

King Nara Narayana's Military Campaigns in North-East India: An Analysis through Numismatics

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Abstract

Besides being an instrument of commercial transactions between individuals, coinage has the ability to tell socio-political history of the period. In medieval times, the issuing of coins was a prerogative to the rulers, as it symbolized political power and sovereignty. The Koch kingdom that ruled parts of North East India in medieval period also introduced currency with the motive of legitimizing its power. King Nara Narayana of the Koch kingdom who conquered large parts of the North East India during his military campaigns introduced his currency in the hill kingdoms. The present write-up focuses on the dual role of Koch coins which contributed to the political solidarity of the Koch kingdom, and at the same time helped in a monetary uniformity over a large part of the land, paving the way of transformation of North East Indian money economy.

Keywords: Koch kingdom, coins, tribute, military campaign, money economy

Kamata-Koch Behar was a state situated south of the Himalayas during the 16th to 18th centuries. The state was established in 1510 AD, in the vacuum created after the collapse of the Kingdoms of Kamarupa and Kamta¹ and became one of the great regional powers of North-East India. There is a great deal of obscurity leading to some academic controversies about the way it was established. Nonetheless, it was unique for its long existence and can boast of its remote antiquity, sustained continuity and survival down the centuries. The survival and expansion of influence of the state can be discerned from its coins. The present paper aims at to analyse the same. However, the evolution of money economy in the territories of Koch state is shrouded in deep mystery, just like its political history before Visvasimha, the first historical ruler. Because of the lack of proper historical information, it is not known to us that when and how coinage came to replace

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the barter mode of exchange. Although some other dynastic coinage like those of Maurya, Gupta and Sultanate Bengal were found within the Koch territory, they are not adequate to explain the kingdom's full-fledged exchange system.

The oldest available coins from Kamtapura were of Samsuddin Ilias Saha.² These coins recovered with other coins from Kamatpura in 1863 had the inscription of Kamru as 'Chaulistan'.³ Besides, a large hoard of 13,500 coins spanning the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries were also recovered.⁴ Before the establishment of the Koch dynasty, the Khenas⁵ ruled this area with Kamtapura as their capital. Nilambar⁶ was the most powerful king of the Khenas dynasty. As the archeologists are yet to discover any coin of the Khenas kings, one may assume that Nilambar and other rulers of the dynasty did not take any initiatives to introduce coins to commemorate their political victory over the region. Though we have not found Khenas coins so far, there are some literary references which spoke of their existence. For example, Radha Krishna Das Vairagi in his book *Gosanimongal*⁷ mentions the introduction of 'Mohur' or gold coin by king Kanteswar. After Nilambara the last king of the Khenas dynasty of Kamtapura, Visvasimha of Koch⁸ clan became the ruler of Kamtapura. Visvasimha during his first few years of reign was busy in consolidating his position to the north of the Brahmaputra. After the departure of the Muslim rulers the whole country was ruled by a number of petty independent chiefs.⁹ Visvasimha seized this opportunity and in course of time made himself the master of the country west of the *Bara Nadi*.¹⁰ Visvasimha assumed the title of Kamteswara and declared himself an independent king after his formal coronation in 1496 A.D. It was the usual practice among the Indian rulers to issue coins in their own name, the moment they felt themselves independent and powerful enough to do so. But unfortunately no coins have so far been discovered. Neither *Darrang Vamsavali*, nor *Rajapakhyani* says anything whether Visvasimha struck coins. This may lead us to believe that unstable political condition of the time might have prevented Visvasimha from issuing any coins in his name.¹¹

Though archeologically no coins of Visvasimha have been found as yet, but some literary sources both from Assam and Koch Behar inform us about Visvasimha's coins. The *Assam Burunji* by Rai Gunabhiram Barua tells us that the predecessors of Visvasimha did not issue any coins.¹² In another words the author suggests that Visvasimha was the first ruler of Kamtapura, who issued coins in his name. Again Durgadas Majumder in his *Rajavamsavali* says that Visvasimha enthroned himself in Saka 13 and struck

