

CHAPTER – I

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The Koch Rajbanshi constitutes a significant community in Western Assam and North Bengal. They are also found in Meghalaya, North Bihar, Nepal, Bangladesh and Bhutan. The present study however, is confined to the Koch Rajbanshi of North Bengal and Assam. They are one of the aboriginal tribes of Northeast India.¹ They are originally known as Koch. But at present, they are known as Koch Rajbanshi or only Rajbanshi in different places. Rajbanshi is the shortened form of the term “Koch Rajbanshi”. The term “Koch”, “Rajbanshi” and “Koch - Rajbanshi” are used synonymously. However, in the present study, effort has been made to use the term “Koch Rajbanshi” as far as possible, unless the context demands otherwise. However in certain places where the context demanded the term “Koch” and “Rajbanshi” has been used in place of the term “Koch Rajbanshi”

The Koch Rajbanshis are one of the earliest ethnic groups of Northeast India to come under the influence of Hinduism. But in the caste ridden Hindu society their position is at the lowest rung.² They are the descendent of the royal blood but they enjoy a low status in the Hindu society and were often sufferers of discrimination. Their status was also challenged with the influx of a large number of Hindu immigrants from other parts of the country. With the settlement of the upper caste Hindu gentry in the Koch Rajbanshi dominated areas of North Bengal, the existing balance in local power structure had changed.³ In due course of time this group of people began to increase in number and gradually began to dominate over the indigenous Koch Rajbanshi people. They began to hold all the key position in administration while the natives remained educationally, economically, politically, and socially backward. In the whole process, the Koch Rajbanshi were categorized as the lowest class of people in the society and they were placed at par with the shudras. This naturally aggrieved the elite section of the Koch Rajbanshi and they tried to elevate their position by trying to climb the social ladder. With this aim in view, they made an initiative to enter the fold of Hindu society by claiming the “Kshatriya” status through the “Kshatriya movement” in the early part of 20th century. The movement was successful to a large extent but once the community got enlisted in the list of Scheduled Caste for Bengal the movement began to lose its relevance and it

gradually fizzled out. This began a climb – down of the Koch Rajbanshis from the Kshatriya identity to Dalit identity thereby creating a new identity crisis for them. The inclusion of Koch Rajbanshi into the list of Scheduled Caste no doubt helped in getting some concession from the Government but the inconsistency between their claimed social rank and the special privileges achieved as a member of the Scheduled Caste category remained unresolved.⁴

The Koch Rajbanshis are also given different status in different states. In West Bengal they are given Scheduled Caste status, in Meghalaya they are given the Scheduled Tribe status and in Assam and Bihar they are given Other Backward Class category. The very fact that they are given different status in different states is also adding to the existing identity crisis. At present, in Assam they are demanding for the Scheduled Tribe status and the delay over granting this by the Government of India is creating great resentment amongst the Koch Rajbanshi. This resentment is at present taking the form of protest and rally against the Government.

In North Bengal also the Koch Rajbanshi were found to have passed through at least three distinct identities in a number of census – from Rajbanshi to Bratya Kshatriya (1891) Bratya Kshatriya to Kshatriya Rajbanshi (1911,1921) and Kshatriya Rajbanshi to only Kshatriya (1931). However, at present they are either known as Koch Rajbanshi or only Rajbanshi. There are also other reasons for the prevailing identity crisis of the Koch Rajbanshis. Firstly, they live within politically demarcated territories where Bengali and Assamese community form the majority of the population. Thus, because of their long assimilation with these communities they are mostly drawn within the orbit of the Bengalis and Assamese. Thus Bengali and Assamese have become the dual identity of the Koch Rajbanshi thereby suppressing their own identity. Moreover, their deteriorated social, economic and political condition, their lack of knowledge regarding their glorious past and marginalization of the Kamatapuri language and culture have also indirectly contributed to their identity crises.⁵

All these factors have contributed to the identity crisis of the Koch Rajbanshi. Various responses are being witnessed during the contemporary period among the Koch Rajbanshi to meet the challenges for the future. In Assam, they are demanding the Schedule Tribe status while in both Assam and West Bengal they are demanding

for a separate state of Kamatapur through the Kamatapur Movement consisting seven districts of West Bengal and sixteen districts of Assam.

The Dheyans on the other hand are the Koch Rajbanshi people of Cachar. They are known as Dheyans because they were the people of Chilarai, the Dewan or prime minister of the Koch King Naranarayan. The local people of Cachar called them the first people of Dewan Chilarai and later as only Dewan.⁶ However, with the gradual phase of time Dewan was converted to Dheyans.⁷ They migrated and settled in Cachar during the reign of Naranarayan, the most powerful and illustrious Koch king of Kamata in about 1564 C.E. Under his reign the Koch power reached its zenith and with the aid of his brother Sukhladhvaj, better known as Chilarai who was also his prime minister (Dewan), Naranarayan sent a number of expeditions and subdued a number of states of Northeast India. After their successful campaign against the Ahoms, Chilarai under the order of Naranarayan subdued Manipur, Dimach, Jaintia, Khyriem and Dimarua. The subdued monarchs were made to make costly presents and to pay annual tribute. Chilarai then marched towards the Tripura kingdom which at that time included the plains of Cachar and a battle took place at Longai (near Chandkhira area bordering present Tripura state) on the southern border of Cachar in which the Tripura ruler was defeated and killed. With this the Tripura rule over the plain of Cachar ended and Longai came to be recognised as the boundary between the Koch and Tripura territories.

