

The Ahom Rulers : were They Bigoted ?

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The religious life of Assam though was divided into heterogeneous religious practices and beliefs, the religious temper of the land was by no means sectarian. There seems to have been complete harmony amongst the followers of different beliefs, sects or cults. Tolerance in religious matters was a traditionally followed policy of the inhabitants of Kamrupa or ancient Assam. The Ahoms who stepped into the Brahmaputra valley early in the thirteenth century were equally tolerant in religious matters and they never coerced others to follow the religion they personally professed and persecuted people on religious grounds.

Historically speaking, till the reign of Udayaditya Singha (1670-1672 A.D.), the Ahom monarchs followed the policy of non-interference in the religious affairs of the country. This Ahom king became the disciple of an alien preceptor and he used his sovereign status to force others to fall at the feet of his Guru and become disciple. ¹ In the beginning of the eighteenth century, queen Pramatheeswari, consort of Siva Singha (1714-1744 A. D.), forced many people and religious leaders to bow down to Goddess Durga and partake the offerings in the worship. These monarchs accused of intolerant attitude and narrow-mindedness were exceptions and therefore should not be taken to suppose as a general rule of the entire Ahom administration.

Barring the instances mentioned above, all other Ahom kings who ruled Assam for six hundred years were not bigoted adherents of their faith and never coerced others to follow the religion they personally professed. There had also been hardly any persecution of people and religious leaders on religious grounds. Assamese chronicles furnishes us many instances of execution and persecution of religious heads by the Ahom kings, but such cases of persecution were exceptionally few, as noted above, and they never took place merely on religious ground. During the period under review, some of the religious heads ventured to depart from the traditionally followed principle that religious leaders should strictly adhere to the duties of spiritual ministrations and guiding the people in the sphere of culture and letters, many of them made attempt to compete with the sovereign in material power and grandeur neglecting the culture of spirituality for which they were granted special favour. Some of them were so ambitious as to conspire to seize the royal power.

In the reign of Suhungmung (1497-1539 A. D.), the Bhuyans were given the charge of catching wild elephants. Owing to their negligence in duty no wild elephant could be captured. Therefore

a few of the Bhuyans including Hari Bhuyan, son-in-law of Sankardeva and Madhav Deva were imprisoned. Hari Bhuyan with a few other companions were ultimately put to death. But Madhav Deva was let off.² Sankardeva, the Vaishnava Guru and preacher, after this event was said to have left the Ahom kingdom for Koch Kingdom for fear of being punished at the hands of the then Ahom king. It is significant to note that Sankardeva in his vast sea of literature composed by himself makes not even a slight reference of religious persecution by the Ahom kings. Sankardeva had probably left the Ahom kingdom for Koch Kingdom hearing the fame and glory of the then Koch king Naranarayan.

During the reign of king Pratap Singha (1603-1641 A. D.), Banchi Gopal Deva, the Adhikar of Kuruabahi Satra, was accused of giving shelter to a few persons who convicted of serious offence. Gopal Deva went underground. When the king came to know of his innocence, he pardoned him. Banchi Gopal Deva came out of his hiding place and established a prominent new Satra at Kurua-bahi.³ Misra Gohain who succeeded to the Adhikarship of Kuruabahi after the death of Banshi Gopal was executed by Pratap Singha for his political intent. Giving up the simple and austere life of his predecessors, Misradeva resorted to pomp and luxury and also alleged to have attempted to usurp the royal power.⁴ One Mukund Gosain was murdered by Pratap Singha for his puritanic activities.⁵ Moamaraya Mahanta Nityananda Deva was executed by Jayaditya Bhaga Raja (1641-1644 A. D.) mainly for his political intent. Once he remarked : "My only equal is the Ahom sovereign descended from the great God Indra"⁶.

Gadadhar Singha (1681-1696 A. D.), a powerful Ahom king, sought to liquidate the malpractices which threatened the austerity of the religious and political life of the people.⁷ It is recorded in the Ahom Buranji that the king ordered one Bezdoloi to seek out the fake Bhakats and to extort from them their properties. The properties of the Bhakats were accordingly taken by force. One Ngupu Daria complained to the king, "I have been living on public charity but Bezdoloi has forcibly taken my gold ornaments and other properties I had." At this the king became very angry upon Bezdoloi and others who oppressed the people and said : "I have never allowed them to pillage the people at large. I have not told him to take silver and gold from the Bhakats. I am quite ignorant of this plundering in the whole country. I am not really offended with the people". Gadadhar Singha made the Bezdoloi return the silver and gold to the proper persons from whom they are taken.⁸ With a view to reforming the Satras, he ordered to retain the celibate disciples living in the satras in their respective positions and to remove the married ones.⁹ From this it appears that he was not against the prevailing socio-religious system of the time. His actions were directed at reformation. He chastised the heads of some of the Vaishnava monasteries of the country as they amassed wealth in improper ways neglecting the noble pursuit in religious and spiritual matters.¹⁰ Therefore his measures did not stir up a universal commotion and uproar in the country. This clearly shows that people had no objection to correction of any

established system. But they would not tolerate attempt to annihilate such system in the way king Udayaditya Singha tried with the help of Paramananda Sanyasi.

Gadadhar Singha treated both the Vaishnavites and the Saktas alike. Even though the king burnt many monasteries and punished many religious heads, he at the same time invited the three Adhikars or heads of Auniati, Benganaati and Kataniparia Satras or monasteries to perform religious rites on the occasion of dedication of Rohdoi tank. He performed a Jangya and ploughed the land for it by himself. ¹¹ It is also interesting to note that the Assamese chronicles do not furnish us any instance of confiscation and torture upon the two of the four principal Satras of the Vaishnavas of Assam, namely, Kuruabahi and Garmur. From this it follows that he punished those Satras where austerity in religious life ceased to exist.

