UNIT 7: THE KOCHES

UNIT STRUCTURE

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7.1 OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to–

- trace the origin of the Koches,
- discuss about the achievements of Viswa Simha, Nara Narayana and other and
- describe the rise and fall of the Koch Kingdom

7.2 INTRODUCTION

In the previous unit we discussed about the coming of the Ahoms and their political achievements. In this unit we will trace the history of the Koches who were a great power that emerged in the Western part of Assam in the 16th century. Probably the Koches had a Mongoloid origin. They were also known as Mech in the Assam history. This unit will explain about the rise of Koch power under different Koch kings and the dynastic conflict that led to its partition in 1581 C.E.

The Koch history consists of long drawn battles with the Ahoms and the Muslim invaders.

7.3 ORIGIN OF THE KOCHES

According to the *Puranas* and *Tantras*, the Koches were of mix blood of Mongoloid, closely allied to the Meches, the Garos and the Dravidians. Adopting Hinduism, they sought skilfully to reinforce their claim to a higher social status through the legend.

The earliest known ancestor of the Koch royal family was Hariya Mandal, a chief or head of the 12 Koch or Mech families of the pargana. He had two sons namely Visu, and Sisu. Bisu, more popularly known as Viswa Simha, with the assistance of his brother Sisu or Hinduised name Siva Simha, laid the foundation of the Koch political power, according to the chronicle *Darrang Raj Vamsawali*.

7.4 VISWA SIMHA

Viswa Simha was a courageous man whose rise to power can be dated bacl to 1515 C.E. He defeated all the Bara Bhuyans (powerful class of local landlords) and set up a strong and independent kingdom with his headquarters at Chikangram. Later on, he shifted his capital to Koch Bihar. He first came into conflict with the Ahoms in about 1523-33 A.D. Visva Simha refrained from any armed confrontation with the Ahoms. .Visva Simha agreed to pay the annual tribute of horses to the Ahom king and became a vassal king under the protection of the Ahoms. Thus, he would be secure from any Muslim invasion and at the same time, extend his dominion gradually. A peaceful relation was established.

With Ahom protection being secured, Viswa Simha gradually expanded his dominion. He initially regularly paid tribute to the Ahoms. But with his growth in power, he defaulted in payment of tributes and invaded the Ahom kingdom to remove the disgrace of being a tributary. He died in 1540 C.E. and left behind an efficient administration for his successor. Under his administration, he had 12 ministers who were also known as Qazis like Thakurias, Saikias, Hazaris, Umras and Nawabs. These ministers belonged to the chief Mech or Koch families. He had also appointed officials like Wazir, Lashkars, Bhuyans, Baruas, etc., as wardens of the frontiers. He collected

revenue from the peasants in kind. Having accepted the Hindu religion, he restored the worship of Kamakhya. He also became tolerant of all other religions.

7.5 NARANARAYANA

Nara Narayana also known as Malla Deva, the eldest son of Viswa Simha succeeded his father to the Koch throne. His beloved brother Sukladhwaj was appointed as the Dewan, combing the post of Prime minister and Commander-in-chief. Sukladhwaj was also known as “Chilarai” as he used to fight like a kite in the battle field.

The reign of Nara Narayan is important as it was during his time that the Ahoms and the Koches came into conflict. It all began when a conspiracy against Nara Narayan by a petty chief who fled to Suklenmung, the Ahom king was detected. Suklenmung gave refuge to the chief that led to a battle between Nara Narayan and the Ahom king. The Koch army under Chilarai fought at the banks of the river Dikrai and was able to defeat their rival. In another battle at Kaliabor, the Ahoms were defeated again with a heavy loss.

Suklenmung attacked soon and encamped at the bank of river Pichala which ended in a disaster as the supplies of the Koch army were cut off. The Koch army suffered a huge loss of man after this battle. Nara Narayan retaliated by burning down some villages within the Ahom boundary. The Ahoms confronted the Koch army in response and in an engagement at the mouth of the river Dikhou, the Ahoms were defeated. Again in a second engagement at the same place, Chilarai, the Koch commander inflicted a crushing defeat on the Ahoms. The Ahom king and his nobles fled and soon Garhgaon, their capital city, was captured. The Ahoms had to sue for peace. The Ahom king had to surrender many of their nobles and sons of their chiefs to the Koches as hostages besides paying a war indemnity of sixty elephants, sixty pieces of cloths and a large amount of gold and silver as per the conditions set while making peace with the Koch king.

However, even though Nara Narayan was successful everywhere, yet the Koches had to face much trouble in their dealings with Padshah of

Gaur. The Koch chronicle informs of the defeat of the Koch forces under Chilarai who was taken captive Nara Narayan was very desperate to make a good relation with the Ahoms for the release of his brother. But he did this under the pretext of the game of dice where he deliberately lost the game and thus released the prisoners and made friendship with the Ahoms.