The Koch general then left behind a contingent of his army at Brahmapur which since then came to be known as Kochpur and then as Khaspur.⁸ Later, Kamalnayan, another brother of Naranarayan was appointed as the governor of the province for maintaining diplomatic relations with the defeated states and collection of tribute. However in due course of time with the decline of the Koch power in Kamata, the governor at Khaspur also began to declare his independence and with this, the Koch territory in Cachar began to emerge as a petty independent kingdom. The other rulers who ruled in Khaspur after Kamalnayan were – Udita, Bijoy, Dhir, Mahendra, Ranajit, Nara Singha and Bhim Singha.⁹ The last ruler Bhim Singha had no son to succeed him. However, he had only a daughter named Kanchani whom he later gave in marriage to the Kachari prince Laxmichandra. With this marriage the Koch kingdom in Cachar merged with the Kachari kingdom and Khaspur which was

once the headquarter of the Koch principality in Cachar became a part of the Kachari Kingdom.

At present the Dheyans are found in 9 village of Cachar namely - Japhirband, Thaligram, Leburband, Larsingpar, Digli, Lakhichera, Dewan, Harinagar and Narayanpur. There is no trace of castism in the Dheyman community. Therefore, they are mono caste. They do not have their own Brahmins and so they had to depend on either the Manipuri or Bengali Brahmins for performance of their rituals. Moreover, they are the immediate neighbouring communities of the Dheyman. Therefore a large influence of these communities is felt on the social life of the Dheyman. However, at present, due to their re - established contact with the people of their mainland again they are trying to revive their culture back. Therefore most of the influences of the other communities on their social life are slowly fading away and the Dheyman are making all possible effort to preserve their culture and tradition. Therefore their socio-cultural life is still in transition. They were earlier known as Dheyman but these days they prefer to call themselves as Koch Rajbanshi or Rajbanshi although people of other communities in Cachar still continue to designate them as Dheyman.

Earlier they were cut off from their fellow beings in North Bengal and Western Assam. But at present, they have re-established their contact with them and are working in close co – operation with them in preserving their culture and tradition which had got mixed with other communities. This has led to the growth of a number of association and organization which is working for the welfare and all round development of the Dheyans in Cachar. A number of cultural shows, seminars and workshops in the Dheyman villages are also being organized at present in corroboration with the Koch Rajbanshi of North Bengal and other parts of Assam in order to generate amongst them the feeling of brotherhood and to preserve their identity. A number of cultural programmes, meetings and workshops are being organized regularly in the Dheyman villages. This interaction amongst them is also leading to the growth of identity consciousness amongst the Dheyman. However, this feeling of identity consciousness amongst them is in a very nascent stage.

Early History of the Koch Rajbanshi:

The Koch Rajbanshi are one of the aboriginal tribes of Northeast India. They assumed political power in the Western Brahmaputra valley in the early 16th century

and for a time exercised their sovereignty over almost the major part of the Northeast.¹⁰ They belong to the great “Bodo family” that entered India in the 10th century B.C. from the east and settled on the banks of Brahmaputra and gradually spread over Assam and the whole of North Bengal.

The first authentic reference to the Koch tribe is found in the *Tabakat-I-Nasiri*,¹¹ a chronicle of the first Muslim invader of Bengal, dated 13th century. It mentioned of three tribes living in the plain between the kingdom of Gaur and the Himalayas. They are the Koch, the Mech and the Tharu. The Tharus were found in the Western part of the Himalayan foothills along the border of present Bengal and Bihar.¹² The Meches were abundant between the rivers Mahananda, Mechi, and the Manas i.e. stretch of foothills and jungles in Northern Bengal and Western Assam.¹³ The Koch were spread over the districts of Northern Bengal and undivided Goalpara district of Assam.

Another reference to the Koch is found in a Maithili text which was written approximately in the 14th century –*Varna Ratnakar*¹⁴ in which the Koch and the Mech were referred as tribes living in the forests. Apart from this no mention regarding their lifestyle, habitation or occupation was made. The reference however points that the Koch and the Mech were at that point of time known to the scholarly Hindu society of Northeastern India.

The next reference to the Koch is found in Ralph Fitch’s account and in Abul Fazl’s *Akbar – Namah*.¹⁵ In describing the Mughal conquest of Northern Bengal and Assam, the Mughal historian described the Koch king’s origin, sphere of influence and his military power. The *Akbarnamah* also makes reference of the Koch kingdom.

There are also some Assamese sources¹⁶ like the *Buranjis* and the life history of the Assamese Vaishnava preachers like Sri Sri Sankardev, Mahadev and Damodardev which mentions about the Koch. The *Buranjis* made mention regarding the divine origin of the Koch royal family and how it was established. From the life history of the Vaishnava saints also we get information regarding the society and religion prevalent at that particular period.

In the Puranic literature also indirect reference to the Koch and Mech was made. In recounting the various mixed races and people remaining outside the fold of

Hinduism these names were stated. Though one may question the historical authenticity of these references, yet there is no denying that these tribal are known to the Hindus at that time.¹⁷

The geographical distribution of the Koches in early historical period was limited by the natural boundaries on all sides.¹⁸ In the east, the Koches were found till the Manas river in the Goalpara district of Assam. In the west their territorial sphere was limited by the river Karatoya. In the south also they were restricted by the physical limits set by the old alluvium known as “Barind” and confluence of Karatoya – Ganges.¹⁹

Origin of the term ‘Koch’:

In the Yogini Tantra, the Koch are termed as Kuvaca, and in the Padma Purana as Kuvacaka who are said to have taken dirty food and spoken a barbarian tongue.²⁰ Because of their dissimilarity particularly in food habits and speeches the Aryan scholars used to call them as such, or sometime as Mleccha. K.L. Barua opines that Mleccha might be a sanskritised form of the term Mech.²¹ This view is also supported by Edward Gait and Suniti Kumar Chatterjee.²² That the Koch and the Mech are the members of the same family, is clear from the point that while Biswa Singha’s father has been represented as the chief of the twelve Mech families, his mother has been described as the daughter of the Koch chieftain.²³ According to Suniti Kumar Chatterjee “the word Koc (or rather Komc), comes from a middle – Indo –Aryan source from Kawomca written Kamoca which can be properly sanskritised as Kamboja.²⁴ He further states that the Kambojas of Bengal are apparently the ancestors of the Koch people of North Bengal.²⁵ This view is also supported by scholars like D.C Sircar.²⁶ Thus it is reasonable to hold that the designation Koch is a corrupt form of the word Kamboja to which we have a number of references as a group of people or as a country where these people dwelt.

