Society and Culture Development in India
Vol. 2, No. 1, 2022, pp. 109-128

ISSN: 2583-0694
URL: www.arfjournals.com
https://doi.org/10.47509 /SCDI.2022.v02i01.08

From State to Stateless and then Coming Back to State Again: The Curious Case of Koch Bihar/Cooch Behar/Kamatapur

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Abstract: The fundamental concern in attempting to understand the state in India or the Indian state can be said to revolve around a shift, a transfer or shifting of the state from the Mughals to the Britishers. Various attempts have been made to understand or examine this shift from Mughal sovereignty and governance to that of British forms. By means of this examination, in fact, attempts have been made to understand fundamentally the very idea of 'state' in an Indian or more so in an Asian context. This paper will focus upon the shifting of the state in the Bengal borderland or frontiers and its implications on smaller, native (princely) and peripheral states. In other words, beginning with the bigger, major, fundamental concerns of state in India, I will in this paper eventually delve into the concerns of smaller, minor states, standing in the periphery of Indian territory and in the frontiers of Asian nation-states. In the context of African Tribal societies, Aidon Southal invented a new form of state called the 'segmentary state'. Burton Stein, while working on the pre-colonial state including the Mughal state, elaborates the concept of 'segmentary state' by means of the case examples of the Southern states of Chola and Vijayanagara. Taking the clue from Southal, Stein asserts that the Chola and Vijayanagara regime or these states were not states in terms of real power but, it didn't stop them from being a state nonetheless- although only nominally. In other words, the concept of 'segmentary state' focuses upon states within a state. It aims to understand the nature of state from the perspective of the periphery. The analysis and approach to understand the state from the perspective of the periphery differs fundamentally from the analysis or approach which seeks to understand the state from above or from the mainland. In this paper, I will elaborate this, first by an exploration of the state of Bengal, then, moving towards the periphery through an exploration of the Ahom state and finally,

Received : 10 May 2022
Revised : 30 May 2022
Accepted : 09 June 2022
Published : 17 June 2022

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Ray, N. (2022). From State to Stateless and then Coming Back to State Again: The Curious Case of Koch Bihar/ Cooch Behar/Kamatapur, *Society and Culture Development in India,* 2: 1, pp. 109-128. *https://doi.org/10.47509 / SCDI.2022.v02i01.08*

I will solely focus on the case of the Koch Bihar/Cooch Behar/ Kamatapur state, which this study considers as a peculiar case from the periphery of the periphery.

Keywords: State, Coloniality, Periphery, Identity, Borderland, Stateless

Introduction

The fundamental concern in attempting to understand the state in India or the Indian state can be said to revolve around a shift, a transfer or shifting of the state from the Mughals to the Britishers. Various attempts have been made to understand or examine this shift from Mughal sovereignty and governance to that of British forms. By means of this examination, in fact, attempts have been made to understand fundamentally the very idea of 'state' in an Indian context. However, I will focus here on the shifting of the state in India and its implications on smaller, native (princely) and peripheral states. In other words, beginning with the bigger, major, fundamental concerns of the Indian state, I will in this paper eventually delve into the concerns of smaller, minor states, standing in the periphery of Indian territory. But, before dwelling into the periphery, here it is important to note the changes or continuities that occurred as the Indian state was shifting itself from the Mughals to the Britishers.

For Ranajit Guha, there has been a fundamental change, a break from the past as the state in India got transferred from the hands of the Mughals to the hands of the Btritishers. Guha extensively elaborates the condition of Bengal to support his argument while referring to the Cornwallis Permanent Settlement Act of 1793. This act for Guha is not merely an act written on paper, but it at the same time symbolizes a new era, a break from the past. There was a break because the act fundamentally changed the nature of landholding or ownership of land. The change in the nature and forms of landholding therefore translates itself to be a change in the very fundamental nature of state in India, claims Guha. Similarly, Nicholas Dirks, in his exploration of colonial ethnography finds out that, the shift from Mughal to British state has resulted in a change on the nature of caste traditions and practices- hence there arises a break from the past and therefore the colonial state for Dirks can be argued to be different from the Mughal state. Sudipta Kaviraj, in a similar but in a more fundamental way points out that the British colonial state is a rupture, a break from the very idea of an Indian state as the colonial state brought in new forms and ethos- replacing the old 'Indian forms and ethos'.

On the other side, there are others who find out that the state in India has been a continuously evolving project. They see no breaks, no ruptures but continuation of similar state practices. Seema Alavi discovers in her comparative study of the 18th century state in India that organization and operation of the Army or the military which is vital for sustaining the state, has been continuous in both the Mughal and then later in the British state. Similarly, Bayly's exploration of the business or merchant class of North India points out the fact that state change happened in the first place because the merchant class (here for Bayly it's merchant families of Banaras) shifted their economic influence and support to the British state from the Mughal state. So, in a new British state, their economic interests and influences over the state remained the same as it was earlier in a Mughal state.

