Revised Edition, 1998), a book written in accordance with new syllabus in 1989, which was earlier prescribed by Board of Secondary Education, Assam provided us valuable information about the truth on Kamta-Kamrup and Koch kings. This book has been discontinued in schools in Assam these days. A copy of the book was retrieved and a picture of Kamta-Koch kings is given in succeeding paragraphs.

Kamrup king Prithu (1175-1228) and First Muslim Invasion (1206): We find mention of Muslim invasions over Kamta-Kamrup in Muslim chronicle *'Tabkat-E-Nasiri'*. Towards the end of 1206, Khilji with his powerful army comprising of 10 to 12 thousand cavalrymen marched from Debkut in present Dinajpur district of Bangladesh towards Kamta-Kamrup (including North Bengal), which during that period was ruled by Prithu, a descendant of Vaidyadev and Lakshansen's contemporary. As a guide, Khilji befriended a frustrated Hindu

‘Mech’ king of Kamrup, renamed him as Ali Mech. Ali Mech helped the advancing army to move further ahead till they came across a fort held by Kamrup forces. There, Kamrup forces together with villagers gave a tough resistance to Khilji’s cavalry and made them to hold back their advance. A fierce battle began. Meanwhile, frontier forces of neighbouring Bhutan marched towards Battle Theater to join hands with Kamrup forces. Sensing their defeat, Khilji decided to abandon his expedition and retreat. But, before they could begin their organized retreat, Kamrup forces reinforced by Bhutanese soldiers encircled them and made a scathing attack causing heavy casualties. Majority of Khilji’s cavalry either were annihilated or got drowned in river Begmati. Khilji, however, was able to cross the river safely along with some of his men to escape to Gaur via Kamtapur (Koch Bihar). Unable to bear the sorrow of humiliating defeat, Khilji died at Gaur. To commemorate the grand victory of king Prithu, a rock-cut inscription was made at Kanai Varasi in North Guwahati. The inscription runs as: -

“(Saka, 1127), Sake turaya yugmese Madhumasa-trayodase Kamarupam samagatya Turushkah Kshayam-ayayuh” (In Saka 1127, on the 13th day of the month of chaitra, the Turushkas arrived at Kamarup but were completely annihilated).

In the battle, the whole army of Bakhtiyar, which had strength of 12,000 strong soldiers, was completely annihilated by the Kamta-Kamrup army. While Muslim rule got a firm footing in South Bengal, Kamta region of North Bengal still held the sway of Hindu rule. However, constant threat of Muslim rulers from wider front in the south-west weakened the Kamta-Kamrup kingdom in early 13th century. By then, the Muslim kingdom was firmly established in South and East Bengal. The country to the east of the river Karatoya was called *Kamrud* or Kamru as Muslim chronicles and north of Gaur was called *Kamta*.

Second Muslim Invasion (1227-28) and defeat of king Prithu: The second Muslim invasion is recorded in ‘*Tabkat-E-Nasiri*’. In 1225, when Sultan of Delhi, Iltutmis invaded Bongodesh, Sultan Giasuddin Iwaz sided with him. But after the Sultan left for Delhi, he revolted, became de-facto ruler of Bongodesh and invaded Bihar. An invasion on Kamrup led by him could not be stopped by Kamrup king (1226) and invaders advanced up to Nowgong. In 1227, when Iltutmis was away to Delhi, his son Nasiruddin invaded Bongodesh. Sensing danger to Bongodesh, Giasuddin abandoned his Kamrup expedition and returned to Bongodesh. Giasuddin was killed in action while fighting Nasiruddin. Nasiruddin, during his two years’ rule invaded Kamrup, defeated king Prithu. However, he could not hold the country under his suzerainty for long and soon descendants of king Prithu regained their power in Kamrup.

Third Muslim Invasion (1257) and Kamta king Sandhya Ray(1250-1270): When Kamrup king, Sandhya Ray stopped paying tributes to Sultan of Bongodesh, Iktiaruddin or Tughryl Khan Malik Uzbek invaded Kamrup and occupied Kamrup(*Kamrud* as then called) forcing the king to flee the capital. Tughril khan took in possession of all the properties of the king. Sandhya offered to pay tributes, taxes and elephants to the Sultan in return of the royal properties but the offer was declined. Then the king made a deceptive plan. He deputed his royal employees and subjects to the Sultan pretending to have left the services of the king and showed their allegiance to the Sultan. They bought all the food grains at a high cost from the Sultan. Anticipating arrival of fresh crops next season, Sultan was happy to sell the food

grains at a high cost to them, who appeared to him to be loyal. During the rainy season when paddy transplantation took place, the so called royal employees of king Sandhya removed the embankments of the rivers from the upper sides, changed the courses of water bodies to flood the whole area causing devastation of standing crops. This caused a doom on Sultan's expectation of bumper crop. Sensing imminent food scarcity, Malik Uzbek ordered a move back to Bongodesh. While they were retreating along the forests of Khasi and Garo hills, King Sandhya Ray attacked them that resulted to a fierce battle in the hilly terrain causing heavy losses on the retreating army. While fighting, one arrow hit Malik Uzbek on his chest, which made him to fall from the elephant he was riding. The fall made him to surrender together with his fellowmen and Sandhya Ray took them as prisoners of war (in 1256-57). The Sultan died soon after due to the injury he received during the fierce battle.

In the year 1260, Sandhya shifted his capital from present day Guwahati to Kamtapur in present day Cooch Behar. This change he made was to avoid frequent skirmishes created by the neighbouring Kacharis along the southeastern border and to facilitate the king to effectively engage the invading Muslim rulers from south-western states. After the shifting of capital, the kingdom came to be known as Kamta or Kamta-Kamrup and the king adopted the title of 'Kamoteswar' or 'Kameswar'. Apart from Cooch Behar, the extent of the Kamta-Kamrup kingdom during the period consisted of entire Kamrup, Greater Goalpara district in Assam, districts of Mymensingh and Rangpur lying on the eastern side of river Brahmaputra (Jamuna as called in Bangladesh).

During the period, whole of greater India except the northeastern part came under the sway of Muslim rulers. Kamta king Sandhya was the only Hindu ruler to remain free from foreign invaders. After the failure of third Muslim invasion, this part of India remained free from Muslim rule for almost two hundred years. During the period, Delhi Sultanate saw this kingdom as invincible. It also acted as a buffer zone between Muslim ruled mainland India and oriental kingdoms of north eastern India, mostly ruled by Tibeto-Burman rulers of pure Mongoloid stock.

All three Muslim invasions that took place for almost half a century caused a social upheaval in the oriental type of Kamta-Kamrup society. Religion of Islam made headway in the entire region. Most of the Muslim soldiers held prisoner of war settled down in the kingdom. While the rulers went back to Bongodesh, many employees of the Sultanate and soldiers remained in the kingdom permanently.

Rise of Baro-Bhuiyans in Kamrup: After king Sandhya shifted his capital to Kamtapur, his influence diminished in Kamrup, which facilitated rise of 'Bhuiyans' (Large Land Lords). Probably, twelve of them became most powerful politically in Kamrup that is why they were well known as 'Baro Bhuiyan' (Twelve Bhuiyans). Their rule extended from Goalpara in the west to Nagaon in the east, area lying north of river Brahmaputra up to river Subanshiri to river Kopili in the south. They ruled independently. Absence of power centric kingship enabled them to rise both politically and raising their own forces. Although they acted as separate entity, when threatened by external forces, they united together under a leader, who was called 'Gamtha'.

It was Kamata king Durlabh Narayan (1330-1350), who brought all the Bhuiyans under his administrative control. Ram Sharan Thakur's '*Guru-Charita*' gives an account on descendants of King Sandhya Ray, which can be summarized as given in succeeding paragraphs.

Sindhu Ray (1270-1285): After death of King Sandhya Ray, his son Sindhu Ray took over the reign of the kingdom and gained widespread recognition by neighbouring kingdoms. He also adopted the title of '*Kamoteswar*'. He brought about numerous neighbouring kingdoms under his suzerainty and ruled as '*Rajarajeswar*' (King the great).

Rup Narayan (1285-1300): He succeeded his father Sindhu. During his reign, the kingdom flourished and the king became favourite to the neighbouring kingdoms.

Singhadhwaja (1300-1305): After death of King Rup Narayan, his son Singhadhwaja ruled for a short stint of five years.

Pratapdhwaja (1305-1325): Pratapdhwaja initially was the minister to king Singhadhwaja and was a Kayastha by caste. He killed his master to usurp the throne. The king successfully gained his confidence among the subjects to prove his worth as Rajbanshi. 'Das' Rajbanshis trace their origin to Pratapdhwaja.

Dharma Narayan (1325-1330): After the death of king Pratapdhwaja, his nephew Dharma Narayan usurped the throne forcibly ignoring the rightful heir prince Durlabh Narayan, son of queen Prabhabati. Dharma Narayan soon declared himself as *Kamoteswar*. Anticipating future family tussle for the throne, Dharma Narayan established a city at Dimla (Rangpur district in Bangladesh), where he shifted his capital. Taking advantage of the situation, 'Baro Bhuiyans' of Kamrup began to consolidate their strength to control their respective independent regions. In the meanwhile, Durlabh Narayan gained control over northern part of their kingdom and established his own capital at Garia. The tussle between two cousins over their supremacy happily ended with division of the kingdom between them. Durlabh Narayan got the northern areas and became *Kamoteswar* or *Kameswar*. After the division, Dharma Narayan left for Dimla, where he received a grand reception hosted by his son Tamradhwaja. Dharma Narayan adopted the title as *Gaureswar* (Lord of Gaur). As a goodwill gesture, Dharma Narayan gifted seven families each of Brahmins, who earlier had hailed from landlord families of Kanauj (Haryana) and Kayasthas to Kamta King Durlabh Narayan. They were given land for settlement in the eastern part of the kingdom with a view to provide a check on the attacking forces from neighbouring Bhutanese kingdom. Their racial behaviour speaks of their Aryan origin and their physiognomy proves it. In present day Assam, descendants of these families later became Sarmah Brahmins and Kalita Kayasthas respectively.

Durlabh Narayan (1330-1350): He was an illustrious Kamta king, who not only brought the Baro-Bhuiyans under his administrative control but also showed great interest in education, art and culture. He had seven queens. During his reign, some of the great poets like Hem Saraswati and Harihar Mishra created some literary works in the prevalent language, which later became Assamese in Assam and Kamta-Rajbanshi in North Bengal and its adjacent areas. Hem Saraswati's '*Prahlad-Charita*' and '*Hara-Gauri Sambad*' were the two literary works that were patronized by the king. Harihar Mishra's '*Laba Kushar Yuddha*' was another such literary creation of the period. Benevolent approach shown by the king earned him a permanent place in the annals of Kamta-Kamrup history.

Indra Narayan (1350-1365): He succeeded his father king Durlabh Narayan. He too was a great patron of art, culture and literature. During his reign, Hem Saraswati wrote '*Jayadrath Badh*'. The poet spoke very highly about the king and described the king as a great believer in God. His short reign ended in 1365, when Arimatta or Gajanka killed him to usurp the throne.

Arimatta or Gajanka (1365-1385): Arimatta or Gajanka was son of Tamradhwaja or grandson of Gaureswar Dharma Narayan. It was generally believed that he avenged forcible taking over northern part of Kamta-Kamrup by Durlabh Narayan from his grandfather Dharma Narayan. After usurping the throne, he shifted his capital from Kamtapur to Baidyagarh on the bank of river Betna (near Rangia in Kamrup district of Assam) and built an impregnable fort, ruins of which can still be seen today. He fought a fierce battle with prince Fenguba, who was a nephew of slain Kamta king Indra Narayan. Ruins of the fort built by the prince located at about 4 kilometers west of Rangiya at a place called Dam Dama can be seen even today. This fort was known as Fenguba garh. In the battle, prince Fenguba was killed. Arimatta also defeated and killed another king named Ram Chandra, the ruler of Darrang. Arimatta is discredited for his patricidal act by killing his uncle, king Indra Narayan for the throne.

Descendants of Arimatta (1385-1440): Ratna Singha or Shukbanka succeeded King Arimatta. During his reign, fear of Muslim invasion from the southwestern frontiers loomed large. The king sensing danger, made friendship with Ahoms and married off one of his daughter named Bhajani to young Ahom prince named Sudangpha. Sudangpha was also known as a Brahman Prince as a Brahmin in a village named Habung brought him up.

As per the Blochman (J.A.S.A.B., 1873. p.235), during the period, Ahoms conquered northeast Bengal as far as river Karatoya. This statement probably referred to the dispute of Ahoms with the Kamta king. Sir Edward Gait, in his book '*A History of Assam*' wrote, '*...An expedition was dispatched under the Bar Gohain to invade Kamota but the raja averted war by giving his daughter Bhajani to Sudangpha, with a dowry of two elephants and a number of horses and a male and female servants, as well as a quantity of gold and silver.*'

During the reign of king Arimatta, capital of Kamta-Kamrup kingdom was located at Baidyagarh; however, his descendants shifted the capital to Kamtapur (near Dinhata in Cooch Bihar district in North Bengal). During the reign of King Mriganka under whose period the kingdom reduced to smaller size mainly circled around Kamtapur. Southern areas called Gaur of the greater Kamtapur went in the hands of Sultan of Bongodesh and eastern part went in the hands of Ahom king. Lesser-known king Mriganka died in 1440 leaving no heir apparent. Once again, a powerful Kayastha Bhuiyan named Niladhwaja became all-powerful in his domain and became new Kamta king. He established Khien or Khan Dynasty.

Niladhwaja (1440-1460): Niladhwaja, whose origin is not clear, adopted the title as Khien or Khan. It was believed that deprived of proper place in the 'Varna' system in caste Hindu, Hindu Kayastha kings preferred to adopt Title of Muslim Khan to denote their martial status.

In later years, similar titles were suffixed to their names of some Assamese also. Assamese saint scholar Sankar Deb had relatives named Bura Khan and Kketai Khan. The Minister of Sultan Hussain Shah was a Hindu Kayastha named Purandar Khan. One of Baro-Bhuiyans, who acknowledged suzerainty of the Sultan, was a Hindu named Ghosal Khan. Descendants of the Khan dynasty later got mixed up with other caste Hindu in the entire Kamta-Kamrup kingdom, making it difficult to differentiate their identity between Kshatriya and Kayastha. While a group of their caste in North Bengal preferred to identify as Kshatriyas, we find another group of theirs i.e. Kayasthas of Assam having surnames as Das, Rajbongshi, Barman and others, who trace their origin to the one similar to king Niladhwaja.

Taking advantage of absence of heir of the throne after the death of king Mriganka, Niladhwaja usurped the throne. He brought numerous Brahmins from Videha (Mithila in Bihar) and got them settled in the capital. He renovated the capital city Kamtapur and turned it into a beautiful and well fortified.

Chakradhwaja (1460-1480): He was the second Kamta king from Khan Dynasty, who became king after the death of his father Niladhwaja. During his reign, Sultan Barbak Shah of Bongodesh made an abortive attack on Kamta kingdom and was humbled by Chakradhwaja. The king built a magnificent temple in the capital dedicated to Mother Goddess Kamoteswari.

Nilambar (1480-1498): He succeeded his father Chakradhwaja in 1480 A.D. He further extended his kingdom by annexing neighbouring states and became powerful king. He built a road from Kamtapur to Ghoraghat (Bangladesh). In the east, frontier of his kingdom extended up to Barnadi in Sonitpur district of Assam. Buchanan in his Manuscripts wrote about the king,

"...His dominions are said to have extended over the greater part of Kamrup, and included part of *Motsvo*, for the fort at *Ghoraghat* is said to have been one of his erecting. Numerous public works, especially magnificent roads, are attributed to this prince who from these, seems to have governed his country with attention; but the circumstances related concerning his overthrow, are accompanied with traits of the most savage barbarity. 201.

Strategic Conquest of Kamatapur. - Whether from a natural suspiciousness of temper, or from an uncommon accuracy of observing such circumstances the Raja on entering his women's apartments one day, observed traces which convinced him that a man had been there. He was immediately inflamed with jealousy, and having sent people to watch, a young Brahman, son of *Sochi Patro*, the prime minister was soon caught attempting to enter the royal apartments and to dishonour his master. He was taken before the King put privately to death, and part of his body was prepared for food. His father having been invited to a grand entertainment given by the king, ate of his son's body, for in Kamrup the Brahmans are allowed great liberties in their diet. After he had satiated himself with this monstrous food the king showed him his son's head and informed him of the crime and what he had been eating. The minister is said to have acted with a presence of mind well suited for an occasion. He said that his son had no doubt deserved any punishment but as the king had made him eat such a horrid repast, that he could no longer continue in his service, but would retire from the world and dedicate him to the duties of a religious mendicant. By this stratagem

he was allowed to retire and having assumed the habit of *sonyashi*, immediately left Kamrup. His first object now was taking revenge, and he proceeded without delay to gaur, where he laid before the Moslem king information, that was followed by an attack on *Nilambor*. For some time however the invasion did not seem likely to terminate in success, for after a siege of twelve years, the Moslem had no impression upon the works of *Komotapur*. Although the length of the siege is probably exceedingly exaggerated by tradition, its issue probably continued long doubtful, for the invading army has evidently said to have been taken at length by stratagem, or rather, by the most abominable treachery. The Muhammedan commander informed the king by message that having lost all hopes of taking the place he was desirous of making peace, and of leaving the country on the friendliest terms. This having been accepted, it was proposed that the ladies of the Moslem chiefs should pay their respect to the queen. This also was received, as a mark of polite attention, and a number of covered litters were admitted into the women's apartments within the citadel. In place of Moslem ladies these litters contained arms, and the bearers were soldiers who immediately on gaining admission seized their weapons and secured the person of the *Raja* who was put into an iron cage in order to afford amusement for the Sultan and populace of gaur. On the way he contrived to escape, and has ever since remained concealed. 202..."

The above account given in the Manuscripts left to certain degree of doubt over disappearance of Nilambar. Buchanan in his report on Dinajpur further wrote about Ishmail Gazi, a Muslim saint highly revered by the Muslims of Ghoraghat, who was believed to have played an active role in Hussain Shah's victory over and destruction of Kamtapur kingdom. But Buchanan expressed doubt over the popular belief. Buchanan further wrote in the Manuscript 'The Account of Bengal', which he procured at Maldah, it was said that the sultan Hussain Shah, immediate predecessor of Nusrat, conquered Kamrup, and killed its king Harup Narayan, son of Malkongyar, son of Sada Lakhyoman. According to Buchanan all these three kings were none but the king of Kamtapur as it was a common practice for any Kamta king to have several names. In the short account of the Assam published in volume 2 of the *Asiatic Researches*, which appeared to Buchanan more accurate than anything stated earlier i.e. -

"...Hoseyn Shah, a king of Bengal, undertook an expedition against Assam in which he had at first considerable success. The raja retired to the mountains and the son of the king was left with a large army to keep possession of the country. In the rainy season the raja descended into the plains and destroyed the whole invading army, who were all either killed or made prisoners." (A.R. II. 180). Buchanan wrote, 'It was probably this rash expedition, which frustrated the conquest of Komotapur, and rendered it necessary for the Moslems to retire after a possession of one or two years. Indeed the tradition of the Hindus states that they made no stay at Komotapur, but retreated immediately with what booty they could procure. This however seems improbable, and I shall have occasion to show, that within the walls of Komotapur there are probable traces of the Moslems having begun very considerable works which have been broken off unfinished. It is therefore probable that Nilambor was destroyed by *Hoseyn Shah* in person and he begun to reign about forty years before the usurpation of *Sher Shah* or about the year 1496 of our era. The conquests

therefore of *Ishmael Gaji* must be confined to the vicinity of Ghoraghat, and perhaps, he did no more than retain these small portions of the conquests made by the sultan *Hoseyn* where he founded the city named after Nusrat, the successor of the prince. 204..."

Sultan of Delhi, Mohammad Bin Tughlag made a strategic plan to invade Kamta-Kamrup with a cavalry consisting of 1,00,000 soldiers. He attacked the Kingdom at a wide front extending from Enayetpur in Mymensingh in the south to the extreme northern border of Kamtapur. The Kamta forces under able military command of King Durlabh Narayan showed an exemplary courage and bravery to hold the powerful army of Delhi Sultanate.

Arrival of Ahoms: In the 13th century A.D., a very important event took place in north eastern India, which changed the course of history for the Kamrup-Kamta. This was the invasion of a branch of Tai speaking warriors from Shan region of Upper Burma (Myanmar) on the northern border of Thailand called Ahoms in 1215. Under the military leadership of Su-Ka-pha (Sukhapha), their axis of invasion was from Maulung, then crossed over Patkai hills (in Manipur) to occupy upper Brahmaputra valley of Kamrup. They got settled down at Charaideo in 1253. When they tried to expand their kingdom, they got a stiff resistance from the Kamta rulers from west and Muslim rulers from the South Bengal.

It was believed that the Ahom invaders did not bring their women along with them. They married Kamrup and local tribal brides. With the mixing of their Tai with Kamta-Kamrupi language a new language developed that subsequently transcended into Assamese. The Ahoms adopted Hinduism subsequently.

The Ahoms brought with them a tradition of writing chronicles called *Buranji*. The Ahoms belonged to Siamese-Chinese family of the Mongoloid stock. They were known by various names viz. Tai, Htai, Hkun, Lu, Lao, Hkamti and in North Burma they were known as Shans. The Ahoms, who migrated from north Burma, are undisputedly the Shan tribe, who had age-old tradition of writing *Buranji*. On crossing over the river Nam-kiu, on the way to Brahmaputra valley, Sukapha counted his followers at Kham-jang and found sixty persons died and seven persons missing. The conqueror issued an order to his learned followers, the Pandits asking them, "...*The Pandits shall keep record in writing wherever something happens on the way*". Thus, tradition of writing *Buranji* came to being in Ahom kingdom. In the next few centuries, they brought the whole Brahmaputra valley under their control. In sixteenth century, they tried to expand their kingdom westward but the Kamta ruler supported by the Mughals strongly resisted them. In sixteenth century, when Koch power of Kamtapur was at its nadir, Assam acknowledged Koch king Naranarayan's suzerainty for a brief period. Ahom Generals learnt the art of naval warfare from great commander-in-chief of Kamta-Koch forces, Sukladhwaja, who defeated Ahom king Chukampha in 1253.

Ahom was the only state of India, which did not bow to the might of the Mughals. Lachit Barphukan, the great Ahom general played a pivotal role in driving them permanently from Ahom. He was an able military commander and strategist and assigned with the task to take over as the commander – in- chief of Ahom forces to take on the mighty Mughal army led by Mir Jumla (1661-1663) and subsequently led by Mughal general Ram Singh. The Mughal forces defeated Koch king to advance further east into the Ahom territory. The Ahoms fought for about thirty years for their independence. Finally, in the naval battle, which took place at Saraighat, Ahom forces commanded by Lachit defeated Mughals and

drove them out in December 1667. Western limit of Assam drew up to river Manas. Lachit has been compared with great military commanders like Shivaji and Rana Pratap and as the architect and saviour of the Ahom with the historical figures Mazzini, Cavour and Garibaldi of Italy.

While Gaur-Bengal, Bihar went under Muslim rule and east of Kamrup under Ahom rule; Kamta was still a stronghold of its own indigenous kings, who were the descendants of Kamrup kings. While the suzerainty of Sultan Malik Iktabuddin, a powerful king of Ayodhya was accepted by Hindu kings of Gaur-Bengal and Bihar, the Kamta king Sandhya Ray, son of Prithu did not accept it. Muslim invasions and Ahom supremacy in the east wrecked Kamta kings during 14th and 15th century. Finally, in 1498, Kamtapur went in the hands of Muslim ruler of Gaur after Kamta king Nilambar got defeated by ruler of Gaur Hussain Shah in a fierce battle. Goshanimari, the capital of Kamtapur kingdom fell in the hands of Hussain Shah. During the period of Hussain Shah, spread of Islam began in Kamta region. The remains of the brick built magazine built by Hussain Shah's army during 15th–16th Century, which later formed a part of Mughal army's cantonment can still be seen at Panbari, Dhubri district in lower Assam. Now, the remains being looked after under supervision of the Archeological Survey of India are in dilapidated state and needs protection and care for its preservation.

<<<Photograph of Panbari Ruins of Hussain Shah's Ammunition Depot, taken on 18th February 2007>>>

(h) History after Rise of Koch Empire till Independence of India in 1947 & Merger of Cooch Behar State in 1949-50

After the fateful end of king Nilambar, Kamta-Kamrup kingdom started breaking up into numerous fiefdoms under the control of different landlords, many of whom declared themselves as kings. Hussain Shah had no intention to rule Kamta people; so he destroyed the socio-economic-political structure of the kingdom. As a result, anarchy spread all over region exposing it to foreign interference. Sensing the danger ahead, the landlords of the region unanimously chosen Haridas Mandal, whose another name was Haridas or Haria, the landlord of Chikna hills on the bank of the river Saral (presently in Kokrajhar district of Assam) as their political leader. His ancestors in descending order were:

Sumati > Bhadrarajit > Bhadraraba > Basudam > Damambur

Haria Mandal: Twelve Meches of Chiknagram village were Panbar, Bhadela, Gubhabar, Phedfeda, Barihana, Kathia, Baihagu, Megha, Juddhabar, Garkata, Jagai and Dokhora. Most probably it was Barihana, who was the most powerful among all twelve Meches, took over as Headman of the village. He became famous as Haria Mandal. Mandal was the title that was given to the headman of 12 Mech families of that village named Chiknagram of Khuntaghat Pargana in erstwhile Goalpara district in Assam. The surname 'Mandal' added to his first name to indicate that he was the chosen leader of the group of landlords. Kamta-Kamrup

kingdom, which was broken down after Hussain Shah's invasion in 1498, again began to take shape in the name of Kamta-Koch or Kamtpur kingdom of which Haria was the earliest ancestor. All this had begun during 1505-1506. A legend is prevalent on Haria's origin, which can be narrated on the following lines: -

There lived a mighty Kshatriya king of the 'Chandra Bansa' (owing origin to the Moon God) named Sahasrarjun, son of king Hoyhoi, who one day along with some of his soldiers went for hunting in a jungle, where lived the sage Jamadagni, father of Parshuram, Brahmin incarnation of Lord Vishnu. The dusk fell after the days' hunting and the king needed a shelter to stay overnight, so he went to the hermitage of sage Jamadagni. Parshuram was away to collect grains. The sage had a wonder cow named Kamdhenu that gave whatever was sought. The sage along with Kamdhenu received the king with a royal dignity. The king together with his hunting team enjoyed the hospitality at the hermitage, but he became greedy of Kamdhenu. He asked for it, but the sage declined. He tried his best to persuade the sage to part with the wonder cow but failed. He was desperate to have Kamdhenu in his capital at Maheswari. So, the king used his force and took it away forcibly to his palace. Looking sad, sage narrated the incident to his son on his return. The heinous act of the king enraged son Parshuram, who at once he set out for the head of the king. He killed the king with his 'Kuthar' (a flat headed hand held spear like weapon) in a fight and took their wonder cow back to their hermitage. Later, one day when Parshuram was away on pilgrimage, sons of the slain king went to the hermitage, finding the sage on meditation killed him and took away the wonder cow to their palace. When Parshuram returned from pilgrimage and learnt from his bereaved mother Renuka the horrifying story of killing of his father, he became so angry that he decided to take revenge by annihilating all the Kshatriyas and make the world free of them. To avoid Parshuram's wrath all twelve princes fled the capital, took shelter in a Mech village and lived in the guise of Mech people. Lord Parshuram went around the world seven times annihilating the Kshatriyas. Parshuram killed all Kshatriyas except those who either changed to other castes or hid somewhere.

As per the legend Haria Mandal was a descendant of those Kshatriya princes of legendary Maheswari city of 'Chadrabansi' king Sahasrarjun. The aforesaid story is a legend but does have a significance as a basis on which scholars might be able to draw the inference on terms of Palia meaning 'the fled', Mech, Koch, Rajbanshi and history of Kshatriya status of the community. Also, it has got all the cultural relevance of the folklore and 'Mecheni Khela', a religious-cultural event of Rajbanshi Kshatriya womanhood. He married two daughters of the king of Hajo, who belonged to Koch community. As both the daughters of the king of Hajo were beautiful and having royal background, probably this was the reason as to why they were said to be belonging to 'Rajbanshi' meaning affiliated to royal lineage. 'Rajbanshi', the word became very popular among all the rulers thereafter, whether small or big, otherwise the nomenclature was earlier confined to the descendants of Kamta-Kamrup kings only from the time of king Prithu.

A beautiful legend is given in '*Darrang Banshabali*' regarding birth of the first son to Hira. The story depicts profound religious faith of the community in their most revered God Lord Shiv and Goddess Parvati. Hira had attractive look and was an incarnation as tenth form of Goddess Parvati. Once, disturbed due to turmoil in the earth, in her most destructive form,

wearing no clothes except a garland of severed heads of sinners reached Kailash in Himalayas. On seeing her, Lord Shiv enquired about significance of her destructive look. Getting no satisfactory answer the Lord then, explained to her about ten forms that she ought to have for the benefit of the mankind. The Lord also showed her a view of all her forms on the backdrop his frontal neck. In the tenth form also She had to go to the earth. As the Goddess had to go to earth alone foregoing the comfort of Lord's eternal love, She got angry and cursed Lord Shiv. As cursed the Lord would have to go to earth at least once and remain in strange form. The curse soon materialized, Lord Shiv went to earth and took the form of Mahadeb Shankar, wearing tiger skin with a 'Jata' i.e. tied hair lock over the head, a snake around his neck, a 'Trishul' i.e. tri-pronged metallic weapon and 'Damru' i.e. a drum like paying instrument and living like a mystic in cremation grounds. However, creator of most powerful weapons the Moon God would always reside on Lord's locks for ultimate destruction if need be. The Goddess repented the curse and soon took her tenth form to go to earth for Lord's company. The Goddess was believed to have taken the form as a beautiful daughter of Hajo.

One day, in the guise of Haria, Lord Mahadev came to Chiknagram and sat under a tree. Thinking her husband waiting for food after working in the fields, Hira went to him to feed him with sumptuous food with intoxicating drink and cooked rice. After having meal they enjoyed each other's company and made love. Hira went back to home. Later, on return from his work place, Haria feeling hungry, asked Hira for food. Hearing to Harias's demand for food Hira got astonished and reminded him of having sumptuous food that he already had in the fields and the incident of lovemaking. Haria could not remember anything but got angry over Hira. During sleep in the night, Mahadev appeared in Haria's dream and told him that He came and entered Haria's physical body to meet Parvati. And, that he should not get disheartened for they would be blessed with a powerful son, who would establish a bigger kingdom. Thus, a son was born to Hira whom they named as Bishu.

First Koch King Bishwa Singha (1496 –1533): After death of Haria Mandal, his bravest son Bishu took over the reigns as a new Mandal. First action point that he took up was to master some of his trusted lieutenants and with their support prepare for future actions against their old adversary, the Bhuiyan of Fulguri, who once defeated and took his father a prisoner of war and later released at the cost of his allegiance to the Bhuiyan. Bishu organized a 'Durgapuja' i.e. worshipping Goddess of power Durga and sought blessings. He began his initial campaign against nearby Bhuiyans to gain sufficient ground for attacking the Fulguri Bhuiyan. Out of the Bhuiyans whom Bishu defeated, two were Brahmin such as Bar Bhuiyan, a 'Daivagya' i.e. a Bhuiyan of astrologer by caste and the Bhuiyan of Kusum. Bishu killed Bhuiyans of Dighala, Jhargaya and Kabilash. Then he turned towards Fulguri. In a fierce battle, Bishu was defeated by the forces of the Bhuiyan and lost heavily both in men and materials. Then, he took sufficient time in reorganizing his forces, again performed 'Durgapuja' seeking divine blessings. He brought certain changes in his strategic planning for ensuing battle. What happened once was that on the eve of 'Bihi' festival, Bhuiyan of Karnapur granted leave to most of his soldiers. Taking advantage of the situation, Bishu entered the citadel of the Bhuiyan and killed the Bhuiyan together with his body guards. Bishu then targeted Howly and killed its Bhuiyan, Somai. He managed to gain loyalty of all the soldiers of Howly and absorbed them under his command. By then, Bishu became more powerful with added support of his younger brother Shishu. With full war machinery, he then

attacked Fulguri and killed the Bhuiyan in a fierce battle. After that, one by one he defeated Bhuiyans of Bijni, Pandu, Rani, Bangaon, Chhaygaon, Barnagar (Sarbhog), Beltola and brought them under his suzerainty. Steadily he extended his kingdom up to river Karatoya (North Bengal/Bangladesh) in the west and up to river Barnadi (Sonitpur district in Ahom) in the east. He established his capital at Kamtapur (Cooch Bihar district) and declared himself as Bishwa Singha, the Koch king and his brother as Shishwa Singha as prince.

During his time, Muslim rulers from the west and the Ahom king from the east were busy in consolidating their kingdoms. Bishwa Singha handled his adversaries tactfully using his intelligence. He maintained friendly relations with the Muslim rulers of Bongodesh. Once, he made a brave expedition against the powerful Ahom king Swarganarayan alias Dihingia Raja Chuhung Mung. Koch forces of Bishwa Singha advanced deep into the territory of Ahom kingdom up to Bargaon, camped there; however did not dare to launch an offensive against the powerful Ahom forces. Stiff resistance offered by Ahom forces forced Koch king to make a retreat. In 1533, Commander-in-Chief of Gaur forces, Turbak were killed by Ahom forces in an action, which made the Koch king to change his attitude towards Ahom kingdom. He then, made friendship with the Ahom king. Till his death in the same year, the king maintained good neighbourly relations with Ahoms.

King Bishwa Singha was popular among Bhutanese also. He had an excellent rapport with the Bhutanese king. His brother Shishwa Singha later took an expedition towards Nepal and extended the kingdom up to the river Kosi (Kosi River in Bihar/Nepal). He built a fort near present day Siliguri in Darjeeling district and started living there. This area was under dense forest cover and moist, moreover not a healthy place to live, which forced him to abandon the fort and shifted to Jalpaiguri, where he again built a fort. He later adopted the title 'Raykot'. Both the brothers added 'Singha' meaning a lion as a suffix to their names. Indeed, they had the lion like prowess to reckon with in those days. Also, Kshatriyas or the Rajput kings during those days fancied suffixing Singha or Singh in their names to denote their martial stature. The king brought number of Brahmins from Kanauj, Mithila, Navadwip, Gaur and Varanasi and settled their families in the kingdom.

King Bishwa Singha strengthened neighborly relationship with other states by marrying their eighteen princesses. Their names and royal origin were – Ratnakanti from Nepal; Hemprabha and Padmabati from Gaur; Chandrakanti, Purnakanti, Hemkanti and Rati from Kamrup; Tilottama from Kashmir; Chandra, Chandranana, Jaya, Bijaya and Jayanti from Kashi (Varanashi); Lalita, Labanyabati and Padmamala from Sonitpur; Satarupa and Kanchanmalini from Mithila. Their best known sons with mothers' names in bracket were – Nara Singha (Ratnakanti), Malladeb or Nara Narayan (Hemprabha), Sukladhwaja or Sangram Singha or Chilarai (Padmabati), Kamal Narayan or Gohai Kamal (Chandrakanti), Madan (Purnakanti), Ramchandra (Hemkanti), Sur Singha (Rati), Man Singha (Tilottama), Mecha (Chandra), Brishketu (Chandranana), Ramanarayan (Jaya), Ananta (Bijaya), Dip Singha (Jayanti), Hemdhar (Lalita), Meghnarayan (Labanyabati), Jagat (Padmamala), Rupchand (Satarupa) and Surjya(Kanchanmalini). Among the aforesaid eighteen brothers, Nara Singha was the eldest, who along with brothers like Nara Narayan, Kamal Gohain and Shukladhwaja proved to be best of all brothers both physically and mentally. 'Gulibant', a system of trying one's luck was in vogue in those days in the region according to which eighteen earthen balls were shaped inside of which earth, gold, silver, iron, brass, copper, bronze, paddy & Maize grains, 'siha' and other articles were kept and all the eighteen princes were required to pick up one to decide his future position in the royal hierarchy. By this

process, eldest prince Nara Singha who picked up gold was to become a king on a foreign land. Prince Nara Narayan picked up earth and was to become the king of his own kingdom. Shukladhwaja picked up iron and was to become 'Dewan' and to lead the armed forces. Eldest son, prince Nara Singha was very dear to the king and that was the reason to keep him in the capital to receive training on state administration. Prince Nara Narayan whose other name was Malladev and his younger brother Shukladhwaja were sent to Varanasi to receive education on various subjects, as they were more intelligent and brave. They underwent educational training on literature, philosophy; politics and military training at the 'Ashram' of saint Brahmananda.

Why Rajbanshis have a great respect for the Brahmins there is an interesting story behind it. Just for amusement, once the king Bishwa Singha committed a blunder that cost a precious life of a Brahmin and soon king died repenting for it. One day the king was busy dealing with state affairs in his royal court surrounded by his ministers and courtiers. On that day a Brahmin named Bhabananda came to meet the king for financial help to marry off his daughter. The Brahmin was stopped at the gate and the royal guard went inside to seek king's permission. On obtaining permission the Brahmin was allowed to enter the palace and requested the king for the help. Being kind enough the king soon ordered his minister to sanction financial aid. Just for the sake of knowledge or curiosity the king asked the Brahmin a question as to why people used to touch toes of the elders while paying their respects in the bowing down gesture of 'Pronam'. The pious Brahmin replied that cosmic energy flows down from human body through the toes. So while touching the toes of the elders the younger gain that energy like a flow of white cow milk. The answer aroused a feeling of amusement in the king. The king ordered his soldiers to cut the toes of the Brahmin and see whether cosmic energy flows like cow milk. The soldiers cut the toe and soon the Brahmin began bleeding profusely. Painfully he cried and expressed disheartenment saying that cow's milk was white that was alright; if the nipple of the cow were cut white milk would never flow; rather red blood would flow. It would be the heinous crime if the cow were to die. Like that if the Brahmin were happened to die of bleeding through his cut toe, the king too would die. The king realized his folly and soon arranged medical treatment for the Brahmin but despite taking great care within few days the Brahmin died. This incident deeply hurt the feelings of the king. Luck could have it; the king was attacked by chicken pox within few months from the day of the incident and did not respond to treatment. The king sensed his end, called his prince sons by his death bed and advised them to respect the Brahmins and never cause any harm to them. This way the end came to the great us the king. Since the custom of the Rajbanshis to show highest respect to Brahmins had begun and continued for ever.

Nara Singha's Usurpation & Abdication of Koch Throne: After the death of King Bishwa Singha, prince Nara Singha ascended the throne of Kamta kingdom in much dislike of his both younger brothers, who were still receiving training at Varanasi. Prince Nara Singha's wrongful action invited strong criticism as it was against the norm already decided through 'Gulibat' process. On return from Varanasi, Nara Narayan demanded the throne and Shukladhwaja the military command. Most of the state functionaries were already against Nara Singha for his misdded and the situation took an unfavorable turn for him. Sensing the danger, Nara Singha took along his son, few loyalists, the insignia of kingship the 'Hanumanti Danda' and the idol of 'Mata Bhagavati', the Goddess of power and fled the

kingdom to seek political asylum in Morang kingdom of Nepal. The king of Morang granted him shelter. Prince Nara Narayan and Shukladhwaja proceeded towards Nepal with a fully prepared army to get the insignia and the idol of the Goddess. When refused by the Morang king to return the items, a fierce battle took place between them sometime in the first half of the year 1533 the Morang king was defeated in the battle and forced to enter an agreement with Nara Narayan. As per the agreement, Hanumanti Danda and the idol of Goddess were returned to Nara Narayan along with a group of infantry soldiers, elephants, horses, gold and silver coins and other items as gifts.