Racial Affinities of the Koch Rajbanshi:

The history of the Koch Rajbanshi tells us that the Koch were a commanding tribe who built a huge empire in Assam and it sustained for a long period of time. However at the present day the word ‘Koch’ is a term of some vagueness. In Assam proper it has become the name of the Hindu caste, into which are received the

converts to Hinduism from the ranks of the Kachari, Lalung, Mikir, and other tribes. In North Bengal and Assam, on the other hand, the term Koch to a great extent has been discarded in favour of the designation Rajbanshi or Koch Rajbanshi.

The origin of the Koch – Rajbanshi is shrouded in mystery. Opinions differ regarding the racial origin of the Koch Rajbanshi. It is said that they belong to the great Bodo family that entered India in the 10th century B.C., from the east and settled on the banks of the Brahmaputra and gradually spread over Assam and the whole of north and east Bengal. Although there is a general agreement to the fact that the Koches includes the Meches, Kacharies, Bodos, Garos etc, there is still a difference of opinion about their racial origin.²⁷

According to Risley (1981 : 492), “ Koch , Koch – Mandi , Rajbanshi , Palliya , and Desi belong to a large Dravidian tribe of North Eastern and Eastern Bengal amongst whom there are grounds for suspecting some admixture of Mongolian blood but on the whole Dravidian characteristics predominates among them.”²⁸

Dalton also stated that “the Rajbanshi are all very dark “and “displayed the thick protuberant lips and maxillaries of the negro”. Therefore he considered them to “belong to the Dravidian stock”.²⁹

Oldham also describes the Koch Rajbanshis as “the most conspicuously Dravidian race in Bengal”.³⁰

However, there are another group of scholars who believes that the Koches are definitely of Mongolian stock. According to the Yogini Tantra, a Sanskrit tantra of the 16th century, the Koch has been designated as Kuvaca. “Ethnologically they belong to the Mongoloid stock allied to the Bodos. But during the last four centuries of their affiliation to the Hindu faith and consequent interfusion of blood, physiognomical change is also noticed in some cases”.³¹

According to W.W Hunter “the Koch are related to the Mech and the Kacharies of the adjacent region and are descendent of the Himalayan groups”.³²

Waddel, on the basis of anthropometry, has shown that they were Tibeto - Burmans and have no affinity with “the dark Dravidian aborigines of India”.³³

G.A. Gierson states “I think that there can be little doubt that the original Koches were the same as the Bodos. ‘Koch’, ‘Mech’ and ‘Bara’ or ‘Bodo’ all consisted the same tribe”.³⁴ He is favour of “the traditional origin of the Koch kings from a Mech father and Koch mother”.³⁵

Bryan Hodgson states that the Koches belong to the “distinctly marked type of the Mongolian family”.³⁶ Buchanon Hamilton and the Dacca Blue Book have classed them with the Bodos and the Dhimals.³⁷

Sidney Endle has also classed the Rabhas, the Meches, Dhimals, Koches, Dimacas, Hojais, Lalungs, Garos, Hajongs, and such other tribes within the fold of the great Bodo race.³⁸

According to Edward Gait “true Koches were a Mongoloid race, very closely allied to the Meches and Garos; and we find that in Jalpaiguri, Koch Behar and Goalpara, the persons now known as Rajbanshi are either pure Koches who, though dark, have a distinctly Mongoloid physiognomy, or else a mixed breed in which the Mongoloid element usually preponderates”.³⁹

Suniti Kumar Chatterjee in his book “Kirata Jana Kriti” has also classed the Koches as “Indo – Mongoloid Bodo people”.⁴⁰

D .C Sircar⁴¹ and anthropologist like B.M. Das⁴² has also support the view regarding the Mongoloid origin of the Koch.

Thus we see that there are divergences of views regarding the racial origin of the Koch Rajbanshi or Koch. Apart from such views there are also certain current sources of the period which supply us with important information regarding the ethnic identity of the Koch. In the *Tabakat – I – Nasiri* written by Minhas –uddin Siraj, which contains an account of the first two expedition of Mohammad – bin – Bakhtiyar Khalji to the kingdom of Kamrupa in the first part of 13th century, noted that during that period the region was inhabited by three non – Indian Mongoloid tribes, the Koch, the Mech and the Tharu.⁴³ Again, Ralph Fitch who visited Koch Behar in C.E 1585 had noted that “the people have ears which be marvelous great of a span long which they draw out in length by devices when they be young”.⁴⁴ Edward Gait further informs us that this practice is still common among the Garos who belong to the Mongolian group.⁴⁵

In the religious belief and rites as well as in social manners and customs similarities between the Koch and other Bodo tribes like the Rabhas were also noticed by scholars like Buchanon Hamilton, Martin and Herbert Risley.⁴⁶ Buchanon Hamilton even found that the language spoken of by the Koch resembles that of the Garos.⁴⁷

The contemporary literary sources of the period also contain references to the Koch and their Mongoloid characteristics.⁴⁸ The Padma Purana referred to the Koch as Kuvacakas and stated that they had no choice of food and spoke a barbaric tongue and portrayed no sophistication in their manner.⁴⁹ The Yogini Tantra also refers to the Koch as Kuvacas and state that they were born of a Mech woman.⁵⁰

Thus, there are strong grounds to lead to the fact that the Koch Rajbanshis are of Mongoloid origin having their homeland in the Himalayan region, most probably in Tibet wherefrom they came to India and settled first in North Bengal⁵¹ and then gradually spread towards the northeastern region of India.