However, my concern here is not to dwell deep into the debate of change versus continuity of state in India but rather another aspect of the same state from a peripheral perspective. In the context of African Tribal societies, Aidon Southal invented a new form of state called the 'segmentary state'. Burton Stein, while working on the pre-colonial state including the Mughal state, elaborates the concept of 'segmentary state' by means of the case examples of the Southern states of Chola and Vijayanagar. Taking the clue from Southal, Stein asserts that the Chola and Vijayanagar regime or these states were not states in terms of real power but, it didn't stop them from being a state nonetheless- although only nominally. In other words, the concept of 'segmentary state' focuses upon states within a state. It aims to understand the nature of state from the perspective of the periphery. The analysis and approach to understand the state from the perspective of the periphery differs fundamentally from the analysis or approach which seeks to understand the state from above or from the mainland. In this chapter, I will elaborate this, first by an exploration of the state of Bengal, then, moving towards the periphery through an exploration of the Ahom state and finally, I will solely focus on the case of the Koch Bihar/Cooch Behar/Kamatapur state, which this study considers as a peculiar case from the periphery of the periphery. According to the Subaltern School's analysis and understanding of state in India, they maintain that, in the pre-colonial situation, the situation was such that 'local' or 'indegenous' communities/ tribes were autonomous of a state. In other words, these tribes or local/peripheral communities were maintaining their ideologies, customs and cultures untainted by any elements- external to them. But, the fundamental flaw with the Subaltern approach is that it fails to locate the state precisely in this local/peripheral context. Because, once they admit that there were structures or institutions existing in pre-colonial times including the pre-Mughal times which may be considered to be a

state, then it becomes imperative to admit, one also must be able to locate that state in its own context, and not merely using comparative approach or analysis with different forms of state- which came later. The problem therefore with the Subaltern methodology is that- it tries to understand state only through a comparative lense, for instance, their analysis regarding state revolves around not a state as such, but state it different time-zones like- pre-colonial state, Mughal state, pre-Mughal state, post-colonial state and so on. In doing so, what their approach fundamentally misses is- the very social,cultural, economic and political foundations, structures, institutions which were built around the state, in its local/peripheral manifestations. While exploring first, the state in Bengal, then the Ahom state and finally the Koch state, I will therefore in this paper move away from the Subaltern historiography and methodology so that an understanding of the state can be reached at from the perspective of the periphery or from the context of the 'local' or 'indigenous'.

The State in Bengal

The 'state' has its very long transitional history when it comes to Bengal. Beginning from an ancient, mythical, un-documented period, the state here passed hands from Indo-Turks to East Africans to Arab houses to Mughals then to Britishers and then finally to India. Initially, a Persian model of political authority was maintained to the end of the Bengal Sultanate. Before that, there were local/tribal/peripheral kingdoms (later princely states) which were maintaining their own political authority in their local/peripheral zones. Hence, the emergence of a Persian model of state overpowering localized states brings forth a fundamental change, a break in Bengal's political fabric. Marshall Hodgson, terms this model of political authority maintained by the Bengal Sultanate as "military patronage state".[1] It was a military patronage state because it employed mixed strategies of military conquest as well as political patronage to maintain its power, hegemony and law over the conquered territory and people. For instance, since early 15th century Bengal, the state, in order to sustain distance from, influence of North India and to attract local/peripheral support so as to broaden its roots over authority- encouraged, patronized folks or local architectures which were opposed to classical Indian styles. Similarly, popular literature was written in Bengali rather than Sanskrit, also, Vaishnava Bengali officials were patronized in place of the Sakta Brahmins[2].

But, things began to change as the state was yet again shifting hands from the Islamic rulers to the Britishers. As the East India Company (EIC) was gaining more power over territories and rulers, they started to change the relationship

of fluid landscapes and fixed notions of boundaries and territories. As a result, there emerged a political authority or structure, institutions founded upon a form of "fiscal subjecthood" and later turning into "fiscal citizenship". In other words, a "fiscal state" or a state solely interested in making revenues. As pointed out by Cederlof, the means and principles by which bureaucratic control was established formed the basis for a form of fiscal citizenship whereby the subject was acknowledged as a person with rights and in communication with the government. Such control was established in the former Nawab's territories which mainly consisted of plains and therefore were landscapes that were intended to be agrarian. It is further suggested that when the neighboring independent states and autonomous villages were brought under EIC rule, this was done by other means which in turn shaped different ruler–subject relations and eventually paved the way for the formation of dual polities under one government (Cederlof, 2014). It is important here to note Cederlof's exploration of the Northern east frontiers of Bengal, in which he explores the tense relationship between this fluid landscape and the fixed notions of boundaries, government control and polity held by the EIC and which they strove to implement into military and fiscal control in northern east Bengal in the early nineteenth century. He argues that the means and principles by which bureaucratic control was established formed the basis for specific forms of ruler–subject relations. The fact that the EIC was a global mercantile trading corporation and not a state in any formal sense, had a decisive influence on the form of polity that was established in the conquered territories. Using the Mughal fiscal institution as a means by which to access revenue and to control, the fiscal relationship, based primarily on land ownership, became the link of communication between ruler and subject. However, this took place in a situation where the EIC was first and foremost accountable to shareholders in Europe and not to the population of Bengal. Thus the emerging polity was partly founded on a dual form of colonialism (Cederlof, 2014).