King Nara Narayan's Nepal Expedition and Coronation (1533-87): Plains of Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri districts often came under the rule of Bhutanese (Bhot) kings during medieval period. Nara Narayan captured these areas during his aforesaid expedition in Nepal brought these areas under Koch kingdom. Nara Narayan ascended the throne towards the end of 1533. His younger brother, Shukladhwaja, a brilliant and brave soldier was appointed as Dewan to assist the king and command the state armed forces. Rests of brothers were given various appointments to run the state machinery. After the defeat of Nepalese king, their eldest brother Nara Singha went to Kashmir first and subsequently, to Bhutan where Bhutanese king Devaraj gave him shelter. On sheer love and respect, as advised by his brother Sukladhwaja, the king decided to arrange return of their eldest brother. Shukladhwaja went to Bhutan for the purpose. During this campaign, he annexed southern part of Bhutan also. His younger brothers forgave wrong doings of Nara Singha and made him king of Panga (in Jalpaiguri district of North Bengal) as per the norm decided earlier through Gulibant process.

First unsuccessful expedition to Ahom kingdom: Long drawn war of attrition between the forces of two rival kingdoms of Koch and Ahom, heavy initial losses incurred by Koch forces, use of both ground and naval forces by Koch military command and the victories achieved by Koch forces under able command of Shukladhwaja (Chilarai or Chilaray) and finally, bonding by cordial relationship between them during king Nara Narayan's reign would be remembered in the history of North Bengal, Assam and their adjoining areas, as both valour and military marksmanship. Let us see what happened:

All was not well on the eastern front of Koch-Kamta kingdom. Powerful Ahom forces kept creating troubles on the frontier and Koch soldiers were being harassed by them as well as by the officials of Ahom kingdom, who did not want Koch king to become more powerful. In 1543 Ahom forces forcibly took away king Nara Narayan's younger brother Deep Singha along with his daughter while they were on pilgrimage to 'Parshuram Kunda'(in upper Assam) and later killed him. Ahoms also killed the soldiers guarding the Koch frontier posts at Sola. Two brothers Hemdhar and Ram Chandra took up an expedition with 3000 soldiers and reached sola to avenge the killings of their brother, soldiers and recover slain brother's daughter from captivity. They attacked Sola and defeated the Ahom forces. In 1546 hostilities again began and both the brothers Hemdhar and Ramchandra were killed Ahom by king Suklemung or Gargayan Raja (1539-1552). Head of the Koch forces, Shukladhwaja regrouped his forces, advanced towards Ahom and attacked Ahoms forcing them to retreat. Both the kingdoms spent almost a year in building up their military power for the ensuing war. During the hostilities, new roads were constructed to facilitate smooth movement of their troops. One such road was constructed by prince Kamal Narayan, starting from Koch

Behar passed through hilly terrain of Bhutan, the river Brahmaputra and reached Parshu Ram Kunda or Narayanpur (Lakhimpur district of Assam). Within a short span of one year (1546-1547) this road of 350 miles long was completed, a rare feat in the history of public works. This road later came to be known as 'Kamal Gohain Ali', which carries its reminiscences, partly in the form of national highway No. 31 and state highways of Assam today.

Shukladhwaja built a fort at Narayanpur, which was made a base camp. In 1547-1548, Koch army launched an attack on Ahom fort Pikia, which proved disastrous for them. Alertness shown and swift action enabled Ahom forces to cripple attacking Koch forces causing heavy losses. It was estimated that about 5000 soldiers of Koch forces got killed in action and their shivered heads were collected at one place called Mathadanga (meaning field of heads) in Sivasagar district of Assam. This victory boosted the morale of the troops in Ahom camp, while in Koch camp, it was time for king Nara Narayan and his brother Shukladhwaja to think in retrospect, plan for better strategy and improve battle skills.

Second successful expedition to Ahom kingdom: Shukladhwaja brought in important changes in the chain of command in their military establishment. Probably for the first time on Indian soil he raised a formidable naval force. Bhaktamal and Tapu were appointed naval commanders. Soon they acquired flotillas of number of battle worthy boats prepared to go in for long voyages. Bhimbal and Bahubal were appointed as army commanders. Kamta-Koch army was fully equipped to go in for a major offensive. On the other side, Ahom king Chu-Kampha (Sukampha as pronounced also known as Khora Raja or Lame king ruled from 1552 to 1603) made his forces fully prepared to face the Koches. In 1562, Koch army launched combined attack of ground and naval forces on the Ahom army and made headway towards Ahom mainland up to the river Dikhu where a fierce battle took place. Ahom forces had to suffer some reverses in this battle. Along the bank of this river, Koch forces made a temporary camp. While camping at this location, dissidents of Ahom king joined hands with Koch king. Shukladhwaja took full advantage of this situation. He had already brought the operational proficiency in their forces to a new height and morale of their troops was very high while Ahom camp got demoralised. By judging the unfavourable situation, Chu-Kampha ordered his forces to retreat to the rear and he himself left the battlefield. Chu-Kampha tried to buy time by sending peace proposals, which did not bring any fruitful result. Long drawn war continued between two forces. Koch naval forces were put into action, which proved to be very effective. They reached up to the upper stream of the river Dihing and constructed a fort there. Koch forces occupied a portion of Ahom territory. Ahom king fled to Naga Hills for safety. Meanwhile, Koch forces occupied some more territory of Ahom including the capital Gargaon. King Chu-Kampha finally surrendered in 1563. In 1564, final terms and conditions of the surrender came into force in which Chu-Kampha agreed to pay taxes annually to king Nara Narayan. Prince Kamal Narayan was made official representative of Koch kingdom to Ahom kingdom and stationed at Lakhimpur to oversee governance of Ahom and ensure that no rebellion took root in the Ahom kingdom. Credit of successful Ahom campaign went to Shukladhwaja for his exemplary courage and military leadership. He used to set personal examples of military marksmanship to his troops. He was said to have jumped over the Bharali River with his horse along with his few brave soldiers and in a lightening attack and killed many Ahom troops. By seeing his swift maneuverability and fighting skills, the enemy fled the scene wherever he appeared. As he had a sharp observation power like a falcon flying high above the sky, he was given a name 'Chilarai' (meaning a

falcon king). Sir Edward Gait, named him 'Kite king' as one day a falcon flying high above the sky like a kite suddenly descended and took away the clothes and ornaments of an Ahom prince kept on the bank of the river while he was bathing. The Ahom took it as bad omen and sensed an imminent attack by Shukladhwaja, which actually happened.

Invasion of Cachar (Hidimba): Defeat of Ahom king Chu-Kampha, gave a boost to battle-hardened Koch forces. Smaller neighbouring states acknowledged suzerainty Koch forces under fear. Koch king ordered his army under military command of Chilarai to advance towards Cachar, who took a select group of 20 soldiers and his trusted group commanders, Kabindra, Damodar and Megha for a guerilla mission. They sneaked into the heavily guarded capital of Cachar kingdom and in a swift action captured Cachhar king Megha Raj (Harmeshwar) who surrendered without unconditionally. Thus, Cachar came to the fold of Koch kingdom, where king Nara Narayan built a fort where his younger brother Kamal Narayan or Gohain Kamal stayed to supervise governance of nearby areas.

Subjugation of Manipur: Next, the Koch king sent a 'Kataki' (royal messenger) for the king of Manipur to acknowledge his suzerainty. The Manipur king was not equipped with adequate armoury to take on the challenge and that made him to acknowledge Koch suzerainty willingly and agreed to pay annual taxes.

Annihilation of Jayantia king: The king of Jayantia refused to follow suit of Manipuri king as it appeared to him too humiliating. A fierce battle took place in which Chilarai himself killed the king of Jayantia. Prince of Jayantia later agreed to sign a peace treaty and subsequently Nara Narayan agreed to install the prince as king of Jayantia in return of annual tax.

Invasion of Tripura: When turn came to conquer Tripura, task became uphill. Only after a careful thought King Nara Narayan gave his nod to his younger brother Chilarai to launch an attack with 40,000 soldiers on Tripura, whose armed forces were strong enough to resist the Koch forces. One of the fiercest battles was fought at Lankai. One of the Koch force commander, Bhimbal, a great warrior got killed in that battle. Koch forces won the battle but they had to pay a heavy price both in men and material. Royal chronicles of Tipra tribe lineage of Tripura kings, who used appellations of Manikya with their names called 'Rajamala' written to record royal achievements, perhaps knowingly avoided recording of defeats and deaths of the kings. However, as it evident that Tripura king Bijay Manikya lived for 33 years (1530-1563) probably he was then Tripura king, who got killed in the battle of Lankai along with 18,000 soldiers. It was one of the fiercest battles that were probably ever fought on the soil of India. Chilarai was in an exhilarated mood over the hard won victory and put his sword thrust deep into the soil at the battlefield as a mark of their victory; hence the name of the place came to be known as Lankai. Later, a peace treaty was signed with the descendant of the killed Tripura king for a heavy amount of annual tax against return of kingship. Victorious king Nara Narayan built a fort in Tripura to maintain their suzerainty over Tripura at a place, which later came to be known as Kochpur (now Khaspur). In the second part of 'Rajamala', which was composed during the reign of Tripura king Amara Manikya (1577-1585), who became Tripura king aftermath the war, a word

'*Dhvajaghatajaya*' was mentioned in the chronicles, which denoted the defeat of the powerful Tripura army in the hands of Koch army.

Subjugation of king Viryavanta of Khairrum: King of Khairrum and his son submitted without a fight to the Koch king and agreed to pay taxes.

Subjugation of king of Dimrua: King Pantheswara, Raja of Dimrua did not submit before the Koch army. In a battle he was defeated and taken a prisoner of war. Later the king was reinstated and paid annual taxes for all four years from till 1565.

Invasion of Shreehatta: After the successful campaign of Jayantia, Chilarai directed Kamta army towards Shreehatta whose king Amil refused to submit before him resulting to a fierce battle, which continued for two days. Once again, Chilarai took on the Shreehatta king himself on the second day of the battle in which the Shreehatta king was killed. However, Shreehatta was not annexed. Later, surviving brother of the slain king Asirai taken prisoner to Koch Bihar was allowed to return to Shreehatta and made new king in return of annual taxes.

Chilarai's unsuccessful first expedition to Gaur: After conquering most of northeastern region of India, Chilarai planned to launch an offensive against the Muslim ruler of Gaur, also known as Bare Bangla in 1567-68. In a battle with the Gaur forces, Chilarai got defeated. The Commander of Gaur forces named Kalapahar took him prisoner of war on person and sent him to Gaur. He was kept in captivity but well treated by the Sultan. This was the first instance that Chilarai tasted a major defeat. As the Sultan did not intend annexing Koch kingdom, Kalapahar was ordered to take a detour of Koch kingdom and advance further east. He destroyed the Hindu temples including Kamakhya temple at Guwahati before returning to Gaur.

It was believed that earlier a Hindu Brahmin, Kalapahar later converted to Islam for some unknown reasons. Thus, he was averse to Hindu faith. For this reason, name of Kalapahar is still remembered negatively. It was widely believed that that once Sultan's mother had a snake bite and became seriously ill. All efforts to cure her by '*Vaids*' i.e. royal physicians failed. Chilarai had knowledge of curing snakebite and he readily treated Sultan's mother that helped Chilarai to win her heart. This was the reason for releasing Chilarai from captivity. It was believed that Chilarai became so fond of her that Sultan's mother began treating him as a son. Alternatively, the Sultan married off one of their daughter to Koch royal family. As token of gift, areas of Bahirbandha, Bhitirbandha, Sherpur and adjoining areas were given to Chilarai. The Sultan gave him a royal send off from Gaur.

Friendship with Ahoms: The incident of Chilarai's defeat and falling prisoner of war in the hands of Gaur forces upset the Koch King. He thought it appropriate to forget the past hostilities with the Ahom king and establish friendship. To do so, the king devised a plan, according to which he invited the Ahom king Chu-Kampha or 'Khora raja' to play a friendly game of dice. As per plan, king Nara Narayan lost the game and in return, he released the Ahom princes from captivity to go back to Ahom capital at Gargaon (upper Assam), who were taken hostages during the war in 1562. Also, as a mark of mutual respect and friendship, a princess named Ratnamala was married off to an Ahom prince. From then onwards, Ahoms followed many traditions followed by Koch kings including worshipping

the idol of Goddess of power, '*Maa Durga*' and celebrate the religious festival of '*Durgapuja*' every year during September-October.

Successful Second Koch invasion on Gaur: In 1572, Koch king Nara Narayan entered into defensive alliance with Mughal emperor Akbar of Delhi to launch an offensive against Gaur with their combined forces. David Kararani, who became new ruler after death of his father the illustrious Muslim ruler of Gaur Suleiman Kararani in 1572 refused to offer allegiance to the Mughals. It was also believed that armed forces of Gaur were already preparing to attack Koch kingdom. Border skirmishes with the Koch and in the western front towards Delhi Empire. Mughals found it advantageous for them to enter an alliance with the Koch king and accordingly, dispatched a letter to Nara Narayan on impending war with Gaur. Bhutanese king Devaraj and Nara Narayan's uncle Shishwa Singha lent their support to Nara Narayan and took part in Gaur campaign. Koch army led by Chilarai and Mughal army led by Man Singh launched attack Gaur on eastern and western front respectively. Gaur lost the war and its sultan fled the country, most probably to Europe. Gaur was divided into two folds with the river Ganga as boundary between two empires. Nara Narayan installed prince Aniruddha on the throne of Gaur. Chilarai, who had maternal relation with the kingdom preferred to go back to Gaur for one year to oversee the governance. During the period, king Nara Narayan ordered Chilarai to conquer Ghoraghat, which was he did and brought under the fold of Koch kingdom. It was done to ensure making the southern frontier safe from enemy attack. The great Koch army chief Chilarai made all the campaign undertaken by his elder brother king Nara Narayan possible. His christened name Shukladhwaja, the fearless human creature, who had an eye and speed like a flying 'Chila' (Falcon), was given the name of 'Chilarai' meaning Chila king (Sir Edward Gait described him as Kite king), one of the greatest general ever known in history. He not only led the Koch army in numerous victories, he was also a successful admiral of Koch flotilla, which sailed up and down the mighty river Brahmaputra during war with great Ahom naval forces, inseparable right hand man of the Koch king Nara Narayan, was also known as Sangram Singha.

Reconstruction of Kamakhya Temple: After conquering Gaur together with Mughal forces king Nara Narayan along with his brother Chilarai came to Nilachal hill (near Pandu, Guwahati) to offer 'Puja' at the altar of their revered deity of power Goddess Kamakhya. They had a wish of taking up renovation work of the temple, but before they set out to invade Gaur. Earlier, Kalapahar did much damage on the old structure of the temple, when the forces of Sultan of Gaur commanded by him ransacked temples and structures of Kamta-Kamrup while they were returning back to Gaur after their expedition against Koch king after the capture of Chilarai in the war. The Koch army camped at the foothills of Pandu near Nilachal hill and both the royal brothers undertook reconstruction of the temple with the help of one experienced craftsman in the field, Meghmukunda. Together with some God And Goddesses, stone images and idols of king Nara Narayan and Shukladhwaja (Chilarai) were also placed in the temple. To mark the occasion, following stone inscription in Kamta-Kamrupi script was also placed inside the temple, which can still be seen today: -

“Lokanugrahokarokoh korunoya prarthodhonurbidyoa
Daneynapi Dhochichikorno sodrisho morjyadoyambhonidhi.
Nanashastrobicharocharuchorito kondorporupajjyoloh
Kamkhyachoronachobijyotey Shrimalladebonripo.

Proasadomodriduhitushcharanarbindobhoktyakorotudonujoboronilo-shoyille.
 Shrishuklodeboimomulyasitopolenoshakey turngagajobedoshashankosonkhye.
 Tosyeibo priyosodoroh Prithujoshabirendromoulitholi,
 Manikkong bhojomano kolobitopi nilachaley monjulong.
 Prasadong muninagobedoshobhritshakey shitarijibhih
 Debibhoktimotambaro rochitobanoshrishuklopurbodhwajoh.”

The meaning of the above, as given in Sir Edward Gait’s A History of Assam is as follows:

“Glory to the king Malladeb, who by virtue of this mercy, is kind to the people who in archery like Arjun, and in charity like Dodhichi and Karna; he is like an ocean of all goodness, and he is versed in many sastras; his character is excellent; in beauty he is as bright as Kandarpa, he is a worshipper of Kamakhya. His younger brother Shukladeb built this temple of bright stones on the Nila hillock, for the worship of the goddess Durga, in 1487 Sak (1565). His beloved brother Shukladhwaja again, with universal fame, the crown of the greatest heroes who, like the fabulous Kalpataru, gave all that was devoutly asked of him, the chief of all devotees of the goddess, constructed this beautiful temple with heaps of stones on the Nila hill in 1487 Sak.”

Passing away of Chilarai: In the year 1575 an epidemic of small pox broke out in and around Gaur taking a heavy toll of human lives. Chilarai at that time was stationed in Gaur and was not escaped from the epidemic. The epidemic was believed to have lasted for long and people started deserting the city. Gaur was evacuated and most of the people migrated to Bongodesh and Koch Bihar. Probably, there was so much of death in the city that made disposal of corpses difficult. From then onwards, the ancient city became deserted. Chilarai too left the city and went to a place situated on the bank of river Ganga for recovery but he could not recover from the dreaded disease and breathed his last. He died sometime in 1576 and that was one of the major turning points for entire Koch Empire after reaching its nadir.

Chilarai as Warrior & Military Statgeist: Chilarai was a personal example of physical strength, bravery, fighting skills and proved to be a great military tactician and strategist. He was the fine example of a trusted younger brother of Koch king Nara Narayan, who not only helped his brother to expand their Koch Empire by taking up the command of numerous successful military campaigns but also became the right hand man of the king in running the state affairs successfully. From childhood only being both physically strong and mentally alert he became one of the most favourite sons of his father king Bishwa Singha and he was chosen to go to Baranasi for studies along with his elder brother Nara Narayan, who he gave unconditional support till his death. It was he, who did all the planning for military expeditions both by land and river. He was instrumental raising the fearful naval flotilla that sailed up and downstream of the fast flowing strategic river Brahmaputra creating a fear psychosis among the enemies of Koch forces. He was probably the first military commander to deploy and effectively engaged both land and naval forces moving side by side during the progress of war. Causing a crushing defeat on the invincible Ahom forces was possible due to personal example set by Chilarai himself to motivate his forces to take on the enemy relentlessly. Like a falcon he used to launch lightening attacks on the enemy for which he

was better known as the Chilarai meaning the ‘Great Falcon’ in Kamta-Rajbanshi language. Well planned mobilization of their forces, advance or calculated retreats in different axis, use of forces both by land and rivers, launching attacks during nights and unfavourable weather and judicious use of men, materials and war machineries were the hall marks of his military planning. King Nara Narayan always consulted him while taking any military decision or for that matter any decision in running the state affairs. He never took any undue advantage on defeated or surrendered adversaries. He taught Koch forces to respect the women and the Brahmins.

One of the finest examples of his adhering to code of military law was that in one battle the Ahom king deceived the Koch forces by dressing up their soldiers in the attire of Brahmin priests by seeing whom Koch forces changed their plan of attack. David Scott gave an interesting account about the following historical fact (A Memoir of The Late David Scott by Major Adam White, pp 103-104):

“ Choocheng Pha was the first sovereign who annexed Eastern Kamroop to his dominions. Nur Narain, king of Kamroop, and his brother Chila Rae or Sooka Dwaj, who according to some accounts shared the government with him, are said to have invaded the territories of Choocheng Pha in 1535-6, A.D. 1616-4, and to have penetrated eastward of the river Dikho. Choocheng hearing that Chilarai was descended from Mahadeo and he would respect the lives of Brahmins and cows, caused some people to be brought from Habong and having decorated them with the Brahmenical thread and affixed the white tiluk or mark on their foreheads, mounted them upon and sent them against the enemy. Chila Rai taking them for members of the sacred order was afraid to lead on his troops lest on on the conflict the lives of the holy men should be sacrificed, and immediately ordered a retreat. Choocheng at a subsequent period deprived some of the false priests of their threads, but others retained them and are still called Brahmins although not respected as much, and indeed, they were employed by the monarch in the menial office of cutting grass for the royal Elephants. After the conversion of the royal family to Hindooism one of the later sovereign ordered the Non Gosain, and arch-bishop of the Empire, to instruct the Habongs descended from the persons who were decked out as priests by his ancestors, in Sanskrit lore, but they remonstrated against the hardship of Edict and project of their conversion was abandoned.” Brahmins of entire erstwhile Kamta-Kamrup region regardless of their origin i.e. Kanauji, Maithili, Bongal or Assamese still have a great respect for the Koch Rajbanshis.

In the annals of military history of India, name of Chilarai should be remembered with great honour. Naming the building of office-cum-residence of the Assam Governor on a hilltop in Guwahati is a worth mentioning respect shown to a great military commander like Chilarai.

An Appraisal of Koch king Naranarayan: Koch king Nara Narayan ruled Koch Empire for about 50 years whose period could be termed as a golden period of greater Kamta-Kamrup. As per Akbarnamah, Koch army consisted of 4000 horses, 2,00,000 infantry soldiers, 700 elephants and 1000 war boats. As per Sir E.A. Gait, there were around 52,25,000 able Koch youth volunteers to serve the Koch army. Nara Narayan was undoubtedly the most successful king during the period and his success was made possible by his younger brother Chilarai, the great general. He was gentle, courteous, kind hearted and peace loving. Much of the time he devoted to his courtiers and learned persons for discussion on politics and other subjects. He was tolerant to all religions. He gave shelter to Assamese ‘Vashnavite’ saint Sankar Deb

and permanently settled the saint at Madhupur Dham. He wanted to become a disciple of the saint but somehow, as Sankar Deb did not want, perhaps due to the fact that time was ripe for the king to do so at that point of time. Sankar Deb's some valuable written work on 'Vaishnavism' was done at the capital of Koch king, which are now widely accepted in Assamese society. The saint breathed his last at a village named Bheladanga in Koch Behar in the year 1569.

Some valuable scriptures and literary works patronized by the king were – Ram Saraswati's 'Mahabharat', Purushottam Bidyabagish Sanskrit grammar 'Ratnamala Byakaran' and Kandali's 'Bhagawat Gita'. Purushottam Bidyabagish was a 'Pirali' Brahmin i.e. he worked in the court of a Muslim ruler i.e. Hussain Shah, the king of Gaur. He later came to Khagrabari (Koch Behar) to grace the royal court of the Koch king as poet. But the poet did not settle permanently at Khagrabari and took his family to Nabadwip (in South Bengal) either for his son Balram's further education or on personal grounds. In later period, when Kolkata came into prominence, his sixth descendant, Panchanan Thakur (Tagore as written and pronounced in English) founded the famous 'Jora Sakhon' where world famous poet and Nobel Laureate Rabindra Nath Tagore was born and gained fame and 'Pathuriaghata' Thakurbari (Abode of the Tagores). Panchanan Thakur wrote 'Muktichintamani' and 'Bishnubhaktikalpalata' and his son Balram wrote 'Prabodh Parkash'. Thus, Rabindra Nath Tagore traced his link with the royal house of Koch Behar. The king introduced the idol worshipping Goddess 'Bara Devi', which later came to be known as 'Durgapuja', the greatest religious festival of Rajbanshis and Bengalis and later followed by Ahoms, Biharis etc.

Division of Koch Empire and establishment of new kingdom by Raghudev: During his lifetime, Nara Narayan installed Raghudev, son of Shukladhwaja as a king of the eastern part of Koch kingdom beyond the river Sankosh. Nara Narayan loved Raghudev like his own son as he had late birth of his own son, Lakshinarayan. During lifetime of Shukladhwaja, it was taken for granted that since King Nara Narayan did not any son, nephew would be natural heir apparent. But after birth of Lakshi Narayan, the scenario changed. Raghudev started distancing himself from the king. Slowly but surely lines were drawn for separation. Raghudev went to the east of river Manas to establish another kingdom to live in. With a heavy heart the king of Koch Behar, unable to hold his feelings, sent a Kataki (messenger) to persuade his beloved nephew all the way to Barnagar (Sarbhog in Assam) to come back but it was destined not to be so. After the division of the empire, Nara Narayan did not live long and left for heavenly abode in 1586. After the death of Nara Narayan, Raghudev started minting currency on his own and declared as independent king. Thus, the Koch empire, once the undisputed power house of north eastern India, got divided into two parts, Koch Behar in the west and Bijaynagar-Koch Hajo in the east.

King Lakshi Narayan of Koch Behar (1587-1627): Lakshi Narayan was installed as a king of western part of the rest of the kingdom in 1587. He ruled the kingdom till 1627. Parikshit Narayan, son of Raghudev developed domestic hostility with his father king Raghudev. Taking advantage of the situation, Lakshi Narayan instigated Parikshit Narayan to rebel against his father. Raghudev tried to subdue the rebellious prince but somehow, Parikshit Narayan managed to give a slip and took shelter at his cousin king Lakshi Narayan's capital. But later their relation got strained.

During his period, his royal poet Govinda Mishra translated Bhagwat *Gita* into Kamta-Kamrupi or Rajbanshi language. Madhab Deb, who carried forward Vashnavite preaching of Sankar Deb once expelled by Raghudev, took shelter at Lakshmi Narayan's kingdom. Similarly, another Vashnavite saint Damodardev was also sheltered in this kingdom. Damodardev wrote *Bhakti Ratnavali* and *Krishna Jana Rahasya*. Vashnavite form of Hindu religion became state religion. Also, the king patronized *Sivarartri Kaumudi* and *Grahan Kaumudi* written by Sidhanta Bagish. Around this is time around Kamrup-Kamtapuri or Rajbanshi, which was royal language and people, took pride in it and to identify them as Rajbanshi, meaning linkage with the 'Raj (Royal) family. The kingdom during Lakshmi Narayan's reign as stated in Akbarnamah, which was supported by Warren Hastings in his memoirs, lay between their (Bhutan) and Rangpur (Bangladesh) and the state of Koch Behar was known in the sixteenth century as Kamtapur state. After the death of his rival nephew Parikshit Narayan, King Lakshmi Narayan led an ascetic life at Hajo where he breathed last.

King Parikshit Narayan of Koch-Hajo: After the death of king Raghudev, a domestic tussle started as to who would succeed the throne. At one side, rebellious elder son Parikshit Narayan was staying at Koch Behar with his uncle, the Koch king Lakshmi Narayan and on the other hand another younger son, Indra Narayan was being groomed by the mother queen for the throne. Parikshit Narayan with the help of Lakshmi Narayan managed to kill his brother Indra Narayan to usurp the throne. On becoming king, Parikshit Narayan shifted his capital to Aswaklantar and began to consolidate his power. Slowly, relations with uncle Koch king Lakshmi Narayan began to worsen as he refused to remain under suzerainty of the later. A war was imminent between them. To strengthen his power Parikshit Narayan established marital relationship with the Ahom king by marrying off his daughter Mangaldai (Mangaldahi) to Ahom king Pratap Singha. Failing to defeat Parikshit, Lakshmi Narayan himself went to Mughal Nawab Sheikh Alauddin Fatehpuri Islam Khan of Dacca (now Bangladesh) for military assistance. The Nawab became happy to get an opportunity to humble the Koch-Hajo king, who like his father never accepted suzerainty of either Lakshmi Narayan or Mughals and always wanted to rule the kingdom independently. So, the Nawab readily ordered his General Mukarram Khan to proceed towards north and invade Koch-Hajo kingdom of Parikshit Narayan. Mukarram Khan took along a strong army of 10,000 to 12,000 foot soldiers, 3,000 elephants, 6,000 horses and around 400 to 500 war boats. A fierce naval battle took place near Salguna, in which Parikshit lost around 300 war boats. Parikshit retreated to his fort at Gauripur near Dhubri (lower Assam). A cautious pursuit over land by Dacca forces under the command of Sheikh Kamal followed. After that, Parikshit fortified his garrison there, which consisted around 10,000 foot soldiers and 500 horses, strong enough to provide a stiff resistance to the attacking forces. The attacking forces then erected a strong siege around the well-fortified fort, which cut off all supplies to Koch-Hajo forces. Parikshit was forced to sue for peace and he as a gesture of goodwill sent presents for the local Mughal commander Sheikh Kamal. Also, as indemnity, Parikshit paid 100 elephants, 100 horses and 20 mounds of lignum aloes to them. Mughal General Raja Man Singh, who was appointed Governor of Bengal province by the emperor Jehangir of Delhi, was posted of all these developments of the ongoing war and peace offer of Parikshit Narayan. Raja Man Singh did not agree to the peace offer, instead he sent the message saying that Parikshit Narayan should go and present himself before him on person and cede whole of his Koch-Hajo kingdom to Mughals. Parikshit Narayan did not accept the proposal; instead he

approached Ahom king for assistance. Ahom king offered conditional help, by which Koch-Hajo soldiers were needed to join Ahom army. Parikshit Narayan found the condition unacceptable and decided to go to war with his forces alone. Finally, battle of the nerves took its worst turn in 1613, in which Koch-Hajo forces had to face combined forces of Lakshmi Narayan's Koch Vihar forces and Mughal forces of Nawab Islam Khan under command of their General Mukarram Khan. As per earlier strategic plan, Lakshmi Narayan's forces commenced invasion from western front (from Koch Bihar's side). Muslim soldiers of the Nawab halted at Dhubri for Ramzan (fasting month before Id festival) delaying invasion from southern flank. During this period, Lakshmi Narayan's forces already suffered few reverses. Hearing the news, Mukarram Khan immediately dispatched a strong force of Bengali soldiers under the Hindu commander Sattrajit to assist Lakshmi Narayan. The scenario of the war changed in favour of the combined forces of Lakshmi Narayan and Sattrajit and Parikshit Narayan retreated to the rear to take up position on the river Gadadhar. Sattrajit's forces then put up a blockade on the mouth of the river cutting off the supplies to Parikshit Narayan's forces. Finding no other alternative, Parikshit changed his tactical move. He sent his son-in-law Dumria to launch a naval attack on the forces of Sattrajit. Parikshit Narayan himself set out with a strong force to launch a night attack on the Nawab's forces stationed at Dhubri. While Dumria was successful in capturing around 250 war boats and inflicting heavy casualties on the Sattrajit's forces, Parikshit Narayan was lucky enough to make it to reach Dhubri during night. When he reached Dhubri, it was broad day light and Mughal forces of the Nawab were ready to take on them. The battle continued for the rest of the day with no results. At night, Parikshit returned to their original position. The Mughal forces followed them from behind. Parikshit Narayan's forces followed a serpentine route through a small river, probably the branch of Sankosh to link up river Manas. The combined forces was later joined by Koch king Lakshmi Narayan himself together with his forces and defeated Parikshit after a naval engagement (1613). Then he escaped to Pandu leaving behind men and war machinery but soon realized the mistake. He thought it to be prudent and to the best interests of his countrymen to surrender. He was taken to the Nawab Islam Khan of Dacca. By then, the Mughal Emperor at Delhi got the news of Parikshit Narayan getting defeated and captured. The Emperor sent a message for taking the surrendered king to Delhi, and accordingly, he was taken to Delhi (1616). The Emperor was keen to settle the matter amicably between two Koch kings and agreed to restore the kingdom to Parikshit Narayan subject to annual taxes of Rs. Four lakhs. The Emperor fixed Sankosh River as the dividing line of two kingdoms. Thus, King Parikshit Narayan was honourably released from royal captivity. While returning, the king decided to pay homage to the Kashi Bishwanath temple of Lord Shiv at the holy place of Prayag (Allahabad), where he fell ill and breathed his last (1617).

Annexation of Koch-Hajo by Mughal Commanders: After death of king Parikshit Narayan control of Koch-Hajo kingdom virtually came under the Mughal commanders appointed by the Nawab of Dacca. At first, Mukarram Khan's brother was left at Khela as the commander of the Mughal garrison. On his death, Mukarram Khan himself took over as governor and stationed himself at Hajo. Estates and lands of the occupied country were distributed to the Mughal notables. Around 12,000 'Paiks' (soldiers) from Bongodesh were transferred to join at Hajo and given land to settle down in lieu of their military service. The areas falling as far as river Barnadi were annexed by Mughal power. As goodwill gesture,

Mughals granted to one of the Parikshit Narayan's son named Bijit Narayan the authority to rule a portion of the erstwhile Koch- Hajo kingdom extending from river Sankosh in the west to river Manas in the east. King Bijit Narayan was the founder of Bijni kingdom. The capital later was shifted to Abhayapuri (Bongaigaon district in Assam) due to washing away of their palace at Bijni by the change of course of river.

Mughal failure to consolidate power in Koch-Hajo: Annexation of Koch-Hajo kingdom was not acceptable to the Koches. In 1615 Bali Narayan, younger brother of Parikshit Narayan never favoured Mughal domination over their affairs. Finding no alternative, he fled the kingdom to Ahom king Pratap Singha, who gave him shelter. Koch Rajbanshis of their erstwhile kingdom became restless and revolted against Mughal hegemony. Several new leaders became prominent among them, who attacked camps of Mughal forces on both the banks of river Brahmaputra and caused casualties. As the situation worsened, additional forces were dispatched to Koch-Hajo from Bongodesh. For the reasons of providing shelter to Bali Narayan and killing of a Mughal trader on the charges of a theft case at Kaliabor by the Ahom camped there angered the Nawab of Dacca. The Nawab wanted to avenge the killing and accordingly dispatched a force under the command of Saiyad Hakim and Abu Baker together with an army consisting of foot soldiers and cavalry numbering 10,000 and 405 war boats. Sattrajit, who was stationed Pandu (Guwahati) also joined the advancing forces. Appointment of Abu Baker as commander of the invading army, Abdus Salem, the Muslim commander at Hajo and number of Mughal officials already stationed there left their posts in protest.

Mirza Sahin aided by Koch king Lakshmi Narayan captured one of the Koch rebel leader of Koch Hajo. However, another such leader named Sanatan held the Muslim revenue officer under a siege. To rescue the official, the Mughal forces dispatched a Mughal commander named Abdul Baqi. He while advancing towards Koch-Hajo captured a Koch fort at Kawahada but was held up at Barnagar (Sarbhog). In the meanwhile, Mirza Sahin linked up Abdul Baqi to assist him. Then, they moved to Hajo and stationed there. A war attrition between Koch Rajbanshi rebels forces and Mughal forces, in which Mughal forces ultimately gained upper hand. At this juncture, in 1616 disheartening news for Mughal forces came saying that their invading army was almost annihilated by Ahom army in the battlefields ranging from Kaliabor to the mouth of river Bharali. Saiyad Abu Baker together with several Mughal officials was killed in the battle. For the rescue of their surviving soldiers, a naval task force was dispatched from Hajo, who could only save around two thousand lives. While this defeat weakened the Mughal power in North East, morale of the Ahom forces boosted up.

Bali Narayan or Dharma Narayan: Establishment of Darrang Lineage of Kingdom: After the decisive defeat of Mughal forces by Ahoms in 1616, the Ahom king Pratap Singha installed Bali Narayan as a tributary king of Darrang. The Ahom king married off a princess from Sonari to the new Koch king and renamed him as Dharma Narayan Koch. The Ahom king also installed few brothers of Dharma Narayan as tributary kings at different smaller areas. All these tributary kings assisted the Ahom king in various battles against Mughal forces of Bongodesh and were instrumental in blocking Mughal hegemony within Kamta-Kamrup areas and driving out from Ahom kingdom. After Dharma Narayan was made the king of Darrang, the Ahom king dispatched a force consisting 'Paiks' of Chutia origin

numbering around 3,000 to assist new kingdom and they were subsequently settled at Mangaldai. These soldiers proved to be helpful to strengthen the hands of the king. Then the king invaded Kamrup to dispel the Mughals from the area. On the other side, the Koch Rajbanshi leader, Sanatan attacked the Mughal forces stationed at Barnagar but both these attacks failed to contain formidable combined forces of 18 Hills kings of the south bank of river Brahmaputra, who had declared independence. All these kings mobilized their forces and piled up stockade for action at a place called Rani (near present day Guwahati airport). An engagement between the 18 Hills kings and Mirza Sahin took place in which Sahin was the winner. Sahin also captured the entire stockade. In the meanwhile, humiliating defeat of Mughal forces in the hands of Ahoms brought a change in the chain of command of the Mughal administration in Bongodesh. Qasim Khan was replaced by Ibrahim Khan as Governor. Taking advantage of the disturbed situation, the revenue collector of Hajo, Sheikh Ibrahim made a plan to seek assistance from the Ahoms and to declare himself as independent ruler of Hajo. His offer was accepted provided that he drove out the Mughals from that Hajo. The Koch Rajbanshis, who launched their own offensive against the Mughal forces stationed at Hajo, did not like this plan. King Dharma Narayan laid a siege to Pandu and on the other front Sanatan launched an attack on the Mughal fort at Damdama. Both these offensive moves were repulsed.

In another action, Sheikh Ibrahim was defeated by Sahin and got killed. Sahin consolidated his power at Hajo. Then, combined forces of Ahom and Koch king Dharma Narayan assisted by the 18 Hills kings advanced towards Hajo. They advanced near Pandu but failed to make any headway towards Hajo due to heavy resistance put up by the forces of Sahin. Fighting with Sahin continued intermittently by the combined forces of Koch and Ahoms but they could not subdue him. Sahin proved to be a great warrior. However, in one surprise attack, he was defeated by the combined forces and lost Pandu together with war machinery. Then he fled to Sualkuchi with some his loyalist. He killed his womenfolk to avoid falling them into the hands of rival forces. When reinforcements reached from Bongodesh, he took up fresh offensive against the rival forces. He captured Samru and made all the Hill kings to submit before him (1619). Then, he advanced towards Pandu to dislodge the forces of Ahoms and Koches. In the meanwhile, Sattrajit had already become friendly with Ahoms and won their support. According to 'Baharistan-i-Ghaibi', Sattrajit treacherously assisted Ahoms in launching surprise attack on the advancing Sahin's forces and became the cause of Sahin's disastrous failure in the mission. Domestic quarrel between Mughal Emperor Jehangir and his son Shah Jehan affected the Mughal commanders in this of the country too. Sahin lent his support to Shah Jehan and left his post. After that influence of Mughal power remained within a limited area around Hajo and few other pockets only, that too unto 1635 when Ahoms overwhelmed the remaining Mughal forces despite strong and valiant fighting gave by Hajo forces. The Mughals then launched fresh offensive in 1637 by dispatching a strong contingent of army from Bongodesh, who drove back Dharma Narayan and his ally Ahoms. Dharma Narayan was defeated in a decisive battle near the mouth of river Kalang and he fled but hotly pursued by Mughal forces. At last, the king was killed in the battle of Singri Parbat in 1637. With his death, domination of Koch rule in eastern part of the erstwhile greater Koch kingdom eventually ended.

King Bir Narayan of Koch Behar (1627-1632): After death of Koch king Lakshi Narayan his son Bir Narayan took over the reign of Koch kingdom. By this time the power of this

kingdom declined considerably. Bhutanese king stopped paying tributes. He ruled for a short span of five years only. He reconstructed the Banerwar temple.

King Pran Narayan of Koch Behar (1637-1665): The Koch king took up temple construction work vigorously. He renovated Banerwar temple and constructed a pond near it. He reconstructed Sandar Siva temple. He constructed a temple at Gossanimari dedicated to dynasty deity Kamoteswari (1665). He also took up renovation work of Jalpesh temple on the bank of river Jarda in Mainaguri sub-division, which was completed later by his successor son king Moda Narayan.