Thus the above study clearly draws home the point that the Koch were initially Mongoloid having close affinities with either Bodo tribes like the Meches, Rabhas, Dhimals, Hajongs, and Garos. But in due course of time in some places, they inter-married with the Dravidians, thus leading to the birth of a mixed Mongoloid–Dravidian race in which the Mongoloid character predominates.

Foundation of the Koch Kindom – Reign of Biswa Singha:

The kingdom of the Koch was also known as Kamata kingdom. Most of the time Kamatapur has appeared as the capital of Kamata kingdom and occasionally Kamata and Kamrup has been treated as the same kingdom. It is generally believed that Sandhya Rai established the kingdom of Kamata in the 13th century comprising few portion of North Bengal and West Assam of present Northeast India.⁵² Historian N.N Acharayya has given a detailed account on the kingdom of Kamata in his book. He has written “shortly after the invasion of Kamrup by Tughril Khan Malik Yuzbeg , the capital of Kamrup was transferred by king Sandhya from ‘Kamrup Nagar’ (North Guwahati) to Kamatapur (Cooch Behar) in the west. From that time onwards, the kingdom of Kamrup was known as Kamata or Kamrup – Kamata. The rulers of Kamata were designated as Kamateswara or Kameswara (Lord of Kamata). The

kingdom of Kamata became, however, much smaller in extent than ancient Kamrup. It included Dhubri, Goalpara, Kokrajhar, Barpeta, Nalbari and Kamrup district of Modern Assam , besides portion of Northern Bengal and Mymensingh (Bangladesh).....”⁵³

It is remarkable to note that though the Koch Rajbanshi identify themselves with Kamata kingdom or Kamatapur, Koch as a political power in this region came much later, almost more than 250 years later; after the kingdom of Kamata was being established by Sandhya Rai. The kingdom of Kamata was ruled by different rulers of different dynasties from the period of mid-13th century to the end of the 15th century. The sources of the 13th and 14th century being very less and confusing, nothing concrete can be said regarding the kings who ruled in Kamata. However, a chronology of Kamata Kings from Sandhya Rai till his 6th generation can be tentatively given as below:

Sandhya Rai -	1250 – 1270 C.E.
Sindhu -	1270 – 1285 C.E.
Rup -	1285 – 1300 C.E.
Singhadhvaj -	1300 – 1305 C.E.
Pratapadhvaj -	1305 – 1325 C.E.
Dharmanarayan -	1325 – 1330 C.E.
Durlabhnarayan -	1330 – 1350 C.E.
Indranarayan -	1350 – 1365 C.E. ⁵⁴

It is the Guru Charitra by Ramcharan Thakur from where we get the names of the kings of Kamata from Sandhya Rai to Durlabhnarayan. We get the name of Indranarayan from a contemporary writer Kavi Ratna Saraswati.⁵⁵ There is much probability that after Indranarayan the throne of Kamata was occupied by one usurper one after another and finally one of them named Arimatta was able to establish himself as the King and founded a dynasty which was ruled by four descendents. They were as follows:

Arimatta -	1365 – 1385
Sukaranka -	1385 – 1400
Sutaranka -	1400 – 1415
Mriganka -	1415 – 1440 ⁵⁶

During the 15th century the kings of Khan or Khen dynasty ruled in Kamata. The first king of this dynasty was Niladhvaj. He was succeeded by his son Chakardhvaj. After Chakardhvaj, Nilamber ascended the throne, attained great power and extended his rule eastwards to the Bar Nadi and westwards as far as Karatoya. During his reign, Nawab Hussain Shah of Gauda (Bengal) invaded Kamata and destroyed his capital Kamatapur. The downfall of the Kamata kingdom ultimately led to the collapse of the Kamata kingdom established by Sandhya Rai. After the downfall of Nilambar there was a lull in the history of Kamata. N.N. Acharyya has written “the kingdom of Kamrup – Kamata witnessed anarchy at the end of the 15th century A.D. With this defeat at the hands of Hussain of Shah the city of Kamatapur was demolished. Thereafter after receiving submission of the more prominent Bhuyans chiefs, he left Kamata leaving his son Danial to consolidate the conquered country, but the Bhuyan chiefs combined themselves and attacked against the Muslim supremacy. They then attacked Daniel’s garrison and drove them out. After this Kamatapur was ruled by a number of petty Bhuyans chiefs.⁵⁷ Among these chief the most powerful were the Koch, initially independent of each other, but gradually united under the authority of one among themselves named Biswa Singha, the founder of the Koch kingdom.⁵⁸ He was the son of Haria Mandal, the headman of a village consisting of twelve other Koch families. The leading man of this families were Panbar, Phedela, Phedphedo, Barihana, Kathia, Guabar, Megha, Baisagu, Jagai, Gurikata , Jugbar , Dakharu.⁵⁹

A similar account is given in the Kharganarayanar Vamsavali⁶⁰ wherein it is stated that “all came and made Haria a Mandal of the country bounded on the east by the Manaha, on the west by the Sankosh, on the north by the Dhavalgiri (Himalayas) and on the south by the Lohita (Brahmaputra). All went away with delight after a feast of rice. From that time he became the administrator of twelve villages. He did not pay tribute to anyone for the land within his boundary”.⁶¹

Haria Mandal married Hira and Jira. Buchanan Hamilton has written the name of the father of Hira was Hajo. According to him, Hajo was a “valiant chief” and he drove away the Mohamedans from Kamatapura.⁶² According to the view of Rai Gunabhiram Barua, the name of Hira’s father was Hajo (Haji) or Hakhia. Another view is that the father of Hira was the king of Hajo in Gauhati.⁶³