Ecologically, the Bengal delta and its landscapes are framed by water. Historically, there have been huge, devastating, catastrophic floods, earthquakes and natural calamities. For instance, the extreme weather conditions in the 1780s and the devastating flood in 1787 changed the landscape completely. A drought was followed by storms and floods. The massive amount of water that inundated the land when the Brahmaputra changed its course westwards and the river Tista, which had been connected to the Ganges by four tributaries, shifted to discharge into the Brahmaputra, causing the death of one third of the population. Whole villages were swept away. Richard Grove has established that an unusually strong El Niño caused

further losses in Bengal during 1789–95. When Buchanan surveyed the country in 1807–14, he had basically no guidance from Rennell's survey since rivers and channels had moved or disappeared or turned into lakes, and the names of the waterways had changed (Cederlof, 2014). However, besides being catastrophic, the ecology, since the 16th century, also helped in increased agricultural productivity and population growth in Mughal times and contributed to making Bengal a global economic hub for raw silk and cotton. However, as EIC was gradually turning itself to be the colonial state, India became a 'theater for state experimentation' where historiography, documentation, certification and representations were all state modalities that transformed knowledge into power. In other words, this was the beginning of the colonial character of the state, and it officially began with the appointment of Colin Mackenzie as the first Surveyor General of India, whose main task was to map newly possessed territories or land, triangulate maps and do topographical surveys.[3] But, as pointed out by Cohn, since colonial knowledge production (making maps, learning Indian languages, customs, culture etc.) was never complete or total, the colonial state also was in no position to exercise total control and power.[4] Nonetheless, the colonial state took control over the basic juridical and legal institutions of rule.

As pointed out by Cohn, EIC was acting as a state by means of waging war, making peace, raising taxes and administering justice. By 1760-1790, debates emerged in British parliament whether the Company be allowed to rule as a state or not? By 1785, the British parliament developed a 'dual principle of sovereignty' where the Company could administer its territories but under regulations passed by the parliament. In 1772, when Warren Hastings became the first Governor General of Bengal, he began to appoint 'collectors' with mixed executive and judicial power in a predefined area or territory termed as 'district', following pre-existing Mughal revenue units named 'circars' or the constituent unit of the 'subas' or provinces (Cohn, 1996). By the time the first British survey and revenue and revenue settlement emerged in 1790, the British claimed all the territories that earlier had been under the Nawab of Bengal. But, the transition or taking over control was not easy all the time. For instance, there have been major confrontations between the British Army and Burmese dynasty for territorial claims over Irrawaddy in Burma and Brahmaputra in Assam. Similar disputes occurred in demarcating territories along the Delasuri river Cachar territories (Cederlof, 2014).

By the 1850s the Bengal Presidency had encompassed a huge geographical area, spanning Bihar, Orissa and Assam, as well as modern-day Bengal and Bangladesh, containing a multitude of castes, sub-castes, tribal populations, and

peoples of different religions and sects. The colonial administration had to devise strategies to accomplish its three-fold task: 'to control this diverse and stratified indigenous society for the smooth expropriation of surplus, to maintain law and order, and to protect property'[5]. And in order to survey these vast territories, James Rennell was appointed as the first Surveyor General of Bengal in 1765-66. But, due to the extreme ecological, climatic, physical and landscape conditions, the survey resulted in negotiations, compromises which in turn the officials enforced without recourse to social and natural realities. In fact, Rennel's survey was later deemed useless by Francis Hamilton Buchannan, primarily because the extreme weather of 1780's and catastrophic floods of 1787 changed the landscape of Bengal completely (Cederlof, 2014). Besides surveying territories, controlling people, maintaining law, the colonial state also was producing reports, datas of the colonized population. For instance, after the famines of 1875-76, Dufferin report was compiled in 1888 on the condition of the ordinary people of Eastern India, in which it says that the peasantry of eastern Bengal are about the most prosperous in the worlds[6]. Similarly, William Twining, in his report on health in Bengal finds out that people who are generally exposed to extreme heat in Bengal are liable to apoplexy, paralysis, inflammatory fever and sudden attacks of Cholera. Further, he also finds out that, Northern Bengal suffered more disease and deaths from disease then both Western and Eastern Bengal, and the reason for this was the style of housing in regard to ventilation[7].

In *The Bengal Delta: Ecology, State and Social Change* , Iftekhar Iqbal points out another aspect of the Bengal delta which has close connection with the state. He provides three reasons for the high population growth in Bengal delta for the last 200 years -

1. Prospect of using more and more family labor in the land reclamation process.
2. Huge migrations to the more fertile deltaic regions.
3. Relatively better health and nutrition.

Here, he also explores the social formation outside the territories of the permanent settlement. As population was growing at a higher rate, new land was being reclaimed from the chars and forests, which in turn emerged as the center of agrarian economic relations and also the origin of the settler/migrant/native confrontations in the peripheral regions. The process for this began when the Rayiots or the cultivators started to leave the permanent settlement zones due to economic vulnerability and a semi feudal agrarian relationship. In the later phases,

they reclaimed new lands from the chars and the forests and began to settle there by occupying tracts. Finally, a new settlement emerges and then with it comes new,fresh migration[8]. However, in North Bengal, due to the prevalence of Jotedars the scene was different. Unlike the reclamation of forest land in East Bengal or West Bengal, where the tenants were at considerable liberty to settle on their terms, the Jotedars controlled the land market and choice of settlement and migration (Iqbal, 2010).

