

Pre-colonial Education System of Kamata Kochbihar State*

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Abstract

Kamrup since its inception may be considered as a place of learning and culture. Regional scholars composed Dhaker Vachan (Parole or words of Drum) in Sanskritized Bengali language in the ninth century A. D. There were people of the area, namely, Gopichand, Gorakshanath O Sona Ray. Joginitantra O Kalikapurana, who, composed on different occasions. Maharaja Nara Narayana due to his acceptance of Bhramanical religion brought Sanskrit and Bengali scholars from Bengal in order to compose Sanskrit works and its translation in Bengali language. It was under the patronage of Koch King Maharaja Nara Narayan, Vaisnavism also flourished in Kamata-Kochbihar which helped spread of mass education among the common people. The Zamindars of Rangpur took initiative to introduce English education after the coming of English East India Company with the financial support and assistance of the Koch kings.

Key Words: Kamata-Kochbihar, Vainavism, Sanskrit Scholar, Pathsalas, Koch –kings.

Introduction:

The western part of the Brahmaputra valley in former time was included in the ancient kingdom of Kamrupa and from the 13th to 15th centuries A.D. The whole tract up to Karatoya seem to have formed a single kingdom but the name had been changed from Kamrupa to Kamata. Though the eastern part of the kingdom declared independence in 1581 afterwards the portion became integral part of the Mughal Empire. The main dynasty ruling the western part of the former Kamata-Koch Kingdom (afterwards mentioned as Kochbihar) however maintained its identity still 1772, when the rulers chose to remain as native states by the Anglo-Koch treaty of 1772.²

From ancient time Kamrup was noted for the place of learning and culture. *Dhaker Vachana (Parole or words of Drum)* was composed in the 9th century and several other books like *Kalika Purana* and *Joginitantra* became published by local Pandits. Prior to twelfth century village poets had composed songs of *Gopichand, Gorakhnath* and *Sona Ray*.³ Like all other Hindu rulers the Koch King was the great patroniser of art and culture. Maharaja Naranarayan (1534-1587) gave great impetus to learning and was called *Vikramaditya* of Assam.⁴ Formerly the Koch King used to patronise Sanskrit learning by establishing Sanskrit Toles and thus supported Sanskrit pundits. The rulers of Kamata-Kochbihar also patronised Persian language and literature. Persian scholars were allowed to teach Persian to the members of the royal family and they were well

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² Partha Sen, *Study of some aspects of the History of Kamata-Kochbihar Since 1772 to the date of accession of Sivendra Narayan*, unpublished Ph.D. thesis, N.B.U, 1989, introduction P-i.

3. S.C. Ghoshal, *History of Cooch Behar* (Eng.tr.) Cooch Behar State Press, Cooch Behar, 1992, P-65.

4 . *Assam Sabitya Sabhar Navam Adhibesaner Abhibhasan*, P-40 cited in S. C. Ghosal,op.cit. P.165.

versed in Persian language. Maharaja Harendra Narayan (1772-1839) of Cooch Behar himself was a Persian scholar. But the real position of the popular education during the period under review is unknown to us. It is to be noted that the first vernacular education was not established before 1857.⁵

Maharaja Naranarayan was also the great advocator of the Brahmin scholars who were brought from Bengal to compose the original Sanskrit works or render them in Bengali and Assamese languages. Maharaja Naranarayan was the first ruler of Assam who had strengthened the ties between Assam and the rest of India by making Sanskrit studies much more widespread in Assam.⁶ It was under the patronage of Maharaja Naranarayan Sankardev, the Great Vaishnava Preacher, composed dramas like *Sita-Sayambara*, *Krishnaqunemala* and various other books on Vaishnava doctrine.⁷ Thus under the patronage of ViswaSinha and his successors Kamata Kochbihar became the centre of Brahmanic culture. It was under their patronage *Puranas* were translated in Bengali language which was exemplified from a letter written by Maharaja Naranarayan to the Ahom ruler in the year 1555. It is an example of earliest form of Bengali prose.⁸

