

## Religious Outlook of the Ahoms

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There prevailed in the Brahmaputra Valley a number of religious beliefs and practices among the tribes who lived in the valley from the hoary past. A portion of the north-east of the valley was inhabited by the Borahis and the Morans. The Chutiyas who lived in the Sadiya tract followed Tantricism.<sup>1</sup> The Kacharis had their own tribal cults. The Bhuyans, who inhabited on both sides of the valley west of the Kachari kingdom followed, Tantricism.<sup>2</sup> And the Koches of western Assam had their own tribal religion.

As far as the Hindus were concerned, they either followed Vaisnavism and Saktism.<sup>3</sup> By and large the bulk of the Hindu population seemed to have followed Tantricism. Vaishnavism also occupied an important place among the Hindus.<sup>5</sup>

Thus the Brahmaputra valley presented itself as a land of diverse religious beliefs and cults. The Ahoms, a Shan tribe of northern Burma who infiltrated into the valley in the early part of the 13th century, laid the foundation of a Tai kingdom and gradually became the masters of the entire valley. The Ahoms after the conquest of the valley, introduced in it various gods, goddesses and ancestral spirits to be venerated and worshipped.<sup>5</sup> Traces of Buddhist influence could also be found in the religious practices of the Ahoms. The Ahoms perform Phra-long upto this day. And the Buddhist religious scripture Phura-Along or Minmang-Phuralong was held in high esteem by the Ahoms. And from the middle of the seventeenth century they came under the influence of Hinduism.

Being thus placed in the valley of diverse beliefs and cults, the Ahoms took an eclectic view of religion. They were not effected by petty religious differences. They were lovers of variety of cults. The ruler's religious beliefs and practices were tolerated by the subjects and there was no opposition from the Hindus. It was because of non-sectarian attitude and freedom of religious belief that the traditional religion of the Ahoms did not come into conflict with any other local cult in Assam even with Islam at a later stage.

The Ahoms wanted social and political intergradation of the country. They thought this would be a strong and abiding founda-

tion of their political order in this new land. They considered this would be for mutual benefit. Hence they allowed themselves to adopt the healthier features of the religion and culture of the governed. The keynote of the religious outlook of the Ahoms was toleration and freedom of worship, and the absence of casteism in their social system. Hence there was no untouchability among them. Even after their initiation into Hinduism, the Ahoms were free from caste privileges and untouchability upto this day. Shihabuddin Talish, the noted Persian writer who had accompanied Mir Jumla in his Assam campaign in 1662 rightly observed : "All the people of this country, not placing their necks in the yoke of any faith, eat whatever they got from the hand of any man (regardless of his caste)".<sup>6</sup> The Ahoms took a very broad view of religion. Followers of different religions were treated alike. They found truth in every religion. Hence they allowed different cults and faith to flourish in the kingdom.

Prior to their conversion to Hinduism the Ahoms were not attached to any particular faith in the orthodox sense. Hence they were not cut off from the people professing tribal faith. Most of their religious functions were of the nature of state ceremonies. But the Brahmanical religion penetrated in a small way in the royal family and also the circle of the nobles. And through them it did make a perceptible headway among the people. The penetration was possible on account of the royal favour shown to the members of a Brahmin family among whom Chao Sudang Hpa (A. D. 1397-1407) passed his early days.<sup>7</sup>

The time during which Brahmanical religion was making its headway in the royal court and outside corresponded with the birth of a new religious movement known as Neo-Vaisnavism. This Neo-Vaisnavite movement was inaugurated by Sri Sankardeva (A.D. 1449-1568) who was a Kayastha by birth. The new cult propagated by Sri Sankardeva was popularly known as Ekasaranadharmā or the religion of the supreme surrender to one God, namely Visnu-Krishna.<sup>8</sup> The main doctrine of Sankardeva's religion was to gain salvation by prayer and faith rather than by sacrifices.