On a similar but different exploration, Anindita Mukhopadhya explores the construction of the legal subject in colonial Bengal. She finds out a dual process in which the colonial state first creates the space for the Bhadralok's understanding of the good legal subject and then the Bhadralok responds with a counter discourse which in turn defines its self-identity of good legal subjects in the public space. And, it happened, argues Anindita, at the expense of excluding peripheral social categories through the educated Bengali's understanding of law and order, security and criminality or in short of state, in the late 19th century[9]. The process is important because through it emerged a relationship of dual colonialism both internal and external - first, the colonialism of the colonial state and then the colonialism of the colonized Bhadraloks of Bengal towards the peripheral social groups, identities and territories. In the process, first, through assistance of the colonial state, the Bengali Bhadraloks - "a variegated, literate, self-reflective social group"- emerged by leaving behind the traditional Raja/Praja relation through Western education provided by the colonial state. And then, they became a Class or more precisely a middle class. Using print media and selective use of a Western legal discourse provided by the colonial state, these Bhadraloks created a one way power relation by constructing the category of the Chhotolok and putting all other peripheral, marginal social groups, identities in it (Anindita, 2006). Thus, the state in Bengal while yet again shifting hands from the Britishers to the Indians, goes to the hands of the Bengali Bhadraloks, gradually this time. And, the 'theater for state experimentation with state' takes a new form, especially with the emergence of the post-colonial state. Now, the Bhadraloks of Bengal use the state to hegemonize, invisibilize, erase, appropriate all others who remain at the periphery - both people and territory. However, since my concern here is to get an understanding of the state from the perspective of the periphery, I will not delve deeper into this here but will now focus on the peripheral Ahom state.

The Ahom State

"There is no doubt a feeling that Assam is more a land of rakshas or demons, hobgoblins, and various terrors" (Curzon Collection, Mss. Eur F lll/247a). This

statement more or less encapsulates the early British impressions of the area and people east of Bengal, also known as Assam or the North-East Frontier in colonial parlance. In colonial literature, the people of Assam are documented as having "ferocious manners, and brutal tempers" and are "fond of war, vindictive, treacherous and deceitful" (Butler 1855). Furthermore, colonial literature declared them to be unlike any other group, "a base and unprincipled nation," without a "fixed religion," since they did not "adopt any mode of worship practiced by the heathens or Mohammedans" (Vansittart 1785). On the one hand, placed outside the lineage of Indie culture and Aryan history, within which the British codified the high caste Hindus, the place was zoned off as a frontier and the people of Assam were reduced into a group living without history[10].

Hiren Gohain, in his exploration of the Ahom state argues that the Buddhist records of the great Janapadas, varying lists of which contained names, did not mention the ancient name of Assam, Kamarupa or Pragjyotishpura. Up to the third century BCE, it was an unknown country for mainland India. In the commemorative monuments celebrating the conquests of the Gupta emperors, Kamarupa and some other kingdoms are mentioned as pratyanta or peripheral. Newly appended material, added during the Gupta period and the great epics mention Kamarupa largely as the land of Kiratas or Indo-Mongoloids, Cheenas or people belonging to regions beyond the Himalayas and Mlecchas or barbarians alien to the pure rites and manners of the inhabitants of Aryavarta[11]. Gohain further asserts that the Ahom state in spite of its rather rigid structure, which ultimately contributed to its downfall, showed remarkable vision and skill in organizing the agriculture and cottage industries, a vast and impressive system of public works for water-control and defense, a polity that united heterogeneous tribes and warring ethnic groups by force, guile . or friendship, and a militia that resisted foreign invasions until royal despotism and arrogance provoked the people into tumultuous rebellion that weakened it decisively (Gohain, 2010).

Amalendu Guha, on a similar tone points out that Ahom political system was not a wholesale importation, nor was it entirely an autonomous growth in Assam. The system did have certain pre-Ahom elements from the civilization rooted in the region during the 5th-12th centuries. In the 13th century, the Indo-Aryan culture still dominated the lives of the major section of the population of the central plains of the Brahmaputra Valley, that the Ahom migrants did not come to a politically void region and that the political heritage of ancient Kamarupa had not left Upper Assam totally untouched. He even argued in the same context that the fragmented political structures incorporating that tradition still loomed large in the form

of petty chiefdoms (bhuyan raj) in the vicinity. It was under such circumstances that the Ahoms started building a state system of their own in the eastern- most extremity of the Brahmaputra Valley. They had therefore some building blocks even there to pick up and start with. Later, as they expanded south-ward and westward, they became increasingly exposed to this heritage[12].