Maharaja Pran Narayan was vastly learned in grammar, literature and other Sastras. He was also said to have formed the *Pancha Ratna Sabha* consisting of five learned men.⁹ The reign of Maharaja Harendra Narayan may be described as the golden age in the history of Koch Bihar. Maharaja Harendra Narayan not only patronised men of letters, the king himself was well versed in Persian, Bengali and Sanskrit languages. Maharaja himself translated the *Asik Parva* of *Mahabharata*, the Great Epic. Harendra Narayan also translated *Sundarkanda* of *Ramayan*, another Great Epic.¹⁰ *Shyama sangeet* (songs) written by Maharaja Harendra Narayan in honour of God Kali got its popularity among the people of Koch Bihar. It should be mentioned that songs of Maharaja Harendra Narayan was very popular among the people of Koch Bihar due to its simple language.¹¹ It was during the reign of Maharaja Harendra Narayan, Joynath Munshi wrote *Rajopakhyana*. Harendra Narayan had granted eight hundred and seventeen acres of *lakberaj* (rent-free) land to the author of the book.¹² The Court of Maharaja Harendra Narayan was adorned with many poets and scholars. King patronised poets named Balaram, Ramnath, Parmananda, Raghuram and Madhavananda translated the *Banaparva* of Mahabharata. Raghuram translated *Kishkindhya Kanda*, *Aadiparva* and *Santiparva*. Duija Kirti Chandra also translated *Aadiparva*. Another Court poet of Maharaja Harendra Narayan named Madhav translated *Bishnu Purana*. Poet Saradananda translated *Kasi Kanda* of the *Brahma-Vaivartta Purana* and some of its portion translated in other language by Maniram Das. Braja Sundar and Ramnandan, the other two poets of Maharaja Harendra Narayan translated *Narsimba Purana* and *Garuda Purana*¹³

5 . H.N. Choudhury, *The Coachbehar State and its Land Revenue Settlement*, Coachbehar, 1903. PP. 280-286.

6 . S. K. Chatterjee, *The Place of Assam in the History and Civilization of Assam*, Guwahati, 1970, PP. 73-74.

7 . S. C. Ghosal, *op. cit.* P.165.

8 . Sajani Kanta Das, *Bangla Gadya Sahityer Itihas* (in Bengali) Cal 1985, PP.27-28

9 . H. N. Chaudhury, *op. cit.* P. 287.

10 . Durga Das Majumder, *West Bengal District Gazetteers*, Kochbihar , 1977, P. 173.

11. Debi Prasad Sen ' Maharaja Harendra Narayaner Shyama Sangeet' in *Kochbihar Darpanedi ed. Aamalya Ratan Gupta*. 9th year, Second issue, 1357 B.S. PP.70-75.

12. Durga Das Mazumdar, *op.cit.*, P.173.

13 . *Ibid*, PP. 173-74.

During the pre-colonial period the centre of learning was centered mainly on the royal court and its surroundings. In Koch Bihar, Khagrabari became the centre of learning. It is believed that there were several *Tols* near Khagrabari. But it is difficult to estimate the strength of the students due to the lack of information. It should be mentioned here that the Koch king used to establish *Pathshalas* for spread of education for some of the royal family members. Maharaja Bir Narayan (1627-1632) had established some *Pathshalas* and the king personally supervised these schools.¹⁴

It was the tradition of the Monarchs of Kamrupa to spread education. Educational institutions were called *Tol* or *Chatrasala*. These institutes were maintained by Brahmana Ojha (Scholars). Sankar Deva received early education in such a *Tol* under Mahendra Kandali, who studied under Rajendra Adhyapak. These were small cottages for students attached to the schools. Brilliant students had to take responsibility of backward students. Students were responsible for cleansing school and its surrounding areas. Educational centres in outside provinces also attracted ambitious Assamese students. Kanthabhusan of Malgudi village near Hazo went to Varanasi for education. Both Naranarayan and Chila Roy went Varanasi for education. Maharaja Naranarayan encouraged *Bakula Kayastha* to write book on arithmetic. Purushottam Vidya Bagisa Bhattacharya wrote Sanskrit grammar. Prayoga Ratna Mala¹⁵ and Shridhar composed a book on Astrology.¹⁶