Darrang Lineage of Kingship till its End: In 1637 the Mughals killed Darrang king Dharma Narayan in the battle of Shingri. Following year, a peace was negotiated between Mughals and Ahoms, according to which areas west of river Barnadi went under the Mughals and rest of the areas ruled earlier by Parikshit Narayan (father of Dharma Narayan) were taken over by the Ahoms. Dharma Narayan's son Mahendra Narayan was installed by the Ahom king as a tributary king. During his time the Ahom king took away Kamrup from the Darrang king and placed under the Chief Administrator, Bar Phukan with the mandate that Darrang king ought to consult him before taking any important decision. King Mahendra Narayan established his capital at Mangaldai. From then onwards, king of Darrang remained vassals of Ahom kings. After death of Mahendra Narayan, his son Chandra Narayan became king of Darrang in 1643. During his reign, the Bhutias were driven out of the country with the assistance of Ahoms. In 1660, king died and was succeeded by his son Surjya Narayan. When Mir Jumla, Governor of Bongodesh appointed by the Delhi Emperor Aurangzeb in 1662, the Mughals subjugated Darrang kingdom. King Surjya Narayan was taken prisoner by Mughal commander Mansoor Ali Khan and kept about 40 years in confinement at Dacca during which period his brother Indra Narayan looked after the kingdom. On release from captivity, Surjya Narayan again took over the reign from his brother Indra Narayan. Indra Narayan again succeeded his brother on his death. On his death of the king, Dheer Narayan sat on the throne but was not a regular king. After the death of Dheer Narayan, two sons of Indra Narayan i.e. Aditya Narayan and Madan Narayan jointly became kings. Both the brothers declared themselves as 'Haru Raja' or 'Deka Raja' and 'Bar Raja' or 'Bura Raja' respectively. After him, his son Dryt Narayan became king. After death of Aditya Narayan in 1728, Dhawaja Narayan became 'Deka Raja', who was later exiled to Bhutan by Bar Phukan. In later years, Bura Raja Madan Narayan was succeeded by his sons Mahat Narayan and Durlabh Narayan, who ruled Darrang as Bura Raja and Deka Raja respectively. After death of Durlabh Narayan, Kriti Narayan grandson of Surjya Narayan became Bura Raja. After Kriti Narayan, his brother, Hansa Narayan (second) became Bura Raja. Slowly, domination of Darrang kings began to diminish further. During the reign of Ahom king Gauri Nath Singha or Suhit-Pang-Pha (1780-1795), the princes of Darrang rebelled against him. In a conspiracy, the Ahom king got Hansa Narayan killed and enthroned Bishu Narayan, son of Dryt Narayan or grandson of Dheer Narayan. Krishna Narayan, son of slain king Hansa Narayan, with the assistance of soldiers requisitioned from midland India and mercenaries captured became king of Darrang. During his period, Moamaria rebellion took place in Ahom kingdom including Darrang. Capt. Welsh, an English army officer intervened and brought the situation under control and compelled king Krishna Narayan to become a vassal of the British. Krishna Narayan renewed the old claim of Darrang kingdom over Kamrup,

which was under Ahom king and governed by Chief Administrator, Bar Phukan but his claim, was declined and the British authority dethroned him. Samudra Narayan succeeded Krishna Narayan in 1805. As per the terms and conditions of Yandabu agreement signed on the 24th February 1826 between the British and Burma (Myanmar), Darrang kingdom became an integral part of British India.

Koch king Pran Narayan's unsuccessful expedition to Pandu-Guwahati in 1666: Pran Narayan, king of Koch Bihar deputed an emissary to Ahom king in 1666 with an offer of friendship but in return, the Ahom king sent a 'Kataki' (Messenger) with a blank paper. Getting annoyed, the Koch king ordered the royal messenger to leave the country forthwith. From then relation between two kingdoms got strained. Meanwhile, Ahom king Jayadhwaja or Su-Tamla or Kharuba Gohain ordered his General Lachit Barphukan to occupy Pandu-Guwahati, who defeated the Mughal forces under the command of one Mughal commander Feroze Khan. On receiving this information, Koch king made a fresh proposal to Ahom king under which their combined forces would drive away the Mughals from the country. After that happening, both the kingdoms would share the reign over the country in which the areas north of river Brahmaputra would be under Koch king and south be of Ahom king. The Ahom king did not accept the proposal. Their relation, in fact further deteriorated. Both kingdoms mobilized their forces for war. In the meanwhile, Bhabanath, the Koch commander, who occupied Hajo, was ordered to attack on the Ahom stronghold Kajir Koth, where a fierce battle took place. In that battle, Koch forces had to face defeat and made the Koch king to retreat to Koch Bihar.

King Moda Narayan of Koch Behar (1665-1680): On his death, his brother Moda Narayan succeeded king Pran Narayan. His relative Jay Narayan, who tried to ascend the throne, succeeded to kill king Moda Narayan. Following the incident internal strife had begun and the Bhutanese found the time ripe for intervention. The Bhutanese king directly interfered with Koch affairs and kingdom at Bijni. During his time Sixth Sikh Guru Teg Bahadur visited Koch Behar.

Mughal dominance in Kamta-Kamrup and its end in Pandu-Guwahati: As per Portuguese traveler Father Stephen Cacella, who visited Dacca, Koch Vihar and Pandu accompanied by another Jesuit, when Koch kings Lakshi Narayan and Parikshit Narayan were kept under detention at Dacca, the people of erstwhile Kamrup (Koch-Kamta and Koch-Hajo) rose in open rebellion under their patriot leaders in various places during Jehangir's time. Parikshit Narayan was reinstalled after he had promised to pay tribute to Jehangir. There was a commercial relation between Koch Vihar and Patna, Rajmahal, Gaur and other prominent places at that period. Brother of Parikshit Narayan, Bali Narayan the king of Darrang continued hostilities towards the Mughal Empire. In the last quarter of sixteenth century, the Mughals conquered rebel parts of Koch-Hajo and Darrang kingdoms and turned Kamta-Koch Vihar into a tributary vassal. During Emperor Aurangzeb's period, Mughal's north east frontier policy became more aggressive. Aurangzeb's appointed Mir Jumla as Governor of Bengal. He conquered Koch Vihar in 1661-1662. His aggressive imperialism in Koch Vihar and Ahom with his ardent passion for releasing Muslim prisoners, rooting out idolatry and spreading Islam in north east was not accepted by majority of Koch-Rajbanshi Kshatriyas of Kamta kingdom. For next two decades after Mir Jumla's death on 31st March

1663, Mughals could not advance much towards Ahom kingdom and the period was characterized by futile Mughal campaigns against a resuscitated Ahom power under great general Lachit Barphukan. The famous 'Battle of Saraighat' took place in the year 1667. Mughal forces under the command of Ram Singh was defeated by Ahom general Lachit Barphukan and Mughal forces had to retreat beyond river Manas. After that defeat, river Manas became the eastern border of Mughal dominion. Overwhelming victory over Mughal forces made the Ahom king Udayaditya glad and he presented many gifts to the victorious officers of their forces. Defeat of Mughals also gave the Ahom king an upper hand over Koch Rajbanshi kings in Kamrup. Darrang king Surjya Narayan and Beltola (South-Eastern Guwahati) king Gandharba Narayan became vassals of Ahom king. The year of 1682 marked the end of grand climacteric of Mughal imperialism in Kamrup. The death of Aurangzeb in the year 1707 lessened the Mughal hegemony in the region.

King Rup Narayan of Koch Behar (1704-14): The famous temple of Madan Mohan at Cooch Behar was the creation of this Koch king. He placed a beautiful idol of the deity inside the temple. He shifted the capital from Atharokota to Guriyahati, which became famous as Behar.

Rise of Bhutanese Power: As already brought out in earlier chapter, parts of Bhutanese territories were annexed by the Koch Empire in sixteenth century and the Bhutanese king paid regular tribute. In seventeenth century Ngawang Namgyal Dycon Dorji came visited the kingdom with a religious mission but garnered political power and installed himself as a theocratic ruler. He became the supreme spiritual authority and assumed the title of *Shobdrung Rimpoche* or as known in Cooch Behar as *Dharma Raja*. He created a new functionary under the title of *Deb Raja* or *Dug Desi* to whom secular administration was entrusted. Relation of the kingdom with Koch kings remained unpredictable.

About Muslim dominance: Muslim dominance actually began when Mughals arrived during the period of Emperor of Delhi, Akbar the great in second half of sixteenth century. Two years before his death, Mughal army under the command of Man Singh advanced and took possession of the area and camped at Rangmati (now Bangladesh). During the period, the country said to have undergone lot of improvement. Man Singh was a trusted Hindu General of the Emperor. The cordial relation between Hindu and Muslims during Mughal period that still exists in the region is the testimony of benevolent secular ideals of Akbar, which was propagated throughout the region. Mughals mostly had a good friendship with the Koch kings of Koch Behar. But they did not have a constant friendship with the Darrang lineage of Koch kings, who mostly sided with Ahom kings and fought against the Mughals.

Muslims dominated the most parts of erstwhile Koch Empire when Koch power started to decline from seventeenth century onwards. In the eyes of Buchanan-Hamilton: In his Manuscripts, Buchanan wrote about Boodah and Rungpoor.

- "About the beginning of the 18th century the Muhammedans, under the command of a certain *Ebadut Khan*, were able to wrest from his descendants the districts which in Bengal At last are called *Boodah* and *Rangpour*, and as if they had conquered the whole, erected them into a new Sirkar, called *Koch Vihar*, or Kochar. Indeed, it comprehends at least a third of the whole principality, and that by far the most

improved, although this is probably owing in a great measure to its change in masters. 221”.

Thus from very beginning of 18th century, a larger part of Kamta-Koch kingdom went into the hands of Muslim rulers, which a form a part of present Bangladesh and Maldah, both North and South Dinajpur districts of North Bengal and their adjacent areas of Bihar.

Inclination of Koch-Hajo and Darrang towards Assam: Ever since, Parikshit Narayan and his brother Bali Narayan took an antagonistic approach towards Koch Behar kingdom and looked forward to Ahom king for political and military help, the great divide between Koch-Rajbanshis began that in days to come became the single largest factor for distancing both divided kingdoms from each other. Regarding Koch-Hajo or Darrang kingdom's affiliation with Ahom kingdom Buchanan papers recorded in page 212, -

‘Raghudeo and Parikshit. – *Sukladhwaj* seems to have governed without any remarkable event and left his dominions to his son *Raghu Deo Narayan*. He had two sons. *Parikshit Narayan* and another who as an appendage obtained Dorong, which his descendants still retain under the kings of Assam. *Parikshit*, however, prudently retained the sovereignty of the whole and lived at Gilajghar, on the west side of Godadhor, where the only remains to be seen although the place is also called *Atharo Kotha*, or eighteen castles, clearly evince the small improvement which his people had made in the arts; but his court seems to have flourished in learning; and seven hundred Brahmans are said to have resided at his capital.’

Thus downfall of the Koch kingdoms both at Koch Behar and Darrang caused the great divide between Rajbanshi Kshatriyas of North Bengal together with its adjoining areas and Koch Rajbanshis of Assam together with its adjoining areas. The division heralded the era of mistrust, debauchery, mis-governance, hopelessness and lethargic lifestyle still common among the Rajbanshi and Kamtapurians.

The British Intervention in Koch Behar: Arrival of the British heralded a new beginning in this part of Indian subcontinent. Since then, the Ahom kingdom, which lay to the east of river Manas came to be known as Asam or Assam. Ahom king Rudra Singh with the help of neighboring Koch Kings and other rulers expelled the Mughals from entire North Bengal in 1714 and extended his kingdom as far as the river Ganga in the south. Since then, Mughal Empire followed a policy of passive defence. In South Bengal, political scenario changed after death of Aurangzeb. From the British point of view, their rule began after the battle of Plassey in 1757, in the words of Sir Jadunath Sarkar, the great Bengali historian, it would be ‘when the sun dipped into the Ganges behind the blood red field of Plassey, on that fateful evening of 23rd June...’. The English got foothold to rule Bengal since then. The East India Company was awarded Dewan by the Mughal emperor in 1765, which gave constitutional right for them to rule Bengal. The British, for the first time appeared in North Bengal in connection with a dispute between Koch Behar and Bhutan that cropped up when Bhutanese king put up a candidate for the throne of Koch Behar against Nazir Deo. In the year 1769, minor king Dhairyyendra Narayan of Koch Behar with a direct support of Bhutanese king Devayadhu fought a battle with Sikkim. Sikkim was defeated and was annexed by Bhutan in 1770. King Rajendra Narayan was installed as ruler of the kingdom in 1770, who was replaced again by King Dharendra Narayan in 1772. Since then, the Ahom

kingdom, which lay to the east of river Manas came to be known as Asam or Assam. Warren Hastings was the Governor General of the Company, who rose from a clerk to take over such a big post in 1772. Regarding East India Company's intervention in Cooch Behar kingdom, Hamilton recorded as: -

“ the confusion that ensued in the Moghal government, secured the *Vihar* family from further encroachments on that side; but their reduced state now exposed them to the depredations of the *Dev Raja* (Bhutan king), who deprived them of one half of their remaining territories. The attack indeed was on the point of proving entirely *ruinous* when *Dorpo Deo*, the Raykot or hereditary minister, having laid aside all regard to his duty rebelled against his sovereign and kinsman. He entered into an alliance with the *Deo Raja* and ceded to him a considerable portion of the *Bottishhazari*, on condition of being supported in overthrowing the *Raja*, to whose title, there were, in fact some objections. Having procured troops from Bhotan, he invaded Vihar. The raja in despair applied for assistance to the Company, and to secure protection engaged to pay one –half of his revenue. Accordingly in 1772, Capt. Jones with a battalion of sepoys routed *Dorpo Deo* who took refuge in Bhotan. Capt. Jones followed, and in 1773 took the fortress of *Dalim Koth*, on which the *Deo Raja* and *Dorpo* sued for peace. This was granted and the parts of *Bottrishhazari* that had not been ceded to Bhotan were restored to *Dorpo*(Dorpo) but he was placed on exactly the same footing as on ordinary *Zamindar*, and a revenue was fixed on his lands; while he lost all authority in the remnant of *Vihar*, which does not now exceed one third of its original dimensions and pays, as a tribute what is supposed to be one half of its net revenue...the descendants of the *Nazirdeo*, had enjoyed these estates from time of the Moslem conquest; but on the British army being bound by treaty to defend the country, the *Raja* represented that he had no occasion to support a military establishment, and that therefore the general had no pretence for keeping lands to enable him to maintain soldiers. It has been thought just to allow the *Raja* to enjoy these assets as a *zeminder*, and to receive whatever profits may be derived from their management. The possession which *Nazirdeo* had obtained from the Moslems, seems to render the case doubtful but the claim of the *Raja* is certainly possessed of great weight.” of Buchanan Manuscripts.

On 5th April 1773, an agreement was signed between the minor king Dharendra Narayan and the East India Company, which made Koch kingdom to acknowledge suzerainty of the company. Bhutan attacked Koch Behar and again another confrontation cropped up. Captain Dennis Morrisson of the Company rendered military help to the Koch king and the Bhutanese were defeated. By signing another treaty with Koch Behar in 1776, Warren Hastings brought this kingdom under complete control of the Company and drove the Bhutanese out of Koch Behar. By this treaty, the British tactfully took control of a large area of Koch Behar state, which included other districts of present day North Bengal, Dinajpur and Rangpur districts of Bangladesh. Rangpur was taken out as a native state. King Dhairyyendra was left with his downsized kingdom at Koch Behar.

King Dharendra Narayan had no son, so his brother Harendra Narayan succeeded the king, who ruled the kingdom for a long period (1783-1839). During his tenure was marked with incompetence, debauchery and taking undue advantage by the royal employees. The

king however is remembered for his construction of temples. He built a temple at Kasi (Varanasi in Uttar Pradesh) dedicated to Goddess Kali in 1787.

Again, in mid-nineteenth century a confrontation started between British India and Bhutan over Assam Duars, the region that was under the control of Bhutan during that period. The British wanted to extend their influence over Duars. War broke out in 1865 and ended with a peace treaty signed at Sich La. In the beginning of twentieth century, Ugyan Wangchuk was declared Maharaja of Bhutan, who played a prominent role during the period of strained relations with the British and durable peace prevailed. The dynasty is still ruling the kingdom.

Change in the Society on Arrival of the British: Life in the society in North Bengal was badly disturbed when the authority of the Koch king eclipsed. The Zamindars (big landlords) became more prominent who helped the British in their administration and tax collection. The British introduced, probably for the first time in India, their infamous ‘Divide and Rule’ policy in North Bengal. They showed favoritism to the puppet kings and big landlords with a view to facilitate collection of taxes from the peasants. They saw no reason to carry out any developmental work in the region. Kolkata was too rising into greater height of prominence day by day. On his promotion from Governor General of Bengal and taking over as the first Governor General of British India in 1785, Warren Hastings brought wide ranging administrative changes. Deputy Nawab Mohammad Raja Khan of Burga and Deputy Nawab Sitab Roy of Bihar were dismissed and Revenue Boards were constituted headed by Collectors. Royal British treasury was shifted from Murshidabad to Kolkata. Both civil and criminal courts were established in Kolkata. Old nobility of Koch kingdom attracted towards this city, which took its shape as a cosmopolitan. Intellectuals found new vistas in this city. The British bridged gap between South and North in greater Bengal by a common administration. Bengali vernacular got a fillip with the arrival of modern printing press. South Bengal with its epicenter at Calcutta became a symbol of developed Bengal while North Bengal with its glorious past history became a forgotten land by the turn of eighteenth century.

We get to know certain vital aspects of the life of the Koch king Harendranarayan (1783-1839) and the state of the prevailing royal affairs from the Buchanan’s Manuscripts, which recorded: -

“**Harendranarayan.** - By the natives he is considered as a very pious person, for he pays no attention to business, but passes the whole of his time in retirement, and as is supposed, much of it in prayer, and as he lays out much money in supporting men dedicated to a religious life. Of course his temporal affairs are not flourishing; and his people would probably suffer less, were he more attentive to their government for he is said to be desirous of rendering justice. At present, the whole management of the country is left to strangers who are alleged to be mere sharks; but all the chiefs of the Rajbonggsis are like their prince, and no one is said to be either able or willing to attend to business. It is supposed by the natives that the gods have bestowed an extraordinary reward on the virtue of the *Raja*. He has fifty wives, and it is commonly reported, and gravely asserted to be believed that all these ladies have often in the course of one day, received the most intimate, proof of the *Raja’s* affection and extraordinary vigour. The accounts which I have heard of this chief from Europeans

who were well acquainted with him differ a good deal from the above, and represent him a poor creature exhausted by drunkenness and debauchery. 218.”

Form this account, which was self-explicit, clearly narrated how indifferent Rajbanshis became from the days of tail wing Koch kings, indulgence in extravaganza and more importantly being cheated by their literate and intelligent royal employees, who were brought to the kingdom mostly from Bongodesh (now Bangladesh). As noted by Buchanan, the king however, is remembered for his religious works. He built the Kali temple at Varanasi in 1787 and a Shiv temple at Dhaluabari.

End of Conflicts and Consolidation of British Power in North Bengal: The Gorkhas of Nepal after overrunning east Nepal began to intrusion into the Sikkim’s territory from 1780 till 1786. During this period raids were carried out almost annually by the Gorkhas of Nepal in Baikunthapur (in Jalpaiguri district) on the plea of that the founder of Sikkim had taken refuse there. In 1788, the Nepalese King attacked Sikkim. In 1805 when Darrang kings Krishna Narayan, the Deka Raja and Hansa Narayan, the Bura Raja failed to contain Bhutanese aggression, Ahom king Kamaleswar Singh (Sukling-Pha) expelled them and established Samudra Narayan as new Darrang king. Samudra Narayan was ordered by Ahom king to drive away the Bhutanese forces from the kingdom, which the new king did. By the Year 1813, the lands up to the west of the river Tista including present day Siliguri sub-division of Darjeeling district passed to Nepal’s hand. By the Year 1814, Rangpur district of Koch kingdom got Nepal and Bhutan as her northern neighbours. Sikkim and Bhutan, two neighbouring states covering between them an area of about 22,000 sq. miles lay to the east of Darjeeling and to the north of the British districts of Jalpaiguri, Goalpara and Kamrup. The Chumbi valley, formerly a part of Sikkim but now belonging to Tibet forms a wedge, which divided the northern part of Sikkim from Bhutan while Sikkim itself lay within the watershed of the river Tista. Owing to various reasons, war broke out between Nepal and East India Company. The Company’s forces expelled the Gorkhas from all the territories of Sikkim. The war ended in 1815 by the treaty of Seogali. In the war the British assisted Sikkim. The victorious British unlike Chinese did not forget to reward Sikkim for its share of help in the war and as a gesture of goodwill, the then Governor General of India, Lord Moira (later Marques of Hastings), ordered the restoration of territory lying between the rivers Mechi and Tista on certain conditions.

As per Encyclopedia Britannica pp 7,9 - “ In 1839, the British East India Company obtained Darjeeling from Sikkim as a health resort. After the defeat of Sikkimese troops by the British, an Anglo- Sikkimese treaty was signed in 1861, by which Sikkim’s sovereignty was recognized, thus establishing it as a buffer state between British India and Tibet. In 1890, an Anglo-Chinese convention was concluded whereby China acknowledged the special relationship of the Anglo-Indian Government, with the kingdom of Sikkim, while at the same time the boundary of Sikkim and China was defined. A British Political Officer was subsequently appointed to assist the Chogyal.”

Kingship Lineage of Cooch Behar kings from 1839 till Merger of Cooch Behar State in 1949-50:

Sivendra Narayan (1839)

Narendra Narayan (1847)

Nripendra Narayan (1863)

Raj Rajendra Narayan (1911)

Jitendra Narayan (1913)

Jagaddipendra Narayan (1922-11.09.1949).

Modernity in lifestyle in Cooch Behar actually began with the arrival of rich cultural ethos and etiquettes of English people. King Narendra Narayan established first English Model School in the capital. Later this school was upgraded to middle and then high school. Earlier palaces and houses were constructed using bamboo and straws. Modern Cooch Behar town was planned and constructed by King Nripendra Narayan. From 1896 onwards Koch Behar began to be written as Cooch Behar in English. He was pioneer in opening both English and Bengali school and colleges. Jenkins's school was opened in 1861. A high school for girls named after the queen 'Sunity Academy' was established under his patronage in 1881. Victoria College for higher education was established in 1888. Many students from out side the state came for studies in Cooch Behar. With the help of Col. Hutton and the British officials and designed by E.I. Martin, he completed the famous Cooch Behar palace in the year 1887. King Nripendra Narayan developed modern Cooch Behar town. For worst to happen politically to the king in particular and the Rajbanshi community in general was that when the king was away in England is minister Dewan Kalika Das Dutt in collusion with British officials exchanged Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri districts with Boda and Chakla. On his return from England king came to know the exchange of important two districts of the already downsized kingdom. Whatever dominance of Cooch Behar was prevailing during the period got further eroded.

During the Freedom struggle, Rajbanshis of North Bengal or Koch Rajbanshis Assam took part in all activities under the banner of Indian National Congress. Even the Koch-Rajbanshis of the princely State of Cooch Behar unconditionally actively supported the Congress party in pursuance of freedom. Numerous Koch or Rajbanshi people courted arrest during different stages of the freedom struggle. Most of these people had a blind faith on the Congress Party that spearheaded the freedom struggle. Indian Independence Act, at last was passed in British Parliament on 18th July 1947 and India became a free nation on 15th August 1947. The kingdom of Cooch Behar, which was reduced to a much smaller in size, by a document signed by Maharaja Jagaddipendra Narayan, ceded it to the Dominion of India on 28th August 1949. Once a formidable kingdom that ever existed in the North East India had to come down to its lowest ebb, like one of the 565 princely states joining free India, administration of Cooch Behar finally got transferred to Govt. of India on 12th September 1949 under a Chief Commissioner. Subjects of the erstwhile Koch king were given all possible of assurances on their overall development and fulfilling their social-economic-political aspirations. DR. Bidhan Chandra Roy, then Chief Minister of West Bengal and an influential national ruling party Indian National Congress successfully tried his best to merge Cooch Behar into the fold of his state. Under section 290A of Government of India Act, 1935, Cooch Behar was merged with the state of West Bengal as a district within on the 1st January 1950.

CHAPTER – II

CONTEMPORARY ISSUES

*Blessed is me; Shiv my Lord; Maa Kamakhya,
You showed me the path I bow with gratitude,
For you gave me courage to speak the truth.*

*Swear by your eternal bliss and divine power
May what come I hold fast, not quiver with fear
Not Rajbanshis alone others people too suffer.*

*Issues I bring to you that hurt them, others too,
Let's address to these and speak in open mind
Who knows there might lay panacea to all ills.*

For a common man, Koch Rajbanshi Kamtapuri appears to be a non-issue, because hardly any political direct action such as non-cooperation movement or uprising has ever taken up by these people. No doubt, they are one of the most docile and patriotic indigenous people of India but issues of socio-economic, political, cultural, linguistic, identity crisis et al are there albeit in dormant or less intensity. In our country, hit and trial methods including those of coercive in nature or police action tried out to solve such problems have not brought out any solution to such problems so far. So, to know the ground realities and the right keys to solve the puzzling issues related to such problems and problems related to caste based politics or reservation policies that our country is facing today, why not try out addressing the contemporary issues related to these people? It may so happen that while going deep into the issues of these people we may find them to be the mother of all issues that might give us clues on their possible solutions for resolving multi-faceted national issues as well. Let us discuss all these issues in succeeding paragraphs.

(a) Have Constitutional Provisions Really Helped this Community So Far?

The Constitution of India is like a sacred gift presented to us by the God for all that sacrifices that our forefathers had made during freedom struggle. As such, every citizen has a moral duty to safeguard its well being and promote its success in every aspect. Rajbongshis are no different than any other Indian for the said purpose or for that matter in every aspect concerning our nation. While every Indian admires the Constitution, the lawmakers of the nation, who are empowered to amend it, too have their moral duty to ensure that all its provisions are properly implemented. The PREAMBLE to the Constitution of India says:

WE, THE PEOPLE OF INDIA, having solemnly resolved to constitute

India into a SOVEREIGN SOCIALIST SECULAR DEMOCRATIC
REPUBLIC and to secure to all its citizens:

JUSTICE, social, economic and political;

LIBERTY of thought, expression, belief, faith and worship;

EQUALITY of status and of opportunity;

and to promote among them all

FRATERNITY assuring the dignity of the individual and the unity
and integrity of the Nation;

IN OUR CONSTITUENT ASSEMBLY this twenty-sixth day of November,
1949, do HEREBY ADOPT, ENACT AND GIVE TO OURSELVES THIS
CONSTITUTION.

We, the citizens of a great nation cherish the ideals of the Preamble and always
endeavour to achieve the goals enshrined in it. While our motto undoubtedly is always in
pursuit of its excellence so as to put our nation on top of the world, let us have some
introspection lest we err somewhere.

Where We Err

All is well with India being a *SOVEREIGN*, so is it being a *SOCIALIST* country that
is well cherished by Rajbanshis. However, when we say about *SECULAR*, it comes under
scanner both within the country as well as outside, more so by Pakistani political
establishment. Basic tenets of secularism advocate that nation does not divide people on
religious ground and respects all religions in the same eye. When we say about secularism,
Rajbanshis would definitely stand tall as this community is one of the most tolerant among
all communities in India. But, alas these people have been looser all the way in this matter, to
them; brand India secularism comes out with different colours, where all the reasoning defies
logic. These are the people who gave their land to the homeless outsiders, mostly the
migrating Bengali Hindu refugees from erstwhile East Pakistan that later became
Bangladesh. It happened not only in North Bengal but both in Assam and Bihar. Giving
shelter and settling the refugees was indeed a noble cause, but game of favouritism played by
party politics has ruined the Rajbanshis. While mainstream Bengali influence over the region
has increased manifold, rate of downfall of Rajbanshis accelerated alarmingly.

Who is communal? Talking about cultural, linguistic, socio-economic and true
democratic rights for this hapless community should not be called communal. What could be
the communal mindset is that showing utter ignorance towards Rajbanshis, subduing them
and at their cost, promoting other communities. We know that that favouring a particular
community for some consideration or political gain means is promoting communalism. But is
communal for anyone sympathising Rajbanshi community for their rightful aspirations? Is it
communal to render a helping hand to this hapless community to save them from extinction?

Ours is a *DEMOCRATIC* nation as given in very first sentence of the Preamble. Then,
first of all, let us ask ourselves 'What do we mean by Democracy'? Is it just the casting a
vote for a candidate of a political party? Does it not mean only the right to equal or
proportional representation or get some elected representatives in State Assembly or the
Parliament? Naturally these questions arise when total Rajbongshi population of almost 100
million spreading over entire North Bengal, two districts of North Bihar and Assam and their

adjoining areas has hardly any elected member to represent them in true sense. Whatever elected Koch Rajbongshi or Rajbanshi members are there in those houses are miniscule in numbers and that too they represent particular political party and even if they desire, due to party compulsions they cannot take care of the interests of Rajbongshi community as such.

Next is '*JUSTICE, social, economic and political*'- when a community is almost becoming non-entity in North Bengal, socially denigrated at its lowest ebb, economically their earlier grandeur and most are below poverty line (BPL) and politically does not have any worth standing at their own, no justice of any kind is clearly visible for the hapless Rajbongshi people.

When opportunities are not conducive for someone in taking pride in own identity or social status liberty of thought, expression, belief, faith and worship is meaningless. This situation has really arisen for this community.

EQUALITY of status and of opportunity appears to have eluded this community for long for host of reasons, major ones being remaining subdued under heavy burden of socio-economic and political problems. More over, near absence of their proportional representation in the corridors of power in the State and the Centre has put them at the receiving end. In the fields of employment opportunities, higher education, trade & industry, business or for the matter large scale farming these people are nowhere and the situation is such that any amount of reservation in any field seems to be ineffective because of acute poverty, high rate of school dropouts and no political hold of their own.

From time immemorial these people remained torchbearers of ancient Indian culture. So, when we discuss about *FRATERNITY* or the unity and integrity of the Nation, undoubtedly Rajbongshi community always comes at the forefront with shining colours. However, when we discuss about dignity of the individual, these people have been at the receiving end from others and lagging far behind from almost all mainstream communities. Their position in the present Indian society is at its lowest ebb because of host of socio-economic and political reasons, which we discuss in succeeding paragraphs.

(b) Actual Population of Koch Rajbongshis or Rajbongshis

Accurate data on the population of Rajbongshi community cannot be made available now. Because for almost a century, identity of Rajbongshis has become so confusing that no actual figure of their population could be finalised. This community never bothered about their actual population. As per survey reports of the British officials initially Rajbongshis were considered as a part of the mainstream caste Hindu Bengalis. After independence the ground realities for the Rajbongshis turned into a quagmire as they became scattered in different states of India and neighbouring country, Bangladesh. When the question came for annexation of Cooch Behar with West Bengal, that time too, Bengali leaders considered Rajbongshis as their integral part; thus becoming a part of Bengal was an easy affair. But, over the years this very idea has proved to be wrong. Rajbongshis could not be fully absorbed in the mainstream Bengali populace, as there remained certain basic differences. On ground their population surpasses almost ten millions but on record they are losing their existence literally. Nowhere in the literary circle or socio-economic-political circles name of Rajbongshis are heard of except that little mention made in some general knowledge books that too made obliquely, which is taken as derogatory by the educated and elite group of the

community. To make a mention we can refer to what is given in Manorama Year book about this community,

"...The states of UP, West Bengal, Bihar, Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh account for more than 50% of the SC population, with UP and West Bengal having more than 20% of its population from SCs. Members of the SC earn their livelihood through their own labour, either on land belonging to other or in occupation like scavenging, flaying and tannery of leather..." .

Such information can be contested as far as West Bengal is concerned. In North Bengal, the rural population mainly consists of Rajbongshis, who are farmers owning lands and not engaged in any type of menial professions like tannery or scavenging. They take pride being *Kshatriyas*. It was sheer circumstantial that the Scheduled Caste (SC) status was given to them against their social standing and that did cost the community heavily. Only the educational scholarship in the form of monetary stipend and little job opportunities attract the Rajbongshis and that prevent them from contesting grant of SC status to their community. Most of the rural Rajbongshis, being poor or the illiterate are indifferent on such issue; whether call them SC, ST, OBC or any category hardly makes a difference to them.

Also, during census as Rajbongshi or Kamtapuri is not a recognized language Rajbongshis find it confusing to indicate their spoken language in all the states or countries they reside. So there has been no proper census as far as this community is concerned. Only census that can be taken as authentic was the Rajbongshi population of erstwhile Rajshahi Division (Now in Bangladesh) with its Headquarters at Jalpaiguri in North Bengal. As per details given, total population in the Division stood as 9,130,072 in 1905, majority were Muslims with 62.4% followed by Hindus with 36.3% and rest with 1.30%. It was mentioned in p.197, 'Gazetteer of Bengal and North-East India' written by B.C. Allen, E.A. Gait, CGS Allen & H.F. Foreword: -

'...About half the Hindus are aboriginal Rajbanshi and Koch, and the great majority of the local Muhammadans are the descendants of converts from these tribes...'

As such, actual population of Rajbongshis of Rajshahi Division alone, which was Muslim dominated area stood more than 3 million during that period. If the converted Muslims, who spoke same language, were taken into account the number would have doubled i.e. more than 6 million.

Surprisingly, during 1961 census only 31,472 heads of Rajbongshis were counted in Darjeeling district of North Bengal, which appeared to be too miniscule keeping in view of the overwhelming majority of these people in its rural areas of Siliguri Sub-division. Another astonishing figure came to light about the Koches in Assam. As per 1961 census only population of Koches was only 3,522. Today, population of Koch Rajbongshis in Assam is estimated to be not less than 3.6 million including around 30,000 original Bodo language speaking Koch tribal. According to Dr. Girijasankar Ray, a renowned Rajbongshi scholar - as per 1961 census total population of Rajbongshis including Rajbongshi Kshatriyas of North Bengal, Koches of Assam and 'Palias'(a group of Rajbongshis) was 18,83,917.

If the print media is to be believed or leaders of the Rajbongshi organisations are giving true estimates or these people do not identify differently and factors concerning non-use of Rajbongshi or Kamta or Kamota language both as mother tongue in official record and by the elite group of the community are taken into consideration then, total population of this community is well set to be over a crore or 10 million at present. Their number surpasses population of number of smaller states of India such as Sikkim (0.05 million), Tripura (0.31

million), Mizoram (0.09 million), Manipur (0.23 million), Nagaland (0.19 million), Meghalaya (0.22 million), Jharkhand (0.62 million) etc. Rajbongshis are in absolute majority in rural areas of all the six districts of North Bengal - Cooch Behar, Jalpaiguri, Darjeeling (except hilly areas where 'Gorkhas' are in majority), North Dinajpur, South Dinajpur and Maldah; Purnia and Kishanganj districts of northern Bihar; Dhubri, Kokrajhar, Bongaigaon, Goalpara districts of Assam. In a matter of fact, if older generation of peoples especially the Assamese are to be believed half of the present day Assamese owe their origin in Koch Rajbongshis. In all other districts, especially in whole of Northern range up to Lakhimpur district, up to Nagaon district in south bank of river Brahmaputra and in Barak valley in south Assam, substantial population of Rajbongshis is found. In Garo hills area of Meghalaya State, some parts of Tripura State, foothills of Bhutan and Jhapa and Biratnagar districts of eastern part of Nepal, a good number of their population is found. An estimate of their population can be worked out as follows:

North Bengal	-	42,00,000
Assam	-	36,00,000
Bihar	-	12,00,000
Meghalaya	-	1,00,000
Nepal	-	3,00,000
Bhutan	-	2,00,000
Bangladesh	-	4,00,000
*South Bengal	-	3,50,000

***Broken Link with Rajbongshis of South Bengal:** It is generally believed that Rajbongshis of southern part of West Bengal differ with their counterparts in North Bengal and Assam in many ways. Their similarity remains with the name and a little in physiognomy. That too, they have the features of Dravidian stock that is predominant, otherwise generally Rajbongshis do have Mongoloid features predominantly. That variation might have taken place during early period of Aryan culture when a group of *Kiratas and Pundra Kshatriyas* (ancestors of Rajbongshis) from 'Pundra' and 'Barendra' (Maldah and Dinajpur districts of North Bengal and parts of Bangladesh) migrated southwards crossing the mighty river Ganga to reach deltaic region of 'Banga' (South Bengal) to make fresh settlements. This was necessitated either due to defeat in war with invading Aryan warlords from midland India or spread of epidemic in the region. As they had royal link of Pundra kingdom, naturally they identified as Rajbongshi. As they were pushed further south in the deltaic region, they had hardly any cultivation and were forced to take up the profession of fishermen and other professions. On arrival of the Aryan culture, these people were not given any social status within four 'Varna' system propagated by the Aryan sage Manu and thus obtained the status of 'Kayastha' that now form the majority of SC or the Other Backward Castes (OBC). Their spoken language is not pure Bengali but got some similarity with that of Rajbongshi language spoken in Maldah area of North Bengal. Now they have an estimated population of 3,50,000.

Advanced Rajbongshis of north Bengal are reluctant to consider their SC Rajbongshis brethren of the South Bengal, as their own. As they do have a close historical affinity both the northerners and southerners should become friendlier and recognise each other as their own people. One thing to learn is that since 'Varna' system is going to stay in Indian society,

it would be worth if the system is accepted. Likewise, we have seen that Rajbongshis do have a priest class whose use the surname as 'Adhikari', whose counterparts use the surname of Sharma in Nepal. This group of Rajbongshis would do well considering themselves as Brahmins. Most of Rajbongshis of North Bengal, Bihar, Nepal and lower Assam are Kshatriyas as they claim, standing one rung below the Brahmins, so they might as well call themselves as Kshatriyas. Third and last of their social class may be the Kayastha, who include all converters from Koch or Mech tribes, Kaibartyas and Rajbongshis of South Bengal. This three Varnas for the Rajbongshis may suit them; they have no 'Sudra' Varna.

(c) Distorted Identity of Rajbanshi Kshatriya or Koch Rajbanshi Community of North Bengal and Assam

The picture is no clearer than ever about the identity of Rajbanshi or Koch community. Eminent scholar K.S. Singh in his work 'The Scheduled Caste', published by Oxford India Paperbacks, New Delhi, 1993, while gave a brief description of Rajbanshi community, all that information given in the book appeared to be inconsistent with the Rajbanshi community of North Bengal, Assam, Bihar and their adjacent regions. All information appears to be mixed up with two communities of the similar communities in North as well as South Bengal. The real picture of these communities should be placed in right respective. Only following lines of the book appear to be partly applicable to both the communities from north and south: -

“Rajbanshi A cultivating and landowning community of North Bengal, they are also known as Desi, or Bahey and Rajbanshi Kshatriya. Sanyal (1965) says that ‘the history of the origin of the Rajbanshi is a mystery. It is said that they belong to the great Bodo family that entered India in the tenth century BC from the east and settled on the banks of the Brahmaputra and generally spread over Assam and whole of the North Bengal. The term Rajbanshi means people of royal lineage. Their population in West Bengal is 2,258,760 (1981 census). They are predominantly found in rural areas... Rice is the staple food. They are non-vegetarians who eat fish, eggs and mutton... Rajbanshi, historically associated with the king of Cooch Behar, claim to be Kshatriyas (Pater, 1931, Chatterjee, 1951). They practice adult marriage settled through negotiation. Monogamy is the norm. Women wear vermilion and conch shell bangles after marriage...Residence after marriage is patrilocal. The family is generally nuclear...The name-giving ceremony and a ceremony at the first feeding (annaprashan) are observed. Marriage rituals are performed at the bride’s house...The Rajbanshi are traditionally agriculturists... The Rajbanshi profess Hinduism and worship deities like Narayan, Shiva, Durga and Lakshmi. They have a Brahmin as their priest. They have rich folk-songs and myth-oriented folk-tales... There are teachers, doctors, government employees, political leaders, etc among them...They were involved in the Uttarkhanda movement which aimed for the creation of a separate state (Kamatapur) for them or to say it more broadly ‘the sons of the soil’. The Uttarkhanda party and Uttarkhanda Dal are the political platforms for the movement...The Rajbanshi attach importance to formal education and send their children to schools and colleges...”