Though its power and jurisdiction were shrinking, argues Guha, that a central state of Kamarupa representing the old tradition somehow survived almost till the middle of the 12th century. Thereafter there was not one, but several successive Turko-Afghan raids or invasions. The invasion of 1205 was followed, for instance, by those of 1227, l257, 1357and 1362. The Turko- Afghan rule even attained a degree of staggering stability over a large part of Lower Assam during the second half of the 15th century. Thus in course of the 13th-l5th centuries, alongside of such invasions from outside, there emerged a number of tribal, Hindu and even Muslim bhuyan chiefs who ruled in their respective localities. Political fragmentation might have had in a way, started earlier. But, it was only in the 13th century when the breakdown of the central state was complete (Guha, 1984). Further, in his *Enquiry into the State Formation Process in Medieval Assam* Guha tries to explain the emergence of property relations within a tribe and that of a state organization per se and also attempts to identify stages in the relevant political development and examine specifically how the Tai-Ahoms -a segment of the Afao-Shan sub-tribe of the Tais of South-East Asia-organized themselves politically in the course of their settling down in Upper Assam after 1228 AD. According to Guha, the period from the 13th to the 16th century saw the emergence and development of a large number of tribal political formations in north-east India. The Chutiya, the Tai-Ahom, the Koch, the Dimasa (Kachari), the Tripuri, the Meithei (Manipuri), the Khasi (Khyriem) and the Pamar (Jaintia) -all these tribes crystallized into rudimentary state formations by the 15th century[13].

Shihabuddin Talish, who accompanied the Assam campaign, chronicled many such details of the Ahom state -

> *"The currency consists of cowries and rupees and gold coins with the stamp of the Raja. Copper coins are not current.... If this country were administered like the Imperial dominions, it is very likely that forty to forty-five lakhs of rupees would be collected from the revenue paid by the raiyats, the price of elephants caught in the jungles and other sources. It is not the custom here to take any land tax from the cultivators; but in every house one man out of three has to render service to the Raja, and if there is any delay in doing what he orders, no other punishment than death is inflicted. Hence, the most complete obe-dience is rendered by the people to the biddings of their Raja.*

The weapons of war are matchlocks, cannon, arrows with and without iron heads, short swords, spears and long (bows) and crossbows. In time of war all the inhabitants of the kingdom have to go to battle, whether they wish it or not"[14]. Similarly, scholar and medical officer, Wade had accompanied Captain Welsh's expedition to Assam in 1792-1794 and paid one more visit there in 1798. He had then seen the Ahom political system functioning in its worst days. He found "the civil constitution of the kingdom partly Monarchical partly Aristocratical exhibiting a system highly artificial, regular and novel, however defective in other respects". The military arrangement was, according to him, "founded on feudal tenure with respect to the Tributary Princes, but on a militia within the limits of the Kingdom" (Guha, 1983). The political system, as comprehended by Wade and later by Buchanan and others, asserts Guha, had attained its relevant terminal point not before the early 17th century. Despite its strong semi-tribal features the system at this point so closely resembled western feudalism in some aspects that S K Bhuyan, too, like Wade, characterized it as feudal (Guha, 1983). But, What was the stage of their political development when the Ahoms entered Assam in 1228 and how did they come to form a full- fledged state? According to Guha, Sukapha and his band of Ahom migrants entered Upper Assam in 1228 with a view to permanently settling there. For years the community went on moving from place to place as a self-governed body of armed peasants in search of a suitable site. In the course of their journey they left behind some small colonies at strategic places like Khamjang and Tipam. But after their temporary experimental stays at several sites the main body finally settled by 1253 in the fertile Dikhou valley, now forming the Sibsagar district. Sukapha chose this tract primarily because he found the hill streams there extremely rich with silk[15].

The first Ahom capital was established on a low hillock, Charaideo, though abandoned in 1397 for a new capital at Chargua and later at Garhgaon in the mid-16th century, Charaideo remained a sacred place for the Ahoms till the end of their regime. By 1539, tile Ahom territory became at least twice as big as what it was in size arolind 1407. More importantly, its Assamese-speaking Hindu subjects were now more numerous than the Ahoms themselves (Guha, 1983). Till about 1770, the Ahom political system, on the whole, worked. But thereafter, as peasant revolts under a religious garb became endemic and as the ruling class could no longer resolve the growing contradictions within itself and between the classes, it soon collapsed (Guha, 1983). Assam was largely unknown to the outside world until the British arrived in 1826. Immediately an essentializing discourse of the frontier emerged. Until 1873 British colonials treated the frontier like a wasteland. By the

Bengal East Frontier Regulation I of 1873, the northeast was demarcated into two zones: the area of the inner line, or the hill area, and the directly administered territory known as the area of Assam, or the plains (outer) line. Assam was initially designated as a "backward tract" and made into a chief commissioner's province in 1874. Before constructing the Assamese category, however, the British had dabbled with another label. Initially they called the group "Ahom" and created fanciful histories of the group's journey to the valley from across the mountain ranges of Upper Burma (Saikia, 2006)[16]. When they failed to find a distinct community of Ahom in Assam, the census takers dismissed them as "dead" in 1931 and replaced the label "Ahom" with the newly constructed term and group called "Assamese".

Thus the Ahom state, unlike the state of Bengal, had been maintaining itself in the periphery till the state got transferred to the Britishers. The colonial state first, annexed the new state with Bengal province, gradually removed Assamese language and almost erased its history as insignificant. Particularly, after the state in Bengal was captured by the Bhadraloks of Bengal, there also emerged an Assamese middle class educated in Bengal, who in later period by means of their relentless struggle for reclaiming their state back, got the state back in 1947. In the above discussed two cases of the state, the common element is that in both the cases, the state, after all these transitions, nonetheless, are claimed back or reclaimed by the respective middle classes of Bengal and Assam, which emerged as a result of assistance from the colonial state. Bengal, as being the more dominant, hegemonic, powerful state in turn produced a counter-response from the emerging middle classes of Assam which in turn resulted in formation of a full fledged state, recognized by the Indian Constitution. However, if we move more towards the periphery, we get a peculiar case of the state, which is although intrinsically connected with the state of Bengal and with the Ahom state, but unlike both of the states. In the next section, I will discuss this case from the periphery of the periphery.