In all probability it was Buchanan Hamilton who made the first mention of Hajo as Hira’s father. After him B.H. Hodgson in his Essay on the Koch, Bodo and Dhimal tribes has made mention of Hajo as Hira’s father. The name is also found in Latham’s Ethnology of India, in Colonel Daltons’s ‘Ethnology of Bengal’ and on his article entitled ‘Notes on Assam Temple Ruins.’⁶⁴

Later Hira gave birth to Bisu, popularly known as Biswa Singha and Jira gave birth to Sisu.⁶⁵ Biswa Singha inherited a small possession “bounded in the west by the Sonkosh, on the north by Dhavalagiri (Himalayas) and on the south by the Lohita (Brahmaputra)”.⁶⁶ He started his career by establishing his headquarters at the hilly region at Chikana (or Chikini), the ruins of which are still in extant between the rivers Saralbhanga and Champawati, fifty to sixty miles to the north of Dhubri.⁶⁷ At the outset Biswa Singha first tried to clear all his obstacles. He first tried to consolidate his kingdom by suppressing the Bhuyans. He first of all defeated and killed the Bhuyans chief of Phulguri. This strengthened him and then collecting more followers challenged and defeated a confederacy of some of the Bhuyan chiefs headed by the Bhuyan of Karnapur.⁶⁸ According to the Darrang Raj Vamsavali the Bhuyans subdued by Biswa Singha are the Bar Bhuyan, Saru Bhuyan, Bhuyan of Owguri, Chuti Bhuyan, Kusum Bhuyan, Kolea Bhuyan, Jargoya Bhuyan, Kavilash Bhuyan and the Karnapur Bhuyan. Next he defeated the Bhuyan of Bijni, the Bhuyan of Pandu and then the Charu Bhuyan. With the defeat of the Charu Bhuyan Biswa Singha conquered the whole of the southern portion of Kamrup as far as Gauhati.⁶⁹ He then turned towards the Bhuyans of Bajali, Kshetri and Baushi on the north. These Bhuyans were under the leadership of Narayana Bhuyan who was the Gamatha or head Bhuyan.⁷⁰ These Bhuyans were not in good terms with the Charu Bhuyan.⁷¹ Therefore, taking the aid of the Charu Bhuyan, Biswa Singha attacked the Bhuyans of northern Kamrup. The Bhuyans under Narayana Bhuyan paid strong resistance to Biswa Singha and so he had to make a strategy to alienate the Bhuyans subordinate to Narayana. Thus, after alienating the Bhuyans one after another he was able to crush

the Bhuyans. After subjugating all the Bhuyans and having cleared all the obstacles he proclaimed himself as the King of Kamatapur.

After his subjugation of the Bhuyans, Biswa Singha transferred his capital from Chikana to Kamatapur (Kantanagar),⁷² later known as Cooch Behar which was four miles to the south – east of the present town of Cooch Behar.⁷³ According to the Rajopakhyana the transfer was made at the suggestion of Biswa Singha's mother who intended to have a fine city in the plains.⁷⁴

Thus establishing his sovereign power over all the petty rulers of the region, Biswa Singha declared himself the King. Meanwhile, he had come under the swaddle of Hinduism. Thereafter the Brahmins tried to associate divinity with his origin. Certain myths and legends were created and re-created in order to give a divine origin as well as a Kshatriya status to Biswa Singha. The myths are mentioned in the Darrang Raj Vamsavali, which is a genealogical account of the Koch royal family, and which was written in the last quarter of the 18th century. According to the Darrang Raj Vamsavali King Sahasranjun in course of hunting in the jungle took shelter in the hermitage of sage Jamadagani, father of Parashurama. The sage had a wonder cow named 'Kamdhenu' which could provide anything asked for. Seeing the amazing power of the cow, Sahasranjun asked for it but when the sage declined it he forcibly took the cow away. Later when Parashurama got to know of it he was overaged and he set out in search of the King and the cow. In the fight over the cow, the King was killed and the cow was brought back to the hermitage. But one day when Parashurama was away from the hermitage, the deceased King's son killed the sage while on meditation and took away the cow. When Parshurama got to know of this he was so angry that he started slaughtering all the Kshatriyas from one corner of the earth to the other. However to avoid Parshurama's wrath 12 princes could save themselves by taking shelter in the appearance of Mech people by marrying Mech maidens. Of these 12 Mech, Haria Mandal was the most powerful and had 2 wives, Hira and Jira.⁷⁵ It is said that Hira was the avatar of Goddess Parvati. One day when Hira was on her way to provide food and drinks for her husband Haria, Lord Siva turned himself in the appearance of Haria and had the foods and drinks which Hira had brought and later had sexual intercourse with Hira. In due course of time Bisu, later known as Biswa Singha was born of them.⁷⁶ In the Vamsavali of Cooch Behar and in the Sankaracharita of Ramacharan Thakur Bisva Singha was considered to be the son of

Mahadeva. Moreover in the Rajopakhyara (about 1823 A.D) Hira is mentioned as the mother of Sisu and Bisu by Mahadeva and Jira of Chandana and Madana by Haridas.⁷⁷

This story of divine origin was evolved by the Brahmins after Biswa Singha became the King. Probably it was done so as to get the adherence of the subjects. The King would also have been pleased to have a divinity associated with his origin rather than a humble one and so he must have happily accepted the theory of his origination propounded by the Brahmins. On the other hand, by pleasing the King the Brahmins also could remain in the good book of the King. With the conversion to Hinduism, the Koch also gradually underwent a tribe – caste transition. Biswa Singha also gradually began to shed off the tribal characteristic associated with his origin. He ruled for a period of 25 years and his reign can be placed around 1515 C.E till 1540 C.E.⁷⁸ He later transferred his capital from Sikkhagram to Kamatapur (present day Cooch Behar) and his kingdom extended as far as the Barnadi in the east and the Karatoya in the west.