The new cult of Sri Sankardev was gaining ground among the people of the valley. The Ahoms who were liberal minded in their approach towards religion came under the influence of this new faith. Having heard of the name and fame of the Neo-Vaisnavite Brahmanical Auniati Satra (institution), the Ahom king Hso-Tamla or Jayadhavaj Singha (A.D. 1648-1663) took initiation from Bonomali Gosain (the head of the institution).<sup>9</sup> Since the reign of Jaya-

dhvaj Singha as a matter of liberal outlook, the Ahom kings extended royal patronage to Vaisnavite teachers to propagate their creed and establish religious institutions called Satras in the Ahom kingdom. As a result, numerous Vaisnavite institutions sprang up in the Brahmaputra valley. It seemed natural for the kings that the followers of every faith be given complete freedom of worship. In consonance with this broad outlook, the Ahom monarchs allowed the Neo-Vaisnavite preachers, the Saivites, the Saktas, the Buddhists and the Muslim saints called pirs to propagate their creeds and carry on work of proselytisation among the people. Revenue free lands were assigned to the religious teachers for their maintenance and establishment of religious institutions. Lands granted to religious purposes varied from a few to thousands of acres.<sup>10</sup> Such lands were mostly found in the Kamrup and the Darrang districts.<sup>11</sup>

Acting on their generous and liberal attitude, the Ahom Kings invited learned men to be settled in the kingdom. Jayadhvaj Singha invited the Vaisnavite preacher Bonamali Gosain who was at Koch Behar to be settled in the kingdom. At a later date Hso-Khrung Hpa or Rudra Singha (A.D. 1696-1714) invited the learned Pandit Krishnaram Nyabagish of Nadia District in West Bengal. The King allowed the Pandit to settle at Nilachal Hill near Guwahati.<sup>12</sup> The King was later initiated into Sakta cult.<sup>13</sup>

Under the influence of the new religious cult, the Ahom rulers of the later period constructed numerous temples mostly in lower Assam which seemed to satisfy the religious cravings of the Hindu devotees.

The keynote of the religious outlook of the Ahoms was toleration and non-interference in the religious pursuits of others. Due regard and respect were shown to different beliefs and faiths. During the entire period of Ahom rule in Assam there was no departure from the general principle of freedom of worship except in the reign of Siva Singha (A.D. 1714-1744). It may be recalled that Siva Singha's Queen Phuleswari of non-Ahom origin, was a follower of Sakti cult. Her intolerant and outrageous conduct towards the Vaisnavite devotees of Mayamara Satra led to the outbreak of the Moamaria Rebellion which ultimately brought disaster to the Ahom kingdom.

The conflict between the Moamaria Vaisnavites and the Queen Phuleswari was a solitary incident in the annals of Ahom rule in Assam. The religious beliefs of the Ahoms had nothing to do with it. Essentially, the Moamaria revolt broke out due to the

conflict between two creeds of Hinduism - that of Saktism and Vaisnavism.

According to the religious practices of the Ahoms, religion was divorced from politics. The main concern of the religious teachers was to propagare their faith. Any deviation from this path was not tolerated.<sup>14</sup> From the development of the last century Hso-Pat-Hpaor Gadadhar Singha found that the State was threatened by the growing power and influence of the Great Neo-Vaisnavite Gosains, due primarily to the concentration of wealth and power into their hands. And this development was against the principle of simplicity and non-possession.

King Gadadhar Singha, therefore took drastic measures to put a stop to the present state of affairs of the Vaisnavite Satras which threatened the authority of the State. He seized the wealth of the Satras, broke the congregational character of the disciples by removing the Satras to remote areas.<sup>15</sup>

The action of King Gadadhor Singha against the Vaisnavite Gosains looked severe. But a realistic approach to the situation reveals that Gadadhor Singha had to grapple with both the internal and external enemies of the State. Lower Assam was yet to be freed from the Mughal. And the alleged interference in administration by the Vaisnavite preachers in appointing officers and selecting candidates for the throne amounted to usurpation of state power which a sovereign ruler like Gadadhor Singha could hardly tolerate. Hence he took action against those perpetrators. It was only after the country was freed from the last vestiges of the Mughals that Rudra Singha, the son and successor of Gadadhor Singha reestablished the Satras in the original sites. The policy of patronising religious preceptors continued till the end of Ahom rule.

From what has been stated earlier, it is apparent that the Ahoms were liberal-minded. They did not look at religion from a dogmatic or sectarian point of view. Hence they allowed different religions to thrive in the Kingdom and extended patronage to religious preachers for propagation of their faith. It was this freedom of worship and the absence of casteism in the social system of the Ahom that allowed them to adopt the healthy features of every religion in order to enrich their own culture - a trait characteristic of the Tai-people of South East Asia.<sup>16</sup> Their attitude towards the followers of other faith was non-proselitisation and religion was not mixed up with statecraft. Religion was not a determining factor in the life of the people who were more pragmatic and less religious as evident from their history and culture.

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