Let us now read the following lines, which appear to be applicable to the Rajbanshi community of South Bengal only and not to the Koch or Rajbanshi community of North Bengal, Assam, Bihar and their adjacent regions: -

“...The Bengali language and script are used for both inter-group and *intra-group* communication. In physical features they are characterized by a short or below-medium stature, *long facial profile, narrow nose form and broad head shape*. The ABO blood group gene frequency distribution among the Rajbanshis indicates high levels of both A (21-25 per cent) and B (20-31 per cent). Gene O frequency on an average ranges from 50-59 per cent. The Palmer dermatoglyphic pattern indicates a preponderance of Palmer mainline formula 7.5.5 (27-28 per cent) in both sexes (Chaudhury, 1962). Only 1 per cent of the males are colour blind...They are non-vegetarians who eat fish, eggs and mutton. *Alcoholic drinks are consumed*...The Rajbanshi have *two subgroups, namely Chhotobhag and Barabhag*, of which the latter is considered higher than the former. Each of these subgroups is further divided into a number of gotras such as Kashyapa, Batsya, Alambyan, Parasar, Modgaulya, and Sandilya...Dowry is paid in cash and kind...*Divorce* and remarriage are socially approved customs for both men and women. Parental property is *inherited equally by all the sons* but only the eldest son succeeds to his father's authority. *Women participate in social, religious and economic activities*, besides attending to domestic chores...*The dead are cremated and a pollution period of eleven days is observed*...A few depend on *inland river fishing*. Some are employed in government offices and a few others pursue wage labour. According to the 1981 census, 29.71 per cent of the Rajbanshi are reported as workers (53.72 per cent males and 3.97 per cent females). Of them, 51.76 per cent are returned as cultivators; 33.18 per cent as agricultural labourers; 3.02 per cent in fishing; and the remaining 12.04 per cent as engaged in various other services. *They have their own traditional caste council and regional association*...Traditionally, they are linked with the *Brahman, Kamar, Dhoba, Paliya*, and so on, in *patron-client relationship (jajmani)*. They accept water and food from the Paliya, Kayastha, Kamar, etc. but not from the Hari and Dom... They utilize public facilities like wells, tubewells, roads, schools, etc...*The Tebhaga movement, in which the Rajbanshis took part, started in 1946*...Their literacy rate, according to the 1981 census, is 24.65 per cent. Of them, 35.87 per cent males and 12.62 per cent females are returned as literate. They use both traditional and modern medicine and medicare. Family planning programmes are favoured. A few of them have received IRDP loans. They avail of banking facilities and have adopted modern methods of cultivation.”

For the benefit of the readers, the aspects, which may be applicable to Rajbanshis settled in South Bengal i.e. districts of West Bengal falling south of river Ganga but are not at all concerned with the Koch or Rajbanshi community of North Bengal, Assam, Bihar and their adjacent regions are typed in italic. These aspects need to be reviewed to remove any misconception.

Equating Rajbanshis or Koch-Rajbanshis with other lower castes to get economic benefits from the government appears to be a historic blunder for these people. In North Bengal, Rajbanshis are considered scheduled caste (SC), in Bihar as other backward class (OBC), in Assam they are trying for the status of scheduled tribe (ST) and in Nepal they are upper caste Kshatriyas. Thus, there exists an identity crisis. Also, group of elite Rajbanshis

feel ashamed to disclose their true identity because of lower caste status. In North Bengal, not disclosing own identity is in total negation for what asked for the status of depressed class or later as SC. So, it is most likely that once tribal status is obtained in Assam, for sure, Rajbanshis will hesitate more to disclose his or her identity as ST Rajbanshi as it is observed among all other recognized tribal and scheduled caste communities. Then, is it worth asking for lower social status?

Going by the historical perspective of these people having anthropological link with the historical Pundra Kshatriyas and legendary Kirata-Kuvach-China stories, it is most logical to redefine identity of these people by restoring their prestigious social status as Rajbanshi Kshatriya. Hopefully, both above cited aspects will attract some attention and create a situation for fruitful debate.

Disowning own identity by educated group – Loose and Win situation: Legendary Koch-Kamta kings are long gone, so are till recently found feudal lords-‘Zamindars’ or lesser rung landlords the ‘Jotdars’ followed suit soon after; even, are their memoirs no longer willing to live long any more. These were the persons wielding enormous power whom people of Kamta once looked forward for shelter and all possible help, have slowly faded away. This hapless situation arisen in Kamta during the British ‘Raj’ aftermath independence has given an easy access to newly created power corridors of Indian democracy. Once considered the higher-class Kshatriyas of greater India, who never ever allowed any foreign aggressor to make their heads to bow down, a day came when an English or Bengali educated Rajbanshi felt ashamed to identify as one. At least in Bengal, identifying oneself as Rajbanshi or Koch is the most secretive business for him or her these days. A self-esteeming Rajbanshi prefers not to identify himself or herself as SC, ST or OBC in West Bengal, Assam and Bihar respectively. Branding a Rajbanshi of Nepal as such a low-esteeming category as done in India is simply not acceptable as there all Rajbanshis are graded as high class Kshatriyas. Due to humiliating social status given to the community most of educated Children of Rajbanshis straightway refuse to apply for caste certificates and avoid describing them as SC, ST or OBC.

Let us see the background of this paradoxical identity crisis. When independence finally came in 1947, educated people from Koch-Kamta sided with West Bengal. They considered themselves as Bengali in West Bengal and Assamese in Assam. Everything seemed to be all right for them. Sacrifices made and contributions of Bengali leaders during freedom struggle were great, Bengali language became the one of the sweetest one in the world and Bengali image became so dear to any Indian that Rajbanshis felt proud to identify themselves as so. Dr. Bidhan Chandra Roy, then Chief Minister, who for all practical purposes, considered the Rajbanshi as an integral part of mainstream Bengali community and thus he got all his support from them. While Rajbanshis felt happy to be called to be one but their distinct cultural ethos, language variation and geographical location slowly but surely alienated them from mainstream Hindu Bengali community. Unfortunately, despite an earnest endeavour made by Bengali political leaders to absorb them, hard reality is that Rajbanshi as not actually welcome in the fold of mainstream Hindu Bengali community especially by the Bengalis of South Bengal. It is most unfortunate that in Bengal indigenous people like Rajbanshi or a Gorkha hesitates to identify as Bengali. In Assam to a Bodo, Karbi, Bengali from Silchar hesitates to identify as Assamese as such. This case is similar in some other states also, where a person of a particular community hesitates to identify himself

by the name of that state. This is a paradoxical identity crisis that can be found in Bengal today in particular and most of north eastern states of the nation today in general.

(d) Own Misconceptions of Rajbanshis and the Reality

For certain follies or misconceptions of their own Rajbanshis are responsible for their present precarious position. Majority of them especially the rural folk have not been able to adjust with the changing world. In all spheres of life they are at the receiving end and downfall is continuing. At times, certain attitudinal follies, belief in myths and social customs of theirs make things appear to be absurd. Let us discuss some of these in following lines: -

i) **Complacent of being a Higher Caste:** Rajbanshis are supposed to be caste Hindu Kshatriyas, one step down to Brahmins. Then why did they accept the status of SC? Is it not an aberration in the social system in our country? The answer is simple but this much talked about aspect could not be made clear to the simple minded Rajbanshi. They are only afraid of loosing the benefits of scholarship available to their students but unaware of the fact that this facility is available to students who go to schools and colleges and not to the majority poor Rajbanshi children who cannot afford schooling. They are afraid of loosing job reservation but unaware of the fact that there are SC candidates from other castes who are more exposed to the modern world and get better education. They do not eat together with low caste people and Muslims thinking that if they do so they would loose their sanctity as higher caste but unaware of the fact that SC status has made them equal to sweepers, washer men, barbers, fishermen and other the low caste people in the country; unaware of the fact that how a person of SC status is lowly treated by others.

The landed gentry class Rajbanshis, whose influence is confined to rural areas only, are found to be carrying a feeling of too much self-complacency regarding their higher caste identity and are totally unaware of the ground realities of SC status, which over the years has changed into a stamp of low caste. Although things are changing fast due to spread of electronic media in rural areas, ground realities of caste based politics seem to be hard to assimilate by this class in particular and the community as a whole.

ii) **Considering of being Mainstream Caste Hindu Bengali or Assamese:** Reality has always eluded the community. During the period of British rule, people of this community considered themselves as Bengali and somewhat got recognition from the rulers. In Assam, the case was similar and Rajbanshis actually contributed a lot to establish the identity as Assamese. But, over the years, their own follies have come to light. Rajbanshi identity has attained a position that hardly makes anyone of them feel proud about. Whatever is said about them, it is certain that Rajbanshis are not considered as the mainstream people of the respective State as such. Then, is the question pertinent to ask as to how far the very name of North Bengal is appropriate for the area where being the majority ingenuous people, do not have their own homeland.

iii) **Averse to Changing World:** It appears that the saying 'Change is the law of universe' is not applicable to Rajbanshis. For them their villages, trees, rivers and jungles constitute the world. Only, little education is required so that they can append

signatures on land sell deeds or to take up messenger jobs in some government office or any school. While the whole Indian society is changing towards modernity, majority Rajbanshi mindset remains predominantly village centric. To cite some examples we may quote what we observe that an eligible bachelor Rajbanshi if employed in any government office or school has a high demand for matrimony, he can easily get offer from much higher educated well to do Rajbanshi family. Their world begins and ends at their villages. For many, a journey to Kolkata, the state capital of North Bengal is a dream comes true.

(e) Hiding Caste Identity by Elite Rajbanshis

Caste ridden social fabric of India has been messed up in such a way that any well to do literate person belonging to scheduled caste/scheduled tribe/other backward caste (SC/ST/OBC) category is ashamed of disclosing his or her caste identity in public. Most of such elite group of Rajbanshis prefers to present themselves as Bengali in Bengal and Bihar; and similarly in Assam, elite Koch-Rajbanshis does it as Asomiya proper. The reasons for such erratic behaviour are typical in nature and very interesting that nowhere else in our country can be observed. The reasons for hiding caste identity by Rajbanshis need an in-depth study.

The very idea of granting SC/ST status for protection of certain basic rights of poor communities or tribes was no doubt was noble but over the years, it has acquired a dubious status of disgraced one. It has become an abusive word seldom used by upper caste people to humiliate a fellow person. Noble definition of SC has undergone a sea change over the years. It is no more the same as the fathers of Indian Constitution envisaged during conceptualizing the very idea of writing it where they wanted to uplift the downtrodden, depressed class and the untouchables. Accordingly necessary provisions for their up-liftment have been enshrined in the constitution. But now, the very word SC is derogatory meaning a low caste that upper caste people love to hate and politicians play to gain political mileage. SC status to the Rajbanshi Kshatriyas of North Bengal is the single largest humiliating factor for the educated Rajbanshis to conceal their paradoxical caste identity.

In Bihar and Nepal, Rajbanshis enjoy a higher social status as *Kshatriya*; and to a certain degree in Assam, Koch-Rajbanshis enjoy respectable social status as because almost half of its population in the State has affiliation to historic Rajbanshi lineage. In fact, Rajbanshis of Bengal, Bihar, Nepal and Koch Rajbanshis of Assam trace to their Kshatriya status related to the same mythical story of escaping the wrath of Lord Parshuram, who vowed to finish off all the Kshatriyas from this earth. But in West Bengal, scenario is totally different, where most of the literate and well-placed Rajbanshis feel ashamed to disclose their identity as Rajbanshi as such. Apart from the humiliating ST status let us discuss why the royal identity of Rajbanshi, which was so respectable till few centuries ago, has now become so disgraceful especially in Bengal, in the following lines: -

- i) **Lack of Knowledge of History:** Most of the Rajbanshis are not aware of their glorious history. Due to changes in geographical boundaries of once contiguous Kamata-Kamrup-Barendra region over the ages, which is now got divided to form parts of Assam, Meghalaya, Bangladesh, Bhutan, North Bengal, Bihar and Nepal; thus entity as one vast unit is lost. Known to be the confluence of ancient cultures of

Pre-Vedic Indian, Mongolian, and Dravidian and lately Aryan, North Bengal is not known by its original entity but known as part of West Bengal. Originality has been replaced by obscurity and that is one of the causes of hiding original identity of Rajbanshis.

ii) **Forced Division between Koch-Rajbanshi and Rajbanshi Kshatriya:** A feeling of difference between Koches or Koch Rajbanshis and Rajbanshis or Rajbanshi Kshatriyas was drilled into their mindset long back. This division had created a gulf between these people from North Bengal and Assam. No doubt, Koches in original Mongoloid physiognomy, in small numbers of around thirty thousand in total are still living in certain rural areas of Goalpara district towards Garo Hills speaking their original language similar to one of Boro language, but reality is that their brethren, who are in overwhelming number and who had migrated to the vast plains of northeastern region of India during pre-Vedic and ancient period, became Rajbanshi long ago. They got mixed up with Dravidian and Aryan cultured people to become indispensable part of mainstream Indians that cannot be changed now. So, unless the reality is known to then and the world, the difference will continue to exist that will keep causing harm to the community. Since the word Koch has an essence of tribal name, elite Rajbanshis prefer to differentiate themselves from their origin of Mongoloid lineage, which is otherwise incorrect and highly detrimental to their true identity.

iii) **Underdevelopment of Kamta-Kamrupi or Rajbanshi language:** This language has not seen the light of development and appears to be spoken in rustic way. Although it is their mother tongue, the reason as to why it is best avoided by the literate and semi-literate Rajbanshis while conversing in public is that it has not developed at all, while Bengali, Hindi and lately Assamese have developed enormously. Due to these reasons, elite Rajbanshis prefer to speak in the mainstream language of their respective States, thus hiding their true identity.

iv) **Not Coming to Terms with Reality in Urban Life:** While the world is progressing towards modernity and becoming urban bound, Rajbanshi community in general remains predominantly rural centric and is shying away from modern urban lifestyle. The community as such remained standstill for decades now. Urban population of the community is almost negligible and that too, most of the urban Rajbanshis are shying away from exhibiting their real backgrounds. Expanding townships are inching towards villages of North Bengal day by day displacing the villagers, who are mostly Rajbanshis. What they prefer to be that selling the lands at rising prices to other caste people and move deep into backward villages to re-establish their rural life because they cannot cope up with pressures of urban lifestyle. A kind of inferiority complex overwhelms them and thus, cyclical economic downfall of the community is continuing. The fallout of such complex is that the rural Rajbanshis try to overcome it by looking for some job opportunities in urban centres. Illiteracy and poverty becomes a hurdle forcing them to take up wage labourers or petty jobs.

v) **Communal Slur:** This community was intensely subjected to social humiliation, especially in North Bengal over a century. Obliquely they were called 'Bahey Bangali' by the sophisticated mainstream Bengalis as this community is basically rural and majority of their rural folks talk and behave in a rustic manner. The word 'Bahey'

itself is not derogatory but the way it was used it appeared to be abusive in nature that hurt the feelings of the Rajbanshis of North Bengal and Bihar. Actually, the word, which was derived from the word 'Babahe', meaning - 'Hello dear' to the younger males and 'Oh uncle' to elders was first used out of sheer courtesy by the Englishmen of East India Company to address the people of erstwhile North Bengal. Later, the word became abusive and was directed to the poor Rajbanshis, as people did not like the way Rajbanshis were given respect using such a word having wider connotation. Thus the word took a perverted form of 'Bahey' and used abusive. Another meaning of the similar word has much more wider meaning in 'Gurmukhi' word 'Wahe' meaning 'Oh my much revered soul' used by the Sikh community while they pray and pay obeisance to their revered highest religious soul 'Guru' as 'Wahe Guru'. The learned people have since avoided using this word and slowly the word is being discarded. Ever since the militant Rajbanshi group Kamtapuri Peoples Organisation (KLO) came into existence, people avoid using the word in public at least in North Bengal. Being a good word having very good meaning it should be taken by every one in good earnest and not in an abusive way directed to the community.

(f) Inclusion of Princely State of Cooch Behar with Dominion of India and Subsequent Merger with West Bengal

When the freedom struggle engulfed whole of India by turn of nineteenth century, Koch-Kamta people of North Bengal jumped into it. Many unknown freedom activists went to jails and many made their supreme sacrifices. On 18th July 1947, Indian Independence Act was passed in British Parliament. India became a free nation on 15th August 1947. As per Section 7(I) of the said British act, it was stated that British Crown lapsed their paramount hold over the Indian Princely states and these were free to either join any dominion of India and Pakistan or remain sovereign. Soon after India won her independence on the 15th August, 1947, most of the erstwhile princely states numbering more than five hundred lined up for inclusion either with dominion of India or Pakistan. Except few princely states like Junagarh, Jammu & Kashmir, Hyderabad most of them had no choice but to agree to the instrument of accession. People of erstwhile Cooch Behar State, majority of whom i.e. 89% were Rajbanshis were eager to join the dominion of India and also it was a natural choice. But it was only on the day of the 12th September 1949; finally the instrument of succession was signed.

These princely states regained their original position legally which they enjoyed prior to assumption of suzerainty of the British Crown. Majority of over 565 princely states were small enough to afford to remain sovereign and immediately joined either India or Pakistan mainly on the basis of geo-political compulsions. As per the act, Cooch Behar kingdom regained her original sovereign status. The King of this state, Maharaja Jagaddipendra Narayan was legally entitled to get back the areas of his kingdom including present day North Bengal, Dinajpur and Rangpur areas of Bangladesh, which were tactfully taken by the East India Company in the Year 1776. After gaining independence, Government of India constituted a separate ministry of states whose basic task was to merge the princely states with the Indian Republic. It was a natural choice for the Maharaja to opt for joining Dominion of India. Accordingly, an agreement was made on the 20th August 1949 between

the Governor General of India and the Maharaja of Cooch Behar wherein it was stated, “WHEREAS in the best interests of the state of Cooch Behar as well as of the Dominion of India it is desirable to provide for the administration of the said state by or under the authority of the Dominion Government”. As given in Article-I of the agreement, it was agreed: -

“His Highness the Maharaja of Cooch Behar hereby cedes to the Dominion Government full and exhaustive authority, jurisdiction and powers for and in relation to the governance of the State and agrees to transfer the administration to the State to the Dominion Government on the 12th day of September 1949”.

The Articles-II to VII of the agreement contained details of the privileges and benefits to be given to the members of the royal family and service conditions of state employees and certain details of private and movable properties of the Maharaja. In Article-IX, it was stated:

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“Except with the previous sanction of the Government of India, no proceedings, civil or criminal shall be constituted against any person in respect of any act done or purporting to be done in the execution of his duties as a servant of the state before the day on which the administration made over to the Government of India.

In confirmation whereof Mr. Vapal Pangunni Menon, Adviser to the Government of India in the ministry of States has appended his signature on behalf and with the authority of the Governor General of India and Lieutenant Colonel His Highness Maharaja Jagaddipendra Narayan Bhup Bahadur, Maharaja of Cooch Behar has appended his signature on behalf of himself, his heirs and successors.”

Subsequently, two more agreements on transfer of Cooch Behar to Central Administration were signed between the Maharaja and Government of India. The Maharaja was anxious about the future status of the state. In this regard, he raised certain queries for clarification by the Central Government. Mr. VP Menon, vide his Demi-Official Letter No. F 15(19).P/40 dated the 30th August 1949 addressed to the Maharaja categorically mentioned about the future status of Cooch Behar state: -

"... It is the intention of the Government of India to administer for the present the territories of the Cooch Behar State as a centrally administered area under a Chief Commissioner..." (Nehru Patel's Correspondences, 1945-55, volume 7 – by Durga Das).

Sovereignty of Cooch Behar State once again got lost and formally got merged with Indian Dominion on the 12th September 1949. Cooch Behar State was placed in the list of 'C' category states. On the historic occasion of handing over of power, Honourable Home Minister, Sardar Vallabhvai Patel sent a message to Sri Nanjappa, Chief Commissioner of Cooch Behar on the eve of formal handing over function. The said message sent in a letter as given in the book, 'Patel's Correspondences, 1945-55' written by Durga Das, Vol. No. 7, page 553, is reproduced here:

“From Minister, Home

Camp, Birla House,

Malabar Hill,
Bombay.
11th September 1949

To,
Sri Nanjappa,
Chief Commissioner of Cooch Behar,

On the handing over of Cooch Behar to Central administration, I send to its people my best wishes and assurance on behalf of the Govt. of India that though far, their interest welfare will claim our close and intimate attention, I am fully aware of the many problems, political and economic, which affect the state and I am confident that with their co-operation and assistance we would succeed in solving them in the best interest of the state and the country for their happiness and prosperity, unity and mutual adjustment between the constituent elements of the population are essential pre-requisites without this such resources and personnel as we may be able to spare for them would avail little.

I hope therefore, that the people of Cooch Behar will work with single mindedness and devotion to duty as a united team for their own betterment and to achieve their due place in the political and administrative set-up of India.

To accept transfer of territory from a ruler is no small responsibility which we feel on this occasion. To give up sovereignty over territory is no mean sacrifice. I am grateful to him for the spirit of accommodation and understanding which he has displayed and the prompt manner which he accepted our advice.

May he and his people be happy, prosperous under the new dispensation which is being inaugurated today.

Sd/-
Sardar Vallabh Patel
Home Minister, India”

The yoke of British power hardly allowed the King to carry out any developmental work despite Maharaja's deep love for his people. The British Government tried to keep the pleased by offering members of the royal family higher official status and providing modern luxuries. People of Cooch Behar gave their full support to freedom struggle. When freedom came to India, people of not only erstwhile Kingdom but whole of North Bengal regardless of their caste and creed were jubilant as they saw a ray of hope in making their homeland into a full-fledged state of Indian Republic. Then Prime Minister of India, Pandit Jawahar Lal Nehru and Home Minister Sardar Vallabh Patel assured the people of the state that their political and socio-economic aspirations would be fulfilled after joining the union. So it appeared to them as a great occasion for celebration by one and all.

Post-merger days could not be termed as happier for the royal house. The ex-Maharaja had been bitterly involved with legal battles with the government of West Bengal for the ownership over royal private properties. The significance of the articles of the agreement for merger signed between the Governor General of India and his highness the Maharaja Jagaddipendra Narayan Bhup Bahadur on 28th August 1949 was given a simple go by, as the state power was enormous. An assurance was given to ex- Maharaja by V.P. Menon on behalf of the central government vide Ministry of States letter D.O.

No.F.15(19)/49 dated the 30th August 1949 saying that “The Government will endeavour to associate the name of “Narayan” with the Cooch Behar State Forces even after their absorption in the Indian Army”(para. 14). It is pity that even the Rajbanshis themselves are unaware of many facts. For example the name of 'Narayani Company' in the Rajshahi Regiment is almost a forgotten name. Many assurances given by the central government during merger are yet to fulfill. The last Koch king Jagaddipendra Narayan even had to seek justice from the Judiciary, albeit in vein. The last king could not remain happy and died young.

How appropriate was the Merger of Cooch Behar State with West Bengal? : While nation was still celebrating the hard won freedom, a political change was being orchestrated in Cooch Behar. The people of the erstwhile state were destined to suffer as their hopes as assured by Sardar Vallabh Patel were belied. Both Nehru and Patel got involved in Jammu and Kashmir imbroglio and had no time to think about the people of Cooch Behar. In a letter dated 28th December 1949 written to Nehru, Patel mentioned: –

“... As regards consulting the people of Cooch Behar, I have already stated that the local Congress has already approved of the merger. There is a local Hitasadhini Sabha, which is partly Muslim with its sympathies definitely with neighbouring area of East Pakistan and partly consisting of some members of hill tribes who are looking to Sikkim, Nepal and Bhutan for the formation of an “Uttarkhand Pradesh”. I feel certain that we should do nothing to encourage this kind of organisation in its mischievous tendencies.”

Sardar Patel depended solely on the opinion of the local Congress party. Anyway, it was natural for the princely state to merge with India. Arup Jyoti Das in his research work found:

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“... Sadly, the iron man Vallabh Patel, did not bother about the common men of Cooch Behar, and assumed ‘Cooch Behar’ as the representative of local people, and found the Muslim members of ‘Hitasadhini Sabha’ sympathetic towards East Pakistan without solid reason...”.

Meanwhile, the Chief Minister of West Bengal Dr. Bidhan Chandra Roy, felt uneasy when Cooch Behar was given a ‘C’ category status of a state in the list of states by the Constituent Assembly in the Constitution of India, which was adopted on the 26th November 1949. After division of India, a major chunk of Bengal went to East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) and West Bengal was constrained of enough space to accommodate Bengali refugees pouring in to the state. That was the time North Bengal came to the rescue of Bengali refugees. Somehow, Nehru and Patel were convinced that Cooch Behar should also merge with West Bengal. Local unit Congress party led by caste Hindu Bengalis were too favourable to the party high commands both at Calcutta and Delhi. Influential Assamese Congress leader Lokpriya Gopi Nath Bordoloi’s plea to merge Cooch Behar State with Assam was set aside in favour of Dr. Roy of Bengal, who managed to prevail upon party’s central high command. Local Praja Hitasadhini Sabha demanded Union Territory status for the state but it was too late to give a due thought on it. Dr. Roy lost no time to visit Cooch Behar and under section 290A of Government of India Act, 1935 declared it as a district within state of West Bengal on the 1st January 1950. He did this for the fear that creation of separate Cooch Behar State would definitely take away other districts of North Bengal, which would further diminish the size of

West Bengal. Merger of Cooch Behar with West Bengal was not carried out in accordance with the provisions of the Indian Constitution, which raised a legal question that remained a debatable issue. As per Section 7 (I) of Indian Independence Act, 1947 passed by the British Parliament, an area covering about 20,000 square kilometers in Rangpur and Dinajpur districts of Present day Bangladesh would have included in pre-1776 Cooch Behar State apart from other districts of North Bengal and adjoining areas. Had these areas been included in the Cooch Behar state as per the aforesaid Act, India would have gained much more strategically as there would not have existed a 'Chicken's Neck' in the plains of Darjeeling district of less than 50 kilometers stretch extending from Phansidewa at Bangladesh border to Panitanki at Nepal border.

Merger of once flourishing formidable Koch kingdom to many Rajbanshis appeared to be an unnatural death caused due to cruel role played by destiny. Koch king lost his position and his beloved Rajbanshi subjects were left to fend for themselves like orphans. The community did not forget the merger; it remained in their minds of Rajbanshis like a haunted spirit. That spirit now has come to haunt the government machinery of West Bengal like a ghost in the form of Kamtapuri movement. Slowly but surely that ghost is spreading its wings of destruction in neighbouring states of Assam and Bihar.

Honourable Calcutta High Court orders: In a case filed by Maharaja Jagaddipendra Narayan Bhup Bahadur of erstwhile Cooch Behar kingdom against the Govt. of West Bengal, following notification issued by the Honourable Calcutta High Court was published by a judicial reporter in a leading daily The Statesman on Thursday, May 15, 1969 under a headline "Rule on Government may be kindly be consulted": -

"...West Bengal Estate Acquisition Act-1969- This Act in question is not applicable in the Cooch Behar State as it was a sovereign State. The merit of agreement made between the Governor General of India and the His Highness Maharaja of Cooch Behar under D.O. F/5 (19)-P 49 dated 28th/30th August 1949 cannot be quashed or void in any way. It is a living record. It is a history. This kind of record can not be died out."

Questions were naturally raised as to whether firstly, if there was no instrument of merger established by law, as per aforesaid observation of Honourable Calcutta High Court, Cooch Behar State was not lawfully merged with West Bengal. Secondly, whether after over six decades now, is it worth debating that the Government of West Bengal made a severe breach of the orders issued by Honourable Calcutta High Court. Then Maharaja of Cooch Behar is not alive today. As such, what would be the suitable remedy or the constitutional remedy?

(g) Bengal–Bihar Merger

After the merger of Cooch Behar with West Bengal, events relating to state re-organisation favoured the state government with its capital in Calcutta (Kolkata). In September 1953, the central government decided to appoint a high power State Re-organisation Commission (SRC) to consider the territorial re-distribution of states in the broadest way without going into specific details about state boundaries. The Commission was formed in the first week of June 1954 headed by Justice Fazal Ali of the Supreme Court of India as Chairman with Dr. KM Panikkar and Dr. Hriday Nath Kunzru as members. The government of West Bengal in

their memorandum submitted to the SRC suggested integration of a total area of about 15,000 square miles adjoining North Bengal in border districts of Bihar and Assam having a population of about 68,00,000, most of whom were Rajbanshi Bengali speaking people. The SRC team came to Calcutta (Kolkata) on the 12th February 1955 to have the views of Bengali leaders. The Chief Minister of West Bengal took the opportunity to convince the members of the commission that for the larger interest of his state, parts of Bihar and Assam be included in the territory of West Bengal so as to enable the state to function as a compact unit. The Chief Minister emphasized the need of a direct link between Calcutta and northern segment lay north of the river Ganga to facilitate smooth administration, improve economic condition and remove the sense of uncertainty among the people of North Bengal. The Chief Minister, Dr. BC Roy considered all Rajbanshi Bengali speaking native people of adjoining parts of Bihar and Assam to basically Bengalis like those of North Bengal. But no representative from Rajbanshi Bengali speaking people from any of these districts was invited in the discussions of the SRC meetings held in Calcutta (Kolkata). His two colleagues, Mr. SK Basu and Dr. R Ahmed and Mr. Arun Mukherjee, the Special Officer to the state government, assisted Dr. BC Roy in putting in place

their arguments before the Commission on linguistic, historical, geographical, administrative and economic grounds while omitting socio-political aspirations of the people of North Bengal as assured by Nehru and Patel during the merger of Cooch Behar state with Indian Dominion in 1947. In addition to already demanded 15,000 square miles on the basis of linguistic demography, Government of West Bengal demanded for ceding Purnia, Manbhum, Singbhum and Santhal Pargana districts from Bihar and Goalpara district from Assam to accommodate the refugees coming from East Pakistan. Meanwhile, Bihar claimed for creation of a new state to be named 'Uttar Khand' in the northern part of Bihar, which would also include three districts- Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar of North Bengal. Hapless people of North Bengal remained silent onlookers on this development. Claim and counter claim made by both the governments of West Bengal and Bihar confused the whole issue before the Commission. Dr. Hriday Nath Kunzru and Dr. KM Panikkar finally came to Darjeeling in the second week of May 1955 to hear the sayings of Bengali leaders on Bihar's claim on the aforesaid area. Ironically, no local leader from any of these three districts of North Bengal was invited to give their views of their own. A picture was painted before the Commission by the Bengali leaders from hailed Calcutta saying that the population of these three districts was only about 20,00,000 in which Bengali speaking people constituted 61% and no one clarified about this percentage of people belonged to Rajbanshi Bengali speaking who differed from Bengalis of South Bengal and that their socio-political aspirations were different from what the Commission was being given to understand.

On the 30th September 1955, the SRC submitted its 300-page report to the central government. In the report, it was proposed to concede 3,400 square miles from Bihar to West Bengal. West Bengal emerged with a slightly larger territory through an additional portion of Manbhum district of Bihar. A portion of Purnia district of Bihar was proposed to be merged with West Bengal to provide a link between South and North Bengal. Bihar government strongly objected to the first communiqué issued by the Centre related to this issue between these two states and when the center announced its decision on the 16th January 1956, it revealed a major cut so far as West Bengal was concerned. This caused frustration and anger in Calcutta. Dr. BC Roy soon reached New Delhi to discuss the matter with Pandit Nehru and succeeded in convincing him on his points. Thereafter, in the second communiqué issued by

the center, an area of about 2,900 square miles was conceded to West Bengal. A draft bill called, 'The Bihar-West Bengal (Transfer of the territories) Bill' was prepared on the 14th June 1956. This came as a great relief to Dr. BC Roy. Earlier, with the aim to stall the whole issue and to keep Bihar in tact. Its Chief Minister Mr. Sri Krishna Sinha made a proposal of Bengal- Bihar merger at a meeting of Congress Working Committee on the 15th January 1956. It was Dr, BC Roy who managed to convince the Prime Minister, who happened to also the President of their ruling Congress party about non-feasibility of merger of Bengal and Bihar but was feasible was to concede some parts of Bihar to West Bengal. Dr. Roy detected a serious flaw in the draft bill. The bill omitted to provide a connecting lifeline link between South and North Bengal. Mr. Jyoti Basu, then leader of Opposition was invited in the discussions on this issue in the state assembly of West Bengal. Despite much bitterness created during the anti Bengal-Bihar merger movement, Mr. Jyoti Basu and the Communist Party supported the resolution moved by the Chief Minister on the floor of the house on the 14th July 1956 urging modification of the draft bill to provide a link between South and North Bengal. The Bill accordingly was amended in favour of West Bengal and the same was subsequently got passed in the Parliament. West Bengal got benefited in getting an area of 2,900 square miles with an additional population of 14,00,000. merger of Bengal-Bihar failed but Dr. BC Roy gained substantially in merging North Bengal with West Bengal. No territory could be gained from Assam by West Bengal. Earlier, West Bengal made a demand to the SRC for conceding border districts of Assam to West Bengal whose people spoke Rajbanshi Bengali. But Dr. Roy did not press for it sensing that it would open a passage for the Koch-Kamta- Rajbanshi Kshatriya Bengali agitation for a separate state in North Bengal. Leader of opposition Mr., Jyoti Basu also did not press for merger of Assam districts with West Bengal.

(h) Religious Ethos and Cultural Heritage: Rich or Poor?

Thousands years ago there was neither any known religion nor anyone to claim to be Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Christian, Jain, Buddhist or Parsi; what probably was either lawlessness or peace like 'Satyam Shivam Sundaram' meaning truth, profound peace, solace and natural beauty. Religions and Caste system came into existence much later. As there was no religion, none claimed to be Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya or Shudra. In this part of the country people worshipped 'Shivlingas', the phallus symbolizing reproduction and prosperity, which was dedicated to Lord Shiv, the supreme God. Lord Shiv is the supreme deity of Rajbanshis. He is worshipped in His different 'Avatars' or forms. Dr. Girijasankar Ray has elaborated Lord's manifestations in different forms and cultural ethos of Rajbanshis in his valuable book - "Uttarbanche Rajbanshi Kshatriya Jatir Puja – Parvana" –published by N.L. Publishers, New Market, Dibrugarh, Assam (Second edition 1999). If the Lord is believed to be Hindu God, then Rajbanshis cannot be any other caste other than pure Hindus, and in that case this particular community is nothing new but age old ethnic Indian Community.

Koch-Rajbanshis are great worshippers of Lord Shiv; mother Goddess Parvati, their sons Lords Kartik and Ganesh, daughters Goddesses Saraswati and Lakshi. Different iconic effigies their favourite deities can be seen engraved in stone sculptures and temples in different parts of the region inhabited by this community. In one such iconic find of twelfth century where Lord Ganesh dancing on the back of His vehicle rat was recovered from North Bengal is now kept in Indian Museum. Similar iconic effigy can be seen engraved in the

gate-wall of Kamakhya temple in Guwahati where four handed Lord Ganesh dancing on the back of His vehicle.

Lord Shiv in the form of Nataraj might have performed His unique dance ‘Tandab Nritya’ at no other place than this holy land of Kamata, as there exists the legend. The Lord once had befallen for a ‘Koch Ramani’ (Koch-Rajbanshi damsel of North Bengal-Lower Asom area). Dr. Ashutosh Bhattacharya in his book ‘Bangla Mangal Kavyar Itihas’ has mentioned that Saivism took its root in rural Koch society, which is evident from then ancient scriptures of Bengal where Lord Shiv’s attraction towards a Koch women was mentioned. It was no doubt a legend but faith was already born in the minds of Rajbanshis. If that were so then, either the Lord danced to His glory by seeing the beauty of Her or after danced to His furious height after loosing his beloved ‘Sati’ in the infamous ‘Dakhya Yagya’. Lord Shiv; the most powerful Hindu God was worshipped in the land of Kamata from time immemorial, even in pre-Aryan age. Pundra-Kamta-Kamrup or Pragjyotishpur were the last parts of ancient India whose people were acculturated by the Aryans. Aryans described the inhabitants of Pundra as *Kshatryias*; probably these people gave them the most resistance and held their further advent for centuries. They worshipped phallus of lord Shiva, the supreme God, the embodiment of undeniable supreme soul, a conglomerate of souls of all living beings as He is invisible but can be felt through deep meditation and our breath. His power cannot be fathomed, His forms are many but He came in a human form to marry mother Goddess Sati from the lands of Koch-Rajbanshis, that is why He is so fond of Goddess Kamakhya or Kamoteswari. It makes a sense when we talk about God. We can indeed feel His existence in the nature and the system of reproduction. He is all pervasive indeed, otherwise how can we explain, to the tiniest minimum, that the way a life is given to an embryo in a mother or to the larger perspective, what is the outer boundary of the space in the above. Lord Shiva and mother Goddess Parvati in different forms became all pervasive God to Rajbanshis from time immemorial. Therefore, in all logical analysis, Hinduism existed prior to the advent of Aryans in these parts of India. Jainism, Buddhism, Muslim, and Christianity- all these religions subsequently made inroads to these areas. In fact, true secularism existed in these parts of India is being highlighted. Thus, religion is being thoroughly touched upon in the book.

Lord Shiv is worshipped in rural Kamta region in His different forms. The lord is ‘Mahakal’, the ultimate saviour of mankind. He is the killer god ‘Mashan’ when dissatisfied with someone’s mischief and neglect. He is the symbol of fertility as god ‘Madan Kam’. As a symbol of agricultural productivity the lord is known as ‘Maharaj’. He is the god ‘Jakha’ as symbol of wealth. He is the creator of all diseases but easily satiable as ‘Burathakur’. He cures killer diseases as ‘Dhumbaba’. He is the tiger god ‘Sonaroy’. He is also known as ‘Gumirathakur’ and ‘Charak’, the god of power.

Jalpesh Temple of Lord Shiv: Jalpesh (Jalpeshwar) temple is located near the bank of river Jarda in present Mainaguri sub-division of Jalpaiguri district of North Bengal. This temple has got much significance to all the Rajbanshis as it is dedicated to their favourite God, Lord Shiv and located in the centre of historic Kamata-Kamrup Empire and symbolizes the very existence of the community. The temple is ancient and exact period of its construction has not been established. It is believed that king Prithu built it, as the king was believed to have constructed numerous temples and erected structures at various places in Kamata-Kamrup kingdom.

In “Buchanan Manuscripts”, we can find some early references to the king, which say: -

“ **Prithu Raja.** – This *Prithu Raja*, from the size of his capital, and the numerous works raised in the vicinity by the various dependants and connection of the court must have governed a large extent of country and for a considerable time. Although he is in some measure an object of worship among the neighbouring Hindus they have few traditions concerning the place from whence he came. Nor at what period he lived; and I heard it only mentioned by one old man, that he governed before the time of the dynasty, which will be next mentioned. 190.”

Goddesses Maa Kamakhya: All Koch-Rajbanshis are mostly ‘Saiva’ or ‘Shakto’ Hindus meaning followers of Lord Shiva and Goddess Parvati and are emotionally dutibound for visiting the temple of Maa Kamakhya located at Nilachal hill, Guwahati in Assam. For Rajbanshis of North Bengal, north-eastern Bihar and eastern Nepal a visit of the temple is a lifetime desire. At least once, especially after loosing own mother, one becomes dutybound to pay an obeisance at the altar of the Goddess, a place considered to be as holy and blissful as mother’s lap. For the Koch Rajbanshis in Assam, however faith is mixed with some superstitious belief. Many of them do visit the temple but do not enter the inner sanctum sanatorium of the Goddess located at a base of round shaped well inside housing the symbolic holy stone of mythological reproductive part of immolated body of Goddess Sati, wife of Lord Shiv, lest a glimpse at the mother’s altar might bring death, such an unwarranted superstition and fear of death. They rely upon an apparently unreliable story of that king Nara Narayan, who rebuilt the temple in 1565 A.D. promised not to have a glimpse at the altar and if one does that death will follow to that person.