It is also mentioned in the Darrang Raj Vamsavali that Biswa Singha established matrimonial relations with different countries like those of Gaur, Kashmir, Nepal, Mithila etc. The selection of the Kingdoms was made in consultation with the ministers.⁷⁹ He had 18 queens who gave birth to number of daughter and 18 sons .The name of the queen and their sons along with their native places are given below:

<u>Name of the queen</u>	<u>Native</u>	<u>Name of the son</u>
1. Ratnabanti	Nepal	Nara singha
2. Hemaprabha	Gaur	Naranarayan
3. Padmabati	Gaur	Sukhladwaj (Chilarai)
4. Chandrakanti	Kamarupa	Gohain Kamal (Kamalnarayan)
5. Purnakanti	Kamarupa	Maydan
6. Hemakanti	Kamarupa	Rama Chandra
7. Rati	Kamarupa	Sura singha

8. Tilottama	Kashmir	Man Singha
9. Chandra	Kashi (Benaras)	Mecha
10. Chandra-nana	Kashi (Benaras)	Brishaketu
11. Jaya	Kashi (Benaras)	Rama Narayan
12. Bijoya	Kashi (Benaras)	Ananta
13. Jayanti	Kashi (Benaras)	Deep Singha
14. Lalita	Sonitpur	Hemadhar
15. Labanyamayee	Sonitpur	Megha Narayan
16. Padmamala	Sonitpur	Jagat
17. Satarupa	Mithila	Rupchand
18. Kanchanmalini	Mithila	Surya. ⁸⁰

During his life time Biswa Singha assigned certain responsibilities of the state to his sons. The responsibility assigned to each one of them is as follows:-

1. Nara Singha - Responsibility to rule over 'foreign lands' (i.e., the conquered tract in Bhutan)
2. Naranarayan - King of Kamrup – Kamata.
3. Chilarai /Sukhladhvaj - Army chief and Yuvaraj.
4. Gohain Kamal / Kamalnarayan - Department of road and communication.
5. Maydan - Construction of Bridges.
6. Ram Chandra - Treasury.
7. Sura Singha - Trade and commerce.
8. Hari Singha - Celebration of festivals.
9. Mecha - Production of Cannons and Guns.

10. Brishiketu - Blacksmith.
11. Ram Narayan - Organisation of musical performance.
12. Ananta - Oilmen and Tantis (Weavers).
13. Deep Singha - Responsibilities of animals like elephants, horses, cows and buffaloes.
14. Hemadhar - Affairs of priests and Brahmins.
15. Megh Narayan - Jolas (makers of cotton thread).
16. Jagat - Maintenance of temples and other religious institutions.
17. Rupchand - Agriculture.
18. Surya - Goldsmiths.⁸¹

The Darrang Raj Vamsavali and J.P. Wade's An Account of Assam also narrates how Biswa Singha distributed the duties of the state among his eighteen sons. It states that he made a stratagem in order to let his sons choose their own duty. This he did by making eighteen packets containing eighteen different articles and asked the sons to pick up one each, without making it known to them what each of the packets contained. This way Nara Singha, the eldest son picked up the packet containing gold, which indicated riches, so he was appointed ruler of 'foreign lands', namely the conquered tract in Bhutan. Malladev picked up the packet containing earth which indicated the throne and so he was appointed the successor to the throne. Sukladhvaj picked up the packet containing iron which indicated arms and so he was appointed Yuvaraja holding the office of Prime Minister and Commander to Malladev and so on.

Biswa Singha also built up a fullfledged home department which had officers like those of Raja purohita (Royal Priest), Daivajna (Astrologer), Vaidya (Royal Physician), Tamuli (Betel – Nut supplier), Supkar (In – charge of the royal Kitchen), Bhandari (Store keeper – cum- Treasurer), Majumdar (Secretary to the King), Dvari (Gate Keeper) and also a group of Char or Dut (Spies).⁸²

The administrative arrangement of Biswa Singha also reveals certain qualities of the King. The appointment of Sisu by Biswa Singha as the Yuvaraja, who was the

next to the King in power and prestige was an act of great prudence, as it not only kept his brother satisfied but also enabled Biswa Singha to get full help and cooperation from his brother in all affairs of the Kingdom.⁸³ This same policy was later used by his son and successor Naranarayan who not only appointed his brother Chilarai as Yuvaraja but also conferred on him almost all the significant state business. Thus, Biswa Singha left a very good and sound administration for his successor.

Biswa Singha was a devoted patron of religion and literature. After his conversion to Hinduism he actively encouraged the worship of both Shiva and Durga. The practice of worshipping both these deities was so much in practice at that time even in present time they are worshipped with full devotion among the Koch Rajbanshi. Every village has a Shiv Mandir and Durga Puja is one of their main festivals. Goddess Kamakhya was also worshipped with full dedication at that period. The Darrang Raj Vamsavali states that Biswa Singha discovered the ruins of the Kamakhya temple lying embosomed in jungle,⁸⁴ in the Nilachala hill. He also rebuilt the temple of Bhavani (Kamateswari) at Gosanimari within the present district of Koch Behar.⁸⁵ Biswa Singha also brought a number of Brahmins from Mithila and Gaur to his kingdom. The local chronicles make reference of one Kali Chandra Bhattacharyya of Gaur who encouraged the worship of Shiva and one Vasudev Acharyya who was appointed the chief priest of the Kamakhya temple.⁸⁶ Biswa Singha also patronized the worship of Lord Vishnu as well and gave gifts to Vaishnava priests and astrologers.⁸⁷ He also took active actions for the defense of the Kingdom. It is said that he constructed an earthen wall on the southern border of his kingdom running from the Karatoya to the Brahmaputra, the remain of which are still existent.⁸⁸ He is also credited for building the fort called Biswa Singhar Killah in the Bhutan border at a distance of about ten to twelve miles from Chikanagram.⁸⁹

Biswa Singha was also a great patron of literary. His court was ornamented with eminent poets, preceptors and scholars. Sakta poets like Mankar and Durgavar who are best known for their Mangal – Kavyas were his court poets.⁹⁰ Kavi Pitambar, the author of the Nal – Damayanti Kahini was also at his court. His fondness of education is well evident from the fact that he sent his sons Malladev and Sukhladhvaj to Benaras to have their education there under one Brahmananda

Sanyasi.⁹¹ The quest of the founder Koch King for education and literature reached its peak in the period of the succeeding Kings.