However, friendly relationship with the Padshah of Gauda was not established by the Koch king. Rather, a few years later Nara Narayan along with Munim Khan, who was sent by the Mughal Emperor Akbar (1556–1605 C.E.), decided to attack Gauda. The Koch army under Sukladhwaj or Chilarai attacked from the East, while the Mughal army under Munim Khan advanced towards Gauda from the West. The Padshah of Gauda was easily defeated and his kingdom was equally divided between the Koch king Nara Narayan and the Mughal Emperor Akbar. But in the course of this expedition, Sukladhwaj contacted small pox and died on the bank of the river Ganga.

In July 1563, the Koch commander, Tipu led an invasion up to the Brahmaputra. But the Ahoms defeated him. In 1570 again, Tipu and Bhitarual raised an army against the Ahoms but the Ahom army was successful in crushing their efforts. In 1577 three men revolted against Nara Narayan, but having failed they sought the shelter of the Ahom king. The Ahom king, Sukhampha allowed them to settle at Gajala. In 1585, the Koch King of Koch-Hajo, Raghudeb gave his daughter Sankala in marriage to Sukhampha with a handsome dowry. Sukhampha in his turn gifted the Koch King generously.

The court of Nara Narayan was adorned with scholars of different branches of learning. Besides Sankardeva and Madhavdeva, they were Purushottam Vidyabagish, Ram Saraswati, Ananta Kandali, Sridhar and Bakul Kayastha. As such Nara Narayan was called the Vikramaditya of Assam. Gohain Kamal, another brother of the Koch king, is credited with the construction of Gohain Kamal Ali, a road from the Koch capital to Narayanpur (North Lakhimpur sub division). The Koches are also said to have built a fort at Narayanpur.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q1: Name the ancestor to whom the Koch dynasty is traced back to?

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Q2: Give the name of the Ahom king who was a contemporary of Nara Narayan.

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Q3: Under whose supervision was the Gohain Kamal Ali road constructed?

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Q4: To which religion did Viswa Simha adhere to?

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7.6 PARTITION OF THE KOCH KINGDOM

After the death of Nara Narayan the Ahom-Koch relations entered a whole new phase. The Koch territory was divided into two parts with the river Sankosh as the dividing line. Being childless, Nara Narayana nominated his nephew Raghu Deva (son of Sukladhwaj) as his successor. But in his advanced age he was blessed with a son named Lakshmi Narayan. This created apprehension in the mind of Raghu Deva, who at the instigation of some officials, declared himself the king at Barnagar. Instead of fighting against Raghu Deva, Nara Narayana, in 1581 C.E. partitioned the Koch kingdom.

The territories east of the river Sankosh known as Koch Hajo were handed over to Raghu Deva and Western part was retained by Nara Narayana for himself and his descendents. Raghu Deva ruled over Koch Hajo, but paid tribute to his uncle Nara Narayana, acknowledging his overlordship. But after the death of Nara Narayana in 1587, Raghu Deva stopped paying tribute and assumed independence by issuing coinage in his name.

The death of Nara Narayana marked the end of the glorious days of the kingdom of Koch Behar. Lakshmi Narayana (1587-1627 C.E.) became the new ruler of Koch Behar. The assumption of independent status by

Raghu Deva was disliked by Lakshmi Narayana as it ended the authority of Koch Behar over Koch Hajo. As a result, there started a conflict between the two Koch kingdoms which finally led to the Ahom - Mughal conflict.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q5: Fill in the blanks:

(i) Naranarayana died in the year _____.

(ii) The Koch kingdom was partitioned in _____.

(iii) After partition Lakhsmi Narayana began ruling in _____.

(iv) Raghu Deva was the son of _____.



7.7 LET US SUM UP

After going through this unit, you have learnt:

- The origin of the Koches and their lineage,
- The political history of the Koches under the rule of Viswa Simha
- The exploits of Chilarai and Naranarayan and
- The downfall of the Koches with the partition of the Koch kingdom

7.8 FURTHER READING

1) Barpujari, H.K. (2003)*: The Comprehensive History of Assam*, Vol. II & III 2nd edn, Publication Board Assam, Guwahati.
2) Baruah, S.L.,(1996): *A Comprehensive History of Assam*, Munshiram Manoharlal, Delhi.
3) Bhuyan, A.C., (1999): *Political History Assam*, Publication Board Assam, Vol. II & III 2nd edn, Guwahati.



7.9 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q No. 1: Hariya Mandal

Ans to Q No. 2: Suklenmung

Ans to Q No. 3: Gohain Kamal

Ans to Q No. 4: Hinduism

Ans to Q No. 5: (i) 1587

(ii) 1581

(iii) Koch Behar

(iv) Sukhladhwaj



7.10 MODEL QUESTIONS

(A) Very Short Questions

Q1. Who were the Bara Bhuyans?

Q2. How do you define a tributary ruler?

Q3. Why did Viswa SImha refrain from any armed confrontation with the Ahoms?

(B) Short Questions

Q1. Write a short note on:

a) Visva Simha

b) Chilarai

c) Raghu Deva

(C) Long Questions

Q1. Discuss in length the Ahom-Koch struggle during the time of Naranarayana.

Q2. Explain the role of Viswa Simha in laying the foundation of the Koch dynasty.

Q3. Describe in details the causes behind the downfall of the Koches.

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