The Kamatapur/Koch Behar/Cooch Bihar or the Koch state

The geographical location where the Koch kingdom emerged is the Teesta-Brahmaputra valley which is bordered by the natural boundaries. Two rivers, the Teesta and the Karatoya, formed the western boundary while the Baranadi and the Brahmaputra rivers determine the eastern boundary. Bhutan Duars is the northern limit and the confluence of the Brahmaputra and the Karatoya in Rangpur is the southern boundary of the valley. In the present political map it is comprising of Jalpaiguri, Cooch Behar and southern part of Darjeeling districts of West Bengal,

part of Dinajpur and Rangpur districts of Bangladesh, and Kokrajhar, Bongaigaon, Dhubri, Goalpara, Barpeta, Bijni, Darrang and Kamrup districts of Assam. Origin and growth of civilization in the Teesta-Brahmaputra valley in the prehistoric stage had its (historical) reference as political identity since the epic period. This region, before the emergence of the Koch Kingdom had been mentioned in different names-viz Pragjyotisha with its capital at Pragjyotishpur, Kamarupa and Kamata. The territorial boundaries of these kingdoms were always not identical. The mythological heroes like- Naraka and Bhagadatta have been described in the epics and the puranas as the Kirata (tribal) chiefs of Pragjyotisha. The Kalika Puram has described the 'Narakasur episode' and located the boundary of Pragjyotisha from the Karatoya in the west to the Dikkar Basini (Dikkrai) river in the east[17].

This region was also known as Kamata during the Muslim period. Kamata was the western part of Kamarupa where the Khenas had established a kingdom in the 15th century. The Koch kingdom emerged in the ruins of the Kamata kingdom and the territorial boundary was almost identical with Kamata. The kingdom of Visva Simha (founder ruler of the Koch kingdom) was extended from the Baranadi in the east to the Karatoya in the west and from Bhutan Duars to Ghoraghat (Rangpur) in the south[18], Under the leadership of King Nara Narayan, the kingdom got its highest territorial expansion comprising the Tista and Lower Brahmaputra valley and began to be known as 'Koch' or 'Behar'. However, the kingdom was divided into two parts in 1581 due to the internal conflicts between King Nara Narayan and Raghudeva Narayan, nephew of the king. After the partition of the kingdom, eastem part has been counted as Koch-Hajo and the main branch came to be known as Koch Bihar or Cooch Behar. In the last days of independent status of the Koch kingdom, it was extended from the Bhutan frontier in the north to Rangpur in the south and from the Tista in the west to the Sankosh in the east. R.C. Majumdar and N.N. Vasu[19] have argued Kombaja Desha or the country of the Kombaja of the northwestern part of the Indian subcontinent as the original homeland of the Koches on the ground of identical etymology. H.C. Ray on the other hand, has indicated another possibility that the Koches came from the northeastern part of the subcontinent particularly from the region between Yunnan and Swechwan lies in present Myanmar. His argument is based on the possibility of the existence of a Kamboja and a Gandhara country in the northeastern region of the subcontinent. On the contrary, there is another group of arguments in favor of Tibet as the original homeland of the Koches and Meches. R.P. Chanda has placed the Kombaja Desha in Tibet[20]. D.C. Sircar, in describing the Kamboja rulers of Northern Bengal of 9th and l0th centuries A.D. mentioned in the Dinajpur Pillar Inscription and Laraa

Copper Plate[21] had stressed on the point that the Kombajas came from Tibet and they came to be known as Koch in the later period[22].

A careful and critical study of the historical sources on the Koch kingdom shows that prior to their emergence as ruling power, Koch and Mech tribes had their tribal societal format, controlled by a pastoral and non-plough (Jhuming) agrarian economy in the hills and foothills of present Western Assam and Sub-Himalayan Bengal. They had their long political experience as 'ruled' under the states that flourished in the Teesta-Brahmaputra valley. But decline of the Kamata state by the end of the 15th century had transformed the Teesta-Brahmaputra valley into a sphere of incessant inter-tribal feuds and conflicts among the decentralized political units. In such a political background, the village confederacy of the Koch and Mech tribes began to transform to chiefdom under the leadership of Haria Mech (Mandal)[23]. The chiefdom eventually transformed to a kingdom due to the successful leadership of Visu (son of Haria Mandal) in the aggressive warfare and territorial formation .The transitional process reached to its climax in the mid-16th century when Nara Narayan (1540-87 A.D.) had successfully materialized other pre-requisites of state formations. Although the kingdom was divided in 1581 for internal conflict, it survived as an independent state till 1772 A.D. with continuous modification of state-structure. From 1773 A.D. to the independence of India (1947 AD) it enjoyed the 'Native State' status and finally merged with independent India in 1949[24].