Thus, Biswa Singha was a very farsighted King who laid a strong foundation for the expansion of his kingdom. It was his extraordinary organizing capability which helped him in removing the entire obstacle from laying the foundation of one of the most powerful kingdom of eastern India. He consolidated his territories and introduced effective administrative machinery. It was partly because of his strong foundation that his son and successor Naranarayan could take the Kingdom to its zenith.

By the end of his rule he was able to consolidate his rule over the lower Himalayan region, the whole of the present districts of Kamrup, Goalpara and the part of Nowgong, as well as the districts of Rangpur except Ghoraghat in present Bangladesh.⁹²

The Koch kingdom founded by Biswa Singha was further extended by his son and successor Naranarayan. His reign included a major part of north –eastern India. It comprised “almost the whole of northern Bengal, Bhutan and Assam as well as the modern state of Kachar, Jaintia, Manipur and Tipperah and extended upto the coast of Bay of Bengal.”⁹³ However since Naranarayan did not bring the conquered territories to his direct rule and allowed them to remain as tributaries, therefore the territories under his direct administration was smaller than his conquest.

Objectives of the study:

The study aims at a thorough discussion on the Koch Rajbanshi identity as well as the Dheyani in Cachar. This is a new and unexplored area and a comprehensive study will uncover many untold historical facts. The study aims -

1. To look into the complex identity crisis of the Koch Rajbanshi.
2. Changing definition of the Koch Rajbanshi during the colonial period.
3. Current status of the Koch Rajbanshi.
4. Migration and re-settlement of the Dheyani in Cachar
5. Detailed account on the socio – cultural life of the Dheyani in Cachar.

Methodology:

The study is based on records both primary and secondary, field study and interviews. Primary sources exploration was done in the National Archives of India, New Delhi, West Bengal State Archives, Kolkata, Assam State Archives, Guwahati, Assam Institute for Tribals and Scheduled Caste, Guwahati. Primary sources includes the Koch genealogical works i.e the Vamsavali, the Ahom Buranjis, the Foreign travellers account, Government records, Census report, interviews, folk songs, folktales, etc. Field trips were undertaken in areas where the Koch Rajbanshis were concentrated in North Bengal and Assam. Frequent Field work was also carried out in the Dheyman settlement in the Cachar district of Assam.

The study is also based on secondary sources like relevant books, periodicals, newspapers and journals which have been found in different libraries like – Assam University Central Library, Silchar, K.K. Handique Library of Gauhati University, Guwahati, ICHR Library, Guwahati, the Department of Historical and Antiquarian Studies, Guwahati, the State Museum, Guwahati, Omeo Kumar Das Institute of Social Change and Development, Guwahati, District libraries at different district headquarters and libraries of different colleges. Materials have also been collected from various sites of the internet.

Proper scientific research methodology mainly the empirical and analytical methods are employed for collecting data and for a proper analysis of them. The proposed study will compare and contrast elements that will be found in all data. The proposed study will follow the convention of acknowledging sources and of appending those in a bibliography.

Scope of the work:

The scope of the present work is confined to the quest of the Koch Rajbanshi identity and the history of the Dheyman in Cachar. The Koch Rajbanshi community is at present facing a crisis as regards their identity. Their identity is gradually getting absorbed with two powerful identities – namely the Bengali and Assamese identity in North Bengal and western Assam respectively. So, the Koch Rajbanshi are at present making an effort to bring themselves out of the dominance of these two powerful communities and thereby maintain the Koch Rajbanshi identity.

For quite some time they have been trying to voice their demands through protest in the form of social movements. This protest can be seen in the form of the Kshatriya Movement of the early 20th century and the Kamatapur Movement for a separate state at present time comprising districts of northern Bengal and western Assam.

The present work would also look into the history of the Koch Rajbanshi people in Cachar who are known as Dheyans. It would study their socio – cultural life and the transition that is taking place amongst them through the period. Besides, it would also make an effort to look into the present status of the Dheyans in Cachar and their identity within Koch Rajbanshi.

Organisation of Chapters

The work has been divided into six co – related chapters. They are as follows;

Chapter I: Introduction

This chapter begins with an introduction to the topic. It deals with the early history of the Koch Rajbanshi who were then known as the Koches. Besides, it has also looked into the racial affinities of the Koches and the foundation of the Koch kingdom by Biswa Singha. It also makes mention of the objectives, methodology, scope and literary survey of the concerned topic.

Chapter II: Political History of the Koch Kingdom

This chapter deals with the political history of the Koch kingdom from the rule of Naranarayan when the Koch power was at its zenith till it became a protectorate of the British during the reign of Dharendranarayan and then from being a protectorate state till its merger with Independent India during the reign of Maharaja Jaggadippendra Narayan Bhup Bahadur and finally its inclusion as a district of West Bengal.

Chapter III: Migration and Settlement of the Dheyans in Cachar

This chapter deals with the migration and the process of the Dheyans settlement in Cachar. It describes the circumstances under which the Koch principality in Cachar

was established. It also gives a brief history of the Dheyans in Cachar and the social structure of the dheyans prevalent at that particular period.

Chapter IV: Identity Crisis of the Koch Rajbanshi

This chapter looks into the prevailing identity crisis of the Koch Rajbanshis, their earlier effort of climbing the social ladder through the Kshatriya Movement and the present attempt of them to carve out a separate state of Kamatapur through the Kamatapur Movement. It also has looked into the role of the different associations and organizations spearheading the movement and the frictions and factions prevailing amongst them.