The story went like this - while construction of the temple was complete, the king wanted to have a glimpse of the mother Goddess coming at the altar at midnight and dance. So he took help of the priest and waited till midnight stealthily to have glimpse but the mother never appeared on person. As an excuse, the priest explained to the king that the Goddess did not want to show herself without clothes to her sons and dance naked in front of them. Then someone from the royal family died and soon it was linked with the incident of the king. There is no linkage of the story, but certainly it provided a superstitious belief among the descendants of the king and local Koch Rajbanshis. Death is inevitable, so why to die before it comes whether it comes naturally or unnaturally. While pilgrims from all walks of life from different places of the country and abroad visit the temple daily, even the Rajbanshis of places other than Asom visit this temple to whom nothing happens but when it comes to some of the Koch Rajbanshis in Asom, death haunts them; while other devotees prosper, the local Rajbanshis die thousands of time before real death comes; such misconception based on baseless superstition should go once for all. Otherwise there is no hope. A visit of the temple and paying obeisance at the holy stone of the Mother Goddess Kamakhya to find solace and happiness is a must that I feel. In the first week of the month of *Ashar* (June end) the temple doors are closed for 3-4 days the auspicious occasion of Goddess Mother's annual holy menses and taking fresh garb followed by worship by Nilachal priests. The occasion is celebrated with an annual fair named *Ambubachi mela*, which is attended by pilgrims from far off areas including foreigners, and they seek Mother's divine

blessings. This period of 3-4 days is a most auspicious occasion for the Rajbanshi farmers during which they do not plough their lands and generally end of this occasion marks the beginning of paddy transplantation.

One legend that is prevalent is – Once the mighty Himalayan king Daksha, father of Sati and father-in-law of Lord Shiv held a ‘Yagna’ (worshipping the sacred fire) to commemorate his royal achievements. He invited all the Gods except his son-in-law Lord Shiv, which enraged Sati. When the auspicious function started, Sati at her own and on behalf of his father approached her revered husband to request him to attend the yagna, which he declined saying that since he was not invited it would not be appropriate for him to attend as a unwanted guest. Sati could not hold back her feelings and sought her husband’s permission to allow her to go her paternal house to meet her father. Lord Shiv granted her permission and Sati went to his father and asked why her husband was not invited to attend the yagna. King Daksha explained to his daughter with the reasons as to why he did not invite him saying that her husband was an errand mendicant wearing tiger’s skin and snake, which would not make him graceful in front of the other invitee Gods. Lord Shiv was not only her husband but also the most powerful God, so the answer of her father did not satisfy Sati but further made her ashamed. She took it as an insult, not willing to show her ashamed face to her husband, she decided to sacrifice herself and at once jumped into the burning sacred fire of the yagna. Her burning body created furor that shook up Lord Shiv, who was meditating far away in the Himalayas. Lord Shiv could control himself and once he reached the place of yagna to retrieve burning Sati. The kings’ soldiers could not stop Lord Shiv from reaching the scene of yagna. The ferocious scene of burning Sati, who herself was the incarnation of the all powerful mother Goddess engaged Lord Shiv, who lifted the burning body on his palm and went up the sky in a destructive mood. Sensing imminent destruction of the whole world, all Gods present in the auspicious ceremony got worried. They all approached Lord Vishnu, the God responsible for well being of all the creatures to save the world. Lord Vishnu then took his ‘Sudarshan Chakra’ (Divine Discus) and threw towards the heaven to cut the burning body of Mother Goddess into pieces so as to bring them down on the earth and pacify Lord Shiv. Goddess Mother’s burning organs cut into pieces by the divine discus fell on the earth at various places. Goddess’ reproductive organ fell on the Nilachal Hill in Guwahati, where a temple was subsequently built dedicated to ‘Maa’ Kamakhya meaning Goddess of Sensual Desire and Power. When the temple was built nobody knows. That could be the reason why the kingdom was called Pragjyotishpur meaning a city of astronomical age.

There is another story that Buchanan recorded in page 184 of his Manuscripts: -

‘Narakasur’- The earliest tradition concerning the history of Kamrup is, that it was given by *Krishna* to *Norak*, the son of the earth (Prithvi). This *Norak*, although an infidel (Osor), was for some time a favourite of the God who appointed him guardian of the temple (Dwarpal) of *Kamakhya* (granter of pleasure), who naturally presided over the region of desire (*Kamrup*). This deity is by the Hindus considered as female, and her temple situated near *Gohati*, the place where *Narak* resided, is still much frequented.’

In page 205, what Buchanan recorded is worth mentioning, ‘Vasistha.- The overthrow of Nilambor is looked upon by the natives as a most unfortunate event. In the *Yogini-Tantra* it is told that in the time of *Norak*, a most holy person *Vasishtha Muni* (Hindu sage Vasishtha) went to the temple of *Kamakhya* and was refused admittance by the

infidel guardian. As such persons, conscious of their worth, are sometimes apt to be a great deal too irascible, *Vosishtho* prayed that the temple might be deprived of all dignity, which accordingly would have immediately happened had not the goddess of love (*Kamakhya*) made a complaint to *Siv*, who although he could not entirely prevent the effects of the holy man's imprecation (*sangpon*), yet postponed the completion until the destruction of *Komotapur*; and he ordered, that this degradation should continue only until the restoration of the *Komoteswar*, who, as I have said, is supposed to be still alive, and his return is anxiously and eagerly expected by the people of *Kamrup*, as some of the events which are prophesied to precede the restoration, have already come to pass. On that happy occasion, the goddess of delight will be restored to full glory, and the four nations of usurpers who now share *Kamrup*, will be extirpated by mutual slaughter. These nations are the *Plov* or *Bhoteas*; the *Saumar* or Assames; the *Kuvach* or Koch, who govern *Vihar*; and the *Yovon* or barbarians of the west, who according to the authority of the *Yogini-Tantro* are descendants of *Haihoyo* and *Taljonggho*, two Khyotriyos who on account of cowardice were degraded, and prohibited from eating pure food, and from following the doctrine of the Vedas.'

So, king Nilambar met with his uninevitable end and destruction of Kamtapur was complete as per the curses of sage Vasistha. Glory of Kamakhya temple is yet to come alive till the Kshatriyas from four places – Plov (Tarai region of Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri districts of West Bengal), Saumar (upper Asom), Koch Rajbanshis of Cooch Behar and western Asom) and Yovon (eastern Nepal and north-eastern Bihar) come together and unite.

Influence of Buddhism and Jainism: As we have already discussed that Pundra and Pragjyotishpur regions of eastern/northeastern India were the last areas where Aryanised culture arrived. It was that period of acculturation when both Buddhism and Jainism had begun make inroads in the region. The indifferent attitude of the Hindu religion towards caste system introduced in the region, especially in Pundra antagonized the people that invited both these newly introduced religions based on peace, brotherhood, non-violence and universal brotherhood. Buddhism entered Pundra part of North Bengal during the reign of king Ashok, if not earlier. Pundravardhan was a part of Mauryan Empire as it was evident from Mahasthan (Bangladesh) stone inscription. According to votive inscriptions on the railings of the Buddhist stupa of Sanchi of second century B.C. recorded the gifts given to two inhabitants of Pundravardhan. In Bogra district of Bangladesh, some evidence of writing of Ashokan period was found. There, an inscription indicated several settlements maintaining a storehouse fitted with coins and food grains for the upkeep of Buddhist monks. The people of the area knew Prakrit and professed Buddhism. Similar inscription was found in the coastal district of Noakhali in Bangladesh showing people knew Prakrit and Brahmi script prevalent in that area in the second century B.C. However, Buddhism did not spread in whole of Kamta region. The Ambari ruins in Guwahati did not show any evidence of Buddhism in the area.

Hieuen Tsang in his travelogue (642 A.D.) while traversing Kamta-Kamrup region recorded: -

“...The country was low and moist; the crops were regular...There were continuous tanks to the town; the climate was genial. The people were of honest ways, small stature...they worshipped the Devas and did not believe in Buddhism. So there had

never been a Buddhist monastery in the land...the Deva temples were some hundreds in numbers... The ruling king, who was a Brahmin by caste...was named Bhaskarvarman. His majesty was a lover of learning and his subjects followed his examples.”

From this account of the Chinese traveler it was evident that till end of seventh century A.D. Buddhism did not spread in Kamta-Kamrup region. During the reign of Pal kings of Bengal both Buddhism and Jainism made some headway in the region and influenced the society to some extent and co-existed with Hinduism.

Influence of Islam in Kamta-Kamrup: The religion of Islam, although entered India much earlier, say around early eighth century through its western front, it took centuries to reach north eastern part of the country. In 712 A.D. Sind, then ruled by a Hindu king named Dahir was invaded by Arabian forces led by Mohd. Bin Kasim and that was the turning point for the new religion to have gained a foothold in undivided India. However, Hindu kings of mainland India resisted the Muslim invaders for several centuries. Much later, taking advantage of the internal conflicts among the Rajput kings, a Turkish ruler, Mohd. Ghori defeated Rajput king Prithviraj Chauhan in the second battle of Tarai in 1192 A.D. after conquering western India, Mohd. Ghori conquered Ajmer. On his orders, his general Kutubuddin captured Gwalior and Kalinjar. In 1194 A.D. Mohd. Ghori captured Kanauj. In 1202 A.D. Iktiaruddin, son of Baktiar Khilji, the general of Kutubuddin captured Bihar. In the same year, he invaded Gaur and dislodged its king Lakshman Sen. From this period, Islam made its entry in Gaur and Bongodesh. In 1205 A.D. an expedition was deputed by Kutubuddin to invade Kamta-Kamrup but had to retreat after getting defeated by king Prithu. During this period onwards, Islamic culture made its headway in Kamta-Kamrup area. In 1498 A.D. Hussain Shah invaded Kamta-Kamrup and ended the rule of Kamta king Nilambar. Although, Hussain Shah did not rule Kamta-Kamrup himself, but facilitated further spread of Islamic culture in the area. During Mughal period, Islamic culture further made ingress up to Kamrup. Conversion to Islam, which began from the period of Hussain Shah, was complete during the rule of Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb.

(i) Social Outcast and Exodus of Elite Group

Fall from Grace of Kshatriyaship to today's degraded SC: How it all happened: Embracing scheduled caste status by Rajbanshis of erstwhile Bangladesh and North Bengal was a right step or set back needs pondering. No other Kshatriya community has taken such a drastic step. In northern states in India, no Rajput or Kshatriya community can ever think of embracing SC status as this status today symbolizes low caste people and almost untouchable to higher caste people.

In the introductory pages of his doctoral dissertation work-cum-book 'Dynamics of a Caste Movement – Rajbanshis of North Bengal, 1910-1947' published by Manohar Publishers & Distributors, New Delhi(2003), Dr. Swaraj Basu agreed to whatever be said elsewhere, there was no dispute about the fact that the Rajbanshis were the early settlers in North Bengal. They were a socially homogeneous community and they had no sub-caste. Their socio-religious practices were simple and free from Brahmanical rigidities. Thus, he found that Rajbanshis had a distinct character.

As such, it is evident that the Rajbanshis did not have 'Varna' system until advent of the Aryans. Because of their ferociousness and fighting spirits, Arayanised invaders described them as 'Pundra Kshatriyas' a martial class, who were earlier also known as 'Kuvacha' or 'Kiratas', or more slangy as 'Danavas, or 'Asuras'. These Pundra Kshatriyas were none but the earlier settlers in North Bengal, who had the origin of both Mongoloid and Dravidians mingled together. This is why, Rajbanshis, at times are said to be related to Bodos and at the same time said to have Dravidian origin as claimed by scholars. Bodos had their origin in 'Chinas', as 'Kacharis' had. Towards south Bengal, Rajbanshis resemble more of a Dravidian physiognomy, whereas, towards north and northeast, they more of a having it like Mongoloid physiognomy.

It is true that in the ancient period, Rajbanshis did not practice Brahmanical rituals but had their own rituals, which mainly dedicated to Lord Shiv and Goddess Parvati, albeit in their different forms. When Varna system was introduced in their fold, Rajbanshis were placed at higher pedestal just below the Brahmins and equated with the Kshatriyas of mainland India. It does not hold substance in saying that Rajbanshis are a low caste as seen from the eyes of some modern day non-Rajbanshi scholars.

Prior to 'Kshatriya Movement', Rajbanshis described themselves as 'Vratya Kshatriya'. 1911 onwards they declared themselves as pure Kshatriyas. Since 1912 mass sacred thread wearing (Paita grahan) ceremonies were organized by Kshatriya Samiti at many places in northern part of undivided Bengal, where lakhs of Rajbanshis took part. By doing so they wanted to establish their identity as Kshatriya i.e. a warrior class next to the Brahmins only.

Flaw in falling from the grace of Kshatriya status to SC does not lie with any particular person or group of persons but the circumstances under which Rajbanshi caste leaders underwent the political process beginning from early twentieth century. Let us see how the Rajbanshis lost their pristine caste status in the eyes of the Royal Indian Government. The Kshatriya Samiti headed by Roysaheb Thakur Panchanan Barma, for reasons relevant in his time, re-asserting for Kshatriya status for fellow Rajbanshis of undivided Bengal wanted special provisions for opportunities for them to improve their socio-economic and political position. However, for reasons best known to them Koch Rajbanshis of undivided Assam and places in neighbouring countries Nepal and Bhutan where Rajbanshis lived were not included in their agenda. Thakur Panchanan Barma viewed the issue in a positive way and he was of the opinion that, '...the Rajbanshis and some other

castes still needed special protection from the government in order to make themselves equal with the already advanced higher castes. But the term 'depressed classes, bore social stigma and it smacked of social inferiority. He suggested that in its place the term 'backward classes' could be used and education be made the criterion for ascertaining backwardness." (Dr. Swaraj Basu). While Bengal Provincial Hindu Sabha did not favour Rajbanshis to be included in the list of depressed classes as they claimed to be real Kshatriyas and wore the sacred thread' Jonieu'. However, the Bengal Depressed class Association, which was founded in 1932 to their logical end and political gain, opined otherwise and demanded that Rajbanshis be included in the list of depressed class. Acceptance of status of depressed class by the Rajbanshi Kshatriya leaders was sharply criticized by a section of literate Rajbanshi community. They felt that it would degrade them socially. But by his sheer influence, Thakur Panchanan Barma prevailed upon them and succeeded in persuading his fellow community people to accept inclusion in the list of depressed class. Somehow, the list prepared by Lord Lotham, Rajbanshi community did not figure in it. Then, the leaders of Kshatriya Samiti fought it again, appealed to the Reforms Officer, Government of Bengal. In 1933, by Government of India Resolution, 'Depressed Class' was replaced by that of 'Scheduled Caste' (or, simply SC, which of course, now looked down in different angle).

Motive behind change of nomenclature was to widen the scope of the very idea of up-liftment of the downtrodden people and even to include those lower caste people hitherto cursed as untouchables. In the list of SC for Bengal, published at the end of the year 1933 by the Bengal Reforms Office, Rajbanshi community was included. Dr. Swaraj Basu in his aforesaid research work in the chapter titled 'Beyond Kshatriyaization' p.91, had to say, '...This inclusion no doubt helped the community in getting special concessions, but the inconsistency between their claimed social rank and the special privileges achieved as a member of the Scheduled Caste category remained unresolved. In spite of the argument put forward by Panchanan Barma, the higher caste elites looked at this as an opportunistic maneuver of the Kshatriya Samiti.'

This happening, thus paved the way for the Rajbanshis to change the course of their lives socially for worst in times to come. While Kshatriya Samiti still argued in its favour of newly acquired status of SC with backing of Panchanan Barma, the elite group of the community dubbed it as a political gimmick and was not happy to equate themselves with the lower castes like Dom, Mochi, Sweepers etc. The year 1933 proved to be the turning point for the elite group of Rajbanshis, mostly whom were royal houses, government officials, intellectuals landlords and economically better off suddenly found themselves in quandary and slowly but surely to the utter dislike of SC stamp, started drifting away from the community and leaving the very tag of the community out of their identity. The royal displacement of the once glorified Koch Rajbanshis from the social milieu began then onwards and still continued, albeit in changed manner with a veil of socio-economic and political tactical game plan as it appears today.

The status achieved by a Kshatriyas community was, at that time did not appear to be so denigrated socially as of today. The ideals of Panchanan Barma in getting SC status were to lift the community up socio-economically were undoubtedly noble during that period. He wanted protection and opportunities for up-liftment of the Rajbanshi community but in return his beloved community SC status, which is now become a word representing only depressed low castes. But over the years, it proved otherwise. Persons belonging to SC or ST do not

enjoy respectable social status anymore. Sociologists would agree that SC or SC status given to Kshatriya community is not in proper order; what needed was guarantee of creation of an environment for proper education to prepare for competitive jobs, economic safeguards from loosing lands to outsiders, development of language and own culture and overall economic development of the region. Educational stipend given to Rajbanshi students in North Bengal appears to be too little to uplift their socio-economic status. Due to all these reasons discussed, many an educated or well off Koch or Rajbanshi, to the much delight of others, sighs away from self identity and try to project self as the member of mainstream group of the society, especially in today's West Bengal and Asom.

Despite all these bonhomie created by Kshatriya leaders, inclusion of Rajbanshi in the books of the office of Bengal Reforms did not help these leaders much in the power politics. But, in the long run, after almost a century now, the Rajbanshi community of North Bengal economically has gone weaker, socially became the worst and at the receiving end politically.

So, while it is justifiable for certain castes traditionally engaged in menial professions like tannery or scavenging, sweepers, washer men, barbers or such other professions lacking social prestige, as for them special protective rights and care are necessary to uplift them socio-economically. But in no case, should it be justifiable for the Kshatriyas, who are only next to the Brahmins in social strata. As it was brought out earlier also, being Kshatriyas, Rajputs of Bihar or Rajasthan can never accept the status of SC as Rajbanshis did.

(j) Drive for getting Scheduled Tribe Status under 6th Schedule of the Indian Constitution

At it stands now, about 706 communities together with 874 sub-groups or synonyms in different States in India are notified as per Article 244 of Part X under the head- THE SCHEDULED AND TRIBAL AREAS. These tribal communities are governed under the 5th Schedule to the Constitution, which empowered the President to declare these tribal areas as such. Article 244(2) makes the provisions of Sixth Schedule applicable for tribal areas in the States of Asom, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Tripura. These areas of four North Eastern States are governed under 6th Schedule, according to which these areas are to be administered as autonomous districts. A constitutional amendment of the Article 224 is necessary to make the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution effective in these tribal areas. Although, special status given to these tribal areas ensure certain economic benefits to these tribal people, but more than that harm has been caused to their social status as they cannot compete with General Category or the mainstream citizens of the nation socially and area destined to remain as second class citizens. How far provisions enshrined in 5th & 6th Schedules have been successful in ensuring proper administration and peace in these scheduled areas that can only be said in due course of time; what we can observe is that the State Government always holds the strings to control all these areas administratively. Actual power remains in the hands ruling parties in the State as well as Central Government. Practically, it is the State Government, which has the say in the matters of administration and any constitutional amendment in such matters as per both aforesaid schedules.

Gorkhas of Darjeeling Hill Council are trying to get this special status as ST. How the Gorkhas of this hill district would flourish after obtaining the status of ST, but for certain, the status would make them second class citizen of India and many educated or highly placed

Gorkhas of Darjeeling would hesitate to loose the present status of General caste. There is all the likelihood of 'Flight of the Elite' meaning the elite class of Gorkhas better prefer to leave the community rather than accepting the ST status as happened in case elite class of Rajbanshis, who have hidden their identity as Rajbanshi, have not accepted the status as SC and tried to become (unsuccessfully?) mainstream Bengali or Assamese as the case may be, ultimately falling prey to an identity crisis. Policy of granting special status in the sixth schedule of the Indian Constitution can at times be used an effective political weapon by the people at the helms of power to their greatest advantage. The best way to subdue an aboriginal community or tribe in India is to grant them special status under this schedule. Because, granting SC/ST/OBC status, although yet to prove beneficial to the needy people after so many decades, may lift economic position to some extent but not necessarily guarantee socio-political development, in fact deteriorates them in this count immensely and outcast them literally. The system, so far acted as a tool to downgrade all such communities and tribes to a second rung citizens. Let us see analyze the reality of ST status given to aboriginals of few states. The Tripuris, who were the ruling people in Tripura, now constituting only 30% outnumbered by migrants stand nowhere socio-economic and politically. The Mizos of Mizoram and Khasis, Garos and other aboriginals of Meghalaya and Tribal communities in Asom such as Chutias, Karbis, Bodos etc. do feel as second rung citizens of India.

Now Koch-Rajbanshi leaders in Assam are pressing for ST status. How viable it would be for the Koch-Rajbanshis in Assam to get ST status is debatable. Are they really tribal? Did they not embrace Hinduism centuries back and loose the tribal status? Do their glorious past and overwhelming population in almost one third of the Northeast India are not an indication of they being an original mainstream Indian community? Before taking such a step, all likely fall outs should be considered because it is certain that if such status is awarded to the community there is all likelihood of loosing present social status and the most of the well off and educated Koch-Rajbanshis of Assam may stop identifying themselves as ST as similar thing happened when Rajbanshi leaders in North Bengal got their status changed as SC.

(k) Reservation and Quota Regime - Any Hidden Agenda?

There is no denial of the fact that reservation is must for uplifting a group of people from backwardness but whether it should be made perpetual or need based is a highly debatable issue of the day. The latest controversy of reservation of 27% seats to OBC candidates in country's elite institutions like Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs) and Indian Institutes of Management (IIMs) stirred a hornet's nest. Pro-reservationists backed by political parties favour the Mandal Commission's recommendations be extended to these institutions also. While the government is in favour of implementing the policy, there lies certain constitutional hitch as OBCs are defined. States have their own list of OBCs. So, there is all likelihood of manipulation. The census conducted in 1931 could not be the basis for identifying the OBCs for the purpose of providing quota. Pro-reservationists' views are that in line with the controversial recommendations of the Mandal Commission submitted to the central government in 1989, which provided 27% job reservation to the category of Other Backward Castes (OBC) reservation should also be extended to admission to the higher

educational institutions. According to them reservation is must for uplifting of the people belonging to the backward class, who do not form the part of SC or ST. Since the government has accepted the recommendations of the commission, it is bound to implement these. Recent developments and agitations of general caste students against such policy do not indicate a bleak future for the Indian society.

Anti-reservationists on the other hand feel that providing educational and job reservations to the OBCs who form the majority of the vote bank are a political gimmick. According to them, the political parties are dividing the Indian society on the basis of caste to gain political mileage. Anti-reservationists, while favouring economic aids for up-liftment of the poor and downtrodden to enable them study higher and compete with others, they are averse to eating away the share of the General Caste students or candidates. Thus this group of people is against the government's move to reservation of seats in educational institutions and jobs on the basis of caste. According to them actual benefit of quota or reservation regime goes to the handful of educated lot belonging to affluent people holding caste certificates and needy people remain deprived.

How much the Reservation Policy helped the Community? Reservation policy for the SC candidates for jobs and monetary benefit as scholarship to Rajbanshi students in West Bengal are two attractive schemes government schemes. Their objectives are noble but there are also, certain adverse effects on the community as a whole like sweetmeats do have diabetic effects. While students' scholarship stipend is alone not enough to enable every Rajbanshi student to pursue further studies, even if some one of them gets a degree job cannot be assured because there are candidates from other castes having better exposure to get selected for the job.

Such government policies on student scholarship and reservation for higher education and jobs are meaningless when drop out rate at middle school level is high. Rajbanshi community is believed to be one such unfortunate community having one of the highest school dropout rates. Average drop out could be anywhere but certainly not above matriculation. What kind of job can be made available to an under-matric Rajbanshi youth? More over, they have hardly any exposure to the outer world. So, in such a pitiable situation, whether reservation is 15% or 100% hardly makes a difference to the Rajbanshis, who are mostly poor and illiterate. Thus, its root cause is sheer poverty and underdevelopment. Therefore, it would be appropriate if these root causes were addressed first before reserving seats for them for higher studies and jobs.

How the Major Flaws in Reservation Policy affected Rajbanshis: A noble idea and, more nobler it being enshrined in the constitution, Reservation has become much talked about topic in Indian polity today. It has become one of the most potent expedient that political parties of both left and rightist ideals often swear by it to inflict political blows to each other very often. No political party dares to speak against reservation that is supposedly beneficial for the uplifting the scheduled caste/tribes, other backward castes and much backward other class people. People of India are busy in mudslinging to each other over the issue whenever any question is raised about the modalities of reservation that it appears that each and every citizen is concerned about the plight of the lower class people.

The implications of the constitutional provisions in the matter and present policy being followed by the government need retrospection; otherwise instead of doing good to

Rajbanshis present reservation policy is harming them the most and all the benefits go only go to a section of influential people. Reasons for the failure of the present policy creating such an unpleasant situation not only for this particular community but also other communities of all over the country need to be analysed. Why not give a fair trial in search of real flaws in the present system of reservation so that matter can be debated for the benefit of the deprived?

Major flaws of the present reservation policy can be explained to the readers in following lines: -

i) **In North Bengal:** In whole of North Bengal barring its hilly areas and towns and cities Rajbanshis constitute the majority in population and going either by their sheer numerical strength they should get major share in seats in educational institutions or jobs. This argument is in line with the fundamental right of equal opportunity in employment as enshrined in the Article 16. But, actually what happened is really astonishing. This particular major community of indigenous people in West Bengal has been awarded scheduled caste status enabling them to get a meager share of 15% reservation in jobs giving away 85% of such opportunities to others majority of whom are mainstream caste Hindu Bengali migrated to North Bengal. That too, aforesaid 15% reservation available to Rajbanshis of North Bengal is shared by much more qualified and widely exposed scheduled caste Bengali and others migrated people. With a population except few jobs such as schoolteachers in rural areas where non-Rajbanshis are reluctant to go, representation of this community in state civil services is negligible. Ever since this particular community has become scheduled caste in Bengal in 1933, there has been steady downfall all the way and deprivation of jobs has undoubtedly a major factor. Thus it has been observed that majority population of a particular region is actually a minority as far as job opportunities are concerned that looks like a policy of apartheid. Similar position can be observed elsewhere in the nation where majority population actually gets lesser job opportunities.

ii) **In Assam:** Most of the student organisations of Koch Rajbanshis of Assam are demanding for inclusion their community in the list of scheduled tribes. They are not happy with the present system of social status of Other Backward Caste; as such arrangement neither has created enough job opportunities for them nor given them political recognition like Bodo tribes. Both Koch Rajbanshis and Bodos form the absolute majority population of lower Assam but when job opportunities come more than half the share goes to other communities. For example in Bongaigaon district total population is almost equally divided between Bodos and Koch Rajbanshis, which as per fundamental right of equal opportunities should provide almost 50% jobs to each of them. But, actually their share in jobs is much less as compared to their numerical strength. As of now, their share of 27% reservation as OBC gets further shared by other communities of the state. Whether it is feasible or not, they demand for scheduling their community, so that at least 7.5% jobs are ensured. Thus a serious flaw in the reservation policy diluting the fundamental right of equal opportunities for jobs can be observed due to constitutional binding of less than 50% reservation for them including other reserved category of people in the state. Here too, being majority in numerical strength the community is deprived.

iii) **In Bihar:** Till few years back, for all practical purposes Rajbanshis in Bihar were the upper caste Hindu community, so there was no reservation for them. Job opportunities too were not enough; whatever vacancies were created used to be filled by candidates belonging to both scheduled caste and scheduled tribe or by the politically dominating mainstream caste Hindu Biharis. Most of the literate Rajbanshis looked for jobs elsewhere. Now things have changed, Rajbanshis got the status of Other Backward Caste listed as Annexure but no surety of firm job reservation. Thus, scenario in Bihar has gone from bad to worse, where they have lost both social status as higher Hindu caste and job opportunities. What is worst is that due to downgrading its social status the community is losing sympathy from their counterparts in Nepal where Rajbanshis enjoy the highest social status as 'Kshatriyas of royal lineage' because their forefathers were related to the Nepal kings in some points of time and still they do so.

iv) **In General:** Whole world is on top when poor becomes rich but it hurts the most when rich becomes poor. Similar is the case for most of the Rajbanshis including those having royal lineage, whose forefathers were 'Zamindar' or landlords and all those self-esteeming families, who never accepted any of the lowly social status of scheduled caste, scheduled tribe or other backward caste and always took pride in being a higher caste. They stand nowhere now as neither they can gather courage to lower their status as SC or ST or OBC, nor can get fully absorbed into the mainstream communities of Bengali or Assamese or Biharis. They are losers all the way, even as general category their chances are bleak due to proposed changes in recent reservation policy on enhancement quota for OBCs. Reservation or quota system has proved to be meaningless for Rajbanshis as in either case they do not get right kind of opportunities to be qualified enough to compete for higher jobs like medical, engineering or joining elite institutions like IITs, AIIMS, IIMs etc.

Therefore, would not it be right to create an environment where children belonging to economically weaker people or the people below poverty line (BPL) regardless of their caste or community are given due opportunities for both carry on higher studies and be fit enough to compete successfully for jobs? In that way, will it not be the justice done and right of equality honoured?

(I) Are Koch and Rajbanshis same or different?

By their nature human beings tend to differ from each other. One of these finest examples of this universal truth has been orchestrated to malign the image of Koch-Rajbanshis of North East while trying to reiterate the upper caste image of the Rajbanshis of Greater Bengal by politically compelled leaders and few some scholars never knowing the truth and underlying repercussions of emphasizing the differences between these earliest caste Hindu communities. Whether they are of the same origin and how they distanced from each other or, they are different community and tribe altogether, is to be understood in broader perspective. Both the words 'Koch' and 'Rajbanshi' should not be considered for the purpose of ridiculing and neglecting this community. In their language the Rabhas, one of the close associate or can be considered one of the parent tribe of Koch Rajbanshis in Assam

‘Koch’ means ‘Human’. Meaning of Rajbanshi has already been brought out in earlier chapter. S.L. Baruah (A Comprehensive History of Assam) had to say: -

"...The word 'Koch' is a term of some ambiguity. In Assam proper, it has become the name of a Hindu castes into which are received tribal converts like the Kacharis, Lalungs, Mikirs and Garos. In North Bengal and Goalpara, on the other hand, the term 'Koch' has been abandoned for appellation 'Rajvamsi', which denotes a tribe and not a caste, whose ethnological origin has been matter of controversy..."

However, it is pertinent here to mention what D. Nath had to say in his book ‘History of the Koch Kingdom (1515-1615), 1989’: -

“...It is possible that when the Koches became conscious of their past ancestral glory at later period, they began to call themselves as Rajbanshis – meaning ‘descendants’ of royal kindred. The new appellation also made them feel somewhat superior to the rest of their kinsmen...”. The historian also wrote, "...The Koches belonging to the stock of the present day Meches, Hojais, Hajongs and other Bodo groups of the great Mongoloid races established a kingdom in the western Brahmaputra valley in the early 16th century..."

Arup Jyoti Das, in his recent research work opined: -

“...During the ‘Kshatriya Movement’ by Rajbanshis of North Bengal in the early part of the 20th century, there was a tendency among the Rajbanshi leaders to differentiate ‘Rajbanshi’ from ‘Koch’ identity. But their arguments were mostly based on mythological stories and had no objective value. Panchanan Burma and Hara Kishor Adhikari were among those Rajbanshi leaders who said that the Koches and Rajbanshis were not the same. Their main intention behind this opinion was to establish the Rajbanshis with a superior identity to that of the Koches...”.

Views of Dr. Francis Buchanan: An invaluable treasure that we refer in connection with Koch and Rajbanshi is found from an old manuscript of Dr. Francis Buchanan alias Buchanan-Hamilton, commonly known as ‘Buchanan Manuscripts’ kindly lent by the authorities of the India Office Library, London in September, 1928 supposedly prepared for Royal Asiatic Society to Shri Suryya Kumar Bhuiyan, then the Vice-Chancellor, Gauhati University, who got it printed and got them recorded as Appendix ‘C’ in ‘KAMRUPAR BURANJI’ published by the Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies: Assam in 1958. In it, Buchanan wrote the followings regarding Koch-Rajbanshis under the heading ‘The Origin of the Koch’: -

“Although the Yogini-Tantra calls the father of Hira a barbarian (Melechchho), yet it has been discovered that the Koch were not in fact an impure tribe, as had been in general supposed, but were descended from some Khyotriyos, who had fled into Kamrup and the adjacent country of Chin, in order to escape from the violence of Porosuram, when that deity pursued the kings of the earth, and gave their territories to the Brahmans. In the exile the descendants of the Khyotriyos had departed from many parts of the Hindu law and on this account were considered impure. This seems to be exactly the same story, which Sir W. Jones quotes (As. Res. II.p.368) from the institutes of Menu, and on the authority of which he deduces the origin of the Chinese from the Hindus. The features both of Chinese and Koch seem to me insuperable objections against that theory, and I have no doubt that both the passage of Menu and the fable of the Koch are equally founded on notional vanity, which however

unbecoming in a lawyer or philosopher like Menu, is excusable enough in the Koch, who among the people with whom it is their fortune to live, are naturally desirous of procuring some means of being raised from the drags of impurity. On this pretended descent the Koch, or at least all of them that have adopted the Hindu religion, and have relinquished their impure practices, assume the title of Rajbongsis, or descendants of princes, and the other rude tribes of Kamrup and Chin, such as Mech and Hajong, who have followed their example in religion, have assumed the same title. All the descendants of Hira, still further related by their supposed divine origin, assume the title of Dev or Lord and all the reigning princes of the family claim the title of Narayaon, which among the Hindus is one of the names of the supreme deity. 210”

The unwanted difference among the same community separated due to geographical location and political reasons was recorded in ‘The Imperial Gazetteer, 1908, Volume-X, p.383’, in which it was written that Vaishnavite Rajbanshis of North Bengal belonged to Dravidian and Saivite Koches belonged to Mongoloid stocks. Perhaps the British officials visiting North Bengal in those days unable to enter Assam took it for granted that Rajbanshis of North Bengal and caste Hindu Bengali community is one and the same. But the statement given in the said Gazetteer appeared to be misleading, as Rajbanshis of North Bengal are Saivite and their physiognomy revealed Mongoloid features similar to that of their brethren in Assam. This gazetteer being an official paper became an authority for further references in terms of any official work like census or franchise. But it created an unwarranted division among these people of the community. No doubt in Garo hills of Meghalaya and Goalpara district in Assam, Koch language is spoken in original, which is similar to Garo or Boro but conversion has since taken place for long years now and original Koches are limited in this area only.

Rajbanshi was a title as recorded in ‘Buchanan Manuscripts’. Only descendants of Kamta-Kamrup kings were initially permitted to use this title. In ‘Account of Assam’, Hamilton (Buchanan) wrote: -

“...On the north side (of river Brahmaputra) the only Raja is Dorong, who is by far the most considerable, and most respected. In Assam, he is called a Koch, the title of Rajbongsi not being acknowledged...”

So, not authorizing to use the appellation Rajbanshi to the Koch kings of the north bank of the river Brahmaputra was a matter of enmity between same royal houses or creation of a social barrier due to rivalry between two royal houses having same origin. Koch Behar kings were easily taken as Rajbanshi. As of now, some difference of opinion still persists on their identity but going by the historical facts and physiognomy, Koch- Rajbanshis of Assam, Meghalaya and Rajbanshi Kshatriyas of Bengal, Bihar and Nepal are the one and same.

What Sir Gait had to say about them? : Can we take it in totality what Sir Edward Gait as written in his ‘A History of Assam’ that the Koches appeared to have been originally a Bodo tribe, closely allied to Meches and Kacharis, but many of them now present the physical characteristics of Dravidian family as a gospel truth to prove that Koches are Bodos of Assam or they are different from Rajbanshis of North Bengal and its adjacent areas? Or, similarly can we conclude that Rajbanshis or Koches are purely originated from Dravidian family? Or, else would not it be wise to analyse the sayings of scholars in details? Sir Gait also said that from the opposite corner of India through Assam and eastern Himalayas, there was a similar influx of tribes of Mongolian origin, whose main physical characteristics were

short head, a broad face, a short but comparatively hairless face, a short but muscular figure and a yellow skin. In Asom (excluding Surma valley) and North East Bengal, the Dravidian type has to a great extent been replaced by the Mongolian, while in the Surma valley and rest of Bengal a mixture of races has been taken place in which the recognizable Mongolian element diminishes towards the west and disappears altogether before Bihar is reached. Ancient Pundra Kshatriyas of Gaur and Barendra (Parts of North Bengal and Rajshahi Division of Bangladesh), now called the Rajbanshis and converted Muslims had diminishing Mongolian but prominent Dravidian features.

If that were the case, then undoubtedly there have been an intermingling between the Bodos of Mongolian origin heading from the east and the aboriginal inhabitants of the Gaur or Barendra, and thereby creating amalgamated people of Koch or the Rajbanshis. Were these people known as Pundra Kshatriyas or Kuvacha in ancient literature? If not who were all these people of similar physiognomy ordinarily residing in vast terrains extending from eastern Bihar and Eastern Nepal to as far as upper Assam from the time immemorial?

Identity as such of Rajbanshis of north-eastern India was not mentioned in any Epic, Puran or even it was unheard in ancient period. Then, can we say that Rajbanshis were none but those people who had the royal lineage of Kuvach kings of Barendra or later known as Kamtapur? Then in later years of medieval period all the aboriginals of Kamtapur areas preferred to identify themselves as Rajbanshi? Other aboriginal tribes having a close affinity with Koches also preferred to identify as Koch Rajbanshi. Again, question is whether Rajbanshis of northern part of Bihar and eastern Nepal will ever like to change their identity as upper caste Kshatriya and downgrade themselves as either as SC or ST? It is a million dollar question.

Then, Sir Gait wrote in his aforesaid book that in the Brahmaputra valley, Koch formerly the name of a tribe has become a caste, which admits proselytes to Hinduism from the ranks of the Kacharis and other aboriginal tribes. A similar process has no doubt taken place in the Surma valley where various communities now regarded as Hindu castes consist largely of aboriginal elements. Going by the Gait's work, would it be in order for all these caste Hindus, like Koch - Rajbanshis, Syhleti Bengalis and Kacharis to revert back to past obscure history just to claim tribal status? Or for the matter, are still bear the tribal cultures like the Bodos, Khasis or Nagas do? To find an answer to these entire questions one has to ponder over the reality and not just to a conclusion.

For all probability, the word Koch was derived from Kuvach or Kirata or China were the earliest mainstream ancient communities of North Eastern India, who were primarily of Mongoloid stock. When Dravidian advent took place, an intermixed community was born named Pundra made settlements in Pundravardhan or later in Barendra and Kamta-Kamrup, the areas now fall in the districts of Dinajpur, Maldah in North Bengal, districts of Purnia and Kishanganj in North Bihar, some portion of eastern Nepal, northern Bangladesh and a sizable portion of Asom. When the advent of Aryans took place, while Pundra resisted their advent for centuries and earned the status as Pundra Kshatriya i.e. a martial race like Aryans, one of their co-communities, the Kiratas, due to advent of Aryans were forced to settle in difficult areas of the northern hills of Nepal, Sikkim, Bhutan and semi-hilly tracts of greater Asom. The Chinas were forced to move to further eastern hills of Eastern Bhutan and present day Arunachal Pradesh. So, the differentiation among Rajbanshi, Koch and other closely related communities and tribes of North East India began from the very ancient period. With the rise of the Koch Empire in almost entire North Eastern India during the medieval period, due

to their close proximity the hilly and semi-hilly tribes of Boro, Mech, Kachari, Karbi, Matak, Lalung, Garo and few others converted to Hinduism and embraced as Koch Rajbanshi. Since Koch kings belonged to present day Asom and forced the Rajbanshis of North Bengal to come under their suzerainty, there existed a complexion between other Rajbanshi kings of North Bengal and Koch Bihar kings. Even, Koch kings claimed to be Kshatriyas and preferred to identify as Koch-Rajbanshis. Rajbanshis of North Bengal always have a feeling of upper caste and prefer to marry off their daughters to Koch Rajbanshis of Assam. During the Ahom rule in Assam, Koch- Rajbanshis remained cut off from their counterparts in North Bengal, Bihar, Bangladesh and Nepal for centuries together, which made them to sever ties and blood relationship. Even today, any rural folk of North Bengal would address a Koch Rajbanshi of Assam as an 'Agaparia Sodor' meaning a relative from erstwhile Koch Kingdom from the east. We do not find variation in their physiognomy of these people, they live in a contiguous region, their habits are same and the language they speak is the one. It is not understood as to why in the census of 1913 difference was shown between Koch and Rajbanshis? By their origin, physiognomy and language, there could not be any differences between them except as already said the gap created due to geo-political reasons. What Kshatriya Samiti and British surveyors did to create a difference between Koch and Rajbanshis may not be the gospel truth that can never be changed. Better they sink their self-made allusive racial differences among themselves now; otherwise days are not far off when neither Koch nor Rajbanshi will survive. Should it be then, drilled into their minds that they are no different but one and the same? Names may differ but they are Rajbanshis, simply.