coins in his own name.¹³ From the *Burunji* of Rudrasimha¹⁴ we learn that one Ahom ruler sent an expedition against Visvasimha in about 1405 Saka i.e. 1483 AD. Visvasimha, who was only consolidating his position at that time, acknowledged the suzerainty of the Ahom king with many presents which have not been specified in the book. But Majumdar refers to a meeting between the Ahom king Suhunmun and Visvasimha in Saka 1419 (i.e. 1497 AD) and the latter's presentation of 500 pieces of coins and five horses to the former.¹⁵ After the death of Visvasimha Malladeva ascended to the throne after expelling his elder brother Nara Simha and assumed the name Nara Narayana.¹⁶ In some of the old religious writings he is called Malla Narayana. Although there may be speculations whether Visvasimha issued coins or not, there is no doubt that his son Nara Narayana minted coins and his coins are discovered in large numbers from Koch Behar and adjoining areas. He issued numerous types of die struck coins, among them full rupees are found in plenty; but only a few specimens of half and quarter rupees are also discovered.¹⁷ All his coins are of the same design with an invocation to Shiva on the obverse and the name of the king and the date 1477 (1555A.D) on the reverse.¹⁸ It is probably that this merely represents the accession year and the coins were struck on several occasions and perhaps even in the several mints.¹⁹ The coins of Koch rulers were known as 'Narayanimudr' after the title Narayana assumed by Nara Narayana.

Nara Narayana continued the aggressive warfare initiated by Visvasimha against the hill states of North-East India. Together with his brother Sukladvaja (also known as Chilarai) whom he had appointed as his commander-in-chief, Nara Narayana continued the policy of expansion. The analysis of his military campaign will throw light on the amount of silver that Nara Narayana was reputed to have as the tribute and will also give us some clues as to when and where Nara Narayana's army had struck coins. Valuable information can also be obtained from certain hordes that have been discovered containing coins of this king.

Nara Narayana started to plan a military attack on the Ahom kingdom of Assam fairly early in his reign in view of aggressive policy of Ahom king Suhengmung.²⁰ After the failure of first attack in 1562, another attempt was made by Nara Narayana the following year wherein he ensured a resounding military victory over the Ahoms, A treaty was agreed in July 1563, whereby the Ahom king presented Nara Narayana with among other things a large store of gold and silver coins and the whole of the north bank of Brahmaputra.²¹

Nara Narayana annexed Kachar after conquering Assam. After the defeat of the Ahoms, Sukladhvja advanced towards Maibong the capital of the kingdom of the Kachar. The Kachar king quickly submitted and presented Sukladhvja with many valuables and 28 elephants. He accedes to Nara Narayana and promised to pay an annual tribute of 70,000 silver coins, 1000 gold coins and 60 elephants. Sukladhvaja established a colony in Kachar.²²

Manipur was the next kingdom which acknowledged the Koch suzerainty. The then raja of Manipur too weak to oppose the powerful Koch kings and accepted the suzerainty without resistance. His tribute was fixed at an annual tribute of 20,000 silver coins, 300 gold coins and 10 elephants.²³

The kingdom of Jaintia was next attacked and the raja was killed by Chilarai with his own hand. His son was placed on the throne after acknowledging the authority of Koch Behar and promising to pay regular tribute. The tribute was fixed at 10,000 silver coins together with some horses and weapons. It is said that the one of the conditions imposed on him was that he should not in future strike coins in his own name. This seems to imply that Jaintipur had struck coins prior to this date. It is also possible that the story was invented to reason out as to why virtually all Jaintipur coins even up to the end of the 18th century did not have the name of the ruler.²⁴ From Jaintipur, Sukladhvaja advanced to Sylhet and extracted an annual tribute of 3,00,000 silver coins; 10,000 gold coins; 100 elephants, and 200 horses before turning his attention on Tripura.²⁵

A fierce battle was fought probably in the plains of Kachar near Khaspur, north of Silchar and the king of Tripura was apparently killed in the deadly battle.²⁶ It is said that the son of the slain king, who was crowned subsequently agreed to pay tribute of 10,000 silver coins, 100 gold coins and 30 horses.²⁷ There is no mention of this war in the Tripura chronicles and the only corroboration of the Koch Vamsavalies is found in an Assamese *Buranji* of uncertain date. This is not sufficient to establish it as an historical fact.²⁸

Subsequently a body of soldiers was stationed in Brahmapur (now Khaspur) to maintain the authority of Nara Narayana. Later his brother, Gohain Kamal became an independent ruler of Kashpur and his descendants ruled the area until the early eighteenth century.²⁹ It is possible that coins may have been struck by Gohain Kamal in the name of Nara Narayana. The king of Khyrim then offered submission and tribute, and apparently sought permission to strike coins. Agreement was given on the understanding that the coins were in the name of Nara Narayana and that they had the symbol

of a mace to distinguish them from the normal Koch Behar coins and the king then set up a mint.³⁰ Annual tribute was fixed at 900 gold coins, 15000 silver coins, 50 horses and 30 elephants.