The Khenas initiated the formation of a state in the early 15th century A.D.in the Teesta-Brahmaputra valley. But origins and early history of the Khenas are shrouded in mystery. Existence of local ballads called Gosani Mangal (on the king of Kamata) made the task more problematic to construct the identity of the Khenas. Buchanan Hamilton during his visits (1807-09) to the ruined sites of Kamatapur Durga or fortified capital of Kamatapur at Gosanimari had recorded a local tradition about the foundation of the Kamata kingdom by the Khenas. He describes that -

> *"According to tradition, there was a Brahman whose name is unknown; but who had a servant that tended his cattle, no one knows where. According to some, this servant was an infidel (Osur) most probably from the mountain of Tripura, but concerning this, different persons are not exactly agreed, and some allege, that it was his mother who was of the impure race, and that she bore her a son while in the service of the Brahmin. The Brahmin by his profound skill in the noble science of Samudrik Jyotisha, knew that the servant would become a prince, on this discovery, the Brahmin paid him to perform any law office, and showed him still more kindness by disclosing the certainty of his future greatness; for the servant in return, promised that when he become a prince, the*

Brahmin should be his Chief minister (Fatro). Accordingly sometimes afterwards, it is not known how, became a king" [25]

These legendary accounts are not satisfactory for the identification of the origin of the Khenas and their Kamata Kingdom. But surely indicates that western Kamarupa or Kamata was going through a stage of anarchy that opened the opportunity to the adventurer like- Niladhvaja who is generally accepted as the founder of the Khena rule in Kamata. Niladhvaja (c. 1440-60) started his political career in a political turmoil of Kamarupa-Kamata. His virtue, dignity and leadership in the mutual contest for mastery over Kamata made him the ruler of Kamata having the title Kamesvar (Lord of Kamata). He constructed the fortified capital called Kamatapur situated at present Cooch Behar district and appointed the Brahmins in the managerial functions of state. Administration was basically the adoption from the previous states that emerged in the region. Although, territorially the state was lying over the small tract of Kamata, the fortified capital city Kamatapur was of 19 miles circumference. A temple was erected within the city for the worship of family deity called Kamatesvari[26] With the strong influence of pre-Koch political traditions and state system, Teesta-Brahmaputra valley again became a center of conflicts and contests between the centralized tribal and non-tribal forces, particularly with the fall of Kamatapur in 1490-98 A.D. The region transformed into a sphere of ultimate chaos as Hussain Shah did neither annex the conquered territories to Bengal nor restore the political and administrative stability of Kamata region. The decentralized chiefs called Raja like- Rup Narayan, Mai Kanwar, Gasa Lakhan and Lakshmi Narayan submitted to Hussain Shah but with the setting of the rainy season, the garrison of the Sultan at Kamata fell in the hands of these Rajas[27]. However, they could not completely overthrow the political hegemony of Bengal. But anti-infidel policy persecuted in Kamata by the subsequent Sultans of Bengal made the Muslim rule very unpopular. So political control of Bengal in the Brahmaputra valley was confined merely in a small tract of Goalpara[28].

Political formation of the Koches began with the election of Haria Mech as the chief (mandal) of the tribal villages of Chikina hill of Lower Assam, in the late 15th century. The 'clan leaders' like-Panbar, Vedela, Bhedbhedo, Barihana, Kathia, Guwabar, Megho, Baishagu, Jeswe, Garukata, Judhabar and Dhekera had accepted Haria Mech as their chief for providing leadership in the further political progress of the tribe. They submitted their ceremonial homage and tributes to the chief. Politically the small tract under Haria Mandal's chiefchip bounded by the Manas in the east and the Sankosh in the west and from Dhabalgiri in the north to the Brahmaputra in the south was an autonomous entity. It was beyond

the jurisdiction of any political power[29]. However, the tribal chiefdom of Haria Mandal was incapable of generating surplus to be appropriated for state formation. Decline of the Kamata state order in the last decade of the 15th century was a circumstantial opportunity for the further development of the chiefdom of Haria Mandal. The first step of transition of chiefdom to kingdom was the warfare of the Koches under the leadership of Visu against the similar tribal identities and Bhuiyans of the Brahmaputra valley. The Rajopakhyan describes that the first conflict of Koches broke out with Turbak, the governor of Goalpara, recruited by the Sultan of Bengal[30]. Emergence of the Koches as a political entity and their successful warfare had alarmed the neighboring states i.e. Bengal, the Ahoms and Bhutan. The Ahoms, an emerging tribal state of upper Assam integrated under the kingship of Dihingia Suhimgmung Raja (1497 - 1539 A.D.), after defeating certain tribal powers of upper Assam, were looking towards Lower Assam. Hence conflict between the Koches and Ahoms was inevitable[31].