(m) Has the Idea of Rajbanshis identifying as Bengali failed?

Bengali-Rajbanshi relationship is old, closely interlinked in many ways yet there exists certain misconceptions that separate them culturally, linguistically and in their physiognomy. Major distinction being the look-wise distinction between mainstream caste Hindu Bengali and Rajbanshi Kshatriyas is very prominent but it is not so when compared with the Assamese. Problem does exist as to whether Rajbanshi Kshatriyas of West Bengal and Koch-Rajbanshis of Assam are really accepted as mainstream Bengali or Asomiya? More than a century and quarter ago, Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay wrote in an article titled 'Bangalir Utpatti', published in Bengali journal 'Banga Darshan', Magh, 1287(Bengali Chronology) declined to accept the Koches as Bengali. A common question that is often posed to a Bengali speaking Rajbanshis whether they are Bengali in real sense and which place they hailed from? Affirmative answer from them appears to be unconvincing, as appearance of Rajbanshi does not commensurate with the answer. In Assam, Rajbanshis seemingly identify as Ahomiya or Assamese. Both in Bengal and Assam, to most of the educated lot exhibits a tendency of clamoring for showing off their identity as the mainstream State resident.

The rural Rajbanshis who unlike the rich traders and the royals of the North Bengal could not afford to migrate to the green pastures of down south of the river Hoogly towards Kolkata and were left behind in the undeveloped villages only to be ridiculed as 'Babahe' or the Rustics by the Europeans, which later taken over by the mainstream caste Hindu Bengali. However, scholars clarified the true meaning of the word, which actually was used by Rajbanshis for addressing their male youths in a respectful manner.

Dr. Girijasankar Ray, a renowned Rajbanshi educationalist, prolific writer and sociologist, while agreeing that Rajbanshis in North Bengal are Bengali raised a question pertinent to this vexed problem in the introductory part of his work, 'Uttarbanje Rajbanshi Kshatriya Jatir Puja-Parvan' Second edition, 1999, p. XII over the identity of Rajbanshi people residing in Assam, Meghalaya, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal and Bihar as to whether these people too be called Bengali? He justifies that Rajbanshis differ from Bengali people not only in their spoken language but in their socio-cultural habits too. He also differentiates them from the people of similar name residing in 24 Pargana and other districts of South Bengal as there is no similarity between them at all.

Most of the literate or the elite group of Koch or Rajbanshis in Bengal think himself or herself as Bengali, whatever be the arguments otherwise, which is in politically correct as where they reside that gives the identity. Even during the Company's time, Francis Hamilton, in his manuscripts 'An Account of Assam', while dealing with a neighbouring country, Bhutan, wrote, "... The territory of the Vihar Raja (King of Cooch Behar), when I visited that country, was so much interposed between Bhotan and the Company's possessions, that I had little opportunity of conversing with the subjects of the Deva Raja (King of Bhutan). Most of those whom I saw were the Koch or Rajbanshis, who occupy the low country conquered by the Bhoteas, who are mere Bengalese, and who know very little of the real people of Bhotan, or of their manners. ...". From the glorious days of East India Company, influence of flourishing Bengali culture was so much that every literate Koch or Rajbanshi preferred to be identified him or herself as Bengali. Even, the king of Cooch Behar preferred to employ Bengalis in his kingdom.

While a typical educated or less educated but comfortably established Rajbanshi tend to hide his or her identity but not possible in most cases, majority of mainstream caste Hindu Bengali takes it with a pinch of salt to consider a Rajbanshi as one of them. In another case, being one of the sweetest languages Bengali is always preferred by him or her to mother tongue i.e. Rajbanshi or Kamtapuri, which he or she feels shy to speak out in public as it is considered a rustic language. Enormous development of Bengali music, art and its cultural heritage has always beckoned the Rajbanshis to love Bengali. Moreover, liberal thoughts of Bengali culture like anybody else attract this particular community to identify itself as one of them. So, the elite Rajbanshis in particular generally avoid speaking Rajbanshi or Kamtapuri in a so-called high mainstream society in general and West Bengal. This is indeed a paradoxical proposition.

To search reasons for creation of such a paradoxical situation, one has to go back to earlier period of modern history. As brought out earlier, mainstream Bengali culture developed tremendously from early seventeenth century when Europeans made settlements in and around Kolkata. Subsequently, similar development spread to Dacca, another cultural hub of undivided Bengal. For all practical purposes, Bengali gentry became the *via media* between the Europeans, particularly the Englishmen of the East India Company and the native Indians. Influence of British culture acted as force multiplier in developing Bengali culture. By the turn of the century this culture almost gained dominating position not only in Bengal but also in neighbouring states. The Koch kingdom was no exception; in fact the Koch kings were keen to bring literate Bengalis for the purpose of teaching in schools. Educated Bengalis were employed in royal houses and were assigned important jobs especially in state affairs as they could converse fluently with the British officials. By the turn of another century i.e. by the end of nineteenth century Bengali population increased

manifold in royal urban centres, which subsequently became important urban centres in North Bengal such as Koch Bihar, Jalpaiguri, Maldah and few other important centres. Bengal was divided after independence; the Rajbanshis of entire erstwhile Kamata area warmly accepted migrated Bengali populace. Bengali populace made their settlements in urban centres of North Bengal. As Bengali culture, by this period around, was a much more developed than Rajbanshi culture, Bengali became the language of the Rajbanshi elite in North Bengal. As Bengali was the state language there was looking back for this culture. Entire North Bengal barring its hilly areas inhabited by Gorkhas came under virtual domination of Bengali culture as a result of which Rajbanshi culture lagged behind. The superiority and domination by Bengali culture and language have adversely affected the originality of rich cultural and linguistic heritage of Rajbanshis in North Bengal and Assam; in fact, such cultural domination has proved to be so powerful, enduring and most effective tool cripple another culture like cultural and linguistic heritage of Rajbanshis in North Bengal.

As we have discussed in history part, especially the British have often considered Rajbanshis as Bengali. Even, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel was in the impression that these people were Bengali. In a letter dated 28th December 1949 written to then Prime Minister, Jawahar Lal Nehru he stated: -

“...Bengalis would never have allowed Cooch Behar to remain away from them for long. Cooch Behar itself is a Bengali area...In any case, organizationally, in regard to Cooch Behar, we have to be guided by what the Cooch Behar Congress tells us to do...”

Patel too considered Rajbanshis as mainstream caste Hindu Bengali and taking what he said as a gospel truth Rajbanshis were too happy to identify themselves as Bengali proper. But question remained as ever as to whether mainstream Bengali would ever take them into their fold and grant them the mainstream status. Similar case remains applicable with the Koch Rajbanshis in Assam too. Was it a blunder for the community?

Even if one speaks Bengali or projects as Bengali as observed such behaviour among the elite group of the community it is impossible to conceal the identity of Rajbanshi because of their sheer physiognomy. In fact behaviour is taken as ridiculous by the mainstream caste Hindu Bengalis in North Bengal. In history, we have seen the distinction where king Nripendra Narayan married a mainstream Bengali woman Sunity Sen., daughter of Keshab Chandra Sen, the founder of ‘Brahmo Samaj’ and after that Bengali culture took firm roots in the kingdom. In recent years we have seen elder brother of ex-Chief Minister of West Bengal, Shri Jyoti Basu had married a Rajbanshi woman belonging to royal house of the king of Jalpaiguri. In normal course also, many mainstream Bengalis marry Rajbanshi women but vice versa is rare. This is so because, while Bengali mainstream culture can accept Rajbanshi women in its fold or for the matter from any other culture, opposite is unacceptable to them due to the reasons as brought out earlier – there exists a distinction between them and likely to continue if some social changes are not made. As we live in a democratic country a socially acceptable change should be brought about with due political backing, of course!

Are Rajbanshis same as Bodo? : The word ‘Bodo’ or ‘Boro’ is comparatively new. In all possibility, Rajbanshis differ from Bodos by their language, cultural and social customs and religious ethos. Although Bodos and Koches belong to same group of Mongoloid stock and spoke Tibeto-Burman language, but over the ages Koches advanced much ahead in the plains

towards west meeting cultures of Dravidian, Aryan and subsequently absorbed in a new mixed culture that came to be known as Pundra Kshatriya or Koch Rajbanshi or Rajbanshi Kshatriya or Koch Rajbanshi or Deshi in later period. The new mixed culture spoke an amalgamated and much Sanskritised language or a Magadhi Apabhramsa language that came to be known as Kamatapuri or Rajbanshi language and remained a lingua franca in the plains of entire eastern region of Indian peninsula. Bodos on the other hand, were, and then known as Kirata-Chinas later came to be known as Kachari and Bodo. They spoke similar languages not much changed from its original form of Tibeto-Burman language. Those Koches, who remained to the rear in the areas of present day lower Assam and Garo Hills of western Meghalaya did not change much from their original habits and did not change their religion to Hinduism still speak their original Tibeto-Burman Koch language, which is similar to Kachari-Bodo language. Such tribes and communities carrying the original features of Tibeto-Burman linguistic-cultural heritage can be traced among Tripuris, Rabhas, Lalungs, Karbis and other tribes of Northeast India. Therefore, despite having similar physiognomy, Rajbanshis or Koch Rajbanshis differ with Bodos for the reasons that Rajbanshis with their Mongoloid features pre-dominant were mixed up with cultures of Dravidian and to some extent Aryan culture in later stage. They have embraced Hinduism or Sanskritised culture long ago; established kingdoms at various historical ages and in demographical strength outnumber many other mainstream Indian communities. Therefore, Rajbanshis qualify for a bigger role in Indian nation, much above the level of any tribal status. Thus, we can differentiate this community from Bodos, who have been given a constitutional status as Scheduled Tribe.

(n) Where do they now stand now socially?

The Rajbanshis are in a great dilemma over their socio-political stand. During pre-independence days, they chose to fight for freedom regardless of their political affiliation. Indian National Congress party was the major party most of them chose to join. Bengali freedom fighters inspired them the most. Feeling of alienation was absent among these people like any other people of north east. Aim was very clear and it was attaining freedom. Rajbanshis felt like the one of any other Bengali. The educated lot had already identified them as mainstream Bengali. But they were destined to remain a separate community soon after the nation's attaining freedom. Still, Dr. Bidhan Chandra Roy endeavoured to make the Rajbanshis a part of mainstream Bengali. Due to his efforts, they sided with Dr. Roy and became a part of Bengal. Might be that there was no other choice also. Slowly but surely, the gap between the mainstream Bengali and Rajbanshi Bengalis became wider and wider. For all practical purposes, there exists a big difference between south and north in the West Bengal State. They stand nowhere now.

It is a hush-hush matter for an educated Rajbanshi to reveal his/her identity as a low and backward caste as he or she is officially known to be so or speaking in own mother tongue and once the lingua franca of a vast Kamtapur Empire - Rajbanshi language in any gathering of educated lot. He or she, either speaks in Bengali in Bengal or Assamese in Assam quite unwilling to reveal the identity, which once proudly spoken by the great people of Kamrup-Kamta-Pundra. Now, it is all just aloofness, dejection, sadness and unassuming feelings that have totally engulfed a Rajbanshi. It is all 'give in' socio-economic-political policy followed by most of educated Rajbanshi, freely exploitable by any Tom, Dick and

Harry, literally. It is a common practice now that their educated lot or the elite groups per force leave their own society disgusted as most of them feel that the common Rajbanshis are incorrigible in their attitude towards the cause of betterment of their community. It appeared to them that common Rajbanshis are getting carried away with the impressive lectures of local political leaders, who assure them basic needs for living and remain loyal to them. It is a height of poverty that can be seen in Rajbanshi community. It so happens in rural North Bengal and Bihar that a poor Rajbanshi in trouble often falls on the feet of an influential local political or social leader of any community, addresses him as 'Father' to seek his blessings to get some material benefit. This unique practice is called 'Bapdai' in local parlance meaning establishing a relationship of father and son is otherwise taken as good but these days this is done either due to poverty or whenever in deep trouble. These are some of the reasons as to why educated lot or the elite Rajbanshis are unhappy about their common brethren. Also, for them it is difficult to make a common Rajbanshi to understand that besides the basic needs, socio-economic, cultural and political rights are must for their improvement.

Modern day mainstream caste Hindu Bengali youth are more concerned about globalization, information technology and fashion than to know about the socio-economic, political and other problems related to the Rajbanshi community as such. However, many a research scholars from mainstream caste Hindu Bengali, other communities even foreign scholars evince keen interests to know much more about Rajbanshis, which is a positive sign for the this hapless community.

(o) Down sliding Economic Status

How the social-economic scenario of Kamata-Kamrup area existed during ancient, medieval and at the beginning of modern period is being discussed. And, then how it deteriorated is being critically examined, because, as per my perception, social unrest has its roots at socio-economic conditions to a greater extent. Had the people of this part of the country been economically well off, dissentient would never have been erupted. So, this chapter of the book is an important aspect.

Changing Holdings of Agricultural Lands: Village or Block level political leaders wielding enormous power delegated to them from their ruling political higher ups often act as decision making bodies for the rural Rajbanshis in North Bengal. In the past, small farmers mostly the sharecroppers depended heavily on local leaders for a share of land under land distribution policy of the State Government. Most of the lands distributed to the peasants, who were estimated to be 1.4 crores alone affiliated to 'Krishak Sabha' in West Bengal, for last thirty years or so have so far changed hands several times to finally reach to the influential local of the other castes or the local level political leaders. The euphoria of land reforms and abolition of 'Zamindari' system, which engulfed in the State long ago, is almost over by now. The cherished dreams of erstwhile sharecroppers under the system of tenancy for becoming owners of lands have not come fully true. Under the land distribution system excess lands owned by the landlords acquired by the government were indeed distributed among the landless people but these poor new owners lacked capital and infrastructure for cultivation in the fields. Soon they started borrowing from their local moneylenders or their local leaders. Once money borrowed could hardly be repaid, in fact their borrowings increased to meet their day-to-day living because they had lost the earlier facility available to

them from their landlords. Finally, poor beneficiaries of distributed lands had to hand over their lands to the moneylenders in lieu of some more money. New owners of the agricultural lands were no peasants to cultivate in the fields and in most opportune times they sold their holdings to outsiders at much higher prices. Ultimately, at present, those tenant farmers or the sharecroppers of yesteryears have no worth mentioning existence; what we find today is that land holdings have either got fragmented due to increase in members of the families or changed several hands to rest with a new class of politically affiliated owners.

Abolition of ‘Landlordism’ and Advent of New Generation Landed Gentry: Soon after gaining Independence, a usual there was a lot of enthusiasm among the masses for bringing changes in the society, abolition of ‘Zamindari’ or landlord system was one of them that got priority in all the states, West Bengal being in the forefront. By legislation, the system was abolished in 1953 in the state of West Bengal. By and large, like any other the Rajbanshi landlords of North Bengal accepted the new act; such was the euphoria of the aftereffects of achieving freedom from the British yoke in 1947. Most of the landlords could manage the situation somehow and left for cities to make their second homes. Slowly but surely the migration of the landed gentry from villages to cities began. As their destination, Kolkata attracted them the most, Jalpaiguri, Cooch Behar, Darjeeling or Guwahati were the second rung choices. Rangpur, being a part of East Pakistan (now Bangladesh), a newly created Muslim dominated nation that would have been the natural choice was it was naturally opted out. The dominance of the age-old landlords in rural populace was by and large over by the end of fifties. Ownership of agricultural lands shifted to new hands, who had the purchasing power. Cash rich Hindu Bengali migrants from erstwhile East Pakistan were the most beneficiaries of the new act.

However, influx of migrants in to North Bengal was a continuous process and their number was so great, they became a major factor of political ‘Vote Bank’ and they were utilised to the fullest. They were mutually benefited too. But, it created lot of pressure on the aboriginal agriculturist Rajbanshis in North Bengal. The demand of land rose. In 1967, leftist Government of West Bengal implemented second phase of land ceiling and distribution to the landless. The backbone of the tenancy system of agriculture was broken once for all. Sharecroppers and the landless wage earners supposedly became new owners of land. But they did not have enough capital or infrastructure to plough the land and sow seeds. Within a short span of time, most of them approached their local political mentors for help, who helped them with money but in return got their lands mortgaged. Lack of funds and pressure of poverty forces the petty landowners to sell their mortgaged land to their mentors. Thus another generation of local power wielding politically affiliated landlords were born, became saved the erstwhile sharecroppers and wage earners for time being. But the problem was far from over.

In, 1977 finally ‘Operation Burga’ came as a second phase of land reforms. Remaining lands hitherto held on record in the names of the erstwhile landlords but ownership already vested in the government, were finally officially given to the landless people. Most of these landless people were the people other than the landless Rajbanshis. Bangladeshi Hindu migrants were the majority of the beneficiaries of the operation. As lands got divided into fragments and lot of Bangladeshi migration took place in rural North Bengal, from this period onwards, most of the Rajbanshi farmers began selling their lands recklessly to meet their daily needs and economic downfall of these people became more visible than

ever before. In 1978-81, as per estimate, there were 1.2 million Burgadars or the new land beneficiaries in West Bengal. The selling of agricultural lands to the outsiders by the rural Rajbanshi farmers still continues.

Displacement of Rajbanshis from Towns: In modern period, literate and better informed upper caste Bengali gentry migrated from south Bengal for royal jobs or trade actually started putting down this community began in 1908 from the day when Kalika Das Datta, minister of Cooch Behar king Nripendra Narayan colluded with the Company officials to bypass the king to take unilateral decision to secede Jalpaiguri and Darjeeling to the British Empire. In fact, after the sad demise of royal influence, upper caste Hindu Bengalis settled in the kingdom, slowly placed them in the driver's seat as far as administration of urban centres of erstwhile entire northern Bengal were concerned. It happened in case of very capital town of erstwhile Koch dynasty, Cooch Behar where ethnic Rajbanshis lost their landed properties to caste Hindu Bengalis, most of who were migrated from south long ago under the patronage of the royal house. Similar case was seen for Jalpaiguri town too. The royal palace of king of Jalpaiguri is in dilapidated state today and left over ethnic Rajbanshi residents are the unhappiest lot in the town.

About Siliguri, one of the toady's most upcoming metropolitan cities in the northeastern part of India prolific writer Soumen Nag in his book 'Bichinatar Utsa Sandhane Kamatapur Theke Uttarpurba Bharat (Bengali), Kolkata, 2003, wrote 'Before independence Siliguri was not a full town. The indigenous Rajbanshis were the major inhabitant of Siliguri. Even these areas were known by their names. The educated Bengalis who came from East Pakistan and settled in these areas after purchasing lands from local Rajbanshis first replaced the indigenous Rajbanshi name from the places with their names. The new names not only pushed back the old names into the past, this also resulted into loss of old Rajbanshi identity' (p.172). Further he wrote '...In a govt. report of 1930, the old name of the present *Deshbandhu Para* was recorded as *Rajrajeswari Jot*. Same way *Hakim Para* was *Brajasingh Jot*, *Bharat Nagar* was *Jagen Jot*, *Mahananda Para* was *Lambodas Mohan Jot* and the present *Babu Para* was recorded as *Sabur Jot*.' (p.100). *Bara Mohansingh Jote*, which is the officially recorded name for ages dedicated to a Rajbanshi personality of a prominent village near North Bengal University in Siliguri sub-division of Darjeeling district is not being used and instead given a new name as Indira Pally, Rabindra Nagar or Rabibdra Sarani to highlight the pre-dominance of the mainstream Bengali population. Weakness of Rajbanshis in two fields i.e. Cultural and Economic has subdued them before better-positioned mainstream Bengali and other business communities settled in the region. 'Socio-economic domination is most powerful and enduring', - has been well experimented on this community and now it can be termed as one of the time tested dictum that has proved beyond doubt.

Negligible Access to Industrialisation and Services Sectors: Industrialisation in Rajbanshi inhabited areas has long been neglected. Except, tea, timber and few others agro-based industries such as pineapple, bamboo, cane furniture etc. no worth mentioning industry is available in such areas where Rajbanshis can find some employability. So far these people have not proved to be enterprising, may be because of their nature or for lack of capital and opportunities. Also, they have not developed banking habits. Due to poor financial conditions and inability to pledge collateral security, generally Rajbanshis fail to get Bank loans for setting up any industry. Again, lack of adequate exposure to the modern life this community

has negligible presence in the vibrant services sector, which is contributing in the growth of Indian economy. So, unless special economic packages are given to the Rajbanshis, they cannot do business and set up any industry.

Distorted Employability of Rajbanshis: World economy is growing in much faster than ever before and so is the Indian economy. But, due to certain anomalies in the public distribution system, here in India we find people starving in certain places. We find farmers are committing suicide when monsoon fails, whereas there is no dearth of food stock in the country. Similarly, unemployed youth find it difficult to get a job whereas, after opening up the economy and private sector given easy access for last several years lot of job opportunities are being created in India. Industries are growing enormously and growth of services sector is not far behind. Little exposure and qualification with practical knowledge are enough for a youth to get a job in urban areas. It is astonishing to note that more than crore jobs have been created every year in India since the year 2000. But how many Rajbanshis got jobs?

The scenario of jobs for the rural Rajbanshis is totally different. Difference between them and the educated mainstream urban communities is so vast that no amount of economic growth can help up lifting of rural Rajbanshis. These unfortunate people, whose number is almost a crore, have to miss the bus of the country's booming employment market for which reasons are mainly two fold - high drop out rate in schools due to poverty and little exposure to urban life. The degree of the worsening situation for job opportunities to the rural Rajbanshis can be gauged when one finds hundreds and thousands of candidates belonging to this community queuing up for only few vacancies of forth grade jobs that too, they fight it out for only 15% seats being SC in case of North Bengal and 7.5 seats being ST in Assam, whereas they are in absolute majority in rural North Bengal and lower Assam.

The situations such that no amount of reservation can help these people because they have not been able to achieve even the basic educational qualification for the reasons already brought out in earlier chapter titled '*Reservation and Quota Regime - The Hidden Agenda?*' As there is hardly any scope for them to get jobs in industrial hubs or developed centres of modern technology, rural Rajbanshi youth are now moving towards manual labour like masons, artisans, wage laborers, stone crushers, domestic help etc. This is the bitter truth and the reality happening to these hapless Rajbanshis today. This trend is harming to the community heavily and is a cause of deep concern; unless trend is reversed the community cannot come out from the downslide of their economic conditions. Also, poor economic conditions are one of the major motivating factors for the Rajbanshi youth to rebel against the system.

(p) Language or Dialect - What is the Controversy?

Whether Rajbanshi or Kamtapuri is a language or simply a dialect of North Bengal is a big question widely discussed today. Unless a clear picture is given today, days are far off when this old language will be extinct forever. Therefore, an urgent need of going through the evolution of this language and its relation with Bengali and Assamese languages that being elaborately discussed in the book. In fact, reality of Kamta language being the forerunner of both aforesaid languages is being analysed in the book.

The lost glory: Questioning the origin of a language is generally not done because there is no practical use of it and it is as old as origin of mankind. But its development can be traced. So, it is not wise to ask when Rajbanshi Kamatapuri language originated. Is it a language or a mere a dialect? This question comes to every one's mind when talking about Kamtapuri or Rajbanshi as such. But, certainly one can ask how this language developed. How this language was spoken at earlier stage, say prior to advent of Aryans, Guptas, Palas, Senas or Ahoms? To answer all these, we have to go back oriental days of Pundravardhan, Pragjyotishpur and Kamta-Kamrup. Probably, there were many local languages, which varied after every hundred miles or so. Then with the development of the civilisation, a common language ought to have developed. Such a language, which existed during ancient period in the vast Kamta-Kamrup areas, perhaps was the one similar to present day Kamta Rajbanshi, which is in its somewhat original form.

In Bengal, it is generally believed that Bengali is a mother tongue and the rest; even Assamese or any other local language took birth from Bengali. Assamese are not in a position to claim that their language is the original because it developed much later after the advent of Ahoms. Then, how Assamese language developed? Was there anything to do with Rajbanshi or Kamtapuri language, which existed from time immemorial? Which language the people spoke during the ancient and medieval period? These are the questions that need to be answered. Then one more question, pertinent to ask, is why earliest form of Bengali and Assamese has similarity with today's spoken Rajbanshi Kamtapuri language? And, which language did Koch kings and their contemporary kings in adjacent kingdoms use for spoken as well as correspondences? Were not the very effective correspondences made between Koch king Nara Narayan and Ahom king Suklemung (Gargayan Raja) and then Chu-Kampha in mid-sixteenth century onwards, which were written Kamta-Kamrupi or Rajbanshi language and powerful language in prose style, the harbinger of modern Bengali or Assamese languages?

On the instructions of Darrang king, Samudra Narayan, descendant of king Parikshit Narayan son of Chilarai instructed renowned Sanskrit scholar wrote a historical chronicle 'Darrang Banshabali' during 1791-1806 in language, which can be termed as the last chronicle of Kamta language, after which it branched out in two similar yet, distinct ways i.e. Assamese and Bengali. Rajbanshi or Kamtapuri accent that still spoken in North Bengal and Bihar can be distinctly found in the aforesaid text. Just to quote one stanza no. 160:

“Bhaloreshe bhalo hoy Hin bongshe hin,
Dhoni bongshe dhoni hoy Dukhi bongshe din.
Chor bongshe chor hoy Sonto bongshe sonto,
Shrestho bongshe montri hoy Sarbo shastrot kohonto.”

What is more astonishing is that while Kamata language is being dubbed simply as a dialect, spoken in a particular area by a particular community, Dr. T.C. Rastogir in 'Maulana Azad Academy Journal (May 1-31) 1993 says otherwise- “The writings of the so called Paschim Bangla Bhasa or Asamiya Bhasa should be regarded as the writings of the Kamata language (Kamata Bhasa) in as much as it not dead but still living language of the Kamata region. The Kamata language is not Rajbanshi dialect of a caste or tribe. It is language of the people, for the region described above. The Kamata language should not be regarded as a mere dialect of Bengali or Assamese languages. It is the language in which the first vernacular writings of the region were attempted and may be called the root of the present Bengali and Assamese languages.”

What Hamilton had to say about the lingua franca prevalent during his period of survey (1808-1814)? : In his famous ‘Buchanan Manuscripts’, while giving out ‘An Account of Assam’ Hamilton unwittingly mentioned about Kamta-Rajbanshi language and wrote:-

“...The old priesthood however continue to be purohits (officiating priests) for the king in the worship of the family deity Chung, which is still followed. The Bengalese language also became more common, although it was not used on the coin, or in state affairs, until the time of Rudra, son of Gadadhar. Now it is the common language even in the court; and the original Assamese, commonly spoken in the reign of Aurangzeb, in all probability will be soon lost; and it is now a dead language, and is only studied by those who follow the old worship. I have deposited in the company’s library a vocabulary of the dialect of Bengalese now used in Assam”.

By referring to ‘the dialect of Bengalis now used in Assam’ did Hamilton mean it as the Rajbanshi or Kamta language as spoken in North Bengal and Bihar?

Also, Hamilton seemed to have always considered Kamta-Kamrupi or Rajbanshi language as a colloquial language of Bengal. It was evident from the fact when he wrote about intermarriages, intermixing and adoption of local languages by Ahoms on their arrival. As such, he wrote: -

“... It is generally admitted, that the Ahoms on their arrival had no women, but espoused those of the country; and the royal family have since had frequent intermarriages with the daughters of neighbouring princes; but since the introduction of caste the Ahoms confine their marriages to their own tribe. The whole have now adopted the language of Bengal, as their colloquial dialect, and have also relinquished the use of beef; but about a fourth part have yet no other priests than the Deodhaings. The remaining three fourths have adopted the religion of Hindus, chiefly as taught by the followers of Madhava Acarrya.”

From his writings, while origin of Ahoms was clear, the reference to their adoption of colloquial language of Bengal was not clear, rather disastrous as it proved many years later, when Bengali was made the official language of Assam for ascertain period. For all probability, Hamilton referred to the language that intermixed people of Assamese people adopted was nothing new but already existed in entire Kamta-Kamrup area as today’s spoken Rajbanshi language is almost the same as Akhomiya or Assamese language.

When Hamilton carried out his survey, area of Koch kingdom under king Harendra Narayan was limited to Koch Behar and its adjoining areas, i.e. in north Bhutan on the next door, in west was the Baikunthapur (Siliguri sub-division in Darjeeling district), in south Rangpur (now Bangladesh) and in the east certain areas up to Goalpara in Assam. Hamilton visited the area of Koch kingdom and found: -

“...the territory of the Vihar Raja, when I visited that country, was so much interposed between Bhotan and the Company’s possessions, that I had little opportunity of conversing with the subjects of the Deva Raja (King of Bhutan). Most of those whom I saw, were the Koch or Rajbansis, who occupy the low country conquered by the Bhoteas, who are mere Bengalese, and who know very little of the real people of Bhotan, or of their manners...”.

By his these words, it was clear that he considered the Koch or Rajbanshis of the area as Bengalese.

Linguistic relation with Bengali: It is generally believed that prose writing in India was absent until the Europeans; especially the English introduced it basically at Kolkata in 19th century. Whether it was imposed for the benefit of theirs or not, the style was new and excepted by Bengali gentry of Kolkata overwhelmingly. Influence of the western culture was of much that Bengali literature developed rapidly. Literary scholar Sujit Mukherjee in his ‘Some Propositions on A Literary History of India’ published by Central Institute of Indian Languages, Mysore in 1981 wrote, ‘That the western impact should have been so severe upon our literary culture is not surprising. For anybody who went to college from say 1835 to at least a hundred years thereafter, there was no escape’. Regarding the content of college education of this period, the author narrated from the book ‘Policy and Conflict in India: the Reality and Perception of Education’ written by Aparna Sen, published by Longman Inc., New York in 1978 (page 60), ‘there was an overemphasis on the study of languages and humanities... The syllabi of the older universities had a strong linguistic and classical bias. The curriculum for the first-year class in Hindu College, Calcutta in 1832, for instance, consisted of English literature, ... history, mainly of Greece, Rome, England, and modern Europe; mathematics and geography. The Indian classical languages and, vernaculars were completely neglected’.

Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, who gave the impetus for unbelievable development of Bengali language by his style in prose writing, earned his name as the Scott of Bengal. Similarly, Rabindra Nath Tagore not only won the Nobel Prize for his poetry and songs also, called as the Shelly of India. Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay followed by some more writers further emboldened Bengali language. British ‘Raj’ was undoubtedly was the blessing in disguise for Bengali, for which today this language is one of the best language as far as sweetness is concerned.

However, Edward L. Dimock in his book ‘The Literature of India: An Introduction, University of Chicago press, 1975, p.27, had to say it differently, “...Prose had existed in India before the coming of the British, for purposes of disquisition, folk narrative, story and record, but under the influence of the British it came to be written with purely literary purpose.”

Are these above stated writings of the great scholars wrong? or motivated? or written for their personal gain? Whatever be the reasons, these facts are to be substantiated with sufficient proofs. If one ponders over such thoughts, one gets entangled with too many examples to be certain to believe the unbelievable. First compare the case for words of oldest songs and folklore of Kamata with the writings of Bengal’s old literature ‘Charyapad, ‘Vidyapati’, ‘Dwijā Chandidas’, ‘Bara Chandidas’. Similiarity between them is unbelievable. If that were the case, then did Kamata language exist in early medieval period or before that? While, there could be hardly any confusion to it’s answer as far as Assamese language is concerned, as we have already got it, answer is still eluding as far as Bengali language is concerned.

According to scholar Shri Dharmanarayan Barma (A step to Kamata Bihari Language), Bengali prose had its roots in Kamata language. He wrote, “This language (Kamatapuri), which dates back it’s origin from the *Charyapada* between 8th and 12th century was the administrative and educational medium in the reign of Kamtapur kings – from the 13th century down to the 19th century. The letter of Maharaja Nara Narayan written in 1555 A.D. to the Ahom king Chu-Kampha (Swargadev) reepresents well the Kamtapuri language. If this be taken as the first specimen of Bengali prose literature as held by the Calcutta

University, then confusion arises that Bengali prose literature generated from the womb of Kamtapuri language.”

Linguistic relation with Assamese: Look wise; Rajbanshis have more similarity with Assamese and Manipuris than mainstream caste Hindu Bengalis and Biharis. Assam derived its name from Ahoms, who came and invaded the land of Kamta-Kamrup in thirteenth century and got intermixed with ethnic people. Thus, traditionally and linguistically Rajbanshis have more affinity with Assamese people. Language wise also, prior to advent of Ahoms the language was called Kamrupi or Kamtapuri and it is only after subsequent creation of Assam state the name of language changed to Assamese.

Is the case to Assamese language similar? Going by the history, answer could be in affirmative. Ahoms, when came had their own language, which was Ahom of Chinese-Thai origin. Initially, their chronicles called *Burnaji* to record events relating to political, social, economic and cultural life were written in Ahom language. Ahoms gradually started accepting local language, which was probably Kamtapuri and an intermixed language was evolved that came to be known as Assamese. The Ahoms were bilingual up to 16th century. The practice of writing *Buranji* in Assamese began in 17th century when this language was accepted as an additional court language by the Ahom kings.

Now, let us study what had actually happened in case of imposition of Bengali as official language in Assam in the beginning of British Raj in Assam. Soon after conclusion of Yandabu agreement in 1826, the British company began consolidating their power in Assam. This part of northeastern region formed a part of Bengal province of British India, which was done for their administrative convenience. As quite a few officials both British and the natives from Bengal hardly knew the local language prevalent in Assam during the period, the company introduced Bengali as the official language for use in schools and courts of law in Assam in 1837. This language remained as an official language for 34 years till resentment brewed among the ethnic people. Also, in 1843, when an American team of Baptist Mission arrived in upper Assam for propagation of Christianity, they found it difficult to converse with the local populace, who spoke Assamese. This missionary people took out a monthly journal ‘Arunodai’ published from Sivsagar. This journal helped to develop Assamese language. During this period, Anandavam Dhekiyal (1828-1859) took the initiative to put forward the demand for recognition of Assamese language through his articles and books published in the journal. Ultimately, in 1871, Lieutenant Governor of Bengal, Sir George Campbell replaced Bengali with Assamese as the official language of Assam. However, Bengali remained official language for all erstwhile kingdoms of northern districts of Company’s Bengal province, thus the name came as North Bengal.

Eminent historian Dr. Suniti Kumar Chatterjee in his work, “The Origin and Development of the Bengali Language” (1926) Part-I, estimated during pre-Christian era, communities such as Mech, Koch and Kachari of larger Bodo group of people belonging to Tibetan-Burmese origin of languages came to settle in Assam, East and North Bengal. They made their settlements largely in the Brahmaputra valley and on the banks of river Karatoya, which came to be known as Pragjyotishpur and Pundra respectively. This northern part of Bengal province was the last to be ‘Aryanised’ in India as we discussed it in earlier chapter. The earliest literary work of Aryans-Rigveda was silent over mentioning Bengal as such. Mention of ‘Pundras’ is made in the Aryan literary work ‘Aitareya Brahmana’ and such

another 'Vangas', who can be identified to have been the inhabitants of the areas of erstwhile Bengal province in the north and north east of the river Ganga.

However, Dr. Suniti Kumar Chatterji's views on Aryanisation of Bengali highly appeared to be biased to many non-Bengali Scholars like Bisweswar Hazarika, who in his article 'On the Origin of the Assamese Language: A Note' published by Dr. R.D. Choudhury on behalf of Kamarupa Anusadhana Samiti (Assam Research Society, Guwahati:Assam) in their Platinum Jubilee commemorating Volume in January 1992, took an exception of Dr. Chatterji's emphasis on Bengali language overshadowing Assamese. It is pertinent to relate Assamese language with Kamta or Koch-Rajbanshi or Rajbanshi language of today to reach a consensus for larger interest of the people of this generation.

Hazarika contested the views of Dr. Chatterji on the advent of Aryans, which according to Dr. Chatterji was that without progressing logically to the east through North Bengal took a turn southwards taking a circuitous route from Videha (Mithila), Anga (Midland Bihar) and then to Radha (Jharkhand-South Bengal), Vanga, Barendra and then, taking a 'U' turn moved to Barendra or Pundravardhan (Northern Bangladesh), then moved to North Bengal and finally made a headway to Brahmaputra valley (Assam). Hazarika wrote, 'Dr. Chatterji has shown that the Magadhi Prakrit and Apabhramsa has ignored the natural short route (through Northern Bihar-North Bengal) to Kamrup and has traveled by an unconvincingly a circuitous route only to cover all the present day Bengali-speaking areas before arriving here (Kamrup in Assam). Such kind of ludicrous conjecture is unbecoming of a scholar like Dr. Chatterji.' (page 98)

While majority people of North Bihar i.e. districts of Purnia and Kishanganj speak Rajbanshi or 'Deshi' language similar to the Hindu Rajbanshis and Muslims of North Bengal, who form the single largest majority in the area, it was illogical to deduce that Aryans, after having mixing their culture in Mithila in North Bihar area went back slightly only to turn towards south. According to B. Hazarika, Dr. Chatterji has contradicted his own theory by expressing doubts over his own views. The fact could be that whole of the eastern part of India bordering from Koshi river in North Bihar running down southwards up to Ganga river and touching Bay of Bengal was out of the pale of Aryans advent till 320 B.C. Aryans could only progress further from Videha (Mithila) to east when the legendary kingdoms of Pragjyotishpur and Pundravardhan fell apart to disintegrate into smaller kingdoms like, Anga, Radha, Vanga, Barendra, Kamta-Kamarupa and other smaller kingdoms. Moreover, as discussed earlier chapter, in Bandhyana Dharmasutra (4th century B.C.), while it was said any person (Aryan) proceeding to Pundra and Vanga had to undergo penance after he returned, it was not so for Kamrup-Pragjyotishpur (North Bengal-Brahmaputra valley of Assam) with whom most probably Aryans had established contact earlier than Pundra and Vanga.

Prior to arrival of the Aryan culture, most probably different languages or a common language mixed of Tibeto-Burman, Austral-Asiatic and Dravidian languages was spoken in the plains and semi-hilly terrains of northeastern part of India. Tibeto-Burman or Indo-Tibetan scripts were probably used. On advent of Aryan culture during pre-Vedic era, process of acculturation began, which continued till early Christian era. Aryanised or 'Sanskritised' meaning 'Civilised' language better known as 'Magadhi' was accepted by the population of Pundravardhan and Pragjyotish. A kind of cultural fusion between the non-Aryan Mongol-Dravidian aboriginal population and the ingress of Aryan culture took place

in the plains of entire northeastern region of India. Finally, Magadhi Apabhramsa of central Bihar made ingress further into east and south. It got divided into three distinct branches: -

- i) Bongo, Samatata and further East (South Bengal and Bangladesh) - Bengali,
- ii) Anga and Kalinga (South-West Bengal and Orissa) – Oriya and,
- iii) Pundra, Barendra and Kamrup (North Bengal, Eastern Bihar and Assam)
- Kamrupi, Kamta Behari or Rajbanshi and later, Assamese.

According to Bisweswar Hazarika Aryan language of Anga i.e. Magadhi 'Prakrit' and 'Apabhramsa' migrated directly from Videha (Mithila) and Anga to Northern Bihar and North Bengal, which in that period of pre-Christian era formed part of Kamarupa or Pragjyotishpur. It was unlikely that Aryan culture could not cross over the river Ganga and instead it took a southward turn to Radha and also it was not so that wave of Aryan language from Videha joining forces with Magadhi jointly traveled to Vanga and thereafter crossing Barendra reached North Bengal; after that only it traveled to Assam. What Hazarika for contested in favour of the theory that Aryans had established a link with Brahmaputra valley much earlier than South Bengal has a taker in the belief that present day Assamese people of 'Kalita' community, were the earliest Aryan settlers in Brahmaputra valley. To link with, this particular community in Assam has the closest social affinity with none other than the Rajbanshi community people.