These victories on the one hand led to the defeat of rival neighboring powers in the region and on the other helped the Koch emerge as a strong state with tribute paying subordinate allies. All this enabled the Koch to raise a sustained amount of surplus from the region and strengthened the kingdom further. Continuity of 'aggressive warfare' under the commandship of Chilarai further extended the territory of the kingdom. The total collection of indemnity from the rulers of North Eastern states was Rs. 380000, 22100 gold coins, 264 elephants 370 horses and other valuable goods.³¹ Not only so the rulers of North East India also agreed to pay an annual tribute of Rs. 422000, to the Koch kingdom which significantly contributed to the economic development of the Koch kingdom. It also accelerated the state formation and consolidation of *Narayani* rupees.

Silver was the main metal used in the making of coins. Trade was a major source of accumulation of silver. As there are no silver mines in northern Bengal or in the Himalayas, it is worth considering the source of the silver used by Nara Narayana for the large amount of coinage struck in the latter half of the sixteenth century.³² During this period there was a major trade route between India and Tibet, passing through Koch Behar and Bhutan.³³ This trade route was recorded by the English merchant and traveler Ralph Fitch in 1583. It is reasonable to assume that the income generated from trade from this route was converted into silver coins by Nara Narayana. The existence of the coinage and the power and political stability of the new state would then have oiled the wheels of commerce and trade with Tibet through Bhutan and with Assam and this trade would in turn have ensured continuous supply of silver for the coinage. Silver was also obtained as booty or tribute during the successful military campaigns initially by Visvasimha, while he was establishing a viable political rule and subsequently by Nara Narayana as he expanded his influence over the whole of the region.

Due to the paucity of material culture it is hard to determine the actual location of the royal mint of Nara Narayana. But finding of plenty of Nara Narayana's coins in Koch Behar, we can presume that the main mint of Nara Narayana was perhaps located in the capital city of his empire that was Kamtapura. It is important in this connection that a mint of Khena dynasty is excavated from Gosanimari which was the capital city of Khena rulers.

As because we have no Khenas coins in our possession, so it can be argued that the mint was perhaps used also by Nara Narayana for minting coins in his own name. Since excavation works are still going on in Gosanimari, we have to wait for definite clues regarding Nara Narayana's royal mint. But instead of this mint, there were some other mints in some other parts of Nara Narayana's empire. As Nara Narayana extended his territory in the far and wide areas of North-East India and his coins have been discovered from so many places of the region. Some of the significant places where some coins of Nara Narayana have been found plenty in number are Gawuhati the capital city of Kamarupa, Kashpur the capital city of Nara Narayana's younger brother Gohai Kamal and in the Khyrim state.

The introduction of a regularized currency system in Kamata-Koch state by Nara Narayana was not a mere event of history but it ushered a new era in political, economic and also in cultural spheres. These coins were the sign of Nara Narayana's personal glory as well as his political supremacy over the territory he ruled. He was a contemporary ruler to Akbar, but in the way he conquered different parts of North-East India and made the indigenous rulers as his subordinates it reflects his political wisdom and ability. These coins were the sign of sovereignty of Nara Narayana's military victory. As we have no specimen of state sponsored coinage before Nara Narayana in North-East India, so it is easy to presume that transaction depended on barter system. But with the minting of coins, monetary transactions appear to have replaced the barter system and enhanced volume of trade. By taking inspiration from the Koch rulers, the other princely states of North-East India also started minting their own coins and popularized the acceptability of coins as a better mode of transaction, ultimately paving the way for economic development of the entire region. Culturally also these coins are very significant as the close study of various legends engraved on Nara Narayana's coins, we can get a picture of cultural and intellectual environment of the Koch kingdom and as well as North-East India. By a minute analysis of the letters engraved in the coins we can know about the evolution of Bengali script and language. Besides the above mentioned importance these coins can be treated as primary source materials in reconstruction of the Koch and North-East Indian history. The information supplied by the literary sources can be corroborated with the numismatic sources and thus helps us draw a clear picture of the past. In conclusion, it can be stated that the coinage of Nara Narayana added a new chapter in the numismatic heritage of North-East India and also in the Indian subcontinent. By a study of these indigenous coins of Nara Narayana we

can learn about so many aspects of Koch and North-Eastern culture. When corroborate with the legends, symbols and language of the era, the coins of Nara Narayana suggest the continuity of the cultural legacy of the mainland India. The information offered by these medieval coins of Koch Kingdom certainly goes a long way to provide an antithesis of the ‘colonial theory’ that the region was ‘completely isolated’ from the rest of India.