There was no Public School at this time in the state. But Vaishnava movement played a great role for spreading education among the common people. Most of the Sankar Deva's works were composed in local languages. In the Vaishnava *shastras* (scriptures) and Namgarhs were founded by Sankar Deva. Regular *Kirtan* were held regularly and Vaishnavas *puthis* were read regularly by the devotees.¹⁷

In this way the Vaishnavas helped to spread mass education in Kamta-Kochbihar. Hunter also observed that it is not uncommon to see that the shopkeepers, chasas, majhis used to read their sacred book at interval of their work.¹⁸ The *shastras* played a positive role for the development of new ethos. Vaishnavism encouraged a policy to de-tribalise by encouraging liberal attitude towards indigenous tribe. Thus Sanskrit Vaishnavas helped to bring the tribal society under Hindu fold.¹⁹ Martin observed that in the absence of public schools parents generally used to instruct their own children. Even in some places generally four or five families unitedly used to hire a common Guru who received food and monthly fees from each child. Total numbers of such teachers were five hundred forty in the districts. But their standard of teaching method was very poor and in most cases the students were taught only how to sign their name and keep account.²⁰

14 . Biswanath Das, *op.cit*, P.31.

15 . N. N. Acharya, *The History of Medieval Assam*, Gauhati, 1966, P.64.

16. Maheswar Neogi, *Early History of the Vaisnava Movement in Assam*, Gauhati, 1998, PP: 96-97.

17. W. W. Hunter, *A Statistical Accounts of Assam*, Gauhati 1966, P.264.

18 . Sudeshna Purakayastha, *Indigenous Industries of Assam, 1870-1925*, Cal, P.72.

19.Martin, *Eastern India*, Vol. I, P.500.

20. G. A. Hutmann, *Report on the State of education in Bengal*, Cal, 1835, P.121.

We get references from the enquiries of the Qanungoes of Rangpur in the year 1823 A.D. that out of 19 sub divisions (Police Circuit) 14 Sub-divisions had no elementary schools at all and in the remaining five areas there existed only Bengali and two Persians schools. Nine sub-divisions had 41 schools of Sanskrit learning where grammar, general literature; logic law, the mythological poems, astrology as well as *Agam Sastras* were taught.²¹

It is interesting to note here that although no public schools was established in the state but the king had taken great interest for the development of education in the neighbouring areas. We came to know that Maharaja Harendra Narayan had donated sum of 1,066-10-8 in Company's rupees to the Guwahati School. From the interest of that amount quarterly prizes were awarded to deserving students.²²

The Rangpur English Medium School was established in the year 1832. Maharaja Hemant Narayan had donated a commodious brick house for the use of the school. A table over the entrance door commemorates the fact of the Raja's gift 323 *Rajasaka* (the Kochbihar era). It appears that Maharaja Harendra Narayan had helped to spread education in neighbouring areas. He himself was author of number of books but in spite of all literary activities Maharaja Harendra Narayan did nothing to spread education in his own state. We do not have the exact percentage of literate person in Koch Bihar. According to the census report of 1901 there was 5.9% literate. Thus education in the states appears to have kept continued within the aristocracy in and around the court and what was the state of popular education cannot be ascertained and in fact there was no record to show the state ever encouraged.²³ It is interesting to note that in neighbouring Rangpur Zamindar class came forward to establish a Public School. They collected money from the public to establish school. They even used to teach in the school. When the Koch king and aristocracy remained idle for spreading modern education in the neighbouring Rangpur, the Zamindars and aristocracy came forward to spread education.²⁴

21 . *Coochbehar Select Records*, Vol. II, P.64.

22 . Walter K Firminger, *Bengal District Records*, Rangpur, Vol. I, Cal 1914, P.7.

23. *Some aspects of the History Kamata Kochbihar since 1772 to the accession of Sivendra Narayan*, Partha Sen unpublished PhD Thesis, 1989 N.B.U. P.166.

24. Dr. Ratan Lal Chakraborty, Susanta Chandra Kha (ed.), *Rangpur Barta Baba*, P.177, Cal 2001.