In Northern part of erstwhile Bengal province (Bogra district of Bangladesh), some evidence is available of the prevalence of writing in the time of king Ashok, the great. During second century BC the people of these areas knew Prakrit and used Brahmi script. People were well settled and learnt Sanskrit. For a century from 432-433 AD we notice a series of old land sale documents recorded on copper plates in Pundravardhanabhukti, the area that covered the whole of Northern Bengal province, most of which now falls in Bangladesh. Formative phase of Kamata actually ranged from 4th to 7th century AD. During this period, writing in Sanskrit developed along with the spread of civilization under the rule of the Gupta Empire. During this time, Buddhism also took a firm root in the area followed by Jainism. The confluence of different languages of followers of different faiths culminated into amalgamation of Sanskrit, Prakrit and spoken local languages that evolved into a distinct language with distinct script, which was followed by the earlier Kamrup kings and later Koch and Ahom kings.

The 'Charya padas' written by the Buddhist saints, the earliest available literary sources in Bengal bear the testimony of this earlier language of northern Bengal. While this language remained almost unchanged in undeveloped areas of Kamata as known as Rajbanshi or Kamta Bihari, it subsequently evolved into different languages, most prominent being Bengali closely followed by Assamese.

Evolution of Kamta-Rajbanshi Language: Can we trace the evolution this way? Rajbanshi language is mainly derived from Sanskrit. As we go towards west in Bihar from North Bengal Maithili element is more profound and while towards east in Asom, influence of Tai Ahom influence is more prominent; towards south in Bongo or Bangladesh Bengali influence is profound. Prior to the advent of the Ahoms in thirteenth century, Kamata-Kamrupi language was the lingua franca in the entire region of this part of India. Even, the reach of

this language appeared to have far off places deep into western India. Except south Indian languages - Telegu, Tamil, Malayalam and Kannada, all other Indian languages do have some distinct linkages, which speak for itself that Rajbanshi-Kamata language might not simply be a dialect of any particular region. This language has many similarities in Gujrati and Marathi languages. For an example, we can quote a word- 'Aayi' meaning mother that is still fondly used to address a mother by the rustic Rajbanshi in Kamata area as well as by a Marathi people of Maharastra in the western India. This is evident from the fact that appearance wise Gujrati and Marathi have much similarity with the Rajbanshis. Distorted word 'Babahe' or on short 'Bahey' in Rajbanshi has similarity in Punjabi word 'Wahe', meaning showing reverence to the great soul. "Wahe Guruji ka Khalsa, Wahe Guruji ki fateh" (Khalsa hails the great Guru, who blesses with victory) is a sacred chanting of the Sikh people in every sphere of their daily lives. 'Bhat' (rice) is a common word used by Kashmiris as well as whole of erstwhile Kamata areas. All languages of hilly areas have some distinct similarities. From this count, it may be deduced that India was mostly inhabited by indigenous people of Mongoloid and Negroid stock people prior to advent of Aryans and when the powerful Aryans made ingress into Indian sub-continent, defeated indigenous Indians took refuge in the hills. In this, it would be appropriate, if we could exclude the people of Pundra and Pragjyotishpur, who inhabited in inhospitable areas of northeastern part of India and southern part of India, where Aryans reached much later. Therefore, can we say that the lingua franca existed in pre-Aryan India has anything to do with Rajbanshi-Kamata language? This needs thorough research.

How did the word- Bengal originate? Did it exist prior to the advent of Aryans or for that matter during the ancient period? When we talk about evolution of Bengal or Bangladesh, the truth could be different. In most probability, it was the word 'Vanga' that existed south of Kamata and west of Samatata that largely now is covered in Bangladesh having its heartland at present day Dacca. It was a dreamland of the Europeans, who wanted to reach via Kolkata (Kolkata). It was the English people, who called the area 'All Banga' or 'Banga – all' meaning the whole of Vanga, Samatata and Kamata areas that alter took the shape of Bengal. Subsequently, it covered larger areas including whole of south Bengal, north Bengal, present day Bangladesh, parts of Bihar, Orissa, Nepal, Bhutan and some parts of north eastern states. South Bengal, especially the areas of Murshidabad, Navadwip Calcutta, Navadwip, Hoogly and Midnapore corridor was much better places for trade and commerce that favoured by the English people and the area developed much faster to flourish. People of this corridor were good looking, simple and spoke a sweet local language that slightly varied from old Kamata language. With the socio-economic development of south Bengal, this language began shedding rustic words and accent of old language and abreast new form of language that came to be known as 'Banglabhasha' or Bengali.

The famous Kamrup king Bhaskarvarman, who is believed to be the first Kamata-Kamrup king, used Kamata as his state language. Was it true? If so, can we say that this is not a language but mere a dialect of this part of the country? It is an established truth that Sanskrit overwhelmed India due to its sheer powerful script, scientifically designed grammar and its prevailing literature, which were much developed then in comparison to lingua franca then prevailing in India. Then, of course, Aryans were in commanding position to impose Sanskrit upon the indigenous Indians. Sanskrit used to be the official language of about a half a dozen states in Bengal province during middle of 5th century AD to middle of 7th century AD.

Undoubtedly, Sanskrit played a vital role in developing the local language that probably resembled Rajbanshi-Kamta language, in south Bengal and in Samatata area (Bangladesh), the areas, which were outside the Kamta-Kamrup Empire. This language came to lime light only when it drew its sweetness brought all the way from semi-hilly people of Karnataka of south India by the 'Sena', kings, who made Bengal historically great. We do not find any trace of Bengali literature in Bengal up to the reign of Sena kings whose ancestors hailed from Coorg areas of Karnataka. During Sena rule, some Sanskrit and Bengali works were written. Sena king Ballala Sena who was a scholar himself wrote 'Smritis' – Danasagara and Adbhutasagara. Their contributions towards development of Bengali literature were undoubtedly the greatest. A language, sweetest of all, most heart rendering that can ever be expressed in words and every one's favourite – Bengali that evolved from the womb of Kamta-Kamrup, nurtured by Sanskrit, perfumed in sandalwood fragrance of Coorgi hills brought by Sena kings and spoken by Aryanised people of Vanga, Samatata and south of the mighty river Ganga areas, finally became a state language of Bengal province leaving far behind its original form.

Dr. Ajay Chakraborty in his book, "Litterateur in Kamata Koch Behar Rajdarbar" wrote, 'As regards, the language of the literatures, written in Kamata Koch Behar Rajdarbar, especially from the 14th to 16th century, were written in Kamrupi dialect. At that time, the Bengali language and the Assamese languages had not taken definite shape. These two languages have taken definite shape from 18th century'. By saying so, Dr. Ajay Chakraborty has indicated that both the modern Bengali and Assamese languages took shape out of Kamata language. In this regard, Dr. T.C. Rastogi was more blunt in saying the truth in Maulana Azad Academy Journal, Lucknow (May 1-31, 1993) – "the writings of the so called Paschim Bangla Bhasa (Bengali) or Asamiya Bhasa (Assamese) should be regarded as the writings of the Kamata language (Rajbanshi-Kamata) in as much as it not dead but still living language of the Kamata region. The Kamata language is not Rajbanshi dialect of a caste or tribe. It is language of the people, for the region described above. The Kamata language should not be regarded as a mere dialect of Bengali or Assamese language. It is language in which the first vernacular writings of the region were attempted and may be called the root of the present Bengali and Assamese languages."

According to a recent research work carried out an Australian scholar, Mr. Mathew W.S. Toulmin, Kamta or Rajbanshi language belonged to Indo-Aryan group of languages. According to Dr. Ichhamuddin Sarkar, Reader in the History department of North Bengal University, under whose guidance the research scholar worked, Mathew traveled extensively deep into the Rajbanshi dominated rural areas of North Bengal and mingled with them and stayed with them under trying conditions to find out the roots of their language. He submitted his thesis to the University titled 'Reconstructing Linguistic History in a Dialect Continuum: The Kamta, Rajbanshi, and Northern Deshi Bangla Subgroup of Indo-Aryan' in May 2006. Hope the thesis sees the light of publication as book so that people get to know something great about this language.

However, we should not jump to a conclusion as to prove greatness or worthlessness of this language, rather should read what Madhav M. Deshpande, Professor of Sanskrit and Linguistics at the Department of Asian Languages and Cultures, The University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, U.S.A. wrote in his essay titled, 'Aryan Origins: Brief History of Linguistic Arguments' published in a book titled, 'India: Historical Beginnings and the Concept of Aryan', pp 146-147, "...I would like to conclude this extensive survey of the history of the

linguistic arguments by saying that historical linguistic research, like any other project of historical reconstruction, is always going to remain a work-in-progress. ... What we can expect from the on-going research is an open-ended approach to continually seeking new methods, data, but not an axiomatic commitment to predetermined conclusions.”

Lastly, it is pertinent to mention a bitter aspect as how people neglect very own mother tongue Kamta or Rajbanshi; instead try to emulate the others. Such a quagmire in which Rajbanshis live in or the precarious situation they have created is proven during census; call it ignorance or negligence towards own mother tongue. During census, these very people write their mother tongue as Bengali in North Bengal, Assamese in Assam, Hindi (or Bihari) in Bihar and so forth resulting further erosion to Kamta or Rajbanshi language. As said earlier the educated or the elite groups of Rajbanshis generally avoid speaking this language considering it too rustic to speak in a social gathering. Reasons for all these aberrations in erratic behaviour of Rajbanshis need to be addressed; otherwise there is no hope for lasting peace in the whole region and extinction of this community appears to be certain.

(q) Political Turmoil

In this chapter, deprivation of political rights are discussed in which focus is given as to whether Kamtapuri should have been given more attention for their happiness and enjoyment of rightful political status by the central and state government of West Bengal aftermath gaining independence. Merger of Kamta areas to West Bengal, Bihar and Assam and its repercussions are examined in this chapter. Militants organizations of Koch-Rajbanshi-Kamtapuri - their origin, political aim, mode of operations etc. are elaborated to some extent, which will be a great help to the public to gauge the gravity of the situation. What the governments think about it is also discussed. As a matter of fact, this chapter provides an insight of the genesis of the problems of self-determination prevailing in Kamta area in particular and other parts of the nation including North East, Jammu & Kashmir and Punjab in general.

While going through ‘The Times of India’ (July 16, 2005), a box news item from Guwahati could be read that was not certainly heartening at all. It read – Ulfa has accused W.B. CM Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee of waging a war against the Kamtapuris at New Delhi’s behest. In its mouthpiece, ‘Freedom’, Ulfa also slammed some politicians and intellectuals for destroying the Kamtapuri society from within. “The Kamtapuris should get rid of such a conspiracy as it their historic responsibility” – Ulfa said. It added that Kamtapuris, too, have the right to enjoy freedom and live with dignity. How dangerous could be such a statement is that too from a militant leader even if some is there in it? That is why, the government machinery, intellectuals and political leaders should think and act in right way and not just the idea should be to bash up Kamtapuris. Now, let us analyse why such a statement came out?

Political Compulsion of Political Leaders and Damage Caused to the Community: Seldom it is seen that a person joins a political party only to serve his people and those who do that are the greatest in the democratic world, no doubt about it. Idea behind ‘party politics’ often proves to be multifarious for different persons. Real ambition of political life may be for a cause of the people, to carry forward the lineage of heredity, to become a public figure

or may be any other of such nature. Just for the 'motive' factor, seldom leaders change their loyalty to the party leadership; even at times change the party itself. All said and done, one thing that almost remains unchanged is compulsion to show loyalty to the top leadership of the party to remain in the hot seat of power corridor even if aspirations of the people are sacrificed at the alter of party politics. Hopes, aspirations, dreams, happiness and prosperity of the people are secondary to the compulsions of the party ideals for a worker of any national political party as seen as of today in our country. So, North Bengal and areas to its entire northeast are no exception. The policy of 'Vote Bank' and the 'Political Number Game' have already taken its toll and made the party leadership insensitive to human values.

It was the compulsion of Dr. Bidhan Chandra Roy to ensure that all Rajbanshi inhabited areas became part of West Bengal while reorganising the states in the post independence period. For all practical purposes, he considered the Rajbanshis belonging to mainstream Bengalis. His then party workers of Indian National Congress from entire erstwhile Koch-Kamta- Kamrup agreed to be part of West Bengal either due to love for their leader or due to political compulsion. Late Sarat Chandra Sinha of Congress party, who belonged to Rajbanshi community as the Chief Minister of Assam tried his best to do developmental work for the community. He influenced to erect statue of great Koch warrior Chilarai, which can be seen standing tall in a park in Amingaon near Guwahati. Also, under his stewardship the Nara Narayan Bridge was constructed over the mighty river Brahmaputra near Goalpara. His love for the community was unquestionable but he was bound by the political compulsion. As such, although from the core of his heart he wanted to give the Rajbanshis their due share in economic-political field but his dreams remained unfulfilled; hence no separate political recognition to Koch Rajbongshis of Assam or Kamotapur.

Demand of ST status by Koch-Rajbanshis in Assam: Koch-Rajbanshis in Assam are in social dilemma as whether to remain placed at higher pedestal of Kshatriya 'Varna' or embrace tribal status in the socio-ethnic strata of India. They are majority in number in the western part of Assam and believed to outnumber other communities in 50 per cent of the villages that are under the Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC) administration. They are also majority in Kokrajhar town. Such a miserable is their plight that this community has been pressing the central government for scheduled tribe (ST) status since 1986. The erstwhile Congress government under prime minister ship of late P.V. Narasimha Rao had accorded ST status to this community through a presidential ordinance that ultimately lapsed, but a bill was never tabled in Parliament. Front runners of their struggle for achieving ST status is spearheaded by organisations like All Assam Koch Rajbonshi Sanmilani, All Assam Youth Students Sanmilani and All Assam Ladies Sanmilani.

By its demanding demographic size over hundred million including all Rajbanshi inhabited areas as discussed earlier, which cover an large geographical area, one should think logically as to whether it is justifiable to ask for mere a tribal status. Will the socio-economic-political problems including unemployment be solved if Koch Rajbanshis are granted tribal status by including their areas in Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution? As the data is already brought out Assam is already crumbled with Scheduled Areas under the said Schedule and numerous Scheduled Tribes. Will not the 7.5% seats reserved for STs be further eroded? Then, where is the benefit? Will not it be better to be General Caste and get the legitimate share in all socio-economic-political fields? If at all their demand is based on gaining some political hold in the areas like the Bodos, who have recently got their own

‘Bodoland Tribal Council’ vested with some political power, then it will be seen as too meager a demand. Because, by granting an autonomous council to Bodos has not lessened the aspirations of this tribal community. Separate statehood is the ultimate aspiration of theirs. So, political turmoil in Bodoland is far from cooling down.

Also, demand for tribal status appears to be unconvincing because most of the Koch Rajbanshis of Assam may have close affinity with the original Koch tribesmen but they had converted to Hinduism long back and became Rajbanshis. Is it possible for them to re-convert now?

Pertinent questions could be endless, but let us ask only a few. Are the Rajbanshis too small a people? If they believe to co-relate themselves with splendid mythological stories as mentioned in ‘Purans’ and great epic ‘Mahabharat’ or if ever they were related to ancient king Kumar Bhaskarvarman of Pragjyotishpur or later Kamta kings – Prithu, Baidyadev, Nilambar or as modern as Koch king Nara Narayan and his warrior brother Chilaray and still believe in their existence then should not they find a better place in Indian society?

(r) Relevant Case Studies

Punjab Turmoil-How it got resolved and Emerging Crisis: Root causes of Punjab problem that persisted for almost a decade need to be discussed because an insight of it may throw some light so as to avoid such a disastrous situation never arise in the country. How dangerous it was can be gauged when the fundamentalist Sikh militants were about to declare so called ‘Khalistan’ a sovereign state and hoist their flag atop the sanctum sanatorium of Golden Temple, the highest temporal seat of Sikh community by in 1984 just before army action to stop such an act. Let us ask two potent questions - Did Sikhs of Punjab really want to secede from India and why rural Sikhs did not lend their support to the separatist ideas? The administrators and scholars have already given many answers to such questions. Some people even felt that the policy of ‘Violence for Violence’ or ‘Boot out the root cause by force’ acted well to finish off the militancy in Punjab. Let us draw such disastrous conclusions for the end of turmoil and finally return of peace in Punjab in early nineties.

In Punjab, feelings of Sikh community were hurt as this great community was being ignored from the socio-political angle and their contributions towards nation building were being ignored by the mainstream political leaders, who were at the helms of power at the centre at Delhi. To make the more critical, by playing real politics with temporal matters of the community, religious sentiments of the community were hurt to the hardest. Not recognizing the community as one of the most successful communities of India gave a wrong indication of being treated the community as second-class citizens. It was partially a kind of identity crisis that multiplied the already hurt feelings of the community. Sikhs are in majority in Punjab but they were given a feeling of minority both in national and international forums. A feeling of being neglected by the mainstream upper caste Hindu leaders, who wielded political powers at national level, really hurt the sentiments of Sikhs that ultimately led to a turmoil and took a form of separatist movement in early eighties and continued for almost a decade taking heavy toll of lives, most of whom were innocent till hurt religious sentiments of the community were healed and identity of the community as one of the mainstream communities of India was restored. As the people of Punjab got the long cherished democratic and certain fundamental rights ensured at all levels, the State is well on the road to overall development.

But, in social sphere all is not well in Punjab. The dictionary meaning of the word 'Dalit' meaning the socially depressed and deprived class people has practically has changed its meaning into hated word 'Chura' or the lower caste or the scheduled caste (SC) people. Like other states in India, among the Sikh community in Punjab, there also has been a great division of classes based on caste as enshrined in the Constitution of India. The biggest blunder that the Sikh community could commit was that allowing its people get divided on the basis of 'Scheduled' and General Castes inviting polarisation within the community. The religious texts of the community do not have any mention of class division based on caste. In fact, five pious persons who partook the holy nectar from the last Sikh 'Guru' Govind Sighji belonged to different religions and caste and changed their religion into one of the greatest universal religion of Sikhism where there is no differentiation among the Sikh. But differentiation created by giving perpetual of scheduled caste even among the Sikh people is proving harmful in the society. The upper caste people in Punjab, to degrade a lower caste person use the hated word 'Chura'. Due to this reason many an educated lower caste person never disclose his or her identity and many of them have migrated to foreign countries. Some of them are well to do today and enjoying better social status abroad but much apprehensive about the social denigration that has taken place due to SC status. These are the harsh realities of the society in Punjab today in particular and everywhere in India in general. Gap between the upper caste people Sikhs and lower caste or SC Sikhs is increasing day-by-day resulting into polarization of the society defying the dictums of democratic political process. If the differentiation is stretched too far it may invite extreme social unrest, stop economic growth or even may attract social revolution. End result of such a situation is destructive. In contrast to this kind of critical social unrest, we may look for better alternatives that are beneficial for the society. Instead of the division of the society based on castes, equal opportunities based on economic parameters suits well in the dictums of political process. Its end result is positive, because such a process is cyclical and perpetual. Rich and poor will continue to live side by side. In this process, the poor will be provided with better opportunities to rise higher in the social strata. Equality in social and economic spheres will complement each other in overall growth of the society and bring harmony without any distinction among people of all classes in Punjab.

Connecting to Problem of Jammu & Kashmir in Search of Solution: How the root causes of the disturbances of Jammu & Kashmir are related to the Kamatapuri-Rajbanshi issues, although appears to be irrelevant, carry much importance as far as the socio-political aspects are concerned. Let us discuss how much these aspects do carry importance. Almost a full army command of Indian army is deployed in Jammu & Kashmir just to ensure the State does not slip away to its claimant neighbouring country Pakistan. Yet, things look do not appear to be fully under control and pragmatic solutions are not in sight. Problem that was created soon after gaining independence with the confusion as to which newly created dominion erstwhile princely State would join or remain independent. The problem became more complex as the majority of the population was Muslim, according to the norm the State ought to join Pakistan, the dominion created for the Muslims but the ruler, Maharaja Hari Singh was a Hindu king. Since all the erstwhile princely states, both smaller and larger numbering more than five hundred had hardly choice to remain independent after the British left undivided India conceding freedom to Indians in 1947. The delay caused by indecisive attitude of the Hindu ruler made Pakistanis to feel jittery and encouraged 'Razakars' the

invading tribals of Pakistan to conquer the princely State with their direct support of Pakistani army. Finding it difficult to resist the invading forces of Pakistan, the Maharaja made a fervent appeal to India seeking military help. India helped and saved the State from the raiding forces with the condition merge the State with India. Major part of the State became part of India and its northwestern part already occupied by Pakistani forces remained with Pakistan. The Indian side of the State became an integral part of India with special safeguards guaranteed in the Indian Constitution. The Pakistani side too, practically remained as an integral part of Pakistan but shown as a separate political entity on paper by Pakistani establishment by giving it the status as 'Azad Kashmir' (Free Kashmir). In India, Pakistani side is called as 'Pakistan Occupied Kashmir' (POK). Similarly, Indian side of J&K is called as 'India Occupied Kashmir' (IOK) by Pakistanis. Most important part of J&K is the Kashmir Valley, which is known as 'Heaven on Earth' and a most beautiful valley having numerous tourist spots, is the central point of enmity between two countries, who were one nation till the British left undivided India. Claims and counter over Kashmir have dogged the peace process between these two neighbours. Already both countries went to war four times over the issue of Kashmir imbroglio but without any concrete results.

As fallout of the vexed problem, militancy in the Kashmir valley including Jammu area of Indian side of J & K was born soon after the disastrous assembly polls were held in 1987. Armed struggle between the Kashmiri militant groups aided by foreign mercenaries and Indian forces has already taken a heavy toll of innocent human lives. Both the warring nations have been incurring huge expenditure in maintaining their armed forces in the region, which is mostly mountainous. Siachen glacier located in the northern most undefined borders of the countries has already become the highest battlefield, where forces of both warring countries are fighting for their survival, mainly against the inhospitable weather conditions. Now the pertinent question being what the root causes of Kashmir problem are and how to go about solving these? An analysis of this problem and trying to find an acceptable solution may not be out of place to discuss here.

The destiny of the Kashmiri people was taken for granted all parties involved in decision-making process of merger of princely States soon after gaining independence. Maharaja Hari Singh could not anticipate the repercussions of not taking a firm decision as to which dominion the State would join and remained adamant to remain independent, which was absurd. Aspirations of the people for good days to come after the British left India were dashed by indecisiveness by the people at the helm of affairs in the royal palace of the Maharaja. Legends, historical events, cultural heritage and a distinct identity of Kashmiri people were never given due consideration in decision-making process so far. Whatever, outcome the peace talks between India and Pakistan that takes place from time to time to settle the long pending disputes bring forth, perpetual peace in J & K including militancy in Kashmir valley,

Hindu dominated Jammu region and Leh & Ladakh areas can only return when identity of these people based on their regional historical perspective are defined, measures are taken to improve their socio-economic status based on equality and fraternity, fundamental rights are guaranteed, respective religious faiths are respected, language is given its due recognition and political power is given to the people through democratic process. All these welfare measures are essential ingredients for people's happiness and overall development. As all these aspects were never addressed in right earnest, we have got Kashmir problem.

The problem got aggravated due to Pakistan's involvement as Pakistanis took it for granted that being a Muslim majority State, J & K would naturally be a part of their country like it happened in most cases of erstwhile princely States. The problem has become a sore point in foreign affairs between India and Pakistan. Both the countries should realize that almost sixty years have passed, now is the high time to resolve all issues. Creation of Pakistan based on 'Two Nation Theory' is a reality and things cannot be undone. POK or Azad Kashmir is a reality now and so are the Kashmir Valley, Leh Ladakh and Jammu regions. Line of Control (LOC), the created temporary border in northern Kashmir has become a de-facto border now, which is impracticable to be redrawn. Neither people of POK or Azad Kashmir can think of calling themselves as Indians nor Ladkhis of Leh and Ladakh, Dogras of Jammu regions and Kashmiris of the valley can call themselves as Pakistanis. If such things are thrust upon them, the problems may be solved for time being but in long run problems will visit again in more aggravated form. Best possible solution could be that political establishments in India, Pakistan and Leadership of Kashmiri people should recognise the ground realities and settle the border issues at the first instance, which is the mother of all issues and then address other issues. 'Give and Take' with Pakistan, mutual respect keeping in view of respective undistorted histories of the regions, respective religions, cultural heritage, language, basic rights to lead a healthy and peaceful life and above all power to the people in a democratic way should be the policy for settling the issues of Jammu & Kashmir. Similar suggestions may also prove practicable in solving all issues related to separatist movements of Northeast including Kamata-Koch-Rajbanshi issue.

Bengali speaking People of Barak Valley in South Assam: Barak valley is in south Assam, far off from its capital city Dispur, Guwahati, connected by road through Khasi Hills and Jaintia Hills of Meghalaya or take a detour via Lumding to reach Silchar by train for a day and night. Geographically the valley cannot be said fully contiguous with present day Assam. Problems of Assam in general affect the life in Silchar much either. 'Bandh' calls given by militant groups in upper and lower Assam are almost ineffective in this area.

In seventies, an agitation led by Bengali community for demand of union territory status gained momentum in Barak Valley in south Assam. Basically, the demand was to establish its Bengali identity. In this valley, both Bengali Hindus and Muslims are in majority almost in the ratio of 52:48. Mainstream Assamese, Koch Rajbanshis and others are in minority. The most striking feature of the valley is that being a part of Assam, Assamese is not the language spoken or written, Bengali writ large everywhere. Only a thin thread of political bonding exists that makes this valley an integral part of Assam, otherwise it is already a separate entity. Going by the logical end, Barak valley is a fit case to be considered with a view of granting separate statehood with its capital at Silchar.

Due to ongoing disturbances in North East in general and Assam in particular, demand for a separate statehood for the valley is lying dormant. But the feelings are there in every one's mind. Economic backwardness is another factor for their demand for up-liftment. Nothing worthwhile has happened in the valley to develop the area and conditions of the people.

In seventies, demand for a separate union territory status erupted in this valley, which died down due to political reasons. As it was discussed in earlier chapter, political compulsion, which at times is effective to curb any movement, played its role and political leaders as usual for their party's interest did not allow pushing forward people's demand. It is

said that vested interests of the local MP and MLAs had confused both Bengali speaking Hindus and Muslims of the valley.

But, future may not remain same as time will take its own course, ongoing disturbances in North East will come to an end some day but before peace prevails in Assam, dormant demand for separate identity for the people of Barak Valley is likely to be revived because as saying goes that people like to be governed by themselves. The problem will have to be addressed by the policy makers of the nation before any damage is done because Barak valley i.e. Silchar area dominated by Bengali people itself considers having a separate identity.

Aboriginal Tripuris of Tripura: An erstwhile princely state with its aboriginal people predominantly belonging to Mongoloid stock similar to Kamta-Rajbanshis, its king and the people fully devoted to the cause of freedom struggle of India, perhaps the most eagerly princely state to do so, merged itself with Indian Dominion on the 15th October 1949. Hard won freedom of the nation brought with it mixed fortunes for the state. Outsiders outnumbered its aboriginals soon. Sensing their doom aboriginals agitated and got some reprieve in the form of inclusion of the state in the sixth schedule of the Indian Constitution, which made provisions for the aboriginals as Scheduled Tribes (ST). Now these aboriginal Tripuris became minority constituting a meager 31% of the total population. Their Kokborok is a dying language for these indigenous people today. While others wield socio-economic and political power of the state, these unfortunate aboriginal Tripuris by virtue of their social status of ST are suffering as the second-class citizen of the nation.

(s) Agitation for Separate Statehood

Genesis of the Movement for Separate State: Demand for separate State for Koch-Rajbanshis is not an entirely new phenomenon. For the first time, a bit of furor was created in Bengal's literary circle when eminent Rajbanshi Kshatriya leader Thakur Panchanan Burma talked in favour of Rajbanshi or Kamtapuri language in third general meeting of 'Uttar Banga Sahitya Parishad' held at Rangpur (now Bangladesh), which was the beginning of a feeling like a nationalism for the Rajbanshis but it was not the separate statehood. However, the issue was raised during pre-independence days. During pre-independence days 'Hita Sadhini Sabha', an organisation that included local Muslim leaders also fought against separate state for the erstwhile Cooch Behar kingdom. According to Sujata D. Hazarika ('Unrest and Displacement: Rajbanshis in North Bengal'-South Asia Forum for Human Rights) - Jogendra Nath Mondal leading the movement for up-liftment of backward classes mooted idea and pressed for a separate state for Rajbanshis called 'Rajar-Sthan' meaning abode of king. He had apprehension that if Bengal were divided, a section of backward class would be dominated by the upper caste Hindu Bengalis and the other be dominated by majority Muslims. In 1969, an organisation named Uttar Khanda Dal (UKD) demanded a separate state for Rajbanshis in the name of either Kamtapur or Uttar Khanda. In the same year, 'Uttar Banga Sanskritik Parishad' raised the issue for recognition of Kamta language and measures for its development. Similar organisation named Kamta Rajya Sangram Parishad (KRSP)

was formed by the Koch Rajbanshis in Goalpara district in Assam in 1969 demanding a separate state named Kamta state. In 1987, UKD was changed its name to Kamtapur Gana Parishad. Again, it was replaced by Kamtapur Peoples Party (KPP) in 1996. A faction of this party formed another party named 'Kamtapur Pragatishil Party', which participated in the Assembly elections of 2000 and achieved success to some extent. *(Both factions of KPPs have since patched up their differences and became one in 2010)*. Off late, the demand for separate statehood has been given further momentum by some Koch-Rajbanshi political organisations and regional political parties like Kamatapuri Peoples Party, Greater Cooch Behar Democratic Front, and Kamtapuri Progressive Party etc. So called militant Rajbanshi organisation named Kamtapur Liberation Organisation (KLO) came into being on 28th December 1995. The West Bengal Government for their militant activities has banned this organisation.

The demand for separate State was also earlier raised by Uttarkhanda Dal in the seventies but did not pick up much momentum and died down due to lack of leadership and it remained confined within a group of few literate people only *(The name has since been canablised from them by Uttaracnchal to remane it as 'Uttarkhand' state)*. In Assam, demand is slightly variable. While All Assam Koch Rajbanshi Students Union, a student organisation demands Scheduled Tribe status for the Koch Rajbanshis in Asom; they too ask for separate Kamtapur state if former demand is not made.

Whether the mindset of the Koch-Rajbanshi community is a separatist one or different needs preponderance. What separatist mindset in real sense may be defined as a common ideological thought among a group of people within a geographical area based on a dissension mood with a view of getting separated from mainland so as to have own sovereign machinery of governance. It implies severing all ties from the mainstream governing machinery of the nation and dilution of the sovereignty, which are the keywords of separatist mindset. In this sense, Koch-Rajbanshis should not be termed as having a separatist mindset. The contributions made towards the freedom struggle, not objecting to the Congress Party's intention merger of Cooch Behar State with West Bengal and remaining loyal to the nation in all respects are the strong superstructure upon which the mindset of this community is standing that appear can never go against the national interests.

Main factors that are responsible for demanding a separate state is have an identity of their own, safeguard their socio-economic interests, development of their cultural heritage and language and have some say in economic-political fields. From practical point of view, geographically and demographically South and North Bengal separated by the river Ganga, are already two separate identities, whereas from the same point of view, entire North Bengal barring its hilly areas, Purnia and Kishanganj districts of Northern Bihar, districts of lower Asom and northern districts of Bangladesh are more contiguous. Therefore, off late, the demand for a separate state for Koch-Rajbanshis has picked up that creates problems for the political establishments both at the Centre and respective State capitals.

On 26th December 1996, a delegation led by the leaders of Cooch Behar Peoples Association submitted a memorandum demanding constitutional recognition of Kamtapuri language. In North Bengal, for the first time in response to call given by Uttarkhanda Dal a general strike demanding for separate statehood on 7th January 1997 took place, which could be considerably termed as successful one.

SEPTEMBER 20, 2005: A BLACK DAY: On the fateful day of 20th September 2005, a horrific incident took place at Cooch Behar, where both agitators and the keepers of law and

order became victims of violence. A correspondent of a leading daily, The Telegraph, under a headline ‘Police lynched in protest, dated 21st September 2005 reported:

“A senior police officer and two constables were killed today in attacks by demonstrators demanding statehood for north Bengal’s Cooch Behar district.

As police opened fire on stone- throwing mobs, two unidentified men died. Two youths died as they got stuck on their way to the hospital in the blockade.

Violence broke out at noon when supporters of the Greater Cooch Behar People’s Association tried to break through police barriers, using the women to lead the charge, set up on the town’s outskirts.

The organisation’s objective was to sit in a mass, indefinite hunger strike to press for their demand in front of the District Magistrate’s office.

More than a thousand policemen had been deployed since yesterday and prohibitory orders were in force. The demonstrators had turned up in large numbers too.

They had gathered in various places outside the town and at one of these the mob broke through the barrier. Under attack, the police first fired in the air but that did not work. In the subsequent firing on the mob, two people died.

Around the same time, at another spot, the situation went out of hand as demonstrators attacked the police, succeeding in isolating two of the men – Gour Chandra Dhar and Jogesh Chandra Sarkar – and lynched them.

The north Bengal inspector-general of police, K.L. Meena, who was injured, said: “We had no option but to fire as the mob was bent upon attacking the police and destroying public property.”

SORROW OF BENGAL: In an editorial column, a leading national daily, The Times of India (September 22, 2005) elaborated the incident under the head “Sorrow of Bengal – Writers Buildings should get over its myopia and douse fires in the north” that is reproduced as follows:

“Tuesday’s (20th September 2005) unprecedented violence between the police and Rajbanshis that left five dead and 60 injured in the erstwhile princely state of Cooch Behar has again caught Kolkata napping. In the Eighties, its late response to the Gorkhaland stir had plunged Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri districts into turmoil for nearly three years. In the absence of a strong opposition, the CPM-dominated Left Front government has over the years developed the dangerous habit of keeping things that take place beyond Kolkata under wraps. It did not pay any heed to warnings from Forward Bloc, a LF constituent that has a strong base in Cooch Behar, about growing activities of the Greater Cooch Behar People’s Association (GCBPA). The GCBPA is fighting for a Rajbanshi state comprising areas that belonged to Cooch Behar before its merger with India in 1950. Likewise, two factions of the Kamtapur People’s Party (KPP) want an independent Rajbanshi state. Rajbanshis are spread over Bengal, Assam, Bihar, Nepal and north Bangladesh. Considering the explosive situation in the north Bengal, Writers Buildings needs to urgently win the confidence of Rajbanshis before they get swayed by rabble-rousers. The KPP accuses Kolkata of imposing its “colonial rule on Rajbanshis and destroying their culture and identity.” It refutes the state government’s claims that Rajbanshis and Bengalis are of same stock. The GCBPA claims that Rajbanshis deserve exclusive rights under the merger pact, which reminds one of Subhas Ghising, who often quotes old Indo-Nepalese treaties to support his Gorkhaland demand. In fact, Rajbanshi and Gorkha leaders had jointly campaigned for an Uttarkhand state in north

Bengal comprising Darjeeling, Cooch Behar and Jalpaiguri districts in 1950. If Kolkata does not nip the Rajbanshi unrest in the bud, Gorkhas may again revive their statehood demand. Jharkhandis, who live in the tea-rich Dooars and Tarai regions of north Bengal, may also seek a separate homeland. Earlier, various Naxalite factions had supported this demand. In view of this, Kolkata must stop relying on police and communist cadres to tame Rajbanshi agitation. Instead, it must empower the North Bengal Development Council, create job opportunities and stop continuing displacement of Rajbanshis from their land. West Bengal needs peace, not conflict, for the revival of its economy.”

(t) Recent Political Developments

As reported by journalist, Shri Debashis Sarkar in his column ‘Cooch Behar tale gets a political twist’ published in The Economic Times’ dated 24 August 2006 brought back the demand of the separate statehood for Cooch Behar a fresh agenda with a totally new lease of life. Greater Cooch Behar Peoples’ Association (GCPA) now decided to become a political party with a new name as the Greater Cooch Behar Democratic Party (GCBDP). The party in its earlier avatar, having suffered setbacks earlier due to financial crisis, factionalism, administrative and political pressure from the Left Front Government in West Bengal, now changed their political strategy and now has decided to take part in the Panchayat elections in Cooch Behar district. With this new development, Left Front of West Bengal government has changed their attitude too and the party now agreed that the Cooch Behar had been wrongly included as a district within West Bengal, though it was agreed upon by the king and the Government of India then that Cooch Behar would be a separate state.

The new party, though decided to participate in Panchayat elections, believes that they were not supposed to be under the governance of West Bengal. Sociologists, on the other hand felt that the basic reason behind demand of a separate state has been the lack of socio-economic development of the district even after so many years.

Now, the majority of the Rajbanshis are getting to know about the developments of the demands of separate Kamtapur state and demand for ST status in Assam. Their demanded Kamtapur state to consist of 11 districts of Assam – Dhubri, Kokrajhar, Bongaigaon, Goalpara, Barpeta, Nalbari, Kamrup, Darrang, Morigaon, Sonitpur and Lakhimpur; All five districts in North Bengal – Maldah, South Dinajpur, North Dinajpur, Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar; and in Bihar-Purnia and Kishanganj districts. The 'Greater Kamtapur Peoples Forum', a conglomerate of politically affiliated Koch Rajbanshi parties and organisations are now coming together as common forum to carry forward their struggle to achieve separate statehood for the Rajbanshi of Kamtapuri inhabited areas.

Government of West Bengal’s Approach towards Kamtapuri Demand for Separate State: The present Government of West Bengal led by the Left Front has taken strict administrative policy in dealing with the Kamtapuri activists yet cautious in delivering political statements. Both the Intelligence wing and Police department of the State have been fully geared up to rein in any separatist movement in North Bengal. All possible measures are being taken to subdue the Rajbanshi leaders so that the demands for separate Kamtapur State including entire North Bengal excluding Darjeeling hills die its natural death. Like, in the past it happened during sixties and seventies when demand for Uttarkhanda State in North Bengal died down due to lack of momentum and internal conflict within the Rajbanshi

leadership. However, the Left Front Government is cautious in saying that Rajbanshis and people of erstwhile Cooch Behar kingdom do have genuine problems. But desist from extending any support to the agitating people of Rajbanshi community or for the cause of greater Cooch Behar State. There is reason for cautiousness because there already exists a Council for Gorkhas in Darjeeling hills where Gorkha population dominates. In the neighbourhood, Jharkhand State for the tribal was carved out of Bihar recently. In such a situation the government can ill afford to lose confidence of more than estimated thirty lakhs strong Rajbanshis of North Bengal.

The State government fully knows the fact that for being the most docile, peace loving and by their positive mindset towards Indian nationalism Rajbanshis can be easily be held in their stride. Also, number of populist schemes like scholarship to Rajbanshi students in schools and colleges, abolition of Zamindari and assurance on the dictatorship of the proletariat, labour friendly approach and hatred for the capitalists work wonder to hold back the Rajbanshis from dissension. Also it is certain that upright rejection for separate State for Rajbanshis may result into disastrous consequences. Thus, the government is in dilemma as how to deal with the situation and whether it will be wise to extend superfluous moral support to Rajbanshis or to deal with them strictly to finish off the separatist mindset once for all by hook or crook.

Government of Assam's Approach towards Koch-Rajbanshi's Demand Either for Scheduled Tribe (ST) Status or Separate Kamtapur State: As already brought out in earlier chapter in Assam almost fifty percent population owe their origin to Rajbanshi community. They are in majority in number of districts of lower Assam, whom the government cannot annoy. Demand of All Assam Koch-Rajbanshi Students Union is either grant of ST status to the community or else, Statehood for the community. If statehood is given for Koch-Rajbanshis, the size of present Assam will almost decrease to half. Other majority communities or tribes have already their own political set ups by way of regional council under fifth and sixth schedules of Indian Constitution. Ahoms, by whose name the State is known for in majority in upper Assam, who also demand for ST status together with some more communities having tribal affinity. Grant of such status to few more communities is going to create lot of political problems for the government.