After Haria Mandal Visvasimha became the chief. Visvasimha's kingdom got the final task of transformation to a 'centralized and consolidated state system' with the beginning of the rule of King Nara Narayan (Malladeva) in 1540 A.D. Together with his brother Shukla Dhwaj (Chilarai), Nara Narayan continued the policy of aggressive warfare initiated by Visvasimha. But division of the kingdom between the successors of Nara Narayan and Chilarai and internecine strife between two branches eventually reduced the Koch territory. But the Koches of the main branch (Cooch Behar) continued the warfare for its own defense against the Ahoms, Mughals and the Bhutanese and maintained its independent status till 1772 A.D.[32] The Afghans and the Mughals of Bengal did not tolerate the emergence of a tribal power under the Koches just in the immediate proximity of Bengal. Sulaiman Karrani, the Afghan Sultan of Bengal (1565-72 A.D.), after conquering Orissa (1567-68) marched towards the Koch kingdom and reached as far as Koch capital but got back to his own capital at Tanda without permanent political result[33]. The Koch chronicles however and the genealogies on the contrary, have narrated that Chilarai invaded Bengal and in spite of his outstanding performance he was defeated and imprisoned by the Sultan and eventually released. This defeat of the Koches had instigated the Sultan of Bengal for further invasions to Teesta-Brahmaputra valley. And it was under the commandership of Kalapahar, the Sultani army invaded Brahmaputra valley and devastated the temples of Hajo and Kamakshya and got back to Bengal without permanent political result[34]. Nonetheless, The establishment of the Mughal supremacy in Bengal in 1576 A.D. was a new development in the southwestern proximity of the Koch state[35]. Unlike the segmentary state[36], the Koch

kingdom became a centralized political entity without provinces and local zones and less capability of controlling the conquered territories. Hence, segmentation was inevitable, unless or until centrality was imposed from above to the administrators of the conquered territories. Even before his death (1587 A.D.), Nara Narayan was compelled to divide the centralized kingdom into two separate branches. It opened a new phase in the state formation process of the Koches which eventually resulted in the gradual decrement of the territories and establishment of Mughal-Ahom hegemony over the Koch state[37].

Finally, division, segmentation and intra-Koch conflict eventually resulted into the loss of eastern Koch kingdom to the Mughals and the Ahoms .On the other hand, the Koches of the main branch were demoted to the vassalage of the Mughals for few years particularly up to 1632 A.D. having political autonomy and certain other requisites of an independent state. The Mughals, however, failed to subdue the Koch kingdom into a permanent feudatory state. Shaistha Khan was busy with the Mughal state affairs and there was no Mughal pressure on the Koches at least for two decades (1665-85 A.D.). But Mahindra Narayan's reign (1682-1693 A.D.) faced a Mughal attack which according to Harendra Narayan Chaudhuri, had 'compelled the Koches to surrender three chaklas, of Fatehpur, Kajirhat and Kakina to the Mughals in 1687 A.D[38]. In other words, the Koch state became a segmentary state towards the end of 17th century and after a long negotiation with the East India Company, the Anglo-Cooch Behar Treaty was concluded in 1773 A.D. by which Cooch Behar accepted the feudatory status[39]. And from this time the Koch state went through a transition as it was being shifted to the Britishers as this treaty eventually established British control over the Koch kingdom and since then Cooch Behar enjoyed the 'Native State' status to the end of the British rule in India. In 1949, the Cooch Behar state was annexed as a district of Bengal, with its population and territory being divided with Bengal and Assam. However, since then, various movements, organizations of both Bengal and Assam have been working to claim back the state. Recently, even the government of Assam has created a new Kamatapur Autonomous Council (KAC) to pacify these demands.

Conclusion

Beginning with the exploration of a mainland state, i.e. Bengal, in this paper I eventually moved towards an exploration of a peripheral Ahom state and I finally focussed upon the Koch state, which this study considers as a curious case from the periphery of the periphery. The story of the Koch state is curious because, unlike

the Bengal and Ahom states, this state had not been able to develop a middle class, which in turn would claim back the state, after the so-called post-colonial period. In fact, democracy had never appeared on the scene, as in the situation in 1949 when the last princely king of Cooch Behar sold out the state to India through the merger agreement of 1949- without even taking into account the aspirations or demands of the population. Further, I also attempted to make a critique of the Subaltern methodology as this methodology fundamentally failed to locate the state in its local/peripheral manifestations.

Notes

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14. Relevant section from Faathiyya-i-ibryya by Shihabuddin Talish in translation in Jadunath Sarkar, "Assam and the Ahoms in 1660s A D", Journal of Bihar and Orissa Research Society,

Vol 1, 191.S, pp 179-195; J P Wade, (comp), An Account of Assam, 1800 (B Sharma, ed, Gauhali, 1972).

15. Sukapha's first choice was the banks of the Santak, a small tributary of the river Dikhau, because he found that "the equal quantity of water of the river weighed twice that of the Dikhau rive", Ahom Bleranji, n 14, p 46.
16. The first colonial myth about Ahom was created by J. P. Wade, a doctor who had come to Assam with the regiment of Captain Welsh in 1792. Although his account of the Ahom origin was not published, it seemed to have made its way into colonial circles; in 1828 Walter Hamilton-Buchanan asserted that "Ahoms were the governing class in Assam, . . . descended from the companions of Khuntai [who were rulers of Upper Burma]" (1828, 74). Until 1931, when the Ahom were declared a"dead" community, this myth had been repeated in many colonial documents and books (Saikia, 2006).
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28. Haliram Dhekial Phukan: Assam Buranji, p. 11.
29. Kharga Narayanar Vamsaali, cited in Khan Chowdhury Amanatulla Ahmed p.82
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31. Deodhai Assam Buranji, pp. 14-21
32. The date of Nara Narayan's accession is debatable. But the year 1540 A.D. has been accepted by most of the scholars as the date of his coronation.

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