Gadadhar Singha was not anti-Brahmin. It is recorded in the Tungkhungia Buranji that he performed a sacrifice by one hundred and eight Brahmins at Biswanath. Katyayan Bhattacharya and Mukalimura made offerings of Til and Kusa and blessed the king with longevity of a hundred Brahmins. ¹² But the same king later punished Katyayan and others when he found fault with them ¹³ It is also to be noted that he allowed to hold Durga Puja in the capital Gargaon but himself remained away for the days of Puja. ¹⁴

A few more instances of interference in politics by religious heads of the period under review may be mentioned here. When with the active support of the powerful officials, Bandar Barphukan had to escort Gadadhar to Gargaon to install him on the throne, Chota Banamali of Dakhinpat met Barphukan and advised him not to place Gadadhar on the throne. His argument was that since he was the religious preceptor of Bandar Barphukan and the puppet ruler, king Lora Raja, he himself felt to be the 'virtual ruler of the kingdom', thereby meaning that his wishes should be respected. ¹⁵ Krishnakanta Bhattacharya, known as Parvatia Gosain was the religious preceptor of Rudra Singha, Siva Singha, Pramatta Singha and Rajeswar Singha. He entered into the arena of politics when Lakhi Singha succeeded to the throne of the Ahom kingdom after Rajeswar Singha. Parvatia Gosain did not want Lakhi Singha to become the king. With a view to overthrowing him from royal position he supported the conspiracies of Bhudhar Singha and Malau Tipamia Gohain against the monarch. He also instigated the rebellious Haradutta Choudhury of Kamrup to rise against Lakhmi Singha and through him he sought to bring a number of Ahom officials of high rank to his side. The repeated conspiracies of this religious preceptor against Lakhmi Singha compelled the monarch to imprison him and to promulgate an order that acceptance of mantras from the Parvatia Gosain would amount to treason and that the transgressor would be duly punished. ¹⁶ The head of the Katnipar Satra affiliated to Kala Samhati was found guilty of conspiring against king Kamaleswar Singha, and he was therefore expelled from the kingdom. ¹⁷

Azan Pir, a Muslim reformer who was said to have entered Assam in the eighteenth century and was sharply critical about

Muslim religious practices in Assam was punished by the Ahom monarch on complaints of local muslim leaders. But when the complaints were found to be false he was recalled and resettled under king's order.¹⁸

From the discussion made above it is now amply clear that there had never been persecution of religious leaders and of people by the Ahom king on religious ground. The kingly authority of the period never attempted to coerce people to accept the faith it personally professed. The same was the case with the local religious leaders who preached their faith without any coercion. It was for this that the long-continued Ahom rule witnessed not even a single clash or conflict between one and the other cults for religious reasons. There seems to have been complete harmony amongst the followers of different beliefs, sects or cults of the Ahom kingdom. There had always prevailed an atmosphere of freedom in the sphere of religion in which everyone enjoyed fully the right to freedom of conscience to choose any form of faith or sect. It was on account of this atmosphere that the inhabitants of this land came to profess different forms of Hinduism, Islamism, Old Tai creed, Buddhism and even tribal and animistic cults in the Ahom kingdom.

Notes & References

1. H. C. Goswami, *Purani Asom-Buranji*, p. 116 ;
S. K. Bhuyan, *Satsari Assam Buranji*, p. 98 ;
S. K. Dutta, *Assam Buranji*, p. 33 ;
S. K. Mahanta, *Assam Buranji*, p. 164 ;
G. C. Baruah, *Ahom Buranji*, p. 233 ff.
2. Tr. No. 108, *Assam Buranji*, or *Buranji-viveka ratna*, Part II ;
S. N. Sarma, *Neo-Vaishnavite movement and the Satra Institution of Assam*, p. 14
S. K. Bhuyan, *Anglo-Assamese Relations*, p. 193.
3. S. N. Sarma, p. 78.
L. Gogoi, *Beli Mar Gal*, p. 65 & p. 66 ;
4. S. K. Mahanta, *Assam Buranji*, p. 6 .
5. S. K. Mahanta, *Assam Buranji*, p. 63.
6. Tr. No. 108, *Assam Buranji*, or *Buranji-Viveka ratna*, part- II.
7. S. N. Rajkumar, *Itihashe Soara Chachata Bachar*, p. 424.
8. G. C. Barua, *Ahom Buranji*, p. 27 .
9. S. K. Bhuyan, *Tungkhungia Buranji*, p. 2 .
10. S. K. Bhuyan, *Satsari Assam Buranji*, p. 117 ff.
11. S. K. Bhuyan, *Tungkhungia Buranji*, p. 20 ff.
12. S. K. Bhuyan, *Tungkhungia Buranji*, p. 2 .
S. K. Bhuyan, *Satsari Assam Buranji*, p. 116.
13. S. K. Bhuyan, *Tungkhungia Buranji*, p. 27 ;
S. K. Bhuyan, *Satsari Assam Buranji*, p. 116.
14. L. Gogoi, *Tai Sanskritir Ruprekha*, p. 148.
15. H. K. Barua, *Assam Buranji*, p. 57.
16. S. K. Bhuyan, *Anglo-Assamese Relations*, p. 215 ff ;
L. Gogoi, *Beli Mar Gal*, p. 46 ff.
17. S. K. Bhuyan, *Tungkhungia Buranji*, p. 166.
18. S. K. Bhuyan, *Satsari Assam Buranji*, p. 149 ;