Together with this community other five tribal related communities such as Tai Ahoms, Marans, Mataks and Tribal Tea Communities have demanded ST status. Their demand for such status is being vehemently opposed by all fourteen recognised tribes of Assam led by Boro tribal organizations for the reason that if such status is given to these six demanding communities, very idea of special rights given to the depressed tribes will be diluted. However, these tribes are not averse to other alternative of reservation for these six communities including Koch-Rajbanshis. Fully knowing the precarious scenario, the State government is in dilemma over the issue.

The Government of Bihar is yet to realize the gravity of the problem and address the issues related to separate statehood for Rajbanshi community, who are in majority in two districts in Northeastern Bihar namely Purnia and Kishanganj.

(u) Rajbanshis and Indian Nationalism

When we talk about nationalism in India, people relate to Indian National Congress, the main political party founded in 1885, which spearheaded the freedom struggle against the British rule. Together with the noble objective of freedom, this kind of nationalism had the fervor of some kind of 'casteism' and capitalism that led to creation of numerous crises later on. Ideological conflicts resulted to factionalism within the Indian leadership and paved the way for the leftist parties. Freedom was any way was imminent to the Indians; international political affairs during the period were not at all conducive to continue colonialism any more. Being a large country India, actually was supposed to free from British rule soon after the First World War, thus it appeared that grant of independence was prolonged only due to the reason that Indians were not prepared for it. Therefore, so-called Indian nationalism as pasteurized actually has not developed fully in true sense. Then, why do we have to relate it to Koch-Rajbanshi Kamtapuri issue, is being discussed here because these are the people in whom may find some valuable ingredients of nationalism.

Did we really realize what one of the forerunners for freedom, Bipin Chandra Pal had to conceptualize about it when he said – “We loved the abstraction we called India but hated the thing that it actually was. Our patriotism was not composed of our love for our own history, literature, arts, industries, culture and institutions, but as a prototype of England which we wished to be ... love of India means a love for its rivers and mountains, for its paddy fields and sandy lands, its towns and villages and poor people, for its languages, literature, philosophy, religion, culture and civilization.” B.C. Pal’s abstraction on Indian nationalism needed application in true spirit. It holds well for all Indians regardless their caste, creed and religion and regions. Indian entity consists of diverse socio-cultural groups residing over diverse geographical areas. Unity in diversity never come calling; it has to be understood, defined and cultivated to make it strong because nationalism rests on strong foundation of unity.

Abstraction also covers all aspects of human feelings; love for paddy fields also means care for cultivators, who toil in the agricultural lands so as to enable them to enjoy the fruits of their labour. Care for cultivators also means that sons of soil should own the land. Care for the poor, needless to say covers wide range of socialist ideals and welfare measures that great philosophers like Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712-1883) of France, Karl Marx of Russia (1818-1883), Vladimir Lenin of Russian revolution fame (1870-1924) and other great communist leaders preached the world.

Where we have gone wrong so far? Basically, Indian nationalism has been politicised too much. Basic tenets of the abstraction have not been fully implemented and at places, have been done wrongly, which should be addressed. For example, one of the tenets of patriotism is love for history but their own history is not taught to Rajbanshi community of North Bengal and Bihar. It is the case for their own language and also, similar is the case for the Haryanvis, whose language is not taught. Love for mother tongue has a larger connotation in developing nationalism. Nationalism and socio-economic-cultural-linguistic development and political involvement are inseparable aspects of a citizen; being a patriot is not enough for overall development of a people and in this case Rajbanshis being docile in nature have always been losers. This aspect was discussed by a handful of Koch Rajbanshi intellectuals, research scholars, academicians, service holders, ex-servicemen and sympathetic youth hailing from Assam and North Bengal in a meeting in Guwahati on 12th March 2006, who formed an apolitical forum dedicated to the welfare measures of Koch Rajbanshis. They have

named the it as 'Koch Rajbanshi Pancha' with the aims and objectives to educate the people on past history of the community, its present socio-economic-cultural-political status, to create a trust for development of their religious and cultural activities, other welfare measures for the community and render all possible help to all the needy people.

CHAPTER – III

IN SEARCH OF POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

*Suppress not the dissension
Eradicate its root causes
Damn not the Rajbanshis
Love a little they shall sacrifice more.*

*Give them their dues and give them rights
They shall perform their duties in utmost faith
Chicken's neck shall remain safe, who will dare?
Peace will prevail everywhere and India shall shine.*

When feelings are hurt, social-esteem at its lowest ebb, identity is in its deepest crisis, economically floored, socio-economic rights are in dire stress, be sure of either of two consequences – one being social extinction kind of state in which living like dead wood and another being creation of a situation just ripe for an impending political crisis. Both the consequences are in negation in terms of highest ideals of our nation. It needs an urgent attention to find out the root causes of dissension of this particular community in particular because who knows, while finding solution to their problem there might lay the clues of solving many more problems that pertains to North East and elsewhere in the country, in general.

The word 'Kamtapuri' is a matter of great concern today to many, especially in the political circle of West Bengal, Asom and Bihar because of its very ill conceived idea of separatism, which actually may be not. While searching the genesis of this movement, trying to relate it to such past experiences in Punjab, certain realistic aspects came to light that need in depth analysis. Development in information technology, fast spreading electronic media and moving towards globalisation make all information so readily available and dealings so transparent that political maneuverability in containing a group of people or a particular community has become almost redundant. Call it a separatist movement or a movement for disintegration or freedom struggle for any people whether Tamils, Punjabis, Tribals of Jharkhand, Gorkhas of Darjeeling, Nagas, Assamese, Bodos of Assam, Tribals of Tripura, Bengalis of Silchar in Assam, Kashmiri Muslims in Jammu & Kashmir and Koch or Rajbanshi Kamtapuri of North Bengal, Asom and Bihar, root causes of their dissatisfaction and alienation from the mainstream citizens of the nation are similar in nature. Even, the main causes can be pinpointed. An endeavour has been to search out those causes in pursuit

of possible solutions so that our nation heaves a sigh of relief from ills of such a vexed problem related to Koch-Rajbanshi Kamtapuri people. The solutions foreseen are equally applicable to all places where ever such problems of separatism, self-determination and insurgency are prevalent. The people at the corridors of power may take a look of these views for solving all kinds of problems that our nation is facing today in whole of North East and elsewhere.

In succeeding paragraphs, aforesaid aspects are discussed under different headings.

(a) Need to Define Identity

Nothing can be more punishing than to degrade a person socially and equally so when a person's feelings are hurt or others ignore the person. Not only to a person, even it is applicable to a group of people, a community or a race residing in a particular geographical location or otherwise. At times it becomes unbearable to the person or the people, which make the person or them to agitate. It is like a home sweat home, where charity begins. Given due love and affection, teaching good manners, right kind of education and better upbringing make a child a good citizen.

Every people of India needs a defined socio-political, even religious to a certain degree, identity. As the point of discussion already brought home earlier in the chapter 'Punjab turmoil – How it got resolved' Sikhs are proud to be Punjabi, their home is the sacred land of Punjab and they are one of the most patriotic Indians; similarly Tamils have way, however, this does not mean that others are not welcome in others' areas. In a matter of fact, outsiders already settled for long should be considered honoured citizens of the particular area.

Hopefully, a simple question will suffice to stress the need for clarifying the identity of Rajbanshis – who were those people residing in whole of Kamrup-Kamata region prior to arrival Ahoms in Assam and in North Bengal and its adjoining areas till recently? Answer is amply clear – it was all the way the Rajbanshis everywhere and that too in dominance.

The past history of the Rajbanshis is indeed eventful beginning with mixing up with different cultures, glories and numerous victories in wars, which provide sufficient grounds for them to qualify for the status of a martial race like Rajputs, Sikhs, Marathas and Gorkhas. Then instead of asking for a lower social status as tribals, is it not appropriate for them to ask for a regiment in army named after their community or Narayani or Chilarai regiment.

(b) Need to maintain good relation with Mainstream Caste Hindu Bengalis

Precarious situation that has been created today for the Rajbanshi community cannot be resolved by restraining relations with their co-habitants mainstream caste Hindu community. No doubt dominate the rural North Bengal in population but hubs of political activities are the urban centres where mainstream Bengali people are the majority. On the other hand, rural areas cannot be ignored for a democracy to succeed. Any ideological conflict or misunderstanding between these main groups of people of North Bengal will only invite troubles for them. They share a common ancient history and till medieval period they had common socio-economic platform. For improving their religious and educational standards, Koch-Rajbanshi kings invited Brahmin priests, teachers and artisans from Anga, Samatata

and Vanga or Bhangala, which now are form parts of southern West Bengal and Bangladesh. Both have to live side-by-side and work for their betterment hand to hand, otherwise there is no hope. Like a clock we cannot be turned back, in a similar way neither the glorious past of Koch-Rajbanshi kingdoms cannot be brought back nor the non-Rajbanshi people can be displaced. Any move to drive away the outsiders already settled in Rajbanshi inhabited areas will be uncalled for as such a thought is against the docile nature of the community.

A contribution of modern Bengali culture in enriching the Rajbanshi community in North Bengal is immense in the fields of basic education and political awakening. Although, before the advent of Europeans in Bengal, both Rajbanshis and mainstream caste Hindu Bengali were almost at par in education and culture. But afterwards while rapid cultural development took place in whole of Bengal, Rajbanshis of North Bengal together with entire Northeast remained slow in development. That is why Bengali dominance in all spheres of life is visible in Rajbanshi culture. Also, it is the main factor of both political awakening of the Rajbanshis of North Bengal and elsewhere.

(c) Need to Replace Scheduled Caste status with that of Socio-economically Weaker Section (SEWS)

Ever since Rajbanshi community was brought under the ambit of Scheduled Caste during the first half of last century, much damage rather than up-liftment has been caused to Koch Rajbanshi community as a whole. In Bengal, while this community people considered themselves as of higher caste, the mainstream caste Hindu Bengali looked down at them. Grading them as a sheltered class. Being listed as SC, naturally India as whole took them as a lower caste equating them with the listed communities such as Dom, 'Methor' (Sweepers), Mochi (Scavengers), and Fishermen etc. The noble cause of attaining the special status of a Depressed Class, which was converted to Scheduled Caste that was accepted by the Kshatriya Samiti Rajbanshi leaders was given a go by, ground realities have changed and now the community is undergoing the agony of identity crisis and host of other crises, such is the plight of this community. Neither economically nor socially has the community as whole developed for last one century. The economically weakness has multiplied their underdevelopment in terms of education, culture and socio-political aspirations. Had it been a special provision to grant them economic aid to meet their basic needs and pursue better education, protection of their land holdings, equal opportunities for participation in governance, the position would have definitely different than what is today.

Ever since SC status was achieved in 1933 in controversial way, the downfall started for the community in North Bengal continues all the way. In one side, these people wore sacred thread 'Poita or Joneu' symbolizing status of 'Kshatriya', a higher caste in 'Varna' system of Hinduism and on the other side they have embraced lower caste status or scheduled caste; such a contradictory social status cannot be seen anywhere in India. This aberration needs to be corrected. As already discussed earlier, except a little financial help from the state government and jobs that too those jobs like teachers in remotely located areas where non-Rajbanshis avoid to go and few others mostly in lower grade, there is no much benefit of being SC. Similar fate is for the Koch Rajbanshis of Assam, where they have been graded as OBC and now they are trying for scheduling as ST. In Bihar, Rajbanshis are graded in the list of OBC in a separate Annexure, where there is practically no benefit. Thus the

community is looser in all fronts. The latest constitutional imbroglio over the issue of 27% reservation of seats in elite educational institutions like All India Institute of Medical Science (AIIMS), New Delhi, Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs) and Indian Institutes of Management (IIMs) in one way is a case of most interesting for this community. While the whole nation is divided over the issue of reservation to OBCs, the plight of common Rajbanshis is such that poverty has made them so deprived and less educated that at the most they can dream of only low jobs what to talk of higher studies and such big institutions. According to them, such institutions are meant for the privileged class or the people who can manipulate OBC certificates and not for poor people like Rajbanshis whether one has got SC, ST or OBC certificate.

Even if political power is handed over to them it is not worth accepting to convert the community to SC/ST/OBC status. If at all it is must to protect, preserve and promote their socio-economic, social and cultural heritage then it will be more justifiable to grant them a status of economically weaker community and then provide them all socio-economic, political and cultural rights. Without a say in the governance by way of giving them an opportunity of equal representation commensurate with their overall population, social status may not improve at all. Therefore, what is the need of the hour is not to issue only SC status certificates to every person belonging to this community but to further debate on the issue. Better, it may be replaced it with special provisions as Economically Weaker Section (EWS). This should not only apply to this particular community but to all people of the nation regardless of their caste, creed or religion.

(d) Amend Reservation Policy Based on Equality and Socio-economic Parameters

As we already discussed earlier in the chapter related to religious and cultural ethos of Rajbanshis, there should not be any discrimination on the basis of caste, creed and religion. There should be only one religion of humanity on the basis of which only all the policies of the government be formulated. Let caste be not the yardstick to decide the reservation policy.

The reasons for dissension among the students or job aspirants are the present policy of reservation of seats in educational institutions and jobs for SC/ST/OBC candidates. Indian society today is undergoing a precarious situation as far as this caste related issue is concerned. Everybody knows what should be done, but political repercussions prevent him or her from expressing their views. Scarcity of employment opportunities multiplies the gravity of this vexed unemployment problem. Of late, nation's reservation for job policy has come under heavy pressure from all corners and needs immediate attention to avoid widespread turmoil. Not only the Rajbanshi community but others too are the worst sufferers of the reservation policy. Why this particular community is unable to get the benefits fully of 15% job reservation in North Bengal has already been discussed in earlier chapter. Is there any other group of people, who too fits in the shoes of this community?

Present reservation policy harms the upper caste people too. Not necessarily all upper caste people like Brahmins and Rajputs (Kshatriyas of North India) are well off and don not have any poor among them. Not all the Brahmins are priests and all Rajputs are soldiers. They too have needy and downtrodden section among them. We can safely say that present reservation policy helps only those, who are aware of the policy and hold the requisite certificates of SC/ST/OBC. Jobs created are just not enough to meet the huge demand for

jobs created by the job-seeking youth because of which most of needy unemployed youth of the reserved category hardly gets the chance. So far, one aspect being overlooked is that poor and needy lot of Brahmin or upper caste i.e. General category job seekers fall victims of the policy of job reservation. Not all of the upper caste people are rich or capable of getting higher degrees just because of their social status. It has been observed that due to poverty and lack of job opportunities, many an upper caste youth have to undertake menial jobs because employment opportunities are not enough to meet the higher ratio of job reservation. While the political parties, due to their caste based political compulsions are busy in increasing the quota of jobs for reserved category, the worst sufferers are the poor and less educated youth belonging to upper castes, who are the victims of the reservation policy. This is an established fact that six decades long reservation policy of the nation has not brought fruitful results. We are not in a position either to confirm that socio-economic and educational status of the reserved category castes has changed for better or the nation has progressed a lot just for implementation of this reservation policy. Then what should be the ideal policy?

More complex we make the policies more chances are there for corrupt practices to creep in. Therefore, a simple policy should be made to provide basic economic help, affordable educational opportunities, health amenities and all necessary facilities to pursue higher studies to all socio-economically downtrodden people on the principle of equal opportunities to all without making any distinction of caste, creed and religion to make them capable to compete with well off citizens of the nation.

(e) Let Sons of Soil own their Homeland

At times, it so happens to an aboriginal mongoloid looking man from North East India traveling across the country, especially in North India finding himself in a quandary with his or her identity. Often, he or she comes across such an awkward situation when someone from mainland India asks him or her as to from which country does he or she belong. Just because of the look, one has to feel embarrassed and forced to curse one's place of birth i.e. North East. Similar is the case for a Rajbanshi because he or she inherits a mongoloid look and belong close to North East. Such a morose feeling hurts one's self esteem. It breeds ill feeling towards fellow countrymen and at the same time one feels alienation at one's own land. A Rajbanshi should feel homely at his or her own land of North Bengal, but absence of real democratic rights make them feel otherwise. They should get their socio-economic and political dues to be governed by them as a true democracy, own their own land in their own country which were promised to them long by tall national leaders like Sardar Vallbhbahi Patel and Pandit Jawahar Lal Nehru soon after gaining independence.

(f) Economic Safety Net for Rajbanshis living Below Poverty Line (BPL)

One of the most critical aspects that are responsible for making the Rajbanshis poorer day by day is selling out their land holdings to outsiders for ready cash to meet their day to day requirements and once money is spent they have nowhere to go except taking to daily wage labourers. Today, most of them stand at a lower level poverty that can well be considered as the ideal 'Below Poverty Line' (BPL). Certain political-economic measures have to be taken

urgently otherwise days are not far off when these people will have to sell out whatever they are left with and leave their homeland for greener pastures elsewhere.

Restrictions of sale/Purchase of property is a must for development of these indigenous people because it has been observed that one of the main reasons for dissension among the indigenous people is the easy inflow of funds from cash rich areas carried by businessmen and displaced persons, who purchase lands at attractive rates from the comparatively poor indigenous people. For the sake of economic development land holdings of the indigenous Rajbanshis are also on sale.

There is an ardent need to put an embargo on sell-purchase of land holdings of the people of the community. Alternatively, what can be done instead for the pressing needs of these people is that opportunities should be created for easy access to Bank loans on easy terms against their land holdings as collateral security. In case of Rajbanshis in urban centres where for the purpose of economic development of the State their land holdings can be leased out for some consideration but real ownership to remain with them.

Therefore, certain bold political decision has to be taken if Rajbanshis, especially their agriculturists are to be saved from extinction. Exodus/displacement of these people is must be stopped otherwise adverse effects brought by market economy related developmental process will create mismatch of distribution of wealth and the gap between the poor Rajbanshis and the mainstream populace of respective states together with other business communities will increase manifold. The price paid for the sake of economic development directly affects the Rajbanshis the most. Development is must for the nation so for people but it should incorporate certain social safety net for the welfare of the people because it is must for sustainable development as well as political stability in the long run.

(g) Power to the People on the Basis of Demographically Contiguous Region

‘People like to be ruled by themselves’ is as true as democratic values. It has got no alternative except either to destroy them to extinction or delay to some extent. It does not exclusively mean struggle for self-determination for a separate state sort of thing. By saying so what can be inferred is that original population of the area must have their own recognition and have a say in the corridors of power and a pivotal role to play in the governance of the state. Without giving them their dues, political stability can never be obtained. South Africa is a vivid example where minority whites had to give away political powers to the majority black people to bring an end to the age-old struggle against apartheid and finally bring peace and stability in the country.

Is the demand of indigenous people of Cooch Behar or Kamtapur for a separate is genuine or a farce? To get the suitable explanation, one has to go for introspection. If the nation feels that power should not go to the sons of the soil, further state making process is no the state policy and let the indigenous people of North Bengal is not to be saved from extinction, and then right policy of the government should to be snubbing the activists for separate state for Cooch Behar or Kamtapuri. If the people really will be happy to get Union Territory Status for their homeland, then it should be worth considering as it would amount to something is better than nothing.

Out of total estimated population of 71.2 million, Rajbanshi people hardly represent in the State Assembly or Parliament, which appears to be unjustifiable in terms of opportunity of equal representation in a democracy. Whatever, in meager in numbers they

represent are due to party based political affiliation of the political leaders, who even if they desire cannot raise a voice on behalf of the community as such unless directed to do so by their party high command. This aberration in the parliamentary system of representation needs to be addressed, as Rajbanshis do not have any say in the parliamentary democracy of the nation. This is one of the vital aspects of the dissention amongst the ranks and files of educated Rajbanshis.

However, suggested political power given to the Rajbanshis to have a say in the governance or state's political establishment should constitute absolute power that can be used to dislodge all other communities settled in the domain. Only new settlers should be avoided and those, who have already settled permanently be treated at par with the indigenous Rajbanshis.

(h) Develop Mother Tongue

Too dear and personal is the mother tongue to talk ill about it. But, for the Rajbanshis all is not well with their Rajbanshi or Kamrup-Kamata language, as it faces criticism from other communities and negligence from within the community. This very language that once served as a medium of expression for all the mixed and composite group of people of the entire erstwhile Kamrup-Kamata region well from ancient period. This very language is also the mother tongue of indigenous Muslims and widely spoken by Tribals of the region. While it changed its form to Assamese after the cultural confluence-taking place between Ahoms and Koch Empire in sixteenth century onwards, in North Bengal it came under severe stress due to fast development of Bengali language after the advent of the Europeans in South Bengal due to which this language remained underdeveloped. In North Bengal, this language is in such a precarious state that many a Bengali scholars term it as a mere dialect to utter disregard to its past status. No doubt, millions of people speak this language but nowhere this language has any official recognition; everywhere it is in receiving end.

If two tribal languages - Bodo and Santhali can find recognition and get included in the eighth schedule of the Indian constitution, then being an old and spoken by over an estimated hundred million people, their language deserves much more than constitutional recognition. Actually, it calls for immediate steps from all concerned to develop and promote this language by modernizing its vocabulary, grammar and literary applications wherever necessary so that it can reach the level of contemporary Indian languages.

(i) Shun Path of Violence-Rule Firm with a Humane Touch: Virtues of Good Governance

No violence has ever succeeded in achieving peace but peace has always achieved all success – this virtue has proved correct time and again. State is an entity vested with the unlimited power; rulers running the State change but State remains forever and, it can change only its form. But, one should remember that ultimate power rests with the people in a democracy. As a republic and democratic nation, how to solve our problems has been most appropriately said by Dr. S. Radhakrishnan in his book, 'The Present Crisis of Faith': –

“... We must try to settle our problems with reason, without bitterness. Democracy and violent action are inconsistent with each other.... Democracy is a political arrangement which treats people as equals. It is an economic approach which requires

us to raise the economic conditions of the masses of this country and this world. It is an ethical way of life where we have to treat other people as friends, potentially friends of ours though at the moment they may happen to be our enemies.... A reconciled foe becomes a friend. Hatred is the greatest danger. It is our enemy.”- pp.123-125.

When truth prevails in all compartments of governing process, the nation need not be afraid of breaking down. Given the opportunity, no dissent group of people can remain aloof but be the first one to come forward for nation building. Issues related to Koch Rajbanshis may be complex but not unsolvable. The biggest plus point with the community is that majority of their people are docile, peace loving and always prefer to avoid violence. This is the only reason this particular community has avoided violent methods of protesting and pressing for their demands. They believe in co-existence, a unique characteristic of the community that should be praised. In his aforesaid book, Dr. Radhakrishnan rightly said – “...Co-existence is the first step and fraternity is the goal...”(P 24). It should be made a gospel truth in the state governance. ‘Two way government – people approach’ should be made an important guideline of state policy in resolving any socio-political issue related to Rajbanshis or for the matter for any people.

Not taking cognizance of their glorious past, historical contributions towards safeguarding integrity of India and more importantly, ignoring them as integral part of the mainstream Indian society are the main reasons as to why their feelings are hurt today. To gauge the level of their feelings, one has to put one in their shoes and to know how deeply saddened are these people of the community. Of late, it has been observed that an able-bodied Rajbanshi male youth is seen in suspicion in North Bengal by the Government machinery and in Assam too, their mind is not free but full of identity related conflicts. This will be an injustice done to a Rajbanshi of North Bengal or for that matter any person from any community including a mainstream Bengali hailing from North Bengal if seen as a rebel or terrorist.

(j) Believe in One God in different Manifestations -Religion is Humanity

Talking about their religion itself gives an opportunity to go deep insight of true religion. That religion is not the one to identify a particular people or community such as Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Christian, Jain, Buddhist or any other. What we are talking about is the form of religion that Rajbanshis practice is almost closer to the one that is related only to identify themselves but has got much more wider connotation not easily understood by the people involved in caste based politics of today. It is the faith in one God, the supreme invisible and all-powerful soul controlling the universe, whom this community worships. As the lord is invisible they worship the ‘Shivlingas’, symbolizing the phallus of the all-pervading God. They are born Hindu as it is necessary for them for recognition otherwise their religion is humanity and loyal to the India, their motherland. Historically, none has ever been ill-treated by this community and never has revolted against the nation. All were always welcome anywhere anytime in the Kamata-Kamrup region.

Koch Kamta Rajbanshi is not new phenomenon but a part of rich cultural heritage in India having roots from very beginning of its civilisation. It existed in different form ancient period. We have already established from our earlier studies that Poundra Kshatriyas lived in

North Bengal prior to the advent of Aryans and their counterparts lived in present day Assam and their adjoining areas. However, whether they were Brahmins, Kshatriyas or other castes cannot be said for certain. But what can be certain is that since Poundra gave stiff resistance against the advent of Aryans, they were given the warriors' social status and thus they were called as Kshatriyas. Similarly, after the advent of Aryans into the North East, descendants of Kamrup Kamta kings or for the matter all warrior class people were also known as Kshatriyas. Various tribes of the North Bengal and North-East were the aboriginals of this vast region, who lived from time immemorial. They fought each other at times but once foreigners attacked, they united resisted the invasion. They had their own identity as countrymen, might be they did not coin the name of being so but to the core of their hearts they have been Indian all through. This was the only part of the country, which had never come completely under any foreign invader from the west. Only, they embraced different cultures at different point of time. As the saying goes that cultural imperialism is more effective, these people became victims of cultural invasions from the west, which have isolated them from the so-called mainstream Indian culture. But by no means, feeling of patriotism was ever seen less in Rajbanshis. In fact these are the people, who can set an example of a positive patriotism, a dynamic fellow feeling and a being proud to belong to India.

Aptly has been said by General SK Sinha (Retd.), ex-Governor of Assam that people of the area are the original Indians. This saying obviously also applies to Koch Rajbanshis and all other indigenous people of entire Kamrup-Kamta region. But only saying so would not work; what is actually required is recognition of their identity as such by taking certain concrete measures by part of the central government, intellectuals and of course by the rest of the Indian population. If the node of dissension, disintegration and desertion were the ills then recognition of identity, equal treatment, social and economic development and political power to the people should be diagnosis. One should go to the past to find the clues for the puzzle of present and future. True history of erstwhile greater Kamta-Kamrup or Cooch Behar, Assam or for the matter whole of North-East should be known to rest of the Indians, probably there lie the much eluded solutions to all sorts of problems of North East, elsewhere in the country or any part of the world.

CHAPTER – IV

CONCLUSION

A beginning to write the near true history of Koch-Rajbanshi and Kamtapuri society was a necessity as seen from academic point of view and most importantly, to save the community from extinction, at least from books, a sincere awareness was to be created among the people who matter. While research work on their demographical origin, history and cultural heritage is till being carried out by historians, academicians and research scholars, as a basic superstructure upon which all their work should have the foundation, it would be the logical to believe that Rajbanshis, call them Koch-Rajbongshi, Kamtapuri, Deshi or Rajbanshi Kshatriya had brilliant past. Under the changing circumstances and political upheavals that occurred in different historical periods and their downfalls being more than their glories, no

history of their own could be written except some historians and research scholars, who have touched upon Kamta-Kamrup and Koch kingdom in their books, which could not taken absolutely dedicated to this community. However, from their writings, from old scriptures, epics, writings of British officials during their 'Raj' in India and of course from the writings of some impartial historians and some bold scholars we get to know certain valuable information about the community. Destiny often made them to fall from the lofty heights of the society but fell them down to disgrace at the lowest of social strata; got them subdued by other communities in such a way that host of problems like identity crisis, poverty, illiteracy, deprivation of fundamental rights etc. pushed them with their back on the wall. Otherwise, once upon a time, this community had proven to be a class for themselves. All distortions in the historical facts and events about the community were needed due rectification to give the community a near true history for the betterment of the community in particular and for the nation in general.

Historians, scholars, academicians and researchers may have different or at times, conflicting views about origin of the community but for all probability this community inherits a mixed physiognomy of both Dravidian as well as Mongoloid stock. Despite differences in opinion by analysing the physiognomy, ethnicity and their demographical set up, a fair idea about their origin can conveniently be deduced. The entire region covering North Bengal, its adjoining areas and Brahmaputra valley of Assam had an old civilization, called Pragjyotishpur. Austral-Asiatic or the indigenous 'Adivasi' people were scanty in this part of the country. Much before the advent of the Aryan culture, the region was invaded first by Mongoloid stock people of Indo-Tibetan of Indo-Burman origin followed by the Dravidian stock from West Asian origin. So, the region became the theatre of war among these distinct cultures. What could have been happened was that the Kuvach and China tribes being the vanguards of the people of Mongoloid stock advanced towards west up to river Koshi (in Bihar and Nepal) where they encountered the people of Dravidian stock. The general area covered by the then famous three large rivers of Koshi, Karatoya and Tista formed the war zone between these two distinct cultures that invariably became the confluence of these cultures. As result a mixed culture was born, people of which in later historical ages formed a kingdom called Pundravardhan (present southern parts of North Bengal, western Bangladesh and its adjoining areas) in the region. Similarly, another kingdom by the people of the mixed culture flourished in Pragjyotishpur (Kamrup in Assam). The Aryan culture came into the region much later, approximately around 320 B.C. In fact, historians and scholars are still doubtful as to whether Aryanised people if at all invaded Pundravardhan and Pragjyotishpur or were stopped on the banks of river Koshi itself. Again, to clear the doubt, we can take help of physiognomy of the people. As we observe, Syhleti Bengali and Kalita community in Brahmaputra valley do resemble the features of Aryan cultured people. So, we can safely agree to those historians, who believed that these communities were some of the earliest aryanised settlers in Assam and Bengal. They must have crossed over then inhospitable areas North Bengal to advance up to Brahmaputra valley or took a detour via Samatata or Vanga (South Bengal) to reach up to Surma valley (Sylhet and Barak valley) and made their settlements.

The people were ancient but the term 'Rajbanshi' came in use in recent historical period. After the arrival of Aryan culture in the region, a new civilized culture developed in the plains and semi-hilly terrains of the whole of Northeast India. The Mongoloid stock of people from the plains started mixing up with the culturally more developed people of the

region. The region adopted a common language, which was either a kind of 'Apabhramsa' or 'Prakrit', both being highbred offspring of 'Sanskrit' a language of the civilized people of Aryan culture. All sections of these people including Kamtapuri Muslims speak the same language.

In later ages, people of this vast region came to be known in different names such as 'Kuvach', 'Kirata' or 'China' and later ages one mainstream stream of their mixed culture identified them as 'Pundra Kshatriya' or 'Koch Rajbanshi' or 'Rajbanshi Kshatriya' meaning having royal lineage. Difference in identity of Koch-Rajbanshis of Assam and Rajbanshi Kshatriyas of Bengal, Bihar, Bangladesh and Nepal were superficial and without any foundation; hence, there may be certain differences in their habits but that is not enough to make them different people because similarity in their physiognomy and racial stock should be taken as the acid test for their identity. Common surnames used by Koch Rajbanshis are Adhikari, Barman, Baruah, Chowdhury or Roychowdhury, Das, Dakua, Deka, Gosain, Hazarika, Koch or Koch Rajbanshi, Laskar, Modak, Munshi, Pramanik, Pradhan or Pradhani, Patwari, Ray or Roy, Rai, Roysarkar, Rajbanshi, Roykot, Rajakhwa, Singha, Singha Roy, Sinha, Singh, Sarkar, Saikia, Thakuria etc. Even priest class Rajbanshis in Nepal are believed to have using the appellations Giri and Sharma; whatever may be surnames or appellations they appear to one and same people.

Racial affinity of these people relates to the dynasties and kingdoms of ancient Assam and North Bengal, which does not find worthwhile mention in the history books of West Bengal and Bihar. The eventful happenings of Koch Empire should have rightful place in history books of India. Firstly, this empire during the period of king Nara Narayan under able brotherly support of Chilarai conquered almost all the kingdoms in the entire North East India in seventeenth century. They conquered and unified the entire region but did not directly rule that was unique about them. Also, it was a shining example of maintaining diverse cultures bonded together to ensure perpetual unity that later helped the British to consolidate entire region under one administrative zone. Most importantly, the Rajbanshi Kamta and Koch rulers never discriminated people on the basis of caste and creed but respected the priest class.

Such a community, who trace their origin in great Kamrup kings like Varman dynasty in ancient period; Kamta-Kamrup kings Baidyadeb, Prithu, Durlabh Narayan, Nilambar et al in early medieval period followed by Koch-Rajbanshi kings Nara Narayan and his warrior and a great military strategist brother Chilarai and their descendants, who carried the prestigious identity of Rajbanshis till recently, today has to struggle, against all odds, to find their true identity and assert themselves for existence.

A hidden agenda that people do not speak but can be clearly deduced from the ground realities that contiguous geographical area and more importantly demographically Rajbanshis are more inclined towards North East rather than West Bengal or Bihar, so logically thinking they should form a part of seven sisters of North East India making it the ninth sister as Sikkim is already considered as eighth sister. Before it takes an ugly turn, the matter should be addressed in right perspective.

Once flourishing and covering a vast area the Koch Empire with its capital at Cooch Behar then reduced to a small district to finally merging with West Bengal is bleeding today. The Empire died a natural death but its good olden days were not forgotten by its people as from time to time demand for separate state was raised by Rajbanshi leaders, albeit in milder intensity, but now it is no more of a low intensity as its new 'Avatar' as Kamtapuri movement

or Greater Cooch Behar movement to get a separate state for them has increased manifold like that of a spirit changing its form into a ghost that came to haunt the respective governments of West Bengal and Assam. The policy of using force- 'Nip the problem in its bud' policy is likely to produce only destructive results and such policy is likely to become ineffective in at least in Assam if tried due to ongoing militancy in the state. As future appears to be uncertain, the situation demands formation of a think tank involving national as well as state political leaders, scholars, local ethnic leaders, administrators and representatives from all concerned parties or organisations to search for an unbiased pragmatic long-lasting solution. Terms of reference for such an important forum together with aspects that are necessary to find a long-lasting solution must include certain fundamental republican features such as true representation of the affected populace, power to the ethnic people and basic human rights.

Issues of Rajbanshis may look complicated but not that difficult to understand if done in right earnest. The aberrations took place for long detrimental to this community were not deliberate but were caused partly due to their own ignorance or follies and partly due to faster development other communities, who came and settled in the region. Acute poverty, unemployment, illiteracy or high rate of school drop outs, lack of leadership, disunity and lack of cohesiveness within the community; baseless distinction between Rajbanshis of North Bengal and Koch Rajbanshis of Assam, flight of the elite group or literate Rajbanshis ignoring own community and language, remaining indifferent to socio-economic and political rights for themselves – all these together with host of other shortcomings made Rajbanshis socio-economically and culturally poor and vulnerable to dominance by others. Moreover, re-asserting Kshatriya status in one hand and on other hand, downgrading themselves as lower status of Scheduled Caste/Scheduled Tribe/ Other Backward Caste (SC/ST/OBC) was disliked by other mainstream Kshatriyas or Rajputs during Kshatriya movement and even today, Rajputs of midland or north India cannot reconcile with the fact that Rajbanshis of North Bengal are stamped as SC. By granting such constitutional status, Rajbanshis have been shown some sympathy, 5% to 15% jobs have been reserved for them that can be termed as a small pie to keep them in good humour; as these people, who for ages do reside in this region with overwhelming population, ethically saying, deserve at least 50% if not 100% reservation in all fields call it political, economic or social, if at all reservation policy is to be followed religiously. But these people are silently accepting whatever is given to them by the state as these people are too simple to understand intricacies of caste based reservation policy.

Such a docile and tolerant people, in sincerity and integrity who have no parallel, quietly serving the nation with utmost loyalty at whatever capacity possible deserve redressed and justice from the respective state governments and of course, from the central government for removal of all their deprivation, legitimate rights, recognize their true identity, recognition of their language and finally rightful representation in the governance in Indian republic truly to be called power to the people. Whether call it Kamtapuri movement or demand for a separate state for the community, what matters is that the justice be done. Let people of India open the windows wide to let fresh air to cross, free the mind to wonder in the wilderness and let the fragrance of colourful flowers bloom in the lands of rivers, small hills and tress make the sacred land of Rajbanshis come alive. Let all misgivings to go once for all for the Rajbanshis to grow worthy citizens of the nation. They must give up some of the most damaging

misgivings such as mistrust within the community, its leaders and blind faith in local level political leaders who thrive on their weaknesses such as poverty, simplicity and illiteracy. But, they always fall easy prey to attractive discourses on the ideals of different political parties and line up behind them. But when asked to do something for them, they show helplessness to do anything for the community, and say - How could they help the community when their stomachs are empty! Such is the pitiable condition of a Rajbanshis, one of the poorest large communities of the country. It is time now they stop waiting for others to do something for them; rather they ought to do for them because, as the saying goes - God helps those who help themselves. If its people are the real trustees of a democracy, so in a democratic country like India Rajbanshis too must feel at home with the political set up and not shy away from participating in the democratic process, otherwise, as ever before they shall keep falling prey to politically more informed people belonging to other groups, whose interests are anything but to keep playing political gimmicks for their own livelihood and to dominate over this particular community. As this community form a large vote bank, no political party shall ever try to annoy them; what they can do is to divide them for own benefit and keep ruling on the basis of 'Divide and Rule' for which these people are easy games; but that is not desirable. For this community, all concerned people and the state machinery must chose best path for the larger interest of the nation.

It is frightening to visualise a situation if only a small fraction of their total population assemble anywhere in the narrow strip between Maldah/Dinajpur districts in the southern flank of North Bengal and Kokrajhar-Dhubri-Bongaigaon axis in Assam border to establish any kind of blockade pressing for their demands. Such thoughts do come not just out of imagination but due to the prevailing situation being created by Kamtapuri activists both in Assam and North Bengal demanding a separate state for Koch Rajbanshis. They are becoming more aware of their past, have easy access to information of all kinds due to development of electronic media and forming various organisations to press for their rights. Rajbanshis are one of the most docile people in nature but present trend indicate that these people can no more be governed the way it is being done for years and no fact can now be hidden from them anymore. Even, other communities of West Bengal and Assam, especially the Brahmins including having origin in Kanauj and Mithila, who were brought by the Kamta-Koch kings long ago and settled in the region, feel indebted to the community and are very sympathetic to the welfare of the Rajbanshis and do not hesitate to express their solidarity to their causes.

Not a small people, most docile and patriotic as eve proved to be, undoubtedly Rajbanshis have always remained as the epitome of universal peace and brotherhood; for all times to come they shall remain so, for sure. Only thing, to overcome the difficulties they face what they need is an ignition to direct their minds. The ray of hope beckons them to enliven their lives, do something good for them as well as for others. By seeing '*The Morning Star*' what one has all to say to them and to all universal human souls goes like this: -

*We can see the morning star
Shining white in the eastern sky
The horizon beneath is soothing red
Telling the earth to come alive
Night is over; darkness goes away
See the first light round the corner.*

*Wake up; God gave you health take care
Go stronger with breath of fresh air
Rise, my dear! Regain your power
Don't you listen to mother's call?
Nation's saviours from the ancient times
Forget not your duties and rights.*

*You've got to work when others sleep
You've lot many promises to keep
When fight you must, fight ills of society
Sing songs of love enliven the world
Win over hearts strive for pride
Happier days shall come shining bright.*

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Born in village Kamar Gochh in Phansidewa block of Silliguri Sub-division in Darjeeling district, the author Ex-Capt. Nalini Ranjan Ray had his schooling in Siliguri Boys' High School and is an Arts graduate from North Bengal University. He served in Indian Naval Air Squadron 300 of fighter aircrafts 'White Tigers' fame as a technical ground crew. After clearing Combined Defence Service (CDS) Examination, 1981 he joined Indian Army as Short Service Commissioned Officer (SSCO) where he served in the 6th Battalion of 11 Gorkha Rifles, an elite Infantry Regiment of Indian Army. On completion of his short service, for a short while he served Hindustan Aeronautics Ltd. Bangalore before joining State Bank of India in 1989. He cleared Indian Economic Service Exam. 1994 and offered appointment but did not join. During his banking service he has served in Punjab and Kashmir Valley. Now he is posted as Manager (Security) in Circle Security Department of State Bank of India, North Eastern Circle at its Local Head Office, Dispur, Guwahati-781 006, Assam. He holds the degree of Certified Associate of Indian Institute of Bankers (CAIIB).