Chapter V: Socio – Cultural Life of the Dheyans

This chapter has dealt with the socio – cultural life of the Dheyans and the transition that is taking place within their society and culture at different periods of time. It has also made an attempt to look into the present status of the Dheyans in Cachar and their identity within Koch Rajbanshi.

Chapter VI: Conclusion

This chapter is the concluding chapter. As a result of a final endeavour this chapter has made an effort to critically deal with the findings of the previous chapters. A Bibliography, an Appendix and the Plates will then follow the conclusion.

Literary Survey:

So far as the topic is concerned, very few scholars have dealt with the identity crisis of the Koch Rajbanshi and at the same time the Dheyans in Cachar. Sir Edward Gait's *A History of Assam* was the first scientific and systematic work dealing with the political history of Assam up to the end of the 19th century C.E. His work is confined to the early Koch kingdom. Besides him, British writers, like Francis B. Hamilton, R.B. Pemberton, Alexander Mackenzie, and William Robinson have dealt with the Koch but all are confined to the early state of the Koch kingdom. Ajit Kumar Boruah's *The Koch kingdom* is a very descriptive work on the Koch kingdom but again it is confined to the Darrang branch of the Koch kingdom established by Balinarayan alias Dharmanarayan. A recent work of Arup Jyoti Das *Kamatapur and the Koch Rajbanshi Imagination* has highlighted on the Koch Rajbanshi identity to

some extent. But it has focused mainly on the Kamatapur Movement. Swaraj Basu in his book *Dynamics of a Caste Movement: the Rajbanshis of North Bengal* has been very informative for the concerned topic. But it has mainly centered on the Kshatriya Movement. M.N. Srinivas in his book *Social Change in Modern India* gives a good idea as regard caste studies. But it fails to accommodate new interpretation regarding caste studies. J .B. Bhattacharjee's *Cachar Under British Rule in North Eastern India* has given us some valuable information about the Dheyans. In the introductory chapter of his book he has mentioned about the expedition sent by Naranarayan under the supervision of Chilarai. Moreover it makes mention of how the Tipperas were subjugated by the Koch army of Chilarai and how the plains of Cachar was occupied by the Koch. It also highlights the settlement of the Koch in Cachar and them being referred by the local communities of Cachar as Dheyans and finally the merging of the Koch principality in Cachar with the Dimasa kingdom. Beyond this he has not given any information on the Dheyans. D. Nath also in his book *History of the Koch Kingdom 1515 -1615* has given a detailed account on the Koches, their origin, the formation of the Koch empire, the rulers, their activities, achievements, conflicts, wars, expeditions, peace proposals, etc. D. Nath has also gives a detailed account on the reign of Naranarayan and his achievements in which the Koch power reached its zenith. It is however to be mentioned here that it was during the reign of Naranarayan that the Koches in course of their expedition toward Manipur, Tippera, Khyriem, and Sylhet set their foot on Cachar and later on a group of them stayed back and settled in Cachar. This book also speaks of the disintegration witnessed by the Koch kingdom under the rule of Raghudev Narayan and Parikshit Narayan. Besides this it also refers to the administration, society, economy and cultural development of the Koches under their efficient rulers. Thus his work gives a very exhaustive account of the Koch Rajbanshi but as regards the Koch Rajbanshi of Cachar i.e, the Dheyans the information is very limited. Though he has presented a detailed work on the Koch Rajbanshi, he did not make much mention of the Dheyans. Sudhamsu Sekhara Tunga in his book *Bengali and Other Related Dialects of South Assam* has touched on the origin of Dheyans and their settlement in Cachar. The religious aspect has also been touched upon. However, it is on the language of the Dheyans that he has given a very descriptive account. A detailed account on the language of the Dheyans has been an enriching source of information for the present work. But, although he has touched upon some valuable aspect which serves a lot to the present work yet he had missed to

bring forth in detail other aspect of the Dheyman and the transition experienced in their socio – cultural life. Suhas Chatterjee in his work *A Socio - Economic History of South Assam* has also presented a descriptive narration on the social and economic life of the Dheyman. But his description also lacks the transition that is taking place in the present Dheyman society. Moreover, many socio – cultural aspect have remained untouched in his work. Suniti Kumar Chatterjee in his work *Kirata - Jana – Kriti* also mentions about the Koch king Naranarayan, the glory achieved during his reign and finally the disintegration which took place between the sons of Naranarayan and Chilarai and how it was divided into Koch Behar in North Bengal and Koch Hajo and finally getting merged with the Mughals and Ahoms respectively. He has also given information regarding the origin of the Koch. But, he however missed to bring forth a descriptive account of the Dheyman.

In addition to these works, a few papers such as the *Hanging issue of the Koch – Rajbanshi of Assam*, before the Parliament which is a synopsis of the All Assam Koch – Rajbanshi – Kshatriya Sanmilani’s memorandum to the Government, J.B., Bhattacharjee’s *The Koch Principality in Cachar: A study of Mediaeval polity formation in North East India*, and Bana Prasanna Misra’s *Revisiting the Rajbanshi Identity* are also valuable addition to the study of the subject. A recent work of Rajib Nandi *Spectacles of Ethnographic and Historical Imagination: Kamatapur Movement and the Rajbanshi Quest to Rediscover their Past and Selves* has given a good account on the prevailing identity crisis of the Koch Rajbanshi. But no one till date has done any comprehensive and detailed work on the present topic. Under these circumstances, the present work has been undertaken where best endeavour is made to explore the Koch Rajbanshi identity and at the same time the Dheyman in Cachar

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In the Kachari language also, the meaning of Hajo is ‘a hill’.

Hajo is situated 14 miles to the north – west of Gauhati. The temple of Hayagriva Madhav is there. When the Mohamedans occupied it, its name was changed to ‘Suja – abad’.

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