Notes and References

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2. *Catalogue of Coins in the Indian Museum*, Part II of Vol. II, p.152, Plate II, Coin No. 38. Order of Trustees of the Indian Museum, Calcutta, 1894.
3. Amanatulla Ahmed, Khan Choudhuri, *Koch Bearer Itihash (Bengali)*, Cooch Behar State Press, Cooch Behar, 1936, p. 279, p. 279.
4. Thomas, Edward., ‘The Initial Coinage of Bengal’, *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Vol. II, 1866, pp. 145-224; also *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, Vol. 36, No. 1, 1867, Calcutta, 1867, pp. 1-73
5. Amanatulla Ahmed, *op.cit.*, pp.36-48.
6. Gait, Edward Albert, *A History of Assam*, Surjeet Publications, New Delhi, 2006 (reprint), p. 45. It may be mentioned that Rudra Simha’s Buruniji (1634 A.D.) now preserved in the Office of Director of Ethnography, Assam, contains the accounts of rulers of Kamta prior to Visvasimha.
7. Pal, Nripendra Nath ed., *Gosanimgal*, Anima Prakashani, Calcutta 1992, p. 100.
8. The scholars are not unanimous about the etymological source of the term ‘Koch’. S.K. Chatterji, a distinguished philologist, argues that the term Koch has been originally derived from the Indo-Aryan source Kawamca, written as Kamoca, which was sanskritized as Kamboja. See, Chatterji, Suniti Kumar, *Contributions to the History and Culture of India*, The Asiatic Society of Bengal, Calcutta, 1998 (reprint), p. 111. The term Kamboja has been further elevated to Kubachaka through Komc-Koch-Kubacha continuum. However, in this paper the term Koch is used to indicate the race.
9. Ghoshal, Sarat Chandra., *A History of Cooch Behar*, Cooch Behar State Press, Cooch Behar, 1942, pp. 81-96.
10. Barua, Gunabhiram, *Assam Burunji*, Guwahati, 1884, p.55; Amanatulla Ahmed *op.cit.*, pp.87-88.
12. Ray, Swapan Kumar, *Prachin Cooch Beharer Sampurna Itibritta*, Kolkata, 2006, pp. 66-70.

12. The Assam Burunji of Gunabhiram Barua says, 'aru veharate visvasimha rajar purve kono taka nachhila', meaning before Visvasimha, there were no coins in Behar. See, Barua, Gunabhiram, *op.cit.*, p. 249.
13. It may be mentioned here that the Rajavamsavali is considered to be the second importance source, next only to the Rajopakhyana. The book says, (tera) Sakaya maharaja *Visvasimha simhasana prapta haiy aapana name chhirka jarap kariya chhenal*, meaning in 13 Saka, Maharaja Visvasinha acquired the royal throne and struck coin in his own name. See, Mazumdar Durgadas, *Rajvamsavali*, Cooch Behar State Press, Cooch Behar, 1863, p. 16.
14. *The Burunji of Rudrasimha*, 17 patra, Office of the Directorate of Ethnography, Assam Government, 1915.
15. Suni Visvasimhabhupa Mahananda mane/
Apanajaravatadakarisehikshana//
Pancha sat a mudra dilapanchaturngama /
Manojavagatitaradrishtihayabhrama //
The passage means, 'Hearing this, king Visvasinha with his mind filled with great delight immediately presented a purse of coin struck in his own name. He gave 500 coin, and five horses'. See, Amanatulla Ahmed, *op.cit.*, pp. 280-283.
16. Chaudhuri, *op.cit.*, p. 236.
17. Rhodes, Nicholas Gervase & Bose, Sankar Kumar, *Coinage of Cooch Behar*, Library of Numismatic Studies, Dhubri, 1999, p.4.
18. *Ibid*, p.5.
19. After 1581 the kingdom was divided with Nara Narayana's brother Sukladvja and his descendants ruling the territory to the east of the Sankosa River. Coins were struck in this area by Raghu Deva dated 1510 Saka (1588 AD), showing that at least at this time, there was more than one mint in the region. *Ibid*.
20. Nath, Dambarudhar., *History of the Koch Kingdom (c. 1515-1615)*, Mittal Publications, New Delhi, 1989, pp. 50-59.
21. Gait, *op.cit.*, pp. 50-52.
22. Baruah, Swarna Lata., *A Comprehensive History of Assam*, Munshiram Manoharlal, New Delhi, 1985, p. 210.
23. *Ibid*, p. 210.
24. See, Singh, Jai Prakash, "Jayantia Coins and the Koch Historical Tradition: an Examination" *Numismatics International Bulletin*, 1988, pp. 112-116.

25. Ghosal, *op.cit.*, p. 123.
26. Numismatic evidence proves that Vijaya Manikya of Tripura died in about 1564, but the *Rajmala* indicates that the king died of smallpox, and no mention is made of any invasion from Cooch Behar. See, Rhodes, Nicholas Gervase & Bose Sankar Kumar *The Coinage of Tripura*, Library of Numismatic Studies, Kolkata, 2002, p. 16-19.
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28. Gait, *op.cit.*, p. 54.
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